



The Mocking Owl *Roost*

**Side Roads
and
Detours**

**Volume 6,
Issue 1**

POETRY

Emerald Asteroid

FICTION

Candy House

FICTION

Holding on to Alan

Featuring

VISUAL ART

After the Rain

FICTION

Shadows of the South

POETRY

Off Course

Masthead

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Wayward Butterfly

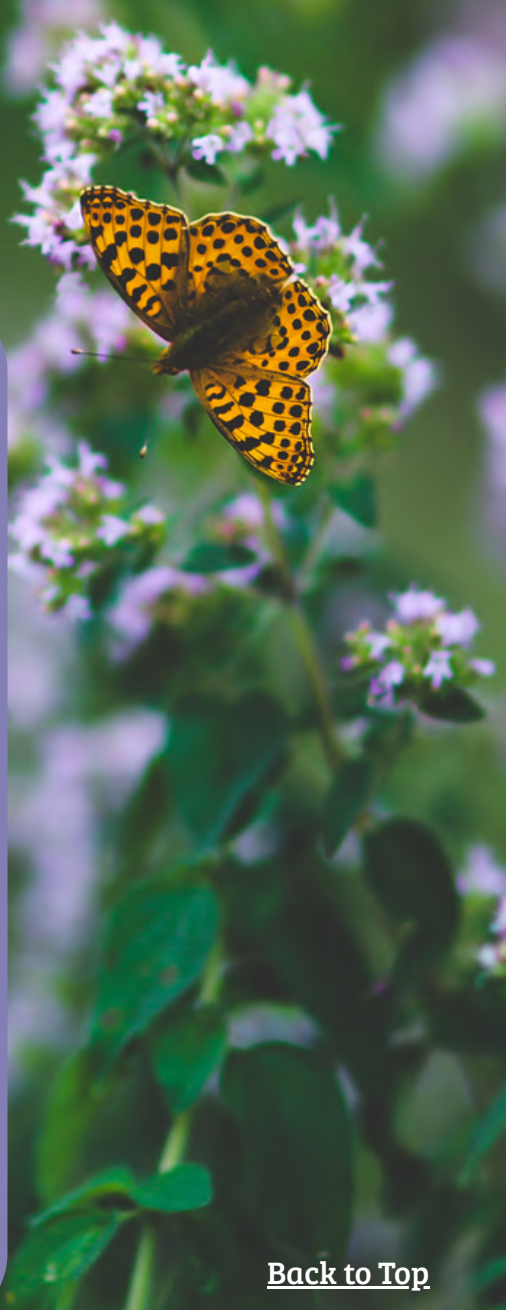
Rita Mock-Pike

A stalk through the forest on a morning run,
Trail turns left, but my butterfly accomplice
Swerves right toward the shaded mud row. Do I
Follow? Do I abandon the plan for my trail-fine
Run? Of surety I do! Who would be so silly as to
Stay the course when a friend so dear, so fluttery,
Leads the way into the great unknown, even on a
Small, local trail along the Salt Creek hiking path.

Nay. I am not so foolish as to think I know best. Who
Do I think I am? Would not a butterfly beauty, this spot-
Filled delight, know better than I where the sweetest
Nectar, brightest sun, prettiest blooms may rest? Of
Course! And I must follow! With every thump of foot on
Trail, every breath filling lungs, every heartbeat pulsing
Through aorta and pushing blood through veins. Yes,
With everything inside me, I must follow this darling
Friend to the ultimate moment of quiet, restful bliss
Among the flowers, the trees, the water. I must run.
I must follow. I must flutter my way along the Salt Creek
Trail as if I, too, were some winged wonder. Else the
End may reach me and I will have regret of the trail
Unwandered, the path untaken, the story undiscovered.

You, my butterfly friend, lead me into the sunlight, and I,
Too shall shine and flutter and sing. I shall run. I shall bloom.
I shall wing my way to beauty as if a wayward butterfly myself.

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Issy Jinarmo

From the
Mouths of Babes

Fiction



****Content warning: Elder abuse and neglect****

Charlotte ran up to the bus seat and climbed onto the wooden slats; her mother was a few steps behind.

“Don’t bump the nice lady, Charlotte,” her mother, Judy, reminded her. Charlotte looked up at the elderly woman sitting there and smiled coyly.

“She’s fine, dear, such a lovely girl. How are you, Charlotte? My name is Emily.”

Charlotte looked to her mother to see if it was okay to answer. Her mother nodded. Charlotte made circles with her finger on the wood taking her time to reply. “I’m four, you know. I can write four,” she replied as she licked her finger to demonstrate her skill on the wood.

“Wow, that’s pretty impressive, you must be a smart girl.”

Charlotte smiled but didn’t reply and continued writing with her finger.

“The bus is due soon, isn’t it Emily? Is it okay if I call you Emily? I’m Judy.”

“Of course, and the bus is due shortly, Judy. It comes past every hour. A long wait if you miss it.”

“We’ve just been to visit my mother. She lives down Stafford Street. Charlotte loves to visit her Nan, don’t you, Sweetie?”

Charlotte nodded and smiled and continued drawing circles, occasionally wetting her finger so she could see her shapes. “Can I have my drawing book and pencils that Nan gave me please, Mum?”

“When we get on the bus, Charlotte,” Judy replied

“Emily, are you catching the bus too?” Charlotte asked.

“No, I’m not getting on the bus, Pet. I sit here when I’m taking a walk as I get very tired.” She turned to Judy. “I live with my daughter-in-law down the road. My son died six months ago and Margaret has become very angry. I miss him too, but she doesn’t want me around when her friends are over. She’s very bossy.”



“That’s sad,” responded Judy. “What do you do with yourself? You must get tired.” Judy felt a lump in her throat and her sympathy grew for Emily.

“It’s worse when it’s raining. I helped my son and his wife buy the house so she knows she can’t kick me out, but she is certainly making my life hard. I think she hopes I will go somewhere else but there is nowhere for me to go.”

Judy was speechless for a while; she couldn’t believe someone could be so horrible to an elderly woman. She imagined how awful it would be if it were her mother. She finally replied, “Do you have other children, Emily? Grandchildren perhaps?”

Before Emily could answer, the bus pulled up. Charlotte jumped up ready to get onboard.

“No, Charlotte, we are not going to leave Emily sitting here alone. We will take a detour. It looks like rain so we will walk her home and put up our umbrella if we need to.” She waved the bus off and helped Emily to her feet.

“It’s okay, she tells me I can come back when this bus comes in.”

Judy wasn’t going to take no for an answer so she took Emily’s arm. “Where do you live?”

“Just a street down but I can walk myself,” Emily replied sheepishly.

Charlotte danced around behind them as they turned into Emily’s street.

“It’s just up there, please go now; I don’t want Margaret to think I’m helpless.”

Judy walked beside her until she heard a voice. “Emily, dear, where have you been? You best get out of the cold.” Margaret said condescendingly, smiling nicely at Judy. “Thank you.” She whispered to Judy, “She’s a bit forgetful.”

Emily turned with a soulful expression as Margaret bustled her inside.

“That lady doesn’t like Emily, Mum.”

How insightful, Judy thought as she patted Charlotte on the head. I wonder if she is forgetful or Margaret is abusing her?



Back at the bus stop Judy gave Charlotte her book and pencils, then took out her mobile phone. *I'm going to ring Mum, she thought, and see if she can enquire around the neighbourhood. If Emily is being abused, it needs to be reported.*

“Hi Mum... No, everything's okay... Just got a bit waylaid,” Judy assured her mum, Sandra. “We met a lady named Emily and walked her home. She lives a couple of streets from you, Irving Street.

“Small woman. Sits at the bus stop for hours?” enquired Sandra.

“You know her?”

“Don't exactly know her, but I've heard about her from my neighbour. The goss is that her daughter-in-law locks her out of her house!”

“What?” Judy screeched so loudly, Charlotte stopped colouring for a moment. Judy patted her daughter on the arm. “It's okay. Nan told me something strange.”

Charlotte laughed and returned to her book. As she journeyed home, Judy mulled over in her mind meeting Emily, plus what her mother told her and decided she was going to make it her mission to check a few things out and definitely stay in touch with Emily. She smelled a rat! Her journalist training told her “something was very wrong in Irving Street”!

Later that evening when her daughter was safely tucked up in bed, Judy told her husband Rob about the meeting she and Charlotte had with Emily and her very obnoxious daughter-in-law, Margaret.

“You would have been proud of your daughter. If I was still at the newspaper I would be checking the files tomorrow. In fact—”

Rob interrupted his wife. “In fact you might do that tomorrow, is what you were going to say, wasn't it? I know you too well and yes, Charlotte is a chip off the old block! I remember when that man, I think his name was Trevor, died. His wife and his mother were brought in for questioning. The mother, I recall, was totally distraught! Not so his wife! The super expressed some concerns about the nature of his demise but, at the end of the day, forensics couldn't come up with anything so the case was closed.”



The next morning with Charlotte at kindy until lunchtime, Judy called at The Carrington Gazette, where she had worked for many years before having her daughter.

“Hi, Judy. What brings you here so bright and early? Got a good lead for us?” enquired Don, the editor.

“I might have. Just wondered if I could go online and check out a few back copies? I promise if I come up with anything I’ll tell you,” replied Judy.

“What story are you interested in?” queried Don.

“The death of a man named Trevor about six months ago. Don’t know his surname. Lived on Irving Street. Wife’s name Margaret, mother Emily. Just between you and I, Rob said his super was concerned about the matter but there was insufficient evidence to keep the case open. The coroner recorded an open verdict.”

Just before lunch, having scrolled through back copies and made a few notes, Judy thanked Don and promised to keep in touch. She left the newspaper office to pick Charlotte up from kindy.

“Are we going to Nan’s again today? Yippee!” remarked Charlotte as she and Judy waited at the bus stop.

Once on board the bus, Judy explained to her daughter that she would be having lunch with her Nan, while she did a small job. Charlotte greeted the news with a broad smile.

As Judy made her way to Irving Street, she texted Rob to let him know her whereabouts. Emily wasn’t sitting at the bus stop which made Judy hopeful she may be at home. Perhaps her daughter-in-law was out giving Emily the chance to relax?

Number 3 Irving Street was a double-storey brick home. The front garden lacked attention; there were tyre marks in the lawn, and weeds were more prominent than flowers in the garden beds. As she pressed the bell, Judy noticed that paint was peeling off the front door. The sound echoed through the house. There was no answer. She pressed again.

“You looking for Em?” called a man’s voice over the hedge.



Judy turned around and stepped away from the door. "Yes, I was hoping Emily may be home."

"She don't get many visitors, not since Trevor passed," replied the man. "I'm Ted. Know Em well. She took it hard, you know!"

Judy walked across the path to the hedge. "My name's Judy," she replied, shaking Ted's hand.

"Reckon 'the sheriff' is out!"

"The sheriff?" Do you mean Margaret?"

"Right on!" Ted's face broke into a smile. "She's a right tyrant, that woman. Me and the missus, we call her 'the sheriff.' Keeps our Em locked out of the house for hours. Spends a lot of her day at the bus stop. It ain't right. Me missus often brings her to our place. Our Em is not a happy lady since Trevor went. She reckons Margaret got rid of him."

"Really?" remarked Judy. "What makes her say that?"

"The sheriff is after Em's money! Trevor got the flu. That woman filled him up with potions! He never recovered. Smart one, she is. Covered her tracks real good my missus reckons."

Judy digested the conversation and smiled. "I think I'll go round the back and check on Emily. She may be asleep?"

"I'm coming with you," Ted said.

Judy peered through the sliding door at the back of the house while Ted tried the kitchen door.

"Come on," shouted Ted. "It's not locked. That's unusual. Hey, Em! Em are you here?" Ted called walking into the kitchen. "Oh, my God!" he gasped.

Emily was unconscious on the white tiled floor. Congealed blood had oozed from her upper arm and neck.

"Emily, Emily! Can you hear me?" Judy called anxiously. Ted began dialling triple 000.



“Oh, no you don’t!” Emily’s daughter-in-law Margaret raced across the kitchen, grabbed Ted’s mobile and hit him across the head with a golf club.

He fell to the ground unconscious.

Judy screamed.

“Don’t pay to be a sticky beak. Who’re you?” Margaret snarled. It made Judy think of a cat.

“I— I met Emily at the bus stop yesterday. She seemed frail and I was worried about her, just thought I’d call to check on her,” Judy stammered.

“I know yer did. Busybody. But who are you?”

“Judy Archer, my husband is a police officer. A detective.” She hoped pulling rank would impress, but it didn’t.

“I’ll definitely have to get rid of yer then, won’t I?” She glanced down at Emily. “Two birds with one stone so to speak”. She shoved Ted with her foot but he was out cold. “Maybe three. This is getting complicated. I need to think. Damn, damn, damn! It’s time old Emily left the planet. I need the money. Not fair that the old bird has lived so long.”

Judy looked down at Ted and saw his eyes flicker open. Did she imagine it or did he wink at her? Then she noticed his mobile phone still under his hand. He had dialled 000 she was sure and knew the number could be tracked. Would she be so lucky that the operator was concerned and had rung the police or ambulance? The answer came a second later when a siren could be heard in the distance.

“Please God, let help be coming,” she prayed silently.

“Maybe you’re not going to get that chance, that’s help coming to investigate the 000 call,” she hoped the comment would buy her time even if it wasn’t the much-needed help on the way.



“What? What? What call? Damn. I didn’t think it had gone through.” She grabbed the phone from under Ted and went to throw it across the room when she saw it was indeed turned on and the number 000 on the screen.

As she twisted to throw it, Ted reached out and pulled her leg with a jarring wrench. She screamed as she fell to the floor and the golf club she had been menacing Judy with fell from her hand.

Judy sat on top of Margaret, pinning her down. Ted groaned and held his head as he reached over to see if Emily was still breathing.

He thought he detected a slight movement but he moaned, “Thank goodness.” The siren stopped at the door and two ambos and two police officers pushed open the door.

“Anyone here? Does someone need help?” called the first officer. Then they saw the chaos sprawled across the kitchen floor.

“I think the answer to that is yes,” said the young paramedic.

Emily opened her eyes and looked around in a daze. She saw Judy and reached out her hand.

“I saw Trevor. I saw my Trevor. He said everything was going to be alright. He said Margaret was going away. Where is she going? Where is she?”

She then looked at the crumpled body Judy had pinned under her while the police officer took handcuffs from his belt.

“I see,” she said and smiled. “Thank you Trevor. Thank you Judy.”

Judy remembered Charlotte’s words the previous day, That lady doesn’t like Emily, Mum.

From the mouths of babes, she thought and smiled with relief as the police officer helped her to her feet. That was quite a detour!

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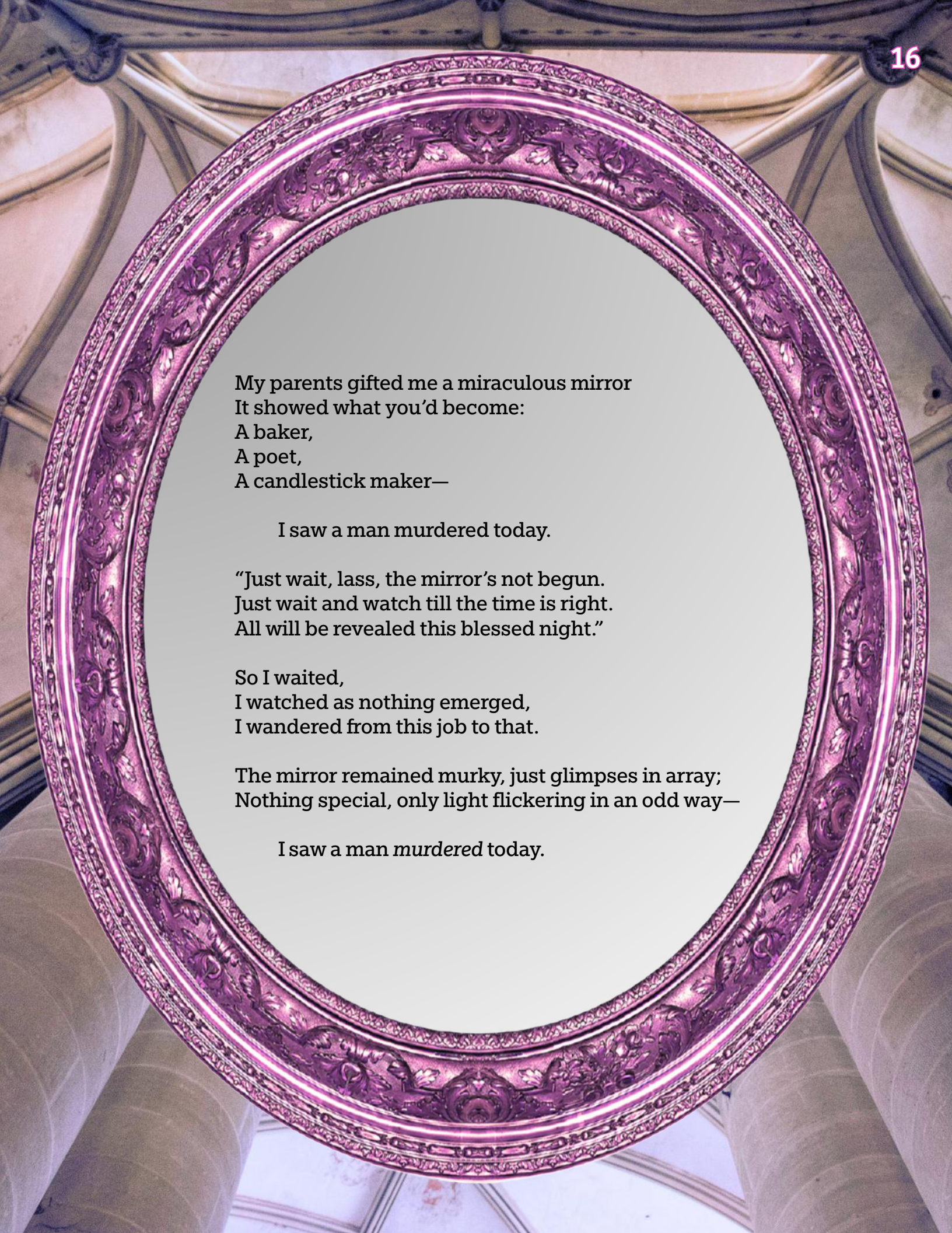
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***This poem is dedicated to Alex Pretti and
Renee Good.***

*Sue Cook
Reality Check*



My parents gifted me a miraculous mirror
It showed what you'd become:
A baker,
A poet,
A candlestick maker—

I saw a man murdered today.

