October Hill MAGAZINE

SPRING 2023
VOLUME 7, ISSUE 1

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With the publication of our Spring 2023 issue, we are celebrating seven years of publishing new and aspiring authors. These years have flown by!

Entering into the season of growth, we can't help but notice how much *October Hill Magazine* has grown. With the changes that occurred last year, we are continuing to grow in our style with an amazing team to help make it happen. Our editors work tirelessly with the authors to help enhance their submissions and to make sure that all stories and poems are perfect for our readers' enjoyment.

With an incredible submission cycle to kick off our seventh year of publishing, we have been continuously blown away. We are so grateful for each and every author who submitted their work to us. Each short story and each poem brings so much joy to the *October Hill* editing staff, and we are continuously grateful for allowing us to enter the worlds you have created. We would also like to thank the artists who submitted their work to us. Your visual work helps to enhance our literary layout.

Readers will be able to immerse themselves into the lives of the short story characters while on a journey through a different world. Some characters even undergo their own transformation, just like the planet when sunshine and warm weather start to emerge. You will also be captivated by our talented poetry authors who use their words to enchant readers and show the world from different perspectives.

As always, we welcome feedback and suggestions from our readers, authors, and critics with regard to how we can improve. That being said, we are excited for you all to continue on this journey with us.

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We're always looking for editors and coordinators. Submit your resume and cover letter to OctoberHillMag@gmail.com

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Waiting for the Five Fifteen

By: D.L. LaRoche D.L. LaRoche is an older soul with the mind of an adventurer. He is the founding editor of *The California Writers Club's Literary Review* and currently works on his grand opus: *Ordinary Times*. Published are: *What Price Charlie's Soul, Abducted, The Mortician*, and *The Arkansas Rose*.

The five-fifteen was always on time—never a minute

one way or the other. A well-dressed man in his late forties was early and waiting alone. He paced, a hesitant ambulation, hands in his pockets, head tipped low, a view of his freshly buffed shoes.

The old station needed maintenance—paint fading and peeling, the windows' transparency lost in the dust, spider webs where the wind didn't blow and the sun was attendant. The platform he walked on was of planks loose in their fasteners. He saw a collection of old faces in the weathered grain—gray and wrinkled ridges wrapped around knots appearing as eyes. The planks complained as he stepped on them, sighing with relief as he moved on.

From his elevation, he could see his town—dusty roads, wash on the lines, a hound dog pissing on a fence post. His was

an old town with a stable population—twelve hundred thirty-six if you come in on County 40. But the sign had been there for years, and Millie, at the grocer's, claimed that more people have left town than arrived.

He seemed apprehensive, as from one end of the deck to the other, he ambled, his mind busy with a future brimming with change, if empty on specifics. He had made a commitment—simple and easy then, but complicated and overwhelming as he thought of it now. It could absorb him completely. The idea was petrifying.

A woman on the fifth-fifteen was coming to see him. They planned it that way. They had met in the city at a bar where the music played loudly, liquor flowed freely, and people were boisterous and joyful. They had found a mutual liking there—a physical attraction, a meeting of minds, an empathy based on loneliness, if some of the drinks that flowed with their conversation. All of it grew over the next few days as they discovered their similarities—the same dishes at restaurants, movies they liked, and the comfort they found in her bed.

They walked the parks and plazas during the day, attended the clubs at night, and swapped bodily fluids during moments of close exploration. In all of the people in the city, they had found one another, and how lucky that was for them. And then, in moments of passion, he spoke of his love for her.

"Yes," she replied. "I feel it as well."

Then, at what appeared a lofty plateau of consolidation, he said he needed to leave as things were piling up in the town where he lived—he had a dog and a garden. To soften his interruption, and to maintain what they'd achieved, he suggested she might like to visit.

Having no ties of consequence in the city and him alone in her current view, she agreed to come, and maybe—they wistfully believed at the time—to stay. She thought, what the hell, time is advancing, and she knew of no other who was offering this kind of promise, if somewhat implicit. So, turning her mind entirely, she packed her bags, readied her surroundings, and purchased a ticket.

"You're going *there*?" the ticket guy said, as if she had purchased a ride to the city's dump. His comment jarred open a door, if only a crack.

Through the window of her coach seat, she watched her city disappear—first, the hotels and restaurants, which offered good food and enjoyment; some

industrial plants, where wages were earned and spent, making the economy hum. There went the city park with its zoo—two giraffes and an elephant. *Clickity clack*—the rhythmic beat of the train's iron wheels increased as the suburbs faded in the distance. Would she miss them? She thought she might.

The countryside appeared as she listened to the beat of the wheels carrying her over the joints in the rails. Leaving now seemed not all it had promised when somehow the decision was hurriedly made. She felt uneasy as this would be new and possibly discordant. She had never been out of the city before and felt a tightening of sorts—things closing in, air thickening and harder to breathe.

Of course, she enjoyed this guy for those days of theirs, appreciating mutual perspectives, the few differences minor and only with trivial things. And she had come to think, while with him, that her life in the city had little dimension. And then she had told herself, bags packed and carried, if things don't work out, there's always a train going the opposite way. *Clickity-clack.*

He was a guy who ordinarily thought thoroughly through a problem or process before acting, often sketched out a decision tree, identifying outcomes with high probabilities, and then would whittle away until only one remained. He liked the indemnity of certainty and had never been

seriously hurt. But this woman, their immediate bonding, and the promise implied with her visit fell clearly outside that methodical progression, and it left him ill at ease.

Clearly, they'd had fun—shared similar cultural tastes and viewpoints; the excitement in bed, unusual for him; even the same flavor ice cream—but none fulfilled the examination he ordinarily made. Had he cheated himself in allowing this choice?

She's coming and might stay—her undies on the line out back; their integrated toiletries crowding the sink; she will want his side of the bed. His aims and needs will change to "theirs," to what extent, he believed the worst. He turned, started back across the planks, heard them groan, noted their eyes watching now in admonishment.

She had made these hasty—she doesn't call them careless—decisions before. Spur of the moment pivots when happily distracted from a view of tomorrow. She had run off in an alluring direction, then, feeling uncomfortable, struggled to return. Is this one of those,

she asked. *Clickity-clack.*

Her life may not have been wonderful, but she liked her routine with its minor, infrequent variances. From her studio into work; lunch with Agnes at Emile's, and later that night, TV or more likely the clubs or the neighborhood bar. Well, she could change any part if she wanted. And it came to her then that she enjoyed her independence, the freedom to think and act as it suited. She was proud of her broad acceptance, prized her openness—people, things, and ideas—and she knew little towns—confining and orderly, silent rules, watching suspicion—all but the iron bars. *Clickity clack*.

Leaving

Would the woman like Bowser? He hadn't mentioned his pup, his pal. A more critical question, would Bowser like her? If Bowser liked someone, he was a teddy bear with nuzzles and kisses. But, if not, a fully fueled ferocious Rottweiler protecting his territory. Problems . . . some he could see, but the where and the what of things currently resolved would all come anew with a stranger's vote. And future others, he could readily imagine, would all lead to compromise.

He leaned against a post supporting the old station's roof and rubbed his chin, and the eyes from the planks were asking: Had he made a mistake?

The woman turned from the window and signaled the conductor, asked about changing her plans. She would not disembark at her designated stop, but go on to the next, then catch a return to the city. He nodded, made a notation on her ticket, took seven dollars, and said something into a two-way that he carried. She relaxed in her seat, a smile on her face and thoughts of the city.

The man on the platform watched as the signal turned green, and the five-fifteen sped through on time— strangers sliding by in a whoosh of warming air. He smiled as the final car left his view and nodded to the eyes in the planks. As he departed, his shoulders squared, and his stride increased in both length and motion. Maybe stop at *Rexall* for a cherry phosphate, dinner with Bowser, and the *Evening Gazette.*

By: Dragana Kršenković Brković Dragana Kršenković Brković is the author of three novels, two story collections, non-fictions, and fairy tales. She has been a guest writer and has received fellowships and grants from Apexart, Art OMI, UNESCO (Rhodes), HHH Fellowship (California & Washington DC), KulturKontakt Austria (Vienna), OeAD-GmbH (Graz), Pécs, etc.

The total silence was suddenly broken by the flapping of wings. Anna quickly turned her head and saw a cormorant flying just above the water. Several large birds stood on a branch protruding from Lake Skadar. Despite the distance, she could make out the yellow patches around their eyes and beaks.

Dusk was gradually falling. The entire area including the surrounding hills was bathed in blue. Her eyes fell on the Great Bay where her father had been casting his nets that day. This had always been her favorite place on the lake. At that moment, as her gaze moved from the thickets and pine trees on the ridge toward their reflections in the water, she remembered how many times she had secretly taken her father's boat onto the bay and gazed fondly at the surroundings for hours from the highest point of the steep cliff.

She put her hand into the water. Its cool touch felt good. In the blue depths the delicate stems of aquatic plants were swaying subtly. She was in two minds about whether to tell her father what she intended to do. She only had to say:

"I have decided . . . I want to leave."

However, she did not have the courage. She knew very well what would happen if she said this.

Her father would fix her with a long, inquiring look. His sunken, dim eyes would sparkle for a moment in deep surprise. His harsh voice would also say something unintelligible, it seemed to her that he said, "Yes", after which he would continue with his work.

Standing in the middle of the boat, he would skillfully pluck the fish out of the nets with his strong, swollen hands. He'd try not to look at her. Instead, he would finish stowing the nets and glance toward the floats, which she used to help reel in, too. Then he'd sit down, start the engine and head for home. The old boat, its paint almost completely peeled off, would make its way through the water lilies, reeds and tops of trees whose trunks disappeared in the water during the spring floods. Along the right-hand side of the boat, the reflection of the remaining letters, painted on when she was still learning to walk, could be seen in the ripples.

Yes, she could see what would happen at home.

It would all begin with her father bursting into the kitchen and throwing his worn-out boots into the corner of the room. Without looking at her mother, seemingly uninterested and in a quiet voice, he would say, "That daughter of yours is planning to leave home."

Without waiting for her mother to erupt, he would walk toward the door, grim-faced and angry. There was no need to ask where he was going. He would head straight to the tavern, where he spent most of his days.

As he passed her, Anna would notice that her father's face looked even more wrinkled in the pale light of a solitary bulb. Old before its time, his face reminded her of the dried blackberries she used to find along the narrow roads and rocky slopes around Lake Skadar.

He would come home just before dawn. If he managed to not break anything in the kitchen, he would bump his way into the room where he and her mother slept,

swearing and cursing the day he met her mother, ordering her to wake up. Though stumbling over his words, he would repeat over and over how everything was her fault. That she was the one to be blamed because he had not taken the opportunity when he was young to go abroad. That it was her fault he was imprisoned in all this damp and that because of her there was nothing for him to be happy about.

While these things were going on, her mother, usually always ready to give a loud and harsh reply, would be surprisingly silent. Occasionally, through the thin walls, Anna might hear her mother's quiet cries, a whimpering sound. After that, her mother would avoid her for days on end.

Anna had absolutely no doubt. As soon as her father left the kitchen, her mother would pounce on her. Even if she went out to the terrace, absently looking at the wooden boats whose tops peeped out of the thick grass covering the lake water to the jetty, she would hear mother's accusations behind her back. How she, Anna, kept on repeating that story. About how insensitive she was. About how she prefers school and some bird study to her mother's illness.

"She to study birds! It's nonsense! Who still learns about birds?" her mother would repeat angrily and irritable.

Anna would not say a word. She would wind some nylon fishing line through her fingers, waiting for her mother to calm down. At some point, that would happen. When she finally came into the kitchen, she would find her mother standing near the narrow window cut into the thick stone wall, looking pensively into the distance across the peaceful lake.

The following morning, everything would continue. Aware of the fact that Anna would hear her voice while in bed, her mother would start complaining to the next-door neighbor. No one has such an ungrateful child, she would begin. She had constant headaches and pain in her bones, but Anna wanted to leave! And that, just when she should be helping her mother in the house . . . And, anyway, how could she let her go? Well, it's a big city . . . And, it's true, mom's sister lives there, but still . . . And those dreams of Anna's! Who wants to devote their life to running after birds, recording what they do on the lake? Nobody.

When even these frequent morning monologues wouldn't help, everything would become tougher.

Her mother would scold her to her face and threaten her. This scene was so vivid in front of Anna's eyes that she suddenly jerked the boat. Surprised, her

father lost his balance for a moment, then managed to regain it. Wanting to help him, Anna stood up with outstretched arms . . .

That was enough to send her falling into the water.

As she was sinking to the bottom, she noticed the oblique beams of sunlight breaking through the thick growth of plants. The roots of these aquatic flowers were located deep in the mud, while the stalks, several meters long, swayed ever so lightly, carried by the gentle currents. When she waved her hands towards the surface, she suddenly realized that she could not move. She looked down and saw her leg trapped in a carpet of green.

The more she strained, the more the stalks tightened their grip on her. Everything started to

grow in size, to spread and to pulsate, faster and faster, until everything started to dance. Even the undulating image of the Great Bay, which had until then been quietly resting on the lake's surface, suddenly started moving. It somehow plunged into the depths, wrapped itself around her, and gently brought her to the surface, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

As she approached the surface, her father's quiet voice reached her ever more clearly. Finally, she felt the tight grip of his large hand and found herself back in the boat.

Anna looked silently at the Great Bay as the water dripped from her clothes.

Visibly exhausted, but with a barely perceptible smile at the corners of her mouth, she looked at the pine trees, the low heather bushes and the broken lines of the numerous crevices in that rocky cliff . . .

Something gave inside her and, without even looking at her father, she suddenly said:

"I've decided . . . I want to leave."

Open Mic

By: Maren Halvorsen Maren Halvorsen is a writer who lives on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. Among her publications are short stories printed in *Chiron Review* and in *October Hill Magazine*, and an essay published in the anthology "The Madrona Project Volume III: Human Communities in Wild Places," published by *Empty Bowl Press.*

So, there was this dog, and he had just three legs.

All things considered, he got around pretty good. I mean, it did slow him down, but never kept him from anything he wanted to do. I didn't know him all that long; I was just the house sitter, looking after him and the house. I'd been hired as a caretaker while the Wilson family went off to Hawaii. It was January, after all, light was hard to come by, and it rained nonstop. So anybody with any money took off, and the neighborhood became a ghost town, if you consider house sitters to be ghosts. It was an easy gig; the house was really nice, roomy, comfortable, and there was no yard work. All I had to do was feed the dog, make sure everything was locked up at night or when I went out, and clean up after myself. There weren't even any

houseplants to tend. They gave me the password to the Wi-Fi, and I was surrounded by whole bookcases of reading material should I be so inclined. I felt pretty lucky; I'd been doing this kind of work for a while and this was the nicest place yet.

The dog's name was Arthur.

People often ask me if I get bored or lonely, doing all this house sitting for families who are off having a good time somewhere else. I am hired through a company that sends me up and down the West Coast, so I'm always a stranger wherever I am. And sure, it can be a little isolating, with only a dog to talk to. That's why I make sure to get out and do stuff. I am, as they say, trying to make it as a musician, looking for a break, and so I make a point to seek out all opportunities to put myself before the public and to network. I do my research and find out about all the open mic events, in even the puniest of towns. You never know.

Example: when I was at the Wilsons', with Arthur the dog, I found out about an open mic at a local café, and so I headed on over on Friday evening with my guitar and my good-luck hat. At the very least, I'd get a chance to play; at the most, I might score a regular gig someplace. You never know.

My dad, of course, Mr. Wet-Blanket, asked me why a Harvey Mudd College education, paid in full, had led me in this direction, and did his best to discourage me. The fact that a good part of the year I lived in his basement was maybe part of the motivation behind his question, who knows. When in fact I had made money as a musician; I had spent more than one summer teaching 10-year-olds how to strum a guitar. I had been busy posting videos on YouTube and then on TikTok, and had something like a hundred followers, which is hardly anything but better than last year when I had thirty. I was committed to my music career and tried to explain to him that this meant sacrificing pretty much everything else, including, it seemed, his regard for me.

Arthur used to nose me awake in the morning, ever so gently. As if he knew what it was like to be woken too abruptly, and wanted to spare me that.

The café, called the Star-Struck, was not exactly hopping when I got there. It was early though. A couple of guys, who constituted a real band (they had a name on a signboard, and an agent, an old coot named Jerry who sat over in the corner with his lady Marjorie), were setting up the equipment. Hardly anyone else in the place except for a woman alone at her table, a glass of white wine next to her as if it belonged to somebody else. There was a family at the table closest to the stage, two women and a little boy,

the table layered in crumbs and napkins and half empty, finger-smudged glasses of pop. That was it. But I knew, as an open-mic regular, that this was just the beginning of a long night.

I don't drink, so I stood myself next to the bar with a glass of seltzer in my hand. People started to wander in: a heavy-set man who looked like he just got off work at the auto-repair shop (a logo on his tractor cap), a young punk in a cheap suit, an old lady with a shaky smile and long gray braids, among others. There was a carefully curated type of nonchalance, of having just bumped into this open mic rather than planning for it all week. They were all new to me, every one a mystery. That's the thing with these kinds of events: it's like just throwing a bunch of people in a room with a pile of guitars and seeing what happens. Some of it is magic, and a lot of it is garbage. I saw that there was even a drum set, which struck me as pretty optimistic; most musicians at open mics are loners with guitars.

The sign-up sheet was blank but I was not about to sign up for #1. I scrolled down the page and decided that #7 was my lucky number. Meanwhile the band, two guys, launched into their act; they did covers, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Three Dog Night, with just a single guitar, no drummer. The singer's voice wasn't unpleasant; it was rough, and emotional, which isn't easy to do when you're a cover band. Even the best songs get old. Jerry and Marjorie, to whom I had introduced myself

and managed to get into my phone contacts, were swinging with the tune, in their happy place. There was an odd decorousness to their movements, sitting so flat on the bench with their upper torsos swaying back and forth. The little kid at the front table got up and began to dance. I worried about how the loud music might affect his hearing, but his mom and her friend seemed at peace with the whole thing, laughing as he twirled around the room. I could see this was a kid used to performing. It was kind of creepy, how he had his moves, the ones guaranteed to get a response from the crowd. He was only maybe four, and already had it all figured out.

The thing with Arthur, he knew how to entertain. He'd do this little jig, with his three legs, when I put his food down for him. Dancing for his supper.

I started talking with the woman with the white wine; her name was Carole ("with an 'e,'" she said, as if it mattered). Carole was finally drinking her wine; maybe she had resolved not to start until the music began. Now she was making up for lost time and ordered a second glass. I got it for her.

"Are you performing tonight?" I asked her, sliding on to the next stool.

"Nope," she told me. "I'm just here to see the talent. You wouldn't catch me near a microphone." Then a raspy old cough that reminded me of my mother. She looked at me with some defiance, as if I were going to argue with her, wrestle her on to the stage. "What's your name, kid?"

"Jackson," I told her. "You know, like the hole." She looked puzzled.

I always like talking to older women. Maybe I got good at it, all those years as an only child, keeping my mom company before she died. My parents had divorced when I was just a little kid, and so it had just been me and my mom, most of the time. After Mom passed, Dad took me in, let me have his basement, said he didn't want my dog in the main part of the house. I was a junior in high school by that point.

I don't have an agenda with the ladies, I'm not a gigolo or a scam artist, I just find that they are good listeners. They've been listening to husbands all their lives. And so when I listen to them, give them a turn for once, it's kind of a revelation, not something that happens every day. It's all win-win: we both get something. I truly am interested how they make it through their lives. When you ask men to sum up their lives, it's all about what they did. Women talk about who they are.

Carole was very thin, which made me think cancer. Really, her trousers were loose, her arms like sticks. But her grip was firm; no tremors when she brought that glass up to her lips. I asked her about herself, how long she'd been living in town, easy questions, and settled in with my seltzer. The band stopped playing and the auto-repair guy got up. Time was taken to fine-tune the equipment, though I have to say it was kind of hopeless.

"So you're a house sitter," she said with a flirty laugh. "And a musician. How do you survive?"

"Cut to the chase!" I cried. I never take offense. If I did, I'd never have time for anything else. "I do some work, I teach guitar, that kind of thing. What do you do?"

"Nothing now," she said, taking another swig. "But I've put in the time. Waitressing, selling real estate, working in a vet clinic, retail, whatever came my way. I worked all the time, brother. I deserve what I've got now, some rest."

This felt a little accusatory to me, but I let it slide as I always do. "I'm good at my work," I said. "I take care of things. Houses, pets, plants, yards. Care is what I take. Caretaker." I liked the way the words combined, flowed. I thought about the song I was going to sing, when it was my turn; it was a kind of caretaking too, looking after my audience. "I've been taking care of a house and a dog this week."

Whenever I got out my guitar, Arthur would go and hide. I thought maybe he'd been traumatized by loud music when he was a puppy.

Carole smiled creakily. “What’s the dog’s name? I used to have a dog, I’m a real dog person. Now, cats are a different story, give me a dog any time. They are all about unconditional love. A cat, now, it wants its comforts, but a dog will put up with almost anything, to be with its person.”

“Arthur,” I said, “which is a great name for a dog, isn’t it? It’s my dad’s name too.” I actually hadn’t thought about it until that moment. Never really thought about my dad’s name, which struck me as a little weird. “The dog and I, we both had cancer. Cancer survivors, you’d call us. We bonded over it.”

I talk about this so much, I’m just so used to the whole thing, that I am always surprised when people react. Carole’s face opened up, like she was seeing me for the first time. Eyebrows lifted, eyes widened, mouth in the shape of a circle.

“Oh you poor baby,” she said. “I know, I know, been there.”

I gave her an appreciative smile—an easy thing to do, cost me nothing—and went and got myself another seltzer, stopping along the way to garner another musician’s contact info. It just felt good to gather all those names and phone numbers. To feel like I was part of a club of some kind.

I liked sitting next to Carole. She had an aura of safety around her. Even though I could see that she had her wounds, just like I did. They weren’t the kind of wounds that make you dangerous to anyone but yourself. I saw her as a shy girl on the playground, getting ignored by the other kids. I saw her getting knocked around a little by her first husband. I imagined her no longer on speaking terms with her youngest, who was into opioids.

“It’s almost my time to go up,” I told Carole when I got back to our table. “I’m next. This’ll be a hard act

to follow.” Right then a guy who looked like he did modeling in his spare time was crooning into the mic, his eyes closed, the whole room his. A ringer, clearly somebody just passing through on his way to and from bigger stuff. At least he hushed the crowd, so I’d start off with a quiet room.

People didn’t just applaud, they whistled and slammed their hands on tables when he was through. No encores allowed though, open mic rules at the Star-Struck, so there I was, standing in front of this crowd that had tears in their eyes.

I wonder what Arthur thought of his three legs. His owners told me that he’d lost the fourth a few years ago, the big C. He had to hop in an undignified manner, rather than run or walk, and I wondered if he remembered what it was like, to just get up and go.

I had cancer too, as a kid. I talk about it on my YouTube videos. I’m a survivor, a word that has attached itself to me whether I like it or not. Luckily I still have all my limbs, though something was definitely lost. I’m not sure why, but it’s the second thing I always tell people about myself, after the fact that I am an aspiring singer. Even though it was just a weird little blood cancer all those years ago, and I’ve been clean as a whistle ever since. There’s something about cancer that really knocks you back. Maybe it’s that I have this sneaking suspicion that it’s never left, even though all the scans are clear. That it’s hanging out someplace dark and deep, waiting for its moment.

Arthur never seemed too bothered by his brush with death. Dogs live day to day, they don’t mull over the past, they’re not moody. Death was not even an option as far as Arthur was concerned.

I got up and did my act. I enjoy singing, and I have an easy stage presence. I wouldn’t say I have a strong voice, but it’s pleasing, smooth and clear, sort of like James Taylor’s. I chose a song of mine that was about a sunny day, because I felt this crowd needed it. We were in the misery of a rainy January, everybody sitting there with pale, dry skin, in their winter parkas and muddy boots, so a little sunshine was my gift. That’s the thing about singing for others: it’s like you are giving them something, handing it over, precious. And even though there was a steady, low thrum of conversation in the room, I knew that some of them were listening, that some of them accepted my gift.

"Good job," said Carole, clapping carefully so as not to disturb her elaborate nails. "That was nice."

I took this thin bit of praise for what it was and moved on. "Well, it's not exactly 'Here Comes the Sun' but you get the idea," I said with a shrug. I began to think of mingling a bit more; some new people had come in. A young man with a Brillo pad beard was singing about his girlfriend's betrayal and how he found it necessary to drown her in the river. His voice was plaintive and filled with self-pity.

Before I had a chance to move on from Carole, a man sat down next to us and introduced himself. He was old, really old, with a thick gray beard. He took trouble with it, for sure; there was a well-tended braid that ran down the middle of the beard, tied neatly with a thin blue ribbon.

