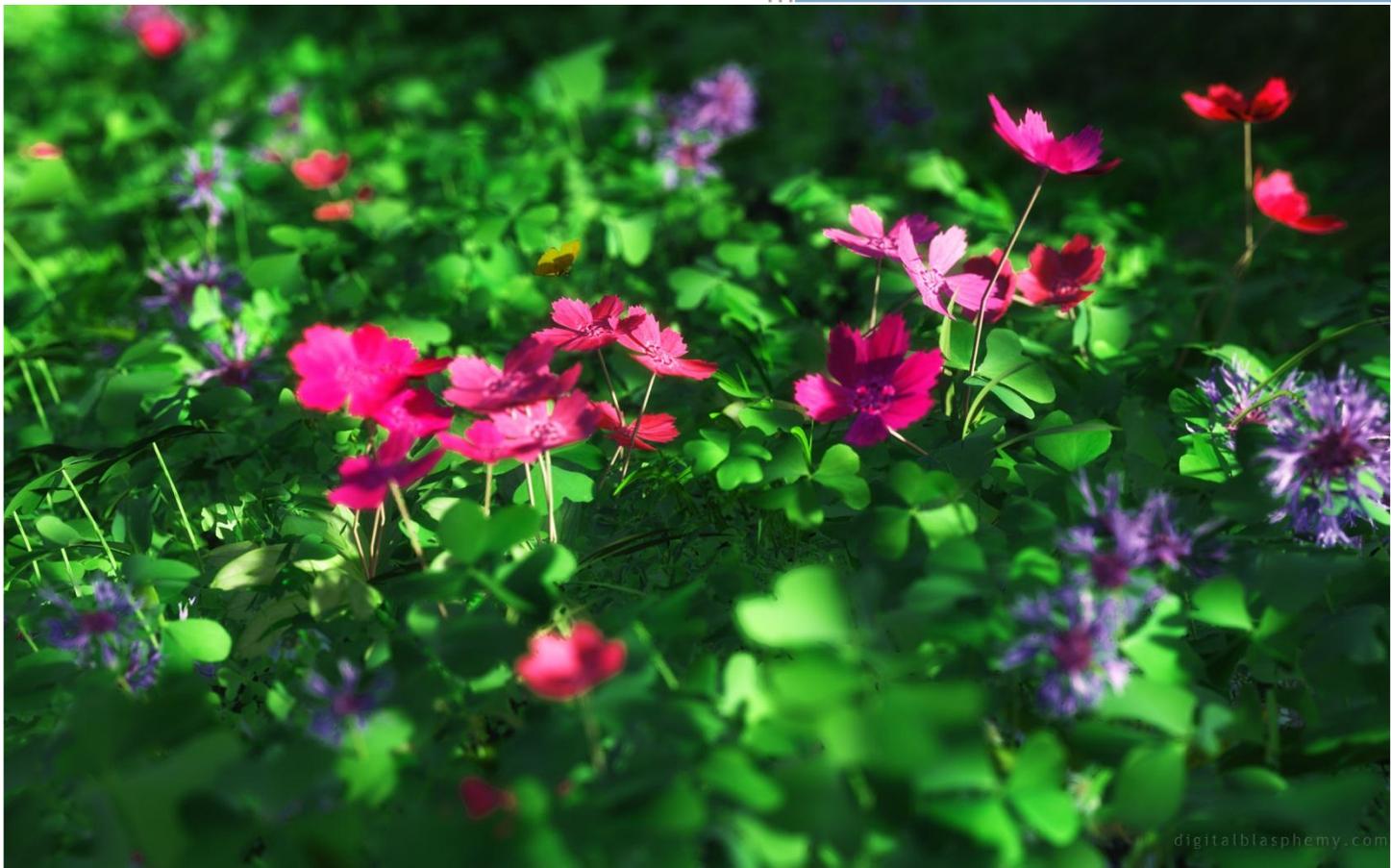


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The Oklahoma Review



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**NONFICTION**



**City Seams by Sandra Soli**

## Goodbye to Eleanor Johnson by Betsy Bell

I am perched on the commode by the bed in their master bed room. It is late June, 1986. Mom can't make it to the bathroom any more. Her face is contorted in pain. I put my hand on her thin leg, barely raising a hump under the summer blanket. She looks at me and tries to smile.

"Mom," I start to speak about my disappointments in how far we have drifted apart, how distant we have become. How I never tell her anything anymore. Our phone conversations are strained and stilted. Her smile twists into a grimace. I begin again, "Mom", I say.

He bursts in and demands that I say nothing sad. "We will have no tears. I don't want her crying. You'll get her crying. None of that."

I never get any words out. Instead I turn to him and say, "She needs more morphine. She is in terrible pain. Let her have morphine."

"It hasn't been four hours yet. She has to wait."

"Why?" I say defiantly, getting up from her side to face him, chin raised.

He grabs me by the shoulders, pulling me to the foot of the bed, face into mine. "I am her doctor. How dare you question me? I will decide. How can you bring this up in front of her? She trusts me."

I turn to look at Mom, whose head goes down sideways on her propped up pillow. She whimpers to the room, to the Universe, "I'll never please him."

When I fly home the next day, I do not realize it was the last time I see her alive. She dies on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. I call Grace, her oldest granddaughter, to tell her. "Independence Day for Grandma," is her solemn response.

There was no goodbye. No words of comfort. No thanks.

I fly back for the memorial service against my father's wishes. "Don't come," he admonished. "I don't want you here."

"I am coming. I need this memorial service."

Aunt Ethel, Mother's sister and best friend has been in Muskogee through the last days and stays on for the service. She and I go through Mother's drawers and closets loading bag after bag for Goodwill. There are five left breast prostheses, weighty, pendulous like the breasts I knew as a child. I am stunned. I have worn a prosthesis for years and years and never have more than one at a time. My cancer was long before hers.

Then we go through the furs: a luxurious cape of sable, a full length black bear, too heavy to wear in Oklahoma, anywhere—it weighed a ton; the foxes with their glass eyes, two head to toe across the shoulders and one more on each side, teeth grasping their compadres at the base of the tail, their own tails hanging down; the fur car coat, reaching just below the seat. We work without comment.

I hold inside the stream of judgment, the condemnation of waste, of animal cruelty, of critical assumptions about her insecurities needing to own all this stuff. Aunt Ethel working beside me says nothing. She scrimped all her life, leaving with Uncle Marty each morning to take the subway from Highbridge in the Bronx to lower Manhattan. She worked as a secretary, he as a meat packer on the Lower East Side. He dropped dead in my parents' kitchen on their very first vacation after he retired.

The service begins. Her friends huddle on the left side of the large sanctuary filling several rows. The center section is reserved for the family. My brother Eric, my father, my aunt and I sit in the front row. Our younger brother Lyman does not come back for the service. The rest of the church is empty.

The minister does not know my mother. His sermon is off the mark. Something about the salt of the earth.

"No." I scream inside, not the salt of the earth. More like the lilies of the field, the swallows who soared. She was a dancer, a singer, an artisan who painted, did needle point, knitted, sewed beautiful complex clothes for herself, for me, for her granddaughters. She led the square dances; would take my arm and go skipping down the side walk. She played the violin. Nothing salty about her, a fire ball with snappy brown eyed anger and a mind for detail that made the Hospital Auxiliary's store a profit center. I would have told her life.

My father, my molester, wanted it impersonal, the more impersonal the better.

In the church parlor, the ladies had coffee, tea, cakes laid out with the best Methodist linen, doilies and silver, lemon slices like paten on a silver tray, a two pronged fork nearby. My father stood severe and unapproachable and left the church as soon as he decently could. He made sure everyone present knew that they would not be welcome at our house that afternoon or later.

At home, a truck delivered three trays of sandwiches, fruit, crackers and cheese, little cookies. I opened the door and let the man deliver them to the kitchen table. We had food for seventy people.

Mother, who hosted every event graciously, calmly, was neither here in body nor in spirit. I stumbled through my sudden tasks as mistress of this house with no compass. The town was so scared of Dr. Port Johnson, that no one came. We were left to retreat to the far corners of this big rambling knotty pine home we'd been raised in.

One friend from down the street rang the doorbell and came in. I had always thought of her as old money. Their pillared porch was anti-bellum. She had gone to the Hockaday School for girls in Dallas, TX. She knew what was right to do and paid my father no heed. I was grateful for her visit. Her presence made this final goodbye more real.

My father left Mother's ashes at the morgue. Neglected again, she slipped into category "Jane Doe." He found a new way to ravage me, denying me all knowledge of her remains.

For weeks after her death, for years, I wandered the cemeteries in Seattle, in towns where I visited, drawn to them, locating my grief in their green lawns and head stones. I found an area full of Scandinavian names in a north Seattle cemetery, Johnson (both her maiden name and her married name) etched on several. A weight lifted by reading Johnson out loud, tears flowing, sobbing with the pain of losing this mother who relived her born-of-immigrants life through me. She pushed me, as she herself had been pushed to experience the best that Muskogee, Oklahoma offered. I had been her hope to achieve the success any stranger in American could win, no matter what the cost.

Less than a month after Mother's death, my daughter Eleanor, her namesake, married on an island north of Seattle. My father came. Mother had planned to dance at this wedding. After the ceremony when all mingled, enjoying the feast, my friend Casper came to find me. "You'd better come to see about your father." He led me to a corner table where my father

was weeping, openly sobbing “She should have been here. She should have been here. She . . . wanted . . . this . . . so . . . much.”

I put my arms around him. Our embrace washed away those shaming years. For the first time in memory our bodies touched as father and daughter. I froze that moment, a still life of acceptance. It was over in seconds. With a final judgment, he vanished. I never saw him again. My father put a gun to his head years later.

I went to his funeral. The minister did not know him. I do not know what was done with his ashes. My brothers never told me.

### Children of the Damned by Louis Bourgeois

The first time I laid eyes on him was in Agriculture Class and we were both assigned the task of filling sausage skins together. Other students were paired up and assigned different tasks, cutting ribs from pigs, cleaning up scraps as they fell to the floor, air packing steaks and pork chops. This was a real-to-life rural school in Southeast Louisiana. Its claim to fame was a 100% white student population. The rural district itself was believed to have the highest Ku Klux Klan membership in the entire county. I remember even the school's teachers bragging about this supposed record to kindergarten children in this school that never had a single "nigger" student in the whole of its history.

Chris Jenkins was different from the other rednecks at Sixth Ward Jr. High School. I'd just transferred from Catholic school in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and had long brown hair, played the saxophone and classical guitar and was an avid Beatles fan. All of this was unheard of at Sixth Ward Jr. High School, and the hicks tore into me ever chance they got. Luckily, I was bigger than most of them or they would have killed me for sure. Also, I played football since the third grade and was quite healthy and could outrun them most of the time, this also helped with staying alive in this rural environment. Once, during morning recess, I had no less than twenty of these degenerates chasing me all at the same time and somehow I managed to outmaneuver them all. Not once did a teacher ever come to my rescue, even though I wanted protection from them badly and wasn't ashamed to take it.

Chris, on the other hand, was one of the few children my age at this school who didn't want to kill me. He had the same crew cut as the rest of the hicks and wore the same cheap jeans and flannel shirts, he wore the same wide belt and obligatory western style belt buckle, but he also would come to school no less than twice a week sporting an Iron Maiden t-shirt. He must have had a whole wardrobe of them because he almost never

wore the same one twice in a month, and each shirt had a different name for a different Iron Maiden song or title of one of their albums, such as “Killers,” “Run to the Hills,” “The Trooper,” and my favorite, “Number of the Beast.” I’m not at all sure how he got past the teachers wearing these violent and seemingly blasphemous shirts, but as far as I know they never called him on it.

He was soft spoken and a slow learner. He was fourteen when I first met him and still only in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, there was an emptiness about him that made it even hard for the worst bullies to pick on him, much less beat him to a bloody pulp like they wanted to do to me. I got the sense that he didn’t have parents, it just seemed like he was raised by his grandparents or an aunt and uncle, but I don’t know that for sure. The fact that he attached himself to me, certainly the most hated kid in the school, couldn’t of done much to help his self-esteem. Even the ones who would talk to me called me “The Jerk,” and they meant it. That I was Chris Jenkins’ only friend was a bad sign for him. We only hung out together at school, and then only in a vague way. We’d talk about fishing and hunting mostly, or about what classes we were failing. We were both cowards. I was big, fast, and mean but I didn’t like to, or, rather, couldn’t, fight very well which was all but a death sentence at this school where most of the students had family and they’d stay huddled together like rats waiting to pounce on anyone who didn’t have any family connections at the school. But Chris and I didn’t really get close, because as pathetic as I might have been, he was even lower than me, so much so that it usually made me extremely uncomfortable to be around him for more than a few minutes at a time. On more than one occasion, he’d ask me to stay the weekend at his house but I’d always come up with some excuse and refuse him. Unlike Chris, at least I had the luxury of being a true outsider to account for my un-popularity, whereas, Chris was so unobtrusive that no one even bothered to beat him up. One couldn’t sink much lower at this school, where black eyes, broken noses or fingernails broken off in the face were at least indicative that you existed, that at least you were there without question. For all practical purposes, Chris Jenkins didn’t exist at all.

About a year or so after we first made sausage together in Ag class, he came up to me at noon recess and asked me if my dad told me about their hunt together that weekend? My dad lived in Slidell whereas I lived with my mother and stepfather about twenty miles away in the piney woods of LaCombe. He’d recently been hired as an electrician’s helper by the St. Tammany School Board and he would travel throughout the parish and do electrical work. My dad loved to hunt squirrel and when he was working at a rural school, he’d always scout out squirrel hunting spots in the vicinity. He found an excellent grove of moss hanging live oaks at the back of a cemetery not far from Sixth Ward Junior High and he stumbled across Chris sitting at the trunk of one of the huge live oaks.

Chris had a .410 shotgun cradled in his arms—they said hello, each of them a bit apprehensive about finding the other in the woods. They exchanged names in the cemetery and Chris apparently caught on to my dad’s last name as being the same as mine so he told my dad we went to school together. They hunted the whole of the evening together under the dark oaks. They did well too, they shot three grey squirrels apiece and Chris shot a trophy mount Fox squirrel. I was jealous that Chris got to hunt with my father. He described their hunt in his weak voice and with such melancholia that I couldn’t really get angry with him even though I wanted to. I was quite possessive when it came to sharing my dad whom I didn’t get to see but twice a month usually. But I couldn’t get mad at Chris. I thought it strange somehow that they should meet in the woods like they did since, in my mind, Sixth Ward is so far from Slidell. It just felt funny that someone besides myself was hunting with my dad, especially another kid. I did feel a sense of betrayal, but on my father’s part, not on Chris’s. I remember how furious I got once when my father had taken a cousin of mine fishing out in Lake Catherine for speckle trout and red fish. It certainly didn’t help matters when I found out they filled the white skiff they were in all the way up to the brim! Then I found out my cousin caught a shark, a rather large sand shark. I was steaming because I’d always wanted to catch a shark but never did and here my younger cousin comes along and catches one the first time he ever fished in salt water, and with my father, my father! But now all these years later, the thought of Chris and my father walking through the woods together side by side with squirrels hanging from both of their belts fills me with an immense peace.

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Chris dropped out of school in the eighth grade and consequently out of life. When I was sixteen years old, I moved out of the country and in with my father in Slidell for a while. That summer I took a job landscaping. One day I was weed eating the parking lot at the back of a bank. There was a metal hallway that connected the bank to another building, a law firm. I shut the weed eater off and walked under the alleyway to get out of the heat and take a breather. It was semi-dark under there with the only light coming from the opening of the law firm entrance. I heard a voice from the dark side of the hall say, Hey, you want to buy a stereo? I knew instantly it was Chris Jenkins, for I’ve never heard such a tremble of humility in a voice in all my cursed years on earth as meek as his, not even from the worst rejects I’ve met in the streets when I was nearly a bum myself. I have never heard such resigned desolation come out of a mouth. Chris, I said, what in the world are you doing in the city? He stood up and took a step out of the darkness and stood and shook my hand gently and said, Luke, it sure is good to see you after all this time—I’ve fallen real low in life and don’t think I’ll ever get up again. In the half light of the alcove I could still see the country boy face I knew from childhood, way back in junior high school, but he wore his hair long in dirty looking demi-blonde

locks—he sported a short but thick mustache and even in the dim light of the hall I could see the needle marks that ran up and down his arms. He had on the same kind of cheap jeans he wore in junior high and he was still wearing an Iron Maiden t-shirt, although I can't recall the song or album he was wearing on this particular day: I had to get back to work so we didn't talk for long but he was quite adamant about me buying the radio, which had a cassette player, as they did in those days long before CDs and iPods. He drew his face a little closer to me and said, Please buy it, for the love of God buy this stereo from me. I'm only asking ten dollars, I need ten dollars worse than anyone in the world, don't you believe me? I believe you, Chris, I said, but first let me hear how it sounds. He bent over and pushed the play button on the cassette player and loud and clear was the voice of Bruce Dickenson from Iron Maiden belting out these words:

*He's watching, like a small child,  
But watch his eyes burn you away,  
Black holes in his golden stare  
God knows he wants to go home*

Chris pushed the stop button and said, See, it's a hell of a bargain for just ten dollars, but not the cassette, Iron Maiden is all that keeps me going.

I bought the radio and never saw Chris Jenkins again. I wonder what he would think, if he's still alive, I really just wonder what he would think if he knew I was writing about him tonight? I wonder if any of the books I've written would mean anything to him at all? Does he even have any real notion about what a book is? Would the very notion of writing be as alien to him as opera music is to me?

### Room for Saltwater by Jess Hagemann

Growing up, I practiced a blind and common form of hero worship for my grandfather. He was the ex-fireman who'd saved so many lives, who'd survived a tornado, who made exquisite furniture in a basement woodshop smelling of raw pine and Red Man. Catching fish with him on an Arkansas lake, I hung on every story of derring-do, of days past, and I tucked them like little valentines into the fleshy corners of my heart. I was fortifying my heart because someday the one organ would have to support us both. Grandpa was a smoker. When I was young yet he had his first heart attack. A few years later he had another. Several years more and he suffered the first in a long string of gradually more debilitating strokes. The strokes left him squishy. Muddled, helpless, a puddle of the man he used to be. Then he'd get better, until the next one. He never quit smoking for long. He drank like he was still eighteen, an enlisted boy in the Navy. Once I loved him because I didn't know about these things. Now I love him despite them, and even because of them--because they have made him the man that he is.

Today my grandfather is in hospital. He was scheduled to go anyway for pre-op, before undergoing a radical open-heart surgery the doctors assured him would cure his all-consuming dependence on a rash of frequently-conflicting pharmaceuticals. When he showed up, however, he was completely delusional. Talking to people that weren't there. Insisting on making a salad out of his bed sheets. His doctors canceled the surgery immediately, assuming Jack had had another stroke. Instead of pre-op he went to Radiology for a CT scan. As his liver-spotted body slid into the big white donut he thought he was cashing in at the slot machines. When the black and white graphics of a brain slice filled the screen he was snoring intermittently. Breathing intermittently. Sleep apnea, and sometimes he simply forgets to inhale.

The CT scan was normal. Lots of damage, yes, but nothing they didn't know about before. Back in his room, Jack woke and he was hungry. Saw the defibrillator on the nightstand, believed it was a stove. Searched the room for a spatula. Did we want grilled cheese sandwiches, too? And I wondered what memory he was re-living. In seventy-four years my grandpa rarely helped cook anything that wasn't steak. The kind of food he could stand outside barefoot to cook, with a beer and a tiny javelin for a meat fork. But maybe he made his daughter a grilled cheese sandwich once. His granddaughter. Maybe he knew his daughter was there today, though he called her Jane. It wasn't a stroke, they said. Rather, the patient exhibits symptoms remarkably similar to those of an alcoholic experiencing withdrawal.

Alcohol. Cigarettes. Suddenly the rage inside me comes to a furious head. It's his own damn fault. He thought he'd be the only one to suffer, and look the man's not even lucid, not hardly present. A whole world is collapsing around him, tears down faces, saltwater seeping sluggish over heartstrings. He tries to grab the coffee that hasn't been there since yesterday morning. He's livid because he wants his coffee. I'm livid that a pile of selfish decisions landed him in this joint, left us waiting here, muddled, helpless, and oh wait what was that line about it being his life? Yeah fuck that. Fuck that. Grandpa. Grandpa.

### Prologue: Get What You Need by Jessica Hahn

On ancient Schwinn, my sweaty husband and I pedal over a bridge crossing Stann Creek in the country of Belize. We are newlyweds making a beeline for a cemetery. It is also our honeymoon.

*Don't be wandering round the cemetery after dark*, the guesthouse proprietor warned before we pedaled away from her guesthouse, which was quiet from lack of guests. I agree with her. I will find the tombstone that belongs to one of parents, a tombstone I haven't visited in maybe twenty-five years. I'll pay my respects by cleaning it up, and carry on. I don't have a map or a photo. I know my parent's name, birthday, and death day, and the poetic instruction that this tombstone was placed under a wild plum tree, facing the sea.

My husband is a good sport. I think he really loves me.

We cruise off the bridge and into the heart of the town where the noisy market jumbles onto the road, careening past a lady carrying sacks of groceries, and a man in a straw hat pushing a dolly stacked with crates of oranges. It's late in the morning, but the town is alive. Trucks and cars vie for space on the narrow streets. We peddle out of the busy ruckus, rolling into a neighborhood of clapboard houses with rusty window screens.

I feel high, although the only substances inside me are red beans and rice, half an omelet, and a few fry jacks that I ate an hour ago under a flapping tarp-covered roadside stall. This is a mash-up of a vacation, a honeymoon to revel in new love and the promise of the future, but also a paradoxical quest for family and connection to the past. My parents met on an island and then lived a seafaring life together, in love with each other. This love story continues even after the death, it can be argued. Just three months ago I was married in my backyard on a California Indian summer day.

Curly-tailed dogs yap in dirt yards. I veer into the center of the road. There are no cars anymore, and the few passersby are black Caribs, the Garifuna whose ancestors were West Africans and Caribbean indigenous people. They have a special religion, a mixture of West African, Catholic, and Indian beliefs. Back in my parents' day when they lived in this country as American expats, Dangriga was still called Stann Creek. Now the town holds the Garifuna name instead of the colonial one.

The heat begins sapping the strength out of my legs. I'm dripping sweat. My pores feel open, sucking in dust and sunshine. An ocean breeze rejuvenates me for a second. Things are slowing after the next mile. Focus on the red-brown road, I think, and then at the dark blue sweat stain on Marshall's back as his torso wiggles back and forth on his bicycle. Zinc roofs twinkle at the edge of my vision.

I actually feel a little sick. Fear of not finding this tombstone, which I think would give me a sense of closure, gives me this feeling like a nest of spiders has hatched in my guts. Breathe out. Pedal. Remind myself that this is the one weird, dark blip in my honeymoon, and that since I requested this side trip to Stann Creek, a town barely any tourists go to except as a jumping off point for the outer islands, that I better cheer up.

The road is full of potholes and a few stray dogs with protruding ribs. There's a little girl maybe ten years old and she's carrying a toddler on her hip. There are men and women on the street, and crones with headscarves and long skirts, the passing faces curious and quiet except for one boy in a blue and white striped shirt and oversized Nikes who goes sailing by on his bicycle in the opposite direction, calling out, "Hellooo!"

Rain begins to fall, a warm, tropical, heavy shower that lasts about two blocks. Cumulonimbus clouds make dark silhouettes against the blue sky.

Suddenly the cemetery appears. I'm shrunk like a Lilliputian in comparison to this vast acreage where grass grows five feet high, the air literally vibrates with the buzz of insects, and the tombstones—those in one piece—look like snagged, crooked combs rising out of the weeds. "Holy cow," I say, skidding to a stop. "How the fuck am I going to find this?"

I'm not sure what a wild plum tree looks like, but none of the trees I see dangle any fruit, green or purple. I'm flabbergasted. So many lives bloomed and wilted in the years since I was last here as a child visiting with my sister, one parent, and an adult friend who had been on one of my parents' ships. My parent and the friend drank an old bottle of wine rescued from a French cruise liner that had been caught on the reef. My sister and I had wandered around, not mourning, just tired and a little grumpy.

I stand at the edge of Dangriga's cemetery, flummoxed by how it's all directions but east, where it borders the frontage road alongside the sea. The air hums with insects, and they fall on my shins and bite me till I'm hitting myself.

"Let's do it," Marshall says, walking in. We push down an overgrown pathway.

It's so hot even the mosquitoes rest somewhere, but some other species of biting bug clusters on our ankles. The air smells moldy. Every blade of grass is heavy with water. My feet squeak in my flip-flops. The immensity of this cemetery, and the thought of plowing through these weeds, is overwhelming. I stop to breathe, hands on my hips, before stooping to read a tombstone. Then I notice the sound, a rhythmic *thwack thwack*. Three cemetery workers are silhouetted in the distance. We navigate through the knee-high weeds to the trio of men with machetes, whacking at the undergrowth. Their dark skin glistens with sweat. They stop to watch us. An old man sits on a tombstone and wipes his brow. He's wearing a black tank top, camouflage pants, and flip-flops.

“Excuse me,” I say to him. “Are you the caretaker?”

The old Garifuna man stands up. “I am Manfred.” His face is creviced with wrinkles, but his muscles sit like rocks under his dark skin.

Marshall and I introduce ourselves, and shake hands. Manfred might be in sixties but he’s much stronger than my husband or myself, who are also strong people. Manfred’s man’s hand is fissured with calloused cracks, and when he peers at me, I try not to keep focusing on the yellow sclera of his eyes.

“My parents met in Belize,” I tell him. “They were seafaring hippies. One of them is buried here.” Manfred listens carefully, eyes on me. I tell him the name of my parent, and then add, “But this was in the 1970s. Did you work here then?”

“Yes, yes,” Manfred says, then glances over at his two co-workers, Garifuna men in their thirties or forties. He barks in a language I can’t understand, a patois of the region, some mix of Garifuna, English, and Spanish. The two co-workers rest their machetes and sit on the nearest headstones.

I continue, “They shipped tallow between the States and Central America, until one day...” I stop for a second. It’s so strange to begin tell a story I learned in my adulthood. I’ve found that one can easily go through life knowing very little about anyone if they don’t ask questions. Once I began to ask, my parents became new people to me. I tell Manfred and his co-workers about the manner of the death, how my parent ended up in Stann Creek’s cemetery. “It’s my honeymoon,” I add with a smile, and the men murmur in their patois to each other. “I’m here to pay my respects,” I say.

One of the guys shakes his head and says, “Whoa man,” and I wonder did he say “woman” or is he surprised by the story?

Manfred chews something inside his mouth, nods and tells me, yes, he does remember the story. “You can’t forget a story like that.” He nods again. “So you must find this tombstone?”

My thumb spins my wedding ring around, hiding the sparkling diamonds. Manfred’s gaze is unflinching. He folds his muscular arms over his chest. “There are hundreds of tombstones here! You won’t find it easy. Mon, I can find it.” He picks at something in his long teeth. I ask about plum trees, since the tombstone was under one. Manfred replies, “We cut those down long time ‘go.”

I feel ill—the trees are gone? My primary way of identifying my parent’s tombstone was to search around each wild plum tree. It’s like I’m in a labyrinth, a hot, sweaty maze, and I’m being watched by people sitting on top of the tallest wall.

One of Manfred’s coworkers, a lean, muscular Rasta with dreadlocks wrapped up like a turban and a Lion of Judah pendant around his neck, jerks his hand. “There still some plum trees, man. Look there.” He points to a squat, windblown tree with branches arcing over tombstones. The

third man, who's wearing a Laker's cap and has a big belly, chuckles and rests his foot on top of a tombstone. I feel a jolt of frustration, of being played.

"That's a wild plum tree?" I ask the Rasta. He nods, and I believe him. "Okay, we're going to look around those," I say to him, then Manfred and the one with the Laker's cap. "Thanks for your time."

"I hope you find that tombstone," Manfred says, moving as one with his guys back into the tall grass. Marshall and I begin this quest again.

There aren't too many plum trees left, just three or four. They could be mistaken as gangly shrubs with thorny branches. In the backyard of the house I grew up in, for most of my childhood, was an old plum tree with leaves perfectly serrated and dark purple, a species completely different from the wild plum trees of Belize. The fruit on this wild plum is yellow and reminds of a citrus.

I circle around one crabby tree, rubbing the faces of dirty tombstones when I can't make out the old-timey names. *Nelson, Elizabeth, and Tillie. Walter, Orlando, Jorge, and Amelia.* In the background is the *whoosh whoosh whoosh* of machetes, the murmur of sporadic conversation, and the chirring of insects.

I have this sense of hubris that some sixth sense will guide me to this tombstone. Or maybe a spirit, or some ancestral compass inside of me. Just about every culture believes in life after death, and although I'm no churchgoer, sure I believe in spirit. My scientific minded husband would debate this, but he's about fifteen tombstones away. We might agree on physics postulating that everything is energy, and energy changes form, it doesn't die or get created. But on a sub-atomic level, everything is energy. If so, each of us is not just a series of genes and inherited patterns seen at skin level, but a bit of everything.

The Nobel Prize winning physicist, David Bohm, speaks of an "unbroken wholeness" in his book, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. He writes: "Individually there has developed a widespread feeling of helplessness and despair, in the face of what seems to be an overwhelming mass of disparate social forces, going beyond the control and even the comprehension of the human beings who are caught up in it." Sometimes it feels good to think about things on a sub-atomic level where there is no past or future, no you or I. Maybe we are just one big cosmic soup of energy; how simple and brilliant.

I wander closer to the men working in the cemetery, thinking they might have the answer. There are three of them, and they look like they've spent days outside, chopping weeds, mixing concrete, setting forms, and digging holes, burying the dead.

I pull out a water bottle out of my backpack and share it with Marshall. We both sit down on the edge of a tombstone. “I used to think going to cemetery was cool,” I say, shaking my head. “I used to like to hang out in them.”

“I like the old stones and the names,” Marshall agrees. “They’re peaceful. But they’re pretty boring.”

I think about being a kid and wandering down the leafy trails of Highgate Cemetery with its Victorian mausoleums draped in English ivy. In high school, I sometimes hung out in cemeteries in Colma, the Californian city where the dead outnumber the living. Somebody played acoustic guitar played as a joint and a bottle of wine passed among friend. Years later after leaving college, I thumbed my way to New Orleans and found myself in the St. Louis Cemetery Number One, strewn with Mardi Gras beads and Greek Revival tombs, loving the peace among the stone angels. But this cemetery does what the others can’t do—it makes me sad.

I say, “Let’s pay Manfred to find the tombstone.”

Marshall’s mouth pinches up—he’s a do-it-yourselfer to the core, preferring to wire new circuits in the garage, solder a copper pipe, or drain motor oil rather than hire someone else to do it. After a moment he takes my hand and agrees.

Manfred looks pleased as he pockets twenty American dollars into his pants. “Yeah man, I’ll find your parent’s grave,” he assures me, but his body is sideways to me and he’s patting the air with one craggy hand. “Come back around sunset,” he instructs.

“Wait a moment, please,” I ask, pulling out a notebook to write my parent’s name on a sheet of paper. Manfred takes the paper, our fingers touching, and his skin is like bark. I’m reminded of our contrasting lives, of past ten years as a schoolteacher, with fingers pampered in manicurist’s shops.

He asks, “You want us to clean the tombstone up?”

I had imagined cleaning was my job, a kind of filial piety. But now that he mentions it I say, “Let me see the tombstone first. Can we still meet a little before sunset?”

“Yeah man, all good,” Manfred says. He nods his hoary head, holding a stiff, dry hand in the air as a goodbye or an affronting gesture, and shuffles into the brush. I feel like an idiot, like a real spoiled princess with my diamond ring. These men chop weeds in a rural, tropical cemetery while a thousand miles away I try to teach teenagers how to organize their thoughts within a stifling classroom. I feel like tourist is written across my forehead. My parents never felt farther away than now. My husband tugs at my sleeve. “Let’s go eat lunch,” he says, and my stomach involuntarily rumbles.

\*

Sunset splashes brilliant red, gold, and purple streaks across the sky and bathes the tombstones in pale lavender when Marshall and I return. The heat has dissipated, and the insects are less noisy. Somewhere drums beat a staccato rhythm; the Garifuna celebrate Christmas in the weeks before the actual event, I've read, with a special dance called John Canoe, or Jonkunu, where dancers don masks of peach-colored fabric that represents the old slave masters, and wear belts covered with shells that rattle as the dancer hops, and headdresses with colored balls of fabric and tall feathers that point to the sky. Drums beat in the distance, and I wonder if they are the Jonkunu.

There is nobody but us in the cemetery, and the light is falling. "Come on, we can keep looking for that tombstone," Marshall says, leading the way, my vision blurry from tearing up. I'm so sad. All I can think about is the fact we're catching a bus out of Dangriga tomorrow morning, and my mission was never accomplished.

Four figures appear at the far edge of the cemetery. I can't tell if Manfred and his co-workers are among them, as the sun is behind them. One swings a machete as casual as if it's a switch. Suddenly Manfred's voice calls out, "I found your grave," and the skin tingles on my neck.

I leap after him through the damp weeds, scattering mosquitoes, my heart hammering, all the way to some big and very unfamiliar tombstone. Manfred points his machete at it with triumph. The man with the Laker's Cap goes and stands on the cement base, and I focus on his toes nearly hanging over the edge of his plastic sandals. In my mind it feels like I'm on the edge of a precipice, threatened by vertigo.

I say, "I'm sorry, but this isn't it."

Manfred's eyes flash. "This *is* it. This is the grave, one American who died here. Man, I dug the hole!" He whacks the earth with his machete. No longer does he look like anyone's wise old grandfather. "I cut down the wild cherry tree here, me!"

Marshall's hand goes to his side. He keeps a pocketknife on him at all times, but it's back in San Francisco because of airline security. I touch his bicep, tense under the long sleeves of his shirt.

I stare at the tombstone and begin to doubt myself. There's no writing on it, no evidence of male or female interred under this stone. "I was a kid when I came here last," I say. "I remember something much smaller."

Manfred smacks the air. "Bah!"

I'm desperate for closure. I look at each of the men in their faces—Manfred with his disgusted expression, Laker's Cap who is literally lording over this tombstone, the Rasta who avoids my eyes, and the fourth guy, who is holding back a smile. Would they try to sell me someone else's tombstone? These men are religious, family men.

Manfred lays out his terms: “For a hundred-fifty dollars US we replace all the concrete. Chop away the old, bring in the new. Paint it nice, white, freshen it up. We start tomorrow morning, mon.”

I don’t know what to do. “No concrete work. That’s too much.”