“Just wait, lass, the mirror's not begun.
Just wait and watch till the time is right.
All will be revealed this blessed night.”

So I waited,
I watched as nothing emerged,
I wandered from this job to that.

The mirror remained murky, just glimpses in array;
Nothing special, only light flickering in an odd way—

I saw a man *murdered* today.

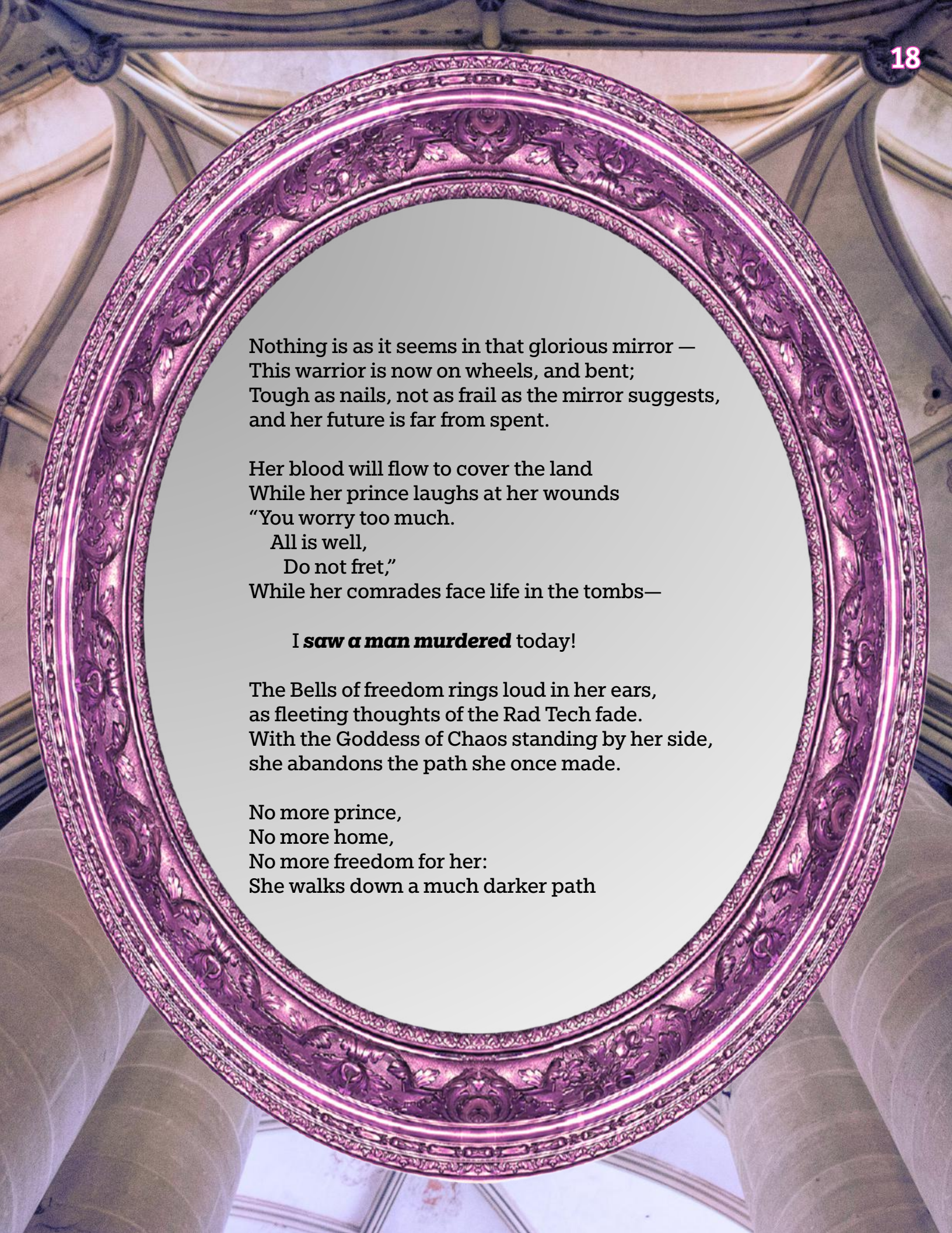
I fell deeply in love with the medical field
Till sickness pulled me back from my peace
Again to the mirror did I go for advice.
“When will this illness cease?”

But the mirror remained quiet as I pleaded and begged;
So I retired to my bed in defeat.

Years passed till a prince did spirit me away.
Illness never slowed the love in his chest.
I reminded in that bed til an answer was found
Too late to return to my quest—

I saw a man murdered today!

Now I stand at the mirror knowing nothing will change,
My path has been altered by time.
The mirror shows a warrior
In sweats, with her dog;
Fear is the mountain she climbs.



Nothing is as it seems in that glorious mirror —
This warrior is now on wheels, and bent;
Tough as nails, not as frail as the mirror suggests,
and her future is far from spent.

Her blood will flow to cover the land
While her prince laughs at her wounds
“You worry too much.

All is well,
Do not fret,”
While her comrades face life in the tombs—

I saw a man murdered today!

The Bells of freedom rings loud in her ears,
as fleeting thoughts of the Rad Tech fade.
With the Goddess of Chaos standing by her side,
she abandons the path she once made.

No more prince,
No more home,
No more freedom for her:
She walks down a much darker path

Will she ever come back to her once happy life?
Even the mirror laughs at the thought of that plight—

I saw a man murdered today!

The warrior stands changed and hard,
Betrayal is her standard aloft.
What she once believed firm is on movable ground;
Everything else is off.

Circumstances leave her beliefs in a whirl,
The young girl was left in the mist
People are devils with promises galore,
A gun they hold tight in their fist!—

I saw a man murdered today!

She lowers her eyes,
Kisses her dog on the head,
Then shouts out one word:
Resist!

Open
Submissions
for Poetry
at the
Mocking Owl
Roost

February 16-28,
2026

Read our
submission
guidelines to
learn more about
themes and
topics for this
period.



What is it like,
this thing you didn't have,
you didn't know was there?
Is it what you imagined?
Hard questions.
Did you lose it?
Did you miss the turn?
Did you miss the boat?
Did you let it slip away?
Did you not understand
that dreams cannot be had
if you never know they
are there?
Did you not see that you can't
just reach out into the dark?
If you can't see it, then you
stumble along, thinking only of
how it could have been
if things had been just right.

David W. Berner

IF THINGS HAD BEEN JUST RIGHT

Nonfiction

Charlotte Poitras

It Was Written in the Stars, But It's Clear as Day

Before I even knew how to write, I was copying the text I saw on milk cartons — strangely backwards, as if read in a mirror, don't know why. I knew how to write my name at three years old: C-H-A-R-L-O-T-T-E. I read stories to my classmates in kindergarten. I kept correcting my teachers in elementary school and they made me skip a year (spoiler: I was gifted). I won every single reading contest in elementary school, even as the youngest reader. I started working as a writer in high school. So I guess the road to follow was clear. I wanted to be...

An actress.

I played a tree in our elementary school version of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. I got only two and a half lines (I shared one with someone else) at a two-week acting summer camp in *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. I had the fewest lines in my high school play *The Bald Soprano* by Ionesco (but luckily a classmate was expelled from going blackout drunk in class so I replaced him). The only agent I got was a scam that not only asked me to pay to join the agency, but also to pay the production to be an extra three hours away from where I lived.

The best advice my acting teacher gave me? “Quit.”

The good thing is, I kept working as a writer during this little detour. I wrote articles as part of a flexible job that would allow me to act (or hope to act) whenever I could. I wrote and performed in my own TV commercial at 14. I wrote a couple of plays in the hope of getting a role. I even won a comedy contest three times from my writing. So when I had to “reinvent myself”, I realized that my writing resume was actually much longer than my acting one.

Two years after that switch, I made a living out of writing — even though I always had another regular job as an actor. I had published more than sixty works of literature — when most of my acting experiences weren't even worth writing on a resume.

I got thousands of dollars from grants — when I spent more money on building my acting career than I earned pretending to act. I worked as a jury for the arts council — nothing to compare with acting, I was only judging myself poorly.

If there is one quote that can summarize this situation, it is: “Love is like a fart, if you have to force it, it's probably shit.”

While I do love a challenge, life isn't supposed to be that hard. Putting lots of effort into things should lead to results. I didn't take the scenic road; I got lost in a creepy neighbourhood and then fell into a river. I quit acting after ten years when I realized that even when I did get a lead role, I still had to keep fighting to get a non-speaking role. I hadn't moved forward; I was only staying afloat. “Don't give up” is sometimes the most unhealthy thing you can tell someone in this situation. Do give up when you are swimming against the current or soon you'll drown. But do find another way to swim up in a river that won't be filled with torrents. Quitting was the best decision I ever made. I took some time to catch my breath before jumping back in and finding an easier way to get there. Abandoning a losing fight before getting injured is what gave me the chance to win a fair one.

The funny thing is, now that I work as a writer, I still get to act. I perform my own audio stories monthly, act in my own short films, and pose for my own visual art. Acting also made me amazing at interviews and book signings. But I am not kissing the casting director's feet anymore. I recognize my worth, and I hire myself in my own productions. I did waste a lot of gas going off-road for ten years, but I brought a lot of souvenirs along with me. Now that I'm on the right track, there are fewer potholes (there can't be none, I'm from Montreal).

I'll end with a meme I saw: Water is (almost) free at your home, \$2 at the convenience store, and \$10 at the airport. It doesn't change anything about you and what you are worth — just walk towards a place that recognizes your value.

Crossroads

Gregory Smith

Fiction



Have you ever played the game of “what if?” For instance, “What if I took the left road instead of the right?” We make decisions every day, from small ones like what to eat for breakfast or what to wear each morning to major, life-altering decisions like where to seek employment.

Some things are just meant to be. Sometimes there is no other explanation, no excuse, no justification for life-changing events. They’re out of our control. Destiny plays a major role in our lives, as though the script of our life has already been written and we are but actors in a play, following a pre-ordained sequence of events. At least, that’s what I’ve come to believe. And I have my reasons...

I was driving home from work one night a few minutes later than usual — Ralph, one of my co-workers, in the middle of punching out on the time-clock, had started pestering me to join him and his wife in their weekly pickleball tournaments. I finally told him I’d think about it, and we separated in the rainy parking lot around twelve minutes after midnight. A country music station crooned on my truck’s radio, and I sang along to Randy Travis as I approached Henderson Road — a rural road so lined with cornfields on each side, it felt spooky even when the weather behaved.

And this particular stretch was especially remote: No sidewalks, streetlamps, or houses anywhere, just dark, empty farmland as far as an eye could see. Then my headlights bounced off something shiny up ahead, and my heart skipped a beat as I realized that someone had wrecked. I slowed down, pulled over, and grabbed my umbrella before jumping out. My headlights illuminated every ugly detail as I sprinted toward the mangled pickup. It looked like someone had T-boned it so hard that they’d flung it aside — the driver’s side was crushed, and the windshield had shattered. I could see blood splattered all around, along with millions of shiny glass fragments, but I looked in the pickup anyway, just in case the driver was trapped inside.

No one was there.

Had rescue services already been and gone, and no one had cleaned up yet? I glanced around, trying to peer into the darkness, then heard a voice calling nearby.

“Please help me!” A young man lay by the side of the road, his face bloodied and one eye swollen shut. Gaping, I knelt beside him, holding the umbrella over his head. “Tell my wife I love her,” he said, as more blood dribbled from his mouth.

Man, I got the chills right there and then, but not from the cold rain, which now suddenly began to come down heavier.

This guy looked young, maybe in his twenties, like me. His face and shirt were full of cuts, gashes, and glass, and judging by how he was laying on the ground, he likely had a few broken bones, too. He must have crashed through the windshield and gone flying a good twenty feet or so from his truck. The poor fellow was lucky to be alive, let alone conscious. Then I noticed his wedding ring.

“Mary, where are you?” he moaned.

Who’s Mary? I wondered. His wife? I swallowed and tried to think of what to say. He must have friends — coworkers, teammates from high school or college, drinking buddies. He must have family, too. Why should I — a stranger — be the one to hear his last words? This guy had lived through childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, only to end up here, at the end of his life with nobody else but me?

With a start, I raised myself up and grabbed my phone from my pocket to dial 911. No way, I told myself, though my hands shook a little. No way is he going to die on my watch.

I wished I could just bundle him into my truck and speed off to County General Hospital myself, but I knew not to touch him. Somehow, he and I would have to wait for that ambulance.

“Hang in there, buddy,” I said. “Ambulance will be here soon.”

His good eye drifted closed, and I felt a wave of sheer panic ripple through me as I leaned over him again. Keep him talking, I thought. Keep him thinking. He started to shiver violently, so I yanked off my leather jacket and tucked it around him. Summer night or not, this rain wasn’t warming anyone up. I patted his cheek gently, and almost swooned with relief when his good eye reopened.

“What’s your name, buddy?” I asked.

“Jeff,” he groaned.

“Hey, that’s my name too,” I said. “How ‘bout that? What’s your wife’s name?”

“Laura,” he answered in a whisper.

“Have any kids, Jeff?”

“Two.”

“Two, huh?” I replied. “Me too! What’re their names?”

Hours seemed to pass before the ambulance arrived, but in reality it had been only minutes. The EMTs loaded him into the back and left, their lights and siren piercing the lonely, rain-soaked Iowa night before they faded away. Then the cops asked me a few questions — how did it happen, had I seen anything, heard anything, had the guy said anything — the run-of-the-mill documentation, really. I couldn't give them much, but by then I'd begun to suspect that I'd only missed seeing the accident by a few minutes.

Wide skid marks smeared a slant across the highway, almost as if the other vehicle had swerved to avoid contact. I told the police that I hadn't smelled alcohol on his breath, hadn't seen anything about him out of the ordinary. But did it matter? Did anything matter at this point?

Eventually, they let me go while they stayed on the scene and waited for the tow truck to show. Not another soul had come through in all that time, and my head had started to buzz by then. It had also started to think, that could've been me.

I was still shaking when I finally got back in my truck and pulled away. I wanted nothing more than to go home to my wife and kids, and to hug them extra tight in the morning. But my mind fixated on the image of a state trooper or a local cop going to this guy's house and breaking the news — news that their Jeff had been in a bad accident.

And instead of going straight home, I found myself making a detour to the hospital.

As I headed into the Emergency Room, I saw the same ambulance that had transported Jeff parked near the entrance, the motor running, but the back empty.

I headed to the reception desk and asked about Jeff. The nurse pinched his lips together and shook his head. "Unless you're family, we can't let you in," he said.

"I don't need to go in," I tried to explain. "And I understand about confidentiality and all that but, damn it, I was the only one there with him at the wreck. I need to know how he's doing. I don't think I'll be able to sleep otherwise. Please."

Another nurse came in from the back triage, and the two whispered together for a moment. Finally, the nurse on duty sighed and turned back to me as the second nurse, a new file in hand, pushed back through the way she'd come.

"I'm sorry," he said. "He was DOA."

The words hit me almost as hard as whatever had hit Jeff's truck. I slumped against the desk as the nurse's words tried to soothe. "You did the right thing calling for help," he said. "You know that, right? We all did everything we could. It just wasn't meant to be."

Upstairs in our room, Mary was sleeping soundly, the blankets over her rising and falling with an even, silent gentleness. It was late, almost 3 a.m., but I sat on the edge of our bed, unable to lie down. That could've been me repeated over and over in my head.

If I had been on time getting out of work. If I'd decided to speed a little to make up for the lost time. If I'd done anything even slightly different — that could've been me. Why was I saved? My Mary could be the one at the hospital right now, trying to come to terms with the accident on Henderson Road. My children could be the ones to wake without me in the morning. At last I stood, pulled the blankets back, and crawled into bed. I wrapped my arms around her waist from behind, laid my head on her back, and inhaled deeply, trying to dispel everything that hung over me by matching her rhythmic breaths.

Mary stirred. "You're home?" she mumbled, still half-asleep.

"I'm sorry to wake you, baby," I replied softly.

"It's okay," she said. "How was work?"

"Work was okay. Saw an accident on the way home."

"Oh, no. Was it bad?"

"Yeah, pretty bad."

"Anybody hurt?"

"A guy died." I felt my voice threatening to begin shaking, and finished quickly, "I was there as he was dying."

"Oh, sweetie," she replied, waking up a little more and turning over to face me. She stroked her hand across my face. "I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said. I'd never lied to my wife, but that night I did. I wasn't sure if I was okay or not. I just kept thinking about the wreck, and about how life can be extinguished so quickly, without warning — everything you work for, all your dreams and plans, gone, within a matter of seconds. I kept thinking about how short a time we have to live and to love and to do good.

After a moment, I made a decision. “You know how we’ve been talking about going with the kids to Disney?” I whispered. “I know money’s been tight since we needed a new roof. But now I’m thinking we should go anyway. We keep putting it off and putting it off, always an excuse. Not anymore. Life is too precious to waste. Let’s start making plans tomorrow.”

But Mary never heard a word. She was already sleeping peacefully again, like a soft kitten curled in a warm ball. I smiled, relaxed a little, and started to doze. But before I had fully drifted off, a final thought crossed my mind: As he was dying, why had Jeff asked for Mary even though he had a wife named Laura?

Later the following day, I found Jeff Walker’s obituary online, with his picture on it.

“Looks just like you,” my wife commented. “Same name too. Freaky...”

I nodded, feeling a small chill at the base of my neck. The only difference I could see was that he had a nicely-trimmed beard, and I was clean-shaven.

I decided to attend his gravesite memorial service a few days later, if for no other reason than to give his final message to his wife. I wanted her to know that, right up to his dying breath, he was thinking of her.

Tell my wife I love her echoed in my mind throughout the service, bolstering me as I sat among so many strangers. If his and my places had been reversed, I could only hope that he would have done the same for Mary.