"I knew I'd find you here," he said to Carole, with sadness. She was on maybe her fourth glass by this point. A lot of money was pouring down her hollow leg: not all of us have the funds for several $6 glasses of pinot grigio.

Arthur, on the other hand, was rarely observed to drink even water. I would watch him, and never saw him approach the water dish. And yet when I would check it later it would be empty. He was sneaky that way.

"I'm fine," Carole said, "you are not in charge of me. Just go live your life, Phil." She turned to me. "Phil's my ex," she said, tipping her head in his direction as if there were other choices at the table. "We were only married—what was it, Phil, two years?—but he acts like it was thirty. Like we have this deep bond or something. Can't get over me, I guess."

"Oh, sweetheart," said Phil with a growl. "I'm just a human being and it's okay. It's just common decency to worry about you. You don't take care of yourself. Is that all you've had for dinner?" He pointed to the nearly empty wine glass. "Man does not live on grapes alone."

Carole had probably heard this before and didn't answer; instead she did her usual careful applauding with the end of the next act. She turned towards me as if Phil no longer existed and shook her head.

"He's a pain, isn't he? We all got to take care of ourselves. Nobody's responsible for my happiness but me," she said, her voice rising. "I get so tired of this bullshit. Nobody's taking care of you, right? Except you yourself? Mr. Caretaker?" She threw the word at me as if it were an accusation.

"C'mon Carole," said Phil. "I just love you so

much." I was beginning to feel a little

embarrassed.

"You take care of animals," she continued, looking at me. "You take good care of pets. Because you're paid to do it. And then you take care of yourself, am I right?"

"Well, it's complicated," I said.

"And I'm not a pet, is that also right?"

"Very true," I said, seeking a moment of levity. "You're hardly a pet!" It came out sounding a bit more negative than I intended. Phil gave me a sharp look.

"I think you gotta care for someone to take care of them," he insisted. "The two go together. Nothin' wrong with it, nothin' insulting, just that's what caring means. To me anyway."

The music covered us like a blanket. A father-daughter duo in matching leather jackets singing "Somethin' Stupid," which seemed a little inappropriate. Times change.

To be honest, I felt a little under attack myself by this point. Not that Phil knew me, but his words did some damage. I wanted him to get up and leave, give up on Carole, let her and me do our ongoing shitty jobs of taking care of ourselves.

"I got the old truck running," he said to Carole.

"It's right outside. C'mon. Let me just take you home, okay? No funny business."

"Funny business," I said to Carole. "What does that even mean?"

But there was a change on her face. I could see it. Small, a softening of her mouth, her eyelids lowering just a bit.

"I could use a ride," she said, as applause erupted for the dad and his girl.

Once they left, Carole leading the way with Phil behind her, I was marooned at the big table by myself. People were beginning to make for the door. The crooner held court over in the corner; Marjorie and Jerry began to dismantle the unused drum set.

I couldn't go back to the house. Not now. My stuff was in the car; the family was due back in the morning. I would just leave town, make my exit, soft and quiet so that nobody knew. I mean, they would know, my employers, because the dog, after all, was dead, but I would be gone by then. As I thought this through I felt my stomach turn a bit.

It wasn't my fault, but I still felt bad about it.

I mean, Arthur was supposed to be in the house, not in the driveway.

I did what I could, made him comfortable, rested his heavy head on my thigh, felt his last breath on my hand. Even with the missing leg, he was a beautiful dog.

I left a note. I really couldn't face the family. I mean, there was a kid, and I knew from experience that he wouldn't handle this well. He'd probably remember it his whole life, coming home from vacation to find his dead dog in the garage with a note. He'd never know all the time I spent with Arthur, taking him for walks, letting him on the bed, making him sit for treats, all of it. The care I took.

The note actually said, "A car hit Arthur," because I decided there was no point in going into details. That Arthur had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. That I, too, had been in that wrong place. At the wrong time.

I realized that this would probably end my career as a dog/house sitter. Or at least a dog sitter. Mr. Wet Blanket might just be right about me. I told him, it comes with the territory: musicians are selfish, they are unworldly, they fail at everything else. Their dogs die. Because they are meant to be musicians, and it's an all-consuming career choice. There's not a lot of room for looking after others, pets or people, even though we try.

"We still have a little time left," said a voice next to me. It turned out to be the house manager, Taylor, whose androgynous style was cool but probably not long for this little town. "You had a nice little perky tune earlier; do you think you could send us out with another? We could use the lift."

Carole and her ex were gone, and the crowd was now just a shadow of its former self. I got up on stage and sang my heart out.

The Annunciation

By: Jeffrey Hantover Jeffrey Hantover is the author of the novel, *The Jewel Trader of Pegu* and the forthcoming novels, *The Three Deaths of Giovanni Fumiani* (Cuidono Press) and *The Forenoon Bride* (Severn House). His poetry and short fiction have appeared various literary journals, including *October Hill Magazine*.

Ed Gorman had $714.37 in the bank—checking and

savings—when he won $673,000 after taxes in the Pennsylvania lottery.

"I was a millionaire for about a minute," he told the regulars at Clancy's.

He had gone to Scranton to help his sister move into the St. Elizabeth Green Valley retirement home. Back in New York, he stood the Thursday night regulars a round to celebrate his good fortune.

Ed didn't throw his new money around. He wore the same dark khakis and long-sleeve cotton shirts that he always had. After that first night back, he didn't pick up the tab for the gang of regulars. What he did with his newly acquired wealth, he did quietly. He bought an airline ticket for Dorothy Everett, the oldest waitress at Clancy's so she could visit her ailing sister in Sarasota. He bought George Lally, the owner, who hadn't had a vacation in five years, a ticket to Dublin. He gave Bill Tuohy and Stan Caster gift cards to Target, so they could buy clothes for their new granddaughters, whose pictures they couldn't stop showing. There were other rumored acts of generosity: school books for the son and daughter of the Ecuadorian dishwasher, a new furnace for a friend's elderly mother just getting by on Social Security, a Quinceanera dress for the daughter of a single mother who cleaned offices at night on Wall Street. Ed tipped in cash but still put his drinks on his credit card.

"I get points, fellows," he said. "I got to be smart with my money."

Ed Gorman was a sixty-seven-year-old widower. His wife died when he was sixty-three. They had no children. He lived in the same two-bedroom rental

apartment he and his wife had lived in for thirty-seven years. If he had any other relatives besides his sister, he never talked about them. He was the longtime manager of a high-end lighting fixture company. He retired at sixty-five. He said he didn't miss the work.

"That was light years ago," he laughed.

He continued to go to the free student performances at Julliard and occasionally bought nosebleed tickets at Carnegie Hall. He said he was a creature of habit, and it was hard to think of himself as a rich man. Before his lottery luck, his pension and Social Security just covered his rent and modest lifestyle.

Ed was a two-drinks-after-work-and-good-night kind of guy. Guinness or Johnny Walker Red. After his wife died, he still came in at six and left before eight. Every Thursday, he came for the corned beef and cabbage special. On those nights, he wore a blue blazer with cuffs slightly frayed and the buttons tarnished. He sat at the bar with a napkin tucked above the top button of a clean, pressed button-down shirt and didn't leave one bite on his plate. He was a steady tipper: twenty percent, whatever the bill. He always came alone.

Jean Evans was a part-time bartender at Clancy's. She worked weekends and an occasional weekday to pay her way through the PhD program in Renaissance art history at Columbia. It was decent money. It rested her eyes from hours spent looking at paintings on her computer and cleared her brain of the dense art criticism that read like poorly translated English from German. She had been working there for two years when Ed won the lottery.

She didn't ask for special treatment, and George Lally didn't give her any. The younger regulars treated her like their kid sister, and the gray-haired guys like their favorite niece. She could hold her own. But, once in a while, if someone new to the bar got sauced and hit on her or complimented loudly on her ass (which she knew did look good in tight jeans), George would tell him, "This is a family bar. Knock it off."

Ed was one of Jean's favorites. She made a point of taking care of him when he came in and sat on his usual stool at the far end of the bar. There were a few regulars who Jean imagined spent the whole day in their drab, musty apartments reading the New York Post and wandering the dark corners of Internet conspiracies, just waiting to come to Clancy's to grouse about how the country was going to Hell. Not Ed. He always had a smile and never talked politics, not even in November. He always called her by her first name, never "Doc" or "Prof," like some of the other regulars. And it was "Jean," never "Jeanie." He read books: biographies—Churchill and Napoleon were his favorites—and courtroom novels—for his money, you couldn't beat John Grisham. He asked Jean what courses she was taking and seemed genuinely interested in her studies.

"I'm more of a music man, Jean. Never took an art course at City College. Strangely, I spent all my life selling lights to people so they could enjoy the paintings on their walls, and I can count on the fingers of one hand the times I've gone to the Met."

"We should go," she said, as she slid a beer across the bar to him.

But they never did.

Jean and Ed skated smoothly on the surface of each other's lives. He might ask her about her weekend, and she might ask what he was reading or saw on television. That was as deep into their lives as they went. Even if she had known the truth, she wouldn't have asked Ed Gorman how he planned to pay for his generosity with $714.37 in the bank and a lottery ticket that didn't exist. He went to Scranton, but he didn't win the lottery. He didn't even buy a ticket.

It was a brisk April Thursday, and Jean was late for her shift. She rushed in, said a quick hello to George and Ed, and hurried to put her jacket and backpack away in a locker in the corner of the kitchen. Still catching her breath, she put her apron on and went behind the

bar. Ed had just begun his corned beef special. "Jean, are you okay? You're red as a beet."

"The bus was crawling, so I got out and hustled the last few blocks."

"Drink some water. I don't want you fainting in my cabbage," Ed laughed.

She drew a glass of seltzer. She told Ed she had been at the Met with two other graduate students looking at the museum's four Correggio drawings in a basement storage room. The drawings were rarely on display because of their fragility. She patted her flushed cheeks.

"I hightailed it here, but my heart was going double time before I got on the bus. It was Correggio's *The Annunciation* that did it."

A small pen and ink drawing no bigger than a four by-six note card, Gabriel and Mary washed in gray and brown on paper tinted with a reddish wash. So delicate, so heart stopping. Gabriel rushed toward the Virgin,

who seemed to cower shyly, unable to escape his holy words. Ed hadn't heard of Correggio. He knew the story of the Annunciation—there was a pretty painting of it in St. Aloysius, the church where he was married.

"Jean, pardon me, but I've never seen you look so beautiful. Your eyes are sparkling. That Correggio… that drawing must have been beautiful."

"Ed, it was. I'm going to do my thesis on Correggio. He painted these beautiful ceilings in Parma."

"Where the hams come from?" Ed said with a smile.

"Right. I've seen photographs of them. They're spectacular. He was ahead of his time. He did things that other great painters didn't do for another 150 years."

Jean didn't want to go all art history on Ed, so she just said, once she had enough money, she would go to Parma to see the ceilings. Ed wiped a smidge of mustard from his lips with his napkin.

"Of course, you should," he said.

The following Thursday, Ed was unusually quiet. He drank his two beers and ate his corned beef methodically. When he wasn't chewing, he looked at Jean with a Cheshire cat smile. He paid his bill and put his cash tip down on the bar. He started to get up from the bar stool. "Oh, I almost forgot." He reached into the coat pocket of his blue blazer. He handed Jean an envelope.

"Go ahead," he said. She started to tear open the envelope. "And the winner for best bartender is . . ."

She stared at the roundtrip business ticket to Rome in her shaking hand.

"Ed, I can't."

"Yes, you can. Just call United and give them the dates."

"It's just too much. I can't take this."

"What's money for? I've got more than I'll ever spend."

She stood on her tiptoes and leaned across the bar and gave Ed a kiss on the cheek. George Lally looked over. "This is a family bar, you guys. Knock it off."

Everyone at the bar knew about Ed's luck and his quiet, unsolicited generosity. No one knew about the ballooning credit card debt he was paying off in dribs and drabs every month and likely would never pay off in his lifetime. All Jean knew was that the ticket was a gift from heaven. Accounting, not art history, would pay the bills, her father had told her. If she wanted to work at an art gallery making peanuts xeroxing newspaper reviews, she would have to go to graduate school on her own dime. Jean would never have asked Ed for the money—that wasn't the way she was raised—but since he offered, she wouldn't say no. She knew it sounded like self-interested sophistry, but she didn't want to deny him the pleasure of his kindness.

It was a slow Tuesday when Ed came into Clancy's the following week. Jean motioned for him to sit in a booth, where they could talk privately. She thanked him again for the ticket. Not having to pay for the plane meant she could spend more time traveling in Italy.

"Here's my idea. Come with me to Parma. We'll see the ceilings together. I know all the good things you are doing for others. You should do something for yourself. You won't be stuck with me. After Parma, you can go off by yourself and see St. Peter's, the Vatican, the Colosseum. Maybe even Russell Crowe."

He laughed and said, "Gladiator was a good movie.

Even better than Braveheart."

"So, it's a deal?"

"Whoa, Jean. I'm too young to have a bucket list. But I'll think about it. Seeing those ceilings with an expert would be special."

They stood at the bottom of the Duomo steps

on a mild June afternoon. They had dropped off their bags at the hotel and had a quick lunch. They didn't want to waste the afternoon light. Jean took Ed's hand. They walked up the steps like a father and daughter on the way to the wedding altar. He placed her hand over his racing heart.

The organist was practicing as they entered the cathedral. Sacred notes filled the immense space. They both silently thought it was a sign. For Ed, God was welcoming him; for Jean, her life as an art historian was truly beginning. She counted each slow, measured step. She wanted to detail in her journal the visual impact the ceiling had on the sixteenth century faithful as they walked down the nave. Saints in scalloped pendentives stood on nubby clouds that looked like the gray-gloved fingers of God. Ten steps down the nave she saw the bare calves of the disciples standing on the ledge of the dome. In another ten steps the hems of their swirling dark robes came into view. As one, Jean and Ed paused to let their eyes adjust to the sunlight streaming through the dome's eight glass roundels. In another ten steps, the disciples came into full view. They were leaning back in astonishment at something that Jean and Ed couldn't yet see. Jean marveled at the painterly illusion of the marble ledge. For a fleeting moment, Ed was afraid one step back and the disciples would tumble from their perch to the floor below. The feet of angels dangled in the air above the unseen object of the disciples' gaze.

The Virgin appeared bathed in the glowing gold and silver light of heaven. For Jean, the fledgling art historian, it was the electrum of heaven. For Ed, it was the color that burst behind his eyelids when he closed his eyes after staring at the sun. With her arms spread wide, the Virgin was borne upwards by smooth bottomed cherubs, their flesh so pink and pulsing with life, Ed wanted to cover them for fear they would catch a chill. They dove and frolicked among clouds large as boulders and light as tufts of cotton. Saints and elders surrounded her in rapturous welcome. Eve was at her left, apple in her hand, Adam at her right. Judith was nearby, holding the head of Holofernes

in her hand. Ed pointed out David holding the head of Goliath and Samson holding the jawbone of an ass. Later, over pasta and wine, they tried to figure out the many other blessed figures. Angels swirled about the Virgin in ecstatic attendance, celebrating her assumption with cymbal, pipe, lute, trumpet, and tambourine. Jean heard their heavenly melodies and felt the rhythmic beating of her heart. Ed looked up until his neck ached. He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck as he and Jean ascended the stairs to the right of the altar.

Beneath the golden glare of heaven's dome glowing in raking sunlight, Mary's son, his back to them, hurtled into view, legs akimbo, arms raised to receive his holy mother. Ed reached out to grasp Jean by the arm. He felt he was being pulled upward into a swirling heavenly whirlpool. He wasn't standing beneath a dome fashioned by man, but the vault of heaven itself. Neither Jean nor Ed said a word. Jean took a bottle of water from her backpack and offered it to Ed, thinking his mouth might be as dry as hers. They stood rooted in place, staring at the heaven above them. Correggio's clouds turned from gray to faint purple in the fading light.

Ed and Jean sat on a stone bench in the Piazza Duomo. They had planned to see Correggio's ceiling at San Giovanni Evangelist the same day, but both knew they wouldn't.

"I can only take one miracle at a time," Ed said. "Jean, thank you for inviting me."

"Me? Without you, I could never have come." Ed patted Jean on her knee.

"I'm almost sixty-eight, and I haven't lived," he said. She saw tears welling in his eyes. "Now,

you can, Ed."

Tears trickled down his cheeks. Ed looked across the cobblestones at the church glowing golden in the late afternoon light.

"I haven't lived." He turned and looked into Jean's eyes. "I want to apologize."

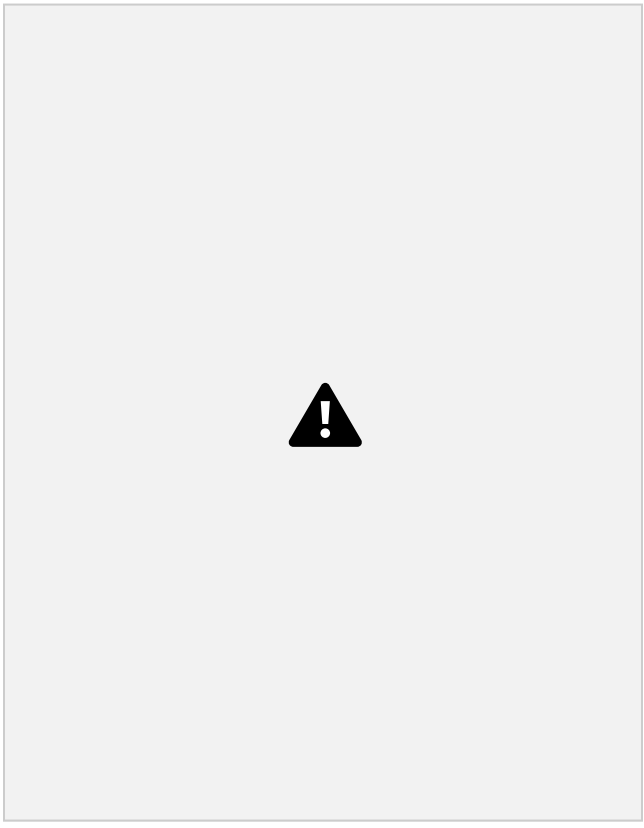
"For what?"

"For wasting time. For not looking at the world." He was quiet for a moment. "I want to apologize, but

who should I apologize to?"

Jean stayed in Italy for the summer. Ed saw the Colosseum, the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo's Pieta, and Bernini's Four Rivers in Piazza Navona. He discovered the Greek and Roman statues at the Palazzo Massimo and Palazzo Altemps and the paintings of Caravaggio, and he tried to see as many as he could in the week he had in Rome. He bought two postcards of all his favorites. One set he would give to Jean when she came back. The others he put in his inside blazer pocket to show George and all the regulars on his first visit back to Clancy's. Two months after he returned, he was struck by a cab crossing Fifth Avenue in front of the Met and died on the way to the hospital. Jean learned of his death on her return.

He died with $578.13 in the bank and a credit card debt of $16,118.37. A fraud investigator from Visa came to the bar asking questions. Irv Salter, a retired lawyer and a fellow fan of corned beef, didn't think Visa would go after Ed's sister in Scranton. Before Jean stopped working at the bar to devote herself full-time to her dissertation, she printed a copy of *The Annunciation* from the Met website and gave it to George. He taped it on the mirror behind the bar across from Ed's favorite stool.



El Corazón de Dios

By: Mike Nichols Among other things, Mike Nichols lives and writes in Idaho, where he continues work on future publications.

Mike earned his BA in English from Idaho State University, where he was awarded the Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize. His short story, "A Silent Passing," was a judges' choice winner in *Idaho Magazine*.

The old man arrives at the compound footsore and thirsty after traveling in the harsh sunlight. He has come from the village of Santa Lupe on homemade huaraches, cut from the sidewalls of an old tire. He departed as the sun first broke the bleak and ill-defined horizon, each footfall puffing a cloud of dust into the air behind him, as if he had been trailed by slight and nebulous spirits. He has risked capture and interrogation by the Federales, as they begin what will be a three month show of force after pressure from the American government to stamp out the drug cartels.

He has come to beg the narcos for the life of his son. He is not naïve. No one in this violent region may enjoy innocence for long. Yet, he has brought all the money he could gather, also hoping beyond logic that his life or the use of that life, a coin minted in a dark and elemental place, might be of some additional value. He understands that this small pouch of coins at his belt, light as bird's bones, is an inadequate exchange for the narcos' pride.

In this land a life holds little value, or perhaps none. What could that life offer? What small service might it provide? Only the value of the next smuggled load, or perhaps not even that. This is the way of the narcos, who, in pursuit of wealth use up lives like the Americanos use up plastic grocery bags. The

discarded tatters of either can be seen fluttering in the shimmering heat along the false distance of the arroyos and washouts.

Knowing all of this, the old man treads down the dirt street toward a large, white stucco building at the center of the compound. Outside the building, well-armed guards, their eyes hooded and apathetic, lounge in multicolor canvas lawn chairs under an ill-built slatted wooden awning. Children, filthy and

ragged, dance and jeer around a tattered, bone-thin dog in the shade of a rusting water tower.

A girl stands in the shade of a hovel on his right as he passes. He is struck by her beauty. Her long, black hair shimmers, and he blinks hard as he imagines her eyes shining pale green beneath her brows. She is perhaps sixteen years, perhaps several years more. Age is an ill-defined thing in this place, which uses up and sends spinning away all things feminine, like the casings of the narcos' bullets. The old man is melancholy for his own daughter, who would have been about this age and beautiful in the same manner. His daughter with eyes of pale green. The girl watches him pass under the shaded arch of her upheld hand.

Granted admission to the white-washed building by the derisive guards, their shirts stained with sweat, the old man sits to plead his son's case before the dark, twinkling eyes of the narco jefe. A sweating steel pitcher of water sits between them on the scarred, wooden table next to a bottle of El Tesoro Paradiso. The narco gestures, offering the old man a drink and exposing the eyes of Santo Jesus Malverde under his rolled up sleeve. Though impolite, the old man refuses the drink, and asks instead for water. The jefe pours the water for the old man and watches him drink.

The situation of your son is unfortunate, but one often repeated. The jefe lays wide his palms, as if to encompass the room, the compound, the horizon. Many young men come to the belief that they can somehow take advantage, that they can become more than they are. But this they cannot do, for men are what they are, *y nada mas.* Their way of being set by their genetics and the experiences of their parents and of themselves, all of which shape them into that which they were foreordained to become.

These things, they cannot be changed. *Tu hijo*, he thought himself invincible, immortal, which is often the case with young men. Now, he knows differently. He believed that he could succeed where others were unable. He thought to cheat me and those to whom I must answer with my own life. So, his life is forfeited. For profit. For the hope of profit not earned.

The old man sits quiet, hands folded in his lap.

The narco leans back, steeples his fingers, sets his dead black eyes on those of the old man.

You are too late to save him. The time for your intercession passed when he made his choice to steal. Perhaps you were destined to be too late. Perhaps this is what was preordained at the moment he gasped his first breath. He cannot be saved, for he is already dead. He suffers now only as a matter of course, as an example. He understands this. I believe you also understood this when you set out this morning, knew it with every step you took. But who may judge you foolish for the attempt?

He shrugs. He unsteeples his fingers and again pours two fingers of El Tesoro Paradiso into his cut glass tumbler, drinks, and wipes the residue of it from his black mustache.

As a boy, I would travel the road to Culiacan with my uncles. There we would purchase our candles and light them at the shrine of Santo Jesus Malverde. We were poor and could not afford to buy the candles blessed in the cathedral. But we do the best we can with what we have, no?

There I learned to ask for his protection from those who would harm us, those who would take the food from our mouths and spill our intestines in the dirt and rape our sisters, our mothers. Pray to be given power to do these same things to our enemies, promise to give to the poor as did Santo Jesus Malverde.

Sinaloan Robin Hood, they call him in el Norte. Always believing that he would favor us and not them.

We did not think to consider why he would pity us and help us, but not our enemies, who were praying the same prayers. Once a man has begun down this path of thought, he must question other things. Larger things. Some say we are here for a purpose, even if we cannot see it. For what purpose? There is much suffering in this life, and much struggle to avoid it. Perhaps, then, life is about pleasure, and its juxtaposition with pain. Perhaps hedonism is the

only answer.

Even so, after all I have seen in my life, I wonder sometimes, now, might we not be better engaged squatting in our simian form, fingering our feces, than to be sentient enough to ponder the unknowable? The reason for our being? The ever-gaping oblivion will, and does, slip away with us, each and all, leaving only a blurred and false image seared on the hearts of our loved ones, and then, when oblivion takes those loved ones, nada. *Nosotros, los nunca fuimos*.

The narco jefe sighs. Shrugs.

Perhaps God hates us. Perhaps the very gift of sentience is our curse. Our punishment.

Both men sit silent, each regarding the other.

