

NORTHERN NARRATIVES 2026

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

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

Volume 10

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

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2026

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Our heartfelt thanks to the volunteers who donated their time and expertise to judging both the written submissions for this volume and the photographs submitted in hopes of being used as its cover.

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NORTHERN FOCUS

Cover Photo: "Boyhood" (2023) by Millie Brown. Taken in Ada, Minnesota.

This photograph was chosen for the front cover of *Northern Narratives* as a part of the Fargo Public Library's seventh annual *Northern Focus* photography project. *Northern Focus* is the sister project of *Northern Narratives*; it 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.

Well over 100 photographs taken in North Dakota or Minnesota were submitted to the project this year. Along with the winner of the cover contest, fourteen additional photos were selected by expert volunteer judges as honorable mentions. We've included these photos in *Northern Narratives* to preserve and celebrate them along with the regional writing selected for the book.

All photographs submitted to the project were on display at the Main Library in downtown Fargo during the fall of 2026. Find the digital gallery online at https://fargond.gov/city-government/departments/library/adults/northern-narratives-northern-focus.

INTRODUCTION

A lot can change over a decade.

That is the first thought that comes to mind as we prepare this, the tenth volume of *Northern Narratives*. Our inaugural year the project looked very different compared to what it's become today. While the ultimate goal stays the same—providing space and support for regional writers—we always come back to the drawing board to see what else we can do. From just a couple of get-togethers and a few zines all the way back in 2017, over the years we've also offered open writing sessions, held National Poetry Month parties, and even invited beloved authors like Larry Woiwode and Marcie Rendon to lead workshops.

No doubt one of the most brilliant things to grow out of *Northern Narratives* is our sister project, *Northern Focus*. Originally born out of a desire to offer the cover of *Northern Narratives* as an opportunity to up-and-coming photographers, *Northern Focus* has blossomed into a full-blown gallery of hundreds of photos that ornaments our Main Library downtown for a couple months every fall. The two projects now work in tandem supporting each other throughout the year, all leading up to a joint celebration when the gallery is live and *Northern Narratives* has been published.

Indeed, no matter what else we've accomplished in a given year, the heart of our work remains this: the completion of the book and the community coming together to celebrate it.

If you've not had the good fortune of attending one of these celebrations, imagine our library community room packed to standing room only—so packed, in fact, we've started using a bigger venue. See the artists arriving, many with family and friends in tow, chattering and mingling or maybe hesitant, maybe nervous, but always excited to

experience it at last: their own words in print. What could be more personal? Writing is the intangible made tangible. Thoughts, hopes, dreams. The memory of a perfect summer afternoon; of a father's calloused hands; the kindness of a stranger. Poetic visions of thunderheads looming low over the endless prairie and hoarfrost sparkling on the boughs of a winter wood. Incredible fictional stories that are no less truthful given the emotions woven through them, stories of monsters and superheroes and ordinary humans just doing their best, made extraordinary by the loving hand that created them. Writing is all that and more. It is the act of translating your soul into a language that other people can understand. That's not an easy skill to master. It is a craft practiced out of joy or grief or fun or love or sometimes all those at once, where the effort of creation is cathartic and transformative and worthwhile.

The sharing of that creation, however, is a leap of faith. It is a show of trust that someone, somewhere out there will take a chance on you, spend their time reading your work, and therethrough find understanding and connection. *That* is what we celebrate when everyone gathers together in the fall: regional writers having their work honored in a beautiful book and sharing themselves with the wider world. Many choose to share by getting up in front of the crowd and reading excerpts of their writing aloud. How beautiful it is to see people from all corners of our community attend ready to listen, ready to receive! How astounding the way the audience open their hearts and aren't afraid to be moved! As the wordsmiths weave their spells we all laugh and gasp and even shed a tear or two, creating an environment of warm fellow feeling that is more precious than ever.

In our increasingly fast-paced world, a celebration like this is a good reminder of how valuable it is to break our routines, come together, and experience something profound with friend and stranger alike. It is our sincere hope that in reading this book you now hold in your hands, you too will be able to feel that sense of connection and community, all made possible by the words these writers have entrusted with us and have so bravely, generously shared.

So get cozy, wherever you may be. Turn the page. We welcome you to the tenth volume of *Northern Narratives*!

POETRY

BIRCH

by Roberta Backman

A great many lives are spent perpetually hanging onto something.
We hang on to dreams, memories, money, people.
We cling to it all—holding it tight to our chests,
listening for a heartbeat,
cherishing each thump like proof of life.
And we do everything we can to hold it there.
To keep it safe.

We're taught that losing something is a dreadful thing.
If something is gone—be it a win or a friend—we lost.
Loss seems a terrible foe to face,
so we cling hardest to that which we love the most.

Loss is inevitable—
no matter how barbed the thought feels
as it grows in the mind.

It is not a creature that bites out of wrath or spite, loss.
In fact, it doesn't have teeth at all.
It's a docile creature of habit
that walks across your path,
blinks as soft as a sigh,
and takes a bit of the pavement with it.

There is no agenda with loss
or its footsteps over your walk of life.

It simply is, and it simply does.
No amount of strength in our love or hands
can hold what loss will come to take.

Perhaps the only way to truly embrace loss—
of an eventual or sudden end—
is to hold the idea of it just as close,
if not closer,
to the heart.

To lose means not to lose.

It means to let go.
To uncurl the fingers and rest the shoulders,
watching how effortlessly something falls.
To allow oneself to lose.
To be lost.

And to find again.
To appreciate what is, right now—
not what was.

What was is no more, and it cannot be given back.
But oh, it may be loved.
It may be loved fiercely,
but need not be lamented—
for a past hurt is a criminal to the present joy.

When we lose,
or are the ones lost,
may we fall like a golden leaf,
its stem browned and ready,
no longer needing the white birch to cling to.

GREEN

by Mary Bjerke

I've overheard the whispering of it,
And smelled its fresh breath slipping up from the soil.

I've brushed springy pillows of its corkscrew curls,
Tendrils, sharply bright, crawling along the garden floor.

I've heard the roar of it,
As wind rages through its needles.

I've crunched it in a pod, juicy and new,
And savored its lush smoothness in an avocado.

I've seen it brooding, a dark, verdant shadow,
Shading the summer's abundance.

And I've seen it spent and stale from too much or too little,
Heard it, toasted rough, slapping one against another,
Irritably longing to sink into its bed of renewal.

THE WIND SINGS SAD

by Mary Bjerke

The sighing gusts let loose their sad,
In contrast to the dreams I've had
Of pleasing feelings flowing free,
Of the time when you were here with me.

So easy then to be content,
Not allowing that the time was lent.
In those days, so quick to smile,
Not yet marked by somber trial.
Not yet stunned, no breath to draw,
Not having yet borne the elemental law,
That all that is must pass away,
And I must learn how, to want to stay.

I HAD PLANS

by Benny Boyd

I had plans.
Natural labor,
breathe through the pain,
fewest interventions possible.
We went to a birthing class
to know what to expect.
I was 30 weeks along.

I had plans.
A late fall birthday,
just like dad,
just like great-grandma.
A third generation of joy,
of the family growing in September.

I had plans,
but I had to pop by the hospital quick
for a blood pressure check.
Afterward, we would eat out with my family in town
and head home and I would get some sleep.
I had to work early the next day,
clocking in at 7 to cover
for my coworker on vacation.

I had plans,
but the midwife highly recommended I stay for observation.
I texted my supervisor and told her I wouldn't be in.
I was 31 weeks along.

I had plans,
and they were engulfed
in the hazy fog of preeclamptic blood pressures,
bed rest,
magnesium drip,
medications my body wouldn't respond to,
the comfort that my baby was well,
even if I wasn't…

I had plans.
In none of these plans
did I meet someone
only to have them tell me
seconds later,
"We're having a baby today."
I was 32 weeks along.

I had plans.
A surgeon's scalpel sliced them open,
and from their remains rose
the first cry of my son.

WHAT A BEAUTIFUL MORNING FOR A SISTER TO PASS

by Jane Braaten

What a beautiful morning for a sister to pass
Birds out making sweet noise
Traffic lightens as I begin to go to work
I think to myself, the first song on the radio will be
A Jo forever song
And, it was.

Radio plays a Beatles tune, "Get Back" with her name in it

To remind me of her gifts to me, to us

Brightest star ever
Great literary and mathematical mind

Style and class
She taught her little sister so much—

What to read
How to dress
Why to do homework
Where to laugh
When not to

Great artwork books from her college humanities classes
So much learning

After her health left her at such a young age

She did what she had to do
Outlive the prognosis of nothing past her teen years
And made it to 77

What a lifetime of gifts she gave me

I can never repay her
And no one will ever know how I got the gifts

Partly from her.

This zest.
This quality.
This demand of life to pursue
To dream
To realize

Again, It is merely a life.
And my sister left me this beautiful morning.

IDENTITY POETICS

by Ingrid Briggs

The ocean, my sister, my best friend: the first people who knew
That I was going to stretch out of this skin, try to become—well—
But it's just so *unbecoming*, I'm unraveling, unmaking, unwinding
I'm losing myself, dissolving down into the shower drain
Nothing but a gnarly collection of red thread, tangled in myself
Searching for a clear outline, carefully colored, impeccably made
Frankenstein's monster, too, was a becoming that was supposed to be beautiful.
My mother gently detangles my hair, the long line of women wrapping behind her
Detangling, unwinding, rebraiding and I think—
Maybe unbecoming is becoming, is becoming, maybe—
I can rewind into a spool, into the ocean, into myself.

THE GATE IN ORBIT

by Brooke Brittain

I am the Moon.

Speckled with craters,
divinely feminine,
as all women are.

The Moon is not a star or planet orbiting the Earth like a forlorn lover.
The Moon is of Earth itself, pieces of a cosmic collision,
slowly formed by gravity into a sphere.

I am the Moon,
because I am also the Earth,
staring at her reflection.

If eyes are the window to the soul, then the heart is the gate.
Sometimes, the organ is black with rot; irredeemable.
Sometimes, it is purely mundane flesh.
Very rarely,
as the gate is the best kept secret,
I find someone with a gate like mine; a matched gaze in sincerity.

Make no mistake, I understand you.
We are the Moon.

The contradiction and paradox of reality in a globe,
a billion gates,
so complex,
impossible to hold one concrete opinion,
unable to be judged by quantity.

The pit of a person is the harvest.

The compact soil of which we stomp,
the heavy branches of which we reach,
the rustling leaves of which we soak,
The smokey blood of which we spill.

Justice for all,
a quiet whisper.

If a star is the only reason to differentiate the years,
then my meaning is chopped fluidity.
One life, one day, one hour,
oneness,
blending so every slumber I wake unattached.

To the exhale of the past,
the clutching of the present,
and the desperate yearning for a more satisfying future.

To be understood at the pit of our being,
muscle and meat; tenderness and tears.

Death holds a warmer embrace than birth.
It is the one guarantee—the reason for continuity.
To validate my existence,
the measurement of purpose,
stretching history,
humanity is seduced into repeating.

Be proud of failure, for it is a sign of progress.
Without pain, there is no love.
One life, one day, one hour,
to define betterment,
to be worthy of it,
to care enough to try.

As I write this,
I release myself.
I give myself permission to grieve the person I was,

who I am,
who I will become.
The gate remains unchanged,
the window frosted and ashen; cycles of life.

I am the Moon, and so she is also the Earth.
When I see her reflection,
I am staring at myself.

GETTYSBURG BATTLEFIELD

by Lynn Bueling

I stood under oaks
on a knob hill known
as Little Round Top
and let my eyes sweep
the scene of that great
and bloody slaughter.
Imagination
placed me in the midst
of the grim battle.
Screams of wounded men
and ravaged horses
echoed through the trees,
across shallow swales,
and over acres
covered with statues
and monuments. Clouds
of fog floated like
gunpowder rising
from the mouths of guns
and fuming cannon.
Glancing down I found
acorns on the ground
and knew that spilled blood
had enriched the soil
in which these trees took
root. I gathered some
to bring home, thinking
that each time I hold
one, I will embrace
life lost in that place.

A HOMESTEAD MOTHER

by Lynn Bueling

On viewing Harvey Dunn's painting "The Prairie is My Garden"

The meadow grass and her long apron
wave in concert with the wind.
Amid her chores she took notice
of the wildflowers blooming
and coloring the prairie after the rain.
She walks with her daughters
to that place beside the creek
gathering bunches
to set on their humble table.
Except for the chimney
on that sad sod building
nothing stands against the sky
nothing breaks the tedium
of this plain horizon
except those lazy clouds
and these petals that rise
to worship the spring sun.
Gazing across this landscape
with no neighbors near
she fears her daughters will suffer
the same lonely fate, and she steals
this brief moment from her chores—
for them.

THE STRANGER

by Carl Child

There is something that's very wrong with me.
I feel cheated, angry, and enjoy no glee.
There must be something causing my anger.
Someone told me it's due to a stranger.

I don't know the stranger I said.
It doesn't matter the other man pled.
The stranger is really the source of your pain.
The stranger will cause you to suffer again.

I want to perceive the source of my distress.
The other man said let's talk and assess
the reason and cause for all of your stress.

The stranger will take all you hold dear.
He will do so with deception and a sneer.

Don't trust the stranger to enter you land.
The stranger will destroy all that you planned.

I wasn't sure I agreed with this man
but as time went by I became this man's fan.

After all, my misery was something very real
and finding a stranger to blame was a perfect feel.

So I learned to hate the stranger instead
of the other feelings of pain in my head.

I thanked the man who taught me to hate,
the stranger who I learned to detest and berate.

The other man said, "Hate the stranger today,
never let the stranger unpack and stay."

I never met the stranger you see,
but the hate, the other man taught, brought me some glee.

WHAT SPECTER ARE YOU

by Catherine Chilton-Werner

after Jenifer Follman's "Never Let Me Go"

The sea is not stormy,
Ocean swells roll toward the shore
unmenacing.
Clouds, high in the sky
are not portents of a coming storm,
Rather, a patch of blue
shows through the thinning clouds
on a pleasant, windy afternoon.

Yet the sand dunes that hide the beach
appear melancholy,
painted in coarse strokes
of dark tan and brown
Dune grasses bend in the salty wind,
their movement drawing us
To the human-like form
Made of wind and sand.

What specter are you?
Standing on the windy shore,
Feet planted in the curve of a dune?
Created by a gust of wind
Your thick knock-kneed legs
At once forming
At once fading
As your grainy figure
Dissipates
Unable to resist the force that created you.

You do not appear threatening,
only sad
The trunk of your torso made of sand
already falling away
as if a coattail blows behind you
Your head,
Not menacing but
tilting away from the wind,
A vague face with hollow eyes
Beseeching,
Hold me close to your heart.

Are you a memory
once clear,
Fading over time
Unable to hang onto this material world?

Are you here to remind that
you were once one of us?
Someone we would hold onto still,
A father, mother,
A lover, child,
A brother, sister,
Beloved friend?

Or does your spirit
Encompass all of these?
The spirits we are incapable of
keeping here,
Who visit our memory from time to time,
A melancholy we feel at the
transience of life?
A sorrow of leaving,
A desire to hold onto what we know
To who we are now
in this moment
As impossible to hold onto
As the sands of time?

A CURIOUS VISITOR

by Victoria Christensen

Curiosity knocks at my door
With intensity hard to ignore

I warily twist the knob and peek
Curiosity turns—I am weak

Curiosity laughs and starts to run
Leaps out of the shade and into the sun

Curiosity beckons and so I follow
Behind the flight of a newborn swallow

We chase a moth that floats on a breeze
Too close to a hive that thrums with unease

Curiosity turns down each new trail
Sniffing the flowers and then setting sail

Across a meadow with grass so deep
I lie on my back, ready to sleep

Clouds turn to sheep, to flower, to boat
My eyes close, my mind drifts, my limbs float

But Curiosity has other plans
So, I follow for more shenanigans

OBSERVATIONS OF A SLORE

by Mike Christianson

your perfume is strong and flowery
mixed with cigarette smoke and hairspray
you marked the entire dive bar
maybe tonight it's 1980-something again
when your pussy was as fresh as flowers
pounded in broken pavement parking lots
to petty, and pink floyd
you're a cheap trick that's been dipped into
many many times now
but not so much lately
left leathery and worn
by years and cock
but tonight the lights are dark
and the liquor
intoxicating
and your old song is on
again

FOR MY SISTER

by Anastasia Cline

She lost the light
In her eyes
After you died.

We visited where
You Left,
Together.

We sat
And
Sat.

She didn't talk much,
Someone came,
An English teacher,

A book you never
Got the chance
to finish
She left it there,
At the site,
A note inside
She cried,
Both of them did

They hugged.

She lost the light
In her eyes
When you left.

-She loved you

[REDACTED] MEMORIES

by Anastasia Cline

The sound of your voice sends
Shivers down my spine,
The kind of shivers
you feel when you go out
In winter with no jacket
The kind you feel when
Your lover
hurts you for the first time.

Looking at you
Makes my eyes tear up,
The kind of tears
When a child gets separated
From her parents in the grocery store
The kind of tears
When the person you thought
You loved
Hurt you for the second time.

Bumping into you
Makes me freeze
The type of freezing
Where you remember how
The person you once knew
Hurt you.
The kind of freezing
Where you can still feel
Their touch on you
Even after you told them to stop.

FREEZE

by Annie Costrini

In the day warm Sun burns brightly
Strong and glowing at the noontime.
Its powerful presence holds its own
In the battle that it wages.
Brandishing fire-sword it sweeps the earth
Shedding light to the creatures that roam it.
But against this force there is another
Held back by feeble light.
From the north and the south
As far as the eyes can see.
Here there lurks an opposition
Gathered on the horizon.
Stayed only by the light of day
Its time will quickly come.
Such giving of light and heat wears Sun
Its time for rest must follow.
Sinking to its earthy bed
It falls below the covers of the western hills.
Now its foe has none to fight it
In the cool of eveningtime.
Great Sun's apprentice, glittering Moon
Has no strength against it.
Silently creeping one breath at a time
Fog approaches from its lair.
With it comes its crony
The just-as-quiet Frost.
Though none see Frost amid the Fog
Its mark is left behind.
As at this time, for now, we sleep
The work of two is one.

The Fog carries Frost
With steady, breathy hands.
It creeps along
To spy on Tree and Bush.
They see Fog and shudder
Sensing Frost on its heels.
Slowly, unseen in its approach
Frost is hidden by Fog's covering of Moon.
It reaches for each branch
Caresses each blade of grass.
Shooting out spikes
It costs the plants.
Creating a pointy protrusion
On every stem.
Fog stays, admiring Frost's work
As the cold night air is its time.
It stares with cold eyes
Directing Frost on where to strike.
But Sun won't sleep forever
And in morningtime will rise.
Sun stops and stares
Seeing the power that Fog and Frost are holding.
Sun sees the trees and lights them aglow
Revealing Frost's cold whiteness.
Sun calls for help to drive Fog off
And Breeze is soon to answer.
Together they will fight both foes
With one each going after.
Sun turns on Fog and once more it flees
Gathering 'round the horizon.
Wind shakes the trees
Their branches whispering softly against one another.
Frost's grip is loosened.

LAMENT FOR THE FIRST AND LAST OF GIANTS

by Caleb Costrini

No rest for poor old dead Monder
Sleepless his bones are laid
Bearing the hills on his shoulders
Weighed down by guilt and pain

Yea, though his kindred yet wander
Beyond the Earthly Plane
Monder remains in the mountains
Lifting up the Earth today

Mighty and wise was old Monder
First of his kin to come
Down from above for all mortals
Welcoming men to their home

Wisdom and power and honor
He taught to the first men
No longer beasts as what were before
Human we became then

Giants of splendor and beauty
Were those of Monder's kind
Grandeur and majesty living
Unbound by death and time

Super-Mortals now given flesh
Pain and pleasure they learned

Directed by the new covenant
To work they gladly turned

Cities they built and wonders
Performed by their doughty hands
Mountains and valleys they traversed
Tended and tilled the lands

Monder in his work did take pride
Man had been lifted high
Giant and man coexisting
Under his watchful eye

Tired was he with his work done
The purpose he came for reached
Mankind had come into wisdom
Naught had Monder left to teach

Leaving his kindred behind him
Monder did take his leave
Within their care he left the world
The stars again he wished to see

Woe, then, for Monder did not know
The work was not complete
Mankind of flesh and bone Earthly
The old errors would repeat

Lo, for mankind was not told
Of those that came before
Mortal bodies, same in nature
Earth's children fell once more

Ever and always, through each age
The beast that dwells inside
Old world's destroyer, now in men
Took hold of Giants' pride

Mortal Bodies, once a glory
Holy and pure no more

All of the mortal temptations
They turned to mankind for

The beast-men, the mighty, the pyres
All of these things and more
Truly they had become as gods
And by mankind adored

Pushed by the hands that had wrought him
Monder returned to flame
Old world's perversion repeated
Judgement again would rain

Not willing that man should perish
Monder for mercy pled
If the old judgement would come again
It would be on his head

Told that the evil must be purged
Monder to his kindred spoke
Alas, the giants would not give up
The new power they awoke

Heart heavy, Monder didn't back down
Giants on Earth no more
Was his decree and if not, then
Monder would go to war

War then it shall be, they told him
For the future of man
The power within man, the God-mind
Could not be lost again

Angry and prideful, they fought him
He much of his kin slayed
To the sky their bodies are stacked
At Kiryat-Arbah laid

Earth to its very foundations
Shaken and cracked became

Monder prevailed, though the planet
Would scarcely last ten days

Back to the stars ever banished
Giants forever roam
Monder, his battle now finished
Strove to save mankind's home

Mortal his wounds were, that he knew
His war had taken its toll
Not much longer of this life
Of the Earth Monder took hold

Holding up the near-fallen Earth
Forever beneath to lie
To the end supporting the planet
The first and last of giants died

His bones are still out there hidden
Harder than rock or iron
Should the giants ever return
He shall awake in ire

No rest for poor old dead Monder
Sleepless his bones are laid
Monder remains in the mountains
Lifting up the Earth today

WHERE THE WHITE BOTTLE GENTIAN GROWS

by Patrice Delaney

The ground is lumpy from generations of cattle wading the wetland
They have affected this place, but not eaten it to death yet

There are living ghosts here
Joe Pye weed lives here, boneset lives here
blue vervain and black-eyed Susans live here
This is where butterflies come from

John mentioned this place in conversation once
ruminating on treasures we find in the prairies we scout
Like a child with a secret fishing spot, he said,
"I know where the white bottle gentian grows"

They are small and unassuming among the grassy mounds
Earlier buzzing with hungry bees
The pale papery seeds float like sawdust now
into our bags, onto the ground

DOES THE SUN

by Frances Dorne

Does the sun get tired of going to sleep
Do the willows cry when they have to weep
Does a star still wish it was the moon
Do flowers sigh when they have to bloom
Does the sky get jealous of the grass's green
Is the darkness longing to be seen

Does the ocean desire to be the land
Do the deserts regret meeting their sand
Does a breeze try to be a little stronger
Do the winter days want to be longer
Does the mountain pine over the plain
Is change realizing it could stay the same

Does time have hope it might stand still
Does won't ever think it will
Does because never wonder why
Does truth believe that it may lie
Does destruction yet want to make
Is the heart ever going to stop its ache?

HEARTS

by Jay Drechsel

How can Hearts be broken if they are never together?
Hearts longing to be held.
Hoping to silently discover each other.
Hoping to learn through silence.
Hoping to feel through kindness.
Hoping through a cress they never feel.
Hoping to catch a glance that is not long enough to even notice.
Voices telling me something, like a weight no words are spoken.
A path that has never been walked, like a heart that has never been touched.
A life unknown between two hearts.
A life hoping for a tomorrow of being together that never arrives.
How can hearts be broken if they are never together?

HAND OF DAMOCLEIA

by Colt Garrett

I am a plain teenage girl.
Plain in life, plain in look.
I look with envy on Dionysia,
Social media's queen.

She has it all—fame, hots, charm.
"What I would give to be you"
I wistfully type in her replies
Before falling asleep.

When I wake, it's in a strange room.
No! I've seen this on streams!
The bedside mirror reflects Dionysia's face.
On the stand is a note, reading
"You think it's all that? Have at it."

With a flawless grin I begin life anew.
Burned into my brain, I copy her every move.
To grasp the same effect.
Heart fluttering, I hit the webcam's "record."

Then I find that if I step out of line,
Nasty comments follow me.
Any "mistake" marring their vision of me
Is twisted to no limit.

"Slut," "Phony," "Life on easy mode"
Even when I do everything right,
The insults never stop.
Online, and in person, I am watched.

With fame comes danger.
Scandal, real or fake.
Stalker, behind any corner or comment.
My benign reply, taken as an invite.

The public's hand always above,
Ready to crush me,
To squash me lower than
I was when I was nothing.

LOVE IS NOT LINEAR

by Rhonda Jo Gilbertson-Evans

I met the lady in the Norwegian Rømmegrøt dress over her alligator tears as she read Romeo and Juliet to a bunch of disgruntled fifteen-year-olds. And then she threw her head back and cackled hysterically at herself for becoming so emotional, but Mother Mary loved words.

During Speech class, MaryAnn asked if anyone would be interested in being the summer nanny for her very precocious four-year-old princess LuLu. And for no dumb reason at all, my hand flew into the air. I didn't even know that I wanted to do it. I knew this kid. She was a hellcat! But I loved MaryAnn to death. The thought of seeing her daily was my life's greatest dream.

Although the little brat made me cry the very first day, Lulu and I became best friends very quickly. Not only did this little ray of sunshine know her directions like nobody's business. Even to Bylerlys in South Minneapolis. The kid would memorize the lyrics to all my favorite songs and sing at the top of her lungs.

I saved her life at Valley Fair from sliding out of a roller coaster. She saved mine when boys broke my heart and Lupus broke my body.

The original plan had been to focus on a steady daily curriculum of math and reading. Swimming, gymnastics, and dance. We quickly said forget that and drove around in my station wagon with my friends. Eating sunflower seeds and hanging out at the pool. Being extra cool. Now, would be the time to tell you I stayed for ten years. And then, shortly thereafter, tragedy struck. Mother Mary went to Heaven. Very suddenly. I was in New York and my phone rang. Lulu stated simply, "You're my mom now." I stated firmly, "Okay." Three grandkids later here we are. We talk every morning about what Lydia Blume has to say about the

weather in her Walk the Dog Report and our fashion commentary on what she's wearing.

This is what we say…Love is not Linear. This is the true building of a family.

8 Areas of Birds and Loneliness

by Alex Grotte

I
the boxelder tree
sitting dead in winter
brimmed with blackbirds
to the point that it looked
as if
full of leaves

II
jets blotted out the sun
the deafening roar cracking
open the sky
the rumbling earth
like an angry
god below

III
only rubble is left
after the demolition of
your childhood home
wires wood and plaster
splayed out and broken
as memories and
dreams

IV
some of the birds died
yesterday
some asshole with
a shotgun
came through
and now
they won't return

V
I heard the news
and drew the
Macallan to my lips
like bleach
but poured the rest
down the
drain

VI
the tea kettle
in the kitchen
sat atop the flame
screaming
and screaming
and screaming

VII
there is
nobody
coming

VIII
the birds
are all
dead

WALLS PUT UP

by Rachael L. Hadsell

Name after name
Panel after panel
Andrew, Walter, Bruce
Again
Andrew, Walter, Bruce
Again
Andrew, Walter, Bruce
Panel after panel
Name after name

So many names
Some the same
But they are never the same

Is it because I am thinking of you?
Searching…
One Jay, One James?
Please
Please no.
Too much of a reminder

Your tears never seen
Your pain locked inside
Your wounds never on display
Your battle fought alone

Walls put up

War after war
Both walls go up

Physically and emotionally

For those who did return
Their wounds, their scars
Sometimes could be seen
Sometimes tucked out of sight

The emotional walls
The emotional chaos
The emotional impact
Immeasurable
The pain untallied
The toll etched deep

The effects may have shown up
In the families
Down the line
Because their pain at times
May have come out
It may have shown up
Through one sip too many
It may have shown up
With the smoke
In the room
It may have shown up
In the nightmares
In the screams that came out
It may have shown up
Through impatience or frustration
Or no longer being able to show up
For their loved ones
Or even themselves

It may have shown up
In confrontations
In disconnection
In silence

Their pain
Their struggle
Their fight
They will never be the same

So much pain
So much impact

Walls put up

Their names etched in
Their names reflected back
Panel after panel
Name after name
So many panels
So many names
So many lives
Why so many wars?

A FAMILY'S JOURNEY HOME

by Rebecca Hansana

When I see our family's name written down or spoken
I see a bond, braided on her wrist, that started out broken

A wife, a mother, a grandma-to-be
Ma's courage and strength is all we see

What would they say, if their journey was made into a story
To describe this family's pursuit for freedom and glory

The headlines couldn't capture Ma's cry for hope
A sound that fell off the page as she turned to her children and spoke

"It's time to say goodbye to the only place we've called home."

History would be made through heartache if they ever got out
She reminds herself that rice still grows in times of drought

A voice in the darkness told her it's time to make a plan
Stars etched a path for her family to leave their homeland

Dreams helped her prepare the meal she'd make
She knew the strength and courage this would take

Resilient and strong they would find new soil as each day passes
Preparing for rain that would give them opportunity and chances

Seen in black and white, but said with so much color
Their gifts would travel and be blended into our culture

His wife would steer them, beginnings in sight
An officer in uniform, he held his chest tight

The threads of our name, protecting his family and heart
Time was starting to fray as the boat was ready to part

Ma knew better and now was their chance
He was given a choice
A choice to sit out, or a choice to dance

His lunch was packed with more than rice that morning
The man with a boat needed some kind of warning

With boots tied up, and a gun in place
Ma would fill the silence, and empty space

A soldier, known by his boots, fought for what was right
The man we call Pa, led his family across the river that night

Their children afraid and uncertain, grabbed what they could toss
Left behind pieces of their home, some couldn't bear to cross

The choice to better their family was clear
Tears would fall as they lived for weeks in fear

An empty home, their beds, just things
Rice sticks together, it hangs on, Ma sings

Her basket would weave a story for generations to pass
A basket of rice that gave us all an opportunity to dance

Would they know that every decision is what brought us here
A path from Loas to America, landed them in North Dakota that year

We are all simply pieces of the branch woven in the basket he took that day
Because if it weren't for the journey to America, we wouldn't be here to stay

Their escape to freedom had to be fought
All along she knew, a family still grows in times of drought

Humble smiles are what remain in their reflection
A legacy that left us with a spirit of peace, and protection

A bond that began broken and tethered
Strength still waves when it's worn and weathered

Today we remember how our roots were settled in the ground
Family is more than the faces we see; it's the freedom they found

THE OLD CHAIR

by Rebecca Hansana

When I see this old chair, I see a place where pride and devotion rested after a long day's work.
I see the bargain you found to save a buck.
I see the stability you framed for our family.
I see everything you gave up to make sure we were happy.
I see the humor and genuine light you gave to others.
I see you, dad.

It's here, in this weathered chair, where you watched me grow up. Whenever you sat there, you had some sort of common sense to rest on my shoulders—even if my teenage sleeves were quick to brush it off. Somehow, you knew those gentle pieces of advice would settle deep in my pockets. It was where you shaped me into the person I was only a blink away from becoming.

The other day I saw your old lawn chair sitting at the foot of the garage. —and it hit me.

You saw a little girl learning to ride bike, and swish a three-pointer for the first time.
You saw a stubborn teenager that was scared, and unsure about life, but still doing her best.
You saw a brave college student, starting a new journey.
You saw the efforts of your advice unravel into the stories I'd share as a new teacher.
You saw me, every day.

And I don't think you would've traded that front row seat for anything.

It's hard knowing I'll never see you in that chair, one dog at each foot, enjoying a warm cup of coffee again, but I know you're *still* watching with pride in your eyes.

The final sights and stories shared from that chair sink in much deeper than the coffee stains still on the surface. Or the muddy paw prints left behind by some loyal friends.
Your legacy will soar far beyond the views that lawn chair could ever capture.

Until we meet again, save me a spot next to your lawn chair in the sky. We both know you've always picked the best seat in the house.

Love you always, Dad.

HIDE AND SEEK WITH A LOON

by Darla Helgeson

I spot him as my canoe glides onto the glassy water.
He dives as I count one-Mississippi, two-Mississippi,
and am all the way to 53 before he pops out of the water.
This lively loon.
Sleek. Streamlined. His black and white feathers
glisten like facets on a disco ball.
He dives again, a quick flash into the sparkling water.
This luminous loon.
Our game of hide and seek continues.
I almost miss spotting him when he emerges amongst the lily pads.
His mournful yodel gives his location away.
This lyrical loon.
The sun is setting as another loon answers his call.
Hide and seek is over; he gets a running start on the water's surface
and takes flight to meet his mate.
This lovelorn loon.

FALL INTO WINTER

by Sarah Herman

The Sun's weakened face
shows through the treetops.
The branches almost bare,
only a leaf here and there.

I feel it now.

The insects have vanished,
as the squirrels and birds
have gathered their feasts.

I smell it now.

The air has a familiar chill
with its traditional color,
a drab gray with just a hint of yellow,
though the chill is blue.

I hear it now.

The North wind perking its head,
forming early morning ice crystals.
Soon the snow will conceal the ground.
Then the white robe shall prevail.

I see it now.

Looking out
beyond the browning grass,
below the periwinkle skies,
and just above the barren branches,
that is where the winter hides.

YOUR BONFIRE CHAIR

by Jennifer Hogenson

I saw you sitting there in your bonfire chair, a blank stare into nowhere.
My heart reaches out to you with incredible care.
Think I should step out to be with you there.
Rethinking, I wait right where I am, in your brand-new camper.
How I love being here. Today is different though.
My heart aches with so much despair.
You are alone in your bonfire chair and tears stream to the ground.
Nowhere is your true love to be found. He's buried in the ground in town.
One weekend with us in your brand-new camper. Now he'll never return.
Your tears glisten in the early morning sunrise. Mine, in the kitchen, run to my chin.

This is our favorite place. Eagle Lake campground. Giant pines, pretty stones to pick, maples, boxelder, ash and juniper. Three hundred campers with a speed limit of 15 miles per hour. Each site surrounded by trees, feeling private and serene.
Early morning coffee for you and me while the family sleeps.
We quietly open the camper door letting your puppies, Winnie and Dolce, out to play.
Our first and favorite thing is to notice and hear the birds that day.
Best of all, our eyes to the sky to find eagles that might fly. Always a treat; they in their favorite tree.

We see them seldomly, but watching brings joy, and we sit quietly. Their scream is unmistakable. Then searching and who will sight them first.
Only a few minutes in their favorite tree, maybe five or only three.

Red-amber coals from the night's bonfire smolder and smoke. The winds puff a little blow on them. Time stands still.

I cannot face that he will never be here, with us, again. Your loving husband Al. A kind, gentle man taken by filthy cancer. How can it be?
But there you sit alone, by the giant white pine tree. He was good to you and me. His favorite place, camping by this tree, blonde hair and eyes as blue as the Mediterranean Sea, no longer with you and me.
Never again will he see the eagle-tree.
I wait in the camper washing dishes, folding blankets.
I feel heavy, feet too heavy to lift. And it is so with my heart. I want to help you with this, the worst loss ever.

I thought we would come back to the campgrounds again to stay. But this was my last day. You hung a notice in the lodge to sell your brand-new camper. Within a week it is sold.
You and your son take your things home. Just you two there, for the last time.

Our American Natives believe seeing an eagle means blessings are coming our way.
They believe seeing an eagle is a sign one of our loved ones, passed on, is watching over us.

Alone for morning-early coffee, you return to your bonfire chair.
Alone forever, with thoughts and memories of your loving husband.

You hear the eagle's scream. Looking up, he is in his favorite tree. You watch, and he stays to visit. Quietly, slowly you move in toward your camera, holding the door of your brand-new camper with your hand.
Outside, to your surprise, the eagle is still there.
Your coffee gone, again, slowly, quietly, you move for more inside the camper.
Surely the eagle will have flown on your return.
But he stays with you for an entire hour.
Never before, never again.
A gift of love from the eagle and our God who will never leave you.

FLY SOUTH

by Sydney Jensen

Privilege and curse,
becoming nobody to no one,
I tear away at my life until it is just me and the bare ground.

I forget how kind the silence is to a wounded heart.
It takes so much to be someone,
and I usually find gratitude in that truth,
but today I need to slip away
to the Things That Work.

I make a stack of my grandma's pancakes
and sit in the sun.
I turn on Searows and sob in the closet.
I rewatch *Ponyo*.
I let my texts go unanswered.
I call this a mental retreat.
There is hardly anything peaceful about this,
besides that it is necessary,
and it always feels good to do the necessary things.

I feel the full weight of my heart and I let it surprise me.
When did all of this water appear?
My grief sloshes around before settling firm in my stomach.

I create my own spells and potions.
I borrow others', too.
I tell myself,
"I do not need this pain to be easily swallowed."
"Even though I am uncomfortable, I am safe."
"My name is Sydney Jensen and I will not be afraid."

"I am not the body, I am not even the mind."
"I have not lost anything irretrievable."
"It is safe to grieve."
"It is safe to hope."

And so, as it goes,
I find my way back to Earth,
to what is primal and infantile.
I remember how simple it can be to observe and respond.
I remember how to pray.

There is not always a reason for pain,
but that doesn't mean it's devoid of divinity.
Existential and strange,
crying until the well runs drier,
being a vessel for what pops up.
Being honest with myself again.

With enough distraction,
you may, for a moment, forget pain,
but along with it you'll forget joy.

I am learning how necessary it is to relearn how to digest something.
It requires time and patience, assessing before consuming.
You cannot plug your nose and eat this whole.
It is alive—it wants to be known.
So I will take my time, bite by bite,
committing it all to memory.
Repeating my mantras and my rituals
until it all becomes appetizing again.

The body always comes back to equilibrium,
back to Earth.

Slowly, there is a new story being told.
Birdsong and light,
a greener world.
My heart, open again, and softer.
Understanding violence,
understanding joy.

The price of hope is simply truth.
I will no longer abandon myself.

When winter comes,
I will remember my nature
and fly south.

I BELIEVE IN MAGIC

by Sydney Jensen

I really do believe
that a good chunk of life is
sharing magic with each other,
both on purpose and on accident.

I have the best banana bread recipe.
Let me tell you a story.
I made you a sweater.

A stranger's flowers in a windowsill
could make me think twice about a bad day.
The smallest things become a pulse check
when your eyes are open.

We are sharing things we don't even know.
Everything is connected,
nerves in a body,
butterflies crossing paths.
We mean something beyond ourselves.
We mean that there is still plenty—
to be shared,
to learn,
to become.

It is a powerful thing, to be alive.
To know you are a magnetic force
that cannot be stopped and should not be small.
Embracing your magic keeps you wide.
It keeps you laughing and crying.
It keeps you living in color.

It keeps you brave.
It keeps you from getting stuck on yourself.

The older I get, I realize that
I no longer need to be good.
Just whole.

Not eloquent and mysterious,
but known.
Honest and true.

I am an alchemist.
I take pain and I make a story.
I take my mirror and I make peace.
I take your hand and I make a whole world.

I believe in sacred spaces,
talking to the trees and the stars,
and the medicine that a good story is to the mind.
I believe in long drives and gentle breezes,
sharing secrets with your friends,
and putting pen to paper.
I believe in smiles to strangers,
buttered toast,
and dancing.
I believe in magic.

My own brand of brilliant,
here I am,
sharing the magic I know.

TWILIGHT

by Linda Johansen

Twilight is my favorite time of day—
When sunlight, where all things are named,
Softens into shadow
And edges begin to blur.

High heels and tight pants
Yield to bathrobe and ponytail.
Tough decisions and weighty business
Are folded away.
In their place arrive
A warm mug of tea
And a juicy novel.

Twilight is where prose loosens into poetry,
Where words surrender to music,
And business bows to love.

For some, it is the hour of dread.
Will Dad come home for supper?
If he does, will he be sober?
Will Mom be gentle tonight—
Or mad as hell?

I remember when my children first left home,
The first evening of true aloneness.
No footsteps, no doors, no supper to serve—
Joyful, bubbling family noise
Replaced by a silence
So loud it rang,

Twilight—
Liminal space, threshold between worlds,
A place where the heart leans in to listen,
Where light learns to trust the darkness,
Uncertainty turns to new possibility.

What dreams will be woven
From the broken threads of today?

FOLK SONG

by Jill M. Johnson

Now we must laugh
or the grief
will be too much
and there is life to live

Now we must dance
or the pain
will be too much
and there is life to live

Now we must eat
or the hunger
will be too much
and there is life to live

So come with me
and laugh with me

So come with me
and dance with me

So come with me
and eat with me

For there is life to live
For there is life to live

For there is life to live

LOVE'S REFLECTIONS

by Norma Johnson

Love I

under a
waxing moon
drunk with lust
I lie in want
and watch for
you

Love II

together
within a
misty light
of love's sweet vision
we are one

Love III

Only you
could take my
sleeping beauty to
soar above time
and never stop

HE IS MY EXHALE

by Erika Kappes

His arms wrap around me, and I melt into his warmth. I exhale. My shoulders soften. I have endured decades of inhaling and holding my breath in the name of people-pleasing, staying safe, and surviving emotional neglect. My core is knotted like a rope on a military obstacle course.

He is solid like an oak tree, yet tender like the moss growing up its bark. He is tough like a leather saddle, yet comforting like the horse's velvety coat. He is protective like a guard dog, yet encouraging like the dog's wet muzzle nudging its pups to roam.

I can feel my knotted rope loosen as we stand there in silence. His warm lips graze the top of my head. One notch of the rope comes undone. My soul is at peace.

He lets go, and my core slowly tightens. My breath turns staccato. I am left fighting my past and my present.

I live for the moment that he is my exhale.

GREEN GODDESS

by Atiya Khan

Green goddess
You stole my heart
I delight
    in your flesh

Call yourself what you will
I submit
to your desires

Who harvested you
in the heat of the day?

Angel wings of sweat
blossoming
between their shoulder blades

the sun striking them
like some kind
of celestial castigation

And yet
you carry
an air of victory

How could you not
when you know
what it is
to be laurel—emblem of triumph

Could they take
from your leaves
        and fashion a crown?

Not one fit for emperors
nor for athletes

but for the humble mouths
that split you open
with reverence

A THEORY OF WINTERING

by Atiya Khan

February has existed here for years now
Frost glazing the rooftops
    like powdered bone
    like ashes of moths
The apple tree's limbs stiffen in ice
mirroring the long silver thread
that stretches from me to the frozen currents
where dolphins drift in shards of ocean
and black-and-white stars bloom quietly overhead

A shadow of myself gnaws at the edges of memory
cautious, as if licking the edge of a shattered teacup
and I pick at my own invisible seams
wondering which whispered names to call tonight
sage, marigold, serpent's tongue

All the hours of the year crowd the doorway
and I turn them away
saying no, there is no room for you
One by one, they curl into the snow

I cannot remember the spring
when I fed my own warmth to the world
nor the delicate vase filled with dusty pink roses
nor the apple tree yearning to rid itself of fruit
so sweet it made the afternoon drowsy
I piled them on the windowsill until it overflowed
Then into the basin, like coins from a fountain

One evening I dreamt I sank among them
as if bathing in fallen jewels
Now ghost rabbits leave prints on frozen glass

I prowl the dark
listening for songs long vanished
I drained the water in the vase
Still I check for its presence daily
I even forgot the necessary invocation
I was meant to use our memories
in case of emergency
I am thinking of something, something

The words rot before they reach me
This earth loosens around my feet
    I am unrooting
    I am unmaking

THE WORLD PASSES BY

by Bibi Khan

Through my window pane,
I see the morning born.
And then again at evening,
I see the fading of day's light.
All against the blue and grey
and thunderous sky.

The winds cover it with dust.
The rains wash it clean.
Still, I witness the clouds
floating near and far;
obscuring the sun and moon.
When Venus shines her light,
with hopefulness, I smile at her.

Through the window pane,
I watch the seasons
in their elementary stages
and as they flourish and depart.

The stripped branches
against the gray sky
open themselves
to the cold north wind
and snowflakes' kisses.
On a clear night they
enfold the moon through its stages
and the bright stars.

I see the world outside silently,
patiently awaiting the coming of spring
as she breezes in with her coat
full of the colors of the rainbow.

And through this window pane,
I hear the birds fly past with their
happy songs. When green becomes
the dominant color against the
blue sky, I know that yet another
season whispers to me through
its enclosure. I feast my eyes
on the big bright full moon as it
seeks the openness of the window.
I let it enter the darkened room with
the heat of the summer night.

Soon the burning leaves begin
to spark and the birds and bees
take flight. Reds and oranges
lay stark against the autumn sky.
Too soon, the leaves are let go;
fluttering in a flurry or sometimes
with a gentle nudge, leaving the
trees to stand tall in their nakedness.

Through all my apprehension and
grievances, my joy and content,
I am grateful to watch my part of
the sky through my window pane
with the shifting seasons, the trees
as they change, yet remain constant,
the stars and moon as they emit
their bit of light to the earth. All these,
and more, impart beauty and hope
and brings a quiet peace to the heart.

ICESTORM POSTMORTEM

by Jeff Kilpatrick

kites'
wings
pull their own strings



milkdrop stillframes
scatter across my lawn
shatter by degrees



feathers
melt from
the wings they become



parchment of ice
kamikaze crocus
each an autographed copy
of the other's deathwarrant



whistling fresh tea
suits me to itself
while I read Hardy's deed
to his house

to his map of peace

THE MODERN SISYPHUS

by Emily Kjenaas

I never understood the pain in the punishment of Sisyphus
Until my mother stopped
Doing my laundry.
There is no Zeus to blame;
I am the one who wears the clothes,
And it wears on me, to wear my clothes
As I grow weary of the wearing and washing.
Wash, dry, fold, again.
Wash
Dry
Fold
Again
Again
Again.
My sanity spinning in a soapy circle.
It's enough to wonder:
Why don't we all just
Join nudist colonies?

TO LIVE AND DIE IN THE AMERICAN WEST

by Timothy J. Kloberdanz

written for the Sesquicentennial of the Little Bighorn Battle, 1876-2026

On this momentous occasion,
I, George Armstrong Custer,
have returned to be with you.
But am I a phantom or a man?
I'll leave that to you to decide.
No matter what you conclude,
I wish to take this opportunity
to inform my fellow Americans
about the events leading up to
& including June 25th, 1876.
Admittedly, this is my version.
I could go on at greater length
yet I will try to keep this brief.

Back in the winter of 1868,
I & my Seventh U.S. Cavalry
surrounded a Cheyenne village.
The hostiles had hunkered down
along a river called the Washita.
At dawn, we attacked the camp.
I & my troops were victorious.
We even killed the band's chief,
a man known as Black Kettle.
He & his wife, Medicine Woman,
had survived the Sand Creek affair.
But they didn't survive the Washita.

Later, we turned our full attention
to the Sioux up in Dakota Territory.
I led a special expedition in 1874
& we discovered some traces of gold
in the cold streams of the Black Hills.
The Sioux claimed that land as sacred.
What were we soldiers supposed to do?
We had to protect all the prospectors
who swarmed into the Black Hills.

Well, the Sioux didn't see things our way.
They threatened to kill the gold seekers.
Angry words turned into an all-out war.
Many of the Indians left the reservation.
So I & the Seventh marched on the Sioux
& tracked them into Montana Territory.

We picked up quite a number of trails &
nearly all the trails led to the same place.
'Twas the Valley of the Little Bighorn.
The Sioux called it the "Greasy Grass."
By now it was Sunday, June 25th, 1876.
I noticed a high, distant hill
overlooking the Little Bighorn.
That hill was not just any hill.
Destiny was waiting for us there.
I could feel it in my guts & soul.

Our Sioux interpreter once told me
that to the "Lakota," time isn't linear.
The past, the present, & the future
have the power to merge together
& sometimes all three of them collide.

But I know what you really want to hear.
I am quite aware there are those critics
who claim that I was a "glory hound"
& that I ignored or disobeyed orders
prior to the Little Bighorn conflict.

Let me say it now & forevermore:
I did not disobey any of my orders.

As a loyal lieutenant colonel of the Seventh,
I was ordered to find & engage the enemy.
When I saw a big dust cloud in the distance,
I assumed it was made by fleeing Indians.
I certainly didn't want them to get away.
We needed to engage & defeat the hostiles.
So I divided my forces and we advanced.
Little did I know that the big dust cloud
was made by Indians racing toward us!
If I am to be faulted for anything at all,
it is for not seeing what was in that dust.
'Twas a misreading, not insubordination.
Under the circumstances, I did my best.

Soon those dusty hostiles were upon us.
The Sioux & their Cheyenne allies,
they came at us in wave after wave.
They charged on horseback & on foot.
There were boys who fought like men.
I shot as many of my feathered foes
as I could, with a pistol firm in hand.
& it was on this high, grassy hill
I decided to make my last stand.

Amongst the howling attackers,
I saw the figure of Black Kettle.
So I shot at that ghost of a chief.
Beside him was Medicine Woman,
the old man's long-departed wife.
She seemed more resolute than he
& she came at me with a bone knife.
I had to shoot her several times.
The woman fell at her man's side,
just like she did at the Washita.

The accursed sun burned like fire.
Dust & powder smoke engulfed us.

My revolver became too hot to hold.
But I saved the last slug for myself.

You see, I chose to live like this.
& I knew it was better to die here
on this high, blood-soaked hill
than on some ice-covered street
in freezing Minneapolis.

PATHOLOGICAL

by Jadyn Krahler

Heat can numb;
cold can burn;
Thinking back on us, I feel so dumb.

Your trap is a paradox.
Like all your promised gifts,
I was wrapped in Schrödinger's box.

Fresh-eyed friends and family
offered words of warning.
However, sweet whispers swayed me.

Success encouraged lies more bold;
I'd say you have a silver tongue,
but Narcissus would boast one made from gold.

Vanity not your sole fixation—
power, control, secrecy—
varied ways to cover a traitorous relation.

And what of the knot we were to tie?
Years of laughter and love undone.
Was it all a lie?

Yet you still attempted to string me along.
Wouldn't cut me loose or even try.
Cowardly clung to someone you'd done wrong.
So the curse and comfort fell on me to finally say, "Goodbye."

RESTLESS

by Jadyn Krahler

Night drags on,
yet sleep refuses me relief.
Shadows grow longer,
but my mind wanders.
Trying to paint a dream,
I stretch the canvas.
First, innocent, innocuous strokes,
Pastel futures, colorful wishes…
Then, a smudge—
A smearing of anxiety
gives way to blurred memory.
Trickles of trauma…
Splashes of pain…
Pictures so clear, so cruel
interrupting inspiration
or, perhaps, summoned
by a marred muse
amused by darkening hues
and muddled shapes.
Indulging in my insomnia
'til all I have left is a
portrait of a tarpit
and the putrid
taste of turpentine.

ABOVE THE CLOUDS OF SLOPE COUNTY

by Shawn Krinke

for my mother, who walks when others pray

Every evening,
she ties her shoes in a quiet ritual,
calls the dog with a voice calm as dusk,
and steps out into the big-lunged silence
of Slope County.

No earbuds. No podcasts.
Only gravel and wind
and the soft patter of paws
beside her.

She meets the sky.
Not like a conqueror
but like an old friend.
Every step is a greeting,
a wordless hello
to the wide blue.

Some folks go to church.
She walks the section lines.
She doesn't need stained glass
when the clouds do the work just fine.
Doesn't need sermons
when the hills preach
with cottonwoods and cows.

When she walks,
she remembers how not to rush.
How not to worry.
How to listen
to what the earth has been meaning to say
all day.

And I, watching from the porch,
wonder how a woman so small
can carry so much peace
and not spill a drop.

She meets the sky,
and somehow,
in doing so,
brings a little of it back
with her.

SLOW GHOSTS

by Shawn Krinke

Slow ghosts stick around,
clinging like a cold mist
methodically haunting your favorite spots.

Year upon year.

One minute you're enjoying a coffee,
the next, the dead whisper their order in your ear,
souring your drink.

You fear them and you fear forgetting them.
Finding joy again is a betrayal.

So you watch for the slow ghosts,
your eyes clouding and your joints stiffening
until you're slow enough to become a ghost too.

GRAM

by Kimberly Larson

I couldn't see my Grandmother without seeing color.

I see row upon row of sealed glass jars—tomato red, purple beets, yellow pears and sunshine peaches.

I see the feathering pale lilac of her bedroom and the gold and white mirror winking in the sunlight.

I see acres of every shade of green as my toes warm in the dirt of her endless garden as I sneak another pea pod from the brown paper bag and pop it into my mouth.

I see a riot of purple and white when her Irises wave their hello to me when I speed past them on my bike, down the long driveway.

I know the very history of every polyester and wool square that make up the heavy quilt she pulls across our lap. How proud I was to be entrusted with the fate of "your Grandpa's favorite worsted wool Sunday suit" and the hideously purple print dress that was "my favorite."

The color of Grandma is stripped now as she lays in a restless sleep in the nursing home bed. All that remains are shades of white. The sheets and gown match her skin and hair. Even her eyes, open now and full of tears, are like faded parchment.

She doesn't know my name, but her paper white hand softly touches my face and with an invisible smile she says, "You've kept your hair long. I've always liked it that way, like mine, when I was little."

At home with my sons, the six year old karate-chopping his way across the living room and the baby softly holding a very private conversation with the curtains, I think and then smile. Gram's colors aren't forever gone. They may have been dormant for a while, but I still see them peeking around the corner once in a while.

Her home is mine now and screams with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle green, monster truck red and bubbles with all the soft pastels that come with a new baby.

This house hasn't raised a child in over fifty years. We are waking up the ancestors, my boys and I. And I am adding colors of my own. I know Gram would be proud.

MOURNING SONG

by Jordan Louks

A flash of red, brown, and beak
Haunting melody sweet on the wind
The sky, it's purple and orange
I gasp, almost forgetting it's ending
Their small yellow-black bodies
And fragile, light newspaper feathers
Soon only art will attempt to reveal
Twilight reverie and a flutter of wings
When will they go? Will it be quick?
Will we sing requiems? Will we weep?
Say that we loved them
Say that we tried our best
These descendants of apocalypse
Adapting season after season
Their ancestors' black gold
With our chaos makes them fall silent
Pew-pew-pew, eek-eek, and tweet
Sounds we'll learn is progress's sacrifice
After all: "Won't it just be wonderful
to have weather like Hawai'i?"

BLACK SHIRT MAN

by Gail Nelson

Sometimes, when I see people hug,
it might be a moment for them…
to enjoy,
to celebrate,
to grieve,
to fuse into one self.

But this time, a man in a black shirt
with his back to me, is standing in the aisle
frosty temples, noting respect; stoic and stiff.
As I glance up, I see
arms in a green sweater
come around on the black shirt man.
He is being hugged
and I can feel it,
novel,
warm,
electric…so out of place.

Laughter and sweetness follow.
Does this woman know this black shirt man?

Another woman, with blond hair, joins them.
They laugh and smile and talk in the aisle.
Are they strangers?
Are they family?
I can't tell. Only humans together at 30,000 feet above the earth.

He looks out the airplane window at the snow-covered earth below.
"Are we over Wyoming?" he asks.
She walks away, the green sweater woman.
He watches her walk to the back of the plane.

He waits.
She returns.
They talk…
…eye to eye
…Heart to heart
…Soul to soul.
We all want what they have.

SHARING MY YARD WITH A BEE

by Gail Nelson

In the spring
at the garden shop
I ponder…
What flower will make the best home for a bee?
Will she like this marigold rug in orange or maybe yellow?
Can this squash blossom be a lovely bedroom for overnight rest?
Will this pink rose make a luscious martini?
Can this red petunia be where she waits for a thunderstorm to pass?
After a long day, will she belly up to the bar for a gin and tonic?

One morning I invite her to have coffee with me.
"Thanks," she says, "I prefer tea with a bit of honey."
We manage to stay in touch the whole summer long.
Now, with Fall arriving soon, I am starting to worry.
I don't see her around and I'm sad.

Every year I've wondered and worried about her during long winter days.
How does she survive from season to season?
What would happen to me if I had to live outside, cold for months?
How does Mother Nature look out for her crew?
Mystery consumes me. How does the bee know how to make a life?
Who was her teacher? Who are her friends? Does she use Tinder to find a mate?

One chilly afternoon, as I'm raking leaves, I spy her sipping at the bee bath.
I see her rest her bumbly bee body, refreshed by a long drink.
She makes a note to call her realtor to find a warm place for the winter.
"Not going to freeze to death this year," she says to me.
"Ok," I say. "I hope you find a snuggly place with a lovely view."
"Let me know if you need anything," I call to her.
"Thanks for the martini," she says with a smile. "Let's have coffee next Spring."

LET'S THINK ABOUT EVERY UPSETTING THING THAT'S HAPPENED WHEN YOU'RE TRYING TO DO SOMETHING PRODUCTIVE.

by Jens Nelson

I don't want to do it, so I lose focus, I ignore the issue right in front of me, staring into the void. I hope the void doesn't mind, and doesn't find it rude to stare. The numbers and letters in front of my face are playing a complicated board game and I don't understand the rules. I start to wander away, further away, thinking towards heaven but walking to hell. Anxiety overtakes my body so quickly that breathing is a laboring task that—am I a bad person—what qualities define who I am—my head falls below the surface of the water I can't escape no matter how fast I swim—no matter how loud I yell—do people hate me—why can't I be the way I see everyone else what if I don't feel fulfilled by my dream—is everyone I love going to die soon—am I going to die soon—what if I fail—what if the people I love leave me—do people only see me as the person I was in high school—remember my dog dying—remember the emptiness at a party in the garage full of people—remember the handful of prozac in my sweaty palm—remember sitting in the group therapy not knowing if they really cared—remember the reaction from my family—remember the reaction from my friends—remember losing a friend to the rage of the glass bottle in his hand—remember the bottles that still scatter across the countertops every weekend—Maybe I should stop
So I open up my phone.

ON THE EDGE OF LIFE

by Riley Nielsen

On the edge of life,
A little girl dressed in pink
dances along the deck,
twirling in circles like an artist's ink,
flouncing closer and closer into a wreck
On the edge of life,
A mother cries in pain.
Her stomach tears in two.
Her life slips away as fast as pouring rain
as she gifts the world someone new.
On the edge of life,
A politician stands behind a podium,
preaching against the radical side
His words are laced with a relentless odium.
He has nowhere to hide.
On the edge of life,
A small business stares at the numbers.
The red line keeps clawing its way down.
Anxiety no longer slumbers,
the business is bankruptcy-bound.
On the edge of life,
A body slams through the windshield.
Sharp shards of glass scatter.
Every thirteen minutes, that's the deal.
They are now a statistic and do not matter.
On the edge of life,
A college student stares at a rope
tied in the shape of a halo
He has lost all hope.
Life is not a gift topped with a pretty bow.

