KEEP CALM AND SCROLL DOWN
Keep going! You're almost there!
The Tishman Review is a magazine of literature published in January, April, July, and October each year. We believe in supporting the creative endeavors of the writers of the world. We believe in connecting writers through interviews to pass on hard-earned wisdom and insights. We believe literature serves an existential function and its value to humanity is beyond measure. Therefore, we will always remain open to the possibilities of a work to take us beyond the boundaries known today. We will strive to honor each writer and the work they share with us, whether chosen for publication or not. The Tishman Review seeks to publish work that reflects these values, offers new insights into the human condition, finds beauty in the garish, and calls us to read it again and again. We want to fold an issue closed and find ourselves richer for knowing the words contained within.

Submissions of short fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and art accepted year-round. Please read the submission guidelines on our website: www.thetishmanreview.com.

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Welcome to another issue of TTR. We’re both delighted and stunned to be celebrating our fourth anniversary.

FOURTH!

In this issue you’ll find the Edna St. Vincent Millay Poetry Prize winning poem—*Smithed on the Anvil*—by Jed Myers, a piece that was hand selected by Major Jackson who said the poem “not only addresses a difficult subject, but does so artfully.”

Finalists’ poems are also included, like Julia Wendell’s *First Tomato* (I swooned over the line “what a partial fruit / the human heart is”) and Jen Sage-Robison’s haunting poem *A Kind of Bird*.

Christina Dalcher’s flash fiction *Regeneration* is haunting and beautiful, Kendall Klym’s short story *The Nebraska Hula* is quirky, funny, and wild.

There’s magic in the details in Lisa Hayes’s thought-provoking craft piece *Beyond Genre: The Structure of Stories*, and in Alison Turner’s review of Sybil Baker’s *Immigration Essays*.

I promise, you won’t get bored.

M
CONGRATULATIONS
to our 2018
Edna St. Vincent Millay
Poetry Prize

WINNER:

Smithed on the Anvil
by Jed Myers

FINALISTS:

Line and Pole
by Joe Betz

The Brown Bear of Norway
(Michigan)
by Terry Hall Bodine

Holyrood
by Joanne M. Clarkson

The Alcoholic Holds Court on the
Patio
by Anthony DiPietro

How I Became a Chimera
by Rosa Lane

Packing for Peace
by Jill McCabe Johnson

A Kind of Bird
by Jen Sage-Robison

How to Cope After a Tragedy
by Sara Moore Wagner

First Tomato
by Julia Wendell

Read all of these poems
and more beginning on
page 12
The shooter’s got US Flag toothpicks poked in his eyes. He’s got extra white stars sewn over his ears, got black and red stripes like a seared rare steak on his back, a posse of long-nailed pain-devils prying open his ribs to attack his heart, it’s gone on like this for years, and the great hate has entered him, sealed itself in with a moisture-lock layer like Vaseline spread on his lungs, seized the root of his tongue, reached up and squeezed the transmission stalks between his retinas and what his brain sees, so he’s stuck with his twisted vision, the American warrior prophecy, illustrated by devotees of Stan Lee, written like scrimshaw carved on the inside walls of his cranium, look at him, he seethes in the roar of his own packed bone stadium, he believes a version of doctrine cooked into him, the convergence of triumph and doom, not unusual among human males, no stranger than a kid’s cowboy heroes firing into the tissues of Injuns or Japs or Krauts while their own skin ruptures red spouts, that glorious finish, that getting the hate out, that rubbing it in with instant lead fingertips making the point at a distance and evading all future debate. The shooter was made for this, smithed on the anvil of eternal vigilance. He, alloy of densest emptiness radio talk show righteousness mental ward lingo satellite TV memes and blank memories, lifts the elongate metallic gift he bought himself to his head, and now that he’s settled up with the anonymous stand-ins for family fresh-dead, blows an escape hatch through his own brow.
First Tomato

poetry by Julia Wendell

Hardly worth plucking,
or eating, though the color’s right.

But it’s the *first* one
he’s left for me,

a wolf peach,
morning gift to ponder.

Diminutive ovoid,
not my usual plump Early Bird.

Broad light fills the house
with margarine and joy,

though just yesterday
we almost lost

our two old ones—
determined as we were
to shoot the other
when the first died.

We howled for their lives
as we learned

what a partial fruit
the human heart is.

*Tomayto, tomahto,*
What’s the difference?

It’s this:
When the sick horse rallied,

we celebrated
with our sun-warmed love apple

still pumping on the cutting board.
How fierce love is.
“Gordon, you were dreaming again,” his mother said, standing over him in the blue light of morning. Her pale face bore the same curious indifference he’d known as a young boy. Now, as a grown man, her expression brought back that memory of helplessness, those years he’d spent reaching for someone turned the other way.

She lingered over him before bending, with a wince, to pick up some of his clothes. Momentarily, he felt embarrassed watching his aging mother pick up after him in the childhood bedroom he should have left years ago.

As clearly as he could see his mother roving around his room or the snow building on his windowsill, he could remember the dream. He’d been in the middle of the lake, drifting there at night, fighting to stay at the surface while everything below pulled him down. There were lights under the surface, moving more like fire than electricity. For only a moment they glowed before dying out. When they were finally gone, he found himself sinking into the throaty silence of the lake, the same body of water he’d feared for what he knew had been his entire life.

But just before he sank, Gordon had recognized his brother’s voice over the waves, calling to him from somewhere in the hollow night. Melvin’s words had no discernible meaning, but their cadence was the same as all those evenings when they’d sat together as brothers, telling stories of the lake.

In the dream, Gordon could not call back. Water choked him, hardening inside his chest like cement. The lake poured in and he went downward, until his mother had drawn him out from sleep.

“We should go,” she said, echoing back to the chilly mornings before school when they were kids. “Before the storm gets too bad.”

He turned his head from his pillow. Outside, snow was falling at a harsh pace, filling the corners of his window panes with white boomerangs.

His mother stopped at his doorway, his jeans over her arm. “I’ll fill a thermos with coffee.”

Gordon listened as she retreated downstairs and across the many boards of the house, which were piled together a hundred years ago along the edges of the woods. He heard her movement amid the radiators and pipes clicking, the chirrup of the coffeepot, the kitchen stove wheezing like an old, black lung. She moved with the same weightless grief of a ghost.

He dressed in an old, green flannel with slacks held up by suspenders and long johns underneath. In the hallway mirror, he examined his pale face encircled by a gradually graying beard. They’d never known their father, but he imagined he must have looked like him. Maybe he looked like Melvin, he thought, as his own eyes went to the open door of what had once been his brother’s room.

The door was ajar and from the window gray light fell upon the unmade bed. Old baseball trophies lined the shelf. He saw ships in bottles, arrowheads, and rusted railway ties. The unplugged ham radio still sat on the desk where Melvin had called nearby ships at night, even when there was homework to be done.

His mother was waiting in the pickup for him. The windshield wipers carved two tunnels through the snow, through which she gazed out expectantly. Gordon
wondered how long she would wait there by herself.

She used to drive them to school, to the doctor, to the bridge to watch the freighters churn past. Other kids thought it funny that a woman drove a truck. Men talked about her, and women chided her in public. She was brazen and earthy, drinking whiskey with men and hosting poker games at the house. She didn’t give a damn that they talked about her, that they kept their kids away from hers.

Now, of course, she was something else entirely. Something hard and worn, like a rock you’d find at the base of a cliff, after it had tumbled down all those ledges, all those years just to get to the bottom.

Inside the truck, he found her listening to weather reports. Snow through tomorrow evening. Eighteen to twenty inches and gale force winds.

“We need to beat the storm,” she muttered as snow fell, and he finally took the wheel.

They slid over the icy roads in between houses long boarded up for winter. Each window had been shuttered like the giant eyelids of a monster pulled down for sleep.

Every few houses they saw life: a chimney spitting smoke, an old snowman growing fatter in the storm. Gordon felt like he didn’t know these people living distant, staccato lives, interrupted only by the occasional ships that came to port and the deckhands who came looking for whiskey, women, and home-cooked meals.

When Gordon was a boy, one came to their house during a snowstorm. Near midnight, they heard the knock. The light from their doorway fell on a patch of snow, upon which the young deckhand stood shivering. So they let him in.

Eventually full with ham salad and coffee laced with gin, the man had unraveled stories of the lake. He told them about threadbare French missionaries living on the land, and the Native Americans sweeping in on raids. A Jesuit priest was kidnapped by the Huron nation one winter, taken out to an island on the lake and held for ransom. The local people used the ice floes to cross the lake to the island, but when they came near, the Huron weighted the priest down with rocks and dropped him into the lake. His rescue party suffered great losses as the ice became too fragile, breaking apart and sending them sputtering into the frigid lake.

There were rumors afterwards. Sometimes ships sailing by the island could see the old priest passing from tree to tree. Sometimes they’d see a cloaked towns-person waving from a passing chunk of ice, crying out for help. But no one, no ship could ever pull close enough to see for sure.

After his stories, their mother took the deckhand upstairs to have him fix the antenna on the roof, though they knew it was no use during storms. Gordon and his brother remained downstairs, watching as game shows and square-jawed detectives wobbled like black-and-white gelatin across the screen.

In their absence, his brother recounted the deckhand’s stories. They both believed the stories like gullible party guests at a séance. Gordon found himself at libraries, roving through old collections, reading of the old ships and the lighthouses that occasionally illuminated their ghostly forms along the dark horizon.

When he’d go to the lake, he’d stand at the edge of the water, looking down at the water and thinking about these things, all the men that had gone into it. He’d nearly gone in himself as a young boy.

He knew that Melvin had wanted to experience the truth for himself. His brother had taken to the lake early on, learning how to swim. On the Fourth of July, there’d been relays from the lighthouse to the abandoned Coast Guard station, and he’d won most of them. When two boys had capsized their sailboat some
yards out from shore, Melvin had been the one to swim out and save them. Girls cheered for him, old men admired his youth as reminders of their own. His picture was printed in the newspaper and hung up in shops. With the lake, he was something more than that scrawny boy sitting in front of the television, failing and listless in school, restless and wayward at home.

“I’m going to ask him to take me with him,” Melvin muttered, when they finally heard their mother and the deckhand coming downstairs, tussled and breathless.

But the deckhand was dismissive, laughing as he rustled Melvin’s hair. “I’ll make a deal with you, young man,” the deckhand said. “I’ll come back for you when you’re older, how’s that?”

His brother went timid and quiet. Together, they’d grown up in a home without a man and had forgotten there were things about themselves they had to prove to others.

They said goodbye.

The deckhand’s ship shoved off in the morning. They never learned his name or the name of his ship. It wasn’t more than a day after that they discovered he’d stolen from them. Money was gone from their mother’s purse. Melvin’s Indian Head coin collection had vanished from its velveteen case. Gordon had few possessions worth stealing.

The store sat not far from the beach so that when Gordon turned off the engine, they could hear the wind whistling along the frosted shore. Past the sloping sands, white water exploded as it met the break wall, great geysers of it launching into the air. He shivered and waited for his mother to leave.

She sat quietly at her end of the truck, clicking her mouth with wet sound. She seemed painfully old to him now, older still because of everything that had transpired. The noises and the movements that filled her days were those of an aging woman, getting farther and farther away from him.

She got out of the pickup then looked back inside.

“Aren’t you coming?” she said.

“I’ll just wait here.”

“I’ll need your arms,” she said and shut the door.

She didn’t wait, just trudged along the icy parking lot, boots barely touching the ground, a solitary bundle of black wool cutting through the white space.

By the time they were inside, Gordon had lost his mother somewhere in the aisles. He moved through the produce section, already sparse and swarmed with the bundled, harried shoppers stocking up for the next few days. They dodged one another, staring vacantly onward at mounds of lettuce and grapefruit, thinking absently of meals to make while the snow shut them in.

Gordon tracked her along each aisle, peering down long stretches of canned goods or cereals, some marked by long, empty lengths of shelves. Where other women had wound scarves or kerchiefs around their heads, his mother wore nothing. She was defiant, flying headlong into the elements in nothing but the ragged wool coat she’d worn all her life. These other women stared at him, looking up from saltines and laundry soap to see his face staring back. One or two smiled softly, sympathetically.

Without a word, Gordon kept going. At the end of the deli, he figured he’d have better luck going to the front, so he dove down the dairy aisle.

“Gordon?” said a voice.

He stopped, half expecting to have passed his own mother without realizing it. When he looked back, he saw her instead. She’d been busy restocking frozen TV dinners in her green vest with the nametag, Theresa, it said mutely in red lettering, Assistant Manager.
“My goodness,” she said quietly, staring back at him. She’d lost weight, grown paler even for winter. In such a town as this, he still hadn’t seen her in some time. Whether it was because—in the intervening months—their orbits had simply never crossed, or because they’d kept themselves spinning far enough away, he did not know.

Both of them paused. He became aware of the cold radiating off the freezers humming around them. She seemed fragile against this cold. He wanted to bundle her in his coat with him. It hurt to want to hold her.

“Are you well?” Theresa said. She bristled, straightening out her vest. “I haven’t seen you, I think, since the memorial.”

He watched as she looked at her feet. “Will you get home alright?” he asked. “Before the storm gets too bad?”

“I’ll be alright.” She offered him another smile. “They say it’s gonna be a bad one though.”

He said nothing more. When she looked up at him again, she looked beyond him. His mother had appeared, wheeling her cart up to them, beaming softly at the sight of Theresa as she reached for another carton of eggs.

“Are you working all day, sweetheart?” his mother asked.

Theresa was quiet for a moment, until she shook her head. “I’m off at noon.”

“That’s good,” his mother said. “You’ll go straight home then?”

Theresa hesitated. “Just need to pick up a few things for my father.”

His mother nodded and pushed on. “We’ll see you on Sunday for dinner then. The storm should be over. I’ll send the boys to pick you up.”

These words froze Theresa. She kept her eyes low as his mother wheeled past, and when she had disappeared, Theresa finally gazed back with her sad, frosted eyes. He looked back for just a moment before he pried himself away, leaving her there alone, standing against the giant freezers humming with man-made cold.

He waited for his mother in the pickup. By then, some of the radio stations had gotten weaker, and he could find no music or reliable weather reports to pass the time. Instead, he sat bathed in the static radio waves.

When his mother finally appeared, crossing the parking lot toward him, he saw in her grocery cart an embarrassment of food.

Pushing himself out of the truck, he confronted her, “What did you buy?”

He looked down into the metal basket, saw bags full of cans, jars, boxes, and packages stacked and thrown together. Enough food to feed them for a year.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, as she dropped the tailgate to load the truck bed.

“Stocking up, Gordon,” his mother said. “How did you even afford this?” Gordon asked.

She swung two frozen turkeys onto the truck bed. “The settlement,” she said.

Gordon stood back and watched her. Just as he figured he should do something, he heard a voice saying his name, almost lost on the wind.

Theresa stood a few feet away from them, without a coat, clutching her arms against the cold.

Slowly, he approached her.

She didn’t say anything at first, just looked out at the lake, gray now, with long bands of whitecaps roving past, like a military parade on review. Finally, she pulled her arms apart and began wringing her hands. And when they were free, like a magic trick she’d just undone, she presented him with the diamond engagement ring. He remembered the day Melvin had asked him to help pick it out.

“I shouldn’t keep this,” Theresa said quietly.

She laid the ring in his hands then turned to get back inside, just as the snow grew thick and frantic.
The house seemed to be sinking under the snow by the time they returned.

Achingly, they plodded through their own footprints with their groceries as the wind turned them breathless and rigid to the door.

Inside, the power was out. His mother fidgeted with the fuse box but nothing happened. Without electricity, the house seemed lifeless and yet expectant, like an old dog waiting for food.

“T’ll make a fire in the stove,” she muttered, pulling off her coat and taking some of the bags into the kitchen.

Gordon remained at the front door, listening as she bothered with the stove, pulling up the metal door and shoving wood into its belly. He heard the strike of a match and the groan of the old steel as it warmed.

He hated the old stove, just as he hated the lake. In cold weather, the stove made noises unprovoked as drafts from outside moved through its pipes. He and his brother had sat beside it eating their oatmeal on cold mornings. His brother never said a word about it, and sometimes their mother let him light the kindling to start it. But Gordon cast wayward glances at the stove, as if at any moment the thick, black pipes might break free from the wall and, like tentacles, drag him into the lake.

Without television or his mother’s Broadway records, they sat in silence eating beef barley soup. A single candle fluttered between them. Elsewhere, only a windup grandfather clock showed any life. The wind had calmed, and the snow fell straight down.

Sometime before they finished supper, they heard a knock on the door. For a moment, sitting quietly, they listened to the echo of the knock rolling through the house. It had been an urgent three beats. Unmistakable and masculine.

Without a word, his mother went to get it, scuffing up the hall in her slippers. She opened the front door.

Gordon studied his mother’s outline against the falling snow, watched her shoulders sink as, dumbfounded, she found no one there. Still framed by the threshold, she looked back at him for an answer.

When he offered none, she shut the door and shuffled back toward the kitchen, coughing into her napkin.

“It’s no one,” she said, as she sat back down and continued eating. “Just the snow settling.”

The same dream came again that night. Or rather, the same foundation of the dream.

This time he was at the bottom of the lake. The pressure of the water bore down on him. He could feel the mud and sand sucking at his feet, and sashays of seaweed grazing his body.

Eventually, as he drifted, he began to see shapes. He could see the great hulk of a ship collapsed in the sand, shattered and grayed-out by rust, as if all that was left was its shadow. Each porthole filled slowly with a pinpoint of pale light. They were faces, he realized, as they stared defiantly at him. He stared back and, for a moment, forgot that he’d never learned to swim.

And then he woke up in the deepest part of night. Clouds and snow reflected one another with a gray, pinkish glow more daytime than night. He could see the steady drop of snow shimmering beyond the curtains.

He felt around the rest of the house. His mother was there, sleeping down the hall. The pipes rattled, and the roof rustled in the snow. But there was something else.

He followed it into the hall. The light of his mother’s kerosene lamp traced the outline of her door at one end. In the middle of the hall, he looked into the mirror once more, where his own half-shadow glanced back at him. Somewhere
in between, he saw the door to his brother’s room, wide open once again. He went toward it.

For a moment, he stood looking in. With his hand on the doorknob, he heard something more, something moving downstairs. He felt himself go flush and shut his brother’s door.

The house was well illuminated from snowlight. In the downstairs hall, he could see back toward the old stove in the kitchen, clinging fast to the wall. But when he looked up the other length, he saw that the front door was open.

He figured his mother must not have shut it properly when they’d heard the knocking during supper. Maybe it had blown open.

When he got to the threshold, he looked out into the yard and saw the figure looking back at him from the trees.

“Who are you?” Gordon said hesitantly. There was no answer.

“Is it you?” Gordon asked.

Gordon waited a moment more before stepping into the snow. It fell so gently, like a thousand eyelashes on his skin. He shuddered. Underneath his feet, the snow creaked with firmness.

“Are you real?” he asked, louder this time.

His heartbeat began to grow, but he was not scared. He felt assuredly that this was real. This was not some trick of his eyes, of the snow or the night.

When Gordon opened his mouth again, the door behind him closed with a pronounced shudder and click. He turned to see, but the house leered back.

He glanced back to the figure, as if for an answer, but he was gone.

“No,” Gordon whispered, suddenly cold in what he realized was nothing more than his underwear and undershirt.

At the front door, he twisted the knob, but it was locked. The snow continued to settle upon him.

“Mother!” he said through the door.

“Mother! Let me back in!”

He shook the knob. Silence grew around him. He could not breathe. He remembered the sensation of drowning, how similar it was to now.

“Mother!” he gasped.

Once more, he threw his weight at the door, but nothing budged. He sank to his knees, with his hand still gripping the knob.

When she finally found him, collapsed in the snow, he wasn’t sure how long he’d been there. He could only judge by how cold he felt.

“What the hell are you doing?” his mother said, standing over him in her flowered housecoat, hair in rollers, as if people still came to see her in daytime.

He shook too much to answer. So she helped him off the ground, and together they went inside. She dusted him off.

“You were dreaming again,” she said. “Maybe sleepwalking this time …”

“I was awake. ...”

“I should start locking your room,” she said, “prop a chair against the door. I’ll light a fire and make some tea.”

“Lock the door?” he stammered, finding his voice.

She was halfway to the kitchen. He shivered for a moment more then looked up at her. “You locked me ... locked me out.”

“What?”

“You locked me out.”

She didn’t move. “The door was unlocked, Gordon,” she said. “You were dreaming. You have bad dreams.”

“You did it.”

She tilted her head back to laugh. “You locked me out,” he said. “It’s freezing, and you locked me out. I could have died.”

“You’re exhausted, Gordon,” she said. “Go to bed.” She said this like she’d said it when he was a boy. When he was being selfish or obstinate.

“This isn’t the first time,” he said.
“Gordon, what are you talking about?” she said, shaking her head wildly. “You’re not yourself.”

“You watched me drown!” he shouted. “I won’t listen to this.”

“I was six years old, and you stood there on the shore and watched,” he said, approaching her. “You had to learn to survive, Gordon!”

“He was the one that drowned. He was the one you lost—”

“Enough! I can’t! Gordon!”

A wash of purple stars overcame his vision. Though he couldn’t see, he felt fistfuls of her housecoat in his hands. When the stars cleared, he looked down and saw her petrified in his grasp.

“Gordon,” she whispered, “Gordon, Gordon ...”

He backed away from her. In the new silence, both of them could hear the static rising from somewhere in the house. Both of them listened for a moment.

Slowly, they followed it back upstairs to the hallway. Steps away from his brother’s room, they heard the noise with sudden clarity. Curdling static drew them to the door, open once again.

The dials on the radio were up, and the microphone sat in front of the console on the desk, waiting to be spoken to.

His mother went toward it immediately. Outlined in the scarce light, Gordon saw her expectant face, bewildered underneath her wild gray hair.

She pushed down on the microphone—the static stopped—and muttered, “Hello? Hello? I’m here. ...”

Gordon shivered in the doorway.

“I’m here,” she murmured. “It’s okay. Mother’s here now. You don’t have to be afraid.” Finally, she sat down at the old desk. “I’m here,” she whispered. Then, almost inaudibly, she began humming to herself, an old song she used to sing to them, the one she’d taken from her days as a dancer on the stage:

“Hang out the stars in Indiana,
Up in a sky of midnight blue.
Hang out the stars in Indiana,
To light my way back home to you.”

The blizzard went on. In the morning, he shoveled a path for the pickup, enough at least for it to gain some momentum and plow through the snow.

While he waited for the truck to warm, he wandered over to the tree line to the spot where he’d seen the figure. Even though hours of a fresh fall had passed, he figured there’d still be the two sunken hollows where someone had stood. But there was no trace of anyone in the snow.

Town was deserted too. The lights were off in the shops. The tavern on the corner—where his brother used to hustle the old Danes at pool—was also dark. The pickup’s tracks were the first through the streets that morning, when he realized he had no destination.

He brought the truck to a stop at the town’s main intersection, idling at the stop sign and looking up the empty streets.

He found Theresa shuffling along the gallery, pulling her jacket tight to the center of her chest and squinting into the snow. Her chestnut hair was afloat around her frowning face. She was coming from the store, at the end of her overnight shift.

He shouted over the wind, “Do you need a ride?”

Theresa looked over at him, the grip around her coat loosening as she realized who he was.
He turned the heater up as she shook inside the truck, sputtering and fishtailing up the road they’d passed along so many times before, whether in the backseats of friends’ cars or at the back of the school bus. She fixed her coat and her hair. The snow she brought in with her fluttered between them.

“Where are you headed?” he mumbled.
“I have to check on my father,” she answered. “His phone is out.”
“Okay,” he said, and his own voice reassured him. “Are you warm enough?”
“I don’t think I’ve ever been warm enough.”
“I can turn up the heater.”
“I don’t think it’ll go any farther.”
“I can grab a blanket from the back, if you just hold on a second while I pull over—”
“Gordon, it’s fine,” she said. “Just get me home. I’ll warm up there.”
“Sure,” he said and looked back to the road, paved in white, without any discernible path. He fell quiet, and she took to staring out the window.
“It was a storm just like this,” she said finally, without looking up.
“I remember.”
He knew the way. Her father lived along the edge of town, back in the woods where he ran a small repair shop for boat engines. He used to smoke alewives and jerky in his shed.

In the summers, the kids used to have bonfires and lie in the fields, watching fireflies make electricity. He remembered laughing a lot there, wondering about stars, catching grasshoppers. One summer, Theresa’s cat had gone missing out in the woods. All day and well into the night, they’d fanned out into the forest, calling out its name, knocking at the trees, whistling. Melvin had been the one to find the cat, injured and shaking at the roots of some trees. He’d lifted the animal into his arms and calmed it down. Theresa had watched with thankful awe and a glimmer of something else that made Gordon’s heart sink.

The path to her father’s was overcome with snowbanks, so they stopped at the end of the long driveway. Ahead, Gordon could see the shack, now just a blip in the snow.

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “This is as far as I can go.”
She paused. During the ride, they hadn’t said much. Now she turned to him, softening, and took his hand.
“Are you well?” she said.
“You already asked me that the other day,” Gordon said, grinning.
He felt the ring in his pocket. He hadn’t taken it out since yesterday. He thought about what it’d be like to offer it to her himself.

“I want you to be well, Gordon.” She turned and pulled the handle of the door.

“Wait,” he said, and she stopped with the door ajar. Snow began circling their heads. “We miss you.”
She stared at him.
“You should come to the house,” he said. “We can talk.”
“No, Gordon.” She left and closed the door behind her. When it shut, the snow fluttering around him fell sharply to the ground, as if all along she had been the source of its weightlessness, as if she sent the whole wide world aloft.

His mother’s light came from within the house, as he stood in the yard watching as twilight spread through the sky.

In the doorway, a thousand scents drifted through the hall. He followed them to the kitchen, where he found the table buckling under a palatial feast laid out over a hundred plates and bowls.

His mother had prepared the food from the day before and probably more that they had had in stock: the ham they hadn’t eaten during the holidays, the TV dinners they ate too often; steaks, waffles,
cereal, and even ice cream. Emptied cabinets had given up crackers, vats of canned soups, and rice. She’d dumped out pots of noodles, each new pasta shape like the catch of the day squiggling on the dock. Every bottle of sauce and condiment held watch over plates of hotdogs and sandwiches impaled by toothpicks with olives. Eggs had been scrambled, fried, poached, or baked into cakes and cookies.

She stood over the stove where more pots rattled with livid water. The toaster chimed, and she added two more slices to a tower of bread. Quickly, she buttered them with what was left of the stick. Her face was streaked in flour and chocolate, ketchup and sweat, like war paint for a battle.

“You’re home,” she said casually. “Good. Sit down and have something to eat.”

Gordon remained in the doorway. “Are we expecting visitors?” he asked slowly. She looked at the table then to him. “It’s Sunday dinner.”

He didn’t move. “Mother,” he whispered. “What are you doing?”

“I made dinner,” she said, shrugging. “Hurry up, or it’ll get cold.”

He looked over the meal—or rather, the many meals, laid out for them. His stomach churned, and he hadn’t even eaten a bite. Some of it had no doubt sat for hours.

“Mother,” he said, looking up at her again.

She turned to see him as bacon popped in her pan, spattering hot grease on her wrist, which she barely noticed.

When he said nothing more, she smiled at him and replied, “I’ll join you in a minute.”

Quietly, he went to the table and sat down at the head beside plates of Jell-O and sardines. She came over a moment later and set a plate of boiled cabbage in the only free space left on the table.

“There’s still much to be done,” she said. “But it all looks so good. I think I’ll sit for a quick bite.”

She sat opposite him, reaching for the nearest dishes. She piled mashed potatoes beside a grapefruit wedge.

“Mother,” he tried again as he watched her. “Come back.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him as she licked mayo from her hand.

“Come back,” he insisted.

“Gordon, have some cocoa if you’re not hungry,” she said.

He swiped aside a pot of chicken wings and creamed corn, paying it no mind as it splattered on the floor.

“He’s not coming back,” Gordon said. She paused.

“He’s dead,” he said, and wondered how many times he’d said this to himself already.

Still she said nothing. “Do you fucking hear me?” he said. “He drowned in that storm. The ship went down. He’s gone.”

She smiled sadly, worryingly defiant. “They never found his body,” she replied softly. “They never found any of them.”

She paused again. “Except you.” Quietly, she asked, “How did you survive and he didn’t?” She shook her head violently, tears coming loose.

“You know, I lived my entire life wishing I was him,” Gordon said. “I figured if I was more like him then everybody would love me. You, Theresa, everyone. I tried to be like him. I signed up for that ship, just to be like him, even though you kept me petrified of the water all those years.” He paused. “Do you know, in the end, when the ship was going down? We both stood at the railing, holding our own, both of us holding our own, feeling it slipping out from under us. We knew we had to jump. Isn’t that funny? He was the one who was scared. And I didn’t even give it a second
thought.”

“No more,” she begged.

“No now here I am,” he said, “left behind with you. And I’m still competing with his ghost.”

When the snow finally finished, he went out into the world. The sky was clear and a portion of the moon revealed everything with perfect, crystalline light. Each tree stretched out, highlighted by snow. His snowshoes broke through the powder, layers of compacted snow holding him aloft.

At the edge of the woods, he paused to look at the house. It was a small world he had shared with his brother. Long ago, before going off on the lake aboard the old rusted freighters, they’d talked of moving far away, maybe to a big city where they’d open a bar together, play music at night, marry sisters, and live next door to one another. They never spoke about their mother, what she’d be doing, where she’d be. She’d had a whole life before them, so she could have a new life without them. Maybe it was the men that had hurt her. Maybe the deckhands that streamed into town. Maybe it had been her own father, a man of the lake as well, and who she’d run away from. Maybe Gordon reminded her of one of them.

Or maybe there was no explanation. Maybe he was just the frayed corner of their little family, the unwanted heir to a fortune of decay.

He turned his back on the house and continued on his path.

Because it was so still, he could hear the lake for miles. With each wave that came ashore, he felt himself getting closer. He walked for a long while—hours maybe, not even cold, always going, never stopping. He knew there were moments like this when it was best to be alone. To share this with someone else meant words spoken aloud. Any word of awe would have broken up the snow, sent it spilling from its tightrope act along the trees.

He finally came upon the lake resting in the middle of the night. Before then, he’d never truly appreciated how far he lived from it. Cars and machines had destroyed any sense of space and distance. He thought of the Jesuits and American Indians living in the woods. How they must have marveled at the lake after so long afoot on land. How they still spoke of it, their whispers passing from tree to tree. In the end, that’s what would remain: forgotten words on the mossy lips of forlorn trees.

Along the edges of a gorge, the lake lapped against the rocks. Platforms of jagged formations sulked in foam. A flat, black surface spread out before him under a blanket of percolating stars. He’d spent so long fearing this. Others looked with wonder. They’d built their lives as close to it as possible, to smell its sand and hear its noises. Some said it was because, long ago, they’d come from the water. All of mankind had sprung up from it, and somewhere, deep inside, they longed to go back.

Maybe they were right, Gordon thought.

He threw himself into the lake.

And when it spat him out, he was nothing more than alive. The fall alone should have been enough, but he was still whole, bobbing along the water’s edge. This was the third time the lake had rejected him.

He stayed at the surface near the base of a rock wall that towered beside him like the prow of a ship plunging past. He was cold, that much was certain. The water was hard but light, like glass. His body rose above it all, like his dreams, the ones that kept repeating themselves like old radio broadcasts floating in the atmosphere, drifting in and out as his brain tuned in to each frequency. But now he had changed that frequency, tuned it.
away from everything that had ever given him fear.

He saw the rocks where he could climb up and onto shore, but he stayed a moment more. Refreshed, he thought once more of the lake, how underfoot it roiled with bones upon the sand. This was where it got its life, he knew, from those who’d gone down into it and were never coming back.
Ancient, jacketed with mud-stiff
  carapace, open claw, the crawdads
  flick spiny tails above holes
  in shallow water of the wheat fields.
    I've hid

in the shade of the good life lived
whistling you get a line
I'll get a pole through the hard
rains of June.

It's noon
  and the soil's hiss cracks for miles
like my grandfather's hand
on tin sheets for the shed thin
as a boy's lips, his confidence.

What depths do the crawdads sink?
How long is the line in the reel?

I've hated, and myself, too.
Yet the sun relieves the sog.
Yet the hole's bottom is found
with string, hook,
    and we yank.
Here’s the way it started: he says to me, “bear by day, man by night.” Five-year trial period—I make it, and we break the spell. What can I tell you? I was in love, I was in, I took the dare. Split-level on a side street and woods beyond town. Most shifts longer than eight to five—gone at daybreak, back at dark—each of us adapting, adopting routine. Evenings in front of the TV, I catalogue the hours spent apart: Pine-Sol-ed linoleum, Guiding Light, laundry wrung and hung to dry. Egg salad, or maybe pimiento cheese. Him? Not much he can articulate. He settles deeper on the couch, edging toward sleep, while I comb the coat across my knees free of leaves, dig out the dirt caked in paws’ leather pads—debris I’ll sweep up before heading to bed. I can bet now my husband won’t rouse before morning, his breath grumbling low in the back of his throat. Some nights, unable to resist, I unzip, I undress, I slip his heavy fur over my pale bare skin. And this might be the way it ends: with this longing to rake an itch up the trunk of a tree, to wallow, to taste the clean of a spring-fed stream as it breaks against my mouth.
small sermons by Susan Currie
In the springtime, a starling flits through the trees chirruping softly and builds her nest in the eave of my roof. She’s an ordinary bird, common like the finch or the sparrow, a smattering of white freckles flung across her body. Her faintly iridescent feathers glimmer like oil on pavement. Starlings are an invasive species, brought from England to North America in the late seventeenth century. One hundred birds turned to one thousand, to one hundred thousand, to millions. Now there’s no memory of her old home, across the ocean. This home is all she knows.

