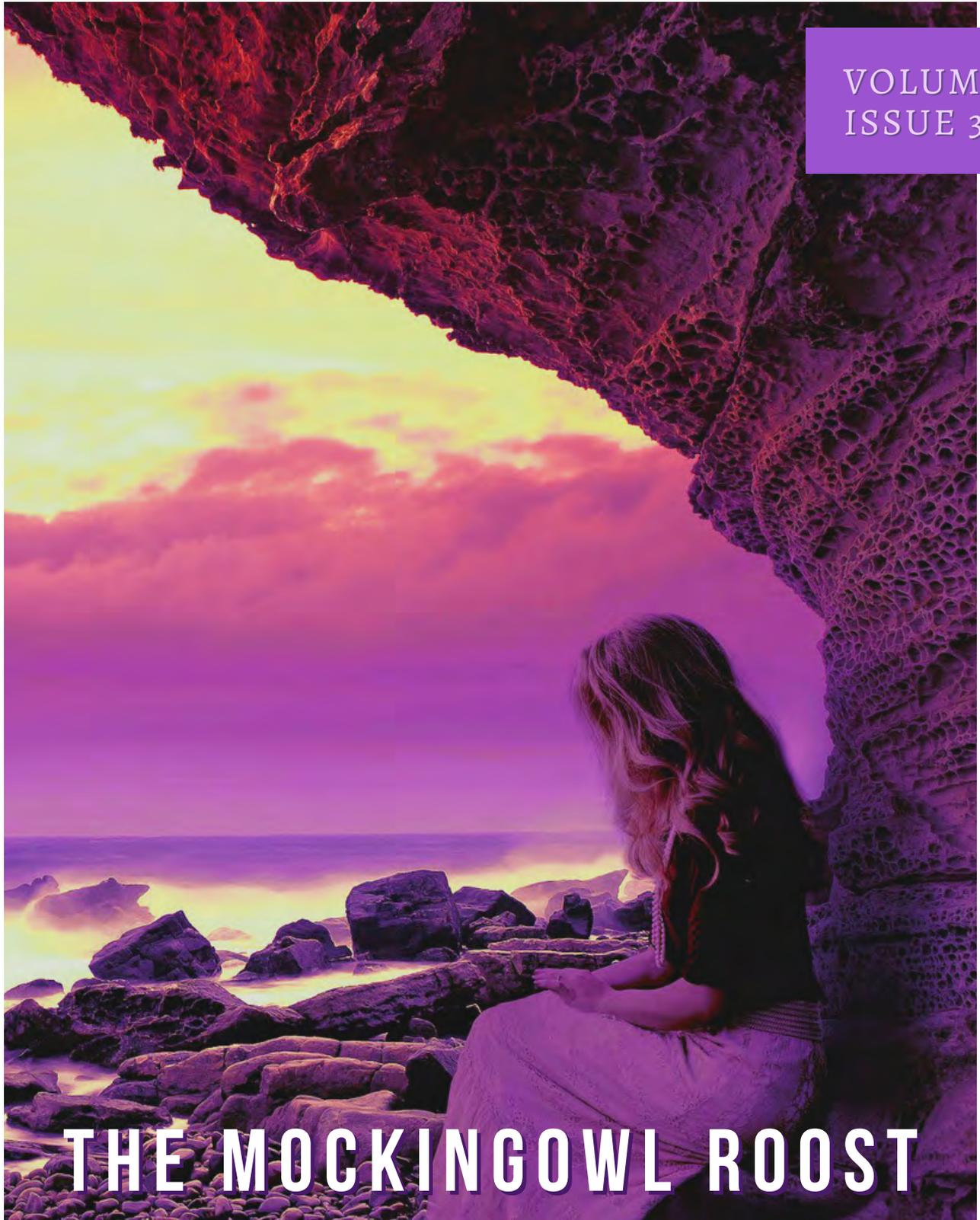


Introspection

VOLUME II,
ISSUE 3



THE MOCKINGOWL ROOST

FEATURED FICTION

Among the Golden Flowers

Piecemeal

FEATURED POEMS

East

Sightings

FEATURED ESSAYS

Deliberate

My Love

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 01 LETTER FROM THE EDITOR**
02 POETRY - Daybreak
03 POETRY - Dreams
04 FICTION - Motet
06 FICTION - Piecemeal
10 NONFICTION - Come In, Come In
12 POETRY - Child Interrupted
13 NONFICTION - Deliberate
16 ARTWORK - Frank Lloyd Wright
19 POETRY - Swing
20 POETRY - Mother's Coat
21 FICTION - The Gloomy Arrival of a Tuesday Train
24 NONFICTION - My Love
26 POETRY - Glass Darkly
27 FICTION - Lethe
29 NONFICTION - Sacred Space: Or Sitting a Spell
33 COSPLAY FEATURE - Cathy Cole
38 POETRY - All I See and Know, Suspended
40 POETRY - Stargazing
41 FICTION - Icarus, Part I
45 ARTWORK - Walk in an Austrian Wood
47 POETRY - In Between
48 POETRY - Mother Robin
49 FICTION - Among the Golden Flowers
55 POETRY - Childhood Minds in Grown Times
56 FICTION - Demons Out There, Part III
60 COLUMN - Dancing with the Muse: Films That Inspire
62 FICTION - Soiled Like Me
64 ARTWORK - sjálvrannsakan
66 POETRY - From "Forms for Others"
67 FICTION - Creature Encounter
71 POETRY - East
72 FICTION - The Whistling Caverns, Part 1
77 ARTWORK - Positive
79 FICTION - I've Been Working on the Railroad
86 POETRY - Sightings
87 FICTION - Claiming Chloe
91 POETRY - Nicodemus Looks Back
92 INSPIRATION - My Messy and His Holiness
93 ARTWORK - Profundity
95 FICTION - Jeremy
97 POETRY - Fall
98 NONFICTION - I Choose Happiness
99 POETRY - When a Hearse Goes By
100 BYLINES

Note from the Editor

As my fellow runners on staff at the MockingOwl Roost will attest, when you hit the trail for a longer run, you can shed the troubles of the world and let your mind run free with your feet.

This year, I'm gearing up for my second marathon. I haven't run much the last couple of years due to several bouts with COVID, personal challenges, and other matters, but I'm finding myself in a place, at last, of introspection. During my long runs, I set aside every day troubles for this now, this moment, this footfall.

Since taking up running in 2004 as a surprise common interest for my best friend, Elizabeth, I have spent hundreds (thousands?) of miles running across the planet and thousands of hours contemplating existence.

I've found running to be my problem-solving space. When I'm directing a show, I take the trail to solve problematic blocking or budget blocks. When I'm writing a novel and can't quite get to that emotional core of the narrator, I hit the track and ask her what moves her. I cannot think of a single time I haven't resolved these mind problems through the clarity of introspective running.

That made me wonder what folks think about when they look inward - and this issue is the result of that question mark. Most of the entries probably didn't come as the result of a long run, but they did come from creators looking deep within to find the hope, the joy, the sorrow - trying to bubble out.

As you read their contemplations, I hope you find your own release.

Rita Mock-Pike, editor-in-chief



Daybreak

Bobbi Sinha-Morey
Poetry

By daybreak living on hope
I carry in my heart a guiding
love, opening my eyes all around
me, my soul set free and no one
can take it away from me; no
shortage of nature – it's everywhere
to waken my senses, my muse
coming like a rushing mountain
stream, the sky to vibrate above
me. And in my sleep I'd dream in
patterns, pin down the sun and
snowy flowers left by a slip of
cloud; a paintbrush dancing
across canvas like a ballerina
onstage; a litter of playing cards
leading the way. In my wakening
hours I glimpsed a feather of
a redbird stolen from the woods
and, before I could capture my
breath I witnessed the giver of
life brush a warm wind across
the joyous earth.





Dreams

As the night turns into dawn
 My dreams struggle hovering in my mind
 Restless to complete its story
 And suddenly it's gone!

With a jolt, I wake up,
 Tucking my loose strands behind my ears,
 Flummoxed, shuddering, wondering,
 "Is it the incomplete slumber
 Or the fatigue of what I gave up"?

Defeated, is what I feel.
 Emotions all crooning to dream that dream
 The heart longs for the same.
 "Without further ado
 Go back to sleep", my nerves squeal.

Aglow with the tantalizing glimpse
 Of the career I could have had.
 Indelicate! A poignant reminder of time,
 The feeble mind entrapped in dreams
 is what the soul feeds.

All I dreamt was a snare.
 How much I despised goodbyes
 To all I thought were mine, fully alive
 For I feared how without these, I would fare.

As I grow wiser and sane,
 The awaiting dreams give me hope,
 Amassed alike the alluvium,
 Depositing with the floods from the rain.

Reminding me of its fertility, so ephemeral
 If remained uncultivated for long.
 Alas! My dreams get nebulous with time
 As I can't 'introspect' my latent potential.

Seema Prusty



Fiction

Paul Lamb

Motet

There is no sycamore tree on my block. The main street in our neighborhood was once lined with great sycamores that arched over the road impressively. But all it took was one person to cut down the two before her house – she claimed she was tired of raking the large leaves and rolling her ankle on the seed balls – for others to begin taking them down for their own reasons. Now the survivors stand in scattered patches, out of place amidst the squat flowering cherry and pear trees that replaced them.

The sycamore leaves in my yard, big as dinner plates, blew in from at least two streets over. This comes up at the homes association meeting each fall. Complaints about one neighbor's leaves blowing into another neighbor's yard and how much extra work that makes. It's not that much extra work, and there's really nothing that can be done about it anyway, so after the expected sour notes from some and the counterpoint from others, the matter rests for a year.

The nearest sycamore is in front of a house purchased last year by a to-themselves couple who likely have a name but are generally known as "Not-the-Tiptons". I see "Not-the-Tiptons" walking in the neighborhood, and they return my wave, but they never stop to pass the time, and with winter coming, it's likely I'll see even less of them. I suspect that's how they like things.

The feathery, rust-colored leaves I'm raking now, on the other hand, have come from two doors down. Laura had planted a victory tree in her yard when she finished chemotherapy the first time. We all thought it was a cypress, but she corrected us by saying it was a dawn redwood, tossing out a Latinate name none of us could pronounce. Neighbors plant cypress trees in low areas where water collects, so they're common enough around here, but Laura's redwood is at the top of a slope. I don't know if redwoods need a lot of water the way cypress do, but Laura's tree has never thrived.

It's always the first to look sickly in the summer heat, though it rallied this year and stayed green until the first cold snap, but now its leaves have fallen. These feathery redwood leaves cling to each other, which makes them easier to lift together from the pile to stuff in the bag, and they make me remember Laura, always ready to ambush you with her opinions about the neighbors but always first at their doors with flowers or a cake when there were troubles.

Not so with Gary up the block, whose pin oak leaves frustrate me. They are dry and stiff and slip out of my hands when I try to grab a bunch. Gary sits in a lawn chair at the top of his driveway on evenings when the weather allows and rags on everyone and everything. His daughter apologizes for him, but it's not necessary. Strictly speaking, these are not Gary's pin oak leaves. He moved in with his daughter's family last year when he grew too infirm, or perhaps too cussed, to live on his own, and he rags about that too. His cacophony of yard signs, once part of his trolling, lay fallen in his yard for a week after the last election when his candidate lost. I've noticed several walkers have changed their accustomed routes since Gary moved into the neighborhood, though not "Not-the-Tiptons", who give no more than a wave to his gibes.

The walnut leaves are all my own, and they fall early in the season, so except for these few strays under my burning bush, they're gone now. What remains on my lawn are mostly the leaves of others, chiefly oaks, which can sometimes hang on through the winter before falling. And any other, crisper leaves left uncollected on neighboring lawns that blow my way and beyond. The foster home at the end of the street has a barely kept yard; no surprise that their leaves appear in my pile. The parents' lives must be busy with such a gang, but some of those children seem of an age now that they could do a little yard work. I don't know, and it's not my place to say. The stairstep kids are always polite when they pass on their way to the shops. "Good afternoon, Mr. Tallis," they chant in unison. That's enough for me.

Beech leaves from the widow next door, bronze and brittle underfoot; sweetgum leaves, earnest and goofy, sent here by my divorced neighbor's noisome blower; lingering linden leaves from the house with the red-headed boy down the way. Maple leaves from the old Coleman house. When they moved away they quietly assured us that a family named Shaw had bought their house, but it turned out to be a family named Shah. All in my yard now, to be gathered by me when I stop leaning on my rake. All suggesting their stories, stories I've heard from discordant voices, which harmonize in my mind as the leaves do in the bag.



PIECEMEAL

MJ Delfin

Fiction



Once upon a time, I
started chopping off
pieces of myself to
feed others.



I started young, like most, through Grandma's warnings: "Ladies sit with their legs crossed." Followed by, "There are wolves about, so sit straight, and give them a smile." I kept my big eyes open, my big mouth closed, and my big hands clutching at my aching guts. At first, I thought they'd be easy to spot by the overgrown tails and fangs winking under their sheepskins. But they're cunning. Those fox-wolf hybrids stalk from behind - waiting years for the flesh to ripen, acting cute as lap dogs. Yet, they're smart enough to only take a few nibbles here and there, pretending to ask with pleading eyes and friendly head nudges. I'd take pity and pluck a nose here, a ring finger there, or some unnecessary ear, then toss them at the wriggling curs, salivating in delight and chewing on my kidnapped laughter. Back then, I didn't understand just how well I was being prepared to be chased. And leaving my scent down the rabbit hole, they led me down a wonderfully twisted game.



Sometimes it was perfectly innocent and I acted out of pure-white goodness - like all those childish books and fairy godmothers taught me. After all, sweet maidens always sacrifice their hearts for others, lest they never be loved. But poison festered in those self-inflicted wounds. My core had begun to rot and worms writhed in the wake of my sliced-up shadow. Seven birds of prey, my "guardian angels", clustered about, ever-vigilant - expectant. All I could do to appease their want was to leave a hand behind. I was even kind enough to gift them my good one - the left - then marked the way back home with chunks of bone. I was left to carry most of my pieces back.

Still, when I left those woods, it was clear I wasn't myself anymore. Something stirred within; warm, sleek, and angry. I dressed my sickness with flowers; if no one else could smell it, then I couldn't be damaged goods. I'd play "the fairest of them all" but hid my pomegranate name in a tiny box. So, I consoled myself and pretended this was just a bedtime story, the mirror-perfect smile only shattered at the corner.



Next, I lopped off bits of my already crooked feet to fit them into tiny glass shoes. I couldn't move but they were beautiful and after midnight I left dainty traces of my blood for any prince-a-penny to sniff. The little red road tasted sweet and they lapped at it while I tried to walk, exhausted, through the forested concrete. The party was a bust, so I took a coach before the magic died out. I thought it was safe but the driver felt me up in his pumpkin-cab for being moderately friendly. His talons on my knee reminded me of the older dancer from earlier who, grinning under his boar-beards, thought that leading my palm under his pants meant consent. I lost my right hand when I pulled back.

After that, having no fingers saved me, since he'd also slipped something in my drink. If it wasn't for my pride, I may have become that evening's feast. All he had to find me was that lone hint left as I waltzed away - minced toes and putrid heart, but with my secret name still intact. No need for a thousand and one excuses, all this happened in one night. So, when the charmed driver kissed me, I awoke from the sleeping spell with a start, then wrenched off my kneecap to slip out of the car. With a pretty shoe missing and my dress in rags, I wobbled my chicken legs into the gullet-black.



It wasn't long before I was swallowed whole. I wasn't even wearing anything bright that time – or maybe it was the stain of ruby lipstick on my teeth?

Perhaps. Who knows? Who cares?

Stumbling deaf and blind in the dark, I quickly lost track of the path. The Big Bad Wolf came at last – growling, undisguised, knowing my scent from years past. Though by then I was so tired and had no more limbs left with which to run nor fight, so he made soup out of my body and hair. This is how the recipe goes, so all future princesses know what awaits.

He will catalog your best-tasting parts in order, reverently, (but always save the best for last):

1. First, he'll savor those star-bright eyes leaking black
(the more vulnerable, the better the flavor);
2. next, he'll prod the cracked marble-dun pillar of the neck,
3. and lick the naked rose-red bruise of your lips.
4. Then he will force his snout into your mouth to eat the tongue quick,
5. so you can't shout.
6. Finally, he will gobble you up in one bite.
7. Happily ever after.
8. The end! Good night.



After a time, a Hunter cut me out of the monster's belly, tearing me from his red-splattered viscera wrapped in cloth-of-blood. But once I saw my charmed rescuer's blue beard, I realized he was that same handsy fella from the ball! The Big Bad Wolf may be dead, but he had a pack. It's a tale as old as time, a song as old as rhyme...

They say: "Not all." But most. Enough.
The Hunger makes beasts of everyone.
Yet, what can you do when you have no hands or tongue anymore?



So, listen, princesses, because this is how our story turns, like those grim and violent tales of olde. Remember these magic words and chant:

"I'm not your consolation prize you get to pity-fuck after climbing some tower, dead flesh for your wife collection, nor a snack in between hunts. You may suck the charm from my dreams, kill my story, or steal the fairy wonder in my eyes, but my name is my own unique scar.
So, keep your gold-turning shit-claws back!"



"Why should I stay silent when you have no more power over me?
It is my Hunger you should fear now,
my Ogress-curses, and my spit—the part of me you can't grab nor eat!"

Then turn thrice, throw salt, and repeat;

and again

and again

and

again.

(One, two, three.)

"I'm not a whole Witch, a mad-moon bitch,

but

a voiceless

Weird

SCREAM

I overflow;

I G R O W

I am free !

Once upon a time... I did. But now,

I feel no guilt.

And at last,

I have

no

more

MEAT

left

to give."



Come In. Come In

10

Nonfiction

John Backman

*I am large,
I contain multitudes.*
-Walt Whitman

The two opening bars triggered a mad itch under my knuckles. The djembe — an African drum I'd started playing three months before — was nowhere near my spot on the family room couch, so I had no way of playing along. It didn't matter: my hands wouldn't take no for an answer. They used my thigh as a replacement, smacking versions of the three basic djembe notes: bass, tone, slap.

The mad itch — that was new. Until that moment I'd been the one playing the drum. From then on the drum played me. It came into my heart and took over.

The djembe had stood in a corner for fifteen years, ignored, until the pandemic brushed away every obstacle to playing it. "You have the time now," the pandemic said. "You can find the djembe lessons on YouTube. You have the drum. C'mon, it's your childhood dream." Before I knew it, my legs had wrapped themselves round the djembe, my hands pattered out a few simple rhythms, and my breath caught in my throat like the first gasp of foreplay.

I developed a routine. Start with the rhythms I'd already learned. Riff a little. Watch a video and play along with the instructor. Practice those new rhythms. Stop for the day.

That's how I played the drum. Once the drum started playing me the breaks between rhythms disappeared — my hands got faster, the riffs more intricate, the gasp deeper, shifting beats over many bars, salving the itch beneath my knuckles, making my hands burn with pleasure.

Every authentic djembe holds three spirits: the tree it was carved from, the animal whose skin forms the drumhead, and the drum's maker. Maybe someday I will learn which of them came into my heart.

In high school my girlfriend wanted Jesus to come into my heart. Her favorite tract explained how, so she led me through it one night. The graphic on page nine made life with Jesus look so alluring: a circle with a cross in the center, tiny dots around the perimeter in perfect balance. I looked more like the circle next to it — ego in the center, dots of different sizes hovering like hornets — if Jesus could come in and calm that down, how could I say no?

(Actually, I'd said no a lot. It took two years of her pestering to get me to the tract — two years of gloom that drove me into windowless rooms for hours at a time. Only when the darkness threatened to swallow me completely did I ask my girlfriend how to let Jesus in.)

I can tell the djembe beats in my heart because of the rhythms that beat in my head. They play at random: I might be walking through the house or driving to the pharmacy, and a few bars will rise unbidden, riff on themselves, fade again. You could pass right by me and hear nothing. So maybe you'll believe me, and maybe you won't, when I say the drum changed something when it entered my heart.



This kind of change wasn't new. Three days after Jesus came in I reported back to my girlfriend, breathless. "I'm suddenly loving people I can't stand!" I exclaimed. "That's not my style!" Neither was exhilaration. Apparently I had found a new style, the new spirit within me lifting the gloom as if by magic.

Not long after that, my girlfriend and I talked about demons and how they could come into your heart and what we had to do to stop them. (I think it involved commanding them to stop, with faith that the Jesus inside us had the power to defeat them.) These demons apparently took many forms, like pop music and other religions, and we had to guard our hearts against their easy entry.

What we never discussed—what we didn't know—were all the other things, good things, that could come into your heart: lovers, animals, Rembrandts, djembes.

Ultimately I left her version of faith because it let in so little. I never read a tract on how to leave, and there was no defining moment: my heart was one way and over the years it became another. What drew me to this becoming, among many other charms, was its insistence on letting things in.

Fifteen years before the song and the itch, my wife and I wandered a South African market for half an hour — that's where I spotted the djembe. Before I knew it the stall owner was sitting beside me, teaching me the bass and the tone. I don't remember handing over the cash. Perhaps I did it in a trance: trances happen to some people who let things in, saints and gurus and folks like that.

I keep saying the djembe entered my heart, like it was a one-time thing, but now I see that's not quite right. Maybe it's better to say the three djembe spirits came in at three different times — the time of buying, the time of playing, the years of neglect in between. Yes, even the neglect: for years it gripped me with shame, but now I wonder whether it too played a role in the spirits' plan.

Jesus stuck with me all that time, even joining me for a conference of world religions in 2015: 10,000 people, a sprawling convention center, every faith you can name — saffron robes and burqas and turbans and crosses and stars of David and symbols I'd never seen. My girlfriend (by this time my ex-girlfriend) would have pitched a fit about the idolatry. I'd let in a lot by this time, but a vestige of her restrictive faith remained — just enough to hold a small part of me back from taking in everything the conference had to offer.

Until Kirtan. The stage with its neon-clothed musicians was tucked into an obscure corner, but there was no missing the sound: music at full roar, chants to Govinda and Rama and other Hindu gods. Drumming, lots of drumming. People in the audience danced wildly as the chant drove on. A different sort of mad itch formed within me: ignoring the ex's voice in my head, I mouthed the gods' names — and found myself face to face with none other than Jesus, a different Jesus this time, a Jesus who opened his arms wide and let every good thing flood in.

I wonder how many have come in over the years: not just Jesus and the djembe but the gloom, my girlfriend, my wife, Govinda, even essays like this. I wonder who is still in there, who will stay, for how long, and who else is coming in and going out of my porous heart right now. That's just one kind of wonder that accompanies coming-in. There's also the exhilaration, like the euphoria when you first set foot someplace you've never been before. Sure, you're afraid—it's a big step, after all—but the fear subsides as you dream about the multitudes you'll meet, and the adventures they'll bring when they come in.

Child Interrupted

TAK Erzinger

You left me here on a Monday
in September. A heat wave,
cardinals cloaked in sunshine.
In the breeze my hair feathered.
Red-cheeked I wanted to make
for the house, where promises
had slipped from mouth to mouth,
empty as the afternoon sky
your body hovered near mine
stopping short as if repelled.

At school, they asked if you had died,
I recall us standing there between two trees
buried in silence, boughs and branches
reaching out and for a moment I almost
rushed to embrace you; easier to feign
a death than to admit abandonment. I keep
trying to let it go like all those autumn leaves
but the season returns each year, stopping me
in my tracks, the memory so clear I am no longer
blinded by the lie just tormented by the ghosts.

Poetry

Nonfiction

Deliberate

Aiman Wesley Mueller

I don't imagine merely washing my extremities, standing, bowing and prostrating will give me peace or that quietude and certainty will instantly replace loss, fear and shame. I have no expectation my chest will cease aching with self-loathing or that I'll ever sleep without waking, dreamless, to a grinding jaw and a knotted back. But as a new Muslim, a days-old baby in the faith, I do believe these rituals will help me escape imminent death.

Age twenty-eight, I lie awake in bed in the dark hour of dawn. A lamp lights just the little attic cove where I sleep, and nothing beyond. The former tenant's graffiti and holes punched in the angled surfaces of unfinished drywall hide in darkness beyond the glow of my fleeting world. In the opposite cove is the lizard they left behind: three foot, a lonely creature mulling about in a long glass terrarium. My bamboo rods—things that enforce the idea I'm home—entwine with rafters in the high peak at the attic's middle. Outside the window at my feet chimes flourish, sounding in the breeze. I intend to get up and perform Islamic ablution and prayer. My inner, primal self intends to sleep.

Hundreds of times I've gotten up before sunrise: to ogle Christmas gifts my parents had left out the night before, to adjust a red tie with blue diamonds before busing to Catholic high school, to make a cup of green tea before heading to the office, to untangle the line of my fishing pole before casting off.

But the goal of rising early was always something tangible—something my inner, primal self desired to get or desired to avoid. This morning, in the dark quiet, I ask myself to forsake sleep, to forsake desire in order to purify myself with water. To stand at an appointed time before a Being I can't see in order to receive a benefit that is, likewise, at least immediately, invisible. The proposal contains no promise of a hamburger, no hope of touching a naked thigh. Neither will someone punish me; practically, I have nothing in this world to gain or lose by rubbing water over my body and forcing it through the motions of formal Islamic prayer. Without anything to offer my inner self that it will understand, my body refuses to budge. I cry, trapped by overdeveloped desire, my own survival mechanism ironically turned against me. As if my body were a board, my own self orders me to be still; to thoughtlessly sleep, to remain on present course, the path of least resistance: shut my eyes and sleep.

Near my head sits the silvery steel bowl of water I prepared the night before, the one I'd held under the bathroom sink and then carefully walked up to the attic, trying not to spill on creaky steps. If I had my own place, I would have used the bathroom sink in the morning, but when I did have a bathroom of my own I knew nothing of Islam or ablution or prayer.



Paranoid of cops, neighbors, surveillance vehicles and everything that has eyes, I had hid in that bathroom, the most secret room of my former apartment, first sucking the wages of my brokerage office job through a glass tube. Then it was my Volkswagen Jetta GL up in flames. I had antiques. One shop even bought the American flag that had lain on my grandfather's coffin; restraining my rush to get high till I was out the door, I hopped on my bike and hauled my sickly, pale-white face, legs churning, to Bemis and Benjamin—drugs for sale—then fast as I could back to my secluded bathroom, lighting fire in my face. No longer able to pay rent, I moved out of the big apartment to the attic. Now I share a bathroom downstairs, and I'm unwelcome to knock about in the early hours. Thus, the bowl of water.

Indeed, just days ago I had asked for this: a way out of the sick routine of mini-suicides. Standing in a liquor store, holding a twenty-five cent bag of chips I had just bought, one moment I wondered where I'd get my next score and a moment later I turned to God and said, "I can't do this life anymore. I can't. I can't. I need the truth, whatever it is. Oh, God, show me the way." Less than a minute later I met, for the first time, a Muslim, a fellow American . . .

As I opened the door to the store I peered down the lamp-lit street. There was this man leaning against the bricks in a neighboring store's entryway. He stood tall and had a huge red beard, his eyes bright. I can't remember if he greeted me or if I greeted him. We just had to talk. After all, I think that's why he was there, to find someone who hated blindness enough to accept sight. "We're all from one God, you know," he said. "And God has not left us without guidance or a way back to Him." I told him what I told everybody, what I thought, what I had concluded but not yet absorbed into my bones: that I believe there's one God, that everything is ordered by that One God. I told him that incorporated into God's plan are our own free wills; we're not forced; we have a choice. "Sure," he said. "No one will make you take guidance, not even God. But you are here today and listening by God's decree." I did listen and follow and wonder until we stood together at a sink in a shabby rental building raising our feet into a flow of cold tap water. "Use the pinkie finger of your left hand to get between the toes," he said. He told me everything, what to wash, which way to stand, how straight my back should be. He told me why, too. He told me "this is how Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, did it; this is how the Prophet worshiped his lord, Our Lord, Allah."

. . . I lie in the morning on my back: the attic, a mattress with no box springs, low to the floor; it is do or die, my choice to make. Converting to Islam was easy—words—but in order to get up and wet my face, arms and feet with water, to get up and speak and move according to a prescribed ritual, I have to actually believe something will come of it. If I get up now I will get up every morning; I will pray in the afternoon; I will pray in the night. If I get up now it means I believe there is a God who sees me and hears me, and it means I will give up enslavement to desire in favor of enslavement to God.

