

NORTHERN NARRATIVES 2024



NORTHERN NARRATIVES

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

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by Writers from North Dakota and the
Red River Valley

Volume 8

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



TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | ix |
| NORTHERN FOCUS | xi |
| INTRODUCTION | xiii |
| POETRY | 1 |
| GRIEF AND ALL ITS FRIENDS <i>by Catherine Ambrose</i> | 3 |
| “FALL”ING LEAFY LAYERS <i>by Stacy Anderson</i> | 4 |
| WIDE OPEN <i>by Dawn Noelle Archer</i> | 5 |
| FATHER, ALWAYS THERE <i>by Joanne Bekkerus</i> | 7 |
| LOSS OF YOU <i>by Mary Bjerke</i> | 8 |
| WHY COMPETE WITH MIDAS <i>by Thomas Bowman</i> | 9 |
| EMPATHY <i>by Catherine Chilton-Werner</i> | 10 |
| DOWN BY LIMBO CREEK <i>by Victoria Christensen</i> | 11 |
| EMMA’S GARDEN <i>by Cara Cody-Braun</i> | 13 |
| AN IGBO TALE <i>by DèMontrà Cole</i> | 15 |
| BEGINNING, MIDDLE <i>by Meggie Cronin</i> | 16 |
| IN TARGET, I CONSIDER A PARALLEL UNIVERSE <i>by Meggie Cronin</i> | 18 |

| | |
|---|----|
| ODE TO THE MOORHEAD PUBLIC LIBRARY by <i>Kaeti Eken</i> .. | 19 |
| BABY RUINED THE SADDLE by <i>Christine Ellsworth</i> | 21 |
| WEDDING GIFTS by <i>Christine Ellsworth</i> | 22 |
| UNTITLED POEM I by <i>Rhonda Gilbertson-Evans</i> | 24 |
| UNTITLED POEM II by <i>Rhonda Gilbertson-Evans</i> | 26 |
| AUTUMN by <i>Rita Greff</i> | 27 |
| MY FAVORITE WALKING ROUTE: THE DUMP GROUND ROAD by <i>Rita Greff</i> | 29 |
| I'LL TAKE THE BACKROADS by <i>Darla Helgeson</i> | 32 |
| VALENTINE'S DAY by <i>Darla Helgeson</i> | 34 |
| THE LONE SUNFLOWER by <i>Sarah Herman</i> | 36 |
| AUTUMN'S HOPEFUL GLOW: A VILLANELLE by <i>Elizabeth Hodgson</i> | 38 |
| AN INLET TO BENEATH THE SURFACE by <i>Elsa Ingebrigtsen</i> | 39 |
| YESTERDAY'S PAST by <i>Ginger Johnson</i> | 41 |
| THE CALDERA OF MY HEART by <i>Atiya Khan</i> | 42 |
| TEA IN THE MOONLIGHT by <i>Bibi Khan</i> | 44 |
| HUSH by <i>Emily Kjenaas</i> | 45 |
| THE LONG PONDERING by <i>Shawn Krinke</i> | 47 |
| THE LIGHT by <i>Lekha Krishna Shankar</i> | 49 |
| MY JOURNEY by <i>Lekha Krishna Shankar</i> | 51 |
| MIDWESTERN LEGACY: IN REMEMBRANCE OF A FISHERMAN by <i>Emily Meester</i> | 53 |
| WITH TIME by <i>Carrie Miller</i> | 55 |
| WET GRASS by <i>Jeannie Olfert</i> | 57 |
| NIGHT ROSES by <i>S.E. Page</i> | 58 |
| YELLOWBIRD by <i>Victor Pellerano</i> | 59 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| TIME by <i>A. Folan Prischmann</i> | 60 |
| THAT SCAR by <i>Maddy Rinehart</i> | 61 |
| THE ROAD TO UTOPIA by <i>Linda Lee Sand</i> | 63 |
| MONSTER IN THE LAKE by <i>Linda Schell</i> | 64 |
| THE BOY by <i>Dawn Schlienz</i> | 65 |
| A WALK THROUGH NYC by <i>Dawn Schlienz</i> | 67 |
| PAPIER-MÂCHÉ by <i>Alex Serthes</i> | 69 |
| WHAT IS THE HEART by <i>Alex Serthes</i> | 70 |
| STRUGGLE OF HOPE by <i>Karla Smart-Morstad</i> | 71 |
| WITH ALL MY LOVE by <i>Lisa Swenson</i> | 73 |
| SCENTS OF A NORTHERN FOREST by <i>Sheri Wien</i> | 74 |
| TO THE MOLDY BREAD THAT WANTED TO BE A SANDWICH by <i>AJ Wylder</i> | 75 |
| FICTION | 77 |
| MERCY WALK by <i>John Anderson</i> | 79 |
| THE GROVE by <i>Kyle J. Anderson</i> | 91 |
| THE FIRE by <i>Elisabeth Beam</i> | 100 |
| THE SHADOW ON TOWER HILL by <i>T.J. Fier</i> | 103 |
| DEVIL KING by <i>Charles Hinton</i> | 111 |
| HJALMAR HELPS SAVE THE LIBRARY by <i>Mark Holman</i> | 116 |
| IN THE CARDS, SHE TRUSTS by <i>Erika Kappes</i> | 126 |
| POKER RUN by <i>Mark Kolstad</i> | 129 |
| THE AYE-AYE by <i>Clinton Larson</i> | 139 |
| SNOW DRIFTS by <i>Jeffrey B. Loken</i> | 146 |
| THE FIELDS by <i>Grace Lougheed</i> | 154 |
| STORMY WEATHER by <i>Dan McKay</i> | 168 |
| MOTH by <i>Mo J. Ruud</i> | 173 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| THE ADVENTURES OF THAVISOUK PHOUNSIRI & SPARTACUS KINGFISHER by <i>V. Blanchard Singingeagle</i> | 179 |
| HOME COMING by <i>Anne Winne</i> | 188 |
| NONFICTION | 193 |
| A GOOD MAN by <i>Jean Anderson</i> | 195 |
| PRECIOUS CHILDHOOD MEMORIES by <i>Alice Bjorklund</i> <i>Gunness</i> | 198 |
| OUR SWEETIE PETEY by <i>Gail Gabrielson</i> | 202 |
| THE STUMP ON CEDAR STREET by <i>Ben Jacobson</i> | 205 |
| THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY by <i>Riley Nielsen</i> | 210 |
| A TWIST OF FATE by <i>Marcella Peterson</i> | 213 |
| SALEM SUE, TAKE TWO by <i>Shayla Sinclair</i> | 216 |
| NORTHERN LIGHTS by <i>Karla Smart-Morstad</i> | 220 |

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



NORTHERN FOCUS

Cover Photo: “Heaven on Earth” (2024) by Derrick Mindt. Taken near Harvey, North Dakota.

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

Photographers sent in their favorite photographs taken anywhere within North Dakota or Minnesota. Entries were on display at the Main Library in downtown Fargo during the fall of 2024. Find the digital gallery online at <https://fargond.gov/city-government/departments/library/adults/northern-narratives-northern-focus>.

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Welcome to the eighth volume of *Northern Narratives*!

POETRY



GRIEF AND ALL ITS FRIENDS

by Catherine Ambrose

Grief

It sneaks up on you.
Like a jack-in-the-box
Out of nowhere
Just when you need it the least.

Grief

It's like a wave.
Feeling underwater
Until it finally lets you breathe
Just to wash over you again

Grief

They say it gets better with time.
Soon it won't hurt as much.
But sometimes the pain of losing someone
Is the thing that keeps them alive.

“FALL”ING LEAFY LAYERS

by Stacy Anderson

Falling temperatures bring out leafy layers of pale buttery yellow hues or rich glittery sunlit golds, some pumpkin veined oranges and fewer rare radiant reds.

Cascading down effortlessly with each wispy wind or swirling like a leaf storm scattering every which way landing down on layer upon layer blanketing the newly dormant grasses while sticking to the lazy sleeping flower beds thanks to the freshly frosted cooling earth. The first freeze always comes like a thief in the night stripping life from the land of the living.

They can dance, flit and flirt through the crisp autumn air or sway drunkenly downward before finding their perfect placements...or perhaps not, picking themselves up like vagabonds thanks to the whirlwinds of a sound stiff fall breeze, gypsies not quite content with where they land.

Some fight back carefully clinging to their homes relentlessly hanging on for dear life trying to escape their imminent descent and drying death. Defying decay and restless rot and mortifying mold all while desperately clutching their bleak chance to keep thriving right where they are. These lonely leaves are insanely ignorant ignoring Old Man Winter's warning that he will soon take hold releasing Fall of its fleeting duties.

Fall can be cruel to those who hang on! For it can bring deceitfully unusual warm, even blazing steamy sunshine filled autumn days tricking all who have stubbornly stayed put high in the treetop canopies overshadowing the leafy layers below. Their fate is clear to those that look up waiting for their fateful falls...gravity cannot be denied! Fall will fade and Winter will eventually take them all...even while they naïvely escape the fall!

WIDE OPEN

by Dawn Noelle Archer

there's a peacefulness
to wide open spaces
places we find
we can almost
see forever
where stress blows away
like dandelion fluff
to settle
somewhere else
places we can breathe
deep
and complete
we can think
and remember
we had dreams
once

places where the air

smells like hope

and wild things

remind us

there are other ways

to be

in this world

FATHER, ALWAYS THERE

by Joanne Bekkerus

Father you are still with me,
Flowing in and out of dreams,
Walking through the dense, vale fog,
Calloused hands touching moonbeams,
Wounded heart within the soul,
Guiding love with light that gleams,
Easing the flood of soured tears,
Helping seal the loosened seams,
Tethered to the firmest land,
Lessons learned through life's extremes,
Happy you are always there,
Riding high on sweet sunbeams.

LOSS OF YOU

by Mary Bjerke

My yearning for you, visceral and somber.

Time without you, slack and charcoal-hued;

Your absence, a cloak of sable, sunk in the river of me that is still
advancing, but shifting, discolored and seeking.

WHY COMPETE WITH MIDAS

by Thomas Bowman

And the battle has just begun.
Me, I began a long time ago.
Sharpening my spears, and dimming my intellect,
With goals that would make Midas weep.
As long as there's a fight,
My spears will get sharper and my wits dimmer.
That's called swimming in murky water.

The pool is turbulent,
The pool is pale yet unclear.

Only when the sun stares itself in the face does the fight end.
With self lost in the current, and thoughts and composure pulled in with
the tide,
A frivolous endeavor within a war.

Don't you want to see clearly?
Don't you want to feel clearly?

Banish the muck from the murk,

An internal task.
An intentional task.

Then those who wear armor and helms,
Will remove their solid and secure armaments.
Only to discover their armaments were of rubber.

And their faces were of friends.

And their demeanor was of love.

EMPATHY

by Catherine Chilton-Werner

Where once I was like a sponge,
Absorbing your emotions,
Holding them fluid in my soul until,
Becoming so heavy,
They escaped through my tears,
Now I absorb them long enough to
Empathize,
Commiserate.
Now I hold your emotions
Long enough to offer what help I have to give,
Give what help you are willing to accept,
Then let the pain flow through me until
I am no longer soggy with it,
Weighed down.

I am older now and wiser.
I cannot carry your pain;
I can only love you.
And when you have learned to face the flood,
I will dance in the puddles with you,
In the lightness of your joy!

DOWN BY LIMBO CREEK

by Victoria Christensen

Hornets wiggle tails
sucking juice from crushed berries
down by Limbo Creek.

Prickly grass crunches
startling grasshoppers that spring
down a well-worn path.

“LEFT! RIGHT! LEFT! RIGHT! LEFT!”
Angry crows flutter away
from the tops of trees.

Three geese *SWOOSH-SPLASH-GLIDE*,
sticky mud oozes through toes
along the cool bank.

Turtles slip from logs,
frogs leap across slick lilies,
clear water ripples.

We squeal at nibbles
as sunfish sneak wiggling worms
from hooks on cane poles.

Swinging and flying,
arms and legs flailing, we soar,
over Limbo Creek.

Train whistle screeches,
the signal for us to go
down that well-worn path.

“left. right. left. right. left.”
Our weary, bare feet march
over sharp pebbles.

Crows flutter away,
a little less angry now
across prairie sky.

Clothes drip, grass crunches,
the berry thicket buzzes
down by Limbo Creek.

EMMA'S GARDEN

by Cara Cody-Braun

A lush August evening
we load into the Country Squire
Dad has been summoned to see Emma's garden
Going to Dog Town – South side of the tracks
Flat land with houses – whites and pastels

Emma waits in her garden
her dress washed and worn for thirty years
hangs comfortably around her lumpy form
What do you think Jimmy? Emma asks expectantly

We smile at hearing his boyhood name,
Dad surveys the garden seriously and lets out a whistle
Boy! Look at those green beans! And the tomatoes! Ripe already

Just canned 6 quarts!
Marigolds keep the rabbits at bay
No cookies are proffered, nor lemonade served
Just a feast for the senses

The smell of tomatoes – spicy dirt
wafts above the neat rows of colorful coffee cans
Peas dangle prettily from the chicken wire fence
Onions stand proudly in two long rows
Beets wave their green ruffled tops and the
large rounded cabbages guard one end while
corn tall and tasseled like soldiers defends the far perimeter

Orange and yellow blooms mark the border and a row of red gladiolas
runs through the middle.
Each plant thrives, not a weed to distract.

A weed wouldn't dare, jokes my mother
Emma laughs delighted at the recognition
You like my garden?
Emma basks in dad's approval, her friend Eva's boy – Jimmy
It is a beautiful garden Emma
We go home with a few cucumbers

AN IGBO TALE

by DèMontrà Cole

We crossed the Atlantic.
Upon the cargo ship that held our ruin.
Deep within our minds, insanity grew.
Fear of bondage and captivity's sting.
In Igbo songs, melodies we knew,
We drowned ourselves and clung
to hope and freedom;
Lost souls adrift in the abyss of time,
Sailing towards heaven's door
Where peace would be restored.

BEGINNING, MIDDLE

by Meggie Cronin

I am born where everything grows:
the spruce and the daylilies, the white beebush
and the tulips' sporadic hope,
the lilacs' blooming privacy.
I don't know it yet,
but I turn into the world on the crest of a wave;
I bring the floodwaters with me.

The town comes together,
builds a sandbag fort to save a carousel,
an unnatural wonder,
a shining island of midwestern craft,
and, due to their victory,
this watery grave slowed and staunched,
one day in the future, this flood-girl sits
in the center of that equestrian spiral
and its songs follow me into my dreams—
a marching band dirge,
a phone ringing into nothing, from nowhere—
you cannot run the circle fast enough
to catch anything,
cannot hold it long enough to answer.

This is a life I lived, once,
a summer home,
a lone echo chamber I would
pace and sing and speak myself into.
What shared care we held
for this place of gears and relic,
a time capsule of brass and smudge,
of pink-flowered panels I dreamed
I would paint on my skin, so one day

when I was not here,
I would remember,
as though I would get a chance to forget.

A person only gets to be called young once, and then they are too late.
You are in the middle before you know what you are.
You watch the lights start to blur around you;
a familiar face might wave to you from the center.
In the time it takes to remember,
you are moving, unstilled—
the motor has you.
We pick up speed and then
we're off

IN TARGET, I CONSIDER A PARALLEL UNIVERSE

by Meggie Cronin

I carry the 6-pack of peach tea on my hip
and it slots in like a toddler.
My body must be built for this,
and what a use of my biology—
as seat or shelf,
holder or consumer or, yes, both,
always both reasons together.
You cannot hold if you do not first consume.

Reasoned as I can make it, this noticing still holds bitter, holds lonely,
still confuses the dual longings of me.
What is more mine?

I stare at the mother and daughter in front of me as they ring up their
late-July school supply run.
Colored plastic folders,
classic wooden pencils, dual French braids running
down her small blonde head.

The mother has a tattoo on the back of her arm,
same as I do.

ODE TO THE MOORHEAD PUBLIC LIBRARY

by Kaeti Eken

Covid lockdown happened, and you were not open
I wandered lost, astray, beckoning for your return
The first day you re-opened, I waited outside with coffee and card in
hand
Wearing your scent of broken-down lignin, I loitered through your aisles
To this day, I'm still seduced by your books
Spanning topics from climate change, corruption, and crooks
It's unbelievable to me, *Stranger Than Fiction*
How you kindly indulge my reading addiction
Lines of words surge through my veins
A hit of dopamine straight to the brains
No intervention can break this hold
I'll be a junkie for you until I'm dead and cold
When you re-opened again
I felt wholeness return
Such forgiveness with late fines
Despite living a stone's throw away
Astell, Camus, and Kierkegaard wax poetic where the love of wisdom
resides
While Jane Austen mingles with Hemingway
The latest scientific discoveries the aisle over, where the stocked shelves
lay
You're there when I'm piss poor, barely scraping by
With no change in my pocket, not even to print
I enter with a head full of questions wondering why
Moorhead Public Library, you always get me by
If I could marry a place, it would be 118 5th St. South
I'd check out your books like they're scantily clad
The librarian says I'm up to thirty-seven dollars in unpaid fines
Yes, it's true that all my books haven't been free

But coffee-stained pages, and dates long past due
Cannot keep me away from you
Moorhead Public Library I promise someday
I'll get my books back on time
And will spend more time in the poetry section
To find out if this ode would be better if it did not rhyme
If this ode doesn't do justice, then I hope my next visit will
Moorhead Public Library, there's nowhere I'd rather be
Than inside your walls, admiring your existence, fine free

BABY RUINED THE SADDLE

by Christine Ellsworth

Greenbroke, dirt cheap quarter horse

Filly if there ever was one. Headstrong
Dancing pretty, a shine of a pony
Named her Babygirl, untried.

All I had was my two hands, book learning and willingness
A girl, myself, at 13. Shy and bucktoothed, too.
We got along for awhile
She loved me with a handful of oats

Until she bucked off the hand-tooled saddle I'd just cinched
Jumped the rails, hit the hills. My folks shipped her for glue in the end.
Colts, I learned, weren't much better.
You might advise higher fences, perseverance. But I think I'd rather run,
too.

WEDDING GIFTS

by Christine Ellsworth

I wash my hands, lingering on the warm water rinse.
I dry my hands on a fresh towel.
I lift a clean wooden spoon from the clear glass jar
Of utensils I keep on my kitchen counter and sink it into the
The cup of powdered sugar, the cup of creamery butter and the drops of
fragrant vanilla.
I gently turn over the ingredients with the spoon and patiently turn.
Patiently turn.
I measure the freshly ground walnuts and salt and unbleached flour
Into the big glass bowl of goodness when, then!
I plunge my fingers into the raw stuff and squeeze—oh, yes, I do!
I squeeze the butter and the flour and the powdered sugar
And the salt and the walnuts and vanilla until my hands know it's ready.
The oven is hot. The pans are lined. My oven mitts are positioned safely
nearby.
I take up generous handfuls and roll them into balls. I don't want them
to be perfect.
I want them to be human, askew, lopsided.
I pop them softly onto the pan. When it's full, I stoop and slide it into
the hot oven,
Scrubbed spotless last Saturday and turn on the oven light so I can peek
again and again.
I ask Alexa to set a 15-minute kitchen timer. She says she will—though I
don't need her;
My nose will know when to pull them.
I clean up the bowls and sugar and spoons; the counters and measuring
cups;
I reload cupboards with canisters and slide clotted spoons and forks and
knives and plates
Into the dishwasher. I remember how I always gave thanks, in years
gone by
For dish soap—especially the kind that nourished my hands—

And pretty towels to wipe them dry.
The alarm sounds, but they need another minute before
I retrieve the pan and move the browned sweets onto parchment-
papered countertops to cool.
Later I roll them once, twice in mounds of powdered sugar then I put
them onto pretty plates to share
With my friends and family at my niece's wedding. They eat my love and
the small bits of my care.
Together, we eat the small bits of the lives of those who harvested the
flour,
Those who harvested the sugar beets and the orchids and sea salt
And that of the bovines and walnut farmers—all who gave, too, to this
blessed dance.
We bite into those soft gifts of life, hands brushing laps clean to share
with the earth.

UNTITLED POEM I

by Rhonda Gilbertson-Evans

I had to make new memories. All the old ones would just disappear into the air like the smoke from the end of my cigarette. It was that instantaneous sometimes. Sometimes I would have to pretend that your memories happened to me because they were that much more vivid and colorful to my neurons.

You see sundowners would come in like an ocean tide and my life would disappear. It's not a conscious activity at all make no mistake. I only know that I'm confused and afraid. I feel as though I have forgotten what I knew but I am completely aware of this fact. It is terrifying.

Sundowners would move in with its overnight bag of any question as "I don't know?" Orientation to time and space becomes "Where are we?", and "Who the hell are you?"

Sometimes you can recall childhood memories during sundown, but you don't get to choose the image. That's the rub. Every once in awhile you draw a trauma card. I once remembered my father killing baby mice with a garden hoe and then seeing my husband's face. Fragmented and furious. I didn't even know if this really happened and how old I was but the emotion I felt was very real. And I was incensed.

Sometimes, it's just dark and alone.

and you forget what a car is and how to walk,

And the word for dog. And your left leg won't stop shaking, but you can remember every kid in your Algebra II class Junior year with Mr. Polley, by God, because sundowners giveth but it also taketh away.

My mom has a complicated neurological condition where she can't say anything that she means but she knows absolutely EVERYTHING. So can you imagine being trapped in captivity of your mouth? The words? Not there. But your mind has all of them? And then your daughter's words come too fast? Can you imagine? I can.

UNTITLED POEM II

by Rhonda Gilbertson-Evans

Eight years old and full of beans. His smile was a showstopper. Blam! All teeth. We fly through my mind's eye to places where there are rainbow connections and it ain't easy being green. We climb mountains and swim rivers from the safety of his chair. He is free. He isn't hindered by a helmet, or hearing aids. Or the thick, coke bottle glasses that distort his beautiful brown eyes. He isn't restrained against the safety straps of a wheelchair.

When October came, he closes his eyes tight when we talk of vampires. This ASL sign has sprung this kid into action. He reaches for me and we repeat the sign until it is part of his muscle memory. Sensory deprivation does not mean there is not an opportunity for communication. We are in an otherworldly kind of neighborhood where no one gets shot and forever is real if you believe hard enough.

Ahh, then sweet, sweet November. Turkeys became a big deal. Not because of turkey itself, but because it was the first two syllable word, this boy had ever uttered. And he said it ten thousand beautiful times. I recorded it in a picture frame so I can go there every day.

In this dark and silent space, I could meet him there. My fingers pirouetted in his hands swiftly. Telling him tales of the sun on his face and the moon in his tightly braided hair. I describe the color blue just that of the stripes of his favorite shirt and what love looks like when it hangs in the air.

My arms wrap through his and it is just like dancing. He invites me in, like a true gentleman. And, of course, I accept. I think it was a waltz.

AUTUMN

by Rita Greff

Observing autumn from the Fine Arts window:

I am on the second floor playing Scrabble.
Waiting for my opponent to play, I look out at Island Park.
The majestic cottonwood trees are unusually still,
Not a heart-shaped, brown leaf is stirring.

I play my word: autumn,
Then resume my bird's eye view.

Just that quickly, the scene has changed.
Leaves are coming straight down
From each of the giant trees.
At first, just a few whoosh to the ground,
Then, a multitude parachutes straight down.

Just a week later, when I arrive at the Fine Arts,
The naked trees watch as I rustle along the driveway.

Observing autumn from the windshield of my Sonata:

South 25th Street is aglow with warm reds, yellows and oranges.
A row of red ash trees separates two church parking lots.
I can't get enough of these vibrant colors, so I drive in for a closer look.
My open window lets in a rich, spicy fragrance of fall.

On South 44th Avenue, I crave a lasting picture to get me through
winter.
Maybe one of the perfectly formed yellow ash trees on the boulevard.
Or the neon yellow and orange sumac bush appearing to be on fire.
But the traffic is too busy for a photo stop. I drive on.

The garage door opens.
I see there is a scattered array of leaves on my garage floor.

Observing autumn from my living room window:

My lone yellow ash tree seems to change colors within an hour.
A stiff cold wind and a driving rain strip the color and the branches.
Finkle. Finkle. Finkle. I hear the leaves blowing into my alcove.
By morning there is a snowy pile of leaves against my door.

I lament that I will miss the color, the bright spots that catch my eyes.
I vow that next year, I will take more photos of the autumn colors.
Pictures of fall, my favorite season in Fargo.
But for now, I will have to find other sources of color in my life.

MY FAVORITE WALKING ROUTE: THE DUMP GROUND ROAD

by Rita Greff

The alarm signals that it is time to dress for the walk.
In the bathroom I try to avoid making sounds that would wake my
family.
Then out the front door and down the five steps I bound sporting my
neon strip.
Out to the street where I head south toward Main Avenue.

It is June, and the sun is peeking over the eastern horizon,
Casting a golden spray over the dewy grass and my newly planted
flowers.
The air has a welcome damp coolness and a fresh, earthy smell.
It seems that few humans are up to witness all this glory.

No need to use the hard concrete sidewalks when there is no traffic.
Hidden by the houses and businesses, I don't see the sunrise
Until the southeastern edge of town where I run out of pavement.
Now I am keeping an eye on the loose gravel along with all the other
familiar sights.

I come to Jim Gion's little horse barn on the edge of town.
Is it my imagination or can I detect the familiar scent of horses?
The horses have left the corral and are grazing in the pasture.
Three heads rise from their munching as I walk by.
I say, "Good morning."

I have reached the ell-shaped curve in the gravel road.
The wind has blown the dirt away and left the gravel in a washboard.
I keep thinking about my plan for today while looking at the beauty.
Bam! I turn my ankle on one of the ridges and down I go!

Sitting on the ground, I evaluate my condition.
Should I return to my house, or go on?
My ankle is a little sore, but not broken.
I look at the horses, who are watching me.
I say, "Well, don't just stand there. Give me a ride home."
They stay where they are, and I limp on. I can't miss my walk.

The little waterway that runs through a culvert under the road
Is full to the brim. As summer heats up it will disappear.
I continue walking on the left side of the road though there is no traffic.
After all, I teach my students to walk on the left side of the road.

The long, easily sloping hill has begun,
And now I am pestered by the same killdeer I see every day.
From side to side she runs along the road ahead of me, dragging her
feigned broken wing.
"Killdee, Killdee, Killdee," she repeats over and over in her high voice.
And then, "Dee, dee, dee." As she tries to lure me away from her nest.

I reach the top of the hill and the highway at the same time.
Crossing the pavement, I breathe a sigh of relief. I have lost the killdeer.
Now I hear a pheasant rooster, "Errkk, errkk, errkk!"
He struts about the field dressed up in his bright colors.

This is the easiest part of my walk.
Downhill on pavement for about a half mile.
Just as I turn toward my little city of Regent,
A meadowlark sitting on a fencepost warbles, "*I'll tell the teacher on you!*"

Crossing the ditch, I reach the *Sidewalk to Nowhere*,
A quarter mile of sidewalk parallel to a field and the highway.
When the cement warms up, daddy-long-legs walk on stilts from crack
to crack.
Walkers dodge along trying not to make a squish.
This morning is too chilly for them to be out and about.

Passing the ball diamond, I recall that my sons have to serve Mass today.
Later they have a baseball game.
I meet Dorothy Christy finishing her daily walk and heading up to
church for Mass.
As I reach home, the boys are biking up to church.

Here at my desk with a cup of coffee I am recalling my favorite, once familiar route.

My senses are sharp with my memory.

Occasionally my eyes blurred with nostalgia as I silently wish

I could physically step back into the past for a short visit.

I'LL TAKE THE BACKROADS

by Darla Helgeson

I'll take the backroads.
Muddy,
on a Minnesota day in spring.
I'll navigate the frost boils.
Try to avoid the ruts that would scrape the bottom of my car.
Be mesmerized by the flora and fauna bursting forth along the road.
So many shades of green!

I'll take the backroads.
Dusty,
on a Minnesota day in summer.
I'll keep my windows up to avoid the dust plume I create.
Or perhaps lower the window a tiny bit,
nostalgic for the dusty smell I associate with my youth,
traveling this same road in an old farm truck
that lacked air conditioning.

I'll take the backroads.
Sun-dappled,
on a Minnesota day in autumn.
Red, orange, yellow leaves flit and flutter
through the sunny sky.
Their last hurrah before collecting on the roadside.

I'll take the backroads.
Glistening,
on a Minnesota winter day.
My mittened hands will clutch the steering wheel
as I accelerate through snow drifts.
Sundogs in the sky.

Whenever I can
I'll take the backroads.

VALENTINE'S DAY

by Darla Helgeson

My father has congestive heart failure.
There is an ER visit to remove fluid.
I escort him for follow up at the V.A.

An echocardiogram is one of many stops on this day.

I help the sonographer prep Dad for the procedure,
removing the many layers of clothing.
(He's so cold these days.)
Never a large man, it's startling to note
just how tiny he is without those layers.

I sit in the corner.

I can see the images of Dad's heart and its chambers on the monitor,
but my untrained eye doesn't know what to look for.
The sonographer maneuvers the ultrasound wand with one hand,
while the other clicks away on a keyboard
isolating certain areas for imaging.

I can hear the beating sound of Dad's heart,
but my untrained ear doesn't know what to listen for.
Too slow? Too fast? Erratic?

I start estimating how many beats Dad's heart has made.
Sixty beats per minute,
times 60 minutes per hour,
times twenty-four hours per day,
times ninety-nine years.

Billions.

And that's just normal beating!
What in his lifetime made Dad's heart beat faster?

Certainly my mother, his wife of seventy years.
But were there women before her?
Did his heart beat faster when he held the first of his children?
Or when he held me, the last of six?
Did nerves accelerate the beat of his heart
his first day working at a Detroit auto factory?
Or the Montana ranch?
I shudder to think what horrors may have made his heart race
while serving in the Korean War.
Did excitement quicken his heart beat when he bought his grandfather's
farm?

I'm struck by the irony today is Valentine's Day,
and my thoughts are all about the heart.
A traditional symbol of love.

Not the embossed heart on an overpriced card.
Not a diamond heart pendant.
Not a heart-shaped box of chocolates.

A HUMAN heart wore out with age.
Wore out from loving and laughing and working.
Wore out from taking chances and having adventures.
Wore out from helping others, building a life, raising a family.
What greater symbol of love on this Valentine's Day?

The procedure ends,
and I help my father dress.
I'm grateful for his long life,
and how ever many more beats his heart will take.

THE LONE SUNFLOWER

by Sarah Herman

As the spring slowly slipped into summer,
I stood often looking out my kitchen window.

I was busy doing the dishes, sometimes
watching our dogs play in the sunshine.

Birds flew about chattering,
trees were growing their new leaves,
as the grass became greener.

One day towards the end of summer I noticed,
through the summer weeds a sunflower,
one single flower had emerged.

How odd it seemed that one sunflower seed would grow,
in our back yard, here in the city.

Where it had come from I did not know,
it stood there among the weeds tall and proud, head bowed.

I watched as the fall came and the frost with it.
Still the sunflower stood straight and tall.

I was surprised to see its true strength,
as the winter winds came blowing cold and hard, bringing the snow.

As I stood doing the dishes late one afternoon,
in the month of January.
I again noticed the sunflower, still straight and tall.

Its head covered in a white cap and its roots buried
deep under the snow, the sunflower stood there alone.

All the weeds had long since been gone, as was the grass,
and the leaves from the trees.

But even lonely and cold the single sunflower
proudly stood, hoping I suppose, for more seeds of its kind
to grow and replenish when the snow and cold have vanished.

AUTUMN'S HOPEFUL GLOW: A VILLANELLE

by Elizabeth Hodgson

From death comes warmth and autumn's hopeful glow,
Beginning the time when all will be remade.
We'll wait as patient seeds lie under snow.

The sharp winds nip 'round bonfires aglow.
Bright fruits from trees, warm sweaters we crochet.
From death comes warmth and autumn's hopeful glow.

Winds trill like arrows from a hunting bow,
Rush in to warn of coming winter's sway.
We'll wait as patient seeds lie under snow.

The hazy horizon and drifting leaves bestow
Small golden flakes to brighten coming gray.
This death brings warmth and autumn's hopeful glow.

Trade life for life: fronds blanket the ground to slow
The cruel cold grip of winter's dark. Be brave!
We'll wait as patient seeds lie under snow.

Aroma of fall; a cinnamon-dusted show
Before harsh winds of change announce gray days.
From death comes warmth and autumn's fading glow,
We'll wait as patient seeds lie under snow.

AN INLET TO BENEATH THE SURFACE

by Elsa Ingebrigtsen

People say I look tired,
probably because I am.
Tired of being mistreated, misunderstood.
Tired of going unheard.
Tired of putting on a face to prove to everyone
that my tiredness does not define my happiness.

They say, “If you are tired, why not sleep?”
But I wish not to sleep;
for when I awake, I am met with a harsh reality—
a dream is only merely a dream.

A dream of lush green pastures,
filled with those who love me.
A dream of the world unseen,
unburdened of the stresses in which
I long to be freed.

Once again awoken to the sound
of arguments, hatred, grief, and pain,
I open my eyes.
Then I wait.

I wait.
And I wait.
And I wait,
clinging to any hope that dreams really do come true.

But in all dreams, you must wake up.
So there my dream remains,
locked in the walls of my mind.

Therefore, I don't sleep.

I don't dream.

I enter the day with the same tired gaze.
A quick layer of mascara and blush can only hide so much.

YESTERDAY'S PAST

by Ginger Johnson

The teddy bears and dolls
Are put away for keeps.
High upon a shelf
In a lifeless sleep.

No more pretending,
Or hide-and-seek games.
Gone are the playmates
With make believe names.

Looking back when kisses
Made everything "all better."
The happiness and heartaches
Of first and last love letters.

Those very important
First time dates,
Hurrying to be ready,
Growing up couldn't wait.

Always someone to lean on,
Maybe Mom or Dad.
Going places with friends,
What great times we had.

Right now, it seems
Those years went too fast,
Longing for tomorrow's future,
Missing yesterday's past.

THE CALDERA OF MY HEART

by Atiya Khan

It was but a few words you said
Still, it was enough to generate a pyroclastic flow
Pushing me away from you
What had taken eons to build
Took seconds to destroy

There is no way to classify the tephra of my heart
Some broken pieces, jagged and sharp like your last words
 Cut me each time I am reminded of their existence
Others are gory
 Still dripping with the viscous magma of my blood

I should have known the history of the fragile ground upon which we
 stood
Felt something bubbling under the surface
 The silver and gold you gave me should have been warning signs
I should have noticed the words no longer flowed easily between us
 as they used to flow like rarified basalt
But instead were stunted, half-formed, rushing to end things
 Almost as if we knew the end was in sight

Oh, but how I needed that emptying of the magma chamber,
 the emptying of my heart
For it was so filled with you, there was room for nothing else
I now have space for the algae, the lichen
 the mosses and the ferns
Come colonize me
Make my barren heart whole again

So now life can thrive in desolation's abyss
In hearts shattered, in the solace of this
The caldera's blank, an open space
Welcoming only what brings joy and grace

And though the caldera of my heart may yet remain unfilled
 It is not unfulfilled
In the quiet aftermath, seeds shall find their way
As roots reach deep and cling to terrene humus

From these ashes new life will emerge
From barrenness springs the potential
 For a garden of hope to bloom,
 For the mosses and ferns to weave their new tapestry
 In the fertile soil of possibility

TEA IN THE MOONLIGHT

by Bibi Khan

With the weight of death on our shoulders
Among the broken bricks and shattered lives
In the darkness of a city reeking with acrid scents
From the explosion of bombs worse than Hiroshima,
We find a glimmer of hope in the light of the moon
Shining down on this graveyard we call home.

Cardboard scraps fuel the flames of a bonfire
Where we huddle for a bit of warmth and community
As we *steal this moment in time* to make tea.
A simple, yet profound, ritual to inject some normality
Into this otherwise end of our time reality.

With the call to prayer sounding in the distance
The fresh scent of the tea wafted through the air.
Sipping the hot fragrant tea in the moonlight,
The sweet taste of cardamom suffuses the tongue
As the slight minty bitterness of sage coats the throat.

Tonight the sky is clear; and almost soundless.
So much so that we can feel it filling our bodies.
Afraid to speak, not wanting to shatter this peace,
Silent tears roll down the cheeks of the women
Overwhelmed with grief for the horrors subjected to us.

Even the children are silent. Devastated by the hell
They thought they'd never see if they were good children.
What comes next? When will our life resume, or end?
Will this be the last time we have tea in the moonlight?

HUSH

by Emily Kjenaas

Hush.
Don't disturb
The lush silence,
The cacophony
Of the crush of slush
Beneath our feet
As we wander.
Hush.
Don't rush.
Let my eyes linger
On your flushed face,
Your slight smile,
Gentle as the snowflakes
Settling in your hair.
Hush.
Hold my hand
As you brush the broken
Leaves off my shoulders,
Sure and steadfast
In your mission
To lessen any burden that dares
To land on me.
Hush.
Let me look at you
Blush.
The frigid butterflies
In my stomach
Flutter, fly and melt
Into lovestruck mush.
The rumor is
That no two snowflakes
Are the same.

Which means there isn't anyone like you.
I thank the rushing
Wind that blew
You to me.
So we could walk
This wooded brush.
Hold my hand.
Hush.

THE LONG PONDERING

by Shawn Krinke

On a gentle hill, a farmer sits pondering.
His faded green Ford pickup hugs him close like a worn-in jacket,
The ever present North Dakota wind whispers softly of years past.

Below him rests his farmstead—built with generations of family toil and strength.
Just how many seeds were planted over the decades-long stewardship of the land?
How much good weight did the farmer add to the scales of history?
A knowing smile brushes his lips, like grain swaying in the breeze.

A warm and inviting white house of many additions—at the core echoes humble ancestry.
A dusty shop where the farmer's three boys learned to change oil and be self-reliant.
A row of evergreen trees hides the ghosts of memories not forgotten.
A paved driveway where his wife begins another meditative walk.

She: the partner, the coworker, and the confidant.
Antiquity labels farmers as lone individuals, the solitary custodians,
But not on this farm; not with her.
She is caretaker and combiner,
Mother and trucker.
She, too, plants.

Retirement has come for them,
The equipment will be sold,
The land rented.
None of those self-reliant boys are coming back to take over the farm,
And the farmer wonders if he taught them too much confidence.
The boys could have remained,
If only he'd twisted an arm a little harder.

But no, that's the way that the world goes round.
Just like the farmer can't force the land to produce,
He can't force his boys to stay.

Farming was his calling, not theirs. Legacy his core value.
If there's anything a farmer knows, it's which way the wind blows.
That and when to shut the operation down for the night.

In the longest of long runs, he knows the land isn't really his.
No, he just resides for a spell on this land,
The farmer—a grain of wheat in one long harvest, like his forebears of
old.

Everything—his whole life—sits in the back of his memory.
It's been a long pondering on that gentle hill, and work needs to be
done.

The old green Ford's engine hums to life, reliable as the sun behind the
farmer's back.
The fields beckon.

THE LIGHT

by Lekha Krishna Shankar

She is the light,
That guarded mine, from going out,
A light that revived my purpose.

She is the light,
That showered me with love,
A light that taught me to care.

She is the light,
That kept me nourished,
A light that nurtured my frame.

She is the light,
That stayed up all night,
A light that aided my healing.

She is the light,
That wiped my tears,
A light that was my solace.

She is the light,
That lulled me to sleep,
A light that helped me rest.

She is the light,
That taught me to pray,
A light that instilled faith.

She is the light,
That recited, stories,
A light that boosted my learning.

She is the light,
That schooled me, to take turns,
A light that taught me patience.

She is the light,
That pressed me, to seek goodness,
A light that brought me delight.