She guards her eggs until they break open and baby starlings emerge, pink, blind, and fragile. They open their mouths wide and call for their mother endlessly, and she dips through the trees, catching insects to feed them. Within a week, a soft blanket of down cloaks their bodies and their big eyes blink open. At two weeks old, the hatchlings crane their necks skyward and turn their heads in wide circles, taking in the world. They sleep nestled together in a fluffy pile, their heads tucked beneath their wings. At three weeks, they tumble and hop from one side of the nest to the other, they stretch their wings and sing in the morning. Then, four weeks, and I hold my breath while they cartwheel into the air. Their landings are clumsy and their hollow-boned wings beat fast to keep them aloft, but it doesn’t take long for them to learn. By dusk they can spread their wings like fans, fluttering and tilting to catch the invisible wind.

And one morning, they fly away. They don’t come back. Only the nest remains, the grass turned brittle and brown, eggshell fragments angled into the folds of straw. I pluck the bits of shell out of the nest and cup them in the palm of my hand, studying the faint brown freckles, the sharp edges where life broke through. I put them in a small box, to remember. The nest, I leave where she built it. Maybe she’ll come back, I think. Maybe she’ll come home again.

Home is a place I’ve never been. A place packed away or abandoned when I move, inevitably and endlessly, to another town, and another, and another. As a child, my family moved with my dad’s job, but something shifted when I became a teenager: I grew restless. I started wanting to leave. A pattern was established. In each place I lived, I had to move away just as my feet started to learn the ground. Just as I started to collect a small pile of memories, or began to understand the subtle ways the seasons change, or memorized the back roads and side streets and the best places to sit and watch the sky. When strangers became familiar and routine felt inescapable, when I found myself craving something new, I couldn’t help but wonder if I’d ever actually stay anywhere. I wondered what life would be like if I never grew roots, if I never found home.

The starling summer is my first summer in Maine, the same summer I’m hired to babysit an eleven-year-old girl named Addie, while her parents run a restaurant. Babysit is something of a misnomer—she’s too old for babysitting, so we say we’re hanging out. Within weeks we become close friends, within a few months, more like sisters.
Summer belongs to us. Our favorite thing to do is drive into town and walk around, watching strangers and drawing caricatures of the people we meet or imagine, sketching out stories with charcoal-smudged fingers. Bar Harbor comes to life in the summertime, tourists flocking to the island to visit Acadia and eat rich, buttery lobster straight from the sea. Main Street is only a few blocks long, but in July the crowds are as dense as in any city, and the stores that have been shuttered and silent through the long, cold winter are open again, their windows glittering with trinkets and souvenirs.

Addie and I avoid the crowds, settling instead on a bench beside the gazebo at Town Square. There we build worlds out of the soft grass of the park while the fireflies dance in the dusk. We talk late into the night, about school and friendships and boys, about her parents and the restaurant and being an only child, about what it feels like to be alone.

Addie has a habit of asking questions I don’t know the answers to. Not knowing never deters her. Sometimes I think she saves up her questions until I’m with her, until we can turn a question into a conversation.

“Do you know what a group of penguins is called?” she asks one night. I scratch a mosquito bite on my ankle, watching a line of ants wind over the sidewalk.

“A colony,” I say. She considers the answer.

“What about owls?”

“I don’t know. A flock, maybe.”

“That’s geese.”

I shrug and say nothing. I try not to let not knowing bother me.

“A bunch of cormorants are called a flight,” she says.

“How do you know what cormorants are called?”

“I read about it.”

When she falls asleep that night, I can’t resist looking it up. It turns out the name for a group of owls is a parliament. Which is just the beginning of the strange and deliberate poetry of bird group names. Crows, for instance, belong to a murder. Ravens meet in an unkindness. There are bouquets of pheasants, sieges of herons, wisps of snipe. Hawks form a cast, eagles a congregation, and raptores a cauldron. Imagine the percussive song of a descent of woodpeckers; the plaintive odes of a lamentation of swans; the sweet, gentle lullabies of a pitying of turtledoves. Picture an ostentation of peacocks with rustling sapphire skirts, plumage threaded with cashmere.

I copy the bird names into the page of a notebook and leave it tucked under Addie’s door. When she finds them in the morning, they will read like a poem written just for her.

Addie loves talking about dreams. She wants to know how dreams change as we grow up, what themes emerge and recur over the span of a lifetime. “I try to concentrate on particular things,” she tells me one night. “Before I go to sleep. Really concentrate.” She believes that if she tries hard enough, she will be able to control the direction of her dreams, rewrite the entire night’s story for herself.

When she asks me what I dream about, I tell her about a dream I’ve had for years. In the dream, I must move out of my house, but I’ve waited until the last possible moment to pack. I don’t have much time, and I start frantically racing through the rooms and taking inventory of what I can carry with me when I go. When I look at the shelves and cupboards, inside the drawers, and at the art on the walls, I realize that I can’t possibly fit all my things in just a few suitcases. I’m going to have to leave some things behind, but as I pile up my belongings I realize everything is significant to me. Nothing
can be abandoned, nothing left behind.

Sometimes, when I remember the different places I’ve lived, I imagine my path traced along a line of objects that were lost along the way. Things that have long since disappeared. A necklace with smooth, silver beads that warmed when I held them, not particularly valuable or pretty but given to me by someone I once loved. A box of journals and sketchbooks, scribbled poems and stories from my childhood, confessions and hints to a past I feel far away from now. Trinkets and souvenirs and shells from the beach, old clothes that no longer fit, suitcases with broken wheels and boxes tucked into the corners of attics. A small box with tiny eggshell fragments nestled tenderly inside.

Is it so hard to believe that we might leave little pieces of ourselves, too, where we go? Not just objects, but impressions and memories, little fragments. By the time I say goodbye to a place, the word takes something from me. There’s a cost to speak it. Does a goodbye linger in the air after I leave? Does the ground remember my name?

A charm of finches. An asylum of loons. An exaltation of larks, singing their reverent hymns to the sun at dawn. A wake of circling buzzards. Nightingales in a watch, parrots in a company. A flamboyance of flamingos, a band of jays, a squadron of pelicans. The list goes on and on.

A parliament of owls murmur back and forth across the canyon late at night. In this case, murmur is sound, specifically, the hooting of an owl. A murmur can also swell in the undertones of a crowd, or in the humming of a child singing herself to sleep. Murmurs are music and language combined; they move like a ripple, gently outward. There’s an implicit silence in murmuring: a certain gentleness in soft, white noise. Like words spoken, but barely—the sound a mother makes to her daughter reaching out to brush a smudge of dirt from her cheek.

In autumn, when the starlings leave their nests and gather in dense communities to roost through the winter together, they belong to a murmuration. Throngs of mothers and fathers and babies heeding the same call, moving through the skies toward each other. Together, they are safer than they are alone. Together, they can survive the frozen ground and the bare trees hung with hoarfrost.

Murmuration is also used to describe the phenomena of the starlings’ synchronous flights together each evening at dusk. The word is a sound, a gathering, and a careful dance, an air ballet with hundreds of birds flying wing-to-wing in a dense, shifting cloud that billows out like fabric snapped open across the sky. The murmuration is primordial and uncontained; like music, the heart of it is found tucked away in the stillness, the pauses and breaths, the beats of quiet between notes and movement. I have read that when you stand close enough you can hear the snap and rustle of feathers as the starlings’ wings flutter. You can feel a breath of air when they change direction.

Scientists have, through careful study and research, been able to decipher what occurs in a starling murmuration. They describe the aerial feat as an example of scale-free correlation. What this means is that, as far as they can tell, there’s no singular leader determining the movement of the starlings; the decisions are made collectively. All of the birds lead, and all of the birds follow. The communicating of direction seems to happen instantaneously, but in fact it’s like a ripple that spreads in the blink of an eye, every movement impacting the shape. Scientists believe that the starlings adjust their flight pattern based
on the positioning of the seven birds nearest to them. That’s the scale-free part—even in robust murmurations with hundreds of starlings, each individual still pays attention only to the seven others surrounding it.

Even though scale-free correlation is a description of the event, it’s not an explanation. We know what happens in a murmuration, and we’ve measured it quite precisely. But we still can’t say exactly how it happens. The fluid, graceful pulsing of the birds retains a hint of mystery, a bit of wonder. Watching them dip and twist with the late afternoon sun glinting off the undersides of their wings, there’s a feeling that can’t be explained, can’t be described, something improbable and beautiful and graceful.

People engage in scale-free correlation too, our own kind of dance. Think about six lanes of traffic rushing ahead at fifty miles per hour, changing lanes and entering and exiting from all sides. Think about the movement of the crowds in New York City, walking shoulder to shoulder in dense swarms of bodies, stopping and veering right then left, entering and exiting indeterminable buildings. The pace and direction of your footsteps follows that of the crowd, the direction of your car aligns with traffic. We pay attention to the movements of the people directly around us and adjust our own movements accordingly, trying not to touch.

But sometimes, we run into each other. Sometimes, we collide.

Another day, I ask Addie what she dreamt about and she tells me a dream about running along a narrow road, winding up a steep mountain. She says in the dream she was tired but couldn’t stop running. She knew her family was at the top, waiting for her, and it was getting dark. Darker and darker until there was nothing but the pounding of her feet against the pavement, the cold gasp of her breathing: keep going, keep going, keep going.

Family is one name to describe a group of people. There are also crowds, throngs, and masses on the sidewalks, and crews on the job. Clusters, communities, tribes. A cadre of coaches, a cohort of students, a coterie of detectives. The things that I lose or leave behind when I move, necklaces or notebooks or seashells or boxes, have little significance when I think about the people who’ve faded in the rearview mirror, perpetually waving in my memory. I’m the one leaving, but they’re the ones gone. When we collide, for better or for worse, something gets left behind. A sharp-edged fragment that’s fallen away. That’s how place becomes home, and how leaving becomes goodbye.

To the starlings, a murmuration is home and family combined, and the birds find each other year after year. But it’s also true that every spring, after a winter together, the starlings disband, as though some invisible current moves through them and breaks the group into individuals again. They find home then they leave it. Theirs is a dance of perpetual goodbye.

Sometimes when I land in an airport after a flight and have some time to pass before the next leg of my trip, I’ll sit at the bar, watching people spill through the terminal. In an airport, everyone is either leaving or returning. Everyone is saying goodbye or hello. I start to feel like there isn’t any difference between the two. Here, I can forget the nature of departure, the leaving that happened only that morning, or yesterday, or in a distant place that seems a dream now. For a few
crowded moments, I can let slip away that
time before, when all the words seemed
empty and I sculpted absence out of the
pauses. I can remind myself that no
matter how difficult it is to part,
something always happens in the space
between.

Addie is eighteen now, nearing the age I
was when I first met her. I’ve moved twice
since our summers together, south to
Boston and then across the country to
California. We write each other letters,
real letters, with pen and paper. We fill
the space between us with words and
memories. I try not to give her advice, and
when I do give advice, I try to say it
sideways—these are the things I wish I’d
known, these are the mistakes you don’t
have to make. I try to remind her: Here
are the cracks where life breaks through,
here are the feathers turned up in the
wind. In as many ways as I can, I say,
you’re not alone.

Near the end of the starling summer,
when we would find ourselves seized with
the strange restlessness of too-long nights
and thoughts that would not stop racing,
we’d go walking through the tangled old-
growth forests, searching for somewhere
we’d never seen before.

One evening, Addie tells me that she
found a hidden waterfall with a clear blue
swimming hole beneath. She waited all
week to take me there. While we walk,
she tells me that she’s realized that the
only thing standing in our way is
ourselves.

“So, how do you get out of your own
way?” I ask.

“I don’t know yet,” she says. “I’m still
figuring that part out.”

“Me too,” I say.

We follow the trail for another half
mile before reaching a towering maple
tree, the edges of its leaves already
brushed crimson with the chill of fall, and
Addie turns away from the trail and
starts walking into the forest. Her feet
know the ground and she walks quickly,
but I hesitate, peering into the woods
after her. There is no path, and the
shadows of the trees are growing longer
on the ground. When Addie realizes I’m
no longer behind her, she turns around
and opens her mouth to say something.

At that moment, the starlings take
flight. The sky fills with the silhouettes of
birds, the sigh of the wind shifting above
us. The birds dip and twist overhead like
a shadow unfurling over the treetops, and
I think about the starlings from my house,
the mother and the baby birds peering
into the sky, calling out to each other in
the morning, cartwheeling into the air
and disappearing. Leaving one home, and
arriving here, at another. The
murmuration unfolds and spreads wide
then curls into itself like flower petals
closing. I can feel the flutter of wingbeats
in my chest. And, just as quickly as it
began, it’s over. With a gentle rustling,
the curve of the shadow settles into the
tops of the trees, the day turns to dusk.
Addie smiles at me and we walk on, and I
wonder if we’ll have to hike back in the
dark. And I know that it won’t matter,
that somehow, we will find our way home.
The Nebraska Hula

fiction by Kendall Klym

Tillie Olsen Short Story Award
Semi-Finalist

Ingrid's Special Notes on Hula Video

Only when something moves her greatly does Ingrid write notes in her pocket notebook—hardback black cover with a red velvet ribbon used to mark pages, given to her last year by her husband, just before he died, for her seventieth birthday.

Hawaiian hula dancers remind me of Nebraska corn swaying in the rain. The tide encroaches, drenching waves wash over grass skirts—legs, torsos, and arms moving in unison. I wonder how they’d look if they moved the dance from the Pacific to the prairie. So sensual yet spiritual as they chant E Pele e Pele in honor of the volcano goddess. The Nebraska Panhandle has a few ancient remnants of lava cones.

The hula dance tells the story of volcano goddess Pele, who meets a warrior named Ohia and asks him to marry her. When Ohia claims his love for Lehua, Pele transforms him into a twisted tree. Expressing compassion for Lehua, the gods turn her into a flower that blossoms on the twisted tree. A legend says the lovers will be together for eternity, unless Pele decides to spew lava and kill the tree. Some say ohia trees rustling in the wind gave birth to the hula. While enjoying an island vacation in 1872, Mark Twain claimed that hula dancers moved in “perfect concert,” as “hands, arms, bodies, limbs, and heads waved, swayed, gesticulated, bowed, stooped, whirled, squirmed, twisted and undulated as if they were part and parcel of a single individual.” Christian missionaries and sugar planters nearly wiped out the sacred dance. When the hula made its way to California, many denounced it as sordid, sacrilegious cavorting. Sounds just like Nicole in a fundamentalist fit.

A Conversation between Ingrid’s Son, Michael, and His Wife, Nicole

The two sit in wicker chairs on their tiny Southern California patio, which features a view of a seven-foot stained wooden fence flanking their neighbor’s beige stucco ranch. In the background they can hear birds chirping, and, on the other side of the fence, their neighbor clinking ice in a glass while ordering pizza.

Michael: We need to go see my mother.
Nicole: In January, to Nebraska?
Michael: How about early spring?
Nicole: Even worse. Either we get a snowstorm or a tornado. Can’t you convince her to move somewhere closer, so we can visit her whenever we like? I mean I love her dearly, but …

Michael: No, you don’t, so please don’t say that you do. But I appreciate you relying on your faith in Jesus to treat her the best you can.

Nicole: You know I do care about her, even if it’s more for your sake. I pray for Ingrid’s forgiveness every single day and night.

Michael: Sometimes you remind me of my mother—always trying to be the boss. My mother’s an agnostic hippie librarian. Her interests are scattered. She’ll never convert.

Nicole: Sometimes I wonder about your faith.

Michael: Don’t.
Nicole: But if she moved into Orangeland or Almond Tree Retirement, she’d be
around people her own age, and with the two of us nearby, we might even get her to church.
Michael: Never.
Nicole: A few scattered houses and a bunch of farmland: That’s the extent of her neighborhood. And who are her friends now that your father is gone? All she’s got in that place is a middle-aged homosexual who inherited a farmhouse. What if something happens to her?
Michael: Her friend’s name is Mario.

Ingrid’s Recipe for Hawaiian Coconut Salad for Docu-Night at Mario’s

Although the septuagenarian watches both her sugar and salt intake, Ingrid does like to indulge in what she calls “trashy sweets” every now and then.

1 can Florida’s Best Mandarin Oranges
1 can Dole Crushed Pineapple
½ bag Baker’s Sweetened Coconut
1 jar Michigander Maraschino Cherries
1 cup Land O’ Snow Sour Cream
1 cup Dannon Plain Yogurt
1 bag Fuffer-Fluffer Miniature Marshmallows

Directions: Fast from eating sugar for at least one week then mix all ingredients and refrigerate to set. Serve sparingly.

An Excerpt from Ingrid’s Diary

Unlike her pocket notebook, Ingrid’s diary appears in wire-bound notebooks bought at the local dollar store. Depending on her mood and/or what’s on sale, she writes in a variety of colors—always in pen. The following section is written in pink.

The other day I was going through an old trunk in the attic—still trying to downsize before I get too old—and guess what I found? One of those plastic Hawaiian hula dolls people used to mount on the dashboard. Michael used to collect them. Must have had it on the Olds Delta 88. Drive that old boat on Nebraska gravel, and aloha Hawaii. I can just see that little hula dancer swiveling those hips a mile a minute as tires on stone rap out a drum medley that’d make you sit back, close your eyes, and order a mai tai. Tackiest thing I ever saw, that fat little doll. Cabbage green grass skirt made of God knows what, faded pink lei that reminds me of a foot fungus I had as a little girl, and a jaundiced flower-print halter top not unlike Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s description of sinister wallpaper.

The doll kind of reminds me of Nicole. Had a good mind to wrap it and send it to California. Then I thought twice. I’m sure Nicole would find a way to use it against me—tell Michael I finally lost my mind. Speaking of losing it, I nearly did, according to one smart-mouthed store clerk. Arthritis started acting up when I was chopping onions for french onion soup earlier in the week. So, I got in the car and went all the way to Lincoln to buy a mandolin. A real doozy of a clerk named Pumice or Peyton or some idiotic nonsense like that—she thought I was loopy, all because she was too dumb to know that a mandolin is a kitchen tool used for slicing vegetables. So much for working in the kitchen department at Muncie’s. All I can say is let her try to chop onions with twisted fingers like mine. Probably doesn’t even know how to cook. No one does these days. No one except chefs and old people. The rest just order pizza and eat out. Puma or Putrid—whatever her name was—eventually found the mandolin, but never in my life did I feel so insulted when all I did was ask a question. She looked at me as if I had lost my marbles. Nicole is just like that, which is partly why I don’t want to go to California. My life is here, even without Hank.
**Shaken, Not Stirred**

This is Ingrid’s favorite radio show, which she listens to faithfully every Friday night. Over the phone, Michael taught her how to download the show, which she puts on CDs to listen to in the car. That’s the closest mother and son manage to get these days, when Michael teaches her how to do something on the computer.

You’re listening to *Shaken, Not Stirred*, the home of lounge, mod-squad pop, and exotica from the land of martinis, mai tais, and fallout shelters. I’m Darren Brigadoon, coming to you from Midwestern State University here at 91.3 on your listening dial. Brrr: It’s cold out there. I don’t know about you, but I’ve had enough winter. For the next two hours, we’re headed to the tropics. Hawaii, to be exact. We’ve got a show dedicated to the sounds of sea breezes, chirpy birds, and clinking glasses: Martin Denny, Les Baxter, and more. So get out your bikini, Bermudas, or grass skirt. Put a log on the fire and mix yourself a drink. It’s time for a luau, right here on *Shaken, Not Stirred*, Nebraska Public Radio.

**NebraWeather**

Ingrid owns the latest, most exclusive weather radio, a gift from Mario last spring. She loves it, but sometimes the computer-generated male voice issuing forecasts gets on her nerves.

An approaching winter storm may lead to blizzard conditions, with up to two feet of snow predicted for portions of southeast Nebraska and southwest Iowa by early tomorrow morning. Winds of up to 60 mph in large swaths of treeless areas will result in drifting snow and closing of roads throughout the area. This is a fast-approaching storm, so citizens are urged to stock up on supplies immediately. School closures are expected for the first part of the week. Police and National Guard are on alert, and travelers are urged to find lodging immediately. Log on to Nebra-D-O-T dot com for the latest road conditions, and stay tuned for any updates to your local forecast.

**Mario’s Phone Message on Ingrid’s Machine**

There is one landline telephone on the first floor of Ingrid’s house. Her message machine is located on the second floor in the hallway outside the bedrooms.

The Hula DVD sounds fantastic, but I’m thinking we should skip our little Docu-Night, with the storm coming and all. The last thing we need is for your son and daughter-in-law to have an excuse to whisk you away to California because you had a mishap on the way to my place. We both know they think I’m a bad influence. Let’s talk on the phone. The Hawaiian salad can keep, along with the DVD. Call me when you get in, so I know you’re okay. Bye for now.

**Ingrid’s Imagined Conversation with a Hawaiian**

Although she retired from the library two years ago, Ingrid refuses to give up the idea of broadening other people’s view of the world. Lately she has imagined herself speaking casually to interesting people in other places. This conversation occurs as the phone rings and Mario leaves his message.

Much of southeast Nebraska is anything but flat, and anyone who thinks so is as ignorant as a gathering of middle-aged haoles imitating the hula by shaking their hips and fanning their fingers. Just as Hawaii is more than tropical breezes, especially on the stinging slopes of Mount Kilauea, Nebraska is more than flat farmlands. The southeastern quadrant of
the state features straight rolling hills, tucked away colleges, and an abundance of trees along the Missouri. The best way to get the lay of the land is to use your imagination in the midst of moving. The first step is to picture a runner rug. Then sit down on the floor and slide your arms under the rug, perpendicular to the length of the runner. Lift your arms lightly, just a few inches, then slide them back, making sure to leave the rug as it is. See the waves that formed from your arms? Up and down, up and down—all in a straight line. Very organized but gentle: sort of like the hula. Put some crops, trees, buildings, and cars on the runner-rug landscape, and you get southeast Nebraska.

No, it doesn’t get lonely here. There are three ups and three downs between my house and my best friend Mario’s. We live three miles apart. On nice days, when I visit him or he visits me, cars are left at home. Sometimes we get together and walk the trails at Arbor Day Farm, where you can get a free tree to plant. In winter, we get together once a week for Docu-Night, which consists of eating dinner while listening to music, watching a documentary, reading out loud, and participating in an activity that relates directly to the documentary.

Ingrid’s Latest Health List

Four times a year, instead of going to the doctor, Ingrid makes health lists, both for her physical and mental health.

Plusses
1. memories of Hank
2. Mario’s friendship
3. books and the library
4. learning
5. my home

Minuses
1. no money to travel
2. old age

3. Michael’s reticence
4. Nicole’s influence
5. loneliness

Decisions
1. Save money for travel.
2. Be myself at all times.
3. Enjoy life.

Ingrid’s Notes for Docu-Night

A lover of bullet points, Ingrid always writes reminder notes on the computer.

- Bring DVD, Hawaiian salad, hula book, hula doll, and CD of Shaken, Not Stirred.
- Remember to read quote from hula teacher Helen Desha Beamer: Everything you feel must show in your whole being. If you’re doing a hula about a person, you must study the person so well that you feel you know them. Your feelings must then show through so well in everything you do as you dance, that the audience feels it has experienced the presence of the person you are dancing about. It is the same when you dance about things of nature.
- Practice reach-tap hula step: Put your right foot out front and your left hip up. Bring the foot back. Put your left foot out front and your right hip up. Bring the foot back. Repeat, allowing hips to swivel. Imagine flowering ohia tree when performing the steps.
- Memorize the following song lyrics from 1937 film Waikiki Wedding: We should be together … in a little hula heaven over the silver sea. Gay and free together … in a little hula heaven under a koa tree.
- Reread pages of hula text that document destruction of Hawaiian culture by Christian missionaries.
Ingrid's iPhone Video

Think of the word *trudge*—its definition and sound—and you may begin to imagine the movements Ingrid makes as she steps through a foot of newly fallen snow on her way from house to barn. The iPhone shakes as she moves through the dark, where she begins to feel the crackling cold of a developing Nebraska blizzard. The wind has yet to pick up, so the snow is still peaceful, flakes falling in unison, dotting the dark with the icy precision of a Russian ballerina. “Skol,” says Ingrid, snapping a selfie, as her rectangular silhouette plods along. “I look like a block of ice. That’s what happens when a seventy-one-year-old puts on six layers and a backpack and goes out into the snow.” Ingrid takes a deep breath. “Refreshing,” she says, facing the screen of the phone. “I am on my way to a Hawaiian luau, Nebraska style, in January on a John Deere.” A couple years before he died, Hank bought a snowplow—rigged it in place of the bucket on the front loader of an old tractor. “Too bad Willa’s not still around Red Cloud,” she says. “Could use me for a story. Boy, won’t Mario be surprised when I show up at his house in this contraption.”

The Breakdown

When the tractor-snowplow breaks down, Ingrid has only one up and one down before reaching the driveway of Mario’s modest brick ranch. She turns on her iPhone and utters a line out of “Snow,” a Canadian short story by Frederick Philip Grove: “The snow suddenly gave way beneath him; he broke in; the drift was hollow.” She takes a breath. “That’s how I feel around Nicole, even if it’s 75 in February. When that woman prays to her hateful god for the salvation of my soul, I feel as if I’m dropping into a cold, dried-up California canyon, faster and faster with every word she utters. Out here I’m alive.

Hank’s with me.” Ingrid lowers herself from the tractor and raises her head. “I am on a mission to spread Hawaiian culture in southeast Nebraska,” she shouts. As she walks up Hill No. 3, the wind picks up, and the snow intensifies. Ingrid can no longer see the road.

Ingrid's List of Medications and Health Report

You can see a printed copy of this list on Ingrid’s refrigerator. Although she doesn’t like to take meds, she never fails to miss a dose.

1. Lisinopril: one 10-mg tablet once a day for high blood pressure
2. Fexofenadine HCl: one 180-mg caplet, as needed for allergies in spring and fall

She’s been taking allergy medicine of one sort or another since she was a child. The last time she had a cold was in the summer of 1998. In 2006, she switched doctors because the one she had, ten years younger than she, had died. Only after Michael married Nicole did Ingrid begin to show signs of high blood pressure.

Michael's List of Medications and Health Report

Unable to produce children thanks to an antifungal medication he took in his late teens, Michael consumes a combination of seventeen different pills, capsules, and liquids for a variety of ailments ranging from diabetes to warts. In addition, he’s about twenty pounds overweight.

Telepathy

Ever since Michael first went to school, he and his mother have corresponded through telepathy—not often, but enough to remind the two that their relationship deviates from those of other mothers and
sons. While this unusual practice often worked well, as in the case of Ingrid offering Michael a surge of praise when he was up at bat, or Michael providing Ingrid a serving of confidence when she baked cakes for competitions, the shared gift eventually went sour. During his teens and early twenties, Michael failed to appreciate telepathic messages from his mother assessing the women he dated. For the past year, Ingrid has resented the extrasensory suggestion that she move to California and join her son and daughter-in-law at church.

Nowadays both mother and son have trained themselves to ignore the chatter in their minds. When Ingrid falls in the snow halfway down the last hill, she feels little impact from Michael's mental picture of a blazing fireplace keeping his mother warm as she reads a good book on a snowy night.

When he calls her, the machine picks up. He hangs up and tries her cell. “I wonder why she doesn't answer,” says Michael.

“Maybe she’s out tobogganing,” says Nicole. “You know your mother has yet to accept the fact that she’s an adult.”

Michael turns to his wife. “And what are you acting like,” he says, “when you say things like that?” When Michael calls Mario, Ingrid’s friend says she probably decided to watch the hula documentary the two were planning to see, which means she turned off all phones.

“I can just see her now,” he says, “pausing every few moments to stand up and perform a new step.”

Michael clears his throat. “I don’t think that’s the case,” he says. “That’s not what I feel.”

**Nebraska Hula**

“That was stupid,” says Ingrid, rolling from her side to her knees to stand up after landing in a soft snowbank. “If I were paying attention, I could’ve avoided such clumsiness.” When she steps on her right foot, she feels snow in her boot and sits down. In the midst of fixing her footwear, she feels dizzy and decides to take a few bites of Hawaiian salad to give her strength. The top section is already frozen. She checks her phone: no service. “This means I’ve got about a quarter of a mile left, before the driveway.” Ingrid takes a deep breath and inches her way through the storm, which, according to the NebraWeather Report she heard before leaving, has caused a whiteout from Rulo to Nebraska City. Having suffered from hypothermia as a child when riding her bike through a thunderstorm, Ingrid realizes that the fall has given her limited time to reach shelter.

“Last thing I want is for Nicole to get the satisfaction of telling Michael, ‘I told you so,’” says Ingrid. She tries jogging in place and realizes how tired she has become. “If only I could lie down for a few minutes.” Looking for a place to settle, she remembers Rule No. 1 from *How to Stay Alive in the Elements*, checked out only six times since the library acquired it in 1986 and the county switched over to digital due dates in 2000: *When the cold gets under your skin, increase your heart rate.* She reaches her arms into the air. “Not until I’ve saved enough money to get to Hawaii and back am I ready to join you, Hank.”

Thinking of the anniversary trip to Maui she and her husband had planned before his illness, Ingrid begins to perform the reach-tap hula step. Allowing her hips to swivel as her feet move in and out, she heads down the road, chanting, “*E Pele e Pele.*” Ingrid feels a spark of warmth enter through her abdomen, and she picks up speed. “Thank you, volcano goddess.” Slowly making her way down the last hill, Ingrid imagines Mario taking her coat, chiding her for not staying in on a night
like tonight. When she reaches a snowdrift blocking 737A, a mile north of its intersection with 645, she curses Pele.

Hawaiian Legend Ingrid Thinks of to Keep Warm

Having grown up in a household in which her mother regularly read or told stories by heart, especially when the children were afraid or upset, Ingrid recently resumed the tradition, telling herself stories, sometimes out loud, but most often in her mind.

Drawn by the beat of hula drums on the distant isle of Kauai, the Hawaiian goddess Pele allows her spirit to separate from her body as she slumbers at the fiery bottom of Kilauea crater. When her spirit traverses the sea to the temple at Haena, Kauai, she falls in love with Chief Lohiau. Several days later, her spirit returns to her body quite suddenly. After she awakens, she asks her siblings to find the chief and bring him to her. Her hula-dancing sister Hi'iaka agrees and sets forth on a long, death-defying journey, on which she battles a giant lizard, a shark-god, and a second giant lizard whose tongue is disguised as a bridge over a deep mountain gorge. Free from monstrous creatures, Hi'iaka runs into bad weather. By the time Hi'iaka and Chief Lohiau return to Kilauea crater, Pele has given up and sought revenge by burying her sister’s ohia trees and sacrificing on the altar of jealousy Hi’iaka’s friend and hula teacher, Hopoe. Although the story originates from more than a thousand years ago, hula dancers continue to reenact its events.

Nebraska Pioneer Remedies

Why Ingrid thinks of these as she stands before a giant snowdrift, she is not sure.

- By carrying around a raw potato, sufferers of rheumatism allow the root vegetable to absorb the pain and cure the ailment.
- To cure warts, simply steal your neighbor’s dishrag and destroy it.
- If you suffer from eczema, place a dozen pennies on the infected area for twenty-four hours, then wash thoroughly with vinegar.

Digging Deeper

According to Ingrid’s estimate, the only way to Mario’s driveway is through the drift, at least six feet high and shaped like a volcano. Going around it would mean risking getting lost. Ingrid realizes she will need something to slice through the snow. Inside her backpack is a long metal serving spoon—Mario has yet to furnish his kitchen with adequate equipment. “Digging will make me warm,” she says, “but I’ll need to take breaks to preserve my heart.” If she reaches high enough with the spoon, she can scoop off the top of the drift. Ingrid sets the timer on her iPhone. “I’ll dig for three minutes and then write notes for one.” During the first round of digging, she realizes her lips are beginning to freeze, so she pulls out her hula book, shines a flashlight on the first chapter, and sings the following chant:

Look at the dancing girl Hopoe;  
Her graceful hips swing to and fro,  
A dance on the beach Nana-huki:  
A dance that is full of delight.  
Down by the sea Nana-huki.

The next time she runs out of steam, Ingrid copies down the aforementioned hula chant in the notes section of her iPhone, allowing her hips to shake as her thumbs punch out the words. “This way I won’t destroy the book any more than I already have,” she says, blowing on pages
two and three to minimize the possibility of water stains. She continues to dig. “Quarter of the way through,” she says, not really sure if she’s gotten that far. Her next set of notes chronicles the aforementioned snippets of Nebraska folklore, followed by a statement that pioneer Nebraskans were no more or less superstitious than traditional Hawaiians. Her third note, also written on her iPhone, which still has no service, is a telepathic text to Michael: *Let go once in a while. Don’t let Nicole spoil all your fun, as I once did.*

Ingrid’s digging has caused her to sweat, the wind has slowed down, and the intensity of the snowfall has begun to diminish. She estimates she is halfway through the drift.

