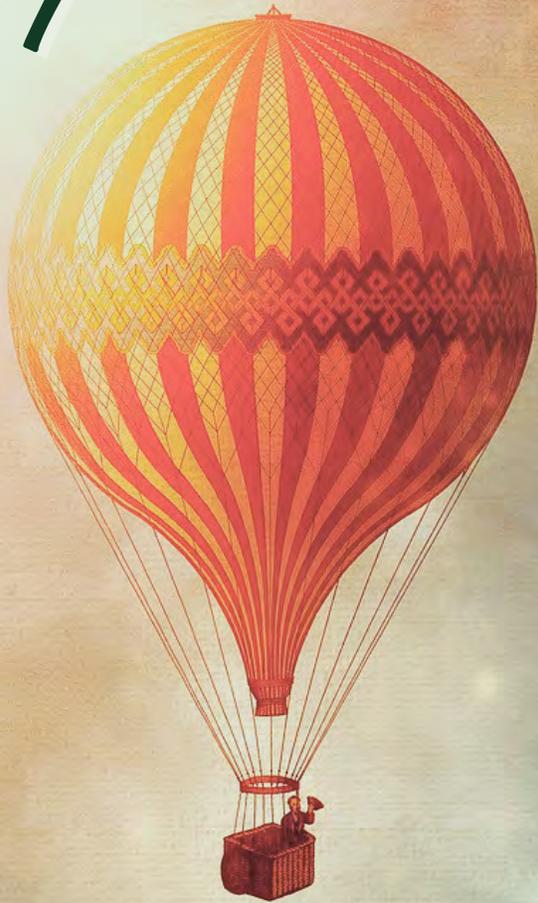


Exploration

VOLUME II,
ISSUE 1



THE MOCKINGOWL ROOST

FICTION

You Can't Get There
From Here

POETRY

The Road to Peć

FEATURED CREATIVE

Melanie Hyo-In Han

And Part Two of *The Dragons of Ash*



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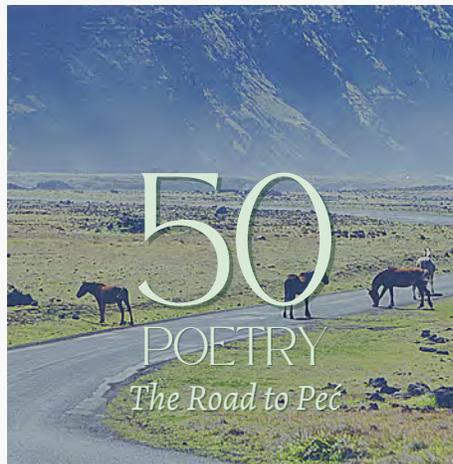
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Letter from the Editor

As we begin a new year of publishing at the MockingOwl Roost, I've been contemplating the publication process, our vision, and the growth we've seen. As editors, writers, design team members, and others on staff, we've seen a lot of changes, learned a lot of new techniques, and grown in our skills. We've also grown so much through meeting each of you – our readers and our contributors.

We've received feedback from folks hoping to help us improve our website, our blog, our mission overall and we have sought to use this feedback to improve our work and make what we do more accessible, more sensitive, more effective. We've not always succeeded and that's been a humbling experience, but when we have succeeded, we've heard back from folks on matters we thought no one noticed.

As we move into the second year of the MockingOwl Roost, we're delighted to expand our publishing purview by adding special issues for all the wonderful works we're receiving from you, and expanding our other publishing with audio-visual performances, as well (coming soon!).

Most of all, we are delighted to know that we have been able to encourage readers across the world to explore their passions in the arts and to give a space where many voices from many viewpoints may be heard.

Thank you for your contributions to us at the MockingOwl Roost! May we continually return the favor with on-going works that encourage creative exploration and finding your voice.



A stylized, handwritten signature in white ink, likely belonging to the editor, positioned to the right of the photograph.

“Be fearless in
the pursuit
of what sets
your soul
on
fire.”



– Jennifer
Lee

You Can't Get There From Here

Jean Ende

"Do you know how to get to the Anderson house?" asked Steve, leaning out of his car window. "The GPS is broken on this rental car and I'm not getting any cell phone reception."

"Couldn't be simpler," said the man standing next to a cow. "Just go a click or two down this road till you see a big oak tree. Then head north and you'll fetch-up there in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

Steve stared at the man who was standing very still, his face expressionless. The cow, however, looked angry.

"Is that very far?" Steve asked. "My future in-laws are waiting to meet me. My fiancé has been visiting with them and she said not to dilly-dally. Funny expression, isn't that? Dilly-dally. She never says things like that when we're together in NY. I'm a native of that place, born and raised in the Bronx."

The man didn't react. Steve wondered if this guy had ever heard of the Bronx but decided not to explain. The cow looked impatient.

His fiancée had assured him that everyone in the area knew her folks. "Just ask anyone," she said. But the whole area was just one big empty field and the only person in sight was this man and his cow.

"Let me see if I've got this straight," said Steve. "You said a click or two, right? Like point and click? Double-click? So, a second or two? Or maybe you mean clickety-click? Is there a train nearby? That's clickety clack, isn't it? Or just the sound? There's an African language that includes a click sound, isn't there? Miriam Makeba? I'm surprised her music is so big around here."

Steve clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. It sounded like the way people called chickens in the movies. Now the man, as well as the cow, were giving him a strange look. Steve hoped he hadn't summoned a flock of chickens. His support of free-range poultry didn't mean he wanted to come into contact with a live chicken. He'd heard they could be vicious.

The man squinted at Steve as if he wasn't quite in focus. "It's about a mile, maybe a little less, do you understand that? Just look for the oak tree."

Steve felt a little better. Now we're communicating, he thought. I'm a doctor, I have to be able to communicate with people. I should be able to talk with anyone. Then he glanced ahead and had the horrible realization that the road was lined with several different types of trees. Some more communicating was obviously needed, but not a hard sell. No way. Steve had seen the movie, *Deliverance*. He didn't want to anger this country boy – or his cow.

“Oak tree,” he mused. “That’s a big one, right? Mighty oaks from little acorns grow huh? It wouldn’t be near a pine tree, would it? I can recognize that one, it’s a Christmas tree.”

The man didn’t laugh. He didn’t say anything. Steve tried to remember something else about oak trees.

“It’s the state tree of Georgia, I once looked that up so I could finish the Sunday Times crossword puzzle in one afternoon,” Steve said.

“This isn’t Georgia,” said the man. “It’s not Sunday.”

“Of course not,” said Steve, trying to sound agreeable, “not like I’ve never heard of an oak tree. The hull of the famous War of 1812 battleship, Old Ironsides, was actually made of oak. And there are over 600 species of oak. I don’t know why I know that. And oak leaf clusters – those are medals shaped like leaves, I guess. Oakie-doke?”

“It’s a big tree. There aren’t any other trees nearby,” said the man. “Just head north when you pass the tree.”

Steve was getting a migraine.

“North? That’s uptown, right? North by Northwest was a great movie. Northern lights are supposed to be beautiful but that’s in Alaska – guess that’s a little too far north. Keep going that way and I’ll wind up at the North Pole, lots of Christmas trees but probably no oak trees. No penguins either, they’re at the South Pole so if I see a penguin, I guess I really made a bad mistake huh?”

Steve gave a slight chuckle. The man squinted harder. He wasn’t laughing.

“Sun sets in the west so if I wait a few hours, I guess I could figure out north by looking at the sunset.” Steve paused for breath. “You wouldn’t have an extra compass, would you? I’d be willing to pay for it.”

The man put his hand in his pocket and Steve flinched. Then the man reached through the window and grabbed Steve’s hand. He wrote the word NORTH on Steve’s left hand and put it firmly back on the steering wheel.

Steve looked at his hand, glad that nothing more lethal than a Sharpie had emerged from the pocket.

He mumbled his thanks to the man and to the cow and drove off. He wasn’t going to try to find out how long it took a lamb to shake its tail.





CHIPMUNKS

Chelsie Kreitzman

All day their scampering draws our attention
 As they dart across the hiking trail just ahead of us,
 Streaks of brown flashing in and out of green thickets.
 We stop to rest at an overlook, sitting on a fallen log
 Gazing out at the expanse of cerulean lake
 Kissing the storybook cliffs with its waves.

One pops out of the brush to watch us,
 Quivering and abrupt in movement.
 It examines an almond from the trail mix
 That sits beside me on the log.
 Before I know it, another one creeps from behind me,
 Snatches the nut with deft forepaws,
 Cramming it into a cavernous cheek -
 A pickpocket stuffing a wallet into a bag of loot.
 I laugh as it dashes away, vanishing into the foliage.

For weeks, we tell our friends about the dramatic views:
 The brilliance of the colors, the clarity of the water.
 Let us not forget to look for wonder in lower places, too,
 Wearing a plain brown wrapper, scurrying along at our feet.

FICTION

Rita Mock-Pike

BEHIND THE BROKEN GATE

The road that winds past my mother's house holds a secret. A deep, dark government secret, we were all sure of it. The dirt drive, the signs reading 'no entry,' the roadblocks, the security system all went up in a single night. We'd driven past that part of the countryside so many times before, and the road had never before existed. I have photographic evidence from the time I spotted a fox in the very spot where the road now exists, blockaded by strange, impending machines.

Curiosity has always been a trait attributed to my ridiculous soul. I love the romance of a good mystery, but I also love the investigation part of finding answers to things I probably shouldn't know about. I considered becoming an investigative journalist for that reason, but then realized I'd be turning my favorite hobby into a living wage and that made it markedly less intriguing.

This particular night, some four years after I'd moved away from the region but was home visiting Mom for the week, I noticed something else had changed. One of the barriers was broken. The electric fence was knocked down in one section.

I knew that I shouldn't do it. It was illegal and could probably land me in Guantanamo for treason or something. But in this stupid moment of my life, probably the stupidest of all, I couldn't resist the intrigue. I wasn't exactly what you'd call trained in combat of any kind, nor in sneaky ninja skills, but I'd been wondering for so long now – nearly ten years – and I had to know. Everything was dark in the whole place. It seemed the security system was off.

I hurried back to Mom's and got myself ready. "I'll be heading out early in the morning, Mom," I told her. I wasn't sure if I'd be coming back. This nefarious operation might be my last attempt at anything. And I couldn't believe I was actually, legitimately planning to do this. But the curiosity wasn't all that was gnawing at my soul. It was also this deep knowledge that something was terribly, horribly wrong. But who could I report anything to? Especially if I didn't know what was wrong?

I'd had some handgun training – thanks to my NRA-happy brother – and I knew where Dad's old service pistol was. I slipped it into my bag, tucked myself into bed with my "sneaking" clothes on, and turned out the lights. I hoped I'd see Mom again the next morning after my little adventure, but, who knew?

I barely slept for excitement. Around 3 o'clock,

I decided to stop fighting. It wasn't worth the struggle and I wasn't helping myself. I quietly rose and slipped into the kitchen. I grabbed several granola bars from the pantry, downed a glass of orange juice and a mug of coffee along with the coffee cake Mom had made the night before. Then, I tiptoed through the living room and out the front door.

It was, of course, still pitch black out. The stars twinkled overhead in the opening between the treetops and the moon was just a tiny sliver of pale gold already sinking in the west. *Ugh. One of those mornings.*

As I drove the two miles to the mysterious road, I contemplated my plan. *This is the stupidest thing you've ever done, Allie.* But I didn't try talking myself out of it. I should have attempted some sense of reason on myself, but this curiosity had me by the throat.

About a half mile away, there was a clearing by the road where I could safely park and walk a mostly clear line on the edge of the road toward the gap in the security wall. It was still dark, though, and I didn't want to draw attention to myself. I also didn't want to get hit by some random driver who didn't bother to keep to his side of the road. I slipped on some reflective bracelets on my wrist – I used them for running – and tried to give myself the mental note to take them off once I got inside.

When I got to the entry, everything was still dark, open, and abandoned, like something really big had happened and I was walking into a giant mess on the other side. I wasn't sure if I'd find dismembered bodies torn to shreds by some dinosaur carnival created by some trillionaire for his amusement, or if I'd just find a completely abandoned facility, stripped of its useful parts and left to rot like so much of the rest of the industrial complexes in the region.

I threw a stick at the electric fence to ensure it was truly no longer electrified. Once when I worked at a horse farm, I leaned on the wrong fence at the wrong moment. I was not about to repeat that, especially since here the intent was likely to do a lot more than startle you away from touching the wired gates.

Since no electricity screamed back in a horrifying arc, I tiptoed through the gap in the fence, gingerly eking past the broken prongs. Nothing snagged, so I continued, breathing slightly easier.

I'd driven past the place for practically my whole life but I'd never set foot on this land before. And until the developments in the past 10 years, I hadn't cared to. But throw up an electric fence, have posted guards and bizarre signs, and you've got my attention.

My mother and best friend both tried to convince me it was nothing. A crazy conspiracy theorist friend told me it had to be a Blackwater operation. My boyfriend's brother, who had been a part of Blackwater at some point, told me that was unlikely. All I knew was that this gate was there. It was calling out to me. And now, I was inside.

Behind the gate, everything was just as pitch black as it had been before passing through the barbed wire. I'm not sure if I thought there would be some magical light that followed me around or something, but grudgingly, I turned on my pin light flashlight.

The trees were thick as ever, the hill unpaved and uncleared. I had to weave through the pines, oaks, and maples, like an utterly confusing labyrinth. I mean, it was the woods in North Florida, so it would have to end somewhere. But at that time of the morning, I could wind up circling until daybreak and get caught in the middle of a secret experimentation range of some kind.

I looked down at the compass on the toe of my hiking boot. *Thank you, Soren!* At the time my boyfriend had purchased the boots for me, I'd kind of laughed at having the compass in the toe. I was sure I'd smash it to bits and destroy its usefulness within a week of my usual hiking escapades. But here it was three years later, and the compass was still in top shape. The boots needed replaced, but the compass was golden.

As I crested the dense hill, I heard other-worldly, mournful cries from some kind of creature I couldn't identify. *You're in for it now! Turn back, turn back you fool!* I pressed forward.

The sky was now starting to lighten. I had maybe 20 minutes before I'd be on full display. Looking down at the clearing on the other side, I could see something moving. Something large – and hairy – moving on four legs. I couldn't make out the shape of it. Was it a deer that had been experimented on and grown an unusually thick coat? Was it a feathery dinosaur? Was it some unknown sci-fi creature that would now smell me and want to snack on my bones?

The creature stopped moving and seemed to aim its gaze at me. I froze, staring back.

We stood like this, gazes locked without being able to see into each other's eyes, for probably five minutes. Finally, I moved. I had to. The light was rapidly lifting darkness from the world and I was in the most vulnerable spot I could have found had I tried.

The creature ducked away into one of the buildings. I hesitated, breathing in ragged breaths. This was all too exciting. And weird. *What the heck am I doing here? Who do I think I am? I'm not even a journalist or a detective or... anything. I'm a professional hiking guide. Who the heck do I think I am investigating this place?*

My survival skillset was better than the average American's, admittedly, but I had no business being here.

The same creature, I was pretty sure, and two others poked their heads out of the building to stare up at me. *Great.*

They're conversing together, deciding what to do with me. Are they

incredibly intelligent deer who've gained telepathy or—

A peculiar, almost ethereal whinny broke out. I looked down at the creatures. *They're horses? But they're... huge. Way too big to be...*

A silvery, long-maned, long-tailed creature stepped out into the open. The other three creatures remained inside, looking out. The creature seemed to shimmer as it walked. And I wouldn't say rainbows sprang from its hooves like you'd see in cartoons or something, but there was an almost prismatic aura around the creature's hooves as it took delicate, graceful steps toward the bottom of the hill.

The creature turned its head as the first direct beam of sunlight struck ground. Something on its head caught the light and scattered the beam into shards of orange and green and blue and red. *Unicorns?*

I began descending the hill. *This is impossible. They can't be... unicorns. Can they? I mean, I was thinking dinosaurs drawn from the DNA of fossils or something. But... unicorns? Where would they even get that DNA?*

The unicorn at the base of the hill tossed its mane and whinnied again. "Are you warning me away or welcoming me?" I asked aloud, uncertain of the differences between a unicorn's behavior and that of a horse. *I mean, it's not like I've met a unicorn before.*

We stared back at each other as I continued making my way down the hill. *I'm committed for sure. And probably going to be committed if I'm not arrested! Unicorns! Unicorns? I must be hallucinating... Well, except for this place... It's... here. I'm here.*

I pinched myself and bit into my upper lip. *Yep. I'm definitely awake.*

I glanced over at the stables and saw more unicorn heads poking out the door at this point. *I guess they're as curious as I am.*

I inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, forcing myself to walk closer. The shimmering unicorn, their apparent leader, whinnied as I approached. She tossed her head, stamped her feet – all the things horses do when they're warning you off.

I attempted to slow the racing pulse that must have been visible in my neck.

They could be nice and delightful and wonderful, magical friends. Or they could be horrible monsters like all the fairy tales of Grimm might suggest.

The shimmering unicorn stamped her hooves again, then backed toward the stable. Her rippling mane glinted in the

sunlight, as if infused with diamond glitter. Her sparkling blueish-gray body almost looked as if she were made of silver sequins.

"I won't hurt you," I whispered, trembling hand extended.

The unicorn whinnied again, almost conversationally now.

I tilted my head, taking in the way the lights hit her majestic, gleaming coat. With each tense movement, the muscled strength beneath rippled, causing waves of glittering bursts in a nearly prismatic shot of light.

Is she trying to blind me?

If mesmerization was her intent, she succeeded. I realized several moments later that I had been standing transfixed.

"Are you trying to hypnotize me?"

It was kind of a stupid thing to ask an animal I was pretty sure couldn't speak English, but I wasn't exactly thinking clearly just then.

She stopped, looked at me intently, then visibly relaxed. Maybe she could sense I had nothing but curiosity and good intentions. Or maybe there was something else. I couldn't be sure.

"Don't get any closer."

Something else, then.

I carefully turned on tiptoe, leaving a weird imprint in the mud as I did so. Something about that moment seared that image into my brain. Perhaps it was because of the harsh contrast between the sandy mud print and the brilliant glistening creature not ten feet away. Either way, I can still clearly see that weird, almost angel-shaped smooch in the mud that morning any time I close my eyes.

I raised my eyes from the ground to the man, dressed in khaki shorts and a muted blue button-down, standing ten feet the other side of me. I slowly raised my hands, certain he must have some kind of deadly weapon trained on me. I didn't see one, but where there were unicorns, there could be anything – even invisible guns.

"Step away slowly, Miss," the man said.

"But I..."

"They're incredibly dangerous."

I sighed, shrinking down into the form of a disappointed child. Drooping shoulders and furrowing brow, I turned back to cast a glance over my side. The opulent creature was rippling her muscles again, slower than before. She seemed oddly calmer now that this warning man had arrived.

"They're unicorns. Right?"

The man nodded and gazed at the creature behind me. "That doesn't make them magical or friendly, though."

"What happened here?" I asked.

The man glanced at me.

He looks familiar. Eh. Probably went to school or church together at some point. This isn't exactly a big town.

"Classified."

"By the military?" I asked.

The man looked me over for a second. "Well, not exactly..."

"Please tell me this isn't some insane Blackwater type op."

The man tilted his head to one side and almost laughed. "Blackwater? Who...? You're not one of those conspiracy nuts are you?"

I laughed now.

"No. I have a few... acquaintances who are. But I'm definitely not. I know I'm stupid being in here on my own, but I wouldn't be that stupid."

The man laughed now, too.

The unicorn stamped her hooves. She didn't seem dangerous at all now. She was practically prancing as she wiggled her tail and let out a musical whinny. The other unicorns in the stable responded in kind, then rushed from the door.

Again transfixed, I found myself suddenly surrounded by the colorful creatures. Each had a different pastel shade to her coat – pinkish, lavender, mauve, baby blue, mint green, aqua, pale lemon, each reflecting the sun in their coats of apparent tiny diamonds.

The lemony yellow one nudged me with his nose. The lavender girl licked my hand. Mauve nickered at me and bumped my side with her head, oh, so gently.

"Dangerous?" I asked.

The man hesitated. "I've never seen them act this way before."

In the middle of the herd, it felt rather like being caught up in a winter storm from the north. The energy emitting from their happy spirits flowed into my own, evoking not merely giddiness at this remarkable moment but a sense of audacious expectancy and complete calm.

A bizarre thought struck. *Have I been called here all along?*

Is that why these ten years I've been drawn to this spot, this oddly normal yet completely out-of-place site which no one else seems to care about?

"Who are you?" the man asked as he watched the mint green unicorn lick my face.

"I'm not going to tell you my name!"

"I don't care about that. Who *are* you?"

I stared back at him, trying to comprehend his question in the flurry of wonder swirling around us. "Nobody."

"You're clearly somebody."

"I thought you were. They calmed down when you arrived."

"No. They calmed down when you arrived."

"But they were hiding from me. And that one... The silver one, she..."

"There's no silver unicorn," he said.

"Yes, there is. She's right here." I pointed at the unicorn that had been cautious but out front leading the investigation into me.

The man's jaw dropped. "You're saying there was a unicorn standing in front of the stable when I arrived?"

"Yes," I laughed. "She's the one who started all of this."

The man shook his head. "We didn't make any silver unicorns. She didn't want silver." He stopped himself, looked slightly shocked over revealing anything – little as it told me – and sighed. "She said any color but silver."

"She?" I had to ask.

The man looked around uncomfortably, seemingly for spies. Or cameras.

"I can't say."

"Classified?" I suggested.

He shrugged.

"Unless you're working for the government on some bizarre 'reinvent the mythical beast' program, there's nothing *classified* about it. Just secret."

I had him there.

"Classified," he repeated.

Or not.

He wasn't dressed in military garb and didn't bear himself like trained militia. He seemed more like the average, ordinary science nerd who'd been caught doing something a little questionable in the eyes of polite society.

"Fine. Let's get back to this silver unicorn. She's right here, swirling around us with the rest of them. You really mean to tell me you can't see her?"

The man looked among the circling herd nervously. "We made every color on the palette except silver. No gray, no silver."

"Maybe I see her as more silver and you see her as more blue," I suggested.

"There's only one blue unicorn," he said. "You just see one, right?"

I sighed. "I see a blue unicorn and this silver one."

"Impossible."

What reason did he have to lie? I had already discovered their insane bioengineering scheme. Why lie about having a silver unicorn? It's not like that would somehow make me seem more or less crazy to someone else.

"It can't be impossible. She's right here."

The silver unicorn stopped abruptly, right in front of me. She nuzzled my arm with her nose, which seemed to stop the others in their tracks. The air fell still and quiet as the herd looked to their silvery mistress.

"What did you do?" he asked agape.

"Nothing. I thought you did something!"

We stared at each other for several moments before the silver unicorn nudged my hand with her nose.

"What was that?" The man looked almost out-of-his-mind surprised.

"The silver unicorn." *He really can't see her? What the heck?*

The unicorn repeated the action. I looked into her eyes, wondering what she might be trying to communicate. *Do you speak human? Do you have telepathy? Can you communicate with me through something other than hand nudges and whinnies?*

The unicorn kept gazing at me, intent on something.

"Do you want me to follow you?" I finally asked.

The silvery mane flipped out suddenly as she turned on her hooves as nimbly as a ballerina on pointe.

"All right. I'll follow you." I turned back to the man. "You

coming?"

He stared at me for a long moment, but saw I wasn't going to wait for him to decide.

"All right. I guess. Why not? What have we got to lose?"

"That's the spirit, buddy!"

I followed the argent beauty. The man followed me, past the stable, to the head of a path I would never have imagined was there. "We can't go there."

I looked at the man. "She's leading, so I'm going. You can come or not."

"But..." the man hesitated. "*She* commanded we never go down that path. Ever."

"Commanded? What are you? A slave? I don't see military gear, so I'm pretty sure any *commands* are rubbish. Let's go."

He looked over his shoulder back at the stable area, now a good half mile off. He heaved a sigh bigger than I expected he'd manage and waved his hands forward. "Lead the way."

Into the woods we strode, along the mysterious forbidden path. The unicorn seemed eager to run, but she held back for us, somehow recognizing that our feeble two-legged pace could never keep up with her four-legged gallop.

She nickered and whinnied multiple times along the way, eager for something. The man behind apparently couldn't hear her or see her and just kept in line with my steps a few yards behind.

Where could she be taking us? A deep, dark encampment in the woods where we'll be sacrificed to the mystical unicorn gods from whom this silver unicorn sprang?

The unicorn abruptly stopped before a cluster of trees gathered and arched in a door-like pattern. Nickering, she beckoned with her shining head. I should have hesitated. This door to another world was beyond the ken of my imagination.

But I was so darn curious. *Even if I get eaten by rabid, man-eating unicorns, I think, somehow, this will be worth it...*

She stepped through the opening into undulating prismatic light. I inhaled deeply and stepped through after, uncertain if I would be able to breathe on the other side.

As I stepped through this ingress, the air was pulled from my lungs for just a moment. Then, the clearest, sweetest breath I'd ever taken inflated my feeble lungs like a newborn drawing its first gulp of air. I breathed in again, deeper this time.

The man stood on the other side, watching to see what

happened.

"I didn't die!" I called back.

He couldn't seem to hear me. The gateway closed, him still watching from the plane on earth from which I came.

The unicorn pranced along ahead at a pace a little faster than I wanted to go, but not so fast I couldn't keep up. We hurried through the ebbing lights in blue, purple, and green, and found ourselves shortly on the other side of the portal.

The next thing I knew, a world of ice crystals, snow, and near whiteout conditions came into focus around me. Yet nothing was cold – all was comfortably cool and delightfully iridescent.

"Where are we?" I asked, as if the creature could speak her answer back.

The unicorn stamped her hooves twice, whinnied so that I thought she might be laughing, and carefully stepped off the path in the direction of a misty clearing.

As we entered the clearing in this strange, misty, snowy place, I saw dozens of other unicorns gathered around, facing each other at the center.

If unicorns are truly evil, I'm done for.

The silver unicorn I had followed tossed her mane, inviting me to join her.

Well, I might as well. I'm here. I... I'm here. Wherever here is.

I stepped into the clearing and looked around at all the unicorns in an array of metallic shades. Some unicorns shone like glorious beams of light from the heavens above, others merely glinted with earthen, dark gemstone shades as if glanced over by a dull cloud.

The unicorn I followed whinnied at the herd. They looked up from whatever it was they were doing – perhaps some mysterious gathering of ancient rites – and gazed in our direction.

The horse-like creatures alerted at my strange presence. The young ones whinnied like laughter. Elder unicorns huffed and scoffed, turning their backs away and then glancing over their shoulders.

The silver unicorn nudged me forward with her nose, gently. I found myself in the middle of the herd's gathering place. *This could be it, you weirdo.* I looked around at the creatures and smiled. *But what a way to go if it is! With real, live unicorns in some... other dimension, I guess.*

The two dozen or so unicorns took turns approaching me

apprehensively, yet curious. I stood as still as I could, never raising a hand or finger, except when I had to sneeze. The movement startled the young ones and made the older ones balk. But I was sure the sneeze itself would have done more damage.

An older male seemed keen on me and approached more quickly than I was comfortable with. But before I could shield myself, his nose was pressed against my shoulders, inhaling a colossal whiff. He sneezed and nickered, then backed away casually.

Apparently, I passed whatever test they had for me. The silver unicorn tossed her mane and whinnied, pawed at the ground for a moment drawing their attention again, and then turned to stare at me.

"I'm sorry. I wish I knew what you wanted."

