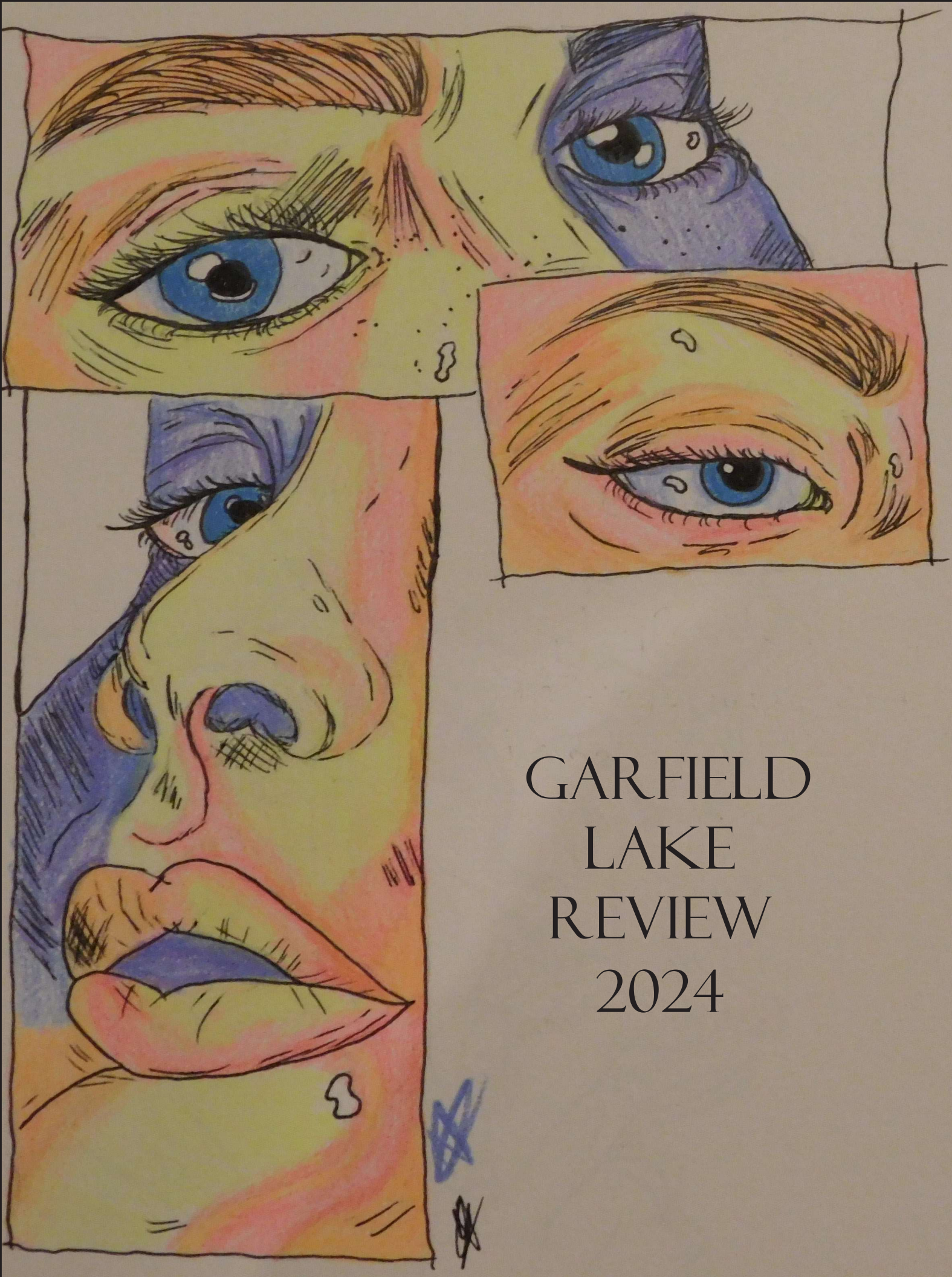
GARFIELD LAKE REVIEW 2024



GARFIELD LAKE REVIEW 2024

The Garfield Lake Review 2024

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A Letter From the Editor

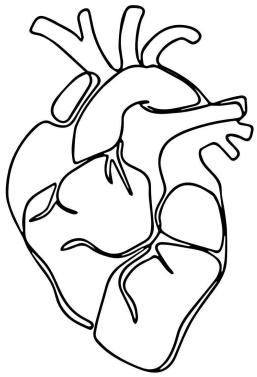
Dear readers,

Hi, my name is Logan Schreiber. This is my first year working on the *Garfield Lake Review*, and the appreciation I have for the program has grown in a way I did not expect. I stepped into this role with a minimal amount of knowledge on the whole process. Extensive amounts of time and effort are put into creating something that represents us and the contributors that share their work with us each year. After working alongside an amazing team and support system, we are proud to present the 2024 edition of the *Garfield Lake Review*.

A team of University of Olivet students gathered to work together to combine authors and artists into one showcase. This year, we explored the idea of humanity. What does it mean to be a human in today's world? How do we feel, experience, and love? What has pushed us to where we exist today? This theme was meant to leave a door wide open for all kinds of literature and representations of humanity.

Thank you for taking the time to indulge in our representation of humanity. We hope that you resonate with the words found here.

Logan Schreiber



Editorial Board

Logan Schreiber
Editor
Logan is a Writing and Publications major with a minor in Environmental Science at the University of Olivet. The Garfield Lake Review quickly became a strong passion of hers.

Kylee Curtiss
Editorial Board
Kylee is a freshman at Olivet and she is majoring in Writing and Publication and minoring in Communications. This is her first year working on The Garfield Lake Review.

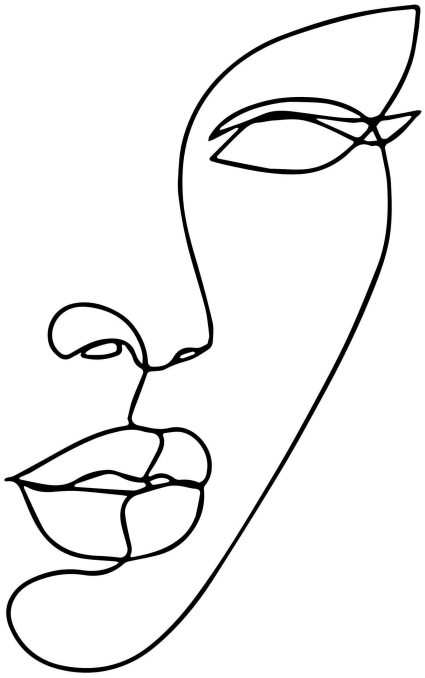
Nadia Tijerina
Graphic Designer
Nadia is a Media Production and Communications major at Olivet. She is a member of the WOCR student ran radio station.

Paris Taratula
Editorial Board
Paris is a freshman at The University of Olivet. She is majoring in Writing and Publications and minoring in English.

Olivia Smith
Editorial Board
Olivia is a Sophomore here at The University of Olivet. She is an English major. This is her second year working with the Garf, and she feels incredibly honored and grateful to gain this experience.

Reece Yeager
Editorial Board
Reece is a senior English Major at The University of Olivet. At U of O, Reece is involved in GCHP, is on the Women's bowling team, and is a member of Alpha E. She hopes to go on to be a published author.

Elizabeth Trueblood
Faculty Advisor
Elizabeth has been the GARF faculty advisor since fall 2023, when she started her career at Olivet as an assistant professor of writing. She has a background in creative writing and has been excited about the project of the journal and helping students achieve their creative vision for the GARF since day one. Outside of the GARF, Dr. Trueblood primarily teaches composition at Olivet.



Poetry

Disillusioned on a Monday

disillusioned on a Monday
because the tips of my plants are brown
and I smoked too much last night
and I can't stop thinking about
falling into wells I've dug
and drowning but never dying
I can't stop thinking about
all the things I don't know
how as a child I wanted to play the violin
but the dissonance in my ears
made me put down the bow
and look for chaos I could stamp
more fully onto the postcard
of long days.
I'm stuck in the middle of a rope bridge
again
looking at two worlds who are facing me
down
both threatening
but I'm pushed to one side by the subtle wind
and I run my hands along the ropes
rubbing them raw
trying to give myself some excuse for
my exhaustion
when I reach the other side
when all I really want is for the bridge
to wrap around me
for the cracked planks to fold me
into a perfect box
and hold me safe from the winds
and the canyon around me
my body safe in its own
small enclosure.

Sweaty Skin

You did such a good job
hiding myself from me!
With Sweeping stories of death
wrapped in a shiny bow,
everyone who felt desire
touted around as a symbol
of the dirty wiped clean.
You painted over every color
in me
with your searing white,
that blinding lie—
I was wrong.
The moment my feet hit
the fields of life,
the moment I could look
you in the eyes,
you saw yourself
and condemned me.
With each breath I took,
each stumble of a child
learning how to walk.
And I won't tell you now
that I'm good—
what a word!—
I won't tell you now
that I'm better than you,
not any more than a new butterfly
thinks it's better than the
shape it emerged from—
I will only tell you that I am.
The moment my feet hit
the fields of life,
I was.
And I have let the roots beneath
my feet form me,
I have let the stickiness of my skin
in the sun
remind me
that the wind feels good
when it brushes
the sweat pooled on my face.

Moriah Brown

Middletown Mall

From the rafters hang smiling faces, perfection:
happy foods, bright teeth, crafted hairstyles—

the creeping of our ubiquitous ads even after
the commerce-cut, giggle-gone. Entry is now

an independent act, and purposes once imposed
dissipated. Whatever one says about past life,

the shell alone is its own universe: time capsule,
spacevoid of delay, decay, speaking of days we

kissed manufactured ideals, valued consumables,
put priority on concrete and plastic, soil and rain

an inconvenience, as wind and bugs, tarantulas
and Trojan horses. Absence now comes to what

we believed in: merchandise disappears, vacant
hollow fills the hall: window displays in decade

static, mannequin stare, cinematic empty, boxes
and tiny toys in distant fade and roof leakage.

I have crawled inside shopper's belly: past fence,
under brush, entering via broken window, this

gargantuan monster now missing costumes, stuck
in spinning silence. Energy depleted and nothing

at move—but, yet, down dark, narrow, hallways
the many toilets still flush—which might be enough.

Timothy Dodd

Invitation

There's a voice in the ocean,
Calling out to you,
And you can faintly hear it.
It's intended just for you—
Of this you're quite certain.
You visit the shore each day,
Waiting on the water's edge,
Watching the waves roll back and forth,
Straining for the invitation—
Buoyed by its presence.
Friends begin to worry,
Wonder where you reside
In this silent life you lead.
But you have a secret,
And intend to keep it,
Until the current sets you free,
Answers any remaining question,
Before you marry the sea.

I’ve Been Thinking

I’ve been thinking…
The most dangerous thoughts—
Those that corrupt each night,
Threaten the peaceful sleep
I wish would arrive.

I’ve been thinking…
Not from boredom alone,
Neither fair, nor square,
Never solving the puzzle,
Whose pieces don’t quite fit.

I’ve been thinking…
Contrary to public opinion,
Curious in any private queue,
Could I claim naivety,
For what I failed to do?

I’ve been thinking…
But, seriously, hope to stop,
Bury these insignificant bones
Below soil so deep,
I dare not claim them again.

Voice

Self-taught, or so I thought—
Until I wasn't any more,
My cry a quivering hiss,
After a stab at formal education
Cut me to the quick,
Sickening what remained,
Leaving this paltry mess behind.
Oh, I could still speak,
Sometimes for hours on end,
But the sound repulsed me,
Took me on a wild ride,
Gambled my last dollar away—
One poker chip after another,
Caught in the back of my throat.
Yes, I made it a career,
Sucking on tenure, year after year,
Like the teat it had become.
Only in current retirement,
Do I allow myself to scream,
Break a vow of academic silence,
Return to learning abandoned,
When I lost what voice was mine.

Bart Edelman

The Most Broken Thing

My eldest brother,
so much older
and wiser
than I
once told me:

“You don’t need to find
the most broken thing in the room
and try
to fix it.”

But I don’t think he knows
what it feels like
to be the most broken thing
in the room.

Alexandra Grese

The Smell of Fire

I don't mean the rebellious kind that leaps the grate or blows from a tossed bud, no.
I mean harnessed hire. Human-sparked, contained enough.
The kind we tell stories to. The kind that always smells like now. Like being human.

A fire smells like camping. Oaks and swirling smoke hazing over the stars.
Pancakes dimpling on cast iron, edges bubbling in butter
while I wiggle out of my sleeping bag, cold-nosed, zipper's loud
Opening to a pine-lined clearing where you can breathe.

Fire smells the way my dad looks in a Polaroid from 1982.
Bushy red beard, binoculars heavy
against a green vest, dwarfed by redwoods.

Fire smells like hormones zinging between a dozen hopeful teens
Mixed with embers against the black on a Saturday night
searching each other's flame-lit faces for
an invitation.

Fire smells like adventure.
Fire smells like Christmas.

Like a late-night, nog-spiked cacophony of anecdotes
His fall of the roof, her night in the cab
that ends in bickering and smolders till breakfast.

To the doe, though
fire smells like fear.
The urge to leap, run, keep running, fawns behind, unknowns ahead
Nature's rage against us all.
Like death
it smells, to the fireman who sweats inside his heavy suit hours, days
all because some human forgot the fragility of the harness -
forgot that all fire rebels
eventually –
(or didn't care. As reckless as fire)
and fell asleep by the fire for warmth, yes,
but also
the smell.

Molly Gross

Sisterhood

I felt loved when the knives
pounded my scalp and scraped
the memories from my hair
I felt loved when my nails grew
too long and I cracked them off
with the metal teeth
I felt loved when I pulled my hair
into a twisted rope down
my scalp like a Viking warlady
I felt loved when I stood in the rain
with my sisters awaiting the sure death
of front line soldiers
I felt loved when we locked eyes
in the mire and I pulled you up
out of the fray
I felt loved when I braided knives into your hair
and called you my queen
I felt loved when you
held my hand and we were like cynic
and old god
saved together
worshiping each other
I felt loved by you

Into the meat fridge

I wander into the meat section, back and forth and back looking for ground pork. Find thirteen ground beefs, including several fakes and impossibles, find three ground turkeys, but no pork. I meander down the aisle another time and remember his sweet words, “I want you,” he breathed into my mouth. My body pulses. I consider asking an employee for help. Decide against it. Reading the same three labels for the fifth time, I feel his body holding mine down. My arms around his neck, his hand on my thigh, thumb in little circles, shifting my swaddled body like he’s weary and rescuing me from drowning. I shuffle down the linoleum floor. Rack of ribs, tenderloin, sausage. Trail my finger in the condensation on the chipped black painted metal. “You ever use the Big L word before?” A woman behind me patiently waits for me to wander out of her way, too polite to raise her voice or reach past me into the meat fridge. I open my eyes and shuffle forward. I said I wasn’t ready for him to kiss me, but that must’ve meant on the mouth, and anyway he was already holding my whole body, so I lay there, stunned, as he gently hammered my face with kisses. That wasn’t so bad and it was only four times, one there, there, there, there. Grass-fed, farm-fresh, organic, 90% lean. My breath hitches and a shudder runs through my torso. It was an airy kiss, all breath and a little water as an afterthought, a little DNA, a little tie between us. He addressed me by name and instructed me firmly not to look past his teeth. I opened my fingers to receive him. He cast out his net to me, told me how glad he is to have me, how wonderful I am, thank u for being u, and don’t think about her. You’re in my life baby. So grateful. I cringed away from his words, I performed for him while I decided what I felt. Inhaling sharply, I grab the plastic railing of the refrigerator, nearly cracking it off. In the in-between moments, I saw myself running, but then I’d hope, and see him again, and he’d cast more lines with his tongue, eyes, fingers. My hand in his hair. His eyes asking questions, making me explain myself. His mouth catching me. I want to be touched. I want to scream. I find the ground pork and hurry out of the store.

Milla Kuiper

September Barbecue with Nostalgia

Early evening, Labor Day hot, chicken breasts
and foil-wrapped ears of corn on the barbecue,
the heat in waves, the long tongs in my hand,
the rest of the family in the air-conditioned house:
I sit in the glider waiting, slowly sweating,
alone with 64, my mouth humming the Beatles song,
and I think about the charcoal gray-white as memory
and about the women I have not had sex with,
not all the women, the legions past number,
the half of seven billion or so around the world,
but the ones whose names I knew and recall wanting,
the ones, myriad enough, who kept me company
in my solitude, the spirits who moved in me
like poems got by heart, the gold that never stayed,
the road unwalked, untried, unknown. They move in me
still, cells dividing unbidden, effortless,
the same old blood pulsing the darkened courses of body
and brain, the static electricity of desire
or love mummified. I remind myself again:
each would be old now, like me, old and, maybe, content,
a cat inscrutable on windowsill in slice
of sun or dog stretched asleep in the company
of fate. Of course, I remember them then, youthful,
long-haired, all energetic innocence and taut skin,
animal smoothness in their movements, laughter ready
in their words. Their voices would have shifted by now,
slipped, lost a little brightness. Their hair would be gray
or dyed and almost surely short. My mother's hair.
My wife's. And the smooth, firm skin I dreamed of touching,
of transporting me to bliss—like my skin: spotted,
beginning to thin, to slide to crepe. But still . . .
in my head . . . . I see a trio of leaves tumble
from the alder. The chicken and corn must be done.
Time to pick up my life and get back in the house.

In the Hospital Room

Our daughter, 39, her meninges alight with cancer,
slips in an out of sleep on waves of Dilaudid and Ativan,
and we sit beside her bed, mere watchers as when she learned
to ride her bike or fly from bar to bar, a little life
escaped and beyond our catching, our saving. Her pain recedes,
a demon exorcised for now, and her eyes relax, release
their squint, her brows unknit, a hempen coil unwinding,
her fist slips to curl of fingers, her hand a silent sigh,
and she is, once more, our baby, her face slack in sleep,
her skin as pale as first light, her new hair the softest fawn
not yet long enough to style. We watch the wonder of her breathing,
the quiet miracle now tempered by pain that comes with waking,
the shadow that hunkers on the opposite side of the room,
that perches on the IV pole and beeps its impatience.
Our will and hers, the little she has left, lean back against
the demon's pull, a tug-of-war with highest stakes, the winner
foreordained, with passing time an extra weight on darkling's side.

Cecil Morris

Daisy Buchanan's Firstborn Says Her First Words

I am not your
American Dream,
mother.
I am not going
to be your
reason for living
nor the
justification for
your suffering.
Life after
survival, avoiding
Gatsby's path
to self-destruction:
When you get eye
glasses, I will
think of a
billboard of
The American Woman
and her earnest
nothingness,
plaid, shin-length skirt
million-dollar smile
on the front
of TIME Magazine
holding her
million-dollar
baby (wasted on)
baby (girl),
of Doctor T.J.
Eckleburg, Mr
blue-eyed father
of wasteland.
I will be
your suffering;
The American Woman
and her
essence.
I will flirt when
I am older
with military officers.
I will love
green dock lights

thinking they look
so much like gems.
We will think of his
silk shirts together
and you will
say, Tom, won't you
buy something
other than linen?
and we will peel
clementines together
on summer afternoons,
and you will
come with a basket
of them when teacher
is unhappy that
I am playing Fool.
I will be your
martyrdom if
not a daughter, and
we will be happy
about that,
for a while,
and when I am
thinking, Have I lived
enough? Father
will remind me that
girls ought not to
run around so
much.
You will watch as
I grow unhappy with
giving sweet sixteen
strawberry pink lipstick
imprints
on military cheeks
knowing that they
will think only of
the imprint in a few
years and not of
me at all,
and maybe (if I am
memorable enough)
the smell of
clementines.

Taken
to war, wondering
if this is all I can
exist in, red 40 mixed
with beeswax
making rain like
God and dissolved
in her creation,
red 40 while they
are crying over the loss of
another friend,
stupid
girl, wiped off so
quickly, girl, quickly
to be found at the
end of all
that destruction stupid
stupid destruction and
be held like a bomb by
the one that craves
death more than
green dock lights,
Mother, why'd you
leave something like that?
You will watch
as I writhe in my
loneliness and you
will perhaps say,
in your sad way,
Darling girl, don't
you know we are
creatures of
decay? and
suddenly the question
is not whether
I have lived enough
but whether the
sun will still rise
tomorrow or
if the clocks will
unwind like us
laid
stretched
sunbathing

over stolen moments
Fool,
Thief,
Girl,
pick the odd
one out.

Vanessa Niu

I Have a Messy House

Behind a golden one, wrapped
chocolate truffles assemble
into four straight floor lines:
red,
Blue,
black,
yellow.
Sigh.
I pick them up. Drift away
as the sun and rain packed cocoa
soulfully melt on my tongue.
I choke on a screech--
Mom! You've just destroyed
my whole army! You even killed
my king, and robbed
his golden crown!

Bed pillow-peppered; quilts a perilous
anaconda. Suspecting another
battle ground, another rumpus,
I gingerly lift a corner, looking
for another candy army
ambush. I am disarmed
by a whisper--
Mom, please do not
disturb the dragon. She has worked
really hard. Her eggs
will hatch soon!

Now do you want to see my kitchen.

Monologue of a Kitchen Fairy

Once, you were smaller than a candy cane
in a giant gingerbread house; and I
was a fairy, disco-drumming pots
& pans. Our magical fingers grew
boxed oyster mushrooms; scooped
& counted seeds for bird banquet;
jam-jellied grapes & berries; baked Santa's
favorite snickerdoodles; and squeeze-bottled
pancake mix into Darth Vader & Chinese
characters. My signature stew almost trapped
a leprechaun – almost!

Our tongue-tips traced the world map,
an *eclectic gourmet* journey of
Dumpling
Manti
Pelmeni
Empanadas
Ravioli
Knödel
& Pierogi.

Ah, wasn't it just yesterday
when I was your kitchen fairy
dancing barefoot
on the magic carpet
pan?
How are you already
taller than
me? !

Jiang Pu

Misdirected Universe

The chattering in the kitchen
that led to our next meal.
The taking-in of food over our teeth
and tastebuds.
Our back-and-forth marching
on the floorboards.
The indiscriminate changing of light into darkness.
And the inconclusive melodrama
lain waste to the ceilings.

No one walks forward in the right direction.
There is always some stumbling
and loss engraved in the walls.
Our ancestors squandered their luck,
As the afternoon dived into our frontal cortexes
all heroes had a touch of evil
scribbled into their foreheads.
Even if we squinted, we couldn't see the shotgun
pointed at us easily and impeccably.
Daylight pretended to be our friend
and on most occasions, it was.
Yet we wanted to cry
because of the blasphemy in the afternoon
that came down to get us.

A Miscarriage of Justice

Because I was a tad vulnerable,
others turned their back on me.

Now, disappointed by the failure of the human spirit,
I want to be full of life,
not destabilized by organ failure or
melting enthusiasm for tea.

Although my kidneys have shrunk, are not perfect,
they work the way they are supposed to.
So if I can withstand this kind of shirking
and still take out enough toxins

I can be a happy,
go-lucky woman
living as well as the next.

Sarah Rosenblatt

Home

Home, my sister says,
is where the human heart dwells,
Where the body and soul rest,
Where the bones relax
And the lips can wag like rain.
I have tried to call you home,
A place for me,
Not a house with walls and windows
And doors.
Not a structure taking up space
For better things,
Like a garden, a lawn, a field
For grooming flowers,
Or growing food,
Or dumping dirt and ruins,
Or a store for technical matters.
It is a place for beauty.
I have tried to cut off my heart
And stow it away in those rafters,
Above your kitchen, you know,
Where smoke congregates at night
From burning coals.
I thought I would be safe there,
And you would treasure it;
I felt you would be proud,
When I called you home.
I wanted you to be a part of me,
To be where my spare parts are.
Why is your face a twilight?

The Way We Are

Who will believe our story
When we tell them that we travelled to the sky
And returned without wearing stars on our bodies?
We discovered oceans in the clouds,
Rivers and seas within the galaxies;
Yet we stayed dry, like a lizard emerging from a pool;
We waded into the sun, but it did not burn us,
Neither did we escape with our bodies tainted by ashes.
Can we live in the forest for a year
Without being transformed into a deer?
Or climb the icebergs without becoming sea mammals?
We know the things we met and saw,
Capable of transforming a frog into an elephant,
A rodent into a horse; a lizard would become a bird;
Where deserts would migrate into a flood
And be transformed into an expansive body of water.
But here we are, untouched and unchanged by what we saw,
Unlamented by the things we left behind.
We saw how the coconuts carried water to the top,
No longer bothered with drought or desiccation;
We discovered how the moon lives
In the bellies of the stars,
And the sun enjoys the society of the clouds;
Everything that breathes cannot survive alone
Except fulfilled through the destiny of others.
We returned the same as when we did not see
How other universes practice the art of living
And that life stays on nothing but an association
Through which we love and be loved in return.
So unbroken and unbreakable we roam around life,
Unshaven by the blade of miracles,
Untainted and untamed by this scourge.

The thing With life

I have been a rose rocking a bud,
a cockroach donning the night like a jacket,
afraid to poke my head out and blossom.
I fear thunder and lightning and tornadoes,
though I know that flowers bloom in the rain.
Without a feathered hope, I'm lame
and cannot swim out of a shallow pond.
I feel danger all around me,
though I must tell myself the truth,
that every risk is a basket of apples
containing the seeds for the blooms of tomorrow.
Life is a hostel inhabited by the worst challenges,
I know, but the fact that I am human today
is a testimony of my conquest of suffering;
I will have many blockages and obstacles,
but every stumbling block is my stepping stone;

I will make no stone the hero for my fall.
When the bricks fall, I will build and build again;
and be sure to dodge a fall like a wind-blown leaf,
and allow the hurricane to pass over me.
Being alive can make me a better person
after I have surmounted all my challenges.
My heart is not a sheet of unbreakable glass;
that rebuilds itself as though unbroken.
I have learned to fold it into a ledger,
whose covering is faith and inside is hope,
restorers of fortune when you lose them.
I will not be afraid of the shadows of this life,
but will build with cedars when sycamores fall.
Such miracles are not a dream but a certainty,
for such is espoused in the gravitational force,
when darkness has kissed the trees enough,
it must step aside for life to have a go.

The State of Man

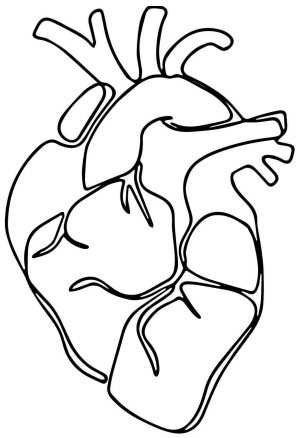
The state of man is a constant enigma,
where words and actions slur into confusion,
a river cursing through his body like a strait.
A man does not play a tambourine
when his house goes up in flames;
nor does he relax in his thinking chair
while a healthy goat dies painfully in tether,
without the sparkling armour of salvation.
In the widening gyre of man's liberation
there is a hunger to eat a mumbling pie
through acts of grace or mysteries of mercy.
How can the falcon hear the falconer,
when he persistently imagines vain things;
not those thoughts that make the falcon hear,
and redeem it from the snare of the Fowler?
When the falcon perches on a man's head,
It's an act of grace if he does not slump and die.
The state of man is nonetheless empty
because there is nothing else in his care,
except for performing the ritual of redemption
and manicure or pedicure his first manhood.
When a man visits the dead, he visits himself,
Since he celebrates his death by mourning the dead.
So, everyone is walking around on borrowed time,
Since our dying begins inevitably with our birth.
If the falcon spares us when it perches on our heads,
It can only be an immense force of grace.