**The Hula Doll**

Although the temperature in Michael’s house is 77—Nicole likes it warm—Michael feels cold. “Next week I’m going home for a visit,” he says to his wife. “Alone.” Nicole reminds her husband that the visit will have to come after the upcoming church revival, and Michael says, “To hell with the revival.” Once Nicole has removed herself from the room and gone to bed, Michael gets out his diary. He writes the following: *I wonder what Mom’s researching these days—the Amazon rainforest, nutrition in New Guinea, the invention of the bifocal? What novels are you reading? Books of poetry? Biographies? I’m sorry I never lived up to your imagination. You live in a library. I crunch numbers in an office building.*

Michael goes into his tiny California attic to look through boxes. After a few minutes, he discovers one of his old hula dolls—slender, the grass skirt tan, the halter top a pink paisley print. He places the doll on top of the box before him, reaches his arms to the left and attempts to swivel his hips. His back locks. His body has become twisted, like a gnarled Nebraska oak. ♦
I keep my father’s promises in my pocket: galaxies of white dwarfs, miniature moons, constellations of black holes swirling around space. A missed Little League game comets coldly across a charcoaled sky. I’d crushed my cleats into powdered earth, red and oxidized like Mars, choked down the bat for a fuller swing and spat out tobacco-free saliva. Swing Batter Batter. Run Batter Batter. Score Batter Batter fell at my feet like molar-crushed sunflower seeds. I watched for the alabaster sphere tailored with blood-red stitches, knowing the ball would knuckle-orbit in. The solid crack zipped through my bones and I ran for home. There are never any full moons. A crescent tightens reflections down cosmic threads. Hot, white light cast the audience in germy darkness and I proclaimed (in constricting-soprano tights), He jests at scars that never felt a wound. I drank apothic poison. Juliet stabbed herself in the heart. The applause was emphatic. I died and curtain-called fatherless. The planets in my pocket sputter and burn and smog ash into the atmosphere; masks are required. The gravity is great. Summa Cum Laude felt heavy and ersatz. I was donned in a blue cap and gown. My speech was mirror-practiced, vomit-doused, and ulcered-out. The week before, I asked him if he wanted to hear it, an audible taste test—there’s a spot where I said, I couldn’t have done it without you. My father shook my shoulder and slurried, I’ll be there for graduation, bet your bottom dollar. As I looked out over a sea of blue, at the empty seat, at my mother texting as mascara drip-dropped down her face, I knew the sun wouldn’t come out tomorrow. He was a man who navigated in perpetual black, guided by pinpricks of light, claiming zigzagging fireflies pointed due north. He had no use for Orion’s Belt. Loved the Big Dipper. Worshipped Phoenix’s legacy. Hated Cancer with the vengeance of a man who’d lost his mother to leukemia. She’d taught him how to sew a button. He promised to teach me how to fish. He promised Arbor Knots, an ’84 Toyota Celica Supra, Albright Knots, a trip to Six Flags, Blood Knots, Linkin Park tickets, double surgeon’s knots, camping at Big Bear, and perfection loops. He wanted to take me out for my twenty-first birthday, to celebrate his anniversary of Fatherhood, to down shots of slippery nipples, and break billiard balls so hard they careened off the table so he’d have to pay a quarter per offense. I cancelled my plans with the gang and bought a Chicago Cubs cap to prove solidarity. I rubbed it in dirt so it’d appear well-worn and second nature. I told him I’d pick him up. I waited for three hours on his doorstep before driving home. I asked him to be my best man. He swore, hand over heart, he’d be there or be square. I promised champagne fountains, pretty girls to dance with, and said he didn’t have to sit next to Mom; he could deck Uncle Joe for moving in with her if he wanted to. The old man made it to the rehearsal, a flask in pocket. He didn’t make it in the morning. I said, I do. I retrieved the warm garter. I consummated my marriage, my wife’s white more than metaphor, and we stained the sheets. All the while, black holes orbited my thoughts, yo-yos going round the world. A week after Taylor was born, he called me and said he was ready to give it up. I poured out five cases of Coors, three fifths of Jack Daniel’s, and a large jug of cooking wine. Did I ever teach
you how to throw a baseball, he asked, shivering under an electric blanket. He died of renal failure. His kidneys gave out. His liver soured, skin jaundiced as a lemon. I was holding his hand when it happened, thinking about a summer afternoon when he staggered outside, an alabaster sphere with blood-red stitches in hand. He wanted to play catch. He threw the ball above my head, too far to the left, too far to the right. Sprinklers pissed rainbows. Dogs barked in the distance. My heart hummed in my chest as I chased after the ball again and again and again. ♦
Packing for Peace

poetry by Jill McCabe Johnson

after Matt Hohner, “How to Unpack a Bomb Vest”

i. when you say you’re packing
   carrying
   armed
   loaded for bear—I want to believe
   you’re carrying
   a kind of mettle
   facing fear
   with friendship
   maybe a nest of
   hummingbird eggs
   filled with marvels
   peace requires so much more than
   weapons and
   explosive
   shells

ii. fill your bags with dandelion seeds
   the stuff of wishes
   you can launch
   in the wind—cram feathers and the taste
   of wild strawberries
   into pockets
   of torn memories
   palm the scent of lilac
   pine-sap spikemoss
   and hollowed out cedar
   offer these to strangers
   the unspent
   promises the
   blossoming
   of dreams
I look you in the eye and know your name:
it’s jack, or gin, or anyway, a full drink. we say
a patient and lazy hello, then I swallow
the peachskin morning. sure as sin,

we have been intimates, we will be again,
and that’s how I want it to stay. we walk straight
across the crowded city, like experts of some sort.
responsible adults who never return home.

no need. we live where no one knows our names,
where no one shouts for us. there’s a silence
that never falls where we can catch it. some days
glow too brightly, air too still or sour. so what?

we sometimes drown so we can live.
I make a painting of you, my one friend.
I call the painting Late Night Wolf Moon
Holds Court on the Patio. this is a love

letter to you and our fire-escape existence.
this is a toast to our seven years, to how we keep
the laundry pile so small, and hide in the alcove
when there’s nothing on. remember the time

we tore through my glass door, flimsy as
the gauzy drapes? never let me go, I say, because
when I sleep with you, we float in warm, soft skies,
blind as the world we are leaving behind.
A Dance for Baynard by Stephen Mead
How to Talk About Dead Dads on Dates: A Guide

nonfiction by Erin Slaughter

1. You shouldn’t.
2. You will.
3. Often, readily, inappropriately, and in thorough detail.
4. An hour after you find out your father is dead, don’t let your boyfriend know your feelings are complex, scattered, conflicted. Don’t make it about you. Just suck it up, pretend to cry. Let him console you. Give him that illusion of power over your life’s most defining devastation. When you don’t, when you react on impulse and choose, instead, to be honest, he’ll break up with you. He won’t understand why you can’t just cry. He’ll call you selfish, and you’ll secretly agree. It’s okay. This one is just practice. There will be others.
5. The Dead Dad is yours to keep now, a shadow breathing loudly over your shoulder. The Dead Dad is your phantom bridge to every man you’ll never reach.
6. In biology class, when the mayor’s son asks if your parents are coming to Senior Night, follow his inquiry with an explanation: “My mom and stepdad are. I mean, my dad is dead, so he won’t be there.” When his face goes startled, you’ve gained a tool; a new facet of yourself is revealed, a Lego block pressed into your heart with superglue and a satisfying click. Here, your Dead Dad Story grows an extra limb. “No, it’s fine, I’m cool to talk about it. Really.” Smile, to reassure him. When the boy—the poor, pretty boy—asks, “What, did he die, like, a long time ago?” “Three weeks ago” is your response. It will seem to you, already, like ancient history.
7. When you meet new people at your brand-new-very-first-part-time-after-school-job, you will tell them, in the same breath as your name, high school, and favorite band, about your Dead Dad. This is how your Dead Dad Story will sprout wings and a jester’s face. You won’t realize how it makes you seem. It wouldn’t matter even if you did. How could anyone know you, know anything you are or are about, if they don’t know this?
8. Start hooking up with your boss at the movie theatre. He’ll probably know about your Dead Dad, even if you don’t tell him. It won’t matter—behind the wall of the box office where the cameras don’t reach, in the back of the dark theatre, in the candy closet—there’s no talking. On the loading dock, his cock in your mouth, there is only sweat and runny mascara. There’s only “thanks” and a wink and a slap on the ass or kiss on the cheek. Your boss will be kind of ugly and engaged to someone else. Your boss will be twenty-four while you are sixteen, but most importantly, he will wear a suit. People will call him “Mr.,” and he will be fake-mean to you in public to throw the other managers off. He’ll give you easy tasks, like a whole shift of sitting on
the floor and sorting 3D glasses in the back of the box office, where he can stop by to make out with you during his rounds. His power will taste like you’d once dreamed cum would. Don’t wonder out loud if he uses your Dead Dad’s brand of shampoo. There’s no room for talking with his fist in your mouth.

9. Quit your job at the movie theatre. Lie about the affair when the GM corners you in his office. Get a new job at the shoe store in the mall. Tell your new boss your Dead Dad Story on orientation day.

10. You’ll be bright, fractured, and holy. You’ll be beautiful and broken, a light bulb patched with electrical tape. Your Dead Dad is the light. He flips switches in morose code. He flickers through the cracks in your smile.

11. Your best friend will tell you that talking about your Dead Dad on dates is a boner-killer. She will tell you that the giggle trailing after “murdered” makes people uncomfortable. You won’t understand. At least not for a couple more years.

12. When you understand, even start to agree with her, it won’t stop you from telling. How could it? Who would you even be, if not a daughter of the Story? How could they sign up to love you without knowing your dowry drips with blood?

13. You will, inevitably, meet people with Dead Dads and Dead Moms, with Stories of their own. At first, it will seem like the kind of thing soul mates could be made of. Like the ancient magic of your collective grief could transform into a gingerbread house big enough to contain it all. But your Dead Dads won’t get along. You won’t understand why they’re so upset about theirs, why their Story leaves them staring out the window in tears, while yours has its feet propped up on the coffee table.

14. When he tells you, smoking a cigarette after sex, how much he misses his Dead Dad, how he idolized him enough to take the nickname he’d bestowed on him as a kid (even though it sounds like something a fat trucker would be called), you’ll lose respect for him. It’ll make you feel like a monster, but so many things already do, and none of them are because your dad is dead.

15. When she tells you, eating pizza at the beach during your first lunch break together, her Dead Dad Story, it will be the first time yours didn’t fall out first. When she tells you she was three when he died of cancer, and she doesn’t remember him that well, that the Story she carries around doesn’t amount to much more than an ambiguous ache, it is the closest you will have come to understanding.

16. The first week of college, you’ll be riding in a boy’s car, the lights from his dashboard staining your faces with purple glow. The Story will emerge from you effortlessly, as it does, and he will reply, “Wow … that’s awful. I don’t know if I can top that.” You’ll both laugh and smile because it’s a bigger deal than either of you want to admit.

“IT’s okay,” you’ll say.

“Well ... I was raped by this girl I knew. That’s pretty bad I guess.”

“Yeahhh, that is about as bad.”
You'll laugh and smile because you're both broken. 
“It sounds really cheesy, but it's like as soon as I got on campus, I felt better. Lighter,” he'll say.
“Yeah, like everything is going to be okay.”
And then the car will come to a stop, because he's found his way to your apartment. You'll wish you could continue to be lost.
“We should do this again sometime,” you'll say, really meaning it.
“Yeah, definitely.”
Walking back to your apartment will feel like coming out of a dark theatre. And you'll smile because you are glad to know him and feel known. You won't see him again. You won't find out why, and it won't matter.

17. There are more Stories living inside of people than just the Dead kind. You'll learn to recognize them by the silver bell lodged in their throats.
18. You'll realize, over a string of casual first dates during a transient summer, that holding your Dead Dad Story hostage is incredibly liberating. That if you're moving across the country in two months, there's no reason dates need to know your real name, or age, or where you're from, or that your dad is dead by murder. So you gag your Dead Dad with a sock and stuff him in the closet before you leave the house. You meet strangers for drinks, kiss them or fuck them sometimes, and you could be almost anyone.
19. You could even be two-parented, unblemished by the metallic smell of grief. You could be anyone, anyone at all, for as long as pretending is practical. Why be known and seen, when you could choose to be free?
20. You will meet someone who cracks your world open bright and tender, like a tiny sun pried out of a clamshell. On the anniversary of the death, your Dead Dad Story will tumble out in front of him. You will have known him for three days, and already he will be the light of your world. After this, you will learn how to cry. For a while, everything will flood you. You will tell him all the ugly Stories you own, because you love him beyond logic or caution, because everything that comes out of you is raw and recklessly genuine, because there is no other way for you to be. You will offer him everything, and he will accept enough of it to know you. He will not be capable of loving you back, but he will be kind. It will feel like enough, until it doesn't.
21. At some point in your life, you will find, by beautiful, careless fate, a group of people who shine a flashlight into every slimy crevice, Dead Dad Story included, and choose you anyway. Who grow fond of your morbidly-timed giggling. Whose Stories will begin to feel as comfortable and familiar as your own, like the well-worn pages of a book.
22. At some point in your life, you will stumble into intimate, healthy, healing friendships with men who know you and love you and do not try to fuck you. At least once, each of these men will laugh, and their laughter will be the tender echo-song of your Dead Dad.
23. It will make you love them just a little bit more. ♦
My father was an alcoholic. Most of my childhood memories are of him in varying states of intoxication. I spent the majority of my early adulthood trying to help him get sober just to watch him relapse again and again. I analyzed everything. Had I said something wrong? Was this my fault? Would things be different if my parents hadn’t divorced? Does he drink because he thinks I am an embarrassment? And the ever-famous, Why can’t he just stop? It’s easy! Just quit!

As his addiction worsened, so did my confusion. I was tired. At eighteen, fresh out of high school, I had a child of my own. I was taking classes at the community college and waitressing, my swollen ankles propped up on the chair beside me as I studied late into the night, checking on my son’s every fuss and whimper until I fell asleep in my chair. My physical stores had been depleted. I had to choose: take care of myself and my infant son or care for my father while he destroyed his own able body. I told my father he was a worthless drunk and that he could call me when he was sober. I thought that would be enough. That the relationship with me, his only daughter, would be enough.

It wasn’t. Of course it wasn’t. We found ourselves in that awkward position when a lot of time has passed without speaking. Something is wrong, but you don’t know how to fix it. No one ever knows how to fix it.

Almost ten years later, on a spring afternoon in which I had promised I would take my three young boys to the park and then to a cookout, I received a phone call from a stranger identifying himself as my father’s roommate. Dad was dying from liver failure due to alcoholism and had no one to care for him.

And so, I did.

I thought it would be redemptive. I thought we could repair our relationship. At least I would “feel better” about the things—his drinking, my leaving him—those years had forfeited. Instead, it nearly killed me.

No one tells you what dying is actually like. It is not like the movies. It is grotesque. The human body, its shutting down, requires a level of care that I was not prepared for. I cut my father’s hair. I trimmed his yellowed toenails. I changed the diapers and examined the bedsores. I brushed his teeth and caught them when they fell out of his rotted gums. I talked him down from hallucinations caused by the ammonia forming on his brain. I explained, again, what the word “terminal” meant every time he forgot. I sat with the doctor as she drained the waste from his abdomen, the liver shutting down at age fifty-eight. She commented on how rare it was to see a family member at the bedside, “Really, especially with the alcoholics. They’re usually abandoned.” I nodded then went back to watching the long silicone needle pump toxins from his body.

I spent nights upright, my head racing. What was I going to do? What hadn’t I thought of? Was this my fault? What hadn’t I thought of yet? Was this my fault? Was I a terrible daughter? How can I fix this? Was this my fault?

I began eating poorly, oftentimes from the vending machines at work or at the hospice center. Sometimes I picked from my boys’ leftovers on the drive home: half a lukewarm peanut butter and jelly
sandwich dotted with playground sand; browned apples or fruit snacks that I picked out of the creases of their matching, monogrammed lunch boxes. I drank cup after cup of black coffee, downed shots of espresso before getting in the car. If I couldn’t find coffee I would revert to Diet Coke, a vice I had quit years earlier, drinking two bottles at a time. I was also drinking way too much wine, averaging a bottle a night, sometimes more. Now, instead of the Diet Coke, I began to look forward to the wine. I would start thinking about it around noon, making half jokes about having earned it then drink while I made dinner. I refilled my glass before it was empty, with the idea that my husband wouldn’t know it was a new glass. Every time I found the bottle empty I was surprised. I slid the empties into the trashcan quietly, my eyes darting around the kitchen, hoping no one would see or hear.

Evenings when I couldn’t fall asleep, I took a handful of Tylenol PM. One weekend my mother came to visit and noticed how many I was taking, so I started rotating them out with Aleve PM. When neither worked, I swiped old muscle relaxers and painkillers from our medicine cabinet, my mother-in-law’s medicine cabinet, friends’ homes, co-workers’ baby showers, wherever I found them. Then nothing worked and my husband began to take notice. I stopped taking pills, and instead, I drank more.

When my father died, I was devastated. Even when you know it’s coming, there is no way to adequately prepare for the death of your parent. I was not prepared for the forever of gone. I was so fixated on the doing, on the tasks of hospice and health care, on the preparing and planning and the new-home-for-the-cats-finding that I never stopped to think about the gone part. My kind, intelligent, strong father drank himself to death, despite my best and most desperate efforts to save him, to fix him, to undo the ten years I had missed.

I hosted a memorial service in a VFW by the beach. I ordered the things a memorial service requires. I counted the paper plates and fanned the napkins, separated the wax cups. I had programs made. I put out sandwiches and coffee and cookies. I made sure there were flowers and enough chairs. My best friend brought me muscle relaxers and snuck me little paper cups of wine. Every time my mother found a cup she poured it out until I snapped at her to stop. After the service my husband drove me home. I put my father’s ashes in my closet behind the summer dresses that no longer fit my tired, bloated body.

We had joined one of those fancy athletic clubs a few months earlier because of the pool. I loved that lifeguard-protected pool. I could take the kids any time I wanted and drink half a carafe of wine while they went up and down the waterslide. I read too much Marie Howe and Ron Rash, ordered cheeseburgers and pizzas, and made sure to never drink so much that I couldn’t drive the two blocks home. My anxiety was so out of control I drove with all the windows down amidst the oppressive heat. That fall semester I taught my classes outside, despite the change in weather, because the thought of four enclosed walls gave me literal hives. Students lingered nervously after class to ask if I was well. I spent nights sitting up way too late, swaying in front of a book or a crime show, thinking, thinking, thinking, and chewing my nails.

Almost a year later, with my father’s little yellow house sold, his belongings scattered, and the dust as settled as it ever would be, I decided I would go for a walk. My head was so crowded it felt as big as my father’s poisoned belly. I found my old running shoes in the back of the
closet and I drove to our regional park. It is wide, wooded, and very secluded. There are loping paths around a fishing lake and you can go some distance without seeing anyone. I liked walking, being outside of my house. I loved the quiet. I loved that I didn’t have to do anything except move my goddamned feet. I decided I would continue the walks.

Those first few walks I cried. I balled up my fists and pounded my thighs, anxiety growing enough to force me to jog. Some mornings I was so hungover I almost puked from the jostling of running. I jogged the trails around the lake, the pounding of my feet matching the pounding in my head, and I would yell at myself, yell at my dead father, yell at the memory of his hands grasping the air, fingers grasping at nothing that I could use to save him. When I saw someone else coming down the path I stopped. I sped up and put my head down.

One day, on a half-serious whim, I said, “Yeah, sure,” at a girlfriend’s invitation to CrossFit. She held me to it and at that first six a.m. class I found bodies and barbells across every square inch of a mechanic’s garage-turned gym. The music was loud enough to drown out coherent thought. I watched a man twice my size bench-press what, to my uninitiated eyes, surely was enough to kill him on the spot. When I looked at the workout written on the whiteboard, I whispered, “I can’t do this.” My friend looked incredulous, “Of course you can!” Surrounded by badasses, I couldn’t believe I survived the class. That night, exhausted and sore, I cried in the shower where my kids couldn’t hear me. I went to bed and slept. No wine, no sleeping pills, just the delicious sleep of physical exhaustion. Thursday morning I definitely didn’t understand why I was going back, and on my own at that, but I did. The coach remembered my name and high-fived me. I finished that workout too, although in last place and nauseated, but when I came back in from the run that would complete my workout, every single person in the gym cheered for me. I felt acknowledged. I was actually doing something. Look at me doing something! I survived that second class too. That weekend, jogging the lake, I was so busy trying to duplicate the movements from the workouts that I forgot to cry.

I went to class every Tuesday and Thursday. For those first few weeks, I sweated wine, cheap food, depression, and self-loathing all over those gym mats, and the coach pretended not to notice. One morning, the workout consisted of burpees, a movement that asks you to fall to the floor, complete a push-up, stand back up, then jump while clapping above your head. When mixed with other components in a workout, it is easy for burpees to exhaust you. Immediately, you begin to talk yourself out of the exercise, out of the gym, into your car, home, and back into bed where you can grieve your father and your lack of self-confidence in peace. On the floor, I needed a minute before getting back up, my body writhing in frustration and exhaustion, the tears coming hot and fast whenever I thought of my father, even in the gym. The coach patted me on my shoulder and said, “You are okay. You’re okay.” And the thing was, I believed him. I was becoming okay.

I started showing up five days a week. I got a little faster, a little stronger every day. Something shifted. Going to the gym gave me something to do with the hours I’d otherwise spend on my father. It gave me a way to clear my head. It gave me a group of people who saw me, every day, at my absolute worst and liked me anyway. And if they didn’t see me, if I failed to show up, they reached out to me. Logging my scores and times every day, watching the weights on my barbell increase and the weight on the scale decrease, no longer needing a bottle of wine and a bottle of sleeping pills, I discovered an immense feeling of empowerment. Here
was a thing that had a flawless formula: If I put the work in, I would get the results. There were no outside factors. There was only me. And I had the tools I needed to fix me. I had to make amends with both my mind and my body. CrossFit forced me to do that.

It was an explosion of knowing.

What CrossFit gave me was measurable results. With grief, when someone asks you how you’re doing, the only socially acceptable answer is “Oh, I’m fine. I’m fine.” There’s no way to gauge growth in grief. But in CrossFit, I could measure my results in quantifiable increments. Today I got stronger. Today I got faster. Today I learned a new skill. Today I remained focused. Today I did not cry. Having quantifiably measured results was growth I understood intellectually as well as physically. It fulfilled both needs.

As I struggled toward the end of a particularly grueling workout, doubting whether I would finish, my coach lay down on the ground, right there on the floor next to my sweaty face. He whispered, forcing me to calm my breathing and listen to him, “Danger, you cannot control what happens out there. You just can’t. But you can control what happens in here. You can. Get up.”

I stood the hell up.

CrossFit, I’ve discovered, is a microcosm for life. It forces me to become and remain uncomfortable, to face an unknown and still continue, to set a goal to task then quietly get to work. As such, three years later, the principles of CrossFit have transferred across all planes of my life: when I think I can’t bear my children’s whining for one more minute. When I think I can’t sprint that last one hundred yards. When I can’t get my elbow up high enough out of the water or cycle fast enough under the barbell. When mastering a new skill taunts me with failure for weeks. When I’m two seconds too slow or don’t pace myself well from the start. When I doubt my instinct in anything. When I think I can’t admit to being wrong. When I translate simple mistakes as absolute failures. When I think I can’t be kind and patient and loving. When I think I can’t forgive my father. When I think I can’t forgive myself. I tell myself that I can. And I just keep showing up.
Poison Damsels in Rajaji’s Harem, 1673

_fiction by Tara Isabel Zambrano_

Sheila smiles, she’s new in the harem. Her skin is smooth as ivory, her voice sweet as a koel, her waist curves softly. I want to take her away from Rajaji—the owner of this harem, the one with small pox lesions on his face, the one who flicks his tongue like a snake. The king of this city. I massage Sheila’s wet scalp with jasmine oil and braid her hair, a custom for new courtesans. She picks up the hookah, brings it close to her face, inhales the opium. I tell her she needs it, especially with all the tattoos she wants.

I had a name once. Everyone in the palace started calling me Anokhi, the exotic one, as I was the first poison damsel. I was raised on a carefully crafted diet of poison and antidote from a very young age. The six other girls didn’t live. Since then my body is a chilly oven of lust and death, never love.

Sheila stares at the ceiling while I get to work. Slow carvings on her luminous skin, a lotus garden on her back, a lair of snakes on her wrist, a shadow of a goddess below her navel. The tip of the needle dipped in poison and dye, my unwavering eye and her skin like Thar Desert under a summer sun.

I pour a glass of water and mix a light sedative. She gulps it. I watch her fall asleep, her arms overhead, and her chest rising and falling like waves in a sea. Later in the evening, listening to old ghazals and watching Sheila dance, I laugh with a surprising lightness. She smiles and I realize I’ve been thirsty for her clear-eyed, joyful way of looking at me. She’s the place I’ve been searching for to call home.

“Anokhi Di,” Sheila hollers. I tell her to rest; the previous night was her first time, with a landlord, a bald man with a paunch, a rival of Rajaji. I place my hand over hers, cup her half-hearted compliance and try to remember what it was like before my body was blitzed with poison—free to love and surrender. But nothing comes to mind.

Sheila wakes up screaming. “I killed the landlord,” she sobs, “with a kiss, Di.” I take her in my arms, her narrow wrists tucked between our bellies. Ten minutes. It’s the longest time I have been in such proximity to another human. “Sh,” I whisper and rub her back, thinking of the two dozen men Rajaji invited to his palace over the years, rulers of small provinces on the outskirts of our kingdom. They passed out after my first kiss: a love bite on their inner lip, foam trickling from the sides of their pale blue mouths, merging our borders, expanding Rajaji’s empire, robbing my conscience.

The next day, I take Sheila to a temple of Goddess Kali. I’m not religious, neither is Sheila. Perhaps I want to believe because I’m dying. Hakeem, the palace doctor, says long-term use of poison has hardened my veins, expanded my heart. I know Sheila’s future is the same as mine, but prayer gives me hope.

She watches the dark-skinned deity, her arms fanned out, each holding an instrument of destruction. “She’s like us,” Sheila says and gazes out at the fields ahead.


When we walk back, the sun beats down on Sheila’s pink face. In the distance a halo of dust rises in the fields surrounding the palace, quilting the green. “How do you feel now?” I ask,
smoothing down her bangs.

“I feel fine,” she says, removing my hand from her face and kissing it softly.

The world spins as I watch a serpentine sheen on her face and body. Sundazzled. She’s nimbler than I ever was, more poisonous. And before I know it, I’m tracing my fingers on her blouse feeling her firm nipples. “Stop, Di,” she growls. But I don’t. We wrestle on the grass and finally, she sits with my head in her lap. She brings my face close to hers, breathing hard. I see her disbelieving eyes, desperate and worried. My nostrils flare to inhale her sweet scent. “Make me feel something,” I plead, my neck cradled in her arms, my head a hive of buzzing desire before she breaks down and bites hard, somewhere close to my heart. ♦
Relic of the true cross.
At the cemetery’s entrance
bare wood crossed bare
wood without a body.
When I touched it in dreams,
my hands woke stinging
the way, after a day playing in the forest,
my mother took a needle
and gouged out splinters.

I have no idea
how she paid for that plot
where we buried my father.
His income had been simple
like the hammer on his
headstone. She, who was just my mother,
must have sold something
perhaps something from her mother.

My job was to find the public spigot
and fill the metal cylinder
that fit into his marker
with water so cold
it wept inside out. In summer
we brought iris,
in winter evergreen,
our skin stained with pitch,
the scent of what we cut.

Shivering there, a woman
and her ten-year-old, we never
prayed. Listened instead
to the tomb of wind called missing.
She bent and with bare fingers
brushed away grass clippings,
gently, the way she had washed
his body and my hands.
My job is be a good girl no more dirty girl stay close pick up
not get sleepy even when I’m crissXcross applesauce
on the bumpy rug outside my closet
in a square of sunbeam
for a long time like now
and it is kissing me all over and I am getting dozey
and Mommy hasn’t told me a job in
a while.

Casey crawls behind me gnawing fat purple beads that fit together and pull apart
with a suck and pop.

Then Mommy finds a line of grey crumble
in the metal groove
where the closet doors slide smooth fast and you have to be careful
not stick your finger in the tracks or you will get it run over and the doors don’t care.

Mommy bends to her track of dirt.
She likes to find hidden trails of crud in secret places like the folds at the top
of Casey’s ears and mine.
This is her closest to happy.
Cleaning is Mommy’s best.
She has to do it hard.
Dirty makes her mad.

She gets busy at picking the dirty
and forgets me so I can shut my eyes.

The warm sun square
has me I am still
crissXcross
applesauce legs
and the next is me floating.

If the lid wasn’t hard white to my room’s top I might go even higher

going,
then all the way gone

Instead I hang
here

see Mommy
scrubbing
mad below
there, my sister pulling
beads.
I see
the square of light
where I waited,
was forgot.

oh.
now
I have another
secret for keeping and never telling

i am a babygirl
who can fly
up
and
up
out of reach

which is a kind of bird
I didn’t know
I'd get to live
to
be.
On Receptivity

nonfiction by J.M. Leija

I. Syllables

It would be easier to say “openness”—so many soft sounds and a first letter that shapes the lips to let something in—but openness is not quite what we’re going for. It’s too soft a noun. Too much a thing to hold inside of you. Too permanent.

We are talking about transmissions, forcible and otherwise, uncontrollable responses. The myriad ways we receive the world.

It’s a state of being, both complicated and precise: receptivity.

II. Words within words

A receptor receives.
A receipt is received.
A reception is the circumstance of receipt.
To be receptive is to be open to receiving.

Receptivity is simultaneously a combination of these and also, none of the above.

III. Receptors

There is no word for a receptor getting two contradictory messages.

The palms of my hands melt snowflakes. The tips of my fingers grow so cold they burn.

A third receptor tells me that the white, the shimmer, is brilliant.

And a fourth: It is so, so quiet. Under blankets, muffled quiet. Which makes everything else seem more. More, what?

More.

IV. Receptions

The circumstances under which we receive are important.

Tonight the snow makes me think of the world as something new. I want to walk in the glassed over quiet and take it into myself.

If it were like this tomorrow morning I’d snort, disgusted, put on another layer over my Monday work clothes and curse that it was only two inches of snow and not the six I need for a day off.

Tonight I can gather magic, like flowers. I can watch the snow sparkle as it falls into my hands. Tomorrow it will be so much dirty dust, tread into slush by the tires of my car.

V. Tomorrow and tomorrow

If it were a different tomorrow the daily criticisms might not be first on my mind. I might not just grumble about the cold. If it were a different tomorrow it might be a morning I wake and see things I like in the mirror: the wide bottom lip, the perfectly controlled left eyebrow, the soft brown hair.

Tomorrow could be different if I make no effort to be anything more or less than I am. I could like what I see. But it might just be different because most mornings I
go about my day without looking in the mirror at all.

VI. Senses

Senses, while they belong to a self, are not, in and of themselves, a self. If my skin were on another person it would still feel. My ears would hear. My nose would smell. The brain is what complicates.

The brain doesn’t receive; it interprets. It organizes. It understands. The brain doesn’t sense; the brain makes sense.

VII. Detail

Your senses will fail you if you drive them hard enough. Hammered hour after hour with monotony you will fail to see the details of each individual piece.

Four or five hours in, each student’s mistakes become the same, their phrasings the same, their grammatical errors the same. I have to look at the other essays to be sure I haven’t already read the one in front of me. The only thing I’ve seen: uniform black words, full of uniform mistakes, on a uniform sea of white. The almost, not quite, sameness erases the detail. Specifics are lost in the crush.

VIII. Space

Some days there is space for everything and I can take it all in by just brushing past.

These days my senses are so acute, I can feel each pluck of the bass undulate the individual strands of hair on my head. The high clear trumpet is a breath of cold in my throat. And when I open my mouth to sing, I fit, utterly.

IX. Too Much

In performance, just before I go on stage, the only thing I feel is the need to use the bathroom. In the instant the lights hit me, I am blind with white and full of panic. Then—a black out. There is no me. There is no sense. There is barely a memory. What I know about my time on stage is that when I am there I am joyful and I feel … everything. I can tell you this only by what happens after a show—I feel my heart pumping, and I’m full of adrenaline. My body aches like I’ve run a race. I’ve sweated through my clothes, and I’m fiercely hungry. Of my time on stage I only know that there are my emotions, already high, and the feelings of every audience member being pushed out of and back into me. I’m a conduit, so overloaded by all that I’m receiving that afterward I have barely any memory of the event itself except for the imprint of power.

X. Self

When I am thinking about receiving, I am more receptive. I can feel the pads of my fingers on my keyboard, the short nail on the first finger of my left hand, my winter-dry nostrils, the chapped right side of my lips. The toes of my socks are still wet from the snow outside. When I’m reminded to think about it, the details of living inside of this skin are countless. If I were aware of every one of them at all times there would be no outside world and the dog would always be able to surprise me by nudging up under my elbow, suddenly, like he did just a moment ago.
XI. Common Surprises

Repetition doesn’t necessarily serve to dull response.

When I’ve been reading for a long while—long enough that time has slipped away—and my attention is called back to the world outside the pages, I often find myself shocked at how vivid blue the sky is, how unmuted, how immediate. Instead of being background, it is all I can take in.

XII. Then again

I know my mother’s scent so well that it doesn’t register anymore unless I’ve been away for a very long time.

Likewise, when my father spent a two-year stint in jail, I used to sneak into his drawers to smell his cologne. The smallest scent could almost bring the rest of him back to me.

XIII. Receptivity

Leaving home is an experience in perspective. Any place that is different from where we spend most of our daily lives will be held in comparison: how unfamiliar the turns, how tall the buildings, how friendly the people, and how many more stars in the sky.

Coming back home is something different. We already know the streets; navigating is automatic. There are neighbors to wave to. But the drive seems to take longer and the bricks on the house seem a more faded shade of red.

There are two accountings of everything, neither of which is fully true: home as it was before and the home we return to when we are steeped in receptivity. ♦
I.

Christmas stories happen to other people. They are in movies and magazines, colorfully illustrated. They happen to plump children full of pluck and innocence; they happen to lonely old women whose sacrifices are made with humble grace. Christmas stories don’t happen around Hinton, Indiana, in 1936, where a longtime-bustling kitchenware factory has all but shut down. Hinton’s sense of shock is so common everywhere in these years that “Hinton” could be replaced with any other of thousands of town names. The people, too, could be interchangeable, even though they feel solitary in their bewilderment.

No, the kinds of Christmas stories told these days with lights and music are fiction. They ignore places like Hinton and people like Rusty Swett, who can’t sacrifice anything more than he already has: car, farm, health, dignity.