The men talk in patois and Manfred cackles, lightly chopping at the dirt with his machete. He says to us, “One hundred dollars, American.”

Marshall yanks his bicycle out of the grass and says, “That’s way too expensive for an hour or two of work and half a gallon of paint.” I squeeze his hand. He takes a deep breath through his nose and says, “I’m thinking more like fifty.”

“Eighty dollars,” the man with the Laker’s Cap butts in, challenging Marshall.

“Sixty,” Marshall counters.

The newcomer and the Rastafarian looks at me with sympathetic eyes. They stand back from the haggling, as I do.

Manfred jabs his hand in the air. “Seventy.”

It’s agreed upon, and I tell myself I’m not here to grieve. Marshall peels three American twenties and a ten from his pocket and gives them to Manfred.

“Thank you,” I say. “I appreciate your time and your energy.” But I can’t shake my doubts, and I ask, “What if this is the *wrong* tombstone?” But Manfred insists that it’s the right one. I’m suddenly thinking I should call it off.

I wanted a tombstone and I got one, but probably not the right one. The playwright Oliver Wilde once wrote, “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” This is my moment of truth.

I run my hands through my sticky bangs. Claiming this tombstone is a terrible decision to make. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. Who knows the future—when I’ll come back, if I’ll have children, or how long I’ll live. If I’m so lucky to have my story unfold over years, maybe I’ll return with children or family, and have a picnic on a stranger’s grave. I smile bitterly.

“Can I have your phone number?” I ask Manfred, knowing I can call in the morning if I change my mind. He points at the Rasta and says he’s the only one with a phone.

The Rasta says, “I can give you my number.” Our fingers touch as I pass over a notebook and a pen; his hand is as damp as mine. We are not so different. For all I know, he is any man; just like my husband he might be someone else’s husband, someone’s brother, or someone’s son. I thank him, reading that his name is Michael, and up steps Manfred to say good-bye.

It’s the next morning and the sun shines through the louvered blinds of King Burger, a greasy restaurant on the far side of Stann Creek. The air smells of fried meat and boiled cabbage. Plates

arrive—scrambled eggs, fry jacks, refried beans, and slices of tomato. We shake Marie Sharp hot sauce over the plates. My mind is on that tombstone.

“I should call,” I say to Marshall, then think to myself that I wish we had gotten up earlier. There’s not enough time to walk to the cemetery; if the work gets done, I won’t see it until I visit Belize again, and who knows when that will be. I have this sense of doom, that the gravestone is not my parent’s. I say, “I need to call off the work, and they can just keep the money.”

Marshall thinks I ought to let the work proceed, but I run outside to a payphone and dial Michael’s phone number. The phone rings and rings—the sound is distant, tinny, underwater. The bright sunlight overexposes the street. Humidity rises up my legs. Sweat beads on my face as the phone keeps ringing. I hang up, feeling so upset I could cry, scream, or smash the phone on the receiver.

In my mind is a song that was frequently sung to me as a child: *“You can’t always get what you wa-AAnt. You can’t always get what you wa-AAnt. But if you try some time, you just might get—get what you need, oh yeah!”*

I walk back in the restaurant, resolved to let the tombstone go.

\*

Marshall and I get into a funky former school bus that coughs diesel soot from its exhaust pipe, and motor out of Dangriga. As we pass through the outskirts and alongside groves of orange trees, I notice a different feeling. Corny as clichés are, I feel lightened, unburdened. I don’t feel things are right or good, but there is no pressure to find something.

I’m not in control of many things, like the cemetery, or the way time alters a stone face, erasing features, letters and numbers. The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley had it right in his poem, “Ozymandias,” reminding us that of constructed monuments to mankind “nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away.” Dangriga’s cemetery is like a haystack, and my parent’s tombstone—if it still remains even as a chunk of rock—is lost as any needle among dry grass.

I didn’t get what I wanted, but maybe what I needed: a visitation to a place that meant something. I didn’t succeed in the way that I imagined, but life goes on. My husband presses against my side because I’m at the coveted window seat, and because I’m his new wife.

What I need is to tell a love story, not a tragedy. And though this seems like the end, it’s the beginning.

Marshall’s thumb rubs the back of my hand. The further we travel from Dangriga’s cemetery, the closer I am to the present. I give Marshall a quick kiss on lips that smell like hot sauce, and enjoy the weight of his arm around my shoulders. For a moment I watch a woman standing in the aisle in

the front of the bus, her body swaying as she chats with the driver. We are all going somewhere, together. Beyond her is the windshield with the Mayan Mountains in the far distance. Up close, on either side of the highway, are acres of orange groves, filled with a thousand buzzing bees, and the perfume of orange blossoms blows in through the open windows.

## Shameless by Diane Payne

I look out window and notice one of the neighborhood stray cats lying there, giving me that look of desperation. I know that look too well. It's one I'd like to ignore, but can't. The cat seems to be in pain, her paws weakly flailing at nothing. I open a can of wet food and she eats a bit. My cats watch from the window. The dogs stand beside the door, quiet. They know something is wrong with this cat.

I have this dreadful feeling that she may die. It's a holiday weekend and there are no vets on call. It's going to be bitterly cold tonight. I can't leave her outside. I need to get her help.

I'm a coward. I don't want her dying inside my house. I've needed a vet on a holiday weekend and ended up driving one hundred miles to an emergency vet. I'm not willing to do that. I'm selfish.

I cross the street and knock on the neighbor's door. The young daughter seems happy to see me. The mother less so. I must look desperate and she knows that look too well. She knows I want something from her.

"I think one of those stray cats you've been feeding is sick. It's at my house," I say, hoping she'll feel obligated to help.

"I quit feeding them." She wants nothing to do with me or with this cat.

Fortunately, her five-year-old daughter is curious. "I don't see it," she says.

"She's over there, by my front door." I step forward, pointing, hoping they'll follow.

"Nope, she's gone," the mother says, ready to push her door shut.

That'd be a miracle. "Come with me. Just take a look."

The mother groans. The daughter looks excited for a mission.

I'm shameless. Two days earlier, I had an umbilical hernia operation. I lift my shirt and show them my black and blue swollen belly, covered with bloody bandages. "I'm not allowed to lift more than ten pounds and can't drive yet. Just take a look at the cat." I resort to the collective we to seal this deal. "We'll figure out something to do. We could move the cat to your carport."

She sighs. They put their shoes on and cross the street. The poor cat is still lying there. She tries to move but her hind leg is ruined.

“I think she broke her leg and came to your house for help.” My neighbor puts the onus on me.

I get a box and put her in it. “We just need to drive her to the vet across the road. Someone will be checking on the animals they board and bring her inside.”

My neighbor rolls her eyes but agrees to this plan. She’s probably afraid her daughter will insist they bring the cat to their house.

“The vet will fix her and find her a good home.” The daughter is filled with optimism. She repeats this mantra several times. Maybe she can tell we are less convinced of this happy ending and is trying to reassure us that the cat will be fine.

Driving to the vet’s office, I notice the box has a shipping label with my name on it. “They’ll think I dumped a cat on them.”

“Just tell him someone found your box in the garbage.” The neighbor seems a tad happier thinking I may get a bill for this poor cat.

She places the box next to the vet’s entrance and we drive away. The daughter repeats her optimistic mantra.

I can’t stop thinking about the cat. I wonder when I became so shameless that I’d lift my shirt to get help from a neighbor. It’s no wonder the neighbors treat me like a Jehovah’s Witness when they see me approaching their homes. I fill a dish with food and set it outside for the cat’s siblings. I have a terrible feeling the other two cats are watching me with disgust. I won’t sleep well for a long time.

### The Amateur by Richard Stolorow

It was a beautiful afternoon. For a hundred miles there were no clouds and the mountains were clear under a baby blue sky. I went out wishing I were a bird or a part of nature more closely related to the air. I settled for a walk in the foothills at the edge of town.

I reviewed my life briefly as I walked: health, love, family, money. I concluded that I was puttering around as usual, living like an amateur.

I stopped somewhere on the crest of a hill and looked back over the city which was turning light green. Spring had come recently to the lower elevations and as I gazed at the valley I felt the mixture of hope and futility I commonly feel seeing things come to life: such bright promise, but for what? I reminded myself that there was no deity to believe in and therefore no purpose to life except its propagation.

I didn't fancy I was much of a boon to the species since I'd never had children nor done much to encourage the process. And I didn't want to be a boon: my life's goal seemed to be to get through it unmolested. A mild curiosity about what was going to happen next kept me alive.

When I got back to my apartment, the sun was low and coming through the window in rays broken by the lilac bush outside. I sat in my easy chair and was still. In a few minutes I was asleep and dreaming of a buxom pregnant girl asking me if I would please make love to her. I was just about to oblige when the phone rang next to me and woke me up.

It was Fred letting me know that he was going to stop here on his way back to New York. I hadn't seen him in person in a couple of years, though I'd watched him in a few television productions. We were friends from college where we did a production of *Waiting for Godot* and took it on the road. He was Pozzo. I had played Lucky.

I was a career dropout who lived in the West alone, working odd jobs and scratching out a few stories. Fred had married a beautiful dancer in New York and stayed in theater. Now he was a moderately well-known and respected professional, working a variety of gigs to make a career. We were both about forty.

I was happy to see him when he arrived on a rainy cold night clad in white tennis shorts and a colorful short-sleeved shirt he must have bought in L.A. It was just like college days as we hugged on the street, he almost crushing my body with his huge arms, my head coming barely up to his shoulder. We started on a bottle of Irish whiskey he'd brought and settled down to an evening of talk.

Fred was a big person with a big person's heart and appetite. I'd always felt that while I was making sure I had clean underwear for the next morning, Fred was out living the life at a high intensity. He might be writing a song, or doing a production, or sitting as he was now, talking to an old friend. He was hungry for exclamations from the heart, for the half-truths that a little alcohol and a little affection resurrect on such an occasion.

I told him, hiding my sadness behind a very frank smile, that I had admired him very much and that since we were kids back in school I had longed to be like him. But I could never approach the velocity of Fred's life, nor his generosity. Mine was a meager existence, a life mostly turned internal, with few friends and few demanding needs. I told him it was all right, but I had wished for more of life's real adventures.

Fred looked at me with big sad eyes, listening attentively and registering on his face the pain that I was obviously feeling. When I had finished he went through the required dramatic sequence—bowing the head, shaking it, looking up with a wary eye and a smile, admonishing me—and then he leaped up and pulled me to my feet. With tears in his eyes, bending his knees so he was down to my level and could look into my face, Fred begged me to believe in myself, in whatever I was doing with my life. No matter what I valued, he implored, *that* was what made life worth living.

I suddenly wanted to follow Fred to New York, to exist under his wonderful strength. But I pictured myself leaning too much on his generosity, being the obligatory friend, the one he would eventually resent for the nagging dependency of my inferiority, and for the guilt such a good-hearted guy would necessarily feel.

When he left the next day, I had to admit I felt defeated by the glimpse I'd had of myself using Fred as a mirror. I sat for most of the day in the easy chair and examined the things of my life with an eye grown cold now, and with a heart hardened to my fate.

Finally, in the late afternoon, when the city sounds had quieted and birds made their last clear daylight calls, I rose and went out. There was something soft and sad about the ending of the day, and I walked slowly through the neighborhood like a man on his first or last walk on the earth.

When I looked up and saw the blue and white sky and the new green leaves and red brick of the buildings, I forgot my despair for a moment and I dearly loved this life, just as it was, this beautiful modest little world. And then I walked home thinking how painful and most difficult is love.

### **In Search of My Good Death by Frank Zahn**

Once I heard a man say of another, “He had a good death.” And it got me to thinking. What is a good death as opposed to a bad one? For starters, neither one is the same for everybody. Death, whether good or bad, comes to us all, but it is very personal—an individual experience.

The bad deaths that come to mind are those most often reported and dramatized on television, in film, and on the Internet. Without question, an accidental death with loss of limb and excruciating pain in combat during wartime or in a pileup on an interstate highway during rush hour is a bad one—upsetting and depressing to say the least. Death with desperation—a massive heart attack while driving at night across a desert, alone and without a cellphone—is not much better.

Worse is a violent death that results from a beating and stabbing by members of a street gang. An even worse violent death is one that results from a beating, torture with electrical shock to the genitals, and finally, a beheading with a dull machete in a terrorist camp. Death by drowning at sea or suffocation in the hot box of a prison farm should also be included in a list of the worst violent deaths.

But these bad deaths seem foreign to me—far removed from what I believe I will likely experience, if, in fact, a bad one is my fate. The most likely is a bitter one, during which my sins are visited upon me, whatever the cause of my death and wherever it occurs.

My sins are many, and my remorse has made them no less painful. Three of them invade my consciousness more often than the others. One is the anguish I heaped upon my mother and father during my willful and rebellious youth. The second is the torment I caused the dear heart of my life when I took her for granted and lapsed into insensitive, selfish, and combative behavior. The third is the harm I did to my son and daughter when I made unintentional, but nevertheless damaging, mistakes in their upbringing, especially the irreparable harm I caused during their early teens when I shattered their sense of family with divorce.

Good God! Consideration of bad deaths quickly becomes depressing, especially the bitter and most likely one for me among them. Enough is enough! Even though my sins have found me out, perhaps by some twist of fate, a good death is still possible. But be that as it may, I promise that from now on in this ditty, I will consider only good deaths and the choice among them I find the most satisfying.

Two good deaths that are often touted above others are peaceful ones. One occurs during sleep and the other with the deathbed surrounded by loved ones who grieve and offer loving words of comfort. A noble death in the defense of individual liberty on a battlefield, in the air, or at sea is another good death—one hopefully free of lingering pain and suffering. An accidental death when hit by a truck, bus, or train is a good one as long as it is quick; it would be even better if it were the result of saving someone's life—a son or daughter, a grandson or granddaughter, a neighbor's child, or a good friend.

But these good deaths seem as foreign to me as the most often reported and dramatized bad deaths mentioned earlier—far removed from what I believe I will likely experience, if, in fact, a good death is my fate. The more likely are a one-last-romp-in-the-sack death, a dramatic one, and a humorous one, all three of which can be viewed as a chance for a last hurrah.

Death after one-last-romp-in-the-sack with a Susan Hayward lookalike would clearly be a last hurrah, and it would be even better if I lasted long enough afterward for a snuggle, a kiss, a ice-cold beer, and a hefty man fart. Of course, every effort would be made to exercise the latter after the Susan lookalike gets up and leaves.

Unfortunately, there is a serious problem with this alternative. Although less frequent, erections persist at seventy-six, but at eighty-six, or so, they may become less reliable, or worse, out of the question. So a one-last-romp-in-the-sack death may well be little more than wishful thinking.

A dramatic death could be Shakespearean in character, one in which I play the role of a tragic but sympathetic victim who has suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The problem I would have with it, however, is I do not think I could do the scene justice. I simply do not have the frame of mind to play the character. I have faced disappointment, failure, and loss of loved ones, but seldom, if ever, have I been a victim—unless, of course, the times counted are those in which I have been a victim of my own ignorance.

A dramatic death similar to that in the final scene of Charles Dickens' *The Tale of Two Cities* has appeal. Carton's love for Lucy and his remorse for his life of vice and sin prompted him to sacrifice his life on the guillotine for that of Charles, Lucy's intended. Although I thank God I do not have to face death by guillotine, I relish the thought of playing the scene on my deathbed as if I did and

speaking Carton's final words, "It is a far, far better thing than I have ever done. It is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

The problem with the scene is I would have trouble keeping a straight face. Rather than play it straight, I am willing to bet I would overdo it on purpose—turn it into melodrama—so as to evoke a chuckle or laughter. And I would make no apology for it. Humor has always been front and center in my life. Early on, I discovered it not only makes life tolerable in bad times but all the more joyous in good times. It relieves tension, renews the human spirit, and makes each tomorrow more inviting.

So what am I saying? It must be that since humor has been front and center in my life, why not in my death? And instead of wasting time bastardizing drama with melodrama for the sake of humor, why not go for humor by a less cumbersome and more direct means?

My humorous remarks and antidotes about my life are a must. My mocking impersonations of faith-based fascists—theists and atheists alike—would not only provide additional humor for the not guilty in attendance but also showcase my lifelong contempt for fascism in all its forms. I assume, of course, that on my deathbed, I will have sufficient strength for these undertakings.

So now that I have determined a humorous death is my preference, I will prepare a bucket list, one geared toward doing everything I can to ensure that it prevails over my most likely bad death—the bitter one. And I will pray as never before that fate cooperates and helps make possible a joyous smile on my face when at last death permits me to crossover into the wondrous hereafter.

Poetry



Garden Cherub by Sandra Soli

### After Math by Joe Benevento

I was an arithmetic whiz at  $4\frac{1}{2}$ ,  
adding and subtracting quicker than my 6  
year old sister. But from long division on I faltered,  
struggled, hated my many ways through all the proofs, charts  
and problems of my life through 12th grade.

I ended up going to NYU in part to avoid Columbia's  
math requirement, acing myself out of the Ivy League  
just to never not excel again the way I always could  
in literature, languages, music, philosophy;  
rustiness in trigonometry for the GRE's probably costing me

Ivy League again, so I settled for the Big 10  
for graduate school. Many years later, my 4 children  
all do very well in math, but none of them like it,  
not even Claire, invited in the 7th to skip to  
8th grade algebra 1, nor my son Joey who had

a 30 on his practice ACT. For the reading part  
he earned a perfect 36. I'm figuring if he had done  
the reverse, he would have kept it from me, knowing as he has  
since about age 4, I agree with fiction's Dupin in "The Purloined  
letter: math is very overrated.

And so my 4 children all have or will get ACT composite  
scores around 33, and most likely be denied the Ivy too,  
settling for something not quite as standardly stellar  
(like my eldest, Maria, newly in the Honors Program at Creighton  
which she chose in part to bypass any core math requirements, so she 2

can try to ignore the tyranny of #'s, B just like her Dad.

### After Realizing I Didn't Have Enough Money by Joe Benevento

... to send my eldest of four to a private college  
unless she got close to a "full ride," I was comforted  
knowing my teaching at this almost  
first rate "public ivy" assured all my children  
seventy-five per cent off their college educations,

but when it became clear Maria  
wasn't going to be happy going to her father's  
U., staying in the same small town near to nothing  
where she has spent her first eighteen years listening  
to my nostalgia for a larger world, I talked my wife into

an overestimation of our solvency, saying we could  
afford to throw ten grand a year toward Maria's  
hopes. My daughter's a lot happier, maybe  
it's even a better school, though probably  
only in ways a lot less measurable

than forty-g's. And her brother starts  
college in a year and a half already  
assuming he should go some place special too,  
while my wife, well, I promised her long ago  
she'd never have to work outside

the home unless she wanted to, which she does  
not, so, I'm wishing I was bankrupt  
enough, morally, to become an administrator,  
or foolish enough to believe in the lottery or  
some other magic means to protect my long

cherished claim money doesn't matter.

**Chrysalis by John Buentello**

Once, when I was young,  
I found a hard chrysalis  
stuck to a branch, hung  
over the fence in our yard.

Its skin was green and gold.  
It rattled when I shook it,  
but its weight was alive  
so I took it home to wait.

Summer passed. Cold came.  
I got bored so I took a pin  
and slid its point between  
the hard folds of the shell.

A bubble of fluid emerged.  
It healed over and I forgot  
why I was so interested  
in a dull, green, sticky thing.

I slept through the winter,  
waiting for the thaw to begin.  
It took its time, unfolding  
new green leaves on the trees.

The thing inside the chrysalis  
woke and became a butterfly,  
its wings the color of spring.  
I woke too, and didn't change.

### Heaven is This by John Buentello

Heaven is when the wind stirs up from its own sleep and touches you just enough to lick your skin, to pull the last bit of moisture from your pores, to rumble soft and low in your ears, a snatch of birdsong, the trill of an insect calling for its life, the heavy tread of footsteps either coming to intrude or fading too quickly.

Heaven is the mustache of heat upon your lip that comes from lying in the sun, hours before the world knows it is sunrise, when the warmth from that hissing body just begins to soak into earth and deep into the skins of plants, and only begins to flatten the ripples upon the surface of all waters, including those that flow within us.

Heaven is the rush of sound that starts with the flap of a single page of newspaper fresh delivered, the bursting of the bubble that formed on your baby's mouth during the night and now pops forth followed by a sigh that you could hear a million miles away, soft, quiet, but with a lexicon all its own that is ground in love and fear and hope and potential loss

Heaven is the slice of another's middle fingertip as it pushes into the round of your palm that you've held outstretched to the tip of her pillow, safe through the night but now the morning has come and her hand smooths the sheets into new territory, bites mindless into your flesh, first to signal, then to rouse, and finally to calm in an embrace that is shaped to your own and is not an inconsequential brush of skin to skin but a final grip on reality shaped by love, carved by desire, and attended to by angels.

## On the Day My Brother Was Born by John Buentello

We stayed up all night playing Monopoly,  
my sister, my younger brother and me.  
There was no time to call someone over  
to watch us because my mother, panting  
like the little dog that lived down the street  
pulled us from our beds and our deep sleep  
to tell us she was leaving, the time had come.

We begged to go with her to the hospital,  
not wanting to stay alone in our apartment.  
Other pains pulled at her to go even as she  
held us in her arms and soothed all our fears  
with warm fingers, her eyes holding steady  
while the tight lines of her mouth whispered  
the coming of the miracle of another brother.

The driver who came didn't bother to knock,  
honking instead from the dark parking lot.  
We ran and shouted at him that our mother  
was having trouble getting down the stairs  
because the baby was coming and watched  
his face lose its stoniness when he saw her  
there smiling at him, the loveliest of sights.

She drove away from us, fading to darkness,  
our younger brother already dropping off.  
We set up the game board, already arguing  
who would get those particular properties  
that we always bickered about, whispering  
the kinds of questions children whisper  
when there's nothing else to do but wait.

Our brother was born during that long night,  
sometime between a random roll of the dice  
one of us made while we sat and listened  
to the sound of another brother sleeping,  
dreaming maybe of the one yet to come,  
or of our mother and where she now lay  
far away from us, but never so close before.

**Cruel as Winter by Linda M. Crate**

you pile words like bricks  
hoping that the sheer weight  
of them will one day shatter  
my bones from beneath me —

so I plied words upon you  
with the torque of the ocean  
hoping that it would one day  
wash you away to some sea —

much immaturity wrought by  
broken hearts decimated to  
embers by a love untrue, you  
were kind to me before cruelty

hardened your features; I never  
knew what broke your wings —  
you just lashed out with hate,  
and burning reservoirs of rain

fell from my eyes in silver pools —  
drowning me in spring flowers  
in may that all bore your name;  
it shattered my love of spring.

**From: Hong Kong, To: Friends in Chicago by Louie Crew**

Alas, winter has begun:  
men have put on shirts.

Double alas: Now deep winter:  
each has buttoned one button.

**Overheard in the Staff Coffee Room of the Bond Department of the World's**

**Eleventh Largest Bank by Louie Crew**

"It's okay to work with them, but live  
next-door, never."

"Yes, imagine having your children go to  
school with them."

"My sister-in-law grew up in South Chicago,  
so it don't bother her none, but my  
brother's about to go out of his ever-  
loving mind."

"Take Marie, for instance. She does work's  
good as the rest of us, but she flirts  
with Ev-vry Body!"

"And's so ungrammatical. Wouldya want your  
kids saying `I axed him this and she  
axed me that'?"

"I'm opposed to the way the South treats 'em,  
but that ain't got a thing to do with  
my wanting to leave well enough alone."

**Dragonflies by Gail Eisenhart**

Dragonflies, like swashbuckling swordsmen,  
somersault as they skim the farm pond.  
Males pivot, accelerate to warp speed  
and scope for mates with opalescent eyes.

Flitting to his perch, the dominant male faces  
away and rakishly trails cellophane rear wings  
like Zorro's cape, showing off his colors.  
Sexy wrap-around eyes meet in a seam  
at the back of his head. He fixates  
on the lady until she gets  
the message.

Sultry and coy, the tiny temptress dawdles  
on the grass, her incandescent eyes  
are a fortuneteller's ball.  
She sees courtship in her future.

**Poem Written in a Crawlspace by Anthony Frame**

Where there is a light, follow,  
be it from Maglite or mini-Bic,  
any trademark or watermark.  
Seek and find divided halves,

lucid flowers observed through  
broken wood. Soon, you'll think  
this is somehow about your sex,  
so let me stop you with a kiss,

that slow crawl, the only time  
I'm not claustrophobic. Or,  
we can throw away the drawer  
full of spoons and act as forks,

our bodies rolling together like  
the double helix, like the symbol  
for *infinity*, how we transform  
*you* and *I* into a palindrome.

Is it so strange to think of you  
while crawling through cobwebs  
and mud, when walls seem to spin  
and lungs buckle beneath gravity?

Down here in the dark, I can see  
the sorrow of termites and foreclosure.  
I read the fine print of failure  
when I reach the rotted out subfloor.

But I'm thinking of you. I follow  
the light between your lips. I look  
for last night, your sex. Love, I listen  
to the sound of an endless breath.

## Why I Hate the Sunrise by Anthony Frame

January 1991, fourth grade.  
Our teacher shadowing an old AV cart,  
the TV a treasure to us ten year olds.  
She turned it on, a flicked switch, a dot  
expanding toward its Technicolor edges. She said,  
*I think it's important that you children see this.*

A green sun exploding over the darkened sky  
of Baghdad, surrounded by cascading comets,  
an emerald meteor shower blazing through  
the dying night. It was beautiful and I said so,  
my voice beginning to gain the depth  
of adulthood. But it wasn't beautiful  
and the teacher made that clear.

*These are bombs and bullets.  
These are buildings breaking over  
children as young as you.  
This is what war looks like.*

That night I prayed for the last time  
to the god of beautiful things:

*Let the sun never burst forth like a bomb.  
Let the stars be the only things that shoot.  
Let the darkness blind and bind the world.  
Let there be eternal night.*

**The Time Teller by Wayne Frank**

The smell of boiling tar, sounds of yellow sand trucks  
Pot holes filled. Men in faded denim ask  
I answer, pointing at the sun, God's nose  
nine, five, two minutes 'till the morning break  
eight, five, one minute 'till lunch  
six, four, three minutes 'till quitting time  
Exactly  
The work crew adopts me. Summer days pass  
as women pass through tar clouds  
white handkerchiefs to their faces.  
On weekends, boys take me to the beach  
to point at God's nose, to reach, to attract girls  
like statues attract pigeons  
Winters, I watch T.V., in black and white  
Spring, Mama says we will meet again in heaven  
before she takes me to the circus manager  
to tour the corn fields of Iowa, Illinois  
endlessly  
One man guesses your weight, your age  
while I point, telling time, to the minute  
Second year, the knife thrower touches me  
Third year, I peak under flaps  
to watch the elephant rider undress  
They let me eat candy for breakfast  
Sixth year, I go blind. I'm taken away  
On rainless days summer, I sit outside now  
knowing God's nose  
by the warmth from His nostrils  
The bearded lady visits, tells me  
that Mama "passed"  
Now cold, in a cold room, I ask the nurse  
if my teeth will rattle in the urn  
I ask her to bury the urn in Iowa or Illinois  
pointed at God's nose  
while I look for Mama

**Poem on a Theme by Robert Lowell by George Freek**

The evening is heavy  
with dust. But I think  
melancholy's out of fashion.  
And I've made a truce  
with unseenly passion.  
Rain withholds its meaning.  
Shadows hold branches like flutes.  
Leaves careen to their music,  
as unstable as parachutes.  
But similes are abominations  
when ideology is evasion.  
I observe a lone cloud  
teasing the moon  
like some nervous bride,  
but tonight a crow is watching  
instead of a groom.

**From the Desk of a CIA Imagery Analyst by J.M. Green**

I choose to live like a mole, fashioning myself a freedom fighter against  
a future dominant  
power. In an obscure building, on a dark vaulted floor, in a corner cubicle, under  
a single light, I fight the villain  
Dear Leader, the Korean Lex Luther, with the super powers of satellite  
photos. I'm prudent  
with national security, knowing my secrets are for safety. And I romanticize  
that my eyes might change the world – if only some politician or media  
mogul writes Kim Jong-Il  
on his weekly agenda. Until then, my intelligence will be typed and stored  
into a database and will extrude,

I'm sure, much too late. Yet I will be blamed – as I am for my penis.  
Exuberance  
has evaporated from my sex life, naturally, since my penis has gone soft.  
Because I don't dominate  
in the bedroom, I no longer call it a dick or my piece. Those seem like  
strong words. My wife placed jonquils  
in the bedroom. She read their scent was an aphrodisiac. Our last hope.  
But, those vile  
weeds made me ill. I wish I were a tyrant. Not a Kim but a Caesar  
with a Roman size  
erection – and wrapped in my bed sheets. My wife would marvel  
at how it protrudes

well beyond the folds of cotton. But, alas, I see no protrusion.  
I've looked at magazines: partial nude, full nude, soft nude, hard  
triple X nude.  
I feel nothing. I'm limp, like lettuce. Mr. Romaine  
she calls me. I need a sex therapist. No, a dominatrix.  
But I hate pain, mental and physical. Anyway, I'll sit and flap  
my legs in an uncivil  
manner, hoping for a reaction, and try to spot unusual activity  
from Kim Jong-Il.

That fucking Kim Jong-Il!  
His obelisks protrude  
from North Korean vil-  
lages where they exude  
his virile dominance.  
A Kim third world romance.

More orgy than romance  
perhaps. A vast jungle  
of tank gun arrogance.  
It seems a little crude,  
all these shafts for one dude.  
Dictators make me ill.

I'll choose to scan a couple more photos before suffocating  
from servility.  
Then, I'll cram into the Metro and scurry across a romantic  
landscape of cherry blossoms. I'll blur the image of that vulgar  
monument, as I hope I'm excluded  
from the vision of the blossom-eaters. Please don't notice my guilt.  
Please don't notice the giant "I" sewn on my chest. See, I'm  
no pro - true  
to justice and the American way. This "I" isn't for Imageryman.  
I'm dominated

by a curse, not super powers. If I'm cursed am I more villain  
than Kim Jong-Il?  
Excuse me, but I've been told I'm not a man if I'm dominated  
by the intelligence stored in my one-eyed willy.  
Yet, without my protrusion, I am NoMan. I see nothing.

## Finding a Nice, New Home for Poor, Old Humbert by Lisa Grove

I punch through the glass  
of a top floor flat with my hard candy fists.  
I pull out a man by the skin of his neck--  
a dandy cat to claw at the mercy of my lap.  
He rubs his face against my bristled knees--  
he'll purr whatever poetry I please.

I drop him in his cardboard room. *Humbert,*  
*don't bristle your whiskers, please. Feel the fuzz*  
*of soda pop? Give us a kiss, now. Let's unzip*  
*those acid-washed jeans.* The hawk holds a saw  
in his beak. *It's make-believe time, Humbert.*

I give him a suit of fresh-scrubbed skin.  
*Let me pull the holes over your eyes.* I explain skin  
that does not zip is slid over the head. *Onesies*  
*come in many colors--choose your luck. Choose*  
*your make-believe. Purr a little in my lap, please.*  
I unzip the poetry of laps and knees.

Humbert sweats in gold dust of old skins.  
It's make-believe time. He dances with dolls,  
their heads stare *mercy me mercy me.* Yes please yes  
please. I kiss and unzip his acid-washed jeans.  
*Show me, Humbert, let me.* I claw inside  
those acid-washed jeans.

I pet poor Humbert in his cardboard room  
in the goldskinlight. Poor Humbert punches  
poetry in the corner of the cardboard. The hawk  
saws a doll's head, saws *mercy me mercy me.* I  
open my hot pink mouth, my hard candy hands.  
*Purr your face into my knees, please please please.*

Bad Humbert's in the basement. Bad Humbert's been bristling.  
*Mercy me. Mercy me.* I push him down  
the basement stairs. *Humbert, kitten, it's time.* He unzips  
his acid-washed jeans, lets me purr as I please. Tiny  
windows peekaboo and broken below the ceiling. His skin  
flattens on smashed glass, pink and make-believe.

*It's make-believe time! Humbert?*  
Check under the cardboard. Check the window  
glass. No neck. No skin. No zip of dandy jeans  
and nothing under them but the swirling skindust  
of dolls. Hear the hawk saw. Scrub a candy fist.  
Hear the purr of soda pop. Blow an acid kiss.

**Confuse my Sins by David M. Harris**

In the dark, I slip out of the house,  
down the stoop, shushing the dogs.  
At the end of the driveway,  
I slip on my shoes and steal away from my life.  
But remembered moments dog my steps  
licking my hand with guilt,  
misdeeds and missteps alike  
trailing just behind my eyes  
where I can't lose them.  
Not the fanciest footwork tricks them  
into a wrong turn  
leaving me free  
and clear.

## Omelette Ode by William Wright Harris

Egg broken- The  
Song of Roland,  
the grace of  
Charlemagne  
and a valiant death.  
Onions chopped, the  
meditations of Rimbaud-  
wondering if God  
made the Devil  
or Manunkind.  
Bell Peppers diced,  
blooming evil on the  
buds of Baudelaire;  
seeds of humanity  
damning nature.  
Bacon is my  
meat of choice,  
although some prefer  
ham or sausage,  
Hugo exiled in  
Hauteville House.  
Shredded Cheese-  
De Pizan- eulogizing  
Joan of Arc  
and attacking  
misogyny six  
centuries be  
fore feminism.

Pan fried dream,  
folded  
pile of protein,  
carbon,

waiting to be enjoyed.

**On the Most Lamentable Treatment of My Colander by William Wright Harris**

I treat this colander as  
women treat my heart.

Gripping the sides with  
both hands and running

fluids through it, shaking  
it with moments of

great enthusiasm be  
fore drying it, and

returning it where  
it was found.

**Salt&PepperShakers by William Wright Harris**

Standing, together,  
on the kitchen table...

on the top of the stove...  
on the windowsill.

My soul wails  
each

time I am  
separated

from your side &  
explodes in glee

when returned- a  
typhoon curling into

itself, an atomic blast  
hanging in my chest.

### Mermaid and Windmill by Cody Kucker

In Copenhagen the mermaid is tainted,  
she is sulked green from basking in flashes,  
her braids are blighted and she is asking  
the windmill treasuring the windy path  
through the park to please work, but, imbricate  
and brick-colored, it hasn't and won't budge.

The tour buses brake light and douse her pink  
as the birds, with circumspect chirps, return  
to the window beneath the windmill's eave,  
while scintillate engine hisses congeal  
into a sheet that blankets the agate  
and seeps into the mud between the stones.

She needs a breeze from sails that just creak.  
She needs pollen blown out of her tear ducts.  
The park she is the tragedy of is near  
the river mouth and the sea is behind  
the storied houses on the opposite bank, trembling  
yellow pennants hung from gutters and gone limp again.

