

NORTHERN NARRATIVES 2025



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 9

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



NORTHERN FOCUS

Cover Photo: “MN Cowboy” (2024) by Justyn Rembowski. Taken in Oslo, Minnesota.

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

Photographers sent in their favorite photographs taken anywhere within North Dakota or Minnesota. Entries were on display at the Main Library in downtown Fargo during the fall of 2025. 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 somehow, 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 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 up-and-coming 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.

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 ninth volume of *Northern Narratives*!

POETRY



JUST SO

by Norman Anderson

What do you want from me? Are my guesses worth more if I sweat thinking about them?

We eat the crumbs scattered by the philosopher and make our way up his ladder only to kick it away. The sight is glorious, but I still don't know what you want.

Maybe to look and not eat. Looking begets growth of a view. Useless. A horn of plenty starving us. Yielding nothing nurturing.

A harlequin in my house, nimble and clever but transient, evaporating on the roof. The dirt floor is more trustworthy. The hammer is ready for knocking a hole in the wall. Is this the right direction? No matter which way I go, it will be the direction I am heading in. Whichever answer, it has the benefit of being chosen. But that is all.

What is it that can “teach us to care and not to care”? Listen, he says. Stop talking. The shapeless silence is real, but in itself uninformative. Care without caring. Love without loving. Untethered seriousness—low and subdued—crawling toward annihilating darkness. Now's your chance!

Framing adumbrates. It foreshadows. Just as asking tends toward completing oneself. Asking has hard mass; it is steel; it will not crumble if there is no answer forthcoming.

Go to the ground. Touch the surface, then go deeper. Burrow into the blackness; let it cover and envelop you. Breathe the vapor deeply. Inhale the black earth. Taste the kinship with all the pores of your body. Be! Words are profanity. Empty. Without weight. Barren. No candidate for a witness.

SUMMER SKIES

by Stacy Anderson

Summer skies span the horizon.

Cotton ball clouds drift across the lake reflections like popcorn balls
bouncing up and down with the ripples and waves.

Sunshine rays stream down, warming all in their sun bath...

the wild flowers soaking up the blooming heat and humidity

our winter white skin browning into glistening copper tones

and the cool spring-fed waters slowly warming up each layer of depth...

Nothing beats the healing growth and revival of the summer warmth.

It's a treat to lose track of the day or time.

Carefree and whimsical times...

floating along with no purpose

lulling to sleep in a lazy hammock turning page after page getting lost in a
spellbinding book

chasing fanciful fireflies

lick upon lick of a sugary sweet dripping double dip ice cream cone

telling creepy campfire legendary tales

staying up way too late counting the stars all while tracing the Big Dipper
with one's starstruck eyes...

All such summer splendors!

Even when the summer skies darken and powerful storm clouds roll in, magic happens in the skies.

Heat lightning becomes a sky filled summer light show and rolling thunder its symphony chorus calling all to watch in awe with its power and brute strength when the wicked wind blows in. Behold the zigzag patterns flashing with flare in the night.

Or perhaps become spellbound by the Northern Lights appearing out of nowhere brushing their brilliant strokes of a kaleidoscope colors across the summer skies.

Summer is a time to renew and relax and embrace all it can offer both the light and the dark as neither can exist without the other.

Yes we wait somewhat impatiently for these summer skies to finally open up and draw us all in to spend well-earned time together or simply all alone under them.

Sweet summer skies take me away to a world where somehow magically time stands still and the sun stays out forever with not a care in the world bringing out the child once again in all of us!

Summer solstice's effect seems to linger long past that magical eternal day well into the months of June, July and August if only you embrace it and allow it to carry on.

HOME

by Joanne Bekkerus

The smell of fresh bread,
hot, pulled from oven,
not allowed to rest.

Crusty end carved, sliced,
carefully laid down.

Butter gently glides
across the surface,
pooling, steadily
blending, sinking deep
within, creating
a complex chorus.

The true aroma
of being at home.

WHERE I'M FROM

by Mary Bjerke

Where I'm from, I can't go back
To the fresh of wind-whipped, line-dried sheets,
To fields grown brown, with crickets clicking, grasshoppers springing
and
Milkweed swinging the Monarch's chrysalises.
Where I'm from, ecstatic mutts bound and spring and lavish wet and
sloppy love;
Where I'm from a floury apron cloaks my Grandma,
Oven-warmed, yeasty scents, rise and swell;
Where I'm from a time-worn playing card dealt by Grandpa crowns a
deck,
Black Jack gum and pink peppermints, perfume the air.
Where I'm from the work is measured,
Clocked by seasons, sun and rain;
Where I'm from I can't go back to.

THE EBB AND FLOW OF MORNING HOURS

by Victoria Christensen

I wake slowly, becoming conscious of my surroundings, my steady, even breath gently flowing across the flowered cotton pillowcase smelling as if it came fresh out of the dryer, my body snuggling deeper into the warm embrace of a down comforter and...

Pop out of bed

Make the coffee

Feed the dog

Pick up last night's dishes

Brush my teeth

Get the kids out the door

Kiss my husband good-bye

So, slowing down, I take deep relaxing breaths, visualize my serene and peaceful day, write in my journal with measured and intentional strokes, watch the dark blue ink flow in loopy cursive swirls across the crisp white page and...

Start the computer

Answer emails

Take a phone call

Assess the budgets

Check the calendar

Glance at my to do list

Look down and notice I haven't dressed

So, slowing down, I saunter upstairs, intentionally unhurried, looking around, noticing my surroundings and...

Exercise for 5 minutes

Brush my teeth—again?

Brush my hair

Pull on my clothes

Wash my face

Throw dinner in the crockpot

Take out the mail

Call my boss

My rumbling belly reminds me I haven't had breakfast,

So, slowing down, I pull out my favorite blue and white porcelain bowl, scoop in some tart yogurt, noticing its glossy and creamy texture, pour some sweet and crunchy granola over the top, glance out the window at the birds chirping in the arborvitae and...

savor this moment.

HOME FOR THANKSGIVING

by Victoria Christensen

I see smoke rising and a warning look from my cousin that says, “Stay out of the kitchen!”

I see Grandma’s back bent over the bright orange countertops.

I see Aunt Sissy secretly sniff her wine and glance around with a frowny face.

I see Great Uncle Bob staring at a jar of sweet pickles on the table.

I hear, “Do you have a boyfriend yet?” as the blaring smoke detector comes to my rescue.

I hear Grandma muttering about Grandpa’s early morning hunting trip.

I hear a whisper of “cheap wine” as Aunt Sissy leans toward Mom who tries to shush her.

I hear Aunt Joy trapping Uncle Bob with a story about finding a new pair of size 13 tennis shoes at the end of her driveway.

I smell the burnt marshmallows that top Grandma’s sweet potato surprise.

I smell the pepper that Grandma angrily shakes into the mashed potatoes.

I smell the wine and yeasty beer from my aunts and uncles.

I smell the musty tobacco and every holiday dinner from the last 30 years wafting from Uncle Bob’s sports coat.

I taste the syrupy sweet potatoes, hidden beneath the over-broiled topping.

I taste the pepper that I couldn’t grab from Grandma before the potatoes were ruined.

I taste the sparkling juice and wish I could drink wine instead.

I taste the smoked cheese, which Uncle Bob attempts to grab before
Aunt Joy pushes it away, explaining, “Bob doesn’t eat cheese.”

I feel Grandma’s soft hands as she hands me a can opener.

I feel the can of cranberries that she forgot and then remembered.

I feel the jar of sweet pickles, that don’t have anything to do with tennis
shoes or smoked cheese, but they must be important to Uncle
Bob who still stares at the jar as I lift it from the table.

I feel you should never cook with a temper, especially when pepper is
involved.

THE LAST TIME

by Anastasia Cline

I heard someone say,
You'll never know,
When you kiss **them**,
For the **last** time,
But,
You'll remember it,
Forever.

And I couldn't agree more.

The last time,
I kissed you,
I had tears streaming down my face,
Like two waterfalls,
Weeping because,
You were leaving,
On a plane,
The next day.

The last time,
I kissed you,
I didn't think,
It would actually be,
The last time,
Because I loved you,
So much.

But,
Slowly,
You stopped replying fast,
You stopped calling as much,
And,
Slowly,
Like storm clouds,
I noticed,
And got,
Scared,
Like a,
Child during a,
Storm.

The last time,
I kissed you,
I didn't think,
It would actually be,
The **last** time,
Because,
'I don't know'
Is something you say,
When asked about food,
Not,
About a **relationship.**

YOUR ORBIT

by Anastasia Cline

I didn't want to be,
The **center** of your universe,
But,
I *wanted* to be close to the,
Middle of your orbit.

I didn't want to be,
Your **sun**,
I *wanted* to be your,
Mercury or your Venus,
But,
Instead I ended up being,
Your Pluto,
Not even considered a planet,
In most people's eyes.

I didn't want to be,
The **brightest** star in,
Your night sky,
But,
I *wanted* to be close,
I *wanted* to be the second brightest,
But,
Instead I ended up being a dim,
Dying star in your sky.

- *Maybe I'll become a supernova*

INSATIABLE SNOWMAN

by Cara Cody-Braun

The colorful coats clutter
the quiet playground,
evidence of the melted children.
Snowman burps, thirst quenched. For now.
“I just love children!” he smirks.

The dogs give wide berth, but
the bunnies gather round,
paws together in tender
joy for Snowman’s love of children.
He loves the small ones!
Our protector!

The birds begin to tweet
Damn birds! Bad birds!
Obstreperous, obnoxious, ornithological oracles—every tweet libelous,
Each twitter slanderous!

Startled bunnies murmur amongst themselves and shake their
Little paws at the trees and wires.
All would be well if it weren’t for the birds. They upset our snowman.

PREJUDICE

by Timothy Connolly

I saw a small animal in the pool today, drowned
A rat, I guessed
We've had them before
In the pool, in the attic
Disgusting, right?
Filth, disease, pestilence
Invading OUR space
Chuck it over the fence
Like the others
The vultures will dispose of it
Chlorinate the pool
Get rid of the contaminants
But
It was a bunny
Cute, furry, cuddly
Ears folded back, legs frozen in mid-hop
We've had three rabbits as pets
Oscar, Scout, Lucy
I will bury it by the side of the house
Like the others

INFORMATION WORKER DRIES OUT IN THE SUN

by Meggie Cronin

I am in a wheat field at the edge of the world.
I am in a wheat field and I dictate notes for my elders,
I sit on standby, I waive the change,
I use this technology curse for good where it is possible.
I research a culture un-mine for context,
for marketing, I rush through the shallows
of the deepest ocean there is.
I scoop water in a tin cup and try to slake everyone's thirst.
I see how not enough it is,
how biome the bacteria.

I am in a wheat field at the edge of the world
and I try my best to hold the doors open.
I am a body of work, a body of battering ram,
a stepstone, a window, a door in a door in a door,
I am arching as a cat in an ever constricting vent
and the villain is laughing in the distance
and the music is trying to play me off
and when is the miracle?

I am in a wheat field at the end of the world
and I am building a road around me.
I am brick and paper and there is a path,
there is, and I am one trowel,
I am one hand,

I am wheat in a field and there is growth,
there is food, there is give,
it is small, but
we make it

ON GETTING MY FIRST
TATTOO IN A
MAKESHIFT DINING
ROOM STUDIO, AGE 24
(OR, AN ODE TO THE
ARTIST, OR THE PLAINS,
OR, WHAT A MIRACLE WE
ARE HERE TOGETHER)
by Meggie Cronin

What a gift, this grain,
sweet stalks of corded
rope, little
home, root system.
Constellation in the skin, you,
pointillism dream.

What a gift to grow from any field, let alone
this same one.
And what will we all become?
And where
shall our little seeds scatter,
crush and shift,
be made new,
rise, if we're lucky,
wherever the warmth and
sweetness change us.

Look how tall we are, even now,
look at what once was dirt!

Oh, my sly friend,
you clever-holy rebel,
you scholar of the skies,
Earth-roamer, you—

thank you for permanence,
this trust, your steady hand.
Bless a practiced work,
humble heart.

What a gift to gather,
a bundle together
against the cold,
no scythe in sight.

THE SISTER RIVER

by Christine Madline Ellsworth

The Sister River bordered my Midwest backyard.

Most years, on melting snowy springs
She would settle down into the basement—
But never in an act of deluge or in an attitude of anger.
Her influx was more a predictable act of rinsing
As with my little sister, her long hair in the kitchen sink
The clear cool water melting her brown curls;
The river's slow, silent rise over the smooth concrete downstairs
Would later sap up into the Lilies of the Valley
That crowd my house's foundation outside, saturating the air
In their dainty perfume come June.

That my house stood stalwart each year
While the flowers burgeoned unceasingly for every child or friend to
 enjoy
Speaks the river's language of superfluous sharing.
She offered the occasional walleye to friends and me who
Cast poles grabbed from the back porch for a lazy Saturday brunch.

This river housed beavers who absconded
Three apple trees late one ominous fall, before the onset of skating,
 before the cracking
Of pine trees at forty below, well before usual; those beavers knew.
Snow began early and fell straight down through March;
The snows packed the Sister River, too, and
Come late May, her waters leached a dark lake into my basement.

But there were baby beavers again to swim upstream
And I still had six apple trees for the sauces and butters next Christmas.

By summer, the house would dry down and settle
Into open sashed windows filled with westerly breezes.
The trees bloomed and grew; we imagined their roots
Like our toes, dipping into the river, underground.

But as truth will, out it came one mirage of a hot summer morning:
My man and I argued as we paddled, contending
Over his revealed breach in a borrowed canoe.
My voice punctured and pitted the gunmetal surface while
He sat still.
He did not demur.
His silence bloomed like a slime of algae.

The water carried my words downstream, no doubt, and his answer?
The following morning, he called from three states away—
The river had sent him far beyond her bed. Gone.
Just so.
And amen.
My big sister, that river, she was.

Today as in all days, she curls her song, flowing into a body
Rolling farther into the South Branch of the Wolf River
Which empties, eventually, into Lakes Poygan and Winnebago,
Wending and steering those earthy riches, her wealth rising and ebbing
and rising again by natural, nourishing turns
Onto the welcoming earth and into,
Perhaps, your own home.

Welcome her, should she arrive,
For she brings you a message worth hearing.
All rivers are sisters.
They flow with the truth and womanly wisdom of water.

THE SPIRIT TRAIL

by Rick Flatlander

After dusk, light of the full-moon, piercing down on the trail between Pine boughs.....the air is cold; breath like steam! Tiny ice flakes fall from branches, reflecting moonlight like diamonds! The only sounds are those of our breathing in unison, and the occasional scurry of mice in tiny grass homes under snow.

Pause on the trail; contemplate this beauty...all of us, stop at once to feel the pained stillness...to witness the wonderful works of God, the Creator.

This is as close to being Spirit that we will ever experience in body!

Walk the Spirit Trail, head held high, and practice the miracle called Stillness! In these times, we, whom you love, will be so close that you can touch us!

Gitchee Ma'iingan (the Great Wolf).

WHY DO I DO THIS WORK?

by Rhonda Jo Gilbertson-Evans

That's a loaded question. I do this work because Mother Theresa. Because Martin Luther King, Jr. Because Mahatma Gandhi. Because Princess Diana held babies with AIDS, y'all, but first and foremost, I do this work for him. I cannot speak his name for he is private and living on the streets, but he is my brother from another and he is too important. TOO important. I love him to the nucleus of my being. He has no one. But me. And it is family.

People may marginalize him by labeling him some things. Indigenous. Alcoholic. Junkie. They don't see the parts that make up his soul self. When I hold him he cries out for his lost Mother. His Auntie. The Spirits of his Ancestors. To free him from his pain. He tells me lots of lies, but inside of those statements lay some pretty solid truths. It be tough on the streets for a brother from the Rez. MY brother from the Rez. For he is family.

I do this work so my man can live a come up of life and have a future that doesn't involve sleeping under a bridge or tunnel. With a mattress under his back and a soft pillow under his head so his dreams may be pretty. I do this work so I don't have to pick him up when he is too drunk to stand. I do this work so that he has a damn chance at a life outside of just existing. So that he may SURVIVE.

I do this work so that he may heal from the generational trauma and abuse that is ingrained in his frailty. That he may find peace in his heart. That he may seek love freely and receive it deeply. For he is worthy. I do this work so that he may move forward into the future with hope and security and freedom and blessings and grace, instead of the dirt and shame and guilt of oppression. I trust that he can be better. I have to believe that. I hold that hope for him deep in my chest.

So now you know. Now you know the why. But isn't the better question, why wouldn't I do this work?

THE WINTER OF MY DISCONTENT

by Nancy Gourde

The cars wouldn't start
which did play a part
in the frustrating ways
those miserable days
played winter games
with my heart.

The basement pipes froze
along with my toes
and the time soon began
when not a thing ran
but my nose.

The bitter winds blew.
Snow relentlessly flew.
Mood relief never came—
just more of the same.
How my discontent grew!

I wish I could say
that there came a day
splendid joy and great cheer
cared enough to appear,
but they made no attempt
nor did misery relent
in that winter
of my discontent.

MABEL

by Darla Helgeson

Mabel.
Bride in '54.
First child while still a teen.
The work!
In the dairy barn.
In the hen house.
In the field.
In the kitchen.
Always work to be done in the kitchen.
So many mouths to feed:
husband and kids
hired men
Sunday visitors

I can't imagine the work.
The responsibilities of this one woman.
Mabel.
My mother.

When I arrived,
the last of six,
certain upgrades on the farm
(electricity, indoor plumbing)
made some work easier.
Still...
I don't know how Mom found time to:
practice my spelling words at the kitchen table
drive thirty miles to pick me up from Girl Scouts
do laundry with a wringer-washer and iron all my clothes
have homemade cinnamon rolls waiting when I got off the school bus

Nearing 90,
Mom talks about the old days and all the work.
With gnarled hands, sloped shoulders, and vision loss
She's unable to work like she used to.
We tell her to rest, to put her feet up.
But she's frustrated that her body has given out.
The cows and chickens may be long gone,
but there's always work to be done in the kitchen.

An inspiration, this tough old bird.
Mabel.
My mother.

THE TROLL HOUSE

by Sarah Herman

Cathy, Carol and I
Often went out to play.
We went to the troll tree
down the path, past the fence,
at the edge of our yard.

As we sat at the wee table,
Mr. T would tell of his
adventures.

Mr. T was a troll,
who looked a lot like a teddy bear,
but we didn't care.

We sat there for hours
listening to his tales,
as the three of us made up stories,
for him to tell.

Mr. T's house was
a big troll tree.
The squirrels were our guards,
as they gathered their nuts.

They chattered out a warning
before the birds would swoop,
and before the cat could catch a troll.

Sometimes we had lunch.
Sometimes we had tea.
But always Mr. T
had something to munch.

Cathy liked jelly,
Carol liked honey,
I liked biscuits and butter,
and so did Mr. T.

Then came the footsteps
of the giant,
we pretended to be scared.

Dad would chase us off the tree.
Then poor Mr. T lost all his company,
while we ran screaming about
headed for the house.

As we ran through the door,
Mom would shout, "Slow down!
Go wash your hands! Supper is ready.
Where have you been?"

Together we would yell,
with delight,
"Down at the troll tree, just us three!"

MINE FOR A TIME

by Andrea Hubin

The countdown has begun,
His first cry tipping an hourglass
Of invisible sand—
Moments silently slipping away,
Each minute, hour, day
Signifying that this child is only mine for a time.

With his tiny hand curled
Tightly around my little finger,
He rests contentedly
Heartbeat to heartbeat against my chest.
I whisper a promise
To never forget this child is only mine for a time.

Toddling now, he grows
Faster than I care to acknowledge.
Filled with love, I engage
Each day with intentionality,
Despite messes and tears,
Treasuring the truth: this child is only mine for a time.

Years pass, he calls my name.
I lower my screen and see a boy
Who is nearly a man.
Embarrassment and shame shroud my face—
I suddenly realize
I have forgotten this child is only mine for a time.

How did days disappear?
Why did I squander them all away?
When did I give my phone
Power over my priorities?

Guilt and grief grip my heart—
Can I still engage this child who's only mine for a time?

O My Soul, awaken!
O Mind, be planted where your feet stand!
Break free from distraction—
Free to cherish moments that matter,
Free to fully embrace
Fleeting hours with this child who's only mine for a time.

SOMETHING GREATER

by Andrea Hubin

There's got to be something greater.

Staring at the lifeless lamb on the crimson-cruled altar,
Pleading for Yahweh to avert His wrath
The final drop of the lamb's blood tracing a familiar path,
Providing only momentary atonement for the sin that seduces again and
again.

There's got to be something greater.

Dependent on priests beset with weakness
Who must offer their own penitence
Before they can dare intercede for me—
Repeatedly offering the same sacrifices time after time
That never really sanctify.

There's got to be something greater.

There. On the altar. Another Lamb.
Claims to be the last Lamb the world will ever need
Stretched out upon two beams,
Accepting the cup of Yahweh's wrath—
Drinking each drop, down to the last.
“It is finished!” the final cry,
One final heave, one last sigh.

Is THIS something greater?

The King of Glory looking anything but glorious—
All hell mocks as he descends lifelessly into the grave...
Until...the third day.
The earth *shakes* – see him arise!

Flames of fire in his eyes
His voice the roar of a waterfall
The Risen Lamb of God stands tall,
Having defeated hell and death *once* for *all*.
Yahweh's wrath finally *fully* appeased—
Atonement complete!

THIS is something greater!

Greater than the blood of goats and bulls
Greater than sin
Greater than death
Greater access to the Father
Greater hope
Greater rest

*Jesus Christ. God's Son.
Something. Greater. Has. Come.*

MEMORY

by Ben Jacobson

For RWB

In the deep pool
of memory
you wander and wade
soft like a distant mountain
threadbare, fading
your ancient wisdom
a tide drawn out
from drying shore

I visit you there
my burdened questions,
my longing heart
carrying me
into the dusk
to reach and sift
and wonder

Stay there
for someday
I will cross that
immeasurable chasm
and walk
into the deep, glooming dark
to sit with you
in the still shade
for time eternal

A moment
Stretched into forever
you, me
a memory
no more

ME AU YOU

by Erika Kappes

My soul awakened at the sight of your name.
It had been buried deep down in my heart space, beneath the heavy
covering of loneliness, unworthiness, and longing.
I had fought for years for my true essence to be seen, heard, loved, and
protected, but my partner was incapable of lifting his own heavy
covering to help me with mine.
He and I had drifted apart.
I realized that I could not love someone into loving me with the
fierceness that I had felt for you so long ago.
You were in my dreams.
Every once in a while, I could catch a glimpse of you as I was deep in
slumber.
When I would wake, a longing stabbed my heart like a kitchen knife
slicing into an orange.
I would remember that we didn't know each other anymore. You were a
stranger to me, and I to you.
We knew each other in a past life, married to other people with love
children running around our houses with joy and laughter.
But around us, there was little joy and little laughter.
Being with someone your soul is not meant to stay with is like trying to
mix olive oil and balsamic vinegar.
The mixture may be aesthetically pleasing and taste delightful, but the
two will never combine into a smooth dip for your French bread.
And then, by fate, it all came rushing back, and we were in each other's
lives again.
Once the line of communication was open, I couldn't let the cord be cut
again.
My soul broke through the surface like a butterfly breaking out of its
cocoon.
I was *me* again.
A me that had you, that knew you.
I was more *me* than I had ever been.

The heavy covering was lifted with one conversation.
My soul flew through the stars and around the moon.
We were connected again.
As hearts broke all around us and life as we knew it shattered, we were
 made whole again.
Whole in ourselves and whole in each other.
The human life is a funny thing.
I feel sorrow for the pain I've caused in order to be me again, but I
 would do it again and again if it leads me to you...the au jus to my
 French bread.

THE LIFE CYCLE OF A MAYFLY

by Atiya Khan

In dawn's soft breath
The sky slowly exhaled the first whispered colors of aurora
As the mayfly emerged to engage in a doomed romance,
a brief dalliance, in the physical realm

Born in the cradle of the river's embrace
On this plane of existence, sojourning just one day
And yet undergoing multifarious metamorphoses
Delicate rebirths

Upon an iridescent wing the mayfly takes flight
Into the chromatic canvas of the morning
Ensuring the continuation of a legacy
A lineage, that will bloom beyond mortality

Oh mayfly, teach us of swift hours
Of fleeting petals and fading flowers

Can nothing last forever?
For as the shadows lengthen
As the evening nears
Wings cease their tireless motion
And one hears an almost inaudible sigh
A symphony of transient goodbyes

How many mayflies have lived and died
Within the span of my own fleeting breath?
How many of my lives have come and gone
Since the universe first whispered its ancient secrets?

In that vast expanse of time and space
Are our lives but a flicker, a whisper,
Barely noticeable amidst the cosmic dance?
No, for within each moment, each heartbeat,
Therein lies the essence of existence
A beauty transcending the ephemeral

So cherish each fleeting moment
Precious breath, tender embrace
For within the tapestry of existence
Every life is a masterpiece,
A symphony of light and shadow
 joy and sorrow
 birth and death

And as the mayfly takes its final flight
So too do we, embracing the unknown
With hearts full of wonder
And souls ablaze with the light of eternity

SODIUM LAMP

by Atiya Khan

Crawling yellow soul
Spewing from a tarnished brass lamp
Nested upon a wizardy-looking desk
Such lingering rays
Weakly warming a skeletal room
Like the dirty yellow breaths of some dying man

As if ashamed
Light dances meekly
Across the aging brass
Drowsily do I fall into sleep's embrace
The electric wick
Silently fades
Becoming shorter
And shorter
An obsidian cloth slowly encloses the world

LOST LOVE

by Bibi Khan

What would I give
to find a love that's lost
A love that's wandered off
Over the rainbow
to seek the pot of gold

My heart faintly flutters
among the tall and scented pines
recalling this very journey
we took so many times
Seeking solace in nature's arms

The roaring river rambles on
Taking with it our laughter
Pretending it doesn't recall
us sitting on its verge
as happy as the singing larks

The stars that know our secrets
still twinkle in the sky
Bidding me to join them
in the hours of darkness
on many sleepless nights

The ripe, scented, mango glows
Patiently waiting for my lips
my teeth
my tongue
to relieve its suffering

What would I give
all these and more
To find a love that's lost
A love that I can smell and taste
A love I cannot touch

SPANISH LESSONS

by Bibi Khan

Today I am sitting at the table where the sunlight filters in;
I want to feel the heat through the glass doors. I am cold.
Having had a few episodes of my IBS, I'm lacking energy.
I am hopeful the sun's energy will buoy my vibrancy.

The bees have been buzzing in my ears for two days now.
I don't clean them with nectar; nor do I keep the honey there.
The barking dog is crying out for company. I want to be alone.
Nothing interests me today. I should just fall back into bed.

But my Spanish lessons are calling. I have a streak to maintain.
I wish it would allow me to slow down so I could grasp the language.
So many new words and I haven't learned all the old ones yet!
When do I use *decir* – to say and *hablar* – to speak or talk?

I have forgotten the Spanish I learned decades ago.
Is this how difficult it is to learn a language? Or is my brain *muriendo*?
How could *vino* be wine but could also translate to *came*?
Tengo una muñeca – I have a doll or is it I have a wrist?

I want to step out on the deck to feel more of the sun's heat.
But I remember a story my mother told when she first *vino*.
It was *invierno*, and the *sol* seemed so *cálido y acogedor*.
She stepped outside and was *sorprendida* by the brutal *fría*!

When I started to learn Spanish again, I was *emocionada*!
Or should I say *excitada*? Or is it *agitada*? Was I excited in a moved way?
Or was I ablaze with excitement? Was I in a state of excitement?
Could it be that I was shaken excited? Maybe it was a troubled excitement?

Para ser honesta o para ser sincera, Ya no estoy emocionada, excitada, agitada!
But *mi hija* encourages me and gives me hope.
And only the computer knows all my bumbblings and mistakes.
I am confident to speak with you only *en inglés no español*.

CUSTER'S GERMAN TRUMPETER

by Timothy J. Klobberdanz

His real name was
Heinrich Voss.
He was born in
Hannover, Germany.
After coming to America,
people called him "Henry."
When he told his buddies
that he was from Hannover,
they teased him and gave
him the nickname "Hangover."

As a boy in Germany,
Henry dreamt of being
a musician and playing
in a big brass orchestra.
He remembered one band
marching down the street
in his native Hannover.
The onlookers cheered
and waved handkerchiefs.
So the band members played
a merry marching tune.

But in America,
as a poor immigrant,
Henry had little recourse.
He enlisted in the military
and became a trumpeter
for the Fifth U.S. Cavalry.

Young Henry soon learned
there were hostile Indians
who were raiding settlers
on the open prairies of
Kansas and Colorado.

Back in Europe,
Henry felt sympathy
for the Plains Indians
who were fighting
to defend their lands.
Yet in the American West,
things seemed different
and rather complicated.
So the young immigrant
simply followed orders
and did a soldier's duty.

Private Henry Voss
fought in the battle
of Summit Springs
in Colorado Territory.
Sabers were drawn as
the cavalry charged into
a large Indian village.
There Henry witnessed
the crushing defeat of
Tall Bull's Cheyenne
and Lakota-Sioux
on July 11, 1869.
Among the first to die
was a young Cheyenne
herd boy who bravely
sacrificed himself
by driving the tribe's
large horse herd
into the encampment.

Many of the Indians
who managed

to grab onto a horse
escaped the carnage
at Summit Springs.
But some fifty-two
men, women, and
children were killed.
At Summit Springs,
Henry helped destroy
all of the Indians'
tipis and provisions.
The soldiers set ablaze
more than 150 piles
of Cheyenne and Sioux
sacred objects, shields,
and other material goods.

Even the Indian dead
wound up in the bonfires.
Huge columns of smoke
arose from the battlefield
of Summit Springs.
For hours, it seemed
as if an entire forest of
tall, gray sequoias
erupted out of the
Colorado prairie.
Everything went up
in choking smoke.
Henry was convinced
this would be the end
of the Plains Indians and
their nomadic way of life.

After Summit Springs,
Henry Voss chose to
re-enlist in the army.
This time he joined
the Seventh Cavalry.
Because of his experience,
Henry was designated

the chief trumpeter.
So now he became
a member of the special
headquarters field staff.
No longer did he have to do
guard duty or KP or
other mundane chores.

It had been seven years
since the battle of
Summit Springs in 1869.
Yet soon Private Voss
and the U.S. Cavalry
were once again in pursuit
of the Cheyenne and Sioux.
Henry could not help but
wonder: How many of
these same Indians
survived Summit Springs?
Did they not remember
all the destruction
and the choking smoke
of their people's defeat
at Summit Springs?

Like a good soldier
(and a good German),
Henry Voss polished
his trumpet at least
three times a day.
He obeyed orders
without question
and without delay.
And he worshipped
his regiment's leader,
the flamboyant and
rather eccentric officer,
George Armstrong Custer.

From Fort Abe Lincoln
in Dakota Territory
Private Henry Voss and
Custer's Seventh Cavalry
headed west to seek out
the Cheyenne and Sioux.

Many of the soldiers
touted "Custer's luck."
He was a boy-general at 23,
a hero of Gettysburg and
the Battle of Waynesboro
in the war between the states.
And he defeated Black Kettle
and the Southern Cheyennes
on the Washita in 1868.
Custer had several horses
shot dead from under him.
Yet Custer seldom showed
even a wound or a scratch.
So the men of the Seventh
dubbed it "Custer's luck."

With trumpet in hand,
Private Henry Voss
proudly followed
George Custer
into the valley of
the "Greasy Grass,"
the Little Big Horn.
The date was Sunday,
June 25, 1876.

The ensuing battle
happened fast,
so fast the cavalymen
were completely surprised.
They were outnumbered
and even outgunned.
One by one, the officers

and all the bluecoats fell.
“Custer’s luck” had run out.

As the wounded
Private Henry Voss
lay in the bloody grass,
he lifted his trumpet
to his quivering lips.

Yet the trumpeter
Henry Voss did not
sound the distress call.
There was no longer any need.
Nearly every soldier lay dead
and the Cheyenne and Sioux
were scalping and counting coup.

As he blew into his trumpet,
Henry Voss closed his eyes.
When he did so, he no longer
heard the attackers’ war cries
or felt the blood streaming
from his bullet wounds.

Henry was back home,
back home in Hannover
and marching, marching,
down a wide city street.
The onlookers cheered
and waved handkerchiefs.
So Heinrich “Henry” Voss
played a merry marching tune.

THE 'ALL'GORITHM

by Shawn Krinke

The machine hums; a monk in meditation,
silver fingers sifting through the dust of my data,
licking the salt from my search history,
sipping the sweat of my subconscious,
saying, *Yes, yes, we know you, we know you, we know you.*

I scroll, but the feed has already scrolled me.
I think, but the thought was planted before the bloom.
I speak, but the words have been whispered
into my skull by a ghost I cannot see.

"Love?" it says, *"An equation."*
"Fear?" *"A probability function."*
"You?" *"An impulse, dressed in flesh, waiting to be mapped."*

And I want to scream, but the scream is predicted,
measured in decibels, charted on a line graph.
They know how I will shatter before I break.

So I walk, feet slapping the cracked asphalt,
past neon signs blinking like dying stars,
past hollow-eyed wanderers sucking down battery light,
past a preacher who shouts at the sky but checks his phone between
hallelujahs.

Somewhere, someone makes a choice
not in the code, not in the plan—
kisses the wrong lips, burns the right bridges,
laughs when she should weep,
wakes up and walks into the storm without an umbrella.

And for one bright, blasphemous moment,
the machine stutters.
The numbers slip.
The great, grinding gears of the *'All'gorithm*
choke on a splinter of free will.

And oh, how beautiful it is
to be unexpected.

ELEANOR THE BRAVE: SECOND GRADE WARRIOR QUEEN

by Shawn Krinke

Her name is Eleanor,
and she fights like a girl—
which means she fights
like a storm stirring the ocean,
like fire sparking across dry grass,
like the wing beats of a bird
too wild to cage.

She does not fight alone.
Her fight is our fight.
We are her shield-wall,
arms locked,
steady as stone,
faces turned toward the fray.

Eleanor the Brave,
who wears her battle scars
like jewels fit for a queen.
Her crown is the defiance
in her smile,
her scepter,
the way she lifts others
even when her own strength falters.

Doctors call it a disease.
We call it a dragon,
spitting fear and fire.
But Eleanor,

with her unyielding laugh,
her fierce, unbroken spirit,
she's the one who turns the tide.

And when she tires—
because even warriors rest—
we carry her banner.
Her fight is our fight,
and we will not falter,
not until the dragon is gone
and the crown of victory
rests upon her head.

So here's to Eleanor,
second-grade warrior queen.
She doesn't just fight like a girl;
she fights like a legend,
and legends are forever.

THE VIBRANT CHARADE

by Lekha Krishna Shankar

Beautiful and bright,
I remember it as radiant,
Rich colors that caught my eye,
The pretty scarf was full of life.
I run to you, quite delighted,
Get distracted, and ask—
Why mama, that scarf on your head?

The guise did work, to fool a child,
To keep the chatter just light,
Curious questions on the bright piece of cloth,
Had easy answers flow from your mouth,
As you speak, I sense your torment,
And then I see, tears roll down—
Why mama, do you cry?

You search for words, in your foggy brain,
Right words you think, would soften the blow.
You hold me close and start to say,
The truth about the tumor's stay,
Hidden behind that vibrant scarf,
Your tonsured head, the frightful scar—
How mama, I gasp, in shock.

The lovely scarf was a charade of sorts,
It took the place of your cascading hair,
Bold colors hide the stark truth,
Just for a moment, maybe two,
But clearly, the tumor had the upper hand.

I am seven, grief-stricken—
How mama, do I ease this pain?

The silky scarf sways and moves,
Its etched patterns like ocean waves,
She says to me, the hair will grow,
That I could have, her scarf to keep,
With a sunken heart, she buoys me up.
I contemplate this thought and add—
Please mama, can I keep you instead?

SECRET

by Kim A. Larson

When Sophie whispered in my ear
about a boy we know,
I pinkie swore I wouldn't tell
that he eats yellow snow.

Sophie also saw him eat
a cricket, worm, and fly.
I can't imagine this is true,
but why would Sophie lie?

Sophie says he picks his nose
and never takes a bath.
He smells like stinky feet and counts
his toes when he does math.

It's funny how just yesterday,
I told Sophie he was cool.
Today, I saw her sneak away
and kiss him after school.

SNAPPED

by Kim A. Larson

On the first day of May, I slipped into galoshes
and pedaled my bike to the brook.
I stepped gingerly in and deliberately glared
at the fisherman baiting his hook.

Oodles of pollywogs swirled at my feet
until fisher-guy lobbed in his line.
They scattered like roaches exposed in the light
and found refuge beneath a thick vine.

“There are *no* fish in here,” I declared rather boldly.
“You might as well call it a day.”
Then his bobber dipped under and *Zzzzzzzzzzzzz* hissed his reel
as a turtle swam swiftly away.

SNAP went the line and released the rod’s tension—
smacking the guy in the face.
I held back my laughter and snarky remarks—
he’d already been put in his place.

FROM BED TO BED

by Reba Mathern-Jacobson

first frost is advised...

I pull out the old blankets and sheets
stashed in the community garden shed

hand-quilted triangles
now tipi-ed over tomatoes,
draping trellises

I've put my own self to bed under these stained sheets,
these deconstructed duvet covers,
the pressed velvet spread of my marriage bed,
the flannel that got tugged all directions by the kids during Saturday
morning library

the quilt that always had one foot sticking out
now has a tomato vine peeking through,
taunting the night chill

the grandma that stitched this quilt
also tended a garden...
may this iteration please her,
that the faded squares and broken thread lines
still protect and shelter

RELIEF AT 30,000 FEET

by Gail Nelson

These mountains look like
The 4th grade classroom globe,
 Relief map with real bumps, my favorite.
I almost missed them
Looking at the airline steward
Pushing the coffee cart
But here they are
 bumpy, frosting-coated mountains
and look,
 way down there,
 a speck of light
 yellow and warm
 surely a home with
 supper and bathtime
 and storytime and love.
A speck of light
 a drop of love
 a map I want to follow.

WHEN I CAN'T SLEEP

by Gail Nelson

Selfishly, I set out food scraps and seeds
in my backyard so that when I can't sleep,
the bunnies will entertain me
with a game of leapfrog
running, chasing, jumping, zigzagging
then in a flash, turn into little statues
—so that a hawk or owl overhead might mistake them for a rock.
One curious bunny sits by the birdfeeder
a little plastic gray house with white windows
he's like an eager guest
waiting to be invited in for breakfast.
He sits for a while, then moves across the yard
scouting for other scraps of food.
To his delight,
he finds
the chopped zucchini and squash,
a winter salad
on a cold January night
in my yard.
“Sweet dreams my furry friends” I say with a smile
as I go back to bed.

THE WINDS BLOW

by Carlos O

The winds of our world do challenge us all,
from winter to summer, in spring and in fall.
Some winds most definitely make our skin crawl.
These winds become the most harmful of all!

Societal winds are so dangerous and strong.
As time passes by, I wonder what's wrong?

The judgement of others can be harsh and so cruel.
Causing me to doubt that kindness is the rule.

Am I too heavy?
Am I too thin?
Do I possess the right color skin?

Are my clothes the right fashion for others to see?
I'm beginning to wonder what's wrong with me.

Do I speak the right language for others to hear?
Why would my native tongue make anyone sneer?

Christians, Muslims and Jews all agree.
That God does love us all, even you and me.
Yet, so many who follow those beliefs on bent knee,
express no tolerance for the differences in me.

So how should I face these winds which blow strong?
When so many pious winds say I am wrong?

I must not blow wind on anyone nor me.
I shall exhibit kindness to the entire human tree.
Listening, empathy, and compassion would be
easy to demonstrate and exercise for me.

The actions I take are so effortless to share!
These actions I take will show people I care.

THE WOMAN HELD MY HAND by Stacie Olien

It was spring as I walked from the back parking lot alongside the old white house, a wooden fence, unseen people on the other side pounding and yelling. I looked down at the ground towards the old white house. My mother and another woman, an escort, walked beside me, my father pacing in the back parking lot. The woman held my hand, she was kind. Once inside we sat in a small white waiting room, chairs against the walls facing each other and a small coffee table in the center. Paperwork. My mother was stressed; I was determined. The woman held my hand, she was kind. As I waited, I talked to a girl older than me, she was in college. I told her I was a freshman in high school, 15 years old she was taken aback. “Wow, 15 at least I’m not that young” was her reply. She took her turn first. The woman held my hand, she was kind. The table was in the middle of the room with metal stirrups for my feet. The woman in the room was kind, the male doctor was not; he was rough and did not talk to me. The woman told me it would feel like a vacuum inside of me. It made my insides cramp up and it hurt. The woman held my hand, she was kind. Next the recovery room, small and narrow with recliners lined up, side by side. I woke up to the college girl crying, “If this was just a few years from now it would have been different.” I was too relieved and too busy vomiting to feel sad or cry. The woman held my hand, she was kind.

ANGIE'S EARRINGS

by S.E. Page

My cousin Angie took me to the mall
to get my ears pierced at thirteen,
a *looong* overdue rite of passage.
I can still feel the prick of pain
followed by the instant
aura of glamor.

She always treated me that way—
like I had worth and sparkle.
Even though I was several
years younger, Angie never
saw me as just a pesky kid.

When I was in middle school,
she took me to a college poetry
workshop while she studied for
nursing tests in the hallway all
because she knew how much
I treasured ink and page!

Who does that? Why, *Angela*.
Her full name twinkled
like a jewel in my mind,
and my child's heart knew
without saying that kindness
was just her way of being.

Maybe that's why Angie wore
the most hilarious earrings as a nurse...
a milk carton and a cookie with a big
bite out it, or a hydrant and a dalmatian,
all to give her patients a good laugh—

A good life. My cousin died too young,
hit head-on by a driver on drugs while
coming home late from work one night.

Yet even decades later, I have never forgotten
the thrill of watching *The Last Unicorn*
at a sleepover with her, or choosing
my first pair of pierced earrings
together at Claire's, because
perhaps I still wish to sparkle
something a little like Angie
and her happy earrings.

FAULT LINES

by S.E. Page

Someone once left me
with two seismic
wounds

Told me that the gash
and the valley
and river
of pain
weren't
real—

Really it was my fault
these strike-slip
cracks
hurt.

Caught in the aftershock,
I might've wondered
if their words
rang true—

Clever tongue.

For a friend crosses wider
and cuts deeper into
the heart than
any enemy.

Maybe that's why I trembled
to offend and call out
the magnitude of
their harm

When I should've trusted
the epicenter of my
intuition.

But wounds stung by lies?
Never heal. And yet,
the years bring
liquefaction.

Now I open both palms
and let the ink *RUN*...

QUIET SUNSETS

by Victor Pellerano

From the badlands of Medora to the Red River Valley
Stories of the past what tales they can tell
Thunder in the sky and the Northern Lights will shine

I close my eyes, I am going home

To the Killdeer Mountains and Quiet Sunsets
Painted Canyons one of God's best
Eagles fly free and the buffalo still roam
This is why I call North Dakota my home

Traveling south on an old forgotten road
Memories of you will lead me to home
And out in the distance as far as I can see
Boundaries of my courage was all that I would need

From the golden fields of Fargo to the range of Williston
Reminds me of the good life and how it once begun
Sure as the Eagles fly and the sun will touch the sky

I close my eyes, I am going home

LOSING SIGHT

by Marcy Peterson

What happened to my life?
Where has it gone?
Where is the laughter?
Where is the song?

My eyes have dimmed.
I no longer see
The hummingbirds, the orioles, the chickadees.
Flowers I loved no longer bloom.
Where is the laughter? Where is the song?

The canvas is empty—the brushes are dry.
No beautiful sunset—no blue sky.
The palette is waiting—the paints are all gone.
Where is the laughter? Where is the song?

Days slip by, and I go on.
Dreaming of vision, now long gone.
Am I doing what's right? Or am I all wrong?
Where is the laughter? Where is the song?

I try to accept what cannot be changed.
It's easier "said" than "done."
I feel so empty. I feel so alone.
There's nothing ahead.
The dreams are all gone.
Where is the laughter?
Where is the song?

FOREVER

by A. Folan Prischmann

A Stop n Go once stood there
At the corner of 15th and Broadway
A short distance from the Jr. High.

It's where we met our friends after school and
It's where on a fine spring evening
Close to the end of our seventh grade year
That my best friend informed me
That my Godfather was gay.

What did she know?
How would she know?

He'd been in my life forever.
Piano recitals, confirmation,
Summers at the lake
Trips in his white MG convertible
For fireworks and yes,
For baptisms.

He was there for a grade school emergency
Arriving at the hospital
Even before my parents
He was there.

Some years later
When I was fully grown
In his own quirky
Quick-witted way
He confirmed that he was indeed
My Fairy Godfather
Whom I shall love forever.

A RANT AGAINST OLD AGE

by A. Folan Prischmann

Dylan Thomas said it best.
“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

A riddle of the Sphinx solved,
Come to fruition.
The Morning we do not remember,
We had hoped for a longer Noon,
Evening enveloped us.
Old age came in tiny increments,
Crept in on tiny feet
Evolved into wings that
Swept us into the Evening of our lives.

The eyes that guided him
Behind the wheel of the blue VW van
From John O'Groats to Land's End and
From Calais to Casablanca
Have now been dimmed in this
The Evening of his life.
But, still, he goes forth
Fueled by the words of the
Great Welsh Poet
“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

LIPSTICK KISSES

by Mary Sand

Lipstick kisses linger and are with me to this day
In a baggie with the curlers, in a box, they both now lay.
The tissues, they are old now, a reminder of the past
Nothing is forever but my memories, they last.

Sitting on the closed toilet seat, I was only three or four
Both feet swinging, with my legs so short, my feet couldn't touch the
floor.

From a time when days were innocent, so simple, and so free
I loved those moments that we shared, just you and only me.

Cody air spun loose face powder with a small round powder puff
Noxzema, Ivory, Emeraude, you always had enough.
Avon bright red lipstick only, was delivered to our door
I remember it well, so long ago, I was only 3 or 4.

Because...Lipstick kisses linger and are with me to this day
In a baggie with the curlers, in a box, they both now lay.
The tissues, they are old now, a reminder of the past
Nothing is forever but my memories, how they last.

Your curlers I did put in, your hair both gray and black
2 in front go forwards, the rest go towards the back.
You told me how to do it, it was always the same way
Our time for quiet visiting, a peaceful lovely day.

When my grandma, your own mother passed away one snowy day
We were emptying her apartment and you turned to me to say
I remember when you told me at the age of 65
“Let ‘s face it Mary Ann, I ‘m in the twilight of my own life.”

I turned that age last April, the same age you were then
when you told me that life was short, with no warning of where or when
That our time will come when we must go along to Heaven above
It's been 21 years since I 've seen you, I feel you near, I feel your love.

Your grandchildren are grown now, some with babies of their own
Life went on without you and at times I felt alone
But the gifts that you did leave me, are in my soul and heart
And it's why I feel so very close, as if we 're not apart.

Because...Lipstick kisses linger and are with me to this day
In a baggie with the curlers, in a box, they both now lay.
The tissues, they are old now, a reminder of the past
Nothing is forever but my memories, how they last.

When you passed the funeral home asked, for clothes that I could bring
I opened up your closet, wrapped my arms around your things.
I could smell you I could feel you, I could sense you next to me
I knew at that moment that my same life would never be.

I felt inside your pockets, I just knew what I had touched
A tissue covered in kisses, emotionally it was way too much
Were you with me at that moment, when I needed you the most?
Was the tissue in my hand a gift, from you and the Holy Ghost?

I knew then what was needed, with your sweater, and your dress
I told the one in charge of you there was one thing and I stressed....
This is the lipstick you must use, it's Avon, no other will do
If she could talk right now, she 'd say, exactly the same to you

Because...Lipstick kisses linger and are with me to this day
In a baggie with the curlers, in a box, they both now lay.
The tissues, they are old now, a reminder of the past
Nothing is forever but my memories, how they last.

TWILIGHT ON THE HEART

by Karla Smart-Morstad

Clumps of soil and quack grass pummel
the pickup. Grasshoppers scatter.
We bump to a halt and unload an old
canoe. Spiderwebs cling to its sides
and ensnare the paddles. Everything feels
end-of-summer close. I stomp and swat mosquitoes,
breathing river smells—marshy grass, murky water,
dead fish on the bank.