So maybe there is something else going on, some other story, because here is Rusty, standing exhausted and dumbstruck a half mile from home at the end of his six-mile walk from the work relief job at the limestone quarry. Today of all days he has not been able to hitch a ride—but worse, Christmas Eve has fallen on a Friday, and the government’s work relief pay has been held up again. Again. Rusty has been walking, tormented and crying, for five and a half miles. He has stopped by the side of the road, a truck route, which isn’t smart in this raw wind and snow as the afternoon light thins. He is a six-foot-tall scarecrow of a man wrapped in overcoat, scarf, and cap. His head goes back and forth, peering through glasses up and down this sandy, slushy ditch, seeing what he doesn’t yet believe that he sees.

Money.

A slew of coins, as if someone had tossed a double handful out the window of a speeding car. Little shiny bits in the sand and muck. In an instant Rusty is on his knees, gloves off, frantically digging and pricking the slop to snatch up every coin he can find. He drops each one into the glove that doesn’t have holes in the fingertips. When the sky has dimmed to twilight, Rusty is still there, combing the freezing, wet sand. Finally he stops because he can’t feel his fingers anymore. He stands, puts the swollen, chinking glove into his pocket and blows on his poor fingers. Even then he won’t take his eyes off the ditch. He doesn’t know whether he got them all.

The sand grows brighter. A horn blats close by and Rusty leaps to the far side of the ditch and falls into the snow. A truck roars past and takes the light away with it.

II.

Rusty’s wife and two children look up from their dinner at the kitchen table as Rusty stumbles into the enclosed back porch.

“Emil,” Agnes calls out, with worry in her voice. She never calls him Rusty.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Rusty calls back. He removes his fogged-up glasses and sets them in the pocket with the coin-stuffed glove so he won’t forget either one. He puts his coat on the wall hook, his hat and scarf on the shelf above, and peels off his rubber overshoes, all with much more care than if he’d had any other reason for being so late. His trouser legs are a sodden mess. He blows on his fingers
again then extracts his glasses and the precious glove from his coat pocket.

“Let me clean up, I’ll be right back,” he says and plows past his family toward the bathroom. His hands are cupped against his chest rabbit-like, hiding the heavy glove. He must look like a wild animal, the way they stare at him.

In the bathroom Rusty plugs the sink drain and turns on the tap. He empties the glove into the water. So many coins! He swirls them around in the water. His fingers burn as they thaw.

He empties soap chips out of the dish and drops the clean coins into it. Indian Head coppers, Buffalo nickels, eagle-sided quarters. A half-dollar ... no, two half-dollars! Dimes. They threaten to spill over the sides of the dish. Carefully, carefully, he places the last coins on top of the shining pile. Slowly, slowly, he carries the dish in both hands to the kitchen table.

“Emil, your trousers, I thought you were—what on earth!” Agnes cries.

Rusty places the soap dish on the dinner plate set for him. Stephen, age twelve, and Maggie, eight, gape and forget their dinner.

The whole family stares at the heap of shining money.

“What on earth,” Agnes whispers.

“I found it,” Rusty says, with a helpless movement of his hands. “It was in the ditch, a half mile down Packer Road. I saw it and picked it up.”

“How much is it?” Stephen asks. He is a practical boy. Rusty sits and begins to count. He sorts the coins into brown and silver stacks, muttering the numbers. Agnes quickly brings a torn envelope and a pencil and writes down what Rusty says. When Rusty is done, Agnes counts. Then she pushes the coins back to her husband and he counts one more time. The total is four dollars and twenty-seven cents.

Four dollars is a week’s rent or a month of trips to the grocery. Four dollars is what Rusty earns from the Works Progress Administration every week for his labor at the quarry.

“Who put it in the ditch?” Maggie asks. “Are they going to want it back?” She is a child already in love with stories, and it is mind-boggling to find herself and her family inside one. There must be something about to happen next.

“There was no one around,” Rusty says, with more helpless movements of his hands, which Agnes watches carefully. “It looked ... it looked like somebody threw it away.”

Stephen opens his mouth to say, That doesn’t make sense, because besides being practical he is observant about his world. But he stops when his mother reaches across the table and puts her small plump hand over his father’s big one, to halt its movements and bring his eyes to hers.

“It doesn’t matter who put it there or why. It’s a gift to us,” she says kindly, but firmly, to Rusty. “Let’s give thanks, dear. Why don’t you say grace?” She pulls back and presses her hands together over her broad bosom, elbows straight out. Stephen and Maggie follow her. Maggie puts her thumbs in her mouth and pushes up the tip of her nose.

Rusty sets his elbows on the table, wraps one hand around the other, and leans his broad forehead against them. He closes his eyes. He has sat this way at the table so many nights, so many hours, always in pleading, so rarely in thanks. Thank you for my dear wife, my sunshine-bright children, he thinks. He remembers he has to say something. “Our Father,” he begins. What next? What is this thing that has happened? “Who art in heaven,” he continues, unable to conjure anything else. Agnes and the children join in the common prayer.

Agnes, while the prayer passes her lips, puts up a secret request to God that He should notice what this quarry job is doing to her husband. Her Emil relishes books and poetry and chickens and planting, and is not meant to run a saw
screaming through stone, day in and day out. Even with torn bits of towels stuffed into his ears, the machine’s constant howl is eating away his nerves and what’s left of his strength. On top of it is the six-mile walk. You see, Lord, we cannot have him fall so sick again, she thinks, as they allow God the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory forever.

“We thank You with all of our hearts for this strange gift, amen,” Rusty finishes.

“Amen,” says Agnes. She reaches into the money pile and counts out forty-two cents, which will be the tithe to the church.

III.
“I thought maybe you’d stayed at the bank,” Agnes says quietly to her husband, as they wash the dishes. The children are in the living room. Maggie reads her big brother’s history book while he is absorbed in his math homework.

Rusty shakes his head. “The checks were late again. Nothing for us again. I was coming home with nothing, Agnes.”

She sets the sponge down and pats his hand. “It is a shame, sweetheart. Right up against Christmas, you’d think the government would put in a little extra work, so folks could have what they need when it’s promised.”

Rusty nods absently. All during the meal, his attention drifted in that manner. Agnes takes his hand and squeezes it so that he looks at her.

“The stores are open late tonight,” she says. “We can go ahead and do what we talked about.”

“You don’t think we should be careful with it? After all ...”

“Emil.” She smiles at him, and her smile always transforms her round, plain face into something wise. “It was a gift.”

IV.
Yes, it’s Christmas Eve. Despite the hour being after dark, the Swett family puts on clean clothes, bundles up, and walks to the end of their little street and then a long block north on Packer Road, the truck route, to catch a bus into downtown Hinton. Rusty watches four precious nickels go into the coin box. Stephen puts in two, and Maggie puts in two. Are we really doing the right thing? Rusty wonders. Four dollars twenty. Wait. He subtracts the church tithe. Three dollars eighty-five cents, and this is another twenty cents gone, it’s three sixty-five now. Goes so fast. Always so fast.

The bus is crowded. Agnes and the children find a bench near the middle; Rusty goes far into the back where men are standing. He grips the overhead bar and half-closes his eyes, shutting out the knowledge of the town lights slipping past on the other side of the greasy, fogged windows.

Where does it all go, whispers a voice in Rusty’s head. Rusty shivers. He wills himself to be still and not argue with the voice. It is what he calls an echo: a private sensation he has learned must not be allowed to rule over his speaking and decisions.

People move on and off the bus quickly. Some are just returning home from work; some have wrapped packages in their arms and bags. Rusty is the only man still standing at the back, and then someone leaves a seat open on the rear-most bench. Rusty sits and closes his eyes entirely. Real rest hasn’t been part of his life since going to work at the quarry. Even hours after leaving the stonemaking machines behind, he can still feel their howls in the marrow of his bones. They give him the shivers. How can I work like this, Rusty lets himself wonder. I’m not worth the government’s money, anyway. Something happened to bring us a Christmas, but why? Why waste a gift like that on someone like me?

Santa Claus sits beside him. The skinniest Santa Claus ever seen. His red flannel suit hangs loose and his long-tailed hat with the white puffball is jammed over a knitted watch cap.

“Will Ferndon,” Rusty says suddenly, the name of a schoolmate. “Will Ferndon! My lands, yes, it’s Rusty, though who calls me that anymore?”

Will Ferndon grins his broad, beautiful grin that takes up most of his face and shows two teeth missing on each side. The men shake gloved hands with strength and affection. It has been nearly twenty years since they last spoke. Will left high school in his second year to start work in his father’s machine shop, while Rusty went all the way through to graduation.

“When did you become Father Christmas?” Rusty asks.

“Aw, they’s a party at the Methodist church before the late service, and the women asked around for someone the children wouldn’t know on sight,” he explains. He shakes the voluminous red flannel jacket and laughs. “They promised they’d have some pillows to fatten me up! I been studyin’ what to say to the children if they forget.” The men share another laugh.

“Why, I remember seein’ your picture in the paper when you come back from France, must be fifteen years ago now,” Will goes on, eyes alight. “Em-Pee in Gay Paree! Guardin’ Woodrow Wilson and them!”

Rusty shakes his head. “I checked identification papers in a train station, that was all.”

“That’s plenty for a Hinton boy! Paree!”

Rusty smiles but waves his hand to let his friend know that this is all that will be said about the Great War. Will turns quiet out of respect then he leans close. “Saw you get on with your family, but wasn’t sure it was you until you set down here.”

“I treasure them.”

Will nods. “Me and Clare, our first was taken in the influenza.”

“I’m sorry for that, Will.”

He glances away. “The other three are all strong.” He looks at Rusty again, intent. “You gettin’ by?”

Rusty’s throat is full of the miracle of the ditch, but he doesn’t dare reveal it. Instead, he shrugs. “WPA tries to help.”

Will nods. “Whereabouts?”

“Moldavia Stone,” Rusty whispers.

Will whispers softly, “How d’you get up there, all that way?” Rusty paddles his hands and jabs a thumb in the air, to say, walking and hitching rides. Will shakes his head. The white puff at the end of his Santa cap sways back and forth.

Rusty notices that he feels nothing at that moment. He remembers how his shame surged hot, early on, about being sent to a relief job at Moldavia. He remembers anger. He remembers despair. But those feelings are flat and distant. Flat and distant and dry, as if they were printed on pages of a book that Rusty is closing.

“Don’t that beat all,” Will says, having turned away to face front again. “Don’t that just beat all. Why the guv’ment would waste a man’s high school diploma on a place like Moldavia, well, they must have thought they had some other Rusty Swett. Some other guy entirely.”

The bus groans to a stop and Will stands. He pulls a curly white beard out of his pocket and stretches the elastic over his head. Rusty notices that he feels nothing at that moment. He remembers how his shame surged hot, early on, about being sent to a relief job at Moldavia. He remembers anger. He remembers despair. But those feelings are flat and distant. Flat and distant and dry, as if they were printed on pages of a book that Rusty is closing.

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The bus groans to a stop and Will stands. He pulls a curly white beard out of his pocket and stretches the elastic over his head. Rusty shifts his long legs so Will-Father-Christmas can step past. In the aisle, he turns back to Rusty and bends in close again.

“It was some other man they thought they were sending out,” Will says to Rusty, quiet and terse. “That’s how I look at it. They didn’t know who they had.” He straightens up and adjusts his beard, his eyes still serious. He touches Rusty’s shoulder because he has to get out the door and doesn’t have time to shake hands. As he moves down the aisle,
passengers’ eyes are caught by his red coat. Smiles and laughter ripple through the bus, and the world’s skinniest Santa Claus nods and waves. “Ho-ho-ho, Merry Christmas to you all,” Will Ferndon booms in a voice that Rusty knows is an imitation of Ferndon Senior. Will pauses to shake hands with Maggie and Stephen, whose faces are caught in perplexity and delight. They know better than to think that this is Santa Claus in the flesh, but still! He is so unexpected!

Rusty shivers with an echo. He does not speak to it, but he listens.

V.
The shops and department stores around Hinton’s courthouse square are indeed open, brightly lit, and the streetlights make the tinsel decorations glitter. People are out, walking, because in times like these just being able to smile and say “Merry Christmas” with real heart and enjoyment of other people is a kind of feast.

After once around the square, admiring windows and the goods in them, the Swett family steps inside the Kresge five-and-ten-cent store. There they stop to unwind their scarves. Rusty wipes his fogged glasses. The children look up at him uncertainly. What now?

Agnes says nothing, but just her intent manner, tucking her gloves into her purse, tells Rusty to go ahead. Rusty leans down to his children.

“You mother and I were going to depend on Santa Claus to bring you surprise presents like always, but this year things have turned out differently,” he says. “This year, you go around the store, and pick out one thing you would really like to have for Christmas.”

Maggie looks confused. Stephen gets it, with a blink and straightened shoulders, like electricity turning on. “So we get to have our idea of Christmas,” he says. Agnes smiles and stifles laughter. This boy, her personal light bulb.

“That’s right,” Rusty says, “you get to choose what you want.” Maggie understands now. She looks around the wide, high-ceilinged store with its endless aisles in wonder. Stephen glances with purpose, mapping out the location of something specific.

Rusty follows his family up and down the aisles, feeling as if he is floating. Several times, he takes Agnes’s arm just to have the warm gravity of her. As they stand in line to check out, Agnes murmurs to him so the children can’t hear, “What about yours?”

“Don’t worry, don’t worry,” he murmurs back, patting her shoulder. She nods, and Rusty knows she thinks she knows what he means, but he knows that what she thinks comes from a different story than the one he is in.

VI.
It is Stephen who insists that he and Maggie and Mother should wait until Christmas morning to take their self-chosen gifts out of the packaging, just as if Santa Claus had brought them like usual. Maggie pouts but then figures she could. So after breakfast, the thin winter sun brightens the sitting room at the Swett cottage. It’s quiet, but bursting with activity. Stephen lounges on an armchair, swinging his legs. He holds a Big Little Book up to his nose, already swept twenty thousand leagues under the sea. Agnes fingers through her new sewing box, choosing among the gem-bright threads for darning her children’s school clothes. Maggie thoughtfully strokes a long streak of red down her sheet of white paper. This will be her fourth watercolor painting with her set of paints and brushes. She has it in mind to paint a picture of a tall, skinny Santa Claus throwing gold coins to her family.

Rusty watches the intense hubbub from his armchair. He can’t help but notice the lack of an echo: no voice, no doubt to make him shiver. Nothing has
slipped away; instead something has arrived.

Maggie looks up and asks her daddy about his self-chosen present. He tells her it isn’t ready for him just yet; he must go get it the Monday after Christmas.

And he does. Instead of taking a breakfast biscuit which Agnes has wrapped in a napkin to eat on his hike out to Moldavia, Rusty shaves and washes with care and dresses in his Sunday best. It’s only a little later than his usual start time; the children are still asleep. Agnes faces him in the kitchen with the question that isn’t really a question.

“You’re not going back, are you?”

Rusty agrees that no, he isn’t. Agnes gets her coin purse, which holds the remainder of the ditch money. She picks out a dime and hands it to him. “You take this then. I’ll be fine with the rest.” He hugs her, holds her. They kiss.

The WPA office doesn’t open until nine. Rusty sits in the window seat of the lunch counter on the courthouse square, waiting, one hand wrapped around his cup of coffee. The other rests on his crossed legs. In his posture and his suit and the warmth of the cup, the smells and sounds of the breakfast crowd at the lunch counter, he settles into being the man they had missed the first time around. ♦
In my dreams, I sit on a rock in the middle of a sea, legs curled under and connected like a fishtail, no telling one from the other. In my dreams, I have working legs again. What I do most days: sit—in gardens and in parlors, behind windows, on beach towels. Watch—palm spiking volleyballs and bare feet kicking sand, suntanned bodies entwining, June kissing Jack. Listen—to hoots and high-fives, slapping waves, whispered I love yous.

When we were kids, Jack announced he was a prince and June wanted to be a princess. I said I wanted to be a princess, too, and June told me there could only be one princess, I’d have to pick something else. I decided on a mermaid. Jack wrinkled his nose. “And have a fishtail instead of legs? Gross.”

I said it was only an imaginary thing; I’d still have my legs. Always. Legs are like eyes and ears; everyone has a pair.

Today, when the tide drags itself back out, I talk to a three-pointed starfish, ask whether it sacrificed its limbs to make other stars or if maybe escape had become necessary. June and Jack look over once before packing up. They have a kid now, a pretty blond thing June calls her little princess. But the way she swims, she’s more mermaid than royalty.

I lie, tell them my brother’s coming to pick me up. Yeah, real soon. I’ll be fine, don’t worry. Then I take my starfish and crab-crawl to the shoreline, the place where liquid turns to foam and humans become sea creatures. We wait there, my lucky star and I, for my bottled witchcraft to cast its spell, bring sleep and dreams.
Ticket in the Salad Spinner

fiction by Sara Gray

The ticket to Dorwl came in a salad spinner. The salad spinner is supposed to make the trivial task of mixing my salad for my workday lunch easier. I like buying things from the homewares section. Every purchase is a promise of a life that is cleaner, more correct.

I like having a full set of towels—face, hand, body, beach—even though I only use the body towel. I like that I also have four full sets of guest towels (presuming a couple stays, towels are changed midweek for hygiene). Towels are laundered on the weekends. I never have guests, but I like the idea of being prepared.

I am a tax attorney (which means I can afford things like guest towels and salad spinners), so my house is neat, clean, and exactly the way I want it. I like this, but lately, I have been feeling like I want to die.

The ticket is heavy card paper. I turn it over in my hands.

COME TO DORWL! The message is printed on a postcard that looks like it came from the 1970s. Dorwl looks like Mars except that Mars is used only for mining, and the picture of Dorwl shows a large replica of the Eiffel Tower with two creatures wearing berets. WE HAVE IT ALL! is printed below.

I hesitate to describe them as creatures. I don’t wish to cause offense. They are known to be smart, but their appearance is off-putting. They look like humans, but with frog-like faces. Their skin is the color of milk but, unlike the white people I know, the Dorwlites’ skin is covered with what seems to be slime. This makes their limbs look like distended maggots.

Their faces are smiling though—presuming the upward turn of the lips means the same thing in Dorwl. I pick up the card and turn it over to read the note.

Dear Human Person,
We have been looking for you for very long time. We saw you time long ago arrive at Superstore and we were amused with your capabilities, food selection, and heartiness and hoped to assist you and share.
Sincere Love,
1101010001

I blink at the message. I think back to my trips to the Superstore, but I have made so many trips to so many homewares departments that I cannot remember what trip it was that may have caught their attention. Dorwlites are rare on Earth. I have never seen one. I would have noticed if one were watching and certainly would have remembered.

Work hours have been extended again. I only have five hours between work ending and work beginning, so I try to sleep. The ticket rests on my nightstand.

I stare at my ceiling. All of us live in the same prefabricated apartment blocks now, which I like. I imagine other people staring at the same ceiling, thinking the same thoughts, and it makes me feel less lonely. I have put a sticker on the ceiling. It advertises 10 percent off bubble bath. We are not supposed to have stickers on the walls, and looking at it makes me smile.

I can change my life, I think, as I look at the sticker on the ceiling. Its edges peel away from the wall like it knows it is part of some rebellion and doesn’t want to be. I don’t know why I chose such a boring sticker. I am attached to it now. I remove it for inspection. I hide it in my shoe while the landlord inspects the flat then place it
back when he's done. It leaves a gummy residue on the surface even when it is not there. I know as long as that stickiness remains, I remain.

I can change my life.
I can leave.
I quit my job the next day.

“I'm going to Dorwl,” I say to my manager. My manager is rail thin and only thinks about and enjoys soda. He never goes into the sun, and his skin is a jaundiced yellow. He subscribes to the company's twenty-four-hour plan, where the company provides food, drink, and shelter in exchange for twenty-four-hours-a-day availability.

I was considering the same before I received the ticket in the salad spinner. Now, looking at him, even thinking about considering the twenty-four-hour plan seems sad.

“Did you hear me?” I ask when he doesn't respond.

He releases the straw from his mouth. His red lips glisten with moisture.

“I don’t care.”

“I'm quitting.”

He shrugs again. Despite my newfound excitement, I feel a little sad. I thought he might suggest a leaving party and give me packs of earth candy. This is what happens when people decide to go to Dorwl. People make a big deal of it because people rarely come back.

“I stop at the end of the day,” I say again. As of today, I will have worked a total of 843 days for the company. In my last performance review I had received a “worker of exceptional merit” stamp. It stings that none of this matters, even though I suppose I always knew that it didn't.

“No one'll hire you again,” he says as I leave his office. I turn around to look at him, but he is already looking back at his computer screen.

He is right. The few people who return from Dorwl are ostracized. The official story is that the Dorwl visitors can no longer handle the Earth's sun. True or not, they are forced to live in the Grand Canyon, which is no longer open to the public but covered with a red tarp.

I look at my manager again. I wonder what he thinks about when he stares at his ceiling at night. I wonder if this life also makes him feel like someone is slowly filling his lungs with concrete.

I walk back over to his desk and put my hand on his cold, boney one. Surprised, he looks up at me.

“Goodbye, Carl,” I say. “I hope you have a good life.”

Still stunned, he gives a short little nod and pulls his hand away. He turns back to the screen. There is a flush of color on his cheeks. I am glad to see his humanity before I go. People whisper about me for the rest of the day. I don't work hard. I am too excited. I research Dorwl on the work computer even though using the work computer for personal use can get me fired. I learn that I'm not to take anything with me. I am just to show up at the Superstore.

The problem is that there are several Superstores: Savings Superstore, Bargain Superstore, Super Superstore. I frequent all of them, and I am not sure where the Dorwlites saw me. The ticket and websites do not specify a time.

These are small, practical problems. I leave my office without saying goodbye, without waiting for anyone to say goodbye to me.

The others in my bank of desks watch me as I pack, their eyes big and resentful. My hand stalls over the novelty mug I keep on my desk. I no longer need it. I don't need anything I have carried forward with me for the last forty-three years.

I leave the box of documents, my key card, even my purse with my house keys and bankcard on my desk and walk to the
nearest Superstore. I don’t look back.

“I’m here for a salad spinner,” I say to the automated help desk.

“Aisle 5.” The dispassionate voice is manufactured, almost alien, and it comforts me. I unfold the ticket from my pocket and walk to the row of salad spinners in various shades of green, pink, and blue.

“I’m here for the trip to DORWL,” I whisper, feeling crazy now. No response. I clear my throat and say it a little louder.

“I’m here for—”

“We don’t actually ride in the salad spinners. That would be impractical.” The Dorwlite looks at me through his heavy-lidded eyes. He is short and white; he has a wide grin. I am relieved Dorwlites smile.

“You humans are so obsessed with these names,” he says. “Dorwlites do not have names.”

“Don’t have names?” I shouldn’t be so surprised. There are few similarities between Dorwlites and humans. The only true similarity seems to be that we are both interested in one another, in other species, in expansion.

“What are names good for?” he asks. “Does your name mean anything?”

I am named Elizabeth after the Queen Elizabeth who existed many hundreds of years ago, because my mother enjoyed history, hated men, and liked the idea of her daughter being strong and smart like the Virgin Queen. “Not really,” I say, because I am nothing like Queen Elizabeth.

“There you go. If you want, you can call me Orange.”

“Orange?”

“It is my favorite human word,” he says with a smile before mouthing “orange” to himself again.

I realize for the first time that he is wearing a translation device around his neck. It looks like a slim, velvet choker. Two headphones stick into his batty ears.

“Will I get a translation device?” I ask, anxiety starting to creep up on me.

Orange frowns.

“Humans coming to Dorwl are expected to learn Dorwlish,” he says. I only know the basic Dorwlish I learned in school.

He sees my face and smiles. “I’m just joking.”

I am not sure. Before I can confirm, he opens the door at the back of the shop. There are rows upon rows of rides, the plastic kind children pay a quarter to ride. Some look like spaceships, others like farm animals, one is a train.

“This is how we get to Dorwl,” Orange says with pride. “Pick one.”

There is not a single ride that looks secure enough to rattle through space. I pick the spaceship anyway. Its plastic wings and crepe-paper flames make me feel more secure.

“Good choice,” he says, helping me up with a moist hand. I am cramped in the child-sized seat, my knees to my chin.

“You’re going to love Dorwl,” he says. There is a glint in his eye that I don’t quite trust, but I force myself to smile back. I came this far. I have given up on so many things. This is going to be different. I am no longer going to be afraid.

“Liftoff in five,” he says. The engines start.

I reach to secure my bag, but I have nothing with me. Dorwl insisted they would provide all necessities. I wish suddenly for my towels and my collection of drinking glasses. The only things I am
carrying are a family photo filled with people I don’t care about and the ripped sticker from my ceiling.

The spaceship starts to vibrate. I grip the plastic edges of the ship. I haven’t said goodbye to Earth, not really. When I was last at my favorite coffee shop, I didn’t soak up the atmosphere, the look and the smell, and say, “I’ll never be back here.” I wish I had.

The rumbling gets more intense. There is no turning back now. The plastic spaceship starts to morph into a large glass bubble. The seat underneath me widens and softens to a comfortable, leather armchair. We are not allowed chairs like this on Earth. They encourage laziness. I take this as a positive sign.

Orange smiles at me and waves. I give a weak smile back but don’t dare release my death grip on the leather armrests.

There is a sound—a small pop—and I am no longer in the storeroom of the Superstore. I am floating just above it in the glass bubble. People below me walk along the street in their matching black jumpsuits.

“Welcome, Human,” says a female voice.

I look around for speakers but can’t find any.

“You have made a good choice. Dorwl is a good place. You will like it.”

I look down at the familiar roads of my town, the parks I played in as a child, the large cement school.

“The flight to Dorwl will take approximately three glibs. Please remain seated for the entire flight. Food and drink will be provided when you feel hungry or thirsty. Goodbye and good luck.”

The announcement ends with a click. The bubble is so quiet I can hear my heart beat. The buildings below me are so small they look like children’s toys. The lake where I learned to swim—now used to collect radioactive waste—shines silver in the distance. I no longer see any people.

Maybe I never will again. My mouth is dry.

A bottle of water pops up on a small table beside me. I drink the water and breathe deeply. I know that I want to leave Earth and its people. I never felt at home among the tightly packed, fleshy humans. They do not like me and I do not like them.

My city vanishes into patches of green and grey, unidentifiable from the green and grey patches on either side of it. Even if I don’t like Earth, I know it. I’m leaving behind the relief I feel in knowing my place. I know nothing about Dorwl. I never thought anything through less in my life than this trip. I pass through the clouds and wonder if I am making a huge mistake.

“If you would like to know more about Dorwl, say ‘okay’ and a short video will play,” says the same female voice.

I jump and swallow. They know what I am thinking. Anxiety pricks my spine.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“It is perfectly normal to be nervous during Interplanetary Travel,” the voice continues. “Please remember there is nothing to be anxious about. Dorwl is better than Earth. Take these pills to feel calm.”

A silver tray with two pink pills appears beside my water.

The front screen of the bubble lights up with the title: DORWL FACTS AND FIGURES.

I take the pink pill between my fingers. I avoided drugs on Earth. One never knew for sure what one was getting.

“Dorwl is located only 2,000,000,000 planetary units away from Earth, making Dorwl the closest planet to Earth with intelligent life. Dorwl and Earth are each other’s closest interplanetary trading partners and are the founding members of GALAXCO, the only interplanetary trading federation.”

The movie continues to show happy Dorwlites and humans trading gifts.
I look away from the screen to Earth. Now, I can only differentiate between the landmasses and the water. I am at the top of Earth’s atmosphere.

Another pink pill appears on the tray. The Dorwlites are known for medication. I pick up one of the pills and, remembering my goal to be braver, take more risks, pop it into my mouth. It tastes like raspberry ice cream. I remember going to the fair with my father. I sat on his shoulders, dripping white raspberry ice cream onto his bald, black head. I had giggled then. Now, I smile and lean back in my chair.

“Dorwlites live in water and swim on the land. There are several major cities, the largest being B ...”

I watch as Earth becomes smaller. First, it is the size of a beach ball, then a baseball. Finally, it is the size of a small marble. I think of the salad spinner, which is still sitting on my kitchen counter. I imagine I’m inside it, spinning faster and faster, stuck to the side of the universe. My eyes are closed, and I can’t see anything. ♦
Treasure Island by Stephanie Flood
Filip woke up in a sweat. He could hear his mother talking to someone at the door and his first thought was the army. They must have come to get him. They had come in person, even though his waiver was valid for a few more months, and he should have been notified by mail about the next appointment. But one could not really count on such procedures, not in the chaos that ruled Serbia during the 1990s.

He scanned the room, wondering if he should hide. Could he fit in the closet, curl behind the curtain, or venture to that little niche outside the window? No, none of it would help if they found his bed still warm, his room still filled with the smell of sleep. Maybe it was best to keep quiet, give his mother a chance to convince them that he wasn’t around. After all, she was a persuasive talker.

The voices drew closer. His mother’s pitch went higher, her words faster, and he listened for the commander’s voice that would tell him to get ready to go to a training facility. When his mother paused, the voice Filip heard was soft and female. He exhaled with relief. It was unlikely that a woman would be recruiting for the army, and the conversation seemed to be about construction, refugees, a comic bookstore, presumably his comic bookstore, which didn’t make any sense.

But Filip was too exhausted to worry about it at the moment. It was nine on a Saturday morning, and he’d barely had four hours of sleep. His head was heavy from beer and music: a June night by the river when for a few hours he’d managed to forget how depressing the rest of the city was. And he was eager to forget about it for a little longer. He buried his head under the pillow and savored its softness, letting the voices outside lull him back to sleep.

A few hours later, when he showed up at the kitchen, his mother greeted him in her usual way. But while she fixed coffee at the stove, her movements seemed a bit off. Her steps were strangely slow, and the cups clanked too strongly as she placed them on saucers.

“Did you have a good time last night?” she asked him at the table.

“I did.”

“Glad to hear that. Looks like you slept well too.”

“Pretty well,” he said, taking a tiny sip of coffee. It was so hot that it nearly burnt his tongue. “Except that someone woke me up, around nine.”

“It was Mira Popović, from the second floor,” she said, sighing deeply and theatrically, the type of sigh she used to announce a complicated monologue. “You know she has those relatives from Bosnia. The refugees.”

Filip leaned back in the chair, prepared to listen. He had noticed the refugees in passing—a couple in their late forties and a girl about his age. Once, waiting for the elevator, he heard her talking to someone upstairs. Her delightful accent and cheerful laughter reminded him of his trips to Sarajevo in the 1980s, after the Winter Olympics, when it was the place to go in Yugoslavia and everyone in the city beamed as if they were in the center of the world.

“The usual refugee story,” his mother said. They had arrived over two years ago with a few things in their suitcases, hoping that their stay at the Popovićs’ would be short. But the war had stretched on, and Belgrade wasn’t full of
opportunities. So the father, a former engineer, worked part-time in a tile shop, the mother, a former teacher, made some money with her sewing skills, and the girl found short-term jobs through the student association. With their earnings they could not afford to rent a place in Belgrade. They had all but given up hoping for a solution until last week, when Mira’s friend in the building department suggested a possible construction in the penthouse area—such projects had recently become popular in the neighborhood.

“So she basically wanted me to sign a document to authorize them to build on this terrace,” his mother said.

“Build on this terrace?” Filip repeated. He could not imagine how that would look. Their own condominium was some sort of an addition from about twenty years ago—the elevator did not go all the way up to their floor, and their windows faced odd niches of the terrace at haphazard angles.

“Yes. All residents of the building need to agree before a permit can be issued. In exchange, they will make improvements to the front entrance and the façade. It is possible because their friends from the tile shop will help them with construction and materials.”

“But where will they build?” Filip asked, his coffee cup now empty, yet his mind still half asleep, not quite up to the task of sorting out the barrage of details thrown before him. He examined the terrace from the window, the narrow walkway that led to their door, and a small covered corner, where his mother had grown potted plants in the past. He currently used it as storage space for comic books that he could not fit in the store.

“They’ll build right here, where your boxes are. And around. They’ll invade a bit into the common hallway and use that dead space behind this wall,” she said, pointing behind her back.

“The dead space? I didn’t know there was one.”

“Oh yes, there is. When we moved in here someone mentioned it to your father, but he didn’t pursue it. You know how he was. Modest, unpretentious. He was grateful enough that we got what we got, didn’t push for more. If you gave him a finger, he didn’t ask for the whole hand. But people like your father have disappeared from the face of the earth. They had no choice but to leave and make room for the other kind.”

Filip sat quietly, nodding his head. He knew better than to interrupt his mother’s speeches, especially if they involved the familiar refrains about her prematurely deceased husband.

“I had sympathy for those refugees. I really did,” she continued. “But I’m beginning to change my mind. They’ve come here to stay, and for them to stay some of us need to go. Look no further than the Popovićs. Since they’ve taken in those refugees, their own daughter has moved out of the country.”

“You mean Nina?” Filip said. “I think she would have moved out no matter what. Everyone in high school knew about her relatives in Chicago, long before the refugees arrived.”

“People visit relatives and come back, but I don’t blame her for staying there, with that other girl camping in her room for years. And as if that wasn’t enough, now they’re asking for your boxes to go, for our hallway to shrink, and for all of us to squeeze so that they can spread out. But I told her no. You need space for your stuff, your business. This condominium came with hardly any storage in the basement, another issue your father never pursued. As a matter of fact, I should pull some strings and apply for a permit to expand into that dead space. Why shouldn’t we spread out for a change?”

Her grin suggested she believed this was a genius proposition, while in reality it could hardly have been worse. “I’m not
sure it’s a good idea,” Filip began, laboring to find the right words. “We have no money for the construction and what strings can you pull? The friend they have at the building department must have pulled some strings already. And many people have already supported them. Who will support you?”

Silence settled for a bit, punctuated only by the old-fashioned clock ticking on the wall of the dead space. His mother gazed out the window, not idly, but with focus and concentration, as if plotting floor plans in her mind, while, hard as he tried, he still couldn’t picture any. “We can give it more thought,” she said. “Consider a few possibilities. And it wouldn’t hurt if you organized those boxes a bit. They’re turning into quite an eyesore.”