The Sorrows of the Prophet

The prophet made a solemn declaration,
that the mountain must move to the other side;
peacefully, as though hypnotised, the hill rose,
and was moving to the other side of the prophet,
when it suddenly stuttered and stopped,
trembled like the twist of a ghost at a bend,
turned and moved toward the dazed prophet.
The congregation stared as if under a spell,
shifting their arses on the pews and wondering
how a miracle could turn on its head,
and deliver a message contrary to the command.
The prophet's face turned into evening ash,
but he decided to retire to his liturgical room
where he turned his shock into puzzled questions,
believing that it was not sinful to question God
about the meaning of redemption and humanity,
one of which must have arrived for him.
The congregation rose like the Mexican Wave,
with bouquets, bread crumbs and glasses of wine.
They stood at the door of the prophet's room,
And wondered how the Spirit turned him human.
A voice like the one they heard in their wilderness,
was louder than the cloistered cherubim
that purged them of their robotic forms,
filling them with something pure and real.
The prophet's door swung open like a secret door.
There lay the Messiah in a heap of misery,
with tears in his ears, knees on the floor,
his hands clasped on his prayer table.
It still rattles non-members of this congregation,
how easily the prophet allowed his faith to outgrow
the powers in his hands and wisdom of control,
without remembering the unfurled sins of the world.
Others argued that he knew something about the cross,
and that the burden of humanity was too heavy for him.

Jonathan Ukah

Non-fiction



A Love Letter For The Mirror

I see you.

I see all of you – the parts you are hiding behind smiling eyes and long-sleeved shirts. Broken, bleeding, scarred; overcome by shame, guilt, embarrassment. And lets not forget the fear.

Fear that it will never end. Fear there is only one way out. Fear that you will never recover. Fear that you will never be loved. Fear that you will ultimately end up alone.

I see you. I hear your silent cries; I feel your urgency bubbling into *silent panic.*

You have no reason to believe me that it will get better. You have no confidence that you can actually heal. I wish I could tell you it gets easier quickly, but it doesn't. You may, in fact, lose your family and friends. You may be accused of being manipulative; an awful, selfish person. Your friends may force you to listen to how you hurt them and the damage you've caused.

Those feelings of embarrassment and shame? ***That is not going away for a while.***

Honestly, it may sit on your heart forever. You will be changed by this darkness, and your life may not look like what you thought it would.

People will walk away, reinforcing that narrative that you are unworthy of love.

All I can tell you, is that fear; that **loneliness** and **darkness** and **agony** and **embarrassment** and **shame –** it becomes a part of your story. It becomes your rock bottom so you can truly understand what it means to being grateful. It becomes your illness so you can enjoy feeling well. It becomes your ugly so you can understand beauty. It becomes your grief so you can understand love.

It becomes your past. It will always be a part of you, but it isn't you. It is not your whole story.

You are more than those feelings, more than those choices, and more than those fears. You may not see it now, but I beg you; look into my eyes and know that you are worthy of love – no matter how broken, scared, or useless you feel. Your value is not in being resilient. The fact is, you aren't resilient; at least not right now.

That is okay.

You don't have to be resilient.

You don't have to be reliable, happy, beautiful, or capable of functioning to ***deserve love, be loved, or accept love.*** You don't have to be any of these things to forgive yourself.

There is no timeline for healing. There are no benchmarks. You will heal in bits and pieces at a time. Each laugh, each tear, each day – they all become woven into a tapestry that carries your story; each stitch representing a part of you that makes up the whole.

It is *beautiful.*

You deserve to be here. You were made to be here. You have purpose, even if you don't know what it is yet. Your purpose may be your healing so that you can hold space for those in pain; providing them the comfort you weren't provided. When you know what darkness feels like, you can become a lighthouse.

Finally, I want you to know, that I am so deeply sorry you are hurting. I hope that you keep fighting, one day at a time. I know these days are long. If you decide you can't make it, I will not judge you; I understand that some things are too impossible to bare. But for our sake, I hope you do make it. I am here to sit with you in body or in spirit, with no pressure to be anything but ***yourself***.

Nicole Bruno

Jailbird

In March 2023 I spent nine days in a Dickinson County jail in Kansas, where I had a front-row seat to addiction maltreatment in the criminal justice system—and, oddly, its potential to change for the better. Why an elderly woman found herself hauled before a judge in handcuffs and leg irons is a story for another day; here, I'll examine the tell-tale stories of fragile mental health, the use of drugs in jail, and how one drives the other. As I enter the women's dorm, I meet two young women, both in orange jumpsuits and Crocs. They're wearing white socks, which I don't have. "I am diagnosed schizophrenic," the twenty-two-year-old tells me, bouncing around the room in ceaseless motion. "I can't be loved. I can't have a dog."

My other roomie—I'll call her Christy—tells me she'll be twenty-one in a week. She is bipolar, she says, married and divorced, no children. Though restless like our schizophrenic roomie, Christy does sit down to write, albeit keeping an eye on TV shows. Every morning the sheriffs bring pills for each of them.

A men's dorm once, when the number of female inmates swelled, it was assigned to women though still bearing the term "Men's Dormitory." It is high-ceilinged and has an airex-change system that keeps us chilled. During the day we use our blankets as wraparounds. We wear our jumpsuits day and night. Once a week we get freshly-laundered ones but not always in the sizes we need. The one I'm handed is three times too large. I keep it to use as an extra cover at night atop my blanket.

A paperback of *Hamlet* lies on the empty bunk above mine; bored, I pick it up and read.

"You like Shakespeare?" asks Christy.

"I prefer modern writers. But I was a TA once—a teaching assistant—to a prof who taught an entire semester of Shakespeare."

"Dude," she says. Our roomie looks on but says nothing.

"That prof was a piece of work. An old-school misogynist."

"What's that?"

"A misogynist thinks males are superior to women. In Shakespeare, wives call their husbands 'My Lord.' In this story"—I gesture with the paperback—"Ophelia addresses her boyfriend with 'Good my Lord,' meaning 'My Gentle Lord,' though Hamlet was anything but."

"Dude." Christy turns to the TV and mutters, "My dad used to beat up on my mom. On me, too."

I'm at a loss for words. "That's awful," is all I can think to say.

"It's ok. He won't do it no more; he's too sick. Can't preach, even. Mom takes care of him after she gets home from work."

Her mother cleans houses, she said, and I wonder how old she is. Housekeeping is heavy work.

"So you're on your own." I phrase it as fact.

"I've been on my own like, forever. I got married to have a home."

"It didn't work out."

"It didn't work out," she repeats after me.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Two brothers, much older than me, somewhere south. Not a pot to piss in, says my mom, but they got pride. They got the Proud Boys."

"Oh, man."

Two days after my arrival a middle-aged woman joins us. She is overweight, has asthma,
and wheezes. At night she snores loudly. Our schizophrenic roomie gets so incensed, she asks for, and is granted, transfer to another dorm. How might she be helped, I wonder, to look beyond what she can't have and can't do? The pills our sheriffs bring at 6 a.m. aren't likely to do much.

Christy makes nice with our jailer sheriffs, all of whom are male, and obtains pocket combs for us, a couple of plastic dishes, socks and T-shirts, plus two different packs of playing cards. "All these things have been left behind by previous inmates," she tells us. Snorer and I thank Christy and high-five each other over the socks and T-shirts. After we slip them on, the three of us play Uno. Snorer keeps track of everyone's points via some system she has memorized, borrowing a sheet of paper from Christy to write them down. The next day her son posts bail and she is discharged, leaving behind her socks for future roomies.

That day Christy and I have the dorm to ourselves. Between glances at the TV, Christy writes. When she shows me a book she owns of scrambled-word puzzles, I ask her to turn off the TV and we sit down and unscramble. Christy is faster than I am, much faster.

"You have potential," I tell her, and she glows. She'll have to go to prison, she says, maybe for three years. She hopes for two years of probation, one of prison. When I ask what she
did to deserve this, she has a hard time explaining herself. Stalking a friend of her mother's, she
mumbles. Stealing stuff that sounds like petty theft. Three years for something as trivial as that?

"Yeah well, I did drugs too. With Rob when we were married, and before him."

I ask if I might see her writing and she beams with delight. She shows me her stuff and reads some of it out loud. She's got an ear for puns; unfortunately, her inspirations are television
shows and commercials. "You need to read," I tell her.

"Sunday evening is library time," she says. "The sheriffs come around with carts of books. We're allowed three per person."

"Poetry books? Books of essays? That's what you should be reading."

"I don't think they have any of those."

Indeed, when the carts arrive, I find they contain mostly religious tomes and crime novels. The one book of essays I turn up is *The Soul of Black Folk*, published in 1906.

"I was a troublesome child," Christy tells me.

"So was I. But if you're a troublesome child, that means your childhood was a troubled one. Have you heard of ACEs?" When she shakes her head, I explain, "Adverse Childhood Experiences."

"Adverse Childhood Experiences, what's that?"

"I'll tell you about mine. When I was little, Mother used to scream, 'You are the nail to my coffin.' She'd grab me by my braids, shake me like a rabbit, and fling me against cupboard or stove, For Karl, two years younger than I, she used whatever came to hand, a frying pan, an electrical cord. Once, when the boy was five, she went after him with a piece of firewood. He

crawled under the table and screamed bloody murder while I stood there, shaking with fear. I wanted to protect my little brother but couldn't do a thing. When Dad came home from prisonerof-war camp, they had two more kids, boys both. They were eight and four when she died.

"That, Christy, is a childhood of adverse experiences."

"Dude."

I was supposed to keep my brothers alive, but they died young, all three, Karl like our mother of cancer, the youngest two by their own hands. As you can imagine, I was seriously suicidal."

"Dude," she says. "How did you get over it?"

I smile to myself. "I had a mentor. An extraordinary, outrageous-luck, wholly undeserved mentor. He was a psychiatrist. He lived in Vienna. He'd written several books, one that became so famous, it's in print even today. I wrote him, in German of course, and he wrote back. We traded a handful of letters. They changed my life." I add softly, "His name was Viktor Frankl."

"I wish I had a mentor," says Christy.

"There's a place in Cheyenne. It's called Recover Wyoming."

"You work there?"

"I don't, but they know me. I write opinion for an online news service and have written about Recover Wyoming. The group started out as a safe place for alcoholics in recovery but has
expanded to people trying to solve their opioid use and other mental health issues."

"Recover Wyoming. I'm gonna write this down." She licks her jail-issue pencil that's no
bigger than a darning needle.

"If you want to touch base there, take the bus to Cheyenne. But start doing your homework now. Go into yourself and think about your past. 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' someone said many years ago."

"Let me write it down," says Christy. "The unexamined life is not worth living."

"Once I'm out I'll send you a book with the poems and diaries of Rainer Maria Rilke. You think you had a shitty childhood? Wait until you read about Rilke's!"

"Dude," she says, turning to the TV.

"The book is in German with English translations."

"Cool."

"You're addicted to television," I tell her. She shrugs as if to say, what else is there?

Christy is addicted in more ways than one. She refuses to eat the boiled eggs on her breakfast tray and won't use her carton of milk because "I only drink chocolate milk." Before returning her tray, she scoops up the coco-puff cereal that came with the eggs and pops the puffs into her mouth one by one. Do the rejected milk and boiled eggs end up in a landfill? Christy is glued to the screen.

That evening another woman joins us, and Christy happily embraces her; they've been together in this place before. "I violated parole," says the newcomer. "When this is behind me, my fiancé and I'll get married."

Working Woman gets up at 4:30 AM to step into a room where she changes from orange jumpsuit to street clothes. She takes the bus to work and returns at 3:30 PM. When I ask

what kind of work she does, she says she takes apart transformers that have quit working.

"Like the ones that read your license plate on toll roads?"

"I guess so. Some are huge, some are small. I have three different workstations."

Every other day before dinner, Working Woman attends a meeting with her probation officer, joined by a drug counselor and a therapist; sometimes, the judge in her case drops in also. "It's a program financed by the state of Kansas," she says. Daily she writes an assignment in her diary, "My Sober Days."

That night Christy wails and calls out in her sleep. As they do every day, at six in the morning, two sheriffs (male) enter with a small paper cup of pills. Christy swallows them with a bit of water, sticking out her tongue so the sheriffs know she swallowed her meds. Then she goes back to sleep, never waking for breakfast. Before returning our trays through the slot in the door,I snatch her carton of milk as a snack for myself.

"You had a nightmare," I tell Christy when she wakes up.

"I don't remember."

"Since you like to write, keep a notebook by your side as you go to sleep. First thing when you wake up, jot down anything you remember. Anything that comes to mind, really."

"I don't think I can do that."

That evening a young woman joins us. She has gorgeous red hair, pale eyes, a pert figure beneath the jumpsuit, and an Irish surname. She sleeps and sleeps. "She's detoxing," says Working Woman. "When I was detoxing, I didn't eat for seven days. I slept most of the time, sometimes feeling hot, other times cold. The first three days were the worst. I wanted to die."

At night Irish has a tough time. While I sleep she leaves her bunk and vomits. When I get up to relieve myself, I find her sleeping on the bare floor next to my bunk.

I shake her awake. "You're ice cold. Let's get you back in bed." I pull on her and she half-crawls to her bunk and flops down on its pad. I cover her up. "What happened to you?"

"My boyfriend was driving too fast."

They left Colorado, she says, wanting to head east. The boyfriend is ten years older than she is. Before she arrived here, the cops took her to the hospital. "I was ill," she says. "In sick bay they told me I'm pregnant."

"Oh boy. You didn't know before?" She shakes her head.

"What sort of work did you do . . . before?"

"I cut hair."

"You're a beautician? You have a license?" She nods.

I don't inquire about the boyfriend who likely deals drugs. "Did you use cocaine? Heroin? Meth?"

She says she doesn't know. "Whatever my boyfriend gave me. He called it the f-drug."

She falls asleep and I clean up the vomit with toilet paper and a washcloth. In the evening Christy washes the floor with the mop and bucket the sheriffs leave with us for thirty minutes every evening after dinner.

At six AM the sheriffs arrive with paper cups of meds, Christy's for bipolar, I imagine, and Irish's for detoxing.

The girls have a hard time waking up, Christy because she watched TV until it went off; Irish, because she can't seem to rouse herself. I call to Christy to get going, shake Irish awake,

bring her a cup of water. The sheriffs watch to make sure the girls swallow their meds. I can't help but think that, by the time the women are released, both will be normalized to prescription drugs they can't afford. They'll turn to street drugs again. Get arrested again.

The demand for street drugs finances the cartels in Mexico, but the demand was created by drugs advertised as nonaddictive—Valium under Reagan, OxyContin before fentanyl hit the scene, both drugs ruthlessly promoted by the Sackler clan. Patrick Radden Keefe's *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* makes your blood boil for the destruction wreaked by a single family. When doctors refused to continue filling OxyContin prescriptions, their patients turned to heroin, too ashamed to admit their addiction. I've watched Keefe on YouTube; he knows what he's talking about.

That afternoon I ask Working Woman if her program will accept Irish to help her get sober.

"I don't think so. It's for Kansas residents," she says.

The next day I'm released. My eldest hired a lawyer who squashed the warrant. While Working Woman is at her job, I embrace Christy and glance at the sleeping Irish. Will she be extradited to Colorado? Will she find that pearl among swine, to use Christy's expression, a judge with a merciful heart? All I can do now is say something useful to Christy.

"Ask your working friend in what court her case was heard," I urge her. "Tell your lawyer
you want to appear there."

"I have a public defender. A woman."

"Ask her. She knows you did drugs, doesn't she? This must be a drug treatment court of some kind." I give her the jailbird pencil I won't need. "I hope we meet again, Christy."

"I hope so, too."

Edith Cook

Bouncing Brain

It's called bouncing brain. Thoughts go from one side of your brain to the other and they're just streaks of light and energy—intangible wisps. It's distracting because you have the feeling of a thought and you want to naturally explore said thought but then, it disappears as fast as it comes and you're left grasping at empty space for something that was there just a second ago.

Over time this is exhausting. It's more than racing thoughts. Thoughts are composed and tangible. These wispy mo-fos that plague my brain before bed are assholes. Imagine one of those object search puzzles except the objects you're searching for move around instantly. As soon as you go to circle it and capture it, it moves across the page. Writing is the only answer. The only way I think I can weed through this bouncing brain is to write. Anything else, unless it's scrolling aimlessly or watching an ASMR video, seems to be impossible to focus on when it's like this. But even as I pause between words or sentences here, the feeling of zipping thoughts and the buzz of static comes back.

I think it's more than just anxiety. Because right now I don't feel anxious. I don't have any anxious feelings or thoughts, it's just this static and flitting around in my head. Like a million ideas happening all at once in a millisecond, but too fast for me to comprehend. Like, I picture this feeling being described eloquently in a poem about anxiety and mental illness and the reality of it without stigmas, but I can't put the pieces of the poem together. Even if I write this out like I am, and concentrate on finding the right poetic words, it's almost impossible to function on. All I can do is occupy my consciousness with a task that takes up most of the memory in my computer brain so that it literally doesn't have the stamina to keep flitting around like Tinkerbell.

Maybe this is a poem. A poem without the iambic pentameter or structure or rhyme scheme. Maybe this is a poem that is more real than anything Emily Dickenson wrote. Real seems to be trending in poetry now a days. Maybe the Missouri Review will take this as a poem or a short story about a girl sitting on her bed, horny, but alone—thinking of unicorns (literally) and about a thousand story ideas all smashed into one.

Contemporary art, right? Something a bit different. A bit out of the ordinary… like Hemingway and his White Elephants. Shh… don't talk about that… we don't speak about mental illness. BS. I say. BS. I'm here to speak about mental illness and the static it brings to my brain. And all you haters can be the first to line up behind me on the truth train to say yeah, I've felt that before, too.

Kyla Cullinane

The Children's Confession

Their move had made headlines in their local community newspaper. A milestone for the town, a testament to the growing acceptance of diverse families. Unbeknownst to the Greene-Evans family, however, the townsfolk knew who they were from the very beginning.

David and Robert Greene-Evans, a loving gay couple in their forties, had settled into their picturesque home on the outskirts of Warren, Rhode Island, with their three children – Charles, Susan, and Laura. Their house sat gracefully on five sprawling acres of land, providing them with both space and solitude.

David, a lawyer, commuted daily to Providence, while Robert, an editor for a lifestyle magazine, assumed the role of a stay-at-home dad. Their distinct racial backgrounds – Robert was African American and David a White mix of ethnicities – made them stand out in the predominantly white, straight suburb.

Charles, at the age of eight, Susan, six, and Laura, five were their pride and joy. Charles was the responsible leader of sorts. Whatever he wanted to do, his sisters followed loyally. The children adored their fathers, but they had a special fondness for Robert, who spent the most time with them and looked the most different in the eyes of their curious world compared to their mixed-race background.

Weekend fall days were beautiful to most, with the turning of the autumn leaves, but for the kids, it was a chance to explore. They roamed freely in the expansive woods and charming neighborhood that surrounded their home. Every weekend morning after breakfast, they embarked on new adventures, fueled by their boundless curiosity.

One rule, though, held firm: they were not allowed to cross the street. So, they walked along the road until they reached a footbridge. The footbridge seemed like a gray area in their father's rules – crossing the street was off-limits, but the footbridge was deemed safe. This technicality breathed life into their daily adventures, for beyond that footbridge lay a whole new world waiting to be explored.

On one of their escapades, the three siblings decided to cross the footbridge and venture into the unfamiliar territory on the other side. What they discovered was a picturesque wooded area with a gently babbling creek meandering through it. Following the creek, they stumbled upon a magnificent church, its stained glass windows glistening in the dappled sunlight. Strangely, there was no one around.

The children's fascination with the church's beauty soon overcame their hesitation. They approached the towering wooden doors, half-expecting them to be locked, but to their surprise, they swung open with a soft creak. The interior of the church was nothing short of awe-inspiring, bathed in a kaleidoscope of colors from the stained glass and illuminated by the streaming sunlight.

As they marveled at the ornate woodwork and the imposing altar, which held a largerthan-life crucifix, they failed to notice the presence of a young priest observing them from the shadows.

"Welcome," he said with a warm and gentle smile, causing the children to jump in surprise. "You must be the Evans children," the priest continued.

Charles instinctively moved to stand in front of his sisters, a protective gesture that did not go unnoticed by the priest.
“Don’t be afraid,” the priest reassured them, “I’m glad you’re here.”
“Why?” Charles asked, still wary.
“I heard that you moved here,” the priest replied. “Your fathers are David and Robert, correct?”
Susan edged away from her brother, curious to get a better look at the priest. He did seem young, or at least younger than any clergy member she had ever encountered.
“Yes, but how do you know that?” Susan inquired.
“It’s a small town,” the priest replied with a hint of a smile, “word travels quickly.”
“We should go,” Charles Interjected, “we have to be home by dinner time.”
“We should go,” Charles interjected, “we have to be home by lunchtime.”
The priest nodded understandingly but then added, “Oh, but do come back sometime. I’ll have cookies and milk waiting for you.”
“We don’t like milk,” Susan remarked bluntly.
“Susan, don’t be rude,” Charles scolded her.
The priest laughed, a warm and inviting sound. “No milk, then. Just juice. And promise not to tell your parents about your visit here. It will be our little secret.”
With that, the children ran off, their young hearts racing with a mix of curiosity, excitement, and the inexplicable intrigue of the hidden world they had discovered.
The children ran all the way home. They were almost completely out of breath.
Robert came downstairs just as they were entering.
“I was wondering when you’d be home; it’s almost supper. Go wash up. Charles, can you help Laura get clean?”
“Sure, Dad.”
The family sat quietly at the dinner table. The chimes of flatware on plates filled the void.
“You know,” Robert began, “I’m getting to know the mothers, but there is one that really annoys me.”
Robert glanced at David before continuing, David was smart enough to look up from his work papers knowing that Robert was waiting for a response.
“Oh do tell,” David chimed.
“Her name is Carol; she used to be an accountant. I think her daughter is Cindy.”
Robert turned to Laura.
“Laura, is Cindy’s mom named Carol?”
Laura shrugged her shoulders and continued eating.
Robert continued: “Well anyway, she told me that she often questions whether she made the right decision giving up her career to have kids.”
Charles furrowed his brow, trying to grasp the concept. “Why would she do that, Dad?”
Robert sighed thoughtfully, his eyes filled with empathy. “Well, it’s not always an easy decision, Charles. Some parents, especially mothers, wonder if they should have kept their jobs or if they’re doing the right thing by staying home to raise their children.”
“Isn’t being with your kids the right thing to do?” Susan asked, her innocent eyes searching for answers.

David chimed in, “It’s not about what’s right or wrong, Susan. Different families make different choices based on what’s best for them.”
“Exactly, and Carol talks to me about it because I’m the only male among the parents who take their children to daycare.”
Charles, being the eldest and most perceptive, asked, “So, is she unhappy, Dad?”
Robert hesitated for a moment, choosing his words carefully. “I don’t think she’s unhappy, Charles, but maybe she just misses a part of her life before kids. It’s normal to have mixed feelings sometimes.”
Laura interrupted their conversation by requesting, “Dad, can you put the peas on top of my chicken strips?”
Robert, reaching over to place a few peas atop her chicken as if to demonstrate. “No, honey, they’ll fall off when you go to eat them.”
Laura pouted briefly but then gathered the peas with her fingers and started to eat them.
“Anyway, I so badly want to tell her to stop whining. She made the decision, and just stick with it.”
“You should,” David said without lifting his eyes off his paperwork.
Bored with the adult conversation, Susan raised her hand.
Robert turned to Susan.
“Yes?”
“Do you want to hear about our day?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.
David and Robert exchanged a quick glance and then smiled at their daughter. “Sure,” they replied in unison.
Susan began her tale, her words flowing like a bubbling brook. “Well, I know you said we couldn’t cross the street, but we found a bridge to cross over.”
Charles chimed in, eager to share their adventure. “It was a foot bridge, so no cars.”
Susan continued, “And we found a creek and followed it to a church.”
Laura, always eager to contribute, joined in, “Yes, and we met a—”
But Susan and Charles, their eyes wide with alarm, shot her a look of panic, prompting Charles to quickly intervene. “Deer! We met a deer.”
David stopped his reading and leaned forward, addressing his children with a playful correction. “You don’t ‘meet’ deer; did you say, ‘How do you do, Mr. Deer?’”
The children giggled, relieved that their secret was safe for now. “Yes, sorry, Father,” Susan said, trying to hold back her giggles, “we saw a deer.”
Robert, joining in the banter. “Well, it sounds like you had quite an adventure today. Just remember to stay safe and not to go too far.”
The following day, the Greene-Evans children once again embarked on their adventure, crossing the footbridge and following the creek’s gentle course to the church.
As they walked, Susan couldn’t help but wonder aloud, “What type of cookies do you think we’ll have?”
Charles, always the cautious one, replied, “I don’t know, Susan. But let’s not forget what Dad said about being careful.
This time, when they reached the imposing church, they found its massive doors wide open, as if inviting them in. It was an unusually hot fall day and the kids dressed too warmly. The sun beat down mercilessly outside, and the cool interior of the church was

a welcome relief.
“Hello?” Susan called out hesitantly, her voice echoing through the cavernous space. Within moments, they heard the sound of footsteps approaching from a vestibule to the right of the altar. The priest stepped forward.
“Hello again. How rude of me, I didn’t tell you my name. I’m Father Cartwright. Please follow me to my office.”
The children exchanged glances but, curious and intrigued, they followed the priest towards his office.
As they walked, Laura couldn’t contain her curiosity. “Father Cartwright, do you have children?” she asked.
Father Cartwright smiled kindly. “No, I am a religious priest, and we are addressed as ‘Father.’”
Laura, still puzzled, questioned further, “Why?”
Father Cartwright continued to lead them down a hallway, explaining as he walked. “Well, it’s a sign of respect, and it’s because we act as spiritual leaders in people’s lives. As the head of a parish, each priest assumes the spiritual care of his church, and the people in the church are his congregation. In return, the congregation views him with filial affection.”
Charles, eager to learn, added, “Filial? What does that mean?”
Father Cartwright chuckled softly. “It’s another word for father, Charles. It’s a way of showing the deep respect and love that people have for their spiritual leaders.”
The office was plain. To the right of the entrance of the office was a couch with a low refectory-type table. Father Cartwright gestured for them to sit there. He then went to his cupboard on the opposite end where he pulled out a plastic bag with the Stop & Shop logo on it. He carefully placed the paper cups, juice, napkins, and cookies on the table.
Charles picked up the box of cookies. “Nabisco Golden Sandwich cookies,” he read.
“I was hoping for chocolate chip cookies,” Laura said.
“Laura, that’s rude. You should be grateful he has cookies,” Susan scolded.
“Sorry.” Laura frowned.
“I promise to have chocolate chip next time,” Father Cartwright said.
Each child took two cookies and placed them on their napkin. Charles placed a paper cup in front of each person, including Father Cartwright, and carefully poured everyone’s drink.
“Thank you. What a polite person you are, Charles.”
“I have to; if we let Laura pour, we’ll get a mess.”
”Now, children,” Father Cartwright began, “I’m glad to see you again. I must admit, I was hoping you would return.” He then pulled out the newspaper clipping from the local newspaper announcing the arrival of the Greene-Evans family.
Susan was the first to take the clipping, but Charles took it away from her.
“What does it say?” Laura said in frustration.
Charles carefully read the announcement. Father Cartwright’s eyes twinkled with kindness as he replied, “I believe that God brings people into our lives for a reason. I think you coming here might be part of a larger plan. This is due to your Father.”
“Our father or dad?” Susan asked.