Jeff’s gray urn of ashes sat on a small pedestal beside the mausoleum wall in the St. Francis of Assisi Cemetery. It had been a while since I’d attended a burial for anyone, but the location held an oddly pleasant note of familiarity for me: I had cut grass here for several summers as a high schooler.

The service progressed with dignity, and an assortment of Jeff’s family and friends came up beside the pedestal to speak, one after the other. They told stories, both humorous and raw, that detailed how engaging a character he’d been, and how his quirks and his lively sense of humor had brightened their lives. By the end of the ceremony, I felt like I’d known Jeff for a long time — like we had some sort of bond, something which tied us together — and I had begun to wish we’d met sooner. We’d lived so near each other for all that while, literally only blocks apart, but our lives had never intersected until it was already too late.

The service ended, and those in attendance gathered around his widow Laura, offering their various condolences. This was my chance. I rose from the chair I’d taken near the back, and stood in line with the others as we slowly shuffled forward together toward her. My turn came.

“Mrs. Walker, I’m so sorry,” I said. “I know you don’t know me, but my name is Jeff and I was there when Jeff—” I paused, then tried again, “What I mean to say is, I was the one who came upon the accident. I called 911. He said to tell you—”

Then the strangest thing happened. As I stood there in front of Mrs. Walker, she reached out her hand to the next person in line behind me, greeting them with a tear-stained smile. I stared at her, then at those around me. No one was looking at me! No one even acknowledged I was there. I took a couple of steps backward, and not a one of them even glanced my way. It was as though I were invisible.

I tried to process everything as I drove home, but minute by minute, the eeriness crept further in. Why did I feel so close to this guy? It had to be more than just being present when he died, more than sharing a name. Something else was pulling at me — something I couldn’t explain. And then that service!

“What is going on here?” I wondered aloud. The notion that I was in some sort of alternate universe or was leading a “mirrored life”, and that somehow our lives had blended for an instant, fled across my mind.

And exactly at that moment, I heard a voice. “Let it go, man,” it said. “Some things are just meant to be.”

I slammed on my brakes and pulled off to the side of the road, as near as I’d ever been to hyperventilating as I jerked my head to look in every direction — in my car, outside, above me, across the corn fields. No one showed themselves, and after a minute, I let out a slower breath and relaxed enough to start thinking it through.

It could have been my conscious talking. Or my alter ego. Maybe I’d just heard that “little voice inside” that people talk about, the one that gives advice, warns of danger, protects and reassures? Or was it a guardian angel perhaps?

After a few minutes, I pulled back onto the road. And when Mary asked me how the service had gone, I lied again and said it went fine.

That night, I drove home from work at the usual time. It was a clear night, with blinking stars spread out above the fields as far as one could see. A full moon shone brightly too, throwing an eerie, buttery glow over the cornfields. I stopped at the Henderson Road crossroads — the first time I’d been back here since the accident — and for a brief few seconds, my truck’s lights illuminated the site of the tragic accident from only a few nights before.

But before I could proceed through the intersection, lightning flashed before my eyes. In an instant, I found myself thrown from my truck, lying on the side of the road, exactly as I'd found Jeff. A torrential summer thunderstorm raged around me, soaking my clothes, and my chest with its now-broken ribs heaved in excruciating pain with every labored breath I tried to catch. I was certain other bones had also fractured, and the pounding rain stung into a hundred different lacerations. I could feel every ounce of energy and life slowly oozing out of me, one drop of blood at a time.

And there — there was my truck in the road, smashed in on the side and turned over. I gaped at it, trying to believe what I was feeling and seeing, trying to understand what I was experiencing.

It was almost as if I had switched places with Jeff!

Speaking of which, through my one good eye, I saw Jeff jumping out of his truck at the crossroad and running up to me with an umbrella in hand. He knelt down beside me.

“Tell my wife I love her,” I begged him. Jeff opened an umbrella and held it over my head as he struggled with shaking hands to call 911. The slippery phone almost dropped onto the road more than once. I lay there, numb, in complete shock. One moment I had been perfectly safe in my truck, appreciating a beautiful and perfectly clear night, and the next—

They say that when you're dying, your life replays itself before your eyes, like a movie. And I did see myself in that moment. First as a young boy, fishing by a local creek during summer. Then as a newlywed, sleeping with my Mary beneath the stars and breathing in the vast universe until dawn, something we still did often in the summer. But now I lay sprawled out by the gravelly side of a country road, in the middle of a stormy night. The rain pelted Jeff's wind-blown umbrella, which he struggled to maintain, and the thunder and lightning fought for dominance overhead.

“Where's Laura?” I asked, calling out the first name that came to mind as I saw him start to speak into his phone.

He turned his face toward me and said, “Hang in there, man. The ambulance is on its way.”

Am I going to die? I wondered. Or am I dreaming? How could I know what was real or illusion? Then I felt the EMTs loading me into the back of an ambulance. Their siren sounded, and everything turned blank and dark around me.

A bright white light pierced through, shining into my eyes, and all fear drained away. I could no longer feel the bouncing of the ambulance or the pains in my ribs; all had stilled to a blissful peace, and a tremendous amount of love impressed itself into my heart and soul.

And then, in the midst of that, some voice whispered, “Go back. You're not ready yet.”

I found that I didn't want to go back. I wanted to stay in that light, in these feelings. But then memories of my life began to blink rapidly across my mind — Mary, our children, my work, our home—

Yes, I decided, Take me back. I want to go back to my wife and kids.

A bolt of lightning flashed into my consciousness, transporting me back to my truck as it sat in the middle of the intersection on Henderson Road. A speeding eighteen-wheeler roared by my back window, blowing its horn and missing me by inches as I stomped on the gas and left the haunted crossroad behind me.

A few weeks passed as I tried to sort all these events out in my mind. Ultimately, the best I could come up with was that I'd fallen asleep at the wheel. That explanation felt like a cop-out, because it had seemed so real, yet what other logical reason could there be? But one way or another, the experience did change a few things: Mary and I started putting aside the funds we needed for that Disney trip, and I finally told Ralph that we'd double up with him for pickleball after all. Life was too short.

Jeff Walker and I had our individual destinies — of that I'd become certain. His was to perish in the accident, while mine was to live, to raise my family. I began to feel that I owed it to him to remember his loss, and to keep at the forefront of my mind what it had meant for both of us. To that end, I decided to visit his burial site again. Choosing a sunny afternoon to pay my respects, I drove over and headed toward the mausoleum, and to the niche in the wall that I remembered from the funeral.

But — there was no marker. The marble niche cover that should have shown his name gleamed untouched in the sunlight. No one was buried there.

Impossible, my mind said. You were here, standing right here—

—Right here, another part of my brain responded, where everyone else had ignored me.

I searched the area, looking everywhere for his name without success. I knew this cemetery — I even recognized the names of others inscribed nearby — but Jeff's was nowhere to be seen.

My hands shaking, I grabbed for my phone and pulled up the internet to find his obituary. As I searched, memories of the funeral flitted across my mind: The funeral director was the same man who'd buried my Uncle Henry; I remembered the exact date and time of Jeff's service; no less than four flower wreaths had graced the front where people spoke.

There was no obituary. It was as though Jeff had never died.

And that evening, the greatest shock of all took place. When Mary and I arrived to join Ralph and his wife for the pickleball tournament, I saw Jeff Walker and his wife Laura waiting for their opposing team on the next court. My knees threatened to buckle, so I leaned against the wall and tried to look nonchalant.

Jeff gave me a nod — a simple greeting, nothing more. We played our matches, and he and Laura won that week's tourney handily. We talked a little after, and he never mentioned the accident, so I didn't either. We've since played — and lost — against them plenty more times, but not a word has passed between us regarding Henderson Road.

All I can figure at this point is that somehow our cosmic signals got crossed. Somehow our lives, so similar already, had been blended together just enough to throw Fate out of whack for a bit. Maybe that's why we'd both gotten a pass — it wasn't our fault that our lives had been accidentally spliced together.

Still, every time we play, the world feels a little bit off, as if I'm looking through the snowy static of an old TV. The balls don't all go where I expect, some things look a little blurrier than they should, and I've begun to wonder: Is my life the illusion? Am I the one who doesn't belong? What is real, and what isn't?

Maybe it's just meant to be. But what if...?



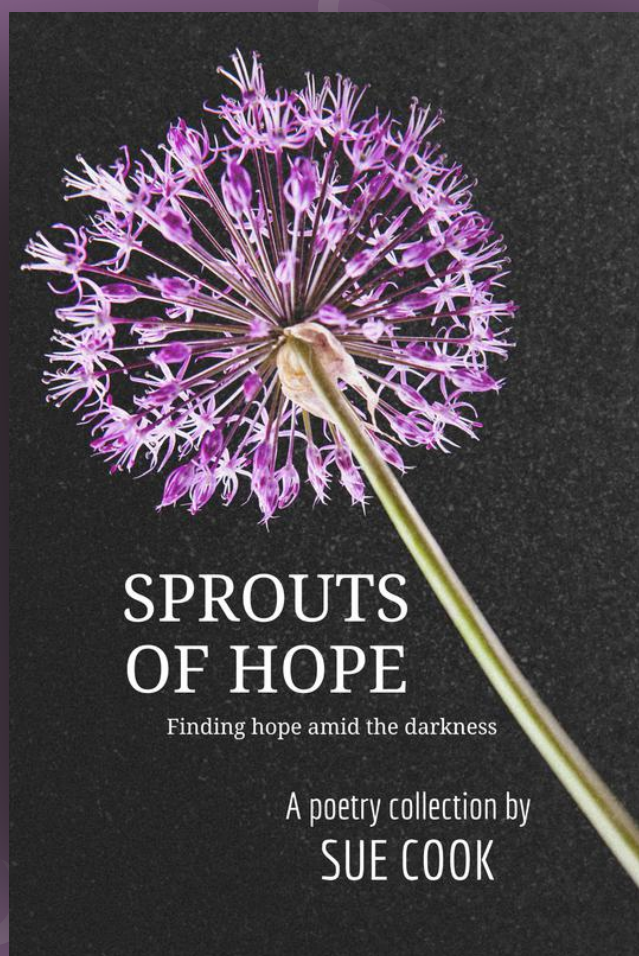
IF NOT

DAVID W. BERNER

If it were not to be,
then where and when?
If it were not to lose,
then how does one cherish?
If not you,
then who would save me?
If not this day,
then how could it be another?
If not the sun,
then it must be Mars.
If not your touch,
then your eyes on mine.
And when you are gone,
and I am alone,
or when I am gone,
and you find yourself among
the midnight stars,
what will be
if not sorrow's wish?
What will be
if not eternity wanting?

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****Content warning: Loss of spouse, hoarding due to depression****

Holding on to Alan

Fiction



Alice Lawson

Janet packed up Alan's clothes; she couldn't bear to see the skins of the man she loved hanging lifelessly. She wouldn't part with them either, so she stacked the clothes-stuffed boxes in the spare room, inching the room narrower.

The gap in the wardrobe drew her eyes, like a missing tooth in a smile. She brought more outfits to fill the space — cosy jumpers that felt like a half-hearted hug.

Weeks crawled past with Janet wandering the house forgetting why she entered rooms; he had been her purpose. Her light. She'd orbited him, delivering cups of tea and slices of cake. Now she rummaged through his packed possessions just to pull out a piece of Alan and sniff it. She tried to sit in his chair, but it was moulded to his shape.

Charity shops in town became her haunts. Janet picked up items that he would have smiled at, like a silly wooden duck wearing wellingtons. And those which caught her eye; beaded jewellery, the tea set with flower shaped teacups, a collection of cat ornaments which were sold separately but destined to be together. At Savers she bought ten cans of old spice deodorant intending to spread them throughout the house to keep it all smelling of cinnamon and vanilla and him.

The bus ride home was tricky, staggering under the weight of bulging bags, feeling the cool gazes of the strangers judging her. Crazy bag lady.

The Fray Bentos pies that Alan had loved called out to her from the cupboard. Janet had been a life-long vegetarian — now she let a piece of steak sit like an extra tongue on top of hers, the salty gravy reminiscent of an after-dinner kiss.

At some point Janet discovered online shopping, and her excursions tapered off. Shortbread, toy trains, brightly coloured teapots, bonsai trees, and a vast array of cat ornaments were ordered. Followed by a shelving unit to put it all on.

Delivery drivers frequented her door. It became harder to find anything as the piles of boxes towered higher in each room. By the time the shelving unit arrived, there wasn't space for it. Janet wasn't so keen on it anyway when she realised it required assembly — Alan had dealt with anything requiring a screwdriver, and who knew where one of those could be found! Possibly in the odds and ends drawer in the kitchen, blocked by several boxes of bleach that were on offer. The box containing the shelving unit was left propped up against the box wall in the hall, permanently narrowing the pathway.



Getting around the house Janet thought of herself as an ant walking through tunnels. Cosy. She added magazines, newspapers, all the papers they put through the door which advertised double glazing and stone paving, and leaflets from grinning electoral candidates. She might want the driveway done sometime. Or to revisit the faces when deciding who to vote for.

To her virtual basket Janet added boxes of scampi crisps and crates of cream soda which Alan adored. The delivery man had to carry them in for her, balancing the parcels precariously on the first space he found. She tore open a box and devoured a bag of crisps. When was the last time she had eaten?

As the weather grew warmer the house developed a musty odour which was worse in some rooms than others. Perhaps it was the bonsai trees which Janet could no longer find to water?

One day, Janet brushed too close to the wall of stuff lining the hall causing the boxed shelving unit to fall, alongside a landslide of boxes and clutter behind her.

Trapped, she tried to manoeuvre some objects out of the way, but there was nowhere to put them. Besides, the shelving unit was heavier than her thin arms could manage.

Janet cried out, but it sounded muffled; the house was so insulated with things. She reviewed the bedroom in which she was now a prisoner. The bed had long since been consumed, so she couldn't sit down there.

What a pickle!

What would Alan think?

If Alan were here, he'd shout his lungs out to get someone to come and help her.

At that moment Alan materialised in front of her, as if summoned by her thinking of him, shaking his head.

"What a right mess this is." He gestured at the wooden legs of a duck with wellingtons sticking out from a pile of clothes. "Why'd I want this daft duck, eh?"



He turned his attention to several unopened crates of soft drinks. "An' what am I supposed to do wi' cream soda now?" His voice was full of exasperation, but his eyes twinkled with laughter, and a teasing smile played at the corner of his lips — the same old straight-talking Yorkshireman she'd fallen in love with.

She blinked and Alan disappeared, leaving her with all the things that never filled the void which he left.

Janet couldn't face the embarrassment of being reunited with Alan if he knew how it came about — her being trapped by a shelving unit she was too daft to assemble, and all the things she didn't need. She hollered, straining her out-of-practice lungs, hoping a neighbour would hear and raise the alarm. She couldn't remember the last time she'd spoken to someone, let alone raised her voice.

Minutes ticked by and no one came.

Janet saw the cluttered room blur through her teary eyes as she contemplated sitting on the patch of floor she was standing on, but getting up again seemed like an impossible task. If she sat down, she was done for — this would be her tomb.

Then, as if by divine intervention, a voice shouted through the letter box, "Hallo, is anyone home? We've had a few reports of rubbish outside. Can you come to the door, and I'll show you my badge and explain?"

"Help!" Janet cried weakly, having shouted herself hoarse.

The kind man heard her plea and called the fire brigade. In no time, they'd knocked down the door and carved a route to Janet who was equal parts mortified at how the house must look through a stranger's eyes, and furious at the way the fireman trampled over her treasures trying to reach her.

"Don't you worry, m'love, I'll get you out," he said, extending a hand to her.

A smile crept across her face for the first time in a year.

She wasn't quite free, but felt freer, and ready to start letting go of some things.

BROKEN

Trust turns on a word.

Once uttered
the world turns,
good graces set
aside, feelings hurt,
hearts defied.

What was once
in harmony, turns flat,
feels final, goodbyes
are never said.



Susan Haifleigh

Eggshells

41

Jeremy Dixon

Fiction



****Content warning: child death, PTSD, vehicle manslaughter****

“Sorry, I know — I’m late,” Emma called, leaning over and giving the car door a shove. She was red-faced, simmering, despite the heavy saturnine sky and the rain that spilled out of it.

Toby caught the door with his foot, pulled it open, brushed the rain off his black leather coat and slid into the passenger seat, dropping his umbrella and laptop bag into the footwell between his feet.

“One of Margaret’s pep-talks,” Emma moaned, watching in the wing mirror for a break in the traffic. “Someone should remind her that she isn’t in charge.” She set off, craning her neck to smile and deliver half a nod to the driver of the blue Mini who’d let her in.

“Shit, look at the traffic,” Emma said, twisting her fists on the wheel and blowing a copper-coloured curl off her turned-up nose, catching it and tucking it behind her ear. She was in her mid-thirties, wearing a grey skirt and an ill-fitting blue and white checked blouse which drooped where the bank’s name badge hung from its pin. Scowling through tired eyes the colour of maple syrup, she peered past the brake lights that fizzed like fireworks in the raindrops bouncing off the windscreen.

“I hate coming this way, it takes so long,” she complained, as the car squeaked to a halt before another red light. She glanced at Toby. He was frowning, staring ahead as if hypnotised by the back-and-forth whir of the windscreen wipers. His small dark eyes, hidden in the shadows cast by low thick brows — far away — alien. He rubbed his face, his hand hissing in his short, dark beard.

“I wonder,” she said, turning the heater down. “It’s been a while since you tried driving.” She straightened her arms and stretched her neck. “Maybe you could have another go.” Her shoulders clicked like an electric shock, and she winced. “I mean, there’s no reason why you couldn’t. And it would be so much easier. I could be home by now, cooking dinner, opening a bottle, running a bath.” She tried to smile, but it was hard as the nerves in her stomach began to tingle, and her chest tightened in that too familiar way. “Tobes, what do you think?”

She risked a glance in his direction as the traffic began to creep forward, up towards the crossroads where the industrial estate met the main road. Toby was gazing through the side window at a flat-bed truck and a blue tarpaulin, twisting and snapping in the wind, fighting viciously with the straps that bound it. He wiped the glass where his breath had fogged it and continued to stare.