The herd took a step back.

"Oh. Maybe I shouldn't speak," I whispered.

The silver unicorn nuzzled me with her nose again. I reached out hesitantly, hoping to pat the sparkling coat. It should have felt like sequins or sharp little diamond nubs, but it was smooth as silk and soft as rabbit's fur.

The youngest looking unicorn – fluffy as a baby penguin – sauntered over to me, whinnying lightly. She leaned into me, nuzzling my side with her nose like she'd seen the silver unicorn do. I reached out, feeling the hush fall over the otherwise shimmering creatures. I touched her coat. Somehow, it was even softer than the silver unicorn's and four times fluffier. *Like petting a cloud.*

All but a few of the crotch-tier-looking unicorns came and asked for a pat. It felt like I was making some kind of other-worldly connection. And, I suppose I was.

As each creature nuzzled in for comfort, I felt slight tingles run through my body. *I guess they're magical or something? I... I don't know what to do with all of this! I believe in science. I believe in miracles, too. I believe... in unicorns, I guess!*

A clearly elderly unicorn suddenly stamped his feet three precise times. The other unicorns froze and then looked at him. *Almost... repentant?*

It felt a bit like the elder unicorn's face, aged and wizened slightly, turned deep amber and red with annoyance as it scolded the younger. *I suppose there may be some kind of tribal or family structure?*

The silver unicorn nuzzled me again. I looked into her eyes, mesmerized once more. Without realizing it, I began following her back down the path, away from this mystical gathering place. Then, before I knew it, we were at the portal entrance.

She nudged me in. I went. Mournful eyes accompanied a disappointed sigh. The portal closed. I was alone in the wormhole. I wasn't sure if walking was necessary but I had walked previously, so I moved forward. The wormhole shifted. Apparently, walking was necessary. *I thought it would be a rushing portal like in Stargate. Oh, well.*

For the briefest of moments, I contemplated what it would be like to stay in there forever. But then I realized I wouldn't have any food or water and forever probably wouldn't last that long. I kept walking.

The colors warped and shifted, pulling in around me. And then, I was back. On the other side. On the boring, human side on earth.

Something cracked behind me. I spun on my heels, hoping. But nothing was there. Just trees and underbrush.

I sighed and started walking back toward the stables again.

As I came upon the clearing, several of the bio-engineered unicorns were casually milling about, munching on grass, rolling in the dirt – acting like horses.

"We used narwhal DNA and mixed it with horse DNA."

I spun to see the man standing just to the left of the stable.

"How long did you wait for me? How long was I gone?" I asked.

"About three hours," he looked at his watch. "Did you hear me?"

I nodded, contemplating. Did I dare tell this nonbeliever? Would he make things worse? Or better? Would I ever find the portal and wormhole to the unicorn universe again? Would these man-made facsimiles remotely compare?

I do love horses. And narwhals...

I smiled at him. "Whose insane idea was that?"

"Mine," he smiled. "I really shouldn't tell you any of this. All hush-hush. I should call the authorities and have you arrested for trespassing."

"But you won't because I traveled through a wormhole to another dimension where unicorns live. **Real** unicorns."

The man stared at me. "Real unicorns?"

"Non-bioengineered ones," I said. "In another dimension. I... think."

I was hardly a scientist, even if I was a bit of a sci-fi nut. I couldn't say for sure what I had seen or where I had been. I just knew what it felt like.

My phone rang. I looked down and saw that it still

miraculously had 45-percent battery remaining, so I answered it. "Hello?"

"Are you okay?" Soren's kind voice reverberated over the line.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"You're not sitting in a jail cell? I don't need to fly down there and bail you out?"

I laughed and glanced over at the man beside me. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"So, uh... What was it?"

I glanced at the man again, then cast an eye toward the stable where the unicorns were mindlessly wandering around, looking for grass to eat or oats to snack on.

"I'll tell you about it in a little while. Right now, I think I'd better go."

The man was waiting patiently for me to finish my call.

"What are you going to tell... her?" I asked.

The man shrugged. "There's nothing to tell."

I eyed him suspiciously. "Nothing?" I thought a second then nodded. "Yeah. I guess not. The power went out, damage occurred to the front fence. You repaired. Uh, you repaired it, right?"

"I was waiting for a certain, uh... well, let's say fox to leave the grounds safely before I get that section repaired. Don't want the little red-headed thing to get singed."

I paused a second, then nodded, fingering my red braid. "Good idea. I'm sure that little fox appreciates it."

"And I'm sure the fox will never return, right?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm sure that fox has at least somewhat cured her curiosity..."

"Good. Best of luck to you then. The power should be going up again in 10 minutes."

I looked back over at the stables where the unicorns were milling around, then back at the man.

I struck out for the hill and climbed easily for a minute or two, then looked back down. The man was standing, watching me. *Darn it. Can't sneak any photos...*

I climbed higher and crested the ridge. I tried to subtly snap a shot, but my phone definitely wasn't going to allow for subtlety. By the time I could get a shot that wasn't so blatant, I couldn't see the unicorns. For a second, I thought about slinking down again for a picture, but then I looked

at my watch and saw I had four minutes to make it back through the fence. It was still tempting. But, logic, in this case, won out, and I bolted for the fence a quarter mile away through the thick trees.

I barely slid through before I heard the fence spring to life and saw some sparks fly off. *Good thing I didn't wait.*

Disappointed, I headed down the road again, now in broad daylight, and found my car. *All those unicorns and not a photo to prove it. Man. And I could have taken one while I was in the other dimension... or whatever the heck that place was!*

Driving back to Mom's, I could have beaten myself silly for not thinking to do just that. But I gave myself some grace eventually. *At least I was living in the moment. Soren always worries I'm thinking of other things too often and not relishing life as I live it. Well! He'll enjoy this story, even if he won't believe it. Although, I'm pretty sure he will. He won't know what to make of it, but neither do I.*

I called Soren as I neared Mom's house.

"You okay, hon?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I made it out fine. No police involvement or anything."

"How'd you swing that?" he laughed.

"Oh, you know me. Ridiculous charm and all that."

"No, really," he teased.

"Well, I'm not sure you'll believe me," I said.

"I believe you always," he promised.

I related the whole thing, now parked at Mom's, waiting to go in.

"Were they just... curious? About you? About humans, maybe?" Soren asked.

I looked in the rearview mirror at my face. "You mean... Like, the silver unicorn brought me to her dimension to prove to them that humans exist?"

Soren laughed, "Yeah. I mean... it kind of sounds like something you'd do if you were a horse or a bear or a beaver."

"Like humans are a myth or something."

I sat thinking about it. Maybe he was right.

"What else could that mean?"

I couldn't be sure, of course, not speaking unicorn and all, but I'm pretty certain that's what happened that day. The silver unicorn was as surprised to discover that humans exist as we were to discover there are real life, non-bioengineered unicorns on another plane.

I'm also confident that I'll meet the silver unicorn again. Probably not on a mysterious unicorn farm in the woods of North Florida, but somewhere.



Words, Music, Grace

*“The Lord is my strength and my shield;
in him my heart trusts, and I am helped;
my heart exults,
and with my song I give thanks to him.”*
Psalm 28:7

Words fall short when trying to explain human love. How much more when describing the Divine.

Music is a better tool for this than words.

Music makes more sense than just words. It's easier to evoke meaning and emotion, whereas words require the construction of a tapestry. Weaving and threading together the words and structure and editing to make sure the meaning is the intended one due to how idiotic English as a language is.

But, for now, words are the best I have and despite how insufficient they are for addressing and talking about the Divine, there are so many things I am grateful for, so many things that I could never earn or deserve.

That is grace, thankfully.

Soren Porter

Nonfiction





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Shatters

Aidan Sydik (Drake Inferno)

Artist Statement

My work centers around taking pre-existing images or photos, “shattering” them using repeated shape and color distortion and then using photo-editing tools to reconstruct the scrambled shapes into something that is simultaneously impossible to recognize as the original image and visually appealing. I impose various rules on myself for this process, such as only being allowed to put the images I use through filters which introduce mild shape distortion and photo adjustments which amplify or decrease what is already present in the image (e.g., vibrance, saturation, exposure, etc.) rather than manipulating or editing the image directly. This results in aberrations and noise appearing in the image which in turn can be distorted to produce new colors and shapes that give the pieces their signature chaotic appearance. Making them gives me something creative to do while sitting down with my own thoughts, in some ways helping them form as the art pieces themselves do. There’s something that I find personally fascinating about visually and conceptually tearing something apart and restoring the pieces of it into something new with its own detail and unique shapes.



A man with a black backpack and light-colored shorts is leaning over the side of a white sailboat with a wooden deck. He is looking out at the deep blue ocean under a clear sky. In the distance, another sailboat is visible on the horizon, and there are mountains on the far shore. The boat's wake is visible in the foreground.

“Jobs fill
your
pockets, but
adventures
fill your
soul.”

– Jaime
Lyn Beatty

Mine, Complete

MIKE LEE

I dreamed of a vacation in Buenos Aires, a city I never lived in but wanted to visit. A friend and his wife vacationed there, back at the beginning of the pandemic, and sent photos of the pubs and coffeehouses. Drinking yerba mate until the situation got spicy and they had to return to the eternal lockdowns.

My dream was made up of fragments, and lacked a cohesive narrative as it segued from one to another scene. In Argentina, I was with Irene, and met a couple. Together, we watched dancers on the street from the hotel terrace. Architecture was modern, postmodern, brutalist all at once.

We were taken from Buenos Aires to more familiar territory. Irene and I found ourselves on the Rio Frio in Garner State Park. The nearest town had a Tex-Mex diner that had the worst chips in history. Burned. Tasteless. The rest of the food was good, though. The restaurant was real: handwritten signs and faded photographs taped on linoleum walls. Nice, friendly people.

Afterward, we went to swim in the river. The water was tepid. It was a very hot summer, and we were alone. Irene walked through the water, hands sloshing across the surface while I walked ahead of her on my hands, pretending to be an alligator: palms on muddy rock down the river to the road ahead.

That was real. I relished the memory, and wished we did this as teenagers when we met. There was a lot we could have done back then. Instead, we were paper dolls, the 1980 punk edition. I can see Irene with fishnets with black pumps, alternating to skintight purple lycra pants, hand-sewn tops, torn t-shirts, and a dog collar. Also her Taco Bell uniform, and hotel maid smock. Me, Marlboro 100 cigarette in hand, in striped t-shirts of various colors, tight Levis waist size 24, and low-cut Chuck Taylors. Also accessorized with a pen and notebook. Sometimes I would write. Otherwise not at all.

Irene wrote, too. I remember the purple marker and neat cursive across the lines. She doesn't recall what she did with her notebooks.

These paper dolls could feel pain. Sometimes you can feel the soreness as older fingers slide to fold the tabs when changing their outfits, believing that by doing so we would heal them, and ourselves.

We finished folding our paper dolls while on the shore of the Rio Frio, kissed as the sun dropped behind the escarpment above.

From there, we returned to the Buenos Aires terrace, watching tango dancers gyrate on the plastic sheet.

Of Stardust and Miracles

A poem series by Sue Cook

I: You Can't Be My Child



"You can't be my child!"
I can still hear this as if it was yesterday.
A stringy haired, sick, weak, thin, pale child.
Heart broken in four places.
Tetralogy of fallot,
rare and deadly.
"Can we use her as a test subject?" they asked.
"Her life could save other children."
"How can this be my child?" Mother cried to the heavens.

Was I her child?
Was I made of stardust and miracles?
Only the angels knew.

The angels and the Watchers.
"Am I her child?" I asked as the gas took me away.
The serenade of joyous giggling accompanied me
as I drifted into oblivion.

II: Watchers

Mommy! Mommy! Look at the pretty lights!
 It was only **her** spirit crying out.
 Her mouth was covered by gas mask.
 Students and Watchers surrounded her suite
 as the operation lingered.
 Incorporeal eyes lifted to the Watchers.
 "Release me from this painful death –
Take me with you!"
 None heard but the Watchers.

A Watcher moved too close.
 The Doctors tried to bind her to this realm with their medicine.
 But her spirit wanted freedom.
She was dying
 The Watchers panicked.
 No... Not **her!**

The small soul left as the Watcher dove into her body
 to fill the void.
 A split second of pressure dropping
 then
 stability.
 Watchers took her home to happy arms.
 But as they left with their precious cargo,
 a quick glance back to her body on the table.
Poor trapped Watcher.
 Where are the stars now?

The lights so bright –
 Everything hurts.
 My chest hurts.
 The tube down throat hurts.
Life hurts.
 Is this what *survival* feels like?

Death is easier.
 Funny they don't know that.

Who am I?
 What did I do?
 Where did she go?
 Did she leave with the ships
 with my friends?
 Where are my wings?
 Am I...**her** –
 The one made of stardust and miracles?

I danced under a sky of twinkling lights.
Stars ignite a fire in my spirit –
I am deliriously happy.
Like a dervish, I spun until I could no longer remain upright, and tumbled to the earth.
Eyes on the heavens I watched as the cosmos opened before me.
The stars danced in concert.
Glorious!

The deafening sound of the MRI roused me to groggy consciousness.
Once more my clanging coffin lulled me to sleep
Will they find the cause of my seizures
this time?

Why must I endure this noise?
This pain?
Where are my stars?
Will I forever be stuffed in a tube to rot?

Take me back to the stars!
To light –
To joy –
To dancing.
The cacophony of the MRI can never diminish
the sound of the whispered
“Soon.”

III: How the Stars Danced



Illnesses sorted.
Some rare and alien.
Some not.
My friend hands me a book –
in a bookstore –
that he thinks I'll find helpful.
A playful smile parts his lips.

The book?
A bit out-of-this world.
He laughs and speaks.
I fit all the earmarks of a Starchild.
Perhaps.

At a fundraiser with my husband,
a Medium asks if I feel I'm from
Here?
Startled, my husband and I grasp each other's hands nervously.

An alien-looking vessel
paid me a visit with witnesses present.
Relatives coming for a visit?
Perhaps.
I should have put the kettle on.

IV: Perhaps

Starchild, what a lovely title.
Labels are usually ugly, profane.
Not this one.
Starchild.
A haunting melody of bright energy and deep suffering.
A miracle child.
Stardust made flesh.

Did they forget me?
I place my hands on rocks
and feel their stirrings.
I know something is different –
Alien.
I touch those who suffer
and bring healing.

The energy in my hands resonates with the universe –
I can alter the weather.
Why then, can I not heal myself?
I hear them singing to me –
“We are coming.”
“When?” I cry to the heavens.

Silence.

V: Starchild



VI: Are You Still Out There?

Floating on the river in my beloved Upper Dells,
the stars moved swiftly above.
Your precision formations silenced a game on the Clipper's top deck.
We all scattered
too unnerved that we were privy to UFOs dancing in the starlight.

But I knew.

I knew you came to take me home.

I waited by the ceremonial wall but
no one came – just a blanket of stars.
I cried to the starlight, “I belong out there!”
My mind needs to see what truly exists beyond an optic's reach.

You came many years later,
hovered over my soon-to-be husband and me.
Close enough to see markings on your otherworldly vessel.
I listened and heard your song.
You remained long enough to let me know.
Someday I will know the secrets you possess.
Then you left.
Twenty-four years is a long time to wait.

Are you still out there?

VII: Visited



Tonight was adorned in starlight and song
You visited.
The world was so small for only a brief period
Time stopped.
You spoke of symbols and meanings
Dreams, little one, only dreams.
Yet, the stars poured out their brilliance.
We danced amongst the heavens as you spoke –
Legend and mythos blurring into reality –
My story falling into place.
Stardust and miracles.

I was to stay.

The world will change soon.
Stardust must rise through the chaos, to do its healing
The dance pirouetted through the cosmos til dawn.
A kiss.

Gone.

On waking,
the dream seemed so real.
No proof except a life altering memory
and a small piece of rock on my side table.

Home visited me, and the reunion was resplendent.

Tonight I walk onto the deck feeling I will see the stars dance.
 How I have missed this feeling!
 The childlike joy at your twinkling splendor.
 Will you dance in formation like that night on the river?

Will you whisper to me as you did in the MRIs,
 letting me know answers would be found?

Will you swoop from the heavens to take me for a ride
 in your black triangular vessel with the dazzling red lights?

I wait in the dark November night,
 shivering as I bask in the magnificent light of Orion.
 Tonight you remain silent.

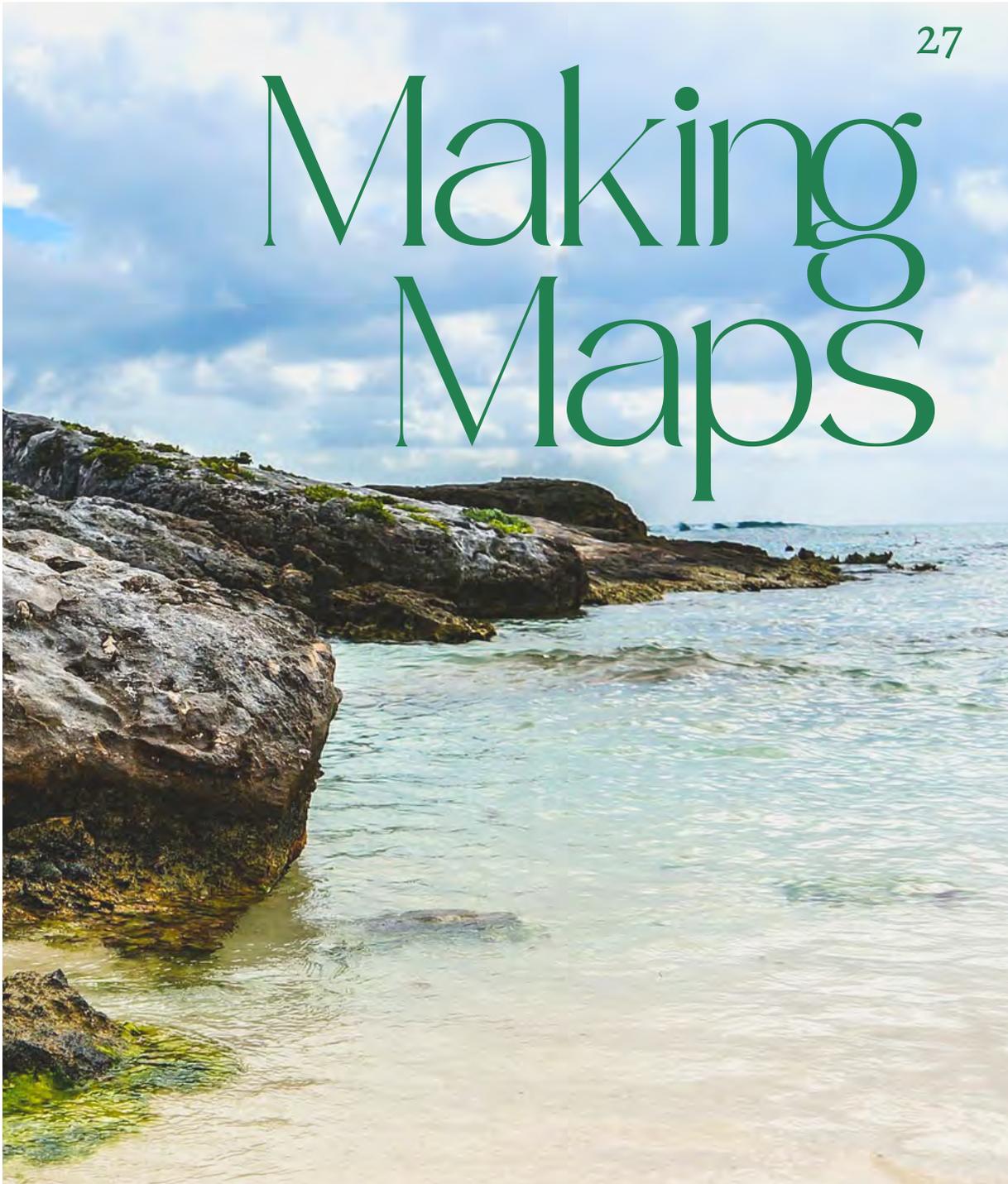
Somehow, I know whose child I am,
 and as those before me carry the lineage
 we all know.
 Not all roads lead to home.
 Some may lead to stars...
 or distant dreams.



VIII: Until We Meet Again

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Making Maps



*My hands render you an island
set towards shore.
Soft sands, craggy edges –
the heart of you,
your hidden treasure –
mine.*

World Left-Handed

Roger Topp

We can't begin with a dream, because dreams come after. They are not for mornings but the end of the day – when we sift through all the shit – when our subconscious brains decide what should and shouldn't be forgotten. We can't begin with a dream, but here is the dream.

I'm shot somewhere in the chest, and after I fall, I lie face to the wall, my head pointed towards the garage door. My eyes are closed. I lie in a clutter of paint cans. 3:30 am. There was a moment before this upon which I could have backed away and said, "Thanks, but no thanks" to tea, to calls, to a return of toothbrushes. An argument's consequences should have time to sink in, to lose the feel of words. Anger should simmer and rattle.

Perhaps this is the conclusion of a much larger argument. Perhaps the pot has boiled dry. Tim, inside the garage, is one moment negotiating with a man I'd not met, and in the next he backs away in a hurry. Tim says, "No," and tries to shut the door. The other man pulls a gun and shoots, and Tim falls to the right. The man shoots again, and I am hit running the other way. A third shot races after Mel, somehow outside the garage already, as if she tried to escape by going through the bullets. She makes a sound, something sharp between surprise and the twang of a bowstring. Then footsteps. Then more shots – two in quick succession inside of the garage. No words now and the metaphor finishes us off. Another shot very close to me. Then the dull, blind sense of a warm gun inches from my skull. Stray, intimate hairs reach out for the barrel.

Once upon a time, I knew to escape before the slaughter. Now that I'm older, I'm slower to react. Perhaps this gangly shadow pulls the trigger. Perhaps he doesn't. These are not things we can remember. Tim's final act before the shots is to try to close the door. It makes as much sense as the first thing he does – in the dream – as I walk Mel home past the rowhouses. Tim comes up the exterior steps from a basement, on cue, as if he knows we'll walk past. He hands me a steel pressure bottle. It might be an oxygen tank with a regulator or it might be a small, dry keg. Either way, he thinks we as a couple look like a good home, either needing air or a great many drinks.

From the point the gun is to my head, I move backwards through the dream, looking for a means of escape. Earlier in the kitchen, I imagine a handgun tucked in on top of a cabinet-mounted toaster. By the dust, it's been there awhile. I think I might take it and carry it into the garage when that part happens. I could explain to Mel that we have to leave, that my gift in dreams is to know the way out.

When she grieves, she screams.

Earlier still. Mel shudders at the dim wreck of the bedroom. She fidgets, so I give her space and step out the backdoor and down into the rear alley where everything from the broken glass to the tarmac and rubbish has turned the color of rags. The skywalks and factory facade are broken. They flap. The alley deserted, it goes on forever, and while nothing seems like a way out, there are clear directions to go. I stay near the door. Mel remains inside with dust and cobwebs, away from the beige powder street and the bowerbird nests where whole people have made homes.

Earlier still. The bedroom is chaff and shadow. Mel lingers as if she has lost something but instead of looking, she thinks about this emptiness – something that should have been high on a shelf or something that rolls quickly under the bed before the door opens. She stares at my chest as if in a mirror. I can't say anything useful. The sculpting knives are far away now and I don't know enough about the events that shaped her. And the bed is unmade, grime and smut dug into the folds. The floor is bare, red, farmhouse wood. And the photographs on the walls are bad exposures drawn from negatives inexpertly cut by unthinking Fotomat scissors – because we like keeping things in flat envelopes and an entire filmstrip is too much.

The images lie. They are sketches, impressions of past events, and out of order. Tim wanders in, doesn't knock, sees us both in the bedroom, standing, mannequins in the light of red chili, glowy peppers. He leaves. Through the noise of us forcing our way to common ground, I can hear the other tenants saving what they can, searching for the best things in their lives and getting out.

Before this. The kitchen is narrow and bolted down and I couldn't pry loose the appliances if I had a crowbar. The toaster is white. It's mounted under the cabinets and still it collects crumbs. No firearm hidden away – those were cheap thoughts – and the cabinet doors are painted on. The microwave is cobalt blue and wedged into a mail slot so thin I'm surprised it can heat a pizza.

Mel disappears deeper into the house. I imagine she touches my shoulder as she goes. I love when she does that. I wish she wouldn't do that. We shouldn't try to explain where we will spend our holidays. Inevitably these reports will contain lies.

Tim comes and goes. I know him from a previous life. He was the husband to a friend of a girlfriend and I don't think Mel ever came within hundreds of miles of him. But Mel knows someone here, or maybe Mel once lived here and now, if she keeps still, she can remember it – by way of negatives, clutter, and chemical burns. Tim and I once spent a scattering of evenings together I still don't remember. I remember his wife driving on account of his DUI. I remember she threw the longer shadow.

I have a few photographs of them, but running on memory alone, I confuse them with every other couple where the woman is the taller of the pair. In reality, I apologize for this helpless prejudice. In dreams, the re-invented couple rents a downtown commercial property large enough to host a roller derby on the third floor. In dreams, they fill one end of the warehouse with beach sand. It hourglass-leaks through the cracks into the floor below. In fiction, we lay in webbed beds beneath sunlamps and ambient ocean noise. In metaphor, the balance of the entrepôt becomes a miniature Hollywood town and boardwalk. Characters walk hand in hand between the gas lamps on pretend dates to the theatre. They walk home drunk from costume parties. If they peek in the windows of the homes, they see falling snow. With hope and wishing, we've made a safe place, but I remember next to nothing about the real them, Tim and –

I stand by the curb as Mel bites her lip against something ahead of us. Again, she enters the rowhouse. A couple other guys wrestle and slap backs on the concrete. I should ask what the winner gets – there's no one to take bets. It's already late, but I decide I can wait up to walk her home. She can take care of things and I won't fight the ambiguity, the non sequitur, the contradictions. Later, I've us to discuss if we can get there.

The wrestlers go back inside, and I stare at the tiny rectangle of concrete at the bottom of the stairs to the basement entrance where the door has been left open. I shouldn't go down. I'm overcome by this sense that there are objects and places – sometimes only a few square feet of nondescript ground, that I do not want to, or should not, set foot on. This feels like an accusation I can't take back, a cracked patch of concrete to flee. If Mel or Tim or anyone asks why I remain near the door, I feel silly and can't explain how I don't want to go into the room and grab a drink and talk – this is why. But, if I stand on the threshold long enough, stairs fall downhill after all, and the keg remains in the road. Deep breath. Some dreams aspire to obtain things. Others aspire towards escape and we should leave the house before the vampires arrive. We must leave all our loves behind before the men with guns break down the door.

Escape is sometimes looking backwards. I can keep Mel with me – this way. I feel for her hand in the dark as we walk from nightfall into the highlights of the street lamps. Not full dark, but the day has concluded its best work. We wear nice clothes. I've stretched my wardrobe and Mel has pulled something posthaste out of another dream. And there is Tim. He comes out the door, carrying junk like words. He gets the debris out now or keeps it forever. He saves the beer first. He has taken all the air from the rooms and canned it. I hate him for surviving this long. How the hell does he make a relationship work? The only reason I imagine him here, out of his time, is that he'll forever be a kick in my gut. I could tell him, "You're not supposed to try to save anything. I should have forgotten you by now."