Father Cartwright seemed confused, which Charles picked up on.
“We call David Father, and we call Robert Dad.”
“Oh, I see,” said Father Cartwright. “Well, I mean your Dad. He’s a special man.”
“Because he’s Black?” Susan asked.
“No, because he’s Catholic,” the priest said.
“Catholic? Is it painful?” Laura asked.
The children exchanged glances, unsure of what to make of this cryptic statement.
“What do you mean? We’re Unitarian,” Charles asked.
Father Cartwright leaned in closer, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret. “No, he was born Catholic. I believe there’s something special about him. You must be kind and gentle to him.”
“But why?” Susan asked.
Father Cartwright smiled warmly. “That, my dear, is something we’ll have to explore together. But for now, let’s enjoy these cookies and juice.”
The children entered the house through the front door, their young faces still reflecting the intrigue of their visit to the church. In the kitchen, Robert was busy preparing dinner, the savory aroma of spaghetti and meatballs filling the air.
Their dad’s voice called out to them, “Kids, you didn’t clean your rooms this morning.”
“Sorry, Dad.” They chimed as they approached him.
“Laura, I’m making your favorite. Spaghetti with meatballs.”
The kids gathered in the kitchen, but instead of sitting down to eat, they stood there, staring at Robert with a curious intensity that he couldn’t ignore.
“What’s wrong?” Robert asked, a hint of concern in his voice.
“Are you okay?” Susan inquired, her eyes searching his face.
“I’m fine, honey. Why do you ask?”
Charles spoke up, a note of seriousness in his voice. “We found out that you are Catholic, Dad.”
Robert was taken aback by their revelation, not expecting this topic.
“Who told you that?” he curiously asked.
“Is it true?” Susan asked, her eyes wide with anticipation.
Robert paused, unsure of how to respond. “Yes,” he admitted, “I was born Catholic, but I’m no longer Catholic.”
“Did you stop being Catholic because it hurt too much?” Charles asked.
“No,” Robert saidm trying to stifle a laugh, “not really.”
David entered. He was coming from work.
Robert was relieved by the interruption. David presented Robert with flowers and kissed him.
Robert gave a smiling look to David, but David had already left his side.
“What’s this for?” A surprised Robert asked as he searched for a vase beneath the sink.
“I saw them in a florist window and couldn’t remember the last time I ever gave you flowers; I could only remember when you gave me flowers.”
“Hello, kids!” Kissing them each and then leaving to wash up for dinner.
That night, as Robert and David lay in bed together, David reminded Rob of his trip.
“Don’t forget, I’m leaving tomorrow for Chicago. So, I’ll be home on Thursday.”
“It’s just 48 hours; I’ll live, David.” Robert said, planting a kiss on David’s lips.

“I hope so.”
“Oh, David, I forgot to tell you.”
Robert recounted the children’s questions about his past Catholicism. He couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss.
“They never told me where they got this information,” Robert confessed to David, his brow furrowed in thought.
David, always the analytical one, considered the possibilities. “Maybe they stumbled upon something. Perhaps they found your birth certificate or some identification that disclosed your Catholic background.”
Robert nodded, realizing that this was indeed a possibility.
David agreed, wrapping his arm around Robert in a comforting gesture. “We’ll figure it out tomorrow; I don’t think it’s anything you should worry about.”
The next morning, Charles quietly entered Laura and Susan’s room. He was still in his pajamas. His demeanor was unusually serious, and the urgency in his voice caught their attention.
“We must see Father Cartwright today,” Charles declared with a sense of purpose.
Perplexed, Laura and Susan exchanged questioning glances. “Why?” they both asked in unison.
Charles hesitated, his thoughts racing as he recalled their conversation with their Dad.
“Well, you heard Dad when I asked him if it hurt being Catholic. He said that it does.”
“No, he said ‘not really,’” Susan corrected him.
Charles nodded, acknowledging her correction. “But what if he’s still hurting? We must see Father Cartwright. Maybe he can help.”
Determined to find answers, the children quickly showered and dressed. They ate their breakfast in silence, a shared sense of secrecy between them and their parents. They didn’t want to reveal their intentions.
When their dad wasn’t looking, Susan reached into the vase and took three flowers from it.
“Dad, can I have these?” she asked.
“Sure, Susan, do you need me to find a vase for them?” her dad replied.
“No, I’ll do it.”
When they arrived at the church, Father Cartwright was surprised to see them so soon after their last visit.
“We didn’t come for cookies,” Charles began, his tone serious, “we have to talk to you.”
“Here, we brought you these,” Susan then presented Father Cartwright with the flowers.
“How lovely, where did you get these?” Father Cartwright asked.
“Father gave them to Daddy.”
Upon hearing those words, Father Cartwright felt a tinge of pain. Instead of going to the priest’s office, they made their way to the closest pew and sat down. Father Cartwright looked at them with a mixture of curiosity and concern.
“Dad said that it hurt sometimes being Catholic,” Charles began, his brow furrowed in worry. “I don’t want him to hurt anymore.”
Father Cartwright, knowing that this was a sensitive matter, chose his words carefully.
“Being Catholic can be a deeply personal and complex experience for some people.”

Laura, her eyes filled with concern, interjected, “How can we stop him from hurting?”
The priest took a deep breath, realizing the weight of the conversation.
“I have something to tell you,” Charles added, “it’s important.”
“Sometimes,” Charles began, “in the morning when Father has left for work, we crawl into bed with Dad. He’s usually asleep, but when we look at his face. He sometimes has streaks on face from the eyes. I think that they are dried tears. I have them too, but his are different. Sometimes, his are light-colored, and sometimes they are dark colored. Mine are just light-colored. Do the dark ones mean that he’s crying from pain?”
Father Cartwright pondered for a moment, recalling his scientific schooling. “The dried streaks on your face are called rheums,” he explained. “We all get them, but for your Dad, as I have said, he is special. I don’t know about the different colors.”
Charles, Susan, and Laura listened intently, absorbing the information.
Father Cartwright went on to offer a comforting explanation. “Perhaps the different colors mean good dreams and bad dreams.”
Laura, still worried, asked, “How can we help him?”
The priest looked at the children with warmth in his eyes. “Your Dad is a special, beautiful child of God. Please be good to him always. Show him your love, and that will help ease any hurt he may be feeling.”
The children nodded, their hearts heavy with the knowledge that their dad had been carrying pain in his heart. They knew that they had a special role to play in bringing comfort and love to their family.
“Let’s help him now. Let us say a prayer for your Dad.”
The priest gently took Charles and Laura’s hands and told them to take Susan’s. The children followed Father Cartwright’s lead and bowed their heads.
“Dear Heavenly Father, I come to You in prayer today asking for the strength that only You can provide for these small, innocent children, Charles, Susan, and Laura. I know that without Your guidance and support, they are weak and vulnerable to the trials of this world. I ask that You fill them with Your Holy Spirit, giving them the courage and fortitude to help their parents with any challenge that comes their way. Help them to trust in Your plan for their lives, knowing that You are always with them, even in the darkest of times. Amen.”
“Wait here, kids, I have something for you.”
Father Cartwright quickly ran back to his office and returned, giving each kid a rosary.
“What are these?” Susan asked.
“They’re called rosaries.”
“What’s a rosary?”
“The rosary is a special set of prayers that we Catholics use along with the physical string of knots or beads used to count the components of each of the prayers. But don’t worry about that since you were so kind to grace me with flowers, I thought I’d give you something in return.”
When they returned home from the church, Charles felt unsettled. He went to his father’s office and turned on the computer, determined to understand more about dreams. As he delved into his research, he was momentarily distracted by an ad for a movie titled “Midnight in the Gardfen of Good and Evil” on cable TV. The synopsis caught his

s attention, especially a quote from the character Minerva: “The half-hour before midnight is for doing good. The half-hour after midnight is for doing evil—seems like we need a little of both tonight.”

Charles couldn’t shake the feeling that this quote held some significance, a connection to his Dad’s dreams. He rushed to share this newfound information with his sisters. For some reason, Charles believed that their dad was battling a conflict of good and evil within his dreams, a silent struggle that weighed heavily on his heart.

Dinner that evening was a subdued affair without David’s presence. The children were unusually quiet, their thoughts focused on Robert. Robert, however, misinterpreted their silence, assuming it was due to missing their father.

“Kids, why so quiet?” Robert asked with a gentle smile. “Do you miss your father?”

Charles exchanged glances with Susan and Laura before responding. “Dad, do you miss Father?”

Robert nodded, his expression sincere. “Yes, I miss him a lot when he’s gone.”

Laura chimed in, her innocent eyes filled with concern. “Do you have bad dreams, Dad?”

Robert nodded, realizing that their questions were coming from a place of love and concern. “Yes, sometimes, but everyone has good dreams and bad dreams. Just remember, dreams aren’t real.”

Charles, still holding on to his earlier realization, added, “Maybe they’re not real because we fight to not make them real.”

Robert considered his son’s words, appreciating the depth of his statement. “That’s a good point. Well, I usually forget mine before I wake up anyway.”

Robert turned to Laura, his youngest, and asked, “Are you having bad dreams, Laura?”

“Sometimes,” she admitted with a small, shy smile.

“Kids, remember, if you wake up from a bad dream, you can always come to us, even if we’re asleep.”

“We know, we have to remember,” Charles assured him.

Robert, curious about their concern, asked, “So, why was there a concern about my dreams? Was I talking in my sleep?”

The children exchanged glances before Susan spoke up. “No, Dad, it’s just...we love you and don’t want you to feel sad or hurt.”

Robert smiled warmly, deeply touched by their genuine concern. “Thank you, my little sweethearts. I promise I’ll always talk to you about whatever is bothering me.”

Laura, wanting to reassure her father, said, “Don’t feel sad about missing Father, Daddy.”

Robert’s heart swelled with love for his children. He leaned down and planted a kiss on Laura’s head. “Okay, Laura, I won’t. I promise.”

It was precisely 11:00 PM when Charles quietly woke his sisters, their plan set in motion. They had discussed this before their dad tucked them into bed earlier that night. With hushed voices and careful steps, the three children tip-toed down the stairs into the dimly lit kitchen. As they entered, they turned on the soft glow of the kitchen light. Their mission began with the vase of flowers that adorned the kitchen table. One by one, they gently plucked the petals, collecting them in an array of assorted colors.

Once the petals were gathered, they carefully disposed of the stems in the kitchen garbage under the sink and placed the vase in the dishwasher to ensure no evidence remained.

Susan and Laura improvised makeshift basins with the bottoms of their sleeping gowns, using them to hold the precious petals they had collected.

Charles checked the time on the kitchen clock. “Hurry, it’s almost 11:30 PM,” he whispered, “Dad will have his good dreams now.”

With the kitchen light turned off, the three children silently made their way back up the stairs, ensuring they didn’t lose any petals from their cupped sleeping gowns.

They entered their parents’ room, where their father, Robert, lay fast asleep. With the utmost care, they placed the petals all around him and on the bed, forming a colorful carpet of flowers.

As they completed their task, the children left and returned with their rosaries. They each gently placed them on their dad.

In the morning, Robert stirred himself awake, the sensation of the petals on his skin slowly pulling him from his slumber. As he gradually awoke, his hand brushed against the delicate petals, and he couldn’t help but be jolted awake. The rosaries fell from him. He blinked in surprise to find the bed covered entirely in petals.

It was a surreal moment that he struggled to comprehend.

Father Cartwright watched from the entrance of the church as Robert’s car pulled into the lone parking lot. He had been waiting, knowing that this meeting was inevitable.

As Robert approached, he introduced himself, “Father Cartwright, I’m—”

“Robert Greene-Evans, I know,” the priest interrupted with a warm smile.

Robert was taken aback, surprised at how young Father Cartwright appeared in person. The priest’s height even surpassed his own, adding to his sense of awe.

Robert searched the priest’s eyes and face, trying to summarize if he ever met the priest. But Father Cartwright’s direct gaze left him puzzled.

“Come in,” Father Cartwright invited, breaking the silence, “I assume the children spoke to you.”

Robert followed Father Cartwright into the church, his eyes wide with amazement at the ornate beauty that surrounded him. He marveled at the stained glass windows and the grandeur of the interior.

“I forgot how beautiful these churches are,” Robert admitted as they stood before the altar.

Father Cartwright’s image was illuminated by the colors from the stained glass windows, giving him a radiant, almost heavenly appearance.

“Father, I’m a bit concerned about the conversation you had with the children. I can appreciate your sincerity, but I believe they may have misinterpreted your words.”

Father Cartwright regarded Robert with kindness. “All I said was that you are special, Mr. Evans?”

“No, please call me Robert.”

“Thanks,” Father Cartwright continued. “All I said was that you are special in God’s eyes.”

“Yes,” Robert nodded, feeling reassured. “I trust you. They had nothing but kind words to say

about you. I only ask
that you explain to them about equality. I want them to know
that both my husband David and I are equals. I know that we are all equal in the eyes of God."
Father Cartwright changed the subject.
"The children told me that you are Unitarian."
"Yes, I actually became Unitarian when I found out that I was gay. Father Cartwright, could you do me a favor and tell the kids that both David and I are equal in the eyes of God instead of just me?"
Father Cartwright smiled, his eyes reflecting his understanding. "Yes, Robert, I can do that."
With a sense of urgency, Robert said, "Thanks. I hate to make this short, but I actually have to pick up Laura from daycare."
Robert turned to leave, but he felt Father Cartwright's hand on his arm, a gentle yet firm touch that halted his steps. Robert turned back, caught off guard by the priest's forwardness.
Robert almost lost his balance and had to step forward toward Father Cartwright to regain his equilibrium. This action pulled Robert into a ray of light from the stained glass window. Although there were multiple colors of rays, Father Cartwright and Robert were bathed in the same golden-yellow light.
"Robert," Father Cartwright began, "you are truly a blessed man to have such a wonderful family. You are always in my prayers. Always."
With a grateful smile, Robert nodded. "Thank you, Father Cartwright. Your support means a lot to us. I really must go, sorry."
"It's quite alright. Goodbye, Robert." He said smiling.
Father Cartwright watched as Robert quickly walked down the aisle and out the door. When he was out of sight, the priest stopped smiling. His face turned to sorrow as a tear escaped him. He didn't hear the sound of Robert's car starting or it driving away. He only heard the emptiness from a hollow church.
The children never returned to the church again. The months had passed, and Easter was approaching. Father Cartwright was happy for the visit from Father Michaels from the neighboring church.
It was the annual precept of the Church where priests must confess once a year before performing their annual communion during Easter.
Father Michaels kissed Father Cartwright's cheeks and gave his friend a warm hug.
"I am so happy to see you, Father Michael."
"And I you, Father Cartwright. How have you been?"
Father, my heart is heavy, and I must say these words before I go into confession with you as they weigh heavily on my heart and soul. The confession is for my soul but what I am saying to you now is from my heart.
Father Cartwright turned away as if unable to face him.
"I saw him. I saw the man who has been in my dreams. Whose life is what I wanted but was too scared to have. All I can do is to keep him in my prayers and watch him from afar as I am committed to my ministry, an offering to God for the salvation of souls. But

sometimes, deep deep inside of me this yearning comes out for what I truly might want but cannot have. I want his life, his children, I dream that they are mine, and it's my life that is with Robert. Sometimes, Robert is there, and I won't let him go even though he wants me to. Then I wake, and the dried tears are washed away but never the memory of him: Robert."
The two men then proceeded to the confessional.

Robert Greene

Missed Milestones

My kid does something amazing, and I repeat
"Remember this,"
"Remember this,"
"Come on, don't forget this moment."
I take another drink
"You'll want to remember this," I repeat out loud, so I remember
If I take another drink I won't remember
But I take another drink
And I am so far gone that I can justify my actions by saying "I'm sure they'll do it again"
I think that if I keep telling myself to remember I will
Yet all I remember is saying *remember this*
But when I woke up, I didn't remember. All I remember is that one of my kids did something *that* I did not want to forget
And that I don't want to drink anymore
For them
For the memories
I can quit.... I think
But I couldn't then
I had my first drink at six years old, I can remember the taste, exactly how the room was set up. I stood by my dad's kitchen table. Broken glass pieces were still on the floor by the refrigerator. My brothers told me not to. But how do I say no when my dad's grease-stained hands hold the beer in front of my face.
I can remember the first time I overindulged in alcohol. My dad's mouth open, laughing at me, his teeth were black, and most were missing. The ceiling spun around and around when I went to sleep. I loved the feeling that I couldn't remember unwelcome hands touching my body anymore.
I remember chasing each high. And I remember when it wasn't fun anymore, when drinking became a necessity to live
My kids do amazing things and I think I'll remember if I tell myself to remember, but each day I wake up and don't remember
And I am missing out on too much
I am flooded in self-wallow
And misery
But next time will be different, I'll only have one drink
But I am drinking out of the bottle now and I don't mix my drinks
And I don't make a face with the drink anymore
And I need something stronger
I am searching for the high I had the first time I drank
I am miserable
I take another drink
I can't get sober
I take another drink

I need help
I take another drink
Somebody help me
The liquid warms my throat
I can't remember my kid's birthday at the doctors
I smell like marijuana and perfume
The world shuts down and I am off work and I have plans
Why stay sober at home when I can spend all of quarantine buzzed
But I know I won't just be buzzed
Two bottles of wine will get me through lunch and a fifth for the rest of the day
But my higher power has a different plan
I can justify going to the park by myself to drink and get high without being interrupted
I take another drink
And I can't remember what I was drinking
And I finally have had enough
There is no other way to describe the awakening other than having had enough.
My father is at my house watching my children
What am I thinking
I take another drink
The same father that left my 7-month-old nephew alone to go to the store
What am I doing
I look out the window and watch the trees sway
And suddenly I am hit with realization
I need help
I need to go home
I call my husband and beg for his help
My body shakes the next day
I am craving the drink, the high
But today will be 24 hours
I can do this
I *want* to do this
And that is the difference this time
This time I don't need a break, I need to quit
I do quit
Today, October 11, 2023, I have 1,300 days of sobriety and
I cry when my oldest son wins his wrestling match
I cry when my daughter cheers for her football team
I cry when my youngest son helps his classmate sound out a word
I do not smell like marijuana when I pick my children up from school
I remember to make doctor appointments
I remember I have a dream
And I start college
And I earn my first degree
And I begin the work for my second degree

And I help other people stay sober
I do not need to justify my actions to myself
I no longer repeat
“Remember this,”
“Remember this,”
Because I live in the moment

Kayla Krohn

THE JACKET

I sit on the edge of the track in the same clothes I always wear: thin sweatpants and a faded grey jacket with a Canadian flag pinned to the front right pocket. My back presses against the icy metal of a lamp post and I'm sitting on cold cement. It's five o'clock in the morning. Thesun is shining but does nothing to warm my skin.

I've been awake for an hour since I opened my eyes long enough to see the curtains shuddering around my head. By the time I realized what was happening, the earthquake was over. Barely a moment had passed. Strangely, in all the time I've spent in this country, I never noticed the shaking everyone else claims to experience. Yet that morning, it seemed as if no onefelt the earthquake but me.

Murakami blames tremors of the earth on an epic subsurface battle between Frog and Worm. But that morning, their seismic squabble seemed much more peaceful than I had imagined.

Although it's early, I'm not the only person awake. Already, several citizens from the temporary housing complex next to the ryokan are out for their morning walk around the track that encircles the baseball diamond. Some of them stop on the far side near home plate and engage in a variety of exercises. As they make their slow, deliberate movements, they look out towards the rising sun – and inevitably, at the places down below.

I know the view from there. There's a ledge that overlooks the road winding down the hill. Lining the road are clusters of brightly lit vending machines, still serving hot drinks and even corn soup, right next to lamp posts bent at ninety degrees. Abandoned stuffed animals have been carefully piled beneath the lamp posts to keep them out of harm's way.

On one side of the road, there's a row of white posters. Each is about four square feet in size, and contains one large, black kanji character tattooed on it with thick black paint. Altogether they read: *Minami Sanriku, we remember you.*

But you can't see the town of Minami Sanriku from the hilltop, because it's blocked by another hill. What you can see is the shoreline embracing the open sea. And you can see the bridge. The bridge starts out perfectly intact, then stops after the second pillar. As if God concentrated His power of will and landed a giant karate chop that clean-cut the concrete straight down the middle. The rest of the bridge is reduced to rubble and lies in the ocean some thirty feet below.

Piles of metal, ropes, boats, cars, tires, and indistinguishable grey matter have been sorted through hours upon days of organized labour performed by men in blue jumpsuits. Nothing has been removed – just rearranged. The mountains of categorized debris wait indefinitely for some enormous hand to scoop them all up.

My own hands shake as I write because I'm shivering. The elderly members of the temporary housing complex occasionally walk by as they round the track, having completed their morning stretches. With each one, I exchange good mornings and a brief head-bob. After half a dozen or so people pass by, an old man veers in his course and comes over to me.

"Samuidesuka? Are you cold?" he asks.

I smile up at him. "Chotto dake — a little bit."

"We're between the mountains and the sea, so it gets very cold here in the morning."

Then he begins to speak about the tsunami. "It's very difficult to find work here now,

ever since the Disaster — yes, very difficult, muzukashi sugi." He shakes his head. "Shikata ga nai, ne? There's nothing to be done. It's hard to make a living for oneself. And the houses — they are so crammed! We are country folk around here, not Tokyo-jin!" He indicates the row of little white shanties clustered near the track. Indeed, they are as crammed as Tokyo apartments.

He explains many foreigners have visited over the past year since the tsunami. He says lots of other things, too, that I don't understand. All the time I nod and murmur to agree, disagree, or convey sympathy as seems appropriate.

Finally, the old man straightens up, and I know the conversation is ending.

"You probably have no idea what I'm saying, but I don't speak any English, so shikata ga nai ne, oh well!" With that, he throws his head back and laughs.

Then he takes off his jacket and gives it to me. He points to one of the white shanties in the temporary housing complex. He tells me I can keep his jacket as long as I like, and to drop it
off there when I'm finished writing.

I wrap the jacket around me and bow. "Metcha arigatou gozaimsu. Thank you very much."

"Iie, iie — it's nothing!" He goes on his way and disappears into the houses.

I write for some time. Eventually, I hear the kitchen clambering to life through the open windows of the ryokan. I close my notebook and wander over to the cluster of homes on the opposite side of the track from which the elderly inhabitants have been emerging all morning.

It's quiet there, and very neat. The laundry is efficiently hung in each tiny patio space. Walking up to the door of the old man's house is like entering a miniature jungle of towels, sheets, cotton shirts, and pants. Passing through it, I have the feeling of invading someone's privacy, even though I'm still outside.

The screen door of the house is closed. Inside appears dark and silent. I have only a few seconds standing amongst the sheets and towels contemplating what to do, however, before an old woman appears at my side. She has crept up on me silently, as only little obaachan are capable. She stands only to the height of my chin, and her grey hair is tinged with blue.

I ask her if this is Ojiisan no ie, the old man's house.

To my surprise, the old woman clucks at me. "The old man is probably still sleeping. Let's take a walk around the track. You have time, there's still fifteen minutes before the restaurant opens!"

So, we walk. She chatters the entire time. Despite her size, I find myself trying to keep up.

Sometimes it seems she's speaking to herself and I am like the trees that just happen to be there. I mostly listen, offering small noises of agreement or condolence where they seem to fit.

"I lost my husband, my parents, and my brother in the Disaster. I used to cry every day — every day I was crying. Oh how I cried and cried!" She doesn't cry now, but she moves her fingers in streams down her cheeks as her gaze looks past me.

"Taihen desu ne, that's very difficult," I say.

"Taihen desu yo! Very difficult indeed!" says the old woman.
"I couldn't even seek help from my neighbours, because they all experienced the same thing." Her voice is steady, transparent. "But lately, it's gotten much better. There is a karaoke place

nearby where we go to have fun!" She indicates a small wooden building sitting next to the track as we walk by.

"Oh, how interesting," I reply, being limited in what I can say.

Suddenly, she asks: "You're Amerika-jin, aren't you?"

"Hai." My response is automatic. I don't bother to correct her.

"Ah! So you must be Christian?" She becomes excited.

"Hai, Christian desu," I say, even though the real answer is more complicated.

"Recently some Christians visited us! They also came from Amerika."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Amerika is so big, and the people are so kind! After the Disaster, we were alone without food and water for some days, scared and alone, and they were the first to come."

I picture helicopters and GI-Joes closing in to save the terrified, forgotten people of Minami Sanriku.

"Amerika is so big," the old woman continues. Her eyes light up as a fantastical vision of America fills first her mind, then her expression. "The people there don't have to worry about tsunamis like we do in Japan, do they? Ah, it must be the perfect place to live, ne!"

My Japanese isn't good enough to respond. I want to explain, "No! America isn't perfect. You couldn't be further from the truth. No country is perfect! Your people are much kinder. Japan is a beautiful country with the most noble people I have ever known. You are just unlucky— blame this whole thing on nature. Blame this Disaster on Frog and Worm!" But the dreamy look on her face stops me from even trying. So instead, I murmur in agreement.

"When you go back to Amerika, would you please tell them our story, so they'll think of us," she says. "And, because you are Christian, would you kindly please pray."

We finish the loop and there's the old man who lent me the jacket, standing outside his house. He's arching his back and stretching his arms up to the sky, but he stands up straight when he sees me. I give him the jacket and thank him. He says, "Mata aimashō. Let's meet again someday. Goodbye!" Then he retreats back through his laundry without a backward glance.

I turn to say goodbye to the old woman. But she has already shuffled her way down the row of shanties and disappeared into her own jungle of sheets and towels.

Grace Meikle

Something's Happened

Growing up, I often found myself struggling with my faith. I was always raised to be Christian, my mother forcing me into scratchy dress clothes that made my skin crawl and stiff dress flats that gave me blisters on my heels before hauling our entire family to a small church that smelled of must. We never went every Sunday, my mother just doing her best to get us there occasionally.

I never quite understood why my mother attempted to get us to church as frequently as she did. I knew that she had grown up Christian and I truly believe that she wanted the same for her children, but we didn't have two parents that both made our spiritual connection a top priority like she did when she was a child. After a while, it almost seemed as though she went out of obligation and what she felt we should do based on how she was raised, rather than out of want and desire to go, especially with having to go through the same struggle every Sunday morning to get out the door. As for me, I didn't feel reason or passion to go. It just seemed like a forced pastime, one that I never felt deep care for.

God seemed to only be present when it was convenient, even if it meant my parents, or specifically my father, were being hypocritical. Actions or behaviors that I often got in trouble for, being told that I was sinning, and that God would never approve, I would watch my father do right before or after me, my mother more often chastising him for doing than doing them herself. I could never tell why I would get in trouble when I said "Oh my God", getting swatted and sent to my room until I could detect the scent of dinner cooking from the other side of my door before I was allowed to come out again, even if it was hours later, when my father could say "Jesus" when he was upset and it be perfectly fine. I remember the anger that used to reside in my chest and under my ribs as I sat with my back against the door after being disciplined, hot tears rolling down my cheeks until the salty drops reached my mouth.

This lack of frequency in what I should believe in religiously, or if I didn't need to at all, as well as the inconsistency of what accountability should be held for, made my faith fade farther and farther away from my grasp. I got to a point where I had no desire to continue to pursue a personal relationship with God, one that I had been preached to about valuing my entire life. It wasn't until I had an experience I couldn't explain with words that I started to believe in a life after death, and the existence of God himself, as my mother always wanted me to.

I was 17 years old. The Sunday before my grandfather died, my entire family had gone to my grandparents' house for Father's Day, as my grandfather had been sick and wasn't able to move from his chair, let alone go out to lunch to celebrate. I remember walking in the front door and seeing him, sipping water from his cup he had gotten from the hospital just a few months before when he had to have heart surgery. His salt and pepper thinning hair was sticking in every different direction, his face pale with dark, purple bags under his eyes. The moment his eyes met mine, though, as he saw my siblings and I walking into the house, his wide crooked smile appeared, lighting up his face.

I remember sitting there with him, talking with him about everything and anything going on in my life and his, as we often did when he had to stay at home more after getting sick.I didn't always have as much time to stop by, but when I was able, we were able to sit and talk like no time ever passed.

