

YUGEN

THE MOCKINGOWL ROOST

FEATURED FICTION

Mystery Lady

FEATURED POETRY

First June

FEATURED ESSAY

Stories of A Restless Mind Colliding with Another World

FEATURED ARTWORK

Protective Bubble

FEATURED FICTION

Black Holes



**Art & Literary
Magazine**

Yugen (Japanese) a profound awareness of the universe that triggers feelings too deep and mysterious for words.

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Masthead

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Invitation from the Editor

01



A deep, profound sense of wonder beyond words. *Yugen*.

It might seem a little bit of an odd theme for a work that is mostly made up of **words**, but we at the MockingOwl Roost have experienced those deep moments of *Yugen* many times throughout the past two years as we've been creating this magazine together with you. The way so many creators have given of themselves, vulnerably sharing deep moments that have changed them, works of art that have shaped them, stories that have shifted their viewpoints and enlightened their struggles. We are honored to have been a part of this incredible journey together and wanted to sit in that feeling a while for this final issue of 2022.

As you read the stories, the essays, the poetry in *Yugen*, we hope you'll find some of those moments as deep and moving and profoundly life-changing, too. Let yourself indulge in the joy of a beautiful sorrow or divine moment of esoteric existence that on some deeper level we all share.

Let yourself grieve or rejoice, sing or dance, sorrow or lament, wonder or pause without thought as you read. These are the stories that may change lives – and have changed the lives of those who wrote them.

May you remember your own *Yugen* experiences and find joy in and solidarity in those penetrating occasions of soulful hush.



Rita Mock-Pike
Editor-in-Chief

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The Ancient Child

02

A poem for N. Scott Momaday
John Weaver

He expounds: God's boredom is infinite,
it shines like a vague, powdered mask, like a skull,
it has the form of a wheel of burning glass;
the reflection in the glass is the transparent mask of a man.

The bear is coming,
butterflies spring from the grass.

Grey considers her appearance,
she is beautiful in her whole being.
She must serve her purpose.

She is looking for the boy,

he is capable of violence

her belief has become absolute.

There is a giving over, a reconciliation, a benediction.
In the hold of such events there is little to be said,
there is menace among the words.

She draws lines on the red earth.
They are the shapes of immortality.

They sit so, like mother and child,

she fixes him in an evil-eye stare,
how can she believe in the child?

Remote as the stars are his sentiments just now,
an awful quiet in his heart, that is all.

Trees in shadow emerge, and a creeping figure among the trees,
he perceives the brilliance of the meadow,
he makes a morning prayer.

Does he have a vision and a song?

He dances.
He dances.

The strange, disinterested figure approaches so close as to be intimate.
He comes into the presence of the darkest power,
the next moment is forever to come.

Even on the verge of madness there are times of profound lucidity.

This matter of having no name is perhaps the center of the story,
the unknown is the largest part of the universe.

The bear is coming,
It all comes to nothing.
Somewhere a raven calls.

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A palpable mist lifted from the face of the waters. A humming rose with a twinkling feel to it. There was something there in the water. I couldn't tell for sure what it might be, but it seemed to twinkle as it rose behind the island, just beyond my sightline. It was more of a feeling than knowing that this thing sparkled. I could feel it in my bones, as Gramm used to always say about the great mysteries of life.

For a moment, I tried desperately to lean out in my little jon boat and see what it was. But Lynnea grabbed my hand and pulled me back. "No."

She was right. I didn't need to know. I could wonder. That was good. Having a mystery in life is good. After all, that's one of those things I've always loved about God. That there's this great, intense mysteriousness of who God is and how God does things – the Great Holy Unknown.

I knew my mother would say it was unsafe, though, to not know what this thing was. That we should investigate and surround ourselves with answers. We'd be able to know if we should avoid the island. Or know that visiting was safe, and if we could play with this magical creature that must be making those splashing noises and the waves sweeping around the curved shore toward us.

We would know if we needed to warn the local Coast Guard, the FBI, or maybe even the Space Force. Would the other boaters on the distant lake in the middle of the forested alpine terrain of Montana need to know?

Lynnea and I had been friends since we were tiny. Mysteries had always been our thing. We often tried to have our own little adventures, solving little mysteries around the National Park we called home. What happened at this site? Or what created this crater? Who would bring and leave behind such odd slippers in backcountry campgrounds? Why would anyone even own such odd things in the middle of nowhere of all places?

The Mystery of Small Island

And as we drifted on the boat near Small Island, looking at each other, contemplating, enlivened, wondering, I remembered why mystery is so important. Without mystery, there is no learning. Without mystery, there is no exploration. Without mystery, there is no room for growth and discovery.

"Thank you," I said, smiling back at my oldest and dearest friend who knew me better than myself.

We rowed off, never looking back, leaving the great mystery of Small Island in the clinging mists that hovered over the waters. A bit like the Spirit of God hovering over the primeval ocean in Genesis, void and formless, and utterly, incomprehensibly mysterious.



Photography &
Flash Fiction
Collaboration

Photographer:
KJ Hannah
Greenberg

Writer: Rita
Mock-Pike

Best Thing for the Bee

Poetry

Marianne Tefft

Before you say you know the kind of life that's right for me
Maybe you had better come and find out what I think
If you can't see your judgment's keepin' us apart
Time to close your eyes and listen with your heart

We don't have to be alike to have a common goal
We all need a little kindness for our human soul
Independent proud of where we're comin' from
All the same but different all unique but one

Put our hearts together to build community
What's good for the hive is the best thing for the bee

People see the world from the safety of their tribe
Contempt and mistrust keep us from seein' eye to eye
You stay you and I stay I – we got no place to hide
Gonna have to find a way to bridge the great divide

Everybody thinkin' they're the ones misunderstood
Payin' no attention to what's in the common good
Just when they imagine that they know it all
That's when they miss the writing on the wall

Put our hearts together to build community
What's good for the hive is the best thing for the bee

People always thinkin' they're the ones who got the answers
They don't even know that they overlook the questions
Reminding us of everything that we have forgotten
Just a sweet refrain -- Beyond the mountain lies the mountain

Gotta look real hard 'cos people needin' us to see
They are who they are -- not who we want them to be
While you wait to be understood try to understand
We all have a neighbor who needs our helping hand

Put our hearts together to build community
What's good for the hive is the best thing for the bee

All Mixed Up with the Taste of the Sun

Michael Boyd

Fiction

Eckta was stuck in the mango tree.

It was such a nice afternoon when she got back from school that Eckta wandered into the dusty yard. From there, she'd easily climbed into the lower branches of the enormous tree where her brother, Mani, had once hammered in a plank of wood to act as a bench. (He had done it when he got his first girlfriend- they used to sit out there during hot nights. Eckta had spied on them, curious.) It took one easy step up to a knot in the tree to sit quite comfortably. Eckta's legs couldn't reach the ground yet, so she would let them swing while she read her books or practised her singing. That was Eckta's dream, to sing like the beautiful women did in all the movies. She had memorised her favourite songs and sang to her own private auditorium in the concave of the tree. The dappled light danced on the floor beneath her and the leaves provided the rustling rhythm to her tune. Everyone said she was good, and that she would go far.

As Eckta climbed this afternoon, there was a loud screech from above. She'd looked up to see Sam, her cat. He was ginger, and she loved him more than anything. He was in the high branches, next to Grandma's window on the second floor of the house. Dad had built that addition with his own two hands. It was over Eckta's room.

She had called out to Sam and tried to get him to come down. He'd just looked at her, as cats have a habit of doing. Then he meowed mournfully. She ran into the house to fetch his biscuits. But not even a whole handful on the bench lured Sam to come down. He seemed to look longingly at the biscuits, and tried to turn around, but nearly fell off the branch. He clung on and meowed again.

He was stuck.

Slowly and carefully, by putting one hand above the next and curling her toes tight over the rough bark, Eckta pulled herself up into the branches of the mango tree. She climbed higher than ever before, and as she did the branches grew thinner and more tangled. Suddenly she felt like Sam: looking down longingly at the bench. Her pile of books sat there, waiting to be opened. She found herself instead amongst the ripening fruit that caught the sun. She strained her eyes against the afternoon glare to see her cat. He was meowing continuously now, but she was nearly there. Eckta called to him gently, trying to soothe his worry.

Finally Eckta reached a branch where she could sit across from him. She stretched out her hand, but he still didn't move. She decided to edge a little closer, despite the risk. Carefully managed to manoeuvre across, keeping her balance by grasping onto an even higher branch. Looking across, Eckta could almost see into Grandma's window now. She didn't dare look down, for fear of how high she might actually be. A small panic rose when she realised that she had to get back down again, but she couldn't think about that yet. First she could get to Sam and lower him slowly onto a branch below, then she would think about herself. Suddenly Sam sat up and stretched. He turned around on the branch and strolled up to her. He started to rub his head against her leg.

"Sam! What are you doing!?" she said to him, with genuine anger. She had thought she was saving him from certain danger.

Sam purred in response and then walked away from her. With a simple, quick leap, he jumped onto the roof of the house, above Grandma's window, and disappeared from view.

Eckta was on her own. She started to edge her way back towards the trunk of the tree, but found her dress had got caught. In trying to un-stick herself, she looked down.

This changed everything. Suddenly the ground was miles below her, and the brown dirt seemed to stretch further away into the distance every time she looked. Eckta did her best to breathe slowly. She knew that no-one was at home, so screaming wouldn't help. Both of her parents and her brother were at work. Grandma was visiting one of her friends down the road. Tears fell down her face. She wondered if she could reach Grandma's window – but then realised that the branch was too thin – it would break under her weight! She sat, crying, not knowing what else to do except wait. As she tried again to slide closer to safety, the branch cut sharply into her legs. To no avail. Her dress was firmly stuck no matter what she did. And so, Eckta was stuck in the mango tree.

The compound in which she lived was right next door to a school. It wasn't her school; it was a fancy school. She knew by the shiny billboard sign outside the gate, it was colourful and showed pictures of children having fun. Once she had even stopped to watch the people walking through the glass doors, and, as they entered, she saw their hair blow about in an indoor breeze. Air conditioning. The ultimate fanciness.

Grandma's room overlooked the school – every night Grandma complained about the noise during the day – and Eckta was currently sitting above the fence separating the two properties. On one side was the dusty compound, and on the other a concrete car park.

So old and large was the mango tree that it stretched over them both.

"Excuse me? Hello?" called a very serious voice from below her.

Eckta glanced down. On the other side of the fence, standing inside the school and looking directly at her, was a young girl. She looked about Eckta's age.

"Can you hear me?" the girl asked, frowning.

“Yes. Hello.” Eckta tried to brush away tears using her arm that was holding the branch.

“What are you doing?”

“I was climbing the mango tree, and now I’m stuck,” Eckta responded. Wasn’t it obvious?

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, don’t cry – do something!”

“I want to, but my dress is caught.”

“Oh. Well, I could call someone from the school – but I don’t know if they would help you. They might shout at me for talking to strangers. Where is your family?”

“I am sure my mother or my father will be home soon,” Eckta sniffed. She knew that her mother was still hours away – she worked in a hospital on the other side of the city. Her father had just lost his job, and she knew he was out looking for one. She didn’t know when he would be back.

Her only hope now was that Mani might come in soon from his fruit stall outside the compound.

Eckta looked down and the little girl was staring at her. She had a ribbon in her hair and she was wearing a beautiful blue tracksuit. It was bright, with red lines. On her back was a black Nike backpack unlike anything Eckta had seen before. It even had a side pocket in which the girl kept a bottle of Coke. Eckta stared back at the girl.

“Do you live here?” the girl called up.

“Yes.”

“In this shack?”

Eckta looked across at her house. She had never thought of it as a shack. Then she remembered seeing other houses from the bus going into the city, when her parents took her to the beach. They looked like palaces. Made of bricks, with red roofs and green gardens. She could see over the walls from the bus. Those houses didn’t seem real, no-one really lived in them. They were like pictures she could look at through the window. Suddenly Eckta looked back down at the girl in her perfect tracksuit, with her silky ribbon and her Nike backpack. She must live in one of those houses. Then Eckta looked at her house again, made of corrugated iron and pieces of wood. The room that her father had constructed was rickety and made of different types of wood. She remembered how her Grandma complained the stairs were falling apart, which her father kept having to fix. Suddenly, she saw what the girl saw. Her house was a shack.

She looked away, embarrassed.

“Do you go to this school?” Eckta muttered.

“Sorry? What was that?”

“Is this your school?”

“Yes... It’s okay. It’s very strict – but my parents have big plans for me, they say.”

“Is it nice inside?”

“It’s okay. My parents have complained that the classes are too big – there’s twenty-four students in my maths class! No wonder I’m failing! Also, the pool isn’t very big. We call it the pond.” As she spoke the girl swished her hair to one side, as if she was in an advertisement, and laughed at the joke. Eckta didn’t get it.

Eckta thought about her own school. She didn’t know how many were in each class, but she knew that some of the students sat on the windowsill because there weren’t enough desks.

That's why she was always early. She tried to remember how many students were in her maths class, but she lost count in the forty-somethings. If the teacher didn't arrive on time, she would take out her textbook (which was her brother's old one) and try to study in the noise. While thinking, she hadn't realised the girl had continued to talk.

"And Dad says that if they don't do something about it, he's going to pull me out of this school. And they seriously don't know what a scandal that would be. You see..." she looked up at Eckta slyly, and then looked around, as if she was about to say something she shouldn't. "Can you keep a secret?"

Eckta didn't know what the girl was talking about. She twisted in her uncomfortable, bumpy seat, and nodded.

"Well, you see, my Dad is quite big. And by big, I mean that he is really famous. He's a film director. I won't say who because you might tell someone."

With this, Eckta's ears perked up. A film director! Images of women singing their songs flashed through her mind. She suddenly felt a wave of lightness as she looked down at the girl again.

"I'm going to be a famous actress one day," she said, trying to imitate the girl's superior tone.

"Really? Can you act and sing?"

"Yes. Everyone says that I'm going to go very far."

"Oh. Well, let me hear you sing. You see, my dad is always asking me to look out for talent – he says I have an eye for it." Another swoosh of the hair.

"You want me to sing?"

"Yes. Loudly, so I can hear you properly."

Eckta remembered her favourite song of all time. Once, when she was singing it while she helped Mum cut vegetables, Grandma came into the kitchen with tears in her eyes and told her what a beautiful voice she had. Grandma had kissed her on the head and she felt like she was famous already.

"Ok. I'll sing." She looked down at the girl who had her arms crossed and her foot to one side.

"Hurry up."

Although she was uncomfortable, Eckta settled herself into place and closed her eyes. She remembered that day with Grandma, the kiss warm on her head. She thought of Dad's tears last night when he told them he'd lost his job. And she started to sing. She sang from the depths of her young, innocent heart – from a place of love and hope – from the highest branches of the mango tree. She imagined the city stopped for a moment to listen to her voice weaving itself with the wind, and winding its way through the branches around her. She repeated the chorus, then opened her eyes and looked down.

The girl was still in the same pose. "Was that it?"

Eckta couldn't speak. She looked away.

"Did you hear me?" the girl asked. "Was that it? I think you need to work on it."

"You didn't like it?" Eckta said.

"It's not about liking it – it's about selling it. I know the movie that song's from and it's unforgettable."

Your version was... how do I say? Well, let's just say that my Dad always says that you need to have something special to be in a movie. You need to have magic inside you. I'm not sure you have that magic. Sorry."

The girl looked to one side with a sudden movement. "My driver's here. I've got to go. Like my mum always says, "It's a shame what people are born into sometimes." Good luck with the acting career. Keep practising.'With that she skipped off, as if nothing had happened.

Eckta sat quietly in the tree for a long time. She felt the branches sway and she saw the golden fruit glinting in the heat of the sun.

"Eckta! Eckta!"

It was Mani. He was below her in the yard.

"I'm stuck in the tree!" she called down to him. She was so relieved to feel a familiar presence again, to see his cheeky face appear along the fence below her.

"What are you doing up there?" he laughed.

"I was trying to save Sam!"

"I'll get the ladder, but before you come down, grab some mangoes! They look ready to sell!"

Mani ran around the side of the house and returned with a ladder. Eckta plucked as much fruit as she could from around her – brave enough to let go of the branch now that she wasn't alone – and dropped them down to him. He ran about in glee, catching the precious fruit that might help to earn some money. When she was done Mani propped the ladder up against Grandma's room, helped Eckta detangle her skirt, and climb down from her perch.

Eckta was free.

She looked up into its branches and remembered the little girl. She made her way quietly to her room and lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling. Usually she would have sung to herself, but she didn't feel like it now. The ceiling looked crooked and she noticed every blemish on the paint, every crack in the walls.

The screws were falling out of her drawers and the clothes cupboard had belonged to her other grandmother in a previous life. Nothing looked right. Nothing looked like a blue tracksuit, a ribbon and a Nike backpack.

She heard each member of her family come home. She heard Mum, after her long, stooped day cleaning at the hospital, start to chop the vegetables for dinner. She heard Dad return, and could tell by his voice that there wasn't any good news. Eventually, Mani knocked on her door.

"What's up, grumpy bum?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Are you coming to help Mum?"

"I will now."

"Also, I'm going to make juice out of those mangoes. We'll have it with dinner. They are delicious! Much more tasty than the mangoes on the lower branches! You should get stuck more often!"

Eckta threw her shoe at him, but couldn't help laughing.

She made her way into the movement of the house. She helped cook while Mum shouted at Mani for putting his fingers in the pots to taste. Dad sat quietly at the kitchen table and Eckta kept looking at him out of the corner of her eyes.

"Are you okay, Daddy?" she asked quietly.

"I will be, little one," he replied.

They sat down to dinner in the usual way. They held hands and grandma led their prayers. Mani proudly presented the mango juice, placing the plastic jug on the table. They each had a glass. Eckta felt like it was the best thing she had ever tasted. Sweet and tangy, all mixed up with the taste of the sun. She looked around at the people she loved most in the world. She thought about the girl. She imagined her in her palace now, taking the ribbon out of her hair. Eckta didn't even know how to picture the little girl's room, but she conjured up an image from the movies. Of princesses, towers and pink, fluffy cushions. She stared into space and stopped eating.

"Do you think we have any magic left inside us?" she asked. Everyone looked at her, each emerging from their own thoughts. She looked back at them, and saw that they understood the loss she felt. Dad placed his hand over hers on the table.

"You know what magic is, my little love?"

She shook her head.

"This mango juice is magic," he chuckled. "Just look at that tree. It will be here when I go, and it will see your children play in its branches. It gives us the most wonderful juice, no matter where it grows. Just because it is planted in our dusty compound doesn't mean its mangoes are not as good as any other. Maybe even better." He smiled and took a sip.

Eckta looked around at her family, laughing and smiling, eating their food with all their hearts..





Starling Murmuration

Poetry

Tina J Gordon

Murmuration. The word itself an onomatapoetic sensory experience.
Close your eyes. Say it aloud.

Imagine swirling starlings in
shades of black undulating in a wave, a
shape-shifting cloud of miraculous movement.
Psychically connected,
the starlings perform their purposeful, synchronized dance. In graceful
choreography,
they swoop, whorl, twirl, delight,
defy expectation. Or explanation.

Thousands move as one.
Each pair of wings intuit the pattern,
for protection, or joy, or both.
Somehow they manage to stay together for this one glorious dance.

Cloud Seeding

Nonfiction

Lisa Daily



I stood barefoot in the meditation hall staring into an enclosed room covered in gold, searching for the left canine tooth of Buddha. It should have been right in front of me, housed in a stupa shrouded in seven hundred pounds of gold. But I couldn't find it. Story of my life. I should have been able to find my way back to myself, should have been able to heal, should have been able to smile again. But I couldn't do any of those either. I was stuck in a whirlpool of grief and sadness, searching for a way out. And just when I had begun to think I had found an answer...

My journey into darkness started the summer my father died. My grandfather followed three months later. As a new year began, holding promise for new beginnings, my twenty-three-year-old brother, Zack, overdosed on methadone just as he was gaining a foothold in sobriety. The saying that bad things happen in threes is bullshit. Still reeling from the death of Zack, our mother was diagnosed with an aggressive form of melanoma before summer arrived once more. Year after year, the deaths continued as if trying to keep up with the changing of the seasons. Fall, great-grandmother, old age. Winter, father-in-law, cancer. Spring, sixteen-year-old cousin, suicide. The cycle of death concluded with my mother five years after my father. Final tally: seven deaths in five years.

I spent the better part of those five years at the bottom of a bottle trying to numb my misery. There hadn't been time to make my way through even a single phase of grief before another loss took center stage. Life wasn't supposed to be this way. I wasn't supposed to live in a constant state of mourning and sorrow, always wondering who'd be next, but this had become my reality.

I'd get up each morning and trudge to work. But my job as a technology consultant was another source of feeling ineffectual. I couldn't focus on anything other than the minutiae of planning my escape. Over the months, a flight from reality had become a beacon in the darkness, a lighthouse shining the way to a safe harbor out of grief's troubled waters. Rather than creating innovative solutions for clients – a job I'd once excelled at – I'd sit at my desk, hiding behind my computer monitor, clicking away, site after site, searching for obscure corners of the world where misery couldn't find me. I was going through the motions of life, but in a cloud, only half present.

I had turned into a woman who was quick to anger and fearful every time the phone rang, wondering what bad news was coming next. I wanted to strangle every person who told me things would get better with time. I lapsed into bouts of sadness and despair without cause. I felt I had no one to talk to, or more accurately, that no one would understand. There was no way to work this out; only a downward spiral into darkness.

Did I need therapy? Probably. But all I could imagine was sitting in an office with an old guy in an argyle sweater and wire-rimmed glasses telling me to recall all my great memories, embrace the pain, remember you're not alone. Blah, blah, blah. *Really? Get over it?* Oh, okay, sure. Can you give me five easy steps?

I was broken and longed to escape my life. I saved and saved until I could do just that.

Before another year passed, my runaway fund was flush and I was ready to leave the country. Among the twenty smallest countries in the world – forty times smaller than Hawaii – an independent country with a single city at the tip of the Malaysian peninsula, Singapore seemed like an ideal nook in which to hide.

As the ticket agent gathered my information, she warned, “The air quality in Singapore is in the unhealthy range right now due to the fires in neighboring Indonesia.” She paused and looked at me as if preparing for a change of heart.

“The smoke is pretty bad. Are you sure you want to get on the flight?” she prodded.

I nodded. The ticket price was too good to pass up. Besides, how smoky could it be?

Nineteen hours later, that question was answered. As the plane touched down, it was engulfed by the thickest brown smoke I had ever seen. Although only midday, the haze choked the sun’s rays and made it feel like late evening. A wall of humidity, smoke, and ash blasted me as I exited the plane. An immediate accumulation of grime caked my skin. The blanket of dense air sapped my energy and left me struggling to get enough oxygen. Had I made the wrong choice in coming here? At least at home grief was a known entity and hadn’t completely choked me.

I woke the next morning determined not to let my discomfort and fear keep me sequestered in the hotel. The smoke had not dissipated and temperatures hovered in the nineties. I slogged into this apocalyptic, sweltering foreign land, my clothes instantly damp. Beads of sweat streamed down my back and my throat ached with each inhalation of polluted air. I was sure I’d never been so hot, as if fire raged just under the surface of my skin.

As I made my way to the Singapore Botanic Gardens, I was relieved when drops dotted my skin. Being from the Pacific Northwest, I was no stranger to precipitation, but tropical rain differs completely from the intermittent drizzle I was used to. Before long, rivers flooded from the sky. By the time I reached the garden entrance, lightning and thunder cracked all around me further enhancing this torrential downpour. The ticket agent directed me to wait under a large open-air shelter until the storm had passed, but I was skeptical of the protection offered; the shelter’s thatched roof seemed far from adequate.

I found a bench and counted the seconds between bolts of lightning and subsequent thunder, the intervals decreasing with each flash. One thousand-one, one thousand-two...

The back of my neck tingled and the hair on my arms stood on end.

Lightning struck just outside the shelter followed by explosive thunder which rumbled through my body and compressed my lungs.

“Oh my god!” I said aloud. I wondered if this was death coming to call my number.

A neatly dressed Asian man sitting near me said, “The planes made rain.”

“Planes?” I asked, taking short gulps of air. I wasn’t sure if this composed fellow had chosen the right words. I couldn’t understand how he remained calm.

“The smoke is so bad, the planes put chemicals in the clouds to force rain. Rain helps clear the smoke,” he replied. Nope, his English was pretty good.

I let his words distract me until the storm let up and the crowd which had gathered set out to tour the Singapore Botanic Garden and National Orchid Garden.

After admiring the thousand species of orchids in every color imaginable, I continued my tour of Singapore. Before I could get too far, however, the torrent returned, and I ducked into the Buddha Tooth Relic Museum. Not a place I might have listed in my top things to do in Singapore, but more substantial protection than a thatched shelter.

The Buddha Tooth Relic Museum claimed to house the left canine tooth of Buddha, recovered from his funeral pyre in Kushinagar, India. Thousands of artifacts and a plethora of information about Buddha were contained in this tiered, five-story, red building with jutting eaves. I wound my way from floor to floor reading a detailed history of Buddha and then found a statue of my personal guardian deity based on my zodiac symbol and the year of my birth. The accompanying sign read: A personal guardian deity serves as a source of solace, spiritual support, and inspiration. Simply having a personal guardian deity is not enough, however. We must actively work on purifying negative tendencies and increasing our store of merit and wisdom in order to strengthen our connection to our deity and speed our progress on a spiritual path.

I liked the sound of purifying negative tendencies but had no idea how one would even begin to embark on such a practice. I’d spent the last five years lumbering through life, allowing the black cloud of negativity to dominate. The series of deaths kept grief at the forefront of my thoughts, never allowing the healing process to begin. As a result, emotions meant to be temporary had staked their claim on my mental processing and

hunkered down for the long-haul, morphing into anxiety, despair, and resentment.

The dim lighting and dark wood interior made the museum a perfect place to lose myself in thought. As I wandered about in a contemplative state, thinking about mental purification, I understood this was really what I needed, but actively working on letting in the positive and flushing the negative required a paradigm shift. Could my guardian deity offer a new way to look at the world? Could healing really be as simple as changing my mind?

When I reached the highest floor of the temple, I was asked to remove my shoes and place my belongings in a locker before entering the shrine holding the tooth of Buddha. I stepped over the threshold to find a large room flanked on both sides by meditation spaces. An aisle led to a glassed-off area the size of a small bedroom, completely covered in gold. Right in the middle of this gleaming shrine was a miniature gold pavilion which housed the tooth of Buddha. Or so I understood.