She is the light,
That cheered on my dreams,
A light that fed my hope.

She is the light,
That guided my path,
A light that was my compass.

She is the light,
That echoed—'I am able',
A light that made it all possible.

She—the light,
That shone so bright,
Rests in peace, tonight.

MY JOURNEY

by Lekha Krishna Shankar

From the land called Kerala—‘the land of coconut trees’,
To the land called North Dakota—the northern ‘friend’!
Oh, what a journey it is—
A journey of eight thousand miles.

From the land of the Western Ghats,
To the land of the midwestern plains,
Oh, what a journey it is—
A journey across the mountains.

From the land of beaches and backwaters,
To the land of valleys and rolling prairies,
Oh, what a journey it is—
A journey across many landscapes.

From the land of monsoons, heat, and humidity,
To the land that snows, freezes, and thaws,
Oh, what a journey it is—
A journey to explore the seasons.

From the land of rice and spices,
To the land of wheat and sunflowers,
Oh, what a journey it is—
A journey across many fields.

From the land of jasmines and golden Cassia trees,
To the land of coneflowers and wild prairie roses,
Oh, what a journey it is—
A journey to see nature’s beauties.

From the land of mackerel and pearl spots,
To the land of walleyes and northern pike,
 Oh, what a journey it is—
 A journey across many waters.

From the land of hornbills and elephants,
To the land of meadowlarks and bison,
 Oh, what a journey it is—
 A journey across the jungles.

From the land of mangoes and jackfruits,
To the land of apples and chokecherries,
 Oh, what a journey it is—
 A journey across the tropics.

From the land of kathakali and mohiniyattam,
To the land of powwows and square dances,
 Oh, what a journey it is—
 A journey that tells many stories.

From the land of drums and temples,
To the land of bells and churches,
 Oh, what a journey it is—
 A journey of faith, hope and dreams.

From the land called 'God's own country',
To the land called 'Peace Garden State',
 Oh, what a journey it is—
 One remarkable journey!

MIDWESTERN LEGACY: IN REMEMBRANCE OF A FISHERMAN

by Emily Meester

What I wouldn't give to hear the joy in your, "Hey there, kiddo!"
or to sit back, roll my eyes, and laugh
as you tell us all about the sorry state of affairs that we are in.

I miss you.

The world is nuts, and we know this, but I would just love to hear your
take on it one more time – *especially* if it is guaranteed to be mixed
with your preposterous explanations that end in one-liners that would
make even the cleverest clowns give up on their careers.

I miss you.

On the hardest of days, when my heart feels too crippled to be kind or
exhausted beyond the point to which I feel I can endure,

your life's persistence and resistance to the

perpetual punishment woven into this world

has left behind a hope and a joy that our at-times excruciating
existence is about more than the loudest shouts from the darkest
depths.

I miss you.

So while the sorrow sinks its teeth in and though many tears may fall, I
delight to know that your bright light has graced this world at all.

I pray the joy you left amongst us will join the warmth of sun,

and your tenacity will settle in with us like the snow,

that your laughter will echo in the rains,

and that your grace will guide us to a world more tender and
compassionate than the one we know.

I miss you.

May your memory make the grayest of skies seem blue,

and the darkest of nights shine your light.

I love you.

WITH TIME

by Carrie Miller

Time is fast
Not usually slow
It can stand still
Or have a natural flow

It flies
It drags
It wrinkles
It sags

It tortures
It consumes
It softens
It tunes

Time crunch
Time in
Time change
Time to begin

Where am I in it?
It's so hard to say
I can barely keep track
Yet I will try as I may

I know I am here
What do I sense?
Well, I am waiting
And it's making me tense
When will you get here?
I am looking forward to that part

Though I know that requires more work
And still has yet to start

It's all so surreal
And sometimes I'm just getting by
It's all very heavy
And I think I know why

My heart swells
I start pacing
My fists clench
My mind is racing

Pause (breathe).
Time out.
Take a moment; be gentle.
It's ok to have doubts.

Time here is our dearest friend
Whatever it holds and however we feel
Mostly, time is precious, and
It heals.

WET GRASS

by Jeannie Olfert

As the rain stopped,
I dared to look for you.
With pensive resolve,
I kept moving forward.
With each step in the matted grass,
I held the daisies with a strong grip.

So many stones,
But the names were not yours.
Amidst their vines and flowers,
There was love to be found.
But I wanted my person,
I wanted you.

Near a small apple tree,
Your name bid me to come closer.
As I laid the bouquet on your stone,
I opened my heart to anguish.
With courage surrounding me,
I felt the cost of love.

NIGHT ROSES

by S.E. Page

Night roses are better
than day blossoms—
Unable to dazzle with
petal frill and flush,
Sunlit senses must trade
eye light for the silk-soft
brush of shape in the dark,
perfume stirred sweet
by evening shadows,
and the quiet flutter
of flower bodies in time
with the twinkle
of starlight.

YELLOWBIRD

by Victor Pellerano

I saw you flying upon a gentle wind
I saw you down by the river's bend
Hey there, Yellowbird, can I be your friend

I saw you dancing on a summer breeze
Like a feather among the blowing leaves
Hey there, Yellowbird I feel much better
I found your gift, a soft golden feather

The Thunderbird spoke to me
He told of your mysteries
How you fly over mountains and seas
Oh my Yellowbird, it feels so good to be free

TIME

by A. Folan Prischmann

for Uncle Bick

Springtime,
A time of renaissance, rebirth, renewal,
Remembrance, relocation.
April; A time to be born,
A time to be borne back
On the tide of time
Swept back on the
Swell of an Eagle's wings

Repentant, unrepentant
Clothed only in a love, shared,
Reciprocated, unconditional.
More than a friendship
A kinship of souls
Nurtured by time
Transcending time.

Time, it is said,
Heals all.
Will there ever be enough?
Enough time?
Have it, give it, take it,
Make it.
Now is the time.

THAT SCAR

by Maddy Rinehart

That scar.
The one above your right cheek bone,
That is real beauty.
It runs deep – like a river,
Down your face, and it glistens,
Like the stars.

It is thin and silver,
That makes millions question how,
But not me,
I ask why.
Why do you hide this scar?
That shines like a shooting star?

This scar is the door to your insecurities,
And I'm going to open it.

It might as well be a speed bump,
That a car occasionally encounters,
On a road.
Because that's what it feels like.

But speed bumps are meant to be driven over,
They're there as a precaution,
Just like your scar.

You may feel as though it is a
Tear on your face, ripping your skin.
But you're clearly confused,
For it is more than a tear,
It defines who you are.

It symbolizes a story.
A story only you know.

Scars are evidence that you lived a life
worth reliving.
And I'm ready to finally do some admitting.
I am in awe of you.
You make my life worth living.

Bees buzz beyond the bushes,
Because they want to buzz
For you.
They swarm to you,
To sing a song for your scar.

In the silence of the night,
When all is quiet,
And children are reliant,
It is then,
When you awake,
Not even all the stars
Could illuminate
Your beauty.

THE ROAD TO UTOPIA

by Linda Lee Sand

There's so much left undone, little brother,
down here
sitting beneath the second largest peach willow tree
in the state, the catfish tasting riverwater with
their whiskers
I wish
I wish we'd had more time.
Then you could have explained the underlines
in the books you left, the tattered covers
held and felt, open, closed,
with your heart out there in the open road
of love
Equality prevails in Utopia
Underlined, underlined
I feel the press of the pencil, the weight of the lead,
your head bowed to the task, your heart all in,
unguarded as water, unscaled, unfinned, you
swam upstream and prevailed
in your thirst for the dignity of all, the call
so much a part of you — *so true* — that I taste it
now too on my tongue, in my heart, on our own long roads
down here
to Utopia.

MONSTER IN THE LAKE

by Linda Schell

Have you ever heard the lake howl
as though it is a monster from the deep?
A deep throaty sound, clear, penetrating
moving across the lake and into the air!

New to the seasons of the water,
naive of the lake's personality.
Once awake at 2 a.m. to the sound
fearing a creature was inside or out.

Sitting upright in bed, I could hear
the sound of cold outside the window.
The water was now ice, and the ice
now shifting, layering, growing deep.

Minutes of listening, heart pounding,
it came to me that this was my own
Monster living in the lake, my own
Loch Ness Minnesota Monster of the Lake.

THE BOY

by Dawn Schlienz

He pays no mind to the dirt and mud
Plastering his face and coating his clothes,
To the scrapes on his knees
Poking through the holes in his jeans,
Nor to the way his hair stands up
When he takes off his backward cap.

His joy is contagious.
Those two big, front teeth proudly displayed in a grin,
His scrunched-up nose,
And the way his eyes turn brighter blue,
Exhibit the joy he feels and the love he gives,
As he opens his arms wide
For his mama every time
She enters the room.

He pays no mind to the butterflies
Fluttering in his gut,
The blush that flushes his handsome, freckled face,
The way his hands shake and sweat,
As he asks his sweetheart
To dance.

His love is obvious,
With his heart on his sleeve,
His pulse beating
To the rhythm of the song they dance to,
His eyes wide open to take in every trace
Of the beauty of her face, of her body,
Of her love for him.

He pays no mind to the jitters,
The weakness in his once scraped-up knees,
Nor the heat that rises
In his belly when he opens his heart
As she walks down the aisle,
And takes her hand in his,
When her daddy gives her away.

His love and joy are contagious,
With his once-toothy grin,
His once sweaty, shaking hands,
His once scraped-up knees,
His bright blue eyes that sparkle even more as he
Holds his son in his two strong hands.

He pays no mind
To the pain in his heart, the tears in his eyes,
Nor the loneliness he dreads
When he holds his mama's hand
As she lies in the bed,
Waiting for her time to leave.

His pain is heartbreaking,
With his heart on his sleeve,
His head in his hands, his wife and son at his side,
As he says goodbye
To the woman who bandaged his knees,
Cleaned up the mud, combed his hair,
And turned his cap around.

Their love is endless.
She quietly voices the joy and love she felt
When he grinned,
With his scrunched-up nose,
His sparkling blue eyes,
And his arms opened wide.

And then she left the room.

A WALK THROUGH NYC

by Dawn Schlienz

A walk through New York City
Is like no other,
Leading you through valleys and heights
Designed by leaders
And readers of hopes and desires,
Visionaries and dodgy grifters.

Among walls of brick and mortar
Are divisions of humanity,
Cloaking you in invisibility,
Rendering you virtually alone
Among those you'll never know.

Vastly different from Small Town, USA,
With "Howdies" and "Heys"
You won't get here.
Wearing selfishness and pleasantries
Like badges on proud chests
Remaining silent on sidewalks
Confined with scaffolding.

Blocks of humanity
Block views of limitless
Towers and delis,
Walgreens and Whole Foods,
Bodegas and alley entrances
To hidden clubs and cafes.

You merge with the horde,
Invincible,
Invisible,

Ready for anything.
Or anyone.

The street musician
With his 3-string guitar
And money jar,
Strumming an ambitious version
Of the tune is his head.

The crusty homeless human
Smelling of last night's wine and urine,
With hand out for a handout,
Waiting, hoping, begging
For a "baconeggandcheese."

Street heralds conducting crowds,
Shouting "Break! Break! Break!"
For street dancers at Broadway and 44th,
While buskers beat buckets and bowls,
Putting Starr to shame.

Co-eds reduced to Liberty's likeness,
Patinaed from top to toe,
With G-strings for gawkers
To string bills in support
Of freedom and more awareness.
From and for what, they don't know.

The BNTs with their suits
And cases slung like armor and shield,
Rushing to prepare for war
On an island
Of their own design and making.

A walk through NYC
Is like no other,
With walls of invisibility
And cloaks of humanity,
Rendering those around you
Invisible and alone.

PAPIER-MÂCHÉ

by Alex Serthes

Papier-mâché.
I look in the mirror
I see Papier-mâché.

Old news and magazines?
They've seen worse days.
Torn to shreds, rearranged.

Glued back together
In fanciful ways.
Starting out empty,
Made to be full.

Breaking apart
Is the joy of this art.

WHAT IS THE HEART

by Alex Serthes

What is the heart but a feral creature?
Captive in chains behind bones formed to cage
So – fruitlessly – she struggles to reach her.

Staccato screams in blind, impotent rage
A war drum beats against animate bars
Till the absence in lonesome nights feels strange.

Memory glazes my eyes, blacking out stars.
Hands reach out blindly as I dream of you—
They brush past the spaces you left: fresh scars.

Awaiting your touch, her signal to coup.
Untamed, she stands, hackles up, e'er eager.
Release her, wild creature, to fly to you!

What is the heart but a feral creature?
Triumphant – she rests just as you meet her.

STRUGGLE OF HOPE

by Karla Smart-Morstad

At the Guatemalan National Palace, broken cement weaves a footpath through floral gardens. A nest, slipped from the branches of a eucalyptus, spills its fledglings. Skin and tiny beaks stain the concrete. As for feathers, here was only the hope.

Of course, everything moves toward death. This is how Guatemala lives. Everyone knows. Even ideas darken, or are erased. Children disappear, and husbands, and women. *Estado fuerte* and the tastes of the North travel every path.

In the plaza, pigeons, sparrows, doves. Families sleep on cardboard beds, small fires for tortillas, nothing for rain. They tell their story, the same story told to the National Palace. Overnight they are removed. *Los desaparecidos*. Hauled in garbage trucks.

In the highlands, sierra rain threads heaven and earth. Not a drop pivots from the course, not a word of wind. Thunder calls the names of the Quiche dead. Cypress and pines hold these secrets. Then the lightning screams “Still they are dying.”

“They have started to make us kneel on glass, if we ask for too much.” Maquila workers, maquila wages. In Barrio La Esperanza, thirteen faucets serve four thousand families. In the campo, as a warning, houses and latrines are burned. Exhaustion grows in export fields of broccoli, snow peas, miniature squash.

In the forest, whole communities wait. Fog covers the face of the volcano. Indigenous families stare through history, hunger, terror. Hiding in their homeland. Their mountains fierce every night, each day. Refugees with nothing, no safe road, no quiet sleep.

Quetzal, sacred, ancient bird. Each feather a sweep of Maya memory. Stories of bright colors, clean air. Few things are plentiful here, except *la lucha*. Indians. Teachers. Priests. Campesinos. Union workers. Students. Lives turn to stains. Orphans and widows, hearts peel open.

Buzzards crease circles in the smokey skies, then drop to feed from landfills. *Esperanza. Esperanza.* Everywhere in Guatemala, “Who will remember us?”

WITH ALL MY LOVE

by Lisa Swenson

If you were a poem
Line by Line,
I'd memorize you
And make it rhyme.

If you were a melody
A love song sweet
Forever I'd play you
On repeat.

If you were a garment
Comfortable and all-weather
I'd clothe myself,
You're my favorite sweater.

If you were a lantern
The darkness to light
You'd show us the way
Dispelling the night.

If you were a photo
In a gold frame
You'd be timeless, unfaded
Ever the same.

But you are a being
And heaven decreed
That we must be mortal
With all my love...Godspeed.

SCENTS OF A NORTHERN FOREST

by Sheri Wien

There is nothing like the scent of a pine forest.
It elicits a feeling of deep peace.
I exhale and sigh as I step into one,
 letting go of the energy of the city.
Wildflowers carpet the forest floor, releasing a soft floral aroma.
 it makes me smile and I feel embraced by Mother Nature.
The smell of pine needles on the ground,
 baking in the sun.
Fallen trees rotting with musky mushrooms,
 turning back into earthy scented soil.
After spending some time in the forest, my thoughts turn to the present
 moment
 and my worries are erased.

TO THE MOLDY BREAD THAT WANTED TO BE A SANDWICH

by AJ Wylder

You were made with love but bought on impulse.
By one who did not appreciate your worth
and who discarded you just as easily.
You thought it cruel,
that you who were made to sustain
had been tossed away
without care or appreciation.
It was indeed cruel, but it was not the end.
Not for you and really, not for anyone.
In the endless cycle of *rot* and *regrowth*
you found that unbecoming
was another way of saying

“I became something else.”

You had children of spores and microscopic lives
Who, without you, had no chance to live.
In them your body was reincarnated
into forms you both did and did not recognize.
It wasn't the way you wanted to feed the hungry.
But you did it anyway.

And in a chain of immutable reactions
of biology and circumstance,
You found yourself growing again as something different
The starter for a thing you had wanted to be.
This time you were not just the thing being made
but rather a *Living Thing*.

You worked in tandem with loving hands
to give birth to something that was once your dream.
Surrounded by sugars and warmth
and a darkness you no longer feared.
You nurtured dead things into something
both different and familiar.
And when bread was broken that night—

You were there.

Both as what you once were
and what you became.

FICTION

MERCY WALK

by John Anderson

“Get away from that thing, Cal! It’s gross!” Helen told her husband.

“And he stinks,” she added.

Cal was standing in front of Bernie’s cage, cell, really. Bernie was a tourist attraction along highway 84 on the north edge of town.

SEE THE LIVE BEAR FOR \$1.00!

Bernie was an old black bear who lived in a small cage next to a propane tank behind a gas station convenience store. A faded sign in the parking lot showed a bulky, robust bear standing on its hind legs towering over nearby tourists. For \$1.00, the sign insisted, one can see this majestic beast. When Cal saw the sign last spring he crossed two lanes of road to turn in.

“What are you doing?” Helen asked.

“We’ve got time, I have to see this,” Cal answered.

“No we don’t, your appointment is in 35 minutes!” Helen said.

“It’s not like they’ll start without me,” Cal replied.

Cal wondered if he was stalling, or if he really was interested in seeing the bear. Either way he had already turned in to the lot and pulled into a space by the bathrooms.

“You can wait in the car if you want,” he told Helen.

“No, I’ll get out with you; I have to pee anyway,” she said.

“Ok, I’ll go in and pay two bucks so we can look at the bear out back,” said Cal.

Helen waved at Cal as she went in the women’s bathroom. Cal walked past a pallet of firewood and entered the store.

Cal waited behind an 80-year-old man who was buying lottery tickets. The old man dug in his pockets for exact change. When the man shuffled

away clutching his tickets Cal propped himself on the counter with his two skinny arms.

“What’s the deal with the bear?” Cal asked.

“One dollar and you can go through the back gate and see Bernie,” the man behind the counter said.

“I mean, where did you get a bear?” Cal asked.

“Bernie’s been here for almost 20 years. My uncle who sold me this store bought him as a young cub from that old place called Frontierland up on highway 19. There’s a Walmart there now, I think, or Target, I can’t remember,” said the man behind the counter.

“I remember that place,” said Cal. “My parents used to take my sister and I there when we were kids. There were all kinds of animals there. And a gift shop with all kinds of Chinese made Indian gifts. It was kind of cool,” said Cal.

“Yup, that’s it,” said the man.

“And I recall a huge female bear there named Sally. She was like the biggest female black bear on record, they claimed,” Cal noted.

“Yup, 750 pounds of ornery mama-bear,” said the man behind the counter. “Bernie is her cub. She was not happy when they took him from her. He’s damn near as big as she was, maybe bigger. Not quite a griz, but huge for a black. You wanna see him or what?” said the man.

“I remember being in awe of Sally. I used to love just staring at her in her cage. I just love bears! They have such a strong serenity,” said Cal.

“For a buck you can stare at her son,” said the man.

“Sure, here’s for me and my wife,” Cal said as he handed the man two dollars.

“Ok, just go out back behind the store. Bernie’s on the other side of the propane tank,” said the man. “He may not even wake up; he sleeps a lot.”

Cal waited for Helen by the bathroom. When she came out they walked slowly to the back of the store. As they turned the corner the smell hit them. It was an animal smell, not bad, wild.

“Phew,” said Helen.

“Reminds me of Frontierland,” Cal chuckled.

“Let’s not take too long, we’ve got less than a half hour now,” Helen reminded Cal.

“Just a quick look,” Cal said.

As they came around the propane tank they saw the cage. It was about six feet tall and ten feet square. It had thick bars that were bent in some places. The bars were three inches apart. A rusty gate was secured with a heavy chain and padlock. In the middle of the cage a massive bulk of dark bear stood on four legs. Bernie was not sleeping, as the man behind the counter said.

Bernie was staring directly at the couple as they slowly approached. His head moved side to side like a radar, nostrils gaping to take in their scent.

“Dear God! That thing is a beast!” Helen exclaimed.

“Wow!” Cal said. “He’s as big as a grizzly dang near,” he added.

“Don’t get too close,” Helen insisted. “He’s looking at us.”

“He looks curious,” Cal said. “I want to get closer. God, I love bears!”

Cal and Helen spent the next ten minutes looking at Bernie. Bernie watched them watch him. At one point Bernie turned and moved to the back of the too small cage. He sat down and leaned against bars that groaned under his weight.

Although Bernie had not been weighed in a couple years, he was in fact bigger than his mother Sally. She had topped out at around 750 pounds, huge for a female black bear. Two years ago Bernie was 830 pounds.

Bernie was 21 years old and showed a little snow around his snout. He was missing one claw on his left paw. He had a sore spot on his right knee that he had been licking. Otherwise he looked pretty healthy. But very bored.

“That cage is way too small for him,” Helen said. “He can barely turn around in there. The sign out front showed him standing on his hind legs. But this awful cage has bars on the ceiling. He doesn’t even have room to stand. I hate this,” she said.

“Ok” said Cal. “Let’s go.”

But Cal knew he would be back; he would come this way many times in the next few months. He and Helen walked back to the car. They got in and drove up highway 84 toward the border to the clinic where Cal would undergo his first of dozens of chemotherapy treatments.

Two months previous Cal went to his normal yearly physical. Everything was fine; he felt great. Three days later the doctor called and said Cal’s blood panel came back with elevated white cells.

“Probably nothing,” said Dr. Carlton. “We’ll do another test to be sure,” Carlton added.

Lymphoma. Further tests revealed a tumor the size of a golf ball in Cal’s lung. Hadn’t he been feeling extra tired lately, now that he thought of it? His appetite not so great? He noticed his pants were sagging. Dr. Carlson was confident chemotherapy and a few shots of radiation would get it under control. However, this was a bomb for Helen and Cal, who were beginning to think about their retirement in ten years or so. They hoped to work another ten or twelve years then retire to Washington state.

A plan of treatment was put in place at the cancer center just inside Canada. There was a sister community about 40 miles north with a satellite clinic known for its oncology department. Dr. Glen Wentz was well known for his innovative, sometimes controversial, approach to treatment. He found Canada more open to his innovative ideas.

Highway 84 North would become a well traveled route in days to come. Helen and Cal had not been that way in a while and had never noticed the bear exhibit on the few trips they had made into Canada over the years. Bernie would become Cal’s highway friend.

The next time Cal came he brought a folding chair. The first chemo treatment wasn’t too harsh and he was ok to make the drive into Canada without Helen. Dr. Wentz had chosen a tried and true therapy to attack Cal’s cancer: Carboplatin IV infusions followed by radiation on his lungs. Fingers crossed.

Cal paid his dollar in the store, bought a bottle of chocolate milk (one of the only things that didn’t bother his stomach in recent days), and went out back to say hi to Bernie. Bernie always seemed to know Cal was coming. He would stand in the middle of his cage and watch as Cal came around the propane tank.

Cal sat and watched Bernie, who watched Cal. Bernie’s nostrils always flaring, ingesting Cal’s scent. Cal had read somewhere that a bear’s sense of smell is 100 times stronger than a bloodhound’s. Could Bernie smell that Cal was sick?

Cal began going to see Bernie even when he was not going for treatments. He always brought his folding chair. Cal came so often the man in the store started waving him through without collecting the dollar. The dollar was always a formality; most people who wanted to see Bernie (not many, these days) just walked out back, anyway. One time, a few

months after several rounds of chemo and radiation, Cal came early in the morning and Bernie was not in his cage.

Cal panicked. Cal's body was wracked with pain by this point. The treatments had so far failed to halt the cancer now racing through his body like a white water raft. But Cal nearly sprinted to the front of the store and inside.

"What happened to Bernie?" Cal hollered to the man.

"No worries, man," said the owner. "He's in the quonset next to his cage. We move him in there every morning to feed him, let him run around, and clean his pen."

Cal realized he had never wondered about how Bernie was fed and exercised, and who cleaned his area.

"Who's 'we'?" Cal asked.

"My uncle and I," said the man. "I bought this store from him. I told him I didn't want the bear unless he agreed to take care of him."

"Oh," said Cal. "So your uncle comes by every day and looks after Bernie?"

"He does," said the man. "I am starting to wonder which of those old bastards will die first. I hope it's Bernie, cuz he don't really care much for me. My uncle should be bringing Bernie back to his cage any time now."

Cal went out back to see a short white-haired man bringing Bernie back to his cage. It was a ten foot walk between the quonset and Bernie's cage. Bernie and the old man made the short jaunt in a rehearsed manner. This had been the routine for many years, Cal guessed. As Bernie stepped into his pen Cal noticed the bear was looking toward the thick woods 40 yards behind the property, the thick woods that led to endless wilderness and Canada.

As he entered his cage Bernie immediately became aware that Cal was nearby. Did he wag his stumpy tail, just a little? Do bears wag their tails?

The old man saw Cal. Taking off his leather gloves he approached Cal extending his hand. The uncle was well into his eighties but still moved like a much younger man. And his grip was hearty.

"You must be the fella my nephew says comes to see Bernie all the time," the old man said.

"I am," said Cal.

"Appreciate it," the man said "Bernie doesn't get many visitors anymore. I come every day in the morning. I have known him since he was a cub. But you can see I am not young...gonna be 87 soon. I may

have to bring him to the bear habitat up near Winston. But that won't be easy."

"I hope you don't send him too soon. I like to see him several days a week," said Cal.

Cal didn't go into details about his health issues, and the old man didn't ask. Bernie was snoozing while the men talked. After a few moments the old man said goodbye and Cal sat in his folding chair. He watched Bernie sleep, huge ribcage moving slowly up and down.

Cal imagined he drew strength from Bernie's long deep breaths. His own breaths were becoming more hitched and shallow in recent weeks. Cal sat for a few more minutes and then walked back to his car and drove home.

The next morning Cal came early to watch Bernie in the quonset. The old man saw Cal walk up just as he was unlocking Bernie's cage.

"Mind if I watch Bernie exercise?" Cal asked.

"There's a little office with a window in here. I guess you could sit in there and look out. Not sure you should be loose in there," the old man said. "Bernie's pretty tame, but let's be cautious," he added. "Now his mom, Sally, she was ornery as hell. We had to sedate her to move her around."

"Okay," said Cal. "I'll go in the office. I really want to see Bernie moving around in more space than his little cage."

After Cal was safe in the small office the old man walked Bernie into the quonset. Cal watched the old man hang up the key to the cage padlock on a hook inside the quonset door.

And then 21-year-old grey muzzled Bernie came to life.

Cal marveled at how nimble Bernie was. The old man had set up a playground of sorts for Bernie. There were tractor tires, barrels, and a few huge logs. Bernie ran rounds through the obstacles, stopping to sniff each item. At one point Bernie put his paw under the biggest of the tractor tires and slid it across the hay strewn floor like a child would kick a beach ball. Cal's eyebrows shot up as his jaw dropped. Cal guessed it would take three or four strong men to carry that tire.

Bernie rolled barrels and logs, stood on the tires, and loped around the quonset for another 20 minutes. Cal was in heaven, glowing with pride at what his new friend could do. Even though Bernie was in his third decade of life he scampered like a playful cub. Cal loved Bernie, and he loved the old man for providing this space for him.

As Bernie began to slow down, the old man brought out a wheelbarrow filled with vegetables, fruit, and what looked like a slab of meat. Bernie's snout honed in on the scent and he darted for the wheelbarrow. In ten minutes Bernie had eaten all of the food. He walked to a trough and drank for a good minute. Then he walked leisurely around his playground for another ten minutes. The old man looked at Cal in the window and nodded slightly. Cal nodded back. The old man walked Bernie out the door and back into his pen. Cal noticed Bernie's head turn to look toward the back of the property, toward the woods. Toward Canada.

The next week was bad. The buildup of chemo in Cal's system made him very weak. What started as a scratchy throat evolved into full pneumonia.

Helen came home one evening to find Cal shivering, barely conscious and wrapped in a thick quilt in his recliner.

"Jesus! Cal, honey! I have to take you in!" Helen cried.

"I...I'll be ok," Cal mumbled.

"No! I am taking you to the ER. Can you walk?" Helen asked.

He could. Barely. Helen got Cal to the hospital. The doctor admitted him overnight for X-rays, IV antibiotics, and observation.

"Looks like the chemo and radiation have really squeezed his lungs" Dr. Stein told Helen. "I am glad you brought him in. His lungs are full of fluid and his left one almost collapsed," he added.

"Oh God, Cal!" Helen choked back tears.

"A few days here with antibiotics and rest and he'll be stronger. He's not there yet. I'll call Dr. Wentz tomorrow and tell him Cal is here. I want Dr. Wentz to see Cal's X-rays, too," Stein said.

"Thank you, Dr. Stein!" Helen said.

She sat down next to the bed in which Cal was already deep asleep. Stein gently touched Helen's shoulder and quietly walked out of the room. Cal dreamed of Bernie's huge lungs pulling in endless waves of fresh oxygen.

Two days after Cal was admitted to the hospital Dr. Wentz came to visit.

"I think we'll pull you off chemo for a while, Cal. Let's see if we can build your strength and weight up a bit," said Wentz.

"Amen to that," said Cal. "I feel like a petri dish full of chemicals. I could use a break."

“We’ll get back on track in a couple weeks. I hate to say it, but that mass in your lung has grown. And there’s a couple spots on your other lung as well,” said Wentz.

“I had a feeling that things weren’t so great in there,” said Cal as he pointed a scrawny finger at his chest.

“I’ve seen bigger ships turn around before,” said Dr. Wentz. “Couple weeks we’ll hit it hard again. If you’re willing, there are some experimental medications being made available we can try,” Wentz added.

“We’ll see. Give me two or three weeks to get some strength,” Cal said.

Three days later Cal went back home. He was feeling a second wind. In fact, he felt pretty damn good. Helen picked him up and they even stopped for a bite on the way. Cal talked Helen into saying hi to Bernie after they ate. Helen agreed to drive by the store where Bernie lived, just for a while.

As always, Bernie seemed to know he had visitors coming. Just like that first time a few months ago, Bernie was standing on four legs in the center of his enclosure as Cal and Helen came around the propane tank. Bernie watched them. Cal had now become so familiar with Bernie that he could put his hand next to the bars and Bernie would sniff him like a family dog. Helen even extended her hand for Bernie to examine.

Bernie inhaled both of their scents, his enormous snout sucking in the smell of sweaty hands. He then turned around and sat against the bars, his 800 pounds evoking complaints from the iron. He yawned and lazily bit at a fly. He took one lick at the sore on his right knee. It was almost entirely healed thanks to a few weeks of antibiotic ointment. Cal smiled. Bernie’s life wasn’t super exciting, but that old man took good care of him. Cal and Helen held hands for a few minutes and watched Bernie as he began to doze, huge head bobbing on an even huger neck.

“I can see why you like to come here” said Helen. “His strength...I...I don’t know...he...” Helen teared up.

“Yeah,” Cal replied. “I know.”

After a bit they walked to the car and drove home, not saying a word.

The next week was good. Cal felt enough strength to work in his garden a little. He knew not to overdo it. His lungs were getting more stingy with oxygen.

He also went in to work a few days. Several weeks before he had stepped down as the supervisor of the IT department at a growing

electrical supply firm. But he felt energized to help out. There were several new hires who appreciated his experience. But he didn't overdo it. He felt great; the fact that the buildup of chemo in his body was leaching away was surely partly why. He would meet with Dr. Wentz in a couple of weeks to talk about moving forward.

After work, Cal drove to see Bernie. As usual, Cal set up his folding chair and sat with his massive friend. Speckles of sunlight warmed the back of his neck. He dozed.

When Cal awoke he saw Bernie staring right at him, head high and alert. Bernie was guarding Cal. Shadows had grown long and there was a chill in the air. How long had he been out?

"Well, good evening, Old Timer," Cal said.

Did Bernie's ears go back just a tiny bit at the sound of Cal's voice? Like a faithful old farm dog when its owner returns from the field? Cal said goodnight and promised to see Bernie in a couple days. But it would be longer.

Cal had an appointment the next day with Dr. Wentz. He and Helen drove right by Bernie on the way to the clinic. They intended to stop on the way back. But the news was not good.

"Well, Cal," said Wentz. "Your scan shows a lot of change in your right lung."

"What do you mean?" asked Helen.

Wentz put the scan print on the lighted screen. A gnarled fist that had been a lung a few months ago dominated the print.

"Cal's right lung is full of cancer," said Dr. Wentz. "And his left is starting to go that way."

"Oh God...what...Oh Christ!" said Helen. "Now what?" she asked.

Cal sat quietly. He was the calmest person in the room.

Wentz cleared his throat.

"Ahem...well, I think we can talk with a surgeon. We can maybe get that right lung out. I am considering doubling the radiation on the left lung. There is a new chemotherapy drug that we can try. It's not legal in the States. I have read that it works in some cases."

"Cal, we have to try. You've been doing so well!" Helen exclaimed.

Cal remained quiet.

"We can try this Cal. You'll be sick as hell, but it might work. You will have to be on oxygen for the rest of your life, no doubt about that," Wentz said.

“Can we think about it?” Cal asked.

“Of course,” said Wentz. “I’d like to admit you to the hospital for a couple of days to run more tests. I want to make sure you are a candidate for this new drug,” said Dr. Wentz.

Helen’s hand was white as she clenched Cal’s in hers. She was nodding quickly.

“Okay, that’s fair,” Cal said.

Wentz clapped Cal on the shoulder as he rose from his stool. He put the scan print back in a folder under his arm.

“I will have my nurse, Violet, get you registered for a room. You can stay now, right?” Wentz asked.

“Sure, why not?” Cal said calmly.

Helen kissed him and followed Wentz out the door to ask more questions and talk to Violet about registering Cal. Cal sat alone, oddly calm, in the exam room. He closed his eyes and thought about his giant friend. He wondered when he would see him again.

It would be about a week. Cal spent three days in the hospital undergoing tests. Dr. Wentz decided that despite Cal’s weakness they would go ahead with the increased radiation and experimental chemo. Surgery was off the table. Cal was far too weak and cutting into him would risk infection and other complications. He was scheduled for the following Monday morning to begin the aggressive regimen.

Cal knew what he was facing. Wentz had told him this would make him sick as hell, but it might buy him a little more time. He and Helen talked it over and agreed to try. But he knew the score.

Oddly, Cal felt calm. He felt pretty good, too. Other than his labored breaths he felt little pain. The lung that was no longer a lung was numb; cancer had eaten through all the nerve endings, he guessed.

Sunday evening, the night before he was to begin the new treatment, Cal insisted he go see Bernie. Helen didn’t protest. She offered to drive him, but Cal declined.

“I actually feel ok, Helen,” Cal said. “I can use the drive to clear my head.”

“Bring your jacket,” Helen reminded him.

“Got it!” Cal called back as he climbed into the car setting his portable oxygen machine on the passenger seat.

Cal drove to the north edge of town like he had so many times. He had never come to see Bernie this late at night. When he arrived at the

store he saw that it was closed. Cal was pleased, he didn't feel like small talk with anyone. Except Bernie.

Even at that late hour Bernie knew Cal was coming. He was on his feet and alert when Cal rounded the propane tank. It was cold. Wispy clouds of steamy breath coiled around Bernie's face. Cal thought he looked like a mythical beast. Bernie looked way too big for that damn cage.

"Hey old buddy," said Cal.

Bernie's head cocked slightly to one side. Cal felt serene, calm. No pain tonight. It was the eve of what was to be radical medical intervention to halt the aggressive cancer racing through his body. "You'll be sick as hell," Dr. Wentz had said.

How much time will it give Cal? And with the fog and sickness of chemicals and pain killers will he even be living? Cal sat in his folding chair. He and Bernie watched each other. Cal saw Bernie turn his head toward the back of the lot. The woods at the edge of the property sawed a jagged line against the sky lit by a moon Cal couldn't see. Cal looked back at Bernie, who was still standing in the center of his enclosure. Bernie stared at Cal.

Without even thinking, Cal walked to the door of the quonset. He turned the knob. It was open. He reached up and grabbed the key to the padlock for Bernie's cage. He walked back and stood in front of Bernie. Bernie stared at Cal.

Cal put the key in the padlock and turned. It was well worn and opened easily. Cal pulled the chain from the door. The door swung open quietly. Cal dropped the chain and lock to the ground and stepped back. Bernie stared at Cal and sniffed. Cal nodded slowly.

Bernie stepped out of his too small cage. Even on four legs Bernie was almost as tall as Cal's six feet two inches. Man and bear looked at each other carefully. Bernie came closer. The giant gray muzzle touched Cal's face. Cal breathed slowly with his one spongy lung.

Bernie stood up on his hind legs, like the picture on the billboard out front. He towered over Cal. He puffed steamy breath from his snout into the cool air eight feet above the ground. He looked down at Cal and gently placed his left paw on Cal's shoulder. Cal noticed that the missing claw had grown back.

They gazed at each other. Bernie's enormous head peered down at Cal. Cal smiled and nodded slowly at his friend. Cal was dead instantly.

His neck broke before his legs betrayed his scrawny weight. Bernie's right paw had swung with a speed and strength that no man on earth could have stopped. Cal melted to the ground, his remaining tiny lung squeezed out the last of his warm breath.

Bernie softly nudged Cal with his snout. Cal lay still. Bernie stood over Cal for a moment. His nose moved side to side like a radar. After a bit Bernie stepped away from his friend and turned toward the back of the property. Toward endless dark wilderness. Toward Canada. He walked.

THE GROVE

by Kyle J. Anderson

California. The land of the beautiful, the rich, and the unattainable standards for the common midwestern transplant to achieve. Since being uprooted from his humble home, Liam tried to keep up with the trends. He always thought his physique was acceptable, and he loved the laugh lines across his face, the thinning black hair on his head, and the belly that was well-fed. Conrad, his husband, moved them to the Hollywood Hills after selling his first multipart script to Paramount. They ordered three movies from the submission. It was a melodramatic love story between a man and woman, which was nothing to write home about in Liam's opinion, but he was supportive and didn't have much going on in *his* professional life. This kind of lifestyle satisfied his free spirit, flying by the seat of his pants and going where the wind took him. Conrad was always the brighter star in their relationship, not leaving any room for Liam to bloom, even though Liam gave him half of his ideas for scripts and would stay up all night editing them. Conrad was not the sharpest tool in the shed, but he had star quality and the right connections. His dirty blonde hair and chiseled body also helped, and he had enough filler in his face to be in the running for the new edition of the Ken doll.

Elaborate homes adorned the hills, with secured gated entry to every driveway, and fences that were too high to climb for any potential stalkers. Liam had an uneasy feeling as they made the ascent to this new residence, trying to keep his eyes down. Everyone left their curtains wide open, and these weren't standard patio doors that you see in modular homes. Some homes had entire walls made into glass, so that the view of the ocean could be accessible at all times. You would think that once inside the community, you wouldn't be able to see what your neighbor was doing, but that wasn't the case. There was no shame, no dignity. Nude gatherings, Botox parties where everyone sat in a circle in massage recliners, copious amounts of snorting *something*. Liam felt like everyone was looking at him, as he was obese in comparison and did not keep up on his facial hair grooming. There was a heaviness in the hills. Authenticity fleeting and

personalities coming from a dime bag and a handle of tequila. Liam instantly felt like a peasant amongst royalty.

“Well, here we are!” Conrad walked into the foyer which was hugged by two staircases that curved in opposite directions. He left his bags at the threshold for Liam to trip on, which he surely did. “Don’t you just love it, darling? Isn’t it exquisite?” He slipped into a Cockney accent while outstretching his arms, as if he were the architect and taking credit for the structure.