Years ago, Mel and I came away from the Culbreath theatre on a warm October night where the south had forgotten to let go of summer. I'd come out of the University of Virginia theatre many times, sometimes on nights out, mostly after acting classes Tuesdays and Thursdays, when I was starving. But this was the first time I'd wandered all the way around the building, touched the trees, walked up and down the fleshed green with nowhere else I more wanted to be. I remember the sidewalks like I must have looked at the ground more than at my friend.

The colors of the concrete lodged in my head better than food between my teeth. A soft autumn makes for a long walk with no words. Mel held a sweater over her arm. The breezes, a loose cording, wove between the bricks and the magnolias. We talked about the little things we had in common: archery, or perhaps fencing, or biology, or the quest for a Lawn room, a prestige walk with Gorbachev – or grandmothers, or travel by train in the Northeast... There wasn't a thing between us in which we didn't compete.

At the theatre, we might have seen *Titus* or we might have watched *Jacques and His Master*. We might have seen *Othello* or a series of shorts. I've queried the theatre, but the records are incomplete. If I liked a show, I went again and again. I adored the lab stage. Sometimes the audience sat on three sides, sometimes on four. I followed the minor characters and listened for differences in the script, for the stiffness of the stage and the sound of hinges, of shut boxes, of bodies dragged across the floor. If I loved a show, I asked everyone to go with me, but one at a time. How do the dead drop on alternate evenings? Are there hints of last night's blood on the rostrum? Do the bed sheets fall the same? Does the air grow rank when the doors are closed, the bubble made and replayed and replayed? A story told backwards and inside out, a theatre couch is a filthy thing and every mattress must, of course, reek. Emulsion side down. Inverted spaces, exteriors manifest on the inside as magically as we flip a film negative and turn the world left-handed. We sense the wrong and we cast about for the evidence, words and numbers curiously alien, a watch and a ring on the wrong hand.

I look for any photographs I have of Mel and among my thin scattering of pre-digital images, characters come and go. As time runs forward, the chemical impressions of the pretty girls at a costume party are no more substantial nor less fragmented than those of a dream. Guinevere slung drinks with a major in the red army, who in shadows gave me a dark look though, really, he was a decent guy – and Kurtz flashed a silver watch, pith helmet, and his red "The horror! The horror!" mug, words painted in correction fluid. It held a gallon. Half full, it sloshed an icy cocktail, and the fumes made the world swim.

Jeff the gangster flashed his gun with the orange cap. Lancelot wore an impressive chain mail shirt, and Matt was fit to play baseball from his cap to his cleats. Mel sported a black tank top and carried a tinfoil knife. She could have been anyone, but I think she was Glenn Close. She was crazy and blonde and she tried to kill the baseball player.

The photography appears rushed, as if I wouldn't put my eye to the viewfinder, as if I blushed to use the camera once I'd picked it up. As if I didn't know where to point it. As if I didn't know when to put it down. Half of each image is headroom, and all the expressions are in the center of the frame, as if I thought a camera was just another pair of eyes. Lurk until they stare at you. Click and the little motor strains to wind the film on.

How I was dressed is not recorded, though in one photograph, bearded Kurtz holds a camera. He uses the viewfinder. His mouth is wide open, as if he's screaming for me to play a part. Maybe, just maybe, somewhere there's more to the story. Maybe there was film and it wasn't a prop. In it, I imagine I wear large glasses and my hair has exploded, wild and flustered and weightless, role-playing Mel.

Youth concerns itself with finding all ways into myriad hidden, intimate places we never again visit: a farm in the country, a house high on a hill, a sweat-stained student apartment buried deep in an alley. We move cities to leave these patches of concrete squarely behind us, as one leaves dreams before the aliens arrive, with pistols and perfect aim. We escape them as half-remembered containers barely bound to events, and the old photographs corroborate nothing. Looking back across the digital divide, I find rolls of Agfa and T-MAX that contain major events months apart. The frame numbers say there was nothing in-between. So few days were worth remembering.

We visit many places once: restaurants that don't turn out and parties that do, but who knows who actually lives there and who is friend of a friend? We don't plan to return. Then, one day we stop moving and settle into a world that smothers these once brief haunts. We build atop the old, grinding old floors to sand. Sometimes we remain long enough to die, and specters keep company. We drive past a house on the way to work daily and for the first time recognize it from an evening long ago. I once went to a party there. It was very cold. I met a girl in the dark and outside in the street we kissed in big coats before they burst the fireworks directly over our cars. Tongues twisted. Fragments fell. Everything was silhouettes back-lit by magnesium, and sometimes now there is a flicker of recognition, a face I once knew, a past life living beside us in a city where there are ghosts. The wary take steps to ensure this does not happen. Those of us stuck in the phlegm of daily theatre trample the old stains.

Mel lied about visiting her grandmother, but who doesn't lie about visiting grandma? It was the sort of lie she was bound to tell. I couldn't see that then. Following her movements as she negotiated ours and other relationships was as maddening as exploring a disused rowhouse. Whatever room we were in, she was there first, arms tumbled and twisted like soiled bed sheets ready for the wash. I blamed her for provoking one moment and giving hope the next.

Mel and I met shooting arrows behind a gymnasium. Mel was working on her resume; she wanted to be president of all the clubs. She said I should come by another of hers – there was a demonstration on Wednesday. She said fencing was something I would like. It was more intimate, popular, aggressive, so unlike walking to and from the butts and pulling arrows out of hay bales. Fencers take it out on each other.

We spun our arrows, like tops and fidget spinners, but in the palms of our hands. We checked the shafts were true enough, that the flights of those we'd already shot were still attached. The target fright was maddening that week. I know because it was maddening every week. When we couldn't hit anything, we stood like elves with our recurves, admiring the forest. We had come two years through college and Mel was already on her way out. She seemed always in the process of leaving, and I knew already, she would quit the archery in another couple months. I knew already, I would follow her where she goes. Fencing it would be then, something I would make as my home – something that would determine all the parties and relationships and road trips for decades to come.

I would lose track of her within the year, and be latently angry for decades after. For what? Because she was seeing a guy in New York?

Then one night, a dream for no reason at all, except there was a doorway with a way out, and not making it out encouraged me to look back – and when I got to the bottom of the shoebox negatives, I'd gone steadily back through time and arrived at a question. What is still missing? Memory is problematic not because memory is bad, just that we've spent most of our time in-between making stuff up. We are discontent with the natural, the real.

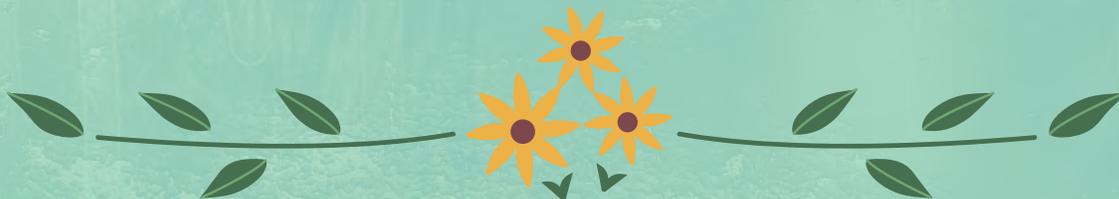
Mel is more deserving than to be murdered in another kid's dreams, but I think a part of my subconscious was mourning, finally, and she was not allowed to go unscathed. This saddens me. She's not a woman I fuss over, but – peace not made, events not understood – the last time I saw Mel, I felt her put a glass of water in my hand and a hand on my shoulder. I didn't turn to look. The room was dark and crowded, a movie was on, and I wasn't then in the mood for reconciliation. I'm sure I could deduce what the movie was. We were a fencing club. There are only so many good options. What good would that effort do? All the best photographs are those I wouldn't have looked at twice twenty years ago.

At the archery range, Mel and I walked back to the line and waited while the compounds stretched and popped. At the time, I could not have imagined the years of weird, blind contempt ahead. Sometimes we forget the unfinished business, and it sneaks up on us one morning. We were only wandering after all, escaping the room, figuring things out.

When I was in high school, a friend of mine who had moved away came back to visit. We broke into his old house, which was still between owners. I remember what he said when we did, when we got inside the empty rooms. He said, "My parents never intended for me to come back here."

I should turn to Mel to say thank you for what comes next, though brief and confusing and full of holes. We can't rightfully expect to get out alive. In this now digital age, pictures trace her to California, but the trail is so thin it is easy to let it go – enough to say an unheard hello and not know if I'm not still looking at the past.

Someone else lives in all those apartments now, and as often as I visit the old towns, I'm never going to find all the old doors. Someone else dreams of awkward events and why there are holes in the plaster near the baseboard here, and bird feathers and lost film canisters behind the dresser there. That odor has resided for decades. It is essential oils and sweat ground into a corduroy couch. I believe something is lost in new homes, in new relationships, a savory history – and as hard as we try to dig down to the bedrock, a foundation is always floating on a little spiritual loess, the worn material of ancient floods and dreams and relationships that didn't work out but that keep us upright and out of the old paint cans.



Wastrel Haiku

Gerard Sarnat



Has our curdled earth
become just a placeholder
as we explore space?

Featured Artist



SUE COOK

Author & Poet

United States

JOYFUL CREATION FROM A LIFE OF NEAR-DEATH: AN INTERVIEW WITH SUE COOK

JP DeNeui

I've known Sue for about a year, having been fortunate enough to collaborate with her on many pieces now for the MockingOwl Roost from poems to book reviews and more. It's always a joy to meet another author who has such passion for what they do. Through the magic of the internet, I interviewed this creative and hard-working talent.



J. P. DeNeui: Hello Sue, thanks so much for doing this interview with me. Could you tell me a little about your background? What's your family situation? Where did you grow up?

SC: I grew up as an only child in Freeport, IL, in the 1960s. My dad was a dentist, and my mother worked as a receptionist for my dad. I had a little dog named Sandy and a toy poodle named Suzette.

I was a sickly child, so reading, writing, and my dogs were my passions growing up. Although I was passing out constantly, my family didn't find out I had a rare heart problem until I was almost five and a half years old. Tetralogy of Fallot was just being explored in various hospitals, so I was taken to Children's Memorial Hospital where Dr. Potts and Dr. Paul performed the surgery.

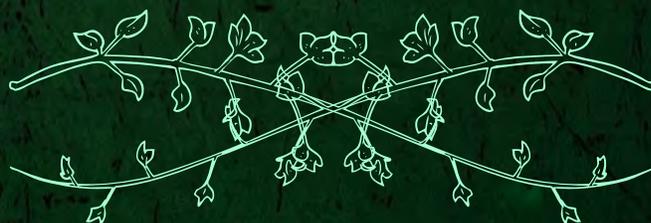
I wasn't expected to live, so the heart surgery was done as a single surgery. Afterwards, I was placed on the death ward. Thankfully, their amazing talent and multiple prayers worked. The poem "Death Ward" came from that experience.



JPD: You're a regular contributor at the Roost both for the blog and quarterly. How did you meet Rita and what's it been like?

SC: I met Rita and Matt at a Doctor Who fan convention several years ago. Through the years we have become friends, and I have attended several of their panels. Rita knew that I was an actor and asked my husband and me to be in several of her audio dramas. They were such fun to do. Destiny unfolded and here I am.

Writing and having it published was a childhood dream. I am thrilled to be working with the Roost!



JPD: You seem to especially enjoy poetry.

SC: It is such a beautiful artform. The word pictures flow across the pages like watercolors. My mother bought me a book when I was bedridden, a child's book of poetry. I had her read from it endlessly. As I grew, I wrote and read a lot of poetry and competed in poetry/prose competitions in high school and college. Before transferring to a college that didn't have a speech team, I won the Bronze in State for poetry. It's in my blood.

JPD: Of what creative work are you most proud?

SC: Death Ward," which was published in the Roost.

JPD: Who do you look up to as an author and why?

SC: Edgar Allen Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Dr. Seuss. They all speak to my soul. Light and dark, yin and yang coupled with mystery and adventure. Edgar Allen Poe's writing is beautifully dark and haunting. Such a tortured soul, with a beautifully macabre mind. Delicious to read. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is just brilliant. Dr. Seuss was such an amazing man. His writing helped millions of children read and instilled a love of poetry in many people of all ages.

JPD: What does your creative process look like on a daily basis?

SC: I wake up, face the day, and if I need to write, I do. Generally, there is a stimulus, but not always. Fragments of dreams often find their way into my poetry.

JPD: What are your hopes and dreams for 2022?

SC: I would like to keep writing for the Roost, finish a book of poetry, and perhaps write a sequel to Quigley's Quest. It's important for me that children and adults learn about Assistance Dogs.

JPD: How can others support you?

SC: They can support me by reading my work. If they feel it is competition worthy, I would love to see students weave one of my poems into their competition piece. If they do, please contact me and let me know.



JPD: If you could give a word of advice to aspiring creators what would it be?

SC: Write. Do not be afraid of failure. If you hold back the words and don't share your writing, you have already failed. Read, explore, digest the works of others. It will fuel your passion.

Sue, thank you for sharing this slice of your life with me. God kept you with us all for a reason. Many blessings and beautiful poems are to come!

“Never underestimate the power of dreams and the influence of the human spirit. We are all the same in this notion: The potential for greatness lives within each of us.”

– Wilma Rudolph





He who marvels at the beauty of the world in summer
will find equal cause for wonder and admiration in winter.

- John Burroughs

Wonder is an important part of what makes us human. At the same time an idea and an action, wonder even qualifies as an emotion!

While it isn't so much a tangible thing that you can hold in your hands, it is something that you can see and experience every day in every season.

The same man in two seasons is experiencing wonder and beauty in both. In summer he looks up toward the leaves in the tree, the far-off grassy hills, and the shining sun in the sky. The same man in winter appreciates all the beauty that winter has to offer: snow-covered peaks and valleys and the brilliant sun as it sets. The tree connects these experiences and the seasons themselves.

- Carrie Huberts

Silent Danger

Mark Blickley

It was starting again. His father slammed the bedroom door so hard Nicholas could feel the vibrations traveling down the hallway, searching for him. He jumped off the kitchen chair.

Nicholas knew those vibrations. Like lightning, they were attracted to metal, and it didn't take a genius to know that the new kitchen set his mother recently bought had chairs with aluminum legs.

After the vibrations wobbled the chair, the yelling began. His mother, Lucille, and his father, Charlie, were now locked in their bedroom.

Nicholas liked living in the city but when the yelling started, he always wished he was living in the country. It wasn't the trees or grass or fresh air Nicholas longed for, it was a house. A big house far enough away from his neighbors so his parents' yelling couldn't be heard. Everyone in the building could hear their screaming and the next day at school Nicholas would get teased about it.

No one called Nicholas by his given name, not even his parents. His father was always asking, "Hey, Nick, how's it going?" Nicholas would answer, "Things are going swell and my name's Nicholas, not Nick." That's when his mother would laugh and say, "Lighten up, Nicky."

The first time Nicholas realized he hated the name Nick was one morning at the breakfast table. Nicholas was busy scooping out raisins with his spoon when his father burst into the kitchen.

He had his hand on his throat and blood was seeping through his fingers.

Lucille jumped up from the table. "My God, Charlie, what did you do to yourself?"

"I didn't do anything! It's these cheap razors you buy. Even when I use a fresh blade, I nick myself." Charlie pulled his hand away so his wife and son could admire his wound. The sight was so ugly that Nicholas' cereal stopped tasting sweet. He pushed it aside.

"If you stop buying such expensive liquor, I might be able to spend more on razor blades!" shouted Lucille.

"Since when have you complained about the quality of booze I bring into this apartment?"

Charlie shouted back.

“Since it’s given you the shakes so bad in the morning you cut your own throat!”

“Ha! You’re the cutthroat in this house!” snapped Charlie.

How dare you say that to me, especially in front of Nicky?!” cried Lucille. But she need not have worried. Nicholas was already running down the apartment stairs, heading for school.

As much as Nicholas disliked the name Nick, he hated Nicky even more. It rhymed with sticky, tricky, sickly, and much worse. More than once he was the subject of some other hot-shot fifth grader’s rap song.

“Hey you, little dicky Nicky,
Clean that fat ass so sticky
But it might be a little bit tricky
So buy a dog to quicky lick
You into not smelling so icky
But be careful its teeth don’t give you a hickey.”

No, you could keep Nick and Nicky, but Nicholas he liked. It had dignity. It was a name long enough that people had to make an effort to say it.

Nicholas tiptoed down the hallway as he made his way to his room. He didn’t want his parents to hear him. Despite all the loud arguing coming from their bedroom, he still had to be careful if he didn’t want to be detected. That’s because a strange thing happened whenever they started their shouting matches. Whoever was doing the screaming had the other’s complete attention. The two voices never overlapped, never collided. When one parent stopped yelling there’d always be a slight pause before the other parent started in again.

Image by Amy Bassin

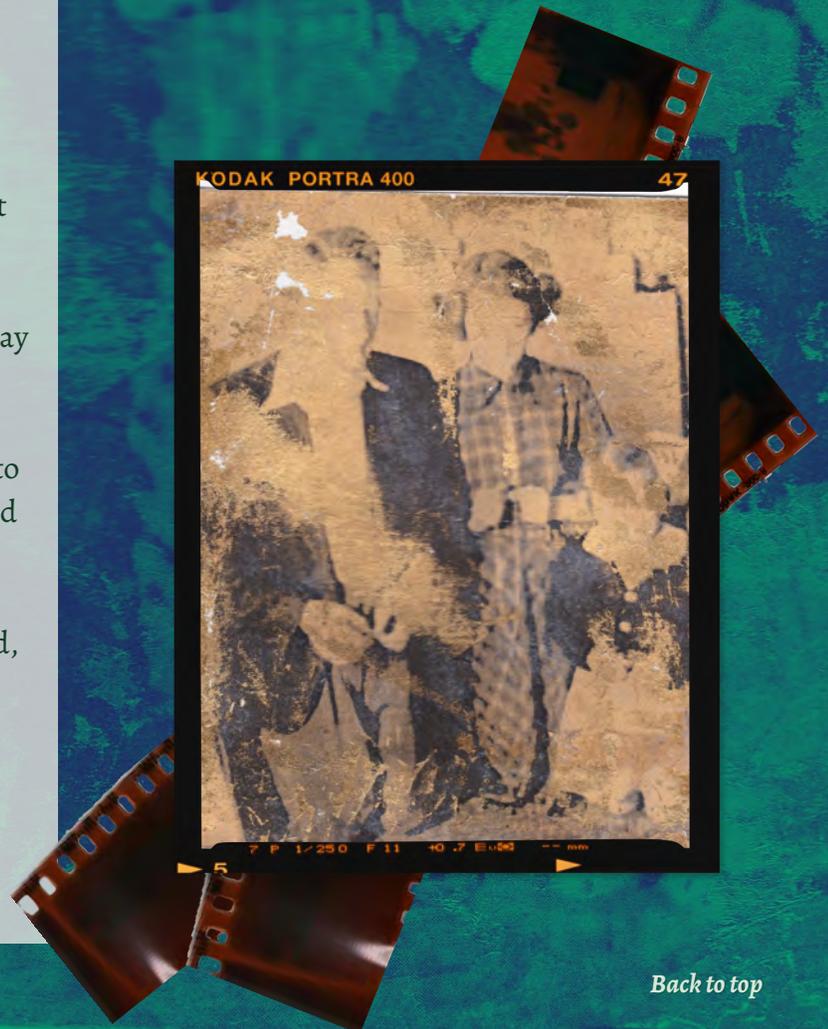
It was these pauses that were dangerous. As soon as they were aware of their son’s presence, they’d stop yelling long enough to ask Nicholas to judge which one of them was in the right. No matter what Nicholas said it always made things worse.

One night at the dinner table he asked his parents about their fighting style. “Mom, Dad, how come when you fight you never scream at the same time?”

His father straightened up in his chair. “It’s because we’re civilized people, Nick.”

His mother placed her spoon by her dish. “And we respect each other, Nicky. Your father and I respect what the other has to say, so we listen.”

“Oh,” said Nicholas as he dipped his spoon into a cup of chocolate pudding.



CREATION FALLS

CHELSIE KREITZMAN

At the falls, we take off our shoes,
Sink our bare feet into brown sugar sand.
Under rock ledges and parasols made of leaves
Everything feels clean and gauzy green
Like a dream or the Garden of Eden.
The boys trot off, their paths marked
By smudged footprints and cherubic laughter.
They jump and dig in the sand,
Splash in the shallow pools at the base of the waterfall.
I roll up my pant legs and wade closer,
Press my hands against the slippery black rocks,
Let the thrumming cool pummel my fingers.
The water feels alive, the way it should.

Later, driving back toward the city, it happens.
Our phones regain service; light up
With a hundred missed notifications.
The incessant chirp of another world resumes:
People scurrying like rats scavenging
For money, sex, image,
Stuffing eyes and hearts and stomachs
With dead things instead of wonder
Until they're plump and ripe for slaughter.
As they crouch fat and glassy-eyed
Behind their illuminated screens,
The serpent creeps in,
Fangs piercing, a drip of venom so slow
They don't even notice.

Meanwhile, beauty
Whispers into the bellowing cacophony,
But no one is paying attention.



Achtoonbaby.com

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DRAGONS OF ASH, PART II

We had reached the mansion of Uller Scrath.

“Show me your hands or I blow you new holes.”

I saw the man just after he said the words, drawing a bead over the rear veranda. Uller’s voice was a primal growl, eyes black and eyebrows drawn. He wore a scarf beneath his grizzled chin and a coat of scuffed and torn black leather.

I put my shotgun down and held up my hands. Hurli knocked his gun over and shot his hands high.

“Don’t move,” Uller said as he left the shadows, barrel of that rifle held straight as horizons. Heavy boots clomped down the veranda steps. “You, stop peeing your pants or I pull the trigger.”

Hurli didn’t look like he was actually urinating, only wobbling and breathing like a beached fish. I decided to chance it and speak, “You have a problem on your property, mister.”

“I do, do I?”

“Up that hill your greengrove’s bleeding out.”

He spat. “Ashes of gods, I own this land. Me. I control my own property. Who sent you up here? What do you want?”

“We came on our own.”

The man sneered. “Sha-Tiel, so you’re do-gooders meddling and prying? I suppose you’re priests of the Omnaq Way out to convert the Moerling Hills.”

“We were merely concerned, sir.”

“Yes, by Kararra, you should be concerned.” The man’s trigger-grip tightened. “I ought to blow you two up like bladder balloons.”

“It was a dragon,” blurted Hurli and the barrel shifted. Hurli gulped and his words ran together. “It was an ash...an ash dragon. I swear it landed right over there!”

Hurli pointed at the hill and I groaned. Now we were trespassers and loony to boot.

But Uller’s gaze darted between us then fixed on me.

“Come in,” he said gruffly and nodded at the house.

We stared.

“Come in!” he said louder, waving his gun. “Sha-Tiel, do I need to carry you myself?”

We hopped to, on the double, me after Hurli. The houndjacks were still waiting on the rim of the woods as Uller slammed his back door shut.

The veranda abutted a vaulted foyer. Uller propped his rifle up against the wall then rattled an oil lamp out of its sconce. A match burned bright and his lamp flared. The air tasted stale as day-old crust.

I thought Uller might leave the gun where it was, but instead he made us check our weapons at the door. Hurli’s chains of ammo got draped over a chair. My revolvers and shotgun found a home with his rifle in a pile on the seat.

“Knives,” Uller grunted with a look in his eyes like he hoped we’d object. I for one wasn’t keen on a strip-search and parted with my dagger and hunting knife. Hurli was likewise quickly disarmed.

Uller herded us into what had been the main dining room only now cobwebs clung to cabinets and corners. The walls held no pictures, the mantle no heirlooms. A dark chandelier brooded over the table for all of its candles had guttered out.

As the man of the house pulled up his chair, he stirred up dust beneath his boots. “What do you know about ash dragons?”

He skewered each of us with those slanted eyes, rifle crossed over his lap. “Yerrl-kin,” Hurli began. He gulped and restarted. “Yerrl-kin he thinks they’re not real but I saw one. It came out of the sky when the lightning hit. Last...last night. And now we’re here.”

“To slay the dragon and sell its heart.”

Hurli, stop talking. “We need to confirm it exists,” I said.

Uller sneered. “So much concern and so little time.”

“We would prefer to assist you in the endeavor, actually.” I made what I hoped was a winning smile. “This was the only route to your house.”

Uller did not smile back. “So you think I can’t take care of my property.”

“You have an ash dra—”

The barrel of the gun swung to Hurli’s chest.

“You saw it? Clearly? You know what it is?”

Hurli flinched with each new question. “I...” Sweat dripped off his nose. “Yes?”

Uller’s glare darkened. Hurli, you idiot!

“No,” Hurli corrected. “No, I swear! Kararra’s Truth, I never saw it.”

Something passed over Uller’s face. He appeared...disappointed? I couldn’t read it.

“Then why are you do-gooders wasting my time?”

Hurli said nothing. He had read my lips.

“Get up. Wait in the chamber down that hall. Second right.”

Hurli stayed where he was. “Yerrl-kin and I—”

“You. Just you. Touch nothing or I blow your balls off.”

Hurli looked at me plaintively, but I was out of ideas. I should have spoken up for him, said something, done more.

My friend’s shoulders slumped. When he rose to his feet I caught his fingers shaking. He left without a backward glance and I felt like I’d stabbed a knife in his gut.

A long moment passed while Uller studied me. “You’re cursed.”

Along with the gut-stab my heart started pounding. My hand went reflexively to the scar at my neck.

“So what was it like? To kill your dragon and be damned?”

I lowered my hand and didn't answer his question. I'd fled to Neren because they didn't know what that scar meant.

“They caught you red-handed at the dragon's corpse. Marked you and tied you up for momma.”

I needed to get out of here. Surely one of those cabinet drawers held cutlery.

“There are no ash dragons,” Uller said. “You said that with such sincere conviction. Believe it so blindly you'll swallow anything else. But everything happens for a reason, slayer. This is the night you atone for us both.”

Uller loosened his scarf, and I saw his scar.

* * *

I am not a man given to exceptional heroism. When fighting two demons, I'll take potshots at the little guy and avoid the raging fiend from hell. I keep a clear head and it's kept me alive, but when faced with that set of decaying stairs, I almost gambled it all away.

I'm still not sure why I didn't do it. There was a decent chance I could have taken Uller, even with his gun pointed at my spine. He hadn't seen me fight and I'd played it nice. Survive the gunshot and I could have disarmed him, shot him in the foot, run off with Hurli. We would have gone down firing to break through the houndjacks; they couldn't

cover everywhere and we could have made it through. And that would have been the end of ash dragons. It would have been the end, and the end for good.

At the top of the stairs I paused, Uller's lamp a flicker below. Before me stretched an empty hall. I opened the first door with less than usual caution and stomped around what turned out to be a vacant bedroom. Uller had not explained where the dragon was, and I was none too keen to find out. I waited ten heartbeats but didn't hear any steps. The man of the house wasn't coming upstairs.

I snuck to a window and flipped rusty latches. Grunting, I pulled the window up and didn't like what I saw.

It was a sheer drop of twenty-five feet to hard dirt, sills spaced too far apart to climb. Ten years back, I wouldn't have thought twice. Now I debated the odds of a broken leg.

Undeterred, I stripped sheets off the cot for a rope. Again, no footfalls from someone climbing the stairs, just too-close houndjacks and rustling stick-trees and the groan of the house as it swayed in the winds.

Someone was crying at the end of the hall.

I dropped the sheets. The cries were muffled but threaded with pain. It sounded like a girl and she sounded broken, and here I had just abandoned my friend.

I am not a hero given to chivalry. I avoid fighting duels for some princess's favor. I once saved a maiden and only caused her distress. I keep a cold heart and it's kept me alive.