The god of my desire has done nothing but hurt me. I have to get up and pray, get up and accept the only answer God gave me or face complete loss of all dignity, loss of all love, loss of all humanity—life left off in the walking, talking death of crack addiction. Too many of those around me are dead of heart attacks or murder, imprisoned or cackling about in drug houses. I could be the shadowy man with convulsive arms who incessantly claims to need money to get pampers for his baby. Or I might be the guy who carries a framed photo of his ex-wife in his pocket and proudly shows everyone he gets high with, the beauty he once touched. Or maybe I'll be the man who needs a loan, just for a couple days, "C'mon, I'll pay it back." If I don't sit up, if I don't wash myself, if I don't pray, I will lose. I will die.

In living, perhaps I could have so many things. Maybe I will go back to school. Or marry a Moroccan sweetheart. Own my own home. Have two bathrooms. I'll meet brothers and sisters who will do anything for me without anything in return. But that's almost too much to imagine right now; I merely don't want to hurt anymore. I don't want to be ashamed anymore, to have a drug order my every movement, to take my every dollar. I don't want anything more than to end the misery. If I let the time pass, laying here in my bed, I will make my choice. I will get up in the afternoon. I will barter my soul for little white stones, and I will smoke them with people who sell dates with their children for puffs on a pipe. Indeed, obeying my desire means a march of enslavement into a grave of eternal ignominy. And this is the easier march, the easier path before me.

Facing myself, my own power of resistance turned against me, I feel as if a literal weight, a load of clay and bricks set and mortared from my head to my toe. Before I got fired, a workmate warned me that after twenty-one days routines become habits—three years of repetition, like piling bricks up, creating a seemingly insurmountable load to lift in order to quit. People on the street told me nobody quits without help—probably not with it either. For three years I knew better, knew I was losing control, but for three years I submitted, followed my desire, fled from my conscience. Crying like a towel being rung, urging my body to cross a line of separation between me and torment, I lie humiliated, beaten, as someone who had refused to fight back until he had lost all his powers, his weapons corroded, reduced to hopeless slavery. This morning, I can't say I am fed up. I can't say I have lost too much, that I am revolting against my enemy. I can't even say it is courage. Maybe, though, I am hurt bad enough to accept the truth without conditions. Maybe I finally hate delusion enough to open my eyes to reality. But I can't even say that.

Allah knows I have a choice, that my stomach muscles are bound to obey my intent, somehow. I don't know. A miracle maybe. I sit up and kneel on the floor. Tears mix with clean water as I wash my hands, three times. I feel I am myself. Yes, I do want to be free. Maybe that is it. Maybe that is what's doing it, the need to have control over my own self. Hands that impulsively bent the car antennae, that threw the liquor bottles crashing, smashing in the street. Those hands that days before had held glass tubes to my face around which my lips had pursed, me watching, silently, submissively, almost urging on the desecration.

I rinse my mouth, the same mouth I had befouled with toxic fumes. “Give me two for thirty,” it had said. Rushing home to smoke and then heading back for more, I heard from my mouth, “Front me one,” my hand held out and grasping another rock to feed my face. My mouth bartered most vigorously when hundreds were involved. My mouth was an expert. The long timer, the lifer, said: “He gets better deals than me.” Indeed, yes, as if my mouth, my tongue, my uvula, my cheeks had been trained. I'd pulled at the pipe, shaking. My mouth sucking as a baby at a poison breast. I held the milky smoke, and exhaled everything; all had been still, a nothing. I sat momentarily proud in that illusory serenity, a dangerously thin dopamine bubble shielding me from the gnarly truths of my degradation.

As I rinse my nose three times, I feel a burning sensation deep in my sinuses. I rub my face, my sad face, with water, three times, immersing myself again in reality, revealing a picture I do not want to see but have to. I wet my hands again, flicking the excess, sending droplets of water into semi-lit space, watching them travel down to a worn wood floor. I wipe my scalp, sliding my hands back over my head and forward again. And the ears, curving my index finger through the channels and contours. Sitting down, alone, with the exception of the God, Allah, watching me, I wash my feet three times with my left hand—using the pinkie finger to get between toes, just as the Muslim I had met taught me, rubbing every cell at the surface of my skin up to the ankle, right foot first, then left. The feet are the most laborious part. They've worked the hardest, carried my whole self into evil streets and shadows; they have the most surfaces, the most hidden places, but now they are clean.



Halfway free from the demands of my desire, I will make it. I will pray.

Frank Lloyd Wright

Richard Lynch

Photography



Artist Statement

Richard Lynch

“I do things no one else does because I am the only one in my head.”

Always delving into the fringes of creativity, this composition created at the Darwin Martin house in Buffalo, NY, USA, was created when Richard was given exclusive rights to enter the property while it was under renovations. This photo is a high-dynamic-range (HDR) image and a vertical panorama stitched together in Photoshop and improved with techniques of photo artistry he developed over years working with professionals in the field of photography.



Coloring Book

Quigley's Quest

Story of a Service Dog

[Find it on Amazon](#)

A Color and Learn Kids' Book

Quigley's Quest

Story of a Service Dog



by Sue Cook

Quigley's Quest is a sweet children's coloring and learning book. It shares how both a service dog prepares to become a good service dog and how their person also prepares. The story allows the reader to interact with the story by coloring the pages.

SWING

AYAN

CHAKRABORTY

POETRY

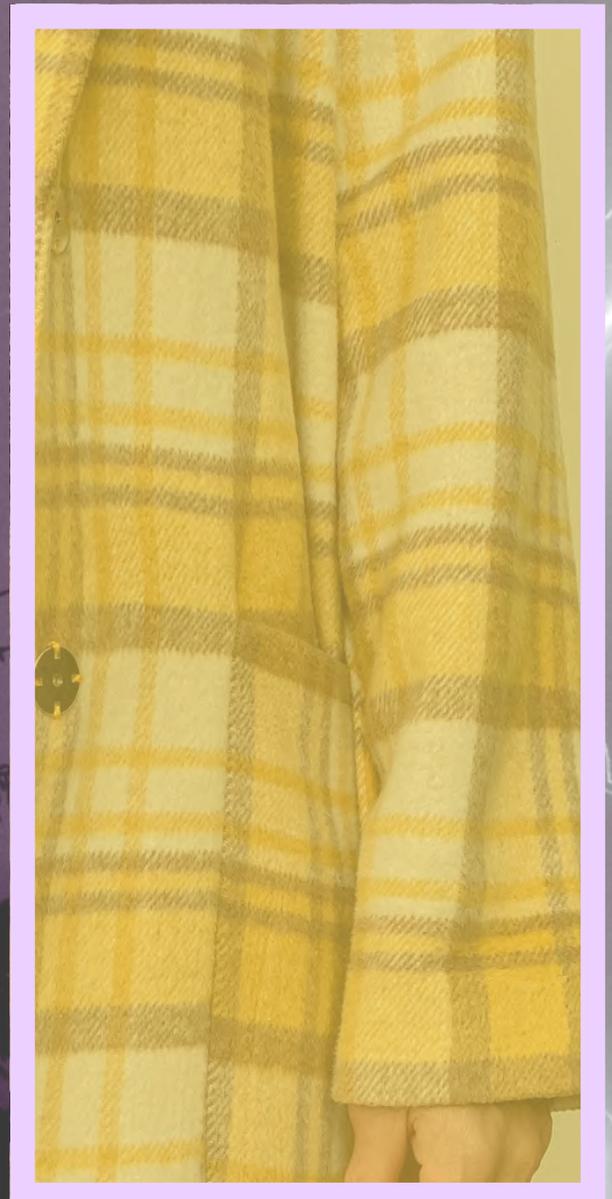
The last night when I walked on the cobbled lane, it rained again. I knew it's time.
Things look old often when they bleakly begin.
On the verandahs and at the attics. Lurking between broken walls of comforting unease.
Generations of laughter now framed into broken hourglasses.
Books that had in them what families would mean.
It had rained heavily then too.
There had been plenty of growth in the green.
And the afternoon heat waxed and waned with silly salt potions.
Long days, deep like arctic summers, bright but breathlessly long they had been.
There's life lost and regained. Like Milton's paradise.
Now, the numbers have dwindled, new sprouts bask in newer hours, unseen.
There's no death before you locate one in your senses.
And about life? Less losses, even lesser bouts to win.
These are days when rooms smell like apparitions and melodies creak on those few seats.
The pain of birth from coyly painted swings.

Mother's Coat

Poetry

Laurie Kolp

On a cold gray day like this, I act as if
Mom still wore the yellow fuzzy coat.
She always said it reminded her of the sun
shining bright, providing warmth.
I can still see her wearing it,
her frizzy auburn hair tinsel gray
like the jacket's accents—
a happy wrap despite
the toxic mothball stink.
I slip my icy hands into the deep pockets
as if Mother's embrace awaited me there,
her hands filled them just last year.
Instead, I am met with
a wadded piece of paper
I open up to find
a grocery list in shaky cursive
with cigarettes scribbled across the top.
Now this cold gray day is gloomy
the sky above like her lungs,
a foggy image I won't soon forget
her last breath taken away
like a moth on a gust of winter.





THE GLOOMY ARRIVAL OF A TUESDAY TRAIN

M. J. Myer

The dark gray clouds, which had been looming for most of the afternoon, cast a dull grayscale mood over the rusted tracks. The train wouldn't be here for another fifteen minutes and it had started to rain. This wasn't the typical train to catch after work. That one had passed through a few hours ago. Maybe a dozen or so people stood out in the cold, blowing hot air into their hands, then pushing them deep into coat pockets. One man pulled an umbrella out as the rain started coming down harder. More umbrellas appeared; puddles began to form. A smaller child, who looked like she shouldn't be

alone, kicked the water, then got down and looked closely. She seemed to study her face. She reached out and with her pointer finger rippled the water. She smiled, most likely at the warped image of herself. A weak shout came from behind the girl. An older woman smoking a cigarette, her mother, impatiently urged her to get out of the rain and come under the umbrella. The girl stood up and stomped in the puddle before walking back to the now scowling woman. Most people had gathered under a large metal canopy. The rain pounding down sounded like a child's makeshift kitchen utensils band.

Clara wasn't under the canopy though. She was out in the rain, her hair soaked, sticking to her face. Streams of rainwater drizzled down her forehead, onto her nose, and into her eyes. But her eyes had been wet before the rain – they'd been wet for the past week. She clutched something in her hands, something small, something important. She sheltered it from the rain, now and again glancing down. A picture of a young boy, only about four. Light brown hair and green eyes. His blue and white striped shirt was stained with remnants of something red that had faded to pink after many washes. His smile beamed as he held up a white sheet of paper with colorful scribbles, looking something like the sun and the ocean. It was barely recognizable, but the way he smiled you'd have thought it was the best piece of art you could lay your eyes on. The photograph didn't look too old, it still had that new picture shine on it, but the corners were wrinkled and a little tear by the boy's feet indicated its frequent removal and return from her pocket and pulled out time and time again. A few drops of rain now splattered it here and there. Clara swiped at the water, making it worse by spreading it, but she wouldn't put it away. Her eyes, now fixated on the picture, unblinking. It was hard to tell the difference between the rain and her tears, they mixed as if sharing in unspoken grief. The train horn rang out from a distance, softly transitioning her back to the present reality, standing in the ever-increasing downpour, waiting for a train. She stood there, away from everyone, alone, eyes glazed and unmoving, stuck. Somewhere deep in memory, in the crevices of loss.

Watching from under the metal canopy he stood in the back, trying to avoid the awkward glances of the tired eyes around him. He wore a black hat and a worn-out, tan coat, no longer waterproof. His gray eyes matched the sky that day. He kept his head down while peering up to see Clara standing out in the storm. Her red coat was an oozing wound in the sea of muted umbrellas. He watched as she stared at the picture, guilt sweeping across his mind. His stomach turned and he looked away. He knew it was his fault, what had happened to the boy. He wanted to run out to her, hold her, be with her. But that was no longer an option. It hadn't been for the past week.

The woman smoking the cigarette with the curious child stepped in front of his gaze, blocking Clara from his sight. Anxious, fearing the worst, he moved to see her again, he once more looked at the black numbers above her head, looming like the clouds, descending like the rain.

"3:17...2:58...2:47..." He murmured under his breath. Panic rose in his body; he could have sworn he saw steam rising from his ungloved hands.

Clara saw the train coming around the corner. She clenched up for a moment, her body tight. Then she sighed. And for what seemed to be the first time since she'd been standing out in the rain, she closed her eyes. Mascara had left its mark down her red cheeks from her tears and the rain. She took a few steps closer and moved out onto the yellow warning line which read in bold lettering

"DO NOT ENTER UNTIL TRAIN HAS COME TO A COMPLETE STOP."

She glanced up from the warning message and smiled. As she took another step, the train grew louder. Its rhythmic tune pulsed, bringing the station to life. People began to move out from under the canopy. They moved slowly, trying to time it just right, so that when the train got there they would be able to walk on without having to wait in the rain.

Bursting through the crowd, he ran out to Clara.

Can't they see what she's about to do? He thought to himself, annoyed by all those who minded their own business. He watched as she seemed to float down onto the tracks, ghostly and too graceful. He couldn't bring himself to scream, or say a word. He ran to the edge of the platform, the tips of his shoes hanging off the edge. Clara held out her hand; he thought for a moment that she was reaching for him. Then he saw the photograph of the boy in her outstretched hand. Her eyes were cold, but she smiled faintly. She seemed happier, as if death were a better lover than he – more reliable and consistent.

Then the train.

The horn blared repeatedly, its headlights lighting Clara. She looked pale, as if the rain had washed the color from her cheeks. He turned to look away but it didn't matter. In an instant, she was gone. He blew back in shock at the speed and force of the train. Quickly he turned around, breathing heavily as if physically pained, tears welling up in his eyes. After a moment, he opened his eyes and pushed out a long breath. He expected to see people rushing towards the train to witness the damage. People always love a good causality. He expected to see women cowering, hands over mouths, turned away but unable to keep their eyes off the horrific sight. He thought men would make phone calls and try to shield the few children who wanted a peak at the gore. Instead, he saw the people casually headed toward the train, which had almost completed its stop. They kept their heads down, using their umbrellas as a defense against the wind and the rain. Most pushed past him, some seemed annoyed that he was in their way, others gave him concerned looks.

Feeling a tug on his soaked sleeve, he looked down. The curious child held up the photograph of the boy, trying to hand it to him. He shook his head but the child insisted. When he would not take it, she spoke softly, "But it's yours, you've been standing out here in the rain looking at it..." Her voice trailed off for a moment as she began to examine the photo.

"You dropped it when the train went by. My mother said you were standing too close." She put it gently in his hand and ran toward the train to catch up to the woman smoking the cigarette. She was waiting for her daughter by the opened train door. She flicked the cigarette onto the ground, took the curious child's hand and boarded. For them, it had simply been the gloomy arrival of a late Tuesday train.

The doors held open after everyone else had gotten onboard. They seemed to be waiting for him, watching him, seeing what he was going to do. He looked down at the photograph, warped from the rain and muddied from footprints of the people who had rushed by him. He put it in his pocket and looked back at the doors of the train. They were now closed and the train began to heave itself forward. He sank onto his knees and pressed his hands gently to his eyes. Flashes of Clara's red coat and dark brown hair played across his mind along with the grim countdown above her head which eventually runs out at the sound of the train. He came to the station for some sort of relief, thinking that visiting the place of her passing would give him something. But there was nothing; no relief, only grief, and a self-loathing he feared he would never shake. His past had become his present, which allowed for no future. Suddenly he opened his eyes, he turned to see the last bit of the train snake around the corner. There were no remnants of a red coat. He kept his gaze on the tracks wondering if they would appear. He waited but no such visions came to life. There alone on the station's chilled, cement ground, he cried. Softly at first, but the tears turned to sobs, with deep sought-after breaths in between. His loud cries were drowned out by the downpour of rain as if the world thought its grief was more important than his.

My Love

Cynthia Ann Lublink

So.

My person died in February.

He committed suicide.

As I sit here writing this, I feel that's all I want to say, and yet there is more, so much more. This final choice of his precious life was not all of who he was or who we were.

What I know is that we loved each other, beaches of sand and to our bones. Those were our words to describe how deeply we loved each other. It's not something that just goes away, ever. His baby girl was everything to him, and in turn, to me. Everything we did and planned for was with her in mind. Everything.

We were not perfect. We had much to learn – and unlearn – with one another. And we did.

Tragedy struck our lives and on that dime, everything changed. We were casualties of things we both had no control over.

Then suicide.

Suicide. I have no placement for this odd, unprepared for puzzle piece. It's been a rebreaking of what was already broken – something still trying to heal. Loss as deep as this never lives far below the surface – it is easily pricked and the tears bleed afresh. I am always caught off guard by that. Always.

Are there thoughts about the could haves and should haves?

Of course.

I believe anyone who loves someone who has made this choice, has had those thoughts on some level. Yet they fall unanswered to the floor, as life insists on stubbornly unfolding and pressing forward.

I deeply believe that we make the best decisions we can with the information we have at the time.

No crystal ball.

Not one person can see the future – not one person.

For any soul to point a finger at oneself or anyone else, it's an act of irrational expectation, claiming, in some way, to know what in truth no one can.

Now I stand on both sides of this fence. Intimately knowing a precious soul who committed suicide and being a suicide survivor; I tried twice to take my own life, and contemplated a third, with a miracle preventing that from happening.

I know the darkness, the irrational belief system that hooks one into horrifically believing and not believing with deep blindness that either life would be better off without you, and/or no one cares. All tethered to a soul begging for the pain to stop.

This is not a matter of strength, willpower, grit, weakness, or failure. There is a powerlessness that can come along with this fight.

For some this decision is the final battle of a lifelong war, to just breathe. The strength it takes to fight is beyond what many will ever understand or need to understand. I pray no one reading this ever finds the need to have that kind of strength or understanding.

When suicide hits, it sits hard within us. Losing someone you love to suicide leaves more questions than answers.

Death itself is not something to understand, it just is. We don't get a choice about death – it is a part of life and it finds ways to weave itself into the tapestry of our lives. Yet this kind of death leaves its survivors facing a dead end. It's a depth of hard with no soft landing.

I believe there are lessons on every path. I would offer these because we let hard things mold us into better souls.

Don't judge harshly, ever. Even if you've walked a similar path. Someone else's journey is not your path. Even if you think you could have done it better or different. It is not your path. Pay attention to yourself and be kind. Be to others the kind of person you would want in your own life in that struggle. If you aren't that person, change.

Walk humbly with one another. No one gets through the hard things alone. It requires love, trust, compassion, and empathy. No one is perfect, so we need to stop thinking we are, and expecting it from others.

Do the work.

You do not need to understand to accept. Just sitting with someone where they are, makes a difference. *Be that person.*

Some things are out of our hands. For those things we leave it with God, pray for peace, and walk in grace with and toward one another. Remember, no crystal ball.

Maybe knowing these will help us process the unimaginable loss, not one soul would have chosen for those they love. I know it won't change anything for my Love, but I get to make a choice on how it will affect my life aside from the pain it has caused. I can allow this to make me a better human being, one who is more patient, compassionate, and mindful for having encountered it.

I pray my Love has found his rest with Christ and is sitting down with his Mama, comforted. I pray peace over his family. I pray all I know that was on his daddy's heart for his baby girl is fulfilled. I pray our girl finds Jesus ever-faithful, present, and El Roi (the Living One who sees her). And that on some level she knows I will always be here for her if she wants or needs.

If you ever find yourself in a place where there seems no way to hope, please reach out to someone and ask for help.

Run toward it.

Don't believe that no one loves you or that life would be better. That is *not* the truth.

Those who love you will be busted out and broken without your presence on this earth.

And trust me, even the darkest night *will* end, and the sun will rise.

Hold on.

Suicide Prevention:

Phone: 1-800-273-8255

Website <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Starting July 16, 2022 – DIAL 988

The Lifeline and 988

988 has been designated as the new three-digit dialing code that will route callers to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. While some areas may be currently able to connect to the Lifeline by dialing 988, this dialing code will be available to everyone across the United States starting on July 16, 2022.



Glass Darkly

Kate Meyer-Currey

Poetry

(Penitent Magdalene: Georges de La Tour)

~ night's blank mirror reflects my sinner's portrait ~ I am shamed by darkened glass my face is a waning moon obscured by flaring candle ~ flames scorned by their smuts on shadowed walls as their wax spittle gutters to scourge my flail-bared shoulders ~ as I tell my rosary each drop is a molten bead that brands my skin with scorched stigmata ~ my chemise is a hair shirt that chafes my open weals with bitter recollection ~ it is a shroud of linen imprinted with sweat and blood ~ I am a momento mori ~ my curtained hair is a confessional where a bald-pated skull adorns my hands like a bishop's ring ~ its eye sockets are empty shrines prised free of gems by grasping pilgrim time ~ my last rites fall on its deaf ears ~ my tears sucked dry by its bottomless orbs ~ as its grin mocks my muted prayers ~ that are the smoke's cloudy incense breath suffocated by the mirror's condensation.



[Back to Top](#)

EMILY MACKENZIE

Lethe

The river isn't at all what he expects; there is nothing mythical, magical, or mystical about it. Maybe the lack of distinction is what makes him uncomfortable. Water stretches before him, wandering through the forest, leading to the unknown. In his hand is an intricate map - hand-drawn, though not his own - held gingerly through equal amounts of fear and reverence. Without it, he would never have believed the historical significance of where he stood. Without it, not many would.

The river Lethe flows crisp and clear, currents well contained within the banks. He sees the reflection of fading moonlight on the uneven surface of the water; it sparkles through the trees, teases and jumps like a kitten after a moth. Pushing the last of the low branches aside, the water in front of him waltzes without a whisper. Silent waves sculpt the shore, discreetly roll over rocks, and the current is chaotic as it tumbles in the distance. He watches the water for a long while, admiring how the light glistens off individual droplets while they arc through the air. The slight shifts in tone and texture of colour as the bulk of the body shifts from depths to shallows, mesmerized as ripples extend from a pebble across the width of a protected pool -

- not a single note hits the air.

He realizes then what unsettles him isn't the river's ordinary appearance in such an extraordinary place, but rather an absolute lack of sound.

There is a gentle touch on the back of his shoulder and he spins around. Her form flickers through features and expressions, as though the universe can't decide what she looks like. After a moment he decides that it doesn't matter and a moment later he forgets he'd wondered in the first place. Her voice is forgiveness; soft, kind, and compassionate. It is more than he deserves.

He frowns, eyes jumping from the goddess to her water and then back to her solid gaze. Belatedly, embarrassed, he bows. "Lethe?" His voice is harsh and uncertain. Out of place.

She smiles, inclining her head. "You know who I am, therefore you know where you are. You know what this place offers?"

He nods. This is where he could lose himself. People through the ages have been drawn to this place; to her power, for better or for worse. She could arrange for an individual to forget their heartbreak, their betrayal, their abuse. With the goddess and her river rests his only chance of starting anew.

"What happened?" she asks.



He shakes his head, he won't answer. He's read – and he believes, especially here where memory is so sacred – that if he says it aloud, there's a chance he won't forget. He can't – he won't... He doesn't want to risk it

"Have you written something?"

He nods. He could have brought someone, of course, but this will be better with no witnesses. Words carefully chosen to guide his forgotten self are clenched in his right fist. The paper was once crisp and hard against his skin, now it moulds to each muscle and sinew, barely noticeable.

She looks at him for a moment. Eyes dark, green, blue, golden. White as the light of the moon. Somewhere as he stands transfixed, she asks: "Are you certain? There is no return."

Eventually he hears her, listens, and nods. Yes, he's sure. He wants the memories gone, all of them, as soon as possible. They aren't worth it. They're not worth the grief, the self-loathing, the stress–

The guilt.

She nods, cups her hands as a chalice for the water at her feet, and offers them to him.

"Then drink, knowing this is your choice, and what happens after is of no consequence to me."

He nods and takes a deep breath before stepping forward, then sips awkwardly from her palms. The liquid is cold, numb, and somewhat bittersweet.

–

The river beside him crackles and splashes. The noise strikes him as odd; he's not sure why – it's just water.

Glancing up, he tries to shrug off his unease, instantly attributing it to too many drinks. "Hello darling. Have we met?"

The goddess presses her lips together and her eyes flash in anger.

If he weren't so confused, he would have taken that as a challenge. Regardless, he reaches forward to grab her arm, and in doing so notices something clenched in his own hand.

Opening his fist, a creased sheet clings to the curves of his now straightened fingers. Unfolding it, he sees three simple lines.

*Let her be – leave now.
Forget everything he said
Do better this time.*

Confused, and now a little anxious, he looks up. The pretty girl is gone and he frowns when he realizes he can't even remember what she looked like.

Not sure what else to do, he turns and walks away from the river; wondering what on earth could have been so bad that he had decided to seek out Lethe in the first place.

Sacred Space or Fitting a Spell

Christie Cochrell

Nonfiction

Your sacred space is where you can find yourself over and over again. (Joseph Campbell)

After an intense week of Roman archaeology on the St. Bernard Pass, on the border between Italy and Switzerland, I knew I needed to regroup, draw in again, reestablish boundaries. On the high Alpine pass there'd been both too much space and too little: vast vistas all around (and the dizzying absence of a single tree at that elevation); roads leading everywhere, once traveled by the Veragri and Salassi, the ancient tribes; Julius Caesar, out to conquer Britain and all Gaul; Charlemagne, back from being crowned Holy Roman Emperor down in Milan; Napoleon, accompanied by forty thousand troops; even, some claim, Hannibal and his famous elephants. But at the same time a shared room, with no windows, no space apart, and every hour of the day spent in a group, with all those eons to process.

After, I chose to spend a week alone on Lake Como, familiar and loved. There, with generous time to pause and reflect, I realized something significant about space. From the room I had booked, with munificent windows looking out over the lake – a paradise of blue with ferries stitching up and down its length, and further down the shore, the gardens of a duke with summerhouse and landing dock – I moved after a few days to a small, cramped room – closed in, the house across the narrow alley (charming from below, cobbled, smelling of meat and fabulous onions at noon) now almost right on top of me, the arguments and histrionics in provincial Italian there until all hours as if my own. The shutters closed for privacy against intrusion heavy as broken wings, the light nowhere, morning swallowed. I saw that one's experience of life is all a matter of the space one can afford, the breath of air one is allowed to drink in deeply – or not given. I understood what a tremendous luxury it is to be able to choose.

The word, *space*, is said to come from Proto-Indo-European (*s)peh* – “to stretch, to pull”, suggesting an opening out, making larger. The kind of space available through my surpassing window on the lake.

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the philosopher Thorstein Veblen considers what he calls conspicuous consumption, conspicuous waste. One of the examples he refers to, which attracted my interest especially as writer and reader and someone deeply concerned about aesthetics, is “excessive margins” in certain books – the kind of books I love. He claims “this [sort of] book is scarce and . . . therefore is costly and lends pecuniary distinction to its consumer”.

For different reasons, maybe, commas and extra spaces between sentences have gone out of fashion, and sans serif fonts are all the rage, instead of the lovely old shapely letters and their interstices among which I love to linger – the object of this leveling to condense, streamline, equalize. Rigid modern apartment blocks instead of sprawling oak-shaded mansions.

I acknowledge what a great luxury space is in one's environment and home in general, as well as more specific spheres. It's one of the terrible inequalities, affecting health, well-being, security, the means to thrive. Crowding has over history led to miseries of every sort. Stress, air pollution, noise pollution, mental illnesses. According to an article on dementia I came across today, “Access to green spaces [and blue], which also tend to be few and far between in disadvantaged neighborhoods, may be another factor impacting cognitive health among older adults.” (Carly Cassella, “There's a Depressing Link between Where You Live and Dementia Risk,” *Science Alert*)

And then, of course, space crucially determines the spread of infectious diseases – something everyone's become aware of firsthand in these past two years. We've learned to measure our safety in six-foot increments, yet keeping any distance at all is for some – maybe for most, around the world – impossible. Space can mean the difference between life and death.

When space is seen as something stretched or pulled outward, I can't deny that it is usually stretched too thin, and that there's not enough of it to go around. But there's another sense of it – a drawing in, instead, a centering or homing, in which one comes back to one's inalienable self. This sort of space, unlike the other, is defined through experiential boundaries, holding dangers and existential threats at bay. It's accessible to everyone, one way or another, because it's focused inward.

Consider a child's time-out. A pause to reflect on one's actions, to recollect oneself, while separated from others. A pause is a temporary withdrawal, removal. A pause occurs both in time and in the inner/outer spheres of consciousness.

It pleases me to know that *pause* and *space* are semantically related. (And that a mutual synonym is *spell*, meaning not just a short period of time but also magical power.)

Consider bullfighting. "In bullfighting there is an interesting parallel to the pause as a place of refuge and renewal. It is believed that in the midst of a fight, a bull can find his own particular area of safety in the arena. There he can reclaim his strength and power. This place and inner state are called his *querencia*. As long as the bull remains enraged and reactive, the matador is in charge. Yet when he finds his *querencia*, he gathers his strength and loses his fear. From the matador's perspective, at this point the bull is truly dangerous, for he has tapped into his power." (Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life With the Heart of a Buddha*)

Querencia is defined as "the place where one's strength is drawn from; where one feels at home; the place where you are your most authentic self".