The mermaid's soldered to a cenotaph  
sunk in what the tide leaves. Her palm is dug  
in blackened brass sand, her fins' scales and hair  
are slick, screeched back from straining toward the out-  
of-commission mill: its color dusked, its eye stied  
with birds' nests, four glass panes chilled and beading.

## Chocolate Bars Remain on Earth by Carol Dee Meeks

Our office breaks are burst with sweets,  
mint chocolate bars in flavored sheets.  
Gold candelabrum trim the tables  
when we eat and share short fables.  
A worker leans to smell the flame.  
He burns his mouth, hangs head in shame.  
In haste he rubs the spot and sore,  
then explodes like a savage boar.  
He rings the fire bells in a manner  
which rips in half, the office banner.  
We watch him glide atop the rug  
on one ski, in steps of jitterbug.

The chairs and tables take a dive;  
we run outside so we'll survive.  
Yet we remain with mouth agape  
in town we love with no escape.

His daughter pens these caper cries  
in a novel unlike magi's.  
In escapades on page sixteen,  
her dad sends love notes to the queen  
'cause she fashions his ego trip  
and coos and woos his injured lip  
where chocolate bells remain on earth.  
The daughter's novel explains the worth  
of town whose hobby slopes on skies  
like steps of jitterbug and busy bee.

**Dream Circus by Mark J. Mitchell**

Clowns, like nuns on a path from the beach,  
Fright wigs bouncing in the salt air,  
Are looking for a lost tide. Each  
One sure it's another's fault. There's

A horseshoe current they can't stand.  
Seltzer bottles raised in salute  
Empty hopelessly on damp sand,  
Adding nothing to the sea. Mute

Clowns slip down the slope, huge shoes slide  
In iceplant. Noses fly. They're pulled  
Like puppies to waves. As they ride  
The dunes, they're targets for gulls

Who peck their make-up, smearing smiles,  
Loud and gray, strict, mean, without guile.

**Left Bank by Mark J. Mitchell**

*"Poetry is made in bed, like love."*

*--Andre Breton*

In the dream I'm surrounded  
By French poets.  
Yellow Pernod goes white.

They speak bad English  
And I don't laugh.  
The boat is too small.

Berets float past,  
Singing quietly, some song  
About love or food.

I am outside and alone.  
The world smells like licorice.  
This river is pluperfectly slow.

Half awake, I roll  
Against your hip and smile.  
I don't know the word for it in French.

**Nature Mort by Mark J. Mitchell**

In search of a subject  
I choose you. Yes, you.  
Right there. Sit still.

I won't make you sing  
like a broken carp or  
paste rheumy eyes under your chin.

Your maculate parentage  
will not be discussed. At least  
not in any detail.

No. It is quite simple:  
I'll look back at you while  
you read these words off this page.

### The Death of Boba Fett by Joey Nicoletti

July 4<sup>th</sup>. Cousin Lenny hurls  
my little brother's Boba Fett  
action figure into the burning barbeque grill.  
I clench my hand into a fist,

then taste the bitter flavor  
of my own blood. Nothing can mend  
his favorite toy; the yellow fever  
of sparklers. Fireworks speak their mind:

the sky is alight with a gold choir  
of booming voices. When I look on  
from my avocado-green lawn chair,  
sparks go off between Roman Candles and the moon.

## The Death of Captain Marvel by Joey Nicoletti

—after the Marvel Comics graphic novel

When Captain Marvel died,  
the stars became  
splotches of detergent.  
When Captain Marvel died  
of cancer, my candy-cigarette days  
smoldered in my father's ash-tray.  
When Captain Marvel died,  
my Uncle's tour bus stalled on bridges  
gripped in frost and rust.  
I was a cracked fire-hydrant,  
calling out my big sister's name  
in my watery dialect.  
I was a pair of boots, an olive-green and yellow  
pair of rubber boots who slipped  
on a sidewalk being fitted  
in a new see-through dress of ice.  
I was a soccer ball  
with a small hole, losing air slowly,  
like my mother was  
in her hospital room.  
When Captain Marvel, the most  
cosmic super hero of all died,  
he was surrounded by family and friends,  
like my mother was  
in her final days. A few pages  
before Captain Marvel died,  
Spider-Man abruptly walked out  
of the Captain's chambers, overcome  
by shock and disbelief. I saw my face  
beneath his mask: blood-shot  
eyes dilated with the awful fear of death;  
his head looking backwards, like mine  
in Mount Sinai Hospital;  
breathless, defenseless, no web to spin,  
only sweaty palms:  
one to place on my sister's shoulder,  
the other to rub my eyes  
after we said our goodbyes;  
my sister and I walking down a hallway  
of dim, sickly light.

**Cloud Nein (You Have the Sky) by Mark Raymond Perkins**

When I hit it big I became depressed.  
It's the scramble that keeps you alive, after all.  
Without it I feel like a bird too high,  
A foreign entity subject to invisible snipers,  
Malignant sky waiting as I fly directionless,  
Teeming blue to swallow me whole.  
It will, of course. But not yet.  
If only there were clouds. Many clouds.  
Steel-infused, due north, daring me  
To accelerate. I've had this feeling before  
When things lost their force, became amenable,  
Offered an early, false heaven I hadn't yet earned.  
The known villains of struggle are in their way life-affirming.  
They tell you you can't, and you believe them. You pretend not to  
Believe them and wage a synaptic war against them. You are both fighting,  
And then, suddenly, you feel it beneath you, air,  
As the other side releases, allows you the wind beneath, soundless.  
The sky. You have the sky. Isn't that what you wanted?

**Performance Piece by Mark Raymond Perkins**

Do you speak from the lectern  
Or does the lectern speak for you?  
The eyes you gaze upon gazing  
Are not waiting for the next syllable  
But something more symbolic  
A twist of the head, an alternation  
Of position, power stance or lean-in  
Framed, sentiment for the old still at it,  
Trepidation for the young blindly  
Feeling for higher planes. A second  
Offering is at hand, phrases wrapped in the physical,  
Lighting, shadows, moment, defining all  
But what lies on the page.

**Around You by Matthue Roth**

When I'm around you,  
I keep my cell phone on silent  
my pen in my pocket  
and pretend like I can color-coordinate

When I'm around you  
I act like I use a knife & fork & napkin  
at every meal,  
even midnight snack.

Even when I'm eating pickles, Slurpees,  
and Froot by the Foot

When I'm around you,  
I turn your mobile to vibrate  
and stick it deep in your pocket.

When I'm around you,  
I stop halfway through sentences,  
try to delete them and  
start over again,  
then forget I'm not using a typewriter until  
I've been pressing your nose like a space bar  
for five minutes.

I get seized by a brilliant idea  
and press your belly button again and again  
like an emergency reset.  
You don't run away.

I'm going to take that  
as a good sign.

## Child Triptych by George Such

### Baby Teeth

When one was loose enough, my dad would take a pair of slip-joint pliers and grip my tooth. Then he'd twist it out, the tiny snap of the root, the blood I'd spit, the taste of metal. He'd been raised in Romania during World War II, where soldiers had had their way, first the Nazis, then the Russians, which he said were the worst. Some things never leave my body, no matter what I do, the flogging with a belt and its buckle, the yanking of hair, the tornados that teach you how to leave your body, and come back after the storm.

### Pews

TENN HUT!! Every Sunday morning before church we had inspection. My father would enter our room like the army corporal he once was, my brothers and I standing at attention, while he glared at our beds made without wrinkles, our spit-shined shoes, our hair combed with Butch Wax, his eyes searching for the flaw. My family was steeped in church, and still is, one inside the other, like bass dipped in beaten eggs, rolled in bread crumbs and fried in oil. I was the only one that left, a split that's never really healed. The oak benches, the organ and piano's black and white keys, the preacher's rising voice, they were fingers squeezing around my breath.

### Thumbnail

We'd fish in Midwest lakes for bass, crappie, catfish, and bluegill, threading the hook through the worm's wriggling body, then casting it into the water. Fish would take the bait, their life surging through the line when they tried to escape, jumping, splashing. Sometimes a fish would swallow the hook, and I'd use the needle-nose pliers, reaching down its throat, grabbing the hook and ripping it out, sometimes pulling the stomach up into the fish's mouth. Later, we'd clean the fish, first sharpening the knife on a whetstone, and then, with the blade facing outward, slice the fish's belly open from the anus to the throat. My dad had been a butcher and he taught my brothers and me how to let the knife do the work, how to pull the fish's guts from the belly, to run the thumbnail up the spine.

### Snorkeling at Gila Aire by George Such

This moment, alive in the ocean's mouth,  
watch the world reveal itself:

emperor angel-fish chase their prey,  
their blue-striped yellow bodies flashing

behind black-sashed faces, Moorish idols,  
chisel-tooth wrasses, their sides

like green comb filled with orange honey,  
sweetlips, snappers, groupers, puffers,

butterflyfish with stripes that go straight through.  
But you don't need to know their names.

All you need to do is breathe and see:  
eyes that swim close and wonder,

pink lips, silky fins, tails  
that drive the ubiquitous body.

### Candidate by Nathan E. White

The mouse eating half a cracker  
along the lower edge  
cannot undo the knot rusted fast  
holding rail in place.

The train making its stop  
starts off inches above the mouse—  
certainly all around the mouse  
filled with shudder and tug.

Only then the mouse running  
under rail, appearing nowhere  
on the other side. What difference?  
On the platform maybe someone

spoke out in the train's wake,  
startling the mouse (nothing  
out of the ordinary). I thought  
the mouse would return

to its meal, thought just as well  
as the next train took sight.

**FICTION**



**Butterfly Bush by Sandra Soli**

**Drive by Allie Marini Batts**

“Drive. Now. Before I change my mind.”

“You can’t change your mind. You’re already in the car.”

“I can still get out.”

He cranks the engine.

For once, it doesn’t flood; the Dodge revs on the first try, and I know that he’s replaced the carburetor. *The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite* snakes out of the speakers. No one noticed me leave with him, or if they did, no one really thought anything of it—and they won’t—until I don’t come back inside. But that could be hours from now, when the bar is empty, everyone’s gone home and midnight turns to twilight and then back into daylight. By then, we’ll be long gone, far away from here, and none of it will matter anymore.

The Dart is named Lucy—I know, because I named her that the day Jack bought her. He put the tape deck in himself the first weekend he spent restoring her. He reverses quickly, like he thinks I’m a bride, not a cocktail waitress, and that Mrs. Robinson and my boss are going to come spilling out of the bar chasing after us. I don’t turn into a pillar of salt as I twist around to look back while he pulls out onto the road. There’s only a drunk girl in treacherous heels having an argument in the parking lot. Its streetlights grow smaller before disappearing entirely as Jack races to put miles between it and us.

I have no idea where he’s going. I don’t think he does, either, but we’re going, and we’re going there fast. We’re going tonight. And we’re never coming back here again. We’re not stopping. I’m leaving everything behind. Everything I own—gone. My roommates can keep it or sell it or do whatever they want to with it. I have my wallet, my phone and a pack of cigarettes. For half an hour, we say nothing.

When *Nightswimming* starts, I look over at him and his cheeks are wet. I reach over and wipe at them, it’s a reflex that I never managed to break and now, I guess I don’t have to.

“Do you remember first year, when I knocked on your door because your light was the only one that was on and made you go to the beach with me?”

“You didn’t make me. I wanted to go.”

“I only knocked because I knew it was your door. You’re the only one I wanted to go the beach with in the middle of the night.”

We’re quiet except for the magic of the song, road-hypnotized by the twinkle of taillights that exit onto an endless highway. The tape flips over automatically when it reaches the end of the spool. He had set the tray of drinks on the bar, taken my hand and led me outside to Lucy’s door. He didn’t talk and I didn’t need him to. I just got in. I already knew what the question was. He’d asked it before; that time, I gave the wrong answer and regretted it. As it turned out, everything holding me back was replaceable and none of it mattered. The one thing that did had driven away in a 1970 Dodge Dart GTS that he’d let me name Lucy, because I loved her.

Wherever we’re going, I know it’ll be near the beach. But until we get there, there is only Michael Stipe’s voice and his whispered command, *Drive*.

## Quilted in Black by Allie Marini Batts

Sara and Scott sat down cross-legged on the floor of the guest bedroom. All the boxes were unpacked. Only this one was left. Everything was in its new place; everything felt just a little bit uneasy because of it. All their things were arranged neatly. There were no dirty dishes in the sink. Once this box was opened, they officially lived together and were officially finished unpacking. Scott reached into his pocket, pulled out his knife and flipped it open. He slid the tip of the steel underneath the packing tape and eased the box flaps open. Sara got her sewing basket and pulled out her tools: scissors, a razor, measuring tape, a pincushion.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Yeah. You?"

The box and its contents were deceptively simple. Inside four walls of cardboard, three cubic feet, neatly folded, with a dryer sheet carefully tucked in the center, were their t-shirts. Not all of them, of course, most were still in the circulation of their wardrobes. These shirts were the ones worn rarely or never. The ones they still kept: outcasts, in the bottom dresser drawers. Many had holes or tears. Their screen prints were faded, peeling, or crumbled. Some had cigarette holes and the ground-in smells of stale beer and sweat. Collateral damage, their flaws numbered the detritus of time, late nights and hard love.

They closed on the condo last month. This was the first weekend that they weren't scrubbing, hauling, lifting, painting, unpacking, or putting anything away. This was the last box. It was also the most important. It held the first small decision they made together, after making the much larger decision to move in together. Scott was patient while Sara picked the perfect place in the room for her sewing machine. He knew she needed order and symmetry in the chaos where she worked.

They had never considered moving into each other's apartments. Their decision to move somewhere entirely new to both of them was both mutual and unspoken. Sara thought little things like that were part of their synchronicity as a couple. Scott just thought it meant she was cool. After

they packed up her kitchen and weeded through his bookshelves, they tackled the dressers and closets.

They sat on her bed together and sorted through drawer after drawer of t-shirts: black, all of them, with graphics from comic books, movies, and bands. She kept them all, regardless of how long it had been since she wore them or how others were just falling apart. Seeing them in the drawers was a landscape of her yesterdays: black clad days she didn't want to let go of, full of combat boots, fishnets and irresponsible nights. As he folded the shirts, Scott asked her what she planned on doing with all the ones she wasn't wearing anymore. She said she wanted to keep them all, even though they both knew there was probably no chance of her ever wearing the Pigface *Hips, Tits, Lips, Power!* shirt again. He held it up, then folded it after she said, *No, I can't get rid of that one.* He asked, "So why do you keep all these? I didn't even know you liked Pigface."

"I hadn't really thought about it," Sara replied, "I just hung onto all of them. I like remembering, I guess. And of course I like Pigface."

He made a face. "Seriously. We should do something cool with all of them. I have a lot of t-shirts, too."

"Like what?"

"Mmm, not sure. It's kind of a shame that they just sit in the drawers and no one ever wears them or sees them, you know?"

They sat on the bed, folding to the soundtrack of the *whirr* of the fan and the flap of folding cloth. They made neat stacks of t-shirts. One pile of the ones Sara still wore, the other pile the ones she just kept. She looked up from an L7 shirt, folded and piled *Smell The Magic* on top of *Hips, Tits, Lips, Power!* Sara smiled.

"What about a quilt?"

"A quilt?"

"Yeah. We can do it together. I saw a how-to on the internet one time. I bet I could find it again."

"One problem."

"You don't have to know how to sew. All you have to do is pin things and help me. "

"Maybe you could teach me how to sew."

"Seriously?"

"No," he said, "But I'll be an *awesome* helper."

"Brat," she said, and tossed the L7 shirt at him.

"Who's a brat now? You just folded that!"

When they sat on his bed, they had a system for sorting and a heavy duty moving box from the U-Haul . Sara tucked a dryer sheet between the stacks of shirts to keep them from picking up the stale smell of the storage unit they'd be moved into until they were ready to move to the new place. Scott liked that she thought of things like that, the things he would have overlooked until he opened the box and thought *Whew! I guess I have to wash all of these now, gross!* When they stacked it into the storage unit, Sara said, "Once we're all moved in and settled, we'll open this box and start, okay?"

He smiled and drew a heart on the box with her purple Sharpie.

So that first settled-in day, when Scott pulled back the flaps of the box and tore off the strip of tape, it was like looking into a box of yesterday taped up by today and unpacking tomorrow. Sara's cat Koshka, who was now by extension Scott's cat too, padded into the room to see what they were doing. Scott shook the tape at her. She batted it and hopped into the box.

"No ma'am," he said, extracting her from the folds of cotton, "This is not for you."

Sara moved Koshka out of the way and handed Scott scissors and the tape measure.

"Measure a seven by seven inch square around the graphic. Then cut out the front. After you cut the front, lay it over the back. Cut out the back the same way. Make sure it's even for borders and

edging, for when we put it all together. When you finish cutting the front out, give it to me, and I'll put the batting inside and pin it. Then I'll sew the edges and we'll have the first square done."

"Which shirt do I start with?"

"I don't know, I guess whatever's on top. You pick."

"Okay."

He reached into the box and pulled out her Lollapalooza '93 shirt. It was impossibly large. Scott doubted it had ever really fit her correctly. The front was studded with psychedelic kopelli dancers, bordered by the names of the headlining and second stage bands. The back listed the tour dates and locations. It was soft, in the way of a shirt that had been well worn and better loved, spin cycled through the washing machine of her lifetime. It smelled like the dryer sheet Sara had nestled in the box and it was lightly dusted with Koshka's fur.

"So where did you see this show?"

Sara looked over to see which shirt he held.

"Miami. Alice in Chains split up sometime at the beginning of the summer. Think they might have played one Lollapalooza date. Primus headlined. They came onstage naked with the letters spelling out Primus painted on their chests. I think theirs might have been the first penises I ever saw. Not up close, you know, but in general."

"I'd hope not up close, what were you, fifteen?"

"Yeah."

Sara smiled as she measured and cut the batting using a razor; she was handy and familiar with the blade.

"It was right before Tool and Rage Against the Machine got popular, too. My friend Beth made me a tape one of the last days of school because she knew I was going to the show. One side had Rage and the other side had Tool. It was really hot that day, even for summer. I wore fishnets under my cutoffs and got sunburned in a fishnet pattern on my legs. It was really weird. "

"It's huge. Why an XL?"

"I was going through the giant t-shirt, cutoffs, fishnets and combat boots phase. I didn't realize how big XL was until I'd already bought it. I didn't care. I wore it anyway."

Scott cleaned up the t-shirt scraps and got out the Dustbuster while Sara sewed the square together. He made sure to get all the tiny little bits of fabric dust off the carpet. Keeping the house neat was important to her. He used the handheld vacuum to clear away all the loose threads and closed the flaps of the box. He put it back in the closet, to wait for next Saturday.

Sara held up the square. It wasn't as impressive as he had hoped it would be. It looked like a square. A Lollapalooza square, which made it interesting; but still, it was just a square, plain and cotton.

"You don't like it?" she asked, frowning.

"No, it's not that. It just seems like it'll take a long time to finish it."

"That's the point. You have to be patient."

"If you say so."

"Trust me."

So he did.

They had fallen easily into living together. The relaxed way they funneled two spaces into one shared life was both a small surprise and no surprise. Like her idea to make a quilt of their old shirts, it was also a tiny pleasure. Their memories, too: tiny pleasures and tiny pains, all the fabrics that comprised them separately and as a couple, stitched neatly together, batted and backed into a blanket that would keep them warm. Its squares might be burned and stained, torn, frayed or faded, but it was warm, comforting and comfortable, no less.

There was an even flow to their weekend routine: Friday night was generally spent at the bar with friends, chain smoking and feeding the jukebox. Pitchers and overflowing ashtrays punctuated the hours until last call. Scott always had dollar bills for her to feed the machine and never once

mentioned that all the same songs she played were stored on the hard drive in their computer. On Saturday, Scott got up first and made coffee. He let Sara sleep in after bar nights, club nights or concert nights. When Sara finally got out of bed, she stripped the bed, putting the sheets and pillowcases in the washing machine. Before she went downstairs, she scrubbed the rings of eye shadow and mascara off her face, leaving them rimmed black and slightly red from the soap. She brushed Friday's smoke off of her teeth and met Scott downstairs. He had coffee ready in her favorite cup. They made toast together; once all the dishes were rinsed and loaded in the dishwasher, they climbed back up the stairs again.

They shared shirt stories as they cut and pinned: where they were bought, how old they were when they got them, what had been spilled on them, whose cigarette hole that was in the sleeve of the Ramones shirt, which ex-boyfriend of Sara's had insisted she keep the Crow shirt that said, *Love Never Dies* on the back. Scott told Sara how disappointed he was when he realized Glenn Danzig painted on most of his tattoos. He was seventeen and in the moshpit looking up at the former singer of the Misfits, seeing the sweat drain the colors down his arms, like inauthentic blood dripping from a fallen god. She stitched up a *Dirty Black Summer* square and said: *It doesn't really matter: the music is still the same, even if the man who made it isn't.*

In August they started pinning the squares together; the first blocks that would form the base of the quilt. After Halloween, they reached the last shirt.

"See," Sara said, "I told you it would start to look like something all of a sudden."

Scott looked at her pinning together a patchwork that all seemed to be black: the fonts and graphics sewn together, like their lives. Her hair, dyed black and faded like the cotton of the squares, fell in a cool ripple over her shoulder. The ends of it tickled the edge of the S on her Siouxsie and the Banshees shirt, the same shirt she was wearing when he first saw her dancing in the club seven years before. The shirt draped on her body, not the one she held in her hands, unpacked his memory of that night and all the ones that had followed. He watched Sara measure,

running her razor cleanly down the side of her old Switchblade Symphony shirt. Her naked face was a cloud of concentration. Her eyes, still black-rimmed even when she'd scrubbed them, squinted at the symmetry and memory of cutting. When she tucked her hair back behind an ear, the sun bounced off of it and into their past, quilted together as surely as all those black squares, to cover them.

That night she had her hair up in ink black pigtails, whiplashing to the music. Her eyes mirrored Siouxsie's on the shirt, thick lined, Egyptian, blacker than her hair. Her boots were calf-high. The expanse from her shin to high on her thigh was webbed with torn black fishnet. She danced like no one was watching her, or like everyone was watching her, because both were true. Scott was on the side of the dance floor, intimidated and intoxicated by the girl he had not met. He leaned into his friend Gina's ear and asked, "Who is *she*?"

Gina's smoke glowed as it escaped in a nasty curl from her mouth. She exhaled and shook her head.

"Who, *her*? That's Sara. She's like a pop-up book from hell. Don't bother."

Scott watched the scuffed toes of Sara's calf-high boots kick to the drums. He watched her lined eyes close and her mouth smile as she sang along, her pigtails whipping the faces of strangers who dared dance too close to her. Gina shook her head and stubbed her cigarette out, said: *Go ahead then, but don't say I didn't warn you.* Scott walked to the bar and bought Sara the first of a million shots that he would bring to her at the edges of every dance floor they would ever visit .

The memory was as black and cut down as the fragment of shirt she held in her hands. She caught him looking at her; she looked down into his palm as he wiped a smudged ring of mascara from underneath her eye. It was a gesture he had perfected over time and that she was finally able to relax into, the simplicity of his hand on her face. The gentleness of his touch was almost unbearable to her, despite its constance and dependability.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just remembering something," he answered.

She twisted her hair up into a ponytail to keep it out of the way as she sat down to sew *Gutter Glitter* into place. With that square, it was finished. It was imperfect, comfortable and cut from the fabrics that clothed their lives without each other. Tonight they would sleep quilted in black: the things they left behind, but could never fully get rid of.

Most of the time, Scott didn't even notice the raised pink scars that jeweled her wrists like vertical bracelets anymore. And most of the time, neither did she.

### Wrong Number by Lynn Beighley

I'm shaking, literally, as I wait behind the curtains. My right index finger traces a wooden seam on my guitar. The strap around my neck seems to want to pull me down. I force myself to stand up straight. I'm really going through with this, I think. I really am.

I'm up after two more acts. Right now, the twins, Layla and Lola, collectively known as "Lady Finga" are performing. Well, lip syncing and jiggling. Although I can't think about it right now, I'm too nervous. If you'd asked me about them earlier, I'd have to concede that, as vapid as they are, they look very sexy and Lady Finga is, actually, a very good name. They wanted to be called Lady Goddess originally, but that was vetoed by our very religious school Principal. "No such heathen name will be allowed," were his words.

All too soon, they finish, accept their applause, and man is there a lot of it, and jiggle offstage. My doom is that much closer.

Next up is Baldo The Munificent, or as I like to call him, Marcus. I am completely in love with him. He's nice to me, but other than one glorious study hall when we discovered our shared taste in books, we've had no real interaction. Marcus is funny, and cute, and clever. His act is corny, and this charms me even more.

And in a flash, he's finished. The audience politely claps, Baldo bows, collects his various accoutrements, and exits, stage left.

I'm being introduced, and then someone behind me hisses in my ear, "That's your cue, get out there." My legs, seemingly of their own volition, walk me out to the stage behind the microphone. I sit on the stool.

I hear myself say, "I'm singing Imagine, by John Lennon." My voice is a little rough, but it seems to be clear enough. My ears are ringing, but I think I hear something, a faint murmur. I ignore it. I begin to sing.

I'm a pretty good singer. I've been doing it for 10 years, I've had lessons. I've played guitar for 5. Even my annoying older brother can't get away with teasing me about my singing anymore. That must mean something.

So when that murmur I thought I heard gets louder, I don't know what to think. And then it turns to booing. I keep singing. Soon I can't hear myself. I see more than one red faced middle aged man standing in the audience yelling something at me.

My microphone goes dead. This is far, far worse than what I expected would happen. I knew Principal Jonas would only be willing to approve something patriotic, or maybe a country song where God steps in to guide someone's daddy home. But I didn't know until this moment how much out of step I am with the people I live among. This hurts more than the booing.

I walk off the stage to, well, face the music. And as I slowly walk to where Principal Jonas is standing and scowling, I see Marcus give me a thumbs up. Maybe, maybe, I'm not entirely alone.

### **Big in the Bars by Carol Carpenter**

One by one, the shoppers are attracted by the flashing blue light above the table. I slice the potatoes into thin wafers, fanning them like a deck of cards. “The magic little machine that slices, dices and shreds.”

I slip on the round gadget, put in a small head of cabbage, and push the button. “Instant cole slaw.” My thumbs point toward my chest. “Proof positive. Even a man can whip up a dish.” The women laugh.

To a young man wearing a shiny gold wedding band: “Want more of the bride’s time? Get her out of the kitchen with this.” The crowd snickers and presses forward, trying to get a look at the man. I hold up the shiny machine, make my pitch and sell four.

At five o’clock the crowd fills the aisle, spills over into hardware. I talk faster as brown paper bags rustle and “Jingle Bells” plays over the loud speaker. I pass sliced apples in a clear plastic bowl.

When I see Johnnie in the crowd, chewing on an apple slice, my fingers move, my words grow. I play to him. He asks questions, pretends doubt. He plays my skill, buys one. I sell eight more Veg-O-Matics and turn off the blue light.

“You never lose the touch,” Johnnie says, helping me pack away the equipment.

“This crowd’s easy,” I say, remembering the times I’d called Johnnie to help me with the tough ones: the cynics, lunatics, born-again who tried to wrench the crowd from my fingers.

“Remember that county fair in Billows? They’d leave that revival meeting full of hellfire.”

Johnnie laughs. “Once we had the good Reverend hooked, they followed like black sheep.” He looks past me, past the shelves of cookie tins, cake pans and Pyrex

cookware. "Thirty-six years. What did we do with all the time?"

"A lot, Johnnie. We did a lot."

What can I say to him? That we ate two pounds of feta cheese when we heard it would make us men at thirteen? That we beat up Ronald Smalderhort for laughing at his mother's accent? That I still have the Greek cross he gave me when we were ten? That I hate him for having had it all and lost it?

Johnnie lays a sheaf of papers on top of the carrots I'll use tomorrow. "The papers from the bank. Even a second mortgage and borrowing to my limit isn't enough to buy that bar in Westhill."

I hand him back the papers without reading them. "So? There are other ways."

"Name one," Johnnie says as he straightens the tilting Christmas tree by the coffee pots.

"Ask Santa. Rob a liquor store. Get a rich mistress. That's three for you to think about. Now, let's eat." I hand him his grease-stained parka. "Doesn't your wife ever wash this thing?"

We walk past the animated elves, past the men's underwear, out into the mall. Johnnie whistles "Silent Night" along with the Salvation Army singers. I drop a dollar into their black kettle.

“Remember Sary Mae that Christmas in Arkansas? The one whose daddy owned those weight loss clinics,” says Johnnie.

“Not the one who put the cold towels on our heads the morning after? Or was she the one who turned out to be a guy? You always were big in the bars.”

At the Coney Island, Johnnie orders his hot dog without chili and grunts when I get the works on two, French fries and a Coke.

“That stuff will rot your guts,” Johnnie says. He stands up and tightens his stomach muscles. “Go on, punch me.” I give him a light tap. “Harder.” I hit him harder and the waitress rushes over. “It’s okay,” he says without looking at her and sits down.

He takes a bite of his hot dog, chews it seventy times (his mother used to count), and says, “You should start working out with me.” After he finishes eating, he washes down his all-purpose multiple vitamin and tablets of B, C, and E. He offers the bottles to me, but I tell him Greeks put too much faith in food and vitamins.

Johnnie says his mother isn’t dying after all. It’s only the gall bladder that has to come out; then she’s coming to live with him. Stella and the kids aren’t happy about it, but he knows how to handle her, how to handle all of them.

I tell him to borrow some money for the bar from his mother, make her a partner. Says that’s not the Greek way. When I ask him what the Greek way is, he shrugs his shoulders. I suspect he doesn’t know. Once he said he couldn’t remember anything about Greece and must have been adopted. He plans to go back someday, but I know he’s just talking.

He wants to know if I'll help him fix Little Lite Mike's car tomorrow after he bails J.B. out of jail.

"Christ, Johnnie. No wonder you never sleep or have any money. Do these bums ever pay you back?" I can tell by his droopy eyelids that he's not listening. I poke his shoulder and he looks at me.

Johnnie says, "Well? Can I count on you tomorrow?"

"See you tonight," and I pay our bill, leaving him to drink his black coffee alone.

That night when I walk in the Pour Devil, Johnnie's on stage finishing my favorite, "...and give birth to the blues." The sound holds, dark and thick like blackberry brandy. He sees me and gives the thumbs-up sign.

I wave to the old lady in orange chiffon, wondering if her puckered chest ever gets cold as she sits listening on the same bar stool night after night. All the regulars are here: Gracie wonders who'll buy her breakfast; Roy looks for his ex-wife; LuAnne dances to forget she's no one's ex.

Tonight they make me tired. All of them. Even Johnnie. I lean against the carpeted back wall and watch him check the mike, move a loudspeaker. Like a depressed housewife, he adjusts, readjusts the furniture.

During Johnnie's second set, the man next to me says, "I used to watch that guy twenty years ago at the Cat's Eye."

"Oh, yeah?" I stare at a broken light fixture.

"Yeah, that's a fact. Knew him before he ever made it on 'Saturday Dance Party,' before he had a hit record, before he fell off the charts."

I imagine the man is a fly and drown him in my beer.

“Say, whatever happened to him?”

“Nothing,” I say as I revive the fly and swat it against the Merry Xmas sign.

“Bet it was either dames or whiskey. What do you think?” the man says.

“I think it was the flies. They done him in,” I whisper.

The man takes his Scotch and soda and moves to the bar.

I push open the Gents door, push it right into Nelson’s back.

“Can’t a guy even comb his hair in this joint without being knocked around?”

Nelson stoops so he can see his hair in the lower half of the cracked mirror. He sees me behind him. “Hey, the man I’ve been wanting to talk to. Do you think Johnnie’d lend me a hundred? Big poker game tomorrow. I could take all they’ve got. Watch it,” Nelson says as I start to step into the stall. “Toilet’s leaking again.”

“Sure, he’ll give you the money. Didn’t you see the sign outside? Drive-in banking, twenty-four hours a day.” Everyone has a pitch these days.

“He gets most of my paycheck every week. Least he can do is give some back. Wish I owned this place.” Nelson shakes his wet hands. “You’d think he’d at least spring for some paper towels. What a cheap bastard.”

“Yeah,” I say thinking of Johnnie’s overweight wife who works at Ford, his rusted-out Mustang parked in back. One hundred and fifteen thousand miles on it, a piece of cardboard stuck over the side window, a broken defroster.

Yet, Johnnie has to play the big shot. Some of our biggest arguments have been over that. I say he's afraid to tell people the truth. What truth, he says. That you don't own this place, I say. What place, he asks. Forget it, I say.

Johnnie is with the Scotch-and-soda man at the end of the bar. I try to warn him but he's already talking, tucking his black shirt tight under the black leather belt, hand-tooled in Greece, special ordered by his mother who went back for a visit.

"I'm all right," Johnnie says automatically as he grabs my elbow and pulls me into the kitchen. He doesn't remember that I stopped asking that question years ago. "You know any rich mistresses?" he says.

You've got to get a class place of your own. You're not getting any younger, you know." I cut myself a piece of the spinach pie Johnnie's wife made. "That woman sure can cook."

"I'll show you who's old," and we spar until he gets me in a headlock. The spinach pie sits uneaten on the counter.

"Give, give. A drink for my life."

Johnnie lets go and we fall to the floor. "Thelma," Johnnie bellows, "a beer and a shot."

"You two are crazy," she says, setting the drinks on the floor beside us. "Must be a full moon out tonight," and she bares her teeth, bites at Johnnie's neck. "You better get out there and keep those animals dancing."

I sit on his stomach to hold him. "Thought you were on the wagon."

Nelson comes through the swinging doors, sees me and turns to go.

“Wait,” Johnnie says, pushing me off. “You start tomorrow,” and he hands Nelson a crumpled sheet of paper. “The pay’s good.” He takes money from his pocket and straightens it between two fingers before handing it to Nelson. “To hold you ‘til payday. Don’t mess up this time,” he tells him.

Nelson thanks him, says he owes him a lot, says he’ll pay him back. Says he can’t pay him back for all he’s done. He leaves by the back door.

“Christ, Johnnie. You dangle your feet in the water and the bloodsuckers feed.”

As Johnnie sings, the sound of the dancers’ pounding feet moves along the edges of the oak dance floor, under the carpet, through coated wires.

I watch Johnnie control the group: move them closer together, pull them apart, urge them into twirls and dips.

It’s not my Veg-O-Matic crowd, but I can sell them a dream they can slice and dice. This morning was my dress rehearsal. Johnnie never did know how to peddle himself.