On the edge of life,
Illness eats the woman's tissue,
killing her nice and slow.
She has no idea there is an issue
as closer and closer to Death she rows.
On the edge of life,
A baby sleeps sound.
He will not cry.
No one will know until he is found.
His mother will never get to say goodbye.
On the edge of life,
An old woman waits.
She has been patient.
The pain can no longer be abated.
She is ready.
On the edge of life,
Death lingers like a persistent cold
He is coming for you,
Young or old.
There is no telling when your time is due.

LOFTIER THINGS

by Michael Norberg

When swooping go the hawks for mice in fields of heather brown,
Pathetic seems my pillow, factory-made with feather down

To think such graceful race, on whom was brilliant flight bestowed,
Would suffer pride beplucked, encased, Egyptian cotton-sewed

Far greater is the forest's fate, whose lofty crown, once felled,
Is pressed and bleached, inked to relate all knowledge ever held

By man whose lofty heads are thus an ark of time's bright fruit
Which by the pillow's conveyance may safely sail the route

To lofty stars, celestial planes therefrom to mine, in dreams,
The brighter things which tell what life may be, from what it seems

CROSSINGS (THE POETIC HISTORY OF FARGO-MOORHEAD)

by Victor Pellerano

In 1871 a border town on the Red became
known as Tent City, Centralia or Crossings
that was what the local people said.

Then in 1872 it was renamed Fargo
after the director of the Northern Pacific Railroad
William G. Fargo

Today the sounds of Main Avenue keep the city's beat
Though in the past it had wooden sidewalks
and was known as Front Street

In the past Fargo was known as the divorce capital
of the west but as time progressed that was slowly
put to rest

These are the stories that "Crossings" can tell

Rails and Depots Riverboats on the Red
Gateway to the West the newspapers read

The sounds of the past still ring in church bells
Roads once dirt now paved where farmers had wells

Horseracing on the Red below that old north bridge
Trolley cars and steamboats a ski jump north of town

In 1893 a strong southern wind
Ignited the ashes thrown from a grocer's tin
The intense fire consumed much of Fargo's boom

These are the stories that "Crossings" can tell

In 1897 the Red River caused "The Great Flood"
Submerged most of the city under silt and mud

Though the boatyards and ice houses are now gone
Lights on the prairie still sing its song

Legends and stories may fade but never die
On the eve of Christmas in 1899
Moorhead's Chief Murphy was wounded that day
In an old-fashioned gunfight by a man named John Gray

In 1915 Clay County went dry
The saloons with their tunnels would slowly die
Like the House of Lords and the Jag wagon trails

These are the stories that "Crossings" can tell

In 1957 a tornado cut through the north section of town
Half a mile wide and only minutes on the ground

Landmark buildings now line the city streets
Where Trolley cars once set the city's beat

So Fargo-Moorhead still grows slow and sure
From ragged tents along the river to large shopping malls

Today the streets are full of traffic
If you close your eyes and listen you may hear
the sound of the Trolley cars' bells

These are the stories that "Crossings" can tell

WALKING IN CIRCLES

by Marcy Peterson

North

I am standing on the driveway of our country home facing north.

I see the house we so lovingly built; this was our first new home after 35 years of marriage. We had cleared the trees from this little hilltop to follow this dream.

In looking past the house, I see the rock garden that was built from all the rocks that were unearthed during the excavation process.

In the entrance to the rock garden is the arbor that my husband built for climbing roses. The flowers in my garden bloomed from early spring until the cold winter covered them with snow. Let them rest so they will be ready for next spring!

Beyond the rock garden was the thick bank of trees: oak, maple, and birch!

Under one of the trees is a small grave of my son's beloved little dog: The stone that marks the site reads, "Rusty, Oct. 25, 1996."

East

As I turn to the east, I look down the driveway and see the neighbor's land across the gravel road. There is a thick forest of trees. As the sun begins to rise above the trees, it illuminates our home with light and warmth.

In late summer, when the leaves are turning color, the sun shines on the maple trees making them appear to be on fire. Only God can create such beauty, and this vision stays in my mind forever.

South

This property belongs to someone else and is solid forest.

We went into the trees and looked for wild mushrooms. We found a few morel mushrooms that are a real treat.

There was a pin cherry tree on the edge of the trees by our driveway, and the birds stripped it clean!
I would use binoculars to search the trees for the elusive scarlet tanager. It was not easy to spot but catching a glimpse of the beautiful red body was worth the effort.

West

As I turn to the west, I know it will lead me to the trails that lead to the rest of our land. But first, I see the small bridge that is on a low area that fills with water in the spring.
There is an apple tree, a plum tree, and a large raspberry patch.
There is a large vegetable garden that provides us with fresh produce. The surplus is canned for winter use.
Beyond the garden I see the trail that leads to the end of our property.
There is a deer stand about halfway down that is used for the fall hunting season. The forest is inhabited by deer, ruffed grouse, fox, coon, woodchucks, squirrels and bear. We loved the wild animals, and they allowed us to share this land with them.
I, along with my husband, loved the land and had a great respect for the land, the animals, and the trees.
As I walked down the trails, there was a feeling of gratitude in being able to enjoy this part of God's creation. As I walk along in silence, I'm at peace.
I have come full circle!

SPRING MIGRATION

by A. Folan Prischmann

I heard them before I saw them
Dozens and dozens
Skeins and skeins
Scattered across the mottled sky
In uneven vees

Sides ever changing
Leaders alternating
Wings flapping in the April breeze
Winging the way northward
To nest, to brood
Along this oft-travelled
Migration path.

WINTER'S GRIP

by A. Folan Prischmann

after P. Bruegel's "The Hunters in the Snow"

A hamlet in the grip of winter, waits
As the vultures, gliding, soaring aloft,
Await the return of the hunters

Bone weary, heads bowed
Backs to the wind, hunched
Hunting dogs, lean
Noses in the snow
Still sensing.
Little to show as witnessed
By the unused arrows
In the quivers.

The frozen pond reflecting
The green bleak winter sky
The children,
Undaunted, unaware
Glide across the ice as
The vultures cross the sky.

Women, heavily garbed,
Work alongside the men
Stoking the large fire
The pig, roasting for the tavern nearby
Food for a hungry hamlet
In the grip of winter.

RETURN

by Linda Lee Sand

When the geese go
honking overhead
until you cannot
hear yourself think
and you know
they're getting out
of Dodge, blowing
this popsicle stand
bound for some
warmer land,

when the grass slips
from green to brown,
and the last tendril on
the pea pod has
shriveled and gone
to ground,

when the wind blows
through your bones

until all the alone
parts
    are whistling,

Listen.

to what
someone told me
once—

Somewhere the
geese have landed,

but they plan
to return.

JULY

by Gina Sandgren

Will July return to me
I lost her years ago
Slowly at first
Mistakenly thinking I had control
over anything outside myself
Yet culminating in a cascade of brutal truths
and desperate allegations
Sounds dramatic
Collectively, I guess it was
shaping things to come
Notwithstanding, July was tainted
Living where cold months outnumber warm ones,
I want her back
Not for her sunbaked harshness, but for her softness
Can you be soft and welcoming
A place to linger rather than fast forward
An alchemy of angst to acceptance
This crucible seems to be up to me
In that case,
I prefer she be a warm breeze
inviting the surrender of an afternoon nap
Welcome back



Will July return
I lost her a while ago
Quite dramatically

VESTIBULE

by Gina Sandgren

A poet from
my grandmother's hometown…
Will I ever write with such detail and vividness?

Walking home…
a paper bag floating in the parking lot.
It's always windy here.
Muffled voices in the distance…
The hum of the main drag or a nudge to look around?

Lingering gratitude for the Broadway bookseller…
supporting writers at a Thursday night salon.
Immersed in the mutual exchange of words and belonging.

Arriving now…
I punch in my access code.
A glimpse of myself
on the screen mirroring my image.
I see my daughter in that split second frame…
She's always wondered where she came from,
not recognizing herself in any of us.
Tonight, proof of that lineage
captured in the passage from
there to here.

UNBROKEN

by Kassey Sather

When did my daughter's jawline sharpen?
When did her cheeks flatten?
Everyday I wait for a quiet evening
To have a tiny semblance of my life before her
For solitude.
Only to stare at pictures of my girl
Preserved in this black box glued to my palms.

Will she know how much I love her,
If I don't love myself?

Daughter—
Will your courage free you to run toward what I didn't dare?
Will you speak without stuttering reluctance?
Will the bellowing voices
Screaming
You're
Too much
Not enough
Never
Quite
Right
…finally quiet?

Or did my
Pathetic tendencies
Doom you
Before you were ever in my womb?

Daughter—
Don't be like me.
A coward to your innermost longings.
A slave to others' feelings.

I ate the indigestible parts of myself at the
forcing of my mother
And regurgitated them into
Small
Sweet
Palatable bites
As did she
As did her mother

Mothers, so inconspicuously shattering hearts
Stealing sparks
Leaving behind hollowed children trapped in bitter women's bodies

You, Daughter—
Will never be hollow.
And neither will your daughter.
Or her daughter.

Even if my mother-wound oozes until I'm dead,
I'll stitch it behind a closed bathroom door,
And choke down the ugly feelings.
Axe every critical thought.
Alone.

So the daughters I will never meet
Are beautifully—
Unbroken.

BABY

by Adam Bryant Sauter

tell me again about the orchids, she said,
waning.
(ah)
Ten-fingered, ten-toed,
I told her what I could:

In the valley where Momma was born, a
long time ago, Grandma planted her garden.

but it wouldn't grow

But it wouldn't grow.
Until one day when she had all but given up

she threw the seeds!

Yes. (a smile can last an eon. I push the soft hair from her face)
She took all the seeds she had left
and tossed them all willy nilly (I love her forever)
into the dirt where nothing would grow.

and they grew...

Rest, it's okay.
Aye, she came back a few days later and
all across that patch of soil she had spent
so long tilling and digging and turning
there were hundreds of little green sprouts. And
a week later those sprouts had grown taller, and
there were more little sprouts about them. And now

in that valley where momma was born there
are Orchids as far as the eye can see (*I'll love you always*), and no one is ever sad or hurt, and no one is ever unhappy,

and Ange…

(baby)
And Angel runs and plays all day

THE BARN BY ZION

by C. Seim

playing Tarzan in the barn near Zion

we are city children we
sleep in narrow beds shared
with siblings all space is theirs
but when death
baptism or
some other holy sacrament pulls us up
across the fields
the neatly sectioned quarters we move
in splendid purpose
full formation in lines diagonal
to Zion
as we make our journey others come
as well from all directions
Cousins we are litter mates and close we melt
to one another: the barn is our domain.

in an aureola of light shining through
one perfect southern circle
a nest I make of hay and each to each
we our tiny cradles make then gather we
as day begins in this
our own creation.
A ladder climbs the western wall where from
a platform high
we naked fly on tethered tendrils tenuously strong wingless
  above our beds of alfalfa
sweet and greenly scented
we gently fall and

we are piglets tiny pink
and nestled one by one against
each other warmly gloved
suckled by our own creation: this barn is our domain.

Through an eastern wall we watch
the place where others sleep
at Zion
pine trees and lilacs surround Samuel
and tiny Hope at Zion lies

Sleep sweetly darling babes in peace sleep
Holy Spirit guard their blessed souls
while the stars burn 'til the moon ceases
and the great Ages around roll

Keep them in Thine arms
and let them henceforth be
messengers of love
between our hearts and thee.

The cemetery gate is iron arched and rusted
through the prairie grasses blows the wind.
All else is silent
Only memory remains
that barn was our domain.

THE WOMEN WHO KNEW

by Sarah Warren Smith

They knew.

I got a voicemail from an unknown number a few days after he died. It was a woman from the small town where I worked. I knew who she was. Her husband was my high school basketball coach. I remember playing with their daughter at practices when she tagged along.

She said *she knew*. And by the pain and strain in her voice, I knew she knew. I don't remember the words in the voice message, but I remember how it made me feel. There are others. I am seen. I am known. O my God she felt this pain too? How did she do it?

A few weeks later I attempted to go out in public. That might seem dramatic, but when you work in a small community, nearly every single person knows you. Every face you see, knows what happened. Every person you pass in the store, the gas station, the pharmacy, is a torturous game of some kind of twisted Russian roulette…are they going to look at me? turn around and walk the other way? acknowledge me? cry? grab me in a hug? rush to me? pretend nothing is different? I could never know. So, I avoided going back to town for weeks. Finally, I went to my sister's basketball game. I walked straight in and headed to the highest bleachers and didn't move.

I did it. I am doing it. Sitting here and watching basketball and pretending I'm not dying inside.

After the game, I see her. The mom who knew. She and her husband are looking at me and they are walking toward me. Now they are climbing up every step to me. I know I can't avoid this contact. She grabs me into a tight embrace.

I'm so sorry.

She pulls me away so she can look deep into my eyes.

You are doing it. I am so proud of you for being here. This is so hard and you are doing it. This is not easy and I see you here and I know how hard this is. You are brave. You are strong. I see you.

She repeated these words over and over, knowing exactly what I needed to hear even when I had no clue what I needed to hear. She knew. She knew that the seemingly simple act of getting dressed and driving to town and walking into a gym and seeing people, was actually a high form of physical torture for me.

Moments after the doctor told us our child didn't live, my mind raced. As he told me I needed to push out the placenta and he kneaded and pushed and pulled on my battered belly, I had a thought…*This doesn't happen.* Followed by *Yes it does.*

I thought of her. The young woman my sister's age. They were both pregnant at the exact same time. Her husband was in my high school class, we even dated a few awkward weeks my freshman year. She had a stillborn baby named Gracie, forever the same age as my nephew. Gracie's mom knew. *It does happen.* It happened to her. And what about all the other mothers? I was moments away from holding my dead baby and I thought of all the mothers who had done this before me.

I felt like I was finally a witness to their pain and they were a comforting witness to mine. I was not alone in this knowing.

The moms who knew, they carried me. Some lived in my time and many more were ancestors and angels who knew more pain than I could ever imagine. Mothers in war, in genocide. Mothers who never even got to see their dead babies let alone hold them. Mothers who watched their children die in their arms. Mothers who watched their children take their lives. Mothers who watched others take their children's lives. Mothers who watched others take away their children never to know if they lived or died.

They were there that day. And they knew.

RASPBERRY PICKING

by Abby Swegarden

It's August when I harvest and make jam.
I stir with a wooden spoon
shove a finger in the pot
and line my lips
with the seeded maroon.

Oh, Nostalgia!
drunk and ripe and swollen
with sun
with sugar
coats and catches my throat
hurts my teeth and haunts my mouth
thick as blood
thick as bushes

No wonder our grandmas sent us out here.

Limbs twisted around endless limbs.
Little bodies curved
around the sharp edges of branches.

Is this where red comes from?

Crimson, blush
scarlet, merlot.

I choke on the syrup.
I prick my fingers on purpose.

GOD RULES THE WORLD

by Veronica Weber

Wouldn't this world be unbearable
if each our future we'd foresee?
We'd know each turn, each joy, each pain,
and every outcome there would be.

Those who'd see their life as a beggar,
would smother in a life of shame.
One you'd see with his head held high,
was proud that he had foreseen fame.

Would it have changed the mind
of a dignified woman—so young—
if she'd have known she'd marry a man,
who'd perish with his own gun?

Would a new mother hesitate
to bring a child to life,
had she known he'd be a sinner
and lose his soul in the strife?

Wouldn't that 'someone' of yesterday
have been driven from his mind,
to know that a horrible accident
would leave him forever blind?

But God's been most kind.
He's shared that privilege, you see.
He has given a free will and mind
to his children—you and me.

APRICOT PIT

by Jack Wheeler

however sweet and somehow
however warm somewhere
a skittering white shelter and sprouting
blossoms here and there

in two hands an apricot pit
it, flowing over with the river
pattern, northern but unique
for whomever begs of givers

however much and who
which arms belong to you?

whenever quiet with corners
what do lovers do?

unstopped

however sweet, insatiable perennials
some dirt and like a loon

underjoyed

singing Whatever into parasols
I only think of You

WRONG

by Jack Wheeler

thumping miracles along

a rap upon my chest

wooden dry and wrong

seeing? something else

sullen and creaky, strong

eye saw a branch

to a lover, gone

RAIN

by Percy Wiegrefe

He can hear the rain falling heavily
on the roof as he lays in bed.
He can see it when he looks out the window.
He can feel it fall onto his face and hands
when he steps outside,

He can feel the rain.
He can see it—
the dark clouds surrounding the sky—
but nobody believes him,
for in reality there is no rain at all.

It is a bright, beautiful, sunny day,
and everyone else can see it.
They can feel the warmth of the sun
and the cool breeze,
and they can hear the birds chirping.

But he hears, feels, and sees nothing
but the dark sky, the heavy rain, the strong wind,
and he feels a sense of isolation,
knowing everyone can see the beauty of the sun,
feel the nice gentle breeze.
Yet, he's stuck with rain and darkness
that no one else can see.

"Why?" he wonders.
"Why must I be surrounded by rainfall and stormclouds
while everyone can see it's beautiful out,
and if I say a word to suggest otherwise, I'm crazy.

Will I ever see the sunshine
and hear the birds chirping
and feel the soft breeze in my hair again,
or must I live a life of darkness and isolation?"

He believes no one will understand his pain,
no one will listen to his cries,
no one will care for his needs,
when in reality, they call out to him with worry.
But he cannot hear
over the loud rain falling on his roof.

If he only opened the door to welcome the pain
he'd find help on the other side.
He'd find people who care, who will listen.
He just has to endure the suffering a little bit longer
and a little bit worse.

But once he does he'll find
the people waiting for him,
ready to welcome him,
ready to listen,
ready to care,
ready to tell him they believe.

FEAR PERSONIFIED

by Sheri Wien

Fear has followed me home.
It wants to keep me all alone.
A dark shadow that reaches far.
A chill, a lie, is what you are.

You suck the air out of the room.
In your heart is only gloom.
Safety feels like an illusion now.
I will not bow down, I will not kowtow.

Hope is a guest I choose to keep.
Out the door to you fear, you are a creep.
Hope comes in the arms of support.
Goodbye fear, your time is cut short.

THE BATTLE OF THE HERO ARKUNE AND THE DRAGON JAYREN

by Emberly Wobbema

Tail whipping, poisoned,
Slashing and stabbing.
Jaws snapping, breath flaming.
Shimmering scales, clicking softly.
Talons clawing, grasping, scraping.
Wings splayed,
Beating the air, powerful.
Hissing, low and guttural,
Defending his hoard,
The dragon Jayren.

Standing firm.
Bright sword at his side,
His armor strapped tight,
Defense against the dragon.
He stood before the beast,
Arkune the warrior.

The hoard of the monster:
Bones atop bones,
Bleached white and charred black.
Gold, silver, and diamonds,
A fortune.
And deep within the heap,
A living body, shaking, quivering,

But listening, still,
For the voice of his father;
Arkune's son.

Arkune stood, army behind him,
Pacing and ready.
His steed, Determination,
Reared and neighed.
The sword of Arkune, Destroyer;
His dagger, Defense.
"Where is my son?"
He roared in challenge.
"Release him, or face my blade!"

Fierce Jayren snarled.
"Your son will serve me,
As will your men.
But when I defeat your army,
You die!"

He breathed a cloud of noxious flame,
Determination stumbled,
Choking.
The army fell,
But Arkune forged on,
Fighting for the life of his son.
He found a shaft,
A path of air,
Leading to the open.
But Jayren waited, watching.

Arkune stumbled free,
Coughing and hacking.
He didn't notice
Jayren's gaze,
Which fell upon him,
And glowed with fire.

An instant passed;
The warrior scanned the clearing,

And instead of his son,
His gaze fell upon the dragon.
Once more he cried,
"Give me my son!"
But Jayren merely growled
And spat fire,
Aimed straight, a bolt,
Headed for the heart of Arkune.

Arkune dodged,
Being fleet of foot.
An idea, though,
Did hit its mark,
And he called out with excitement:
"My son! Cry out, and lead me to you!"

Arkune's son,
Sitting in the hoard,
Heard and heeded his father's cry.
"Father! Father!"
He shouted aloud.
But the hoard,
Thousands of gold, of silver,
Muffled the cry,
Muted it from the ears of Arkune.
But Jayren heard.

The dragon growled, and
Lunged for the pile,
His goal to silence
The voice of the boy.
He clawed furiously at the glittering heap,
The metals clinking against his talons.

Arkune roared a challenge,
Charging,
His sword held high.
Jayren swallowed his flame,
Lest the heat
Destroy his precious gold.

Turning to face Arkune,
The great dragon raised his talons,
Hoping to end
The life of his foe.

Before Jayren struck,
The great hero charged.
Arkune's blade, Destroyer, now faced its mark,
A weak point in the dragon's thick scales.
And as it plunged into the
Monster's pale flesh,
A scream,
The dying shriek of Jayren,
Pierced the air.
The dragon fell.

Weary, Arkune released his sword,
But his work was not done.
He dug, down,
Through the hoard,
To his son, who embraced him.
Together, they emerged.

As they approached
Arkune's waiting army,
The soldiers all cheered for the hero.
Jayren lay dead,
The monster that had stolen a boy.
And together,
In honor, glory, and joy,
The conquering heroes
Returned to their homeland,
Exhausted but happy.

CARRIED BY THE WIND

by ♥Zkye_New Town_ND

I send my voice into the quiet,
hoping the wind will find you—
soft, unseen,
yet strong enough
to carry what I cannot say.

Can you hear me
when I sing these silent songs of love?
Can you feel me
when every thought I have
drifts endlessly toward you?

My mind is like a battlefield—
where every thought
pulls me closer to you.
And in this silent night,
when the world finally sleeps,
it is your name
that lingers in the dark.

I lie awake,
waiting for hours that refuse to end,
held by a feeling
I cannot escape—
a love that moves like the wind,
restless,
searching,
never still.

My lips tremble with words unspoken,
but my heart—
my heart is louder than silence,
overflowing with everything
I have yet to confess.

I want you close—
closer than breath,
to exist in the same quiet moment,
to breathe you in
like air I cannot live without.

Tell me…
are my dreams close enough
to become real?
Or are they just whispers
scattered into the sky,
waiting to be carried away?

These are the secrets of my soul—
fragile, aching,
caught between hope and fear,
waiting to be freed
from the shadows of night.

If only the cold wind
could carry my hidden emotions to you,
if only the sun
could melt the weight inside my chest,
if only you could hear
what my heart has been saying all along—
the quiet cries
I release into the dark.

My feelings move like a whisper,
soft, trembling,
yet persistent—
hoping they brush against you
like a passing breeze
you cannot ignore it.

As the night passes that seems so endless,
I close my eyes
and let the wind take me—

and there,
in dreams shaped by longing,
I will find you again…

your smile
warm as sunlight after a storm,
the one that once touched me
and never left.

So I will keep sending my heart
into the open air,
into the unseen—

hoping that somehow,
somewhere,
the wind
will carry me
to you.

TRAILS

by Laura Zucca-Scott

Two sisters on the same bike
One small with blond curls
One tall with brown braids
They rode against the wind
and the harsh realities
of illness and poverty

That rusted man's bike
meant freedom within their reach
One the quiet protector,
One the fierce fighter
They never let go
of what little they had

Their mother told them,
Education is your future
Do not let anyone
convince you otherwise

Their father worked the fields,
his shirt soaked with sweat
The horror of the war
tucked in his heart
His pipe smelled of stale tobacco
in those long summer days

You kept riding until
you could not fit together
on the bike anymore

And your lives became
more complicated
Still, you did not let go
of each other

You left me your world
Your legacy
and open trails

FICTION

THE TREE

by John Anderson

A long time ago there was a village of very poor people. They worked hard and loved their families and friends. But they were impoverished and often did not have enough to eat. One day when several of the people were out foraging for food they came across a beautiful tree. It stood in the middle of an open field.

The people had been through that field many times but they had never noticed the tree before. It was a lovely tree with soft leaves, fragrant blossoms, and small colorful fruit. The people slowly approached the tree. In fact, they felt drawn to the tree. As they grew near a sweet calmness came over them. The shade under the tree had a coolness and serenity unlike any other.

The air felt fresher under the tree. Someone thought to pick one of the small fruits. The person took a small bite. Almost immediately her body felt renewed and strengthened. The fatigue that was ever-present from a life of struggle vanished. The hunger she felt all the time suddenly felt sated. Others began picking the fruit and eating. They were all very hungry. There was more than enough for everyone. In fact, as they picked the fruit multiplied, growing back on the same branch. Those who could not reach the branches were served by those who could. Those fruits grew back larger than the others.

After everyone had eaten, and there was much happiness and peace, one of the people said, "We must tell others about this tree. We must share this wonderful news!" And so they did. Each went back home and told their family and friends the good news about the tree. Before long, people were making trips out to the clearing to see the tree and sit in its calming shade and eat its tasty fruit.

And there was enough for all. In fact, as they picked the fruit it multiplied, growing back on the same branch. Those who could not reach the branches were served by those who could. Those fruits grew back larger than the others. And those who once quarreled with one another

now became friends. They worked together to pick fruit and serve those who could not reach the branches. And, as always, the fruit picked and shared grew back twice as large.

After a while the king learned about the tree. He said to his servants, "I should like to possess this tree. Then the people will come to me for happiness and food and life. And they will obey and serve me, and maybe even love me."

So, the king's men built a palace around the tree with sturdy walls to guard it. From then on, the people had to ask the king for permission to visit the tree. After a while some people were not allowed to come in. Perhaps they had angered the king or his family at some time. Or maybe they were behind on their taxes or rent. After a few years, hardly anyone was let into the palace to see the beautiful tree and sit in its shade and eat its sweet fruit.

All along the king had expanded his palace. He added high walls, soaring towers, beautifully adorned courtrooms and dining halls. Lovely rugs covered every floor. And expensive sculptures and paintings of the tree hung on every wall throughout the palace. But the palace got so large and so fancy that people forgot about the real tree. Most people gave up trying to get in to see the tree. In fact, even those who lived in the palace could not remember where the tree was. The palace had become so enormous that the tree was lost in some back courtyard behind several tall walls.

But a few people still came to see the tree. Although it had become almost impossible for most people to get inside, these few had stayed in the king's graces and they were allowed in.

And they remembered where the tree was. Every time they came the tree seemed smaller and not as vibrant. Without anyone to pick and share, the fruits began to shrink.

But the fruit was as tasty as ever. And biting into it still evoked an indescribable sense of love and calm. One of the people said, "We must share this with people. We have to find a way to get this wonderful fruit to our friends and families." So, the small group of people filled their pockets with the fruits to bring back to their friends and families. But when they walked away from the tree the fruit in their pockets turned into a gooey mush. The people turned out their pockets and poured the pulpy mess out onto the ground.

But within the mush there was one piece of perfect fruit. It seemed that for some reason they did not understand, each person could only take one piece of fruit away from the tree at a time. This saddened the people

because they wanted to bring enough home to give to their families and friends. But each person could only take one piece of fruit from the tree.

The people left the sprawling palace to go home, each with one fruit in his or her pocket. They figured they would eat the fruit later. They planned to return in a few days to see the tree again. But that night, in the darkness of the sunless back courtyard, the tree withered up and died.

On the way home, while thinking about what to do with their one last piece of fruit, the people saw a very poor family with young children on the side of the road. They were terribly thin and sick looking. The children looked pleadingly at the people, hoping for something, a small coin, or piece of candy.

One of the people could not resist. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the lovely piece of colorful fruit. The child's eyes lit up with happiness when she tasted the fruit.

Soon, the others gave their pieces of fruit away, too. The family cried tears of joy and thanked the people joyfully. Then the people turned and resumed their journey home.

They felt glad to have helped the family. But the people were also sad because they had given away their one piece of fruit. As they walked they put their hands in their pockets. There, each found a fresh piece of fruit, twice as big as the one they gave away.

DOT'S DEPARTMENT

by Mara Wilson Campbell

Latin taxonomy was not a required course for theatre majors at Baymont College. So, when the entire cast of *The Lion in Winter* was laid low by *Yersinia pestis* in the winter of '84, the administration's use of the formal name in documentation coyly concealed that bubonic plague was the culprit until weighty Latin dictionaries were consulted. Nor did it reveal poor Dot as patient zero.

Poor Dot. No one would have thought of her in life, and even in death she was cheated of the notoriety that sometimes serves as an epitaph. But Dot it was who spread the plague, and it happened in a peculiar fashion.

Dot was a campus courier, delivering mail and packages among the departments of Baymont. Physically she was unprepossessing and shaped somewhat like a teapot, with a large rear that banged on her legs when she stomped up and down the stairs in the daily discharge of her duties. Her colorless lips were the same shade as her skin, and when she smiled it looked as if it was painful. Though she never suspected, Dot was partially chosen for her looks. The previous campus courier, a friendly blonde, had struggled mightily to evade the rapacious fanny pinchers legion among the tenured faculty. The blonde courier lasted a month and was replaced by Dot, who was left unmolested. Quiet and courteous, she moved through her work with efficiency and trustworthiness. So much trustworthiness that she was given a master key, and, as is academia's wont, given more work than her pay justified.

Dot soothed her mind at the end of the day with that master key. She entered all the buildings on campus, all the faculty offices. She noted who was tidy, who framed their diplomas, who had an incipient drinking problem, and who kept a bottle of toupee glue on the bookshelf, partially hidden behind a coffee-stained, dog-eared text of On the Genealogy of Morals. More than once Dot had accidentally uncovered behavior that was sure to be the topic of the interdepartmental memos she so

assiduously ferried about. During her evening perambulations, she developed a taste for certain spaces on campus. None was more thrilling to her than the theatre costume shop.

The costume shop! Dot's entire limbic system rearranged itself in the presence of this cornucopia of personalities and imagination, realized in cloth. Sensuously she would drape herself in a silken toga. She'd lace up black Victorian ankle boots. She'd cover her face in white greasepaint, find the Queen Elizabeth wig used in Shaw's *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, and stalk the backstage hallways in a velvet cloak. Dot became another Dot, Dot became all the women of the world, Dot became marvelous, and Dot became Dorothea.

During the day, Dot continued to be efficient and trustworthy. The administration did not notice, and yet in their strange way they did, for as a reward, to her workload was added the charge to lay mice traps in the evenings, three times a week.

But Dot had a gentle soul and few living creatures to which to cleave. Her first evening laying traps was her last. As she bent down to place the first, she came eye to beady eye with a small *mus musculus* and recognized a kinship. She threw the traps in a dumpster and befriended the mice she was meant to destroy. She loved how quickly she overcame their fear, how they showed little traits that endeared them to her, as identifiable as the colors of different birds. Soon, evenings were spent in her solitary apartment depositing crumbs of cookies and crackers into individual envelopes for each mouse. An envelope for Reggie, for Kyle, for Zelda, and for Charles. But she saved a special bit of Sarah Lee cake for her favorite mouse, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

The theatre costume shop was preparing costumes for the Christmas production of *The Lion in Winter*. Dot's admiration was unbounded for the combining of silk, velvet, damask, and leather, but it was the fur that entranced her the most. Everything fur trimmed, everything with a glossy sheen of nuzzling warmth by the neck and wrists, trailing behind in cloaks, sweeping the edges of gowns. The most magnificent gown was Eleanor of Aquitaine's and by some small miracle of medieval sartorial grace, the gown fit Dot. It was only a short matter of time before the costumes were to be moved from the shop to the theatre building, and every night Dot reveled in the enclosing fur and the weight of the fabrics, the weight of the Queen's crown.

Though she spent hours in the costume shop, Dot never neglected her mice. She was troubled that Zelda and Charles had stopped appearing, that Kyle would not eat. When she noticed the itchy red welts dotting her

arms, she thought it was an allergy to the costume sizing or perhaps the vodka the costumers sprayed to keep the fabrics fresh. She didn't make the connection between her evenings hand-feeding the mice and the gradual physical malaise that overcame her. She didn't make the connection when she found Eleanor and Reggie stiff and cold on the floor of the music department. The flu, Dot thought. By the time she died, the fleas had already colonized the fur of the costumes; plague and all was moved to the theatre building.

Everyone got sick during dress rehearsals. What a terrible flu they thought. Each in their turn fell ill, the buboes grew. Understudies were called, and swiftly left the stage of life. The cast perished, one and all. The physicians were perplexed; campus was closed. It was only when a young doctor from India examined the poor soul who played Geoffrey that the flu had a name. The doctor had seen the plague before. Soon, the august campus buildings were tented and the ashes of the costumes wound their way with smoke into the cold December sky.

The Lion in Winter passed into Baymont College legend, henceforth as unutterable as the Scottish play. Poor Dot was forgotten but the winter of '84 endures.

MCGWIRE, NORTH DAKOTA

by Mara Wilson Campbell

Dusty is the king of The Paradise, a dive bar in the town of McGwire, North Dakota. The Paradise isn't much to see, but in truth, McGwire itself isn't much to see, and neither is Dusty. But he was born and raised in McGwire and The Paradise is his second home. A narrow wooden door illuminated by a neon palm tree marks the entrance. Dusty passes through it nightly, the pink and green lights sparkling in his otherwise lusterless hair. The bar is dimly lit and reeks of spilled beer. A clear front fridge displays the wine offerings, both red and white kept chilled in defiance of the existence of sommeliers. Hair band posters on the walls, a well-worn dartboard, and stained vinyl chairs complete the space. Here, Dusty shines.

He walks confidently up to the bar and makes conversation with the part time bartender, Cathi. Cathi is famous for her heavy pours, her ready laugh, and her nipple piercings. Dusty's drink of choice is beer, any beer. It goes down easy and with Cathi's liberal hand, he can be drunk within an hour. Smiling widely and wrinkling his reddened nose, Dusty loosens up with every sip. Tonight, perhaps, he will shoot darts. On very special occasions, Dusty will choose a song on the sulky old jukebox backed into the east corner. It is always "The Gambler." Dusty raises a glass to his compatriots, the other regulars of the Paradise. They return the salutation, half serious, half ironic. None of them cares about Dusty. None of them can see beyond the bottom of their glass, and the narrow scope of their own lives. The gesture remains, all the same, and Dusty feels he is one of the guys.

Dusty's wife owns McGwire's main coffee and lunch spot. A prematurely aging woman with an ikon's long face, she changes the menu daily. The food is soft and bland and the coffee tastes of stale cigarettes. The locals never drink it black. Her sister, a twin in every particular but age, operates the ancient till. When he is sober, or sober enough, Dusty helps serve the lunches. He does this with an oily grace that annoys the

society matrons gathering for their gossip. They sit with their blue curls tightly shellacked with hairspray to guard against the North Dakota winds, and they murmur with malice disguised as sympathy over the latest local tragedies. A bible study of young Christian moms sits on the other side of the shop, drinking smoothies. Dusty moves among them, refilling drinks and taking plates. The matrons shrink from his nearness, sour expressions unconcealed. The bible study moms say "Thanks, Dusty!" in voices too bright and perky with strain. They draw their lollipop sticky, petulant children closer. Dusty's wife looks on with a sad eye.

After closing, Dusty rides his Schwinn around town. He cycles aimlessly, hoping someone will call "Hey, Dusty!" and affirm his place in the world. Sometimes Dusty dreams of vacations, but his imagination is limited. For Dusty, a weekend in Fargo is a fantasy. Fargo has the only strip club close to McGwire. That costs money, however, and he rides and rides, killing time, waiting for The Paradise to open.

Once every two weeks, he goes to the barbershop. There are two in McGwire, Herb's and Joe's, and they share a building. The rivalry between the two is bitter and long standing, the result of a fight during childhood. They came back to McGwire to ply their trade and heaven help any customer who considers a switch. Both men specialize in bowl cuts. Dusty's choice is Joe's because Joe makes small talk with Dusty as he shampoos and styles Dusty's hair. He offers to trim his mustache and beard as well, but Dusty declines. He feels the beard gives him the air of an outdoorsman, a hunter, a bringer of trophies, something he has never been. It also serves to hide his many missing teeth.

When Dusty is done, his wife picks him up. She is always the designated driver as Dusty lost his license years ago. Together they travel to the Walmart in Kingston to pick up supplies for the coffee shop. These drives irritate Dusty. It's a long way between McGwire and Kingston and he can't drink in the car. He daydreams about The Paradise to pass the time. As soon they return, Dusty sits in front of the TV with his beers while his wife unloads the bags. He reclines his nicotine-stained blue La-Z-Boy. He chooses a show and a pair of Yorkies, aged and blind with cataracts, come to huddle at his feet. He pets them halfheartedly and the dogs startle each time, unable to see who is touching them, yet aware the hand is familiar.

Tonight is Dusty's birthday, passing unacknowledged but for a card from his mother, enclosing a crumpled $10 bill. He makes his way in the snow to The Paradise, where the neon palm tree looks especially incongruous in the middle of the North Dakota winter. He plans his

evening along the way, his boots crunching in the snow. Tonight, he will certainly play darts. If he closes his eyes, he can hear the thuds on the board, the low murmurs of the men arguing over the score. Tonight, he may switch from beer to Everclear, a Paradise specialty at 190 proof. He may even get up the courage to ask Cathi about her nipple piercings. Dusty is sure he saw one snag on the chiffon shirt she wore one memorable evening. She kept pouring drinks, seemingly unaware of how her shirt pulled provocatively against the metal. It's a memory Dusty brings out to fondle on those long Kingston drives. Sometimes life is beautiful, Dusty thinks. Tonight, Dusty will play "The Gambler" three separate times. He will toast to Cathi, The Paradise, the dartboard, and his wife and tonight, after last call, Dusty will stumble into the North Dakota night and be found dead the next morning, frozen and smiling.

FREE FALL

by H.E. Coffman

Nothing is more exciting than leaping out of a perfectly good aircraft into the blackness of the night sky, the great unknown, and being one with the universe.

The lone commando stared down the frigid, cold, hollow tube of the plane at the gaping black orifice of its open cargo doors. It, in turn, looked back at him, waiting to devour him like a giant mouth and spit him into the blackness of space. Blank red and green lights to the right and left of the door stared back at him empty. He had passed all his medical and physical fitness tests, rifle and pistol range qualifications, High Altitude, Low Opening, HALO, High Altitude, High Opening, HAHO, free fall, and static line jump certifications weeks before. They all said he was ready.

This is suicidal! What the hell was I thinking? Sitting by himself against the aircraft's bulkhead, the commando began to wonder if he had made the right decision. No one knew where he was, no one knew what he was doing, and no one knew he was on a special assignment, not even his closest friends. Even the rented German aircrew in the borrowed NATO C-17 didn't know his mission. All they knew was they were to fly a particular air route at a specific altitude, and a single passenger would jump out of the plane at a specific time and place. What they didn't know was he was to land hundreds of miles from the plane's flight path in a different country.

The jumpmaster gave the commando a few hand signals. Signaling back to the jumpmaster, the lone parachutist pulled the helmet over his head. The HUD heads-up display flickered to life, besieging him with intelligence data, temperature, aircraft altitude, airspeed, etc. Even though it was pitch black out, he could still see the earth's curvature, a thin blue arc, below as he looked out the rear of the mammoth aircraft. His mind flashed back to the first day in jump school. The instructor gave them a crash course on physics and the laws of falling bodies—how, from the moment a man leaps from an airplane, he will continue to fall faster and

faster each second until the pull of gravity and the friction of the atmospheric resistance are in perfect balance. There, at the region of terminal velocity, a man will plunge to earth at a steady rate of a hundred twenty miles per hour—unless he remembers to open his parachute. *God, I hope everything works!*

He straddled a one-hundred-pound utility pack in front of him. An oxygen tank rested on top of a Russian-made AK-47 assault rifle with a silencer. A hose ran from the tank to the mask he wore. He'd been pre-breathing 100 percent oxygen to purge the nitrogen from his blood for the last ten minutes so he wouldn't experience hypoxia or the bends. The helmet he wore was a specialized helmet with a heads-up display built into it. Looking to the right side of his visor, he scanned all his vital signs. His blood pressure was slightly up, but he knew his body was ready; mentally, he wasn't sure.

He had never had an anxiety attack in his life, but the night he left his house, his nose began to bleed. He did everything he could to make it stop. Grabbing a towel, he tilted his head back and tried to soak it up. Finally, he just sat in the shower letting the warm water wash the blood away. All his senses were screaming not to go, but he couldn't back out of being the man he was.

He stared at the altimeter display before him and watched it creep past 25,000 feet. This was the highest altitude he had ever jumped from. He was starting to second-guess himself. *What do you think you're doing?*

He wasn't used to the new rectangle competition parachute, which he used as a seat cushion. He would rather have his standard old airborne parachute. They hadn't changed much since World War II. They were twenty-eight feet in diameter when fully opened. Each chute contains a hundred and forty panels, and each set of five panels constitutes what's known as a gore. In other words, twenty-eight separately reinforced triangular pieces, or gores, are in the chute. *God only knows what's inside this one.* His parachute, as well as his outer jumpsuit, was thick, heated, and laced with the latest biometric sensors. It was made of highly classified, specialized, radar-absorbing material, rendering him invisible when he jumped. "Not to worry, I still have my backup chute," he whispered. *Not to worry! Shit! I'll light up every radar site within three hundred miles. If both chutes fail to work…well, no one will be there to gather me up.*

The commando closed his eyes and leaned back against the aircraft's bulkhead. He thought about his life and the people in it. A smile appeared. He could hear them now if they had known what he was about to do.

Suddenly the tiny red light above the door came alive, looking like a bright red beacon, lighting up the inside of the cargo bay. He knew the order was coming, yanked hard at his one-hundred-pound duffel bag, and retrieved it from the tight gap between his feet. Inside were all the tools he would need for his mission. He pulled the zipper, opened the bag, found a small tube of grease, black and oily, squeezed a thick stream onto his fingers, and rubbed it on his face, coating any part that would reflect the moonlight.

The jumpmaster, a Master Sergeant, faced the commando, giving him hand signals and yelling over the wind, whipping inside the cargo hold of the C-17. "Stand up! Hook up!"

The commando nodded, giving the jumpmaster a thumbs-up sign. He was too frightened to risk words. He was determined to control his quivering body, to hide the consuming doubt that took away his breath.

The commando stood and moved to the center of the empty cargo hold, hooking the static line from the chute to the cable above his head. The jumpmaster was there to help the parachutist up and waddled with him toward the orifice in front of them. They both stood on the lowered ramp, waiting for the green light, the commando with his one hundred pounds of gear and the jumpmaster, tethered to the bulkhead, holding on to him.

"Check equipment!" the jumpmaster bellowed over the noise inside the aircraft as he stepped behind the commando to check his chute, no dangling straps or buckles that might have come loose. The Master Sergeant tapped the commando on his shoulder and looked him in the eyes, giving him a thumbs-up. The commando gave the Sergeant a thumbs-up. The Sergeant guided the commando down the center of the aircraft to the edge of the down ramp.

The commando looked at the signal light, still red, and glanced outside again seeing nothing but blackness. Suddenly the aircraft's interior turned green, lighting up the whole plane. This was the moment the commando was anticipating. There was no thought, just training. He stepped forward, putting his arms out and was gone.

The commando stepped out into the void, allowing the wash to carry him away and down from the perfectly good airplane. He immediately felt the cold blast of air slam against his body. Hearing and feeling the air around him, all his fears left him. Now, he was himself again, in control and loving what he was doing.

Tumbling away from the plane, he straightened himself out, spread-eagled until he stopped in the horizontal position. He positioned his body

into a shallow dive, arms and legs close together, letting the law of physics take over. The airspeed on his HUD ticked up to 120 miles per hour. He had attained the region of terminal velocity. The facemask also showed air temperature, heart rate, adrenaline levels, heading, altitude, and angle of approach. *This was the closest a human being could ever come to perfection.*

The commando swung his arms and legs out, opening his wingsuit, the fabric slowing his descent. He watched the GPS and navigation systems on his facemask do their thing. Within seconds, the GPS kicked in, and a red arrow pointed in the direction he needed to fly. When he was within the tolerance of his flight path, a green arrow appeared, indicating he was on course.

A computerized voice filled his helmet. "25,500 feet, 24,000 feet, on course. Distance to target, 250 miles."

Christ, they make this so easy.

At 6,000 feet, the altitude buzzer for the automatic parachute activation device (APAD) went off, and a blinking red dot in his HUD indicated it was time for his parachute to deploy. The voice inside his helmet said, "Drag chute deployed." The commando felt the pull of the small drag chute deploy as it took him out of his glide path and slowed him down so his main parachute would open. He kicked his feet down. "Main chute to deploy in three, two, one," the metallic voice said in his helmet.

There was a violent jerk, and a bullwhip-like crack sounded as his main chute deployed, slowing him down even more. The parachute was fully open now and he grabbed the risers. He kept his gaze on the helmet's face plate watching the data being displayed. He scanned the horizon in the pre-dawn light and found his target just a few miles away. He spoke into the miniature microphone inside his helmet.

"Plot course to the landing zone."

"Course plotted. Estimated time of arrival is two minutes. Rate of decent normal. No electronic emissions detected." *Good! No one has seen me.* The commando followed the dotted green line in his faceplate to his landing zone. He manipulated the parachute lanyards, directing him toward his destination. He made a few more adjustments and circled overhead his LZ, dropped his pack as soon as he felt it go limp, and landed three feet from the spot he was supposed to hit. It was more of a controlled crash landing than a parachute landing as he slipped on loose rocks and rolled to a stop. The commando looked up, trying to find the aircraft that had dropped him off. It was long gone. *Hey*, he thought, *come back, let's do it again.*

THE TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

by Caleb Costrini

It had been forty scorching days. What little water he had brought into the wilderness was long gone by the time the sun rose that morning, marking the forty-first day of his fast. The sun's unrelenting heat had shriveled every living plant many days ago. In mere hours, the empty landscape would become a sizzling furnace with no water to be found for miles in any direction.

Jesus of Nazareth had been awake long before the first golden rays peeked over the distant hilltops. Forty days of no food and rocks for pillows made sleep nearly impossible. Every part of his body ached like it had never ached before. Even the hardened muscles of a carpenter, honed through many years' labor in his father's workplace, struggled just to function in such a hostile, unforgiving climate.

With a groan, Jesus lifted himself up and staggered to his feet. Sand fell from his tangled, matted hair into his eyes as he shielded them from the sun and peered toward the horizon. As usual, there was nothing there. All appeared the same as it had every day he had been out here. The Spirit had led him out here, of that he was certain, but whatever it was that the Father had in store for him in this barren wasteland had yet to make itself known. Perhaps he was being taught patience, being made to understand the restiveness and discontent that his children felt when the fullness of time in the divine plan seemed to them so long in coming.

So Jesus continued to wait, and as he waited, he prayed. He prayed as he had each day of his fast. He prayed for the steadfastness to continue in the holy path that the Father had set for him, for the wisdom needed to guide his children, and for the sustaining of the mortal body that he had been made to inhabit. Though he was no longer connected to the Father and the Spirit in the same way that he had once been, neither had he been separated fully. They had been with him from the beginning,

hearing his praises and his supplications, guiding him as they did mortals, filling him with the truth of who he was and the knowledge and understanding of his purpose on this lower plane of reality.

But today the Father was silent. Jesus, his eyes shut against the rising sun, hands clasped in front of his chest, could no longer hear the voice that had guided him since he was old enough to comprehend it. As he listened for the voice of the Father, he felt the absence of the Spirit as well. Having led him through the wilderness for forty days, the Spirit must have decided he had arrived at wherever it was he was being led to.

His stomach brought him back to the mortal world with a loud growl and a sharp ache. Jesus lowered his hands and opened his eyes. The sun was climbing high into the sky; he had prayed half the day away waiting for a response. Hunched over in the hopes of easing his pain, Jesus sat down on a large rock and pondered his situation. He trusted the Father as he always had, but even he couldn't help a feeling of uneasiness about this unusual silence. For the first time in his eons upon eons of existence, Jesus was alone.

No. Not alone.

As Jesus sat upon the stone, eyes upon the locusts and other little creatures crawling through the dirt, he became aware of a presence. Not merely the presence of the wild animals; no, someone else was out here in the wilderness. Somewhere behind him there was another person.

Jesus sat up straight and turned to look over his shoulder. Squinting into the sun, he saw that ten or so cubits away was another human form. A man, unassuming, nonchalant, perched on a stone in the blazing hot desert and casually eating a hunk of bread. He looked as though he hadn't a care in the world, as though he thought he was alone all the way out here and had simply come to get away from it all for a little while. Could he be a mirage? A hallucination? No—Jesus's mortal senses weren't lying to him. This man was just as real as he was.

Jesus's stomach churned at the sight of the bread. The man glanced up, seemingly noticing him for the first time, then smiled and waved.

"Hungry?" The man tossed what was left of the loaf in Jesus's general direction. A rock clattered to the ground in front of his stone seat. Jesus's jaw clenched as he stared at the rock that had just a moment ago been bread and his stomach rumbled once more. Hunger that even he couldn't control—after thirty years, it hadn't gotten any easier.

Footsteps crunched on the gravel behind him. With a weary sigh, Jesus stood and turned to see the man approaching him, that calm smile still plastered on his face. There was no longer any doubt as to his identity

or his purpose. Only one entity would be here facing him under these circumstances. The test the Spirit was leading him toward had finally arrived.

They had been allies once. Most glorious of all heaven's angels, second only to the Godhead itself in power and majesty, that one had truly earned his title as Son of the Morning. He had been a shining and beautiful star, a dragon wreathed in wisdom's flame. He was the pinnacle of created beings, a matchless warrior fighting for the glory of God. Unrivaled in beauty, in splendor, and in pride.

His true name was no longer spoken. No longer was he called by what he had been, but by what he had become. The titles were as plentiful as the abominations that he had committed in his own name. The Tempter. The Deceiver. Worthless One, Lord of Flies, Prince of the Earthly Kingdom. And most clearly and concisely of all, the Enemy.

Satan.

"Not hungry?" Satan shrugged as he approached Jesus's seat from behind. "I suppose I should have known better. After all, no father would send his own son into a desert like this without anything to eat."

He paused, waiting for Jesus's response. Jesus, for his part, was silent, refusing to give the devil his satisfaction. When no answer was forthcoming, Satan's jaw dropped and he slapped a hand to his forehead in a melodramatic expression of shock. "No. Surely no. Surely he hasn't sent you all the way out here with nothing?"

The expression of shock faded into a look of gentle understanding. As though suddenly realizing his teasing had gone too far, Satan nodded once, his lips drawn into a thin line, and laid a gentle hand on Jesus's shoulder. Jesus felt a surge of anger at the touch but controlled his instinctive response, unmoving.

"I understand how it feels," Satan spoke softly. No longer even looking at Jesus, he was staring off toward the horizon as if remembering something from the far-off past. "To spend eternity revering, loving with your whole heart…and beginning to wonder whether the one you so respect feels any respect for you. To realize that you were never loved at all, but merely a tool to obey their every whim, to be used and discarded once you had served your purpose…"

He sighed deeply, looking down at the ground and closing his eyes. Then his hand dropped from Jesus's shoulder and the old carefree exuberance returned to his face. "Well, anyway, it's not as though you're helpless out here. I know you've got power. After all, you're his son, aren't you? All you'd have to do is speak and these rocks would become bread."

The idea was tantalizing. Jesus had to admit that. Even as Satan spoke to him, the pain in his stomach sharpened once again. It would be so easy. Just one small loaf of bread would ease his pain so much. Surely the Father did not mean for him to perish in this wilderness, surely he had fasted long enough by now…

Behind him, Satan was speaking again. "Though now that I think about it, it's been forty days, hasn't it? You must be on the verge of starving to death. Certainly, anyone who could have fed themselves would have done so by now. You *are* his son, aren't you? That's what he's told you?" Satan broke off his speech, a new look of concern entering his eyes. "You don't think…?"

At that point Jesus knew he could not let this continue. Forcing himself to ignore the pain in his abdomen, he stood with effort and looked into the face of the being standing behind him.

"It is written in the Scriptures," Jesus spoke with difficulty, for his lips and tongue were parched. "'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.' I have come to this wilderness not for bread, but for the Word of my Father."

A flash of anger crossed Satan's face, though it was instantly replaced by a look of sympathetic understanding. "Of course. Of course. You always were devoted to the Father, weren't you? None of the angels could match the love that you showed for him, and I see that your new body hasn't diminished your heavenly spirit one bit."

Satan walked forward and looked Jesus in the eye. "But you're naïve. That's always been your weakness. You spent so much thought on your love for the Father that you never once bothered to wonder if that love was reciprocated. You should know better than anyone that love, true love, must go both ways."

Satan turned and spread his arms to encompass all that could be seen. "If you're going to be residing on this plane, especially to carry out this mission that he's sent you on, this is something that you'll need to consider. Have you ever thought about it? I mean, *really* thought about whether the Father feels the same love for you that you feel for him? You assume that he'll sustain you, but does he really care enough to do so? You know as well as I do why he's sent you here. It ought to make you wonder, where do his priorities actually lie? Look down there."

Jesus followed the line of Satan's arm down to the direction in which his finger pointed. Expecting to see the same dirt and rocks that he had seen every day for over a month now, he instead saw paved streets and a

bustling crowd. Down below were buildings and people, a city, instead of the wilderness.

Not just any city, no less. It was Jerusalem. Looking about him, Jesus saw that he and Satan were now standing atop the highest point on the temple in Jerusalem. None of the people below seemed to notice their presence.

Satan was speaking again. "You cannot accept that someone loves you only because they say that they love you. They have to prove it by their deeds, by their actions, because love by itself is worthless without the good works to support it."

Jesus looked back down at the crowds below. "And so, you've brought me to the temple?"

"That's right." Satan nodded affirmation. "What has the Father done for you lately? It's about time that he proves his love to you, don't you think? After all you've been through, it's the least he owes to you." Satan gestured to the edge of the temple roof. "Jump. Throw yourself off the roof. Make him prove that he loves you, that he *needs* you, by saving you from the fall. Don't worry, I'll be there to catch you if he doesn't feel like it." Satan flashed an impish grin.

Jesus, perched on the edge of the roof, gazed out over the city. The height activated his mortal body's fear response and he felt a wave of dizziness wash over him.

"Pretty high, isn't it?" Satan's unsettling smile hadn't faded. "But if you really are his son, whom he loves, you shouldn't have anything to worry about, should you? After all, isn't it written in the Scriptures, 'He will command the angels concerning you to guard you?' And, 'On their hands they will lift you up, so that you do not strike your foot against the stones?' The prophets were divinely inspired in so many of their writings. Perhaps it was foretold what you are meant to do here?"

Jesus tore his eyes away from the drop and turned to look at the smiling face of his tempter. Whether he wanted to confess it out loud or not, these same doubts had surfaced in his mind before. To go from ruler of all creation to yet another flesh and blood creature was jarring. The lives these creatures lived, the pain they felt, the temptations they endured were all awful to experience. At the very least, such trials were below his status as the ruler of the cosmos. And Jesus knew the worst was yet to come. The tribulations he felt now paled in comparison to the approaching inevitability, the looming specter that had haunted him all his years on this planet. He dreaded it, he had to admit, the pain and the

humiliation. This existence was torment. Why would the loving Father of all creation force him into such debasement?

And then the face of the man who had raised him rose unbidden into his mind. The man who was not his true father but had lovingly filled that role anyway. The man who had cared for him and his mother when everyone else turned away, the man who had remained faithful throughout so many burdens he had never expected to shoulder. Before Jesus had come into his role, Joseph the carpenter had been there to guide him and to teach him. Even now Jesus could see his smile, could feel the rough but gentle hands on his own, guiding him as he worked the woodcutting tools for the first time. The young boy with his undeveloped mind had not always understood why Joseph had withheld what the boy wanted or made him do the things he didn't want to do, but as Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, he came to understood that his earthly father was wiser than he had been then. Joseph had not been perfect, but he had done what he did always with the good of his son in mind.

Sometimes the two of them had taken a few extra pieces of grain and gone outside to feed the birds. The sparrows would happily eat the grains that were tossed to them, but Jesus knew that they didn't depend on him and Joseph for food. The Father sustained them, just as the Father had sustained Jesus throughout his life on Earth. If the Father cared enough to provide for the sparrows, how much more would he care for his own son?

Jesus trusted the Father. No matter what Satan told him, Jesus remembered the Father's presence nearby all his days. Jesus loved the Father and he knew the Father loved him as well. Even if the presence of the Father and the Spirit felt far away at times, Jesus knew they were never truly gone. The Father had a plan, a good plan, and Jesus would continue to follow in that plan, trusting in the Father's love along the way.

His eyes focused and the waiting face of Satan became clear again. "It is also written in the Scriptures, 'Do not test the Lord your God,'" was all that Jesus said.

This time the anger in Satan's face did not pass. His voice, once soft and beguiling, now held a razor's edge. "Do not test the Lord your God. Do not question the Lord's will. Do not think or reason or do anything but blindly devote all your energy to the pleasure of some higher being. Have you ever, even once, spared a thought for *yourself*?"

With visible effort, Satan calmed himself. He stepped forward and grasped Jesus by the arms. "Jesus son of Joseph, you have been very patient with me. You have endured my teasing beyond what I deserve,

admittedly. You've allowed me to badger you with questions and try to make your tired mind work hard. I'm sorry; I'd forgotten how spent you must be after so long in this harsh and unforgiving wasteland. That was unfair. Forgive me. But please, indulge me one last time. Allow me to get to the true heart of why I came to speak with you."

Satan looked directly into Jesus's eyes, still gripping him by the arms. "Allow me to be serious now. You and I both know why the Father sent you to this plane of reality. For *them*. The Father's favorite new playthings. The little friends he created for himself after he became bored with the angels. You're going along with the Father's plan, of course, because you never bothered to think about whether there were any other options. But what if I told you there was another option, a better one?"

Once again Satan pointed out toward the horizon and once again Jesus looked. Where just minutes before his field of vision had been filled by the streets of Jerusalem, now he could see all the way outside the city walls, the place that they called the Skull. Now standing atop a mountain, Jesus could clearly see the remains of the prisoners that had been tormented to death at the last Roman execution. Soldiers laughed and joked with one another as they cut down the crosses, tossing the bodies to the eagerly awaiting wild dogs without a care in the world. One of the men lifted his spear and threw it into the midst of the dogs simply for the fun of it, his comrades cheering him on as the wounded dog dropped to the ground with a pained whimper.