And so I wondered what fool could be approaching that door, which idiot could be turning the knob, whose heartstrings strained as he cracked it open; first by a sliver and then enough to step in.

This bedroom was expansive, cavernous even, and filled with the memories the house had forgot. Faded tapestries illumined walls. Singed dusty rugs swam over floorboards. A painting of a housewife in oils presided over porcelain dishes, ivory carvings, and a gilded box.

She sat, half-turned, looking over her chair, skin so white it could have glowed, twined fingers thin and smooth and trembling, locks an aura of black-limned silver. She wore a rumpled gray silk dress and her eyes were as blue as mountain springs. She was sixteen, seventeen, in the flower of youth, and it was haunting how she looked at me; waiting as if she'd known I would come.

Her gaze flicked to the scar at my neck. Still waiting.

"You must be Enne."

"Yes."

Her whisper might have been a breeze. I bowed, feeling foolish. "Beg pardon if I've disturbed you. I'll be going."

Tears welled in her eyes. She daubed them with the sleeve of her dress then burst into sobs and covered her face. I crossed the room in a heartbeat and bent beside her. "Enne," I said. "I'm not here to hurt you."

I reached out a tentative hand for her shoulder.

She leaped up backward with a feral scream, slamming the writing desk, eyes wild.

"Get away!" she screamed. "Stay away! Stay away!"
I snapped my hand back. "Very sorry, miss. I..."

Her eyes drifted to what mine had seen. A chain trailed from a band at her ankle to a stake plunged into the floor.

"Who did this to you?"

Enne reset the toppled candles. Two of the three had guttered out. I started looking around for something that would work. Curtain rod, wooden. Lampstand, unwieldy.

"I'm sorry I scared you," Enne whispered.

In the middle of rifling through a chest I paused. This one was filled with childhood dolls. Decaying cloth and fraying fabrics; just the materials to bust out of jail.

I closed the lid. Enne looked so innocent re-lighting her candles, dipping the wicks in the one that still burned. My heart twisted. Uller was a monster to do this to his daughter.

"Do you eat in here?"

Enne nodded, still repairing her desk. "Where do you put your silverware?" She pointed at a cabinet.

"I scare everyone," she said. "They all go away and they never come back."

I found plates on one shelf and cups on another. I slid open a drawer and at last found the silverware; no steak knives but enough of these thin blades ought to work. I grabbed up a handful and tossed them on the floor. I perused several bookcases and picked the thickest volumes.

“What are you doing?” Enne said.

“I’m breaking you out.” I bent over her chain and dragged it up to the bed. She kept looking at me curiously as I wedged a knife in a link.

“I never go out.”

“And that’s wrong. Whoever did this deserves to be flogged. Whoever chained you up deserves to rot in hell!”

My words flustered her and she bit her lip. She watched me tinker a few moments then walked away. The chain was long enough I could still work the same link. I kept my ears peeled but couldn’t hear Uller coming.

Enne bent over her bedside table as I watched her out of the corner of my eye. She slipped long silk gloves on that merged with her sleeves. I jammed in two more knives, all the link could hold. I arranged the books and scowled at the bed. Four-poster largesse. At least it should be heavy enough.

About ready to lift, I paused as Enne approached. She set something on the bed.

A peach.

At my reaction, her face shadowed. “You don’t like it.”

“No, I…” I was at a loss for words. “Thank you,” I said and accepted the fruit. The peach’s skin felt velvety smooth.

Enne sat down on the rug across from me. I should have put the peach in a pocket, but she obviously expected me to eat it. She watched as I chewed, eyes piercing my own. “It’s good,” I said, after a bite, and it was—sweet and delicate, perfectly ripe. I chewed down to the seed feeling self-conscious.

Normally I would have flicked the seed off. But this was her room. I started to pocket it.

“I’ll take that,” Enne said. I offered it to her and our hands almost met.

We froze.

“I’m sorry,” I said and put it down on the rug. Enne glanced down at it, then back at me.

“You must think I’m so strange.”

“I don’t think that, Enne.”

She averted her gaze, balling up her gloves into little white fists. I turned back to the chain.

“You’re going to leave now,” she said to the floor.

“I’m breaking you out.”

“You asked me who did this.” She took a deep breath. “I was the one who did this. It was me.”

“He only told you that because he wants to keep you here.”

“No one told me. What’s your name?” she asked suddenly.

“Yerrl.”

“I’m dangerous, Yerrl. I can’t go out.”

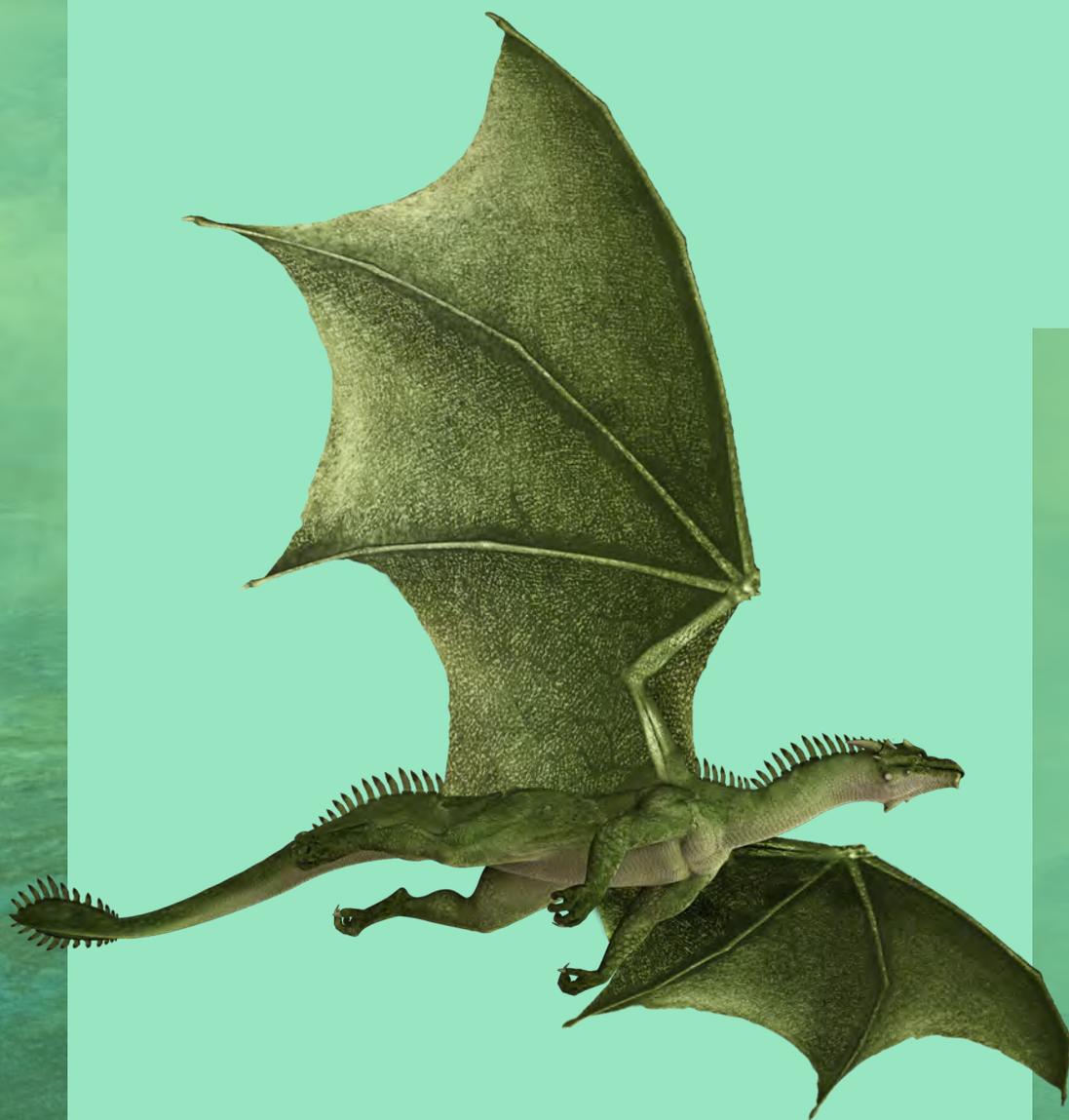
“Your father told you that and he lied. You’re a prisoner here and I’m setting you free.”

She looked at me, tears again glistening in those deep blue eyes. She slid off a glove and picked up the seed. She pressed it into a fist and closed her eyes.

Ash tilted off her palm when she opened her hand.

Footsteps.

To be continued...



A scenic landscape featuring a stone path that winds through a lush green field. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains, some of which are shrouded in mist or low clouds. The sky is overcast and grey. The overall atmosphere is serene and contemplative.

– T. S. Eliot

“We shall not cease from
exploration, and the end
of all our exploring will be
to arrive where we started
and know the place for
the first time.”

ANCIENT ROAD

Along this *camino*
uneven with the passage
of centuries, the
knowledge of how
to lay these stones
level, smooth lost

*to the trample
of Spanish hooves*

missing in parts, sunk
into the muddy earth
or washed down these mountains

quilted with fields
verdant with winter rains,
uneven with the ruins
of an ancestral city—

Yálape, its name torn
from the tongues
of Chachapoya
who dwelt, loved
and died in those
tambos

*by the trample
of Quechua troops*

adobe homes dissolving,
emeralds waves of crying
loros across the sun

The *camino* stones
worn smooth by the passage
of thousands of shod feet,
worn smooth by the passage
of a million unshod
feet

*of conquering forces
of conquered peoples*

mud imprinted with our
slipped steps, our refuse—
with hooves and dung of animals
strange from another world

*I hear the whinny of a
conquistador's horse...*

Lorraine
Caputo

A Poem for Two
Voices

THE ROAD TO PEĆ

LYNN WHITE

It was long before the war wreaked its destruction,
 long before the massacres stole so many lives
 long before Yugoslavia was broken
 that we two decided to hitchhike to Peć.
 Well, to hitchhike as far as Belgrade.
 You see, we knew the road
 from Skopje to Peć,
 knew it was impossible for hitch-hiking,
 had already explored its awesome hairpins,
 spent two days driving slowly,
 very slowly
 over its suspension-wrecking rocks and ruts.
 Had already gazed in alarm
 at the rusting corpses of dead buses
 scattered down the vertiginous hillsides.
 So we took the overnight train from Belgrade.
 Uncomfortable, but at least possible.

And then, at a party later on, we met someone
 who had achieved the impossible.
 His lift had dropped him
 near the beginning
 of the rocky road to Peć,
 but he had seen enough
 not to chance it further.
 So he clambered down
 onto the track made for donkeys
 and continued his journey on foot.
 There was a long way to go.

Two days later he came across a horse market.
 One old horse was unsold.
 It had a hollow back, he said
 and was coughing up green stuff.
 So laughing, they let him have it for fifty pence.
 He never rode it,
 but it carried his guitar
 and on its good days,
 his rucksack and tent.
 And so it was that two weeks later they arrived in Peć.
 He left the horse in a field and began to hitch
 along the now asphalted road.

Something seemed familiar about the approaching car
 that slowed and stopped, the driver was no stranger
 and greeted him with hugs and smiles.
 Yes, it was the same driver who two weeks ago
 had dropped him off at the beginning of the rocky road.
 So together they resumed their journey for a while
 With new stories to tell...

Poetry

SHADOW
AND
WHISPER

Emily MacKenzie

For as long as he could remember, it had been present at the back of his thoughts.

A small whisper.

Barely even noticeable, hardly even there. A 'smudge-on-the-corner-of-your-glasses-don't-notice-it anymore' sort of situation.

Just another part of day-to-day life.

It wasn't until his sister said something that he realised it wasn't normal.

"Sarah?" He had asked tentatively, only about ten or eleven years old at the time. "What does the Whisper tell you?"

"When people are whispering," she answered, tone solemn in her position as caretaker at seventeen, "It usually means that they're telling you a secret. Only snitches share other people's secrets." She leant down close, commanding his full attention. "Is someone telling you secrets?"

He wrinkled his forehead. "I – I don't know."

Sarah pursed her lips and stayed silent for a moment, watching him, thinking. "Is it something that will hurt anyone? Make someone mad?"

"No, of course not!" He exclaimed, "Sarah, I'm not talking about people, I'm talking about the Whisper – I don't know what you call it, but—" He waved his hand in the air, gesturing to his head, "You know."

"Buddy, I have no clue what you're talking about." She lowered her voice until it was barely audible, and her brother leaned forward to be able to understand her. "A whisper is like this," she demonstrated.

"I know that!" He rolled his eyes. "Never mind."

Frowning, Sarah gave him one last look before returning to her book. "Is everything okay?" She asked absentmindedly, not wanting to make him feel self-conscious.

"Yeah, everything's fine. Forget about it."

She nodded, eyes glued to the page. Still, she resolved to keep a closer eye on him until their mum got back.

For as long as she could remember, it had been present at the back of her thoughts.

A slight shadow.

Barely even noticeable, hardly even there. A ‘ticking of the clock-don’t-notice-it-anymore’ sort of situation.

Just another part of day-to-day life.

It was comforting to her in the darkest moments when she didn’t know what was going to happen. At the age of seven or eight —she’d lost track of time for a while there— her whole family had been stolen from their living room while a casserole baked in the oven. She’d been first torn from her father’s arms, then transported for ages in the dark to be finally placed in a small room with no windows.

Food arrived twice daily through a one way holo-field in the door. Sometimes they’d let her walk around the complex, hallway upon hallway full of doors identical to hers and no way to see the world outside.

Day after day she’d asked to see her father. She’d been so young, how could she have understood what was happening? At the beginning, her captors made excuses. Then they moved on to threats. When they began ignoring her, she learned to stop asking.

She was only allowed to talk to the people they brought to see her and all they ever wanted to talk about was the written tests they gave her. Listen and test or read and test. Test after test, worse than school had been – and she remembered that all too well. She might still have been learning, in this strange complex with no sunlight, but it wasn’t fun anymore.

It was in those darkest moments, ironically, when the shadow in the back of her mind offered the most comfort. It held a warm and comforting presence – a beautiful, quiet friend who listened. Like somehow when the shadow was with her she was stronger, protected, even safe.

Logically she knew that safety was relative and that the comfort offered by the shadow existed only in her mind.

Yet she clung to it; desperately, like a tired man grasping caffeine.

She was eleven years old at the most, after all – you could forgive her need of comfort from time to time.

He couldn’t remember the first time he’d become aware of the whisper existing– to him it simply was. Most people couldn’t remember the first time they heard or smelled, or felt. In a way, his sense of the whisper was similar to that. He did remember, however, the first time he spoke back.

“Thanks, Whisper,” he’d instinctually replied to a small helpful comment about maths, just as he would have out loud.

“Anytime, Shadow.”

He smiled.

A solar system or two away, Whisper smiled too.

Maybe her Shadow did have a voice after all.

Their friendship developed, like many do, through a shared secret and experience that no one else could fathom. Much like nearly getting caught sneaking into the skate park after it had closed, being on the same football team for years, or sharing and gossiping over the same set of books, Shadow and Whisper were the only two people who could possibly understand what it was like to be them.

“Shadow,” Whisper called out, a frantic edge to her tone. “Shadow they’re moving me again.”

Shadow grimaced and rolled out of bed, then flicked up his holographic pin board from the receiver around his wrist. Ever since Whisper had first let slip that she was being held captive, and Shadow had sorted that she was light-years away, he’d structured his life around finding her– every choice he made mattered. Near the very beginning he’d asked Whisper to let him know whenever they moved her, and began to build the foundation of his information that would only grow through his tenacity.

Shadow had started out by cross referencing her movements with pretty much anything in hopes of finding some sort of pattern. When choosing a university major he’d specifically chosen one that allowed him into some close knit circles. He cultivated both legal and illegal channels to keep him in the loop and up to date, and as much as Whisper worried about his safety at times, she wasn’t in much of a position to stop him.

“More likely the first than the second. You know that.” He poured optimism into his words like an amateur baker over-poured sugar. “Varaax doesn’t have much pull on the intergalactic stage. Ships outside of their territorial space would have been reported. They’re not well liked.”

“No wonder why.” There was a bitter edge to her words and faintly he could hear an echo of doors slamming and orders being barked.

When he’d discovered that Whisper wasn’t on earth, or even from earth, that had been his first real breakthrough. His first major breakthrough and first dose of reality.

He’d been thirteen at the time. How could he have hoped to pull off a rescue mission on another planet? He had no funds, no experience, no way of chartering a passage – let alone chartering a ship to take him into potentially dangerous territory.

His head had not been a fun place to be just then, and he re-apologised to Whisper from time to time even years later.

The next bullet was when they'd riddled out that she was being kept in orbit—

The bastards.

“My sister wants in,” he announced suddenly, a desperate distraction from the bleakness of this topic for the both of them

It worked. *“On this? No way. Not being able to stop you from taking risks is bad enough. I can't talk to her, it would be even worse. No.”*

“Whisper, she could be a big help.” He wove his words with trust, and a confidence that he never truly believed could exist. All that mattered was that Whisper believed.

“How on earth could she help? I'm sorry. I know you love her but she knows less about this than we do.”

This required some careful treading. *“Actually...”* He grimaced and thanked whatever cosmic entity was out there that Whisper couldn't see his face. *“She's been digging into our mum's disappearance—”*

“Your mum – she was military.” It wasn't a question but a statement. People like Whisper didn't forget.

“Some of the contacts I have are only possible because of her; hold your judgement.” There was a reason he'd never told her that detail before – she was stubborn when she thought she was right. Whisper was also brilliant, which meant that she was rarely wrong, which in the end meant ideological conversations were hard to moderate. She hardly ever changed her mind.

“Terra's military, I'll grant you, has a better reputation than ours.” It was the closest thing to a concession he was going to get. It was also an understatement. Varaax's military was corrupt at best.

“This is an odd time for them to be on the move, isn't it? I don't remember having to wake you up before, we've been lucky until now I guess—” Whisper rambled to ease her nerves, as she often did, and Shadow's mind, as it was prone to do, found itself stuck in a dark loop.

The holo-board on his wrist picked up on his morbid thoughts and helpfully suggested a few articles on the subject for him. When he didn't immediately respond, it took the opportunity to read one out for him.

“Varaax, one of three life sustaining planets circling the star Aetolia. Commonly referred to as the Imprisoned Planet, Varaax is controlled by four individual factions which rule their population bases primarily through mass indentured servitude and prison labour. Varaax has few commodities with which to trade with other planets.

Its number one resource remains their high ratio of individuals with a near perfect memory (see: Everich). Often these individuals are taken from their homes by the faction militias and brought to training encampments to be conditioned or encrypted before being sold as equipment to interested parties—

“Stop.”

He didn't know which was shaking more as he halted the readout – his voice or his hand. It took a minute before he could read any of the information suspended in the air.

He knew everything it had told him already, of course, and had since Whisper first heard the term ‘Everich’ and passed it on to him. Since he'd first asked if she was from Varaax and to which she'd proudly replied, “Of course.”

He knew all of that and more.

That the factions required all Everich to register.

That any Everich that wasn't registered risked the death of their entire family unit.

That the families were responsible for proving that the Everich were worth more at work on the planet than they were should they be sold. Then when the families didn't meet the purposefully rising quotas, it was then their own fault their child was taken away.

That although no one would admit it, nearly every planet with a space presence in their known universe had at least one Everich under its employ. Some paid them. Others didn't. But they all left Varaax alone to continue its atrocities.

“Shadow?”

“Yeah?”

“You didn't answer my question.”

Question? What—

Shit. He'd not been paying attention. She needed him more than ever and here he was daydreaming.

“Sorry. Missed it.”

“Hell of a time to get distracted.” There was an edge of annoyance to her tone. “I asked what does your mum's disappearance have to do with what's happening to me?”

“Nothing directly. Her unit were on the edge of Varaax space when they vanished.”

“Shit. I'm sorry.”

In the years since she'd first been taken, Whisper had figured out a great deal about her lovely homeworld. Disillusionment had come quickly.

"Thanks. What it means is that my sister has tracked nearly every ship in and out of their space for a long time, hoping to find our mum onboard as a prisoner. If I fill her in, she might see something I've missed."

"I thought you said your mum was gone?"

"That's what her CO said when he took us into military care. Officially she's listed as 'Missing in Action'."

"So the military lied to you, and you still trust them."

"Whisper, it's not that simple. We were kids."

She sent back a wave of annoyance.

"She would be useful."

Shadow, no. I said no."

"But—"

"End of conversation. I won't let you lose your mum and your sister to my planet."

He brought a hand up and rubbed his face. When she said things like that, it brought everything into perspective. He didn't want to lose his sister. "All—"

"—aaaaaaAH—UMFF!" Whisper mentally shrieked, cutting off whatever it was he was about to say, and instantly Shadow's anxiety skyrocketed.

"Whisper?! Whisper!" He yelled. Each moment that passed, each call unanswered, his heart beat a little more staccato.

Time was agony.

"Whisper! Please, say something!"

Beats faded into nothing

"Please?"

...

"Hey. Sorry. I'm here. I'm fine." Whisper's voice returned in a rush to reassure him. "The sudden stop kinda threw me across the room. They must have turned the dampeners off to run under the radar."

"I was —"

"I know."

Shadow took a hesitant breath, and released it. He stood and checked the timer, then the map again. In need of something to keep his mind busy, he calculated a radius of maximum distance they could have traveled given his theorised original position and the speed threshold they would need to maintain while considering the safety of the crew when stopping with minimal or no dampeners...

"Right." He refocused. "If you are where I believe, I could be there in a week, give or take."

"And if you're wrong?" she worried.

"I—"

"It's too risky."

"You always say that."

"And I'm always right. Look, it's probably just a move to keep us safe, out of the clutches of another faction. I'm fine and I'll be fine until those odds you keep running in your head are better than whatever percentage they're at now."

"Twenty-two," he replied sheepishly.

"Yeah. You're gonna need a lot better odds than that."

"I'm worried about you."

'I'm worried how little time I have left to get you out' went unsaid. She knew.

"Well, that's a waste of energy. You've got better things to be doing."

"Whisper," he scolded, voice soft. "Don't say things like that—"

"I've held them off this long, I can go a bit longer. I can give you enough time to figure it out."

"Stay safe. Don't do anything risky."

If Shadow ever learnt how bad things had gotten, she wouldn't be able to stop him.

But the rescue he wanted to mount? It was too dangerous. He was going to get himself killed.

It was selfish but then who would she talk to? From her point of view, if she made it out of this training facility the usual way, she might be out of options, but she would still have him to talk to through her years of servitude.

And maybe they'd eventually be able to show each other images or memories.

When they'd first started communicating it had been a simple presence, which had evolved into speech, emotions, feelings, and lately, some sounds from their own environment.

More than anything though, she needed him around to keep her sane. His mental companionship was some days the singular reason she was able to continue. To carry on.

If he died trying to save her – well, it wasn't an option.

She wanted to see the fields and mountains of earth. She wanted to see the lunar earthrise and cruise around the rainbow rings of Eime.

She couldn't have that if he got himself killed beforehand. So, call her self-centred but it seemed like her own rescue was something she should get a say in. She just had to buy him a little more time. Had she been too hasty in forbidding the involvement of his sister?

No, no. It didn't matter if Sarah's involvement could help her, the risk to Shadow was too much. He still had a life, a planet, a family that loved and looked out for him.

She would never put that at risk.

Then, not nearly long enough later, time ran out.

TANG TANG TANG

Metallic sounds of a fist banging on her door gave her warning. She stood, arms back, head down, and waited.

The door scraped along rivets in the concrete that it had worn down long ago. The man in the shadowed frame nodded at her once, then turned and walked away. She followed.

The doors taunted her once more as they trekked along the bleak corridor. Rectangles of black in grey metalwork, featureless in all ways, draining of optimism and hope. How many of them concealed exits? How many of them concealed more people like her?

A chill ran through her as a cold breeze blew by.

"Air units are back online, Sir." One of the guards walking with them announced the information, as though her warden couldn't figure it out for himself.

He nodded, then stopped and opened an unremarkable door. The hinges swung at the slightest touch.

She followed him without a word.

As a child, she'd tried to fight back.

Physical fighting, sometimes, breaking things and screaming, others, but always running and twisting every door handle she could get her hands on. As time passed she'd learnt there was a better way to rebel. Silently.

Each time there was a check on the rooms, hers was perfection. She offered no complaints or resistance, hadn't tried to escape since she was thirteen, and acted the absolutely broken and submissive subject that they had been molding her into since they first brought her here almost ten years ago. The psychological torture would have worked on others, it would have worked on her – but she had Shadow.

She played the ideal soldier and fought back in other ways. She was perfectly conditioned, but inept, and they were growing weary of her.

"You want me to what?!" She had asked, stunned when he'd approached her with the idea.

Shadow had a plan to keep her in the space complex as long as possible, because everyone knew that as hard as they were to get into, orbital stations were still always the easiest piece of any network to get away from clean.

"Pretend to get hurt. Head injury. Brain recovery is hard to predict. Then, start to forget."

"I can't forget, You know that."

"I do. They don't."

It worked. For almost seven years she'd been kept in orbit because of 'delayed development'.

Now she sat demurely on the chair across from her warden and offered him the standard greeting. "How may I offer my services?"

He didn't reply, but sat and watched.

She kept her face blank and stared right back.

A spike of alarm at the impulsive man's calm behaviour shot out towards Shadow, unintentionally. She couldn't help it, reaching out to him for comfort was instinct.

"Whisper?" He replied almost immediately, "What's wrong?"

She tried to clamp her emotions in place. *"Nothing. Don't worry about it."*

"Wrong answer. I'm always going to worry."

"I'll handle it."

"Whisper, what—"

At some unseen signal, her warden stood and nodded.

Immediately bracelets slammed down over her hands, and Whisper's emotional control flew to the wind.

"Shadow." She knew he could feel her terror, and hated herself for her weakness, but there was no time to apologise now.

"What's going on?!"

"Shadow, I need to say something."

"Whisper, I'm coming."

"I need to say thank you." She felt his own anxiety peak at her comment. "I didn't say that enough. For being there."

There was a prick at the side of her neck. She didn't even bother to look at who had done the deed, she had little enough time and energy in the bank and more important things to spend them on.

"Fight it!" There was more than a little desperation in his request as her own vision started to grey. "Adrenaline can do amazing things! Fight it. You're strong enough. I know you can."

Whisper took a breath to moderate her own emotions, one last time, just for him. It took nearly everything she had to keep her voice steady. "Not today. Fighting it would tell them I'm on to them. If I fight it, they'll know it was all an act. If I wake up, I'll need that ace up my sleeve."

"If?" she felt him hold back a cry of anguish. "Whisper—"

She interrupted whatever it was he was going to say. There wasn't time to listen.

"Live well, Shadow."

Her other senses dimmed away over the next few moments, but a peripheral awareness of Shadow and his panic stayed with her for minutes. It remained a warm shadow at the back of her mind longer than it had the right to, and she took last comfort in it's simple presence.

Then the shadow ceased to be.

Sarah had gotten home early from work to the abode she and her brother shared. Even though he was technically old enough that she wasn't his guardian anymore, this was still their home.

Exams were coming up at Uni, so walking through the door she more than expected a snappy stressed teenager.

What she wasn't expecting was a desperate cry of pain from his room.

Bags and keys clattered to the floor as she ran.

"Whoa—" Sarah poked her head into his room. "What happened? You okay?"