When Johnnie steps off the stage, I step on. I turn on the Christmas lights ringing the backdrop, pick up the mike. People look at me and point. Most of them know me but only off stage. No one uses Johnnie’s stage but Johnnie. Nelson leaves to get him.

I pick up the tambourine and shake it above my head, against my hip. “Tonight’s the night,” I say quietly, forcing them to lean forward in their chairs. Louder. “The night to pay old debts. The night of truths.”

I shake the tambourine and point to Johnnie who's motioning me off stage. "Who doesn't laugh, dance, and sing with Johnnie. Who doesn't tell him problems?" I set the beat. "Problems, we all got problems." The crowd's clapping with me. "I got problems. You got problems. Even Johnnie's got problems. Yeah, yeah," I chant.

I can feel the crowd with me, hear their echo. I make my pitch. "Johnnie don't own this bar." The silence after revelation. Then louder than ever. "But we can buy stock in Johnnie's dream. Help Johnnie buy his bar. Buy a dream."

I pull silver and bills from my pocket and drop them into the tambourine, shaking it. "Dig deep for Johnnie," I say, passing it to the silky girl beneath me. "For Johnnie's bar. For Johnnie's dream," I continue as the tambourine is passed from hand to hand. Thelma empties it twice into her tip jar.

"For Johnnie," one final time as someone turns on the juke box and everyone dances.

I find Johnnie in the back room stretched out on the mattress he sleeps on when he's too tired to go home.

"I'm not a charity case," Johnnie says.

"No one says you are, you blue-eyed Greek. But you're big in the bars."

### The Property Manager by Wayne Cresser

I was approaching the Delaware Water Gap and you have to pay a toll there, so the car windows were coming down, letting in a harsh rush of December air. This was happening at maybe fifty miles an hour. And I was fumbling for my wallet while a CD played and my phone rang.

The caller ID said William and I knew it was the guy with the beefy Rottweiler who'd just moved into the first floor of the two-family I own back in Rhode Island. I'd gotten a call from the upstairs tenant earlier in the day, maybe around Mystic or New London, Connecticut anyway, complaining about the stench of cigarette smoke coming up the stairs. It was filling the landing, she said, slipping through the floor spaces where the pipes came up from below, clinging to her clothes, like a pestilence.

Cindy was a good tenant, a nice young woman who paid her rent with pink checks that had kittens on them, and I knew instantly from her story that the gap-toothed William had lied to me about smoking.

The first day I met him, he reeked of stale tobacco. He stood in the living room of my house on Maple Street, a sweet Craftsman-style bungalow with an in-law apartment upstairs, smelling like an ashtray and I said, "You don't smoke, do you, because I won't have smoking in the house."

And he said, "No, I do not, but *she* does. *She* was standing at his side, a woman of indeterminate age. Come to think of it, William fit that description too, except he was a guy. You know, they had hard lines in the hollows of their checks, dull hair, and wore flannels and jeans. They could have been anywhere between forty and sixty. But being a gentleman, and thinking that she might be his girlfriend, I said, "I'd appreciate it very much, ma'am, if when you're visiting, that you smoked outside the house."

No problem, she said. She was trying to quit.

"I'll make sure she remembers," said William, and handed me a check for \$2500. As I folded it into my wallet, I began to think of the trip I was about to take to Pittsburgh. I began to think too that maybe it wasn't William's fault that he smelled bad. He'd just been standing too close to *her*, the smoker. The rent, he said, would be no problem because he owned trucks, three of them to be exact and he hauled goods, and his trucks were always on the road making him money. He knew the road; sure he did, because he very often drove the rigs himself. He told me not to worry. The other tenant wouldn't see him much. He was on the road a lot.

And now my phone was ringing because I'd called him and left a message asking him to call me.

I turned the music down and picked up. I was nearly at the toll booth so I said, "Listen, William, I've got to slow down and pay this toll. Hold on a minute."

"Where you at?" he said.

"I'm on I-84, leaving New Jersey."

"What?" he yelled. "There ain't no tolls on I-84."

Okay, that should have been a deal breaker right there. Everything I needed to know about the essential unsoundness of this character. He'd probably lied about making his living from the road too. He was beginning to give me the creeps. I imagined him suddenly in the woods, hunting rabbits and deer with a bazooka. He skinned them and sold their pelts at lodges and camps far removed from polite society.

"I'm stopping at an actual toll booth right now, William, at the Delaware Water Gap."

"Oh yeah," he shouted. "Delaware Water Gap, sure. Yeah, they got one there."

I paid the three dollars, rolled up the window and starting talking again.

"Look, William," I began, "I got a report from the upstairs tenant that someone was smoking in the house."

"I told you I don't smoke."

"If it wasn't you, then was it your girlfriend?"

"She's not my girlfriend. She's my lady friend," he said.

I thought I misheard him. "She's your lady friend?"

"Yeah, we enjoy each other's company, but I don't screw her."

"Thanks for putting such a fine point on it, William," I said.

I was rolling away from the toll booth now and looking for a spot to pull over so I could tell him I didn't give a damn what she was to him. Instead I wanted him to know that I wasn't going to

lose a reliable tenant over cigarettes and lies, regardless of who was smoking or who was lying, but he hung up.

I rolled on to Pittsburgh to see my old pal Morstein. The Steelers were in the playoffs and he had tickets to the game. I'd never seen Pittsburgh except in movies and I didn't have to return to my new digs at the private high school where I was to begin teaching drama for another week. Morstein showed me around the city and I enjoyed it. But the sights, and the food, and I mean even the perogie casserole at Morstein's own celebrated delicatessen, would have been better without the jittery phone calls from Cindy upstairs.

"I have an allergy to cigarette smoke," she said. "It's real."

"Look, I want to help," I said. "I've spoken to William about it, but I don't know what else I can do until I get back."

I thought I could hear her sniffing. "Are you all right?" I asked.

She didn't answer right away, just kept sniffing into the phone. Finally she said, "When will that be?"

"Monday," I told her.

As the Steelers were losing to Jacksonville, I explained the snowballing mess back home to my friend, who snapped his fingers and said, "I know what you need."

"You do?"

"Sure, you know I meet every kind of person in my line of work."

"I don't know, but I believe it if you say it."

"Right, well, you should. Now what you need someone to manage your property for you. They take a small commission, usually a month's rent, but the beauty part is you don't have to deal with any of this mishegas you're talking about."

"That would be a relief," I said.

"Really," said Morstein. "It's too late with this crew you got now, but usually the tenants don't even get your phone number. The property manager takes the calls, does all the triage, and you collect the rents, pay the taxes. Everybody gets happy."

I slapped him on the back. "I'm doing it, man," I said.

Morstein rolled his eyes, "Jeez, Philip, remember where you are. The Steelers are two minutes away from getting their asses canned for good."

"Oh yeah," I said.

"No, really," he insisted. "It's not safe to look so happy right now."

I scanned the faces of the crowd around me, so many sad faces painted black and gold. It was tragic. I nodded and tried to look as glum as Hamlet.

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I returned to my rooms at the Abbey School a couple days later. I had stored most of my furniture in my garage. The things I brought with me, the CDs, books, my stereo equipment, were the kinds of things I'd moved into my college dorm nearly twenty years before. Maybe that made me feel less like a grownup, but I reminded myself I still owned property and I still had the responsibility of supervising twenty-five college-bound miscreants between the ages of 14 and 17. I looked forward to my new life as resident faculty and had high hopes. If only had to solve the William problem, which had deteriorated even further.

By the time I got home, Cindy was so inconsolable that she'd Fed-exed a letter to me saying there was nothing I could do now to stop her from moving out. "The situation has become a landlord issue," she wrote. She was leaving at the end of January, period.

When William wouldn't return my calls, I went over there. All the curtains and shades on the first floor were pulled shut. There was a pickup truck in the driveway, and although I felt some relief that it wasn't on jacks, I was disheartened all over again when I noticed the islands of dogshit and butts of dead cigarettes sitting atop the thin layer of snow in the yard. It was at that moment that I thought about Richard Evans, the broken-hearted divorced fellow that I'd bought the house from. I'd promised him I'd be a proper steward of the place. It meant a lot to him, the house, his neighbors, and up until this point, I hadn't let him down. This business with William though, was beginning to make me feel like a fraud.

I rang the doorbell in front. Nothing. Around back, the same thing. So I got back in my car, unearthed the Yellow Pages that I not yet moved into my new place from a stack of things in the trunk, and phoned some property management companies.

I scheduled my first meeting with someone named Preston Hathaway at Empire Properties. The next morning, I drove through a moderate snowstorm to his office in a rehabilitated brownstone on the West Side of Providence.

“Nice place,” I told him as he asked me to sit down. He was very tall, an athletic looking man with a big head of black hair that had started to grey at the temples.

“Thanks, Mr. Carroll, we did all the restoration, that crown molding you see above your head, the hardwoods under your feet. Imported mahogany you know. Now what can I do for you?”

“Well, as I said on the phone, I’m in need of somebody to manage my property. You manage properties, right?”

“Sure, of course. How many properties do you have?”

“Well, I have one.”

Hathaway leaned back in his swivel chair and laughed. “I’m sorry, Phil, may I call you Phil?”

“I prefer Philip.”

“Well then, Philip, you see Empire is a large company. We manage hundreds of apartments and we own most of the buildings they’re in. Now occasionally, someone with several buildings with multiple units in each will ask us to do what you’re asking us and we’ll say yes. But a single property, well, I’m sorry, my friend.”

“No, it’s okay,” I said. “I’m new at this. I’m just now finding out how it works. I hope I haven’t wasted your time.”

“No problem,” he said. He stood up, all six and a half feet of him. Peering over me, he dropped his voice an octave and said, “Well Philip, you know what you have to do now, don’t you?”

“I’m not sure,” I said.

“Well sir, you just have to go out there and buy a bunch of property. After that, you’ll come back and we’ll talk.”

Then he pumped my hand and I walked out.

Just up the street, in a flat roofed, single story building that had been a bakery, I stopped at CityRent. I had expected things at Empire to go longer, so after I introduced myself to the young woman with the Florida tan and navel revealing top, I took a seat near the door and waited for my appointment with Nick DiCenzo. On the phone, Nick had said, “Everything’s case by case, here. We like you and you like us, well then Phil, we can do business.”

While I studied the exotic contours of Angelina Jolie’s face on the cover of *Us*, the receptionist looked me up and down and then shifted her gaze to the windows behind me.

“I hate snow,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest and giving herself a hug. “Just looking at it makes me cold.”

I knew she wasn’t flirting with me. No, she was as serious as every other New Englander who chooses to live in a place where snow falls every winter and feel miserable about it. Maybe saying it out loud made her feel better, maybe she missed her boyfriend in Boca, maybe she hated her job, but I couldn’t help her. In fact, I loved the way the city looked when snow was falling on it.

I noticed a wool sweater hanging on a hook behind her. “You know,” I said. “I usually just bundle up.”

At that moment, the phone on her desk buzzed and she picked it up.

“Nicky can see you now,” she said, “he’s in the office all the way to the back.”

The first thing Nick DiCenzo did was hand me an application and ask me to sit down. “Usual stuff, credit information, gotta see if your money’s good,” he laughed.

“I’ve got solid credit,” I said proudly.

“I bet you do. I bet you do, and I’ll tell you, Phil, we’ll get good people in your buildings. No deadbeats and absolutely nobody who’s done hard time. How many places you got, anyway?”

“Just the one,” I said, “but you never know, I may pick up some more.” This was a gambit on my part.

He frowned but kept the chatter upbeat. “You know what I said, Phil, we go case by case here.”

On his desk sat one of those phones with a row of push buttons across the top and all of them were lit and blinking.

“Look at this,” he said waving his hand over the phone, “Look what I gotta deal with every time we get more than three freakin’ inches of snow. It’s in the leases we write, snow removal. The city says it’s gotta be in there.”

At that moment the tanned receptionist walked in.

What is it, Steph? I’m with a client now,” Nick said.

“I got Frankie Russo on the phone,” she said. “He says daddy never paid him for last winter.”

Nick stood up, “You’re shittin’ me.”

“His plows aren’t going anywhere,” he says.”

“Tell Paulie to bring the car around,” Nick told her and disappeared into a closet near the door. When he reemerged, he was wearing a very large overcoat and a New York Yankees baseball cap. I couldn’t be sure he was concealing a bat under the coat.

He looked at me, and said, “Hey, hey, you still here? You want my freakin’ job or somethin’?”

I shook my head, “Not today,” I said. Then I gathered my things and left the still blank application on his desk.

I felt discouraged but I had one more appointment. This one, with a woman named Kate, would be a different setup, at least. She wanted to see the house. I was happy to show it to her, I told her, but it might be difficult to get in there right away. When she asked me why, I told her it was because an insane person lived on the first floor, and giggled. I hoped she’d think I was kidding and not see through the dodge. I really didn’t want to tell her about William because I was afraid of losing her before I got a chance to meet her.

When I finally reached William on the phone, he reminded me that the law says a landlord has “to give a tenant at least two day’s notice before they bring anybody into the unit.”

My heart sank. Suddenly my New England bungalow with the hardwood floors, built-in bookcases and open floor plan from the front room to the back deck had been reduced to “the unit.”

“All right,” I said, “You’ve been notified. I’d like to bring her by near the end of the week. “

“I’ll be on the road then,” he said

I didn’t believe him, but I said, “That’s ideal. Then nobody gets in anybody’s way.”

“No,” he said. “I mean, I don’t want nobody in my place when I’m not here.”

He was beginning to wind me up. “Your place?” I shouted.

“It’s my name on the lease,” he said.

“I don’t need your permission here, William. You’ve been told, and that’s that.”

There was a slight pause before he said, “Why’s she comin’ here, anyhow?”

I didn’t lie. “I don’t have time to take care of the property so I’m handing it over to a pro.”

“Oh,” he said. “Good,” he said. “I got some ideas about some things need doin’ around here.”

For the first time in two months, his tone with me was less than poisonous. I saw the moment as a way to end our chat on an up beat

“Rightio then, “I said, “But William, there is the matter of the dog. Is she protective of the house? I mean, will she let us in?”

“You mean Lady Diane?”

I bit my tongue. “Yes, Lady Diane.”

“I’ll make sure she’s not here.”

The day of my appointment with Kate Sullivan was unusually warm for January. I got there early and let myself into the garage where I pulled out a deck chair. From the deck, I could see the driveway and look out over the backyard that was still littered with crap and dead cigarettes. I wanted to relax, but I couldn’t stand the sight of it, so I went back to the garage, fished out a shovel and a lawn bag and started to clean around the crab apple tree, which I guessed was Lady Diane’s dumping ground. I must have gotten lost in the work because I didn’t hear Kate’s car pull up. She was nearly beside me when she said, “Mr. Carroll?”

I turned and said, “Is it you?”

It was a silly thing to say, maybe. Who else would it have been? Her sudden appearance had surprised me but that wasn't all of it. I noticed her eyes first, they were strikingly blue. She was blond, maybe thirty-five, and very bright, I mean, shiny. Her hair caught the sun and she offered her hand.

"It's nice to meet you," she said.

I placed the shovel against the stockade fence behind the tree. Then I shook her hand and said, "Well, let's take a look inside."

She followed me onto the deck and I unlocked the door to the mudroom. While I fiddled with the key to the inside door, I could hear low growling on the other side.

"There's a dog in there," Kate said.

Lady Diane, I thought, and cursed William under my breath. "Bastard," I muttered. The mudroom was tiny and Kate stood very close to me. She put her hand on my arm and said, "Don't open the door yet. I'll be right back."

She dashed to her car and returned with a bag of Crunchy Treats. "I have a puppy," she said.

"Oh," I said, and not knowing what to do next, I asked, "How should we handle this?"

"Unlock the door and just open it a crack. Then I'll toss a handful of these inside. Well make friends right away."

"I don't know."

"C'mon," she insisted. "You'll see."

I slipped the key in the lock and turned it, but before I opened the door I stopped. I really didn't want Kate Sullivan to be mauled by a Rottweiler before lunchtime. I made a cup of my hands and said, "Give me the Crunchy Treats, please."

"Really?"

"Please."

"That's sweet."

I opened the door and tossed the treats inside. They scattered like coins over the kitchen floor, and Lady Diane didn't know where to start with them. In the meantime, I opened the door and let us in.

"Act very relaxed," Kate said.

We stepped across the kitchen floor and the dog barely raised her head. I was amazed that she wasn't vacuuming up the treats. She seemed to be taking her time and savoring every bite. Once we moved into the dining room that opened into the living room, I breathed more easily, but then I was startled all over again by the candles sitting on nearly every surface of the furniture. They were large and scented and the mixture of bayberry and cranberry and pineapple on top of the odor of stale tobacco just about knocked me over.

"I have to sit down," I said and collapsed on a puffy sectional covered with dog hair.

By this time, Lady Diane had trotted out to see the strange people in her house, but there was no growling.

Kate had one eye on me and another on the dog while I sat there thinking that I had to get William out of my place. She removed a chair from the dining room table and walked it over to one end of the sectional, "No way I'm sitting on that," she said.

I noticed the dark wool of her coat, the fleecy scarf that by now she had loosened at the neck and wanted to apologize for the state of my place, for dragging her into this reeking dog-haired facsimile of my once cozy bungalow.

"I don't blame you," I said. "I didn't know we'd be walking into this."

"I've seen so much worse," she said and settled into the chair. "You know, a lot of property managers never look at the places they manage. Oh they might go out now and then to deliver a key or let a workman in to do some repair, but most do their business from the office."

"I know," I said.

"I like to see the place and more importantly, I like to see the owner in the place."

She was scanning the floors I had refinished and the walls I had painted as she spoke, and I couldn't take my eyes from hers.

She glanced at Lady Diane, who had stretched out on a filthy braided rug in a corner of the dining room. “She’s a lamb after all.”

“So she is,” I said. “Is there dope in those Crunchy Treats?”

“That’s funny,” she said, “But I wonder if I can tell you something, Mr. Carroll.”

“Call me Philip,” I said.

“Philip, yes. That suits you.”

I don’t know if she knew how much she was picking me up. I don’t know if I was grinning like an idiot or keeping my cool, but suddenly William, Lady Diane and the whole shitty mess didn’t seem as important as meeting Kate Sullivan on this particular afternoon, and I just wanted to keep her talking to me. “What is it?” I said.

“Well, only this. I don’t think you really want anybody but you in this place. It’s just a feeling I have but I’m usually right about these things.”

Of course she was right, because I’d made the place my home, because I’d come to think of it as mine and not a place I was passing through, because I promised the former owner I’d take care of the place since he’d been so happy once to do that.

I told her I believed her.

“You seem like a nice guy,” she said. “So I’m going to tell you something else.”

“Sure,” I said, “Anything.”

“Talk to your insurance company about the dog. I bet they don’t know there’s a Rottweiler living here.”

“Is that bad?” I asked.

“I can’t say, definitely, but it’s something they should know. If things work out the way I think they might, you’ll either be looking for a new tenant or you’ll be coming back here yourself and you won’t need me at all.”

She started to gather up the bag of Crunchy Treats and head out the door.

The words tumbled out before I could do anything to stop them. “But I do need you.”

Neither of us stirred for a moment. I didn't want her to go and I wanted to see her again, but I didn't know how to say any of that, so I had said something desperate. Then another angle occurred to me. It had been there all along, and I would have seen it too if like Kate Sullivan, I had remembered to stick to business.

"I have another apartment upstairs that's emptying out soon," I said. "William, blessed William, has smoked the poor kid who's in there right out."

"That's awful," she said.

She had me talking and thinking and my mouth was rolling like a runaway train. "I know, I know and I don't want to lose her, but tell you what, let me take you to lunch and tell you what I'm thinking we might do."

I didn't have a clue what we might do but I hoped to think of something on the way over.

"I'd like that," she said.

As we walked out together, me keeping a watchful eye on the dog and Kate walking softly by my side, she paused and said, "Wait a minute."

She stepped over to the braided rug where Lady Diane still slept and emptied the Crunchy Treats onto the floor, next to her head.

"For you," she said.

### Fever by Daren Dean

“Come in here quick!” Angie shouted over the drone of my push mower. “There’s something wrong with the baby! She won’t wake up!”

It was one of those days when nothing unusual was supposed to happen. I was out cutting the grass trying not to think about how my life had gone to the dogs. The wheels of the Briggs and Stratton were wobbling because I had never put them on right in the first place. The thing needed an oil change and a new filter, but beyond that I had a knack for killing anything mechanical, anything with an engine. I was just getting by helping my old man doing tearoffs. I was in no shape to be on a roof in nearly one hundred degree weather. The only thing sustaining me was some crazy idea that I would have an epiphany, any day now, that would change my life, our life, here for the better. I can’t account for why I thought that way but I did.

The sweat was pouring off me and gathering into a triangle under my collar. I was using my fingers to gather up the sweat and flick it off. I hated mowing. I never wanted this yard, much less this house, to begin with. It was all her idea, but I had been the one going with the realtor to check places out and taking baby Riley with me. I was a new father and didn’t know a damn thing about babies or mothers either.

I just wanted Angie to get off my ass about not having a job. She made it clear to me that what she wanted was a house. It was her dream. If we just had our own place instead of living in my mom’s old house, she would be happy she said. I, on the other hand, had moved three times a years since I was a kid so I didn’t understand. We’d been married for many years before we had the baby and had essentially lived as single people who are roommates. We didn’t divide the peanut butter or our checking account, but still we had never really had to rely on each other out of necessity the way you do your family when you’re growing up.

I had no idea that when she said she wanted a house what she really meant was get a job! Angie informed me later I should have easily made the connection that her talk about wanting a house really meant she wanted me to get a job immediately. Never mind the missing synaptic spark in her conversation, but I’m a little slow. I filled out online applications and received my fair share of automated responses. There was hardly a decent job around that you could walk in and get a paper application for anymore. A temp agency gave me a job for a couple of days moving furniture around in a Real Estate office and then doing detail work at a car wash for a day two months later.

I know people who might say ‘if he wanted to work he’d just take any job he could get but it’s not that easy when you have a kid. If you take a minimum wage job in retail they want you to work

nights and weekends. Angie worked during the day running Hair Today in the mall fifty hours a week. Nights and weekends were their busy times so she seemed to be there constantly. The upshot was I'd have to pay a babysitter more than what I made for the privilege of working. It was demoralizing to realize a high school babysitter could easily earn more. It wasn't like I didn't want to work. I told her that once while she was doing paperwork on the couch and a cigarette burned in green ashtray on the coffee table. She didn't say anything, but she stared at me and tapped her front teeth with a mechanical pencil. Besides my crumbling marriage the economy was falling apart too. Ever since 9/11 things had slowly and steadily been turned upside down. It was a different world, but it had taken most of us a little while to realize it. I'd lost my gig selling radio advertising for KLAK 106.1 FM. I wasn't worried at first because I knew I'd find something in the meantime. It was just a small stepping stone before I found another job.

Angie was forever overreacting to things. She lost her keys every other day and I would tear the house apart looking until one of us eventually found them in the door lock, next to the flour in the pantry, in the freezer, or under the bed. She would work herself into a frantic state and not be satisfied until I was more crazed than she was and we were tearing the place apart looking for the missing item.

"If you don't get a job you're going to have to think about moving out on your own," Angie finally told me one day in a distracted tone as she peer at the screen of her cell phone. "You might want to try that for awhile."

I was incredulous. We'd been married for ten years. We had a child together. Things had looked very different when I started working on my degree in Journalism, but then suddenly jobs were drying up. Overnight it seemed that getting a Journalism degree seemed to be the worst plan a person could make for the future. Angie had been proud of me back then. She read self-help books and was impressed by the way I'd set my goals and achieved them. Just like all the gurus said! When I realized how the market had fallen out I came home and announced I was giving up on Journalism and school. I was done. No plan B for the future. Circumstances had changed; we were at each other's throats.

"Get a job? What do you think? I haven't been looking? Is that what you think?"

"I guess you're right," she set her cell phone and turned back to her scheduling. "I just want you to see what it's like to earn a living again and maybe pay some bills. It isn't easy, you know."

"I know it's not easy," I said. "It's not like I'm some kid who doesn't know the difference." I just stared at her with, I'm sure, stunned disbelief on my face. "You know when we first got married you didn't work and that was just fine with me. Was I wrong? Maybe I should have told you to get a job or hit the bricks!"

“It’s not like I’m saying get out!” she shouted back at me. “It’s just a lot of stress I have on my back right now.”

We stared at each other as if one of us might attack the other tooth and nail and then she said something that floored me.

“Besides,” Angie said. “If you did get your own place you’d probably find a job right away then.”

I was burning up. My shirt was drenched in sweat. I just let go of the mower and it went off by itself. Almost immediately the cicadas started their screeching. Dark clouds were forming a gunmetal gray bank of clouds full of static and thunder. A yellow jag of lightning flickered in the distance. The storm was well off from us I could feel the electricity building in the air and in my veins. Inside our little ranch style house was cool and dark. The silence was ominous. Riley normally filled the void of our angry silences with her toddler’s chatter. Angie looked back over her shoulder at me and stepped into Riley’s room.

“She won’t wake up,” Angie said.

“What do you mean?” I stepped into the blindingly pink room.

“When I laid her down she had a little bit of a fever,” Angie said. “I didn’t think too much about it, but then it seemed like she had been asleep forever. When I tried to wake her up she made some noises, but she wouldn’t wake up. Her entire body shook like she was having a seizure and then nothing. I said her name over and over, but it’s like she can’t hear me.” Angie’s voice had reached a strident tenor that clearly told me I had to do something, but as usual I felt completely impotent, defeated.

“Riley, Riley!” I knelt down next to her little bed and gave her a little shake. The baby continued to sleep, but her body didn’t tense up or react to my touch. “What’s wrong with her?”

“What are we going to do, Dylan?” She stared at me as if I had caused this to happen.

I picked Riley up and carried her to our unmade bed. I’m not sure why I did that, but it felt like the right thing to do. Her little body was limp in my arms and hotter than a woodstove. The seconds seem to go by like very important fireworks in my mind signaling a limit of precious time for my daughter. Angie was anguished, beside herself, as if I could bring Riley back to us. I went and got a wash cloth out of the linen closet, wetted it, and folded it before laying it across her forehead.

“Should we drive her to hospital?” Angie said.

“No,” I said. “We’re both too keyed up. “Call 911, Angie,” I said. “When they get here they’ll have what they need to help her.”

“What are we going to do?” Angie wailed. Mascara ran down her face. She rested her face in her hands.

“Listen to me,” I said. “Call 911 on your cell phone now and then go out in the yard and flag them down so they know where to go.”

“Okay,” Angie said. She dashed for the phone. I heard her talking to the operator.

“She’s so hot,” I said as much to myself as Angie. “Riley, Riley.”

“They’re on the way,” Angie said.

“Go out and wait for them.” Surprisingly, she did. Angie is someone who does things so I think she was happy to have an action to perform. I didn’t want her to see me crying.

“Riley,” I said. “This is one hot mess.”

I held her delicate hand in mine. We’d only just recently discovered that the reason she seemed to be constantly sick was all of her food allergies. She was allergic to milk, eggs, tomatoes, beef, and pork. Feeding her was a challenge. I could already hear the sound of sirens. Looking down at my precious daughter’s sweet face I had the gut feeling she wasn’t going to make it. She wasn’t responding. It was almost like she had already died. I’d been in hospitals a lot lately with my uncle and step-father who had both past away in the last couple of years. I’d seen my step-father pass away right before my eyes. I knew death when I saw it. Riley wasn’t dead yet, but I knew at that moment she wasn’t going to make it. There was a drop of dried blood on the sheet from Angie’s side of the bed. It seemed a harbinger or an emblem of our shame that I didn’t want the EMTs to see. I tried to position Riley to cover up the tiny rust colored teardrop, but wasn’t having much luck since it was near the edge of our bed. I wanted to get a wash cloth and scrub out that bloody stain before they got here. The pressure in my chest was tremendous. A waterfall crashed in my ears.

The sirens were loud. Too loud for an ambulance. The firemen had arrived first. I heard Angie’s voice yelling something unintelligible. I heard men’s voices. The screen door to the front of the house opened. The next thing I was aware of the firemen were in our bedroom looking down at me kneeling next to our daughter. The look on their faces was coldly critical. Now they were looking me up and down.

“How long has she been like this?” one of them asked.

“Angie?” I asked.

“She had a fever earlier,” Angie explained. “When I tried to wake her up she wouldn’t responded. Her body was like a little flame.”

I stood up and backed away as one of the firemen advanced. They both smelled of smoke as if they had been called away from a burning building. The EMTs bolted through the door. Now there were four professionals standing in our small bedroom where our lives were going wrong in a hurry. One of the beefy EMT guys was working on our daughter.

The firemen were scrutinizing me very closely now. Staring at me in an accusatory way. It was

as if they suspected me of harming the baby somehow. I looked back at them trying to communicate my concern, but to them I supposed it looked like guilt.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked, looking from one to the other. “You’re looking at me like I did something to my baby.” I was pissed.

“Are you going to be okay, sir?” the fireman with red hair asked.

“That’s not it,” the other one said pointedly to me.

“I’m fine,” I said. “I just want her to be okay.”

“Well, you look like you’re about to have a heart attack,” the shorter firemen said. “Your face is bright red.”

“Oh,” I almost laughed out loud. “I was mowing when she called me in to tell me about the baby.”

The firemen said nothing to my explanation, but they nodded in unison as if they practiced the move. The other EMT ran out to the ambulance.

Riley’s eyes fluttered open.

“She’s going to be okay,” the first EMT said. “This is really quite common.”

“Febrile seizure?” the redheaded fireman said.

“A what?” I asked.

“Yes,” the EMT said. “Can you get her some water until I can get the IV going?”

“What?” Angie said. “What are you talking about? Is she going to be all right?”

The firemen were already making for the door.

“We see this all the time,” the EMT said. “At this age a child’s brain is developing. It’s not how high the temperature is, but it has more to do with how quickly it rises. When she’s a little older this won’t likely happen again. It’s the age. You can take her to the emergency room and have her checked out if it makes you feel better about it.”

“Oh thank God,” she sat next to Riley. Her hands were visibly trembling as she patted the baby as if she might disappear any second. I felt useless.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” I said. “But thank you very much.”

“We see this all the time,” he said. He carried his bag out of the room like an electrician.

The emergency vehicles were gone.

“Mommy,” Riley’s sweet voice whispered.

Angie looked at me with relief on her face. Her eyes seemed to say how silly we were for all of our fighting when our baby girl was all that mattered. I knew what she meant. I knew where she was going with this. This was the sign that now she should understand what was truly important in life just like all the gurus taught these days. A moment of epiphany, a terrible life moment, and now the

subject is cured. All is well. Talk about your problems and then you find that suddenly you can cope with them. I knew that this was how she felt, but I didn't believe talking about it helped anybody at all. I pushed a wild strand of Angie's hair in place behind her ear. I kissed the baby on the forehead. The next thing I knew the car keys were in my hand and I was walking out the door. I glanced up as I stepped over the threshold. The black clouds were low overhead and the wind nearly ripped the screen door out of my hands. A storm was coming low on the horizon; a black anvil out of the west.

## **Katrina, Katrina, and Katrina and David, David, and David by Ella Delany**

“Morning,” David yawned. He shook Katrina’s shoulder gently. “It’s your turn to get the bread.”

“Seriously? There’s yesterday’s in the fridge.”

‘What a thought! Come on. This is Paris!’ He always says things like that, Katrina thought, dragging herself upright. They didn’t used to annoy me so much.

Downstairs, Katrina slammed the big French door shut and felt the cold eat into her cheeks. She jumped, noticing her landlady who stood a few steps away, staring into space. When she got back to the apartment, Katrina aimed a kick at the rich smelling rubbish bag David had placed outside the door. David two materialized and removed it, apologizing profusely.

In the tiny bathroom, Katrina put the hot water on full blast. The room filled with steam, making her eyes water. She looked at her skin through the fog, ran her fingers over the cells and hair of her faintly pink and damp outer covering. She carefully removed the residue of eye makeup from the skin under her lashes. Outside, she faintly heard the sound of Katrina two and David making love. She rolled her eyes.

After she dressed, Katrina walked down the Rue St Jacques to her classes. She carried her portable electronic French dictionary in her left hand. Katrina two walked briskly beside her. Katrina two always looked chic, no matter what she was wearing, and she was capable of making poised, grammatically correct remarks on *l’archéologie orientale*. Kate, another student who lived in their building, trailed Katrina and Katrina two.

Kate and I should be friends, Katrina thought. After all Kate walks near me almost every morning and I should just start a conversation. She sighed. In her mind all of her jobs and tasks stretched out like a complex web. Close up, the web was composed of tiny stitches. From a distance, it looked like a grey moulding monolith.

Katrina, Katrina two and Kate arrived at Luxembourg gardens. Statutes looked down on them. Small French children ran in a restrained way around the lake in which their little boats bobbed. Why does Kate always walk to university at the same time as me, Katrina wondered, but never actually say anything? She must find it as strange as I do. They reached the end of the gardens where cars were zooming down the Rue D’Assas, ignoring speed limits. The ratty Paris pigeons communed on the head of Bartholi’s Lady Liberty. A small boat tilted on the waters of the fountain, then dipped and submerged.

I am part of this, Katrina thought. I am another molecule in this dripping, shaded, tumbling universe, and I am lonely and alone, and nobody can see how unfair everything is. Still, she thought. Still. Enjoy this moment. Enjoy the cold wind, the leaves, the streamlined perfection of these sculptures, and the design of the wide, neo-classical streets.

“Hi,” Katrina said, turning suddenly to Kate. “Hello.” She smiled expressively, in the way she always smiled with other girls. Sudden tears trembled on her eyelids; Katrina cried easily, at the slightest moment of intimacy, at the faintest possibility of friendship. Kate, very deliberately, turned her back and looked towards the lake with the boats. They stood for a moment, Katrina looking at Kate, Kate looking at the boats.

I have to go, I have to go, Katrina realized. I’ll just skip that first class. She walked back through the gardens, until she reached the crepe stand at the opening of the gardens, at the beginning of Rue St Jacques. It didn’t take her long to get there. The gardens, like everything in Paris, were small and self-contained. She looked back. Katrina two had not followed her. She seemed to be talking to Kate. Their heads were clustered together. As Katrina watched, Katrina two and Kate looked back through the park towards her.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy,” Katrina said lightly, shutting the door of the apartment behind her. “The craziest thing happened to me and that Kate girl from upstairs.”

David said, “I have to go to school in a minute, where are you, why aren’t you at school?” He quickly walked towards Katrina and picked her up, swinging her around. One of Katrina’s tiny feet hit the VCR from Taiwan, sending it crashing to the ground. “Shit,” David said, then placed Katrina gently on the ground and scratched at his rust-red beard. “Oh god,” David said, blushing too much. “Shit. Look. Look okay. Okay, I was watching something I shouldn’t have. You know what I mean?”