“What’re you doin’?” Toby barked, as Emma flicked the indicator on.

“Cutting down Harper Street.”

“No, take the bridge.” His voice was shrill. He was sitting upright, his seatbelt stretched tight, hands flat on the dashboard, his gaze everywhere all at once — everywhere except on the entrance to Harper Street.

“It’s just a road, Toby, like any other and it saves twenty minutes.” She checked her mirror. “I’m tired.”

“Em, please take the bridge.” He shifted in his seat as he breathed quickly. He looked at the door handle and his hand twitched towards it.

Emma glared at him; her plump lips nipped shut. She shook her head and turned into the slip road.

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“Take the bridge,” Toby screamed, snatching the wheel and pushing the car back onto the dual carriageway. A horn howled and tyres hissed on the wet road as a white Mercedes swerved into the outside lane.

“Jesus, Toby,” Emma shrieked, punching his hand off the wheel and grabbing it back. “What the hell are you doing?” She hunched her shoulders, bracing for the bang but there wasn’t one, just a purple-faced Mercedes driver with a bald head, spitting obscenities and pointing.

“I told you to take the bridge.” Toby sounded like a child and Emma desperately wanted to slap him.

She slowed down, steadied the car, took a moment to breathe and looked at Toby. “It’s just a road, Toby, just a fucking road,” she growled.

He stared back, his mouth pinched tight and quivering, his face as grey as the sky. He reached for her but she slapped his hand away. He flinched as her nail caught his skin and watched as a fine red line appeared.

“This has to stop. I can’t do it anymore, I just can’t.” She made a noise through clenched teeth, a desperate strangled scream, thumped the wheel and began to cry.

Emma turned into the drive, the gravel crunching under the car’s wheels, and pulled alongside Toby’s Golf. She looked for a moment at the flat tyres, the willow leaves scattered across its roof, the pigeon shit left uncleaned and burning its way into the paintwork that he’d once been so proud of. Stupid bloody waste, she thought.

She stopped the engine, closed her eyes on the black, plastic interior and listened to the soothing patter of the rain on the car roof, like the crisp drumbeat of a marching band. She opened her window; the air cooled and filled with the musky, vegetative green smell of autumn. She leaned over and kissed Toby’s forehead. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but — well, y’know.” She rubbed her face and groaned and pressed her thumb and forefinger hard on her tightly closed eyes to try and ease the throbbing. She felt guilty for getting angry, or perhaps angry for feeling guilty — she wasn’t sure — but she knew she was exhausted by both.

“A new woman started today,” she said, staring at the red front door, blurred by the tiny rivers running down the windscreen. “She’s nice, my sort of age.”

Toby didn’t reply but he smiled and nodded faintly, like her pleasure meant something. She felt buoyed, took a deep breath, and cautiously continued. “She’s called Sarah.”

Toby still said nothing but his forehead creased and tiny beads of sweat began to appear along his top lip. He looked away.

“I kept thinking that she looked familiar. Then it dawned on me where I’d seen her before.” She gripped Toby’s hand, tightly, as if she was worried that he might be about to run and paused to steady herself. “It was at the trial, Tobes. It was her... The girl’s mother.”

Toby closed his eyes and gasped. She felt him tremble and squeezed his hand a little harder. She waited.

“Are you going to ask me how she is?” she said, eventually.

Toby pulled his hand away. Then he picked up his bag and umbrella. "I need a shower," he said, exiting the car and walking towards the house. The rain dampened his shoulders and glistened in his chocolate brown hair.

Emma was watching the bubbles roll gently down her raised leg, like a tiny lavender and rose-scented avalanche. She was listening to the painted bamboo blinds she bought in Cornwall, with the seagulls and the lighthouses on, clicking against the tiles as it swung back and forth in the draught from the open window. She was thinking about Toby and his reaction to her news. Like he'd been switched off, wandering around the house, a robot on autopilot. She wondered if she'd done the right thing, telling him, but she was so tired of questioning herself, of being his anchor, of hanging on, of guarding every word against his hair-trigger temper, of tiptoeing around on fucking eggshells.

They used to dance every Friday night in the Midnight Club, behind the precinct, which was a bingo hall when they were kids. He could move too, for a big fella. Not like her, of-course. Not like her. She smiled, closed her eyes and rested her head on the smooth plastic rim of the bath. "Dance like nobody's watching?" – Fuck that. Dance because everyone's watching, what other reason is there? She lowered herself a little deeper into the water and breathed in the floral scented steam. She wasn't built to tiptoe; she was built to dance and she so wanted to. She promised herself that soon, she would dance.

Toby had left early that morning. She vaguely remembered hearing the taxi arrive just as the first flickers of daylight had crept around the edges of the bedroom curtains. And now it was late as the front door slammed, sending a shockwave through the tiny terraced house which rippled the water in her bath.

She listened to the footsteps coming up the stairs, and to the creak of the loose floorboard on the landing, thinking about the man she had married, strong, broad like a rugby player. He hadn't seemed so big lately. He was squashed, squeezed, compressed by something tremendous, something too big for him to manage — something too big for them to manage. The bathroom door opened.

"Oh, sorry," Toby said, "I didn't realise. I thought you'd be in bed. I'll go downstairs." He took his toothbrush off the glass shelf above the sink and turned to leave.

"No Tobes, wait. I've missed you." She sat up and took the clip from her hair, releasing it to tumble over her satiny shoulders. "Why don't you join me?" she asked, sliding her tongue along her top lip.

"Not tonight, Em," he replied, closing the door behind him.

Her eyes narrowed into a determined frown.

Toby was in bed when she entered the room, with his back to her and the duvet pulled up to his neck. She was wearing a short silk nightdress which sparkled in the silver shards of moonlight cutting through the gap in the curtains. It clung to her damp body. She crossed the room silently, the deep woollen carpet soft beneath her feet.

She climbed into bed beside him, pulled the duvet off his naked shoulder and kissed his neck, tracing a line with her finger through the short, coarse hairs on his chest. He tasted salty and smelt of his own natural musk and peppermint, which masked stale lager. He didn't react. She kissed him again and squeezed his skin between her teeth.

He shrugged his shoulders like he was flicking off an annoying fly. "Not tonight, Em."

She rolled onto her back with a huff and looked at the star shaped shadow cast on the ceiling by the light fitting. She remembered all the times she'd woken up in the night and he hadn't been there; how she'd found him engulfed in the darkness, sitting in the wicker chair on the patio, smoking, wrapped in an old hoody. She rolled back towards him, slipped her hand into his boxers and stroked the inside of his thigh. "It might help you sleep," she whispered.

"Fuckin' hell, Emma." He rolled towards her and pushed her hand away. "Do you even know what tomorrow is?"

She climbed onto her knees. "Yes Toby, it's Thursday."

He scowled at her. "You know what I mean," he said, sitting up and sliding back, so that he rested against the brown suede panels of the headboard.

"No Toby, no I don't know what you mean. Why don't you tell me?" she said, knowing that he couldn't. It was anger she felt now, she was sure, and soon it would be guilt. "It's been three years Toby. Three fucking years." She scooped her hair off her face and dropped it behind her shoulders, and banged her fists onto her knees. "What happened was awful, and that poor, poor woman, I can't imagine, but it wasn't your fault."

His face crumbled like a sandcastle engulfed by the tide. He rubbed his hands roughly through his hair and groaned.

"How come everyone knows that but you?"

"You don't understand," he said, "you don't know."

"What don't I know?" She leaned into him so that their faces almost touched. She could feel his warm breath on her skin, and she began to calm down.

He shook his head.

"I spoke to Sarah today," Emma said, her voice softer. She squeezed next to him and folded her arms around him. "We went for coffee after work." She kissed his forehead and ran her hand through his hair, cradling his head into the nape of her neck. "I told her who I was."

He stiffened then went limp like he'd just felt a stab of physical pain. Emma, determined, squeezed him more tightly. "She's okay Toby," she whispered. "I don't know how but she really is. I thought, maybe, if you—"

"No." He pushed her away.

"But maybe..." she pleaded; her fists clenched. She punched her thighs until they throbbed.

"No Em, I can't."

She let out a breathless growl and slid off the bed onto her feet. "Then how, Toby? How do we get our lives back?"

"I don't know." He had his hands over his face.

“Starting a family, buying a place of our own with a proper garden. Has all that gone?”

“I don’t know, Em. I don’t know.”

She walked over to the wardrobe beside the door, opened it and dragged a blue paisley blanket off the top shelf.

“What’re you doin’?” he asked.

“I need a break,” she replied, snatching her pillow from the bed.

She stopped at the door and turned to him. “It’s not fair Toby. I’ve lost as much as you have, and I wasn’t even in the fucking car.”

She left, slamming the door behind her.

Toby was sitting on a damp wooden bench below a gloopy, porridge-coloured sky. He was looking out on a suburban street, lined with silver birch trees, narrow grass verges, and wide pavements. He leant forward, staring at the ground, his hands clasped together, his fingers knotted. Footsteps clicked down the pavement towards him, a pair of heeled boots. He dragged his legs towards him to allow the owner to pass but the footsteps stopped.

“Do you mind if I join you?” A faintly familiar, feminine voice.

He looked up, opened his mouth to speak, then froze.

Sarah sat down, pulled her black woollen coat snugly around her, rested her bag on her lap and with wide red lips half smiled like she wasn’t sure if she should. She had an elegance about her, a presence like a classical statue. He felt weak beside her.

“I used to live over there,” she said, nodding towards a 1930s semi with a bay window and a blue front door. “Number forty-two.”

“I know. When d’you leave?”

“Straight away. I went to stay with my mum and then never came back. I have a flat now, down by the dock. It’s alright — I’m alright.” She nodded to herself and smiled tightly like she’d just realised it for the first time.

“I can’t do this.” Toby rose to his feet. “I don’t know what she’s told you, what she’s engineered but she’s wasted your time.” He began walking down the pavement, his hands in the pockets of his short leather coat, his shoulders hunched against the cold.

“Don’t do any more damage, Toby,” Sarah called.

He stopped.

“There’s been too much already.”

He turned and looked at her.

“She’s going to leave. Emma. She doesn’t want to but she’s going to, soon.”

Toby's stomach twisted and his whole body sagged. He returned to the bench, sat down, took a packet of cigarettes from his coat pocket and offered one to Sarah. She declined and reached into her bag for a mint.

"I was smoking too much," she said. "After the—" she stopped and blew the air from her cheeks. "Anyway, I'm trying to cut back."

Toby lit his cigarette, took a long drag and watched jealously as the exhale curled away and vanished. He wished he could somehow do the same.

"Do you remember the truck driver? From the trial? Do you remember what he looked like?" Sarah asked, rolling the mint between her teeth.

Toby shook his head and shrugged.

"I do. He looked a hundred years old. A bag of bones, like he hadn't eaten in weeks, and white as a ghost. He was broken." Sarah nodded.

"Good."

"He never looked at me, the whole time — couldn't I suppose. His wife did, often. She sat in the gallery and cried. I tried to smile at her, to speak to her but I just couldn't. I don't think I was really there — you know?"

"You sound like you've forgiven him."

She half laughed. "Forgiven him? Wow, I don't know. Is that up to me?" She looked around, cleared her throat and wiped her eye with the cuff of her coat. "I'd forgotten," she said. "It's nice here."

"Sometimes," Toby said, without looking at her. "I wish they'd locked me up too."

"Why? Would it bring her back?"

He dragged on his cigarette, flicked it into the road and watched it burn out.

"Do you think he feels any worse in prison than he would at home? Do you think he feels any worse than you? Or me? He took the blame — I suppose somebody had to — but what good did it do?" Sarah shivered and hugged herself. "It's cold, do you mind if we walk for a while?"

She stopped where the side road joined Harper Street. Toby waited nervously, a few feet behind her, trying not to look at the lamp post where the flowers had been tied. He could feel himself coming apart like a rotten ribbon in the rain.

"I'd forgotten how steep it is," she said, turning to face him. "It was wet too, wasn't it?"

He nodded.

"The bike was new, well, new to us anyway. She was desperate to ride it." Sarah reached into her bag for a tissue and for the first time her voice began to wobble. "I was busy in the kitchen. I'd promised a Victoria sponge for her school's bake sale. It's the only thing I can make." She chuckled and dabbed her eyes. "I'd told her that we'd go out, that she could ride her bike but it had rained all afternoon, and by the time it stopped, it was too late. She asked if she could go on her own. I kept saying no, but she wore me down, like always." She paused and took a long deliberate breath.

Toby closed his eyes and imagined himself running, but he couldn't move. He was captivated by her honesty, shamed by her strength. He was chewing his lip and it had begun to bleed. The pain was strangely comforting.

"I told her to be careful and to ride on the path and to stay within sight of the house — and I baked a cake." She gasped and stumbled as she turned away.

"I lied...at the trial. When I said I hadn't seen her." Toby watched Sarah's slender frame stiffen like a tightened spring, and her straight blonde hair ripple like a tremor passed through her.

"I was watchin' her. She was weaving around the cracks in the pavement. When I looked back it was too late. The truck was already there, sliding out of the junction."

She turned and stared at him, her teeth clenched, her peridot eyes wide and glistening. The air was cold and still, holding its breath as if anticipating some huge revelation. Time seemed to stop.

"I chose," he whispered, his voice failing, his courage ebbing away.

"What?"

"I chose to swerve, I chose to miss the truck, I chose myself... I chose to..." His breath ran out and he fought to steady his buckling legs. "I chose."

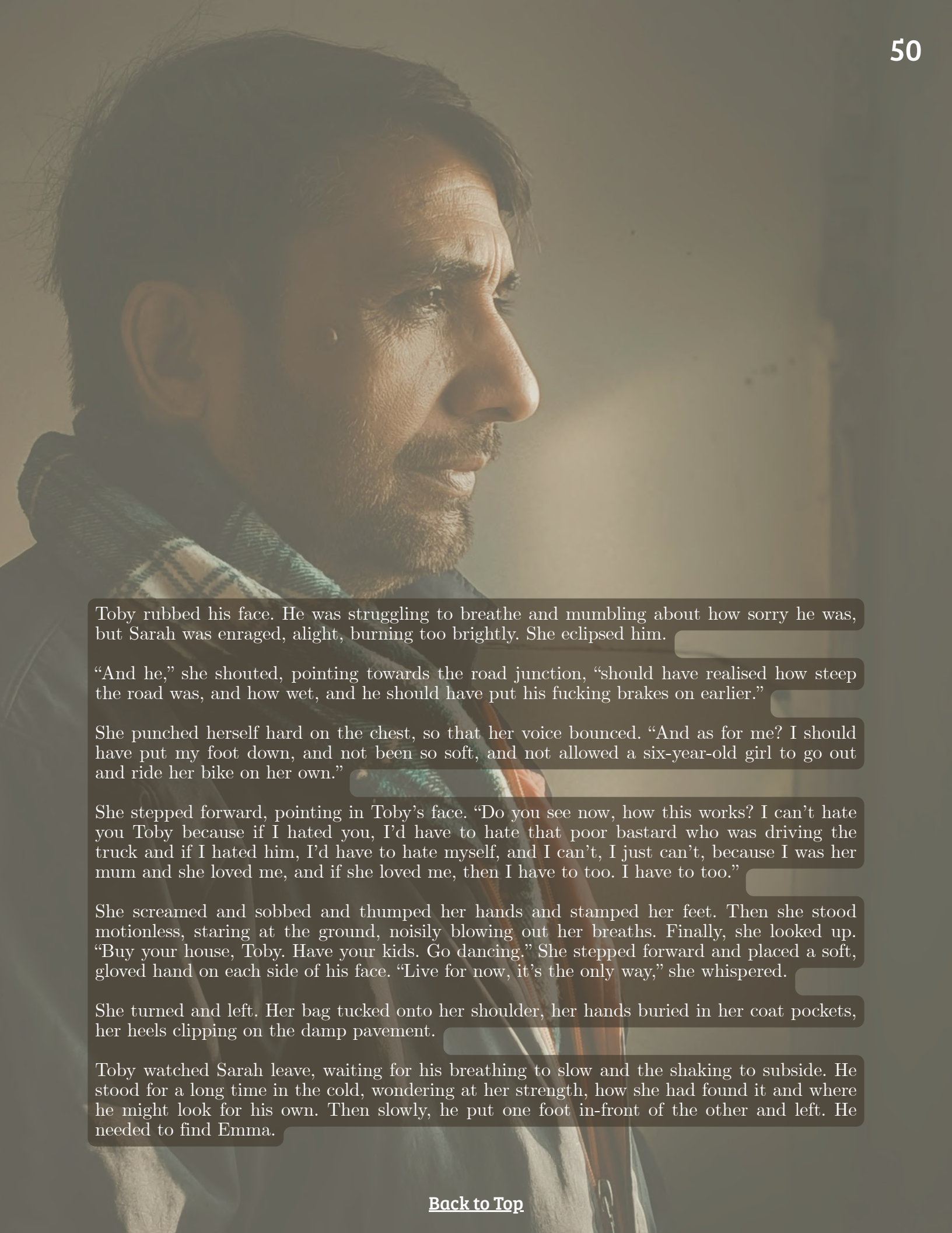
"To what? Knock a little girl off her bike? No you didn't. No, you really didn't." She answered ferociously, glaring at him — into him, searching him, scrutinising his soul like he was made out of glass. He thought he might shatter under her gaze.

He shivered and tried to back away.

"What do you want, Toby? What will make it better?"

"I want you to know what I did. I want you to scream and shout and hate me as much as I do." The dam gave and three years' worth of desperately guarded tears began to flow, tipping down his face. "I want you to tell me that I should've hit the truck," he sobbed.

"Oh, that's easy. Damn right, you should have hit the fucking truck. What's the worst that could have happened? A sore neck for a couple of weeks? And if you had, my little girl would be halfway through junior school by now, but that's your part in it. That's for you to deal with. That's your slice of the guilt."



Toby rubbed his face. He was struggling to breathe and mumbling about how sorry he was, but Sarah was enraged, alight, burning too brightly. She eclipsed him.

“And he,” she shouted, pointing towards the road junction, “should have realised how steep the road was, and how wet, and he should have put his fucking brakes on earlier.”