A little later, walking around his inventory outside, he couldn’t agree more. When had he managed to accumulate so much stuff, he wondered, that monstrous heap covered by thin plastic, that tower of dirty white cartons with banana pictures on them? And what did he even have in these boxes? The best used comic books he’d acquired had gone straight to the store; these boxes held the issues that people had practically given away for free when they had sold him more valuable things. There were no Zagors here, no Dylan Dogs, no Alan Fords.

Perhaps he was never going to find shelf space for this material and would be better off sending it straight to recycling. Except that he wasn’t even sure how to do that. He remembered how years ago, in his elementary school, they had had paper collection actions. Children asked parents and neighbors to hold on to old newspapers then brought them to school on a designated day, when a recycling truck would come to collect them. But Filip was quite certain that such actions were no longer held in schools. The city now suffered from gas shortages, children stood in lines for milk. Most people stopped buying daily newspapers. Paper recycling was just one of many good things that had disappeared with the collapse of Yugoslavia.

As the strong midday sun burned on his face, Filip’s head hurt again, heaviness spread all the way down to his feet, and he barely managed to seat himself on a big box, which sagged under his weight. Even the air was heavy, humid, almost suffocating. He thought about not-so-distant summers, when his father was still alive, his parents had earned decent salaries at their jobs, and they had traveled to beaches and mountains. Then everything happened at once: the sudden breakdown of Yugoslavia, his father’s stroke, his own life defined by a shortage of money and fear of the draft. He was now stuck on this hot roof, between shaky boxes in the corner of the terrace and crumbling façades on the other side of the street. And his biggest hope was that the whirlwind of changes would stop, that the fateful knock on the door would not come.

The following Saturday at the break of dawn, Filip was returning home from a party. With hints of light emerging in the sky and the mild summer breeze in the air, his neighborhood looked better than usual. He loved the absence of crowds and abundance of shadows, the world revealed in crude silhouettes, open to interpretation. Yet the silhouette he saw when he stepped on the terrace startled him. He rarely encountered unknown people here, and never so early in the morning.

Filip paused for a moment. The other person stood by the rail, facing away from him, looking at rooftops that stretched to the horizon. She was in a long dress, which didn’t reveal much, but he noticed her waist and ankles, the figure of a girl he’d like to approach at a party.

“Good morning,” he said.
She shivered and turned around.
“Good morning.”
“Sorry if I scared you.”
“Oh, it’s okay. I mean, I am sorry. I didn’t want to intrude.”
“You’re not intruding. This is common terrace space.”
“Still,” she said. “It somehow feels private, or semi-private. After two years in this building, this is the first time I’ve come here.”

She was a few feet away and Filip couldn’t see her well. But he knew who she was. “You live with the Popovićs?” he asked.
“Yes, I’m Svetlana. Mira’s niece from Sarajevo.”
“I’m Filip.” He joined her by the rail. Hues of orange were now appearing under the distant clouds, and the soft light was beginning to reveal her face. Her eyes were big and round, her skin clear and smooth. She looked quite like her cousin Nina, the evasive beauty who’d broken many hearts in Belgrade before her move to the States. Filip had known of some of Nina’s impressive dates: guitarists and photographers, graduate students and protest leaders. Needless to say, he was just a year-younger, ordinary neighbor and never had a chance with her.

“So, you’re the guy who owns a comic bookstore?”
“One of the co-owners, yes.”
“I see you have a lot of stuff here,” she said, glancing at his boxes.
“Most of it is not worth much, actually. Though you never know. Sometimes people show up and ask for something unexpected. We’re still figuring out what makes sense to keep.”
“Sounds fun.” She smiled. Her teeth, densely packed in her narrow mouth, were uneven and irregular, very different from Nina’s. He found them appealing. Svetlana looked like a down-to-earth person, someone he could easily talk to, become friends with or even take on a date, if he got lucky.
“It’s a fun job,” he said. “Not a great income, of course, but it works for me. I’m sort of between majors at college and have a little extra time on my hands.”
“What do you study?”
“I’m officially enrolled in mechanical engineering, because of the army. I’d like to study economics, but I might not get a waiver with that. They keep changing the rules. So I’m taking some exams that might be transferable or not, probably wasting time in the process. But when I think of the alternative…”
“You definitely want to stay on the safe side,” she said, nodding with understanding.
“I mean, I had a friend who went to the army and got killed in Croatia,” Filip said, upset with himself for taking the conversation to this tragic place, yet unable to change the direction.
“So sorry to hear that,” she said. “Was that in 1991?”
“Yes. He was conscripted before the shooting started in Slavonia. Died in a mine explosion.” His voice always trembled when he talked about Miloš. They had bonded as kids—two boys with the best comic books in the park, who read the latest issues on a bench while the rest of the crowd chased a soccer ball down the field.
“Terrible,” she said. “Some of my friends from Sarajevo ended up like that. And I’ve heard some are fighting over there now, though who knows. I’m not even sure who’s still alive.”

Her words left him speechless, embarrassed. He imagined her old park, hundreds of parks between Belgrade and Sarajevo and beyond, so many guys like Miloš. Of all people, who was he to whine about the war to this girl, a Bosnian refugee? He’d so far lived through the Yugoslav disaster without having to move out of his childhood bedroom,
running a used comic bookstore by day and partying on most weekends. Compared to tragic and heroic war stories, his struggles were mild and peripheral. His role was the one of passive observer, a silent bystander.

On Monday afternoon, after his shift at the store, Filip ventured into opening the first box. He quickly confirmed what he had suspected all along: The only thing that looked uglier than the boxes themselves was their contents exposed in daylight, the yellowing covers of decaying comic books littering the terrace like the aftermath of a storm. He tried to spread them out and somehow organize by age, or theme, or quality. But the deeper he went, the worse it got. He realized he was incapable of dealing with it on his own, so a day later he brought along Petar, his old high school friend and the comic bookstore co-owner.

“‘Yes, quite hideous,’” Petar said. “Which is why we must clean up. So let’s see what we got here. Wow, *Lucky Luke*!”

“I know, that’s the best thing here,” Filip said. “But not in the very best shape.”

Filip flipped through the comic book, pointing at torn pages and crayon scribbles, an older brother comic book spoiled by a younger sibling.

“You’re right, it’s a hard sell,” Petar said. “Unless we pair it up with a few of its kind and sell them for a dinar, maybe.”

“Well, we have two here. Of course we can search further, if we know what we want to do with the rest of the pile.”

They rearranged the pile back and forth for some time. There weren’t any popular issues, they agreed, which was precisely why they were here. An issue of *Blek Stena* here, *Komandant Mark* there, *Politikin Zabavnik* which some people adored, though it was a magazine, not a comic book, and they still weren’t sure what to do with that.

“Remember that guy who once stopped by?” Petar said. “The guy who said he lived in New York. Spent $100 on *Alan Ford*."

“Sure,” Filip said. Customers with so much cash were a rarity in the store. Their visits were special occasions, happily recounted months later.

“So, didn’t he mention that in some used bookstores in New York, they have a box of free stuff? You know, things that no one would actually buy, but some would like to look at?”

Filip didn’t remember that part of the conversation. It probably occurred after it had become clear that the guy was a serious customer and Filip ran to the back of the store to pull out as many things as possible. But a box of free stuff? Sounded so generous and genius, nearly revolutionary.

“Wow, that would be something. Yes, let’s give it a go.”

As they debated what to put in the first free box, Filip’s mother showed up and they presented her the plan. She shook her head in disapproval.

“This is not New York,” she said. “I’ve never heard of stores giving away stuff in Belgrade. Except, maybe at the farmer’s market, if you’re selling tomatoes that have begun to rot. But these aren’t rotten tomatoes.”

“Honestly, in terms of the selling price, they aren’t far from that,” Petar said. “And we have to somehow speed things up. Because this situation should not drag on for too long. No one loves these comics more than me, but we don’t want to risk our lives over them.”

“Risk your lives?” his mother said, her eyebrows arched to match the exaggerated tone of her voice.

Filip didn’t say a word but wondered what Petar had on his mind.

“Yes,” Petar declared. “I mean, if you keep fighting over that addition, who knows what your neighbors might do. If that woman knows some people at the
building department, she might know some people at the army. What if she tells them to look at our store, our waivers, our engineering studies?"

“I doubt they can find anything wrong with your studies,” his mother said. “Don’t they look just fine on the paper?”

Filip held onto the rail, recalling the conversation with Svetlana, his own words playing impossibly loudly in his mind. Was he the stupidest guy in Belgrade? He never even considered her reasons for showing up on the terrace, her true motivation. In the town where everyone was second-guessing everything, he was as transparent as a cellophane wrap on one of those special issues that hadn’t shown up in stores in years. Svetlana hadn’t come to the terrace to make friends, to make him feel good about the store or bad about the war. She had come to extract information.

“We look borderline decent on paper,” Petar said. “But if they really want to screw us, they’ll find something to pick on. Do you want us to end up in Bosnia?”

Filip looked behind his friend, into the city, trying to focus his frustration on the general situation and divert it from his own idiocy. He tried not to think of what Petar might do if he found out about the conversation with Svetlana. While he stood in grave silence, his mother cleared her throat.

“I hear no one’s going to Bosnia these days,” she said.

“Some people do,” Petar said. “Maybe some of those special volunteer units,” she said, lowering her voice as if a bird might be eavesdropping from a nearby maple tree. “But you’re not going to volunteer.”

Yes, that was a great point, Filip realized in relief. He thought of everything he’d recently heard on the matter—a cousin had been sent to the barracks in western Serbia, a friend was currently serving just outside of Belgrade.

A customer mentioned patrolling the border, but never crossing it. Even if the army showed up tomorrow, he wouldn’t go to the frontlines.

“Okay, maybe they haven’t sent regular conscripts to Bosnia lately,” Petar said. “But that can change quickly, in these crazy times. Remember, when Miloš left, no one was too worried. No one was even capable of imagining anything close to what happened.”

Filip remembered Miloš’s departure way too well. His father had hugged Miloš goodbye, right here, on the terrace, and given him a shot of homemade rakija. They made a deal to meet for another drink soon. Filip was also invited to the company of grown-up men; rakija burned his throat, but the taste was strangely satisfying. And then, within months, both his friend and his father had vanished.

In a cold sweat, Filip tried not to think of what would come next, but the image still came to his mind. His mother alone on this terrace, dressed again in black from head to toe, neighbors lining up to offer condolences. But the Popovićs wouldn’t be there. Because how could they offer condolences if they turned him in? Or maybe they could still pretend that it was in the hands of some higher power, that it had nothing to do with them?

After a few days, it had become clear that the free box was a great idea. People browsed through it in amusement, talked about it on the way out of the store, came back to check it again. But it was also obvious that some restrictions were needed: one free issue per person a day, two free issues with a purchase. Or maybe three would be better, Filip wondered, as he rearranged boxes on the terrace on Sunday afternoon, looking for comic books to take to the store the following morning. The sun was sinking in front of him, the heat was subsiding, and he felt unusually...
relaxed, almost satisfied.

“Good evening,” he heard a woman behind his back. “I hope I’m not interrupting you.”

“No,” Filip said, startled. The joy was gone the moment he recognized the voice. He wished he could hide behind his inventory, or better yet disappear. But that sadly wasn’t an option. So he started turning around in slow motion, doing his best to move as calmly as possible, to shake off the pangs of anxiety.

“Great,” she said. “I really wouldn’t like to be in your way. You must have so much going on with your store and your studies.”

Filip nodded his head, trying to cover up his confusion. He couldn’t imagine where she might be heading with this odd irony.

“And it’s not easy for young people to stay motivated these days, given the circumstances in the country. So when I see a young man working hard like you, I’m all for supporting that,” she added, smiling.

“Thank you,” he uttered, examining her appearance for hints of impending disaster but not finding any. Her linen shirt looked crisp and soft, and the gemstones on her earrings sparkled in the evening sun. If one were to look at all the middle-aged women in the building and guess whose niece was the most beautiful, only a blind man would not choose Mira Popović.

“Now, I suppose you heard from your mother about our conversation the other day?”

“I did.”

“So you know the situation,” she said, pausing for emphasis. “You see, when I came to talk to her, I didn’t know about your comic book business. It was news to me. Good news, on one hand, because, as I said, it’s always nice to see young people working. But also somewhat unfortunate news, because it seemed to interfere with this addition we had in mind. I was really worried about it for a while. Then my husband came up with an idea. If you agree, of course.”

No, this didn’t sound like a threat, Filip thought, still bewildered. But what was it then? People of her age had rarely talked to him in this formal, business-like way. He had rarely been asked to approve, or potentially reject, a proposal of any major significance.

“I also didn’t know about your basement storage issue,” she continued. “I understand you have a really small space. While we have a large unit, possibly the biggest in the building. And we aren’t using it much. So my husband suggested that we offer you the use of our space.”

“Yes, for as long as you need it,” she said. “Of course, it’s smaller than this space here, but there are some nice shelves. Maybe you can go downstairs and take a look? Number 8. I brought you a key.”

“Sure,” he said, extending his hand. That was another thing he rarely received from others: a key. And though it opened only a basement space, not some exotic, mysterious vault, Filip felt a hint of excitement, as if there existed a tiny possibility of some surprising discovery.

His mother showed up after Mira left. She must have heard pieces of the conversation from the kitchen, yet he repeated every detail to her.

“Sounds quite reasonable,” she said, after he mentioned the key. “But one always needs to be careful with such arrangements. Maybe we should consult someone with more expertise. Perhaps a lawyer.”

“A lawyer?”

“I didn’t mean some famous, high-end lawyer. I meant my cousin Miroslav. Or perhaps my friend Jadranka.”

“Why would that be necessary?”

“Just in case,” she said. “You see, no one guarantees you that the Popovićs
won't change their mind. Once they get their construction permit, it cannot be revoked, while they can kick you out of their basement at any time. Maybe you can sign a contract. Protect yourself from some risks.”

Of course, Filip saw her point. On one hand, her arguments were perfectly logical. But there was something amiss about them, something he couldn’t quite define yet.

“Mom, that sounds ridiculous,” he said. “I mean, risks? There are so many risks around us these days that thinking of them is making us crazy. Yes, there would be a risk they’d kick me out of the basement, but there’s also a risk they’d turn me into the army. When she showed up today, I actually thought that some commander was hiding behind her, on the other side of the wall. But all that was hiding was a key in her pocket.”

His mother looked thoughtful and hesitant, as if she was preparing for a rebuttal, but he wouldn’t let her use this pause to her advantage.

“Remember, we are no longer in the 1980s,” he continued. “This is 1994 and the whole country has been flooded by shit. We’re all stuck in it. Some are stuck knee-deep, others neck-deep. And we can’t do much about it, except maybe move a few steps up, to a little shallower region, or help someone get there. That’s actually the very best we can do right now. We can make a difference for those people.”

Filip could imagine them settling here, bringing furniture, pots and pans. He could hear Svetlana laughing with him by the rail on some early morning or a late evening. He felt some unusual enthusiasm, some inexplicable lightness growing in his body, as if his lungs were filling up with helium, and it was only his mother’s cautious look that kept him grounded.

“We have little to lose and a lot to gain,” he said. “We can lose some space on this terrace and get some new neighbors. Neighbors with various useful skills. That Bosnian woman, for instance, would sure be happy to make you some new outfits.”

Words rushed out of his mouth like never before. He felt that he could go on talking forever. Whatever argument his mother brought up now, he could address.

“I heard she’s not a very good seamstress,” she said. “Ljiljana, from the third floor, told me that she had ruined a prom dress for her daughter.”

“But you don’t need a fancy prom dress. You need simple things, like removing ruffles from that shirt you mentioned the other day, or adjusting buttons on some old skirt. She could hardly ruin that. And even if she really can’t sew, I bet she can cook. Remember those Bosnian pies from Baščaršija? Burek, sirnica, zeljanica, krompiruša …”

He could almost smell those pies. He thought of a winter day in the late 1980s, on his last visit to Sarajevo with his parents. Everything had been white—the houses, the trees, the mountain peaks in the distance. Icicles hung on low roofs above his head, the pavement slipped under his feet. And warmth had been coming out of bakeries and restaurants—the savory, mouth-watering warmth, which he could now feel arriving from that dead space behind his back, as the night was settling over Belgrade and street lamps were lighting up before his eyes. ♦
nonfiction by Allison Darcy

In Israel, the campsites are huge and sprawling, and, because of their army training, everyone is equipped to go camping any time they wish, which they do—not like at home, where it takes planning, propane stoves, connections for small indoor heaters. The fire pits hold yesterday’s ashes, the damp pallet wood jumped on and broken. The picnic tables are long and sticky with wine and sit under trees that are so short and sprawling my head reaches the leaves. There are tents, but few of them, and most of the sleeping bags are out where the Eastern Hemisphere sky will be visible through the branches, as will the sun in the morning, too bright and too early. We’re used to it, now, and while the sorority girls, who swear after three months that they make the best tahini sauce in the entire country, run back to the bus to get the ingredients, two of the boys sit with me, claiming the best spots to sleep in while showing me their knives.

Both of them are drinkers and stoners who, in their private moments with me, say things that make me want to be better. I respected both of them until they tried to use me as a replacement for the girls back home waiting patiently, as the men I know generally do. They let me test the sharpness of the blades on my fingertips, competing somehow, and show me how to carve my favorite words into wood. We talk about how we would fare if this were a horror movie, some American campfire fantasy. Allison would die first, one of them says. She’d ask the killer to see his weapon. I wonder what in my past weeks of trying to stay under control had given my penchant for all things destructive away. Later, one of them—it doesn’t matter which—and I will lie on the concrete and ask each other about the constellations, and I will think about how I prefer to look at the knives.

Calloused children run naked next to me, holding supply packs I couldn’t carry myself, and I hide from everyone while I can. Israel had made me an introvert. I spent the winter seeing everyone I didn’t care about from high school, and now overseas, I take solo vacations, spread mats on my apartment floor to make a private gym, and request not to do group projects. My friends are good, exceedingly so, and I tried to do what I have always done when I lose control of everything: invite them over to drink and yell and pile up on my bed. But when the music was through and the vodka had spilled and even the stray cats stopped crying, I was just me again. They went to climb buildings. I just wanted to sleep.

The hike earlier today was through the North, through the waterfalls, not a long trek through the desert that left me feeling changed and strong. Hiking came easy for us now and left time and breath to talk about the things we generally didn’t, unlike with the Israelis, who avoided our English but rolled their eyes at our stunted Hebrew, our slow walking, and our distaste for things like instant coffee, plug-in stovetops, and metal detectors at the front of every shopping mall.

We finished in the afternoon with time to spare and our energy high, but somewhere my body had grown accustomed to layers of sandstorm air and sweaty hair up—the ways I wouldn’t be at home. And so now, while some leave to shower, I sit by the outlets to charge my phone and speak with a man who has just hurt me again and who I have forgiven
without question. Take pictures for me, he tells me, and so I keep an eye on the other campsites and do, because I do what he says, and because I love him deeply. My heart breaks as I stay alone and pose. Partially, this is why I do it. I have learned what to expect from him. I know now it will be easier. Interpreting his behavior as part of his pain isn’t very difficult.

I don’t welcome Shabbat, don’t bless the bread. Nobody listens when I do. In the Holy Land, I am the only one I know who cares about God. I watch the sky turn black and pray over my camera and my misplaced trust. I sanctify my legs that carry me and my new ability to be alone. And when I get tired of the time difference and it gets too cold to stay still, I wander back out to find my friends grappling on the grass.

They invite me in immediately. They shout out who wants to match with me next. They have leaves in their wet hair and throw each other to the ground, and I am amazed at how nobody assumes I am fragile. Somewhere I lose my shoes, and I don’t lose every round, and somewhere I feel grateful I haven’t showered and fine about missing my favorite prayers.

Over a small creek is a Druze family with their big eyes and their dozen cousins and they are in a circle with a CD player that keeps skipping. The religious Jews nearby look on with disdain. The Druze dance with their feet flexed and their American t-shirts and suddenly we are running over and clapping. I watch as everyone imitates them, wondering if it is offensive. And then I am there too. We join their circle all on one half and then all scattered. I feel drunk and holy. I am spinning then I am in the center and a teenager is pointing to her hips until I imitate them, and none of them, no one in the whole family, seems to question us. Yes, they laugh at us, but they give us their drinks and their warmth and they don’t stop. We are all there: the drunks, the cheaters, the partiers, the quiet girl with the curious face and the laugh that I admire, the politicians, the scientists, and my friends, all out of breath from dancing. We stand in the circle and we don’t feel like outsiders and I hope that they don’t either, the Druze from the Haifa hilltops that we know nothing about. I dance. I don’t think about anyone in the West or the things I can’t do or the strength I don’t have; I dance. I watch the girl’s hips and I move my own. I stand a few feet away and look at her and I look at where I am and I am okay. ♦
The Scarecrow Dreams of Fire by Terry Wright
Once, for a little chump
change, I succumbed to boy-man’s thigh

& where he swelled, I knelt down
in a dress, mistaken, hard rain popping

the tin roof of the coop.
& when the coop became my figment (& not his)

inside its secrets, I roosted there
with each girl (I loved) winter nights, we slept

inside the same hushed beds of hay.
& when boy-man caught wind, I became a chimera

at fourteen, outran the field
& the open ended barn. Dire-wolfed, his tongue

at every knothole, revolving rage at gunpoint,
boy-man knew where to peep, his eyes lit

shiny coins. (& here’s his mistake) he wagered
his shank as if that was all

we wanted, as if he could make us turn—
as if he could ever rain our own soft fire inside us.
How to Cope After a Tragedy

poetry by Sara Moore Wagner

A long time ago, I built a stick house
by the railroad tracks in the backyard
of my childhood,
covered myself with leaves and the earth
was as small as my bony wrist.
I was escaping
like our father always
has, to the woods.
Later, the sheeted cold,
the sky metallic
as a gun barrel and not one thing
was natural or small, not one thing.
This is the secret: buried
under brush, osage oranges piled
like landmines, no one came
to find me. The mind of a parent
can keep you in your bed, tucked even
when you are lying
under foliage, heavy as your own
body. I don’t want you to be afraid to walk
shoeless into the wide field, but look
at how the ground splits beneath us
like a cantaloupe rind dropped,
these seeds—imagine
safety while the girl sleeps
alone, the buzzing of mosquitoes,
the rattle of passing. You’ll know
what the world looks like, how
sometimes nothing is watching you
slip away.
MASKara by Tempus Serene
Ancil tossed a pair of rubber gumboots into the skiff, along with a rifle, fishing gear, a tackle box, and a cooler streaked with oil. Inside the cooler was a thermos of coffee, two egg salad sandwiches, and a canister of live shrimp from the bait-vending machine at Curkinpok Pier.

Behind him Cora stood shivering in the cool morning mist. She was fourteen. Her hair was short, a boyish cut, making her face look vulnerable. She stared at the mangrove trees crouched in the water like women with their dresses up. Ancil knew how he must appear to her—a forty-seven-year-old stranger with strange ways and a backward, hillbilly manner. Probably expected him to get up to what uncles sometimes got up to when alone with young, pretty nieces.

“Get in the boat,” he said. He sounded gruffer than he’d intended.

She shambled in all fumbly-legged and coltish. No swamp-balance under her, he thought. She slipped on the strakes, and the boat responded to her weight like a prehistoric amphibian unused to riders. She reached for the gunwale and nearly tumbled head first into the muck.

“Bend low,” he said. “At the knees. Don’t ride like a scarecrow.”

They shoved off through the root system, the outboard motor puttering while the seagrass brushed the bottom of the hull like a lover prolonging a goodbye.

“Your mom says I should talk to you.”

The boat’s gray chop slithered away behind them.

“I don’t give a shit what my mom wants,” she said. She made a gesture like flicking a cigarette into the water.

Mangrove branches arched overhead, a tunnel of shade strung with monstrous beards of Spanish moss, making Ancil think of Billy. He wished Billy were here. Billy knew how to talk to people. Billy the oddity. Overeducated. A transplant who’d appeared ten years ago in the glades as if by magic, knowing the Latinate names of fauna and flora, come to monitor wood stork populations and never left. Now on nights they drank together, Billy recited Romantic poets as Scriabin sonatas played on a hand-cranked gramophone. Ancil could have used Billy’s help about now, his wondrous way with words. Instead, they continued in silence.

Beneath a black mangrove gilded with dew, a spoonbill, with its ridiculous flat beak, seemed to purse in dissatisfaction. It eyed them through the foliage, wheeling its head on its long neck as they passed. Ancil slid the Winchester bolt-action .22 from its quilted sleeve and took aim. He stayed his breath. Despite the Evinrude’s rumble and the sway of the boat, the sights fell into line.

“What are you doing?” The girl put her body in front of the gun.

Ancil dropped the barrel. “Don’t you ever do that.”

“What did that bird ever do to you?”

“I wasn’t going to shoot the damn thing. They’re protected.” He returned the rifle to its sleeve.

“But why’d you point at it?”

“Sometimes you have to think about what it’s like to kill a thing. Ever do that? Think about the damage you might do?”

“No, you psycho.”

He tried talking more evenly. “That’s what you’re doing. You’re pointing a gun at your mother’s heart. Maybe you haven’t fired, but your finger’s on the trigger. Your mother doesn’t see why you gotta—”
“Be attracted to girls? Is that why I’m out here?”
“Your mom thought if you got away for a bit.”
“Is this some kind of swamp-people intervention? God, I cannot believe how backward you are. Half my class is, like, bi—.”
“Bye?” he said, waving as if departing.
“No, like bisexual,” she said, drawing out the word. “Who even cares? Are you trying to scare me straight?” She let out a short bray, a single Ha!, but her delicate shoulders kept on quivering beneath the t-shirt.
He pointed at the breasthook of the boat. “You didn’t know it got cold, I bet. Jacket’s under there.”
She resisted for all of three seconds then turned and pulled out his buffalo-plaid. Didn’t put her arms through the sleeves, just cinched the thing together with both hands so her slender, pale neck had an avian aspect, a small bird trapped inside the wrong plumage.
“Is that why I had to come out on the boat? Mom afraid I’d go lez-out with some skank at the local watering hole?”
“Something like that. Plus, I got something you need to see.”
He didn’t elaborate, and she didn’t ask him to.

Last week Elizabeth had called after sixteen years incommunicado. She was sending Cora on a plane from Little Rock until she got over this “teen rebellion thing.” Ancil had tried to right the way Elizabeth’s voice sounded with the way he remembered her. She sounded like a grown-ass woman now. She’d gone away to Miami U on what Pap called a pinko scholarship and never come back. Not that Ancil blamed her. After all the hot, ugly nights. Tobacco breath. The sweat-slick chest and sneaky shadows wheezing like a nightmare.

“Show her what you do,” Elizabeth said over the phone.
“I work part-time at a call center. You wouldn’t know that, I guess.”
“I mean what you really do. You still do it, I assume.”
“Was it ‘cause I couldn’t protect you? You leavin’?”
Her sigh sounded like wind in a freshly scythed field. “I don’t want to talk about that.”
He still dreamed of ways he might have stopped Pap—violent and smart ways.
“The butch-dyke girl gets put to the side,” she went on. “I won’t have Cora looking at the world from the outside in. I did that. No one should go through that. She needs taught. She needs taught what really happens to monsters and freaks.”

He brought the boat to a bend half a mile from the delta. The harsh smell of brine cut through the trees. He switched to the trolling motor and found an equilibrium with the current. Shafts of sun terminated in brilliant swatches of light that rippled on the surface, spots on a jaguar’s skin. Ancil loaded a live shrimp onto a hook and offered the pole.
Cora gave him the response he expected: middle finger.
He cast and waited.
She had no phone (Elizabeth had seen to that). Without internet or much electricity at the house, she’d paced all night. Less than twenty hours in the glades and she was boiling over. Her heel bounced like a tamper.
“You’re scaring the fish,” he said. He pulled up a snapper, unhooked it, and dropped it into a five-gallon bucket.
“I hope you’re planning on eating that,” she said.
“I am.”
“Or else it’d be, like, unethical.”
“I don’t kill what I don’t have to.”
“No? Just strangle the gay out of ’em. Catch and release.”
That took him by surprise. He laughed.
“You think it’s funny?”
“Not everything’s about you.” His eyes never stopped scanning the tree line. He opened his egg salad sandwich and offered her half.
She offered him another trusty middle-finger salute and stood. “I’ll have you know that I, Cora Beatrix Thomas, do actually love a girl. Gasp! Big shock to the big fucking world. I proclaim it here in this butthole of America, in this smelly, mosquito-filled swamp that I do love Abby—”
He moved quickly. Whipped the .22 from the sleeve and lowered himself off the thwart so his shin jammed against the hull. Elbow on knee, he cradled the forestock and took aim. The muzzle emitted a hard crack that rose into the canopy.
“God! Why did you do that? Did you kill one of those stupid birds?”
He torqued the trolling motor toward the shore. She almost fell over.
“What are you doing?” she raged, then fell silent. Her breathing changed. She’d seen what he shot.

It lay face down in the shallows, its hairy arm draped across one of the thick-knuckled mangrove roots. Its fallen body, like that of a large man, had sprawled unceremoniously between solid ground and brilliant green muck. Its face was hidden among fronds of bracken.
The words came out of her like air from a punctured tire. “What is that?”
He stepped out of the boat into the shallows. “Myakka ape.”
“It stinks sooooooo bad.”
The bullet had passed through its neck, leaving a dark spurt of blood to run down its gray-brown fur. Kidney-dark droplets dribbled into the water and were gobbled up by minnows. He slid his arms beneath the ape, still warm.
“Help me,” he said.
“Get that thing away from me.”
“It’s not going to hurt you.”
“It looks like a guy in a costume. Are you sure it’s not a guy in a costume? It’s so … big. What is it?”
“I told you, it’s a myakka ape.” He hefted its stomach onto his shoulder and flipped it over the gunwale. Its arms flopped over its head. Its naked hands flung water.
Cora scrambled away. The coat fell from her shoulders, and she landed on her ass. “Its face.”
“Don’t you faint on me.” He climbed back in, soaked, and cursed himself for forgetting his waders.
“It’s a person. I swear to God you killed a person.”
“Stop,” he said. He lowered himself to her level. “First off, it’s dead. Nothin’ to worry about.”
He poked its broad chest and felt the thickly corded muscle like a gorilla’s. Its long legs were stretched across the back thwart. Its head lay at Cora’s feet, the stench stronger than ever. The swamp water hadn’t done it any favors. The face Ancil examined last. He hated their faces. She was right about that. They did look human. Or almost. Like a Darwinian smoking gun. It was a man’s face wreathed by hair that overtook the cheeks and encroached about the forehead. Its brown eyes were still open, turned skyward, its slack mouth full of thick, blunt teeth. It looked stunned by the sun and by the flanking leaden clouds overhead.
“I’ve never—”
“Not many people have.”
“Is it a—”
“Don’t say none of those other names.”
“Why?”
“The wrong name makes a thing what it ain’t. Just ’cause you have an idea and

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you attach a name to it, don’t make it so.” He could see a thousand more questions rolling around in her head, so he added, “Government pays me a subsidy.”

Then he did what Elizabeth asked. He recited the speech she’d written out: “This is what happens. This is what happens in the real world to unnatural things.” He’d practiced this part in the mirror like a stage actor, getting the grim expression just right. “They get themselves gunned down. Expelled from the natural order. You understand?”

She looked as if she might crumple, might even accept the broader message being implied.

Then a spout of blood geysered into the air. Gobs of viscera—dazzling rubies in a sunbeam—rose in a state of near suspension. They fell and splattered across the cooler, the boat, his boots, Cora’s legs.

Her scream sounded remote.

He looked down and saw the ape clawing at its wound and spitting blood. Suddenly everything in the boat was alive. The girl thrashing, the ape rolling, the fish flopping. The boat rolled, and Ancil nearly fell out. He removed his hunting knife from its sheath and lowered the blade to the ape’s throat. Before he could act, Cora cracked a small hand across his face. He stumbled backward, more out of shock than from the force of it.

“You stay away. Just stay the fuck away.” She was standing with the sun at her back, angelic and fierce, the myakka ape gasping at her feet.

She has her swamp legs now, he thought.

Her jaw flexed. She lowered herself to the ape and pressed the coat against its wound.

“They bite,” he said. “They’re dangerous.” But he didn’t stop her.

“You missed its airway. It’s not an artery.”

The ape’s eyes rolled in its sockets. It arched its back and released a howl that sank into the bristling quagmire. The swamp responded in a thousand hair-raising indications.

“There are others,” Ancil said. He scanned for movement.

Cascading florae, palmettos, and vining cat’s claw layered the middle distance like a Chinese screen, camouflage for alligators and fiddler crabs. He couldn’t see more than a few feet beyond the water’s perimeter but he heard the sounds of animals’ mucky meanderings. A breeze so thick it felt like breath. Amid the green were the paperbark trees, slender and pale. An invasive species, the paperbarks had been introduced to try and dry up the swamp, more proof of the government’s ineffectuality and half-assedness here in the wild. He’d sighted many a target silhouetted against their backdrop but saw nothing now.

“We have to go.” He chambered a new round and pointed the gun at the myakka ape’s heart.

She shoved at the barrel. The animal bit at her shin without conviction.

“If you shoot it, I swear to God I’ll kill myself.”

“It’s my duty,” he said.

“I’ll tell Mom you molested me.”

That stopped him. His heart slugged against his sternum. If Cora said those words, Elizabeth would believe. She’d realize it had been a horrible mistake sending Cora. The spectre of it hung too low. Pap hadn’t been picky when it came to the two of them, but he’d favored Elizabeth. It would all come back.