I was staring into the golden housing searching for anything resembling a tooth, when a museum guide approached and led me to a monk who'd been kneeling in meditation in the corner of the room.

"He would like to sing a blessing for you," the guide said as I approached.

The monk was dressed in a traditional Buddhist saffron robe, a long necklace of large brown beads reached almost to his waist. He stood and greeted me with palms pressed together and a gentle bow. I responded in kind. The crevices in his aged hands and wrinkled face held years of wisdom.

Incense sticks burning in a small pot produced a sweet haze, a welcome relief from the charred odor emanating from my skin and clothing. The monk did not speak but looked at me directly for a long moment. His gaze along with his beatific smile put me at ease. Could he see inside my soul? Feel the intimacies of my struggle and the heartache I'd experienced? I looked back at him, not wanting to break the connection, and began to feel like a weight was lifting off my chest. I could breathe a little easier.

The monk turned his head toward the guide and nodded. The guide asked me to kneel on the bare wood floor and speak my name aloud. The monk again looked at me with an intensity I could almost feel as I said my name. He then knelt in front of me, our bodies no more than two feet apart, and began to sing a blessing in a language that was foreign, soft and melodic.

He closed his eyes, so I did the same. The discomfort in

my knees faded as his baritone melody mingled with my thoughts. My mind danced around having a personal deity and purifying negative tendencies. It made perfect sense that if I didn't replace negative thoughts, they'd take up permanent residency and become harder and harder to kick out over time. If I wanted to break up the cloud in my brain, I would have to work at it. I would need my own, non-toxic version of cloud seeding to clear the air.

After a few minutes, the song started to lose clarity in my mind, replaced by an ache in my knees. My legs started to tremble and I felt lightheaded. And just as my thoughts shifted back to my physical being, the blessing ended. The monk smiled and bowed. Sitting back on his heels, his head almost touched the floor. I returned the bow and thanked him. The guide held out a hand to help me stand and then led me back to the golden shrine where he directed me to meditate. I stood quietly in this holy space, alone with my thoughts, eased by the monk's chant. I didn't know how to interpret the song, but I knew something had changed within me. And I knew what I needed to do.

I had to keep moving forward and stop replaying the messages from the past. I had to practice staying present in the current moment and enjoy my temporary respite from everyday life. Not in an effort to forget my loved ones who had died; that would never happen. But to honor the people still living, and myself. Shift my attention to the present experience. I left the museum not having glimpsed the tooth of Buddha, but I didn't mind not finding it; I had found something much greater.

Back at my hotel that evening, I went to bed feeling at ease in the world, as if I had glimpsed a light at the end of the tunnel. I could see a way through my grief – a way to not only temper the smoke but put the fires out completely. I rolled onto my side, the springs groaning beneath my body, and wished for a moment that I could simply close my eyes and let the monk's song float through my dreams only to wake in the morning to find the clouds had lifted and life had returned to normal. But I knew it wouldn't be that easy.

Singapore opened my eyes to the idea of thinking about things in a different way, actively working on clearing negativity and working toward peace. But knowing and practicing are two different things. Simply knowing without action would not clear the haze built up inside me. It would take time and effort and practice to figure out how to seed the clouds of rage and resentment in a way to help them dissipate.

But, maybe, just maybe, I was pointed in the right direction.

Column:
The Corner Table Cynthia Ann Lublink

Life is a series of ups and downs that we all endure to one degree or another. Every journey tells the story of our becoming. All the ingredients blending to influence the becoming who we are now. When we stop and acknowledge one another, we can see the beautiful, hard, sweet, and bitter threads not only within our own, but in each other's tapestry. Beauty for ashes. Isaiah 61

She surrounds herself with tokens of love given, made, gathered, or captured.

All invisible strings to her heart,
pictures captured of family moments resting peacefully in the past.
dried flowers mark moments in time.
walls papered with sweet words, pictures, and handmade crafts.
a box of Daddy treasures holding memories, her old age will live on.

There is not one place you look, and don't see
a piece of her heart,
a declaration of her faith,
a piece of her warrior soul.

She is a woman, a mama, an oma*,
a sister, a daughter,
a tante*, a friend.

She is faith and fight,
She is laughter and tears,
She is grace, not perfection,
She is prayer, peace, and hope.

She is the moon shining light in the darkness,
She is pixie dust and magic,
She has scars, not wounds,
She is battle worn and courageous.

She is surrounded by the Living One who sees her.
She sits amid hurricanes, roasting marshmallows at the crossroads of life.
She has lost deeply and grieved deeper still.
She loved till it hurt, then walked away so it wouldn't hurt anymore.

She has broken hard, but never bad.
She has crumbled, stumbled, and erred, yet not unforgivable.
She has sinned, yet is not unredeemable.
She has shattered into a million pieces and has not died.

She, by God's grace,
gets up,
even if it takes a minute.

Just wait for it.

She is ashes and fire,
always a phoenix rising.



Isaiah 61:1-3

*Oma and tante are Dutch terms for grandmother and aunt, respectively.

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FIRST JUNE

JOSE V. CLUTARIO

WHAT COMES AFTER
THE EARLY RAINS OF MAY?

A HOMECOMING. SPRING'S
SIBLING. LIFE EMANATING

FROM YOUR TRUTH – THE FREEDOM
TO BE AND BE LOVED, FIERCELY.

THIS IS YOUR FIRST PRIDE.



Rita Mock-Pike

IN A DRY AND WEARY LAND

O God, you are my God: earnestly I seek you:
 my soul thirsts for you:
 my flesh faints for you,
 as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
 beholding your power and glory.
 Because your steadfast love is better than life,
 my lips will praise you.
 So I will bless you as long as I live:
 in your name I will lift up my hands.
 My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
 and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
 when I remember you upon my bed,
 and meditate on you in the watches of the night:
 for you have been my help,
 and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
 My soul clings to you:
 your right hand upholds me.
 But those who seek to destroy my life
 shall go down into the depths of the earth:
 they shall be given over to the power of the sword:
 they shall be a portion for jackals.
 But the king shall rejoice in God:
 all who swear by him shall exult,
 for the mouths of liars will be stopped.

- Psalm 63, English Standard Version

This passage changed my life in college and the years immediately proceeding. I'd been fed this "woman must marry" mindset from most angles for my whole life. The church I grew up in, the school I went to, the Christian novels I read... Life was incomplete as a single woman – even as one seeking to be a missionary in a spiritually dry and weary land where no water of life can be found.

Then someone shared this passage in a chapel service – looking at it from the perspective of someone who'd lost his family, his livelihood, his expectations for life in God. Finding this an impetus to seek God more – to long for God with all his being.

In a Dry and Weary Land...

I found myself in a spiritual wasteland. I was starving for something more than just existence to please other humans. I'm a people-pleaser – it's always been a struggle – even without the mentality that marriage was somehow the answer, I needed to serve people. Not that that's a bad thing – but it had become my god. I was a missionary. I was a servant. I was a minister. Service became more than my identity.

And finding the right husband had become my mission in life, though I dressed up the search with spiritual words and convinced myself that wasn't what I was about at all.

My Flesh Faints for You...

That year began a four-year period of loss – over 10 people I had served with, been mentored by, and loved by passed. Two ministry partners by suicide. My dad suddenly from complications of diabetes. A cousin and my mentor to cancer. Two ministry clients by car accident. Others... And my best friend was diagnosed with schizophrenia after a severe mental health break.

I'd had great losses before, but nothing like this.

**The Psalm was written by King David in the Judean wilderness. Scholars believe this period was the time when his own son, Absalom, pursued his life.

And now I had nothing to give.

But this passage helped me to see that God wasn't asking that of me. Instead, he was offering himself. I was weary. I was faint. I was destitute. I needed Him more than anything else.

And then I nearly died from being unable to consume water for two weeks. I couldn't drive myself to the doctor, and my brother, who I lived with at the time, didn't believe me when I said I was ill. He ignored me, scoffed at me – and almost let me die.

I experienced the faintness of flesh in a way that I hadn't imagined I ever would. And in my desperation, I felt a great parallel to David in this passage. I had nothing else – nothing I could do but sit and wait and hope as I experienced this nearly terminal dehydration.

And as I waited in hope, I felt a greater need for God in my life. Some of this sense of need was desperation. Some of it was sorrow and loneliness. To be in the presence of someone who should believe me – should care for me – but to be ignored and treated as though my life didn't matter – it makes you aware of your own existence in new ways. It changes how you see yourself and the world. It creates a void.

Some of this desperation was a true spiritual dehydration, revealing the god I had made of my ministry. My plans. God's call in my life had not changed – has not changed – but that call's place in my existence is different now, partly due to that time.

My Soul Will be Satisfied...

Satisfaction is a strange thing. Most of our lives, we seek it. In relationships, in food – as David mentions – in sex, in intimacy with other humans, in hobbies, in possessions. But when we find satisfaction, so often, we discover we're not satisfied. We want more.

In relationship with God, this has been true. Not because He is not enough, but because my humanity cannot connect with Him enough. In that time of desert, I found myself satiated for a moment, but then in continued desperate need for Him. I remember falling on my face, kneeling in quiet spaces, crying out, "God I need more of you!" Over and over. The desperation was one of the most satisfying experiences of my life – and one of the worst, because I was not truly satisfied. There was more to learn, more to know. More to experience.

I won't say I've reached that place now, though in many ways my satisfaction with Christ is much deeper now. Looking back through lenses whose hues have changed, I no longer see my desperation for God as a requirement as I did in that era of spiritual flagellation which I roamed in the Moody bubble and the next few years after graduation, trying to find my way in a world of chaos and pain. Now desperation for Him is a delight – a need I don't want filled. I am able to recognize that fulfillment will come only when I'm finally in His presence in eternity. And I appreciate that. It leaves me with so much more hope and joy for things to come.

My Lips Will Praise You...

In that time of literal starvation, God began shedding the weights off that held me back from seeing Him more clearly. My body lost thirty-five pounds in two weeks, my soul lost twenty-five years of expectations. I faced death and found praise on my lips: "My God is better than life."

My God was better than the things I had put my hope in. My God was better than marriage, than relationships, than music, than theatre, than dance. My God was my God – his name on my lips night and day as I sought His salvation in prayer, praise, and song. And as my lips dried out, his name was on my mind. I couldn't speak – I had little saliva with which to utter – but my heart heard the Lord calling and I responded with silent praise.

My Soul Clings to You...

It was one of the darkest periods of my life. But it was one of the most beautiful. I found whom my soul loveth. And I clung to Him with all I had in me. I had no choice. I felt guilt over that – but then, I felt freedom. He didn't ask me to be uber spiritual, to stop being human and feeling those experiences of desperation. No one pursued my death, but neither did anyone pursue my life. I had to cling to Him – I had to hold on with all I had. I had nothing else. No one else.

I had indeed gone into His sanctuary and seen his power and glory. His beauty. His grace. His mercy.

Nevertheless, I am continually with you:
 you hold my right hand.
 You guide me with your counsel,
 and afterward you will receive me to glory.
 Whom have I in heaven but you?
 And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
 My flesh and my heart may fail,
 but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
 For behold, those who are far from you shall perish:
 you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.
 But for me it is good to be near God:
 I have made the Lord God my refuge,
 that I may tell of all your works."

Psalm 73:23-28. English Standard Version

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Embrace

Katie Jordan

Fiction

Skyscrapers extended straight to the heavens, infinite windows lit up, like tiny torches blazing to welcome her. Each illumination cradled a generous abundance of solace: the metropolis of Shanghai cast its approval, sending beams of warmth over tourists navigating pristine sidewalks below.

Hannah inhaled deeply. Scents of ginger from Nanxiang steamed buns and sweet lotus leaves wrapped around Beggar's Chicken permeated the air, the aromas navigating to and fro before dissipating and fleeing, traveling north toward the Yangtze River. Meanwhile, a plethora of city-goers bustled about, infusing the municipality with a cacophony of conversation, automobiles, and the whirl of gas-powered bikes speeding along the edges of traffic.

Deep golds and warm teals outlined the surrounding architecture, accompanied by patriotic banners the color of fire, the aesthetics in cahoots with paradise's unrelenting weather. Hannah's thin cotton tunic became saturated with perspiration, from the humid subtropical climate, and the relentless determination of the adrenaline ebbing inside her, pulsing with anticipation.

Anxiety hit its precipice as she approached her destination and paused in the sweltering heat, albeit momentarily. It was time. Time to satiate the abyssal chasm harbored in her core, longing to be filled like an eternal spring evaporated. Its low-lying base turned to dust overnight.

Long blonde eyelashes batted against the crimson of her flushed cheeks as the faintest sound of a guzheng pricked her awareness and heightened her senses, its player unaware of the effect harmony had on its listener as they plucked the strings of the instrument with jade fingerpicks, the paulownia wood soundboard cradling the melody.

A deep breath successfully warded lingering uncertainties, replaced by the sharp coppery taste of fear when Hannah crossed the building's threshold. Nipping air chilled her senses and sent a gossamer's trail of arctic frost down her spine, her footfalls echoing against the freshly waxed mezzanine. Her heart's pitter-patter rhythm galloped within. Approaching the front desk, she shakily extended the stack of paperwork in her right hand and, in her left, the luxury gifts that traveled with her, packed in bubble wrap and neatly taped with painstaking care to safely make the fourteen-hour flight from Salt Lake City.

The woman behind the front desk leaned forward as she spoke, her eyes as gladdening as a cool glass of lemonade on a late June afternoon. "Ninhão. Hello." Hannah's soul became pacified with kindness, clinging to effortless niceties from the compassionate stranger. "Welcome to China."

Blurs followed as Hannah leaned against the opal marble countertop, endeavoring to keep a level head: overwhelmed by occurrences too momentous to grasp. Reassuring expressions from the cheery woman kept her from bolting, perhaps to weep in the bathroom of the foreign country to collect her wits, or to allow self-inflicted terror to ravage her from the inside out. *Maybe they'll change their minds*, she thought. *Maybe I'll fly home empty-handed.*

A thick stack of crisp white papers was pushed under her nose. Hastily snatching a pen off the desk, she scrawled out loopy cursive letters, accidentally slanting the slapdash signature below the line of the official document.

The woman's eyes continued to shine with compassion as she retrieved the paperwork from her and announced, "It's time."

Hannah flinched. Time, in its hourglass, had seemed to pass one grain of sand at a time, until it was inexplicably absent, evading her will and leaving her with nothing. Now the opportunity had arisen for that void to become an essential piece of her painful personal history, not the defining crux she was forced to lean upon. Hardship would no longer define her.

A spacious area with brightly upholstered chairs in shades of crimson and gold offered Hannah a dose of warm hospitality: the waiting room. "Not much longer," she hoarsely whispered. Her parched throat attempted to close in protest, begging to be quenched. A full water cooler sat nearby, a bead of moisture running down its translucent, sky-blue surface.

Five minutes passed. Then ten. Hannah stewed with an equal concoction of anxiety and frustration and began restlessly pacing. A bystander, with eyes that were drawn to her like magnets to iron, leaned against the smoothly textured wall, heightening her anxiety.

Inadvertently making eye contact, every fiber of Hannah's being felt as though it were being shredded when they asked the probing question. "What led you to China?"

The words, "none of your business" exited Hannah's chapped lips as she grappled to bridle the floodgates of her emotions, forced to revisit the torture of her past: all-encompassing waves of heartache. An impossibly grueling physical battle with cancer. A win that never quite felt triumphant. A marriage that crumbled faster than a sandcastle disintegrating beneath a high tide.

Her voice caught in her throat as her mind lingered, recalling the blush pink of the unoccupied nursery back home, the neatly organized wicker bins filled with diapers in the antique armoire, and the yellow teddy bear sitting on the pristine white cushion of the rocker patiently waiting. Hannah's heart squeezed, longing for little fingertips to touch every inch of that room.

And then, finally, finally, a door swung open and a woman emerged from the back corridor, promptly setting an infant into Hannah's open arms, with rosy cheeks and dark eyes, who smelled of jasmine and sweet-scented soap. Time, for once, ceased to exist. The cosmos aligned, ticking clocks deemed inconsequential, as Hannah embraced the tiny body tenderly, allowing a long pause as she held her breath and looked at the living parcel as if she might shatter and turn to microscopic particles of dust.

Trepidation melted when the baby laid the flat of her palm on the bridge of Hannah's nose and cooed softly, instantly lifting the insurmountably heavy tonnage inside her. Tears of joy pooled in her eyes and softly rained down, leaving trails of moisture on her cheeks, symbolizing the hardships that led to Shanghai. Cutting through the grief and thriving, like a seedling blossoming into a towering sunflower, Hannah's heart burst, rejuvenated by love and strength.

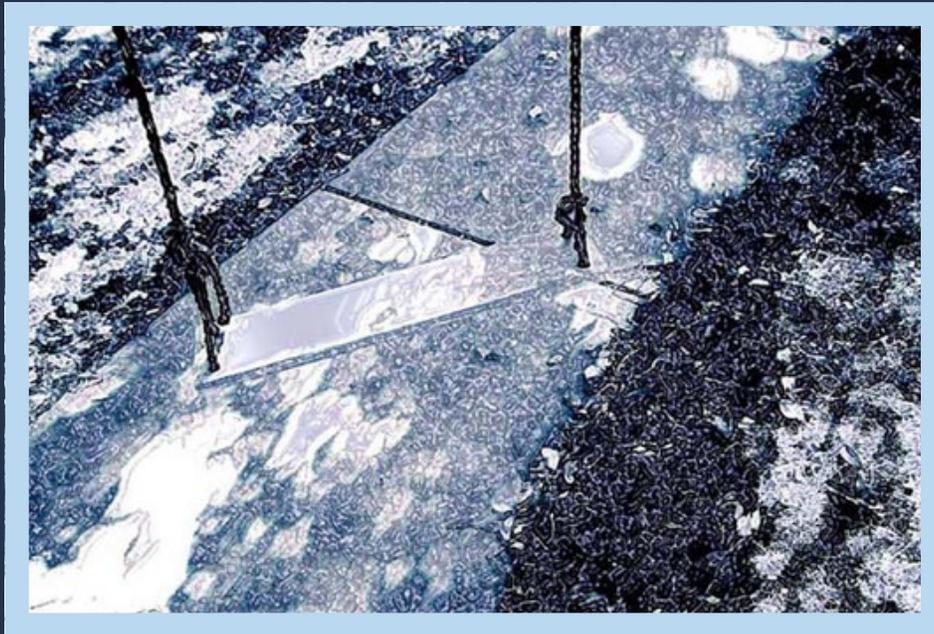
Many pictures were taken, but photographic evidence wasn't necessary. Hannah would never forget meeting her daughter and becoming whole.

Swing/Waiting

21

Photography by
Jeffrey Spahr-Summers

Poetry by
Sue Cook



Today is different.

No loud noises, no running.
No joyous calls to me in passing.
I wait for your voice.

But
nothing.

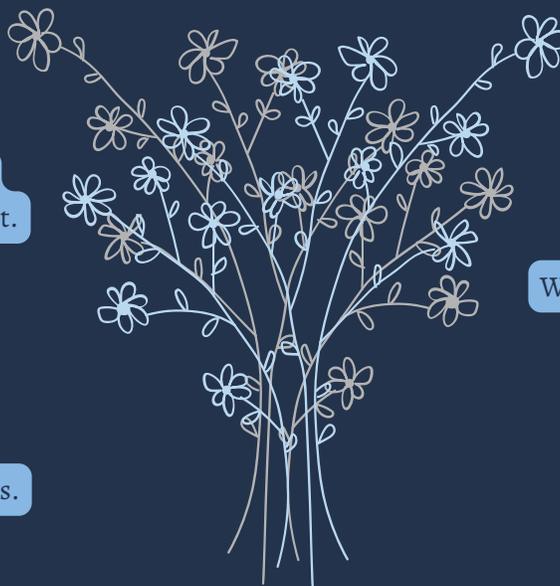
Yesterday I moved
with the wings of angels
as you went higher and higher.
A pump, a kick, a scream of delight.

Your voice called me,
reaching the heavens with
the power of Daddy's push.

I felt powerful as an eagle –
we soared through the air
our feet almost touching the clouds.

Today I am still.

Waiting as you are carried away by
angels unseen.
Not wood and chains.



Bullets gave you wings

Now you soar even higher –
away from life's pain,
this noise and misery.

When the tears stop falling
and anger takes pain's place,
I will be cut down.

A remnant of a happier time,
needing extinguishment,
tossed to the burn pile.

When the smoke rises into the ethers,
my ashes will go higher, too.

We will be reunited,
my wee one.

Over the skies of Uvalde Texas,
we will soar.

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Risk for Falls

Cheryl Snell

First the floral-faced watch, now these pearls. If I'm decorated, I feel better, he insists. "But you'll break the bank!" I shake a limp loop of pearls at him. "It's worth it," he says, meaning this bribe not to leave him. I'll wear the pearls with everything from now on, even with my hospital gown. The necklace could double as a rosary, I suppose, but that might offend — but not him, since he's irreligious and works without a net.

He's been looking for the whereabouts of my will to live. He has a test for me: he opens his hands, showing a plum in one and a prune in the other. He wants me to choose hope. I want him to face the harsh truth. I pick the prune and glimpse his flinch. "Who was that guy with the half dead cat?" I say, changing the subject, but not entirely. "Schrödinger? He was a snazzy dresser too." He lifts the necklace and drops it gently back onto my chest.

A nurse interrupts us to tend to my bags and attach some electrodes. I move my pearls out of the way and she flicks them for no reason. When the string breaks, the pearls slide over the floor like an iridescent oil slick.

FICTION

John
Sheirer

Up To Him

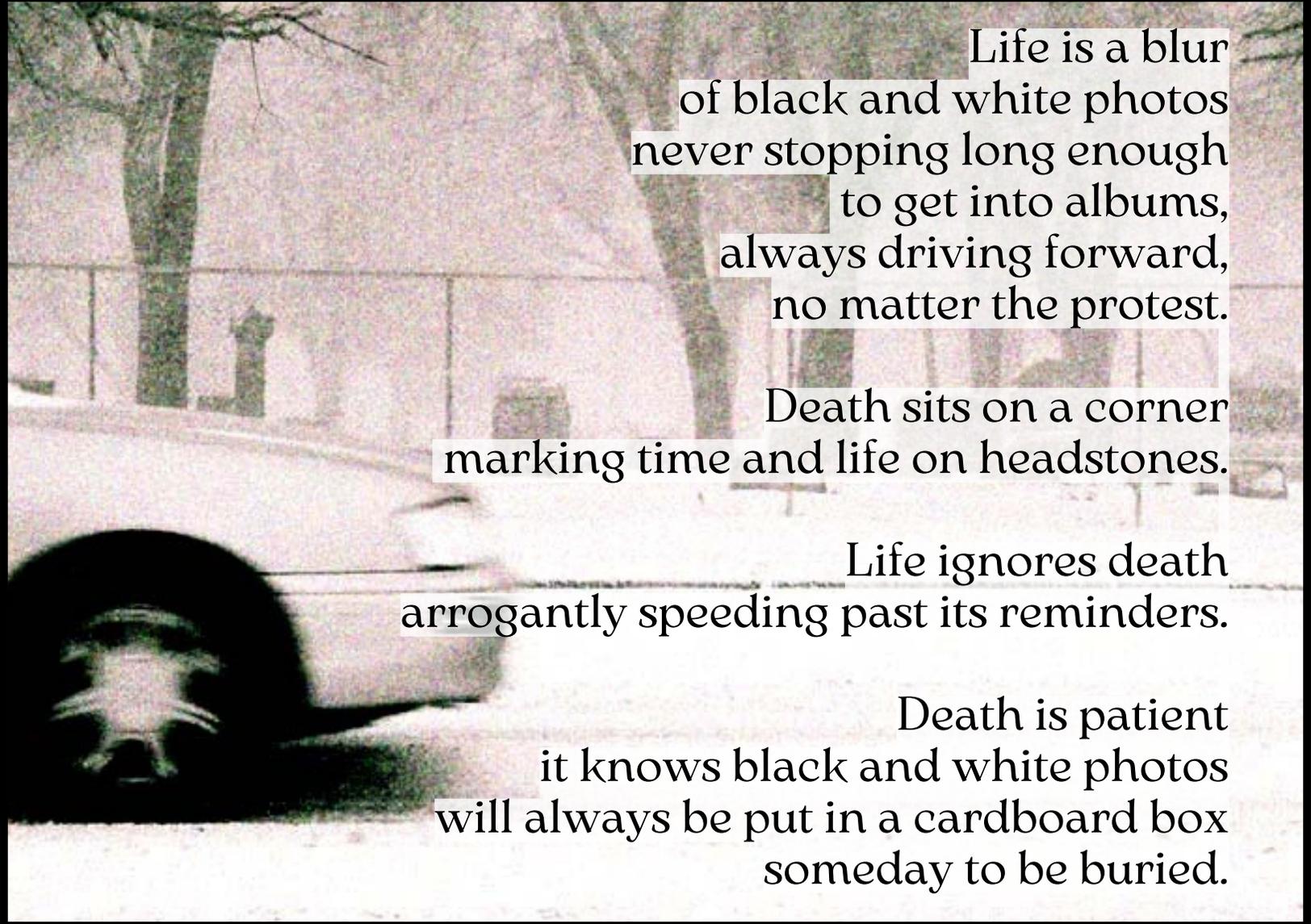
Both hands betrayed him when he turned sixty. After decades of power drills and chainsaws, hay bales and cement blocks, both index fingers curled and locked, snapped straight with electric twangs of pain. He assumed arthritis but his doctor diagnosed “trigger finger.” Ironic, considering he hadn’t fired a gun since his teen years. The treatment hurt as much as the affliction; cortisone shots that swelled each finger to near-burst sausage rockets. He drove home using only thumbs and pinkies, knowing that he’d need surgery within a year, one at a time or both hands at once. That was up to him.



Life and Death

Photography by
Jeffrey Spahr-Summers

Poetry by
Cynthia Ann Lublink



Life is a blur
of black and white photos
never stopping long enough
to get into albums,
always driving forward,
no matter the protest.

Death sits on a corner
marking time and life on headstones.

Life ignores death
arrogantly speeding past its reminders.

Death is patient
it knows black and white photos
will always be put in a cardboard box
someday to be buried.