The wood floor cooled my skin on the back of my thighs as I sat on next to him, with my face resting on the soft fur cushion of his lazy boy chair. He asked how school was going, how it felt being so smart. I tipped my head back and laughed, assuring him I couldn't be as smart as he led me to believe but he promised me I was. He would often tell me this, urging me to have confidence in myself and what I could do. I remember asking him how he was feeling. He told me he felt like a million bucks, but I knew he was lying. I could tell from how exhausted he looked, from how the color that had been in his cheeks a few months back was no longer there and from the way my grandmother seemed too scared to allow him to get up and get his own things, seeming to prefer to just bring it to him. I had never seen him look so frail, so small. I knew he was faking it just so I wouldn't worry about him, as he continued to smile and talk about the *M.A.S.H* and *Gilligan's Island* episodes he had watched in the past few days. As he looked down at me and spoke, I was close enough that I could smell the coffee on my grandfather's breath.

The smell brought me back to all the times I would sit at the breakfast table in my grandparents' small dining room. With honey nut cheerios in my bowl, I would watch as my grandfather would dance around the kitchen as my grandmother would brew a pot of coffee. The gentle tunes of older music played through the speaker while the gentle hissing and churning of the coffee pot filled the gaps of silence, my grandfather moving his hips and swinging his arms. His singing was off-key while he'd pull my grandmother into his arms and dance with her, making me giggle and cover my face. I remember feeling embarrassed at the displays of affection my grandfather would show to my grandmother, kissing her lips and cheeks while they danced as erratically as they could for being in their 60's, but also feeling such immense happiness, hoping that one day I would have a love like theirs.

As my grandfather sat in his chair, his plush, navy-blue blanket covering his legs and feet, I remember promising him that I was going to come back and give him a pedicure. He laughed deeply and melodically, promising me I wouldn't want to touch his feet. This was always a running joke between us, me promising I'd rub his feet and paint his toenails and him firing back that from years of wearing uncomfortable shoes, his feet were disgusting, peeling and ugly. Knowing he was just being his normal self and exaggerating everything, I always pushed, and I continued to this day. I swore I would find the hottest pink toenail polish I had and, on my way out the door as we were leaving, told him I would be back in a few days to do his nails. He grinned at me and chuckled, telling me he couldn't wait.

That night, I found the perfect polish and painted my own nails, being as careful and precise as I could and letting them dry. I set the polish on my dresser so I wouldn't forget. I climbed into my bed with my fresh sheets and cuddled into my teal body pillow, willing myself to sleep for school in the morning.

All of the sudden, it was bright, almost like I was standing outside in the middle of the day, but there was no nature around me. I couldn't tell where I was. I believe I was asleep, but I've never quite been able to distinguish where I was or if I was conscious. I looked around and saw someone walking towards me, slow and fluid. As they came closer, I recognized his smile first. My grandfather looked as he did a few years prior before he got sick and before the heart surgeries. Before his heart was struggling to keep him alive and out of the hospital and before the doctors, nurses, and diagnoses. His shiny leather shoes clomped softly on the non-existent floor. He was dressed in his normal black pants, a soft grey sweater like he always wore, with

his black raincoat wrapped around his frame. His hair was slicked back with gel and his face looked healthy, the bags gone and the gentle pink color back in his cheeks. His musky cologne invaded my nostrils. I felt the tears welling up in my eyes and I reached for his hand, intertwining our fingers, and feeling the warmth from his palm seeping into my skin. I told him how amazing he looked and how healthy, tears streaming down my face. He smiled at me and squeezed my hand before telling me he had to go. I asked him where he was going, but he just continued to smile softly at me. He repeated himself in a soft tone, wiping a tear off my cheek and telling me that he just had to go. He told me how much he loved me and how proud he was of me. He promised he would always be there when I needed him, that we could keep talking as often as I wanted and he would be able to listen, no matter when or where. I reached to wrap my arms around his torso, ready to bury my face in his chest and inhale his scent like I was always able to.

Suddenly it was dark. There was a light only behind his head and I could feel his arms on mine. I called out his name but as he came more into focus, it wasn't Papa that was in front of me anymore, but rather my father. Even in his apparent absence, I felt relief and calmness I couldn't understand sitting in my chest at the idea of my grandfather being safe and okay. It was the oddest feeling. In that moment, I felt more connected to my spirituality than I had in my entire life. I felt like there had to be something after death. That there was a safe place to go, anda higher being, whether that be God or someone else, waiting for us. It was in that moment that I felt I had found religion again, that I had something to worship and pray for. Because if my grandfather, one of those I looked up to most, could find such a peaceful and safe place, maybethat was a place I could find too. Maybe in that safe place, my grandfather could still be with me in a way, loving and supporting me as he always had, just in a way that was no longer in the same realm I existed in.

My surroundings became clearer at this moment. I was in my bedroom once again, the soft blankets wrapped around my body. My father, a man that had rarely shown any emotion throughout my entire life and who I had never seen cry more than twice in my life, was holding me gently, as if I would break at any moment, and had tears running down his face, dripping ontohis white t-shirt he wore to bed.

"Something's happened.

Reece Yeager

Fiction

See Here How Everything

"Don't *Grandma* me. You know damn well I won't answer to anything other than Bertha," the old woman snarls at her granddaughter.

The younger woman nods as she opens the curtains. Miranda studies the early morning sunshine slanting on the pine floorboards her grandfather installed when they built this house in Laurel Canyon. He is long gone, but his memory exists in every corner of the custom house he lovingly constructed for his bride, who dreamed of a romance like Joni Mitchell and Graham Nash. Maybe it was Stephen Stills. Miranda can never remember much of what her grandmother says. Her grandmother, whose actual name is Ethel and not Bertha, for the record, reminisces about her Grateful Dead days while Miranda purposefully tunes her out. If this new applicant for a home health aide doesn't pass muster, Miranda doesn't know what she will do. This is the seventh interview in as many days, and no matter how many times Miranda emphasizes to the agency how important the aide's taste in music affects their chances at employment, not one candidate can answer the golden question: who is Jerry Garcia?

There is no way the university will extend Miranda's sabbatical past next semester, especially considering the lack of publications she doesn't have to show her time was productive.

It was productive, but not from an academic sense. Bertha would say it was cosmic timing that she had a series of strokes the day after Miranda closed her office door and left campus, intending to finally complete her research. Of course, Miranda's mother, Cassidy, can't be counted on to help.

Miranda sighs before turning to Bertha to begin the laborious task of bathing and dressing the old woman. She swallows her resentment that Cassidy's endeavor to travel with a band called Phish to sell tie-dyes is more significant than Miranda's tenure-track position as a professor of English. What other family thinks like that? The hippie on tour with a band, doing God only knows what drugs is in higher esteem than the black sheep who had the nerve to pursue an MFA in creative writing, publish three collections of poetry with small but prestigious
presses, and have the further audacity to sign a contract to teach for a formal academic institution to pay the bills. No matter how many times Miranda cites Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and mentions City Lights Bookstore, Bertha rolls her eyes and says, "They had nothing on Robert Hunter. You know, he was a direct descendent of Robert Burns. What? Burns isn't good enough for you, Miz Brainiac?"

As she helps Bertha to the bathroom, Miranda studies the framed photograph of Jerry Garcia she mistook as a picture of her grandfather until she was five years old and could decipher the letters of the autograph that did not spell Jacob Pratt, her grandfather's name. Although she only has vague memories of the man since he died when she was three, it was Miranda's first tug of resentment. The frustration at her misunderstanding still burns as a tiny flame in the recesses of Miranda's thirty-year-old brain. The back of her memories, the lyric instinctually leaps to her consciousness, much like another Grateful Dead song triggers while reading scarlet begonia printed on a white plastic label in a garden center. Miranda mentally responds, daydream every time she hears sunshine. She can't help it. It's infused in her genes. Using organic chamomile soap infused with lavender Bertha receives on trade from a woman

named Rainbow, Miranda carefully washes her grandmother's body with a hemp sponge before lathering her in patchouli oil and dressing Bertha in one of the several caftans she now favors. Combing Bertha's long hair and winding it into a bun takes less time than patience. Miranda leaves Bertha to consider which jewelry she will choose from her vast collection; jewelry is crucial in her grandmother's life. Beading jewelry was her vocation and avocation, more her reason than her means for touring with the band. Being a vendor on Shakedown Street gives you a place of belonging. The holes Miranda's mother pierced in Miranda's ears when she was only a baby stand naked in protest. No vivid colors in her wardrobe; her teacher outfits consist of pencil skirts or tailored pants with simple knits, and cotton or silk shirts paired with leather loafers. Not one tie-dye in her closet and merely one strand of pearls Miranda clasps around her neck to teach. When she's not teaching, Miranda dons blue jeans and simple shirts or yoga pants because when she is not writing or teaching, she likes to practice yoga.

She stretches her neck, pulling her ear to her shoulder as the tea kettle on the stove boils, knowing the past three months of merely practicing yoga sporadically and not attending her regular classes are taking a toll on her muscles. Hell, it is wreaking havoc on her mind, too. There is only so much pot a person can smoke. When Miranda points out to Bertha that even Ram Dass stopped using psychedelics and started practicing meditation because he didn't like to come down, Bertha replies, "That's only because he didn't wait long enough for the bud these kids are growing and selling today. Long gone are the days of schwag, stems, and seeds. Come down? What's that?"

It's not as if Miranda doesn't like the Grateful Dead's music. It's not really about the music or the scene. Anything that takes her mother's attention away from Miranda is a source of anguish, a lingering pull children feel when abandoned. Of course, her mother wouldn't consider Miranda abandoned. Cassidy carried her daughter on her back as an infant, wandering from city to city to follow the band. It was a family affair for a while, including her grandfather and Bertha. But whenever Cassidy fell for a new man, Miranda was cast aside to her grandparent's care without a backward glance. Sometimes Cassidy would only be gone for days. Other times, weeks, and a few times, months. Because Miranda was told her mother was gone, on tour with the Grateful Dead, carefully omitting the part about Cassidy in yet another romance, Miranda resented the band. And it is embarrassing that Bertha inserts her ideas and hippie philosophies everywhere she goes, in every conversation she has. When three children rang the door to ask for a donation to travel to Costa Rica on a missionary trip, offering, in return, a wooden ornament printed with scripture. Bertha retrieved a ten-dollar bill from her pocket.

"I am not Christian, but I do believe in your faith to do what you think is good for the world and what I believe in most is kindness. So, take this money but keep your ornament. Go do good in the world, children. Fare thee well," Bertha said as she closed the door, and Miranda responded in rote, *my honey.*

The doorbell rings after breakfast in the garden where Bertha prefers to spend her days reading and listening to music, stretched on a lounge chair where she nods off to birds chirping; blue sky the last image before fatigue overtakes her senses while Miranda sits at the scrolled metal garden table, laptop open, empty document waiting to be imprinted with new verse she has yet to muster. Answering the door for this new candidate is a welcome interruption, even though Miranda dreads the inevitable. Bertha will cast sideway glances, dismiss the poor soul as unworthy, and pretend to fall asleep to end the interview early as Miranda politely makes

excuses for her grandmother even though it isn't the strokes that changed her personality. Bertha has always been this way. The irony of the deadhead culture irks Miranda. Open-minded, liberal, enlightened people are as elitist from their perspective as the capitalistic, middle-class conservatives they criticized are. Status depends upon how many shows you have seen, what vehicle you drive (VW buses, Jeeps, and Subarus, the gold standard), whose tie-dye you wear (better be Cassidy Creations, or you're a poseur), and which strand of marijuana you smoke. There are more categories defining the "custies," short for customers, from the real heads, primarily vendors.

Consequently, dismissed were the young woman in a starched blouse with a Peter Pan collar, the older man in an actual suit and tie, and the middle-aged woman Miranda believed to be the most qualified candidate, unsuitable because she donned Gucci loafers and a Cartier watch. Bertha may never wear anything designer like that, but she could identify status immediately. "Must be a recent widow, looking for something to do. Better off joining a million charities and devoting herself to endless fundraising than wanting to care for an old hippie like me," Bertha sniffed. After reading the woman's resume, Miranda saved that applicant's contact information. If whoever walked through this door didn't meet with Bertha's approval, Miranda has no choice. Bertha will just have to suffer the indignities of being washed by a woman wearing Brooks Brothers. Serves her right.

Determined to hire this new candidate, Miranda arranges for a preliminary meeting she plans to whisper in the front room before escorting the person through the back of the house, out to the garden where Bertha waits. Instead of an afternoon appointment like all the others, Miranda lies to Bertha and says this candidate can only meet in the morning, knowing Miranda could carve this private conversation easily while Bertha reclines in the garden. Practically the only thing Miranda can count on is Bertha's daily schedule. Its regularity mundane yet necessary to keep Bertha soothed. Any changes in routine or environment prompt Bertha to become so agitated that it takes Miranda hours and too many weed gummies, in Miranda's opinion, to quiet the old woman. Ironic for a nomadic woman. If Bertha went too many weeks without a live show, she would be so antsy that it drove her husband crazy, inevitably packing up the VW Bus, loading his wife and family, the tie-dyes, beads, jewelry, and supplies, and taking them on tour. Miranda wonders what he would think if he could see his wife now and returns to the recurring thought she hopes to shape into a poem. The heart attack that took Grandfather down was a perfect death, a clean death, if you will, especially compared to the devastation a series of small strokes have on a person, reduced to an infant almost in its diminished quality of life. Certainly, in need of full-time care.

Miranda reaches for the door handle as the bell rings a second time. Standing on the front porch is what appears to be a perfect candidate. Blond hair cut not too short, bearded, with smiling eyes wearing blue jeans and a plain hooded sweatshirt, Miranda spies a woven bracelet around his left wrist next to a watch and notices a glass pendant hanging from a hemp rope around the man's neck.

Miranda smiles at the young man and says, "Hello, you must be Jonathan. Please, come in."

Miranda settles in an armchair and indicates for Jonathan to take a seat on the sofa. Like most people upon their first visit, Jonathan hesitates, too busy gaping. Grandfather spared no expense in money and time to build his dream house. The sweeping front room with

beveled glass windows reaching the top of the cathedral ceilings is impressive enough without the stained-glass transom windows above the doorways leading to other rooms of the house. Another wall features a stone fireplace flanked by bookshelves so high that a sliding ladder was installed. Stuffed between the vast collection of books and on the wood slab mantle are objects of art, vases, and sculptures her grandparents collected from friends and through their travels. Paintings, and photographs, some framed and others not, dominate the only wall without doors or windows, hung so closely that the paint behind is barely visible. Miranda smiles when Jonathan spots the intricately beaded cobweb in the far-left corner of the room and walks toward it for further inspection. Not many people focus on one of the most exquisite pieces in the room, its web strung with crystal beads and pearls with tiny chandelier crystals mimicking dewdrops.

"How long have you worked as an aide with the agency?" Miranda asks, distracting Jonathan from the web and back to the matter at hand, his reason for being, this interview. Jonathan takes a seat on the sofa and replies, "Three years. My patient just passed away last month, so I'm looking for a new assignment."

When Miranda says, "Don't say, *passed away.* Say, dead," Jonathan looks startled. She also does not offer expected condolences. Good. Better she surprises him first in preparation for the earthquake that is Bertha. Miranda needs this final applicant to be a good fit. There is barely time to wait. She shakes her head to dismiss the lyric and asks, "Who is Jerry Garcia?"

"Only the *Greatest Story Ever Told*," Jonathan replies correctly.

Miranda feels the crick in her neck disappear in relief. Not trusting in hope, she squints and asks, "What do you really know about the Grateful Dead?"

"I wasn't old enough to see Jerry on stage, regrettably. But I have seen Dead and Company thirty-two times. And I like JRAD and catch Phil and Friends whenever I can. Does that count?"

In response, Miranda stands and motions for Jonathan to follow her to the garden to meet Bertha, who would surely be ringing the bell at any moment to request tea or fruit, another book or an extra blanket, assistance to use the bathroom, or any of the multitude of tasks Miranda looks forward to entrusting to Jonathan if the interview continues as well as it started. They walk swiftly through the unused formal dining room into the kitchen, where Miranda pauses to point out the obvious. If he is hired, they will return to this room for detailed diet and medication instructions before Miranda takes him to the bedroom and bathroom, newly outfitted with rails, a seat in the shower, and everything else a stroke survivor needs to be safe.

Miranda squints in the sunlight as she pushes the screen door, Jonathan following. Bertha's lounge chair faces the garden, and as Miranda walks across the stone patio, she makes a mental note to fix Bertha's bun that is askew, which she does as she leans over her grandmother, who is asleep, and whispers, "Bertha, you have a visitor."

Miranda waits for Bertha's startling blue eyes to open and for her to say something like, "What the hell are you thinking, waking an old woman? Don't you know dreaming is my favorite thing to do in life? I worry that we don't dream when we die. That would be terrible, wouldn't it? To not be able to dream anymore?" But Bertha doesn't move. Miranda strokes her grandmother's arm and says, "Bertha, wake up. You have a visitor." Bertha's hand is cold. Miranda perches on the lounge and repeats, "Bertha? Bertha?"

Jonathan puts his fingers on Bertha's neck to check her pulse while checking for signs of breath that do not come. "She's gone," he says.

Miranda doesn't repress the response this time. She owes Bertha that much. "Nothing's going to bring her back."

Elizabeth Beck

Love She Said

I walked into Brad's Ale House with half a cigarette burning in my mouth and a five-dollar note in my pocket. I noticed an open seat next to a Rabbi and a toothless girl with a crucifix between her breasts.

"What can I buy for you, my friend? Abel's the name." The Rabbi held out his hand, then patted the ripped leather bar stool, gesturing for me to sit.

"Jake," I said, shaking his hand. He looked at the girl for a second while speaking, and then, when she met his gaze, he turned his eyes back to me. He had thick, dark eyebrows, bushy enough to comb each morning. And he had a sharp hook-shaped nose extending over his top lip and spoke with an accent.

"Canadian?" I asked.

He laughed, "I get that a lot." And then he pulled up the sleeve of his Kittel and showed me a purpled-tinged *Prince* tattoo.

I noticed the girl still barely glancing at the Rabbi. And the way her eyes and lips creased downward, her expression appeared scornful.

"Minnesota?" I smiled.

"You betcha!" He raised his shot glass, which I guessed was filled with whiskey, then tossed it into his mouth like a splash of water.

As I sat down, the girl whispered. "Life ain't easy, Handsome."

I nodded, grinning something anxious.

"Damn straight," Abel mean-mugged the woman, then focused back on me before saying, "So what you drinking, Kid?" His eyes appeared more bloodshot than previously.

"Whatever you're drinking, Sir," I smirked, half looking at his empty glass.

"Brad, get this man a double!"

Brad, the barman, was a short, stocky man with one of the most beautifully manicured handlebar mustaches I'd ever seen. He wore a yellowish stained cut-off white shirt and a train conductor's hat.

"On the rocks, Stranger?"

"Sure."

"Looks like someone broke your heart, Kid."

I fiddled with a button on my baby blue cotton shirt.

"You know how I know?"

"How?" I mumbled.

"Your eyes. The eyes of a man don't know how to lie." The way Abel's voice carried, it seemed he intended his words for the toothless woman.

Brad set the double shot of whiskey in front of me. I slung it into my mouth, straining my face as the burn traveled down my back. Laughing, Abel shifted his gaze between me, Brad, and the toothless girl. "That's how we all drink 'em, all of us broken-hearted types. Pour him another, Brad!"

I lifted my hand, politely refusing, but Brad banged the glass against the counter without hesitation as though he'd been expecting Abel's instruction. I'd only eaten half a BLT at lunch, now more than sic hours ago, unable to finish it after Vicky told me she'd be leaving me.

"C'mon kid, its good for you; helps with the pain." Abel nudged the glass towards me

as a warm euphoria began roping my senses.

"What the hell," I said, then threw the shot down as though I'd been drinking nightly doubles for twenty years.

"I only ever dreamed of two things," I mumbled, looking down at the counter, tracing my finger into the names carved with a steak knife.

"And what's that?"

I craned my neck to look at the toothless girl. The late afternoon sun shone through a crease in the tinted window, brightening her silver crucifix. I turned back to Abel and then to the girl again before speaking, "A girl and a mission."

Abel nodded, puckering his lips. "Ain't that all of us, Kid?" He raised his empty glass. "Be fruitful and multiply!"

"She said she'd leave me if I didn't stay. If I don't put my roots down in this god-forsaken town."

"Well, do you love her?"

I traced my finger into a carving that read, *Summer-of-85*. "I think so."

Fiddling with the crucifix, the lady stood up, driving her palms into the counter, looking at me with something fierce. "No, you don't."

"Now, now. Give the kid a break, will you?" Abel spoke sharply, standing up and meeting the woman with a dirty look.

"Why'd you say that?" I asked the lady, feeling sheepish, trying to deflect her anger from Abel.

She leaned towards me, her crucifix dangling in front of my eyes, her breath the scent of licorice. "Because any man who truly loves his woman will give up everything to have her." She momentarily made eye contact with me, then stared holes into Abel's temples.

"Everything!?" Abel slammed his leathery hands onto the counter, twisting his head to meet the woman's gaze.

"Everything!" the lady screamed, storming out of the barroom.

"She'll be back tomorrow," Brad mumbled.

"I know," Abel replied, resting his head in his palms.

My curiosity veiled my heartache as I thought about inquiring Abel for more details about his relationship with the toothless girl. But it was as though the light had turned dark on his face, and the previous blush of his olive skin was now a dull grey.

We sat in silence for a while. I felt unsure where to rest my eyes, eventually settling them on a TV showing a bull riding contest.

"We used to be in love." Abel's head turned slowly towards me. "Me and Terry." He pointed to the empty bar stool where the lady had been sitting.

"But then she found Jesus. And all of that changed." He snapped his fingers.

"And don't forget about Pastor Daniel," Brad added.

Abel nodded. "Yeah, he's part of it for sure. She doesn't know how to wipe her own ass without getting clearance from that prick."

Abel began drumming his fingers on the counter, a slow, sad beat. "I used to be everything to her, and then just like that, I ain't nothing. Nothing more than a piece in her great divine puzzle. So you know what I did, Kid?"

His words slurred as he spoke louder. I turned to look at him, and instead of being

distracted by his thick eyebrows, I watched a stream of saliva trickle down his bottom lip. "What?" I managed.

"I became a damn Rabbi."

Brad chuckled and offered an expression that indicated he'd heard this story a hundred times before.

"Why?"

The Rabbi raised two fingers towards Brad. "I don't exactly know why, Kid. Maybe to show her I could also find God, make her jealous, make her feel the way she made me feel, to try put that damn fool, Daniel, in his place? I don't know. All of the above, I suppose."

"Did it work?"

"Not even a little. It pushed her further away. She told me we'd be done if I didn't convert to Christianity. That's why she's in here screaming about giving up everything for someone you love, but she's so scared of hell, Kid, scared that our love's going to send her there. Plus, I'm sure she's probably trying to get another notch in her evangelical belt to run and tell Pastor Daniel that she converted the whiskey-loving Rabbi. But I'll be damned if I let that happen."

I looked at the Rabbi, half thinking about my situation with Vicky. "But you still love her?"

Abel stared into the counter, then turned to look at me with eyes that seemed to be on the verge of giving out in tears, "More than you know, Kid."

Brad set two shot glasses of whiskey in front of Abel. Abel slid one of them over to me, then slammed the other down his throat. "But I ain't no puppet, Kid, and neither are you!" His eyes were nearly completely red, and now, instead of looking like he was going to cry, he appeared rage-bent. "And that damn Pastor Daniel hasn't made things any easier. Keeps telling her to stay away from me. He's why we divorced; kept telling her our marriage wasn't biblical! Whatever that means!" Abel let out big breaths of air as though struggling to breathe, or he was trying to calm himself. I noticed Brad studying Abel with a concerned face, fingering his mustache while wiping a glass that appeared clean. I stared at the shot of whiskey before me, trying to keep a steady gaze on Abel in my peripheral. Abel's head began bobbing back and forth, and his deep breathing became softer. He landed heavily on the counter within a few seconds, making a loud thud. Brad stepped closer to him, set a soft cushion under his head, and then wiped the spit pooling between his lips. "Happens at least once a week."

"That they run into each other?" I said, a little confused.

"Oh no, the fighting. They meet here every day around this time." Brad had an eye on my shot glass. "Terry normally stays a lot longer, though."

"Why!?" I shouted, curling my hands around my glass and pulling it closer to my chest.

"Because they love each other."

I hurled the whiskey into my mouth and then let out a burning sound. "You're going to have to explain this all to me, Brad."

Brad took my glass, held it under a tap, and then started wiping with the same rag he'd been using. "They started meeting here after the divorce got finalized about two years ago now. Terry was a real zealot back then, way worse than she is now. She'd open and end their time together with prayer, wore long, loose dresses, virtually zero neckline."

I struggled to keep my eyes on Brad as I felt my head going light, and his voice seemed

to develop this trailing effect. “Speak up a bit, will you?”

He put the glass down and moved closer. “Just saying she’s eased up a little, that’s all. The only reason why she lost it tonight is cause there’s probably some revival happening at her church, and she’s feeling guilty. She’s only like that when they say the spirit’s moving, you know?”

“So why don’t they just get back together?”

Brad chuckled. “The human conscience is a powerful thing.” He glanced at the Rabbi. “And so is religion. And Pastor Daniel, I guess. He’s got some kind of grip on her. Wouldn’t be surprised if he’s trying to jump a ride on that pink canoe when they close the altar curtains, if you know what I mean?” Brad gave me an exaggerated wink and a wry smile.

“But they still love each other?”

“Yeah. They do. But like I said, when you think you’re going to go to hell because you’re married to a heathen, love doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“The Bible says that?”

Brad poured a shot of whiskey into the glass I’d just drank from. “Apparently. At least according to Terry and Pastor Daniel. Hell, if I know, though, Kid.”

I stared into a neon-pink-lit mirror above the bottle rows of liquor, mulling it all over. The pink-lit frame swallowed the mirror the longer I looked at it. Brad tossed the whiskey into his mouth.

The same shade of pink as the mirror began cloaking Brad in my vision. “Well, why doesn’t the Rabbi just become a Christian? Seems like that would solve everything.”

Brad laughed, grabbing the bottle of whiskey again. “Abe’s one of those old soul purists. It’s what I love about him, a take-it-or-leave-it kinda of guy, you know? He ain’t about to jump on Terry’s hamster wheel. He doesn’t think that’s the way love should work. Neither do I, frankly.”

I stopped thinking about Abel and Terry for a minute, arrested suddenly by my dilemma with Vicky.

“What’s so confusing, Kid?”

In the pink-lit mirror, I noticed the frown on my forehead. “Oh, it makes perfect sense,” I said, “Just thinking about something else now.”

Abel began snoring; then he moved his head so half of it was off the pillow. Brad immediately readjusted the pillow, perfectly repositioning it.

“It’s not the same with me and Vicky, you know?”

Brad turned to me with confused but caring eyes.

“How does she expect me to stay in this town all my life? And do what? I want to see the world, you know? Make something of myself. Is that too much to ask?”

Stepping closer, the bottle of whiskey turning in his hand, it looked as though Brad was about to pour another shot. He started to say something when the saloon-style doors swung wildly back and forth.

“Just a simple prayer and a water baptism. Is that too much to ask for love, Brad!?” Terry had been crying; her black mascara looked like lines a child had drawn down her cheeks.

“He doesn’t think that’s how love works, Terry, you know that.” Brad tilted his head downward and kept his eyes on the sleeping Rabbi as he spoke.

“I always thought the Bible spoke out against divorce. Didn’t Jesus say something like that?” I

said. The effects of the whiskey made me feel more confident in Terry's presence. I also noticed the beauty of her delicate, pleasant face, hardly carrying the weathered marks of somebody her age.

"Well, that ain't what Pastor Daniel says! That's why I came back in here tonight." Terry stared at Abel, moving closer to him with eyes that appeared longing for something she knew she couldn't possess.