“Help me,” Cora said. Her voice sounded more like her mother’s now. Like a grown-ass woman. His mind spoke the need to stitch the world back together, from before, when he was so very little and it tore open. He wanted more than anything to be forgiven for being a boy,
weak-limbed and powerless, when the worst of it had occurred. It’s why he’d agreed to do this in the first place, in hopes of reuniting. But he’d fudged that up with a botched killshot. Now, maybe helping Cora was the best he could hope for.

“Help me,” she repeated.

He placed a knee over the ape’s arm and straddled its chest. He thought for only a second of lowering his full weight onto it and suffocating it. Instead, he bound its hands with the fish stringer and held the thing’s forehead to keep it from biting.

She showed him how much pressure to apply to its neck. “Direct me,” she said. She lifted the trolling motor, released the catch on the Evinrude, and dropped its blade. She’d been paying attention.

It was herky-jerky and slow, but they puttered home. The morning turned hot. The mist burned away. All the world was clear, the light hard as gold, and the viscous black shade of palms and mangroves and reeds stretched out against the water.

They hauled the thing up on a makeshift gurney, a busted wheelbarrow fitted with a half-sheet of plywood. He’d only ever used it to tote corpses. They rolled the wheezing ape—eyes shut, mouth still slack—up the mud-strewn embankment where Ancil’s double-wide awaited. Cut off from the grid, there was only electric from a few solar panels that powered a bulb in the bathroom. Inside, Cora tore open the linen cupboard and retrieved his homemade first aid kit stocked with antivenom, splints, and poultices. She washed a hooked suture needle in water from the rain cistern then sterilized it with rubbing alcohol, attending to the ape like a surgeon while Ancil watched. He clearly didn’t know the child, her history or her depths.

He held out hope the ape would expire during triage, but it didn’t.

When she’d finished, she pulled his grandmother’s quilt from his bed and dragged it into an old beagle kennel in the back room. They put the ape inside.

“You better hope it doesn’t die,” she said. She stormed out the back.

He followed her like a chastened child. He could see she expected answers, so he pointed out the crematory, which was little more than an outdoor woodburner fitted with the iron door of an antique boiler.

“That’s where you do it?” she said.

“Regulations stipulate. Document and burn.”

“And that’s what you would have done with it?”

“It’s what I’m going to do. Don’t think for a second I’m keeping that thing as a pet.”

She peeked through the open doorway. The ape breathed in shallow gulps. Here was a cryptozoological bombshell, proof perhaps of one of the world’s greatest conspiracies or evolutionary games of hide-and-seek. She didn’t bring this up.

Instead, she pulled the door closed as if to give it privacy. Then began to weep.

“Stop that,” he said.

“It’s so terrible. Someone pays you to do that?”

“Govr’ment,” he said in that clipped way he had when anyone—Billy especially—hit him with a hard question.

“For how long?”

“Your grandpa used to do it. All of us lived out here, including your mom. But that money’s not enough to live on anymore. They haven’t raised the stipend since ’82. Twice a week I drive out to the loop road and catch Tamiami to Ochopee so I can cold call retirees with special discounts on Key West cruises.”

Her cold-eyed silence implied she didn’t empathize. “I’ll tell everybody. If you kill it, I’ll tell everybody it exists.”
“Nobody’ll believe you. Nobody \textit{wants} to believe.”

The flush in her cheeks made her look like Elizabeth the last time he’d seen her, before she hopped a Greyhound and escaped.

“Can’t you just release it? Back into the wild?”

“It’s more dangerous now. They get a whiff. Of people. Of anything civilized. They get curious.”

“About what?”

“What it’s like, I guess. To live like us. To live \textit{among} us.”

A metallic \textit{ping} came from within.

Inside, they found the myakka ape awake and panicked, plucking at the wire cage. It had chewed its wrists free from the rope and lay on its side, its face pressed into the bars, teeth nibbling the latch. The white bandage around its neck gave it the ridiculous appearance of a werewolf clergymen in a B-rated horror movie.

“I think it’s going to live,” she whispered.

The myakka ape released a trilling moan, like a child gibbering a lullaby learned at the breast. Ancil waited for the ape to descend into that odd chuffing, that wild canticle of ferocity he heard sometimes at night raging through the tangle of swamp in the mating season. But it just continued in a low singsong.

“He’s so much like us,” she said.

The ape began to cry, pounding harder on the cage. The cry blossomed into a panic that caused its body to quiver and seize.

“Help it,” Cora said.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Calm it down!” she shouted over the thumping of the cage.

And maybe because he didn’t know what else to do—or because, on the ride back, without admitting it, he’d actually begun to consider alternatives to killing it—Ancil complied. He started the diesel generator, switched on the television and VHS player, and dragged them to the back room where he pointed the screen at the ape.

It stopped its kicking, momentarily mesmerized by the flitting images.

Ancil left the girl and the animal like that, watching old episodes of \textit{The Beverly Hillbillies}, the box set a gag gift from Billy for his birthday that he sometimes watched anyway because there was nothing else. Then he retreated to the tattered La-Z-Boy in the front room to think.

Without meaning to, he dozed off.

He awoke to a riotous eruption of canned laughter. \textit{The Beverly Hillbillies’} laugh track sounded unnatural and haunting like ghosts escaping a crypt. In the back room, the ape and the girl were both asleep. He should do it now. Just put the gun to the thing’s head and poke a bullet through its skull. The room had already gone redolent with its stench, a mixture of rotten eggs and dung. He retrieved the Winchester.

After Pap finally pitched forward one day from the boat into the mire (felled by a common heart attack), Ancil sometimes thought the world might react favorably to the myakka apes. He, Ancil, was not the ugly one. He was not a monster. \textit{Monsters} were monsters. The world might even thank him. But inevitably he always second-guessed this optimism. If anything, people seemed \textit{less} inclined to truth than ever.

It was the same reason he’d never contacted whatever agency continued to pay him. He feared they might cut his services. He’d been forgotten and abandoned by his government, but at least he still received payment. Best not to rock the boat and make anyone reevaluate. He sometimes wondered how he was codified, what it said in some accounting column in whatever secret government ledger where his job and pay grade must appear. How did they sum
him up and list him? Did anyone ever think of him at all?

Holding the gun, he watched the animal. It stirred and muttered like a human disturbed during sleep. Then a hard knock on the front door nearly caused Ancil to send a stray bullet into the wall.

Billy Shy stood in the grass before the trailer’s front door. He was a big man, six-three, with tumbling blond hair that fell around his sledge-swinger’s shoulders and incongruous red beard. Billy stepped in and kissed Ancil on the mouth. Ancil didn’t shy away but didn’t return the affection. “Not now. The kid is here.”


Ancil didn’t laugh. Billy’s jokes were usually lost on him. “Just go.”

Billy feinted playfully and tiptoed toward the back room. “She back here?”

“Stop it.” Ancil grabbed for Billy’s shoulder, but Billy shook him off. He stopped half-in, half-out of the doorway of the back room.

“What kind of crazy shit is going on in here?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Who are you?” Cora said, sitting up. She rubbed her eyes.

“Billy Shy. Shy Billy to my friends.” Billy bowed like a gentleman doffing a nonexistent cap. It was the same self-effacing charm that had drawn Ancil to him when, a year after Billy arrived, they went hunting Osceola turkeys and pintail ducks. The first time they’d made love, Billy had been showing Ancil where best to find muscadine grapes and beautyberry in the undergrowth. Ancil had just grabbed him by the arm and kissed him. To his relief, Billy hadn’t broken his jaw with a swift haymaker to the head.

“Is that what I think it is?” Billy said. “Leave it be.”

“Bigfoot?”

“It ain’t bigfoot. Don’t say those names.”

“Skunk ape?” Billy seemed to be accepting it too easily.

“Tell him he’s not allowed to kill it,” said Cora. “Tell him he can’t.”

“You were going to kill it?”

“I’ve killed one hundred and seventeen of those things. This one ain’t special. I been tracking it for weeks. I’d have killed it three days ago, but Cora’s mom called me with her stupid plan. I was supposed to show it to the girl. To make her understand.”

In the cramped kennel, the ape sat up and eyed him from beneath its heavy brow. It scratched at its wound.

“Ah, hell,” Ancil said. “I’m ending this now.” He poked the gun through the bars and pressed the barrel to its forehead. The ape didn’t move.

“Don’t,” whispered Billy. He didn’t grab for the gun.

“Please,” Cora said. She was sobbing again.

“I got no choice.”

“That’s stupid,” she screamed. “That’s the stupidest thing I ever heard. You have a choice. You always, always, always have a choice.” And she was a girl again, a magic creature that transmogrified slick as quicksilver between adult and child, between strength and the kind of vulnerability that tugged at every fiber of Ancil’s being.

“Shut up,” he said, maybe to whatever voice was in his head more than the girl. “Just shut up.” He shoved the ape’s head back with the gun and lowered his eye to the sight, a superfluous gesture meant to solidify his resolve.

The ape bared its teeth. Not as a growl but like someone awkwardly smiling for a photo. It exhaled heavily, emitting the familiar smell—carrion and pond scum, a repugnant perfume of fecund soil hidden by a million years of secret life. What had Ancil yet to see? Why was he so afraid?
He imagined pulling the trigger, the ape’s skull shattering in rubescent globules and gray matter. The animal would slump unceremoniously to one side, one eye pressed against the wire bars. Its hand would crumple beneath it like the wilted petals of a prehistoric flower.

He tightened his grip.

Then the ape began to laugh. Not a real laugh. An imitation. Mimicking the laugh track on *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Ancil recognized the familiar cadence which fluttered and died, then rose up again.

“Stop that,” he said. “Stop it.”

But the ape kept on, its open-jawed outburst simultaneously unnatural and human. The way humans have of pretending. The way humans have of feigning happiness in a crowd when they feel trapped and afraid.

“I said stop,” Ancil growled. “Stop laughing!”

It guffawed. It chuckled. Huffed. Sniggered, altering its bearing as if attempting to find an equilibrium, a smile in which the low, gross chortling that rolled off its tongue would appear genuine. But there was no expression that could make a laugh like that seem natural. Ancil knew too well. It was the laugh he’d provided his father when his father made comments about queers and coloreds and a veritable host of other offensive creatures in Pap’s sight.

That laugh had a purpose. It was placation. It was survival.

How Ancil had practiced that laugh as a child in the bathroom mirror.

How he had practiced everything. His gait. The way he spit. His hooded eyes and downturned mouth. Blending in.

Cora placed a hand on Ancil’s. “It’s okay,” she said. “It’s okay. Just let it be.”

Some bulwark cracked inside of him. A stone wall mortared by years of discipline came crumbling down. An onrush of emotion he couldn’t define. A wail bubbled in his throat and lodged there, turning his vision blurry with salt water as he choked it back down. Then, like that, some pain subsided, a pain he hadn’t even known was there just beneath his sternum, replaced by what first felt hollow, but then warm, boundless, and finally electric. What would happen if he let it all go, he wondered. What would happen if he stopped pretending?

He pulled the gun away.

Was that all it took? It felt like heaven.

Cora unlatched the cage and opened the door. The ape stood upright. In the late afternoon sun tiling the floor, its shadow stretched absurdly thin.

“Haaahaaaaahaaaaa.” The ape laughed, breathy, without discernible voice.

“Haaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhaaaaah.” Losing inflection and rhythm as it backed out.

“Hauhaahaaawwwaaa.” Timber and tempo erratic. Watching the gun. Hand on the doorjamb. So near it might have reached out and snatched Cora and dragged her away into the fen like a storybook goblin.

“Haoooooo ooowww oww.” Until the laughter was breath again.

Nothing but belabored and life-giving breath.

“You’ve done it now,” Ancil said. He didn’t know who he was speaking to. He was looking at the girl, but he trailed off and stared at his own hands. “You want the world to know? You sure as hell got your wish.”

Billy disarmed him gently. “Let’s be done with this nonsense, shall we?”

“How can you just accept it?”

“Which part?”

“Monsters,” Ancil said. “Those monsters walking around in the world.”

“Lots of different definitions of monster,” Billy said and winked—actually winked—at Cora.
“You’ve always known?” Ancil said.
“Not always. But a while. Just waiting for you to be ready.”
“They’ll come back,” Ancil persisted. “Thirty years I’ve kept ’em contained. Never brought a single one back. Not that wasn’t dead. They’ll come back here now. They’ll be... emboldened.”
“Then let me suggest,” Billy said, “we write an ending.”
“You’re a strange guy,” Cora said to Billy, not without humor. She seemed to have grasped something about Billy and Ancil’s relationship almost intrinsically. She was clearly taken with Billy, or at least saw the same special inner light that had drawn Ancil to him.
“What are you doing with him?” she said, hitching a thumb at Ancil.
“One thing you’ll find, little girl,” Billy said, “is that there are too few people in the world who try and do the right thing. Those who roll up their sleeves and try. You might, say, attend an Ivy League institution, which at the time will seem the pinnacle of erudition and enlightenment. You might pursue this or that, but if you’re smart, you’ll realize that the real work of the world, as Marge Piercy said, is ‘common as mud.’ And if you’re lucky, you’ll fall in love with someone with the goodness and the strength for such work. Even if sometimes their motivation is misplaced.”
He placed a warm hand on Ancil’s shoulder. “It’s time to go. Let the mythical beasts flourish. Let the strange and wondrous thrive. We must advocate the rediscovery of ancient creatures.” He kissed Ancil on the forehead. “Don’t be afraid, love. I’ll protect you. I’ll always and forever protect you.”
“Me too,” Cora said, understanding with fairy-tale-like quickness the truth about himself that had taken Ancil decades to accept.
She took his hand. “You have a hell of a lot to learn though.”

Night fell, and Ancil fired up the generator one more time. He left the television on, the doors open, and retreated with Cora and Billy to the boat where they sat on the water.

After a few hours of silence and moonlight, they spotted the apes slipping inside the trailer like shadows. One among them wore a bandage like the collar of a priest. They didn’t rummage or destroy or even climb to the top of the double-wide in exploration. Instead, a dozen of them hunched on the floor before the flickering screen, crowded about and curled against one another, marveling at the wonders of some half-imagined life beyond the swamp. Billy stared through his binoculars at the open window and laughed quietly. Cora examined the shaggy heads in silhouette.

“Some people are going to freak the fuck out,” she said.

“That’s putting it lightly,” Billy said.
Ancil remained quiet. He’d grown calm between Cora and Billy. He felt safe. Free of some horrible and nameless duty for once. In a large duffel bag at his feet were hundreds of Polaroids, along with extensive paperwork detailing the myakka apes. He’d never once shirked his obligations. “Document and burn,” he’d been told since he was a boy. Heavy on the “document.” He didn’t know yet what he might do with it all, but he thought it would probably be useful in the next phase of his life. Maybe downright valuable.

“Might I suggest we go?” Billy said. Cora took up the tiller and directed them into the twilit swamp. As they went, they heard the myakka apes laughing. It echoed across the water. Followed by what sounded like words, like the speech of beasts broken free. Of menace. Of fear. ♦
Claus and Bertold Von Stauffenberg: Brave Brothers & Allies, a Billion Thanks
by Stephen Mead
The Dialogues of Tea

poetry by Jeff D. Min

arose on the
active side of infinity
and found a prayer in
my cup

the script was gilded
just like the
inside of my eyelids

it read:

1 gram ginger root
½ gram turmeric root
pinch of black pepper
coconut oil
fresh lemon juice
green tea
5 cups water

drank and found a cardinal
swimming in a blonde sea

some believe
it’s as easy
as breathing
in and out

and sometimes it
is
How to Conceive Daughters

poetry by Dayna Patterson

From a man’s heart, his humour flows on right side of his body to right testis. Tie a ribbon slipknot round it to blockade. Inside a woman’s body girls are made from ovum on the left. Postcoital, hip left into mattress. Wait for sun to slip.
good morning

poetry by Betsy Johnson-Miller

and so moth
you are dead.
I let you live

while I showered
even though
you’d startled me

as you flew
from somewhere near
the underwear

I’d dropped
on the floor
to get naked

and wash for a day
I didn’t
have the heart

to enter spontaneously
which is
to say what joy?

wet I stepped
dry I dressed
and woke

my husband
who rose, peed
and killed you.
Whoever loves the sea has nothing but the horizon and movement and doesn't have a point of reference except for the constellations which from a balcony at least twenty floors up from the avenues might be Mercury until Saturday Venus from Sunday on. Whoever loves the sea has the sound of sand and sand castles tumbling which frightens my dog with its enormous crashing and imaginary bodies drowning in its moats. Women who love the sea have an idea how close the other side is, how far away and how many rows it would take to reach the other shore where a woman with a small dog and a book is peeling an orange and wondering from which direction I’ll arrive.

Sea, she says. 

_Hurricane. Earth._
The water reflected a calm, pale blue around the boat sitting low at anchor in the first light of dawn. In the distance, a darker stripe of cobalt—almost black—broke the smoothness where a breeze flowed off the mountainside on the far end of the bay. Seagulls floated past with the outgoing tide. On the vessel there was no movement. All aboard were asleep. As the planet rolled from night to face the sun, the men, bay, and boat rode together inside a space like that between two giant breaths—of things that had happened and what was to come.

The boat, a fifty-eight-foot seiner rigged for long-lining with a reel full of gear and a plywood bait house aft, sat low in the water with a hold packed full of halibut and ice. The skipper and his four-man crew had been catching fish for the past five days without a break. Tired and with the weather forecasted fair, the skipper and crew found the bay an inviting anchorage to catch a few hours’ sleep before making the run home. They had pulled in and dropped anchor, silhouetted against a dusky sky streaked with high cirrus clouds.

The activity on board died down quickly, the last movement on deck when the skinny deckhand walked barefoot to the stern brushing his teeth with one hand and holding a coffee mug of water in the other. He held the toothbrush in his teeth and looked at the faint burn of pink on the horizon, while he pulled the front of his sweatpants down with a thumb and took a leak over the side. Finished, he pulled up his pants and watched a fish jump in the distance. He stood a moment longer before washing out his mouth and leaning over the transom to spit into the sea. He turned, shaking his toothbrush as he walked back into the cabin and closed the door.

Hours passed. The crew slept. In the bowels of the engine room a hose—leaking under the clamp that held it to a fitting that pulled seawater in from beneath the waterline, and overlooked since the boat had taken to sea two weeks earlier—finally ruptured. The ocean poured freely into the bilge under the engine.

A boat floats because it displaces more water than the vessel itself weighs. Once the weight of the vessel exceeds the displacement, it sinks. To prevent seawater from filling the seiner in the event of a leak, a pump with an automatic floating switch was installed at the bottom of the bilge, below the engine. The pump worked to empty the water from the boat but was hard-pressed to keep up with the incoming seawater. But keep up it did, and would have continued to do so until the engineer discovered the problem in the morning and turned off the valve that fed the damaged hose. But spray from the hose soaked a small rag hanging over a wire beside the engine. Once the rag absorbed the water, it slid off its perch and landed in the bilge. Wadded in the rag, a long strip of discarded electrical tape floated free.

The pump was mounted to the hull inside a cracked debris guard that protected its impeller from potential obstructions. Loose in the mount, one side of the pump lifted above the guard as the impeller spun, moving 2,200 gallons of salt water an hour through the hull and into the sea. The electrical tape, caught in the current created by the pump, slipped past the debris guard and was pulled into the impeller, which promptly jammed. The pump made a gurgling sound as the
water remaining in the hose drained back into the bilge. Unchecked, the water began to rise under the engine.

In the fo’c’sle, the top bunks were reserved for greenhorns. To port slept the skinny skipper’s nephew on his first fishing trip. His expression in his sleep was the same as it had been for the past week: the open-mouthed look of someone who can’t believe what he’s seeing. Even closed, his face looked surprised, like he was watching whales surface next to the boat or reacting to the news that the crew was expected to work until the fish quit coming over the side or the hold got full. “Sleep is what fishermen do in winter,” the mate told him earlier in the voyage.

The kid wasn’t the type to ask questions, and he commented even less on his shipmates’ discussions and arguments. At seventeen, he only knew how little he knew. He slept the deep sleep of one who was overtired and overwhelmed, on his back, arms framing his head as if he had fallen there. Aside from his deep breathing he hadn’t moved since he hit the bunk.

Below decks the pump spun briefly against the tape but only succeeded in pulling it further into the impeller, straining until the wire powering it began to overheat, causing the circuit breaker in the wheelhouse to trip with an audible click. Click! Dreaming, the skipper dropped his plastic net-mending needle onto the deck. He was asleep on his day bunk in the wheelhouse, his feet a yard away from the breaker panel. The ship’s controls glowed red in the dim light of early morning. Shaking his head at his clumsiness, he bent down in his dream and picked up the needle.

A stocky fifty-one-year-old, the skipper was normally a light sleeper when at sea, but five days of steady fish, a full fish hold, a calm bay in a good anchorage, a reliable boat underneath him, the anchor alarm set, and a forecast for fair weather gave him permission to dive into the deeper sleep usually reserved for his bed at home. A good rest would charge his batteries for the run back and the hours they would spend delivering the catch. He used the needle and its mending twine to repair a hole that in his dream never got smaller.

In the engine room the deepening pool of seawater was about to engage the boat’s last line of defense. A float switch, located above the bilge pump but below the critical starter motor on the engine and the batteries to either side, waited just above the now rapidly rising water. Once the water lifted the float, an alarm would go off with a piercing shriek in the wheelhouse, warning the crew of the threat. Swirling, the water continued its climb.

The starboard top bunk held another green crew member, a friend of the skipper. He signed on looking for a summer adventure from his middle-school teaching job. Exhausted and sore, he lay on his back, snoring. He spent the past five days tired: tired of being seasick, tired of being chilly and wet, tired of diesel fumes and dead, heavy fish. His hands were swollen and his fingers and wrists stung from dozens of scratches from halibut teeth. His back ached even though he had begun eating ibuprofen like candy. As he pulled off his boots and climbed into his bunk, he never appreciated his bed at home and his boring life with his wife and children more. His sleep was the deep and dreamless sleep of escape.

The engineer snored beneath him on the lower port bunk. A lifelong fisherman, his beefy hands lay huge on his chest like two fish from the hold—white, motionless slabs. His boots stuck out from under the rumpled sleeping bag piled over his legs. Pieces of halibut covered his tangled red hair and beard and festooned his pillow, sleeping bag, and boots like feathers. His hands twitched in his sleep as they turned...
a wrench that became a live red snapper on a raft in the open sea. He rolled over in his bunk as he felt a wave lift the raft and fought to keep the fish from sliding off. The salt smell was thick in his nostrils.

Over a year ago, a different green deckhand smoked what was left of a joint as he came down the ladder to the engine room. The skipper was in town and left him the job to install the new high-water alarm float switch. It was one of a dozen menial tasks he’d been left with while the skipper was running errands, and he was bored and more than a little stoned. While he listened to Sheryl Crow sing in his headphones about how she can’t cry anymore, he lost his grip on the stainless mounting screws under the engine. Instead of retrieving them, he plucked a single rusty screw off a shelf and used it to fasten the switch to the hull. The power drill battery was low, and he only got the screw halfway in before it gave out. He pulled at the switch and it held. That’ll do, he thought. As he went up the ladder, he sang with Sheryl about her lousy luck. In the salty dampness of the engine room, the rusty screw continued to corrode and weaken.

Across from the engineer, the mate looked the picture of contentment. Even a week’s hard work hadn’t hurt his looks. He was a handsome man in his thirties who emanated confidence. As the deck boss, he had reason to feel self-assured. He had seen the crew through a long haul of constant fish. The best catch of his career was in the hold, and the crew was safe and healthy. His lips had a slight smile to them as his eyes moved beneath the lids. He was in a Mexican cantina, a beautiful dark-haired woman in his arms. They were dancing to a song he knew but couldn’t name. Their feet were bare as they glided along the thick, cool grass of the floor. He caressed her long hair and neck with his hands as they spun. They stared at one another as they moved, her eyes deep brown. He stretched his desire upward on the bunk as they leaned together in his dream. Her lips parted. He may as well have been on a feather bed, he was so far removed from the ocean and the boat where he slept.

As the water level reached the ruptured hose, the constant splashing that could have signaled a lightly sleeping crew was silenced. The force of the incoming flow created a current that swept over and lifted the high-water alarm switch, pulling against the rusty screw until it snapped in two. Without a screw to hold it in place, the switch hung in the current, tethered by the wire powering it and suspended upside-down by its own buoyancy. Unable to activate in that position, it was useless.

When the vessel dropped anchor in the bay with 43,000 pounds of halibut and ice already in the hold, her rounded hull settled nicely as the weight lowered her center of gravity. But hours later, the three feet of water in the engine room weighing sixty-four pounds per cubic foot added another 40,000 pounds forward of the fish hold. The auxiliary engine, weighing just over a ton and situated to port of the main engine, added enough off-center weight that the boat began to list in that direction. The bow rode lower in the water as the water caused a shift in the vessel’s attitude. Forty-five minutes later, when the seawater in the hold reached a depth of four feet, the extra load approached thirty tons. Even though the water was not leaking into any other compartment, its presence was manifesting throughout the boat.

The skipper came out of his dream as he turned onto his side. The angle of his daybed was different. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. In the quiet glow of dawn over the bay everything looked fine at first glance. A seal caught his attention as it broke the surface off the bow, throwing a dark ripple of a wake behind its head as
it swam past.

A deep groan reverberated and echoed through the hull. Wide awake in an instant, the skipper’s first instinct was to get the engine started. He tossed back his sleeping bag and swung his legs over the edge of the bunk to put on his slippers. As he did so, the boat shuddered and groaned again, rolling to port and throwing him off balance, toward the helm seat. He grunted as he struck the chair with his shoulder. He tried to grab on, but it swiveled on its pedestal and twisted from his grasp. The floor beneath him was at a forty-five-degree angle and with the boat rolling fast, he tumbled across the wheelhouse. His forehead struck the sharp metal corner of the radar unit mounted overhead with such force that when his face collided with the doorframe, he hardly felt it.

In the bunks below, the noise was deafening. A monster had risen from the ocean to join the crew in the fo’c’sle, and it roared with fury as it heaved the boat over. The teacher, wrapped in his sleeping bag, fumbled with the zipper until the angle of the roll became so steep that he slid headfirst out of the bunk and fell toward the floor. He struck the back of his head and neck on the rail of the bottom bunk with a loud snapping sound. He saw white then felt an odd tingling sensation in his arms and legs. That he was conscious at all was an unfortunate miracle. His body loosened as he slid down the side of the bunk and settled there.

The mate pushed his arms against the bottom of the top bunk to hold himself in place. He watched the teacher fall past him and heard the engineer yell “Jesus!” as the teacher’s head hit the teak rail with a sickening crack. In the dim light he looked into the teacher’s eyes as the man slid downward. He wore a matter-of-fact look like he was discussing fish price over coffee. There was no expression of pain on his face.

The boat continued to roll, groaning and creaking like it was coming apart. The mate could hear the clatter of dishes and pans crashing around the galley. We’re going over! He swung his legs out into the space between the bunks and stood on the side of the port berth, his feet only inches from the teacher’s face. If the boat kept rolling, they’d be dealing with a flood of cold water very soon. With no way out, the bunks would become coffins.

“Out!” he yelled at the top of his lungs. “We have to get topside! Now! Get out!”

There was an answering shout from the engineer as he struggled to get out of his nearly vertical bunk. The mate started moving for the entryway into the galley. The boat shook as the house slammed against the water. That’s it! he thought. We’re fucked! His chest constricted as a rising tide of panic surged through him.

An access door in the galley led downward to the now-flooded engine room. As the boat completed her roll to port, the water in the engine room blew the door open. The mate froze, horrified. The water careened off the now-vertical floor and came racing toward him. He turned for the teacher. “You have to get up!” he yelled as he reached for the prostrate man who stared blankly back. At the same time, the engineer, finally disentangled from his sleeping bag and nearly standing on his head, swung his legs over the edge of his bunk and caught the mate hard above the eye with his boot. Stunned, the mate fell backwards with a splash just as the water reached the fo’c’sle.

In seconds the mate and teacher were under water. The engineer rolled himself over and stood on the side of the hull, standing sideways across the compartment. He held out a hand to the sputtering mate, who grabbed it and pulled himself upright. “We have to get out of here!” he yelled at the mate, who nodded and stared at the ice-cold water rising up his legs. Underneath it, the
teacher's hair swirled. His eyes were still open. He blinked.

“Move!” yelled the engineer, and shoved the mate back toward the galley, then climbed over the teacher and fought his way out through the rushing water. Kneeling in the bunk behind him, wide-eyed and silent, the skinny kid watched them go.

Unbelievably, the boat continued to roll. The mate and engineer struggled to pull themselves through the surging water while walking on the cabinets beneath the table. “We have to get out a window before she heads to the bottom!” yelled the engineer.

They both looked at the starboard side of the boat above them. The windows were now below water. The roll of the boat was slowing, but it was taking them deeper, and what little light they had was almost gone.

The engineer picked up a deck broom floating in the galley near them. “Get back!” he snarled. The mate stepped backward and his feet went out from under him as his socks slipped on the wet cabinet. He crumpled beneath the table behind the engineer who raised the brush and threw it with a growl at the starboard window. The handle punctured the glass and stuck there, suspended in the air. The window cracked and bulged in slow motion as the two men stared. Then with a great roar and rush of air, they were engulfed in a torrent of ice-cold water and pieces of broken glass. The engineer twisted away as the force of the water slammed him into the side of the table. He caught a glimpse of the mate pinned to a window under the table on the port side of the cabin. He felt a sharp pain in his side and looked down to see a large triangle of glass sticking out of his torso under his arm. Already waist-deep, the rushing water continued to pummel them. He strained with his other arm to reach the bloody glass.

The mate felt the pressure from the initial torrent of water ease as the cabin filled. With the water flooding in, there was no getting out the starboard window. The galley was almost full of water. They only had time for a few more lungfuls of air. He pushed himself above the table and gasped a breath. He went under the table again, feeling his way along in the dark. He fought the chaos of the rushing water until he was next to the port window. Using the table for leverage, he kicked the window with his foot. Underwater, he heard a snap, but it didn’t break. He slid deeper to get a better angle. Again he kicked. And again. Eyes burning with salt, he finally broke through, but his calf caught on a broken shard of glass stuck in the pane. He let go of the table and surfaced again, the pain hot in his leg as the glass, still stuck in the window frame, tore through muscle. No, No, No No! he thought. This can’t be happening! Not this way. Not this way!

He rose, his face contorted and barely out of the water as he screamed and took another breath. He went under again and floating, lifted his leg away from the glass with his arms. Freed, he spun around, trying to feel his way back to the opening. Something bumped his shoulder in the dark. He reached out and grabbed the deck brush. The engineer was holding it, and together they swept it around the window frame, breaking away the remaining glass.

On the roof outside the cabin, the increasing water pressure around the sinking boat activated a switch on the hard plastic container that held the life raft. With a low thwump! the case blew open and the raft tumbled out, inflating automatically. The partially expanded raft floated upward directly under the sinking vessel. It rolled off the roof and rose toward the surface, only to become caught between the cabin and the stabilizer poles bolted to the deck. Filling
with air, it wedged its way higher and
tighter, the pressure stretching the fabric
around the poles until, overwhelmed, it
burst. A violent flow of bubbles surged
toward the surface.

Trapped inside the deflated and
snagged fabric of the raft, an Emergency
Position-Indicating Radio Beacon
automatically transmitted a repeating
distress signal and location information to
a GOES weather satellite in orbit 24,000
miles above the earth. Had the EPIRB not
been submerged, the signal for help would
have been received and immediately
relayed to the United States Coast Guard
station nearest the boat’s location. From
twenty feet below the surface and sinking,
the signal had no chance of escaping the
dense, cold water.

Lungs burning, the mate and engineer
backed away from the window and pulled
themselves to the top of the cabin for
another breath of air before attempting to
swim out. They rose in the deepening
darkness until their heads bumped the
floor above. The boat was upside-down
and full of water. They turned to each
other and stared. They could feel the
changing pressure as the boat slid toward
the bottom, taking them with it. The
engineer shook his head, but the mate
swam off, frantically looking for a pocket
of air. With a look of resignation on his
face, the engineer exhaled.

Completely capsized, the boat didn’t
linger. Once the windows were breached
and water engulfed the cabin, what
remaining air that might have kept the
hull on the surface was quickly purged.
Bubbles roiled on either side of the
capsized hull as it settled into the water.
The air in the aft storage locker held the
stern up a long moment, but the rest of
the vessel was too heavy. With a hissing
exhale, it too slipped under. Bubbles
raged then slowed for several minutes as
the sun broke the horizon and a new day
began.

The surrounding mountaintops
reflected golden yellow from snowcapped
peaks. The water echoed a cloudless ice-
blue sky. A pair of seagulls, attracted to a
few final ripples stirring in the center of
the bay, circled and landed. Finding
nothing, they took flight once more,
wingtips striking the surface again and
again and again.
Snap of Pieces by Kara LC Jones
Ravine 1

poetry by Miriam C. Jacobs

She stands with us in judgment of the law.
Between pumped-in rivers,
shoots of plastic palm, of orchid
buried in shredded cardboard,
green Earth under glass
requiring neither decay nor death
for sustainability,
not sustainable,
desire—endless—determines
help from harm, fair from foul,
ethical particularities.
Before that fatal first bite
she does not understand
what she is ready to do,
can not measure a good God
against a scoundrel.
For it is He still in those days,
He who constructs set-up, no-win,
hardening hearts on purpose,
who plants yearning and defeat
together in the same rut.
We like to think since that long-ago
betrayal, S/He has evolved, like to think
the puzzling name promises,
“I will become,” not that low-rent pledge,
“I’ll be there,”

like Michael Jackson song.
Not yet concerned with justice,
only obedience, primitive king,
human weakness is foil
to displays of power
and the garden a swindle from the start.
Willing to pluck freedom,
love the binding force,
for so she is made,
not guessing what suffering she might gain
in exchange for enlightenment,
not knowing, quite, what suffering is,
she does eat.
Ravine 6: Potiphar’s Wife

poetry by Miriam C. Jacobs

Barely urban, bored with the house,
its dry settling and tick of mantis wings,
she, little schooled but with much to think of—
what colors must be mixed and cushions sewn
to brighten a dark bedchamber, darker night—
while he snores under the great weight of his belly.