Finding Tara Brach's quote, this wonderful concept which I'd had no idea of, I realized something else important about space. Looking at things through the bull's eyes, those ample margins which I had insisted on and started feeling guilty about aren't necessarily excessive. They can be considered an essential time-out, too. Boundaries on a page (an arena of thought) allow that strength-gathering moment, that source of power.

These spaces or pauses take many forms.

Reflective space: pauses on the page, especially, conveying/convoing the written word. This includes the commas I can't do without in my writing, to slow things down, to separate, to allow for small moments of reflection – glances back over the shoulder, maybe, or off to distant hills; the margins one can saunter in, as under shade trees on a sunny summer afternoon; graceful serifs like dance moves; typefaces full of character and wonderfully flexuous.

Reflection means "capable of being bent; mentally or spiritually pliant". Reflect, "to divert, to turn (something) aside". To, in effect, pause. And further, I learn that *compose*, to write, coming from Old French *composer*, "put together", has as its parts *com-* (with, together) and *poser* (to place) – from Late Latin *pausare*, "to cease, lay down" – also the origin of pause.

God is in the details . . . which reveal themselves during a pause. And are preserved in quiet observations such as those I recorded during another week of archaeology, another summer, in Northumberland, excavating and exploring at leisure around Hadrian's Wall – "It makes me so happy to notice things like the marks in a planted field that show the presence, even in absence, of the planter. Things like the play of light and time."

That followed, in my notebook, a list of other things found –

- . two Labradors crossing a bridge
- . learning that wattle is willow or hazel, woven
- . that Roman roads are always axle width, and straight, unlike rambling sheep paths
- . the potato and egg shop,
- . and the farm shop offering potatoes: white, red, bakers
- . the town of Wallish Wall

Aural space: time-out from sound. Quiet is something that's always been essential for me. During my frequent air travels I learned that when I was stuck having to sit in a middle seat, with no physical space forwards and just inches on either side (one particularly awful overnight flight from New York to Rome and on to Sicily spent painfully wedged between a Greek who kept expecting me – without Greek – to translate his wishes to the stewardess, and an officious Italian who refused to permit my reading light; both with enormous bags rammed up against my legs), the only substitute for lack of space was silence – the ability to wrap around me the illusion of privacy and self-awareness. Take a pause from interactions with others. With breath, expel intruders from my consciousness.

Breathing space: a pause to catch one's breath. Not just essential ventilation, windows that open to the precious outside air, but an innerly expansive, restful interlude, an opportunity to lessen, lighten, lilt even, and figure out what to do next. How best to deal with invasions of squealing spiky dog balls, uninvited mice, whatever sort of energy sapper can't be kept out. Establishing strategic psychological boundaries, when the physical fail.

Temporal space: the time allowed to pause before acting or responding; sitting a spell. Jury duty just before Christmas was to me a horrifying invasion of my mental and emotional space, as well as physical (no social distancing, during a bad infectious surge). With my introvert's way of processing new things, I needed and wasn't allowed a psychological veranda, covered, long, dappled with light, to meet my need to approach everything slowly, to pause before responding, before acting and being judged by all the listening ears. I needed to be allowed to sit a spell (in all senses), to gather my wits, gather some moss.

Liminal space: pausing at the threshold. During that week of archaeology up near Hadrian's Wall, we explored (more quietly than on the Alpine pass) what it meant to inhabit the borderlands – a threshold “where things get noticed”, as British archaeologist and theorist Michael Shanks put it to us. A pause between places or states. A pause in the journey out, back, giving the traveler a chance to breathe, reflect, adapt. Decompress before returning to the normal world.

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey writes “There are things inside the body that are foreign to it, and there are things outside of it that belong to it . . . that must, that is, be taken possession of if life is to continue”. I've lived all of my years taking possession – after a pause to marshal my resources at that limin supercharged with possibility. There at the entry, at the changing-point, I've typically felt energized, alive, balanced between present and past, distant and near, foreign and *mine*.

And then, as perfectly described by Katherine Mansfield, “if I went for a walk there and lay down under a pine tree and looked up at the wispy clouds through the branches I came home plus the pine tree.” There, back home, I've found myself able to center more fully, drawing the necessary far things in, making them part of my *querencia*.

I could feel those outside things calling as I stood near the north end of Hadrian's Wall looking out impossibly far, considering the vastness in conjunction with the square inches of soil we would concentrate on again the next morning. Finding the little Roman spoon in hard-packed mud. Uncovering the stones of physical thresholds – the doors of vanished buildings, baths and barrack blocks. Seeing clearly that the same space can be both limitless and minute – an inhale and an exhale, a pivotal focus, as in mindfulness meditation. The archaeological *sondage* (sounding) is a perfect metaphor for that: a carefully measured space, a trench only a meter or two square, the place of exploration. A threshold between the past and discovering something new (though old), a heedful pause before proceeding, venturing.

Back home again in my enclosed garden, I find a space at least as restorative as that just outside the ancient arched doorway atop Glastonbury Tor, the ruins of the 14th-century St. Michael's church, if I let myself be there fully, wholly, Tor and church (and pine tree) included, among my plants and birds, the bird tota hung from a branch with drenched colors and beads, sequins to catch the light, and a tiny goat bell – bringing to mind also the goat bells carried on the wind to my hammock on a Mallorcan hillside, during a writers' retreat, another essential time-out. Clean water in the basin of the hollowed stone which the birds come to drink from; the studious St. Francis keeping watch over the bed of herbs.

Venturing out again, and in, I lay claim to Green Dragon Temple, where I went to find silence and a lovely old lichened apple tree. The green cathedrals of the cottonwoods along a cherished river. Cedar and juniper incense. A Zuni fetish horse or bear carved from blue sodalite, said to contain emotional balance, calmness. All these my home.

By way of these long, circumambulating routes we come like dedicated pilgrims to the idea of *sacred space*, which Joseph Campbell refers to, interestingly, as a *field of action*. More explicitly, “A place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be,” and further, “A place of creative incubation.”

A place of tapping into one's power, like the bull and his querencia.

I see this field as charged, allowing or even requiring a response from the one resting there. Calling forth various sorts of inner action, in the interest of self-care. Accomplishing and guarding the essential pause. Being wholly within it, gathering one's unique strength. Weaving a spiritual enchantment; casting a spell.

The first step in the incubation process is finding, then plowing and planting that field. Often that means reclaiming space, as typesetters of old painstakingly inserted bits of metal between words and lines, between letters, even, to let them be their best, breathing completely.

“One breath taken completely; one poem, fully written, fully read – in such a moment, anything can happen.”

(Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*)

I am remembering how I have made new, unfriendly spaces my own – gathering in creative elements and energies that might (and did) restore me. Moving from the beloved old Press building on campus into a new, sterile, unwelcome space, I needed to bring in a Navajo dye chart with a pinewood frame, a branch of fragrant eucalyptus leaves, natural things. A little box of shells. An inherited sandstone mortar and pestle, steeped in history. After another move I had to add a carmine Turkish rug, my hand-carved horse fetish, a string of paper birds, my fat collected works of P.G. Wodehouse, and things I had made myself – photos and collages (the marsh tit on the vast stretch of Hadrian's Wall, the paleographer with alphabet and Japanese paper) – my very being on display defiantly, where it was under threat, where I was constantly being effaced, erased. Classical music to block out the noise of other people's thoughts; remedial “Happiness” tea. All incantations, magic spells. That might have seemed extreme, but finding how out of my element I was, I knew I needed *something* to make the hostile environment more friendly, mine. A spiritual pause, a decisive time-out.

As I write this, teasing out ideas in my head, I'm gladdened by a flight of luminous, prismatic bubbles that someone is letting go over the ocean at day's end. Perhaps not blameless, possibly harmful to sea creatures or the environment, in its own way as selfishly entitled as my spacious lakefront hotel room was all those years ago – but somehow in this moment necessary while across the world an escalating war destroys the squares and gardens, personal and public space, and life itself. Within the thin membrane of soap bubbles, the boundaries that define a scintilla of power, of enchantment, a pause drawn out, tenuto, in the middle of the terrible bull ring, we're held, returned to our power, allowed to be what we were meant to be, in this transient moment quietly triumphant.

*Cosplay Feature:
Cathy Cole*

Every Body Can Cosplay

Cathy's very first cosplay at Chicago TARDIS in 2015



Cathy as the TARDIS from "Doctor Who", with Terry Molloy.



Cathy as a magical school girl from "Harry Potter"

My name is Cathy Cole and I am a plus-sized cosplayer over 40. I don't sew at all, in fact I have never met a sewing machine I couldn't destroy. That information at face value would make it seem like cosplay and I shouldn't go together, but we do!

I use businesses in the United States, overseas, and on Etsy, to make costumes for my cosplay. I work on the smaller parts, like accessories, which I often get on Amazon, eBay or at convention floors. I also focus on makeup, which I do myself, and learned from many masterclasses offered at Nordstroms and Ulta and all the online tutorials. I also have a favorite wig shop. I can take a photo to them and they will have a wig that is close. Plus, I learned about wigs, how to wear and style them at a convention during a costuming panel.



Cathy as Padme Amidala in purple senate gown from "Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones", with Hayden Christensen.

I have learned in my five-plus years of attending conventions that there is no body type, weight, shape, or size that can't cosplay. If you're short and skinny, you can cosplay. If you're average build, you can cosplay. If you're plus-sized like me, or big and tall, you can cosplay. Every body can cosplay!!!

Cosplay is the love of a character interpreted and displayed by yourself, however you feel shows your love for that character. It does not need to look like a Xerox copy stapled onto yourself.

The cosplays I love on others tend to be genderbends or mash-ups.

A genderbend is where a character that identifies as a particular gender is cosplayed as the opposite gender, male to female or female to male. I do a femme version of the 6th doctor from Doctor Who, for example, as a genderbend cosplay.

A mash-up is the combining of two or more characters together into a new character that has parts of all the characters in it. An example would be the *Broadchurch* Tenth Doctor. That could look like a trench coat and suit from the series *Broadchurch* with a sonic screwdriver and the Converse hi-tops shoes that the Tenth Doctor wore on Doctor Who.



Cathy as a gender-bend 6th doctor, from "Doctor Who", with Colin Baker



Cathy in "Doctor Who" kimono with "Star Trek" TNG and DS9 Cast members



Jedi Cathy at Disney World

Thankfully, many conventions are adding secondary costuming events without the handmade requirement.

Cosplay, like other artforms, should not be limited by opinions and norms of the masses. What matters is that you are offering an authentic interpretation of a character you love, however you present that.

Every cosplayer has a little kid inside them playing dress-up on the outside. When you grow as a cosplayer, you start to have a sense of what will work for you and what you like to cosplay. You also get a larger wardrobe and are able to recombine what you have in a new ways for new cosplays.

I don't really cosplay for other people. In fact, I sometimes forget that I'm in costume. I cosplay to show my love for a particular character. Wearing a cosplay, no matter who you are, is not an invitation or blanket permission. This means it's not my permission for you to talk about my body or make suggestive innuendos. It's also definitely not my permission for you to touch me. Too often now, we as people, just blurt out what is on our minds, or do what we want to, without stopping and thinking about it first.

Conventions have had a sort of elitism in cosplay. In many cases, to enter the main costume events, you have to have personally made a certain percentage of the costume. I do not say this to take away from the many talented people who do construct their own costumes. Credit where credit is due. To make your own costume is amazing! But I say this to acknowledge that it is possible to have an amazing cosplay and not sew it yourself.

For someone new to conventions, this idea of making your own costume can make cosplay seem like it's not for everyone and that is not the message we should be putting out there as a community of fans.



Cathy as Clara from time of the snowmen in "Doctor Who."

Two good rules; if you wouldn't want it said to yourself, don't say it to others, and ask first! Cosplayers are human beings and we can be anxious or overwhelmed too. Conventions are really large and have a lot of attendees. A lot of times I do say yes to a photo but sometimes I need to run to meet up with a friend or go to a panel and I have to say no. For anyone like me who has ugly critics giving them reasons why they shouldn't cosplay, tell those critics to take a hike.

I truly do believe every body can cosplay!



Cathy as Ghostlight "Ace"

All I See and Know, Suspended

Because all I see and know I believe to have its main purport in what will yet be supplied.”

--Walt Whitman, Thoughts

“But who can tell when we escape/ from life and death?”

--Ch'Ang Yu, A Ringing Bell (c. 810), tr. Kenneth Rexroth A Gigan

“As I walk into my center,
folding back each layer of meaning

drums my rhythm, fires my heartbeat
where the core emits its bonfire,
unborn particles of starfire:

there its treasures, golden fibers
circling each to each, electric

consciousness of dual electrons,
all I see and know, electric

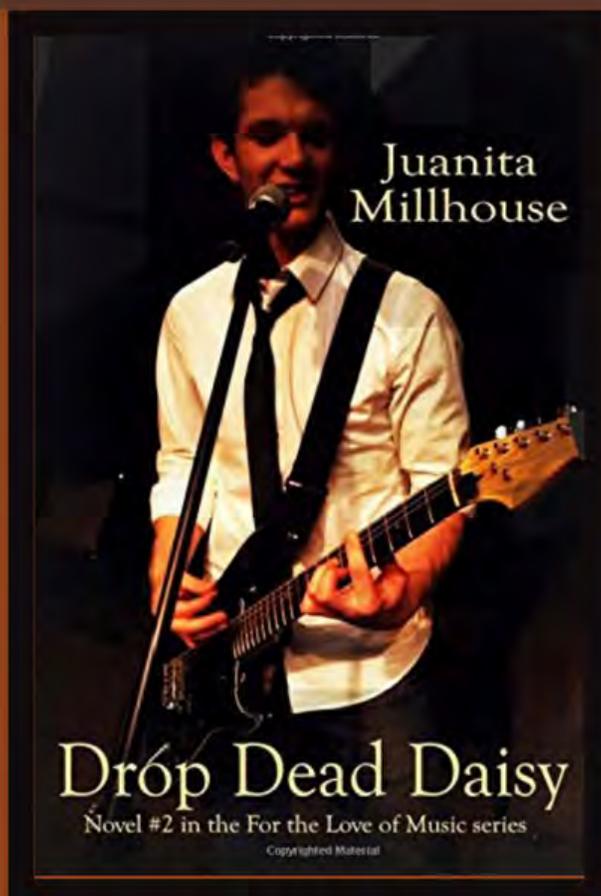
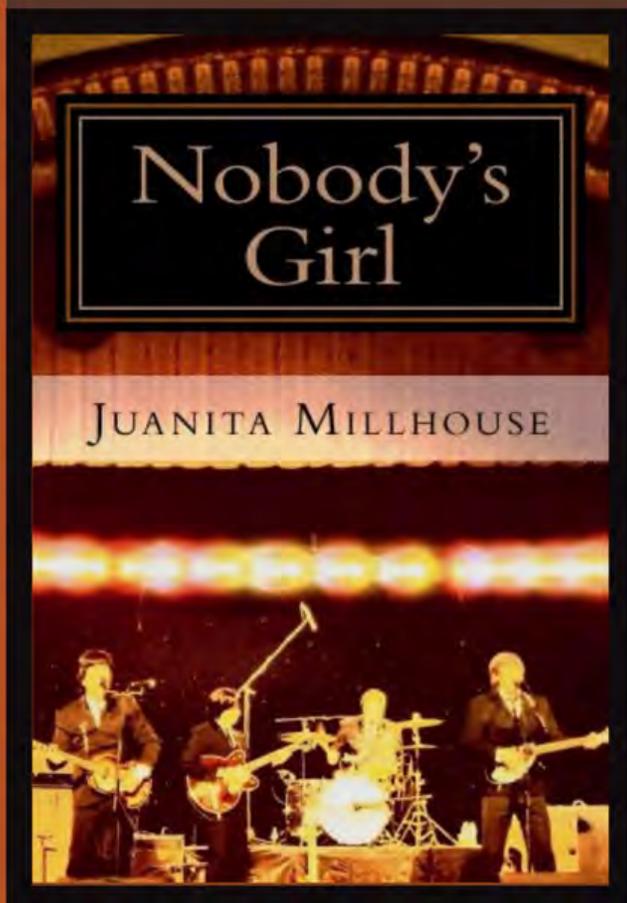
intersecting, smoldering, sparking
as I walk into my center:

there its treasures, golden fibers
living inside scriptures, nimbus
blazes in my soul's long journey.

Time recedes amidst the firing
and the path continues inward.

"FOR THE LOVE OF MUSIC" NOVEL SERIES

AUTHOR: JUANITA MILLHOUSE



FOR LOVERS OF ROCK 'N ROLL & ROMANCE

**PURCHASE IN EBOOK OR
PAPERBACK ON
AMAZON/KINDLE**

Stargazing

40

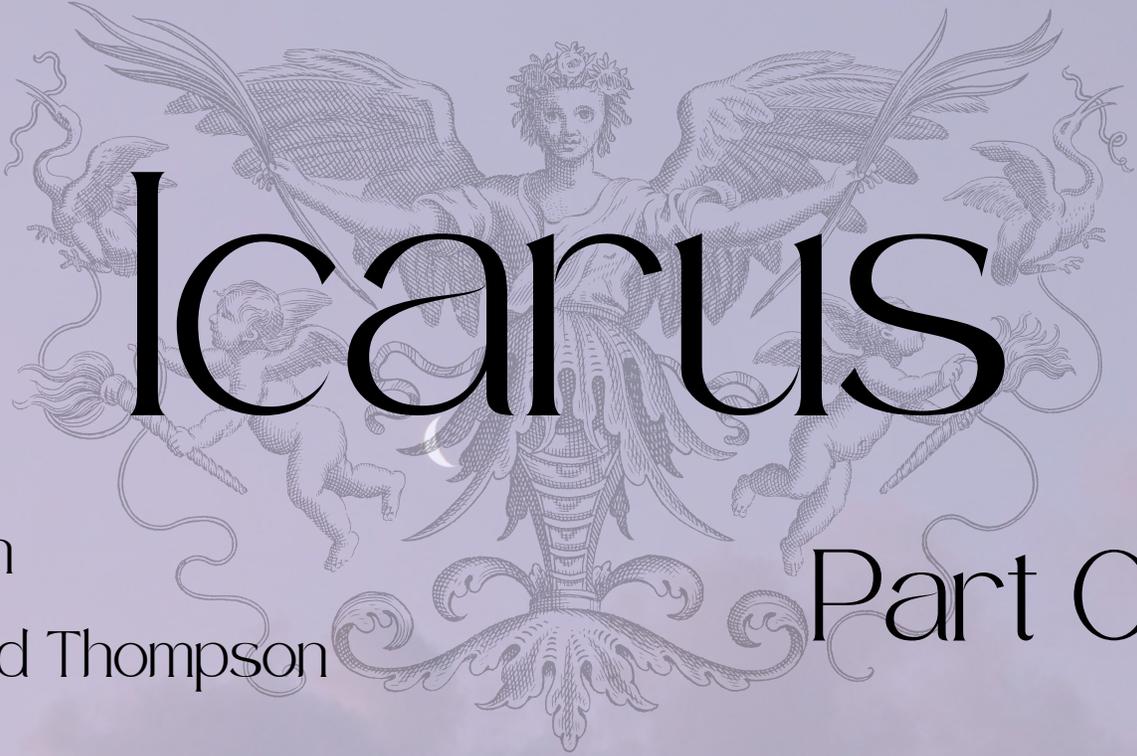
Whenever I stare at the stars
I think how vast and beautiful they are,
and how I long to fly to their pure, distant light,
but feel an overwhelming sense
of insignificance:
I'm an atom-sized speck in a sea of galaxies.

Would I be welcome there,
with frigid stones and fiery glares
gliding ancient dances, singing sharp as lances;
yet pulsing silence is all I hear,
an icicle urgency and fear
as my fibers to their piper melody
unravel and abandon me.

From chaining gravity finally freed,
airless airs of relief we breathe
caged away far too long
muted, deafened from the song;
now
crystalline threads strewn in space,
brightly still we resonate
adding chord to distant strains
eternally to weave again.

Carol Edwards

[Back to Top](#)



Icarus

Fiction

Gerald Thompson

Part One

Firefighters, astronauts, and doctors. One kid even said ninja. Such are the answers I recall hearing the day our 3rd grade teacher asked us what we wanted to be.

Some kids shrugged their shoulders and said they didn't know. Others weren't even asked. The teacher asked me, and I didn't hesitate. I said I wanted to be an angel.

Everybody laughed. I first thought that something funny had happened, like when the class clown fell from his chair because he leaned too far back. Or when our goldfish jumped out of his bowl and flopped on the ground for a few funny seconds. Highly amusing.

But this time, I was the subject of their glee. I didn't realize this until amid all the laughter I heard the word "silly" and my name in the same snicker. My face flushed red.

Yet however embarrassed I felt that day, I wasn't deterred. After all, angels have the best of all worlds. They are the epitome of goodness. Righteous, blessed, and protected from all the lower-based natures we mortals must suffer, angels are free to bask in joy, in rapture beyond anything we can relate to. Are they not physically perfect, the definition of beauty in human form? It's no wonder why they smile in every painting, as if they held a secret no one else had. And do they not wear celestial crowns of aureate white, with eyes full of mercury and light? Soft yet severe, compassionate but just, they are also divine warriors wielding swords of fire with which to fight the good fight.

Yes indeed, there's nothing silly about wanting to be an angel.

Such eminent qualities alone make a great case, had I the mind to argue my aim, yet one more trait sealed my little heart in its utter fascination. Above all, and without a shadow of a doubt, their finest feature was their wings. They could fly.

Even now, in my middle-age, I remember well enough how I spent every waking hour imagining the sort of life it would be. And I flew. I really flew. I knew the sensation of breaking through clouds and turning like a corkscrew through the high atmosphere where space and sky meet, all the while summoning warm winds against my face that blew my hair back. I would swoop over the houses of my neighbors, the neighbors of my neighbors, and even over the immeasurable green forests where the ruins of El Dorado and Atlantis slumber.

Oh yes, it goes without saying that I was a child with an active imagination. How much time I spent dreaming of what it would be like to live as an angel and to do what angels do I could not say, as I was still too young to be aware of time. I'm sure it was the better part of every day. But after that class, I shared this wish with no one. I was steadfast in my silence and guarded this secret wish as a treasure, protecting it in my clutched possession, cradling and nurturing it in my heart like a new-born babe. I kept it hidden, for had I told anybody about it, the dream would have no longer been mine.

One day my mother, exhausted from work and in need of respite from my boundless energy, decided to take a bath. She did so quite often to rest her feet and relax her mind. To keep me busy she would put a tape in the VCR and give me a piece of fruit. It was often a banana, but on this particular day she decided on an orange, which was always fun for me to peel. I suppose she wanted to keep me doubly occupied. The film she put in the machine was *Top Gun*. It's about a rambunctious air force pilot who overcomes the sadness of his best friend's death to save the day from the Cold-War Russians.

I sat Indian-style in front of the television and watched most of the movie without blinking. I didn't touch the orange, and I don't remember moving. With wide eyes I stared at the screen and at one moment I forgot to breathe. It was as if somebody had recorded my deepest thoughts and added form to my most sacred wish. Starting with a montage of jets taking off from an aircraft carrier, the film reflected something in me so accurate that I felt my purpose had manifested on screen. It was beyond good. It was destiny.

What amazed me most were not the planes themselves, impressive though they were, but their aerial maneuvers. The grace of these man-made machines was the stuff of ballerinas. Everything they did seemed to be against the laws of physics. And their shape, although made of hard cold steel, had an aesthetic quality so fine they looked delicate to the touch.

Yet they were war machines designed to fight the good fight. The main character was a young pilot, full of youthful arrogance and brave enough to risk his life to help his friends in need. Although he answered to the military, he was his own master. There was no difference between him and an angel to my mind. He was exactly what I wanted to be.

And so, I decided there and then that I had found my calling and the key to my future happiness, born from aeronautics so obviously magical that they must have been divinely condoned. Of course had I known the mechanics behind what I saw perhaps its spell wouldn't have been as intense as it was, but I didn't know, and nor would I have cared, for what I saw in that film filled me to the brim with an overwhelming bliss. To this day, it's still the most religious feeling I've ever had.

I became obsessed and watched the film every day after school. I recited every line of dialogue and even sang along to the music. Like a Pavlovian dog hearing his bell, I giggled with delight in anticipation as soon as I heard certain notes of the soundtrack. I knew that with these notes came a sweet montage of fighter jets twirling, whirling, and dancing in the sky. Even after all these years, I can never forget those tunes.

In fact, just a few weeks ago I was going through a box of old knick-knacks when I came across my original cassette of the full soundtrack. I hadn't heard it in years. I borrowed a tape player from one of my new neighbors, and even though the music is old and dated, it still carries the ambient residue of that initial joy.

Nowadays I've been listening to it a lot. When I'm down, it never fails to work as a quick pick-me-up.

Recently, I've been down quite a bit.

It was late. It was too late. There was a distance in her eyes so casual, so absent of warm affection that I no longer saw the complicity I was so used to reading in them. I no longer recognized her. She was now a stranger.

It's sadly anti-climatic how our marriage ended. We were at a table in a low-end restaurant, discussing the specifics of the divorce like two business associates dividing the tasks of a project. After so many years, it gave me the feeling that all the time we shared was nothing but an exercise in private theatre. It maintained only the vestige of love. She was on point, explaining what her lawyer had said about how we should divide our things. She laid a check-list in front of me, wiped a strand of auburn from her forehead.

"You've changed your hair," I said, partially to lighten the mood but mostly for a sense of familiarity.

She threw me a half-smile before looking down at our marriage certificate on the table. "Thanks, now, about the lawyers' fees." She doggedly handed me another of the many papers I was to sign that night.

She seemed to have moved on. But for me, the relationship wasn't so easy to abandon. I was "in denial" as they say. I couldn't help but think that after all we'd been through, after such soft intimacies, unrecognized sacrifices, well-intentioned, silent compromises, and well, to throw it all away would be such a waste.

But at that table I looked into the wet mirrors of her eyes at a reflection of a stranger. I saw my new solitude. There was no fixing it. I tried my best. I did. I have no idea if she would agree, but I'd like to think that she would, even though I'm too afraid to ask. It doesn't really matter now.

"What did I do so wrong?"

"You didn't do anything wrong. You were you. I never expected you to do anything in all these years but stay yourself. I never expected. I accepted you as you are. But now, I can't forgive myself if I accept you, for my life and for what I want, because I deserve to be happy. And you can't help me be happy because you don't know how to be happy yourself."

Yes, it's true. But it wasn't always the case.

We were high school sweethearts. The type joined at the hip. We met when I started my sophomore year. At the time, I was shy, reserved, and highly insecure. I see now that this is normal for those who have such a rich interior life that it excludes them from most peer groups. I didn't see it then.

In class I breezed by my studies, doing the bare minimum. Physically, I never considered myself special-looking, neither handsome nor ugly, on the cusp of average. But I was awkward. So it was with a general befuddlement on my side when a girl in my second period class took notice of me. She would smile at me when she entered class, and once in the cafeteria she waved in my direction. I must admit I had no clue what to do, until one day she asked if I wanted to walk her home after school. It was easy. She admitted later that she liked me because I had a nose like her father's. I met him and didn't see the resemblance. I don't see it now. A nose is a nose.

When we started walking home together, whatever awkward vibes I had in school and with others began to fade away. I fell into a role with her. Carrying all her books, doing everything I thought a gentleman should do, I listened while she talked of all her passing thoughts. Sometimes she unloaded on me the specifics of drama and conspiracies among her school-friends. She talked about her plans for university and her future, already having names for the children she would have and the style of life she would live. I admired her vision, as it was so different from mine. She had sensible methods of looking at things, practical and without the loftiness of ephemeral dreams. Everything was so clear to her. She wanted to study computer programming and work for Intel.

I didn't feel the need to talk much during these walks, content to be at the side of a pretty girl. When she asked me what I wanted to do, I told her I wanted to be an Air Force pilot. She laughed and said I was cute. I blushed and asked if she wanted to be my girlfriend.

After that day, you couldn't find us separated. Holding hands to and from periods, we became one unit. Where you would bump into one of us, in the hallway or bathroom between classes, it was not uncommon to find the other nearby. I had a mode of reference, was part of a team, and it excited me.

Meeting her popped my little bubble. Lacking any common interests with others, I didn't know how to speak or behave, which led to some very uncomfortable moments I magnified as only a hormonally chaotic teenager could do. Besides having an unhealthy obsession with all things aviation, I was socially inept, which, to be honest, I didn't mind as long as I was free to

pursue my passion. But then a whole new world opened up.