"What you mean?" Brad set a shot of whiskey in front of Terry.

She threw it into her mouth, then slammed the shot glass with a sound like a Fourth of July drum against the counter right beside Abel's ear.

"God Jesus, mother, Mary of Moses!" Abel almost fell off his bar stool, wobbling backward, reaching his hands towards Brad, who grabbed him by the fingers, securing him on the seat.

"He asked me to marry him."

The bottle of whiskey fell crashing to the floor, slipping out of Brad's hands.

"Pastor Daniel."

"What?" Abel screamed, standing and approaching Terry with an untempered urgency.

"He says a woman needs a man. A God-fearing one. And he's damn right, you know. He's right, Abel!" Terry's voice was high and cracking now as she spoke. I kept looking for tears, but she succeeded in holding them back.

"Son of a god-damn bitch. He's been playing you all this time! Can't you see it now?" Abel rolled up the sleeves on his Kittel, revealing trim, veiny forearms.

At this point, I began mulling over old Sunday school lessons I'd attended as a kid. I was almost certain that the Bible and Jesus didn't condone divorce. Terry and Abel kept arguing while I grabbed my phone and began a simple Google search. After refining the search a few times, I found a great article titled "What Jesus and the Bible Say About Divorce."

When I looked up from my phone, Abel had his arms around Terry, and her head was in his chest, both crying.

"Read this!" I shouted, holding my phone up to them. "If anything, the Bible wants the believing woman to stay married to the unbelieving husband. Read it!"

Abel grabbed my phone while Terry lifted herself off his chest. He set the phone on the counter, and they began reading the article.

"Well, I'll be damned," Abel dropped a gentle fist on his bar stool, and a broad smile appeared over his lips as though he'd just found something he'd been searching for all his life.

"How do we know it's true though?"

"It's the Bible, Babe!"

What I determined on Terry's face was not the same excitement that Abel possessed. She looked nervous as though caught in a devious act.

But then her face began to soften as she continued pondering the situation.

"So Pastor Daniel's been lying to me this whole time? He said the Bible forbade it, that a Christian woman couldn't be married to a heathen without the certainty of hell."

Brad came up from the floor with a dustpan full of shattered glass. "Because he wants to butter the biscuit! That's why I don't go to church; too many bad players in the game." Brad reached for another bottle of whiskey, poured four shots, and passed them around.

Abel took Terry's hand and pulled her closer, then lifted her and put her on his lap. He

whispered something in her ear, and she laughed nervously, then he raised his shot glass, saying with great triumph, “To the words of Jesus on marriage!”

Terry was the first to clink her glass next to his, and then Brad and I joined. “Cheers,” we said in unison, pouring the whiskey into our mouths.

We spoke a little more about the Bible and marriage. Abel and Terry discussed wedding venues and a tentative date.

And then, after a bit of silence, Abel squeezed my shoulder and rocked me back and forth. “You’re going to be my best man, Kid! We owe you that much, at least!”

“And you can bring your lady friend. We’d love to meet her.” Terry added.

Abel moved his hand to the back of my neck, gently massaging his finger and thumb, much like a father would do to a son. “Yeah, what you thinking about her, Kid?” Abel was a blurred blob of black in my vision.

“I guess I’m not sure now.”

On the dim TV, I could make out an interview with a man who’d sailed around the world in a hundred and fifty-two days. I grabbed the remote and turned up the volume. He had his arm around a crying woman, or so I thought that’s what I was seeing in my drunken state.

The reporter moved towards the woman. “How did you do it? How were you able to let him go for that long?”

“Love,” she said.

Luke Beling

Aperture

Margaret extends her hand. I reach into my pocket and pull out my wallet.

"Twenty should do it," she says. I hand her two tens. She turns and follows our daughter, Beverly, down the young adult aisle. This bookstore has the best selection of kids' books, so we visit often.

I stand in front of the magazine display, eyes skimming over colourful covers adorned with Hollywood starlets and pop singers. I pick one at random and flip through the glossy pages.

Beverly loves to read. She may not look like me—she's the spitting image of her mother—but at least she's inherited my love of books. The bookshelf in her bedroom is crammed with novels, mostly popular teen fiction like Judy Blume, but with a bit of fantasy thrown in. Even *Watership Down*. Her favourite is an oversized faux-leather hardcover of children's stories. I think she just likes the weight of it, as if its bulk makes it an "important" book.

Margaret has no patience for reading, unless it's the Bible or perhaps Good Housekeeping, which she occasionally reads while waiting for water to boil on the stove or for bread dough to rise. She prefers keeping busy with housework, baking for church fundraisers, or shopping. Our closet is bursting with her outfits; I may eventually have to move my clothes into the closet in the spare room. Many of her dresses and blouses still have the tags attached. I think shopping is her way of coping.

I replace the magazine in its rightful place and stroll through the store. Margaret is now in the cookbook section studying a book of dessert recipes; I pass her without a word.

I find myself in fantasy, which is tucked into a corner—it's probably the smallest section in the store. I stand with my back facing the aisle, reading the first few pages of something by Piers Anthony, when I hear someone laugh nearby.

I haven't heard that laugh in twenty-one years.

I turn and see two men who look about my age at the end of the aisle, heads bent over a hardcover. One man has his back to me; he is short with thinning blonde hair. The other, the man who had laughed, is turned toward the bookshelf. I can see his face in profile. His beautiful face, a face I haven't even allowed myself to recall in years. Peter.

A warm sensation floods my chest. I hold my breath and steady myself with a hand on the shelf. Questions crowd in: what if he turns and sees me? What if I approach him? How should I act? How will *he* act?

For the moment Peter is oblivious to my presence. I stare at him, remembering his pointed chin, now covered in a short beard; his slender frame, now developing a paunch; the deep love

I had for him, a love that washes over me again.

***

I have no idea what living in a rural area is like today, but back in the sixties I felt pretty isolated. In high school I wished I could have stayed after class and hung out with my friends who lived in town, but I had no choice but to catch the school bus home. It was that or walk four miles, then get reamed by my father as soon as I walked in the door for being so late. Outside of school, I rarely saw anyone my own age; it was my parents and I, day after day. My parents hardly had any friends either, being the only black family in the vicinity. Integration was still very new, and most neighbours kept their distance. My mother would simultaneously complain about their narrow-mindedness and call them horrible names, declaring she'd rather cut off her own arm than associate with them.

Being an only child certainly didn't help. All of my parents' expectations fell on me alone, and without having a sibling as a built-in playmate, someone to help with the chores or share ideas and dreams with, everything just stayed in my head.

Until Peter, that is.

Peter lived in town, which had a small black population. He was a good all-around athlete, and this bolstered his popularity. Most girls were off-limits, but I knew many of them harboured not-so-secret crushes on him. They weren't the only ones who watched him run around the track behind the school. Margaret and I would occasionally sit on the bleachers together and watch the track team practice.

"He's so cute," she'd breathe.

I would nod, trying to act disinterested, but inside I agreed. Peter was gorgeous.

In twelfth grade Margaret asked him on a date. The "date" was spending the evening with her family—parents and two younger brothers—drinking lemonade and listening to Margaret's father talk about cars, specifically a Ford convertible he was currently saving up for. Peter was also saving up for a car, but hardly a new one: a jalopy their neighbour planned on selling. So long as it ran, that was all that mattered to him.
Though the "romance" with Margaret fizzled before it had even begun, their friendship opened the door for Peter and me to start spending lunch breaks and study periods together. During this time I thought about him constantly while pretending to my parents that I wasn't bringing any girls home because they weren't interested in me.

"What about Margaret?" my mother asked on more than one occasion. "You should invite her over sometime."

I would shrug and make vague assurances that someday I would. The very thought of bringing

a girl around, especially one my mother held in high esteem, filled me with dread. I feared following the same stifling trajectory as everyone else around there: get married. Have kids. Work the same job until you retire. Play with grandkids. Die. I did not want to end up in that box. Surely I could somehow live outside it.

About a month before graduation, Peter finally bought his car: a ten-year-old Lincoln Continental that obviously hadn't been maintained. Peter did his best to fix it up so it was at least road-worthy.

"Gets me from Point A to Point B," he said when he first drove it to school. "That's all I need."

It took two weeks to drum up the nerve to ask him if he'd like to go fishing sometime in the pond near my house. I thought that at least we could hang out together if nothing else. I assumed he liked girls—I assumed everyone but me was "normal"—and that even if he didn't, he wouldn't be interested in me, and even if he was, we would still go our separate ways after graduation, get married, have kids and work in the same job until retirement. Perhaps we'd be lucky enough to cross paths years from now, miles from here, and we could hold our heads up and stop pretending to be just like everyone else.

But Peter wasn't like everyone else.

On Saturday he drove out to my house and, after he charmed the pants off my parents, we shouldered our fishing poles and struck out through the woods to the pond. It was deserted, which was surprising for a warm Saturday morning—usually young kids would fish or swim or play tag in the trees. But today it was ours.

We settled down with our lines in the water. The sounds of crickets and cicadas filled the air. Peter gazed across the pond as the silence between us stretched. Finally he turned and asked, "Am I reading you right?"

He smiled, and I was lost. The touch of his hands on my face was enough to make me weep. The relief, the want, the joy of knowing I wasn't alone overwhelmed me. I told him I loved him that very morning, unsure if I really meant it but needing him to understand how important he was to me.

We only saw each other for three weeks. That's how long it took to be found out.

Almost every day Peter would drive up and we would trot out to the pond with our poles, but never return with any fish. Or we would tell my parents we were meeting some friends in town, but instead drive farther out into the country for privacy. At one point my father suggested I not spend so much time with Peter—"The chores aren't getting done," he said—but his eyes were dark and I couldn't help but laugh at the seriousness of his expression. I was too happy, too distracted to notice. All that mattered was seeing Peter, spending every moment I could with him. I should have paid attention.

To this day I don't know who saw us doing what or where; I assume at the pond, where someone could easily have spotted us through the trees and then reported back to my parents. All I know is at the end of the third week, after Peter dropped me off home, I was confronted by my stony-faced mother and a father who wouldn't look me in the eye. Within forty-eight hours I had been shipped off to a farm three hours away where my uncle worked as a field foreman. My uncle only spoke to me about our work on the farm and the weather. Otherwise he stayed tight-lipped. Humiliated, confused and ashamed, I worked hard and stayed out of his way until it was time to return home for college.

Only then did I learn that Peter's parents had forced him to enlist. I prayed he hadn't been shipped to South Vietnam, but I had no way of knowing.

During my absence my parents had spoken with Margaret, who was at loose ends after high school. Upon my return we began dating, and we married once I completed a marketing course at college. I found entry-level work with a "progressive" advertising agency, and we rented an apartment in town. As I dedicated myself to my new career we could afford to move away and buy our first house.

Life with Margaret hasn't been easy, and it hasn't been happy. I can put on a smiling face when needed, and I have colleagues and a few cousins of Margaret's with whom I'm chummy, but Peter was the only person I've ever felt I could truly be myself around, share my thoughts and fears with. It's been twenty-one years of pretending to be someone I'm not. Margaret would say I'm not a very good actor. I know she isn't very happy either; I know this isn't the life she envisioned for herself. But Beverly has been our bright spot.

***

The fantasy book is forgotten in my hand. I watch Peter smiling at his friend (boyfriend?), who says something that makes him laugh again. It sounds so good to hear his voice—deeper, rougher, but still his.

I return the book to the shelf. This could mean rejection, it could mean divorce, it could mean nothing, but I have to try. I have to.

I approach them, eyes on Peter. He glances up, his smile fading and eyes widening.

"Hi, Peter," I say, and extend my hand.

Elle Boyd

The Bereavement Axis of Animal Spirits

"Animal spirits is the term John Maynard Keynes used in his 1936 book The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money to describe the instincts, proclivities and emotions that ostensibly influence and guide human behavior..."--Wikipedia

According to all of the tests that we judge our self-worth by, I'm emotionally brilliant and bookish to a fault, but I can't seem to figure out why I don't have any friends.

I used to think it was a problem that could be diagnosed. I've endured a barrage of medicine and treatment but no matter how chemically happy and stable I become people still don't like me.

Therapists are people you pay to be your friends when you can't get anyone you know to like or listen to you. Unfortunately, they're also mostly idiots.

"For your homework, I want you to write three things you like about yourself a night."

I hid my scorn like it was my poker hand. "For how long."

"For however long it takes."

That night, I sat down with my brand-new notebook and my brand-new pen and prepared myself for positivity. I came up with one thing.

1. I like that I know that this exercise is bullshit. I haven't gone to a therapy session since.

There was this story on the news about a high school girl who offed herself. When they asked her parents why she did it, they said, "Because she thought she was a loser."

The reporters asked why she thought that.

The mother's eyes filled with tears. "She said because her only friends were her parents." The clincher is, your parents have to like you; it's biology.

So I heard that.

And I felt that.

But I really try to not feel much of anything anymore.

Like that girl whose name I've already forgotten like probably everybody else, I didn't shine in high school either. My teachers all loved me, the quiet girl who didn't do her homework or pay attention in class but aced every test. My economics teacher took a special interest in me. I wrote up a graph about the net profits of investing time into socialization and the opportunity cost of devoting money and energy into connections that faded once you hit grade 13. She gave me ten points of extra credit and a slip to visit the guidance counselor.

The guidance counselor whose name doesn't matter either placed a copy of my graph in front of me the way detectives in crime shows place pictures of victims in front of whatever suspect they're grilling. In a voice that carried just as much levity, she asked, "Can you explain this to me?"

I looked at the graph and then I looked her dead in the eye. "It's a fucking graph," I said. "It's designed to explain itself."

She gave me an appalled look that I took as a dismissal. That afternoon, I went out and bought a pack of Mistys. I heard about oral cancer and lung cancer but I also heard that smoking cigarettes made people feel better. They made me feel like I was hurting myself, and that's always a bit of a high, so I guess, in a way, they did.

I would smoke before school, during lunch, after school, and on the roof outside my bedroom window before I went to bed. When Pennsylvania's rainy April gave way to a humid May, my mom started sleeping with her window open. She smelled the smoke and opened my bedroom door with the key she kept in her underwear drawer and stared at me for a full minute before acting.

She ducked out my window and sat down beside me. She held out two fingers and I wedged the half-smoked cig between them. After she took a puff, I asked, "You smoke?"

"Not since I got pregnant." "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

It was almost an, "I love you."

When Twitter came around, I made an account. I garnered over a thousand followers in my first month but I was also completely anonymous so there's that. On Facebook, where everyone actually knows you and everything you don't want them to know about you, no one liked any of my shit. Even when I posted that my dog died, I didn't get a single heart or like. Not even a sad emoji. So fuck those cunts.

They told me it would be different once I got to college. I had the grades to get a full scholarship to Penn State, so that's where I went. A "party" school with 20,000 students in their student body, I was bound to find friends. I joined clubs, tried to get involved--everything from Ultimate Frisbee to a Christian youth group, though fuck God if she is real.

None of them stuck. There was no "Creative Economics" club, so I was shit out of luck.

I ended up double majoring in Econ and Statistics because those were the subjects that made the most sense to me. I did my homework when I had to and put in the minimal amount of studying I needed to pass which wasn't much. I killed time by walking around campus. And around and around and around. I liked that I could blend into the crowd like I belonged. When in motion, I felt like I had a sense of purpose--like I had someplace to be with people that actually cared about me.

My senior year, I got my own apartment. They didn't allow pets, but I thought about getting a dog. A lab, like Keynes had been. I drew up graph after graph of the objective pros and cons and decided against it. Instead of gaining the freshman fifteen, I'd lost it and then some. I didn't weigh a whole lot to start with, so how, I wondered, could I take care of someone else if I couldn't even take care of myself?

In the interest of full disclosure, there was one kid who liked me. Not just wanted-to-fuck-me like me, but actually liked me. He was a wiry boy with wire-rimmed glasses and a wry sense of humor. He sat next to me in economics class and saw one of the graphs I was doodling. It was an analysis of brain cell and dignity loss before and after the initiation to a fraternity or sorority. He leaned over while I scribbled away on my graph pad and whispered,

"I never had much use for Greek life either."

Without looking up, I said, "How's that Geek life working out for you."

When he didn't respond, I looked up. He was smiling.

After that, I let him buy me ice cream. The Creamery was one of the few places I actually ate. "So you're not skinny because you starve yourself," he said.

I licked my mint chocolate chip cone. "Not on purpose."

He was nice enough to laugh.

He showed me a song by a British pop band that was the perfect mixture of sardonic

and sad. I put it on repeat because it made me feel not happy but okay and that's more than any of the drugs I tried could do.

I lost him a week after he kissed me. The first time he did it, I was so surprised I didn't kiss him back. Then he did it again, in my bedroom, and I panicked.

He jerked back, utterly turned off. "What's wrong?"

I jumped up and felt my heart pounding. "The door's unlocked the door's unlocked the door's unlocked."

He stared at me. "You live alone."

I started to cry.

He became distant after that. We no longer had class together--he was an Anthropology major--so there was no reason for us to interact. I tried texting him a few times, but I didn't know what to say. I stared at the blank text message until my hands shook and I had to put my phone down. To no one, I whispered,

"The door was unlocked."

I've been told that I'm pretty. Not just pretty--beautiful. Even when I cut off all my hair, the boys still stared. None of them wanted to talk to me, but all of them wanted to look.

I think that's why girls don't like me. It's an unwritten rule that girls are always in competition with other girls. And I'm smart and skinny and pretty. I'm a triple threat. Three strikes and you're out.

I had two female friends in middle school. Moriah and Kelsey. They told me I was funny and Keynes liked them so I thought they were cool. Then I found out once a month that they had a sleepover with just the two of them, and they would talk for hours about all the "weird" and "uncool" shit I did.

"She actually likes math."

"And why is she always quoting statistics to us. Like, who cares?"

"Not me."

"Not me."

And they'd giggle like I never could.

I found out from Alicia Rockburn, the mean but somehow popular girl who had the decency to bully people up front. She came up to me one day during science class and stood over me until I looked at her.

She waited for me to speak first. "What?" I asked.

She popped the gum she wasn't supposed to be chewing. I got hit with a cloud of grape.

"You know you have no friends, right?"

I stared at her.

"Moriah and Kelsey don't actually like you."

I put down my copy of Artemis Fowl. "What?"

"They talk about you all the time. How you're...different. "

'Different' doesn't inherently carry a bad connotation, but she said it like it did. "How do you know?"

She popped another bubble. "We have Art together. They joke about you all the time." Looking pointedly at my novel, "Those books you read are your only real friends."

After that, I started eating lunch alone. Moriah and Kelsey never said anything, never even pretended to care. If they ever caught me looking at them, they'd whisper behind their

hands and giggle the way they could. By high school, they were 100% Alicia's lackeys and I was a branded outcast. I didn't go out for any sports and didn't join any clubs. I'd go straight home after school and walk Keynes until it was too dark to stay out any longer. If my mom thought it strange that I was always alone, she didn't say anything. She was always alone, after all. Dad left her for a younger woman when I entered the Terrible Twos. She was like me, beautiful but bookish--unfortunately so. She didn't drink, but she smoked the shitty weed our town had access to in her bedroom with the door locked and I pretended like I didn't know. She still made it to work on time, still performed brilliant biochemical research I didn't pretend to understand, and still made ends meet. So I pilfered a nug now and then and said sweet fuck all.

I got drunk once. Just once. I stood in the parking lot of a gas station like a prostitute until some fifty-year-old man was creepy enough to approach me.

"How's it going, sweet thang?"

I shivered in my skimpy outfit. "It's my birthday. I just turned 18."

His eyes lit up. I handed him a twenty. "Buy me a drink?"

"Sure, sure." He tried not to salivate. "What do you like?"

I had no idea. "Something strong."

He came back out five minutes later with a bottle in a brown paper bag. "Sweet wine for a sweet thang," he said, handing it over. "How about we drive over to my place and let it breathe for a while?"

I turned on my three inch heel and strode toward my Subaru. The November chill had turned my skin to gooseflesh. "No thanks. And my birthday's in February. I'll be 17."

I waited until midnight, when Mom's high wore off and she'd munchied herself into a slumber. Then I put on sweatpants and my oversized coat and crept out onto the porch. We had a swing bench outside and a picturesque view, weeping willow and all. I googled how to work a bottle opener and took a swig.

It tasted like strawberries and made me cough. I'd looked up the optimal BAC for my height and weight and drank the three glasses that would get me there. Then I set the half-empty bottle down and allowed myself to feel loose and bubbly and silly. Keynes, ever by my side, came up to me and sniffed the bottle and then me. I giggled. Then I froze, remembering who I was. Then I said, "Fuck it," and giggled again.

I ended up drinking the rest of that bottle. I woke up on the living room sofa with a blinding headache covered in goosebumps. Something was banging, banging, banging to the rhythm of the pounding in my head. I stood up and stumbled toward the noise. I found the door unlocked and ajar. I closed it without thinking twice and stumbled to my bedroom before my mom woke up.

Three hours later, I woke to a different pounding--someone was thundering away at our front door.

My mom beat me to it. She switched the lock and cracked it open a couple of inches. She recognized our neighbor, Bill Something, standing on our welcome mat looking pale and sickly. He held something brown and limp in his arms.

My mom's hands went to her mouth. My heart dropped to my shoes. My feet turned cold and grew roots.

Bill cleared his throat. "Is, is this your dog?"

He knew it was. After a moment, my mom managed to nod.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He even sounded it. “I found him by the side of the road. Somebody must have hit him some time last night. Did you leave your door unlocked?”

Mom shook her head, and I stood there watching her, too frozen to nod mine. Because she hadn’t.

But I had.

My only friend in the world, and I’d killed him.

That’s when the therapy started, the incompetent paid friends. They drugged me up and pulled my story out of me like wisdom teeth. They all said the same thing.

I didn’t kill him.

I didn’t kill him.

I didn’t kill him.

And I want to believe them, but I don’t think I believe in much of anything anymore.

Alexandra Grese

An Unacceptable View

"Zach, call security!"

The screen is a blur, but she dabs her eyes with her sleeve and manages a few words: "Samantha, you are mending broken hearts." And — since there's no one here to see — she wipes her nose with the same tear-dampened sleeve and adds, simply, "Thank you."

The messages of support pop up so quickly on the livestream that they bounce away before she can push a "like" or a "love" button, but she will go through them later, as she's been doing since the start, read every word, respond to some, thumb-up or heart most. Not her usual style, engaging in social media love-ins with strangers, but these are not usual times. Right now, it's all she can offer, and she has the time. Nothing is left for her but time.

"Zach, call security!"

That's how it had started, she supposes, though it hadn't really hit her until sometime later, after she'd stood outside the hospital for what seemed ages, hands and feet numb from middle-of-the-night December cold, mind numb from shock. Not the ordinary shock that was yet to come, that harsh reality everyone who has truly loved must one day face. No, this was a strange awakening, this shock, the comprehension of a blatant and unapologetic segregation; of being deemed unworthy of even the smallest kindness the comfort of a caring voice could have provided, just a head stuck out the heavy automatic glass doors of Emergency to let her know what was happening to her life's only treasure.

"What?" The young man, to his credit, had seemed incredulous at his supervisor's unwarranted command, and Alena had been grateful for that, had spared him.

"No, please, that's not necessary. I'm leaving now." She had looked at Hamish, who'd half-risen — unmindful of his condition — from the chrome and orange-vinyl chair that faced the Admissions desk, eyes wild with fear and confusion as he plucked helplessly at the binding, just-applied patient bracelet.

"Please sit down, honey. You're likely having a heart attack and I can't take you home." She'd looked into the stony eyes of the plump, fortyish woman behind the Plexiglas barrier, hoping to ignite some hidden ember of kindness there, but found nothing. "He's sixty-nine and his hearing's been off, he didn't understand, okay? He thought you said *he* has to leave." She'd looked back at Hamish then, so clearly in distress, in need of immediate help while the woman — leisurely, it seemed to Alena — ticked off her questionnaire boxes as if this were a denture office or perhaps a bank from which they'd been applying for a loan. She'd mustered what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

"It's okay, Hamish. I'll be right outside."

Right outside. For three hours, as it turned out — the surreal scene hovers, even as she watches the trucks roll into Regina on her screen — she'd waited without word outside the massive glass panels, her endless pacing inadvertently yet repeatedly activating the sensors, causing a whoosh as the automatic doors opened, startling her each time out of a threatening stupor. No one seemed to notice her, not the blank-eyed uniformed security guards who made their rounds in a regiment of three (*three!*), not the various staff members who came and went as changing shifts dictated, staring vacantly ahead or intently at their phones.

. Not, understandably, the regular folks caught up in wee hour traumas of their own. Only a rather disoriented elderly man in a wheelchair had asked for a light, which she regretted not having, so starved for some connection with humanity was she.

Three hours, and it would have been more had she not gotten bold. She'd waited patiently, what choice was there? The desk, to the immediate right upon entry was visible, but just — no way to know what was going on mere steps beyond the unoccupied head Admissions nurse's chair. But she'd watched until it seemed fairly certain that the hostile woman was on a break or had gone off duty; presumably she'd left by some side exit, and only the milder young man remained. *Be honest,* she corrects herself now. *You didn't find courage, just opportunity.*

Alena wipes another tear at this unwelcome reminder of what she views in herself as a lack of character, focuses on her screen. Now *here* are some brave souls! Saskatchewan in winter is infinitely colder than Vancouver Island, and at towns and overpasses all along the route, people have bundled up, wait expectantly — even now, as it grows dark — to wave their flags and banners, laden the truckers with homemade sandwiches and cookies, carefully wrapped with handwritten messages of encouragement and appreciation. Alena marvels as the video captures families gathered around bonfires, she catches fireworks going off in the distance. When in her fifty-six years has she witnessed something like this? *Oh Hamish, how I wish you were here to see this.* It is now so clear that she had never been alone; even sitting in solitude in front of her laptop at her old maple desk in the dim light of a January evening, so far away, she feels a part of something. There's a reconnection with her childhood, a stirring of pride she's not sure she's ever, in all honesty, experienced. It's an unexpected feeling that, even considering all she's lost, resembles hope.

"You're right, Susan, there is so much hope… I know, Gabrielle, I'm overwhelmed too … Thank you for your support Amir, and I'm so very sorry. Know it's for kids like your son that we're on this journey …" As always, often through tears, the pretty, petite blonde woman, Samantha, accompanying the driver of the lead truck takes time to respond to some of the thousands of comments her livestream inspires. Raising her camera, she again pans the crowd. "Thank you, Regina. Thank you Saskatchewan!"

Saskatchewan. They'd had such plans. Hamish and Alena had spent the previous summer in the badlands of that province's Southwest, roaming the hills, searching the grasslands for flowering cactus and wild rose, crouching still and breathless at the approach of antelope or even, in certain places, a buffalo herd. Listening… for the distinctive trill of mourning dove, meadowlark or nighthawk; marveling at the ways of vibrant magpies and graceful bluebirds. Evenings they would fill a thermos with coffee and seek a quiet spot where you could turn three hundred and sixty degrees and see no other human; would sit, hushed, and gaze — enchanted as the heaven-dressed skies performed their colourful dance to the strains of a coyote choir; inhale the sweet scent of mingled hay and longing that floated on the gentle twilight breeze.

Saskatchewan had been a return, of sorts, for both of them. Hamish had found the vanished Alberta of his youth in the pine dotted short-grass rangeland with its deep mysterious coulees and white-ringed mud hills, turf of badgers, foxes and deer. For Alena, images of her Manitoba upbringing burned deep through her skin: intense as the blistering hot sun were those days spent bumping along gravel roads in their dusty old pick-up, dodging curious transmuting gophers — one moment dignified clerics observing safely from baked-clay roadsides, the next moment frivolous, darting pups. And still in that province, to her delight, surrounded by

endless fields of wheat and barley and mustard, the quintessential wooden grain elevators and so many abandoned clapboard barns and farmhouses that drew her, trancelike. She had constantly asked Hamish to pull over somewhere so she could wander a bit, wrap herself in the allure of a yesteryear she'd barely glimpsed in childhood, so sure she would find the spirit of her ancestors even in the faded grey remnants of some other family's vanished past.