Mystery Lady

Ron Hardwick

Fiction

The train carriage is very warm, whilst outside a fearful wind pushes the temperature way below freezing. I can hear the wind buffeting the windows and roof of the carriage as the gale howls in from the German Ocean. I have every reason to suspect that I am deeply flawed psychologically, if not actually mad. This journey is the culmination of my madness.

The railway line stretches into infinity. Warehouses give way to fields, and light to darkness, as we push on into the night. Recent copious rain has made the embankments lush. Swollen streams gush through verdant fields. The hills beyond are shrouded in dusk's purple mist. Electricity pylons seem to be marching across the flat fields from which colour is being drained as if water is being squeezed from a sponge.

Soon it will be completely dark, and I will only be able to make out the weird shapes of the embankments and cuttings that the train will flash through on its way north. Outside, the darkness closes in around me like a lid being nailed down on a coffin. A train rumbles past at speed, heading southwards. Its lights flash briefly in my window. The moon illuminates a trio of rusty steam locomotives, industrial saddle-tanks, that lie forlornly in the yard of an abandoned castings factory. They must have been there almost forty years. I wonder what is to become of them, whether they will just rot away until they're a pile of red dust on the ground. A solitary street lamp illuminates a country level-crossing gate. A car, headlights blazing, stands waiting for the train to pass and the gates to open. The moon has brightened by now and hangs low in the sky. It is a three-quarter moon, and the right cheek of the man in the moon is obscured by a diaphanous chiffon scarf of scudding cloud.

I look at an advertisement at the head of the carriage. It has a Christmas theme: Edinburgh sparkles – shopping, shows, celebrations. Visit Edinburgh. In the advertisement, a young woman in a fur hat, is smiling roundly and raising her eyes upward, whilst behind her head is a night image of a backlit Princes Street and Edinburgh Castle.

I study the woman who sits facing me from across the aisle. I have been studying her for some considerable time; in fact, I can scarcely take my eyes off her. She knows, but she doesn't let on. She is around sixty years old, as skinny as a flagpole, with cheekbones as gaunt as knitting needles. The skin around her chin is map-folded with age and there is duck-down on her parchment cheeks. Her elfin ears are pierced with golden starfish studs. Her dyed auburn hair is swept severely back into a ponytail. She wears on her face a pair of spectacles with lenses as large as dessert spoons. She is dressed in a modest white top and a long, pleated black skirt. Her legs are encased in dark tights and her feet in dainty tan shoes. She has elegant arms and wrists but coruscated hands, flecked with the liver spots of age. Her long, spatulate fingers are devoid of rings, and her fingernails are carefully cut short and almost square. I notice how well manicured they are and I put her down as a woman of great erudition. She is as clean as a fire-engine and mysterious as a seraph. Her maquillage is that of a younger woman. She has lost her colour and has had to regain it from the bottom of a jar.

She reads a newspaper as if it were in Braille. She frowns darkly and I attempt to gain a mental picture of her thoughts. I close my eyes, and images flash into my brain. She is puzzled; the world has defied her. The sands of time are running out – she sees death on page seventeen. She drips class and self-respect. Her simple hair-clasp demonstrates her severity; the golden bangle on her right wrist shows her wealth and taste. She is proud of her ancestry. Her forebears were moneyed, bankers and the like. They imbued in her a sense of stealth. She's Protestant, you can see it in her eyes and the relentless way she purses her lips. She's lonely now, ploughing a silent furrow, sporting just one hook on the bathroom door. She grimaces; she has read enough. How many policemen do we really need? She doesn't seem attuned; she is pragmatic. Her head is somewhere in the clouds along with the cherubs and angels.

I am served coffee by a young man in a coloured waistcoat. I want very much to start off a conversation with the lady, but I lack the courage to do so. The hot coffee and a burst of warm air from the heater vents make my face go very red indeed, at the same time as she turns her queenly head, and we inadvertently look directly into each other's eyes. I mutter an apology. She smiles faintly. I want to sit next to her. I want to say:

"Hello, you're very beautiful."

Then I might learn all about her. I sit silently across the way, knowing that this hour will be the last I'll ever see of her, and she will expire one day, somewhere in the nether regions of Tory middle-classdom, and I won't even know. Finally, in desperation, I speak up:

"Excuse me, I think you've dropped your handkerchief."

She offers a tortured lopsided grimace that hurts her.

"Thank you."

She bends down to pick it up from the floor.

"It's just that... I was just looking, and I saw..."

"You were looking? At me?"

"I was...I am ...intrigued by you."

"You are presumptuous, are you not?"

She speaks with the refinement of a Cambridge scholar.

"I can't help it. I find you fascinating."

She regards me coolly.

"I could call the guard."

"Please don't. I haven't been too well, lately. The guard would just confuse me."

"You have been ill?" A hint of interest.

"Yes, you know, the strain. Of living. And not loving. And not coping."

"You are better now?"

"I've been trying very hard." I lie.

"I, too, have been unwell," she says.

She sits back in her seat, half-closes her hooded eyes, and begins to speak, in a drifting, dusty voice as if she were falling in and out of consciousness. She looks stunning to me, a graceful porcelain vase with some cracks and fissures, but oozing class and grace. I listen with all the intensity of a Marxist pamphleteer.

"My name is Helena Beauchamp. I'm one of the Hertfordshire Beauchamps. We go back to the Magna Carta. I was educated privately, at St Martlet's Academy for Girls. Mine was not a happy childhood. My parents were cold and distant. I was an only child. I spent a lot of my youth cold, lonely and friendless. At the age of twenty-two, I was married. It was an arranged marriage. My parents insisted that I marry Viscount Allenby, a scion of the oldest family in Berkshire. The Allenbys were wealthy landowners. The Viscount served in the Berkshires, and he cared only about two things: the army and horses. He cared nothing for me and I cared nothing for him. We divorced after five years, when he found out I couldn't have children."

She pauses, as if for breath. She tilts her chin and looks upwards. The light shines on her saintly face. I speak.

"I was divorced recently, too. It shattered me. It..."

She interrupts, firmly and gracefully.

"I remarried several years later. The Earl of Hillingdon. He was a beast. He used me cruelly. He routinely beat me."

"You allowed him to do that?"

She looks puzzled.

"I could do nothing about it. You have seen how slender and weak I am. I had no means to do anything about it."

"The law?"

"There was no proof. I could have sustained my injuries falling on a stair or walking into a door. That is what my husband would have said. Besides, he played golf with the chief constable and the local magistrate."

I look more closely at her face. Under her make-up, I see that she has a thin scar on her brow. She nods.

"A letter-opener, drawn horizontally across my forehead during one of his darker moods."

I am momentarily distracted. A brightly lit factory, seemingly a manufacturer of electrical cable, is in view. Next to a yellow fork-lift truck, redundant now until the next day, a peaked-capped security man stands thoughtfully by a pile of cable. I think about the singularity of the security man's nightshift vigil, and conclude that, if one is touched at all by feelings of loneliness, such an occupation is not to be recommended.

The train rips through a rural station. Rain streaks diagonally down the windows and founders in the gutter-rails. A lorry stands at a level-crossing.

The lady speaks again, in scarcely a whisper.

"I ran away. Across the sea. I ended up in Dublin. I had nothing. I had to start again from scratch. I became a personal assistant to the managing director of a firm of electrical wholesalers. I rented a flat in Howth. The managing director fell in love with me but I rejected his advances and he sacked me. I flew to Holland and made my home in Maastricht. There I taught English at a business college. I lived in rooms on the Vrooweplein."

"I've been to Maastricht. On a course once. It's very beautiful."

"I loved the Netherlands. However, I had one disastrous relationship after another until I realized that my nature would not allow me to form any permanent liaison with a member of the opposite sex or, come to think of it, even the same sex. Eventually, I returned to these shores where I have lived ever since, in loneliness and isolation."

"Where are you headed now?"

"Wick, in Sutherland."

"That is peculiar. So am I."

"Indeed? That is a coincidence."

"Why are you going there?" I ask.

"I have heard that the air there is bracing, and that the place has the necessary bleakness and strange, ethereal beauty that suits my mood. Why are you going?"

Her question is pointed, direct, as is the inquisitive glance that accompanies it.

I shuffle. I do not want to tell her the truth. She would not understand. She might even try to make me change my mind.

"I am looking into some business opportunities. One is in Wick."

For the first time, she looks at me with particular interest.

"That would suggest you are a person of independent means?"

"That would suggest so."

"Your frayed shirt cuff tells me something quite different."

"I just threw on an old shirt. I was in a hurry."

"Indeed? You were in a hurry, yet you have taken the time to look out for a pair of cufflinks and a matching shirt and tie?"

I look down at the table. It seems pointless to expand on my falsehood.

"I take it that you have been down on your luck lately?" she says, less severely.

I nod.

"We are all running away from something. I am running away from myself. I hope to find what I need in Wick. I hope to find the solution to everything," she says. "I want to get as far away from my current circumstances as I can."

"You can't get much further than Wick," I reply. The semblance of a smile lights up her face. It transforms her, and I open my mouth in astonishment at her faded beauty.

"You are travelling light?" she asks. "I believe your stay will not be long?"

I have only a bottle of Scotch and a car hire confirmation docket in my case. My stay will be very short. Not even a day, maybe not even an hour. Everything depends on the demographics of the place.

"You do not seem to have a great deal of luggage, either," I observe.

"I had it sent on ahead of me."

"To your hotel?"

She deigns to answer. I feel impelled to carry on unburdening myself to her, to make her understand my loneliness, my unhappiness.

"I've spent months living in fly-blown budget hotels with stained bed sheets, windows that won't open and the noise of all-night buses keeping me awake, living off cheap microwave meals and raw carrots, and talking to myself all the time because I'm lonely. Charles Dickens said: 'Loneliness is like a prison with no walls, a prison of the mind. Everything around seems so important.' He was right. I suddenly feel very old, and very, very tired. I've just about had enough."

A girl arrives with a trolley. She is petite, blonde, and French.

"Do you wan' any dreenks? Wine, vodka, wheesky, gin?"

"Could I buy you a drink?" I ask the lady.

"Yes. I'll have a gin and tonic, thank you," she responds. Her voice is warmer now.

"And I'll have a Scotch on the rocks."

"Vair sorree, but zair eez no ice."

"Plain Scotch and water then," I respond.

I pay. The trolley girl wanders away. I take a sip of my drink. The whisky explodes on the back of my throat, forcing its delicious vapours up into my nose and its fiery taste down into my stomach. The lady swallows her drink like a robin sipping water at a birdbath.

"You have been unhappy for a while?" she asks.

"Since my divorce."

"Will you be happy in Wick?"

"I'm hoping that I will resolve all my difficulties for once and for all." I am deliberately vague, ambiguous. I want this woman to be curious about me, to need to learn all about me, for me to be centre stage for the only time in my life. I crave that. I need that in these final hours.

She merely nods, as curious as a coalman's horse.

"You and I both, then."

I am puzzled by this remark. Why should a lady wish to visit a God-forsaken place that Robert Louis Stevenson's father once described as "the meanest of God's towns on the baldest of God's bays"? I know why I am going, but I cannot conceive why she should desire to.

The train pulls laboriously into Georgemas Junction station. One passenger embarks. The station has taken on the aspect all stations do in the late evening, empty, eerie and lonely. It is vistas such as this that increase my paranoia. The guard blows his whistle and the train lurches forward. I look at my watch. There are just forty minutes left in our journey. I want to yell out to her:

"Please let me stay with you and you can teach me what it is like to know and love someone again. I promise I won't be any trouble to you. I'm civilised, clean, and, like an old long-case clock, although damaged, I can possibly be repaired again. Just give me a chance."

I cannot speak the words, for they choke with the whisky in my throat.

I know what I have to do, and I cannot be deflected from the matter in hand.

She looks at me for thirty seconds as the train hurtles towards our destination, and our destiny.

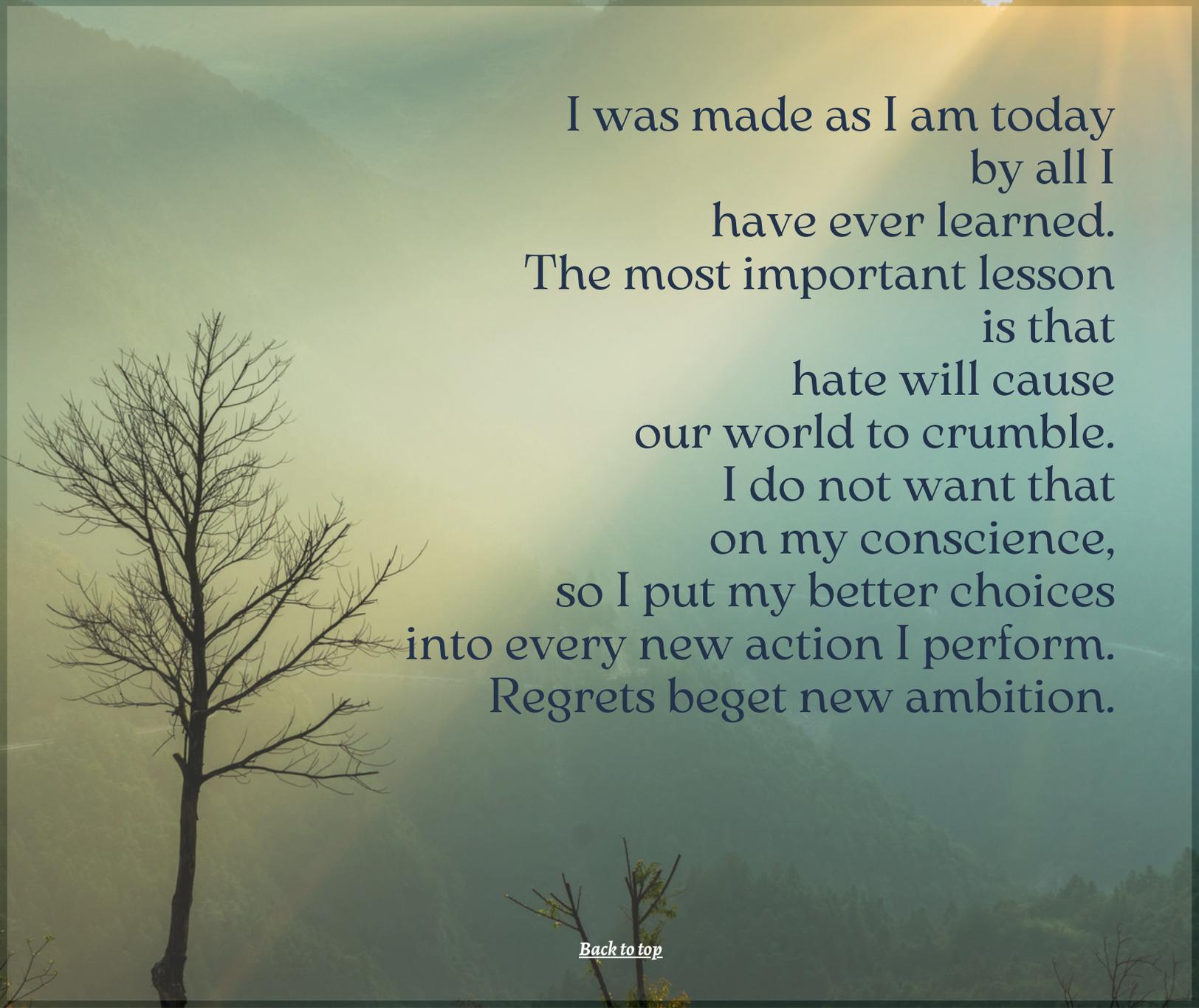
"Au Revoir," she says, quietly and thoughtfully.



Regrets Beget New Ambition

Linda Imbler

Poetry



I was made as I am today
by all I
have ever learned.
The most important lesson
is that
hate will cause
our world to crumble.
I do not want that
on my conscience,
so I put my better choices
into every new action I perform.
Regrets beget new ambition.

In My Day

Joss Richards

Fiction

I.

I plant a chamomile on the dresser then my head on the pillow, and soon I'm dreaming again about smothering my husband. But not tonight. I need the sleep. This isn't my application for sainthood. This is just my side of things.

I might panic before the police and say something stupid, so I wanted a few thoughts on paper. Nearing the end of my eighth decade, it's a peculiar time to begin a diary. A bit late in the show to find a voice isn't it? I don't even know who I'm speaking to. I guess some writers call that freedom.

Derek, my husband, knows his name and sometimes mine, and that the view behind the blinds is Yorkshire (what else counts for a view?). When he seems still, I roll my feet across the carpet. I descend the minefield of noisy floorboards to the living room to catch up on council emails and early-evening television. It's barely eight o'clock. Jacob, my grandson, acknowledges from the sofa through his swiping, without moving a muscle to remove his earplugs.

There's shuffling from behind my head, and on turning, I see Derek in the doorway. It breaks the very first rule to tell him it isn't breakfast yet. And it was a long time ago that I learnt not to ask any questions. There are no such things as lies to someone like this. There are just ways of getting them quickly and safely back to bed.

"I'm just preparing breakfast darling. I'll bring it to you in bed."

"Oh. It doesn't much look like you're making breakfast."

"I'm just reading while the kettle boils. Why don't you hop along back to bed?"

"Oh, Well I'm really quite hungry. And what did you say we were doing today?"

"We're going to bed darling."

"Oh. It seems a strange time to be going to bed. I'm not too sure I want to go to bed."

"Well I'm feeling sleepy and I'm going to bed."

"Oh. Well if you're going to bed I'll probably go to bed. I'm not entirely sure I want to go to bed."

"I'll bring you your cornflakes when you're in bed."

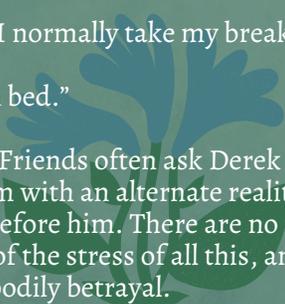
"Cornflakes?"

"You like cornflakes; they're your favourite and you like eating them in bed."

"Oh. I thought I normally take my breakfast in the kitchen."

"No darling. In bed."

So these rules? Friends often ask Derek if he enjoyed our holiday or what he had for breakfast. There's no point. It's confronting him with an alternate reality. What holiday? He didn't know he was on one. What breakfast? Even with a finished bowl before him. There are no new experiences. Just survival. My cardiovascular idiosyncrasies are a manifestation of the stress of all this, and something I really don't need, but it's impossible to be this patient and strong without some bodily betrayal.



Derek didn't get his breakfast this evening. And I didn't get any sleep:

21:46 – Derek appears in the living room for the fourth time, and so I escort him upstairs and join him in bed.

22:59 – I'm woken from a dream where I smother my husband, to find Derek opening the curtains and asking what I've made for breakfast. It takes a few minutes to get him back into bed.

23:35 – Derek draws the curtains and comments that the sun is taking a little while to rise. He asks what we're doing today, and I say I'll tell him if he gets back into bed.

23:57 – “ ”

00:11 – “ ”

01:36 – The mattress is soaked, so I get Derek out of bed and we move to the spare room.

02:37 – Derek wakes up, confused, asks what we're doing, then about breakfast, and then draws the curtains, commenting that the sun is taking a while to rise.

03:28 – “ ”

04:34 – Derek soaks the sheets.

04:35 – I give up hope of sleep, and put the television on quietly downstairs.

An ordinary night. If it weren't for the promise I made at the altar, Derek would already be dead. I want him to die, but I can't make him die. And I would miss him. I want nature to get on with it. Heaven's cruel humour will have it that I drop off first, no doubt! Derek just seems to keep waking up. Perhaps I will start taking him on longer walks.

At actual breakfast, Jacob places another hoop of cereal into a growing pile to keep count.

“So Grandpa, tell me how you met Granny.”

Derek is American. Not by birth. Not even on the passport. Not even on the tongue anymore: his pronunciation is as received as anyone's. When I met him I was the headmaster's daughter and bored of English boys and their coy gallantry. None of them could hold a conversation. Fresh off a boat, properly fed and with a New England twang, Derek came right over in the refectory as if talking to women was a natural thing. We struck up a friendship. By sixth form and at considerable risk, he would sneak into my quarters at the top floor of Philadelphia House. The rest is better told by Derek – one of the few stories he has left – although by Jacob's cereal count, this is his seventh declamation of breakfast.

“Oh, well, yes. It was after I came back from New England in, um, 1946, and I was enrolled at Knaresborough College. And she was the headmaster's daughter. I remember being teased a bit for being younger than everyone else and for having an American accent, and...”

II.

Yes, Granny says I swipe a lot. It scarcely seems worth it but for the hope. Taking control of your destiny; being proactive in fighting misery, however overmatched. I take comfort telling myself there aren't many ladies in rural Yorkshire. But I'm never far off the headspace that appears, frequent as rain, where I tell myself that I could be in New York and still suffer neglect. I sometimes wonder, in darker patches, what I offer as a being.

We all have acquaintances and contacts. Even hermits shop. Some of it may be down to my art. I'm a photographer. Actually, I'm a perfectionist who takes photographs and cares deeply about the form. But photographer will do for now. I've worked all the coffee houses and bars between the villages, and it has certainly crossed my mind to move down to London, or across to Leeds, York, or Manchester. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm a sensitive chap. Perfectly masculine, but unwilling to partake in this beauty parade that is the modern world. I hate to admit it (one wants to be positive), but there is a lot about the world; besides injustice, famine, racism etc., that I'm not too happy about. When my eye is down the lens, my mind is focussed on how this picture can help rid the world of the things I'm not best happy about. Reality television for example! Nobody who watches reality television has an excuse not to have read Ulysses. But I'm not going to complain too much. My work is in the field of the 'pretty.'

Between the villages, I know a few girls who model (or is it 'do modelling?'), and one of them who I've known for a bit, Em, for some unknown reason, has a hook into my heart. I try to be professional and remove emojis from my texts and ensure our shoots are business-like and go off without trying to worm a hug, but she still has a hook. There are some things I shouldn't be saying, but further to that hook: my online self. Well, to start again, I have a popular online self for my photography, but my private self has a number of manifestations. I'll stop there. Everybody does it. Especially those who deny they do. And it's not for anything bad. I just can't go a minute without knowing what she's up to and I don't think she needs to know that. It's interesting to see what she keeps from me.

But over the last few months, and despite my notepad showing the correct progress trajectory, she was starting to get close to someone on the periphery of our circle. Only two months ago, we were all a quiz team at the local, and this guy got close and elbowed his way in. She slated him for his rudeness on our shoot the next day.

It was almost all she spoke about. The next day they were following each other on Instagram and the next week she was on dinners and walks, and consistently hiding a companion from view. And then two weeks later they turned up to the quiz together, joining another team. They disappeared at the interval and nobody knows what happened, but there are rumours going around the village, each repetition a new dagger in my soul. Nobody started these rumours a few months ago when I was spending practically all day, every day with her in woods and cafes, and doing things which should have enraged watchful third-parties.

So when Granny asked me to take Grandpa Derek for a walk, I was happy to oblige, as I had it on good authority that Em would be there. I wouldn't look like I was on my own. Win-win.

Grandpa shuffles along the towpath and the disused train line where Em and I spent last week. I kept him fed and watered and told him we'd just left home whenever he said he was tired. And when he asked what we were doing and that he wanted to go home, I told him we were heading home. Or I told him that a few moments ago he told me how much energy he had and how much he was enjoying himself. It's a strange situation to find oneself in: using Grandpa for company. With my own friends, we fall into familiar routines and it's difficult to meet new people without neglecting them and making them feel used. Grandparents are perfect: slow moving, keen to sit still and happy to snooze after a lunch.

Grandpa Derek wrote a local interest book on the wharf two decades ago, but that doesn't stop him asking which river this is every few minutes. Then he asks which town we're in when I settle us outside a coffee shop near where Em just uploaded an Instagram Story. She's so near. On closer inspection, there's the shadow of a second person. I have no idea what I'd do if I saw it was him. My palm is drenched and I fear my pits are in a worse condition than during the walk.

It's got quite trendy 'round here. Although Grandpa can no longer take hot drinks without a medical disaster, I hadn't acknowledged how easily accommodated these needs were with a Frappuccino or an iced latte. They would be wasted on him, so I put my order in twice.

Beneath his eyelid I have a lit cigarette. He's been adamantly anti-smoking as long as I've known him, or rather, as long as I've had an interest in smoking. I convince him it's the next table, before taking a puff as he turns to investigate. I fear my smoking might be his first new memory in a decade. Such would be the outrage. Our coffees arrive, and he stirs, confused, and surveils the town. He winces and verbalises disapproval at a passing group of darker skinned chaps.

They were out of earshot before he used any offensive terms, but I realised my mind was being pulled off the mission at hand and onto preventing Grandpa causing a scene.

Granny has told me that it isn't worth reasoning with him, but I try. She explained that his only memories are from childhood and there's no way to reason with 1940s America. You'll just have to do it over and over again. But I ask Derek why darker faces are an issue for him. I point out that even America has softened its edges on such issues in the eight decades since he was there. He replies that he was confused.

I felt I had gotten through to him, but not long after, he used an appalling word as a couple passed. They heard him. They turned and confronted Grandpa Derek, who turned to me, confused. I suppose this was what he was used to doing when he grew up, but I hardly knew whether I had it in me to defend him. Before I could enter a plea on Grandpa's behalf, Grandpa reiterated his distaste, and the chap released his girlfriend from his hand, approached, and took Grandpa by the collar. I plead. I explain his condition, then shout his condition, and then I try to get myself between the two of them, pleading that this was his first time out of the house in weeks and that educating him is no longer an effective strategy. The chap insists that in the current climate, Grandpa should take responsibility for his words. I contemplated, considering their offensiveness, taking responsibility for Grandpa's words myself: it was me who walked him here. But I was also sensitive to the corollary: is it right to keep Grandpa locked away at home between now and the day he dies? I soon found myself in the unusual position of justifying to the chap's cocked arm that racism sometimes has mitigation.

At home, I told Granny that Derek must not be allowed out of the house again, or rather, that I was unwilling to take him out of the house again, which was more or less saying the same. As she had yet to discuss rent with me, I was grateful for getting one over her in terms of leverage. I wondered whether I should have had a little more spine in defending Grandpa in town, as a few scars and scrapes are the kind of thing more likely to endear me to Em. Euan, the bloke I'm 95% certain she's with, doesn't appear to have any scrapes and scars. From what I've seen on Facebook and Instagram and Twitter and LinkedIn, he appears to be a bit of a prissy sort of chap, and from what I know of his parents from Companies House, they seem to be a family that hasn't undergone much of a struggle. It would hardly hurt my chances to turn up at her doorstep with a few cuts and bruises and a good and gallant reason. Unlike Grandpa, my memory is close to exceptional. Not for facts or events, and I'm not that great in the pub quiz, but I remember all of Em's photographs and the backgrounds and the directions of the shadows, and I've got a pretty clear idea of their Fri-date routine, however depressingly conclusive it is on the finding of fact that they're together. They can't be far off being Instagram official.