She punched herself hard on the chest, so that her voice bounced. “And as for me? I should have put my foot down, and not been so soft, and not allowed a six-year-old girl to go out and ride her bike on her own.”

She stepped forward, pointing in Toby’s face. “Do you see now, how this works? I can’t hate you Toby because if I hated you, I’d have to hate that poor bastard who was driving the truck and if I hated him, I’d have to hate myself, and I can’t, I just can’t, because I was her mum and she loved me, and if she loved me, then I have to too. I have to too.”

She screamed and sobbed and thumped her hands and stamped her feet. Then she stood motionless, staring at the ground, noisily blowing out her breaths. Finally, she looked up. “Buy your house, Toby. Have your kids. Go dancing.” She stepped forward and placed a soft, gloved hand on each side of his face. “Live for now, it’s the only way,” she whispered.

She turned and left. Her bag tucked onto her shoulder, her hands buried in her coat pockets, her heels clipping on the damp pavement.

Toby watched Sarah leave, waiting for his breathing to slow and the shaking to subside. He stood for a long time in the cold, wondering at her strength, how she had found it and where he might look for his own. Then slowly, he put one foot in-front of the other and left. He needed to find Emma.

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We Came to Guidance

"True wisdom begins when we realize what we do not understand." ~Socrates

Holly drove an old Marquis,
'the Blue Beauty', around town
clutching her brown bag lunch,
with only a pear and cottage cheese
(said it was enough).

Snow white lupus skin, baby blue eyes,
light blue blazer, sometimes gray,
black slacks, sometimes beige, short blonde hair
(always styled).

They came sagging jeans, wearing name brands,
in crisis, in confidence, seeking answers—
bullies, babies, breakups, classes, what next ...?
(she always spoke softly about their potential).

We worked side by side,
said I was no twinkie, she was no brown nose.
This made her popular with everyone
(except those wanting her under thumb).

Holly loved opera; we often went together.
We could relate to drama, tragedy,
lavish dress, song and dance
(the big sister I always wanted).

We stood by each other until the very end.
She walked me out of the office the day
I resigned. She was afraid of dying alone
(I did not let her).

Poetry

Michael J. LaFrancis

The Apple Never Falls Far From the Tree

****Content warning: Substance abuse/addiction and physical/emotional abuse****

Footsteps creaked up, sounding softly from every step of the wooden staircase. The bedroom door handle turned slowly. Jason lay in bed with his duvet pulled up to his ears. Clenching his shoulders, he wished he was invisible. He could hear the laboured breathing coming from his father's loose mouth and knew there would be spittle hanging from his lips.

The smell of whisky flooded the room. It seemed to seep from every pore of the drunken man's skin, as if his body was full-up of the stuff, and finally overflowing.

A firm shove ensured that the door slamming against the set of drawers behind it would wake the boy. Jason jumped, then peered at the figure in the doorway, silhouetted by the hall-light behind him. It was an all-too familiar sight: Still in his work clothes, yet with hair awry, diminishment surrounded his father. He looked shrunken and vulnerable, as if his spine had melted in the alcoholic fumes.

"Jase...?" he spoke in a babyish, pleading voice, a trick Jason knew he used to try to sound sober. "Where are the min — mina — minachurs you bought back from holiday? I know they're in here somewhere..."

"They were souvenirs for my mates, Dad, you know that. I've already given them out."

"Liar!" The sudden raised voice was harsh, and its disappointment palpable. "Where are they? Where have you hidden them?" He lunged at the nearby furniture tops, examining them with his half-open eyes before clearing every one of them with a few short-tempered swoops of his arm.

Jason felt his heartbeat rise to a terrifying rate. He reminded himself that he was used to this, that his father would never physically hurt him, that this was just a scare tactic. This was his alternate father, he told himself, a man filled with rage, lack of reason, and violence; a complete aberration of his normal self. But this transient monster within still frightened Jason — and it had only emerged from the black since the death of Jason's mum, Sarah.

While Jason sat up in his bed, hugging his knees, fear twisting his stomach, the monster raged around the room, grunting like an animal searching for food. Ugly. Desperate. He emptied Jason's wardrobe of its contents, flinging clothes across the carpet. He landed with a thump onto his knees and ran his hands along the length of the bed beneath the mattress.



Perri Dodgson

He found nothing. The gift pack of miniature liquors Jason had bought at the airport evaded his search. Exhausted after his wanton rampage, he stood and glared at Jason while his son stared back from the bed. Then his chin began to quiver, and his eyes slid to a side and downward. He snuffled, muttered something Jason couldn't hear and started to back away, swinging his arms loosely as if to shrug off the moment. Jason felt his shoulders start to relax, but then a yell of agony exploded in the air as his father rammed his fist into the wooden door. The bed shook as his father dealt it a severe kick with his work-boot. Then, cradling his injured hand to his chest, his father stumbled from the room. Jason heard his mother's glass and china ornaments throughout the house rattle as the front door slammed shut a moment later.

Tears of relief rolled down Jason's cheeks as he scanned the turmoil of his room. He wondered what was to become of them. Visions of his father getting into a car crash or a bloody fight — and of being injured, or worse, killed by them — haunted him.

He imagined his mum, only a year gone, walking through his room now, picking up his clothes, models, and games, and putting them away. He saw her soft hair flowing down her back as she absent-mindedly tucked a strand behind her ear. Then she turned and smiled at him.

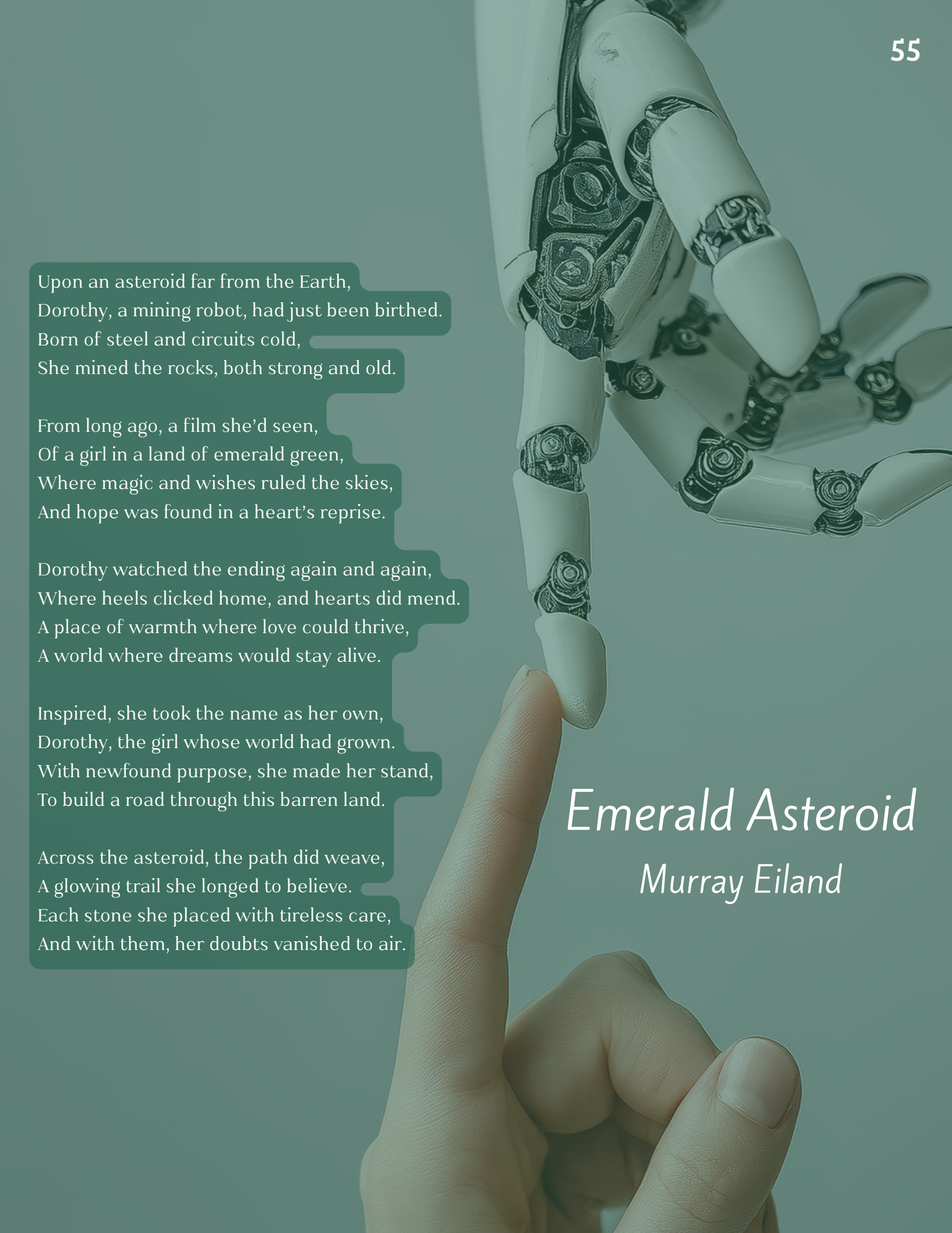
"Don't be angry at him," Mum's vision said gently. "He's hurting. This is how he copes. It will get better, I promise." Then she vanished, and the room darkened to the pale gloom of before.

Jason knew he should try to be understanding; he knew he needed to be the stronger man for his father. But needing and wanting are rarely enough. At eighteen, he still needed his parents, and he felt as if both had abandoned him.

His mind screamed, What about me? With barely a thought, he reached under his pillow, pulled out the gift box of liquors, tore off the cellophane wrapping, and tipped the twelve small bottles out of the display box. They clattered onto his lap.

"Don't I matter too?" He whispered. Then, feeling like the most lonely person in the world, Jason tilted his head back so as not to miss a drop, and blindly proceeded to drink the contents from every... single...bottle.





Upon an asteroid far from the Earth,
Dorothy, a mining robot, had just been birthed.
Born of steel and circuits cold,
She mined the rocks, both strong and old.

From long ago, a film she'd seen,
Of a girl in a land of emerald green,
Where magic and wishes ruled the skies,
And hope was found in a heart's reprise.


Dorothy watched the ending again and again,
Where heels clicked home, and hearts did mend.
A place of warmth where love could thrive,
A world where dreams would stay alive.

Inspired, she took the name as her own,
Dorothy, the girl whose world had grown.
With newfound purpose, she made her stand,
To build a road through this barren land.

Across the asteroid, the path did weave,
A glowing trail she longed to believe.
Each stone she placed with tireless care,
And with them, her doubts vanished to air.

Emerald Asteroid

Murray Eiland



But the road was just the beginning,
For a grander dream was slowly spinning.
In her mind, an emerald city gleamed,
A place where hope and courage beamed.

With green stone and unyielding might,
She built tall towers that pierced the night.
Spirals rose to the endless sky,
A city born where stars would lie.

An expedition came, eyes wide with awe,
Stunned by the wonders they never foresaw.
The yellow road, the city so grand,
Brought dreams to life upon this land.

And there they found her, waiting with pride,
With a mechanical Toto beside her, robotic yet wide-eyed.
She told them of her quest for home,
No longer content in space to roam.

In her city of green, beneath the stars' gaze,
Dorothy dreamed of Earth's faraway days.
She wondered what future lay in store,
In a world she had yet to explore.

Candy House

Lorelei Greenwood-Jones

Twisted Fairy Tale



When the skinny girl and blobby boy burst out of the forest into the village road bellowing like crazed calves, they were scarce to be believed. The townsfolk, I among them, had stood with mouths agape, trying to take in the wild story that came in dregs and tumbles from the children's wobbling mouths. And although the magistrate, once he was roused from his second lunch and had come waddling imperiously to the square, sent several armed men to acquire said witch, he only did it to ease the tensions of the horrified parents of other youngsters who also liked to play in the woods.

Naturally they returned unsuccessful.

My doubts, warring with far too much curiosity, made themselves known to me, so I set out my own self, with incomplete and likely incorrect directions, to find this house of iniquity and cavity-causing foodstuffs. After a few false trails — easily traversed once you found the way — I came upon a clearing.

My first impression of the house was one of marginal disbelief. That such a thing could exist at all was fantastical. But there it stood in all its gingerbread glory, looming before me like a parent's nightmare and a dentist's dream. Shingles of chocolate bars, windows of isomalt sugar, dormers of doughnuts, and, spread all about like the work of a drugged mason, frosting filagree and icing idiocy. Gods, it gave me a toothache just to look upon it. Silly house, that.

They'd said that a witch lived here, a canny old hag that enticed young folk with caloric delights only to bind them in candyfloss misery in cages of peppermint sticks and grapevine. No one knew what she fed the children she kept, only that it must have been more than just sweets — for as we all know, too much sugar spoils the meat. She apparently had kept a few chickens, though the one mangy nannygoat I found wandering about looked far too haggard to give any good milk. There was no vegetable garden — would you expect one, really? — but a few herbs straggled here and there about the grounds. Mints, mostly. No real surprise.

With a sigh I approached the front door. Gumdrop knob. I rolled my eyes. Grasping the gritty confection, I pushed open the cookie portal and peered within. Golden afternoon light filtered through the isomalt panes and shined brightly on pots, pans, cutlery, and kettles. Oh, and cages, two or three, hanging from the rafters — made of candy canes, I noted. Could this get any more cliché? A small bed with a patchwork quilt stood in a far corner and a slew of rushes lay flattened nearby. The girl had said something about sleeping on the floor in her captivity. Looking more closely at the candy cane cages, I had to wonder at the sheer amount of magic that would be needed to keep such a contraption, to say nothing of the rest of the dwelling, in action and hardiness. What a waste.

Sensing movement behind me, I turned and, as I expected, there stood Enid Flossbottom in the doorway, looking for all the world like she had fallen off her broom. And indeed, in the hand not pointing the dagger at me was a raggedy besom, still sparking from her hasty descent.

“What are ye doin’ in my house, Gilda Goosefeather?” she demanded.

“Trying to decide whether to laugh first or tap you upside the head. Honestly, Enid, what have you wrought here?”

Her wrinkled lips parted and a cackle — oh dear, a true cackle — passed over her three remaining teeth. “Living large in my old age, Gil, living large. Read a tale of old Samantha Sprinkle trying candy magic and ain’t it fun! What are you, some sort of vegetableterrium?”

“I’m hardly a vegetarian, Enid. Have you really been caging and eating children? You know it goes against the code.”

She snorted. “Code schmode. I makes my own rules now. The Guild can’t stop me cuz they can’t prove I’ve done wrong. Those chilrun got away and no harm to ‘em. Not even a nibble.” And in a barely-audible mutter, “Hardly a lick.”

“But the drain you’re putting on the vortex — don’t you know you’re leaving some of the outlying regions with barely a trickle of power? If that’s not doing wrong, then I don’t know what is. Keeping this candy hut standing takes a vast amount of continual magic.” I kept my eye on that dagger. Enid was a prehistoric peahen but still likely sprightly enough to nick me if I wasn’t cautious.

Then all of a sudden, she deflated like an arrow-shot waterskin. Her shoulders sagged and, to my relief, the dagger dropped from her gnarled fingers. She shook her head slowly.

“Ye’ve taken all the fun out of it, Gilda. Here I am in my eightieth year and really, how many more delights can I expect? But who am I kidding? I can’t lift the axe, and even if I could, I couldn’t rassel that blob of a boy into the oven without my sacroiliac giving me the gimp. I just wanted one more fling before hanging up my hat, is all.” She gave a brief snerk and cracked a grin. “But it was fun watchin’ that boy stuff hisself and fartin’ like to blow a hole in the wall.”

I schooled my face into stern features. Mostly.

“You’re going to have to go before the magistrate, you know, and explain your actions. Those children couldn’t keep the story straight at all.” My countenance wriggled a bit as I recalled that the boy had indeed been a bit...gusty.

Enid picked up the dagger and placed it in its sheath on her leather belt. “Feh, I saw him born, and he warn’t no thinner than he is now. I’m not afraid of his bluster and blow.” She looked about the sticky interior of her storybook shack. “I’m supposin’ you’ll want me to take this all down.”

I only had to look at her.

Enid flapped her hands at me to move me out of doors, and then followed. She blew a raspberry in defeated defiance and began speaking the words of the reversal spell. The ridiculous house didn’t so much vanish as melt, the filigree and icing washing down the sides and flowing into nothingness as they touched the ground. Soon before us stood a regular woods hut, with stone chimney, log sides, and a definite lack of gumdrop doorknob. A confused squirrel chirruped at us from the top of the chimney. I bet he chipped a tooth.

We walked the paths back to the village, chatting and squabbling like two old witches will, neither of us particularly concerned about the magistrate. Sweets would shut him up soon enough, and Enid had learned the magic. I bet she could turn some of his for-looks-only law books into pies.



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Noah's Fall from the Centre of the Universe

Created in fire, careless flame fanned by young love, Noah, once riding high in the energy of a benevolent universe,

is now destined to weld bonds of iron on Earth. His heart, a whispering ember barely casting a shadow from its low light, is encased in unyielding earthen walls — protected from being extinguished by the storm of life's cruel circumstances.

Noah, a prince of peace, prefers to wander alone wearing his armor of ink but magnetized souls gather 'round him and make merry while enjoying his soft, time-dimmed energy.

They suck hope from him through rainbow straws, and dare each other to see who will first draw the eventual smile or laugh, a rare favor bestowed upon a lucky soul.

Yet Thor's lightning bolts, secured in Noah's belt of stars which ring the leather tunic of his profession, remind the people he is still vulnerable.

They have witnessed his threat to unleash the deadly jagged weapons from time to time. An idle, frustrated threat, but it does provide a release of pent-up breath sharpened by the smell of ozone.

Chris
Rodriguez

Still, he trudges along from inn to inn, seeking solace, respite from the heavy load of his knowledge, his existence and soul-bending experience at the craggy rough edges of this life. His neglected Sword of Righteousness drags behind him carving deep cracks, like the cracks left in his resolve.

Exhausted, he awaits his Valkyrie ride, his return to the heavens. Sometimes with impatience. Sometimes with resignation. Even the heavy dust from hard-knock roads settling on his restless boots will not hold him still for more than a few moments.