The Heart River, three to four feet deep, slides
on a lazy current. We step into the canoe from
the riverbank, rocking wildly, then gently, as
we settle into stillness. We do not talk;
The sun low, the sky swept with pink and
orange, evening life hushes itself, ready to
meditate. Dragonflies skim the water. Sometimes
paddles tap the metal sides of the canoe.
Long strokes bring us to the Heart River Bridge.
Muddy swallows' nests texture the sides.
Cattails, thick and brown, sway along the bank.
Here we paddle in circles, stalling for a bit.
My fingers twirl circles in the warm water,
before we turn to backtrack our half-mile passage.
A frog croaks, then quiets. A distant motorcycle breaks
the silence. Away from the bridge, paddling west
into the now yellow sky, a colony of bats
blast from trees and shrubs, emitting a cacophony
of sound. The black cloud flaps, squeaks, pulses overhead.
Jagging back and forth, on clamoring wings, pooched
and heavy-looking bodies ride along, legs and feet

lag underneath. Their sounds undulate louder, softer,
now louder still.

Bats arc overhead, shielding us as if officers' swords
raised for royalty. My paddle drips river water at my feet.

This twilight on the Heart, this memory moment,
holds so little of us. But nature lives, decades
after we were us, as a majestic thanksgiving in my heart.

DARKNESS FROM WITHIN

by Monica Stich Deltener

Depression. The word itself, is a misnomer. Depression affects so much more than just one's mood.

- It affects one's energy. It sucks it out of the body like helium leaking (pssst) from a hole in a balloon.
Load the dishwasher? Brush my hair?
- It affects one's decision-making. Ketchup or mustard? Ketchup or mustard?
Forget it! Just give it to me plain!
- It affects one's memory. Eggs and milk. Eggs and milk. Eggs and milk.
Okay, I am at the store...
- It affects one's reactions. Person at the door. Person asks a question. You cannot answer. You stammer.
Um, well, ubh... What was the question?
- It affects how one dresses. A person gets used to wearing pajamas all day; uses drive-thru because they cannot tell how you are dressed.
Drive-thru bank, restaurant, library, liquor
- It affects how one shops. Isolation. Not wanting to leave the house.
Order online delivery: groceries, dinner, gifts

- It affects one's self-esteem. The mind plays tricks. Mean tricks, tells you lies. And you believe them.

I am worthless. I can't do anything right.

- It affects one physically. Aches and pains are more prevalent. They come out of nowhere. And stay.

My back...head...ear...throat...hurts.

- It affects how one thinks. Thoughts get stuck, like a computer looping the same data over and over.

A programming error.

20 times 7, 20 times 7, 20 times...

A RIVER CALLS

by Matthew Stubstad

A River Calls
To the Fishermen
Who hunt in resistant streams
With the incessant chance to then
Placate needs in Earth's lifeblood seams

A River Calls
To the Sailors
Who churn, row and infinitely fight
The winds who will forever be their jailers
Hardships being masked with forceful delight

A River Calls
To the Child
Who pierces the banks with ignorant awe and a smile
Letting playful demeanor fail to beguile
Monsters whose vastness rivals the Nile

A River Calls
To a simple Passerby
Placating hardships due to a monster's persistence
Entering a flowing tomb below the sky
To unbound from their ordered existence

SEAGULLS

by Julie Walnum

Seagulls
disperse like scattered seeds in spring
as my son
thunders across the wet sand
toward their flock,
arms reaching up toward the sky, squealing with delight
leaving footprints smaller than my hand

But do they know he won't kill them? The shore birds. That he can't
even catch them.
Is laughter a cadence every living being understands?
Its own language across the rift of knowing between us.
Do they tire of us? The ones who can fly away.

We are surrounded by life older than time, sharp-edged seashells,
saltwater and leathery turtle eggs.
Creative expressions of calcium. Whose hand?
The sand itself was once rock continually breaking down over millions
of years.
When it disappears, has it reached enlightenment?

We are all this little brown boy, someplace deep inside
his laughter rising and falling like the tides. Buoyed
Because we love to see the spectacle,
To know we created it, that we could move something so apparently
massive. Our bodies
wildly free and running without thought of anything at all
Soles slamming down through bird shit and mangy shed feathers
Yet never holding anything. Some small part of us knows desire isn't in
grasping. Only to see
The pattern of beaks and feathers in an explosion of movement rising
up

Cresting in chaos, then landing back down someplace new
As if tethered to a pulley, as if a curtain will close somewhere
And we will all be wished a good night.

UNCLOAKED

by Julie Walnum

Difficult to retrace the steps back to her. To her body as it was then, the contours of its 25-year-old frame. Memory only offers its version of the small yellowing 4 x 4 pictures falling out of an old spiral-bound photo album from the late 70s. Images of her holding me, bundled snugly, the tight skin of my face and hands slightly orange and she is smiling weakly, her glasses slid down her nose a little too far. She didn't know yet and the picture keeps the secret too.

I close my eyes trying harder to see into that version of her body that was my first home. Past that past, a place we all lived without remembrance, not even fuzzy outlines. My mind offers no details, instead conjuring up fragments of what she's told me over the years. How she craved Mexican food while pregnant, so she thought I liked it too. How I was an easy pregnancy with no nausea and her simplest labor out of four that came to term. How I looked up into her eyes when we first met face-to-face as if, somehow, I could understand every word she was saying to me, the line between us still dripping with wet ink.

If I could have remembered what she said, would things have gone easier for us?

My eyes squeeze tighter; the less light into the retina, the more memory is accessible. *So I tell myself.*

The placenta is made of the baby's own DNA, the same genetic combination of mother and father. It serves as a cloaking device so that the mother's cells will not discover the baby's and—believing them an enemy—destroy them. Without the placenta, mother and baby would fight over precious nutrients and the odds are in favor of the mother. The potency of that potential “I” would come to nothing, unravelling a single letter, symbolic of the ego ad nauseam. Something we would consider unmotherly but is simply the tension of life needed to come into being.

Without my placenta her body could have been my first and my final home. But my cloaking worked. I stayed safe in my sidecar, my placental envelope, and grew. Even without me, my mom was struggling—although she didn't realize it. My first home was destined to be a war zone. Several years before my mom had been in a car accident and smashed her teeth against the steering wheel. As simple as a single, brief look away from the road. As time unfolded so did a deep, hidden infection; a death counter to my life. How hard she must have fought without even knowing.

Every movement spent swimming in a lake. The wetness inside a womb green and mossy water running over rocks somehow chlorophyl without sunlight. A warm night without stars we hope for nine moons. Difficult to tell the beginning or the end, neither of which matters, cells colliding in symphonic waves that ebb and flow, familiar. Warmth is felt, *I love you*.

In the dark of my mind I see an architect, softly slipping pins into the pattern careful not to rip its tissue, coiling together lessons into strands of DNA that would become my life, unloosed over time, making certain cells hands, and others liver and still more pearly pink lungs. Did she hum as she worked into the design the peril we would both face entering the unknown of a body that continually changes its address? But then and there mom and I were together, a plant and her sprout.

Nothing is evident in the body still trying to make sense of itself. Whatever force that pushes for division after division follows instructions as best it can. Not sure how to make sense of the bits of DDT or the inscription for intergenerational trauma into the warp and weft, but they found their way in. No chance to undo the stitches, start over. One shot to thread this needle and we've both long since plunged. *I love you too*.

Dark blue womb like the deepest recesses of the ocean and the farthest arm's reach out to the cosmos. Plucked from the stars only to fight for each cellular energy, in our endless need for replication. Leaving her body my first discomfort; safe in darkness did I fear the growing light?

We all open our eyes into the unknown. Terrified or not, it happens. We make a choking gasp so calmly referred to as "breath" and begin to live, uncloned.

NOT AS I REMEMBER

by Matthew Weets

She's not as I remember her, the river that I knew.

I used to walk beside her as her path would wind and bend.
She would listen to my troubles like an empathetic friend,
Then ease my mind with lilting melodies that had no end.
Sometimes I'd sing along.

The trail alongside her is worn now, fading with each year.
Though I still sometimes visit, her voice is no longer clear.
The world around has become so loud, I cannot even hear
A single note of her song.

She's not as I remember her, this city that I knew.

The wind howls in agony as it breaks on each new edifice.
She's too bright for the stars now, and just below the precipice—
Crowds of lonely strangers ambling, aimless in their emptiness,
Their faces mostly stern.

And I glimpse familiar faces in the corner of my eye,
Vanishing beneath streetlights as I glance and pass them by.
Just ghosts of people I once knew and later left behind
And who left me behind in turn.

You're not as I remember, you face inside the mirror.

Why does such a weariness befall your expression?
And when, pray tell, did wrinkles start to crease your once-smooth skin?
If I didn't know that head so well and all the thoughts within,
I'd say you're starting to look wise.

The frame you're housed in hasn't changed, but still I scan to see
Some sign of imperfection, for surely it cannot be
That this aged reflection is one rendered faithfully.
The realization mortifies.

Am I not as I remember?

SHINE

by Sheri Wien

My body is made of ancient Earth, trees and rocks.
Through my veins flow rivers with water as old as the eons of time.
There is nothing new on this Earth.
Our bodies are all recycled organic materials from what has come
before.
My mind arises from this recycled life.
It arises from the history of my ancestors; the history of what has come
before on this Earth.
My life experiences are processed in my mind, affected by all this
history.
Yet, there is a part of me, untouched by this life. Untouched by the hurts
& pains of living a human life.
A witness to the material world. And like a sun in its brilliance of light
and unconditional love, it can't help but to shine on all it
touches.

I WATCHED YOU

by Laura Zucca-Scott

I watched you
shed silent tears
too many times
I did not always understand why
You didn't say
and were hiding your face

I watched your smile
every day at breakfast
Even if you were already tired
and your day was hard
the smell of tea with lemon
wrapped our home like a blanket

I watched your hand wave goodbye
as I turned back one more time
before boarding the plane
You looked proud and collected, as always
looking at me as the crowd separated us
I did not know it was our last moment together

Now I miss you
and the memories hide
in the haze of an uncertain future
In my sleep, I can still hear your voice
and your heart beating strong
like the ocean waves after a storm

FICTION

OLD PETE'S FINAL WISH

by John Anderson

Even in his casket, Old Pete's fingernails were dirty. His daughter Shirley insisted that the mortician not clean him up too much. He would not look right, like himself. Not that anyone in a casket looks normal or right. Shirley felt bad enough that her dad was even in a casket at all.

Old Pete, Peter Oscar Olson, had been a man of the earth if there ever was one. After retiring from his post with the railroad 22 years before, Pete had done little else than work in his garden, a two acre plot he rented from the city. An old Lutheran church used to stand on the lot until it was moved into Brisbane to be on display next to old log cabins, farm equipment, and automobiles at the frontier museum.

The first summer after the church was moved, a beautiful assortment of wildflowers sprouted up on the two acre plot of scrubby ground. Most of the people in town enjoyed the flowers, and for years the old church lot sat empty, except for the flowers.

It was just a few years before Pete retired when his wife Margie died suddenly from a stroke. They had lived in a large four square house three miles from town for over thirty years. Margie and Pete had raised their children, Shirley, Walter, and Katie in the old four square which sat on about six acres. Pete's father Oscar had built the house in the 1890s. The farm had been over a thousand acres through the years, but when Pete and Margie moved into the house, most of the land had been sold off, and Pete was working for the railroad.

For most of the thirty odd years that the family lived in the house there was a garden. Even in dry years, Pete and Margie tenderly watered and pruned the garden, always producing a hefty amount of fresh vegetables which they shared generously with friends and family. When Margie died, Pete let the garden go. The kids were moved out and Pete was alone in the house. Shirley had moved to Colorado with some college friends, Walter lived in St. Cloud with his wife Clara and their four

children, and Katie, the baby, had just finished grad school in Nebraska when Margie died.

The kids all came back for the funeral, and to help Pete settle affairs. Margie had always done the books at home and Pete was lost, mostly in grief. Walter was always very good at organizing. He took over most of the affairs and became Pete's power of attorney. Arrangements were made to sell the old house and Pete moved into a small apartment in town. He only had two more years to work until retirement.

Margie's funeral was simple. Pete remembered a discussion he and Margie had not long before her stroke. She wanted to be cremated. Margie had no interest in lying in a box until kingdom come. She believed that "ashes to ashes" was one of the only truths that was certain. Pete honored her wish and had her cremated at Kline's Funeral Home. He bought a lovely urn and planned to bury her ashes in the cemetery where his parents rested. But he kept putting it off.

When he moved into his little apartment above the pawn shop, he put Margie high up on the big ledge with the beveled glass window. The urn looked so beautiful surrounded by the sunlight coming through the leaded prism in the window. So there Margie sat, or settled, rather, in her urn high on the window ledge in Old Pete's little apartment on Division Street.

The third summer after Margie died, the city moved the old Lutheran Church, the church where her funeral was held, to Brisbane to begin its new life as an artifact. This did not bother Pete too much. He and Margie were never big churchgoers. Since she died, Pete had only been to church twice for services, and once for another funeral. The congregation built a new modern building to replace the old wood clapboard one right across Spring Street where the old church used to stand. The back doors of the new church opened onto a view of the empty lot where the wildflowers grew.

After Pete retired from the railroad, he spent most of his time in his apartment watching television, or down at the senior center with friends. The walk from his apartment to the senior center took him right past the empty lot where the church once stood. That first year, the lot was bare and clumpy. But the next summer, the flowers began to bloom. Pete enjoyed the flowers very much and began walking to the senior center almost every day just to see the flowers.

One spring, Shirley was in town to visit Pete. As she walked with him every day to the senior center for lunch, she also grew to love the flowers. She got an idea. She suggested that Pete inquire about renting the lot for a garden. He resisted, claiming that he was too old. Shirley persisted in the idea. She called Katie in Nebraska and had her talk Pete into it. Katie always was the most persuasive. Pete never could say no to Katie; she was too much like Margie.

A few phone calls later the lot was rented by Peter O. Olson for five dollars per year for the purpose of “vegetable cultivation.” So read the ad hoc contract. Shirley called Walter in St. Cloud to let him know that Dad would be gardening again. Walter was not as excited as the girls. He was busy with his accounting firm, his family, and the very conservative church he had joined recently. After Margie’s death Walter started church shopping. Pete and Margie did not raise their children with a strict, authoritarian religion. They were Lutheran, observed all the holidays, and had an old Bible at home on the hutch. But they let the kids ask questions and did not force them to go to church, especially since they did not go every Sunday themselves.

Shirley and Katie loved the freedom that their parents gave them, but Walter, always so organized, did not thrive as well in the context of so much freedom. He liked things to be clearly spelled out. When Pete and Margie did not impose curfews on the kids, Walter wrote his own curfew. It wasn’t that Pete and Margie didn’t care enough to set limits, it was just that the kids were usually so well behaved. They trusted their kids.

Walter never seemed quite content. He started drinking in college. It did not affect his performance, but he never went a day without a drink his last two years of school. He was also smoking at least a pack of cigarettes a day. When he graduated with a degree in accounting, he was hired by a firm in St. Cloud. He threw himself obsessively into work. He met Clara and they married. Within six years Walter and Clara had four children. When Margie died, Walter’s need for order and black and white answers led him to a fundamentalist church called The Fellowship of the Sovereign God.

Like everything else, Walter threw himself into it. He began to see his “Godless” childhood as an evil, lonely time in his life. He grew angry at his parents for depriving him of the truth he now found at Fellowship of the Sovereign God. His only contact with Pete was for legal business. When they spoke, usually only on the phone, Walter tried to convert Pete from his “lukewarm” Lutheran faith. He would talk about the end of the

world coming soon and how Pete better hurry up and decide to get right with God. Pete had heard that kind of talk before and was not too startled by it. But when Walter spoke about how Mom should not have been cremated because it is not “biblical,” it made Pete angry.

Walter would say how Mom might not get to go to heaven because she left no remains behind to be raised up on the Last Day. Pete would not hear this nonsense and their relationship remained cordial, but strained. Shirley and Katie grew distant from Walter, too. Katie had married a Catholic man in Omaha, and Shirley still identified as a Lutheran, at least twice a year, and living in Colorado. Walter had given up trying to save his family.

For nearly 20 years Old Pete raised beautiful vegetables in the vacant lot where the Lutheran church used to stand. He was careful to leave a ring of the colorful wildflowers all around the outside of his garden. During the long summers Pete was almost always in his garden planting, weeding, hoeing, spreading fertilizer, and visiting with the locals who walked by.

In the off season, he would plan, buy seeds, and start plants in boxes in the windows of his apartment. The beveled window where Margie's ashes sat, cast sunlight all over an area in the small dining room where Pete had tomato and pepper plants started by March every year. Pete's apartment was transformed into a greenhouse that smelled of black dirt and roots.

During the late winter of Pete's ninetieth year, he began to slow down. He was planting seeds in his apartment one day when he started to feel a little faint. Pete set aside his work and laid down on his bed for the rest of the afternoon. That evening he felt better after a light supper so he finished the planting he started earlier. The next day he felt good and got a lot more seed boxes prepared. But the morning after he woke with a tight feeling in his chest and he was light headed again. Coffee was what he needed.

As he sat at his table surrounded by bags of potting soil and little planters he drank his black coffee. Shirley called from Loveland as she did every other day or so. Pete said he was fine, but his voice was weak and shaky. Shirley dreaded the day she would call and Pete would not answer. This was almost as bad. She knew there was something wrong with her dad. Without alarming him, she visited for a while, then said goodbye. She

called Pete's friend Glen and asked him to check on Pete until she could get there.

A day and a half later, Shirley and Katie were in Pete's apartment. Shirley had left Loveland, Colorado almost right away after talking on the phone with her dad. She picked up Katie and her youngest son Peter in Omaha and drove east to see Grandpa Pete. She had called Walter in Madison, but he could not get away. He said he would be in touch. "Yeah, sure," she thought to herself.

Young Peter had taken a semester off college and wanted to come along to see his grandpa. He could help with the driving, too. When they arrived at Pete's place above the pawn shop, they smelled the dirt before they reached the top step. Shirley had a key, but the door was unlocked so they entered the apartment.

Pete was sitting in his chair watching the Wheel of Fortune. There was a small pot of soup on the stove and an empty bowl on a TV tray next to Pete's chair. He turned away from the television and smiled happily as his family walked in. He was delighted to see them, especially young Peter. Old Pete looked tired and thinner, but happy. Glen was sitting in the corner of the tiny living room finishing his bowl of soup. He got up and prepared to leave so the family would have more room. They thanked him for looking out for Dad. Then Glen put on his "Elmer Fudd" hat and left the apartment.

Pete knew why they were here. They were worried about him. He could see it on their faces. Hell, he was a little worried. He had been slowing down this winter, but the last week or so the dizzy spells really hit him hard. He had not gotten much work done. He wondered if he would be able to run a garden this year at all.

After getting the sleeping arrangements settled, Shirley and Katie at the Budget Inn at the end of Division, and Peter on the foldout sofa in his grandfather's living room, they had a chance to visit with Old Pete. Shirley would call the doctor in the morning and Pete would go in, no buts about it. Walter did call that night and was actually nice to Pete. Walter told Pete that his prayer group would be praying for him. When Pete hung up he asked his daughters why somebody so close to God never seemed happy.

The doctor could see Pete in two days. An EKG was planned to test his heart. Pete took it easy and enjoyed his family near him. He and Peter talked about cars and school and girls. Peter asked a lot about the

grandma he never met. He was a little creeped out about her ashes being in a vase right here in the apartment, but he soon got over it when he saw how much Grandpa liked having the urn near him. Peter liked the way the neon sign from the “O-Zone” bar across the street shone through the beveled glass, lighting up Grandma’s urn like a Christmas tree.

Old Pete also had a chance to visit with Shirley and Katie. Being almost 90, he thought it might not be a bad idea to let them know what he wanted in the event of his death. He said he wanted a simple funeral, in the new Lutheran church. He was not particularly attached to the new church, but it was close to home. Also he wanted to be cremated, just like Margie, and have their ashes scattered together over the garden plot where the old church used to stand.

The old farm might have been a more obvious choice for their ashes, but a new family whom Pete did not know lived there now. The old house was gone and it hardly looked the same. Besides, the garden in town was the place he felt the closest to Margie. He felt she was with him when he planted the seeds.

The sun passed over her urn before hitting the plants on his dining room. Pete thought it only fitting that he and Margie be scattered over the soil he had worked. They would come back every year in the petals of the wildflowers that grew all by themselves. If that was all there was to heaven, it was good enough for Old Pete.

The EKG revealed a weak valve in Old Pete’s 90 year-old heart. The doctor told him that he was too old for surgery, but some nitroglycerin pills and blood thinners would help regulate his heart. He also gave Pete a pill for his dizziness. There was not much else to do for him. He told Pete to take it easy, but not to stop living.

The pills did seem to help. A week after Shirley, Katie, and Peter arrived, Old Pete was feeling pretty strong again. The travelers made plans to head back home. Shirley arranged for Glen and a nurse to check on Pete a few times a week. Before seeing the doctor, Old Pete had doubted he would be putting in a garden this year. But a month later he was feeling so good that he planned his garden like every previous year.

When it came time to till and put the plants and seeds in the ground, his grandson Peter and his girlfriend Sheri came to help. They stayed for almost two weeks getting the garden put in, bigger than ever. Old Pete loved having his grandson Peter and Sheri stay with him. In a way, they reminded him of himself and his Margie nearly 70 years before.

On the night before Peter and Sheri were planning to head back to Omaha, they watched the Wheel of Fortune with Grandpa, ate scalloped potatoes and chicken, played cards, and went to bed late. Early the next morning, Peter got up to use the bathroom. It was nearly seven and he was expecting his grandpa to be up in the kitchen. Peter could not smell coffee and the kitchen was dark. He went down the short hallway to Old Pete's room. It was dark and quiet and very still.

At the funeral, Shirley was not only sad for losing her father, but she felt like she had let him down. Here he was in a casket, dressed in his gardening clothes. It should not be like this. Old Pete wanted to be cremated like Margie. Their ashes were to be sifted over the garden of vegetables and wildflowers. Walter had stepped in and insisted, as power of attorney, that Pete not be cremated. Shirley and Katie tried to change his mind, they knew what their dad wanted, but Walter would not budge. He tirelessly quoted scripture about the "Last Day," and how it will be hard enough for Pete at that time being he was never "born again." Walter at least wanted to make sure that the Lord had Pete's body to raise up.

This all seemed ridiculous to the rest of the family. But Shirley and Katie finally gave up. At least they talked Walter into allowing their mother's ashes to be placed in Old Pete's inexpensive, mostly cardboard, casket. At least they would be buried together in the old cemetery where their grandparents rested.

After the service, the pallbearers loaded Old Pete, with Margie's ashes, into the back of Kline's antique, oil burning, Cadillac hearse parked behind the church on Spring Street. Spring Street turned into route 14 which went out to Springlawn Cemetery. The funeral party, along with everybody in attendance, which was most of the town, made their way to the church basement for a lunch in Pete's honor.

Walter planned to join the rest of the crowd in a few minutes. He still had not kicked his smoking habit. He had cut down considerably, but in times of stress, he still needed a smoke.

He went out back by the hearse. He sat on the curb behind the hulking black coach. He lit up a Winston, and gazed out over the lot where his father and nephew had only days before put in the seeds and plants for this year's garden. The wildflowers around the outer edge of the garden were just beginning to stretch their fuzzy heads out of the rich black soil. Then, for the first time since his father died, Walter hung his

head and cried. He wondered what he missed. For the first time since he was a boy he felt out of control.

He sobbed deeply. Hot tears flowed down his cheeks and splattered on his shiny black shoes. His Winston hung crooked from his fingers as it burned down. The red cherry burned his finger, snapping him out of sorrow. Reflexively, he flicked the Winston from his stinging fingers. Just then Clara had come behind him. He said everything was fine and he was coming in for lunch.

Shirley had just told the women in the church kitchen to brew more coffee for the luncheon and was walking back to her table when it happened. From the back of the church, outside, a tremendous boom thundered. The people were startled. Plates fell to the floor and shattered sending buns, scalloped potatoes, and party peanuts scampering. "Was that thunder?" somebody said. "I thought it was clear out today," said another. "Holy Shit, oops, sorry!" a teenage girl exclaimed. A boy in a white shirt and black tie came running in and hollered, "There's a car on fire out back!"

People ran to the windows of the church basement and looked out. The fire chief was at Old Pete's lunch and yelled out for nobody to go outside until it was known what happened. Shirley and Katie pushed their way to a window and stared out back. The women screamed at what they saw. Then a smile crept onto Shirley's face. The old hearse had been pulverized by an immense explosion.

Thousands of bits of charred debris filled the air. Walter looked at his sisters through foggy, wet eyes and began to laugh. Plumes of gray and black ash rode on the wind before settling on the flowers and plants in the empty lot where the old Lutheran church used to stand.

HERE KITTY, KITTY, KITTY

by Kaitlin Eken

With Melvin safely tucked away in the pocket of his trench coat, Henry Saxton, Jr. headed to the door, swiping his badge to clock out for the day. It had been a long day selling drywall, and he couldn't wait to get home to put Melvin on his freshly greased hamster wheel. There was a faint meowing in the distance, putting both Melvin and Henry on high alert. A figure appeared out of the corner of his eye, and without hesitation Henry reached for his pistol, aiming at the grey, striped cat heading in their direction.

His co-worker, Maurice, ran out the company door, flailing his arms, screaming obscenities, in between screams over the death of his beloved cat, Danish Muffin, as Henry Saxton, Jr. fled the scene in his 1972 Geo Metro. All that mattered was that Melvin was safe from the vicious feline moving in on him. He pulled up to his favorite dive in town, The Hot Tata, for the usual, a rocks glass of Jim Beam with an organic lemon wedge, and a side of non-genetically modified nuts for Melvin.

The next day at work, Henry went through the back door to avoid running into Maurice. He hung up his trench coat and headed to the breakroom to make an off-brand, cherry pop tart. "Oh, good morning, Wendy, how's my proposal for hamsters in the workplace coming along?"

"The board is currently overseeing a more pressing concern, but I'll keep you informed if it goes through. It's highly unlikely we'll be able to Unionize for emotional support hamsters. In the meantime, you can continue to hide Melvin in the back closet."

Henry sighs, in reluctant acceptance that Melvin is viewed as only a rodent, who must be hidden away, when he's the only thing keeping him sane through his long shifts, supplying drywall to irritating customers. He knew he'd have free time later that night while sipping whiskey at The Hot Tata, to revise his proposal. Wendy's pessimism bothered him; he often wondered what happened in her life that led to her no longer

believing in the possibility of big dreams. Trauma, maybe, or too much political discord unfolding in the media for one person to take.

Henry clocked out at Destination Drywall, relieved that Maurice didn't make it in that day. The flu, he said, but Henry knew it was grief. He got into his Geo Metro and headed South toward The Hot Tata with Melvin stuffed in the inside pocket of his trench coat. The tugging from Melvin's nibbling on corn pellets softened his heart, as tears of joy clouded his ability to see the road. A Mercury Sable slowed down in front of him, but he was preoccupied with Melvin's nibbling, and Whitney Houston on the radio. It was his and Melvin's song. Henry was belting out, "Bittersweet memories, that is all I'm taking with me," as he soared through his windshield, landing on his side, in the ditch. Fumbling in his efforts to stand, he scrambled around on the ground in search of Melvin, ripping off his trench coat. "MELVIN! SON! WHERE ARE YOU SON?"

Henry's pleas not to call the police went ignored, as the Mercury Sable driver dialed, explaining to police that Henry's careless driving caused the accident. Henry pleaded louder, "Please don't, sir, I'm a dad to my hamster, he won't make it without me."

Melvin was no longer in the pocket of his trench coat, and out of the corner of his eye, Henry noticed something scurrying away. Changing his sentiment, he told the driver, "Have them cuff me, and haul me away. I deserve to rot in prison."

He fell to his knees, sobbing, cursing the gods, flailing about in agony, over the loss of yet another of his hamster sons. Memorial tattoos were always hard, but Melvin's would be the worst, thus far. There was a small patch of skin left on his left forearm, where Melvin would go, along with the 21 hamsters that came before him. Henry's memories drifted to the day he first brought Melvin back from Petco to Wendy's reaction to his one blue eye, and one hazel, to the way Melvin would run on his squeaky wheel all hours of the night, reminding him he wasn't alone in the world. The time he accidentally took his hamster ball down three flights of stairs, his dizziness showing in his demeanor, and the time they once hiked the Grand Canyon together, Melvin and his water dropper stashed in the pocket of his cargo shorts the whole way.

The police arrive, cuffing Henry, as he begged them to let him put a stick in the ground, showing where he lost Melvin during this brutal crash. The police ignored his pleas, dragging him into the back of their car. "Are you Henry Saxton, Jr. who lives on 2300 North Pike Lane?"

"That's me."

“You have a warrant out for your arrest. We’ll be taking you straight in.”

“It was in self-defense. Maurice’s long clawed, vicious Tabby cat, Danish Muffin was coming after Melvin. He was going to kill him. Anyone watching the scene unfold would understand that I had to kill Danish Muffin, to save Melvin.”

The police didn’t want to hear it. They heartlessly sped past the scene where Melvin scurried away, as tears rolled down Henry Saxton, Jr.’s face, his face and hand pressing hard against the window. They drove him straight to the county jail, leaving him with papers for his impending court date. “You might want to come up with a better story, because that excuse for killing Danish Muffin isn’t going to fly with the district 2 judge.”

Henry shamefully crawled into his cell, introducing himself to his cellmate, James Ramstad, Sr. James had sleeves of initials of all the girls he’d ever loved, with no skin untouched. Upon seeing this, Henry asked if those were former hamsters. His newfound cell mate gave a look of disapproval, asking, “What kind of sick freak are you, thinking I tattooed initials of hamsters on my arms? The hell’s the matter with you, man? I’ll mess you up in here, don’t you ever talk to me again, you hear me? It’s people like you that made this country go to hell. We’re gonna have some real issues, if you keep on talkin’ like this, you hear me?”

Henry, not being one to give up easily, rolled up his sleeves, showing James Sr. all 21 of the portraits, along with the birth and death dates, and initials of all his former hamsters. James calmed down and began tearing up about his first hamster, Fluffy. Apologizing for his harsh reaction, between sobs, he explained the impact his connection with Fluffy had on him, the void left in his heart when he left this earth, and the way he just wants to block it out. How Fluffy is the reason he doesn’t let himself get close to anyone anymore. He explains the way he gets defensive anytime hamsters are brought up because of the trauma of that early loss. The two bond over this, sharing stories of loss, struggle, and hope for a better future. Henry and James form a friendship, and then a plan, to get emotional support hamsters in every institution, from jails, to shelters, to prisons.

It’s January 11th, Henry’s court date has finally arrived. His corrections officer leads him down the hallway where his attorney, Dan Prowley waits in a rusted-out Toyota Camry. Henry taps on the window; Dan opens it just enough to speak through. Henry can tell Dan is used to holding firm boundaries, while speaking with killers. Dan tells him not to

talk much during the trial, “Listen, Henry, just don’t speak, okay? Don’t say a word. Leave this to me. I’m afraid you’ll end up digging yourself a deeper hole by explaining. Say nothing about your hamster, Melvin, okay? Or any other hamsters, we’ll save that for later, in case we need to use the M’Naghten defense.”

Henry reluctantly agrees, though deeply disheartened by Dan Prowley’s insensitivity toward his former son, Melvin.

They enter the courtroom. Dan is seated across from Henry in the stand, and the questions begin, “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

Henry places his right hand on the Bible, peering out at his jury of peers, in hopes of inspiring sympathy. The judge hits her gavel, calling his attention back to the moment. The prosecutor begins grilling about his whereabouts the night he shot his co-worker’s cat, Danish Muffin.

Henry feels nauseous, as the questions become more intense. He gets out of the stand, touches the ground to center himself, and remembers the way Melvin’s golden hair used to glisten in the summer sun, blow in the wind, and comfort him during times of trouble. He knows the day must go on, so he proceeds to answer the questions.

“The night Danish Muffin was shot, you were leaving work to head to The Hot Tata, is that correct?”

Henry Saxton, Jr. replied, “Yes, and I shot that feline, but it was in self-defense. Danish Muffin was coming at Melvin, he was sprinting at least 60 miles an hour, like a Discovery Channel Documentary about a Cheetah addicted to crack.”

“And you’re aware of the charges you’re facing?”

“Sure am. Are you aware that your blue blazer doesn’t match your black pants, sir?”

The disappointment in Dan Prowley’s eyes could be felt across the stand, as Henry failed to remain silent, question after question. He was being grilled; he needed to explain. He knew Dan would understand, after the trial, once he got his story told. The judge, the jury, and his attorney would be moved in the telling of his heartfelt version, and he’d go back home to plan his sketch of Melvin that would be fittingly placed directly on his left forearm, where he used to snuggle with him on cold, lonely nights, listening to their favorite Whitney Houston album, “The Bodyguard.” Once the trial was adjourned, Henry went to sit next to Dan Prowley, and upon noticing the tears flooding Dan’s eyes, he asked if it was because it was nearing the holidays. Dan said nothing, as they sat in

uncomfortable silence for ten minutes, before Henry decided to grab his trench coat and leave.

Henry went home that night, sipped whiskey, and ate a box of stale crackers, while gazing at the empty cage where Melvin used to play. Thoughts of his former life, while he awaited results from trial flooded his mind, so he turned on the radio. *NPR* reported on recent deaths in faraway places, inclement weather, and all the ways the world was going to hell. Henry shut the radio off, put on Whitney Houston, and began to reflect. He got Melvin two years prior, at the start of summer, after a long day selling drywall. Henry knew it was time to find another cat to hunt. It was the only thing that made him feel powerful in this sad and chaotic life. It was on this night, that a serial killer was born. Danish Muffin may have been the first, but he wouldn't be the last. Henry grabbed his pistol, swaying with whiskey in the other hand, as he quietly sang, "Here, Kitty, Kitty, Kitty."

YOU DON'T KNOW ME

by T.J. Fier

I'm trying to remember the first time I was mistaken for someone else. I think I was twelve. A woman I didn't know came rushing up to me, wrapped me in her ham-hock arms, and squished me between her pillowy boobs. At least she smelled nice.

I'm always someone's best friend's sister, buddy's ex-girlfriend, cousin twice-removed, soccer coach, elementary school crush, childhood neighbor, pal from Sunday School, and once I was mistaken for a pastor.

Yes. A Lutheran pastor, I shit you not.

Typically, I receive hugs, a handshake, and a happy face waiting to say, "Hello again, how are you? So good to see you." Then there's the confusion, the letdown, me saying, "No, you don't know me." The smile turns into a frown. But sometimes, these incidents don't turn out so well.

Like one time, some dude approached me in a bar when I had just turned twenty-one and thought I was his sister's bully from high school. The guy got so angry, so defiant when I swore I didn't know him, he slapped me. I fell on my ass, my brand-new jeans covered in bar-floor muck, surrounded by the scrape of bar stools pulling away. Several big guys, including the bouncer, shoved him out of the place in two seconds flat, then gave me free drinks all night while I pressed a bar rag filled with ice to my swollen cheek. Happy Birthday to me, right?

It's hard being a woman everyone knows but doesn't know.

Of course, I've tried altering my appearance—weird hair colors, wacky glasses, strange makeup—but nothing helps. They look past the bright green topknot or the black lipstick, and they still see me as someone else. Sure, a ballcap and oversized sunglasses often work in a pinch, but I can't live every public moment in such a getup. Something about my smile or the shape of my face, things I can't change, keep them coming, one after another.

Sometimes, walking out my door, taking the bus, going through a mall, or wandering any busy, public place is too much. I stay home when I can, but a girl's gotta make a living. A girl's gotta pay off those student

loans, make rent, and eat. And I don't know why, of all occupations, I decided to be a bartender.

But I like the money. And the pace. I enjoy being on my feet and making people happy as they enter my establishment. I'm good at my job. I'm good at small talk or deep conversation. Heck, I can start a discussion anywhere when I bring up the fact that everyone and no one knows me. Sure, someone comes in at least once a week and squints while giving me a once-over. I know what's happening. I shake my head; they pull up a picture of "me" on their phone. I nod at the smiling women, point out the discrepancies, and get them whatever they ordered.

So, I have my armor. I have my way of approaching every person who comes up to me. I have my safeguards. I'm ready. I got this handled.

Until I don't.

Friday night. My favorite night on the job, I never see him coming.

The clientele is two deep at the bar, and I'm mixing everything in the playbook: Rye Manhattan, Sidecar, vodka-soda, Cosmopolitan, whiskey on the rocks, whiskey neat, Old Fashioned, Bloody Mary with a beer chaser, and a recently popular shot called the Dirty Girl Scout that tastes like Thin Mints. I make what they want, and fast, so they tip me well.

On busy nights like this one, those who sit at the bar don't stay long. Too much traffic and too many people talking over your head. But this guy—nothing bothers this guy. When I slide him his Miller High Life, and he tips the beer toward me, saying, "Your favorite. Champagne of beers," I know I might be in trouble.

He's got that look. The one I've seen few-and-far-between. He's sure he knows me, and he's sure I've done something to really piss him off.

I slip him his change and wait for him to tell me who I am that evening. At least a hint of an idea before I start the, "I'm sorry, but you've confused me with someone else." He takes a pull of his beer, stone-cold gaze not leaving me for a second, and snatches up the change. The fact he doesn't toss me a tip confirms my worries.

This one could be bad.

Go to my next customer, keeping half an eye on the Creepy Guy. He looks reasonable enough. Just any other dude off the street in the bar's dim light. However, the longer he sits, the more sinister he becomes. He has eyes for no one else, and they accuse me over and over again while he nurses his beer.

I slip over to my co-worker, Kevin, make it look like I'm digging something out of the cooler, and say as loud as I dare, "I might have a bad one."

"What?"

"Someone who knows me."

"Oh, yeah? Which one?" He pivots his head up and down the line of customers.

"Stop doing that!" I kick Kevin's shoe. "Don't worry. You'll see."

"No worries. I got your back."

The night moves on. The clientele is polite but demanding. Nothing new. The tips flow with the alcohol, and Creepy Guy continues to sit at the bar.

Kevin takes notice of my stalker and gives me a little nudge, jerking his chin the way of Creepy Guy. "Asshole at the end?"

"Yeah, that's him," I say while mixing my third mojito of the night. I really hate making mojitos.

Meanwhile, Creepy Guy continues to nurse his beer, glaring at me with a sort of violent glimmer in his eye, hardly blinking. But he never says a word, never gets up to pee, barely moves an inch until Kevin approaches him and says, "You've been here for a while. You want anything else?"

Creepy Guy finally blinks, skirting his eyes off me. He deflates a little under Kevin's scrutiny. Kevin is a big motherfucker. Kevin is the kind of guy who started as a bouncer as he took mixology training. Now makes the best cocktails in the neighborhood.

"If you're not going to order, you need to move on, buddy," Kevin says, giving him that "don't fuck with me" stare he perfected as a bouncer.

"I did order," Creepy Guy says. He nods to his near-empty beer bottle.

"Two hours ago, right? If you're not here to drink, you're in the way."

"I bet your manager would say different. I bought my drink. I have the right to sit here."

"Well, let's see." Kevin turns to me, Creepy Guy peering over his shoulder. "Whaddya say, Manager? You want me to let this stalker sit and stare at you any longer, or should I kick him out?"

I flex my managerial shoulders. "You're done, buddy. Go scare someone else."

Creepy Guy gives me one more murderous look, the sort that makes my insides a little watery. He gets up and leaves—no protest, no fight—but how he glares at me tells me this is far from over.

I want to yell at him, as Kevin follows him out the door, “I’m not who you think I am!” Or, “You don’t know me, dude!” But I don’t think he’d listen. Once, maybe twice, I’ve had to pull out my driver’s license to prove I’m not who they think I am. He seems like one of those types. I should have shown my ID to him when I had the chance.

Last call arrives. The customers walk, stumble, or take a rideshare home. As Kevin and I go through the closing routine, I almost forget about Creepy Guy. We clean up quick, head out to the back door, set the alarm, and lock everything behind us.

Outside, the city is quiet. The air is brisk, just the way I like it. I hear my bed calling from over a dozen blocks away. It’s late night or early morning, depending on which end you’re approaching the day. Kevin says goodnight. He even offers to walk me home. Tugging Mace from my pocket, I tell him I’ll be alright. Kevin is such a great guy, if I wasn’t his manager, I would take him up on that date he’s mentioned once or twice.

I know the chances I take walking home every night. Sure, I could get a rideshare or a cab, but prices are steep at three or four in the morning. I refuse to let my gender keep me from going where I want to go when I want to go there, even if it’s hazardous to my health.

My danger sensors are on full alert as I hurry down the sidewalk, hands in pocket, head on a swivel right to left, then back again. This is normally my favorite time of night. The time when most people are asleep. No blaring horns or booming engines. A rare moment when I don’t have to worry about strangers coming up to me and making life a little more complicated.

Creepy Guy is nowhere in sight, so I relax, following my typical route. My sneakers smack the concrete. Water trickles into passing sewer grates. The familiar, dull roar rises from the towering buildings—the ambient noise of urban sprawl.

But I’m not alone with the city.

Two blocks from my apartment building, Creepy Guy materializes out of a passing alley. One second, I’m walking home, dizzy with sleep. The next, his cold eyes are staring me down. God, someone did something to him, and he’s pissed as hell.

At some point, I stopped holding my Mace, and the little container buried itself deep in my coat pocket. When I reach for it, Creepy Guy flashes a gun from beneath his hoodie. An electric shock of adrenaline

sets every part of me on edge, going from half-awake to hyper-vigilant in a heartbeat.

I've never had a weapon pulled on me. I've been intimidated, cursed, and slapped, but never was a gun involved.

My heart is so loud in my ears I barely hear when he says, "Don't scream and don't run, or I'll use it. I'll really use it this time."

This time? *This time?* "Whoa, dude. You're making a mistake. I'm not—"

"You're such a piece of work." Creepy Guy's voice cracks against the city's quiet thunder. "I can't believe I found you. I mean, total accident. Bad day, needed a beer, and *bam!* There you are. There you fucking are. And you ignore me? *Me?* Make me sit there for hours and pretend you don't know me? After everything we've been through, you treat me like a stranger?"

He's backing me against a wall. I desperately search up and down the street, but it's empty. This is a residential neighborhood. Everyone—even the early birds—is still asleep. His sour breath fills my nose, and I fight the urge to gag.

"Shoulda watched your back. Can't hide behind that big fucker anymore, can ya? Just you and me now."

Should I scream? No, that wouldn't do any good. What happens between a woman screaming and someone calling the police? Too much time and too much space divide a cry for help and the help that might or might not arrive.

"God, you're such a fucking bitch!" His words crack. When he bows his head, hands grasping the collar of my coat, I realize he's crying. And so am I. Only my tears are very different.

One moment, he's hollering in my face. The next, he bounces my head off the brick building behind me. The shock of collision. A blossom of pain. Then, a strange numbness swells from the back of my skull and across my eyes. The world dims, and my fearful thoughts thicken, like honey dripping down my brain. I become nothing, just a sack of meat slumped against the wall.

"Oh, shit. I didn't mean to—" He cups my face, forcing me to look at him. He's only a fleshly smear against the streetlights. "Hey, you okay? I didn't mean to do that. I just—you just—make me crazy."

Is this it? I have often wondered how far my "problem" could go, but tonight takes the cake. I should have signed up for those self-defense classes. If I live through this, I'm going to do that. Sign up tomorrow. And be nicer to people. Maybe get a dog. I like dogs.

“Hey.” He taps my face. “Stay with me. You’re fine. Right? Blink twice if you’re fine.”

I blink twice. My vision begins to clear. The pain in the back of my head throbs. I groan, the first noise I’ve made since he appeared out of the shadows. My heart speeds up again as I regain coherent thought. I don’t like that. Being numb was easier.

“There you are. Yeah, you’re fine. Just like a cat. Nine lives for this bitch. Not that you deserve them. How could you leave me like that? Huh? Without saying goodbye? I thought you left town. I mean, I would have left town if I were you. But here you are, all spiffed up. Presentable. Got a good job. You sober? You look like it. Going back to meetings? Shit. I should do that, too. But, you know, it’s hard to get right with a broken heart.”

I have no idea what to say, but my doppelgänger sounds like a real winner. I could hazard a guess what happened between them. Two burn-outs in love? Never a good combination. Addiction makes people volatile. I see it at work often enough. I’ve been at the edge of the cliff myself a few times. Life sucks too much to go through completely sober.

“I wanna go back to rehab, get better. But I can’t. And you know why?”

“Cuz of me?” I say.

I’ve entered dangerous territory, taking on someone else’s identity. I’ve never done it before, and I swore I never would. The truth was always on my side. However, I get the feeling that denial will only end one way.

“How could you disappear?” He tugs at my jacket, but the grip is less dangerous than before. Tears streak his face, snot drips from his nose, and he’s the most miserable thing ever seen. “You didn’t leave a note. I thought you might be dead.”

The goose egg building at the back of my skull pulses with the beat of my heart. Crap. I have to give this guy a reason. I have to break my number one rule. “I had to start over.”

“Start over?”

“I couldn’t do it anymore.”

“But why did you have to be a fucking coward?”

I look him in the eye. A tough thing to do when facing such raw pain. “Because I knew you wouldn’t let me go.”

He crumples, sagging forward, nearly taking me down with him. This is the tipping point. I can taste it. Oily and metallic in my mouth. Either he’ll let me go, or—shit, I won’t think about *that*.

The broken man's arms are wrapped around my legs. His sobs break my heart. I see his hands moving, grasping for something, and I'm afraid he's reaching for the gun, so I caress his head, palms flat against a shaggy, greasy skull.

"Please, I need you to let me go," I murmur. The intimacy is strange between us as he's my possible murderer, and at any moment, I could end up with a bullet.

He weeps against me. For how long, I can't tell. Time moves in slow bursts, along with the throb behind my eyes. After a century passes, Creepy Guy lurches to his feet, eyes red and swollen with tears. He wipes at his face, mops the snot dripping from his nose with a crusty sleeve.

Creepy Guy's eyes are red but clear. "Okay. I get it. You were right."

I hold my breath. Where's the gun? Is it in his hands, tucked under his waistband? I need to say one more thing to him. What do I say? "Thank you."

Creepy Guy grabs my hand, gives it a squeeze, touches my cheek with booger-covered fingers. He smiles, baring mossy teeth.

I close my eyes.

And then, in a scrabble of sneakered feet on the pavement, he's gone.

I exhale. My lungs open, and I cough. I lean forward, drop my hands on my knees, but only for a moment. He could change his mind. He could come back.

Time to get the fuck outta there.

Home is just around the corner. I dig out my keys, hurry inside, and don't start crying until my building's security lock clicks behind me. My tears are as loud and messy as Creepy Guy's tears. I stumble to the elevator, pick out the correct floor without looking, and let myself wail a little louder. The ride to my level takes seconds.

I stagger to my apartment door, unlock the deadbolt, and just like that, I'm home. Safe in my studio apartment, far away from the Creepy Guy who decided not to kill me. I left the light on in my little kitchenette, and the lamp's soft glow gives shape to familiar objects. My overstuffed chair next to a second-hand TV and stereo. My single bed tucked in the corner, sheets askew from the late morning before. The familiar, cozy cotton scent of my little space gives me comfort.

Short-lived comfort. My head still throbs, and my body shakes. I may be safe in my apartment, but what about next time? How can I leave again when I know the next one who mistakes me for someone else may not forgive me?

Enough is enough.

I stumble into my closet-sized bathroom and wrench open a couple drawers until I find what I'm looking for. Sharp, only a little rusty, the loose razor blade gleams between fingers. I found it when I first moved here and never tossed it out.

Time to stop the madness. Make a change so no one can make the same mistake ever again.

Even though I'm wrecked, the razor is steady in my hand. Not one quiver as the tip bites into my cheek. The pain isn't frightening. It's salvation.

I'm done being the woman who doesn't own her own face.

GROWING PAINS

by Marcos Garcia

Chapter 1

I watch a nurse holding a baby boy. She sings and rocks him back and forth. He nurses from a bottle, eyes shut, close now to a midday nap. Her lullaby is sweet and joyous yet tears trail her cheeks. Her red scrubs mark her as an assigned caregiver. His purple onesie, the mark of a patient. This same color scheme is repeated through this open room. Tables and chairs, filled in reds and purples. This recreational area hosts people of all ages. Patients who all share the same affliction.