I have no idea what I shall do that day. Quiet, sombre walk probably. But it's as inevitable now as war. It was all so easy in Grandpa's day. You met someone, called it love, married them and grabbed the nearest six-bedder with loose change. Lack of choice! If Granny had a choice, I wouldn't have been born. Choice has always spelt the end for people like me.

III.

Derek is asleep, or rather, upstairs is quiet and downstairs I'm catching up on council paperwork (planning, footpaths, anti-social behaviour, and the upcoming fete). Not that he'll know or remember if I tell him, but I have just defended Derek's honour in front of our Grandson at considerable cost. Jacob says Grandpa shouldn't be allowed out of the house and that he is a racist, or racist as I think it's now called. But Jacob doesn't understand that his only memories are long-term memories. Who in America wasn't racist in 1942? Derek needs to have some sort of life: if that means he says a few bad words in a sleepy Yorkshire town, then so be it. It wasn't like this in my day. Derek has no filter between thoughts and words and I sometimes wonder what I'd say if I had no filter between my thoughts and words. Or worse! If I had no filter between my thoughts, words, and actions.

From Jacob's table-slapping in the kitchen, I've assumed there's probably something else: something girl related. It normally is at that age. Joining some dots, I think it's someone in the village who prefers one of the other chaps. I understand that affairs of the heart, especially unshared, hurt more than mourning. Death provides the finality that a break-up doesn't. Chaps think they can always flip it and reverse it, or try harder, or make grand gestures. I've been the recipient of a few grand gestures. They were always by the men too shy to even ask my name. Oddly, Derek never really courted me. It was part of the attraction. I felt like he was the catch. Yes, I understand what Jacob is going through. I wonder whether to offer advice. Young'uns carry devices that can tell you anything you want to know, but in my day, men would look in the phonebook for my address, then wait at the bottom of the drive with a rose, wine, and once even a full length novel. Father was delighted whenever there was wine. One lively summer, he only had to visit the Merchant's in Tadcaster once a fortnight.

Jacob says we got everything easy. He's quieter when I tell him about the war, but he says London and the working class areas of Yorkshire got it worse, and that we bought our house for what is now his weekly salary. He obviously hasn't heard of inflation. It was a lot of money in those days too. He just needs to get off his backside. He's in a privileged position; a big house near lively villages and towns in the most beautiful part of the world, yet he expects to earn a living taking photographs. We all take photographs here: the scenery requires it (and in our day you had to wait a week to see if you liked them). My generation, in hobbies, work, love and marriage, we had to be right the first time.

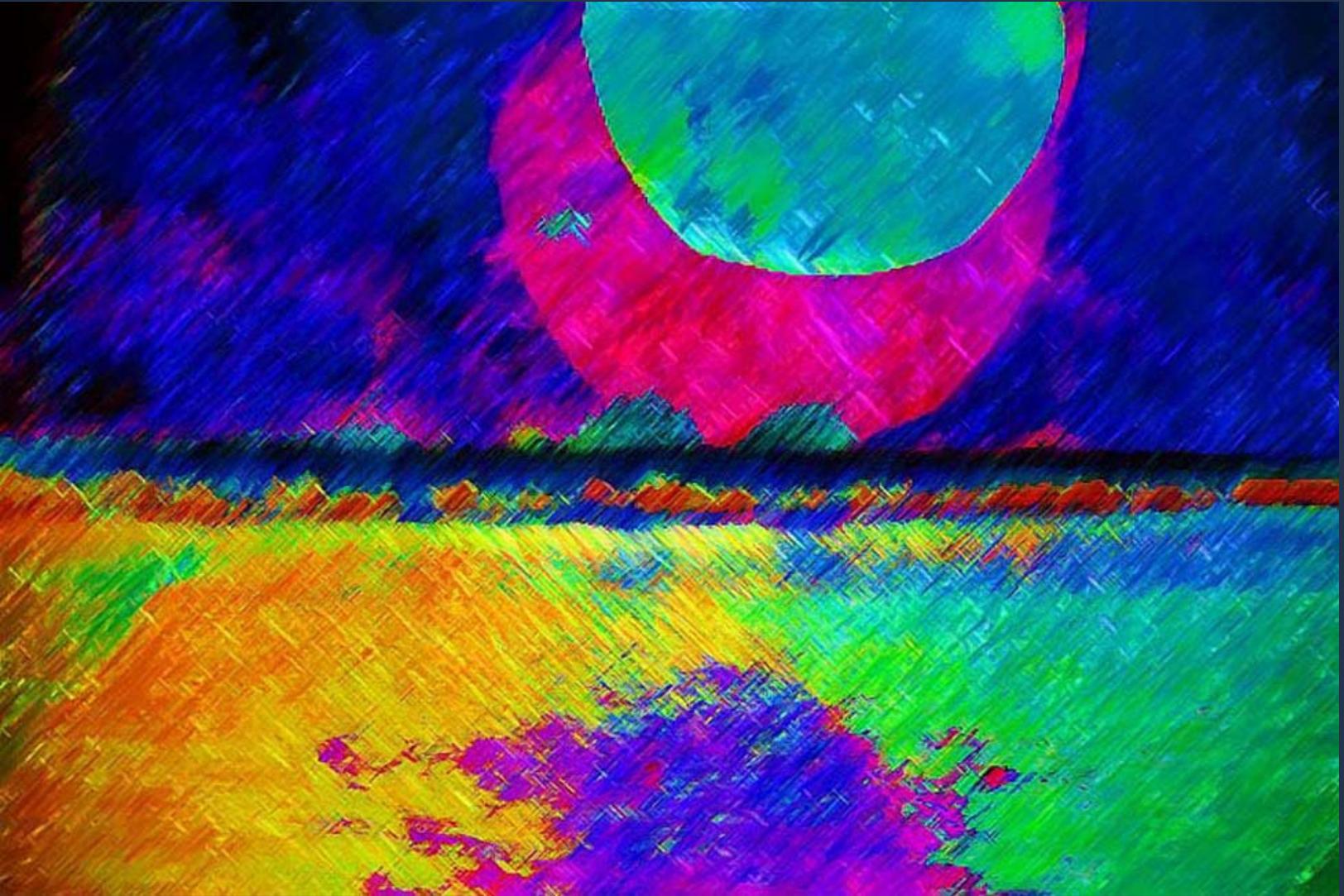
I'll have to be right first time. My conscience is killing me thinking about the things I'm thinking of doing. Then reason elbows in and says it's okay. I'm almost okay with it. What I'm most okay with is putting my pillow over Derek and going to sleep, and having only one of us wake up. I think my conscience would let me get a night's sleep at that. My head's normally propped up by two pillows, so no harm in replacing something soft and feathery with something soft and feathery. His mind is rotting faster than fruit out of the fridge and there's no way of getting it back. There's only so much mould you can cut off before you have to ask yourself whether it needs to go in the bin. But there's nothing in the Bible and there's nothing in British law that deals with the dignified disposal of rotting fruit. I just want him to enter heaven in the right form, and join him not too long after. And I don't want to be taking these chesty palpitations, getting worse by the day, through the gates with me.

I put down the council papers and bent over to tune the radio when I hear Derek shuffling in. I exhale, preparing for the barrage while working through a plan. Having just napped, he won't be appeased by bed. And maybe this will be our final evening to do something together. Maybe we should have a glass of wine and play Monopoly or bridge, or watch a film. Or not. There are no new experiences. I'm still bent over when I sense him behind, shuffling closer, then his arm on my shoulder causing me to straighten, before his other arm creeps around my other shoulder and then around my neck, briefly suffocating, and then the rest of him slides onto me from behind, his chest beating in whimpers and his half breaths caressing my ear as he plants his chin on my shoulder and holds me feebly tight saying my name like he used to as if it will be the last thing he'll forget. He whispers what he said to me at the weir in 1951 when we first kissed. Maybe he's been pretending all this time? He still has the moves. It excites in a way little has for years. You get to a certain age and wonder if the one you love will ever breathe gently over your neck again and hold you where you should be held and interrupt your breathing and make you feel young again. But then they say it's like riding a bicycle, don't they?. He could teach our grandson a thing or two. I sometimes wonder about Derek and what could have happened if he had Jacob's level of choice.

I remove Derek. He might have forgotten he was holding me. He shuffles out of the room and I return to my council papers, but soon he is back, sliding next to me on the sofa and pulling me in. I look over his forearm at his salami skin and it comes to me how it looked when we first met, all bronzed, muscular, and throbbing. I wonder what he'd want me to do if he understood his situation and mine. What would Derek do if our roles were reversed? I wonder whether I can do it, but the first trick will be getting him into bed.

I put a chamomile on the dresser, fluff up my pillow, and close the blinds. Derek enters, asking what we're having for breakfast.

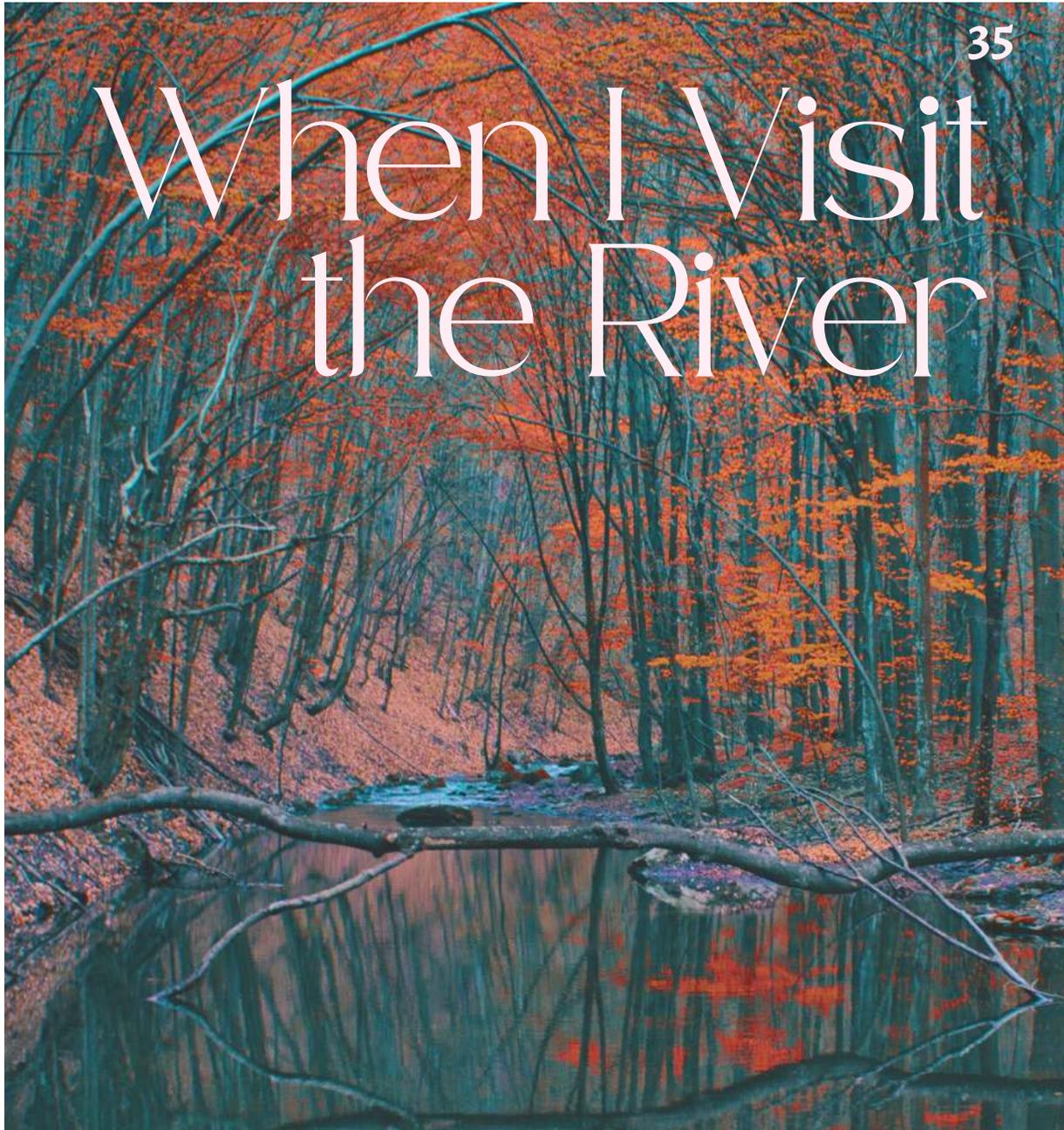
Moon Shadow



Jeffrey Spahr-Summers

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When I Visit the River



*I crunch the spines of leaves
between my teeth and drink river water
seasoned with the leaves' sun baked bodies*

*fold flower petals in on themselves
to observe how they hold
those creases in their bellies*

*pour beads of water onto my wrist
create a bracelet of translucent pearls
skip on lily pads so my toes can sip the river*

*rub rose water on my ribs
cough old air out of my lungs
catch sun rays with my tongue*

Trypophilia for Liminosity³⁶

Nadia Arioli

Nonfiction

Once, I dreamed of an IKEA housed inside an even bigger warehouse. A week or so later, I saw an image of that exact same thing in a Facebook group for unsettling places, called “The Backrooms.” I was shaken.

At my first apartment after college, laundry was communal, and it smelled like a warehouse but worse. I was forever gathering quarters. The apartment was a shithole by any reasonable standard, but I was in the shithole phase of my life. Four hundred dollars a month got you one bedroom, a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a little balcony you could smoke on. The balcony had a closet you could cram your body in if you thought you needed to be slick when you were smoking weed.

Once a week or every other week, I’d haul my boyfriend’s and my laundry through the complex to the laundry area that always smelled like urine. This was my job because my boyfriend had a bad back, which also justified the weed habit. For whatever reason, doing laundry took all day, hauling up and down stairs, being at the ready. The laundry area was a place I hated, full of ephemeral that wasn’t mine but could be: empty tubs of detergent, trash, wrappers, socks. Moist and spooky – like a place you’d commit a murder but settle for something paltry. The machines never drained properly and it smelled like you hated your whole life – your car, your job, your partner, your body, your inability to know how to be a real adult who faced the mundane with bravery and tact.

My hatred of the laundry room is only remarkable insofar as it is precisely the sort of place I would love. I have what can only be described as Trypophilia. Like Trypophobia but in reverse. A love for holes and passing-through. Not in a sex way though. (I think, maybe. Is being pregnant liminal too? I suppose it is, a means to an end, a state of becoming, a passing through. I am growing a second skeleton, and oh so fatigued!)

I read a poem called “Claustrophilia” by Alice Fulton a few years back, and thought, I get that. The desire to be close without being close.

I think at some point during young adulthood, probably college, we all heard the Coen quote: “There’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” I heard it from a boy I was dating. We were friends with benefits, rather, close without being close. I’ve never seen the quote written, so I guessed on the punctuation. I like that comma. It gives the weight of “This is my body, this is my blood,” which Strunk and White will tell you is grammatically correct. It has the sound of poetry, and it has the sound of sense, but what does it mean? That you can’t have darkness without light? Something like that. It’s as good a starting place as any for “Over the Garden Wall,” a show dedicated to the notation of holes and pocket worlds.

Trypophobia is the fear of clusters of small holes, like honeycomb, coral, or spider eyes. My sister has it and huffily clarified that it’s not so much fear as revulsion. She states that she thinks the origins have to do with evolutionary defense. Back in hunter-gatherer days, a collection of small holes usually meant a place predators lived. A place spiders could just pop out of. She’s a psychologist, so I trust her on this. She thinks I am just trying to get a reaction out of her when I say I have the opposite, that when I see a cluster of small holes, even if it’s a skin infection, I say, I think, *yes, oh hell yes, how beautiful, I love it*. But I’m being completely sincere. I cannot for the life of me figure out the advantage of that. The only thing I can think of is the role of healer. Meaning, in a hunter-gatherer society, you would want the healer to be intrigued, to be deeply curious about infections and pustules and boils, not revolted.

But comparing myself to a healer feels nauseatingly vain. I’m just a girl who likes a lot of holes, but not in a sex way, just regular!

I used to have a green heavy blanket with no known origin; a comforter but scratchy. I nailed it up inside the bedroom door. My boyfriend would play video games until all hours and the sounds would disturb me while I tried to sleep before going to a job I hated. He refused to get headphones. *This was my fault for being a light sleeper.* The idea was the blanket would muffle sound and I could get the sleep I wanted. He called it wanting sleep – not something I needed.

At any rate, the thing needed a wash. Despite being hung over a door, it got nasty. The dust in the air, the general aforementioned shithole-ry of the apartment. So I took the heavy blanket off of its nails on the wall above the door, removed the nails from the holes, and hauled it off to the laundry room. The machines were medium-sized and I thought it would be big enough for one, heavy blanket. I placed it in the machine, inserted my quarters, and left.

If fear – or revulsion – of small holes is about staying safe, then love of small holes means wanting predators to come in. Or walking right out to meet them. But again, comparing myself to the very brave is not great and not something I would like to do. I'm just a fool who finds the peeling away, the corrosion, the there-but-missing, beautiful.

“Over the Garden Wall” is a mini-series for Cartoon Network, consisting of ten eleven-minute episodes. Two half-brothers go on an adventure. It's a classic Campbell's soup, in the vein of *Wizard of Oz*, or *A New Hope*, or a Pevensie Narnia Book. But part of what sets “Over the Garden Wall” apart (besides the lush animation and a truly hilarious one-liner, uttered by a horse no less) is the lightness. I began thinking more about the concept of lightness when reading Kay Ryan's thoughts on Stevie Smith and then reading Stevie Smith herself. There's a way of dealing with serious subjects in poetry with a deft touch, a humorous jab, an unexpected rhyme. It's taking poetry serious enough to make jokes. It's the opposite of a heavy hand.

When I came back, the machine was still full of water. The blanket had prevented it from draining. Too heavy. The blanket laid in laundry stew, wet, failure, inept and useless as I was. I yelled “God damnit.” A mother and daughter were out on their porch, in shorts and cigarettes and asked if I needed help. I said “yes,” because it was the phase in my life where I had to rely on the kindness of strangers.

I said, “Look, I killed the machine, and I don't know what to do with this blanket. I mean, it's sopping, it's dank, a dryer is not going to fix it, it's too heavy for me to wring.”

They said, “No problem, we have a good washer and dryer on our porch, just haul it over, pop it in the washer to drain, and we'll pop it in the dryer when it's done, and come back in a few hours.”

I said “Thank you, thank you, and you're sure your machines can take it?”

I have always linked Trypophilia and a fondness for “Over the Garden Wall” with a love of liminal places. Passing through. Like subways, or laundromats, or hospitals at night, or being the only person in a movie theater. Places you go to but shouldn't stay. Prosaic thin places seems like another way of putting it.

Nets, too, are passing through places. Clusters of small holes look like they are becoming, or unbecoming. Stuck in between but not stagnant. Small pocket worlds you can hold but feel like they would slip between your fingers like water.

I wanted to leave them to their cigarettes and whatever else they were doing, so I went back to my apartment and made pizza rolls. I didn't tell my boyfriend, because I didn't want him to say “how inept, how embarrassing, to always be needing a hand.” I pretended my wall blanket was elsewhere. The pizza rolls finished, so I went to pull them out of the oven. And for whatever reason, I did not use a glove. Or I did use a glove, but it didn't cover all of my hand – OJ Simpson style – and I knocked where my hand meets my thumb against the top of the oven, burning it completely. The flesh bubbled and popped until it resembled a pizza roll, like one I was about to eat, all goo, all red, all pus; a sign that something is very wrong

“Holes are modest little creatures,” is the very worst sentence in the worst book of all time. The author was arguing by analogy and concluded that movies are not like holes. Movies are like dreams. *Baffling.*

In “Over the Garden Wall,” the action takes place in a kind of pocket world – a twilight feeling, in autumn, when the last rose of summer is gone. The two young half-brothers wander from town to town, trying to get home. And it is important, I think, that they're half-brothers – there's nothing full in the show. The first town they visit is inhabited by skeletons, and it's strongly implied this is the land of the dead. Elsewhere in the show, there's fairies' mournful cries, bogs, lost daughters, a cursed woodsman, enchanted birds, and stowing away on a wagon full of hay. Everything in the Unknown is a kind of crack, and you may find yourself there by accident.

The next time I had to do laundry, I went across the street to the laundromat. A place I found sort of by accident. It was a squat building, next to a gas station and a Waffle House. All laundromats are. It was dirty and the lights flickered. It reminded me of a subway, a passing-through place. You have to go through it on your way to wherever, which didn't quite make sense, because unlike trains or subways, where would you be going? Out of poverty, I guess?

The waiting was the main thing. You sat in a plastic chair with your magazine or phone or whatever. There was a vending machine but I never used it. For one thing, I was out of change by that point, and for another, I didn't want to eat with the smell of farts, steam, and laundry detergent. (Almost a decade later, when I was briefly pregnant, the second time, the smell of laundry detergent made my stomach churn, even a whole house away. Passing through an alley, I smelled my neighbor's and felt instantly nauseated.) The waiting must have been what made this place a passing through place, like a doctor's office. You can't leave, but there's no movement.

This is a detective story, but we do not know it yet. At least, not all the way. Not everything that asks "why" is a detective story. Sometimes, it's philosophy, or whistling in the dark.

It's like this:

What are the little holes? Why do they appeal? Could this be connected to a similar love of liminal places, of passing through? If so, what does a love of liminal places signify? Let's reason together. Let's start over.

A good first step would be to make an outline. Any good detective would tell you so.

Here is what I want to know: Liminal places, holey places, and prosaic thin places are all related. Let's find out how and why.

First, we should define each.

If not a definition, give examples.

If not examples, then stories. Stories out of order because this is a detective story, and those don't go in order. You think they do, but they don't; the reveal is the beginning.

Why the appeal? What are the ramifications of liking things?

Can we make our own stories like that?

What, then, is the light, in this twilight kingdom, this kingdom of lost men, hollow men, whimpers, in the garb of a goofy children's show story? Humor is one thing. Greg, the younger of the pair, is forever telling jokes. They're wonderful. They make little sense. A classic Greg joke is saying whatever comes into his head, such as listing potential names for his pet frog: "...Antelope, Guggenheim, Albert, Salami, Giggly, Jumpy, Tom, Thomas, Tambourine, Leg Face McCullen, Artichoke, Penguin, Pete, Steve...". Or staring into the eyes of a (seemingly) rabid dog: "You have beautiful eyes!".

In the first episode, he is convinced an enchanted bluebird will grant him one wish. He lands on "I wish Wirt Jr. [the frog] had fingernails, so he could play the guitar better!" There is something so sincere and weird about his jokes – in addition to being genuinely funny. He is a child pleased with his own mind. In a world of lost souls and beasts and curses, a child's delight in their own imagination and capacity to invent in the spur of the moment is more than a welcome distraction; it's almost sacred, it is light, it is life in a pile of dead leaves.

I would always find myself at the laundromat at night. Less kids, I guess, or I procrastinated. Sometimes, it was just me and the owner, a thin Vietnamese man, who was missing half of his left arm. With his right arm, he would practice ping pong against the wall.

Another noteworthy light in the show is literal – shining out of a frog, no less. In the seventh episode, the boys are on their own. Beatrice, the enchanted bird guide, has abandoned them to their fates. Because this is a show of episodes which build and build, they stop at a house with a witch. The witch has a niece living with her who is compelled to do what the witch tells her to when she rings the bell. The witch intones "The ringing of the bell compels you." The big reveal is that Lorna is possessed by an evil spirit and the bell keeps the spirit at bay. The bell compels the spirit, not the girl. In a moment of genius, Wirt, the hesitant and older of the pair, takes the bell and commands the spirit to leave Lorna. Because the ringing of the bell compels the spirit, it does. The frog (George Washington, or Kitty, or Wirt Jr., or any number of names) eats the bell and faintly glows.

One night in the laundromat, it was just me, the owner, and a few other customers, darting in and out. Sitting in the row of hard, red chairs, a mouse scurried by my ankles. I thought, did I imagine it? But I knew it must have been real because it looked different than a normal mouse. Meaning, I could see myself imagining a regular blur of a rodent, but this one had massive, bent back legs, like a kangaroo. So I knew it was real.

Imagine wanting only this. Imagine staying home and never going anywhere, not even in your mind. Imagine being a hermit, being a wayfarer.

I think wayfarer is key to the whole mystery. There is something hermit-like baked in. I suppose if one is to wander, one hopes one will find their way to the end of something eventually. Liminal places, clusters of holes, prosaic thin places all are edges of some kind.

Beginning again

There are many sorts of places one can end up, no matter how deliberate one is in their movements. I am going to the gynecologist this afternoon. That is deliberate. I am going there on purpose. But who knows what the vibe will be – even though I went there a month ago. Some waiting rooms just have a vibe, y’know? Like the lights should be flickering and the fellow waiters without faces.

When making category distinctions, I think a “family resemblance” approach is best. Strict definitions are limiting and prompts interlocutors to find exceptions. “Well, what about X?”. I’m not interested in X! I am merely trying to establish broad categories. Let us learn and describe by saying things in Category 1 tend to have characteristics A, B, and C, the way you might say Smith children tend to be tall, have red hair, and large noses. Not all of them do! Not all have all three! But those are the strong, inherited traits.

I didn’t want to cause a fuss at the laundromat, an inherited trait, so I went up to where the owner was practicing ping pong and said, “Excuse me, I don’t mean to alarm, but I thought you would want to know there was a mouse.”

And he said, “A what?”

He had a strong accent, but I didn’t want to go any louder, lest I cause a pandemonium. So I said, “Um, a mouse.”

And he said, “I do not know what is a mouse.”

I brought up a picture of a mouse on my phone and showed him.

He said “No, it’s okay. A mouse.” And went back to playing ping pong.

I did not think it was okay, but I did think I was in a Tom Waits’ song, maybe.

I never went back.

What is a liminal place? “Liminal,” of course, comes from the Latin “Limin,” meaning “doorway.” A passing-through place. Not a destination. No one goes to a doctor’s office for the waiting room, no one goes to the theater for the lobby, no one goes to Rome for the subway system. (But there’s something romantic about doing so, isn’t there? Wildly impractical and vaguely rogue. Taking a bus journey around town only to come back again.) A liminal place is a stairway, a hotel (but especially the hallway or lobby bits) or a parking lot.