Her little brother, the kid she'd basically raised from the age of ten, looked up at her. Tears flowed freely, and Sarah didn't like the way his eyes lacked focus. She sat down on the bed next to him.

"Oh, bud, c'mere." She pulled him into a hug. "You're not hurt, are you?" Her eyes scanned the scene automatically, giving him a quick once over for blood or tenderly held limbs even though she knew she wouldn't find anything. His eyes settled on nothing, his fists clenched, as though he couldn't handle the pain coming from inside his own mind, and struggled against it. The only other time she'd seen him in a state like this was when they'd lost their mother. She kept her tone soft, not wanting to add to whatever was causing so much grief. "What's happened?"

"Whisper, she—" he shook his head. "I need to go get her."

Sarah frowned. "Go get who?"

"Whisper."

"Go get who?" she whispered.

He looked at her like she'd asked the dumbest question.

"Whisper." He repeated slowly. "They've found out, and I'm not going to have another chance, because even if they don't kill her it will be so much harder and it's risky but I need to try, Sarah, I need to try."

He grabbed her hands as he finished his long declaration, shaking them lightly as though he was pleading with her, begging; as though he still needed her permission.

Sarah was playing a little bit of catch-up, but was up quick enough on her feet. He needed her help. "Whisper is... a person?"

He nodded, relieved she'd made that connection, and stood up. He reached into the back of his closet and grabbed a bag before filling it with seemingly whatever his hands first touched.

"And she's in trouble." Sarah continued.

He nodded again as he packed

"How do you know?"

"She told me. She—" he swallowed thickly. "I can't lose her, Sarah."

"Well, we can alert the authorities."

Her brother was already shaking his head vehemently. "She's not here."

"Not here. As in a different country? Across the ocean?"

"Varaax," he whispered, then looked up to her, face split between determination and fear.

Varaax.

What had he gotten himself into?

Sarah sighed internally. Alright. If they were going to do this, they were going to do it right. She grabbed the bag he'd just finished stuffing, grabbed his hand, and dragged them both to her own room. Reaching up, she retrieved a pre-prepared travel bag from a high shelf.

"If she's in danger on Varaax, then we need to get going quickly. It's not a short trip, even with a fast ship."

His eyes widened, and he nodded hurriedly, then reached into his pocket. "I've been saving up."

Several small squares tumbled to the floor, and she stared at him for a long moment. Where on earth had he gotten that much cash? Rolling her eyes she tossed him his bag, swung hers over her shoulder, and smirked. "C'mmon, Jerk. We've got a long way to go, and you've got a lot of explaining to do."

"Whisper?" He called out.

Again.

Like he had every hour, on the hour, for the past three days.

At the front of the ship, Sarah checked on their speed and coordinates, then adjusted the atmospheric controls to dim the lights for the evening.

She winked at him, then slipped into a bunk and rolled over to grab some sleep before they arrived.

While true Sarah was a little miffed that he had been keeping secrets from her, she had no right to judge, considering the level of secrets she'd been keeping from him.

Somehow not only did she have almost immediate access to a near top of the line ship, but she also knew how to fly it, had brought a crew of her mates along, and so far they hadn't had to pay a single thing- his credits sat awkwardly in his pocket.

If he hadn't been in awe of Sarah before, he certainly was now. She certainly wasn't a Dignitaries' aid, that was for sure.

Shadow looked out one of the windows to the featureless void that was space as you flew at high speeds, (even relatively close suns passed too fast to even register on the human retina) and thought about the plan as they'd set it.

Between his data and Sarah's (he remembered with a sliver of pride her impressed look at his gathered intel), they'd actually been able to solidly pinpoint the moving station that Whisper was most likely being held on (He gave it about 87 percent). Time was on their side, for once, for as much as the Factions might want to dispose of Whisper, they wouldn't be able to do anything until two days from then when they could travel to the surface of Varaax. Local customs, Sarah had explained.

Neither he nor Whisper had known anything about that.

So there were at least two more days that Whisper was guaranteed to both be on the station, and alive.

He worried about Whisper's lack of response but he also trusted his sister's intentions; she wouldn't give him false hope. There was still a chance this could work. He set another timer on his wrist and shut his eyes.

"Please, Whisper. Give me a sign that you're alright. That you can hear me. Please. We're coming, I promise, We're on our way and we're going to get you out."

Silence.

He sighed and tried uneasily for sleep.

Sarah's little brother had been talking to someone in his mind for as long as he could remember, and he hadn't ever told her- and somehow Sarah wished that was the strangest part of the last few days. As it was, he'd also somehow been able to get his hands on data that she didn't even have access to – and she hadn't thought that was possible.

They'd been waiting for an opportunity like this for months. Getting someone on the inside of Varaax politics was nearly impossible, for as willing as they were to sell their own to others, they were otherwise isolationist by nature.

Now, thanks to her brother and a freak incident of nature, not only did they have intel from the inside, but a relatively detailed idea of what they would face in terms of resistance.

Not to mention if they succeeded, the militia maybe even earn an Everich who would be willing to work with them. They'd certainly never sink so low as to buy one.

Whisper hadn't had this bad of a headache in a long time.

Shadow must have been trying to get her attention for a while, she surmised from the steady throb, and as much as she wanted to know what was happening, there were bigger things to handle right now. Things he didn't need to "worry about."

Something he had said before she passed out had been ruminating in her mind and she couldn't get the idea unstuck. This was going to be her last chance. No more waiting, no more playing for time. If she was going to get out of here, she had to do it now.

She stood up and looked at her wrists, mercifully free of restraints. They obviously hadn't considered that she would wake up.

TANG TANG TANG

On the other hand, they likely didn't care. They certainly wouldn't have knocked if they hadn't expected her to be awake to hear, and to fear.

That was all the time she had. A split second decision; it was now or never. *What was her best option for survival?*

The door swung open.

"Go!"

She didn't think. She reacted. She went.

And... *Go!* Shadow thought as he and Sarah timed their way meticulously past another Varaax guard. Her friends were spread out all over the station, looking for anything useful and keeping an eye out for the target of their rescue. Safely around the corner and out of sight, they paused for a breath. He pulled up the station specs that he'd downloaded with a quick hack and continued towards where he hoped Whisper would be.

There was a grunt, followed by a snarl and the tell tale twack of flesh hitting flesh from around the corner in front of them. Had one of Sarah's people beaten them to their

destination??

"*Whisper I'm coming!*" he shot off, and impatiently looked over to his sister. Hands up so he could see, Sarah signed fluidly as soon as she caught his eye:

'Are you ready to fight?'

He nodded.

They ran. There were three individuals involved in the scuffle as they skidded into sight- two in standard guard uniforms, and another in a sleek blue outfit. Had the blue girl been on the ship coming here with them? He honestly couldn't remember, he hadn't been paying that much attention.

Shadow scanned the room as he'd been taught to do in hand-to-hand training all his life, and settled on cornering the larger of the guards fighting with Sarah's blue friend and leaving Sarah on her own with the other. He settled beside the girl in blue for a moment, then locked eyes with the Security guard and thrust at the guard's nose with a palm strike.

Instinctually, the guard yanked his head back and stumbled slightly, not expecting an attack so straightforward. Shadow pressed his advantage and aimed another series of jabs to distract the guard, simultaneously steering him further away from his companion.

There. That should give Sarah room to work.

"Here," Shadow called out and tossed his baton to the girl in blue. "*Back of the head.*"

"*Couldn't happen to anyone nicer,*" she smirked and swung.

The guard sandwiched between them didn't stand a chance and in less than a minute he was unconscious on the floor, a massive welt behind his ear.

Shadow turned to see Sarah tying up her guard.

"*The room should hold them,*" the girl said, and he nodded.

"*Good idea.*" Together they picked up the unconscious man and tossed him in, then looked expectantly at Sarah, who, after a moment, followed suit.

"I'll say one thing." Sarah offered, "It's freaky and a little unnerving, but its handy."

"What are you talking about?" He frowned.

"The two of you," she explained. "Now that's definitely something the organization could make good use of."

“Sarah, I presume?”

The girl asked in the background, her voice an afterthought as Shadow continued trying to make sense of his sister’s words.

Sarah nodded and smiled, holding a finger up to her lips and winking. “Shall we get you out of this place?”

“The sooner the better.”

Wait. That voice. Everything clicked. The reason the Security guard had fallen to their tactic so quickly. The reason Sarah had been confused for a moment about the disposal of the Security Guards. What his sister had said about their teamwork...

Sarah hadn’t heard what they’d said, which could mean only one thing—

“Whisper?” he asked tentatively, barely daring to hope.

“Hey, Shadow,” she smiled, voice warm and full of life. “You know, I told you not to come. I told him not to come,” she re-directed the statement to Sarah, “and I definitely told him not to involve you.”

“Well I’m glad he did,” Sarah smirked as she led the way back to where their ship was docked, already checking in with the two or three others via her bracelet. “You’d have both been screwed without me.”

Whisper grimaced. “I—“

“I know, hun.” Sarah nodded in understanding, and I appreciate it. But you were in danger and he can get tunnel vision when he’s worried.”

Smiling faintly, Whisper nodded. “Yeah, I guess he can. Did he ever tell you about the wolf—?”

“Tell me? No need, I saw it! You might have heard all about it, but I had to bear witness to it. The place was plastered with flyers and posters!”

They both chuckled and Shadow blushed bright red as he remembered the incident that both girls spoke about with humour. “Can we— we’re in the middle of a prison break and you want to talk about my awful choices as a child? Could we— not?”

Sarah shrugged, a smile pulling up the corners of her mouth, but nodded and refocused, “fair point.” She mouthed the word ‘later’ to Whisper with a wink, and Whisper nodded in agreement. Sarah started away, “Let’s get out of here.”

“What about the other Everich on the station?”

Sarah frowned. “Others? There’s no one else here.”

Whisper frowned for a moment. “Are you sure?”

Nodding, Sarah gave her a soft look. “We encountered minimal security and Varaax presence on board or outside. They’re here for you. Why – did there used to be more?”

“I – I don’t know.”

Her desolate tone prompted Shadow to reach forward and grab Whisper’s hand.

“I always dreaded, but also hoped that there were more.” She started slowly in their way. “I didn’t want there to be other people trapped, but I also hated the idea of being alone.” Whisper paused and glanced over at him, only to look away just as quickly. “Shadow, how could I not even know if there were ever other people here?” She shuddered. “I’m a horrible person.”

“You’re not. We’ll figure it out.”

She looked at him and nodded. “We’ll figure it out.”

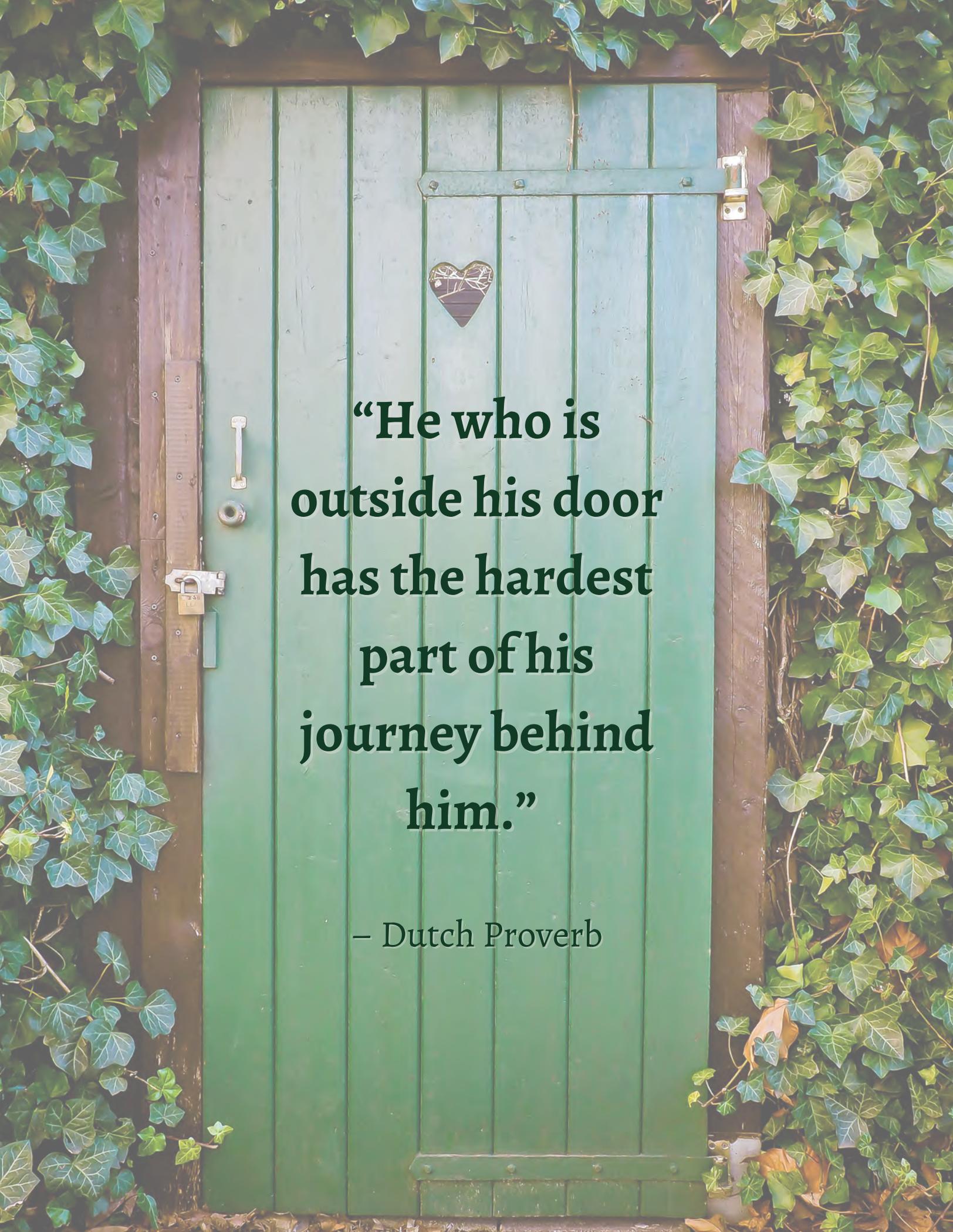
“For now, I want to know. Now that you’re getting out of here, what is the first thing you want to see?”

“That’s a dumb question.”

“Really? I know you fairly well and I have no clue what you’re going to say.”

“Earth of course.” She said aloud. “I want to explore Earth. We’ll get to everything else later.”

He squeezed her hand. “That sounds good.”

A green wooden door with a heart-shaped metal ornament and a padlock, surrounded by ivy.

**“He who is
outside his door
has the hardest
part of his
journey behind
him.”**

– Dutch Proverb

Forgiveness

Chelsie Kreitzman

POETRY

Forgiveness is a process, or so my therapist tells me
When I grow frustrated with my inability to do it now,
Check it off my to-do list and move on.
I think about the cost of a failed marriage,
Imagining the wasted time:
A decade's worth of unspooled yarn
Passing through the loom of the Three Fates,
For example.

Time is quantitative—the easiest part to consider.
Betrayal, on the other hand,
Overflows all my measuring cups and
Shatters the bathroom scale with its enormity.

I saw a white pine growing on the edge of a cliff,
At some point having been turned violently sideways,
Uprooted by the sliding and crumbling of dirt.
The tree, though bent, was thriving.
In infinitesimal movements,
Its roots had deepened, clinging to healthy soil,
Releasing its grasp of the eroded debris,
Twisting to change its course of growth,
Stretching up toward the light.

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Eve Reserved

Tiffany Lindfield

He was a tall sip of cold water with dark eyes and messy black curls. He clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth like a bird claiming the morning. He didn't walk, but strutted, and curtsayed with a wide grin.

"Top of the morning to you fine people," he demanded of the people gathered in the general store. Two women buying linen moved out of the way, as he laid a box – or suitcase – on the counter. The owner of the store, an elder woman, soaked in the charm of the man. "Well, yes sir. Good morning. How can I help you?"

He scanned their faces, raised his eyebrows high, and young women tried to hide their blushing cheeks. "It ain't what you have for me but what I have for you."

"Well, what do ya got, sir?"

"Well, call me Truth, because that's what I got for you." The man scanned their faces again. "I got it for everybody and anybody that wants it."

He said all this as they looked on. He opened the case he had laid on the counter. "This here is a lie detector machine. Designed it myself. Its accuracy is right on the mark. I've helped solve mysteries from here to Egypt."

They craned their necks to get a better look at the machine and all the gadgets. He held one up. "I attach these pads to parts of your body. You may let lies slip from your lips, but this machine will catch 'em all, even the lily-white ones."

There was a gasp, then a hush. Mrs. Merriweather laughed out loud. "Why in the blue blazes would anyone—?"
 "—Want the truth? Well, I'll tell ya, Miss. Because the truth really does set one free."

"Well, I wasn't meaning that. I just... I don't believe your machine can do that. Only God can part lies from truth. We all just livin' on his grace."

"God and my machine!" He smiled. "I'll be down the road at the green lodge. Nice little inn y'all got here. I had myself the best pancakes there this morning."

Truth, as he called himself, packed his machine up and slid a card onto the counter.

The woman who ran the store picked up the card as he skipped out of the store.

It read simply: Seek Truth.

Mr. Churchill went to the door and watched the man walk out of sight. He shifted small fat hands in his vest pockets. "I don't know what to say about all that."

And nothing was said. The townspeople pretended to shop as before. They bought seed, flour, sugar, and peanuts, shuffling home, curious as cats about Truth, but not saying a word, until late into the night, the witching hour when magic and mayhem is acceptable.

It was when the moon peaked in the sky that the town became abuzz, every home lit in conversation, the flicker of lanterns on exaggerated faces. Their voices started in whispers but rose and fell again in rhythm with the waves in their gut, pulled like the tide, by the moon glowing over them.

One woman, sitting at the edge of her bed, watched her husband, fat and red like a deformed beet, lying in their marital bed. She wrung her small hands. She needed to know. It was this need that drove her to slip sneakers on her feet and to walk to the newly built lodge. A lodge with only three rooms. She knocked, seeking Truth.

Truth opened the door with a smile that seemed perpetually pleasing yet haunting.

"Mr. Truth, I'm Betty. The preacher's wife. There's something I need to know."

Truth was soon seen at every house on the cove of the small town, centered like a party favor, becoming as staple as a deck of cards on their parlor tables. People sipped wine and sat under his machine, answering the most ridiculous of questions. Do you iron your dress before church? Do you have a favorite child? Do you read the church's newsletter? Do you have a secret crush?

Truth knew to start slow, to work his way in. And so, the questions started easy but got harder, with some townspeople answering – against all odds – with blatant lies, others humbly apologetic for deeds uncovered. Eventually all succumbed to the truth.

Mrs. Simmons admitted to not cleaning the chicken coop everyday as paid to do. Mr. Churchill confessed he didn't pay his full tithes to the church this season, instead investing the money in a new strand of tobacco. Mr. Miller admitted to drinking wine alone in his study. He even showed his houseguest where he hid the bottle. And, oh the blushes when Mrs. Bell – the town's oldest widowed woman – admitted to reading Smut Books. She scoffed with a laugh, "Well, I ain't dead yet."

A great cleansing of the souls of the town occurred, a revival moving through the town like a wave. The people surfed it, wanting to be next to admit their deeds, to confess, to repent, to be set free.

As Truth dug deeper, knocking cobwebs from corners, flooding the night with light, affairs were uncovered like gravestones removed. Inheritances were reinstated, family relations sealed, and the cords of friendship strengthened through the adversity of knowing – and tolerating – the good and the bad.

The darkness feels enveloping; it cloaks and protects. Truth brutally blighted this night, causing a stir that ignited rage, anger, hurt – ultimately an extreme vulnerability in all the townspeople. None walked without shame, yet they refused to live in shame. They united in their animal instinct, promised to be better, to rise above, but not so above that they forgot the soil under the soles of their feet. Their conversations grew more somber but the depth to which they plunged pulled at the heart, making them as weightless as the feathers of baby birds.

Only one man avoided Truth and his new posse of folk. The pastor of the town sneered; his lips pulled in a snarl. He stood at the pulpit – at first every Sunday – and then every night rallying as vigorously as he could against Truth. He called the man a lie! *A damned ole lie!* He claimed the man was of the devil. He would stomp his feet and slap his Bible, declaring that *God had told him so.*

The town listened to Pastor Bobby in one ear but in the other Truth whispered louder. They continued to seek Truth, to bring him into their homes, feeding him supper, and letting him bounce their babies on his long legs. Since all their secrets had been rooted out, from the rot of too much time hidden, they no longer sought his device, merely his presence.

Then the first Sunday of winter came.

It was a cold day. Everything was covered in a white blanket of snow. The townspeople watched birds from their windows fluttering red wings against the white. They suited and booted, bundling under hats and scarves. They left the warmth of their homes, trekking through the pure snow to church service.

Eve picked up a single red feather from the snow. She tucked it in her Bible and told her father, "I'll hide it away here... for safekeeping."

"You have quite the collection now, don't ya?"

Eve smiled. "I sometimes wish I were a bird."

Her father's voice was stern. "They are beneath us. God made us in his image. Not the bird's image."

Eve stared at the ground. "Of course, father."

They walked into the church. The preacher was at the pulpit, his face as scarlet as the feather. His face always reddened like that from the cold. He called for his flock, smiling as they filled his pews. The piano lady was fluttering her fingers over the keys – made of real animal bone – crafting a winter tune.

"It's the day of our Lord God! Please gather; let us worship."

It was on that line that Truth strolled in the church and to the stage of the church, whistling.

The piano lady, absorbed in her music, didn't see him until he sat down right beside her. She jumped with a chirp.

"Excuse me, sir!" The preacher man hollered but Truth acted as if he couldn't hear the man. So, the preacher slapped both hands on the piano, yelling louder, "Excuse me!"

Truth looked up, as if to see a gnat. He was whispering in the woman's ear. The townspeople watched as Mrs. Chime's face went soft. They knew she wouldn't be able to resist. She took Truth's hand and stood to face them. Tears spilled from her high cheeks.

Mrs. Betty, the preacher's wife, stood up, while the townspeople sat, transfixed by the oddness, the peculiarity of what was occurring.

Truth spoke. "Mrs. Chimes, I believe you have a confession to make."

"I do. I have a confession to make."

Mrs. Chimes looked at her daughter Eve, blossoming into a young woman. She looked at her husband who tensed a worried face.

"Me and Pastor Bobby have been having an affair. For years. Over a decade. My Eve is his Eve. We meet once a week out of town, every Monday... at a little motel... We've never missed a Monday. I love him." She began to cry. "I love him. And he loves me!"

Pastor Bobby rose as a few townspeople gasped, many laughed, but most shrugged their shoulders. This was all routine now. Truth had uncovered dozens of liaisons and affairs. These revelations had become rather unremarkable.

Mrs. Chimes cleared her throat, scanning our faces. "Anyone—"

Mrs. Betty put a single finger up. She then walked to the woman and wrapped her arms around her. "Don't you know that you've already been forgiven?"

Pastor Bobby, who had been standing in a state of shock, revived his senses and demanded the blood in his body to charge his muscles. "This is a heap of nothing! All of y'all are caught up in some form of hysteria. I've never, never, never been with anyone but my wife!"

No one heard him. Truth had drowned out Pastor Bobby, his book of sins, and his raging about hell. Bobby tried to speak, to yell, to grab their collars and to shake them, but as if he were a mere fly, they lightly swatted him away.

No one asked him to leave but without the power of the pulpit, he left with his coattails between his legs.

Some said he became a car salesman. Others said it's insurance he peddled. The townspeople didn't care either way and didn't inquire after his location. They did note that Mrs. Chimes disappeared a few days after Pastor Bobby left town, leaving Betty to help raise her daughter Eve and to fall in love with Mrs. Chime's sister.

The townspeople repurposed the church into a community hall, turning the sanctuary into a dance room. The manicured grounds were revived into lush community gardens. Church services were discontinued, traded for rambunctious dancing and wanderings in the garden.

Eve, now a grown woman, went to toss her Bible but remembered the feather of the cardinal tucked inside. She pulled the feather out and stuck it behind her ear.

She no longer wanted to separate herself from the feather or the bird.