Perhaps it is as you say, the old man begins. Or perhaps you are lost in this system, set in place by those who came before you, too immersed in it to see its falsity. Perhaps we both are buried in this falsity. Perhaps, instead, it is put to us to help each other, to care for our families and our communities.

If this is so, then I am twice a failure, having already lost my daughter to *la heroina*, to the needle. I think that perhaps she was trying this hedonism for a time. She told me she was bathed in the throbbing presence of the heart of God the first time she pressed the plunger and sent the residue of death into her vein. She sought that presence until the final needle, which stayed in her vein even as her soul departed her body.

I do not claim to know the will or whim of God or who He might hate, as you say, if He is capable of hate. I know only that I desire to see my boy. To hold his face in my hands. To stroke the lids of his eyes with my fingers. To remember him as he was, a slight and loving boy, and to consider what he might have been but for the drugs. For I do not believe all is preordained, as you say, but that we make of ourselves what we will by our choices. As I have chosen to come here, to plead for my son's life.

You can choose to let him live. Or you can choose to conform to the rule that those who go against you must die. You may choose differently, but you choose to remain a slave to the dictates of this system set in place before you were born. You can choose for yourself, but you will not. I did not understand this as I stepped out my door this morning. I understand it now.

The jefe's dark eyes narrow and his mouth turns up at one corner. It is silent but for the clucking and pecking in the dust outside the entryway.

I will grant you your request, that you may see the face of your son once more. I do this because it takes no small courage to come here and speak to me in this manner.

As the old man and the narco step out into the heat and walk toward the shallow pit in the ground, covered by a corrugated tin door wherein the old man's son's sanity bakes away in darkness, the first missiles of the Federales' helicopters hit the fence line, destroying the pit and the building nearest to it. And so, too, the old man's wish to hold his son's face in his hands for a final moment, gaze into his eyes, consider what might have been, tell him one last time that he is his life, his heart, is destroyed.

He drops to his knees for a moment, as if in supplication, then presses his face into the dust

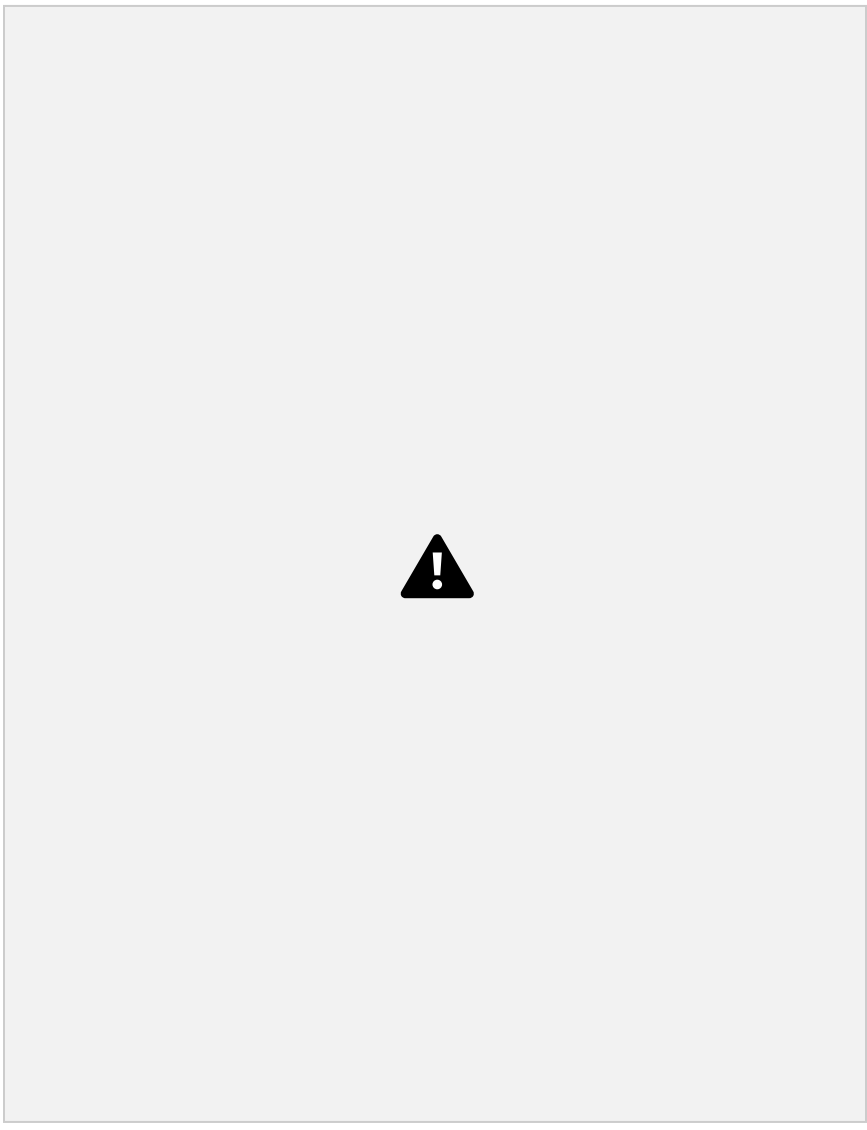
and covers his head with his arms as the narco jefe, his belly sloshing Paradiso, runs zig-zag for cover and falls, spattered with blooming red holes from the Federales' M134 bullets.

The old man can hear the silence beneath the wailing and the praying. He clutches his side and stumbles to a faded green Pontiac, an antiquated two-door vehicle from el Norte. The long door is difficult for him to manage with the bleeding shrapnel wound in his side. He finds the ignition key in the car's ashtray. The engine sputters and coughs black smoke, and he must push the gas pedal and hold it several times before the engine begins an erratic idle.

He pulls away, down the dirt street toward the wooden gates like the batwing doors of a saloon crisscrossed with barbed wire and rusting metal supports. He drives only a short distance before the girl steps out from behind the smoldering wreckage of a building on the right. Her face is cut and glistening in various places. Her manner is defiant. Her arm hangs limp and charred at her side and her dress is torn and blackened. Her eyes are not green, but brown.

The old man stops the car. She tries to open the heavy door but cannot manage it, so with a deep moan he leans across the wide seat and pulls the handle until the door creaks open on its hinges. The girl falls into the seat, slams the door, and the two continue toward the sagging gates, the exit from the silent and smoking
world of the narco's compound. Neither speaks. The man's breathing is shallow and labored.

Two hundred paces from the gate a small boy walks out from the dust, near a dark-spotted goat, which has been eviscerated yet still struggles to stand. The man once again stops the car, and the girl manages to open the door and let the boy in to sit between herself and the man. The dust from the approaching Federales' Jeeps wafts in the shimmering distance as the car door bangs closed. The old man's coin pouch has fallen from his belt to the crease between seat and seat back. The boy sets the pouch on the old man's lap. The Pontiac moves through the gate and travels swaying down the road to the west, toward the village of Santa Lupe.



Mnemosyne

By: Micaëla Clarke Micaëla Clarke is an emerging writer who just graduated with a BFA in Writing from the University of Victoria.

She is a queer fiction author and poet, and she is currently working on a horror-fantasy novella. Her writing has previously been published in *Passengers Journal* and various other magazines.

It feels inaccurate to call what I have memory.

Claiming that title is too self-congratulatory. My remembrance fragments in my mind, like shards of kylix laid out on flagstones.

The hem of my yellow dress flares around me. The floors are clean. The walls are decorated with tapestries handwoven by my daughters. Early morning light cascades through the space and illuminates their work. I sit with my knees curled beneath me, a plush cushion pushed to the side.

Over the centuries, the comforts allocated to divine beings have lost their luster. I do not imagine that I need them as I used to. I have become uncomfortable with gods and titans imposing their superiority upon mortals, even through seemingly insignificant things like the objects that we sit on. But few remember the way the titans' wrath struck mortals down in the centuries before the Olympians wrested control from my family. They remind their worshippers of their superiority by sitting high on their mountain peak, surrounded by wealth and power as far as the mortal eye can see.

But I do not forget. It is in my nature to hold on to what has happened, how things came to be as they are now. No one, god or mortal, trusts me when I say that knowing our shared history is the best way to move forward, despite the fact that I am a living document of the history of titans, gods, and mortals.

My long hair tumbles over my shoulder; my fingers fumble with the ends of my hair, twirling it in loose patterns. Divinity allows the strands to stay perfectly auburn, unmarred by streaks of gray, unless I willingly choose to let the years show. My daughters are the same, though they relish in their eternal youth. Sometimes, time is best held close and experienced, rather than set aside and ignored. Besides, time is cyclical, and gods and titans can always return to previous states if they so choose.

I think of my nine children, each more intelligent and clever than the last. I endeavor to center their abilities over their appearance, unlike the mortal poets who endlessly discuss the goddesses' narrow ankles and glowing golden hair.

One wall-hanging depicts the ten of us together. The background is our home in Eleuther, where I raised the Muses by myself. I sit in the middle, auburn hair between all their bright gold, framed by their youthful pliability. Surrounding us are the small figures of mortals who worship at the altars of poetry and music and history. Various dedications to the Muses cluster at their feet. Perhaps the mortals sought their favor, despite the fact that their favor wavers as quickly as leaves on an olive tree. My daughters are much like their father in that way.

I sift through the images of my children in my mind's eye, their births and growths. An unwanted feeling sweeps through me along with the flickering image of the Muses' father.

I shut my eyes tightly, overtaken by the memory as it sweeps over me. When I open them, Hera's power rings through the space, her presence preceded by a sickly sweet impression of pomegranates.

In the span of a blink, I am seated in the same place, but my robes are pale pink, rather than the yellow they just were. Outside, the light is low as Dusk herds the Sun across the sky. Hera sits before me, her own gown a sky blue with purple embroidery along the hems.

Her power shimmers around her like an aura, and her golden hair is carefully bound and wrapped

in a beautiful cloth and encircled with a decorative gold chain. She is perfect, representing the exact expectations for a goddess.

“I’m leaving him.”

She does not provide more explanation than that, and she does not need to for me to understand that she refers to Zeus. Surprise does not nestle in my chest, as this is not the first nor the last time she will say this to me.

“I need your testimony. Will you help me?” Hera’s voice carries a deep resonance, the timbre would shake the ribs of a mortal if they dared listen.

I say the approximation of I will help you by asking her, “What need I say?”

“Speak of his infidelity, for I know he held you close, as if you were his own,” she says.

There is anger in her tone, but her face is a marbled mask of ambivalence.

It is not becoming of a titan to fear a god, particularly the offspring of my brother Kronos, but Hera’s cold and piercing gaze brings me to a semblance of that emotion. She lets me linger in her boldness, but I do not cower. Only a fool would think my position is one of submission, and Hera is no fool. I raise my eyes to meet hers, harden the edges of my mouth. She blinks in acknowledgement and disappears, leaving the tart scent of pomegranates in her wake.

I whisper to her absence: “We were each other’s for nine nights only.” My eyes close as a breeze slips through the room. The darkness behind my eyes flickers, as if the scene is reconfiguring on the other side.

A voice like thunder, low and rolling, collects around me: “Welcome, Goddess Mnemosyne, daughter of Ouranos, to Pieria.”

When I open my eyes, a face like that of my brother set against a background of Mount Olympus shrouded in clouds awaits me.

Zeus, the Lord of the Skies, tips a smile towards me. Long waves of cloud-white hair and beard frame his face, and a strong brow shadows vibrant eyes the blue of a clear summer day. On his head, a golden band of crackling lightning glints in the gray light as an eternal reminder of the power of the King of Gods,

Usurper of Titans.

Though I would never speak the words out loud, I always thought it strange that it was the youngest who became their king. Maybe Zeus can sense this dissent within me.

“Thank you, Lord Zeus. Why have you sought me out this evening?”

I brush my hands over my chiton and adjust the wrapping around my hair in a self-conscious gesture. It does not strike me as odd to come across Zeus, as he is often strolling among the mortals when I come to visit my friends in Olympus. What does strike me as odd is that he would seek me out so directly.

“I was hoping to seek comfort in your beauty,” he says. “The sky is clouded over, and Hera’s eyes are busy with the children.”

Zeus moves forward, his hands tracing my shoulders with gentle touches. My eyes are drawn to the way his body moves beneath the white and gold robe pinned over one shoulder. The shapes of his muscles are too defined, even more so than in the statues mortals make of him. He has stone made skin, and it occurs to me that he chooses this form with great intention. The wisdom of an older man lies in his full beard and long hair, but he chooses the litheness and muscularity of youth. I think of the future memory and Hera’s attempt to intimidate me. Maybe it is Zeus I should fear?

I will recall the particularities of this memory, our careful fingers, soft on one another’s skin, up to a certain point. After that, I choose to create my own sequence of events.

Parsing out why I take him to bed with me those nine days and nights is difficult. It was not my intent to hurt Hera or cleave wide the chasm between her and Zeus. And if I'm being honest, he was no god of gods in bed.

But each time his eyes meet mine, as we lay side by side, our damp skin sticking to one another, I can understand why so many mortals and gods alike fall for his wiles. I can also see with clarity that he will not stay long, that his interest will waver and shift to another. The only consistency is Hera, who he has yet to be truly consistent toward.

The gray skies of our first night break, and the rain lasts for nearly a fortnight. Each morning, after we go to bed together, I hold a different marvel to my breast. My children, who Zeus would call the Mousai, enter the world one after the other: Small, fragile girls who will become strong and powerful in their godhoods.

The sound of rain disappears; the gray brightens to midmorning sunlight. The damp smell of plants fades into the floral scents of my garden, as a wind carries through the windows. I am wearing my yellow chiton again, my knees cold beneath me on the stone floor. My daughter Kleio, muse of history, leans the cushion against the wall and takes my hand.

"Mother, are you with us?" she asks, her voice tentative.

Kleio remembers the histories of our world. But, while I remember things witnessed through my own eyes, she knows every event as it happened. I sometimes envy her objective truths.

She hovers over me, concern in her eyes:
"Are you lost in the past again?"

Her question warms me, and I smile, "I'm never lost in the past, my darling. My memories are laced with my present so I cannot live in the linear progression of time."

"Perhaps we can discuss what has already happened, then? As an aid for telling the difference?" she suggests, holding my arm as I stand.

"I do not wish to tell the difference, Kleio. Every time I get lost, I find myself with you and your sisters again, on the first days that I met you all."

Her wary eyes trace my expression as I speak: "Do not think me incapable or senile. We are gods, after all. It is that the past is difficult to bear sometimes, when you cannot forget, and I prefer to return to what is important and good."

My words do not ease her concerns, but they pacify her, as we wander through the halls of my house and out into the garden. The sun brings out the colors in the flowers and the leaves, brightens the gentle shine in the stones along the walkway. My home has always been in Eleuther, and my daughters visit when the mood strikes them.

Divinity makes us all fickle, and I do not hold their absence against them.

A careful wind ruffles my hair, and Kleio tidies it around my face, pulls it back behind my shoulders and ties it off.

"Hera spoke to us about Zeus' infidelity."

"Ah, yes. She intends to leave him again. It is habitual of them to do so, and I am tired of their antics." I pause, free a strand of hair and loop it around my finger. "Young gods are so careless in their relationships. There is a space between Hera and Zeus that cannot be fixed with remarrying every couple hundred years."

"She spoke about your coupling, Mother." A hesitation edges into Kleio's voice, and her gaze trails the horizon. "She implied that Zeus had been forceful in his seduction of you."

"That is hardly for her to say."

Kleio nods, "but she does know her husband. Perhaps she is concerned for you."

The sky darkens with clouds, and I stand before Zeus in my purple dress. He welcomes me to Olympus again, as if my memory is on a loop. I remember it was around this time that I chose to dress in simpler fabrics, sated from being around so

many riches for so long.

Two memories layer one upon another, and I cannot tell the altered one from the original. They pass over and through one another like shadows.

Zeus' transparent hands move through one another— one holds my shoulder warmly, its grasp friendly and inviting; the other slips up to the clasp holding the layers of fabric over my body.

The scenes slip, crack like a kylix falling from a sleeping hand, and shatter across my vision. There is a moment of willingness, followed by the shock of fear. I struggle to sift through what formed the initial encounter, a panic rising in my chest. With a deep exhale, I ignore chronology. I assemble the pieces of my memory as their edges meet, where they feel right, rather than trying to reconstruct an objective truth.

Zeus wanted me to give him everything. He is the God of Gods. Why should he expect any different? But I never give that to anyone. My everything includes all I remember, and that is too much for those who do not have my memory. It's especially too much for small gods who think they are bigger than their powers.

At least I think I would not give small gods my everything.

I take another deep breath, settle the anxieties roiling in my chest. The pieces of memory reassemble, and the shadows of Zeus' hands merge into one vision. I reach out my own hand, push his aside. His beard is rough in my palm, and I pull him toward me. That night and the eight that follow, he does not pursue me, nor I him. We pursue together; and after those nine nights, we are full of one another.

After, I return to Eleuther, and I am busy with my children, and he is busy with other bodies.

In an abrupt shift, Hera stands before me, waiting. I've returned to the most recent time Hera has requested an audience. Parts of the scene shift, as if a new fragment of remembrance has been inserted into the gap between her initial request and her subsequent departure.

"What will you say?"

I do not pause to think. I say: "I will say that we went to bed together, we had nine children, and we never coupled in that way again."

It would be easy to say that he was unfaithful as her husband. It would be even easier to show her and the other Olympians my nine daughters by the King of Gods. But their involvement is so incidental, and the Mousai do not need this burden resting on their shoulders.

"Is it something you both wanted?" Hera asks, her voice dipping low, like the fading light outside. Her dress becomes a shadowed, stormy shade of blue, the purple designs like stained clouds at sunset.

For a moment, she warps her face to assume a facsimile of concern. But I know Hera better than that. I was at her birth when her mother, Rhea, brought her into the world. Hera has only ever known the approximation of things, like she now knows the approximation of worry.

"It was something I made myself want. If he wanted power over me, then I would also have it over him."

"I do not mean to insult, Titaness, but I wonder if your memory is not as your reputation implies." Hera's voice is small, wary as she treads into wrathful waters.

I sigh, growing tired of her and Zeus' squabbles. "My memory is what I make it. I will give you my testimony, and it will be the last time that we do this. I think you forget how often you and Zeus shun each other's love, only to return to the fractured foundation."

Hera's eyes glint bronze in the closing darkness, her power reaching outward in rage. No one has come to light torches around the house yet. But the room brightens for a split second.

"It is not I who forgets, it is he," she growls. "He forgets that he loves me, and that I am equal to him in power. I hide it away in our marriage because it scares him. He knows that I could take his place, make him obsolete. But his ignorance makes him forget that he loved me for my power first. I do not think he knows how to love me without it."

I cast myself through the memories I have of Hera and Zeus, the ones from the birth of the world as mortals know it, through all the two gods have endured together and despite one another.

I stand and move toward her, taking her hand in my own.

"He loves you for other reasons, Queen of Gods," I say.

When she meets my eyes, I'm thrown into the first morning after Zeus and I lay together that first night in Pieria. Zeus faces me, a sadness clouding the corners of his eyes as I tell him: "It seems you and Hera have both lost sight of something in all your arguing. Return to it."

A hand sweeps across my vision, and I squint as the sun brightens and moves overhead. Clouds fade, and I'm upright before my garden. Kleio waves her fingers before my face and takes my hand with the other.

Kleio waits as I settle back into the present. With a gentle gesture, she brushes the loose strands of hair back over my shoulder and draws my gaze to her face. It is soft, round, and kind. There is a sadness there that matches the one I saw in her father, and I enfold her in my arms. I breathe in the breeze, as it passes through Eleuther, and close my eyes. Behind them, the faces of my daughters look back, their small, cherub-like bodies reaching for me for the first time.

The White Butterfly

By: Richard Risemberg Richard Risemberg was born to a Jewish-Italian family in Argentina, then dragged to Los Angeles to escape the fascist regime. He's spent the last few decades exploring the lost corners of the American Dream, writing somewhat relentlessly about it all.

The image of the white butterfly, hovering beneath

a sycamore tree at the side of a desert trail has stayed with the observer for over forty years. The trail meanders along a plateau about halfway down in the Grand Canyon. It is not a popular trail; it lacks the grandeur of the popular trails, and so the observer did not meet any other hikers, and certainly encountered no mule trains suffering under a burden of overweight tourists. There was only the plateau itself, dry and level, hosting desiccated desert shrubs whose twigs made faint ticking sounds when there was a breeze. The sky was broad and silent overhead. Occasionally, the trail looped back toward the rising cliffs to find the narrow points of side canyons, where it was made easier to cross them. The luckier side canyons nurtured trickles of water, even in the late August heat. One of these fortunate declivities was noted on the creased and tattered map as Sycamore Canyon. There was indeed a sycamore tree there, though a singular and small one. It was on the

approach to this tree that the observer noted the white butterfly.

The presence of such a delicate entity in that dry, harsh space was almost startling, but then it was not quite so dry and harsh as the rest of the trail—there was a whiff of humidity in the air. That was also startling— it had been as if water no longer existed for much of the traverse. There was also shade—the thin shade of the sycamore, and the more solid shade of the narrow canyon walls just beyond it. And somehow, butterflies lived and bred here, though the observer could note only the unique example, hovering gracelessly in the meager shade of the tree, perhaps trying to decide whether to cross to the other side of the trickle of water. The observer stopped and watched.

It was almost as though the butterfly were dangling from an invisible string. For a moment, the observer wondered whether it was perhaps caught in a spider's web. But soon the insect flew freely up into the sycamore tree, then returned to its post by the trail. Its flapping wings provided the only movement the observer could note in the space by the trickle of water in its narrow gully. The sun bore onto the observer's shoulders. But the observer chose to wait and watch the butterfly. The insect seemed to be on the verge of making a decision. The observer maintained a quiet posture about ten steps away from the fluttering white wings. It was a perhaps momentous time for the butterfly. The observer did not wish to disturb it.

A lizard skittered into the center of the trail, stared up at the observer briefly, and then skittered back into the dry shrubbery, where it likely lived in hiding from birds, snakes, and perhaps even bobcats, while itself stalking beetles and, of course, butterflies. There must be birds also that ate butterflies. Such a public life as the insect lived, flashing its wings as it staggered about in the space under the tree, must be exceedingly fraught with mortal risks. The observer understood that the lifeless-seeming plateau was deceptively well-populated, and all its denizens were hungry. Did the butterfly understand this in any way? While the observer pondered this, a small, elegant rat of some sort peeked out from under a gray twig, noted the observer standing on the trail, and retreated noiselessly. A light breeze moved invisibly through the air again, but did not disturb the butterfly's evolutions—it continued to weave about some unknown center, never straying far from its locus under the tree. This behavior puzzled the observer, who could not understand what purpose this expenditure of energy could serve for the insect.

Was it related to mating? Was the insect trying to attract the bearer of slightly-variant genetic material? Certainly humans, including the observer, habitually dedicated large expenditures of energy to

the attracting of potential sexual partners. Certainly human culture has dedicated large expenditures of energy to depictions of this process, not only the pornography discovered even on ancient walls and which in the observer's time burdened the internet, but expressions touted as more refined, from Socrates' bitter quip regarding marital happiness, through *Romeo and Juliet* and its ilk, to the weepy movies and bitter songs of generations contemporary with the observer's span of years. These thoughts troubled the observer, who hastened to push them away. Better to be "in the moment" as a bearer of eyes watching the white wings flutter in the thin shade of the tree. It was likely the butterfly itself understood its intentions only vaguely; certainly the observer did not.