Eating lunch in groups, going to parties, and attending school functions became the norm. With her help and advice, I changed my appearance and attitude. I felt accepted. This new life awakened in me an unknown awareness of social standing that started dominating my thoughts. Things that I once considered shallow soon gained my full attention. I was impatient and acted with an unreserved eagerness to make her happy, to feel worthy of my new position. In retrospect, I reckon it was the process of maturing, albeit sideways.

For Christmas the year I watched *Top Gun* the first time, my parents bought me a boxed set of aviation documentaries from *National Geographic*. Covering all types of flying machine, like the Boeing 747 and the Concorde, the videos mostly focused on jets from the Navy and Air Force. Which of course I preferred. Because although spitfires and barn-dusters were interesting in their own right, there was nothing more captivating to me than to see a fighter jet do barrel rolls while going at supersonic speed.

These videos enabled me to watch it all to my heart's content. They showcased all kinds of cool planes. Yet I had no trouble in deciding my favorites. The plane in the film was the F-14 Tomcat. Its most endearing quality is that it has wings that react depending on its speed. If it's cruising, the wings extend out to an almost ninety-degree angle. But if the plane needs to go high-speed, as for a dogfight or to intercept other planes, the wings retract, making it more aerodynamic. It reminded me of an aggressive dog that folds its ears back. It was by far my favorite.

That is, until I saw the F-18. Unlike the Tomcat, it had a design akin to an insect, sleek and minimal. I enjoyed the F-18 in person when the Blue Angels performed at an air show near my town. I even had a poster of one above my bed.

And then I came across the Harrier. A marvel in flying engineering, the Hawker Siddeley Harrier, designed by the British, was a bit on the clunky side, possessing none of the finesse the American jets have. But it more than makes up for it with its almost supernatural ability to take off vertically. To watch it is a sight to behold. On the ground, the plane is stationary, inert, seemingly dead-weight, and by summoning a force of power from its turbofan jet engine, a precursor of energy begins to build, progressively gaining momentum, forcing everything to vibrate and everyone around it to retreat, as if the spectacle of its take-off demanded enough space to be seen in its full regalia. It then slowly starts rising, stops, and hovers about twelve meters off the ground. A hummingbird of fire and steel, the Harrier is proof to all skeptics that miracles exist.

Deep down, my attraction to all these planes was based on the understanding that they were only vehicles, instruments to reach forbidden heights. It wasn't some fancy dream I had, nor was it a light guise of my childish whims that kept me captivated. It was the desire, the genuine obsession I had with experiencing the sky. The absolute liberty of my body, unshackled by the burden of gravity, in which all sense of direction is made redundant. That is what appealed to me the most. The fact that there was no need for direction, no up, no down, left, right, side to side no no no – there was only straight to where you wanted to go. Only straight, and forward through the absolute serenity and safety of an abundant space.

There was no doubt in my mind where I belonged. Heaven was real, and I wanted to fly in it.

It wasn't until we started getting intimate that my interest in planes started to wane. The first time she entered my room, her face lit up in disbelief. I had been enthusiastic to show her and involve her in my collection of models, magazines, and odd paraphernalia. But to my surprise, from the first second of entering, she was put off. Suddenly I was embarrassed, like that day in class when I told the teacher I wanted to be an angel. Shame had sucker-punched me. I hadn't expected her to judge as she did because I loved her, and I loved planes, and I had never meant to be other than what I loved. But as she stood in my room, and for a long time afterwards, my fondness for aviation began to diminish, as I saw it more and more as a sore on our relationship. And she, for her part, subtly punished me. She believed that it was a phase that would pass, the same way that a toy is outgrown or a favorite shirt empties of all novelty. And over time, by reflex I started to judge myself in her eyes and see how childish it was.

In time, the posters came down, the models put in the basement, and the phase turned over. Even now I remember the moment when I decided not to continue my yearly subscription to *Flight* and the rest of the magazines I had been so devoted to. I had a new passion and she made my body feel good. It was a slow process, but in the end I lost sight of something dear.

After we graduated high school, it was decided that I would follow her to college, where she would study programming. Her father, who was a good man, persuaded me to try law. My parents agreed. They all were convinced I was too scrawny to be in the military. Over time I chose to believe them. Even though my grades were less than impressive and my S.A.T. scores didn't reflect an aptitude for anything in particular, her father pulled some strings and got me into the same college as his daughter. He himself was a lawyer and at the time had a bit of clout in the state, having been on a few high-profile corruption cases. He liked me, we got on well, and it was through his insistence that I asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. "To complete the circle," he said.

The funny thing about being young and in love is that within the dense arrogance of inexperience comes behavior with zero foresight. Mistakes are made. It happens. Of course, in no way have I ever considered our son to be a mistake. In no way. He says he wants to study law himself and I'm sure he will surpass me in his career. He's a smart kid and has his mother's sensibilities. He also has a girlfriend, but I haven't met her yet. I'm eager to see how their relationship unfolds, as I realize now how important it is to complete the circle.

He's not happy about the divorce either. We were married for seventeen years. I moved out six months ago. To be honest, it didn't come as a surprise when she finally decided to drop the bomb. We had grown distant over the years, the both of us practicing an immense amount of restraint night after night as we habitually dodged the drama of a tense conflict. I became adept at pretending to be relaxed. She became skilled at believing me. I'm sure she knew as much as I did that it was a sham. Inside me, hidden behind the pit of my stomach, a seed of doubt began to grow. The future of our love, the health of our relationship, and the brilliance of our individual happiness became tainted by this doubt, which infected everything I did with her. I didn't know it at the time, because I loved her, but this uncertainty expanded so resoundingly in me, that when we were together I was nothing except doubt. Out of my control or even my awareness, it affected everything said and done between us unconsciously, the same way a fish wouldn't be conscious of the tide that violently washes the water.

Now I live alone in a small apartment in one of the rougher parts of town. My son visits sometimes on the weekends. I sense he doesn't like it much. But despite the environment, laden with late-night shouting and police sirens, the place itself is perfect for my needs. I keep it clean, with minimal decor. I find the lack of clutter gives me a peace of mind I've learned to appreciate over the years with my wife. Ex-wife. And when I come home from the office, it's always pleasant to walk through the doors into this little sanctuary of spotless space. Now I have nothing to worry about and no one to demand from me. My new life has taken some getting used to.

Walk in an Austrian Wood



Candy Patchett

Artwork

Artist Statement

A Southerner by choice, I have lived in Florida for 50 years. I have always loved music, play various instruments and have been a writer for newspapers and magazines. In the last 5 years I began trying my hand at painting, using oils as well as acrylic and watercolor.

A Walk in an Austrian Wood, my art piece is inspired by my husband's photo, taken while I was pondering the beauty. A walk in the woods was a wonderful moment of respite. There was a beautiful, peaceful forest surrounding me and the incredible city of Salzburg below. I was so into the moment; I was unaware of my husband behind me with the camera. As I painted, the peace seemed to come back to me. It was the smoothest process ever!

-Candy Patchett

In Between

Katrina Kaye



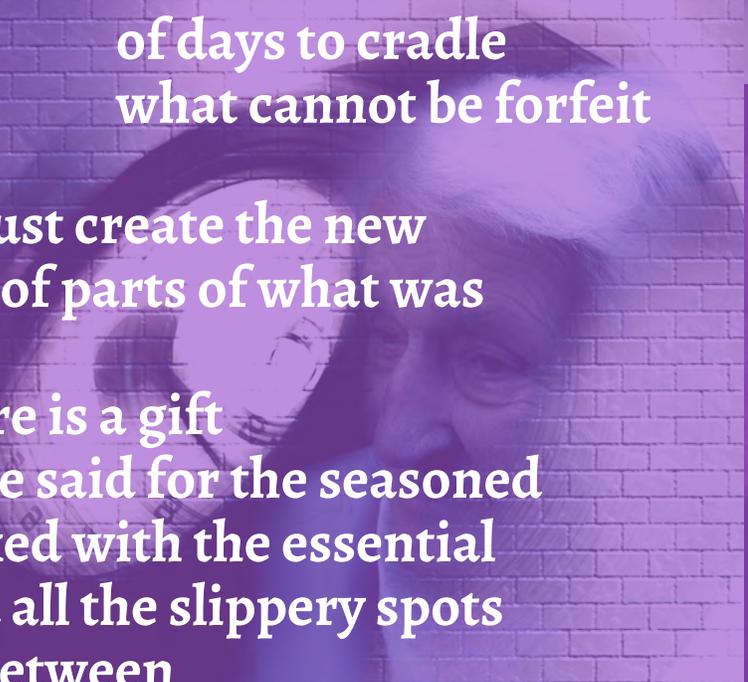
the woman I was
is desperate to find
conciliation with
the woman I am



we come together
inside aging skin
and seek a stretch
of days to cradle
what cannot be forfeit



I must create the new
out of parts of what was



there is a gift
to be said for the seasoned
mixed with the essential
and all the slippery spots
in between

I am not yet finished

She glides, steps delicate and quiet,
as she moves from one good deed to another,
a beacon, a firefly on the horizon of the night,
a promised protector with a broken heart.

Her touch is Carrara marble, heavy and cold,
burdens ciphering her radiance,
Michelangelo's masterpiece of incorruptible purity,
and I bow in sanctified silence.

She delights in childish wonders.
Magic yet devout,
her brilliance blindsides the saints,
and she wears her stolen halo in communion with the angels,
sacred and revered in her mission.

Her holy voice consecrates her words, soft and solemn,
hallowed by a virgin, venerated by the flesh,
her attention a spotlight that only shines casually.

The blood of Christ stings my tongue as I swallow my sin.



Chandra Rice

Mother Robin

Among the Golden Flowers

Josh Poole
Fiction



On the outskirts of the small city of Takahashi, a man sat with his son, eating lunch next to a well-tended patch of golden chrysanthemums. They were in Old Town, the largely-preserved extension of the ancient Matsuyama Castle carved into the verdant mountainside of Okayama Prefecture. Nestled among the modern buildings were the restored residences of samurai families, including the Haibara and Orii, among others. The man wore a fitted suit and black shoes that grew hot in the sun. He was a civil engineer visiting Takahashi to appraise the structural integrity of the aging infrastructure of the old samurai town, and had taken his ten-year-old son along.

“Their houses are small, not like our house,” the boy said, pulling a piece of pork from his yakitori brochette.

“Matsuyama Castle is not small,” the man said, handing his son a napkin. “I haven’t been here in so long.”

“But these houses are tiny.” The boy shrugged, dripping sauce onto his white dress shirt with a clumsy bite.

“Your mother will kill us if we return with those stains on your shirt.” The man looked at the dark brown blotches on the white fabric and sighed.

“We can buy a new one before we leave,” the boy said, swatting at a bee.

The man looked out upon the rolling hills and the artful buildings buried in the old forest. The bee still buzzed around them, landing on the flowers with a heaviness that strained their stems.

“Someone spent time making that shirt. You will not throw it away,” the man finally said, tossing a fried dumpling into his mouth.

“It isn’t hard to make a shirt,” the boy replied and continued eating.

“It is hard to make a good shirt and you have a good shirt.” The man snatched the food from his son’s hand. “You can have more when you respect that.”

“I’m hungry, we haven’t eaten all day.”

“You know,” the man said as he looked up the mountain at the distant silhouette of Matsuyama Castle before shifting his gaze to the well-tended chrysanthemum patches. “The history of this place is so steeped in craftsmanship that even the flowers grow with a symmetry.”

“Are you about to tell one of your old stories again? How old are you again, dad?”

“Too old to overlook things.” The man stood up, wiping his hands with a napkin before tucking them into his pockets.



“There was once a great sword-maker in these mountains,” the man began. “And his name was Nakasone...”

A child had long lived in the mountains without a name. No one knows how he came to live in such a way or what had happened to his family. Alone, the child learned to live off the land, to eat the wild plants and hunt small game in the forests. It was while hunting that he learned his precision and patience, for the animals were small and quick. Then as he grew fond of foraging he learned the importance of using only the right materials, such as when the berries were unripe, they would hurt his stomach, and when they were overripe, their taste was bitter.

As he grew older, he sought a different life, having smelled the scents from the restaurants in the town far below as the smoke would wander up into the mountains. He would venture into Takahashi under the cover of darkness and take what food he could find in the scraps. It was on one of those nights that he was caught, not by samurai, thankfully, but by a swordsmith who lived and worked in the town. The swordsmith, pitying the boy, took in the child with the lure of food. It was a hard task to explain to the child this bargain, for the boy did not speak, nor could he understand.

After some weeks of fleeing the swordsmith’s captivity, the boy agreed to live in the swordsmith’s shop. As the swordsmith taught the boy how to speak, he was amazed at the child’s ability to learn the language so quickly after living so long in the forests. He allowed the boy to live with him and his wife in their small home at the edge of the town, where they had a small yard and a porch that faced down the mountain. As the boy learned more from the man and the others who worked for him, the swordsmith explained to him his craft, how to forge metals and build a strong flame. When the boy began to grasp the trade, the swordsmith bestowed upon the child his own family name, Nakasone, and told him many stories that his father and mother had told him.

By the time the boy was thirteen, he was a better sword-maker than the man. He used his judgment cultivated from years of foraging to pick only the finest ore to craft the blade and the best charcoal to fuel the fire. He used the patience and skill he’d honed while hunting to form that ore into the most intricate blades the samurai of the town and castle had ever seen. Nakasone directed the men’s workers just as the man had done before and they respected Nakasone in spite of being more than twice his age.

When the man grew old, Nakasone, then in his twenties, took over the shop fully, and made a name for himself as the greatest sword-maker in all of Nihon. The men who had once worked in the shop with Nakasone had retired and instead their sons and nephews worked for him. There were many that wished to work in the shop but Nakasone took in no apprentices, pledging to the workers that they would always have work, for their fathers and uncles had trained him.

The old man died some years later, after many seasons of watching Nakasone forge the most beautiful blades he had ever seen. In his final hours he could not sit up or speak, but wrote for Nakasone to come up to the house, for he had one last instruction. Nakasone abandoned his work to be present for the death, leaving the workers to finish the complex process of heating ore. When he reached the house, the old man’s wife invited him in. He stooped down next to the old man, asking what he could do and the man, fueled by a new but fleeting invigoration, finally spoke.

“Someday you shall make a blade so sharp that it could separate death from life.”

The old man died as the words left his mouth. Nakasone buried him in the soft ground where his teacher had cultivated a beautiful garden. Upon the grave, he placed a pile of copper and iron ore to mark the man's life. He took care of the man's widow until her death months later. As a heavy rain fell, he found her laying in the garden with a basketful of cherries. Nakasone watched as the water, itself unlike any rain he had felt in all his years in the mountains, pulled the red dye from her yukata and seeped with it into the ground. Stolen, too, was the color from all but one of the cherries. After the rain ceased, he buried her alongside her husband and planted the seed from the single cherry in between the two graves.

Years would pass and Nakasone continued to make the swords that had made the swordsmith, his father, so proud of his life. With every blade he carried the last words of the man, each time trying to create a blade worthy to honor those sentiments:

Someday you shall make a blade so sharp that it could separate death from life.

It wasn't until Nakasone had seen sixty years of seasons that he ceased to make swords, having failed to create an edge that could separate death from life. His workers quit with him, starting their own blacksmith shops in towns near and far. Over the next ten years his arms withered, and his hands, so abused by time and his intensity of creation, remained closed and locked with tension. He took to drinking at a nearby izakaya, spending a great deal of the money he had accumulated. On those nights he would stumble back to the home where he had been raised and sit in front of the cherry tree, which had an unusual red hue to its bark and leaves. There he would recite the old man's last words to himself before falling asleep on the grass.

One night, however, as old Nakasone sat in the izakaya and drank a great deal of sake, a mysterious traveler appeared. He was a samurai, Nakasone realized, but he carried only one sword. The man scanned the room over and over, ignoring the host's offering of drink or food. At last, the man approached Nakasone's table and unsheathed a wakizashi

"This was my father's blade," the man said. "Forged by a man named Nakasone, the greatest swordsmith in the world. My father, before he died, told me that this man no longer made swords. That Nakasone did nothing but drink." The man placed the wakizashi gently on the table in front of Nakasone.

"I am no longer Nakasone," the old man said. "But an old drunk whose hands cannot even grip a bottle to drink from it."

Nakasone held the bottle between his two hands and took a long gulp before placing it back down.

The young man, angered by this, slashed with the sword, but nothing happened. Nakasone laughed. "What kind of samurai are you? You could not even strike an old man!"

Nakasone reached for the bottle again, but as he went to pick it up, the top half pulled away from the rest of the bottle and sake poured out all over the table.

"You owe me for the sake. Whatever caused that scar upon your head must have made you so foolish," Nakasone said in annoyance, pointing at a heavy discoloration that ran across the man's scalp and down nearly to his eyebrow.

"My father tasked me with finding you and requesting that you make one more blade so that I may place a proper daishō upon his grave, for he lost the other in battle as a young man. I live for this task and this task alone, for I, too, tire of life."

"I do not make swords anymore," Nakasone said as he stood up from the table in an undignified stumble. "Your words are wasted."

The samurai slid the sword back into its sheath before stepping directly in Nakasone's path.

"My father also left me with these final words: "You must find the man who can make a blade so sharp that it could separate death from life, so that I may live on."

Nakasone froze for a moment before sitting back down. He rubbed his stubbled face with dirty knuckles before replying, "Meet me tomorrow."

The samurai nodded, and, trusting Nakasone's word, left the izakaya. Nakasone shook his head, and finished the sake in the broken bottle.

The following morning when the sun had not yet risen, and the air was still cold, Nakasone met with the samurai in front of his blacksmith shop before leading him back to his home. They stood on the porch, facing the two graves and the untended garden that grew nothing in the tree's shade. He gave the young man an ax and told him that he must chop down the cherry tree in the yard as Nakasone collected the copper and iron from his teacher's grave, which was by then oxidized green and stained red from the leaves that fell upon it each season.

"But it is alive, it will not burn," the young man protested.

"It will burn," Nakasone replied. "Cut it down."

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"But it is alive, it will not burn," the young man protested.

"It will burn," Nakasone replied. "Cut it down."

The samurai obliged and spent the entire day chopping up the tree into blocks to use in the forge. Nakasone nodded as the task was completed and then made the young samurai, who had placed aside some of his dignity to seek his father's wishes, carry the wood across town to the shop in the late evening hours. As the young man transported the wood, Nakasone carried the strange metal to the shop. When Nakasone grew thirsty from the exertion, he made the samurai venture into the mountains to fetch buckets of water from the springs he had known as a child. The samurai, who was strong in will and in body, fetched Nakasone many gallons that they stored in the shop.

Nakasone showed the samurai the strange ore he had collected from the grave and the samurai laughed.

"What is that? It will be soft," the samurai said, recognizing the copper hues.

"Be quiet," Nakasone said. "And help me build a fire."

The two men constructed the tataru, the clay vessel required for forging, and then sat the charcoal, which had remained dormant for ten years, alight. Nakasone allowed the charcoal to burn for a day, making the young man add the fuel as needed before mixing in iron sand and the strange, copper-like ore in layers with fresh charcoal. Along with the charcoal and ore, Nakasone threw in pieces of the cherry wood, which would cause the tataru to glow with a red aura. This continued for three days, with the young samurai doing the work of half a dozen men to keep the fire roaring at the correct temperature.

For weeks they molded the metal, forging, hammering, honing, and polishing, using the spring water to quench the material. The blade curved with the heating and cooling, but finally began to resemble a proper weapon as the samurai showed the same devotion as Nakasone, and proved useful with the precision he had learned from combat. The finished blade, as Nakasone cleaned it with a delicate cloth, shone with a bronze hue that breathed with red waves trapped inside the metal.

"Do you believe this blade could separate death from life?" The samurai asked, eyeing the magnificent construction as Nakasone handed it to him.

"We cannot know until it is made into a sword. It is but a blade now. You must take it over the mountains to a nearby town. There is a craftsman there who will make you a fine sheath and handle, far better than I could manage," Nakasone said, nodding to the samurai.

The samurai bowed and swore he would return with the completed katana.

For weeks, Nakasone did little but sit in the garden, looking at the graves that now sat without the shade of the cherry tree. He had no idea of the quality of the blade's metal, but he was certain of one thing, that he had never produced such an instrument. The red and copper hues lingered in his mind as he watched each sunrise and sunset over his mountainous home until, at last, the samurai returned.

"Hamamoto is a fine craftsman, just as you said," the samurai declared as he bestowed the sword, furnished entirely in black and deep copper, upon Nakasone.

"The finest," he said, and he unsheathed the sword.

"But how do we know if it could do as my father wished?" the samurai asked.

Nakasone stood up, holding the sword in one hand and the sheath in the other. "Come," he said.

The two men wandered through the streets to a nearby patch of chrysanthemums where bees floated from flower to flower. Nakasone stopped and pinched pollen from one of the flowers before rubbing it onto the blade. He held the edge above the flowers, pointing it towards the sky.

"What are you doing?" the samurai asked.

"Wait and see," Nakasone replied.



A bee soon attempted to land on the blade to fetch the pollen, but its body was halved by the edge under its bumbling weight.

“I have never seen its equal,” the samurai remarked with a smile.

“But it did not free the bee from death,” Nakasone replied, as disappointment took over his face.

“No, it did not.”

Nakasone suddenly hummed with an amused smile. “I have just figured out something, young samurai.”

“What is that?” the man asked.

“In making this blade I have found my life again. Perhaps,” Nakasone paused. “When you bestow it upon your father’s grave, you too shall find life outside your father’s death.”

The samurai nodded with an amused smile and accepted the sword from Nakasone with a bow.

“Perhaps. I must, however, feel the edge of this sword before it finds its final place,” he said as he gently pressed his hand against the sword. A ribbon of blood trickled from his palm as the samurai smiled and walked away.

Nakasone died some years later, having never made another sword. The samurai, upon placing the two swords upon his father’s grave, watched as the trees and grass in the area over the years came to have a strange red hue and the chrysanthemums that blossomed in the nearby garden bloomed copper rather than gold. He could never bring himself to tend to the things that grew there, believing them to be divine, and so the grave and two swords were quickly obscured, lost to time. The samurai, who had found his purpose in life rekindled in the wake of such a magnificent creation, lived a long, good life.

The man finished the story before turning around to see his son sitting, the food having gotten cold and uninteresting to the boy.

“Who told you that story?” The boy asked.

“An old friend,” the man said with a smile. “Now come. We have to find a place that can clean that shirt.” He held out his calloused hand and hoisted his son to his feet as a cool breeze blew his hair to the side.

The father brushed his hair to cover up the scar the breeze exposed, and the two wandered back into the town, past the old building where Nakasone and the samurai had worked.

Childhood Minds in Grown Times

Brittany Anne Forster

Dreaming to a sweet lullaby
 Tearful downpours haven't yet prevented you to fly
 Your head is held high
 with starry eyes constantly on the sky
 We are all fighting childhood minds
 in these grown times
 Nostalgic wonder
 Crippled by worldly thunder
 Seeking empathy and kindness
 in crowds of chaos and blindness
 Difficult conversations we try to weave,
 but any sign of resistance, we choose to give up and leave
 We search for safety in creativity
 Road blocked by sheer naivety
 We forget mystery and imaginations
 Hiding in the dark our own deep fascinations
 Take time to pause
 This is an urgent cause
 Reflect and read the signs
 Color outside the lines
 Time may have made you disappointed,
 and changing now might feel disjointed
 It's never too late to build anew
 Your questioning was the first clue.



Demons Out There,

Part III

Deborah L. Bean



When we left our home planet, the faint possibility of a first contact scenario had been discussed and prepared for by the World Space Agency. A way to communicate with an alien species had been debated for about the last hundred years amongst astrophysicists, astronomers, astrobiologists, computer analysts, and artificial intelligence engineers. Attempts at interstellar communication had been made by numerous institutions for decades listening via global observatories and large satellite arrays. Even science-fiction writers had added to the possibilities.

So, when I gave the order to send our first communication, the Seeker's computer banks had started with our first message which was the transmission of simple prime number sequences by radio at high frequencies at the 145.825 MHz band. The same message was also sent on the microwave bandwidth that especially targeted the natural marker frequency of neutral hydrogen at 1420 MHz. The Seeker didn't send a message at optical frequencies because we knew those were best used only for communication over light years and our contact was now in the same solar system.

Just over three days later, we received a reply. The bridge erupted in joy - laughing, crying, and shouting. Patrise Kelvin jumped up, along with others, and ran and gave Shandra Yang, our operations officer and her best friend, a hug - both jumping up and down and squealing like little girls. Then, realizing what they'd done, the women returned to their stations red-faced. Zenock was fistbumping with Mátteo Aguirre, one of the HelmsTechs. Griggs, in his usual gruff manner, called the bridge back to order, but I'd seen his downward fist punch as I'd slapped the console hard to my side in the excitement.

Our first reply was not understandable at all, unfortunately. But, a short hour later, our original message was returned. It seemed to me they had been caught unprepared to "hear" from someone other than their intended target. I realized that the other ship was only communicating with their home base, as we had to HQ for years, instead of other alien species.

Maybe they didn't think they'd find other intelligent races out here.

From that first message of prime numbers, our communication to the alien ship progressed to an algorithmic language.

This transmission consisted of the governing principles of mathematics, geometry, and physics, such as gravity. At the end of that message we added logic operators of mathematics: AND, OR, and NOT. All that we sent was to expand a common vocabulary between two separate species, at least that was the thinking of the experts back home. Included with that were geometrical formulas showing that we were moving the ship closer so that our communications would only take about fifteen minutes to reach them. Shortly thereafter, we received the exact same reply from our contact.

This is strange. Are they not trying to decode our message? They really thought they were the only ones out here. I hope we don't scare them off.

After that, in a series of back-and-forth messages, we transferred the basics of a rudimentary programming language. Using our messages, they were, warily but finally, able to establish their end of the virtual machine that would create the program to decipher each others' language. Again, I was a bit surprised that we were doing all the work, but they, obviously, hadn't been searching for extraterrestrial life. So it was that all of our linguists and everyone who could be drafted to the project were running shifts around the clock to translate their language.

I stood in front of my captain's chair and looked over at the dark-haired Ksenia Noalski, our chief linguist. She was of medium height and had an oval face and a nose that was narrow, but broadened at its downturned end. Of course, linguistics wasn't her primary occupation. All our linguists needed to have other specialties and Noalski's was in Life Support.

Noalski gave me a nod, and held up her crossed fingers after fiddling with the controls one last time. With some anxiousness I spoke into the air and to the computer that was running our side of the virtual language machine. This was

the first actual dialogue that was being held. I'd been warned to keep my words simple, no contractions, no adverbs, and no long sentences. I cleared my throat and took a breath.

"Hello? I am Yoshua Hills of the spaceship named Seeker."

Beyond normal crewmembers we had decided to allow a dozen others up here also. As captain I wasn't supposed to be aware of it, but there had been a lottery and then trading for the coveted spots. These were the winners. Off to the side, an assigned ComTech held a video recorder to capture what was an historic moment for our ship, our planet, and our people. Others were holding recorders also.

I waited, and, because their ship had been moving closer to us over the last ten days, the reply came back to me in just a couple of minutes. That included the time it took the computer system to run our dialogue through the translation process. The words were also displayed on the screen before me. Noalski had warned me that words that were unclear or assumed would also be shown.

"Greetings. I [verb assumed = am?] Graffin. [possessive unclear = our?] starship is Star-explode."

In the background, I could hear the actual communication that was received. It was easy to see where the translation was still lacking on the screen. Obviously the computer wasn't completely foolproof in its interpretation as could be seen by the starship's interpreted name. But it had only been a few days.

One of the programmers interjected. "Sorry, sir. I think they mean Starburst." He ran his fingers over the console, most likely making a correction.

Fascinating, it's not all hisses. It's also not too high or low on the frequency scale so what's being said isn't outside our hearing range - at least as far as I can tell.

Before I could answer, the computer went on. "We are [emotion unclear = gladness/joy?] to [action unclear = meet/hit?] Seeker."

With a quiet chuckle, I added, "We are happy to meet you, Graffin and Starburst."

"We [word not found?] to meet you. I Graffin, and [designation unclear = officers/crewpeople?] Bincho and Frab."

"I look forward to our meeting."

"Starburst have [object assumed = hardware/equipment?] for meet."

"Good. We will see you soon."

After that, I transferred the communication to the engineers, biologists, and linguists. They would have to do

the hard work of setting up our meeting with the Starburst. I wanted to get my hands dirty and join the crew that was responsible for those things, but I was still captain and had a ship to run, reports to look over, and messages to send to Headquarters.