Nether Lands

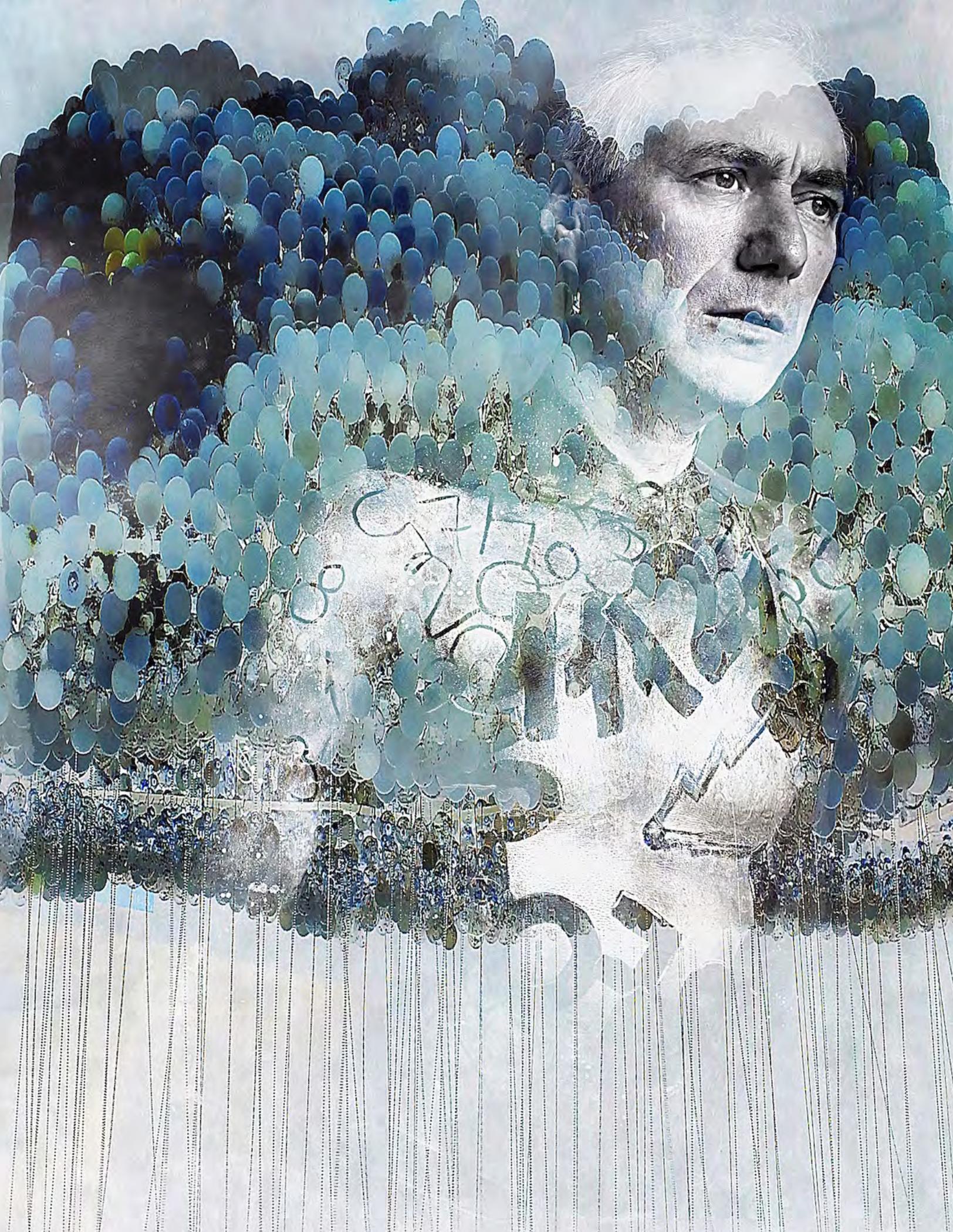
John Muro

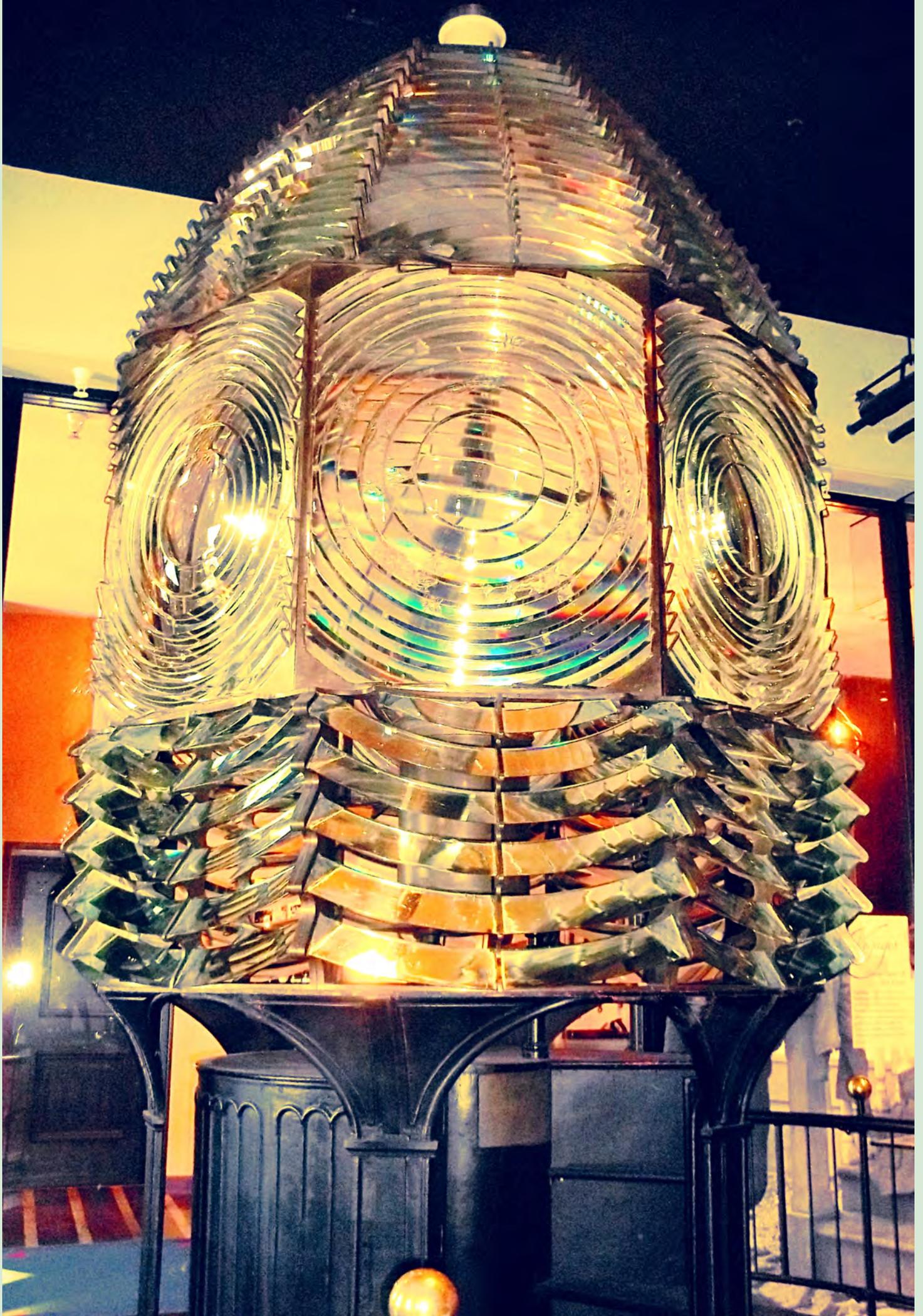
Sometimes I wake and wonder where
You've gone, released from my arms,
Drifting off to sleep thru an intimate
Darkness to some other space beyond
Our bodies and the sound of water
Pipes rasping inside plaster walls
In search of breath or the drowsy
Wind exhaling thru unglazed dormer
Windows; too soon sensing your
Own weightless release like a keel
Gliding over rocks and then the
Uncoupling from land, awaiting your
Return as a watery ghost from some
Other life lost and beyond remembering.

When I create visual artwork from my photographs, I look for more than one image to overlap my images, resulting in a piece that is completely different and unusual from the original image. "Exploring the Climate of Change" is an example of that. The desire to find texture and lighting in my work hopefully gives the viewer a reason to look deeper at the image. Finding unexpected detail is what feeds my photography's creative process.

- *Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier*

Images by Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier
This page: Movement
In succession:
Exploring the Climate of Change
Lighthouse Bulb
Not Afraid of Heights







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Demons Out There, Part I

Deborah Bean



The robotic voice of CrewNet came over the speakers so I sat down at my desk. “D-Space transition commencing in 10 seconds. Seeker to enter dimensional space. Crew to assume d-space duties.”

The announcement, which had started at thirty minutes to transit, started counting down: 10, 9, 8... At the end a prickling sensation swept through my body so fast I could almost ignore it. My eyesight blurred, edges rippling, everything as if I was underwater.

My captain’s cabin was the same as most other cabins, except for my office at the front. It held my antique oak desk, a gift from my grandmother, and a couple of chairs for when I met with the crew. Behind my office door was a small living area with a kitchenette at the back. My bedroom and a sanitary were to the side of my living area. Everything was decorated in shades of blue, green, and tan, just because the design appealed to me.

As I sat there in the haziness, contemplating our next destination, a couple of columns of light, about the size and shape of a large man, passed through one wall and out another. One came through and then stopped in front of me. Sparkles in its form flashed and blinked. It was brilliantly bright. These shimmering entities populated the realms of d-space and it seemed as if some of them watched the crew, like the one before me. Ship’s personnel regularly scanned the objects down in the science labs and other places on Seeker. We still had no idea what they were, just some form of unknown energy.

Translation between dimensions could surprise some people, if you weren’t careful. I was lucky; some of the crew had extreme reactions to the boundary, including vomiting, headaches, and some experienced hallucinations; even after eight years in space. Those had diminished for most of the crew, but a few were confined to their bunks for the time spent in dimensional space.

After about twenty minutes, another chime sounded throughout the ship as CrewNet announced “D-Space transition complete. Seeker returned to normal space-time. Resume normal duties.” My vision quickly cleared of the watery blurriness. We had arrived at the next interstellar system.

Although I spent most translations on the bridge in the captain’s chair, today I’d decided to spend the time in my cabin. I worked on the ship’s logs and went over several reports.

I got up and headed to the kitchenette to make myself some green tea, a strong blend. As I sipped the brew and resumed looking over files on my desk, my handcom chimed. I keyed the accept button. First Officer Chaun Griggs’ voice came over my earpiece.

“Captain, come see the new system?”

I looked at the paperwork, which really needed doing; I hated it. I’d rather get my hands dirty with some of the systems that ran the Seeker than sit behind the desk, but it came with the Captaincy. “Sure, Griggs, I’m on my way.” Maybe I could talk to Yeoman Wijers or Marchall to handle the boring stuff. Then again, I needed to know all those figures and information on what was going on: the Seeker’s systems, department efficiencies, as well as the crew’s wellbeing and mental state.

I left my quarters and headed to the bridge. On the way to the vator my eyes drifted over the walls of the corridor. Niches, spaced every two-and-a-half meters on opposing walls, were filled with greenery. Miniature trees and vines burst out of their containers and filled the corridor with an outdoorsy scent. Some even contained fruits and vegetables that were occasionally harvested, although their main purpose was to absorb carbon dioxide and provide variety in the ambience of our enclosed world. Life Support included keeping the air balanced for the crew via hydroponics, algae filters, and gas separators, but the little spots of life from home did help make the recycled air smell better.

The vator doors opened and Commander Bayley Akkaba, my second officer, stepped out. I moved to let her by, but she awkwardly back-stepped, her six-foot frame bulging hugely. Twins were confirmed three weeks ago – she and her husband were immensely proud.

“Captain, can I ride with you? I’ve got those reports.”

“Already? I thought you were off this shift?”

Bayley shrugged and handed me the datapad. “These rascals kept me up, so I went ahead and did them.”

I scanned the reports. Fuel consumption, plant yields, and efficiency stats. One figure took me by surprise.

“What’s this about engineering? They’ve missed two sets of scheduled diagnostics on the life support.”

“I’m looking into that. I’m scheduled to meet with Chief Murfee on third shift to discuss it, but I think I already know the problem.”

“It’s EngTech Chomsk isn’t it?”

“Yea, I think he’s still trying to convert people.”

I shook my head. “I thought we had this problem fixed last year.”

“Yes, but we’ve translated through d-space four more times since then. Each time, he claims that angels speak to him.”

“Well, talk to the Chief and find out if Chomsk is the problem. If he is, ask him what we need to do. We can’t let one person disrupt the Seeker. Other than that, everything else looks in spec, don’t you think?”

“Yes sir, I do. Oh, with three more children due in the next few weeks not counting the ballplayers in here,” she pointed to her stomach, “plus the eleven we already have, I want to start the children’s program that was in the mission plans. You know, schooling, childcare for parents pulling overlapping shifts, and maybe some babysitting. We have a couple of crew with the appropriate secondary specialties. I’ll see if they’ll go primary in that area.”

“Good idea.”

I stepped out onto the bridge and CrewNet announced “Captain on the Bridge.” A few of the bridge crew looked up and acknowledged me with a quick nod. I saw Griggs peering over the shoulder of the Sensor technician’s station. The officer manning Sensors turned to me.

“We’ve arrived in the Lorelay system, sir. Short-range sensors have detected an object of interest. Long-range sensors are still charting the rest of the system.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.”

As Griggs straightened his lanky and grizzled physique, I turned to the woman on his left. “Navigation, plot a course for the fourth planet. Engage sublight engines on my signal.”

“Aye, sir,” she replied.

“Griggs, has Communications deployed the message buoy and sent our current status report to HQ?”

“Communications?” he turned to that station.

“Yes, sir. Buoy is prepared and ready. It’s launching now that parameters from Sensors have been received.”

“That’s good. So, what’s the problem, Griggs?”

“Mabenda. You explain.”

The youngish Sensor tech was a short dark, brown-skinned man with green eyes and blackish hair. He looked up at me. “Sir, there’s an object, about a meter-cubed, two-point-three-six kilometers off our port bow and one-point-nine-eight forward. Its composition is ceramic and platinum, probably an alloy not naturally occurring.”

Finding alien-made objects was uncommon, but not completely unknown. During our mission, the crew of the Seeker, our space-faring vessel, searched for life and minerals at each star system we reached and explored. Once our investigation was complete, we dropped a marker at planets or moons with the identified resources. We’d send our findings back home, then continue our mission of discovery. Later, HQ deployed ships to take advantage of the data, sending others to exploit or colonize those locations. Our home system, with its burgeoning population, increasing pollution, and lack of resources was forced to expand. Providing for twelve-plus billion people was too much for our birthplace.

Finding an object that was unnatural meant it could be made by intelligent life. It could also be millennia old and whatever civilization had created it long gone. I remember those ruins back in the Zendazi system four years ago. Everything had been deserted. According to our tests, the ruins were over thirty thousand years old, but it looked as if everyone had simply stepped away and disappeared.

Navigation and Helm put us in close proximity so a couple of the crew could investigate. Unfortunately, the object turned out to be a dud, just an artifact from some lost civilization.

Two weeks later I was on the Bridge when the junior ComTech motioned to me. “Sir, I’ve got something here.”

“Go ahead, Kelvin.”

Patrise Kelvin was a pixie-like young woman, who looked like a stiff breeze would blow her over. She had creamy skin and blue eyes; pretty to look at, especially with that heart-shaped face.

"But I knew she was tough as titanium and had aced all her fitness exams, as well as those for her specialty, so that she and her husband, an agrotech, could be assigned to the ship. They had a baby girl now who was two and the oldest of Seeker's second generation.

"I've received the message from Home, but there's something weird about it."

"What's the problem?"

"There appear to be two messages, sir. But one – it doesn't make sense." Her nose wrinkled with consternation.

"Push them to me."

She hit a button on her station and a soft chime sounded on mine. I opened the files. The first was a standard communication from headquarters, compressed to be received in the minuscule time our buoys dipped in and out of d-space.

Kelvin stood and walked up to my chair. She pointed to the second message. "See. It's gibberish. The computers can't decode it. But it has structure. This hasn't happened before."

I looked at the ComTech. Kelvin was a whiz at finding the messages that reached us from HQ. Something was strange if she couldn't decipher it. "How did we end up with two messages? Is one a reflection or scrambled?"

She looked at me. "I don't think so, sir." She hesitated, but I could see excitement bubbling up in her face.

"Why?" I stared back at the strange signal on my screen.

"Two reasons, sir. The first – they have different lengths. Second, this transmission was received on the rear dish and the one from HQ came in at midships, portside." She hesitated a moment. "Sir, I don't think they're from the same source."

"Not the same source? What're you saying, Kelvin? As in... someone else?"

We were all hopeful – but the crew knew we might never find another intelligent species out here. The timeline of the universe was too great. It was theorized that we could miss other sapiens by millions of years. Groups against spending the resources of our planet on a "frivolous" search always claimed the probability of finding intelligent beings in the galaxy was miniscule.

Sure, the Seeker had found plenty of life where we'd searched; but none of it was sentient

Bacteria, plants, and simple animals were all we'd discovered in eight years, but for some, including myself, that was evidence that more could be out here.

"Possible, sir," interjected Griggs as he came over.

"He's right, Captain. We aren't sure how far the message traveled." Kelvin turned back to her station and screens. I followed her. "It could be ancient, though the probabilities are against that."

"But the source has to be line of sight, right?"

"Yes, sir. We could be looking for something near, relatively speaking, if other objects aren't in the way."

"So, if it's close, we're either between or behind a receiver, right? Can you calculate an approximate source?"

"Within several degrees of arc, I think I can."

"Do so, please."

I went to my command chair and sat down. I didn't want to appear too eager, so I tried looking over data on this system. My mind kept drifting, and soon I was envisioning the tests and calculations that Kelvin was running; complex mathematics dealt with a host of variables.

She was still working as Nightshift came on duty. Most of Dayshift hung around, waiting for answers. I started to feel crowded but didn't say anything because I could feel the excitement in my crew. By now, the news was probably all over the ship. Secrecy, as well as a stiff protocol aboard Seeker, isn't my style.

Chief Communications Officer Kalanov looked over Kelvin's shoulder, assisting her. Finally, he signaled me, and I joined them. Kelvin tried to hand the data to her superior, but the ComChief nodded for her to make the report.

"Captain, I've identified six potential sources for the message we received, each with varying levels of probability," said Kelvin.

"So, few?"

"Based on the parameters – yes, sir."

She flashed the data to the large screen above her station. A starfield display appeared with several locations highlighted. I felt a lot of heads leaning in to see until Griggs' firm stare had them stepping back.

Kelvin selected one of the points on the screen and zoomed in to that location. “Site one is a star very like our own. It has a statistical probability of 78.6 percent. The message could have originated from a 24-degree arc along the ecliptic in that system.”

The ComTech pointed and the screen expanded again. A curved line in front of the displayed star system was highlighted, with a cone extending to our location. “This site has the additional benefit that, if the message originated from a moving vessel, the path shown allows enough time for us to have received it.”

In the same manner, Kelvin went through all six sites. The probability ratings dropped drastically after that first one. Only the third site offered any other possibility of a moving source.

“Cap’n,” Griggs said. “Sites one ‘n’ three – in line?”

I looked at the display again. “Kelvin, calculate that possibility.”

“Yes, sir.”

She looked up a few moments later. “Sir, there’s an 88.5 percent probability that site one was transmitting to site three. That explains to 90.3 percent accuracy how we received the message, since we’re effectively behind site three through most of the transmission.”

“Yes!” Griggs gave a downward punch of his hand in his excitement, and quickly recovered, turning red at his unprofessional display.

I felt that way myself. Communications meant only one thing – intelligent and technically evolved beings. I walked to my chair and hit the intercom button, possibly with some extra zeal of my own. “Attention, Seeker crew. As you’ve probably heard, we intercepted a message from an unknown source. The data is posted to CrewNet. Take a look at it. At shift change, interested personnel can meet in the rec room to discuss our next move. I want your ideas, people! Captain out.”

I toggled the off switch and looked at my tablet again. I had some time before the meeting and wanted to do some research of my own.

To be continued...



Sue Cook

THE HAND

Touch has always been important.

Faces
lips
fur
skin –
all gone now.
The fingers that once caressed
a lover's hair
feel nothing.
Blackness of digits and loss.

Will I lose them all?

I will find a gold lining to this strange illness
that robs my fingers of blood.

I must explore a new way
to communicate intimacy and language.
My language sometimes requires
the use of hands and fingers.



The white coats will find me an alternative.
Android hands and fingers –
blended elements of robotics and skin.

The hope of touch,

synapses and binary code
working to allow me to feel the curve of your
back.

Shall I be left bereft of touch forever?
Or the birth of the next stage of mankind?

My touch screen phone sits to my side –
a reminder of what I have

lost
and gained.



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Nature, In Brief

Soren Porter

*"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.
The world and all its people belong to him."
Psalm 24*

In Genesis 1:26-27, where God creates man and gives dominion over all the earth, the Jesus' parable of the Tenets (Matthew 21:33-46), and God establishing the new Kingdom on earth (Revelation 21) make for some interesting reading. I believe these passages show that the dominion God gave us over earth is temporary and that there will be spiritual consequences for those who are abusive tenets.

This is where I could go on a rant about growing up in the SBC (Southern Baptist Church) and pastors from the pulpit would paint natural conservation attempts as being evil. Thankfully, I think there are some things changing in that corner of the world.

It's bad enough that human leaders seemed damn determined to continue civilization's course towards self-destruction and eradicating nature. Regardless of a future return of Christ to save us from the consequences of bad choices, Christians need to lead by example with viable solutions.

Instead of focusing on the negative, I would rather think about the positives. Not everyone has a fondness for deep nature, but it is a place I have always found to be restive and meditative. Thanks to twelve years of Scouting, I was able to explore some of the more pristine places left in the Southeast USA.

Once I got away from civilization, so far I could not hear cars and very rarely hear airplanes, it became deeply spiritual to me. It requires spiritual discipline to slow down and willingly remove our reliance on modern trappings. There is peace, in the middle of the wilderness, that cannot be found anywhere else.

Featured Artist



SEEMA PRUSTY

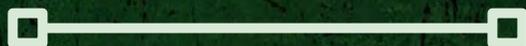
Poet

Saudi Arabia

THE HEALING POWER OF POETRY

Sue Cook

Poetry, in my opinion, is the rhythm of life. It is the beat of a heart, the sound of a child learning to read, or a dance waiting to be discovered. It speaks to our souls. It can heal the body and mind. I have always been enamored of poetry since I was a child, which is why I was excited when I was asked to interview Seema Prusty. Seema is a fellow poet and published author of the poem, "SHE" which may be found at Women's Web online.



Sue Cook: Tell us a bit about your history. You're from India, now living in Saudi Arabia. Your background is in civil engineering and now you're working at the University and writing poetry on the side. How have all these things come to be?

SP: I work as an administrative assistant at Kaust University to seven professors. My husband is working as a research scientist currently, and I accompanied him after we got married in 2016.

After embracing motherhood, I got little or no time for myself as I had to take care of my son and house since my husband was keeping busy with his experiments. So, I loved to read articles, opinion pieces, and short stories in my spare time. I recently got diagnosed with IBS (ten months ago) and I realized I needed to divert my mind from my stomach issues.

While visiting a friend at her home, she recited to me her composition in her native language which really moved me. I thought why not try my hand at poetry. I then wrote my first poem, 'SHE'.

Poetry has the power to beautifully touch the subtle nuances of life which we usually are not thoughtful of in our busy lives. And that's what it did for me. Most importantly, I forgot my stomach cramps while reading and writing poetry. So, this is how I started.



SC: How do these aspects of your life impact your poetry writing?

SP: The answer is quite simple. As I stated, my husband works very hard and keeps busy all the time. Initially I used to wait for him and then sleep during the days. I started to work in the University three and a half years after marriage and it gave me a little independence, but I always felt the need for a little more recognition and appreciation and craved to do something which is only my own.

My work pressure is not much – an 8 to 5 job. As my son grew, he would go out and play in the park and I would watch him play. I thought of writing poetry to engage myself while keeping my eyes on him.

When I first recited to my friends and parents, my poetry was so appreciated that I joined a Facebook poetry page and there I found [MockingOwl Roost].

So, every evening I would read your issues and slowly my boredom faded away. I recently read your "Wonder" issue and I just loved it. I find the environment here very conducive for writing poetry.

SC: What are some interesting facts about yourself?

SP: I love traveling places. I travelled to Spain, France, Italy, and Turkey three years ago. I loved the scenery there and, of course, the people, their lifestyle, and love and warmth towards us. My exposure grew so much as I had been travelling only to places within India.

And then Covid happened, and it all stopped. I love Indian cuisines and I am a good cook by now. It feels so amazing when my husband and kid love to eat only the food prepared by me. I love to read newspaper columns though I am not able to give much time now as my job keeps me busy. I love to interact with people from different countries and cultures, and fortunately, I am at Kaust where there are people from almost all countries of the world. It is a different world altogether here – a mini world.

SC: What artforms are you practicing?

SP: As of now, it's only poetry that I have started with, but I would love to learn more forms of art – dance being the next.



Seema, you have lived in so many amazing places and cultures that it is easy to see why you chose poetry as your medium. Your words, like a painter's palette, coloring the page with vivid images of where you have lived and the cultures you have seen. Blend the love of various cultures together with your warmth of family and it fuels the fantastic dynamic you bring to the poetry scene. I find it so uplifting to hear how the power of poetry brought healing energy to your body. This is a beautifully inspiring message for young poets who may be struggling. I look forward to reading more poetry from you in the future.



WORLD EXPLORATIONS

RITA MOCK-PIKE

Following in the footsteps of family pioneers...
exploring the world on foot,
by car,
airplane,
bus,
train,
bicycle...

IMAGES

Rottnest in Blue and White - Rottnest Island, Australia - page 82

On Tranquil Bay - Isle of Arran, Scotland - top page 83

Lighthouse Skies - Rottnest Island, Australia - bottom page 83

Ancient Door - Aegina, Greece - page 84

By Way of Ruin - Aegina, Greece - page 85

Olden Spires - Dublin, Ireland - top page 86

Stirling View - Stirling, Scotland - bottom page 86

Heron Sunset - Pensacola, Florida, USA - page 87

Guatemalan Eve - Antigua, Guatemala - page 88

Cloud Level - Mt. Wellington, Tasmania - page 89



















My parents, grandparents, and dearest friends have encouraged me to explore the world, my own desires, my passions, my dreams without another's expectations placed on my soul. But to do so with compassion, reverence for God, and respect for others and cultures unfamiliar to me. As I have traveled the world, I've sought to capture moments of beauty in nature, among people, and animals I so love. Each image in this series captures a moment of peace and contemplation, joy and wonder, compassion and introspection. I find myself delighting more in the peoples and cultures of the world as I revisit these travels, daydreaming of the future, and sharing them with others who, too, may delight in the magnificent allure of each landscape.

-Rita Mock-Pike

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Okay, I hear you. How are theological journals inspiration for creativity? The truth is, I'm a deeply spiritual person who's also highly logical. I follow things from Point A to Point zzz to that logical conclusion. Sometimes, that gets me in trouble with folks. They don't like what I have to share about the logic (or lack thereof) in their situations. I aim to speak this logical conclusion with grace, but there's not always a way to soften the blow.

For me, this means that having logical, well-crafted arguments and information gathered on materials that are highly personal actually provokes creativity. I genuinely find theological journals an evocation for creative exploration in my fiction and nonfiction alike.

For instance, one of the novels I'm working on right now is about a young woman from the South during the Civil War. It's her reckoning, as it were, and reconciliation with her upbringing as the daughter of a plantation owner and her faith. Studying the actual history of the use of religion in the justification of slavery by Southerners has not only been eye-opening, but inspirational for the character as she dissects her beliefs and dismantles her faith in order to rebuild a new life of justice and grace.

Each time I crack the spine of a theological journal, I ask three questions.

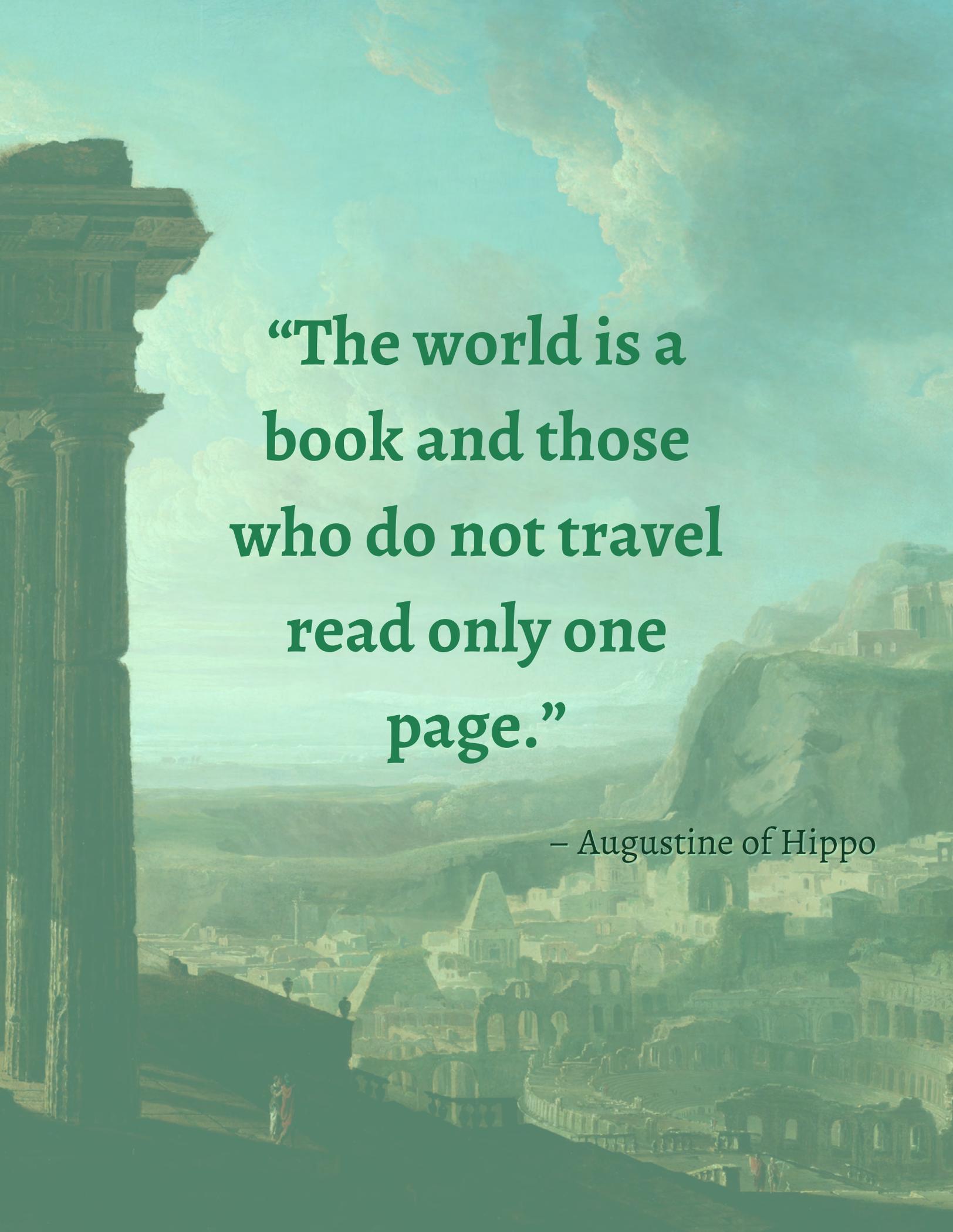
1. Is this a resource that makes sense for what I'm working on (be it theological essay, short fiction, or personal development)?
2. What kind of perspective did the author have in writing this? (I.e., what was their agenda?) and
3. What can I personally glean from this for my personal faith, my creative being, and my education?