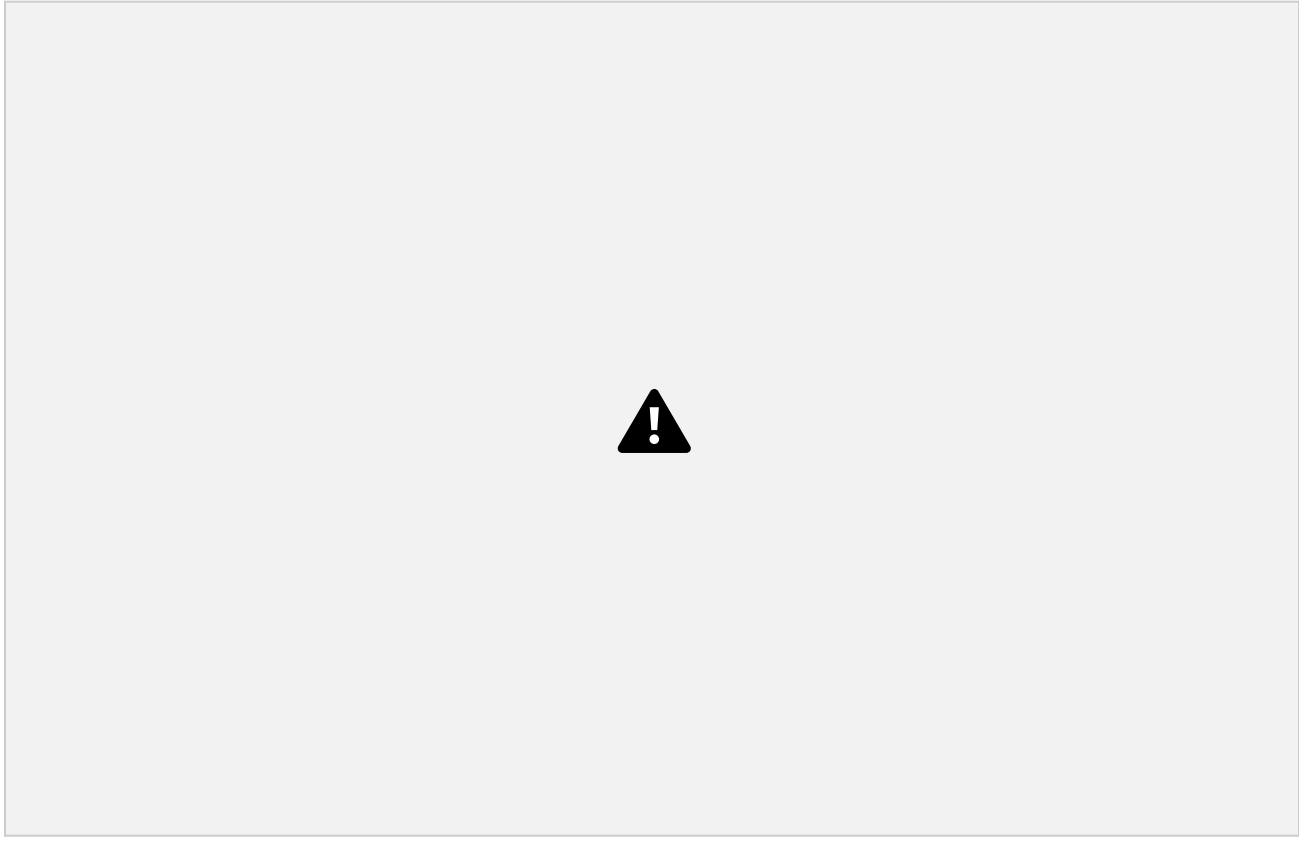
In some way, the vision of the white butterfly calmed the observer. Perhaps this was only because of the geography in which it was set– the quiet of the plateau, the broad, empty sky, and the perfume of desert plants. But the observer, considering this, was forced to admit that it was the butterfly itself that held some peculiar meaning, or rather the jittery yet silent movement in the circumscribed space which it had chosen for its aerial dance. The observer acknowledged that the butterfly was not likely to have which the word dance implied. Nevertheless, if the universe bore any meaning whatsoever, it was a meaning imputed to it by consciousness, and so the observer decided

that it was a dance, if only when the observer was watching it. But considerations such as these were not what calmed the observer; in fact, they were distractions. The observer, in the end, did not know why the contemplation of this insect frenzy was calming. In this, the observer was perhaps no different from the butterfly as the observer understood it.

The butterfly, for whatever reason, dove down suddenly and perched on a rounded stone at the edge of the watercourse. Was it resting? The observer banished the question and considered the aesthetic aspects of its movements observer had hoped.

simply watched. The butterfly stood on the rock for perhaps thirty seconds, then returned to the air and flew away, up the canyon.

The observer felt a sense of release, as if watching the white butterfly had been a sort of obligation, a fortunate ritual. Now it was time to move on. A few steps beyond the tree, there was a rough plank bridge across the watercourse, which the observer could have stepped over, easily, had the planks not been there. The rest of the walk was uneventful, as the



The Twenty Second

By: Michael Tyler Michael Tyler writes from a shack overlooking the ocean just south of the edge of the world. He has been published in several literary magazines and plans a short story collection sometime before the Andromeda Galaxy collides with ours.

Brother, You Won't Find Anything There

Even now she will not let me be. Her hair is stroked and she replies a simple, "I am sleeping." I roll over and all is failure once more, and I stare at the wall and consider tomorrow.

I wake early and dress. She still sleeps and I move quietly, the morning stirs and I leave my ring in a bowl on a bedside table. I will take the rifle wrapped in brown paper and a man will make his mark.

I wait at the end of the drive. I answer, 'Curtain rods,' as I lay the brown paper package across the back seat of my co-workers car. It is cloudy and the street glistens, an early reminder of morning rain.

I carry the paper package under my arm and nod at fellow workers and climb the stairs and ready myself for a morning of moving boxes. It is quiet and I am silent and the minutes tick by.

It is time for lunch and the building is near deserted as the audience gathers. I remain behind and walk to a window and place a box here and place a box there until I am surrounded. I kneel and I am sheltered. I am sheltered as I wait and eat chicken and the minutes tick by.

I will wait and I will remain quiet and the moment will arrive and there will be gasps and cries and crowds will flee in wild abandon. And sirens will sound and I will stand and those below will witness as I take to the wind.

Blasphemy On A Friday

It was a late decision and a decision that would haunt me for years to come. We witnessed history but as to the cost . . . well, as to the cost a man never can tell.

The morning of the motorcade I decided to keep the kids out of school. The wife was far from pleased, 'once in a lifetime' was an argument that held little water it seemed. We arrived late but found a comfortable spot on the grass embankment near the end of the motorcade route.

'Once in a lifetime,' I repeated as the children ran up and down the hill. The wife had on her Sunday best, as did we all and we mused at the mood of the crowd on such a morning, a curious mix of wonder and wild expectation. He was far from popular but the man sure could draw a crowd.

Many held cameras and I kicked myself for not bringing my own. Still, we would be present as they drove past and the kids, though barely out of diapers, could say they'd seen a President, alive and kicking and in the flesh.

As the cheers grew louder I yelled at the kids to come see, my boy at my feet, his sister at her mother's. The motorbikes came first and then he appeared. Lean and bronze, teeth from a Colgate commercial, right hand waving, basking in it all. The Governor and his wife were in the front seat but all eyes were on the back seat as the cheers grew and many hands waved many hopes and many dreams.

A shot. Many later said it sounded like a firecracker but I'd been in the Army reserves and I knew a rifle shot when I heard it. My training kicked in and I grabbed my wife and threw her to the ground as I lay

upon my son. 'Cover your head!' I yelled as a second shot whipped by so close I could feel the sucker. 'Cover your head!' I repeated to my wife, but as for me, I had to look, instinct be damned. My head rose and I saw the President with his elbows astride, his hands clutching at his throat. Pure unadulterated shock. And then a sight most sickening, a blood red halo as the President's head rocked back. I knew then he was dead and despite the immediacy of it all I felt a hint of the grief that was yet to come.

The car accelerated as sirens screamed and the motorcade roared toward the underpass as those remaining took a collective breath.

And then mayhem.

Many shrieked and covered their eyes, some held their heads in their hands, but most took flight like deer disturbed. Many ran past my family and I, up the hill and beyond. I looked at my boy and my girl, both in tears, and my wife whose face held a resolve that was virgin to me. Someone had dared risk harm on her children and forgiveness would be a long time coming.

A Picture And A Verse

He is gone when I awake and the house is all the calmer for it.

He holds hope we will once more live as a family and I agree, but I will go to Hell before I answer his call. One can only take so many black eyes and tearful apologies and so I will not relinquish today, I think as I wander to answer the baby's cry.

Ruth runs from the kitchen, hands covered in soap bubbles and tear streamed cheeks.

"Turn on the television! God it can't be true . . . let it not be true." She fails to wait for me to turn the switch and anxiously turns it herself leaving bubbles round the edge.

The television slowly sets itself and a man with a cigarette stares at us both. "The President has been shot. I repeat, the President of these United States has been shot." Something within me rebels.

I turn and rush to the garage. There to the side are the remains of our marriage, boxes upon boxes, but it is the blanket I am seeking and there it lies, undisturbed, concealing the rifle.

The rifle is here, I tell myself as I return to the house. A bird lands on a windowsill and I remind myself, the rifle is here.

Ruth is beside herself, hands to her cheeks she listens and breathes deeply and wipes an eye as the man continues his tale.

The President is dead.

The President is dead and the rifle is wrapped in the blanket.

It is absurd and yet it is all I can think as Ruth cries and the baby cries and the man speaks for us all.

I dry the dishes as Ruth washes and the baby sleeps in the quiet of the afternoon. We both turn our heads to the knock on the door and as we approach the thought returns and as Ruth opens the door I reflect calm amongst chaos. Two police officers speak in quick, harsh tone and I fail to understand and look to Ruth who simply speaks and I understand the word 'house' and the word 'search' and I nod in reply.

They search the room in which we slept and the lounge where he played with the baby and there is a pause and I lead them to the garage and they take box after box and finally the blanket as it folds across the policeman's arm and I put my hand to my mouth and all is fragment and pall and isolation and I recognize the sparrow as it falls.

Announcing Your Plans is a Good Way to Hear God Laugh

And it's an hour into my shift as I knock on the door. "Open," he replies.

"Looks like it'll rain today," he says. "Shame, damn shame." A politician to the last, more than aware a wet motorcade is as good as no motorcade at all . . . image is paramount. The First Lady has made an effort to accompany him down south after all.

She exits the bathroom, placing in an earring. "We'll be out in an hour." A look, a glance and I turn and exit.

Mother Nature is a rare temptress it appears. As we descend from unexpected sunny skies, a crowd five deep greet them both as they exit, he in a dark gray suit, her in pink. Already one gets the impression it is her they have come to see. The President is far from popular down in these parts, one of the

reasons he pressed her to join in the festivities.

As usual, he is all hands on when it comes to walking the line. This makes us all anxious, but voters are voters and the man simply cannot stand to be disliked —although he often belly laughs while he reminisces of those he's screwed over along the way—but then again his is a life lived on the high wire.

The man lived with a certain weary resignation toward an early death. He'd been so ill his whole life he'd come to terms with death in a manner ill-suited to someone so young. Three times he had received last rites and three times recovered.

Not one week ago he had been drinking whiskey in his suite and turned to me as he pointed out the window, "You know, if they really wanted me dead there's nothing we could do, nothing you guys could do . . . all you'd need is one guy up a high rise with a rifle." His index finger became a barrel, he pointed and fired, turned and continued his drink. Here was a man who had oft stared death in the eye and come away the victor.

We finally made it to the presidential limousine. No need for a bubble on such a clear day, so he and the First Lady sat with the sun at their back. The Governor and his wife sat in front with the driver. With a final wave and pearly white smile we were on our way. At least the President was on his way—we had all become resigned to remaining inside or alongside the follow up vehicle. The limo ahead had designated running boards and handles for agents to use but we were under strict orders to remain behind. Follow up. Remain behind.

One month ago, on a similar motorcade, two of the agents had heard a blast from the crowd and instinctively sprinted, caught the limo ahead and rode the running boards the rest of the motorcade. The blast turned out to be a car backfiring, and they certainly had their asses handed to them on return.

"You made me look like a fucken coward! A fucken coward!" The President roared, his normal tan face a dark red. "A fucken coward!" He yelled once more as he turned on his heels and departed.

Dallas had turned on one hell of a day and if anything the crowd thickened as the motorcade proceeded, screams and shouts of acclamation, applause and cheers for their President and his beautiful bride, each returning a smile and a wave. The Governor in front was lapping it up, although even he must have known that no one had lined the streets in his honor that day. Still, a politician will take a couple of free waves, deserved or not.

We had reached the final turn of the motorcade and everyone relaxed. It was a short drive till the underpass and then up on the motorway toward the Trade Mart for luncheon.

A blast . . . a firecracker perhaps . . .

All heads turned. I heard another blast and witnessed the President pull his arms up, elbows pointed, hands to throat. I jumped off the follow up and sprinted toward the limo.

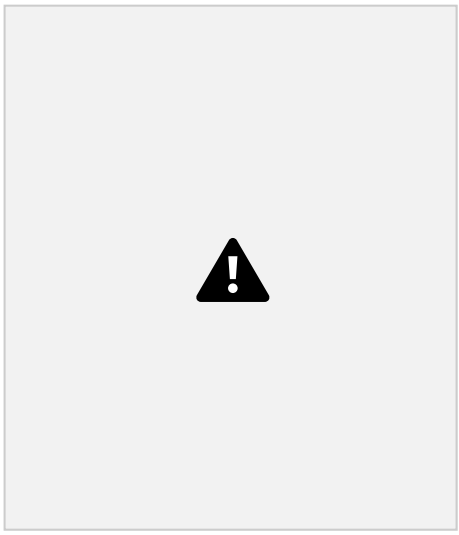
Too late.

A blood red crown, a mist as his head rocked back. I caught up to the limo and jumped on the trunk, climbing on all fours toward the First Lady, on her knees in a vain attempt to gather the President's brain and skull. Her eyes were saucers.

"Down!" I grabbed her and threw her back into the rear seat. "Down!" I screamed as I covered the President's limp body with my own. Yet as we sped away I knew with a certainty, in some ways strangely calming in its clarity, that this was all simple protocol. No matter how quickly we reached the hospital, no matter the surgeons, no matter the technique, he was dead.

I sat with her outside the operating theater. She still held pieces of scalp in her hand she could not relinquish. Her dress was stained with blood, dried darkest red. "Let's get you into a room ma'am," I said softly. "Let's get you changed."

"No," she replied. "Let them see what they've done."



Short Stories

The Doll

By: Magdalena Blazevic Magdalena Blazevic is the author of the short story collection *Celebration* (Fraktura, 2020) and the novel *In Late Summer* (Fraktura, 2022). She won several awards for the best short story. Seven stories from the mentioned short story collection are published in UK in the anthology *Take Six: Six Balkan Female Writers.*

Danja has the face of my old doll, Ninka. Big black

eyes, a small nose, and pouting lips. The same dark, curly hair. She just smells different.

I am awake before dawn. The shadows have distorted everything in the room. Elongated arms extend towards me. I can feel their cold skin and sharp nails. I can hear the caterwauling of cats outside. They're mating near the stream. In my ear, the caterwauling is a child's cry. It's cold and wet underneath me. My sister is sleeping. I uncover her and take off her pants. Hers are dry. I put mine on her and pull her to the place I slept. I wipe myself with a towel in the bathroom. The window is always open there and the cats are even louder. I put on my sister's pants. Mother will never notice. The kitchen door is open. More and more lights are coming on in the house. Presents on the table. A large flipper, candy, and a doll with black eyes. Ninka. I fell asleep last night waiting for Father to come home from his trip. He likes drinking. Mother gets up every moment and peeks from behind the curtain into the dead of night.

She lives in the house below the forest, in the cold shadows, and smells of the cellar and the inside of an old well. At some point in time, the white house transformed into a yellow slime mushroom from all the water that decanted onto it. Rose vines climb up it. They've even reached the roof, the attic window. The ground floor door is always open because the wood has swollen from the damp and caught on the concrete floor. The ground floor once served as a storeroom, but now it's a garbage dump. Rags, black from mold and dust, hang from an open wardrobe. Wheat has sprouted from the damp couch. Mice scattered it from the plastic barrels. Cobwebs have besieged everything. The windows are constantly open, but the smell still can't leave.

Ninka has a maroon velvet dress. Mother has embroidered her name and a star in pink thread on the dress. I put

biscuits into a blue plastic basket. They're still warm and smell of honey. Ninka and I sit next to a haystack in front of grandmother's barn. The hay is wet and black. It smells of saturated wool. Granddad's bottles are in the hay. When Granddad doesn't come back from the village in the evening, Grandma locks the door. She doesn't peek from behind the curtains.

It's summer and Danja's wearing a dress. It's blue and reaches to her knees. Her mother makes all her dresses. Her skin is dark and her breasts are enormous, so large she can barely do up the buttons. Grandmother tells her she's exactly like her mother, a real Bessie, and that her boobs will soon drop to her navel. Danja never invites me into her house. Even when I knock on the door, she opens it just enough to stick her head out through the opening. Today, she invited me in for the first time because she has something to show me. We take off our shoes in front of the door with dirty panes. It's flimsy, not even worth locking. The smell in the house is the same as on the ground floor, but fainter. Floorboards creak beneath and old dust sticks to our bare feet. We pass a pile of dirty dishes in the kitchen, so high it's nearly toppling over. Flies dart quickly and buzz loudly. In the room, fabrics have been spread out in leftover scraps and threads on the floor. She says they use magnets to collect needles off the floor. Danja opens the pantry. It's dark because the window has been covered with a thick curtain. In the pantry, wooden stairs lead to the attic where Danja

spends her days. She calls the attic her chamber. It's all made of wood. On the floor, there's a mattress covered with a blanket. Scattered books by the pillow: *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre. Jane Eyre.* Paper birds with eyes colored-in black hang from low beams. A white rabbit sits in a cage in the corner. It's quite well-fed, and I don't know how it gets out of the cage. Beneath the window there is a sniper rifle. Danja says that it's her father's and that

they still haven't handed it in. Grenades lie in boxes by the wall. When Mother and Father aren't home, I sneak into their room. Pornographic magazines under the mattress. Two rifles and ammunition on the wardrobe. Foreign soldiers come to the door to collect weapons, but no one hands over anything. Danja takes aim at Jovana's house with the sniper. They left the house at the beginning of the war, but she sent us a letter and let us know they were all well. Foreigners have lived in the house ever since. They come and go. Now Igor has moved in. He's alone, and he must be of age because he doesn't go to school. No one knows where he came from or who his parents are. Have a look yourself, she says, you haven't seen anything like it.

Ninka's hair smells of raspberry juice and chewing gum. Mother brings them home from work. First, she says she only brought a lollipop, and then later, when she's put the groceries away in the kitchen, she takes out the chewing gum. I wait for mother in the yard in red stockings and a shirt. My Grandmother takes care of me even though she doesn't like doing it. She lets me go outside to do what I want. Granddad is sober and chops wood in the yard. His sweat drips to the ground together with tiny wood splinters. I never get close to Granddad. When I run past him on the path, he calls me Dunja-Dunjuška. I hide under my house with Ninka. I draw lines with chalk on the concrete blocks. A beautiful, small house, sun, and trees. Mother leads me into the house by the arm. She hisses angrily because Grandmother doesn't change my diapers. She sprinkles powder down my legs. All the children in the village have scabies. In the evening, I stand on the balcony in bare feet. They're white from lotion and powder. That's how the scabs dry out fastest. Yelling in the yard. Grandmother is barefoot on the street. Granddad runs after her with an ax in his hand. Father catches up to him.

"He's taught all the girls in the village how to kiss. The older ones have already fucked him."

Danja purses her lips. I think of how unusually beautiful she is. I'm jealous.

We come down from the attic. Danja says that her father will be back soon. He never drinks. He gets up at the crack of dawn and showers in cold water by the open window. There's nothing healthier. Then he goes out and hugs the trees for a long time in the forest. Danja closes the door behind me. I run home. I think of Igor, and of how he fucks the girls in the village. I'm jealous of that too. I'm under the covers. It's hot from my breath.

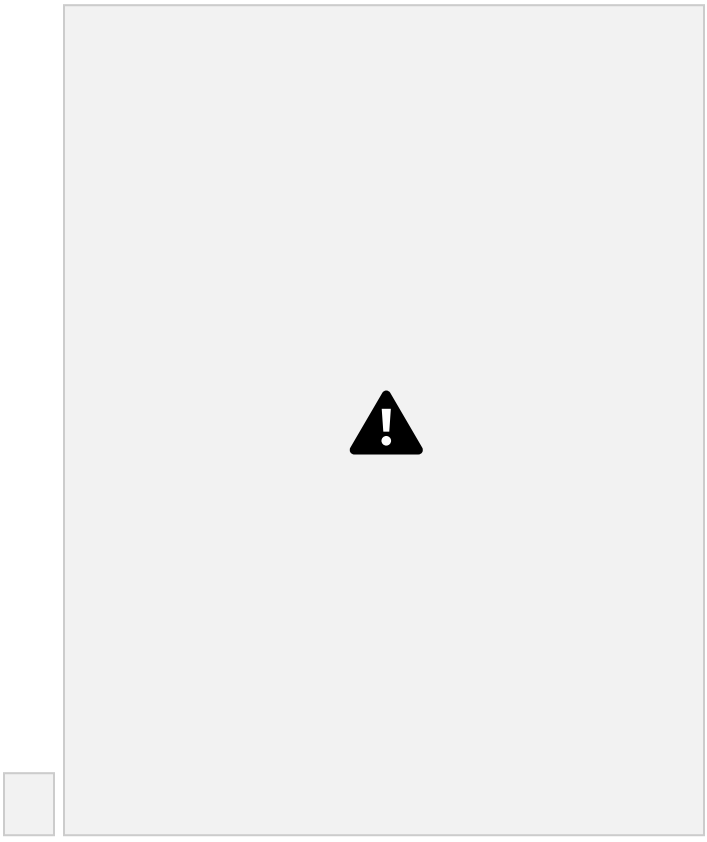
A chick is chirping in my hand. I can't feel any weight, just

cold claws. There's water in the barrel. I dunk it in up to its head so it's clean. I add a little soap. Ninka sits on the stairs in front of the house and looks at us. The chick has gotten smaller. I dry it with the hair dryer. Yellow feathers in the air. I put it in the shoe box and take Ninka. I sit underneath Grandmother's apple tree and pretend it's the wooden bench in the bus. Ninka and I travel far. The chick has fallen asleep in the shoe box.

Dusk descends on the village. Distant windows are fireflies. I used to catch them in jars. They're hard and thump at the sides of the jar. I take one out and press it to my skin. I drag it. It leaves a neon trail. I knock on Danja's door. Nobody opens the door. It's dark in the attic window. I run down the street. My heart pounds strongly. I can feel it in my head. Jovana's house is along the railway track. It's isolated. There's a large walnut tree beneath

it. It outgrew the houses ages ago. Igor under the tree. His hands beneath Danja's dress. It's ripped at the breasts. Danja caterwauls like the cat near the river.

I can't find Ninka anywhere. I left her near Grandmother's barn. Near the haystack. I'm crying. I run around. In the garden I find her body without her head. Someone has taken off her dress. Boys descend the path on their bikes. They're loud and fast. Ninka's beautiful head has been stuck on a handlebar.



Pink Crab Over Canajoharie

By: Andrew Armstrong Andrew Armstrong won a regional poetry contest two years ago. His poems have gotten better since then.

Andrew is also a cartoonist with over 100 sales.

Since they were going to visit Aunt Rose and Uncle

Fred there was no hurry; their nephew, Paul Peterson, had elected to avoid the Thruway, and instead drive north on the Taconic State Parkway, crossing the river on the Mid-Hudson Bridge.

"We'll see some country instead of the backs of other cars," Paul said to his wife, Cecily, and their eight year-old daughter, Nell, who was sitting silently in the back seat. He took one hand from the steering wheel and made a grand, sweeping gesture. "Woods and water, fields and flowers, no trucks allowed, nice and peaceful." For all his alleged devotion to the Taconic, Cecily thought it

might only be a way to delay a visit none of them were eager to make.

"I still don't see why you can't leave me behind," said Nell, not for the first time. "We're coming back tomorrow. There's lots of food and I can put myself to bed."

Her mother laughed. "Leave someone your age alone for a whole day? Why, that's child abuse!"

"I could have stayed with Millicent," protested Nell. "Her parents wouldn't mind."

"But Uncle Fred and Aunt Rose like you so much," her father said, half turning in his seat. "They're so lonely in Canajoharie. They hardly ever see anyone, and they had only one child."

"Yes," Cecily said, softly. "Barton."

The name brought a halt to the conversation. They drove a few miles in silence, the limbs of massive trees sometimes touching overhead, shutting out the sun. Then suddenly there would be light again, light so strong it made them blink. Paul reached for his

sunglasses and put them on.

Nell closed her eyes and said what one other person in the car was thinking. "I don't believe there is a Barton." Nell had brought her worn Raggedy Ann doll with her, and she addressed the question to the doll. "Annie, do you think there's any such person?" She shook the doll's head from side to side, and her mother, watching her, smiled. Cecily turned to her husband.

"You must have seen Barton sometime, darling," she said.

Her husband squirmed. "Well, he's much older than I am. I assume my aunt and uncle had him when they were first married, and they've been together nearly 60 years." He paused to negotiate a curve. "Barton was gone by the time I stayed there."

"Have you ever seen his picture?"

asked Nell. "No."

"Then how do you know he's real?" the girl persisted.

"Of course he's real, he must be real, they talk about him all the time." Paul was silent for a moment. "I admit I've never seen his photograph. All his things were put away or given away years ago." He hesitated. "I believe he got in some kind of trouble, I've never asked what kind . . ."

"And where is he now?" said Cecily.

"Somewhere in California, my aunt always says. I think he's a salesman, though I don't know what he sells. I imagine they talk sometimes over the phone . . ." He shrugged. "I don't know for sure, and I don't

want to pry."

Cecily turned on the radio, and failed to find a station agreeable to all. The CDs they had also proved unsatisfactory, so they drove in silence, punctuated by Paul's recollections of his youth.