“It’s uh, it’s cute! A lot of white, but we can mute that with the right décor!” Liam recovered from his stumble and looked around.

“Oh, my little nerd, I’ll make you appreciate high end taste in no time!” Conrad dropped the accent and guffawed, rubbing his husband’s head like one would do to a golden retriever after doing his business outside.

Liam brought the rest of the luggage inside as if he was the hired help. The house came furnished from the previous owners. Living room, all seven bedrooms, the four bathrooms, even some artwork on the walls, and the main thing that drove a wedge between Liam and Conrad—a fully stocked bar on every floor. It wasn’t the physical act of having drinks that bothered Liam, it was who Conrad became after a few too many martinis. He was even more condescending and biting than when he was sober. Liam put up with it only because Conrad was providing a life that Liam had never known. The celebrity parties, the lavish lifestyle, getting anything and everything you need at the swoosh of an outgoing text message. Liam was simply along for the ride, even if he had to clean up the sickness that Conrad left behind on any given night.

“We will save on a maid with how attentive you are!” Conrad came down from the bedroom, completely naked and stumbling with one eye closed. Liam was scrubbing the couch and the floor underneath it. “You don’t need to do that.” He continued, clumsily grabbing a throw blanket from a nearby armchair to cover himself.

“I do, though. Apparently, you sent out invites to a housewarming party.” Liam responded, less than impressed, but familiar with this situation. It happened time and time again at every crappy apartment they had together. Liam was the only reason they got every security deposit check back, which Conrad intercepted and did God-knows-what with it. It probably went up his nose, or to fund his dream that had seemingly come true. He made his way through the mansion, making sure nothing was broken or there wasn’t vomit drying on any walls or behind the toilet. Conrad left moments before to go to the gym with his new famous friends. His new circle was made up of other writers, up-and-coming

actors, singers, entrepreneurs, and nepotism babies. Liam was lonely for a minute but took the opportunity to crack open his laptop and pull up his novel that he had started years ago, before he met Conrad. To his surprise, the entire document had been deleted. All one hundred and nine pages. It wasn't much, and a glimmer of hope to start fresh outweighed any anger, frustration, or confusion. He immediately locked the document via password, so that no one could edit or delete it but him. He had an inkling that Conrad found it and got rid of it to eliminate any competition but tried to not think about that possibility. In any case, his brain was too foggy to start anything new. He still gave it a random title and locked it.

Darkness fell over the hills. The lights under the Hollywood sign turned on automatically, and everyone started to turn on their interior lights. There was no sign of Conrad. No text, no call, no Snapchat, nothing. Liam mischievously walked over to the bar after putting on some easy listening music. He hadn't had a drink in months, because taking care of his husband was a full-time job on top of his full-time job. Before the move, Liam was working his way up in the world of graphic design. He had landed billboards, high circulation magazines and newspapers, a few album covers, movie posters. It was all put on hold, and there was no money set aside. Conrad was an adult child who drained almost every penny with his irresponsible ways. Liam was just expected to pay for it all.

The first sip of alcohol slowed his brain and relaxed his muscles, but he was craving fresh air, so he brought the bottle of vodka, a bucket of ice, and mixers onto the balcony. This wasn't an ordinary apartment balcony. It was large enough for a full patio furniture set, a built in firepit, and a medium sized hot tub. It wrapped around the entire third floor to provide a full view of the area. Liam danced around the entire balcony, fourth drink in hand, after connecting the built-in Bluetooth speaker and blasting hits from the nineties. That free-spirited little boy from the Midwest was alive and well, allowing the elements to recharge his once free spirit. He was so caught up in that moment that he didn't even realize that a section of the railing had been weakened. He grabbed the top of the railing, about to pull off a risqué move for the neighborhood to see, and then he heard the snapping of the wood and his stomach rose to his throat as he fell three stories into the shrubbery, somewhat breaking his fall.

"Liam?" Conrad poked his head through the front door in the wee hours of the morning to see if his husband was home. He kept calling his name as he stammered through the estate, and when there was no sign of him, he motioned for two other men to come inside. Liam was slowly coming to, and in his blurred vision he could see broken branches and

greenery, amongst many scrapes and scratches. He squinted up toward the balcony and pieced it all together after seeing the section of railing that gave way. Three vague human-like shapes were peering over the wreckage, calling for him. It was in this moment that Liam had a choice; he could be rescued by his husband and the two other mystery men, or he could change the trajectory of his life and slip into the literal unknown. Impulse took over, and Liam used the less damaged leg to propel his body deeper into the shrubbery, camouflaging himself. He let out a sigh of relief when Conrad and company retreated back inside the house to continue partying. The lack of care or concern made him feel better about his decision to leave, but now what? Daylight would soon arrive, and he knew he had to find shade from the impending heat.

He made his way to a group of trees, to which he could pull himself up to a standing position. All he could see was light pollution from his residence, and he could hear the muffled bass from the music blasting. Had Conrad gone missing, Liam would have done everything he could to find him, but Conrad didn't have the capacity to do the same. He tried not to be surprised at this fact, but damn, it hurt. It *really* hurt. His face scrunched up and his heart sank, and finally, the tears started to roll. There was no one else around, so he let it all go at that moment. Screaming, crying, shouting, getting out all the emotions that he held back in regard to his husband. None of it mattered anymore, and even if he wanted to file divorce papers, it's not like he could consult the wildlife that he would inevitably encounter. After some time, his other leg reached a limping status, and he could at least get around more easily to find his next resting place. He knew he wouldn't slumber underneath six thousand-dollar bedsheets or lay atop a Tempur-Pedic luxe breeze mattress, and the thought of two other men sharing his bed with his husband enraged him enough to keep trudging through the undiscovered hills, even though he was forlorn and drained of all stamina.

Somewhere along the way to wherever he was going, he succumbed to his fatigue and passed out. It must have rained because the full light of the morning shed light on his condition. The dried blood on his body had washed away, and his dirty clothes were very damp. He had no idea where he was, as everything looked the same when you were that deep in the hills. All he knew was that he was very thirsty, and most of the moisture had already dried from the leaves of the trees. He took his shirt off and wringed out any kind of water he could over his open mouth. Once his thirst was satisfied, his stomach began to growl. Even if he was a hunter, he had no way to trap anything and he forgot to fall off the balcony with a shot gun and ammo. After making his way around the hills, a tree with

bean-like growth caught his eye. Carob. He read about this before the move just in case he was stranded. Its taste was allegedly like chocolate, and he was in no condition to turn down *any* kind of edible possibility. He used his shirt as a shopping bag and loaded it with as much carob as he could find. It lived up to the hype, and for a minute, he saw himself as a wilderness dweller. This was now his identity. He explored the countryside for hours, snacking on carob and sucking the water out of his clothing, embracing the situation. If Liam was anything, he was resourceful and always kept a positive outlook. He was determined to make it, even if he didn't know what *it* was.

Temperatures dropped as the sun was falling behind the hills. He still had no plan, no signs of refuge, and his shirt had dried up. His stomach was beginning to eat itself as the carob quickly burned off, but the motivation to find some place to rest distracted him from his hunger pains. It became harder and harder to see as the light from the day was being sucked out, and through his blurred vision, he saw a growth of deer grass. He racked his brain about deer grass; the dangers, the creatures that lived inside, the palpability of it making some kind of resting place.

“Thorns. It only grows thorns at full bloom, and it flowers. None of this has flowers or thorns.” He talked to the growth as his hands caressed each blade. It wasn't ideal, but it would suffice, at least for one night. He burrowed himself as deep as he could, bending an arm behind his head to function as a pillow. Shivers radiated down his extremities, and he could hear birds of prey talking to one another, as if they were deciding to feast on him or leave him to rot. He stayed perfectly still, eyes closed, and hoping the birds would decide against him as a dining option. They circled the perimeter around him, their beaks poking through the grass and contacting his clothing, and some taking samples from his shirt with bits of skin attached. He stayed completely still until he felt the breeze of their wings taking off. When it was all clear, he let out a painful shriek and stood up, blood from the pecking running down his body.

A glow caught his eye, and Liam walked towards it, nothing to lose. As he got closer, it got warmer. He came to a peculiar clearing, where he saw a statue of an owl that must have been over twenty feet tall, with stairs at the base. There were people in robes, all performing some kind of ritual around a gargantuan fire. He made sure not to make any noise, and hid himself behind some trees, observing what could only be described as a cult. The group of people abruptly stopped what they were doing and looked back in Liam's direction in unison. Shivers coursed through his body and his bottom lip quivered, and he sunk back into the foliage to hide himself, careful not to snap any twigs. These people held their gaze

in his direction for what seemed to be an eternity before turning and forming a crisp, single line. Liam crept forward just a little, observing them descending into the ground. His eyes darted back and forth in disbelief, and he rubbed them over and over until they felt hot and clearly irritated as they began to leak. In his cloudy vision, he saw leftover food and water. Was this a set up? Were there people camouflaged in the trees with bow and arrows, ready to shoot the minute he got too close? He looked back at his old life, now a distant memory as he could no longer see any of the party lights or hear any part of the booming music. If he *truly* wanted to change his life, this was the moment. He had been dead inside for a long time, so being physically murdered would naturally be the next progression of his meager outlook with Conrad.

He made a run for it, and before he knew it, he was at a solid wood table with an epoxy resin finish on top. There was no thinking about it as he clutched handfuls of pulled chicken, washed down by mashed potatoes, and topped off with water from golden chalices. He felt a vibration in the ground as his stomach reached capacity, and a door-shaped beam of light opened up on the forest floor. It was not ominous or threatening, but rather an inviting presence. Before he knew it, he was at the opening. A soft yellow glow lit up his entire body, his head slightly cocking to the right in curiosity.

“You can come down.” A female voice with a Romanian accent climbed the stairs and into Liam’s head. His feet led the way down, and he found himself at the end of a long hallway. “I don’t bite, dear.” The same voice continued, inviting him to come closer.

He couldn’t go back up the stairs even if he wanted to, because the door had closed and the staircase had dissolved into hundreds of glowing butterflies, leading the way to the end of the hall. Liam gazed at the flying insects, smiling, and laughing as he made his way to his destination. A sense of euphoria that had been long gone had finally found him once again, and he started to dance the way he did on the balcony. Visions of his hometown came into play in the blackness not inhibited by the butterflies, showing all of the moments where Liam was *truly* happy. Graduation, the release of his first poetry book, the birth of his first niece, reaching weight loss milestones, being in love for the first time. Finally, he made it to the end of the hall and was greeted with an ornately decorated throne, and the woman sitting on this throne was breathtakingly beautiful. Skin as pure as porcelain, long platinum hair that was straightened to perfection with a side swept bang, ethereal makeup, and a gown made purely of owl feathers.

“Where am I?” Liam was standing at the base of the throne, looking up at this other-worldly being.

“You are witnessing the birth of a new you, a new project. You have been stifled for far too long.” She motioned Liam to look down on either side of the hallway, which was now lifted into mid-air, like a floating runway. In the depths, he saw himself nude and in the fetal position, surrounded by fluid and attached to a life source by what looked like tentacles. He looked back at this oracle with confusion.

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.” She gave him a minute to take it all in, and then forcefully planted her foot in the middle of his chest, sending him back to his lush bed.

Liam woke up to the sun peering through a break in the curtains, and there wasn’t the normal feeling of having to rush to get up for the day. There was a stillness in the air that he hadn’t experienced in a long time, as if he all of a sudden stumbled into paradise. After breathing in the morning scenery, he got up and walked to the bedroom door where his bathrobe was hanging, took it off the hook, and slid into it. He pranced down the stairs and into the kitchen, making himself an extra strong cappuccino, holding it with both hands once it was brewed, and brought it with him on his leisurely walk on the balcony. It was just crisp enough outside that the warm cup comforted his hands, and his robe wasn’t causing him to overheat. He watched the birds play and look for food, and in the near distance saw a few deer doing the same. Upon looking down, he saw a cellphone with a cracked screen. It was not his, because he left his phone by the bed, so he put his cup down and picked up the phone, turning it on and walking around the perimeter of the balcony to find service. As he was walking, he saw a portion of the balcony that had been damaged. Curious, he walked over to it, and as he glanced over the top of the railing, he saw Conrad’s body splattered on the ground below. He landed on his stomach with one leg fully extended, and the other bent at the knee and almost perfectly parallel to his waist. One arm was raised above his head, the other by his side. Liam’s mouth dropped and he brought his arms up to either side of his head but was too much in a state of shock to cry. He ran in slow motion back into the house to call the authorities.

It took months to sort it all out, and Liam did what he did best when he was experiencing any big life change, he wrote. Day and night, he wrote, sometimes confusing plotlines with other projects he had in his mind, which frustrated him beyond belief. He was all alone in this pretentious mansion, so you would think the words would flow like a

raging river, but no. He hated it. He hated all of it. For a little inspiration, he snooped through Conrad's things, to see if he stole any other of his ideas, but instead found a note that was hidden underneath a false bottom of a desk drawer.

My Dearest Liam,

If you've found this, it means I am no longer here on this earth. It also means that your intuition and detective skills are on point, because no one looks for a false bottom in an old desk anymore. You were always so clever, and I know you never got the recognition you deserved for my projects. Without you, I would have been nothing. I didn't treat you how you should have been treated, and for that I will be eternally sorry. To make it up to you, my fortune is yours, along with the house. I know it doesn't make up for my shitty behavior, but you were the best thing to happen to me and I pissed it away. I've boarded my spaceship now, and I hope we can reconcile in the afterlife. I love you, and I've always loved you, even if I had a fucked-up way of showing it.

With Love, Conrad.

One month later, Liam listed the house for sale on the same day that he put the last period on the last sentence of his new novel. He had no intention of staying, and instead moved back to his stomping grounds in the Midwest. Not long after, he received a check that liquidated all of Conrad's assets, along with the sale of the house, totaling a staggering thirty million dollars. Conrad's first movie in the series he sold to Paramount premiered a week after his untimely passing, with royalties to be paid to Liam over the course of the movie release dates. His novel was also sold to a rather large publishing house, landing a publishing deal for two million dollars. The money was nice, as he could take care of his family. Mom's house was paid off, and dad got an upgrade at his gravesite. He spoiled himself with a new car and a modest house by the lake and gave each of his three siblings a healthy chunk of change. His novel, *The Grove*, topped the bestseller charts and was translated into six different languages, with an audiobook included. There was still a hole in his soul, so he enlisted the best therapist he could find.

"It sounds like Conrad did a number on you." Her name was Antanasia, and her blonde hair was perfectly straightened with a side swept bang, and she had a necklace made of feathers, with a slight Romanian accent. Liam did not make eye contact and looked around the room instead of responding right away. Pictures of owls, bonfires, and people in robes adorned the walls. Her coffee table was finished with epoxy resin. His eyes darted around the room, unable to speak or focus

on any one thing. Antanasia flashed a half-smile, slightly mischievous in nature, but also oddly welcoming. Liam locked eyes with her, and started from the beginning.

THE FIRE

by Elisabeth Beam

The flames were hot on my back as I looked around the crowded street. Faces stained with sweat and tears were everywhere. Scared shouts and the crackling of fire blended into a strange melody. The fire had been quick. Quick to eat the foundations of the home I'd grown up in. The home my family had lived in. Died in.

Joel stood beside me. His face dark with soot, ash, and malice. His light-lipped mouth was turned upwards in a sinister smile. This was his fault. His idea. His fire.

Momma had never liked Joel. She always said he was a no good troublemaker who would lead me down a dark path. I should stay away from him. Joel hadn't always been mean though. When we first met he would bring me presents and friends. He would make me laugh and always made sure that we had fun. He gave me Walter, a small grey tabby cat who liked to cuddle up in sunny spots on the floor. He also gave me a white bunny I named Snowy. Walter and Snowy didn't get along very well. Walter liked to bite Snowy and scratch at him. Joel always smiled whenever Walter hurt Snowy.

Joel played tricks on Momma. He'd move chairs right before she sat down and laugh as she crashed down onto the floor. He liked to put dead things in the twins' cribs for her to find. He once brought a live snake into the house and slipped it into the shower while Momma was in it. She had screamed something awful and locked me in my room for a week straight. I would always get blamed for Joel's tricks and pranks. It wasn't fair.

Momma used to bring a lot of friends over to the house. They'd come in with big briefcases and long white coats and would ask me question after question about Joel. They wanted to know why he played tricks on Momma and why he liked it when Walter hurt Snowy. I told them I didn't know and that they should just ask Joel. Joel hated their questions and would stand behind them and make faces at me as they asked their questions.

Once Momma brought a man in a black suit to see me. He walked around the house and mumbled in a strange language. He held a cross up

to my forehead and splashed water on my face and the walls of the house. I thought he was crazy. Momma told me to be quiet and sat me down at the kitchen table. The man stood over me yelling in his strange way. His hands grasped my chin and lifted my head up. His fingers were cold and sent shivers through my body. I didn't like him. Joel got upset. He didn't like the man's strange language and cold presence. I didn't see it happen but suddenly the man was lying on the floor. Blood gushing from a wound on his head. Momma screamed. I cried. Joel laughed.

Momma left after that. I didn't know where she went just that she was gone and in her place was Grandma. I didn't like Grandma. She was mean. She locked me in my room and didn't let me out unless it was dinner time, bathroom time, or Sunday for church. She told me I had to believe in the Lord and that if I did he would right all of my wrongs and save my soul. I didn't understand what that meant or why she thought I was bad. Joel was the one doing all the bad things.

One night at supper Joel made scary faces at the twins who started wailing and crying. Grandma told me to stop it. She tried to calm the twins down but they just started screaming louder and louder. Grandma grabbed my shoulders and started shaking me. Demanding that I stop. I pushed her away from me and pointed at Joel. This was all his fault. Grandma sent me to bed. Joel was mad. He told me that they were going to send me away. Separate us and we would never be able to see each other again. I told him I was fine with that. He was being nasty and mean to everyone. That upset him. He brought Walter and Snowy to me and forced me to watch as Walter ate Snowy. I cried myself to sleep as Joel sat next to me, smiling and laughing as he looked at the remains of the bunny.

Joel woke me up at midnight. He said he was sorry about Snowy. That we could get a new bunny but we had to make sure we stayed together. He smelled weird. Sweet, sticky, and toxic. He opened my bedroom door and led me downstairs and into the kitchen. He told me to open my hands and placed a lighter into them. I didn't want to do it but Joel got angry when I said no. He told me this was the only way for us to stay together. That if I didn't do this they'd keep blaming me for all of his tricks. That Momma would never come back and we would never get a new bunny for Walter to play with.

My hands shook as I ignited the lighter. I held the flame up to my face and looked at it. The faint orange glow cast a frightening shadow over the kitchen. Joel's lips turned upwards into a smile. He pointed at the stove. The flame flickered as my breath shuddered over it. I didn't want to do this anymore. I didn't want to be with Joel forever. I wanted Snowy and

Momma back. Joel snarled and knocked the lighter out of my hand. It landed with a soft thump on the stove. There was absolute silence for a moment. Then a big whoosh of air and the stove was engulfed in fire. The flames ate the kitchen in moments. Then moved onto the rest of the house. Their insatiable appetite ready to consume everything in their path. Joel grabbed my hand and led me outside, wicked laughter spewing out of his mouth.

We stood to the side as the fire ate up the house. I couldn't find Grandma or the twins but Joel told me not to worry. That they wouldn't be able to take him away from me anymore. Loud screams came from the house and joined in the chorus of sirens and cackling fire. The screams died and then silence fell across the night. The sirens arrived but had been turned off. It was already too late.

I looked to my side for Joel but he was gone, leaving nothing but thick ash and the smell of destruction in his wake.

THE SHADOW ON TOWER HILL

by T.J. Fier

January 13, 1998

Dear Mom,

Why do I bother writing this down? No one's going to believe me. But I have to tell you. Even if no one else reads this, at least I will have said my piece—and you might understand why I've done what I've done.

I need you to know one last time: I'm not crazy. This has nothing to do with my illness. It's not some "inner turmoil," like Dr. Eric would say while looking all smart, writing me another prescription. And this has nothing to do with Alex. I swear. This monster isn't in my head. It's totally real.

You know when everything started, right? Well, maybe you don't. You've been really busy. And I'm not mad. I see how hard you work and how tired you are.

Remember that day when Mr. Stevens didn't like my Marilyn Manson t-shirt? He said I was a "devil worshipper" and sent me to the principal's office. You had to leave work, come to school, and bring me a new t-shirt. You were so mad, but I couldn't tell if you were mad at me or the principal and Mr. Stevens. Mr. Stevens said I needed more discipline at home and a proper father figure. What a dick.

Everyone was so smug afterward, laughing at me—the weirdo loser. Everyone treats me like I'm stupid. I'm not stupid. Dr. Eric's IQ tests say differently, don't they? I'm just stuck at a shitty school with shitty teachers and even shittier students.

Anyway, I couldn't stand being around all those posers, looking down their noses at me. Even Alex stopped by for a second and told me to ignore everyone. Alex hadn't shown up in a while, and he freaked me out. So, I skipped the second half of school. Sorry, Mom.

I was so angry. Angry at Mr. Stevens and the principal. Angry at you. I hate living in this stupid little hick town when I could live with Dad in Minneapolis. I bet I could find people like me in Minneapolis. Then I

wouldn't always feel so alone—a city with real, live friends instead of making up my own.

So, I went for a long walk. The kind of walk that feels like days have passed when you're done. Somehow, I ended up at Tower Hill. You know that place, right? The highest hill in Deer Lake with the radio tower? I hiked to the top without stopping, going so fast my lungs ached. I could see Deer Lake spread below me when I reached the top. Our hick town doesn't look so bad from way up high. The rolling hills go on and on like a giant, lumpy quilt spread out in every direction.

Above me, buzzards circled the radio tower like they usually do on sunny days. I've always found them creepy but also beautiful. And there were lots of them, dozens. Something about the vultures made me remember a few stories from when I was little. I'd forgotten Tower Hill has a monster. The "Shadow." Remember that old folktale? It sure scared me as a kid.

Don't walk on Tower Hill in the rain, or the Shadow will get you. Silly, right? Be a little more creative, why don't you?

By the time I reached the top of Tower Hill, the sun was setting. The sky was blue, yellow, and pink, and the valley purples and oranges. I couldn't leave—not yet. Everything was peaceful below the radio tower while the vultures circled the gold-blue sky. No bullies. No judgmental adults. No one asking me if I worship Satan because I love Tool and Megadeth and dye my hair black.

After sunset, everything got dark fast. I knew the service road up Tower Hill had no lights, and going down would be a little spooky. But I've often been in the woods at night, so I wasn't too worried. The crickets started to chirp, and the whippoorwills made those crazy whooping calls. I love that sound.

When I first heard some odd noises, they didn't bother me. Just some animals moving around the woods. Maybe a raccoon, deer, or possum looking for some chow? Then, everything went quiet. Too quiet. The silence didn't make sense. I was worried I'd lost my hearing for a second until I snapped my fingers next to my ear. They still worked.

Then I heard it. And I promise on Grandma's grave I am not making this up. I'm not lying when I tell you I heard the Shadow's scream. You know the sound, right? Everyone in Deer Lake has heard it once or twice before. A faraway roar echoed through the whole valley. Through all of Deer Lake. Like a monster from a horror movie.

Some say it's an elk. Or the howl of a rabid dog. One old guy said the Shadow's call reminds him of a lynx, but I have no idea what a lynx sounds like. To me, the Shadow's cry was like all hope, life, and humanity had

been drained from a man. Then, some sort of demon took hold, replacing a man with a monster.

I heard the Shadow behind me. Like, *right* behind me. I think I shouted. The Shadow's scream was so loud my ears rang. It was as if someone had set off an alarm clock and pressed it to my head.

I couldn't move. My muscles froze, and I peed myself a little. Pressure built behind my eyes, and the ringing in my ears became a high-pitched whine. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. Every part of me went cold.

Mom, I wanted to run hard, but I couldn't.

And then?

I wish I could remember. But, my brain did that thing it sometimes does leaving a big blank space. When I came to, it was nearly dawn. I was shuffling like a zombie toward our crappy rental house, freezing cold with soaked shorts and mud all over my Converse.

You freaked out. Made sense. You wanted to know where I had been, and man, you were pissed. I didn't have any answers. Even talking was hard. All the words and thoughts jumbled together in my head. Like that nasty goulash you make when you don't want me to know we're almost out of food.

Most mothers would have grounded me right then and there. Most mothers don't have sons like me. Only what happened on the hill was different. My broken mind didn't manifest what happened on the hill (another Dr. Eric word).

I couldn't tell you that at five in the morning. All I could do was take off my messy clothes, shower, and sleep for two days.

You wanted me to go back to the doctor, run more tests, and have more sessions with Dr. Eric. He'd just give me more drugs that make me tired and my brain itch. I understand why you wanted these things, but I said no, wait, and you listened. I appreciate how you've always heard me. It's hard to admit when your mother is right, and you're wrong.

I got better for a little while. That's how these things work. The sun shines, the birds sing, and everything for Isaiah Thomson is just fine, thank you very much.

Except nothing is fine. School still sucks. Dad's still gone and has a new girlfriend in Minneapolis. The kids at school are worse than ever. You're gone all the time. Gotta pay those bills, right?

My nightmares returned. Sure, I've always had crazy dreams where I wake in a pool of sweat, screaming like my hair was on fire. Dreams where I have to get up, drink a glass of water, and pace my room before my heart

stops racing. But my nightmares never had a uniform “theme.” Not until my lost night on Tower Hill.

In each one, hundreds of vultures circle the radio tower. They hiss at me. The sound is like static from a wall of televisions with the volume turned full blast. I stand on the top of Tower Hill. The woods around me twist and bend, reaching for the sky. Blood is a constant feature. Sometimes, it rains from the heavens or bubbles up from the earth. Or, worst of all, it pours from my mouth, ears, nose, and sometimes even my eyes.

I bet you can’t guess the star of these nightmares. Even I was surprised when the one and only Shadow of Tower Hill started showing up. The strangest thing about the monster—apart from being a monster—is that I can never get a good look at him.

Oh, did I mention I figured out the Shadow is a “him”? I can’t tell you how I know. I just do. I dream of different versions of the Shadow. He’s a deer with antlers so big they gouge into the earth. He’s a broken shape that falls apart and comes together again over and over. He’s a black skeleton dragging eight-foot-long claws behind him through the mud.

And then, somehow, the dreams became reality. Vultures started circling above our neighborhood every morning on my way to school. Super weird, right? I figured there must be a simple explanation. We live near one of the curvy local county highways often covered in roadkill. Go where the food is, right? But then, they started hanging out in the trees near our home, and more weird stuff happened. Someone or something tapped on my bedroom window at night, and Alex returned.

And yeah, maybe I lied about this having nothing to do with Alex. I’ve lied so much over the last month. It’s like breathing.

You know how I told you and Dr. Eric, the voices in my head started when I was fourteen. I was closer to twelve. He was just a tiny little voice at first. An imaginary friend I needed at the time. He showed up the summer before you and Dad filed for divorce. The two of you fought all the time, even when I tried to sleep at night. But then this happy kid whispered in my ear, and I felt better. I liked talking back to him, even if it seemed like a childish thing to do.

Alex got me through the next few years. He would have helped me through high school until you caught me having a full-blown conversation with someone who wasn’t there. I didn’t want him to leave. He was my closest and only friend, but you made me get rid of him. You had Dr. Eric fill me with drugs and rip Alex out of my life.

I fooled all of you. He never really left. I just convinced you he did. As you read this, I bet you're surprised to know he's still here. I'm good at keeping things from you. Too good.

Sorry, Mom.

When I first heard the tapping at the window, I blamed Alex. Even though I missed him, I had pushed Alex away every time. Time to grow up, right? Be a man, like Dad told me to be. Men don't have imaginary friends.

Of course, everything got worse. "Escalated," as Dr. Eric would say. The vultures started hanging out on our roof and in the half-dead elm tree next to my bedroom window. Some mornings I found their crap covering my bicycle. Remember that one morning when you were about to head to work and had to hose off your car because it was covered in vulture shit? I do because I don't remember what happened after you left.

I was supposed to go to school. Instead, I woke up on the top of Tower Hill with blood in my mouth. And cold, so cold I couldn't move. All of my joints were stiff. My fingers and toes numb. A dark figure walked along the edge of the woods, but I was so out of it I couldn't be sure.

I soon discovered the blood had come from a mangled dead cat. The poor kitty's gore and fur were all over me. And I mean *all* over, even on my face and mouth.

You know me, Mom. I would never intentionally hurt anything, especially not a cat. I'm not a monster. At least, I wasn't. I was so scared I blacked out again for a while. When I opened my eyes, I was still on Tower Hill, lying on my back, and something stood over me.

The Shadow. A giant man-shaped beast with a crown of antlers. I didn't get a good look at him because he raced into the woods in the next instant. He left me covered in blood, feeling as if I might be a monster too—another shadow lurking on Tower Hill.

I had no choice but to walk down the hill and go home. As I snuck through town, I stuck to the back roads and dumped my crusty flannel in a church dumpster. By the time home was in sight, I was freezing shaking everywhere. Like when I was ten and stayed out sledding too long, and my toes turned white.

You weren't there because you got stuck at work late. Again. I showered until the hot water ran out, and all the bloody bits of the cat had washed down the drain. A few cat chunks got stuck in the strainer. I had to fish them out and flush them down the toilet. So gross. I threw away my jeans, socks, and shoes. That's how I lost my favorite pair of Chuck Taylors. Sorry, I lied about that, too. The truth was too awful to be believed.

After the cat incident, everything went downhill fast.

Alex was bigger and louder than ever before, but he didn't help this time. He only made things worse. My imaginary friend wouldn't shut up. He kept telling me the Shadow wanted me to become a monster, too. The Shadow of Tower Hill wanted a companion. Monsters get lonely, too. Alex also said the vultures were the Shadow's puppets. They had been sent to watch me and report my movements to the Shadow. And yours.

As you can imagine, I freaked out a little.

I tried to be normal, but school was impossible. Alex wouldn't let me concentrate. I spent most of the day fighting the urge to yell at him in the middle of class. I was afraid I might say something wrong, so I stopped talking altogether. Some of the other kids noticed and started calling me Zombie Boy.

The name fit. I felt like the living dead. And I wanted to do what zombies do and rip every one of them apart. Eat their raw, dripping flesh, just like I ate the cat. Like the uncooked ground beef I stole from the freezer at home and gobbled down without you knowing. Until you tried to make Hamburger Helper too many times and realized that ten pounds of meat were missing.

I was cold all the time. It would start in my chest and slowly spread over my whole body. I wore several shirts beneath my sweaters and hoodies and sometimes even a jacket indoors, along with three layers of socks. I drank warm tea and hot cocoa. I ate bowls and bowls of scalding beef broth, but nothing could warm me. You didn't notice all the extra clothes because I had dropped twenty pounds in less than a month, and you were too distracted anyway.

And now? Where am I now? As the Pixies say, "Where's my mind?"

I am living in a world between dreams and waking. I'm never sure which one keeps bleeding into the next. I exist outside my body while the Shadow slowly takes over. Alex always hangs around, and he isn't just a voice anymore. He doesn't look like you would expect. When he first manifested long ago, I pictured him as a kid my age—someone who might be a friend. He's a shadow sitting in the corner of every room and walks inches behind me everywhere I go. I never can get a good look at him. He's always on the periphery. There but not there.

As I write this letter, Alex is with me right now, telling me what I should say next. Sometimes I don't know if it's me writing this letter or Alex.

My meat cravings are getting worse. I didn't believe I could be a dangerous person until last week. The other day, in the middle of World History, I had this horrible desire to grab Missy Jones by the hair when

she started running her mouth about something stupid. I can't even remember what. All I know is I wanted to sink my teeth into her arm while ripping out her throat and watch her blood spurt everywhere.

I didn't want to hurt her, but Alex goaded me on. After school, I followed her home. Don't worry. She didn't see me. She didn't know I sat outside her bedroom window for an hour while she talked to her annoying friends on the phone. I spent all that time deciding whether to go through the front or back door into her empty house. Which would be the less obvious, the less loud? I wanted to surprise her, see the horror in her eyes, and then—

All I know is I thought of you and Dad and ran home.

I tried to tell you all this. Remember? You were super tired from working all day (surprise, surprise), and I attempted to eat some leftovers, but they kept sticking in my throat. You got mad about my eating habits. Or, at least, you pretended to be mad even though you were scared. I finally told you Alex was back and told you about my disturbing thoughts. God, the look on your face. You made a doctor's appointment for me the following day. Of course, I refused to go.

We fought. You yelled. I said horrible things, and you started to cry. I didn't mean to do that. I'm so sorry. I hope you can forgive me someday.

The tapping on the window happens every night. I hear the Shadow whispering through the glass, telling me to come out and play. He and Alex are working together to destroy me from the inside out. The Shadow wants me to do terrible things, Mom—awful things. So horrible, I can't write them down, or you may stop loving me.

They'll never quit. No one can help me. I'm sorry I kept most of this from you. I'm sorry I didn't go to the doctor like you wanted, but I'm afraid Dr. Eric will see right through me. See the freak growing beneath my skin and lock me away forever, which might not be so bad. But at what cost to you, Mom? Having to visit me in a psych ward while the medical bills pile higher and higher?

So, I've made my decision. Tonight, I'm going into the woods and never coming back. I'm not sure what they'll do to me. If you ever see me again after you read this letter, run. Call the police. Throw me in jail. Stay as far away from me as you can. I'm a danger to you and everyone else.

Please don't blame yourself for this. You tried. I know you tried super-duper hard, but you can't help me if you don't believe me. Please understand that I tried, too, but I can't do this anymore.

They'll never stop. Well, they can have me. I give up. I want this to be over.

I love you, Mom. I hope you can forget all about me and start a new and better life far away from Deer Lake. Tell Dad I love him too and forgive him for leaving us.

Your son,

Isaiah

PS – Please don't try to find me.

DEVIL KING

by Charles Hinton

‘Lo there. I must get moving, so I will have to make this quick:

Stephen King—yes, the writer—was on my mind, so I decided to revisit one of his books. I had nothing to do and no place to go, so I stretched out in my old recliner, placed the old, worn novel close to my face, and began reading, knowing damn well that I’d be snoring within five minutes. I’m old and I seem to sleep more than a cat these days. It was no sooner than when my eyes began to droop that I saw Stephen freaking King resting on my kitchen counter, hands folded across his chest, staring at the ceiling.

“Take a picture why don’t you!” he said, his voice booming that Maine twang.

“Who the hell are you?” I asked.

“Who the hell am I? Why I am the Devil, that’s who.”

“Then why do you look like Stephen King?”

“Well, I didn’t want to frighten you, Mr. Hinton,” replied Devil King. “Since you were reading one of King’s nasty little novels, I figured you like the guy, so presto change-o, here he is. By the way, I’ve read that book. When all is said and done, the black guy ends up on Old Sparky’s lap despite it all.”

Had it been anyone but the Devil, I would have been outraged, even though I was rereading the Green Mile and knew how it ended. But Devil King was the Devil, so I knew it simply couldn’t help itself. Spoiling anything and everything was in its nature.

“I am here to make a deal,” it said. It sprung up and jumped from the counter, edging its way closer. This was when I noticed that this was the *young* King. Back in the ‘70’s King. Black haired, unibrow, thick glasses, bucktooth, bearded King, who was at the infant stages of his long, lucrative, and murderous career. Years from letting a lunatic with a gun hijack a classroom, or allowing a clown to eat children, or digging up green aliens, or, yes, electrocuting an innocent black man. “Let’s cut the bull,” Devil King continued, “you know, and I know, all the bad things you’ve

done. The fact of the matter is that you have a high probability of going to Hell. The last time I checked, the odds of you dodging Hell were 1 out of 666. I am confident that I have your soul, but why not make you an offer and seal the deal. You dig?”

A deal with Devil King, I thought. Now who on God’s green Earth would be foolish enough to bargain with the Devil?

“Lots of people bargain with the Devil. Or Devil King, if you prefer.”

“Get out of my head!” I yelled.

“Sorry! There are rules, but sometimes I...Well, I am the Devil for crying out loud. Be that as it may, I will not do it again. I will not peep inside your head. Girl Scout’s honor.” The thing that looked like Sai Stephen King, placed its thumb over its pinky and raised three elongated fingers, showcasing the Boys and Girls Scout’s sign that promised to be honest and fair, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong.

“Your mother dates dogs!” I screamed inside my head. Devil King did not flinch, so I figured it was telling the truth—the Devil telling the truth, now ain’t that a kick in the head. Either it was telling the truth, or its mother truly dates dogs. Whatever the case, there was nothing I could do about it.

“What kind of deal?” I asked. A small part of me wanted to rise up from the recliner and face this Devil King, but a bigger part of me refuted the idea, so I stayed put.

“Nothing too fancy. How about the guarantee of your soul in exchange for a long life of mischief?”

“What do you mean?”

“Really? Do you really want to go there?” Devil King moved closer. It smelled like a bonfire. Although it was wearing Stephen King’s face, it was clear that this was not King. The skin on its face and hands was shiny and waxy like an unattended corpse. Its eyes were the eyes of a rat, magnified behind those old and outdated spectacles. There were grey patches of decay on its cheeks and forehead. My mouth swung open and out came a gasp. Devil King stared at me for a moment, and then bellowed laughter as maggots, worms, beetles, and roaches escaped from its mouth. The grotesque buffet of bugs fell to the carpet where they instantly burst into small flaming cinders and then vanished, leaving small trails of black smoke behind. When its laughter, that sounded like that of a jackal, if not a hyena, subsided, Devil King said, “I am here because I have been watching you for years. I’ve seen all the dirt you’ve done. Very impressive, in fact. You beamed a brick across a freeway causing a seven-car pileup when you were ten. When you were twelve, you poured gasoline

on a car tire and rolled it into a corn field, causing acres and acres of land to go up in flames. And of course, there was the time when you tried to smother—”

“Stop!” I yelled, “I was young and dumb. I don’t do those kinds of things anymore.”

“Well, lie to the Devil why don’t you. Who are you trying to convince? You didn’t stop doing those kinds of things because you were young and dumb. No! You stopped because you almost got caught, and it scared the pee out of you. And something else, I suspect. You would have done some time for that little caper that only you, God, and of course, the Devil knows about. You know it and I know it.”

The cat was out the bag and running up a tree. It seemed as though I was on my way to Hell so why not have something, or in this case, leave something, to show for it?

“I know where you’re going with this,” I said. “You want me to pick up where I left off. You want me to cause as much destruction and mayhem as I can as long as I am on Earth. You want me to do the Devil’s bidding.”

“Key-rect!” Devil King smiled. It had somehow swapped its human teeth for rows and rows of teeth that protruded from its black gums like sharp V’s. “Now let’s wrap this up, for Hell is a busy place and I have a trillion things to deal with down there. You’re thinking...Sorry. You are *probably* thinking: why make this deal when you could just continue to do nothing? Either way you’re going to Hell, so what’s in it for you? Why do you need me, right?”

“Key-rect!” I tried to stare into its hideous black eyes but couldn’t. I looked away, hoping that my repugnance didn’t elicit another bout of laughter, followed by another heaping helping of Hell bugs.

“Well, as far as Hell is concerned, I could set you up. I could give you a job that I know you’ll love. Imagine inflicting pain for all eternity. But wait! There’s more! Meanwhile, on Earth, I could offer you an assistant to help you execute the bad things you love and have been longing to do. I will lend you one of my agents to watch your back.” Devil King saw the confusion on my face. “An agent! A Demon, if it pleases you. He, or she—we don’t play that sexism crap in Hell—will do all he or she can to make sure that you don’t get caught. As long as you’re not overly reckless that is. I mean; if you just up and shoot someone in broad daylight just for giggles, you’d be S.O.L. But, if you play your cards right, you’ll have a long life of hurting people, and you’ll have insurance in case you forget to dot an I or cross a T. And you will never know that the agent was there.”