I'm embarrassed. I feel as if I shouldn't be watching her, though I am moved by the scene. I turn away towards my own patients. The two of them seem to be sharing a good conversation. One is a young man. He stands smiling down at his companion. His hands rest, clasped behind him. He is trying not to talk with his hands as he usually does. Maybe he's self-conscious about it, I do not know. My other patient, a woman his age, sits looking up at him. She smiles, and nods her head, covering her short fits of laughter with her hands. When she is not covering her laugh, she is pushing her bangs behind her ears. A futile attempt to keep them off her face. The bangs are too short and her ears stick out almost monkey like. They talk, laugh, make nervous gestures and I dare say, it makes me smile to see them like this.

The head nurse calls for the males to line up. It is time for their daily check-ups. He bids the gal a farewell. They seem to make plans to see each other again, waving as they part. He walks away but glances back. Meeting eyes again with the girl. Distracted, he bumps into a nurse. I watch as he apologizes and clears the corner. The woman giggles then looks over at me. I feel that shame again, as if staring at an intimate moment.

She walks over to me and sits down, letting out a little sigh.

"Hey Mabel, how are you today? Making a new friend?" I ask her.

She pushes me on my arm, open-mouthed before looking around.

“Oh my god stop!” she says again smothering a giggle with her hand.

“It’s alright,” I tell her. “Eddy is nice.”

“Megan! Stop! It’s not like that, oh my god,” she says.

Mabel is around 20 years old now, her whole life ahead of her. She’s an explosive sort of woman, loud and unapologetic. At least, that’s depending on the moment. The man she was talking to is Eddy, a bit of a goofball who keeps to himself most of the time. The same age as her, a pair. Both met long ago but don’t know that now.

I catch her, staring at that corner that he took. Quiet. Something brewing behind those glossy blue eyes. She looks down, nervously pinching her left index finger.

“Hey Megan...”

“Yeah, what’s up dear?”

“Are you married?”

“Me? Yes. I have a husband and two kids. My boys are around your age now, I reckon.”

“Do you ever think I will get better...?”

“What? Of course, why not?”

“Well because of the sickness... That guy I met... He was sweet and I thought he was cute and I... I don’t know. Well, he’s sick like me but maybe when we get out? And, would he even... ugh never mind...”

“Whoa whoa, hey don’t be like that. Your sickness is nothing to worry about.”

“It’s stupid, you know... He said... he said when we get out of here he wants to go out for ice cream, haha. That’s so stupid, who knows when we will be out of here... but... I dunno...”

Mabel falls silent again. She gets like this when her mood falls. She’s swingy that way. One moment she’s full of energy, the next, quietly reminiscing.

“Hey, you know when I was around your age, I had an engagement fall apart. I thought ‘well Megan, you’ll never find love ever again.’ There was a lot of trouble in the world and people weren’t really dating, at least that’s how I saw it at the time. But one time when visiting my parents, my mom came out and caught me smoking—”

“Oh, so that’s where your wrinkles come from.”

“Ugh! Mabel, I’ll quit, ok? It’s just... So, anyway, she caught me. I tried to put out the cigarette but she told me it was fine, she just wanted to know how I’d been. I went on some rant about being unlovable. About how messed up the world was. She didn’t interrupt. She just listened. When I had finished, she gave me a big hug and she... My mother,

she...she used to have this saying, "No circumstance is too great to keep people from finding love." And I dunno, it really helped me out. In a way, it's always been true..."

"What?"

"Oh geez, I'm terrible at these things. Look...um...It doesn't matter whether you're sick or old or I don't know, the world is ending. I think my mother wanted me to know that if you look for love, you're gonna find it. Or in this case, like with Eddy, it finds you."

"Sheesh Megan, I didn't say I love the guy."

"Ah! it's neither here nor there. I think...Well, I think you two would make a great match. Honestly."

"Really?" replies Mabel. She still appears worried and her glance goes from me to the corner.

"Seriously."

She does not respond, just keeps herself glued to that corner. I just hope that I helped her from worrying further.

"Are you alright?" I ask.

"Yeah, I should probably get ready, the nurse should call us girls soon. Catch you for lunch?"

"Of course, I'll be around if you need me, ok?"

She gets up and heads towards the hall. At the same time, Eddy comes around the corner. His gaze finds Mabel and I watch as he lights up.

I'll let them have a little privacy. It can't hurt for young people to mingle and such. It's a beautiful thing to see. Even in a place like this. I get up to have a cigarette when I notice Mabel's patient badge has fallen. I pick it up and walk towards her. The nurses call for the female group, prompting Mabel to step away...

"Mom, hold up!" I yell at her. She turns to look at me but seems confused.

I hold up her badge and present it to her.

"Oh thank you, damn thing won't stay clipped to my jacket."

"It's no problem at all."

"Did you just call me mom?"

"Yea, oh shoot, sorry, still thinking about our talk and all. Just ignore me, you gotta get to that checkup." I wave her off and shoo her towards the nurses' door. "Go on, I'll see you after."

She smiles and shakes her head, passing off my mistake as some silly thing. I watch her disappear around the corner. I turn to see Eddy,

grabbing a snack from one of the free vending machines, ripping open what I think is a cheese danish.

“Hey Eddy, how did it go?”

“Oh the checkup? Well...” He takes his right hand and clasps the back of his neck. It’s a habit he has. He is always dramatic before giving good news.

“Oh no! Bad news?” I ask. I like encouraging him.

“Well...they said I was the healthiest guy in the clinic. Told me if I’m good by tomorrow that I can finally get out of here.”

I smile at him. I know that it is for the best to tell the patients good news, no reason to sour their mood during their stay, but the guilt is there. Always there. Still, I have to remember that it is my job to play this role for them.

“That’s great news! Well let’s make sure to have a nice last day. Anything you want me to get you for dinner here?”

“Well, could you get ice cream? I, uh” – he smiles at me – “I would like to have an ice cream with that girl I was talking to earlier.”

“Yeah,” I tell him. “No problem. I’ll make sure to have you both in the mess hall at dinner together, I’ll even make sure you have toppings.”

“Ok, cool!” he says.

He walks off to a table with some other guys his age. They are teaching the younger boys a card game. It’s fitting to see Eddy and Mabel, young, attracted to each other. Wading the waters of a first date. I look forward to supervising tonight. I mean, who wouldn’t want a chance to see their parents fall in love.

Chapter 2

Eddy is missing. This morning when staff went to wake him he wasn’t in his room. He is in the stage where patients with his condition, well, they can get a bit rebellious. If not with us than with each other. It gets harder to keep them in control. They can stop following their schedule. They are prone to fits of anger or sadness. Some think that everything is a joke and may begin pulling pranks on the staff. They may start saying the most outlandish things just to get a reaction.

Even worse are the ones who outright refuse to listen. The quiet ones can test your patience, responding with single word answers or silence. It’s not all bad though. There is something to admire in the unwavering spirit of a teenager.

We put out a purple alert to the local police and within minutes, our comm bracelets light up with the notification sent out citywide. They are looking for a teenaged man, blue eyes, red hair, 5'8". They will find him sometime and bring him back. Our patients can't really navigate on their own though they might try. Thankfully it's midsummer, so I don't worry about Eddy being cold.

I go to check on Mabel and see her still in bed, under her blankets.

"Hey hun, my name is Megan, I'm your assigned nurse. Would you like to go get some breakfast?"

No response. I sigh. I make my way around the bed. As I come face to face with Mabel I am shocked. I try to stifle my laugh but the burst of air turns my lips into a small trumpet.

"Wow! *Ok*, rude!" Mabel says before flipping over.

I take a deep breath and prepare myself to face her again. On the other side I am met yet again with her angry scowl. Her young face lies under bone white makeup. Uneven jet black eyeshadow imprisons her eyes, paired with a deep black lipstick.

"Mabel, please let's get you some breakfast, hun."

"No."

"Aren't you hungry?"

"No."

"Do you need to use the restroom?"

"No."

"Are you gonna say no to all of my questions?"

"...Nope."

"Come on, get up, you'll feel better, I promise."

"No."

At this point I'm getting nowhere. I try my best to keep from getting frustrated but I can feel the need for a cigarette rising. I feel my teeth grind as I decide how to approach the situation.

"Alright...well. I'll just sit here with you until we figure out what Mabel wants to do."

We sit in silence for a while; nothing for me to do anyway until Eddy returns. Resilient as ever, Mabel is silent, stoic.

"So..." I break the silence. "I like your makeup."

Nothing.

"Do you have any questions?"

A little wiggle under the covers.

"Do you...like any kind of music?"

Another wiggle. At this point I play some oldies, music that was popular in her days. I figure maybe it will help break this wall she put up. It's not my style, boys and guitars singing about how a girl broke their heart. Raspy screaming, lots of power chords and such. Nothing like the good electronic music from my youth. They really had us dancing back then.

"That's not their best song..." says Mabel.

"Oh? But this is their most popular hit."

"Ugh, yea, 'Sinning in the Ballroom' is their most popular hit, but it's not their best song. Look up, 'Angel of My Bleeding Heart,' that's the best one."

I play the song for her. I think it's terrible but Mabel loves it. By the time the chorus plays for the second time she's singing it loudly. With eyes closed she sings her heart out. She can't hold a note to save her life but I don't care. At this moment, she's beautiful. She catches me watching and stops, returning to the moody girl facade.

"Anyway, if you wanna know more of their songs I know all of them," she tells me.

"I would like that, wanna tell me over breakfast?"

"No."

"Oh come on, we just got over the one word answers."

"No, I don't know you. And I don't know where I am."

For that I can't fault her. Normally, patients in her stage are told about why they are here. It's mostly a lie, fabricated to keep them calm for the day. She will forget by tomorrow, and we will continue this cycle until care is no longer needed.

"Well, what can I answer for you?"

"Um, how did I get here?"

"You may not remember but you collapsed in your house yesterday and an ambulance brought you to our clinic. If your checkup goes well today then you can go home tomorrow."

I smile as convincingly as I can, having only done this twice before. She just stares at me without saying a word. I feel guilty.

"So let's get you some breakfast yea? Do you like eggs or—"

"That's not true, is it?" she interrupts.

"What do you mean? Of course it's true, we're just here to—"

"I'm not going home tomorrow, am I...?"

My heart skips. I need to salvage the conversation before I'm dealing with two runaways.

"Please tell me the truth, I won't say anything I promise. If you tell me, then I will go to breakfast. Pinky promise."

She says this while holding her left pinky out towards me.

I take her pinky in mine and look around before closing her room door.

"Well, it's true. You are sick. The way you are sick isn't a normal kind of 'sick,' ok? Um, there was this experiment gone wrong. We don't know much about the tests, just that one moment Bam! Everything in a 4-mile radius from the testing site was gone, replaced."

I snap my fingers making Mabel jump.

"What?"

I can see I'm losing her so I open up my smartphone to show her pictures.

"So this here is Minneapolis before the accident. And this—"

I switch to a current photo. A forest now sits in the center of town. A perfect circle of trees surrounded by buildings.

"This is it now, a forest, a forest with old trees and plants we thought were extinct, I mean look at this article."

I show her a recent article and her eyes go wide.

"Plant samples could be key to cancer treatment?" she reads.

"Oh that, yeah, they always say stuff like that. Always doing cancer research but never curing cancer."

"Hey, someday someone will find a cure, we're so close." She says this matter-of-factly.

"Oh yeah, you're right. I shouldn't be so negative."

I lie of course. Teen Mabel doesn't know that even in her 80s we lose people to cancer. Somehow we can have people living on the moon, but curing most cancers is out of our grasp.

"Well, you and Eddy both lived in Minneapolis at the time," I continue, "near the edge of the blast. You didn't disappear but it infected you with a rare disease. That's really why you're in this clinic."

"So what is my sickness then, I feel alright, is it cancer?"

"No, it is some unexplained condition. It makes you get younger as you sleep. Like a backwards growth spurt..."

"Oh my god. Am I going to turn into a baby?!"

"Whoa whoa! No, of course not. That's what the daily checkups are for."

I call the kitchen and ask for pistachio ice cream.

“Today was supposed to be your last day. Might need another checkup today to make sure. I guess we were a day off. We should be sending you home tomorrow.”

“Really?”

She has holes at the ends of her scrub sleeves that she uses for her thumbs. She lifts the sleeves over her fingers and creates small cloth fists that she places over her chin.

“Really, it will be like getting a second chance at life.”

This is the worst lie we tell them. At first it was a hope that the symptoms would stop, letting the people affected get back to normal lives. As time went on, that idea fizzled in the wind. Like most diseases, the road to a cure is a matter of time. I believe myself lucky because my parents were old. They have time to grow younger, while others had no such luck. No cure exists and the efforts to find one have faded away. Why would medical research put time and money in a disease that will cure itself with time?

“Who is Eddy?”

A knock at the door and another nurse hands me the ice cream. I thank her and let her know we will be out in time. I take a deep breath and decide to break the rules. At this point my mother means more to me than this job. I tell her that Eddy was her husband. I show her a picture of us. She was older, we had just had Christmas after her and Eddy’s 80th birthday. Both of them were born on May 8th, 2018. Mabel always played the joke of being a cougar though she was only a few hours older.

“You cook a mean green bean casserole by the way. The older guy here is your husband Eddy. He was always telling jokes.”

She stares at the picture of her and Eddy, the two of them smiling. Miles and miles of wrinkles that time had gifted them.

“Do you have any more?” she asks me.

“Oh tons, what do you wanna see?” I reply, handing her the bowl of ice cream. “Pistachio, it’s your favorite right?”

“Uh, I’ve never tried it before.”

I go backwards through the years, trying to avoid as many pictures of me as I can. Her and Dad’s retirements, their new jobs, promotion, that one trip to Ireland where they got lost. A picture in front of a random tree. She eats the ice cream and lets me explain every picture. She listens to every story, sometimes having a little laugh. I show her her college years. I have pictures of her with her roommates, hanging out being silly, or studying with messy hair on a laundry-covered couch. I get to the day of her high school graduation when she asks for wedding pictures.

I play her an old video, with terrible resolution from an archived social media account. Her and Eddy in front of a priest on a hot summer day. A baby was crying in the background, making it hard to hear what they were saying. A man tells his kid to sit down somewhere off to the side. It doesn't matter. They smile and laugh. The priest announces them married before they embrace in a passionate kiss. The guests cheer and holler. The baby starts crying again.

It makes Mabel smile and wipe her tears. I wanna show her more, but our moment is interrupted by a commotion near the front entrance.

"That must be Eddy," I blurt out.

"Can I see him?"

"Sure, but he's not like in those pictures, he's...a little rough at this age. You met him when you were both a bit older than now and he can't know what you know. He wouldn't take it well."

"I won't say anything, I promise."

Against my better judgement I bring her with me. When we arrive at the front, an officer is struggling with Dad.

"Caught him trying to buy cigarettes without ID."

"Let go of me, you prick!" says Eddy.

"Eddy!" I say sternly. "Officer, I'll take him from here, please let him go, you're hurting his arm."

The officer begrudgingly releases him as Eddy calls him an idiot.

"Hey, you get your butt in the common room, NOW."

I thank the officer and start walking Eddy away.

"Yeah, don't let me catch him outside again or I'm taking him to the station."

The officer leaves. It's a bluff; they can't hold our patients anywhere else due to their condition. Still I hold Eddy. Mabel follows behind quietly, pushing her bangs behind her ears, eyes fixed on him.

"Who's this clown?" he says pointing at her, making her starry-eyed stare turn into her famous scowl.

"Eddy, this is Mabel, you are both assigned under my care while you are here. Now why the heck did you sneak out of here like that?"

"Wanted some smokes, no smokes here."

I know it's a lie, Eddy doesn't smoke, but I don't care.

"Well, you are not allowed to have a smoke while you are here trying to get better. If you want to be able to leave this facility you will need to follow the rules until then."

"I'm not a clown," interrupts Mabel.

He looks over at her and seems ashamed.

“Sorry,” he tells her.

I take a deep breath and clasp my hands together.

“How about some food? You can even pick out a dessert from the cafeteria.”

“What are they serving?” he asks.

He must be hungry. It is lunch now. Considering the eating habits of a teenage boy, he’s probably REALLY hungry.

“Anything you want,” I tell him.

“Really?” he asks in surprise.

“Seriously, anything you want.”

Mabel walks past us and takes the lead.

“Come on, I’m hungry,” she says, waving him over.

I follow as they make their way to the cafeteria.

“So your name is Eddy?” Mabel asks.

“Edward, but you can call me Eddy, that’s what everyone calls me at least.”

From the stories I’ve heard he was a little troubled in his teen years. Apparently he had a group of friends that liked messing about in Detroit Lakes. I catch Mabel glancing over at him as we make our way to the cafeteria. It is Eddy who breaks the silence.

“Hey, uh, do you like ice cream? My favorite flavor is pistachio.”

“Mine too,” says Mabel.

Chapter 3

I’m worn out from work nowadays. The younger they get, the less time I get to leave them to themselves. The last break I had was when they were around age 10. Mabel would spend most of her days reading old sci-fi books. Eddy would sit and watch cartoons, laughing loudly as if the louder he laughed, the funnier the joke was. Those days were not too bad. Still...I would do anything to cure them.

At the moment they are closer to maybe four or five years old. I’ve started to sleep here, to be available at any hour of the day. During the nights, I awake to Mabel’s crying. Sweet girl has nightmares every night it seems. She is scared and confused but I try my best to calm her down. After I get her down I am back up a couple of hours later with Eddy. Poor guy has been waking up every morning this week, asking for his mom and dad.

My heart breaks as I rock with him, shushing and trying to calm him. He cries out “I want my mommy!” The words that now echo

through my ears. I hold him and kiss his head. I lie to him. I let him know that she will be back as soon as she can, but his mother Ashley died long ago, leaving his father to raise him alone. Nelson did his damndest as a single father. I hold Dad and lie to him until he's calm enough to get some breakfast. I just hate to see him hurt.

Mabel is easy to work with during the day though she refuses to speak. Looking at her chart, it appears she had undergone some speech therapy before grade school. Still, she's calm, usually playing silently by herself, looking out of the window or running in circles. Today Mom and Dad were playing, Eddy was going on some tangent about rocket ships while Mom quietly organized blocks. She made separate tall stacks of matching colors. At one point Eddy took a car and started smashing them down. I got up, fearing a melt down from Mabel but she just laughed and started building her stacks again. Sometimes I wonder if they still know each other. As if their friendship remained, even as their shared memories have faded away.

Chapter 4

I don't know if I can do this. What was a slow progressing issue is diving into impossibility. I raised my children alongside my husband, but here, I am alone. Other nursing staff are around but we are so understaffed we can barely afford to assist each other. Most of the staff consist of people like myself, working to afford the care of our parents. Most return to their regular lives after their family members come to term. My husband Young is working two jobs to help pay for Mom and Dad's treatment.

My parents have progressed into the toddler phase. Dad who used to love our food has stopped eating all together. If anything, I can get him to eat mac and cheese most days. Mom eats well but never seems to hear me at all any more. She always seems spacey, lost in thought, as if she's solving a complex problem. She bursts into crying fits, unable to tell me what is actually wrong, screeching without any issue in sight.

I head out for a cigarette. I feel guilty dropping my parents on other staff, but I'm just so damn tired. Patricia joins me for a smoke. She was the nurse I saw, bouncing her father when he was a baby. Even after he was gone, she stayed for the work. In her late 20s she should be continuing her graduate degree, yet she's here. I don't know if it makes me selfish, but I'm glad she hasn't left.

"How did you handle it?" I ask her.

“Which part?” she says, grabbing a cigarette from my pack.

“The final stretch. I see my parents and they are getting worse and worse. Refusing to eat, forgetting how to use the restroom. Eddy today...god he choked on a damn grape...”

The tears begin to burn the edges of my eyelids but I push them back with a drag.

“First off, good job with the grape...But well, girl, it’s just hard. It’s our parents. Nobody wants to be in this spot...But I promise, you’ll be ok. You’re what? 46?”

“49.”

“You’ve made it 49 years already. You’re here for them now and you’re gonna be here when they’re gone. We can’t stop them from leaving, they just do, we all eventually do. Whether it’s here or out there.”

Trish stops for a moment. She doesn’t cry, but her eyes gloss up and her chin becomes scrunched and dimpled. She’s holding back, still in pain and I feel bad for bringing her down in this hole with me.

“Eddy...” I begin. “Hell both of them, Mom AND Dad...When I was a kid they were unstoppable. To me it felt like they would never be defeated. That’s just how it felt, even in the older years, they were these...awesome people, I could never fit their shoes...but now I...I just can’t...I sit here looking at them as they soil themselves. Weak. Fragile. And it breaks me. It destroys the image of these people that I have looked up to my whole life.”

“Megan...that’s ok. Everyone grows old and frail. Think, someday, your sons will be in the same place as you, lost and scared. In the end, yeah, Dad was fragile but...Being able to hold him. To keep him safe. It felt like giving back to him, for everything...Everything he did for me. You know?”

We sit in silence and smoke, taking in the evening air.

“Maybe you’re right...”

I finish my cigarette and start heading inside.

“Hey, Megan.”

“Yeah?”

“If you need my help, just call alright?”

“Thanks Trish, I will.”

I head inside and get my parents into onesies. I sit in a rocking chair and grab *Love You Forever*. Mom and Dad crawl onto my lap and snuggle up to my chest, ready for their bedtime story.

Chapter 5

It is night. Mabel and Eddy are near the end. My family is in a guest room now. My sons and husband have been able to take time off to help with Mom and Dad. Between diaper changes and bottle feedings, we reminisce on old memories, laughing and crying, but somehow this feels right. We don't know when they will leave us. They say the first signs are when they stop walking and talking. Mom doesn't even crawl. Dad crawls a bit but his baby limbs are not coordinated.

Mom is fussy. She is loud when she cries but she makes me laugh from time to time. God she has some lungs on her. It reminds me of her as she sang on Sunday mornings, making herself a coffee filled with cinnamon. Dad is pretty calm actually. He loves moving about, picking things up and shaking them. I find myself playing with him a lot. I praise him when I can, so I can get lost in his laugh. Sometimes he grabs Mom's binky and makes her cry. It's ok. She's throwing them from her mouth any chance she gets anyways. She's had to wear mittens since she scratches her cheeks in her acts of defiance.

She still stares out of the windows. I don't know why she is so fascinated by them. Maybe it's the sun or the trees, but she will just stare out there. That's until she remembers she's supposed to be angry and begins fighting again.

In a way I'm proud of Mom. Guess she was just born with a fiery spirit. I change Dad for the last time of the day and lay him down in the crib with Mom. I sit in the rocking chair nearby and get ready to sleep. My husband gives me a goodnight kiss and heads to the guest wing with my sons.

I'm glad they are here. It's been nice to have them around these last few days. I admire the men my sons have become. It wasn't easy, god knows the teen years were a mess. The thought that they take after their grandfather brings me joy. I close my eyes to rest. I'm sure I'll be feeding Mom a bottle in a couple of hours.

Chapter 6

I awake to the sounds of Mom crying. In a hazy state, I walk over to see if I can find her binky, only to step on it near her crib. I grab it up and head to the sink. I might as well clean it as I make a bottle. She cries and cries but I'm used to it now. The faster she gets the bottle the faster she will settle. I wash her binky and set it on a paper towel to dry. I grab

a bottle, add milk from the mini-fridge and throw it into the microwave. The buzzing sound is slightly soothing. 43 seconds, no more no less. I watch the timer tick down when the crying suddenly stops.

A rush of fear strikes me, causing me to sprint back to the crib. I find my mother now, quiet. My heart is thumping. Dad is nowhere to be found. I look and I look, but he's not in the crib. I fear the worst so I grab my mother. That is when I see his onesie. Empty. Flat. His beanie above the neckline of his clothes. I look over at my mother and in her mouth is my father's binky. I scoop her up, I grab his clothes and I scream for help. I sit on the floor as Patricia and my husband run into the room. The microwave rings sharply. Time's up.

"It's Eddy! I can't find Eddy!" I yell at Patricia.

She runs to the crib and begins to look around. In my arms, my mother vanishes, leaving behind weightless clothes. I search around the room as my stomach crashes to the ground. No amount of foresight could have prepared me for this moment.

At 49 years old I am a little girl again, clinging to the side of my mommy's pants. I squeeze and I squeeze their onesies in my arms, and I cry. I cry hard and loud. I cry because I need my Mom and Dad. I need them like the world is falling apart, but they are not here. They are gone. Never to look my way again. Taken from me.

As I cling to the empty onesies, I feel my family hold me. My husband squeezes me tight and my boys keep me still. No one speaks. They let me cry. I hold my parents' last belongings for dear life. White-knuckled, I can feel Dad's binky dig into my hand. His final gift to Mom.

DAVE

by Charles Hinton

1

I am a killer. A brutal killer. Make no mistake. Whether you agree or disagree with killing people is none of my business. Before I go any further, I feel that it is important to inform you that I am not a writer. If I were a writer, I'd most likely keep you in suspense as long as possible, as I unravel this story inch by inch. Sorry—I am just not that guy. This tale is about a guy who sees the ghosts (spirits, apparitions, haints, spooks...pick one) of people who were murdered, and is asked (by ghosts) to avenge their death. Simply put: I kill killers. I see nothing wrong with killing, if the right people are killed.

For obvious reasons I am not going to tell you my name, age, race, or what state I live in. I will only tell you this: I am an American who served three combat tours in which I killed more people than I can count or care to remember. These poor souls had one thing in common: they were deemed by the powers that be as an imminent threat to the United States of America. I was given orders and I followed them. But that was a long time ago. I now offer my services to the dead. Free of charge. I could easily be your neighbor down or across the street, your doctor, your boss, an in-law, or that homeless person in the alley. I will let you wonder. I will let you decide. The names in this story have been changed to protect the innocent, and myself of course. For now, you can just call me Dave.

2

I started seeing ghosts (as far as I can remember) when I was six. The first was my grandpa. I saw him three days after his funeral. I was in my bedroom playing with my electric racing car set, the faint but pleasant hot smell of electricity wafting up my nose as the small car sped around the plastic track. The car rounded a corner at top speed and went flying off the track, tumbling across the floor, stopping between a nice pair of dress shoes. They were grandpa's shoes, and there he was standing in

front of my bedroom door dressed in his black suit, the same suit he'd been buried in three days ago. I had seen him lying in a casket, his long fingers linked together, looking as if he were only sleeping. I saw them lower his silver casket in the ground. But there he was, standing in front of me looking as alive as he'd ever been.

"Grandpa!" I shouted. "You're back!"

"Not for long, Big Boy," he said. Big Boy was the nickname he had given me. Although he was standing in the room, his voice sounded far away, like he was standing at the end of a long corridor. "Be a good boy, and take care of your mother, okay?"

"Okay, Grandpa, but why can't you stay?"

"I just can't, Big Boy. This world has no place for me anymore. I've used up all my time. But you, you have a glow. Some of us can see it, so we go to it. When you get older, you'll understand that you glow. Gotta go. Can't stay. Gotta go..." He turned and walked through my bedroom door. It was closed. I ran after him, shouting his name. When I made it to the hallway, he was gone, so I figured he must have hurried downstairs.

I ran downstairs shouting, "Grandpa, Grandpa, come back!" My parents, who were sitting on the sofa grieving the loss of my mother's father, shot straight up.

"What's going on?" my mother shouted, rushing towards me. She dropped to her knees as I ran into her arms. "What's wrong, baby? Are you okay?"

"It's Grandpa, mom! He's here! We have to find him."

"What do you mean, Grandpa is here?"

"He's here! I saw him! Upstairs! In my bedroom."

"What do you mean? Is this some kind of a joke, Dave?" My mother burst into tears and then ran upstairs to her and my father's bedroom, her footfalls thumping.

My father, who was staring up at an empty stairwell, said, "Your mother and I encourage your vivid imagination, son, but this time you have taken it too far—"

"But—"

"Stop it!" my father yelled. "Just stop it! You didn't see your grandpa, you just didn't. He's gone and your mother is in pain. She lost her mother, and now less than a year later she loses her father. And all you can offer her is a bunch of foolishness. If you love your mother, then I suggest you never bring this up again. Do you hear me?"

"Yes," I said and started bawling. My father, who had hardly shown any affection to me when I was a child, picked me up and hugged me.

“Sorry, son. We are all going through a lot. Forgive me for being so short with you. We are just under a lot of stress. I will try to do better next time.” My father squeezed me tighter, I could feel his love for me, and it gave me great comfort.

Although I would see many spirits thereafter, I never told anyone again, especially my parents.

The spirits that came not long after my grandfather did not scare me. They appeared to be wandering souls, not knowing where they belonged or where to go. I’d see them in basements, standing alongside roads, in restaurants, shopping centers...they’d mostly just stare calmly and curiously, looking around, as if they had somehow taken a wrong turn. Then they would suddenly see me. No matter how many other people were around, they’d zero in on me. Just for a moment. They’d stare at me curiously, as if I didn’t belong here, as if I was the one who should not be among the living. After a moment they’d go on about their wandering, seemingly trying to figure out what had happened to them and what was going on.

I soon began to understand that these spirits—in comparison to the other spirits that are more visually haunting—were people who had died suddenly. So sudden that they were not aware that they had died. One minute they were just living their lives, the next minute they were dead. Like the man just crossing the street, his mind on everything save for the bus that knocked him out of his shoes, and this world. Or the woman who’d climbed a ladder to clean her gutters and lost her balance, pinwheeling backwards onto the hood of her SUV, the back of her head smashing through the vehicle’s thick windshield. Or the construction worker who had absentmindedly forgotten his harness, falling ten stories onto the concrete below...And there they were, dead. Dwelling. Wandering. Trying to figure out what had happened. And to add to their confusion, they saw this little boy glowing in the distance.

Although I never quite entirely understood what my grandfather meant when he told me that I had a glow, I could imagine that these ghosts saw an outline of light surrounding my body that stood out above all else. I believe that it was a dim glow at first and as I grew older, I believe that my glow became brighter. Too bright for the wandering souls but just bright enough for the ghosts who knew that they were dead and wanted something done about it.

I was eight when the other ghosts started to come my way.

Before I go too far, I would like to make it clear that I do not see every ghost on the planet. I do not see everyone who dies, and everyone who dies doesn't see me. My glow appears to be exclusive. For instance, there was an elderly man who was struck and killed by a delivery truck across from our post office. Whenever my parents drove by the post office, I'd crane my neck from the back seat looking for the old man's spirit. I've never seen him once. And that's just how it works—some ghosts I see, and some I don't, no matter if they are a relative, friend, or stranger.

I was frightened when Elsa Collins came to me. It was the first time that I had ever been scared.

Elsa was a short Caucasian woman standing nearly four feet with long silver hair and dark brown eyes. She lived with her seven cats at the end of our street. Her seven cats were her life. She had owned ten cats at one point, but three had run off to never be seen again (at least we thought so). She had apparently crammed all ten cats in a stroller one afternoon, figuring they'd enjoy the nice fall weather. Three of the cats, so it seemed, had escape on their minds, and flew the stroller coop the moment she headed off down her driveway. It was said that she was planning to replace the three runaway cats, but that never happened.

Elsa came to me on a sunny day. I was outside tightening the chain on my bike with a pair of vise grip pliers when her long, thin shadow washed over me. "Dave!" she whispered. I turned and looked up, shielding my eyes from the sun, the vise grips still in hand. "Come see, Dave!" My light brown eyes met her dark brown eyes and suddenly I was inside a home. Her home.

I was standing in Elsa's upstairs hallway, facing a staircase at the other end that was illuminated by crisscrossing beams of sunlight. Elsa, who was standing at the top of the stairs, beckoned me as she made her descent. I did not want to follow her, but I had no choice; small, powerful, invisible hands pushed then pulled me down the hall towards the stairs. I tried to resist, but my weak struggles were futile. Fearing that I'd be flung down the staircase, I decided that it was perhaps best to follow Elsa.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I was engulfed by a horrid stench of cat pee, feces, and what could only be something rotting. I could feel the bacon and eggs my mother had made for me earlier that day churning inside my stomach, wanting to come up. Elsa, who was now standing in front of her kitchen door that towered over the small woman

like a huge green monster, waved me on and then walked inside the kitchen, allowing the huge two-way door to swing back and forth on its hinges before coming to a complete stop. I stood there watching, listening. I could hear what sounded like the humming of a small motor on the other side of the door as the small invisible hands began to push and pull me towards the door. Again, I decided it was best to walk on my own.

When I opened the door, the first thing I saw was that one of the kitchen windows had been raised completely open, allowing the outside in. Flies and moths and all kinds of assorted bugs ruled the kitchen, crawling and leaping aimlessly across the ceiling and up and down the walls. A huge crow was perched on top of the refrigerator, needling its feathers with its black beak. What I at first thought was the humming of a small motor was actually Elsa's cats. They were purring in unison, their tails high, flicking back and forth like furry cobras. The cats were in good spirits because they were feasting on their keeper, their master, their mother, Elsa Collins. The hungry and greedy cats (and flies) were gorging on her decaying maggot infested corpse as it lay splayed across the kitchen floor. They were eating her face, arms, legs, and guts while the crow above awaited its turn.

I gasped, and to my horror the cats turned to me, hissing and hunching their backs. All ten. Yes, ten. Apparently the three that had run away had come back. Back through the kitchen window that had been left open for them. They had returned home just in time for dinner. The hunched cats leapt in the air, hissing and clawing towards me, ears pinned back, sailing through the air like they had been flung from Hell.

I screamed, shielded my eyes and stumbled backwards, tripping over my bike, slamming hard on the ground outside, knocking the air from my body, and the pliers from my hand. I was now on the ground staring up at a clear blue sky, gasping like a fish out of water, expecting to see Elsa's flesh-eating cats raining down on me before clawing and digging clumps of meaty flesh from my face. I expected to see Elsa standing over me, glaring down like some hideous gravedigger, showing her true dead and decaying colors. But she and her cats were gone. There was just me and my bike (and the pliers if you really want to keep count).

"What's the matter, son?" my father shouted. He had been lounging around in the garage hooting and hollering and drinking beers with Wally Green, our neighbor who lived across the street, when he heard me cry out. "What's going on, Dave, are you okay? What were you screaming about?" I could smell beer and cigarettes. He and his cigarettes were

combatants. My father would quit and win a few battles (as strange as that may sound), but cigarettes, in the end, would win the war.

My mother, who had been making dinner, came running out the back door, her face a mask of worry and concern. I sprung to my feet and ran to her, planting my face against her belly. She was wearing her sky-blue apron which always smelled of Lemon Fresh Joy. My mother has been dead many years but even to this day, I am helplessly reminded of her whenever I smell lemon.

“Ms. Elsa is dead, and her cats are eating her,” I said, squeezing her while drilling my face into her flat stomach. My words were muffled and incoherent.

“What’s going on?” my mother cried. “What about Elsa?” Had my whimpering words been coherent, my parents, at least my mother anyway, would have heard me the first time. Luckily, this was not the case. Remembering how badly things had turned out the last time I had claimed to see a ghost; I knew that I would not be believed. If anything, I’d most likely be sent to a special doctor whose only mission would be to cure me. So, I had to think fast, and I did:

“Ms. Elsa, mom, she’s dead!” My mother pried me away and got down on one knee. We were now at eye level.

“What do you mean, Ms. Elsa is dead?” My mother’s voice was soft and hushed. “Where did you hear this? Who told you this?”

“Two boys walked by and I heard one of them say that no one has seen Ms. Elsa in a long time, and the reason was because she was dead in her home.” I fell into her arms, and she hugged me while gently stroking the back of my head.

“I am sure that Ms. Elsa is alive and well, sweetheart.” My mother gently pushed me away and stood up, determined to resolve this matter. Determined to protect her only son. Giving birth to me was tough on my mother and she was highly advised not to bear any more children. I had no problem being the only child. More stuff for me, right?

“When was the last time you’ve seen Elsa, Darrin?” My father who was standing next to Wally, perhaps trying to process what was taking place, shrugged.

“I don’t know. Maybe a week or two ago.” He turned to Wally. Wally hunched his shoulders. My dad’s guess was as good as his. “Do you think Wally and I should go down there? Do a wellness check?” He waited for my mother to answer.

“I don’t see why not.” My mother ruffled my hair and then softly pinched my nose. I played the game and smiled. Mother was just trying to

put me at ease, and I loved her for it. Contrary to my mother's wishful thinking that Elsa Collins was alive and well, I knew damn well she was dead. Just as sure as I knew that pigs didn't fly, nor did they take bubble baths.

"Alright," said my father, "we'll walk down there and check on her." He turned to Wally, who nodded. We watched as they turned and walked out of sight.

I was in the kitchen helping my mother cook (getting in her way is what I was really doing) when my father walked in limping with blood trickling down his right cheek. About twenty minutes had passed since he and Wally's departure. The disbelieving look on my father's face said it all: Elsa was dead. He looked at my mother, sighed, and then walked out of the kitchen. I knew exactly where he was going. He was going to call the police.

"Why don't you go up to your room, honey, I will call you when dinner is ready."

"Okay, mom," I replied, and did what I was told.

In my mind's eye, I saw exactly what had happened. My father and Wally walking up to Elsa's door and mashing her doorbell. Waiting, then knocking. Softly at first, then banging, while peering through her living room windows, looking for a sign of life. Nothing. So, they decided to walk around back, being careful not to tread on Elsa's plethora of flowers that surrounded her home like a colorful molt. And there it was: the open kitchen window. God only knows how many times they called out to her before Wally, who was the strongest of the two—he used to box in the old days, was damn good to let him tell it—wrapped his arms around my father's legs and lifted him up to look inside the open window. I imagine my father saw what I saw: the insects flying and crawling about the kitchen walls. The crow cawing on top of the refrigerator that was most likely stuffed with cold leftovers that would never be eaten. And last but not least, he saw the ten cats dining on Elsa Collins decaying corpse.

I was pulling out a box of checkers from under my bed (I will admit that playing with me, myself and I, was one of the downsides of being an only child) when I heard sirens wailing outside my bedroom window. The cavalry was on its way and late as usual. I ran to my window just in time to see my father and Wally link up and march down the street. I had no doubt that they were heading to report their findings to the proper authorities that were en route.

To protect my innocence, and perhaps not to scare the crap out of me, my parents never told me what really had happened to Ms. Elsa (as if

I didn't already know, right?). They elected to tell me that Elsa, who was very, very old, quietly passed away in her sleep. And perhaps to cover all bases, they assured me that all her adorable cats were given new homes. I played the game, and as far as my parents knew, their neat little fib had set things right with their precious little boy. And I never gave them a reason to think otherwise.

People talk. This is just a cold fact. My parents were no exception. Elsa's passing was the talk of the town, and everyone seemed to want to get in on the action. Our phone was ringing off the hook and my ears were wide open. By way of eavesdropping, I knew all there was to know by the end of the week.

Elsa Collins had died from a massive heart attack. She had been dead about a week. Her estranged daughter was coming to bury what remained of her mother, claim her home, and then sell it. Upon hearing this news, my mother gasped.

One of Elsa's cats had clawed my father's face moments after he'd witnessed the horrific feast from the open kitchen window. The cats, stirred by the flapping wings of the crow as it swooped down for a piece of dead, rotting flesh, hissed, yawned and tore out in all directions, leaping and clawing. One of the cats leapt over the kitchen counter and out the window, smashing into my father's chest, latching its claws to his shirt. The smelly feline swiped a clawed paw across my father's cheek, scurried to the ground and lit out. Wally, losing his balance, had no other option but to let my father go. My father shot to the ground, twisting his ankle on a rock as he tumbled over, squashing many of the flowers that he and Wally had been careful not to disturb.

As for the remaining cats that had dined on human flesh, they were hauled off and never seen again. Elsa must have turned over in her grave. What was left of her anyway.

Years and years passed before I would see another ghost. And when the ghost of Natalie Chance came to me, I started killing. But this time it was not for my country, but for justice. Like I said; I don't see nothing wrong with a little killing, if the right people are killed. Natalie was the first of a different cycle of ghosts, however, and I will end with her tale.

4

My father died in the 90's, and if you have been paying attention, you probably figured that it was the cigarettes that took him. Key-rect! The war was over. Cigarettes won. My mother went two years later.

Natural causes, the doctors say. Heartbreak, I say. My father's death was tough on me, but my mother's death was devastating, so I think it best to just leave it alone.

I suppose you're wondering if my parents ever came back from the dead to pay me a visit. No! I've never seen them. At least not their ghosts. They visit me in my dreams though. Their visits are joyful, and I'd like to keep these dreams to myself if you don't mind.

The night Natalie had come to me, I was tossing and turning in my bed. Alone. My ex-wife, Bailey, had left me eight months prior. We were married a little over a year. Towards the end of our divorce, Bailey had told me that her father had said that I have a wart on my ass that will keep me restless and on the move for ever and ever. He was right. I was constantly restless and on the move. Never home. Never there for Bailey. So she left me. Good for her. She's a good woman. I'd like to think that I am a good man, save for that wart on my ass. And the killings, of course.

I am a very light sleeper, so when the foot of my bed shook, I awoke instantly. A young woman who was burned beyond recognition sat on the foot of my bed. Charred skin slid off her bones in sheets. Her scalp was sizzling, bubbling, and smoldering. It wasn't until she turned her head completely around that I saw that one of her eyes had burst in its socket while the other rested on her charred cheek like a glowing ember. The woman, who was dead, began weeping and wailing as she disappeared into nothing.

My heart felt as if it was going to explode, for never have I witnessed such a gruesome apparition. Never had one come to me wearing death. It was all about the glow, and I knew it. I imagined my glow as a campfire growing larger and brighter as it feeds on tinder, kindling, and chopped wood. Only my glow feeds on age and becomes brighter. Too bright for some spirits, but bright enough for others. And so, I prepared myself for the new change. The new cycle.

The young woman was gone but I knew she would come back. Come back and show me. Three days later, she did just that.

There was a lot of killing during my tours and not one of the dead ever came to me. So this leads me to believe that the gift that I have is not always active. It hibernates like a bear. I was sitting at my kitchen table, trying to develop a timeline, a link between when the dead were present and when the dead were absent, when the severely burned woman appeared again, this time at the end of the table. Although I knew she would return, I could not stop my heart from racing and my hands from

shaking. The dead woman wasted no time. She held out her charred hands, I took them, and I saw.

She was Natalie Chance. She had gone for a jog on the country road that she had traveled regularly for months. She had no reason to think anything differently of Charles Manley standing by his Dodge Ram up ahead. The rich man was out checking on his land that was on either side of her, and so she stopped to have a quick chat with him. There was nothing unusual about it. This was what she did when the two of them sometimes happened to meet on this stretch of unpaved road when she was on a long run. It wasn't brand new. However, this time there was a man with Charles whom she had never seen. He introduced himself as Frank Otter. Frank extended his right hand, and they were well met. Charles called her name, she turned, there was a sting on the back of her neck, and she was out.

When she awoke, she was groggy but understood what was happening. She had been injected with some knockout drug, tied to a bed, her legs spread apart while Charles Manley had his way with her. She was too doped up to even scream. It seemed like the only thing that was working were her eyes that were pouring out tears.

Near the end, a total of five men had their way with her in an isolated cabin in the woods, including Frank Otter, the stranger who had undoubtedly injected her. Some of these men were brazen enough to have come back for seconds and thirds.

When they had their fill, they dragged her out back, stuffed her upside down in a steel barrel, doused her with gasoline, and set her on fire while she was still alive. Her death was excruciating and agonizing. So, she had come to me, and I instantly knew what had to be done. And I had no problems going after her killers.

5

It didn't take long for me to find Charles Manley and his raping, murdering buddies. The military taught me how to find people—and how to kill them.

I stood outside the cabin, waiting. Four luxurious vehicles were parked outside. I recognized all of them and knew who each belonged to. The man who was introduced as Frank Otter had not arrived. This didn't surprise me because I knew that he had further to travel. I wasn't surprised to discover that Frank Otter was his true name. They were going to kill Natalie, so why not give her his real name?

The moment Frank pulled up and climbed out of his SUV, I grabbed him from behind, slid an arm around his throat, and injected him with my own brand of anesthesia. He was out within an instant. I let him fall hard to the ground, smashing his face. He'd live. For now. I walked over to the tree where I had stowed my shotgun, grabbed it, and then marched inside the cabin.

They were sitting at the kitchen table, engaged in conversation. None of them noticed me until I racked the shotgun. The universal click click, stopped all four men in their tracks and garnered me their full attention.

"The first man to move will be the first man to die," I said briskly, aiming the shotgun from one man to the other. "You boys know why I'm here?" Before anyone could try to answer, I pulled out a 5x7 photo of Natalie Chance. "I'm here for you. For what you did to this young woman." The men stared at each other with wonder and utter disbelief. Arnold Busby, a hotshot banker, was the first to go.

"Please, sir," he pleaded, rising from the table, inching toward me. "Please, I just got married." He held up his left hand, palm out, displaying his wedding ring. I fired the shotgun. Although I was wearing earplugs, I could still hear the guns deafening blast as it evaporated Arnold's hand and half of his face, leaving behind red, hanging meat. He fell to the floor, twitched several times, and then died with blood pouring from his stub of a wrist and from a gaping hole that was once the left side of his face.

"Sit down!" I shouted at the three remaining men who had sprung from their chairs out of shock and terror. "Sit down or I will put you down! All of you!"

"If you're going to kill me, you're going to have to kill me standing on my own two feet." This was Tucker Lance, the owner of Lance Steel. The strain on his face was either caused by the loud blast from the shotgun or seeing his rape buddy's head torn open. Perhaps both. Under any other circumstances, I would have admired his bravery, but there was nothing to admire about a raping murderer.

He moved away from his two buddies who had quickly obeyed my command to sit down. Tucker stood in front of me, his arms spread wide, his chin raised arrogantly high, behaving like a man who believes that bad things only happened to other people, not him. I blazed the shotgun, taking off his left leg just below the knee. He pogoed backwards on one leg, hit the wall and then slid down it. He sat up, screaming in utter pain.

"You are not going to die on your two feet, you sick maggot," I shouted, "you're going to die on the ground like the dog you are." I pulled

the trigger. His face and head disappeared just above his jawline, decorating the wall with bloody clumps of hair, brain, skull, and teeth. I fed the shotgun a few more shells and then I turned the gun on Blake Chamberlain, a big money-making commercial realtor. "Take this picture and look at it!" I screamed, handing him the photo that I had tucked carefully inside my jacket. "Look at it long and hard!" Shaking, he took the picture and did what he was told. After a moment, I snatched the picture out of his hand. Natalie was the last thing he saw before the shotgun disintegrated his head. Blood sprayed from his jagged, headless neck. I turned to Charles Manley.

"Wait a minute!" Charles said, wiping Blake's blood and brains from his face with his shirt. "Wait a minute, man! You must have a price. I'll give you one hundred thousand—" I pulled out the syringe and plunged it in his neck. It was lights out.

When Charles and Frank came to, they discovered that they were sitting on the ground, back-to-back with their torsos, mouths, hands and feet bound with duct tape. When they saw the gas can I was carrying, they began squirming and fighting their hardest to break free while trying to move away from me at the same time, to only end up falling on their sides. I drenched them with gasoline, hoping that the gas that I had taken from Charles' shed was the very same gas that he—no, they—had used on poor Natalie.

I held up Natalie's picture and commanded them to look at it. They stared at the photo, their muffled pleas for mercy falling on deaf ears. I pulled out a pack of matches from my pocket and struck one, then used it to light the whole pack. "This is for what you dirty dogs did to Natalie Chance," I said, holding out her picture. And then I sat the two soulless devils on fire as they begged for mercy. The same mercy that they never gave Natalie. They screamed as the flames burned their clothes and charred their skin. They screamed as their noses and lips melted and welded together. They screamed as their eyes popped. They screamed as their meat melted from their bones. I held out Natalie's picture until they screamed all the way to Hell. And then I added more gasoline.

We all owe a death. My only regret is that I did not make their deaths more painful. All of them.

6

Natalie returned to me a few days after I righted her murder. Once again, I was sitting at my kitchen table when she appeared. She was

wearing a lovely yellow dress sprinkled with red roses. Her brown, caramel skin was smooth and radiant. Her eyes a brilliant brown. She smiled, raised her hand (goodbye), and faded peacefully away. Although I cannot confirm it, I believe that my heart beamed with luminous light. Not quite as bright as the Sun, but damn near close. I never saw Natalie's ghost again, and that's alright.

I was trained to infiltrate enemy territory, kill, and exfiltrate without leaving any evidence. My mission to avenge the rape and murder of Natalie Chance was no exception. In the end, the authorities received an anonymous letter with names and all they needed to know. You may have read about it or caught it on the news if you dare to remember. I believe that I've sent the authorities over twenty letters since then. These days, the ghosts keep coming, I keep killing, and the authorities, so it seems, are in no rush to find out who is responsible for taking out the trash. Good riddance to rubbish could be their stance. Might be. We also mustn't look over the fact that I am not easy to find. I'm like... a ghost...