All along, Wirt has been stumbling through the woods trying to find himself. As Beatrice rightly points out, Wirt is a pushover who doesn’t stand up for himself.

He relies overmuch on the kindness of strangers. But here, with Lorna, he solves a problem by thinking it through for himself and genuinely helping someone. A crack here in the approach – solving a riddle by knowing it’s a riddle.

Riddles make another appearance in the show. In the last episode, Greg sacrifices himself to the Beast who gives him impossible tasks, such as bringing him a golden comb. Greg brings him a honeycomb. The Beast tells him to put the sun into the cup; Greg lines up the cup with the horizon and waits for the sun to set.

Whatever Coen really means by light and cracks, solving a riddle seems to fit neatly; looking at where the questions fold around the edges and having a moment of clarity. Jokes and riddles are but kissing-cousins – all hinging on a mind that looks.

A kissing-cousin, I think, to a liminal place is a prosaic thin place. A thin place generally means a place between two worlds, as told for a tourism ad for Ireland and Scotland. You might say Stonehenge is a thin place – in this world, but not of it. Places where reality is just a little bit altered. A thin place, generally, means this alteration is that of an elevation. The prosaic thin place makes no such claims. It’s, well, prosaic. Take a parking lot at 3 AM, say, outside of a Walmart, or, better yet, an out of business Toys R Us. Dairy Queens, especially the ones along the highways, are prosaic thin places.

I put “parking lot” in both cousins. The latter refers to the parking lot as place, as destination, as stuck. The former is on the way to the supermarket.

Hospitals are prosaic thin places, and not just because there’s all that death. Nobody is ever quite themselves in a hospital – even if they’re just a visitor. Genitals are thin places too, I suppose. Body, but in a different way. Whether genitals are prosaic or not depends largely upon the context.

And the third of the cousins is tripophiliac places, right where we started. These tend to be small. A space between object and place, which makes them sort of liminal. The dried flowers sometimes used in dour bouquets. I love them all. Abandoned wasps’ nests. Flesh after it has been eaten away. All of it real. All of it important. Between being and non-being.

The plot twist, too, is a kind of light, a hole punched to let in the truth. In the penultimate episode, it is revealed that the children live in our world. Greg has a teapot on his head and Wirt is dressed like a garden gnome because it is Halloween. The episode in which they first enter the Unknown is told in flashback, coming in at the ninth episode. Wirt had made a mixtape of him reading poetry and playing clarinet for a girl he likes, Sarah. He decided, wisely, not to give it to her.

Ever the benevolent agent of chaos, Greg had put the tape in Sarah's pocket, and of course, they have to get it back. Wirt and Greg follow Sarah to a party, and the group of children goes to the graveyard to tell spooky stories and drink age-appropriate drinks. At the party, the cops find them and the children scatter. Wirt and Greg go over the garden wall and run. While running, they dodge a train and fall headlong into a pond.

I like reminders that we are all travelers and no one belongs here. This essay is a mess. Soon, I'll give birth to my first child, this time it'll work, it'll work this time, third time's the charm, and we will both be in a state of becoming. It's okay to always be becoming. I don't know what I'm doing, but I do know what I'll do differently.

It's not where I thought this essay would end up but here we are. The essay becomes becoming, becomes passing through. I think my love for holes and all its cousins is the feeling of not being at home for eighteen years inside those awful walls. A relief because you will be leaving. A burden because you're a kid and you shouldn't feel like you have to.

And so it goes like this: I will make a home with my unborn child. I will make it a home where it can stay. But a passing through, so the child can move on.

Because, try as I might, I can't seem to leave mine all the way. I'm still there. It lives in my head but not rent-free. They call that trauma. They call that PTSD. They call that hell – which is, of course, eternal. That house was full of holes. I did not love it – unlike the wasps' nests, unlike the thrush-covered tongue. Trypophilia is another way of saying "same."

Like Dorothy going to Oz in the film version, we learn then that the Unknown is a kind of dream or death. After defeating the Beast, the children wake up in the hospital, both remembering what has taken place. Normally, I am firmly in the camp of "it was all a dream" is a terrible trope, a cheap narrative choice. But here, we have a kind of lightness. Yes, death's other country wasn't real in the sense that the mixtape is real, but now it hits a different resonance. In some ways, the land of dancing skeletons and a school for animals is now more real. It is not Middle Earth but Narnia – a place we well may visit. Well, not quite Narnia, because we know for a fact death is real. This is a kind of light, I think, a weightlessness in saying this happened but did not happen. It is not cheating or yanking out the rug. It's saying the heaviness of death is not so heavy if it's a place you can visit.

The frog who has served as the narrator sings a song to close out the series. A recurring line is "the biggest lies of all." Here, a lie is a story, an untruth that tells the truth.

What I want is to make a home like a purgatory. We think of purgatory as punishment, as stuck, but really, at its core, it's a passing through. Another way of saying getting pure is purifying – becoming more the thing you truly are.

I grew up in a house full of holes – cracks and decay, souls being eaten away by hate. I learned how a laundry room can be terrifying at night. Everyone wanted me thinner. I don't want my house to be a doorway – that seems so insubstantial. And like something that could hit you in the face if you're not careful.

When Joseph Campbell's hero comes home, he is altogether changed. He is the same but upside-down, or, perhaps, right-side-up for the first time, and everything is on its head, but his feet are firmly planted. And so I would like to turn one of my theses inside out: There's a light in everything, that's how the cracks get in.

Sometimes you have to make up your own words for things. I propose: Liminosity. A pass-through place, like a doorway, yes, but full of light.

Like the miniseries, this essay has a coda, a song at the end. I am too old now to go on a hero's journey. I have blood under my nails, and my hair is shot through with gray. Childhood is a country I can never go back to. That is my unknown. But sometimes I get a postcard like a luminous frog. I frame them when I can.

when i am old enough, i will learn child for help
– after stevie smith, with a line by mary oliver

you thought i was reading
under the covers, but i was
signaling. i was lost in a duvet
cover my whole life.

i was not waving, but
falling. my hand fumbling
for branches the whole way down.

you thought i did it for a laugh.
i've made too much a joke, rushing
headlong to save a life.

pine branches in my lungs now, their
scenty branches clawing my bronchi.
the needles sting twice.
and not waving, but falling.

Nonfiction

Written

by M

The Stories of a Restless Mind Colliding with Another World

Chapter One: My Sorrow vs. Your Understanding

There is a vast difference in the way people around the world interact with each other. Life has become a useless struggle, which is probably why I'm zeroing in on human behaviors so much that it becomes a delightful distraction for me.

For example, the man I'm chatting with right now is a reasonable, mature Canadian professor who has a wife and children with two cute dogs. Though he likes the fact that I'm a young Persian woman who enjoys hiking – at least it's what my profile states! He never made a move on me and it's been a strictly platonic friendship from the start.

I like his mature appearance that in no way resembles a grandpa. He is younger than that and still extremely attractive, with the eyes of a hard-working university instructor; I know because I've been in college and came across the type a few times. He is living in northern Canada, one of the coldest regions on planet Earth.

Sometimes people find their soulmates online and chat each other's brain out for hours, but we were never like that! Instead, we relied on honesty to provide the other party with knowledge of a different world to which we were separately born and raised in, becoming friends and nothing more. We were like a TV channel to each other's hemisphere. Like a news agency, one from Iran to Canada, the other from Canada to Iran. But with a more sincere and less compromising attitude, without all those deceitful policies tarnishing reality.

The internet can be pretty amusing and sometimes, you want to blow off steam. I see people looking for lunatics and their unhinged posts, just to put on angry comments or read crazed ones other people have left. But our interaction was a wholly different matter from the start.

Our chats during the pandemic were always started by him, with expressions of concern for me. and I was always the one with a straightforward and whiny tune:

- I see that cases are rising in Iran. I hope you are safe. They are rising here also. My wife got vaccinated on Thursday.

- It is a red zone here; a COVID-19 hell! No vaccine, just a few doses for doctors, which are yet to be confirmed. People are frustrated; they don't care anymore. They literally say if we die, we die! They have so many other problems; this one isn't even in the top 10. When do you get vaccinated?

- No idea!

- I see Americans are better at vaccination than Canadians. Is that true?



- Yes, much better.

- Well, you take care and I'm sure sooner or later you'll get vaccinated too. But us, if we want to live, we just have to beat the disease.

- I hope it turns out well. There is good news and bad news, and it's confusing. I'll sleep now. Have a nice day.



I don't get why we had such a close interaction all of a sudden while being so far apart. It was never a sexual or love-oriented type of communication. There was mutual respect and caring between us. We often vented to one another, yet always asked about each other's well-being.

- How are you? Is everything cool in Iran?

- Hi. A little sick, probably Covid!

- But you said just a little, so I'm reassured.

- I'm not worried about myself, but my sister and my parents are at risk now. Our city is a red zone and the hospital didn't have enough tests, so I only tested my sister. If she has it, I most certainly have it too.

- Are they sick? Do you live all together?

- I'm almost in the same household. And I'm so close to them. They are not sick yet. I have to visit my mother in her room wearing a mask!

- Good precautions. Wear two if you can. Keep me posted about your sister's results, please.

- I will.

Two days later, he reached out.

- Hi, what's up? Are you feeling better?



- Yes, still coughing, though my sister's test was negative. They say it might take more than two months to recover completely. The coughing, I mean. What about you?

- Great! My oldest got vaccinated yesterday and my youngest next Sunday. What vaccine are they using in Iran? Sputnik?

- No vaccine for us yet. But now, they only vaccinate at-risk workers and people over 80. It takes a long time for us to become vaccine eligible.

We continued our chats as if an invisible rope kept us linked. I didn't understand it either. What made it so appealing, I wonder, to have someone you don't even know care about you?

Chapter Two: In The Depths of Despair

- Everything is alright in your house? I heard there was a flood in your province.

- Yes, we in the city are safe but the main roads and bridges to the area are flooded. No way in and out of town, and one bridge has broken so far. I guess in Iran, these things are very casual now.





- I hope it doesn't get worse. With climate change, it's difficult to predict which part of the globe will be affected next. In the last five years, we have always suffered from the heat in the classrooms in August and September.

- People here are mostly angry because an almost new bridge has collapsed while a bridge half of a decade old is still standing. What kind of unqualified engineers or managers are we dealing with?

- Here in Canada, corruption is a big problem, too, even though there are stricter rules.

- Well, no offense, but I bet you have no idea the first thing about corruption! Here, corruption is a full-time job for many authorities; being corrupted means you made it! It has become a badge of honor, unfortunately, and people are so hopeless they come to accept that there is no other way.

After that, I thought I had lost his attention, but that didn't happen. In fact, we even become so much closer. And one day I was in the depths of despair...

- I'll send you a picture of a young girl who has to spend 24 years in prison because she publicly protested the Islamic Hijab. In what universe is that fair?

I continued:

- They want to make an example of her. It is so stupid! Her actual crime is not wanting to have to wear a Hijab and protesting for freedom. She, her mother, and some other women went to the subway without having Hijabs. They started handing out flowers to Hijabi women, saying 'We must learn to live together peacefully and in harmony.' They posted their video on the internet and that was it! Bam! 24 years! She was 19 at the time.

- It seems worse than the middle ages!

That was his only answer to all my ramblings. It was unfamiliar and scary territory for him. I was frustrated and hurt and for quite a while, I felt a distance between us. But this passed, and after that, as things were getting worse on my end, all I did was complain. I tried hard not to seem a miserable mess, but life wouldn't give me a break. Whenever we opened our eyes, some new horror was invading our lives. Sometimes, I didn't want to say anything. However, it was inevitable.

- Hi, I saw your post. Is it safe for you?

- What do you mean? It is not like I'm going outside protesting in the streets. There was a time that I would, but not anymore. It is just hopeless, I suppose.

- What is happening over there?

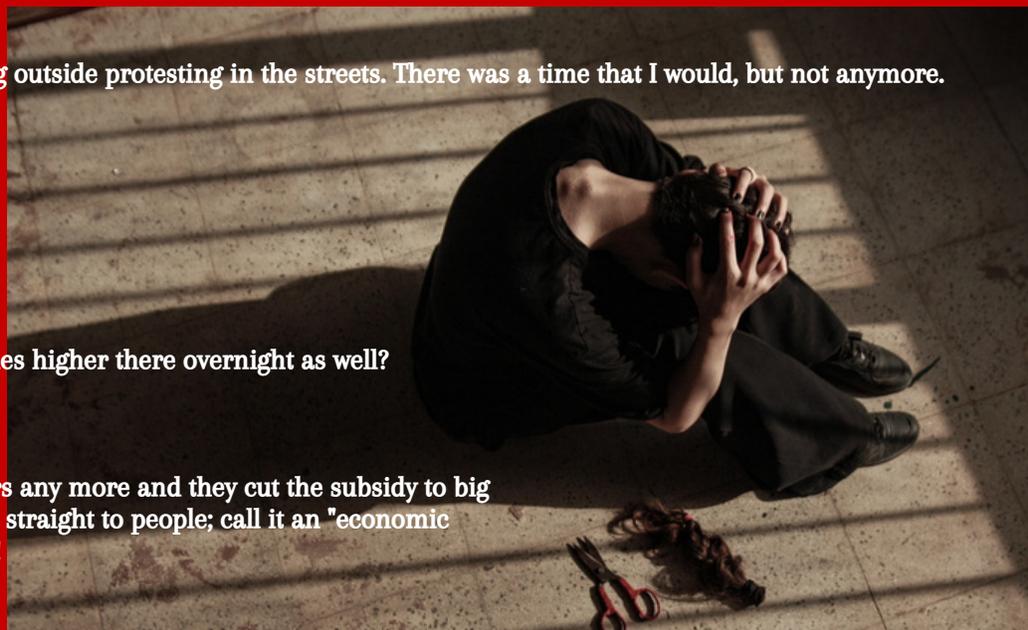
- Prices went up like crazy overnight.

- It is inflation; prices are higher here too.

- Really? So the price of oil became five times higher there overnight as well?

- 5 times? That's just crazy...

- The government is not supporting vendors any more and they cut the subsidy to big companies claiming they're going to give it straight to people; call it an "economic surgery." More like an economic massacre!



- The world is suffering from inflation and the war is not helping either. What you are facing is harder, I guess.

- Only the price of bread is tolerable. People are panicking and every day you see them standing in lengthy lines to buy bread.

- That's a relief.

- Yes, I mean, we eat bread and we don't die. We are not alive; we are just breathing.

- Stay safe.



- He was an anti-government journalist staying in France. He was a whistleblower, and because he had some old connections inside the Persian guard, he succeeded in revealing some nasty businesses. In fact, he struck them with some hard blows. Then, they made a plan and lured him from France to Iraq, kidnapped him, dragged him back, and executed him. Sorry. I want to start crying again. It is so f*cking awful.

- How did they trick him into going back to Iraq?

- I heard it was a very expensive and calculated plot. Apparently, they sent a team, including a young woman he knew and trusted, and they tempted him by saying the high Molla in Iraq that has a huge influence on people wants to support him and help him in his path. It was an elaborate scheme to lure him into his death.

- Why didn't the French police or Iraqi authorities stop that from happening? It is just so embarrassing!

- I think they were paid off or promised leniency for certain prisoners if they looked the other way. They paid a lot of money to make it happen. They wanted to make an example of the man, announcing publicly that no one is safe! Even in France... Something like this happened some months ago to a woman journalist living in the U.S., but they missed their target that time.

- Really!? It is horrific! Why is the Iran government still working so hard to catch opposers? Is it even worth the money and effort?

- They are afraid these oppositions will become their doom! Especially this woman. She is so fierce with a lot of followers. Good thing they didn't catch her! Even though they used the dirtiest trick in the book to get to her. It was quite the tale!

- I see you got pretty excited and a little less sad now.

- Yes, I suppose. Thinking about that story makes me happy and sad at the same time. Many are unaware of this story, although the news about it has spread worldwide.

- Just tell me already. I'm excited now too!

Chapter Three: Something Hard Hit

What is it that makes people think that if we talk about stuff, the horrible feeling will go away miraculously? But we still keep doing it. Whether a horrifying turn of events hits or just the usual complaints of high prices, it made me feel better every time. It was as if I wasn't suffering alone anymore. As if it mattered that he knew and cared. So I kept doing it. Until one day, something hard hit.

- I heard the news, it was a journalist, right?

- It is really sad indeed. I still can't believe it happened. I was crying all day. I'm sorry it got ... I mean, I feel there is something caught in my throat.

- Do you mean a lump in your throat?

- What?

- Just talk to me!





- Well, How should I start? This woman is like a leader of the freedom seeker front in Iran and has a giant fan page. Anyway, she is tough yet very sensitive, and she has been in exile for many years, away from her family, whom she misses a lot, especially her mother. So they tricked her mother through her sister, who is not a fan of her activities. The plot was to lure her to Turkey to see her mother and kidnap her there.

- Oh! My God! They used her love for her mother to lure her? That's horrendous!

- They first convinced her sister and said 'we just want to talk to her and guide her to the right path.' Like hell! She would have been executed for sure.

- What happened next?

- They were willing to hand enough money to the sister so that the mother could travel to Turkey and visit her daughter, not knowing what dark path awaited her there. It was all set and almost done, but fate intervened.

- How was that?

- In the middle of all this, her brother found out the real reason behind their mother's trip. He is a big fan of his sister, the journalist. Unaware of this fact, the other sister confided in him, and he suspected there must be a conspiracy behind all that. Especially, when he learned that the shady government people offered to pay for the get-together. He immediately decided to contact his older sister to warn her. He sent a recorded message to make sure she believed that it was him. If you want to see that message, I can show you.

- Really? You have seen that!?

- Yes, it is a video message. I think he sent a video message so she can be sure it is really him and not someone posing as him. Because the enemy used that trick before, they sent messages to them pretending to be family members. In this video, he asked his big sis to please stay away; 'You are not safe in Turkey. They're plotting to kidnap and kill you. They tricked our fool of a sister and played on our mother's feelings, who misses you a lot! Please! Please! Don't go to Turkey!'

- Good God!

- She didn't go and is still alive, thank God! But her brother...

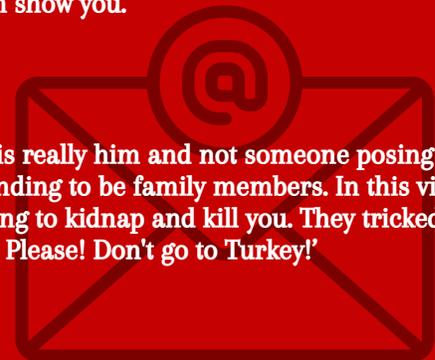
- What!? Did something happen to the brother?

- They found out he warned his sister and he was arrested right after that and got eight years in prison for his actions. She was so heartbroken that she decided to reveal the video message for the world to see.

- Such a brave brother!

- After she unraveled the truth, the Turkish government started an investigation and arrested those agents and officers working with the Iranian government to kidnap the opposition.

- How is the brother now?



- Still in prison, poor guy!

- But I think he must be happy; he saved both his sisters, one from hanging and the other from feeling guilty for the rest of her life for killing her own sibling. Not to mention their mother. What would have she done after such a tragedy?

- Yes! I suppose you're right. It was a disgraceful defeat for the kidnappers.

- It is kind of like the one about German troops who wanted to kidnap Winston Churchill. Its name was "Eagle Has landed."

- I don't know about that.

- Really!?! You should read that book! Or watch the movie!

- No! The book is better.

- Yes!

We continued talking about all sorts of topics and it felt like cold water poured over my burning heart whenever we spoke. It never occurred to either of us to try and put a name on our relationship. As social media describes, we are "just friends." A friendship beyond boundaries. All we needed to become friends was a mutual understanding and a cellphone with an internet connection.

I'm sure we'll keep it up for years to come.



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Fall from Grace

Lisa Brodsky

Poetry

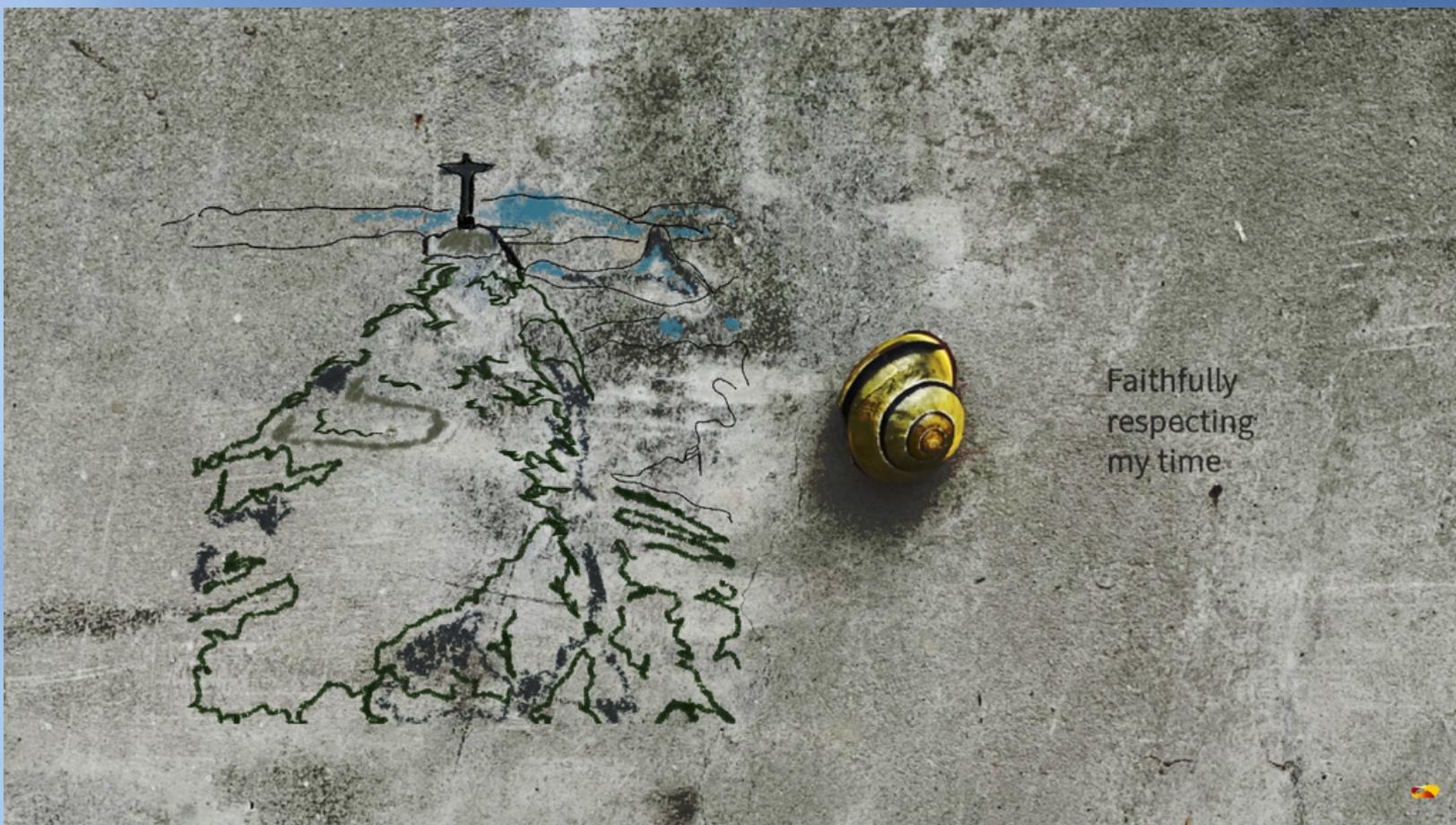
I listen to the snow angels
as they cry for me. Their song
cuts deep. Is this all there is?
I see their song as it falls all
around me. Blanketing me in my
fall from grace. We weep together.

House full of demons too busy
to care. Snow fills my eyes as I
blink out the crispy cold truth. The
slippery sidewalk spins like the
Rotor Ride. The bottom drops out
beneath me. And I wait.
Damaged. Broken.

I wait for you. Or do I wait for me?
But neither demon nor angels come
no matter how many times
I call out for you as I count the stars.
Manna from heaven screams
as it pelts down on me so

What am I waiting for? Redemption?
Absolution? Death? Salvation of
their filial soul? As I move without grace
across the frozen landscape, I wonder
who will fill their stomachs? Will they
mistake their growls of emptiness
with rumblings of loneliness?

The perfect moments freeze
and I savor them all but I
will miss the joys to come.
An epiphany fills my glass half full
for if this is all there is,
I should have written my eulogy.



Faithfully Respecting My Time

"Faithfully Respecting My Time" is a painting that suggests a new relationship to time as the utmost redeemer. The image of Christ with opened arms besides a snail on the concrete suggests an inward attention to our unknown temporal possibilities within bodies as the best ally in this journey of existence. The actual image is a picture of a real snail with a digital drawing on top of it.

- Desirée Jung

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Mimi's Sonnet #10

Milene Correia

Poetry

The other night I had a dream
I asked of my genie
but one simple thing
to keep me fresh
in your memory

But the genie laughed
and mocked
and made fun of me
She said
"I have no use for thee

"I have but the faint idea that you must have not known
that the feeling you wish to grow
might have already grown
It has roots and vines and flowers
that blossom and bloom
and you might hear
the word from her soon

"You're never forgotten
She keeps you in her thoughts
ready
steady
start
You've never been forgotten
she keeps you very close
to her very loving heart"



I have waited ever since
for a word from you
patiently
And so I have written
words about you
passionately

Like the pen that touches the paper with unnegotiated devotion
my heart fills with warmth at the presence of such emotion
To write you and describe you
in pieces for you to read through
I have dedicated
my favorite words
my sincere lines
my softest rhymes
just for you



Icarus

Fiction

Gerald Thompson

Part Two

The other day I was at a gas station filling my tank. Feeling sluggish, as I usually am after a long day at work, by chance I looked up and noticed a jet stream stretched across the sky. The plane itself was invisible, but its trail lingered, starting from the west wide and translucent until coming to a thick fine point in the east. Its western point already dissipating, it would take about a half hour until the whole thing integrated into the blue.

I watched the stream disperse, feeling strange. It wasn't nostalgia, not as I experienced it before, sentimental with a touch of yearning; no, it was a new feeling, which was quite surprising at my age. Like an unexpected email from an old friend, a crumpled ten dollar bill in an old pair of pants. Only this sensation carried with it a bright enthusiasm I hadn't felt like in a long time, and never to such a degree.