“So, what would I be doing in Hell?” I asked eagerly. This brought

another one of those hideous smiles to its Stephen King face that was now peeling and cracking like some worn-out mask.

“You’d be in charge of the Fame Department. You will help invent new ways to torture the likes of Charles Manson, Jeffery Dahmer, Dynamite Bob, and ‘lo and behold: Hitler himself. You and your team will come up with imaginative ways to make them scream and holler over and over and over...beyond the end of time.”

“That sounds like fun, but I am curious to wonder: if Hell is so busy, then why are you here? Surely you could have sent one of your, umm...agents to try to make this deal. Could it be that you’re in a bind because you’re way behind down there?”

The Devil, that was looking less and less like Stephen King by the minute, clasped its big hands together and turned its head. This jester reminded me of a mother who had been told that her child had fallen from a tree, despite her warnings. All that was needed to seal this image was for the Devil to murmur: *Sweet Jesus!*

“Why do these silly humans always ask me that?” asked Devil King (sort of), to no one in particular. “The answer is simple, my devilishly good fella: even the Devil needs a break! Now, do we have a deal or not?”

“Do I have to give you an answer right now?”

“Do you plan on living for the next hundred years? Because that’s when I will most likely make my rounds again.”

“Yes!—No, wait!”

“Too late! It’s in the books now. We have a deal.”

“Like hell we do! Don’t we have to shake on it? Or sign something in blood?”

“Nope! All you have to do is say yes. Now ain’t that a kick in the head?” The Devil that had appeared to me as Stephen King cackled, and the look on its decaying face said it all: one more lollipop sucker.

“You can’t do that!”

“I just did. Look, I don’t make up the rules. If you have a complaint, make an appointment with the Man upstairs. The upstairs business is slow these days, they can get you in within an hour.”

“So, I guess my job in Hell is not what it’s cracked up to be,” I asked, soaking.

“It’s Hell, Mr. Hinton. I never said that your job would be easy. I never said that you yourself would not be tortured. And I sure as hell didn’t say that you would love the place. It’s hot as... well, Hell, down there. That I can promise you. You won’t like it down there, let alone love it. I guarantee it!”

“This is messed up!” I placed my face in the palm of my hands. “You

could have at least given me a ten second countdown to decide my fate.”

It grinned, its mouth seeming as big as a cutting board, then said, “Only three things happen when there is a countdown: something is either taking off, exploding, or is done cooking. In your case, one could say that it is your goose that has been cooked.” The Devil spat laughter as black bile rolled down its chin and dripped onto the floor, scorching the carpet like acid. Everything about it, the way it talked, moved, looked, and laughed was foul and evil.

It looked down at a watch that was wrapped around its wrist with barbed wire. The watch had twelve numbers—all were sixes. “Well, look at the time!”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. I closed my eyes and shook my head.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I am bidding for Stephen King’s soul, and I think I may get it. Can you imagine? I’ll show that guy a Fire Starter. Well, would you look at that!”

Devil King (no longer) pointed over my left shoulder, and I turned. There was nothing. When I turned back, I awoke with King’s novel resting on my stomach. I looked all around the room and saw no one, but I could smell something burning. I got a quick whiff of it and then it was gone. Could it have really happened? I thought. Of course not! It was all a silly dream. There was no Devil King and there was no deal.

I looked over at the clock. It was 5:30pm. I stood, stretched, and then got moving. I knew my wife would be coming home soon. She would go upstairs, shower, and rush down for dinner. She’ll rush downstairs because she’s always in a rush. I am constantly warning her to slow down. If there’s anything that history has shown us, it’s that bad things can and often happen when people are in a rush. I mean, what if I just suddenly go out to the garage, grab my toolbox and accidentally leave it near the top of the stairs just before she’s ready to come down to eat? Just the thought of her racing along then tripping and falling down those long flight of stairs is unimaginable. I don’t think Stephen King crossed with the Devil could imagine such a horror. Or be more horrified.

Well, this took longer than I had anticipated. I really must get moving. My wife is home now. She is upstairs taking a shower, and I suddenly have an urge to fix a leaky faucet. I am not much of a handyman, but I do know you have to have the right *toolbox* for the job. I don’t know why I am so excited right now. You’d think I’d made a deal with the Devil.

HJALMAR HELPS SAVE THE LIBRARY

by Mark Holman

Librarian Berit Bjornson screamed in an agitated voice into the phone, “A group has broken into the library and is taking books off the shelf and piling them in the street out front! I think they are planning to burn them! The other staff and I are building a barricade in front of the irreplaceable documents and titles in the archive as a last stand and will hold them off until help arrives. I’ve called the Sheriff, but she is on the other side of the county chasing cows off the highway and won’t get here for some time.” Library board president Hjalmar Hjalmarson, quiet, hermit bachelor farmer, aging curmudgeon, and member of The Knights of the Welded Pliers, the informal group that ran the New Norway Threshing Show, listened calmly in his stoic manner as he left the North Dakota capitol building. Nodding his head to the librarian’s impassioned pleas, he promised to get there as soon as possible. Hjalmar knew that the library and all it represented must be saved at all costs.

Arriving at his rusty, dented old 1947 Ford pickup truck named Rusty Nancy, he jumped in beside a small, rotund dog named Sancho L’Panzer, who hopped down from the top of the seat to greet him. “Sancho, my chunky, tank-like little friend, we have a quest. We must return to New Norway as fast as possible so that we will take the shortcut.” Hjalmar, known by some as the Knight of the Rueful Bib Overalls, and Sancho took off for New Norway like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as part of their ongoing quest to do battle with armies masquerading as sheep, just like the eponymous quixotic quotidians of literature.

Hjalmar, who had just left the Capitol moments earlier after expressing his opposition to a new law by the North Dakota legislature that would render progress questioning Luddites like him illegal, got into his truck and started to drive. In addition to banning people against progress and his beloved old-time threshing and tractor show, the law would also purge the Marks Brothers Bonanza Farm Library of New Norway, better known as the New Norway Public Library and other

similar institutions of agricultural history books and archives. Presenting the rural past, its methods, lifeways, techniques, history, and especially its machines and literature would soon be banned under a new North Dakota law because they were against progress. Proponents said it was to protect people from those seeking to glorify the past and turn back the clock to an imagined agrarian utopia. Opponents noted that once the past no longer existed, it could be customized, repackaged, and rebranded to suit the whims of those in power. Some said the problem with the past was that it was inconvenient and sad and needed an upgrade. “We need to prepare our kids for the 21st-century jobs working for international conglomerates like Everything And The Squeal and Incontinent Oil and Gas and not create a nation of glamorized drudgery of people independent of a system that is bringing them so much progress,” said one of the law’s boosters.

What had swung the legislators, besides well-funded lobbyists from large companies preaching the gospel of progress, was the powerful testimony of the parents of a college student who blamed the New Norway Threshing Show for scarring their son for life. After participating in the John Henry Competitions at the show, which comprised several contests that pitted human power against modern and old machines, inspired to think more carefully about how we live on the planet, he arrived at an intellectual crisis. It had catalyzed in his mind after watching members of the New Norway High School Synchronized Scything Team compete against gas-powered brush cutters wielded by the Modern Power Team from Hell High School from the tiny nearby village of Hell set to the strains of classical and pop music (only audible during the scything), putting him in a state of vexatious vexation. The parents claimed he was further unhinged the following day by joining a team competing in the Claude Monet/Vincent Van Gogh Wheatstack Building Competition. His team attempted to create the most aesthetically pleasing stack in the shortest time for assembled painters to emulate the famous paintings by the great artists. Finally, after the annual New Norway Hedge Laying Competition, where laying a hedge encouraged meditation on deep time while building something durable people making it may never benefit from, he set off on a new path and retreated to a cabin.

His mother said, “After three days engaging in that orgy of antediluvian iniquity, he dropped out of college to go live in a cabin and grow vegetables like some weirdo freak he calls Thor O, who wrote a book about it. The only Thor O I know is Thor Odegaard, who stumbles out of the Grain Bin Saloon almost every night. Maybe when he’s not passed out in his truck bed, he is some kind of unsung writer like

Hemingway fueling his thoughts with alcohol? Inspired by Thor O's book, he told me he was going into the woods to 'live deliberately and suck the marrow out of bones', like some caveman. All I know is that his life will suck because the only woods around here is that old tree claim on Ima Aasen's land. Living like that, he just won't be able to do his part to consume and throw away like he is supposed to in our consumption economy. How will he afford a new Everything Phone from Everything And The Squeal or any other products they sell us?" She continued as she flipped her slideshow to a video. "Look at the happy children frolicking in the flower-filled fields of the oil, pharmaceutical, tech, food, chemical, and stuffed pig toy advertisements from the conglomerate Everything And The Squeal. Everything we need from one convenient company! Doesn't it just make you want to buy something?"

According to the new law, when presenting the rural past, it needed to be as a world of Hobbesian and Dickensian horror and "nasty, brutish and short" lives of struggle only alleviated by the techniques of modern agriculture and the providence of corporations rumored to be sent by a higher power. The law banned displays of old machines, timeless lifeways, information about them, and a rustic landscape filled with anything not of the present moment. It would force those with local history museums, archives, libraries, threshing, and tractor shows to stop their activities, hide their tractors, and remove certain books. It went into detail, especially prohibiting hand tools when a power tool, preferably expensive, loud, and smelly, that pollutes and creates toxic waste at every step from birth to death was available. It was very profitable for the companies until their product left a mess. Then, it wasn't their problem.

The highest fines reserved for human-powered labor with simple hand tools were the most punishing. To be caught in a field with an Austrian scythe cutting grass was to risk a felony while cultivating beans with a late 1950s Minneapolis Moline tractor was a mere misdemeanor. It spelled out penalties for using tools such as scythes, rakes, and hoes; the latter two included a footnote in the law describing them as tools used for tilling the soil, assuring no homonymic confusion that might trap the unethical. Threshing machines and old tractors lining roadsides were now unlawful, and museums must put away those old plows. According to the law, the New Norway Threshing Show, a tradition since the 1950s that celebrated the agricultural past, would now be against the law.

The Threshing Show occurred on the same three-day weekend as the Hotter than Hell Hot Sauce Competition and Burn in Hell Pit Roast in nearby Hell, which would continue since there were no laws against raising hell. Hell, named after a village in Norway where many early

settlers had emigrated from over a century before, derived its name from old Norse, not the all-around lousy and insalubrious place to be from several religious traditions. Hell, with five streets and six avenues, was six miles south of the slightly smaller New Norway with four streets and five avenues on the line of the Big Nothing railway beside a road paved within living memory. Old timers said getting to Hell was much easier now than in the past, but they were unsure whether that was a good thing.

The events in Hell attracted a much bigger crowd than the antiquated antiquarian artifacts of the show in New Norway. Hell featured a five-street bacchanalia with spicy food and titillation that was more exciting than the staid traditions of past times and geeky, detail-oriented fawning over old iron in the smaller town with four streets. The contrast of the juxtaposition of libertines with their love of smoked meat, hot sauce, and spicy dirt road sexuality, and the powerful, sweaty thrusts of the pistons on the giant Case steam tractors surrounded by a bunch of folks having emotional orgasms over the fart like popping of hit and miss engines would come to an end. During a gathering of the Knights around the only round table at the only cafe on the only paved street in New Norway, Julius Vern said, “At least they won’t need that blasted billboard on the highway anymore that says: ‘Done threshing, sowing, and reaping? Come and burn with us in Hell.’ Now, they can just burn in Hell because that is still legal.” Knight, Pastor Thelonious “Monk” Johnson from the tiny country church, Stordalen Lutheran, commented that “both towns’ varied gluttonous and lustful pleasures were akin to Sodom and Gomorrah from the biblical Old Testament.” He said there was “no difference in longing for and gorging on barbequed pork in Hell or lusting after the bright green two-cylinder “Johnny Popper” tractors in New Norway.” He continued: “The law creates a double standard, allowing some to sin and others to be charged with a crime.” Hjalmar, disliking the characterization, retorted that the distance between Sodom and Gomorrah was thirteen miles, not six, so they were nothing alike.

At that gathering, where they lay their pliers on the table, jaws open, forming a connected star symbolizing their unity, local Senator and member of the Knights, Baldur Thingsdahl, and the others voted that Hjalmar should go and speak to the Senate and give testimony. Later that day, determined to save the threshing show, the library, and himself from the law, he set out for Bismarck aboard Rusty Nancy with Sancho riding shotgun. As they drove along, he spied a large herd of bison pushing through a fence line to one side of the road. The herd, a metaphor for the natural world pushing back against the human one, had grown to the point it was hard to ignore. “Sancho, the bison once teamed across the plains in

the tens of millions at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but decimated by our greed, cruelty, and overwhelming drive to turn the very substance of the Earth into fuel for our civilization, ended the century almost extinct. Having endured our assaults, the Earth is pushing back on us now. Will our present avarice and continued exploitation of the Earth without limits cause humanity to meet a similar fate as the bison by the end of this century?” Sancho, usually speechless, continued to say nothing to Hjalmar’s rhetorical conjecture.

Arriving at a building a few years older than his truck, he parked and began to walk toward the towering jazz-age streamlined gem of a building. Constructed in the 1930s, when democracy was receding worldwide, North Dakota invested in a beautiful new temple to a democratic government that replaced the burned one. Hjalmar entered the building and headed for the Senate chamber. He stopped as he passed the free lunch of waffles provided by lobbyists from the multinational oil, chemical, food processing, machinery, tech, and baby formula corporation Everything And The Squeal and its subsidiary, Incontinent Oil and Gas. The latter’s name derived from the fact that the company, like Hjalmar, leaked fluids and gasses regularly, except in their case because the emanations were not just mildly unpleasant but much more toxic. The conglomerate’s motto, “From Frack to Fork: We Will Make You Squeal,” was a slogan always accompanied by media featuring happy squealing children running in fields of flowers, whether they were advertising a new oilfield, pharmaceutical, petrochemical, agrichemical, pesticide, or sweetened breakfast cereal.

Picking up a waffle, Hjalmar quipped that there was “already enough waffling inside the building”; he didn’t know why they needed more. As he poured some of Everything And The Squeal’s signature waffle syrup from its oil-derrick-shaped bottle, he noticed the label, “This product contains chemicals known to cause cancer in California.” “Thank god we aren’t in California so that I can enjoy your tasty syrup without concern for my health,” said Hjalmar. “I just hope the water you used to make it came from somewhere outside the legal loophole that allows you to use toxic chemicals and ignore clean water laws.” “No need to worry,” said the representative in the expensive suit, “we keep waste out of our backyard and leave it in yours; we only use the cleanest water for our syrup.” Hjalmar replied, “At least you are compelled to report the chemicals in this waffle syrup, but what about all those secret “proprietary” chemicals in your fracked-up water out there in the Bakken Bacchanal? If I want to know what ingredients you are pumping into my

field like a salty, toxic enema, it is a secret. There is no propriety in your proprietary fracking of my precious land, sir!”

The besuited representative of the multifaceted, multifarious, multiplicitous, and Machiavellian multinational shrugged and said. “It is up to the folks who make the laws to decide what is safe and not us. What we may or may not know about the safety of a given product is immaterial if it impacts our bottom line. We may have information that says we should not do something because of toxicity, but our role is not to moralize but to maximize shareholder value and profit. Besides, those waffles are for legislators and not the public.” “How do you know that I’m not a legislator?” replied Hjarar to the man in the uptight suit. “Because you’re wearing greasy bib overalls and an old fedora, which are inappropriate in the Senate chambers.” Hjarar replied that it was the “only appropriate wear for the group of mostly older men and women like himself with poor circulation to wear”: anything but a suit and tie. According to Hjarar, the devil wore a suit and tie, fitting his cloven hooves into shiny, evil loafers. Emulating the famous act of Jesus, he grabbed another waffle as he walked toward the chamber as a small turning over of the merchant’s table, defiling the front of the temple.

He got the nod from Senator Thingsdahl, who represented the tri-county area around New Norway and moved quickly through the sea of senatorial suits toward the front. Hjarar began to speak, “Why do you want to discriminate against a small minority who just want the freedom to live and practice their love for agricultural history and old machines? The ancient, traditional world is dying out, only to be replaced by homogenized computerized consumerism, even without laws. Languages, traditional knowledge, lifeways, biodiversity, and all the human diversity that has maintained cultures since the beginning of time are disappearing under a globalized, corporatized sameness. Our little threshing show, with its competitions based on the technologies of the past, is barely keeping some of those memories alive. Your law will mean the death of so much tradition and knowledge that people will have no choice but to turn to Everything and the Squeal, which already sells us most of the stuff we depend on at stores like Everything in a Big Box, Acres of Stuff and Everything Online all the Time. With this law, Senator Thingsdahl and I will be at risk of jail for starting up a threshing machine, using an unconnected pre-internet device, or reading a tractor book. All society’s ills are not the result of a few older men running a threshing machine!”

Seeing little response to his monologue, he kicked things up a notch, vowing to continue the New Norway Threshing Show despite the law declaring: “Our theme this year will be Lead: Centuries of Progress. Come

and join us to celebrate the mind-numbing metal and its impact on society. In the hit-and-miss engine shed, we invite people to take a step back in time to breathe tetraethyl leaded engine exhaust like the good old days while we are sanding old lead paint off a hundred-year-old engine for restoration. You will have so much brain-killing fun that you won't even notice. I am going to ask the Everything And The Squeal reps in the hall to create a promotional video for us featuring flower-filled fields and happy children with lead in their bloodstream since some of the companies that profited from all that leaded gas and paint now make other products under the Everything And The Squeal umbrella. In addition, our friends from the Unsullied Usufruct Foundation will present the multiple toxic futures we can look forward to, thanks to smiling companies hiding the truth." Finishing, ahead of the vote, he walked out with a nod to Baldur.

On the way to his truck, Hjalmar stopped to greet a group celebrating the passage of the bill that would effectively ban old Luddites like him and all he believed in taking place on the Capitol steps. They held banners that said "Moving Forward with Progress!" and "Save Us From Old Tractors and Luddites!" In passing, he joined their chant "We Squeal For Everything And The Squeal!!" to get one of the free mesh-backed baseball hats with the embroidered circular Squealing Pig logo of Everything and The Squeal Corporation and its subsidiary Incontinent Oil and Gas. While Everything and the Squeal's logo was a smiling pig, Incontinent used the same pig with a spray of dark liquid emanating from unknown regions behind the smiling face. He grabbed an Incontinent Oil hat and headed for his truck.

Meanwhile, back in New Norway, after getting the green light from the new law, several locals who hated the threshing show and history out of line with their beliefs stormed the library at closing time as a flash mob. The New Norway Public Library housed one of the finest collections of agricultural history materials centered on the Marks Brothers Bonanza Farm archives. More than a century earlier, the Marks Brothers, flush with profits from the first age of exploitative agricultural and industrial extraction on land swindled from American Indians, pledged to "build a library and 'temple of the muses' to rival those being built by Carnegie" in what, at the time, was the booming hub of a growing new town. Along with one of the largest threshing shows in the region, the library made the tiny village a hub for preserving agrarian incunabula and wisdom.

The library building, a blend of neoclassical and Scandinavian motifs, was incongruous in a small town where similar impressive facades from the town's heyday in the early 20th century had disappeared as the slow

entropy of rural depopulation continued to pull the built environment back into the Earth. Like an ephemeral Potemkin Village, the whole civilizational enterprise had been a false front like the facades on the remaining small-town buildings. Often, the only remaining old building was a bar, alcohol being the only thing lasting and sustainable in a culture built on nothing more solid than the price of agricultural commodities. The brownstone library was the only reminder of the farm whose impressive rows of collapsing barns and bunkhouses had stood outside New Norway until its story was erased forever by bulldozers scraping the land clean so that a few more acres of corn could be grown. In a culture built on the unstable and shifting sands of economics, nothing is sacred, and everything is expendable unless it makes money. Based on nothing lasting, each new extractive boom ends by scattering its people to the winds while its evanescent substance slowly melts from the land.

Taking the shortcut from Bismarck with Rusty, Nancy, and Sancho, the normal bounds of time and space fell away, and they were transported magically to his farm because New Norway was as much a magical place as a real one. Some said voids and portals in time and space could be found along lonely rural roads if one looked hard enough. Hjalmar was more than just a wizard of old machines.

Arriving home, he jumped on his trusty, rusty, dented, welded ancient Farmall M tractor named Rustynante and drove the few miles toward town. As he moved toward the library, he could see a fire raging as members of the flash mob were tossing piles of books onto the growing flames, looking a bit like old films from Nazi Germany. The way they were throwing books overhead into the fire made it look like they were giving the Hitler salute with every book. Hjalmar turned the old tractor down a side street to where a gigantic pile of corn rested in the vast gravel lot of the Farmers Co-op Elevator just a block away. Scooping up a loader full of corn, he drove quickly back and tipped it onto the fire. The fire immediately smothered beneath a pile of bright yellow corn with one dusty plop, replacing the burning books' sick, chemical smell with warm, toasting corn. Angry faces shook their fists at Hjalmar.

Hurrying up the stone steps, he passed between the two Greek columns that held up the lintel over the door covered in Greek writing nobody in town could read. Old Phineas Marks had studied classics as a youth and had a sense of humor. It was a quote from Plato's *Phaedrus* expressing the folly of writing over memory, poking gentle fun at the very idea of knowledge from books. He stepped through the hand-carved wooden doors made by Odin Thorson, a mix of ancient intertwined

Viking motifs blended with early 20th-century symbols like writhing wheat, tractors, and peak-roofed grain elevators.

Moving inside through the foyer, he entered the great central dome of the library. In the center, below a massive hand-carved chandelier with dragon heads fanning out from the center, the soft yellow wood glowing under the dappled light streaming in from the glass dome above, a melee was taking place. He found librarian Berit Bjornson and other staff shaking their fists in front of a barricade of chairs and tables blocking the entrance to a row of shelves. They were throwing solid, stout hardcover books at the citizen flash mob near another row of shelves to the back of the dome. Hjalmar rushed to the barricade, guarding the irreplaceable local history documents, and began throwing books with the others. He placed his grizzled frame across the entrance, uttering, “You are not getting past us!” His gray beard, scraggly hair, and old, worn fedora made him look like a farmer wizard in bib overalls, which, in actuality, he was. The mob rushed toward them, but along with the thrown books, he kept them at bay by snapping the jaws of his slip joint pliers to grab clothing or skin, catching a few soft rear ends as they turned to run. They backed off and went back to gutting the farm literature collection they felt was poisoning people’s minds. Benjamin Franklin said: “This type of propaganda infects minds against progress,” as he held up a copy of Wendell Berry’s *What Are People For?* “Throw them on the fire!” yelled the mob in unison. “The fire is out!” exclaimed Hjalmar. “I dumped a loader bucket of corn on it.”

Ben Franklin replied, “Grab what you can and restart the fire with gas from an old fool’s tractor; we will burn the corn with the books! Like this old Luddite, the law will ensure those archival documents disappear forever.” As they rushed out the wooden doors toward the tractor, they couldn’t see a couple of tiny figures that looked a bit like garden gnomes with old-fashioned clothing, floppy hats, and white beards slipping down one of the tractor tires and moving toward a growing pool of gasoline on the ground emanating from Rustynante. One of the Nisse scratched a tiny flint onto the pool, and flames shot up as they ran away. While the rusted metal of the old tractor defied combustion and may have had protection from Hjalmar or the farm spirit’s magic, a few nearby vehicles owned by the mob, made chiefly of different forms of what was burning on the ground, would be unstoppable if the fire reached them. As part of the volunteer fire department, most members of the library flash mob ran to the fire shed led by Franklin. Driving the one block from the fire shed to the library, they soon had the fire out since the tractor refused to burn. Fire extinguished, the individuals who had comprised the mob stood

speechless, feeling things might have gone too far. The whole business seemed silly, and everyone stared at each other, unsure what to say.

As Hjalmar and Berit stepped outside the library to witness the final dousing of the flames, a few buffalo began to filter through town. Only a few, but in regular times, even one, would be enough to make people think it was unusual. Despite it being the height of strange, they seemed to be the only ones to notice as the others were focused on putting out the fire of the moment, unaware or unconcerned with the future taking shape around them. “Things are going to change around here, Berit.” She looked at Hjalmar and nodded.

IN THE CARDS, SHE TRUSTS

by Erika Kappes

Karter sat at a table covered with a star-patterned cloth, crystals, candles, and sage. A blue-haired, pale woman named Caterina sat before her, eyes closed, waving a clear cylinder-shaped crystal back and forth in front of her. “I am calling in your guides,” Caterina spoke softly. Karter took a deep breath in. This was her first tarot card reading. She wasn’t sure how she ended up in the backroom of the crystal shop. She was just visiting the shop to buy her best friend, Rae, a sage smudge to cleanse their apartment of Rae’s many ex-suitors’ energies.

Karter studied Caterina’s face and presence. She was one of the most beautiful women Karter had ever seen. She had delicate, flawless skin, piercing blue eyes that were accentuated by her dyed blue hair, and an energetic but peaceful aura. Caterina started to shuffle the deck of tarot cards. “Tell me when to stop shuffling,” she announced. Karter let Caterina shuffle for a bit. “Stop,” she eventually said. Caterina started to lay five cards down in a cross pattern. “Alright...” Caterina began. Karter was overwhelmed with nervousness. She didn’t know what to expect from this reading. She had just started researching spirituality and toying with the belief that humans may live many lives, they are all part of one consciousness, and they have spirit guides to help them through life on earth. She was still apprehensive about connecting to her spirit guides and questioned if tarot card readers and mediums just tell people general statements that could be related to any situation.

The first card Caterina pointed to was the card in the middle of the cross. “The High Priestess,” Caterina began. “You are very intuitive. Do you feel like you are questioning your intuition right now?” Karter thought for a moment. “I guess you could say that.” “Yeah, I see that you know what is right for you in your gut, but you’re doubting yourself,” Caterina continued. Caterina moved her hand over to the next card. “The Emperor in reverse. Is there someone in your life that is causing you to question your knowing and intuition? Someone that could be trying to control you? Maybe a partner or a family member?” Karter sat back in her seat digesting what she was asked. Karter’s fiancé, Eldon, came to mind. She recalled

the phone conversation with Eldon prior to Karter walking into the crystal shop. Eldon didn't like that Karter was getting into spirituality. He came from a strict Christian family. He wanted Karter to be the stereotypical Christian housewife that doted on him and their future children and devoutly attended church every Sunday.

"Yes. I guess you could say that my partner has an idea of what our life should be, and I am questioning if it's right for me," Karter divulged. "Sure," Caterina went on, "because right now, with the Six of Swords showing up, I see that you're in a state of transition. You are going through a rite of passage or a mental shift. This is leading to dissonance within you." "Dissonance," Karter repeated, nodding her head lightly while her long curls bounced from her chunky pink sweater. "I can feel the uneasiness," Caterina offered with heartwarming concern as she touched Karter's hand. "Take a deep breath." Karter felt the softness of Caterina's cold hand. There was a sense of familiarity almost like *déjà vu*. "I've lived this moment before," Karter thought to herself. She took a long deep breath.

"Are you having thoughts of ending your relationship?" Caterina asked. Karter's mind raced. "Yes, well, kind of," Karter replied. "I have just been questioning a lot of things lately." Caterina moved her hand across the card layout and touched a card with a man standing next to what looked like four trees. "Four of Wands," Caterina announced. "It appears that you need to focus on the things that make you happy in life; the things that you love the most. You're out of balance right now. You need to do something to restore balance." Karter's heart sank a little. She understood the nudge she was receiving from her spirit guides. "It may be time to end my relationship with Eldon," Karter admitted.

Eldon wasn't fitting into Karter's life like he had in the past. As she grew, he remained the same. They didn't share the same beliefs and dreams anymore. Karter felt like a butterfly wiggling its way out of a tightly wound cocoon. "Dissonance," she whispered to herself. "The outcome of this reading is that it's time for you to allow yourself to grow and release the hidden potential within you," Caterina said. "You have the Judgement card here. It signifies an awakening." "I feel awakened," Karter said while wiping a tear from her eye. She had never felt so seen before. "Good," Caterina said with a sigh of relief. "I am glad this reading has provided some guidance. You should really trust your intuition here. Do you have any questions?" A million questions popped into Karter's mind, but she sat in her chair quietly. "No, I don't. I think I know what I need to do. This was enlightening. I appreciate your time."

Karter stood up to leave the backroom of the crystal shop. “Thanks for coming by today.” Caterina responded. “Here is my card if you ever need another reading. I also do reiki work and astrology readings.” Karter nodded with a smirk on her face. She was thinking she might need some energy healing after the events she was about to endure. Karter grabbed the gift bag containing the sage smudge and walked through the crystal shop toward the door. A piece of wall art caught her eye as she was taking her final steps. “The spiritual journey is the unlearning of fear and the acceptance of love. – Marianne Williamson” it read. Karter felt validation in her decision. “Trust in your intuition, unlearn fear, and accept love,” Karter chanted to herself. Karter walked briskly to her car. “You *have* to do this,” she thought as she reached for her cellphone. She clicked on Eldon’s contact. He answered quickly, “Hey, Babe.” “Eldon, we need to talk. Can you come over?” Karter asked sadly into the phone. She grabbed the sage smudge from within the gift bag and inspected it closely. She knew she would have to cleanse her apartment of Eldon’s energy now too.

POKER RUN

by Mark Kolstad

The first Friday in February. Seventeen below. Cold enough, Stub would have said, to freeze the balls off a brass monkey. Iver nursed his beater pickup down the driveway behind Baxter Memorial Hospital. The truck squeaked to a stop facing the service entrance. A frosted window warned “DELIVERIES ONLY” and reflected the glow of the truck’s single working headlight.

“Damn.” Iver pounded the steering wheel. He hoped that Deputy Wayne Hunke was driving the town’s only patrol car and would be too lazy to even notice Iver’s burned-out headlight. It was a standing joke in town that Wayne only left the heated comfort of the cruiser to get more potato chips at the Super America on the north end of town. Iver entered the hospital and found his way to Stub’s room, conveniently close to the rear of the hospital.

Iver had visited Stub every day for six weeks; he knew Vi Cossette’s routine by heart. Fridays at six she abandoned her nurse’s aide post, pulled purple moon boots over her swollen ankles, and dodged garbage cans for three blocks of deserted alleys to reach the back door of the Eagles Club. In the kitchen Armand, her husband and crew leader of the Friday night steak-fry contingent, slipped her a bloody Porterhouse and twice-baked potato with cheese. Two Black Russians and twenty pull-tabs held her captive until quarter to seven.

Iver exhaled with a loud whistle when Stub’s hot breath grazed his hand. He knew Stub could die the moment he pulled the plug, but he felt no qualms as he disconnected his comatose friend from the tubes and hospital tape. To him, Stub had died six weeks ago. He pulled a new Arctic Cat snowmobile suit from his travel bag and shook it like a rug; price tags and attached instruction pamphlets crackled with the movement. He lifted Stub one leg at a time, then his butt, his back, finally his arms as he fitted the suit onto him. Iver’s hands trembled; there would be no more liquor runs or poker runs or hunting or fishing. Tonight with Stub was the last of it, the end of the good old days. God, he missed the stumpy little sonofagun.

Their routine had been honed to a fine edge, as Stub liked to say. They'd punch out at Baxter's Arctic Cat clothing factory after eight hours of hammering snap rivets into snowmobile suits, then leap into Iver's white-and-rust Pontiac to barrel the thirteen miles between Baxter and The Rainbow Club, located on the far side of Penby and identified by its WE ♥ CANADIANS sign. Iver and Stub didn't always agree with Rainbow Club manager Cecil Underberg's sentiments. "Our northern neighbors," Cecil liked to call Canadians. In the initial stage of a good drunk, they could get ugly about them friggin' frogs, as Stub called them, and Iver – on his way to a bathroom break – mimicked Canadians by threatening to go "outside and piss on a Winnipegger's tires, eh." But the two would regain their jovial spirits, down a final beer and a shot, then raid the Club's off-sale to prepare for the week ahead.

Fearing the world would suddenly go dry – an inverse variation on Noah and the Flood – they would load up Iver's once-majestic Grand Prix: a twelve-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon, a fifth of Ancient Age, a pint of peppermint schnapps, a pint of blackberry brandy, and two tins of mixed nuts. Some Rainbow Club regulars would tease them about not having enough room for themselves, then suggest that Iver strap Stub to the fender so he – Iver – would have room inside to turn the steering wheel. Iver didn't laugh, didn't smile, ignoring their attempt at humor, but he carried the suggestion through to its logical conclusion; Iver was nothing if not literal. "Sonofabiscuit," he said, "that ain't a good idea. I can just see some crazy-ass Canuck mistakin' Stub for a doe and guttin' him." Iver would smile and a couple regulars would hoot and double over in laughter.

The return trip to Iver's trailer passed, as always, like a blur. Stub rode shotgun, downing a beer in the time it took Iver to maneuver them down Highway 59, dodging hyperactive high-schoolers racing repainted Camaros and truckers hauling beer from Winnipeg to St. Cloud and points south. Sober drivers considered this trip part of the typical workday; Stub looked at Iver – humped over the wheel in an alcoholic trance – as Hemingway regarded ambulance drivers during the Spanish Civil War: with admiration bordering on worship.

Back at Iver's, the boys popped a beer, poured a shot of bourbon, settled into matching woven-plastic lawn chairs facing the giant Magnavox. They yearned for the end of basketball season; then they'd get their fill of truck and tractor pulls, alternated with John Wayne on Turner

Classic. Iver and Stub spilled more tears, beer, and mixed nuts during the tragic climax of “Sands of Iwo Jima” than during any other television event. To regain their emotional equilibrium following The Duke’s on-screen death, the boys needed daily doses of “Andy Griffith” and “Green Acres” reruns.

Iver knew there would be no rerun of tonight. As he carried Stub from the hospital room to the pickup, he felt shoulder blades and elbows and kneecaps, parts of Stub that never stuck out before. Stub had lost not only his brain but most of his brawn. Iver guessed that Stub’s old snowmobile suit – cut off him in sections that would have made dandy quilt squares – had weighed more on Christmas night than Stub himself weighed now. Getting him to the pickup was easy.

Iver seated Stub on the rider’s side, but a problem surfaced: the pickup had no seat belts or shoulder harnesses. A week after becoming the vehicle’s fifth owner, Iver had sliced out sections of the belts to make critical repairs on his Grand Prix and his snowmobile. He turned around, saw a remaining buckle and attached belt hanging from the gun rack behind their heads.

Stub bobbed forward, then sideways. Iver knew he had to stabilize him or he’d flop around the interior like a live walleye. He grabbed the belt from the gun rack with his right hand; his left hand held Stub upright. He looped the belt loosely under Stub’s chin, buckling it behind the gun rack. He ran duct tape across Stub’s belly, pushing the sticky ends against the vinyl seatback on either side of him. Stub sat plumb-line vertical – erect as a mannequin – and certainly more upright than he had ever sat on his stool at The Rainbow Club.

The seed for tonight’s action had been planted a week ago. It was the last Monday in January, a month since Stub’s accident. Iver chased straight shots with beer and watched ESPN. First a grainy 1972 NFL blooper film with an annoying laugh track, now a truck pull. Mesmerized, Iver watched a heavy-metal redneck named Reed Rucker prepare to tug a weighted sled, heavier than Iver’s ten-by-fifty trailer house, across a packed-dirt arena in Atlanta.

Iver had pulled the winning ticket in last spring’s Legion baseball raffle; first prize was the big-screen TV that covered the trailer’s front wall. His good fortune had moved him to tear out the half-wall between kitchen and living room so he could sit at the dinette table and watch TV, recreating in miniature the ambience he felt in the long, narrow multiplex

theaters in Grand Forks. On the screen, Reed popped the clutch. His customized Chevy pickup, with “The Axle Rose” stenciled in lurid greens and purples on both doors, arched straight up like a coonhound begging for beef scraps, then lurched forward. Smoke shot from the wheel wells as the rubber of the grotesque oversized tires “combusted”; Iver talked to the screen in perfect Gomer Pyle as he mimicked the announcer’s verb choice. Midway through the fifteen-second ride the announcer shouted, “Whooooee! He’s takin’ that sled for the ride of its life!”

“Sonofabiscuit!” Iver whispered. “That’s it – the ride of his life.” His attention shifted from the TV screen to the window. Outside, heavy snow reflected the glow of his yard light. It looked artificial, like the snow on The Perry Como Christmas Special. That’s what he’d give Stub, Iver thought: the ride of his life. Iver would be the navigator; his best friend and constant companion, Ernest “Stub” Leabo, would be the pilot.

Now, as they pulled away from the hospital’s service entrance, Iver knew this mission had reached *the point of no return*. He had heard the term in “The High and the Mighty,” during John Wayne Week on TBS. The Duke, as a commercial pilot, nursed a wounded airliner from Honolulu to San Francisco, then whistled the haunting theme as he swaggered down the tarmac at film’s end. Sometimes Iver would try whistling it; fragments of mixed nuts would fly from the circle his mouth formed, popping his spit bubble before landing on his coveralls or the kitchen linoleum, sometimes in his shot glass. The alcohol in his system dried him out, caused him to sound like an emphysema patient. Then Stub would say, “Jesus, Iver, every dog in Baxter’ll be around your trailer howlin’ and humpin’ the hitch if ya keep that shit up.” As the hospital grew smaller in the pickup’s mirror, Iver whistled the song. He’d been on the wagon for three days, drinking water like a madman, so he had enough spit to produce a passable rendition. Stub gave no sign of recognition.

Outside the city limits, Iver added fifteen miles to his route, taking less-traveled roads to avoid being spotted. They would certainly be conspicuous, a driver with a serial killer’s expression seated next to a motionless mannequin. They arrived on the far side of Lake Milo, then doubled back on old logging trails to reach Manzer Blakeley’s yard. Manzer had left work at two that afternoon for a weekend of antique-hunting and cheap tipping in the Twin Cities. He and Arnetta were probably into their second pot of decaf in a suburban Perkins right now. Iver pulled into Manzer’s yard, bringing his rust-scarred pickup to a stop next to the Blakeleys’ satellite dish.

Iver got out and walked around to the tailgate. Bending down in the pickup’s box, he removed a blanket from his Arctic Cat. It gleamed in the

moonlight; the fresh paint he had applied earlier in the week still appeared liquid. It was Iver's final beautiful gift to Stub. And, like the redneck's truck on ESPN, it was customized: two steel bars – welded to the seat – rose to the height of the driver's head. Iver had wrapped several blankets around the bars, creating a padded vertical stabilizer for Stub.

He turned the key; the sled fired instantly and he drove it down the two-by-fours he'd set up behind the pickup. Idling, it was barely audible; Iver had even sprung for a tuneup. He could run it all season before he'd need to touch the engine again. But the trails would never be the same without his partner.

Iver and Stub had begun their poker runs more than twenty years ago. A dozen or so boys, most from the clothing factory, would haul their sleds to the Baxter Eagles Club after supper. They followed the Pine River, some nights for forty miles, stopping at selected taverns on the route for a couple hands of poker, a beer, maybe a chaser. Returning, they'd stop at the same taverns in reverse order, treating patrons and bartenders to second helpings of their camaraderie and wit.

Attendance had declined the last few years; poker had been forgotten. Some nights the boys didn't even get off their sleds, just dug out a pint of blackberry brandy from their suits and drank on the fly. The night of the accident, the group had dwindled to only two – Iver and Stub. Recently the image of them flying across Lake Milo on Christmas night had invaded Iver's mind – after Sunday morning religious cable, or during a hard solo drunk – and Iver had taken to comparing Stub and himself to the last pair of creatures on the Ark.