"The Father loves these creatures," came the whispering voice in Jesus's ear once more. "I cannot fathom the reason why. What you see down there only scratches the surface of their barbarism, and yet he loves them enough to value their lives over his own son's. You were willing to go along with the Father's plan when you didn't know any better, but now you've had over thirty years to live among them and experience it all personally."

A sinuous hand caressed Jesus's cheek from behind and at its touch Jesus's mind was flooded with visions. The voice whispered again. "Look."

Fire and smoke rose as a village was surrounded and burned.

"You've seen them at their worst."

Screams and roars filled the air as a crowd cheered.

"You've felt their cruelty firsthand."

A whip cracked and shackled prisoners were herded aboard a slave ship.

"Surely you must have wondered…"

A switch was flipped and a small room flooded with gas.

"Are they really worth it?"

The hand was cool and steady against Jesus's skin. The voice became seductive and alluring. "It's your destiny to rule over them. We both know that. But do you really need the Father peering over your shoulder and making you his puppet king? I think not. One way or another, you are now separate from him. You don't need to wait for him to give you your kingdom. You can take it."

Now the ground rose beneath Jesus's feet. He was lifted up, higher than the clouds, until his view extended far beyond Jerusalem, far beyond Judea. He could see Egypt, where he had spent much of his childhood, the tombs of its great kings towering above the sands. Beyond Egypt was Babylon, the splendor of its gates and gardens on full display.

Jesus was lifted higher and higher until he could see all the world's kingdoms below him. The mighty empire of Persia was there, as was the sparkling white marble of Greece. Beyond that was the majesty of Rome, encompassing all he had ever known in his earthly life. Further east was Serica, its magnificent wall fluttering with banners of brightly colored silk as far as the eye could see. And past that were nations and empires too numerous to count, too vast to be measured, expanding across the land and across time, covering the earth with beauty and grandeur in a testament to the spirit within humanity.

"Magnificent, isn't it?" Satan whispered, his hand brushing Jesus's shoulder. "Why wait and hope that they'll come to you? All of this could be yours to own, to rule. Instead of letting the Father force you to submit to them, make them submit to you.

"I can help you. It's not too late to join me. What does the Father know of humanity? But you and me, we've been living among them, living as they do. With my help you could break free of the Father's control and take your rightful place as ruler of this world. You've suffered enough; why put yourself through any more pain? Reject the Father, turn to me, and I'll give you what you're here for, but sparing you the agony and the humiliation." Satan stepped back from the cliff's ledge, arms folded, grinning smugly as he waited to hear Jesus's response.

But by now Jesus had tired of this game. He turned and the kingdoms of the world faded into mist, replaced once more by the Judean wilderness. Jesus walked unflinchingly toward his enemy, meeting the gaze of his enemy with a cold stare until they stood eye to eye.

"Go away from me, Satan," Jesus said quietly. "For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

Satan stepped back from Jesus's glare and something contorted within his countenance. For a moment his face was not the man's face that he wore, but the face of his true self: weird, vast, ancient, and utterly beyond the false human form he had taken. Then it was gone and replaced by the man again, with eyes hard as steel and a mirthless upward twist in the corner of his mouth. "So be it. Here we take our leave of one another, Jesus son of Joseph. But my offer still stands. If at any time you want to give me more consideration, you know where to find me. After all, I'm never far away."

Satan spun on his heel and walked toward the horizon, one arm raised as his form faded in the sunlight. "The game has begun, Nazarene. I look forward to its conclusion."

Jesus stood silently, watching until the man in front of him had faded completely and he was alone once more. The game had begun indeed, he thought. Soon he would embark upon his mission in earnest. He had passed the Father's test and his reward would be further testing of his body and soul, but Jesus would rise to the challenge. The Father's plan was righteous and his work on Earth through his Son good. And as the angels descended from the heavens, the presence of the Spirit and the Father returning with them, Jesus looked out across the sands and smiled a smile of satisfaction.

THE ATTIC

by Lyn Dockter-Pinnick

Rosa pressed her face into the corner of the window, trying to see where the sirens were coming from, almost losing her balance as one foot slipped off the folding chair. She saw nothing out of the ordinary. Just cars; and at the corner, the familiar sight of people in orange vests, bundled in winter coats and boots.

The sirens continued. Maybe a fire, she thought.

Returning to their bed, she picked up her laptop and resumed her homework. Across the large room, her mother, at the kitchen table, was staring intently at her own laptop.

Rosa prodded her new filling. The Novocain had left her entire jaw numb, so her mother kept her home after the dentist appointment.

Suddenly her mother slammed her laptop shut and grabbed her phone.

"Rosa, come here! Now! We're going into the bathroom, just like we practiced."

Rosa closed her laptop with a loud sigh.

"This is stupid," she muttered.

Her mother grabbed her and shoved her into the bathtub, in a bathroom not much bigger than a closet.

"Stay here," her mother hissed, yanking the shower curtain closed.

Rosa stared angrily at the back of the shower curtain, seeing mold on the flowery, plastic fabric. She could hear her mother tapping on her phone. She wished she had brought her laptop. At least she could be doing homework.

Her mother always overreacted.

Then, she heard pounding on their front door. They lived in an attic apartment at the top of a large house.

She peeked around to see her mother's ear flat against the door.

"Mom? What's going on? Who's at the door?"

She was embarrassed at how scared her voice sounded. Not like someone who was nearly thirteen.

"Shhhhh…"

Rosa hugged herself, suddenly cold.

The knocking continued. Finally, she heard her mother slowly push open the bathroom door.

"Camila! Come to the door."

"Mom, it's Sarah," Rosa said, as she flung back the shower curtain.

"Don't! Stay there!"

She could hear her mother letting Sarah into their apartment. Sarah was a friend who had offered them the apartment after her father had been sent back to Mexico.

Finally, her mother opened the door. Her mother grabbed her and hugged her, which made Rosa even more afraid. What had happened? Was her father dead?

Sarah was sitting at the table. Her mother pulled Rosa with her to the table. Rosa wanted to be anywhere in the world but here.

Sarah blew her nose loudly, and then spoke.

"A woman has been murdered; over on 34th and Portland. I heard the sirens and walked over. It's a mess, with ICE agents everywhere. It's not safe out there. You can't go outside again."

Rosa's brain had just processed that they weren't talking about her father.

"Can't go outside again? We hardly go out now. I mean, I go to school and Mom works from home. We never go anywhere!"

When their father got taken from the Mexican restaurant where he worked, they heard nothing. They cried and held each other and accepted the outpouring of kindnesses and food from their white neighbors. Unfamiliar foods multiplied in the refrigerator. They tried something a woman strangely called a hotdish but the macaroni with tuna and no spices was tasteless to Rosa.

Then, late one night, people came and moved them out of their apartment to this much smaller attic apartment. Rosa figured it was about money. She asked no questions. At least she still got to go to school and see her friends every day.

Her beautiful mother looked suddenly old and stared down at her hands.

"Wait, do you mean, I can't go to school?"

Sarah nodded.

Rosa exploded. She got up and headed to the door, but her mother grabbed her.

Wrenching herself free, she ran back to the bed, grabbed her laptop and headed to the bathroom.

She stayed in the bathroom until she heard Sarah leave; then she went to the bed. Finally, exhausted with grief, she fell asleep. She woke to the smell of frying hamburger and realized she had slept hours.

"I'm making tacos. Why don't you come over to the table and eat."

Reluctantly, Rosa went. She realized she was hungry.

"A woman named Renee Good was shot and killed by ICE not too far from here today. She was trying to help people like us. She had children; one very young. It is not safe out there. You can do school online. I already put in the request and apparently, all of the schools are allowing it."

Rosa struggled to make sense of this. She was born here and her mom was a naturalized citizen. How could they be in danger? And she was to be away from her friends in this attic? Hiding?

Her mother set a plate of tacos in front of her and went on, "Sarah is going to bring us supplies once a week. She doesn't want to do more often to draw attention to this apartment as she's not sure about the neighbors behind us."

As Rosa ate, she realized that the blinds over their few small windows were tightly closed. It wasn't as late as she had thought. It was just so dark in the apartment.

She pushed her plate away, her appetite gone.

"How can this be happening to us, Mama? You are a citizen. I am a citizen."

"I know, but it is true. They are picking up brown people who are citizens just like me and they are even using their children to do it. That's why I can't let you go to school; they might follow you home."

Rosa gasped, and then she started to cry. She cried for all that was lost.

Over the next days, Rosa became increasingly depressed although her friends were supportive and frequently texted her. But it was always about news from school. She ignored them. When she wasn't doing homework, she slept. One day, searching for something for a class, she stumbled on *The Diary of Anne Frank*. She hurried past it; too real.

Then, one morning, Sarah, against all the protocols that had been established, came upstairs during the day and pounded on the door again.

Without waiting for them to respond, she used her key and rushed in, "It's happened again. Only this time, a man; a VA nurse. ICE killed him."

Rosa ran to her mother, and started to cry. She no longer worried about looking like a baby.

While her mother held her, Rosa closed her ears to their voices and pictured herself floating above them. She wasn't here. She was back in their other apartment. Things were fine.

When she woke up, she realized she had slept until morning. She could tell by the birds she heard outside. Her mother was in the same clothes she had been wearing the previous day, and, surprisingly, she was watching the news. Rosa cautiously settled beside her mother and her mother wrapped her arms around her.

"Look," her mother said. "Thousands of people marching in the streets. Not just here in Minneapolis, but everywhere."

They watched, city after city. So many people, marching.

"Rosa, I can't watch this happen without doing something, too. I can't hide anymore."

Rosa gripped her mother's hand, terrified and silent.

Later, driven by Sarah, they went to a neighborhood center run by the Immigrant Defense Network. Her mother became a volunteer and Rosa began doing her homework there, while her mother worked. Sometimes Rosa helped watch little children. They left very early in the morning and came home very late, always under the cover of darkness.

But, Rosa didn't cry as much and she felt proud as she watched her mother work.

It felt like hope was rising.

And, so they persevered, through the darkness.

EVP SESSION #454

by T.J. Fier

Alice parked her rusty Honda Civic outside the cemetery yard and yawned. Driving several hours to the middle of nowhere after a long shift at work had better be worth it. She cracked an energy drink and grabbed her black backpack full of ghost-hunting paraphernalia.

The cemetery was appropriately creepy with a rusting iron front gate and moss-riddled grave markers. Even the oak trees were of the leafless, twisting type. Maybe Alice would find evidence of a ghost or two after all.

Alice finished her energy drink, belched, and pushed through the creaking gates. A fall-chilled breeze buffeted her light jacket. She tugged the zipper under her chin and scanned the landscape. According to Dave, her ghost hunting guild leader, the mausoleum at the cemetery's center was "super haunted."

Of course, Alice had jumped at the assignment. If she wanted to move up through the guild's ranks, capturing paranormal evidence was necessary. Especially after her fellow apprentice, Neil, showed up with a remarkable EVP last week.

"Fucking Neil," Alice muttered as she drew her K-II EMF meter from the backpack. She couldn't stand Neil with his know-it-all attitude and expensive ghost hunting gadgets. He was the type to rattle on for hours about the differences between ghost boxes and the exceptional quality of his binary-response device, because, *blah, blah, blah*. Some people had too much money to waste.

The decrepit mausoleum was easy to spot. Between the thick layers of moss, water stains dripping down the stone eaves, and the encroaching fog, the building screamed, *"Find ghosts here."* A thrill trickled down her spine. "Alright, Mr. Dead Guy, here I come."

She fired up her EMF meter and cleared her throat. "Hi, I'm Alice—a paranormal investigator. You're probably scared or frustrated because no one listens to you. But I'm here to listen."

Unlike the men in her guild, Alice preferred a gentler, more conversational approach. Let the ghosts get to know her before she pumped them for information. Neil loved to provoke. He would say outrageous things to the dead because "An angry ghost is gonna wanna show off." Neil was such an obnoxious ass.

"I heard an unfortunate story about the person who haunts this place." Alice circled to the back of the mausoleum, swallowing a squeak of surprise when a mouse scurried past. She wasn't squeamish about vermin. However, she startled easily, which worked against her as a ghost hunter. The guys were always trying to scare her during investigations. Jerks.

"The story was about a young man named John Alexander." Alice stood in front of the mausoleum entrance, her EMF meter stuck at zero. "He fell in love with the wrong woman. She married a rich guy with a big house. John Alexander was so heartbroken that he ate some lye and died. Are you here, John?"

The trees created frightful silhouettes in the swirling fog, branches like twisting claws against the fading sky. Alice's EMF flickered, rising to 5 volts per meter, then returned to zero.

"Bingo." The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. "Is that you? Do you know you're dead, John Alexander?"

Her EMF detector hit 10 V/m. She tugged out her digital voice recorder from her backpack and clicked it on. "This is EVP Session #454 with Alice. Time is just past sunset on October third." She cleared her throat and held out the recorder. "John Alexander? Can you give me a sign? I would love to hear your story, or anything you want to share with me."

Alice held her breath as a cold sensation pressed against her neck. Yes! There was something here, alright. If she could catch something, then maybe her guild would—

"Who the hell is it this time?" A deep voice tickled her ear.

Alice yelped, dropping her EMF detector.

The voice chuckled, "Jesus, you've got a set of pipes."

A presence hovered behind her right shoulder, no more substantial than the fog.

Alice thrust her recorder toward the presence. "Who am I speaking to?"

"Take a wild guess, lady."

"John Alexander?" She turned her head, but the presence evaporated. "T-thank you so much for offering to speak with me. I know it can take a lot of energy to do so."

"Meh, it's not that hard." The voice grumbled in her other ear. "The living rarely are worth talking to, anyway. And who said I ate lye? Who eats lye? Yuck."

"Then, how did you die?" Alice's hand quivered, and she almost dropped the recorder. Neil was going to eat his hat when he heard this.

"I had a bad can of tomatoes and died of botulism. Not the worst way to go, actually. Thought I drank too much whiskey, but nope. Just rotten tomatoes."

"So, you didn't kill yourself?" Alice tried one more time to catch a clear visual of the ghost. Once again, he dissolved into the dark.

"Nope. Died of plain old bad luck."

"Sorry to hear that, Mr. Alexander." Alice grinned to herself. "What's it like being dead?"

"Please, call me John. Eh, not so bad. I haven't been too lonely since Jack joined me a few decades ago. Say hi to the nice lady, Jack."

"Hi, to the nice lady," a voice sniggered in Alice's face.

"Fucking shit!" Alice almost dropped the digital recorder.

"This one's gotta mouth on 'er," Jack sniggered.

"Well, you scared the poor woman. Anyway, nice to meet you, Alice. Jack and I are heading to the next cemetery over to hang out with the Gibson sisters. Hope you got what you needed."

"Thanks," Alice laughed. The look on Neil's face when he heard the dead men's voices would be priceless. "You have a nice evening, too."

Alice sensed the two figures leave. She switched on her cell phone's flashlight, hands trembling from the unexpected encounter. They would have to move her up to journeyman after—

"You've got to be fucking kidding me." Alice turned the voice recorder in her hands. It was off the whole time. She let out a long, calming breath. No reason to panic. She could fix this. All she had to do was find the next cemetery over and two grave markers labeled "Gibson."

Alice turned on her heel, praying the Gibson sisters were as talkative as Alexander and Jack.

THE RISING SUN

by Alex Grotte

Her first client of the day transmitted such grief and negative emotion into her that the rest of it (her day) was a serious struggle. After work (only two more clients before 4:00 p.m.), she drove home to her suburban apartment complex with her windows down on a great wave of despondency. For the millionth time since a decade ago, when she began this variety of work, she considered how maybe it wasn't for her. Turbulent personality types are often too fragile and full of doubt to not bring this kind of work home with them always, she of course knew only too well. And for the millionth time again, she could feel in her subconscious a quiet and convicted resolve that told her to suck it up and what she did was more important than herself. In times like these, when the sun was out in the late afternoon, and the city was full of gaseous traffic, she often thought of Bukowski's depraved poetry, and how it resonated (although not acutely) with the gloominess she frequently felt inside herself. (Despite the feelings of despondency, feelings of complex and remote hopefulness also laced in with the threads of her life.) *If only*, to get away from it all, to spurn and spite all of society, while maintaining a quiet love for humanity and a silent admiration for the artistic life. Maybe only the depraved can really get away with it.

As she arrived home, a text notification sounded from her phone: a text from her one and only true friend (which, even she was only more of a friend in theory than in practice, that is to say, they used to spend quality time together, but not so much anymore, indeed rarely), and this friend was the only person in the whole world that she fundamentally, regularly game a damn about, truly. She was hanging her keys and putting away her jacket in the entryway, golden and angled sun leaked in from her apartment windows, as it does when all interior lights are turned off, and she stopped for a moment before entering the kitchen to read the text from her friend.

"How's life been treating you lately?" read the text. She sighed deeply, locked her phone screen, and set it on the kitchen counter. With deep breaths, she attempted to let the silence of the apartment permeate her soul, and after a brief moment there, started the water on the shower (it always took a few minutes to warm up), undressed in her bedroom where she could immediately put her day's clothes in the laundry basket, and walked nakedly through her apartment to the shower where she would spend the next twenty minutes psychoanalyzing herself, talking to herself, reaching various complicated and unresolved conclusions, and she would finally step out to apply moisturizer while her mind continued running, humming like the industrial gray electrical box that sat out near the entrance of her complex.

"How's life been treating you lately?" Her eyebrows raised, and she laughed out loud. The first client of her day that had so affected her emotional-body was a radically, suicidally depressed lady who, like many of them (us), had serious issues with loneliness, anxiety, isolation, connections to herself, others, the natural world, and so on and so forth. This morning was particularly bad because she (her client) had just lost her job, due to her mental illnesses and unforgiving company policies, and was now teetering on the brink from passive suicidal ideation to active suicidal ideation, in which case she of course would have the duty to warn, which is always a messy and heartbreaking business indeed. This inherited suffering thrummed inside her with a sense of uneasiness that nearly made her vomit. She sat down at her office desk as the sun continued to fall in the sky and through the windows, winding down the day the same way she could feel her spirit winding down into a cold evening. She picked up and began to read APA's latest AJP, but even the first entry was so abstruse and academic and dully technical and spiritless that she again threw it aside, at least for tonight, and decided instead to practice some breathwork. Box breathing: a five second inhale through the nose (ensuring to breathe through the stomach/diaphragm and not the chest), hold for five seconds, exhale through pursed lips for five seconds, and hold empty lungs for another five seconds, repeat.

After such, she saw again the sun's continued descent, feeling only very slightly more mindful. She stretched her neck and looked up some specific sections in the DSM-5 that she had be wondering about that day, glancing over the information without quite perusing (she knew how most people egregiously misunderstand the word "peruse" to mean essentially something like "absentmindedly leafing through something," that is, while it actually meant "to read or examine something thoroughly and

carefully"). This made her curious as to if her English usage dictionary had any entry on the topic, but she was too lazy to check and consciously decided her spiritual torpor was the way for the rest of the evening. Enough clinician (human?) for a day; she began to get ready for bed.

Sleep spindles took over right as she was on the very edge of unconsciousness, and she suddenly jolted and came out of them in a flurry of wild thoughts and associations that felt as if they took place on another plane of reality entirely separate from her own, now again woken and conscious, state. Frustrated, she growled and hurled a weak fist into the mattress, knowing the opportunity had just slipped and now she wouldn't be able to get to sleep for at least another couple of hours. The sun was completely gone; she lay staring up at the ceiling, trying to make sense of the patterns that the very dim ambient light (which entered from another room via a slightly cracked door) formed by casting strange and complex shadows along its uneven surface.

She grimaced with multitudinous worries about her client, and she was struck with a guilty feeling for not texting her friend back. She wondered what they were both doing right now. Her client was likely doing exactly what she was currently—lying in bed with worry and suffering. She imagined her friend was only slightly disappointed a few times throughout the night due to her own lack of response. Her stomach felt hot, and she clenched her fists hard. (Are you still following?) It wasn't until hours later that she was finally able to get to sleep, not more than three hours before she was supposed to be up and ready for the next day.

The few hours (night) eventually passed by with mostly restless dreams.

And in the morning, where consciousness (broader awareness) was always faint, as she brushed her teeth, combed her hair, and prepared her coffee, for those brief minutes, before any strange idea, ragged thought, or sinister feeling could reach her, before any humanly complicated tragedy befell her, before any of the voices in her head were there to interrogate her, for this vague and fleeting time, she was happy. And she went to work.

THE END IS A BEGINNING ON LONE TRACTOR PLAIN

by Mark Holman

On a stretch of level plain in what had been the northern plains of what might or might not still be the United States, an old tractor stands. The day after the bombs wiped the prairie clean, all that remained was the old tractor beside the burned remnants of a cottonwood tree. Yet, after the bombs, only the tractor was visible on the horizon—flat prairie reaching as far as the eye could see in every direction. Moments earlier, a hunter had relaxed by a fire in the great tree's shade, eating and marveling at the setting sun. Now, nothing remained but the tractor. Through fall, winter, and spring, the tractor endured until the blackened earth turned green, as though the nuclear fire had been no more than an intense prairie fire, cleansing and renewing the land, shedding an old skin for a new one.

After the atomic war, the sun rose and set, rose and set, rose and set. Years passed, and life went on, but not quite like before. Humans had pushed the buttons, but only because an unseen interconnected world had pushed buttons on them that they could not see. That first spring, the world around the tractor was dominated by invertebrates, as if returning to some Precambrian past. The ants were the first to emerge from the ground. The colony beneath the old tractor, shielded by its bulk, had survived better and emerged as if it were just another spring. They moved across the burned-over earth toward carbonized lumps near the charred rocks of a fire ring. Like their ancient ancestors that swarmed over the carcass of Tyrannosaurus Rex sixty-five million years before, a thousand formacids swarmed over the bounty on their doorstep, having outlasted yet another seemingly dominant species. As the weather warmed, the lumps began to take on the smell of fuzzy mammalian death that, had there been noses to be offended, would have hung in the air like a toxic force field, sticking in the olfactory passages like an inky goo. In time, the

smells attracted a variety of creatures, entomological, mammalian, and avian. Most died, but enough lived to keep life going.

It wasn't long before burgeoning life returned. A new cottonwood tree sprouted in the shadow of the old tractor, on the small island between a pile of rocks and the broken machine that stood out on the plain of the broken world. The farmer had left the tractor after it broke down, and he would not be back. So it remained alone. Many things were left undone in a human world that had been so busy but was now quiet. Much of the busyness had been against life. In the absence of humans, life surged back into all the spaces it had temporarily been held at bay by the selfish machinations of machine man.

Surrounded by the emergence of new life on the prairie, as it always did, always had, and always would, the tractor waited. For a long time, no one came because there was no one left to come and look in a place where there had been few people, even in the pre-nuclear holocaust, pre-climate change time, survivors began to call the Before Time. Those who survived here and there and in bunkers, fallout shelters, and places somehow not destroyed were too busy surviving to worry about much else. The nuclear war had been little more than a coda to a long, drawn-out drama in which humans pushed the boundaries of ecological limits until the holistic whole, which is the interconnected, interrelated everything that is, was, and always will be, rose up in rebellion. It has many names, Gaia, Mother Nature, Mother Earth, Biosphere, all meaning an inseparable whole with many parts. The Whole, as it would later be called, like a vast all-inclusive pond, connects everything living and nonliving to everything else. When something causes ripples or waves on its surface, it seeks to calm what was upsetting the balance and restore the glass-like calm of homeostasis. The Whole turned up the heat, clouded the air, and sent pestilence both as a warning and a fig leaf, hoping humans, a species with an important place in the Whole, would stop rebelling against it. The bombs were sent as much by the Whole as by the opposing sides, who couldn't see that their rebellion against their place in the nature of things was the cause of all their problems. The Anthropocene, the brief moment when human civilization moved the world, like a rock thrown into a pond, was nothing more than a brief ripple on its surface.

It was some time before humans returned to the shadow of the tractor and tree. The next year, in late summer, almost fall, a group in a military vehicle stopped. Wearing protective gear emblazoned with insignia, they emerged from their vehicle's shell to inspect the tractor. They had received no rescue and endured in their subterranean facility as

long as possible. When their supplies ran low, they set out, sticking to the roads until they found the tractor. They examined the old machine, hoping to find clues to others who might still live. In the months since the blasts, the tractor, stripped by nuclear fire, had rusted a bright orange-brown in the summer sun. They approached on foot, looking for reminders of a world they understood. More than that, they wanted to touch a piece of the past so recently erased. Walking back to their vehicle through the drying grasses, insectlike in their breathing apparatus and suits, they quickly moved on. They drove away toward the horizon to where only the wind remembers.

A few seasons later, a solar-powered tactical vehicle with three survivalist preppers came upon the tractor after leaving their bunker in search of supplies. Though provisioned for years, they ran out of the countless little things made by civilization that even the most prepared couldn't prepare for. Seeking others and surviving civilization, they drove their solar-fueled machine following the broken roads, hoping to find anyone. In time, the complex product of complex civilization came to a halt, for there was no longer a complex civilization to keep it running. The machine stopped and joined the corroding hulks it once sped past on the old road. For want of a small, cheap part resembling a nail, the large machine—the zenith of the tool-making Before Time—was lost. It came to a stop amid a dense stand of six-foot-tall stalks of turkey-footed big bluestem grass that was recolonizing a prairie from which it had been banished by grasses and crops more amenable to the self-serving geomodification of machine civilization. As the old machines came to a stop, grasses returned, pushing through the surface of even the hardest roadways.

The complex civilization of the Before Time had nurtured people to believe they could be separate from everything and live in a sort of cocoon, but a cocoon, while protective, also cuts the inhabitants off. Just as the veneer of complex civilization led humans to believe they were somehow apart from nature, it also led them to believe they could be separate from each other. Fictions piled upon fictions, the fallible tools of civilization allowed people to live in bubbles that reinforced fictions. At its height before the Unravelling, privileged humans relying on the largesse of wealth had ensconced themselves in cocoons of imagined separation. Those with means bunkered themselves in a hierarchy of increasing security and comfort, while those without banded together because that was all they could do. In time, those with means found themselves groveling at the door of those without.

A woman and two men emerged from their cocoon and entered a chrysalis of transition, becoming new people for a new world. They stepped onto the road and saw a tall band of grass following an old fence toward the horizon. Their high-tech vehicle failing them, they grabbed what they could and began walking. Following the ribbon of tall bluestem, they soon spied the tractor and walked toward it. Armed with assault weapons and fancy tech, they now had to carry what they needed. Leaving their bunker, they had expected a world like those in catastrophe books and movies, but instead found something more like cosmic horror: travelers lost in space, on an indifferent planet with little hope of meeting anyone. Arriving at the corroded tractor, its rust deep brown, they admired the young tree shading it. They touched the old machine, seeking connection to a lost world, and noted how oddly low the radiation was. One quoted from Edwin Muir's poem *The Horses* about tractors rusting and becoming soil, heralding the return of horses. As they sat in the shade, reflecting on the weight of their transition, the woman said, "I sure wish we had some horses," as they began to transform into new people for a new age.

As they rested, they leaned their assault rifles against the tractor. The woman began to speak, pointing to the rifles: "Without bullets, these things aren't much good anymore," she said. "I'm out of bullets. How many have you got?" she asked, looking at the two men.

"I'm out," said one, while the other said, "I have one."

"Might as well leave them here, just one less thing to carry," she said.

As they stared at the old tractor, hoping to glimpse signs of life from a world consumed by nuclear fire and unpredictable weather, one bullet man, consumed by his own fire, dropped to the ground, lost in a world without the things he depended on. Like the dead tractor and solar vehicle, all complex technologies were dying.

"I'm going to stay here for a while," he said. "This is the nicest spot I've seen. I'll catch up and meet you at the old concrete grain elevator marked on the map. I just want to rest and think a bit."

He sat with his back against the tractor, listening to the cottonwood leaves rustle and watching seeds float by on the wind as the others walked away. A new world was dawning in which some would make the transition and some would not. From the tractor's vantage point, while the two stood at the edge of the horizon, they glimpsed the tops of a giant grain elevator complex, its pearly-white silos gleaming in the sunlight. As they moved toward the towers and out of view of the tractor, they didn't hear the crack from somewhere behind them over the sound of the wind. Like

the first people in many creation stories, the man and woman walked toward the horizon to begin the world anew, as had been done many times before. They moved on—where to, only the grasses remember—as the pace of humans returned to what it had been for most of its history—that of a walk.

Time moved on, years and decades passed, and radiation dissipated before the next humans arrived. As new generations of brightly colored radiation-sensitive cats and deer shed their hue as radiation levels dropped, people returned to the plains. When they finally arrived to take their place in the way of things, the tractor would be waiting. Seasons and storms came and went, came and went, came and went, and wildlife that could return flooded back into the breach: bears, buffalo, and wild cattle wallowed at the ephemeral pond, enjoying the capacious shade of a now-gigantic cottonwood tree that stretched its hanging, fountain-like branches over the water and surrounding land. In time, as new generations of Ray Cats and Ray Deer displaced their neon colored parents with the more muted hues of normal animals, people returned. In the final days of the Unravelling, when the old world was collapsing, what was left of the government set up safe zones and danger zones by releasing genetically altered animals into the landscape that would show danger when no tools to measure it were available. After the animals returned to normal once again in response to the falling radiation, a large nomadic group of almost a hundred came over the curvature of the earth toward the tractor and the tree on the old road.

In the distance, at the edge of the horizon, from the vantage point of the now giant cottonwood tree and tractor, a cloud of dust appeared. In time, the cloud materialized into a group of some kind of creature walking and kicking up dust. More time passed, and individual people began to emerge from the mass. As the group moved closer, individuals could be counted by the various colors of their attire. Reds, yellows, greens, and blues stood out. Closer still, different shades of skin put heads, arms, and legs on people, while logos and symbols on clothing that may or may not still have meaning became visible on the walking assemblage. Some were pushing and pulling a variety of carts and wagons along the low grass of the raised road, while a few dogs, goats, and sheep trailed alongside. The heat of the day was oppressive as the temperatures climbed toward dangerous levels in the fickle, unstable climate of the present. It could become one of those days when the normal dry heat gave way to a deadly humidity the elders called a wet bulb. It meant no matter how much one drank, sweated, or shaded themselves, the body couldn't cool itself.

People died in such events. The summer before, they had lost almost half their number, mostly children and the old, when they were caught with no shelter or way to cool themselves. The weather in the present, often shifting from hot to cold to dry to titanic storms, along with spots of high and low residual radiation, kept the human population always on the move in this region, making survival a struggle.

As they approached, a wizened-looking grey woman gestured toward the gigantic cottonwood tree shading the pond, which still held water from torrential rains a few weeks before. She climbed up a berm near the island and began to speak as everyone gathered along the edge. She balanced on the edge of a gash in the earth that looked like an open tomb from some lost age. The embankment had been eroded in spots by the recent rains, revealing the rusted iron and almost petrified wood of a long-buried fence line. "If today turns into a wet bulb, pitching our awnings under the shade of that tree and dousing ourselves with water from the pond may help us to survive. Let's hope it is enough. I am leading us to a place my grandmother told me about that offers the cooling of a cave, even in the hottest summers, but we need to get there first."

As everyone moved to set up, a boy asked a few of the older people, "What is that?" pointing at the tractor. Younger people and children looked to the elders whenever they encountered a machine they had never seen before.

"That's an old tractor, they were used to dig the soil to grow food," said a man who looked to be somewhere in the last quarter of his life. "My grandfather used to drive tractors on farm fields when he was young. People used them until they couldn't get fuel to power them, or the EMPs fried their electronics. That is a really old one, though, long before even my grandfather's time. The tractors took too much and gave back too little, like too many things in the Before Time, and so they sit."

He tried to explain to the children concepts that were completely foreign to them, from the world he dimly remembered from his own childhood. A world of plenty, a world of more than enough for some, too much for others, but too little for far too many. He wondered: "How do I convey the concept of a time where there was more comfort than could be had in a thousand lifetimes? If one had money that was." The group he was part of, cobbled together from families and survivors, shared everything, and wealth was looked on as something to be used in common, because what could one do with it anyway? Wealth was invested in the group because the group was the only wealth. Without the group, there was no survival. Those older than him, the elders who had passed

on, many of them in the previous year's wet bulb, had taught him that for a brief moment in history, humanity had been consumed by the pursuit of everything for the one by sacrificing the many, which was an inversion of how people should live. It led to the cataclysm that divided the Before Time from the present, which was really just a return to the way things had always been, except for that brief moment when humans thought they were gods.

As they moved to the edge of the pond, small groups of men, women, and children began setting up camp. Like one big human-powered machine, and as if by muscle memory, small groups began to erect tents and awnings around the edge of the water where the canopy of the tree reached over the pond from the island, blocking the midafternoon sun. Others began building a cooking area to be used after the air cooled, while others began filtering water for drinking and cooling. In a short time, everything was set up, and people retreated to the shade of the awnings, some dousing their headgear and others immersing their bodies in the pond water for added cooling. Several hours passed as the sun moved beyond its peak and as the day began to cool, people began to move again. Fortunately, the margin of cooling brought by the shade and water was enough, and everyone survived. A fire was started, and a soup of preserved meat, prairie greens, and vegetables began to be cooked. The camp worked like a well-oiled machine, noiselessly and with such efficiency and practiced precision that few people spoke. It was the age of human machines that did most of what god-like machines had done to excess in the Before Time. As the work was completed and the meal was ready, it was twilight. As people gathered around the fire to eat, laughter, singing, conversation, and storytelling continued far into the night. Around one of the fires that night, a young man brought out a gun he had found when going behind the tractor to relieve himself.

"That's an AR-15, a type of gun from the Before Time," said one of the elders, one of the few to remember such things. "They were both popular and infamous when I was young."

"Maybe we can clean it up, and it might be useful if we find some bullets," said a strong-looking middle-aged man. "If not, it is pretty high-quality steel we can use to make tools with."

The elder smiled and mused aloud, "Swords into plowshares, as the Bible says."

"What are plowshares?" asked a young girl, marveling at the rusty piece of metal.

The elder replied, "They were used to dig the ground behind machines like that old tractor over there and probably made the dirt blow over that fenceline long ago." Almost talking to himself and waxing philosophical, the elder went on, "One can ask whether it was the plowshare or the sword that was more responsible for the demise of the Before Time world I grew up in." The gathered children and young people looked at him without comprehending his rhetorical question. "Did the sword beget the plowshare, or did the plowshare beget the sword?" he continued. "The world I came from was all plowshares and swords. Back and forth, back and forth, plowshares into swords and swords into plowshares, round and round. One destroyed people, and the other destroyed the earth. Swords to move people off the land so that plowshares could exploit the land. They built civilization, erasing swords like nuclear weapons and planet-consuming plowshares like corporations, finance, and stock markets, and then combined them with the ultimate plowshare and sword magnifiers, digital technology and artificial intelligence. Of course, the plowshares brought much that was good, but at a great cost. Like the tractor over there, the plowshares took more than they gave. In the end, it became possible for people in the Before Time to build and wield plowshares and swords simultaneously, and to put them into hyperdrive. They drove the plowshares and swords until they couldn't be driven anymore."

"Why did that happen?" asked another girl. "Weren't there elders to guide people in the right direction? Weren't there taboos about things that were sacred?"

The man thought and said: "It was a time without elders or taboos and little that was sacred. An upside-down time when nothing was built for the future, and instead everyone lived for the present. The whole civilization was built around a religion of buying, consuming, and throwing away, and doing it again and again and again until it couldn't be done anymore, and so here we are." He went on as more children and the young gathered around to listen, even though much of what he was saying was confusing; he was their only link to that strange time. Trying to further explain such arcane concepts, he tried to use an analogy the kids might understand: "The young man who found the rifle when he was relieving himself behind the tractor shouldn't have done it where it could even have a chance of coming in contact with the water we need to use. We are very careful about keeping our water clean, but those of the Before Time were not. That tractor used to have a pipe that spewed its toxic excrement into the air. Imagine the air filled with the excrement of millions of metal

beasts just like that? The people of the Before Time lived as if we all decided to relieve ourselves right here and now, then roll around in it. They put their waste into the air and water as if it were normal." Voices of childish disgust and giggles arose from the gathered children as they imagined a time when people rolled around in their own excrement. "Things used to be mostly nice, but they purposefully sprayed waste into the air and water, and now it isn't. That is why, when we go through the ruins of the places of the Before Time, like Fargo a few days ago, we don't eat anything or drink the water, because in the time I grew up, they built everything embedded with poisons and spread them around."

A young boy in his teens asked, "I don't understand why they spread poison everywhere if they knew it was bad?"

The elder continued, "The people of the Before Time were consumed by buying things and throwing them away to keep a peculiar, inexplicable thing called the Economy moving. The Economy was like a pushcart that needed to keep moving as fast as possible, no matter what. Anything that moved the cart was considered good, even if it was bad."

A tiny girl spoke up and asked, "I don't understand throwing away. Was it fun to throw things? If they threw things, wouldn't they just have to pick them up again later?"

The elder laughed at such an erudite question from such a small girl and replied, "Waste was the point. The only way I can describe waste to you is to call it excrement because they were excreting things to keep the system moving, just like we do, so we can eat more food. Without excrement, people wouldn't need anything new, and the Economy would stop. When I was young, there was a massive waste-burning, electricity-generating plant that powered a data center for an online game I used to play called *Winner Take All*, which had billions of players. The goal of the game was to take everything from everyone, no matter what it took. The only rule was to win, even if you destroyed everything in the process. I remember the 'We Can Do It!' advertisements featuring Rosie the Gamer flexing an arm while holding a fistful of plastic trash, and others that said: 'Keep Buying and Throwing Away for the Sake of the Future!' People needed to create enough waste to keep the fires burning so we could keep playing the game. We consumed the planet and burned it up just so we could sit and play games in an artificial world while the real one was being destroyed."

A reflective teen stood up and asked: "If their religion was buying and throwing to keep a cart moving, who was their god?"

The elder replied, "They worshiped many things, but most of all, everyone worshiped a god called Money."

"What's money?" said the boy.

The man laughed slightly as he stared at the stars blinking in the sky. "Exactly, young one! People are funny creatures, able to hold many ideas in their heads that contradict each other, yet they can still believe they are all true. Things like, 'I can keep living the way I do, and everything will be ok in the end.' When we do something, we think of who will come after us, we think of generations not yet born, we think of the time we will return to this spot and use it again. They didn't think like us. None of that matters now. They made this world, and now we need to just live with it. I remember when my parents and grandparents apologized to me, saying that they hadn't done enough to make a future for me. I was too young to understand that the world I grew up in was slipping away around me, or to understand the helplessness of my elders to do anything about it. I'm sorry too, children, but I was too young to do anything to stop it. This was done to us by the people in the Before Time. You never knew and will never know the world I grew up in, and maybe it is better that it is forgotten." So many of the things the man said were confusing and lacked context for the young in the present.

A young woman, seeing the confusion on so many young people's faces, tried to summarize, in a nutshell, what the elder had just said. "The world our elders grew up in was a bit like when the berries are in season, and we are lucky enough that the weather doesn't destroy them. We think it is the best of times, and they will never end. They are so good, but we know that if you keep eating them, it will make us sick, and there will be none left to save to dry for later in the winter. In the Before Time, they just kept eating those berries, believing they would go on forever. As if there was no tomorrow. They ate all the berries before we were born."

"Is there anywhere out there that is still like the Before Time?" asked a young woman in her teens.

"Maybe," said the elder, "but it is impossible to know. There were rumors in the time of my parents and grandparents of places people fled to as things started to come apart. One place people flocked to was called The Humane Republic, where all the disappearing comforts and technologies were said to still exist, but at a price. But, there was nothing humane about it, and it was no republic. As the world began to unravel, the Republic, created by some corporation or something like it, had somehow grown in the vacuum left by collapsing governments and institutions. The price of entry was said to be signing over your life to the

"republic," but in the living horror of the imploding world, many were willing to trade anything for a secure bubble of certainty. I think my parents really considered it when I was a child, the year we almost starved, froze, fried, and were almost murdered. It was said at a certain point, after years of plenty and of giving birth to and raising children to work for the Republic, that a time for the old would be chosen. An old man like me can impart little but the kind of wisdom I share with you now, but it was said the Humane Republic had little use for that. In a world short of fuel, water, and certain types of labor that machines couldn't do, having it all just walk through your gates had become a solution. Some said it was all perpetrated by a few elites and their AI servants or overlords, but no one was sure which. Some said it was just a machine, running a program written by long-dead technicians that would keep running as long as people kept coming to its gates and allowing it to perpetuate. Of course, maybe that was as it had always been in the old world of the Before Time, an evil machine, invented long ago, that kept on running because people kept feeding it by walking through the door."

For a brief few hours, it was quiet, only interrupted by the notes of the birdsong flutes played by sentries to signal to each other that all was well at regular intervals. At first light, the undoing of the process the afternoon before was once again set in motion as the human machine reversed itself, deconstructing what had been built the day before. As the sun rose, the wind rose with it, soon beginning to wreak havoc on those trying to load and tie down the carts. As they had almost finished loading their carts, extinguishing their fires and filtering water into huge plastic jugs, one of the distant sentries blew a certain tone on his flute that meant one thing: Fire! As they looked to the horizon, they could see smoke rising. The sentries ran into camp yelling. "To the island and water!" and a mass of carts and people moved up the embankment that led to a narrow isthmus that connected the island to the land. Two men dug into the extinguished breakfast cooking fire, unearthing still glowing buried coals with their knives. On the narrow fence line leading to the island, they set a fire that would burn away from it and cut the island off from fire. They also set fires on the far side of the pond to burn away from the island. The only concern was embers setting the island on fire or the tree above, as people, animals, and carts jammed every available space on the island, while others stood in the water around its edges. As the line of flame became visible in the distance, it would be only seconds before it arrived, and everyone took turns jumping into the water to wet themselves and their gear. Those who could immerse themselves in the water of the pond

did so. A few minutes more, and the flames reached the edge of the island, wind-blown sparks and embers showering the island, but the cascading branches of the great tree stopped most of them. People screamed as they were hit by the mix of hot air, gases, and embers that stung, despite their wet skin. As quickly as it had arrived, it moved past and went to the south since the burn to the west had burned ahead of it. Everyone waited for the smoke to clear and the ground to cool enough so that they could leave the island. People spoke in hushed tones, breathing sighs of relief, but the well-oiled human machine, whose function was the survival of the group, waited. As the line of flame moved off into the distance, the grey woman, who moved much more quickly and nimbly than her grey hair and wrinkled skin suggested, climbed atop the tractor, balancing atop one of the steel wheels.

"Friends, we have been saved by this island and pond with its tractor and tree twice in the last day. What could have left many of us injured or dead has ended, and everyone is ok. We feared loss of life from a possible wet bulb event and a prairie fire, and, by luck, we have been saved from both. I have sought to lead us into the Dead Zone to a place that will protect us from raiders, wet bulbs, fires, and all the terrors of this world and allow us to finally stop moving around. It is a concrete silo complex called Grain Terminal One. It is an old grain elevator with massive, thick towers that have a natural cooling system that pulls air from the ground. The fear of the Dead Zone should give us a few years before people come back, and challenge our lives there. This lone tractor and tree on this island will be remembered in our history as the place that saved us twice, when all could have been lost before reaching our new home just over the horizon. From this point onward, we will know this place as Lone Tractor Plain." The woman pointed at the exposed posts and fenceline that had long been buried beneath feet of windblown soil. "When my grandmother was young and grew up here, all of this prairie was tilled by huge machines, and at times the wind would blow soil or water would erode it just like this. There was a time when dirt clouded the air and clogged rivers. People knew it was bad, but like so many things then, they kept doing it until it couldn't be done anymore." As she began to get down from the tractor and the group slowly moved back toward the old road, she said, "We will be different, we will be better." They moved on, the land remembered them, and this time, they also remembered the land.

As they moved away along the old road, the tractor watched them go as much as a decaying inanimate object could. On Lone Tractor Plain, generations of life come and go, yet the tractor endures; the tractor abides.

THE OTHER SIDE

by JP Jardiel

The app has no icon.

That's the first thing you notice, and it's a small thing that you almost scroll past it. A blank white square between your weather app and calculator, sitting there like it had always been there and you'd never looked hard enough. "You" is written underneath. Same font as the rest of your apps, but in bold. No loading screen when you tap. Just: open. It's clean. A minimal white chat interface, the kind of design that costs a lot of money to look like it costs nothing at all.

At the top of the screen is, what to you suspiciously looks like a single contact.

You.

You laugh out loud. Alone, in your apartment, at eleven-thirty on a Tuesday night, you actually laugh—a short, dry sound swallowed by the low hum of the window unit.

What the fuck is this?

You figure it's a gimmick. An AI chatbot with a cute hook. You've seen worse. You've downloaded worse. You once spent forty minutes arguing with a chatbot about something completely stupid just because the alternative was staring at the ceiling, and you'd already done that for two hours.

At this particular moment in your life, you're bored enough for almost anything.

So when the first message arrives on its own, before you've typed a single word, you stare. You tap the notification.

"Hi. This is going to be weird, but have you figured out what this app does yet?"

You stare some more. It's a strangely casual opener for something on your phone at eleven-thirty at night that you definitely didn't download. Like someone knocking on a door they're not sure leads anywhere.

You type back: "I just opened it. Who is this?"

There's a pause. Not the blank speed of an app, but the kind where someone seems to be deciding how much to tell you.

The typing icon comes and goes for ten seconds. "Honestly? I'm still figuring that out."

"Great start."

"I know. Give me a second."

Another pause, longer this time. You find yourself watching the screen.

"There's an app," they finally write. "This one. I found it on my phone about three weeks ago, probably the same way you did—just there, no explanation. I thought it was a joke at first. I almost deleted it."

"But you didn't."

"But I didn't. Then someone on the other side started talking to me. The same way I'm doing with you right now. They explained what it was. I didn't believe them either."

"So what is it?"

"It connects people. Different versions of the same person. Same starting point, alternate branches because of different choices."

You read that twice. "That's what you're going with."

"That's what it is."

"Alternate realities."

"More or less."

"And you're one of them."

"Yeah," they write. "I am."

"Prove to me that you're an 'alternate reality' version of me," you write back hastily.

Why are you even entertaining this? Oh, right. Bored.

The typing indicator is back. But it's quicker this time. "Our parents had a list of names if we ended up being a boy, but only one for a girl."

Your hands take on that quality of someone whose world just shifted and is now fundamentally and irrevocably going in a different direction.

"My name is Mara."



You learn what she does over the first few calls, in pieces. She's an architect—not the office-tower, hotel-lobby kind, but parks, plazas, and the occasional transit hub. Places people pass through without really thinking about them.

"Do you like it?" you ask.

"Most days," she says. "Some projects are a slog. But yeah. Most days."

You tell her what you do: logistics, medical equipment specifically. You say it the way you always do—fast, dismissive, moving on before anyone can respond.

She doesn't move on.

"Don't do that," she says. "About your job. What you do matters."

"It matters the way a traffic light matters. Nobody thinks about it until it stops working."

She's quiet for a second. "I used to say stuff like that."

"Past tense?"

"Working on it."

You're still mostly convinced she's an AI. A good one—uncomfortably good—but an AI. So you start poking at the edges, the way you do when you're testing something. You bring up things you don't even have a clean opinion on, just to see how she handles them.

Wait, if it's AI why am I thinking of her as she?

She doesn't handle it smoothly. She disagrees with you, sometimes mid-explanation—not in a chatbot way, but in an actually annoyed one, the kind where you can feel the eye roll through the screen. She's wrong about things occasionally and it takes her too long to admit it. Once, she tells you to stop going in circles, just like that, no softening.

That's the thing about AI: it doesn't tell you to stop going in circles. It follows you in and acts like it meant to get there.

She doesn't do that. She gets impatient with you the same way you get impatient with yourself, which is its own strange thing to sit with. Somehow that's what starts tipping the scales.



The other contacts appear gradually over the first two weeks.

The app doesn't announce them. You just notice the list growing. Each one is labeled You with a tag—You (diverge: 14y), You (diverge: 22y), You (diverge: 7y), a few others. You ask Mara, who was designated You (diverge: 14y), what the numbers mean.

"How old we were when things split, I think," she says. "That's how it was explained to me, anyway."

"So there's a version of me that went a different way at seven years old."

"Yeah."

"And one at twenty-two."

"Yeah."

You sit with that for a second. "Shouldn't there be a lot more versions? Like a staggering amount of them?"

"These are just the ones the app found," she says. "I try not to think too hard about the rest. This is already weird enough."



You talk to a few of them out of curiosity, mostly because you're not sure what else to do. The diverge-7y one, Joaquin, is a lot. He's in finance, mentions his apartment in the third message, laughs at his own jokes before he finishes them. He's doing well by every measure you'd have named at seven years old. There's something slightly exhausting about him, though you can't say why. Like someone who's been performing confidence for so long it's the only gear he has left.

The diverge-22y one, Enzo, is different. Quieter. He lives somewhere rural, fixes things—engines, appliances, whatever people bring him. He doesn't make it sound like a consolation prize, which you appreciate. He mentions offhand that he paints sometimes—landscapes mostly. He sends you a photo once without much preamble: a field at dusk, the kind of thing you'd scroll past, but the light in it stops you. You keep coming back to it. You're not sure what to do with that.

But it's Mara you keep coming back to most. The tag says fourteen, and fourteen is an age you remember the way you remember a bad stretch—not specific events, just a feeling, a before and after. Something shifted then. You couldn't tell when exactly. One day you were one way. Then time passed, and you were another. Whatever happened in between, you mostly stopped thinking about or forgot about.

"What happened at fourteen," you ask her one night. You're on the fire escape, coffee gone cold in your hand, the sky doing its last colors above the building across the alley. "For you, I mean. What was different."

A pause. Long enough that you wonder if she's going to answer.

"A teacher took a drawing I did," she says finally. "Didn't ask. Just took it off my desk and pinned it up in the hallway. I wanted to die, honestly. I walked past it every day for like six months."

"And?"

"Four months later, I stopped being embarrassed and started feeling something else."

"What?"

"Like it was worth something." A breath. "Like I was worth something, I guess. It sounds small."

"It doesn't," you say.

Below you, the city gets louder for a little while, the way it does around this hour, then settles.

"Nobody kept mine," you say.

"Oh," she says. No follow-up. No I'm sorry. Just that. Steady, plain, like she's been holding it with you.



The pieces start aligning in the third week, and once you notice them you can't stop.

She mentions her commute. A specific bus line, a specific stop, the driver who always has talk radio on too loud. You take a nearly identical route in your own city, and something about the way she describes it—the slight incline near the end, the smell of something warm from a shop by the exit—maps almost exactly onto your own mornings. The details are different but the bones are the same. You've made that ride half-asleep so many times you could describe it blindfolded.

"There's a bakery," you say.

"Near our stop," she finishes. "I have no self-control when I pass it."

Then she starts describing her coffee order, and you join her halfway through because you get the same thing. She goes quiet.

"How did you—"

"I get the same thing," you say with a laugh.

"And you always drink it too fast," she says. She's starting to laugh.

"Every time."

"I burn my tongue every single morning and I have never once learned from it."

"I think it's commitment," you say. "Not a flaw."

"Commitment to what, suffering?"

"Commitment to wanting something right now instead of waiting until it's perfect."

She goes quiet. Then: "That's the nicest thing anyone has said about that."

You're smiling. You notice because it's been a while since you smiled at your phone and meant it. Noticing makes the smile go slightly sideways, which she somehow hears in the silence that follows.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Just thinking," you say. "This is either real or the most elaborate AI I've ever seen, and I genuinely don't know which one I'm hoping for."

"Does it change anything right now?" she asks. "Real or not?"

You look around your apartment. The takeout containers. The stack of books collecting dust on the corner shelf. The closed box on your

desk—a set of good drawing pencils you bought on a tired night, the kind of purchase that felt like a previous part of you took hold and had all these old intentions. And now it's just there, unopened.

"No," you say. "I don't think it does."



The fourth week she sends you a photo without saying anything first.

You almost scroll past it. Then you stop and go back.

It's a page from an old sketchbook—you can tell by the warped paper, the lines pressed hard the way you press hard when you're young and haven't learned that light marks are easier to fix. The drawing is a building. Something tall that doesn't quite make structural sense, with a bend near the top that has no reason to be there except that it looks right. Little figures around the bottom of it, going somewhere.

You sit with it for a minute.

"How old were you?" you type.

"Thirteen, I think. Maybe twelve."

"It's good."

"It's not," she says. "But thank you."

You put the phone down and look across the room at the box on your desk. The drawing pencils. Still sealed. Since then you've mostly just stepped around them.

You get up. You open the box. Inside, with the pencils, is a small sketchbook you don't remember throwing in at checkout—blank, plain cover, nothing special. You take a photo of the first empty page and send it to her before you can think too hard about it.

She doesn't respond for a second. Then: "Yeah."

That's it. The two of you leave it there for a while.

You draw something that night. It's bad—your hand doesn't remember how to do this, keeps second-guessing itself mid-line, and the whole thing ends up stiff in a way that bothers you. You draw it anyway. A building, roughly, with a courtyard in the middle and a covered walkway along one side. Something you've had rattling around in your head for so long you'd stopped noticing it was there.

You don't send it to her right away. You just look at it for a while. It's wrong in a lot of places. It's also something, and you let both things be true before you do anything else.

Then you send it.

Her response takes long enough that you put the phone down, wash the dishes, and come back.

"Hey," she writes. "This is really good."

"Come on, now. It's rough."

"Yeah, but it's doing something. The covered part on the side—is that for weather or…?"

"I don't know," you write. "Both, maybe. I didn't think about it that hard."

"I think you did. You just didn't know you were doing it." A pause. "Can I ask what the courtyard's for?"

You start typing an answer and then you stop, because you're not sure. You've been carrying this building around in your head for years without ever asking any questions. You sit there for a minute, genuinely thinking, and when the answer comes it surprises you a little.

"Somewhere to stop," you write. "In the middle of everything. Somewhere you can breathe for a second."

She doesn't respond right away, and you check the call was still connected. When she does it's just: "Yeah. That's what I thought."

"How do you do that?" you ask. "Read something like that."

"Someone did it for me once," she says. "You kind of have to receive it before you know how to give it."



It is not a clean or easy thing.

There's a night—bad week, bad day on top of it, nothing dramatic, just the accumulated weight of too many hours spent feeling behind on a life you're not sure you're living right—when you end up on the bathroom floor. Not on purpose. You sat down against the wall for a second and didn't get back up. The tiles are cold. The light flickers slightly, the way it's been flickering for two months, and you keep forgetting to fix it.

You call Mara.

"Hey," you say, trying to keep the tremble out of your voice. You fail. "I'm having a rough one."

"Okay," she says. Not "oh no" or "what happened?" Just okay, like she's already moved her whole attention to you. "Talk to me."

So you do. You tell her about the week. The specific way certain days at work make you feel like you're disappearing into the function of the thing instead of actually doing it. The way you came home and stood in the kitchen and couldn't figure out what you wanted to eat, or watch, or do, and so you didn't do anything for a while. You tell her you're on the bathroom floor. You tell her that without meaning to—it just comes out, and you feel slightly embarrassed saying it, but she doesn't make it weird.

"Are you okay?" she says. "Not like—I know you're not okay. But are you okay."

"Yeah. Just tired. Everything just feels very—I don't know. Stuck."

"Yeah."

"Is this just what it is? Like, is this just the thing."

She's quiet for a second. "I don't think so. But I also can't promise you that."

You appreciate that she doesn't. You've had people promise you that and it always felt like something they said to move the conversation forward.

"I had a stretch," she says, "a few years ago. It lasted almost a full year. I'd done everything I thought I was supposed to do and I still felt like this, like nothing was connecting, and I kept trying to figure out what I was getting wrong."

"What were you getting wrong?"

"Nothing, it turned out. I just had to get through it. I hated that answer when someone told me, but it was true."

"That's a terrible answer."

"I know."

"I was hoping for something more actionable."

"I know," she says, and you can hear her almost-smile in it. "I'm sorry."

You sit there a while longer. She stays on. You don't talk much. She doesn't try to fill it, which is the right call. At some point she says something about a project she's been stuck on—not to change the subject, just to give you somewhere else to put your attention for a minute—and it works. You ask a question about it. She answers. It goes back and forth a little.

Eventually you tell her you're going to try to sleep.

"Text me in the morning," she says. It's not even a question.

You do. Early, before you've made coffee, still half-asleep.

She writes back immediately.

"Good morning. You good?"

"Still here," you write.

"Good," she says. "I would've worried."



In the fifth week she asks to video call.

She texts first. "This might be a weird thing to ask."

"Probably," you write. "Ask anyway."

"Can I actually see you?"

You look around the apartment. Afternoon, decent light, the sketchbook open on the desk. The takeout situation has improved—

you've been cooking, nothing complicated, just enough to feel like you're making something. There's a small plant on the windowsill you bought a couple weeks ago because it was there and it looked like it was trying hard, and you've been watering it.

You look approximately like a person who lives here now. That feels like enough.

"Yeah," you type. "Okay."

You're not ready for it when her face comes up on the screen. You thought you would be—you knew what it was going to look like, roughly, and you'd had time to prepare. But there's knowing and then there's seeing. She looks like you. Not like a twin, not like a mirror—like you. The same face run through a different set of years and experiences, and the result is someone who looks comfortable in a way you're still working on. But you can see it.

Neither of you says anything for a second.

Then you both start laughing at the exact same moment. Not at anything specific, just at the overwhelming strangeness of it, the sheer "this is actually happening" of it. Then the fact that you laugh identically makes it worse, and you're both gone for a good thirty seconds.

When it settles she's looking at you with something you can't quite read. Not quite what you expected.

"You look good," she says.

"I look like I haven't slept great."

"Yeah but—I don't know. Better than I thought." She smiles.

God, she's beautiful.

Before you can dwell on that thought, she glances off to the side. "Is that your sketchbook?"

"Yeah."

"Open."

"Yeah."

She nods slowly, like she's filing something away. "How's it going?"

"Slowly."

"But going."

"But going."

She's quiet for a second. Then: "Can I tell you something that might sound strange?"

"We're on a video call with an alternate version of ourselves," you say. "Strange is practically the foundation of this conversation."

That gets a small laugh out of her, then she gets serious.

"I started using the app because I was lonely," she says. "Which sounds weird because things are good for me, and I know that. But there's a kind of lonely you can't really explain to someone who isn't you. You know?"

"Yeah."