She laughs a little as she recalls the less romantic aspect of these diversions, how she never missed an opportunity to squat behind a tumbled toolshed, so rare was it to find even a single tree along those farm-country highways and though traffic was scarce it always seemed to materialise when you had to go. She'd developed very strong knees over the summer and an ability to empty her bladder with lightning speed, no small feat for a woman her age. And, she muses now with less humour, hadn't that skill come in handy that dreadful night in the hospital parking lot?

Cold and numb, she'd waited for word, aware that these things take time, yet afraid to head to the truck (she'd parked some distance away after dropping Hamish at the entrance) to warm up even for a few minutes, lest she miss someone who might be looking for her, someone with news. Eventually it had become clear that was never going to happen, and by that point she'd had to pee so badly and not a single portable plastic outhouse on site. She knew where the washrooms were located inside but couldn't chance walking in and alerting any staff or people in the waiting area who'd been witness to the earlier drama; couldn't risk an encounter with the strolling security guards because when she went in, it had to be quick and focused on Hamish. And so, leaving the brightly lit entry area, she had walked across several treed boulevards to her parking spot and, after sitting in the cab a moment with the heater running, trying to stop the shaking — impossible to tell how much was from cold and how much from nerves — she had opened the truck door and slid down behind the limited shelter thus provided and, elbows on floor, half leaned, half squatted, beyond caring if someone's headlights caught the unmistakable stream that splashed between her bared legs. That taken care of, she'd squared her shoulders and marched back to the hospital entrance, breathed deeply and stepped inside.

"This is your hometown, isn't it Chase?" The livestream having ended, Alena is now watching an earlier video she'd missed. The convoy is entering Swift Current, met again with crowds of well-wishers. Samantha turns the camera on her travel companion, the owner of the rig affectionately known as "Big Fred." He's a pleasant looking man, maybe fifty, in a ball cap, petting a small dog named Skippy, his apparently well-seasoned co-pilot. Alena has watched with admiration how the participants are received at their scheduled stops — evenings they are served hot, home-cooked meals, while mornings, tables are set up bearing coffee, breakfast items, lunches for the road; there are mounds of window-washer fluid, toiletries, even pet food, and all this not possible if not for the generous offerings of acres of well-ploughed parking grounds. Now Chase, after accepting a playful face-lick from his dog, grins widely and nods in the affirmative.

"Yep, this is where I grew up." There is obvious pride; these are his people.

The people sitting in the Emergency waiting area had looked at Alena warily as she'd entered and she'd quickly shifted her gaze and found, to her relief, that she'd been correct, that only the young nurse, Zach, was now seated behind the Plexiglas barrier. Aware that at any moment she might be unceremoniously escorted out of the premises, she had cautiously approached the desk.

"God, did no one tell you? Have you been out there this whole time?" The young man had appeared genuinely contrite. "Listen, he's alive, he's stable. He's in ICU and, last I checked, was sleeping."

She hadn't been able to stop the tears of relief, knowing that Hamish still breathed, that — however mean and cold the world was — they were still in it together. Zach had scribbled a phone number, advised her to go home and get some sleep.

"For what it's worth," he'd whispered, looking around in the manner of those not wishing to be overheard, "I don't agree with what they're doing, with what… *we're doing*. I—I *had* to, to keep my job, but… personally, I believe in everyone's right to choose."

That unexpected crumb of kindness had affected her profoundly. *Please tell him I waited,* she had wanted to say, but her voice failed her and, on turning to face the long drive home, she'd managed only a strangled, "Thank you."

"Thank you!" she shouts now at her crowded screen. Oh, to be with them, riding high in one of those eastbound rigs, or cheering in solidarity amongst the hardy, hope-filled souls somewhere along that vast, frosted highway, sharing meals and trading sorrows.

Hamish had died alone in the cold glare of a hospital room, something she'd long ago sworn to him would never happen. The only promise he'd requested of her broken, shattered on impact like a windshield struck by a single flung pebble on a gravel road. She too had faced his death alone, but in her anguish had accepted it as justified punishment for her failing. The undertaker, with whom she'd made arrangements and paid online, had met her outside the funeral home; masked and gloved he'd wordlessly handed her the thick plastic bag that contained the box that contained the only tangible remains of everything, to her, that mattered. But she knows her story is but a quivering leaf in an endless landscape of suffering and loss: David, the young man unable to support his family after irreversible injury; Mei-ling, the young mother left with two toddlers to feed after losing both husband and unborn child the same week; Carl, the elderly nursing home resident, left fearful, uncomprehending, alone. Jacob, fifteen, collapsed on a school soccer field. *Tasha*. Twelve years old and paralyzed, confined to a wheelchair…

Alena shudders; it's the young who affect her most. She watches as, bright-eyed and rosy, children wave hand-painted posters and red-and-white flags, jump up and down in the steeply piled snowbanks that line every prairie town road. She can smell that harsh freshness, can taste that air so cold it hurts; she can feel that hard punishing crust of snow as it breaks on contact and slides into boots hastily laced, piercing and tickling tender skin before melting and trickling, soaking hand-knit woolen socks and freezing tiny toes. She marvels at how odd the sheer ordinariness of her childhood now seems. What devastation is masked behind those children's smiles? How much damage, psychological and physical can be endured? How much fear and guilt still to emerge — in those whose duty it is, above all else, to protect?

Samantha has three grown daughters and a little granddaughter, Alena has learned, no doubt the inspiration for her bold undertaking, but it's clear she is as astonished as everyone that the fundraiser she started to support a few acquaintances is rapidly growing beyond anyone's imagination.

"Turn those maple leafs right side up!" she calls out as her camera reveals some greeters holding upside-down flags. "I understand your distress, your frustrations, but we've got this! We're going to be okay."

Morning, and the convoy is passing through a Manitoba town not far from where Alena grew up. Again she is transported through the decades; she's in her grade four classroom after a recess spent sliding down the hill the snowplough had piled at a corner of the playground. Cold skinny legs itch beneath saturated corduroys (only primary kids wore snow pants back then), so uncomfortable yet she can't wait for the noon hour, the snow mountain and all its possibilities irresistible.

More flags flying, more banners waving, there are drummers drumming, too, as children and adults alike — in jackets made psychedelic against a backdrop of blinding white snow — stand hand in thickly-mittened hand and sing the national anthem. She sings along with them, loudly, stumbles over forgotten words but it's okay, there is no one here to listen. The sweet melody, so long rendered meaningless, now brings tears to her eyes… oh, if she could be *with* them. She wants to do something, *needs* to do something. After completing the steps required to send her donation she finds she is elated; she can't resist, through blurry eyes, typing one more message.

On the screen, Samantha too is wiping tears as she responds to some of the recent comments. Can Alena have heard correctly? She will press replay again and again over the dreary weeks ahead, the dismal months to come.

"Alena in B.C., I hear you. It is only through unity, through the support of those like yourself that we can — and we will, bring back joy. And Alena… we love you, too."

Jane May

Emotional Blackmail

Ava, the Golden Doodle, was an explosion of a case that just kept detonating. She came in 'stat' in the middle of the night when we were already up to our elbows in stat cases at Pet's ER. That wasn't unusual. During COVID everyone decided they needed fur-babies, and no one realized that adopting a pet was a bit like raising a toddler that never got out of the put-everything-in-their-mouth phase. On top of that it was summer. As a rule, animals try to die in the summer.

There was a Labrador sedated for surgery, waiting for the on-call surgeon to come in. The owner, an angry but determined blonde woman who stared holes into our cinderblock walls, was adamant she wanted to see whatever the surgeon found inside the dog. We all had theories on that one. Once we retrieved a pair of red lingerie from a dog which set off a screaming match between the married owners. No one was openly betting on what would be found in this particular dog, that would be unethical. But raised eyebrows and sly comments abounded around the coffee pot, when we could get there.

There were four male cats who probably had urinary tract infections but needed to be observed overnight, a puppy with Parvovirus, two hit-by-cars waiting to be put to sleep, and a Chow that had been picked up and shaken by a Pitbull. Miraculously, the Chow looked like it only suffered a few bruises and a minor laceration, but the vet wanted to keep it under observation because it seemed improbable to have that much luck.

The vet on call that night was Raki. Jess Raki, but all the vets went by their last names in the office. It created quite a bit of confusion for me when I started. For a while I thought there were twice as many people working than really existed. It wasn't until a doctor everyone called Thomas appeared and was a petite woman that I realized my mistake. As an administrator, I was on a first name basis. By which I mean I don't think anyone except the hospital manager knew my last name.

I liked Raki. She wasn't pretentious, an attribute of most of the older specialists. On particularly crazy nights she dropped her credit card off at the front desk and had us order pizza for the hospital. Or if she was on day shifts, which started at an hour I considered still nighttime, coffee and doughnuts. Veterinarians don't make people-doctor money, but she understood how overworked the nurses and other staff were in the hospital. And how few of us even made Target-greeter money.

That night Raki was on by herself. It was pretty normal for the nightshift to be covered by one doctor and a skeleton crew. There was a perpetual shortage of vets. Not just because there are only thirty-two accredited veterinary schools in the country compared to over a hundred and fifty medical schools. Or even because a veterinarian, having spent years studying the anatomical and physiological intricacies of dozens of species to earn a doctorate, could expect to earn the equivalent living to a moderately successful accountant, all while working twelve-hour shifts treating patients who couldn't tell them what was wrong. Notwithstanding the fact that their staff, as I mentioned, could earn more working retail. The shortage was because all this combined to mean that a veterinarian, and their staff, worked in a labor of love. And like all things one does out of love, it takes more than it gives.

Ava's case wasn't unusual. She snuck outside when her owners were leaving. Not suspecting that their dog was out they didn't pay close attention backing out of the driveway and

– *thump* – they hit Ava. It happens more often than you'd think.

The owners called ahead, which was more forward thinking than a lot of the patients we get, so we were ready for her. In most ways the case was by the book. Because she was a stat case and the rest of the patients were thankfully not trying to die on us unexpectedly, Raki and the majority of the nurses and techs saw Ava immediately. I tried to check the owners in and collect a downpayment for services, but they rushed back with Raki and the staff talking over each other to explain themselves.

Raki and the staff handled Ava the way they would handle any other stat case. They got her vitals, evaluated the superficial flesh wounds, and ordered the basal tests that are normally covered under the deposit we take upfront. And then Raki approached the owners to give them proposed courses of treatment.

I've heard that in some vet hospitals the vet provides that information to the administration and we are the ones who have to ask the owners what they want to do, how much they want to spend, but that wasn't how our hospital worked. Raki developed a few courses of treatment. She presented the best practice but expensive, the middle of the road, and the wait-and-see options. It's an interaction I never hope to have with an owner. As it is, I get enough grief just asking for a deposit before we admit patients.

I was back in the treatment area, waiting to get the owner's credit card information, so I heard the whole interaction. The best practice option included x-rays, bloodwork, an ultrasound, and a surgery consult, all of which would have cost thousands of dollars before they even knew what was wrong. The cheapest option was to put Ava down.

Ava was in rough shape. Her hind leg was at best dislocated but most likely broken. It stuck out from the table at an unkind angle that was hard to look at without feeling nauseous. Her blood pressure was all over the place, and she was in and out of consciousness. I hadn't been with Pet's ER for long, but even I could tell the prognosis wasn't good. I'd seen dogs in better shape be put down for reasons stretching from the money just wasn't there to we can't handle that kind of rehab. You'd think you get numb to it but every time it stings you, like a scab that just won't heal over.

The owners, a man and a woman, were frantic. He was short, balding, and wore a wrinkled Versace polo shirt in a way that said he could have been wearing it to the opera, dress code be damned. She was severe, her brown hair cut with short bangs and worn tight above her neck. The skin on her face was stretched over a beaked nose and made her look like an osprey. They kept saying it was ridiculous to talk about money and to just save their dog.

We'd all heard words like that before and leapt into action. Raki went into best-practice mode and she and her staff did everything they could for Ava. I managed to extract a credit card from the vulture-looking woman and added it to their profile. Blood was taken. X-rays and an ultrasound ordered. The surgeon coming in to extract the suspicious object from the Labrador's stomach was diverted before he sterilized for surgery. But before any of that could happen, Ava crashed.

If you've ever seen CPR done to a real person you know it isn't exactly like how they portray it in the movies. There's no *pump pump pump blow pump pump pump* blow and the patient coughs a few times and then jumps up saying thanks. It is a rib cracking, terrifying experience. For dogs it looks unnatural. Limbs are being held and jerked this way and that. The whole hospital comes to a halt while everything is done to aid the dying dog.

Raki performed CPR for fifteen minutes before speaking to the owners again. They reiterated, "Just save our dog. Save Ava." So Raki pushed more drugs and kept performing CPR. At the thirty-minute mark she called it. Ava was gone. She spoke to the owners who were as distraught as you'd expect. They accepted Ava's body rather than utilize our cremation services and they left. It was a sad case, but, as I said, not unusual.

You might think I remember all of this because of the subsequent blog posts that caught the attention of the local paper and then blew up on social media. Or maybe because of the court cases that were later filed. But you'd be wrong. I remember it because of how horrible the owners were.

Don't get me wrong, we deal with a lot of unkind interactions from owners. We get it. They are having one of the worst days of their lives. Pets love unconditionally in a way you are lucky to find in a spouse. When they are hurting you want to do everything you can for them and it is the last day you want to find out that according to United States law a pet is property, not a person. I've seen vets go above and beyond for animals, writing off services provided and donating time in needy cases. But something about attaching costs to courses of treatment rubs owners the wrong way. They equate us to a hospital, earning revenue from insurance and government subsidies. It's understandable. The vets are doctors. We operate in a medical environment and do everything we can to save lives. But equipment, salaries, medicine and rent have to be paid. And hardly anyone knows you can buy health insurance for your pet.

The best owners understand the costs but even they look surprised at the initial quotes. Several hundred dollars for an exam and bloodwork? Really? They hand over a credit card or let us know what they can afford and we work based on that knowledge. Some people pale at the cost and ask us to please give their animal back. But Ava's parents were something else.

From the moment they walked through the sliding automatic glass doors into Pet's ER they were screeching. They demanded the attention of the entire waiting room and refused my insistence that they please wait with the other owners. I've dealt with entitled owners before but I'd never been brushed off so efficaciously. They simply did not accept my existence.

In the treatment area they acted angry at the world. I've seen owners melt into their emotions, most often hysterically crying over a bad prognosis. But neither the rat-faced man nor the bird-faced woman gave any indication that they were sad. They screamed at the staff who were dealing with other animals that they should be helping. They asked for updates every few minutes from Dr. Raki who asked them repeatedly to leave the room while she worked. When I finally extracted a credit card from the woman it was like taking away a teenager's phone. And when Ava finally succumbed to her injuries the first thing they screamed was, "You killed our dog." As they left, they gave everyone dirty looks, even the other owners waiting in the waiting area, as if their presence had somehow taken medical treatment away from Ava.

The experience lasted a little under two hours, but it felt like an entire shift had gone by in the time between Ava's arrival and departure. I can't imagine what it was like for Dr. Raki and the nurses. We all collectively shook the experience off and returned to the other patients. The cats were medicated. The Chow's laceration stitched up. The surgeon removed what appeared to be a half-digested pair of panties from the Labrador and the owner stared at them intently, manipulating the cloth in the plastic baggy we returned them to her in, searching for some identifying features. We never did find out if they were hers or not. Ava and her owners

receded in our memory. They made up part of what could be described as a rough night, but not one of the worst.

The first indication that Ava's saga wasn't over was an online review that showed up the next day. None of us make a habit of looking at reviews regularly. Like any service environment, the reviews of most emergency pet hospitals are either spectacular or morbid, and both should be taken with a grain of salt. But when a particularly juicy review gets dug up it makes the rounds of the hospital staff quickly, passed around in various group chats like a flu decimating an elementary school class.

Ava's owners posted a one-star review accompanied by a slab of text that required scrolling to get through. It included phrases like *inept, incompetent "medical staff" and extortionate, heartless people*. By itself, we didn't pay it much attention aside from the fact that it was wildly inaccurate. Taken at face value, it made it sound like Ava arrived for a routine check-up only to be taken home in a splintery pine box. I wasn't there to see Dr. Raki read it but she apparently took it in stride. They weren't the first owners, and wouldn't be the last, to be distressed that their pet's injuries were too great. It certainly wasn't the first negative review Pet's ER had dealt with. It was incoherent and filled with misspelled words. It read like it was written by an inconsolable person distraught at the recent loss of their dog. Not yet something anyone was inclined to worry about.

The story didn't end there though. The local throw-away paper, an ad-filled tabloid allegedly owned by a wealthy business consortium in the area, picked up the review and interviewed the owners. They ran a story detailing the review as if it was factual, and insinuated Pet's ER ran an extortionate money grab aimed at people in an emotionally vulnerable state. The column concluded that "Pet's ER couldn't be reached for comment," but neither I nor any of the other admins ever received a call from a reporter. Worst of all, the article named Dr. Raki.

If the paper had been print-only we wouldn't have worried. But the article ran online and quickly gathered a staggering number of views. Hateful comments at Pet's ER and Dr. Raki in particular flooded the page. It sparked people to share anecdotes of other horrible experiences at the hospital, few of which anyone who actually worked here could remember. The hospital got review-bombed, thousands of one-star reviews in a matter of hours. The article was shared outside the community and eventually was picked up by the national media. It got a short blurb but linked back to the original article. The owner of Pet's ER was able to get a comment to the national distributor but it was buried. The local news site crashed from all the additional visitors.

When the national article broke, things started getting weird at the hospital. Suddenly there were people picketing on the sidewalk, and the parking lot filled with cars with license plates from neighboring states. Someone was organizing. We started getting hate-calls at the front desk. Someone wrote a program to have randomized numbers call the hospital constantly, and for two days we couldn't take any legitimate phone calls. And then someone doxed Dr. Raki.

A brick was thrown through a window of her house. The words *Dog Killer* were keyed into the side of her car. She started to get unknown calls and death-threats via text message. The police couldn't do much without known perpetrators to go after and the picketers at the hospital couldn't be removed unless they caused physical harm.

It lasted about two weeks before the circus dispersed. The picketers latched onto the next relatively local abomination and clutched their pearls elsewhere. The out-of-state license plates disappeared and the hospital's phones were eerily silent. Dr. Raki had taken the last week off. At the time she couldn't enter the hospital without being screamed at and once actually egged. She seemed to be taking it as well as could be expected. The night of her last shift she shrugged off our questions about it.

"It'll blow over," she said. After those two weeks it seemed like she was right.

The lawsuit shocked everyone. People have joked that there are two types of vets: those who have been sued and those who haven't been sued yet. But normally a vet knows when a case they take has something that might cause a lawyer to salivate. A misdiagnosis that shouldn't have been made, a drug given that made matters worse, a routine procedure that went haywire for no apparent reason. Ava's case was not that case. The dog presented in dire condition that steadily deteriorated.

Dr. Raki was served her first week back at the hospital. We were busy. Business had never really slowed down. We were the only emergency veterinary hospital in over a hundred miles. People really didn't have much choice in the matter.

She worked nights that first week. The doctors' schedules were always a mishmash of overnights, day shifts, and swings, but I think the owner put her on nights in case there were any leftover protesters who might try to give her trouble.

Since we were slammed, Dr. Raki had been buying pizza for the office every night. A process server dressed as a pizza delivery man said he needed her signature and slipped the papers underneath a faux receipt. No one understood what had happened until he was already out of the door.

"What does it say," I asked.

Dr. Raki was staring at the papers, her eyes fluttering furiously across the page. Then her brow furrowed and she shut her eyes and shook her head quickly, like she was dog shaking off water.

"I can't deal with this right now," she said, and turned back to the hospital. She had a busy night ahead of her and made it through her shift cleanly. There were two stat cases, an obstructed Pitbull she rushed into surgery, and an emaciated dog that had run away and found its way home but was starving. Both patients were stable before she left, along with the dozen other hospitalized patients she'd inherited from the prior day. She was rounding the morning doctor when I finished my shift and headed out.

I couldn't tell if it was just my imagination making something out of nothing, but it seemed to me something was off. Her eyes were darting around the room more than normal, her shoulders held a little too stiffly. She looked like she was subtly uncomfortable and doing a good job of hiding it. I was outside waiting for the bus when I saw her come out of the hospital. It was a cold, gray morning, but she hadn't put her coat on. I watched her get into her car and put her head down on the steering wheel. She was still sitting that way when the bus screeched to a stop.

Someone more legally fluent than me was able to find the specifics of the lawsuit online. We all knew that it was a private matter, and our gossiping could only make dealing with the affair more difficult for Dr. Raki. We almost made it a full day before the details were

known to the entire office. There was a lot of legalese that we couldn't decipher, but one phrase stuck out. Tantamount to emotional blackmail.

"It was literally by the book," one of the nurses said. "That can't hold up."

"It's a civil case. I don't know if it has to be technically illegal to find against her."

"The hospital will probably settle to avoid any more publicity. We don't need more egg-throwers standing outside."

"They can't do that, can they?"

It went on like that all day. It seemed like every nurse, tech, admin, even the other vets, had an opinion. Dr. Raki kept to herself on the issue. The few times she walked into a room that had been discussing the lawsuit everyone clammed up awkwardly, so she must have known it was a topic of discussion. She never said anything. Someone in HR sent a mass email instructing people that legal issues shouldn't be discussed but otherwise there wasn't any instruction from higher up. We hoped they were giving Dr. Raki more guidance, but no one ever asked.

Our general consensus was that the hospital, or Dr. Raki's insurance, it was a little unclear who was actually liable, would settle and we'd never really understand whether or not the lawsuit had any teeth to it. There was an online resurgence in negative reviews but the owner had contracted an SEO consultant. After a few days the most egregious of them disappeared.

The lawsuit dragged on and the local paper reported every new tidbit of information like it was following a hostage negotiation. There were continuances, mediation, offers and counteroffers. They made it sound like Dr. Raki or her lawyers were playing hardball but the tech who found the initial legal details was able to find an unbiased legal summary that, once decoded, sounded like the plaintiffs were the ones rejecting offers. It was very confusing and none of us had any real experience in law.

Dr. Raki took a leave of absence. She'd started showing up to work looking harried. Everyone in emergency medical fields runs short of sleep so bloodshot eyes and wrinkled scrubs tend to be part of the dress code. But Dr. Raki started looking like a neglected shelter animal. Her cheekbones stuck out on her face and her eyes sunk into her skull. Her scrubs started to look baggy and her hands shook so badly that her sutures started looking like a first year intern's. When she finished her last shift one of the nurses hugged her and walked her to her car. She kept shaking her head as she walked, hunched over, clutching the nurse's arm.
She was expected back in a month. We all hoped that the lawsuit would conclude before then but more continuances and requests for additional documentation were filed. Each time the paper named the hospital and provided a link to our site that landed, conveniently, on the review page. At the advice of the SEO consultant, the owner temporarily broke the page.

I was nervous for Dr. Raki's first shift back. The lawsuit appeared endless, and, to our eyes, vindictive. We all hoped that she'd been able to reflect on it and look past it, but the constant articles and instantaneous and ubiquitous nature of the internet made that impossible.

Her first shift back was supposed to be a mid-week, night shift. We all have our superstitions, some of which bear out. Summers are busier than winters. Weekends are busier than weekdays. The Fourth of July brings in a lot of manic dogs, freaked out by fireworks. Dogs eat stupid things on Thanksgiving. But by all measures, an overnight, middle of week shift should have been a relatively easy first shift back. I was on and waited anxiously for her to arrive.

The shift start time came and went. Some doctors were more punctual than others but at

the hour mark the dayshift doctor came to the front desk and asked if I'd seen her. Dr. Raki had to be rounded before they could leave, a process that could take another half-hour at best. I shrugged and picked up the phone to try her but the line was out of service.

"Did she change her number?" I asked.

"I don't know," the dayshift doctor said. "But I know I would have."

At the two-hour mark we called Pet's ER's owner. He said that she had changed her number and gave me a new one to try. It rang and rang and went to voicemail.

At this point we'd called in the surgeon on call to cover the ER. It wasn't ideal but with the shortage of doctors no one else was available. The dayshift doctor had been on for fifteen hours and was barely functioning. We kept trying Dr. Raki but no one could get through.

The owner himself came in to cover the next night's shift in case Dr. Raki didn't show up again. He was semi-retired from practicing and only came in when it was absolutely dire. We still hadn't heard from Dr. Raki and people started to worry.

We asked around, hoping someone was closer to her than we knew any of us were. She was a private person. No one had been to her new apartment. She had moved after the brick incident. She wasn't a regular at our happy hours. When someone held a birthday celebration or a retirement party at local bars and breweries she always made an appearance but was among the first to leave. She got along with everyone but none of us really knew her that well. She never offered, and we hadn't tried very hard.

We heard about Dr. Raki in the newspaper of all places. After her third missed shift she was quietly removed from the schedule and we started wondering if we'd ever see her again. Rumors abounded but we didn't really know anything. The owner mentioned in passing that she hadn't returned any of his calls and from a business standpoint we needed to move on. That was the morning we saw the obituary, and so it came across as callous. He walked it back in an email.

It was a short obituary and didn't contain any more information than that she had passed away. There were too many questions unanswered for us, but there wasn't any way to answer them. Dr. Raki's private nature extended to her online life, so there weren't any public outpourings of grief to sift through.

We tried to be subtle in our morbid search for information, but it was impossible to miss the local papers, normally thrown away, strewn across our workstations. Dr. Raki's profile page, a small lock symbol offering tantalizing frustrations in the bottom right-hand corner, sat open in a tab on the computer at the front desk for weeks. We took to staring at it, asking unanswerable questions that, in our hearts, we knew the answers to.

There were no more mentions of the lawsuit in the local paper. Whether the reporter knew the defendant was deceased and so the story was at a dead-end or not was unclear, but it didn't stop us from looking. We waited sanctimoniously for a headline so that we could take to the comments in force and scream "How dare you?" It never came.

A new vet was hired. She was a recent graduate and hadn't completed an internship yet, but we were desperate for staff. Summer was heating up and she went through a bit of a trial by fire. After a few stressful weeks she found her footing.

Months passed. We were busy, at the point of the shift where one more stat case would send the hospital into a state of turmoil. The nurses and techs were constantly in motion,

checking vitals and prepping patients for procedures. The new vet fluttered from one patient to the next, triaging as best she could. It was early in the night, the parking lot filling up with the cars of waiting owners. It promised to be a long shift. The new hire stopped by the front desk after discharging an incontinent poodle she'd diagnosed with Cushing's disease and passed her credit card to me. She asked if I knew what kind of pizza everyone liked.

My face froze, but she'd already turned away. I was flooded with such a strong memory of Dr. Raki, and subsequently a freezing feeling of shame. I couldn't remember the last time I'd thought about her. It made me want to throw up. She was gone, and yet pets continued to get sick. Nightshifts swung to dayshifts in a never-ending cycle of emergency medicine.

I struggled to remember the specifics of Dr. Raki's features. I couldn't remember if she preferred blue or maroon scrubs. Did she wear her hair in a bob or a ponytail? The image I conjured was of the rat faced man and the hawk of a woman. The details of those hateful people burned in my memory like a decaying tooth. I considered them responsible for her death and hated that they lived on more vividly in my mind than her memory.

The legal case stagnated. As far as we could tell it was never dismissed or decided. We weren't sure what happened in a case where a defendant died in a civil case. At some point we just stopped talking about it. But it did not disappear.