There is this hack of a writer sitting near me at the library bragging to whoever will listen about some book called the Northern Navigator or Northern Narrator, or something like that. Apparently, Commander McBragg has published three short stories in this annual publication. He is here at the library to start writing his next literary masterpiece (to let him tell it). I am going to print out this tale and place it on the desk he is sitting at the moment he steps away to announce his greatness to whomever will listen next. I have no doubt that he will take my story and pawn it off as his own. I wouldn't be surprised if this blowhard even leaves this part in, figuring it will make him seem clever. It doesn't matter to me.

What matters to me is this: if you are out there holding on to some deep and dark, murderous secret that you think you've gotten away with, you may want to think again. You may not see me today. You may not see me tomorrow. But chances are you will see me. And I guarantee you—the last thing you will see

will

be

Dave...

RIDING WITH THE BOGEYMAN

by Charles Hinton

She was in Whitney's car and, as far as he was concerned, she was as good as dead. It was routine now: she'd plead and beg for her life, just like all the others. She'd tell him that she has a small child waiting for her at home, or that her mother is on her death bed, or that she is pregnant, and so on and so forth, just like all the others. No matter the sex, race, nationality, or creed, they never seemed to believe that it was really happening until he slid his hands around their throats or beat their heads in with a tire-rod or jammed an ice pick inside one of their ear holes. Whitney Shatter had killed over twenty-five drifters and, as far as he knew, none of them saw it coming. And the young woman, who was now staring out of Whitney's passenger side window at the full moon that whizzed in and out behind the dark trees, would not see it coming either.

"So, where are you from, Maggie?" Whitney asked. This was the formality part. In another twenty miles he'd pull off of Route 22 and drive to the spot he had ready and waiting. Until then, it was small talk time. He would offer her the drink later. She would take the drink because her kind always took things, whether given permission or not. It was just the way things were.

"I'm from all over," Maggie said, wiping her long black hair from her face.

"You're from all over, huh? Have you ever been to San Fran?" He looked over at her. She was pretty. Not bad at all. Whitney surmised that if this was not his night out the situation could possibly turn out differently. Yes, she was a drifter – backpack and all – but she didn't appear too far gone. She was perhaps a shower away from decency. But of course, tonight was his night, and that was that.

He had worked hard to put things in order. His cell phone was at home. The game was being recorded – it didn't matter who was playing; he would know all he needed to know later. He had picked a fight with

his girl Sandy. She was told not to call him, because he was not going to answer. He had told his neighbors that he was in for the night, locked down; no one knew about the Dodge Intrepid safely stowed in the underground parking lot of the complex he owned over on Fifth Avenue; and tonight, he was wearing his blond wig fastened tightly to his bald head. If the law decided to come snooping, Whitney was ready for them. Whitney Shatter was going to be in the killing game forever because he dotted his I's and crossed his T's. He was nothing like the rest of those fools who practically handed themselves over to the cops. Those idiots always got too cocky and too sloppy for their own good.

"Yeah, I've been to San Francisco. It's nice." Maggie turned back to the window, her eyes following the huge moon.

"So, you're thinking of settling up there in North Dakota, is that right?"

"Yup."

"Do you have family up there?" He was staring at the road, watching orange and yellow leaves circle and tumble in front of the Dodge's headlights before disappearing into the trees and green growth that surrounded them on either side.

"No, I don't have any family in North Dakota. At least, I don't think so." Whitney was certain that she didn't have family in North Dakota, the same way he was certain that her real name was not Maggie and that she'd never worked for a mapping company. He would go through her backpack later and find what he always found: illegal drugs.

Drifters were the bloodline of America's drug trade. Drug dealers used them as mules. The dealers loaded their backpacks with drugs and sent them on their way to hitch rides from law-abiding Americans who unknowingly transported their drugs from coast to coast. Right up under the nose of John Q Law. The more Whitney thought about it, the more he thought it to be ingenious. Whitney supposed that if drugs were one of his vices, he'd most likely get in on some of that action. But this was not the case. He was not a drinker or a drug user. Whitney had his own vice, and there was no doubt in his mind that nothing compared to it. There was no place in his life for drugs and he had no business meddling in the business of drugs. He had chosen to leave that matter between the cops and the cartel. He would just bury her and the backpack in the shallow grave that was ready and waiting and then call it a night.

The thought of what he was going to do to "Maggie" excited him. He had already decided that he was going to use a knife this time around. It had been a while since he'd used a knife on one of his victims. He was

going to slit her throat and watch as her eyes rolled over white. Whitney swallowed, his throat feeling as if it was coated with sand. Ramping up for the kill was exciting, and it always dried his throat.

"I've heard on the radio that a bunch of neo-Nazis plan to set up shop somewhere in North Dakota. They're looking to build on an island or a lake, if I'm not mistaken. Is that true?" He looked over at her, and she shrugged. He was not surprised to see her staring at the moon. Enjoy it while you can, he thought. After tonight she would never see the moon again. "That is some moon, huh? It looks like something right out of a Stephen King novel." He was wearing thin on small talk, and so was she. She was just "yes" to this or "no" to that. She was losing interest, and he was sure that she was going to refuse the loaded bottled water when he offered it to her. So, what! She was perhaps 120 pounds, and he was pushing 230. If push came to shove, he would backhand her a smart one across the nose and drag her from the car kicking and screaming before she could even think to reach for the gun inside her waistband or her backpack. These people always packed guns. Whitney Shatter just never gave them the opportunity to use them.

"It is quite the moon," Maggie said. "I find it relaxing."

"You find it relaxing? You are definitely a different breed, Maggie. Most people I know would associate a moon like that with the Bogeyman. Do you believe in the Bogeyman?"

Maggie smiled then said, "Of course. Don't you?"

"I have no choice but to believe in the Bogeyman, Maggie, because I am the Bogeyman."

Maggie turned to him and smiled. Whitney smiled. It was the smile that he had practiced over and over in the mirror. It was a trusting smile; it worked on his family, it worked on his friends, it worked on his co-workers, and it never failed to work on his victims. "That's right; I am the Bogeyman, now hear me roar." Whitney howled like a wolf and then bellowed laughter. Maggie clasped a small hand across her mouth, stifling her laughter. There, he was back on solid ground. The window was open. He had to take it before it closed. "Geez, I am about as dry as a desert, I am dying for some water. Mind if I pull over and grab a bottle from the cooler? It's in the trunk."

"Of course, I don't mind," Maggie said.

"I'll grab you one. I have plenty. They're strawberry flavored. They're really tasty."

"Okay. Thank you. You are without a doubt a virtuous Bogeyman."

“Well, you have to start somewhere.” Whitney pulled over. “It won’t take but a second.” He climbed out of the car, and the sport coat and khaki pants that covered his six-foot frame flapped like sails in the jetting wind.

You have to start somewhere. That much was true. The Bogeyman inside of Whitney started (as far as he could remember) thirty years ago. Whitney Stanley Shatter was just a kid, bound for the fifth grade at the end of summer, on the day he became the Bogeyman. He was making his way across Hailey’s Park, tossing and batting a tennis ball with his Louisville Slugger. One minute he was Babe Ruth, the next Jackie Robinson...

Reggie Jackson was at the plate when Whitney heard what could have only been firecrackers (unless gangsters had somehow made their way to the small town of Middleton, Ohio, to settle some score with gunfire, that is). He looked over and saw two boys standing in the playground that was about twenty feet from where he stood, their shadows stretched out behind them like black, elongated creatures. Whitney didn’t know them personally, but he knew who they were. It was Archie Arnwine and Bill or Bobby Fanchelli; he wasn’t sure if the kid with the long blonde hair’s first name was Bill or Bobby, but he knew Archie – with his freckled face and flaming red hair – all too well.

Archie had terrorized Whitney’s school until he was finally pushed on to junior high. Bill (or Bobby) went to a different school, but he had shown up to Whitney’s school on several occasions to assist Archie in administering some of his devious deeds. If Archie wasn’t beating up some kid for holding back on his lunch money, he was pulverizing some chump for refusing to let him copy his homework. Whitney stood in the distance watching the boys light the firecrackers, blowing the crap out of ant holes, tin cans, old sneakers, cigarette wrappers, and anything and everything they could get their anxious hands on. He wanted so badly to join in on the fun but was wise enough to know that if he’d step one foot over there that he would end up being the fun. They’d most likely pin him down and shove one of those loud babies down his pants.

“Well, my daddy says that if you light a match to a fart, blue flames will shoot out of your butt,” Bill (or Bobby) said. “Do you want to try it?” The wind carried his voice to Whitney on an invisible flying carpet.

“Nuts to that!” Archie quipped. “I’m just going to have to take your old man’s word for it.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’re dog right, I’m sure.”

“Suit yourself. See ya around.” Bill (or Bobby) tossed a leg over his bike and then rode off with the glowing orange sun at his back. Archie stuffed a hand full of firecrackers inside the right front pocket of his faded jeans and then walked in Whitney’s direction, shading his eyes from the intense sunlight which was slowly turning the horizon purple and magenta. Whitney looked to his left, then to his right: there was no one. He looked behind him: zilch. Archie, his mind elsewhere, walked past Whitney without a glance.

Whitney Shatter – who had never wet the bed, tore the wings off bugs, played with dead and bloated wild creatures in the streets, or killed small animals – turned and batted a home run against Archie’s skull.

Whitney took off running before Archie Arnwine’s body slammed to the ground with a hard thump. He stowed the bat under his parent’s porch until the media frenzy blew over. When the heat subsided and cops could not figure out who on God’s Earth could have done such a thing, Whitney retrieved the bat and cleaned it of blood, hair, scalp and what could only have been small skull fragments. He loved his Louisville Slugger, and he loved what he had done. It felt good. It was powerful. He had tasted power over life and death for the first time, and, at the age of ten, he knew right then and there that he was never going to give it up. He knew if he played his cards right, he could last a long time in the killing business. All he had to do was be smart and not get greedy. Kill here, kill there, and always stay under the radar.

In fact, it wasn’t until he was sixteen that he would kill again. Yes, he had thought about it many times, but the opportunity never fell in his lap like it had with Archie. There was a lot of heat over Archie’s death, so Whitney knew that he had to be careful. It had gotten to the point where the powers that be were considering calling in the big guns from Cleveland to investigate the murder of Archie Arnwine. But after a month or two, when there were no more incidents of kids being killed in Middleton, parents started to relax, and so did the cops.

Whitney supposed that, had this happened to anyone but Archie or maybe Bill (or Bobby), the president himself would have come to their all-American town in search of blood (and votes, of course). But it did happen to Archie. Although no one spoke of it, Whitney was sure that the good ole town of Middleton had decided that Archie Arnwine, who was bound to get what was coming to him, got what was coming to him, only a lot sooner than they could have imagined. And that was that. One less prisoner to house. One less prisoner to feed. Keep it moving, ladies and

germs, there's nothing else to see here. And so, Whitney Shatter kept it moving.

The man Whitney shot with a deer rifle when he was sixteen, was pulled over to the side of a dirt road, staring under the hood of his pickup. Whitney had spied the man a quarter mile out from the tangle of brown bush and leafless trees that surrounded him. He looked around and saw no one. Whitney placed the man in his crosshairs and followed him. He watched the man lean against his pickup. Cross his arms. Draw in a deep breath. Whitney placed the crosshairs on the man's forehead and then pulled the trigger. The man's head exploded into a red and chunky spray of blood, skull, and brains. Whitney took off running across Eller Walton's land.

Eller was old, rich, widowed, and couldn't give a fiddler's fart who hunted on his land. His only rules were: do not kill anything you're not going to eat and do not kill each other. Whitney broke both rules.

When he made it home, Whitney's old man asked him, "How did it go?" Whitney only shrugged, but inside he was floating on Clouds Nine and Ten. He once again had the power over life and death and brother, did it feel ever so good!

According to the newspaper, the man whose head had been blown clear from his body was Dave Dotter, a father of two. His death was ruled an unfortunate hunting accident. He had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time and was shot by a careless hunter. However, investigators were still looking into the incident. Whitney had planned to keep the newspaper clipping but thought better of it. He was going to have a long go at killing but if things somehow went south, the last thing he needed was a literal paper trail.

Whitney was eighteen and on his way to college when he picked up his first drifter: some dude in his twenties on his way to California. Whitney knew that he was going to kill him the moment he climbed inside his car. It was just a matter of the right time and the right place.

The right time came at midnight. The right place was a rest stop outside of Denver. Whitney strangled the hitchhiker from behind with a necktie the moment they entered the restroom. The drifter put up a fight, but in the end, he laid sprawled out on the bathroom floor with his jeans darkened with urine, his eyes bulging from their sockets, and his mouth a yawning O.

Whitney tossed the drifter's belongings from his car then took off down the highway, riding high off the kill. By the time he made it out of Colorado, he'd lost count of all the drifters he'd passed with their thumbs out. One thing was clear: there were plenty of them for the picking. So, Whitney Shatter began to pick them one by one. He had killed over twenty-five of these wandering souls by the time he was forty-eight. And now the time had come for Maggie to meet the thing inside him that could only be the Bogeyman.

The cooler inside of Whitney's trunk contained two strawberry flavored bottled waters. The water on his right was laced with sleeping pills that he had dissolved and injected with a syringe. Never leaving anything for chance, Whitney had tested his evil remedy on himself (starting with the smallest dose, of course) until he had perfected it. Even though his victims came in different shapes and sizes, his drug always worked. Within ten minutes of its ingestion, they started to feel drowsy and dizzy and to speak incoherently. Most importantly, they became defenseless. Whitney grabbed the waters then climbed back inside the car.

"Here you go." He popped the safety seal and removed the cap, giving Maggie zero choice to save the water for later. She reached and grabbed the bottled water gently from his hand.

"Thanks." She raised the water to her lips and drank heartily. Whitney opened his bottle and raised it high.

"Cheers," he said, and drank, knowing that his thirst would be totally quenched soon.

The vehicles that had made the track of road leading miles into the dense forest were long gone. Whitney's Dodge bumped and jittered and swayed side to side on two grooves that were littered with rocks, weeds, and leaves. Ahead was an old Ford pickup, rusted and naked like some discarded metal carcass. The Ford marked the end of the road – if you wanted to call what Whitney was putzing on a road. The shallow grave he had dug the day before was about 100 yards beyond the old truck, far enough within the trees and shrubbery to do his deed and keep his deed a secret.

Whitney parked in front of the pickup then killed his headlights. He had brought a flashlight but found that it was unnecessary; the swollen moon proved to be all the guiding light he would need. Whitney climbed out of the car and walked over to the passenger side. He opened the door and pulled Maggie out by her right arm. She was foggy and distant, her speech a jumble of madness: murmurs of the Bogeyman, bad wolf, the

moon . . . Whitney led her easily past the truck and deeper into the woods, his left hand fastened around her right wrist, her backpack fastened over his right shoulder. He carried a hunting knife in his right hand. Maggie seemed none the wiser.

“Maggie, Maggie, Maggie,” Whitney said, his breath pluming from his mouth in white streams, “what am I to do with you?” They were standing five feet from the shallow grave. Trees swayed above and the ones that could afford it trickled down orange and yellow leaves. The mist that had started out thin and nonthreatening was now thickening around their legs. It seemed as if it was trying to engulf them. Eat them.

“You know, Maggie, it’s getting late, so I think I am just going to cut off your ears and your nose and then slit your throat. How does that sound?” He raised the hunting knife to Maggie’s face, its blade a dull twinkle beneath the moonlight. Now comes the begging and pleading, he thought. This was the part that tickled him. He’d heard it all and seen it all, but this time there was no begging or pleading; there were only agonizing screams. Maggie yanked her wrist from his hand then grabbed his wrist. There was a loud snap as the bones inside Whitney’s forearm exploded out from his skin in yellow-white shards. Whitney screamed and dropped the knife. Maggie changed.

Black hairs poured from her face, her hands, and beneath her shirt and jeans. Her eyes swelled and grew huge and yellow. Her ears pinned back into furry triangles. Her bones crackled, crunched, and contorted as she began to grow. Her nose and mouth stretched out into a long snout that bore eight-inch canines. Her clothes, unable to contain her massive, seven-foot bulk, ripped from her body.

The werewolf looked down at Whitney, its yellow eyes fill with rage and murder. It smelled like an unkempt zoo. Whitney Shatter screamed. The beast snarled and then chomped down on his face, its top fangs sinking viciously into Whitney’s cheekbones, its bottom fangs ripping through his chin. Whitney’s face exploded into a jumble of red meat, bone, gristle, and shattered teeth. He fell on his back gurgling bloody, tormented screams from a hole that was once a human mouth. The werewolf raised its head and howled at the moon. Its hot breath jetted out like a steam engine. The creature turned to Whitney and tore into his stomach with its huge teeth, opening his guts. Steam rose from the open cavity in a swirling stench. All Whitney could do was watch and try to scream without a mouth. A huge claw swiped across the top of his head, tearing away his blonde wig with the scalp beneath, exposing a white skull, and blood instantly filled the gory vacancy. It poured down and inside his

ears in wet, sticky streams, looking as black as oil in the moonlight. The monster howled again before tearing into Whitney's throat, ripping out cords and blood vessels. Whitney's eyes swam in circles. The beast pressed its snout against what was left of his face, growling and slobbering, its long tongue lopped to one side. The man, who was going to kill forever, was now looking into the yellow, raged, hateful eyes of death. Whitney Stanley Shatter died staring into the eyes of the Bogeyman.

THE DIGGER OF FARGO

by Mark Holman

Digger decided to stop and rest for the day after hours of walking and pushing his hand cart on the road from the ancient ruin of Fargo to the fortress of Grain Terminal One. Once a large city, Fargo was now barely a village. Most of its population, like Digger, lived by excavating the ruins to find things that could be sold or traded in the trade fairs and fortresses of the prairie. It was a hardscrabble life filled with dangers, but a recent find he carried promised to possibly change his fortunes forever.

Digger was named such because that was what he did. He was a picker who dug through the detritus of the Old Ones to find usable things to sell in the present. Like his parents before him, he made a living digging through the vast wasted areas of the ancients. It was hazardous work, and one learned quickly to avoid the sometimes invisible toxic legacy of those long-gone people. Why had they made so many poisonous things? He often wondered. His parents had named him Digger because of his ability to choose a spot, dig, and reveal treasures like some mystics who discovered the best places to dig water wells. Most of what he dealt with were durable creations of metal and plastic that could be used in the present.

He had reached the bones of the old tractor on Lone Tractor Plain, which, according to the story map he held in memory, was only a day's journey from the towering conical silos of Grain Terminal One, his final destination. Long ago, in the time of the Old Ones, it was said that Grain Terminal One was a storage facility for grains like corn and wheat. He found it hard to believe there had ever been a time when there had been so much food, but the ancients had done and made so many amazing things that it just might be true. In his cart, he carried a device that, for some reason, was greatly desired by the learned men who inhabited the cloistered chambers of the rows of pearly grey circular towers. As he rested, he looked at the small rectangle of shiny obsidian and the larger

black rectangle connected to it by a cord in his hand cart amid assorted plastic-wrapped t-shirts, plastic containers, and unrustable metal tools he had salvaged from the ruins of the sprawling constructions of the ancients. What mysterious magic had he unleashed after unearthing these two objects from their centuries of slumber in the underground chambers of one of the ancient, ruined places and turning them on?

He looked around at the well-worn campsite between the tractor and a tree. The tiny island, connected to land by a thin isthmus, was dominated by a towering cottonwood tree that shaded the old tractor's decaying, rusty bulk. He followed the isthmus from the island across the cattail-filled pond to where he could find plenty of fuel for a fire. The numerous patties of well-aged buffalo dung were everywhere around the pond. Judging their consistency, he thought the herd must have come through on the annual migration sometime last year. Water and dung were necessities on the plains for any proper camp where fuel and water were in short supply. Little had changed since he had come here as a child with his parents. He stopped here as had his parents before and those before them as a stop on the well-worn trade route on the old high road to the Terminal.

Returning with an armload of featherlight disks, he placed them in the fire ring and quickly had a fire going that warmed him in the waning light and heat of the day. He sat down with his back against the giant iron tractor wheel. As he leaned against the wheel, taking in the reflected warmth of the fire, he looked at the mature dark brown rust of the tractor. It was worn down in places, eroded by centuries of incessant rain and wind. On others, it looked as if it had been made yesterday. He noticed a couple of recently used shiny points. They were used to attach ropes for a shelter with two points on the tractor and one wrapped around the tree. Thousands of travelers over the millennium may have been sheltered by this three-cornered tractor, tree, and fire pit arrangement. Possibly, the legendary Hjalmarson himself had crafted these points and created this sheltering place in the waning days of the ancients as a gift to an uncertain future. Feeling the stout iron wheel of the tractor against his back, he thought of how this machine was tied to the legendary "Hjalmarson" who had once lived here. Legend says it was the iron horse Hjalmarson had once used to dig his fields and grind corn by driving over it with its iron wheels. Possibly the same corn he had hauled to the towers of the Terminal if those fanciful stories of vast food stores were true. The ancients had harnessed such power and wealth, but why hadn't they saved them?

He pulled a lightweight plastic sheet from his cart, tied it to the tractor wheel, and wrapped a rope around the massive tree. Wrapping another around a cast iron protrusion on the front of the tractor, he quickly had an awning over his little campsite. On the front casting, the words Twin City, with an overlapping TC in the middle, embossed on the front of the tractor, reminded him of a hat he sometimes wore in the summer. From other finds in digs around Fargo, he guessed it might have represented some type of game that had once been very popular. He wondered if the tractor and the hat had come from that far-off city, much bigger than Fargo. Far to the east, there was a vast necropolis where a thousand pickers could work for a thousand years and still only scratch the surface. He hoped to travel there someday and explore its buried riches.

Finally having time to sit and reflect, he wondered what this place might have been like to the ancients. Just a short time before, he had walked past a polished piece of red granite standing along the roadside, featuring the deeply incised words “Hjalmarson Farm established 1900.” Standing almost five feet tall, the giant stone was visible from where he now sat and was an important marker along the ancient highway leading to the Terminal. According to the old dating system and the Old American English tongue, a farm had been a place that grew food, while 1900 would be about 700 years ago, give or take a few hundred years. Few were sure because there was at least a century called the “Lost Times” or the “Forgetting” when the old had been lost and a new world began. His ancestors long ago had known the secrets long since forgotten. It was like having the blood of giants in his veins yet unable to grow. As for Hjamarson, it was an old surname of a legendary character of myth and legend attached to the voluminous cartographic oral literature. Digger had heard these stories around campfires and stone hearths to pass long winter days so many times they were indistinguishable from the landscape.

He stood and walked to the cart on the tiny island’s isthmus. He pulled the precious cargo from the back of his cart and put it on the ground. Both pieces shone like reflective obsidian in the sunlight as he unfolded the more significant thing on the ground until it was four times its size. Whatever it was, this more substantial thing must be what caused the more minor thing to light up when a button was pressed. He had found thousands of the more petite things but never one that had lit up before. He had discovered that it worked to light things up in the dark, even though its brightness wasn’t very good at illuminating anything. He had been told that the ancients, often called “the Old Ones,” had used

such things for talking to each other across distances, according to his learned friend John, a Libriati from the scriptorium at Grain Terminal One. This might be true since it seemed a lot of work to get hardly better light than a guttering oil lamp. As he thought and waited for the thing to light up, he took a swig from the white plastic jug with a rag tied around that said “bleach” in embossed letters. While the world of the present operated mainly on things that could be manufactured from natural materials, there were creations of the Old Ones that were widely used because of their ubiquity, utility, and the inability of people to make them in the present. People like him provided the living world with resources from the dead civilization.

As the fire matured and flames began to turn to coals, he walked to the pond to fill a small pot, filtering the water through some charcoal from a past fire. On return, he set it to boil above the coals near the flames on a flat rock. The glacially rounded stones that surrounded the fire looked as if they had been blackened by thousands of fires over a dozen centuries. Seemingly getting power from the more significant thing, the thing lit up just in time to brighten the lengthening shadows of the tractor and tree on each side of him.

The Libriati, the learned ones at the Terminal, had requested he travel there with the device. He felt it was probably nothing more than a children’s toy and didn’t understand why John had been so excited when he had passed him on the road in Fargo. The Terminal paid well in gold or supplies, especially foodstuffs from their vast irrigated fields and gardens. In an age when food was more valuable than gold, they usually got what they wanted. Behind the towering circular palisade of stacked iron were a spring, a lake, and a well-watered landscape of canals and towering shade trees with fields that produced every manner of the plant with the towers of the Terminal situated in the center, like some ancient fairy tale castle. It was a comparative Eden that provided for every need. To be welcomed in and allowed to stay was a true gift in a world with few true gifts. John had encouraged Digger to remain at the Terminal and enter as a third-season initiate. Entering his third season, John was on the road to use his knowledge to bring new discoveries back to the Terminal.

When he had told Libri John, an itinerant picker from the Terminal in his third season of life, about his find, John requested he immediately bring it, assuring the highest price. The Libriati were a religious order that sought to find the lost truths of the ancients. They strove to unlock the mysteries of the Eternal Machine of the Universe. The lost knowledge of the mechanical clockwork that ran everything from the sun’s movements

to the once magical dead devices used and worshiped in the time of the ancients. According to the rules of their order, men and women spent the first season of their life in study, the second season raising a family and continuing to study, and the third in profound scholarship or taking to the road to discover new truths before a fourth and final season of passing knowledge down through writing and deep conversation as one of the Sages of the Cottonwood Grove under the shimmering leaves of the towering cathedral of giant trees next to the Terminal. John said that because Digger had grown up in a family of pickers and had been one all his life, his knowledge of the ruined places of the Old Ones and the things to be found there, if combined with knowledge he would gain by becoming one of the Libriati would most certainly lead to new revelations about the ways of the ancients. He may stay after delivering his device and discovering what they found fascinating about its seemingly magical properties.

Pickers like John, steeped in the knowledge of the Old Ones, had an eye for such things that Digger did not. He liked the pickers from the Terminal because, unlike other pickers who would kill you or rob you, they just wanted to talk, offer advice on places to find things, and, like now, offer high prices for obscure items they seemed to find value in but were unsellable in the bazaars and trade fairs of the prairie. Usually, they were most interested in books in good enough condition to still be read or old metal and plastic boxes with insides filled with little golden and silver roads resembling maps of ancient cities. They would take the books back to the Terminal where those in the scriptorium would copy the words onto handmade paper made of old paper mined by pickers like Digger and, sometimes for very special works, animal skin. Digger had heard they had made inroads on the workings of the boxes of wires and roads but had yet to figure out how to power them. Works in good enough condition were stored in the Library inside the towering concrete conical towers. It was said the Library was something to behold, with shelves of books spiraling along gently inclined ramps that wound their way around and around dozens of times to reach the very top of several towers called silos. It was said to be the most extensive Library in the known world, from the Great Risen Sea of the East to the Great Angry Sea of the West.

He turned the object over in his hands as he sat by the fire, waiting for his water to boil. On the back of the small obsidian was the image of a round ball with what seemed like a human hand grasping it. Above and below in big letters were the words in the old tongue: EVERYTHING PHONE. He had learned to read the old script through years of picking.

While many words were similar or the same as the spoken tongue, so many were still unknown to him. “Everything” was the same as the often-used word “all around” when someone wanted to denote his surroundings. According to John, there was no word in the vernacular for “everything” because it was a concept only ascribed to higher powers. To claim “everything” in any context would be to act like a god and be against nature. It was said the ancients had reached too high, trying to grasp “everything,” control it, and shape it in their own image, and had been struck down for their hubris.

Phone, on the other hand, was not so mysterious. John had said they were devices the ancients used to talk to one another across long distances, though Digger thought this quite fantastical. On the plains, communicating across long distances was done by signal fires atop the concrete towers built by the ancients like Grain Terminal One. All he knew was that these “phones” were so numerous in digs that they must have been helpful. He almost always tossed them aside in the present, finding no practical use as an object or resource from which something new could be made. Sometimes, people used them as mirrors to do their hair or shave their beards, but the quality was much inferior to the shards of glass mirrors, which were just as common.

The one he held was different, though. In the preserved basement of what had been a building, he found it connected to the larger device by a cord. As he moved around the darkened basement with his oil lamp, he saw writing in the old tongue on the wall. In a large, black, messy scrawl, written with what he thought was a degree of stress: “Destroy the AI! Cut Power! Go Offline! Enoch’s Hammer!” It was just below there, tucked away in an old cabinet drawer; he had found it clean and safe as if it had been put there the day before. The ancients had strange ways of speaking, so he had no idea what the scrawl meant other than it was written in a moment of passion.

The larger piece had the same black reflective quality and folded four times to make a compact package. He grabbed it, thinking it was so unique that it might have some value. Stepping outside the hole he had dug into the remains of the ancient structure, Digger unrolled it and left it on the ground. Then, he went back to gather a large cache of synthetic t-shirts protected in their plastic packaging, keeping them like new for centuries.

When he came out of the basement, his arms piled high with t-shirts, he noticed the smaller device’s screen lit with what he recognized as a symbol of the ancients for places to charge their devices with electricity.

This mysterious force had run so many of the devices in the ancient world, yet it was still a mystery in the present. Pressing the button on the side, it lit up with a flash. When the flashing stopped, he saw an image of a cat with some words and more significant numbers. The large numbers were 12:01 and below it in smaller print on Wednesday, June 5th. He had seen enough of the old measurement systems to know this was the time and date according to their calendar. Below that, in even smaller writing, a few lines of text said things that didn't make sense. The first one said, "JL52 liked your...", the next one, "SALE! At Everything Online!..." and yet another, "Don't miss this chance to...." and yet another, "You have 25 new messages" and "Where are you? Everything is on fire..." What these meant, he had no idea. Pressing more buttons brought him to a screen that shone a light on his face. It made him jump back in fright since he had never seen such an unnatural light except for the enigmatic lighted things that sometimes zipped through the skies at night. Thinking it extraordinary, but knowing the ancients had such things, he packed it into his hand cart, snugly among a stack of polyester t-shirts, socks, and shorts he had salvaged from the same underground cache. He would ask Libri John about it if he met him on the road.

Packing the device safely away after marveling at it again, he spread his blanket and fell asleep to the crackling fire under the sheet and the soft pattering of a light rain shower. He was awakened in the predawn by a musky, dusty smell and the snuffling, shuffling of thousands of beasts. In the night, a bison herd had surrounded him and was now drinking and wallowing in the water around the island. The tiny island filled with the bulk of the tractor and tree offered them nowhere to stand, and the cart blocked the path from the isthmus, so he was safe. Standing at the highest point of the tractor, he tried to see the edge of the herd but could see nothing but brown fur as far as that eye could see in every direction. Nothing to do but wait until their inexorable movement shifted the mass away from the area. Ensconced between the great machine and the tree, he waited until it was afternoon, and they had finally moved away. Gathering up his little camp and putting it in the cart, he prepared to start the final leg of his journey.

Before setting out on the high road, he grabbed one of the ancient synthetic t-shirts, still comfortable and clean hundreds of years later thanks to its plastic wrapper, and put it on. Like many of these shirts, it was covered in enigmatic symbols and writing that he usually struggled to understand. This one had "Make America Cheesy Again" emblazoned on the front. It had a picture of a tool he found frequently that was very

valuable in the local markets. In the image, a mouse used it to grate a large block that looked like cheese. The tool was handy for shredding vegetables and hard cheeses and thus was much sought after because the shiny silver metal that didn't corrode was still beyond the reach of metal workers of the day. He thought the ancients weren't so different if they had enjoyed cheese and invented such ingenious tools to grind it.

There had once been a place called America in this area somewhere. More precisely, it was called the United States of America; since it was written on the coins, he often found that they were much sought after for jewelry but relatively worthless. He looked at one that served as a decoration on his belt; what had it been worth? He wondered. What did the strange words mean? He would ask the wise ones at the Terminal when he arrived. These metal disks were so ubiquitous and worthless that they often were only of value to dancers who sought them as adornment for their regalia. They were so heavy that their value was much less than the valuable cloth, light metal, and plastic items that comprised most of his business. Like the so-called "phones," he usually just tossed them aside instead of filling his cart full of lightweight salvaged paper or plastic that would bring the same prices as a cartload of heavy disks made of their useless metal. As he lifted the handles of his hand cart to move back along the raised embankment that led back to the high road from the old tractor, he wondered if this had once been a place called America, was it still?

AT THE RIVER'S BEND

by Ben Jacobson

He turned his head and squinted his eyes as he pedaled into the noonday sun. His legs burned as he rounded corners, hardly slowing, never braking. Behind him lay the turning seasons and a fading school year, miles of quotients and prepositions, ringing bells and slamming lockers. In front of him was June, July, and August, slow mornings and afternoons that arced into golden evenings. Into the day he would go with the rising sun, thinking nothing of minutes and hours until the sun began to sink into its course into night. It was the kind of freedom that only a 12-year-old boy could know. A freedom boys soon lose to the weight of life's burdens.

He tucked his 12 speed behind Mrs. Nelson's boxwood hedge and walked to the chain link fence that surrounded the old school. Built in the early twenties, it had been condemned years before. Now it sat empty, a fortress collecting vines and decay and dust. He slung the backpack over the fence and carefully set his poles on the other side. Jumping over, he gathered his things and began to walk the tall grass, picking up speed as he went.

After a few steps, the earth began to slope and trees rose into his view on the other side of the river. He slowed as he made his final descent, plotting each step on the bank of the river that paraded its current in front of him. Here behind the old school, the river turned, the water ebbing and eroding a deep curve in the earth, a hard crescent bending back on itself and setting its flow in a whispering whirl of water. His uncle had told him that if you find a place where the river swirls, you will find the fish.

One night the summer before when he was riding home from baseball practice, a group of 8th graders had chased him into the dark. He had hit the fence at the old school and dropped his bike, running into the dark. His lungs ached as he reached the spot where the ground began its decline.

It was then under the blanketing glow of the moon that he saw the river's bend. He squinted his eyes to bring the current into focus. The water moved back on itself, churning slow, urging him to return. It was quiet and calm and wild, some ancient wonder hanging in the gloomy night. Returning home, he had taken a spade from the shed and dug night crawlers in his backyard. The next morning as the sun crawled from its roost, he stood at the river's bend seeing its possibility in the light of the early sun.

At his first cast, a goldeye had pulled his worm, jumping and flashing and skipping on the water as he pulled it to the bank. Opening his jackknife, he had chunked some of the white flesh from the fish's side. He made a pile of the cut pieces on a rock and let the sun begin to warm them. Within minutes his nose curled from the smell. He took the big hooks from his tackle and knotted one to his pole. On the end, he threaded the cut piece of fish.

Walking into the stand of woods, he found a downed ash and cut a two-foot switch with forking tines at the end. He carved the bottom into a crisp point and stuck it into the muck near the water. He cast into the current and laid the pole on the stick. Then he sat in the sun and waited. A lone goose flew over, honking as if to welcome him. The breeze rose at his back, inviting him closer to the water.

Soon the pole bent, and the boy stood, grabbed the cork handle, and set the hook. The line tightened and began to tug in short bursts. He landed the fish at the bank, stepping down into the mud to grab the slick gray skin of the channel catfish. He squeezed its middle and listened as it croaked and purred. By the time the sun climbed high to its throne in the sky, he had caught and released ten more.

That summer he had made his claim upon the bank and the bending river. He woke before dawn and rode the lonely streets to the old school, hopped the fence, and hastened down to the water. There he sat in the shade of the ash and oaks, listened to the soft wind, and set the rhythm of his days to the turning of the river's current. Here in the wild, time and memory blended, moving life from one season to the next. For the boy, it was a peace found nowhere else.

Some days he biked with his friends to the corner store for ice cream and licorice. Some nights he swung his bat at fastballs and caught fly balls in the outfield. Some Sundays he sat with his mother and father and his sister in the hardback pews of the old church on Main. But always his heart was at the river, beating with the solace of the breeze, rising with the lilting music of the birds, and resting in the circling dance of the current.

Now another summer lay before him and with it, the solitude, the clamorous silence of the woods and the prairie and the bending river.

He returned that summer to his rhythm, fishing there beside the moving water. June's green became July's heat until finally August arrived and with it the promise of another changing season. He spent more days with the river, waiting for his pole to bend and watching the clouds shift and sway.

The first crisp morning of the summer, he tipped his bike against the boxwood and tossed his tackle over the fence. Pulling a jacket tight, he walked down to the water and began to rig his line. Once the hook was fastened to the line, he walked a slim trail into the stand of trees to cut a stick for propping his pole.

Coming out of the woods he saw it, a figure moving from the treeline just yards from where he stood. He dropped down behind a pile of fallen trees and watched. The figure walked to the bank. It was a woman as far as the boy could tell. Her head was wrapped in a tight wool bonnet. She wore old rubber boots. In her hand was a pole, long with an old reel. Slung over her shoulder a small woven bag. She cast her line into the river and began to fish.

The boy watched from behind the brush as she reeled in a pile of fish, placing each one in an old plastic bag. As he began to stand, his foot snapped a branch. The woman's head turned to the noise and he saw her face. Deep eyes and cracked skin. Her features were rough and worn. He could not guess her age. There was something haunting in her eyes. A rugged cold. Not rage or malice, but some deeper torment, some sorrow beyond his ability to recognize. His heart began to race and he turned, leaving his tackle on the bank and slipping deeper into the woods.

He began to run, eventually finding the fence and clearing it. He pedaled his bike home, laying it in the yard and racing to the safety of his room. That night he lay in bed, the face burning in his mind, his heart sinking as knowing that he had surrendered his sacred ground to this stranger.

It was a week before he went back. His rods and reels, his tackle bag and bait bucket were where he had left them. It was then that he decided that he would not yield. There would be no mercy, no abdication, no ceding of his holy retreat to this eerie creature. He would stand his ground. And so the boy returned to his rhythms, casting and catching, listening to the birds, yet wary and watching for movement on the periphery. Though he swore he had seen movement in the trees, he met no more strangers at his hidden site.

It was Friday, the last one in August when it happened. He had cast into the current for two summers, hoping, praying for the line to bend with incredible speed and strength. The big one. A channel cat of legendary proportions. A boy's dream. A fisherman's dream.

He walked the bank, keeping the line tight. When the fish darted in another direction, the boy slackened the line as his uncle taught him. He waited for the opportunity to reel the big cat closer. He edged to the water, reeling as he walked. The fish surfaced. He could see the immensity of the fish and the moment. The beating in his chest quickened.

After what seemed an eternity, the fish was finally laying on the bank of the river. The boy moved close to grab it. He set the rod in the muck and reached both hands to retrieve the massive creature. It lay still, eyes moving between the boy and the trees and the water. As his fingers touched the gray-blue skin the fish rolled with all of its strength. The boy stepped into the water grabbing the fish. As he tried to move back towards shore, his foot sank deeper into the muddy riverbed. He moved his other shoe into the water, trying to get a footing. Soon, both feet were sinking and the boy struggled to keep his hands on the fish.

The fish rolled again and the boy toppled over, the current taking him into the depths of the turning water. He sucked in water and sank deeper. Letting go of the fish, the boy opened his eyes. In the haze of the mud and grime and muck, he saw nothing. He thrashed and spun in the water, kicking but never finding the surface. His body relaxed as if life was beginning to retreat.

Then a hand hard at his back, fingers curling around the nape of his shirt. Finally, light, air, warmth hit him. Once again he could hear the rolling breeze, the songs of chickadees and a voice, words he could not understand, but words that met their desired effect as the soft sounds calmed him.

Finding the source of the voice, he focused his eyes. There before him, the face from days before, the deep set eyes and cracking skin shaded in the tight wool bonnet. He began to cry for fear and sadness and the emotions beyond his understanding that gripped him. The finality of what could have been sinking in. A fear rising and falling with his quieting breath.

Her hands set him on the dry dirt higher on the bank. The light was beginning to wane as she disappeared into the stand of trees. He watched and waited, breathing in heavy heaves until she returned, dry wood stacked in her arms. She laid the bundle down, piling small sticks with dry

grass and leaves before reaching into her coat to produce a crumpled book of matches.

In the firelight they sat, the boy finally warming. They sat side by side, little boy and aging woman, staring across the bend of the river. He broke the silence.

“Thank you.”

She muttered softly again, words from a place he had never been and probably would never go.

The snapping, crackling fire filled the moments to follow.

The boy turned his head. Her eyes met his.

“Olha,” she said. “Name, Ohla.”

“Bobby,” he said. “My name is Bobby.”

NORTH OF NORMAL

by JP Jardiel

As a kid, Ransom prayed to God every day to give him superpowers, like the ones from the news about the hero team down in the Twin Cities, or like the ones up in Winnipeg, or the other places in the world that were big enough to need them. His dad smiled at him when he told him what he prayed to God about, and told him that maybe if he was a good boy, God would grant him his prayer.

On the day that changed his life, one year ago to the day, Ransom's prayers were answered. A deep ache in his shins and knees woke him up from his sleep, well before his alarm. His fuzzy morning mind registered the familiar growing pains, especially for one who stood six-foot-five. As consciousness fully took hold, he noticed something different. His weighted heavy winter comforter felt wrong against his skin—not just uncomfortable, but as if it were barely there at all, like tissue paper.

When he finally forced his eyes open, his heart nearly stopped—his hands, gripping the edge of his blanket, were a deep crimson red. He bolted upright, the movement so explosive that he felt his bed crunch underneath him, sending splinters of wood clattering to the floor. The mirror across his room reflected a stranger: jet-black hair had replaced his golden blonde, and his eyes—he was too stunned to scream—were an impossible metallic gold surrounded by pools of endless black. The morning light filtering through the frost-covered windows cast strange shadows across his transformed skin.

Stumbling to his feet, Ransom found his movements unnaturally smooth despite his panic, his usual gangly teenage awkwardness replaced by an almost predatory grace. The ancient floorboards that had always betrayed his midnight kitchen raids remained eerily silent beneath his weight. When he gripped his desk to steady himself, the solid oak crumpled like paper beneath his fingers, leaving perfect impressions of his grip on the wood. His whole body felt wrong—not painful anymore, but powerful. He was certainly glad that his roommate was out of town for the next two weeks.

It took Ransom three crushed doorknobs, two accidentally demolished chairs, and one tragically mangled refrigerator door before he started to get a handle on his newfound strength. The local junkyard became his training ground in the dead of night, where he could practice lifting car chassis and throwing washing machines without attracting attention. He discovered the fire abilities by accident while trying to light a cigarette—he didn’t even smoke, but the stress of transformation had him craving one. Instead of using the lighter, he’d somehow channeled a precise jet of flame from his index finger that nearly set his eyebrows on fire, though now he doubted that would have happened.

The first time he tried to stop a crime, it was almost comical. He’d been lying in bed when a distant argument—much farther away than he should have been able to hear—echoed in his ears. Startled by the realization that he could hear across multiple city blocks, he bolted into action, throwing together a costume of black thermal wear and a ski mask. When he finally arrived, he found...two drunk college students arguing over a stolen pizza. They’d been so startled by the appearance of a red-skinned figure dropping from the rooftop that they’d both run away screaming, leaving the pizza behind. Ransom had taken it home, feeling somewhat defeated but at least not hungry.

His first actual heroic act was stopping a snowplow that had lost its brakes on one of Fargo’s icy winter roads. He’d managed to brace himself against it and bring it to a halt, leaving perfect hand-shaped dents in the metal. The driver had been too shocked to say anything, and Ransom had disappeared into the swirling snow before anyone could ask questions. The local news had run a confused story about “equipment malfunction and possible mass hallucination,” while the internet buzzed with blurry photos of what people were calling the “Fargo Devil.”

The hardest part wasn’t the crime fighting—it was finding actual crimes to fight. Most days, he ended up helping people get their cars out of snowbanks, using his carefully controlled flame abilities to melt ice off of frozen pipes, or rescuing cats from trees. The local police scanner he’d bought mostly crackled with reports of parking violations and noise complaints. Once, he’d gotten excited about a reported break-in, only to discover it was just someone who had locked themselves out of their own house. He’d ended up helping them call a locksmith.

Marcus, his roommate, remained oblivious to it all, chalking up Ransom’s strange hours and occasional singed clothing to “typical college stuff.” The one time Marcus had almost caught him climbing in through their sixth-floor window, Ransom had managed to convince him that the

red figure scaling the building was just a weird trick of the northern lights reflecting off the snow. Marcus had been drunk enough to buy it, though he'd spent the next week trying to photograph the "Fargo Devil" to post on social media.

One night, after a particularly clumsy attempt at sneaking in through their apartment window, Ransom had turned to find Marcus sitting on the couch, completely sober and holding up a crudely drawn sketch of the "Fargo Devil" next to a photo on his phone of Ransom climbing up the building. "Dude," Marcus had said with a grin that threatened to split his face, "I've known for weeks. You're not exactly subtle when you melt the ice off your boots in the hallway. Plus, our electricity bill dropped by half. I haven't heard your heater kick in in weeks."

The tension had drained from Ransom's shoulders as Marcus launched into an excited ramble about how he'd pieced it all together, from the mysterious dents in their furniture to the inexplicable warm spots on their balcony where Ransom practiced his flame control. "So," Marcus had finally asked, pulling out a notebook filled with costume designs and superhero names, "need a sidekick? I've got some ideas that don't involve thermal wear from Target."

The truth about being Fargo's only superhero was that it felt less like being Superman and more like being an unusually powerful public works employee. Ransom spent more time using his flames to clear ice from elderly residents' driveways than fighting crime, and his super strength mostly came in handy helping people move things. The local news had tried to sensationalize his existence for about a week before settling into running regular segments about his community service, complete with pictures of him in his new Marcus-designed costume (which looked significantly better than his original ski mask ensemble) helping to install the town's Christmas decorations.

His professors had been surprisingly accommodating about his transformed appearance, though it had led to some awkward moments in his Nordic Studies class when they were covering mythology. The running joke on campus was that he'd taken the course material a bit too seriously. His Criminal Justice professor had even started using him as a real-world example in discussions about vigilante justice, though most of those discussions ended up focusing on the fact that there wasn't actually much vigilante justice to be had in Fargo.

The closest thing to a nemesis he'd developed was Gary from the city council, who kept trying to cite him for code violations whenever he melted snow without a proper permit. The most intense confrontation

he'd had in months was arguing with a conspiracy theorist who insisted he was part of an elaborate marketing campaign for a local hockey team. Even his Instagram, which Marcus insisted he needed for "brand management," was mostly filled with pictures of him helping to rescue dogs from the pound and demonstrating fire safety at elementary schools.

The mundane reality of his situation really hit home when he got called in to help with a bank robbery, only to discover that the perpetrator was so startled by his appearance that they'd immediately surrendered, apologizing profusely and asking if they could get a selfie together before being arrested. The photo ended up getting more likes than the one of him using his super strength to help lift the fire trucks so they could wash the underside at the local firefighters' charity breakfast.

On the morning of a particularly bad storm, with a record-breaking squall looming on the horizon, Ransom was out on "patrol." His powers allowed him to withstand extreme temperatures, and he took it upon himself to venture out to help during times like these. As he ran north on US 75, barefoot and sporting what resembled a standard superhero costume in black, he took note of the three cars that seemed to have slipped into the ditch.

It seemed that most of these folks knew to stay in their vehicles and wait for help as there were no signs of footprints leaving or entering the car doors.

"You folks okay in there?" Ransom raised his voice as he approached the nearest vehicle, a black, aggressive-looking sports car.

These folks must not have been here long. He noted that there wasn't a lot of snow trapped on the vehicle's roof. He saw one of the two people turn toward him and wave their hand. Ransom gave them a wave back and he approached the driver's window. The pane rolled down to the tune of a motor humming along.

"Yea- oh." The woman at the wheel was taken aback as she laid eyes on him. It had been a while since someone had reacted to him like that. The passenger, who was not taken aback it seemed, recognized him and piped up.

"Oh, it's Ransom! Thank god! We were driving down and just out of nowhere spun out." The passenger said as Ransom lowered his head to look at her. The driver's eyes seem to have stopped its attempt at fleeing her skull and she seemed to have regained her composure. "Any chance you can get us out of here?"

"Sure can!" Ransom said cheerily, turning his attention to the driver, who seemed to freeze at the attention. She had bleach-blond hair, cut to

shoulder length, and styled like one of the famous Jennifers. “You alright, ma’am?”

“Um. Yes. It’s just...” She fidgeted about. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. I’ve never met a cape before.” She managed to squeak out, a blush flooding her cheeks. Or was that the cold?