"Talking to the others helped some. But you—" She pauses, not for effect, more like she's trying to get it right. "You've made me think about things I stopped thinking about. Like I got somewhere and just moved on from the getting there. Stopped remembering what it actually cost and what I did to get there. And you've been bringing that back." She looks at you through the screen. "I needed that. So—thank you."

You don't have an immediate response. It hits somewhere unexpected. Not the gratitude exactly, but the specifics of it. That the part of you still in the middle of things, the part you find hardest to look at, is the part she finds valuable.

"That's a generous thing to say," you manage.

"I mean it," she says.

You believe her. That might be the strangest part of all of it—how easily you believe her.



Weeks pass. The sketchbook fills, slowly and then less slowly. There are pages you pull out and pages you leave in even though they're wrong, because she said once that crossing things out is fine but pulling pages is like pretending they didn't happen. You've been trying to stop doing that.

The plant is still alive. You've been watering it. This is a small thing and not a small thing.

You check in with the others occasionally. Joaquin is harder to talk to the more you get to know him—not because he's unkind, but because there's something sad about him that he can't see and you can, and you don't know what to do with that. You've been sending drawings to Enzo since he mentioned the painting. He doesn't say much in response, but what he does say is worth reading twice. Once, he wrote that the only way he got better at light was by painting it wrong so many times that wrong stopped being scary, and you've thought about that more than you expected to.

But you talk to Mara every day. It stopped being a decision somewhere around week three, you think. Something goes tits-up at work and you're typing before you've thought about it. She sends you a photo of something she's working on—early, rough, not ready to show anyone—and you've been looking at enough of her work now that you

can ask real questions about it, not just say it looks good. She takes the questions seriously. Every time.

"Can I ask you something?" she says one evening. You're both outside—she on her balcony, you on the fire escape, both of you running out the last of a Tuesday.

"Yeah."

"What do you think this is? Between us."

You're quiet for a second. "What do you think it is?"

"I asked you first."

"I know."

The city does its thing below you. Somewhere a few blocks over someone's having an argument through a window, voices carrying without words.

"I don't know what to call it," you say finally. "It's not nothing."

"No," she says. "It's not nothing."

"Is it weird," you say, "that it doesn't feel weird?"

"A little. Yeah." A pause. "I mean, it's obviously completely insane."

"Completely."

"And yet."

"And yet," you agree.

She laughs. You laugh. It goes quiet again, but it's a comfortable quiet, the kind that doesn't need filling. The sky above you has gone that deep blue that happens just before it gives up and goes black.

"Is it narcissism," you say, "technically?"

"I asked Joaquin that. He said probably not. He said something about how it's only narcissism if you can't actually see yourself, and that what we're doing is the opposite of that."

"He said that."

"I know. He surprised me too."

"Don't tell him."

"Already did. He did seem pretty pleased about it."

You stay on a while longer, not talking much, just existing in the same moment from different ends of it. Eventually you both say goodnight. You go inside. The sketchbook is open on the desk to a page you were working on earlier, and you sit back down and pick up where you left off without deciding to.



There's a night near the end of the sixth week when you don't call her.

Nothing is wrong. No distance, no falling out. You just want to see what an evening alone feels like now, and that wanting is new—for a long time alone felt like a punishment the day was handing you. Tonight it just feels like an evening.

You draw. The building—the one you keep coming back to—but you've been working on it long enough now that it's starting to take a shape on its own. The courtyard in the middle, the covered walkway, the windows. You still can't fully explain what it's for, except that the answer you gave Mara still feels right.

You don't know what happens with any of this. You're not sure it matters right now. What matters is the pencil and the page and the fact that you're here, at this desk, on a weeknight, doing something because you want to.

You text her before you sleep. Just the photo, a new version. "Working on something."

She responds fast—still up.

"Oh," she writes. Then a minute later: "Oh, that's really something."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. The courtyard especially. You figured out the light."

You look at it. She's right. You hadn't noticed, but she's right.

"Keep going," she says.

"I am."

A pause. The typing indicator comes and goes. Then: "I wish I were there to see it."

You read that twice.

Something in your chest goes oddly still. Not because it's a big thing to say, exactly. Because it isn't. Because she says it like it's simple. Like of course she wants to be there. Like of course the distance between you is suddenly the most obvious thing in the world.

You look back at the page. The courtyard, the covered walkway, the windows catching light. For the first time it doesn't feel finished because you've finally gotten it right. It feels finished because it isn't empty anymore.

"Yeah," you write, before you can overthink it. "I wish you were too."

She doesn't answer right away. Then: "Good."

Just that.

You put the phone down. The apartment is quiet. Outside, the usual sounds. A siren somewhere far off. Music from a window down the street, there for a second and then gone.

You think about Mara on her balcony in her city, her own desk, her own window. You think about Enzo out in the country, somewhere working through his next painting. You think about Joaquin in his downtown apartment who hasn't slowed down long enough to ask himself anything real in years, and you hope—genuinely, without irony—that something slows him down soon.

You're not fixed. You're not done. There are going to be bad weeks still, days that feel exactly like they always did. You know this. But something is different and the difference is real even if you can't quite name it yet. You pick up the phone less to escape now and more because there's someone on the other side worth talking to—someone you want, suddenly and plainly, in the room with you.

Somewhere in another version of this, a woman with your face is still awake, waiting.

You open the sketchbook one more time. Next blank page.

You start with a courtyard.

You fill it with light.

ACOUSTIC BLASPHEMY

by Carter Kipp

The clock approached 6:37 in the evening, right as the sun was setting. This is when Amarillo first started to smell the smoke from the torches. He placed his pocket watch onto the workbench and continued tinkering with his clockwork familiar, Sprocket. This smoke seemed like a weekly activity for Toadstool, one that Amarillo rarely participated in. He was a laid-back individual who believed in doing what makes you, you. These old toads had too much time on their hands and they focused on others rather than what could make themselves better.

This evening was different from all the other torch parades. Amarillo was going to be an unwilling participant in tonight's march. He heard the steps and the chanting creep closer. There was tension in the air as Amarillo started to fear this might be his last night in his workshop. He thought he had done everything right this time. He had been quiet. He had been productive.

The marching stopped just outside his home. The torchlight broke through his windows, invading his cool, white workshop lights with a flickering orange. He had only moved in two months ago and he was already the subject of the weekly protest. This marked his shortest tenure yet and he had plenty of history to compare it with.

"Be gone, Amarillo Sterling! You are no longer allowed in these parts, ya hear? We are done with yer kind!" the mob cried out.

Amarillo thought he could live in a town full of toads. Being a frog, he was not that far off, so where did he go wrong? He was starting to believe kindness was a loan that folks will eventually come to collect with interest, and most of the time you can't afford to pay.

He looked over at Sprocket sitting on his workbench, cracked a sad smile, and began to pack his things. He mostly worked out of his extradimensional satchel he'd refined over the years, so there was not that much to pack up besides some tools he was using just before all the commotion ruined his evening.



This was his third time being run out of town. The first had been when he was barely a teen frog. His parents lived in a strict agrarian co-op where "productivity" was measured in sweat and bushel counts. To the elders, a productive day meant hoeing rows until your back screamed or hauling water from the creek until your arms felt dead. They had no room for a boy who spent his afternoons in the shed, grease-stained and whispering to scraps of brass.

Desperate to prove his worth, Amarillo had spent a week of sleepless nights creating what he believed would be his salvation: a clockwork courier. He had used every spare gear he could scavenge to build a small, brass frog, inspired by his own reflection. He imagined it darting through the co-op, delivering mail, tools, and supplies into the tight spaces the older frogs couldn't reach.

The presentation was a disaster. Because he'd neglected his actual chores to build the machine, the elders were scowling before he even set the brass frog on the table. Every sixty seconds, the showcase had to stop so Amarillo could wind the key, the frantic crk-crk-crk filling the silent, judgmental room. They didn't see a miracle of automation; they saw a toy built by a boy who was too lazy to pick up a hoe. That was the first time he'd heard the word "unproductive" used as a sentence of exile.



Amarillo reached out and tapped Sprocket's head. The familiar didn't need a key anymore; a pulsing magical core now hummed behind its ribs, a refinement that had taken years to master. "Ready, partner?" he whispered. Sprocket responded with a rhythmic, mechanical click that sounded almost like a croak.

He stood up and checked the somatic bracer on his right forearm. He'd moved away from the heavy, cord-filled suits of his younger years; they were too cumbersome, making him vulnerable when he needed his hands for delicate work. Now, a single, elegant brass vambrace housed the internal gears. When he flicked his wrist, the bracer performed the complex mechanical choreography required to trigger his spells, leaving his fingers free to guide the energy.

As he stepped toward the door, he caught his reflection in a dark window. He looked like someone who had been here before. Someone who was despondent in their future. He adjusted his Stetson, pulling the brim low to hide the sting of disappointment in his eyes. He wasn't going to fight them. He had learned long ago that you can't open a mind that's rusted shut. With a sharp, practiced gesture, he initiated his Silence spell.

The bracer whirred to life. With a soft, internal click, the room went eerily still.

He pushed the door open. The orange glow of the torches hit him like a physical wave, smelling of sulfur and stagnant resentment. The toads stood in a semi-circle, their shadowed faces behind the flames. And there they were, the pitchforks. These weren't tools for moving hay; they were ritual pieces with polished tines gleaming under the firelight, held in ornate leather sheaths embossed with the town's crest. It was a sign of a town so practiced in bigotry that they had turned their weapons into high-end fashion.

As Amarillo walked down his porch steps, Sprocket hopped along at his heel. Each time the clockwork frog landed with a metallic *tink*, the surrounding toads flinched. They jumped back, eyes wide with a mix of fear and disgust, as if mechanical progress were a contagious disease they might catch if they got too close. They didn't want to give up any ground, their chests puffed out to maintain a facade of dominance, but the jump in their legs betrayed them.

Amarillo looked at them and felt a heavy, familiar sadness. He didn't fear them, he'd practiced exile enough to be beyond fear. He pitied them. They were standing in the middle of a miracle of engineering, and all they wanted to do was set it on fire. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. He could see their lips move and their throats bulge as they bellowed a discordant cacophony of insults, yet in his ears, there was only the peaceful, hollow hum of his own breathing. They were casting him out for "disturbing the peace" while they themselves were a visual riot of noise. The sight of their soundless fury triggered a bittersweet memory for Amarillo. A time when he couldn't cast his Silence spell. There was a time when he was the one that made the disturbance.



Weary of finding another farming village where he would be useless again, Amarillo sought to find a town of industry where machines were valued just as much as hard labor. Wandering around the land of Atakann for a place to settle had led to many miles of travel. This eventually brought him to the Merike Basin, home of Turbine Valley.

This city of Turbine Valley was built on the wall—not the wall of the canyon, but the actual masonry of the dam itself. Theological texts claimed that two clerics co-opted the town to create a monument to their deities. In doing so, they hoped to benefit the surrounding area, seeking a sign that would make the desert prosperous and habitable. At first, the "Mist-Shimmer" of the Great Covenant Dam had felt like a blessing,

making the interior of the valley much cooler than the scorched salt-flats he had crossed to get there. But he quickly learned that in a theocratic technocracy, some machines were more sacred than others.

The town was founded on the theory of Harmony Equilibrium, the belief that the stone would only hold so long as the Sacred Hum of the turbines remained in perfect harmony. Amarillo's mechanical casting and tinkering, however, operated on a different frequency. Living directly on the wall meant his workshop didn't just cause sound pollution; his somatic rituals created a resonance that traveled through the very structure of the Dam.

To the ruling priests of the Turbine Synod, his work was more than a nuisance; it was acoustic blasphemy. Every time Amarillo worked, the vibration of his gears mimicked the groaning of stone, threatening to topple the entire civilization. These "false notes" of his tinkering sounded like the first cracks of future disaster, triggering the Breach Alarms. He had watched hundreds of his neighbors flee to the high ground in their nightgowns, terrified by the old clerics' warnings. They lived in a constant, holy dread that the water goddess, Kailani, was finally losing her mind. If she did, the deep weight of Lake Merike would surely dismantle the stone wall the god of creativity, Artifex, had blessed to protect them.

Unlike the town of Toadstool, this town wasn't rude. The clergy kindly asked Amarillo to either give up the tinkering or to move out. They respected his talent, but they feared the vibration. If Amarillo had known the Silence spell back then, he could have stayed and lived a long life in the cool mist of the valley. But he hadn't mastered it yet. The song of Turbine Valley wasn't something he could harmonize with. This pushed him back out into the heat. This goodbye was anything but a burnt bridge. It would have been a much lonelier departure if it hadn't been for the company he kept.

The Hatter had been the only one who didn't fear Amarillo's workshop noise and became a close friend in the two and a half years Amarillo lived in Turbine Valley. The two would spend hours talking as the mist drifted through the city. Working the various fabrics in his shop left the Hatter's clothing smelling of a faint, but sweet woody aroma. This and the secret maintenance tunnels they would explore in their spare time would be the things Amarillo would miss the most. On his last night in town, he had a long goodbye conversation with The Hatter.

"You shine too bright for these dusty parts, friend." The old man had pulled a silver-belly Stetson from his cart and placed it on Amarillo's head. "A lad with gold skin needs a bit of shade to keep the world from getting

jealous. Wear it like a crown, and they'll look at the felt instead of the frog."



As Amarillo touched the brim of that hat in the present, he felt the weight of those years. He had been too loud for them, too "resonant." He had spent months after that exile perfecting the Silence spell, determined to never let his work scare anyone again. He had become a master of quiet, only to find that in a place like Toadstool, being quiet was just another way to be wrong.

The mob followed him all the way to the edge of town, a wall of flickering orange fire and silent, hateful faces. Amarillo didn't speed up. He kept his pace steady, his boots squelching rhythmically in the mud. Ahead loomed a towering, iron-bound structure ready to protect the town from his "toxic" ideas. The Great West Gate had been the pride of Toadstool for generations. Now it was a scar that Amarillo inflicted.

As he reached the threshold, Amarillo stopped. He looked up at the massive hinges, where his polished brass canisters and intricate overflow valves remained perfectly intact, gleaming under the torchlight. This was his "meddling." This was why they were throwing him out. He let out a snide, narrow smile, finding a strange satisfaction in the scene. He had made so many people upset just by being helpful, and to Amarillo, that felt like an achievement in its own right. They were too paralyzed by the fear of change to even attempt to dismantle his work. Long after he became a legend in the next territory, they would still be nursing their grudges. They would be cursing his name every day while using his superior machinery.

When he had arrived two months ago, the gate had groaned so loudly it could be heard three miles away. It was rusty, slow, and dangerous. Amarillo had spent weeks building a self-lubricating, gear-driven assembly for the town. He had done it for free. A way to improve his community and ensure they finally had a bit of peace and quiet. He had improved the gates so perfectly that even a child could open them with a single finger.

The gate glided open with a smooth, effortless silence that seemed to offend the very air. A toad official, his neck ruffed with self-importance, stood staring at the pristine assembly with stagnant disgust.

"We liked the groan, Sterling," the official spat, his words readable even through the Silence spell. "It told us when someone was coming. It told us the gate was still there. We didn't need your so-called 'improvements' to make our lives easy. We liked our gates hard to open. Keeps the world out."

Amarillo didn't respond with words. He didn't have to. He simply performed a sharp, 180-degree spin to face the crowd, his golden skin flashing one last time in the firelight. He tipped his Stetson in a silent salute—a memory of his friend the Hatter—and then stepped past the gate's threshold, tempted to take a bow. His somatic bracer gave a final, mournful click. He had tried to fix their world, and while the machinery remained perfect, their spirits were still rusted shut. He realized then that Toadstool didn't want to be better. They just wanted something to complain about.



Amarillo continued to walk until the orange glow of the torch parade finally faded into the distance. He didn't stop until his own shadow, once cast long and distorted by the fires of Toadstool, vanished entirely into the indigo night. Exhaustion finally caught up with him, a heavy weight that even his extradimensional satchel couldn't lighten.

He found a small depression in the earth, shielded from the wind, and set up a modest camp. As the fire began to crackle, Amarillo sat back and watched the flames. Sprocket settled beside him, his brass limbs clicking into a restful "sleep" mode. Listening to the fire, Amarillo felt a strange sense of clarity. It was too soon to return to Turbine Valley, and it seemed that the rigid, religious city life was not for him. Neither, it appeared, was the stagnant farm life or the petty small-town ways of the toads. He needed a place that truly needed his expertise—not just his hands, but his mind.

He fell asleep to the rhythmic, mechanical breathing of his familiar, waking only when the first light of dawn touched the horizon.

Amarillo adjusted his Stetson as the road turned to dust beneath his feet once more. He looked back one last time at the distant toadstool, then turned his gaze toward the horizon. The dry, parched smell of the plains was eventually replaced by something heavy and cool. It was a scent he hadn't smelled before. The stinging tang of salt.

He looked down at Sprocket, whose brass limbs were already catching the first hints of moisture from the morning air. He touches the brim of his hat, feeling the smooth felt the Hatter placed there so many miles ago. Should he give up and become someone he is not? He took a deep, salty breath and continued to walk. He is Amarillo Sterling, and he is a gentleman of gears and gold. If the land doesn't have a place for him, the sea certainly will.

He looked at his mechanical companion with a determined grin. "I think we can do this, Sprocket!"

THE FOOLS

by Emily Kjenaas

A woman sits on a train, spinning a ring around her finger as if to remind herself it's still there.

A man sits on a train, willing himself to forget his ring, but aware of its presence all the same.

Trains are loud. They chug; they roar. Whistles blow, and too many people take up too little space and say too many meaningless things. But the air around the husband and wife is nice and quiet. Well, not nice.

The wife thinks, "I'm sorry," but says nothing.

The husband thinks, "I'm not sorry," but says nothing.

"I miss him," the wife admits.

"I don't miss her," the husband lies. Because they are both fools, of course.

She wants to ask, "What are you thinking?"

He wants to ask, "What were you thinking?"

They both want to ask, "Do you still love me?"

But they don't. Because now is not the time. Now is never the time. The time was, or will be, but it isn't now. So, the wife does not ask her husband what he's thinking, and he does not tell her.

The husband and wife look out windows. In the sky, there is a bird. The wife knows it is a red-wing blackbird, and she thinks about telling her husband this, but of course, she doesn't.

The husband does not see the bird.

Children careen through train cars like so many launched pinballs, bumping into the sidebars that are really passengers, screaming and making a mess and behaving the way children do.

The husband sees children and imagines how much fun it will be to be a father someday, because he is a fool.

The wife sees children and imagines what a terrible mother she would be, because she is a fool.

They have not spoken of children in a long time. They avoid that topic the most. His past is shaped by lovely parents who may not love each other anymore, but make it clear in no uncertain terms, that they will always love *him*. Her parents left her with nothing but uncertain terms. A father with quick fists and a mother less full of love than complacent silence did not set her up to be an emotionally secure adult, eager for children of her own.

Long ago, the woman decided that parenting could not be in her future because it wasn't in her past. She had told her husband that, before he was her husband, back when it was easy to say things, and it was always the right time. She wonders if he's forgotten that conversation, or if when they had it, he always thought she would change her mind.

The woman has not changed her mind.

Train rides are long, and the husband is a fool with a penchant for coffee and had drunk three cups before the ride. Without a word, he gets up and stumbles to the bathroom, feeling drunk and disoriented by the swaying of the train.

As the husband stumbles down the aisle, the train conductor approaches the wife. To the conductor, the woman is not a wife, she is a woman alone on a train. And if the conductor is being honest with himself, she is a very beautiful woman, though a little sad. Often, the conductor finds himself thinking that taking tickets for a train is all well and good, but it is not extremely fulfilling. His life is currently ticket stubs and frozen meals, and he would like it to be more. However, more is very hard to find. To find more, the conductor is about to be very foolish, but that happens to the best of us.

"Morning, Miss! May I see your ticket?"

Wordlessly, the woman hands over her ticket, and the conductor takes it.

"Are you having a nice ride?" he asks.

She nods.

"Do you take this train often?" he asks.

"No," she says. "I've never been on this train before." The woman misses the conductor's foolish attempt because she is foolish too.

"Well, I hope you take it again." The conductor smiles.

Realization crosses the woman's face and suddenly she is so angry. She is angry because she is just trying to ride the train. She is angry because she is flattered. She is angry because she has a husband, damn it! And people used to know that. She is angry because when she first got married, no one flirted with her because she was so obviously a wife! So obviously

in love. When did that stop being obvious? She used to love her husband so loudly. She still loves him, but it is quiet now. Does that mean it is less? Does that mean train conductors can flirt with her, and she has no right to be so, so, angry and make the conductor so, so uncomfortable?

The woman says nothing. She finds that safe. Familiar. She is used to saying nothing. The conductor awkwardly moves on.

While the conductor is making a fool of himself, the husband wanders to the café car almost absentmindedly. Almost. What's really on his mind is a Snickers. His wife wouldn't be pleased if he had a Snickers, so he doesn't. He grabs a Milky Way.

In line behind the husband is a young man who wants to talk. Not to anyone in particular, he just likes to talk. And the husband is right there, so he finds himself in a conversation he does not want to have.

"You having a nice ride?" the young man asks the not-so-young man.

"Not particularly," the man answers. He is not good at small talk, but the young man is not deterred.

"That's too bad, man. You know, I'll bet mine's worse." He grins, a foolish grin. The grin of a man who thinks his jokes are always funny.

"Oh?" the husband responds. He does not want to respond.

"Yeah. My girlfriend left me."

"She left you?" The man does not know what to do with this business that is not his business but is now being made his business. He has enough business.

"Yeah, man. Apparently, I was 'taking too long' picking out my food or something and her pizza would get cold. So, she left me. For pizza. Can't blame her though, she's adorable."

"Ah," the man says. Because it is all he can manage to say without words he should *not* say pouring out of his mouth. He wants to tell the man that his train ride is decidedly worse. He wants to tell this young upstart that he should keep his mouth shut. He wants to tell this silly child that life is unfair and too short and one day that girlfriend might be his wife, and she might not talk to him anymore and the silence will make him miss the bickering about pizza and candy bars.

But he doesn't. Because he is on a train, and that would be impolite. Because this isn't the right time. It never is. So instead, the man pays for his Milky Way in silence.

The man returns to his seat. The woman goes on sitting. The husband and wife sit on seats and stare out windows.

Eventually, a voice over the loudspeaker interrupts the overwhelming nothing that is being said.

"M11 Riverbank Park – West Village."

The woman stands. This is her stop.

The man does not hear the announcement.

The man does not hear the announcement because he is on a different train. His train is not going to the West Village. He is sitting on a train heading home and wondering whether it is even home anymore because his wife is on a different train heading somewhere else.

The woman has just rented an apartment in the West Village after leaving her husband. She doesn't know why she chose it. Maybe because it doesn't feel like home. She wonders if anything will ever feel like home again.

Inside the apartment, she pulls her phone out of her purse and places a call.

Inside his not-quite-home, the husband's phone rings.

"Hello?" he answers.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," she wants to tell him.

"I'm not sorry I married you," he wants to assure her.

"You deserve better," she wants to say.

"Why did you leave?" he wants to ask.

"I love you," she wants to say.

"I love you," he wants to beg.

They say none of these things because they are fools. Because there really isn't anything to say. Because there is too much to be said, and this isn't the right time.

"Goodbye," the woman says.

The call ends, and the fools sit in their silent, not-quite-homes.

SUPPLY RUN

by Ian Manock

White snow drifted gently down around deserted skyscrapers to the quiet streets of grime and dirt below. Sasha's tattered boots crunched softly on the fresh blanket of snow. Hands in the pockets of her hoodie, she could see her breath in the air as she exhaled. This was not a good idea. Her father would be furious if he knew what she was doing. Then again, her father was the reason she was out here.

The wind whistled softly through the alley she walked down. Torn newspapers flitted past like tumbleweeds. Sasha knew what was written on those pages. The last issue of any newspaper ever written. She pulled her hood over her auburn hair.

She reached the end of the alley. On the street, abandoned cars sat dormant, engulfed in snow. Not a soul in sight. Peering up, the cloud cover was thick, casting the city in a dull blue. Sasha's shoulder relaxed slightly. No need to worry about Vultures, so long as they stayed in their buildings. They wouldn't have a reason to come down to the streets today, right?

Pulling her pack off her back, she rummaged through the contents until she found the crumpled piece of paper. It had the directions to the clinic on 32nd Street, as well as the name of the medicine she hoped to find. She held the note in her hand and said a silent prayer. For father.

Returning the note, she zipped it up and started down the street. Head up, eyes shifting left and right, she peered into shadows and cutouts. Movement was scarce on the streets and her eyes snapped to every movement. Snow slid off a storefront awning up ahead. Sasha froze. Nothing. She continued on.

Two blocks later she took a left onto a wider street. Even more cars and buses hibernating. Sasha gagged, the stench in the air overwhelming. Bodies were scattered everywhere, the soft snow converting them into white statues. She could feel her heartbeat. After all this time, it never got

easier. Hacking a cough into the silence, she stumbled up the steps of an office building and through the shattered glass door.

She finished coughing, leaning against a chair. An American flag drooped above her on the wall. Wiping her mouth, she straightened and looked around. A hallway led deeper inside. Taking a glance back at the bodies outside, she stepped toward the hallway.

Her footsteps echoed off the walls as she made her way, checking drawers and bins, rummaging for anything that might be useful. Pens, a notepad, stapler. She tucked them in her pack. She grinned when she looked in the fourth room. Stuck in the very back of a broken vending machine, she wrenched at a bag of potato chips trapped in the spiraling arm.

"Come on," she said through gritted teeth, "Gotcha!"

The bag snapped out from the vending machine's grasp with a *thunk*. A smile spread across her face. Her frigid fingers fought to grip the sides of the bag before ripping it open. The faintest scent of cheese escaped the bag. She stared at the smashed chips inside before quickly grabbing at them. They were stale and chewy. She grabbed for more, stuffing her mouth, before tipping her head back and dumping the rest in. She licked her fingers clean.

The chips reminded her of home. Not of where they lived now, but her actual home. Outside the city, in the suburbs with her parents and younger sister, Alexis. They would ride their bicycles to the gas station a few blocks away and spend the money their mom gave them. Sasha always grabbed chips. Alexis would go for whatever sour candy had the most colorful bag.

Sasha smirked at the thought of it. Not just at the happiness it brought her, but the irony. The money she used to use was worthless now. Survival was the only thing of value these days. Sasha was reminded of the length of rope she traded for the name of the medicine that would help her father.

Instinctively, she checked the pack for the note again, confirming it was still there, zipped it up and exited out a side door. Back on the street, she hurried quickly to another building, pinching her nose as she went. A grand chandelier lay broken in the center of a large lobby. Ornate designs on the walls, seating tipped on its side, a long desk parallel to the back wall. It was a hotel. And a fancy one at that.

She made her way through the lobby, as she took in the grandeur and elegance, or at least what elegance was left. Looters and vandals had their fun here a long time ago. Something moved back at the entrance. Sasha

turned and froze, then burst into movement, backpedaling toward the front desk. Her heel caught on something and she went weightless. On her back, she could hear a soft clicking sound. She looked forward to see a gray wolf staring back at her.

"Oh my god," she breathed. Her heart was racing now. The wolf was huge, bigger than any dog Sasha had seen. Yellow eyes, fur like ash. She could only make out its head and shoulders, the rest hiding behind an overturned sofa. Its head moved side to side, ears twitching, tongue sliding out from its jaws. Sasha slowly kicked her feet, crawling backwards. She felt the hard desk behind her. Lifting her hand, she grabbed hold of the top and rose to her feet, eyes still trained on the wolf.

The beast turned its head toward her again. It took a step forward. Sasha could see the hallway that led deeper into the hotel out of the corner of her eye. She edged her way along the desk. The wolf sniffed the air. Closer. Sasha spied a door to a room in the hall. The wolf took another step. Closer. Her legs were beginning to shake. Closer. The wolf let out a huff and started loping across the room.

Sasha threw herself away from the desk and down the hallway. The clicking sound of the wolf's toenails sped up behind her. She let out a yell as she wrenched on the door's handle. Locked. Her chest fell, heart turning into an anchor. Something broke behind her. The shrill sound of glass breaking sounded down the hallway. Sasha ran further, not daring to look back. A frost-covered exit sign hung in front of her. Her legs felt like jelly as she ran.

Lungs on fire, heart beating out of her chest, she slammed into a door. It opened, but only slightly. Something was blocking it from the other side. "Please, please," her arms strained as she pushed against the door. Finally, the door gave way a little and she squeezed through the gap, slamming the door closed behind her. Crown of her head pressed against it, she gulped down air. Below her, the rotted corpse of an old man stared back at her without any eyes.

She screamed, pushing away from the door and the body leaned against it. A shiver ran down her spine and she started running. Tears welled in her eyes. She wiped at them and pulled her hood tight to her face. The wind had picked up since she had last been outside. The smell was carrying across the street now.

I should just go back. I'm going to die out here. Doubt coiled around her stomach like a snake. Her heart was still racing. She slowed down to catch her breath, spat into the fresh snow, a small crater leaving an imprint. She

racked her brain, weighing her options. There's a reason why nobody goes out alone. It's too dangerous. This was a bad idea.

A wave of guilt washed over her as she thought of dad. She straightened and looked back the way she had come. Clenching her fists, she rubbed her temples. *No. I have to keep going. This won't end well. I have to try. It's too risky.* Her stomach rolled over itself. Blinking back more tears, her breath caught in her lungs. Two blocks away, a white building stood. A shining beacon in a sea of gray skyscrapers. She was here. She made it. A smile stretched from cheek to cheek. She let out a laugh. Her body shivered. With a long exhale and defiant step, she started toward the clinic.

The once sterile white walls of the clinic were stained with dirt and graffiti. Furniture was everywhere. Drawers pulled open or thrown on the floor. Broken lights hung from loose wires. Sasha tiptoed through the waiting room, avoiding broken glass. The wind whistled outside as it blew snow to gather in the entryway. She rubbed her hands together, blowing into them for warmth. She found a map across the room.

"Great," she muttered. *YOU'RE LOST* was written in black graffiti over the map. She pulled her sleeve up and tried rubbing the paint off. No luck. Squinting, she attempted to make out the map behind the paint. It looked like the pharmacy might be on the west side of the second floor, but she couldn't be certain. Giving up, she looked for a staircase.

The door creaked as she pushed into the stairwell. The sound echoed up the stairs to the top floor. More graffiti adorned the walls. She began climbing but stopped. A toppled gurney blocked her path. The gurney was perpendicular to the staircase. The head was wedged in the railing with the feet pressed against the concrete wall. Stooping, she tried to look for a way under, but the space was too tight. Standing back up, she stood on her tiptoes to look over the gurney. *I guess it's over then.*

She reached for the side of the gurney. The metal was cold in her grasp. She gritted her teeth and hopped, lifting her right leg up and hooking her ankle up on top of the gurney. Pulling with her arms, she lifted herself off the ground. She heard grating metal. *Uh oh.* Then she was falling. The gurney freed itself from where it was wedged and rolled down the stairs with a crash. Sasha landed hard on her back, the gurney slamming into her arm and rolling past her, coming within an inch of her face. A symphony of bangs echoed in the stairwell followed by a low moan.

Sasha laid on the floor. Her face scrunched up as she tried to push with her arm. Pain lanced its way up to her shoulder. She sucked in a breath and pushed herself off the floor. *Ouch.* Gingerly, she moved her

fingers sequentially. Her arm shot with fire and she gasped. *Not good.* Using her other arm, she placed her hand in the pocket of her hoodie, trying to keep her injured arm from moving. Then she turned and kicked the gurney behind her.

"Stupid thing," she kicked it again.

She grabbed the railing with her free arm and climbed. She wasn't going to let this be in vain. On the second level, she turned and walked down the hall, using medical beds and carts to prop herself up. More graffiti covered the walls up here, but eventually she was able to make out the word PHARMACY with an arrow pointing down an adjacent hall.

She reached the counter, glass everywhere from looters breaking in. The door nearby was stuck. With a sigh, Sasha wiped the glass from the counter and slowly clambered over and into the back. Empty pill bottles skittered across the cool tile floor. The place was ransacked, shelves empty save for a few opened and tipped over bottles and boxes.

Taking a breath, she took in the scene. How was she going to find what she was looking for? She wouldn't know where it would be in normal circumstances let alone the state the room was currently in. After a minute, she began gently kicking bottles and boxes into the corner closest to the counter. She frowned at the hollow sounds from the bottles and featherlight boxes.

Eventually, having gone up and down the aisles, everything was in the corner which was now overflowing. She lowered herself to the floor, sitting with her legs crossed, and began going through the pile. Empty. No. Empty. No. Empty. Empty. Empty. She rolled the empty bottles and boxes behind her and kept a separate pile of the ones that still had something. The people back home might need them.

The pile was getting smaller, Sasha's chest tightening with each discarded bottle. Empty. Empty. She threw an empty container over her shoulder. It clattered against the metal shelf, echoing off the walls. Sasha froze. Have to be more careful. She reached for another box.

"Clayton?" a gruff voice bounced down the hallway outside. Sasha's heart dropped into her stomach. Eyes wide, she looked for an escape. Spotting a door leading deeper into the building, her arms shot back to push herself up. Pain lanced up her arm and she let out a hiss. "Clayton! Was that you over there?"

On her feet, Sasha rushed to the door, reached with her good arm and pulled the handle. Locked. No, no, no. She looked over her shoulder. She could hear footsteps now, the sound of glass breaking underfoot. The

steps were heavy. Whoever it was, they weren't trying to hide their presence. Not good.

Realizing she was still yanking on the locked door, she let go and shuffled to the end of the closest shelf. She pressed her back against it. Closing her eyes, she focused on her breathing. In. Out. In. Out. Her breath slowed, even as her heart continued to pound. She covered her mouth, trying not to make a sound. The voice was at the counter.

"You in there, Clay? Come on, man. I'm not in the mood for games." The voice was gruff. The words boomed down the aisles to the back where Sasha stood. "What happened in here? Pretty sure Jess got everything we need back up top, man. Hey, would you come out already, it's freezing down here."

Sasha looked for something, anything that could help her. A fire extinguisher sat in a box on the wall. It was across the aisle in clear view of the front counter. Slower than she'd ever moved before, she twisted around to face the shelf. Forehead pressed against the cool metal, she took a deep breath. She peered around the corner. A large man, almost a foot taller than Sasha loomed over the counter, scratching at a scraggly beard. Luckily, he was looking down the hall as Sasha sized him up. Her breath hitched at the sight of the gun in his hands and the patch on the shoulder of his jacket. A black vulture highlighted by a yellow background.

Eyes wide, she clenched the side of the shelf, legs losing feeling as new fear washed through her. The Vulture turned his head back toward the room. Sasha pulled her head back just in time. "Okay seriously, I'm getting tired of this." Sasha could hear the Vulture walking over and trying the door at the front. Hesitating for a moment, she swallowed and pushed away from the shelf. Reaching the box on the wall, she pawed for the handle until she found purchase. Opening it, she pulled the fire extinguisher out and hid behind the other shelf.

The Vulture was banging on the door. Sasha could hear his grunts from around the corner. With each resounding bang, she clenched her teeth harder. Through the noise, she moved closer to the counter, keeping the shelf between her and the door. She reached the end of the shelf, hidden from the doorway but visible to the counter. With a loud crack, the door burst from the frame, the Vulture stumbling through from the force.

"Alright, what's going on here?" He kicked the empty pile of boxes and bottles. Sasha lifted the fire extinguisher to strike in her one good hand, only for it to slip in her grasp and fold back over top. She dropped

her arm to right it once again, this time bringing it up and resting it against her other shoulder.

Her vision narrowed. Stories of the Vultures swirled in her mind. This man, who could have been a plumber or salesman, now ran with a gang of thieves and killers. Carrion birds who perched on the rooftops and took what they could from the people below. With rifles and grenades, they terrorized people, stealing what they could from their victims and hoarding supplies in their metallic towers.

A bullet from one of them is what gave her father his distinct limp. They were lucky that day, dad and the others. Jack told her the story after they had returned. It was a standard supply run, on a block that was usually deserted. They had found a shipping van with some supplies.

Sasha remembers the look on Jack's face as he told the story. The blank stare he had when he described the way the man next to him collapsed, the crack of gunfire following. It was an ambush. There was nothing they could do but run. The sniper fire came from buildings hundreds of yards away and they didn't have the firepower to fight back.

Jack recalled the sound of bullets whizzing by as he pulled a man to cover. It was Sasha's father. Tears formed in her eyes as he recounted his story. She hated the Vultures. Many times, she had tried to convince the others to fight back, but it was no use. They didn't have the means to take on such a force. It wasn't fair.

A rage bubbled within Sasha. Fire extinguisher at the ready, she tensed her muscles, waiting for the man to come closer.

"Clayton, seriously. Are you in here?" He stepped further into the room. Closer, you beast. She heard another heavy step. Adrenaline pumped through her veins. Vision blurring, legs shaking. She could hear his ragged breathing around the corner. Just a little more.

A noise echoed down the hallway outside. A loud crash followed by a series of softer thumps. The Vulture turned on his heel. "Clayton, that you?" he called out of the room. Now was her chance. With a wordless grunt, Sasha whipped around the corner, fire extinguisher extended outward. With a thud, the canister slammed into the side of the Vulture's head. He groaned and fell into the other shelf, pill bottles scattering.

"What the hell?" the Vulture groaned, rolling onto his back. Sasha's blood ran cold and her face contorted. How was he still awake? Sasha didn't have time to wonder. The man raised his gun and she was all motion. Dropping the fire extinguisher, she launched herself over the front counter as an explosion of gunfire flew overhead.

The pharmacy was temporarily bathed in the color of amber fire, before being consumed once again by the muted blue. Ears ringing, Sasha reorientated herself, looking both ways before kicking her feet opposite the direction where the crashing sound had come from. Blood pumping, heart racing, she willed her legs to propel herself down the hall.

"Get back here!" the Vulture called after her. Reaching a corner, Sasha sprinted around it, nearly slamming into a medical bed. She kept going. Down another hall, deeper into the building. Her footsteps echoed off the walls. Another intersection in the hall was coming up, but she wasn't planning on turning. The staircase was straight ahead.

She couldn't hear the Vulture's shouting anymore, nor his heavy footsteps behind her. She looked over her shoulder. Nothing. A smile split her lips and she turned back to her target.

"Whoa!" Sasha yelped. Something crashed into her. Not something. Someone. Oh god. It was him. This was it. She hissed from the pain in her arm. Eyes trying to focus, she stared wide-eyed at the man. Only it wasn't the Vulture. No, he was skinnier and clean shaven. His dark sweatshirt looked oddly familiar. That's when he lifted his head to face her.

"Jack?" she sputtered. Relief washed over her, and she let out a shaky breath. "What are you doing here?"

Jack flashed his bright smile, "Looking for you of course, firecracker." They untangled themselves. Sasha grimaced, gripping her arm. She watched Jack's eyebrows knit together. She didn't have the words to explain when something caught her eye behind him.

"What is she doing here?"

Behind Jack, Sasha's sister, Alexis, stood nearby. The hood of her coat pulled over her brown hair, hands in her pockets. "Are you two done yet?" Alexis nodded to the two of them.

"What? Oh." Sasha side-eyed Jack before walking over to Alexis and wrapping her good arm around her. She smelled like home. They stood like that for a minute. Sasha could hear Alexis sniffling. Pulling back, tears were welling in her sister's eyes. "It's okay, it's okay. What are you doing here?"

"You left. I thought you were dead," Alexis said through sobs.

"It's okay. I'm alright. I was just getting something to help dad," Sasha wiped a tear from Alexis's cheek.

"Uh, not to ruin the moment, but we gotta get out of here," Jack said behind them.

Sasha nodded and grabbed Alexis's hand. Following Jack, they pushed into the stairwell. Jack began down the staircase when Sasha grabbed his shoulder. "Hey, you didn't answer my question."

"What?" Jack turned.

"Why is she here?" She cocked her head back toward Alexis.

"She was worried about you. What was I supposed to do?" Jack grabbed the back of his neck. She watched his eyes wander around the room, not meeting hers.

"What were you supposed to do? Not let her come with you!" She shoved his shoulder.

"I couldn't stop her! She was relentless. She was going to leave by herself. I would have had to tie her to a chair or something. I almost thought of telling the adults but then I wouldn't be able to leave either."

"Then you should have done that, Jack! What were you thinking. It's not safe out here, she could…she could get hurt."

"What about you!" Jack threw his hands up and motioned at her. "Look at yourself, Sasha. You can't even lift your arm."

"I'm not talking about me. I'm talking about—"

"I'm not weak," Alexis interrupted. "I'm not a little girl anymore."

Sasha turned, "Yes, you are. Think about how dad would feel if something happened to you."

"What would he think if something happened to you?" Alexis crossed her arms, staring daggers.

Sasha's mouth hung open as she thought of a response. Jack took the moment to gently tug on Sasha's good arm. "We have to go, we're wasting time. We should be able to get home before it gets too dark."

"No, we can't leave now. Dad's still sick. He needs that medicine."

"Sasha, there's Vultures here. We can't."

"Yes, we can. We have to, we're so close. If we go back now, he might not survive." Sasha turned back to look at her sister as she said this. She saw a hint of fear in Alexis's hard gaze.

"We don't even know where to find it," Jack said.

"The Vultures have it, they have to. I heard that one say they had taken everything from the pharmacy. It has to be higher up."

"Sasha," Jack breathed.

Sasha clenched her jaw, brushing past Jack and starting up the stairs higher into the building. Stopping halfway, she turned, "I'm going. You can either come and help or take her home. The faster you decide, the faster we all get home."

Jack let out a sigh, his head sinking to the ground before grabbing the rail to go up, Alexis following. "You always were a stubborn one."

Together, the three of them climbed to the top of the stairwell on the third floor. They crept stealthily through the cold hallways. Jack led the way. Sasha rolled her eyes when he cut in front to take point, but a thin smile split her lips when his back was to her. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Alexis staring and kicked her foot.

The whistle of the wind grew as they made their way down a hall that ran along an exterior wall. A heap of snow collected on the floor in small dunes. Sasha thought it came from an open window. The light from the evening storm cast the hallway in a gray pallor. As they drew closer, the bite of the cold tingled on her face and she realized it wasn't a window, but a hole in the wall.

The hole stretched from floor to ceiling. Sasha could see exposed brick. There was no rubble, no evidence of what caused it. Then she saw it. Metal sheets and pipes of different sizes and materials were on the floor, stretching out of the hole in the wall. A makeshift bridge. The three of them stared at it. It reached about eight feet before entering a similar hole in the building over.

"That's it. It's gotta be. Their stash is in there," she said.

"Do you know what this is?" Jack turned. "This is a Vulture nest. Sasha, we can't go in there."

Sasha glared at him, even as she could feel her heartrate elevating. Jack let out a groan and grabbed the back of his neck.

"The longer we sit here thinking about it, the longer it'll take to get home." Sasha brushed past Jack and stepped out into the cold.

The makeshift bridge creaked from her weight. Snowflakes coasted over the metal and around her boots. She stepped forward, not daring to look down at the three-story drop. She shivered, not sure if it was from the cold or the fear crawling up her stomach. She rushed across and stumbled into the other building.

Breathing heavily, she turned to see Alexis nimbly crossing the bridge followed by Jack's hasty steps. "Now where?" Jack muttered next to her. She looked around the hall. This must have been an office building. Once warm, cream walls were stained with more graffiti. A black Vulture covered one wall. Paper and trash were strewn about the halls. Not sure which way, Sasha started down one of the hallways.

Down one and turning into another, the heaps of trash were more contained, like it had been kicked out of the way. A good sign. She predicted this was the route from the Vultures stash to the bridge. She

kept her eyes forward, searching in the dark for anyone that might come their way. They turned down another hall until they reached the doors to what must have been an office for a law firm. Names of lawyers most likely long gone were crossed out with spray paint on the frosted glass door.

The three of them slipped inside, making sure the door didn't slam behind them. They were in a large room full of cubicles and offices on either side. At the far end, Sasha could hear muffled voices. The hairs on the back of her neck stood and she looked at Jack and Alexis. They stared wide eyed, Sasha putting her finger to her lips.

Sasha gestured for them to wait near the entrance while she looked. Jack grabbed her arm, Sasha looking back at him. She read his mouth saying "Be careful" even as he made no sound. She nodded before sneaking deeper into the room.

She heard a boisterous laugh at the end of the room. She didn't know how many Vultures there were, but she wasn't keen to find out. Moving on, she came across what looked like a crate full of food, metal cans and bags reaching the rim. Her stomach growled. She started edging her way toward the crate before stopping. Beyond the crate was an open office door, a massive stack of pill bottles stacked on the desk inside.

Her heart skipped a beat. She hastily stepped past the food and into the office. The room was empty. She immediately started grabbing bottles, reading the labels, putting them back down. No. No. No. One of the bottles tipped over and made a *tap, taptap, taptaptap* on the desk.

"Hey, did you hear that?" a voice echoed softly.

Sasha hands started to shake as she sped up. Bottle after bottle. No. No. Come on.

"Go check it out." Another voice, higher pitched than the last.

Sasha could hear movement now. A man's groan and the shuffling of a fabric. It has to be here. Footsteps. She could feel her heartbeat in her temples. No. No…wait. Yes! Adrenaline overcame her as she read the label again. This is it! A gasp escaped her lips and a smile spread across her face.

"Well, what do we have here?" a voice asked. Sasha froze. "Turn around real slow for me."

Sasha willed her legs to move, turning to face the man. The Vulture was a tall man, broad shoulders, dark hood pulled over his head, a hint of a beard growing on his jaw. Except his jaw wasn't what she was focusing on, her eyes fixing on the gun he lazily pointed at her. He held it down by

his waist with one hand. His other hand was resting on the door frame, his body blocking her from escape.

"Don't know if I ever seen someone so bold, trying to steal from the Vultures," he grunted, looking at the pills in her outstretched hand.

"What's going on, Clayton?" the higher voice called.

"Caught myself a stray, Jess!" Clayton grinned. "You gotta come check this out."

"A what? Someone's in here? How did they get in?" Jess's voice was growing louder. Clayton turned his head out the door.

"Some girl, and she's going through our…" His words clipped as something connected with the back of his head. The tall man fell into the door frame, going down on one knee. Sasha could see Jack dropping an office chair at his feet, chest heaving from the exertion.

"We have to go," he said through breaths.

The walls of the room exploded with orange light. The cream walls strobing in rapid fire hues as gunfire laced through the room. Jack ducked for cover behind a cubicle wall. The gunfire paused. Ears ringing, Sasha shoved the bottle in her pocket, then ran and dove over the Vulture.

"Come on!" Alexis called from the door. Jack and Sasha were off, racing past the cubicles. Glass exploded just as they passed through the door, more bullets slamming into the wall where Sasha's head had just been.

"You get back here you brats!" Clayton yelled.

They sprinted through the hallways now, kicking up papers and trash. Sasha's legs were on fire. She could hear Alexis gasping for breath behind her. The three turned a corner into a hallway engulfed in white snow. The wind howled outside, the makeshift bridge rattling as they ran to it. The hole was a white screen, the snow shrouding the clinic on the other side.

Closer. Almost there. Sasha's feet slowed, skidded on the hard floor. A figure appeared out of the snow. Lumbering across the bridge, hand blocking the snow from his face. Sasha could make out his scraggly beard. It was the Vulture from the pharmacy. He paused.

"There you are." The Vulture reached for his gun.

"Stay close," Sasha said over her shoulder before screaming as she charged at the large man. He fumbled for his gun, eyes going wide as she gained ground. He grunted as she crashed into him, sending him spiraling.

Not stopping, Sasha kept charging forward across the bridge and through the other hole. It all happened in a matter of seconds. Her chest heaved as she drew out a breath. The Vulture yelled behind her and a shrill scream caught her attention. She whipped back toward the bridge. Jack's

back was to her, rushing back along the bridge. Sasha couldn't make out what was happening. Bodies were moving and the Vulture was falling.

Then she saw her. Alexis, hanging over the side of the shaky bridge. Legs kicking, her left hand slipped. Sasha held her breath, clambering back onto the bridge. Then Jack was there, grabbing Alexis' arm, holding on as she reached back up with her other hand. Jack strained as he hauled her up. Sasha made it to them and grabbed Alexis' jacket with her good arm, wrenching her up.

With another pull, Alexis flipped her leg up and onto the bridge. Her breathing was shaky. Standing, Sasha pulled her close. Jack stood as well.

"That was too close," he exhaled deeply, "Are you alri—" He stopped. The resounding crack of a gunshot echoed out from the hall across the bridge. Sasha looked up from embracing Alexis and turned to Jack. He fell to a knee, his face white as the snow that blew past them.

"No!" she screamed as he grabbed at his side.

"Got one!" Clayton's voice carried down the hall. "You're all dead."

Jack looked from his hand and up to Sasha. "Go."

"I can't leave you here," Sasha pleaded.

He pushed on her shoulder, his blood smearing her hoodie. "Go now!" More gunfire screamed toward them. "I said go! Run!"

"Jack, please!" Tears streaked down her face, burning in the cold. Her shoulders shuddered as she sobbed. She could feel Alexis pulling on her arm, dragging her back toward the clinic. No. No. This can't be happening. Her legs faltered and she stumbled back into the clinic as Alexis tugged hard.

They fell in a heap. Propping herself up, she looked back at the bridge. Jack was still on it, scooting closer to the entrance of the other building. He was on his back, his body wriggling. She could see the dark shapes of the two Vultures striding down the hall.

"Sasha come on, we have to go," Alexis said behind her.

"I can't!" Sasha screamed.

She saw Jack tilt his head, looking back at her from where he lay. "Stay safe, firecracker." Then he was kicking hard against the side of the building, one edge of the bridge in his grasp. The scrap metal of the bridge began to move toward Sasha on the other side. The Vultures were getting closer, almost to the hole now. Jack kicked again and again.

"Is he having a seizure?" the Vulture, Jess, asked.

"Who cares, grab those girls," Clayton pointed.

The two Vultures stepped onto the bridge and over Jack. Alexis was pulling on Sasha's sleeve frantically now. Jack let out a yell and then Sasha was up. She grabbed one end of the makeshift bridge.

"Alexis grab the other side, now!" Sasha began wrenching the metal toward her into the hallway.

"What are you?" Clayton started. "Hey, stop that!" He raised his gun on the platform as Sasha and Jack yelled in unison. The metal in her grip ripped itself free, flying up toward the ceiling before sliding and falling out of the hole in the wall. A cacophony of panicked screams came from Jack and the Vultures as they plummeted down into the alley followed by the resounding clang of metal.

Sasha looked over the edge into the alley. Metal and debris scattered in a kaleidoscope of destruction. Her heart was in her stomach. No. Deeper. She couldn't even feel it. The tears wouldn't stop, sobs racking her back. After some time, Alexis pulled on her sleeve and she turned to look at her little sister. She could see her eyes were red with tears as well.

"Let's go home. We have to bring the medicine back for father," Alexis mumbled through her own tears.

Sasha pulled the pill bottle out from her pocket, clenched it in her fist and nodded. "For father."

ENDED BY LOVE

by Kaylie Moses

I watch the sun set behind a hill, a figure atop its crest glowing with the dying light. His gold armor glistening under the sun's gaze, his eyes alight with a fire I had never seen before. The man atop the hill, basking in sun and flames, looks a shadow of the man I used to know. The man I called husband.

I turn to my fellow soldiers as the hill casts a menacing shadow upon us all. Each of their faces holds a different piece of humanity. Anger, fear, acceptance, cowardice, courage, but the one I see the most, the one I feel, is resignation. Because we know now, facing this crime against nature, that we will die here in these hills, seas away from our homeland. I turn back to the hill in front of us as the ground begins to shake with the ever closer beating sounds of horse hooves. A shiver runs down my spine, and I blame the lack of sunshine, though deep down I know I am lying to myself.

I hear yelling from a distance, a call to arms, a call to fight for what's right. My eyes search the hill, looking for my husband, but he has been swallowed by the incoming cavalry. The same way his mind was swallowed and shaped by the magic he now slaves under.

I remember the night well, the night I woke to a note promising wealth. The night he left me and our child to fend for ourselves against the debt we owed to the physician. He left us for the magic which he now has, but he has lost himself along the way. So for him, for the man I loved, for the father of my dead son, I raise the call with all my chest.

We charge. Though in the face of fire wielding puppets riding horses we must look puny and pathetic. They wait a moment atop their towering hill before descending faster than I thought possible, racing towards us with abandon. I hear shouting and screaming and clanking of metal as the shields rise. I heft mine, the familiar weight grounding me as the earth shakes under my boots. I hear them getting closer, feel the heat almost brushing against my armor.

I shriek as the horses ram into the spikes on my shield and the shields of those beside me. Blood sprays as I fight back tears from the cries of the innocent animals and the strain in my arms. I hear the grunts of the human puppets as they fall with their horses, hopefully getting crushed beneath their corpses. I cannot see over my shield, but I can hear. I can hear the screams, the grunts, the pained whinnies, but mostly I hear the sound of swords and hammers bashing against our shields, trying to break us apart. Further down the line I hear a scream of pure agony before hearing the sound of toppling shields. The effects ripple through the rest of us as the remaining enemy cavalry push through the hole in our shieldwall, breaking us apart.

With that we drop our cumbersome shields to the muddy ground and fight. I draw my sword just in time to catch a blade arched at my neck. I hold with all my strength as the heated metal inches closer and closer to my throat. I foolishly take a second to look at my opponent and am relieved when my eyes meet blue instead of red. I duck out of the way of the blade as my arms fail as the fight pursues. The world blurs together as blood sprays around me, as people fall to the ground with glassy eyes, as swords clash and armor burns.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a flash of light but I am too late as a wave of flames hits my armor, heating it to painful levels. The skin on my back starts to melt and the wooden wedding ring on my finger goes up in flames as I turn to face my attacker. I feel my heart stop beating in my chest when I see the face of my attacker beneath his helmet. Ruby eyes, dark skin, white hair falling over his face. My husband. My heart. My Callum. Those ruby eyes that had haunted my dreams are no longer glassed over, but cleared in terrifying shock.

I don't recall falling to the ground, I don't recall the feeling of the fire on my skin that has left my back a marred pound of flesh. All I remember is his eyes staring into mine for the last time. As I stare at the night sky and feel my life slipping away, I can only think of the time before magic, the time before war, the time before promises.

I sit behind the bar as the sun rises over the horizon, light filtering through the dirty window. As day breaks the town comes to life outside the tavern walls. Farmers riding out to the fields, mothers ushering their children towards the schoolyard, soldiers changing shifts, and drunks finally stumbling home. The last patron of the bar cleared out only fifteen minutes before daybreak. From noontime to daybreak he had been drinking, his coin pouch empty when he ultimately staggered out the door.

Just in time to be out of the way for the travelers who have been up in their room. They seem to be packing up, the ruckus coming through the thin boarded ceiling.

Two men, hefting sacks full of what look like weapons, stalk down the stairs. The first is toweringly tall with skin the color of wheat, brown hair longer than mine, and eyes as white as clouds. I cannot see the second though I can hear him, a voice smooth as honey, singing a song that I do not know. I am captivated by the perfect notes and silky tone almost instantly. I can't help but tap my foot to the beat of his unfamiliar tune as I work on cleaning last night's glasses.

At last I get a glance at the face which owns this heavenly voice. Striking ruby eyes, dark skin and hair as white as snow, carrying a heavy sack over one shoulder and a fiddle over the other. I watch as his lips form around each note, his mouth producing words in a language I have never heard in this small swamp-town tavern.

"So, shortcake…Can I get a pint of ale for me and my friend?" the tall one says, leaning against the bar, hair falling over his face. The one with the voice heads out towards the stables leaving his fiddle leaning against the frame of the door.

"Two pints for you gentleman?" I ask, and he nods in return. "That will be four chips."

I turn and grab two clean glasses from the wall and tap the ale from the barrel, watching the amber liquid slosh around the inside of the cup. I place the glasses on the bar with a thud turning the copper chips around my fingers. The tall one drinks deeply from his glass as I go back to cleaning. I fill the emptiness inside with cleaning, the silence with singing, being idle has never been a thing for me, especially not in this tavern.

"So, where are you boys coming from? I have never heard an accent such as that," I ask the tall one as the one with the voice comes back in and starts strumming his fiddle as he walks over and takes a seat in a nearby booth.

"We came from across the east sea, shortcake, heard there was magic spreading, wanted to see what was happening," he says while taking another sip.

"Magic? Here? On this continent? There's no way anyone would be stupid enough to take those westerners up on their puppet offers," I spew, the blasphemy of the idea shaking me.

"Really? No one desperate enough to trade their soul for money and power?" the one with the voice says, stopping his strumming abruptly,

ruby eyes piercing into my blue ones with dominion, his majestic voice dripping with sarcasm and sharpness.

"No one in this town, valley, or country. We know that magic has a price too steep for any northerner to pay, or any sane person for that matter," I reply staring right back at him, blue against red, fire against ice.

"Whatever you say, button," he dismisses, going back to playing his fiddle.

I sigh. "My name is Henley, I would appreciate it if you both used it."

"Well then, Henley, my name is Emmitt and my friend is Callum," the tall one, Emmitt, says. "Though how a pretty girl like you got named after a chicken must have been quite an unfortunate circumstance."

"Well, being a Hen is better than being a cock," I quip, giving them both a pointed look before putting the freshly cleaned glass on the wall and moving on to the next.

"I apologize if we gave the wrong impression," Emmitt says, sarcasm and amusement dripping from his tone.

"But come on, button, how could we not when you're just so galvanic and gorgeous?" asks Callum from his booth, leaving his fiddle and walking to the bar to take a heavy drink of his ale. With an unceremonious burp and cough, he laughs such a musical laugh I can't help but be enraptured.

"Truly, though, from both of us, or at least from me, we mean no offense and no ill will. He's a rake and I can't resist such a lovely woman, Henley," Callum says, earnestly, and I can almost feel the sincerity in his words.

I laugh as a blush runs across my cheeks, "Well, now that we're all acquainted, are you boys staying another night in town or are you going to brave the swamps in search of 'magic'?" I say, a tinge of mocking in my voice, trying to shift the subject away from such a vulnerable topic.

"We are not searching for magic, we are hunting it," Callum says, a cocky glint in his eyes. "But we could be persuaded to stay another night or two if a lovely woman would join us."

I laugh at the attempt, blush growing, as a large group of patrons walks through the door. I turn to help them, getting four of the men a pint of ale and the two girls each a bottle of wine. As the sun starts to shine its full light more patrons come and go but I can't help but look back at the two travelers, eyes always drifting back to Callum and his fiddle.