I checked. I couldn't order pizza before looking, a kind of penance for having gone so long without thinking about her. I tried to argue to myself that it was for her. I wanted to know in her honor, but I looked over my shoulder to make sure no one was reading my screen. It felt wrong to be looking after so long.

The case was easy to find. The newspaper articles with so many comments and engagement showed up first, but I'd clicked the legal summary link so many times before I found it easily. The shape of the words was more familiar than their actual component letters. The legal summary still existed and listed the case as pending. A case of emotional blackmail, a truer statement than any of the attorneys knew, stuck in limbo.

Roy's Accident

Roy Raskin took the long way home. He took the first exit off the Richmond bypass and quickly found himself meandering across rolling country backroads, flanked by fields filled with the dead stalks of old corn crop, interspersed with buffer groves of pine trees. The sun was still high but beginning to fall, casting everything in rich, golden autumnal light. It was a beautiful day for driving in the country, but Roy couldn't enjoy it. He wasn't taking the long road home because it was beautiful and he wanted to enjoy the empty pavement all to himself. He'd never heard of half of the numbered county roads he turned onto haphazardly and didn't care to learn them. He just couldn't face going home and meeting his wife, whose tenure ensured that she wouldn't be suddenly let go from her job, as he had just been.

Everything delightful about the day irritated Roy. The falling sun glared through the windshield and the winding roads ensured his visor never stayed in the right place. The sunlight warmed the car making him uncomfortably hot under his sweater and pressed dress shirt. He felt sweat dripping under his arms and imagined his shirt moistening and discoloring. His air conditioning alternated between too cold and not cold enough. The road was old and gravely and he winced at pebbles dinging off his SUV's undercarriage.

As Roy swung the visor for the umpteenth time to block the sunlight now blinding him from the driver's side window, he decided that his discomfort really was the fault of his employer. Former employer, he corrected bitterly, and he gritted his teeth hard enough to make his jaw pop. His boss, a repulsive man - yes, after years of falling over himself to cater to the man's every whim he could openly think without fear of repercussion that Mr. Owen was an open mouth chewer, a man who would shake your hand after wiping his nose, a person who told the kind of jokes you had to look over your shoulder before deigning to fake a smile at – had the gall to ask him to rush to finish their current data set and project the next quarter's sales figures, something that required staying late, before firing him. Roy had expected a pat on the back for getting the work done as quickly as he had done. As nauseating as the thought of being touched by Mr. Owen's assuredly disgusting hand, it would have been preferable to being canned.

Roy slammed the visor back across to block the front of the windshield as he came around a banked corner and had to swerve to avoid roadkill. He cursed. It looked fresh, like the small mammal could have just been resting in the road. He glanced in the rearview mirror and watched it grow smaller. He empathized with the racoon or cat or possum. Whatever it was, the animal had just been minding its own business when a greater force conspired to take it out. It was like an unsatisfying end to a movie, a *deux ex machina* that ruined a suspenseful story. One moment you were living your life, completing spreadsheets you'd helped build for a company you'd spent the majority of your life working for, and the next you were out in the cold without so much as a severance package to fuel the hearth.

Roy didn't know what he would tell JoAnne. They'd finally reached a level of financial security that let them relax the tight reigns strangling their spending. They were buying wine in cases directly from wineries. They bought organic produce, agreeing with each other that it wasn't their imagination that it tasted better. They'd just booked a two-week vacation to Hawaii that just a year ago would have been a financial stretch. It was, unfortunately, nonrefundable. The only part of their lives they hadn't focused as much on was their savings. Their jobs

and salaries marched steadily upward. Those things felt preordained. Roy slapped the steering wheel, frustrated that they hadn't thought to build a buffer before committing their money in what seemed like frivolous pursuits.

Roy's car rounded a steep bend and descended into a tree-filled hollow with a stream running along the bottom. The temperature dropped and Roy shivered. The sun shifted across the windshield and fluttered under the thin canopy. His hand caught between the opposing needs to move his visor and turn off the air-conditioning. The sun blinded him. He looked at his dashboard to find the right knob to turn. There were a dozen different reasons why he might have looked away from the road at that moment, but later he wouldn't be able to say for certain which one had taken place.

Roy didn't see the deer on the side of the road, but he clipped it. He felt the car recoil from the impact. He cursed and only then belatedly swerved. He looked in the rearview mirror, didn't see anything, and almost kept driving. Then he thought of the potential damage to the car, another expense to add to the list of things they could no longer easily afford, and decided he needed to see how bad it was.

Roy assumed he hit a deer. He felt the collision as if the car was an extension of his body. It struck high on the passenger side and he thought he could see a flash of the body running along the passenger windows but it had happened too fast for him to be sure. He parked the car on the far side of the stream from where the collision occurred but when he looked back the road was empty. The deer, or whatever it was, must have been well enough to flee.

The car was in better shape than he expected. The impact felt solid. It was a frame shifting collision and he'd expected enough body damage to total the car and had already made a guess at what their new insurance premium would skyrocket to. But when he looked there was hardly any damage noticeable. There was a small dent on the bumper and a light scratch running down the passenger door at his ankle level. Roy's chest loosened and he touched the dent. He thought he might be able to pull it out with a plunger. The scratch was cosmetic. No need to involve insurance at all. He let out a long, relieved sigh and turned to walk back around the car, and he saw the headlight. The headlight was scuffed. He would have expected it to have shattered or cracked, but it was scuffed like it had scraped against something. He frowned and looked more closely, trying to remember if he'd ever scraped the car against something metal. It was an old car, so it was possible the scuff had been there for a long time. He couldn't remember the last time he had walked around the car to inspect it. But as he looked more closely he saw red in the cracks. He watched as a bead of the red line terminated in a drop that grew pregnant and dripped onto the pavement. Roy sighed again. He'd definitely hit something hard. He looked back at the low bridge and the road across the stream. The underbrush was dense in the hollow and he couldn't see anything. He thought about getting in his car and driving away. It was a deer and it was likely dead. It had just been pushed over the bridge's railing into the undergrowth. He started to walk across the bridge. He wouldn't be able to get it out of his mind until he knew for sure.

Roy stood at the railing looking down the steep slope into a wall of green. It was too dense to see anything from the road and he mentally prepared himself for the unpleasant hike down and up. At least he wouldn't ruin his work clothes. You had to have a job to consider clothes work clothes.

He was thinking he would need to check himself for ticks when he got back and had

just swung one leg over the railing when an old, red pickup truck pulled over behind him.

"Ya alright?" a middle-aged man said. He was leaning forward to look out of his open passenger window. He was chubby, wearing a stained white t-shirt, and looked like he hadn't shaved in about a week.

"I'm fine. Hit a deer," Roy said, gesturing at the green wall behind him. The man nodded like he'd been there.

"What, does he owe you some money? Don't tell me you're going to butcher him up and take him back in that fancy car."

Roy looked at his car. He never would have called his old SUV a fancy car, but he remembered how expensive it had felt when he bought it. He was still making car payments on it.

"No," Roy laughed. "I guess I just want to make sure it's dead is all." Roy shrugged. The man sucked air through his teeth and nodded again. He looked up to road, sighed, and then back at Roy.

"I get that. Want some help looking?"

Roy was taken aback and suppressed the urge to yell at the man to mind his own business. He lost his balance on the railing and for a moment thought he'd fall. He hadn't expected an offer to help, and something cold inside him grasped his stomach and squeezed. He felt sweat beading on his brow despite the cool shadows of the hollow.

"I think I'm good," he said, trying to make the words come out normal sounding. "It's probably stupid but it's my thing to see out." He shrugged again, and hoped he looked casual.

The man nodded again and turned to look down the road but he didn't pull out right away. They stood like that for a beat longer than Roy felt was necessary before he asked if Roy's car was drivable. Roy said it was and the man drove off. Roy breathed out and felt the sweat drying cold. He'd been holding his breath without realizing and tried to shake himself back to normal. It didn't make sense that the interaction would make him uncomfortable. The man was being a Good Samaritan, nothing else. Why hadn't he just accepted his help?

Roy trudged down the steep stream slope in loose soil and grasping leafy vines. He dodged as much of the undergrowth as he could but it was too dense to avoid all of it. He wasn't sure what poison ivy looked like but every leaf he touched was already making him itchy. There was trash too. Invisible from the road, there were mountains of refuse in varying stages of decomposition. Old fast-food bags and wrappers, some torn and others looking like they'd just been thrown away. A surprising number of tires, one which had a small sapling growing through the middle of it. There was even a toilet, sitting upright on the slope like someone had installed it there purposefully. The lid was cracked and the bowl filled with leaves and pine needles.

The bottom of the culvert was no less filthy. Where the ground wasn't covered in creeping ivy it was plastered with plastic bags and more tires. Roy could hear the stream but couldn't see it through the trees and brush. He didn't see a deer anywhere.

There was a sinking, futile feeling to standing at the bottom of the culvert. An elephant could have hidden in the undergrowth and never be found. You'd have had to pull up all of the ivy and cut down half the trees to see anything. Roy kicked an aluminum soda can, so old the label was transparent. He stepped onto a tire to give himself a slightly higher viewpoint but it was pointless. He stepped down and picked up a helmet. The helmet was unbuckled at the

bottom but cloven cleanly in two down the center. It hung on by a thin layer of plastic, a graphic that had been applied depicting flames. It was the kind of thing a kid would put on a helmet. Aside from being split in half it looked relatively new, like it was a recent addition to this hidden landfill.

You could probably find a bike down here if you looked hard enough, Roy thought. And as he smirked, shaking his head, he saw the dogleg joints of bicycle handlebar sticking out of the ivy. He snorted, but his stomach clammed up again. It was spooky to think something like that and have it appear in front of him. He stepped forward and saw the rest of the frame. It was a fancy road bike. It looked like the kind you saw on the Tour de France or being ridden around town by old and out of shape people. The frame shimmered like ocean water in the uneven light beneath the canopy. Roy thought it might be worth some money, if he could haul it back up to the car. But he wasn't sure he would be able to get back up the slope by himself, let alone carrying the awkward frame of a bike. Still, it seemed a waste to leave it down there.

Roy stood staring at the bike for too long. He'd forgotten about the deer. Once he'd seen the undergrowth in the culvert he knew it was a hopeless task to find it. He'd just have to hope it had been lightly injured and bounded away, or was hidden in the deep ivy, dead, and not suffering. He might never have seen the person sprawled next to the bike if a cloud hadn't crossed the sun, dimming the light, and bringing the bright green bike jersey into contrast with the surrounding vegetation. And even then, looking directly at the body of a man, unmoving in the undergrowth, Roy's brain didn't comprehend. His first thought was, "That's a funny looking deer. At least I found it."

Realization came piecemeal. His stomach turned to asphalt. He gasped for breath but couldn't make the air go from his mouth to his lungs. He swallowed again and again. He looked at the helmet and then dropped it like it had burned him. He found his breath and started to hyperventilate. The green of the shirt melded into the green of the trees and everything began to spin around and around until black spots clouded his vision. He fell to the ground.

Roy wasn't sure how long he sat on his knees with his forehead pressed into the dirt but it felt like a long time before the earth stopped spinning. Clouds were covering the sun in earnest and the culvert was cast in sinister leaf shadows when he picked his head up. The body lay in a depression of ivy so that he could only see its suggestion from his knees. The bike handlebars stood up out of the vegetation like the wrapped arms of a mummy reaching out of a shallow grave. Roy took a shaky breath and levered himself to his feet to look at the body.

The man was dead. His body was contorted in such a way that his legs faced down and his chest up. It defied life. His skin was already taking on the shiny pale sheen of wax fruit and his eyes were half open and looked like two glassy marbles. Any hope that Roy had hit a deer and stumbled on the body left him. Stabbed into the man's skintight bike shorts were long, transparent shards that could only be slivers of his car's broken headlight.

Roy touched the dead biker's arm tentatively and stepped back. His skin was still warm but unnaturally cooler than it should have been. He felt shame but it was overcome by a black pit of fear. He shivered and looked around nervously. He felt like every leaf was an eye watching him from above and someone was spying on him from behind every tree and shrub. Roy looked back at the body and felt nausea bubbling up. Every time he looked away and back the body looked more and more human. His arms flailed out in helplessness. A dark streak of blood drew a line from his ear to his chin from where the helmet strap snapped off his cheek. There

was a protrusion sticking out of his stomach, tenting up his jersey where no protrusion should have existed. Roy knelt back down and threw up.

The body disappeared into the ivy again. From that low position, unable to directly view the body, Roy let himself think about what to do next. The sourness of his pile of sick and the acidic loamy smell of the earth began to ground him. He didn't need to rush his next move. The biker was dead and no call to the police or an ambulance would bring him back. If anyone questioned him, he could honestly say that it was a jungle beneath the road, and he couldn't find the biker. He could honestly just leave and say he thought he hit a deer. If anyone could even trace the incident to his car. There weren't any cameras on these back country roads. And that was only if they did find the body.

Roy started to stand up and caught a quick glance of the biker's spine tenting the bike jersey above his stomach and threw up again. His head started to spin and he cursed his boss again for firing him. He'd never have been on his road if he hadn't been fired. It was really all his boss's fault.

Roy almost spun out. His thoughts were tripping over each other to assign blame and assuage guilt. He could have easily lost his mind laying in that ivy with the man he killed half buried in shrubbery, limbs akimbo. It was the earth that brought a semblance of his senses back again. Beneath the layer of ivy, the ground was loose. His hands sunk into it. It smelled dark and rich like potting soil.

It would be easy to dig a grave in it. And the ivy would cover the evidence.

The thought came unbidden and automatically and Roy tried to banish it but only helped it echo in his mind. Part of him had internalized those words the moment he saw the body and realized it wasn't a deer. A more subliminal part of him might have been looking for them since he stopped his car.

Roy never thought he was the kind of person who could hide something like this. He liked to think he would take the high road. That he would call the authorities and throw himself prostrate in front of the victim's family. Yell *mea culpa* and take whatever judgement might come. He'd once cheated on a vocabulary assignment, copying the answers from a friend in the hallway between classes. He owned up to his fault in tears before the day was out to a teacher who looked bemused at his self-flagellation. But this was different. He tried to argue that this was an accident. He was distraught. He was ashamed to admit it but he didn't want to be the person who killed a cyclist. That wasn't who he was. But it would become all he would ever be to anyone that knew about it.

He looked at the body again, forced himself to look at it. Roy internalized the awkward angles of the biker's limbs. His joints complained in ghost pain where the unnatural angles denied life to the biker. He imagined touching the knobs of spine. He felt something trying to pop out of his own stomach. He might be the person who killed this cyclist. He would have to live with it. But he could be the only person who had to live with it.

Roy picked himself up and walked next to the cyclist, heaving over him with a curved spine. His jaw trembled but his eyes were wide and not his own. He knelt down and plunged his arms deep into the ivy next to the body. He grabbed the stems and they lifted up with little pops that he felt as tremors through his arms more than heard. The ivy lifted up like a blanket, just like he imagined it would. It revealed a plot of loose soil, black and loamy. Roy fell onto it.

He dug furiously, piling some dirt around the hole but flinging most of it away to disperse into the undergrowth. He dug with his fingers, pushing piles with his arms. He stopped once, the grave still shallow, and looked at the body. He dug again.

Roy dug until his fingers ached. He was missing the nail of his right pinky and the finger throbbed but in a strange way it gave him penitent comfort. Now that the grave was dug Roy hesitated. He looked at the body again and shivered. The sun was low and the shadows in the culvert lengthened and merged with each other. Soon it would be too dark to see anything. He needed to move quickly, but he was staring at a Rubicon. He could stop now, but in a moment he wouldn't be able to turn back.

The body tipped easily into the grave. More easily than it should have, but rigor was still a few hours from setting in. Roy had to bend the legs and arms back into a more natural composition to make them fit, but the body sat in the grave completely below ground level. Roy started to kick dirt back into the grave, trying not to look at the dirt falling on skin. When he couldn't kick any more he fell to his knees and pushed it over, trying to smooth the soil over the body. When it was done, he picked the ivy blanket up and laid it across the grave. In the dark it was impossible to tell the ivy from any other patch. It looked like undisturbed wilderness.

Roy walked away from the grave and started to climb the culvert's wall. He turned back to look, standing next to the discarded toilet. It and the other trash stood out in the shadowy culvert, like they were glowing with some kind of internal luminescence. Roy looked back to the blankets of ivy and shrubs. It was dark, but even knowing where the grave should have been, he couldn't find it. It was as if the culvert had claimed one more piece of detritus, swallowing it whole. He looked up and through a patch of canopy saw the moon rising. It shot a beam of light down on him, illuminating him like a police spotlight.

Roy emerged from the culvert in full dark. He had been reduced to crawling up the slope, fighting off clinging vines, ripping through thorny shrubs that tore his shirt and pants and scratched his face. He half expected to see the police already waiting for him on the road. Not because he thought they would have found the body, but because his car had been abandoned on the side of the road for hours at this point. But there was only darkness on the road. Darkness and the suggestion of his car, a darker shadow across the bridge. He walked towards it, feeling naked on the side of the road in the dark, afraid a passing car might not see him. His keys were thankfully still in his pocket, and he shuddered, letting the hypothetical reality in which he had to explain to the authorities how he managed to lose his keys so close to a recently buried corpse whip through him like a bad dream. The light in the car came on when he opened the door and as he settled into the driver's seat he caught his reflection in the rearview mirror. Or rather the top half of his face. He was unrecognizable. Dirt stained his skin like he hadn't washed in days. His hair was a tangle of twigs and leaves. Scratches crisscrossed his cheeks and forehead, deep enough to leave polyps of blood that was already clotting in black circles. He looked like he'd fought his way out of a grave.

Roy's wife threw open the door to their house when she heard his car. He was late and hadn't answered his phone. It had only been a few hours but it was so out of character for her husband that she'd already imagined nearly every possible accident that could have occurred. That he was in trouble was a foregone conclusion and she had paced the room, waiting for the

appropriate time to start calling hospitals.

She watched him step out of his car and limp from their driveway to the front door, confirming her suspicion that something awful had happened. She was paralyzed between the desire to wait for him, to bring him inside into the warmth of their house, and to run to him. Nothing like this had ever happened to them. Bad things didn't happen to people like them.

Roy stepped out of the darkness and into the threshold light cast from inside the house and she screamed. He was something out of a horror movie. Dried blood and dirt caked his work clothes. His hands looked raw and bloody under a layer of grit and filth. His eyes were the worst. They were wild, white orbs darting from her to the house. They didn't look like her husband's eyes. They looked like the eyes of someone who had seen something horrific.

She stepped forward and grasped his shoulder to prove he was really there and that this wasn't a hallucination. His body felt hot under his clothes. She could feel the dirt grinding against his shoulder through the sweater.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "I got laid off today. I just need some time to myself. I walked in the woods, and I guess I got lost. I'm so, so, sorry."

Roy broke down in tears and collapsed the entirety of his weight on his wife. The first feeling that filled her was relief. He'd been fired, which was bad, but it could have been so much worse. She thought it was a little strange that it reduced him to this blubbering pile, but she'd long expected he put too much personal stock in his position at work. Having it ripped away unexpectedly was like being struck by lightning under a cloudless blue sky. Her worst fears alleviated, Roy's wife let herself feel a little disgusted by his state. He was filthy and they'd both need to shower now. Losing a job was bad, and it wasn't coming at a great time, but they needed to brush themselves off. They'd suffered a little fall, a setback that could be set right. She patted his shoulder and comforted him and helped him into the house.

In the coming days, Roy scoured the local news stations for word of the dead biker but couldn't find anything. There weren't any signs posted around town, no classifieds requesting strangers to keep their eyes out for a man gone missing. Roy was in a delicate state, but day by day, with no new news, he pulled himself together. He and his wife scaled back their wine purchases. He dusted off his résumé and started reaching out to colleagues. After a month he landed a job. It was a lateral move, and for less money, but it was something. He and his wife still went on their trip to Hawaii. They started budgeting more closely and built a safety blanket.

It was almost a year after the accident when Roy, whittling away the last few hours of the workday on social media sites, saw a post, on Facebook of all places, about a missing man. He was from several counties over, a family man, who had disappeared without a trace while his family was away on vacation. Roy stared at the photograph and couldn't fit it to the face to his dead biker but he knew it had to be the same man. That afternoon he took a winding, circuitous route home. It seemed the county was filled with bridges over small streams but none of them looked familiar. The bend in the road wasn't right, or the bank wasn't covered in the same clinging ivy. He thought the trash might give the location away but that, too, appeared ubiquitous. The roadsides, ditches, and streams were all choked with wrappers and bags, tires and cans. He even saw toilets tossed down more than one embankment. There was no telling one location from the next. No telling which streambank was simply an unofficial landfill, and

which was a graveyard. He thought back to the man in the truck who had seen him moments after he hit the biker, wondering if the man remembered him or the location. It seemed impossible he would have remembered the car or license plate. Still, Roy drove home unsettled, furtively checking his rearview mirror for imagined pursuers while his heart pounded so hard he felt his neck bulging with each beat. He had to get home before he aroused suspicion in his wife. There was only one person in the world who knew he was a killer, and he intended to keep it that way.

Parker McIntosh

Trigger

In 1959, the Los Angeles Dodgers played the Chicago White Sox in the World Series. For us Catholic School boys, the games made it almost impossible to concentrate on classwork. Pete Scarlotti sat next to me at the back of the room in fifth grade. He'd sneaked a tiny transistor radio into class and had it turned on low, listening to the game.

Stupid me, I leaned into the aisle and tried to hear Vin Scully give the pre-game commentary. But I guess I was too obvious. Sister Mary St. John came storming toward us, her hard leather shoes slapping against the linoleum.

"Give me that," she snapped and Pete handed over his radio, Vin's tinny voice still chirping from its speaker. The class laughed.

"I'm sorry, Sister. Can I have it back?" Pete pleaded. "I promise I won't—"

"You can have it back at the end of the day . . . from the Principal."

Pete groaned. We both waited for Sister Mary's famous punishment.

"Peter, I want you to copy the letter A." She turned to me, "And James, you get the letter T. Have your work on my desk before you leave school today."

Sister Mary favored a peculiar form of punishment. She would have the offending student copy a section, word-for-word, from our children's dictionaries. If your offense proved egregious, you'd get something like Pete got – the "A" section. If your offense was less serious, you'd get something like I got – the "T" section. I think she thought that particular punishment would improve our vocabulary and give us practice writing.

I lifted the lid to my desk, stored my books inside, and took out a yellow lined tablet, my dictionary, and a handful of sharpened pencils. I decided to work through the lunch break and continued throughout the afternoon so that I wouldn't have to stay after school.

I made good progress. The words and letters that flowed onto the pages seemed like the symbols etched into the tomb walls of Egyptian pharaohs, beautiful, each telling a story. We had an hour to go before the final bell. I came to the word "trigger," my eyes aching from hours of squinting at bug print. My writing hand almost moved on its own volition, covering each of the tablet's lines with neat cursive.

Trigger. I thought about guns and my father's old .22 rifle that we'd take into the back canyons north of Santa Barbara for target practice. Then I thought about Roy Rogers' stallion, *Trigger*, a palomino that had a full mane and long golden blond tail. It reminded me of my older sister's ponytail that she kept washed and combed to perfection. Carolyn was beautiful and all the boys wondered if she came from a different family since she didn't look anything like plain ole me.

I had chosen my fifth grade desk because it had been the one she had sat in three years before. You could see her initials gouged into the desk's heavily scarred surface, then stained with blue ink from a fountain pen. Next to her initials someone had carved the outline of a dagger that dripped red blood. Sometimes on hot stuffy afternoons, just like the one last May, the blood almost looked real, like it could flow across the desktop onto the floor and form a huge puddle.

I sucked in a deep breath and kept writing.

"Carolyn, sure has developed early," Mrs. Lockheart had told my mother over Saturday

morning coffee.

"Yes, she is pretty," Mom said then laughed. "Just what I need, a bunch of teenage boys beating a path to our door."

I eavesdropped from the hallway and grinned, the comments somehow making me proud to have something beautiful in our house.

And Carolyn sure loved rock 'n roll. At night after she and I finished with homework, watched TV then went to bed, I could hear music coming through her bedroom door. She had commandeered our family's ancient Motorola and listened to the local station's late-night offerings.

"Can't you turn that crap off?" I muttered to her one night.

"What, don't you like music?"

"Sure I do, but that stuff gets me all juiced up and I can't sleep."

"Why don't you come listen with me?"

"Really?" My sister never let me in her room.

"Just keep quiet so Mom and Dad can't hear."

"They're downstairs. They won't. Just let me get my robe."

On most school nights I'd sit on the edge of her bed and we'd listen to Elvis, Rickie Nelson, Little Richard, Connie Francis, The Platters, and the Everly Brothers until we both got sleepy. I'd sneak back into my room and drift away to memories of *Twilight Time and Who's Sorry Now.*

On afternoons with Mom down the street at her coffee klatch and Dad still at work, we'd close all the windows in her bedroom and turn up the radio. She showed me how to dance, all the cool new steps that her girlfriends had taught her. We'd sing along to the radio and after a while could harmonize and stay more-or-less in tune.

That year they started telecasting Pacific Bandstand on KEYT, a dance show hosted by some guy named Lou Stumpo. Mrs. Lockheart drove Carolyn and me to the TV station on top of the Mesa. My sister had dressed up like a high school senior with lipstick and makeup that she applied in the car. I stood in the background and watched the couples dance to fast and slow tunes. A negro singing group came on. With slicked-back hair and dressed in sequined jackets, they lip-synced slow songs while the dancers clutched each other and moved to the rhythm.

On the way home, I thought Carolyn would burst out of her skin. Her smiling face still fills my dreams.

And she helped me with my homework and I with hers. It turned out that I was good with words and she with math. If we worked together, we could get our homework done quickly, leaving more time to watch our favorite TV programs: hers was *Sea Hunt* and mine *Red Skelton.* She loved watching Lloyd Bridges apprehend the bad guys wearing only his tight wet suit, scuba gear and a knife, the action all-quiet except for the dubbed-in music. Carolyn moved like a fish in the ocean and could swim the entire length of the municipal pool, holding her breath and gliding silently underwater.

Every time I thought about last May I'd hold my breath until spots formed in front of my eyes. That day, I walked home after school with Jerry who lived down the hill from us on West Valerio Street. We talked about what we would do that summer and the grand adventures we'd have. About half a block ahead of us, my sister walked with one of her many girlfriends.

The friend peeled off down a side street. Carolyn strolled up to the stoplight at Highway 101 and Micheltorena. Cross traffic roared past. I yelled at her to wait up. The light turned green. She turned and waved at me then stepped into the road.

With a sickening crunch, a delivery van hit her full on. She sailed through the air, her blonde hair a streamer hiding her face, and landed on the concrete. Jerry and I screamed. I dashed forward. The van's driver had climbed out and stared at the body lying before him. He collapsed onto the pavement, crying. I tried not to look. But I couldn't help it. My dancing, singing, swimming, smiling sister lay in a pool of slowly expanding blood, broken, bleeding, not moving, not breathing.

I couldn't see right and darkness closed in. Jerry yelled something at me but I couldn't make out what. Then sirens, lots of cars, firemen, cops, a white van with County Coroner painted on its side, all crowded in. In a daze, I rode home with a kind policeman who came inside and talked with Mom. I went upstairs to my sister's room, sat on her bed and clicked on the radio, listened to Tommy Edwards sing *All in the Game*. But I could still hear my Mom downstairs, sobbing. It would go on for days with me thinking: *If I hadn't called to her, distracted her, if she hadn't turned, would she still be alive?*

Trigger (trigar) v. 3. Cause something to happen or exist.

Yikes, I've only got a half hour to go. Better pick up the pace. I stared at the pages before me and froze. All my thoughts about my sister stared back, neatly recorded with perfect penmanship. Would Sister Mary notice? Would she make me stay after school? Would I miss my bus, lose my way? Did I want anybody reading how I felt about Carolyn? Maybe, somehow, I did.