Our new friends on the Starburst approached our position to match trajectories and set up contact so that we could meet. Their ship was much smaller than ours, sleek and curved as opposed to Seeker's string of wheel-like structures. *What minds conceived of such a design?*

We'd learned a lot about the aliens. Remarkably, they had the same life support requirements as we did. We still weren't able to transmit visual images, which seemed a little strange, so we still didn't know what the others looked like. But I was going to find out real soon. I took a few moments to freshen up.

After I washed my face, I rinsed my hands and noticed them in wonder. My ten fingers were long and dexterous; perfectly shaped for an engineer, whose trade required the ability to manipulate tools. Will the others have hands such as these? Or will they have other means of manipulating their environment? I looked into the mirror and noted my two ears, nose, and a mouth with straight white teeth. My chin had just the tiniest impression of a cleft. My hair was short. This is what a man is. Will they be men or monsters?

Mara was waiting outside my quarters. "Are you nervous?" she asked.

"Absolutely! Who knows what they are?"

"You will do fine." A slight frown crossed her face. "Yoshua? You must let them know we come in peace."

"I will." I watched as she headed back to the MedBay to watch this historic moment, as almost all of the rest of the crew were doing.

When I reached the portside airlock, linguists were setting up a comp to translate the aliens' language when they boarded. On a wallscreen I keyed up the external shipcam. Their ship hung out there, extending a wide tube to connect to our airlock.

Suddenly, something knocked me down. I landed hard, hitting my head. When vision returned, Chomsk stood over me. Shaking, he had a gun pointed at me.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't do it. Can't let the demons in." His eyes were red and bloodshot.

"There *are* no demons." *How can I make him understand?* I had to get control of the situation. We were making first contact in a few short minutes.

"Yes there are!" He pounded his head with his hand in

apparent frustration. I started to rise, thinking to overpower him.

“Don’t!” he yelled at me, then at some of the crew who had edged closer. “Get back!”

“Peder,” I tried to project calm. “What are you doing?”

“Stopping the demons.”

My heart froze. Fear took over. *He’s an engineer, like me. What had he done? “How?”*

“When they open the airlock, a rocket will launch toward their ship and hole it. A second one will wipe them out.”

My stomach spasmed and I clenched my hands. “You’ll kill innocents.”

“No! I’m destroying servants of the dark. The angels spoke to me.” His face took on an unworldly visage as his eyes seemed to shine. “These are they which turned to the Holy Father and his habitation. These he hath preserved to everlasting exaltation.”

On the viewscreen, the tube slowly matched up with our airlock. I noticed shadowy humanoid shapes in bulky spacesuits within. I could hear pounding on the door to this area, probably Griggs. Then I saw the wrench thrust into the mechanism that kept it closed.

“Chomsk, if those rockets explode, you’ll kill people here too. You can’t do that.”

“God will forgive me!”

“You’ll be a murderer!” I shouted back.

“Doesn’t matter. I must save us. Order the others out, so they’ll be safe.”

I watched him. At some point, he’d make a mistake. As the crew moved away from the airlock, Chomsk glanced at them, his gun moving away fractionally. I propelled myself forward. There was a bang near my head. I slammed him into the wall, grabbed his arm, and smashed it against the bulkhead.

He pushed me over, falling on top of me. He raised his arm to smash the gun into my face. I could see it coming but others grabbed it. The firearm went off again and Patrise Kelvin fell to the side, a burst of red spreading across her shoulder.

People were shouting. Machinery was crashing. I pulled my fist back and slugged Chomsk, hard. His head snapped back and someone’s arms went round his neck. I pulled the gun from him. Someone kicked and Chomsk crumpled as a foot connected with his ribs. I pushed him off and jumped up. One of the linguists let Griggs in, who took over.

I ran to the wall and pushed the com unit. “Medical –

emergency at airlock two!”

Mara’s voice answered, “We are on our way immediately.”

As Noalski was trying to right our translation machine I hurried to the airlock. In my peripheral vision, I saw Security take hold of Chomsk and lead him away. Good riddance. He’ll face charges for this. Now what has he done? I glanced at the viewscreen.

Unfortunately, the tube had reached the airlock by the time I got there. When I looked through the tiny viewport to the compartment, I could see a rigged-up launcher. I punched the override button on the airlock just as the outside portal was cycling open. No! Too late!

A streak of flame left the lock heading towards the other ship through the tube, pushing aliens ahead of it. A silent explosion bloomed bright in the vacuum against the alien ship. A second explosion followed, then a third and fourth.

Chomsk said there were two rockets, where did those come from?

I pushed the intercom. “Mara – get another med team to the portside lock, ready for vacuum. Security – you too. Now! We have to rescue survivors over there!”

I punched the close button for the outer lock doors. As soon as I could, I opened the inner doors and headed for the vacsuits. By the time I was suited up, the two teams had joined me, everyone scrambling.

Jetting over, it was obvious the other ship had explosively vented air. Equipment and bodies were everywhere, tumbling in myriad trajectories. The bodies appeared very human, which piqued my curiosity. I wanted to check them out, but I had to get to the ship. Aliens might be dying.

“Captain – those guns?” Griggs pointed.

I looked more closely at the debris around the bodies and I saw what he referred to: large guns at that. “I think you’re right. Did you notice their appearance?”

“Yeah. Humanoid.”

Now I was glad we were armed. SecChief Majers took charge when we reached the ship. “Defensive postures, team, Captain, Doctor – hang back.”

The security team surrounded the hole blown in the ship. They entered, leapfrogging in the vacuum for cover. Finally, Majers came over the comm. “Entrance secure, Captain.”

I headed in with the med team behind me.

The ship was a mess. Bulkheads were blown and anything loose was slowly streaming out the opening now that the first explosive decompression was over. Past the impact point, a long corridor ran the length of the ship. Most of the doors appeared open.

To my right, one body was caught on a protruding girder. I looked at it, astonished. The remains looked human. Eyes, hands, feet: a woman clad in slinky fabric that wafted obscenely in the air flowing out through the corridor, surprise on her dead face.

We started our search, looking for secured bulkheads where survivors might be trapped. When we found the first secured door, I called back to the ship for some engineers to help rescue whoever was left alive.

Twelve days later in the conference room, I sat down with department heads to go over our discoveries. The results were both shocking and amazing. I'd heard most of the reports before, but this meeting was to make sure the information was dispersed among the department heads and officers. Later, it would go to the rest of the crew and then to HQ.

Sec Chief Majers made her report first. "Captain, we recovered twelve bodies in the debris field, and estimate twice that are on unobtainable trajectories headed away from Seeker. Five of the located individuals were heavily armored and the others lightly so. We also found multiple firearms of various types; also, one undetonated explosive and the remains of others. It appears their crew was getting ready to storm Seeker. In a way, we were lucky those rockets took them out."

So that's what the other explosions were.

"In the cargo hold were 37 individuals. They were all alive and with the same story as far as we've been able to tell with the help of the linguists, communications, and the medical department. They claim to be survivors of raids made by this ship. They also say they are from different worlds. The ship appears to be a pirate and we were its next target. Also, one of the 'pirates' was found alive. We had to remove him immediately from the area we designated for the survivors when they first came on board. Some of the rescued wanted to kill him for what his people had done. He's now in detention until we can turn him over to another planetary government for criminal activities. Right next to EngTech Chomsk, who'll have to be punished for his actions."

I turned to Mara, my eyes raised. "What did Medical discover?"

"They are all human. Right down to the DNA and other metabolic systems of the individuals I have tested. These people are human enough to reproduce with us and the children born would not be considered hybrids. And they have knowledge of psychology. Since it would be cruel to hold EngTech Peder in captivity for the rest of *Seeker's* mission, we may be able to find a planet willing to rehabilitate him." She looked at me, almost pleading.

"I'll take that under advisement, Doctor. Thank you." I addressed the group at large. "So, you're saying that all these people, from – how many worlds?"

"Nine, Captain," said Griggs.

"From nine worlds – is there some big confederation out here that has colonized all these different planets?"

"I cannot say," Mara replied. "But the researchers and linguists who interviewed them reported their claim that most planets have evolved humans spontaneously. They assert that beyond a few colonized planets, their fossil records show that their people evolved on their planet. It is hard for me to believe and I plan to do more research – probably for the rest of my life."

I turned to Kelvin. "Comm – what have you found?"

Kelvin stood and bounced a little, then winced. Her bandaged shoulder and arm were in a sling from Chomsk's attack. She had been dying to share her discoveries as she cracked a huge smile. The ComChief also smiled at her enthusiasm. He looked proud as his subordinate started on Communications' findings. "Sir, we cracked the computers of the ship. It was a pirate ship! The autolog shows how it's prowled trade lanes. Those people we recovered in the cargo hold, they were going to be sold as slaves.

"Also, we downloaded their star maps! It shows 24 different inhabited planets. The comp libraries have too much info to go into now, but it's all uploaded to CrewNet. Almost every department is studying the data. In addition to the stories told by the survivors, the libraries we discovered on that ship had science info. I guess even pirates wanted some education." She laughed at her joke, along with others.

During the discussion that followed, I took a moment to reflect. We came searching for life and found – what? Our genetic cousins? More like brothers and sisters... Maybe there aren't any slimy monsters out here that we can't understand and relate to – just ourselves.

Another thought soon followed. So, how did Chomsk guess about the pirates? Lucky for us, though. Did the "angels" really speak to him or was it just the workings of his delusional imagination?

It was a question for the future.

Fin.

Films That Inspire

DANCING WITH THE MUSE

One thing most of us have in common is a love for good films. Even if my idea of a good film is different from yours, we probably both want to lean into those recliners at the theater and inhale a moving, entertaining, or thrilling story that's told well by the moviemakers.

And while I don't yearn for inspiration every day, sometimes I long for it outside of my creative life. And amazing films can offer that for different phases of life. In 2017, I first experienced inspiration for my physical and mental health from watching the film: "Wonder Woman." Well, sort of. It was more the knowledge of Gal Gadot's history with Krav Maga and fitness that inspired my fitness life (and having friends nickname me Wonder Woman!) and self-defense skills. I took up Krav Maga to be able to fight off the stalker who was making my life hell at the time. And ran to my heart's content – many miles at a time, just for fun.

This year, after two years of struggling with Long-Hauler Covid and relapses, I needed inspiration in this area again – and found it in "Brittany Runs a Marathon." I'd run a marathon before, but things have been frustrating regarding my health of late. Watching the film about a woman who had no interest in her health turn to running a marathon (and filmed during the real NYC marathon, by the way!) was inspiring for me. It took me a few weeks to get going, but I started training for a marathon this fall.

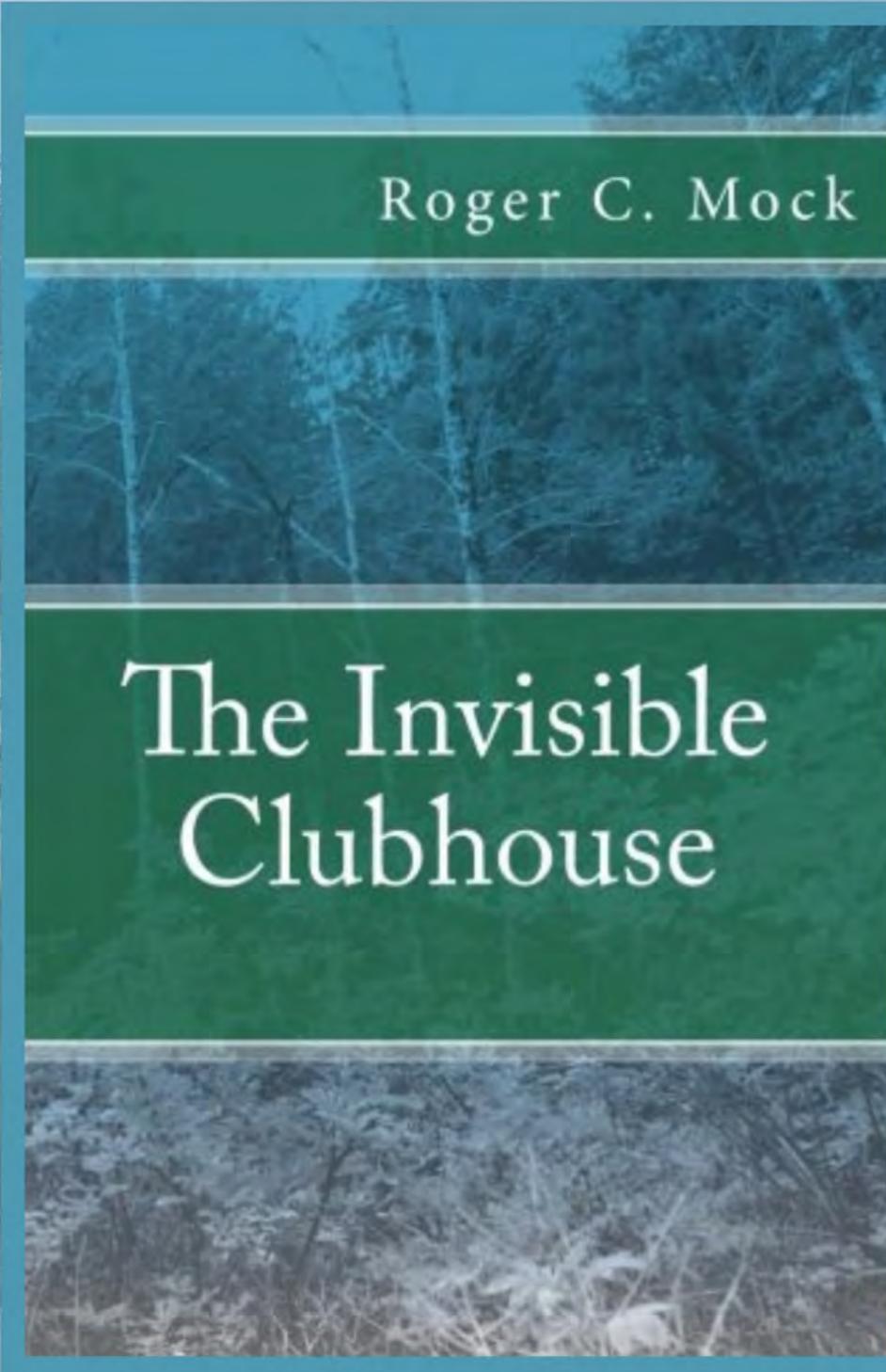


I guess what I'm getting at here is that if you're struggling to find motivation for something in life – whether health or creativity or spirituality – you might want to get streaming. Choose some films that work with the area of life you're yearning to boost and enjoy! There are a ton of lists all over the internet based on the topic that the film deals with, so it shouldn't be too hard to find some great pieces that could help with motivation.

Watch, breathe in the dream, repeat.



Rita Mock-Pike



Roger C. Mock

The Invisible Clubhouse

After bullies destroy Tony Miller's third clubhouse, "the professor" and his friends and sister, Rita, decide that it is time to build a new one where nobody can find them. Adventures await the children as they plan, construct and camouflage their best hide-out yet. But can they really keep it secret? Will it really be invisible?

A YA novel available on Amazon & Kindle

She said I was one step above a murderer. Really? Me, who serves at St. Francis' soup kitchen? Me, the president of the youth's Sunday school committee? My heinous crime, what is it?

I am transgender.

Others in my culture attack me as well. "You are following a dirty trend. Your soul is dirty. You must repent."

Stephanie Daich

Soiled Like Me

I sit below a massive sequoia tree as it reaches up to the heavens. This tree is endangered, and so am I.

I grab a handful of dark soil from amongst the roots, its heat warming my hand while little clods of dirt drop to the forest floor. I smear the rich brown against my white shirt.

My shirt: now soiled, like me.

The white shirt will no longer shine. I too have lost my brilliance.

"Mom, if only you were here to guide me. Strengthen me against those "pious" Christians of the world, the ones that teach love with their lips, yet their actions speak otherwise."

I still believe in God and I have met some fabulous Christians. Christians willing to love me because they love God. Despite those small few, I can't help feeling that the majority of people see me as something dirty.

I rub the deep brown dirt along my arm in an attempt to let my outside reflect the perceived inside.

My mind returns to my childhood—me decked out in pink bows at my dance recitals. "She is so beautiful," my mom's friends would comment.

I never liked the bows or the fluff. When I looked at my dance-self in the mirror I hated who I saw. I couldn't help but think: "This is not me."

I felt handsome when I went on adventures with the neighborhood boys, diving into the muddy pond to capture tadpoles. Life exhilarated me when we played 'war' and zoomed around the neighborhood on our bikes. I felt free to live my natural self when I hung with the guys. That was the glorious me.

Mom supported my zest for adventure; the ladies in the neighborhood said it wasn't natural. When I chopped off my hair, my aunties scolded me.

Who were they to determine who I should be?

A breeze passes over me and chills my dirty skin.

"Mom, what would you tell me to do? Are you in heaven waiting for me, or am I too 'soiled' to enter the pearly gates?"

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Above me, a woodpecker pecks into the sequoia.

"How old are you, mighty tree? What have you withstood? What have you seen?" Sequoias are said to be thousands of years old.

The heartless woodpecker continues to deface the gorgeous specimen. Nature is not the sequoias only enemy. Logging sequoias, constructing roads, and raging fires have hurt the sequoias. Humans have caused great damage to these stunning trees.

Just like the sequoias, humans damage me. Whoever said, "stick and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me," must not have been transgender.

"Here you are. Thousands of years later, still standing. You have had birds leave their scars. Surely, bugs have burrowed through your bark. Yet, here still, you stand."

The sequoias have withstood such adversity. Surely, I can too.

Can't I?

I move my fingers along the rough bark.

"Your armor."

I rub the dirt along my arms, now wearing it as my armor against what hurts me the most. My society has stripped me off my worth because I do not conform to their cookie-cutter version of who they want me to be. Why does it even matter to them? No matter how I try to block them out, it still feels like they are winning. Maybe they are right. Perhaps I am dirty; inside and out.

My mom taught me I had value.

My God has taught me that I have value. I have worth. Today it is not Him, but others who try and take that from me.

"You are one step above a murderer."

Why? Because I don't conform to the social norms of what my gender should be? Mom loved me for who I was. She knew my intimate thoughts and goals. She was proud of me.

Am I really soiled?

I look around at nature's temple. All you have to do is look in nature if you want diversity. God created flowers of a million varieties. Fabulous birds that are all unique.

God created me.

He created me to feel the way I do.

"I am not soiled!" I yell.

Vigor swells in my chest, confirming I have worth. I have value.

"I will not let you take my joy!" I yell to the lady who had so painfully wounded me.

The Sequoia carries its scars for thousands of years, yet they are no less beautiful, no less exquisite.

I am exceptional, just like this tree. I will carry my scars, and they will not break me.

I take another handful of dirt and paint it on every inch of bare skin.

"I am not soiled. I am *me!*"

sjálvrannsakan



Theresa Kohlbeck Jakobsen

Artwork

Artist Statement

The piece shows a landmark/craine, Faroese “Varði”, that people built in the old days (before tunnels, cars, roads etc) to mark trails through the mountains leading between villages. It is in its own a trace of the past. Furthermore it includes the traces of many hands who put stones on it when passing by. For me a Varði is a timeless but dynamic monument which simultaneously holds traces of the past and the present. Through that it allows an introspection into society and one’s self.

- Theresa Kohlbeck Jakobsen

Marc Phillips

From "forms for others"

-and some things will always seem unfinished, good things especially.
Stop trying to finish them.

-therefore, it seems very few people are noticing that The Meaning of Life is at the bottom of the form. Even if you could answer that question correctly from the start, the answer itself would be unintelligible without first knowing for instance, What Life Is, which is right up top.

-and likewise with happiness (different form). If by some miracle you stumble upon What Will Make Me Happy, are you apt to understand it – much less do it – without first knowing why? That's the reason the happy form begins with What I Am.

-so anyone claiming to have completed a form is called a quack, before or after they sell you something.
Anyone who has completed a form may be disturbed, from the answers or the journey to them.

-while other times will be bad. Whatever you're doing, whomever you're with, it's coincidental, souvenir.
The present itself is sometimes bad.
You can omit those times on any form.

Creature Encounter

D. Dunn-Carr

Fiction

I hope this thing is on. Murry here. It's weird looking at myself on this laptop. I'm not one for writing things down. My sister showed me how to make what she calls a "video diary", so here I go, talking to a computer. Damn, it's weird looking at myself on the screen. This thing is worse than a mirror.

I study my haggard face as I move my head from side to side while keeping my gaze on the camera. Then, I lean in closer and notice my eyes are bloodshot. Lord, I am exhausted. My shoulders slump, and I rest my forehead on the table for a minute while I run my hand through my thinning gray hair. Sitting up, I let out a huge sigh. Something pops in my back when I am halfway up. When did I get so old? Thinking like that annoys me, so I look down at my mud-caked boots and think about changing them. I follow the trail of the dried mud spray all over my bulky camo pants and jacket. I must have gotten muddy while I was running in the woods.

So, I'm gonna rest for a minute and then get the rest of my gear out of the Jeep. I can't seem to focus. Whoa, I can see myself in the cloudy mirror across the room. I feel and look like shit. My hair is messy, hell I look like one of those goofy muppets with the wild hair, my sister calls me Beaker, but I could care less.

Where was I? Oh yeah, the hunt. I keep replaying what happened in West Virginia in my head. It's like I'm watching a bad movie, and I can't look away from it. It makes me so damn angry I didn't bring him down! I've got to walk around. Geez, my boots are loud. It's too quiet and cold; maybe this old wool blanket from the back of the couch will warm me up. I found the ancient thermostat and, would you look at that? One of my eyebrows shoots up as I read, 40 degrees! That realization makes me shiver even more, so I pull the blanket tighter. My fingers feel like ice cubes as they fumble with the dial and I turn it up to 70 degrees, then I feel relief when I hear the heating unit kick on. The unit sounds like an old car starting up. Wow! That burning smell is the worst.

It's sunset, here in Raleigh, N.C., and I'm still shaken. I don't know where I got the energy to drive all night to get here after leaving the West Virginia state park.

Yeah, I had to get out of there right away. It was a damn shame. My partner, Ben, and I were so looking forward to the hunt. We had rifles, flashlights, headlamps, and a map of the area. But, to be honest, most of the time, it was dull. All that guy wanted to do was roam around the dark woods banging on trees and wailing like a banshee. Me? I don't like to walk a lot; honestly, I'm not a walker. It would have been more fun with an ATV. Before this hunting trip, I didn't believe in the creature. You know: Big Foot, Sasquatch. So many names for something so ominous and scary. I researched the hell out of him, and I thought I wanted to see it. Some wishes shouldn't come true.

Okay, here's what happened. It's just after sunset, and you know the October sky gets dark quick. It's even darker in the deep woods. I usually like the evening in the park. I enjoy sitting around a fire pit and watching the colors change in the growing flames, but we were on an expedition of sorts, to prove the creature was real. And we had to walk because the forest was too thick and overgrown for my ATV. My backpack must have weighed as much as I do. I got wore out quick, and Ben kept complaining about my "slow pace and my heavy breathing", but I kept going.

"Murry we are almost there!" Ben is practically jogging through the woods. I'm too tired and winded to answer. Ben is looking down at the GPS on his phone and he keeps giggling like a little girl. I walk up beside him and drop my heavy pack.

"Hey Murry, this is the place, there could be a Sasquatch running through here!"

When I was a little less winded I said, "Maybe I should light a fire. My hands feel like ice." I start to look around for firewood while Ben pulls out his infrared goggles from his backpack. He sweeps his head back and forth while I continue to shiver. He looks like some kind of bug man with those things on.

Ben pulls them off and smiles, "This is cool Murry. Just like daylight with these on." He frowns as he watches me rub my hands together. "You cold?"

I blow on my hands and shake my head, “What was your first clue?”

Ben holds his hands up in surrender in front of his all camouflage outfit. “Hey, I’m too excited to be cold. Why don’t you open one of those hand warmers? You packed enough of them.”

“Let’s start a campfire,” I suggest as I stand up. My own camouflage shirt is soaked with sweat from the walk.

Ben waves his hands at me. “Murry we are not here to camp, we are here to hunt the Sasquatch. Try the hand warmers.”

It feels very spooky being alone in this tiny cabin. The dim lights in the kitchen cast contorted shadows on the walls from the table and couch. Geez, you’d think after a 90-degree day, it wouldn’t be so cold here. Who am I kidding? I’m up in the mountains; this is where I can think about my next move and plan my next hunt. I don’t know. Maybe I shouldn’t have left my hunting buddy alone. No one would blame me after what happened. Right? Heck, I honestly didn’t know him that well. We had just met at the prehunt meeting. He seemed like a nice guy, He was really excited about the hunt. That was some messed-up stuff, and I had to get out fast.

Was running the right thing to do? My partner, I can’t seem to remember what happened to him. He wasn’t next to me while I ran. Was he? Maybe he ran in another direction? But I’m mad at myself because I’m supposed to be the hunter. It’s not supposed to be the other way around. I run my hands through my sweaty hair, gripped by the memories of my ill-fated hunt. Shit, here it comes again; I remember the shooting. Did I get him? Why is this vision stuck in my head? I can’t believe I am talking to myself. I messed up out there. Why can’t I remember if I got him? My shots should’ve taken that son of a bitch down! But all I can think about is how I let him scare me with his deep growling and the twigs snapping all around us. Then an enormous black shadow ran straight at me!

Ok, that’s before the shooting, I remember how dark it was. If we didn’t have our headlamps on, we wouldn’t be able to see anything. Then we noticed this god-awful smell like rotting meat, and the smell made us gag and cough. Our eyes were watering, and we covered our mouths and noses with our jackets.

Alright, let me rest a minute. I tap the laptop’s mouse to make sure it’s still recording. What happened next? Whoa, my heart is beating fast; then we heard this deep evil-sounding growl. It was loud. We quit moving when we heard it. Then we could faintly make out in the distance, a black blob or a person, it was tall and big running towards us. The leaves are crunching, twigs snapping all over the place, and then whatever it is crashes through the brush roaring! I’m a big guy, you know, 6’4, but my headlamp lit up his chest, I think.

Now I remember, Ben was holding his phone up taking a video. Why was he trying to video that thing on his phone? He had it raised up in front of him while that creature charged at us.

I raised my gun, but I’ve never used it before so I accidentally shot the phone out of his hand. Ben screamed and jumped back, but he recovered quickly enough to pull out his gun. We had our guns raised, and bam! Ears ringing like a bell got stuck in my head. We must have unloaded four or five rounds. He didn’t drop, and he kept charging us.

After that, I turned in the opposite direction and started running. What happened to Ben? Shit, why can’t I remember? My guess? Well, my partner and the beast must still be out there. Maybe my hunting buddy is lost. I don’t know. I got the hell out of there! Hell, I couldn’t stay in those woods after that. Okay, my heart is racing again, and I feel like I can’t breathe. Whoa, my knuckles are turning white as I grip the sides of this table; I can’t get my hands to stop shaking or my heart to slow. Maybe if I keep talking about it, yeah, get it off my chest. I keep thinking about... explosive gunshots. I’ve got to think about something else. Who was screaming? Me? Ben? I shake my head, it had to be the creature.

I know, I’ll think about something else. A happy memory about this Campground. Oh, I know, my last fishing trip with my best friend, Eric. Damn, it’s been a lot of years. Yeah, back in the 80s, good olé, Eric Lewis. He didn’t have many friends in school either. We bonded because his parents got a divorce too. Geez, I haven’t thought about him in a long time. Heck, we were in our teens. We decided to come up here and blow off some steam, climb the trails and drink a lot of beer. It makes me chuckle, thinking about all the stupid stuff we did, like sitting around huge bonfires and drinking. Drinking, hey, that’s one of my favorite pastimes. I sure could use a cold one.

Looking around the cabin, I notice the small kitchen, the flowery wallpaper faded and curling up on the edges near the window. A sizable window like this will come in handy for keeping watch. Just in case he finds me here. I walk over to the brown paper grocery bags covering the surface of the butcher block countertops, and I peek out the window. Nothing is moving out there. It’s annoying how loud the tiny beige refrigerator hums in the corner. Looking through the bags, I might make soup or coffee to warm myself up, but honestly, I just want a beer. No, it’s still too cold to open a beer, so I go over to the fireplace, and guess what? Damn! No firewood! I gotta go outside and get logs off the porch. So, I throw the blanket off and let it fall to the floor, and I unzip my backpack and dig around, then pull out my red hoodie. I give it a quick sniff, then pull it over my head and big stomach.

I look back at the solitary laptop and finish my story about Ben. When I ran into the ranger station and told them what happened, they looked at me with what I can only describe as disgust. Those rangers were actually angry at me for not getting taken away by that creature. Hell, they wanted me to go back.