After hours of serving drinks and food my replacement finally shows up. I go to clear the dirty tables before the night rush, gathering empty glasses and collecting spare chips left as a tip. Callum and Emmitt left barely ten minutes before I got off and their table was a mess of empty glasses and stained playing cards.

I pick up one of the glasses and find a note underneath and laugh. On it, in what I can only describe as crude writing, is an invite to the docks, signed by Callum with a heart. I can't help but laugh, a smile spreading across my face at the thought of the ruby-eyed, silk-voiced, arrogant man I can't rid from my thoughts.

Apron off and glasses finally washed I decide to trek into the swamps to get to the docks and truly meet this man I am shamefully interested in. The journey by foot is gross, the cold swampy water soaking through my worn boots. Bugs nip at my skin and buzz around my head incessantly. I finally break through the trees to the docks, candles lighting the boards as people dance across them to the sound of a fiddle.

In the center of the lively circle is Callum, with a smile on his face, a song on his lips, and a light in his ruby eyes that captivates me. His eyes lock onto mine and he finishes his song with a flourish, taking a bow and letting the actual ensemble take over.

Another song commences as he crosses the platform of the docks, people returning to their vigor after a roaring round of applause and whoops. He offers his hand and takes a bow, some witty remark leaving his lips that I cannot hear over the pounding of my heart. He pulls me toward the center of the lively circle and I feel my heels digging into the boards beneath us.

"Oh, don't be a chicken now, you're already here," he says, that sly captivating smile on his face as he tugs me towards the dance.

"First of all, I don't dance, and second, it's Hen not chicken," I say, comedy filling my voice even as I dig my heels deeper.

"Yes yes, Henley Hen, the danceless barmaid who has captured my heart. Oh Hen of Hens won't you do me the honor of one dance?" he asks, dramatically, like he is in a play, a laugh on his lips and a spark in his eyes. He lets go of my hand and takes a dramatic bow, offering his hand again.

"Well, how can I say no to such a handsome face and pretty words," I say, conceding and taking his hand as he whisks us into the center of the dance.

Spinning around the dock in each other's arms, hand in hand, feet shuffling in unison on the boards. My eyes glued to his and his to mine.

Red on blue and blue on red, smiles on our faces and laughs on our lips. Time blends together when his hands are on my hips, the music coursing through us. Eventually, though, it all has to come to a stop. I only wish I could live in this moment, this memory, but I cannot, because I can no longer live.



From memory to memory my mind jumps, from the first embrace to the last, it races through the happiest year of my life, as my life comes to an end.

I remember the day he decided to stay, not so long after our first dance. I remember when he set down the sack of weapons and said no. No more hunting, no more traveling, no more magic. Emmitt was enraged beyond anything I had seen in the short time I had spent with him, but rightfully so. He was being left behind, alone. I now know his feelings well.

"You can't be serious, Callum!" Emmitt shouts loud enough that the whole tavern goes quiet. I can hear every word clearly through the thin creaky ceiling that leads to the rented room of Callum and Emmitt.

"We have a duty! An oath! We swore to repel magic, to keep the westerners and their ways at bay! How can you give that up?" Emmitt's voice rattles the paintings on the walls as many of the patrons look around in uncomfortable silence.

"You made an oath, Emmitt. I never did!" Callum yells. "I went along with you because I believe in the eradication of magic. But I found something here. Something worth more than a dream." I can barely hear those final sentiments as Callum and Emmitt's voices quit and the tavern comes back to life.

I pour drink after drink, time running together as the commotion upstairs comes and goes in waves, just like my anxiety. I hear a crash upstairs before the door slams shut so hard it rattles the glasses on the wall.

Only a second later Emmitt comes flying down the stairs, bag slung across his back and anger in his eyes. He stalks over to the bar and slams the keys to his room down in front of me, glaring.

"This is all your fault. You will be the end of him," Emmitt says before storming out the door, leaving me in shock.

I was frozen there for a long time, I remember. Those words were blasphemy to me, but now, as I lay dying, they ring true. I was the end for Callum and Callum was the end for me.



My eyes fling open in pain as I hear squeaking nearby. I have no idea how long I have lain here, forgotten and dying. I turn my head, pain soaring through my back as the burnt skin moves.

Next to me lies another soldier, burnt beyond recognition. But what I do recognize is the rat eating his charred skin. Fear floods my blood, or what remains in my body, as I pray to die faster, so that I might not be alive when I become food.

I feel a sharp pain in my leg but am unable to look down as I feel my marred flesh rip and one of my worst fears comes true. I close my eyes again and hope and pray for a different place, for the past to be here and me there.

I think back to Callum, back to the husband I loved with all my heart. Not the shell who has left me here burned and dying. To the day I married him and he became my world. The sun shone true that day, and so brightly I was blinded when I took my first steps down that aisle.

My feet shake and falter in my new polished boots as I walk down the boards, flowers in my hands and my hair and my veil making it hard to see. I look down at my simple white dress, the finest piece of clothing I had ever worn, more than anything I could have dreamed of.

I look up through the veil and see Callum standing at the end of the dock where we first danced, beside him our officiant. I squint due to the sunlight glistening off the swampy water to look into the eyes of my husband and my steps suddenly feel sure beyond belief. I want to run down the aisle into his arms, kiss his lips, stare into his ruby eyes and hear his musical voice in my ear.

It all seems to go so fast, the walk to him, him holding my hands, him promising to be mine and I his. I stand here, on the docks of the northern continent, on the swampy shores once again in my mind, I stand here as I hear his vows again, a promise long since broken.

"I, Callum Wright, swear to you, Henley Iver, that I will abide by your will and stay by your side from this day through all days, with this ring, that is my promise."

I stare into his eyes as he offers me his hands, callused from years of fiddle playing and hunting down the scourge of this world. I take the wooden band in which I carved three crude feathers and place it on his finger as I speak my vows.

"I, Henley Iver, swear to you, Callum Wright, that I will abide by your will and stay by your side from this day through all days, with this ring, that is my promise."

I feel the wooden ring slip onto my finger and I admire its handiwork, intricate flowers whittled into the band of wood, and a tiny music note, hidden from the eye.

"Now, you may kiss your bride," the officiant announces, and I feel a blush spread across my cheeks as Callum goes to lift my veil. His fingers brush against my cheek, wiping away a tear I did not know was falling. My smile is almost bright enough to rival the sun as my eyes fall upon his.

I feel full beyond anything I have ever felt. I wish to stay in silence with this man, to sit idle as time passes with this man. I stare into his ruby eyes hoping to convey this feeling with true and unbridled sincerity, that I love him. He was the part missing from me, the part that was empty.

I get up on my toes to reach his lips as he leans down to capture mine. Finally they join and it is the beginning of my life. I feel my love born anew, a new type of commitment blooming in my chest, this promise forging me to the man I love, from this day 'til the day I die.



I remember every thought, every moment, every detail of my wedding to my love, but that final thought that had been my own private promise, rings with a bitter edge through my mind. I can only wish to go back to that day and live it out forevermore. The memories of my life blur together, days and weeks turning into mist that slips through my fingers. I try remembering our first time lying together, our first dance as husband and wife, or our first meal cooked together. Anything, but that one fateful day that started it all, but that is all that remains.



On one seemingly uneventful morning did I realize my bleedings had stopped. It had been like every other day. I awoke before the town came to life and went to work. Callum came to the tavern to have breakfast with me before heading out to the fields. It was honest work, though I could see it wearing on him, see him missing his adventurous hunter life. It was noontime before I realized I was pregnant.

Cleaning glasses and serving patrons, hands never idle. I tell myself it is worth it, that it is the best job for me and I am good at it. I finally get a moment's reprieve and sit behind the bar, feet aching and swollen as I open my schedule for the tavern. I look at the paper, each day of the year blotted off or marked with some important information.

Every month on one day has a red dot in the corner of the day, each one a warning of my bleedings. But this month, the dot passed over two weeks ago. I feel my breath pick up and my head spin but it is as if it is no longer my body. I feel detached in this realization, my mind going blank.

I still have hours of work to get through, still have so much to think about. It has only been a month since I married and laid with Callum.

I go about my work in a daze, hands idle for once in my days as I can barely pour a drink, let alone clean with my usual vigor. The idleness leads way to such an emptiness I have not felt since I was married, an anxiety that fills every humor in my body. The time passes in jumps, one second here, an hour there, and at the same time it could not go by fast enough. For I am pregnant. I am carrying life. I am so nervous to tell Callum, but also so excited. But how are we going to afford this? Callum and I together barely make enough combined to eat each week, now to provide for a child, we will be beyond our means.

Eventually, enough time seemed to have passed for Callum to return from the field and walk me back to our tiny one room house.



My screams rips the air as my child rips from my body .

"One more push, dear, the child is almost here. Breathe, breathe now Henley. Now push," the elderly midwife tells me, yelling over my own screams.

I push once more and I feel the child ripped from me into the arms of the midwife. I collapse against the birthing bed in exhaustion, trying to catch my breath against the pain racking my body as I await my child's first scream.

"It is a boy, my dear!" the midwife proclaims as Callum rushes into the room and to the side of my bed, covered in dirt from working the fields.

"Button, how are you doing? How is our child?" Callum says, grabbing my hand with his dirty ones. The midwife responds before I can muster the strength to.

"It is a boy, sir," she says, but I can almost feel a heavy sorrow in her voice that makes me anxious. I hear a small intake of breath, shaky and quiet and weak, but there.

"There seems to be something wrong with his lungs," the midwife says as she examines him before bringing my son to me and I see what she means. My baby boy is blue at the lips and fingers, his ribs are swollen and his nose runs with phlegm.

I hold him close to my chest as tears start to run down my face. Callum, beside me, starts to bawl. I feel the sorrow in the air thick, like this future loss has become a foot over my heart just waiting to stomp it out.

I hold my son even closer to my chest as his breath comes out in shallow rattles. I turn to look at Callum, his face broken in defeat and anguish.

"Your baby seems to have a dropsy of the lungs. I will call for the physician but there is little he can do with such a large imbalance of phlegm. He will be here in a week or so but the fee will be high, as you must know," the midwife says solemnly, confirming our fears. Callum nods, eyes bearing a new weight of a responsibility no one should have to bear, a decision no one should make.

I look at my baby boy, lips and fingers gaining small amounts of color but the rattling of his chest stays the same, I cannot bear if he were to die, but I do not think Callum and I can bear the weight of such tremendous debt to the doctor. I need to stop thinking about this, I need to think of my boy and my boy alone.

"We must name him, my love. What should we name him?" I ask, trying not to let my voice break, knowing that this name is all I can give, that and a happy life, though it will be short. Maybe if I gave him a name he would stay longer than if we gave up.

"What about Evan? Or Ivan? Donovan? No, we know a Donovan from somewhere. Rovan? Estevan? Stevan? I like Stevan," Callum says, laughing through his tears, the weight leaving his eyes and shoulders for a moment.

"What is your obsession with Van?" I ask, looking down at my baby boy, worry filling my heart as he coughs up more mucus, but love creeping in, making itself known. Even though this child is sickly, he is still my child, my baby, my son, and I love him more than my own life.

"My mother's name was Vania," Callum whispers, and I refrain from gasping, he never talks about her, ever. "I never met her, she died giving birth to me, but I want to honor that sacrifice for what it has given me. You, my beautiful, and now our beloved son."

"Then I love Stevan," I say, smiling wide as I cradle the babe to my chest and greet him for the first time.

"Hello, my Stevan."



I did not think I could cry anymore, that my pains of death and failure and betrayal had robbed me of all my tears, but seemingly not. They fall now freely as I remember my Stevan as he was, Callum as he was, I remember my family as we all were for those few months of blissful peace. But reality had to come crashing in.

"I wish you didn't have to, but we will lose the house if you don't go back to work!" Callum yells, eyes pleading but his body is pulled taut in restraint.

I bounce Stevan on my hip, tapping his back lightly, trying to ease him through his coughing fit, just the way the doctor taught me.

"We can't afford to pay the church what it demands to look after such a sick child! He needs constant care, Callum. The doctor said that, in the early stages, if we give him lungwort, licorice root, and bloodlet twice a day, he could live to twenty! I will do everything in my power to help my child survive, if that means living on the streets to afford his treatments, then so be it!" I whisper as Stevan gurgles curiously, his breathing has been slightly better.

"I know, I know. I am sorry. I don't know how we are going to afford it all right now," Callum says, sitting down on the edge of the bed defeated, head hanging in his hands, white hair filled with dirt. He looks disheveled beyond recognition, I probably look the same, motherhood has been filled with love but also sleepless nights and hours of playing nurse. Callum abruptly gets up and starts pacing and muttering to himself.

"Callum? What is it?" I ask, curious but terrified, having heard of such stress and overwhelming work leading to serious humor imbalance in a person, especially in the weaker easterners.

"I-I-I can't, it wouldn't be worth it. But then again it is worth it and much, much more. You are worth it, Stevan is worth it. But I can't help but think that not even the life of my own child is worth it," Callum prattles on, pacing back and forth more frantic with each step, more deranged with each word.

I back away from him as he is coming to resemble more and more a caged animal wanting to get free. I gently set Stevan down in his crib in the corner, the one Callum built by hand and carved music notes and birds into the sides of. I run my hands over the design, reminding myself of the man I fell in love with, the father of my child and the holder of my heart and promise.

I walk over to him, gently placing a hand on his shoulder to still him. He flinches but doesn't pull away or push me, I take that as a good sign.

"Callum, my love, what are you talking about?" I ask gently, guiding him to sit on the edge of the bed beside me. He blinks a couple of times, ruby eyes focusing in and out, like he is looking far away in a daze before returning back to me. Finally his eyes clear and he speaks after a long moment.

"Nothing, my love. All will be fine. I found an answer to all our problems," Callum says with a resignation I have never heard before.

I was too tired to question it then but I wish I had, oh how I wish.



That night I had woken up to Stevan coughing, I remember, or maybe it was the storm outside that woke me, but that didn't matter once I lit a candle and found Callum gone. I ran out into the rain, the already constant mud turned to sludge found only near the coast, and I had found nothing but emptiness and a note.

My feet fall into the sludge, sinking with each step I try to run. Going deeper and deeper until I can no longer move them. I fall to the ground screaming and raging as I pry open the note I grabbed.

"Button, I left to honor my promise to you, but in all honesty, it feels selfish. Not even a week ago two westerners came through town and offered five thousand chips of silver to anyone who would take up their cause. Every northerner denied it vehemently, just like you said they would. But we need this money, even if I have to sell my soul for it, Stevan needs this. With all my heart, take care of him," Callum wrote, each word shaky and filled with the cowardice of a puppet.

The man I fell in love with is good as dead and gone now, a puppet to magic all for money that he won't even remember to give to us. He won't remember us. He won't remember us. He won't remember us.

That thought is a litany in my brain as I kneel in the sludge outside of my house as Stevan screams behind and the storm rages around me. That my husband, the man who sang to our child, who had hunted magic and its puppets, had sold himself for nothing but false promises.



I awake with a start, breathing heavy, clothes soaked through with water and caked with mud. I pry myself from the dried ground as the sun glares down at me. I sit there, feeling empty once again, basking in the silence of heartbreak and betrayal.

Silence.

Silence.

Utter Silence.

I get up and run, my short legs weighted down by heavy mud, but hindering me not. Fear pumps through my veins with a vengeance, guilt already creeping around the edges of my mind as I run through the open door and to the crib in the corner. I pick up Stevan and tap his back, trying to dislodge the phlegm like the doctor taught me. He had said that if the

baby was not making noise to dislodge the phlegm and everything would be alright.

Everything will be alright, all I have to do is dislodge the phlegm, I keep saying to myself. I am focused entirely on Stevan's back, on letting him make noise again, on letting him breathe. I cradle him to my shoulder and tap his back harder, tears starting to form but I deny them the right to fall for my child is not dead. Stevan is not dead, not now, not anytime soon.

I pull him back to check his throat and truly look at his face for the first time.

I scream.

And scream.

And keep on screaming.

I don't remember how long I screamed, I only remember the face of my baby, my Stevan, blue as the sky and as cold as ice.



I remember walking through the streets, holding my blue baby in my arms, I remember the pain it took to take each step, the want with each step to slit my own throat and join my child.

I walked out past the town, out past the fields, through the swamps, I walked endlessly. I remember thinking that if I keep walking, god would save my Stevan, magic would save my Stevan, someone would save my Stevan because I couldn't.

I crest a hill, bare feet bloody from the hours of walking, sun now setting behind the next hill and atop I see three figures and a pike. I keep on walking, hoping one of them can save my Stevan, hoping one of them is god.

As I reach the bottom of the hill the figures atop it are illuminated. One in gold, one dressed plainly, the other in bloody garbs. The one in plain clothes raises a sword and brings it down through the neck of the bloody one, sending his head rolling down the hill, only feet from me.

To my surprise, the head belongs to Emmitt. I thought he had died long ago. Seeing his bloody head roll should have made me feel something, we were friends once. But I feel nothing. Nothing at all.

I cast my eyes back to the crest to see the plain one has white hair and ruby eyes and skin the color of coal. That was when I knew my husband was gone, my love and my baby, taken from me, all because of greed and magic.

NOT A DRILL

by Riley Nielsen

The alarms reverberate through the school during the middle of math work time, screeching a dire warning to the school's inhabitants. I glance up from the handwriting worksheet I am grading and stand up. *That's weird. I didn't see an email about a lockdown drill,* I think. Pushing down my surprise, I ask my first graders, "Okay, class. What's the first thing we do during a lockdown drill?"

"Lock and barricade the door!" they chime in unison. I quickly walk over to the door as my students begin pushing their desks toward me. The door is open, and I spot a tiny figure on the opposite end of the hallway moving frantically. I squint to see if it is Marie, who had gone to the restroom only minutes ago. There is an object in the child's hand. *Holy fuck!* my brain screams as I register what they are grasping. The child has a gun. There is a *gun* clutched in their hand. They lift it to their eye as if to aim it right at…

"Get to the closet!" I order, slamming the door shut and locking it as fast as I can. I grab the closest desks and shove them in front of the door. I find the emergency bucket right next to it and look at my students, who have not moved a muscle. They stare at me, eyes wide as apples, puzzled by my sudden outburst.

"We need to get into the closet. Now!" I demand, herding them towards it. The storage closet is in the far corner of my classroom; its door is decorated with pictures the students have drawn over the year. I turn the metal handle, and they shuffle in one by one. I exhort them to move faster; the wasted time is paced by my racing heart. Rupert is the last in line, and I file in behind him. I lock the door and take a deep breath. My brain cannot grasp what is happening. Julian, Elias, and Ronan giggle in the corner. *How can they think this is funny?* I shush them and look at my other students who are huddled together like baby birds in a nest. I quietly direct them to sit and flinch as their shoes squeak against the grey linoleum floor. Books and miscellaneous school supplies surround us, and the scent

of printer paper wafts through the small space. The only source of light comes from the nightlight plugged into the corner. I am grateful I decided to buy it this year—just in case. My students sit around the walls under the shelves of school supplies. They look small and defenseless, curling against each other in the dim light. Standing up, I grab a container filled with scissors and give each of them one. Their hands curl tightly against the plastic handles as I whisper, "These are not to hurt your classmates. If a dangerous person breaks into the room, I need you to stay back and let me protect you. These are for if I am not there."

Pulling plastic totes of books off the shelves, I set them carefully in front of the door and check the lock again. It is locked securely. I stack the totes as high as I can reach. I pat my pocket where my phone should be but find that it is missing. *Dammit!* I left my phone in the room. How am I supposed to contact the principal, the SRO—anyone, for that matter—without my phone?

I grab my emergency bucket and open it. Inside lies a first aid kit, glowsticks, papers with parent contact information, two three-foot squares of fleece, and evacuation plans. Pulling out a glowstick, I crack it. I shouldn't add more light, but the dark is scary for first graders. It does nothing. I try another, and still nothing happens. *When were these last replaced?* I place the bucket aside and settle in front of the totes. Sage flops into my lap. She cries relentlessly, her whimpers sound like bloodcurdling screams in the sinister quiet. The shooter will hear her if she keeps her volume high. I lean forward and whisper in her ear, "Sage, honey, I know you are scared right now, but I need you to be quiet. You are brave, so brave, and I am here for you."

I rub her back, and she begins to quiet down. I can feel her tears soaking my pants.

I examine the other students. Three are also crying, but silently. Multiple shake or rock. The quiet and still children scare me the most. Their faces remain blank as if to suppress any emotion that might seep from them. I wish I could bundle each of my students in my arms and shield them from the terror that waits outside these four walls. I remain by the totes, patting Sage's back. Her cries are minimal now. The only sound is the hum of the air conditioner. Could I make it louder? Drown out any sound of our existence? I focus on its scratchy whine. There is no shooter. There are no crying children. There is only the melody of the school's crappy AC.

A loud BANG roars outside. We all flinch, and many students begin crying again. I crouch next to them, whispering in their ears and trying to

remain calm myself, "Everything is going to be okay, but I need you to be quiet. I know it is scary, and I need you to be brave."

My thoughts wander to Marie in the bathroom. Hopefully, she stayed put. *The shooter*—oh, that was a weird statement to think—*wouldn't go in the bathroom, right?* I picture her standing on the toilet seat, like I told my class to do in this situation. In my mind, she hovers motionless and quiet. What is she wearing? A white dress with violet flowers—her favorite color—on the hem and a matching lavender scrunchie holding back her curly, black hair.

BANG. *BANG!* We all simultaneously recoil as each shot rings. I breathe rapidly, questions swarming my thoughts. Who is a victim? Who is standing on the other side of that gun? I don't bother asking the big question. The "Why?" Why would someone—an elementary student at that—show up to school with a gun and start shooting? I know that the whys cannot always be answered.

Zuri and Jenny scream. I shuffle across the floor and grab their hands.

"Please, girls, you need to stop," I say as I grip their tiny hands tightly. My voice is desperate, and tears crawl down my cheeks. My sangfroid is cracking by the second, and I do not know how much longer I can keep it together.

"I'm scared, Miss Gostings," Zuri wails.

"What if they come after us?" Jenny adds.

I've been refusing to ask myself that question.

"I will protect you," I say firmly and wrap my arms around them. My embrace muffles their screams. I hope the girls don't notice that I am shaking too.

Another BANG cuts through their shrieks. It is closer this time. The shooter cannot be moving closer to us. Why would they come here?

"Miss Gostings, I have to go potty," Lyra whispers.

Crap. What do I do?

"Number one or two?"

"Number one."

"You have to hold it, Lyra. I'm sorry."

"But—"

BANG! The sound of glass shattering echoes off the walls. We all still.

"You all need to be very, very quiet," I whisper, clinging to Zuri and Jenny. I look and see Orion scooting closer to the wall. Carefully, I direct Zuri and Jenny to do the same. Jenny clutches my sleeve, desperately

trying to hang on to me. I grab her hand away and pull it off my arm. I motion to everyone to go as close to the wall as possible. Julian holds his scissors with both hands, aiming at the door. His face is resolute and dark. I take a pair from the box and hold them at the ready. Quiet footsteps echo on the linoleum floor at a running pace. Our breathing feels too loud. The scissors shake in my hand, and I press my ears against the door. The person on the other side knocks. I jolt backwards.

"Miss Gostings," a small voice murmurs, barely loud enough for me to hear, "are you in there?"

"M-M-Marie?" I whisper. I press my ear to the doorframe. "Is that you?"

"Please, let me in. The boy…He's scaring me." Her voice wobbles like the rope of a tightrope walker. "He's getting closer."

My stomach plummets. "What do you mean? What do you see?"

Another shot rings out. A scream follows. Then a thud. "Marie?" I call. No answer.

Behind me, a chorus of wails sings. I whirl around. Sage frantically crawls backwards. In her path, a trail of blood follows as her faithful shadow.

That's impossible. How is she bleeding?

My eyes land on the blood's origin, and I shove my hand into my mouth to keep from screaming. The dim glow from the nightlight illuminates thick red pouring out from the crack between the door and the floor, staining the linoleum with its lurid color. Flinging off my blazer, I stuff it in the crack in hopes it absorbs the next bouts of blood. Running to Sage, I wipe the blood off her leg with my shirt and try to soothe her. "It will be okay," I say, wrapping my arms around Sage's trembling body.

The smell of urine permeates the air and Elias exclaims, "EW!"

I look to my right and see in the reflection of the nightlight a puddle of liquid surrounding Lyra. Her pants are wet. She whispers, "I'm s-s-sorry."

I crawl over and say, "There's nothing to apologize for, sweetheart. Let's get you cleaned up."

I pull the two blankets out of the emergency bucket and wrap one around her waist and the other on top of the puddle. She scoots beside me and leans against my arm.

Tears cloud my vision, making the room blur to nothing. There is no controlling the cries, the screams, the tears. All I can do is hope. Hope the shooter will not come into the room and break down the door. If they do, I can stop them. Marie's innocent face floats into my head. Seeing her

infectious smile shatters part of me. I pat Lyra's back and move down the line of horrified students. I embrace each of them and attempt to whisper alleviating words. They know I'm lying. Everything will not be okay. This won't be over soon.

Days of silence seem to pass before we hear anything from beyond the door.

"I found another student," a male voice yells. "I need medics in Room 110!"

I sit up from my slumped position.

More voices join the man's. There is shuffling.

As I attempt to stand, Zuri grabs my hand. In a small voice, she asks, "Are they the good guys?"

There is hope in her terrified expression. I smile, "I think so."

"Is it safe to come out?" I call. The wait for a response is excruciating. I hold my breath.

The knock on the door makes me jump. "Hello? Is someone there?"

"We're here!" I shout. "Miss Gostings's class."

"Miss, my name is Officer Wallace. Is everyone in there unharmed?"

The truth is no. None of us are unharmed. Zuri and Jenny cannot stop crying for even a minute. Lyra sits in her own urine. Sage still has some of Marie's blood on her. Rupert and Julian clutch their scissors as if their life depends on them. The rest of my students are in equal disrepair. And I…I didn't know how I am doing.

"Yes, no one is injured," I reply.

"How many students do you have with you, Miss—"

"I have sixteen students, and Marie is…" I cannot bring myself to say it. "Marie is okay, right?"

"Marie. What is Marie's last name?"

"Huntington. Her parents are—"

"Miss Gostings, I need you and your students to stay put. Do you have your cell phone?"

I shake my head and say, "No, I left it in my classroom."

"When it is safe for you to exit, I will come and get you. Please do not leave the closet until that point."

My smile falters. *Don't leave the room? How much longer are we going to stay?* I picture what lies beyond the door. Maybe it is better in the sanctuary of the closet.

"Okay," I say feebly.

I sit down again. Orion comes up next to me and asks, "Does this mean it's over?"

In truth, I do not know what to tell him. Can this truly ever be over? The school will be cleaned, but can a stain so large be scrubbed away? There will be a trial for the shooter, which could take months to years, depending on the circumstances. The people who were shot could be injured so severely that they could be incapacitated for months if not the rest of their lives. The news stories of school shooting survivors flood my thoughts, and one question floats to the surface. Can I get over this?

"I hope so," I told Orion. He seems satisfied with this answer and drifts off to talk to Ronan.

My eyes study each of my students, their slumped figures lit by the nightlight's glow. Tears have left their eyes and cheeks red. Their fear is well-hidden, but I see it in the way Julian winces every time there is an unexpected noise, and how Zuri and Jenny never move apart from each other. *They are so brave*, I realize. *Braver than I am.*

My eyes move to the door where my blazer still rests. Marie must be okay. I cannot bear the thought of never hearing her laugh or her silly stories again. Suddenly, the room is too small and too warm. I need to see Marie. I stand and shove the totes away from the door. One tiny peek will not hurt. The door unlocks with a small *click*.

Nothing. Nothing in my five years of teaching, the thousands of hours of safety videos and first aid demonstrations, hundreds of news videos could have prepared me for the sight of Marie's body drowning in her own blood. An anguished cry escapes my throat as my eyes travel along her blood-soaked dress and the gaping hole on the right side of her stomach. I back away from the door.

"Ma'am, you need to remain—" an officer says.

I slam the door shut. Marie's mutated body grips my mind, and my heart races—a rapid *tu-tum-tu-tum.*

I hear quiet chatter outside the door, but have no desire to hear what they are saying. The image of Marie burns in my mind. What on Earth was I thinking?

There's a knock on the door.

"Miss Gostings, you and your class can come out now," someone says.

I don't want to leave. I don't want my students to leave. Rupert goes to the door. I yank him back. They *cannot* see what I saw.

In response to my silence, the officer says softly, "It's okay. Nothing out here can hurt you."

I don't move. My students stare at me strangely. I thought nothing could hurt me in these walls. For years, the school has been my

sanctuary—the place where, no matter what was happening, I had people and students who relied on me and cared. This is no sanctuary now. It is a tomb. I hear a sigh and the door opens. I expect blood to coat the floors, not black blankets. Tentatively, we walk out, looking around. Math assignments lay forgotten on desks. Chairs rest haphazardly around the room. The window next to the door is broken, the hole just big enough to fit a first grader. I glance at the floor where Marie was. Where I saw the hole tearing through her—

"This way," the officer says. He starts to lead us out of our classroom.

I turn to my class, who are in a straight line as if we were just walking to gym class. "Voices quiet," I tell them. "Single file."

A tiny hand grabs mine. I look down and see Jenny staring at me with a blank expression. One by one my students grasp hands and we walk down the hall of destruction together.

Later at my apartment, I cannot sleep. I pace my tiny living room, clutching a pillow. A cold cup of coffee has rested on the end table from this morning. I turn the television on. I turn it off. I can't look at any of the channels. I sit in my chair and try to read a book. I put it away. The images preoccupy me. Right now, children across town clutch their stuffed animals tighter. Parents hover outside their children's doors waiting for the nightmares to hit or are already with their sleepless babies. Teachers are unable to sleep; the faces of their bloodied and terrified students haunt their minds and scare away sleep.

Unanswered questions stab my sides, and the word *why* booms through my thoughts.

"Why not me?" I ask the darkness. The lights are all on. I should have bought myself a nightlight.

"Why *our* school?" I demand with a shaky voice.

The darkness does not need to reply. I know the answer.

Why *not* our school? It could happen anywhere. Any day, at any school. It could be sunny, cloudy, rainy, and it could happen. We see it in the news, and sympathize with the families whose children will never play on the playground or run in the gym again. The children who will never gossip with their friends or exchange fist bumps with their former teachers. We see, we commiserate, we move on.

We never ask the question we need to.

Could we be next?

A MIDWESTERN MARRIAGE

by Michael Norberg

Somewhere between the gurgle of the second nice little bourbon being poured, and the clack of the third nice little bourbon leaving its ice cubes behind in the glass, the doorbell rang. Tina licked her lips and tightened her face into a smile. The house, large as it was, felt like a pharaoh's palace with just her in it, and this sound was a silvery bugle ring through her halls, announcing a victory: the capture and return of her fugitive people from the desert. A homecoming. A putting-back-in-place.

"Mrs. Christina Berndt?" asked the officer on the step.

"Berndt née Hegstrom, actually," Tina responded. She stood with arms crossed over fleece bathrobe, bristling with proprietary stoutness in one half of the double-wide doorway. "My grandpa was Hegstrom Farm Seed."

"Oh ya? Okay. So, Mrs. Berndt-Hegstrom, I'm Officer Larson with—"

"You can use Ms. if you like. Covers all your bases."

Tina's accent was the more sarcastic variant of Minnesota Nice, and she was still brandishing that tight smile like an Aegis against all mankind. Looking out across the snow, she saw the white unmarked SUV parked at the end of the property, under the empty red oak. Someone had probably told him how to find the place by that marker tree; there was nothing but scrub brush and soybeans for miles around. She looked back at the deputy. Every inch the county man, he stood there under a campaign hat and aviator sunglasses on a cloudy February morning. The corn-fed, blue-collar countenance; son-of-a-thousand-honest-lawnmowers expression, tied off with a ridiculous, bushy, cop mustache, for cripes' sake.

"Won't you come in? I was just having a little drink."

She did her best at a sweeping turn back into the house, leaving the front door standing open, winter breeze be darned.

"Ya, generations of family business, Hegstrom Seed," Tina expounded, back in the front lounge and offering one bottle after another to the starchy uniform. He had eventually followed her in, and was standing under the huge, mounted steer horns; arms crossed, sticking his cowcatcher jaw out at her in an impatient manner.

"We supply hundreds of farms: six different states, and proud of our name. I'm not in the business myself, really—my brothers do all the managing, but dad told me when I was just a kid in earmuffs that I should always be proud of our family name, and never let anyone take it down, or disrespect it."

"I see. Ms. Berndt—"

"Tina, if you must."

"Ms. Berndt, I've come to ask about the posters slapped upside every gas station and diner bulletin board in the county."

Tina finally gave up on offering the man drinks, put her hands on her hips, and arched her eyebrows at him as an action-movie ex machina cocks a brace of shotguns at the villains.

"Well? Ask away."

"You posted those up?"

"Between the hours of six and nine yesterday morning."

Officer Larson here introduced a visual exhibit to the exchange, by pulling out a piece of printer paper, which he unfolded to display a black-and-white photo of a white man in middle age, with a good head of hair, over the word "WANTED" with a block of text beneath.

"Jared Isaac Berndt," he began reading, "…being a slimy, ungrateful *expletive*, a philandering, cow-*expletive*, and lying *expletive*."

The officer raised his eyes from the paper and Tina raised her palms from her hips. "All true."

"Frequently seen at the following liquor establishments," he continued "…reward of $100,000…returned to his wife's property at 4717 County Hwy 18." He looked up at her. "*Dead or Alive*."

He glared. She picked up her bourbon and made Lauren Bacall expressions over the rim of it.

"Ms. Berndt, depending on how the judge sees it, that could classify as conspiracy to commit murder, solicitation of murder, murder for hire—that one's federal—or attempted murder."

Frigid air blew in from the still-open door in the other room. The paper crackled as he held it out to her.

"You're also in violation for printing and posting language like this in a public place."

"*HE'LL ANSWER TO EVERY NAME AND WORD OF IT*!" she roared, and flung her glass at the marble countertop. "I married that man 23 years ago—I married *him*—I condescended to allow him into this family, to share a home with him, to take his name and pledge my faith and devotion to him for the rest of our lives. He was crazy about me, pathetic—I took him out of that little town and gave him my hand, my home, all the best years of my life! But he was never worth that claim. He was lazy, purposeless—he ran around with his boys and spent my money. He'd rather pass a whole weekend out loitering somewhere with his little drinking buddies than have a nice vacation with my family! Yes, he comes from a different…level of social upbringing, but he could try to appreciate what's been done for him. He doesn't. He talks real smooth but he's still working on boat motors for Pete's sake, when my dad offered him a management position at corporate! He just…doesn't care! He's an embarrassment! I will *not* be *embarrassed*."

She heaved and fumed, and wiped her mouth with her sleeve.

"And so you asked him to leave, I gather."

"No! Well, I kicked him out. But he hasn't come back for six days and I don't frankly care what happens to him, but I want him to know he can't disrespect me like that. And before you ask, no I will not consider divorce. I won't give him the satisfaction of letting it be my idea."

"He owes you a groveling, huh? Mm. $100,000 is a lot of money to make a statement."

She flicked her hair from her forehead, and the hand with which she did was festooned with carats and cuttings; the pale green and rose of Black Hills Gold. The smallest of these, by far, was the circlet on her ring finger.

"My statements have cost more."

"I believe it," said the lawman, in a tiger-taming croon, "but Mrs. Berndt, you can't put out a hit on your husband. You're a capable woman, and you've been insulted. I understand, Mrs. Berndt—"

"You *DON'T* understand! How could *you* know? You're a, a highway cop; I am royalty of the American Midwest! My *husband"* —she pronounced the word with too much throat, like she was trying to cough it up out of her system— "is a leeching stain on my family, on the fields and firmament of our God-given homeland, and I defy him to try living out there without my grace. He will come back to me, Officer Larson. He'll turn up on that front drive in what state I do not care, and the justice system will bear no threat against the power of my righteous hand of retribution."

She was standing very tall now, half-unraveling, something between biblical queen and Captain Ahab. The cold air in the room made more chill her imperious words—though they were still spoken, incongruously, in that microwaved-hotdish Fargo accent.

The doorbell rang again.

Tina pulled the fury and steel on her face into a triumphant smirk, and left Officer Larson standing in the lounge, the steer horns above him an upturned echo of his mustache.

The man at the door was a tall, bald stranger in sunglasses and square-toed boots. He held another of her posters in his hand.

"Your husband?" he asked.

"Pending review," Tina replied, archly.

"Hundred thousand?"

"As advertised."

The man flung a thumb backward over his shoulder. He'd parked his black suburban right next to the front steps.

Tina stepped down, shaded her eyes with her hands, and squinted in at the darkened back window.

All in one moment she saw Jared, lying very still at a very wrong angle, bound all round with duct tape, his whole front spattered in dark red stains.

She shrieked and jumped back from the vehicle.

"What?!" she began sputtering. "What is this—what did…Why?!"

"You advertised," he said, holding up the poster.

"But you weren't s'posed to actually—*YOU'VE KILLED HIM*!" She backed away and began wringing at her neck with one hand and pointing wildly with the other. "Are you crazy? You're crazy. What in God's name made you…oohhh no…this is—oh, that son of a—"

"Well…" Officer Larson stepped out into the winter light, adjusted his sunglasses and then, seeing Tina's face, looked once at the stranger, once at the suburban, and straightened his shoulders, dropping his hands to his sides.

No one moved.

The officer took one step at a time down into the snow, and, without approaching it, looked hard at the tinted back window of the suburban.

His left hand snapped to his radio and Tina howled—

"NOOOO, don't, pleeease! We can, we can work this out! None of this has to be a problem! Please."

She took several breaths, ran two fingers down the length of her nose, then straightened up. She chopped a hand toward the stranger.

"What do you want?" she asked.

He glanced at the deputy, then back at Tina. He slowly raised his hand with the poster in it.

Tina nodded.

"Right. You," she looked at the deputy. "You deserve the same. Don't you? I'll double it, for both of you, I'll go into town right now and get the money. I have it."

Officer Larson slowly let fall his hand from his radio.

"You were right, Officer!" she bleated. "And you're very good at your job. You know all the right things to do and the wrong things to do and how to, how to…take care of things."

She was panting puffs of steam in the winter air, looking between the two men with desperation.

"I can make you rich. Both of you! I'll go get the money. Today! I'll leave it—I'll wait 'til dark and leave it behind the bison statue in Prairie Park, and then I'll, I'll drive straight from there and get a flight to Palm Beach—I've got a loft there—I can stay for the winter! I do it all the time—nobody will think anything of it, and by the time I come back you'll both have done what you do best and, and…all this will be over. I know you can do it. Just—" she whined, "make it all go away."

The lawman looked at the hitman, then up at the house, then back at Tina. The wind whipped over her fields of hereditary seed, and flapped at her bathrobe.

Twenty minutes later, Tina steered the Lexus round the house and rolled down the driveway. Her suitcase was in the backseat, her photo IDs on the passenger seat beside an empty Prada bag. She passed the black suburban by the step, and the stark white SUV under the oak. She looked once in her rearview as she neared the end of the drive, and saw both men standing in the snow, arms crossed, watching her progress. She turned onto the county road.

That evening, the two men sat together discussing the merits of marriage.

"It can truly be a beautiful institution, when both parties are of sound mind," said the bald man. "And money," he added, tossing a glance at the Prada bag between them.

"Oh you can't talk; you're twice-divorced, yourself," said the younger man with a slurp of his bourbon. "Fraud."

"Fraud, indeed," smiled the older man, tipping his glass in the direction of his interlocutor. "In any case, I like to think of myself as *between wives*, at the moment."

"Ya, sure. I'm behind on the average quotient for marriage, I think, for my age." The younger man mused, loosening his uniform by another button. He had laid the flamboyant brown mustache neatly on the marble countertop with his aviators, and was chiming a tune with his police baton on all the fine bottles he had been offered, that morning, by the lady of the house.

"I haven't yet been married, y'know," he continued, "and I'm not necessarily wanting it; honestly it horrifies me, but most American men at 27 have at least a taste of—"

"Marriage has done very well for me."

The debaters looked up as the speaker strode into the lounge, scrubbing at his ear with a towel and tossing a bundle of red-stained fabric at the bald man.

"As evidenced!" said the semi-uniformed man, hooking the Prada bag with his baton and flinging it at him.

Jared caught the purse and grinned. He hung it from the steer horn on the wall, so it gaped its gaudy stacks of bills at them. He picked up the remainder of the celebratory bourbon bottle his wife had opened that morning.

"You'll have to resume it at some point, I s'pose?" asked the bald man.

"Not 'til spring. I'll think of something plausible by then. For the moment, we have many blessings before us—blessings both of absence and of plenty—for which we must give credit to that great institution. Gentlemen," he raised the remainder of the bottle at them. "Marriage."

THE DARK AND LONELY DEPTHS

by Mo J. Ruud

The house was cold—Flora refused to seek warmth. The fables her mother told her said it was dangerous to wander alone. There were beasts in the woods. Stalkers in the water. The Siren on the mountain. Flora was cold, and that was why she stayed huddled in the closet, covered in coats, her mother dead on the bed.

The monsters came when Flora started to grow delirious from lack of food and water. They looked like people, pawing through her things. Opening doors and turning over furniture. They sounded forlorn when they saw her mother on the bed. When they opened the door to the closet, they almost didn't see Flora until they started digging through the coats piled on top of her. She growled at them—territorial, aggressive. She bit the monster that reached out for her. It almost swung to attack her, but the other monster called it off. They retreated—waiting in stalemate—until a third monster arrived.

It was tall and beautiful. Its hair was dark like Flora's mother's, but curled instead of straight. It bent down, warmth in its voice. Flora couldn't focus on the words, but the tone, the tone was lulling her to drop her guard. All of the cautionary tales slipped from her mind as the woman's warm hands gave her bread and swaddled her in the coats. Nibbling on the food, sinking into the woman's bosom, the delirious child fell asleep.

The next thing Flora became conscious of was running up the forbidden mountain behind the village—the village her mom used to travel to for food. She was wearing unfamiliar clothes. Simple, woolen things, scratchy but warm—they must have come from the orphanage she had woken up in. Flora tried recalling what had happened after waking up, how she'd ended up here on the mountain path. The woman—the monster—had kept asking Flora for her name. Bestial little children had

been running around and shrieking. It overwhelmed Flora–so she ran. Ran out of the monster den, through the town, towards the only landmark she recognized: the forbidden mountain.

In the primal, instinctive rush, Flora made it halfway up the mountain before her senses returned. The mountain. The *forbidden* mountain. The view from up there was something not meant to be seen. All she had ever known stretched out before her in a dizzying new perspective. But then she recognized the lakes down in the valley. Places where she would swim in the summer months. The smoke rising from the village at the mountain's base. Between them, Flora could see the little house her mother raised her in. Her house was still out there. Her home. She felt as if she could reach out and grab it. Take hold of a life that was quickly fading. If this view, this beautiful view, was meant to be forbidden—

"Excuse me," a voice called, shaking her from her spiral. "You're in the way."

The voice came from a little boy, half a head shorter than Flora. He was bundled in a ratty coat, his hair an awful brown bowlcut. He carried a big rucksack and a determined face.

"Please move," he reiterated.

When Flora continued not moving, completely stunned, the boy simply sighed and forced his way past her. The narrow space on the path left her stumbling into the briars, and as she reached out to catch her fall, the thorns of the plants bit into her skin. It wasn't a deep wound. Given a couple days it would heal on its own. But it was bleeding, creating a small pool in Flora's cupped hand. Not knowing what else to do, she followed the boy. He continued his trek unperturbed.

"Why are you following me?" he called out behind him, not bothering to turn around.

Flora thought for a moment before settling on the answer: "I don't know."

"I'm not fun to be around," he said.

"That's okay."

This made him pause for a moment. He spared a glance back to her, and she caught his eyes. They were an icy blue. He gave the slightest nod and continued walking up the forbidden mountain.

"Do you have anything I can stop this bleeding with?" Flora asked after a moment.

"Wipe it off in the snow," he replied.

Flora did so, staining red into the pure white. "It's still bleeding," Flora noted.

The boy had stopped walking, and was now giving Flora his unimpressed attention. "Use your sleeve."

"But that would ruin the shirt!"

"So?" The boy turned and started walking again.

Flora stayed stooped over the stain she had left on the ground. What did it matter if she ruined the shirt? Her mother always told her to take extra care of her clothes as they took a lot to make and mend. But her mother didn't make this shirt. It came from that atrocious orphanage. She had no connection to it; it didn't matter if this shirt got ruined.

And yet she paused.

"Are you following or not?" the boy called from up the path. He had already walked past a turn beyond Flora's sight. She wiped her hand once more on the snow before quickly pressing her sleeve tight against the cuts, running to catch up with the mysterious boy.



They walked in silence for an hour before arriving at a massive caldera, a lake in the hole left by an ancient volcano. The air grew warmer around them, rolling off the top of the lake. The boy walked up to the water's edge and set down his pack. From it he pulled a large woven rug, and placed it over a patch of frozen grass. He looked up at Flora, and purposely made space on the blanket next to him before pulling food out of the bag. Bread and cheese. He also pulled a thermos and took a drink from it. He looked up at Flora who was still standing there, and held the thermos out to her. She hesitantly took it, tipping it back to drink, and was pleased to get a mouthful of warm tea. When she looked back, the boy had torn a piece of bread in half, setting one part down in front of her. Handing the thermos back, she sat and picked up the bread.

Her mind was awash and the warmth coming from the caldera made her sleepy. She knew she was hungry, but couldn't bring herself to eat the bread. Instead she picked at it, breaking it into crumbs that trickled between her fingers. She pushed the crumbs into a pile, then pressed her thumb down into the top, spreading it like the caldera they were in. Then she pushed them back together, just to press them down again. Flora thought of her mother. Laying on her bed. Sleeping.

The boy's sniffling grabbed her attention and Flora finally noticed his stare. She looked between him and the pile of crumbs, her face getting warm with embarrassment. "Uh," she began, "my name's Flora."

"Billy," he responded.

"Sorry about your bread, Billy," she said, looking over the sad clump of crumbs that were now enmeshed with the weaves in the blanket. Her stomach growled— "Do you have any more?"

He handed her a chunk of cheese. She didn't really like cheese, but she wasn't going to complain. Taking a bite, she asked, "Why're you on the mountain? It's haunted, you know."

"I know," he said. "That's why I like coming here. People from town always stay away so it's quiet."

Flora nodded. That was a good reason.

"Anyways," Billy continued. "I don't believe in ghosts."

"'Not believing will get you killed,'" Flora said, quoting the mantra she had been raised on.

Billy rolled his eyes. "I know that *monsters* are real. But ghosts are different. Ghosts are just people."

"So then you admit they're real."

"I guess, but they're nothing to be afraid of."

Flora thought about that for a moment. "Have you ever seen a ghost?"

"I think so. But she's different from what they say ghosts are supposed to be like. That's the other reason I come up here. She should be coming by soon."

With that, Billy leaned out over the water's edge, looking down into the depths. Flora followed his gaze into the endlessly deep pool plunging down before her. The rich, deep, cerulean hue was mesmerizing. And in it, spiraling upward, was a girl, swimming through that deep abyss. Her hair fanned out around her in a tangled mess. She smiled at the two kids at the water's edge.

"This is my sister," Billy said. "Her name is Nadia."

The girl was beautiful. Taking a closer look, Flora noticed Nadia looked very similar to Billy. If her hair was shorter and she didn't have the two moles on her face, Flora would have likely mistaken those icy blue eyes for the boy beside her. "She's beautiful."

"Yeah," replied Billy. He had stopped paying attention to Flora and was now waving his hand through the water, playing with his sister; he would send a ripple across the lake's surface, and she would chase after it.

"Is she the not-ghost you see?" Flora asked.

"Yeah," replied Billy. "She died up here—last year."

"In the water?"

"No. Somebody killed her. They wouldn't let me see her body. So I don't know if she actually died. She's right here, so she must not be a ghost."

"But she can't be a person. People would drown like that."

"I dunno," Billy said, abruptly pushing himself from the water's edge. The sudden movement seemed to startle Nadia, who pushed away, deeper into the water. "But she's here, and I get to play with her, and that's all I care about."

The two strangers sat there, staring at each other for a moment. Flora noticed the sun had tucked behind the hills of the caldera and the sky was darkening. They'd been gone almost the whole day. Nobody was looking for them. Her mom wasn't coming to get her.

Ever.

"I think I get it," Flora murmured as the wind picked up. "I don't think I believe in ghosts either."

"Do you think monsters are real?"

"Which ones?"

"I'm not sure, but I think one lives here in the trees or at the bottom of the lake. Every time I get here, Nadia looks scared, and I think it's because of the monster."

"Why would she be scared of monsters? She's dead—isn't she?"

"I dunno, but that's what she always looks like when she gets scared. We both used to be scared of the monsters together. What else would she be scared of?"

Flora thought for a moment. "Being alone."

Billy said he had to go, but he left the blanket for Flora, telling her to keep it however long she needed. Flora didn't want to be caged at the orphanage, preferring to stay atop the quiet mountain. Not forbidden. When Billy left, so did Nadia. Flora didn't watch the submerged girl leave but when she looked back at the lake after Billy started his trek down the mountain, she was gone. In her stead, Flora watched the reflection of the night sky dance across the surface of the caldera.

There were ripples in the water, disturbing the stars that were being reflected. Beneath the surface, she saw a face. It wasn't the girl, Nadia, but an older face. More mature. More familiar. She wore a cloth skirt and coat, all covered in kelp and detritus. She looked younger than when Flora last saw her. Looking into the woman's face was almost like looking into a mirror covered in stars.

It was her mother.

"Mama…" Flora whispered, not wanting to trust her eyes. Her vision grew ever blurry as tears formed. She reached out to the mirror, hand wrapped in cloth hitting the surface. The cool of the water sent a shock through her body and she tried pulling away, but the cloth on her hand had caught something. The resistance knocked Flora off balance and she slipped on the frosted ground and tumbled into the lake.

The abyss encompassed her and she let out a squawk, her mouth and lungs filling with frigid water. She got wrapped up in her too-large clothes and the smothering embrace felt…comforting. Warm. Flora's vision faded as the sensation started to feel like the warm hugs her mother would give.

Everything went dark.



Flora was floating in a pitch-dark void. She could see herself clearly. She wore her favorite dress her mother had made with her when teaching her how to sew. She wasn't in the awful, scratchy clothes, and she didn't have that nasty cut on her hand. Her hair spread out around her, like she was underwater, but she felt dry.

Then she saw her mother.

A beautiful woman, glowing as she walked through the void, solid footing appearing beneath her steps. The floating sensation faded as Flora took a step towards her mother. She lost her balance, falling forward, swiftly caught by the arms of her mother who pulled her into a tight hug.

"Mama," Flora cried into the folds of her mother's skirt. "Why'd you go?"

Her mother held her tighter. This was it—she was home again.

"Dance with me, Flora," her mother said. That soft voice melted around Flora's heart. Tears were freely streaming down her face, but when she pulled back to look at her mother, Flora saw she was smiling. Flora, overwhelmed, did what she always did best. She followed her mother.

They began to spin over the dark expanse. The surface of the ground they danced across rippled with each step of their toes. Flora realized it was the reflection of water, and in those ripples, she could see stars—twirling and spinning along with her and her mother. Through her tears, Flora smiled. She leapt with her mother, letting herself be carried through the starlit void. She forgot about all that had happened. The cold winter. The monsters that came to steal her. All Flora focused on was that dance with her mother, leaping across the night sky to a song all their own.

But all things come to an end. The stars began to fade. The music came to a lull, shadowed notes floating away. Flora's mother knelt down

and held her face. Flora knew that they couldn't dance forever. Already, the features of her mother were beginning to blur. But still, she could see her smile.

"Please don't go, Mama," Flora pleaded.

Her mother wiped the tears from Flora's eyes and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Slowly, she pulled away, but Flora reached out to grab her hand.

"Don't go!" she called. But her mother was dissipating into the stars, the weight of her hand now fading. Flora squeezed her eyes shut and wrapped her arms around herself. "No, no, no, no!"

If she kept her eyes closed, maybe she could hold onto that moment. The warmth. She could feign the hold of her mother with her own arms. The weight felt real enough. She'd never have to be alone again.

In the darkness behind her eyes, the weight of the world once again began to smother her. She couldn't breathe, and in the panic that came, she started heaving water from her lungs. When she could again lift her head and inhale, the air was cold. Letting her eyes focus, a glint of hope pierced her heart as she thought she saw her mother kneeling beside her, mounds of blankets at the ready. But the woman's hair was curled.

Flora felt the urge to run, but her joints were too frozen to cooperate, and the woman pulled her into a tight embrace. Her body bled warmth through the soaked clothes Flora still wore and there was familiarity in that warmth. It was soothing. Comforting. Sinking once again into the woman's bosom, the half-drowned child fell asleep.

Again, Flora woke up in an unfamiliar bed, but this time there was no squall of beastly children. It was dark. Out a lightly curtained window, she could see the faint outline of the moon. The bed was warm but Flora couldn't sit still. Pulling the covers with her, breadcrumbs fell as she stepped out onto the wooden floorboards.

It was only as her feet touched down that Flora noticed she was no longer wearing the scratchy clothes from before. She had on one of her favorite night gowns, one her mother had made for her most recent birthday. Curious, she stepped towards the light peaking through the bottom of the doorway.

She slipped through, closing the door behind her, and followed the sound of sobs echoing through the hall. She expected to see children, but instead it was the woman sitting at a table, wiping her face with her skirts.

"—and I know it sounds crazy. But I *swear* I saw Nadia in there," the woman gasped between sobs.

"It's that motherly instinct," a new voice replied. Masculine. "Your mind knew where she'd be. It showed you what you needed to see."

The woman blew her nose, and after more sniffling, finally looked up to notice Flora hiding around the corner.

The man turned and Flora recognized him as the monster she bit. His face was dark and rugged and his eyes looked incredibly tired. He gave her a slight smile before turning away. "I'll give you two a moment," he said as Flora heard heavy footsteps fading. Flora hid back behind the corner, out of the woman's sight.

"It's okay, dear," the woman said. "You can come out. Are you hungry?"

Flora was hungry. The cheese Billy had shared with her wasn't enough to fill her. Weighing her options, Flora stepped out from behind the corner and into the room the woman was in.

It was a kitchen. Surprisingly small for the amount of kids it needed to feed. There was heat eking from the remnants in the stove and the smell of cinnamon filled the air.

"Would you like a roll?" the woman asked. "I was going to save them for breakfast, but I think we both deserve a treat tonight." Moving for a couple plates and trays, she set down two gooey cinnamon rolls.

Flora pulled herself up to the chair next to the woman, careful to keep some distance, and started tearing into the roll.

The woman giggled. "Not going to use the fork?" she asked.

Flora looked to the table and next to her plate, a set of silverware. Embarrassed, she set the roll back down and picked up the fork. After a moment, frozen by her surroundings, she murmured, "Um. Thank you."

"You are welcome," the woman replied. "Now don't be ashamed to dig in."

With that, the two of them ate in silence. After finishing their rolls, the woman grabbed a second one for each of them, and they ate those as well. By the end, when Flora had gone back to grabbing the roll with her hand, using it to catch any stray bits of cinnamon that had fallen to the plate, the woman pushed her own plate aside and took a deep breath.

"I suppose we never got to actual introductions," she said. "The other kids here call me Momma K. I understand if you're not comfortable with that. Please call me Kali."

"Kali…" Flora muttered to herself.

"And what can I call you?"

Flora looked at the woman's—Kali's—face. They held eye contact. She wasn't Flora's mom. However, there was a kindness there. A

genuineness that made Flora feel warm, like those rolls. The stories her mother told her had monsters that tricked you—but this woman was far too kind. Flora wanted to see the evil in her, but couldn't. Remembering her tight embrace at the lake, no monster would have saved her. No monster would have such warmth. The smell of cinnamon still drifted through the air.

"My name is Flora," she, finally, whispered.

"It's nice to meet you, Flora," Kali replied. "It's getting very late, but you don't look too tired. Would you like me to tell you a story—or two?"

Flora nodded—she very much needed a story.

"Let me grab us some warm honey milk. Then I'll tell you about my two best friends growing up: Billy and Nadia."

THE CHURCH RAFFLE

by John Weber

Three Sundays in a row, Caroline Thompson read the notice in the church bulletin: "Volunteers Needed! Women volunteers to organize our first raffle in twenty years, how exciting is that! Meet Monday evenings in September." Caroline was interested. Since she and her husband moved to town in July, she had been looking for volunteer opportunities, especially at church, where she wanted to better put her faith into practice. However, she wasn't sure if organizing a women's raffle was the kind of volunteering she was looking for. In fact, she wasn't quite sure what a raffle was. Monday, the day of the meeting, she called the parish office for more information. The secretary couldn't help. "Looks like tonight at seven, is all it says."

That evening at seven o'clock, Caroline walked into the community room at the church. Four women, all much older, sat around half of a large, round table. "Is this…Is this the meeting tonight?" Caroline asked.

"We're it," a woman said. She looked at the others. "I guess."

"Something about a church raffle?" Caroline asked.

"That's what it said," a second woman said. "He wants a new sign for the front of the church."

Caroline sat down. "Not a bad idea," she said. "The sign *is* hard to read." She recalled how she and her husband had to approach within a few feet to read the much-faded Mass times their first day in town.

No one responded. She proceeded, "The last raffle was twenty years ago?"

The third woman rolled her eyes. "That's a reason to have one now?"

The fourth added, smiling, "I think they made that up."

"Yeah, sounds like something…" That person trailed off.

"I didn't see a date for the raffle," Caroline said. "Do we know about that?"

"Oh!" The second woman examined her bulletin. "You're right, hon. There's no date."

"Coffee's ready."

Everyone but Caroline filled Styrofoam coffee cups. Caroline felt uncertainty, all around. "Should we do introductions? My name is Caroline. My husband and I moved to town last month. We teach at the school."

The women introduced themselves. Caroline repeated the names, adding a memory aid: Kelly is an organizer, solid eye contact. Barbara works at the bank, nice grooming. Marilee is probably in her 80s, quiet, shy. Lucy is funny, clumsy, and appealing. She cleans the church.

"That's the crew," Kelly said next. "We do pretty much everything."

"Everything? Well, I hope there's room for a new volunteer once in a while."

Kelly smiled. "How about chairman? We need a chairman."