Perhaps this jet stream was a reminder, a subtle type of wake-up call, or maybe seeing it was happenstance. I suppose it's not important. What is important was that I felt a sharp impulse to be closer to the plane, to touch it and feel its body, to consume the distance between self and an object of obsession. At that moment, I witnessed in myself my mood quickly rising like a balloon freed from its tether and quite suddenly, with no prior reflection, I was thrilled.

I hurried home and immediately looked online for airports in the vicinity. The closest was about an hour's drive outside the city. I took a photo of the address with my phone and jumped back into the car. I figured that, if able, I would sign up for classes that weekend. If not, at least I'd have the chance to ask a few questions.

When I finally arrived, it was half-past six in the evening.

The airport felt as desolate as a ghost town abandoned to the desert long ago. A place where you had to be careful of scorpions. The space between a small hangar and the strip had grass growing as tall as my knees. Dust covered everything in sight. Which wasn't much. It didn't appear to be an airport. There wasn't even a radio tower.

However, there were some signs of life. After I had walked around a bit I came to a lot of sorts, behind what I assumed to be the office. Three single engine planes were parked haphazardly in the old dust. I first thought they were junk, but on closer inspection I found that although they were old and beat up, these planes were impeccably clean. As I took a few steps back to get a better view, it dawned on me how excited I was. My heart was racing like a mischievous child's while breaking a rule. Or better yet, like a starstruck fan meeting a favorite celebrity. Admiring the rickety planes, I heard a shout behind me.

"Hey!"

I turned to see a man walking toward me from the hangar.

"Whataya doin here?" The man stopped two feet away from me and wiped his black hands on a towel.

"I stopped by to ask someone about classes. I found this place on the internet."

He put the towel in the left front pocket of his overalls. "Ahh well, I was in the garage. You should have checked the office. The opening hours are posted. No matter, no one's here but me."

He eyed my suit. I was in such a rush I hadn't changed from my work attire.

"You fly before?" he asked.

By my green face I'm sure he already knew the answer. "As a pilot? No. But I'm keen on learning."

The man was nearly six feet, a little taller than me, and he carried what you could call a "rough air" about him. He had acne scars on his sun-tanned skin and it seemed as though he and the shower were not the best of friends. With blue eyes deepened in his head, it was hard to guess his age. Between sixty and seventy, if I were to bet. He appeared to be the type of man who wasn't as good with people as he was with machines. Strangely, after this impression, I knew we could get on well with each other.

"I'm Lee. I'd shake your hand but I've got grease all over mine. Listen, you're gonna have to come back tomorrow when Delia is in the office. She handles all the class info."

"Are you one of the pilots?"

"I'm the only pilot. And mechanic. You see, these are here for service. I'm working on the fourth in there." He pointed his thumb back behind him to the small dust-covered hangar. "I've just finished for the day though. Damn Cessna been giving me problems and I don't have the parts. Tomorrows another day." He shrugged.

Hoping to get some resolution and resolved to go home with at least a modicum of recompense, I asked if it was possible to get some info. A pamphlet at least, so I had evidence at hand of this new adventure I was eager to start. But since the office had already closed for the day, and he had no keys, he apologized and said that it wasn't possible. But if I was up for it, he was heading to his local for his afterwork beer, if I wanted to tag along. He was friendly enough, and since I had made the journey, I accepted his invite with little delay. Maybe he had seen the profound disappointment on my face and sympathized. Or maybe he was just being kind. In any case, I was glad for his company, and so we headed to the bar.

Following him on the highway, I chewed over my failed marriage. To be honest, now that it's finished, and the girl who became a woman in front of my eyes is such a stranger, and now that what has been said can't be unsaid, I was always more afraid of being alone than of losing her. In my cowardice I pushed myself back to accommodate her and, numb to the consequence of my sacrifice, I deigned to carry our marriage like a beast of burden resigned to its fate.

Perhaps she sensed it after a while, and perhaps she had more courage than me for pulling the plug. I don't blame her. We both deserved more, as we knew that our love was distorted. Even on our good nights, full of sweet nothings and tender affection, the word "love" escaped our lips more like a confession of a crime than of joy. There was always a moment's hesitation before saying it. She didn't say it often, and eventually its tone became suave over time, until finally disappearing under a tired effort.

That tone I remember very well. It was hard enough to break my defenses, yet soft enough to sing in a whisper. A mix of passionate desire and shrewd acting. She knew what she was doing, and if she didn't then I suppose her methods could be attributed to that infamously unregulated arch of the female psyche. Because she never loved me, not as I imagine love to be. She loved the idea of loving someone, and by having a surplus within her heart, she unabashedly decided to give it to me.

At the beginning, oh how lucky was I to be her chosen one! But over time everything comes to the surface, and over time what was once a seed matures into a garden. In our case, the truth of the matter; that we weren't right for each other. Our relationship was a garden of thorns, rose petals scattered under the bristles.

"Ahhh you're one of them romantics," Lee said as he took a drink. The bar was a rustic working-class community center, full of tan dust and dirty glass. A typical establishment of the desert.

He continued, "There are some people, and I can usually tell right away, who just belong in the sky. As if the order was mixed, and God accidentally put the soul of a bird inside a human body." He took a drink with an audible sigh. "Of course, there are the others who are so afraid of flying that they'd rather spend two days on a bus or train through Texas than two hours on a plane. Not very efficient if you ask me."

I agreed. Curious, I asked how he became a pilot.

"Military," he replied quickly. "Air Force. Back in the day it was a good way for a poor kid like me to secure a future, with the G.I. Bill and all. Believe it or not, I used to be a test pilot. Working with experimentals. With all the money being poured into defense, it was a field day for kids like me. Of course, it was a lot of hard work, theory, safety regulations, but since I was riskin my life day-in and day-out the higher ups didn't demand too much. And there was always the high pay-off."

"You mean the money?"

He laughed and drew his head back. "Money? It was not even close to enough. That's another story. I mean going supersonic with thousands of pounds of thrust between my legs."

“Why did you stop?”

“My wife and kid. A family has a way of changing priorities y’know. It’s a heavy sacrifice for some people, but a lot of good men died testin’ new engines, electronics, and designs. I lost good friends and I didn’t want to leave my family hangin’.” As he said this his eyes rested on me in a somber silence. After a moment’s pause, he asked, “You got family?”

“I did. I’ve got a son. Recently divorced.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he said, letting the words hang off his lips before taking another drink.

The silence remained, and it grew in tension as it began to dawn on me that perhaps he felt he’d overstepped his boundaries by hitting on a delicate subject. I was about to break the silence and explain to ease his mind when he started.

“You see, there’s an element of existential danger involved with flying that turns people off from the idea. I suppose it’s like deep sea diving or being in space. We should not be there. Our bodies aren’t designed for it. It completely contradicts our biology. I suppose it’s because of this that people like me get such a kick from it. My wife never understood. But she also never saw what I saw.”

“What did you see?” I asked.

Lee slowly took a drink, likely thinking of what to say. It seemed he was collecting his memories, organizing his words, and relishing the past. I did well not to interrupt him.

“Well, one day, shortly before I gave them my resignation, I was up in the X-15. By then, it had already broken all the records it’s famous for now, but they wanted me to do some more mid-air diagnostics. As we were going up, attached to a B-52 bomber, I was unusually calm and everything was going smoothly. It was early morning, still dark, although I could see the outline of the trees. My favorite part of the day really.”

He was speaking slower than he had before, with a tone less rugged than his native character implied. His words were almost feminine in the round edges of his Southern pronunciation.

“Once we were at 40,000 feet and around 450 miles per hour, I detached from the transport and hit the rocket. You can’t imagine what it’s like those first few seconds. The plane rattles as if it will break any second, an instant two G’s of force, and I’m sitting there, above everything that gives me any sort of security. You can’t feel more alive. I mean, with so much pressure, it’s enough to make your head spin,” he chuckled.

“Before each flight in this thing, I tried my best not to think about what I was about to do. If you thought about it, you could never go up. It’s a killer. There’s a very specific moment when you’re completely in tune with the situation. I mean, the possibility of a mechanical failure and going out in fire and smoke –”

There was a lull in his speech as he tried to invoke words to match such heavy sensations, until he finally mumbled, “– the raw reality of it, and you just, submit.”

After another faint intermission, he continued.

“Honestly, it’s very soothing. To accept it. That moment when you put your life in the hands of God and say ‘If today is the day, at least I’ll go out with a bang.’”

He finished and looked down, lost in thought. Although I could understand everything he was saying, still I couldn’t imagine the essence of his words. I touched his meaning only on a superficial level, like a child would when being explained the concept of love or the necessity of money. Then his face animated.

“And a bang it would be! That X-15 plane was super. After the initial crunch of the rocket boost, I was going at 4,000 miles per hour. Unreal. It never felt right, but it’s amazing how malleable the body and mind are. Initially, it’s always intense y’know, but after focusing on diagnostics and switching off manual pilot, it’s smooth sailing, believe it or not.”

Lee stopped and called the bartender to ask for two more. After the beers arrived and a small chat with the bartender, he continued with his story.

“The first thing I noticed out of the ordinary were these little divisions of light around the plane. I’d seen some strange things up there before, cloud formations and such, but these were unusual. They were like those little white stars that you get when you stand up too fast. Floaters. You get those sometimes?”

“Yeah, my ex-wife used to say it was high blood pressure.”

“Well possibly, I don’t know enough to say, but blood pressure or not, that’s how it started out. At first there were only a few, which I assumed were floating around in my head. I checked the cockpit to make sure. I could see the controls just fine. I understood then that they were definitely outside the windows. I had the thought that maybe they were ice crystals, but it was unclear why they were floating in such strange patterns. Some of the stars were headed in my direction. Some were criss-crossing each other. Still others followed a latitude and longitude unknown to physics. There was no pattern to their motion, no invisible current keeping them in line.

After a few seconds, there were more of them. It was stifling. There came a point where I couldn't see anything but this strange collection of energy. I got dizzy, and out of my usual cool composure, I felt a rush of panic. I just couldn't make heads or tails of what I was seeing. Like television static, that's what it reminded me of, only static remains at a fixed point in the room and you can look away. In the plane I couldn't escape it. It grew so intense I had to keep my eyes on the inside of the cockpit to keep my equilibrium."

While he was talking, a few people entered the bar, people who seemed the same type of breed as Lee, and he would periodically nod to them as they passed our table with beers in hand. I reckon he knew them all by name.

"Well, with all this going on I radioed mission control and asked if there were any irregularities in the data they were receiving. They reported back that everything was hunky-dory. I didn't bother to go into detail though, because while we were talking I started to hear an unusual sound. The plane was humming. It was so low at first that I felt it before I heard it. A vibration in a deep baritone, a heavy bass that came in waves, swelling and pulsating in a tempo that felt almost violent. I was sure it was coming from outside the plane, from the static. I'm positive it wasn't coming from the rocket. One hundred percent. It was like the plane was convulsing, contracting in these waves, being pushed from behind by something. I don't have the words to describe it, but it felt familiar, almost comforting, like being rocked back and forth in a cradle.

"The rumbling got more and more fierce, and after a few seconds its pitch grew. I suppose it was harmonizing with the metal in the plane, like one of them singing bowls from India. Then came a bright horn sound. Strange, calming, soothing somehow; this note amidst all the chaos. It had such an even sustained pitch that I couldn't tell the difference between it and my thoughts. Now, keep in mind that it was not only vibrating the plane, but my body too. It was quite painful actually, as with each concussive wave pangs of pressure reverberated inside me. But I didn't have time to register anything because everything was movin' so fast that it was hard to get a grip. I mean, with the static outside the windows, the rolling vibrations, and being inundated by the sound, in the expanse of everything, I was overwhelmed. Then everything in me just shut down. My mind gave in, my hands stopped working, and I was as helpless as a baby. At its peak, it was unbearable. I could only focus on breathing, and even that was hard.

"Completely at the mercy of this maelstrom, I had nothin' to do but ride it out. It lasted a good few minutes, not very much in the grand scheme of things, but when it was happening it seemed like it would never end.

It was only when I saw the pink and purple hues of the morning sky through the static, and the sun's bright dawn light began breaking through, that I knew it was over and I would survive it. And when the wave finally broke and everything returned to normal as if nothin' happened, well, I never felt more relief in all my life. To this day I have no idea what went on up there."

Pausing to take a drink and nodding over to a group of men two tables over, Lee seemed to have triggered impressions long forgotten. It was mystery not yet solved; a door still open. The story itself was unbelievable, and it's possible it was embellished a bit as the fickle memory often does with old adventures. Yet I had no reason to suspect his honesty. I could tell by the look on his face that whatever happened to him that day left a profound mark.

"A voice on the radio brought me back to reality, and in the end, even though I was beyond dazed, I had enough mind to safely land the plane. I don't know how I did it. Because that moment, well, it was one of those moments that make a person, y'know? You probably think I'm pullin your leg, I don't blame you, even I find it all hard to believe. And I was there!" he chuckled and finished his beer. "I remember it as clear as my wedding night," he added.

"And what happened when you landed? Did you report it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No no no, I told no one. At first I was worried they'd take me off the flight program and send me to a doctor or, even worse, a head shrink. But when the shock died, I decided to keep it secret. I think sometimes it's better to hold things inside, just for you, so you can always call on it when you feel down. They remain sacred and pure inside the heart. I didn't want to corrupt the experience with an analysis or explanation. The world has a way of tainting even the most beautiful things. So I kept it for myself, only sharing it with my wife. And now you."

"Why me? We just met today."

"I'm getting old, I'm in the mood, and my memory isn't what it used to be. So I'm giving it to you. To pay it forward, as they say. I suppose I don't want it to die," he said and smiled that old soft smile of concealed complicity.

It was late in the evening and the bartender wanted to close. After chatting a bit more, we left the bar, both of us a bit buzzed and very content. Agreeing that it was a sincere pleasure to meet each other, and without any of the formalities two strangers share, we said our goodbyes with promises on our lips.

As I was driving away, I could not help but think of how lucky I was to be there at that specific moment and time. Just moments earlier, I had been recycling the same thoughts and sentiments over and over, about my ex and my own failings, and for the first time in a long time a balm of serenity had settled over me. I can't explain how, but the story Lee had told me had in some way confirmed a profound truth that I had known but forgotten. As if I heard a slow echo that was late to return.

There is an old print I used to have. It was about the size of a Hallmark card, and I'm sure the quality wasn't as good as I remember. For some reason the image stayed with me. I'm reminded of it now. It was of an angel wearing a white gown, looking down on a large crowd. I remember I liked it because the wings were at a certain angle. Their grace appealed to my simple taste. But truth be told, I'm not interested in the wings now, as elegant as they were. The hands are what I see.

The angel had its arms loosely spread in the pose of one who pleads. The hands, with their palms facing upwards, carried nothing but a hushed interrogation. As if asking, "Why?" It's not an unusual pose and most typical. A non-verbal question. At least I've always assumed it was a question, but now I can imagine it a bit differently. Now I see this posture as a statement.

It could be that in one hand, open to the sky and attached permanently to the palm, lies everything that has happened. Each victory, and every defeat, my failed marriage, the birth and life of my son, and all those hidden fears, joys, and dreams I've told no one collected into a tiny stone that sits in the middle. Like a diamond heavily blemished by time and usage, this little stone represents all the experiences I rely on to maintain my identity and carry on in a world that requires me to function. It may be true it's dead, but it is also pure data. At its core there is only information.

On the other hand, fresh, pristine, pink as a newborn's heart, lies another stone, the future. Attached to me as securely as the past, it's the source from which everything else is syphoned. It waits to be revealed. Even though it is constrained to only a few years, the future is completely open to be melded by my desire, which is not all limited in its potential. And since it is equally influential in shaping my "now" as my past, being in a continual process of giving, this jewel is a battery that supplies the power needed to fill out the form of my design. For I am not only the sum of my yesterday, but also the dimensions of my tomorrow. At the core there is only hope.

And I, a blend of my past and future, as there is no distinct border to divide them, live in the present as an organic conduit; a bridge of sorts between the jewels, I suppose I'm exactly where I belong. Maybe. Or maybe not. But the thought is such a pretty thought that I'll continue to believe it.

Whatever the case, after meeting Lee and hearing his story, I'm no longer facing the abysmal south of myself. What has been preserved in its entirety deep in my heart has resurrected and by having recourse to comfortably stretch in the grand space of it, the past is put in its proper place, my present is put in its proper place, and the future, unraveling itself in praise of its design, feeds me all I need to live in the splendor of a radiant hope.

In the past, for as long as I can remember, I felt I was trying to fit a square inside a circle, never bending, always forcing, and close to breaking. I was not in the correct place. But things have changed. It's no longer necessary to ruminate on the past, which has been long due for digestion. It's a habit hard to break, but I'm on the right track. The fact that this weekend Lee invited me to go flying with him to test fly one of the Cessnas proves it. Soon enough I will be in the sky where I'll feel the high wind on my face. Soon enough the sun will welcome me into its celestial domain with all the warmth of a million caresses. And soon enough my wings will come into their majestic form in their proper place. It sounds like heaven.

Fin

Black Holes

Daniel Tarker

Fiction

"Only the lonely know why I cry" – Roy Orbison

Shelby's right hand started quivering shortly after she picked up the phone.

"You all right?" I asked after she hung up. What a stupid question. I've never been very good at helping people in distress.

"My dad's in the hospital," she said, trying to steady her right hand by holding it tightly with her strangely calm left one. But still it shook uncontrollably. "Have you seen my purse? I need to get to the emergency room."

"Sorry," I said. "I haven't."

She started searching behind the check-out counter. "It's big, almost like a satchel," she said. "How could something like that just disappear?"

Before the phone rang, Shelby had been in the middle of training me to run the cash register at the used bookstore she owned. She was normally a serene woman. Warm eyes. Calming voice. Gentle touch. So, it was jarring to see her so upset – her voice growing sharp and panicked as she repeated – "Where the hell is my purse? It's huge. It's colorful!"

"I don't think you should drive," I said. "Maybe we should just close the store and I can take you. What hospital is your dad at?"

"Monterey." She pressed the palms of her hands against her temples, closed her eyes, and took a couple deep breaths. Her right hand was finally calming down. "Fine," she said. "Close the store."

I ran around the counter with the keys and locked the front door and put up the closed sign. The hours for the bookstore had become erratic over the past year due to declining business. As Shelby said when she hired me, it's hard to sustain a used bookstore in a culture where people don't read more than 280 characters at a time anymore. So, it was doubtful anyone would be inconvenienced by our closure.

When I ran back to the counter, Shelby threw her purse over her shoulder and we headed out the back door to the parking lot. She was right. Her purse was big and colorful. Woven red and orange with a white heart in the middle. She sheepishly confessed that she had found it stuffed into the nook underneath the register – where she normally kept it.

Once we got to the parking lot, Shelby insisted we take her old green Subaru. The interior smelled like sage and incense. As we pulled out onto highway 68 toward Monterey, she closed her eyes and began whispering a mantra as she clenched the "oh shit" handle above the passenger side window.

"Om. Ah. Hum. *Vira guru padma siti hum.*"

I felt like I'd just been thrown into some surreal movie during the drive to the hospital. I glanced over to see how Shelby was doing. Her eyes were closed. Mouth clenched. A vein in her neck throbbed. I wanted to say something comforting but I wasn't sure what words to use. They all seemed hollow and dumb. So, I tried to resist the impulse to say anything.

"So, you doing OK?" I asked.

Damn it. I cringed as soon as I heard the words escape my mouth. Of course, she wasn't doing okay, *you idiot.*

She turned her head to look out the window at the dry grass on the hills along the highway. The sky was too clear and blue for an afternoon filled with so much dread.

The receptionist at the front desk of the emergency room told us that Shelby's father – his name was apparently Terry – had been moved to the fourth floor. We took the elevator up. Shelby said that I didn't need to stay. She could pay for a taxi or Uber to take me home or wherever I wanted to go. I told her that I didn't have any urgent plans, so I could hang out just in case she needed me.

I tried to act nonchalant about it, but I really wanted to help Shelby. She had been kind and supportive of me over the past couple of years when a lot of other people weren't there for me. I'd gotten into a car accident during my senior year of high school and when they released me from the hospital, my brain never quite worked right.

I found it hard to focus, and it was difficult to resist my impulses. Instead of studying for classes, I spent my days skateboarding and playing hacky sack with a bunch of stoners in front of the coffee shop next to her used bookstore. Between the hospital stay and my after-school recreational activities, I got behind in classes. My counselor warned me that I was on the verge of not graduating. If it hadn't been for Shelby checking on me with a kind word when I came into her store to buy books, I may not have found the motivation to make up all my work and graduate. I can still remember her warm and soothing smile as I walked up to the counter with a stack of books.

"How are classes going, Justin?" she asked, slipping my books into a paper bag.

"Good," I lied. "Just need to finish an essay for a US government class."

"You've got this," she told me with an encouraging smile. "You can do it."

I imagined having to tell her that I failed high school. The image of her downcast eyes made me feel disgusting. She already looked at me sideways for my reading preferences – mostly conspiracy theory books about the Illuminati or UFO cover-ups – so I could only imagine the disapproving look she would give me for failing high school. I'd have to jump off a bridge or something.

As we rode the elevator in the hospital, I remembered going into the bookstore to tell Shelby the good news – that I had managed to squeeze through and graduate. She ran around the counter to give me a big hug. "I knew you could do it," she said. Her embrace felt warm and safe. I wanted to stay in her arms forever.

The elevator chimed. Shelby hurried off as soon as the doors opened and ran down to the nurses' station.

A blond woman with a stoic demeanor escorted us to Shelby's father's room. She said that he had slipped into a coma but he may be able to hear us if we spoke to him. "You never know how conscious people are in these states," she said. "So, it doesn't hurt to talk to them. Send them words of encouragement."

The way she used the word "send" made it sound like Shelby's father was in some faraway place. And maybe his consciousness was hiding out in some distant region of his brain while his body laid on the hospital bed attached to several monitors tracking his vital signs. Shelby gasped when she saw him and covered her mouth with a clenched fist. I looked at his face and took a step closer to make sure that what I was seeing was real.

I knew this guy – I knew Shelby's father.

Terry Stokes was probably the biggest cocaine dealer in Carmel Valley. He was a large man with a balding head, rat-tail, and assortment of rings in each ear – and perhaps some other body parts. I'd met him through some friends who were invited to his annual birthday party at someone's compound deep in the valley – a crazy ass annual event filled with music, drugs, and debauchery that attracted some of the strangest humans I've ever met – all from up and down the west coast.

Terry was a gregarious guy who loved providing plenty of party favors to keep the festivities going throughout the night and into the morning. He would pour a mountain of cocaine onto the table in one of the wooden sheds on the compound, and his guests would line up to snort lines. Then he would walk around and offer his favorite guests little plastic baggies full of mushrooms – warning them that they were really strong, *so don't eat them all at once*.

I should have listened. Once my mushrooms hit, it was like I received some kind of extra-sensory perception. Everyone I ran into at the party seemed to be followed by a shadow aura – an insatiable darkness slithering around the contours of their bodies. It made talking to people fucking terrifying. Everyone seemed to possess this slithering and gaping black hole inside of them – hungry and needy, desperate to feed off the life force of all those around them – especially me. – They all wanted some part of me – all of them – and they were desperate for it.

So, I ran. I ran from all of them. Deep into the trees. And the night. And the stars. I ran and I ran...

The doctor came in shortly after we walked into Terry's hospital room. She was a raven-haired woman with streaks of white. She stated in a calm, matter-of-fact tone that Terry was suffering from internal bleeding in the lungs. With a mix of concern and diplomacy, she asked Shelby if her father suffered from any addictions.

Shelby looked down at her sandals and sighed. I said that I should probably step out so they could talk. The doctor flashed me a comforting smile as I walked into the hall. I found a couch near the room and took a seat.

I remembered Terry once giving me a ride to work. He drove a classic powder blue Impala. He saw me skateboarding on the side of the road and pulled over alongside the curb.

“Hey, Justin,” he said. “You need a lift? Hop on in, buddy.”

Terry drove me to the grocery store where I worked as a bagger at the time. He was listening to a golden oldies station. As he pulled into traffic, Roy Orbison’s “Only the Lonely” came on, triggering some memory in Terry’s mind. And so, he started reminiscing about growing up in a military family that was once stationed on Fort Ord. His dad was a strict colonel whose best friend was a bottle of Wild Turkey. Terry described him as a spit-polished right-winger who never gave him a hug but always attended his football games. I found it hard to imagine this portly old cocaine dealer with a rat tail running down a football field cradling a pigskin in his arms. We didn’t talk about Terry’s business ventures, but I wondered about how an Army brat football player ended up becoming such a big-time coke dealer. After he dropped me off, I went into the store and started bagging groceries, thinking about that old Roy Orbison song and how Terry seemed like one of the loneliest people I had ever met.

The door to the hospital room opened and the doctor walked out making notes on her chart. I didn’t want to bother Shelby because I sensed their conversation hadn’t been easy, but I thought I should check on her.

She was sitting beside her father’s bed holding his hand. I felt like an intruder standing in the doorway. She should be with a family member, not some kid she barely knows.

“Is there somebody you want me to call?” I asked.

“No. I’ll call some folks in a few minutes,” she said. “I just want to spend some time alone with him first.”

I nodded and walked back to the couch in the hall. The doctor was standing at the nursing station talking in hushed tones with the blond woman who had escorted us into the room.

“It’s really sad,” the nurse said.

The doctor nodded and handed the clipboard to the nurse before heading down the hall, the sound of her steady footfalls echoing throughout the hospital floor. I began to feel alone like that night in the woods in Carmel Valley, running from everybody, afraid of the black holes inside them – slithering and reaching out for me.

I remembered crashing into an old brush oak and wrapping my arms around its trunk, feeling its energy pulsate and enter my body and make me feel whole and connected to the world and the universe and all of creation for the first time I could ever remember. I dissolved into its bark, into the roughness of its wood, and into its sap, flowing between its roots deep in the earth and its branches reaching up toward the nighttime sky.

I’m not a very quick person. I’d seen Terry in Shelby’s bookstore once but didn’t put two and two together. I was browsing the philosophy section looking for some easy Nietzsche to read when the bell above the door rang and I looked up and saw Terry walk in with a big smile.