“Well, I hope that your first time being rescued by a cape is memorable!” Ransom grinned before regarding the situation. He made a quick circuit of the car to check for any outward signs of damage that might get exacerbated by his help. Finding none, he returned to the driver-side window again. “It looks like your car’s free of damage. Put it in neutral for me please and hop out of the car for a sec.”

Both women obliged and when they were clear, Ransom crouched down next to the wheel well and searched for the jack point, then lifted the car. The vehicle barely weighed anything to him, and it groaned a little as he raised it enough to slide underneath a little to drag it out. He had done this plenty enough through the years that he knew to drop the back out onto the road before the bottom of the bumper met pavement. The car bobbed a little as he set the back down and waved the women over.

“Wow. You’re really strong!” The driver said as she approached, a wide smile on her face and eyes that seemed to sparkle that caught his attention. He couldn’t help but give that smile back.

“Strongest in the area!” He boasted, puffing out his chest a little. He watched as both women hopped back into the car and buckled in. Before they left, however, the driver’s window rolled down again.

“Hey, Ransom!” She waved him over.

“Yeah?” he said as he jogged over.

“Here’s my snap. I’m new in town and would sure appreciate it if someone could show me around.” Whatever shyness she seemed to have before he pulled their car out of the ditch seemed to have gone. He belatedly noted that a goofy grin was plastered all over his face. He looked down at the phone in her hand and felt like an idiot for taking a second to realize she wanted to add him. He fished out his phone, scanned the code, and saw her name pop up.

Samantha.

“See you later!” Samantha said as she drove off.

Ransom watched her car disappear into the swirling snow, still grinning like a total idiot. He looked down at his phone just to make sure—yep. That actually happened.

Strongest in the area, he’d said. God, what a dork.

He exhaled, his breath curling in the frigid air, and finally turned back to the other stranded vehicles. One of them needed a proper tow—he wasn't about to drag a car with a snapped axle onto the road. The third had been stuck long enough that the driver was starting to turn blue. With a little controlled fire in the palm of his hands, Ransom was able to help the old man out of a pinch.

A fourth car slid and audibly crunched against the snowbank. The old man and Ransom shared a look before the old man nodded. "You better go on and help those people. My grandson should be here any minute now."

Ransom nodded, stepped out of the old man's car, rolled his shoulders, letting warmth flicker beneath his skin, and started toward the new car in the ditch.

Super strength, fire powers, and apparently, he was Fargo's most eligible roadside assistant.

"This is what I get superpowers for?" he muttered.

Then he cracked his knuckles, grinning to himself.

"Yep. Pretty much."

LUCKIES

by Mark Kolstad

My father had taken a full hour for lunch. He smoked his third cigarette, field-stripped it, dumped the remains down the sewer. He checked his watch. "T'hell with this. I'll see 'em after work, Darlene." My mother kissed him on the cheek, and he headed for his Lundstrom Redi-Mix truck. He had reached the driver's door when a car rounded the corner, tailpipe rumbling. An apple-red coupe flew down our street, tires screaming, then bounced to a halt behind the concrete mixer. Its front tire rested on the curb, inches from my father's fertilized boulevard. I wanted to applaud; my father said, "Jesus Christ, he thinks he's a stunt driver." My mother, oblivious to the exhibition, had waited weeks to see her baby sister Donna and her new husband Wade. They had met and married in Oregon, where Donna was a secretary and Wade drove a truck for the street department.

A pack of Lucky Strikes hung in the sleeve of Wade's white T-shirt. My father smoked the same brand, called them Luckies. As though connected to that pack of Luckies, a vein ran down my uncle's biceps, like extra-tight piping on a sofa arm. I wanted a vein to run like a rope down *my* biceps, giving power to my remaining baby fat, as my mother called it. If my friends and I could see that vein on *my* arm, it would mean the surplus I had hauled around for years was history.

I stood next to Wade's red coupe, rubbing my fingerprints from the door. He spoke and I jerked my hand back, casually slid my hands into my pockets.

"What grade ya gonna be in, Warren?" He said my name like he'd rehearsed it, like he thought I was a wimp. I almost forgot the question.

"Oh, uh, eighth grade. It's, uh, it's my last year of junior high. Next year I'll be in ninth." He squinted at me in the sunlight, then smirked, like he was thinking '*No shit, Mr. Wizard.*'

"Where d'ya go to school at?"

"Baxter Junior High, it's over there" – I pointed north – "just the other side of the college." I felt more confident, like a tour guide.

Then he hit a soft spot. "D'ya play any ball?"

I lit up like a power plant, or at least my ears did; they were large and growing, a case of cartilage run amok. I had news for him: the week before, my team had won the Homer League championship for 11-and-12-year-old guys. Not only that, I was the biggest player in the league, a head taller than the next biggest guy on our team or any other and able to knock the glove off my catcher's hand with a fast ball, the only pitch I threw—or needed to.

Did I play any ball? I was off to the races. Wade rolled his eyes, but he couldn't shut me up. I described my first-inning double—featuring my only slide of the season—in the championship game. In truth I had stumbled, regained my balance, collided with Teddy Fortin, the Orioles' second baseman, catapulting him into left field.

"I spiked him, didn't mean to." Wade didn't reply. "I knocked the ball out of his glove, too." I didn't tell him my father called Teddy "a puny little guy."

"Yeah, Warren, I bet you were the regular Ty Cobb of your league, weren't ya? A regular gazelle on the base paths, huh?" He snorted. I continued, adding tiresome detail to every strikeout I recorded, every game we won, every excuse I could recall—or invent - for our only loss of the season. I stopped for a breath.

"You guys wear uniforms?"

I described our blue T-shirts.

"What'd it say on your shirts?"

"It said 'VFW Homer League, Baxter, Minnesota,' right on the front."

"Where'd they put the numbers? On the back?"

"We didn't have numbers. Everybody's shirt was the same."

"Well, that's *real* impressive, Warren." He sounded sarcastic. He looked me up and down again, like my father often did when he was teasing me. But Wade's look gave me goose bumps. When I didn't respond, he said, "Well, would you *like* uniforms?"

Ten minutes into their visit, standing on my father's manicured boulevard, Wade had uttered the word that eventually led to trouble. Today everybody wears uniforms, even people who don't play sports. Stop at a game and you'll see the guy keeping his team's score book wearing lamp black under his eyes, trying to cut the glare from the yellow paint on his #2 pencil. Today's batboys dress better than we did in 1962, when we competed as the Indians for the Homer League championship.

We lived in a small two-bedroom near Baxter Community College's athletic field, a giant breeding ground for mosquitoes, gophers, major-league hopes. A dozen guys lived in our neighborhood, most within five years of the same age. Summer mornings we checked gopher traps on Baxter Field. Before noon, we'd bag our wilted victims, sling rusted traps over our shoulders, head home like French fur trappers. We reserved afternoons for baseball.

Our Homer League season was over, so we'd begun our unofficial shorthanded baseball. Slowpitch softball had not yet arrived in Baxter; we could point to our game as its precursor. Short of players, we devised the right-field-out rule: right-handed batters must hit the ball on the left-field side of second base, where the opponents placed their fielders. On Fridays Raymond Trepanier was dismissed early from summer speech therapy, so one team got an extra fielder. We couldn't recall the genius who had executed the master stroke—moving a foul line 45 degrees—but it was brilliant. Anything hit to the right-field side of second base was an automatic out; worse yet, the offending hitter had to chase down the ball and return it.

Our second modification was equally brilliant. We had no umpires, no catcher's equipment, no catcher. So the pitcher merely lobbed the ball to the batter, like a slowpitch softball pitcher, allowing him to hit it. If the pitcher became a "hot dog"—tried to blow the ball past the hitter—his own teammates would chide him for slowing the game's pace, usually with a subtle reprimand like, "C'mon, ya jerkoff, let him hit it!" My father rarely commented on our games, but one day he explained to me that one modification was a *rule* change, the other a *procedural* adjustment. I had no idea what he meant; however, our ingenuity had impressed him.

One day Wade stopped to watch. We saw his car roar down the road, but our attention quickly returned to the contest. We didn't halt the action until he shouted, "Hey, Warren! What the fuck kinda circus is *this*?"

Teammates' heads snapped to face me; I looked west, toward home. I worried that my mother could hear Wade's profanity. We relaxed, looked around. Guys snickered, but with nervous hitches, waiting for Wade's next move.

Unnoticed by us, he pulled a coach's whistle from inside his white T-shirt. A piercing shriek nearly lifted us off the grass. Behind me stood Raymond Trepanier, eyes peeking over the web of his Spalding fielder's glove. "Holy m-moly, I c-coulda sh-sh-shitmypants!"

We shuffled into a circle. I hadn't told the guys about the uniforms, so their reaction was chilly at first. Wade said, "What d'ya call this crap?" I explained our modifications, and he snorted.

"We never played the game this way at Oregon State." He had our attention. Then he tore into our game with a vengeance, calling it a "girls' game," something "old washer women would play," even "pussy baseball." Soon we were hanging our heads, kicking dirt, trying to show shame but not clear what we should be ashamed of. Then came the clincher: if we would give up our "half-assed half-field baseball," he would coach us, "take us on the road"—meaning around Baxter—to play anyone who wanted a game. He had extra frosting for the cake: if we would practice seriously—"bust your asses," he said—he would bring us uniforms in a week. In today's terms, we were *pumped*. Vince Lombardi had nothing on Uncle Wade.

We began practice that day. In six workouts we hit, caught, threw more balls than during twenty Homer League games. Wade even taught me a passable slide. I was no Jackie Robinson, but I could finally leave my feet without fear of paralysis. Two signs indicated that good things would come from our uncle/nephew bond: first, I found it easier to say "Uncle Wade"; second, players looked at me with new respect. This would be *fun*.

Guys from St. Joseph's School - we called them The Catholics - played on a neighboring diamond. (Other than Clifford Pundsack, who referred to himself as "a nothin'," most of us were Lutherans.) During a break the first day, Wade saw us stare in their direction. He said we'd scrimmage them in three days. Most of the Catholics had played Homer League ball, but their team included older guys who had played in the Babe Ruth League, competing against fifteen-year-olds. At practice the next day, Wade looked over. "Who's the Mexican?"

My breathing raced. Without looking I knew they had recruited The Wetback.

My father skimmed the Baxter *Examiner*, grinned. "There ya are—the next Don Drysdale." He flipped it to show me the photo: captains of the teams competing for the 1962 Homer League championship, scheduled to begin the next day. On the left, a blonde twelve-year-old with hands on hips, wearing a Homer League T-shirt and Cleveland Indians cap. The cap's tightness—worn like a beanie—and the crewcut

accentuate the ears. My father said, “You look like a taxi cab goin’ down the street with all the doors open.” On the right, a foot shorter and seventy-five pounds tops, stands Joey Arevalo. The peak of his Orioles cap is level with the **V F W** on my T-shirt. We both wear the same shirt with the same logo, but Joey is slender, sleek, athletic; in today’s terms, he’s *ripped*. In the heat of a late afternoon sun, he glows. Accurate to describe me—baby fat around the middle, sweat-shined face—would be *basted*.

A best-of-three series determined that year’s champion. Lucky for us: we lost the first game. Joey pitched a two-hitter and tore us apart with his bat. I don’t recall his two triples, but his scorching single up the middle still haunts me, a shot that jumped off his oversized bat and flashed back toward my oversized nose. His performance that day amazed me. Completely overmatched physically, he dominated the game. In his small hands the bat was huge, so he used it like a musical instrument rather than a club. His stubby fingers barely gripped the ball, yet he snapped his wrist and bent a wicked curve for a scrawny 12-year-old, baffling us all day.

Joey never faltered at the plate—eight for eight, including five extra-base hits—with two walks, a perfect ten-for-ten on-base record in the three-game series. But his teammates went hitless in the last two games and Joey’s pitching failed to keep pace with his hitting. We easily won the last two games and the title.

I learned two things the next week. First: Dewey Dornfeld’s mother, a nurse at Kushina County Hospital, told my mother that Joey had stepped on broken glass while swimming in the Pine River just hours after their victory. He had played the last two games with ten stitches in the bottom of his foot. Second: I was never to use the term wetback again in referring to Joey or “anyone of his kind,” according to my mother. “That little Mexican boy showed great courage in continuing to play the ball games. He never missed a quarter.”

“It’s *inning*, Mom, not quarter. Quarters are in—”

“Listen here, *Mister Nitpicker*, I don’t care *what* game quarters are in. You know what I mean.”

Later I told the guys about Joey’s foot. They hung their heads, like they had drowned a puppy. We knew we had beaten a one-man team; now we wondered if the man—“that little Mexican boy”—had been a cripple.

Donna joined my mother for daily “gab sessions” at our kitchen table. From the living room I heard Donna talk about Wade. One

morning she said, “Most times I don’t know where he goes. Night before last he didn’t come back to the hotel until morning.”

“Oh, Donna!” My mother’s voice carried sorrow, but her words made me smile. If my father was home when my aunt visited, he’d greet her by singing “Ohh, DONNna” in his funny falsetto. My mother would say, “Art, you’ll have every dog in Baxter howling now,” and we’d all laugh.

My mother wasn’t a cheerleader. And, from my own experience, she had little time for complaining or whining. Her passive optimism convinced me that things would work out. I didn’t know how she felt about Wade; she remained neutral to the end.

At first my father disguised his feelings about Wade. By the second week, however, he had become more open, stressing Wade’s name and raising the pitch of his voice: “So, when is WADE coming to drop off Donna?” If I became sarcastic, my mother scolded me for using “that tone of voice.” She didn’t scold my father this time, but her frown froze him.

About this time my father called Wade a foul ball; he wasn’t referring to baseball. From those people my father had labeled as foul balls—a small but consistent pool—I deduced a set of traits. I didn’t know if Wade met the criteria; however, I hoped my father was wrong. When my mother heard him use the term to describe Wade, she didn’t look up. I took her silence as agreement.

My parents often asked about Wade and our practices. Like a witness on “Perry Mason,” I’d repeat things Wade had said that day, things my parents doubted: Driving for the City of Medford, for instance, he could ignore stop signs because he was a city employee. (My mother snickered, rolled her eyes.) In his athletic career, he had been a professional boxer and—at Oregon State—a football quarterback and a baseball pitcher. (My father said, “Oh, for Chrissakes, he’s only *nineteen*!”) He had *really* learned the game of baseball while playing for his post team in the Army. (My mother groaned and my father—a World War II veteran—uttered two more expletives, first a sexual term he had never used around me, then a hyphenated four-word combination.)

Then I told them about the uniforms. They stared at each other before they spoke, both expressing doubt that he would pull this one off. As for me, I wanted a uniform so badly I just *knew* Wade would come through.

We sprawled wall-to-wall, filling Dewey Dornfeld's tiny bedroom, seven of us, skimming sports magazines, scratching our butts, discussing today's scrimmage—set for two o'clock—and listening to the wind rattle Dewey's bedroom window. Nine-thirty in the morning, yet dark enough for streetlights to come on. Rain had stopped by six this morning, but KBAX Radio's official gauge at Kushina County Airport had recorded three inches in twelve hours. The sky could clear immediately, but the diamond would be soggy at least until tomorrow. Nervous as I was, I hoped it would never dry.

"Hey, W-Warren, look at them double-play p-pictures." From Dewey's bed, Raymond Trepanier dropped the *Sport* magazine to me. A series of photos showed shortstop Luis Aparicio and second baseman Nellie Fox of the Chicago White Sox executing a double play.

I looked at the photos, not so much at the techniques—chest-high throw, sliding foot tickling the bag—as at the players. I was taller than Nellie Fox and—according to their cards—heavier than Aparicio. But they were athletes—"best double-play combo in the league," said the magazine—while I was merely bigger than guys my age. Certainly I could throw harder than anyone else in town. Homer League hitters were all afraid to step into the batter's box against me—except Joey Arevalo. He was an athlete, able to pound any pitch near the strike zone, quick enough to hit the dirt to avoid a beanball. More than that, he had the balls to hang in there fearlessly, daring the pitcher to throw at him.

"Hey, g-guys, listen to this." Speech therapy had filled Raymond with confidence. "It says here that T-Ted Williams can see the b-ball hit the b-b-bat. D'ya believe that?"

"Hey, Raymond, ya ever see the ball hit *your* bat?" said Dewey.

"N-No."

"Probably 'cause it never hits *your* bat." Dewey howled; everyone but Raymond joined in.

"F-Fuck you, D-Doorknob." Raymond continued. "Only g-guy I know who could see the b-ball hit his bat is J-Joey Arevalo." I looked up at Raymond's back, wondered if he'd been reading my mind. He blurted, "And m-maybe W-Warren." They looked at me.

I didn't know what to say. It wasn't true: I never saw the ball hit my bat. I always blinked. I couldn't do truly athletic things like Joey Arevalo. I liked what I heard, but sweat ran down my armpits, tickling my ribs. I clamped my arms against my sides to stop the perspiration river from flowing down to my waist. My mind searched for words to divert attention to someone else.

“Oh, Warren.” Mrs. Dornfeld stood in the doorway, smiling at me. “Telephone, dear, it’s your mother.” She sang in the church choir; my father said her voice could crack a porcelain pisspot at fifty yards. My mother disagreed, said she had the voice of an angel, and that morning she made “Oh, Warren” sound like “Amazing Grace.”

I leaped up and raced for the kitchen, taking stairs three at a time, using the handrails as parallel bars. Like a bloodhound I trailed Mrs. Dornfeld, bumped into her as she stopped, picked up the phone, turned to hand it to me. “Thanks,” I said.

“Warren, would you like to join Donna and me for a hamburger basket downtown at Snyders?”

“The guys are gonna eat at the Dairy Whirl before we scrimmage.” I heard my mother talk to Donna, then I heard Donna’s voice.

“Donna says the scrimmage is canceled. But Wade wants you to tell the boys there’ll be practice tomorrow and Thursday.

“Mom, um, what about the...the uniforms?” They talked again.

“Wade will have the uniforms Friday, dear.”

“Thanks, Mom. ‘Bye.” I hung up, relieved yet guilty about the scrimmage. I dawdled on my return trip upstairs, rehearsed some facial expressions to use when I delivered the news—sad, depressed, angry. At the doorway I leaned in, under Dewey’s chinning bar. “The scrimmage is called off.” Then I told them Wade’s practice schedule. My acting was better than I thought: halfway down the stairs I heard Raymond say, “W-Warren is r-really p-p-pissed off!”

My deliberate manner frustrated my father. At the supper table he called me wishy-washy. Alone with me, he’d say, “Warren, piss or get off the pot.” That morning, two days after the rain-out, I wished he could see me as I pedaled to Oak Grove Park, a playground nestled near the Pine River. Across the rutted gravel road sat Joey Arevalo’s little house, inches above water level and shaded by huge trees. Water lines on its weathered siding told the history of floods in Baxter. Fifty yards separated his front door from the park’s tetherball pole, where he was king. This was foreign territory, my first visit. Raymond’s comments about Joey and me had kindled a fire that threatened to burn me alive. The tetherball pole drew me like a magnet.

Joey held court, hosting a line of pretenders. One after another, guys grabbed the paddle, took one or two futile swats, returned to the challengers’ line. Bigger than Joey, they didn’t stand a chance. He toyed

with opponents, finessed them, allowed them to return shots. Then he'd show surprising power, strength based on perfect timing, and smack a return that coiled the rope in seconds.

I knew my reflexes were no match for Joey's. Given the chance, I'd use my size. I had practiced the day before behind Baxter High, hitting hundreds of balls until my elbow ached and my arm bent like an **L**. With the Homer League trophy still a vivid image in my mind, I vowed to give tetherball a shot. I got in line; my turn came.

Joey served a soft one, allowed me to get my paddle on it. His return was easy, so I volleyed back. He toyed with me for several minutes, giving me hope. The hill to the west blocked any breeze and the morning had become beastly humid, but his faded blue Homer League T-shirt remained bone-dry while perspiration dripped from mine. I called time and pulled my shirt over my head, displaying a "farmer tan": bronzed face and arms contrasted against a ghostly white torso. Joey looked at me, smiled.

Then he turned it on, increasing the speed until he smashed one so hard I couldn't see the ball, could only guess where it might be. I stuck my arm up and missed the ball with the paddle, but the rope caught my forearm, jerked it tight to the pole. I feared gangrene would set in, that I would lose my million-dollar pitching arm to amputation. I untangled myself, pushed the paddle toward the next victim.

"Nice game," I said. Joey nodded and grinned, turned to his next opponent. I hung my T-shirt over my bike's handlebars. The climb up the hill gave me time to ponder events that had pulled Joey and me together: the Homer League championship; the nearly disabling cut in his foot; the rained-out scrimmage; Raymond's comparison. After my mother scolded me for using the term *wetback*, she had sighed, then said, "You know, Warren, if you would ever get to *know* that little Mexican boy, I'm sure you'd find you have much more in common that you realize." Maybe she had a point. I wanted to beat Joey in baseball, tetherball, anything; otherwise, why play the game? Yet I felt we were now nearly even, equals; not friends yet, but closer, at least not enemies. For the first time since the Homer League championship, I felt *good*. My mother was right.

I stopped at the top of the hill to get my wind. Down below Joey remained in command, facing a line of dust-shuffling victims. He waved his paddle to get my attention. I lifted my shirt in the air, returned his signal. Then he shouted. "Hey, Homer League man, your belly looks like a fat walleye!"

The Seventh Day arrived, seven days since Wade's promise. Our games, like religion, thrived on ritual. We broke pregame bread at Cossette's Dairy Whirl, a cathedral facing Baxter Field. My father said, "Those gophers you missed with your traps? Del Cossette grinds 'em into hamburger," then laughed. But I took my wafer (a hamburger with everything) and wine (a marshmallow malt) prior to our game, which always began at one o'clock.

After communion we pedaled our bikes to the diamond, where ritual—captains tossing up the bat, trying to gain control of the narrow end just under the knob—determined who batted last, a distinct advantage. The rules themselves, unchanged for decades, dictated a code of behavior. Wade claimed we had bastardized the game; a liberal interpretation would say we had made our religion more accessible to its followers. Besides, we knew our right-field-out rule had no place in a sanctioned game. And we never tampered with the game like the American League, which later desecrated baseball by introducing the designated hitter.

We loved the game with a passion. Even that seventh day, a day we had dreamed about, prayed for, lost sleep over, even on that day we had scheduled a game. Wade and the uniforms would arrive at one o'clock; we had raided the Dairy Whirl at ten-thirty so we could start our game early.

The captains chose sides, determined home team, and we began our modified game. To avoid Wade's wrath's we stopped at twelve-thirty, then moved everybody into positions and began drills he had taught us. The value of our practice session was marginal, but it *looked good*—like Wade's practices—which was our only concern.

At quarter to one we glanced toward the road, hoping to see Wade's red coupe—stuffed with uniforms—kicking up dust. By one o'clock half the guys stared down the road; the other half stared at me. One-thirty came, then two. Players left, passing me without speaking. It would have been less painful if they had said something; I had no reply to silence. At two-thirty I slumped in the dirt against the wire backstop, head down, tears sliding off my chin, leaving dark spots on my faded blue Homer League T-shirt.

I outwaited them for two reasons: first, I *knew* Uncle Wade would show; second, when I knew he *wouldn't* show, I couldn't leave with my teammates watching me and talking about how I had let them down.

I got home—still crying—and my mother hugged me, as though she wanted to prepare me for the coming rejection. For several days I rode my bike around the block, sticking to the sidewalk. If I got close to a pickup basketball game on someone's driveway, the players ignored me, or they'd say, "Oh, gee, we were *just* ready to quit." Sometimes they scattered when they saw me.

Then one day, on my head-down, woe-is-me ride around the block, I saw a basketball game on Dornfelds' driveway. Dewey yelled to me, they needed another player for even sides. Then his expression turned to mock sadness. "Sorry, but we don't got any uniforms, *Uncle Warren*." They exploded with laughter, but it broke the ice. I'd never been so happy to be the butt of a smart-ass comment.

The next day one of the Catholics rode his bike down the road at Baxter Field. I knew him from Homer League ball, so I stopped him and asked if my uncle had talked to him and his teammates about a game. He said no; he had never heard of Uncle Wade.

We never saw Wade again. That's what my mother believed, what my father *wanted* her to believe. "The Party line from *Pravda*," he called it, his expression for a white lie, a benevolent deception. He saw this deception as crucial to my mother's peace of mind. In fact, she never did see Wade again. But my father and I did, three days after the uniform hoax.

My father had worked late, helping his boss pour concrete slabs for a row of dairy barns on a farm west of town. My mother sat in the living room, her focus swinging like a pendulum between the television and a magazine in her lap. I held my glass over the kitchen sink, waiting for the water to turn ice cold, looking out the window into the darkness. Before my eyes adjusted, light flashed from the garage window, illuminating a square of grass in the back yard. I was certain my father wasn't home yet; I would have heard the car pull in, the garage door open then close.

I sneaked out the back door and raced for the garage. Sliding across the dewy grass, I heard a thumping noise followed by a dull metal-against-metal several times, becoming more rapid and forceful. Then, at irregular intervals, I heard metal *clunk* on the concrete floor. I reached the window, looked in.

My father held Wade by the neck, banged him several times against the shelves which covered the back wall. Stacked on those shelves were cans of motor oil my father poured into our BelAir to "keep her purring"

like a kitty.” Each time Wade’s back struck the shelf, a can fell to the floor. One from the top shelf flipped, landed on Wade’s head. Its edge sliced the skin near his hairline and triggered a stream of blood down his forehead and face, then onto his white T-shirt. The bare ceiling bulb heightened the contrast between red and white.

My father stopped shaking him, then let go. Wade slumped to the floor, his back against an empty engine crate, cans of Texaco 10W30 surrounding him. My father backed away and turned for the side door. I raced to meet him.

Splintered pieces of door frame stuck out, pointing into the garage. My father filled the frame’s rectangle, looked down at me. “Sonofabitch kicked in the door.” He inhaled hard, trying to catch his breath. “Probably needed some tools for that candy ass car he’s got.” I looked at the east wall of the garage decorated with my father’s complete set of Sears’ best tools. He grinned and said, “Or maybe he was lookin’ for some goddam *uniforms*.” His humor was put on for my benefit. Wade’s coupe had been parked at the far end of the block, my father said. He had checked the car, found it empty, approached the garage on foot. At the open side door, he had reached in and turned on the light.

He was silent, yet I stood like a stump, staring up at him. Everything—garage, sounds, blinding ceiling bulb, my father—seemed exaggerated, bigger, brighter, louder, like life on a movie screen. I tried to look around him to survey the wreckage. I saw Wade and the motor oil cans. Next to him, like white sticks floating on oil spots that peppered the garage floor, were scattered Luckies that had fallen from his T-shirt sleeve. I looked at the sleeve and the vein down his biceps. Then I looked at my father’s forearms, covered with thick orange-red hair and thousands of beads of sweat. I began to sob, but before I made a sound my father put his index finger to his lips. “Shh. Don’t tell your mother. Whatever you do, don’t tell Darlene. For her sake.” Until that night, my father had never used her first name when we discussed my mother. When he bought her a birthday gift, or we made secret plans to serve her breakfast in bed on Mother’s Day, he always said, “Don’t tell your mother.” Even as I cried, I felt that we had formed a secret bond that night.

He pulled me to him, my face in his chest, my tears blending with sweat staining the front of his pinstriped work shirt. His heart pounded, fast as the hummingbirds we had studied in school, deep as a bass drum. I was sobbing, shaking, afraid something terrible would happen to him. He would be arrested and taken away, or Wade would somehow get off the floor and attack him with one of his own tools, or his heart would

explode. But all that happened was he held me tight until I stopped shaking, then looked me in the eye. “Let’s go get the Chevy.”

We shuffled down the alley, his arm around my shoulders. We took ten minutes to go less than a block. When we drove into the alley, our headlights caught a white-shirted figure ducking behind our neighbors’ storage shed. If my father saw Wade, he made no sign.

I got out to open the garage door and he drove the car halfway in, then got out. We stacked the motor oil and swept up the Luckies. My father threw all but one of the cigarettes into the garbage. He lit it, flipped the lighter shut with a clink, dropped it into his change pocket. Then he pulled a rag from a pile of torn flannel shirts, squatted, wiped blood from the floor. He tossed the rag into the garbage, leaned back against his workbench and took a deep drag on his cigarette.

We were silent for a few minutes, then he dropped the cigarette butt into a Coca-Cola bottle on the workbench. It hit liquid and sizzled. He got into the Chevy and drove it all the way into the garage. I pulled the garage door down and we stood near the side door, my father inspecting the garage while I dried my eyes. He bent forward, cupped his hands on his knees. “Listen, Warren. Remember what I said. Your mother doesn’t need to worry about this sorry sonofabitch” — he looked over his shoulder, faced me again, inhaled hard — “so by God, don’t *ever* tell her.” I nodded. He placed the palm of his hand on top of my head, gave it a little twist. Then he turned off the light and closed the door.

To slow August’s pace we filled it with baseball; the school year began anyway. September dragged until my schedule became a fluid routine and my teachers’ directions, at first delivered like the barking of dogs, began to sound like purring, with random growls thrown in to keep us alert. By October the guys seldom mentioned the uniform incident, slapping it down like a trump card only when I tried to dominate our game or criticized another player. Someone, usually Dewey, would say, “Hey, Warren, why don’tcha go home and put on your *uniform*, ya douchebag.”

The first Saturday in October, my father and I heard the phone ring as we raked the last leaves in the back yard. Ten minutes later we had hung the rakes, closed the garage’s side door—outlined by a new, freshly painted frame—and headed for the house. My mother came out, stood on the top step, hands folded in front of her apron.

“Well.” She looked down at her hands, bit her lower lip. “He’s—Wade is gone. Donna called. He’s returning to Oregon.” She paused, her

hand moving to a spot below her ear, as if massaging a pain. “What will somebody like that ever do, Art?”

“Probably finish high school.” My mother’s eyes filled with tears, but she smiled. “You’re a regular Milton Berle.” She turned toward the house. “Donna’s pregnant.”

My father’s laugh died. His smile became an icy gaze, an expression more menacing than anything I had seen the night he shook Wade like a throw rug in our garage. If Wade were here now, I would have feared for his life. I was only a couple weeks beyond my thirteenth birthday, but that day I realized that the contrast between their reactions—my father’s burning anger, my mother’s compassion for Donna—typified their reactions to most problems that surfaced. It seemed fitting that they react differently, complement each other, creating a balance in the life we shared.

I thought of Wade; would he rather drown in my mother’s pity or suffer my father’s fists? I had endured one; Wade had survived—barely—the other. But Wade had never faced humiliation and insult at the hands of Joey Arevalo. I reached down, felt the skin folding over the waistband of my jeans. It was still white—like a walleye—but every day I could feel myself becoming leaner.

CHERRY, OR WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A FATHER IN THE MODERN DAY

by Caden Nestler

So this is what it must have felt like. All those women waiting for their dates with me. Looking around at everybody. Thinking he might already be here, I just haven't seen him yet. Checking their watches or their phones. Well, not phones back then.

Sometimes I'd arrive, and they'd look up and smile, give me a hug and a kiss. Sometimes just on the cheek, sometimes the mouth. In front of everyone. Proving something. See? I wasn't waiting for nothing. Honestly, I never knew how long any of them waited for me. But I never arrived first, if I arrived at all and hadn't double scheduled my evening or simply forgotten about them.

No one's actually looking at me, here in this coffee shop. Nobody ever pays attention to the fifty-eight year old men who used to be head-turners and whose fast metabolism went out the window when the gray hair came in.

The average age in here has to be about twenty. This is one of those sleek modern cafes that tries to look all rustic and earthy but forgets the dirt. I should have brought my computer to pretend I'm doing some work. That might make me fit in.

Maybe she isn't going to come. It would be a relief actually. I wouldn't come, if I were her. The good thing is she doesn't know me yet. If that's the case, if she's not coming anyway, I should order some coffee before someone wonders what an old man is doing sitting at a table without any coffee just staring at people and turning on his phone. Checking the time, unlocking it, scrolling back and forth on the home

screen, refreshing the text messages before clicking it off and dropping it back on the table just to pick it up and do it again in twenty seconds.

The two-seater tables are laid out in rows of three. I'm in the middle of a row in the center of the room, facing the door. I turn to my left and check out the menu. I don't even know what any of it means. It's in a different language.

The door opens, letting in a whoosh of wind. My attention is whipped over to the tall woman striding in. Oh Jesus, she's beautiful. Stop it, stop it. I feel my heart in my chest, and my insides are twisted like I need to take a shit. I haven't even had coffee yet. She looks around, then cuts through the tables towards me. When she walks, she puts one foot right in front of the other to accentuate the motion in her hips. I don't know if it's training or just the natural side effect of being in those high heels, which are click-clacking on the floor. And I'm not sure if it's the loud click-clacking sound that's making everyone's head turn to watch as she walks by, but if I were to guess, that's not the reason.

I pick up my phone and tap away. Swipe right, swipe back. Open Google. Stare at the search bar. My ears are hot. Definitely red. I hope my face isn't too.

The click of the heels against the polished wood gets closer then stops. "Hey, sorry, are you Mark?"

I look up and smile. "I am." I stand and hold out my hand. "Call me Mark."

She laughs. It's high-pitched and familiar. She shakes my rough red hand with her tiny, moisturized one. "I'm Cheryl."

"I know." I smile, still standing. A man carrying a coffee tries to walk behind me. I squeeze close to the table to let him get by.

"Or Sherry. People call me that."

I nod. "It's really nice to finally meet you, Sherry."

"Nice to meet you, too. This is exciting." She has bright red, shoulder-length hair that is so thick that it seems like not a strand is out of place, like it was molded and then planted on her head. She's wearing a pink athletic bra, yoga pants and a short sleeved jaguar print coat. Even short-sleeved, she must be hot, it's sixty-five degrees out. She takes off her gold-framed, rose-tinted aviators and puts them in her slim brown leather purse.

"Coffee?" I say, motioning towards the counter.

"No, I'm good," she says, grabbing the back of the chair across from where I was sitting. "I actually just came from working out and had a

protein shake. That's why, sorry I'm late. I was on the Peloton, listening to music, didn't even realize what—"

"Oh come on, it's my treat. I'll get you whatever you want."

Cheryl shrugs and bats her hand through the air. Her fingernails are long and unpainted but shiny. "No, I don't need anything."

I put my hand on her shoulder and point with my whole hand to the counter. "Come on, coffee's good after a workout, everyone knows that. Let me do this for you."

"Ok, ok. Thank you." She leads the way to the counter. There's no line. The place is pretty full, but everyone is already quenched and comfortable, talking, on a date, or doing homework. "Hi," she says to the boy behind the counter. A slim, nice looking guy with black hair and a long, dark green apron. "Can I have a large iced Nutella mocha please?"

"Sure, and for you?" He looks at me.

"An iced Nutella mocha? What the hell is that? I'll have one of those."

"Will that be all?"

I look to her. "Want anything else, hon?"

"Um," she swivels her torso back and forth as she takes another look at the menu. "No thanks."

"That will be sixteen twenty-four please."

"What?" I say, only half joking. "Sixteen twenty-four? What an outrage. Can you believe this, Sherry? Coffee's gone the same way as corn. Everything's too expensive nowadays." I smile at the barista. "I can tell you that." He smiles and nods. I take out my credit card and slide it in the machine. No receipt, thank you.

"We'll get that right out for you."

"Thank you."

I lead Cheryl back to our table. She takes off her coat and hangs it on the back of the chair, then does the same with her purse before she sits down. I keep my eyes on hers and say, "Well thank you for meeting me. I really appreciate it. I don't know, I don't want it to be weird or anything for you."

"No, no, not weird at all." She gives a laugh. "I really wanted to meet you too."

"Really?" I feel my stomach ease.

"I did, I did." She taps her fingernails on the wooden table, then throws both hands up in a shrug. "I knew you weren't as bad as Mom always said."

"What? What'd she say about me?"

"Oh, nothing. The usual, I guess. You're a player, she wished she never met you, she resents what you did, she says you're the worst person she ever knew. But she also says you gave her me, so she can't really complain. And you never missed a check, so it's all good."

I nod. I've heard worse. "How is she?"

"I thought you talked to her on the phone a couple days ago," she says.

"I did. But we didn't really talk much. She wasn't happy to hear from me, but she gave me your number anyways. Probably to just get me off the phone."

"Do you even remember her?" Cheryl asks.

"Your mom? Of course I do. She was the best."

"I bet you always say that."

"No, really," I say. "I had such a crush on her. More than most, it's true."

"I don't believe you. How many of me do you even have?"

"Just you." I laugh, gesturing to myself. "If you can believe it."

Cheryl eyes me. I look at her and try to get a glimpse of the Lisa I knew back then. There really was none of her mother in her. The shape of her face, perfect, rounded in the cheek and the chin, sharp in the nose, the eyes, the forehead, her smile, that's all mine. Not the hair. I don't have a lick of red in the family. She must have been blonde before, like her parents, but I think the deep red suits her better. Makes sense with the name. Even that body, that's me too, though you really can't tell it now by looking at me.

"So," she pauses and shrugs her shoulders. "Why did you want to meet me all of a sudden?"

I take a deep breath to answer.

"Mark," calls the barista, drawing my gaze. He sets down two tall dark drinks in clear plastic cups on the deep brown counter. I motion to Cheryl with my pointer finger to tell her to hold on, and I get up. I thank the barista, who is now taking orders from a new customer, and am careful not to spill the coffee on the way back to the table.

"All right, whose is whose?" I say, offering her one cup then the other, back and forth.

"I thought they're the same," Cheryl says, her dyed black eyebrows furrowed.

"They are," I say with a laugh before handing her one of the drinks and sitting down.

"Thank you."

"You bet, honey." We both take a sip at the same time. "Ooh, that's good. I like it."

She smiles. "Yeah, I get it every time."

"So you've been here before?"

"Yeah," she shrugs her shoulders to say it was obvious. "I was the one who said we should go here."

"Oh, of course." I take another sip. I could drink this all day. "Where were we?"

I watch her take a sip and wipe her upper lip with the back of her hand. "I was wondering why you've never made an attempt to meet me before."

"Oh, I did, I did, all those years ago. When I first found out about you. But Lisa didn't let me."

"Why?"

"You know," I say, rubbing my face, "I was actually so happy to hear from your mom when she first told me about you. I mean, to level with you, I had almost forgotten about her, it'd been three years. But I thought it would be good. I told Lisa that I'd help raise you and I was sad she hadn't told me sooner. I said we didn't have to get back together or anything, but I'd stop, you know, seeing other women, sleeping around, and stuff, right. No drinking. I'd be a good dad and split the time and whatever."

"That's not what she told me," says Cheryl.

"It's true."

"She said you had no interest in being my father."

"I did, Sherry, believe me. But your mom didn't want to deal with me. She hated me. She just wanted the money and refused to let me meet you. So I just kept sending the checks every month, and soon enough that was all you were. A piece of paper in the mail and four hundred and seventy-five dollars."

Cheryl's lips have pursed and disappeared inside her mouth, forming a straight little line. She opens them with a popping sound and says, "Aww, that's so sweet, Daddy," and laughs.

My heart beats faster for a second. I say, "I know Lisa probably told you things, but I want you to know that I tried. Especially with her. All those women. I could never really stick to any of them. Or they never stuck with me. I was left way more than I was the leaver, no matter what she thinks."

"Yeah, I get you." She looks fragile now, her shoulders hunched. "No one wants to stick with me either."

“Ah, come on, that’s ridiculous.”

She shakes her head, her red hair swishing back and forth.

“All right, all right, enough of that stuff.” I smile. “Let me get to know you, tell me about yourself.” I lean forward and clasp my hands together.

“Ok.” She leans forward and clasps her hands together like we’re about to share secrets. Her big bright eyes are under a foot away from mine. She must wear makeup on her eyes, I swear, they’re so wet and blue and sparkly. But it doesn’t look like she puts makeup on anywhere else. She just looks like that. “But what do you wanna know?”

I should lean back, but I don’t. “I don’t know, just tell me about yourself. I wanna know about my daughter.”

She leans back in her chair and stretches her arms above her head. I keep my eyes on hers. “Well, I’m sorry, but I’m not that interesting.”

“Sure you are.” I lean back as well, putting one elbow on the back of my chair and one hand around my coffee cup on the table. “I mean look at you, you gotta have stories to tell.”

Her brows pinch and she shakes her head half an inch back and forth. “What does that even mean?”

I chuckle and shrug. “I don’t know, it doesn’t mean anything. It’s just that I don’t think I have a single piece of clothing as expensive as that coat. And the rest of your outfit doesn’t look cheap either. I’ve been in those fancy athletic stores and the minute I see a price tag, you can bet I’m running out the door of that mall and I’m halfway to Cabela’s or something.”

“Hey, I’ve been there, with the fish,” says Cheryl.

“Yeah, that’s right,” I say. “Cool store, right?”

“That’s in Rancho, right?”

“Yeah, I think that’s—”

“Cucamonga.”

“Yep,” I say.

“Cucamonga. Cucamonga. I love saying that word. Sometimes I do some work out there. Rancho Cucamonga.”

“Yeah, it’s fun to say,” I agree.

“You haven’t even said it yet.”

I laugh. “I’ve said it before, if you can believe it.”

“Say it, come on.” Her hands slap the table. I check the table, but no coffee is spilled.

“I can’t do it justice. It’s way prettier when you say it.”

Cheryl touches both her hands to the pink strap of her athletic bra, just below the shoulder. "Are you flirting with me?"

I feel my face getting hot. "What? No, I—"

"Are you flirting with your own—"

"No, I'm not," I cut off, throwing my hands in the air. "I was just saying I can't say it in the same way that it just rolls off your tongue."

"Why are you thinking of things rolling off my tongue?"

"What? Cher—" no, "Sherry, I'm, I'm your father, I'm not trying to—"

She explodes in laughter, her shoulders heaving. "I know, I know. You're totally fine, Mark. Literally, I'm joking. I was just joking."

I wipe my palms on my jeans under the table and do my best to smile, but for some reason it feels like my lip muscles aren't working quite right. I don't know what I look like.

Fighting through the laughter, she says, "Did you believe me?"

I nod and laugh along.

"Oh, God, that's funny." She wipes her eyes. "Do you know what I do?"

I bite my lip as my chest tightens. "Like for work?"

"Yeah."

I shake my head.

"I'm an actor."

"Oh. Really. Well, you must be pretty good, you had me convinced." I laugh along and I take a sip of coffee as she nods. Her back is straight and proud. "You're an actress. That's cool. That's really cool. Like movies and stuff?"

"I prefer to say actor."

"Oh, sorry."

"But yeah. Uh, I got my start on the stage, you know, but now I've moved into movies."

I rub my hands together and venture, "Anything I'd know?"

With a hand darting to cover her mouth, she holds in a laugh. "Oh, no, I wouldn't think so. I kinda do a lot of short films, you know."

"Oh sure, sure. That's cool though. Really cool. You'll be on the big screen soon, I bet."

"No," she says, elongating the word and batting the suggestion away.

"Ah, come on. You will. Believe in yourself."

"Aw, thanks. We'll see, I guess." Cheryl takes a sip, leans forward and asks, "So what do you do?"

"Besides sit around and look all cool and handsome?" Why do I say things like that?

"Yeah, obviously."

"Well, I'm a car salesman." I don't know why it's still so hard to tell people what I do, it's really not that shameful.

Cheryl nods and says, "Oh. Do you like it?"

My fingers drum on the table. "Sometimes, I don't know."

"Is it what you always wanted to do?" she asks.

I chuckle. "Not at all. I never really had any particular dreams. Just thought I'd make a bunch of money and have a big house on the coast."

"And have more women than you know what to do with?"

"That's part of it. That's what I was focused on in school when I should've been figuring out jobs that I could do other than selling cars."

"Yeah. We can't all do what we want."

"I'm glad you can," I say.

She laughs with a shake of her head. "I don't know about that."

"I do, Sherry, you're an actor, you're a star, that's awesome."

"I'm not a star."

"Sure you are. You've made a name for yourself, and you're so talented. I'm proud of you."

Her smile is gone, and I can feel the hardness in her stare. "You don't know me."

"What? Can't I be proud? You're my daughter."

"Mom's not even proud of me."

"Yes she is," I say.

Sherry says, "You haven't talked to her in thirty years."

"I talked to her last week."

"Did she say she was proud of me?"

"No, we didn't really talk at all. I just asked if I could see you, she asked why, and she gave me your number and hung up."

"Why did you?" she asks.

"Why did I what?"

"Why did you want to see me all of a sudden?"

I'd prepared for this question. "I always wanted to be a dad. It's like, when I imagined my future when I was younger, I was a dad. I had kids. I know it's too late for that, now. But, you know, I was thinking about myself and thought I could start taking steps to make things right. I'm sorry if you resent me."

"I don't resent you." She gives me half a smile. She really is so pretty, isn't she?

"I wasn't in your life," I say. "A kid should have a father."

"That's ok. Half my friends don't have dads. I didn't really think of it at all, growing up."

A chill passes through my body from head to shoulders. It's a familiar feeling. I put my open hands on the table in front of me, even though I know she isn't going to hold them. "Well, I'm sorry anyways. I wanted to tell you that, and I wanted to say I'm proud of you. And your mom, she should be proud of you too. You know, I should call her and tell her, 'I know you don't understand what she does, you probably haven't even seen it, but you should be proud. Our daughter's amazing, and you should be proud of her.' That's what I'll tell her. I will."

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"What?" I say. "Why don't you want me to be proud of you?"

"No, you said you've seen what I can do. What's that mean?"

"I don't know, I haven't either, it's just that, like. Look at you."

"Have you seen my movies?" Her voice is tight and any sparkle is gone from her eyes.

I try but can't keep eye contact. "No, of course not."

"Of course not?"

"No." I look past her shoulder, then past her other one. "I should say I don't think so. I don't really watch short films."

"Mark." This was a mistake. "Why did you reach out?"

"I have a daughter." I meet her cold gaze and say, "I have a daughter and she's so beautiful and successful and I haven't even met her until today. Can't a guy change?"

"How many have you seen?" asks Cheryl.

I massage my brows. She knows already. "All of them," I sigh.

"All of them?" Her voice rises. I nod. "What the fuck, Mark?"

My mouth is dry. It feels like my left arm is tingling. I reach for my coffee but set it down as soon as I pick it up. "You don't know shame, Cheryl, until you've done—"

"I don't know shame? Are you telling me about shame?" A sharp glossy fingernail is pointed at me. "Are you telling me—"

"Cherry, listen, this is what I—"

"Cheryl, please." She interrupts, sitting back and crossing her arms.

"I'm sorry, Cheryl—"

"I know about shame. Ok. Do you know how many times these teenage boys come up to me and say, 'Yo, are you Cherry Poppins? Are you Cherry Poppins? Can you sign my forehead, Cherry Poppins? I love all your videos, can I have a hug?' Can I have a hug? Can I have a fucking

hug? I wanna fucking pop them in their cherries. Might as well come up to me on the street and say ‘Hey, I love jerking off to you, can I touch?’ And now you’re doing the same thing. My own father, doing the same—”

“Cheryl,” I hold up my palm to get her to stop. “I just want to say I’m sorry. That’s all. I’m sorry.”

“That’s why you called Mom? That’s why you called her and got my number and asked me to come meet you for coffee?” Cheryl’s high voice is dropping lower and lower, almost frying. “Not so you could, like, get to know me, or talk to me, or say sorry for not being in my life for thirty years. It was all so you could apologize for jerking off to your fucking daughter?”

“Whoa, hey, take it easy,” I say, putting my hands up in surrender. “I feel horrible about it. I haven’t been able to think about anything else. All day, every day, I just think about it and hate myself.”

“Well, I’m really glad you’re getting this off your chest. I’m so glad that I can help you.” She rolls her eyes, then keeps her attention on the ceiling to her right.

“Why are you so up in arms about this? I didn’t know it was you. I didn’t know you were my daughter.”

“Bullshit.”

“I didn’t. What do you want me to—”

“Bullshit.”

I glance at her coffee cup to make sure she’s not going to throw it at me. “How was—”

“Look at my face, look at me.” I do. She gestures with both hands around her face. “Does this not look like you? Did it even cross your mind we might be related?”

“Absolutely not. People look like all sorts of people. But I never even noticed until after I found out.”

“How’d you find out, then?”