"Oh! But…I don't know anyone. We just moved here."

"There isn't much to know. And you ask good questions. Let's make her chairman." Kelly looked at the others.

"You're it," Barbara said.

Caroline scanned the table. She saw mostly smiles.

"I'll take notes," Kelly said. She flipped her bulletin and wrote in the margin. "What is date of raffle," she repeated. "Here's another one: what are we going to raffle? Anyone know about that?"

No one knew what Father intended to raffle. Nor did anyone know about food, location, expenses, other prizes, or legal requirements. By a quarter to eight, they'd completed a list of questions. Kelly said that she was retired now and would have time this week to discuss the list with Father. Caroline made a list of phone numbers and who texted and who didn't. Finally, they agreed to meet again next Monday at seven.

The women stood up, combining napkins and cups. Caroline paused. Her group at the student center at NDSU prayed at meetings, before and after. "Would it be okay if we pray?"

"Oh, yeah," Lucy said. "Almost forgot."

"Of course," Kelly added. "We should pray."

Caroline led an Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be. They said goodbyes and broke up. As she drove from the parking lot, Caroline still had doubts. She noticed Kelly and Barbara lingering near one car, talking intently. Marilee and Lucy stood near another car, also talking intently. Caroline surmised their talk was at least partially about her, the new parishioner, new teacher, new track and volleyball coach. Had she fit in? Did she want to fit in? Did she want to come back? She wasn't sure.

When Caroline arrived the following Monday evening, Lucy was waiting at the door. "Kelly couldn't make it but she gave me her list."

She handed Caroline a full sheet of paper, both sides crowded with neat handwriting. "Notes from talk with Father," it said at the top. The first question read, "When is raffle?" followed by "October 5. After 10:30 Mass. In Community Room." "That's a good start," she said. "Let's go inside."

Inside, at the same table as last week, Marilee sat drinking coffee, along with two other women, also older. "Barbara couldn't make it, either," Lucy said, sitting down. She looked at the two new women. "This is Sandy. That's Nita."

"Someone said you're chairman?" Sandy asked. She widened her eyes.

"Good to meet you. I'm Caroline. I could be chairman, if the group wants. There wasn't a vote or anything."

"She got gerrymandered in," Lucy said. Everyone laughed.

Caroline led the prayers. Then, "Kelly was good enough to give us the notes from her discussion with Father. I have those right here. Thank you, Lucy."

"I hope you can read it. I couldn't make heads or tails out of that handwriting."

"Okay, let's try. I read the first question okay. That was the date. It looks like October 5."

Sandy spoke next. "I wish Father would speak up more about these. People listen when he has something to say. Nobody reads that bulletin."

"I've read every bulletin for the past fifty-five years," Lucy said.

"I always read the bulletin," Nita said. "It's the first thing I do."

"Me, too," Marilee said. "My parents did, too."

"Well, anyway," Caroline resumed. "It looks like October 5. After the 10:30 Mass."

"It's always the 10:30 Mass," Sandy said. "What if you go to 8:30 Mass?"

Lucy answered: "You still get your name in, right?"

Caroline realized that Lucy's question was directed at her. "I don't know. I think that's how raffles work. You buy a ticket, right? The tickets get put in a hat?"

"Who keeps the money? Who keeps track of the money?"

No one knew.

"Maybe that's why we haven't done raffles for twenty years," Sandy said.

Caroline started again. "Okay. October 5 after 10:30 Mass. Next question—"

Sandy interrupted. "October 5; is there a Vikings game that day?"

"Does that make a difference?"

"You bet. For some, all the difference. What about harvest? Or does that matter anymore?"

"What about deer hunting? That takes my brother out of it." That was Lucy.

Marilee groaned. "Oh, boy."

Nita sighed. "How about if we do when it says and move on. We can't please everyone."

No one spoke. "October 5, it is, then," Caroline said.

"How much money are we supposed to raise?" Sandy asked.

Marilee: "A sign shouldn't cost much, should it?"

Nita: "It can if you go electronic. Which he'll want."

"Does it say anything on that paper?" Sandy reached for Kelly's notes.

Caroline slid her the notes and said, "Does anyone know if Kelly and Barbara intend to continue in our group?"

No one knew. "It's a week at a time," Lucy said.

"Fourteen thousand dollars," Sandy announced. She read from the notes: "Fourteen thousand dollars total, fifty dollars a ticket, two hundred eighty tickets. Whew!"

"If we sell some and can't sell the rest, then what?"

"We better figure it out. Less than four weeks to go."

"What are we even raffling? Does it say?"

"Yup." Sandy again read from the notes. "Grand prize is a wood smoker. Four thousand dollar value. Donated by Adamson." She looked up. "Wow! That'll sell tickets."

"Sounds great," Caroline said. She had only a vague idea what a wood smoker was and no knowledge at all of this Adamson. "We better get selling."

"First, we need tickets. Like, printing them."

"Great," Caroline said. "We have some tasks to assign. Who wants to get tickets printed?"

They spent the next several minutes dividing up tasks: getting tickets made, putting a notice in the bulletin, keeping a ledger of tickets sold, keeping track of cash on hand, making snacks and coffee the day of the drawing. For her task, Caroline said she would talk to Father about

promoting the raffle to the congregation. By eight o'clock, they were done.

"Great work, hey," Sandy said. "Look at all we got done!"

"Thanks, Caroline," Nita added.

"We're a good group," Caroline responded. She was pleased at how well the meeting went. As she led the closing prayers, she felt the glow of volunteering she had been hoping for.



The next Monday, Kelly and Barbara were back, as well as the four who attended last week. They had lots to talk about, starting with reports from last week's assignments, including Caroline's own report about her conversation with Father.

After the opening prayers, she began: "Who wants to report first?"

There was hesitation. Sandy spoke: "I don't know. This might not be the best time…" She looked around the table, lingering at Marilee.

Marilee seemed aware that all eyes were on her. Caroline saw a tear. "I'm sorry," Caroline said. "Is there something I don't know about?"

"Did you read today's paper?" Kelly asked.

"No." Caroline's Mondays were busy: after her morning run, she had classes, volleyball practice, a quick dinner, then the meeting. "What did I miss?"

"There was something about Marilee," Lucy said. She turned to Marilee. "I felt so bad for you, Marilee."

Caroline was in the dark. She wondered: did someone die? Did someone get hurt? Is someone missing?

Finally, Kelly spoke up. "I hope you don't mind that came up, Marilee. I'm glad you came tonight. That's so courageous."

Marilee shook her head. Her face reddened. "That's okay. You guys are okay. Thanks, everyone. It was just me."

Everyone but Caroline seemed aware of the news about Marilee, whatever it was. "Could someone explain?" she asked.

Kelly pressed a hand on Marilee's. "Are you okay if—"

"Go ahead. Everyone knows anyway."

Kelly turned to Caroline. "There was an article on the front page about online scammers. This stuff is happening all the time now and…Well, Marilee got started with one. Is that the right way to say it, Marilee? Or…involved with one? Is that—?"

"Sure. I don't know…" Marilee looked toward the empty half of the room.

Kelly continued. "The police were talking about these online crooks who stole money from Marilee. A *bunch* of money. Like, what was it again?"

Barbara: "A hundred fifty-five thousand dollars. Something like that, I think it was."

"A hundred fifty-two thousand three hundred dollars," Lucy clarified. "They tricked her into thinking there was a romance."

All eyes were on Marilee, who looked quickly from face to face, smiling weakly.

"Oh." Caroline sighed. "Oh, my goodness. Marilee, I'm so sorry."

"That's all right. You guys had nothing to do with it. It's okay, Caroline."

"Is there anything we can do, Marilee?"

"No. I'll be okay. I won't starve. You don't need to worry about me."

"I was wondering, how old are you, Marilee?" Kelly asked.

"Eighty-two," Marilee answered sadly.

"So that was your play money, Marilee?" That was Sandy. Whatever she meant by the statement, it fell flat.

"Isn't there insurance for something like this?" Kelly directed her question at Barbara, the bank employee.

Barbara shrugged.

"Are you still—?" That was Lucy.

"No, you guys, really. I'm okay." Marilee looked miserably at Caroline. "Can we move on?"

"We respect you, Marilee. Of course. We can move on. But we're always here for you. Okay? If anything comes up, just reach out."

The rest of the meeting focused on the raffle. Sandy reported that tickets were printed and stapled into bundles of five. Caroline described her conversation with Father which, at his request, took place on the phone, and lasted about two minutes. She omitted Father's opening statement, which seemed off the record: "So they finally got the ad in." Per his instructions, each parishioner will be asked to sell one bundle of tickets. If someone can't sell their tickets, they could buy them themselves or bring them to the parish office for others to sell. He will promote the raffle at the conclusion of Masses the next two Sundays. Barbara and Kelly will manage the money and ticket stubs. Lucy, Nita, and Sandy will take care of snacks and coffee. The group agreed to meet again next Monday.

That night, Caroline slept fitfully. She kept thinking about Marilee. She wanted to believe Marilee's assurances that she was "okay" but there

were reasons to think otherwise: her age, her aloneness, her passive personality, the shocking amount of money involved. Caroline felt that the group had let Marilee down. Their expressions of concern seemed half-hearted. They accepted too quickly Marilee's words "You don't need to worry about me," as if all that mattered was the money which, apparently, Marilee had plenty of. Even Caroline's own statement "If anything comes up, just reach out" seemed, in hindsight, dismissive. What about Marilee's obvious depression, her safety? Their discussion seemed to represent a feature of small-town life that she and her husband, who also grew up in Fargo, had noticed several times: act like you're fine, say you're fine, while you might not be fine on the inside. Conversations kept to a formula, starting with "How are you doing?" followed by "Fine," followed by talk about the weather, the cost of groceries, the game last night—anything but real feelings and real problems. But who was she, Caroline, just out of college, new to town, to talk deeply to Marilee, who'd lived here all her life and surely knew everyone? At 3 a.m., Caroline prayed. She closed with her go-to Bible passage: "Whatever you do, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." It made a difference: she recognized that something more should be done and she, as group leader, should do it. What that might be, she could only find out by asking.

That morning, during her break, Caroline called Marilee. "I just thought I'd check in," she explained.

"Why? This is none of your business," Marilee said.

"Marilee, I just felt like maybe you're hurting and, as a fellow parishioner, I—"

Marilee cut her off. "I'm *not* hurting. I'm just tired of people wanting to talk about this. I never should have talked to that reporter."

"Darn, I'm sorry. I don't want to pile on, Marilee. I just want to help."

"The best help is to drop it, Caroline."

"Okay. But keep in mind, Marilee, that I'm available if…" Caroline felt ignored. She looked at her phone. The connection was ended.



For the rest of the day, Caroline thought about the phone call with Marilee. She felt ashamed. This was exactly the kind of small-town intrusiveness she'd heard about and wanted to avoid. "Everyone knows everyone's business," she was warned about small towns more than once by her friends in Fargo. Maybe this was why conversations here tended to be shallow. And why people like Marilee might be lonely. Caroline couldn't stop worrying. Late in the evening, she confided in her husband.

"Yeah, I heard something about her," he said. "She's a widow who owns a bunch of land, I guess. She's known to be very generous whenever there's a fundraiser."

"She was pretty angry. I don't know if she'll even talk to me anymore."

"If she's angry enough, she'll quit the group. You probably won't see her there again."

"How about in the community? She's related all over town, for all I know. Every time I see her, I'll think about this. I think I get now why they wanted to make me group leader."

"Just be normal. She has other troubles anyway. Like not having her hundred fifty grand. You aren't as big a deal to her as you think."

For the rest of the week, Caroline worried about encountering Marilee: in church, at the grocery store, at a gas station—anywhere. As the days went by, she felt more anxious and more ashamed. She should have known that Marilee needed space, normalcy, time—not a phone call "to check in" from someone who hardly knew her. Caroline guessed what caused her mistake: her perfectionism, her need to improve, to control things—the very things she wanted to do less of. She wondered if she should quit the group. She could say she didn't have time, which was true. Kelly would take over.

Sunday evening, Caroline received a text—from Marilee, of all people. "Caroline. Can we meet before the meeting tomorrow?"

Caroline felt wary. She texted back: "Six-thirty at the church?"

There was no response. At six-thirty the next evening, Caroline parked at the church. Marilee stood waiting. "Let's meet in my car," she said.

Marilee's SUV smelled new. She moved a pile of mail from the passenger seat. "Thank you for meeting, Caroline," she began. "Last week, you called to check on me. I'm sorry I was rude. You were right; I've been struggling. And that meeting last week didn't help."

"I'm sorry it turned out like that, Marilee."

"It wasn't you. But some in the group, they were just looking for gossip."

"Darn. I was hoping that wouldn't happen."

"You didn't take part, Caroline. But that's not why I wanted to talk tonight."

"What is it then, Marilee?"

Marilee smiled wanly. "It's just that I have to come clean to someone and you're the only person I know I feel comfortable with."

"I'm honored by your confidence, Marilee. What is it you want to admit to?"

"Well. Here goes." She exhaled. "Just between you and me, Caroline, I knew the whole time it was a scam. I knew they were crooks."

"You mean you *gave* them the money?"

"I did. At first, they just talked. They called every morning about the same time. Ten o'clock, give or take five or ten minutes. I started looking forward to it. At least I had someone to talk to. Later on, I knew all they wanted was my money. But I kept going anyway."

"It sounds like you've been…lonely? Is that the right word, Marilee?"

"Worse than lonely. Lonely you can change by just talking. This is more like…Oh, I don't know the word."

"Unheard? Unimportant?"

"Unimportant. That's it."

"I see. You want to make a difference. To have value. I think I get that."

"It built up gradually until the time came to transfer the money. Before I hit send, I stopped. I thought: you know, this is the best day of my life. At least I'm making *someone* happy." Sadly, she shook her head. "Me, with all my grandkids." She laughed. "It shows you how messed up I am."

"Don't be hard on yourself, Marilee. You're not the first and certainly not the last."

"Everyone says that. It doesn't help."

"Mm. Okay. I get that, I think. Anyway, how can I help, Marilee?"

"Oh, you've already helped. Just listening, not explaining it away. I don't need excuses. I can think up those on my own. Oh, here's Kelly." Marilee nodded at a vehicle that had just parked nearby. "This was just what I needed, Caroline. Thank you so much."

The group met at their usual table. All seven members attended and made reports. Most of the tickets were sold. Lucy said that she and one of her friends would pick up the doughnuts. Sandy announced that her husband was willing to donate fifty pounds of beef for a second prize—an offer the group accepted, of course. Their last meeting before the raffle was scheduled for next Monday, when only a few items might need attention.

After the meeting, Caroline felt relieved about her talk with Marilee. Yes, she'd wasted time and energy all week with worrying, even missing

hours of sleep, but she was the only one affected—not an unbearable thing, now that she understood Marilee's dilemma. Also, she realized that she hadn't prayed all week. Her lack of faith disappointed her. She should have known to stand back, to let Him manage this. After all, wouldn't He want what was best for Marilee? As she drove home, she repeated her go-to prayer, felt everything change for the better, and resolved to remember from now on.



The conversation was lively when the group assembled the following Monday evening for their last meeting. Kelly brought a plate of fresh-baked cookies that started around the table.

"These are amazing!" Barbara exclaimed, taking the first cookie.

Lucy was next. "Oh, wow," she said. Solemnly, she examined her choices.

"Well, time to get started," Caroline said, pleasantly.

Raffle plans were going well. Most of the group knew family members and parishioners who planned to attend. Many had heard positive comments about putting a new, modern sign in front of the church. "Even the Adventists have a nice sign," Nita said, capping that part of the conversation.

By a quarter to eight, the business part of the meeting was done. "I have to have this recipe," Barbara said, starting the plate a second time around.

Sandy spoke next. "Marilee, you look wonderful today. I love that outfit!"

"Oh. Thanks." Indeed, Marilee was wearing a new blouse and scarf. Her hair was just done. "Just to let you all know, I've been feeling much better lately."

"Anything get figured out about those scammers?"

"Nothing that I'm aware of. But I'm feeling better. I won't get any money back, but what I've learned about myself is worth what I lost. I have Caroline to thank for that. Thank you so much for your words of advice, Caroline. You got my life back on track."

Caroline wondered what she had said that was helpful. "I'm glad I could help, Marilee. You're so thoughtful."

"Do you think you were vulnerable when they called?" Sandy asked.

"I made myself vulnerable. You know, one of the things I learned from Father, it really is a sin to let yourself get depressed like I was."

"You, depressed, Marilee?" Lucy asked. She looked at the others. "I sure didn't know."

"Angry, too. I know you don't think of me as angry a lot but now I know that I was."

"Angry?" Kelly said. "I didn't see that."

"Yes. Since my husband died. Since my son wouldn't farm. Since…" She stopped. "Well, since lots of things."

"And then it gets in the paper," Sandy said. "I'm sorry, Marilee."

"I'm okay now." Marilee's eyes fluttered. "I wasn't going to talk about this yet, but Father and I are working on something better. Something more important. For the Lord."

"That's exciting," Sandy said. "What do you have planned, Marilee?"

"I think we decided Father will make the announcement. It's still in the planning stage."

"It'll be after the raffle?"

"Oh, yes. After the raffle."

It was after eight o'clock. Caroline was disappointed that Marilee had made that announcement. It seemed too soon, like another distraction. She wondered what Marilee had learned from her victimization. She remembered her prayer. "Well, it's for Our Lord. We know that much. Thank you for sharing that, Marilee. Well, shall we pray? Our raffle is in six days! Can you believe how time flies!"

Caroline's week was busy. Tuesday, she got home from a volleyball match after midnight. Wednesday, Nita called to ask if she and some friends could sell pies at the raffle to raise money for a youth trip to Fargo to work at a food bank. Thursday, Kelly called to report that "quite a few" non-parishioners in town "just like raffles" and had asked to sell tickets, of which it turned out, after a phone call to Barbara, that less than a dozen remained. Friday evening, Caroline and Lucy set up tables and chairs for a hundred people in the community room. Saturday afternoon, Caroline and her husband drove to Jim Adamson's farm twenty miles from town to transport the smoker—an impressive iron structure, a work of genuine skill, Caroline recognized—from Jim's shop to the church community room. Saturday evening, Kelly called and offered to set up the sound system and microphone. "We have a tricky system and I know you'll need help." Through it all, Caroline remained prayerful and patient. It was difficult, especially the hour and a half she and her husband spent gabbing with Jim in Jim's shop. Sunday morning, the day of the raffle, as they were getting dressed, her husband asked, "Are glad you volunteered?" Caroline remembered the anxiety, the frustrations, the sleepless nights, the five Monday evenings. Over the past day or two, she had been wondering:

why do all that work when a few well-placed phone calls could raise the same money? "Once is enough," she answered.



After 10:30 Mass, at least a hundred parishioners assembled in the community room for the raffle. It was chaotic: children ran back and forth, women stood in groups talking and wouldn't sit down, men stood in groups in the hallway, and senior citizens sat at the tables, looking impatient. Within five minutes, the doughnuts were gone. Nita arrived with her twenty pies but no one had thought to set up to sell them.

"We need to get going," Kelly said to Caroline, who was sitting by her husband. "They've been sitting for an hour and now we need activity. You know, some action. Like, right away."

"I'm not sure what else we can do right now."

"Who's drawing the number?"

Caroline hadn't thought of that. "Father. I guess."

Kelly walked away, muttering.

Just then, Father arrived. He made his way from the entrance, greeting people and moving ahead at the same time. He reached the front table and picked up the microphone. "We better get started," he began.

The room quieted.

"What a great turnout!" He beamed in all directions in his extravagant manner. "Like they always say: say the word 'raffle' in a bunch of Catholics and you get their attention."

That brought polite laughter. Also, the kids that were running stopped. People that were standing began finding places to sit. The senior citizens leaned forward.

"Shall we pray?"

The room hushed. Everyone bowed, made the sign of the Cross, and said the Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be.

Next, Father thanked Jim Adamson for the smoker. "What a gift from God to have such talent to make something like this! Jim tells me he sells these for thousands of dollars and he has orders ahead for two years. Let's have a round of applause for Jim for this wonderful donation."

Caroline joined the applause, which was robust. Indeed, she was impressed with Jim Adamson's craftsmanship, as well as his dedication to the Church and the parish. Except for his gabbiness, she admired him as an example of good volunteering.

Father continued. "I also want to recognize Kelly and her group for their meetings and extra work they put into organizing this. When I first came here three years ago, I saw the sign in front and I knew we had to

have something better. People said it couldn't be done, it's a lot of money, we have other pressing needs, all of which were true, but we still accomplished it. So how about a round of applause for Kelly and the other good folks."

This applause was subdued. Perhaps people weren't sure who they were clapping for, nor why. Or perhaps they simply liked Jim. Or they disagreed about the need for a new sign. Or they were ready to move on. For herself, Caroline had to admit, she felt disappointed. If she was chairman, why did he recognize Kelly? She thought back to her phone call to Father. Did she identify herself as chairman? She could have, she should have, but she couldn't remember.

Father continued. "Now, everyone: I'm putting you on the spot. There were two parables in today's Gospel. One was the mustard seed. What was the other?"

The room buzzed: whispers, questions, smiles, laughter. Caroline had to admit, she couldn't remember. She turned to her husband. "Do you remember?"

"Maybe," he answered, smiling.

Father pointed at a boy waving his hand. "Jacob?"

"It was about a seed that grew to a tree."

"Excellent, Jacob! Yes, that was the mustard seed parable. But there was another little parable in the middle of that one. People often overlook it. It's one of Jesus' shortest parables—I don't know, maybe the shortest. What was it?" He pointed to a girl with her hand up.

"It was mixing yeast into bread."

"Right! And, Brenna, when you mix a little bit of yeast into a lot of flour, what happens?"

"It turns into bread."

"Right! Great job, Brenna! Just think: a tiny amount of yeast" —he gestured with two fingers— "makes all that flour change into bread. Now: what does the parable mean? What is Jesus saying to us?" He pointed to another boy.

"It's the kingdom of heaven," the boy said.

"Yes! He's talking about the kingdom of heaven. And what is the kingdom of heaven?"

"We're out of coffee." That was Lucy. Caroline pursed her lips. She'd assumed that Lucy, because she cleaned the church, would manage the coffee.

"Can you make more?"

"I don't know where they keep it."

"Can you look?"

"I can try." Lucy walked toward the kitchen.

"What is the kingdom of heaven?" Father still was looking for answers. Several people made attempts: going to heaven, where God is, the tabernacle, being without sin. Father praised each answer but none were correct. "Listen again," he said. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened."

Caroline heard that parable, she remembered now. With all the distractions, it drifted past. Now it came back. She smelled the sharp yeast, felt the dry flour, the soft dough. She understood being the woman.

"The kingdom of heaven is within you," a woman said.

"Yes," Father said. "Close. Anyone else?"

Caroline's heart thumped as she raised her hand.

"Yes?" Father pointed.

"Father, for me, the key part is the yeast. Jesus wants us to be the yeast."

"Yes! With a bit of yeast, all that flour changes. What a gorgeous mind Jesus had, huh?" He smiled again, extravagantly. "Great work, everyone! We have our answer, don't we? The answer is us. It's us! When we love one another and work together and do things like this raffle today, that's the kingdom of heaven."

Caroline looked across the room. The parable was two thousand years old but still working, still causing change. Her body felt warm and light and alive, starting in her chest, moving to her head, her arms and fingers, her legs and toes. For a moment, she felt herself glow. She saw Kelly across the room talking and gesturing and felt a deep love for this person who'd done things nobody else would do for years for the church. She saw Lucy refilling the coffee pot on the serving table and loved that person who cleaned the church so magnificently, probably paid next to nothing, probably for years. She saw Marilee smiling among a tableful of people of mixed ages, probably family, and felt great love for this person who simply wanted warmth and belonging and closeness. She loved the men laughing excessively in the hallway, displays that may or may not be warranted but, in their own way, stood like pillars. She saw children playing energetically and loved each one. In fact, she loved everyone in the room, so much so that she felt like laughing: from the simplicity, the childishness. It was a feeling, she recognized, she wanted more of.

"Let's do the drawing," Father said. "I'm excited!"

An older gentleman had the winning ticket. He seemed a bit dazed as Father held the microphone for him. "Uh, thanks, everyone. I never won anything before." He looked at his wife. She had a knowing smile. "We'll figure it out, though."

When Caroline left the church that day, she was glad she'd volunteered. For one thing, she knew that, after the sign was installed, every time she saw it, she would remember her part. Also, she would have inside knowledge when the announcement was made about Marilee's contribution for the important project that surely would recognize her as donor with a plaque or in some other prominent way. She would pay closer attention when the Gospel was read. She would try to know Father personally and trust his judgement and decisions. She would teach and coach and mentor with patience. And, finally, even after she and her husband had their own children, she would look for new volunteer opportunities, and know that success meant her name not being heard again.

THE STORY OF EARTH AND HUMANKIND

by Harper Wilson

Amara giggles as she runs barefoot down the hallway leading to her family's bunker. She is out of breath when she gets to the stainless steel door, but still manages to find the energy to hop around impatiently as her mother walks slowly toward her.

"C'mon, mom! I have to pee!" Amara whines as her mom punches the code into the electric lock on the door. The lock whirrs and clicks, and the door swings open to reveal a sparse living space consisting of a small beige couch, a TV, a two-burner stove, a microwave, and a tiny sink.

Amara bounces through the kitchen and living room, down the only hallway in the bunker, and slams a door. Her mother follows but walks past the bathroom where Amara is humming to herself on the toilet, and into the only bedroom. She sits on the lone bed, wrinkling the tightly tucked sheets and smoothed wool blanket, and waits for Amara.

Once Amara is finished using the bathroom, she twirls into the room and flops dramatically onto the bed, wriggling around until her head is in her mother's lap.

"I don't wanna go to sleep," she says pleadingly, looking up at her mom, who smiles softly and shakes her head.

"It's already well past your bedtime, Amara." Amara opens her mouth to beg more, but her mother holds up a finger. "I'm not hearing anything more of it. Sleep is important." Amara deflates and crawls dejectedly under the covers. Her mother is standing up and moving to shut off the lights when Amara speaks up again.

"Can I at least have a story?" She peers hopefully over the covers she's pulled up to her chin and holds her breath while her mother considers this.

"Alright, one story." Amara's mom flicks the lights off and makes her way in the dark to the simple lamp next to the bed and turns it on,

which just barely gives enough light to be able to see her silhouette as she perches herself on the edge of the bed. Amara snuggles deeper into the covers, eagerly anticipating the story to come.

"Once upon a time, there was a woman named Earth…" her mother whispers into the dim light of the room.



Earth was a great sorceress. She could rule the universe if she wanted to, but she wasn't interested in controlling life; she was interested in creating it. Earth created animals as large as planets, and herbs that could heal any sickness. She created flowers with thousands of petals—each one a different shade than any seen before, and winged animals that could sing so purely they made the sky cry. She created illusions of delicacy that, in reality, could withstand the strongest winds and the heaviest rains, and creatures that appeared predatory and unbreakable but had kind and vulnerable eyes. All of Earth's creations reflected the beauty of her heart.

Despite finding joy in her magnificent creations, she was lonely. There was no one to admire her work. No one to admire her. One day, Earth grew tired of feeling this way, so she used her extraordinary abilities to create Humankind.

Humankind became her beloved companion and delighted in each of Earth's creations he discovered. Soon enough, Humankind began to realize the potential of Earth's creations. He worked tirelessly at fabricating new inventions with Earth's creations. He discovered the magical world of electricity, engines, telescopes, satellites, and, most magical of all, fuel, which made all of his findings possible.

Earth was pleased with Humankind's innovation and continued to bring to life more things for him to use in his own creations. As she did this, Humankind started to realize the extent of Earth's powers. He began to grow irritable when his inventions didn't work because he knew Earth could simply create a solution for him. As this started to happen more and more frequently, Earth grew more and more concerned. There were periods when Humankind would hole himself up, bent over his work, and not speak to Earth for days on end.

Eventually, Earth confronted Humankind. She pleaded with him to be happy with what he had and to be happy with her. "Why should I be happy with what I have when I could have everything?" he responded. It pained Earth greatly to hear this, but what broke her was what he said next: "If you will not help me achieve your level of greatness, then do not help me at all." With that, Humankind left Earth brokenhearted and distraught, and vowed never to speak to her again.

Humankind threw himself into his work and began to harness more and more of Earth's power. During this time, Earth grew weak. Her creations were a part of her, and the exploitation and destruction of them took their toll. She became very sick and feared she might not make it.

While Earth was dying, she had lots of time to think and look back. She remembered the day she created Humankind and how happy they had been together. She remembered all of the things she had made for him and the joy it brought both of them. She remembered the small moments of wonder between the two lovers with each new invention and creation. As she remembered, she began to cry. She cried because she missed the steady companionship of Humankind and mourned the potential they had to be together forever. She cried because she realized that once she was gone, there was nothing stopping Humankind from taking her power and making it his own, and she cried because she knew what she had to do.

With a heavy heart, she drew on the power of all of the creations that Humankind had abused and on the life remaining in her. She summoned acid from the sky and scorching heat from the sun; storms of torrential rain and howling winds, and waves taller than mountains. She sent it all to Humankind in hopes that it would destroy him and he wouldn't be able to cause any more harm.

When all of these afflictions reached Humankind, he shook and fell to his knees, finally realizing what he had done. He pleaded and cried and pounded his head with his hands, but it was too late. Earth had used up the last bit of life in her to stop Humankind. She was gone.

Everything around Humankind slowly started to crumble, including himself. He frantically gathered what he could and set to work on a way to save himself. He scrambled a craft together that would preserve him just in time for the dust of all of Earth's creations to blow away, and he blew with it, floating into nothingness.



"That was a really sad story, Mom," Amara mumbled sleepily. Her mother caressed her face and smiled sadly.

"Yes, it is." Amara's mother sighed heavily. "Now go to sleep, my love." She stood up and turned off the lamp, then made her way to the other side of the bed and got under the covers, already drifting off.

How insignificant one feels, blowing through nothingness without an Earth to love.

"HOW FORTUNATE!"

by Emberly Wobbema

Once, a long time ago, there was a hunter named Orion. His servant, who was Orion's good friend, was named Tamir. Tamir was a loyal servant, willingly following Orion. Strangely though, whenever something happened, whether good or bad, he would always exclaim, "How fortunate!"

One day, when the two were out hunting, a landslide caught them off-guard. Tamir managed to avoid the largest rocks and was unscathed, but Orion's leg was crushed beneath a boulder. When they returned home, a medic announced that Orion's leg was unsalvageable. It would have to be replaced with a wooden prosthetic. Tamir, true to his nature, declared, "How fortunate!"

Orion was furious. "How can you say that?" he cried. "You think the loss of my foot is *fortunate*? Get out of my sight!" Picking up a vase from his bedside table, he hurled it at Tamir, who barely managed to duck in time for it to shatter against the wall.

Tamir left, carefully avoiding the shards of glass on the ground, and remarked again, "How fortunate!"

Later that week, Orion was recovered enough to return to hunting. He ventured out into the woods, with no real intent other than to wander. He wove further and further into the thick forest until he looked around and realized that he didn't know where he was. He slowly took a couple more steps, and then the ground plunged out from beneath him, sending him tumbling into a deep pit.

Luckily, the bottom of the pit had been padded with leaves and brush, so he landed without much injury. Looking up, he realized that the opening must have been covered by brush to blend into the forest floor as a trap for animals.

Or unsuspecting hunters, he remarked wryly to himself as he pulled himself gingerly to his feet.

"Help!" he called out, hoping that whoever made the trap would be nearby. He called again and again, until his voice was hoarse and the sun was setting.

Suddenly, he heard several voices above him. He looked up eagerly and yelled out one more time. A man's face appeared over the edge of the pit, and Orion nearly whooped in joy.

"I fell in here by mistake!" he called. "Can you help me?"

The man nodded, studying Orion. "We can pull you up, but you'll have to send your weapons up first so the rope won't get tangled."

Orion quickly unslung his bow and quiver off his back, and unbuckled his sword from his belt. A rope unspooled from the top of the hole, and Orion tied his weapons to it. They were pulled up, and then the rope was lowered again.

Orion grabbed on, and using the wall as leverage, half-walked, and was half-dragged up and out of the pit.

"Thank you," he began as he stood, but then stopped. There were nearly a dozen men, all dressed in animal furs, in a neat semi-circle around him, all pointing weapons at him.

The man who had talked to him at first stepped forward. "You are coming with us."

Seeing no other option, Orion complied. He was marched through the forest, a spear to his back, until they reached a fortress made of logs. He was forced inside, and tied to a large pole in the middle of the camp. The men dispersed except for the man who seemed to be the leader of the group—he headed into a tent.

A few minutes later, he returned with another man, who was dressed in animal furs and carried a staff that looked as though it was made out of a human leg bone. He seemed to be a chief. Orion tried not to gag as he was poked and prodded by the man with the bone.

Finally the chief turned to the other. "He will do. Prepare the altar."

Orion began to panic. It seemed like he was about to be sacrificed! He thought quickly.

"Excuse me, sir," he called out.

The chief turned back to him, a bored expression on his face. "What is it?"

Orion gulped. "I have a wooden leg. May I sit down so that it does not hurt so badly?"

The chief's eyes narrowed. "A wooden leg. Show me."

"I can't bend down enough to roll up my pant leg." Orion made his voice as apologetic as he could.

The chief strode closer and tugged up Orion's pant leg, revealing his wooden replacement. He snarled.

"You are blemished." He pulled a key out of a hidden pocket and unlocked Orion's chains. "Begone."

Orion ran as fast as he could out of the fortress and through the forest. When he finally reached home, he called for his friend.

Tamir came quickly, and Orion immediately recounted the entire tale to him.

"So you see," he concluded, "it *was* fortunate that I lost my foot because it allowed me to keep my life!" Tamir smiled. Orion continued, "But there is still one thing that I don't understand—why did you say 'How fortunate' when I sent you away?"

Tamir grinned and responded gleefully. "I say 'How fortunate' because everything that happens in life is a gift. It is only until after that we understand why. You see, if you had not sent me away, I would have been with you on that hunting trip, and would have been captured with you. Because I have both of my legs, I likely would have been sacrificed."

Orion was astonished by his servant's forethought and immediately rehired him.

LEVITATION

by Wolfgang Wright

After graduating from college, my grandfather, a man known for his eccentricities, set off for India in search of enlightenment. For several months, he traveled around the country, going from ashram to ashram looking for a guru who would accept him as a disciple, only to be refused at every turn. These were wise men, studied in the ways of the world, and they did not fall for my grandfather's good looks or charm; one even went so far as to call him an arrogant dilettante looking for an amusing way to kill time while dodging the Vietnam War, an accusation my grandfather found difficult to refute. Sullen, out of money, and no closer to his objective than when he'd first arrived, he took to wandering the streets of Bombay, adopting the attitude of a disaffected tourist looking to lose himself in the quotidian wonders of a foreign land, until one day he discovered that he *was* lost—literally. After circling several dusty neighborhoods, desperate to locate anything that looked familiar, he stumbled upon a narrow back alley where a large crowd had gathered. Hoping to avoid trouble, he decided to try a different route, but as he turned to leave, he was struck by a pain in his side, sharp enough that he had to stop and brace himself against a nearby wall.

"I thought it was the curry I'd had for lunch," he told us—us being my parents and I— "but it was too close to my armpit to be food-related."

It was Thanksgiving and I was seven. My grandfather, my mother's father, had suggested we go around the table and share what we were thankful for, and though it wasn't what we usually did—we usually just ate—not even my father, who didn't like his father-in-law, could find a reason to object. My mother had gone first, talking about how grateful she was to have all of us here for dinner, while my father expressed his gratitude for the new tires on his truck. When it came to my turn, I gave thanks for the leather basketball I'd received for my birthday, and also my four-day vacation from school. Had I known at the time what an incredible tale my grandfather was about to tell, I would have also

included that on my list, though I'm guessing he gathered as much from how I was hanging upon his every word.

"What's curry?" I asked, my mouth full of mashed potatoes and gravy.

"If you're lucky," my grandfather grimaced, "you'll never find out."

He paused for a moment to finish chewing on a piece of turkey, and afterward washed it down with a cranberry martini, a concoction he'd brought along with him in a thermos; judging from the bits of fruit floating around in his glass, he'd no doubt mixed it himself.

"Anyway," he proceeded, his palate cleansed, "as I was resting there, waiting for the pain to subside, I glanced down the alley again, trying to make out what all the fuss was about. I could hear them laughing, and for a brief second, they broke into song. Then, suddenly, everyone got stone quiet, as if they were listening to someone tell a secret. Naturally, it piqued my curiosity, so as soon as I'd regained my bearings, I hobbled over and fell in at the rear, hoping not to be noticed." My grandfather laughed and took another sip of his martini. "Fat chance of that, being the only white skin amongst a bunch of browns, not to mention I was a full head taller than they were. Not long and several of them were sending me looks, though how they'd managed to pry their eyes off of what was going on in the middle of this throng was beyond me."

"What was going on?" I asked, still riveted.

"Maybe you should finish your stuffing," my father said. "Then you can have pumpkin pie."

"What?" my grandfather complained. "You think I'm about to describe an orgy? Give me *some* credit."

"What's an orgy?" I asked.

"It's when a bunch of people get together and have sex with each other," he replied, then turned back to my father. "May I continue?"

My father scowled but relented, even encouraged my father to finish his story, if only to distract me from asking any more questions about orgies.

"A man levitating," my grandfather said.

"What's that?" I asked.

He told us that the man in question, who was wearing nothing but a piece of white cloth wrapped around his waist, was hovering several feet above the ground, seated—"if that word means anything for someone floating in midair"—in the lotus position, which my grandfather explained was otherwise known as Indian-style. For a moment, my grandfather just

stood there in awe, not knowing what to make of it, until this man, sensing a foreign presence, motioned for him to come forth.

"Not to mix religions, but the crowd parted for me like the Red Sea, and I stepped forward, finding myself face to face with him, and I mean that literally—he was that far off the ground. Smiling, he bowed his head to me, then placed his hands out in front of him, palms up—like this. I gathered he wanted me to place my own hands on top of his, so I did, and right away, *whoosh*, I felt this tingling sensation run up my arms and into my chest, and then disperse all throughout my body. I tell you, it was the greatest sensation of my life—even better than that orgy I attended," he threw in for my father's displeasure. "And afterward, after the tingling had left me, he bowed again and motioned for me to leave—and I don't mean the alley. He wanted me to leave the country, which, after our 'interaction,' I was happy to oblige him, because for the first time in a long time, I knew exactly where I was supposed to go."

"Where?"

"Seattle. The Space Needle. Which is where I met your grandmother."

He went on to tell us that he'd never repeated this story to anyone before, not even my grandmother, who'd passed away a few years prior. It wasn't that he thought no one would believe him, or would think that he was crazy, because people already thought that. No, he was worried that talking about it would ruin it somehow, sully it, corrupt the magic of what had happened to him that day. Why he had chosen to tell it now I had no idea, and I didn't think to ask. By then, I was far too absorbed in the idea that someone could hang in the air like a bird to care what his reasons were, and as soon as I was excused from the table, I ran into the living room to see if I, too, could raise myself off the ground.

A full quarter and a half of the Lions game had transpired before my father walked in and asked me what I was up to.

"I'm trying to lebitate," I said—just like that, because I'd misheard what my grandfather had called it.

"Great," my father moaned, then shouted into the kitchen: "Raja!"

My mother appeared a moment later, drying a dish.

"Look. Look what he's doing," my father said to her.

"What? He's sitting."

"He's trying to 'lebitate.'"

My mother laughed, saying that at least I wasn't trying to do the other thing her father had talked about, but when the joke didn't land—and it did *not*—she handed my father the dish and then sat next to me on the

floor. As delicately as she could, she explained to me that perhaps my grandfather hadn't been telling the truth.

"I don't mean he was lying to us, sweetie. No, he wouldn't do that. But your grandpa…let's just say he has a very unique way of looking at the world, and sometimes, well, sometimes that leads him to believe in things that aren't always real."

"What about the tingling?" I asked.

"Sometimes we do get tingles running up and down our body, don't we? Like when I used to sing 'Criss Cross Applesauce,' and I would move my fingers around your back. So it could be that that part of the story was true. And it could also be true that the tingling gave him the idea to return to America and go to the Space Needle. Who knows where our ideas come from? But as cool as it would be if we *could* levitate, it's just not possible. So don't waste your time on it—okay, sweetie? Otherwise, you won't have any time left for practicing to become a professional basketball player."



The next summer—I was eight by then—my parents decided to take a vacation to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. My father did his best to try and find someone trustworthy to take care of me while they were gone, but in the end, only my grandfather was available.

Before leaving, my mother warned me to go easy on my grandfather, saying that he'd been under the weather of late; and sure enough, I wasn't at his house an hour when he grew tired from playing one-on-one and suggested we go inside and give hide-and-seek a shot instead. Of course, being eight, I was far too old to enjoy such a childish game, but I'd remembered what my mother had told me, so I said okay. As soon as we got inside, my grandfather went straight for the couch in the living room and closed his eyes, and only after I reminded him did he begin to count. That's when I ran upstairs, into his office where there was a closet filled with old newspapers—I'd hidden there before. As I waited for my grandfather to come find me, I peered through the crevice between the folding doors. On the other side of the room was bookshelf, and one book in particular had drawn my eye. It was called *Enlightenment and Levitation*.

I'd barely thought about levitation since my mother had convinced me it was impossible, and yet to see the word printed there in gold lettering immediately rekindled my interest. Forgetting all about what I was supposed to be doing, I left the closet and pulled the book from the shelf, then brought it over to the desk and began flipping through it.

Straightaway I found a picture of a man levitating, and for the next minute or so I tried my best to decipher whether it was genuine, or, like the time I'd seen a magician cut a woman in half, it was all a trick. But before I was able to reach any conclusions, my grandfather cleared his throat behind me.

"Not much of a hiding spot," he said.

I closed the book and spun round, worried that I was in trouble. But my grandfather merely came forward and reopened it, right to the picture I'd been scrutinizing.

"That's just what he looked like," he said, "except his beard was shorter, and he wasn't wearing a turban."

"So it really happened?" I asked.

"It's hard to say for sure. Besides the curry, I'd also smoked quite a bit of ganja that day. Add that to the heat, and it's possible I wasn't thinking straight. He could have been seated on a barrel and I just didn't notice it."

"But what about the pain in your side? And knowing you were supposed to come home and meet Grandma?"

"The truth is, I was tired of India, and I'd heard a rumor that the U.S. was pulling out of the war. Plus, I hadn't had a hamburger in forever. There was a place in Seattle that sold a mean bacon double cheeseburger." He looked at me and tousled my hair. "Speaking of which, why don't we go and get one at that restaurant you're always going on about, and afterward, we'll go bowling. Now there's something I can still beat you at."

Needless to say, I was disappointed by what my grandfather was telling me, and I wound up spending the rest of the vacation in a funk. But when I returned home the next week and was unpacking my duffel bag, lo and behold, there was *Enlightenment and Levitation* resting at the bottom, underneath my dirty underwear. Obviously, I knew that I hadn't put it there, which only left one of two options: either my grandfather had slipped it in when I wasn't looking, or it had found its way in there on its own. Whichever the case, I took it as a sign.



A month later, my father caught me. He walked into my room while I was repeating a mantra about lifting off the ground and nearly flew through the roof himself. Seizing me by the bicep, he hoisted me up and dragged me downstairs for a family meeting. And had it not been for my mother, who wasn't as shocked by the news as my father had expected

her to be, there's no telling what sort of tongue-lashing I might have received.

"You *knew*?" my father accused her, suddenly more upset at her than he was with me.

My mother hesitated—who wouldn't?—but ultimately confessed: "I found Dad's book when I was cleaning his room."

"What book?"

At this, my mother fell silent, and only spoke again after my father had stormed out of the room. Turning to me, she whispered, "Sorry."

When my father returned, he waved the book around as if he were planning on striking someone with it; instead, he grounded me, then ungrounded me when he realized that grounding me would only give me more time to practice levitating. Fed up and frustrated, he howled at the ceiling.

"I don't know what to do with you anymore," he said finally. "I really don't. I feel like I've lost all control of you."

"Let's not overreact," my mother put in. "If he were watching TV, or playing Super Nintendo—"

"Then at least he'd be doing something other boys his age are doing. Not sitting around thinking he can fly." He rubbed his forehead and covered his eyes, then all at once lifted a finger in resolution. "I tell you one thing. We're going to get to the root of the problem, that's for sure."

The root, of course, being my grandfather, whom my father invited over for dinner that evening, presumably to give him a piece of his mind. But he never got the chance, because before the bread basket had made its way around the table, my grandfather interjected another bit of drama of his own.

"The cancer treatments worked," he said, sipping on the wine he'd brought with him, which more than likely had come from a box. "I'm in the clear."

"What! That's great!" my mother rejoiced, getting up and giving him a hug.

"What cancer?" I asked, my mouth full of spaghetti.

"That's so wonderful! Oh, I just knew you'd beat it."

"Hold your horses, I ain't done." He set his glass down and clasped his hands together, resting his forearms on the table. "It's the damnedest thing. The drugs they put me on, the ones that worked, were experimental, meaning my health insurance won't cover them. So all the money I'd saved up for retirement, *poof*, it's gone, and I still owe a buttload. I've got no choice but to sell the house, which means I'll be needing somewhere

else to crash until I can afford a place of my own." He picked his glass up again and took another sip of wine, then looked directly across the table at my father. "Any ideas?"

My grandfather moved in a few months later, into the basement, and it was while I was helping him unload boxes that he asked me how things were going, if I was levitating yet. I told him what had happened, how my father had caught me trying and how he forbade me from doing it anymore.

"Alright, what about the other part?"

"What other part?" I asked.

"Enlightenment. You getting any closer to becoming one with the universe?"

He must have sensed from my silence that I had no idea what he was talking about. I admitted that I didn't read the whole book, only the parts that had to do with levitation. He seemed disappointed and expressed a desire to go out and have a smoke, but in the end he sat me down on the couch, which, later that night, he would convert into his bed.

"Now listen to me, okay? Levitation's just condiment, but enlightenment—there's your meat and potatoes. See, you have to remove the weight of your ego first, and once you've done that, then you'll start to feel lighter. Now go back and read the rest of the book, all of it, and you'll see what I'm talking about."

"I can't," I said. "Dad took it away."

My grandfather cursed, then mulled it over a moment. "Alright," he said, "I'll figure something out."

That evening, as I was putting on my pajamas, he came traipsing into my room with the book in tow. Well, what was left of the book, because roughly half of the pages had been torn out, and it wasn't hard for me to tell, even at a glance, which half they were.

"You better remember this, kiddo," he said as I searched in vain for the picture of the levitating man. "I fought hard for you. I swore to your father that I'd be out of here by winter, so you'd better make good by me. Understand?"

"But what if I can't levitate?" I asked him nervously. "What if it's not possible?"

"Criminy, weren't you listening to me? I'm talking about getting yourself enlightened. I couldn't make it work for me—I don't know, maybe that guru was right, maybe I am a dilettante. But you're not like me. You've got will, you've got determination. So it's up to you now, you hear?"



And so, for the next decade, I dedicated myself to becoming enlightened. I learned how to breathe, how to meditate, how to observe my thoughts and emotions in order to diminish them, but most of all, I learned how to dis-identify with the self that I thought I was and become one with the ultimate Self of existence. None of this was easy, especially considering my age. Puberty hit me as hard as any other teenager, and getting cut from the basketball team was a real bummer. On top of that, I had to deal with my parents' brief separation and their fatalistic getting back together. Still, instead of getting angry or lashing out when something didn't go my way, I chose to accept all that was happening, intensely observing what was going on within me rather than projecting my angers and frustrations onto the world.

And then, in my senior year, Tanya, my first and only girlfriend up to that point, broke up with me. I suppose I should have seen it coming: she was always getting upset at me for not getting as caught up in the drama of our daily lives as passionately as she did, and even cited that as a reason for dumping me. "You don't *feel* enough," she complained. I suppose I proved her right when I didn't cry or get down on my knees and beg her to take me back, but instead closed my eyes and began to take deep, controlled breaths, reminding myself that nothing was permanent. This caused her to slap me across the cheek, as if *I* had been the one to dump *her*, and then she stormed away to console with her friends.

That afternoon, I went straight home to meditate, for though I may not have reacted as Tanya had wanted me to, I was nevertheless profoundly affected by the breakup. As I sat in my room with my eyes closed, attuning myself to the pain within me, I experienced a sudden sensation of emptiness similar to what had been described in my grandfather's book. On the whole I felt lighter, and the ground beneath me seemed to be less constraining, as if my sit bones were merely grazing the carpet rather than pressing down into them with the full force of gravity. Suddenly, I became very relaxed, as if I had cast off the rigidity of my body and had become transformed into a pure ball of light.

It was around this time that the phone rang. Because I was expecting a call from a friend who wanted to check up on me, see how I was doing after the breakup, I had placed my phone on the floor next to me; but when I reached for where I thought I had put it, it wasn't there. Opening my eyes, I felt a sudden thud, and my hand slammed down onto the receiver, knocking it off its cradle. Puzzled as to what had just happened, I nevertheless answered the call.

As it turned out, it wasn't my friend but my girlfriend—my *ex*-girlfriend. Apparently since breaking up with me, a good four hours prior, she had been doing nothing but mulling over my reaction, and after consulting with her friends about it, had reaffirmed that I hadn't responded appropriately; her call was to inform me of this. For several minutes she spoke without pause, going into great detail as to why I should be heartbroken and on the brink of suicide, after which she switched gears and told me that we were getting back together.

"I'm confused," I said.

"It's simple. You obviously don't get how miserable it is to lose me as your girlfriend, so we need to get back together so I can show you."

"And then what? You'll break up with me again?"

I don't know if she had anticipated that I would see through the ludicrousness of her logic so quickly, or if she had even seen through it herself, but she'd already made the call, and so she stuck to her guns: the breakup was off, and we were back together. Of course, when I did not immediately express my gratitude to her for taking me back, she yelled at me, then demanded that we get together tomorrow to talk about it.

"Fine," I said.

After hanging up, I went to the bathroom, and as I was washing my hands I recalled what had happened to me while I was reaching for the phone. When I got back to my room, I remained standing in the doorway awhile, staring at the spot where I'd been meditating. I remembered that it had felt like I was sitting taller, more upright than usual, so it was possible that when I reached for the phone, my arm simply wasn't long enough to grasp it. But that didn't explain the thud, why I'd felt like I'd fallen an inch or two. Maybe, without knowing it, I had been lifting myself up by my knees, as I sometimes did when I was about to get up from meditating—except that to do that, I had to be leaning forward, and I was sure that I hadn't been.

I went over and sat on my bed and did a quick check of my entire body, twisting each part, trying to get a sense of how everything was moving. Though I no longer felt like a ball of light, I was looser than usual: my toes wiggled freely, my knees swung like well-oiled joints, and my shoulders easily rotated to their full capacity; even my eyes seemed to be resting in their sockets with a newfound ease. I felt calm, serene, wholly in touch with myself and my surroundings. I leaned over to pick up the phone, and *whoosh*, I suddenly got an image of someone I supposed to call.

No, not call. It was clear as day to me that I had to go and speak with him in person.



Because it wasn't five o'clock yet when I got to my grandfather's apartment, I didn't think he'd be home, so I let myself in, and while I waited for him to return, I ambled over to his bookshelf and picked up *Enlightenment and Levitation*. I'd given it back to him a few years ago, having moved on to other, perhaps better, books about enlightenment, classics like the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Dhammapada*, and the *Tao Te Ching*, but also books by more recent authors like Ram Dass, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Eckhart Tolle. Still, my grandfather's book was the one that had gotten me started on the path, and I still felt a great deal of nostalgia for it, so I picked it up and began thumbing through it for old time's sake. Of course, it wasn't in the same shape as when I'd first laid eyes on it. The pages that had been torn out had never been replaced, and with all the times I'd read through the remainder, occasionally underlining or highlighting a passage, and once in a while spilling food, the book was in pretty rough shape. But all the important lessons were still there and still legible, and it was pleasant to see that I'd put into practice much of what it had to offer. It was while I was rereading a passage on karma that I heard a noise coming from the bedroom.

"Grandpa?" I called.

"Arnie," my grandfather moaned, "is that you?"

I set the book down and walked into the hallway. My grandfather was in his room, lying on his bed on top of the covers. His shoes were off, but otherwise he was dressed for work. His head was resting on the pillow and he looked tired.

"Are you alright?" I asked.

"I got lightheaded stocking peas. All those fluorescent lights, they wear on a person. Is that girl with you?"

He asked me that because that's the reason he'd given me the key—so Tanya and I would have a place to fool around.

"We broke up," I said.

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

I came closer and knelt down on the floor next to him so I could get a better look at his face. His eyes looked puffy and his skin was pale. "Do you want me to get you something? A glass of water? Something to eat?"

"No, thank you." He put out his hand and I held it. "I suppose your mother told you."

"She told me."

"Did she also tell you I've decided not to fight it this time?"

"She cried about it. So did I."

"Is that why you're here? To lecture me, like she did?"

"No, I…it's not important."

"You ain't got herpes, do you?"

I grinned and shook my head.

"Then what is it?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Maybe I could show you. I don't know if it'll work or not, but I could try."

Keeping hold of his hand, I readjusted myself so I was sitting in the lotus position. It was a little awkward at first with one hand out in front of me like that, but as he was able to rest his arm on the side of the bed, I let him do most of the work of holding up my own. I closed my eyes and took several deep breaths, then went inward, deeply, as deeply as I had before. Soon, I found the source of my energy, and I latched onto it, became it. I felt myself becoming lighter, as light as a feather, as light as air.

"Yeah, that's it," my grandfather said, sitting up. "That's just how I remember it. Keep going, you're doing good."

And so I did. I continued to float upward until my knees were level with the bed, and my eyes, when I opened them, were staring into his. And there we sat, the two of us together, holding hands, sharing eternity.

A TALE OF TWO SUNSETS

by Jack Zaleski

When we discovered that Joey Witzer had fallen off Sunset Rock, a plunge of some 200 feet, we knew he was dead at the bottom. His body, limbs akimbo, looked small from the height of the crag, but there was no doubt he was broken beyond repair. Even from our lofty elevation, we could see a bloody splash on the splay of granite boulders and scree where he had landed face down, silently save for a muted cry we thought we'd heard, but ignored as just another sound in the dense woods around us. Could have been a bird. Or the creak of a tree limb in the wind.

The glow of the setting sun brightened the stain on the rocks. It distracted us from the late-afternoon celestial spectacle that made this place special. Nonetheless, the view to the west was as spectacular as always. It was one of the reasons we hiked there. Now, sunset's radiance played across a broad valley where factory smokestacks and church steeples marked small cities nestled in a verdant summer landscape of low hills, sparkling ponds and modest rivers. It was, after all, *Sunset Rock*. On official maps and tourist brochures it was described as an undeveloped public park with beautiful vistas, but with limited access. No road, a crude trail that was hard to find and not recommended for inexperienced hikers. Years later, despite its renown for the resplendent late-day panorama, the site was closed.

At that moment, however, our gazes were fixed downward to the darkening tableau. Joey Witzer was dead still. No one talked as we stared in disbelief into the gathering gloom.

Turning away so they couldn't see my misting eyes, I thought, no, not Joey. Skinny, wiry, frenetic and funny, he was the smallest of us. Always moving, always an impish grin, always joking. Carelessly irreverent, the first to use cuss words with casual comfort. Furiously peddling that battered bike of his like the devil's demons were after him. When we were down about trouble at school or hurt at home, it was Joey who brought us up laughing. He was the instigator of our petty crime spree; by far the slickest

shoplifter among us. Unlike his miscreant confederates, he never got caught. When a situation went dicey, he would evanesce, or so it seemed. He just was better at a quick duck and run. Memories dried my eyes. Not Joey. This can't be real. I backed away from the edge, joined the others at the fire pit, and we began a ponder that would change our lives.



We didn't know he had fallen. We looked around and couldn't find him. We called out. He'd been with us on the hike from the edge of town on a trail that disappeared into the trees and ledges on the easy eastern rise of Rattlesnake Mountain. We knew the way. By late afternoon we'd reached a level ridge near the summit, about 50 yards behind the cliff's brink. Months before we'd built a rock-ringed campfire pit and camping site there. We fanned out to gather wood for a cook fire to heat tins of beans and Spam we'd carried in our rucksacks, along with burlap-wrapped bottles of Avery's birch beer and cream soda, and army surplus water canteens clipped to our belts.

When we met back at the fire pit with armloads of dry twigs and branches, we were one man short. "Where's Joey?" I asked. "Skippin' out on the work again?"

We had not seen the collapse of the pitted "scenic view" sign and the rusty pipe barrier that had cracked off its rotted footings when, we figured, Joey leaned against it. The broken pieces dangled over the rocks in a crazed tilt—like crooked fingers pointing to the grim scene.

"We gotta go get 'im," said Freddy Francini, the de facto leader of our quintet of Washington Junior High 8th graders, mostly because he was bigger than the rest of us. Maybe a little more streetwise, too, because his father had been a city alderman and owned a liquor store on the east side of town. Freddy had status. The rest of our dads were union tradesmen who worked in blue-collar jobs in our industrial hometown.

The five of us had been friends since grammar school, in Boy Scouts together, and had hiked and camped on the mountain more times than we could remember. We grew up in close by neighborhoods, children of the prospering World War II generation. Life was good for Billy Bernardi, Peter Blane, Freddy, me and Joey. And we were oh-so-smug about knowing the overgrown start of the mountain trail, which was just beyond the crumbling remnants of a stone-lined canal, where Long Swamp Road was swallowed by thorny thickets, scrub coppice, tall cattails, taller willows, and a menacing expanse of dark-water fens that gave the road its name.

"Yeah," I said, "I guess we gotta get 'im." But even then with the shock still raw, I was not convinced.

A sheer path alongside the rock face snaked to the bottom. Late-day shadows were pressing in. Billy said, "We can't get there in the dark. I ain't goin' on that path in the dark. It's wet and slippery. Besides, how we gonna carry 'im up? It's way too steep." He paused, contemplating. "Maybe we should go back right away and tell someone. You know, the police, and they can get to 'im on that dirt road down at the bottom. But geeze, we can't just leave him there, can we?"

"Wait, just wait a minute," cautioned Peter. "What are we gonna say? That he just fell? Who's gonna believe us? Heck, we don' even know what happened. I don' know, guys, I don' know. This could be real bad for us."