"My aunt and uncle were wonderful to me after my parents broke up," he said. "When the divorce was granted I went to live in New Jersey with my mother, though I was always in Canajoharie for a couple of weeks during the summer, playing with kids in the neighborhood, and seeing a movie once in a while. My aunt was in and out a lot."

"You said she had many interests," said his wife.

Paul nodded. "I remember going into the living room one evening when I thought my aunt and uncle were playing bridge with the Longs, the couple next door. Instead the four of them were sitting in the dark with their eyes closed, holding hands. When my aunt heard me she opened her eyes and said, 'I'll be with you in a minute, dear. Right now we're trying to reach my great-grandmother.'" He frowned. "That's when I realized they were holding a séance. Trying to communicate with, ah, those who have passed on," he explained for Nell's benefit.

"I think she's a witch," said Nell.

“Aunt Rose? Darling, don’t be silly,” replied her mother.

“She must be. She has a black kettle in her yard.” Nell had seen it for the first time when they visited the summer before. Her parents laughed.

“It’s been filled with flowers for years,” scoffed her father. “I can’t remember it ever being filled with anything else. Wait, here we go,” for they had driven onto the needle-narrow Mid-Hudson Bridge.

“We’re way up there,” said Cecily, looking down at the river, more than 100 feet beneath them. Then, concerned that Nell might be frightened, she said, pointing north, “Look at the beautiful clouds, sweetheart, up towards Albany.”

The clouds were indeed spectacular; like smoke rings from cartoon cannons, Paul said, or fleecy balls of wool, lacking only legs to be perfect sheep. There was one resembling a giraffe, with an elongated neck, and another that looked vaguely like a seal, swimming in the sky instead of the sea. Further off were wispy

cirrus clouds, sweeping upward like angels' wings; a good sign, thought Cecily. Then the Petersons were across the Hudson, and the clouds disappeared behind tree-topped hills.

“I’m hungry,” Nell said.

“There’s a rest stop in a few miles,” her father replied. “We’ll get a bite to eat there. Besides, we couldn’t expect your aunt to feed us twice.” Aunt Rose would cook a casserole for supper, and even if she forgot an ingredient or two it was always edible.

They stopped and ate something filling if not delicious, and an hour later began the slow, wide turn down the Mohawk Valley. “This is real history,” said Paul. “We’ll go by the Barge Canal—it was the Erie Canal two hundred years ago, or at least some of it was. Hundreds of thousands of people went west this way, before the railroad, and long before cars.” He looked in the rear view mirror and saw that Nell, as usual, wasn’t paying attention to him. “Some of the battles of the Revolution were fought around here, and there were Indians before that, of course.”

“Native Americans,” said Nell. “We learned about them in school.”

“That’s who I meant,” said her father, irked at being corrected. He pointed to one of several sheer hills towering above the highway. “Right up there— anyway, on one of those cliffs—they found the remains of a Native American longhouse. That’s where they spent the winter months, shivering and half dead from cold. Can you imagine living all together like that, one big unhappy family?”

“It must have been dirty,” said Cecily.

“And smelly,” Nell added. “Stinky.” Then they were at the exit and entering the tiny village of Canajoharie. They passed the former Beech-Nut plant, now an acre of empty windows, and climbed the hill to Cliff Street.

“I remember the way now, from last year,” said Cecily as the car nosed upward. The home of Fred and Rose Burwell was a brick Victorian that had seen better days; one shutter hung from a front window by its upper hinge, moss grew on the roof, and a drain pipe swung off an eave.

“I don’t know why they’re still living here,” said Paul, as if reading his wife’s thoughts. “I guess there’s no market for real estate in a backwater like this. I imagine they’ll move to senior living eventually.”

But the occupants of 13 Cliff Street, elderly or not, were out of the house before the Petersons were out of their car.

Aunt Rose, who was wearing an ill-fitting blue dress and a necklace that looked like it was made from shark’s teeth, held out her arms, her fingers quivering like fat white carrots. “Welcome, welcome,” she said. She grabbed Paul’s hand and gave Cecily a hug. Nell held back.

“She’s a little shy,” Cecily explained. Rose leaned over, put her hands on her knees and cooed, “You sweet thing, coming all this way

to see your old aunt."

"Hello, Aunt Rose."

"You remember Uncle Fred," said Paul.

"Hello, Nell. Hello, everybody," said Fred Burwell, a man who, for all his size, had managed to conceal himself behind his wife. He was a little chubby, wore dark pants, a white shirt and a bolo tie, and looked to Cecily like an old photo she'd seen of William Jennings Bryan.

"Well, come inside," said Rose. She led them up what might have been the original steps, their feet echoing hollowly on the porch, and went inside. The house was surprisingly cool on a warm June day, and not only cool, but dark: shades nearly shut out the sun, and what little light there was, glowed faintly on old oak furniture. Nell saw a card table in the living room, and wondered if that was where people sat when they spoke with the dead.

The Burwells and their guests sat at a different table, an oval one, in the kitchen while Rose made tea on an ancient range.

"Do you have any soda?" Nell asked.

"We don't drink soda here," said Fred, stiffly. "That stuff will rot your stomach." It was an unpleasant idea, but Nell thought at her age she might take a chance. Instead, she poured hot tea over ice cubes and got something midway cold.

"How is Barton?" Cecily asked Rose during a pause in the conversation.

Rose looked at her husband, who came to her rescue. "Oh, Barton's fine," Fred told them. "Heard from him the other day—well, not long ago."

A bird sang somewhere beyond the screen window and they could hear a car descend the hill. Paul broke the silence by mentioning how beautiful the clouds were on the way up.

"Nature speaks to us in clouds," said Rose, nodding knowingly. "I once saw—" Her husband started to protest, having heard the story before, but his wife shushed him and went on. "This happened, oh, ten or twelve years ago. I'd been visiting friends south of here, in the Catskills, and was just getting home as the sun was going down. It had been a beautiful day, early fall it was. Suddenly I saw a big gray cloud ahead of me, so big it almost filled the sky. Then I saw that it was more than a cloud; it was a face." Nell looked skeptical, and no one spoke. "It was the face of a lovely Indian maiden. I could see her wide forehead, her perfect nose, lips like yours and mine and crown of hair. Her eyes were closed, like she was dreaming— she could have been a spirit overlooking the valley where she once lived." Rose sat back in her chair. "It was almost like having a religious experience, seeing that face in the clouds."

"Why didn't you take a picture?" asked Nell.

"I couldn't. I had no camera or one of those cell phones. Still don't."

"Now for my cloud story," said Fred Burwell, looking directly at Nell. "Not so long ago, just a few months in fact, I had to go to Utica. I was coming back along Route 5, about suppertime, when I saw a glow in the sky."

"What was it?" said Cecily, expecting nothing less than a flying saucer.

"It was—" he spread his arms, "—a big pink cloud, shaped just like a crab." Cecily began to laugh, and Fred, a little flustered, hurried on. "I'm serious. I could see its claws, its shell, and its—" he gestured toward his forehead, at a loss for words.

"Antennae," Paul suggested, and Fred nodded eagerly.

"That's right, antennae, and two black spots where its eyes would have been," he said, making owl-like circles around his eyes with thumbs and forefingers.

"A crab? But we're nowhere near the ocean," objected Cecily.

"They were here millions of years ago when all this, where we're sitting, was under some primeval sea. I find fossils all the time down

by the river. Speaking of which," he stood up, pushed in his chair, and said to Cecily, "what do you say you and I and Nell see what downtown has to offer, while Rose and Paul catch up."

The three of them walked the short distance to the intersection of Main and Church Streets, Nell all the time wondering what downtown Canajoharie had to offer this summer that it didn't have to offer the year before. They stopped in the library—also an art museum, Fred proudly said—and Nell flipped through a few children's books she'd already read while Fred and Cecily chatted with the librarian.

"We'll see Palatine Bridge next," said Fred. "All we have to do is cross the bridge and we're in another town."

"Not much of one," thought Cecily once they had crossed; except for a chain drugstore, Palatine Bridge seemed as quiet as Canajoharie. But a freight train passed underneath the bridge on the way back, and they paused to listen to its rattle and roar.

"I counted 182 boxcars on a single train not long ago," said Fred. Then the train was gone, and with it any reason to linger.

The trio climbed the beginnings of Cliff Street, Fred stopping twice to catch his breath. "I should do this more or less, I'm not sure which," he wheezed. Cecily offered him her arm, and he took it. The day was warmer now, with a slight breeze funneling up the valley.

After dinner there was more talk, this time on the back porch (the Burwells had a television set, but it got only one channel; "No sense paying for bad news," Rose said). While the grownups chatted Nell examined the iron kettle for signs of recent use (she found nothing but flowers, the pansies and petunias, as her father had predicted). A black cat, intent on a mouse, or perhaps a handout, came down the driveway and into the yard; it ran when it saw people on the porch.

It wasn't quite dark when Rose said to Nell, "You must be tired from your long drive—would you like to turn in?" Nell, a little bored and very tired, agreed. She went upstairs with her great aunt, Rose carrying the girl's overnight bag.

"I'm putting you in Barton's old room. Really, it's the nicest room in the house," said Rose. Nell was too weary to protest, and the room, though almost unfurnished—an old brass bed and a chest of drawers with a mirror were the only contents—looked clean and comfortable. Rose waited outside while Nell got into her pajamas, and then opened the door partway.

"I don't have a nightlight—"

"That's all right, Aunt Rose."

"—but what I can do is leave your door open a crack and the bathroom light on. The bathroom's right down the hall. Fred and I will be across the hall and your Mom and Dad are next door to us if you need anything." They said goodnight and Nell got into bed, waiting until her aunt had gone downstairs to turn off the light by her bed.

The curtains were moving slowly in the breeze, and she heard the distant rumble of thunder, thunder that never came nearer. The bed was very nice, the mattress firm, as was the pillow. She wiggled her toes under the light sheet she'd found on the bed. All seemed snug and cozy.

Then she remembered something her father had said on the drive up, about her great aunt and great uncle holding séances. Maybe that's what they were doing right now, the four of them, sitting at the card table in the parlor, waiting for some dead person to say hello. She turned over on her right side; best not to think about that. Her mother and father would never be so foolish. Would they?

There was no rain, and the night air was agreeably cool. Conditions were perfect for a good night's rest, and Nell was sleepy. But a light was shining, one that bothered her. At first she thought it was coming from the bathroom, so she got out of bed and partially closed the bedroom door. Still there was a glow from somewhere, and now she saw it

came from the other side of the room. It was a bright, thin rectangle of electricity outlining the closet door, and she knew that someone must have left the closet light on, probably Aunt Rose. Or maybe it had been on for weeks, or months, or years, or ever since Barton's time. Well, it wouldn't matter then if it stayed on all night, she told herself, and she rolled over and closed her eyes. But once having seen it she couldn't go to sleep, and she knew she would have to get up and turn it off. She opened the bedroom door a little wider, walked over to the closet and turned the doorknob.

The closet, which smelled strongly of mothballs, seemed empty; there was a shelf with nothing on it and an iron bar below, for hanging clothes. Nell's eyes traveled down the back wall to the floor, and there lay something small, black, and hideous, covered with what might be a spider's web or rot: the body of a bat.

That must be Barton, she thought; Barton had been a bat—and Barton was dead! She screamed then, and heard her father coming up her stairs two steps at a time, shouting her name. He ran into her room, and right behind him was her mother. Aunt Rose and Uncle Fred arrived a few seconds later, Fred puffing from the effort.

Nell stood in front of the closet, crying a little and pointing at the bat. "It's, it's Barton," she said, and then was angered by Rose's laugh and the indulgent smiles of the others.

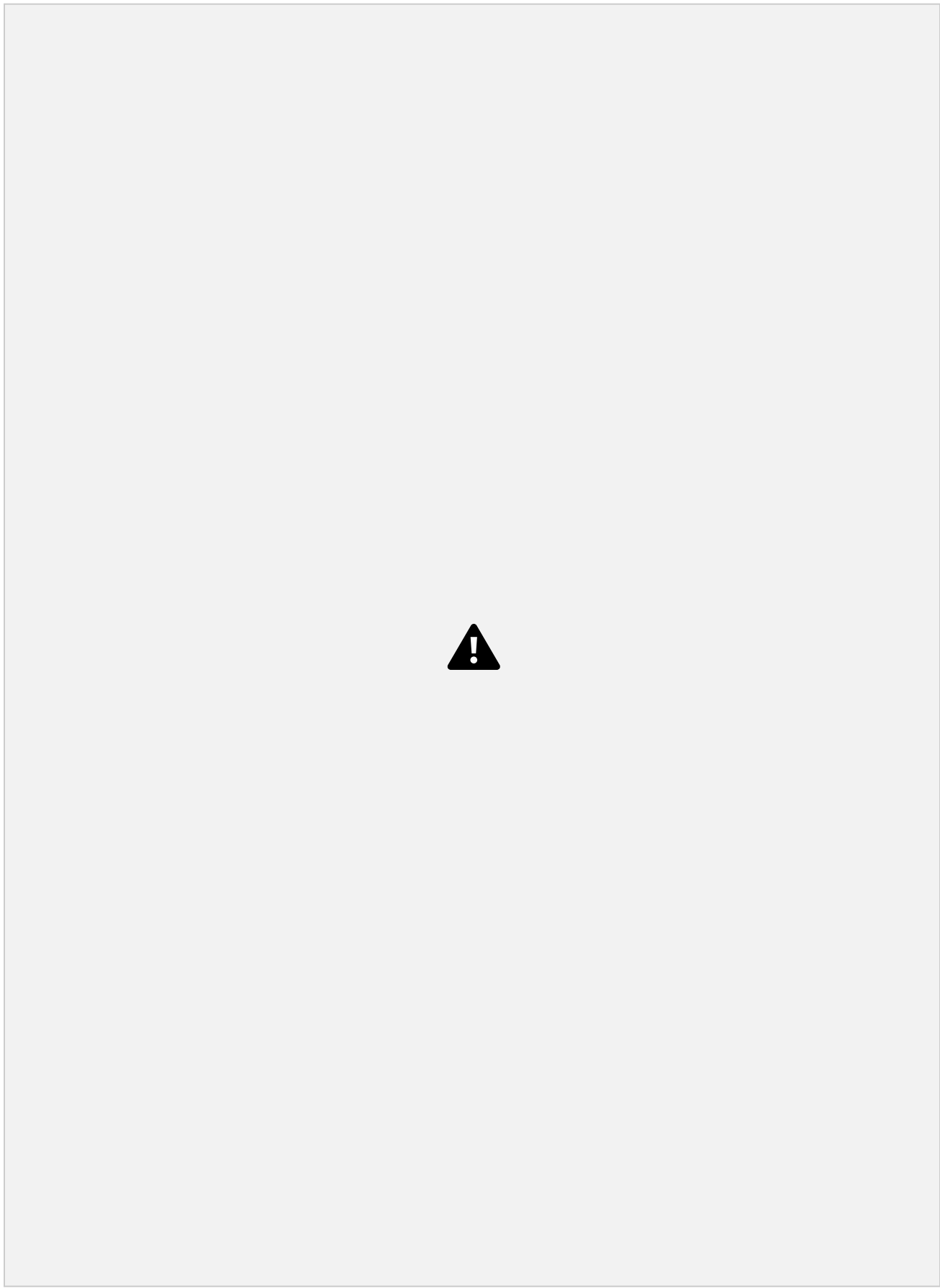
"Oh, that's not our Barton," Rose said. "Our Barton looks nothing like that." She shook her head. "Now, how did that nasty old thing get in here?"

"It's been dead a long time by the looks of it," said Fred. "It couldn't have bitten you," he added, addressing Nell.

"We'll take care of him," said Rose, and she got a broom and dustpan from the hall closet, swept up the bat and carried it downstairs.

"You can sleep in your parents' room tonight," Fred assured her. "We have a foldaway cot."

Breakfast was awkward. Nell sat sipping chocolate milk, wondering what her great aunt and great uncle had done with the bat; maybe after they went home it would be buried by the kettle, its grave marked with a cross of Popsicle sticks. The Petersons left early—"Nell has to get back for soccer practice," said Cecily, which wasn't exactly true—and drove east on a morning as lovely as the day before. Nell sat in the back seat, not speaking, clutching Raggedy Ann. Halfway to Albany her mother said to her, "See that pretty cloud? What do you think it looks like?" But Nell wouldn't, couldn't look; her imagination was filled to overflowing.



Eight Over

By: Keith Manos Keith Manos's stories have appeared in both print and online magazines like *Aethlon, Storgy, Wrestling USA, New Reader Magazine, and Attic Door Press*, among others. He has also published twelve books to date, including his debut novel *My Last Year of Life (in School)*, which was published by Black Rose Writing.

Dad yells, "Get in here, Dallas! You have to see this kid!"

I drop my spoon into the bowl where a few limp noodles linger in the slimy broth, my dinner on this Thursday evening, and trudge reluctantly into the living room. "What kid?" I'm starving. As usual. I want to finish my dinner even though it tastes lousy.

Dad gestures with the remote at the television. "Look! This kid proves what I've been telling you."

Telling me?

Then I get it. The kid on the screen is legless below his knees. He's wearing green shorts and a tight t-shirt. The sports guy calls him Jimmy MacKenzie and adds that Jimmy wrestles 120 for his high school team in Indiana. His upper body is huge, all shoulders and biceps, as if baseballs are stuck underneath the skin in his arms. As Jimmy pops around the mat in his practice room, the sports guy babbles on about him, that he's only lost once in ten matches, that he has a great attitude, that he's captain of his team.

Dad uses the remote to raise the volume so I can hear Jimmy say at the end, "I just try to do my best. That's all." He's breathing hard because his practice just ended. "My goal is to get to State." He smiles at the camera in that wish-me-luck kind of way.

Get to State?

Then the news program shifts back to the studio where all the newscasters join the sports guy in gushing about Jimmy MacKenzie, how he's an inspiration.

"See, Dallas?" Dad lowers the volume, sets the remote on the arm of his recliner, and reaches into the mini-fridge next to the chair for another Budweiser. "Always do your best. That kid's only got half his legs, but, shit, he still wins matches."

Sure he wins matches. Indiana wrestlers suck. Not like guys here in Ohio. "I know, Dad . . . always do my best."

"Yeah, not like the last two years." Dad cracks open the can and takes a swallow. Then he sets the beer on top of the fridge, shakes his head, and groans. "That was fucking brutal at the end."

Thanks for reminding me.

"If that kid can win matches, just think what you can do," Dad continues without looking at me. "It's all about busting your ass, you know. That's how you win a state title." He punctuates his sentence by saluting me with the can.

Yeah, a state title. At 132 this year.

State runner-up last year at 126. Third at 120 as a sophomore. "I get it."

The news program ends followed by a commercial for Pizza Hut. Damn. I love pizza. Especially with sausage and mushrooms. I'm starving.

Dad gulps more beer and wipes his mouth with the sleeve of his Dayton Diesel work shirt. Four empty cans rest on top of the fridge. Dad's full belly makes him settle deeper into the recliner as he points a stubby finger at me. "You know, I didn't have an older brother to help me at baseball."

He means Harlan, my older brother, who got me started in wrestling when I was in elementary school. Harlan still lives at home even though he's two years out of college. And I know Dad's story. He tells it in this dingy living room every World Series. Sometimes he even brings out pictures of him standing proud in his baggy uniform, Grandpa next to him holding a two-foot trophy.

"I had to do it all by myself to be All-County." His forehead wrinkles. "I had to bust my ass . . . That's what you gotta do."

"I will." Wait! "I am, Dad. I am."

"Practice . . ." Dad clicks the remote, and we both watch Pat Sajak and Vanna White walk on the stage to hug each other. "Grinding it out at practice . . . doin' extra . . . that's what wins a state title."

"I'll win it," I should have said that at the beginning. Save time. That's what he wants to hear.

Dad peers up at me and sighs. "How much?" The same question he asks every day when I get home from practice and start to eat dinner. The glint in his eyes from staring at Vanna disappears, and his eyes darken, the leathery skin across his cheeks tenses, his grip tightens on the beer can. He's ready to get pissed off.

Then I sigh. "Eight over."

"Eight pounds?" His voice goes up eight decibels. "On a Thursday?"

I should have lied.

"I've got it under control, Dad." I glance at my soup bowl. Feel the rumbling in my stomach. Start to move back to the kitchen to search for Saltine crackers to crunch up and drop into the broth. It's my last meal until Saturday night after the match.

"You're 138?" Dad won't let it go. "You got Johnstone on Saturday, and you're eight over! Not good, Dallas. You shouldn't be more than four."

He's right. Donuts and chocolate milk this morning. Pizza slices for lunch today at school. I love donuts. I love pizza. I love Snickers. The wrapper says it's less than two ounces. Shit.

Dad ignores Vanna and the balding guy spinning the wheel. "That Johnstone kid isn't bad. He qualified last

year."

The arrow stops at $1,000, and the bald guy asks for an R. Pat shakes his head slowly and declares no Rs are in the phrase.

My turn to remind Dad. "I beat him last year in the District semis by seven." Jeremy Johnstone from Dayton Christian is good, but not that good.

"You gotta beat the scale first," Dad chortles before getting up and shuffling into the kitchen. He opens a cabinet door and pulls out a box of Triscuits. Cheddar cheese and Triscuits are awesome. "Jimmy MacKenzie," he calls out. Then Dad waves a hand at my soup bowl. "Now use your two good legs and put that damn bowl in the dishwasher."

I do as I'm told. As always. Seconds later I'm in the dark hallway of our one-story house. The ticking sound on the television and Dad crunching on Triscuits push me to my bedroom. I can't remember. Do we have any potato chips?

The clock on the nightstand says 6:42. My trophies on the bookshelf gleam against the overhead light, the books removed long ago to make room for them. My Algebra 2 textbook is still on the floor where I left it. We're supposed to do the odds on page 124. Polynomials. My dark laptop screen adds to my guilt. It's reminding me to work on that research paper for English. My topic? Crash diets.

Which is what I have to do now to make weight for the Dayton Christian match. Damn.

A thirty-minute nap wouldn't hurt though. Get

refreshed. Then tackle those algebra problems. Google some more diet websites. Write the introduction. I belly-flop onto my bed and let my face sink into the blue bedspread. I slide my cheeks against its scratchy surface—or is it just my acne? Faint clapping sounds from the television drift into my room. I'm Dallas Cord now. On the mat, I'm someone else, someone different, the kid who rips every opponent, wins tournaments, gets high fives. Afterwards I'm plain Dallas again in this house with Dad and Harlan.

Suddenly, Harlan is at my doorway, leaning against the door jamb. "How was practice?" he asks.

I sit up, a little embarrassed for some reason, and fix my face so Harlan sees the wrestler Dallas. "The same as yesterday."

"Eight, huh?" He exhales loud. "Dad told me." Harlan wrestled for Cheney High six years ago. A league champ at 160 pounds. But he's different now. Like he's a stranger to me. Like one of us has forgotten we're brothers. Maybe me. Jesus is his brother now.

I stand and move to my desk and slide onto my chair. The black laptop screen chides me. Diet websites have been bookmarked since I made varsity as a freshman. "I got it under control."

Like Dad, Harlan shakes his head slowly. "Eight over on a Thursday. That's rough. As muscled as you are, that's going to be tough to lose . . . You worried about Johnstone?"

I swivel hard in my chair to face him. "What? You think I don't want to make weight?"

Harlan's eyes are the color of burnt toast. "Satan makes us have doubts, you know . . . fears."

I stare at him. "I'm not afraid of that

punk." "No, of course not. Still, eight

over—"

Change the subject. "Why you home so late?"

Harlan straightens his lean body and peers down the hallway as if he can see all the way to the street. "I went to Mom's grave . . . cleaned the dead leaves off her stone, said a prayer, talked to her."

Harlan misses her. So do I. He says God wanted her. I say fucking cancer wanted her.

He faces me and chuckles. "I bet Coach Mac made you guys do scrimmage matches for over an hour, huh?"

"Yeah." I nod, keeping my face blank and distant. "We went live against each other for at least that." Coach Mac's Thursday practices are always brutal. No one is allowed to stop. At the end, two freshmen quit. "And I'm still over."

"Coach Mac hasn't changed at all," Harlan snorts. "Did anyone today take—?"

"No, Harlan, no one took me down." I've wrestled varsity for four years. No one has ever taken me down in the practice room. Last year no one in Ohio took me down until the state finals.

He grins and drags the fingers of one hand through

his buzz cut. "That's my kid brother."

I shrug, thinking Harlan will leave now and that I should get a buzz cut too. Maybe lose some ounces. I click my mouse to light up my laptop screen.

Harlan sighs, again like Dad. "God's blessed you with exceptional talent, Dallas."

I eye the screen, feel pangs in my stomach. Sure He has.

"Have you read your Bible today?"

It's in my room. Somewhere. "Um . . . no." More guilt.