That night they had begun at the Eagles and swung south along the Pine River, their customary route. But on the way back, Stub had become talkative – for Stub – and said, “Once across Lake Milo, Iver? Lots of goldang stars tonight.” So they had swung east about three miles, taking the Skunk River as it branched off from the Pine, following it to Lake Milo. The boys could see lights from the fish houses dotting the lake. It was calm and beautiful; Iver knew they would have a perfect run to the east side of the lake, two miles away.

Iver had taken the lead, positions determined earlier that evening by a best-of-three plate-shattering, beer-spilling bout of arm wrestling at Iver's dinette table. He never saw Stub go under. The light from Stub's loud, rattly Polaris bobbed all around Iver, then it didn't. The hum of Stub's sled was gone.

Iver had slowed, circled back around, spotted open water with a green-and-purple stocking cap floating in the middle. His instincts told him Stub was beyond his help. He circled around to the north at full throttle, aiming for Manzer Blakeley's house. As foreman at the factory, Manzer always knew what to do if someone got hurt on the snap-rivet line, so Iver thought he'd know what to do for Stub.

Iver crossed Manzer's property line, his speedometer maxed out. Like a banshee he wailed, "Sonofabuck, Stubber, ohhh sonofabuck!" He was unable to determine whether Manzer's woodpile was traveling toward him or he was traveling toward the woodpile; Einstein had a theory of relativity but Iver didn't.

Iver lost control of the Arctic Cat and rolled it twice, flattening two cords of stacked birch and poplar, nearly taking out the remaining eye of Manzer's pain-in-the-ass Pomeranian named "Spider," and coming to rest partially under a picnic table littered with birdhouses and bread crumbs. Manzer stared down at Iver, stunned but peering up through the ear hole of his helmet. He finally recognized Manzer.

"SonofabuckStubisinthelake!"

"Silovich, you numbnuts! What in the hell are you doin'?"

"Stubber! He's in the lake! The sonofabuck is in the lake!"

Manzer raced inside and called 9-1-1. Returning, he shouted, "EVAC's comin'! Let's go! Let's go!" He sprinted toward the garage to fire up his own sled, expecting Iver to follow. When he looked back, Iver sat motionless on his Arctic Cat, eyes closed. Manzer couldn't tell whether he was asleep, passed out, or dead.

Some nights guilt gnawed at Iver when he recalled the accident. Tonight, as he carried Stub from the pickup to the glistening Arctic Cat and sat him on the seat, he knew this was the best Stub would ever be. He duct-taped him to the vertical stabilizer, making three waist-high loops around Stub and the bars. He placed a new Arctic Cat helmet on Stub's head, then wrapped tape around the top of the clear plastic face mask and behind the bar, pulling the back of the helmet tight against the padded bar. He admired his own handiwork. "Sonofagun, Stubber, I shoulda been a chiropractor." His hands trembled and he dropped his knife twice before cutting the strip of tape.

Iver sat behind Stub, reaching around him to steer and control the throttle. He let gravity pull the sled downhill to the lake. At a crawl, he looked around Stub, saw his helmeted head in profile. And he saw the fog created by Stub's slow but regular breathing cloud the inside of his face mask. Involuntarily, like a dummy controlled by a ventriloquist, Iver emitted a whistling sound, a sort of gasp, that was new to him. Stub was

alive, but he wasn't the same Stub that Iver had missed so much in the last month.

In many ways Iver's life had remained unchanged since that Christmas night. He still occupied the last bar stool at The Rainbow Club, just ten feet from the men's room door labeled "BUCKS." He still hunched forward – like a monkey with hemorrhoids, Cecil said – with both hands wrapped around his draw beer, as if trying to crush the glass into sand. This position evoked pity from strangers; colleagues simply recognized it as poor posture – and an easy reach from Iver to the pickled-egg jar. He still wore the lamb chop sideburns he had grown during the '70s to complement his three leisure suits. And still, when the glow of the beer signs and the bar's backlighting intersected like searchlights on his acne-scarred cheeks, those lamb chops next to his pock-marked skin resembled a field of prairie grasses shading a pitted sidewalk.

There was, however, one unmistakable, irreversible change in Iver's life: for the first time in more than thirty years, he was alone, and lonely beyond description. They had, after all, been friends since junior high school. Since then neither had left Baxter for more than a month at a time. One January Stub migrated to Florida to work on a fishing boat; an infection from a hook in the butt had festered and become blood poisoning, souring his outlook on the tropical scene. Disillusioned, he had returned to Baxter and Arctic Cat. In the fall he moonlighted, driving truckloads of sugar beets to the processing plant in nearby Staunton. He continued to work days at Arctic Cat and managed to fit into his weekly schedule several liquor runs with Iver and, when winter cooperated, a couple poker runs with the boys. Asked about the time crunch, Stub grinned and said, "It's a goldang miracle what a man can do when he sets his mind to it."

The problem now *was* Stub's mind; Lake Milo had washed it away, jerked it out of Stub's brain and pulled it down onto the muddy bottom. Some nights, sitting next to Stub's vacant stool at The Rainbow Club, Iver imagined that Stub's mind really did rest on the bottom of Lake Milo, under his Polaris or next to the twelve-pack that had sunk with Stub. No one had retrieved them. Iver recalled stories on CNN about plane crashes no one survived. Investigators always searched for the black box. Some nights Iver became reflective – six beers and beyond – and he wished God had provided humans with a black box in their brains. Perhaps a diver could search Lake Milo, find Stub's black box, maybe even return Stub's mind.

No matter how hard he tried, Iver couldn't stop thinking of Stub. Like that night they watched "Jeopardy" at The Rainbow Club. Alex Trebek

asked what “A bear hug administered to dislodge a foreign object from the windpipe of a choking victim” was called. Iver had shouted, “What is ‘The Heineken?’”

Cecil couldn’t pass it up. “Iver, don’t ever tilt your head to the side.”

“What?”

“Your brain will fall right out your ear hole.”

Stub sprang from his stool. “You smartmouth jackass!” He tried to vault the bar to get at Cecil’s throat; he was too short and too drunk. Iver grabbed the collar of his coveralls and jerked him back onto the stool. The regulars roared, spit, spilled beer, pounded the bar like WWF referees. Finally they regained control and looked knowingly at each other, certain they had witnessed comedic genius that night in the form of Cecil Underberg.

Thoughts of that night returned often to Iver, usually in a series of what-ifs. What if Stub had been quicker, like Sugar Ray Whatsisname? What if he’d been taller? (Cecil always said Stub had to stand on a box to kick a duck in the ass.) What if he had stopped at four beers? What if he had made it over the bar? What if he had wrapped his stubby but strong sausage-like fingers around Cecil’s turkey neck, or gained a deathgrip on Cecil’s toupee? Tonight, as the incline from Manzer’s yard to the shore flattened and they reached the broad plane of the lake, Iver thought about that night again.

“Sonofabiscuit, Stubber, you shoulda gone into the fight game. You coulda made the Guinness Record Book as the world’s shortest heavyweight.” He punched Stub’s shoulder just below the duct tape. He had never thanked Stub for defending him that night, ineffective as it had been. But Iver hoped Stub knew he was grateful. “Ya know, Stubber, I’d a been a hell of a lot *more* grateful if you’d a pulled that goshdarn beaver pelt off Cecil’s head.”

Iver cranked the throttle, began the first lap around Lake Milo. It’s a shame, he thought, to scrap this finely tuned machine; the engine purred like a kitty. But this was more than a ride tonight; this was a mission.

The first lap read fourteen minutes by Iver’s Timex and placed them in front of Manzer’s yard again. He decided to give her the gun this time; Iver wanted Stub to enjoy this ride.

He gave it more gas; the machine responded with a smooth growl. To keep his mind off Stub, Iver checked out the fish houses. He recognized none of the vehicles parked near them. Again he looked toward Manzer’s yard. Still no one. And again he checked his Timex: twelve minutes. He knew the machine had never gone as fast as it would on the next lap. And

he knew – at least he *hoped* – Stub’s mind had not registered a sensation in the past six weeks.

Not that Iver hadn’t tried to revive Stub. Some nights, after the nurse had left the room, Iver would try his own brand of shock therapy. Once he smuggled a *Playboy* under his snowsuit, then passed the centerfold back and forth past Stub’s open but vacant eyes. During the same visit Iver bowed his legs, scratched his ribs, hooted and made faces like a monkey. It was Stub’s favorite routine, guaranteed – in the old days – to have Stub grabbing his stomach and hooting and spilling his beer, then pleading with Iver: “Stop or I’ll piss my goldang pants!”

Two days later Iver received the final sign that Stub was gone. Iver had found a magazine in the men’s room at the factory, hidden under copies of *Saturday Evening Post* and *Outdoor Life*. Probably purchased by one of the bachelors on the zipper line during a weekend in Grand Forks or Fargo, the magazine was called *Men on Men* and contained photos of pairs, sometimes trios, of men embracing and touching each other in places where Iver was embarrassed to touch himself. He certainly couldn’t picture Stub and himself performing these same maneuvers; they had never seen each other without at least three layers of clothing on. Statues and lighted candles surrounded the men in the photos. But even with all the candles, the pictures were dark, murky. What they needed, Iver thought, was a good trouble light, like the one he used in his garage when he worked on his Pontiac or pickup or sled.

Iver had sneaked the magazine into Stub’s room. After the nurse left, Iver held it before Stub’s face, flipping through page after page. He held it close, he held it far away. He showed Stub each page three times, giving extended play to the most graphic photos. The old Stub would have sprung from the bed, torn the magazine into confetti, maybe even tried to strangle Iver.

Ready for tonight’s third lap, Iver leaned forward and twisted his neck far to the right so he could put his head near Stub’s. He placed his helmet lightly against Stub’s helmet; the vibration of the sled caused a staccato tapping of the plastic shells. Over the years Stub and Iver had shaken hands, patted each other on the back. Until they reached their late thirties, they had even wrestled, drawing blood or giving the other a fat lip or a black eye. But neither had ever come this close to an expression of love. Before he sat back to begin the final lap, Iver spoke haltingly. “Well, goshdarn it, Stubber – er, Ernest, I hope you enjoyed this poker run. Sonofabuck, I’m gonna miss ya. Take care of this here machine.”

Halfway around, Iver thought the engine would explode. Then he thought, so what? He gave it more gas. The engine began to cough and

miss. He gave Stub one last hug and a helmet-to-helmet tap, then headed for the gap in the shoreline where the Skunk River flowed into the lake. He knew they were close; then he spotted open water.

Iver buried the needle; the engine began to smoke. Fifty feet from the water, he slapped Stub on the shoulder and hollered, “She’s all yours, Stubber! Give her hell!” He leaped sideways from the machine, curled into a fetal tuck, and rolled twenty feet to the side. He lay on the ice, looking toward Manzer’s yard. Nobody had come for them yet and, as far as he knew, nobody would see Stub go down. *He* would never tell anyone; he couldn’t bear to see Stub revived, to live the same horrible life he had lived these six weeks. Even if somebody ran out here right now and leaped in and dragged Stubber’s ass to the surface and tried to revive him, Iver thought, *that sonofabuck* – not me – would have to give Stub The Heineken.

He watched the shining, smoking machine with Stub on board hover over the water for a moment, then sink out of sight. He rose to his feet and walked to the open water, standing dangerously close and looking into the blackness. When the water resumed its normal lapping motion and the odor of gasoline drifted away on the light breeze from the north, Iver sniffed once, looked up into the star-filled sky. “Well, sonofabuck.” He turned and headed toward Manzer’s satellite dish and his own ailing pickup.

THE AYE-AYE

by Clinton Larson

Hunter woke after the first few beeps of his watch alarm at midnight, just as he had hoped. He quickly silenced it and sat up, his senses taking a moment to catch up to his already focused mind. His nightlight slowly brought form to his room and the backpack placed next to the door. He waited and listened for the sound of his mother's footsteps coming down the hall in case the alarm had woken her, but all he heard was the rhythmic flutter of his dad's snores in the guest room next door. Most nights Hunter found the snoring annoying, but tonight he was grateful for the cover it would give him. When he was sure no one was coming, he slid out from the covers and changed into the fresh clothes he had stashed under the bed—jeans, t-shirt, sweatshirt, socks, everything black. He only had one pair of black socks, the thin, uncomfortable dress ones he had to wear with his shiny shoes for Christmas concerts. He hated them, didn't like the way they always seemed to stick to his toes, but just like Christmas, it was important that he dress appropriately. He grabbed the backpack, heavy with supplies, and opened the door as slowly as he could.

The night light next to the bathroom cast a yellow glow up and down the hallway. Hunter moved quickly to get out of the light and into the kitchen. He ducked down behind the counter and peered over the laminate and a half-eaten sandwich his dad had left out. Still no sign of movement from the bedrooms. Hunter crept over to the garage door and put on his sneakers and jacket, then eased his way into the garage. The earthy smell of motor oil and wood hung in the air, but it was comforting, made Hunter think of going on road trips. He unlocked the back door of the garage and closed it softly behind him, one final click marking his transition to the outside.

He checked his watch—12:04. That was good. He wanted as much time as possible. Ahead of him, the dark shadow of the garage stretched into the inky black of the forest behind the house. A few feet to Hunter's right, the yard light filled the rest of the backyard with soft white light. He took a few steps, pushing down the urge to move over and walk in the light. Nocturnal animals did not fear the dark, so neither could he. The

cool night air brushed his face as he strode over the grass and toward the tree where he had seen the aye-aye.

“You saw a what?” his mother had said when he told her.

“An aye-aye. It’s a nocturnal animal with huge eyes that goes along branches at night and taps them with like, super long fingers, listening for a hole where a grub is. Then it chews open the branch and takes a special finger with a sharp claw and pulls the grub out like this.”

Hunter had made a hook with his finger and swung his arm in a dramatic snatch-and-grab demonstration. His mother’s eyebrows raised.

“And these things live in Minnesota?” she had asked.

Hunter shrugged. “Not normally. It must have escaped from a zoo or something.”

“Well, I hope it stocks up for winter, then.”

However, his dad had been quick to dismiss his claim.

“No, you didn’t see that,” his dad had said, eyes never leaving the TV. “I’ve hunted those woods since I was kid. There’s nothing like that in there. Probably just a possum.”

“It wasn’t a possum,” Hunter had said, but he didn’t have much to add after that.

He had seen it at twilight, while playing explorer in the woods after being sent outside again. His ship had crashed, and he needed mushrooms for fuel, the big flat ones that grew out of the side of trees like ladder steps. He had to go deep into the forest to find those, but he liked it back there. He couldn’t see the house, couldn’t hear his parents. Everything around him was green and bright and rich with the smells of the earth. He had found some big mushrooms that were perfect, creamy white and rippled like an old seashell. He was knocking them off with his walking stick when he heard a distinct tapping and caught something gray slip around the trunk of a dead tree just off to the right. He was always on the lookout for animals, so he immediately dropped to a crouch and slinked his way over to the tree, peeking up and around the peeling gray bark. Two huge yellow eyes stared back at him, freezing him in place. The pupils were black holes that seemed ready to suck in all the light the forest could offer. He barely had time to make out the small body and the perfect camouflage of black and gray frizzy fur before it scurried out of sight again. He stayed still for a few minutes after, hoping it would come back, but it was gone.

He went back to the house and straight to the animal books he kept on the second row of his bookshelf. He flipped quickly through pages and suddenly there it was, the aye-aye, staring at him again. Free to study the animal up close now, his heart started thumping as he absorbed all its

features: the scary-even-for-Halloween face, hands like tensed black spiders ready to attack, and of course the alien middle finger, skinny and wicked with its sharp hook of a claw. He could remember it clearly then, the way the fingers had scratched and shredded the wood as it scrambled away into the dark. After his mom tucked him in that night, he got out of bed and stared through the window at the faint outline of the forest edge in the darkness. The aye-aye was somewhere out there, hopping from tree to tree, fully awake, hungry for its next meal. And Hunter had known instantly what he needed to do. He had to catch it.

Just before he entered the woods, Hunter dug in the front pocket of his backpack and found the small flashlight he had packed. He clicked it on, and a large circle of the forest appeared before him like a portal. The unnatural light and the large shadows it cast made the forest scarier somehow, as if now things were hiding outside the light rather than just existing in the dark. The air got a little colder all of a sudden. Hunter's stomach tightened. He wanted to go back inside, but he knew this night was his best chance. Tomorrow was the weekend, and one of his parents would likely stay up too late for the plan to work. Then after that, he had to go to his grandparents for a few days, and they lived miles away. Who knew where the aye-aye would be by then. It was now or never.

It took him a little time before he figured out the best way to hold the flashlight to watch his step and keep an eye out for any animals. Familiar sights helped settle his fears: the tree with the big Y-shaped limb he would sit on, his stick fort and the neat pile of mushrooms inside it, the patch of cockleburs he was trying to chop down with his best swinging stick. He gained more confidence as the light showed him the forest was still the same one he saw during the day.

He made it to the aye-aye's territory and found the old pine tree he had marked with two sticks to make an X. He shined the flashlight up and walked his eyes up the pockmarked trunk and gnarled, twisty gray limbs. The tree did not have any needles on it, just lots of tiny little branches pointing up. There would be plenty of places to grab and put his feet, just no straight path up. He'd have to figure it out as he went. He grabbed a branch about chest height and pulled himself up. The limb was curved toward the ground, so he was able to get his feet under him and stand on top of it. Simply being off the ground made him excited and boosted his confidence. He scanned the branches again and found his next steps, but he needed to put the flashlight in his mouth to have both hands. Slowly, he began climbing up—grabbing, pulling, stepping—just like he did at the playground dome at school.

He was making good progress when he hit a space where the branches were tight together and he couldn't get through. He looked left and right and saw a sturdy branch to grab onto, but he'd need to lean over to grab it. Carefully he lifted his knee onto a limb at his waist and reached out for the new handhold. He had just wrapped his fingers around it when the limb under his knee snapped off. His body dropped and he grabbed madly for the tree trunk with all his limbs, slamming his cheek into the wood and knocking the flashlight against his teeth. He let out a yowl of pain and the flashlight went tumbling down, bouncing off branches before hitting the ground and going dark.

Hunter was pressed against the tree trunk, his right arm and leg now wrapped around it in a bear hug, his left arm gripped tightly around a branch overhead and his left foot securely on a limb. He was scared to move any part of his body. He sucked in huge gasps of air and the musty smell of old wood filled his nose and made him realize he didn't know how high he was. His left leg started to shake, and he gripped everything tighter. His throat tightened and he could feel the tears start in the corners of his eyes. He tried to hold it back like he had been practicing, had gotten really good at actually, because every time he cried in front of his parents it seemed to make their moods worse—his dad would be quieter, more frustrated. His mom would get sadder, start crying herself—and so he had sworn to himself he would never cry again. But the tears came now. His chest bounced against the tree as all the cries he had pushed down recently seemed to come out at once. He wanted to yell out for help but there were nocturnal predators around, animals who looked for prey that were in trouble. His nose filled with snot, and he tried to rub it against the tree to get it out, but that just made him sneeze and blow the snot down his lips. Carefully, Hunter moved his right arm off the tree and wiped his nose and mouth on his sleeve. He didn't fall or slip, and that helped calm the sobs. Gently, he tried his right foot, felt around for another place to put it, but there was nothing but air. He looked down and saw nothing but shades of black. He couldn't climb down without the light. The branches above his head were tightly packed. If he could get up there, maybe he could sit.

He slid his right hand up the tree and grabbed onto a branch above his head. He pushed off with his left foot just enough to get his right leg back in front of him and put his foot on the stub from the branch his knee broke. There was enough wood left to get a good grip. He took a deep breath and pushed himself up. The stub held, and he was able to work his way up another level. There were branches close enough together to make a seat, and with slow, deliberate movements he was able to lower himself onto the limbs and sit facing the trunk. He took some

deep breaths of the cool night air. This would have to be the place, but that was okay. He could sense it was a good spot.

Hunter rested for a few minutes to let his breathing go back to normal. His fear dissipated with each breath, and Hunter gained enough confidence to work his backpack off and open it up. The gopher traps were out of the question now that he didn't have his light, which was disappointing, but he would just have to bring the aye-aye in closer so he could catch it with the towel. He placed the rolled-up bathroom towel in between him and the tree and dug down to the bottom of the backpack to pull out the wax worms. He had tried to find real grubs, but his digging around in the forest had been unsuccessful. Instead, he'd opted to take the freeze-dried wax worms his dad kept with his fishing tackle. They might even be more attractive, Hunter thought, something new the aye-aye hadn't seen before. He opened the top of the plastic puck and placed several on each of the branches around him. He put the backpack on again. The key now would be to be very quiet and still.

His eyes had adjusted enough that he could make out the soft shapes of the treetops around him, and up above, the sky glittered with stars. The sounds of the night turned from whispers to small talk—wood creaked, frogs and crickets chirped, leaves rustled. Now and then a small whoosh of night air would flit by, tousling his hair and filling his ears. It was peaceful. Hunter started to daydream about what he would do with the aye-aye once he caught it. His parents probably wouldn't like it in the house—they didn't even let him have a dog—but he thought they would be okay if they knew it was temporary. He'd have them call the zoo down in the Twin Cities first to see if they would take it. That would be the shortest drive. The zoo could make a habitat for it, maybe even let Hunter help set it up. The newspapers would take his picture and he'd get an A for science for the year. Then he and his parents would drive back home from the zoo like they did last year, with lots of laughing and no fighting.

Hunter's daydream was broken by a soft thump and the groan of a branch on the other side of the trunk moving up and down. Slowly, carefully, he peeked around to see what had landed. A dark shape was at the end of the branch, perfectly balanced and unfazed by the swaying it had caused. Hunter focused hard, tracing every line he could find on the animal. Then like magic he could see them, the two big yellow eyes designed specifically for the night, staring right back at him. They stayed locked in each other's gaze, the aye-aye calm but wary, Hunter frozen, scared to move a muscle. Hunter looked away for a moment to check the wax worms. They looked like they were still there, but it was hard to know in the dark. He met the aye-aye's stare again and he thought it had moved

closer. That's it, he thought, keep coming, but it refused to move any farther. They both just sat there, daring the other to move. Hunter started to worry. The wax worms had called the aye-aye in, but clearly it could see him. He would have to change tactics. With very small movements he reached down and gripped the towel with his right hand.

"Hey little buddy."

Hunter thought the words sounded like a thunderclap coming out of his mouth. He was sure the aye-aye was going to run. It stayed put.

"Come on. It's okay. You can have the grubs. I won't hurt you."

It wasn't a lie, Hunter reminded himself. He wasn't going to hurt it, just catch it with the towel. It would fight him, though. Animals hated to be captured. He would have to be extra careful.

"Come here. It's okay, I promise."

The aye-aye refused to move. Hunter felt for one of the wax worms and inched it closer. The aye-aye didn't budge. He squinted to try and see it better, and the big green eyes seemed to flare even larger in response. It was studying him, just as he was studying it. Hunter realized the aye-aye had probably been watching him the whole time he had been in the forest. It had seen him climb the tree, had seen him stumble and panic. Hunter suddenly felt exposed, like the aye-aye had known his plan the whole time, knew Hunter couldn't catch him. It had just come to look at the weirdo, the boy in the forest at night, the thing that didn't belong here.

"You shouldn't be here, either," he told it. "You're not supposed to be here. People are scared of you. They don't want something that lives like an opposite. You come around when things are sleeping and rip holes in their walls and pull them into the dark. You're like a monster."

The aye-aye listened but still didn't move. Hunter unfurled the towel and placed it on the branches.

"Just come with me, okay, I'll take you somewhere safe and nice where you can eat all the grubs you want. But you can't stay here, okay? You can't be here."

The aye-aye continued its silent stance. Hunter waited a minute and then got mad.

"Just go then. Leave here. Find another home. I don't want you here."

He picked up the towel and threw it at the aye-aye. The towel spread out like a dark cloud in the night and snagged at the end of the branch, making it bounce up and down again. The aye-aye was gone.

Hunter sat motionless as he waited for it to come back. His legs were starting to hurt where the branches dug into them. His back hurt from the awkward leaning against the trunk. But there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't climb back down until the morning. He'd have to

just sit there, stuck, and let the aye-aye continue to watch him from wherever it was in the dark. He thought he was going to cry again, but his body seemed out of tears. The sounds of the night fell on him again, though now he thought he could pick out more individual notes—a specific frog that kept up the same pattern, the varied pitches of the cricket chirps, some high, some low. The night sky wasn't black anymore, more like a soft grey, and more stars seemed to be appearing everywhere he looked. Around and above him, the leaves and limbs of other trees were swaying gently in the breeze that grazed his face.

He was struck by a sudden urge to get down from the tree, to tiptoe through the darkness of the forest and hunt the frogs he heard. He was sure he could pinpoint them now simply by sound. He'd sneak up on them, keeping the wind in his face to hide his smell, something his dad always talked about with deer hunting. He'd sneak up on all the nocturnal animals, if just to watch and study them, too. He'd figure out how they did it, how they learned to live in a place where everyone else was afraid. If he couldn't catch the aye-aye, he'd at least bring back its secrets.

He was lifted from his thoughts by a small plop on his backpack and something hard and round bouncing down his arm. The bobble landed almost intentionally in the crook of his elbow where it was pressed against the pine tree. He grabbed it with his other hand and could tell instantly it was an acorn. He looked up to see where it had come from, but he already knew. It was gift from the aye-aye. Not an apology for what had happened earlier, but a welcome present. It hadn't been gawking at him, it had been sizing up the newest member of its world now. He palmed the acorn and closed his eyes to listen for more animals, more fellow nocturnals who may be moving around him.

He woke briefly, opening his eyes just enough to see the soft glow of the morning sun filling the space between the leaves. He could hear his name being yelled somewhere near the house, the two tones—one high, one low, both loud and quick—easy to make out in the morning air. He thought about calling back, but he was too tired. It was his bedtime now, the sun coating him in a warm blanket as he settled in and closed his eyes once more to let the daylight wipe everything away.

SNOW DRIFTS

by Jeffrey B. Loken

“Anything yet?”

“Practice is still on,” my wife replied to me.

“And the roads?” I asked, knowing the answer.

“No travel advised.”

I let out a sigh. The youth hockey association that ran our nine-year-old’s hockey practice had decided they have better judgement than the North Dakota Department of Transportation. Saying nothing about our own reasoning skills on the matter, my son and I were soon in the car and on the way across town to the arena.

While driving I was able to survey the damage done by an early November blizzard. A modest amount of snow by Fargo standards, the six to eight inches had been blown around the city by thirty mile-per-hour sustained winds and gusts, causing drifting on the roadways that made me thankful for my high-clearance SUV and four-wheel drive. Even so, scattered about my route were a few motorists shoveling snow with their hands or ice-scrapers in an attempt to dislodge their vehicles. I kept my eye out for pedestrians and stuck cars.

After practice, as we walked to our car again in the dim light of the early evening, the flashing emergency lights of a newer model midsized white sedan caught my attention. From my car, I could see that the frontage road that led to the arena parking lot had a long drift extending from one entrance of the arena to the other. This sedan had appeared to try and go past the entrance we came in on, through this drift, but got stuck directly in the middle of it. A man was making quick, frustrating kicking movements under his car, trudging around it in the drift.

“Stay in the car,” I said to my son, and ventured off toward the man. I tightened my shoulders and tucked my chin to my chest so the collar of my down jacket shielded the side of my face from the wind. Hands in my pockets, I approached the man and observed for a few seconds while he breathed heavily and grunted with jerky, frustrated movements under his car.

“You want me to try and push?” I asked, and he turned his head quickly, startled.

“Yes! Thank you,” and he got up from his crouched position and got into his car. I positioned myself at the back of the car and once the sounds of the engine elevated and the wheels started to spin, I pinned my shoulder to the bumper and with my toes dug into the snow, I pushed forward.

The car didn’t move an inch.

He got out and looked at the car with me. “I think you’re going to need more help,” I said. “Look here, you’re hung up underneath,” I pointed under the car, and then motioned toward the front parking lot entrance, “and here, you’re right in the middle of this drift, so even if we did get you moving, I think you’ll just get stuck again.”

He didn’t say anything.

“Do you have a towing service you can call?” I asked.

“No, I don’t,” he replied, as he began to dig under his car again.

“Well,” I started to walk back to my car and turned to face him again, “I think you’re going to need more help than I can offer, and I really should get going.”

No reply.

“Best of luck!”

“Thank you,” he said in a defeated tone.

Back in the car, my son asked if he could help and I explained that he couldn’t. In his best youthful curiosity, he turned his entire body around and around to keep his eye on the car as long as he could as we drove away into the waning blizzard dusk.

The following week I was pulling up to the arena again and couldn’t believe the sight of the white sedan still lodged in the snowbank. A snow plow had cleared the frontage road, save for a couple of feet around the car. Piles of snow scattered around the complex seemed to have been feeding this one section of the area, converging like mountain streams to a waterfall, adding to the size of the drift.

I got out of my car and stared for a while, thinking of the poor man and his inability to afford a tow and my inability to help, puzzled by the fact that the car was still there and not towed away by the arena at this point. We walked in, my son beside me finally asking, “What happened to that guy?”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” I said.

To my shock, I would be able to confirm that very suspicion after practice. I stopped dead in my tracks by the car to witness the same man, in the same brown jacket, standing by his car sipping a cup of coffee and

reading a newspaper. He seemed to be putting his coffee cup into a small indent of snow on the hood of his car, and nonchalantly holding the publication at an angle so the parking lot lights could illuminate the words. At this motion, he caught my stare and lowered his paper slightly to discern who it was. He dropped the paper to his side and held up a hand and smiled. I held up a hand, too, out of reflex, but my expression didn't change. After a few seconds, he started reading again.

"Dad?" My son asked. As if jarred from a trance, I turned toward him struggling to hold his oversized hockey bag and stick and grabbed it from him to stash it in our car. I got in and started my car and once again drove away while my son repeated his acrobatic seated positions to keep his eyes on the man.

"It's ok, son," I said as I reached over to him and guided his little body to a normal seated position in the car. "I need you sitting normal with your seatbelt on, ok?"

"Ok," he said, but he continued to crane his neck backward, as the impossible image of the man's car pixelated into the early evening atmosphere.

When we returned to the arena the following week and the car was still there, this time with the man sitting on a folding chair beside it, I had already decided there needed to be some sort of investigation. After my son stepped onto the ice for his practice, I snuck out and walked toward the man's car. His chair was empty, and I looked around for him but could not see him anywhere. Another storebought coffee sat in the cupholder of the chair, a backpack beside it unzipped had a few magazines and newspapers sticking out.

"Howdy neighbor!" I heard from a distance. I turned and watched as the man in the brown jacket, this time wearing a stocking cap and gloves, walked confidently toward me and his car.

"Hello," I said as he got closer, trying to mask the confused curiosity in my tone.

He began to reach out his hand as he got closer, and I offered mine as well for a shake. "Neil. Neil Daniels," he said.

"Mike," I offered as I shook his hand. I could feel the tension between my shoulder blades tighten as I studied his face for any evidence of maleficence. He just looked like a normal person.

"Awful kind of you to try and help the other day," he said after a few awkward seconds. His accent revealed that his upbringing likely involved a much warmer climate.

"Oh, you remember?" I said, adding some animation to my incredulity already seeping from my pores.

“Of course! You were one of about four neighborly folks who tried to help. Can’t thank you enough for the offer.” His smile and genuine gratitude confounded me.

“So, what’s going on?” I finally asked.

“Oh, not much, you know. Just trying to keep up on current affairs and stay warm,” he motioned towards his chair with coffee and reading material as he said this.

I smirked, already knowing that the way I asked the question welcomed his ambiguity. “No, I’m sorry, I guess I mean, what is going on here? Why are you still out here?”

“Oh,” he fidgeted with his hands in his pockets and looked at his feet, “yeah...” he trailed off and looked towards the arena entrance searching for words, then he looked back at me. “You know, life sometimes.” He looked down again.

I kept looking at him as his discomfort heightened. He looked all around the parking lot, the car, the arena entrance, anywhere but my face. He finally started moving slowly toward the chair and said, “Well thanks again.”

“Neil, you said?” I asked.

He stopped by his chair and looked at me again. “Yes. Mike, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Listen, I don’t have any cash, but... is there anything you need? Anything I can do for you, or get for you? There’s a grocery store nearby and some restaurants or something.”

“Awful neighborly of you, Mike. Thank you. I’ll be just dandy for now, but I appreciate the offer.” As he said this he sat down and sipped his coffee and started reaching for something to read. I looked down at the side of his car and noticed an angel-wing-sized trough of snow where his driver side door would swing open, the snow all around the area pressed into itself to create a matte icy deck.

“You sure? I mean, I could get you a hotel room or something... maybe a few nights at the one down the road?”

“Awful kind, Mike. Awful kind.” He looked at his car and back at me. “Good for now but thank you.”

With that, he snapped the pages of a magazine taught and began to read. I walked back into the arena, puzzled, thinking about what could cause a man to be so stubborn, reminding myself to try not to judge those less fortunate.

As we drove away, Neil noticed my car and waved. Both my son and I offered a hand back and this time my son did not express concern as we drove away.

The next week was Thanksgiving, and the following week had introduced a different cycle to our hockey practice schedule, so we didn't get back to the arena until about a month later in mid-December for a couple of weekend tournament games during the day. My senses heightened as we drove toward the arena entrances and at even a distance away, I could make out the outlines of a familiar situation camped out in front. As we got closer, however, my mouth may have actually dropped open as the details became clear. There, by the white sedan, stood Neil in his brown jacket, almost basking in the sunlight of a brilliant December day. He was standing aside an evergreen tree with a string of lights in his hand and chatting with an unknown figure sitting in the chair by the front of the car. Another chair sat empty. A mailbox appeared on the back of the sedan with its red outgoing mail flag up, snow cleared in that particular spot so that it seemed it had been affixed to the top of the trunk somehow.

Knowing that tournament games are harder to get away from, I looked at the clock in my car and studied Neil's home. I looked at my son, "Stay here."

"I know," he said.

I got out and walked toward Neil and before I could even make eye contact he yelled, "Mike, I thought that was you!"

When I got around to the side of the snowdrift that had grown into a chunky mound of dirty, clayish ice mold, Neil just continued to string his Christmas tree as naturally as one would in any normal circumstance while I stood and watched.

"I, uh, can't stay long, but, uh..." struggling to find the words, Neil just turned and smiled.

"Merry—er, Happy Holidays, I guess?" His rising intonation could not have befit the situation more.

"Merry Christmas," I said.

I began to study the woman who was seated in the chair, almost forgetting an important facet to an already detail-rich situation.

Seeing my stare, she said hello. "Oh!" Neil said, "Mike, Nancy. Nancy, Mike. He's the one I told you about," he said to her as he went back to stringing lights.

"Hello," I nodded. Nancy nodded back. As she offered a slight smile, I could see that her teeth were fully intact. Her pretty face had make-up on it and was guarded by curly blonde locks fitting into a pink stocking cap and splayed out atop the folds of a nice winter jacket. She slapped the tops of her knees with her hands, knees covered by stretchy yoga pants, stuffed into high white boots with puffy grey fur at the top.

"You want a beer?" she asked with the slap.

“No, thank you.” I said.

She got up and cracked open a bottle with an unfamiliar label on it then she sat down and took a sip. I stood and looked at this scene for a while. I couldn’t work up the courage to ask about the mailbox, let alone his new friend.

Walking away I heard Neil say, almost as an afterthought and continued commentary with his new companion, “Oh thanks for stopping by, Mike! Good guy, that Mike. Good guy. Salt of the earth people up here in North Dakota, Nance...” his voice trailing off as I walked back to my car to get my son.

Later in December, during a night game at the arena, I was able to see the lights on the tree lit up, the sound of a generator humming revealed the answer to a question I hadn’t thought to consider. More lights drew the outline of the mailbox and the outward facing side of the car. I could not see Nancy or Neil.

By the end of January, a bitter cold descended upon the region as it normally does, and I began to worry about Neil. I looked at our schedule and the forecast to see if any games or practices would bring us to his arena before the frigid air moved on. On the night of that practice, I loaded up our car with some cheap blankets and candles I had bought from the local dollar store. Driving on the road toward the arena, I could hear and feel low hums, beats, and bass notes far off in the distance. I somehow already knew but looked with incapacitated interest to see multiple pop-up tents now propped on both sides of the berm separating the frontage road and parking lot. Lights flashed. Twenty or thirty people bounced and swayed to the rhythm of the blaring music, loud enough to drown out the now multiple generators that fueled the portable standing infrared heaters that dotted the structures. Two grills standing just outside the periphery of the tented area emitted smoke. Bottles of booze protruded from the side of the snow drift. From my car, I could see Neil dancing with Nancy.

“What the—” I heard my son say as we both stared.

Inside the arena, a group of people were huddled around the entrance to the office area. I told my son to go get his equipment on and I edged closer to hear their conversation.

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Why would they be allowed to—”

“You seriously expect us to believe you’re doing everything you can lawfully do?”

“Yeah, well I’m going to call my lawyer.”

A chorus of questions and answers from all around the group rattled off for a few minutes. As best I could gather from one of them, the owners of the arena were unwilling to pay a specific fee to the city for something, was legally bound to do something else, and if they did it they were liable for even something else. I got confused by the loopholes the man tried to explain to me, but the bottom line I took away from the situation was that Neil was not going anywhere and the law gets a little weird in parking lots owned by private companies.

I offered no insight or questions of my own, I just walked away and watched my son practice hockey while the boom of dance music echoed in my chest. I forgot all about the blankets and candles in my car.

In February, I drove by the arena on a separate errand and caught the unmistakable figure of Neil shoveling the area around his car. I chuckled at this thought, as I noticed that one of the tents and two heaters remained from the party in January.

In March, a mild thaw had begun to set in, and I could see during my next trip to the arena that the shoveled area around the car and under the tent had begun to dry. Neil sat in one of the chairs alone and looked at a laptop. I walked over and noticed a sign that posted a Wi-Fi password. Business cards propped on a ledge that was screwed to the side of the white sedan, which had by now become so much a part of the original snow drift and landscape of the parking lot, I didn't even notice the shades added to windows inside the car.

"Is that one of those portable camp showers?" I surprised Neil.

"Mike! Where have you been, partner?"

"Oh you know, life's busy," I said as I motioned toward my son in the car. "Quite the set-up you got here," and I reached for a business card. "Consulting Services," I read aloud and looked at him as he studied my expressions.

"Yeah, I've been dabbling with this and that. Hang on to that, if you like," he said as I set the card back in its spot.

"I know where to find you," I smirked and began to walk away. I stopped, "Oh, hi to Nancy for me?"

"Na," he said, "wasn't to be."

"A shame," I said. And walked back to my car.

In April, as the spring set in and the snow was all but gone, wood decking was seen piled up by the white sedan.

In May, fencing guarded all sides of the deck that now covered the entire berm from the first parking lot entrance leading up to the car.

In June, as the beautiful summer sun of a humid day drifted high in the sky and I took a detour by the arena for no actual reason, I watched

as Neil mowed the grass berm on the far side of the parking lot. A roof attached to the fenced-in deck covered the car. A small red sports car parked close to the white sedan in the parking lot.

“All because snow drifts,” I said to myself. And I kept on driving.

THE FIELDS

by Grace Lougheed

The boy was fairly certain he'd been awake for a while now. However, the warm sun on his face and the subtle sweetness of the wildflowers that filled his senses did little to encourage him to open his eyes. It was the swift poke of a stick to the leg that finally roused him from his rest. Slowly, his lids fluttered open as a second jab landed lightly on his ribs. The first thing he saw was the brilliant pinks, violets, and blues of the sky overhead. The second thing that caught his gaze was the irritated girl who pointed a crook at his face.

"Hey," the girl grumbled, "you're in the way of my flock's grazing. Can you move?"