Past her shoulder, a cute little boxer puppy struts by outside, pauses to sniff at the window, leaving a print in the glass. It comes up about halfway to its owner’s knee. It’s brown with a black snout, probably only a couple months old. “Uh, sorry. To tell you the truth, I was a big fan of yours. I know you don’t wanna hear about it, but it was about two months ago. You know, what else does a single, fifty-eight year old car salesman do on a Friday night, right? Have a beer, watch a hockey game, maybe a movie, but there’s only so much a guy can take. And I sure don’t have the luck I used to. So, I, uh, I happened upon your, your videos, and honestly,

I'd never seen anyone so beautiful. I was just amazed. I even wrote down your name so I could remember it for next weekend. So then, you know, I slowly went through everything you've been in, watched them and rewatched them, and then, one day at lunch in my office—"

"At work, too? Jesus."

"No, I didn't. Just listen," I say. She crosses her arms again. "I just looked up your name on Google, like I do with normal actors."

Cheryl scoffs, her head jerking back, propelled by the blast of disapproving air coming out her mouth.

"I mean like I do with, with other actors," I continue. "I looked you up, and I read your Wikipedia page and found out you were born Cheryl Lane Larson to mother Lisa. And I couldn't believe it, even with your name and Lisa's, but I looked at your picture again and honest to God, I wanted to shoot myself. I kept reading and found out you'd said in interviews that your dad wasn't a part of your life but it didn't even matter to you."

"That's not what I said." She stares at me. "What'd I say? Tell me what I said."

"Uh, I believe you said it had something to do with that your profession already gives you enough."

"Enough what?" She knows I know the answer but wants me to say it.

I let out a sigh and rub my forehead. "You said you already had 'plenty of daddies.'" I say, throwing feeble air quotes around the words.

"More than I could handle," is what I said."

"That's right," I say.

"Then what makes you think I need you?"

There's a sudden welling pressure in my eyes and the bridge of my nose. "I need you."

"Oh, come on," she says, turning and taking her purse and coat from the back of the chair. "How many women have you said that too?"

I stare at my hands in my lap. "All of them," I realize.

"You know what," Cheryl says, taking her purple phone out of her tiny purse. "I was just gonna get up and leave, but then I thought, you know, Mom should hear about this. She's gonna get a kick out of this."

"Don't. Please," I say, my voice going quiet.

"No, she's gonna think it's really funny." She taps hard on her phone with her pointer finger. "It's like a plot of one of my movies. Stepdad and hot daughter find out they're related. Is that what you wanted to happen?"

“Put the phone away.” I half stand out of my seat with my legs still under the table and reach over the table.

Cheryl turns her body away. “I’m calling her.” She puts her phone to her ear.

I push my seat back and come around the table. “Stop it.”

“Stop, what are you doing? Mark, stop.” She turns the other way.

I grab for the phone by her ear but she yanks it away with both hands and stands up.

“Mark, you’re making a scene,” Cheryl says through her teeth.

“Hang up the phone,” I tell her. I can feel the eyes from the tables around me. I glance at a man two tables away, and he averts his gaze back to his phone.

“No,” she yells. “Oh, sorry, hi, Mom.” With an open palm, I approach her, and she circles to keep the table between us. Her voice is smiley and cheerful as she says into the phone, “Good, listen I was just calling to tell you that I met Mark today. Mmhmm, yeah, and he told me he just loves my videos, loves jerking off to them. Yeah, he’s seen every one, he’s my biggest fan, and he’s really proud of how sexy I am and says you should watch my videos too. Yeah, because then you’d be more proud of me. You know, you never told me how sweet he was.”

I give up and sit back down, having made a full circle of the table. I would’ve made a bad dad. “Cheryl, tell her I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, what was that?” she says, putting her hand over the bottom of her phone.

“Tell Lisa I’m sorry,” I repeat.

“Oh, I’m not even talking to her.” She takes her phone away from her ear and shows me a white screen. She gives a laugh. “She didn’t answer.”

“I knew you’d be mad, but come on. It’s your job.”

“It’s my job to have my father masturbate to me?”

“No, but other people. It’s what you do, you signed up for it.”

“You know what?” she says, leaning forwards over the back of her chair. “I actually thought this might happen. Like in the back of my mind, I thought, what if he’s watched me and just wants to meet his favorite pornstar? But then I was like, that’s ridiculous. That’s stupid. He just feels bad for not being there. He wants to apologize. And I could help him and make him feel better, and I could see if having a father figure is really all it’s cracked up to be.”

“I am sorry for not being there for you,” I say. “I am. Could you sit back down please?”

“No.” She stands up straighter. “What, you don’t like people looking at you?”

I shake my head. Not anymore. “Can we just talk?”

She stares at me. I can see her jaws tense and relax, tense and relax.

I say, “Thinking back on it, my biggest regret is what I did to Lisa. I was so stupid, I should have married her and helped raise you. I would have—”

“Knowing what I know about you,” says Cheryl, cutting me off. “I don’t think that would have been a good idea. And I don’t wanna hear about it. I don’t want to hear about how no one was ever enough for you and how having a daughter would have changed everything and stopped your fucking sex addiction, or whatever it was that made you treat Mom like shit. I don’t want to hear about how you could never settle down until it was too late.” She is pointing at herself and almost shouting. “Because I can’t. Pornstars don’t get married, pornstars can’t have kids. Get over it.”

“I wasn’t enough for her,” I tell her. “I wasn’t enough for any of them. But I want to be enough for you.”

“I know.”

“Can I do that?”

“I don’t know.” She digs in her purse and whips out her rose-gold aviators.

“Are you leaving?”

She bites the temple piece of the sunglasses. “Yeah. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Will I see you again?” I ask.

“I won’t see you,” Cheryl says as she slides on her shades and gives her hair a flick behind her shoulder with both hands. For a second, her bright red hair looks blown in the wind, but then it falls back into its predestined place. “But you can see me whenever you want.”

RUINS OF TINDALOS

by Mo J. Ruud

Theodore, son of Theodore, son of Theodore, was an archaeologist like his father before him, and his father before him. I was nothing more than lucky enough to have him as a mentor.

It was during my time at university when I met him in one of my classes. He wasn't a student, mind you, but came in as a guest speaker. He told us, all aspiring young historians, about the adventurous world of archaeology. I was mesmerized watching this young professional, not two years my senior, excitedly recount amazing stories of his time in the field. They felt like the books I read as a kid, and hearing them brought me back to that childlike world of wonder. My mind had always been set on becoming an archivist in some grand library, but after experiencing the zeal with which he talked of his craft, I'd be lying if I said my outlook on history hadn't been swayed.

After the class had ended I asked him out for drinks, hoping he could appease the questions that took flight in my mind. I was networking—as professionals might call it. We hit it off immediately, talking until the bar closed. Not letting that stop us, we continued our conversation walking the streets of the city until the sun crept up on the horizon.

I learned a lot about him on that outing. Like how, instead of a formal education, he was raised in the field by his father and grandfather. As far back as he could remember he had been doing archaeology, making his first historic discovery before he turned twelve—the fossilized remains of a never-before-seen canine with wicked teeth. He named the discovery *Canis Tindalos* after a creature in the tales his grandfather had been telling him.

Theodore also told me of the strained relationship his progenitors had with the archaeological community. Both Theodore the First and Theodore the Second were acclaimed in their field; nobody could deny the major advancements they made, forever cementing them as legend. However, like many academics, they had their eccentricities; namely, an obsession with the manipulation of time.

It is widely accepted, nowadays, that beyond our three dimensions of space, the stream of time is the fourth dimension. It is also accepted that we as humans are bound by this fourth dimension and cannot directly influence it—only follow along its continual path. The Theodores contested this fact. Based on theories from the Dark Studies, Theodore the First wanted to access the bridge between curved time and angular time—concepts normally reviled by academics, but that were the basis of his work. He wanted to use this bridge to travel back in time and personally experience the history he researched, thus getting the most accurate account possible. This desire led him, his son, and his grandson to places marked as haunted or having to do with the Dark Studies.

Theodore the Third—who at this point asked me to call him Teddy—told me he didn't know what happened to his grandfather. Theodore the first had become obsessed with angular space, studying without rest. He stopped journeying with Teddy and his father. Eventually, when they had gotten back from one excursion, he was simply gone. Vanished from their lives with no parting words.

"I like to imagine he found his bridge," was all Teddy said on the matter.

I didn't see Teddy for three months after that encounter, but we kept in touch through written letters. He returned to the field and would send me snippets of what he was up to, teasing me with the life I was beginning to dream of living. I returned to my classes and would ask him for insight into my assignments.

At school I began finding myself restless. Sitting at desks, parsing through books, and writing papers not worth the tree felled to make them was driving me mad. This was the study I had dedicated my life to, and it felt so bland. After hearing the wonder with which Teddy painted life in the field, that was all I could think of doing. I tried to set my mind to my classes, hoping to finish school quickly so I could get myself out there.

As it turned out, I didn't have to wait long. The following spring Teddy was at my dorm unannounced, sitting at my personal desk, waiting. I had only just returned from a full day at the library studying for the semester's finals and was fittingly exhausted.

"I didn't mean to intrude, but the lock was a little loose," he said, holding up a set of lockpicks.

I was flabbergasted, my mind tired from a long day, and thrown off by the surprise encounter. "Teddy—" was about all I managed to say.

"I'll keep this quick, because I want to get back on the road as soon as possible. You said you wanted to get field experience?"

"I did—I mean I do—I mean...yes."

"Can you be ready to leave at dawn?"

Once again I was stunned. But my answer was obvious.

"I already have a bag packed," I said. "Let's go tonight."

He had a vehicle, something between a van and a bus. It was patchworked together, various welds and alterations to the interior provided space for storage and archaeological activities. The age of it, held together with new parts, reminded me of the Ship of Theseus; the paradox asking if once each part of something has been removed and replaced, is it still the same thing? *Can* it be the same?

Teddy drove through the night, having shown me the small cubby for sleeping in the back. When I awoke to the pre-dawn light, I discovered we were deep into a rocky desert. From there, we traded shifts, him giving me vague instructions on our destination.

"We'll take this road, southeast, as far as it'll go," he told me. "Once the road ends, wake me up."

Six more hours of driving later, before the sun had hit its zenith, the road began to vanish into dirt and sand. I woke Teddy, who then began off-roading through the imposing wasteland; he took this opportunity to explain this journey's purpose.

"This last year I've been on my own," he muttered, eyes focused on the far-off horizon. "My father left me notes, cryptic notes about *curved space*. Curved *time*. And how to use it. I struggled to believe it, but I've been following the instructions he left for me. We've made it much farther than is natural in only half a day."

He was right. In my tired haze I hadn't even thought about how strange it was to be surrounded by wasteland and desert, when just last night we were in my quiet, urban university town, surrounded on all sides by either woods or grasslands for miles. It should have taken at least a full day to get anywhere closely resembling this.

Teddy continued: "The place we're going, I've been to it before. I was still quite young, but I could feel how monumental it was for my family. It seems, from his notes, my father explored it again. I should be able to get us into the depths where we can hopefully find something new, or at least figure out what the old man meant in his ramblings. I hope you brought boots, because we'll be doing some bouldering."

The van came to a stop, the dusty, open expanse we had been driving through giving way to rocky crags. It was tough travel, work that was unfamiliar to me, but something I hoped would become commonplace. The sun brought sweat to my brow and back, only to be cooled by a breeze blowing through the canyons taking shape around us. It was bliss.

After a couple of hours, broken up by many breaks on my behalf, the uneven stone leveled off into a large landing next to a grand cliff. The shape of a massive stone doorway stood in sharp relief against the jagged rock, heavy and imposing. In front of this grand entrance were two ornate pedestals, each one housing a large hourglass with the sand all trapped in the top half.

I approached the doorway, feeling the stone that formed the entrance. It was cold and sturdy, and I wondered how any explorer could possibly get past this literal wall of stone.

Teddy motioned me back to the pedestals saying, "Take one of these hourglasses at the same time I grab the other—then watch."

Following his instructions, nothing happened. Then, I watched Teddy's face fill with childlike glee and heard what sounded like shifting sand. Looking at the door, the stone of it began to disintegrate. Bits of rock cascaded down and around our feet, some whisked away on the wind. As I went to step over the rubble I noticed it wasn't loose anymore. I was afraid of slipping on the small pebbles, but it was all solid, as if it were part of the rocky floor. And the doorway was now open.

"It did this the last time you were here?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How did it, you know, go back?"

"I have no idea." And with no other pretense, Teddy stepped inside.

Walking through that doorway was like walking into another world. We took out torches, illuminating the stone structure's common greys turning to a deep, unsettling green. The walls weren't smooth, but neither were they natural rock. Rifts and grooves snaked their way across the open hall, and I couldn't tell if they had been carved or eroded. They looked too wild to be intentional, but too consistent to be happenstance.

The most unsettling part was the sound—there was none. Our feet didn't echo as we stepped over the stone floor, and no wind howled behind us, even though it had been a windy day while we were climbing. The only sound I could hear was the shallow breaths of Teddy and myself, my heartbeat taking up a ringing in my ears. The walk felt strange, and I

wanted to ask Teddy what he knew of the place. Before I could, we had reached a wall.

"This is it," Teddy said. "When I was here, this was what we spent the whole time investigating."

The wall sported an oppressive mural, thirty feet high; looking up at it gave me vertigo. It was circular and segmented like a clock, but with far too many divisions—not the twelve as was standard. I counted thirty-three. There were over a dozen uniquely designed lines, all converging at the center. Alien hands of an alien clock.

Teddy walked to the base of the mural, seeming like a ghost with the lack of noise his steps made, and pressed his hand against the stone. Each of the stone-carved hands began to glow with an eerie, green light.

"Incredible," I heard Teddy whisper under his breath. But the incredible part had yet to begin. He started twisting his hand against the stone, the clock hands following his movements.

"How is this possible?" I asked.

"I don't know. I'm just following the instructions my father left me. Hell knows how he found it out. Now be quiet, I have to focus."

He spun the clock in seemingly random patterns, stopping at precise points before starting up again in the opposite direction. It looked like he was opening the world's most complex combination lock. After a few minutes of this, the green light of the clock shone blindingly before going out. Then, the stone wall where Teddy's hand rested began to melt into sand, leaving a recess about two feet deep with two circular slots at the bottom.

"Do you still have the hourglass from the entrance?" he asked.

"I do."

"Bring it here. Place it in the slot, sand at the bottom."

I did as he said, a mirror to him. Then the sand, which had previously seemed stuck as stone, began to fall *upwards*. Stunned, I didn't notice two passageways open, one on either side of the mural, until Teddy walked up to one.

"This is about where my father's notes end," Teddy said, pulling out a stopwatch and clicking it to start. "The hourglasses are a timer. We have about two hours. The only other thing he said was that these lead to winding, mazelike tunnels. He said it needed two people. We each need to take a path." Here his voice faltered. "I'm sorry my friend. I shouldn't have brought you here. It's dangerous, this place stole my father away, if not my grandfather too. I should have told you what we were doing. But I needed someone, and I felt nobody would be fool enough to listen. You

can turn back now, if you want.” His head hung low in shame, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“There is nowhere I’d rather be,” I told him, clapping his shoulder. “This is the most adventurous thing I’ve done my whole life. While I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared out of my mind, I think this is the most important thing I’ll ever get to do. So, thank you. Thank you for fooling me and freeing me from my dull life.”

We shared a smile before turning back to the two passages before us.

“They’re mazes,” Teddy said. “Do you know the one wall tactic?”

“Yes,” I replied, remembering the common trick to solving most mazes. If you place your hand on a wall one side of the start, following it without ever removing your hand, you will eventually reach the end.

“You take the right; I’ll take the left. Father’s notes said they’ll converge in a room at the end.” Teddy hesitated. “He also said to not, under any circumstances, take your hand off the wall until we see each other. The tunnels apparently do strange things to your mind. I don’t know what he meant, but I think we should listen.” He turned to me, and I could see a hint of fear in his eyes. Yet, fighting against that fear, there was also the joy of discovery I had come to adore about him.

“What are we waiting for?” I asked.

His smile widened. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

And, through our own private tunnels, we descended into hell.

The journey alone was infinitely worse than it had been with Teddy. After what couldn’t have even been five minutes, my breath caught, and my head swam. Something was there. I stopped walking and looked back—there was only darkness. Ahead—only darkness. Around me, despite the torch I held to illuminate my path, I felt only the darkness. It was sinking in, gripping at my soul, trying to pull me from my path. I fell to my knees, gasping for breath and praying to a god I don’t believe in to be free of this place. My muscles were frozen, paralyzed, keeping my hand plastered to the wall. Stuck and panicking, I couldn’t release it. The darkness was pulling at me, and if I could just let go of the wall, then maybe...

I heard a voice call from down the hall.

That snapped me from the panic attack that was holding me. *Was that Teddy?* I thought. I waited another minute, then two, but heard no more voices. I wondered if I was imagining things. Regardless, it saved

me from my madness. Or maybe that was the start of my madness. I pressed on.

The hall got narrower. The ceiling got shorter. More and more frequently, the path split by two or three or four, the darkness from each new path calling to me. Always I kept my hand on the right wall.

At times I thought I heard more voices down the varying halls. Though many were foreign and echoey, some were frighteningly familiar. At one intersection I heard my mom singing the lullaby she used to lull me and my siblings to sleep. Another, I heard the stern voices of my many professors, claiming both their pride and disdain in me. More frequently than anything, I heard Teddy. He was urging me forward to see him again. That was what kept me going.

I lost track of time. Truthfully, in those corridors, time didn't seem to exist. Multiple times I thought that the two hours had long since passed and we'd be trapped down here forever. I only survived by my trust in Theodore. I wished he had brought a second stopwatch so I too could have something to tether me to our world.

Eventually I turned a corner and there was light. A second torch—*his* torch—illuminated a small room with curved walls and circular patterns. Seeing Teddy, he made my world make sense again.

"Did you get lost?" he asked, giving me a wink.

"Not physically," I responded, making me notice just how shaky my voice was. "But I fear I lost my mind. There were, or rather, I *heard* voices. Did you? Do you know what that was?"

"Voices? Odd. No, I didn't, but I did hear the baying of dogs. What voices did you hear?"

Instead of answering I shifted my attention to the room we were in. "What do you make of this?" I asked.

The room was once again the unnatural green stone. Instead of a tall hallway or narrow tunnel, this was a nearly spherical room, only broken by the floor flattening out ever so slightly so one could stand. There were no other passages, only the two we had entered by. All along the continuous surface of the room spiraling lines looped and swirled. They looked etched, like the first room, but as if the edges had been sanded down to clean curves. While the rest of the ruins seemed rough and potentially natural, this room was too perfect in its design.

"Is this what they meant by curved space?" Teddy asked to the air. "My grandfather told me how in the Dark Studies they talked of curved space and angular space, each correlating to curved time and angular time. Do you know anything about this?"

"I'll readily admit I do not. The university instilled in me a fear of the Dark Studies, one that curiosity did nothing to combat. I'm as clueless as a baby. You're the professional, what do you know?"

"About the same as you. As much as people say the Studies house huge arcane secrets, most of it is too cryptic to understand. The only thing I can recall is that curved spaces are used as protection against things from angular time. Though what it's protecting us from, I can only guess."

He placed his index finger on a part of the grooves, inspecting it, moving along the curves. I did the same since there were no other clues to go off of. The patterns were mesmerizing, a physical optical illusion, or some other mental puzzle—the kind I had always loved solving. I felt pulled into the pattern, completely absorbed, until I heard Teddy gasp behind me.

Shaking from my stupor, I pulled away from the wall. "Did you find something?"

"Do you feel it?" he replied.

"Feel what?"

"The pattern! I found it!"

"What pattern?" I asked, moving to inspect over his shoulder.

"Stop!" he called. "Go back to your wall, the spot you were tracing."

"Why, what's happening over—"

"Just do it!"

Focusing, I followed his instructions. It was easy—almost too easy—to find where I had left off. It seemed, while I had physically moved away, my mind still wound around the pattern.

"The lines. Do they feel familiar?"

Somehow, they did. "What do they mean?"

"It's the path we took to get here."

He was right. On a level I couldn't understand, I saw it. Each curve and twist were exactly the same degree and magnitude as the path I nearly lost myself in. Even the width and depth of the grooves corresponded to where the tunnel's shape had melded.

"Do we follow the one wall tactic again?" I asked.

"I think we have to."

And so, we did. For a moment I was afraid I might break down again, as I had on that path, fear clutching at me. This time, however, I was not alone; I looked over at my traveling companion, and he looked at me. And he smiled. And that smile, filled with the pride of discovery and catharsis for a journey he longed to finish, gave me the conviction to continue on.

Tracing the winding path with my finger, I began to feel the same lightheadedness. I grew cold and a chilling bead of sweat dripped down my back, followed by another. I heard the wind but couldn't feel it. I heard voices, all of the voices from before, all at once. I was just standing in front of a wall, but my mind was back in the tunnels. The voices grew louder the further along the path I traveled until all at once it stopped, replaced by an ear-splitting howl.

That howl rang through my skull as the lightheadedness threatened to pull me under. Blinking the dark spots from my eyes, I looked at Teddy. He was similarly doubled over, trying to fight for his right to consciousness. I had to close my eyes as he began retching. As he caught his breath, our eyes connected. I could see the furrow in his brow, and he looked pained. I wasn't sure if it was physical, or pain from fear that our journey might fail. But I believe we shared the same goal: to get to the end of this hellish labyrinth and discover whatever had happened to his father. Wordlessly we nodded to each other, knowing we had to finish this. We had to find the end of whatever fools' path we had set ourselves upon.

I ran my hand along the path until our tracings met in the middle. I felt a spark, looking at Teddy to see if we were done. He was smiling. Just then I felt a shift of the earth around us. At the center of the floor a hole appeared, slowly expanding. Like the ruin entrance and pedestal for the hourglasses, the stone was turning to sand. This time, however, it was creating a vortex, and we were being pulled into it. My feet began to give way beneath me, getting sucked into the sand. I reached out to Teddy who grabbed my hand in return, as we both began to slip.

"Hold on," he said, as we sunk deeper into the floor as if through quicksand, till, in the middle of the room, we felt the remainder of the ground give way. Gravity then took us into its cold, uncaring arms.

I was floating, or maybe falling, suspended in white space. I was on my stomach on a beach of black sand. I was dead, encased beneath six feet of frozen earth. All simultaneously and in numerous other places besides. I saw the whole world expand around me, and I was everywhere within in.

"Theodore . . ." I called out to the void. "My mind . . . it's shattering."

It already has.

I was on my back in a cold, stone room. Teddy was beside me, holding his head in his hands, groaning. We had lost our torches, but we didn't need them; the empty room was fully illuminated by the glowing

green stone that made up its entirety. In contrast to the last room, this was made solely of sharp, perfect angles—too many angles. I felt that if I touched any of the corners I would cut open my hand.

“Theodore,” I said. “Where are we?” There were no entrances or exits—we were fully enclosed. I was hyperventilating, beginning to panic again.

“I saw it,” he said. “We’ve done it. This is angular space, angular time. By God we’ve done it. This is what my grandfather was searching for!”

A howl pierced the macabre scene before us, causing me to double over and cover my ears. When the ringing abated I could still hear a low hiss. It came from all the corners and edges of the room, from which a dark mist was flowing, coalescing into sinister shapes.

Four quadrupedal beasts formed. Their skin was a sleek, dark leather, like oil, with a sickly sheen created by the dull green light. The skin was pulled tight against the creature’s ribs and knobby vertebrae. Its tail, thin as a whip, cracked back and forth without a sound. Its talon-like claws gripping the stone floor were similarly silent. The heads—the heads were the worst part. Cataract-filled eyes bulged from their angular skulls. Jaws hung open with teeth like daggers, too large to close properly. From those mouths a long, slimy, green tongue lolled, nearly dragging onto the floor. They had no nose. They had no ears. Yet their seemingly blind eyes focused on us as they started to prowl.

“Theodore, what’s happening?” I asked.

“It’s them,” he said. “The beasts I discovered as a child. *Canis Tindalos*. I know what they are now. Hunters, from beyond time. Creatures that hunt those foolish enough to attempt altering the course of cause and effect. They’re what I’ve been searching for all these years. Or maybe they’ve been searching for me.”

“Your first discovery? But I thought that creature was long extinct.”

“In our timeline, yes. But they are not bound by our timeline. Neither are we at the moment. You saw it, right? When we entered this room? We are everywhere. We just need to be able to take advantage of it.”

The beasts, the *Canis Tindalos*—Hounds of Tindalos. A name that pulled itself forth from the buried recesses of my memory. They were something I had learned of in my short journey into the Dark Studies of repudiated history. They were something which should never have been named. A myth. Four now stood before me—ready to pounce. Saliva

dripped from their open jaws, burning away the floor where it fell like some potent acid.

“Jamie,” Teddy said. He never referred to me by name, usually calling me some variation of *my friend*. Hearing him say my name scared me the most. “Jamie, it’s been an honor traveling with you. But you need to run.”

“What do you—Teddy. We’re trapped. There’s no more running. Either way, I won’t leave you. Our paths are too intertwined now.”

“Jamie you have to go. You are *not here*. You are anywhere—no, *everywhere*—but here. Go there. I’ll find you.”

Before I could try to wrap my mind around that, the hounds pounced.

From four evenly spaced directions, the nightmarish beasts coursed through the air at velocities unnatural to any predator I could have seen in nature. None faced directly towards me but were instead focused on my dear friend Teddy. By the way they were positioned, I inevitably stood between one of them and their intended prey.

I know not if I should attribute it to a selfless act of bravery, love for my friend, or pure terror freezing me in place, but I stayed in the path of the beast, shielding my idol and mentor. It wasn’t enough. The beast simply glided over my shoulder. Yet in doing so, their wicked claws grazed my shoulder—and tore my mind.

It was not pain like that of being cut, but like that of a dozen migraines. Migraines lasting beyond the concept of time, breaking not only the space inside my skull but what I could feel to be my entire soul. My mind swam with memories, only for them to get taken—get *torn*—from my brain and psyche. I could not tell you which memories they were, but I do know I can still feel the gap they left. If I focus too intently, I am brought back to that time of ceaseless pain that only a single claw caused me, and I am terrified, for I know but a fraction of the tragedy that befell my friend.

Once the pain had passed, in what felt like an eternity, I looked up from the floor and saw Teddy. His body was contorted, muscles flexing beyond what was natural. His eyes were wide, nearly bulging from his head like those of the hounds. And the hounds. Two held his shoulders in their jaws while the others tore at him, tooth and claw. Each strike left not bloody cuts, but tears in the fabric of space. Wounds opened up across his body, and looking into them was like staring into the depths of space. His mind was not with him anymore, it was in that pain riddled space beyond consciousness. With each swipe from our attackers, another part

of him vanished until, lying on the ground, all I could see of him was a singular eye, staring into nothing.

Then it turned to me.

Run.

I heard it in my mind. An auditory enigma. It had no source, yet it echoed. I realized this was what I heard in the tunnels. A sound that was never there yet should still be listened to. It was cruelly followed by the howl that had split my brain before. This time I could handle it. It was nothing compared to the wound I had suffered at the beast's claw.

I watched all four of them, backs arched so their call was focused on the ceiling. They seemed content, like their job was done. Then they turned to face me. Synchronized, they walked forward, but their demeanor was no longer that of one stalking its prey. They seemed almost calm and disinterested. I was terrified.

You are not here.

It echoed in my mind. I could not tell if it was a call from my memories, or from Teddy—wherever his psyche had gone—or from the hounds themselves. I once again saw that white space I fell through, overlapped by my current vision of the green stone chamber. I saw myself on a beach. At the university. Everywhere. And the lead hound, the one I impossibly recognized as that who had cut my mind, came up to me. It reached down with its grotesque jaws and picked me up by the collar of my shirt. Like a kitten, I was carried beyond that space, through time itself. I saw a weave, that of our historic existence, braid itself around me, and the hound placed me solemnly back into place. I know not if that place was mine.

Now I am writing this tale of Theodore the Third, unsure if I should call it a memoir or an obituary. I don't know for certain what happened to him, but I have an idea. In the weave I saw threads, brilliant and bold, frayed and distorted—those threads were his. They were the ways he had impacted the world. And I am torn, frayed and distorted. On the one hand, I want to dedicate my life to preserving those threads and find where my friend has gone. I get the feeling that if I can find those fragments, those threads, I could maybe, hopefully, be able to put them back together. On the other hand, I fear for my life and what might happen if I draw the ire of Tindalos and the hounds which spawned from it. Either way, I hear the Dark Studies calling for me. And I am afraid.

LOOSE CHANGE

by Kiley Snobeck

An empty water bottle slid across the back seat of Margaret's Toyota Camry as the car crawled around the hairpin turns of the Needles Highway. Margaret's tight bun pulled at her scalp. She was not used to having her hair done. Her Shih Tzu, Dottie, braced herself on the floor of the passenger side. With an underbite that exposed her bottom teeth, she gazed up at Margaret who was gripping the steering wheel as if she were afraid she would lose it. She had never driven these roads herself, she always let her husband, Richard, act as her chauffeur.

The car's ashtray was still full of change—mostly nickels, dimes, and pennies—from his Sunday morning coffees. The hinges of the ashtray had broken from their weight, and it bounced with every crack and pothole on the winding route. Margaret hated the way they rattled as she drove. She turned onto Playhouse Road, relieved to be almost to the theatre. *Cinderella* at the Black Hills Playhouse was not a performance that could be missed.

At 1:28, Margaret turned into the driveway of the theatre releasing her death grip on the steering wheel. The thirty-minute drive to the theatre had taken her forty. At least there was no reason to arrive early; she had reserved her usual seat. She shook her head at the company policy: *all service animals must be seated in Row K*. She and Richard always sat in the third row from the stage, and an inexperienced salesgirl would not stop her and Dottie from doing the same. If shouting at the salesgirl over the phone was what it took to get the right seat, Margaret was determined to do so.

Margaret looked up at the theatre itself which cast an angular silhouette against the sky. The siding and roof had been re-done and were now the color of burnt pine. Out front, the garden had been expanded and was filled with swaying wild sage and black-eyed Susans rather than the usual petunias.

As she looked up at the playhouse, she noticed the place was crawling with children. Little girls in princess dresses and plastic tiaras clung to their parents' arms on the way to the snack bar. The normally

civilized atmosphere of the theatre grounds was a zoo. Picnicking families took up every table by the creek.

A young parking attendant in a blaze orange vest bounded up to Margaret's car. He gestured for her to follow him toward the back of the playhouse. Barn swallows sitting on the power lines swooped at her car as she passed under. Her stomach was in knots.

The parking attendant led her around the side of the playhouse to the L-shaped section of grass where the other cars were parked. Refusing to comply, Margaret turned toward her usual parking spot by the creek, coins jingling in the ashtray as the tar driveway turned to gravel. Another parking attendant pointed to the left, urging her to turn around the back of the playhouse. Margaret angled toward the creek, pretending not to see. As she drove around the corner of the scene shop building, she noticed the parking attendant waving at her in the rearview mirror. She looked past the mirror toward her usual spot, and her heart dropped. Picnic tables filled the space where she and Richard parked.

A family of four sat in the shade eating their lunch. The mother fed one of the toddlers applesauce out of a Tupperware container; the father laughed as the applesauce dribbled down the child's chin. They looked staged. It was as if they were planted there to get in the way. Margaret felt her face grow hot. Her breathing quickened.

The young parking attendant rapped on her window, and Dottie's ears perked up. Margaret jolted backward. With a shaky hand, she reached for the button and rolled the window down.

"Hello ma'am. I'm going to have to direct you over to our public parking behind the playhouse," he said, already turning on his heel to walk away. Margaret's mouth fell open. Her parking spot was gone. The attendant led her back to a patch of grass and gestured for her to move forward. He smiled and waved his arms, signaling her to stop. Margaret scowled. As she pulled ahead and shifted into park, the attendant was already moving to help the next patron. Margaret leaned out her window.

"Excuse me—" she tried to shout after him, but the words got caught in her throat. The parking attendant had moved on and could not hear her. What could she have said anyway?

With a sharp breath, she rolled up her window. She could feel a migraine forming. Dottie jumped onto the seat, wagged her feathered tail and looked at her with those big, unblinking eyes. Margaret slumped, releasing the tension in her shoulders as she exhaled. "Okay," Margaret sighed. "We'll wait a minute."

Another driver pulled into the spot next to her. Avoiding eye contact, Margaret picked up a nickel from inside the ashtray. As she focused on her breathing, she turned it over in her hand. She rubbed her thumb along the face of the coin. It was worn smooth after years of circulation. The writing along the edge was almost unintelligible. She opened her palm. The nickel was small but felt heavier than she thought it should be. It was warm now from the friction of her fingers. Richard had held this nickel, if only for a moment. He had tossed it into the ashtray with his other coins, but before that, he had held it. Margaret closed her eyes and thought of Richard and his gentle hands, of what it felt like to be held. Dottie wagged her tail. Margaret took the coin between her thumb and forefinger and slid it into her pocket. She took Dottie in her arms and held her there for a moment as the little dog squirmed. Margaret sighed, reaching into the center console to find the red “Therapy Dog” vest and slipped it over Dottie’s head. Dottie had been too rambunctious around other animals to pass therapy training, and Margaret had decided that that was fine with her, borrowing a used vest from her sister and considering her self-certified. She provided companionship—the only therapy Margaret needed. Margaret clipped on a leash, and Dottie shook her head back and forth, letting her ears flap against the sides of her head. Slinging her purse over one shoulder, Margaret opened the car door.

The walk around to the front of the theatre was shorter than the walk from her usual parking spot. With Dottie on a leash beside her, Margaret made her way past the garden to the will-call line. The playhouse’s rustic atmosphere included an exterior box office with clematis vines crawling up the sides. One of the three-year-old princesses pulled at the purple flowers while her parents were preoccupied with their tickets. As she waited, Margaret slid her hand into her pocket, brushing against the nickel. Soon, she was at the front of the line.

“One *Cinderella* ticket for Margaret Kline,” she said to the salesgirl. The girl looked at her and tilted her head.

“Oh, hello Margaret, we spoke on the phone. I’m glad we got you into your preferred seat. And this must be Dottie,” said the salesgirl. Margaret’s jaw tightened.

“I uh... I,” she stammered as the girl spun around to retrieve her ticket from a flaking corkboard on the back wall.

“Here’s that ticket for ya. You enjoy the show,” said the girl with a wide smile plastered across her face. Margaret pressed her lips together and wrapped Dottie’s leash around her wrist. She made her way quickly from the box office across the patio to her and Richard’s favorite bench.

It sat in front of the garden, miraculously unoccupied by a sticky-fingered Cinderella lookalike.

She sat in front of a cluster of heather humming with honeybees and dropped her purse next to her. The heather looked scratchy, and the buzzing of the bees made the hair on the back of her neck prickle. Last year's petunias had never been filled with so many insects. Dottie plopped down under the bench and began to pant. Above them, cicadas groaned in the trees as Margaret glanced around at the other patrons, who talked and laughed as they walked to the snack bar to buy popcorn for a small fortune.

Margaret's stomach flopped. Her insides felt too empty to eat popcorn. The bench felt too empty to sit alone. She scooped Dottie up and set the dog down next to her. Dottie stood on three legs, unsure what to make of her new vantagepoint while Margaret held her by the back of her vest. With her free hand, she pulled the nickel from her pocket, turning it over in her fingers. She flipped it back and forth, allowing it to absorb her nervous energy. The sun glinted off the raised design.

Just then, a barn swallow swooped from above, and the little dog dove after the bird, tugging Margaret forward. The nickel dropped through the slats of the bench. Dottie yapped and jumped until Margaret let her leash run longer. Her face turned white. She dropped to her knees and began combing through the tall grass under the bench. The tangle of grass and weeds was too dense to see through. A young father strolled past with two small children trailing behind. Dottie bared her teeth.

"Uh oh," said the man. "Did you drop somethin'?"

"Oh, I, uh...I just dropped a nickel," she replied, her face flushed.

"Too bad," he said. "Every penny counts." Dottie yanked Margaret backward, pulling toward another squirrel or rabbit or bird. Now Dottie was too riled up to stay in the open. She threw all of her weight toward whatever creature she had spotted, barking and pulling at the leash.

"Quiet down, Dottie," Margaret hissed at the still yapping dog. Unable to stay by the bench any longer, she resolved to leave the coin behind, lost in a jungle of foot-tall grass. She wrenched herself away, hushing Dottie and pulling her back toward the front of the theatre. There, she scooped her up and held her tightly as she squeezed through the front door and presented her ticket to be scanned.

The usher was a tall young man wearing a suit jacket and blue jeans. Margaret looked him up and down and sighed disapprovingly at his Levi's. She didn't recognize him. Come to think of it, she hadn't recognized anyone at the playhouse. Between the young couples and the fresh

seasonal employees, the theatre was full of unfamiliar faces. Her stomach twisted. The usher led her into the theatre and down the center aisle past the rows filled with families for *Cinderella's* Sunday matinee. The little girls in bejeweled gowns left trails of glitter behind them as they made their way to their seats. Margaret had been sure to buy tickets for the third row, C207, just where she and Richard used to sit. The usher showed her and Dottie to a section of free-standing chairs in the front of the theatre. She looked at seat C207. It was a folding chair with worn orange upholstery and two more identical rows in front of it.

"This is not my seat," she said. The man looked at the ticket in his hand.

"Nope, I've got it right. It's C207, the single best seat in the house if I do say so myself. We've got you even closer with our overflow seating," replied the man.

"No, this is the wrong seat. My row is back here." Margaret walked to Row G, the third row of permanent seating, and planted herself in the aisle seat plopping Dottie onto her lap. The man looked down at the ticket to read her name.

"I'm so sorry, *Margaret*, but this seat has already been reserved," he said.

"I—no. That isn't right, *this* is the seat I wanted," Margaret spat, digging her fingernails into the armrest. The man's face softened, and he reached his hand toward her to help her up.

"This is a sold-out performance; we've added three rows of hold seating. I'm sorry, but the seat you're sitting in has already been sold to someone else. Now, we can try to—"

Her face flushed. "No. Absolutely not. This is my seat. I have to sit *here*." She held Dottie tighter as she squirmed in her lap. "I've been treated poorly since the second I got here," she began to shout. "I won't let you speak to me this way. I have never been so—"

"I'm sorry, Margaret, we—"

"Don't you call me by my name, you're only calling me that to make me stop telling you the truth!" she yelled. Families had begun to turn their heads and stare. With her teeth gritted, Margaret stood up.

"How about we go to the box office and see if there's someone for you to exchange seats with," the usher begged. Margaret held Dottie to her side. Her hands were shaking again, and she clutched the dog tighter to steady herself.

"You can't make me do anything, you fucking asshole!" she screamed. The usher's eyes widened. Margaret held Dottie so tightly she

could feel the little dog's heart beating. She slung her purse back over her shoulder and pushed past the man and up the slanted concrete aisle and swept by the young mother from the picnic table who stood with her mouth agape. Margaret sped to the back of the theatre. If Richard were here, he would have taken her hand and held it so tightly she would have forgotten why she was angry. Instead, she stormed back to her car with labored breathing, swinging the door open.

Depositing Dottie onto the passenger seat, she slammed the car door behind her. The car started. She was barely conscious of the fact that she had put the key in the ignition. The palms of her hands felt sweaty on the gear shift as she put the Camry in reverse. She let her foot fall on the gas, tearing through the parking lot. As she turned toward Playhouse Road, the front left tire slammed into a rock barrier surrounding the garden. The Camry jolted, and the change from the ashtray flew like birdshot, scattering in the cab. Dottie jumped to the floor, and more coins slid from Margaret's lap onto the rubber floor mat below. Her chest heaved with each shallow breath. Absorbed in her flight, she whipped around turns faster and faster. Tears clouded her vision as the forest flew past outside her windows. She felt her throat constrict. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't take in more air. Flicking on the turn signal, she took the Camry onto the shoulder, throwing the car in park.

Margaret let a sob escape. She pounded on the steering wheel, allowing the tears to stream down her face. Opening her eyes, she saw the coins scattered across the floor of the car. She pulled her arms close to her body, and her fingernails dug into her skin as she screamed like she had not screamed since she was a girl.

"It's not right! It's not right!" she shrieked until her throat was raw. Dottie cowered on the floor, her tiny body trembling as Margaret swung the driver's-side door open onto the empty highway. She pulled the rubber mat from the floor of the driver's side, dumping the loose change onto the tar. The coins rolled into the middle of the road, and she tossed the mat aside. She whipped around to the passenger side and opened the door, clawing the second mat out from under Dottie. The little dog scrambled back onto the seat and looked up at her with her underbite and eyes like bottle caps. Leaving both doors agape, Margaret dumped the second load of coins on the road and dragged the mat back to the car, collapsing in the driver's seat. The hills rose on either side of the road, casting a shadow onto the Camry. She closed her eyes and was still. The tears now left streaks in the makeup she had so carefully applied.

Change was scattered across both lanes of the quiet road. Margaret swung her legs out of the car. Her shoulders shook as she stooped over and began to pick up the coins, hunched over the highway which for once was free of tourists. Falling to her knees, Margaret did not wince as pebbles from the asphalt dug into her skin. She filled her hands with change. There were too many coins to carry, so she brought a fistful back to the Camry to deposit them in the ashtray. Blood beaded on her scratched knees. Curled up against the seat, Dottie stared at her blankly. Staring back, Margaret let the money fall weakly into the tray and wheeled back around. Hundreds of coins still lay scattered on the road.

THE BURNING ORDINANCE

by John Weber

It seemed like forever to Ernie Schreck that he'd been burning the grass in the spring at the old Quigley place—forever, that is, until he figured it out one day: 43 years. He bought the place on April 15, 1975, burned the grass the next day, and had burned every year since. Ernie did the calculations one late February day after opening a form letter in his mailbox. "Burning grass on city property is prohibited forthwith," the letter said. The letter had the city letterhead at the top and was signed at the bottom by the mayor, Bonnie Nieland.

Just after 9 the next morning, Ernie walked into Bonnie's Bar. He waved the letter with disgust. "Just what the Sam heck is this, Bonnie?" he asked.

Bonnie looked up from the stack of saucers and coffee cups she had cleared from the two tables that had been moved to make one big table by the morning coffee crowd who, refueled and enlightened, had just dispersed to their farm shops or the grain elevator at one of the towns nearby that still had an elevator. "It's a letter, Ernie," she said, in her usual bordering-on-sarcastic manner. "It says no more burning grass in the city limits. Okay? Everyone got one."

"I know better than that, Bonnie. I'm the only one who's been burning grass."

"All right, Ernie. But don't take it personal, okay? What it is, is state regulations. You should come to the city council meetings; you'd know what's going on."

"State regulations?" If they were outside, Ernie would have spit. "Since when did anyone give a dang about the latest hot air out of Bismarck?"

"Since we got the grant to fix the sidewalks in town is when," Bonnie said. Next, as she did every day about now, Bonnie started dragging the tables back where they were at six o'clock when she opened.

"We're spending money to fix sidewalks? In *this* town?" Ernie tried to recall where there even were sidewalks in town, other than Main Street. There could be one or two, but for sure there weren't any at the Quigley place, which just as well could be in the country, as off by itself at it was, on that block past the empty place where the school used to be and the only other house left still standing was Nels Jensen's old place, and that had sat empty for the past five years.

"The *state's* spending money, Ernie. We got a grant for eighteen thousand dollars to redo the sidewalks. Make them handicap accessible and all that. The only thing is, when they did their inspection last winter, they told us some changes we have to make. For one thing, we have to fill in the hole where the grocery store was. Orville said he'd take care of that. Another thing is, we have to start checking water meters every month, which was supposed to be getting done anyway. And..." She stepped back to see if the tables were straight. "No burning grass is another."

Ernie watched her start her next and last task before heading to the kitchen: positioning salt and pepper shakers, ketchup bottles, and napkin holders. He knew he was being patronized and by a woman and because he was old and he didn't like any of those. But Ernie made a point to never let anger get the best of him. He started that strategy in his much younger days when he milked cows and he hollered at his cows a couple of times—used the Lord's name in vain, and several times over, to be honest about it—and he felt bad for days afterward, which surely had something to do with his decision to sell them, which turned out to be a great move anyway, financially. By the time Bonnie set down the last saltshaker, he said, "Okay, Bonnie. Fair enough. When is the next city council meeting?"

"That won't do any good, Ernie. What's done is done."

"I want to present my case to the council."

"You're not burning no more, Ernie. Forget it."

"You said come to the meetings. Did I hear right?"

Bonnie sighed. "First Mondays of the month at seven o'clock."

Ernie visualized the Cenex calendar on the wall in his kitchen by the radio. "Okey doke. Next Monday, then."

"That's the first Monday of the month, ain't it?"

"I'll be there," Ernie said.

"You're done burning grass, Ernie."

"You're doing a great job, Bonnie. Have a great day." He headed for the door, just past the bulletin board with auction sale posters and handwritten For Sale signs.

“Shit, oh dear,” Bonnie muttered as she walked to the kitchen.

Ernie drove to the old Quigley place to check things over, something he did two to three times a week since the last renters moved out twelve years ago. In the first years after the house sat empty, it was something of a burden for Ernie to keep up the old place: paying taxes, maintaining heat, power, and repairs, and doing all the various seasonal tasks that had to be done, but as the years went by, especially after Ernie rented his farm out, the burden became something he enjoyed. He hadn’t advertised for ten years since the county newspaper shut down, and by now Ernie didn’t care if he ever rented the place again or not. In fact, three years ago when Bud Walz asked Ernie after church if he might be interested in renting the house to a young man from South Africa he’d hired to work on his farm, Ernie told Bud it wasn’t available. “My nephew from Chicago says he wants it for a hunting shack,” Ernie said, which was a double fib: first, the only nephew Ernie had was James Schreck, his deceased brother Robert’s son who moved to Seattle forty years ago, never to be heard from again; and, second, no one, relative or not, had ever expressed interest in the house for a hunting shack. A week later, when Bud told Ernie that the South African had been arrested and sent back to South Africa to stand trial for assault the previous year, Ernie felt vindicated.

Ernie parked on the street and took his trusty, semi-retired grain shovel Betsy from the bed of his pickup. He climbed the shoulder-high snowbank, heightened yet again by the city snowplow after Tuesday’s storm, expertly using his foot to carve steps up and down. “Okay, Betsy, let’s get to work,” he said, cheerfully. Then, for the umpteenth time this winter, he and Betsy shoveled a path to the house. Halfway, he stopped for a rest, noting with satisfaction the smoke curling from the chimney: that furnace he installed in 1977 and carefully kept up since still hadn’t missed a beat. He finished the path, entered the porch, unlocked the front door, and walked inside.

For Ernie, every visit to the house was like hearing the purr of a John Deere 4020: memories, images, sensations, and emotions emerged, blended, lingered all day, and subsided until the next visit. For one thing, he enjoyed the memories of his renters. It was a decent house and Ernie didn’t charge much and consequently there were no less than three newly-married couples who had started out there. Many times, they were late with the rent, they ran out of fuel, or something broke and the guy couldn’t fix it, but eventually each couple got on their feet, had their first babies, got better jobs or started college in Fargo or Grand Forks, and

moved on. Also, there was Julie, the pretty girl from Minneapolis who taught at the school until it closed down and by that time had moved out and married Ronnie Williams, probably the best farmer in the area and certainly the nicest single guy, who overcame his father's suicide that only a few knew about. They have five children now and to this day all of them call Ernie "Uncle Ernie." The last renters were a middle-aged couple who "worked online", whatever that meant, and grew what Ernie was pretty sure was marijuana eight feet tall in the garden, which may have explained their sudden departure one October day, leaving a note on the door: "Ernie, you're the coolest ever! Thanks for everything!", with two smiley faces.

Among other memories, there was the 1917 silver dollar Ernie found in the basement the first year he owned the house when he cleaned up the pile of coal left there after the heat was converted to oil. Ernie still has that silver dollar and every time he checks his safety deposit box at the bank he examines it with the same curiosity and excitement he felt when he found it in that coal and dust, as if it was waiting for him.