“We don’t watch any DVDs anyway,” Katrina replied quickly, looking at the ruins of the Taiwanese VCR. “Don’t worry about it.” She touched David’s hot cheek.

Katrina three wandered into the bedroom. “What a fucking asshole he can be,” she called. She took David’s porn collection, (stashed in a plastic supermarket bag in his underwear drawer), and stacked the DVDs in a neat pile. She placed the pile in the wastepaper basket. She set the wastepaper basket on fire. “TITS episodes three, four and five” started to burn, sending a horrible burnt chemical smell into the air of the small apartment.

“Fuck yeah!” Said Katrina three. “And he should offer to pay for that DVD player. *You* brought it, remember? And air freshener. Gardenia.”

“I guess I could try to fix the player,” David said. “But it looks pretty dead. Maybe we should just get a new one.”

“It’s nothing,” said Katrina. “Please don’t worry.”

“We definitely needed a new one anyway,” said David.

“No we didn’t,” Katrina three called.

“I love it here you know,” Katrina said quickly. “I love it.”

“A French girl wouldn’t say that,” David said, still red. “I’ve been meaning to tell you. You’re too easily pleased.”

Katrina realized that Katrina two and David had been having private conversations behind her back. Katrina two had said the exact same thing to her three days ago, verbatim. Katrina two would have sensed David inside. She would have lurked outside the door until he was ready for her to enter the apartment, loudly and in slow motion.

David and Katrina went out to their favourite bar that night, which served candy in sweet cocktail drinks. They sat in silence and watched other people. The day had left Katrina feeling tired. A girl in a lovely dress walked in, and the room swivelled and stared.

Katrina two was having a wonderful time. She was laughing, and had her arms around a handsome French man with a moustache. They were talking in beautiful French about the crossover in principles between the Brutalism movement and communist architecture.

Katrina three sidled up to the Katrina two and the beautiful man with enviable confidence. “Why do men dominate the conversation so much,” she said. “Katrina two, you’re really smart! You shouldn’t just be listening and nodding! You’ve done things, you’ve learnt things, you know things, speak, argue, you don’t *agree* with that point!” Katrina two whispered something appropriate into the French man’s ear. Katrina three rolled her eyes. “You don’t *agree*,” She repeated angrily.

The beautiful girl in the tiny dress is Kate, Katrina suddenly realized. It’s her. Katrina ducked under the table, upsetting her drink, feeling sodden candy drip down her neck, creating a sticky trail down her back.

“We’ve got to go,” she whispered from under the table.

“When’s your friend going to arrive?”

“Why don’t we get out of here? I’m so embarrassed. That Kate girl thinks I’m mad.”

“We definitely didn’t cook that fish properly for dinner. It was so *dry*. From now on, I’m doing the cooking. French girls know how to cook.” Katrina two was excellent at cooking. She could make Coq au Vin perfectly, because she had attended cooking classes in the Military arrondissement.

At 3am, Katrina slid out from underneath David's sweaty right arm. She pulled the creaky door shut very gently. Katrina two was still at the bar, talking to Kate. The streets were empty and quiet, rich and plump, with a transparent thickness like the inside of a grape.

Katrina held a paper and pen in her hand. She paused, halfway between the fifth and sixth floor, and squatted down, feeling a strain in her knees.

*I'm sorry for this letter from the blue* [the letter was in strange French, with many accents misplaced, or simply made up; the worst, Katrina's accent circumflex, looked more like a crumpled boater hat]. *It's just weird that we walk together every day and never talk. I was just trying to be friendly. I'll walk again tomorrow. I'll look out for you. We should get to know each other! Katrina.*

I'll put it in the letterbox, Katrina thought. She walked outside. The Paris fog was so thick the upper second half of the building was invisible, covered in a decayed grey cotton candy mist. *Kate Fremonte*, one letterbox said, in big black cursive.

"What are you doing?" Katrina three inquired, leaning against the letterboxes, her eyes bloodshot and rimmed in dripping dark eye makeup.

Katrina jumped. "You scared me."

"I came home early for my beauty sleep," Katrina three said. "You know, if you want to talk to her, just talk to her! I'm so tired of watching you mute yourself! Be confident!"

During the next morning's lecture, the teacher was scribbling something on the blackboard, a long distance away. Katrina two was writing useful notes in small cursive. Katrina three was flirting with one of the beautiful Brazilian exchange students. She leant forward and stared into his eyes, put her right hand on his left thigh.

"I'd like to feel your body," Katrina three told the beautiful student. "I'd like to feel you against me."

Katrina's seat crashed back as she exited. It made a sharp crack, as loud as a gunshot. Katrina three gave Katrina the thumbs up and an exaggerated madwoman smile.

Katrina two paused from her note taking. "You're falling behind," she warned.

On the street, the rain started, and a man riding a bike past hissed at Katrina. She fought to keep her face from crumpling. She unfolded for the seventh time the letter she found, addressed to her, in her mailbox, from Kate. It was in perfect English.

*I'm sorry, I don't know you. Perhaps your letter was meant for someone else.*

In *Agnes B* near the university, Katrina looked at a long leather men's jacket. The salesgirl was talking on the phone, but she walked over when she noticed Katrina's presence.

"Ca va," she said.

"Ca va," Katrina repeated.

"Ca va," the girl said again.

"Yes, yes yes," Katrina said, then quickly retreated into the sort of changing room. It was a shower-like area, encircled with silk curtains.

"Do you need help," the girl said, in heavily accented English. "Can I bring you something. You know you have a mens coat."

"Yes, yes yes." Katrina held the coat to her chest. It was far too big. She saw the shop girl's feet outside the curtain. The girl was standing up on her toes and then dipping down to the ground. Up and down, again and again, like a ballet dancer.

"Do you need another size? You know this is a male coat. For men. Male. *Pour des mecs.*"

"Yes, yes yes." The salesgirl paused for a moment, and padded away. Katrina dropped the coat on the floor, and reached for the extra button on the inside lining. She ripped the stitches, took the button and thrust it into her pocket. She wrapped her hand around it, like a lucky charm. She walked out of the changing room with her fist still in a tight ball.

"You don't just leave a jacket on the floor like that," the salesgirl said. "You don't just do that in a place like this. Just who do you think will pick it up, if you don't? I am not just a salesgirl. I am a *dressng assistant.*" Her eyes darted from Katrina's face to the crumpled coat, then back again, as if the coat was a dead body. A doorbell tingled and Katrina two walked in. She smiled charmingly at the salesgirl.

Paris is the saddest city in the world anyway, Katrina decided, letting the button fall through her fingers down on the cobblestones. All around her girls walked, their faces tight with anxiety, as if they could sense their growing lack of relevance- this tucked up little city, tucked so far up its own ass it couldn't see any light anymore.

The city of light- what total bullshit.

Katrina walked quickly, out of the gardens, all the way down Boulevard Mont St Michel. She walked past the homeless man shivering on the street and all the dying trees. She walked past the reverent, gawking crowds, staring at the Sorbonne, as if it would sprout wings, or accurately predict futures.

When she reached the river, she pushed her way through the crowd of tourists, until she was staring into the sludgy green grey water, and feeling the biting, stinking wind on her face. She took

her bag and threw all of her notes, which she was planning to memorize verbatim, into the river. Katrina three tapped her on the shoulder.

“Knew you’d crack eventually,” she said helpfully.

“Pollution,” An old American woman said in a shocked voice. “She’s polluting the river. That girl just threw all that paper in.”

Back in the apartment, Katrina two was waiting, meticulously revising her notes. Katrina three was making a huge mess of flour, milk and eggs on the kitchen bench and taking regular swigs from a bottle of Martini Rosso. Katrina extracted the bag of chocolate the size of her head that she had brought from one of the fluorescently lit hypermarkets. She consumed the chocolate, piece by piece, watching Katrina two, who did not look up from her studies. David walked in.

“I hate the way you don’t talk about them,” Katrina said. Katrina two still did not look up. She was too absorbed. Her lips moved slowly, memorizing information. In the kitchen, Katrina three sung, badly and loudly. “I hate it,” Katrina repeated.

“I hate the way *you* talk about them.” David replied. “I have the Davids to think about after all.”

“What are we going to do?”

After all, David thought, people push on every day, and they are grateful for what is. “Let go,” David said. He looked into Katrina’s face, her swollen eyes and messy hair, the chocolate around the edges of her lips. “It’s much better not to talk about them.”

“Don’t you wish,” Katrina said, and then trailed off.

“Don’t you prefer if we go about our lives, as if it was just us?” Katrina three danced to the window, opened a packet of cigarettes, and lit two at once. Katrina two put her memorized notes on the bed, and started applying rose-coloured lipstick. “Don’t you prefer it?” David repeated. Katrina didn’t answer. She hardly even heard him. David two and David three were hugging her, kissing her on the earlobes, holding her close and telling her every single thing that she had ever wanted to hear.

“Isn’t it better,” David persisted, moving to the window, “pretending it’s just us?”

### Prepartum Depression by Matt Doran

She confidently comes out of the bathroom holding a small, slender, white piece of plastic. "I'm pregnant."

I see her bent over the toilet after breakfast, coffee and huevos rancheros in reverse. She flicks a piece of bell pepper from the rim that hasn't quite made it. She doesn't look so sexy with dribble on her chin. She tells me I have to get rid of my cologne. My ear used to get licked and nibbled because my musk was so appealing. Now bacon dipped in peanut butter turns her on. Her boobs ache, and not for my gentle touch. She's too tired to do anything, especially that, except at the most random times, like the butcher shop. I want your pork loin, she says. I do not feel like sharing my schnitzel.

I see her hand nervously squeezing mine during the ultrasound. I do my best to look brave. I feign pride when the nurse gives us the sonogram, a three by five colorless, impending blur. I make some remark about my scion, the future varsity athlete astrophysicist. She wants to have it framed. Why do I need it framed when it's encysted in my mind? The doctor tells us everything is normal.

I see a bump. No more black cocktail dress. No more cocktails. Happy hour used to be our thing. I down my neat scotches alone after work to delay going home.

I see my office disappear. My desk is swapped for a crib, my reading chair for a rocking chair. My bookshelf collects dust in storage, my volumes fodder for vermin. I have to pay the bills and look at porn at the kitchen counter. I have to paint the nursery yellow. All my knickknacks are gone, too. Everything angular must go. Baby-proof – taste poof. Her hormones are out of control, and I can't get a word in edgewise to slow Pregzilla's redecorating rampage.

I see her dragging me to Babies'R'Us. She is gaga for everything, holding up the baby shoes, onesies, and bibs with androgynous icons – teddy bears and balloons. I want to know where the Mens'R'Us store is. I do – it's called Tassels and it's on 6<sup>th</sup>. She zaps everything with the registry gun. I like the idea of a shower. People buy us stuff we need, plus I have permission to disappear for the day. She and her friends ooh and aah over NASA-engineered strollers while I'm at the OTB.

I see a frantic phone call. I rush to the hospital in my new dad-mobile. The maternity ward smells like diaper and despair. She looks awful. There's crying and placenta everywhere. Why the hell would I want to cut the umbilical cord? A little girl grips my pinky. I'm scared.

I see waking up in the middle of the night to tell my daughter to stop waking up in the middle of the night. I cradle her softly as I look around the room she usurped. She spits up on me. I dip the tip of her bottle in rum, the only fatherly advice my dad offered on child rearing. I need sleep. I don't

eat lunch at work anymore. I go to an empty conference room and conk out. One of the firm's partners catches me. He laughs, says he's been there. I don't want to be here.

I see Christmas. Her mother tells her Santa is coming. I have to HO HO HO shortly after midnight so she can run down the stairs to find all her presents under the tree and her stocking stuffed. She loves all her toys. I get a World's Greatest Dad coffee mug. How 'bout rent?

I see a nursery school drawing on the refrigerator under a #1 Dad magnet. I cringe every time I reach for a beer. It's our Crayola family photo. She couldn't manage to stay within the lines, but she made sure to accurately capture my recently gained girth. Nice attention to detail, honey.

I see school plays, a parochial rendition of *A Christmas Carol*. I'm supposed to be proud she's a beggar, the scourge of Scrooge. All the other dads record everything. I nip on my flask while the tiny thespians adorably forget their lines. A mother notices and disapprovingly shakes her head. You don't really care either, lady. My daughter crouching in that cardboard box is a better actress than you. The recitals and softball games are no better. Don't worry honey, you'll get 'em next time. She doesn't. She strikes out. It's tee ball.

I see a boyfriend, a pimply punk with unruly limbs, sitting in my den waiting to take my daughter to a party. He's older. He can drive. My chauffeur days are over. I'm supposed to vet and hassle this horny toad, assure him of certain disembowelment should he attempt to uproot my daughter's flower, but the game is on and it's the fourth quarter. She kisses me on the cheek before heading out to kiss him not on the cheek. I don't give her a curfew. I don't care when she comes home as long as it's sans zygote.

I see her prom. She wears an expensive dress and fills it out. Those same dads are still there with their camcorders. Some of my daughter's friends are foxy. I envy the young guys. No taxes, no jobs, no kids, no responsibilities – just man time. Me time. I barely remember smoking at the pier or hoops at the Y or hitting the slots in AC.

I see her graduate from college. I am happy. I no longer have to claim her as a dependent. She moves out. The nest is empty. I have time but no daughter to fill it with.

I see walking her down the aisle. She is crying. I smile gladly as I give her away. It's your turn to dry those eyes, buddy.

I see her children. I have to babysit them while she goes to work. AARP never mentioned this. Where is shuffleboard, dinner at four, movies before noon? Where are my golden years? What happened to my life?

“Are you sure?”

She hands me the missile. A small purple plus sign stares back at me.

It's positive.

### Therapy by Chris Dungey

Before Spencer Curtin got his knee replacement, no one told him that the physical therapy would be the worst part. They didn't mention that he'd have a catheter in his penis for twenty-four hours, either, but that disagreeable circumstance soon ended. The painful rehab would go on for several weeks after he went home.

The first crew of therapists, at the hospital near Flint, was the toughest. They had him up and moving behind a walker as soon as the piss tube was removed. He plodded into the bathroom of his semi-private room. A red stain darkened his first halting stream. Then he was led out into the corridor for a brief tour of the ward. He joined a glum parade of new hips and knees staggering over the treacherous, gleaming tiles. After these exertions, he was offered a modest morphine drip to hold him until the next scheduled Vicodin. He accepted.

Curtin was informed, during the first stroll, that there were certain benchmarks which must be achieved before he could be discharged. Joint patients with new knees were supposed to be able to lift the affected leg or legs straight out, 180 degrees from a seated position. They must also bend the knee back past a 90 degree right angle—almost under the same seated position. Three days were allotted to accomplish this recovery though Spencer could not imagine anyone being kept longer. The insurance companies probably wouldn't stand for it. Still, he wasn't willing to risk an additional day with the hospital therapists.

\*

Spencer's roommate was an elderly gentleman named Ernie. He became acquainted with Ernie in the first hours of post-op as the pain killers flowed freely and they both groaned for fresh ice-packs. Vibrating devices, wrapped around their feet to stimulate blood flow, thwarted any kind of sustained sleep.

Ernie distracted himself with an old war movie on the rental television. "Hey, guy! Hey over there! This is a classic. *The Dirty Dozen*. It's on TBS if you wanta see it. They're showing war movies all week," he called through the dividing screen.

Spencer tried to read a book of John Cheever's correspondence with his children, editors, and lovers, but lost focus midway through each paragraph. He wanted to find out if Cheever would ever sober up or come out of the closet but the anesthesia still skewed his comprehension. He waited for the sensation of pressure to build in his bladder, followed by the sound of his urine spilling into the collection bottle below the bed. "I'm good," he told Ernie.

“Telly Savalas was the homicidal religious nut,” Ernie added. “Classic. And when Donald Sutherland impersonates a general to inspect those regular troops: ‘They’re pretty. Real pretty. But can they fight?’ I loved it.”

“Yeah, but I’m about to sleep.” Curtin placed the hardcover on his tray and rolled it aside. “Maybe later.” As drugs and emotional exhaustion dragged him under, he heard the Dirty Dozen rehearsing their individual roles for killing the German General Staff in their fortified chateau. An easy-to-memorize rhyme laid out the plan for the convict soldiers.

The following morning, while Curtin made his first trip to the commode, Ernie had a dispute with his nurses. The tiny balloon which anchored his catheter within the bladder would not collapse.

“It happens sometimes,” one of them cooed. “We’ll try again in a few hours.”

“Pardon my French, ma’am, but bull-shit!” Ernie groaned. “You get my doctor in here. I’ve had prostate cancer so I know about this shit. This is *not* routine! It’s gotta come out!”

“I understand your frustration, Mr. Ballentine. But if you’ll only try to relax, you’ll...”

“Oh! *You* understand my frustration?” Ernie mumbled some more epithets. “Well, understand this: You better figure something out quick. Twenty-four hours is enough. I’ve yanked these things loose myself!”

Curtin wadded up his open-assed gown. He managed to pull on some loose sweatpants and an undershirt. The lead therapist came in to introduce herself. As she escorted him out of the room, he heard Ernie yelp: “There we go!”

“Oh my goodness!”

“I wudn’t playin’,” Ballentine snorted with relief.

As they passed the other bed, Curtin got his first look at the roommate. Ernie was almost as grey and angular as he had imagined, though maybe a bit taller. “There you are,” the older man said. “Have fun, now.”

After the hobbling lap around the ward, the “fun” indeed began in the therapy room. Ernie was tardy and Spencer soon envied him. He began to consider the rehab staff to be just a bit sadistic behind their frozen smiles and rote encouragements.

He pushed himself and there were tears. The muscle system around the worn-out joint had been stretched and spread to insert the artificial device. Bone had been polished to ensure a smooth fit. The therapists seemed unmoved by tears or any other expressions of pain as the patients exercised in a group.

Most of the others were joined by ‘coaches’—spouses or friends who came in to assist with the tortuous flexing and stretching. Since the sessions took place during Pauline’s work hours, Curtin was stuck with the lovely commandant who brought him in. This young woman was fit as a gymnast

and demanding as one of those crazy Romanian coaches. He did his best to restrain any f-bomb language as she cajoled him to lift another inch, strain another degree. As she escorted him back to the room, she told him in a whisper that he was ahead of schedule. He accepted the post-workout drip of morphine anyway.

This reward was followed by lunch—a not inedible veggie burger with tomato soup and yogurt with strawberries for desert. The food was gone before Curtin could remember much about it. He heard Ernie tell his wife that his own meal was disgusting and to bring him something from KFC. When the attendant came for Curtin’s tray, a nurse followed to help him into a reclining chair by the bed. He dozed while Ernie clicked steadily through the television’s menu.

“That so-called therapy was a bitch, wudn’t it, pardner?” he called. “I already had a hip done some years back. Wudn’t too bad, but the guys with knee work, I could see it was rougher.”

Spencer opened his eyes. He wondered where a growing sense of melancholy had come from. The drugs perhaps? But these always took hold with a warm flush of goofiness. He had looked forward to having his knee fixed for the last three years and now it was nearly done. Still, he could not yet envision normal walking and normal activities as his Surgery Guide suggested he should do. The feeling was like Christmas Night with the gifts put away and the candles burned down and cooled to solid puddles. He remembered, dully, that his roommate had spoken to him: “I see you managed to duck out of it. You’ve still got that to look forward to.”

Ernie laughed. “Yeah, no doubt. Hoss, you just gotta decide you aren’t gonna be pushed. Say ‘fuck ‘em!’”

Curtin sensed an old, familiar antagonism coming at him in the most unlikely of places; individuals of independent spirit once again prodding him to be more defiant of authority. He thought he’d left all of that behind when he retired from the auto plant. A constant tug-of-war played out there between bosses exploiting conscientious workers and the lazy ones who didn’t want to be shown up.

“So you don’t believe that stuff about getting your range of motion back quickly or not at all?”

Now Mr. Ballentine paused. The television settled on a daytime courtroom drama. “If you wanta know the truth, I think it’s a scare tactic. You realize their performance reviews depend on how you perform. Right? But don’t take my word for it. Spencer, wudn’t it? Sorry, I’m pretty doped up over here. Anyways, I’m seventy-two and maybe don’t give a rat’s ass no more.” He cackled again.

Ballentine could not avoid the afternoon session. Curtin paused during some excruciating long-arc repetitions as the older gentleman was wheeled in late by his wife. He wondered why the guy couldn’t come in under his own power like everybody else. Another dispute with the staff, though, about his attendance, might explain his tardiness.

Ballentine's wife parked him opposite Curtin in the circle of whimpering, cursing patients. A roving therapist helped her maneuver the docile guy onto a straight-backed chair. As she explained some of the procedures, Ernie interrupted repeatedly. In a slurring drawl, he demanded clarifications. Then his eyelids fell partway shut and his head lolled as if he was losing consciousness. As the trainer knelt in front to help with the first leg-lifts, the old man opened one eye just enough to wink at Spencer. His lower lip trembled and the corners of his sagging mouth turned up as he struggled not to laugh outright. Curtin wondered if he would attempt to drool at some point.

No matter how the therapist and his wife implored, Ballentine's efforts were indifferent at best. He continued to suppress an idiot grin of satisfaction at his non-compliance. Curtin watched this lame progress only as a distraction from his own pain. He wasn't taking any chances with a stunted recovery and did everything the leader asked. His thoughts drifted from Ernie's act to the carrot of additional morphine. At one point he reached out to bump fists with a man in tears next to him. "Almost done, buddy," he winced.

When the most painful part of the work-out had been completed, the patients were herded to elevators. The hip replacement folks in wheelchairs took longer. They all found a mock-up of a passenger car and a typical home bathroom constructed on the floor below. Since most of the group had achieved their range-of-motion requirements, it was now time to learn some 'recovery skills.' They were shown the proper way to ease into a car seat or onto a toilet seat. Spencer practiced stepping into a tub. Though his incision wound had begun to throb, he took a turn clomping up a short set of porch steps. He followed his walker, quickly learning to lead with the affected leg. Ernie Ballentine did not rejoin the group.

\*

Curtin awoke from his post-session stupor to find that an early December dusk had turned dark grey outside the vast hospital complex. There was no evening star. Pauline arrived for visiting hours. She brought sub sandwiches because it was her payday. "It's supposed to snow tonight," she said. She moved Spencer's abandoned sweatpants off the recliner and sat down. "What time can you come home?"

Curtin heard the martial theme music from *The Great Escape* through the drawn room divider. "I guess whenever you get here," he told her after a long pause to chew and swallow his first bite. "All they said was that it couldn't be before noon. The doctor'll come by in the morning. How much are we supposed to get?" He chewed slowly, marveling that the Vicodin could keep him from bolting his food though he'd been famished. Too bad it was also constipating him, he mused.

"Could be up to four inches. Then it's supposed to turn real cold."

“Great,” Curtin sighed. “We have to be back in Lapeer to fill some scripts at Kroger. And I wanta set up my rehab schedule at the clinic before they close.”

Pauline took his used napkins and wrappers off the bed tray. She wadded all the trash into a waste basket. Beyond the divider, Ernie chuckled as Steve McQueen, caught and returned to the prison camp again, resumed bouncing a baseball off the wall of the ‘cooler’ cell. The old slacker had apparently recovered from his swoon in group therapy.

“Well, we won’t have any overtime ‘cuz all the bosses wanta clear out for the weekend,” Pauline said. “The roads should be cleared by then. Cheer up! We’ll make it.”

Curtin told Pauline that he would call her when he knew the exact discharge time. When she was gone, he asked a nurse if he could have some coffee. He had craved it immediately after the surgery and hoped to resume his usual guzzling now that peeing was easier. The prospect of moving on to the next stage of recovery buoyed his spirits somewhat, though he wouldn’t be driving just yet and finding rides to therapy might be complicated. He opened the collection of Cheever letters again and found that he could concentrate through an entire page. The author had quit drinking just in time to get cancer.

“Hey, over there! McQueen’s getting ready to do those motorcycle jumps at the Swiss border,” Ballentine called. “Check it out!”

Spencer clicked his television on with the remote. “What channel?”

“Twenty-two. This is better than that Mustang he abused in *Bullit!*”

The escaped P.O.W. revved his stolen bike, eyeing the barbed wire barriers separating him from freedom. He calculated the incline of the berms he would use to hurdle the nasty tangles of concertina. Pursuing German troops dismounted from their trucks in the background. McQueen’s face showed no panic or doubt; only unemotional calculation and will. If he had worked on an assemblyline, neither side could have pushed him around.

\*

In the morning, Curtin finished his oatmeal with brown sugar as the surgeon came in. The man was tall and slightly stooped with broad hands and a grey crew-cut. Curtin imagined him playing in a senior basketball league.

“All right. Your incision looks great,” he said, smoothing the gauze pad back in place. “No more drainage whatsoever. Looks like we can get you out of here.”

Spencer thanked the cutter while the man circled instructions on a printed sheet. He held out three pharmacy scripts that were already written. “Here’s your Vicodin. No more than six-a-day for four more days, then you have to tail off. You can have Tylenol Threes then and lots of ice. We send two wrap-around packs home with you. The last prescription there is for a blood thinner. Read the

precautions. We'll have you off of that as soon as possible. Get your blood work every three days with your primary physician—like, whenever you go in for therapy. That coumadin is nothing you wanta be on for long. I'll see you in my office in ten days.”

They shook hands and the surgeon hustled out on his rounds—a lumbering center trying to catch up to the fast break.

“Watch your broccoli and leafy greens with that blood thinner,” Ballentine spoke from the other bed.

“Why? What's it do?” Curtin eased over the side of the bed. His traveling clothes were laid out on the recliner—more sweatpants, but clean.

“Natural thinners you won't need, hoss. Shit hinders a boner for one thing. Or, you might nick yourself shavin' and bleed out. It's all in the disclaimers. Surprised your guy didn't mention it.” The old man's television was strangely quiet. Only the juice and maybe one wedge of toast were missing from his breakfast tray.

“Damn! And I've been craving a broccoli-cheese baked potato.”

“Yeah? More than a boner?” Ernie sighed. “Well, if you're headed to Wendy's, have a chili in my honor.” He carefully rolled over, reconfiguring his ice-pack then folding the pillow around his ears.

“Will do, old man,” Curtin said. “Nice meeting you, too.”

\*

When Pauline showed up in mid-afternoon, a nurse told her that she should go and bring the car up to the entrance. After all the work Curtin had put in, it was hospital policy to take patients to their rides in wheelchairs. Pauline carried his duffel bag down while a nurse loaded him into the chair. The folded walker rested on his lap. As he was wheeled out, he called his gratitude to any of the nurses and therapists within earshot. There were two more wheelchairs with attendants in the elevator; one knee and one hip.

Down in the lobby, a file of wheelchairs waited to be moved into a glass-enclosed foyer and then out under a broad portico. Cars stood bumper-to-bumper between freshly plowed heaps of snow on a three lane circular drive. Discharged patients, some quite elderly, were arranged with meticulous care in the homeward-bound vehicles. The sky beyond the portico was a cloudless blue toward which the many plumes of exhaust whirled and disappeared. As the nurse eased Curtin's chair into the biting cold, Pauline's Buick inched forward. She was still five car-lengths away.

Spencer could feel his nasal membranes clotting and as he inhaled the crystalline air. If he couldn't make it that far, he thought, maybe he shouldn't be leaving. He unfolded his walker and stood up. He began to carefully pole himself toward Pauline's car.

“Mr. Curtin? Mr. Curtin, please...!”

When he reached the Buick, Pauline leaned across the console to push the door open for him. Curtin turned away to face the building. He backed into the passenger seat just as he'd been instructed and then pulled the walker in after him..

### The Library by Vincent Francone

Not surprisingly, my school's library didn't have the books I needed. I say this not to denigrate the university—it's a fine school, definitely not one of those for profit places. Still, the school lacks when it comes to books. Part of this has to do with the constant renovations that tear up the campus, relocate buildings, and drive up my tuition.

It was cold and I was tired. The Harold Washington Public Library sat imposingly on Van Buren, State, Congress, and Dearborn. I approached from the northeast corner passing commuters speeding to their office jobs. Several homeless men and women sat outside the library waiting for the doors to open. On the printout of my desired books—three texts on the subject of eating disorders—I had written the library's hours. I looked at my watch. Despite confirmation that I was early, I tried the doors. Locked.

Across the street six pigeons fought over a discarded bagel. I watched them while standing with homeless men who were making cracks about the birds, laughing and speaking in nearly unintelligible sentences. At one point, I thought I detected a nasty observation about me but I wasn't sure.

After an uncomfortable seven minutes, the doors opened. The men filed in past the guard with apparent regularity. I was stopped.

"Can I help you?"

"I just want to get some books," I said, suddenly nervous.

"What floor?"

"Excuse me?"

He sighed and shook his head. I apologized.

"What floor?" he asked, pronouncing each word with deliberate, infuriating care.

"I don't know. I need books on eating disorders."

"Seven. You'll need a pass."

After a pregnant pause I asked how I might get one.

"Go to three. There's a desk there. Ask them."

I thanked him and started toward the elevator but was stopped by a second guard, this one shorter and slightly less officious.

"Well, young lady, where are you headed off to so quick?" he asked.

"Third Floor."

"You'll need a pass."

"Excuse me?"

“A pass. Standard procedure. Come with me. Won’t take a minute.”

I was led to a small room below the first floor, adjacent to the children’s reading room. I could hear children’s laughter behind the doors. The slightly less officious guard asked me to take a seat while he processed my request. The process lasted only five minutes, maybe less though it felt like more. I was asked to provide my name, address, and social security number, all of which I agreed to do even though it seemed excessive.

“Alright, miss,” said the guard, “here you go.” He handed me a sticker that read: “GUEST. A-D”

The third floor was populated with homeless men and women sleeping in carrels and a few students reading books. Across a long table, a pudgy, bored man thumbed a newspaper on a stick. The information desk was across from the elevator. Sitting behind the desk, a thin faced, fiftyish looking man eyed whatever was on his computer screen with extreme focus. I asked him if he might help me. Without taking his eyes off the screen, he agreed.

“I need to get to the seventh floor to get these books.” I slid a copy of my printout across the desk. He glanced at me reproachfully, then condescended to examine the print out.

“Those are on seven.”

“I know. I was told I needed a pass and that I had to come here first.”

“How did you get up here?”

“A guard let me up. Here,” I said and showed him the pass the slightly less officious guard gave me.

“That’s A through D. To get to seven you need an A through G.”

“How do I get one of those?”

“The guard downstairs should be able to get you one.”

“But they told me three had to give me a pass for seven.”

“They’re wrong. The same guard who gave you this pass can issue you one for seven. You should have told him you need to go to seven.”

“I did.”

It was no use; he had returned to his computer and was not bothering with me any further. I walked back to the elevator but was blocked by a guard, this one taller than the others with steely eyes.

“Where to?”

“I need to go to the first floor. No, wait—the basement.”

“You mean the lower level?”

“That’s it.”

“You’ll need an exit pass.”

“What?”

“An exit pass. Can’t let you exit without a pass.”

“Where do I get one?”

He pointed to the clerk behind the information desk. I sighed and said something along the lines of *you have to be kidding?* and returned to the indifferent clerk.

“I was told I need an exit pass.”

“Your name?”

I told him my name, then, per his request, my address, and social security number. He typed the information into his computer, pressed a button on his printer, and, after the old machine had done its duty, handed me a sticker with the words “EXIT PASS” printed in large black letters.

I showed the pass to the steely-eyed guard and he let me on the elevator. I had every intention of pressing the down button, but my finger slipped and I pressed up. The elevator ascended. I pressed down a few times, but it did not register. I was going further and further up until the elevator stopped on the fourteenth floor, the very top. The door opened and two guards who could have been twins asked me to come with them. I protested but they ignored me, ushering me to a room at the end of a very long hallway. The windowless room was painted such a strong shade of red that I felt nauseous when the guards closed the door, shutting out all natural light. In the room was a desk. A voice from outside the room told me to have a seat. Someone would be with me shortly. I closed my eyes to avoid the assault of the red walls.

When I awoke, a small man in a grey suit was staring at me. “Miss,” he said. “Are you conscious?”

“Huh?”

“You were out for a bit. Are you with us again?”

“I was asleep?”

“Yes.”

“How long have I been waiting?”

“Not sure. Okay, then. To business!”

He told me that I had violated the terms of my exit pass by attempting to access a higher floor. I told him that it was an accident, and that I meant to press down.

“An accident,” he said, not asking. Rather he chewed on the word, his mouth moving curiously side-to-side as he said it again and again: “Accident. Accident.”

“Yes. It happens, you know.”

“I suppose. I suppose. An accident... Hmm... Well then...” He twirled a pen in his fingers and made more side-to-side movements with his mouth. “Okay, I can let you go with a warning. But please be more careful in the future.”

“Thank you,” I said, nearly in tears. Before leaving the room I asked if I needed a pass.

“Use the exit pass you were given. But remember: press down.” He shook his finger as he said it.

Back on the first floor, the less officious guard was still on duty. I informed him that I needed an A through G pass.

“Well, why didn’t you say so the first time?”

Twenty minutes later, I was on the seventh floor. Feeling in my pocket for the printout, I remembered that the clerk from three never returned it. I had to obtain an exit pass from seven to return to three, and then, after showing the guard on three my A through G pass, confront the clerk and ask for my printout. He told me that he was given that paper some time ago and, since I had not returned to claim it in the proper timeframe, the document was destroyed.

I returned to the seventh floor and approached the information desk. The clerk, an elderly woman wearing thick-framed bifocals, raised her eyes to me as I asked her for assistance. After placing a bookmark between the pages of a magazine, she asked me what I needed. I told her the titles of the books.

“Did you try looking them up on the E-catalog?”

“Yes,” I told her, also stating that I had printed a copy of their location but that the printout was lost. I started rambling, going into detail about the clerk on three and the exit pass and the A through G and the homeless men who, come to think of it, seemed free to roam as they pleased, but she was not paying attention. After enduring my speech she asked me if I had a library card.

“Actually, I had hoped to renew mine while I was here.”

“Oh lord, *really?*” I said nothing in response. We looked at each other for an uncomfortable half minute. “Fine,” she said and fished some forms from her desk drawer. “Fill these out over there.” She pointed to an empty carrel.

Ten minutes later, I returned with the completed forms. She took them without a word and began typing on a computer. The typing went on for some time. Finally she told me that I needed to provide more information.

“Such as?”

“I need a copy of a bill with a current address at the very least.”

“I don’t have one. Your website only said my ID and old card would be enough.”