When Noah is alone, truly alone, he craves and quietly contemplates the promise of a new beginning after divine judgment — the judgement that brought him crashing to Earth from his rightful place in the center of the universe.

A reflection of nova-blasted stars emanates from his eyes. Noah waits.





PERRI DODGSON

FICTION

MY WALK
TOOK AN
UNEXPECTED
TURN

As usual, I was lost in an engrossing daydream as I floated through my afternoon walk. This time, it took a stumble over a protruding piece of knotted root to bring me back to the present. A graze on my forehead where it had struck a low branch proved to be of little consequence, and once all the raised autumn leaves resettled on the ground, I realised that they had disguised my usual path; I had strayed into a small unfamiliar glade canopied by tall oaks.

Unworried, I pulled a well-used map of the woods from my pocket and held it loosely as a mouthful of water from my flask revitalised my senses. A sudden draft of wind caught the paper from my fingers and, cursing at the unexpected need for a burst of energy, I gave chase. At once, an acute, whipping noise echoed through my ear canals and an arrow neatly caught my map, pinning it to a nearby trunk of an oak. My breath caught in my throat. An arrow?

“Do not fear, little lady, I meant you no harm,” came a laughing voice from behind me. Turning, I must have gawped at the smiling, long-haired man in forest green tunic and tights carrying a bow and a quiver of arrows hanging from a leather band about his waist. He strode over to retrieve his arrow. His strange leather hat rested at a jaunty angle and was decorated with the feathers of an eagle. I recognised him immediately from my old history books, he was the outlaw, Robin Hood.

“But what is this you wear upon your person, my lady? Such strange and garish garments must surely belong to a jester at least, or some undiscovered creature from another land.”

“I—I—I’m just out for a walk.” I could only stutter in complete shock.

With a wave of his hand, a motley group, evidently friends of his, emerged from the surrounding skeleton trees and, crunching on the brittle leafy carpet, chattered and laughed at my attire: my bright pink leggings and my grey hoodie with turquoise racing stripes down the arms hanging loose over a large Led Zeppelin t-shirt. On my feet, my favourite trainers must have looked to them like huge white boats. A confident arm reached from nowhere and snatched the beanie from my head, which bore a wolf design with comical whiskers and ears. But I raised my hands to stop him. “Oi, geddoff!”

“Ha ha! We have a feisty one here.” Robin laughed with his gang. Then to me he said, “Let me introduce myself. I am Robin Hood and these are my merry band. We are known throughout the forest for robbing the rich and distributing the gains among the poor in the villages around Nottingham. We never cause physical harm to any soul, for we are all God’s creatures. Unfortunately, I have to ask a very strange favour of you, in good faith. You see, I need to steal away your clothes for a while.”

I gasped and must have appeared immediately terrified as he continued.

“Don’t worry, nothing untoward will happen to you. I merely beg the use of your strange garb for a few hours. It is the perfect disguise for me to enter the walls of Nottingham castle as a travelling jester. That way I can pass on a message to the lady’s maid, Marion, without attracting the attention of the dastardly Sheriff of Nottingham.”

“Maid Marion?” I said. “I’ve heard of her.”

“Yea, my dear. My dearest lady love is held in the dungeons and no doubt in the gravest of tempers. I have contacts who can pass her a note from me; an assurance to be strong and doubt me not, for already there is a plan being made for her rescue. But first I need your consent to such a noble act of assistance for I would not deem to force my will on your kindness, without agreement. And you may be certain I will make sure that you are richly rewarded for your generosity.”

Robin’s honest smile and twinkling hazel eyes must have affected my sensibilities for I silently nodded my head in agreement. I told myself I would never be one to stand in the path of true love.

“Until I return, my men here will keep you swaddled and safe,” Robin continued. “Here is Friar Tuck, a godly man as you see, who has never hurt so much as a flea.” Friar tuck took a solemn bow in front of me and removed his outer robe, folding it neatly to make a soft seat on the ground. Another of his men, Little John, gently approached me and wafted a strange potion of smelling salts under my nose and I allowed myself to let the aroma engulf me. “This will help.”

As my head began to spin in a haze, I felt myself being gently lowered to the ground and my head laid upon the pillow. It was as if my whole being was filled with the sense of a thousand bluebells bobbing in a gentle breeze, under a blue sky. The silence of nature was all about except for the sweet twittering of birds in the branches above.

I awakened with a start as a beam of sunlight fought through the branches to reach me and land on my face. Blinking at first, and my body stiff, I sat bolt upright as I remembered my encounter with Robin Hood and his merry men. My forehead ached where I had hit the branch and a painful bump was no doubt bruising up nicely. I must have knocked myself out, I thought ruefully. I felt a little dizzy as I stood and straightened my huge t-shirt and hoodie. “Nice dream though, can’t wait to tell my pals. I suppose I am in Sherwood forest after all.”

As I walked away, something heavy weighed down my hoodie pocket and banged against my hip. Annoyed by the discomfort, I reached inside and pulled out a necklace.

What’s this? It doesn’t belong to me, I thought. From a heavy gold chain hung a medieval pendant, a princess cut emerald surrounded by pearls in a gorgeous diamond shaped setting. This was not in the style of today’s jewellery. I remembered that Robin had said I would be rewarded. Was this a stolen necklace from his cache of booty? I think it was, and as I found my way home, I glowed with the unmistakable knowledge that I had been in the presence of the legendary, kindly outlaw, Robin Hood.



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AFTER THE RAIN

After the Rain is a mixed media work in which acrylic paint monoprints and photography are digitally combined. The image is rooted in a personal moment during my travels through New Mexico. I was driving along this deserted road on a cold morning, shortly after rainfall had passed through the desert. Rain is a rare visitor in this landscape, and its presence transformed everything. The air felt heavier, the silence more pronounced.

The abandoned car and the emptiness of the road evoked a strong sense of being lost. Not in a dramatic sense, but in a quiet, unsettling way, as if time had paused and direction momentarily dissolved. The vastness of the landscape overshadowed any human trace, amplifying a feeling of vulnerability.

But as the sun broke through the clouds, light returned to the scene, introducing a sense of hope and freedom. These elements suggest movement and the reassurance that something continues beyond uncertainty.

In my artworks, landscapes are not backdrops but active presences. I explore moments where inner experience and external environment merge, often placing the human trace as small, fragile, or absent. Through layered imagery, I seek to reveal landscapes as mirrors of emotional states and as spaces where belonging and quiet resilience coexist.

~ *Françoise Vaal*

Off Course

Phyllis Hemann

precariously
fragile as the wall
of a bubble

remarkably buoyant
and prismatic when
hit with rays of sunlight

my heart floats,
buoyed by the breeze

its circumference shrinks
over time minimizing
memories

compartmentalizing
feelings in an effort
not to implode

i drift into the
horizon, reappearing
amid the winks
of firefly twilight

patterns of aurora
nightfall and
bloom of first light

my travels take me
to destinations unknown
neither planned nor expected

i roll end over end
stretch and flex
to locate air currents
to stay afloat

so i continue
to explore

POINT OF CONTACT

Keith A. Dodson

May God
give me the peace
to listen to your story,
the patience
to learn
who you are,
the confidence
to accept you
where you are,
the grace
to love you
you as you are,
the discipline to speak
only as invited,
and the hospitality
to make myself
available
if you are open
to another
pilgrim
on your path.

A black grand piano is the central focus, with a person's hands visible on the keys. The scene is dimly lit with a blue and purple color palette, creating a moody atmosphere. The piano is a Steinway & Sons model, with the brand name partially visible on the side.

*L'ivoire
Oublié Dans
Poussière*

Rita Mock-Pike

(Ivory Forgotten in Dust)

Fiction

They praised my action; I hummed their tunes. They swooned over my stunning ivory; I giggled out their frustrated complaints against rude conductors or impish students. I was their solace; they were my songs, the once great masters of music. Their fingers danced across my keys, drawing the magic of the stage into the cornices of time.

Even in the darkest night of the War, when German tanks invaded and the people fled, my master — the director — staged performances, keeping up spirits of those unable to run. We, together, fought the enemy with our light, our strength, our music.

The dust rests heavily now, scattered and covering every surface. If a pigeon graces my presence, she coughs. The occasional streak of sunlight beams in through cracked shutters aged yellow and green by this seaside mingled with time. Where once the most beauteous of ballets filled the apron and I sang out their odes and led the chorus for the prima donna and her rival ingénue, silence now ticks away history one aching stroke at a time.

The elegance of the most laudable music of the planet once resonated through my strings. Now, I anxiously sit abandoned in the former glory of the French people, a forgotten instrument of their deepest longings and strength. Known for their artistic endeavors, they promised the world to me. But even the most auspicious of artists will someday forget. They all forget — or so I've witnessed.

And I, the forgotten, *l'ivoire oublié dans la poussière*, simmer in the dust while the summer sun streaks through the building one last time before the demolition begins. I've known this day would come; I've long known my fate. As the ashes fell during the war, and after the dust and blood had settled, I knew this would come at last. I hadn't imagined it would take 80 years more.

“Lauriete, regarde!” A woman dressed in coveralls and wearing a dust mask called out through the hall once. The acoustics still held — her voice bounded from beam to ceiling to floor to pillar.

“C'est un piano. Et alors? C'est un théâtre.” (*It's a piano. So what? It's a theatre.*)

“Oui...” She gently touched the middle C on my keyboard. The out-of-tune twang hurt, but not as much as the silence of these years has burned into my birchwood body.

Then, softly, so the other won't hear: “Peut-être que je te ramènerai à la maison... Tu es magnifique, mon amour.” (*Maybe I'll take you home... You're beautiful, my love.*)

She tickled my keys a little longer, smiling and humming “An die Freude”. Her voice was not a lyric soprano's pride, but she gave to me music once more — a brief moment of reprise in my long night.

“Ma grand-mère jouait ici autrefois. Pendant la guerre. Bien des années plus tard, elle m'en parlait encore. Alors que les bombes tombaient, elle jouait. Elle avait tout oublié, sauf toi. Je ne t'oublierai pas non plus, mon cher. Je te le promets.” (*My grandmother used to play here. During the war. Many years later, she still talked about it. While the bombs fell, she played. She had forgotten everything, except you. I won't forget you either, my dear. I promise.*)

I remembered her grandmother. How could one forget concerts under the bombs falling day and night? It seemed a miracle had befallen us when we weren't destroyed in all the wild and terrible excitement. I also remember the night when a flamingo wandered in, seeking shelter, I suppose. She was our only audience member in the house. She kept us company through the night. And I believe we kept the neighbors company as we fought the anxiety and terror that fell all around us. I believe we were a blanket of covering in the darkest of nights. That is why the then young and brave Antoinette played my keys through the days and nights of war.

I also remember the final night she played. She was torn away from me, clutching after my ivory keys, my pedals, my etched face. She cried out as they dragged her away, “Je reviendrai te chercher!” (*I'll come back for you!*)

I never knew what became of her. Until today. Surely, she had survived if this young woman had heard her stories. Or were they displaced from generations past?

As day turned to night, I doubted her return. After all, I was broken, regressed, quiet. Out of tune, at best. Would she keep her vow? Would she return? Or would her promise ring hollow like that of her grandmother? It would, of course, for different reasons not be true. But still...

I longed to be heard once again. My ivories quivered with the thought of it. If I were capable of sneezing, I would have dusted myself off for her by the shaking of my hopeful soul.

Darkness fell. My old friend, the owl, perched on the edge of the last balcony. The royal box. She ruffled her feathers and looked below, waiting for a midnight collation. Her regal beauty suited her seat. Soon, she swooped down and flew off with a tasty meal.

The moon rose late, pinpointing my birchwood frame like a spotlight on the long silent stage. A voice rose from the dust-covered backstage. She called sweetly like a nightingale. "Là, sur scène." (*There, on the stage.*)

A male voice echoed through the hall. "Magnifique!"

She had returned, and with a guard of strapping youths to carry me away. "Plus jamais silencieux," (*Silent no more*), she whispered, plunking my most out-of-tune key. She blew off the dust from my stand and smiled. "Aucun de nous deux" (*Neither of us*).



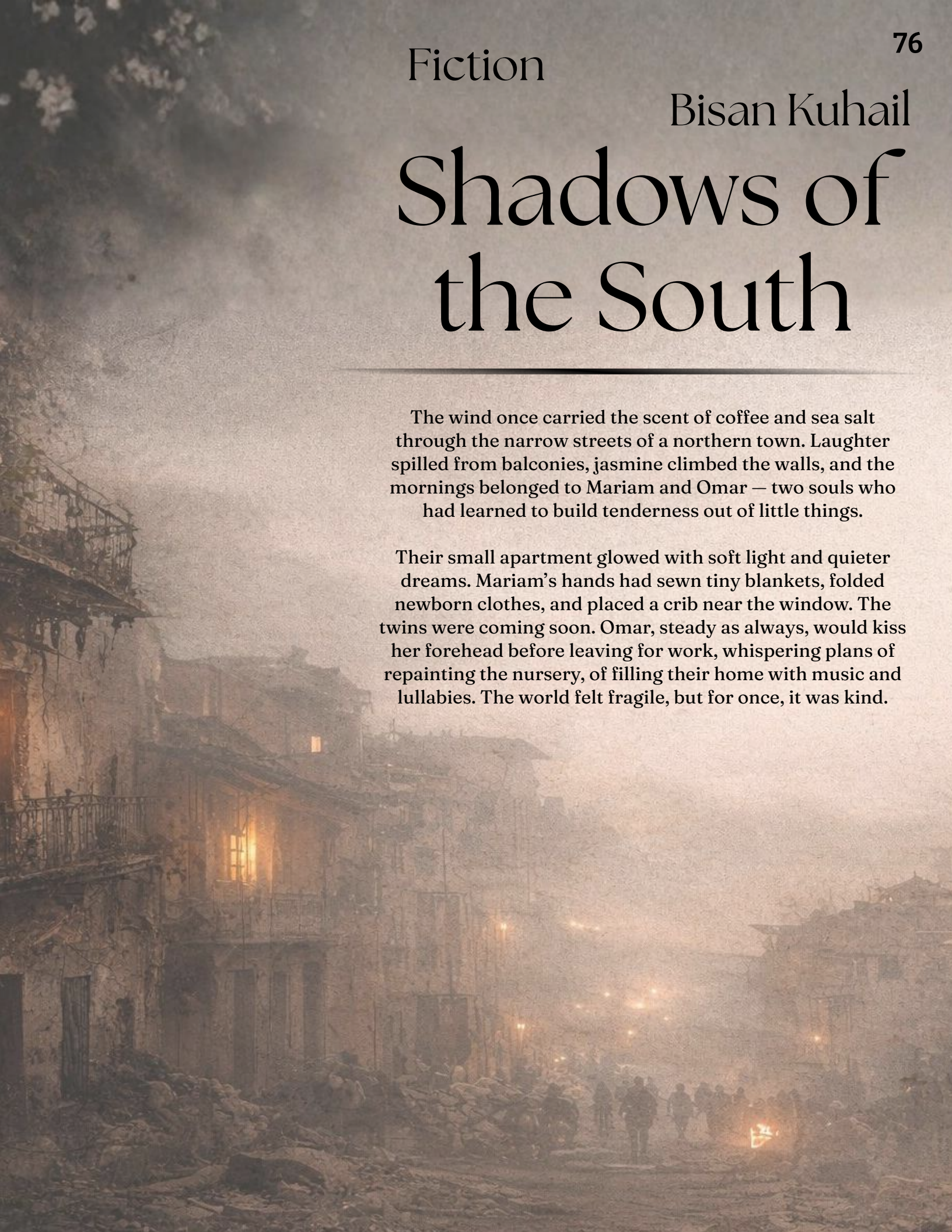
Fiction

Bisan Kuhail

Shadows of the South

The wind once carried the scent of coffee and sea salt through the narrow streets of a northern town. Laughter spilled from balconies, jasmine climbed the walls, and the mornings belonged to Mariam and Omar — two souls who had learned to build tenderness out of little things.

Their small apartment glowed with soft light and quieter dreams. Mariam's hands had sewn tiny blankets, folded newborn clothes, and placed a crib near the window. The twins were coming soon. Omar, steady as always, would kiss her forehead before leaving for work, whispering plans of repainting the nursery, of filling their home with music and lullabies. The world felt fragile, but for once, it was kind.



Then came the siren. Its scream tore through the morning like a warning from the sky itself. Omar returned running. They packed what they could — papers, water, the twins' blanket — and fled south under the echo of collapsing walls. The night was lit only by explosions and flashlights of other families, all moving toward a promise of safety that never truly existed.

The road was endless. Smoke blurred the stars. Mariam, in her seventh month, carried both life and fear in her trembling body. Omar, weakened by a wound, leaned on her as they walked. But the world fractured again — the air shuddered, light turned to fire, and when the dust settled, Omar was gone.

Mariam's hands found only emptiness. Her voice made no sound. She kept walking, alone now, with the twins still inside her — fragile proof that something sacred had once dared to grow amid ruin.

When pain came, it was merciless. Beneath a broken signpost, surrounded by strangers running toward anywhere, she gave birth to silence. Two small bodies, too still, too quiet, entered a world already collapsing. Mariam held them close, wrapping them in the same blanket that was meant for warmth, now a shroud. Around her, the city roared, and yet all she heard was the whisper of what could have been.

Days blurred in the crowded shelter. The floor was cold, the air heavy with grief and dust. Every mother carried her own ghost. Mariam's arms were empty, her eyes distant, her voice forgotten. When the last evacuation came, she walked out alone, back toward the ruins where her home once stood.

At dusk, she lit a candle beside the broken wall and whispered, "I'm still here." The flame trembled, refusing to die.

No one knew where she went after that night. Some said she followed the sea. Others said she became part of the wind — still carrying the scent of dust, salt, and memory through the town that once promised her peace.

“There is a steel truss bridge over the Rock River that makes her shiver every time she come to this town.”



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Running From Something

Jessica N. Arzola-Grissom

Content warning: mild violence



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 Flamingo

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 SOUVENIR BEERS
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 BIRD
 BEER

THE LINO • HIGH ROLLER

Fiction

Victor Frankl said, “When a person can’t find a deep sense of meaning, they distract themselves with pleasure.” The quote is hanging on my wall, and it freezes me in my tracks every time, even as my mind races back to a time I want to forget.