The boy tilted his head with curiosity, carefully pulling himself into sitting position. He frowned, turning his head as he studied the vast meadows of tall, spring-green grasses and colorful flora that surrounded him. It began to dawn on him: he had no idea where he was.

"Are you listening to me?" The girl leaned down closer to the boy. "Who even are you?"

The boy looked back to her, brows knitting in thought. "I'm...confused."

"Well, Confused, can you move?"

"Oh, um! That's not my name!"

"Then what is it?"

The boy paused, looking down at the rubber boots upon his feet. He clicked his shoes together, drawing a blank once more.

"I'm not sure."

"Then Confused it is," the girl stated, offering a hand to the boy.

Confused grasped her hand tightly as she pulled him to his feet. He began to brush the dried grass and dirt from his clothing, glancing back to the girl. She was not much older than him, but she was dressed quite strangely. She wore a white woolen shawl over a dull purple gown, reminding Confused of an illustration one might see in a book about colonial times. Her dark hair was pulled back with a gold, crescent-shaped hair pin that seemed to clash with her simple garb.

“I, uh, thanks,” Confused stammered. “What’s, um, your name?”

The girl’s expression grew thoughtful as the boy spoke. She glanced towards the flock of sheep behind her, chewing her bottom lip as her mind wandered.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever asked me that,” she murmured wistfully. “I guess it’s Selene. Yup, it’s Selene.”

Confused shared an uncertain smile. “It’s nice to meet you. Do you know where we are?”

Selene laughed lightly at his question. “We’re in the Fields, duh.”

“I know we’re in a field, but where exactly is this field?”

“I don’t really know what else to tell you, Confused. We’re in the Fields. I’m taking my flock through the Fields, and you were sleeping in the Fields. Don’t you remember wandering all the way out here?”

“No, the only thing I really remember is the last five minutes.” The boy’s worry began to creep into his voice.

“Huh, well, that’s bizarre,” Selene replied, glancing about the meadow. “Doesn’t look like you have a flock, and you aren’t dressed for herding anyway. Hmm, tell you what, why don’t I help you get to Psyche? Maybe the higher-ups can figure things out for you.”

“Psyche?” the boy questioned, his confusion only growing more obvious.

“Headquarters, you know? The place that runs the whole system.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Selene sighed, cocking her head as she studied Confused. “Man, you must have hit your head or something. Just follow me, we’ll get you sorted out.”

With a wave of her hand she turned from the boy, heading back towards the grazing flock. Confused stumbled, quickly trying to keep pace with the girl. As she reached the herd, she began to lightly prod and guide the noisy animals back together. The odd beasts, each with a soft, unique hue to their wool, grunted and bleated as they were filed into order.

“There you go, come on, you buggers,” Selene ordered as she tapped a candy-colored sheep on its flank.

“Don’t you have a sheep dog or something to help you?” Confused piped up.

Selene looked up from her flock. “A sheep...dog? No, I don’t think I have one of those. What is it?”

“You know what? Never mind.”

“Do you want to be my sheep dog?” the girl snickered.

“What?”

“You said dogs help, right? Come and help!”

Selene grinned as she prodded her sheep forward, leaving Confused to scramble to catch up. The two walked parallel with the flock between them beneath the never-changing skies. The constant pastel hues twisted and swirled, but never dulled in their brightness and warmth. The pair made light conversation as they wrangled the wandering sheep, mainly discussing the creatures themselves or the strangeness of Confused's predicament. They must have been traversing those meadows for hours before they stopped for a break, but time never seemed to move forward. Selene set the beasts free to graze upon sweet grasses and vibrant flowers before taking a seat upon a large rock. Confused followed her lead, sitting at her side.

"How long have we been walking?" he questioned, looking up at his companion.

"Uh, not sure. But we're almost to the Woods."

"The Woods?"

Selene chuckled at his response. "You're living up to your name. Yeah, the Woods. I go from the Farm to the Fields, and then to the Woods, and lastly, the Weavers. The people at the Weavers can probably get you to Psyche."

"You won't be going all the way with me?"

The shepherdess shook her head. "No, I need to take a sheared flock back from the Weavers. That's my whole purpose after all is to move the flocks."

"Your whole job is moving sheep around? Do you ever get a break?"

"It's not a job, it's a purpose. I'm not getting paid or anything."

"You're not getting paid?" Confused looked at her with utter shock. "No pay? No breaks? All you do is walk sheep around forever? What about your family?"

Selene looked back to the herd, humming softly, "I don't think I have one of those either. Maybe I did at some point, I'm not sure."

"How long have you been doing this?"

Selene silently replied with a shrug, glancing down at the boy at her side.

A frown crept onto Confused's face. "Don't you get lonely?"

"Hmm. Sometimes I do, but that's okay." She paused, giving him a tiny smile. "I've been enjoying talking to you though. Maybe I should look into getting one of those 'dogs' if they're nice company like you."

Confused managed to share a soft laugh. The two turned their attention back to the flock, watching as they happily wagged their tails while eating. Selene slowly twisted her crook in her palm, tapping it against the rock she sat upon.

“Well, I think we should get going again,” she stated as she hopped down from her perch. “Oh, yeah. Since you seem to be a bit clueless, I should warn you about the Mares.”

“Mares? As in horses?” Confused questioned as Selene once again helped him to his feet.

“No, no. These things are different. Honestly, they all look somewhat unique, so it’s hard to describe, but you’ll know them when you see them. Just keep an eye out and keep them away from the flock.”

A nervous look found its way onto the boy’s face. Selene gave him a sympathetic smile, holding out her crook to him.

“Here, take this. Something to protect yourself if you need it.”

“Are you sure? What about you?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got my own way to keep me safe,” she smiled reassuringly.

Confused nodded and the pair turned to herd the brightly colored animals into some semblance of order. Once they were satisfied with their work, they began the long trek. Unlike their previous stretch, the land that surrounded them no longer refused to bend to change. Gradually, the grasses, weeds, and wildflowers beneath their booted feet began to thin and shorten until there was only a dirt path remaining. The beautiful pastels of the sky above began to grow grim and dark with tones of gray. Eventually, the light overhead was nearly snuffed out entirely by the shadows of reaching branches and heavy foliage. The dreamy landscape that once lulled Confused to sleep was now gone, replaced with a silent labyrinth of trees. The boy’s heart began to pound as they wandered deeper into the forest.

“Confused,” whispered Selene, “it will be okay, I promise. We’ll get out of here just fine.”

Confused looked back to his companion, but whatever words were rising in his throat were squashed as a cacophony of rustling branches filled the air. Selene whipped her head around, searching the Woods for the source of the movement. Flickers of glowing eyes and strange shapes stalked the trees around them, their malicious gazes locked on the flock between the herders.

“Confused,” Selene hissed in the gloom, “get the crook ready, we’ll need to run. On the count of three.”

The boy prepared the crook, ready to startle the sheep onwards. The silhouettes slipped amongst the trunks, drawing closer.

“One...” Selene began.

The monsters grew nearer.

“Two...”

And nearer...

“Three!”

With a shout, the herders and their vibrant flock bolted deeper into the thick of the trees. Their pursuers gave chase, snapping and howling as they followed their trail. Confused egged the flock onward. He turned his head, making the mistake of looking back at the Mares. His heart leaped in his chest as he took in the visage of their hunters. Wolf-like beasts who seemed to be a collage of images and items tacked poorly together were at their heels, snarling and shaking their pointed heads. Their ever-shifting forms were a bizarre mixture of teeth, needles, and ink-colored murk. Each had their own frightful traits, such as spider’s limbs or mechanical parts that twitched and jostled with each janky movement. Confused could not tear his eyes away from the shambling horrors. His mind swarmed with images of terror. He saw a car, a bike, and a rock. He felt the sensation of flying, falling, and then nothingness. He jumped with a start as Selene screamed a warning.

“Confused! Watch out!”

He turned just in time to dodge a lunging Mare. The boy jumped to the side, saving his own skin at the cost of a sheep. The Mare pounced on the flock member behind the boy, sinking its needles and teeth into the passive animal. Selene grimaced but forced herself and the flock onward.

“We don’t have time to stop! Keep running!”

Confused nodded, but guilt had already begun to wrack his brain. The two herders forged onward, solace filling their lungs as the sight of gentle light broke through the tree line ahead. As they neared their sanctuary, a second grouping of the crooked predators leaped from a barricade of foliage. Selene rushed to the front of the flock, pulling a small brass bell from the belt of her dress. She rang it wildly, sending the Mares running back into the shade of the Woods. The shepherdess darted ahead of the herd, stopping at the edge of the Woods. She waved her arm, ushering Confused and the flock through. Only after the last sheep had crossed the threshold did she herself escape. The flock scattered throughout the meadow on the other side, filling the air with their frightened sounds. Confused crouched, panting heavily as he waited for Selene’s approach. The girl wandered over, collapsing to her knees in exhaustion.

“Selene,” Confused began. “Your sheep...I’m sorry about your sheep.”

Selene shook her head, speaking through heavy breaths, “Don’t worry. Are you all right?”

“I think so. Selene, but your sheep...”

Selene shook her head, carefully getting to her feet. She brushed the dirt from her skirts as she turned her gaze back to the woods.

“It’ll be okay. Not ideal, but this stuff happens sometimes.”

Confused knitted his brow, following her line of sight. He squinted, watching as a mangled shape began to trudge towards them.

“Are the Mares coming?” he panicked.

“No, just our lost sheep.”

Selene watched solemnly as the targeted animal limped from the Woods. Its pastel fleece had transformed into an unsettling mixture of dreamy colors and nonsensical shapes pieced together with dripping ink. The disturbing beast bleated and snarled, making its way back to the rest of its flock.

“We still need to deliver the sheep, even if it gets bit by a Mare. Usually when they get sheared, they go back to normal.”

“It’ll be okay?” Confused asked as he watched the new creature move about the meadow.

“It should be. If I delivered a whole flock of Mare sheep, I’d be in trouble. One or two are common though.” Selene moved over to Confused, patting his shoulder. “It’s okay.”

The boy looked to the shepherdess. “Um, back in the Woods...you used a bell to scare them?”

Selene nodded. “For some reason, any kind of ringing sends them scattering sometimes. It’s useful. Anyways, we should collect our sheep. The Weavers aren’t too far ahead.”

Confused hummed in agreement, handing the crook back to its rightful owner. Selene took the tool, the corners of her lips turning upwards in a worried smile before beginning to round up the flock. With marching order reestablished, the group began the journey once more. While not as beautiful as the Fields, the path to the Weavers did much to ease the tension caused by the Mares. The dirt path was now paved with rustic cobblestones that were surrounded by open fields of yellow and white flowers. A gentle breeze ran through their hair, cooling down their warm bodies. A comfortable silence surrounded them as they allowed their nerves to calm. It wasn’t until her heart finally settled within her ribs did Selene speak.

“The Weavers are just over the hill. They’ll get you up to Psyche, okay?”

Confused looked over, disguising his worry with a sheepish grin. “All right.”

The herders and their wounded flock carefully crested the hill, revealing a large, expansive structure on the other side. It was cobbled

together with dark wood and stone bricks that seemed to absorb the sunlight that touched their matte surfaces. It was by no means a tall building, but instead reached across the meadows like a grand wall. Clotheslines wove between the rustic panels of the workshop and tall wooden poles planted across the pasture. Each line was adorned with bright, woven blankets that shared those same candy-colored hues of the sheep's wool. As they approached a cracked wooden doorway, another figure rushed out to greet them.

A young man with ruddy brown hair swung open the door, gesturing for the pair to approach. He wore clothes that looked to be of a similar time period as Selene's, although his was covered in bits of wooly fuzz and rainbow fibers.

"Hey, kid! You're early—Oi! Arty! Come out here, we got another flock!" The man shouted, turning his head back to the door of the building.

Another girl, perhaps 12 years or younger, dashed from the building with a crook in one hand and a clipboard in the other. She shoved the clipboard into the palms of the young man before wandering over to assist Selene with the flock. Once each sheep had gotten through the gate, Selene handed control over to the girl.

"Sorry if we caught you off guard," Selene began, dusting herself off. "There were a lot of Mares this time. We had to move fast."

The man seemed to finally take note of Confused as he stood next to the shepherdess.

"You have a friend?"

"Yeah. Actually, Mani, I have a favor to ask," Selene began. "This one here seems to be a little lost. I was wondering if one of your weavers could take him up to Psyche with the next delivery. I thought the managers could help him figure things out."

Mani bit his lip, furrowing his brows in response to her inquiry.

"Uh, about that...Why don't you come inside? Some stuff's been happening," Mani stated, handing the clipboard back to Arty as she maneuvered the bleating beasts past the group.

With a wave of his hand Confused and Selene followed Mani into the long structure. As they entered, the clicking of machinery filled Confused's ears. Mechanical looms and spinning wheels covered the expanse of the interior, whirring and ticking as they spun vibrant fibers into spools and blankets. Selene grabbed the distracted boy's arm and pulled him after Mani. The young man led the pair into a corner office, offering them a seat on a worn bench as he took to sitting upon a worktable.

“So, the thing is, all our weavers are up in Psyche right now. They haven’t come back,” Mani stated, leaning back on his hands.

“What? What’s taking them so long?” Selene exclaimed.

“I got a letter saying that they can’t make deliveries for some reason. I was actually going to ask if you could bring up the next order to Psyche and ask the weavers there how long they think it will be.”

“You want me to do Dream delivery? You know that’s not my purpose.” The shepherdess raised an eyebrow.

“I know, I know,” he sighed, “but my weavers aren’t able to do their purpose, and if we don’t try to keep things moving you know the whole system will get backed up.”

The girl looked between Confused and Mani, contemplation scrunching her features.

“Fine. This is a one-time thing. I’m only doing this because Confused here needs to get to Psyche anyway.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Mani beamed, getting to his feet. “Your flock will be all sheared and ready to go by the time you get back, I promise. Oh! I’ll go get the cart for you.”

Confused and Selene watched as the young man flew from the room, shouting for his assistant once again. The shepherdess got to her feet, stretching as a sigh escaped her lungs.

“Are you sure you’re okay with taking me to Psyche?” Confused asked as he looked up at her.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m more annoyed that I’m picking up Mani’s slack,” she smiled reassuringly. “Let’s head out then, hmm?”

The two carefully made their way through the mazes of weaving looms and clicking spinning wheels and back through the dark wooden doors. Outside, Mani pulled a small wagon full of wooden crates through the front gates and onto the road. He waved as the two herders approached.

“Fresh Dreams for Psyche, all packed and ready to go,” he grinned.

“You owe me a future favor,” Selene snapped as she picked up the wagon’s handle.

“Sure, sure. For now, you should get going, and I should start shearing. Good luck!”

The young man gave the pair one final grin as he scampered back to the Weaver building, nearly falling as he attempted to hop the fence.

“I don’t think I’m ever getting that favor,” Selene grumbled, flashing an exasperated smile at Confused. “Shall we?”

Confused nodded, chuckling at her expression. Together, the two pushed and pulled the wagon over the last few bumps of hilly land before

taking to a more even trail. The cobbled path beneath their boots gradually became smoother with every step, leaving them with a level road that made pulling the cart far less cumbersome.

“So, Psyche’s a bit different from the rest of the places we’ve been,” Selene finally piped up after a period of silence. “It’s a lot more put together, as you can tell by the road. The building itself is beyond fancy, I’ll tell you that much.”

Confused clicked his heel against the steady pavement before glancing back at Selene.

“Why’s it so different?”

“Well, I think it’s because they host so many guests. They want to make a good impression,” she stated, leaning forward as she pulled the wagon behind her.

“Guests?”

“Yeah, guests, Boy-of-One-Thousand-Questions,” the shepherdess chuckled. “It’s this huge building with millions of rooms. Each one has a guest. It’s honestly overwhelming to look at.”

“Is it like a hotel? It sounds like a hotel.” Confused tilted his head.

“I guess you could call it that.”

Selene turned her eyes back at the road, raising her head to gaze out into the distance.

“Not too much farther,” she hummed.

Confused glanced ahead, his mind wandering back to the thought of a hotel. Somehow, the idea created a sense of familiarity within his mind. It was a strange feeling that rose in his chest, making his insides twist with the uneasy feeling of anticipation. He knew he had never been here before. He had no idea where he even was. For some odd reason, a sense of belonging began to creep into his mind. The growing sight of the building in the distance did little to ease the growing tempest of emotion within the boy. Just as Selene had stated, this building was far different from what he had previously seen. It towered over the companions with massive, marble spires and well-maintained brick walls. It spread across the land, millions of windows and balconies peering down at them like a many-eyed monster sizing up its prey. Even Selene seemed to be intimidated by the grandeur of Psyche. Confused caught her voice quavering as she spoke.

“All right. This is Psyche. I think we’re just supposed to head in.”

Confused extended a hand to help Selene pull the wagon onward. With shaking fingers, the two pulled their delivery forward and through the large oak doors that loomed before them. As expected, the interior of Psyche was just as ostentatious as the outside. Gilded statuettes of sheep

and cherubs graced the corners of the lobby, only to be overshadowed by the gaudy paisley wallpaper that stretched upward towards the lofty white ceilings. Those waiting within the lobby heavily clashed with its furnishings. People of all ages, dressed similarly to the shepherdess loitered about the foyer. Many sat with carts and crates of their own, each of their faces decorated with expressions of irritation and boredom. Selene frowned, noting the number of individuals.

“Let’s go talk to the desk,” she stated, grabbing Confused’s hand and leading him forward.

They approached the empty marble table that resided before a set of dual staircases that curved and twisted like a set of writhing snakes. Selene reached over the desk, tapping the small silver bell with force. The bell chimed loudly, disrupting the uncomfortable silence of the lobby. However, seemingly nobody answered their call. Furrowing her brow, she reached out to smack the bell once more, only to be stopped by a voice from behind.

“You’re not going to get any service,” a man spoke from behind the pair.

Selene turned to face him. “Why’s that?”

“The manager’s currently dealing with a crisis or something on the second floor. We’ve been waiting for forever to drop off our deliveries, but she won’t come down to see us.”

“Why don’t you go up and get her?”

The man shrugged. “She just sends us back down. Go ahead. Go try to talk with her yourself.”

“I think we will. Come on, Confused.” Selene pulled on his hand, yanking him forward.

“Isn’t she busy?” Confused looked to her with a worried expression.

“It’s her purpose to take the deliveries. She needs to at least take them so the weavers can go back home.”

Selene abandoned the wagon’s handle and snatched one of the boxes with her free arm. She marched past the desk, dragging the poor boy behind her. They ascended the stairs, marching down the grandiose hallway laid out before them. Thousands of doors stood guard on each side of them, each gilded with a glimmering room number. Confused’s head snapped back and forth as he tried to take in every number. The mixture of anticipation and familiarity began to pound at the back of his skull. He found himself holding tighter onto Selene’s hand as they stormed forward. Selene’s stomping only softened as the visage of a woman came into view. Unlike the others, she was dressed far more elegantly. She wore a long gown of pressed, blue cotton over an off-white

mutton-sleeve shirt. A black ribbon that was once neatly knotted seemed to be coming undone around her neck. Her hair that was perhaps once perfectly in order now had loose curls of blonde hair that refused to return to their rightful places. The woman stared at a darkened door, a sour look of worry gracing her pointed features. She jumped as Selene interrupted her pondering, nearly dropping the noisy set of keys in her hands.

“Excuse me? Are you the manager of Psyche?” the girl inquired.

The woman’s head turned to her, eyes wild and startled.

“Are you from the Weavers? Can you go back downstairs and wait for a moment? There currently is a problem with one of our guests. Don’t worry, it’s under control.”

“Problem? What’s the problem? You’ve been taking so long to fix the problem that your lobby is full of weavers. The system’s getting backed up!” Selene scolded.

The woman’s features twisted with guilt. “I’m sorry, I truly am, but there is currently an urgent issue with this guest.”

“What’s the matter?” Selene huffed.

The woman glanced around as if someone could be listening. She then leaned forward, speaking in a hushed voice.

“The guest is gone.”

“Gone? Gone!? How is that even possible?” the shepherdess gasped.

“Keep your voice down,” hissed the manager. “It’s rare, but it happens occasionally. If I do not locate the guest soon and return him to his room, I’ll have to check him out.”

“Don’t guests check out all the time?” Selene clicked her tongue.

“When they’re in their rooms! If I check him out while he’s not here, he won’t wake up. He’ll be stuck who knows where.”

Selene’s eyes grew wide at her words. Her head snapped to Confused. “Confused, I know we’re here to get you sorted out, but...” Her voice trailed off as she noticed the boy’s expression.

Confused stared up at the door, completely engrossed in his own thoughts. A voice pricked the back of his mind, urging him to reach for the door.

“I think,” he whispered, “this is my room.”

“This is yours? You’re the guest?” The manager’s face filled with mild relief. “Thank goodness. Thank goodness! Ah! We’ll need to get you settled in again!”

The woman snatched the crate from Selene’s arms, pulling off the top and grabbing one of the many vibrant blankets inside.

“All right! All right! We just need to get you back in place!”

With a quick movement, the manager wrenched open the darkened door, her look of relief fading from her face as she took in the sight on the other side. There was nothing. An empty, darkened space that seemed to stretch forever greeted the group as they leaned into the frame.

“Oh, dear. Oh, no, no, no. This is not good. Not good!” the woman panicked.

“Where’s the room?” Selene questioned, turning to the manager.

“These rooms should never be vacant very long. I think Psyche has already started to check out the guest.”

“Do we still have time?” the shepherdess said, leaning further into the gloom.

“Maybe? I’m not sure. I’ve never seen it like this,” mumbled the manager.

Selene turned to Confused, her brows furrowing in determination. The boy met her gaze, biting his lip in worry.

“I said I’d help you out. I try my best to keep my word,” she smiled hopefully.

“You’ll need to be quick,” the woman said, handing the blanket to Selene. “If the check-out finishes while you’re in there, I’m not sure what will happen.”

The girl took the blanket, nodding solemnly.

“Selene, are you sure about this?” Confused whimpered.

“Look, we don’t have any time to be second-guessing. Let’s just get you settled back in.”

Reluctantly, Confused agreed with a nod. Hand in hand, the pair turned to the empty space. In a burst of energy, they rocketed themselves forward into the murkiness. A sharp coldness bit at their skin as they moved deeper into the room. Their eyes refused to ever fully adjust to the void that filled their vision. The clatter of their shoes on the floor echoed eerily through the space.

“What are we looking for?” Confused said, doing his best to keep pace with Selene.

“A bed, I think,” Selene responded, her head moving like a swivel.

The hair on the back of their necks stood as a familiar, low growl reached their ears. Uncanny, lanky mixtures of images slinked about the pair, their needles and teeth barely glinting in the low light.

“Mares,” Confused squeaked. “Why are there Mares!?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know! Just keep running!” Selene exclaimed with a shaky breath.

They gripped one another tightly as they forced themselves onward, Mares once again snapping at their ankles. Their heavy breathing only

seemed to entice more of the stalking shapes to give chase. The fear that gripped them weighed heavy on their chests, making their lungs feel as if air could hardly escape. Confused's feet nearly failed beneath him as he caught a glimpse of another silhouette within their bleak surroundings. It was solid and sedentary unlike the ever-warping forms of the monsters that pursued them. He pulled Selene towards the object, speaking with raspy breath.

"I see something!"

Selene gave way to his tug, following him towards whatever lay ahead. As they neared, the image came into focus. A white, wooden bedframe stood before them, isolated within the shadows. Selene swung an arm, practically pushing Confused over as she propelled the boy forward. Their hands slipped from each other as the boy ran into the side of the bedframe. Selene whipped her head around, pulling the bell from her belt. With violent force, she threw the object deep into the gloom. Its amplified chime echoed, causing the Mares to tremble and convulse as the noise met their ears. Selene turned back to the boy, holding the blanket spread between her palms. She dashed at the boy, throwing her arms and the comforting fabric around his shoulders. She pulled him into a warm embrace. The last thing Confused saw was the shepherdess' smile as his senses were consumed by the encroaching void.

...

"...Con..."

"Con...?"

"Connor?"

The boy's eyelids flicked open at the sound of his name. Connor was his name. That was right. It took a minute for his bleary vision to focus. It seemed to be late afternoon based on the hues of the sky. Another boy, a few years younger than Connor, stood over him, his face filled with relief.

"Man, I was so scared you weren't going to wake up or something! That car came out of nowhere! Does your head hurt? I think your helmet kept you safe," the younger boy leaned over Connor.

Connor lifted his hand, feeling along his temple. Warm blood was running down his face, leaving his fingers sticky and red.

"I called 911 and Mom. They're both on their way. Also, sorry, but your bike is totally wrecked." The younger boy managed a tiny grin. "But we get to ride in the ambulance!"

"Oh, cool," Connor shared an exhausted smile, his head still fuzzy from impact.

It wasn't too long until the ambulance arrived, followed shortly by Connor's mother. The boy was quickly taken away with the flashing reds and blues of the ambulance light. Thankfully the boy's helmet had taken the brunt of the trauma, allowing him to recover swiftly.

Like most who find their way into the Fields, Connor never remembered much of his time there. Images of mangled, wolfish beasts and candy-colored herds of dreamy sheep have faded from his mind. He can no longer describe the halls of Psyche nor the millions of looms that filled the Weavers' workshop. Those never-changing skies have escaped him, taking along with them their warm sunshine and the sweet scent of wildflowers. Despite the loss of memory, one image has refused to leave him. He still dreams of a strange girl with a wooden crook. Her name is a mystery, yet her face is familiar. Her voice is a warm memory, yet he swears he has never heard it before. He never knows who she is, and yet somehow, he always knows that she is a friend.

STORMY WEATHER

by Dan McKay

Jeb huddled in his sleeping bag on the rickety twin bed while the wind howled through cracks in the cabin walls. The bed frame and mattress had been rescued from a large apartment complex, leaning against a dumpster. That was the point of free-cycling—taking things others didn't want.

Moving off the grid seemed like a noble idea. Self-sufficiency—who needed all the hassle? Modern living saddled people down. Too bad none of the ladies he met in the organic section of the grocery store agreed to move out there with him. At first he thought his name, Geoffrey, wasn't manly enough and more suited for an accountant. He tried calling himself Jeb, which earned him more points, but not enough to convince anyone to move out with him.

One of the young ladies, Darla, had shown interest. They chatted over organic chai tea served in mismatched shabby-chic cups. She was plain looking and made a point of showing him her hairy shins under her floor-length skirt. "Armpits, too," she said. "And, well, there's more. But enough about that." She eyed his face. "You'd look good in a beard."

He rubbed his chin and wondered what a beard would be like.

"I was the only girl not invited to the prom," she said. "It might sound like I'm complaining, but it's a badge of honor I wear with pride. They said I wasn't good enough for them but I see it as they weren't good enough for me."

Jeb offered a smile of understanding.

"After graduation," she continued without pausing, "I took a couple of years to find myself. Or so I thought. I ended up sitting at home watching soap operas. Go ahead, ask me anything about *Lonely Hearts Club*, or *Nashville Nurses* or *Mob Nephews and Nieces*. I know everything there is to know about them. If they ever created a trivia game, I'd win. I can talk about them for hours."

His eyes glazed over.

"Oh, do you like this skirt? I made it myself, just like how my great-grandmother Annie made things. And I'm learning to cook the way she did, with a pinch of this, a handful of that."

“Cooking will have to be simple stuff,” he said. “I only have a woodstove for heat.”

“That’s okay, I have an InstaPot,” she said.

He shrugged and grinned. “There’s no electricity.”

“I can live simple but not primitive. No electricity is a deal-breaker. Running water?”

He shook his head.

“So, an outhouse?”

He shook his head again.

“That’s another deal-breaker. Way too primitive for me.” She snapped her fingers. “I just realized I definitely need electricity for my music. After school, I started my obscure music phase. Still in it, I guess. Right now it’s Japanese bands who cover the Beatles. I can sing along to *Eleanor Rigby*. Don’t know what words I’m saying but it sounds good. Maybe someday I’ll meet someone from Japan and ask for a translation. Did you know there are some bands who made up their own languages? It’s true! It’s weird when they sing a song you know. One band chants like monks, but it’s all nonsense talking. ‘Pig Buick Mayor Purple Monkey Dishwasher’. That’s ‘Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band’, you know.”

Jeb excused himself to the bathroom and left without looking back.

Stocking the woodpile was a lot harder work than he had originally thought. The woodstove literally burned right through it. Who knew it took that much wood to heat a tiny wooden cabin? Of course, with cracks he could stick his fingers through and no insulation, much of the heat disappeared in the wind. His clothing fit looser with all the hard manual labor. His arms became taut with muscle. That would help with the girls the next time he traveled to town, twenty-five miles on his mountain bike.

The wind howled like a raging animal. A few snowflakes landed on his face. “Is that all you got?” he yelled. “Bring it on!”

The only light in the cabin was what leaked out around the woodstove vents. The fire burned fiercely due to the draft. He had shut the vents and closed the flue, but the wind sucked air through the stove like a blast furnace. With the wood pile outside and no more wood inside, the fire would be out in a couple of hours.

Jeb stared at the round thermometer dial on the wall. Already five degrees colder than when he had looked before crawling into his sleeping bag. Thirty-five and dropping. His sleeping bag was rated down to zero

degrees. Would the blankets be better on top of the sleeping bag or inside it?

And what if he had to use the bathroom in the night? He didn't actually have a bathroom, not even an outhouse. Only a tree a respectable distance from his cabin and the opposite direction from where his garden would be. He'd rely on canned goods until then. Would the cans freeze and burst open?

A gust slammed into the cabin, hard enough for the walls to creak and groan. The tin on the roof rattled and buzzed. How could the wind be so fierce here with trees all around? No way he'd survive out in that. What did the animals do? How could they eat? Maybe the rabbits could nibble on the twigs and branches where they crouched hiding from the storm and predators.

Coyotes were the biggest carnivores around, although some people claimed there was a mountain lion, as well. Some claimed black bears would move back, even though none had been seen in over fifty years.

Snowflakes drifted onto the woodstove and sizzled. One of the few items he'd paid for, it was only fifty dollars and in fair condition. It didn't hold much wood but in his naivete he'd guessed it would last the night. In reality, it required frequent attention.

With no TV, radio, or cell phone, he had no weather forecast. The old timers had gotten along without modern conveniences. You had to take it as it came. He yawned and pulled the sleeping bag over his head.

The next morning, he poked his head out into a small snow drift. A layer of white covered the entire inside of the cabin, except for the wood stove. Even a curved pile on top of the thermometer which read ten below zero. The windows rattled in the wind. Was it dying down? Maybe so, but it seemed like it could pick up again.

His bladder demanded attention. The old timers had used a pail until they could carry it out to empty it. He had left his pail outside, a plastic ice cream container which had undoubtedly blown to another county. He slid out of his sleeping bag into the frigid air. His boots were cold but necessary for a trip outside. He needed wood, too, and kindling.

He leaned against the door and pressed. The bottom was stuck in snow. Why hadn't he noticed that the door opened out before now? The hinges were mounted on the outside. He kicked at the bottom and it slid open a few inches. The snow could be pushed back only so far. He

kneeled and reached outside, digging the snow away. His gloves were thin and his fingers quickly stiffened in the cold.

Once outside, the wind quickly found any gaps in his clothing. He gasped at the coldness in his lungs. The sun was shining but diffused through all the snow in the air. A thin layer of snow hissed across the ground, packing down the snow stuck to the ground.

He tramped to his lavatory tree and tried to stand out of the wind. The process seemed to take forever. When he was done, he faced the wind to the woodpile and filled his arms. It would take several loads if he were to stay indoors until tomorrow. He remembered the plans for homemade snowshoes. A project like that could occupy him for the day, but he hadn't gathered the necessary twigs and branches. He didn't even have a deck of cards for solitaire.

By the time the pile inside the cabin looked big enough, his chattering teeth made his jaw ache. He used his hatchet to shave some kindling and fed the meager coals. He had almost run out of paper. Twenty-five miles by bicycle was a long way to raid a recycling bin full of newspapers. He'd need to keep the fire burning twenty-four hours a day.

The fire crackled, and he stuffed the furnace full, relying on the draft to help ignite the larger logs. An hour later, the temperature had risen to zero. He opened a can of pork and beans and set it on the stove to heat. The brown liquid had frozen, but the stove glowed with the heat it generated.

Snow and ice crystals still swirled inside, landing on his face and in his hair. Someone to talk to would be nice. The idea of a lone man fighting against nature—or was it living in harmony with nature?—sounded better than it actually was.

The wind seemed to sense his waning resolve and whipped the cabin with a syncopated rhythm. It must have changed directions as the stronger gusts were rattling the door and whistling underneath. Jeb took the rug next to his bed, rolled it, and placed it at the bottom of the door. That muted some of the noise. The window panes rattled, loosening the ancient putty.

He shook the snow off his blankets and sat on the bed. Nothing to do but watch the stove. How was he going to live all winter like this? He had a blank journal and a couple of pens. Write the next great American novel? It was more likely he'd tear out pages to start the fire.

The sun set and the cabin drifted back to darkness. He lit a scented candle in a jar that he'd found in a dumpster. Seven of them. When the aroma reached his nose, he knew why they'd been tossed. The wind picked up and blew the fake pine scent everywhere and made his cold

pork and beans taste like cheap gin, without the benefit of a buzz. The candle gave him a headache, just like a hangover.

How could it blow for so long? He'd heard of three-day blizzards, but even one day was bad enough. There was no sign of it letting up. His stressed mind raced. What poor planning. Nothing to do and nothing to eat but too-sweet pork and beans and bland canned vegetables. He scratched his beard, trying to get relief from the incessant itching. The tin lifted partway off the roof and slammed down. Snow fell in clumps onto his bed. As he brushed it off, he noticed the thermometer had dropped back to ten below.

As soon as the weather cleared, he'd bike the long miles to town and find somewhere else to live. What was her name again, Daria? Dora? Darla, yes, that was her name. She'd seemed like a nice girl.

MOTH

by Mo J. Ruud

Blaine sat locked in a staring contest they could never win. Their eyes were stuck in competition with a moth. Not even a real moth, but a picture of a moth. In reality, the picture wasn't even about the moth. It was a much larger poster promoting some study abroad opportunity that would cost two fortunes that half the students at their school would never be able to afford. The moth wasn't part of the poster, not really. It was a background detail; most likely it wasn't even noticed when the picture was taken. Blaine just happened to spot it one day, hidden between two large leaves, kitty-corner to a smiling monkey. Miniscule. Unremarkable. Stuck to a paper that itself was stuck to the back of a door.

And Blaine was losing to it.

The classroom was currently empty other than Blaine and the furniture that had itself become part of the room. Not literally, the desks and chairs and posters hadn't merged with the floor or walls, but they were part of the room in the sense that without them, the room wouldn't feel like the same room. Something would be missing, similar to how seeing the collar removed from a dog you had previously only ever seen wearing that collar might make it appear more naked, and wrong. Logically you know that the studded blue strip of fabric isn't part of a dog, but part of its identity is still held in that small constant splash of color that its owners' youngest child picked out when they were only a toddler. The decision of one undeveloped brain having forever altered the way that dog was perceived until the day it finally passed. Strangers might assume the dog was a boy, based on the blue, or that it was dangerous based on the spiky studs. Both assumptions that were as likely to be true as not. It's funny, Blaine thought, how an object completely its own can become a standard part of something else. The room would still be a room, but it wouldn't be their classroom without the shoddy desks, the loud hum of the radiator, or that hidden little moth forever staring out into nothing.

Blaine was stuck in this classroom (and further stuck in this staring contest) rather than at rehearsal for the new band they had started with

some friends and classmates. Blaine always liked music, learning to read sheet music before they could read sentences and joining the school concert band a year before any of their classmates. Yes, they would have much rather been at their rehearsal, but instead it had been decided by powers beyond them (the principal) that they must stay in this overheated classroom rather than enjoy their after-school freedom. They supposed it was better than getting stitches in their lip, like certain other people, so they didn't complain too loudly. They just stared at a moth.

Rudely, the staring contest was interrupted by the door swinging open, severing the intimate connection that the two were having. Blaine wondered if that meant they won.

"Blaine, your parents are here. They're talking with the principal." It was Mr. Jordan. Students weren't certain if "Jordan" was his first or last name, but a few hypothesized that it was both. They called him "JJ."

"And?" asked Blaine, now staring at their boots since they thought it would be weird to have a staring contest with a moth in the presence of an audience. That moth was a secret battle they kept between only themselves and their best friend. And the moth.

JJ didn't respond, he just walked around the classroom sliding his fingers against the desks he passed, looking at the bright spring day that shone in through the windows. He sat on a counter at the edge of the room with his back to Blaine, giving them the ease to look up at him again. They both knew eye contact wasn't necessary for their conversations.

"How are your knuckles?" JJ asked.

"Better than they were this morning," Blaine responded, looking down at the forming bruises.

JJ looked over his shoulder at them, brow furrowed. "The fight only happened an hour ago. What do you mean?"

"I mean they feel better. Exactly what I said." A long pause followed where JJ sighed and looked back out the window, leaving Blaine to fill the silence. Giving them the room needed to speak. "I mean," they tried again, "this morning they were getting antsy. Like a dog locked in a kennel for too long. Knocking that dipshit's lights in was like letting them run loose in a field full of squirrels." Blaine relived the entirety of the events in their mind once again. "They felt free."

"Free or not, you can't let your dogs get bloody and bruised. Did you remember to keep your thumb out of your palms?" Blaine nodded as JJ stood up and faced towards them, acting the boxing forms he'd told so many stories about, a remnant of a past life. "Kept your balance?" Another nod. "Elbows in?" Nod.

A satisfied smirk filled the student teacher's face, like that of a proud parent. Blaine found himself warmed by the sight of it. JJ spoke, "Then it sounds like you've picked up more from our talks than from any of my lesson plans. Don't know if that says more about me or about you."

They sat in silence after that for a while, neither quite looking at the other.

Finally, Blaine broke the silence with, "He deserved it."

"Oh, he's had it coming for a long time. Doesn't mean there won't be hell to pay for it."

"But it's so unfair that I'm getting in trouble after all of the shit that he's said!" Blaine's voice started rising. "Those kids are gonna feel far worse for far longer than he is. His split lip has probably already been healed by some goddam lasers or something. His parents can afford it."

"I thought you two were finally starting to get along. Isn't he part of your guys' new band?"

"Not by my choice. The others said we needed more people, I got outvoted. God, just seeing him in my garage last week I almost lost it."

"But you didn't."

Blaine sighed. "No, I guess I didn't."

"What happened today, made you snap?"

Blaine went quiet. They slumped back in their chair, kicking up onto its two back legs in the way that every teacher since grade school yelled at them not to do. Their warnings had never worked. JJ simply sat back, patiently waiting. Blaine sat, patiently stalling.

They sat in that silence for a long time. Blaine was still slightly shaky from their pent-up emotions, but they felt comfortable in a way you only ever do around a trusted adult. It wasn't the comfort of being with your friends and acting goofy, or the calm comfort of a pet you've known your whole life sitting on your lap. It was the comfort of being seen. A comfort that Blaine needed so desperately that they never wanted it to break.

Unfortunately, their attention was drawn to a knock at the door, harsh and jarring. They again saw the moth, huddled beneath the leaves of a fern, keeping out of sight for its own protection. Blaine was afraid of what was on the other side of that door.

JJ walked across the room, giving Blaine a brief squeeze on the shoulder as he passed by, saying, "I'll talk to them for you."

As he walked through the door, Blaine caught a glimpse of three people. One was their dad, another the principle. They didn't recognize the third.

Minutes passed like hours. The murmurs outside that room felt like the verdict of a judge, condemning Blaine to a life of self-confinement.