“You have not been here in a long time. We’ll need further information before we can issue you a replacement card.”

“I don’t know if I have that... wait...” I looked in my purse. Luckily, I had a magazine with my name and current address listed. I asked if this would suffice and, miraculously, was told yes.

The clerk fiddled with her computer some more and occasionally shook her head in dismay.

“Now what?”

“I’ll need you to file an addendum.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve not been here for quite some time.”

“I know...”

“Quite some time, indeed.” She softly clucked in a scolding manner, then, after tremendous effort, rose from her chair and went to a file cabinet where she found yet another form.

“You’ll want to fill this out as well.”

“Come on. Another form?”

“Yes.”

“I just want to renew my card and check out some books.”

“Well, you’ve not been here in some time. We need more information.”

“You know, considering the treatment I’ve gotten today, is it any wonder it’s been a while since I’ve been here?”

“Young lady,” she said, her body stiffening as she spoke, “there’s no need to get sassy. I don’t make the rules, but you can be sure they exist for a darn good reason. Now, you can either take the forms and fill them out or you can leave right now and never return.”

I took the forms. The clerk sat back down and resumed her magazine reading. Then I went back to the carrel where I had completed the last set of forms and pretended to write. Then I waited. The clerk was not looking in my direction. When I felt it was safe I walked to a computer and pulled up the electronic card catalog. It took little time to find the books and their call numbers. I didn’t dare print anything out, so I wrote the information on the forms. Walking from the computer to the shelves took more concentration than I imagined. I had to be very quiet if I wanted to find the books. Once I found them, I knew my trials were nearly complete. The only thing left to do was slip them into my purse and exit the library. Of course they had a security system—this was a given—but I figured if I could find a way to get them in a more private spot I could burrow into the spines and remove the sensors. Then again, I thought, what if they have buried the devices inside the covers? Both of the books were hardbacks without dust jackets. There was too great a chance that a security apparatus was hidden somewhere I would never find. Besides, I thought, surely there were

cameras watching my every move. I had the books; I had best set about reading them and making notes.

At a different carrel, one far from the eyes of the clerk, I began reading the first book, Susan Orbach's *Bodies*. I didn't get very far before a guard—the tallest yet—asked me to please come with him.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have a lot of time and I really need to finish studying."

"Miss, don't make a scene."

I rose and gathered my things. When I tried to grab the books, he stopped me.

"I'll take those," he said.

I was back in the red room. The guard told me to sit and shut the door behind me. I was certain he was stationed outside. I shut my eyes to avoid the headache I could feel swelling in my temples. The color was so strong and now—or maybe I didn't notice it before—the room smelled of glue and sawdust. In vain, I asked the empty room for a glass of water. I had had no breakfast that day, which meant nothing to throw up. Still, I could feel dry heaves coming on.

The man in the gray suit entered the room carrying a satchel and a glass of water. I accepted the water with sincere gratitude and gulped it down.

"Again we find ourselves here," he said sounding like Yoda.

"I'm sorry."

"Twice in one day. Twice in one day."

"I'm not sure what I did."

"You are accused of," he paused to examine a slip of paper. "You are accused of surreptitiously removing texts without proper authorization."

"I wasn't going to take them off the floor. I just wanted to read them."

"According to this, you do not have a valid library card."

"Right. I was trying to renew my old card, but until then I figured I would just study here. At the library."

"Young lady, do you know the purpose of a library?"

"To study."

"A library cannot study. It's not alive. No, a library's purpose is to house information. Those who wish to obey procedure, those with a respect for protocol, they may take advantage of the information housed within a library. But those who do not follow the proper steps, who attempt to circumnavigate the established rules, they shall not be granted access. You, young lady, have twice attempted to thwart the rules of this institution. You seem to think that you are exceptional. I hate to burst your bubble, but you are not."

“I’m sorry,” I said sincerely. “I had no idea that I was not allowed to look at the books without a library card.”

“First: ignorance of the law is not excusal from the law. Second: you clearly knew what you were doing. According to this,” he shook the paper listing my offenses, “you moved to a different carrel. Why would you do that if you were not hiding, hmm?”

“The... light was better.”

“The light was better,” he mimicked. He said it again and again after that, each time twisting his voice into crude caricature. “I’ve heard a lot of excuses in my day, let me tell you, but this takes the cake!”

“Honestly, I was just trying to study the books. I wasn’t going to do anything to them. Really, I can’t see the harm in my actions. All I wanted to do was spend the day studying. Where better than a library, right?”

He did not answer. He removed a pen from the inside pocket of his jacket and began writing on the slip of paper. After a dramatic silence he said, “I’m afraid I cannot let you off with a warning.”

I braced myself. From his satchel he produced a leather bound journal. He began writing in the journal without looking at me. Some time passed before I worked up the nerve to ask about my punishment.

“I suppose you think I should go easy on you.”

“I never said that. Honestly, I just wanted to read the—” He waved his hand, implying that I would do better by saying less.

“Young lady, let me explain something to you, and I want you to listen carefully. Rules exist for a reason. They are neither arbitrary nor flexible. The old adage ‘rules are meant to be broken’ was invented by people like you, people who feel above the law. But, you see, without rules, procedure, protocol, and what you might call bureaucracy, where would we be?”

“I understand that, I really do, but...”

“But what?”

“Nothing.”

“No, please. Let this serve as your sole opportunity to defend your position. By all means, plead your case.”

“Well, it’s just... I thought the library was a place where books were kept so that they might be shared with the public. I’m a student. I don’t have a lot of money. I just wanted to read some books. I understand the necessity for rules, but the level of bureaucracy is maybe a bit much, don’t you think? What harm is there in reading books in a public place?”

“So you think this a public place?”

“Well, my tax dollars fund this operation.”

“You mean your tax dollars pay my salary, right?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“No. No. It’s fine. Let’s speak truthfully. Yes, your tax dollars do indeed fund this operation and pay my salary. But this does not give you the right to ignore the rules of the library. Do you think you can drive at one hundred miles an hour because your taxes went to constructing the highway? Do you expect an officer of the law, paid, of course, by your taxes, to let you go with a warning?”

“I don’t understand... This is a public library. I have a right to access information.”

“Indeed, provided you follow the proper procedure, which you most certainly did not!”

He wrote one more sentence in his book and closed it shut with a definitive gesture.

“I hereby inform you that you are banned from this institution for one year.”

I didn’t say anything. He rose, adjusted his tie and smoothed the front of his gray suit.

“Good day,” he said and started to leave.

“So I can go?” I asked.

“Ask the guard,” he said and closed the door. I waited in the room for as long as I could tolerate, but the sickness was severe. My stomach was queasy and I knew that if I couldn’t leave, I would add more color soon enough. I tried the knob. The door was locked. I knocked. Nothing. I knocked again and asked if anyone could hear me. The door opened and the tall guard asked me what I was doing.

“I’ve been banned. I have to leave.”

“Do you have an exit pass?”

“I think...” I looked for my first pass for some time, fighting a pounding headache and extreme nausea. The glue and wood smell was horrible. Every one of my senses was aching.

I found a pass and gave it to him.

“This has expired. You’ll need a new pass.”

“How do I get one?”

“That is not my department.”

“Who do I speak to?”

“That is not my department.”

“Please, I’m ill. I’m going to be sick.”

“I would advise against that, miss.”

“I have to get out of here.”

“There’s nothing I can do about that.”

He closed the door. The finality of it was further insult to my system. Somehow, without food in my stomach, I was sick.

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### The Pick Up by Lisa Hill-Corley

I pull up to the high school and spot Sadie on the curb by the bus lane, chewing chipped black nail polish from her stubby fingers. She has put on that crazy blond wig of hers, but hasn't shoved her spongy dark hair far enough underneath it, so it poofs around her head in an uneven crown.

"Get in," I say.

The smile she had when she saw my car fades a little bit when she sees my face. "I thought you had an afternoon shift."

"I switched, c'mon."

"How do you know I'm not busy?" she says, leaning towards my passenger window.

I know, as well as I know that my husband is out with Sadie's whore classmate, that she isn't busy. "Doing what? Yearbook? Homecoming Committee?" My voice comes out sharper than I mean it to and she stands up to go.

"I found a receipt in Jack's wallet for a card and another one from that store with the prissy quilted bags," I say.

Sadie folds her arms and looks down at the ground. "It's her birthday today."

My hands shake as I shove the worn canvas purse I've been carrying for five years from the passenger seat to the floor. Sadie looks up and watches the purse fall and spill out its contents, then gives me a look of pity. I take a breath and blow it out before leaning over to open the passenger door. She slides into my car.

"So just get your own nice bags," she says. "What about all those cute ones in the closet? I like that black one with the pink dots..."

I cut her off. "Those are *diaper bags*."

Sadie's eyes get big. "Oh, I didn't know. Sorry," she says, picking up my wallet and makeup from the floor. She pauses as she picks up my cigarettes, then holds them out to me.

"Forget it." I take the cigarettes from her and toss them onto the backseat.

I ignore her grin and point to her backpack, which has little black skulls all over it. It is jammed between us and sitting right on my gearshift.

"Put that in back."

"But my lunch is in there. I wanted to eat it before work," she whines.

I look at the clock on my dash. “You haven’t eaten lunch?” I say, then stop myself from going on. We don’t have time for the ‘you’re-not-my-mom-hell-girl-I’m-better-than-your-mom’ argument if we are going to find Jack and the whore before the dinner shift. So I just play it off and say, “Figures, why eat at a table in the cafeteria when you can get crumbs on my seats instead?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she says.

“How’s that turkey?” I say as she unwraps a sandwich I made for her this morning.

“Okay. I still say baloney tastes better. But this is good.”

“Yeah, good *for you*,” I say.

I hit the roof when Sadie told me that when her mother’s boyfriend’s car was parked in the driveway it meant her mom had locked the door for a couple of hours and that Sadie had to find somewhere else to go, like a mother/daughter version of the sock on the doorknob thing. One time after that, her mom came into the diner, to borrow money from Sadie of course, and I stomped over there, ready to bitch her out right there in Section C. Sadie dragged me off and promised to come to my house the next time she got locked out, if I would just *calm down*.

Now, she usually just stays the night. I never ask Sadie if her mom wonders where she is all night – I can guess the answer and I have too many other depressing things to think about.

I am just about to pull away when two lanky boys step off of the curb and cross in front of my car without looking. I stomp on the brake and beep the horn. One peers at me through fried, overlong bangs. He looks annoyed at first, and then he looks at me, rolls his eyes and walks on. The other boy barely glances up as he lurches past. He says something to Bangs, who looks over at me and laughs. I beep again.

“Stop!” Sadie leans over and puts a hand on my arm. “Those guys keep a site where they rate all the girls in school. They put up nasty things about anyone that pisses them off. Trust me; I do not need to get their attention.”

“Seriously?” I say. “Don’t they have anything better to do?”

“Guys like that never have anything better to do,” Sadie says. Sometimes she can make her voice go dark and sound like she’s twice as old as she is, and has seen it all. All I can think about when she does that is what must be happening on the nights she isn’t locked out of her mom’s house.

“Well, who cares what those idiots think?”

“Easy for you to say; they only post about high school girls,” Sadie says.

“Figures. Jack can come over here and get an 18-year-old girlfriend, but I’m all ready an old biddy,” I say.

Sadie wrinkles her nose and sounds like a kid again. “You want an 18-year-old guy?”

“Why is that grosser than Jack and the whore? Why am I old and he’s not?”

“Whatever, twenty-four isn’t old.”

“I know. That’s not the point,” I say, stomping on the gas. The car jerks away from the curb.

Sadie grasps the door handle. “God, Nicole! Quit tweaking or we’re gonna get pulled over.”

It’s quiet for a while as she eats her sandwich and I drive in the general direction of downtown. Usually I’ve made some excuse by this point, about how I happened to be near the high school and thought I’d give her a ride to work – even though we both knew why I picked her up. But whenever I feel bad about dragging Sadie in the middle of this I remember her studying me as I kept pressing repeat to dial Jack’s number and cursed when I got his voice mail.

“I think I have art class with her,” she said. Just like that, as if we were in the middle of a conversation about me suspecting that Jack had a girlfriend. She used that dark, old voice, and something just told me she wasn’t making it up.

Finally Sadie finishes her sandwich and says, “She was supposed to go out after school to the Amphora with Mindy and them for her birthday, but I saw her walking out by the back field at the beginning of sixth period. I couldn’t see if his truck was back there though.”

“Where were you supposed to be for sixth period, Missy?” I was trying for a joke, but my hand slapped down hard on the bar for the turn signal.”

“It’s just a crap study hall. Besides, do you want to know this stuff or not? I can’t be in two places at once. Where are we going?”

“The park with all those woods, where else would he take her for a birthday treat?” I wrench the car around in a U-turn.

Sadie wads up the sandwich bag into a little ball. “I can’t go for long. I have to work and my stuff’s back at your house.”

I glance down at the backpack and don’t see the uniform we wear at the diner. “Why didn’t you bring your work stuff?”

“Not to school!”

“I don’t mean wear it to class, Dork.” Not that I blame her. The diner uniform wasn’t as ugly as some I’d had, but they all look depressing on a kid.

“Why do you want to see that anyway?” she says. “Screw all of this and just kick his ass out.”

We go quiet again, then I reach over and palm the top of her head. She starts squeaking about how I’m messing up that dumb wig and I laugh at her. Then we both spot Jack’s truck sitting on the side of the road.

Through the cab window I see that at first he is reclining, with one arm slung over the back of the passenger seat. I spot the back of a smaller head next to him, which quickly disappears as Jack yanks his arm down and turns back to look at us.

“I knew it.” I mean, it wasn’t like Sadie hadn’t told me months ago. I *knew* he was doing this. But actually seeing them together makes my throat close, plus I can feel my heart beat through a vein in my neck.

“Oh shit,” Sadie slides down in her seat.

“Sit up, what are you hiding for?”

“I don’t want her to see me; she’ll know I’m the one that told you!”

We pass by Jack’s truck and I look over, catching his eye. My car is crawling, barely at school zone speed. Calm and cool, Jack lifts up two fingers from the hand that rests out of the open window. It is just like we are passing by each other on any normal day. Just like when we were the high school kids in that truck, me saving my tips to take him to Red Lobster for his eighteenth birthday; when we had long day drives and sexy nights on that bench seat. Just like later on when we would play fight over what to name the baby as he rested one hand on my belly, before we started to have screaming fights every day after we found her cold and blue in her little crib, and he started disappearing. Lately, our boss had to stop scheduling me and Sadie together, since we spent most of our shift in the bathroom – me crying and her rubbing my back.

I look at Jack and for a second I just want to us to laugh, or even cry together over the heads of our hidden passengers; the whole situation was just so stupid. But his eyes are little slits with no expression; he just sits there, waiting for me, and us, to pass him by. I honk and drive past the truck, which I figure has enough room for all of his crap once I toss it out of my house.

“Hey,” I yell down to my passenger side floorboard. “We’re cleaning house Saturday. Hell, bring your stuff too. Screw your mom, screw all of them.” I fumble in the back for my cigarettes.

Sadie sits up with a look that is the opposite of the dark, old-sounding Sadie: hopeful, excited and concerned all at once. She swivels her head around to see behind us. “What happened?”

“Don’t look back,” I say, driving on.

### Condoning by Nikki Larson

Johnny was going to die. It was a fact that Mary had come to live with; one of the few things in her life she knew to be true. She didn't know the date or the time this death would occur, but she knew it would be sooner rather than later. One of the hardest things for her to hear was Johnny openly acknowledging this fact, embracing it, and even joking about it. Him not wanting to stop his own death, or prevent it, made her blood boil. The fact that all she had the power to do was sit there and ride his wave of self-destruction with him made that boiling blood explode. Unconditional love was a bitch.

Mary cursed life for bringing her to this point where all she did was watch as drugs, and the need to feel high, completely destroyed people she cared about. They were killing Johnny, and on more than one occasion she had watched friends of hers disintegrate. She knew she should do something for Johnny, but she accepted long ago that making someone live their life the way she wanted them to never ends well. She had seen Jonny push others away when they tried to change him and she didn't want to be one of those people who tried to form him into what she wanted. She did sometimes let him know that she didn't like what he was doing, but she never pressed the matter too far; as if she were trying to tiptoe quietly around the subject. At what point does one stop thinking *this person needs an intervention*, and start thinking *this person needs all the love they can get because an intervention will do nothing*? That's what Mary seemed to be struggling with quite a bit.

Mary sat in her room with Johnny; the colors from her black lights danced in front of her eyes as she came down from her high, and looked over at the boy who had become like an older brother to her. She could see the life-force being sucked from his eyes with every pill he crushed and railed. Hollows in his cheeks cast deep shadows across his face and his long spindly legs were curled up into him where he had moved to lay down on the bed. He was drowning in his own bad choices, and all Mary could do was sit next to him while choking on her desperation. The only thing she wanted was for him to stop, be motivated about something, and maybe do well in school for once. Before she knew what she was doing, she grabbed her coat.

"And just where are you going?" Johnny mumbled from the pillow in which he had buried his head.

"For a walk," Mary replied nonchalantly, not wanting him to catch her unease. She didn't have the energy to talk about her feelings; that was something they didn't do.

"But it's cold . . ." *Freezing, actually*, Mary thought.

"I'll be fine," she shrugged. She wanted to seem tough, because at this point she was far from it. There was a long pause as Johnny thought about what to say.

"Well . . . don't forget your umbrella," he offered.

"It's not raining outside," she half laughed, half whispered as she corrected him.

"Oh, well take a scarf," Johnny tried.

"I don't need one," she sighed. "I'll be fine," Mary assured him, secretly loving every second of his prodding. She ruffled his long, sandy curls and kissed the top of his head like he would always do to her, before striding over to the door.

"Okay, well, I love you," he said, as she reached for the door knob. *Was there a slight bit of desperation in his voice?*

"I love you too," she said back to him as she let the door swing shut behind her.

Mary walked until her fingers felt numb. How does someone become as knowledgeable as a drug index and still not manage a day sober? How did Johnny take so much molly (Mary looked molly up online when she first heard it mentioned among friends and found that it was essentially the powdered form of ecstasy) that he had to quit smoking weed for a year? How does anyone do that? At the age of nineteen he had permanently fried his brain to the point where he would hallucinate if he didn't get enough sleep. After all that he had done to himself, and all those bad trips, he was still pushing his body to the limit. He had reached the point where being sober just wasn't what he wanted to do; he preferred being high.

Mary came upon the college library not even realizing she had walked all the way across campus. She went inside and soaked in the warmth, still trying to understand her best friend. How does someone even become best friends with a person they rarely see because he is always off taking a different drug? Granted, she loved to smoke with him once in a while, but it wasn't all day, every day either. Mary saw herself as a pothead, not a druggie. Marijuana was as far as she was going to take it because she could quit that any time she wanted to, and she saw firsthand with Johnny what crossing over the threshold of other drugs could do. So she wasn't a hypocrite if she wanted him to stop taking the other drugs.

The way Mary saw it she was at a crossroads in her friendship with Johnny and she couldn't tiptoe any longer; she had two options: she could either accept Johnny for who he was because she couldn't change him, or sever their friendship completely. The latter of the two thoughts caused Mary to almost stop breathing. Why did that hurt her so much? Was their friendship that valuable? It was her mystery, and she had to solve it.

She could never really think of a time when she had done anything for Johnny. Mary bought him batteries once, but that was because she broke his laser pointer. When she really thought about it, all she could see was Johnny taking care of her. Mary sat there remembering the time when she smoked something a stranger gave her.



They had been hanging out at the river that evening, Mary, Johnny, her friend Kate and her roommate, Laney. The sun was bright even as it set and filled the air with its warmth. Kate had left the group to go over to the bathroom and came back with two of her other friends and a guy Mary didn't recognize. Kate was really high, stumbling up to Mary she yelled,

"Get on my level!" Mary wanted so desperately to be on Kate's level, that she didn't even stop to question who this person was who filled a batty and passed it to her. She inhaled, but it was so smooth she felt like she didn't get anything.

"Do you feel it?" Kate was grabbing at Mary's arm and dancing around, laughing at the clouds.

"No, I don't," Mary said as she inhaled again. *This was supposed to be strong stuff?* She remembered thinking to herself. She inhaled again, and again. "I still don't feel anything," Mary said to the guy who filled the batty.

"Don't worry, just count to twenty-five and you will," He said to her with a little chuckle. Mary looked over at Johnny, he was saying something to Laney with a look of concern on his face but she couldn't make out what he was saying so she turned her attention back to Kate.

"One . . . two . . . three . . ." Mary and Kate said in unison as they ticked the numbers off on their hands. Everything was moving in and out, Kate's face was getting bigger and smaller with each number they passed. Were they rocking back and forth or was this just the world? She needed to sit down. Mary had to coach herself to the bench since she forgot how to walk. Johnny, next to Johnny was a safe place. She finally made it, sitting down she started to feel her body. Mary's bones were vibrating while her skin stayed stubbornly still and she felt chills racing all over her. She was mentally falling through a dark abyss within herself. She inhaled sharply and the world came back into view. Johnny was there, next to her. Was he talking about her? What were they all talking about? She drew another breath.

She was in Johnny's Jeep. Laney was gone, but Kate was in the back seat. They were at the gas station. Mary was so thirsty.

"Can you get me something to drink?" she asked Johnny.

"Yep. What do you want, sweetheart?" he asked. Mary pulled out a dollar because for some reason she thought that would buy her something.

“An elixir of life? Or maybe a water? I don’t know, just get me something,” she said as she handed it to him.

“I’ll get you a Monster,” he said, not even questioning the dollar he took from her.

When Johnny got back to the car and handed Mary the drink, she took a sip. It was so thick and golden that she would later swear that she was Winnie the Pooh and she had been drinking honey. When had it become dark outside? They were driving and dubstep was playing, and as she raised the honey to her lips she could feel her joints tightening. She looked down to see that she was the Tin Man from Wizard of Oz.

“Johnny, I’m the Tin Man,” Mary stated matter-of-factly.

“Oh sorry, my bad,” Johnny said as he changed the radio to something smoother. “I’ve had that trip before. Not that fun.”

“Why did you let me smoke that stuff? Was that synthetic?” Mary asked as she felt herself sobering up a little.

“Yeah, and I said not to, but you didn’t listen,” Johnny said, a little bit of an edge in his voice.

*Anger?*

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you,” Mary mumbled as she looked down at the can in her hands.

“But you’re practically my big brother. You should have come over and taken it from me.”

“Those are your choices to make, I might have if I had known you hadn’t heard me,” Johnny said staring straight ahead. Just like that the conversation and that night’s fun, were over.



Because of that night Mary would never take any drug without consulting Johnny first and she trusted him completely. She knew he would take care of her for the most part, but what did he get out of their friendship?

Frustrated, Mary got up to grab a cup of coffee. The silence was eerie. She could feel the presence of people, but none of them were making any sounds. She sat back down and put some ear buds in to block the quiet, she turned her iPod on. She needed to know why they were friends because if she couldn’t answer that, then she should be able to cut him loose. She didn’t give him anything, except her time once in a while. How had she built a friendship on so little? She just wanted him to be whole again - or what she thought was whole. She had seen pictures of Johnny from high school before she knew him. He was still slender, but there was more to his face and he had muscle from running track. There was life in those eyes, and all she wanted was to hear him sing, because word on the street was that he had been pretty good. That was when he cared enough to pick up his guitar. She wished the boy from long ago was the one she had known. So much wasted talent. Mary sighed. Sometimes it really sucked to become so attached to the wrong person.

Mary rose to her feet so fast that she knocked her iPod off her lap causing her music to stop as gravity pulled the ear buds out of their socket. She finally figured something out, and tossing her empty cup into a trashcan, she ran out the door. How could she be so stupid? What were the big things relationships are built on? Most friends have common interests, which was easy because they both really liked smoking weed, they could agree on music for the most part, and would have ridiculously long conversations about simple things, like how to cook Ramen. Another huge building block was trust. She trusted him with her life and he trusted her with his, or at least his body, since he was always giving her funeral plans for when he went, and letting her drive his Jeep when he was incapable. Trust drove their relationship. Once they had it, all the love and respect came easy, and who was Mary to throw away love?

She also thought about those stares, the long ones they exchanged from time to time, never saying a word. Mary analyzed Johnny and loved to see what he would think about certain things and she knew he did the same with her. All the times they said 'I love you', and all the hugs they shared, and the innocent naps taken together, they all built up this trust and affection. She didn't know how he felt, and she might never know. She knew the limitation of her power now: trust. She couldn't force him to do the right thing for her, but she could trust him to do the right thing for himself, even if she didn't like it. She knew that he would be there for her if she needed him and how could she even consider giving that up?

As Mary reached the door to her room, she breathed a sigh of relief, or maybe she was just catching her breath. She opened the door to find Johnny right where she left him curled up in the bed, a skeleton of his former self, perfectly content in sleep. She went over and kissed his forehead and whispered, "I will love you till the day you die."

Noticing the disturbance Johnny awoke slightly, "Hey," he said smiling through his sleep. Mary looked at the bed he was laying in and noticed Laney had come home from work and was lying beside him. She knew she loved him like a brother, but it wasn't until tonight that she realized her love didn't stop there. It wasn't until that moment that she realized loving Johnny that much would only break her heart.

"Have a nice nap?" she asked, forcing a chuckle.

"Yeah," he looked up at her groggily still managing to stare into her eyes. "What were you saying when I woke up?"

"Just that I really wish you would stop killing yourself. That's all," Mary whispered as she fumbled with her hands and refusing to meet Johnny's droopy stare.

"I'm not killing myself," He said with as much exasperation as he could muster for being half asleep. "Night."

“I’m finished,” Mary choked on the words that couldn’t be heard by the two sleeping beings next to her. She was letting go. Mary picked up her backpack, shoved some things in it, and left her room for the second time that night. Once in the darkened hallway, she leaned against her closed door, and felt a tear begin to slide down her cheek dragging with it all that she held in her soul.

### Passenger by Shawn Mangerino

The stoplight at the corner of Sheep Creek and Phelan Rd, one of two in town, changes from green to red. It is ten at night and the streets are empty. A few street lights illuminate the faces of worn shops that disappear into the relentless black of the desert night. The faint sound of music and conversation echoes from the open doorway of the dimly lit Thunderbird Inn across the street. There are cars in the lot but it's cold and no one stands at the log rails to smoke in the night air.

For the moment, the only movement is a large red dog that comes from the shadows at the edge of desert behind an AMPM gas station. She stops at a puddle under the water machine and drinks before trotting across the lot to sniff the trash can outside the glass AMPM walls. The attendant spots her and comes out. The dog waits. The man tosses a hot dog out into the cold night. She takes a few cautious steps back, edges around it, sniffs it, takes it between her jaws and sneaks back into the desert. The night is still again. The stoplight changes from green to yellow.

A pick-up truck pulls into the station. The driver gets out into the night, breathing out into his palms for heat. As he pumps gas, he watches the ticker and releases the lever just a few cents shy of ten dollars. He replaces the nozzle, screws the cap back on the tank and closes the guard. Despite the cold he takes the squeegee from the plastic container of dirty fluid. He uses the spongy side to mop a layer of dirt from the windshield and he uses the rubber blade to screeed the liquid off.

As the driver cleans his windows, another man walks up the sidewalk. His hands are tucked deep into the pockets of his coveralls. Shopping bags hang from the crook of his arm and he swerves a bit with each step. When he sees the truck and the driver, he crosses the strip of grass along the edge of the station and joins the driver at the pumps.

The two men lock eyes.

"Heading that way?" the man asks, taking a hand from his coveralls to point. His speech is thick and he sways as he stands at the hood of the truck.

"No," the driver says, and he continues to clean his window.

"I only need to go a couple miles," the man says. "It's cold."

"Sorry," the driver says.

"I'm wearing my court clothes," the man says. "They're clean. I keep them clean for when I have to go to court."

The driver doesn't respond. He has finished his windows, throws away the paper towel and places the squeegee back into the plastic container mounted on the gas station pump.

"Well, which way are you headed?" the man asks, stuffing his hand back into his coveralls.

The driver leans an elbow on the dirty hood of the truck and he stares at the coveralls and the bags.

“I’m not a bad guy,” the man continues. “I’ve got my court clothes on. Can’t do anything stupid. I know I’ve been drinking. Too drunk to do anything stupid.”

“I’m headed to the bar,” the driver finally says and nods at the Thunderbird.

“I can wait for you. Too cold to walk,” he says. “I don’t mind waiting.”

The driver sighs and lays the windshield wipers back across the windshield.

“Fine,” the driver says. “I’ll take you. But you’ve got to ride in the bed.”

“It’s cold.”

“I’ll give you a ride but you’ve got to ride in the bed,” the driver says again.

“My clothes are clean. I don’t smell. These’re my court clothes.”

“Damn it,” the driver says. “Get in.”

The driver slides behind the wheel and pops the passenger side door. The passenger gets in.

They pull onto the highway. The heater blows into the cab and they feel the chill leave their skin. The passenger puts his hands up to the vents.

“Had to go to court today,” the man says. “Don’t have a car. I appreciate the ride.”

It takes a half-mile of road to leave the glow of the town behind them. All at once the road is empty and black desert stretches from either side of the truck.

“Cold out there,” the man says, placing his palm on the glass. When he pulls it back there is a large smudge.

The driver nods and turns the radio on.

The silhouettes of Yucca and Joshua Trees flash against the dark sky. At points along the road, the truck rattles and slips over sand that has spilled onto the road and hardened into a rib cage pattern from the recent rains. The driver spots a mound on the pavement. He slows the truck. Both men recognize the body of a large red dog.

“Shit,” the driver says under his breath. “I see that dog all the time.”

“Aw shit,” the passenger says, and he presses his face to the window as they pass. “Aw shit.” He clutches his bags against his chest and stares behind the truck though the driver doubts he can see anything. “Shit,” the passenger continues to mumble.

The driver accelerates and says nothing more. The passenger has gone quiet as well and points out the turn with hand gestures. They turn onto Eaby, a stretch of non-maintained dirt road that peels upwards into the hills and eventually breaks into miles of trails. At one point the road splits into two roads that pass on either side of a small copse of scrub brush and California Juniper. The driver takes the road at an easy pace, navigating the ruts and bumps as best as he can. The

passenger gestures at a house on the side of the road. There's no porch light and no lights in the windows. The passenger opens the door and steps into the night.

"You're welcome," the driver says, but the passenger says nothing back. He nods, closes the door and walks into the darkness.

Soon the man has disappeared into the dark house and the driver backs out. On his way back to the highway he speeds down the short stretch of road, jumping between gears. The truck slams over the road and bounces with the dips. Several times the driver slams the brakes to avoid dropping the tire in a rut or clipping a rock. Brakes, gas, brakes, gas. He spots where the dirt meets the highway and he slams the brakes again and the truck slides up to the pavement. A cloud of dust pours around the truck, into his headlights, and across the street before him.

The highway is well-travelled by those passing between Wrightwood and Victorville, or in the opposite direction, those heading out to Bakersfield. Occasionally cars pass but the driver doesn't pull back onto the road. The radio is a low buzz in the truck. He shuts it off along with the headlights. Once the dust clears, a sea of black stretches out before him, broken below by the sparse porch lights of desert homes, above by desert stars. The green reflection of the clock shines in the windows.

The driver kills the engine and tilts his seat back. The cab is stuffy and he rolls down his window letting the cold desert air into the truck. He folds his arms behind his head and listens to the quiet of the desert.

The highway glows with headlights, a car passes and then all is black again. There is a rustle in the scrub outside of the truck and the driver hears the deep call of a great horned owl and then the flutter of the bird taking flight. He sits like this staring out into the darkness, watching the cars that pass by, nodding off in the minutes between, until he hears the crunching step of someone walking in the sand.

Behind the truck, the passenger is trudging through the sand behind a wheel barrow. The handle of a shovel sticks out of the tray. He's mumbling to himself.

"Hey," the driver says.

The passenger stops and looks over.

"Hey," he says back. His shadowed form stands still for a minute before he reaches into his jacket. The driver can vaguely see both a bottle and that the man is wearing something other than his "court clothes." The passenger unscrews the cap and drinks. "Can't leave her out there."

"Can't do anything about it," the driver says.

"Won't leave her." He turns and begins to walk.

"Hell, I'll give you a ride back there but there's nothing you can do for her."

They load the wheel barrow and the shovel into the bed of the truck and they're soon on the road again. The driver blasts the heater when he sees the other man shivering and they drive at an easy pace.

"You wouldn't think it," the passenger says. "Most them dogs don't last. That girl's been around a long time."

"I know," the driver says. "I've seen her all over."

"I seen her all the time for seven years now. Maybe eight. Maybe more. See her at the gas station most nights. Wouldn't let me pet her but she don't run neither. Never hurt anyone."

"It happens," the driver says. "You can't do anything about it."

"I'd sooner it was me," the passenger says.

"Bullshit," the driver says.

Her body appears in the headlights in the same place at the edge of town. The driver pulls off onto the shoulder and kills the headlights. He leaves the engine running and the heater blasting.

"Here she is," the driver says. "Gonna pull her off the road?"

"Gonna bury her," the passenger answers. "What do you think I've got the shovel for?"

Without the headlights on, the dog is only a black mound on the road. They both stare at her and then the passenger gets out. He unloads the wheelbarrow first by yanking it off the tail gate and letting it slam to the ground. He tosses the shovel in the sand beside it.

The driver watches as the other man guides the wheelbarrow onto the road. He kneels beside the dog, placing a hand on her side. He seems to search the body and then gets each hand on one of her legs and pulls her up onto the edge of the wagon. The dog is large and he struggles to lift her. He hefts up the bulk of her and the wagon tips over.

It's more than the driver can stand and he jumps out of his truck, pulls his t-shirt over his head and uses it to grab one of the other legs. They fumble with her, her body slipping in their grip, but between both of them they get her into the tray. The driver wipes his hands on his shirt and tosses it into the wheelbarrow with her.

The highway is black in either direction and the two men stand along the center divider to catch their breath. Neither man can clearly see the other's face. The driver sticks his hand out toward the dog's head.

"Don't pet her," the passenger says. "I told you she don't like to be pet."

The passenger takes another drink from his bottle and hands it to the driver. The driver takes a drink. Cheap whiskey. He takes a second drink and hands it back.

The wheel is flat on the wheelbarrow and one of leg supports is missing the bolts that keep it attached to the tray. Now that the wagon bears weight, the passenger struggles to move it. The

progress is worse in the sand and it takes both men to keep the wheelbarrow from tipping. There is a mound of sand that lines the shoulder. The passenger pushes on the handles while the driver pulls on the front of the tray. Both men fall at different times but they eventually get the wheelbarrow on the other side and into the desert beyond. They struggle for about twenty yards until the passenger stops pushing the handles. The driver drops into the sand, shirtless and cold but breaking a sweat.