Shelby came around the counter and gave him one of her enthusiastic hugs – all smiles and arms. I didn’t think anything of it because everybody was super friendly with Terry. Then they walked to the back of the store together and went inside the metaphysical room full of all the spirituality books and paraphernalia – lots of crystals and incense and Reiki healing shit.

I wasn’t trying to spy or anything. But I was curious about what they were up to in the metaphysical room. Lots of people, including me, often slipped back there to make out with girls. I pretended to browse the sports section across from the entrance to the room and saw Terry hand Shelby a roll of twenties. I thought it was some sort of business transaction, one I decided that I didn’t want to think about too much in case it might tarnish my image of Shelby. I didn’t want to think of her as a coke head – or something worse. Terry probably sold weed, too. Shelby seemed like the type of woman who enjoyed indulging in a bowl or two after work – or maybe before work – or even during a bathroom break.

But it became clear to me waiting in the hospital that he wasn’t selling Shelby weed. Terry was helping keep his daughter’s small business afloat. How else could Shelby keep a used bookstore open with barely any foot traffic if it weren’t for her father’s drug money?

I started feeling thirsty and thought about looking for a vending machine, so asked Shelby if she wanted anything. The sun was setting as I entered Terry’s hospital room, casting a golden hue on the walls and bed sheets through the window blinds. Shelby was still sitting next to Terry’s bed, holding his hand tenderly, with her eyes closed as if she was in deep meditation.

I thought it best not to disturb them, so I turned to leave.

“What is it, Justin?” she asked, her eyes still closed.

“I’m going to find something to drink,” I said. “Do you want anything?”

“That’s sweet,” she said, opening her eyes. They were red around the edges. “I could use a water.”

“Okay,” I said. “How’s he doing?”

She stroked his hand. “He’s not ready to go.” She said this with a strange confidence as if she had been communing directly with his spirit or something. “But he doesn’t want to suffer.” She began to make circles in his palm with her finger. “Yes. No suffering. I promise,” she whispered. She lifted his hand close to her and kissed it.

I nodded and walked out of the room. It took me about twenty minutes to find some vending machines. I bought water for Shelby and Pepsi for me. When I got back, the monitors tracking Terry’s vital signs were turned off, and Shelby was kneeling beside his bed praying. The blonde nurse put her hand on my shoulder and whispered that he passed right after I left. Shelby asked the doctors not to perform any heroics. It must have been fast. I sighed and went back to the couch to wait for her to finish saying her prayers. The nurse asked if I needed anything. I shook my head and tried not to cry.

I thought about that night in the Carmel Valley woods. I recalled laying on the ground beside the tree I’d embraced, resting my head on one of its roots. Overhead, stars moved above the forest canopy, appearing and disappearing – inhaling and exhaling – for hours or minutes or seconds or nanoseconds or no seconds at all. And the branches of the forest stretched up and intertwining themselves with the gravitational forces guiding the orbits of the stars until everything – the roots, the branches, the leaves, the stars, and what was left of me – began to swirl into a whirlwind of pure energy and then dissolved into a sweet nothingness and everythingness.

I opened my eyes and saw Shelby leaning against the hospital room door. She looked exhausted. I was glad I could drive her home. I wanted to hold her close.

Shelby lived in a modest bungalow in South Salinas. It was decorated much as I imagined it would be. Shelves full of books. Eclectic artwork on the walls. Used furniture in the living room. She came out of the kitchen wearing a purple robe and holding a bottle of red wine with two glasses.

“Do you like blends?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said.

I actually prefer beer, but any alcohol was welcome at that point.

She poured us a couple glasses and we sat on the couch together. We were both quiet for a while, absorbed in our thoughts. I could feel my own black hole growing inside me, the budding desire to reach over and touch her hand and comfort her.

“Do you like the wine?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s delicious.”

“I really appreciate you being my driver today,” she said. “That was very kind.”

“Least I could do.”

We fell silent again. I could feel a tension grow inside of me as I wrestled with how to move things forward without scaring her off.

“My father was a complicated man,” she confided in a solemn tone. “He did a lot of things I didn’t agree with. But he was still a good man.”

“He was,” I agreed.

“Oh. Did you know him?” she asked, clearly surprised. “How?”

I didn’t know what to say without making an already uncomfortable situation more so. And I didn’t want that to make her feel awkward. I wanted to at least hug her before the night was over, to feel the gentle touch that had gotten me through so many hard times before this. “I’d seen him around town a few times.”

Shelby could tell I was lying. Her warmth began to fade. There was only one reason anyone would know Terry. She looked down into her glass.

“He thought he had a lot of friends,” she said. “A year from now, most of them won’t even remember what he looked like.”

“No, Terry will be a legend,” I said.

“That’s not the type of legend I want my father to be. Not a legend for those people.”

“Those people,” I asked.

“The reptiles,” she said. “His so-called friends. Nasty little reptiles. That’s what my mom used to call them. They were all just hungry little amygdalas desperate for their fixes. That’s why she left him. She couldn’t stand watching it anymore. There’s nothing more debasing than watching an addict starving for their fix, pretending to be someone’s best friend.”

That stung. I was one of Terry’s buddies. He invited me to his birthday party. Plus, who was she to judge? Seemed hypocritical. She benefited from his dealings. And before I could stop myself, I blurted out as much.

“Well, you took his money, didn’t you?”

She looked at me with a furrowed brow, trying to figure out how I knew that her father gave her money. My black hole began to twist and seethe and lash out. How could I say something so stupid? How would reminding her that her father subsidized her bookstore with drug money make her feel any tenderness toward me? How do you expect her to hug you after saying something so cruel?

Shelby re-filled her wine glass. Her hand began to shake again as she took a sip, splashing droplets of wine on her robe. This wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to comfort her. She had cared for me so many times in the past. I didn't want to make her feel bad. I wanted to make her feel the way she made me feel – warm and safe.

So, I put my hand on her shoulder.

She flinched and pulled away from me like she could feel the slithering of my black hole coursing around and through my very being.

“I'm only trying to help,” I said.

“You should go.”

The anger in her eyes made me feel sick.

“I'm really sorry,” I said. “I didn't mean –”

“I asked you to leave, Justin.”

So, I gathered up my jacket and backpack.

At the doorway, I attempted to explain things, tried to tell her that I only wanted to comfort her, but her whole body began to quiver and shake with what I can only describe as a volcanic eruption of disgust.

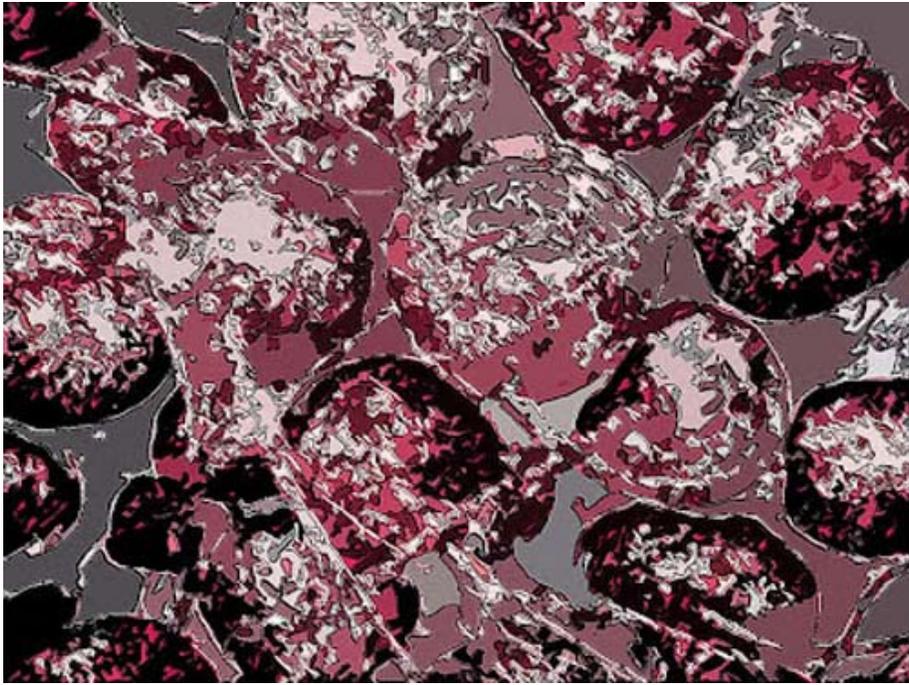
“I can't believe you touched me like that,” she said. “Tonight, of all nights!”

She slammed the door and locked it.

There was a chill in the air as I walked down the street feeling terrible about what happened. Eventually, I arrived at a 7-11 on Main Street and bought a Red Bull and a pouch of Drum rolling tobacco. I sat on the curb by an empty newspaper stand and contemplated going back and apologizing. It really was all a big misunderstanding. I only wanted to comfort her. That's all. I took a sip of my Red Bull and saw this guy, Carlos, pull up in his VW van. He was all smiles and black saucer pupils as he jumped out of the van and bounded toward me. He offered to give me a ride. It'll be wild, he assured me with a maniacal laugh. Two girls covered in glitter opened the side door of the van. They were giggling at nothing and everything. I looked up at the overcast sky. The clouds were the color of a moldy orange. I really wanted to beg Shelby for her forgiveness, but I knew it was useless. She would never answer her door. I'd never feel her warmth again. So, I said fuck it all and climbed in the back of Carlos's VW Van and took him up on his offer for a wild ride.

Fin

Beets



Jeffrey Spahr-Summers

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The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse met for

coffee one night at The Diner, a dingy little 24-hour joint that served the darkest, thickest, strongest coffee on the planet. No one there would ever notice four hooded men with ghastly pale hands drinking coffee in the dead of night.

With them sat a young twenty-something woman with long dark hair and large blue eyes. She was slender and dressed in a blue flowered sundress. Quite a contrast to her companions.

Softly, she spoke to the men gathered. "So, you called me all the way here to tell me what? That it's finally the end? That you're finally going to end the Game?"

With her well-manicured nails, Sophia flicked something from under the edge of one of them. She knew that when Grace spoke, these, her charges, would listen. Sophia was passionate about her job and being the embodiment of healing grace made her feel the boss's profound love.

Leaning her elbows on the table, she whispered softly so the next one over couldn't hear. "What do you want me to do? Save your asses like I always do? One thing you did do right, the horses..." Glancing out of the large window of The Diner to the road, "I love the bikes. It makes you a little more heavy metal. That's a cool look right now. If you're going to go around killing people you might as well give them a thrill from it."

One hooded rider lifted a hand to softly touch Sophia's hair, letting his bony fingers run the length of the silken tresses.

Sophia couldn't help shivering slightly. That was always her reaction whenever he touched her. She clenched her fist, digging her nails into her palm to keep from showing any outward response to his caress. No way was that going to happen around her charges. Pain, blessed pain, always distracts the senses.

Death spoke softly to her, "Oh Sophia, how flippant you can be. This is not an easy time for us, you know. Then again we have been working so...intimately together lately." He gave a little nip toward her earlobe, then chuckled as he admired Sophia. "They always seem to call to you at the end. Regardless of how they find the path, they always call for Grace."

Sophia took a deep breath. She could see this little shindig was going to take all night. Waving an ebony hand in the air, she motioned over a waitress, and ordered coffee, black. The waitress looked into her blue eyes and almost dropped the tray. The waitress recovered quickly and thanked her profusely before leaving to get the coffee.

War leaned back in his chair and chuckled softly. "Ohhhh, little Momma, you may want to watch those eyes of yours. I think she just recognized the grace. Did you recently help one of her family members?"

Sophia muttered something unintelligible under her breath, then "Perhaps."

Famine lifted his bony arms and clapped his thighs. "Well, when that waitress comes back I think I'll get myself a burger. Maybe I'll add some pie to that. Of course a cup of coffee. I wonder if they have any good soup? I'm just a little bit hungry."

Sophia put her head in her hands and gripped her hair pretending to pull her head off. Had they been alone, she would have done just that to get a rise out of the boys. She had been listening to their banter for what seemed like eternity. Enough, already.

Pestilence laughed hard, tossing his skull back and dropping his hood momentarily. All conversations ceased in The Diner, with many sets of eyes turned in his direction. He swept a gesture toward the other customers and said, Sophia made sure that everyone in The Diner had a brief loss of memory when Pesty lost his hood. It was in her power. She worked for the boss. He trusted her. That's why she was here.

It's Just a Little Cold
Sue Cook Fiction

She sighed as the waitress returned with her coffee. Oddly enough nobody ordered anything. Just talk. It was always talk.

Pesty leaned to Famine and muttered, "I bet you are hungry. I'm starved after spreading everything in my arsenal across the globe. I even pulled out some oldies."

Time for business, Sophia thought. "I was sent here by the boss to ask exactly what you're planning. I don't think he's happy about you pulling out all the stops, Pesty." Motioning her hand to the customers, "You know he likes them."

With a hand on a slender hip she turned to War. "And *you*. Have you lost your mind? You're creating nuclear wars! These people are ruthless. It's not nice to play that kind of game, brother. One push of a button and it's game over. Your brothers would be out of the game immediately."

War laughed and shrugged and slapped the two closest horsemen on the shoulder.. "I always say that if you can't keep up with the big dogs, don't play."

"Yeah? Well, chill out *Big Dog*." You could hear the quotations. "All of you." Picking up her coffee, she sipped delicately. "All of you, except Death, need to cool your jets. He alone has the right to continue his work. This comes straight from the boss's mouth."

Sophia knew they would listen. And she would have to listen to the tirade that would follow about the Boss always choosing favorites.

Her eyes flicked to Death. He was the favorite of her four charges. Not just the boss's favorite, but hers, too. Sipping her cup of coffee, her sky blue eyes traversed the lines of his face. She thought she could hide behind lush dark lashes.

Funny, Sophia never thought she would become interested in one of the Horsemen, but fate has a way of making the impossible... possible.

Death felt her eyes and lifted his to meet hers. A smirk played across his lips but he continued to drink his coffee.

Sophia sighed, "So... Azer ...Death, how about a ride on the bike before you go to work?"

The other Horsemen stared at Sophia. "Ahhhh, when did this little *thing* start, my brother?" Pesty said with a grin. He thwacked his brother's arm playfully. War was unmoved and drank his coffee. Famine was too busy ogling the waitress to notice.

Sophia spoke up softly, "It's just a ride on the bike boys. Don't rev your engines over it."

She stood up and stretched like the lithe creature that she was, then moved to the door leaving the boys to pay the bill. Slipping out she sauntered up to Death's bike and let her fingers run the length of the bike. The sleek black machine seemed to shiver under her touch.

Leaning down she whispered to the bike, "Miss me lovey?" Again the bike responded to her words. Gripping the handlebars she climbed on and leaned back til her hair swept the sides of the seat. In a blink, her clothes had changed from a simple frock to tight, inky black leathers that hugged every curve.

"That's better" she purred. She clicked her nails together and a black helmet appeared on her head.

"How I have missed this," she spoke to herself. Suddenly, Death was at her side. She looked up and smiled. "Climb on, let me do the driving for a change." He chuckled softly but did as she asked, sliding his arms around her tiny waist.

"Allons-y" She cried as she jumped down hard on the pedal to start the bike. Appearances, you know. Couldn't have the customers at The Diner see reality.

As Sophia turned *Lightening* towards their destination, *Death* shuddered. Sophia realized at that moment how hard this job was on her charges. It was her task to give them the grace to keep them functioning.

Rain pelted them as they neared the ground. Tears from heaven, she thought. How appropriate. *Death* shifted his weight uneasily as they neared the ground. He softly whispered in her ear "Life is so fleeting. Mine is not to question the boss's orders, but why?"

She patted his leg gently in an attempt to offer strength. A transfer of energy to lift his soul, to be his beacon in the darkness. Sophia remembered her days as "*Death*", and it was not an easy run. A black cowl can hide many tears.

The horse landed a short distance from an elementary school and instantly shifted to a large black SUV. Sophia remained at the wheel and drove slowly down the street. No one would see them. But, if they were seen, no one would remember.

Death motioned Sophia to stop a block from the school.

Dropping his head in his hand, he said a small prayer.

"These are always the hardest jobs to handle. The small ones have so many questions. No fear, just questions."

Sophia leaned over and hugged him gently.

He turned to her. "Are you ready for the aftermath?"

Sophia squeezed her eyes shut, taking in a deep breath and blowing it out slowly. She nodded, then leaned forward to rest her head against the wheel in a silent prayer.

Death got out of the car and walked unseen into the school, while Sophia waited outside. She was radiant, white energy. Grace.

Death walked from the school to the SUV carrying the smallest fatality in his arms and leading the rest. Seventeen total. The SUV expanded to fit them all. Vibrant, beautiful, dead.

Grace expanded her aura and surrounded them with love and hope. As they came into Grace's presence, the little one sat up in *Death*'s arms and cried out "The colors! Look at the beautiful colors."

All the children began to speak at once asking questions.

"What happened?"

"Where are we?"

"Is there WiFi in heaven?" a young boy asked Sophia as the doors of the SUV closed, cutting off his questions.



Sophia smiled and waved to the passengers. Small fingers against glass were met in kind, as she pressed her hand against theirs with just a “window” between them.

Death kissed Sophia on the cheek and got behind the wheel.

The SUV drove away and Grace began her dance. Sophia no longer.

Grace danced hope into being for the injured and comfort to the hurting. The white energy of the universe streaming down on all those in the area.

It's always the same, thought Grace. Death, followed by Grace. Even in the quiet times, when Death is gentle, nothing ever changes. It will not change until the world changes.

Grace's dance picked up speed, healing hearts, allowing people to continue living.

Death and Grace.

Darkness and Light.

Like two electrons spiraling around a nucleus in a never ending dance of creation.



Divinity

Poetry

65

David Lawton

A starfish has no brains or blood
But still finds a way that it can shine
Harmless lizards who somehow seem to know
To disguise themselves the color of their poisonous kind

An opossum when threatened doesn't just play dead
It can emanate the stench of a corpse
The bolas spider does not need to hide
But cops the shade of droppings from the birds alongside

All is spirit
This spark of life
That eternal mystery
Each a part of the divine

In the heart of the frozen arctic
Naked rock the spawning ground for lichen
Something hangs coconuts in tropical palms
For ev'ry desert island Gilligan

This spirit goes on
Sun up and moonshine
Breath of the forest
Rhythm of the tides

No woman's child can shift the paradigm.



Fiction

G
o
n
e

There **he** was. **He** was there. Not five metres away from **him**, and *he* would never see **him** again. *He* knew that as an indisputable fact. As soon as **he** left *his* line of sight, **he** would be gone, just as sure as apples fall down or the sun rises up. Gone and out of *his* life. There was no doubt in *his* mind. "Please don't go," *he* had said. But **he** had gone anyway. **He** had to. Not a question of want.

No. No no no.

But of absolute necessity.

He was everything to *him*.

Was?

Was.

He was now a was, no longer a will, nor even an is.

He stood still, riveted to the spot and watched as **he** walked away from *him*. Forever.

At first, *he* could see **him** clearly. Then as **he** walked, **he** began to disappear into the crowd. *He* caught occasional snatches of **him** through the packed crowd. **He** didn't even look back. Not once. Then **he** was gone. Devoured by the crowd. Gone. Without a trace. Vanished and lost to the steady pulse of bodies. Billions of people. Each a unique universe. Billions of universes. Never again, though, would *he* know that universe. There were other options. But there would never again be that option. The thought made *him* want to cry. And so *he* did. *He* cried for the once-in-a-lifetime that had become a never, of the universe lost, and the great pain now found.

Never again.

Till the next.

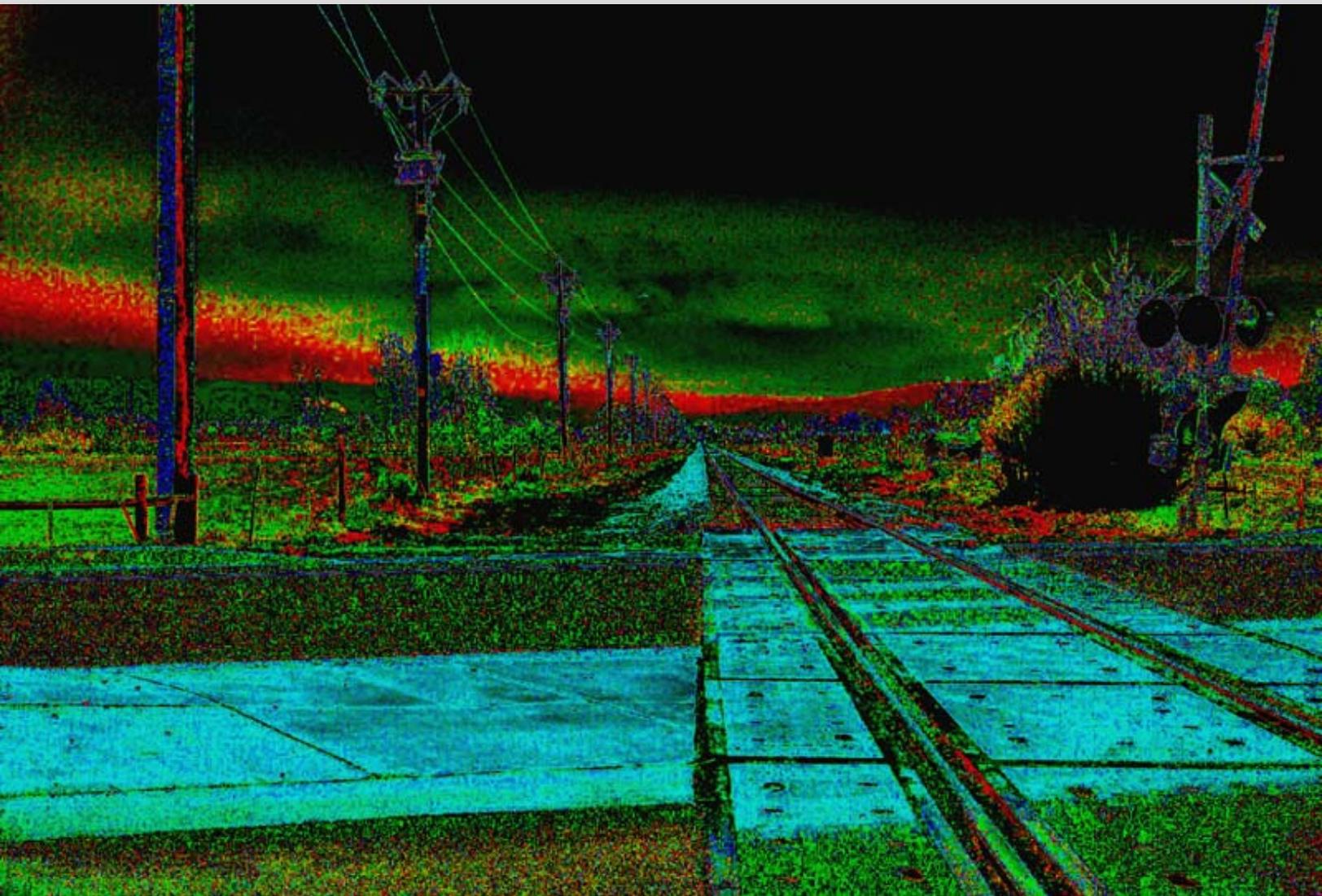
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These are Dark Times



Jeffrey Spahr-Summers

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The One Percent

Bobbi Sinha-Morey

Poetry

On days when the creek silently runs, I sit alone on one of the benches meant for lovers and loners who have no one like me.

The shape of time stopped for my other half and now as the years go by, I hope God blesses his kind soul while my heart summons me to live on; me, a woman who has just turned sixty-one, who used to bloom like a cherry, and now there is no one for me.

I watch birds fly gingerly from branch to branch, humbly living inside my mobile home. A vacant space inside of me wishes the long sunlight would bring someone new into my life. I thought no one could ever replace him. My will to go on without him is so badly broken.

No one could match what I loved about him, and I vowed I would never replace him or his memory with someone else.

Yet, what if the rare man were out there? Who had all the same qualities? It would be a one percent chance and I grimly knew there was no possibility.

Yesterday morning someone surprised me; it was a slip of a birthday card with a man's handwritten message, it left me shaken and giddy.

The deer lifted their antlers and idly watched me. Here, where no suitor ever comes, where most are older than me, his words stayed in my mind, and though I had no memory of him, I was filled with the smallest of hope.

When I woke up the next morning,
white blossoms flew outside my window.

Serialized Fiction

The Whistling Caverns, Part 2

Rita Mock-Pike

The woman rose as we approached, shadowed light softening the harsh curve of nose, deep wrinkles, and wizened hand. The woman, ancient, lifted a soft, whispery whistle, to which the others around me saluted a response.

I looked now at those who'd brought me here. Light revealed a strange brood – not of humans, but of human-ish creatures as tall as I, or taller, with pale eyes almost white, soft green skin, long tails of glittering gold, hair long and white, falling from head, hand, and leg.

“A human.”

The creatures bowed before the woman who spoke with crackling voice.

“Another human.”

“Yes,” I said, unsure of myself.

“I have seen none other for many years. I was young when I fell into the well, coming here, finding... Them. I am wrinkled now – I see this aged skin in the glow light.” She motioned to the object I had believed to be a candle. The stick of glowing crystal flickered, almost bioluminescent in movement. And then, it moved distinctly.

Not almost. It was a living creature filled with glowing essence like the fireflies I had chased as a child.

“A human,” she echoed to herself. “How have you come to me?”

“I do not know,” I said. “I fell into a bottomless pit. And a creature, soft and gentle, led me to a cave deep within. And they came. And they brought me to you.”

Throughout, light whistles went about the space as the green creatures watched and listened.

The woman whistled to them now and they seemed pleased with themselves. “They did well to bring you.”

I stared into space, uncertain of what might come next. My innocent heart expected – nay yearned – for reprieve, forgetting somehow, that this aged woman herself was captive to these depths.

“Are you injured?”

“Not that I can tell.”

“Hungry then?”

“No. They fed me well,” I said.

“Thirsty?”

“Golden nectar from a flower,” I nodded.

The woman smiled, showing bent, cracked, and nearly gone teeth. She had indeed been here ages long.

“Where are you from? Perhaps once I knew it,” she said.

“Chlynestra.” The name breathed from my lips as if by magic – but I knew it was mere instinct reminding me of the place.

“Chlynestra?” the woman shook her head at me. “They still exist? And who there rules?”

I sighed and sat before her on the cavern floor. My will waned, thinking of the cruel ones above. “The Thresentine.”

“Thresentine?” Shock and anger pummeled her face with dismay. “Those vile behemoths!”