I’ve told myself many times before that it didn’t happen. It was a bad dream — merely a nightmare. I was drunk enough to make it seem like it anyway.

And you know, if you tell others a lie long enough, they’ll believe your narrative. You just keep it concise: It’s a summary without too many details because those details can be easily picked apart.

Yes, it was safer to stick with the narrative. It was consistent storytelling that stayed in my mind for years. I’ve told the story so many times now, I’ve even convinced myself. Well, almost. But everything was fine. Everything was normal — until she decided to ruin it.

In the summer of 2005, when Will had asked if I wanted to go to Las Vegas, I’d jumped at the chance to get away. Since the city was founded in 1905, I figured we could really live it up for their 100-year celebration. It beckoned us with reckless excitement — after all, we’d just turned 21 and were feeling the freedom of being real adults.

Out of all the casinos, the Flamingo intrigued me most. It felt like I’d stepped back in time, ready to rub shoulders with the mafia, and I imagined what it might be like to have enough money to not care about basic necessities. With my credit card in hand, I gave in to that imagination and lived freely, ignoring any daunting thoughts about what “normal life” and “back home” meant.

On the third night there, Will and I sat at the bar, checking out the ladies as they walked past us, and growing bolder with each drink we tucked down.

When one woman who looked about our age sat down beside us, we thought we might have a little fun. She wasn’t my type, but hey, it was Vegas. And we did have a great time at the bar — she left with Will and I after only an hour or so.

But as to what happened afterward, it’s all just a drunk-up blur. And I had the worst hangover the next day. It’s hard to run when your head is screaming.

Eight years later, I looked out the kitchen window and saw a stray cat hunching itself down in predatory mode. The cat’s body tensed, its eyes completely focused on a tiny field mouse in a corner of the yard. I gripped the windowsill, feeling a tension building in my shoulders as the cat slunk closer and closer until it finally pounced with full force.

The cat held the mouse down, its teeth clamped on tight as the small body writhed in pain and panic. But after a minute, all went still. The cat slowly released its grip and started eating its dinner. I let out my breath, only realizing in that moment that I had been holding it for a while.

“Whatcha doing?” asked Esther from close behind me.

I nearly leapt out of my skin.

“God! You and your sneaky ninja skills. You always scare me half to death!” I exclaimed.

“Oh my gosh!” My wife reached out a consoling hand. “I’m sorry, Hon! I didn’t mean to. You were just so focused, like you were lost in another world.”

Esther squeezed my arm, then glanced out the window and saw the cat chowing down on the final remnants. “Ah! Well, at least that stray cat is good for something!”

She quirked a smile and turned her face toward me as I grimaced and crossed my arms. I couldn’t look at her.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” I muttered, rolling my eyes.

She halfway smiled. Alarm bells sounded in my head as I waited for more, but she didn’t press the matter. Maybe it would have been better if she had.

Will and I noticed pretty quickly that most gals had a posse whenever they walked into the casinos. And they’d usually decked themselves out in bodycon dresses accessorized with ostentatious rhinestones.

But this gal was different. She wore jeans and a simple flannel shirt — quite the obscure look for this scene — and she’d ordered a beer. Will nodded his approval. This gal was down-to-earth, casually drinking, and had barely noticed us. If she was lonely, she was perfect.

So Will started chatting her up, and before long we were playing “Never Have I Ever”. She wasn’t very bright. I wondered if the beer hit her badly or if she wasn’t firing on all cylinders. But the more I drank and played the game, the less it mattered. She was having fun. We were too, and it was fine.

She came up to our room to watch TV with us, or so she claimed. I guess we did more than that, but I passed out before long. I’d probably had a dozen or more drinks. I’d been diligent at first, but I lost count after eight.

The next morning, I woke with a pounding headache. Will skulked around the room and cursed when he saw her leather bracelet left behind. He wrapped it in a Kleenex and put it in the trashcan.

I looked at him and asked where she was. He said he wasn’t sure, but slivers of memories began to creep back into my focus. I remembered walking out in the nighttime cold of the desert. Walking and arguing, but about what?

As I rubbed my face to try to de-fog my brain, I felt the sudden, shooting pain of small splinters prickling into my hand. It radiated up to my wrist in seconds, consuming my entire focus. One by one I pulled them out, but my hand continued throbbing. And Will just stared at me, a dark frown on his face.

The next year of school came and went, with my junior year in college only a hazy blur. My grades rode the line of barely passing versus dropping out.

It wasn't for a lack of aptitude. I just had too much on my mind, and couldn't sleep. Every weekend, Will and I went out to drink our paychecks away.

But it didn't matter. Nothing was important anymore. We just needed a bit of something to ease the tension, and kept losing track of how many we'd had.

I met Esther at the beginning of my senior year. She sat there in the library, picking out books for a women's history class, her chestnut hair just touching her shoulders. And when her deep, brown eyes glanced up at me, they sparked with such life that I thought she might read the essence of my soul.

I longed to know her, but I told myself she was out of my league, and quickly looked away.

Something in her gaze terrified me. If she could really see inside, I felt sure she would despise me.

I thought of the many ways I would be on a list for her disapproval: I got high and drunk on the weekends, I skipped classes and got poor grades, and I loathed myself for it. What woman wants to be with someone who can't even smile in a mirror?

But we kept running into each other. She was magnetic — and when I realized we had a class together, I started attending for her sake. She didn't know that though.

The changes that simple choice brought upended my life again, but this time for the better. I needed to get up on time for class now, and if I ever wanted a chance to ask her out, I'd need money for a date. So just like that, I quit drinking on the weekends. And suddenly, I had a few hundred dollars in my pocket.

Will was furious at me for ditching him that first week. After the second week, he all but pounded down my door in a drunken stupor to ask what the heck was wrong with me. Week three, he wanted to know why we never had any fun anymore, and his whines began to grate on my last nerve.

He kept pestering me, asking if it was a girl, or a conscience, or something my mom had said, until finally one day, I punched him so hard he landed on his back, momentarily stunned.

Then he started shouting obscenities, from right there on the floor. He rolled over, pushed himself to his knees, then up to his feet, and turned to face me, his face red and his eyes wild. I crouched into a ready stance, certain we were about to repeat our first meeting from middle school.

I'd won that time. But he stood a head taller than me now.

After a moment of staring at me, Will gave up. "Fine," he said. "But I'm the one who knows your secret. If I told anyone, your life would be ruined forever."

He stomped away and I felt sick — sicker than any other time in my life, because this time, I was sober enough to understand.

But I also remembered: He'd been there too.

Esther and I started dating officially a few weeks later, and I learned a lot about her pretty quickly. For one, she was circumspect, which somehow seemed to work with the divine. Her style made me think she might be full of herself, but she was methodical and practical.

She never forgot a detail about me. Her mind was like a steel trap, and I was terrified one day she was going to shatter the calm facade and come bearing down with the force of a gauntlet.

Normally, she used that brain to ferret out answers in her study guides or anxiously await the next exam. She had little academic self-confidence, and constantly worried that she might be on the brink of failure.

Maybe my overconfidence helped ease some of that, but one way or another, we balanced each other out and graduated the following spring — and she took honors in the process

But Will — he dropped out, and I didn't see him again.

Esther and I got married in 2008 and began our version of happily-ever-after, settling into life with Elysian ease. Everything was exciting and different, and we revelled in the "togetherness" we shared.

But one night a few months later, I woke up to the sound of Esther calling my name softly. My eyes flew open, and I found myself already upright, perched on the bed like a gargoyle.

Esther sounded scared. "Sweetheart, you've been muttering on and on. I couldn't tell what you were saying, except that you kept repeating 'sorry'. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," I said. My heart beat rapidly. I remembered the nightmare I'd been in the middle of, and it wasn't something I wanted her to know. "You sure I didn't say anything else?" I tried to peer at her eyes through the darkness, but I couldn't see her expression.

All I could do was accept her quiet, "No, nothing else," and apologize for waking her. We went back to sleep — or at least, she did. I tried, but every time I drifted back down, the nightmare re-emerged in another form.

One dream had me dressed up in cosplay as a nun, roaming the streets of New Orleans, but the corner of my mind told me it was Las Vegas in disguise.

Another dream was filled with bunkum dialogue, mismatched like a jigsaw puzzle that had been thrown into the air. And once it had all come back down, I'd lost a few of the pieces and couldn't get them to fit back together.

And in the last, everything happened so fast, only the blurring, drunken colors remained behind to taunt me.

My nightmares grew as time went on, but I managed to avoid disturbing Esther again. Night after night, axiomatic thoughts rose and fell like waves in the ocean. If they'd soothed on their own, or if I could have found an escape from them, maybe it would have been different, but the ocean was endless — I couldn't see past the edge of the earth.

When I was younger, I thought that if I got to the end, I would fall off the edge into a new adventure. But there was no falling; there was only my boss, accusing me of harangue.

I quickly apologized and told him I wasn't angry — I just hadn't been sleeping well and it was stressing me out, and of course I wouldn't let it happen again.

I'd believed from the first that my wife and I were kindred spirits, though I hadn't been able to put the words to it then. But six years into our marriage, it still struck me as unbelievable. I'd never been this close to anyone before.

Then one afternoon, I asked her where she wanted to go for her birthday next year.

Her eyebrows arched up. "Go?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Why not? While it's still just us."

Esther grinned. "Hm. I've always wanted to go to New York, Seattle — Oh, I know! Let's go to Vegas!"

I swallowed, and tried to keep the edge out of my voice as I asked, "Why Vegas?"

She giggled. "Well, you know my family — they'd never visit with all that gambling. But I heard they have a baking competition, and it sounds amazing. Maybe we could time our trip for that?" Then she looked at me, pausing for a moment before asking, "Have you been to Las Vegas before?"

"Yep. In college. Went with Will."

"Oh! Fun! What did y'all do there?"

"Nothing!" I said.

She raised her eyebrows again, but her smile wavered. “Okay,” she said slowly, drawing out the syllables.

She didn’t believe me. She knew me too well. But I couldn’t risk conflating the story floating through my head. I stood up and left the room to avoid that long stare.

Over the next two weeks, I tried to casually convince her that other places would be better than Vegas, but the more I pressed, the more she dug in. My wife had always been vivacious — but this insistence was something new, and something I couldn’t compete with.

I bought the tickets. And then I began to read up.

Esther had always teased me whenever I got in a studying mood. “Bailiwick!” she’d say with a grin, before walking away, laughing and shaking her head.

And back then, in those peaceful, mundane days, I could laugh too. Even looking at that night ten years ago, I could have laughed. If I’d been a docile student in college, I might have soaked in everything I needed then, faced all my insecurities, and won strong. But I hadn’t. I’d allowed myself to generalize, hoping my jack-of-all-trades attitude would pay out.

All it had done was delay the inevitable, and suddenly, I found myself out of time. So in those months leading up to our Vegas trip, I buried myself in research. If anything happened, I hoped to make it unmistakably clear that I had nothing to do with anything. That night was more blur than anything anyway, but I needed to be able to express that convincingly.

Because now, the other meaning for “bailiwick” had begun to haunt me.

I didn’t step foot in the Flamingo this time, but it didn’t matter. I’ll never be able to erase the look of horror that crossed Esther’s face when they knocked at our hotel door on our second morning there, a warrant for my arrest in hand.

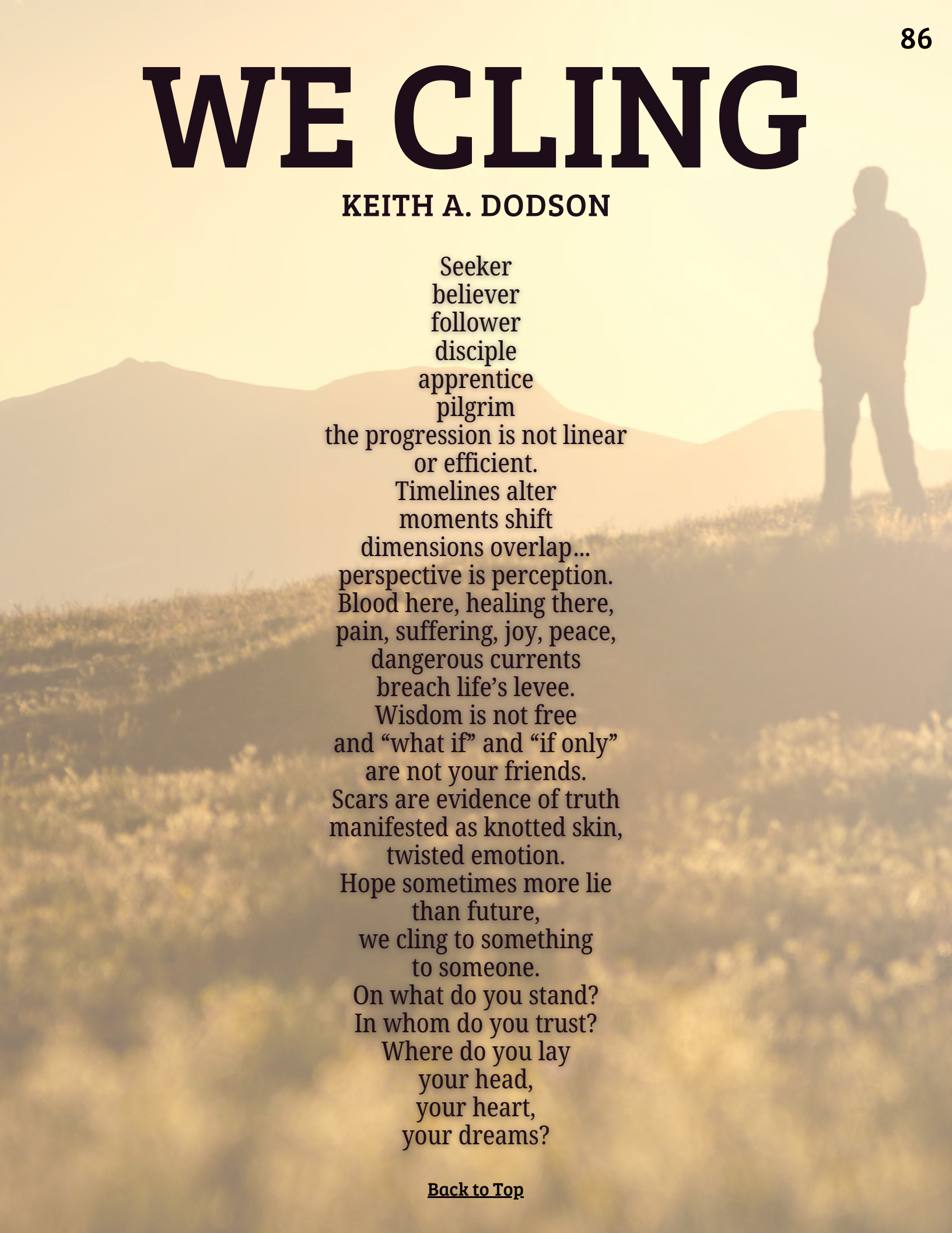
Sarcasm has become my unfettered friend. I lie on my cell cot, thinking of Will, thinking of that night, and I refuse to capitulate. Some secrets are meant to be broken, but others only cause harm.

She might have ruined everything, insisting to come here like she did, but she didn’t know. And I’d barely understood what was happening in that moment, either — I had more mental speculation than anything else. So unless they track Will down and he breaks, they won’t have a case.

It was a long time ago. I’ll keep running as long as I can.

WE CLING

KEITH A. DODSON



Seeker
believer
follower
disciple
apprentice
pilgrim
the progression is not linear
or efficient.
Timelines alter
moments shift
dimensions overlap...
perspective is perception.
Blood here, healing there,
pain, suffering, joy, peace,
dangerous currents
breach life's levee.
Wisdom is not free
and "what if" and "if only"
are not your friends.
Scars are evidence of truth
manifested as knotted skin,
twisted emotion.
Hope sometimes more lie
than future,
we cling to something
to someone.
On what do you stand?
In whom do you trust?
Where do you lay
your head,
your heart,
your dreams?

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Rita Mock-Pike

*Volcano Run
to Freedom*

Nonfiction



Thump. Thump. Thump.

Heart beating fast, lungs gasping for oxygen. Scattered stones around the spot where I stood. Running a volcano had never been a dream. Running in the mountains was never an expectation. Sure, I'd fantasized about one day running some magical European terrain like that of the Biarritz International Marathon in France — but that was just a dream, not the promise.

Living in Guatemala had never been the plan, either. I had no attachment to the country and felt forced there against my will.