“You’ve got to go back with us Murry to show us where!” Hell NO! I’ve never been more terrified in my life. Look, I’m so scared I’m crying.

They are going to need to question me some more about what I can remember in the morning. Those rangers told me I need to collect myself and they would return in the morning. I left before sun up. After what happened in the last West Virginia park, I thought I would just go home. But, no, I can’t go home yet. Not until I get the creature. Make no mistake, and I will get him! He killed Ben. Yeah, gung-ho Ben. Why didn’t he run away? What if those rangers blame me? I didn’t shoot him! It was a creature! The Sasquatch got him!

At that moment, I shiver as beads of sweat begin to run down my forehead. I use the back of my shirt sleeve to wipe my face. Then, looking into the camera again, I find myself yelling, “It’s that creature or me! I know he’s hunting me!”

I rub my cold hands and open the heavy cabin door; the thick hinges creak like a violin playing a sour high note. That sound spooks me so much I begin to rush, and then I start dropping the logs I’ve bent down to pick up. The once neatly stacked logs on the porch begin to roll across the patio.

Suddenly, the hair on the back of my neck stands up, and I get the same uneasy feeling someone is watching. Quickly, I gather a few logs into my arms. As I turn my head, I can hear footsteps crunching across leaves. There are no lights in the park, and I curse myself for getting into a lonely cabin so close to the dense woods. Then, as if on cue, an owl hoots nearby, and I laugh at myself then relax as I cradle the last log to my chest. A twig snaps. I shoot upright and stiffen. Ears straining to identify the sound and location. All I hear is a frog croaking somewhere near the porch. I clear my throat and turn to walk back inside when I hear a low growl. My chest is tight, and my heart races. I know that growl. It’s Him!

Slowly, I take a deep breath and mull over where I put my weapons. He growls again, holding it longer and it sounds closer. Clutching the logs to my chest like a shield, I rush through the door and into the cabin. Once inside, I immediately dump the load on the floor, ignoring the thuds I scan the cabin for my weapons. Next, I hastily kick the door shut. I heave my body at the door while fumbling with the doorknob’s lock. My head begins to throb, and I’m so frightened I become dizzy; my breaths are labored as I turn around, back to the door. Finally, I spot the gun case on the couch when another noise outside makes me jump. A

nervous scream escapes, and I immediately cover my mouth with my hand. My fear propels me to the couch, and I plop down next to my gun. I’m shaking so much I can’t move the zipper. Somehow I manage to unzip my gun case. Gripping my weapon tightly, I rise and stumble across a log. I catch myself on the tabletop. I check the chamber; it’s fully loaded. I breathe a sigh of relief. A sense of security washes over me again. Even though my heart is beating wildly, my breathing begins to slow.

“I’ll show you I’m not afraid!” I shout at the door while holding the gun in front of me. When no one answers my challenge, I cautiously move forward. Once again, it is eerily quiet. An enormous horseshoe hangs over the door; I remember the horseshoe is a sign of good luck, so I close my eyes and touch the symbol reverently. Strained nerves inside me begin to settle as I stand there with my left hand covering the horseshoe.

At that moment, something bangs into the metal trash can outside the kitchen window; my eyes open widely, and without delay, I dash over and push open the window.

Pointing the gun at the window, I shout, “I’m armed! You want a piece of this steel in your ass?!” At that point, I’m sweeping the pistol right and left as if it can locate the creature in pitch black.

Again, the metal trash can rumbles. Someone is kicking it! I take a deep breath and frantically sweep the gun back and forth across the window. Panic is beginning to ramp up again, so I grip the gun tighter. While trying to decide what to do, a rotten stench wafts in through the open window on the cold night air. I recoil and start to gag and cough. I try to hold my breath, but wave after wave of his stench becomes more potent every second. Nauseous, I cover my mouth to stop the bile rising from my throat as I crumble to the floor like a bag of bricks. Finally, I release the white-knuckle grip on my gun, and it slides out of my hand onto the cabin floor. I cover my mouth and nose with my hands. If only they could keep the putrid stench out of my lungs. My lungs are so tight as if a hand is squeezing them. I’m starting to hyperventilate as tears stream down my feverish face. What am I going to do? My body begins to shiver. Oh God, he’s here. Oh God, no! He found me!

Then, there is a forceful bang on the cabin door. The walls shake as if they would break apart, and somehow I find the strength to get up. Holding my breath, I pick up my weapon and shakily point it toward the door. Although tears continue to stream down my face, and the new waves of stench trigger more gagging and coughing, anger helps me keep my gun raised.

“Come and get me, you son of a bitch! I’ll drop you this time, I swear!” Yelling triggers more coughing fits, and I drop to my knees. I think I’m a goner!

Then I hear a human voice on the other side of the door. Unable to hold myself up, I crumple while the cabin door bursts open. All my heavy eyes can make out are two sets of feet hurrying towards me. My head goes limp and rests on my chest. As I start to sway, I feel arms pulling my body off the floor, and I open my eyes to see them set me on the dark couch. One person puts a bottle of water in my hands as my coughing subsides. After sipping on the water, I notice one of the men is wearing a park ranger uniform.

His thick jacket zipped against the cold, overhead light reflected on his badge. He smooths his hands over his dark pants and tilts his hat back over his dark curly hair. I give him a weak smile.

“You okay? Murry, right?”

I squeak, “Yes,” then sip more water.

The ranger pats me on the shoulder and looks into my eyes. “You don’t look so good, Murry. You’re white as a ghost.”

“Seen a ghost?” the other man jokes.

I manage a nod. “Smell is gone.”

The ranger looks puzzled. “Did you hit your head too? What smell?”

The second man is wearing all camouflage as well. I recognize him as one of the men assigned to tonight’s hunting team. He is looking at my pistol on the floor.

“What’s that doing out?” he asks.

“What?” I answer, trying to get up.

The hunter points at my gun. “Is this thing loaded?”

“Huh.. loaded? What’s going on here?” The forest ranger asks while walking over to the hunter’s side. He points to my weapon.

“Fellas, you gotta help me! The creature is out there. He was hammering on the door, trying to get me. Didn’t you guys see it?”

“What are you talking about?” The ranger’s voice is incredulous.

“He must have hit his head too. Look at this place,” the hunter says while eyeing the messy cabin.

The ranger looks at the scattered logs on the floor. “Did you trip, Murry?”

I stand up angrily. “No!”

The ranger holds a hand up like a stop sign, his voice calm. “What creature Murry? There’s nothing out there.”

“What?!” I shake my head furiously.

“You don’t look so good, Murry.” The hunter is eyeing me suspiciously. He slowly backs away as if he thinks I am going to be sick.

I look back at the laptop sitting on the table. “I was recording! I’ll prove it to you!”

The hunter walks over to the table and glances at the open laptop. He wiggles the mouse and watches the screen. “Hey Murry, you got nothing. This thing’s not even on.”

Katrina Kaye

East

You said,

*take what
I want
and leave
the key
under the mat.*

*But as I stand
leaning on the
front door frame,*

*nothing
here belongs
to me.*

*Instead
I leave the
key in the
door and
walk east
and stare
into the rising sun*

*wondering
how many
steps it will
take to forget*

your name.



Serialized Fiction

The Whistling Caverns, Part 1

Rita Mock-Pike

When one falls into a pit for days uncounted, there is much time for thought. Such happenstances have been known to happen in strange stories of old: fables laden with eerie traces of magic and happenstance, tales meant to bring one to repentance – or contemplation of one's self-worth or personal values. Occasionally, such things happen to real humans, as it did me, without a foundational moral story meant to teach children to stay home, play quietly in the garret, nor spoil their dinners.

A giddy girl, tripping towards the daydream of a brilliant future paints the landscape of circumstances under which this abyssal story begins. My impetuous wandering led to this slip, this fall into the story far greater than damsel playing in the woods. The happenings while I sat in the sludge, unseen and unheard for time unknown, and what happened thereafter are far more the strange and unusual happenings worth telling.

At first, I questioned the existence of a dark and foreign crater amid the forest in which I dwell. Why did such a place exist? No trappings above laid expression of ruse, no signs or warnings gave indication that danger lay ahead. Why then, did this massive inky shaft exist?

Wrists throbbing, knees scraped and bruised, I stumbled about in gloom once the initial thoughts fled and left me frightened. What else could be down here with me? What creature (or creatures?!) of slime might seek to soak up my soul with tentacles of mythical evil? What other lost souls might I find remnants of down here in this murky tomb?

No bones crunched beneath my panicked feet, nor were there sucking sounds of angry monsters absorbing my skin through sticky tongues, so I returned to my seat and wept. What had I done to deserve this fate? This quiet, moldy kismet of unexpected despair? Had the life I led brought me to this place?

Before this time, here in this pit, I thought I had wept before. Now I understand that I had not. Those were merely tears.

When my eyelids dried and my soul accepted the incoming night of life, I sat quietly dormant. I did not ask the universe to send help. Death would find me here, and I was unsettled. Here I would perish – and no one I cared for would ever understand what had happened to the girl wandering through the forest. A girl on her way to meet a secret love.

As thought of my love crossed my mind – that it should have taken more than a moment of reflection! – hope lifted my spirit heavenward. He would never stop looking for me! I would cry out for him when I heard his voice echo through the forest that had, by its own fate, united us one day many years past. Surely the heavens smiled upon me!

As time danced past soul with untold tickings, hope waned in tiny inches back. Where is he? Why has he not come for me? Did he not know I made my way toward him through the wood? Does he not care that I am lost? Bound in tight knots within, dread vied for attention, tearing away the memory of my lover's face. Trepidation pecked at details: First the touch of his hand against my cheek as he wiped tears from my eyes. Then the sweet taste of lips, the smell of his natural musk, the crooked nose, color of eyes – all faded. His voice.

Would I even recognize the sound of his call if it reverberated among the trees above? Would I know it was he that sought me? Would everything flood back when the hail rose above the silence? Would I remember my name?

My name. The one label I had embraced all my life. I had been called many things apart from it: fool, daydreamer, imbecile, goose, ninny. Perhaps these unkindnesses led me to cling to my name as an address only used by my loved ones.

Now perhaps I would never hear it again.

I said my name aloud softly. Hoarse from crying and days, I could only say it once. Faint from dehydration, leaning back against the mirey wall, I whispered his name and closed my eyes.

When sleep peeled herself from eyelids, I startled to the touch of something soft and furry beside me. With no light, my eyes played tricks, leading me to imagine that beside me lay a soft, gray kitten nearly grown. I stroked the fur, fearing no consequences. The wild creature had come to me in time of great need – I could not believe her presence was nefarious.

The ears were not like a cat's ears. I should have stopped stroking her at once. The nose was round and button-like and dry. I should have trembled in terror. The fur, luxuriously soft, was clean and smooth as one imagines a magical being of the forest must be, having come straight from waterfall bathing and drying in the sun. Though my eyes could not see them, I'm certain that glittering sparks rose from her fur as my hand connected with it, as though magic were mine and she my familiar. A savior in gray fur, perhaps?

As we sat together in the darkness, nestled against one another in the damp cold, my imagination took us on journeys heretofore untold. I like to think that whatever spell bound us together, drawing her to me, brought forth the visions that filled the dank pit with sparkling light. That cosmic alignments had foreordained our encounter and the events that unfolded. I can't be certain, of course, but this seemed right to me.

She rose to her tiny paws, lifting her soft body to a shoulder height of three feet. The tiny kitten was not so miniscule after all, but more the size of a lynx or ocelot, with the gentleness of an imagined kitten. Unseeing eyes deceive when we feel certain we understand a truth in the dark.

I rose beside her, laying a hand on her head, stroking the fur once more, trusting her to lead me as the fates would destine. A rough, sandpaper wet tongue scoured my hands. I flinched at the tickling sensation, then smiled. She was gentle, this ocelot beast- and she was friendly. She would lead me into hope.

I gripped the jutting fur and waited. Would movement follow or mere shifting of position that encased us in this fate?

She stepped forward. Clinging with relish and odd wonderment to the soft yet coarse, oddly sweet-smelling fur, I followed.

The wall that once had blocked me in now appeared to have vanished. She moved forward, and as I held grip on her fur, so did I. Where we meandered in this dark trench, I could not tell. But wander we did. No light above, no light in front. Sheer darkness with only the occasional purple spark as fur connected with something on cave walls.

The world remained silent as we made way through the inkiness of the depths. Stale air filled lungs, but not must or mildew. Suddenly, a wide chasm seemed before us. I tiptoed forward and the large cat stopped me, pulling back, keeping me from the edge.

We made our way around what could only be described as a deeper, darker blackness in the center of what might have been a room or a palace or a cave or a home. I could tell nothing from the shape or sound. I had lost all senses by now, save the sense of touch clutching her fur. I, the girl known for mirth and noise, was lost in the cavern of deafness, blindness, muteness. I smelled nothing, tasted nothing.

Skirting the danger, we came to what must have been a corridor. Through the tunnel blasted crisp, clean, cool

air. The wind prickled and tingled on the skin, awakening my senses. I tried to speak, to make some exclamation of joy at feeling anything different, but nothing came out.

Through the tunnel we went, pushed backward toward the former cavern by the wind. The she-cat helped me journey on, giving strength as I clung helplessly to the dark coat. At the other end of the tunnel, some miles long journey away, I collapsed in the sudden, vibrant room. Still no light to see by, but the atmosphere was bright with life. Still, no sound or smell greeted me, and I inhaled deeply only of the sensation that something good was nearby. The she-cat lay down beside me, nestling close, giving me moments to catch my breath. It had been a great struggle to come through the wind tunnel and my rest was the sweet reward for my effort.

While I sat there, panting and yearning for water, something else soft and gentle came and nestled up beside me on the other side. The she-cat encouraged the creature to cling to me, nuzzling it with her nose, pushing it toward my leg. The creature sandpapered my leg with its tongue, causing me to realize the wound I had procured at some point along my journey. Several other creatures came in, gathering around, now all licking me and nuzzling me, cuddling and cozying with me.

I should have been terrified. I could not guess what these creatures might be. Small furry things, certainly, but rats? Beavers? Ancient rodents never seen by humankind thanks to their deep burrows into the core of the earth? But as the tiny creatures gummed and slurped on my bitterly sweating skin, I found contentment, not fear. I had come this far – and I had either no more or many miles to go. It seemed not to matter. I would miss my dear beloved, but if I died like this, cuddled and calmed by gentle creatures hoping to heal, how could I reject the end? I'd been hidden beneath the earth's crust so long I had no knowledge of time or location. My beloved and I would never see each other again, except by miracle, and I cared not anymore. Weariness had overtaken my soul. Gentle death by soft affection seemed gracious.

As I succumbed to my perceived fate, my memory danced backward to days of childhood playing in fields and streams with my siblings and playmates. I leaned over, smelling the fragrance of effervescent honeysuckle, red and bright, sweet as honey, deep as roses. The petals brushed my cheeks and dew drenched my lips.

I startled from my daydreams. The honeysuckle brushed against my mortal lips, offering dew for drink.

Rich, spicy scents followed – rosemary, marjoram, onions. A stew of natural ingredients seemed to be brewing nearby. But creatures could not make stew! They had no power over fire and cookery! At least none that I knew could.

The first sound, beside the snuffling animals, now pierced my ears. A whistle. A tune unfamiliar but as human as a stone-built house with mortar between bricks. My mind willed a sound – my lips refused.

The whistling drew nearer, unaccompanied by light as I would have expected. I languished in the darkness, being cleansed by what seemed a million tiny tongues. I tried to rise. The animals shifted away. No strength allowed my legs to stand. Too many miles and too little fuel prevented me from making my presence known. The she-cat, large and comforting, left me. My spirit begged her to reveal my presence – if the stranger were charitable.

Padded feet crossed the open space, each pace growing distant as the she-cat vanished. Tears failed me as the dew had not yet quenched my need for water. The other animals came back around, coating me with their friendly licks and pats, cuddles, and soundless sighs. I ached for rest as I awaited the she-cat's return. My soul whimpered for her, though my near lifeless body could ask for nothing.

I sank deeper into the soft pile of fur and released a heavy sigh.

But after a seeming eternity, a soft press against my foot by the she-cat. Then a human hand. A whistle of surprise and the gentle touch as hand sought mine, finding it and freeing me from the pile. Then a spoonful of water pressed into lips, poured into mouth, and dripped down the throat.

I gasped.

The spoon pulled away. I struggled to breathe. I shifted, urging my body upward from the pile of creatures that had strangely not run off at the presence of an intruding human. A human male, from the musk.

"Help me," croaked out from my broken lips.

Another startled whistle.

Rugged hands pulled at my torso, moving me from the pile of tiny rodents, setting me against the wall where breath came easier. The rodents followed and began licking again. The human brushed some away to sit beside me, more water in hand, and now something I hadn't tasted in many years, and only once before: bread.

The shortage of wheat in my family town had been so severe that only rice and corn had been fed to the poor for nearly two centuries. We had no ovens, no stoves – only fireplaces bricked into the walls of our outdoor kitchens. These were for searing potatoes and rice bowls. The long droughts made indoor fires a distant dream of centuries past.

The taste of bread filled all my senses. I felt the soft, doughy texture against lips and skin as the crumbs fell to my breast. The aroma infiltrated my nostrils and mouth, sending dancing pleasure through every nerve of my body. The soft, smooth chewing action filled my ears with tender memories of that one time in past when bread had passed these lips before. My friend, the son of a baker – the servant of the king, had sneaked one loaf to my family under fear of death were he to be caught. The evidence had been quickly devoured, not a crumb left behind. Not even the dogs had snatched a bite.

The next bite of wheaten flavor drew me back into my present reality. The blackness of the hidden place weighed upon me as the human man kept silent, only whistling on occasion, surprised at my eagerness for food and water. I soon sputtered out the meal, unable to eat as much as I desired, so overcome with near starvation that my body rejected the precious roll.

The man raised water to my lips once more. With caution, I sipped the purest dew of the earth, afraid of repeating the earlier overwhelming illness brought on by sustenance after so much need. The man gentled away the spoon when I began sputtering once more.

“Who are you? What is this place?” I asked, voice like a wizened hag in fairy tales grim.

He refused to speak.

“How far are we from the surface?”

Still, no words parted his lips.

“Please! I have been lost, wandering, waiting, for days... Days? Weeks? I cannot tell.”

The man gently touched my shoulder and offered more water.

As I sipped the purest water I had ever tasted – though perhaps only pure from such long need – wonder filled my being. Was this place to be my final home? Would light ever touch my eyes again, drawing forth images seen by dilated pupils? Would I wander in darkness for eternity?

A gentle, low whistle entered the space before more echoes of padded feet. The man beside me whistled a salute, stood, and shifted weight. A whistle reply echoed through the cavern, a higher pitch now, with gentle overtones.

There are more of them. Did they whistle instead of speak? Was that the reason for the language barrier between the man and myself?

I raised my voice, asking, “Hello? What is this place? Who are you?”

A startled whistle glanced my shoulder as it hit the wall behind, echoing throughout the cavern.

The man whistled in reply, calmer, deeper.

In that moment of confusion, that moment of dark despair, I realized that the man might not be a man at all. What if I had wandered into the cooking den of some mountain bipedal creature of legendary age? I had felt gentle, work roughened hands but nothing more. Were backs of hands covered in fur or scales? Could whistling creatures stand on two feet and shuffle through darkness seeing what my human eyes could not reveal?

The second creature – for now I dared not call them human – came to my weakened form, cowering in the corner, surrounded by furry creatures with roughened tongues and dew sweetened breath.

“Hello?” I tried once more, uncertain of how I might broach the subject, the request, the hope. “Are you human?”

Whistling replies echoed through the darkness. Now, at least four of them were here. What creature’s home had I stumbled into? Clearly, this was a gathering place for whistling beasts on two legs, with scaly hands – I conceded they must be some scaled creature of the deep with eyes like snakes’ capable of seeing in the pitch black of underearth dwelling – and I had no escape.

The gentleness of the male creature – if it was male – fled the world. In its stead, cruelty and devious plans for helpless human girls filled the space. The stew I smelled must surely be a vegetable medley meant for cooking human flesh.

But they knew not that I would come. Unless... I felt the she-cat purring beside me in the din. No. How could a creature so kind, so forthright be a demon in fluffy form? The she-cat nuzzled my elbow with her nose, begging for pats and cuddles. I gave in. If this be the end, let it be with some comfort by you, my hairy friend.

One of the new bipedal creatures came to me and offered down another loaf of something sweet and wheaten. My hunger fought the fear in my breast and won. Tiny nibble after tiny nibble brought joy to my lips and tongue and gullet. *If this be the end, let it be with some comfort by you, sweet pastry of forbidden grain.*

By now, whistles ricocheting off cavern walls almost felt familiar. The eternity spent in darkness now began to melt into familiarity, too. I was certain my end drew near, but I was comforted by simple things – a kind cuddle, a sweet morsel – and I would accept my fate.

But for my lover, lost to the sunlit plane above, I would have gladly succumbed in that moment, at rest. But the eyes – remembered as vivid green with flecks of pale brown throughout – called me. The lips – dark like chocolate and twice as sweet – whispered words of love and hope in my ears. The gentle touch of brown hand – wrapped in garden gloves as he plucked potatoes from the soil – touched shoulder with passion as promises made.

“I must above!” I called into the lofty room.

Whistles bounced around the caverned room, some treble, some bass. Far more people – humans I still assumed – had entered the space than I could have sensed in the great chasm of endless night. The whistles grew up around me, closer and closer with each breath, surrounding me now with a great presence, as if they formed a being that should lift me high into the atmosphere and set me free from despair.

A pair of hands, gentle and hairless, brushed against my face before dropping to my shoulders. I could not ascertain what might follow, but I let the strength of the person lift me to my feet. Weakness still shifted my weight backward, downward, but the strong hands kept me aright. Other hands, now some hairless and some hairy, kept me going.

I was led away from the cuddle of creatures and out, out to where I knew not. No light followed us as we made our trail through the earthen deep. But I followed. My fate sealed now and forever. I released my will into kismet’s embrace, lifting one final prayer for my beloved. “If this be the end, do not mourn for my loss, beloved. Find another love, rejoice, and thrive. The bread of hope has found me, and I will accept my end whatever it be. I am at peace. Go, my love, into the world above, into peace without me.”

Along the journey, water was spooned to me, bread given, whistles expelled. This tribe beneath the mantle communicated through these shrill sounds that reverberated through wounded ears and burst out swollen eyes as tears. The darkness made the sound more piercing. But when I spoke, if only to bring relief as often as I might, the whistling halted as they listened, it seemed, of curiosity.

And then, we stopped. All of us – all of it. The whistling, the echoes, the deep sense of emphatic despair. Light lay ahead – and a woman, silhouetted by the beam of a single candle flickering in the maw of another cavern, deeper in. The shadowed head jerked upward.

She had seen me.

To be continued...



POSITIVE

Artist Statement

Positive is a reaction to the email I received on the 29th of April, letting me know that my ColoGuard screening test was positive for potential cancer. Whenever you hear the "C" word tossed about, it can cause you to become a bit introspective.

The red circles are representative of my colon, which is healthy and red. The black creature is the potential cancer spreading. However, my hand is stopping the spread, with healing energy, or to let the cancer know that I will not let this continue. Although nothing is confirmed, doubts do creep in. The hand is to help keep those thoughts at bay. The hand is my hand, gnarled and bent, but powerful.

Red is the color of the root chakra. The hand is drawing both spiritual and root energy to do the healing. Hopefully this picture will help people consider early screening for colon cancer.

With knowledge comes power, and with power comes the cure.

- Sue Cook

I've Been Working on the Railroad

J. P. DeNeui

Fiction

Eons ago when Sol was young, some bigwig congress okayed the proposal, if the legends can be believed. The proposal might have sparked years of debate, or perhaps it had hoodwinked democracy, passed in the dead of night – who knows? Regardless, bureaucrats went to work, installing committees and garnishing funds and typing up endless reams of procedures to slather the project in red tape. The price tag would double, sextuple, leave orbit; and perhaps the ever-erupting expense contributed to the Great Collapse that cut off funding and stranded workers trillions of kilometers from Terra Firma. Most government projects would have ended at that point, awesomely expensive skeletal frames abandoned as monuments to hubris. That the Trans-Galactic Railroad Initiative would continue to be built long after the civilization that started it perished to the sands of time, is less a testament to perseverance than to dully devoted AI, self-replicating nanobots, and sadly, us.

Us: the workers on the railroad.

“That’s something, right?” asked Mike beside me. Over a gloomy translucent sphere our constructorship hovered, keeping watch. With a diameter of fifty meters, like ten billion of its brethren, the nanoglass node would soon enclose its very own stable singularity – a rift now gently pocking space-time and shooting zany wavelengths of light up and out of the visible spectrum. It would link to the last node in the chain, 11 million kilometers away, upon achieving quantum flux. One small nail hammered into the railroad.

We were in the business of folding space-time, scrunching bits close together to bridge, and that 11 million kilometer scrunch-limit is a headache for the Initiative. Span any larger swath of space and any passenger on the railroad risks failing to make the connection, which would almost certainly kill them and had killed so many workers no man could recite the list. Not that there were any women “employed” by the Galactic Railroad Initiative. Only men worked on the line, raised up from test tubes, taught by machines, probably the last humans alive in the universe. There’s a rumor our genomes have been recycled from what worked endless generations ago. Maybe deep down in my cells I’m the one hundredth version of Caleb or a seventy-second Obadias. Or maybe I’m unique. Unlikely.

“Sure,” I said to Mike. “It’s something.” Checklists of procedures were supposed to be followed now and were being followed by the swarm of nanobots foaming around the budding node. We were supposed to keep tabs on all the micro-nonsense and when I’d first started working, I’d been vigilant. But the machines always followed the same procedures and I soon lapsed into apathy.

An AI uprising would really be “something”. Doing anything else – a better “something”, too. While time wallowed, as it was wont to, my mind reached towards impossible dreams. No longer endlessly plodding through stars, I wanted to know the taste of sea spray; I wanted to feel the deck underneath me of a real ship sway and buck. Take me back across the eons and I would be a dashing admiral charting Old Earth’s Seven Seas.

“What’s on your mind, Charlie?” Mike asked.

“Nothing.” Not exactly the truth, but close. All around us the “nothing” of space extended: tremendous, limitless swaths of darkness spattered with lonely pricks of starlight stretching above and below and forever. It was utter insanity to think we could shrink this, to link anything, to make it accessible. Many millions of years had passed and we were still in our arm of the galaxy. Far, far away from the core of the galaxy. Far, far away from the other side.

“Poker night’s tomorrow,” said Mike. “You playing?”

“Sure.”

Mike wrinkled his mustache in annoyance at yet another deadpan answer. “Dirt get in your coffee?”

“Nah.”

I hoped that would be all we'd say to each other for the rest of the shift and maybe forever. But such silence was not in the cards for, instead of blooming and calming, the rift contained in the node beneath us seethed and warped and spat out a spaceship.

The newcomer speared through the shell in an instant, cooking the vicinity in fusion backwash. Our emergency forcefield saved us, if barely, snapping tight around our craft microseconds before destruction. The constructorship shuddered, grav-fields screaming, and I was hurled into the cockpit, bouncing off safety-sponge glass with a curse. Mike always buckled himself in (the daredevil), and so lurched less far and gagged on his straps.

I pushed off the port bulkhead and floated over. “You all right?” I asked my crewmate. Face green, Mike valiantly choked down a barf.

“F-fine,” he croaked. “Did something...?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Looks like someone used the railroad.”

They say you never know before a crisis who's going to freak and who will stay calm. Thanks to providential genetic wiring, the near-death encounter sent pure energy surging through me from head to foot. I wasn't scared, I felt alive.

I keyed manual controls on and poured in inputs, fingers flying across the keyboard that the ship popped free for my console. It was all a rather arcane control scheme compared to AI backstops and neural links, but for once, I didn't feel self-conscious. This remained how I worked fastest.

Inquiries swiftly yielded data. The unauthorized vessel that had charged through the railroad had slowed to 2 million kph and was arcing back now to our coordinates. The thing had to be the least sleek spaceship designed, asymmetrical, blocky, unevenly painted in white and red, and leaking protrusions scanners couldn't make out. It had done a number on the railroad: the node had been completely vaporized, its nascent singularity lost. And it could have been much worse. Had the singularity persisted, a node-breach would gobble up space for parsecs. Not healthy, being gobbled up.

I hailed the spaceship on quantum radio. Hopefully these numbskulls had a working receiver, else communications would be a slog.

They answered, eventually, a crackling holographic feed popping up blue before me and Mike.

A seated boy of maybe twelve appeared on the hologram,

stroking a mongoose (?) that perched on his shoulder. The boy was looking to his right, addressing someone out of view. “...maybe the work ship. Yeah, they're on.” The boy turned to me and sat up straighter in a floating chair a size too big. “Hey. Um. Whoever you are, we're very sorry we might have made a mess of your railroad. Is everyone on your side okay?”