“Better watch for cholla,” the passenger says.

“I know,” the driver says.

The passenger retrieves the shovel from beside the highway, brings it back and starts digging. With only one shovel, the men take turns. The other sits in the sand and takes a drink or two from the bottle. Once the hole is a few feet deep, the passenger tosses the shovel aside.

“How long do you think she made it out here?” the driver asks.

“Longer than we will,” the passenger says. “Tip her.”

The driver grabs the handles and lifts while the other man guides the dog out of the tray and slides her into the hole.

Once the hole is filled the two men walk back to the road. They leave the wheelbarrow behind.

“I’ll come back for it,” the passenger says.

Back at the highway, both men lean against the truck and finish the bottle. Neither speaks. They listen to the emptiness of the desert as they pass the bottle back and forth, each shivering in the night air but neither moving to load the wheel barrow. To the west, the town of Phelan smolders in the night. They can see the stoplight, one of two for the town, blink from red to green.

### All Those Stars by Stephen March

On my twenty-second wedding anniversary, I wake up to find my wife, Rae, missing from the bed. I know where she is: in Josh's room. Josh, our older son, is twenty years old and he just got his tonsils out four days ago. Rae has been in a state of agitation ever since—sleeping in his bed at night and fretting over him nearly waking moment.

I go down the hall to his room and find him sleeping on his back, propped up on pillows, his mouth open. Rae is asleep beside him, her back to me. Josh makes a gurgling sound when he breathes, but I am relieved he is no longer plagued with that horrendous snoring. It was so bad his roommate at welding school had to move out of their room. Josh's snoring had been a problem from the time he was in grade school. His tonsils and adenoids were huge, but the doctor we consulted refused to take them out. Some kind of pride thing, according to Rae, who is a nurse in the ER. "The pediatrician recommended it, and after that he just refused to even consider it," she said. "He didn't want a woman telling him what to do."

I touch his forehead to see if he is hot, the way I used to do when he was a little boy. He wakes up and looks at me through red-rimmed eyes.

"How's it going, buddy?" I ask.

He shakes his head. Still can't talk.

"You're doing great," I tell him. "In a week or two this will just seem like a dream."

He shuts his eyes, breathing deep. I know he's in pain. I'd rather it be me than him, but what can you do? The surgeon warned us a tonsillectomy was an extremely painful operation for an adult. Said he had done it recently for a friend of his, a power lifter. "He called me every day, crying," the doctor said. "On a pain scale of one to ten, an adult tonsillectomy is a twelve."

Why do doctors say crap like that?

I go back down the hall, passing the rooms of Briana, our daughter, and Cody, our other son, both of whom are still asleep. In the kitchen I heat up some cold coffee in the microwave and try to figure out what I can accomplish today. First I have to figure out a way to get the recliner I bought for Rae into the house without her seeing it. Friday I put it in the shed while Rae was at work, but I want to bring it into the den and surprise her with it.

She has been complaining about the couch and saying we need a new recliner. I found her one last summer and offered to buy it but she said it cost too much. We had just paid the tuition for Josh's welding school and Briana needed braces. Rae was right, as usual. It would have just loaded more money onto our debt. What the hell, I'd said, why not get it with plastic, isn't that the American way?

“Very funny,” Rae said. But she wasn’t smiling.

Her whole family is like that: dead serious. Crack a joke around her dad and he’s as straight-faced as a mortician. Most of the time he doesn’t even get that you are joking.

Once her parents were visiting when Rae was pregnant with Josh, and we were trying to come up with names for him. Just having fun, I suggested “Slim Harpo” and “Mr. Fitzgerald.” Rae and her mom, Olivia, were smiling these tight little smiles. Mason—that’s Rae’s dad—was silent and scowling. But he spoke up when I said I thought June Bug would be a good name for our son.

“*June Bug*. Who would want to go through life with a name like that?”

You have to hold up a sign for some people.

Rae holds our family together. Despite her full-time job at the hospital, she still makes sure the bills get paid, the kids go to the doctor, and Cody and Briana do their homework. I bring home a paycheck, too, fix things when they are broken, and keep the grass cut. But most anybody who knows us will tell you Rae is the backbone and I’m just the comic relief.

I like to get everyone to laugh but lately that has been like trying to push a semi up a hill. We’re behind on some bills, Cody is flunking algebra, I’m afraid I’ll get laid off from my job, and Rae’s parents are facing some major health issues. Olivia has suffered two strokes, and she is confined to a wheel chair. She is still at home, but Mason provides her with twenty-hour care. At seventy-eight, he has his own problems, including arthritis and congestive heart failure. Rae and her sister finally convinced him to get a nurse to help out, but Olivia wouldn’t allow it. She doesn’t want to spend the money for one thing; she also doesn’t want anyone taking care of her but Mason. They live in Memphis, along with Rae’s sister, Viola, who is high strung and calls Rae two or three times a week with disturbing news about their problems. “Daddy’s breathing has gotten worse,” she’ll say. “Or Mama couldn’t remember her Aunt Millie’s name today.”

Viola’s phone calls make my wife feel guilty because she is not there to help care for her parents. “You can’t spend the same amount of time up there, too,” I tell her. “You got more things to worry about than Viola.”

Viola isn’t married, has no kids and a relatively easy job. She’s got plenty of time on her hands, is the way I look at it. But Rae still suffers from guilt, especially after receiving one of Viola’s hysterical phone calls.

I met Rae at a diner in Pascagoula twenty-three years ago. I was a driver for Gabe’s Septic Tank Service when I went in there and first saw her waiting tables. I liked the way she filled out that tight little skirt she was wearing, liked the sparkle in her eyes. So I asked her out to lunch.

“I’ve been skipping lunch lately,” she said. “Trying to lose weight.”

She was smiling when she turned me down, though. She didn't do it in a cold way, just kind of sassy. I went back to the diner a few days later, and this time she gave me her number.

I took her bowling. It was her first time bowling and she beat my ass.

It's been that way ever since. Rae manages to stay one jump ahead of me in just about every area.

She likes to take charge of situations. She says it's the nurse in her. This has been especially true with Josh's surgery, but her nerves haven't been as steady as they usually are in a crisis. She is worried he will start bleeding—although the doctor said there are only four chances in a hundred of that.

I worry about Josh, too, just not as much. Once we got him home from the surgery, I felt confident he would get better with time and care. When he was little, I was scared to let him out of my sight. But Josh is over six feet tall now, and he weighs over two hundred pounds. He's finished welding school, he's got job offers in Biloxi and Jackson, and he possesses one hell of a work ethic. He doesn't drink or smoke and he's as level headed a boy as you could find.

He's going to get through this just fine, I keep telling her, but it doesn't seem to help much. She has always fretted more about Josh than she has our other two kids. She says it's because he's her "first born," and she never got over the anxiety of doing something wrong.

"Does he want you to sleep in his bed with him?" I asked her yesterday.

"Yes," she says. "He's afraid he'll start bleeding."

"And who put that idea in his head?"

"It pays to know what the risks are, Dwight," Rae said.

All this talk about what *could* happen seems to me like bidding the devil good morning, but I keep my comments to myself. We got enough to worry about without getting into a big fuss, too—like our two younger kids. Cody, who recently turned sixteen, forgets to tie his shoes half the time and he can never find his homework assignments. He is flunking algebra and the rest of his grades aren't that great, either. Briana is twelve going on sixteen; she wears padded bras and purple eye shadow. Unless she wants something from me, she rolls her eyes at everything I say. What more can you say about that?

I check on Josh again. Rae is pouring his pain medicine into a measuring cup. He drinks the medicine down and lies back on the pillows while Rae puts a cold compress on his forehead.

"He wants you to read to him," she says. She is wearing pajamas and her hair is a fright.

"Sure, great," I say, glad to be of some use. Neither of us mentions our anniversary.

When Josh was little, he wouldn't go to sleep until I'd read a story to him. He still has some of the children's books on the bottom of the bookshelf I built for him. The top rows have the books he read when he was older—*White Fang*, *The Call of the Wild*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a history of NASCAR, and a biography of Dale Earnhardt.

"Josh, which book do you want me to read?"

He motions for his pad and paper and Rae hands it to him. He writes down the title of a children's book—an illustrated story about a family of rabbits getting ready for the winter. What is he choosing something like this? The last time I read that book to him he must have been eight years old.

I locate the book on the shelf, then lie down beside him and begin reading. He puts his head on my shoulder, the way he did when he was a little boy, and looks at the pictures.

I glance up over the book and see Rae looking at us. She mouths the words, "Happy Anniversary."

While Rae is taking a shower, I wake up Cody and get him to help me carry the recliner from the shed into the den. I wrap it with a pink ribbon.

I go put on my clothes in the bedroom, and when I come back to the kitchen. Briana is in the recliner, talking on Rae's cell phone and eating a Moon Pie. Her T-shirt reads *Mess with me and you mess with the whole trailer park*.

"That's Mama's present!" Cody says. "Get out of there. You're going to get crumbs on it before she even sits in it!"

"Drop dead, you creep!" Briana says.

"Keep your voices down," I say. "You're going to spoil Mama's surprise."

Briana rolls her eyes in such a manner as to convey extreme displeasure. I am not her favorite person right now.

"Are you talking to Lyle?" I ask.

She puts her hand over the phone and shakes her head, giving me a hateful look.

"Who's she talking to?" I ask Cody.

"Satan most likely."

Briana puts her hand over the phone again, "I am talking to the only friend I have left in the world, Miss Brittany Teal."

Lyle, a hormonal little rat with a mustache, lives in our neighborhood, and he's been calling here far too often lately. He's fifteen, and one look at him will tell you what's on his mind. This past

Friday, I stopped him when he was riding his bike by my driveway and asked him not to call our house any more. "Briana is too young for you," I said.

When I got home that night, Rae said Briana was in her room "throwing a hissy fit." Lyle told his cousin what I'd said, who told Briana, and now in addition to being "humiliated in the eyes of the whole school" she also wants me to know she will never speak to me again.

That's all right with me, I told Rae. "She'll be glad to talk to me the next time she wants money for clothes."

All three of our kids know who the soft touch is. They need something extra, I'm the one they come to see.

No use to even bring up a luxury with Rae--the only person I know with a real savings account. "You don't need that," she tells the kids when they ask her to buy them stuff. Briana says she's going to get Mama a T-shirt for her birthday with *You don't need that* printed on the front.

The truth is we would be in bad shape it wasn't for Rae's job and her ability to manage money. I've had three jobs in the last seven years and the one I've got now, assistant manager at Gulf States Building Supply, is probably on the chopping block. Housing been hit hard during the recession and the decline has sure affected the company's sales. The owner has laid off half the guys in shipping, two or three salesmen, a couple of deliverymen, and a fork lift operator. You can feel the fear and tension in the place when you walk in the door.

Fear of losing my job has been contributing to my high blood pressure, Rae says, who takes it every day when I get home from work. It has been hitting as high as 160 over 90 some days, so she made me an appointment with the doctor. He prescribed some pills I have yet to take.

One of the salesmen at Gulf States told me the blood pressure pills his doctor put him on ruined his sex life. Not that I have much of one myself, what with all the pressure we've been under lately, but I'd like to keep the capability intact, just in case. I did a little research the pills the doc prescribed for me. Found a bunch of testimonials about side effects. They include erectile dysfunction, joint pain and hair loss.

The pill bottle is in the medicine cabinet. Because Rae keeps a sharp eye on pills around here, I have been taking one out of the bottle every day and hiding it in my tackle box in the garage.

Briana and Cody lead Rae into the den with her eyes closed.

When she opens her eyes and sees the recliner, we say, "Happy Anniversary!"

Rae's lower lip trembles. I see tears in her eyes.

"What's wrong? Was it the wrong color?"

“No, the color is perfect. I just don’t have anything for you. I haven’t had a chance, between work and Josh’s surgery.”

“That’s all right, honey,” I tell her. “I understand. I don’t want anything.”

Her tears keep falling. You can tell this is disturbing the kids, since Rae hardly ever cries.

“Look, I got everything I want right here.” I put my arms around her and the kids.

“Sit down in the recliner while you cry,” I say, trying to get her to laugh. “That way you can try it out and relieve stress at the same time.”

I lead her to the recliner and she sits down.

“Girl, you are looking good!” I say, and my wife smiles a little through her tears.

Working together, Rae and I manage to get a cup of chicken broth down Josh. About the only time we can get him to drink fluids is twenty to thirty minutes after he takes his pain medicine, which is every four hours. Rae says he needs to “stay hydrated” to cut down on the risk of bleeding, so we take this task seriously. We keep water by his bed and encourage him to drink all day long, but without much success except after he has taken his medicine. This reminds me somehow of the way we fretted over him when he was a newborn, both of us worrying he wasn’t getting enough milk when Rae first began nursing him.

We missed church again. I am relieved Rae didn’t mention it. Being that she did a load of wash this morning, I know she will hang the clothes on the line in the backyard. I go into Cody’s room and tell him to crank up the weed eater and cut the weeds down around the back door and the clothesline. It’s Cody’s job to keep them cut but it’s been so hot lately I haven’t had the heart to send him out there to do it.

He is usually proud of doing chores like weedeating, for which I slip him a little money afterward, unbeknownst to Rae. She doesn’t believe kids should be paid for doing chores, but I figure it helps them see that their work has value and involves rewards. It’s hard enough to survive the work world today. I figure paying him a little money will help give them a better start. Cody uses the money I give him to buy DVDs and other luxuries Rae won’t buy for him.

After he goes outside, I pour myself a glass of tea and stretch out on the couch in the living room. I try to relax but the face of Newt Boggs comes into view. Newt, the general manager who gives you your layoff notice, is the last person I need to be thinking about on my day off. I’ve been at Gulf States for three years now, and I’d like to keep this job long enough to start building a decent retirement account. Rae has a good plan with that state but I’ve got zilch. I could have started one before now, but with Josh in welding college, Briana’s braces, and the used Toyota I had to buy for Cody, I’ve had to put retirement plans on hold.

I will probably die on the job anyway. I can't imagine sitting in a rocker all day watching TV. Even worse, I can't imagine spending my last days in a wheel chair, like Rae's mom. Just thinking about it makes me want to reach for a cold beer—or, better yet, a bottle of whiskey. Where I come from, those are the main medicines for a man with worries on the mind or pain in the heart.

I don't hear the weed eater running so I go outside to see what's wrong.

I find Cody standing by the back door, gazing down at the pieces of the weed eater. The spool that holds the line is on the ground along with assembly cap and a pipe wrench. "What the hell's wrong?" I ask. "What are you doing with a pipe wrench?"

"Trying to get the top off so I could more line on," he says. "It was stuck."

"You don't force it." I pick up the top of the weedeater, see what he has done—broken the plastic cap that holds the spool in place. "You broke the damn thing, Cody! I just bought it last month!"

"Sorry, Daddy. I was just trying to get the cap off to put more line on. It was really stuck."

"Just go in the house. Can't I trust you to do a simple job?"

I fool with the thing awhile but I can tell it's no use. So far this year Cody has broken the window in the garage and pulled the towel rack off the wall in his bathroom. Last year he was swinging a softball bat inside and knocked a hole in the den wall.

Rae is sitting at the table when I go back inside. She has combed her hair and put on a T-shirt and a pair of shorts.

"He broke the weedeater!"

"I know. He's crying."

"He's sixteen! What the hell is he doing crying over a busted weed eater?"

"Because he let *you* down."

"Jesus." I sit down at the table, rub my temples. I feel a headache coming on.

"Dwight, What the hell is *this* all about?"

I look at what Rae is holding up in front of my face: it's the blood pressure pills I hid in the tackle box in the garage. Still wrapped in a napkin.

"How'd you find those?"

"Cody was looking for a knife to cut the line for the weedeater."

I look down at my hands. I don't even know how to begin explaining it to her.

"Are you trying to get a stroke? You want me to have to raise these kids alone?"

Rae sets the pills on the table and leaves the kitchen. Her words have entered my heart like a plumber's snake, twisting their way down to the center.

I get out one of the pills and a glass of water. Then I go into the bedroom. Rae is lying on our bed, her back to me.

"I'm taking the pill," I say, showing her the pill in my hand. I put it in my mouth and swallow it, washing it down with water. "It's down, see?"

I sit down beside her on the bed, begin massaging her shoulders. I was foolish to try to hide the pills. You can't hide anything from Rae.

"I think I'm getting a damn urinary tract infection," she says, after awhile "Honey, I'm sorry. Can you get the doctor to call you something in?"

"On Sunday? He's on the golf course."

"You can go out to the emergency doc in the mall."

"And sit there for three hours?"

"I can take of Josh."

"I'll take care of it tomorrow."

"You've been worrying about everybody but yourself."

"Who else is going to worry about you all if I don't?"

I look at the photo of us on our wedding day, displayed on our dresser. Me in a tux, Rae in her white gown. God, how young we look.

"You were a beautiful bride," I tell her. "Your looks have really held up."

"Oh shut up." Rae sits up and looks at the photo, too. "That was so long ago. We didn't know what we were getting into."

"I'd do it all over again."

Rae squeezes my hand. She is leaning over to kiss me when we hear a commotion in the hall.

Cody throws open the door and says, "Josh threw up on the new recliner!"

We both fly out of the room, into the den. Josh is sitting on the couch now, hanging his head over a mop bucket.

"Oh, Josh, baby," Rae says, kneeling in front of him. "Was there blood?"

I examine the recliner, don't see any blood.

"It was mostly water," Cody says, from the doorway.

I put my hand on Josh's shoulder. "It's going to be all right, buddy. Hey, look, you want me to read you another story?"

Rae looks at me and shakes her head.

"That recliner had stain free fabric," I tell her.

I can tell she wants me to hush so I don't say anything else.

Rae, Cody and Brianna are in the den watching the TV when I hear this popping noise outside. I open the deck door and hear what sounds like gun shots, coming from Jack Perkins' house, two doors down. A couple of minutes later, the phone rings. It's Rae's friend, Sandy, who lives on our street.

"Is somebody shooting a gun up your way?" she asks.

"Sure sounds like it," I say. "I think it's coming from the Perkins' house."

"No, I just called there," she says. "Jack was asleep in front of the TV."

I step out the front door and hear what sounds like two shots fired from a semi-auto. It's coming from the Johannsens, who live two doors up, toward the highway.

Thinking there might be some kind of whacko loose in our neighborhood, I get my .357 Magnum out of the lock box in my closet, along with two speedloaders, which I put in my pocket. I lay the pistol on the loveseat and look up the Johannsens' number in the phone book.

While I am waiting for someone to answer the phone, Rae and the kids come through the door from the den.

"What's that gun doing there?" Rae cries.

"Shhhh," I say, as Larry Johannsen answers the phone. "Hey Larry, Dwight McCallum here. I heard gunshots up your way. Everything OK?"

"It's kids throwing out firecrackers," he says.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, fooled me too. I went outside and looked. They've gone up the street now."

I thank Larry and get off the phone.

"Thought I heard shots," I tell Rae. "It was just firecrackers."

"One of the kids could have sat down on that love seat!"

"It's OK. Nothing to worry about," I say, picking up the revolver. "Only way it would go off would be if someone pulled the trigger."

Rae and Briana are looking at me like they just found out I killed someone with an ax and buried the body in the yard.

"I thought there was a wacko outside," I say. "It pays to be careful these days."

Rae and Briana return to the den, but Cody stays in the living room.

"Is that gun loaded, Daddy?" he asks.

Later that night, I go down the hall to check on Josh. I pass Briana's room on the left and hear her sniffing.

I knock once on the door and then go in.

She is sitting on the side of her bed, her lower body covered up with a towel. She has her panties in her hand.

"Briana, you OK?"

"I want Mama!" she says, hiding the panties behind her back.

"O.K., honey. I'll get her."

I check our bedroom, but Rae isn't there.

I hurry into the kitchen. Cody is sitting at the table eating a bowl of frosted flakes.

"Where's Mama?" I asked him.

"In the den."

I rush into the den. Rae is asleep in her new recliner. The TV is on.

I shake her awake. "Rae, Briana wants you."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I think it's a female thing."

"Oh, my God." Rae gets up from the recliner and goes back to our room.

I stand there a moment, in a kind of daze.

"Daddy?"

I turn to see Cody, standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"What's wrong with Briana?"

"It's no concern of yours." I get a can of beer out of the fridge, pop the pop, and then slip out to the deck and sit in the swing. My head is aching again, and my heart is pounding. I wonder if the blood pressure medicine is working, if it will cause my joints to ache or my hair to fall out. I lean my head back in the swing, take some deep breaths. I remember carrying Briana wrapped in a blanket out here one night to show her the harvest moon. She must have been three or four years old. She smelled like baby powder and peanut butter.

After a while, Rae comes outside and sits down beside me in the swing.

"Briana OK?"

"Yeah."

"Was that what I think it was?"

"Yes."

"She's just a baby."

"No she isn't."

“I had no idea what to say or do.”

“It’s all taken care of.”

“I was just remembering bringing her out here in a blanket one night when she was about three. I wanted to show her the moon.”

“You think of all the trouble it takes to get one here,” Rae says. “And that’s the beginning.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

We are moving the swing now. I put my arm around her and she rests her head on my shoulder. “You remember the way the boys used to chase lightning bugs in the back yard on summer nights?”

“Yes.”

“I remember bringing all three of them out here to look at the sky through the telescope Santa brought them. I had to hold Briana up to the eyepiece.”

“I think the main section is in the attic.”

“I found a lens for it in the garage the other day.”

“There was a piece of it down in the loveseat,” Rae says. “No telling where all the parts are now.”

I look up at the sky, at all those stars, and think how nice it would be if we could look through that telescope again. I could show the kids Venus, the North Star, the rings around Saturn, the mountains on the moon. It would be a way to get them off their computers, a way for us all to do something together—see the beauty of the night sky.

“I wonder if I could ever find all the pieces to that telescope and fix it up so it would work again.”

Rae kisses me on the ear. “I don’t think so, baby,” she says.

## Deep Shaft by Claudia Mundell

His body rocked as the cage lowered him down the shaft, his pick ax occasionally nudging the wire wall. When the door opened, he picked up his tools and headed down the shadowy corridor along with a dozen other men. Although his face was freshly washed, a black residue remained in the pleats of skin around his eyes and in his scrubbed knuckles. Yesterday's coal dust still hung in his patched overalls. As he began the day's repetitive work, he thought only of ending another day.

She was cooking for him, he knew. Waiting with warmth, release, and extra cash for the larder on a Saturday night. She bubbled with life and smelled delicious. He knew other men wanted her too, as they came sniffing around after work. He shared but always kept a little of her for himself.

At the end of the day, Oscar Bourey headed down the road that lead back to the company owned frame house. His face was a road map of black lines following the crevices in his cheeks, and his hands had a few fresh nicks from another day of hacking at the spiny coal.

"Hey, I'll be see'n youse, later tonight, right Oscar?" called back another miner ahead of him on the road.

"Of course, Salvatore. Bring your fiddle. We'll dance late into the night." Both men laughed.

Without going into the house, Oscar set his empty lunchbox and tools on the crooked porch floor and walked behind the small house. Without hurrying, he ambled towards the crick that moseyed through the Kansas hedge row a half mile away. Once deep into the trees, he followed a path, now familiar to his booted feet, through tree trunks, brambles, and weeds. In a depressed wedge of earth, there she stood, waiting.

Once on top of her, he could smell the sweet grainy fragrance of mash. Her long copper tubing stretched and coiled from the tank to the wooden barrel, staves damp from her contents. Oscar dug in the weeds for a lone tin cup and then dipped it easily into the crock sitting next to the oak barrel. His sipped the amber liquid, ripe with corn and sugar, fermented to perfection.

"Um," escaped from his coal-cruled lips as the brew slid down his parched throat warming his insides with a soothing fire. He closed his eyes and let the potent whiskey loosen the knots in his shoulders, the cords in his forearms. Then he reached over and patted the still.

"You did swell, old girl. You're the love of my life." He eased himself back out of the hidden spot and tramped back towards the frame house, his step lighter as he whistled.

"It's gonna be a good Saturday night," he thought to himself as images of the mine slowly faded.

\*\*\*Deep Shaft was the name given to bootleg whiskey in Prohibition-era Kansas.

### Sarah by Lori Sublett

I hear my name as I walk through the food court, navigating the maze of people, tables, strollers and mountains of shopping bags. I look around but see no one I recognize, can't imagine who would be calling me. I start to walk but stop again as I hear my name, louder, unmistakably mine. I see you waving at me from across the Auntie Anne's Pretzel Counter. It takes me a moment to remember who you are. I've always been good with faces, not so much with names. I recognize you, though I haven't seen you in over 6 years. But you wore your adult face even then. At 19 you were the oldest in our senior class, while at barely 17, I was the youngest. We shouldn't have been such good friends but we'd already put in too much time together to be otherwise.

I was 11 when my parents decided to move back to the place where they had grown up. I transferred from private school to public in a city where I didn't know anyone. You sat in front of me in English class. You didn't even blink the first day when you turned around and told me your name was Sarah and you were 13 and the only reply I gave was that I wanted to dye my hair blue. You invited me to your house that weekend and helped me do it.

You smile at me now and leave the customers in line waiting, as you come out from behind the counter. You wear a smile and a blue polyester apron, your stomach round and bulging with child. You offer me a hug and a Hi-how-are-you like we haven't seen each other in just days instead of years. You tell me that you're happy. You ask what I'm up to and I tell you how school is going - I'm getting my Master's degree, you know - and about my new job as a CPA. You laugh, a big hearty laugh that throws your head back and opens your mouth wide, so I can see the gold tooth in the back. You laugh because you know I hate math and anything to do with the subject. You remember my struggles all through school and how I did your English homework for you so you'd do my Math homework for me. You remember that I have an attitude and have never censored anything that made its way from my brain to my mouth. You remember me in high school with blue hair and bondage pants, sitting cross-legged on the Magic Carpet.

It was just a square remnant of brown carpet set in front of the side doors and stained with more than 20 years of abuse. We sat there during lunch, foregoing the crowded cafeteria and the even more crowded student lounge. I sat with my back against the cool glass of the door, just in reach of escape. Manda laid down on my left, my jacket covering her arms like a blanket, her head on my thigh holding me down. Chay and Tina on my right. And you sat across from me. As Manda slept and Chay and Tina ignored us in favor of using a split-jack to share music, you shared my lunch. Over turkey sandwiches and Doritos you told me about the man you'd delivered pizzas to last night, who opened the door in his underwear and tried to bribe you to get you to come in and stay a few

hours with him. You told me how you grabbed the money and ran away with his pizzas and took them home to feed your little brothers and sisters. Over M&M's and Dr. Pepper I told you how Afshaun spent the night and set her hair on fire, just because. I told you how I snuck a pack of Marlboro's from my parents and Afshaun and we sat by the open window of my bedroom and smoked the whole pack, the smell covered by the even more overpowering smell of burnt hair.

You tell me that you're happy. You rub your belly and smile and tell me that this is number 4. You tell me that you have just made shift manager of Auntie Anne's. You are hopeful that when you come back from maternity leave that you will be promoted to assistant manager. You rub your belly like it's Aladdin's lamp and it will make your dreams come true. You tell me that you're happy and you hope this time it's a boy.

At 19 you were the oldest in our senior class. We sat on the Magic Carpet and you held the words in your mouth, sandwiched between your teeth and your tongue. You tried to swallow your Dr. Pepper and choked on the words you didn't say. You waited a month to hand them to me, the tattered words that you'd rubbed down to nothing. You were pregnant with his child and were getting married at the end of the month.

You ignore the line of customers who are waiting impatiently for their food to tell me that you're happy. You look at the bags in my hand, rummaging through them like it's a treasure hunt. There's a small one from Hot Topic that holds pins to attach to my backpack. There's a heavy Barnes and Noble bag that holds a variety of books. There's a large Vans bag that holds a new pair of blue and black plaid low-tops and a t-shirt. You ask me what I'm shopping for. I shrug. I tell you that I'm on my way to Pottery Barn, that I'm going to buy a set of silverware for my sister's wedding present. You get excited, you love fancy stuff like that. You tell me you've never bought anything from Pottery Barn but you wander through the store everyday on your lunch break. I tell you that I eat off paper plates and use plastic sporks.

I was 11 when I met your mother. She walked in on us in the bathroom, blue dye staining the bathtub and walls, dripping down my hair to puddle on the rug. The bathroom looked like a crime scene if the deceased had had blue blood. Your mom stood in the doorway with her adult face on and stared. She didn't say anything for a few minutes, and neither did we. She shook her head and backed up a step and announced I'm-divorcing-your-father before she walked away. You and I looked at each other, wide-eyed, before grabbing the good towels and starting to clean up our mess.

The customers are getting impatient but you don't notice. You run to the back and grab your purse. You want to show me pictures of your kids and the latest ultrasound. I stand in the middle of the food court, shifting from foot to foot, fidgeting. I have become an obstacle for people to move around. They part around me like the Red Sea, glaring and muttering as they walk on by. You come

back and show me a fuzzy black and white picture. You expect me to recognize something in this Rorschach test. I smile and ooohh like I do and you tell me that you're happy, that you have a name picked out but you're not sharing it just yet because you are still just hoping that it's a boy. You've bought tiny little black dress shoes to match his fathers.

I was 17 when you told me you were getting married. I sat with my back against the glass door, the matted and scratchy pile of the carpet itching where the holes in my jeans showed skin. Manda was a heavy weight on my left leg and my right hand slid in the condensation of my Dr. Pepper. I thought you were joking with me but your serious adult face finally convinced me otherwise. I ask you when you are getting married and you tell me right before Christmas break, in the middle of the school year. I ask you when you decided this and you tell me 2 weeks ago. I ask you what the rush is and you tell me that you're pregnant, that your mother has moved back in with your father and is going to have her own child. You tell me that your future husband wants to get married on the last day Ramadan, the Islamic Holy Month. I ask you who this future husband is and you tell me that he is a fine man, that he is the night manager at the pizza place where you work, that he is 40 years old. You tell me that you are going to be happy. I drink the rest of my Dr. Pepper and wash down the words that try to rise in my throat. I set the can down and wipe my hand on my jeans.

I tell you congratulations and hope that you are happy. You tell me you are as you reverently tuck the pictures back in your purse. You finally notice that there's a line at Auntie Anne's of people who are waiting impatiently to be helped. You see someone off in the distance and wave a little. You start to head back to work but turn around and scribble your phone number down for me on the back of a gas station receipt. You tell me to call. I smile at you and tell you of-course-I will. I tell you to bring your family for dinner sometime, that I'd be happy to have you all. You smile back and say that you'd love to, then offer a nod as you return to your place behind the counter. I walk away, both of us knowing that I will never call and you will never question it. I walk past Pottery Barn. I step inside and head straight to the dishes. I decide to buy a set of the Gabriella, I might need them one day if I decide to have guests over.

**Say-so by Lori Sublett**

I lost my voice. I don't know where it is, but I haven't seen it for a few days, maybe a week. I have to write everything down now, making sure I use my best penmanship so people will understand, not the scribbling shorthand that I use for myself. I've made pages and pages of notes and thoughts and reminders. Pages of one-sided conversation and monologues (there is a difference). I have notebooks stacked 3 feet tall and loose papers bound in alligator clips. I lost my voice but I am prepared to soldier on until I find it again.

I didn't realize that people have forgotten how to read.

I show my pages to the outside world: to the girl at the coffee shop where I like my latte tall with whole milk and a splash of cinnamon, to the mechanic on duty where my car needs the tires rotated along with my oil changed, to the lady at the bank where I want my two hundred dollar withdrawal all in twenty dollar bills. I show my pages to the people I come in contact with and see only the polite *humor-the-crazy-person* blank and distant look that comes across their faces. I write my needs and wants with different colored inks – blue, black, purple – but never see variation or a hint of recognition.

After a while, I stopped. I made my own coffee, changed my own oil and went to the ATM. I took to sitting on a park bench across from the place I thought I'd left my voice at. I remembered having a conversation with my best friend here, right before I noticed it was missing. I was hoping someone would find it and return it to me. I watched the people come and go while I lingered like a shadow, dark and quiet and out of the way. I watched them hurry to appointments. Watched as they lingered in the sunshine, enjoying the stretch of muscles as they walked along. Watched humans being led on leashes by their dogs. Watched as people lived their lives in front of me.

Then one day I saw her, she sat beside me on the bench.

Cathy had been my best friend for years. I knew everything about her. I knew the obvious things: she was older, my mother's age; her hair was thinning but she dyed it black every two weeks anyway; she wore bold red lipstick, thick and waxy; she'd been married for almost 30 years to the father of her two children. And I knew the less obvious things: she favored her son over her daughter, because her daughter was too much like her; she drank far too much, she could drink a bottle of wine to my glass; and her husband of almost 30 years was cheating on her, had been for over a year, and with multiple women.

I was there with her the day that he didn't come home, and five days later when he finally did. I took the midnight runs with her to track him down at whatever woman's house he happened to

be at. I was there after their fights starting getting physical, she no match for him. I knew her better than anybody, but when I saw her that day, she didn't notice me, sitting on the bench beside her.

I watched her for a while, wondering if she'd feel my gaze on her but she never did. She just sat there, thinking her thoughts, and left when she started to get chilled, goosebumps working their way up her arms.

I took out my notebook. I wrote her story. I wrote her story like it was my own, like I had the right. It took me months to chronicle everything that had happened to her, to explain the minutiae required to understand a lonely woman's life. I wrote her favorite color, and the car she drove, and how much she paid on her mortgage (except that she hadn't paid it in months and her home was going into foreclosure). I wrote her job, and her sickness, and her dreams. I wrote her nicknames, and her origins, and her travels. I wrote her daughter, and her mother, and her husband. Everything she was I laid down in black ink on lined paper.

When I was finished, I published the entire manuscript in thick, leather-bound pages. I dropped the book off at her house, leaving it in front of the door where she'd be sure to see it. I thought that even if no one could read it, she would still appreciate that someone paid enough attention to understand.

But I had forgotten that she was older, from a different generation, and she had learned to read as a child, before it became passé.

I left the book on her doorstep and walked away, back to my bench in the park. I sat there every day for the next week, watching the people as they passed by, jogged by, ran by. A week before she sat beside me prim and proper, her back straight, hands clenched in her lap, face forward.

"I'm divorcing him." I couldn't tell who she was talking to, me or herself. "I read the book. I couldn't see myself as I was until I you showed me exactly what I had lost. I deserve better."

I patted her on the shoulder, mouthing the words, *yes, you do*. I was surprised to hear the words fall from my mouth.

"My voice. It's back," I patted my throat. "I thought I'd lost it for good."