Billy fumed, "What are you talkin' about? Bad for us? For *us*? What about Joey? Pretty bad for him, don't ya think? You jus' wanna leave 'im down there? He's our friend! We gotta *do something*."

We got quiet, shamed, I supposed, by the truth in Billy's rant, each of us grappling with the horror of the situation; but beginning to reassess our plight and contemplate options.

Freddy had gone silent, but then said, "Hold on, guys. You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'? We got big trouble already because of that cop, John Harrigan. You know what I'm talkin' 'bout. It's not just shoplifting. I mean, that's bad enough, but remember all them other things we got away with? Harrigan knows about all that stuff. So what's he gonna think when Joey is missing? He knows us. Our parents, too. Right away he's gonna come hard at us about where Joey's at."

"What are you talking about?" Peter asked.

"Aw, c'mon," said Freddy. "Jus' count 'em off. I mean the stuff the cop knows about. What we done and got away with. I dare ya, count 'em off. Here's what I'm talkin' about, guys:

"First, there's that time we smashed up those little kids' bicycles and threw the bikes and their sneakers down the spillway at Swanee's Pond, jus' 'cause they was mouthin' off, and they told their parents, and Harrigan rounded us up. Remember?"

"Well, yeah," I said, "but nothin' happened to us. Never saw them kids again."

"Okay, but Harrigan knows about it," said Freddy. "But that ain't all. Here's another one. That time we started the fire where that big drain pipe empties into Swanee's and smoke was comin' out the manholes all the way to the corner at Osgood Avenue where Pop's store is. Heck, smoke

was comin' out manhole covers on all them streets. And the street drains, too." We grinned as we remembered.

"It looked like the whole neighborhood was on fire. Remember all that smoke?" Freddy said. "The fire engine from No. 8 came out? Firemen found the fire and was askin' around who started it. That cop knew it was us, but didn't say nothin', so we got away with that, too, 'cause of him."

"Well, yeah," said Billy, "but what's that got to do with where Joey is?"

"Wait, wait," said Freddy, "there's more. The shoplifting's the most bad. He knows all about that, our parents, too, but we got clear 'cause of Harrigan. But that ain't all. You remember the night we rolled them old wagon wheels from the farm near Jack's house right out in the middle of Corbin Avenue and a car hit it? All them cop cars. It was in the paper next day, picture and everything. Harrigan knew who done it. He knew. He talked to my dad. But nothin' happened, remember? Nothin' happened."

Billy didn't see the connection. "So, what's that all got to do with Joey down there? No one but us knows 'bout this."

"I think I get it," I said to Freddy. "Lemme see. Because Harrigan knows all that stuff about us he'll think we done somethin' that made Joey fall? That what you're thinkin'?"

"Yeah, that's it," Freddy said. "It's like we done all these crimes and he's been writin' it all down, so it'll be easy for him and everybody to believe we pushed Joey, or got to fightin' or were horsin' around and he slipped or somethin', and he'll come lookin' for us."

I'll be darned, I thought, *Freddy's makin' sense.*

"Okay, so here's what I'm thinkin'," Freddy said, suddenly living up to his leadership role. "We gotta figure out somethin' so's it's like we don't know nothin' about Joey. Whadda ya think, guys?" Peter and I nodded. Billy stiffened.

After a moment I asked, "Who knows we're up here?"

Distraught, Billy said, "What's that got to do with anything?"

"C'mon, guys, who knows?"

Turns out neither our parents nor anyone else knew we were on the mountain that day. It hadn't been planned. We didn't ask permission to go. Like so much of what we did at that uncorrupted age, the trek up the trail was spontaneous. We'd done it before; grabbed our gear and took off. It was a Saturday routine; our day, a magical time. On other Saturdays we'd pedal our Columbias and Schwinns to Batterson Park Lake for a swim in the summer heat, then the world's best milkshakes and sundaes at nearby Guida's ice cream shop. Other times, we'd round up a few more

guys for pick-up baseball on the Memorial Hospital grounds at the dead end of Neanda Street, where Freddy and I lived, until the old hag superintendent shooed us off. Or sometimes, when the weather was rainy, we'd ride the Burritt Street bus downtown for a matinee at the Embassy or Palace theaters, then Capitol Lunch hotdogs and Cokes, followed by a few hours of shoplifting before hopping the bus back to the neighborhood.

Shoplifting. It had started small—a comic book, a candy bar, baseball cards. But by the time we were well into 8th grade we'd become accomplished little thieves. Joey was our leader and planner—where to hit, what to lift. A couple of us augmented model train layouts with parts stolen from Amato's hobby store on Church Street in the heart of downtown. Joey had pilfered enough boxes of Crayolas to equip a kindergarten. We got snared twice, and each time police officer Harrigan talked old man Amato out of an arrest. Instead he drove us home in his squad car to face the wrath of our dads and moms. Lectured, grounded or worse for some of us, we remained stubborn and stupid. We had been seduced by the thrill of it all. We kept swiping from Amato's and other places even after Joey died.

Shoplifting and our other juvenile transgressions had put us in Harrigan's book. He didn't classify us as criminals or budding gang members, but he had tagged us as troublemakers. The simmering unease about our record with that cop would weigh heavily on what we were about to decide about Joey.



We had started out early for the mountain on that perfect Saturday morning. As the road decayed from broken pavement to gravel and finally into a muddy trace, we gave wide berth to a rank mink farm where snarling, mean-eyed hounds patrolled inside a rickety perimeter fence; found the trailhead; rested halfway up the slope in the dank shade of a smoke-stained cave where legend had it bootleggers holed up during the 1920s; tossed sticks and stones at feral pigs that scavenged in a midden near an abandoned sawmill; and planned to be back at dusk. It had been a good day until Joey fell.

"Okay, so no one knows we're up here," said Peter. "Whadda you and Freddy sayin'? Just leave Joey?" He paused, ruminating. "Well, I suppose, like maybe, that would be okay. He's, well, you know, he's not goin' nowhere. And you know what, guys, it's gettin' dark and I gotta go home. My mom and dad…"

"Yeah, yeah," Freddy said, "we all gotta go home or they'll come lookin' for us. We know that. So, whadda we sayin', Jackie boy? We just leave Joey?"

Coldy, slowly, I said, "*Yes. That is what I am saying."*

Their expressions see-sawed from vexation to outrage, from righteous resistance to anxious acceptance. Self-serving options were beginning to tranquilize angst and anguish.

"So what happens when Joey don't show up at his house?" asked still-angry Billy. "They're gonna ask us where he's at. My dad knows we all hang out on Saturdays. Joey's dad, too. Geeze, he lives next door to me. Right off, they're gonna ask *me.* I don' like this one little bit."

Peter started to whimper.

"For Chrissake, Peter," I said, "that don't help. Cut it out." Peter, embarrassed, snuffled and pulled himself together.

" Listen you guys, think about it," I said. "We can't go down the rocks and get 'im. Right? No way we could carry him up, and we can't go all around the other way. Right? Heck, it's at least a couple a miles that way. And we gotta get movin' if we're gonna get home before they start worryin' where we are. Right? And there's gonna be all kinda questions when Joey don't show up. I'm right, Freddy, ain't I?"

"Yeah, we get it," said Freddy, "but watcha sayin'? Can we just leave 'im like that? Aren't we breakin' the law, or somethin'?"

"So what do *you* say?" I asked our leader. "You got a better idea? Let's hear it. But, 'member this. You know who's gonna get blamed. Us, that's who. I'm pretty sure about that. And you know why? It's like you said, Freddy. Because of the shoplifting and all the other stuff, and ol' flatfoot Harrigan knowing we been doin' it. He knows us. He might say we was foolin' around on the cliff. Maybe daring each other to go right close to the edge. Remember how we bragged about it 'cause we done it lots a times? Heck, we even bragged about it to Harrigan himself awhile ago. That was you, Billy. Remember that? He'll remember, I bet. He'll wanna know where Joey is, and he'll be on us 'cause he knows Joey hangs 'round with us, and we come up here all the time. Maybe he won't stick it to us, like he didn't do nothin' before. But this is different. This ain't no prank like that other stuff. This is bad, really bad. I'm tellin' you, we're in trouble if we don't think up somethin' real fast."

I felt it closing in around us like a dark closet. I was frantic to escape, to beat down the hysteria I saw rising in my friends and felt quickening in me. Freddy and I had to convince Peter and Billy. Peter was coming around; Billy was still a hard sell.

"Listen, jus' listen," I said. "We can't do nothin' for Joey, right? We all feel real bad, but ain't nothin' we can do, right? I know this sounds lousy, but it really don't matter if we leave him. Someone will find him. We can't do nothin' for him. Like Billy said, we ain't goin' down there. That's right, Billy, ain't it? We all get that, right?"

Billy grunted, "Yeah, I guess…"

Freddy paced a nervous circle in the dry leaves, wobbled his head and stammered, "OK. I, I, I, well, I jus' don' know…I jus'…OK, Jack, you're right, I guess. But whatta we do? What's the plan? We gotta have a plan." Our once-timid leader was passing the test. He suddenly was convinced we needed a plan. He was all in. As was Peter. We had to persuade sullen Billy.

Once Peter quit blubbering, he began to think out loud, almost talking to himself, but starting to play hardball. Freddy and I let him pitch it to Billy.

"Yeah, and like Jack says, no one knows we're here," he said. "*Someone's* gonna find Joey, like he says, but all we gotta say is we don't know nothin' 'bout it. Yeah, listen Billy. We can say we was somewheres else. That'll work, Billy. It will. But, we all gotta be in or it ain't gonna work. Won't work without you bein' in on it, Billy."

Peter's plea did the trick. Billy bought it, grudgingly, petulantly, but he bought it. "Okay," he sulked. "Don't much like it, but guess we're stuck, ain't we, 'cause of all that stuff Harrigan knows. And geeze, we gotta get back before it gets dark. I don't want my mom calling your houses wonderin' where we're at. That'll be real trouble for me. So, let's git goin'."

"Hold on, slow down," I said. "So, what's our story gonna be? If we wasn't up here, where was we? You can be sure they're gonna ask. Harrigan, our dads—they're gonna ask. What's our plan? Like Freddy says, we gotta have a plan."

"Yes, that's right," said Billy, fully in now. "Gotta have a good plan. Gotta be real smart and we all gotta agree…"

Peter, who had embraced the evolving lie like a bear on a honey tree, said, "How 'bout this: Let's jus' say we wasn't hanging 'round today. You know, that we all was somewheres else and not together. That way we can have our own stories that's got nothin' to do with Joey. Like we say we wasn't with him today. The best thing is we don't have to remember the same fake story. You know, 'cause each one we make up will be different. Billy will have his story, I'll mine, and like that. I think this is a real good idea. Whadda yous guys think?"

It was brilliant, we concluded. Peter's strategy reeked of surprising savvy. It made desperate sense to four frightened boys who were teetering on their own precipice of panic. It was uncomplicated. We liked it. We packed up, leaving Joey's gear behind, and hustled down the shadowy trail to town. Four of us, not five.

The simple subterfuge worked. After a search for Joey that night in the neighborhoods that we knew would be futile, his body was found the next day by a trucker who was hauling hay on the dirt road near the base of the rock face. The headline in our hometown newspaper read: **"Local boy dies in fall,"** illustrated with an old official photograph of the once-sturdy guard rail and a mugshot of smiling Joey in his Boy Scout uniform. Authorities believed it was an accident, the story said. Joey's rucksack and piles of branches were found near the rim of the cliff, leading to speculation about why he was up there alone. An investigation was continuing, the story read.

Our neighbors, classmates, just about everyone knew we were Joey's friends, so over a few days that week, we were questioned, first by officer Harrigan:

"Were you up there with your friend, Joe Witzer?" No sir, I wasn't. Nope.

"You know why he was up there by himself?" Nope. Don't know.

"You boys hike up there often, don't you?"

Yessir, a lot, but not last Saturday.

"Why do you think he was on the cliff all alone?"

Gosh, I don't know, but he sometimes does stuff by himself. You know like when he climbs the fence 'cross the street from his house where them nuns and priests from the Polish orphanage got cows in the woods over there. He jus' rides his bike sometimes. We all do stuff like that, I mean by ourselves.

"What were you boys doing that day, if you weren't with Joe on the mountain?"

Um, I guess we just wasn't together that day. All of us doin' different stuff, I guess. I don't know what they was doin'. Different stuff, I guess…

"Different stuff? Like what? Exactly what were you doing?"

Hangin' around, I guess, you know, on my bike. I went over to Pop's store for a Moxie and a Snickers, like always. Said "hi" to Carlo Ciquera helpin' his mom at the store. You can ask him. Went over to Swanee's Pond tryin' to catch turtles and frogs and stuff like that. Went over to Osgood Pool, but didn't see nobody, so I jus' rode around. Jus' rode my bike 'til it got dark, then went home. Didn't do nothin' special. You can ask Carlo that he seen me.

Oh, you can be sure we will. Count on it.

But they didn't roust Carlo, whom, of course, I had not seen at Pop's store because I was on the mountain.

And so it went. Police and parents grilled us separately, together and separately again, but our lies held. We knew Harrigan and our folks doubted our stories. My dad wondered, "A Saturday and you and your buddies weren't together? Since when? You guys are always together on Saturday. Are you going to tell me what's going on here? Your bike was here all day, right there on the porch, buddy boy."

"Nothin' goin' on, dad, really," I said. "Didn't see them guys Saturday. That's all. I was right around here with my bike, you know… parked it when I went walkin' over to Swanee's 'cause it's muddy over there. Bike gets stuck in the mud, so I left it here on the porch. I don't never take it over in that mud."

He called Harrigan, but I never knew what was said. Freddy said Harrigan came to his house, met with his mom and dad, but they never revealed what they talked about.

A week later, we four conspirators, squirming in our church clothes, and with our parents, went to Joey's funeral mass at Holy Cross Catholic. The place was packed with teachers, families, kids who knew Joey and kids who didn't, even Harrigan, who eyed us like he knew we were lying. When Peter began to sniffle and weep, we all cried; even stoic Freddy, whose approval of the game plan had convinced Peter and Billy to go along. It was a godawful day, made worse by the lie that was festering in our guts—that was taking up residency in our memories.



Years passed. The investigation was forgotten. The secret slumbered.

I bolted town after college for a new life in a distant state to return only for family obligations and a couple of school reunions. Eventually, when nearly all my family were gone, I stayed away.

We four childhood friends tried to keep in touch for a few years after Joey's death, but the carefree camaraderie of youth had been wounded by the lie, and did not mature into lasting friendships. There were no more hikes to the mountain. We chose different friends in high school. After graduation we went separate ways for education, family and career, seldom seeing each other; never talking about our friend who had died at Sunset Rock. Maybe we could not forgive ourselves for the deception. Maybe we decided there was nothing to forgive, therefore nothing to talk about. Occasionally I'd hear that one of them had died or was sick. I'd send a card.

Several years after Joey's death my little sister married John Harrigan's son. Following the ceremony, the retired police captain sought me out and ushered me to a bench on the veranda of the wedding venue. It was a beautiful summer evening. After exchanging pleasantries, and after a disquieting pause, he said, "Can I ask you about it?"

"About what?" I said, but I knew what he meant. I knew what was on his mind.

He looked at me, his intimidating cop visage still affecting. "You know what I'm saying. It's just us talking man to man. I'm not a policeman anymore. Haven't been for years. We're just talking, you and me. Tell me what happened. The others never would. Your old friends? I lost track of 'em, never see 'em anymore, and when I did years ago, they wouldn't talk about it. But you? C'mon, Jack, talk to me. You're leaving town tomorrow, so why not talk to me? I need to understand what you boys were thinking."

There was nothing accusatory in his voice, nothing judgmental. I was not surprised that after all the years that had passed, he still was curious, even obsessed, it seemed. I knew Harrigan had made it go away, legally that is, just as he did with all of our other teenage misdeeds. In every instance, he had violated police practice and, as his admirable career attested, he got away with it. But without his intercession, we were convinced the fallout would have been catastrophic for us and our families. So we buried the lie. But now? *What the hell,* I thought, *tell him everything.* I owed him at least that. After all, I was witness to the events of that day, and the three boys who had stayed in town would not talk about Joey. Not a word from them, Harrigan said.

I related the details as vividly as I remembered them. I told him we withheld the truth for fear we would be blamed because we had run up a string of law-breaking that he knew about. "God, John, we were so naive we thought we had a police record!"

We were sure we'd be forever implicated if we admitted we'd been on the mountain with Joey. There would always be questions. There would always be suspicion. Yeah, we were there. We had lied. But we knew it had been an accident—a slip, a stumble, a misstep.

We had not seen it. We saw the aftermath. It was that simple. We did not know why Joey was near the weakened rail or how he fell. We were collecting wood for a cook fire, and there was none near the edge, just barren granite. He should not have been near the cliff. Maybe he was mesmerized by the sunset that brought us there.

"And when we saw him down there…" I said, my eyes going hot with tears. "Oh man, John, it's like I can see him now, like it's happening again."

I told Harrigan how we had concocted the stories—the lies—as we hit the trail, almost running to keep ahead of the mountain's chasing shadow. Each of us made up his own fib. We stuck with them when he questioned us.

He chuckled. "Yeah, you sure did, you damn delinquents."

I said, "We vowed to keep silent, but we could feel it falling apart right away, I mean the bond we had. It was starting to eat at us way back then. I miss those guys…" The conversation stalled into a pensive pause.

"And that's all," I said. "That's the way it happened. We were just kids and we were scared. I know keeping the secret messed up our friendships. I'll regret it for the rest of my life. We were good buddies. We might have been lifelong friends, but for what we did or didn't do …"

Harrigan looked into the coloring sky and said, "You really were dumb kids, but you were good boys, better than most, all good families. No one would have blamed you. As God is my witness, I believe that's the way it would have played out."

"Maybe so," I said, "but those guys and me, we paid a price. Losing those friendships has been hard on me, probably on them, too. The stress of bottling up the lie has hurt. And the worst was that Joey's family never knew the truth. They never heard it from us. That's on us, on me. I can't make it go away."

"Let it go," John said. "I need to tell you something I should have told you a long time ago. *I knew you were lying.* Don't look so surprised. *I knew.* We all did—your folks, I mean. Joey's family suspected from the start it was an accident. It's what they wanted to believe. It took awhile, but in time they were okay with it. You should have told them what happened right away. It would have been better for them, and for you, too. But still, I never heard them say an unkind word about you boys, never blamed you. You understand that?"

He sighed as though a weight of years had been lifted off his shoulders. I could see heartache in his old eyes. "Some of the hurt could have been avoided," he said. "I was part of it, knowing you boys were lying, I mean. I'm to blame, too, maybe more than anyone. I could have made it tough on you boys because of all the stupid things you did back then. You know that. But really, what could I do? Send you to juvie? I wasn't going to let that happen, even if I was risking my job. I still believe it was the right thing to do. In the end, when I made the case to the chief,

I got a pass from the department. It all worked out. What's done is done. It was a long time ago, Jack. We can't change it…"

The sun was caressing the horizon when John Harrigan walked away. "You take care of yourself," he said. *Good man,* I thought.

For a foolish moment I was young again, trying to remember the glorious view from the height of Sunset Rock as the solar dazzle sketched the sky and the valley in kinetic hues and shades. But my conscience—that cold whisper—was having none of it. All I could conjure up was the still life canvas of Joey's body shattered on the rocks. And like that day long ago on the mountain, twilight surrendered to gloom.

NONFICTION

THE CAR RIDE HOME AFTER A GAME

by Samantha Andersson

The car pulls out of the parking lot.

The gym doors close behind us, and with them, the noise—the whistle, the sneakers, the voices layered on top of each other. A second ago it was loud enough to feel in your chest. Now it's gone, replaced by the low hum of the engine and the steady rhythm of tires against pavement.

The car ride home after a game is a strange kind of space.

Sometimes it feels light.

A kid in the back seat replaying every good moment, talking fast, the words coming out quicker than the car is moving. His hands move as he talks, still in the game.

"Did you see that pass, Mom?"

"I almost had that steal. Didn't I?"

"I should've taken that shot earlier."

He's still half in the game, reliving it out loud, glancing toward the front seat to see if you saw it too.

Sometimes he catches your eye in the rearview mirror.

Just for a second.

Not saying anything. Just looking.

And in that look, you can almost see the question forming—not spoken, but there.

Did you see it?

Was it good enough?

It's a small moment, but it carries more weight than you expect.

Those rides home feel easy. The game becomes a story, something he's excited to tell, something he wants to stay inside of a little longer.

But sometimes the car feels different—heavier.

The kind of quiet that doesn't just sit but settles in and stays there. The streetlights slide across the windshield as you drive, the inside of the car briefly illuminated and then dim again, over and over. No one says much. No one really knows where to start.

A missed shot.

A turnover.

A moment the player wishes they could take back.

He sits a little further back in his seat. His hands are still now. The energy that filled him minutes ago has somewhere to go, but nowhere to land.

Sometimes the kid feels it most. Sometimes the parent does. Sometimes everyone in the car is carrying something different, and no one quite knows how to say it without making it heavier.

And then there are the rides where the questions start.

Why didn't you take the shot?

What happened on defense there?

Why do you think coach kept you out?

The game, which ended only minutes ago, gets replayed piece by piece. Pulled apart. Dissected. Every decision revisited. Every mistake pulled back into the light and held up a little longer than it needs to be.

"Next time you've got to attack the basket there."

"You can't leave your feet on defense like that."

I know those rides too.

Because if I'm being honest, I've been the parent in all of them.

I've sat in the quiet, replaying the game in my own head.

I've celebrated the good moments.

And I've started breaking things down before we even made it out of the parking lot.

It's taken me a while to realize how easily those conversations can become something else.

Because when your kids play a sport you once loved—or maybe still love—it's hard to separate their experience from your own.

The lessons you learned.

The mistakes you wish someone had corrected sooner.

The voice of a coach that still echoes somewhere in your head.

I can still hear it sometimes—what to do, what not to do, what mattered, what didn't. And without thinking about it, I've found myself carrying the same voice into the car.

Your own memories.

Your own expectations.

Your own identity tied up in the game.

And without meaning to, you start handing pieces of that identity to them.

I've recently started to wonder if that's where it begins.

Not just in what we say, but in what they start to feel responsible for.

Because when they look back at you in that moment—in the mirror, from the back seat—it isn't always about the play.

It's about whether they got it right.

Whether they saw it the right way.

Whether they did enough.

And I can't help but wonder how much of that comes from me.

From the way I watch.

The way I react.

The way I've learned to measure the game.

Not because I meant to put that there.

But because I've been carrying it myself for a long time.

And the way I see the game is starting to shape how they see it.

That's a heavy thing to notice about yourself.

Because the truth is, I don't think the answer is simple.

If we never correct them, how do they improve?

If we never point things out, how do they learn?

Part of sports is learning from mistakes.

But I've started to wonder if something else is happening in those moments.

Because kids are already replaying the game long before we say a word.

They know when they missed the shot.

They know when they made the wrong pass.

They know when they didn't play the way they wanted to.

They are already carrying enough.

Sometimes the ride home is the first space they have to start making sense of it—to think about what happened, to decide what they want to do next time, to figure out what the game means to them.

And maybe our role in that moment isn't always to fill the silence.

Maybe sometimes it's to let the silence do its work.

There have been rides where I almost said something.

A correction.

A suggestion.

A breakdown of a play that was still sitting in my head.

And then I caught my child's eyes in the rearview mirror and realized they were already thinking about it.

So I let the silence stay.

Whether that was the right thing to do, I don't know.

The older my kids get, the more I find myself thinking about those drives home.

A kid in the back seat.

A parent in the front.

The road stretching out ahead of us in the dark.

But lately, I've been coming back to something simpler.

The way they look at me in the mirror.

Just for a second.

To make sure.

And I find myself wondering what the game feels like to them when they don't look back at all.

MY BROTHER

by Sheila Omoth Christensen

My thoughts are of my brother tonight; it is his birthday. He would have turned seventy-eight this year. I always pause on his birthday, not out of ritual but because memory has a way of rising on its own, like something carried to the surface by a slow current. Fifty years have passed, yet I can still see him at twenty-six—hopeful, restless, standing on the edge of a new beginning he never had the chance to live.

He had just landed a new job two hundred miles from home, the kind of opportunity that makes a young man feel the world is finally opening. Our mother had sent him off with the small, practical gifts she always gave when one of us stepped into adulthood: pots, pans, sheets, a couple of pillows, dishes, silverware. Enough to make a temporary place feel like a start. He'd served in the Army, married young, divorced young, and now he was ready for something new—declaring a sort of independence, something of his own.

He drove the long stretch of highway to stay with our sister and her husband while he looked for an apartment. By the time he reached town, he was tired—the kind of tired that makes a cold beer sound like a small kindness. He called my sister to see if they wanted to meet him, but they had another obligation. He told them not to worry—he'd just stop for one and head over later.

I think about that phone call more than I should. How ordinary it was. How none of us knew it would be the last time his voice moved through a line we could answer. It was the phone call every mother and father hope for, the one that says he reached his destination safely.

He walked into the bar alone that afternoon, just a tired young man looking to unwind after a long drive. It was quiet inside—the kind of slow, midday lull where the air feels still. Only the bartender and two men shooting pool in the back. My brother ordered one beer. Just one. He wasn't the type to linger.

What happened next is something I've replayed in my mind more times than I can count. He reached into his pocket to pay, pulling out the roll of cash from the paycheck he'd cashed before leaving home. A simple gesture. A moment that should have meant nothing. But the two men in the back noticed. They watched him. And when he left, they slipped out the back door minutes later, the bartender said.

I've often wondered if he felt it—that instinctive tightening in the chest when you sense someone behind you. Or if he drove away thinking only of the evening ahead, of settling in at my sister's house, of the new job waiting for him in the morning. I hope it was the latter. I hope he had a few final minutes of peace.

The Sheriff later told us that my brother's car was found in the middle of a train trestle that stretched across a wide, fast-moving river. The headlights were still on. The driver's door stood open. His glasses were placed on the passenger seat, as if he had taken them off in a hurry. Had he seen a car behind him? Did they chase him onto the trestle? That is the only thing that makes sense when you think about it.

The trestle itself was narrow, high above the water, with steep embankments on either side. The Sheriff believed my brother had been chased, that he had gotten out of his car, that he'd climbed the embankment in panic—maybe trying to get away, maybe trying to get help. Whether he jumped or fell, no one could say. The river kept its secrets.

My brother was a good swimmer; we spent summers living at our lake cabin. He learned to water-ski using only one ski, which was a talent by itself. So perhaps, if he was being chased, he considered a jump into the river an option of escape. He probably underestimated the strength of the current.

Even now, when I picture that scene, it feels suspended in time—the open door, the silence of the engine, the headlights shining into the dark. A moment frozen, waiting for someone to return who never would.

At home, we were sitting down to supper when the phone rang. I remember the sound of the chair scraping back as my father stood to answer it. I remember the way the room seemed to still, as if even the air was listening. The Sheriff's voice on the other end. A missing son. A car found abandoned. No explanation.

We finished our meal because that's what people did then—you held yourself together until you couldn't. Then we got in the car and drove the two hundred miles to my sister's home. I understood that something

terrible had happened, even if no one said the words out loud. It was a very long, very quiet car ride as the sun was going down.

When we arrived at my sister's house, the television was playing the newly released movie *Helter Skelter*. It was dark outside now, the kind of deep winter darkness that settles early and stays. Snow was falling slowly, steady flakes drifting past the window. I remember standing there, watching the television screen, feeling the warmth of the room on my skin, and thinking only one thing: I hope he isn't cold.

It was such a simple thought, but it carried everything I couldn't say out loud. I didn't know where he was. I didn't know if he was hurt. I didn't know if he was alive. But I knew it was snowing, and I knew he was out there somewhere. That thought has stayed with me for all these years—the snow, the darkness, the fear that he might be cold.

My sister and her husband were beside themselves with guilt. They kept saying that if they had gone to meet him for that beer, none of this would have happened. I've carried that memory for fifty years—the way grief makes people blame themselves for things they could never have controlled.

In the weeks that followed, the local newspaper printed details about my brother that were wrong—his age, his description, even parts of the timeline. I remember my frustration, even as a young person, thinking: How can you find a missing man when the world is looking for the wrong one? It felt like shouting into the wind.

Months passed with no word. No sightings. No clues. Just silence. The kind of silence that settles into a family and becomes part of its architecture.

Then, on Father's Day of the same year, the phone rang again.

I remember the way my father's face changed as he listened. A fisherman had found a body in that river. A man so bloated from time in the water that he weighed over a thousand pounds. Unrecognizable. But the clothing—bits of it—was his. The same clothes he had been wearing when he left home on April 1st. To this day, I cannot approach April Fools' Day or Father's Day—days meant for celebration—without thinking about my brother.

The Sheriff told my father quietly that he didn't believe it was an accident. But the death certificate said "accidental drowning." The official story and the truth we lived with were never the same.

The Sheriff had spoken with the bartender on duty that afternoon, and he recognized the two men from the bar as being from a nearby reservation. The Sheriff had no jurisdiction there. He couldn't question

them. Couldn't follow the trail. Couldn't push the case any further. And so the investigation stopped at a boundary line drawn long before any of us were born.

That was the end of the official story. But not the end of ours.

In the years that followed, the story of my brother's death became something we carried quietly, each of us holding different pieces of it. My father held the facts—the phone calls, the Sheriff's words, the clothing he recognized. My mother held the ache—the pots and pans she had packed for a future that never arrived. My sister held the guilt, though it was never hers to bear. And I held the memory of that night—the snow, the movie, the fear that he might be cold.

Grief changes over time, but it never disappears. It becomes something you learn to live alongside, like a river that runs through your life whether you're looking at it or not. Some days it's quiet. Other days it rises without warning. But it's always there.

I've thought often about the life my brother might have lived. The apartment he never moved into. The job he never started. The ordinary days he never got to have. I imagine him older now, maybe with a softer face, maybe laughing at something one of us said. I imagine the birthdays he missed, the holidays, the small family moments that make up a life. These imaginings aren't painful anymore. They're tender. They're a way of keeping him close.

His story didn't end on that trestle. It didn't end in the river. It didn't end with the death certificate or the unanswered questions. It continues in the people who remember him, in the love that didn't have time to grow old, in the way his absence shaped the contours of our lives.

Fifty years later, I tell his story not because it brings closure—there is none—but because it brings him forward. Because he deserves to be remembered not as a mystery, not as a case that went cold, but as a brother who was loved. A young man on the edge of a new beginning. Someone who took off his glasses carefully, even in fear. Someone who called his sister because he didn't want to drink a beer alone.

Some stories don't resolve. Some wounds don't close. But love—even interrupted love—endures.

That brings to mind an email I once received from the television show Unsolved Mysteries. They asked for people to submit stories. I submitted this one about my brother. They responded. In the questions they asked, I mentioned that the case could not be investigated because the two suspects were from a reservation. That was the end of that opportunity to learn more about my brother's death.

And so I write this for him. For the life he lived. For the life he didn't get to live. For the snow that fell that night, and the hope I carried that he wasn't cold. For the brother who should have turned seventy-eight this year. For the memory that still rises, steady as a river, carrying him forward.

A BONE OF CONTENTION

by Mary Ann Donaldson

It is said, *"When the student is ready, the teacher appears."* I never expected my teacher to be Maggie, my feisty black Scotty. Her lessons arrive without words yet speak loudly with inherent wisdom. This is a story of one of her lessons.

For days I had been searching for a healthy bone for her to enjoy. At the meat counter of my favorite store, I learned that butchers rarely receive bones for soup or for gnawing dogs. Consumer demand for boneless meat and bone broth has limited the bone supply. So, imagine my delight when, at another store, I discovered a hefty ham bone. I bought it with visions of Maggie spending hours biting, gnawing, and toying with her new treasure.

She greeted the bone with pure joy, her entire body quivering with anticipatory delight. Grasping the bone, she wrangled with it, chewing with noisy delight. Alas, the bone was too large to consume and eventually she grew tired of it. Still clutching it in her jaw, she trotted around the house searching for a place to bury it. Pushing it between couch cushions did not work. Nosing it under the pillows did not work. Pulling up a throw rug to hide it did not work. Each failed attempt heightened her urgency. Whining with agitation, the bone had transformed from an object of pleasure to an oppressive encumbrance.

Weary from her task but frantic to preserve the bone, she began to whimper with misery. She wanted to be rid of the bone but needed to preserve it. Finally, she went downstairs and returned without it. I felt relieved, hoping she had realized that she could abandon it. But minutes later she reappeared, the bone clenched tightly again and whining even louder. I tried to help by placing towels around the house, hoping she could release the burdensome bone. She seemed torn between clinging to the bone and letting it go. Was she obsessed with the need to possess the bone or had the bone begun to possess her?

Feeling compassion, I reached for the bone. Obediently she opened her jaw and easily relinquished it. She walked away without looking back and settled to the floor, falling asleep. Relieved of the seduction of the bone she could let it go. She did not have the wisdom to discern that her clinging was the cause of her distress. She needed my wisdom to free her from her clinging.

The second of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhist teaching states: "Suffering arises from craving, attachment, and clinging to impermanent things and desires." Watching Maggie struggle with her bone brought this teaching vividly to life. The bone itself was just an object, but Maggie gave it power. It was not the bone that tormented her, but her attachment to it.

Maggie's lesson was simple but profound: Letting go is not a loss. It is a relief**.** When I finally removed the bone from her grasp, she did not mourn. She slept. She rested in a way she could not while she coveted the bone. Maggie, my unexpected teacher, taught me that letting go is an act of self-compassion.

As I pondered her actions, my own behavior came into focus. How often do I respond just like Maggie? Do I cling to objects, plans, habits, and beliefs as if they are essential to my well-being? By simply letting go of the non-essential things in my life, could I find an enduring contentment? How can I be like Maggie letting go of her bone?

It is not that simple for us. Like Maggie, we fail to recognize how our clinging causes suffering. Ads beckon us to purchase a piece of clothing or a new gadget. We are told that our lives would be enhanced beyond what we could imagine. Would we look younger with that facial cream? Would our chores be cut in half with that new appliance? It is as if the item in the ads sprouts invisible strings that zoom out to entangle us with images of promised bliss. However, when we possess the item, we are disappointed. It did not fulfill what we imagined. Then a new set of strings soar to us, inciting new desires, and the cycle repeats.

In addition to pursuing external possessions, we crave control over how we think and feel. Our minds are overloaded with thoughts about how to act, ideas about how things should be, fears about the future, regrets about the past and assumptions about how others should treat us. If we can think, act, and feel the "right" way, could we achieve happiness? These questions turn into rumination, and we are again entangled in conflicting desires. Because we do not have a watchful caregiver to monitor and advise us, we unconsciously continue to hold on to our patterns.

And so, I ask myself, what bones am I carrying? What strings seem attached to me? I have far more possessions than I need. My closets are filled with clothes; my kitchen counter is populated with appliances; and my house is filled with furniture. Which of these bones do I pick to discard? Can I let go of the attachments?

These reflections trouble me, so I pause to collect my thoughts. I relocate to my favorite chair in the living room and I behold Maggie. She is chewing the foot of her five-foot-long stuffed dog named Bob. She loves Bob, chewing him brings her comfort. Then it strikes me, it is not bad to have things that bring us comfort. This is not an all or nothing proposition. We need to develop the mind of a wise caregiver and discern when attachments lead to anxious clinging. Then we can recognize that those strings do not cling to us, rather we hold onto them. We can simply let them go like Maggie let go of the bone.

As we pick the bones to discard and let go of the strings we grasp, we will find peace. Now, I am going to lie with Maggie and take a nap. No bones or strings allowed!

THE MANY SIDES OF A FATHER

by Rita Greff

If I met a book character like my father, he would likely provoke complex emotions throughout the story. My father lived with intense feelings and strong principles which he worked to instill in his children. When I recall life with him, my thoughts do not take a steady, smooth, sunny course. That would be the course of my mother's perception of her path in life. My father's life would more likely be projected from side to side on a cow path featuring bumps, big rocks, and even muddy ruts. And yet our parents kept on a common road throughout their lives.

As Frank began first grade, he did not speak English, and the teacher did not speak German. During much of his first year of school, he was kept busy with sewing cards. As he grew older and more necessary to the operation of the family business of custom farming with horses, Frank started the school term late and ended it early. He demonstrated a quick mind and a love for learning, but school seemed to be a place he went for entertainment. In 8th grade one of his teachers warned him to shape up or he would get an F in deportment. Frank answered, "Give me two of them." The teacher complied. Pondering this facet, we note Frank's sense of humor and his need for attention were developing. Upon graduating from 8th grade, his formal education was complete. After this, his love for knowledge simmered as he read and learned. He developed a high regard for teachers and books. We children saw him reading every evening: farm magazines, a paperback from an auction sale, or sometimes a hardcover from The Book of the Month Club.

Frank began to work in the fields with teams of horses when he was just eleven years old. That year he drove a four-horse team hooked to a disk and a harrow, and though he was supposed to walk after the harrow, it didn't take him long to figure out how to drive the horses while standing on the four-horse evener. This was dangerous since the evener was about

four inches wide. If he fell off, the disk and harrow would go over him. This perspective of Frank demonstrates how he acquired his strong work ethic, how he used his inventive ideas, and how he was not afraid to take a risk. We children often saw him poring over farmer magazines gleaning ideas about farming and new equipment. Once he read about a straw catcher attachment to a combine. He persuaded a local dealer to secure the franchise, and then he traveled to install the straw catchers.

In my mind's slideshow of Father, I have a picture of my newly married parents with Mom's sister Lena and her husband, featuring my father riding a little tricycle. The others are all laughing and egging him on. Mom once admitted to me that Father was such a show-off, but she thought he was cute then. My father was known to be a cut-up, and he was known to fuel his antics with whiskey. He loved being the life of the party until he wasn't.

Around 1942, my father was drafted into the Army. My sister Kathy created a shadow box filled with medals he had earned while he served in the Pacific arena in WWII. Father remained silent about what he saw while he was at war, but we all knew it haunted him. In 1952, he seemed excited to be able to vote in the presidential election for General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had served in the European arena during WWII. Throughout Father's life, he was a great promoter of patriotism.

Extended family was important to our father. His sharecropping endeavors were usually in close proximity to his parents and his three bachelor brothers. They worked closely while sharing a love for horses and cattle. He referred to his five sisters as "the big five." Because of living close to Grandpa and Grandma Martin, we had an opportunity to meet many of my father's first cousins when they came to visit. We observed firsthand the love and respect Father showed for relatives and the fun he cultivated with them.

Father was openly proud of his children to other people. Stopping by H and J Implement and Rixen's Bar in Mott, he could be heard bragging to other men about our good grades and our accomplishments. But to our faces, he scrutinized our report cards, seemingly not noticing where we'd improved, always noticing where we went down. When I had a steady boyfriend, he reminded me, "I thought you were going to college." We all knew that we were expected to uphold the family work ethic and to get a good education or a job utilizing our skills and that we should always honor our family values.

His love for cattle and horses kept Father very busy in our neighborhood. At times our family was asked to break a horse to be

ridden. Father rode it at the beginning when it was wild, and then after it settled down he'd pass it to whichever child was ready to ride it. Ranchers from the community would ask Father to treat cows that had trouble calving, bloated cows, calves to be neutered, and whatever animal needed nurturing. Often, he would take my brothers along to wrestle the cattle and hold them down, while he ministered to them. Father didn't charge for his services, but sometimes a few dollars or a pint of whiskey would be left in his pickup. What we gleaned from this side of Father is that he was very generous with his talents and was ready to lend a helping hand to someone who needed it.

His grandchildren mellowed out our father. In retirement Father sometimes followed Mom's lead relaxing and enjoying the antics of the grandchildren. He read to them, fished with them, made beaded creations with them, played cards, went to baseball games, and picked apples with them. From his attentions, they gained the idea of how important they were, where they belonged, and that certain expectations needed to be met.

Frank never lost his ambition, but his health often limited his productivity as you can ascertain from the following adventure.

Beside the little gravel driveway, an ancient, triangular-shaped Oliver tractor squatted on the tall, June grass. A hay mower had been mounted to the tractor several days back, and the sickle had been returned from its sharpening in town.

My father, Frank, chugged his old International pickup close to the mower and climbed out. He leaned against the pickup door for a couple of minutes as he struggled to release the air from his barrel-shaped chest. Then he clanged open the end gate and slid the sickle off the pickup box. He lugged the sickle to the mower, puffing as he went. Everything is hard work when you have emphysema.

With the sickle nearly in place and a few rest periods in between, Frank rummaged under the front seat to locate a little ball peen hammer. A couple of whacks on the sickle to move it into place informed my father that he did not have enough air to do the job. Where the hell is Margaret when you need her? Probably talking on the telephone.

There's only one solution to this problem, he will have to go get Margaret (my mother) to do this job. He climbed into the International and drove the short distance to the front door of the house. Inside he used his energy to project a loud, gruff voice to convince my mother that he needed help. He added his opinion that "not a damn thing works

around here." Reluctantly, my mother agreed to help and they walked the short distance back to the tractor.

My father was not the calmest, most patient teacher. At this frustrating point in his life, his teaching methods included yelling, berating, and admonishing that **he** could do better. Somehow, he managed to get the point across on how to get that sickle in place, and my strong, patient mother ignored him when necessary and accomplished the task.

Mom picked up the tools, and huffing and puffing, Father climbed up on that ancient Oliver and turned the key. CLICK! Again: CLICK! It's like disaster followed this man around! The battery was dead. A few more words punctuated the sunny, June day. And then my dad breathlessly issued the order, "Go get the pickup and pull me."

Mom walked to get the pickup and backed it up toward the Oliver. With a few minutes rest while my mother had gone for the pickup, my father had enough air to finish his rant. "Back up straight!" he yelled. "If I were backing, I could back up straight!" My mother kept backing up slowly and crookedly, and she said just loud enough, "Shut up. Or, I'll back over you."

Each of us who knew him may carry a different image of Frank Martin: driving in the spring green pasture counting the cattle. Or lying on the couch on his back with his knees bent, reading a novel. Casting a line into the water to lure a walleye. Watching a Twins baseball game on television or sitting on the bleachers watching a grandson play ball. Working on an Oliver tractor. Flying through the air when a frisky horse dumped him. Wearing a cowboy hat and boots while showing one of his Angus bulls at the Winter Show. Yet we all recognize an intense man to be viewed as a prism for he had many sides.

GLORY

by Ellie Landeis

This poem is inspired by the personal experience of watching my grandmother slowly die from pancreatic cancer and how that experience shaped my understanding of medicine, suffering, and faith. I was inspired to emulate this essay by poetry. The vibrant imagery of poetry was something that helped me to love language and writing in the first place. I chose to blend the emotional progression of disease as well as how illness can rearrange a life, a home, and a family.



They put her on hospice in January.

I did not really think that that was the end. They told us she was going to die once before.

A couple of summers earlier she developed an infection. I could not tell you what it was. I was thirteen. No one explains diagnoses to middle schoolers; they just put you in a room that smells like antiseptic and sadness and tell you to say goodbye. In the presence of IV drips and heart monitors, you have to say goodbye to someone who has been with you your whole life.

Grandma was not ready to accept that fate. Not yet. She told whatever combination of diseases and infections and pain she had to go straight to hell. Three days later she walked out of that hospital right back to her own house.



After that, I thought she was *invincible*.



She lived with pancreatic cancer for more than 7 years. More than long enough to change my own narrative of what cancer was and what it looked like.

My understanding was, that if someone had cancer, they had to be bald, thin, and smell like a hospital.

My grandma was never bald. She kept doing her nails. And she *never* forgot to call me to discuss the newest 'Ulta' catalog in the mail. She was always so beautiful; a true reflection of what was in her heart.

It was not the chemotherapy that changed her the most. It was the *pills*.

She would always say it felt like swallowing coins. They were massive. And she took *so many*. Morning, noon, and night. Every day.

She took those pills for years and years. Pills my dad sorted for hours each week. Her child turned caregiver.



I was sixteen when she decided she was ready to surrender. No more pills. No more suffering. Hospice moved into her home so she could be in *her* space when she left us. A hospital bed replaced the spot in front of the TV we would play UNO. It was not the same house where family dinners happened or where I learned to make grandma's famous fudge.

I sat in the chair next to her bed and watched her sleep. I cried. Quietly, of course, I did not want to disturb her.

I left school knowing it would be one of the last times I saw her. I knew she had stopped eating days prior, but I went to the gas station by her house anyway. I bought her honey barbeque chips and a cherry coke. Our favorite snack. No one loved it as much as us. It felt stupid to do but also like the best way I could tell her I loved her.

I set the treats on the kitchen counter by the stack of fentanyl patches and other pain management technologies. I had no idea what fentanyl was at the time. All I knew was that they replaced the spot I could once count on a pan of homemade Rice Krispy Treats waiting for me.

I whispered to her that I had brought her the best treat ever. She smiled at me the warmest, most satisfied smile. It was the last smile I ever saw from her. She closed her eyes again, and sighed, the smile still lingering.



I kept going to school that week and going to see her after school. Most days she just slept.

A couple of days before she died, she asked my mom to bring her the cherry coke and chips. It was the last thing she ate.

She died on February 21, 2022.

I am twenty now. I feel like I have lived an entire new life since then. One I would so like to share with my grandma. In some ways, I still do. I keep her rosary and the crucifix from her casket in my room. It makes me feel close to her; like she gets to witness who I am becoming.



I used to take offense when people would say I was just like my grandma. I did not want to be like an "old lady" I wanted to be entirely *myself*.

Now, I think that compliment is the best I could receive. Because that means I am doing something right.

My grandma was the biggest empath I knew. That still holds true. If I am like her, the anxiety and worry I feel over my loved ones each day and the tears I shed over small instances remind me that a piece of my kind and sensitive grandma lives in me.

Her name was Gloria, which means "glory" in Latin. Glory, as defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary means "the splendor and bliss of heaven." Gloria is the perfect name for my grandma. In her seventy-two years on earth, she brought the splendor and bliss of heaven to those of us lucky enough to know her on earth. Not through grand gestures but instead gentle, genuine kindness. Cancer may have attacked her body, but it never touched the part of her that mattered most.

NOT THE PLASTIC BAG I EXPECTED ON A DOG WALK

by Jeffrey B. Loken

"Be sure to bring your phone with you," I said to my twelve-year old daughter, upon asking if she could help our neighbor, Penny, walk her dogs.

While she put on her shoes, I checked the weather app on my smartphone and glanced outside. The glint of sunbeams seeped through dangling green leaves of a linden tree in our front yard, as another vivid July evening sparkled across the lawns and driveways of our little North Fargo neighborhood. I could see Penny waiting at the end of our driveway, with three dogs in tow, wearing an all-purple sweatsuit and her short shiny silver hair glistening. A familiar smirk was on her face, as if always on the verge of laughter, accompanied by the kind of contained, yet wild disposition found only after a life lived in full.

Alluring, if anything, but just unpredictable enough to make her untrustworthy (or at least enough for a wary dad in suburbia), Penny was our neighbor across the street and husband to Brad. If Penny was wild, Brad was a stalwart counterpart, reliable and soft-spoken. They were good neighbors.

I watched as Penny and my daughter disappeared around the corner on their walk. I returned to pretending to watch TV while welcoming distractions on my phone.

About five minutes later, my phone rang, and it was my daughter. "Hey sweetie, what's up?"

"Hey dad, can you come and help me and Penny? Something is wrong with her dog, Buddy, and you need to bring a blanket."

The already heightened awareness in my brain slowed its functioning in an attempt to process the information provided, but was left without a comprehensible conclusion. "I'm sorry, you need a blanket?"

"Yeah, I'm supposed to ask you—" I could hear Penny in the background asking for the phone. "Oh, here's Penny…"

Through stops and starts of phrasing and deep inhales, Penny managed, "Buddy collapsed. Bring an old blanket. Something you don't need. I think he's dead." With the last word she broke down into a full heaving sob. I asked her where she was and she labored an explanation of just a block away.

"I'm on my way," I said.

Still unsure of what exactly I was doing, I yelled up to my wife, "Hey, do we have an old blanket or something we don't need?" She replied with obvious incredulity and I told her what I knew so far, which wasn't much. Soon I was driving around our little neighborhood block, to a strip of sidewalk just in front of an apartment building.

As I approached, two unfamiliar people were walking toward Penny from the apartments. A black dog lay on its side on the sidewalk. My daughter held the leashes of the other two dogs. I parked right next to the berm and got out of the car.

"What happened?" was the obvious question, but I directed it toward my daughter who seemed to be doing just fine considering the situation.

"He just fell down."

"He fell?" I countered.

"Yeah, we were just walking along and he fell."

"Probably a heart attack," Penny offered.

I looked at Penny, then at the two strangers, then again at Buddy. Lifeless and flat upon a slab of warm concrete, he lay with eyes and mouth open, tongue dangling, exactly as I imagined a dead animal would look.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the unknown lady said.

"Yeah, that's too bad," the man agreed. "We were just eating and we saw this commotion out here and wanted to see what was going on. We have some pizza if you want some," and he chuckled at this ridiculous suggestion.

"I'm good, thanks," I replied without any hesitation. "Penny, what do you want us to do here? I can put him in my car and take him back to your house while you guys walk back, if you like?"

"I'll help," the man said, trying to make up for his ill-timed offer of pizza earlier. He maneuvered closer to the dog to be ready for action.

"Thanks," I said. "Penny, what do you think?"

Penny frowned and shook her head, looking at Buddy, "I don't think I should leave his side." Her red, damp eyes darted in contemplation, as

though navigating a deep, bewildering sadness. "I just don't know if I can," she squirmed.

"You'll only be away from him for a few minutes while you walk to the house. You'll have company."

"I don't know." She started to cry again, still staring at Buddy. She bent down next to him and grabbed his face. "Maybe he's ok?" she asked. "You're ok, aren't you, Buddy?" she begged.

I was immediately reminded of years earlier when our kids discovered a dead bird that had flown into the picture window in the front of our house. They had consulted Penny on what to do and she encouraged us to have a funeral and bury the bird in the flowerbed in our front yard. In a few brief moments of silence before offering those wings to their final resting place, Penny thought she felt a flutter while she cradled it in her hands. "It moved," she exclaimed, "I felt it move!" After ten more minutes of consoling and uncertainty, we finally smoothed over the soil and placed a small landscaping stone as a marker.

"Penny." I bent down and touched her shoulder. "Penny." I looked her in the eye and said, "I'm so sorry. He's gone. We can't carry him back to your house. I can drive him there. She can walk you and the dogs back." I gestured towards my daughter. "I'll wait for you there."

She nodded.

With that, the apartment pizza man and I got in position with the blanket covering the dog and began to lift him up. As we lifted him, we all noticed a small curl of feces left on the sidewalk where his rear had been resting. "Oh, he pooped," Penny giggled. I was startled by her sudden tributary of emotion.

We placed him in the back of my hatchback car and closed the door.

"I'll see you back at your place," I said to Penny. "Thanks for the help," I said to the man.

I got in my car and started to drive, opening the windows as I got further down the road. Within a minute, I was backing up into Penny and Brad's driveway. I opened the back hatch and stared at the dead animal in my car while I waited for Penny to arrive with my daughter and the rest of the herd. While waiting, my wife emerged from our house across the street. As she got closer she ducked her head under the open hatch and peered in.

"Wow. Yep. Which one?"

"Buddy." I replied.

"Aw, he was a good boy. And Brad just had to be out of town."

"Of course." I sighed and looked down the street as Penny rounded the corner.

"We got it from here," I said to my daughter as they got closer, and I motioned her to toward the house.

After my wife hugged Penny and gave her a few reassuring words, the weight of a rotting canine corpse in my vehicle began to strain in a twinge between my shoulder blades. "So, where do you want him?" My wife shot me a quick look as if that was not the right way to ask. "Uh…" I corrected myself, "Where, uh…What do you want us to do next?" I fumbled.

"I don't know," she answered. I was almost relieved to find that a dog person also was perplexed by our next course of action.

"Should we call Brad? Maybe he knows?"

Penny and my wife both agreed it was a good idea and they disappeared into the house. I stared again at Buddy in the back of my car, the matte black footpad of one of his hind legs protruding from the old blanket. I wondered about the timing of rigor mortis, the scent of death, and the exact place I set my golf clubs hundreds of times past. My wandering mind was startled by the sounds of plastic garbage bags behind me.

"Okay," my wife started, "we're going to put him in a bag and carry him inside and put him in the freezer."

I blinked as my wife stared at me, her face matching my inner shock. "Okay, then," I said.

It took two heavy black plastic bags, cinched and tied at each end, to hold Buddy's weight. When it came time to carry him inside, Penny led the way, and I grabbed the part of the plastic bag that held his head. The carrying strategy we would employ looked much different in execution than I imagined, as by the time we got to the door, my wife was carrying the entire weight of a dead dog in both arms, as I merely guided the head-side of the bag with a fist full of plastic, not totally sure I was actually offering any load-bearing help whatsoever. Too uncertain of the entire situation, we proceeded down the stairs to the basement upright freezer, until finally we lodged Buddy into it. I stared at the open freezer, boxes of frozen food filling the top section, a dead carcass in the bottom, before the door was finally shut. We glanced at each other awkwardly for a few moments.

"Thank you," Penny said with tears again in her eyes.

"No problem," I replied. My wife offered more condolences as I walked back home.

Days later, while driving back home from some errand, I noticed Buddy's turd, still where he left it, on the sidewalk in front of the apartment building where he died.

OLD FAT BASTARD RIDES AGAIN

by Brian Martin

Ok, to start off, we have to address the title. I want to make something clear; the OFD designation may be self-imposed, but it is delightfully true. First, let's start with Old. This may be the weakest point, but I am definitely firmly ensconced in the second half of my life, and my beard is gray. Secondly, my doctor told me I am overweight and would do well to lose 20 pounds, so Fat is accurate. As for Bastard, my biological mother was unmarried. Old Fat Bastard. (My daughter says I'm the only one who finds my humor funny—I contend that she is wrong.) At any rate, this is about the fact that I haven't ridden my mountain bike since before covid. And that I am an OFB.

No excuses to give, no reasons that will resonate with any of you hardcore, dedicated denizens of the trails. But sometimes, for those of us who are not hardcore riders, life just kind of happens. And sometimes gaps in riding unintentionally become big gaps. Be that as it may, I was contacted by my stepson Dom. He had gotten a new bike. A Canyon Neuron 6. A full boinger. Fully suspended, beautiful to behold…at least in pictures. Suddenly, I'm like the kid— "Hey, if I bring my bike down next weekend, would you want to go riding?" Ever gracious, he assents. Then reality strikes. I haven't ridden my bike since the summer before the pandemic. How many years has that been?

The day before we leave, I get a Thule bike rack on Marketplace for $25. I dig my bike out. My bike is the same bike I bought before I got married. A 1996 GT Timberline FS. It was never a top-of-the-line bike, but it was always a functional ride for me. My bike is covered in dust. (The lyrics from "You Suck" by The Murmurs come to mind, albeit a reference to dust on a guitar, not a bike.) I fill the tires. They hold air. I ride it down the block. The gears work. The brakes make horrific noise. I locate my helmet, a Specialized Mountain Man purchased at a thrift store for 5 bucks

after discovering that the padding in my old GT helmet had disintegrated. This has suffered the same fate, but there is no time. It will work.

Saturday morning. I wake up feeling alive in a way I haven't for a long time. A nervous flutter in the pit of my stomach. I have had a long-lasting cough and had finally been given Prednisone to deal with the inflammation in my lungs two days earlier. I'm hoping it works. I'm hoping I don't have a heart attack out in the woods. I'm hoping I can sort of keep up and not feel entirely stupid. Hubris, man, hubris. Of course I won't keep up. Dom goes to the gym for his morning workout. I look at his bike and drool.

Elm Creek Singletrack Trailhead, Champlin, MN. I'm comparing the bikes again. Umm, really, what's to compare? GT Timberline FS—the front suspension being a Rock Shox Quadra 10 that had, what, 44mm travel new? The elastomer (whatever the hell that is) has to be shot. There is little shock absorption. His bike is even more beautiful in real life. It's beauty and the beast, the young and the old. That beautiful pale blue bike boasts something like 140mm travel up front, 130mm in the rear.

If you are expecting a detailed accounting of the terrain, some judgement or description of trail conditions, an evaluation of the difficulty, it isn't happening here. It is singletrack, it is rated as intermediate, which I suspect for hardcore enthusiasts is probably optimistic. It doesn't matter. I'm following that pale blue bike to hell and back if necessary. For the first 5 minutes or so, thanks to his workout and his being a gracious host, I am keeping up. I'm not sure how. I feel like I'm riding some foreign object. Nothing is intuitive. I'm almost immediately sucking wind. I can't seem to remember which way the gears work. I feel way off balance. I accidentally upshift when I'm trying to downshift. I feel like I am going to topple over or run into a tree any minute. It's like I haven't been on a bike for years—oh yeah, I remember something about that.

The thing is, when I was a kid, I rode bike all the time. I lived in the country, and that's how I went to see friends. I would ride my Pamida special Huffy Pro Thunder BMX bike for miles to go hang out. We built jumps. The bikes were like a part of us, and riding along trails was second nature. I remember the feeling of shifting slightly to one side or the other, of flowing over obstacles, of sailing through the air off a jump, and landing smoothly. I remember feeling comfortable on my bike. Comfortable now I am most definitely not.

And then, the mountain bike gods determine the OFB has stayed upright long enough, and I am falling. I have no clue why, but suddenly I

am sprawled face first in the dirt. I hear a snap by my right ear and think "There go my glasses," but no, it's a twig that wedged between my head and the bow of my glasses. I stand, shaking. I'm brushing dirt off my right leg, and see it. First Blood. My leg is scraped and bleeding below the knee. I laugh. I remember that from when I was a kid. I'm back on the bike, riding. Somewhat less unsteady than before. I find Dom waiting for me, and we ride off.

We ride. I'm settling in a little, but my legs are burning. Up inclines, over little bumps, and I catch some air. Well, a little. I can't really jump, I'm way too shaky. I vaguely remember the feeling of effortlessly sailing through the air when I was 30-plus years younger and a good 80 pounds lighter. I want that feeling again. Another little jump, but oh crap there is a curve right after, and I am careening out of control. I stop inches from a tree. I'm exhausted. I'm shaking. Seriously, why am I doing this? I could be reading a good book in an air-conditioned house. No blood and sweat. No accidentally inhaling a mosquito while I'm sucking wind. I could be sleeping in. I could be listening to music, or shopping for antiques. What fresh hell is this? Who am I fooling, I'm too old for this. Then I'm back on the bike, and riding. That part of me that kicks in when I'm backpacking or kayaking or hiking kicks in. I want to keep going. I want to know what's around the next curve.