"Oh, Dallas, you know you . . ." He trails off, his eyes scanning my bedroom, searching for it.

He gave me the Bible three years ago. A Christmas gift. When I was a kid Mom took Harlan and me to Christ Church every Sunday. I liked the bake sales, the Christmas plays where men dressed in robes and a plastic baby was Jesus. I could do without the

sermons, however. When I hit middle school and Mom died, Dad didn't see the point anymore. So I stopped too.

Not Harlan.

After he graduated from Cheney High School and before he went to college, Harlan dragged me to his youth group meetings where someone always played a guitar and warned us about Satan and losing our souls to him. Sinning would lead to our skin burning for eternity in Hell, jackals biting our arms and legs, worms slithering out of our mouths, the devil and his minions laughing at us as we shrieked in pain.

To comfort me, Harlan told me to pray.

Okay, I tried. It was like talking to a tree.

Harlan steps deeper into my room. "Ah, there it is." He smiles and pats my shoulder as he passes me. "Kind of under the bed." He picks it up and hands it to me.

The Bible is heavy in my hands. It probably weighs a pound. That's what I'll lose just by sleeping tonight. This isn't leisure reading. It's homework. Worse than algebra.

"Go ahead, read it. You know, get inspired." I

flip through the pages, stopping about halfway

through. A guy named Jeremiah is worked up about King Zedekiah and another king from Babylon. I slap the book closed. "Not feeling it, Harlan."

"C'mon, Dallas, read some more," Harlan insists, gesturing at the book in my hands. "Try Psalm 18." He smiles.

"Is that the one about the guy wrestling the angel? I got homework, Harlan." That match lasted the whole fucking night, and when the guy lost, he had to change his name. Our matches today lasted an hour and a half.

"Look it up," Harlan tells me. "It can help, especially with your wrestling."

"Help me?" Dumbass. I want to kick myself for giving him the chance to start in, but I find Psalm 18. I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies. I stare at Harlan. "Dude, I don't need the Lord to save me from Jeremy Johnstone."

Harlan's eyes turn to the ceiling for a moment; then he stares at me. "God gives those with faith tremendous power, makes them strong against their opponents."

"Right," I say to make him stop. I beat Johnstone by seven last year. Had him on his back twice. I did that. Not God.

"Athletes especially need faith." He gestures with his forehead at the Bible in my hands and jabs a thumb at his chest. "I wish I had more of it when I wrestled."

"What do you mean? You won a lot of times."

Something flickers in his eyes. "I think being more serious about my faith—my soul—in high school would have helped me do more than win, Dallas."

I turn the Bible over in my hands. "Well, it's kind of hard to understand . . . the words and all."

"If you want, I'll help you." He sits on my bed and reaches for the Bible. He never sits on my bed. Never comes into my room. Never asks about the Bible. Then I remember.

Mom.

He found a new church after she died. New

friends. Almost by instinct, I scoot my chair

closer to my desk.

"No, I'm good. I can read it on my own."

He keeps his eyes on me and pulls his hand back. "Eight over, huh?"

"Yeah. Eight." I drop the Bible onto my desktop. It will go back under the bed after he leaves.

Harlan shakes his head, his eyes downcast. "Do you want me to leave you alone?"

We both know the answer.

Harlan's face gets cloudy as he stands. "You've got talent, Dallas. I was never that good." He passes my desk and taps the Bible with his finger. "Read it." Then he strolls out.

I get up, shut the door, walk over, then close my laptop. Thirty minutes. That's all. A power nap. I plop on my bed again, burying my face against soft pillows that smell like stale bread. I kick off my sneakers.

Mom made me pray before bedtime when I was a kid. She taught me how to flatten my palms against each other, to close my eyes, to repeat the same prayer each time, her calm voice encouraging as I recited the words all the way to amen.

After she died, I quit praying. I saw it for what it is: a sign of weakness. A crutch. And when I stopped the make-believe talk, I started winning matches. A lot of them.

I check my clock. 7:19. I close my eyes and picture myself on the victory podium at State. I'm standing at the top, tired but happy, dressed in my blue Cheney High warmup, holding the gold plaque they give state champs. Then getting scholarship offers so I can get out of this old house and away from Harlan's Bible. I'll leave it under his bed.

But it's a stupid daydream. Dreaming doesn't win a state title. Nor does praying. It won't help me beat Johnstone or lose even a pound. I beat him last year without praying. I beat everyone except Randy Chase in the finals.

I pull half of the bedspread over me. Settle onto the bed. Ignore my stomach. Thirty minutes. That's all. Fucking eight . . .

"Dallas . . ." The voice is small and close. "Dallas, wake up." Louder now. Familiar. "C'mon, buddy." It cuts into that last warm moment of a dreamless sleep, forcing my eyes open, making me blink against the overhead light. What time is it? Harlan stands next to my bed, his face a milky blur. "C'mon, get up."

"Harlan, what the—?" He's in my room. Twice in the same day!

"Let's go running."

"What?" He's making no sense, and he's making a lot of sense. Running? I'm eight over. The red numbers on the clock say 8:03 P.M.

"Sure." His voice is strong now, confident. "It's a little cold outside, but . . . Jeremy Johnstone. You got to get ready." He's already dressed in gray sweatpants and sweatshirt, a red OSU stocking cap on his head. He graduated from Ohio State two years ago. He works as an IT tech for a company in downtown Dayton now. "I bet I can outrun you," he teases. "You need to lose the weight." He nudges my shoulder. "C'mon."

I sit up, yawn, rub my eyes. "Okay, Harlan . . . okay." Eight over. Shit. I check the temperature on my phone.

Five minutes later, I'm dressed in thick socks, navy blue sweats, and a heavy coat and we're outside, stretching on the driveway, our breath turning to mist. I take a couple of lunges, like we do at practice. My body scolds me. It still wants to sleep. We're probably crazy, or stupid, to be running when it's January and thirty-seven degrees outside.

Without warning, Harlan starts jogging, looking back for a second to see if I'm coming. He swings his arms the way boxers do before their bouts and pounds onto the street.

I don't ask where we're going. It doesn't matter. Except for the thumping of our feet in the street, we run for a while in silence, the frigid wind at our backs.

Harlan breathes deep. "I'm sorry if I got pushy before." "Forget it." I don't want another sermon.

He grins, his teeth bright under the streetlights. "You know . . . it just feels . . . good to run . . . like when I wrestled." He studies me for a moment. "Let's pick up the pace a little bit."

"Okay." I match him step for step. I've never seen Harlan go for a jog. Maybe he's training for some church 10-K later this spring.

Two blocks later he slows and his breathing evens out. His stride is long and steady. He points at the next street. "Let's run . . . down Sycamore." On either side, cars are parked in gravel driveways in front of cold-looking bungalows.

I nod. My right shoulder burns a little where I wrenched it climbing the rope at practice, and I wonder if this running is a good idea. Harlan points next at a red brick house about fifty yards up the street. "Race you there." He takes off.

I catch him, pass him, beat him. For some reason, it feels good, hearing him stomp up behind me, out of breath and coughing a little.

"Way to go," Harlan says, gulping air.

"Want to go back?" I know now why it feels good to beat him. I hate losing. I hate those two guys who beat me last year and the year before that. I had to stand below them on the victory podium.

Harlan looks shocked. "No way!"

We jog slowly now, getting our wind back, down the gravel berm of streets where there aren't sidewalks and homes sit farther back from the road.

"What do you think . . . about State . . . this year?" Harlan's calm voice seems strange as he pumps his arms and jogs along next to me.

He should know the answer, but I tell him anyway, "I'm going to win it all."

"You will . . . if you have faith in yourself . . . and in Him." Harlan eyes the gray clouds for a moment.

I stay quiet and match Harlan's pace, turning corners when he does, jumping over potholes, wondering when we'll head back.

A car passes, the driver honking at us. The car's dirty fumes slam my face. A dog barks from inside a two story house. Television screens send a blurry blue glow through the windows. Harlan runs faster. I stay with him even though my lungs ache from the cold air. He didn't have to endure a three-hour practice today.

"I've always wished . . . I qualified for State."

"Yeah?" Harlan lost at Districts. Dad grimaced next to him as Harlan cried. Convinced by Harlan's tears, I

made a vow against losing that day.

"I was probably lucky . . . to win conference."

He got a takedown against the Smithville kid with ten seconds left to win by one. Dad almost ran on the mat to hug him.

"And then . . . I blew it . . . at Districts."

I don't look at him. I take a breath, and when I exhale, my breath makes a cloud in front of my face. "That must have sucked."

Harlan exhales too. "If I had . . . turned to God . . . maybe . . ." But he doesn't finish. He wants me to finish his sentence.

We turn onto Maple, and when Harlan angles into the park, I follow him. The metal fences are half buried in snow drifts, but the gravel road around the park is clear enough, so we take it. Harlan and I jog around the baseball diamonds, past the playground where swing set chains rattle in the biting wind, and onto some frozen grass which crunches beneath our feet.

Minutes later, we exit the park and turn onto a dark street. Ash Street. I stay close to the curb to avoid a couple of cars driving by. In one of them the passengers are laughing. My lungs still ache. Plus, my sweatpants, Nikes, and socks are wet from the slush next to the curb. It feels like I'm dragging twenty pounds on my ankles.

But I can tolerate the pain. All the aches. I can ignore the hurt in my shoulders after climbing the rope. Take the pounding on my knees from all the sprawling at practice, the grind of wrestling against Billy or Calvin every

day, and even the sprints at the end, how my lungs burn and spasms grip my calves at every turn. I've formed a truce with the pain because I can endure it, even go beyond the discomfort if I need to.

Pain isn't going to beat me. Losing weight isn't going to beat me.

"You really think . . . you can win . . . State?" Harlen waits for me to answer.

Sarcasm?

"Coach Mac says I can." The chilled air actually feels good now. I've got my second wind. In one block, I'm turning left, heading home, no matter where Harlan goes. "And I say I can."

"That sounds . . . arrogant." His voice is real serious. He wipes his face with the sleeve of his sweatshirt.

I turn to glare at him. "I only think it, Harlan . . . I don't say that . . . to anyone."

"God listens to our thoughts, Dallas . . . all the time."

I breathe and think of donuts and pizza and shitty noodle soup. "Harlan, if God is listening . . . to my thoughts . . . He's gotta be bored."

Harlan chuckles and says, "He's running

with us." Yeah? Then let's see if He can

keep up.

I run harder down Ash, crunching on dead leaves, like the ones Harlan brushed away at Mom's grave today. Years ago, Harlan and I tackled each other in piles of leaves, laughing and swearing at each other, our fists pummeling into each other's ribs, until Dad would storm out of the house and yell at us to finish raking the yard.

I sprint.

"Dallas," Harlan pants behind me. "Dallas .

. . wait." But I don't.

"Dallas . . ."

Whatever he's saying, I don't hear it. I leave Harlan behind. I'll leave Johnstone behind, too. He's the real reason I'm doing this. Feeling this fatigue. The cold.

I leave Ash and turn right onto Oak. My face goes numb, and my wet socks get heavier. I imagine myself falling ill after the State Tournament. One of those rare diseases that doctors from all over the world come to check out. My name will be on the television news, like Jimmy MacKenzie. A picture of me in a hospital bed. Harlan standing next to me, looking sad. Coach Mac patting my arm. Dad won't be there. Mom's cancer made him hate hospitals.

I reach the end of Oak, turn, and sprint harder, trying to prove to myself the pain doesn't matter, remembering today's practice when Coach Mac kept badgering me over and over, shouting as loud as he could, "State's coming up. You ready, Dallas? Huh, are you?"

"Yes sir!" I yelled back at him because that's what he wanted to hear, and that's what I wanted to say.

My feet make rhythmic splashes on the slushy street, and several minutes later I turn at the intersection and head home. Harlan is somewhere way behind me in the dark.

"Dallas . . ."

Is that Harlan?

The pain moves up my legs and centers itself in my middle, twisting my insides and squeezing my stomach. I race away from that voice and these new aches that jab at my insides like spikes. The frigid wind makes me squint, and I lower my face into it. I pump my arms and try to ignore my aching stomach and heavy legs. I don't stop until I'm back at our driveway. I peer down our street, but Harlan isn't in sight.

Inside the house, Dad is still in his recliner. More empty cans rest on the fridge. He glowers at me, then slurs, "Check your weight."

"I'll do it in the morning." I begin peeling off

my sweatshirt and wet socks.

He punches the air with his beer can. “Now!”
cap.

“Why didn’t you wait?” He takes a deep breath. “I thought we could—”

“Could what, Harlan?”

“I thought we could . . .”

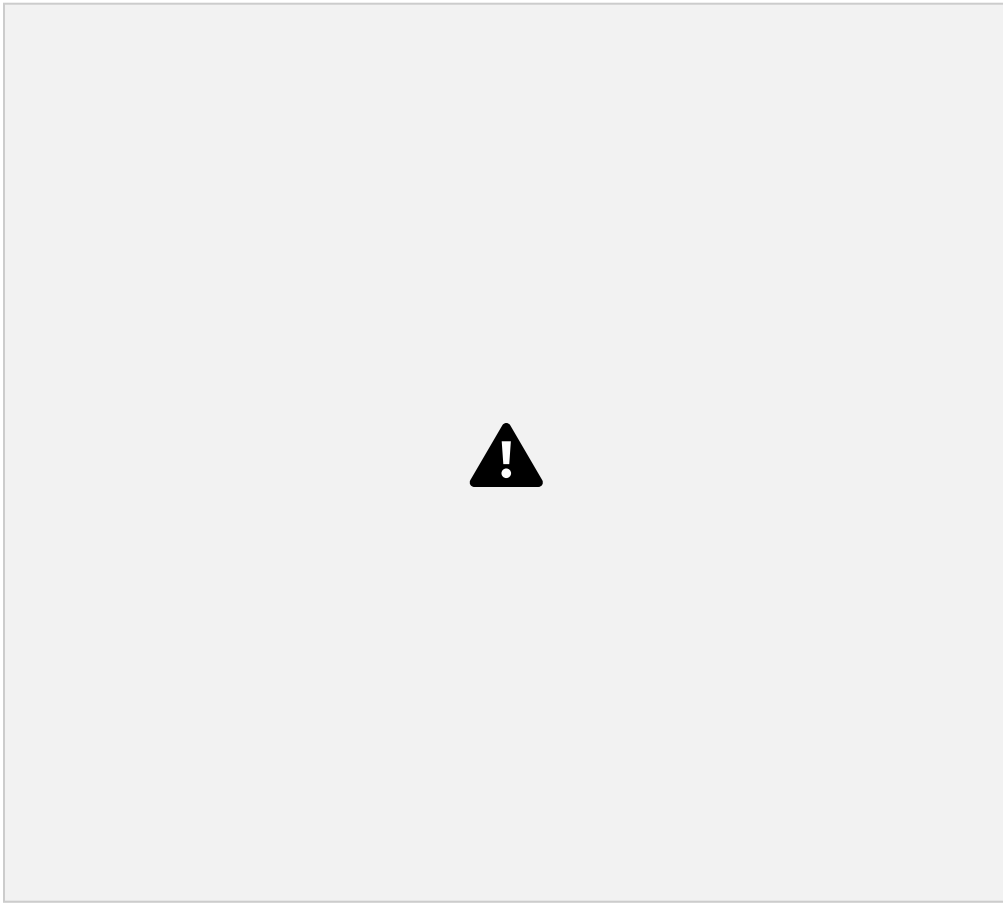
This time I finish his sentence. “Pray together? Huh? Did praying help Mom?” I stare at him. “Did it?”

He doesn’t answer. He’ll never understand. I stomp past him to my bedroom and put on my pajamas. I plop onto my bed and jam my damp face against the stale-smelling pillow. I’ll copy the algebra homework from a classmate tomorrow, ask Mrs. Cravitz for an extension on that English paper, eat nothing on Friday.

And that Saturday I make weight. I’m a half under, in fact.

But Jeremy Johnstone of Dayton Christian High School beats me by two points.

Figures God plays favorites.



So I do. I walk to the bathroom where we keep the scale and pull off the rest of my clothes. Sweat cools against my skin. I drag a towel across my back and chest and step on the scale. I’m six and a half over, but at least my hunger is gone. When I walk out of the bathroom, Harlan stands there, glaring at me. He’s still dressed in his gray sweats and the stocking OSU

I’m heading to Pizza Hut anyway, and if He wants me to change my name like he did with Jacob in the Bible after the angel wrestled him, that’s not happening.

Ambrosia

By: Nicky Pessaroff Nicky Pessaroff is editor-in-chief of *Pen World Magazine*. He has an MFA in Creative Writing. His non-fiction work is forthcoming in an anthology from the *AutoEthnographer*, and his fiction work is forthcoming in an anthology from Nat 1 Publishing.

purposely-aged Guinness

1. **Becca:** Great header, but you know how I hate subheaders that are sentence fragments. Find a way to make this second part a stand alone.

Falling for *falling*: Jerome*(1)* Ambrose and the Problematic Memoir

2. **Becca:** See end notes below

By*(2)* Renata Schreiber

3. **Becca:** A corner is not sentient. It cannot make someone famous. However, someone can make a corner famous. Is this what you intend?

I meet Jerome Ambrose at Bar-10, just across the street from the corner that made him famous*(3)*. Our interview is scheduled for 2 p.m. EST, and although I arrive 30 minutes early, Ambrose is already there, sitting in a shadow in the remotest corner of the remotest booth. He stands to shake hands, a lanky man of around six feet, somewhere between the age of 25 and 30. When I mention that he is a man with a thing for corners, he giggles and covers his mouth with his left hand in a gesture that reminds me of Michael Jackson being interviewed by Martin Bashir.

4. **Becca:** Great use of quotations

Becca

Deleted: cognoscenti

"I think of them as angles," he says as he moves around the table and pulls out a chair for me. When I ask him to explain the difference, he responds, "Corners are something you get stuck in. Angles are something you work*(4)*."

5. **Becca:** Redundant. Also, you're pushing it with "litera ti"; "cognoscenti" is just obnoxious. Delete.

By this point, all the literati*(5)* know both Ambrose's corner and his angle. His c~~orner was 42nd and 6th near Bryant~~ Park, within walking distance of the Bryant Park Station and across the street from the bar in which we sit. Just up the road is Simon & Schuster, and just down the road are the New York City headquarters of a number of other international and independent publishing houses and magazines, this one included.

While it's only a couple years old, Bar-10 has a reputation among media publishers and editors, assistants and interns, as a watering hole in the Art Deco mold with just enough stink on it to lend an air of disrepute. Bar-10 is not the place one goes for interviews; it is the place one goes for strong martinis and mauve booths, posters and pre-fab 1970s-style wood paneling. It has the air of mid-1990s Calvin Klein commercials: self-consciously smutty*(6)*.

Ambrose claims this is the first time he has patronized Bar 10, but when pressed, he admits to me that this is actually his sixth time in the bar but his first time paying for his own drinks. In all the other instances, his publisher or editor footed

the bill.

"Sometimes I slept in the park. Sometimes I slept at a shelter. Sometimes I slept on the street. Most times I didn't sleep," Ambrose writes in his memoir, *falling through the cracks: a life.* The book has been a phenomenon since its initial publication in the fall of last year, following the serialization of its first two chapters in this very magazine (Vol. 103, Nos. 13 & 14).

A book of grit, humor, and pathos, falling through the cracks is the true story of Jerome Ambrose, an aspiring writer who struggles to find space for himself in the ultra-competitive New York publishing scene. From his beginnings in the comfortable suburban hamlet of Great Neck and following his path through the elite university system, Ambrose is "a boy full of promise but stymied by convention," as one professor told him. After a struggle with drugs, estrangement from his family, and successive failures in graduate school and the professional media environment, Ambrose finds himself homeless and helpless, begging once again to be heard. In the silence and anonymity of street life, Ambrose finally finds his voice—and his ultimate redemption.*(7)*

Thus reads the blurb of his *New York Times* and Amazon best-selling memoir. Rumors abound that his premiere book is a shoe-in for the Pulitzer. His contract remains a closely guarded secret, but one thing is certain: Jerome Ambrose is no longer homeless. He has a loft in one of the boroughs, but his home remains another closely-guarded secret.*(8)*

"Too many people find me as it is, and everyone wants something," he says. "Advice. A place to crash. Drugs. A fuck."

As*(9)* he speaks, he stabs his right hand continuously with the plastic sword that once held the two olives in his gin martini. Whether the tic is conscious or unconscious is unclear. Indeed, Ambrose's level of consciousness as it pertains to his actions is the proverbial $64,000 question—or in Ambrose's case, the $6,400,000 question. That number, according to tabloid reporting and this reporter's anonymous source*(10)*, is the amount that 20th Century Fox paid for the movie rights to *falling*.

What sets Ambrose's rags-to-riches, Horatio Alger myth apart from others is his method. Rejected by his family, the education system, and the New York publishing industry, Ambrose writes, "I only had one more trick up my sleeve—

drop out entirely. *You don't want my story?* I thought to myself, *I'll give you a story you cannot ignore*.

6. **Becca:** Excellent description. Good job of putting the reader in the atmosphere. "Self-consciously smutty" is exactly what Bar-10 is!

Becca

Deleted: He was, after all, homeless at the thime. Wasn't **Becca**

Deleted: ?

7. **Becca:** Do you really need to reproduce this entire blurb, or are you trolling me? We both know who wrote this. Don't be cute.

8.**Becca:** But *you* know where it is, don't you?

9. **Becca:** Add paragraph break. Let the quote stand on its own line. Great detail, but don't push it with the hands references. See comment below….

10. **Becca:** If you have an "anonymous source"—ahem, ahem—then why do you refer to "rumors" above? This is not TMZ.

“I looked in my wallet: a hundred bucks I snaffled from the last friend I had in the world. That hundred bucks could buy me one of two things: enough heroin to get through another week (if I was lucky), or I could take the biggest gamble of my life. I decided to let it ride.”*(11)*

Ambrose describes walking down to Kinko’s, inserting his thumb drive, and printing—double-sided—as many copies of his memoir as he could. He walks back to his corner on 42nd and 6th and writes his beggarly sign.

I’ve seen it myself, I saw *him* myself, time after time on my way to and from the office. It was cardboard, as they always are. It was written in capital letters, in Sharpie, as they often are*(12)*. The sign read: FREE TO THE CURIOUS. DONATIONS WELCOMELY ACCEPTED*(13)*.

And I was. Curious, that is. So on a random day in which I was particularly bored, I picked up the sheath of 20 double-sided pages, with the opening two chapters of Ambrose’s memoir in Times New Roman 12-point font, one-inch margins along the page, that title and that name left-hand justified on the first page, no address (because obviously)*(14)*, 18,096 words.

I gave him $5. He never looked up, and his Boston Red Sox cap kept his entire face hidden. His clothes were clean, his sneakers scuffed Nikes, his change cup a hot mug from NYU, his undergraduate alma mater. As I ate my lunch, I began reading. I couldn’t stop. The prose was sparkling, angry funny*(15)*, immersive. I was a half-hour late getting back to the office, but I didn’t care*(16)*. I stormed into the office of this magazine’s editor-in-chief without an appointment, something I’d never done before, low woman on the totem pole as I was.

“If you don’t publish this, you’re a fool,” I said before I could stop the words.*(17)*

My editor is no fool.*(18)* She read while I waited on her scrunchy leather couch. When she finished, she simply stood up and walked out, leaving me in her office. Chapter One was published in our next issue, and Chapter Two followed a month later.

Ambrose became a made man. I got a promotion. My editor got a raise. That, I thought, was the end of it.

A memoir is the true story of a life, written by the one who has lived it. This is problematic.*(19)*

In a biography, one leans on facts. Myriad interviews and first-hand documentation provide tangible proof of the

11. **Becca:** God, I hate this paragraph of his. What clunky prose. Still, you are correct to include it.

12. **Becca:** I’m okay with the use of repetitive language for effect, but ask yourself if it’s implying the effect you intend.

13. **Becca:** Great addition. That’s the part of his sign that struck me as well. Was it ironic and self-aware, or was it sloppy? We will probably never know for sure.

14. **Becca:** So you *are* trolling me, yes? My hatred of par entheticals? Har-de-har.

15. **Becca:** YES! That is exactly it.

16. **Becca:** *I* did!

17. **Becca:** This is *not* how I remember things going down.

18 **Becca:** Or perhaps I am after all…

19. **Becca:** Finally, a thesis! Took you long enough to get there.

events described in a biography; subjectivism only plays a part in the interpretation of the facts, not the recitation.

A memoir, as the name implies, rests on the memory of the individual who lived the events described. The problem is that memoirs depend on the caprices of the writer.*(20)*In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway describes an incident in which Fitzgerald begs him to compare penis sizes. It's an entertaining passage based on the well-documented insecurities Fitzgerald carried with him. It's also entirely false.