Assuming only this local node had been pulverized, no human personnel would have perished. Bots would have to replicate new construction materials and reassemble the node from scratch. This would take time but we'd done it before. We'd connected a dozen-odd solar systems (full of ghastly, uninhabitable planets) over the course of rail construction, which we ransacked for raw materials as needed. HQ was currently in System XQ-J. Replication and transportation would delay the Initiative about six months.

In the grand scheme of things, not bad.

Feeling in a forgiving mood, I smiled at the worried kid. “We're all right on our end. Has your ship sustained damage?”

“I'm um...I'm good. Viola, how's the ship doing?” the kid shouted.

“Doing great,” some muffled voice answered.

“We're doing great,” the kid intoned. Then, wide-eyed, he noticed something off-screen. “Oh except... Viola, what's this?”

A new figure shuffled into the hologram: a teenage girl (if I had to guess), with tightly braided rosy hair, a nose ring and varicolored irises flicking between green and blue independently.

“Damn,” she whispered. “They're still following.”

The kids scurried off to check some other terminal, line still open, hologram abandoned.

Staring over at Mike, I saw my burgeoning shock reflected in his pale face.

Was that a girl? I didn't say it. “What are they doing here?” I asked Mike, cutting the audio feed on our end. “How did they get here?” Only construction craft were authorized to use nodes on an under-construction line and everyone needed clearance.

“I...” Mike still barely looked able to speak. He swallowed and wiped his sweaty forehead. “Something's gone wrong. We should have been told.”

Mike had more faith than me in our communication protocols. We'd had the argument, changed no one's mind, and moved on. He believed in what we were

building. That the Railroad would work.

He's wrong.

No one knows what happened to Old Earth – not AI, not administrators, not nanobots.

No one. Along the Railroad, matter shirks the light-speed limit, and within a “bubble” around each node, quantum ship-to-ship communication lets radio waves dance around the same. It's all reliably placid and functional, but stretch between nodes and problems mount, exponentially ensuring failure. There are ten billion nodes I know about and you have to get clearance to access each one. Not too much of a problem with two nodes or twenty, but reach back farther along the line and passcode mismatches, authentication delays, physical wear and tear on the nodes (even in space, tech peters out), and all manner of other inevitable disasters derail every concerted attempt to cleanly link back to the beginning. It feels to me less like we're constructing any unified rail and communication initiative than a stellar mock-up of that old game of “telephone”, the message doomed to become so corrupted players can only laugh or cry.

“They're back,” Mike hissed, elbowing my chair. I might have been staring off into space.

Indeed the strange duo had made a reappearance: the boy seated now beside the girl – Viola? – who'd pulled up a floating chair of her own.

“Pirates are after us,” the girl announced. “They want to kill us. It's Gary's fault.”

Pirates? What? I pretended to have heard about these space rapsallions. When in doubt, just bluff on through. “Why are they after you?” I asked calmly. “Will pirates be using the railroad?”

The boy and the girl regarded each other.

“So,” the boy said. “It's all Viola's fault, actually –”

“Is not!”

“She let him go to go find a mate so he tried to, he just jumped on the wrong ship. We freed him and now the pirates hate us.”

Viola rolled her eyes. “Whatever. We hacked one of your silly dumb nodes a ways back. That's what you call those portal-things, right?”

The AI said it was all completed, the perfect shortcut across the galaxy. But your railroad's janky and sucks.”

Mike and I regarded each other.

“Did –” Mike croaked. His voice still sounded hoarse. “Did you have clearance for each node?”

The boy answered. “We um, we didn't have time to get a good spoof in so we kind of brute-forced... Oh no, they're here!”

The feed from the duo cut off completely and my fingers returned to the keyboard, frantically querying local scan-nets.

New intruders: there and there. Two new spaceships, blotchy and large. Scanners couldn't breach their hulls, which seemed a patchwork of unknown substrates. The ship designs were completely foreign.

And, and this took a moment to realize, the new arrivals had just appeared.

A kaleidoscopic storm of warheads erupted from the pirates' ships. Lasers threaded through streams of missiles. Explosions charred the red-white hull of the kids' ungainly block-ship, which shuddered under the brutal pounding. Shuddered but refused to break. My jaw fell open as I stared at the sight of a spaceship pummeled but still intact. Exotic weaponry had knocked it off-axis but could not punch through a forcefield.

The storm of warheads petered out and scanners reported a quantum phone call too encrypted for us to hack. At least they're talking instead of shooting. The two pirate spaceships glared at their enemy while I nervously tapped on my keys. Too many new things confronted me at once, right after nearly dying. My mind couldn't take it all in. Couldn't process.

“They can't have warp drives,” Mike said suddenly. I stared at my companion. “What?”

“That tech's impossible. Literally impossible. You can't just bubble up space how you like.”

Mike flicked a lever and snapped on a headset. Unlike me, he loved direct neural links. Someone thinks their trick's a laugh.” His eyes unfocused, and I had to launch my own queries to check on what he was doing with his mind. He was drilling into ship and system source code, reviewing all recent entries, correlating.

“Mike,” I hissed. No answer. “Mike!”

“What?” he grunted, rapid-fire queries continuing to probe.

"Our whole damn cockpit can't be a hologram. All local scan-nets confirm they're here. And that node blew. There was a firefight. I know it's incredible, but no one's playing a trick."

"Hmm," Mike grunted, still querying away.

"No one at base could cripple that many systems. Think about the redundancies, Mike. This is real!"

"Kids in a box-ship. Pirates with warp. Cripple the railroad. Make us look stupid." My eyes widened when I saw Mike's utility knife, which he'd slipped out of his belt. "Always knew your head was twisted."

I slid back from my keyboard, hands held up. "Don't go crazy, man. Put that down. Think."

"I did think and it's the only thing reasonable." Damn, but it always struck me as creepy how someone running a neural search could stiltedly multitask while staring through you. Mike's knife raised up to the level of my throat as my viewscreen continued to report on his quest to hunt down the error or virus or glitch or whatever vile thing conspired to destroy the Initiative.

Which he concluded had infected me.

In zero-gravity Mike flailed a slash that I ducked just underneath. I caught his knife arm and wrestled for control, my skintight spacesuit getting gashed as he continued to attack my torso. "Mike, come on, it's me!" I shouted. "Come on, we know each other. It's me!"

"You've gone off into the dark," he grunted. "Knew they made you from bad stock."

Unfocused eyes flared wide and bloodshot, queries lighting up my viewscreen too fast now to ever follow.

I finally twisted his wrist correctly, popped loose his weapon and held it to Mike's throat. Could I use it? I didn't know. "Mike!" I shouted. "Stop! Just stop!"

My roar finally got his attention. His focus receded from the neural net and his eyes narrowed in on mine. I prepared for a tongue-lashing, a struggle, an argument. Anything but the look of disgust on his face.

"Yeah, we know each other, Charlie. For years I knew you hated the Railroad. We're all we've got and it's all we have and folks like you want to blow it all up, gaslight me, blame someone else. But I'm not sitting back this time. I won't let you get away."

Text glared out of the corner of my eye.

VENTING CABIN, my viewscreen announced. THIS IS NOT A DOCKING PROCEDURE. REMAIN IN SPACESUITS. CABIN WILL DEPRESSURIZE.

Mike's gashes had cut clean through my suit, something I realized too late. You'd think after eons of construction someone would have mandated something sturdier, but this had not been a funding priority. We had never been a funding priority.

The airlock above us opened to space. Mike, still strapped down and safe in his spacesuit, grinned, as I gasped and grabbed his sleeve to hold on, oxygen streaming into the breach.

"Sorry, Charlie." He smiled and waved. "Won't be seeing you for poker night."

He pushed my helmet and I lost my grip.

The human body does not like space. Skin holds in gasses well enough and radiation will kill you, but it'll take some time. The more immediate problem of having nothing to breathe means you have fifteen to thirty seconds before everything darkens and your brain dies after. Assuming air pockets trapped in your lungs don't expand and rip you up.

I had no time to worry about air pockets. No time because I had never had time that was ever fully mine. No worker in eons had had a choice about what they were going to do with their lives. It was like we were living in Old Siberia, sentries unneeded with nowhere to run.

Flashes of memory surged and faded as I floundered in the dark. No coherent narrative formed and instead my stupid brain fixed on something amateurish.

I saw a girl today. A girl.

—

The stars around me bubbled and shimmered, and then faded. I was...

Alive?

The expanse of the Milky Way had fled for a strange, dim windowless room. Eight thin rods bracketed the tiles I lay on; beyond, marble pilasters lined windowless walls, translucent sapphire crown molding glittering. I heard the sound of pounding steps and a door between two pilasters opened.

A boy with a mongoose perched on his shoulder rushed in and my eyes grew bleary. I hadn't made it up. I hadn't made him up.

"Are you all right?" the boy asked breathlessly, running to

my side and swabbing something gelatinous on my cut chest that seeped through my skin in an instant. "Here. Um. Can you put on these?"

He handed over new pants and a long-sleeve shirt; just as well because my skinsuit had been reduced to immodest rags. I shrugged on the clothes. They were soft and fit.

"I'm Gary," the boy offered. He looked like a perfectly ordinary kid: scrub of brown hair, casual T-shirt and shorts. Apparently this ship did not have a dress code. "Don't think I said."

"Good to meet you, Gary. In the flesh."

"Yeah." Gary stared down at his shoes. Even the furry mongoose looked downcast. "I'm really sorry we broke your railroad. It was my idea to use it." Gary's gloomy face brightened a little. "But once we were in, we really flew along except for a few hiccups, but not too bad."

You should have seen the lead we opened up. We would have left those pirates in the dust..."

An intercom crackled to life overhead. "Gary, is that man all right?" Viola.

"Yeah, he's good. Your name's Charlie, right?"

"Charles," I corrected.

"Yeah, Charles says he's doing good."

"Good. Whatever. Get your butt back up here. We're sitting ducks!"

Gary broke into a sprint and I ran with him to a lift, marveling at how everything seemed so spacious. Hundreds of people could be crewing this ship and as far as I knew there were just two aboard.

Gilded doors on the lift slicked shut and we rocketed up a glass tube, spilling out next on the bridge I'd seen earlier. I immediately spotted the girl; back to me, she was addressing a viewscreen divided to show each pirate spaceship. In person the bridge seemed larger than I'd visualized; the hologram also had not conveyed the thick blue carpet or rich wood paneling or how even ordinary bulkheads appeared to be traced with silver filigree. This was wealth beyond my dreams.

Viola swiveled at our approach and I stumbled at the sight. The girl was more beautiful than anything I'd seen: red hair blazing, white skin flawless. Her face was perfectly proportioned and the way her eyes changed color dared you to ever look away.

She, apparently, didn't see me, choosing to snap at Gary instead: "You sure took your sweet bloody time."

Gary claimed a seat beside Viola, interfacing through a touchscreen keyboard which immediately made me smile.

"They're not shooting. What's the problem?"

"Bad news from the eavesdrop. Thanks to that go-fish program firing, they're figuring out how to phase through our shield."

"They think penetration won't trigger our warp-cut?"

Viola rolled her eyes. "Yeah, Gary, they're a little skeptical. They think we're two kids, not suicidal maniacs. And they could probably dodge that anyway."

"Any luck spoofing weapons?"

"Clearly no or I'd lead with that." Viola violently groaned in frustration. "We've got five minutes, maybe less. Stupid pacifist useless parents."

"Don't say that!"

"I'll say whatever I want, damn you! We're about to get blasted to atoms all because of your stupid pet!" Face flushed, Viola turned her glare upon me. "Why were you drifting in space alone anyway?"

"I..." I realized that for the first time ever I was poised to address a woman in person. Well, a teenager technically. Possibly. Questionably. How old were these "kids" anyway? "My partner didn't believe you were here."

"Yeah, I don't either. Wanted to kill you for it? Can't blame him. Seeing as you just killed us."

"Oh, stop whining." Gary ignored Viola's protest, querying his console like a pro. "It's not that bad, you're always worrying..."

Reams of numbers I didn't understand flashed holographically in front of him. Gary's shoulders slumped at the sight, triggering a claw-hold and a squawk from his mongoose. "Sorry, Zebulon," Gary said, conciliatorily patting his pet.

"Well?" Viola demanded, fists clenched.

He shook his head. "Sorry, I still can't crack their warp-lock."

"Useless," Viola muttered. "Useless." She buried her head in her hands out of sight.

For all their incredible technology, both children appeared to have reached the conclusion that they and their ship were doomed.

Having recently been doomed, I didn't care to feel that way again.

Plus I'd just had a crazy thought. "Put me through to the pirates," I said.

Gary's morose mongoose looked at me first, and then his owner; then his owner's sibling. Viola and Gary regarded each other.

Viola nodded. "Fine," she said. "What the hell."

Gary's fingers sprinted over his keypad. "You're on in ten. Keying audio to your voice."

A countdown projected across the main viewscreen, bold numbers flicking down to zero. Not much time to fine-tune my plan. I wished I knew anything about these pirates, wished Mike was here to help me work this. I couldn't believe he thought I'd cracked. I couldn't believe he'd tried to kill me.

ZERO, announced the viewscreen. Showtime.

I closed my eyes, took a breath, and began.

"To the three unauthorized vessels currently violating our space, this is a transmission from Admiral Charles of the Old Earth Railroad Security Fleet." *Always wanted to be an Admiral.* "Given your previous hostile acts, our ships are cloaked and all transmissions spoofed. Our scanners indicate you have destabilized, by your recklessness, a quantum node. This node must be repaired immediately or all vessels within ten parsecs are at risk of annihilation. "This is your only courtesy warning. If you'd like to stick around, I don't think we'd mind too much."

I gestured at Gary to cut the transmission. He was gawking at me and took a few moments before he understood my hand signals and finally awkwardly ended the call.

The pirates had heard me. I hoped. I slumped. Their ships still loomed large on the viewscreen, staring down coldly, disbelieving, judging.

My fingers were trembling. Fortunately this new pair of pants had deep pockets, so I hid my hands and stood up straight.

"The Railroad crewed a small Security Fleet, but none of those vessels could mask energy signatures. And not one of those ships was here. Or could be here for weeks.

"They're running away!" Viola gasped, a moment before the viewscreen showed it: warp bubbles forming around the two pirates, swallowing them up in an instant. Gone.

Gary leaped up and gave me a hug so intense it nearly bowled me over. Laughing, I embraced him back. Viola laughed, though she stayed where she was. We all three exulted and gave each other high-fives. Funny how that human tradition had survived the fall of worlds. There was

so much to say but it didn't feel right. And so the three of us stared from the bridge into the vast expanse of the galaxy, into the same stars I'd seen all my life.

They had never looked so beautiful.

Space bubbled over the streak of the Milky Way and Gary broke loose, both of us cold. Stars shimmered, twisting away, as a real fleet appeared, gleaming and sleek beneath hard starlight. The viewscreen enumerated forty-five ships, listing off columns of weapons and specs.

"Who...who's this now?" I managed to choke.

Viola squealed and clapped her hands. She hit a button, accepting a call, and the intimidating panorama fled for a comfy starliner bridge crewed by a middle-aged woman and man.

"Mom, Dad!" Viola cried. "Thank God you found us! Gary almost got us killed!"

"Hey!" Gary exclaimed in protest as his onscreen mother gasped and waved.

"Viola, darling, are you safe? Gary, you are in very big trouble. Who is that with you? Is he a pirate?"

"Hi," I said. I awkwardly waved. "Hi, I'm Charles. Not a pirate."

"Oh, I should hope not. Has he hurt you, Viola? Has that man done anything?"

"Yeah," she said. My heart skipped a beat.

Viola grinned slyly at me and continued. "Yeah, he works for some dumb railroad. He also kind of kept us alive."

"Hmmp." The mother regarded me with deep suspicion. "I never heard anything about this railroad. Never mind, the both of you could have got yourselves killed! Never go gallivanting off like that ever. Do you hear me, Gary, do you hear me, Viola? I will not stand for it, it will not be borne. You are both grounded on Tarcallis for a month with no more sniffing around on GalNet. Why you can't trust anything anyone posts, not like in my day when —"

"Gary," interrupted the father. "Is that Zebulon on your shoulder?"

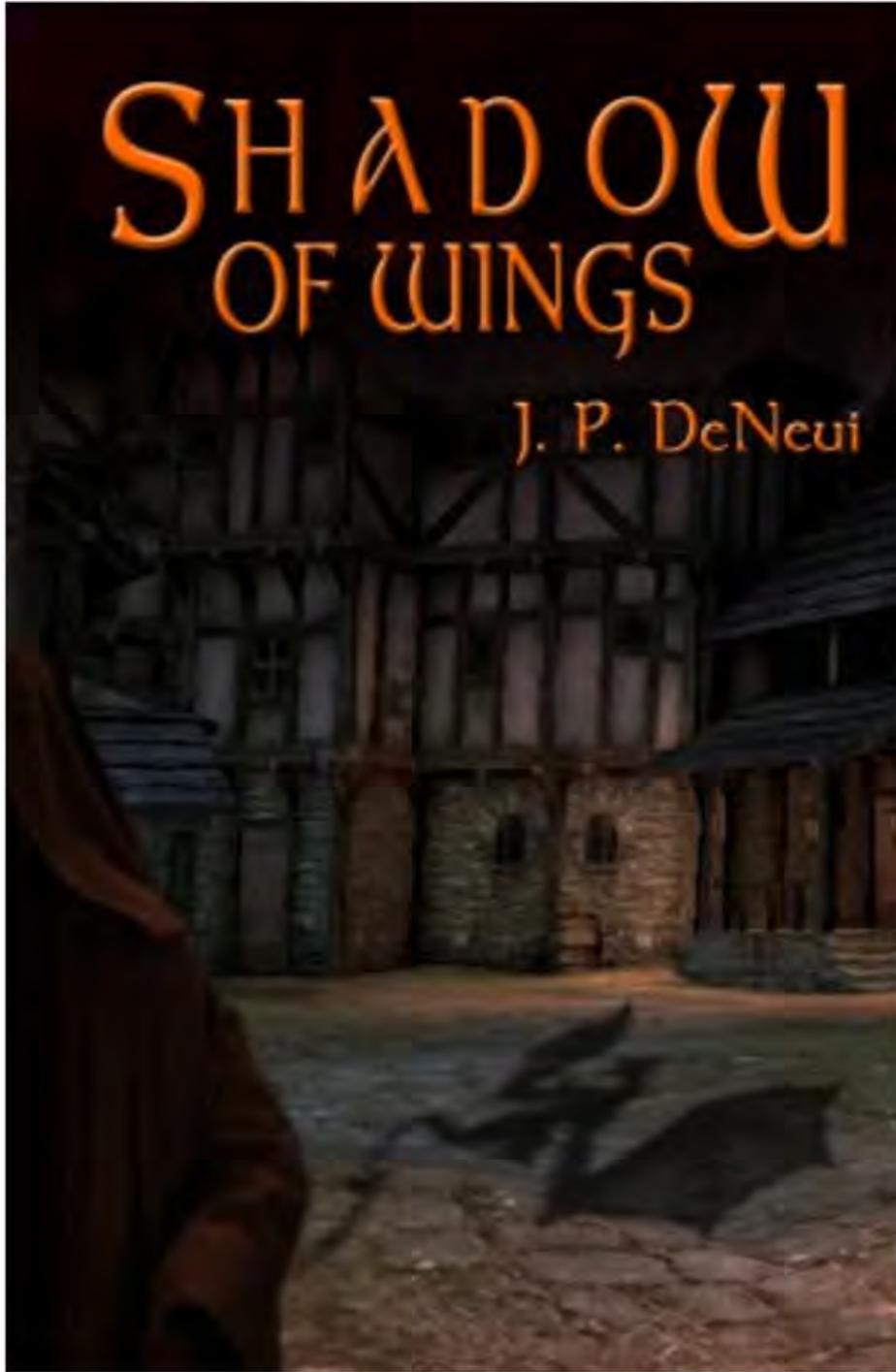
Gary nodded and patted the thin leather collar encircling his furry pet's neck with a nametag. "Yeah. Yeah, we found him, Dad, on Old Earth. I put the right collar on. He can't warp away."

"Good," said the father, smiling. "Finally nabbed that roving rascal. Gary, Viola, Charles from the Railroad. Stand by and I'll phase you aboard."

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Poetry

*"Hurt coyote by itself seen last evening in Devon Woods about 6:30 wandering around."
Next Door neighborhood email post, March 25*

Last evening a neighbor saw a lone coyote.
The writer leaves himself out of it.
What difference does it make –
The coyote was seen. Neighbors in Devon Woods should know.
Who knows what a hurt coyote will do.

Coyote circles
to consider a dark shape on the ground next to it.
When the coyote rounds a tree, the sun leaves and the shape goes away.
The hurt place keeps whining to lick it – the taste of fresh kill, dripping.
The hurt place cries and cries until coyote knows
she is a self by herself seen
and by herself except for the silent shape that shambles alongside her.

Overhead, giant oaks stand far apart, branches, roots, and rhizomes out of touch.
Since the woods that had been Devon Woods was razed, the old trees wonder
how the others who were spared are getting along over there and there and there
and how they might send warnings about a withering rain
that falls in bud-time from long snakes spread across the grass.
They wonder about the coyote, unsteady wanderer.

She sniffs, looks up at the still two-legged that smells of fear.
She must ignore her stinging paw,
try to run, seek the trees to hide the shape that limps beside her.

Claiming Chloe

Uday Mekerji

Fiction

"Do you want a refill, sir?" asked the server with a coffee pot in hand.

I was glued to my laptop, going through my paper one last time before I presented it to an elite audience. Although I used to attend and speak at conferences like this all the time, I hadn't done it for the last four months, making this my first appearance since I had lost Megan to a fatal road accident.

The Miami Beach Convention Center wasn't new to me. Still, I had reached the venue early to avoid any last-minute delays and walked into a café for a cup of coffee to recharge after a three-hour flight. I saw the server's white apron in my peripheral vision and without looking at her face, I answered, "Please. I would love that."

As she refilled my cup, my phone buzzed with an incoming message. I had already turned my phone to silent mode and left it on the table. Megan's smiling face – in an old, teenage photo – lit up on the screen. I found it the other day in her Google Photos. My phone vibrated for a couple of seconds and stopped.

"Is that my picture on your phone? ... How did you get that?" The server freaked out as she stepped back, spilling coffee from her pot all over the table and my phone.

"Oh my god!" I quickly grabbed my laptop and the phone and jumped on my feet. "What are you doing? I have to attend a conference now! You're spilling coffee all over me."

I looked up to give her a piece of my mind. But I froze as soon as I saw her face. My head started spinning. She looked just like Megan in that photo. The blue eyes, blonde hair, and high cheekbones. Living at the other end of the country. How was that possible?

But the young woman ranted on. "Delete them right away. I'm calling the manager."

But she didn't have to call anybody. Hearing the commotion, the manager had already rushed to the table. He asked, "Is everything okay here?"

I tried to diffuse the tension and addressed the young woman. "Trust me, the pictures on my phone aren't you. She was my wife, Megan. If you don't believe me, see for yourself." I offered her my phone. "You can scroll through them all."

The woman hesitated.

I looked at the manager and continued, "I tell you what, you keep my phone and check it out. I'll pick it up later. I'm speaking at the EPA Conference in the Junior Ballroom at ten-thirty. I must go now."

The manager stepped forward and said, "That won't be necessary, sir. I'm sorry. Chloe apologizes for her mistake."

"No, I don't. I did nothing wrong," shouted Chloe. She pulled off her apron and threw it on the manager's face. "I quit. You're a coward."

I looked at my watch and said, "Again, I'm sorry for the confusion, but I really don't have time now. Let me come back and sort everything later." And I ran toward the exit.

After my presentation was over, I didn't even wait for any other speakers to deliver theirs. I rushed back to the café to talk to the server again. I wanted to see her for two reasons. I didn't want a young woman to throw away her job for a stupid misunderstanding. And, although I likely would never see her again, I didn't want her to remember me as an old creep, taking pictures of random women.

But more importantly, the similarities between her and Megan had startled me. It was uncanny. Though I had never met Megan when she was in her early twenties, I had seen her pictures. I was first introduced to Megan on her twenty-ninth birthday. My friend, Amanda – her roommate – had invited me.

I walked into the café and looked for Chloe, to clear the air. Unable to find her, I asked the woman at the counter for help. She said, "Chloe doesn't work here anymore, sir. What can I do for you?"

I hesitated for a minute and asked, "May I speak to the manager?"

The woman at the counter quickly disappeared behind the kitchen door.

I pulled up a chair and sat down. Only two or three tables were occupied at that time. She came back within minutes and said "He'll be with you shortly, sir."

She lowered her voice and asked almost in a whisper, "Wasn't Chloe arguing with you this morning? Just so you know, she is a nice girl and she needs the job. The manager already scolded her."

"That wasn't necessary. And that's exactly why I'm here – to clear up the confusion," I answered softly.

"Can I get you anything?"

"No thanks."

The woman left as soon as the manager stepped in. Before I could say anything, he started apologizing again. "I'm sorry about this morning. It was all her fault and it'll never happen again. I don't know why she's always so angry. I say good riddance."

I looked him in the eye and said, "But it wasn't her fault. She bears a close resemblance to my late wife who died in an accident four months ago."

"I'm sorry for your loss." The manager sounded sincere.

"I'm sorry about the misunderstanding, too. I have an hour or two before my flight. Let me go to her place and clear up the confusion. If need be, I can also talk to her parents."

"Her parents died a long time ago. She stays with her grandmother. But I can't give her address to you. It's against corporate policy. If you leave yours, I'll be glad to pass it on when she comes to collect her paycheck."

I handed him my contact details and left for the Miami airport. But the whole incident left a bitter aftertaste. I wished Chloe hadn't left her job over a silly misunderstanding.

My flight back to New York took off on time. I took comfort in thinking that at least, I wouldn't be seeing her any time soon, not until next year.

Two weeks went by and I had no time to think about the Chloe incident, until I met Amanda for coffee the next Saturday afternoon. We had a lot of catching up to do. She and Megan had been close and Amanda was one of my closest friends. She was practically family.

"How was your conference in Miami?"

"No hello? No pleasantries? It was good," I said. "But also something very weird happened. I met a young girl who looked exactly like Megan – the same blue eyes, the same high cheekbones – and I'm not exaggerating. She freaked out when she accidentally saw Megan's picture on my phone. She thought that was her."

"That's odd. How old is this girl?"

"I don't know. Sixteen or seventeen?"

"Really!" Amanda put down her coffee and looked at me, puzzled. "But the kind of similarities you're talking about is generally only possible if they share some kind of genetic connection."

"You're kidding, right?" I chuckled.

"No, I'm serious. I'm a doctor, David. I don't kid about such things. Do you know anything about this girl's parents? No, let me guess. They're both dead."

"Yes, but how do you know?" I was on the edge of my seat.

“Just a calculated guess.”

I pushed aside my coffee mug and asked, “What calculated guess? What are you trying to say?”

“That Chloe could be Megan’s daughter,” sighed Amanda. Her face turned pale as she leaned back and continued. “Abandoned kids often grow up believing their parents as dead.”

“Please, don’t do this. It’s not fair to Megan.”

But Amanda refused to back down. “Well, let’s go by the facts. Chloe has similar hair, eye color, and face structure as Megan - enough that she thought you had pictures of her. And how old was Megan on her last birthday - thirty-seven or thirty-eight?”

“Thirty-seven.”

“So, is it possible that she gave birth at nineteen or twenty and then abandoned Chloe?”

“Theoretically, yes, anything is possible. But why are you doing this to me? I’m sorry I don’t want to hear any of this. Your stupid hypothesis.” I banged my fist on the table. “Wasn’t she also your distant cousin? Wouldn’t you know if Megan had a daughter?”

Amanda paused for a second. She said, “That’s the thing, David, we weren’t cousins. When she first came here, she had no one. I felt sorry for her. I didn’t want her to feel like she didn’t have any roots. So, I lied.”

I looked at her, shocked and confused. “What else didn’t you tell me about her?”

“Come on. That was one innocent lie. And that’s all. I also don’t know much about her. You were her husband. Didn’t she tell you anything about her past?”

“Not really. All I know is that she came here from Seattle after a bad breakup. Tell me who wants to talk about that? She used to say, ‘Only fools live in the past.’ And I kind of agree with that.”

“Still, you could have asked her about her school or college days.”

“So, all this is my fault now? Anyway, Megan told me she was born and raised in Seattle whereas Chloe is waiting tables in Miami. Can you connect the dots?”