They shut out the noise. Focused in on themselves and imagined their music. Classical strings filled their mind as they could see that poor kid again from earlier in the day. The way he was happily running from his car after hugging both his moms. Not older than sixth grade, being stopped and told by upperclassmen that his family were freaks. Slurs slid out of mouths as naturally as a dog running free in a field of squirrels. Blaine's fingers twitched, antsy. They could imagine the rhythmic thumping of their knuckles against the training bag they had set up in their basement. Beating in time with the percussion as a low brass began to bellow, filling their chest with a growing sense of strength, a sense of self, a sense of being true. A sense they had lost for years since being a kid. A sense that was wanting, no, *needing* to burst free. Freed in the motion of grabbing the shoulder of their classmate's shirt. Free in turning him away from the poor little kid. Free as they took a breath to the rhythm of the band.

Elbows in.

Balance steady.

Thumbs out of palms.

A sharp *crack* – as Blaine snapped the pencil they didn't even realize they had picked up. The door cracked open again and they could see JJ's back as he slowly tried slipping into the room, speaking with the other voices outside saying, “—no, I can tell them. It's not a problem at all, thank you for coming to an understanding. Just give us a moment, Blaine will be out as soon as they're ready. Yes, thank you.” And with the closing of the door, he severed the hold of a conversation that was palpably obvious he had been trying to escape for some time. Pressing his hands against his face, JJ let out a deep sigh as his back slid down the side of the door until he rested in a deep squat, head still held in his hands.

Inhaling deeply, he said, “Do you ever feel like you're stuck in a stupid battle that feels impossible to win?”

Blaine looked three inches above his head where the study abroad poster was hung. “Sometimes.”

JJ confusedly glanced at where Blaine was looking before standing up. “They came to an agreement. Your ‘victim's’ parents, as they so elegantly described their child, wanted you expelled. Everybody else thought that was stupid.”

“Did they say that?”

“No, but if they weren't thinking it then they're stupid.”

“Did *you* say that?”

JJ gave Blaine a steely glare, “I'm surprised it was your fists rather than your mouth that finally got you into trouble. No, regardless of how much I wanted to, I didn't call anybody stupid. But, unsurprisingly, there's

gonna be repercussions for how this went down. First, you're suspended from school and events for a week and three days."

"That seems like an oddly specific amount of time," Blaine said, trying to think of what might be happening around that time. "Wait, that's not..."

"Your suspension will be up the day after the band concert."

Blaine's mind short-circuited. The band, their music, was one of the few decent parts about this school in their eyes. Before they could finish processing JJ continued. "After he heals from his concussion, our poor little victim is going to have to watch three diversity-inclusive PSAs under supervision of the counselor. Again, his parents were furious about this, but a win is a win."

Again, Blaine was reeling. First, they felt bad. They didn't realize their punch had given the boy a concussion, and even though they still felt justified in their actions, simply having a quantifier put to the harm they caused made them feel just a bit more guilty. They looked up at JJ, who still had a morose look on his face. "Was there anything else?"

Blaine didn't remember leaving the classroom. Next thing they noticed, they were in front of their locker with their hand frozen on the combination lock, not remembering what the second number was. Their father's words, "Get your stuff, we're going home," finally registered in their mind. He had said other words before those, but Blaine was struggling to fit them together. Something about "disappointed," "your mother," and "it'll be alright" were in there, but they couldn't remember in what order they had come. The only words they could think of were JJ's; "They're making me finish my student teaching at a different school."

Frustrated with the lock, Blaine pulled out two bobby pins and lockpicked their locker, the muscle memory working far better than remembering the numbers. To avoid processing their emotions, they thought about what they were doing next. They'd grab their math textbook, get in their dad's truck, ride home, nap until mom got home, then be forced to talk—

No, painful thoughts. Instead, they thought about the concert, how they'd sneak in with their friend's parents into the audience. If they couldn't play, they'd still support and listen to their friends. Get lost in the music they spent so long mastering—

Painful thoughts. Blaine was so busy pushing them away that they almost didn't notice when a folded-up piece of paper fell from the slit in

their locker and onto their boot. Blaine blinked, shaken out of their stupor by the strange circumstance, and leaned down to pick up the paper.

It wasn't anything fancy; simply a torn-out sheet of college-lined notebook paper. Unfolding it, they saw over a half dozen names written in different pens and handwritings. Blaine recognized two immediately, being the names of their best friends. There were also a few names of classmates and underclassmen that they recognized. The rest were names Blaine was unfamiliar with. They were all written in different, vibrant colors.

Amidst the names was a short message, written out and signed by the same quick, sloppy handwriting. It read: "Thank you for fighting our fight. Standing up for us when we can't do it ourselves. Never stop. Never back down. You are seen."

Tears fell and stained the page before they could put it away. With the newfound clarity in their mind, Blaine could hear their father calling for them to hurry up.

Blaine grabbed the rest of their things and pulled out the page again. Rereading the names a warmth filled their chest and a smile filled their face. They began recognizing more of the names; people from cliques Blaine was absolutely not a part of. There was even one boy from the popular crowd who had written his name. Most of them were people that Blaine had had next to no interactions with in the past.

Beneath the name of their best friend, they also noticed a small drawing.

A doodle of a moth.

THE ADVENTURES OF THAVISOUK PHOUNSIRI & SPARTACUS KINGFISHER

by V. Blanchard Singingeagle

with apologies to Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor

This year at Kattegat Elementary we got a whole bunch of new kids from somewhere in Southeast Asia. Miss Pupo, our fourth grade homeroom teacher, said they're refugees from Laos. I had no idea where Laos is until my Mad Scientist Uncle showed me on a globe, then showed me "Siam" on our old Risk game (more about Uncle Addy later).

Anyway, I thought it would be really cool to have all these new kids in town because they look just like us Indians and my dad says maybe with more of us around, things will get better. That was before Thavisouk Phounsiri. It seemed like the minute Miss Pupo assigned him to the desk behind me, he started to turn my whole world upside-down.

Of course, things were pretty much upside-down already thanks to Sam Scruggs and Matt Muffaloni, two fifth graders who made it their lives' mission to make my life miserable. My mom said I was overreacting but I think she was just trying to make me feel better. Dad tried to say something but Mom cut him off with one of her "not-in-front-of-the-kay-eye-dee-ess" whispers. Seppy, my little sister, and I already knew what he was going to say because it's sort of his tagline: "The sooner these kids learn about how cruel the world is to Indians the better off they'll be."

But we've already been learning that since nursery school.

So what does all this have to do with Thavisouk Phounsiri? Well, at noon all us kids were standing in the cafeteria lunch line, Thavisouk in front of me. I was just working up the courage to talk to him when all of a sudden, *WHAP!* on the back of my head.

I didn't have to turn around. Matt Muffaloni and Sam Scruggs. Like always, they were here to take their place in line, cutting in front of me.

WHAP! again. "Yo, thanks for saving our space, savage!"

Thavisouk turned around and Matt said to him, “You don’t want to be caught hanging out with this little whimp. He’ll get you sent straight to hell. — Know what our pastor told us at Bible camp? He said all you pagan Indians worship sticks and rocks instead of Jesus. What a bunch of losers.”

“Yeah, losers,” Sam added helpfully.

I thought that was weird because every Saturday before Holy Mass, Father Mervyn is right there with us in the sweat lodge. He calls it the Indian Sacrament of Reconciliation. In fact, that’s where he baptized Seppia, my baby sister.

Another *WHAP!* re-focused my attention. This really cracked Thavisouk up, so Matt *WHAP!*ed the back of my head again. “So, like, dude, why don’t you hang out with us instead of this red devil?”

“Led debbo!” Thavisouk said. Then he, Matt, and Sam turned their backs on me as the line moved forward.

That afternoon in science class, *WHAP!* Right behind me was Thavisouk Phounsiri grinning like Emperor Palpatine, yellow corn teeth and all. Geez! Didn’t they have toothbrushes in Laos?

Then Mr. Bledsoe, our science teacher, came bouncing in. He welcomed us back from vacation and said he hoped we took time to appreciate Siskiyou County’s natural wonders over the long summer vacation. Something about him reminded me of that stingray teacher on *Finding Nemo*.

“Now class, today I’ve got something totally cool to show you; you are going to love this! — Euglena Gracilus! Not quite plants, not quite animals, these tiny, single-celled organisms really baffle the scientific community because while they are omnivorous and can move around like animals, they also have chlorophyll and can make their own food like plants. Now plant yourselves (ha-ha!) behind a microscope and let’s have a look. This year’s budget is a little tight, so most of you will have to pair up.”

There was a microscope sitting right in front of me, so all I had to do was scootch forward but Thavisouk elbowed me aside.

“No way! You led debbo. Go find anodder.”

“Mr. Kingfisher, I’m sure Miss Ortiz wouldn’t mind partnering with you,” Mr. Bledsoe announced.

I hated working with my Cousin Amalfia. She smelled like an ashtray because her mother, who named her after Lady Amalthea on *The Last Unicorn* but didn’t know how to spell it, smoked like a logging truck. Sure, I know it wasn’t Fia’s fault but yuck! What’s worse, science had always

been my favourite class but now with *WHAP!*py Thavi and smelly Fia, it quickly became just another class to suffer through; in fact, the more I thought about it the more sore I felt. I mean, why should I let these guys ruin it for me? But instead of saying anything I just squished all my bitterness deeper inside. I guess we Indians are good at that.

By Friday all those squished down feelings had grown bigger and bigger, just like a giant loogie stuck in your throat that just has to finally come out, bad manners or not! This time when I felt the *WHAP!* on the back of my head I lost it. Like an Olympic gymnast I vaulted over the lab table and landed on top of Thavi. Fists flying, we rolled all over the floor, making the other kids scream and drop test tubes. Then I felt a big hand grab the back of my shirt and I was lifted into the air. It was Mr. Bledsoe. I forgot to tell you how big he is. He had me dangling in one hand and Thavi in the other.

“Ah, splendid!” he boomed. “I’d been hoping for an assistant to help me clean the lab after school. This semester we have TWO eager volunteers, Mr. Phounsiri and Mr. Kingfisher! Now, boys, if you’ll kindly accompany me to Principal Goudeau’s office, we’ll obtain proper parental permission and get you oriented. The rest of you young scholars, kindly continue your experiments and I’ll be back momentarily.”

For the next two weeks, Thavisouk and I cleaned the science lab in silence, sneering, backs turned, not making eye contact. Then one Friday afternoon Mr. Bledsoe clomped in, “Good news, gentleman! You’ve been doing such a fine job, I’ve phoned your parents and secured their permission, so this evening I’d like to treat you both to dinner. So, what’ll it be? McDonald’s?” I couldn’t stop myself. The old song-and-dance just burst out of me before I knew what I was doing:

Eeeeeew, yuck!
McDonald’s is the kinda place:
They serve you rattlesnakes,
Hamburgers up your nose,
French fries between your toes!
The last time I went there,
They stole my underwear!
McDonald’s is the kinda place!
Da-da-da-da! YEAH!

Well, Thavisouk whooped and guffawed and clapped his hands, shouting, “Again! Again!”

“Ah, humour!” Mr. Bledsoe interposed, “I see you gentlemen have finally stumbled upon your own Doudna Moment.”

“Our what?” I puzzled.

Mr. Bledsoe sighed, “Dr. Jennifer Doudna? Discoverer of CRISPR genetics? No? Oh, well. Remind me to work that into next week’s lesson plans. Now let’s go.”

“You do realize we’re only fourth graders, right?” I asked as we walked out of the lab.

“Perfect!” Mr. Bledsoe replied. “You’re never too young for science! Mark my words, gentlemen. We are at the dawn of some exciting times! Exciting times indeed!”

Mr. Bledsoe took us to Grumpygram’s instead of McDonald’s. Run completely by old folks, it’s a combination nursing home, truck stop, and 24-hour diner. They make the best chili burgers and pies in all of Siskiyou County, and they’re right where A-12 and I-5 meet, so you know they’re always packed.

After that day, no more *WHAP!*s and best of all, I finally got a best friend. Scruggs and Muffaloni didn’t bother me anymore either because **SOMEBODY** started a rumour that Thavisouk Phounsiri was a junior Thai kickboxing champion (hehe!). Thavi and I arranged it so we could sit together in all our classes, and we even tripled up with Cousin Fia in Mr. Bledsoe’s lab. When we weren’t in school we were fooling around in Lookie, our favourite hangouts being the skate park, the A&W, and the beat-up old bowling alley. On Friday and Saturday nights we did sleepovers at each other’s houses, but I think Thavi preferred my place. Kingfisher Manor, as my dad called it, was a rickety old rock-and-log house on the other side of I-5, right up against the mountains, on the edge of a really awesome forest.

“You kids need to be careful roaming around in those woods,” my mom said. “Remember, there was a wildfire out there last summer! And whatever you do, stay away from the railroad tracks! It’s not safe!”

I knew what she was talking about, the English majors. They even did a special about ‘em on the KSQ, the local public radio station: “Folks, we’ve been getting news of some highly disturbing phenomena all over Siskiyou County,” the announcer warned. “Citizens have reported increasing incidents of violent encounters with hordes of starving, flesh-eating, homeless English majors. Owing to their failure to find gainful employment after graduation, English majors have been hopping trains and establishing tent cities all along the railroads. Keep in mind that these are hideous creatures with unimaginable imaginative and persuasive

powers, so parents, be sure to keep a close eye on your kids and at all costs, do not let them play anywhere near the railroad tracks!”

But Thavi and I weren't scared. “Don't worry, Mom,” I said. “Soupy has our backs.”

Soupy is the family dog. Well, more like the family werewolf. When we first got her from the shelter in Berryvale, she looked like a little ball of fur, all fluffy and whiny and stuff. Mom didn't want her but as soon as my baby sister, Seppy, laid eyes on her she was in love.

“Ooh! Puppy-wuppy-luppy!” she screamed with glee. She snatched her up by the hind leg and cradled her like a babydoll. Then the puppy licked Seppy's face and I knew there was no way we were getting out of there dog-less. When we got her home, Dad joked that the Plains Indians used to make soup out of their dogs, so the name stuck, Soupy. You know the story about Clifford-the-Big-Red-Dog? Well, not quite but I kid you not: in a matter of months Soupy ballooned to more than 150kg! “Extremely rare canine gigantism,” the vet called it. We can't take her into town anymore because everyone flees in terror, so we keep her at home as our own sweet-natured farm-and-forest dog.

Now I know what you're thinking – giant malamutes, haunted forests, zombie English majors, and two boys who love adventure: recipe for disaster. But hang on. I haven't gotten to the part about the angry Bigfoots.

Okay, so here's how it went down. Early Saturday morning, Thavi and I went out exploring as usual. We had been awakened by a bright flash outside that had lit up my entire bedroom. It could have been Uncle Addy's robot woolly mammoths again; we weren't sure, so we immediately rolled out of bed and set off to investigate. Soupy snuffled along by our sides, in front of us, behind us, basically orbiting us like a giant, hairy satellite.

As we trudged along, we could see a tiny wisp of smoke rising up into the sky not too far from us. It happened so fast neither of us could react. Soupy suddenly stood straight up, still as a crane, ears perked. Then she tensed her hind legs and shot off.

“Soupy, no!” I groaned. “Not Judge Slugnest's land again!”

Thavi looked at me curiously. “Who dat?”

“Only the meanest, most rottenest judge in all Siskiyou County. He threatened to shoot Soupy the next time he saw her! Come on! We gotta stop her!”

Judge Arval Slugnest is, like, one of the richest people in Siskiyou County. My dad says he makes a killing off us Indians by sending us to jail. I'm not sure how that works but I do know he owns two liquor stores

that sell cheap booze to wino Indians, plus a pawn shop in Lookie that's chock full of our tribe's traditional stuff. Worst of all for us at the moment, his acreage butts up against our own land and it's surrounded by lots of barbed wire and signs every few metres that say, "POSTED! NO TRESPASSING! VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW."

I always thought the "POSTED" part was pretty stupid. It's like saying, "My heart was beating in my chest, which is where it usually beat." Anyhow, hearts beating wildly, Thavi and I raced lickety-split through the trees, and like track stars, we leaped over Judge Slugnest's barbed wire fence. We ran another three hundred meters before we saw it. Right where the judge's mini-mansion should have been was a huge, smoking crater. In the middle of that crater was something like a small boulder glowing yellow-gold. Standing around that stone were—

"Enggish majors! Run!" Thavi cried.

"No!" I hushed. "Running away might attract them. Up there! Climb! Hurry!" I don't know what possessed me to shimmy up a hundred-meter tree, but we both climbed and climbed. And when we got high enough, not only could we spy on the English majors without being seen, we also had an excellent view of Kingfisher Manor, our little elementary school, and our little town of Kattegat. Oddly enough, the English majors were completely naked and they seemed to be dancing around the glowing stone. But our dog Soupy was nowhere in sight.

"Wonderful," I stage whispered. "Our giant wooly malamute has run off, we have no weapons, and we're a hundred meters high in an old-growth Douglas fir spying on a nest of flesh-eating, homeless English majors as they perform some sort of nude ritual around a mysterious meteor crater. This is exactly the kind of thing I did not want to be doing today."

Trying not to shake the whole tree as he trembled, Thavi muttered, "Dey catch us up here?"

I rolled my eyes. "Nah! Everybody knows English majors can't climb trees, only write haikus about them. Still, I would much rather be at the skate park, or the A&W or even the broken down old bowling alley."

We watched the disgusting ceremony go on and on until all of a sudden, the English majors froze and started backing away.

"Holy crap!" I whispered. "Is that my uncle Addy?"

A small, nerdy man with frizzy white hair and a lab coat stood at the tree line. He was holding up a clipboard and flashing it like a weapon. Whatever he had written on it (math problems I bet) worked because as soon as they spotted it, they fled in terror. I was going to call out to him

but hesitated to watch as Uncle Addy stooped, took scrapings off the meteor, put them in a small vial, and walk away. When we could no longer see or hear anything, we clambered down and started off in the direction we saw Uncle Addy go. The problem was, without Soupy to act as our guide, neither of us knew where we were going.

Soon we found ourselves moving through a grove of burned up junipers. Thavi stumbled along, snapping branches and kicking up black dust. Up ahead was an especially gnarled tree, four long slashes across its trunk. And then I smelled it. Even stronger than the burnt-out forest smell was something like a combination of mouldy coffee grounds and stale body odour. Thavi's nostrils flared.

"You smell it too?" I whispered.

He nodded.

In the darkest part of the dead trees there was movement. A distant grunting noise. I pulled on Thavi's arm but he wouldn't budge. The grunt grew louder, now a growl.

"Keep moving," I urged.

"No," Thavi countered. "Hide!"

"Hiding won't make that thing go away. We'll just be sitting ducks."

I pulled harder and led him, tip-toe, tip-toe, away from the noise. A few meters ahead, I thought I saw one of the trees move. We froze and tried not to breathe. Then we saw two glowing, cat-like eyes blinking at us. We ran for our lives! Crashing through scratchy black branches and over clumps of dead grass, we both skidded to a halt when we saw them, the railroad tracks, the tattered tents and ratty lean-tos. A death trap. We had stumbled right into the heart of the flesh-eating, homeless English major camp. That's when we heard the heavy, raspy breathing and eerie mumbles in languages neither of us understood:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade

Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate
Beauty is truth, truth beauty.
That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.

Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,
To maken vertu of necessitee.

Now the smell of mouldy coffee grounds and stale body odours was overwhelming. “Oh no,” I cried. “I think one of them snuck up behind us.”

“Sneaked,” a wheezy, phlegmy voice proclaimed. “Snuck is not a real word.” A pale white limb reached out, tentacle like, and grabbed Thavi’s shoulder. Thavi’s eyes widened and he squeaked out something that sounded like, “M-m-meep! M-meep! Meep!” The hand was glistening with some sort of goop and it slid onto Thavi’s windbreaker. The goop sizzled where it touched his bare skin, where neck meets shoulder. He started to go pale and his eyes rolled back into his head.

I was frozen in fear. Other than my earlier scuffle with Thavi, I had never fought anyone. Thavi was certainly bigger and stronger than I, but I knew if I didn’t do something quick, Thavi was going to die. The tentacle-like appendage started to pull Thavi backwards into the shadows. Thavi reached out for me, for anything that could stop his momentum. I looked around desperately for a weapon among the dead trees. I grabbed a broken branch and began whack-whack-whacking at the pale limb dragging my friend away. The English major made a gurgling howl, and matching howls echoed from all over the camp, from all throughout the charcoal forest. I whacked harder. The slimy limb slackened. Thankfully, the English major’s toxic slime worked against him and I finally pulled Thavi free. Thavi’s neck and left shoulder were a mess of brown blotches. It made me so mad I whacked the English major’s limb once more for good measure and it recoiled, rolling back into its monstrous body. Suddenly it shot out again, but we ducked and ran down an embankment!

When we got to the bottom I looked over my shoulder and saw the creature emerge from the shadows above us. There in the full rising sunlight I saw exactly what an English major looks like. It had glowing red eyes and splotched skin, and in the centre of its face was a tongue-like tentacle, or tentacle-like tongue glopping out iambic pentameter sludge. My stomach lurched.

“Move! Move! Move!” I screamed. Even with English major venom coursing through his veins, Thavi moved swift as a deer and I struggled to keep up. “No fair!” I cried. “You’re taller and faster than me!”

“Faster than *I*!” coughed another spine-chilling voice. One by one and from all sides, emaciated, pale bodies moved on us like giant snails smearing thick, oily trails across the dead grass. We were surrounded.

Thavi and I looked at each other, clung to each other as we awaited our fate. Just then we heard a tremendous commotion. It was Soupy to the rescue! She bounded through the woods like a canine slime-seeking missile, and she’d brought some friends with her. I wouldn’t have believed

it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. What could only be described as several three-meter tall Wookiees pounced on the English majors. My eyes might have been playing tricks on me, but I swear one of them was wearing a Valkyrie costume and another was riding a big, black motorcycle! Anyway, the hairy beasts grabbed the slimy monsters and tossed them into the air, scattering them. Not to be outdone, Soupy clamped her jaws around an English major torso and she shook the creature with all her might.

"Go! Go! Go!" I shouted at Thavi, and together we ran as thoughtlessly as we could. Thavi, even with his body weakening, had found a reckless energy that propelled him forward, and we became a four-legged animal of escape. There weren't even footprints in the ashes. That's how gone we were. And just as we stumbled across the railroad tracks and onto Old Stage Road, we turned to see the entire forest, the blackened grass, the rocks, the trees all swell up and then shrink back to normal with a *WHOOOMP!*

Then it was quiet. There was no sign of any creatures, but Soupy was standing right beside us. Gasping for air, not knowing what else to do, we leaned into each other and laughed. Thavi was still covered in brown blotches and pouring sweat but we laughed about that too.

"Oh my God!" Thavi huffed. "I thought we were goners for sure!"

And then it hit me: "Thavi, your, your, your a-accent is gone!"

"Yeah," he said. "I think it was the English major venom. Good thing you pulled me away when you did. Otherwise, I'd have become one of them, growing a goatee, spouting Shakespeare, taking out student loans, and living in a lean-to." Then we limp-carried each other away from the flesh-eating, homeless English major camp, back toward Kingfisher Manor, back to sanity, Soupy panting and tail-wagging by our sides.

I will never forget that experience as long as I live. It will haunt me in my worst nightmares until my last breath. On the day I finally do croak, one of my last thankful thoughts will be, "Well, at least I won't have to remember that anymore." And I will die smiling.

HOME COMING

by Anne Winne

Frightened and angry Tribble was whipped and shouted at until she jumped into the big trailer with all the other frightened horses. She knew none of these horses, the horses she knew had been left at the summer camp. The camp people did not like her, nor she them, so she had been driven to another kind of school where the people were impatient, and they hit her with their whips and the ends of the lead lines. She was always angry or frightened there.

So now she was in the big trailer. It was days before the movement stopped and the gate opened. Days with no water, but what they could lick off each other when they were hosed down through the slats of the trailer.

Tribble was with a group of horses near the gate, all they saw was a long alley, they bunched up together in fear they did not know that they were supposed to jump off and go down the long dark alley.

“Get a move on!” someone shouted and poked a stick between the slats of the trailer and the young mare next to her squealed and jumped forward, her momentum carrying her off the trailer and down the long dark corridor, the other horses followed. There was a gate open at the end and all of them rushed into the pen, there was a water trough and a round bale of hay, the six horses and Tribble started in surprise when the gate behind them was slammed shut. The other horses on the trailer were herded into other pens.

There was food and water, it was dark. The six horses in the pen scrambled for water, an equine scrum that quickly sorted out the hierarchy of the temporary herd. Tribble drank her fill and moved to the big round bale in the feeder. These horses had not been fed in days, she ate. Not knowing when she would have food again.

When the sun came up more horses were unloaded and forced to run past the pen she was in. They were all scared too. People seemed to be always bustling between pens, shouting at each other. Then two men one with a clipboard were walking through, stopping at every pen taking notes and occasionally shouting. They stopped and took a long look at the six

horses in Tribble's pen. "Some of these are young, but it's a sorry looking lot," he said to the man with him. "This lot should go near the end, these are fodder for the kill buyers."

"Wait, we got one more Leopard Appaloosa, hiding behind the bay."

"So we do. That's four, make the call, that guy comes every time we have them, even if it's not the one he's looking for. He usually buys."

"Okay. What time is the auction?"

"Noon tomorrow, make sure they all have water, and get hip numbers on them too."

"Yes sir."

The men went away and there was just the noise of horses and cattle closely confined. Tribble stayed in the far corner of the pen near the hay, and water. She did not like being hungry, and at the last place she stayed, she was often hungry.

Two men interrupted her day, she had watched them as they progressed through the pens. Each pen they stopped at erupted in activity, horses circling the confined space in panic. One young horse flipped over backwards and hit hard on the railings before he lay still in the dirt. He never got up again.

They reached the pen she was in; she laid her ears flat on her head and bared her teeth. "Oh, a tough one," one man said. He flicked out the big whip he had and caught her on her flank. She threw her head up, and began frantically circling the pen, looking for a way out. As the animals went around the second man slapped them on hindquarters with a round cardboard number. It stayed where he slapped it by means of an adhesive that would give the new owners some trouble to remove it. Once all the horses had been labeled they were left alone again. Just before sunset the water trough was filled but no more hay was added, the round bale was mostly already eaten, some of it had been scattered on the dirt floor and was no longer appetizing.

About mid-morning two men came through, this time only looking at specific pens. One man looked and smelled slightly familiar to Tribble. The other one was the man with the clipboard.

"This here is the last one, she's a mare, some age on her, no other information." Will James, the head groom at Sue's stable looked at the mare hiding at the back of the pen. She was thin, about 2 or 3 hundred pounds underweight, she still had some muscle she had welts on her back and sides, some old, some new and still scabbed. She looked at him with curiosity, but when the auction barn manager spoke, she laid back her ears and made that odd sound in her throat that Sue always said meant she was afraid.

The manager stepped forward with his heavy stick to prod the animals in the pen to circle so that Will could get a better look.

“No!” Will said, “don’t, I can see what I need from here.” He never took his eyes off the spotted mare. It had only been one year, and she had transformed into a terrified and possibly dangerous animal. She had always been grumpy, but she had never been dangerous.

“Not the one your looking for? Too bad. . .”

“Just the opposite. As we agreed, I’d like to buy the Appaloosa, and these 4 hip numbers. I’ll give you \$800.00 for the lot.”

“Well now,” the manager couldn’t help himself, he wanted to bargain for more money.

“That’s a firm offer for five horses that will fetch at most \$75.00 each from the kill buyers.” He paused here, put his hand in his pocket. “I’m paying cash.”

The manager also knew that a cash sale would be easier for him. Easier for him to pocket the extra. “Done, when do you want to pick them up?”

“Now, I have my rig here, you round up the other 4, I’ll pull my rig to the gate, you leave this one to me.”

Once the other four horses had been run on to Will’s large trailer, he closed the gate bisecting the space, he grabbed a halter and lead rope and a plastic bag with a wadded-up tee shirt in it.

“You ain’t crazy enough to go in that pen are you?”

“Yes, but I want you to block off the other animals, leaving the mare on her own near the gate.”

It was a frustrating exercise, and took some time but Tribble found herself separated from her small herd by boards thrust into the pen from the ally while the animals circled.

“Thank you, stand back please.” Will stood on the bottom rail, his body on the outside but his head and shoulders leaning over. He had the halter and lead rope over one shoulder, dangling into the pen, in full view of the horse.

“No secrets Tribble,” he said. The mare stopped her nervous pacing, she hadn’t heard that name in a very long time. One ear came forward, she was still making that growly noise. “I know, you haven’t had such a good time of it have you?” He spoke to her softly. He opened the plastic bag, out of it wafted the best scent Tribble knew. That scent meant surcease from pain, it meant good things to eat, it meant fun and grooming that didn’t hurt her sensitive skin. She took one small step toward him, he stayed still, he did not reach out to catch or touch her. He offered the bag again, it was like magic, she couldn’t help herself, she had to get closer to that wonderful aroma.

She finally reached him and attempted to plunge her nose into the bag. “There you go,” Will crooned to her, “there, that’s a good girl.”

He gently ran his hands up her neck and rubbed her ears, as he had many times. He knew she enjoyed it. She visibly relaxed at this attention. “Okay Lady, what do you say? Is it time to leave this place?”

The manager, dumbfounded, watched in silence as he had been instructed. Will held out the halter and the ornery spotted devil nearly stuck her head in it. She allowed herself to be led out of auction barn. Will’s trailer was waiting, Tribble stopped and refused to move. One of the mares already on the cavernous trailer nickered softly. Will had already hung a bucket containing a small amount of sweet feed to entice her.

Will stood still and let the mare look. “It’s okay little girl,” Will crooned to her. One red ear swiveled in his direction. She remembered that name, Will was the only one who called her that.

“I can give her a swat if you want,” called one of the auction attendants.

Will didn’t raise his voice. “Don’t, she’s fine.” Will rubbed his hand along Tribble’s neck. She was dirty and had not been groomed in some time, he noted the welts and open soars on her back and flanks.

“What do you say Tribble, let’s get on out of here, and I’ll take you to Sue.”

The spotted horse turned her head and bumped his shoulder with her nose. Will held his breath but stood still. Tribble was known to bite, she didn’t she just tapped him.

“I know, it’s a big decision.” He pulled the bag out of his back pocket and offered her the smell of her favorite human. She stuck her nose in it and sighed. He took the shirt out of the bag and lobbed it into the trailer near the bucket.

Tribble snorted, gave Will a shove and entered the trailer.

“Atta Girl!” Will followed her, grabbed up the shirt and tied it snugly to the divider, so the horse couldn’t eat it, and unclipped her lead rope. He jumped out, and closed and latched the door.

Three and a half hours later, Will pulled the rig into the stable yard at the quarantine barn. Here at this huge facility, there was a twelve stall barn just for new animals. The five horses he had with him needed the isolation and veterinary care. They would get what they needed here, he knew.

Sue came running from the outdoor arena. “Will?” She was vibrating with impatience. “How is she? Where is she?”

Will climbed wearily out of the cab of the big pickup. “Steady there, she’s fine, more or less. You calm down. You won’t help if you’re all upset.”

Sue shook her hands like she was trying to dry them to diffuse some of her tension. Then she heard it. The sweet low whicker, the call of a mother horse to her foal. Tribble made that sound whenever she saw Sue.

Sue moved with purpose to the rear of the big rig and reached for the latch.

“Stop, you know better. Close the gate, I’ll open the barn door, do we have 4 stalls ready?”

“Yes, the stalls doors are open, the back door is closed we’re ready.”

“Good, now wait.” He grabbed the lead rope off the truck seat and gave it to her. “She’s separated from the others; you go and get her. I’ll open the door.”

Will barely had the gate open, when Sue slipped in, and Tribble pinned her to the wall of the trailer with her head. Not hard, just to keep her there so the spotted horse could drink in her smell.

“Oh baby,” Sue crooned to the mare. “You’re home now, I promise you’ll never live anywhere else.” Tears streamed down her face, she put her forehead on the mare’s, wrapped her arms around the horse’s head. “I’m so glad you’re home.”

NONFICTION

A GOOD MAN

by Jean Anderson

It's always been men. I've seen men crossing the bridge over the Red River, standing at bus stops or street corner stop lights, or hurrying along a street that has no sidewalk. Strange that it's never been women I've noticed, but only men.

They stick out because they stride hard, or stand with hands jammed in their pockets, or keep their shoulders hunched up. They're bolstering themselves against the wicked winter north wind of 22 miles an hour and minus-5 degrees temperatures. One look at them and you shiver.

Maybe it all started when my dad and I were driving in his pick-up one day and passed an old church serving as a homeless shelter. Dad turned to me and said, "I'm afraid David might end up homeless someday." Oh. That was a tough admission to hear from Dad. My brother David never did end up homeless, but it opened my heart for people who might be.

Winters can be dreadfully — even deadly — cold in Fargo-Moorhead. There's no lingering to be had without significant clothing, or you risk serious damage to life and limbs. The relentless wind, snow, and freezing temperatures could kill you.

One January Sunday morning found me winding my way to see my husband Mark at his memory care home. The sky was muted still in its night darkness, but it was brightened subtly by the snow and streetlights. Freezing cold. A frozen world. Minus 13 degrees.

And who is that who is walking past the roundabout onto the bridge? At this time, on this day, in this bleak mid-winter? I slow down...I turn to look at him. I catch his eyes...and I wonder...who is out here in this weather? The earth frozen solid in its stillness. There is no traffic yet. The light so soft and the day so still on what is normally a full and fast-paced bridge.

I slow...I wonder...No traffic. Not a car in sight. Offer him a ride, I think. But what if he pulls a gun? I almost laugh at myself. Out of his pocket he would pull a gun? Not likely.

There are snowbanks piled along the side of the road. He'd have to climb over. Slow...slow I go. And now a break in the snowbanks. He

looks at me. I motion “Come!” And I still keep driving slowly. He begins a slow trot to meet me. I put on the car blinkers to warn others. I see a couple of headlights in the deep distance. My car door is locked. So I unlock it.

He gets in. Sweet relief. “Thank you,” he utters.

“Yes,” I say, “it’s too cold out there. Where are you going?”

“To Burger King.”

“What’s your name?”

“Doug.”

“My name is Jean.”

He’s now squeezed into the front seat. I’d tossed everything I could into the back. Then I noticed his hands. Red, ice white. Bare. No gloves!

“Here, try these on.” I pulled off my gloves and handed them to him.

“They’re your gloves.”

“Yes, but you need gloves.”

Doug tries, but he can’t pull them on. Too small.

I see that Walgreen’s is ahead. “I’m going to pull in here. You need some gloves.”

There is a perceptible pause. “I don’t have any money.”

“That doesn’t matter. You need gloves.” Usually, I’ve had a stash in the backseat of my car, plus scarves and hats. Where are they?

Slowly we go into Walgreen’s parking lot, but they’re not open.

“Where were you walking from?”

“The other side of downtown.”

I simply can’t imagine it. He has a stocking cap, a hoodie pulled over that. Tennis shoes — not boots — and a semi-serious winter jacket, but NO GLOVES.

On to more snippets of conversation. He’s already told me he thinks a contractor will call with work for him. But he’s still \$100 short of his rent money. He’ll do anything...shovel snow...I asked for his phone number and gave him mine.

Just down the street is Hornbacher’s grocery. It’s open. “I’m going to swing in here for a minute. Why don’t you come in?” In the parking lot, I’m thinking...haven’t I seen gloves in here? Walking towards the store, Doug says again, “I don’t have any money on me.”

“Oh, that’s okay.” And from Doug, “I’m so ashamed. I’m 28...a grown man.”

“Oh, don’t think twice! Everybody needs help at some time. I’ve needed help. I’m just passing it along.”

In the store, I head directly left and spy the rack at the end of an aisle. “There it is — pick out some gloves.” Doug tries on one or two and finds

a pair that pulls on easily. I'm casting my eyes over the rack...anything else of use? "Get another pair." And so, he pulls on a gray fleece set. Then I spy a balaclava mask. "Would this be helpful for your face?" "Yes," he says, and over we go to check-out. I request an extra \$50 from the cashier.

Back in the car. But all of a sudden, I think of his \$100 need for rent. "Let's go back in for a minute. I'm going to get a mocha for my husband. Would you like something?"

While we're ordering at the kiosk, Doug says, "I can't read the sign." Hmmm, I wonder, maybe he can't see well, maybe he can't read. I'll get him the same as I do for Mark, a medium turtle mocha. Then I told Doug I'll be back in a minute. I headed to the ATM and pulled \$100 out. When I return to the coffee kiosk, our drinks are soon ready and out we go to the car where our conversation continues.

I'm quietly startled when Doug discloses a painful memory.

"It was \$6,000 for my mom's burial. My sister had \$5,000 and I had \$500. My mother had a necklace. I have it now. It has a gold charm with the letter S for Sharon. I don't want to sell it."

"Of course. You can't sell it. When did she die?"

"Two weeks ago." Oh!

"Was it expected?"

"No, she died during the night. Accidental overdose of pain meds. Oxygen just kept going down. I don't know why I came here. A couple of friends here."

"Good friends?" I ask.

"No. Not quite the same goals as I have."

"What are yours?"

"Find good work. Get married. Get a cabin for our home."

We arrived at Burger King. I've told him earlier about Mark — how he's on hospice care but keeps on living. I now tell him, "I'm so sorry about your loss. That's very tough." Doug replies, "She was only 58."

Doug gets out and sets his mocha on the pavement. "My friend is waiting for me, so I guess I better put these on. He pulls the gloves apart, picks up the tag that's fallen to the ground and then puts on the gloves.

The \$100 I have is folded, and I put the \$50 with it. Leaning over the passenger seat, I handed it to him. "Here, I want you to have this for your rent." Doug's whole body stops. "Oh," he utters. I see his face contort and the beginning of tears. "Oh." He is without words. I don't want to delay the moment. "God bless you," I say. A pause.

He looks at me, "God bless you."

PRECIOUS CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

by Alice Bjorklund Gunness

Mother's Wash Day

“If I wouldn't have gotten my Maytag washing machine in 1935, I would have died,” Mother said. Before the washing machine, she used just a scrub board, a wash tub, and a couple of tubs for rinse water, plus a hand cranked wringer. It was 28 years of very hard work. Think of all the dirty farm clothes and diapers!

It was wash day and water needed to be hauled from the well house to the kitchen. The well was close to the barn. The water was hauled on a sled in winter or a wagon in the summer, in 13-gallon cream cans. It was hauled along with a 13-quart copper boiler that sat on top of the fire box on the iron cook stove to heat water fast. Mother filled the boiler with water to heat.

While the water was heating to a boil, my dad helped setup the stand and the tubs for rinse water. He rolled the Maytag into the kitchen from the porch. The exhaust tube from the Maytag's gas engine was placed outside the kitchen door, cracked just enough to get rid of the fumes. It seemed like the wind was always from the northwest on wash day and it blew the fumes back into the house. It was a very unpleasant odor and the house cooled off.

As the water was getting hot to boiling, Mother sliced a bar of P&G (Proctor and Gamble) soap into it. This was a tedious job, standing beside the hot stove. Next came the can of lye powder added to the hot water to keep the white clothes white. Then Mother placed a load of white clothes, including the sheets, in the boiling lye water. From there she transferred the whites to the washing machine with a wooden stick so she wouldn't get burned. After the load was finished, more hot water from the 13-gallon can filled the washer and the colored clothes, including the shirts

and ordinary wear, were washed. After everything else was washed, the men's dirty overalls and work socks were agitated and washed, too.

All the loads were rinsed in the two rinse waters and run through the wringer twice—from one tub to the other. When the basket was full of each load, it was carried to the clothesline outside the house.

The main line of the Sioux Line railroad ran past our farm. The first thing my mother did, before hanging out the clothes, was to run a damp cloth over the four clotheslines to remove the oily coal dust. It was from the steam engines that billowed into our yard as each train passed. Then she hung the clothes on the line. The sheets were first, then the white clothes, and lastly the rest of the laundry was hung to dry.