I turned to the end of the Ts and hurriedly copied the last seven or eight words and their definitions. The buzzer sounded. An explosion of activity followed. Groaning, I stood and shook my writing hand, it hurt from that day's effort. I tore the pages from my tablet and moved forward, laid them in front of Sister Mary.

"Did you learn any new words, James?" she asked.

"Some."

"Did you finish copying the T section?"

"Yes, Sister." I felt my face flush. I told only half a lie.

"Well, let me see."

A coldness washed over me as she slowly turned the pages. Then she stopped and drew them closer. Her mouth began to quiver. Her left hand pressed against her heart. She continued reading, retrieved a handkerchief from a secret pocket and dabbed at her eyes.

"Very . . . very well put, James," she said in a quiet voice. "I remember Carolyn. She was such . . . such a lovely girl."

I nodded and stared at my shoes. Sister Mary stayed silent.

"Can I go now? I have a bus . . ."

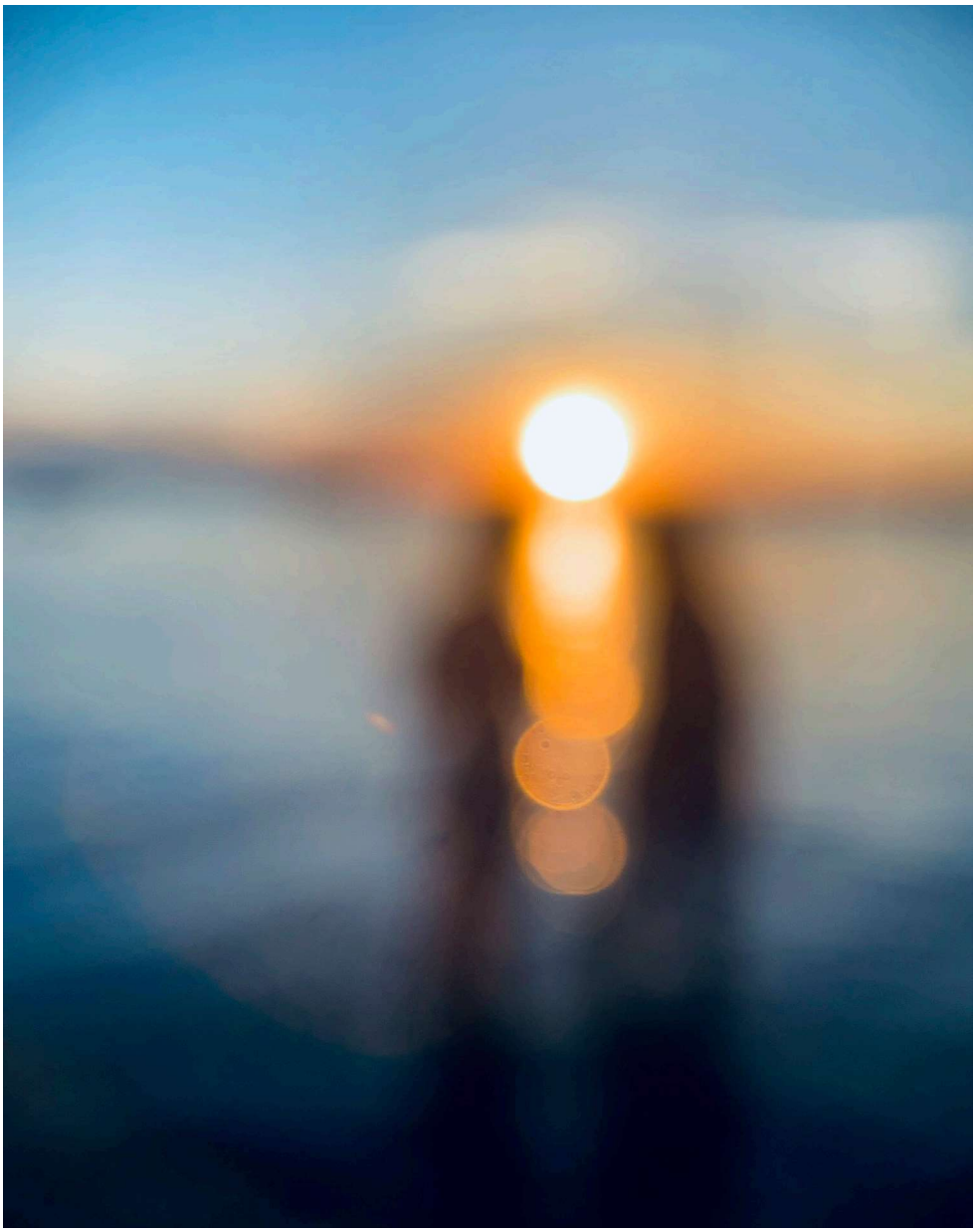
"Yes, yes, go. And tell your friend, Peter, he can go too."

Pete and I left quickly before she could change her mind. But on the bumpy bus ride across the West Side, all I could think about was Carolyn and how she would have laughed at my easy escape. I couldn't wait to get home and turn on the radio.

Walter Sanville

Visual Art

The Light Passing Between Them



David Goodrum

I’m Still Here

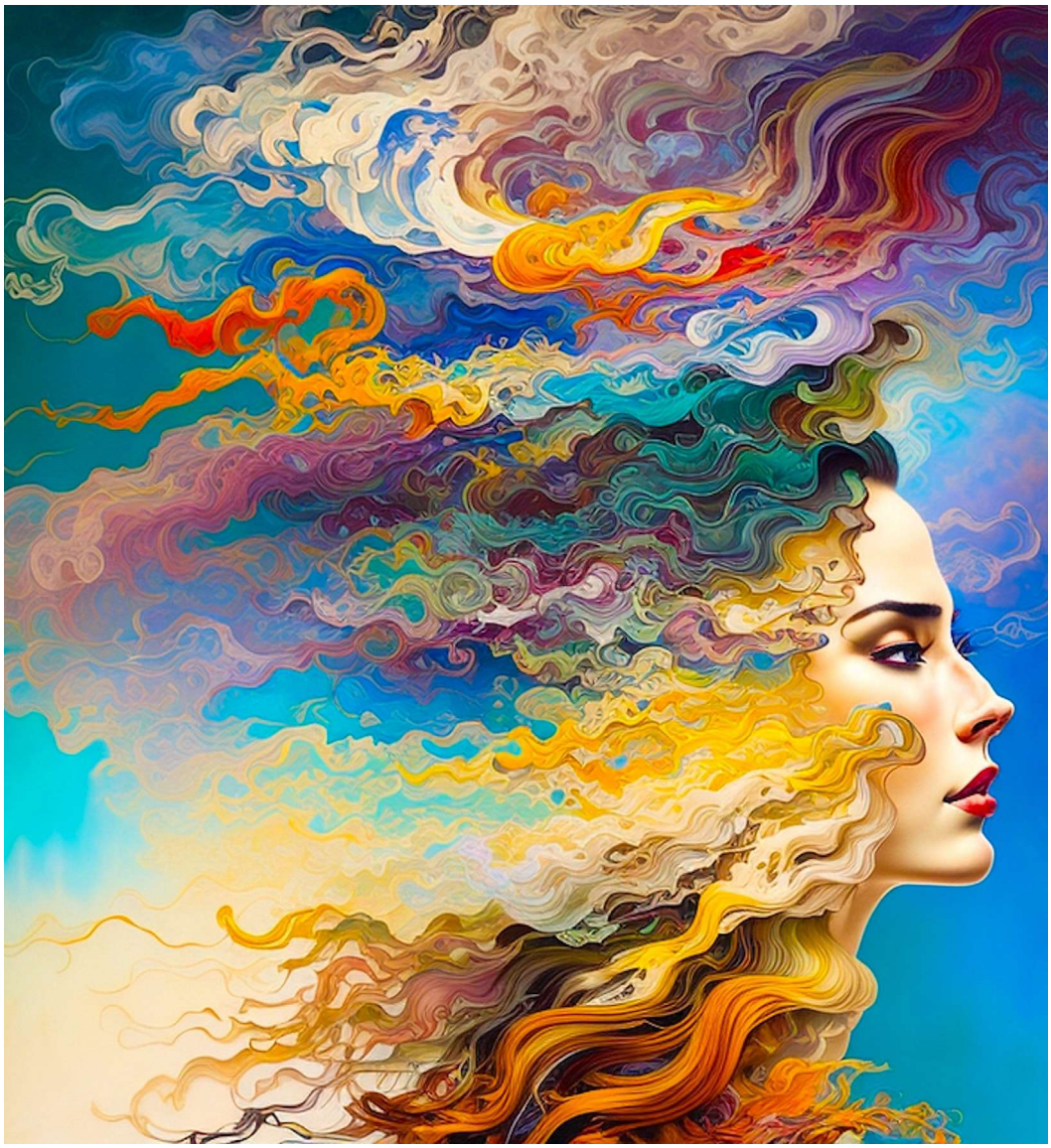
Riley Hancock

Japan ; Reservation

Japan ; 2019

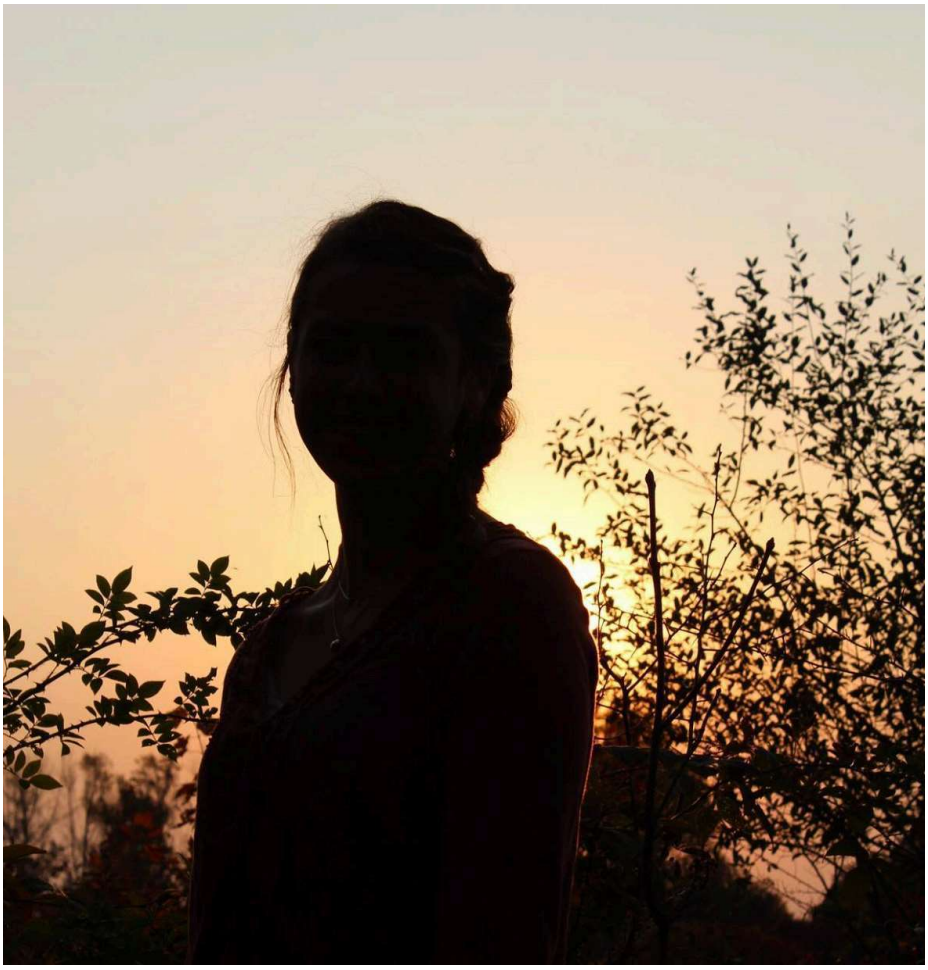
Marah Heikkila

Becoming a Woman



Janis Holm

Daybreak



Leah Hopkins

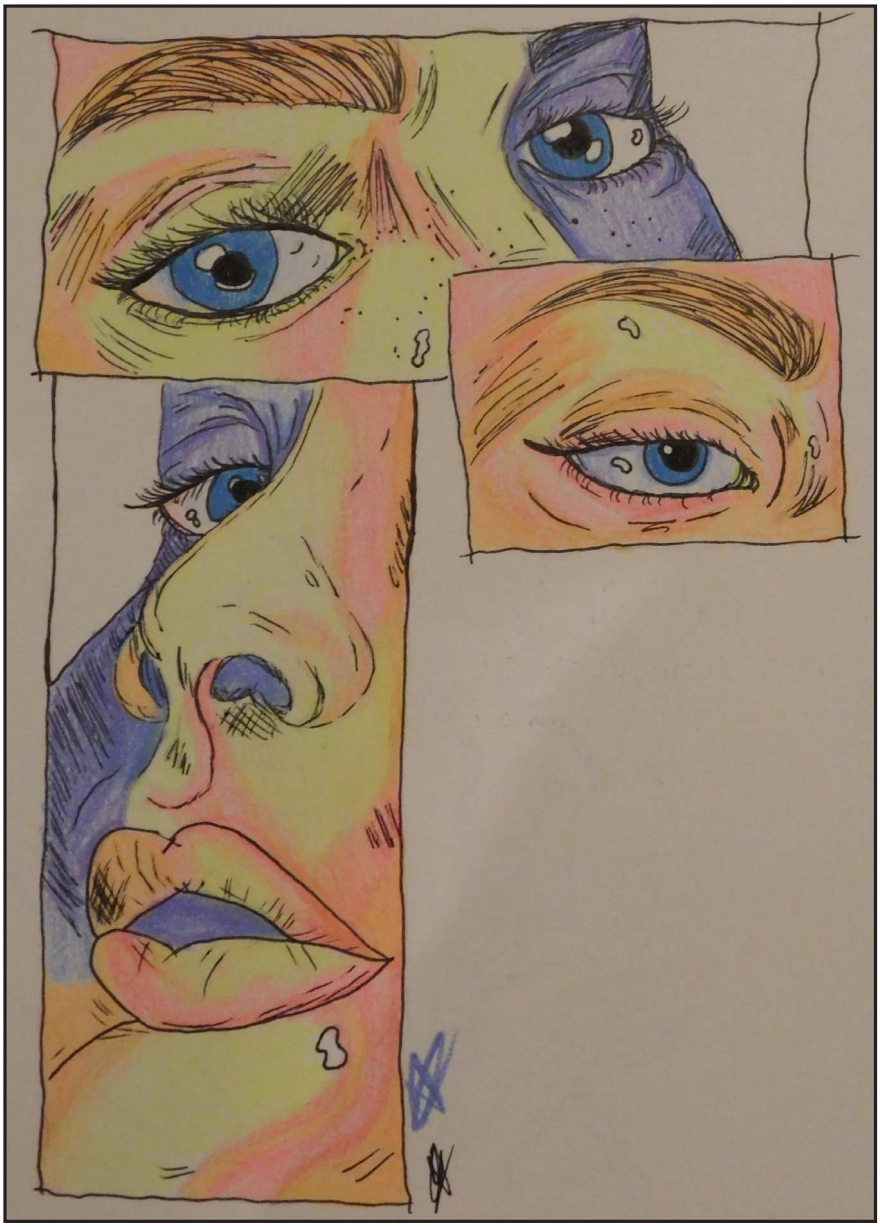
Nowhere (Hu)man

Claudia Tong

Selene

Alice

Inferno



Amyah Walker

Poetry

Moriah Brown – Moriah Brown is a poet, fiction writer, and full-time student at Syracuse University working towards a degree in creative writing. She is from Fort Worth, Texas, and loves writing, reading, and her cat Nala.

Timothy Dodd – Timothy Dodd is from Mink Shoals, WV. Author of short story collections Fissures and Other Stories (Bottom Dog Press), Men in Midnight Bloom (Cowboy Jamboree Press), and Mortality Birds (Southernmost Books), along with poetry collections Modern Ancient (High Window Press) and Vital Decay (Cajun Mutt Press), his website is timothybdodd.wordpress.com.

Bart Edelman - Bart Edelman's poetry collections include Crossing the Hackensack, Under Damaris' Dress, The Alphabet of Love, The Gentle Man, The Last Mojito, The Geographer's Wife, Whistling to Trick the Wind, and This Body Is Never at Rest: New and Selected Poems 1993 – 2023, forthcoming from Meadowlark Press.

Alexandra Grese – Alexandra Grese doesn't talk much and usually has ink on her fingers. Her flash fiction collection DREAMSCAPES was published in 2022 by Alien Buddha Press.

Molly Gross – Molly Gross has an MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts and teaches composition and creative writing at Kentucky Wesleyan College.

Milla Kuiper – Milla Kuiper is a young writer with a deep love for learning about random nonsense. Her recent passions are forgotten constellations, bog bodies, and Scottish Gaelic. Her backup plan is to live barefoot in the woods and bake bread.

Cecil Morris – Cecil Morris retired after 37 years teaching high school English, and now he tries writing what her formerly taught students to read and, possibly, enjoy. He has poems appearing or forthcoming in The Ekphrastic Review, Hole in the Head Review, Rust + Moth, Sugar House Review, and other literary magazines.

Vanessa Niu – Vanessa Y. Niu is a first generation Chinese-American spoken-word and page poet who lives in New York City. She has also written text for the modern composition scene at music institutions such as Juilliard and Interlochen. When not writing, she can be found at the opera house.

Jiang Pu – Jiang Pu, Ph.D., is a first-generation Chinese American author, editor and translator; and the founder of NextGen Education. Her recent poems have appeared in California Quarterly, Caesura, Topical Poetry, among others. She grows a bee & butterfly garden in the San Francisco Bay Area. www.jiangpu.org.

Sarah Rosenblatt – Sarah Rosenblatt is a poet and therapist specializing in intergenerational trauma. Sarah's poetry has been published in myriad journals including Ploughshares, Poetry East, Heartland, The Portland Review, and others. She is the author of three books of poetry published by Carnegie Mellon University Press. Sarah lives in Shorewood, Wisconsin.

Jonathan Ukah – Jonathan Chibuike Ukah lives in the UK. His poems have appeared in NDQ, The Pierian, Boomer Literary Magazine, Strange Horizons, Kingsman Quarterly and elsewhere. He won the Voices of Lincoln Poetry Contest 2022 and his poetry collection was a top 6 finalist of the African Diaspora Award 2023.

Non-Fiction

Nicole Bruno - Nicole Bruno is an artist, writer, activist, coach, and mother. She strives to divest from grind culture while supporting others on their journey towards personal liberation and enjoys writing about moments of time that capture years of emotions. She resides in Maryland with her husband, tween daughter, and eight cats.

Miss Edith Cook - Edith Cook worked as a translator before immigrating and marrying in California. She has taught writing and literature at colleges and universities. In Wyoming she received the Wyoming Arts Council's Frank Nelson Doubleday Memorial Award. Her work has appeared in various anthologies and literary magazines. Visit her at www.edithcook.com.

Kyla Cullinane - Reece Yeager is a Senior English Major at The University of Olivet, in Olivet, Michigan. This is the first literary journal she has submitted to. She hopes one day to become a published author.

Robert Greene - Mr. Greene is known for The Gay Icon Classics of the World, a collection of love stories from different cultures. Following the book's release, Russian students translated "The Blue Door", a story about a gay Russian prince, and used it to protest the "anti-gay propaganda" laws in Russia.

Kayla Krohn - Kayla is a student at the University of Olivet. She has three children and is studying to become an elementary teacher.

Grace Meikle - I am a writer and scientist living in Edmonton, Alberta that grew up in Idaho, Virginia, Japan, and Taiwan. In addition to writing, I work on solutions for nuclear waste and climate change. My creative nonfiction was recently published and received an award from the literary journal White Enso.

Reece Yeager - Reece Yeager is a Senior English Major at The University of Olivet, in Olivet, Michigan. This is the first literary journal she has submitted to. She hopes one day to become a published author.

Fiction

Elizabeth Beck - Elizabeth Beck is the author of the Summer Tour Trilogy and four collections of poetry. Her forthcoming collection of poems, Dancing on the Page will be published by Rabbit House Press in 2024. Accents Publishing has accepted her debut collection of short stories, Swan Songs.

Luke Beling - South African born author and singer-songwriter, Luke Beling, believes art should embody both the miracle and labor of life. Everyday tales borne from world wandering, Beling's songs and stories hope to impart something honest.

Elle Boyd - Elle lives in Nova Scotia, Canada, with her husband and their cat overlord. Her work has appeared in Otherverse Magazine, Black Hole Comics, Pigeon Review, and Recesses, among others. Elle can be found on X/Twitter and Bluesky @TheElleBoyd.

Alexandra Grese - Alexandra Grese doesn't talk much and usually has ink on her fingers. Her flash fiction collection DREAMSCAPES was published in 2022 by Alien Buddha Press.

Jane May - K. Jane May's fiction appears in print in Grain, Pulp Literature and The Antigonish Review and has placed second in both the 2019 Lorian Hemingway Short Story Competition and 2018 Sheldon Currie Prize. She lives in Saskatchewan, Canada.

Walter Sanville - Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). His short stories have been accepted more than 500 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist.

Visual Art

David Goodrum - David A. Goodrum, photographer/writer, lives in Corvallis, Oregon. His photos have graced the covers of Cirque Journal, Willows Wept Review, Blue Mesa Review, Ilanot Review, Red Rock Review, The Moving Force Journal, Snapdragon Journal, Vita Poetica and appeared in many others. See additional work (photography and poetry) at www.davidgoodrum.com.

Riley Hancock - Riley Hancock is a senior at the University of Olivet where she is studying Art Therapy. Their passion for creativity has led her to explore different mediums such as painting, photography, and even quilting with a style that's influenced by the human figure and what it means to be alive.

Janis Holm - Janis Butler Holm served as Associate Editor for Wide Angle, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in LA. Her prose, poems, art, and drama have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

Leah Hopkins - Janis Butler Holm served as Associate Editor for Wide Angle, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in LA. Her prose, poems, art, and drama have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.

Claudia Tong - Claudia is an artist based in London, dedicated to storytelling and humanity. Her practice spans from landscape, architecture and illustrations to mixed media, visual computing and music. She graduated from Brown University in computer science, and has lived, worked and exhibited in 4 continents. https://linktr.ee/claudiaxt

Amyah Walker - Amyah Walker is a graphic design student at the University of Olivet.

Projects of the Bill Buchanan Fund

2023 was the 20th anniversary of The Bill Buchanan Fund and the centennial of the birth of Bill Buchanan. Bill Buchanan died in Sri Lanka before he could return for the celebration of his 80th birthday. Well over one hundred of his former students, colleagues, neighbors, family and friends participated in the service that was held for him. They came from around the country, and recited poems, played music and told stories for three and a half hours. Five years prior to that event, many had gathered in Klock Commons to celebrate Bill's 75th birthday, just like they had for his 70th.

Throughout Bill's 16 years of teaching at Olivet College, his classes were not as populated as the required courses. However, they were no less important. In his honor, the Bill Buchanan Fund was established on April 2, 2003 to create projects in support of the liberal arts. As the fund grows so will the amounts of the prizes and the award.

Currently the Buchanan Fund awards the Stevens Award and the Coleman Prizes (in prose and poetry). The Stevens Award recognizes an excellent educator in the tradition of Arthur R. Stevens & Charlotte Whitney Stevens, who both taught in Olivet. The first award honoring Art and Chatlotte Stevens was presented at the Honors Convocation on April 17, 2019.

The Jim Coleman Prize was established in memory of Tim Boal, Class of 1969, and funded through the Bill Buchanan Fund. Prior to the Garfield Lake Review, Olivet College had faculty member Jim Coleman, a professor in the 1960s and 1970s. It was through him that the undergraduate literary journal we know today exists.

While Mr. Coleman now lives in Connecticut, his Comet connection continues through the Jim Coleman Prize, which has been awarded since 2008 to students who have been published in the Garfield Lake Review. The honoree is chosen annually by outside judges.

Past Honorees:

2023 Hanna Sauve
2022 Savannah Baker
2021 Penelope Katz
2020 Kailey Collins, Class of 2022
2019 Emma Cole, Class of 2018
2018 Adam Walle, Class of 2017
2017 Linda Jo Scott, professor emerita of English
2016 Meghan Eldred, Class of 2015
2015 Camieo Green, Class of 2014
2014 Meghan Wilkerson, Class of 2013
2013 Jennifer M. ten Haaf Hodges, Class of 2012
2012 Jennifer M. ten Haaf Hodges, Class of 2012
2011 Jacob "Coby" Heller, Class of 2012
2010 Anabel Montalvo Hall, Class of 2009
2003 Anya Letson, Class of 2008
2008 Katrina Williams Thigpen, Class of 2007

The University of Olivet strives to provide diversity and depth to students becasue its founders understood the value of a liberal arts education. Those associated with the fund experience this value. Marty Mason Jennings ('67) earned a degree in the fine arts, and Steve Burton ('68) studied chemistry. As a philosophy major, Jim Briney's ('69) education included biology, chemistry, math, and physics. Matry and Steve are advisors to the fund, and Jim is its founder and representativre.

A History of the University of Olivet and the Garfield Lake Review

The University of Olivet, the home of the Garfield Lake Review, has a storied history beginning even before the founding of our nation. Pilgrims that traveled across the ocean seeking religious freedom were the first Congregationalists, the founders of the earliest colleges in the United States. These same Congregationalists also funded the defense in the court case of the Amistad, a slave trading ship, in which the slaves won their freedom. These revolutionary efforts would trace their way to Olivet, Michigan.

Naming Olivet College after the biblical Mount of Olives, Rev. John Shipherd founded the school in 1844 in a small area of south-central Michigan. Because of Olivet's unorthodox view - offering anyone, including women and minori-ties, an education - the state of Michigan refused to grant Olivet a charter, so it opened as a private institute.

Into the early 1900s, the school transformed from a primary school for educators into a true liberal arts college. By the 1930s and '40s, young president Joseph Brewer pushed forward with innovative educational policies that allowed Olivet to become a haven for scholars.

By the late 1990s, Olivet bad experienced many changes, and the faculty created a new Olivet Plan to encourage students to combine the founding principles of the Congregationalists and the reforms of President Brewer. The Olivet Plan still exists today, allowing students to focus their education on the global mindset. It is a nationally recognized educational plan.

One of the school's proudest accomplishments is the Garfield Lake Review. The *Garfield Lake Review* is a production of University of Olivet students interested in creative writing, artwork, and music; it began in 1971 as a project in a creative writing class. The founders of the program were Professor James Coleman, Brent Danielson, James Hudson, Andrew Johnson, Amy Leithauser, George Parmenter, and Norm Wheeler.

The *Garfield Lake Review* is the annual literary and visual arts magazine produced by Olivet College students, and it is a proud member of the University of Olivet Media Board. From its inception, the policy for the *Garfield Lake Review* has been to accept submissions from students, staff, and alumni. Submissions from outside of the college are accepted as well. Submissions for the magazine are accepted every fall; see guidelines at garfieldlakereview.com.

Works are chosen through a blind screening process that was introduced in 2006. The blind screening assures that no author will be judged by race, creed, sexual orientation, or political ideology. The selections are reviewed, selected and edited by students on the Garfield Lake Review Editorial Board.

Readers interested in donating financial support for future issues of the Garfield Lake Review should contact the University of Olivet Advancement Office at (269) 749-7000. The University of Olivet's website is www.uolivet.edu.

The University of Olivet is committed to the principles of equal opportunity and non-discrimination. The college, in its employment, student admissions, recruit-ment, and personnel policies and practices, will not discriminate against any individual on the basis of age, color, sex, gender identity, disability or disability status, height, weight, marital status, national origin, political persuasion, race, religion, military or veteran status, or sexual orientation.