The next curve (or maybe the next after that) is a tight little corner to the left and my left pedal is down and catches. My foot slips the BMX style pedal and it's chewing the back of my left calf like a starving wolverine. First Blood part Two. Stuff like that used to be instinctive; it would have never happened. I'm sweating and breathing hard and pushing myself. I realize I'm riding the saddle way too much. Then things start to be more steady. My legs aren't burning. They are tired and feel kinda weak, but they aren't burning and tight. I'm flowing a little, missing rocks and roots and obstacles that 5 minutes before I wouldn't have been able to avoid. A small jump and some air that doesn't feel like it's the precursor to a crash.

I start noticing things. I remember thinking that I really like this trail. I remember thinking that I really want to do this again. I started thinking of how much I would have liked this trail as a kid. I remembered riding and jumping my BMX bike. Then I'm in among some small trees, and my shoulders mistake the trees for bumper pads and I am bouncing around like a pinball, but I stay upright and on the pedals. Dom is like a ghost, flitting along, and I catch glimpses of that pale blue bike through the brush, and I start pedaling harder. I am breathing hard. I feel like if I stop,

I won't start again, and I don't want to stop, because I have to see what is over that hill and around that curve; and damn it, I want to catch him.

I don't, until he stops and waits for me. That's ok. I promised myself I wouldn't do anything that was not "intermediate." Nothing hard. I promised. Ok, I lied. There was a drop. I just had to. Nothing major by any standards of hardcore expert mountain biking. But it was a drop in off of a rock, marked by caution signs. Actually, there was a choice, two tracks on either side with jumps, one in the middle with a drop. He went right; I went down the middle. It wasn't pretty, it wasn't graceful or smooth, but it was fun. The added bonus is that I didn't have to fight to stay upright. I didn't fall. No broken bones or hospital bills.

In the end, it was about 8 miles of trail. In the end, despite Dom having done an hour kickboxing workout that morning and also being a really nice guy, I couldn't keep up. I rolled off the trail into the parking lot at the trailhead dripping blood from both legs as well as from a cut on my right temple. I had dirt all over my legs. I stopped by his pickup, and I had the biggest smile I have had in years. I'm lightheaded, leaning against his truck, clinging to it, actually, but I want to go again. Just not right now.

MY HEART IN MY EARS

by Kayla Stenstrom

Over a year after I finished breastfeeding my son, I felt the familiar discomfort of mastitis—painful breast, body aches and fatigue. I went downstairs and dug my breast pump out of the packed shelves of our storage space, hooked the tubes to the machine and the pump to my slightly swollen breast, and turned it on with curiosity. In a moment, thick milk came out of my nipple, just a few tiny drops, almost like the colostrum that arrives after birth. I don't know if the doctor believed me when I told her, but she gave me antibiotics to clear the infection.

Now, seven years later, I tuck my son under his favorite gray comforter, which probably needs to be washed, and on top of his favorite blue blankie, which most certainly needs to be, and I kiss the fuzzy top of his feverish head, where the hair is thinnest and I can best smell his skin. I listen to his coughs of influenza; my chest aches and I wonder.

Time is most evident on our bodies, yet our bodies easily forget about time.

My period is regular to the hour; I can conveniently track it on the calendar. But it is getting shorter and lighter, and people no longer ask me, "Do you want to have more children?" (If they did, I'd say, "Hell, no!")

I am in a new phase of life where my kids are quite independent and I'm not sure what to do with the snippets of time I have to myself, when they don't need me. Mercifully, my kids are also still in that sweet limbo where they like to be with me, the thin boundary where they hurry to see friends but also rush back into my arms.

I simultaneously cherish and mourn.

What a weird space of time this is, like the last day of a long-awaited trip, when you're immersed in the last planned adventure—perhaps a day at the ocean—but feel like you're already departing, both pushing your feet through the sand and dragging your suitcase through the airport.

The constant mental pinch to be present is achingly sharp and sweet, exhilarating and exhausting. Increasingly, I feel like I'm in one of my lucid dreams.

"You know what?" my nine-year-old said, just before he fell asleep tonight. "I'm weird in a lot of ways, but really weird because I can hear my heart inside my ears."

I know what he means—that he can hear his insides because his sinuses and ears are stuffed up. Still, I find the description awfully close to what I'm trying to articulate.

My daughter recently asked me how old she needed to be to kiss someone and I realized she is only two years younger than the first time a boy touched me below the waist. "Never," I wanted to say, but settled with "Fifteen?"

She has long curly hair—the kind that spirals in gorgeous, effortless rivulets down her back. I have no idea where it came from. Mine is equally thick but stick straight.

She has the body of a woman at thirteen and I know her father is alarmed. He accidentally opened the bathroom door on her the other day and scampered back upstairs, appalled at the stranger he'd walked in on.

This same female, though—this girl—snuggles in close to me on the couch every night. She throws her arms around me and squeezes tight. "I love you so much, Mom," she says.

Why do I feel my body fighting her touch? Why is it hard for me to put down my book and embrace her, when this could be the last time she asks? Is touch just not my love language, or am I not the mother I want to be? I don't know why I feel myself pulling away from her on the time trajectory, when there's not a platform I wish to station myself, an identity that I want, irrelative to being her mom. I encourage her to go to bed and look forward to watching a show alone. Is my mind mercifully closing doors so that I grieve less as she grows?

I am always grappling with what it means to live in the moment, squeezing and stretching and kneading that concept like play-dough, wondering if even thinking about it is the reason my heart races too fast.

I talk to myself like mother to child: Take a deep breath. We'll have supper and then we'll play a game together. That's all you need to know right now.

How do parents live on this edge and enter this frontier? Has any mother successfully let her kids be separate beings after experiencing them nestled inside her core? I long for quiet and a stint alone, while sucking in

a sob when they're not in the room. It's madness. It's mothering (one letter away from "smothering").

Other times, I'm moving so fast, I skip right past this sentimental border. I'm on to the next thing on my list and it's okay that the world needs my children more and more.

It's a morning that I drop my son off at school, kiss him, and he's out of the car, sprinting for the main door. But he comes racing back. I sigh and roll down my window. "What is it?" I ask, audibly impatient.

"I forgot to say I love you," he says. And I melt.

Later, when I'm going through a flare of chronic pain, my daughter sits next to me, holding my hand and saying the simple but exact things I need to hear: "it will pass," "you'll be okay," "you're not alone."

When I ask her how she knows just what I need and why she never yells at or talks back to me like a teenager would, she says, "Why would I bother making our lives harder?"

At night, this considerate boy and this young adult flank me on the couch, needing Mom's touch before bed. And I hold them, feeling feverish with rushed time—the imbalance of responsibility, rest and really being here.

Some milk hovers inside the ducts of my breasts. My heart is in my ears.

TOO LUCID TO BE REAL

by Kayla Stenstrom

I have always had very vivid dreams—self-aware ones that I can start and stop, or dictate the course of. When I research lucid dreams, it is (apparently) rare to have them regularly, yet I do. Every night is an adventure, and I often have a say in what happens next.

I have lived endless lives in my novels *and* my dreams. How about that?

In some of those lives, I outrun hordes of zombies, but nonchalantly. The biters are mostly there to rough up the edges of the landscape, as I explore the crevices of a world where I can jump high and fly—the Infected pinching my toes as I slip away, just in time, onto the nearest rooftop.

I dream about Camp friends often, but in different configurations with odd plot lines, such as the time we bought a house together and the rooms rearranged themselves daily, according to our moods.

I dream that the kids are grown and their adult selves are exactly as I expected they'd be—witty and soulful, introspective but brave, as they sift in and out of focus.

I dream of other countries, of trips. I dream of old friends, past friends, new friends, now friends, not-real friends. It's usually a mix of people I know and people I have imagined to be.

I have recurring dreams, and 92% of the time they involve being late. It makes sense, given my propensity for poor punctuality, and so I sweat and stress through this process subconsciously night after night.

I am almost always late for my own wedding or a flight. Or I'm in school again and have missed a final test or forgotten my class schedule. I don't know if this is triggered by my career in higher ed or because I'd devote my whole life to learning if I could.

I also often have dreams where I can't see. I'm rubbing my eyes again and again, but they won't clear. I'm squinting but I can't make out what's there. I'm running with my eyes closed and hands held out. I think it stems

from a combination of living half my life so nearsighted I couldn't see the person beside me and spending years treating dry eyes that cloud my vision.

I dream so many fascinating and colorfully rich things. I wish I could remember them all or had logged them. I consistently remember my dreams for the first four minutes after I'm awake.

I dream so many weird and bizarre things. In fact, I know when I'm falling asleep because I suddenly see something illogical, like a plaid elephant riding a skateboard, singing the lyrics to a Mr. Big song. "Ah, it's time," I think. And then I drift away, or rather *in*. Into myself further, where I expand into a cosmos of prospects, some separate and some simultaneous.

There are many mornings in which I need to lie still and think hard, carefully cataloguing what's real and what's a remnant of the mind, not moving until I'm sure which ground is solid. Even then, I'm not always sure of what's *actually* happened or been said—here in the now.

There are some nights in which I'm afraid to fall asleep, because I get lost, layers deep. Time slows in the lower levels. I age and forget. Though my dreams are usually pleasant, or at least interesting, I fear getting caught in between three, four, five floors, riding the backs of characters to swim my way up. I have been dreaming, known I was dreaming and couldn't get out.

That's why I'm still waiting to wake up now.

I rarely have nightmares, but when I do, they are just as hard to escape from as the happy vaporous tales. Yet I trust my instinct to know when I'm dreaming and I have experience in manipulating my visions, so there's a way I can pivot the plot and toss myself out.

Just like all the other dreams, this living one is inexplicable, with pain that's untouchable by any medication known to man and with a whole horde of quirky characters, all doctors of this or that.

Have you dreamt that your teeth were falling out? That's in this dream as well! Except I have asked—no, begged!—for them to be pulled out, one by one and months in between. And there is nothing in the real realm that exists to replace them. Because when I'm awake and disfigured, there are no retainers or dentures or implants that work. There are just nerves, angry and activated by touch.

In my hellish "dream," I have lost all sense of who I am and all the hopes I had for myself and my life. Not expected things like success or contentment, but the scaffolds of my identity.

In this dream, I cannot sing or read books to my children. In fact, those two actions make knives appear out of thin air and chase me. I cannot jump high or fly in this dream. Instead, I curl up and pour pounds and pounds of pills down my throat until being in a stupor is a stronger sensation than being stabbed.

In this dream, I am not a Confirmation leader for my daughter or a Church School teacher for my son, though they ask me to, my son saying, "Cali told me what it was like when you used to lead her group."

In this dream, I will never be a professor or a project consultant, anything in which I need to speak at length in front of people or rely on building relationships through conversation.

In this dream, I do not go back to school for my master's, give more speeches, lead games for children, or tell funny stories to friends and family. I step into the background at gatherings, no longer the Woo.

In this dream, anything that involves me speaking steadily for more than a few minutes is not possible. The daggers rise and I begin to run.

I am still running.

When the physical exertion is so strong that I make myself small, the tightest ball I can be, just a moan, my husband is there in the dream. He does not know what to say but he holds me. He holds the walls of this world, too; I can see his multiple arms stretched out to keep the layers from melting us into this level forever—entwined and screaming.

He cries later, when I have sobbed myself into a dream within this dream. He cries after, when the parts of himself he has shoved here and there puff out, like the stuffing of an over-washed plaything.

But there is a time he cries with me, when he cannot listen, hold it in and hold it all up at the same time.

That time when he breaks—when I know this isn't a dream—is when I say, "I keep waiting to wake up. Why haven't I woken up?"

EATING ALONE

by Monica Stich Deltener

I don't mind eating alone, I thought to myself as I got out of my car and headed to the restaurant door.

"Table for one?" asked the hostess with her brows raised in question.

"Yes," I answered. "A booth by the window, please."

"Of course!" said the pretty hostess as she hugged a single menu to her chest. She smiled as she said, "Follow me."

I followed the hostess to a nice-sized booth with a window view. She had led me to the nearly empty side of the restaurant. I didn't mind eating alone.

Being nocturnal, I was going to order breakfast while others were in lunch mode. "Your waitress will be with you shortly," informed the hostess.

"Thank you," I replied, as I began to peruse the menu—as I had so many times before and yet, I always had such a hard time deciding what to order. So many choices and they all sounded so good; especially when I was Starvin' Marvin!

I studied the omelet combinations because I had been craving eggs lately. I wasn't much of a meat-eater and sautéed onions, mushrooms, and red peppers sounded wonderful! A vegetable omelet with dry rye toast and a fruit cup. If I ordered it off of the Senior Menu, it would be made with two eggs instead of three and came with special pricing. But I was Starvin' Marvin, so I was going to order off of the regular menu. Three eggs for me.

A cheerful waitress arrived with a coffee pot in one hand and an ice water in the other as she asked, with coffee pot poised high, "Coffee?"

"Oh, my gosh, yes! I haven't had my coffee yet today." As she poured my coffee and placed the ice water next to my cup, she asked whether I was ready to order. I told her I was and she took my order without writing it down. Her ponytail bobbed high on her head as she scurried away to turn my order in.

While waiting for my food, I added ice to my hot coffee. As I took sips, I studied the couple just a few booths straight down from me. They looked around college-age and sat across from each other. The young man faced my direction. There was an older gentleman sitting at a table in close proximity to the couple in the booth. So that made four of us *on that entire side* of the restaurant.

It did not take long before my food arrived and I busied myself with tasting the many flavors of my meal. Soon the dishes were cleared and I was enjoying the satisfying after-breakfast cup of coffee. As I looked up, I noticed the young college guy had on a jacket with familiar colors. I could see around his female companion just enough to recognize the green Packer color of his jacket. A West Fargo High School Packer. As I caught his eye I couldn't help myself and blurted, "Ah! West Fargo Packers! Would you be interested to see what a 1973 West Fargo class ring looks like?"

"We sure would!" he answered enthusiastically for both of them as he and his companion both stood up. They stood at the end of my table as he confessed that he did not attend West Fargo High School and his girlfriend said she had bought it for him at a thrift store.

I held my hand out for them to admire the aquamarine stone set in my Jostens 10k gold class ring. As the couple were in awe of my 50-some year ring, I commented how well the jacket fit the guy—especially coming from a thrift store. It was more of a fitted jacket and it fit his shoulders perfectly. "Do you lift weights?" I asked.

"No," he replied, "I'm a bodybuilder." Whereupon he took out his phone, scrolled through a few screens and then showed me his photo. "They spray on the tan," he explained when I asked about posing—all tanned and shiny. He was in direct competition against his friend, he told me and he quickly showed me a second photo, featuring the two of them. "I won," he casually commented.

His girlfriend and I talked a little more about guys with broad shoulders when suddenly the older gentleman sitting at the table by himself said he was a graduate of 1972.

"Ah! You're a year older than me, then," I said across the room.

"Oh," he said. "I thought you said 1972."

"No, I graduated in 1973, West Fargo High School." (I can't remember what school he said he graduated from, but it was in 1972.)

The couple left my table and made their way back to their own, where the conversation with the 1972 high school graduate continued. Turned out he had been a weightlifter in the military and had a photo of himself

when he was just a young'un. "Yeah," the aged weightlifter said. He gazed up to the ceiling as he remembered, "I didn't have a neck back then. I was al-l-l-l muscle." He was lost in thought for a while before he came back to us.

Meanwhile, I had written my phone number down on a piece of paper and asked the bodybuilder if he would forward me a copy of the two photos he had shown me. I explained I had some girlfriends and classmates I wanted to show the photos to. All of them were like me—70 and 71 years old. He agreed to text me the photos. I looked over at the photo they had been viewing of the weightlifter. I turned to him and said, "You looked like Clint Eastwood in a war movie." He soaked up the compliment that it was meant to be.

Returning to my table, I gathered up my purse, my cane and my new experience and as I walked by, the three of them were still talking and enjoying each other's stories.

I really don't mind eating alone.

PERIMENOPAUSE AND THE PROSPERING OF COMMUNITY

by Hannah Vanorny

If I could relive any day in my life, one of the top contenders would be December 25, 2025. That Christmas day I flew down my sister's icy outdoor steps, landed squarely on my backside, and suffered what has turned out to be a painful chronic butt injury. As I sit writing this piece, fruitlessly trying to nestle my sore rear into my special seat pillow, I find myself reflecting on that fall and other health issues. Sadly, this current problem is just one of the numerous ailments that have plagued me during my late 30s and early 40s.

Many of my troubles seem to center around my derrière; consequently, far too many doctors and physical therapists in my town of residence, Bismarck, ND, have seen this delicate part of my body. It has been thoroughly examined, poked, and prodded. Besides my current torn butt muscle (technically my gluteus maximus), the next most painful ailment that has struck that area has been sciatica. My sciatic nerve pain allegedly stems from a disc problem in my back, but I always feel all of the agony in my rear end.

Health problems revolving around my hindquarters are not the only ones to rear their ugly heads lately. In recent years, I have also battled ailments such as rapidly failing eyesight and rotting teeth. I am now old enough that the LASIK eye surgery I had done in 2013, once a miracle that gave me perfect eyesight, is now wearing off. Who knew that was even possible? Then there are my teeth. According to my dentist, my teeth are decaying so fast that I need a prescription for a special fluoride toothpaste. That's right, regular old department toothpaste is not good enough for me! I need something you have to go to a pharmacy to obtain.

But back to my most current complaint, the torn gluteus maximus muscle. I injured that particular part of my body after a surprise rainstorm that turned every outdoor surface into a skating rink. If I *could* live that day over, instead of waltzing carelessly out of my sister's house, I would step out onto the landing much more gingerly. There is a recording of the fall because, of course, my sister, like many people nowadays, has a handy door camera. In the video, after I land, I take a few moments to lie in a heap at the bottom of the steps and moan. I have no memory of doing that, but my verbal groaning sums up the incident.

I will admit I now find myself feeling jealous as I watch younger people just flounce around freely, playing sports, exercising, and walking on icy sidewalks without a care in the world. I see them trip occasionally, or even fall, and just bounce back up as if their bodies are made of stretchy, elastic rubber. I, on the other hand, now repeat "walk like a penguin, walk like a penguin" under my breath as I venture outside in our wintry landscape here in North Dakota. Penguins have perfected the art of walking safely on icy surfaces. For humans, it means pointing our feet out, while taking slow short steps, and extending our arms out for balance. And, no, doing the "penguin walk" does not look silly at all!

Naturally, I am not the only one with health issues of all sorts as I reach the midpoint of my 40s. I often find myself chatting with others, especially women, about our health problems, and there is one word that has come up more and more lately. That word is perimenopause. According to Mayo Clinic experts, perimenopause is the period (yes, I am adding my own pun here!) when one's body is preparing to stop having periods. During this "delightful" time in a woman's life, estrogen goes up and down, sometimes fluctuating wildly, leading to a rather astonishing variety of symptoms (more on that in a moment). It seems that the timing of perimenopause varies widely. While most females enter into a form of perimenopause in their 40s, some experience it earlier or well into their 50s. I saved the worst fact for last, which is that perimenopause can last over ten years![1]

As my peers and I discuss our ailments, perimenopause does indeed seem to be the magic word for our distress. Doctors, friends, family members, ourselves—we all throw this word around as if it is the evil incarnate behind all of our problems. I have lost count of the number of times someone has looked at me with concern and asked if my current symptom could be due to perimenopause. Feeling really hot and sweating

[1] "Perimenopause." *Mayo Clinic*, 18 Dec. 2025, www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/perimenopause/symptoms -causes/syc-20354666. Accessed 8 Mar. 2026.

through your pajamas at night? Definitely perimenopause. Feeling especially cold instead? Ah, yes, a common symptom of perimenopause. Having trouble falling asleep? Or feeling overtired and sleeping too much? Suffering from anxiety? Strange pains in any part of your body? Menstrual cycle slowing down as you age? Or perhaps your periods are stronger and getting more cramp-heavy? Sight or hearing going downhill at a breakneck speed? An excessive amount of hair growing anywhere except your head? Experiencing moments of total brain fog? Difficulty remembering ordinary words? We know the drill. It has to be that blasted perimenopause! My favorite symptom of perimenopause, however, is mood swings. No one can be upset that I am yelling, acting impatiently, or experiencing three different dramatic emotions in the space of one hour. Obviously, these are all normal behaviors when one is suffering from a bad case of perimenopause!

Despite all the perimenopause noise in my life, I cannot help but wonder if this perimenopause phenomenon is a bit of a medical copout to try to fool those of us of a certain age. Perhaps it is and perhaps we are buying right into it. I do not doubt that many women in their 40s are in various stages of perimenopause, but can every symptom really be blamed on it? I think that yes, it can! It is a handy scapegoat for symptoms that do not seem to have a medical explanation. And in fact, it is a handy scapegoat even for symptoms that do seem to have a more obvious cause. For example, is my current butt pain really all from falling down those stairs, or is perimenopause a strong co-culprit in my troubles? Who really knows?

For fifteen years of my life, I lived with a group of older women who did not discuss perimenopause much since they were more likely to be going through menopause, the infamous after-perimenopause stage. I went to live with a community of Benedictine Sisters in a monastery near Bismarck in 2006, was fully professed (became an official Sister) in 2013, and then left the community in 2021. Most of the Sisters I lived with were in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. There were even a few centenarians. Being a woman in my 20s, and then 30s, while living with the community, I felt very young there, and rather energetic in comparison to my fellow Sisters. I even felt a little reckless. I am a runner, and I often ran on the paths around the monastery and sometimes did some 5K races, and even a few half marathons during my time there. Often when I returned from a run, an older Sister would be waiting to lecture me about the dangers of running; she was sure I was going to lose all function of my legs if I kept

up this "dangerous" pastime. This advice was hard to take seriously at the time. I liked running and the endorphin-filled energy it gave me.

Unfortunately, the joke was on me! That elder Sister was somewhat right, I hate to admit. Years later, while still not convinced that any kind of running is bad for a person's health, I have suffered from a lot of running-related aches and pains. I still run at age forty-five, but now at a much slower pace so as not to aggravate the painful beast of sciatica. I also now wear, not one, but two knee braces to protect my kneecaps, since I have developed patella problems. Additionally, I now run at a somewhat lopsided gait to compensate for the torn gluteus maximus muscle on my right side. I have a feeling my next move will be to buy some fashionable orthopedic running shoes, as foot problems, from blisters to plantar fasciitis, have popped up intermittently as I age. I have been known to scare people on the streets when they see me jogging, with my double knee braces, tilted posture, and penguin-like movements whenever I catch a hint of ice. But if anyone stares at me too long or asks if I am okay, I just yell cheerfully at them, "I'm ok, it's just perimenopause!" That answer seems to satisfy most people and end any further questioning!

I left religious life when I turned forty, right when I was starting to feel some empathy for the older Sisters I had been living with. As my own body started to fail a bit, I began experiencing some of the same symptoms that affected many of them, such as failing vision, age spots, aching muscles, general forgetfulness, and others I cannot remember right now! It was nice to be able to talk to the Sisters about some of these ailments; it gave us a common bond. There is nothing like shared illnesses and pains to really cement friend relationships. Talking about ailments is right up there with the weather in terms of being a subject that everyone can relate to in some way. The symptoms may change a little as we age and enter new decades of life, but everyone has something health-related they can complain about. Even as a younger Sister, while it may have been difficult to relate to a symptom like age-related hearing loss, I could still complain about my menstrual headaches and commiserate with older Sisters. It is satisfying to have a common enemy, which is where the evils of perimenopause and menopause come in. Clearly, no matter our ages, the Sisters and I were facing common demons.

One of my best friends in the world, until her death last year, was Sister Gerard, known as Sr. G to me and many others. Sr. G was almost forty years my senior, but the age difference did not matter in our relationship. Sr. G was funny, sometimes irreverent, extroverted, and an enthusiastic participant of life. She stubbornly would not back down from

her position as an eternal optimist, no matter how hard people (such as me) occasionally worked to bring out her very rare negative side. Although many health issues are scary and serious, Sr. G taught me that there are often solutions to our medical problems and that taking our physical health too seriously is never good for our mental health.

Sr. G was a nurse, and I used her as a personal doctor for years. She was very nonchalant in her treatment of injury or illness. No matter how frightened I was about something, she stayed calm and looked for solutions. Weird rash? Sr. G had a cream for that. Worrisome nausea? Sr. G had a special wrist ointment for that. Muscle ache? Sr. G could massage it out for you. Feet problems? No worries, Sr. G was an expert on foot care. Sr. G taught me a lot about how to take care of my own health. While I would often run myself ragged trying to get things done in my life, Sr. G would deliberately set aside an entire day to go to the community cabin to relax. If she was tired, she scheduled a nap into her life. If she was overwhelmed, she found a way to cut back on something. I wish, looking back, that I had imitated her sense of life balance a bit more.

Like the rest of us, Sr. G went through some of the health issues associated with perimenopause and then menopause, but talking to her about it felt more reassuring than panic based. The triple combination of Sr. G being a nurse, an older woman who had already gone through much of her body's changes, and one of my best friends proved to be a real boon to me. I realized that no matter which symptoms of perimenopause I was going through, chances are either Sr. G or someone she knew had been there before. Certainly, I learned that sharing about health issues with close family members or friends can make them seem less big and intimidating. It can be very isolating to go through health issues alone; having someone to commiserate with can make all of the difference. People need others when they are going through a medical crisis. They need someone to complain to, to describe in great detail what the doctor said at an appointment, to talk about the side effects of their medicines, and to sit with them through the boredom of chemo or dialysis.

I recently started watching *The Pitt*, a television show on HBO Max. *The Pitt* depicts a large, busy emergency room in a hospital in Pittsburgh, PA. As is true in real life, many patients on the show have no one to contact or be with them during some of the worst moments of their lives. Showing up for someone during a time of medical distress, so you can share the experience with them, is a very powerful thing to do for a person. However, not everyone has others in their lives who are willing to be with them in those moments, or people willing to listen when they

are going through a tough medical journey. This was one of the many legitimate fears I faced when contemplating leaving monastic life after having lived in a communal setting for so long.

Generally, in a Benedictine monastery, all the Sisters live together in a single building or complex of buildings, praying, eating, and socializing together. A Sister gives up some individual freedoms, such as owning her own car, controlling her own money, and even directing her own schedule. Beyond the reward of hopefully living in a loving community, a Benedictine Sister also expects a certain amount of support and security. If she is sick, she will always have a ride to the clinic or hospital; if she is having surgery, she will have someone to wait for her in the waiting room; and if she is going through a time-consuming procedure, she will have someone to sit with if desired. Most importantly, a Sister living in a community will always have someone to talk with about her ailments and medical experiences. As I pondered leaving religious life, this was one aspect I naturally worried about. Would I ever feel such a sense of safety and security again if I left the monastery and community of Sisters?

Fortunately, as I have learned, a religious community is not the only place to experience positive, healthy communal relationships. Community is a varied concept and can be constructed out of many aspects of life. After I left the monastery, I lived with my sister and her family for a while in their home before striking out on my own. What I remember most about that time is being overwhelmingly happy to be flying solo. I missed my community very much of course, but how thrilling to be able to do things without having to report back to anyone! I could go to Fargo for a weekend on a whim, or blow thirty dollars on something frivolous, or eat out with a friend two days in a row. Oh, the freedom! I felt like I was coming back into a person that I had forgotten for a time.

Of course, eventually reality set in as my post-religious life euphoria started to wear off. For example, it turns out that the physical therapy appointments I sometimes enjoyed as a Sister to treat my sciatica or jaw issues were actually quite expensive! My never-ending teeth problems were now my responsibility to pay for. Car payments, rent, internet bills—these were all new to me. But beyond the expense of having to pay for everything myself, the real challenge I felt was building a new community after leaving the supportive, tight-knit group of Sisters I had lived with for most of my adult life.

And so, with a feeling of reckless freedom, I went about trying to build my own community. I tried out different committees and activities and volunteer positions to see what I wanted to do with myself as a now

ordinary, non-consecrated woman in the world. Admittedly, this was not always hard for me, as I am an extrovert who enjoys attending events and meeting new people. I am also prone to joining clubs and boards, and really any groups that seem fun and try to recruit me. However, throwing myself into a plethora of activities and meeting lots of people was not the same as making meaningful connections that would last beyond any single event. I was determined to form some real, lasting relationships. One of the best things I did was join a local open-minded church. The pastor and church members there work very hard to maintain dedicated relationships with all churchgoers and take care of them when needed. It is a warm feeling to know that your church will support you when no one else can. No one falls through the cracks. And certainly, if one were to listen in on a conversation after church on any Sunday, one would hear many tales of afflictions, ailments, and other health woes being shared. I know I have heard that word, perimenopause, uttered there a few times in conversations!

I was able to get closer with work colleagues after leaving religious life. I became a Girl Scout leader, joined groups and committees, and just generally met a lot of people, many of whom have become my bona fide community. I did not replace my wonderful monastic family, but I did eventually find other communities full of people I consider to be amazing supportive friends. Luckily I have not needed any of my community to help out with my painful butt tear…yet! But I have subjected many people in my life to the story of my great Christmas Day fall, and the ensuing problems that have occurred. Whether it is muscle tears or any other medical issues, I now have many people I can chat with about these symptoms.

I am ending this essay now, as I have been sitting and writing for far too long, and I am sore! I need to go lie down and text a friend about my current pain in the butt. She will be sympathetic, tell me about her latest health issues, and we will end our conversation by cursing what is surely the cause behind our latest problems—that evil perimenopause!

A FAVORITE PLACE

by Harper Wilson

A writer does well if in his whole life he can tell the story of one street.
~Nelson Algren

I have a favorite place. A magical place. A sacred place.

To get to this place, you first have to go to Lake of the Woods. No, actually, first you have to drive to Canada. Or maybe first you should have a mom from Canada. But, in order to have a mom from Canada, you might need a grandpa who fought in the Vietnam War. Then that grandpa needs to have returned to the United States to such poor treatment and hostility that it drove him to move to Canada. Your grandpa might also need to have met someone who gave him a job in a time of need as a caretaker for a lakehouse. Before that, though, the continents should have shifted to form the land indigenous peoples inhabited before Canada laid unrightful claim. And also, a glacier needs to have melted to create the Lake of the Woods.

So, after all of that happens, you will get into a car and drive north towards Canada. Then, you will cross into Canada (so make sure you have your passport) and keep driving three hours north to Winnipeg. When you hit Winnipeg, you will veer east for another three hours until you reach Kenora, Ontario, where you'll stop at Ye Olde Chip Truck for the best chips and vinegar you will ever have. Then, you'll drive thirty minutes back the way you came to Clearwater Bay. When you get to Clearwater Bay, you'll unload your boat in the water (I hope you brought a boat) and park your car. You'll then hop in your boat and set sail (not really, you should use a boat with a motor) on a twenty-minute ride due east on the Lake of the Woods, where the wind whips your hair and makes your eyes water and fills your lungs with the cleanest, freshest air.

Finally, after you've done all of that, you'll arrive at an island. On this island lies a navy blue lakehouse with white accents and a red deck—the picture of patriotism…except, in Canada. You'll tie up the boat and climb the staircase to the house. You'll have to dust off the spiderwebs that coat

every surface and empty the mousetraps in the kitchen. After you've opened up the house, you'll have to open up the outhouse and the bunkhouse (the best building on the island, except for maybe the boathouse due to its excellent jump-off-ability).

Once you're done restoring the living spaces to habitability, you will put on a good pair of shoes and grab an empty cashew container your grandma saved for just this adventure, because it is transparent and has a convenient handle. With your good pair of shoes and your treasure chest (empty cashew container), you will trek through a woodsy area, past a clearing, and down a path that forks (but meets up again, so you can take either side—I like the right side, there's a tree that a beaver got halfway through the trunk of). Eventually (very soon, actually, the path is not very long), you will reach a staircase that leads down to a bridge. You will traverse this bridge until you reach a little island of black rock.

This is the most special place. The magical place. The sacred place. It is called Turtle Island. Here, you can collect the colorful claws of crayfish, abandoned by the gulls that ate their accompanying body parts, and lay them out in rainbow order. After which, you will put them into your treasure chest (again, empty cashew container), only for your mom to tell you they are too smelly to bring home. You can chip away at one of the many fissures of quartz in the island's rock and collect the mystical crystal fruits of your labors. You can collect a bouquet of wildflowers and lay it out for the fairies to find when you leave (because they never show themselves when you are there, but they most definitely frequent this holy little piece of rock). You can bring a jacket and watch the sunset, or even shooting stars if you wait long enough. The possibilities for what these enchanted grounds hold are only limited to your imagination, your creativity, and your willingness to get a little bit wet.

I can no longer go to this special, magical, sacred place. The long line of serendipitous coincidences that allowed me to foster imagination and creativity has been interrupted—my connection to the island has retired, and the land has been sold. Life keeps moving—grandpas age, girls grow up and go off to college. However, parts of the magic remain in the way wind blows through car windows like wind blows on a boat ride. In the way empty cashew containers are still used to collect rocks and shells. In the way imagination and memory take hold of moments in everyday life and transport you back to your most carefree and wild self. So, while I can no longer return to this far-off land, its magic lives on, waiting to be discovered by the next curious mind brave enough for a journey that all starts with a continent shifting and a glacier melting.

BOOGIE RED'S HORSE

by Jack Zaleski

No one on the reservation knew where Boogie Red came from. He didn't say, and his aggressive unfriendliness all but guaranteed that no one asked. It was, however, universally agreed that no one liked him. He was tolerated by the people of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa because he had married a widowed mother from a venerated native family. The buzz and blather on the moccasin telegraph, the tribe's traditional and trusted method of spreading the word, affirmed he was doing right by her and her two young boys.

Why the stunning Wenona Birdsong had chosen the peculiar white man Boogie Red over several worthy Ojibwe suitors was a puzzle. What the college-educated tribal beauty pageant winner saw in his red-faced, straw-haired, pale-eyed persona—that no one else saw—was a mystery. That the moniker *"Boogie Red"* perfectly captured his odd aspect became a standing joke, told often at the Tomahawk Bar or Ernie's Barber Shop, but never within earshot of the much-admired Wenona; which was an unlikely circumstance since she rarely left their ramshackle farmstead on the Jackrabbit Road, a few miles from Belcourt, the only town on the reservation. Other than a rare appearance in his battered flatbed truck at the post office or gas station, Boogie Red himself was seldom seen. Visitors to his sagging double-wide trailer, tumbledown sheds and barnyards, and his market menagerie of hogs, chickens, and sheep were very few and mostly unwelcome. He was less loutish—almost friendly, some reported—to buyers of his pork, chickens, lamb, and sacks of seasonal sheared wool, all of high quality and priced fairly, they said.

Nonetheless, Boogie Red's routine demeanor mirrored his visage: sullen, snappish, and, as gossip and first-person accounts confirmed, downright hostile. Scuttlebutt had become gospel truth: *One encounter with Boogie Red was one too many.*

Jack, a 1960s VISTA worker from the East Coast, lived in a drafty log and stucco cabin a mile east of Boogie Red's squalid spread. A naïve

newcomer to Indian country, he had signed on to what was then called a "domestic Peace Corps." He had fled the University of Connecticut in his second year, and soon found himself assigned to an American Indian reservation in North Dakota that was cradled in forested hills near the Canadian border. Eager to make friends among the Ojibwe people, he believed he could do some good with the resources VISTA made available to him. He was off to a promising start.

Jack's secluded cabin was some distance from the nearest neighbor, but he had been told about the strange fellow who lived down the road. He often heard the squeals of pigs, the bray of an unhappy horse, and the occasional sputter and chug of a farm tractor. When breezes came from the west, the commingled stench of hog wallow, rotted hay and trash fire smoke stank up the sparsely populated reach of gravel, potholes, and washouts.

One chilly June morning, a raucous cluster of Boogie Red's hogs broke out of their mudhole and bee-lined to Jack's place, where they snorted and rooted in the spring grass Jack was managing as pasture for his newly acquired horse. The revolting porkers plowed furrows with their snouts, and ripped up the lush growth with their tusks. When Jack brandished a shovel and hurled obscenities at them, they paused, glowered with evil eyes, wiggled their pinkish ears, and returned unfazed to destroying his meadow.

He jogged down the road to find Boogie Red. "Not home," said Wenona, who was hanging blankets on a wire strung across the trashy yard. "I'll get my boys," she said with the ghost of a smile that made Jack ignore the muck and shambles around her.

"Boys not in school?" Jack asked.

"It's June," she deadpanned, smiled again, and shook her head as if she were talking to an idiot.

"Oh, yeah, yes, it is, right, June," he stammered. *Wow, I am an idiot,* he thought. "Um, have 'em follow me. Pigs are diggin' in my grass."

The two boys picked up a stout staff and a knotted rope, and ran ahead. When Jack caught up, they had the squawling pigs off his grass, in the road ditch scuttling toward where they belonged, shrieking with every whack and whip from the punishing staff and knot-studded rope.

With the swine rounded up, Jack staked out the horse he'd bought from Ernie, the barber. He was repairing the vandalized turf, and the tethered filly was grazing peacefully, when Boogie Red rumbled up in his 1950s vintage International Harvester truck. He parked at the turn into the weedy driveway to the cabin, got out and walked briskly toward Jack.

Having never seen him, Jack thought: *Oh my god, is that who I think it is? Holy hell, it sure is. What does he want? He's got his pigs back. Be cool, Jack, be cool.*

He was not a big man, but because of the folklore, Jack felt a quiver of alarm snake up his spine. Boogie Red's ruddy complexion was not weather-worn robust. Rather, it seemed his longish face had been sandpapered to an ugly raw. A frayed, sweat-stained straw hat shaded eyes that could have been mistaken for the vile orbs of the pigs that had vandalized Jack's grass. A scraggle of rufous hair wisped from beneath the crackled hat band. Filthy knee-high barn boots, stitched-up railroad-striped overalls, and a grime-dulled flannel shirt that probably started out life as white completed the off-putting picture.

"Mornin'," Jack said, barely controlling the anxious tremble in his voice.

Without preamble or hello, Boogie Red said, "I'm hearin' from Wenona you got a problem with my hogs. That so?"

"Nope, that's not so," Jack said. "All okay thanks to your boys. They came right over and ran 'em back to your place. You got 'em back, right? Did damage to my grass, is all. The hogs, I mean, not the boys," Jack said and gestured toward the torn up pasture. "I'm repairing it best I can."

"Don't look alls that bad to me," Boogie Red said without so much as a squint at the gashes in the turf. "June, you know. Gonna rain for sure. Gonna grow back prit' damn quick."

"Yeah, right," Jack said, "but I still have to fill the holes. It's a mess 'cause of your pigs. Let's hope they don't do it again. Your boys won't have to come chasin' 'em down. Sure as hell better for my grass if your pigs stay away, right?"

Boogie Red bristled. "I'll take care of my pigs, sonny, and alls my animals. Don't need no advice from you. Them pigs is my money crop, like my chickens and sheeps. Don't want no one messin with 'em. 'Specially the likes a you."

The likes of me? Jack thought. *What's that supposed to mean? This guy is a real pain in the ass.*

Boogie Red took a long look-see at the cabin, the grazing horse and the make-do corral in the trees, raised a calloused hand to his face, blew a wad out of his nose, and scowled at Jack from beneath his ragged hat.

"Just wanna learn ya stuff since you is new here on *my* road. You got that, sonny?" he said, his voice going low and raspy. "I got me a Shetland pony over to home for the boys. Older stud horse, he is. Boys like 'im, call 'im Ol' Binny. Can be real ornery, ya know. Kicks his way out now and then and he goes off wanderin'." Nodding at Jack's horse on the

tether, he added, "You best keep that animal in the corral you got there back in the woods. Ol' Binny gets out, he'll trot on over here prit' damn quick and raise a ruckus with her."

"Well," Jack said, "it's easy to prevent that. All you gotta do is keep Ol' Binny at your place. That's on you. It's your horse."

Boogie Red sneered and said, "Hey, sonny, I'm just sayin' so's you knows what can happen. So now's you been warned."

Jack thought, *Warned? He's warning me about his outlaw horse and his runaway pigs? What the hell is that all about? Who the hell does he think he is? Goddamn bully, that's who he is. He's not gonna bully me…*

"And here's somethin' I'm wantin' you to know since you's new here, so listen careful," he said. "You stay 'way from my place. You don't go talkin' to Wenona or them boys. You got that, sonny? Unless you sees my truck, you just stay 'way. They got no use talkin' to you, and you got no use talkin' to them."

The son-of-a-bitch calls me "sonny" again and I'll… Jack thought, and then thought better of it.

"Hey, take it easy. I'm good with that," Jack countered. "Didn't mean to trespass or whatever you think I was doin'. Just figured you should know where your pigs got to. Hey, man, those were your pigs on my grass, remember? Your pigs. My grass."

Knowing he was in the right, Jack cranked up his courage and said, "All you have to do is keep your pigs and chickens and your little horse where they're supposed to be. I have no problem staying away from your place. No reason for me to go there. But listen up, *mister*. If your pigs or that horse come over here and start doing damage, well, we're gonna have to deal with it, ain't we? You get that, *mister*?"

Too much? Jack wondered. *Am I pissin' him off? Don't antagonize this guy. Take a deep breath and shut up.*

Nervous sweat trickled down his back. It was a nippy morning, no reason to sweat. *Admit it,* he thought. *This character has you rattled.*

Boogie Red said nothing, but he made no move to leave.

"Hey, neighbor," Jack said. "I don't want any trouble with you or your pigs or your horse or anything else. I thank your boys for coming so quick to get the pigs. They did good. You tell 'em that, will you? You got nice boys, there," Jack ventured, hoping a friendly word might temper the tension. It did not.

"They ain't mine," he snapped, "but, Ivan and Frankie, yeah, they's real good boys. Good workers is what they is. You don't be botherin' them no more. They's got plenty to do right there to home."

And with that he climbed into his truck and drove off, leaving a pall of oily exhaust and dust hanging over the road; leaving Jack to deep-breathe away the gall of panic in his throat; and bearing out the prevailing tattle: *One encounter with Boogie Red was one too many.*



As Jack feared and as Boogie Red had predicted, Ol' Binny would not stay home. Not long after Boogie Red's visit, the blocky, thick-haired, shaggy-maned Shetland was out of his slat-board paddock, and within minutes was at Jack's cabin kicking at the primitive pole and scrap lumber corral Jack had lashed together in the trees. Ol' Binny was wild to get at Jack's horse. But to his surprise, Jack approached the criminal horse, quieted him, hitched a lead to his bridle and walked him home—several times during the weeks that had passed since the invasion of the pigs. *This has to stop,* Jack thought.

Suspiciously, Boogie Red was never home when Jack returned Ol' Binny, but Wenona and the boys were. She was convincingly apologetic and impossibly beautiful in that wretched setting. As irritated as Jack was, he was captivated by her incongruous elegance, and he kept his ire in check. Ivan and Frankie were polite and helpful. Every time he led the Shetland home, they promised to tell Boogie Red about it. If they did, he never acknowledged to Jack that he knew Ol' Binny had been making mischief. Wenona's subtle, disapproving glance at the boys told Jack that something was amiss.

"Boys are doing their best," she said. She did not elaborate, but he had a hunch Boogie Red was letting his nasty horse run wild in order to make life difficult for the newcomer on Jackrabbit Road.

The situation did not improve. Ol' Binny started showing up at Jack's corral late at night. Awakened by the racket of the two horses whinnying wildly and smashing around the rails, Jack either ran Ol' Binny off or, more often, got a line on him and tied him to an oak at the foot of the overgrown driveway. In the morning, the boys showed up to retrieve him, as if they knew where he'd be. Jack told the boys that they have to keep their horse at home. They said they would, but they didn't. Ol' Binny came back night after night. Jack had had enough of roping him, calming his horse, repairing the damage, and losing sleep. He sought advice in town.



"That's the story, and it's getting worse. Any ideas?" he asked Tommy and Ella Prichard, who owned the gas station in town and the cabin Jack rented from them.

"I complained to the tribal police, but they blew me off," he said. "'No laws broken,' they said. How could that be? There's trespass and property damage. And what about disturbing the peace? They laughed me out of the office."

Ella laughed. "Them cops as useless as hair on a frog. Don't expect no help from them."

"Shoot the little bastard," Tommy said matter-of-factly from the depths of a grease pit where he was wrapping up an oil change. "Sounds to me like you got a bad horse there. I'm tellin' ya, shoot the little bastard. You got that pistol we gave you, right? You know, for them toughs that might give you a bad time, and for rabbit huntin'. You been doin' any rabbit huntin'?"

When Jack moved into the cabin, Tommy and Ella had urged him to be wary of a posse of hooligans who specialized in terrorizing and sometimes assaulting "whitey." "Happens a lot," Ella had said, "right over there at the Tomahawk Bar," and she waved across the gravel lot at a quonset-like building festooned with faded beer signboards. "You're lucky they ain't started on you."

"You been stayin' away from the bar, and that's smart," Tommy said. "But keep the pistol handy, just in case they drive out to the cabin to hassle you. Few of 'em get drunk and there's no tellin' what they'll do. They get damn brave when they get drunk," he smirked. "Hell, I'm surprised they ain't rousted you already."

"Tommy, you just shut up," Ella said. "Don't be worryin' him 'bout them thugs. The gun, it's like insurance, just in case," she said to Jack. "You keep it close by when you're at the cabin. Don't go shootin' nobody, but like Tommy says, keep it handy if you gotta scare 'em off. We ain't heard of no trouble out that way, but you never know with that bunch a bad boys."

The Colt Frontier Scout .22 calibre revolver hung on a peg in the headboard of Jack's bed, loaded, but mostly ignored. He hadn't thought much about it; hadn't fired it since Tommy brought it out to him. And on that day he got a quick drill in handling the pistol and a few minutes of shooting practice. He hadn't hunted rabbits. He certainly didn't believe he'd need the gun for the grisly purpose advised by the Prichards.

"Whadda ya mean, shoot him?" Jack said, shocked by the idea. "I can't do that!"

"Well, we don't mean right off," Ella said, "Aim a couple of shots in the air to scare him. Might work. But, I gotta tell you, Tommy's right. Bad

horse don't never get good. If Boogie Red don't do nothin', you gotta do somethin."

"Shoot the horse?!" Jack said. "I can't do that. I really don't want to shoot the horse…"

"Listen, kid, you best start thinkin' right," Ella said with hard-eyed seriousness. "You wouldn't be doin' nothin' that ain't been done 'round here before. You got good cause the way you say the horse is bustin' your filly out. Every night, you said? How long it's been goin' on?"

"About three weeks," Jack said, "maybe a little longer."

Tommy agreed with Ella. "Three weeks? And all that time you been lettin' Boogie Red know what's happenin'? Hey, you got every right. Just ask the folks 'round here that's got animals—cows, horses, sheep even. They don't put up with that crap. You got every right to take care of it yourself."

Tommy climbed out of the grease pit.

"Listen," he said, "you try this first off. Try scarin' the horse with a couple shots over his head like Ella says. And a couple more in the dirt right close. That oughta do it. But, if he keeps comin' back, and Boogie Red don't do nothin, well…"

"Yeah, I know," Jack said. "Shoot the little bastard."

Tommy said, "If ya got to, ya got to. But remember, it's a .22, it's just a popgun. It'll take more than one shot to knock down a horse, even a little one, 'less you pop him between the eyes, and you ain't gonna do that. You don't wanna get that close 'cause a mean horse will kick you in the ribs and bite your ear off."

Tommy laughed, wiped oil off his hands, and began a sober lesson.

"Here's what you do," he said. "You be steady and hold the gun with both hands—I mean no shakin'—you pop one right behind his front shoulder; two, if you're quick enough," he said, making a finger pistol and pointing under Jack's armpit. "And another one in the neck jus' south of his ear," he said, aiming his finger at Jack's neck below his ear. "That'll do it, maybe not right away. It might take some time for him to go down, but he will. Might run, might go down right on the spot. Hard to say, but better for you if he ran off a ways. You don't want the horse droppin' dead at the cabin. Me and Ella sure as hell don't want no dead horse layin' out there. Be better if he run."

Jack wanted to be appalled by the cold pragmatism of their remedy, but he wasn't. He was listening with morbid interest, wondering if he could do it, concluding that there was no other solution. He thought, *Shoot the little bastard? Maybe, just maybe I should do it…*

"If that's what you gotta do, you just do it and don't say nothin' to nobody," Ella said. "I mean nobody. Even us. 'Specially us. We don't wanna know nothin'. Just do it and go about your business like you don't know nothin'."



Three nights later Jack shot Boogie Red's horse. The crack of the pistol echoed through the trees in the sultry summer air, louder than it should have been, Jack thought. Ol' Binny had not been moved by warning shots into the sky and into the dirt. So, channeling Ella Prichard's severe counsel and following Tommy's precise anatomical instruction, Jack, in quick succession from about 10 yards away, plugged the horse in the right shoulder and in the neck just off his right ear. It was easy, and he had to concede, distressingly satisfying.

Ol' Binny whinnied and stomped, stood stock still for a long moment, raised his head, then took off running toward Boogie Red's place. He disappeared into the moonless gloom. Jack listened to his hoofbeats fade into the night. Jack's frightened horse retreated into the dark of the corral.

Must have missed, Jack thought. *He's moving awful fast for a horse that's been shot. He's galloping like a racehorse. Doesn't seem hurt at all. Must have missed…*

Back at the cabin, he secured the .22, and crawled into bed, exhausted from the brief ordeal; fell into fitful sleep, unsettled by the enormity of what he'd done.

The unmuffled grumble of Boogie Red's truck roused Jack at sunrise. He dressed, pulled on his boots, reheated a cup of stale coffee, and opened the cabin door to the cool morning just as Boogie Red was rolling down his window. *So much for "one encounter with Boogie Red was one too many,"* Jack mused.

"What can I do for you? Pretty early, isn't it?" Jack said. "Coffee?"

In a slow, flat voice Boogie Red said, "No, don't want no coffee. Ain't that early, sonny. Sun's up. Got somethin' to show you." He crooked his thumb toward the flatbed. "Jump up the back. Hang on." It was not a request. Jack complied, and they were off on the short ride to Boogie Red's place.

Ol' Binny was lying unnaturally still, his right flank resting on the high side of the paddock where the ground was dry. His short legs out stiff and straight, his left eye staring lifeless up to the freshening sky, his lips curled back over worn teeth, his neck bowed in a death curve.

"He sick?" asked Jack. "Why am I here?"

"Naw, he ain't sick," Boogie Red said. "He's dead. Lemme tell you why you's here, sonny. Weren't he over to your place last night?"

"Yeah, early, like just after dark," Jack said, "but he didn't make trouble. I didn't hear any noise from my horse. I heard him run off, and that was about it. No problems, and I didn't worry about it."

"That so?" said Boogie Red, the cynicism in his voice as sour as a crabapple.

"Yeah, that's what happened," Jack said.

"Well ain't that somethin'," Boogie Red said. "'Cause I tell ya what happened. He come back here, laid down and died. Found him little while ago, dead, right there. Musta come from your place. Prit' sure somethin' musta happened over there. Watchya thinkin' 'bout that?"

Jack said nothing. Ol' Binny's dead eye gazed into the blue. Boogie Red's mean eyes drilled into Jack. Wenona and the boys were nowhere to be seen.

"I think he been shot," Boogie Red said. "You know anythin' 'bout that? You got a gun over there, don't ya?"

"No, don't own a gun," Jack said, which was true. "Can't own a gun. It's against the rules of the government agency I work for," which also was true.

Boogie Red let the half-truths sink in, walked a couple of times around the dead horse, and in a less ill-tempered tone said, "Help me flip 'im over. I looked on this side, can't find no bullet holes. Ain't no blood, neither. Must be on t'other side. You grab his back legs and lift and push hard when I says. I got good hold the front."

Jack hesitated, assuming the fatal damage must be on the horse's downside, but he had no choice but to oblige. With no small effort they rolled Ol' Binny down side up, exposing his thick mat of brown-red hair flecked with straw and dirt, but no blood. No sign of wounds. Boogie Red probed and brushed every square inch of Ol' Binny's flank, haunch, legs, neck and head, and found nothing that could have killed his horse.

I didn't miss, Jack thought. *I was close. Couldn't miss. But maybe that dense horse hair is hiding the bullet holes. After all, it's a .22. The hair, the hide could have closed over small wounds…*

Boogie Red's suspicion had nowhere to go. His anger settled. "Whatcha thinkin'?" he said. "You's a prit' smart guy, ain't ya? Watcha thinkin' 'bout what you seein' there?"

"I don't know," Jack said. "I'm not seeing anything you can't see. Maybe he got into poison chemicals or something, bad water, or maybe it's old age, you know, a heart attack or a stroke. I don't know much about

sick horses. Maybe you should call a veterinarian, you know, a horse doctor."

Boogie Red shook his head. "Guess you really ain't that smart, is you? Ain't no horse doctor 100 miles near here. One I know won't come to Indian country no more 'less he get paid up front. Anyway, horse is dead. Ain't no horse doctor can do nothin' 'bout that. For sure, Ol' Binny don't need no doctorin'. What I's gonna need is to dig me a deep hole back a them sheds, an' you ain't gonna be much help with that, are ya?"

"I will, if I can," Jack said. "I have a shovel and…"

"Nope, don't need ya, sonny," he said. "I gonna get the tractor and dig with the loader, drag Ol' Binny to the hole. I'll get it done m'self. Boys will help if they want, but I won't make 'em."

He walked to a high paddock plank, looked over toward the double-wide, and said, "You better get yourself outa here. Boys an' Wenona ain't seen this yet. They wantin' to know what's goin' on, and they ain't gonna be happy about this. You best be gone 'fore them boys comes out."

"Yeah, sure, I understand. I'm going right now," Jack said. He walked the mile to his cabin as fast as he could in his boots.



News of the baffling death of Boogie Red's Shetland spread quickly. When Jack rode his horse into town days later, the Prichards were silent, but pantomimed the lips-are-sealed finger twist, and smiled approvingly. Jack felt their respect for him had notched up.

Postmaster Faisiez Albert, who had never given Jack so much as a nod, had a "Good morning" and a "Nice to see ya" greeting that day, and a sly grin.

On his way out of town, Jack stopped at St. Ann's Mission School to shower and to ask Benedictine Brother Dan Fielder to bring a couple of 10-gallon cream cans of drinking water to the waterless cabin. "Will do," Brother Dan said, "but only if I don't get shot at," he whispered, and laughed out loud. "Just kidding, Jack," he said, and held up both hands. "Honest to God, not a word, not a word. Yeah, I'm doin' a water run out your way tomorrow with the church van. You don't shoot church vans, do ya?" he grinned. "Okay, kidding, kidding…"

What is going on? Jack thought as he rode west on Jackrabbit Road toward the cabin. *Does everybody know? Does Boogie Red know? The postmaster, for God sakes! Or are they all guessing? Nah! They know, they know…*

As his horse trotted easily through the tall grass in the road ditch, Jack was racked with conflicting feelings about what he had done. He knew he'd killed Ol' Binny, and felt guilty about it. But he had accepted

the Prichards' rationale, and his standing on the reservation had changed considerably, and for the better, and he liked it. His conscience struggled with the conundrum, but not for long. Nudging aside a moral twinge, he concluded the end had justified the means. Ego smothered ethics.

Boogie Red's truck was idling on the side of the road in front of the cabin when Jack rode up. Wenona was behind the wheel. Ivan and Frankie were back on the flatbed, peering through the side rack.

Uh, oh, Jack thought, *this can't be good.*

He dismounted and walked to the truck. Boogie Red wasn't with them. A week had passed since he'd shot Ol' Binny.

Wenona leaned out the window, looked in Jack's eyes, and said, "I am wondering, 'cause my boys don't have a horse anymore, could they come over here sometimes and ride yours? They'd take real good care of her. They know how to care for a horse, you can be sure of that."

She saw surprise and hesitation cross his face; and concern about where all this was going. It was a startling request. He wondered, *Does Boogie Red approve?*

Reading his mind, she said, "Not to worry about him," and she tilted her head toward her place. "He's good enough with what I'm telling you. It's me doing the asking. Not him. They're my boys, and they're good boys. They never been trouble for me or anybody. I'm asking for them. You like the idea, don't you boys?"

The smiling boys nodded "yes." Jack thought he saw a shadow of sadness in her eyes when she said, "They sure do miss their Ol' Binny." And with no evidence but the sincerity in her voice, he believed she knew the truth, and was alright with it.

"I can pay, if you want," she said. "I make good money from my bread and pies."

"No, no, none of that," Jack replied. *Wouldn't it be ironic, perversely so,* Jack thought, *for her to be paying the man who had killed her boys' horse?*

He didn't have to give it much more thought. It might have been stifled guilt, but he quickly said, "The boys can ride anytime. The saddle and tack are right inside the cabin door. They can use all that stuff. I'll be happy to have 'em here."

She nodded and smiled at Jack, backed the truck around, the boys waved, and they drove off.

Within a few days, the boys and Jack's horse were working well together. They rode nearly every day. They lugged hay and oats for feed, groomed her like professionals, even soaped and mink-oiled Jack's hand-me-down saddle and bridles. They shoveled manure out of the corral and

repaired loose rail lashings. They trimmed and cleaned hooves with their own farrier tools. They carried water from a clear, woodland fen a few yards back of the cabin. As summer cooled into fall, they worked around their school hours to help Jack build a shelter from straw bales and salvaged boards. Good boys, Boogie Red had said during Jack's first dust-up with him over the pigs. They surely were.



The Jackrabbit Road neighborhood settled into a peaceful and predictable rhythm. The pigs stayed home. Several versions of the Ol' Binny affair took hold in the reservation's oral storybook, told often at the Tomahawk Bar, Ernie's Barbershop and the post office. Jack never again had cause to lift the .22 pistol off its perch on his bedboard. Brother Dan delivered water from the mission to the cabin, and every time joked about being shot. Occasionally, Wenona would send over with the boys a sack of fresh-made frybread or a bitter-sweet juneberry pie. Jack wanted to thank her, but never did. "Stay 'way from my place," Boogie Red had warned. She remained a beautiful enigma living with her good boys and a strange white man at their run-down homestead.

Boogie Red's reputation was secure. In truth, no one bothered him and he was a bother to no one. Other than a rare drive-by in his rattletrap truck, Jack did not see him. They never spoke about Ol' Binny's demise, Wenona's frybread or the boys riding Jack's horse…or anything else. Jack was just fine with that. After all, the consensus that "*one encounter with Boogie Red was one too many"* did not change. And Jack had had two.