Her beloved, lamp to the nations, reviews accounts:
pastures, tenants, grains and wools,
payments in cloth, gold sent from the king,
domestics—himself, one wife—she
tallies in silence the bricks of slavery—auditor, architect,
ever a choice; in another century she might have forum
for the mind, a place fit for geometry.

Instead, childless, near forty, she can ponder no further
angles with what means are to hand;
to have this boy, comely and wise in youth,
trace his form with her fingertips, taste his words,
so measured, so few in her mouth;
for him she will tremble; while he, boasting to an audience
of one, himself, taking pleasure in knowledge, not in flesh
of her desire—to fulfill it would end it.
Even when she enters nearly naked his counting cell
to deal in pledges, hold his lists to the light,
snatch his veil, he demurs, protests, flees.

Then the mob comes for him.
She holds out his rag in evidence.
Town gossips witness—street trial, cuff and drag—
climax for a story’s end broken too soon.
Idly, now, she may mock him, in conscience force
his aspect if not regard. Dissatisfied with the nothing
that comes next, follow-up to spent passion,
she studies dark triangles

between everybody’s legs.
“The moon is no door,” Plath warns us of madness. First wife in the attic, under key, whose golem pleasures will not be reasoned to silence, frightens God and man. They deal—brother, uncle, father, lawyer—trade her to profit all around. How their masculine shoulders quake in merriment! They shake on the dowry, slap one another on the back, seal their fate with hers. Humanity leaps to the tune of that laughter. She studies fire, hones the murderous urge, loveless satisfies gravity’s sentence. No new wife born of bone to acquiesce can measure ties that bind evil to dust, can curb mankind with a civil tongue. Lilith in the attic eats barbeque, yet: sets your barn, your goods, your household stuff, your crazed children aflame. For her and for Rochester, born the same, dust and breath, there is no escape, no past, no door. All time is present time. Her lust is consummate.
Calvin was only ever interested in the big picture...
“So much about our lives as black people in this country involves this form of creation, the proverbial making of something out of nothing, of finding a way out of no way, and surviving (and hopefully thriving) off remnants, remains, and leftovers.”

Jeffery Renard Allen

Urgently Visible: Why Black Lives Matter

Evergreen Review

Let’s suppose, for the purposes of this article, that American history is nothing more than a series of structural patterns spawned from an original sin and high idea. Or, as Mark Twain has widely been attributed with saying, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” And let’s also suppose that those patterns have slight deviations that allow altogether different possibilities, both negative and positive. So where there was the Civil Rights movement, there is now Black Lives Matter. Where there were once mass hippie protests, there is now the Resistance. Where there was Richard Nixon, there is now Donald J. Trump. Where there was Martin Luther King Jr., there is now a realization of Barack Hussein Obama. Now, if you consider racism a plague, you might recognize these patterns as no es bueno. You might even be a little bored of the spiritual pestilence, rot, and disease. Si si, muy malo. You may be sickened by a system predicated upon incarcerated black bodies and young American men murdered. Who wouldn’t be, right? This requires grit and grind. We remember where we have been. If you have considered slavery and its fascinating twin babies of discrimination and institutional racism to be cancer agents of a toxic and malignant characteristic, you might consider Mr. Jeffery Renard Allen, a Reiki doctor, gripping a satchel of diagnosis and cure in a tightly clenched fist. We know where we are. He is, in fact, a master mystic creating the work of a generation previously unknown. Now, forward to where we have yet to go.

Throughout the nascent twenty-first century, Allen has made work of traveling, learning, educating, reflecting, and creating. In 2006, he traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, working with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie soon after Half of a Yellow Sun came out. He taught at the Kwani? Litfest. In 2008, he traveled to Accra, Ghana, organizing a writers’ conference at the Kokrobitey Institute and working with fellow author Arthur Flowers. In 2012, he again worked with Chimamanda’s Farafina Trust Creative Writing Workshop in Lagos, Nigeria. That same year in Zanzibar, he served as program director of literature at the Jahazi Literary and Jazz Festival.

“At the same time, I think in narrative in terms of African cosmology, circles within circles, where life is a swirling continuum of the real and the metaphysical, the supernatural.”

Jeffery Renard Allen
As we prepare for this interview, Allen seems most proud of his recent work appearing in the premiere online version of the celebrated journal, *Evergreen Review*. His answers to my questions were equally insightful, deliberate and thoughtful, both hands of the American Bard, prepared to do their work:

**Patrick A. Howell:** Jeff, you’ve been globetrotting in recent months, completing a residency in Bellagio, Italy, at the Rockefeller Center. You worked on completing your book of short stories, *Fat Time*. Also, you have traveled to Dublin, Ireland, to do a reading at the James Joyce Center and lecture students at the University College Dublin. Did you enjoy your time away from our grand American experiment ... I mean, experience? Away from the Black American experience? How have your recent travels informed your work? How do they inform your identity as an American?

**Jeffery Renard Allen:** I arrived at Bellagio last November only a few days after the election. I truly felt as if I were escaping my country at a time when it was necessary to do so. The good thing is I was able to spend a month there, spend a month on one of the most beautiful places on the earth, and simply focus on my writing. Of course, I was also trying to get my head around the election, so I watched things from afar as it were.

I have always had an itch for travel, and my life has been such that I have had the good fortune to travel quite extensively abroad. As a Black person in this country, we often don’t feel welcome, but when you go overseas and see another American, you have a strange feeling of kinship. Traveling overseas can’t help but change your understanding of what it means to be an American. You notice, for example, that nowhere on the planet do you see scores of people who are obese. You only see obesity in America. What does that tell us about who we are as a country?

Let’s be frank about it. Americans are the most naive people on the planet, which also makes us the most dangerous people on the planet given our nuclear arsenal and given that we have the strongest military in the history of the world. More than sixty million Americans were so stupid that they voted for Donald Trump. And let me be perfectly clear about that: If you voted for Donald Trump, you are an idiot. It doesn’t matter why you voted for him. I traveled to Dublin back in January and arrived there before Trump’s inauguration. I was talking to a taxi driver who had been to America numerous times and to many different parts of the country. He clearly finds much to like about our country because there is much to like, and our country is like no other. So he said to me with great concern, “I hope Donald Trump doesn’t ruin the country.” My question, how is it that a foreigner can recognize Trump for what he is, but tens of millions of Americans could not?

You can travel throughout our country and find monuments that celebrate the conquest of Native Americans, and few stage protests to have these monuments removed. This means one of two things: On the one hand, either most Americans are so ignorant about our history that they are incapable of recognizing why these monuments are an affront, or, on the other, they are perfectly comfortable with celebrating certain forms of conquest and genocide. Thinking about such questions, one thinks about the overall question of the American psyche. Travel, conversation, reading, and observation have led me to understand that we have a type of optimism that exists nowhere else in the world.

We believe that we are entitled to happiness. In fact, that very wording is in
our Constitution, the “pursuit of happiness.” In contrast, the rest of the world has a firm and realistic Old World view where they expect nothing, and where they know that they have little chance of improving their lives. They may long for improvement, but the reality is that for most people in the world, life has afforded them few opportunities of improvement. This is not to say that life has not improved for millions of people around the world over, say, the last century. I’m talking about mindset, attitude. Americans are the only people in the world who feel entitled to happiness, a feeling that often comes with other kinds of expectations, as in an expectation to make money and acquire wealth.

How true is that expectation? Statistics from the last census show that the median income in this country is quite low, one where most families are led by a couple, with each person working a job where the annual income is just above the poverty level. And that’s the kind of job most people work in this country, one that keeps them a few thousand dollars above the poverty line as our federal government defines poverty. That is the economic reality.

“The election brings home once again the reality that this is a country that can never come to terms with what it is.”

Jeffery Renard Allen

Couple that with certain forms of historical, political, and emotional denial—this country that has never come to terms with the strange legacies of genocide, slavery, and segregation, to say nothing of our colonial experiment that took half of what used to be Mexico. This country where the majority of white people don’t think that people of color suffer racial discrimination. This country where sixty million people voted for Trump, including the majority of white women. This country where tens of millions time and again vote for a Republican and thereby vote against their own economic interests. Why would they do that? The answer is simple: because they embrace their whiteness, their feelings of privilege and superiority. They embrace white superiority. There’s no other way to explain it.

To be honest, the recent election has caused me to become completely disillusioned with this country, notwithstanding the fact that the Trump presidency is starting to look like the best thing in American politics given that it has given rise to a grassroots movement that we haven’t seen in decades. The election brings home once again the reality that this is a country that can never come to terms with what it is. The resistance to reality is such that it leads to a violent resentment of anyone who speaks the truth about certain forms of systematic injustices and the like, as was made evident in the rise of the fanatical Tea Party and also in the violence that erupted at Trump rallies time and again last year. This is a fanaticism, a hatred, that is steeped in the most blatant forms of ignorance. So scientific illiteracy is such in our country that millions of people don’t understand why we need environmental protections and certain regulations, and it leads millions of people to deny such factual phenomena as evolution and climate change. Given our refusal to come to terms with who we are, these troubling realities are not surprising. One might simply say that it is all a failure of education. If our government were truly interested in serving its citizens, every American would receive the best possible education, to say nothing of a livable wage, healthcare, childcare, and other essential life necessities.

PH: It is interesting that with the current unrest, with our civil rights moment in Black Lives Matter, with an authoritarian, unpopular president with Machiavellian tendencies, and with the
unprecedented legal muck of the White House, there are a lot of parallels to the 1960s and '70s, particularly the civil unrest and another authoritarian character at the White House's helm. It is some sort of acute, unpleasant déjà vu. Your critically well-received Song of the Shank dealt significantly with themes of race, art, class, and religion from the Civil War and Reconstruction. Do you feel more of the new or more of the old in this moment? What world, do you, as an author of historical fiction, an artist, and father, think can emerge from the current challenges?

JRA: I feel both the new and the old in every moment. As William Faulkner famously wrote, “The past is not dead. The past is not even past.” One reality is that the human animal is morally flawed. Nothing will ever change that. As an American, I feel there is the troubling reality of the many things I talked about earlier. Despite it all, I am an optimist because I know that life offers so much that is joyous and beautiful. And I also know that we will continue as a species. As Faulkner put it at the end of The Sound and the Fury, They Endured. We will endure. I will tell you that after the election last November, many of my students at the University of Virginia were devastated, crushed, depressed, distraught, crying. What could I do to comfort them? I knew the answer. I sent them Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

And here’s the thing: I lived in New York when the World Trade Center attacks happened in September 2001, and I taught MFA Creative Writing students at The New School, which was only a few miles from the World Trade Center. The university and much of Manhattan beneath Fourteenth Street was shut down the week after the attack, so during that week, I thought a lot about what I would say to my students once class resumed, thought about what I could say to them to let them know that their writing and art still mattered. I decided to give them Faulkner’s Nobel Prize acceptance speech, which is a powerful piece of writing. I cry whenever I read it, in the same way that I cry whenever I hear the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. delivering his “I Have a Dream ...” speech and some of his other speeches. The words transport me, the words are transcendent, they are all “up in my body” as Miles Davis says in his autobiography of what it felt like to hear Bird and Dizzy playing for the first time. “Music all up in my body.” I live for all that is music.

For me, my writing is always about music in one way or another, especially as a way of living in the world, moving about in the world, and as a way of seeing what’s actually there. Of course, words on a page never have the immediacy of music or oration, such that you have to do other things to make the work interesting, which is largely about the paradoxical process of both writing the world as is (what Henry James called the “disappearance of the author”), and, at the same time, getting yourself on paper, telling a story that only you can tell in a way that only you can tell it. That’s why it can take a while to develop stories that compel you, that draw you in and demand to be written.

So, for example, I wrote a novel about Blind Tom because he was a figure from the historical past whom I found tremendously interesting for a number of reasons. That is, I wrote about him because he interests me, not because I write historical fiction. (In fact, I don’t write historical fiction, a particular genre which is fine in and of itself but which I have no aesthetic interest in as a writer.) And in the book of stories I’m presently working on, Fat Time, I’m writing about some other figures from the historical
past—including Jimi Hendrix, Jack Johnson, and Miles Davis—because they interest me for one reason or another. But I’m also writing stories set in America now, and in Africa now, even as I write stories set in a speculative future in both America and Africa.

As a father, one has to be hopeful about the future. In fact, I fully believe that my children will live enjoyable and rewarding lives. I’m doing everything I can to make that possible. As a father, one also recognizes that my children will face the same specter of race that I have had to face. It’s impossible for them not to. So the best one can do is prepare them for it, and be sure that they have the “equipment for living” [Kenneth Burke] that they need. One can only hope that they remain emotionally and spiritually whole as they engage with and navigate through the many absurdities of race (or gender or class). I say that because I know what damage this has done to me, and to so many others. The battle is wearying, so much so that when I retire from teaching in ten or twelve years, I will leave the country and live elsewhere, most likely somewhere on the African continent, most likely in South Africa. All of the African continent is a special place to me with many heartbreaking realities, but also with an energy and an impulse for life that I feel nowhere else.

My story “Heads” is in the current issue of Oxford American, their annual music issue. In the piece, I imagine a friendship between Jimi Hendrix and painter Francis Bacon.

PH: Is “magic” real? From Harbor and Spirits to Stellar Places to Song of the Shank to “Heads,” the real is there inviting comparisons to the realism of Faulkner and Ralph Ellison, but magic jumps from your pages in language, scenes, and happenings. Is that art, or is it observation?

JRA: Life is rich in myriad ways, far richer in fact than what we often see or feel. I try to capture the thickness of life in my work. I think about narrative in terms of the African sea of time where the past, the present, and the future exist all at once. At the same time, I think in narrative in terms of African cosmology, circles within circles, where life is a swirling continuum of the real and the metaphysical, the supernatural. For these reasons, I reject limiting terms like “magical realism.” The real is always more than real. It is fat time.

PH: So, there it is, the American Bard wielding his great instrument of cleansing in the one hand. Tearing down old, staid structures and allowing the light to come through the afternoon branches of evergreen pine needles and to bounce off the demure blues and greens of the lakes, allowing humanity to breathe big, puissant breaths unencumbered by the recalcitrant realities of our current America, which is really the old America come up moribund from the ground. American Bard. Do that thing. Do it hard. He’s just beginning.

Beginning.

With the work that has taken Allen around the world and the African continent, the future seems clear for those willing to look back on this period from the perch of 2117. The trajectory is clear for those clear-eyed and inviting hope and change in a moment wrought with bitterness, anger, resentments, and a deep depression. In his work with the Norman Mailer Center and Writers Colony, Allen has worked with a number of emerging writers from the African continent, including A. Igoni Barrett, Victor Ehikhamenor, Yewande Omotoso, and

And indeed the struggle is beautiful. It is sweet. It is inspired. It is blessed. That seems to be what Jeffery Renard Allen’s body of work would suggest: the metaphysical properties and beauty of light work. The hammering of words, ideas, and visions firm in hand channel the bursts of lights coming from visions previously unseen. The harmonic convergence of his work is beautiful, an incomplete symphonic piece underlain with rhythms and harmonies, taking inspiration directly from Tom Wiggins, Miles Davis, and Jimi Hendrix, American masters. It is a new song for the new day. From here to over there, yonder, where imaginations are fertile, and the land is plenty and willing.

*Lightworks.* ♦
Rare Bird by Stephanie Flood
I'm writing this essay from a child-sized bench at the Grand Rapids Public Museum, where my two daughters and their two friends are running through a hands-on exhibit. Speaking of hands, my right one is currently seeping blood from a cuticle I ripped off just moments ago. That's what I do when I'm anxious about a deadline, particularly a last-Tuesday deadline that has been, by the grace of a good editor, granted an extension.

Through sheer luck I have with me a water bottle from a long-abandoned yoga studio, and despite the bottle’s block-lettered slogan of “FUNK YEAH”—the N, of course, of course, worn down to an ambiguous any-letter—I've decided that finding it in my bag is an example of good intuition. Rinse the wound, wrap in tissue. Funk yeah, weekend museum crowd.

We take our relative victories where we can get them. I'm a single mom and a full-time faculty member at a college an hour away from home; my guilt over seeing my children in the latest hours of their days and on weekends is only augmented by my guilt over wanting to do more in my field. While I'll never be Felicia, the ever-coiffed, ever-caffeinated PTO mom who, it must be said, is more likely undead than extant for all the personal time she appears to have in the predawn school-day hours, I'll likely always be the mom who can convince her kids that quality time together includes letting them take off with friends while she writes. Hashtag: victory.

I'm not a stickler for norms is what I'm saying, but using a prescribed rulebook for building stories makes a lot of sense to me. Storytelling's patron saint, David Mamet, says that giving yourself up to form opens the story to creative possibility, “because the form's going to tell you what's needed.” Time after time my students (and I) have learned the hard way, that foregoing an early framework doubles a writer's frustration. One cannot subvert structure, after all, if one does not understand it.

Since you're reading this in a literary journal, you already know where you can get the minutiae of writing. What I'm giving you here are the basics that come up constantly in my classes—the fundamental parts of the writing process that apply to almost any long-form story. And just as it was five minutes ago, when my oldest tripped into this bench and got my crimson fingerprint on her white shirt, we'll start our analysis with something of a joke.

**Premise**

Mamet tells us that if you explain a joke's punchline, the audience might understand it, but they won't laugh. That means your whole job is to structure a natural flow of one-plus-ones while resisting the urge to cover your page with twos. Your first step in this process is to state your premise—the basic story idea that's been rolling around in your head.

*The Martian*: An astronaut becomes stranded on Mars after his team assumes him dead, and must rely on his ingenuity to find a way to signal to Earth that he is alive.

*Groundhog Day*: A weatherman finds himself
inexplicably living the same
day over and over again.

Knowing your premise is akin to
knowing your vacation destination, and
why you want to go there. “The whole
family is headed to Yellowstone for a
reunion, to make up for the one that went
horribly wrong last year.” When you
decide to go on a vacation, what do you
do? You plan. That’s next.

What If

Now consider your premise using what if
questions. Doing this will help to identify
any resources or problems that might
come up as you write. According to John
Truby in his excellent book The Anatomy
of Story, “The more often you ask ‘What
if…?’ the more fully you can inhabit this
landscape, flesh out its details, and make
it compelling for an audience.” For
example, what if the kids get bored on the
drive to Wyoming? What if someone gets
carsick? What if there are mosquitos at
the campsite? What if Aunt Irma brings
up politics again?

Here’s Truby’s take on this as it relates
to The Godfather:

A story about a Mafia family
promises ruthless killers and
violent crime. But what if you
make the head of the family
much bigger, make him a
kind of king in America?
What if he is the head of the
dark side of America, just as
powerful in the underworld as
the president is in official
America? Because this man is
a king, you could create grand
tragedy, a Shakespearean fall
and rise where one king dies
and another takes his place.
What if you turn a simple
crime story into a dark
American epic?

Here on the bench it looks like this: To
spend time with her children and get her
work done, a single mom takes her crew
to a hands-on museum. What if she cuts
her finger? What if her oldest daughter
gets splattered with the blood? What if
her youngest daughter throws a fit? What
if, just as the mom convinces the younger
girl to take calming drinks from the
“FU?K YEAH” water bottle, Felicia
McPTO strolls in with her brood of bow-
topped mini-mes, all of whom come to a
dead stop in front of the child-sized bench,
the marked tween, and the expletive-
implying nine-year-old?

That’s right, Reader. The queen of
caffeine is at the museum, her seraphim-
level fingernails waving a dutiful hello.
Now in your story you have resources
culled from the what if exercise; here in
the museum Felicia and I are leaning into
the Midwest-perfected constant of
passive-aggressive behavior. In the same
way you can imagine the ebb and flow of
our judgy pleasantries, your story, too,
has world-specific customs. These
originate with its designing principle.

Designing Principle

“The designing principle is what organizes
the story as a whole,” Truby says. I’ve
taught it as the “controlling idea” too—
either term works. It’s basically this: If I
gave your premise and world to a dozen
writers, how would the story you
write be unique, based on its structure? Here’s an
example from The Anatomy of Story:

A Christmas Carol:
Premise: When three ghosts
visit a stingy old man, he
regains the spirit of
Christmas.

Designing Principle: Trace
the rebirth of a man by
forcing him to view his past,
his present, and his future
over the course of one
Christmas Eve.

Remember the what ifs we asked about The Godfather? The story’s designing principle, Truby says, might be: “Use the classic fairy-tale strategy of showing how the youngest of three sons becomes the new ‘king.’”

I’ll posit the designing principle for Pride and Prejudice might be: Place a man and a woman in situations in which they must confront their prides and prejudices, learned from their norm-obsessed community, and let the resulting insights bring them together.

In our vacation example, the designing principle could be: Taking the shortest route possible to get there, a carsick-prone, insect-phobic family drives to Yellowstone National Park to navigate a potentially volatile reunion—and have the first good vacation of their lives. You can use time, place, narration—whatever structure works in your story. If you’re not writing fiction, a unique designing principle changes a recounting of facts into creative nonfiction.

Change

By the end of the story, how will your protagonist have changed?

Pixar has this great formula: Once upon a time there was ___. Every day, __. One day ___. Because of that, ___. Because of that, ___. Until finally ___.

It works because our caveman brains are constantly seeking lessons learned through experience—in other words, change. How did you learn to stop sleeping with ex-lovers? (I had these experiences.) What did your experiences lead you to do? (Change.)

I often pull up the Rainer Maria Rilke poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo” for my students. I tell them about how, feeling disappointed by his work, Rilke took a job with the sculptor Rodin. Wanting to write poems as densely physical as Rodin’s sculptures, Rilke studied his boss’s process and eventually wrote “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” a poem about something that is both broken and whole, that has suffered but is better for it:

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,
gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breast could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark center where procreation flared.

Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast’s fur:

would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.

Reader, here is what this character knew, and what he wanted. Here is what he experienced, and what he learned, and how he changed. What do you know? What do you want? How will you change your life?

Inner Motivation (want/need)

Oftentimes we know how our protagonists will change before we know what they want. In The Matrix, Thomas Anderson transforms into Neo, and his physical and psychological changes represent larger concepts (the Matrix versus the Real World; control versus freedom). But what precipitates this change? What did Mr. Anderson want, which would bring about the “one day” from the Pixar formula? Our doubting Thomas wanted the truth, and the truth will—well, you know.
How will your character change? Based on that change, and using the established rules of your story’s world, what could your character want or need that will shake everything up? Harry Potter needed justice. Elizabeth Bennet needed real love. Rilke needed presence. Our vacation family needs to find inner peace despite outer chaos; I need to feel confident that I’m a good parent—a good human—even if I don’t do things the way Felicia does. What’s your character’s inner motivation? How will you change her life in its pursuit?

Outer and Moral Motivations (wants/needs)

In each of the Harry Potter novels, our hero’s inner motivation (justice) remains the same, while his outer motivation (seeking the Sorcerer’s Stone, competing for the Goblet of Fire, and so on) changes. Another way of thinking of this is psychological versus physical. In The Matrix, Neo’s psychological need is to know the truth, while his physical need is to embody his true form.

It’s helpful if you can tack on a moral need as well. In addition to seeking personal fulfillment, both Harry and Neo have to save their worlds. I need to show my daughters that an unmarried woman can thrive at work, as a parent, and within her own skin despite the figurative and literal pandemonium the scenario occasionally hazards. As Truby tells us, not every story has a moral motivation, but good ones frequently do.

Beat It Out

Using everything you have above—Premise, What Ifs, Designing Principle, Character Change, Character Inner Motivation, Character Outer Motivation, and Character Moral Motivation—plot, or “beat,” your story out like this (based on Michael Hauge’s “Six Stage Plot Structure”):

1. Heroine lives in her ordinary world, where her inner motivation (need) is revealed through everyday action.
2. Something happens: an opportunity to change.
3. In taking the opportunity, Heroine glimpses what her life could be if she satisfies her need—but she’s unsure about giving up her old way of life.
4. Something challenging and opportunity-related forces Heroine to decide to try to satisfy her need.
5. Heroine chooses to move forward toward a new way of life but still won’t give up her old way of life.
6. Something happens to make Heroine choose to move beyond the point of no return—her old way of life, as she knew it, is gone.
7. There are complications; the stakes are raised.
8. Heroine experiences a major setback.
9. With everything to lose, Heroine makes an inner and outer show of living her personal truth and satisfying her inner, outer, and moral needs. Drawing upon who she’s always been and what she’s recently learned, she realizes she’s smarter/stronger/better than she ever thought she could be.
10. Heroine’s needs are satisfied (for good or for ill), and life has a new normal.

As you beat these points out, keep a red pen handy to note what the stakes are in each. There are always stakes. What are your protagonist’s? Your antagonist’s? What are the stakes for your story’s world?

If you’re working on nonfiction, focus on the moment of change in your story. Check to see if any of the above beats fit within your or your subject’s evolution. If so, consider structuring your piece in the
Hauge fashion—does the flow become smoother? More intuitive? Maybe the exercise won’t become your final draft, but instead helps you better understand how you feel or what you know about your topic. If so, think about structuring your piece in a way that echoes how you came to that understanding. If that feels difficult, find an object within your story and transfer the focus of your writing onto that—then give us your process of understanding the real theme of the piece in a parallel or secondary story within the piece.

Back at the museum, sitting in Felicia’s actual shadow, I look up from my bench and hope to find humility. A detail, a twitch, an indication that her stakes—as a mother, as a woman, as a person with needs and goals—aren’t all that different from mine. But before I can shift my perspective from the personal to the universal, a nine-year-old voice booms out over the crowd: “FUNK YEAH!”

And like gossip or fire or lice, the phrase spreads amongst the exhibit’s young visitors in a contagion of implication. Felicia looks at the water bottle next to my bag.

I’m not certain if it’s a grace or a curse that we each can’t choose our own life’s premise, but there is hope in our ability to structure our worlds. Rinse the wound, wrap it in tissue. Wave to the happily inappropriate kin. Swear to teach them about the stakes worth writing for.
Portuguese American writer Millicent Borges Accardi’s fourth and newest book of lyric poetry, *Only More So*, arrived on the scene in 2016. Glowing with sexual overtones and vulnerable language, this collection found its home in an Irish publishing house. Though the book remains young in its publication, Accardi already has another collection forthcoming entitled *Practical Love Poems*. She has received much recognition for her work, including but not limited to awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fulbright Program, CantoMundo, and the California Arts Council. Accardi, as if guided by fate, was named after The Millicent Library in Fairhaven, MA, where her mother went as a child, and where, at the entrance, is a stained glass window featuring the muse of poetry whose face is that of Millicent G. Rogers. Fittingly, Accardi has created for herself a life rich with language, encompassing the poet’s exceptional struggle to discover the right words.

Accardi’s career has been flooded with an array of locales, customs, and languages. She has attended writing residencies in places such as Lisbon, the Czech Republic, and Spain. The landscapes of her poems include locations such as Germany, Prague, and Vienna at different times in history.

Her work has also been honored by her beloved. Her husband, Charles Accardi, a visual artist, created covers for two of her books. For her debut chapbook, *Woman on a Shaky Bridge*, he contributed a portrait of her lounging on a zebra-striped couch. She says in a 2010 interview for *Women’s Voices for Change* that “it was one of those moments—I was sitting on the couch and Charles had finished a series of nude self-portraits, then, another series of fallen soldiers, and was about to launch onto a new pathway when he looked at me and said, There! I had just returned from yoga and had no makeup on and I was not all that engaged.” On the cover she appears open, her arms uncrossed, her sweater baring a shoulder. It stands in as the perfect persona for her poems—routine moments caught, full of vulnerability, and worthy of immortalization.

The title of *Woman on a Shaky Bridge* comes from a 1974 experiment in which two social scientists created a study to see how anxiety affected attraction. Some men were interviewed after crossing a solid bridge, while other men were interviewed after crossing a shaky bridge. The interviewer, a woman, was asked out more by the men who had crossed the shaky bridge.

When asked, in the article for *Women’s Voices for Change*, if she was the interviewer or the “observer of anxiety,” Accardi answered, “The observer. Poets are witnesses.”

Indeed, Accardi exercises this philosophy openly. In “Buying Sleep” from *Only More So*, Accardi uses a young male as the speaker of the poem, an approach many readers are unaccustomed to. In an interview with the *Portuguese American Journal* she says, “People have asked me
about the autobiographical nature of my poems, and I am shocked to think that they think the experiences I write or tell about happened to me. I just feel that an 'I' narrator is closer to the subject than a distant second, so for most of my poems, I adopt the role of someone else; like an actor. I put myself in that place where the poem can grow safely. ...” Her approach, and the subsequent reactions, raise the question—Is it time writers celebrated the voices of and utilized the languages of others more, as in contemporary fiction?

Accardi’s poetry is the poetry of witness—of her innermost self, of the thoughts and feelings of others, of different cultures. Poets like her allow us to look outside ourselves and see not only our lives as interconnected but also the danger of ignorance of other cultures and experiences. ♦
Sybil Baker’s first collection of essays, *Immigration Essays*, is varied in form and content, including pieces of travelogues, interviews, observations, and memories. Readers will spend time stuck ambivalently in the gentrification in Chattanooga, at borders and bus stations in Greece and Turkey, on hikes in South Korea, wandering through a select fem-lit history of female liberty, pondering the experience of a black man through the eyes of a white author, and listening to stories of refugees from Sudan, Cuba, Iraq, and Mexico. The breadth and depth of these topics might have sagged the collection with their weight, if not for the author’s mindfulness of her own place in the essays’ inquiries.

The book’s array traces Baker’s physical and professional sense of adventure. This is an author who has written several books of fiction. She is faculty at the Yale Writers’ Workshop and the fiction editor at *Anomaly*. She has earned two MakeWork arts grants and an Individual Artist Fellowship from the Tennessee Arts Commission, and she has taught abroad in South Korea, Hong Kong, and North Cyprus. She is a woman of the literary and physical world, and these essays prove it. Indeed, the occasional dangling content of the essays creates a sense of adventure. Along with the assorted content, the text is decorated with photographs, different methods of sectioning and division, and (with mixed success) footnotes. The variety of media and method builds a sense of “what’s next?” at the beginning of each essay that is both intriguing and fun.

Interestingly, beneath the skin of this lightness is a recurring sense of discomfort—a discomfort that highlights the complexities of Baker’s authorial situation. Combining the author’s adventures with other people’s experiences of real crises in the same project seems to suggest that a privileged white woman’s soul-searching around Turkey and Greece is similar to a black man’s experience in the United States or to a refugee’s flight from Iraq or Cuba. When she and her partner choose to live out of their car for a period, she writes, “There was something about our silly scheme that connected us in a small way to those forced to make larger and more significant sacrifices.” One wonders if the latter would agree.

This type of discomfort returns in various iterations and lingers, until Baker addresses it directly, which she does with regularity and always just in time. She self-identifies as a “fake immigrant;” she acknowledges her “luck to be born a person who could live in a tent for a few days, pack it up, and walk away;” and she muses that some of her fantasies while traveling “revealed a chasm between worlds, one of [her] own ignorance.” After
moving from the troughs of discomfort to the peaks of understanding, the reader begins to get it: These uncomfortable feelings are not just about Baker. The combination of these essays and its discomforts asks the formidable questions that haunt so many writers: How can a person write about the marginalized when she is advantaged by that marginalization? Do we as authors have the right to tell other peoples’ stories when those people are living and breathing next to us? Is it okay to presume connections with people when the distance between is as vast as tourist is to refugee?

Perhaps Baker warns us that we will not—should not?—sit comfortably through these pages. The collection opens with an epigraphic challenge to those who are free, borrowed from Toni Morrison: “The function of freedom is to free someone else.” Baker’s putting her freedoms to travel abroad and avoid discrimination at home next to the stolen freedoms of people behind borders and racist policies reminds us of Morrison’s charge. How do I use my freedoms? How do you use yours? How do we use our freedoms as writers, editors, and readers? Writer, editor, and reader Sybil Baker uses her freedoms to look these discomforts dead in the eye. ♦
A Review of Ian Stansel’s The Last Cowboys of San Geronimo

craft talk by Ellen Birkett Morris

At the beginning of his novel, The Last Cowboys of San Geronimo, Ian Stansel places the reader at a murder scene. The words What are you doing, brother? echo through the mind of Silas Van Loy, as his brother, Frank, lies dead in the dirt from a “clean heart shot.” Or, as Stansel puts it, his brother’s words “cling to the gnarled oak of Silas’s consciousness.” The gnarled oak, dry dust, and Marlboros left on the seat of the truck place the brothers firmly in the American West. This book is a modern Western complete with gentrified stables where real cowboys teach rich show riders to ride English-style, not Western, and drink California cabernet instead of whiskey. Yet, the flavor of the Old West is preserved by Silas’s choice to flee the murder scene on horseback and by a vengeful widow’s decision to pursue him.

The slow journey on horseback offers opportunities for meditative passages on the nature of the brothers’ relationship.

Reflecting on what brought them to violence, Silas muses:

Frank. The man was a pestilence. Silas used to keep a tally in his head of all the wrongs he’s been done by his brother, but at some point it became useless and impossible, one ill deed morphed into the next. A slight would recall an insult years back. Why bother to differentiate between one and another? It was a sea; what was the use of counting every polluted wave to come along?

Of course, this is just Silas’s side of the story. Frank’s widow, Lena, offers a window into the brothers’ bond, including their early business success as partners and the late-night dancing and drinking that followed. She is witness to the collapse of the business and their ten-year feud. Lena understands the brothers’ flaws, what drives their actions, and remains aware of the costs of those actions.