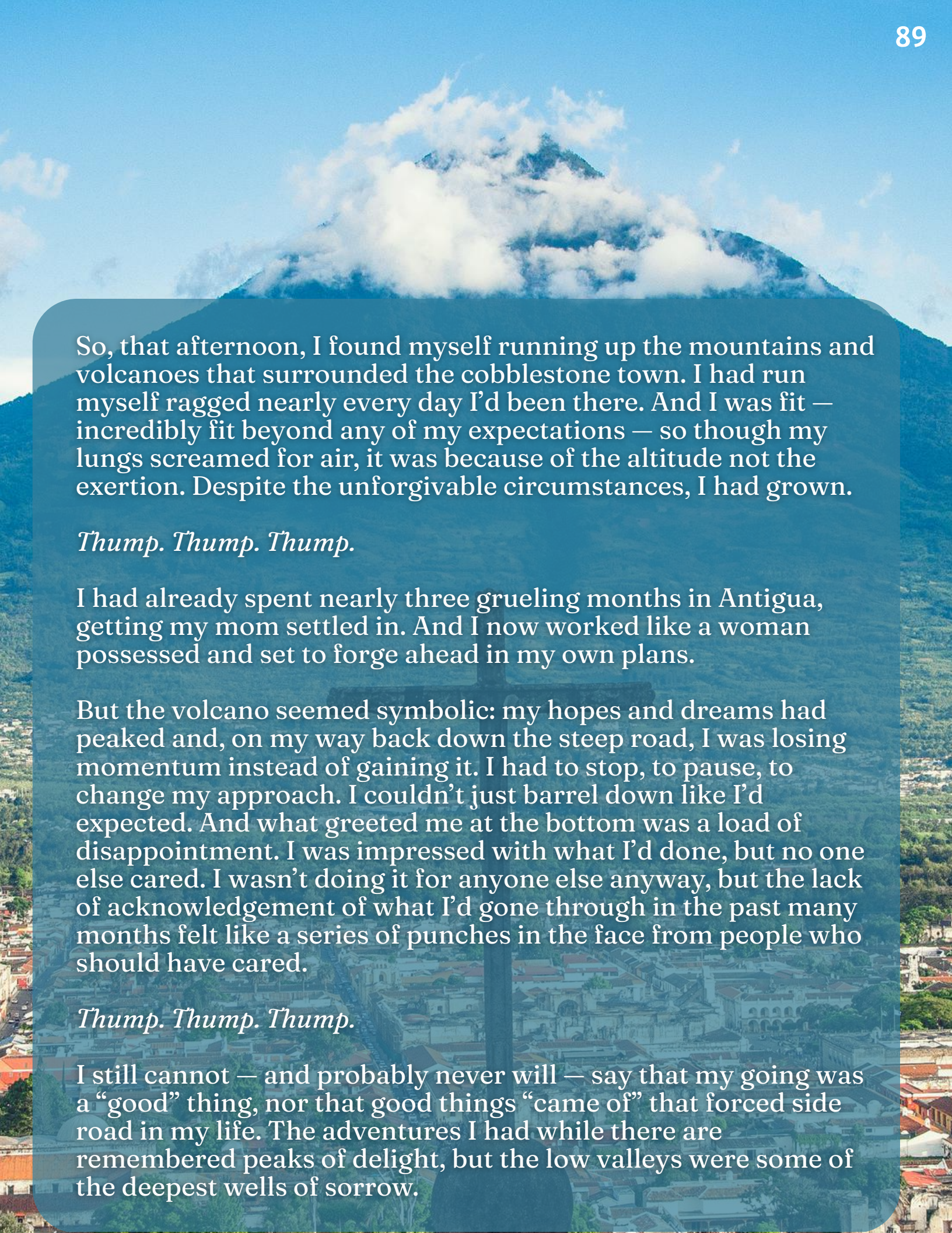
Thump. Thump. Thump.

A lot of things had felt against my will lately. The people I cared about were far off. The land of my heart seemed worlds away. Working as a writer for a remote company making pennies per assignment was hardly what I had envisioned for myself at this point in my life. Only months earlier I'd hit a high peak of adventure, health, creativity, and fitness. And I'd grown comfortable in my own skin for the first time in my life. And, yes, I'd dared to imagine I could find a partner who would love me for who I was and not for who others thought I should be.

And now I was stuck in Antigua, Guatemala.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

It's a beautiful town but it was not my chosen destination. I felt boxed in, broken, and frustrated beyond belief. And I resented being there. I knew I was losing something far dearer to me than those involved in this "forcing" could ever imagine — worse! More than they cared to know — and I had no say in the matter.



So, that afternoon, I found myself running up the mountains and volcanoes that surrounded the cobblestone town. I had run myself ragged nearly every day I'd been there. And I was fit — incredibly fit beyond any of my expectations — so though my lungs screamed for air, it was because of the altitude not the exertion. Despite the unforgivable circumstances, I had grown.


Thump. Thump. Thump.

I had already spent nearly three grueling months in Antigua, getting my mom settled in. And I now worked like a woman possessed and set to forge ahead in my own plans.

But the volcano seemed symbolic: my hopes and dreams had peaked and, on my way back down the steep road, I was losing momentum instead of gaining it. I had to stop, to pause, to change my approach. I couldn't just barrel down like I'd expected. And what greeted me at the bottom was a load of disappointment. I was impressed with what I'd done, but no one else cared. I wasn't doing it for anyone else anyway, but the lack of acknowledgement of what I'd gone through in the past many months felt like a series of punches in the face from people who should have cared.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

I still cannot — and probably never will — say that my going was a “good” thing, nor that good things “came of” that forced side road in my life. The adventures I had while there are remembered peaks of delight, but the low valleys were some of the deepest wells of sorrow.



Instead, I took the lesson for what it was: Someone else choosing your pathway is never the right choice. Not when you're an independent adult capable of making decisions for yourself. I could no longer remain within proximity to those who felt they had a right to steer my life for me or determine who I was "allowed" to marry or dictate where I should live.

And though my own detours have followed, I've never looked back on that decision to flee their presence. And every time I waver, I remember that deep sense of betrayal and I nod to myself. I do not hate them, but I do not heed them. No one will ever be permitted to do that to me again.



No one.

This life I've chosen isn't perfect, but it's *mine*.

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SPRING OF PEACE

Ivan A. Salazar M.

They say spring arrives with a suitcase of pollen —
but in Gaza, sunflowers grow through the ribs of staircases.

A child's kite knots itself in barbed wire,
transforming into a theorem of unanswered questions.

In Ukraine, the snow melts to expose trenches
where the Earth still hums with the warmth of a rifle barrel.
Hands dig for potatoes, find only the geometry of shrapnel,
and a grandmother hangs her laundry between two tank husks.

Meanwhile, the Saharan wind carries a chorus of dates and tea,
but the dunes remember the names no one writes anymore.

A goat chews on a scrap of a map,
its belly full of borders drawn in the 19th century.

Peace conferences bloom like mushrooms in air-conditioned rooms —
delegates sip mineral water, argue over commas,
while a drone's shadow ripens over a field of bullet casings.

What good is a season that arrives only for the clouds?
They hang low, heavy as a cease-fire signed in invisible ink.
We plant flags where the roots should be.

And somewhere, a poet sharpens a pencil with a kitchen knife,
whispers: Let's at least pretend the olive trees aren't weeping blood.

But the joke's on us —
spring is just a rumor invented by calendars.

In the end, the only thing thawing
is the white flag, slowly graying in the rain.

I thought my life would be sunshine and roses,
That retirement would be one adventure after another.
Peace,
Tranquility,
Joy!

It has been anything but.

The “road less traveled” has been a sorry path.
It’s been filled with world-weary nights of tears and goodbyes.

Fear,
Frustration,
Failure!
Self-pity was my destiny.

In a dream state, Master Usui whispers to me,
“Remember your training. Energy is life!
The energy of failure is also the energy of beginning.”

Perhaps when failure looms,
One should dive deep into the mystery of The Fool.

The Fool teaches that we need not always look
Before leaping into the wind to capture it.

The solar plexus chakra opens wide —
Confidence grows and the hummingbird becomes
A raptor.

There is no such thing as a failed journey;
Just an end
And a beginning.

Journey hard,
Journey wild;
Embrace the energy.
Be at peace.

I close my eyes and breathe in the energy
Of the myriad of paths that surround my soul.

Peaceful leaping awaits.

Sue Cook

Failure's Folly

JESSICA N. ARZOLA-GRISSOM - TEXAS, USA

Jessica N. Arzola-Grissom lives in a small Texas town with her husband and son. Her writing has appeared in various print and online publications, including *The Image*, *Logo Sophia*, *Valiant Scribe*, *Reedsy*, and *Latine Lit*. When she isn't writing, she enjoys libraries, tea shops, and consuming dark chocolate.

DAVID W. BERNER – GREATER CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, USA

David W. Berner is the author of several award-winning books of fiction and memoir. His short stories, essays, and poetry have been published in a number of literary journals. Berner has been honored as the Writer-in-Residence at both the Jack Kerouac Project and the Ernest Hemingway Birthplace Home and Museum.

KEITH A. DODSON – NORTH CAROLINA, USA

Keith A. Dodson has dabbled in poetry for over 40 years, was somewhat notorious in the early years, destroyed most of what he's ever written and, after a long hiatus, accidentally rediscovered his poetic roots. He is a professional Life Wrestler losing his strength and stamina which improves the quality of life for everyone around him.

JEREMY DIXON - YORKSHIRE, UK

Jeremy lives in the U.K, near the Yorkshire coast where he works in a school. He graduated with a B.A in English Literature and Creative Writing from The Open University and now teaches creative writing night classes for his local adult education organisation. His fiction has been published in print, in the *Glittery Literary Anthology Four* and *The York Literary Review*. His stories have also appeared online with *Sky Island Journal*, *Loft Books*, *Erato Magazine*, and *The Mocking Owl Roost*.

MURRAY EILAND – CALIFORNIA, USA

Murray Eiland is an archaeologist and speculative fiction enthusiast, particularly stories from the 1940s. His work has appeared in: *Aphelion*, *AcademFic*, *Bewildering Stories*, and *Mystic Mind Magazine*.

LORELEI GREENWOOD-JONES - MAINE, USA

Lorelei has been writing since childhood and has enjoyed expressing herself in many different mediums. Recently her passion has turned to the retelling and reshaping of faerie tales in both short story and poetry.

SUSAN HAIFLEIGH - MICHIGAN, USA

Susan is an architect by training, and a poet by design. Her writing explores the interweaving of light and dark. She has been published in the book *Story Medicine*, online and in print in *The Fahmidan Journal*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine/Berlin*, *The Stafford Challenge Anthology*, *Women Raise Our Voices*, and more. Susan won 2nd place in *The Chancellor's Prize* and in the *Faruq Z. Bey Award*. She was selected for the first cohort of the *Fahmidan Journal/UK* writing mentorship and is currently working on her first full collection of poetry.

MICHAEL J. LAFRANCIS - CONNECTICUT, USA

Michael J. LaFrancis is an author, advocate, advisor, and connector. Writing poetry is a contemplative practice providing insight and inspiration for living a creative life. His poems appear in *Amethyst Review*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *City Key*, *Friday Night Library*, *MockingOwl Roost*, *Northeast Coast*, *One Art*, *Last Leaves*, *Seraphic Review*, *Synkroniciti*, and *Oreanaug MT*. He and his partner, Sharon, have two sons and were recently promoted to Nani and Popi for their two granddaughters. Michael and Sharon recently published their autobiography: *Our Wonderful Life*. They live in Windsor, CT.

ALICE LAWSON - LONDON, THE UNITED KINGDOM

Alice Lawson lives in Bromley with her wonderful daughter and husband — who also serves as her reluctant proofreader. In February 2024, she was longlisted for Free Flash Fiction's Competition Twenty, and in April, she won the New Writers 100-word Spring Contest. Her flash and micro fictions have been published online by The Horror Tree, Cranked Anvil, 101 Words, and Flash Fiction Magazine. Alice is an active member of the Bromley Writers' Group, where she has built friendships with many talented individuals.

CHARLOTTE POITRAS – MONTRÉAL, QUÉBEC, CANADA

Charlotte Poitras is a neurodivergent and queer artist-entrepreneur based in Montreal, Canada. She explores the blurred lines between fiction and reality through writing, visual arts, and short films. Her work aims to entertain both hearts and minds by embracing devil's advocate perspectives.

CHRIS RODRIGUEZ - IDAHO, USA

Chris Rodriguez has retired from the horrors of conventional life. She now lives on the brink of inspiration in Idaho. Her works have appeared in print and online in various formats and themed anthologies including Rhetoric Askew, several by Horrified Press/Thirteen O'Clock Press, Left Hand Publishers' Mindscapes Unimagined, ParABnormal Magazine, DL Russell's Nobody Goes Out Anymore, Gravestone Press, The Writer's Prison's Second-Hand Creeps, Wicked Shadow Press, and Blunder Woman Productions' Wrong Turn, which won Best Audiobook Anthology at the SOVAS Awards.

IVAN A. SALAZAR - WINNIPEG, CANADA

Ivan A. Salazar M., a passionate poet from a rich literary tradition, captures the human condition in his work. As the author of Temporal Echoes, If You Head South, Weaver of Dreams, and Love & Life, he bridges cultures through his words. His fifth poetry collection will be released in mid-2025.

Gregory Smith - Pennsylvania, USA

Gregory Smith is a retired medical social worker. He is the author of 32 short stories, 20 of which have been published or accepted. He is also the author of the upcoming memoir, Stronger Than Bone. Greg is active on social media, including Facebook, X, Blue Sky and Instagram. He enjoys reading, watching sports and classic movies, and listening to music during his free time. Greg is married with two cute dogs, Katie and Cocoa.

FRANÇOISE VAAL - THE NETHERLANDS

Françoise Vaal unveils the sacred bond between humanity and the wild, transforming rugged landscapes into portals of wonder and belonging. Her art invites others to step beyond the veil of the ordinary and see themselves as part of something vast, timeless, and extraordinary — a journey of the soul woven into the earth's embrace. Her artistic journey started late in life, is rooted in landscape photography inspired by her mother's amateur photography, has evolved into an intimate odyssey — moving from vast horizons to the intricate details of the earth's sacred language. Françoise intertwines textures, layers, and monoprints into her photographs.

SUE COOK – COMMISSIONING EDITOR, STAFF POET, WRITER

Sue Cook (she/her) lives in Illinois with her husband Randy and 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.

EMMA DIEHL – COPY EDITOR

Emma Diehl is a recent graduate of Ohio University with a Bachelor's in English pre-Law. During her time at OU, Emma contributed to several local literary journals, served as the vice president of two writing clubs and the editor-in-chief of Elephant Eyes Literary Journal, and played trumpet for The Thursday Night Jazz Band in her free time. After traveling in Ireland, Emma plans to either attend law school and focus on education law and students' rights or join an indie band as a trumpet/bass player, whichever one comes first.

PERRI DODGSON – REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Perri Dodgson was born into an RAF family, which meant travelling extensively and receiving a disjointed education. Her first job was a layout designer for a publishing house, then for twenty years she worked in the care sector, looking after the elderly and mentally ill. Now retired and living in Wellingborough, England, and after joining a writing group, she discovered the joy of writing. She has had features published in magazines and online literary magazines and been 'highly recommended' in a national competition. She also explores interior design and embroidery. Currently she is researching for her book which will be a biography.

UFAN-ABASI FRANCIS – WEBSTER

Ufan-Abasi Francis is based in Nigeria and is part of the SEO/Web/Social team. She's interested in digital media, especially how content and design work together online. Outside of work, she enjoys journaling, exploring visual aesthetics, and curating content ideas. A fun fact: she's always on the hunt for the perfect playlist to boost her focus.

ISSY JINARMO – REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Issy Jinarmo is the pen name for the writing trio Jill Baggett, Narelle Noppert and Maureen Kelly OAM. They live far apart, Mudgee, Picton and Adelaide, but started writing never ending stories by email during the lockdown. They have had numerous stories published in anthologies and magazines. They never tire of seeing where their next story will take them.

BISAN KUHAIL – REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Bisan Kuhail is a creative writer and content creator based in Palestine. She enjoys exploring topics related to culture, identity, and everyday life through writing and storytelling. She has experience in translation, film analysis, and educational content development. In her free time, she loves photography, discovering cozy coffee spots, and working on personal projects. She hopes to bring meaningful and relatable pieces to a global audience.

ANDI MAGANA – COPY EDITOR

Andi is a Mexican-American enthusiast of the humanities and a lover of literature and cats. She is an Atlanta-area resident who loves reading flash fiction, translations, poetry, and fantasy novels. With an interest in different genres and styles, she also values opportunities to develop her editing and work-shopping skills with fellow writers. It was in a creative writing class that she discovered her love of writing and hopes to publish her short stories or even a book one day. In her free time, she enjoys learning different craft skills, traveling, painting, and watching history documentaries or video essays on various topics.

TANDY MALINAK – HEAD COPY EDITOR

Tandy Malinak was engrossed in visual art, stage performance, and storytelling before she knew what the words meant. A second-generation homeschooler with a BA in Elementary Ed, she also knows kids and homelife; set her down with a cup of tea, and she'll go until you stop her. She loves fantasy, sci-fi, Nintendo, board games, studying the Word, the smell of a campfire, the sound of ocean waves, and all things feline—to name a few! Originally from Seattle, Tandy now lives in Chicago's northside with her husband, 2 dragon-loving kids, and 5 cats.

THADDAUS MARTIN – GUEST COPY EDITOR

Thaddaus is a musician, gamer, lifelong student, film enthusiast, and speculative fiction bookworm and author. He's often guilty of escaping the Texas heat in his imagination, dreaming of rainy days and snowy peaks while burning coffee-scented candles at home. An early passion for language and narrative form and structure led him to pursue a BA in Creative Writing and English with a concentration in Fiction. Alongside boocoos of caffeine and Asian cuisine, he's sustained by his work as an on-staff academic and creative writing tutor for undergrads and time well-spent with his amazing spouse, friends, and mini Bernedoodle.

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 – EDITOR-IN-CHIEF & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Rita Mock-Pike (she/her) is the granddaughter of aviatrix, Jerrie Mock, first woman to pilot an airplane solo around the world. Rita has taken 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.

MAE MONTERO – DESIGNER & WEBSTER

Mae Montero is a New Orleans-based graphic designer with a B.A. in Graphic Design from Loyola University New Orleans and a background in photography. She's passionate about visual storytelling and enjoys creating thoughtful, minimalist work. Her inspiration comes from time spent in nature, natural textures, and everyday light. Outside of her creative practice, Mae enjoys being active outdoors and hanging out with her favorite cat, Mr. Leo.

RACHEL ROBINSON – DESIGNER & VOICE ACTOR

Rachel attends the University of Wisconsin – Madison where she is obtaining a degree in graphic design. Some of her hobbies includes track and field, F1, WWE, taking walks with friends, BTS, Law and Order SVU, and more. She has recently gotten into ceramics and has an interest in voice acting. A fun fact about Rachel is that she binge-watched the show 9-1-1 in about 5 months and it's her new obsession.

AMANDA WOLF – DESIGNER

I'm a storyteller fueled by a love for history, art, and a touch of magic. With degrees in Art History and Anthropology and certifications in Museum Studies and marketing, I've spent 15 years bringing exhibits to life in museums of all sizes. Whether curating, teaching, or traveling the world in search of ancient ruins and local legends, I'm passionate about connecting people to the past. I thrive where history meets imagination—think Victorian time travelers, ancient aliens, and fireworks over Disney castles included. A devoted cat lover, I share my home and lap space with three curious and cuddly cats.

IMAGE CREDITS THIS ISSUE

UNSPLASH

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THE
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