"You didn't lose your voice, kiddo." Cathy turned to face me and I could see the new lines that ran around her forehead, branching out to the corners of her eyes. I could see the cracks in her thick, glossy lipstick. "You were just kind enough to lend me your voice until I found my own." She took my hand and we sat there, as the sun went down, watching the people who passed us by.

**Speculate by Lori Sublett**

I found the dryer's secret hiding place, the one where he stuffs all the socks that go missing. I stumbled across it one day when I chased the dust bunnies out from underneath the couch. They are such fickle things, always hanging out under one bit of furniture or another, never in the same place long enough to wrangle them. They liked the dryer though since he let them stay in the lint trap, the one place I was sure never to look for them.

This time, though, I followed them, pulling the lint trap out to catch the tiny buggers. They got scared and ran through a crimped silver tube that was connected to the back of the dryer. I'd seen it before but, I must admit, I'd never really noticed it. The dryer was asleep and not likely to notice, so I unscrewed the pipe and crawled inside. It was a tight fit, the skin on my arms and knees scraping off as I moved forward.

A month later, my throat dry and my stomach rumbling, I reached the other side. I slid onto a white sand beach, surrounded by clear turquoise water. Little dust bunnies splashed in the water, their parents huddled together under the towering palm trees, keeping an eye out. My stomach *roared* and everyone stilled, heads turning to stare cautiously at the intruder. I walked forward, my bare and bruised feet sinking deep into the sand as I made my way to one of the shorter trees. There was some kind of fruit growing there, purplish and vaguely pear shaped. I tore one from a low-hanging branch and bit in. It tasted like cranberry sauce, cool and bitter and slightly gelatinous. The dust bunnies remained still as they watched me devour each and every bit of fruit that hung from the tree. Only when it was empty and my hands and my mouth and chin and my *Dear & The Headlights* t-shirt were stained red with goo, did I noticed the utterly domestic scene around me. A brave little fuzz-ball made her way hesitantly from the water's edge to the place where I stood. I reached out a hand, palm-down, to pet her.

The dust bunnies panicked, gathering the small ones and floating away on the breezes that blew over the ocean. I watched them go, a little saddened as they disappeared into the ether. I waded into the water, letting the cool liquid wash everything away. I dove under the gentle waves, swimming along with the current. The world under the water was more alive than the island had been. There were forests of seaweed in colors I'd never imagined, mountains of coral that stretched up from the ocean floor. There were many creatures swimming lazily by, unconcerned by the large mammal splashing clumsily in their midst. When I felt clean enough, the water surrounding me taking on a purple hue, I stepped back onto the shore. There was a heavy, hot wind circling on the sand that dried my clothes and hair and skin. I walked back the way I'd come in, but the silver tube no longer looked inviting. I lay beside it, using the soft aluminum as a pillow and fell asleep in the

sunshine. It was some time later that I woke, a shadow blocking my body from the warmth of the light.

He was a small man, rounded in the belly and long in the arms. He had thinning white hair and a full beard – Z.Z. Top style. I could see the top of a green cotton glove though his hands were stuffed into the pockets of his pants.

“Hello,” I said.

He nodded at me, just a slight up and down of his head.

I stared at him for minutes, hours, years, the time crawled by so slowly I couldn’t keep track.

“Can I help you?”

He opened his mouth but nothing came out, just a harsh, dry creaking as his jaw moved.

I sat up, my back against the metal pipe, and tried again.

“Did you need something?”

He withdrew his hand from his pocket, the one covered in green cotton. He held his hand up near his face like he was waving at me. The glove on his hand was green with white and red stripes; I recognized it as one of my missing socks. But now it had short strands of white and red yarn protruding from where it rested on his knuckles and big googly eyes glued underneath the yarn-hair. My missing sock had found new life as a sock puppet.

“Hey! That’s mine,” I said, pointing.

“Pardon me, miss,” the voice seemed to come straight from the mobile mouth of the puppet.

“My name is Jean-Luc and I am afraid I do not belong to you.”

“But you’re my sock. One of my best, actually.”

“While I appreciate the compliment, I do resent that you keep referring to me as *yours*,” said Jean-Luc. “I belong only and entirely to myself, you see.”

“Oh, so what’s with the old guy?”

The puppeteer seemed completely uninterested in the conversation, looking longingly towards a tree covered in the cranberry sauce fruit.

“He is unimportant, merely a vessel for navigation. I have come to greet you as ambassador of this island and to see if you need an escort to help you find your way home?”

I stood up at that, my feet spread apart, arms folded across my chest.

“Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“Most assuredly, miss. You do not belong here,” Jean-Luc said as the man gestured with his other arm. “If you will follow me?”

The man started walking north, Jean-Luc swiveling his head back to make sure I followed. He led me to an air conditioning vent, industrial sized, just large enough to walk through if I ducked. The man opened the grate one-handed, Jean-Luc busy watching me.

“Just head straight and you will find yourself where you are supposed to be.”

I took a few steps towards the vent before looking back. There were more puppeteers coming out from their hiding places among the trees and sand dunes. I recognized some of the socks they carried: the red one with the snowflakes, the blue one with the rainbow strips, and the black one with the smiling skulls. Jean-Luc cleared his throat and arched an eyebrow he didn't have.

“Okay, okay, I'm going.”

I stepped through the vent, hearing a loud *clang* as the grate was closed behind me. Suddenly I was swept off my feet as a blast of cold air propelled me forward, flying on the current back towards my home. I arrived minutes later in my bedroom, the comfy pillowtop breaking my fall from the vent placed high on the wall. I laid there for awhile, chilled, and thought about what I'd seen. I heard my cat *meow* and wondered if she'd eaten while I'd been gone. I made myself get up and went into the kitchen to give her fresh food and water. I passed my dresser on the way, the pile of lonely socks sitting there sad, missing their other halves.

I did laundry later that day, the pile I'd left behind a month ago smelled ripe. I washed the clothes but was careful to dig out all the socks, clothes-pinning each pair to the line above the dryer. The dryer was awake now, watching, unhappy about this new arrangement. I shoved the single socks into the dryer, pinning a note to the lone green sock with the red and white stripes – To Jean-Luc, you should always stick together.

### Curtains by Ariaiah Wood

Like the curtains of Solomon, do not stare at me because I am swarthy.

Song of Songs 1:5-6

As she closed the curtain he cursed softly. He had been down this road.

He paid her though he wanted to leave. But he knew full well that leaving without payment was no option, no matter what did not occur inside. Even in this city there were not enough inebriates to cloud the brutes outside, waiting with patience and heavy hands.

She smiled to him, set a kitchen timer for fifteen minutes, opened the small square, and began. After a minute or so, he lifted her chin and shook his head.

“Maybe you can tell me something about you,” he said.

“No more? About me?”

“Yeah, like, where are you from and what do you like and all that. I mean, I know what you do, so what else.”

She spoke to him. His heart seemed to lag alongside the ticking of the timer. His blood was confused. She spoke to him, but not out of the sadness he had expected, not the regret he hoped to use to sympathize with. Now he had no way to excuse his slackness.

She answered his questions. She was proud of her daughter. She was not poor in spirit because she was not hungry. She missed the dawn in Romania, but not the hunger. Perhaps she was not happy here, but in the same way an overextended bartender is not happy, yet content to be at their work.

“You enjoy this city?” he asked.

“Yes, yes. I enjoy.” She opened the small refrigerator and pulled out two cans of beer. “You enjoy?”

He took the can. “Yes, it is very beautiful. As are you.”

Which meant nothing to her. She went on.

“It is like in my country, there are many girls who do not have many parents. You know? Like, many childs but not many people? You see?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“But here I can have my child and she can have me. And I can give her food. There are no days I cannot give it. I always can.” The woman crossed her legs.

He was incensed inside. At himself for spending this worthless fee. At her for being a person. Didn't she know what she was? Shouldn't she be ashamed for doing this so many times a day. With so many.

“How about you?” she asked. “What do you come from and enjoy?”

He stood. “I have to go. I am glad I came.”

She held out a sideways palm. “I am glad with you.”

All across the city canals lapped against stone and curtains closed, holding in close their own comings and goings.

### In the Tank by Ariaah Wood

Versions of cities flattened under the equalizing night.  
The summer demands and takes away too much,  
But night, the reserved, the reticent, gives more than it takes.

John Ashbery, "As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat"

Never kick a cat while you're drunk. It won't turn out the way you might hope. I have only tried it once and the results wore me down.

The night was like the majority of nights had been since I was legally allowed to spend any and all of my paycheck buying enough alcohol to forget my name. Me and a few friends, a low life crowd made up of bar sluts and bar pricks, a steady pounding of Springsteen, Fogerty, and Nugent, and the clack of pool balls colliding. No, it's not even fun. It's just my town and it's just what we do.

Work had been especially bad of late. My dad claims there was a time in this country when a high school degree mattered, when a guy like me who doesn't care much for books and hates all empty bubbles that expect to be filled in with only #2 lead, could finish high school and get a job to pay the bills – maybe even put some away for a boat, or Alzheimer's, or a stiff drink. But my dad is a goddamn lawyer. My dad got a law degree. My dad is a well-meaning shit. He hates that his son works at a hydroponics shop – the "Zoo" as he likes to call it – and I'm not thrilled with it either.

Recently, I had gotten to the point where being stoned at work wasn't enough to make Maury Povich entertaining anymore. I needed to blow off some steam, or at least break down and buy a universal remote so we could change the goddamn channel. But then again, that would be two less whiskey and waters.

My brother was the smart one. My dad won't say it and neither will I. Not out loud. He had the brains. Then someone with a proud bullet ruined that. Then my mom put a helpless one in her which started this sort of chain reaction. Dad threw away the gun in the lawn trimmings bin and I stopped doing my math homework and there I was, or, considering my memories, here I am, at the bar with Scott and Ben, wondering if Connie Chung ever felt this way.

"I just want you guys to know," Ben tells us, "as soon as Margaritaville gets played I'm out of here."

"It's been a few nights since anybody let Jimmy Buffet in here. I bet you have time for at least one more drink," I tell him.

“I just don’t get how somebody could push those two buttons with a clear conscience,” Scott adds, “knowing that everyone will hate them for forcing that shit on the room.”

“Essie,” I yelp at the bartender, “can you make an announcement that the Jimmy Buffet buttons are made of lava tonight?”

“What?” she asks as she grabs the generic whiskey from the shelves, as if my voice has Pavlovian reverberations.

“Made of lava. It kept us off the clean carpets growing up. Maybe it will keep people off that awful noise tonight.”

She smiles and fills up my glass halfway. “Ok, Seth. I’ll let people know.”

Essie knew my brother. She got her blow from him. She swears she doesn’t know the guy who jammed the bullet into his head, the guy who also bought coke from him. And I believe her. Quite a few guys and dolled up bartenders bought their drugs from Alan. I did, too.

“Seth, you gonna come by the house later tonight?” she asks me. “We got a little slide show from the camping trip.”

This was our after the funeral distraction last month. A few days in the hills. A few too many lines, and a lot of fire.

“No, not tonight. Maybe tomorrow. I got to open up the Zoo early,” I tell her as I smell my drink. “Just enough water, kid.”

She laughs as she reaches for the nozzle that holds all the buttons for soda. “You taking it all straight tonight, old man? No water is enough?”

“Just right.”

Essie takes off about eleven or midnight and makes sure to tell the other bartender to keep my tab running, the tab that hasn’t existed since Al hasn’t existed. It’s appreciated and she knows it. Me, Ben and Scott toss some darts at the wall, drink too much bad brown whiskey, and close in on our blackouts before closing time. The next sound is a frantic meow.

Ben and Scott don’t talk back to the cop. I do.

“What the hell do you think you are doing, son?”

“Walking home.”

“You think you can just kick an animal like that – right in front of me?”

“I was pretending you were uprights. Come on, man, there can’t be a law against kicking cats. Lay off.”

This was not the tone he was looking for. He wanted fear, regret. I don’t have those any more. He got what I have. Fuck you.

Next thing I know Ben and Scott are gone and I am alone, handcuffed in the back of jackoff's car. I don't remember talking to him then. Just remember sitting quiet, pulling my arms apart behind my back, thinking of blood and feeling warmth on my wrists.

Then the drunk tank. He takes my shoes and gives me a glass of milk which I throw at his feet. "Milk's for pussies," I say. "And I've had enough."

The room is empty. So empty I can't breathe. I am becoming claustrophobic from the lack. I yell and yelp, rant about like an unfortunate, pleading my case for a lobotomy, but no one hears. I am alone. Again, wishing I was underground, too.

"Get me the fuck out of here! My dad's gonna have your ass for this, pig ass mother fucker!"

Nothing. Maybe this will work:

"Your gun doesn't make your cock any bigger, swine shit. Fuck you! Size does matter! Length and girth, you piece of shit!"

I'm actually getting mad now. I realize, finally, that I really am stuck in here, that I won't get a drink till the morning, that none of this is going to be taken back.

Okay. I have to get really mad. I figure if I can't get his attention and I can't get out, I might as well make him work later. Make him remember me. There is a small window on the door of this otherwise whitewashed tomb room. I smash my skull into it. Into it. Against it. Fighting desperately to go through it. The blood begins to come now and I smile and smear it all over the walls, smushing my forehead into the walls and streaking my blood as I cry out, "This one's for you, fuckhead. This one's all I got and it's for you!"

The door opens and he leaps onto me, drives me into the ground. The handcuffs are back on.

"It's about goddamn time," I laugh. "Time to do your job, you fuck."

He punches me in the back of the head and my lights are dimmed. I giggle and am gone, for now.

I come to in a different cell and there are people here. Crazy people. Bad people who belong here and I want out. Really this time. But there is also one man lying on the ground, shivering. I take off my flannel and begin to hum, "Alive". Times like these call for Eddie Vedder. I lay it on him and he looks up at me, confused.

"Stay warm man. It's cold in here."

I look over at another man who is staring at a sandwich container on the bench he sits on.

"Where'd you get a sandwich from?"

He stares back at me blankly and continues scratching his arm.

"Can I borrow it?" I ask, but no one seems to speak to me tonight.

Instead, I grab the box and move it to the end of the bench. I put it down and then place my head on it. I sleep soundly. I needed this.

The morning wakes me. Some of the men are gone. Some are still there. Others have come in the night. The cell door opens and a new officer says my name, backwards, as if he thinks last names are more important. In the end a first name is all we have. I won't tell him this because I just want to be home.

I sign a few forms, get my date for court and ask for a phone. I am told how lucky I am to have my dad for my dad. I don't fill in the gaps of their knowledge there, either.

"Ben, it's me. I'm out."

"You dumb fuck. I'm in the parking lot. Essie made me come early."

"Lucky," I laugh.

In the car Essie makes me sit in back with her. She strokes my hair and whispers in my ear, "Do better for him."

I say nothing. I think hard at my eyes and tell them not to.

Essie takes me home to her home. That's where she thinks we need to be. I need to be. She should be at the bar, at work, but she is here with me.

"Your head is new," she says.

"Yeah, girl. New places in there now."

"What the fuck? Go on."

I have nothing for this, her. I try.

"I got real mad, you know. Mad for real, really. Outta my hands. Gottussome wine? I think we need that."

She walks over to a cabinet and opens one half of the doors. I think of perception and stop. It was just a moment, anyways.

"I got-us-some-wine, but you need to start speaking, Seth. Really."

"Ess, that was a bad one. Bad night. You know all that. Let's just not for a while."

"No, Ethy." She never calls me this. Bad, man. This means bad. "Last night was a real thing, kid. Real. Not to be laughed at. Not to be remade. See?"

I take the wine from her and pour out two jars worth.

"Yeah, Ess. I do." My head cries for me to run. It is done for now.

"Fuck you, Eth!"

"No, Ess. I do. I swear to Christ I see it. Just, fuck it and let me be for a minute."

“Fuck you, Eth. He was ours, too. That was your last card. Last. Last fucking one. You see? I am done with it! He was our friend too, Seth. You can’t keep making us feel bad.”

I see red. I see dots. I speak.

“He was ours. Was is the fuck. Don’t you get that? If you do or don’t then tell me ‘cuz I don’t do or don’t about it. I hear you, Ess. I do fucking hear you. This is not about how much, kid. Who has it worse. It can’t be. We are all... this is lasting. Fucking lasting.”

Essie stands up and takes my jar from me. Pours both down the sink. Breaks the bottle. Gone, son. Glass in the drainer. Filtering it out.

“Seth. Look at me. Goddamn straight at me.” She grabs my face like a pin cushion. “I am done with you if you don’t make some sense now and again.”

“I can’t promise anymore.”

She looks around the room. I look, follow her eyes, and lose my cool.

“Can’t fucking promise you, Ess!”

She grabs this hand. This very one.

“Seth – no more! No more making up for it. We can’t live in this fucking making- up-for-it fucking zone. This is not a way to live.”

“It is a way, Ess.”

“Not my way, Eth.”

She tosses me her key and leaves. Gone, son.

I sit heavy. You sit light in the tank. But at home, or at Essie’s home, it is alright to sit heavy some. Gone, son. She was supposed to not do this.

I wander around her place for some head space. In readily marked packaging. I think I need a list. A list of *supposed to*. I think I might write that someday soon.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Allie Marini Batts** came here to kick ass and chew bubblegum, and she's ALL out of bubblegum. Allie is a New College of Florida alumna, meaning she can explain deconstructionism, but cannot perform simple math. Her work has appeared in over forty literary magazines her family hasn't heard of. Allie calls Tallahassee home because it has great trees to climb. She's a research writer by day and is pursuing her MFA degree in Creative Writing through Antioch University Los Angeles and oh no! It's getting away! To read more, visit <http://kiddeternity.wordpress.com/>

**Lynn Beighley** is a fiction writer stuck in a technical book writer's body. Her stories often involve deeply flawed characters and the unsatisfying meshing of the virtual and actual world. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and currently has 13 books published. Her work is either forthcoming or published in *The Kelsey Review*, *Ink Sweat & Tears (UK)*, and *Thrice Fiction*, and in the e-book "The Lost Children: A Charity Anthology." She can also be found at <http://www.fictionaut.com/users/lynn-beighley> and on Twitter as @lynnbeighley.

**Elisabeth J Bell (Betsy Bell)**, b. NY, NY 1937, grew up in Muskogee, OK, graduating in the class of '55. Twice widowed, I live in Seattle, WA where my four daughters and their husbands and children also live, as well as the 4 step children and their children. In addition to being a writer, I work a part time direct selling business as a wellness adviser with Shaklee products; serve as co-chair of the Church in the World justice ministries of Saint Mark's Episcopal Cathedral (Seattle), play the flute and sing in the choir at church. I hike, cross country ski, garden, raise chickens and stay in touch with the cultural events of Seattle. At the age of 12, each grandchild and I plan and carry out a trip to places all over the world and the US. I have three more grandchildren still to turn 12 and make this special trip with me.

**Joe Benevento:** My poems, stories and essays have appeared in a few hundred places, including: *Poets & Writers*, *Slipstream*, *South Dakota Review*, *The MacGuffin* and *Bilingual Review*. I've had eight books of poetry and fiction published, most recently "Tough Guys Don't Write," a poetry chapbook with Finishing Line Press. I teach creative writing and American lit. here at Truman State, where I am also poetry editor for *Green Hills Literary Lantern*.

**Louis Bourgeois** is the Executive Director of VOX PRESS, a 501 (c) 3 avant-garde literary press located in Oxford, Mississippi.

**John Buentello:** I am a writer who has published fiction, poetry and nonfiction in a variety of magazines, anthologies and journals. I have had poetry published in *North American Review*, *Bearing North*, *the Aureorean*, and other journals. I am the co-author of the novel *Reproduction Rights* and the short story collection *Binary Tales*. Currently I am at work on a novel and a book of poetry.

**Carol Carpenter's** poems and stories have appeared in numerous online and print publications, including: *Barnwood International Poetry Magazine*, *The Pedestal*, *Orbis* and *Quiddity*. Her work had been exhibited by art galleries and produced as podcasts (*Connecticut Review* and *Bound Off*). Her online chapbook, *The Empress of Patton Avenue*, was published by Heartsounds Press. She received the Hart Crane Memorial Award, the Jean Siegel Pearson Poetry Award, Artists Among Us Award and others. She lives in Michigan.

**Linda Crate** is a Pennsylvanian native born in Pittsburgh yet raised in the rural town of Conneautville. She currently resides in Maine. Her poems have been previously published in *Magic Cat Press*, *Black-Listed Magazine*, *Bigger Stones*, *Vintage Poetry*, *The Stellar Showcase Journal*, *Ides of March*, *The Blinking Cursor*, *The Diversified Arts Project*, *The Railroad Poetry Project*, *Skive*, *The Scarlet Sound*, *Speech Therapy*, *Itasca Illinois & Willowtree Dreams*, *Carnage Conservatory*, *Daily Love*, *Dead Snakes*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Write From Wrong*, *Moon Washed Kisses*, *The Wilderness Interface Zone*, *Samizdat Literary Magazine*, *Danse Macabre*, *The Horror Zine*, *Boyslut*, *Flutter*, *EMG-Zine*, *From the Depths*, *Trapeze Magazine*, *The Rusty Nail*, *Dark River Press*, and *Earthborne Poetry*. Her short stories have been published in *Carnage Conservatory*, *Daily Love*, *Circus of the Damned*, *Linguistic Erosion*, and *Dark Gothic Reconstructed Magazine*.

**Wayne Cresser's** fiction has been nominated for awards and prizes at *New Letters*, the *Tennessee Writer's Alliance* and the *Newport Review*, published in the print anthologies *Motif 1: Writing by Ear* (Motes Books), *Motif 2: Come What May* (Motes Books) and *Motif 3: All the Livelong Day*, *An Anthology of Writings about Work* (Motes Books), online at *Wandering Army* and *Shaking*, and in journals such as the *Ocean State Review* and *QuixArt Quarterly*. New work is forthcoming at *The Sound and Literary Art Book* and *The Written Wardrobe @ModCloth.com*.

**Louie Crew**, an Alabama native, 75, is an emeritus professor at Rutgers and lives in East Orange, NJ. As of today, editors have published 2,182 of Crew's manuscripts. Crew has edited special issues of *College English* and *Margins*. He has written four poetry volumes *Sunspots* (Lotus Press, Detroit, 1976) *Midnight Lessons* (Samisdat, 1987), *Lutibelle's Pew* (Dragon Disks, 1990), and *Queers! for Christ's Sake!* (Dragon Disks, 2003). See also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louie\\_Crew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louie_Crew). The University of Michigan collects Crew's papers.

**Daren Dean** is the Founding Editor of *Cedars* literary journal. His work has appeared in such places as *Fiction Southeast*, *Image*, *Chattahoochee Review*, *Poetry Southeast*, among other places. His story "Bring Your Sorrow Over Here" was selected Runner-up for Yemassee's William Richey Short Fiction by contest Judge George Singleton and it is forthcoming in the Spring 2012 issue. He holds an MFA program from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He has taught writing and literature at Westminster College, William Woods University, and the University of Missouri. He worked for several years in Acquisitions and Marketing at the University of Missouri Press.

**Ella Delany:** I'm from Melbourne, studying for an MFA in fiction at Columbia University in NYC. I have contributed fiction and non-fiction to McSweeney's Internet Tendency, Publishers Weekly, the New [Yorker.com](http://www.yorker.com) and New York Times, amongst other publications.

**Matt Doran:** I am a creative writing graduate student at San Diego State University who will be graduating in May of 2012 and will then take the first opportunity to sell out and repay my exorbitant student loans. I am also an amateur rower. I enjoy a good martini as much as the next man.

**Chris Dungey:** Retired auto worker here. Still sub teaching and taking sports photos for local papers around Lapeer, MI. Enjoy hiking and camping at sports car racing venues. Recent impetus to four 70s stories from reading Anne Beattie "New Yorker Stories." (This isn't one.) Sixteen story credits. Most recent in print at Zone 3, South Dakota Review, Pinyon, Asphodel, and Rockhurst Review. Online at paperskinglassbone and R.KV.R.Y. Forthcoming in Gargoyle and Controlled Burn.

**Gail Eisenhart's** poems can be seen in, *Assisi, Cantos, Generations of Poetry, Specter, Jet Fuel Review, New Verse News* and *New Mirage*. A retired Executive Assistant, she works part time at the Belleville (IL) Public Library. She travels in her spare time, collecting memories that show up in new poems.

**Anthony Frame** is an exterminator who lives in Toledo, Ohio with his wife. His first chapbook, *Paper Guillotines*, was published by Imaginary Friend Press and recent poems have been published in or are forthcoming from *Harpur Palate, Blood Orange Review, Third Coast, The Meadowland Review, Pirene's Fountain* and *Bigger Than They Appear: An Anthology of Very Short Poems* (Accents Publishing 2011), among others. He is also the co-founder and co-editor of *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*. Learn more at <http://www.anthony-frame.com/>.

**Vincent Francone** is a Chicago writer. His poems have appeared in *Rhino, Spectrum, and Blast Furnace*. Two of his poems were accepted as part of the *While the He/Art Pants* project and he won the 2009 Illinois Emerging Writers Contest.

**Wayne Frank** is a produced playwright and published poet from Milwaukee. He currently winters in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

**George Freek** is a poet/playwright living in Belvidere, IL. His recent poems have appeared in *The Poydras Review; The Empirical Review; Symmetry Pebbles;* and *The Vein*. His play TOO JUNG FOR FREUD was recently produced by Middle Class American Productions (Bellmore, NY) and his play CHEMISTRY LESSONS was produced in April by the Naples (FL) Community Players.

**J.M. Green** is the author of the chapbook *Super Rich* (Pudding House, 2008). Recently his work has been published in *Cincinnati Magazine* and *The Whistling Fire*. His poems have appeared in several literary

magazines. Green is a librarian with the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. He lives in West Chester, OH with his wife and daughter.

**Lisa Grove's** poetry has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Poetry International*, *A cappella Zoo*, and elsewhere. She lives in Los Angeles.

**Jess Hagemann** is a graduate student at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. Her work has previously appeared in *Pank Magazine*, *Gambling the Aisle*, *Kweli Journal*, and is forthcoming in *The Devilfish Review*. She is the 2009 recipient of the Richard T. Sullivan Prize for Fiction Writing.

**Jessica Hahn:** I have self-published books in the 1990s when I was an itinerant punk rocker and college dropout, but now in my more sober, older years, I'm publishing in small journals such as *Wordrunner Echapbooks*, *Ontologica: A Journal of Art and Thought*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Tonopah Review*, and *Prime Mincer*.

**David M. Harris:** My submission from a series I have been calling "Trompe l'Oreille," based on eggcorns – misunderstood phrases that I have picked up and reinterpreted. Other poems from the series have been published in *My Poem Rocks*, *Strong Verse*, and *Bull Spec*. I have also had work in *Gargoyle* and *Pirene's Fountain*, among other journals, and will be in the upcoming edition of *The Labletter*.

**William Wright Harris:** My poetry has appeared in nine countries in such literary journals as *The Cannon's Mouth*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *generations* and *Write On!!!* I am a student at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, where I have been lucky enough to study poetry in workshop settings with such poets as Jesse Janeshek, Marilyn Kallet, Arthur Smith, and Marcel Brouwers. In my work I juxtapose concrete images with abstract notions, often write in structures such as unrhyming couplets and triadic verse, stress economy, and utilize such literary conceits as the ekphrasis poem, parallel structure and the incorporation of mythology within my work.

**Lisa Hill-Corley** is a third-year MFA student in fiction at George Mason University, where she recently served as Fiction Editor for the student Literary Magazine *So to Speak*. Lisa's story, "Terra Villa" was a finalist in the 2011 Charles Johnson Student Fiction Award. She is currently beginning thesis work and continuing to craft prose from the desk of her administrative assistant job at GMU.

**Shanon Huston-Willis** is currently a MFA Student at Spalding University.

**Cody Kucker:** My poems have appeared in *Splash of Red*, *Willows Wept Review*, *EDGE*, and *Route 2*. I am an MFA candidate at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

**Nikki Larson** was raised in the St. Louis, Missouri area and later went to Southeast Missouri State University where she is now majoring in writing. She writes mainly poetry, so “Condoning” was a break from her norm. She loved pouring her personal experiences and feelings (as well as her made-up ones) into real characters and giving them life.

**Shawn Mangerino:** I am a recent graduate of San Diego State University’s MFA in fiction program. My work has appeared in the *Lullwater Review*, *Mason’s Road*, the *Pacific Review*, and *Fiction International*. The submitted stories are part of a larger sequence specific to the California high desert.

**Stephen March:** My stories have been published in *The Texas Review*, *South Carolina Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Tampa Review*, and *Seattle Review*, among others. My most recently published book was a novel, *Strangers in the Land of Egypt*, (Permanent Press, 2009).

**Carol Dee Meeks:** I am the 2011 Oklahoma Senior Poet Laureate at "Amy Kitchener's Angel Wings Contest." I was the 2004, 2005, and 2007, NEW MEXICO SENIOR POET LAUREATE at the same contest. I've placed poems in *Writer's Digest* top 100, have Honorable Mentions at *Bylines*, won contests in National State Poetry Society Contests, and am published at *Poet's Forum*, *Potpourri* and *Red Ink*, among other magazines. I hold memberships in BARDS OF A FEATHER, NFSPS, Poetry Society of Oklahoma, High Prairie Poets Chapter of NMSPS, and chaired the committee for the bi-monthly contests held by High Prairie Poets. I am retired.

**Mark J. Mitchell** studied writing at UC Santa Cruz under Raymond Carver, George Hitchcock and Barbara Hull. His work has appeared in various periodicals over the last thirty five years, as well as the anthologies [Good Poems](#), [American Places](#), [Hunger Enough](#), and [Line Drives](#). His chapbook, [Three Visitors](#) will be published by Negative Capability Press later this year and his novels, [The Magic War](#) and [Knight Prisoner](#) will be published in the coming months. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, the documentarian and film maker Joan Juster. Currently he's seeking gainful employment since poets are born and not paid.

**Claudia Mundell** has a Border War in her writing. She grew up in Kansas, but her work life has been in Missouri. She has many memories from each state that work their way into her fiction. After raising a family and teaching, she now writes for pleasure—and maybe for profit someday. Her work has appeared in *MidRivers Review*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Redbud*, *TEA*, *Good Old Days*, *Romantic Homes*, and others along with several anthologies.

**Joey Nicoletti** is the author of *Cannoli Gangster* (Word Tech, forthcoming 2012) and the chapbook *Borrowed Dust* (Finishing Line Press, 2011). His poems, reviews, and essays have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Waccamaw*, *Tulane Review*, *Italian Americana*, and *Green Hills Literary Lantern*. A

graduate of the University of Iowa, New Mexico State University, and the MFA program at Sarah Lawrence College, he is a former poetry editor of *Puerto del Sol* and currently teaches creative writing and English literature at Niagara University.

**Diane Payne** shares her home with several dogs and cats, and during breaks from college, her daughter reappears. Diane teaches English at University of Arkansas-Monticello. She has been published in hundreds of literary journals. You can learn more about her publications here <http://www.amazon.com/author/dianepayne>

**Mark Raymond Perkins:** My poetry has most recently been featured in *Downtown Brooklyn*, *Dust Jacket*, and *Punk Soul Poet*. I'm a graduate of Long Island University at Brooklyn's MFA program in writing and currently reside in Seattle.

**Matthue Roth:** My most recent novel, *Losers*, was published by Scholastic. I've also been published in anthologies by Soft Skull Press and McSweeney's. As a poet, I've filmed for HBO's Def Poetry Jam and MTV's Rock the Vote.

**Richard Stolorow:** I have been an English teacher, with work in construction, gardening, hotel and bookstore, in Illinois, Ohio, New Mexico and Rhode Island. I have enjoyed seeing many of my poems and stories in literary magazines.

**Lori Sublett:** I am a recent graduate student with an M.A. in Creative Writing from Oklahoma City University. I have had creative writings published in *The Scarab*, *Sugarmule*, the print anthology *Ain't Nobody That Can Sing Like Me: New Oklahoma Writing* and the upcoming issue of *Conclave: A Journal of Character*.

**George Such:** I'm a graduate student studying English at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Washington. In a previous incarnation I was a chiropractor for twenty-seven years in eastern Washington. When I am not busy studying, I enjoy hiking in the Bellingham area, experimenting in my kitchen, and learning to sail. When I am studying, I drink a lot of black tea. My poems have appeared in *Arroyo Literary Review*, *Blue Earth Review*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Dislocate*, and many other journals. My essay, "Metal," is forthcoming in the spring issue of *Phoebe*.

**Nathan E. White:** I hold an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New York University. My work has appeared or is forthcoming in such publications as the *Tulane Review*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Bellingham Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *REAL: Regarding Arts & Letters*, *Redactions: Poetry, Poetics, & Prose*, *Rock & Sling*, *Existere: Journal of Arts and Literature* (Canada), *Southern Indiana Review*, *California Quarterly*, *Owen Wister Review*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Lake Effect*, *Grasslimb*, *Roanoke Review*, *Blood Lotus*, *The Chaffin*

*Journal, Assisi, Spot Literary Magazine, The Los Angeles Review, James Dickey Review, Psychic Meatloaf, Quiddity, Willard & Maple, Magma (U.K.), and The Monongahela Review.*

**Ariah Wood** is just beginning. He teaches and writes in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**Frank Zahn** is an economist and author of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. His publications include nonfiction books, articles, commentaries, book reviews, and essays; poetry; short stories; and novels. For details, visit his website, [frankzahn.com](http://frankzahn.com).

## Oklahoma Review Staff

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**Layout & Design:** Brandon Ramirez

## Oklahoma Review Mission Statement

The Oklahoma Review is an electronic literary magazine published through the Department of English at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. The editorial board consists of English and Professional Writing undergraduates, as well as faculty advisors from the Departments of English and Foreign Languages & Journalism.

The goal of our publication is to provide a forum for exceptional fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction in a dynamic, appealing, and accessible environment. The magazine's only agenda is to promote the pleasures and edification derived from high-quality literature.

- The Staff

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## Submission Guidelines

All works wishing to be published must be submitted electronically. We will neither consider nor return any submissions turned in via hard copy. Writers may submit the following:

- As many as three (3) pieces of prose/fiction, with all pieces, together, not surpassing thirty (30) pages in length.
- As many as three (3) pieces of nonfiction, with all pieces, together, not surpassing thirty (30) pages in length
- As many as five (5) pieces of poetry or translations of any length.

Pieces should be submitted through email in either .doc or .rtf file types. When sending in multiple files, please send separate files, instead of sending one big file. Indicate in the file name, your name and the title in the following format (Author – Title of Piece).

Authors should also provide a short biography either in a separate file or in the body of the email. Simultaneous submissions are acceptable, but please advise us in your email if your work is being considered elsewhere.