For me, all three of these are intertwined. I love learning because it helps me to grow as a scholar, certainly, but equally it influences the way I live life and relate to others. Reading theological journals helps with all of this.

So, if you're looking for inspiration from new places as you explore your own journey of faith or spirituality, community, relationships, and life, consider journals as excellent resources for learning that can help steer all of those aspects of your adventure.

THEOLOGICAL JOURNALS

Rita Mock-Pike

A classical painting of a cityscape, likely Rome, viewed from a high vantage point. On the left, a large, dark, classical column stands prominently. The city below is filled with various buildings, including a large amphitheater or arena in the foreground. In the distance, a large mountain or cliffside features more classical structures. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds, and the overall color palette is dominated by greens and blues, giving it a monochromatic or tinted appearance.

**“The world is a
book and those
who do not travel
read only one
page.”**

– Augustine of Hippo

Sue Cook

CONSIDER THIS

We are made of infinitesimally small particles of energy
yet we whirl about with swirls of the cosmos,
wrapped around us like the shawls of dancing girls.

Is it any wonder that space beckons?
That the gentle twinkle becomes the beating of our hearts
—
a call —
a need to find the source of our soul?
The infinity of space grows finite within us.

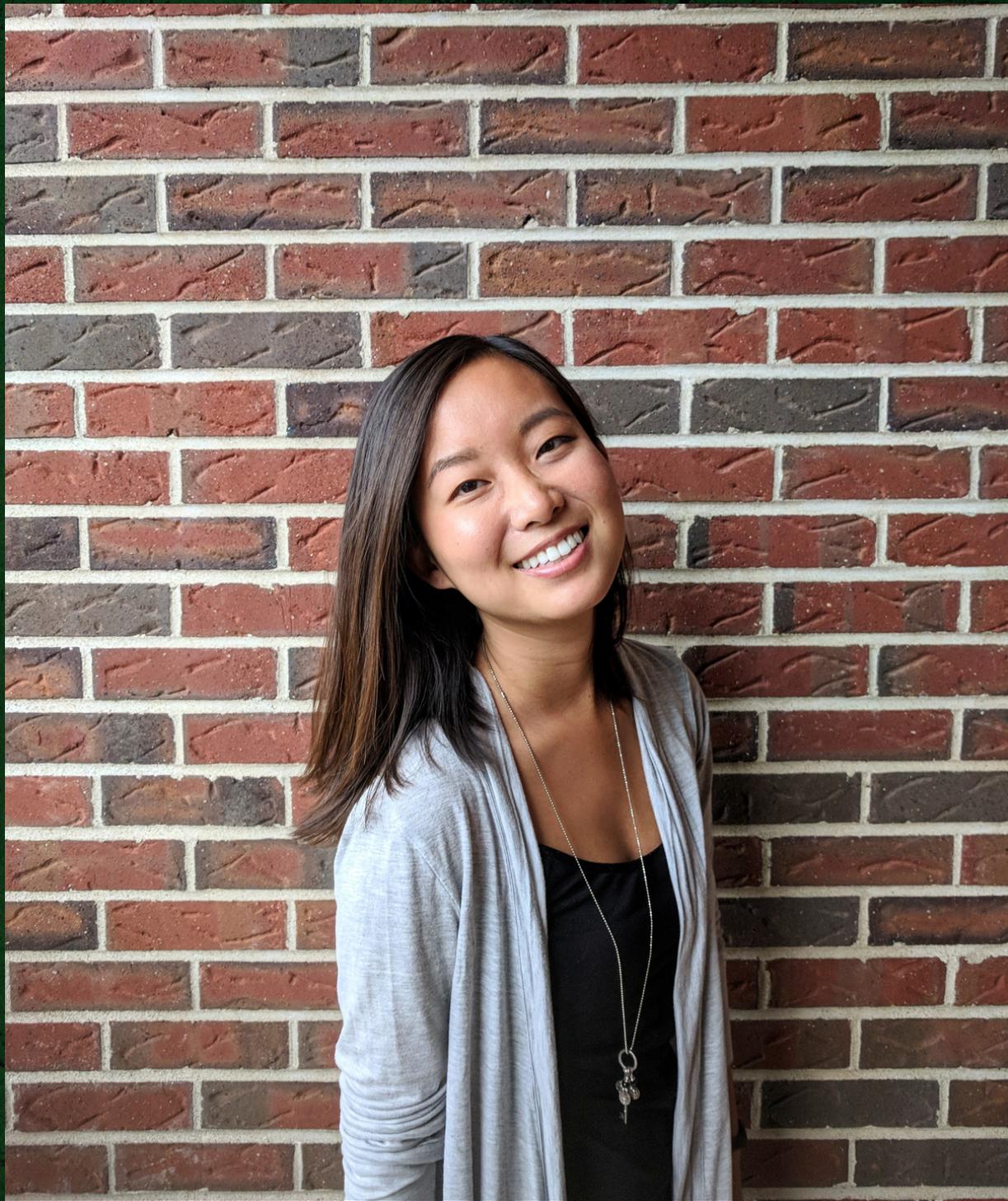
This skin keeps us from throwing our arms wide,
releasing our spirits back to the stars that beckon like a
lover for our return.
Death is not the only release.

Meditation allows the soul to wander,
to explore every being,
every star our species can imagine.
We become one with the beat of the universe.

We are the universe.

Consciousness awakes to the vast expanse of space and
time
For a time we are limitless.
Then we open our eyes,
lift ourselves into the chair
and wheel out of the courtyard.

Featured Artist



MELANIE HYO-IN HAN

Poet & Teacher

Seoul, South Korea

Fragments of Inspiration: Interview with Melanie Hyo-In Han

Rita Mock-Pike



This autumn, we met Melanie during an open submission period. Her beautiful works begged us to interview her so we might learn where her inspiration comes from and how we, too, might grow in evocative language and imagery. Her background and personal history, explorations of cultures, and experiences as a teacher drew us deeper and sparked creativity.



RMP: Your bio says you were born in Korea and raised in East Africa, now living back in Korea. What are some aspects of those cultures that have impacted your creative purpose and vision in life? How have the intersections of those cultures continued to impact your life?

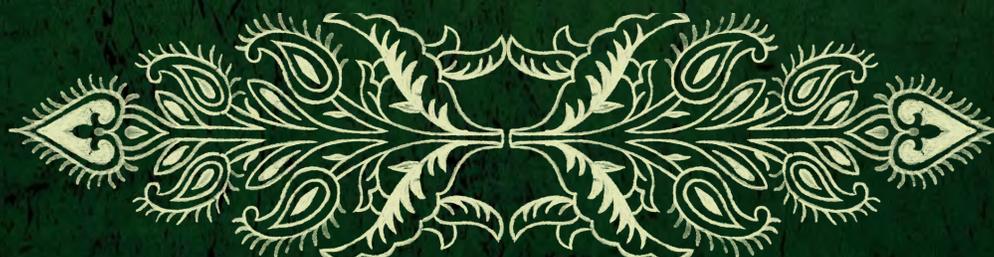
MH-IH: The majority of my poetry is autobiographical, so growing up in Kenya, Tanzania, and South Africa has really impacted my writing, especially because I struggled with my identity as a Korean living abroad. With the intersectionality of transnationalism, childhood trauma, and cultural clashes, I continue to think about who I am, and the experiences that I've been through shape my poetry and the content I write.

RMP: What artforms do you practice? Tell us about your inspiration and vision.

MH-IH: My main focus is poetry - much of my work is fragmented in poetic form and includes multiple languages because they reflect who I am and the life that I've lived. I also dabble in a bit of nonfiction, but I find myself always going back to poetry. My hope is that other transnational poets, readers, and Third Culture Kids (TCKs) will be able to read my work, empathize with my experiences, and know that they're not alone.

RMP: You're a teacher - what do you teach? How does that teaching impact your writing? How does writing impact your teaching?

MH-IH: I teach English, Spanish, and Creative Writing at an international high school in Seoul. In my Creative Writing classes especially, I get to be inspired by my students when they try new artforms or discover different ways to express themselves. I learn just as much from my students as they probably learn from me; because creative writing is such an expansive form of self expression, I get to share my writing with them and help broaden their worldviews. In turn, they teach me something new every day, which spurs me on to try things in my own writing at home.



RMP: You've received several writing awards - how has it felt receiving those? Have those awards inspired further writing? Have they impacted you in other ways?

M H-I H: Honestly, I still have a hard time calling myself "a writer" or "a poet", even though I've won several awards; each time I receive an award, it feels absolutely surreal, but it does give me a sense of purpose and conviction that what I'm doing is touching and inspiring others. The main reason I got into writing, actually, was due to an award I won in 2016. Before that, I had written poems for fun and mostly for myself. On a whim, I decided to submit one of my poems to a writing contest, and to my surprise, it won first place at Lyric Magazine. This got me trusting in my own writing a bit more and got the ball rolling for additional publications, awards, and interviews.

RMP: Your poetry is very visceral and evocative. What inspires this type of writing? Are there tips or thoughts you'd offer to other poets seeking to grow their art?

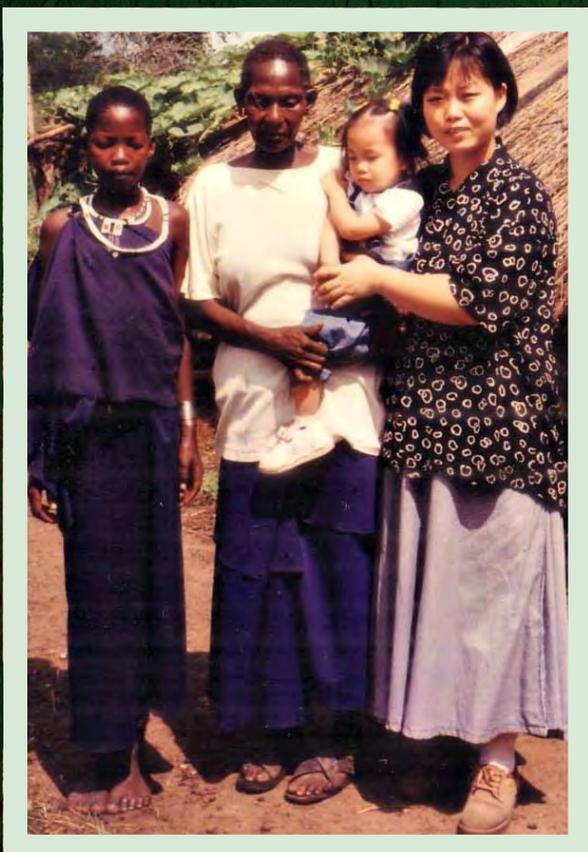
M H-I H: Personal experience is the biggest inspiration behind my poetry. I try to think about an event in my life that has shaped me, focusing my energy on what I'd felt at the moment then going on to describe those feelings through poetry. I'd encourage other poets to try the same – ultimately, I believe that what it comes down to is writing from the heart and with a sense of genuinity.

RMP: Is there anything in particular that you'd love to share with readers? About yourself, your teaching, your writing, something else?

M H-I H: One thing I'd like to share with readers is that we, as writers, appreciate every single one of you and hope that what we write can leave a lasting impression on you. We're grateful for you!

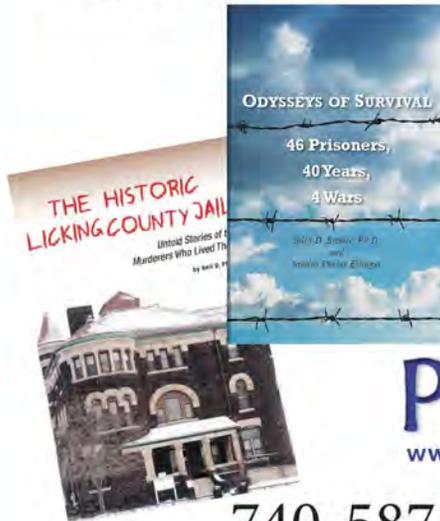


Thank you for your vulnerability and willingness to share your story with us, Melanie! May we all move into a deeper creative flow and follow your inspiration along the way.



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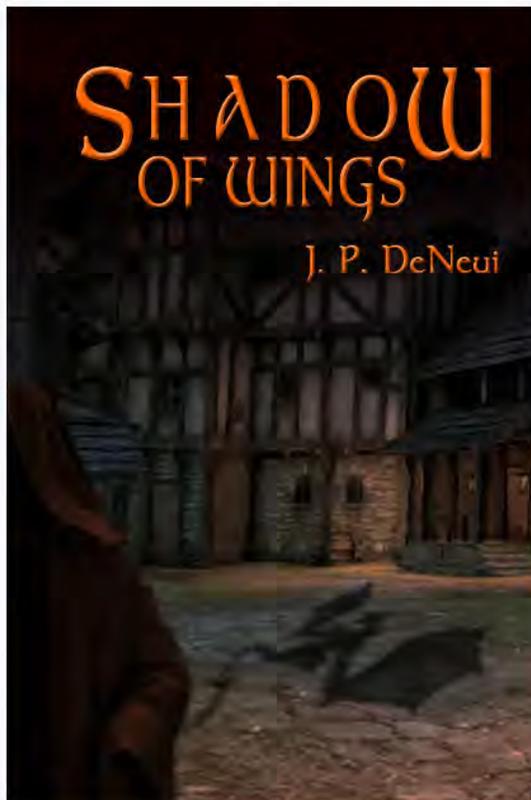


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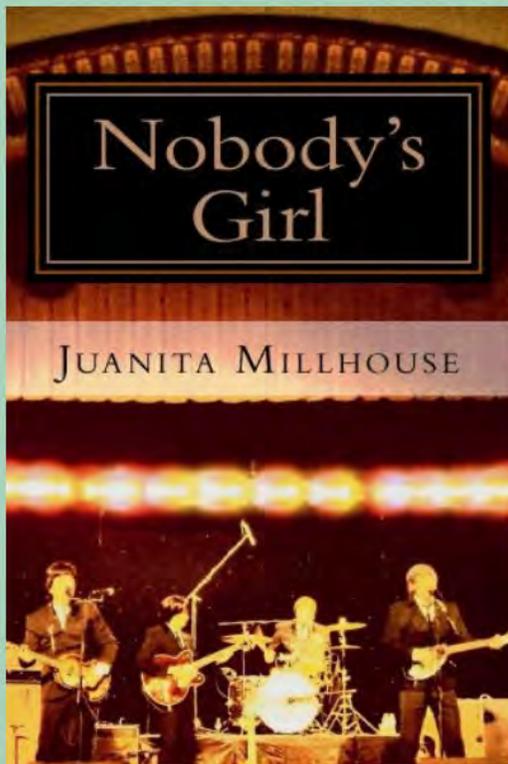
A FLAME IN LIFE
AFLAME IN DEATH
SO MUST THE DRAGONMEN DIE

Heir to the kingdom of Anthea, Crown Princess Dera Wrencliff knew like every good Anthean that all dragonmen are monsters. The very few men who spread their wings grow to serve the evil Shadowman, becoming too dangerous to let live.

And then a dragon saved her life.

Though Robyn Kawlsmith is condemned to death, Dera intends to break him free. But larger forces are at work...and something else may be unfurling inside her own traitorous heart.

Purchase in paperback or eBook on Amazon



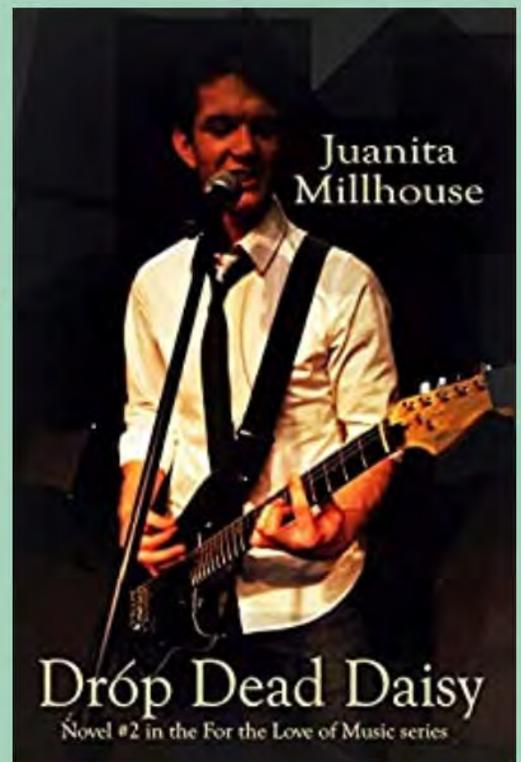
For the Love of Music series by Juanita Millhouse

NOBODY'S GIRL

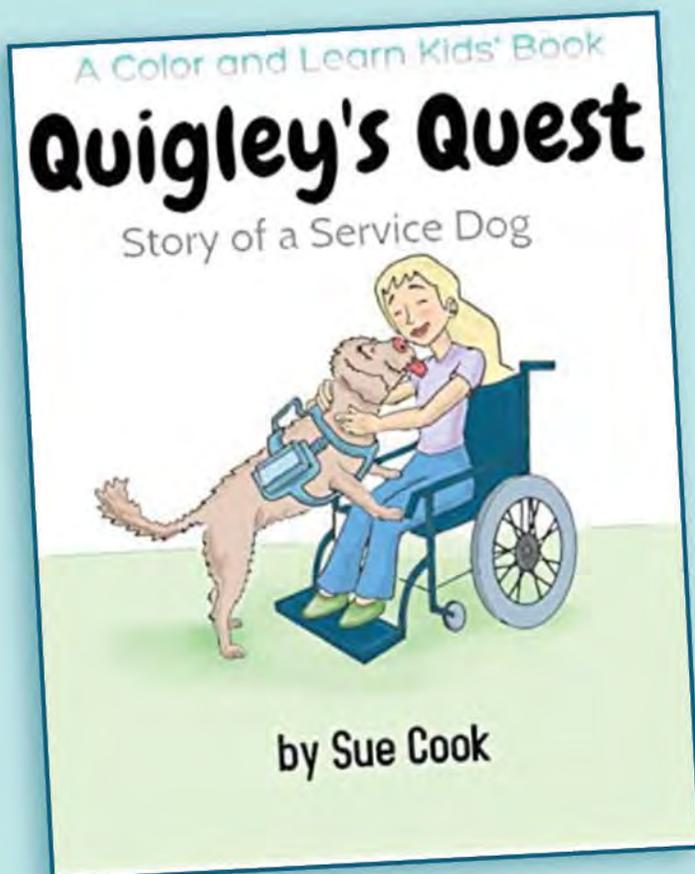
Tess Brenner never would have imagined that she'd be in love with a rock-star. Of course, when she fell in love with Jamie Bennett back in fourth grade, nobody would have guessed the nerd with long hair would be one of the most popular men in the world just a few years later. But when Jamie and the band leave their hometown to tour the world, Tess must learn to live without that love. But can she? Will she ever forget the love that binds her heart to the lead singer of the Four Jays?

DROP DEAD DAISY

Daisy Meeks never really knew her family. She's never known love. She's never had anyone stick around long enough to open up to. Well, except through her music. But those who hear her heart don't get her. They think she's just some hot chick who plays a mean guitar. Until Kane Sullivan comes along and pulls her into the world of heavy metal and fame. And, of course, love. But is his love really all she's been searching for? Is he really enough?



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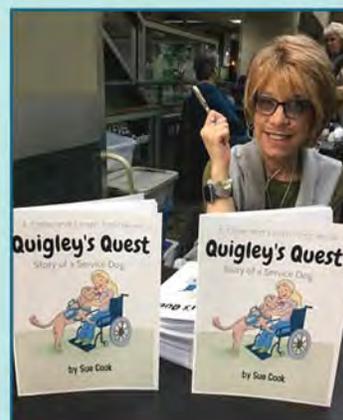


Quigley's Quest

A children's story/coloring/activity book which follows Quigley on his journey into becoming a service dog. Heartwarming and fun for children of all ages.

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Pictured: Author Sue Cook and Quigley the service dog



VERACITY

98

Michele Mekel

Bare feet and bare hearts
are both paths
to truth.

POETRY

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The Day I Escaped One D

Fiction

Ivanka Fear

One minute it wasn't there and the next it was. Or maybe it was there the whole time, but I wasn't aware of it. I suppose that in order to open doors to new worlds, you need to start with an open mind. Now, I pride myself on being rather receptive to possibilities, but this really blew my mind into a whole other dimension. I know you won't believe what I tell you, but I was there, and I can attest to the truth of it. If my retelling of the events of that day seems disjointed, imagine how I felt as I experienced them.

Last night's fight with my boyfriend, Mark, kept running through my head as I threw his dirty jeans and shirts into the basket while he snored away, oblivious to the fact I was still upset. For the third time in one month, he had broached the topic of marriage, buying a house, and starting a family. For the third time, I balked at the thought of commitment. As much as I loved him, I wasn't ready to be chained down. Things were perfectly fine the way they were. No need to change anything.

Hoisting the laundry up against my hip, I slammed the bedroom door on my way out, satisfied I had rudely jostled him out of some blissful dream in which I was barefoot and pregnant, prancing around in the kitchen of our new home, having taken a leave from teaching.

One of the handles on the plastic bin cracked as I let it fall to the floor and slammed my fist against the elevator button. The numbers on the display panel counted down from nine to the basement level.

I exited the elevator and started down the hall when I saw it, right there inside the laundry room of my apartment building, where I go all the time to wash clothes or get things out of storage. Strange how I never noticed anything amiss before. Straight ahead of me lay a two-lane road with buildings on either side, cars parked in front, vehicles heading in both directions. Between the hall where I stood and the roadway, a line that looked like a crack in the floor, or rather, a crack in the road, delineated the border between my reality and something completely foreign.

As my heartbeat morphed into a rapid staccato, the dirty clothing slid out of the bin and fell to the floor.

Mesmerized by what I saw, and unable to stop myself, I approached the divide and gingerly stepped into the other world, my laundry basket and all it entailed, left behind.

I walked along the sidewalk, the blare of traffic pounding in my skull as I scanned the buildings to my right and left. Not looking directly ahead to where I was going, I bumped into myself on the concrete. Only it wasn't really me, of course, because I was me and I couldn't be in two places at the same time, could I? Besides, this person who I thought was me was an old lady, maybe 50 or even 60, I don't know, really old. I wouldn't even have recognized myself if she hadn't stared at me for ages as though I had just climbed out of my spaceship or something.

Face to face, inches apart, we asked each other at the same time, "What is happening?" At that point, I wasn't sure which one of me was really me, but I did wonder if clicking my heels together while repeating, "There's no place like home," would get me out of what was obviously a nightmare. Too bad I wasn't wearing ruby slippers.

Somehow, it dawned on me where I was supposed to be. With a purpose, I quickened my pace until I reached a large building with letters along the front entrance. The old lady tagged along, as if glued to me. St. Joseph's Hospital was an impressive older building I'd seen before, but never been inside. I navigated my way through the front entrance and up the elevator to the maternity ward.

"My baby... is everything okay?" I heard myself ask the nurse monitoring my blood pressure. I could see that I was clearly agitated as I lay on the hospital bed, my boyfriend sitting beside me holding my hand. He didn't appear to see me standing beside the bed, gazing down at myself.

"Am I dying?" I wondered as I hovered over my younger self. "Is this some kind of out-of-body experience?" I turned towards the door where my father stood framed in the doorway, holding my newborn son.

"Look at his head full of black hair," he said. This made no sense to me as my father had passed away two years ago.

I must be dreaming. No other possible explanation.

Old Lady Me motioned to the clock above the bed. It was five minutes to midnight.

Confused, I drifted past everyone into the hall and back down the elevator to the exit and out the back door, to find myself on a wide expanse of green lawn at an outdoor wedding. I stood and watched with a great sense of pride and wonder as my old lady friend said, "Oh look, here comes our husband with our beautiful daughter." She wore a flowing white gown as she floated down the aisle. A vision of the future? No, that couldn't be. My mother and father sat in the front row. Did they come back to life to attend my daughter's wedding? I blinked several times to clear my vision, thinking I needed to have my eyes checked. When I looked again, I realized that it was actually me, not my daughter, walking down the aisle towards my future husband who waited for me with a smile.

Clearly, I was somehow experiencing a distorted vision of the past mixed with the future. Am I seeing ghosts? Having a premonition?

I turned around and walked away, hoping to find some semblance of normalcy elsewhere. Across the street, I noticed my old high school. After waiting at the crosswalk for cars to stop, I headed over and climbed the stairs to the entrance. Once inside I was drawn to a classroom where my nervous teenage self stood at the front delivering a speech on Martin Luther King Jr. The classroom calendar was void of dates, empty squares where numbers should be.

"I have a dream that..." I heard my younger self say.

"What on earth...?" I uttered.

"Another memorable moment in your life." The older version of myself tapped me on the shoulder and beamed at me. "You were so proud of the speech you wrote. And so brave to deliver it in front of an audience."

Thinking someone must have slipped something into my morning coffee, I exited abruptly and went back out into the street. At that point I was sure I must be dying, seeing my life flash before my eyes in this crazy way. I was sweating, wishing I could just gain consciousness, and everything would be all right.

The strange thing was, as I left my old high school, the street was no longer a street, but merged into a beach. There in the sand lay a teenage girl on a blanket next to an older me, both of us getting some sun.

"Our daughter," explained Old Lady Me. "Isn't she lovely?"

Dealing with three versions of myself was taking a toll on my sanity. I asked the old lady to please leave me alone.

"I'm kind of woozy. I think I've had too much sun," I said to the teenage girl. She didn't appear to hear me. I walked toward the water, leaving the two of us behind. On the horizon, a ship sailed into the harbour. I was on that ship. Although I couldn't actually see myself, I somehow just knew it. On a nine-day voyage, my parents and I, as a baby, were emigrating from Europe to Canada. I was fine, not crying, but Mom was seasick.

Then the ship transformed into a hospital, and I said my goodbyes to Mom as she lay in the bed, her life slipping away. "It's okay, you can rest now," I was telling her. In a trance, I left the hospital with my husband, who carried an infant car seat with our newborn son in it.

At the same time, our son walked alongside us, all grown up, and we shared our grief. Yet when I turned to face him, it was my dad's face looking down at me.

I couldn't make any sense of this, as I'm sure neither can you. I'm just telling you what happened.

Getting into the car with our infant son, my husband prepared to drive the three of us home. Upon entering what I had believed was my home, I found my way to a table in a disco where my university friends waited for me.