“We starve while they feast,” I acknowledged. “A wheat shortage continues as long as my breath, while they dine on breads and pastries each night. Children fall from hunger. Mothers’ breasts run dry. There is no milk, no wheat, no fresh fruit or vegetables. We forage for mushrooms and fiber-less grains.”

“If I were but young enough to resurface and fight,” the woman said hotly, but withered. “Tis a long life since I took up sword and fought.”

“Sword?”

“Aye, lass,” the woman looked me over anew. “In my day, we all fought.”

“Women, too?”

“Aye.” The pale head nodded thoughtfully. “And men.”

“Men only be our warriors,” I said. The thought of women fighting intrigued me, but I gratefully never had to wield a blade. “I could never.”

“Why not?” the perplexed woman shook her head.

“I believe in peace,” I said.

“Ah. If only all the world agreed with you.”

“Aye,” I nodded. I knew my strong hold on peaceful will was not met with mutual belief the world over. Else, there would be no Thresentine, the lords of pain, as their names literally translated. “My love, he...” My love. How long had it been since his face I have seen? How long more will it be?

By the long, lightless life of this woman, I now doubted I would ever see him again. How could I? She had never found escape from these dark caverns of whistling creatures who would never dare show face above the surface.

“Could you never escape?” I asked suddenly.

The woman looked off toward the almost-light in the far ceiling of the room and sighed. “No.”

“And you have looked every which way and searched every crevice and canyon?”

The woman slowly lowered her gaze back down to mine. The eyes were steeled with something I could not name. Something that felt as though anger and sorrow bred together to form it. “No.”

I looked back at her for several painful moments, searching my understanding for any other meaning than this single syllable could contain.

“Did you not wish to return above?”

The woman motioned to her companions and urged a seat brought forward for her. She sat wearily down and looked off again. “Who would wish such a thing?”

“I do!” Explosive words from my anger-thinned lips.

“Why? What good should you find above with Thresentine in power? Or the Mollerdun after they? Or the Wishkanaki after they? There is no end to the evil, the struggling, the suffering. Immense life is not what once it was. Our fathers before us had hope, had peace, had joy. There is none left for us in this universe. It has been drained by the greedy thieves of life above.”

“Have you no hope left in your broken soul?”

“Hope?” A derisive laugh echoed through the cavern. “Foolish girl. What hope would I have above? Here, with my people, I have shelter. I have quiet and darkness. I have peace.”

“Darkness?” How could this be a good thing? “We need light to grow and blossom. We need light to change and rejoice. We need light for health.”

“Health?” the woman laughed. “You have no bread nor fruit. How could you have health?”

I opened lips to speak but clamped them shut. Her woe spoke truth. How could we have health without necessities for life?

But still, I did not want to dwell here beneath the earth, hidden from love, from light, from what life I could draw from the world above. The body of the wizened woman told her story. Wrinkles from great age or great misery, hair thinned and stringy and nearly gone from lack of light and care. Forehead of deep furrow lines, not merely age etched in skin. Misery was her company, as the adage told, and I would not become her companion.

“Help me find my escape,” I pled, falling before her. “I have love and life and...”

“No will to fight.”

“No, but I do.”

“Then why have you not?”

“I am a woman...”

The woman before me cackled strangely, a dark sound emanating from a tragic soul swallowed by sorrow. “If that may stop you, then life shall not find you.”

“How could it not? ‘Woman shall not draw sword by pain of death.’”

“But you must, if life you seek. Defend yourself against villains and life thieves. Draw blood only when you must. Spare souls when you might. But fight or you shall die. Or stay here in these caverns and dismiss hope as though it were a servant incapable of bearing its load. Stay with me and find peace.”

To be continued...

In Praise of Sameness

Essay

Edward A. Dougherty

Rushed in the shower one morning, I hesitated choosing among three slivers of soap. Scent, quality of foaminess, and dropability. It was remarkable how many criteria were at play. It was a momentary—oh so brief—decision, or indecision, one that's totally inconsequential, but it showed me the elegance of sameness. How many minuscule choice-points do we get bogged down in like this?

Georgia O'Keeffe, the painter who created enormous Western landscapes and zoomed in on flowers revealing their vibrant sensuality, routinely dressed in black and white. She restricted her color choices in clothing so she could put all that attention into her artwork. Restraint of the desire for novelty allows openness to subtlety to emerge. It's certainly a discipline worth trying.

There's a social side to regulating our attention as well. "Bread and circuses" was coined by the Roman writer Juvenal to describe political leaders' methods of providing only some of the necessities of life (bread) along with captivating diversions (circuses), all to curry favor with the public. Meanwhile, substantial issues go unaddressed. In my own mind, I set up the big top and let my mind circle the rings, laugh at clowns, and stare at the freaks. I open a beer or point the remote at the Netflix queue or browse for new fountain pens or choose the right song to stream for the occasion. Other times, my attention stands firmly in the bread line, working over the demands of my life—any number of details for teaching, yard chores that await, scheduling the next oil change, working out holiday travel arrangements.

But it's not only a personal, psychological dynamic. Going back to Juvenal's time, social forces and collective powers encourage our distraction, a word that retains the feeling of its Latin root: to pull apart.

Our entertainments are designed to pull our attention away from other pursuits. People are distracted with choices of breakfast cereals or phone plans or fingernail polish designs or small-batch ales or game systems. Endless commercial choice seems like freedom, seems like we are exercising our autonomy, seems to be an assertion of our inalienable rights as consumers. But our identity is far larger than as a consumer. And as long as we entertain so many choices—so many of them trifle—we build into our lives and our society countless little hesitations. Each one is a momentary paralysis when we are stuck between options.

That's why I have a healthy respect for ritual and repetition.

Mindless routine done by rote is not praiseworthy. In moments like that, our body is performing one task while our mind has pulled itself away and is doing another. It's the same division as texting while "listening" to our spouse's day; we're not doing either one well.

When staying in monasteries, I've observed the monks pray the same prayers in the same order just as they had for years, and just as monks before them had for centuries. At the Benedictine monastery, the ritual of the Mass is called "liturgy," a word with roots going back into the Greek for "work for the people," a service. It requires effort as well as selflessness, done over and over again. What is the reward of such repeated attention? Once we get over the initial awkwardness of learning the ropes, we slowly become sincere and moved by it. If we stay with rituals long enough, we also grow bored. We need to search for deeper meanings. This is an important passage in any long term pursuit, like a career, marriage, or parenthood. This passage of boredom could be a momentary flash in a conversation or a mid-life re-questioning; in this moment, we can seek novelty or return to our commitment. If we return, something else can happen, something profound and simple. This is reflected in the Zen saying:

Before I sought enlightenment,
the mountains were mountains and the rivers were rivers.

While I sought enlightenment, the mountains
were not mountains and the rivers were not rivers.

After I attained enlightenment, the mountains were mountains
and the rivers were rivers.

Even the repetitive phrasing of that saying demonstrates the experience of sticking with the content of our lives so that we can offer our whole selves to it, and in return the world gives itself to us. In the warmth of an initial commitment, the mountains and rivers are marvelous, miraculous. Worthy of attention. But then the novelty wears off and they cease to be anything but the usual landscape. That's why monks wear a "habit" and pray the "office." It's the work of the heart: to identify what's important in life and give over to it in practice. Reducing variation to choose sameness invites a whole different kind of novelty. Not new spiritual experiences, monks seek to create a whole new person.

That's the art I'm after.



Protective Bubble - Artist Statement

As we cocoon ourselves in a "Protective Bubble", swinging blissfully through the ups and downs of our emotions, it is this space that provides our deepest 'Yugen' existence. It's ours. Only ours. Don't burst it. I love this image. It's my son, swinging at the park. He loves the moon, and so the bubble itself is actually the moon. Our backyard trees (a third image layer to this piece), and the chains of the swing, complete the visual journey I was trying to depict. We swing within our physical limits, but we're held back by chains. We always want to soar higher and see our feet "appear to" touch the treetops or tap the moon. But the one who gave us the original boost, that first push and a loving nudge, ultimately knows in their hearts, that if they could keep us in a bubble of protection, their life would be blissful too. It is a vignette of how I feel about him.

- Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier

Sunset

Seema Prusty

Poetry

It's spring! I work mundanely under the yellow sky
On an elevated beachside kissed by gentle sea waves
Unaware of a zephyr that passes by.
As life presses me for promotion and success,

For now, I bask in the warmth of the sun's falling rays
It transforms into a myriad of hues
I never noticed such ombre displays
Or its waning unwillingly from tangerine to amber;
Oh! this tantrum ensues

As I take my evening interlude, I watch the sunset,
Trying to keep my mind unoccupied. I am silent and still
Though I hear the waves and winds ambient
Finally, the Sun sets down the hill

I feel so mystic, a joy so profound
An experience so divine, an emotion so deep
As peace and serenity become my background
And the beautiful evening goes to sleep

I never allowed myself to take the moment in.
I couldn't perceive nature's benediction.
Unfelt, this beauty could not be seen
by my unplugged eyes and soul -
I lost nature's conviction.



Jeffrey Spahr-Summers

Artist Statement

I find that what cannot be said in words, is often better expressed in images. I work on photographs every day, experimenting with black and white, but mostly color. I use a broad subject matter when shooting photos; street scenes, flowers, trees, mountains, people, animals. While black and white offers the huge gray scale range, color offers much more. I often produce double exposures, exaggerated color, textures, humor, and sometimes incorporated text. Currently, I use 35mm cameras, 2 ¼ cameras, digital and phone cameras, depending on my subject and my mood. I believe that one doesn't just take a photograph, but makes a photograph. At times, political and social statements appear in my work, but mostly I focus on what appeals to me visually, which can be anything, anytime, anywhere.

Art is my therapy.

Linda Imbler

Sit, Drink, Watch



I want neither coma nor adventure,
simply to watch the world go by.

It takes a distinct attitude, one I've culled well,
to do nothing but sit still as I often do,
while living in my own world with no wasteful unrest
to pull me where I need not go.

It takes a distinct attitude,
to eliminate the unnecessary,
and sit exploring what's beyond my window with loony gratitude.

The bright ice clinks in glasses,
and, I, the Pantheist chemist
hold my face above the gruff rim
of numerous glasses filled with
that Southern joy,
a mimosa.

Within the essence of a year, I can observe 4 things:

Watching Spring's profession of wildflowers
Looking at Summer's luxuriant variety of greens
Noticing Autumn's burst of reds and yellows
Witnessing Winter's dazzling white of ice and snow

So, I sit, clearing my thoughts,
seeing with greater clarity
the huge harmonious oneness
laid before me across the landscape
of a world going by.

When I get stuck in my head, have writer's block, or just can't come up with ideas for stories or articles, or whatever I'm hoping to put to page, I call one of three friends: my husband, my best friend, Annali, or my other best friend, Cyndi. I don't necessarily tell them directly that I'm feeling stuck, but it comes out. They hear it in my words or see it on my face. They know me.

And we talk. And talk. And talk. We talk about the things I'm working on (or wanting to) and we talk about my hang-ups. Am I uninspired? Am I exhausted? Am I burnt-out? Am I bored?

And they ask questions.

And they daydream with me.

And we get goofy.

And we get crazy.

And we get serious.

In the free-flowing flights of fancy, ideas surface (usually for both of us). And I walk away from the conversation, maybe not completely unstuck, but at least a bit less so.

And it's lately I've been realizing that this needs to become one of my regular practices in life as a creative. I need to peel away my own issues in the creative realm by listening to others. Not just as they talk through my issues, but as they talk about their own.

Giving of myself and hearing others is inspiring. In all areas of life, not just the creative realms. When I let go of myself and embrace those I deeply trust and feel safe with, I find myself freer – and hopefully they do, too.

So, next time you're stuck, call someone who knows you and who you trust as much as they trust. Find safety together and get silly together. Let your imaginations take wing together, even if it's about places you'd like to travel to someday and has nothing to do with your creative problems at the moment. Listen to them and give back to them as they listen to you. And let your relationships with good people set your inner muse free.

*Intentional
Conversations
With People I
Trust*



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Farewell/Adieu

Poetry

Gerard Sarnat

Kol Nidre, the holiest day this tenth of Tishrei,
I drink my last, chant prayers of penitence.
It rains, the first in months.

As dusk descends on amen's corner,
she wakes from the depths, smiles once
as the family collects 'round her bed.

Bid goodnight and goodnight. Failing
– unable to fight wiping and diapering,
too elsewhere to nod or blink –
though apneic spells last minute after minute,
frown and tear make me think
she's still here. Swabbing her lips, I speak,
“Bubbe, it's all right.”

The shallows in earnest
this last Friday night, we light candles,
burn molecules might fuel extra hours
though not till her centenary next Shabbos.

Knowing it's good to end here,
enter the bardo, rejoin her love;
I place my palm on our matriarch's forehead,
whisper, “It's time for you to go to him now.”

With a breath, a breath of intense slowing,
extra dimension of dignity, her spirit passes.
We weep in the bed across,
listen for the hearse.

Contributor Bios

NADIA ARIOLI - USA

Nadia Arioli is the co-founder and editor in chief of Thimble Literary Magazine. Their recent publications include Penn Review, Hunger Mountain, Cider Press Review, Kissing Dynamite, Heavy Feather Review, and San Pedro River Review. They have chapbooks from Cringe-Worthy Poetry Collective, Dancing Girl Press, Spartan, and a full-length from Luchador. They were nominated for Best of the Net in 2021 by As It Ought to Be, West Trestle Review, Angel Rust, and Voicemail Poems.

KAREN BOISSONNEAULT-GAUTHIER - CANADA

Karen Boissonneault-Gauthier is a Canadian indigenous photographer and visual artist. When she's not walking her Siberian Husky under the Northern Lights, she designs with Art of Where. Her publication covers include: Synkroniciti, The Feel Magazine, Doubleback Review, Arachne Press, Pretty Owl Poetry, Wild Musette, Existere Journal, Vine Leaves Literary Journal, Gigantic Sequins and Ottawa Arts Journal, among others. Karen has also been featured in Vox Popular Media Arts Festival, Bracken Magazine, Zoetic Press, New Feathers Anthology, Maintenant 15, Parliament Lit and Pure in Heart Stories to name but a few.

AMA BOSCO - ITALY

Alexander is a philosopher, writer, and teacher. He has served seven years as a soldier in the British Army and has lived and worked in several different countries. He currently speaks Italian, French, and Arabic, in no small part due to his Italo-Lebanese heritage, though he prefers to write in English. He now teaches philosophy and English as a second language. He lives with his two cats and fiancée.

MICHAEL BOYD - SOUTH AFRICA

Michael Boyd grew up in Southern Africa but moved to England as a teenager. Having always been an avid reader, and working for a spell at various film festivals, he decided on a career in teaching English to bring together his interests. This would also allow him to fulfill his longing to return to Africa. He now lives in Johannesburg, South Africa, and recently completed an MA in Creative Writing.

LISA BRODSKY - USA

Lisa Brodsky holds a Master of Public Health degree from the University of Minnesota and works as a Public Health Director. She was born and raised in Canada and is a mom of four boys. She is currently working on her Associates in Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing at Normandale Community College and was the 2nd place winner in the 2022 Patsy Lea Core Awards for poetry. Lisa places a great emphasis on lived experiences in her work. In addition to writing, she enjoys painting, photography, and raising her Shetland Sheepdogs.

JOSE V. CLUTARIO - PHILIPPINES

Jose V. Clutario earned his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing degree at De La Salle University in 2017. His poems have been published in Kritika Kultura Anthology of New Philippine Writing in English, Philippines Free Press, Literature Today, and The Muse International Journal of Poetry. He currently teaches creative writing and literature courses at the Department of English, Foreign Languages, and Linguistics under the College of Arts and Letters of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines.

LISA DAILEY - USA

Lisa Dailey is an avid traveler and writer. In her time abroad, she unearthed new ways of looking at her life through her discoveries in remote corners of the world and she continues to enrich her life through travel. She is currently working on a recipe anthology as well as her first work of fiction. A native Montanan, Lisa now makes her home by the ocean in Bellingham, Washington, but returns to her roots every summer for a healthy dose of mountains and Big Sky. Lisa is the owner of Silent Sidekick and Sidekick Press where she helps guide authors through their publishing journey.

EDWARD A. DOUGHERTY - USA

Edward A. Dougherty is the author of 11 collections of poetry, the most recent of which is 10048 which is named after the zip code of the World Trade Towers. His latest book is Journey Work: Crafting a Life of Poetry & Spirit, essays about his development as a poet, peacemaker, and spiritual seeker.

KJ HANNAH GREENBERG - JERUSALEM

Faithfully constructive in her epistemology, KJ Hannah Greenberg channels gelatinous monsters and two-headed wildebeests. Forever an inventor of printed possibilities, Hannah's been nominated four times for the Pushcart Prize in Literature, once for the Million Writers Award, twice for The Best of the Net, and once for the PEN/Diamonstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay. She flies the galaxy in search of assistant bank managers, runs with a prickle of rabid (imaginary) hedgehogs, and attempts to matchmake words like "balderdash" and "xylophone."

TINA J GORDON - USA

Tina J. Gordon is the author of Hardscrabble Way, a coming of age novel about an affluent teenager who becomes homeless. She has previously published poetry, travel essays, and short stories. She recently completed a new novel about a woman who makes a grisly discovery in a trunk in her grandmother's attic. Intentions is based on actual events.

Contributor Bios

RON HARDWICK - ENGLAND

Ron Hardwick was born in Wallsend-on-Tyne in the north-east of England but now resides in East Lothian, Scotland. He is married with one son and a grandson. He has Master of Arts degrees in both Literature and Creative Writing from the Open University, and especially enjoys writing short fiction. He has written over 200 short stories, covering various genres. He has had his work published by e-zines such as Secret Attic, Makarelle, Write Time, Pure Slush, Bindweed and Cranked Anvil. He has 29 short stories of his fictional comic private eye Mr Lemon still awaiting a publisher!

LINDA IMBLER - USA

Linda Imbler's poetry collections include six published paperbacks: Big Questions, Little Sleep, Big Questions, Little Sleep" second edition (expanded with 66 additional poems), Lost and Found, Red Is The Sunrise, Bus Lights, Travel Sights, and Spica's Frequency. Soma Publishing has published her four e-book collections, The Sea's Secret Song, Pairings, a hybrid of short fiction and poetry, and That Fifth Element, and Per Quindecim. In addition to writing, she helps her husband, a Luthier, build acoustic guitars and steel strings in Wichita, Kansas, U.S.A.

KATIE JORDAN - USA

Katie lives in the Pacific Northwest with her bonsai enthusiast husband, Brad, two daughters, and the world's most elegant guinea pig, Mademoiselle. Her work has been featured in Enchanted Conversation, Marrow Magazine, and 101 Words, among others.

DESIRÉE JUNG - CANADA

Desirée Jung is an artist born in Brazil, and adopted by Vancouver, Canada. She has published translations, poetry, and fiction in several magazines around the world. She has also participated in many artist residencies. Her education includes a film degree from Vancouver Film School, a BFA in Creative Writing, an MFA in Creative Writing and a PhD in Comparative Literature, all from the University of British Columbia. Writing, for her, is a hopeless attempt to capture light. Her most recent work, a series of video poems about memory, landscape and what is not-all out there, has been screened in several film festivals around the world, and can be found in [her website](#).

DAVID LAWTON - USA

David Lawton is the author of the poetry collection Sharp Blue Stream (Three Rooms Press) and chapbook Inspiritive (Moonstone Arts), and serves as an editor for greatweatherforMEDIA. He has work currently in From The Inside: NYC through the eyes of the poets who live here (Blue Light Press) and Call Me {Brackets} and upcoming in P-Queue and the New York Quarterly anthology Without a Doubt: Poems Illustrating Faith.

EVA LYNCH-COMER - USA

Eva Lynch-Comer holds a B.A. in Creative Writing from Hamilton College where she received the John V. A. Weaver Poetry Prize and the Sydna Stern Weiss Essay Prize in Women's Studies. Her poetry has appeared in Nightingale & Sparrow, Capsule Stories, and Peach Velvet Magazine, among others. She enjoys singing, journaling, and drinking tea.

M - IRAN

M is a freelance writer, with advanced university studies in science. She is a fan of nature, cycling, and exploring. Born and raised in Iran, although she has written many stories, due to suppression and the cultural, religious, and political nature of her work, has been unsuccessful in publishing anything inside her own country. Although it wasn't easy, she improved her language every day and wrote different stories, some of which are liked by friends abroad.

JOSS RICHARDS - UK

Joss is based in the United Kingdom, and a writer of short stories with works published by the RC Sherriff Trust and Manchester University Press. Hobbies include cycling and mountaineering, and is currently working on a debut novel.

GERARD SARNAT - USA

Gerard Sarnat MD has won the San Francisco Poetry's Contest, Poetry in Arts First Place Award/Dorfman Prizes. Nominated for Pushcarts/Best of Net Awards, Gerry's published in Hong Kong Review, Tokyo Journal, Buddhist Review, Gargoyle, Main Street Rag, New Delta Review, Arkansas Review, Hamilton-Stone Review, New Haven Institute, Texas Review, Vonnegut Journal, Brooklyn Review, SF Magazine, LA Review, NY Times plus by Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Penn, Chicago, Columbia presses. He's authored collections: Homeless Chronicles, Disputes, 17s, and Melting Ice King. Stanford professor/healthcare CEO, Gerry's built and staffed clinics for the marginalized and devoted energy/resources toward climate justice on Climate-Action-Now's board. Married since 1969, Gerry has nine grand/kids.

JOHN SHEIRER - USA

John Sheirer lives in Western Massachusetts and is in his 30th year of teaching at Asnuntuck Community College in Enfield, Connecticut, USA. His latest book is the award-winning short story collection, Stumbling Through Adulthood: Linked Stories.



Contributor Bios

BOBBI SINHA-MOREY - USA

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.

CHERYL SNELL - USA

Cheryl Snell's books include poetry collections from *Finishing Line*, *Pudding House*, *Moria Books*, and others. She is also the author of the *Bombay Trilogy* novels. Widely published online and in print, her work has been nominated seven times for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and one poem was included in a Sundress Best of the Net anthology. She won the Lopside Press Chapbook Competition with *Prisoner's Dilemma*, illustrated by her late sister Janet Snell, and recent work has appeared in the *Ilanot Review*, *Cafe Irreal*, *The Drabble*, and elsewhere. She was trained as a classical pianist.

JEFFREY SPAHR-SUMMERS - USA

Jeffrey Spahr-Summers is a poet, writer, photographer, and publisher.

DANIEL TARKER - USA

Daniel Tarker (He, him) holds an MFA in creative Writing from San Francisco State University and a Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership from Oregon State University. Since turning his hand from theatre to prose during the pandemic, his fiction has been published in *Lothorien*, *Confetti Literary Journal*, *Marrow Magazine*, *Once Upon a Crocodile*, and *Aji Magazine*. He has also published his research on leadership in multiple academic publications.

MARIANNE TEFFT - SINT MAARTEN

Marianne Tefft is a poet, lyricist, teacher and voiceover artist on the island of Sint Maarten. Her work has appeared in the poetry anthologies *Where I See the Sun* (House of Nehesi/2013) and *Captured by Corona* (Beyond Kultura/2020). Her first poetry collection, *Full Moon Fire*, is planned for July 2022.

GERALD THOMPSON - USA

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.

JOHN WEAVER - USA

John Weaver lives in Grand Ledge, Michigan with his wife, daughter, a dog, six cats, and a whole bunch of tame rats.

Staff Bios

ANNALI CARMEL - CREATIVE TEAM

Annali Carmel (she/her) enjoys her life in rural New South Wales, where she listens to a lot of music, does some singing, and welcomes the occasional affection of Aria the cat when she deigns the peasant worthy.

SUE COOK - ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, WRITER, SOCIAL TEAM

Sue Cook (she/her) 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.

MILENE CORREIA - REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Brazilian multidisciplinary artist. Major in English Language and Literature, taking a specialization course in Teaching of Drama. I write, rewrite, draw and compose and expose because my heart can't fit all these feelings. Leo, Queer, 92.

KATIE DANIELS - STAFF WRITER & INTERVIEWER

Katie Daniels is a lifelong Florida kid, where she still resides with her husband and their pup-child. She loves reading, meeting new people, and seeing new places. If you need anything, just bribe her with a donut.

JP DENEUI - HEAD COPY EDITOR

Joseph Paul "JP" DeNeui (he/him) 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.

JEFF KIRBY - COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Jeff Kirby (he/him) 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.

CYNTHIA ANN LUBLINK - COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CREATIVE TEAM

Cyndi (she/her) 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 forty 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 like solving math equations. She has been a writer/poet since the age of nine, her first poem being about God's Hands. She wrote for Christian Biker Magazine for five years.

EMILY MACKENZIE - 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.

TANDY MALINAK - STAFF WRITER

A Seattleite by birth, Tandy Malinak loves mountains but not rain. So she escaped to Chicago to learn what 'winter', 'summer', and 'real thunderstorm' mean, and she decided she liked them all. Tandy earned a BA in Education specializing in English and now spends her days homeschooling, nannying, and helping to lead her church's kids' ministry. In her free time, she writes fantasy and sci-fi, solves crosswords, and plays Nintendo. She lives with her husband, two dragon-loving kids, and three black cats.

ELIZABETH MOCK - CREATIVE TEAM

Elizabeth Mock is a Grand Rapids, Michigan native and senior in illustration studying at Grand Valley State University, where she is also the Vice President of the Student Interest Group of Illustrators, the university's illustration club. Outside of school and The MockingOwl Roost, she is a community manager at Adobe. In the official Adobe Creative Career (ACC) Discord server, she helps host panels, challenges, and discussions to elevate members' careers through mentorship. With hopes to pursue a career in graphic, layout, and information design, Elizabeth also enjoys community engagement, animation, and photography. You can find her daily in ACC.



Staff Bios

NANCY MOCK - PROOFREADER

Nancy (she/her) 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 - CO-FOUNDER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Editor-in-Chief of The MockingOwl Roost, Rita Mock-Pike (she/her) 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.

SOREN PORTER - CO-FOUNDER & COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Soren Porter – He/him, INFJ, 30s-ish I think?, happily forever taken (sorry lads and ladies!). Writing reflections of faith and philosophy. LGBTQIA+ ally and sworn enemy of white supremacy. You might hear Soren ranting against evil policies, sharing ridiculous pop culture, or tossing around some theological thoughts on Tumblr or Twitter.

SEEMA PRUSTY - REGULAR 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.

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