Amanda shook her head. “No, but something isn’t right. Megan’s first thirty years couldn’t be just a black hole. We can search public records to find out her old address and phone numbers and see whether anything jumps out. I could maybe ask some of my dad’s old contacts from work. Any Megan and Chloe in a hospital register? She was hiding something. But what? Criminal records maybe?”

“To what end, Amanda?” I got on my feet. “She’s dead. I’m not doing this. I don’t care. I was happy with the person she was and I want to hold on to that. I’m leaving. I gotta see my mom this evening.”

But the big gap in Megan’s life also started to bother me. What had she been hiding and why? I had never looked into Megan’s drawers even after she had passed away. I wanted to keep it that way. I had always respected her privacy. But could Megan have a secret daughter? Didn’t Chloe have a right to know if her mother was alive until about four months ago? So, I started digging through her files and drawers.

I called Amanda. “I found her yearbook. She went to Franklin High in Seattle. Later, she studied at the University of Washington. Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

“You’re missing the point, David. I’m not doing this for myself. But chances are those records aren’t real.”

“What makes you so—”

Amanda interrupted, “I gotta go now. Meet me in the evening. My shift will be over at eight.”

When I met her in the evening, Amanda said, “A few days ago, I had already called in for a favor from Uncle James, one of my dad’s friends in the CIA. Although my dad left the organization a few years ago, Uncle James is still there.”

“CIA?” I repeated after her in disbelief. “But why?”

“For the same reason you are digging through her files. We both want to know the truth, David. And of course, there is Chloe. I don’t want her to be in the dark and feel lost and abandoned like I did when my mother left us. You wouldn’t understand how important it is to know your roots, especially, when you grow up without having any.”

In one evening, I found out more about Megan than I did in the last nine years. It turned out that Megan's real name was Claire Coleman. Amanda's source had told her that Claire used to work as an investigative journalist in Miami Herald. Her life became at risk after she had reported a major Columbian drug cartel.

One early morning in 2002, federal investigators had found Claire unconscious at the bottom of a hill in a car wreck. To protect Claire and her family, the authorities declared her dead and gave her a new identity.

Amanda said, "Ten days later, when she woke up in Harborview Medical Center in Seattle, Claire had already assumed her new identity as Megan Sanders. She practically had no choice. She was forced to leave everything behind including her daughter to start over. She must have thought Chloe would be safer that way, although the threat never really went away."

"Why didn't she tell me about any of this?" I muttered. .

"Maybe, she didn't want to drag you in."

"Damn it! I was already in it. I married her." I shook my head.

"So, what now?" asked Amanda.

"Nothing. I'm going home and I want to forget any of this has ever happened."

"Aren't you a little bit suspicious now about her death in a road accident? Isn't it too much of a coincidence?"

"If you are saying what I think you are saying, why didn't the cops tell us anything?"

"I don't know. Possibly the feds didn't want to acknowledge any lapse on their part. But Claire in another road accident?"

I got up from my seat and prepared to leave. "Well, let's find out."

"Where are you going?"

"To the police station. I want some answers."

"Before you stir the pot, shouldn't you take a minute to think about Chloe?"

"What about her? I have no time to think about anyone else now. I wanna know the truth – who or what killed Megan," I said as I walked out.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done. I wished I had never met Chloe. Her angry but innocent face popped up whenever I closed my eyes. It must have been ten times harder for Megan to leave her behind. How did she do it?

Now that Chloe was growing up looking like her mother, her life could be in danger as well. I had no idea how to face Chloe again with the newfound truth. Our last accidental meeting hadn't exactly gone all that well.

But I knew I had to defend Megan, too. She only did all that to protect her daughter. Hadn't she suffered enough?

But I also needed to do everything possible to protect Chloe. These guys are ruthless.

So, instead of going to the precinct to meet a detective, the next morning, I boarded a Miami-bound flight again from JFK – for the second time within two months. But this time, I would be presenting my arguments – claiming Chloe – to one angry teenager. Do I even have a claim? We are just two individuals left behind by the same person we both loved dearly. Does that make us a family?

What if Chloe gets angry again? That would be the most usual reaction, right?

Besides, where do I begin? I was desperate for answers. And I didn't want to waste time waiting.

I looked at the clear blue sky out the window. I ordered a drink to take the edge off. I touched the two return tickets in the front pocket of my jacket and closed my eyes.



Nicodemus Looks Back

Christian Gospel of John, chapter 3, 7, 19

At first we agreed we must keep him in the corner of our eye
because of his motley, extravagant following,

bold promises, riddles, and strange healings
like fabulous stories I daydreamed at school.

But soon I began to picture us meeting and hear
myself pose questions that appeared like memory.

I found myself preparing as though for court –
a respectful opening, questions cleverly sewn with doubt.

When I finally went to see him,
as if I were the witness, he overturned my wit.

I ask myself, what harm in keeping ways so long revered
and looking to the law in these trying times?

Besides, he went too far, running mad through the temple,
daring to accuse us while people gathered and gaped.

He trampled borders and doomed himself. Yet
when I ask for sleep, under my eyelids his imprint burns.

Merryn Rutledge



My Messy and His Holiness

Cynthia Ann Lublink

Inspiration

My life from the outside, and even from the inside, can look and feel messy, a seemingly constant thunder roll of events and situations that have laid the foundation for many life stories.

I am always aware that this is my journey, no one else's. No story is to compare but to share, so that maybe someone can glean some bravery for their own journey.

The last three years have been the hardest in my life, with grief and sorrow coming at me from places I never thought arrows would be fired. To say grief has been laid upon grief minimizes the shattering my soul has endured.

I would never have gotten through one millisecond of my life without God. That is the bottom-line truth of who I am. He knows my humanity. He knows that although I trust Him, I am still affected, frail, worn, and tired by the journey my life has been.

My messy and His holiness can sit beside one another without invalidating either. They merely are.

My faith and humanity are intertwined. They ebb and flow, hopefully with faith in the lead.

I believe that God is not caught unaware and is not un-acquainted with grief.

I do not live there. My faith doesn't allow it because I believe Him *more* than the pain, sorrow, or grief. I'm not afraid of these moments because I know they do not reflect an issue of faith; they agree with the reality that I'm human. And God certainly can handle my humanity; He did create me after all.

Yet, even as I tease that I have way too many stories, I know they are testimonies of where He has walked in the midst. Where I've been reminded that He is El Roi "the Living One who sees me". Where he has collected my tears, placed balm within the pain, and put gold in the fractured places of my soul.

If we allow Him, he'll turn trial into testimony, fire into faith, ashes into beauty, and pain into praise.

Carl Scharwath



Model: Afruja Akhtar

PROFUNDITY

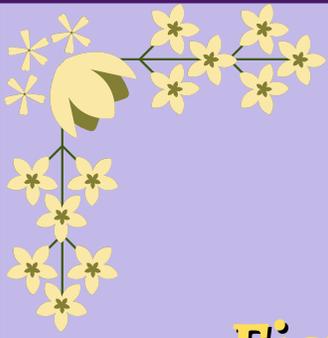
Artist Statement

Carl Scharwath

The most important quality of a photograph, as in all of art, is to evoke an emotional response. A passionate runner, Carl Scharwath uses photography as a means of self-expression and loves capturing surrealistic moments: the play of light, colors, movement, and unusual situations. He creates works which combine painting and photography and also frequently collaborates with poets.

Afruja Akhtar

Afruja Akhtar is a talented Assamese poet, writer, and translator hailing from Chhaygaon, India. She is a teacher by profession and received her Master of Arts both in English and Assamese literature from Gauhati University and Dibrugarh University, respectively. She can be found drinking tea at roadside shacks in Duliajan, where she lives with her husband and two sons.



Fiction



Sue Cook



I was five years old, in 1965, when I first met Jeremy. My parents introduced us; it was love at first sight. From that moment on Jeremy and I were inseparable. He had such ideas, at five, that I could not help but listen to everything he said. I loved his words- they were music to my soul.

We were inseparable, we went everywhere together. Sometimes my teachers were upset about Jeremy always tagging around me, but I didn't care. Their opinion didn't matter to me, his did. The only thing that mattered was Jeremy. His eyes were my light.

At one point my father actually thought that I was spending too much time admiring Jeremy, and not tending to my studies. Silly Daddy. I was a genius and Jeremy was my muse.

Nevertheless, he escorted Jeremy out of the house with a firm grip, and told me he would leave his worthless hide in the bin. Jeremy smiled, but I could see his eyes flicker. He didn't like that idea one iota.

Oddly enough, that was the day my Daddy lost his fingers in a compressor accident at work. Two fingers on the right hand were gone in an instant! I can picture how the blood splattered across his instruments. Daddy said he lost his balance somehow, and this hand went into the compressor. So much blood.

Jeremy snuggled next to me that night in bed, and I told him all about the accident. Jeremy chuckled, and said he had really sharp teeth. I wasn't sure who to believe, but I did see a drop of blood on Jeremy's face. Daddy let Jeremy stay after the accident.

As I grew older, things changed. Homes changed, I changed. I surpassed all studies, jumped several grades, and was declared a genius in physics. The one constant in my life was Jeremy. I knew he would never leave me. After graduation, Jeremy came with me to college. Don't get me wrong, there were bullies. People always seem to like to bully me. I'm short, quiet and in a wheelchair. Sometimes people just can't help themselves. At least that's what I told Jeremy. Jeremy made sure the bullies got their comeuppance regardless.

There was one particular bully that always seemed to be able to make me cry. His name was Ralph. He tortured me whenever he could. He actually had the audacity to slap me in the face, knocking me out of my chair, all because I could not be as physically active as others. Jeremy witnessed this.

It was over climbing a rope. A rope. It was supposed to be a team building activity. Ralph wanted me to climb the rope and slapped my face hard, because his team would lose for having “something” like me on his team. That did not sit well with Jeremy. It was horrible, but I survived. Wish I could have said the same for Ralph.

Jeremy sang a little song to lift my spirits.

“Dingle, dangle in the sky,
Slap her once and then you die.”

(That is where they found Ralph, you know. In the tree. Hanging from a rope. You don’t mess with Jeremy, and you definitely don’t mess with me. Jeremy doesn’t like it when you mess with me.)

After college, life became a little strange. I went from job to job, but no one seemed to want to hire a woman in a wheelchair. Jeremy shared my frustrations.

There was one interview, in particular, that was cruel. It was for a systems analyst position at a hospital. I would be the Director of Billing, and Medical Records. The HR assistant, Lisa, told me that I looked like a monster. That they didn’t need someone with a degree, because a monkey could do that job. Interesting that they wanted my expertise before they saw the wheelchair and ring braces.

I went home distraught. Jeremy was not amused with her derogatory comments. He snuggled near me. He leaned over me and released a deep breath. It smelled of lilacs and sulfur, as if someone struck matches. Suddenly I *was* the fire. It was like I found myself after diving deep underwater, and re-surfacing. I **am** fire!

Poor HR assistant. The police called it spontaneous combustion. I called it retribution.

It amazes me that fire comes from my hands. Jeremy says that fire burns the chaffe away, and cleans the soul. I believe it’s true but the energy it takes to burn the deadwood, makes my muscles ache like they are now. So much pain.

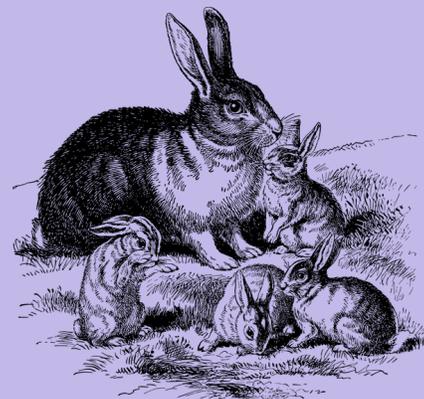
I am getting tired of the pulling in my shoulders. No one wants to upset me, Doctor. I don’t blame them. I think that’s why you’ve tied my hands behind my back.

I understand you wanted to give me a lovely coat because it was so cold outside, but to have it so that it holds my arms so tightly? I don’t like that feeling of being held in a vice.

I was glad you brought Jeremy though. I couldn’t live without Jeremy.

I know you think he’s just a stuffed rabbit, but to me he’s **everything**. You may fear him or think he is evil, but I think he is *beautiful*. I worship him.

You realize, the night that he breathed into my lungs his eyes changed from pink to red. Beautiful rubies, beautiful crystals, luscious fire. The world is **fire**, Doctor. You either dance through or are consumed by it. Jeremy and I dance.



Fall

The fall of silence echoes through these halls
I wait.
I wander.
I wish.
The breath of sorrow leaves me to fend
for myself
and all who would walk here.

Falling leaves, dropping rain through the night.
I wait.
I whisper.
I dream.
As memories flood back to find me
Alone
defenseless and weak.

But I do not fear weakness.
I do not fear quiet and sorrow.
They are not evil themselves.
I whisper into the darkness,
not to run off the silence
but to welcome it.

Hold it,
embrace it.

Plunging darkness, tidal anguish that haunts.
I wait.
I reflect.
I ache.
In this destination of pain and loss
memories echo through time
Silent
yet loud as agony itself.

I sit quietly in the mist of lament.
Calling your name
with a heart stilled
by trauma
by mourning
by grief.
You are with me
though you are gone from this world.
You are present
in memory, if naught in form.

Each of you.
Your names,
voices,
laughter,
Promises.
They are here with me.
I utter your epithets
and mourn
groaning within
tears falling without.
Nothing will replace your presence
And
nothing will replace my love.

I know someday...

But until someday,
I remain
longing
lost
aching.
Comforted
by the One
who gave you to me.
Gives me voice to
weep
gnash and
whimper in the darkness.

Yahweh.
Presence.
Hope.
Grief.
Hope.
In the One who hears me.

Rita Mock-Fike

Nonfiction

I Choose Happiness

Despite my circumstances, I choose happiness. There are plenty of things I could complain about, pain being the primary thing. But there are other things that could derail my choice to be happy.

It would be easy to dwell on my pain or on my inability to move around freely. At times, even getting to the bathroom can be embarrassing, with the floor and my clothing showing evidence of the difficulty of getting there in a speedy fashion. I still choose to be happy.

My brain tends to perpetually exist in a fog because of pain and lack of sleep as a result of pain, but that doesn't mean I can't be happy! It just means I have to take things slowly (as if I had a choice, anyway!), deliberate for a long time over decisions that have to be made, and generally just try to cope as best I can.

I recently had to make a hard decision, that of giving up my independence. But I finally realized that I need help. There have been many nights I have gone to bed hungry because I couldn't face going into the kitchen to fix a simple meal. (Funny how I haven't lost any weight!) I can tell how long it has been since I fixed an evening meal by how many dirty dishes are in the sink. Only one coffee mug means I ate supper last night. More than that indicates I wasn't up to fixing supper. I wash dishes while my supper is cooking in the air fryer, so it is easy to keep track of meals skipped or eaten.

Would it be easy to spend all my time complaining about how difficult things have become? You bet! But that doesn't mean I want to do that. The times that I gripe just make me feel more despondent. So if I don't want to feel depressed, I don't complain. I have to admit that I have complained more than usual lately – and I don't like it.

No. I will choose to be happy. I don't want to ignore my pain but I can live with it and not feel sorry for myself. I choose to be happy!

Nancy Mock

When a Hearse Goes By

Ace Boggess

Life is never long enough.

I've yet to drive west of the Mississippi,
north of the border,
downtown today for takeout -
is where my arrow points,
not in the direction that shiny lawman leads his posse.

No hard choice for me:
chicken tenders or the grave,
greasy burger or the grave,
standing in a long line
for soda or what have you.

Queue of cars goes on as if forever,
forever in the first car has the rest by a nose.

There's a left turn open—I'll take it.
I'll take every left that's left,
until I'm home.

Bylines

JOHN BACKMAN - CONTRIBUTOR

A bigender person and quasi-hermit, John Backman (she/her) writes about gender identity, ancient spirituality, strange wrinkles in human behavior, and how they collide from time to time. This includes personal essays in *Catapult*, *Typehouse Literary Magazine*, *Tiferet Journal*, *Amethyst Review*, and *Sufi Journal*, among other places. For the past two years John has been named a top 10 creative nonfiction finalist in the Wild Atlantic Writing Awards.

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*.

ACE BOGGESS - CONTRIBUTOR

Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, most recently *Escape Envy* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021). His poems have appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble.

AYAN CHAKRABORTY - CONTRIBUTOR

Ayan Chakraborty is a PhD Research scholar and a Junior Research fellow at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. He comes from Kolkata, West Bengal in India. He is a student of English Literature and enjoys poetry and fiction. He has published several critical academic articles in his sphere of work that mostly concern philosophical linguistics and political philosophy.

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.

CHRISTIE COCHRELL - CONTRIBUTOR

Christie Cochrell's work has been published by *Catamaran*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Cumberland River Review*, *Tin House*, and others, receiving several awards and Pushcart Prize nominations. While growing up in Santa Fe, she was chosen as New Mexico Young Poet of the Year; she recently published *Contagious Magic*, a volume of her collected poems. Christie lives by the ocean in Santa Cruz, California – too often lured away from writing by otters, pelicans, and seaside walks.

SUE COOK - ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, STAFF WRITER, AND SOCIAL MEDIA 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.

STEPHANIE DAICH - CONTRIBUTOR

What transpires when Stephanie Daich observes life? She creates stories. What happens when you read her stories? Your imagination comes to life. Stephanie Daich works in corrections and writes for the human experience. Examples of magazines and books you will find her work in are *Making Connections*, *Youth Imaginations*, *Chicken Noodle Soup for the Soul: Kindness Matters*, and others.

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.

MJ DELFIN - CONTRIBUTOR

MJ Delfin is a Mexican-American feminist writer and cat mom who dreams in English instead of her native Spanish, with a Literature degree from The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), and a special interest in Shakespeare, fantasy, and folklore. Currently works as a self-employed subtitle editor, translator, and fledgling voice actress. Her stories have been dramatized in several podcasts (*Sin aliento*, *Vanya Reads*, the *80 Cuentos* bilingual anthology project by *Studio Ochenta*), posted in online literary magazines (*Revista Marabunta*, *Revista Irradiación*) and will soon be published formally by ITA Editorial.

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*.

D. DUNN-CARR - CONTRIBUTOR

D. Dunn-Carr is a retired middle and elementary school teacher. She currently works part-time as the Vice President and office manager for her family's fabrication and welding shop. Deborah studied creative writing while attending Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, where her poem "Strands" was published in the University's journal: *The Dominion Review*. Deborah shares her love of writing with her husband of 30 years, Chip, who is her first critic. Together, Deborah and Chip have two children and four furry friends.

CAROL EDWARDS - CONTRIBUTOR

Carol Edwards is a northern California native transplanted to southern Arizona. She lives and works in relative seclusion with her books, plants, and pets (2 dogs, 5 cats, + husband). She grew up reading fantasy and classic literature, climbing trees, and acquiring frequent grass stains. She enjoys a coffee addiction and raising her succulent army. Her work has recently appeared in Trouvaille Review, Open Skies Quarterly, Otherwise Engaged Literary and Art Journal, and Red Penguin Books.

TAK ERZINGER - CONTRIBUTOR

TAK Erzinger is an American/Swiss poet and artist with a Colombian background. Her poetry has been featured in Cornell University's Bien Acompañada, McMaster University's The Muse, River and South Review, Welter, and more. Her debut chapbook *Found: Between the Trees* was published by Grey Border Books in 2019, and her 2021 poetry collection *At the Foot of the Mountain* won the University of Indianapolis's Whirling Prize for best nature poetry book. A staff writer for *Alebrijes Review*, TAK lives in a Swiss valley with her husband and cats.

BRITANNY ANNE FORSTER - CONTRIBUTOR

Brittany Anne Forster grew up in a small beach town in Florida. She has gone through life events of graduating with her Doctorate in Physical Therapy, married her beautiful wife Stephanie Forster, and recently moved to the suburbs of Charlotte, North Carolina. She finds inspiration in the changing clouds, earthy formations and landscapes, and satisfying word plays and rhymes.

KATRINA KAYE - CONTRIBUTOR

Katrina Kaye is a writer and educator living in Albuquerque, NM. She hoards her published writings on her website ironandsulfur.com and is seeking an audience for her ever-growing surplus of poetic meanderings. She is grateful to anyone who reads her work and in awe of those willing to share it.

GURUPREET K. KHALSA - CONTRIBUTOR

Gurupreet K. Khalsa is a current resident of Mobile, Alabama, having lived previously in Ohio, Washington State, India, New Mexico, and California. She holds a Ph.D. in Instructional Design and is a part time instructor in graduate education programs. Her work has appeared in *The Poet*, TL;DR Press, *New York Quarterly*, *Far Side Review*, *Necro Productions*, *IHRAF Publishers*, *Aurora Journal*, *Last Leaves*, *Delta Poetry Review*, *Ricochet Review*, *Pure Slush*, and other online and print publications. Several poems have won awards. She lives with her husband of a billion years, and a sweet cat.

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.

THERESA KOHLBECK JAKOBSEN - CONTRIBUTOR

Theresa Kohlbeck Jakobsen (they/them) is a German creative, who, after spending ten years in the noisy party-metropolis Berlin, moved to an archipelago in the centre of the North Atlantic. Exchanging the dirty streets of Germany's biggest city with the wild, untamed nature of the Faroe Islands. The challenges of living in another country were a propulsion to their creativity. Theresa's works have been exhibited and published internationally. Right now, Theresa is working for the student magazine *STUDENTLIV* and finishing their Master in Nordic Language and Literature at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

LAURIE KOLP - CONTRIBUTOR

Laurie Kolp is an avid runner and lover of nature living in southeast Texas with her husband, three children, and two dogs. She is the author of *Upon the Blue Couch and Hello, It's Your Mother*. She enjoys writing found poetry because it creates restraints and unleashes inhibitions at the same time. Laurie is currently working on a project to honor her father, who passed away in 2021.

PAUL LAMB - CONTRIBUTOR

Paul Lamb lives near Kansas City but escapes to his Ozark cabin whenever he gets the chance. His stories have appeared in *The Adroit Journal*, *Magnolia Review* (nominated for a Pushcart Prize), *Aethlon*, *Danse Macabre*, and others. He keeps a blog about his writing and other oddments at *Lucky Rabbit's Foot*. He rarely strays far from his laptop.

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.

Bylines

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.

RICHARD LYNCH - STAFF WRITER

Richard Lynch was one of the original Photoshop authors from the 90s where he pioneered techniques and the science behind imaging. He had an interest in photography from a young age and became the editor of a photography book publishing house (Amherst Media) after going to school for fiction writing. His background in science and love of art tied together in that time at the publisher, allowing him to explore ways of seeing.

EMILY MACKENZIE - COPY EDITOR

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.

KATE MEYER-CURREY - COPY EDITOR

Kate Meyer-Currey lives in Devon. Her grandfather was the WWII poet R.N. Currey who taught her to write. A varied career in frontline settings has fuelled her interest in gritty urbanism, contrasted with a rural upbringing, often with a slipstream twist. She has over a hundred poems published since 2020. Her poem 'Boys of Vallance Road' came third in the poetry category of the London Society's 'Love Letter to London' competition (March 2022). Her chapbooks 'County Lines' (Dancing Girl) and 'Cuckoo's Nest' (Contraband) are due out this year.

ELIZABETH MOCK - DESIGN TEAM

Elizabeth Mock is a Grand Rapids, Michigan native and recent BFA graduate from Grand Valley State University. Currently, she is a community manager at Adobe in the official Adobe Creative Career (ACC) Discord server. There, she hosts and moderates panels, challenges, and discussions to elevate members' careers through mentorship. Elizabeth hopes to pursue a multidisciplinary career involving community engagement, graphic design, 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.

AIMAN WESLEY MUELLER - CONTRIBUTOR

Aiman Wesley Mueller teaches academic writing at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, MI. He enjoys creative nonfiction essays but also dabbles in hybrid and mixed media. Having reinvented himself many times and also having close contact with multiple immigrant communities, open-mindedness and empathy are among the things he most cherishes.

UDAY MUKERJI - CONTRIBUTOR

Uday Mukerji was born in India, and he worked as a creative director in advertising agencies in Singapore for over twenty years. However, in 2009, he left his job to pursue a new goal in writing. His first literary fiction, a 2017 Readers' Favorite Award Winner, Love, Life, and Logic was published by Harvard Square Editions, NY in November 2016. His second novel - Book Excellence Award Winner - Dead Man Dreaming, was published in October 2019 by Adelaide Books, New York. His short stories have also appeared in many print and online magazines in the UK and USA.

M.J. MYER - CONTRIBUTOR

M. J. Myer, a Northern Utah resident, loves hiking in the mountains, reading by natural lakes, and movie nights with the family. Some of her favorite movies are Inception, Parasite, and The Prestige, basically anything by Christopher Nolan. She will always be a fan of classic literature, Orwell's "1984" specifically, and young adult literature the "Chaos Walking" trilogy by Patrick Ness is a new found favorite. Writing for her is an extension of how and what she feels, from the places she visits and the people she meets. Everything deserves a story and every person deserves to hear it.

CANDY PATCHETT - CONTRIBUTOR

A native of Illinois, she has lived in Florida for 50 years with her husband of 52 years. She has always loved to write, play the piano and saxophone, and recently took up painting. All of which means it's a good thing she retired (from teaching for 10 years and then from real estate) because she is far too busy to hold down a job!

Bylines

MARC PHILLIPS - CONTRIBUTOR

Marc Phillips lives in Texas and has had fiction and verse published for 30 years in several countries. Marc had a virtual presence before the internet became a vicious shopping circle and spawned a dark child, before social media grew into the leviathan even an idiot could see coming. At present, all you can read about him is what others have said. Luckily for the curious, others have said some things.

JOSH POOLE - CONTRIBUTOR

Josh Poole is a 26-year-old visual artist and writer working out of a sleepy Virginia town.

SOREN PORTER - COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Soren Porter - He/him, INFJ, 30s-ish I think?, perpetually taken. Writing reflections of faith and philosophy. LGBTQA+ ally and sworn enemy of white supremacy.

SEEMA PRUSTY - CONTRIBUTOR

Seema Prusty comes from India and now resides in Saudi Arabia. She recently discovered that she can write poetry. While scrolling through Facebook, she found the MockingOwl Roost ad began reading the magazine and the beautiful poetry therein, finding inspiration for her own work. She received her degree in Civil Engineering in India, then married and settled in Kaust, Saudi Arabia where her husband works as a Research Scientist. She works at the same university as her husband. They have a 4.5 year old son.

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.

CHANDRA RICE - CONTRIBUTOR

Chandra began writing as a child but never thought it would lead anywhere. She had other plans for her future. It wasn't until she was recruited to be a newspaper reporter that she began writing professionally. It was a different kind of writing, but it brought the joy back for her. Now, she writes for release, for therapy, for fun, and for distraction.

MERRYN RUTLEDGE - CONTRIBUTOR

Formerly a literature and writing teacher and then a national leadership consultant, Merryn Rutledge now devotes herself to writing poems and book reviews, teaching about poetry craft, and working for social justice. Her work has appeared in *Pensive*, *Muddy River Review*, *Multiplicity*, *Speckled Trout Review*, *Aurean*, *Poetry Porch*, and other journals. As a consultant, Merryn's research on leadership and organizational culture was published in peer-reviewed journals and as book chapters. Merryn also sings, dances Zumba-style, plays with her grandchildren, and enjoys the woods, marshes, and beaches near her home in Massachusetts.

CARL SCHARWATH - CONTRIBUTOR

Carl Scharwath, has appeared globally with 50+ journals selecting his photography or art. Carl has published three poetry books and his latest book "Playground of Destiny" features poetry, short stories and photography (Impspired Press) He also has two photography books published by Praxis in Africa. His photography was also exhibited in the Mount Dora Center for The Arts gallery and The Leesburg Center for The Arts. Carl was nominated for The Best of the Net Award (2021) by *Penumbra Magazine* and was a finalist for the Mary Cassatt award for photography. He is also a competitive runner, and a 2nd degree black-belt in Taekwondo.

BOBBI SINHA-MOREY - CONTRIBUTOR

Bobbi Sinha-Morey's poetry has appeared in a wide variety of places such as *Plainsongs*, *Pirene's Fountain*, *The Wayfarer*, *Helix Magazine*, *Miller's Pond*, *The Tau*, *Vita Brevis*, *Cascadia Rising Review*, *Old Red Kimono*, and *Woods Reader*. Her books of poetry are available at Amazon.com and her work has been nominated for The Best of the Net Anthology in 2015, 2018, 2020, and 2021 as well as having been nominated for The Pushcart Prize in 2020.

GERALD THOMPSON - CONTRIBUTOR

Gerald Thompson is a writer from Los Angeles C.A. but has been living in various parts of Europe for many years. He is currently residing in Boston M.A. where he is finishing his first collection of short stories and novellas.



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