The record of false memoirs is a long one. From white supremacists pretending to be Native Americans to *New York Times* writers pretending to be junkies, the memoir genre is tainted by the words of ambitious, unscrupulous writers willing to take liberties with the facts of their own lives. But that is only the most obvious problem.

"Every word I wrote is true," Ambrose says. He looks me in the eye directly, unblinking. In the gross light, it's impossible to tell whether those eyes are blue, green, or brown. When I ask him for his definition of truth, Ambrose responds, "Truth is the breath of life*(21)*."

"If that's the case, then my brother has a severe case of halitosis*(22)*," says Brendan Westby, Ambrose's older brother. "First off, his name is Jeremy Westby. I have no idea where he got that other name. Sounds like something out of Collier, who he was reading at the time. He was always reading someone—their entire oeuvre—as if he was trying to become them. "

Westby is a probate attorney based in Westchester. In addition to being Ambrose's brother, he was Ambrose's best friend through high school. "And by the way, we attended Stuyvesant."

What, I ask, about his brother's time at a black-majority high school in which he was one of only two-dozen white students?

"He did that," Westby says, "for a week, first week of his sophomore year of high school. So yes, it's true—legally—but you read his book, you'd never know the greater truth. You'd think he spent every day at that high school. I was surprised he lasted as long as he did."

And what about gaining a full merit scholarship to NYU?

"Sure, he got a full scholarship. He was a gifted squash player. That's why he lost the money—he stopped playing. Never gave a reason, just stopped. When Papa got wind of the fact that he was losing his scholarship, he drove right to the dorm,

20. **Becca:** Yes, this is the problem, but it extends beyond memoir. For example, in journalism, the caprices of an ambitious writer might get in the way of telling the true story. We have discussed this a lot, and yet here we are.

Becca

Deleted: The second problem is one of context

21.**Becca:** He is such a tool. Why are you humoring him by including this clear bait?

22. **Becca:** Ha! This is the brother who should have writ ten a book.

Becca

Deleted: Maybe he was

Becca

Deleted: .

collected Jeremy, gave the university a big honking check. Graduation was basically assured after that, scholarship or no."

So he didn't drop out of graduate school due to his inability to get along with his instructors?

"Oh, he dropped out alright," Westby says. "Nobody liked him. Nobody liked his writing. He wrote his stories the morning of class, never wrote end-notes for anyone, never showed up for his T.A. gig. It was either drop out, or fail—and no one fails an MFA program."

And the heroin addiction?

"Broke his leg in a water-skiing accident. He was on Vicodin for two weeks. He could have been addicted, I suppose—he sure was a bitch for a week after his script ran out," Westby says. "That's the thing about Jeremy—he never exactly lied, he obfuscated. Here's an example: that story about being homeless? Sure, yes, he was homeless—but it was a stunt. That 'last hundred dollars' he writes about? It was a cash advance on his American Express Black card on our daddy's account. Any time he wanted, he could've moved into the Waldorf."*(23)*

"My older brother is a little man with a big chip on his shoulder," Ambrose says as he finishes his martini. "I stand by every word I wrote. Everything I describe, I experienced. You saw me there. Right out there." He points first at me, then out the window. "Are you going to deny what you yourself saw?"

It's true; I saw him myself.*(24)* But what did I see? He was a homeless man, but he had a credit card with no limits. He struggled with heroin, but in prescription pill form, not skin-popping form. He failed out of graduate school, but not exactly—or, at least, not entirely—for the reasons he writes in his memoir. He defied the revolving doors of the publishing industry and found a means of printing his truth—but is *his* truth *the* truth?

"You're missing my point. My truth, your truth, *the* truth— it's all just marketing," Ambrose says. "I had to read this book in college where some journalist pretends to be poor to experience what it's like to be a slave wage earner. It's supposed to be this big exposé on the difficulty of being a minimum wage troll. But she's this journalist, like you, paid well enough. She even writes in that fact to point out that she can only get *so close* to the hourly wage earner's experience."

Suddenly, Ambrose bangs the table with his fist.*(25)* "But so what? So fucking what? She acknowledges the

23. **Becca:** NDA NDA NDA NDA NDA NDA NDA!!!!!!

24. **Becca:** Do you really want to bring yourself into the story? Because if you do, you have more chapters to tell. Either fess up to the extent you were involved and what you knew (or at least surmised), or don't. You can't have it both ways.

Also—generally speaking—your timeline is very confus ing. How many years was he in school? How old was he when he "became" homeless? Clarify!

Becca

Deleted: Ambrose wipes his mouth with a napkin, cumples it into ball, and lets it fall to the floor.

25. **Becca:** Suddenly, you're really pissing me off. You know I hate this structure.

discrepancy, the *falsity* of her experience. And yet she still goes ahead with the experiment. In a lab, that experiment would be dismissed as inherently subjective. She's not actually poor, she possesses a higher ed degree probably. There's always an escape hatch for her.

"And there I was, reading this ridiculous piece of non-fiction with a bunch of other privileged white kids and the occasional P.O.C. scholarship student, and everyone's saying, *What an amazing book! Look at the lives these people lead!* And those same people clean their parents' mansions, or serve them fucking cocktails at brunch, or whatever. And I realized: *this* is who that book was written for. Even if she thought she did, that writer didn't give a damn about the experience of those poor people because the book was meant for you and me, not the poor shmucks who work at Walmart. And we're all sitting there, all us privileged fucks, and we're like Mrs. Lovejoy in *The Simpsons* saying 'Won't someone think of the children?!' Well, but, whose children? Because what I realized is, I *was* the children, and that's just it—I was a 'children,' not a child, a demographic and marketing point in space-time, a cynical generational branding experiment. So who, exactly, is owed the truth, and what does it look like? Is *this* truth?"

Ambrose flashes his phone in my face, his main email portal. He clicks on a tab that reads "The Rejectory. " Within the tab are sub-tabs for the prior three calendar years. He clicks and clicks, scrolls and scrolls*(27)*, showing me hundreds—literally hundreds—of rejection letters from literary journals, online zines, publishers, editors. He tells me that each year contains at least 200 rejections for his works of fiction, each of which cost him at least $3 to submit—a yearly total of at least $600 in literary rejections.

Most of the letters, Ambrose tells me, are simple form letters—"Thank you for submitting your piece 'XXXXX.' Unfortunately . . ."—but he pulls one up from a leading literary journal in continuous publication for the past 50 years with a more detailed rejection:

"While we found the main character Ambrose to be fascinating and complicated, unfortunately we found the action of the piece to be unbelievable. The sheer number of plot points to which Ambrose is subjected defies the experiences of the average person. We recommend reining in the amount of plot contained in this piece and focusing more on varied emotional registers and complex prosody."*(28)*

Ambrose experienced this particular rejection as a sort of crossroads. He could accept the editors' suggestions or defy them, as he saw it. Or, he could do neither*(29)*.

"I figured, if it was impossible to believe that all that shit could happen to a fictional character, well, what if it happened to *me*?" Ambrose says as he clenches and unclenches his fists*(30)*.

26. **Becca:** That's more clever than anything he writes in his book.

27. **Becca:** Stop this already! Stop this and stop this!

28. **Becca:** Yes, it's true, I rejected him. You were right, I was wrong. Happy?

29. **Becca:** Yeah. He could play you instead.

"What if every too-too plot point was a part of my personal narrative? So I dropped out of school. Got addicted to painkillers. Wasted my money, became homeless, refused to use that credit card you're so fond of pointing to. I fucked for money, begged on the street. Everything I fictionalized, I made happen in real life. *That* is the truth.

"And guess what? You loved it, Renata. You and Becca and Izzy," Ambrose concludes, referring to this author, her editor, and her publisher. (He is correct: We did love it. He was, for all of us, the nectar and the ambrosia, our guaranteed pass to the publishing halls of Olympus.)*(31)*

In that sense, every word of *falling* is true. Every action, every plot point, actually happened to Jerome Ambrose. On the other hand, Jerome Ambrose is a self-conscious construct, a persona and a caricature, a simulacrum of human experience.

But what of Jeremy Westby? Did he experience homelessness, addiction, etc.? Or did Westby experience these phenomena through an avatar as fictional as those short stories that were rejected?*(32)*

"In the end, what does it matter?" says Brendan Westby. "He gamed your own system. There are, what, four publishing houses? And where do you make your money? You make it on the larger-than-life experiences of real people doing extraordinary things. You should've seen my brother when he'd get another rejection. It's like you were killing his children. And for him, you were. He was disconnected from all of us, but he loved his characters with fury. In the end, he loved them so much he became them—and all to give you what you really wanted. Of course my brother is bullshit, but he's a product of the bullshit environment. What's that Shakespeare line?"

"Physician, heal thyself," says Ambrose, as if answering the question he had no idea his brother asked. *(33)*

And with those words, Ambrose stands, shakes my hand, and walks away.

I stay where I am, order a beer, then another, then another. I am late, but Bar-10 has fizzled at the edges, the Guinness posters blending into one another so that the emu is choking on a steel girder a man carries while a turtle balancing a pint glass looks along, and the wood paneling becomes leering faces, and the mauve booths become an endless bench that carries on into infinity, and none of it is real, because we are all of us *falling*.

30. **Becca:** You can't see me, but I'm clenching and un clenching my own fists right about now.

31. **Becca:** Mixed metaphor. With the "Jeremy" vs "Bren dan" narrative, you're giving me the Birthright story. Now we're Olympians. Make up your mind!

32. **Becca:** More rhetorical questions, really? Say what you feel, or don't.

response? I'm guessing the latter, and it's my job to know your writing better than you yourself know it (and yes, I'm using "you yourself" consciously; you're not the only one who can troll).

33. **Becca:** Did this really happen without prompting, or did you lead Ambrose to say this? Did you, for example, read his brother's quote to him so that you could get this

Dear "Renata,"

I don't even know where to begin. I asked for a profile article of 1,500 words or fewer on Jerome Ambrose for our annual "35 under 35" special section. My instructions were clear: a brief synopsis of his book, a physical description of him, and a run-down of his Manhattan lifestyle. This is not at all that. I don't even know why I bothered with the line notes. If I had a big old REJECTED stamp in blood red, I would use it.

Normally, I would ask you for a complete rewrite, but in this instance, I must consult with our publisher, and when I gave him the general synopsis, Izzy was *not* pleased. In fact, Izzy was hurt. So am I.

Ambrose was *your* project—your first assignment as an associate editor. I logged 23 consultation hours with you on his book, and never did you bring up questions of disingenuousness. I certainly never saw this article coming. Congratulations: you blindsided me.

Where this sanctimony comes from, I have no idea. When did this palpable resentment arise in you? Whence the superiority, *Ashley Green*, nice Jewish girl from Manhattan who *also* attended Stuyvesant?

(Parenthetically (*ahem-ahem*), I've always hated your pen name. What are you trying to be—German? Spanish? Argentinian? And "The writer reborn?" Please.)

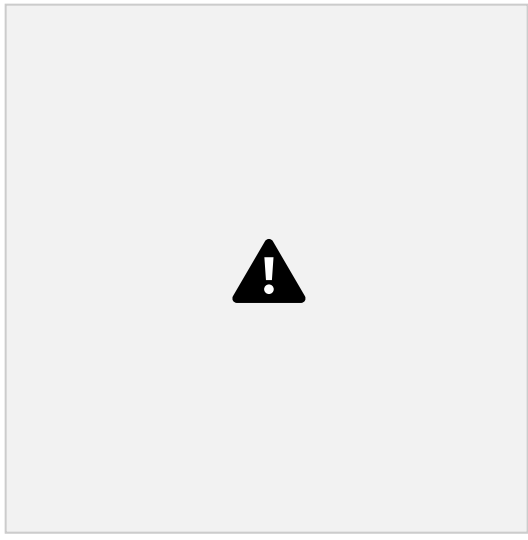
I remember the four of us doing shots at Bar-10—you and me and Izzy and Jerome. We toasted him, raised glasses to ourselves, celebrated the greatest coup of our respective literary careers. And now this. The bus is clearly running, because you just threw us all under it. But throwing someone under the bus only makes you a murderer.

Know this, my friend and protégé: you are just as tainted, just as disingenuous as any of us. You *are* Jerome Ambrose—no better, no worse—yet another self-entitled New Yorker who resents that the world doesn't hand you its wealth and power. You are the personification of the reason I continuously think about moving back to the Southwest.

I hope this piece is worth it to you, because I can no longer protect you. I can no longer guarantee your continued employment with us, Ash—that's Izzy's

decision now. To carry along your own mixed metaphor, I should note that you might have just rescinded your birthright. But don't worry—I'm sure that there's an "angle" with your name on it somewhere.

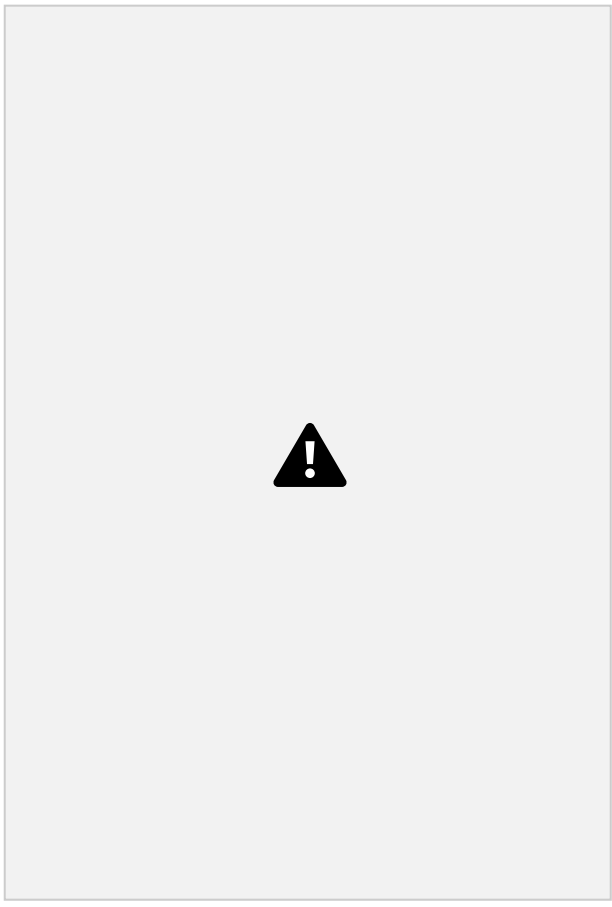
—Becca



Book Reviews

A Kaleidoscope of Science Fiction

Title: ***Hit Parade of Tears*** **Author:** Izumi Suzuki
Translators: Sam Bett, David Boyd, Daniel Joseph, and Helen O'Horan
Print Length: 288 Pages



Publisher: Verso Books
Pub Date: April 11, 2023
Rating: 4/5 Stars
Review by: Julia Romero

unreliable. They are often thrust into the sci-fi world,
forced to adapt as the changing scenery around them
gets stranger and stranger.

As the best of sci-fi often does, Suzuki reimagines the world as a tool for hope. What is dark and dreadful becomes playfully punk and satirical. The unexplainable and traumatic become fantastical, easily digestible, and capable of granting power instead of ripping it away. I can see the ways in which Suzuki is writing a way out, or a way toward,
concepts that seem so out of grasp in the real world:
Hit Parade of Tears by Japanese science fiction writer Izumi Suzuki is the second short story collection by the countercultural icon published by Verso Books. The first being Terminal Boredom, which was met with critical praise upon its release in 2021.

Equally hilarious and heartbreaking, *Hit Parade of Tears* was my first introduction to Suzuki's surreal and extradimensional stories. For a lifelong fan of science fiction, Suzuki's unique and far-reaching purview was a joy to read. She dabbles in the alien, the immortal, the psychic, and the arcane. Her things like healing, self-acceptance, and connection.

What is dark and dreadful becomes playfully punk and satirical.

characters are fledgling wizards, alien castaways, and
schizophrenic telekinetics.

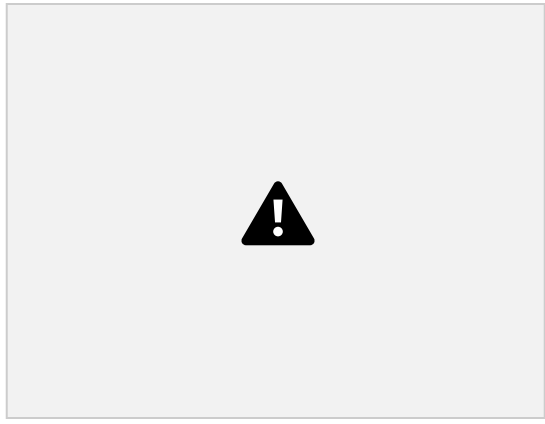
In 288 pages, Suzuki manages to include eleven cohesive sci-fi stories. She does this by keeping the
high concepts simple and emphasizing the carnal and mundane parts of the human experience. Her characters are depressed, lonely, anxious, and

As a work of translated literature, *Hit Parade of Tears* is quite an accomplishment. The tonal quality of Suzuki's voice shines through, an apt achievement of all four translators. She's funny, outlandish, and intoxicatingly brackish. In my favorite story of the collection, a woman is visited in the middle of the night by a man telling her she's been chosen to become a witch. Her newfound powers end up turning her adulterous husband into all types of hideous creatures.

It's a simple story with a killer ending, which can be said for every story in the collection. Her beginnings and endings are a sucker punch, shaping them into ingenious thematic stories.

It was clear to me when I finished this collection that Suzuki is not for everyone. Given the cultural and social context in which she's writing these stories—1980s Japan—there are a lot of references that can go over people's heads. This is a collection that could have greatly benefited from a foreword, which would have helped set the scene in which Suzuki was writing. Going into these stories with a deeper understanding of her cultural context would have helped a general reader understand the deeper purpose behind Suzuki's multi layered comments and social-political agenda.

All in all, *Hit Parade of Tears* was refreshing, as odd as that sounds. It reminded me of the power of sci-fi: to escape, to dream, to reimagine. It is a special honor to have Suzuki's words continue to live so long after her death, and there's much that we can pull from her musings, however fantastical as they may be.

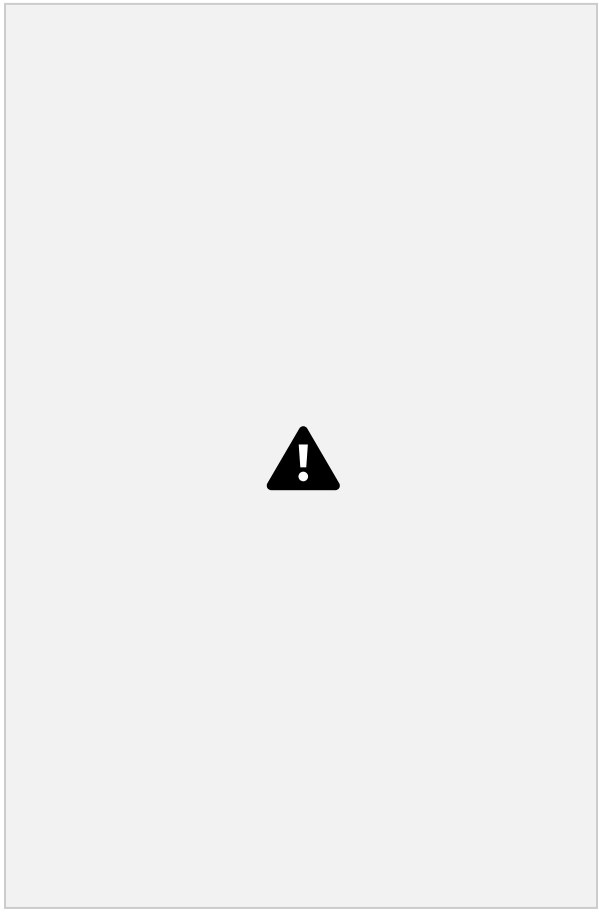


Izumi Suzuki (1949–1986) was a countercultural icon and a pioneer of Japanese science fiction. She worked as a keypunch operator before finding fame as a model and actress, but it was her writing that secured her reputation. She took her own life at the age of thirty-six.

Julia Romero recently graduated from New York University with a bachelor's in English. She has a keen interest in speculative fiction that tests the limits of reality and offers new insights. She was a prose editor for *West 10th*, the NYU creative writing program's undergraduate literary journal. She's written about art, theatre, and music in *Encore Magazine*, and currently works as a publicity assistant at Wunderkind PR.

Language Unlives Us

Title: *Totally White Room* **Author:** Gerrit Kouwenaar **Translator:** Lloyd Haft
Print Length: 38 Pages
Publisher: Holland Park Press London



Pub Date: March 30th, 2023
Rating: 4/5 Stars
Review by: Abigail Hebert

In the acclaimed Dutch poet's collection *Totally White Room,* the reader is confronted with the transience of life and grief on a metaphysical level, while also being challenged to think about the form of the poem itself. The quartet of sections, "A Glass to Break," "Four Variations on a Triptych," "Between Times," and "Totally White Room" moves through the initial acceptance of death which precipitates rebirth, a renaissance. Upon an initial read, the collection seems almost too simple. The phrasing is not something that may be accessible immediately to a contemporary reader, but don't let that deter you; read on.

be familiar, grass that was denied came

grumbling again."

He grapples with the same idea of arrest and movement happening together, and how one may continue to live in memory, or as a ghost in the people still living, while being held in the moment of their death

Kouwenaar returns to several images throughout the collection: personified nature, glass or mirrors, a
still moment, seasons, and emotions or experiences
as colors. This being said, the collection verges on
repetitive, but it is evident that the speaker is stuck—
in a standstill—on several emotional hills, the main
one being grief. Aptly, the poet uses spring as a means
of distilling the experience of death evolving into life.
In the first poem, "A Latter Day," the speaker begins
with a heralding:

"It was bound to come: the day it would all

> Perhaps the poet is addressing the inevitability of death, or maybe he is reaching deeper, examining the day that one accepts the death of a loved one. Spring will return each year, regardless of failed preparations, bringing death to the cold, maybe lonely, winter and a resurgence of life in nature.

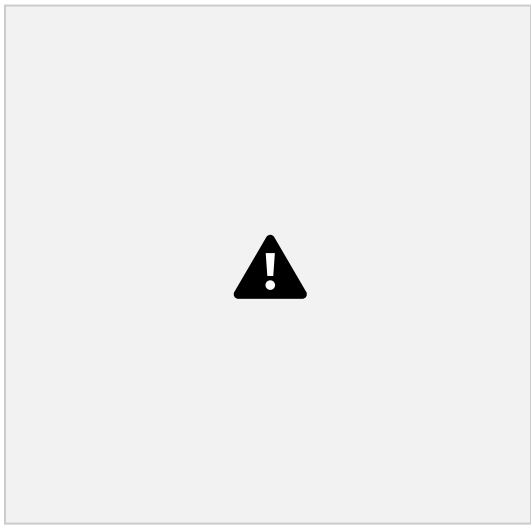
It seems as if the speaker is at once aware of this seasonal transition, while also being resistant to it. The grass is not welcoming of spring, it's "grumbling." In the following poem, "Standstill"—the moment between spring and summer, or between grief and acceptance—is meat growing cold, but a fire warming. We, as readers, are asked to rest in this liminal moment. How can we go on? What happens when the season passes and the next begins? We await the answers in the poet's purgatory.

The next section reveals that the speaker is grieving a woman, a woman of many personas, maybe she is someone who was never fully present. Two realities are given: The woman herself as many personas and the woman as other women the poet sees on the street, "slant rhymes" of the woman he's grieving. The final triptych leaves us with the image of a woman pulling on and off her nylon stockings; he calls this "art on the point of being born." For me, this was the crux of the collection, honing in on the cyclical nature of life, literally, at the turning point. Calling on T.S. Eliot's imagining in *The Four Quarters*, Kouwenaar is bringing us to "the still point of the turning world." He grapples with the same idea of arrest and movement happening together, and how one may continue to live in memory, or as a ghost in the people still living, while being held in the moment of their death. The beauty lies in this paradox.

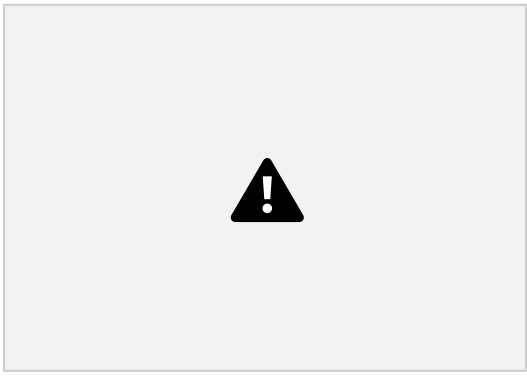
The final two sections of the collection turn inward with the speaker's use of color, wearing black in mourning and ending in a white room. The image of being surrounded by white—purity, rebirth, cleansing—also engenders a great sadness. The poet leaves us swimming in the paradox of life itself, and by proxy, the form of a poem. Poetry allows one to exist in a reality that may be nonsensical. Kouwenaar's mastery is most present in the context of turning the poem on its head: using the poem to portray grief and rebirth and all of the aforementioned ideals, while urging the reader to think about how the form addresses those ideas naturally.