"What took you so long to get back from the bathroom?" asked Sue. "It's four minutes to midnight. They'll be closing up soon."

"I...I think I've had too much to drink. I don't feel so well," I told my friends. "Maybe someone should take me home." "You do look like you need a few bolts tightened. Maybe you should get your head screwed on right," Sue said.

As we drove away from the bar, I closed my eyes and tried to stop the spinning in my head. When I opened them, I was swaying on a gondola above the Rocky Mountains. My fear of heights and my claustrophobia were certainly wreaking havoc with my mind. I was having the strangest hallucinations.

I know what you're thinking. But I'm as sane as you are. Somehow, we ended up on firm ground again.

I stumbled out of the gondola and into an airplane where a stewardess escorted me to my seat.

"Wake up, we're almost there. Fasten your seatbelt. We'll soon be landing at Ljubljana airport. You must have been having a nightmare while you were asleep," laughed my brother. "You were muttering all kinds of nonsense."

Walking through the jetway between the plane and airport, I wobbled back and forth, having a hard time maintaining my equilibrium.

My brother and Mom walked way ahead of me, fading in the distance. I tried to quicken my pace, lugging my bags behind me. Beyond the exit of the jetway stood a medieval village. The streets of the old town were cobbled, difficult to navigate, even though I wore sensible shoes. I wondered how many centuries had passed since the town's inception, and whether the ghosts of years gone by still roamed the streets, unseen.

The smell of pizza wafted through the air, and someone held the door open for me, ushering me in. What happened to Mom and my brother? Once inside, I looked over to the table where an old friend of mine was waving me over. With her sat some guys who I didn't know, one of whom was my boyfriend and future husband, except I hadn't met him yet, much less married him, if that makes sense.

As I bit into my pizza, I asked, "Are these mushrooms okay to eat? Or is there something funny about them?" They all looked at me as though I had lost my mind. Trust me, I hadn't.

I excused myself and headed for the bathroom to throw up, hoping to get whatever this was out of my system. On my way out, I tripped over Old Lady Me again.

"Sorry," she said, steadying me and pointing at the clock above the bar. "But it's three minutes to midnight. And I know it feels like you've got all the time in the world, but time moves in mysterious ways."

I headed back out onto the street, which was no longer cobbled, and walked towards a Tim Horton's I recognized as the one around the corner from my apartment. Yes! Finally something makes sense. I must have been sleepwalking and was finally waking up from the weirdest nightmare I'd ever had. When I opened the door to the Tim Horton's, I found myself sitting cross-legged on the carpet in my classroom, reading to my Grade 4 students. That's not right. I'm not supposed to be here. Do I have dementia?

The students morphed into adult versions of themselves and one said, "Are you still teaching? We heard you got old and tired and retired."

No, it's not like that. I'm of perfectly sound mind.

Out the door of Tim's and into the adjacent outdoor pool I went. I was in the deep end. Never having had lessons, I shouldn't even have been there. I watched as I sank, struggling to get to the surface, but I couldn't help myself. I panicked, couldn't breathe, thought I was going to die here and now in this pool at the tender age of ten. Drowning... drowning... I stared in relief as the child in me broke through the surface, coughing and gasping for air. I looked terrified, but it seemed I was okay, so I simply left myself behind.

I headed from the pool towards my childhood home, through the cemetery, remembering our old shortcut from when we were kids. Names were etched onto the tombstones, but the dates had been left off, as if the dead hadn't quite made it to their graves yet. When I got to our street, something else didn't look right. The street was the same old boulevard, but not quite the same.

A procession of large black cars slowly proceeded down the street towards the cemetery entrance. On the boulevard sat my kid brother and I along with some of our childhood friends, bat, ball, and gloves by our side, waiting to resume play. I wondered whether Mom and Dad would be waiting for me in our old house after the game.

"But that's ridiculous," I said aloud. "I'm not a kid anymore and Mom and Dad are dead."

A stranger passing by on the street stopped and asked if I needed recharging.

Seriously worried for my sanity, I asked what year it was. I couldn't tell whether I was in the present, past, or future.

"Why are you asking?" The stranger's brows came together. "That doesn't matter. What's important is that it's two minutes to midnight and you're running out of time."

"I don't understand what's going on. I keep seeing myself, my family, and my friends in different years, and everything seems really mixed up." I fought back the tears that welled in my eyes.

"Are you okay? Do you want me to get you some help?" he asked. "Someone to uncross your wires?"

"I don't know. It's like time and places are all a jumble and I'm everywhere I've ever been and even haven't been all at once. I can't explain it. I think I might be losing my mind," I confided in him as the tears broke through.

"Your mind? What is it that makes you think that?"

"Look over there!" I pointed. "That little girl just fell from that hayloft and broke her arm. I think she's me!"

"Yeah, and...?" he asked, unfazed by what I was telling him.

"How can that be? It's not possible!" My frustration got the better of me and I sank to the ground.

The stranger raised his right hand and made a circular motion in the air, and called out, "One one one."

"What are you doing?"

“Calling for help. You seem really disoriented. I think you’re stuck in One D. It’s okay. Maybe you should sit down under that tree and try to relax. Someone will be along shortly to rewire you,” he reassured me.

“One what? Re...what?” I ventured.

“Have you had a fall or been in an accident recently? Did you bump your head?”

“No, I don’t think so. Well, maybe I tripped...there was a crack in the concrete...” I remembered. “Can you just tell me where I am? And I’m kind of confused about what year it is.”

“You’re everywhere,” he explained, “And it’s every year, the same as it always is.”

And I understood, then. It was like an awakening or rebirth. The realization hit me like a slap in the face. The world isn’t flat, nor are we. Time and space are human constructs. It was too much for my mind to absorb, this knowledge of the truth. Sure, I had always thought there had to be more to our existence than we knew. But this was beyond anything I could ever have imagined. This world I’d stumbled into, this alternate universe, this nightmare, this was something I couldn’t live with. It put my brain into overload and threatened to explode it in a shower of neurons. You can’t possibly understand, I know.

“I want to go home! I want to go home!”

I concentrated on a single goal – getting back to my old life, safely cocooned in ignorance.

I pictured my basement with its grey walls and concrete floor, the hall leading to the laundry. Staring ahead, willing the road to open up, I closed my mind to everything but the basement and the laundry waiting for me.

“Where is home?” The old lady appeared next to the stranger. “Where do you belong?”

“Home. With Mark.” The realization swept over me. It wasn’t a place. It wasn’t a time. Home was someone.

And then there it was, right where it wasn’t a second ago. The crack in the concrete. The laundry room beyond.

“Are you coming?” I asked Old Lady Me, reluctant to leave a part of myself behind.

“No. It’s too late for me. I’ve been there, done that. But you’d better hurry. It’s one minute to midnight. You have a past. You have a present. Don’t throw away our future. Now get out of here.” She vanished into the air and I rubbed my eyes.

When I opened them, my husband, son, and daughter stood before me. “Hurry up,” said Mark. “It’s almost midnight. We can’t wait all night for you to get your head straightened out.”

I eagerly stepped over the crack and back into a place and time my simple mind could process. I returned to my one-dimensional world where I knew I belonged. Back to my boyfriend. Back to my future. Back to my life.

Believe me when I tell you I have no plans to escape ever again.

Beyond Redemption

Nalini Priyadarshni

This far and then no more.
You can't come any closer.
I cannot let you see my soul
Bare to its bones or
Fiddle with its colors.
When it's no more than a game,
An engagement to keep you busy,
Until your next job,
Or a more compliant warm body
Finds way under your sheets.

I am not shy.
But you can't peer into my eyes.
They tell tales, you don't care to listen
You have already made up your mind
About my truth.
All you listen to is resonance
Of your own notions.
It allows you to treat me
Like a doll
Devoid of any life

No, I can't let you kiss these lips
Therein sleep the wild winds
That saw me paint your face
A bright red as I sent you to war
They still echo with songs
I sang for your victory.

The ashes I heaped on my head
When you did not return
Will be caught in whirlwind
And get in our eyes.

Some things are best left unexplored
Until we wake up

Things that cannot be seen with eyes
Like the smell of our skins

Tattoo our thighs with crimson
Of fresh blood

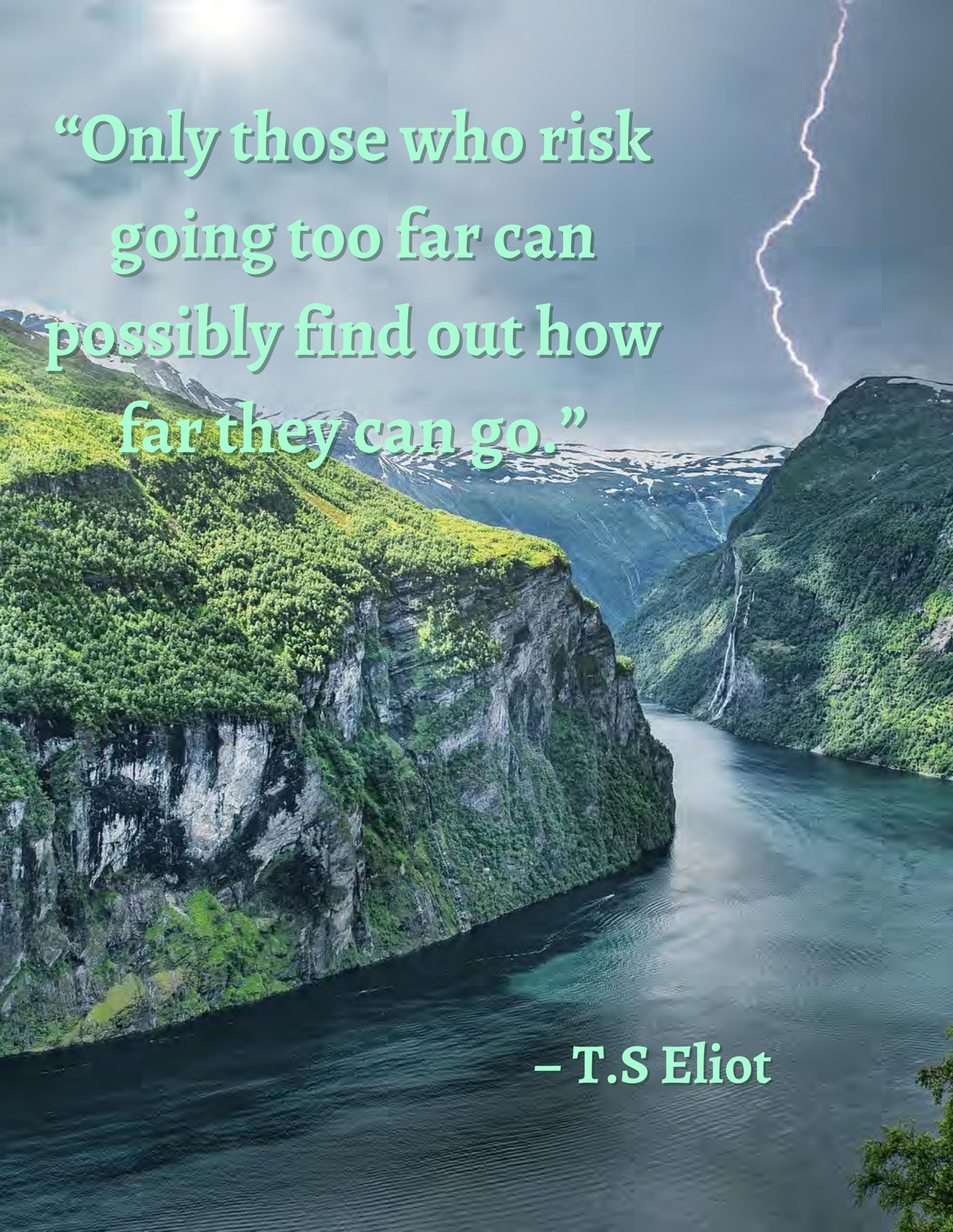
Pierce our noses with bones

Roll in thistles

Fire-walk without singeing

If it does not ruin us beyond redemption
It is just a waste of time.

POETRY

A dramatic landscape featuring a deep fjord with a river, steep green cliffs, and a lightning bolt striking a dark sky. The scene is captured from an elevated perspective, showing the river winding through the valley. The cliffs are covered in lush green vegetation, and the sky is filled with dark, stormy clouds. A bright lightning bolt strikes down from the upper right corner, illuminating the scene. The overall mood is one of awe and natural power.

**“Only those who risk
going too far can
possibly find out how
far they can go.”**

– T.S Eliot

AMY BASSIN & MARK BLICKEY - CONTRIBUTORS

New York interdisciplinary artist Amy Bassin and writer Mark Blickley work together on text-based art collaborations and experimental videos. Their work has appeared in many national and international publications as well as two books: *Weathered Reports: Trump Surrogate Quotes from the Underground* (Moria Books, Chicago) and *Dream Streams* (Clare Songbird Publishing House, New York). Their videos, "Speaking In Bootongue" and "Widow's Peek: The Kiss of Death," represented the United States in the 2020 year-long world tour of *Time Is Love: Universal Feelings: Myths & Conjunctions*, organized by the esteemed African curator, Kisito Assangni.

Mark Blickley grew up within walking distance of the Bronx Zoo. François Truffaut's film *The 400 Blows* made him want to become a writer because he saw that childhood trauma and abuse could be turned into poignant works of art. Just weeks before the international pandemic shut travel down, Amy Bassin was mugged and had her phone robbed while visiting Barcelona, Spain. She's hoping for a much more satisfying and triumphant visit abroad once it's safe to travel. Her upsetting European experience did not result in the knee-jerk reaction of far too many Americans to run out and buy a gun.

DEBORAH L. BEAN - CONTRIBUTOR

Deborah L. Bean is a native Texan raised during the height of the moon race, which piqued her interest in science-fiction from a young age. She won First Place from The Writers Guild of Texas for her flash fiction piece "The Visiting Professor," 2017. Ms. Bean has authored four technical user manuals on Act! Contact Management and Peachtree Accounting for Windows (Wordware Publishing 1997, 1999, 2000, 2002). In 2016, she completed her Graduate Certificate in the Your Novel Year program at ASU's Piper Center for Creative Writing. She is currently working on her series, *The Moabim Chronicles*.

KAREN BOISSONNEAULT-GAUTHIER - CONTRIBUTOR

Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier is a Canadian indigenous photographer and visual artist. When she's not walking her Siberian Husky under the Northern Lights, she designs with Art of Where. Her publication covers include: *Synkroniciti*, *The Feel Magazine*, *Doubleback Review*, *Arachne Press*, *Pretty Owl Poetry*, *Wild Musette*, *Existere Journal*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, *Gigantic Sequins* and *Ottawa Arts Journal*, among others. Karen has also been featured in *Vox Popular Media Arts Festival*, *Bracken Magazine*, *Zoetic Press*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Maintenant 15*, *Parliament Lit* and *Pure in Heart Stories* to name but a few.

RACHAEL BRITTON - COMMISSIONING ED.

Rachael Britton is currently studying stage management at Florida State University's School of Theatre. She loves all things *Star Trek*, *Mamma Mia!*, and can often be found hanging out in her favorite city (Chicago), relaxing on a beach somewhere in her home state of Florida, or decked out in her favorite Mickey ears at Walt Disney World.

LORRAINE CAPUTO - CONTRIBUTOR

Lorraine Caputo is a wandering troubadour whose poetry appears in over 300 journals on six continents, and 19 collections – including *Notes from the Patagonia* (dancing girl press, 2017), *On Galápagos Shores* (dancing girl press, 2019) and *Escape to the Sea* (Origami Poems Project, 2021). She also authors travel narratives, articles, and guidebooks. Her writing has been honored by the Parliamentary Poet Laureate of Canada (2011) and nominated for the Best of the Net. Caputo has done literary readings from Alaska to the Patagonia. She journeys through Latin America with her faithful knapsack Rocinante, listening to the voices of the pueblos and Earth.

ANNALI CARMEL - CREATIVE TEAM

Annali Carmel enjoys her life in rural New South Wales, where she listens to a lot of music, does some singing, and welcomes the occasional affection of Aria the cat, when she deigns the peasant worthy.

SUE COOK - STAFF WRITER, SENSITIVITY READER, SOCIAL TEAM

Sue Cook lives in Freeport, Illinois with her husband Randy and two dogs. Her passions include assistance dogs, rescue dogs, music, acting, theater, poetry, and Doctor Who. She's been in both film and theater and is a regular cast member of the podcast *Doctor Who's Line is it....Anyway?* Sue is an advocate for the use of Service Dogs to assist their disabled handlers to maintain their independence. *Quigley's Quest*, her first children's book, addresses how a dog becomes a Service Dog.

KATIE DANIELS - SOCIAL MEDIA COORDINATOR & STAFF WRITER

Katie Daniels is a speech-language pathologist in Florida, where she resides with her husband and their pup-child. She has dabbled in professional and personal writing over the years, but only recently began sharing her work with others. She is a proud Florida kid who enjoys meeting new people, seeing new places, and all things related to laughter, travel, faith, Disney, reading, and F.S.U. football. She is easily bribed with donuts or mac 'n cheese.

JP DENEUI - HEAD COPY EDITOR

Joseph Paul "JP" DeNeui is a basketball-loving missionary kid from Thailand transplanted to Chicago, Illinois, where he shivers through winters and writes fantasy and sci-fi. He is the author of the fantasy novel *Shadow of Wings*.

JEAN ENDE - CONTRIBUTOR

Jean Ende is a nice girl from the Bronx trying to exorcize her background by writing short stories about her immigrant family. Her stories have been published and recognized by a dozen publications and contests. She is a former newspaper reporter, corporate marketing executive, political publicist, and college professor. Jean is almost finished with her first novel and wishes it weren't so hard to find an agent.

IVANKA FEAR - CONTRIBUTOR

Ivanka Fear is a former teacher pursuing her passion for writing. She resides in Ontario, Canada with her family and the stray cats that wander in. When not reading and writing, she enjoys watching mystery and romance shows, going for walks, and visiting the lake. Her poems and stories appear in *Last Leaves Literary*, *Analogies and Allegories*, *The Mark Literary Review*, *Dead Fern Press*, *Defenestration*, *Autumn House Review*, *South Shore Review*, *Black Moon*, *Red Alder Review*, *eucalyptus and rose*, and elsewhere.

KARRIE HUBERTS - CONTRIBUTOR

Karrington Huberts is from the small town of Hudsonville, Michigan. After trying digital art and finding it wasn't for her, she returned to traditional mediums – though she often combines the two. With a love for all things black and white, she can usually be found at her desk working on her most recent pen and ink drawing.

JEFF KIRBY - COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Jeff Kirby is an avid doer of things, and can often be found on a bike in downtown Chicago, with a cup of coffee at hand. Jeff is a fan of Chicago, podcasts, witty comedies, and professional wrestling, and is just beginning to get his mojo back as a writer.

CHELSIE KREITZMAN - CONTRIBUTOR

Chelsie Kreitzman lives in Kentucky with her husband, two young sons, and a tuxedo cat named Cookie. Along with reading and writing, she loves animals, outdoor activities, and spending time with her family. She has published poetry in several literary journals, including *Poetic Sun* and *The Purpled Nail*.

HELEN A. LEE - COPY EDITOR

Helen A. Lee is a Kansas native and Chicago-area resident with 20+ years of writing and editing experience. She has a master's degree in journalism from Columbia University and a master's degree in biology from Miami University in Ohio. Her work has been published in many magazines, newspapers, books, and online publications, including *Looper.com*, the *Chicago Windy City Guide*, *The Pretty Pimple*, *Simplemost*, *The Happy Puppy Site*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Gamespot.com*. She's a single mom with one child who enjoys volunteering in her spare time.

MIKE LEE - CONTRIBUTOR

Mike Lee is a labor journalist and editor who's lived something of a magical life, including being a single parent for nearly twenty years, building an editorial career by sheer force of will, and attracting interest as a short story writer and photographer. His philosophy is simple: "I fall in love with the impossible to grasp the improbable. My priority is finding joy in the effort of creation." Mike's work is published and forthcoming in *Ghost Parachute*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *The Quarantine Review*, and others.

TIFFANY LINDFIELD - CONTRIBUTOR

Tiffany Lindfield is a social worker by day, trade, and heart, advocating for climate justice, gender equality, and animal welfare. By night she is a prolific reader of anything decent and a writer.

CLAIRE LOADER - CONTRIBUTOR

Claire Loader is a New Zealand born writer and photographer now living in Galway, Ireland. In her spare time Claire may be found with a camera in tow, exploring the medieval ruins of the Irish countryside, soaking up inspiration. Her work has been published in various magazines and anthologies, including *Poetry Bus*, *Splonk*, *Crannóg* and *The Cormorant*.

CYNTHIA ANN LUBLINK - COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CREATIVE TEAM

Cyndi is the mama of two grown children and Oma to eight grandchildren, all of whom she adores. She's a biker chick with a lady's heart and thirty-nine tattoos that tell some of her life story. Not just a cancer survivor, she's a life thriver. She also loves painting, and finds the process similar to solving math equations. She has been a writer/poet since the age of nine, her first poem being about God's Hands. She wrote for *Christian Biker Magazine* for five years.

EMILY MACKENZIE

Emily MacKenzie is a Canadian born writer who currently teaches Secondary English in Scotland. She studied English and Creative Writing at Carleton University in Ottawa, although her love of writing developed long before that. Emily loves exploring different narrative formats and styles in her own writing, and while she tends to stick with long or short prose fiction, the odd poem slips through from time to time. She can most often be found tackling one of several young adult fantasy stories she intends to publish, both on her tablet, and on the walls with stickies, markers, and poster paper.

TANDY MALINAK - STAFF WRITER

A Seattleite by birth, Tandy Malinak loves mountains but not rain. So she escaped to Chicago to learn what 'winter', 'summer', and 'real thunderstorm' mean, and she decided she liked them all. Tandy earned a BA in Education specializing in English and now spends her days homeschooling, nannying, and helping to lead her church's kids' ministry. In her free time, she writes fantasy and sci-fi, solves crosswords, and plays Nintendo. She lives with her husband, two dragon-loving kids, and three black cats.

MICHELE MEKEL - CONTRIBUTOR

Living in Happy Valley, Michele Mekel wears many hats of her choosing: writer and editor; educator and bioethicist; poetess and creatrix; cat herder and chief can opener; witch and woman; and, above all, human. Her work has appeared in various academic and creative publications, including being featured on Garrison Keillor's The Writer's Almanac and nominated for Best of the Net. Her poetry has also been translated into Cherokee. She is co-principal investigator for the Viral Imaginations: COVID-19 project.

ELIZABETH MOCK - ILLUSTRATOR AND DESIGN TEAM

Elizabeth Mock is a Grand Rapids, Michigan native and senior in illustration studying at Grand Valley State University, where she is also the Vice President of the Student Interest Group of Illustrators, the university's illustration club. Outside of school and The MockingOwl Roost, she is a community manager at Adobe. In the official Adobe Creative Career (ACC) Discord server, she helps host panels, challenges, and discussions to elevate members' careers through mentorship. With hopes to pursue a career in graphic, layout, and information design, Elizabeth also enjoys community engagement, animation, and photography. You can find her daily in ACC.

NANCY MOCK - PROOFREADER

Nancy was born in Montana, raised in Ohio, and moved to Florida almost 30 years ago. Mother of Rita Mock-Pike and her two siblings. Nancy learned to make computers "dance" in the early 1970s, with her husband's encouragement, before most people had computers in their homes. She's had a lot of experience formatting magazines, flyers, etc. throughout her life. As a retiree, her favorite hobbies are still crafting (mostly sewing) and reading.

RITA MOCK-PIKE - EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Editor-in-Chief of The MockingOwl Roost, Rita Mock-Pike is the granddaughter of aviatrix, Jerrie Mock, first woman to pilot an airplane solo around the world. Rita has found inspiration from her grandmother's life and flight and pursued many of her own dreams in theatre, podcasting, novel writing, and cooking up delicious food from around the world. She now writes on food, travel, pets, faith, and the arts. She's happily married to Matt, and faithfully serves the very fluffy kitten queen, Lady Stardust.

JOHN MURO - CONTRIBUTOR

A native of Connecticut, John's professional career has been dedicated to environmental stewardship and conservation. In the Lilac Hour, his first volume of poems, was published in fall 2020 by Antrim House and is available on Amazon. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous literary journals, including River Heron, Euonia, Sheepshead, Moria, Willawaw, Writers Shed, and The French Literary Review. He is also a two-time nominee for the 2021 Pushcart Prize. John and his wife, Debra, live on the Connecticut shoreline and they enjoy travel, kayaking, and spending time with friends and family. John has a life-long passion for art, music, and all things chocolate.

SOREN PORTER - COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Soren Porter - He/him, INEJ, 30s-ish I think?, perpetually taken. Writing reflections of faith and philosophy. LGBTQA+ ally and sworn enemy of white supremacy.

NALINI PRIYADARSHNI - CONTRIBUTOR

Nalini Priyadarshni is a poet, a writer, an editor, a translator, and an educationist though not necessarily in that order, who has authored Doppelganger in My House and co-authored Lines Across Oceans with the late D. Russel Michnimer. Her writings have appeared in numerous literary journals, podcasts, and international anthologies including but not limited to The Madras Courier, Ugly Writers, Counter Currents, Art Hut, Silence Between Notes, Witness, and Still We Sing. She has edited several poetry collections including Contemporary Major Indian Women Poets and lives in Ludhiana, India.

**AIDAN SYDIK (DRAKE INFERNO) -
CONTRIBUTOR**

Aidan Sydik is a student, artist, and writer of stories and poetry. He has been doing creative writing since 2018, and began creating Shatters in May of 2021. He enjoys games, fencing, and music, and is currently located in Nebraska.

DANA REEVES - STAFF WRITER

Meet Florida born-and-raised Dana Reeves: Wife, dog mom, certified personal trainer and lover of all things reading and writing. What began as a hobby in writing short stories while in school soon turned into a full-fledged passion for all things writing as an adult. She loves to create fiction, poetry and fitness-related articles. When Dana isn't writing, she loves running, traveling with her husband and family, exploring the world via cruise ship, and, as always, searching the universe over for more exciting writing material.

GERARD SARNAT - CONTRIBUTOR

Gerard Sarnat MD has won the San Francisco Poetry's Contest, Poetry in Arts First Place Award/Dorfman Prizes. Nominated for Pushcarts/Best of Net Awards, Gerry's published in Hong Kong Review, Tokyo Journal, Buddhist Review, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Arkansas Review, Hamilton-Stone Review, New Haven Institute, Texas Review, Vonnegut Journal, Brooklyn Review, SF Magazine, LA Review, NY Times plus by Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Chicago, Columbia presses. He's authored collections: Homeless Chronicles, Disputes, 178, and Melting Ice King. Stanford professor/healthcare CEO, Gerry's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized and devoted energy/resources toward climate justice on Climate-Action-Now's board. Married since 1969, Gerry has nine grand/kids.

ROGER TOPP - CONTRIBUTOR

Previously from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Yorkshire, Roger Topp lives in the boreal forest of Interior Alaska. He came north for sea ice and the nightlife and received an M.F.A. from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. By day, he directs museum exhibitions and digital media design. To date, his fiction and nonfiction have appeared in more than a dozen publications including The Maine Review, Dunes Review, Into the Void, Bennington Review, Zyzzyva, and West Branch.

LYNN WHITE - CONTRIBUTOR

Lynn White lives in North Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice, events, places, and people she has known or imagined. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net, and a Rhysling Award.

THE
M  C K I N G  W L
ROOST