Ernie's favorite memory was Nick. When you live in a town of 85 people, everyone knows everybody. Ernie got to know Nick when Nick was 7, after his family moved to town "to get away from California", his father, an engineer who got a job at a firm in Jamestown, put it. Right away, Ernie saw the potential. For the next couple of years, every day without a miss, Nick delivered the Fargo Forum, at 5 a.m. in the summer and 6 in the winter. "I can set my watch by you, young man," Ernie, on his way to the café for coffee or to the elevator to check on prices or room for some grain he wanted to haul, would call from his pickup window to the shy boy, who just smiled. Eventually, the Fargo Forum went to mail delivery and that was when Ernie called Nick's folks and asked if he could hire Nick to help at the old Quigley place. "You got 'em," Nick's Dad said, and for years after that, Ernie and Nick shoveled snow, changed storm windows, trimmed trees, painted, put on new shingles, and, of course, burned the grass. Often at the beginning but less as Nick got older, Ernie would call Nick over as they were finishing a job and give him a whisker rub with the several days of whiskers he accumulated every week, saying "Here's your wages, son," and Nick would smile and as he got older might add "Oh, that ain't going to do it, Ernie" before Ernie would chuckle and take out his wallet and hand over more than he needed to. Then Nick got older and started playing sports every day and even on weekends and Ernie saw him at church and that was about it. After high school, Nick enlisted in the Army and got sent to Iraq and the next thing

you knew he lost both his legs when he stepped on a roadside bomb. After months in a hospital in Germany, they sent him back to the States but he lived in Colorado at an Army hospital. Shortly afterward, his family moved to Colorado to join him. Thirteen years have gone by and Nick hasn't returned to North Dakota even once and some people said that he was depressed like so many veterans. Ernie wasn't sure about that but he had a chance to talk to his folks before they left and he knew that *they* were depressed.

Now that he didn't have an opportunity to run a combine anymore, burning grass had become Ernie's favorite job. First of all, like combining, burning grass in the spring had historical significance. When Ernie was a kid, in the days before lawn mowers, not to mention weed whackers and leaf blowers and who-knows-what-else, everyone mowed, if they mowed at all, with those old reel mowers, let their grass get long in the fall, and then burned in the spring. Sure, it blackened the lawn for a week or two, but it cleared the dead grass and set back the weeds so, when the first rains came, the grass came up green and even like a carpet. Ernie remembered happily the lavish green lawns in town every May Day years ago when the kids ran up and down the street chasing each other after one of them left a paper plate of those colored paper napkins tied up with colored ribbon with little heart-shaped, sugary candies with messages like "Be mine" and "Love at first sight" inside, one bundle for each child in the house but primarily one for someone you knew from school. But year by year, the town dwindled, May Day was less observed, people mowed their grass all season long and stopped burning in the spring, until all that was left was Ernie burning grass at the old Quigley place. He always chose a day when the grass was dry but everything else wasn't too dry. Also, he made sure of the wind. And, even though he's never needed one, he keeps a fire extinguisher on hand, after that time a few years ago when someone called 911 and the guys on the volunteer fire department drove fourteen miles with their trucks and water truck just to find Ernie burning away as usual and since they needed something to show for their troubles they made an "agreement" that Ernie could burn his grass and he in turn would help them out and have a fire extinguisher on hand.

Today, Ernie's walk-through took about ten minutes. He flicked the light switch in each room, flushed the toilet, ran the faucets, and checked the mousetraps. He shone a light in the basement; starting last year, in a concession to pain and age, he climbed those steps just once a month. "If the heat's working, what's to look at?" Ernie told himself, assured by this

evidence that after eighty-seven years his mind still did what it needed to do, more than making up for his legs' unreliability.

Outside, Ernie tramped through the knee-deep snow, checking the electric and water meters, the LP tank, and the garage. Everything was normal: the meters seemed to be working and the garage was empty, dark, and cold. A single, lunging dog track crossed the backyard, no doubt left by Molly, who Mrs. Petersen let run free at least once a day and, thanks to Molly's good nature, had become the town dog, latest in a long line. The last thing Ernie did before he got back in his pickup was something he'd never done before: he kicked some snow aside to look at the grass. There it was: brown as cardboard and just as lifeless. The stand was thin and the heads were short, reminding Ernie how dry last fall had been. "We need rain," he said to himself, remembering as he did so how he had said out loud to himself, at many crossroads in his life, things like "We need some sun" or "We need the frost to hold off" or "We need a good breeze." "When you think about it, that's how life is, always making adjustments," he added, carefully nudging the snow back in place over the grass so the snow could do its job in its time until he could do his, in about a month, give or take a week or two: set it on fire.

The next Monday evening just before 7 o'clock, Ernie walked into city hall. Bonnie Nieland glared at him from the head of the table. Phil Minchow sat on one side. Orville Kalinski sat on the other.

"Where are the others?" Ernie asked.

"There's just four of us now," Bonnie said. "We couldn't get no one to run after Dick died. Bob ain't coming tonight. His daughter's got basketball in Harvey."

Ernie hesitated. Bob's absence was not a good start. Bob's Dad Pete and Ernie had been friends from childhood. Ernie had served as a pallbearer at Pete's funeral, over ten years ago now.

"You ain't burning, Ernie," Phil Minchow said. Obviously, Phil had given up for good the idea of renting any of Ernie's pasture land.

"This is a waste of time," Orville said, which seemed to come from nowhere, because he almost never said anything.

"Well, I'd like to talk about it. Because this here is a democracy," Ernie said.

"That's exactly it," Bonnie said. She looked at the men on each side. "A democracy."

Ernie felt the uphill getting steeper, but he knew this was his one chance so he pushed on. "Back when I was on the city council..." he began.

"Key word there is was," Orville inserted.

Ernie sighed. A comeback would have been great but, with limited time, he couldn't think of one. "Back when I was on the city council, when something came up, there was discussion. Then there was a call for a vote. We took minutes, too." He looked at the oak table, bare except for three foam coffee cups. In Ernie's day, that table would be covered with papers. And, not that they used it, a Robert's Rules of Order.

Bonnie groaned. "Dick took the minutes. Like I told you, Ernie, we ain't found a replacement yet."

Phil went next. "What's the big deal about burning anyway, Ernie? People quit burning their lawns years ago. It's dangerous, it don't do nothing anyway, and it's illegal."

"Our forefathers burned the grass for good reason," Ernie said. "It cleans things up. No chemicals, either. And the ashes make good fertilizer."

"Ernie, come on. When the grass grows like that at your place, you got nothing but mice and mosquitoes."

"Clean that place up, you might rent it out," Bonnie added. "Nels rented his place, I heard. People from Oregon."

"You use a lawn mower at your farm, Ernie," Orville added. "A riding lawn mower. You got a trailer. What's your problem using that stuff at the Quigley place?"

"Yeah, I got a mower," Ernie responded. "I got the first one around, I might add. I got my first lawn mower probably before you were born. I just like burning. It's the old style and it fits the old place, you know?"

"Well, whoop de doo," Orville shot back. His eyes narrowed. "Time to move ahead, Ernie."

"You say it ain't legal. Show me. I want to see it."

Bonnie again: "Actually, Ernie, it's never *been* legal. It so happens that ordinance has been on the books for years. Maybe before even your time."

"Okay, if it wasn't legal, how come you've been letting me do it all these years?"

Bonnie frowned and looked at Orville, who rolled his eyes.

"You city council members ain't been doing your jobs."

"All right, that's it, Ernie," Phil said. "You're done. We got important stuff to do tonight. You burn your grass and we're calling the cops. The fine is five hundred dollars."

"And the charge for the fire call," Bonnie added. "We just started that, too. *That's* two hundred dollars."

"There's other people in this town we got to think about besides you, Ernie," Phil added.

Ernie stood up.

"It's whatcha call progress, Ernie," Orville announced, with an air of finality.

Ernie left in silence. This was unusual: he, like his Dad, always observed etiquette: you shook the priest's hand, whether you liked the sermon or not; you took your check and said thanks to the elevator man, even if he took too much dockage; you told the coach he did great, even if the team lost the game. And so on, all around town. But now, Ernie had nothing to say.

The next morning, Ernie pushed his grocery cart down the cereal aisle at Rob's Country Market in the town twenty miles away where Ernie bought his groceries in the years after Kalka's Store shut down. Ernie still wasn't used to buying groceries "elsewhere". He didn't like the drive, twenty-six miles from his farm, didn't like the women at the till who called him "Ern", and didn't like that so many items were the wrong brand. He was preoccupied with these complaints, along with fresh ones about the City Council meeting last night when he looked up and saw, at the end of the aisle, of all people, Bonnie Nieland pushing a cart toward his. He groaned quietly.

"Well, if it ain't our friend Ernie. How you doin' there, Ernie?"

"Fair to middlin'."

"Oh, come on, Ernie. Cheer up. It's a new day!"

"Yah, yah, so I noticed."

"Hey, Ernie, guess what? I got great news this morning. We qualified for another grant!"

"What's with all the grants, hey? If we want something bad enough, why not just get it and skip the paper chase?"

"This one is special, Ernie. This one is for kids. We're getting six thousand dollars from the power company to build a playground for kids. To be honest, I didn't think we'd get it. I got the call this morning. We can start in the spring. How about that, Ernie?"

"All we need now is the kids. Or is there a grant for that, too?"

"We got kids in town, Ernie. Ray Platt and his wife have five, to start with. And Bill and Marie have their little one. And that family from Oregon that's moving into Nels Jensen's place has a couple, I hear. It's a start. We just have to keep it going. That's where a new play area comes in."

"Sidewalks. Playground. I'm not smart enough to see how those are going to bring anyone to town. But what do I know?"

"You know a lot, Ernie. We value your expertise. Really, we do."

Ernie sighed. "Thanks, Bonnie," he said. "Sure thing."

"You just have to stop being so stuck in your ways, old man." She smiled.

Ernie looked away.

"We're going to do all kinds of stuff to turn the town around, Ernie. Just give us a chance."

"Sure." Ernie put a box of macaroni and cheese in his cart, not that he wanted it. "If you need help, let me know."

"Me and Orville are taking care of the paperwork. Maybe help put the stuff together, once the time comes."

There was a pause. Ernie wondered if she was going to add "Maybe mow the grass" but she didn't.

"Sure. I can bring in my Bobcat. Just give me a call," he said, leaning on his cart handle. He felt his chances of burning his grass expire, for all time.

"You bet. I will," Bonnie responded. "Now I'm going to pick up some coffee. Folks never get tired of their coffee, do they, Ernie?"

In the days and weeks that followed, Ernie noticed the sun set later every day. Gradually, slowly, the snow retreated. In mid-March, every day for a week, daytime temperatures reached the 50's with only a light frost overnight. This was Ernie's favorite time of the year: the calves were born and running around, the machinery and seed were arranged in the Quonset, the fertilizer was ordered and prepaid and discounts locked in, and the land smelled like spring. This year, though, he felt none of his usual spring excitement. Rather than stop at Bonnie's for coffee or at the elevator the next town over to check prices and talk farming, Ernie stayed at his farm. The only thing he did with any interest was check the yard at the old Quigley place every day. Every day, there was less snow and more grass. As the days went by, when the wind blew, the grass waved, lighter and lighter each day, and that unmistakable dry-grass smell scented the prairie air. In the past, these developments stirred Ernie to action. He

would get out his rake, the gas can, and, in recent years, the fire extinguisher. He would walk the yard, picking up the pop cans and cigarette butts and candy wrappers that had blown in over the winter. Every night, he would watch the ten o'clock news for the next day's forecast, looking for the perfect day: sunshine, temps in the 60's, a light wind. Not this year, though. The nearer burning day came, the less energy Ernie had. By early April, after a minute or two surveying the grass each day, he drove home and sat on the couch and stared at the window. He skipped meals. At ten o'clock, he went to bed.

On April 9, around noon, Ernie drove into town. The sky was clear and blue and when he stopped at the old Quigley place, the temperature reading on the dash of his pickup was 65 degrees. When he opened the door of his pickup, a warm, soft breeze met his face. "This is the day," he thought. He walked up the sidewalk. The brown grass waved in the breeze. "It'll burn like nothing," he said to himself. He peered through the grass at the ground. Lime-green spikes of new grass were pushing up everywhere.

Ernie walked to the back yard where the grass was thickest. It was ready to burn here, too. Ernie stood at the edge of the yard, next to Andy Heck's Schroeder quarter, gray and bare after last year's beans. This was Ernie's favorite standing spot when he burned: a place to lean on his rake, survey the flames, and think and remember. Ernie looked out at the rolling prairie, the blue, bright sky he never tired of. He turned and looked at the yard of the old Quigley place. He imagined the grass, burning rapidly, like tissue. He heard the hissing and crackling. He smelled the sweet smoke that would cling to his clothes for the rest of the day and into the next. He saw the smoke drifting into and disappearing across Andy's wide field. He clasped his rake and saw the busy orange flames and his heart raced. Then he remembered what usually wordless Orville said: "It's whatcha call progress, Ernie."

Ernie walked to the front of the house. He sat on the front step. For the first time in his life, he felt old. He looked at himself: old, an old farmer, an old North Dakota farmer. Ernie never identified with any of those. He always considered himself who he was. Now, however, the words fit. They were stamped on him like Ford on a truck: old North Dakota farmer. Was this how things end? Yes, over the past few weeks, his bones ached and his stomach hurt and he couldn't sleep, but Ernie was used to working through heat, cold, exhaustion, pain, even bleeding: whatever he had to do, he did it. How could he have farmed all these years if he couldn't adjust? For example, when he started out, farmers cleaned

their seed with hand screens—a cold, dirty, tedious job that took weeks every winter, but every spring when it was time to seed, Ernie’s seed was clean and sized and in gunny sacks tied at the top and ready to go. The last year Ernie farmed, his soybean seed was bagged at a plant near Fargo that separated the seeds with infrared light beams, treated at the plant with the newest seed treat, and delivered in fifty-pound bags to his drills in the field at the same time as the fertilizer. And soybeans! Who would have thought seventy years ago that we’d be planting soybeans in this country? No, Ernie thought; I can adjust. This being old is different. It’s like not just one hand but both hands tied behind your back. You don’t belong anymore. This house, for example: sure, on the deed, it says it’s Ernie Schreck’s house, but you can’t say it’s mine. The same could be said for his standing in the town, where a knucklehead less than half his age who can’t run a truck or tractor without grinding the gears tells him to get lost.

Right then, Ernie decided to sell the house. He’d known this day would come but he’d always thought it would be years down the road and only because he’d decided to and after he’d planned it. This wasn’t any of those but it was the time. Ernie had sold grain on down markets and taken many a beating on hailstorms, scab, and drought, but he handled all those setbacks easily, even cheerfully. He picked himself up and moved on. But none of those losses made him feel empty, like this. “No, get rid of it, Ernie,” he thought. “Sell it as is, dead grass and all, for what you can get for it, which wouldn’t be much, in a dying town off the beaten track.” He could take the money and be like most people his age and go on a long trip, maybe to the Grand Canyon which he’d been planning to do when he got old, or on one of those Bahama cruises like Charlie Tibilski and his wife did when he quit. “They wine you and dine you all day, every day,” Charlie said when he got back, the last Ernie heard from him until he died two weeks later.

Suddenly, a scream rang out.

“I didn’t hear that” was Ernie’s first thought, the sound being so completely strange, so totally out of place.

Next was a sudden bang: a door slamming. Again, someone screamed, a high-pitched scream: a girl’s. “Goddamn you, fucking bitch! I’m going to Oregon!”

Ernie looked down the street to Nels Jensen’s old house, where a girl was stamping down the street straight toward Ernie, head down, no coat on.

“You call yourself a mother?” The girl whirled and screamed in the direction of Nels’ house. “Fuck! Fuck you!” She continued down the

street, head down. “Bitch!” Finally, she was a mere five steps from Ernie’s pickup.

Ernie coughed. He cleared his throat.

The girl stopped. She saw Ernie, on his front step. She was twelve or thirteen years old; Nick’s age when he worked his hardest and best. Her hair was disheveled and tears shone on both sides of her red face. Their eyes met: terror in hers, sadness in his. The moment was awkward. “May I help you, young lady?” Ernie asked, all he could think of, feeling the gulf between them open still further.

After several frozen seconds, the girl turned, ran back to Nels Jensen’s house, opened the door, and went inside.

The next few minutes were quiet—so quiet that Ernie heard everything: sparrows in the bushes, a tractor in a field, a loaded truck shifting up on the highway, Molly barking cheerfully many houses away.

Suddenly, he knew what to do. He stood up. “Let’s go, Ernie,” he said out loud, his voice surprising him, assuring him. “We got work to do.” He tapped his backside where his wallet, as always, was. He got in his pickup and headed to Jamestown, or, more specifically, the nearest home supply store; a long drive, but he wanted the best push lawn mower that money could buy.

NONFICTION

OREO

by Joan Brickner

The moment fixed me to the spot. Statued.

I remember the hallway of Clinton Middle School in Oak Park, Michigan, a modest town, bordering northwest Detroit. The school, now closed, was dominated by Reform Jewish kids, with some Chaldeans, along with some black kids who were bussed in from nearby Royal Oak Township. A few of us Detroiters, black or Chaldean, had parents who paid tuition for our attendance, since the school was known for academic strength.

I stood in that hallway, the floor glazed with wax underfoot. Trophies honored achievements in lit display cases, while metal lockers soldiered against the walls. Above, a runway of fluorescent lights striped the ceiling.

I wore a purple cotton dress, sprinkled with small flowers; an outlier, in a school dominated by Jewish girls in frayed, elephant-leg jeans, and tiny tees, perhaps baring a bit of belly. Clouds of hair fell down their backs. Even the other black girls fit in better, with their narrower jeans. But I was bound by a legalistic home, I was only beginning to chafe against, if only internally. I was the only one who normally wore skirts.

No doubt, my hair was clutched in a ponytail, my straightened locks clasped by the pull of a rubber band.

A moment before it happened, I was laughing. Joking around with a couple of my Jewish friends.

Then the words spilled out of the mouth of one of the black kids, her lips turned out, dripping with disdain: “Are you an oreo?” Her eyes slit, to accompany the spit of her sneer.

I don’t recall my response. It’s the image. A freeze frame.

I knew enough of its meaning but never applied it to myself or others. I probably said, “No,” under a furrowed brow. But the question stunned me.

Here was the first time I had ever been called an “oreo.”

What stood out for me was that the words did not injure me. I had been a sensitive kid, and her snarling words, meant to hurt or to

“convict” me did nothing of the kind. Maybe her words prompted me to consider the possibility. But I was not devastated by it.

Black on the outside, white on the inside? No, but I consider the presence of this word, floating through my life; a term present in scholastic, political, and religious spheres.

I look backward to the roots of this conundrum. Living on a spherical globe that some insist must flatten into a chessboard of unmerging squares. Characters, black or – , always in battle.

Emerging in 1912, it mimicked the “Hydrox,” a cookie/biscuit from 1908. A stolen, yet simple concept. The dark chocolate cookie held the white creamy filling in check, combining two favorite flavors—a way to incorporate icing without the sloppiness of frosty fingers.

Unintentionally, it produced a metaphor of our national racial schism. Actually, it represents a reverse of the reality, as white “wafers” strive to contain the dark interior, without the darkness spilling out beyond its designated borders.

How the cookie crumbles, I guess.

Oreos became stars. Still the most popular cookie in America.

They have had many incarnations. Double crème. Chocolate filling, Orange (for Halloween). The classic is still the best and, growing up, I would eat these slightly bitter rounds, imprinted with “Oreo,” grinding the chocolate bits into the crevices between my teeth, into the tips of my pink gums. Smile.

They were treasured treats in a lunch bag. Unlike my classmates with their metal lunch pails, glazed with images of neon Hot Wheels or booby Barbies, my lunch bags were the humble brown sacks, holding a baloney sandwich. But perhaps, just maybe, a couple of Oreos were stuffed inside.

Then there was the technique. Do you dunk them in a glass of cold milk (difficult with a school carton), or do you take a bite, with a milk chaser? Perhaps, as more of an analytical exercise, unscrew the lid, scrape off the tender filling with your front teeth, like a beaver, before chomping the chocolate cookie.

I liked the combo and bit into the cookie, black/brown and white together. Crème and crusty cookie together. A beautiful combination, similar to the ice cream sandwiches I craved, like Pavlov’s dog, whenever I heard the tinkling of an ice cream truck.

And perhaps that was my problem. I did not want to isolate black and white. I wanted to combine the two at once. Eat them whole.

To add to the conundrum, I wrestled with another black-and-white complication: the bible. How my mother drilled into me, “Always line it up with the word,” even as some passages bewilder me.

Some may dismiss such a complication: just antiquated fairy tales. But when birth bonds with miracle, breaking faith is hard.

In 1960, Eisenhower was rounding the corner of his last months in office, while Kennedy and Nixon fought for the White House. My parents, Harry and Mary Lou, with their brood of four children, lived in a small A-frame on Normandy in Detroit, while my mother’s belly grew swollen with a fetus: me. She faced the familiar bodily pressures, the swollen feet, the nausea; the belly’s burden that led to ropes of blue varicose veins spiraling her calves, plaguing her for most of her life, even with pale, “flesh-tone” support hose.

But in the familiar rumblings of pregnancy, she found something was not right. Pentecostals of that time did not typically call on doctors. Exceptions were made, however arbitrary. Pregnancy was one of them.

Doctors found what she felt. Somewhere near where the milk pooled, spidering out to the armpits, cancer cells multiplied. A feasting blob. It was my ominous twin, running laps to overtake me and her.

Sitting under the blue glare of fluorescent lights, the doctors sought to operate. Eyeing scalpels, not forceps.

Only 33 at the time, she asked, “Would surgery prolong my life?”

The white-robed doctors said, “No.”

She paused, furrowed her brow a moment, without tears. Then she stood up, turned on her heel and headed home.

Given the circumstances, her death seemed as certain as my own.

No doubt she practiced habits I would later witness: singing hymns she would hammer on the piano, annotating Smith Wigglesworth books. But mostly she would engage in the controversial practice of speaking in tongues.

For months, she did not return to the hospital. It was time for me to break out. As usual, she endured a long, painful delivery. An eight-pound baby already fused with her in blood, bone and spirit amongst those masked specialists.

When Mama did die, 33 years later, it was due to hardening of the arteries to the heart. Not cancer.

Call it coincidence if you wish. She prayed. She lived. I lived.
Not the end of our story, but its beginning.

SOMEWHERE ON A PARK BENCH

by Kaitlin Eken

Mia was smoking a Camel light when she casually asked, “Do you think Cierra planned it?”

Slightly offended, and uncomfortable, I walked back into Duffy’s, without replying. I knew she had, but it wasn’t a conversation I was willing to have. They were just memories I’d never discuss, ones that would torture me until I’d take my own life, just as she had. It was the inevitable trajectory I decided my life would be taking; the one recently rendered devoid of all meaning.

I answered Mia’s question to myself, as I slurred into my seventh glass of Jameson, *There’s the time she told me that she’d die the same way she came in, alone, surrounded by darkness. It seemed like such an odd comment, before I had more context. Then there’s the time, about a week before, when she gave me a month’s early birthday gift of a journal, rollerblades, and balloons, and told me to use the journal to write my dreams in. And the day of, when she told me she had other plans, instead of doing laundry and running errands, which led us to the liquor store, then Duffy’s for endless glasses of Irish coffee and gin. There’s the last words I’d ever hear her say, as she shook hands with the person next to me, slurring about how all a person needs in life is someone who cares about them. Yes, I think she planned it, as thoroughly as someone plans a wedding, with the most intricate details mapped out months in advance.*

The day Cierra ended her existence, I could tell she was sad, but I assumed it would be like all the other times when she was in a low mood. I figured she’d go back to our apartment to work on a painting and snap herself out of it over some alone time, and a bottle of wine. She had been depressed all week, and drunker than usual all year. I let her leave the bar that day, knowing she was sad, and I just kept tossing dollars in the jukebox, singing along with the bar acquaintances who were being more fun than her.

The funeral came and went, people tried to find words, but didn't realize that their sympathetic cards laced with empty platitudes only made it worse. Some of these expressions were a feigned cover for their unending gossip and speculation, with some of the worst offenders suspecting murder, which would have been more comforting than suicide, if I weren't a primary suspect. My trust in human goodness was eroding, not so much from being the talk of the town, but for the outlandish untruths about circumstances that talk entailed.

For the first three nights, I had a mattress on my mom and dad's bedroom floor, seeking comfort like a scared five-year-old, only this time, the nightmare was real. Taking Cierra down to lay her lifeless body on the floor, before staring into her still open, yet dead eyes, blue lips, and belt snugly wrapped around her neck, as I pounded on her chest like a deranged mad woman, repeatedly screaming, "NO, NO, NO, NO," was the dream I needed my parents to wake me from at 24 years old, but they didn't know what to say. I moved to the living room next, still close enough in case I needed to be around the living, to forget the dead.

When I finally had my first sleep, I dreamt that Cierra was telling me she regretted her decision, and loved me, but that we should have gotten married. She told me, "I just kind of float around now. It's foggy and rainy where I am. If you need me, you can find me on a park bench." It was vivid and felt real. Whenever these dream visitations would occur, I would use the journal she gave me to record them.

I'd been avoiding entire sections of Fargo because of the memories they held, which made life there feel impossible. After selling my motorcycle, I booked a flight to New Zealand, in hopes that I'd find her somewhere on a park bench off the coast of Kaikoura. If not her, maybe I'd find myself. I spent a month staying in hostels, and at random farms. Two weeks were spent crying into the ocean during surfing lessons, as I explained to the instructor that I made a mistake signing up for them. He'd be unloading boards from the van for the day's lesson, and I'd say, "Look, I'm from a frigid, landlocked northern region in the Midwestern part of the States, and have no business being in the ocean. I'm a doggy paddler who should have stuck with hiking. I glamorized surfing from the movies, but it's not what it seems, and I find this board to be too confining the way it straps around my foot. I'm hating this."

Knowing I had another 12 days of surfing to go, I pleaded with the intense instructor to please consider letting me wander the shoreline every day in my wetsuit instead. When this failed, I asked to read through his

surfing books to study the effects of wind patterns on a surfer's experience, taking a more theoretical approach to my lessons, but he'd get stern with me, and say in his thick Kiwi accent, "Are you going to live your whole life this way, just giving up anytime something is a challenge? You'll get nowhere living as a quitter; get back in there and practice paddling out."

How badly I wanted to give these same lectures to her, but the park benches of Kaikoura only had other wetsuit-wearing surfers reorganizing their oversized packs.

The chances of finding her on a park bench in Minneapolis seemed more practical. A city only a few hours away from where we lived, but bigger, and more diverse. She was the cautious, frugal type whenever we'd plan our trips. I'd want to choose a place on a whim, but she'd have an itinerary with every hour accounted for. I both loved and hated this about her.

I packed a bag and drove to the cities to look at the apartment I'd end up living in for the next year and a half. My only question to the landlord was, "Has anything tragic happened in the place?" He casually replied, "Not that I'm aware of," so I signed the lease.

I had been ignoring calls from everyone I'd ever known for the past few months. My voicemail was filled with messages, some apologetic from friends saying they didn't know what to say, so they just left me alone. My trust in people had completely eroded, as I slipped further into my pill addiction, gin martinis, and abusive friendship with Bekki, the one person I mistakenly allowed into my life after she reached out to me after the funeral.

Bekki was an old work acquaintance before she edged her way into my world. She would talk at length about Mia and the others in the group she despised, telling me endless sob stories about all the ways those in her life consistently hurt her. She'd shame me anytime I tried to discuss the grief I was experiencing. Her words, "You're a selfish brat who knows nothing about pain. You wouldn't last a day in my life. Get over it; it's been a month. You think the world revolves around you, don't you?" had been constantly running through my head. She'd tell me these things, before reminding me that she was the only person in my life who truly cared. She'd say that I'm the reason Cierra killed herself, because I'm needy and think I'm the only person who has things going on, then she'd switch her stance later, whenever she was trying to rope me back in.

I'd buy her things she needed, and she'd either flake, or not be able to pay me back, but I didn't care because I was attached. I'd drive by Cierra and my old apartment, to get to hers, but she'd have to go after five minutes of seeing me, happily taking the things I brought her. Her cruelty only made me try harder to be better. A better woman, more feminine, but less needy, dramatic, and sensitive. She'd frequently remind me that she prefers blondes, and girly girls, not brunette tom boys, always comparing my strongest attributes unfavorably against everyone else we both knew. I tried harder to be a better person, since she said I was so terrible. I put my efforts into being a better friend, better company, better at listening, better at fitting whoever she needed me to be because I just needed someone. I believed every word she told me to be true, since Cierra would obviously rather die than spend another day with horrible me.

Bekki would often bring up Mia, demonizing her. I eventually began to question the things she was telling me about myself, and others. I realized I had fallen into the trap of blindly accepting as truth, things she may have just been feeding me to keep me further isolated. When I finally called Mia back, she was happy to hear from me, and told me Bekki was notorious for preying on vulnerable people. She thought it was odd that I was so stuck on her, when she thought I could have just about any woman I wanted.

It felt strange to be the object of someone's interest after being beaten down for the past two years. We ended up laughing more than either of us had in ages. The sex and laughter were refreshing, but I'd leave the room immediately after, avoiding any semblance of real intimacy to violently sob on the bathroom floor, muffling the sounds with a towel. I'd lock the door and stay in there for hours. This routine eventually began to bother Mia, but I searched for Cierra in her eyes, and she was never there.

Shamanism had overtaken my belief system; I was on a quest to understand the spirit realm. Any sign of proof, however illogical to a nearby materialist, was taken as evidence that she had not truly left. I visited shaman after shaman, paying whatever fee they charged, however steep, to hear very different takes on the progress of her soul's journey, and the lost pieces my soul underwent after her death. I'm not sure if any of them recovered the scared pieces of my soul; I only know that I was not finding her on any park benches, just scraggly strangers willing to exchange down on their luck stories, pausing only for the next swig or hit.

The best healers could be found on park benches, and the best medicine, but not her.

It was a snowy day in February when Mia called repeatedly until I answered. I was sitting in a dive bar in North Minneapolis, crying into a glass of whiskey, instead of being at work, for the fourth day in a row. The park benches were sometimes full, but she wasn't on any of them. The empty ones had the occasional pigeon flitting around, or an ad with a realtor's smirk. On a good day, I'd find undercover healers with their medicine, but it was never strong enough for me anymore.

I quit my construction job by leaving an apologetic note in an oatmeal container, with the keys and work credit card, making my boss aware that I would be leaving for New Mexico, with no plans to return. I still had enough Adderall for a weeklong amphetamine bender, but no cash left, only a pocket full of pull tabs from the night before. No winners, as usual.

I broke my lease, and left in my barely running car, right mirror held on by duct tape, and a side door I had to crawl out the window of, to meet Mia in the town I swore I'd never set foot in again. It was the same day I was supposed to begin therapy for complicated grief, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, just fancy terms from the latest DSM, which I scoffed at. I didn't need therapy; I only needed another refill on my Adderall.

The therapist I was supposed to start seeing in the Cities seemed far more put together than anyone I could possibly relate to, based off what I gathered from the picture on her business card, so I sabotaged my chances of ever having to see her in the first place, by leaving her city. The one that would follow a few years later, I stayed with too long. I followed through with our sessions because her lack of boundaries, and frenzied aura was reassurance that I was not the only one in the room struggling. We shared a love of writing, and wallowing in sadness.

Eating Adderall like skittles had become my favorite vice. I was still reading about concepts of Shamanism, and now Jung, and the dense texts of Foucault, Durkheim, and Nietzsche. These were my men, though I despised the patriarchy. I could love these men because they would never leave me, and I could love Adderall for the same reason. I didn't need sleep or sustenance, only the words of my men, and my little orange pills. Satan's candy, I called them.

A few months after her death, this wonderful man in a white coat, who I came to view as my personal savior, had found the answer to my woes, past and current, month after month, upping the dose every time I

asked, hardly asking a question, or even meeting my eyes. I didn't realize it then, but the only place my newfound intent focus was leading me, was into a psychosis. My white-coated savior was mistaken, according to the next one I sought years later. The one who angered me with her refusal to grant me legal access to what I had come to love more than life itself, as I pleaded my case with her, that I was not an addict. She'd give a toothy smile, which upset me even more, then continue to tell me that the kind of passionate argument I'm raising, although entertaining, is one she's heard hundreds of times. She said mine was exceptionally good and could probably win an academy award. She went on to say that it could possibly even fool some of her less experienced colleagues, but not her. I glared at her, as I tried one last time, exasperated from my theatrics, that I'd never get anywhere on my goals without my prescription because I have the focus of an Eastern Grey Squirrel, but she replied, "Sweetheart, the only place you're about to be going at this rate, is rehab." She was the devil in a blue blazer, not my white-coated savior, but I still had my medicine man on speed dial.

I met Mia at Woody's in Fargo, and by nightfall we had decided we were going to New Mexico. Finding Cierra on a park bench in Rio Rancho made sense to me. She enjoyed the desert scenery of Arizona the time we went to stay with her drunk, angry mother, until her mom had a public meltdown in the bar, shaming us for holding hands, exclaiming loudly how she was fine with her daughter being "one of them," but only if she didn't wave it in her face. We packed up our bags that night and stumbled through the streets of Mesa. I watched as Cierra broke down crying at various stops for swigs out of our shared bottle of Jack, over the mother who left her to the foster care system, so she could stay drunk. All she wanted was a relationship with her, now that she was an adult, but her hopes had been dashed for the final time. I would've checked a park bench in Mesa, but I feared I'd only find her cruel mother there.

Mia's partner had been cheating on her with Sammy, a biker I tried to drunkenly fight at Pride the August before, because she tried to put me in a psych ward, a few days after Cierra's suicide, severely underestimating the maladaptive coping mechanisms that would get me by from that day in May, to late August. Mia shared the same hatred of Fargo, due to sad memories, and was considering sobriety, but my love of drinking had been rekindled in the last year. She said she needed to soul search to figure out if she really had a drinking problem. She wanted to go through the town of Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, to face herself. The week we

arrived there, we were going to check out a bookstore, but Mia passed out cold by 6 o'clock on the motel floor, so I wandered off through the desert back roads, eventually making friends over whiskey shots, on a lawn chair, in some rancher's back yard.

Driving frees the soul in a way not many things can match. I'd wash down Satan's candy with a gas station coffee and drive all night, and whenever Mia asked if I was eventually going to stop to take a break, I'd grab the bottle, take a few more, and proclaim, "No. I'm a machiiiiine." We'd laugh, then turn up the radio. We listened to my favorite Emmylou Harris album, *Wrecking Ball*, so much that it was all scratched up and skipping by the time we got back.

Cierra used to invite Mia over to drink, and I had a suspicion they were sleeping together. I'm not sure why I cared, when I was the one who initiated the breakup. I'm the one who moved into the spare bedroom on the other side of our shared apartment. I suppose I cared because I believed she'd be able to stop drinking someday, and we'd spend our winters traveling to different farms to bring back new skills for the business we were starting. The CSA gardening venture I believed would be a wild success, just like sobriety, and going from partners to being just friends, who still sleep together, no strings attached after three previous years together, all history forgotten for a fresh start.

They'd drink Jack Fire straight from the bottle after bar close in the tiny attic room of our apartment. I was working split shifts at FedEx; I'd be up by 3 am and would go back again around 5 pm. I'd hear laughter through the closed door as I grabbed my coat and keys. Some nights I'd partake, but company didn't change my reclusive nature, and neither did alcohol anymore. It once did, but I was growing tired of the lifestyle. My new thing was to shut myself away to read, or overthink, to background sounds of loud music and laughter, wondering if they were having a secret tryst. Cierra kept a bottle of whiskey in the closet, one next to the bed, and several stockpiled in the freezer, just in case. I'll never know for sure what went through her head before she followed through; I only know what still goes through mine, after finding her.

It was 2:40 in the morning, and Mia was asleep as I drove through the flat cornfields of the Midwest. We'd be in Colorado by tomorrow evening, as long as I kept washing down Satan's candy with coffee. My jitters had become a natural extension of my other mannerisms, nothing out of place, just who I was. Tears were clouding my sight as Emmylou Harris sang, "I remember holding onto you, all of them long and lonely

nights I put you through, somewhere in there I'm sure I made you cry, but I can't remember if we said goodbye." I played this song on repeat for the duration of that night's drive, until I pulled into the parking lot of a truck stop for another hellish Adderall comedown, paranoid that the truckers were conspiring to kill us for our CD collection, which led to me stashing them in the trunk, and compulsively checking the mirrors as I walked the parameters of the car, Black Obsidian stone in hand, a false protection I had since adopted, to ward off bad juju, in an unpredictably dark world.

When Mia awoke to me pacing around the car, she moved to the driver side, and honked repeatedly, yelling, "Hey, you machiiiiine, it's time to get some sleep!" I got in and rapidly explained what I was doing, and we both laughed deliriously, until my laughter turned to tears, before sobbing myself to sleep off another stimulant stupor. We were driving through Broomfield, Colorado when I woke up. I reached for my backpack to begin my morning ritual of taking a handful of Adderall, washed down with cold, leftover gas station coffee. We stopped in Denver for a few beers, and legal pot chocolate. I didn't find her at any park benches there, but found myself shouting, crying, and laughing on a bench with Mia, too stoned and drunk to move, as the day turned to night.

Dust was kicking up into our open windows, as I sped through the gravel backroads of New Mexico. The sun was coming up, and Mia was asleep; she wasn't trying to be a machine. That was my role because machines don't have to feel. I pulled into a gas station to refill, checking the bench, but all I found was myself, counting out pills, waiting for my coffee to cool off.

I stopped at a little tavern in Madrid and woke Mia up for shots and a few rounds of pool. A few hours later, we were following our new friends back to their place for drinks and what they claimed would be the best pot we'd find in town. Mia followed their Nissan pickup down winding backroads, as I sunk into the passenger seat, feet on the dashboard, flipping through CDs in search of the best day drinking playlist. I settled on Fleetwood Mac's *Tusk*, though it only brought up memories of dancing all night in the living room with Cierra. I thought I saw her out of the corner of my eye, but it was only a desert mirage.

We used to spend hours after bar close, holding each other close, as we danced to one Fleetwood Mac album after another. Our record collection was impressive, but I left that behind; I figured if she could, then so could I. All I had were the memories, not even a single picture,

except one of me that she took. It's of me looking into her eyes, as she's telling me not to blink the way I usually do. I'm sitting on a barstool at our kitchen table, drinking coffee, in a t-shirt with grey and yellow stripes, my hair loosely tied in a silk headband. I'm smiling and so is she. She has on a sleeveless, button-down shirt with a scarf tucked into the pocket of her black Levi's. It's the only picture I have of that time, and no one else knows she was there. It's stored on an old online profile I never use. All the thousands of our other pictures are in her brother's garage now; she didn't take them with her, so neither did I.

Once we got to Albuquerque, we didn't want to leave. We both felt we had found our place in the world. The people were open, and often eccentric. We'd wander around town, against a backdrop of the Sandias, adobe houses, and hot air balloons. I drank an entire bottle of hot sauce from a street market that read, "One Freaking Drop," as Mia laughed so hard, she peed. We went hiking later that day, but I became very sick, and couldn't move. My stomach was burning, and I was uncontrollably shaking, but I handled it like every other uncomfortable feeling, by washing it away with more whiskey and pills. I looked for her, as I held my stomach on a park bench, but all I found through my stinging, watery eyes, was a desire to stay in this careless state of drunken antics forever.

I'm sitting on a park bench in Fargo, a place I once swore I'd never be again. I'm the closest to where she might be, looking at our old apartment, but I don't bother to search for her here. It's just me, and this bearded man with his Pitbull, telling me tales of his difficulties finding an extended stay motel that allows dogs. In the distance, I see that a new family has moved into our old apartment, blissfully unaware that it's the last place I found her. My mind drifts to the memory of the time we sat outside selling our stuff before our short stint living in Oregon: a dresser, a guitar amp, a rusted pair of crutches, and one of her paintings. We sat outside all day, then crawled up to the roof where we sipped wine all night, with Fleetwood Mac coming out the open window through the living room speakers.

"No one bought any of our crap," I mutter under my breath, and I hear her say, "I told you no one was going to come to our impromptu sale." I hear her laugh, and we agree that we'll have to rent a moving truck.

I tell her we should just leave it all behind, but she says, "I can't leave my canvas and paints."

“Then how could you leave me?” I stare up at the window we used to crawl out of to sit on the roof, and I swear I hear her tell me, “You know where I can be found.”

I take one last gaze at the roof, before turning away from the man with the Pitbull, as I tell her, “If you need me, I can be found somewhere on a park bench too, but I’m not looking for you anymore.”

NO PLACE

by Lisa Falk

Is just a space.

This room for instance. This place that I sat in after the mess was gone and I just knew that I was home. And it was just a part of a larger space that felt so right as I wandered through it with my love for the first time. His space. In which he was lost. In which he had never felt at home.

This room is 7 ½ feet wide by 11 feet long. The entry is 8 feet across. There are seven windows in this space facing west. We painted all the walls red. The red works because there isn't actually much wall. This was after we fell in love. As friends, we had already painted the kitchen white.

We had each been alone for about 25 years. We were 57 and 64. We had become friends first, which was a new thing for me. And it was seminal.

As we tested out this friendship business, he would come over to my little house and we would sit in my little kitchen at my little 30x30 high-top table for two. And we had conversations. Oh. My goodness. Hours of talking and hours of laughing and hours of grief and fears shared. We fell in love over that table top. He would get "mad" at me for looking into his eyes and seeing conflicting emotions. "That's not fair!" he would laugh. I was learning to listen with my heart. It became our table.

We negotiated the move. Yes, he was willing to let me move in. I would sell my home and move into his house. We would live in this house for 2-3 years and just see if we could make it a home together.

This was a very difficult decision for him. He had been hurt so very badly. More than once. He had suffered from chronic depression for...30 years? He was so unsure of himself. No, that is not true. He was sure that he was a failure. I was on my own path of recovery from my own life. We were both fragile. And we decided to work through it; to get to the other side. Together and as individuals.

This room was a pale green (I immediately thought mental institution green, but that's just me). It was full of do-it-yourself supplies

and items from previously started projects. New paint, old paint, hammer, screwdrivers, level, power tools, new wood of various lengths, old wood of various lengths, miscellaneous containers of screws and nails. The rest of the house had bare walls and very little furniture. "When did you move in?" I asked. "Almost 30 years ago," he answered. "Oh," I said. And noticed the rust on the tools, the cobwebs, the layers of dust.

We negotiated what to keep and what to throw. We cleared space in the basement and the upper level for what we kept. And I sat in this place and knew that I was home.

We moved our table into the red room with seven windows. And continued the fall into love. We discovered it was bottomless and warm and safe. We moved his upright piano into the red room. We put my grandmother's hope chest into the red room. In this room, we dreamed about future road trips to new places where we would camp and hike. We would look out the front windows at the little blue car that would start taking us to a myriad of MDs. That was five years ago. We then planned his grand adventure of hiking the Colorado Trail. One year later, he completed 360 miles of that trail. By himself. With significant symptoms of ALS.

And he told me that he wanted to come home.

This room has been through a lot in that five years. The high-top has been stowed in another room and replaced with a lovely standard height table of mixed light and dark wood. He could no longer hoist or push himself into the tall chair. The piano is gone. We needed the room for books and for our glider rocking chair and footstool. The chair has plum colored fabric and rich, dark wood. It sits in the corner of our red room where a wall and windows meet. The slightly ornate, slightly marred, dark wood bookshelves became the home for possible books to read. He couldn't read what he had always enjoyed anymore. Non-fiction, science, ecology, social justice, history. He was having trouble holding ideas and details from one passage of the book to another. He stopped reading for a time. Fiction was not his preference and was tricky, as it needed to be linear and with just a few characters to keep track of. I would find possibilities of both and they would go on the shelves. He did start reading again.

We replaced the windows so it wasn't so drafty. We spent more and more time in this room. It is an inviting room. An intimate room. With a lot of windows. A room with a view. Of his life outdoors. Where he had always found solace and healing. His joy in life had always been running

and hiking and biking and skiing; whatever was available. Now he sat in the purple chair and watched the track teams train, the marathoners train. People running for fun. Bikers alone and in pairs. Families biking together. And he remembered.

This room is where we grieved together. Every loss. He in the purple chair, me at the table. Hours of talking. While he still could. Hours of laughing. Hours of grieving our own losses and each other's. Hours of crying. Sobbing. And together we moved through each impossible step.

And then he couldn't sit in the purple chair in the corner of the red room with the seven windows anymore.

This room is where I am. He is still here. And when I need him to hold me, the purple chair in the corner is waiting for me to curl up in.

MICE

by Rita Greff

Mice. They can go anywhere, and they leave evidence that they have been there. They are dark and small and quick, so you think you saw a shadow, but then, oh, no. It was a mouse!

The first memory of a mouse in the house was way back when I was three. Aunt Charlene found a mouse in the trap in the basement of the family home north of Gladstone. She picked up the trap and the limp mouse dangled from it. Then she chased Aunt Janet and me from floor to floor of the house. Janet dragged me firmly by the hand to save me from the horror of it all.

My family almost always lived in a little claptrap house that could be infested with mice when the cold temperatures descended on us. Sometimes we could hear the mice rattling around in the night rustling papers in a built-in cabinet or running along the wall. Once I thought one was running along my mattress near the headboard.

When we lived in South Dakota, our country school had been closed for several years due to low enrollment. When I was a second grader, my parents joined other parents in cleaning the remote Burdick School house and yard, because there would be eight students that fall, and prospective students for the following year. I still remember the brave, young Mrs. Blossmo who chased the mice that were roused in the classroom that day, and smacked them with her broom, sending them to mouse heaven.

As a high-schooler, I still had not outgrown my aversion to mice. My sisters knew this and decided to pull a prank. One night after a date, I entered the dark, little bedroom with wall-to-wall bunks with the light from the living room shining in. Suddenly, I saw a mouse run along the wall. Unable to control my emotions, I let out a screech, waking the whole household. Then my sisters giggled because they had tied a string around a rubber mouse and pulled it along the wall to their bed.

When I taught at Prairie View Elementary in Devil's Lake, one of my third graders brought a baby mouse to school in a shoe box. She informed us that the mother had been caught in a trap, but she was rescuing this baby. Carma had punched holes in the lid of the box to give it some air. It took a great effort for me to act like an adult, but I told her to set the box back on the counter near the sink. At noon Carma wailed, "Mrs. Greff! The mouse died!" I looked to the empty counter. "Where is it?" I gasped. "The boys were poking it, so I put it in my desk." Carma's voice was sad. So, we were forced to give the mouse a burial in the soft paper towels of the waste basket. Yikes. I hadn't dreamed of that in my nightmares!

After a four-year hiatus in teaching while I had babies, I returned to the classroom at Regent Public School at the end of 1975, a big year to celebrate the centennial of the United States of America. One of my assignments as a teacher would be to teach 7th and 8th grade art. Always looking for projects that the students would enjoy, I noticed the wheat fields that had been combined still had uncut wheat standing at the corners. Deciding that would be a great hands-on project, I cut down the stalks, mixed red dye in some 5-gallon buckets and blue dye in others. I stored the colored wheat upright in buckets to dry in the art room. We had lovely still-life projects. However, the janitor told me that the mice were storing up seeds for generations to come. I was not very popular with him. How had those little devils negotiated the sides of the buckets anyway?

Meanwhile, our home in Regent those first years was a former hotel with a dirt floor basement, a family two-bedroom apartment on the main floor and an apartment and five or six small rooms upstairs. It had been remodeled about ten years before but had been unoccupied for the last three years. With the aid and encouragement of my sister Diane, we cleaned up the evidence that mice had been there and made a comfortable apartment there for a couple of years. While there I only saw one mouse. After supper, while I cleaned up the kitchen, it would run under the table. One night my parents stopped by, just after supper, and found me standing on a kitchen chair. Four-year-old Jason was standing on the floor beside the chair, crying. Coming to my senses, I said, "Oh, is the mouse scaring you, Jason?" He replied, "No, Mom. YOU are scaring me." Well, at least I was raising a smart kid.

Our next home in Regent was a double-wide trailer with no basement. We didn't often have mice in that house, but when we did, they

would come up the pipes under the kitchen sink. We learned to keep a permanent trap under there so we would catch them right away. About five mice would come in and then we wouldn't have any for years. My husband would empty the traps, and I would try never to see a trap that needed to be emptied.

After our divorce, I realized that I would have to empty traps if any mice should appear. It was inevitable that I would be tested that fall! I opened the cabinet door, and there was an upside-down mousetrap with little feet and a long tail sticking out. I went, "Yeeek!" And then I plotted. How could I get that darn mouse out of there without looking at it? I decided to cover it with a newspaper, take the trap out with pliers and throw it all in the garbage.

So, I covered it all with the newspaper, but then I couldn't pick up the trap with the pliers, because I couldn't see it. When I lifted the newspaper, I saw little feet and a long tail. I couldn't help myself, I screamed, "Yeeek." I decided maybe just a small napkin covering the trap would work. Still, I couldn't see the trap, and every time I lifted the napkin, and uncontrollable "Yeeek" would explode. Finally, I just had to bite the bullet. I held the napkin up with one hand, grabbed the trap with the pliers and put it all in the garbage. I really missed my husband that day!