"One must decompose for language unlives us."

It is not the ultimate line, but it is one that I feel prompts readers to amend their previous ideas of death, questioning whether death comes before birth, or whether the written word is ultimately the final decider– an omnipotent creator and destroyer.



Gerrit Kouwenaar, born in 1923 in Amsterdam, was active in the resistance during World War II. He made his debut with *Vroege voorjaarsdag (Early Spring Day)* a clandestine self-published poetry collection. His official debut collection *Achter een woord (Behind One Word)* was published in 1953. His poetry collection *Totaal witte kamer (Totally White Room)* was published by Querido in 2002. It won the Karel van de Woestijne prize in 2004 and the KANTL prize in 2005. Gerrit Kouwenaar died in 2014.



Abigail Hebert graduated from Vassar College where she participated in the Vassar Poetry Review and as an editor, poet, and reviewer. Originally from Arizona, she is now based in New York where she works as a foreign literary scout, writing poetry in her free time.

Poetry

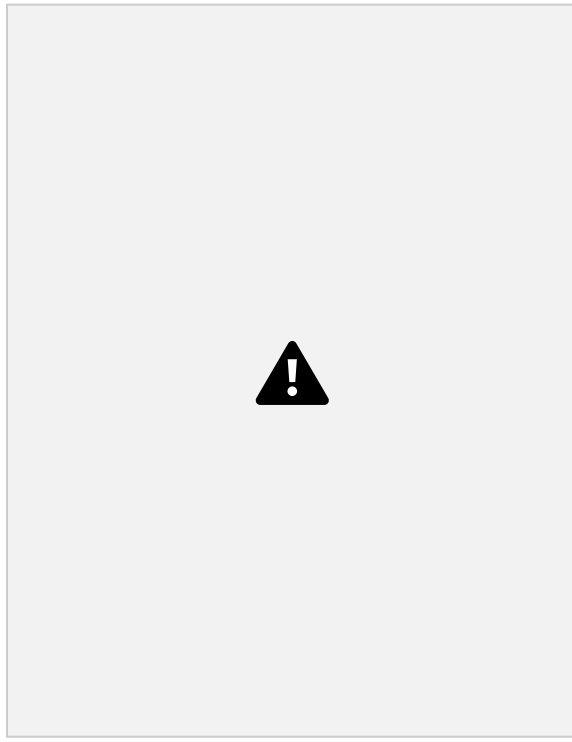
Under the Twin Trees

Mara G. Szyp is an emerging international Argentinean-Canadian artist. She is a double cancer survivor. Mara loves working with oils. She specializes in West Coast seascapes and Contemporary abstracts

Their Wings are Legendary Scrolls

By: Terry Trowbridge Terry Trowbridge's poems have appeared in *Carousel, subTerrain, paperplates, The Dalhousie Review, untethered, Orbis, Snakeskin Poetry, M58, CV2, Brittle Star, Bombfire, The Beatnik Cowboy, Borderless, Literary Veganism,* and more.

Caterpillar sleepwalks along a green stem.
A scent, almost nectar, seeps from a cut leaf.
Caterpillar is dreaming with a future mind.
Consciousness is for twelve legs,
camouflage.
Unconsciousness is for the future's winged
dreamer.
Dreams of proboscis slaking in hot summer
hint with small psychic nudges
inside chrysalis. Caterpillar imagines flight,
but knows falling, climbing, sailing wind.
Soon to enwomb oneself (October is cold),
each lepidoptera conserves calories,
considers the architectural possibilities
of pulp and silk, papier-mâché.



But sleepwalking?
Sleepwalking is for animals that tell legends.
Caterpillar is having the first transition.
Practice balancing in the frost without
waking.
The air on caterpillar's back is cold and
scented.
The different temperatures, different
flowering essences,
that curl over the green segments
will be remembered and drawn
on those future wings.
This Autumn will be remembered, but in the language of dreams.
Caterpillar sleepwalks, makes Autumn legendary.

Transmut

e By: Catalina Lassen

Deep into November and autumn still
lingers like smoke, rough and woody,
caught in my hair. Pirate skeletons of trees
clutch in desperate avarice at their
remaining jewel-leaves, reluctant to admit
death or defeat.

I, too, linger like autumn,
my rage clinging madly, all garnets and golds. I
hope winter winds come
rattling soon, and I, shivering, will shed this
anger as it shrivels, dry as bone and brown.

And then in spring, in the warm wetness of
April's wide mouth, when snow runs in
rivelets,
a single bloom, a sunny daffodil will sprout
from where my anger sits decrepit, de
composing—

Catalina Lassen has been writing for over fifteen years. Publications include *Daedalus* and *Cicada*, and she is an alum of the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers. She is also a visual artist who has had her work exhibited at galleries in and around the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania metropolitan area.

Three Poems

By: Dominic Windram Dominic Windram is a personal tutor and poet from Hartlepool in the North

East of England. He regularly contributes poetry to *The Northern Cross*: a Catholic newspaper that serves the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle. He is a resident poet on PNN (Progressive News Network) radio.

The Arrival of Spring

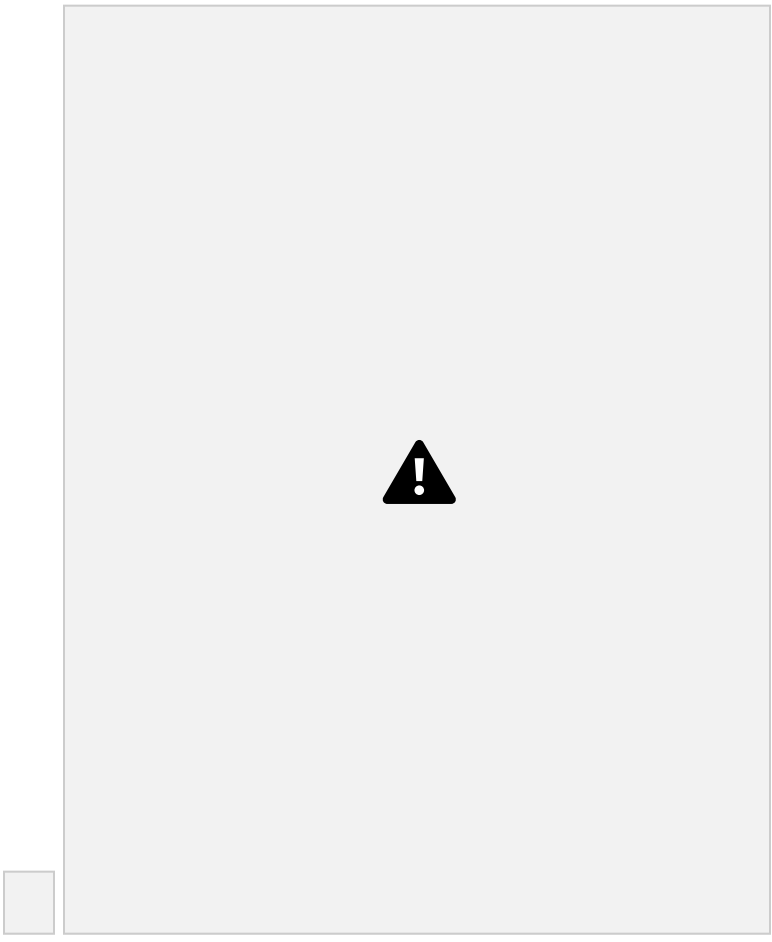
In spellbound forests,
the trilling of birds as spring
arrives. Nightingales
fill the woods with praisegiving.
In small, fenced gardens,
once bare branches of apple
trees clad themselves in
flesh pink and milk-white blossoms
as colour returns.
April rain redeems the land
and new light blesses
fields and parks and avenues.
Although modern ways,
distract us from life's essence,
Nature's divine ways
are discovered in springtime.

I Can Remember: (Sonnet)

I can remember a fragment of time:
When the light was dream like; clouds were milk white And the days seemed to flow like vintage wine. Angel birds soared into heavenly heights. I can remember a brief flash of time:
When we were one with the deep green and blue Of wondrous worlds conjured up by our minds. And there was no strife between me and you. I remember the flowering of time,
When we gently awoke to rose pink dawns; When complex, frozen steel symbols and signs
Did not overburden us. We were sworn
To the secrets of our warm, little lives.
We were content as bees in golden hives.

In a Dream

In the fading memory of a dream,
Dewdrops glisten by a silvery stream.
Such soft and delicate colours abound,
Nature is alive with beautiful sounds.
For it is the coming of verdant spring,
When flowers resurrect from winter's grave;
When treasured birds begin to sing again;
When pure joy drifts by us wave after wave.



Will Poems Drown?

By: Lee Chottiner

When I read of the rising sea levels, I wonder if
the poems will drown,
consumed like countries under anarchic oceans.

Some will surely drown. Prose poems, dense and thick, will drop like anchors from warships.

But haikus, so light,
will take flight or
float over the waves,
white caps vainly trying to snatch their syllables.

Of these poems
I am sure.

Yet sonnets, couplets,
ballads, lyrics,
odes, elegies—
acrostic, ekphrastic . . .

They might survive, their stanzas inflating
like flotation devices,
riding the tides 'til
rescue readers arrive.

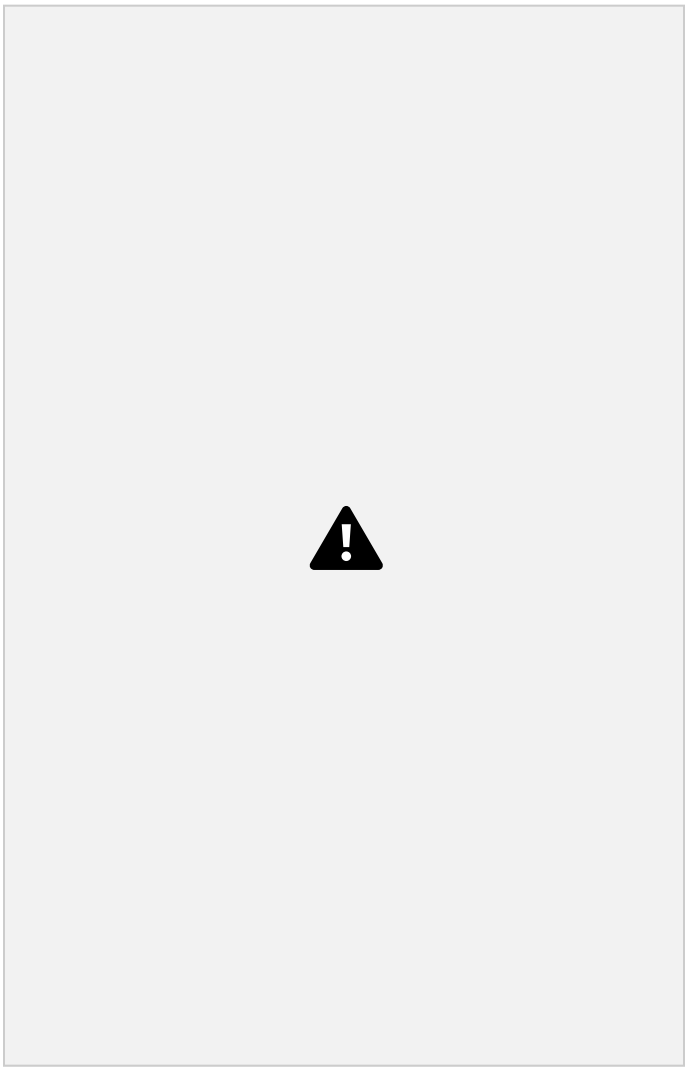
They just might.

But like so much,
I don't know

Lee Chottiner is a poet and journalist, whose coverage has been reprinted by several news services. His poetry has appeared in *Brink Zine, Jittereview, Journeys, October Hill Magazine, Pokeberry Days: A West Virginia Literary Collection, Poesis, Poetry Super Highway and Weelunk*. He lives in Louisville, Kentucky.

I only know the earth is
no longer cold in winter,
that printing presses rust
under rushing water.

And I wonder:



Can iambs even swim?

Water & Earth

By: Jillian Picco Jillian Picco has been writing for seven years. *October Hill Magazine* will be her first publication, though she has self published a novel entitled *Walking the High Road: Canoeing with the Seasons.*

to think I am earth and you are water, we might be balanced.
I at your core,
you might surround me.

I may contain the lush,
you may keep it cleansed
we may have layers and depth
that mirror consequence

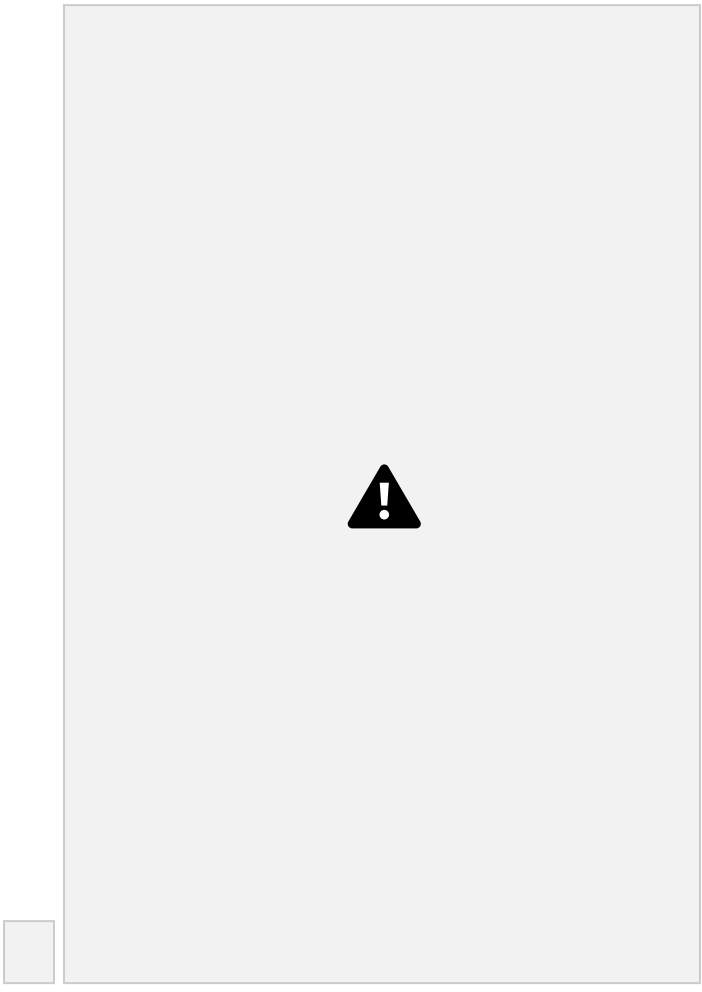
if only you could see and surround me though you perpetuate your swarm if only you could cleanse me wholly you draw tsunamis to my buildings

I build homes for you
and their foundation cracks,
you flood
I give you self-awareness
a martyr all too easily won

I stood ashore: one dot in zillions, my love maneuvered in in the endless,
the active, the heaving -
though you were always leaving so

I left my earth and swam to you, but all I saw was endless blue
I became one wave of many in
your crushing cobalt and marine

only when to shore I turned
was it you who made the waves return oh how they clashed and guttered me, but it was feeling in the least
I'd always been a swimmer,
I'd always left the shallow moves and I thought I knew just when to stop that throat-bound bloody feeling
of doing too much, of caring too much,
becoming thwarted by the overhaul of love I tried to tame your waters, your screaming reckless blues, yet besides becoming grounded, I did all without a clue



Tanager & Minuet

By: Sara Barnett Sara Barnett is an emerging writer, professional actor, and certified yoga teacher. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in the UK, Singapore, and across the United States in several other great magazines, including *Canary, The Harbinger Asylum, The Sublunary Review, Rogue Agent, The Hungry Chimera, October Hill Magazine,* and *Namaste.*

Mama is tomato sunflower desiccated melon rind
Scooped and bulging where she lays and where she walks—
She is a thunder.

Our mother takes news clippings from the tides and rolls her car upon the gravel drive.

Inside are pips, for she is the cherry-orange ovary what
Pulls down branches—
Temptation and the seed.

Inside are pips, for she is universe and clock
Stars congested too dense for us to do anything
but see them one by one.

For us, she lets some fall.
Fertilization.
What world would wish upon.

Earth, she wears nude lipstick
A signal that she's going mum, for
These are words too much to share.

Hush. Then hush. Let her teach you about the
beauty of all silence.
Drift into the colors of the spring.
First soft, becoming songbirds who flash by your
lenses,
pause on branches, and cock heads.

And when birds sing, you'll say you've heard of
us, but can't recall our names.
Just like the minuet you've danced to all your life, unknown.

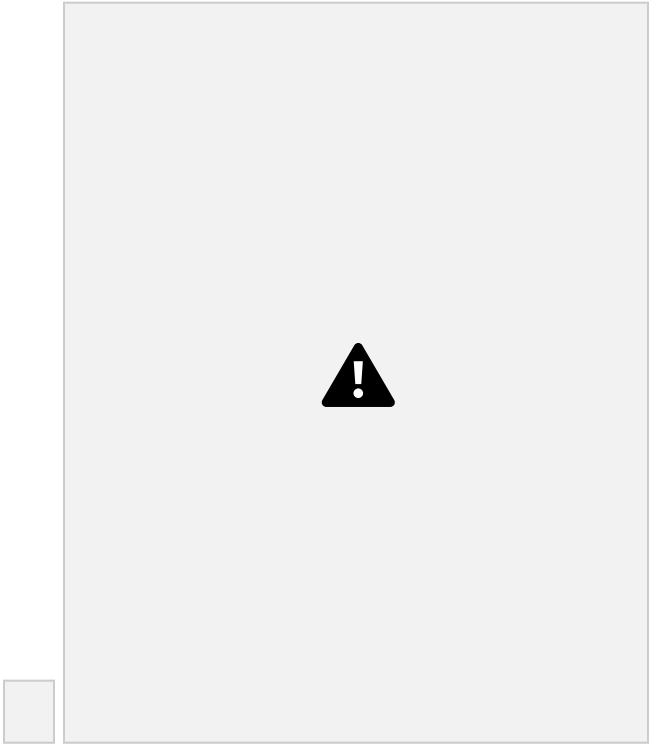
To you
red birds, well, they're all the same.
Like pots of makeup at the mall.

Inside are pips, take some.
Roll dyed finger across your glorious mouth.
Become accessory to and acquaintance of
the poppies in the field.

The Gift

By: Beth Brown Preston Beth Brown Preston is a poet and novelist with two collections of poetry from the Broadside Lotus Press and two chapbooks of poetry. She is a graduate of Bryn Mawr College and the MFA Writing Program at Goddard College. Her work has been published in numerous literary and scholarly journals.

I call this inspiration the gift:
when I awake with a poem ripe, a sweet fruit I can pluck
from midnight's fecund tree. I light the bedside lamp
and find myself, sleepless, awake and alone
on a drowsy island of wonder.
I anoint my ears with the balm of music's fragrance:
the rhythms of jazz echoing through my room.
I live in this house built on a foundation of dreams.
I hide within omens foretold upstairs in the attic.
I rise and turn off the radio,
seize my notebook and in contemplation the helix reveals
this gene for poetry bestowed by my ancestors.
Two o'clock a.m.:
alone in the attic
I crack roasted sunflower seeds with my front teeth
trying to recapture the revelations of a muse.



The muse is you and the quiet desperation for poetry
you inspire. I send up a thankful prayer
I know will be answered
by the ritual of a poem this night.
From where do they come?
These sweet dreams? These truths?
These gifts?

Two Poems

By: Renee Cronley Renee Cronley is a writer and nurse from Manitoba. She studied Psychology and English at Brandon University, and Nursing at Assiniboine Community College. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Chestnut Review, PRISM international, Off Topic, Love Letters to Poe*, and several other anthologies and literary magazines.

In the Heart of the Prairies

The prairie landscape follows me, an imprint of green pastures
for my homesick heart to graze while I sow post-secondary seeds within the roily urban sprawl.

But I see my roots on trips home along stretches of gravel roads,
nostalgia wafts through the car windows, the sweet scent of alfalfa and clover taking me back to country cruises and farm dugouts for summer swims.

A myriad of memories
cut from the fragrance of hay
wrapped tight like golden bales secures a healthy harvest for my psyche.

I was grown here,
nourished by the rich browns,
uniting flora with the sunshine, changing with the seasons.

My hands cradle the swell of my belly. Thoughts of what grows here next dance along wheels of straw
resting on their earthen beds.

Soon the city-streaked noise
will fade behind graduation's sigh and a rustic wind will guide me back to fields of long golden grasses waving me back home.

The Strong Scent of Words

Some people call the smell of old books musty— I call them earthy.
All good stories put their roots in us,
like the way trees extend theirs deep into the soil and collect nutrients
the minds got to eat.
Some of them mat the forest floors and anchor

themselves within the crevices of rocks, so they can withstand violent storms
We all have our defense mechanisms.

These pages of yesterday promise us escape like they have to the thousands of eyes before ours.
Making us into the heroes and heroines in faraway kingdoms and dystopian realities—
battling villains and personal demons
from the safety of our chairs.
Learning lessons from characters that force us to see the world through their point of view—
absorbing their bravery, strength, and resilience through literary osmosis.

That potent, unmistakable smell of old books is the scent of a new experience lived through words. And we all got to breathe.

In Tandem

By: Anne Whitehouse Anne Whitehouse's most recent poetry collection is *Outside From the Inside* (Dos Madres Press, 2020), and her most recent chapbook is *Escaping Lee Miller* (Ethel Zine and Micro Press, 2021). She is also the author of a novel, *Fall Love*.

When we moved into our apartment, we painted over the ugly wallpaper in the master bathroom, first with primer, then with white, oil-based paint in an eggshell finish.

Using artists' oil pigments
we mixed a Caribbean aquamarine and thinned it with oil glaze.
With a ribbed cotton cloth,
we ragged the luminous glaze
in gentle swirls over the white walls, suggesting the depths of the ocean.

My husband created a stencil in mylar of Hokusai's famous tidal wave
rearing its head like a stallion,
tossing white flecks of spray
like the locks of a horse's mane.

Master of Exacto knives
and mathematic intervals,
my husband sized the stencil
so its repeating pattern
fit the wall's dimensions,
and he cut it flawlessly.

He invented, and I implemented, balancing on the bathroom counter to apply the stencil to the walls.

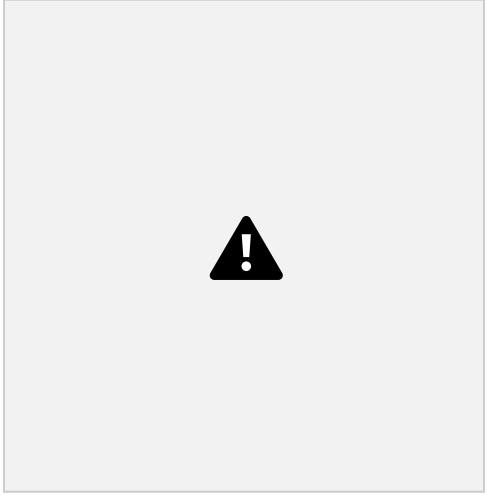
The waves, in dazzling white
and black and dark cobalt,
contrasted with the aquamarine.

To add to the illusion,
we made miniature models
of Caribbean fish in paper-maché— black drum and red snapper,
triggerfish and porgy,
grunt and angelfish,
seahorse with a curved tail—
which we painted realistically
and strung using dental floss
from hooks in the ceiling,
suspended below Hokusai's waves in the bathroom's watery element.

We didn't know then
about Hokusai and his daughter, how he recognized her talents
in childhood and fostered them. She worked alongside him in the studio. It is said that some of the works attributed to him were made by her.

In a time and place where women were confined to the domestic sphere, did Katsushita Oi's obscurity
trouble her? Her modesty and her sex were impediments to her renown, so perhaps she was content to add to his.

Seeking to penetrate a culture
and an art so alien to me,
I come no farther than our stencil.



Ghost Notes

By: Phil Powrie Phil Powrie has taught film studies in a university in the South of the UK He has had poems published in *South and Ink, Sweat and Tears.*

. . . the quickest of all times, not . . . the time for church or chapel music of dignity and solemnity . . . but a skipping time, the time of the goat in fact.
(*The Musical Times*, 1 February 1888, p.82)

He drops
stone notes to
seawater. Objective: the
splash of the final chord
like an air crafted
crash.

She skims
musical pebbles, skipping
time. Wind swirls as they arc
and soar
like clouds of
weathered
lace.

He says:

I will become a standing
stone, a silence, cloaked in pewtered
waterwind.
I will become pagan and priestlike
in my quavers of leaden
granite.

She says:

skim me my crotchets of
amber and obsidian.

I will chime as they glitter, rippling
like ghosts
across the rising