In the wintertime, no matter how cold, Mother had to hang out the clothes. It was called “freeze drying.” The clothes were hung outside in the morning and left hanging into the middle of the afternoon. Then Mother would start bringing them inside—frozen board stiff!

Gradually everything, in turn, was placed on top of the big heating stove in the family room, layer upon layer, until all were getting dry. Everything smelled good until we dried the woolen long underwear. They were clean, but they still had that wet wool smell.

We weren't through yet though. Next came the cleanup. We had to empty all three tubs and carry the water out in pails. If it was dry weather in the summertime, the rinse water was poured on the flowers. The wash tubs were cleaned and rinsed, and the Maytag was rolled out of the kitchen to the connected enclosed porch.

Then the clothes were folded and put away, and another pile was made for ironing the next day.

When you work with an automatic washer and dryer, don't complain about needing to wash clothes. Think of all the work that was involved for our ancestors—mothers and grandmothers. In all those years of washing clothes, I never heard my mother complain about laundry day. But boy, by night, she was tired and she'd earned it.

The School Christmas Tree

It was the end of an era. About the last Christmas trees on my father's land across Rice Lake. There weren't many trees left, except for the evergreens that someone had climbed up and chopped the tops off. My dad wasn't at all happy about that and he thought it a mean thing to do.

Once my brother Clarence and I went for a Christmas tree for our family. We skied and then skated across a pond until we found the perfect

tree. Clarence chopped it down with a hatchet. We then proceeded to follow our path back home, skating over the pond, then skiing across a field. I carried the unused skates or skis while Clarence carried the Christmas tree. That was the last year we ever did that. The next year, we started to see Christmas trees in towns on vacant lots. Truly an end of an era.

A few years before, my oldest brother, Harry, and a good friend, were given directions to go across Rice Lake and bring a Christmas tree back for the school. It was District 272, Ottertail County, Richville, Minnesota.

Our school was a big, imposing structure with two floors and two teachers. I was in the first grade in the downstairs room and Harry was an eighth grader upstairs. Farm work had developed him into a strong young man.

So off they went, Harry and a friend. Contrary to the present day, the boys asked permission to bring along their .22 rifles in case they saw squirrels to shoot. There were lots of oak trees and acorns for the squirrels to winter on. It must have been their nap time though because the boys didn't shoot any squirrels.

I didn't know about the trip to get the tree. After school, I was thrilled to see my brother Harry and his friend coming back around the corner in front of the school. There was a big Christmas tree on their shoulders and rifles in their free hands. The tree was a native Minnesota spruce, with softer needles than the imported Colorado blue spruce that we mostly see today. The white schoolhouse, with a belfry in the corner, was magnificent. I'm sure the tree they brought home stood at least 10 feet tall.

The beautiful tree graced the second floor for the Christmas program two nights later. With candle holders and little, real candles covering it, the tree was lit for the program. We kids were awed by its size and beauty. A pail of water sat alongside the tree to douse a fire in case something happened.

It was again the end of an era. A beautiful one that I cherish along with other precious memories of childhood.

Mother's Ball of String

What was it doing up in the kitchen cupboard? How did it get there? And what was it for?

“What is a ball of string doing in our kitchen cupboard, Mother?” And so she told me. “This is an accumulation of more than 40 years of saving string.”

It was nice light-weight string that fastened sacks of food staples: 50 lbs. of wheat flour, 10 lbs. of sugar, and 5 lbs. of salt. The sacks were sewn at the top with white string because there was no other way to fasten sacks at the time.

And this is how it started. Mother took a piece of envelope and folded it for a stiff starter. Then she proceeded to wrap the string around the paper, making it thicker in the middle and criss-crossing itself to keep it from unravelling. As she continued to save the string when she bought staples, the ball continued to grow. With each new addition of string the ball was rotated all the way around again, criss-crossing itself to keep the ball together. When I was old enough to know what it was the ball had already grown to the size of a baseball.

And this is how she used the string. Just about any time I would do something and get into a little trouble by injuring my fingers, maybe I cut my fingernails too short or got a hangnail that infected, or maybe it was because I had a pocket-knife on me just like my older brothers, and maybe the knife slipped, whatever happened, I told my mother. She proceeded to grab the ball of string and a small green square of cloth.

After seeing my hands washed well, she took the cloth and wrapped it around my finger, folding the ends over my fingertip. She would say, “Put your hand here, Alice. Hold it while I get the string ready.” Then she would find a nice long piece of string, fold it in half lengthwise to thicken it, and, wrapping the string criss-cross around my finger, Mother would put a knot at the bottom of the cloth and tie it snugly. Then she took the two strands, brought them down to my wrist, and knotted them together before proceeding to tie them in a bow knot on the other side of my hand.

At the time there were no adhesive band aids available on the market. Or, if there were, we didn’t know about it.

I marvel at my mother’s ingenuity, and, as the Bible says, her “being found faithful in little things.” I never knew where the little cloths were saved, but she knew exactly where they were when needed.

Just imagine the number of years it took to build that beautiful ball of string. Perfectly round and ready to be used. And guess what? I still have *that* ball of string. It is a treasure to me.

OUR SWEETIE PETEY

by Gail Gabrielson

Out of nowhere comes a howl, startling me from whatever I was doing, and then the incessant barking of a dog that's certain our home will be invaded by marauders intent on doing us harm.

"Oh, Petey," I say, after pulling myself off the ceiling, "it's just the mailman."

Sometimes this can quell his on-alert status; sometimes he needs a little more convincing, consisting of clapping my hands (to get his attention) and some more forceful yelling of "Petey, no barking!"

Our dog Petey will bark at anything – children across the road, people on bicycles, cars honking, thuds from upstairs, and even doorbells ringing on television. And there are times when we cannot figure out WHAT he is barking about.

My husband and I have had dogs for most of our married life. Our first was a darling little dachshund puppy we named Doobie because he had the coloring of a Doberman and the Doobie Brothers were playing on the radio. He became more protective of his food dish than the little boy playing on the carpet, so he went to a dog rescue organization for "re-homing."

Our second dog was adopted as an adult when our children were older and thought that having a Dalmatian was the right addition to our family. We went out to meet the Dalmatian at her foster home. She was too busy running around to come and meet us, and oh, by the way, she might be pregnant.

Quick family meeting, and we decided on the sweet cocker spaniel who came and sat amongst us, wagging what was left of her tail, and gazing at us with earnest brown eyes. Buffy (as every buff-colored dog is named) adopted me, since I was the one who fed her and then walked her every morning, giving us both the exercise we needed.

Alas, Buffy's arthritis medicine affected her internal organs, and she died peacefully at the lake, curled up under my chair. She was laid to rest at the lake, along with other beloved family pets.

I couldn't stand not having a dog to walk, so we contacted the same adoption agency and met Charlie Puggle. Puggles are a pug and beagle cross, and typically have the pug coloring (brown) and the beagle demeanor (pure enthusiasm).

Charlie loved everyone he met. He went with me for early morning walks, and hardly ever barked. His only quirk is that he loved to get into the garbage. Our solution was to put every garbage can up where he couldn't reach it. To this day, the small trash can in the bathroom is on the back of the toilet.

Alas, adult dogs don't last as long, and Charlie went to Doggy Heaven to raid garbage cans and make friends with everyone.

We had a long dry spell without a dog. The kids left home and then my husband retired. Concerned about what he would do all day, we checked out the dogs available for adoption and found Petey. We were told that Petey had had other homes, and we were warned that he didn't like being alone, and he needed to be the only dog in the house.

That wouldn't be a problem – Jerry was going to be home and there weren't any other dogs in the condo. Jerry and Petey (named after the dog that hung around with the Little Rascals) went to obedience class, and walked together every day.

Our little family was complete. In more ways than one. Normally our dogs have had their own space – a pillow on the floor, or an open-door kennel. That's where they slept or went to hide when the hollering got too loud.

Petey had his own idea of where he was to sleep: in bed with us. We gently moved his butt back to the doggie bed on the floor, but he just jumped back up like the bed was his. We were tired and didn't want to make it an issue. It's a king-sized bed, so we let him stay.

Petey spent his days with Jerry and greeted me after work at the back fence with forceful tail-wagging and the occasional zoomie. (For folks who don't have dogs, a zoomie is when the dog takes off running crazy-fast laps wherever they can get traction.) I tried to get a video of Petey doing a zoomie, but couldn't follow him quickly enough with my phone. He dashes in and out of the frame while I try not to curse.

Having a dog again has its ups and downs. He prefers one of the most expensive dog foods, but then we haven't needed to take him to the vet much. He always has to have someone home with him, so we recruited our condo neighbor to watch him when we've both been needed elsewhere.

Our neighbor upstairs brought home a larger, younger dog, and Petey has made a provisional friendship. He's okay with Nora, as long as she doesn't get too pushy or too frisky. Petey's an adult, you know.

I've since retired, and Petey has become the center of attention. I used to accuse my husband of talking to the dog more than he talks to me. He told me that the dog responds to his endearments more than I do. Okay, he's got me there.

So now we both talk to Petey, and he's become a Velcro dog. Wherever we are, there he is too. A Facebook meme declares that having a dog means never having to go to the bathroom alone. Petey has that one down pat.

If I'm in one room and Jerry's in another, Petey will split his time with us. He'll sit with me for a while, and then go check on Jerry and lay on the extra bed in the office. He doesn't sit ON my lap, since he's too big and heavy, so he sits between my legs on the recliner.

And that's where he takes at least one nap a day, or hangs out when I'm just sitting and doing something quiet – reading or solving crossword puzzles.

If I don't go to bed at the same time as Jerry, Petey will come out of the bedroom and check on me – a silent reminder that I need to be curled up with the rest of the dog pack.

I could go on and on about how Petey enhances our lives – how he makes every blanket his, how he insists on treats before and after meals, and how he makes his presence known throughout the condo by shedding dog fur.

It's that last one that I've come to terms with. No matter where you are, there's going to be dog hair. Inside my shoes, on the comforter on the couch, collecting under the hutch, amassing for an attack from under the recliner.

We rearranged our furniture recently, and found that we had to empty the vacuum twice before we were done collecting all the visible dog hair. Which leads me to my obvious question, "Petey, how are you not bald?"

And for all his barking, we have to say Petey has endeared himself to us completely. One day while I was in the bathroom with the door ajar, Petey poked his head inside to see if I was there. I looked at him and said, "Peek!"

And then he quietly disappeared to check on Jerry. No barking needed.

THE STUMP ON CEDAR STREET

by Ben Jacobson

There are no cedars on Cedar Street, just tall ash and spindly elm trees shading little lawns. An occasional pine severed the monotony, but no cedar, not anymore. Two houses in from the wide avenue that cut across town, the only cedar that Cedar Street had ever known rested there in the front yard of a small brick home.

The stump did not bother Tom anymore. At first, he had missed the tree, the way it wisped in the wind and the resinous scent that cut the winter air, but everything comes to an end. It says that somewhere in the Bible. He was sure. Now, it was just a memory or even more, a slight turn of the lawn mower a few times a week in the summer.

Tom stood in the window looking out at the budding spring. The tulips had risen red. The crocus wore their pink. The forsythia glowed yellow in the growing daylight. Next to it all sat the stump, and next to the stump the sign, hammered in just weeks ago by Mrs. Netta Johnson, licensed and certified real estate agent. She came back proudly just one week later with the tape, tiptoeing through the mud in her red heels to stick it on: SOLD.

Tom's eyes rose as the car turned onto Cedar Street and into the driveway. He waved to Sammy through the window as she walked the few steps to the door. When he opened the thick wooden door, he was hit by the spring air and Sammy's soft green eyes. He'd never seen green eyes until he met Sammy's mother.

He had been driving truck for the dairy in Clear County when he first saw her. Helen's mother and father owned a quarter section 7 miles north of town. As Tom pulled off the gravel road one summer morning, she was sitting under the shade of a willow, her back pressed against the smooth bark, Jane Eyre or Pride and Prejudice or some other thick-bound volume open in her hands.

The rest of that summer, Tom would catch those green eyes as he turned the corner or reversed down the small drive. In the evenings as he lay in bed listening to the hum of the cicadas through the open window,

he would pray to find the strength to say, "Hello." One September morning he did.

Four years later, they were married, and after a tour in Korea, Tom and Helen bought the brick house on Cedar Street, the only one with a mighty cedar in the yard. Tom worked for the railroad and Helen taught school. Sammy came two years later, her eyes as soft and as kind as her mother's.

Sammy looked around as she passed through the door, her eyes moving from the shoebox of pictures that overflowed onto the coffee table to the cardboard box piled with crocks and dishes and silver.

"Dad, the inspection is tomorrow," she said. "You really need to get this place cleaned up. I told you Jeff and I can help."

"I'm working honey," he replied, "but you can't sort a lifetime in a week. It just won't happen, and you know that nobody can do it but me."

"I sometimes wonder if you are moving so slow because you are still bitter about selling."

"Bitter isn't the word, honey."

"Fine. Not bitter. Maybe just angry. It's been three years, Dad, you can't keep this place up yourself."

She disappeared into the kitchen, and he listened to the sound of her opening the cabinet and pouring a cup of coffee.

In the days after her death, Tom had tried to keep the routines that Helen had spent years establishing in the little brick house. The changing of the linens, the prompt evening suppers, the playing of the piano had all been an anchor. Tom had plowed into the grief with a steady determination, but by the end of the first month the dishes were piled up, the dinners were made in the microwave, and the calendar on the wall sat unturned.

As he listened to his daughter tidying in the kitchen, his eyes moved around the room. Helen was everywhere. In the corner, her shelf of books. On the coffee table, the lamp she had taken weeks to choose. Under the lamp, the photo from their wedding, young faces bright and free of the burdens that come with life.

Sammy's growth was marked on the oak door frame, the inches ticked out tracking each year of growth. Her school years unfolded in pictures across the hallway, first glasses, then braces, and finally freedom from both. This was the room where they danced when Helen told him she was pregnant. It was the room where Sammy had taken her first steps. Where she had torn open the tightly crimped packages on Christmas mornings. Where she had practiced her speeches and traced out her posters for the

student council campaign. It was the room where Sammy had first told them she and Jeff were engaged, Helen covering her face with both hands and bouncing with delight.

They had lived in that house, lived in that room, the green cedar rooted firm in the earth just outside the window, swaying in a summer wind or catching the winter snow. Helen had died there. First, she sat in her chair, pulled close to the window so that she could rest in the noon sun. Then it was the hospital bed, and finally, chairs pulled close holding hands, whispering goodbyes.

The preacher had visited that last night. He talked about the cedars. The Bible said they were strong and tough, graceful and beautiful. The ancients saw them as a fountain of wisdom and protection. Much like Helen. But no cedar stands forever the preacher had said. The things of this earth are passing away. Tom had stood quiet during the bedside sermon. The words meant nothing. This was the end, the end of all that was good in his life, a final goodbye to everything that mattered.

It was just Tom and Helen in the early hours of the morning. The room dark, only a sliver of light just beyond the horizon. She closed her green eyes for the last time. Something closed in Tom, too, a part of his being hardening like a morning frost.

The tree had fallen three months later. A storm had bulled through the valley and left a wake of debris. With that great wind, the last and only cedar on Cedar Street fell. Jeff and Tom had brushed it out, cutting and splitting what they could burn, hauling away the rest. The stump stayed.

After she had finished her coffee, Sammy walked through the house again, pausing at a picture of her, her dad, and her mother standing in the front yard of the brick house.

“I’m glad you accepted the offer, Dad.”

“Well, they better not be griping about it. I gave them a fair price.”

“I’m sure they are happy. Why don’t you come by for coffee when they come for the inspection tomorrow? Netta wanted me to remind you that you can’t be here. She still has the key, so don’t worry about them getting in.”

“I know I have to be gone. I’ve got a few things to do anyway, so don’t worry about coffee.”

After she left, he sat in the chair. He closed his eyes and listened to the quiet of the room.

The next morning, Tom backed out of the garage with every intention of going to the hardware store on Main Avenue. He started the truck down the block, making the left towards the strip mall. As he did, he saw

Netta's shining Mercedes turn the corner. A light-colored van followed close behind.

Tom sighed out a low breath and eased the truck around the block. He followed the turns back to Cedar Street and parked a few houses down, sinking low into the seat. After a few minutes, Netta got out wearing a brown wool coat, holding a cup of coffee. The door to the van slid open, and a young woman with auburn hair came from the passenger seat. She grabbed the hand of a young girl and began to walk toward the brick house. Behind them came a man in his thirties, smiling and calling out to the little girl.

Tom sniffed as he watched the girl, six or seven, curls of auburn like her mother, run toward the house in her green dress. She pulled her mom behind her. Netta opened the door and they all disappeared inside.

As Tom waited, he gripped the wheel tight. He thought about walking into his yard and pulling the sold sign out of the dirt and throwing it at Netta's crossover. His chest was tight, and his ears started to warm with grief and anger. His eyes began to well.

The little girl came out and ran around in the yard. Her mother and father stood on the steps with Netta talking. After a few minutes, the little girl ran to her mother and tugged at her shirt. The mother looked down and reached into her purse, rummaging and pulling out a small apple. The little girl smiled and grabbed the apple. She skipped over to the cedar stump in the middle of the yard and sat down to eat.

Tom sat in the truck, yards from his house, for long after they had left. It was midmorning by the time he pulled back into the garage and went inside. There was not much left, just stacked boxes and a few articles of clothing hanging in the closet. He had worked well after dark the evening before. Sammy had offered for him to sleep at her house, since the furniture had been moved out, but he had told her he wanted to sleep one last night in the house.

He lay there in the living room that evening. Stiff back on the wooden floor. A small pillow and a sleeping bag pulled up close to his chin. Helen had laid right there on her last night. She had never known this view without the cedar. She had never known this house alone. He closed his eyes, and after a time, sleep came.

On the last morning in the brick house on Cedar Street, Tom cleared the final things from the house. He paced the floors, pausing in the bedroom and in Sammy's room. He stood quiet in by the big front window and spoke aloud, "Damn it, I guess that's it."

At the hardware store he checked out and got back in the truck before driving to the house one last time. He opened the tailgate and got out the shovel. Next to the stump he dug into the earth. The hole was just right as he lowered the tree in. He had cut the root ball and shaken the bound roots free. He used an old five-gallon bucket to water the tree in. He rested on the shovel to admire his work. There it was, an apple tree, planted firm in the yard of the little brick house on Cedar Street.

He looked at the big window and a heaviness left him. Maybe a hard part of him had been buried with the roots of the tree. Maybe in digging something had been set free. Maybe the thought of a little girl eating an apple on a cedar stump lifted his spirit.

He checked the lock on the door to the house and opened the door of the pickup. He closed the door, rolled down the window to welcome the spring air, and drove down Cedar Street, the street without a cedar.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

by Riley Nielsen

Imagine a world of vast wilderness, with trees towering over your head and murky water surrounding you on three sides. A world where your only company is the mosquitos buzzing in your ear and the offkey call of an unknown bird at 12:06 AM. A world where indoor plumbing is only a dream, and your diet consists of mac and cheese and beef jerky. While most would think this world is something from a wild imagination, it is closer to home than most people think. The Boundary Water Canoe Area is more than a million acres of protected wilderness full of canoe and hiking trails, and offers freedom to those who yearn for solitude and a good challenge. I personally go to the Boundary Waters once a year for a week in the summer and look forward to going “off-the-grid” for months in advance. The no electronics and the serenity of the wilderness is always relaxing and gives you a fresh feeling (even if you cannot properly shower). It also gives plenty of joyful memories that can last a lifetime. I know I have made many memories during my trips. One of my fondest memories came from my last trip (the summer of 2023) when a snapshot of a fish quickly turned into easily one of the most embarrassing moments of my life.

To set the scene, our crew was trying – unsuccessfully – to catch a nice walleye for dinner. The crew consisted of two of my cousins, three of my dad’s friends, my dad, and me. For the better part of two hours, we had been canoeing all over the lake, pulling crank baits behind the canoe and casting topwater baits into the reeds. The only thing we caught was a hook full of weeds and a bit of sunburn. One of my cousins, William, suggested that the reason we were not catching anything was because we were not fishing with his PJ Masks rod. Now this particular fishing rod had started out as somewhat of a joke months before we set off. William (who mind you was fifteen years old) thought it would be funny to bring a little kid fishing rod. It was between Barbie and PJ Masks, and he inevitably chose PJ Masks. When one of my dad’s friends, Jeremy, an avid fisherman, caught sight of the childish rod, he grumbled about how

William would never catch a single fish with something as worthless as that. The whole trip the rod became an inside joke we delighted in referencing over and over again.

By midmorning, we had all almost given up hope on finding any bites, and the whole crew was getting irritated. Nonetheless, we persisted and after finding a nice cove, we banked and clambered out of the canoes. We split up, four and three, going on each side. My dad, Jeremy, and I fished on the right, while the others took up the left. Perched on a big rock, I went into relax mode by taking off my water shoes and life jacket and basking in the sunshine. For the first half hour, no fish were biting. Sitting in silence, as one does while fishing, each of us focused on the line in front of us. We casted out, then reeled in. Out. In. Out. In. Out.

“Holy crap! I got something!” William shouted across the water. I looked up to see him reeling as fast as the PJ Masks fishing rod would allow him and out of the water came a 10-inch walleye. We all cheered as he held up the flapping walleye like a championship trophy. As the designated photographer of the trip, I quickly abandoned my own rod and scoured the pockets of my rain coat for our waterproof camera. What I failed to recognize was that the rock I was sitting on had a steep slant, and as I snapped a picture of my cousin’s victorious fish, the rod began to slide down the rock. Noticing this, I jumped to go and catch it. Since the world has its way of laughing at me, I saw everything in slow motion as the fishing rod continued its descent down, landing in the water with a pitiful flop.

“Dad, what do I do?” I screamed, watching in horror as it sank in the mucky water.

Across the reeds, my father replied, “Grab it! Grab it!”

I panicked, trying to shimmy down the rock without falling in. My dad continued to urge me to grab it in a frantic tone. I reached a hand out, my fingers inches away from grasping the rod’s tip. My foot slipped from beneath me, and I splashed very ungracefully into the water, letting out a petrified scream.

“Dad!” I wailed as I flopped my arms as if I had no idea how to swim. The water was much shallower than I expected, and my feet grazed the rocks at the bottom. My brain was going wild with the worry of getting my feet cut on the sharp rocks below me like I had done many times before. I could hear my mother’s lecture already if I got so much as cut on the soles of my feet. Since I was not wearing my water shoes, I could not stand and, with no life jacket to keep me floating, I just flapped my

arms. My cries were met by a confused expression from my concerned dad.

“Did you get it?” he called.

“No, I need your help!”

He proceeded to take as long as possible to come across the rocks; he then had the audacity to stand there and watch me struggle. “Where’s the rod?” he asked, obviously more concerned about that than my well-being.

I handed it to him, momentarily losing the flap of my arms that was keeping me afloat. “Why aren’t you coming up?” my dad asked.

I let out a sigh of frustration. “Because I can’t stand, Dad! I don’t have my water shoes or my life jacket on. That’s why I need your help.”

“Oh,” he replied, studying me yet again with a confused expression.

What the— “Don’t just stand there! Help me!” I yelled, flopping extra hard to emphasize my point. He finally got the memo and helped me out of the water (not before snapping a picture of me in my upset state). When I finally sat down on the rock, I was drenched, water pooling beneath me. The rest of the crew was laughing at me, and my face burned with embarrassment. Not only was my pride wounded, but my leg had taken a significant scrape from my fall. I could only imagine what my mom, the nurse, would say!

You can probably guess that I was a bit of a grouch the rest of the morning. I knew my little dive would not be forgotten so easily, and it was not. The jokes came almost daily, but I found after a while, I was laughing too. On the last day, we sat around the campfire and discussed our favorite part of the week. All six of my companions said it was me falling into the lake.

The scrape on my leg also became a bit of a spectacle when my father refused to bandage it up saying – and I quote – “It’s not that bad. You will be fine.” Once again, I wondered what my mom, THE NURSE, would say.

Taking my father’s word for it, I continued to swim with my open wound, not bandaging it until we accidentally let it slip to my mom on the phone. She was (and still is) appalled that we did not take the proper precautions and frequently reminds me how lucky I am that I did not get some sort of lake disease or a massive infection that would have made me have to amputate my leg. She says this year she will make sure to have extra medical supplies and frequently check in to make sure that we have had no medical emergencies. Needless to say, she will not have to worry this year, because I know better now. This year, I will just let the fishing rod drown.

A TWIST OF FATE

by Marcella Peterson

Have you ever thought about a single event that changed your life? I now realize that our lives would have been much different without this “Twist of Fate.”

In 1976, we moved to the lake cottage after selling our business. We had a fireplace that provided much of the heat to this small cottage on Big Pine Lake. We were looking to buy some property where we could cut wood.

We looked at a couple of sites and found one that was just what we wanted. It was 80 acres of almost all woods. There was just one problem! Another couple wanted to buy 40 acres of that tract of land! They wanted the front 40 acres of the land near to the road. That meant that if we bought the “back 40,” we would need an easement for an access road.

We were considering our options when the realtor called to inform us that the other party was unable to obtain financing. So, we could purchase the entire 80 acres! There was no question that we would buy it. This “twist of fate” was the beginning of a whole new direction in our lives! We were ecstatic to have our own land again! We were still farmers at heart! Ed never got rid of his chainsaw!

The “80” was about ten miles from the lake cottage so it was only a short distance for us. The first thing we did was to explore the property to see where we could cut a trail. As we walked, we marked areas that surrounded the perimeter. Loggers had been in it some time previously, and there were acres of wood and piles of brush that they left behind. I tied strips of cloth to trees to mark a path for cutting a trail.

Over the next several years, we had trails on three sides and were able to drive the pickup truck through. We cut a lot of wood from those brush piles and cleaned up some of the brush piles. It was a lot of work, but also very satisfying. I now had my own chainsaw!

We put up a large metal shed and bought an old John Deere tractor. It was probably forty years old but it was all we needed. Now we were real

farmers again! Ed added a few pieces of vintage machinery for the tractor. We loved going to auction sales!

In 1988, we decided that we wanted to build a house and move away from the lake. It was a modest, two-bedroom house, but to us it was Paradise! We moved in December of 1988, just before Christmas. It was the beginning of a sixteen-year love affair with the woods, the beautiful maple trees, and a variety of wildlife. We were so happy!

We landscaped the lawn ourselves. We picked rocks, and raked through roots and debris until it was ready for seeding grass. We planted evergreens, shrubs, fruit trees, and flowers. Over time, I used the rocks to create a rock garden that became a place of quiet peace when I needed time alone.

We worked the soil for a large raspberry patch. We had a big garden that supplied us with produce all year long. The apple trees and grape vines always yielded enough to share their fruit with others. Did I mention, “We were still farmers at heart?”

We loved walking through the woods. Each season brought changes from the first budding of the trees in spring to the fiery red and orange of the maples in fall. Winter snow blanketed the trees with white snowflakes that sparkled in the sunshine—nature’s beauty!

When you spend a lot of time in the woods, you begin to feel a “kinship” with certain trees. Like: “Do you remember when we cut this tree down? The blocks were so heavy we couldn’t lift them into the trailer. We had to cut them into small slices to lift them off the ground. We went to smaller trees after that.”

We never tired of the haven of pines. We loved it. One of the later walks was one I remember vividly. Ed wanted to walk to the back “40.” We had trails on three sides but not around the far edge. He was diabetic and sometimes forgot some restrictions. It wasn’t always easy for him. I knew this was important to him so I just said we would both go.

I took some candy bars along in case Ed needed an energy boost. I grabbed my inhaler since I’d had an asthma problem. It’s so much fun to get old—right?

We started down the left side where the trail was wide. When the trail ended, we walked through the brush to the back fence. We walked around that back fence until I saw that Ed was getting tired. We found a rock for him to sit and rest. I gave him one of the candy bars and after a while we continued to walk around the back and then around the corner. After a while we reached the trail on the other side. We were out of the brush!

By this time, Ed was so weak, he couldn't stand. The candy bars were not enough to keep him going. I was terrified! I tried to think of what was the best way to handle this. I found a large tree stump. I told Ed to SIT STILL and NOT TO MOVE until I got back.

It was still a long way home. I didn't dare run because if I had an asthma problem, I'd be no help for Ed. I was so scared!

I managed to get back to the house! I called our neighbor, Steve, for help. No one was home!! I got into the pickup and drove back down the trail to where I had left Ed. He hadn't moved. Thank goodness. I don't know how I managed to get him into the pickup, but I think it was "Divine Intervention." I drove the pickup into the garage. Then I broke down and cried. Ed was okay but it taught both of us a lesson.

We never tired of walking through the woods. There is a feeling of tranquility when you can touch nature at its source. Truly God's gift!

We owned this 80 acre woodland for nearly 28 years. The last 16 in the home we built. In 2004, our dream came to an end. Health issues made living far from town not a good option. We both had vision loss. We were getting old.

When we had our auction sale in October of 2004, Ed was still recovering from his third brain surgery. He was not fully aware of all the activity. I was glad that he couldn't see all his things being sold. John Deere was gone.

We moved into Perham and then to Fargo in 2011. Ed left this world in 2014. Neither of us ever forgot those 16 years we spent in that country home we carved out of the woods. They were the happiest of our 60 years together.

Looking back over all the treasured memories, I realize that we could have lost it except for "a twist of fate."

SALEM SUE, TAKE TWO

by Shayla Sinclair

The image on the screen was not moving. Nor did it have any distinguishable features. The technician finished up her job quickly and quietly, and then exited the room as if she were tiptoeing on broken glass. At that point, I knew.

I looked over at my husband as I wiped away the tears that started to pour down my cheeks. I don't even remember what words we exchanged at that point, but he knew I'd been nervously optimistic during the days leading up to that moment. This was a follow-up ultrasound, a very early one, to a surprise and wonderful pregnancy in our forties. I had felt all the symptoms and had physically felt great up until this point...but still, I could not shake that motherly instinct that something was not exactly right. Our baby had stopped growing. There was not a heartbeat.

The old, painfully familiar and crushing feelings of emptiness started to grip my lungs and press down on my heart like an unbearable weight. This was our third loss in a decade. I could not believe it was happening, again. Only there was a major difference this time around. This time, we had brought along three very squirrely, healthy, and noisy children. The oldest two were reading Garfield comic books in the waiting room, and the toddler was sitting on my husband's lap, pretty much oblivious to what was going on. We did not tell them why Mama had such an early appointment. They were unaware of our family's sudden loss and shift in dynamics.

What I distinctly remember from that day are the mental snapshots I took of our living children. It was like the grief of that day sharpened my senses, and I paid extra attention to the details of their existence. I particularly recall our toddler son clinging to his daddy in that hospital setting. He was full of extra hugs, but they also came with a worried brow and protruding lower lip. It was like he just *knew* that a bomb was about to be dropped, and that things were going to be incredibly difficult for us from that point forward.

What happened after that appointment is kind of a blur. When we made the long drive from our hometown to “the big city,” we did not have an exact plan of where the day would take us. It was incredibly early when we stepped back out into the way-too-bright for the occasion morning. What to do? How to cope?

We didn’t know how or when we should break the news to our children. How do you properly tell a child that their sibling has appeared into our family but has been taken back out of it, all in one breath? It was too much to bear.

We did the only thing we could think of at that time. After he and I had a quick private conversation as they played at the park, and I cried a long, agonizing cry in the park bathroom by myself, we braved the day. We put on our parental “happy faces” and tried to make the most out of the morning while we attempted to process this devastating news and form a plan to trudge forward.

We ended up at the mall. We wandered into the play area, and let the kids run wild, meeting new friends. We promptly ran into a co-worker, (because this is North Dakota and you can’t go one hour without running into someone you know) and feigned cheerful small-talk with her. The school year was about to start, and we all worked together in elementary school. Suddenly, our daughter reminded us that she was almost seven, and we had promised her that she could get her ears pierced at this age. She informed us that she was finally feeling brave enough, so today was *the day*.

She didn’t need to hold the teddy bear they gave her at the jewelry store as she sat in that chair looking suddenly so much older and so brave, so I hugged it tightly to my chest instead. Somehow, I thought pressing against this stuffed animal would help me hide and contain my sadness just a little bit longer. Then, we went out to eat. The kids ordered the most ridiculously sugary and syrup-laden brunch I had ever seen. But I was numb at this point. I just poked at my food and stared out the window with agonizing thoughts of what might have been.

While on the highway drive home, someone had the idea to visit “Salem Sue,” a gigantic monument of a Holstein cow that was erected on the top of a huge hill in New Salem, ND. Though this landmark is very interesting and fun, and we observed it often when we had traveled this direction, we had never actually taken our children up to see or touch it. Why not? I thought to myself. Just one more thing to do...one more thing to see...to just get us through today.

They had a blast. I have a picture of my husband taking all of our children up the hill. They look like a little ambitious team, trucking up like ducklings as they quickly followed their athletic father and tried to match his huge strides. I smiled to myself through my tears. Would there ever be a fourth duckling trailing in this scene? We might never find out.

It is May 2020. After two months of quarantine at home due to the Covid pandemic, and an unexpected, grueling end to the school year with way too much time spent in front of screens during a stint of distance education, everyone was pretty burnt out. My husband had the idea that it was high time we got out of the house and do something we hadn't done in a while to break up the monotony and stress. We loaded up the pickup, grabbing water bottles, sunflower seeds, and books for the road. Once again, we headed to "the city."

We took a road less traveled to see some interesting sights along the way. When we got there, we drove through McDonalds, got Happy Meals for those who wanted them, then got in a long line for Taco Bell for those who wanted that meal...where we sat for ten minutes without moving and watched an employee come out of the back with his mask on and cigarette dangling right over the top of it, smoking as he wearily peered at the cars in line. Back to McDonald's we went. We went to a new park and happily enjoyed the beautiful afternoon eating junk food "put hand sanitizer on immediately after" playing, social-distancing style. It was exactly what we needed.

On the way home, our kids started immediately begging to go see our old friend Salem Sue. Actually, they started *chanting* "Salem Sue! Salem Sue!" My husband chuckled to himself and looked over at me. I raised my eyebrows and smiled in a "this is your call" fashion. As we neared the approach, to everyone's delight, he made the turn that would bring us toward New Salem.

When we arrived at the bottom, I had a tough decision to make. My belly was getting pretty big, and I was rather tired from the little bit of activity I'd already done that afternoon during our impromptu adventure. I probably needed a rest. The baby was kicking like crazy, and I took it that he or she sensed that we were standing somewhere special.

"I'll just stay here at the bottom," I decided, as I contentedly smiled. "I will take your picture. When you get to the top, wave!"

And they did, and I did. As I turned to look at the breathtaking view that I didn't clearly see through my tears of grief the first time we had arrived at this place, I wiped away tears of joy and whispered, "*Thank you.*"

NORTHERN LIGHTS

by Karla Smart-Morstad

Have you ever commanded morning or guided dawn to its place—to hold the corners of the sky and shake off the last few stars?

~The Book of Job

In memory of Elinor Torstveit

Kip Hines and WDAY promise Northern Lights this evening. It's nine o'clock, and dark hasn't settled completely. I'm sleepy. The alarm is already set for 6:00 a.m. But, wow, the Northern Lights! The Aurora Borealis!

I call Mom. She's two blocks away and ready for bed. She sounds so sleepy. No, we agree, a person probably couldn't see much from here in town. You'd have to drive out into the country. "Do you want to?" I ask.

"Do you? Don't you have early school tomorrow?"

"Yes. No, I don't want to drive around in the country, but it would be great to see them. We could try from here in town."

Mom has a lovely habit. She can pretend *as if* it was so. "Well, we can imagine them," she says. I agree and wish her good night, good sleep. She will come out to go to the old Moorhead Dairy Queen on a summer night, but this is early September. It's cold and late now. She's snuggled with a purring cat. This isn't Mom's cup of tea!

I pad through the house in my big LL Bean slippers and long flannel nightgown. The hem of the nightie drags behind me. I need to dry it with high heat next time and hope it shrinks. These big slippers are my constant companions. The floors are drafty in the fall, winter, and spring, and in summer the air conditioner makes my feet cold.

It's now 10:20 and KVLV is also championing the Northern Lights. Tom Szymanski barks out, "It's going to be a real light show out there in the next half hour."

I could drive out of town, toward Horace maybe. But by now I really don't want to do that. I feed my four cats their last bowls of kibble for the night. I climb into bed, scrunch down into the pillow, pull the pink quilt

up to my shoulders, put my glasses on the table, and reach for the light. The ceiling above me comes alive. Tiny yellow-green stars glow and twinkle. My own florescent night sky—every night. I go to bed under the stars in my bedroom.

I look at the stars stuck to my ceiling and then bolt out of bed. I could at least check. Check the yard and see. Turning off every night-light along the way, I unlock the door and step into the dark garage. The side door to the driveway always needs a slight nudge at the bottom to open.

The scent of fireplaces—the bite of mold that wood smoke holds—plunges down my throat in the chilled night, the cloudless night. I pad to the center of the driveway. And, lo, the heavens above me are alive with light. The Northern Lights. Right over the middle of the driveway. A glowing center of pink, and amber, and green, and white light, with spokes stretching across the sky. Beyond that are stars and stars and stars.

I must share this with someone! Elinor's house, next door, is dark except for the little light she leaves on in her dining room. Elinor needs to see this! I pad back through the dark garage into the dark house. All four cats are bunched at the door to meet me, just like when I come home from work. I switch on the kitchen light and reach for the phone to wake up my 83-year old neighbor.

“Elinor?”

“Yes.”

“It's Karla.”

“Oh.”

“I hope I didn't wake you.”

Of course, she says what we all say. That I didn't and that it's okay.

“The Northern Lights are out. They are stunning. They're centered right over our driveways. I was just out to look. You must see this.”

“Well, okay. The Northern Lights, you say?”

“Yes. They are glorious. Come out. I'll meet you at your front door.”

“I'm already for bed.”

“That's okay. So am I. Come out in your pajamas. Wear slippers, though. It's cold.”

Off go the lights. Back out through the darkness into the Aurora Borealis and the smell of fireplaces. I hear a little bit of traffic moving on 8th Street, but otherwise the night is silent. Gold leaves shine on the elm tree poking up from behind my house. My head is cranked back so far it hurts. Elinor's screen door makes a little creak, and then she stands on her porch, ready to step down to the driveways we share.

“Hi! Come out! I know you'll love this.”

She often has vertigo, and arthritis bends her shoulders, but Elinor is always up for anything—eating barbeque outside even in a dust storm, or feeding live mice to her pet snakes, or digging iris bulbs to give away in the neighborhood. Really anything.

“They’re right over the center of the driveway. It takes a minute to get used to the dark,” I encourage her.

We walk a few steps together in silence, heads straining back.

“There.” I point. “Do you see them?” She leans close. “Stand behind me and put your hands on my shoulders for balance. There. See?”

“Oh, my, isn’t that something. They’re beautiful.” Elinor’s voice is soft and full of wonder. I put both hands on top of hers that rest on my shoulders. We balance together, two pajama-clad women, years apart in age, but knotted in friendship. We gaze at the night sky. The fall breeze bites into us.

Two women in awe. Two women in flannel, gazing at the glory of God’s creation.

“It’s a gift,” I whisper. “I’m so glad you came out to share it.”

Back in the house, I pat the cats and know that this tiny moment was, in every way, spectacular. I can’t forget how much I wanted Mom to see it. But I understand. Once swaddled in bed with her cat, it seemed too hard to get up again. This was Elinor’s and my special moment, under pastel shimmering, late at night. God will shake out morning soon enough, a new day will begin, and our memories will carry forward the Northern Lights forever.