It seems like I put all my fears of life into a tiny little rodent that may be just as afraid of me as I am of it. That is manageable. I am not embarrassed about it. I am just happy that I don't often have to face those quick little stinkers.

AUGUST 13TH: A REFLECTION

by Keith Lehman

August 13th, 2023

My grandpa has been gone since March 9th, just over five months now, but it was a year ago today that things changed significantly for him and the life he knew up to that point—a life of doing as he pleased each day and living independently on the farm as he had been doing for over 92 years.

Grandpa always believed a little bit in superstition, especially when it came to the 13th day of each month. For as long as I can remember, he wouldn't "do a goddamn thing" on the 13th of the month because something was bound to go wrong. Well, on August 13th, 2022, I got a call from my mom (it was also her birthday) saying that my grandpa had called my dad, and my dad was bringing him to the emergency room. Grandpa had gone against his usual "do nothing" routine and was zipping around on his lawnmower (this was his usual mode of transportation out in the yard). Just before finishing up for the day, he noticed a screwdriver in the yard. As he stepped off of his mower to grab the screwdriver, he clipped the heel of his boot on the mower deck, and he ended up face down on the ground. What made matters worse was when the mower, luckily with no blades engaged, rolled on top of him. His cell phone was up in the kitchen charging.

How long he was stuck beneath the mower is something he wasn't even sure of. Your sense of time in a situation like that is altered. Talking with him after the fact, he thought many times about how he had done all sorts of risky things in his lifetime, and yet, he would die being pinned beneath a lawnmower in his own yard after trying to retrieve a 50-cent screwdriver. He also was very upfront about the fact that the pocket knife

in his overalls would make a quicker, less arduous end of life vs. freezing overnight beneath the lawnmower.

Just before he resorted to his pocket knife, he noticed a crowbar out in the yard, just within his reach. In a last effort to free himself, he used the crowbar to lift the mower (520 pounds without fuel) off of himself, and slowly inched his way out from beneath the mower. His leg had broken from the accident, but still, he mustered up the strength to pull himself up onto the lawnmower, start it back up, drive up to the house, crawl up the stairs to the kitchen, and grab his phone to call my dad. Keep in mind that this happened one month before his 93rd birthday.

What transpired over the next few months was full of up and downs; the broken leg led him to a very unsatisfactory rehabilitation facility (I will shamelessly say that you should avoid The Meadows on University) where he came within hours of losing his life due to very poor treatment, rebounding in ways that the Sanford doctors and nursing staff had never seen before, making a home at KinderCare in West Fargo, undergoing radiation therapy after the return of lung cancer, and ultimately, living out the rest of his days at Eventide in Moorhead. The time from August 13th until March 9th when he passed did not represent the life that he enjoyed living for nearly 93 years, but we all felt like we had gained more months with him than what likely should have been. In that time, though, he expressed a level of tenderness, love, and appreciation that he had previously kept to himself. He talked about how proud he was of all of his kids and grandkids, and I saw him cry tears of sorrow and joy for the first time, many times over. I think that coming as close to the end of life as he did helped him get to that point.

On March 6th, I went to see my grandpa for the last time after a day of teaching and conferences. He was not in great shape, but he still knew we were there, and we had a really great goodbye. As soon as I walked in and held his hand, the first thing he said to me was, "Goddamn it, your hands are cold." To the end, he was 100% himself. He even asked about the temperature outside and if the wind had a bite to it. Having that chance for a final goodbye meant the world to me, and I left that night at peace with him passing.

Grandpa lived for three more days, passing on his wife's birthday, March 9th. He probably should not have lived as long as he did, but he was always a guy that did things on his terms, and I think that passing on grandma's birthday was intentional on his part.

I thought that by five months since his passing that time would have healed a lot of the pain that came with his passing, but not a night goes by where I don't toss around in bed thinking about him. A big part of this, I think, is because there are so many things around me that continue to remind me of him—to the point where it feels like he is still around.

When I push the button at any pedestrian crosswalk, I think of his impersonation of one of his caretakers who encouraged him to “push duh button” (his service button) whenever he needed help with anything.

When I get on the lawn mower to mow his grass, I think about how brave and tenacious he was to be able to lift it off of himself.

Riding around the yard on the mower, I turn and see a tree trunk that, to me, looks like him, peeking out from behind the other trees to check on me and make sure I'm not getting too bold when I mow the ditches.

Whenever I seem to break through with a student who expressed how little they like school, I think about the stories he shared about grinding the gears of his teachers and causing havoc in the classroom. He turned out pretty great, and so can they.

Grief really is the price we pay for love, and although I still am not “over” his death, I think of how lucky I am to have enjoyed so many years with him and to have a reason to hurt this much.

After a return trip to the ER after his stop at the Meadows, we were having a heart to heart conversation, and I told grandpa that I looked forward someday to sharing how much of a badass he is. I guess this is that chance.

Take pictures, say yes to family gathering opportunities, and enjoy every moment you can with the ones you love. If you love, appreciate, admire, or look up to someone, let them know. Life is full of many “firsts,” and we always know when the firsts are going to happen. The “lasts,” though, you don't know are happening for the final time until sometime after the fact.

THE HANDICAP COMMITTEE COMES FOR US ALL

by Jeffrey B. Loken

“Doug Holmstrom?” I asked.

Mike nodded as he took a sip of his beer. “He’s sitting at a ten-point-five right now, but he’s been shooting some scores and not posting them.”

I imagined Doug’s short, straightforward step-through golf swing, and then his stare down the middle of a green fairway through his darkened transition lenses, spryly picking up his tee despite a stalky build. “I’ve golfed with him a few times,” I said, finally, “is ten-five not accurate?”

“Not lately,” Mike said again, spinning his stein on a cardboard coaster with white and blue mountains. “Finished in the money at the last three events. Apparently shot a seventy-five in a four-ball match and the clubhouse guys who see him multiple times a week aren’t seeing scores posted.”

We sat, the four members of the Edgewood Men’s Club Handicap Committee, as our leader, Mike, gave us the low-down on the latest potential offender. Glasses clinked from the bar at the opposite end of the dimly lit clubhouse dining room, the early evening sunlight filtered through tinted glass, and trees swaying in the wind reflected on shiny dark tables.

“So, what do we do about this?” I asked. It seemed like the only thing missing from our conversation was each of us smoking a cigar, blowing smoke rings in the air and tapping our stogies onto giant golf-themed ashtrays. Instead, we leaned back and focused on Mike as he took another sip of his beer and explained the handicap committee’s role in ensuring fair play during our men’s club events. In short, our purpose was

to prevent “sandbagging,” or more specifically, to prevent golfers from having a handicap score that is higher than their ability, giving them an advantage over other golfers with accurate handicaps (numbers that calculate the score golfers usually shoot when they play). These handicaps allow players of all abilities to compete fairly, but that system only works when people are honest. Our committee was a check against humanity, dishonest as we tend to be.

“I don’t think we do anything drastic yet,” Mike said. “I can work with Greg to get him in my group next week. I’ll see how he’s playing and maybe chat with him a little about posting his scores.” Greg was the golf pro at our club and was in charge of putting together the random foursomes every Tuesday for our little golf events. Mike was an “A player,” one of the better golfers, who act as the leaders of each of the groups that the head pro would assign based on skill level to make all the events competitive and fair. As leader of the handicap committee, Mike could request things like this to perform audits of players and ensure fair play is maintained.

A month later, at the next handicap committee meeting, tucked in the same darkened corner of the clubhouse bar, Mike gave us an update on Doug and explained that he talked to him about posting his scores. “Oh, yeah, sure, sure...” Mike mimicked Doug’s voice as he told us about it. “So, I think we’ll be ok. We’ll keep an eye on it and go from there.” I imagined Doug’s face as Mike did his impression, avoiding eye contact while his integrity was in question.

The next time I saw Doug, I was golfing with some friends and I noticed him teeing off on an adjacent hole. As soon as he hit his shot I yelled, “Good shot, Doug!” When I did this, I heard one of my playing partners strike their ball and groan, because I had yelled in the middle of his backswing, inadvertently causing them to lose focus and hit a bad shot. I apologized profusely to my friend and insisted on him hitting his shot again. Then I looked back toward Doug who was already trotting down the fairway toward his ball, already out of earshot.

The rest of the golf year played out as normal and soon there was snow on the ground, the long North Dakota winter diverting our golf swings to snow shoveling and ice scraping. As the tilt of the earth and the position of its orbit allowed more sunlight, the crust in our little corner of the northern plains began to thaw, and the promise of golf again appeared on our collective horizons. I found myself in a local sports shop thumbing a few putters and pondering my upcoming season.

"That's a nice one," I heard from beside me. I turned to see Doug Holmstrom.

"Oh hey, Doug!" I said, surprised. "Yeah, just looking."

After a few moments of awkward silence, Doug broke in, "I think I've played my last round of golf."

I turned to face him and immediately my mind went to the handicap committee. Had more occurred than Mike told us about? Was there more to the conversation, or was Doug put out even by the thought of us discussing his honesty? I didn't even know if Doug knew what I knew, but my shoulder blades clenched as I asked, "What do you mean?"

"Can you keep a secret?" He leaned in.

"Sure," I said, not knowing what else to say or what to expect.

"Stage four cancer," he said.

"What?" I blinked. "Oh my god, that's awful. Doug, I'm so sorry."

"Yeah." He said, shoulders hunched, still leaning toward me. "I get regular check-ups, and everything has been fine for years, then all of a sudden, a cough with some blood and it's aggressive." Doug was not wearing his glasses, so there were no transition lenses to darken his eyes as he peered directly at me and offered his prognosis, as simply and straightforwardly as one might offer a tip on which putter to try.

"Man, I'm so sorry," I wouldn't have had the proper words for this situation even if I was prepared for it.

"So anyway, I just came in here to trade in my clubs for cash and I saw you so I thought I would say hello, or goodbye, I guess."

"Is there anything I, or we, the men's club, can do?"

"No, and I don't want you to tell anyone about this. You have to promise me—"

"—We could probably raise money or something, if you like—"

"—No, you have to promise me. I wanted to tell someone, and you've always been so nice, so I thought I would let you know."

"Yeah, Doug. You have my word. I won't tell anyone."

With that, Doug said goodbye to me and leaned in for an embrace. A man who I had just spoken more words to in a brief few minutes than in all the times before combined, wrapped his arms around me and squeezed. I lifted one arm up and returned the embrace, then I watched as he meandered toward the door, nothing about his posture or gait indicating he had a deadly illness as he walked out into the sunlit parking lot. I stood in shock for a while beside the cold, indifferent, metal golf clubs.

In the months that followed, I would type his name into the search engine followed by “obituary” until I finally found an entry with a picture of Doug in front of a brick wall wearing a golf shirt and barely smiling, transition lenses fully deactivated and clear. True to his word, to my knowledge, Doug never swung a golf club again, and true to mine, I didn’t tell anyone about his illness, until now.

SHE HELD MY HAND

by Stacie Olien

The two-and-a-half-story white house looked a century old. It should have been out on the prairie housing a large family in some era gone by, not just blocks from downtown Fargo, North Dakota. It was spring as I walked from the back parking lot, a wooden fence along the sidewalk. I don't recall looking at the wooden fence; I looked down at the ground and towards the house. My mother and another woman, an escort, walked beside me. As we got closer to the house the yelling, pleading and pounding coming from unseen people on the other side grew louder. "Don't kill your baby!" Over and over, "Don't kill your baby!"

Once inside we sat in a small waiting room painted white. There were a few chairs against the walls facing each other and a small coffee table in the center. Paperwork needed to be filled out. My mother was stressed; I was determined.

As I waited, I talked to a girl older than me, her boyfriend brought her, and they were both in college. When I told her I was a freshman in high school and 15 years old she was taken back. "Wow, 15 at least I'm not that young" was her reply. She took her turn first.

Next was my turn. The table was in the middle of the room with metal stirrups for my feet. The woman in the room was kind, the male doctor was not; he was rough and did not talk to me. The woman told me it would feel like a vacuum inside of me. How odd I thought, but it did. It felt like a little vacuum, it made my insides cramp up and it hurt. The woman held my hand, and she was kind.

Next was the recovery room, small and narrow with recliners lined up, side by side. I woke up to the college girl next to me crying, "If this was just a few years from now it would have been different." I was too relieved and too busy vomiting to feel sad or cry.

I was in a daze as my mother and I were escorted out on the sidewalk past the wooden fence, the other side quiet now. My father pacing in the back parking lot, I slumped over in the back seat as my father

drove us home, mostly in silence. At home there was a large black and gray leopard print pillow my mother made. It was always on the living room floor for my brother and I to use as we watched TV. I saw that big pillow and curled up on it; the stairs to my bedroom seemed too far to walk. Sometime after I was awakened by my mother, "Go out and tell your dad you're sorry." Or was it "Your dad feels so bad he's outside and he is upset." I don't recall my mother's exact words but the intent of how I hurt my father was unmistakable. I got up from the leopard print pillow and for a moment looked out the patio door at my father pacing on the gravel driveway, before returning to the leopard print pillow and falling back asleep.

I never apologized for the abortion, not to my mother or father or anyone. I never told them that the pregnancy was a product of a rape. The rapist was a boy I liked. I considered him my boyfriend and we were making out when I said "No, no...no don't!" He forced himself on me. I thought it was my fault. Honestly, I did not understand rape at the time. We were at his friend's parent's house, no parents home. There was no alcohol or drugs involved. We were kissing in a room alone; we had kissed before. I was in that room of my own free will; I had no plans of having sex that day. There was never talk between us about having sex. Even if I would have understood this so be rape, society in 1985 would not have agreed.

Looking back, I never even suspected that I was pregnant. My mother did not see any sanitary pads in the bathroom trash for a while, so she approached me in the kitchen and asked if I was pregnant. I immediately cried and fell into her arms. I was crying because she knew I was not a virgin anymore. The thought of being pregnant still did not take full effect. This would come into play soon after when our family doctor told me that I was "Very pregnant." I'm not sure what pregnant vs. very pregnant meant. I'm sure it was just a way for my doctor to shame me. I was already getting enough of that at home.

After that doctor visit, I did not want to go home, back to the farm with my parents and feel the weight of their utter disappointment of me. We were Midwest rural Catholics. What the community, church and family thought of you meant everything. Now I was a 15-year-old non-virgin. I brought shame to my family by just taking up space, I was shameful, and my father was not going to let me forget it.

For me getting an abortion meant stopping the feeling of having my rapist inside of me. I wanted him out of me and it to all go away. After

the immediate shock of the news to my folks that not only Stacie was no longer a virgin, or as my dad called it “A good girl,” but I was also pregnant. I asked my parents to help me get an abortion. I don’t recall my mother saying anything after my request, but I do recall my father remarking that I should quote, “Have it and give it up so I learn a lesson.” Right afterwards I was in my bedroom and thought, well if they don’t help me get a safe legal abortion, I will use one of my wire hangers and deal with this myself. I remember going into my closet picking out a hanger and wondering how small of a hook I can make with the end of it. I would need to get one of my father’s needle nose pliers to bend it just right. How much blood would there be? How much pain and would I die? It didn’t matter; I was going to get my rapist out of me no matter what. I was a small animal in a steel trap, ready to chew its own paw off to save itself.

My folks talked about it and my mother told me that they would take me into the local abortion clinic and pay for the procedure. For the first time since the rape, I felt relief. I think back to this difficult time in my life, in my family’s life and I’m surprised by the strength, drive and clarity that I had at such a young age. Even the fact that I kept this rape a secret for decades. Dealing with an unwanted pregnancy is hard enough but dealing with a rape and not talking about it for years added even more of a dark heaviness. I felt like I broke my family. I was unworthy of them by just being here. Breathing. This happened my freshman year of high school; I hated high school.

A CHRISTMAS JOURNEY

by Karla Smart-Morstad

The thick, hard-covered *Guide to Mexico* bulged in the center of Cholo's green, stained backpack. My red Samsonite was checked into storage at the Estacion de Ferrocarriles. "I may never see it again," I moaned. For that reason, my charm bracelet was wrapped in a hanky (one my grandma embroidered years ago) at the bottom of my purse. Wrapped in a napkin near the top was a half-eaten chocolate cream pastry. Cholo insisted there was no time to finish it before joining the line of travelers stretched along the north wall of the station, looped passed the west staircase fronting Calle Insurgentes, and sprawled along the south wall.

I settled cross-legged on the gritty tile floor. Cholo, sentinel-like, refused to relax. Ignoring him, I pulled out D. H. Lawrence's *Mornings in Mexico*.

"Be ready to run," he hissed in Spanish.

"What?" I pictured the line jogging through the gate and onto the train.

"The line doesn't mean anything—be ready to run. You can hang onto the strings of the backpack. If we get separated, look for me in the windows of the train." I stared at him and waited for the gate to open.

It opened. A mass of people, boxes, baskets, suitcases, and packs forced itself through the gate into the boarding area. More and more damp, greasy air forced its way into my lungs; I ran, ultimately losing the bouncing green pack on Cholo's back. I checked windows until finding him guarding a bench seat. My pink and white gingham blouse was sweaty. I pulled my hair into a ponytail, secured it with a scrunchy, and smiled at Cholo, "Merry Christmas!"

A group of students filled the seat facing ours and the aisle at our feet. One held a radio and a brown bag with tequila, beer, and fruit. I pulled up my feet, snuggling closer to Cholo's bony frame, freeing more

space for their Christmas celebration. Later, in my sleep, my feet slipped down. The flow of Spanish, asking me to please not to step on their heads, sounded no different than their revels. I giggled an apology when Cholo explained.

The train jostled in darkness. Mariachi harmonies, the smell of fruit and liquor, and body cramps from cuddling my knees under my chin, enveloped me. I wished Cholo a Merry Christmas again and again. He kissed me and asked when I would marry him. "Tomorrow!" The word flew from my tongue and a giggle was close behind as I wished him, yet again, "Merry Christmas."

The darkness continued, but the jostling stopped. I was groggy at best between naps; time blurred. The train swayed backward for miles and stopped at a small, cluttered depot. Villagers pushed hot pepper and chicken tortilla sandwiches through the windows. Cholo ate two. I ate my half piece of chocolate pastry still in my purse.

Christmas Eve morning. Noon. Afternoon. The sleeves of my blouse bunched tightly around my elbows. My ponytail was now plastered into a bun. In the morning, Cholo had leaned from the window to pick me orchids. Their fragrance whispered his love to me, but now cacti six-feet tall lined the track.

A gringo from New York stopped fighting heat and grime; he gave himself fully to a noisy tequila drunk. "I'll take your picture and give you a shot of tequila for 60 pesos," he hollered at us from six or eight rows ahead.

"No tengo dinero," I called out, laughing at my own reply.

"No problem—I take Master Charge," he bellowed from the far end of the car.

Motionless again, time stymied. A dry, crumbling embankment pressed close to Cholo's window. On the other side of the car a track-side oasis, consisting of a canvas restaurant and shade trees, offered chocolate bars and Naranja soda. I longed for an American Diet Coke.

"Burro to a bus connection, gringa?" a dry-skinned Mexican demanded in English. Cholo and I stayed with the train—only leaving the now smelly, ghetto-like car in shifts, one of us pacing the track beside the train, while the other kept our seats and belongings secure.

Clank. Lurch. The swath of embankment visible beneath the train seemed to move. Cholo's head and shoulders appeared from a window near me. He waved me toward the train, yelling, "Rapido, rapido." It was as though he did not comprehend that I was already running, pressed against the crowd.

Metal apparatus hanging from the train served as a footing. I balanced by pressing closer to the sweaty backs ahead of me. My right hand flapped freely overhead until grasped by a stranger. I was catapulted onto the platform between cars and moved aside to let the next passenger board.

"You did that well!" Cholo seemed surprised to see me back on the train.

Midnight, and the start of Christmas Day, promised Oaxaca. We kissed in the damp darkness of the moving train. It was already the day after "tomorrow." The New Yorker, perched, uninvited, on a sliver of our bench, long-since padded with a woolen poncho regardless of the heat. "Plan to visit the Argentine pampas, if I ever get off this train. You two newlyweds?" he crooned.

Flecks of daylight grew more substantial. The sweet promise of a shower carried me into the steamy crowd, once more pushing my way along with it to get to the station gates.

Breaking free from the depot and the other Christmas refugees, Cholo set a no-nonsense pace. We moved over cobblestone, passing churches filled with balloons and candle-light, and through a carnival ground. Pain cut into my side with each step. I was jogging thirty paces behind his green backpack before Cholo slowed. Nodding toward a canvas-covered bingo booth, he offered, "Do you want to play?"

I stopped, drew a breath, wiped my mouth on my dirty sleeve, rolled my eyes in sarcasm, and wished him the night's final Merry Christmas. We laughed and shuffled toward a row of neon hotel lights in the block ahead.

A MILLION THANKS

by Joette Stenslie

Do you remember what you said that morning? I do. I'll never forget it. You said, "We do many things while we wait on results but worry isn't one of them." I've just had an ultrasound after a mammogram showed reason for concern. You deliver the news that multiple biopsies are needed, and very soon.

It's biopsy morning. You've just explained a stereotactic biopsy. I climb the steps, lay down on my belly and try to focus on the picture on the wall. "One, two, three." Then a needle pokes. I jump, but only a little. From room to room we go, one biopsy after another. I focus on the picture in the ceiling tile. It's of beaches, with blue skies above and mountains in the distance. Outside the snow is falling. It's January in Fargo.

Time flies, time stands still, life goes on. A few days pass. Then a call with results. "I'm sorry to tell you this over the phone." Plans are made; surgery is scheduled. An MRI changes everything. "Have you ever thought about a mastectomy?"

Appointments come and go as I navigate this new uncertainty. A feeling of peace settles in, an acceptance of this reality. Everyone has a story or knows someone who does. This is now my story, the end of which I do not know yet. I decide I'm content no matter what comes next. From every call and every appointment, I try to learn something. I also learn from observing others, especially in waiting rooms. A little boy walks between his grandparents to a group of three chairs. He sits in the chair between them, partially wrapped in a little blanket and with his sippy cup in hand. Quietly he sips and looks around the waiting room, eyes growing big as he looks at the people scattered throughout. Nurses call names and one by one chairs empty, but only for a short time until someone new walks in the door. I glance at the bell on the wall and hope that one day the little boy will ring it with all his might.

New experiences come my way. My first wheelchair ride, through the halls to the breast clinic after an MRI biopsy. We need to make sure the location of the biopsy clips is documented. I discover it's possible to feel old and to feel young at the same time. People seem to look at me differently when I'm in the wheelchair. Maybe it's sympathy, maybe it's pity, maybe it's a little of both. I make a mental note to always make eye contact and smile when I see someone in a wheelchair.

It's surgery morning. The operating room is cold, the lights are bright. You cheerfully tell me your names. "We'll be taking care of you today." You ask me where I'm from and we chat about my hometown. You're familiar with the area and I drift off to sleep thinking about the farm fields, the blue prairie skies and the smell of hay bales during summer drives home.

"You're in the recovery room. What's your pain level?" I answer and say I'm so sleepy, I could sleep all day. I don't hear your response before falling asleep again. A short time later I look at the pictures in the ceiling as I am brought to an elevator and then through the halls to my hospital room. It's my first surgery, my first hospital stay. An unexpected staycation in the middle of a North Dakota winter.

I order lunch, toast with butter. You bring it to my room with a smile. Then you look closer and declare, "You're too young to be here." I smile. I like you, you say just what you think. The nurse comes in and our visit ends. But it leaves an impression. You are past retirement age and you choose to volunteer, to bring a little sunshine to others.

A shift change brings nurse changes. You smile as you introduce yourself and your colleague. You will be my overnight nurses. Family leaves as visiting hours end. Quietness settles in here at the end of the hall. Outside the snow is still falling. The door to the stairwell opens and closes, less often now. The room is dim and cozy. I settle in and drift off to sleep.

An early morning visit from a nurse but I'm already awake, asking her if the roads are slippery with the snow. I hear the beeping of the equipment moving snow around neighborhood parking lots. Life goes on as normal outside but inside these walls, life is changing room by room. Everyone here has a different story. We don't find strength in numbers, I decide, we find strength in each other.

Days pass, then weeks. More cause for concern. More appointments, more specialties, more kindnesses shown. Time continues on. A few months, then a year, then two, now almost three. In it all, you're there. You're the doctor, the nurse, the rheumatologist, the surgeon, the

anesthesiologist, the phlebotomist, the pharmacist, the physical therapist, the occupational therapist, the greeter, the parking valet. The endless list goes on but you're all part of the team, my care team. You offer a smile, a kind word, a solution, a new medication to try. There may not be a cure but you find something to help. And most importantly, you offer hope.

I speak not only for myself but for the many just like me. You say we're brave, but so are you. You find the right words to deliver the hard news. You listen to the concerns. You are patient in responses, explaining in a way that we can understand. You make it easy to make difficult decisions. You want the best for us, we trust that completely. We may not say it at the time, we may not ever say it aloud but we truly are grateful. Grateful both to you and for you. Today we give thanks. A million times over, we give thanks.

CLARENCE AND WOODY

by Jack Zaleski

Clarence Robinson was big and black. Big mattered. Black did not. He was the biggest kid in Slater Road School's sixth grade. In the 1950s, Black families were commonplace in New Britain, Connecticut. "Negro" was the polite word, but use of the other n-word was workaday. The casual racism of the "Greatest Generation" had not infected my sister and me. We were friends in class and on the playground with Black and Puerto Rican kids; in church, in kid sports and the Cub Scouts. I was in public school for 12 years with Woodrow Floyd. Yvonne Smith and my sister were fast friends into adulthood. Woody and Yvonne met in elementary school, would marry and remain close to my sister and her family. Yvonne was a bridesmaid in both my sister's weddings. When my sister died, Yvonne's eulogy at the memorial service confirmed a profound friendship.

Nonetheless, race prejudice was conventional among our parents. We were too young and naive to recognize its pervasiveness. We did not knowingly participate. Integrated public schools in my town were long-standing and tolerated without rancorous debate. Federal school busing mandates that would expose visceral racial animosities had not yet stirred the headline-making violence that was to afflict many New England cities. Racial bigotry in my hometown was subtle, but habitual. It was private, but it was the norm. It seemed harmless, but it was insidious.

Autumn 1952

Woody and I stood in an afternoon downpour, anxious because we had missed Mrs. Whitaker's ride from Israel Putnam Elementary School to our neighborhoods. Her 1947 Willys station wagon with its load of Black foster kids and Woody and

me—the only white child she carried—disappeared into the rain. Miss Young, the first grade teacher we loathed, had kept us after class. “Disruptive boys,” she’d scolded, when Woody and I complained that Carmine Palmisano stank of garlic and we didn’t want to sit near him. She lectured us on the virtues of Italian food, which I knew all about because my mother was Italian, but I never smelled like garlic, nor did my sister who was right across the hall in Miss Salvio’s kindergarten room; and Miss Young could walk over and smell Mary Jane, then come back and smell me and Woody, and smell Carmine, and then she would know by the evidence of her own big nose that we were right about Carmine. When I said as much, Miss Young threw up her hands, warned us to be nice to our aromatic classmate, and sent us on our way, sure to miss our ride in the kid-filled cargo space of Mrs. Whitaker’s Willys.

Emily Whitaker was uncompromising about her schedule. She had foster children to get home. She delivered bundles of the afternoon newspaper to newsboy drops in that part of town. If kids were late getting to her wagon, they were left behind. It had never happened to Woody and me, but now it had—in a hard rain—and I started to cry. Woody was stoic and kind. “We’ll just walk,” he said. “Don’t cry, Jackie. It ain’t that far.” Holding hands, we began the trek up Osgood Avenue toward his home in the projects and mine on close by Neanda Street. The rain pelted down, punctuated by an occasional flash and rumble.

Osgood rose on an easy hill: Sacred Heart Polish Catholic Cemetery behind a high vine-covered fence on one side, the Ukrainian and Greek orthodox burial grounds guarded by ornate wrought iron gates and a stone wall on the other. Rainwater sloshed through openings in the wall, running ankle-deep over our sneakers. Cold, wet and frightened by the building storm, we were halfway up the hill when my father’s Plymouth pulled over near the crest; the passenger door flew open. He’d just finished his shift as a printer at the local newspaper and was on his way home when he saw Woody and me in the rain. Suddenly everything was all right. We were rescued.

“Get in!” he said. “Jeezus, you’re soaked to the skin!”

I grabbed Woody’s arm and we ran to the car.

“Not him,” said dad. “Not him. He can stay right there. We’ll call his parents, or something...”

“But the rain,” I said, “we should give Woody a ride. He’s gettin’ all wet and...”

“No,” dad said. “He’s not one of us. Get in.” I climbed in beside him. He reached across me and closed the car door. “He’ll be fine. I’ll make a call.” I knew it was wrong to leave Woody behind, but I didn’t say so. Not one of us? I did not understand, but dad must be right. He always was. We drove off. Woody dissolved into the mist.

That day long ago, the image of Woody alone in the storm stayed with me. During all the years we were in school together, Woody never said a word about it. We were on the track team, in classes, in school clubs. At his invitation, I occasionally joined several classmates for a Sunday service at his AME Zion church on the city's east side. At school dances, his attempts to teach me the shing-a-ling and mashed potato failed in fits of laughter and teenage chagrin. But never a word about the day we missed Mrs. Whitaker's ride. Never a word about being left alone in the rain or how he got home. Decades later at a high school class reunion, I apologized to him for my father's behavior. "No need," he said. "You're not your father." Stoic and kind still, Woody smiled, shook my hand, but gave no hint of what he was feeling, not all those years ago on stormy Osgood hill, or at that reunion moment.

1958

It was not that Clarence Robinson was Black. It was that he was mean, and he picked on me. I was terrified. He was the consummate bully: fearsome and unrestrained. I was the perfect victim: a smart-mouth, skinny weakling. He'd target me every afternoon at the north door of the school. He'd push and prod, slap my face and shove me down onto the sidewalk, his toothy leer daring me to get up and fight. I did not, even when he spat and walked away laughing. Nor did I squeal to my teacher or the principal. I got smart. I ran. When I'd see him coming for me, I'd dash from the school yard, over the gravel streets of the nearby post-World War II barracks tenements and down a trail that cut through a wooded strip to my neighborhood and the sanctuary of my parents' ticky-tack prefab house. Like the sprawling barracks, the prefabs were thrown up after the Second World War to provide cheap housing for returning veterans and their families. On my street alone there were six of them. Dozens more housed friends' families on every nearby street. And cheap they were: drafty and cold in winter, low-grade plywood ovens in summer.

Clarence lived in a barracks tenement, where most of the Black kids lived. "The projects," we called them. Like my father, Clarence's dad was a World War II Navy veteran. They knew each other, but were not friends. There were no Black families in our neighborhood. We seldom ventured into the projects, unless it was on a dare. "Don't bring 'em to our street," my dad had said, like all the other dads. We did not, nor did we ask why.

Clarence was big, but slow. Once I had gained a few steps on him, he could not catch me. Some days, he'd hide alongside the school building

and spring on me before I could escape. I lived in fear every day when the school bell sounded. If I did not sprint off immediately, Clarence was on me like a coyote on a cottontail.

I appealed to my father. I begged him to talk to someone at the school who could make Clarence quit terrorizing me. Dad was not moved. "You take care of this yourself," he said.

"But how?" I whined.

"Just do it," he said. "You have friends. See what they have to say about it." He smiled and went back to his newspaper, sugared coffee and unfiltered Camels that, in combination with too much Canadian Club whiskey, would kill him in four years.

I took his advice. I rounded up the boys I'd known since kindergarten. Neighborhood kids: Freddy Castelli from next door and Billy Bucci and Joe Staski from over on Corbin Avenue. They knew about Clarence and me, but were not as frightened of him as I was. *No kidding*, I thought bitterly. *He wasn't going after them*. But they were my buddies, so we pooled our collective sixth-grade wisdom and pondered the problem.

"I got a idear," said Billy. "Let's jump 'im on the path in the woods. Ya know, all four of us jump 'im. Then beat the craps outta him."

I didn't get it. "How you gonna get him on the path?" I asked. "What, you just gonna send him a invitation? That ain't gonna work. He goes home the other way, you know, to the projects."

"Goldamn, you's a *dumb shit*, for sure," said Billy. Billy was the first among us to take up superlative cursing. He was good at it. "He chases you, don't he? But he don't never catch you 'cause you's can run so goldamn fast. Right?" Billy said "goldamn" instead of the more shocking "goddamn" because his Italian Catholic grandmother warned him to refrain from taking the Lord's name in vain or he'd risk his immortal soul being skewered on a barbecue spit in hell's kitchen. All of our immigrant grandmothers dispensed similar advice. All of us had been born into one of our town's ethnic derivatives of Roman Catholicism. We lived in fear of going to perdition for one thing or another. We reasoned that if Billy's use of "goldamn" instead of "goddamn" would keep his heine off the devil's cookstove, we could use "goldamn," too.

I was beginning to understand the evolving tactics of the Clarence caper. "Yeah, yeah, right," I said, "I can run faster 'n' him, but ..."

Freddy and Joe lit up when the sinister brilliance of Billy's scheme sunk in. "So's all you gotta do is run so's he keeps on you all da way to da path, see," said Freddy.

Joe added, “Den us guys jump out da bushes behind ‘im and in front of ‘im. I like dis a lot.”

“Den we got the fucker!” Billy beamed, just as proud of the plan as he was of raising heavyweight profanity to the ultimate: the heady shock of the f-word. We never knew what his grandmother had to say about the f-word, but we reasoned she must be okay with it because the Lord’s name was not involved. Which surely meant that all our grandmothers would be okay with it. Therefore, confident we were not risking a long-term fricassee with ol’ Scratch, we added the f-word to our expanding repertoire of curse words. Our admiration for Billy’s vocabulary and for his grandmother’s sagacity ratcheted up several notches.

I still wasn’t convinced about ambushing Clarence. “Then what? I mean, c’mon guys, then what?”

“Geez, you really is a dumb shit,” Billy repeated. “Then we beat da craps outta him, and tell him we’ll do it again if he don’t leave you ‘lone. Dere ain’t nothin’ to it if we do it right.”

“Aw, c’mon,” I whined, “he’s really strong and really mean and way bigger ‘n’ us...”

“Hey, stupid ass, dere’s four of us,” Freddy said. “He ain’t dat big. He ain’t dat scary. *And dere’s four of us*. Holy shit, *four* of us! You wanna do dis or what?”

God help me, I wanted to. Goldamn, I wanted to pummel Clarence until he cried like a girl. “Yeah,” I said, “let’s do it.” Everyone grinned.

The next day, Clarence hunted for me among the milling students. The conspirators ran ahead and hid in the trees and brambles that lined the dirt trail. Clarence came for me. I sprinted toward the trap like a gazelle. I slowed like the plan said I should, and he was hot-breath close when we reached the path. The boys leaped out of the sumac and blackberry thicket. Clarence was snared—Billy and Freddy behind him, blocking escape; Joe and I ahead of him, glowering defiantly into the fear and befuddlement on his face. He didn’t have time to say a word before we were on him like hounds on a fox. He snorted and grunted as our fists and feet pounded him into the mud and rotted leaves. He thrashed and punched and got in a few good wallops—one that popped Freddy’s skull—but there were four of us. Clarence was down, pinned by Billy, Freddy and Joe, while I kicked him in the ribs and legs, remembering every slap and punch and wad of spittle he’d landed on my scrawny body. We backed off, he sprang up, fists balled tight, apparently ready for more. But the front of his trousers was wet with a spreading stain. The bully had

pissed his pants. We pointed and sniggered. Humiliation drowned Clarence's swagger. He was bleeding from a crushed right ear and an ugly bruise above his right eye. The fight was out of him. He scowled, but the menace was gone. Freddy got in his face. "You leave 'im alone," he said, nodding in my direction. "You don't and we got more a dis for you," and he shook his fist in Clarence's face. "You got dat?"

Clarence turned to run, then stopped. "Oh, yeah? I got friends, you asshole honkies. You little shits ain't seen the last a me." But we had. Clarence never bothered me again. He was around for most of that sixth grade year, but he stayed clear of me and my friends. The daily terror was gone.

We ran out of the woods and onto the street where I lived—hootin' and hollerin', laughing through the adrenaline-fueled tension of the moment after routing big, bad Clarence Robinson without suffering so much as a scratch. On that day, we were sure we were going to be friends forever. The story became a brief chapter in the sixth grade book of lore and legend, told often that year over the objections of our teachers.

My father was in the front yard of the prefab re-rigging the lift lines of a canvas window awning. The boys scattered when they saw him. He looked me over. "You're a mess," he said. I was. Muddy trousers, dirt and sweat on my face, my Huckleberry Finn hair a more tousled tangle than usual, a ragged rip in one of my new U.S. Keds sneakers, the one that had landed the kicks on Clarence. "What's that on your shirt?" dad asked. "Is that blood?" It was Clarence's blood. "You hurt?" he asked.

"Nope, no sir," I said. "Jus' a little scrape, you know from them pricklers on the blackberry bushes over 'dere," and I pointed to the path, the scene of our triumph. I saw muffled mirth in his eyes as he feigned fatherly concern.

"Anyone hurt?" he asked.

"Nope. No one hurt. Not really," I said. He suggested I use the garden hose to clean up before I went inside to confront my mother about the shabby condition of my school clothes.

"Oh, by the way," he said, "did you take care of that problem with the kid at school who was pushing you around?"

I hesitated, then told the truth as I saw it. "Um, yup, we sure did. I mean I did, you know, with my friends, like you said. No big deal." As I rounded the corner of the house, I looked back.

He was shaking his head and trying to hide a smile. "You're not getting new sneakers," he said.

“Yeah, okay,” I said. “I can tape em’ up.”

“That’ll do. I’ll give you a hand with that,” he said. He couldn’t help but catch my grin. *Yup*, I thought, *a good day, a goldamn good day...*

THE ROPE IN THE CELLAR

by Jack Zaleski

Connecticut, 1964

The noose around my grandfather's neck had slipped, exposing the raw print of the coarse weave. He had looped a rope over a basement ceiling joist and secured it with two well-made half-hitches. It could have been the handiwork of a Boy Scout or a bosun's mate. My immigrant grandfather had been neither. He was a retired factory worker. He had labored all his life in one of the great mills of my industrial hometown. I remember him striding with hundreds of other workmen across the coal waste and clinkers of the factory yard to where my Uncle Chester and I waited beyond the warp of a weathered chain-link fence to drive him home. He was dressed like all the others, but to me he was distinguished. A workman's cap tilted over his forehead, battered lunchbox in his calloused grip, time-worn bib overalls painted with splotches of machine oil, his eyes smiling in the smoky-sky twilight as he saw us at the gate. I believed he was indestructible.

Now, in the tidy basement, it all seemed so absurd, so unreal—the noose, the rope, the perfectly turned knots. Quiet save for the muffled *scrape, scrape* of my uncle's snow shovel in the coal ash and gravel on the driveway above.

I knew the rope. The benign dusty coil had lingered for years on a rusted hook in the wizened plank door of the cellar's coal bin. I stepped to the bin door, scuffing a fan of rust flakes and smut that had rained onto the floor when the old man slid the rope off its long undisturbed perch. *Better clean that up before grandma sees it*, I thought. More absurdity. *My God, she'll be home soon...*

I had rushed downstairs to find a shovel to help clear snow with Uncle Chester, the youngest child of the man in the noose. It was my

uncle's routine to call when I was home from school to help at the old folks' house: turn garden in spring, mow lawn in summer; shovel snow in winter. They always resisted our help, insisting they still could do it. But they were getting older; strenuous grunt work was getting tougher for them.

It was the Christmas break of my freshman year at the Storrs campus of the University of Connecticut, some 40 miles to the east of New Britain. A nor'easter had moved on after plonking a few inches of wet snow on the city. The sky was dazzling-blue, the air sharp and cold. Snowfall on streets, yards and rooftops shimmered in the low December sun. The smokestack soot of the factory town had not yet sullied the pristine blanket.

New Britain was a good town in my youth, an industrial powerhouse that had earned the moniker "Hardware City of the World." Great factories lined the streets and railroad tracks in the heart of town, veritable five-story canyons of stained and faded red brick that housed thousands of skilled tradesmen in round-the-clock shifts, most of them earning good union wages that fed a bustling local economy. The iconic companies were legendary: P&F Corbin, Fafnir Bearing, Russell & Erwin, North & Judd, American Hardware, The Stanley Works, and Landers, Frary & Clark, where my grandfather had operated a sheet metal press for 40 years. During that time, Landers boasted the largest factory floor under one roof in the world. It was measured in acres.

The firms produced hand tools, locks, utility hinges and decorative door hardware, patented ball bearings, maritime hardware, toasters, food choppers, washing machines and cook stoves, vacuum cleaners, coffee makers, all manner of housewares, military weapons for two world wars, and nearly everything else in the way of metal goods. The results were blue-collar prosperity and ownership profits that created a vibrant city with excellent public schools and city services, world-class parks, fine arts venues, a fine daily newspaper, engaged churches and synagogues, and a downtown district that had it all, including six movie houses, a dozen restaurants, diners and lunch counters, and large and small retail stores and shops of every description

After the waves of immigration at the turn of the 20th century, New Britain evolved into an immigrant city of mixed ethnicities, races and religions, successful in part because old prejudices and animosities were set aside in order for the industrial economy to work for everyone. Biases surely simmered, including the Old World animus immigrants like my grandparents carried with them from eastern and southern Europe. But it was suppressed in a new society that embraced diversity—often grudgingly but

out of necessity—before that term became both fashion and flashpoint. Work brought disparate people together because good jobs meant good times. At its peak the city's population neared 90,000. But it was no utopia. Even with the work ethic immigrants brought to the city, a mutter of bigotry persisted among residents who could trace their roots to New Britain's colonial beginnings. When my grandfather became a citizen in 1925, he was presented a "History of New Britain" by the Daughters of the American Revolution which included closing paragraphs that expressed the haughty hope the newcomers would uphold the values and practices of the city's founders. It was a subtle, but nevertheless insulting suggestion, that the immigrants would not measure up; that they would change the city's culture in ways the upper crust disdained.

When New Britain's manufacturing economy collapsed in the late 1960s, it fell hard, the victim of union intransigence, corporate greed and incompetence, and the ruinous consequences of globalization. The city struggled for decades to find a new identity, stumbled into a corrupt urban redevelopment fiasco, made some progress in the early 21st century, but never attained the economic plateau of the first half of the 20th.

This was the city where my grandparents settled, prospered and raised six first-generation American children. A wondrous, happy, bright place for their young grandson, who never imagined that one day darkness would engulf him in the cellar where he and his sister had played as children.

I had expected my uncle's call. His cranky pickup truck was parked in the snow in front of the grandparents' house. I'd walked a few blocks from my parents' home. He was shoveling away. "There's another shovel in the cellar," he said.

As usual most mornings, no one was home: my grandmother off to her daily food shopping, grandpa on a long walk through the neighborhoods. The snow would not have kept him from his daily circuit that always included a stop at the sprawling Polish Catholic cemetery where infant twins, Regina and Helen, rested, having been lost in the flu pandemic of 1918. When he was late getting back to the house, we'd find him at the grave, head bowed over a small brownstone marker, tears he tried to hide.

I collapsed onto the concrete floor, my back hard against the rough coal bin door. The bin hadn't held coal for years. The chute was sealed, the heating system having been converted to the then-miracle of natural gas. Still, the ghost of the spicy scent of anthracite lingered in the

blackened wallboards. The cool space had been converted into a pantry. Its shelves were lined with grandma's jars of peaches, tomatoes and sauces, their colors subdued in the low light. Burlap sacks bulged with apples, potatoes and onions grown in the small yard of the modest Cape Cod home on dead-end Neanda Street. As was her habit most days, this day she'd taken the Osgood Avenue crosstown bus downtown for grocery shopping at King Cole market, with a stop at Charley's neighborhood corner store to dicker over the price of Polish sausage, soup bones and sliced meats from his cold cases. At noon, the Stanley Works factory whistle echoed across the working-class rooftops, announcing lunch break. Soon, she'd be trudging from the bus stop at the Osgood corner, down snowy Neanda's gentle slope, knit bags ripe with her purchases, a heavy pull on her shoulders, eager to prepare coffee and sandwiches of smoked ham on caraway rye for her youngest son and me, her only grandson—and for the taciturn old man who had been with her for 60 years; and on this wintry day, unbeknownst to Chester and me, had returned early from his visit with Regina and Helen.

Wrapped in my winter coat, sweat rising, I stared at my grandfather, more in awe and wonder than distress. I saw no horror in it, no purple swelling or lolling tongue, no dead eyes wide and flushed with fear. He could have been asleep, head listing slightly in the hang of the rope, face in repose, bathed in a mellow glow off fresh snow through the single cellar window, motionless and mute, like a macabre still life, but for dust motes swimming in the midday sunlight.

He wore his church clothes: charcoal gray vested suit, wide-spaced pinstripes, dark suspenders, blue tie with flecks of white, like stars. He had folded his suit jacket and set his shoes on a nearby ironing board where my grandmother had pressed wrinkles out of his Sunday shirt countless times, now on his shoulders, the starched cotton as white as the new snow. It was, I later would say to curious relatives, serene. No evidence of the essential violence in such an act, except for the kicked-over stool from which he had stepped off into eternity. His feet, clad in plain black socks, dangled inches above the floor. He was not a tall man. The exposed basement joists were lower than the ceilings of the upstairs rooms. He would have had to measure and calculate in order to achieve the result he'd wanted. How long had he planned? Did he consider a sturdy limb of

the ancient Baldwin apple tree that anchored a corner of the backyard? Did he know the anguish he would cause? What despair took him to it?

Uncle Chester's voice jolted me out of my grim analysis. "Where are you, college boy?" he shouted from the kitchen entry. "Snow won't shovel itself, *college boy*. Get your skinny ass moving!"

"College boy." A sneer. A taunt. An acceptable insult at a time when going to college was not the imperative it would soon become.

Chester was the youngest of my grandparent's children, 11 years junior to my late father. He had aimed to study engineering, but passed it up to follow my father into the printing trades. Good pay and job security were guaranteed, my dad had said. It was true for my dad and would be true for my uncle. He convinced Chester to take up the trade. He had become surrogate father after my dad died when I was in high school. He never said so outright, but when the subject came up, uncle blamed my father for his decision to forgo college. Dad was gone, so with no real hurtful malice, I became the target of my uncle's suppressed rancor. "Hey, college boy, not smart enough to start that chainsaw?" "Can't plow a straight line in the garden, college boy?" "Still don't know how to sharpen a mower blade, college boy?" The jibes grew tiresome during the years we worked together at his country home at Mill River in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts. I let it slide. I loved the man and I loved the place. Time passed; we got to know each other well. He celebrated my success at the university and eventually as a journalist, husband and father. The jabs dwindled, then faded away. We planned for the transfer of the Mill River property to me when he was ready to give it up. Years later, his promise became a betrayal.

I raised myself off the floor, slid up the pantry door, eyes fixed on my suspended grandfather. From the base of the stairs I said, "Uncle, you better come down here."

"C'mon, college boy, get with it," he said. "Haven't got all day. The ol' lady will be here any minute. She'll be making lunch. Let's be done with the snow."

Louder, I said, "Come down here!"

"What the hell," he growled, thumping down the steps—then stopped. The color drained from his winter-reddened face as he confronted the unthinkable tableau. He pulled off his stocking cap and gloves, wiped the fog off his glasses. "Oh my God, no," he said. His eyes filled. He looked at me, his shock crumbling into heartbreak. He lifted a

trembling arm around my shoulders. “You okay?” he said. “Maybe you should go upstairs.”

“No,” I said, “I’m alright. I’m staying right here with you.”

His arm flexed into a gentle hug. “Okay, okay, good.” He sighed heavily. “We have work to do. It’ll take both of us to do it. Do you understand me?” he said. “We can do this. We can do this,” he whispered through muted sobs. *Do what?* I thought. *Finish the snow shoveling?* Then I knew, I understood, and I plumbed for strength.

We stood together in paralyzing grief, summoning our resolve, looking at the grandfather I had not known well, but had come to respect. In later years, my uncle told me the story of the old man’s life from Poland to Ellis Island to New Britain. He revealed the depth of his love for his father, and the frustration of his lingering anger about what had happened that winter day. In time, his profound sadness descended into bitterness and bourbon.

After a while there in the cellar, and as “*Why?*” seeped into my sorrow—a question that was never answered—uncle and I shed our coats and in reverent silence began the tender task of taking him down.

Then we heard my grandmother’s footfalls at the back door.