The novel uses the brother against brother archetype played out in the Bible with the story of Cain and Abel, in Roman mythology with Romulus and Remus, and in the Persian tradition with Angra Mainyu and Spenta Mainyu. In Stansel’s tale, the brothers are unpolished and impulsive—drinking hard and landing punches at the slightest provocation. They compete for the approval of their father. Silas recalls his father deeming Frank “the smart one” and saying Silas is just like him, “a collection of dumb old cowboy limbs.” That observation sends Silas musing in a beautifully written passage from which the novel gets its name:

The words hit like a blow to the head. Silas thought of his father’s death as the extinction of the species, but here now
the old man was telling him, no, you’re the last one. How humiliated he felt, how foolish. He sat there on the edge of his father’s bed, the last dodo, the lone mammoth lumbering across the prairie. Later, in the autobiography he wrote and revised in his head, the story of his life molded and edited to make sense of himself and the world, he had this dialogue with his father down as the moment he knew he would eventually sever himself from his brother and set off on his own.

Frank and Silas don’t embody different ways of seeing the world. Rather, they share a hardscrabble upbringing, a fighting spirit, and, as is ultimately revealed, a sense of honor that pushes the narrative to its conclusion. Like many classic sibling rivalry stories, they are fighting for control over the same ground, both literally when they run competing businesses and metaphorically as they continue to strive for their father’s approval even after his death.

What elevates this Western story above its brethren is its focus on the insights and experiences of Lena who bears witness to the brothers’ rise and fall. Early in the novel she is seen this way:

Only a few cars passed that first morning, their headlights cutting through the dark, illuminating the mist settled on the fields flanking the road. And none of those drivers and passengers would recall seeing a middle-aged woman atop a horse, her eyes ringed with grief but blazing with intent.

Women are often window dressing in Westerns. They serve as the wife, harlot, or victim. Not Lena. She is the character in the novel who most often acts with intention and full awareness of consequence. She is the one who nurses her father-in-law through cancer, teaches the kids at the stable whom no one else wants to teach, and decides to avenge her husband’s death. As the novel goes on, it become apparent what she has given up for “the tall man in the Stetson, the one who could charm with a side smile, a wink, the one who shot her fun, lusty looks across a party room, and who danced terribly with a tumbler of whiskey in hand, who knew how to make love to her at night and sometimes in the day and who didn’t bother her often in the morning.” Lena also offers her own take on what drove the feud: “Their hostility had little to do with the specifics of their past together and everything to do with bull-headedness and stupidity, with some innate male urge toward violence.” Ultimately, she is left to make sense of the killing and reckon with what is left behind.

While Lena pursues Silas across Northern California, he seeks respite at a llama farm run by a lesbian couple and the gay ex-husband of one of the women who lives in an outbuilding. When one of the women sees his picture in the paper, Silas is forced to flee. These secondary characters reveal an ugly side of Silas and increase readers’ understanding of how actions between the brothers have gotten out of control. Silas, fueled by the woman’s fear, lets loose with a homophobic rant. Stansel writes, “He didn’t mean any of it and hated himself for it even as the words sliced past his teeth. He sounded like some mean and ignorant redneck, the kind of person he would normally disdain, the kind of person he’s always feared he really was.” Anger and impulsivity mark Silas’s behavior throughout the book. He feels misunderstood, and his actions do nothing to allay the conflict.

Similarly, Lena encounters another group while in pursuit, including a big man named Roger, who wants to engage Lena in a debate about horses. Lena feels the absence of her husband acutely and contemplates what it would feel like to draw her gun on Roger. Her impulses
toward violence, including her pursuit of Silas, seem to be an effort to correct the imbalance of power that had her sitting on the sidelines for years, watching the brothers’ rivalry play out.

As the novel ends, the reader knows what unites the brothers as well as what had divided them and just how far familial obligation goes for these siblings. Stansel returns the reader to the scene of the shooting with a clearer sense of what motivated the act. There is also the final, inevitable standoff between Silas and Lena, which occurs on a beach as the waves roll in, adding to the sense that this tale of sibling rivalry will continue to be played out over and over through time. At its core, The Last Cowboys of San Geronimo is a meditation on brotherhood, the beauty and pain of an unbreakable bond forged by blood and tested by circumstance. ♦
Kelley died today.

It would be the only three words I would write in my journal for a few days.

My cousin’s death propelled me into a void, one not even my typically nihilistic mind had yet conjured. Though she was my cousin, Kelley had fulfilled the role of sister in my life, especially since my own sister labelled me harshly. Kelley didn’t understand or read poetry, but she read mine, my books, the academic journals I sent her that housed my poems, and each week when Kelley called me, she asked about my writing.

Prior to Kelley’s passing, I’d started a new project, a manuscript titled The Pale Goth, a hybrid collection of autobiographical poetry and artwork that I hoped would dispel negative stereotypes of the gothic subculture. Many of the poems focused on music, art, goth aesthetic, and, stereotypically, death, as well as all sorts of weirdly beautiful creepiness (e.g., Slavic folklore, Egyptian symbolism, cemeteries at night). On the day of Kelley’s death, I’d drafted a poem titled “Lacrimosa,” in which the Pale Goth imagines losing her best friend (I never imagined the poem would become a sort of prophecy): “In my head, I pen an eulogy for a friend who’s not yet dead.”

In the weeks after Kelley’s death, when I finally managed to resume formulating coherent thoughts into verse, I felt hesitant about including poems that utilized Kelley’s death as the subject matter because of how intimate the subject of death was at that point in my life. Then, I considered the mainstream’s view of the gothic subculture: a bunch of bondage-strap-clad delinquents with an unhealthy preoccupation with death, gore, fetishism, occultism, self-harm, and other questionable subject matters. In fact, the gothic subculture is the opposite (though we do respect and acknowledge horror, death, the macabre, etc.) As YouTube vlogger Freyja MacLeod (also known as “Black Friday”) states, “Humans are herd animals. And we all want to find the tribe in which we belong.” For most of us who “join,” the subculture is a place where we can celebrate not only our differences and our individualism but also our interests in art, poetry, history, literature, religions, and anything else we goths decide to add into our intellectual and personal repertoire.

And, so, I began drafting. The first poem, titled “How the Heart Ruptures,” came after I learned of Kelley’s official cause of death—myocardial rupture:

III.

Sudden syncope, chest pain, the distension of the jugular vein. The rupture occurs where damaged muscle abuts the healthy; the most dramatic rupture is the rupture of the free wall, associated with immediate collapse; the rupture occurs in areas of shear stress.
The poem depicts the clinical process of myocardial rupture, but, more importantly, the poem became my way of shuffling through an emotional onslaught: how at a young age, my parents taught me that death is part of life; how people who did not know me, because of their subculture stereotypes, thought I approached death and grief; how, at age thirty, I knew I needed to accept Kelley’s death. The poem’s structure, which rotates between clinical analysis and personal reflection in four short stanzas, functions as a portrait of the ruptures then appearing in my life: my immense grief and Kelley’s death—both sudden and swift and incomprehensibly deep.

The second poem, “A Station of Grief,” plays on the Catholic Church’s Stations of the Cross. This devotion, also known as the “Way of the Cross” or the “Way of Sorrows,” refers to a series of images depicting Christ on His way to His crucifixion, and the images are accompanied by prayers. In the poem, the narrator is the thread an undertaker uses to sew shut a corpse’s jaws:

I am the thread who forgets how this ends,
where the director ties the knot and how he ties it
when he cinches closed the soul’s escape hatch
where I now reside beneath glued-shut lips.

After Kelley’s death, as part of my emotional and mental preparation for her funeral, I read academic articles that detailed corpse preparation, the embalming process, and how undertakers help struggling family members through grief. The poem’s enjambment represents the sudden tug of the string the undertaker uses to sew shut the corpse’s jaws.

I deeply questioned my faith, and the poem mulled in my head until days after Kelley’s funeral because, though I did not want to accept that Kelley was gone, I had to begin the healing process both for my sake and my family’s sake; at the same time I recognized that if I needed to grieve for days, for weeks, even for months, then I could allow myself my own station—that of grief.

For weeks, I remained firmly stationed in my grief, but in my manuscript, I found a respite from it too. Throughout the month of March, I wrote, and I cried. I bawled through my thirtieth birthday, knowing that, unlike past years, Kelley would not be the first family member to call me on that special day. I struggled through publication successes, acknowledging that Kelley was no longer one of the first people I texted to announce the news. I struggled with simple conversations because every day I recognized that Kelley was no longer home in the evenings or on the weekends for me to call when I needed loving, sisterly “girl talk,” those hour-long phone calls when she would ask, “What’s happening?” and I would answer, “Oh, nothing,” and then we’d launch into giggling fits about some oddball scenario—a friend of mine referring to his granddaughter as “that little girl” or her dog opening the kitchen sink cupboard and eating an entire box of dog treats.

Instead of talking to friends, to colleagues, to my fiancé, to my parents, I turned to my journal, and I showed my family and friends a fake happiness so they would think I was okay. I would find myself detailing the waves and
undulations of sadness, cheerful memories, questionings in extensive entries, determined to return to some state of rationality. However, when I felt at my lowest, that’s when the Muse struck, and I would find myself drawing inspiration for poems from snippets—entire stanzas, a sentence or two—from my journal entries.

In many ways, the motivation I formerly possessed for teaching, for participating, for finding the typically unacknowledged beauty in life’s blacks and grays and imperfections faded, and I slowly passed into a state of carelessness, which eventually formed into the poem “After My Cousin’s Death,” in which the Pale Goth confesses that her mourning is affecting her relationships, her work performance, etc.:

I’ve misplaced everything:
the watch my fiancé gave me for Easter last year;
the keys to my ten-year-old pickup;
a friend’s letter, received days ago, that demands a reply.
I can’t find paperwork in my office—receipts, reimbursement forms, quizzes needing graded, the manuscript to a new collection that, three months ago, I determined I’d finish.

In “Since My Cousin’s Death,” I portray the Pale Goth’s emotional and mental turmoil through her act of losing simple items that hold sentimental meanings. I also played with the stereotype that goths are continually depressed about everything (Not true! Don’t let our black clothes and macabre senses of humor fool you!), because at this point in my grief, I fulfilled the stereotype, which benefited my writing because fulfilling the stereotype granted me entrance into many unexplored crevices and deeply macabre and melancholic places within myself that I had not visited in a very long time (let’s say twelve or thirteen years). Thus, “Since My Cousin’s Death” displays the Pale Goth’s floundering as well as her recovery (thanks to the help of a few caring people), though she continues acknowledging and recognizing loss and the benefits of sharing her experience with others:

The fiancé says not to worry.
I’ll find the watch in the oak armoire
my cousin gave me for Christmas or
in the craft supply box in my room
where I keep my painting and embroidery materials.

After I finished the poem, which was later published on vox poetica, I realized that I needed to re-stitch myself and my wounds, that I needed to check off tasks on my daily to-do list, that I needed to live and participate because, whether I wanted to believe it or not, that is what Kelley would have wanted me to do, and I poured these concepts into the final stanza of “Since My Cousin’s Death,” which expresses the need for healing not only for one’s own sake but
also for the sake of others, and how re-entering one’s routine can serve as a cliché, yet needed, healing process:

But I need the paperwork:  
the receipts and forms,  
the quizzes my students want,  
not because they’re concerned for their grade,  
but because they’re curious about  
what’s incorrect on the multiple choice section—  
the one they deem most important for discussion  
and review for the final.

In the months after Kelley’s death, I continued writing poems for The Pale Goth. As I wrote, I repeatedly recalled a scene from the German documentary Mein Leben in Schwarz (My Life in Black), an independent documentary directed by Anna Schmidt (MDR, Central German Broadcasting) that follows various members of the German gothic subculture. The documentary examines why people enter the gothic subculture, gothic subculture aesthetic (specifically the incorporation of ancient, religious, and death-associated symbols), society’s reaction to and discrimination of goths, and the creative outlets (art, music, fashion, literature) that the subculture provides for its members. One goth, Ronny, often takes walks through a Leipzig cemetery, where he reflects on the transience of life. He states: “We ‘Gruftis’ reflect a lot about death. For many people, the subject of death causes fear. But death is part of life. And it is very important to reflect on.” Ronny also states that when he was twelve, his grandmother passed away, and, shortly after her death, he began writing poems about the night his grandmother died and about the longing he felt: “Only later I became aware of the fact that already early on I had started being part of the scene.”

After I remembered what Ronny says in Mein Leben in Schwarz, I realized that despite mainstream society’s stereotypes about a subculture understood by few yet judged by many, despite society’s disassociation with what comes to us all at the end and at any moment, I had used writing a manuscript as a grieving process: to mourn; to admit depression; to play into negative stereotypes in order to reach an unexplored part of myself; and revisit my own levels of Hell I thought I would never visit again. I formed a manuscript that pays homage to a safe place (the subculture) that I discovered years ago as a misunderstood teenager, a place in which I could celebrate my individuality, life, and creativity. Most of all, however, using my manuscript to acknowledge and respect death reminded me that I must continue doing what is most important, and, along with writing, what is most important is living.

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Contributors

David Armstrong (fiction) is the author of two story collections, *Going Anywhere* and *Reterrations*, and a chapbook, *Missives from the Green Campaign*. He teaches creative writing at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, where he lives with his wife and son. Updates and links to his individual stories can be found at davidarmstrongwriter.com.

Joe Betz (poetry) lives and teaches in Bloomington, Indiana.


Terry Hall Bodine (poetry) holds degrees from the College of William & Mary and the University of Mary Washington. Her poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry, ellipsis, Passager*, and online at *Typishly* and the Maier Museum of Art. Terry lives in Lynchburg, Virginia, with her husband, Bill.

Joanne M. Clarkson's (poetry) full-length collection *The Fates* won Bright Hill Press’s contest and was published in 2017. Her chapbook *Believing the Body* from Gribble Press appeared in 2014. Clarkson’s poems have been featured in many journals internationally. She is a registered nurse and lives in Olympia, Washington.

Boston-based writer and photographer Susan Currie (art) visually documents life’s “meanwhile” moments, often using her pictures as inspiration for free verse. She is the author of *Once Divided* (Shanti Arts, 2016) and its recently published follow-up, *gracenotes*. In April she will share her signature creative process in a week-long creative workshop for writers of all levels, *A Page From Thoreau*, at Maine Media in Rockport, Maine.

Christina Dalcher (fiction) is a linguist from the Land of Styron and Barbecue, where she writes, teaches, and channels Shirley Jackson. Find her work in *The Airgonaut, The Nottingham Review*, and *New South*, among others. Laura Bradford represents Christina’s novels. [http://www.christinadalcher.com](http://www.christinadalcher.com) // @CVDalcher.

Jessica Danger (creative nonfiction) lives, writes, and teaches in southern California. She holds an MFA from Bennington College. Her work has been published in several journals, including *Crux Literary Journal, Wild: A Quarterly, Gold Man Review, Thin Air Magazine*, and *Mud City*. She was recently shortlisted for *The Iowa Review* Nonfiction Prize. Her memoir *No Heroic Measures* is forthcoming.

Allison Darcy (creative nonfiction) is a writer, seeker, and graduate student of religion. In recent months, her work has been published in *Jewish Currents, The Forward, Nat. Brut, Write About Now’s litter, Poetica Magazine*, and *Vagabond City*. She tweets at @_allisondarcy.
Anthony DiPietro (poetry) is a Rhode Island native who previously worked in community-based organizations on issues such as violence, abuse, and income inequality. He is a candidate for a creative writing MFA at Stony Brook University and teaches undergraduate courses. His poems appear in numerous journals and are linked from his website: AnthonyWriter.com.


Stephanie Flood (art) was born as an orphan in the Philippines and raised adopted in the United States. She is a librarian, writer, and artist based in Arizona. As a Pushcart Prize nominee, Stephanie has stories, art, and essays in literary magazines and journals. Her adoptee media had been featured in adoptee conferences, organizations, and blogs. You can view her website at http://smflood.weebly.com

Sara Gray (fiction) studied creative writing at the University of British Columbia. She lives in Toronto. She had previously been published in the York Literary Review and can be found on Twitter @thisaddledbrain.

Kelly Grogan (creative nonfiction) lives in Santa Barbara, California. She received her MFA from Antioch University, Los Angeles with the support of a private grant from The Elizabeth George Foundation. Her work is forthcoming in the New Plains Review and was shortlisted for The Iowa Review Fiction Award.

Lisa Hayes (craft talk) teaches undergraduate literature and writing in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

LM Henke (art) is from another place and time.

Patrick A. Howell (craft talk) is an award-winning veteran of banking. His essays have been published in various publications such as Entrepreneur.com and Huffington Post. His short stories have been published with the Mandala Journal and Xavier Review. He is a contributor for The Tishman Review's Craft Talk series.

Miriam C. Jacobs (poetry) is a University of Chicago alumna and teaches writing, literature, and humanities. The “Ravine” poems are part of a series exploring the Hebrew Bible from non-traditional perspectives. Jacobs's work has won an Atlanta Review International Publication Award (for "Ravine 4") and placed in Poetica's Anna Davidson Rosenberg Award competition (“When You Enter/Ki tavo”), both in 2017. Her poetry has appeared in The Reform Jewish Quarterly, Calliope, and other publications.

Jill McCabe Johnson (poetry) is the author of two poetry books, a nonfiction chapbook, and two edited anthologies. Honors include a Nautilus Book Award, an Academy of American Poets award, and a Mari Sandoz Prize in fiction from Prairie Schooner. She teaches writing at Skagit Valley College and directs the nonprofit Artsmith.
Betsy Johnson-Miller’s (poetry) work has appeared or is forthcoming in Alaska Quarterly Review, Prairie Schooner, Boulevard, The Rumpus, and North American Review.

Kara LC Jones (art) is the Creative Grief Educator and the ARTist behind GriefAndCreativity.com. She co-founded both the Creative Grief Studio and KotaPress. She’s a Carnegie Mellon University graduate who interned three years at Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood back in the day.

Jury S. Judge (art) is an internationally published artist, writer, poet, photographer, and political cartoonist. She is the cartoonist for the The Noise, a literary arts and news magazine. Her Astronomy Comedy cartoons are also published in The Lowell Observer. She has been interviewed on the television news program NAZ Today for her work as a political cartoonist. She graduated magna cum laude with a BFA from the University of Houston-Clear Lake in 2014.

Born in Yerevan, Armenia, Shushanik Karapetyan (art) is a psychotherapist by profession and an artist by avocation. She utilizes art as a therapeutic tool with her clients, and her profession as a source of inspiration for self-reflection and expression.

Featured as one of “the greatest up-and-coming fiction writers today” in the Amazon description of Best Short Stories from The Saturday Evening Post Great American Fiction Contest 2014, Kendall Klym (fiction) is a prizewinner in multiple short story contests, with publications in Puerto del Sol, Hunger Mountain, and other literary magazines. A former professional ballet dancer, he received a PhD in creative writing from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

Ksenia Lakovic (fiction) grew up in Belgrade, Serbia, earned a PhD at UCLA, and now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She recently completed her first novel, about life in Belgrade between the 1990s and today, and the Yugoslav diaspora.

Rosa Lane (poetry) is author of Tiller North (Sixteen Rivers Press, 2016), winner of a 2017 National Indie Excellence Award and 2017 Maine Literary Award, and Roots and Reckonings, a chapbook. Lane received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Her poems have appeared in Crab Orchard Review, New South, Ploughshares, Verse Daily, and elsewhere.

Shayne Laughter (fiction) has lived in Seattle and New York City, and now resides in her hometown of Bloomington, Indiana. Her karmic-mystery novel, Yū: A Ross Lamos Mystery, was published by Open Books Press in 2010. Her stories have appeared in Matador Review, Bacopa Literary Review, and SAND.

Catherine Roberts Leach’s (art) photography focuses on improbable combinations that others may miss. It has appeared in solo and group exhibitions in galleries from New York to California and been published in numerous print and online publications including, at the request of Yoko Ono, on the cover page of her website: imaginepeace.com.
**J.M. Leija** (creative nonfiction) is a Detroiter and graduate of the Bennington Writing Seminars. By day she is a teacher/disguised superhero who tries to convince her students that reading is cool. On nights and weekends she is a writer torturing herself over whether writing about things that have really happened and people who really exist can ever be ethical. She writes about them anyway. Her work has previously been featured in *A Detroit Anthology* and *Seeking Its Own Level: Motif*, an anthology. She was a 2015 Write A House finalist.

A resident of the state of New York, **Stephen Mead** (art) is a published outsider artist, writer, and maker of short-collage films and sound-collage downloads. If you are at all interested, please place his name in any search engine in conjunction with any of the above-mentioned genres for links to his multimedia work and merchandise.

**Tim Mellish** (art) is a freelance Australian cartoonist who works as a statistician by day and a cartoonist at any other time. He is married with two grown children and enjoys keeping fit and drinking coffee. He draws a single panel comic, *Truth be Known*, which is up on [comicssherpa.com](http://comicssherpa.com).

**Jeff D. Min** (poetry) prefers bridges over walls. His ancestors are his silent guides, and his wife is a living reminder that the only thing that matters, in this life and the next, is love.

**Jed Myers** (poetry) lives in Seattle. He is author of *Watching the Perseids* (Sacramento Poetry Center Book Award), *The Marriage of Space and Time* (MoonPath Press, forthcoming), and two chapbooks. Recent honors include the Prime Number Magazine Award for Poetry, *The Southeast Review*’s Gearhart Poetry Prize, and the McLellan Poetry Prize (UK). Recent poems can be found in *Rattle, Poetry Northwest, Southern Poetry Review, The Greensboro Review, Natural Bridge, Valparaiso Poetry Review, Solstice, Canary*, and elsewhere. He is poetry editor for the journal *Bracken*.

**David Nelson** (fiction) is a writer based in Chicago. Previously, his short story “Tusk” was published in the *Rappahannock Review* and earned an honorable mention for *Glimmer Train*’s August 2015 Short Story Award for New Writers. Currently, he is at work pitching a novel while also writing a true crime book.

**Dayna Patterson** (poetry) earned her MFA from Western Washington University, where she served as the managing editor of *Bellingham Review*. She is the poetry editor for *Exponent II* magazine and the founding editor-in-chief of *Psaltery & Lyre*. [daynapatterson.com](http://daynapatterson.com).

**Jen Sage-Robison** (poetry) was born in Torrington, Connecticut, where generations of her family worked the mills, taught school, built houses, and guarded the sewers. She is interested in stories of the working class, outsiders, and women, always. Jen leads Amherst Writers & Artists workshops at Westport Writers’ Workshop and seeks to amplify vulnerable voices.

**Tempus Serene** (art) is a young, self-taught artist from Detroit, Michigan. As a child, Serene used art as a tool for manufacturing adventure and mastering quick escapes from reality. Nowadays, art continues to play an equally nurturing role. You can learn more at: [www.tempusserene.wordpress.com](http://www.tempusserene.wordpress.com).
Seth D. Slater (fiction) writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. His work has appeared in various publications, including TreeHouse: An Exhibition of the Arts, Bird’s Thumb, Canyon Voices, The Tower Journal, and Metonym. Slater is completing an MFA in fiction at San Diego State University and interns for Fiction International.

Erin Slaughter (creative nonfiction) holds an MFA in creative writing from Western Kentucky University. In 2017 she was a finalist for Glimmer Train’s Very Short Fiction Contest and has been nominated for a Best of the Net Award and a Pushcart Prize. You can find her writing in River Teeth, Bellingham Review, Sundog Lit, and Gravel, among others. She is the author of a poetry chapbook, Elegy for the Body (Slash Pine Press, 2017).

Sara Moore Wagner (poetry) is a Pushcart Prize nominated poet whose work has appeared most recently in Gulf Stream Magazine, Gigantic Sequins, Alyss, Stirring, and the Pittsburgh Poetry Review. Her chapbook, Hooked Through, was published by Five Oaks Press in early 2017. She lives in Cincinnati with her husband Jon and their children, Vivienne, Daisy, and Cohen.

Julia Wendell’s (poetry) most recent poetry collection is Take This Spoon. Her memoir, Come to the X, will appear in 2018. She currently lives in Aiken, South Carolina.

Sarah Wetzel (poetry) is the author of River Electric with Light (2015), which won the AROHO Poetry Publication Prize and Bathsheba Transatlantic (2010), which won the Philip Levine Prize for Poetry. Traveling between Manhattan, Rome, and Tel Aviv, Sarah also teaches creative writing at The American University of Rome.

Sibyl Woodford (art) is a photographer and visual artist based in London. She likes to create art that tells a story. Sibyl loves the bizarre beauty, the unusual, and tries to capture it in her work.

Terry Wright (art) is an artist and writer living in Little Rock. His art has been featured widely in venues, including Queen Mob’s Tea House, Potion, Sliver of Stone, Jet Fuel Review, Third Wednesday, and USA Today. Exhibitions include the 57th Annual Delta Exhibition. Deep dive to cruelanimal.com.

Nicole Yurcaba (craft talk) teaches in the English department at Bridgewater College. She is the third place winner in central Virginia’s Skyline poetry contest, and her novel, Razorblade Kyiv, is available through Red Dashboard Press.

Tara Isabel Zambrano (fiction) lives in Texas and is an electrical engineer by profession. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in SmokeLong Quarterly, Moon City Review, Slice, the minnesota review, and others. She is a prose reader for The Common.
Remains of the Day by LM Henke
Sheila Arndt (fiction reader) is a PhD and MFA candidate living in New Orleans. She cares about the modern and postmodern, critical theory, Americana, saltwater, garlic, canines, old blues, and new dreams. Her poetry and prose has been published in The Tishman Review, Gravel, and Literary Orphans, among other places. Follow her: @ACokeWithYou_.

Much of Mary Ann Bragg’s (copy editor) written work can be found scattered all over her kitchen table in Provincetown, Massachusetts. She’s pursuing an MA in English at UMASS Boston and worries about the economic health of her hometown in southern West Virginia. Visit maryannbragg.com.

Lauren Davis (associate poetry editor) is a poet living on the Olympic Peninsula in a Victorian seaport community. She holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars, and her work can be found in publications such as Prairie Schooner, Spillway, and Split Lip Press. She teaches at The Writers’ Workshoppe in Port Townsend, Washington.

Aaron Graham (associate poetry editor) is a military veteran and was the Cecilia Baker Memorial Visiting Scholar for the 2016 Seaside Writers Conference. His work has appeared in Cleaver Magazine, Print-Oriented Bastards, SAND, The Rising Phoenix Review, The East Bay Review, Zero-Dark-Thirty, and F(r)iction. His chapbook, Skyping from a Combat Zone, was shortlisted for Tupelo Press’s 2016 Sunken Garden Poetry Prize. His first full-length collection, Blood Stripes, was a finalist for Tupelo's 2015 Berkshire Prize; his poem "Olfaction" won the Seven Hills Literary & Penumbra Poetry Prize; and "PTSD Poem #12" was nominated for the Best of the Net. Aaron recently received an English lectureship appointment at Kennesaw State University and is finishing his PhD in literature at Emory University.

Jesse Holth (poetry reader) is a freelance writer and editor based in Victoria, British Columbia. She is a contributor for Huffington Post, Thrive Global, and Seaside Magazine, and her writing has been featured in over half a dozen international publications. Her poetry was recently selected for a gallery exhibition, has appeared in several literary journals, and will be included in a forthcoming anthology from the University of Regina Press. She is currently working on two full-length collections of poetry.

Emily Huso (assistant fiction editor) is pursuing her MA in English with a creative writing emphasis at California State University, Chico. She was a participant in AWP’s spring 2017 Writer-to-Writer mentorship program. When she isn’t working on her latest story, she enjoys freelance copywriting, coffee dates with friends, and, of course, reading.

Tyler Jacobson (copy editor) holds a BA in English and in Spanish from Walla Walla University. He is primarily a professional circus artist specializing in handbalancing and contortion (@tylerarykwat on Instagram) but also enjoys editing copy.
Sarah Key (craft talk editor) is a ceramicist, ESL instructor, and VR/AR optimist. Her work has appeared in The Greensboro Review, Tricycle, Kudzu, NAILED magazine, HeartWood, and elsewhere. She is the founder and director of a secular organization, Nashville Women in Atheism, and performs research on misophonia. Follow her (@serahki) on Twitter.

Tasslyn Magnusson (community outreach coordinator & fiction reader) lives in Prescott, Wisconsin just outside of the Minneapolis-Saint Paul metropolitan area with her husband, two kids, and two dogs. She has an MFA in creative writing for children and young adults from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She writes poetry for adults and poetry and fiction for children.

Melissa McInerney (nonfiction reader) earned her MFA in fiction from Bennington College in 2015 and her BA from the University of Texas, Austin in 1981. She has written series of short stories about growing up in boomtown Houston, blogs about living with Lyme disease at http://lifeandlyme.net/blog/, and is working on a memoir. She has been published at http://www.fiftiness.com and her work has appeared in Logophile Magazine and Jet Fuel Review. A late bloomer, she tolerated the south and its unrelenting heat for years. Now she thrives in Colorado with her grown daughter, three dogs, and a cat. She hikes, swims, and avoids skiing.

Alison Miller (fiction reader) is a fiction writer and freelance editor. Her work has appeared in The Tusculum Review, edifice WRECKED, and elsewhere. She grew up in Ohio but now calls the Sunshine State her home. When she’s not writing, she enjoys biking with her family.

Colleen Olle (assistant prose editor) spent her childhood summers climbing trees and reading books and sometimes reading books in trees. At the University of Michigan, she won a Hopwood Award for essay writing and from the Bennington College Writing Seminars she earned an MFA in fiction. She works as a freelance editor and lives with her husband south of San Francisco.

Katie Phillips (copy editor) lives (and writes, works, bikes, and walks dogs) in the Chicago suburbs with her husband and their ancient Alaskan Malamute. Her chapbook Driving Montana, Alone (Slapering Hol Press) was published in 2010 and the title poem was later read by Garrison Keillor on The Writer’s Almanac.

Jennifer Porter (co-founder, prose editor) lives just outside East Lansing, Michigan. Her novella The World Beyond can be found in The Binge-Watching Cure anthology from Claren Books. She has an essay in the current issue of The Ocotillo Review. She spends her days with three dogs and three cats writing, editing, conducting research, and fixing an historic home.

Meaghan Quinn (associate poetry editor) lives and teaches creative writing at a boarding school in Massachusetts. She holds an MFA from the Writing Seminars at Bennington College. She was nominated for Best New Poets 2015, a 2015 Pushcart Prize, and was a recipient of the Nancy Penn Holsenbeck Prize. Her poems are forthcoming or have been published in A Portrait in Blues: An Anthology, Off the Coast, r.kv.r.y., HeartWood, 2River, Adrienne, Triggerfish Critical Review, Free State Review, and other journals.
Maura Snell (co-founder, poetry and art editor) lives and works in New England.

Alison Turner (associate prose editor) is a PhD student in literary studies at the University of Denver. She was born in the mountains of Colorado where she learned to spend large amounts of time outside. When traveling, she insists on visiting public libraries.

Gene Turchin (nonfiction reader) recently retired after 12 years of teaching electronic engineering technology and mechatronics in West Virginia. Prior to teaching he worked as a network engineer and telecommunications technician before stumbling into the academic life. He has published how-to articles in technical magazines including Servo and Tech Directions in addition to poetry and short fiction in literary journals. He spends the winter months in Florida where he is currently working on a science fiction novel and comic book scripts. Most recent published works can be found in VerseWrights, 365 tomorrows, With Painted Words, Aurora Wolf, The Literary Hatchet, The Ginger Collect, Eye to the Telescope, and The Broadkill Review.

Catherine Weber (website design) is an award-winning poet and artist who works with encaustic, photography, paper, and textiles. She was raised in upstate New York, Indiana, and Connecticut and now lives in Massachusetts. She holds a BA in communications from Emerson College and an MA in critical and creative thinking from the University of Massachusetts.
THE BINGE WATCHING CURE
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THE BINGE WATCHING CURE
Edited by Bill Adler Jr. & Sarah Doebereiner
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Presenting THE TISHMAN REVIEW's 2018 Tillie Olsen Short Story Award with final judge Tori Malcangio
Tillie Olsen was the author of the short story collection "Tell Me a Riddle", the story "Requa I" as seen in Best American Short Stories 1971, and several journalistic pieces from the 1930s about the struggle for economic justice. All of these works have been gathered by the University of Nebraska Press—Bison Books.

Olsen was born in 1912 on a tenant farm in Nebraska, the daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants. Early in her life, she began crusading for worker rights and was jailed for organizing packinghouse workers and participating in strikes.

She continued working as an activist her entire life, especially in her San Francisco community. She and her partner Jack Olsen suffered under McCarthy’s witch hunt. Olsen died at the age of nearly 95—a mother, grandmother, award-winning writer, feminist, and human rights and anti-war activist. Olsen’s family has graciously given The Tishman Review permission to name our short story contest in honor of one of our heroes, Tillie Olsen.

Entries should consist of unpublished short stories not longer than 5,000 words in length. Manuscripts and filenames must not contain any identifying information. All entries must be received through Submittable. The contest fee per entry is $15.00. Entries will be accepted between February 1st and March 30th, 2018. Simultaneous submissions are allowed—please withdraw your story immediately if it is accepted elsewhere for publication. All details can be found on our website:


All entries are considered for publication and all entrants receive a one-year e-book subscription to The Tishman Review.

The winner receives $500.00 and publication in the July 2018 issue.

We are pleased to announce that our 2018 final judge is Tori Malcangio.

Tori Malcangio received her journalism degree from Arizona State University and her MFA from Bennington College. She lives with her family in San Diego where, besides writing fiction, she is also a freelance advertising copywriter. Stories are forthcoming or have appeared in: Glimmer Train, ZYZZYVA, The American Literary Review, The Chattahoochee Review, Mississippi Review, AGNI Online, Tampa Review, cream city review, River Styx, Ruminate Magazine, Passages North, and more. She is a winner of the William Van Dyke Short Story Prize, The American Literary Review Fiction Prize, and the Waasmode Short Fiction Prize. She was awarded a 2016 Writing by Writers Residency and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She hopes to one day find the last line to her novel.

Submissions open February 1, 2018 and close March 30, 2018
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