





# NUDE BRUCE REVIEW

*Issue 11*

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&  
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Greetings Brucelings,

When we last dispatched an issue of *Nude Bruce Review* a pandemic was raging and people were filling the streets demanding justice and an end to policing and the earth was a tinderbox and the rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer and there is a time for mourning and a time for laughing and a time for weeping and a time for dancing and the poems heave-ho and chit and chat and shout and shout and somewhere a guitar is trembling and sweating while its strings crack and snap and the music stops and the rocks cry into sound and curl out from their shipwreck greaves and shallow spendthrift graves and stand tall and shout and shout and the rich are stealing from the poor and the Law says it's just so and the Law says yes yes Go and the people are in the streets and the people are singing and dancing and burning the precinct and the people yes the people say NO.

So, not much has changed.

Bruce is back and he'll keep coming so long as there are poems in the corners of minds and on the tips of tongues. Bruce digs a well-crafted prose piece, too. There are plenty of each to be had herein. Poetry up front, prose in the back. *Tolle, lege.*

Thanks to Britney Logan for the truly brilliant cover illustration. A little sunshine will do a Bruce good.

Andrew and Tim  
Editors-in-chief

# Poetry

# Glow

By Christopher Fettes

From the window, fog and smoke  
Can't be told apart. I wouldn't have  
Perceived the smoke at all, but stepping  
Into the night, I smell damp wood  
Burning. Freshly felled trees, chopped  
And sized for the fireplace. Obscured  
By a row of houses, the streetlights  
Glow orange. Each could be a smoldering  
Fire, unheeded in the night. I feel  
Unsettled and turn to go inside,  
Hoping the smell of smoke won't  
Follow me as I step indoors and leave  
The burning world behind me.

# Metaphor

By Christopher Fettes

Was there a poem  
I meant to write today?  
Some reflection on a  
Significant change?  
Was the day its  
Own poem,  
Treading the narrow passage  
Between hope, expectation,  
And anxiety. Maybe that  
Metaphor doesn't work.  
That's it: eggshells  
(He remembers)  
A poem about walking on them.  
It's simple, really:

To walk on eggshells  
Is to crush them nonetheless.

# One Eye Green, the Other Far-seeing

By Robert Beveridge

In six more weeks the feel  
of a communion wafer on the tongue  
will change. Transubstantiation  
has taken hold of your body.  
The bread of heaven, the cup  
of salvation. Wisdom not meant  
for mortal eyes passes yours  
leaves no impression  
except the tickle at the back  
of your dreams. In darkness  
you read pathology textbooks  
absorb pictures of the dead  
beneath your fingertips.  
Yet only your body is braille,  
the smooth curves that telegraph  
images of liquid, the moist kiss  
of morning, before the call of breakfast.

# Released (excerpt 43)

By Cameron Morse

*When you are sitting in the middle of your problem, which is more real to you: your problem or you yourself? The awareness that you are here, right now, is the ultimate fact.*

In the clamps of your eyes,  
I am kinked, a twist  
of wire waiting to be straightened.

I am the wrinkle  
to which you would bring your hot  
steaming iron, seething

with spittle. I am the hammer  
that cratered your sheet  
rock, your dry

dry wall, a nail that pokes out,  
snagging your scarf. As a school  
girl, you would begin

each new notebook  
with a fresh determination.  
After the first scratch,

blot or slip of ink, you would be  
released from any effort:

It was already ruined.

# Meditation

By Yvonne Higgins Leach

Elements from inside the furnace  
of long-dead stars, new molecules  
in the cell walls of bacteria,  
atoms from the lungs of my ancestors:  
I was formed.

Fused to this world too at the holiest cell level  
are the bodies of strangers,  
sun-drenched and rainfed like mine.

Beloved, I say:

*You are part of me that*

*I do not know yet.*

Braided to each other

like radiant light between leaves,

I say let us abandon religion  
for the natural world astonishes.

Let us go back to where we started,  
to the grandeur of being a child.

How we pondered the sinewed shape  
Of the beetle's black back, how we  
poked, prodded, studied, and then let it go.

If we hold close this wonder,  
that all is made of the stuff of stars,  
we will remember how to love again.

# 25 Items: We Gather to Divide Our Mother's Possessions

By Yvonne Higgins Leach

## *i. Firstborn Daughter*

This poem should start with us entering the apartment  
in morning light, but before that we needed a process

because I am a lawyer and like logic,  
how one step occurs before another toward a goal.

I also am the executor of the will  
and take my responsibility seriously.

The coffee table laden with lamps. Vases bulge  
on the mantel. Dishes dress the kitchen counter.

Room to room, as if in a museum, we get an hour  
to pick the top five items that mean most to us.

## *ii. Oldest Son*

A frost-covered February morning  
the apartment exactly as Mom had left it.

I open the blinds like she would have.  
Her caretaker from afternoon

to bedtime for years, I know how the light

invites shadows on the walls,  
the creaky complaint of the bathroom door,  
how to fold and stack the linen towels.

I love how a poem is written in sections  
like this one like these objects in their spaces.

*iii. Middle Son*

Like most of my life, I arrive  
on time. Listen. Follow the instructions.

The smell of coffee lingers.  
Languid lights nudge us along.

Pen and paper in hand,  
I write a list poem today.

An owl statue, a hand-painted bowl,  
coasters, and books about Montana.

How I wish I had asked more  
about her life.

*iv. Second Daughter*

Happy to support my sister  
in creating the process

but today is about the wood-carved sculpture  
of mother and child adorning the dresser.

And the story that goes with it.  
God, how I adore symbolism.

A life's division  
is not left in lightless basement boxes.

We carry them to our homes—  
each has a voice and sings!

*v. Youngest Son*

We name the heirlooms we picked and say why.  
Amazingly, no duplicates, no tussles, no conflict.

Maureen picked the everyday dishes,  
shared memories of special meals.

Tim picked a set of books on Montana,  
said he loved them since he was a boy.

Like the perfect rhythm of a poem,  
each commentary flowed.

Through objects, anecdotes about our mother  
alive in the modest afternoon light.

# Canary in the Kitchen

By Mckayla Beauchamp

My dad is a canary in the kitchen  
He whistles with the kettles  
Chirping with the pans  
As he flits about  
To create a masterpiece of a Sunday Feast.

And like the canary  
Whistling away deep in the mineshaft  
He stops singing when there's trouble,  
Warning the rest of us  
That death awaits  
If we comment on the charred dinner rolls.

# Arcanum

By Sarah Hopkins

call a cab or race the lines  
you've been smoking on a crack pipe  
out of a light bulb  
there goes the light bulb  
of an idea so rock and roll  
it's a roller coaster straight to the bottom  
of your night stand  
where the anxiety sits and waits  
because it cannot stand the light of day-  
Dreamers  
who desire a punk-pop fantasy  
where everyone bleeds red hot  
like the Chili Peppers  
because it's the love that has inspired  
all of the music and poetry  
even if I don't know a damn thing about reading  
the music  
in my head it's classic  
just like me  
and I am The Breakfast Club  
you replay me everyday  
because you can't forget about me  
don't  
don't  
don't  
don't  
you forget about me

in an alternate dimension  
where the analysis can be sketched in 4d  
time is paused and played like a boom-box blaring  
1960's love songs that never get old  
old like the Beatles  
whose songs don't make any sense  
unless  
you've been smoking on a crack pipe  
out of a light bulb and  
you get an idea so rock and roll  
it's a stairway straight to heaven.

# Looking

By Stephen Mead

Nasturtiums burst orange to yellow  
in the sweet pea, the morning glory furls  
of purple, blue, white.

What delight, impressionistic, raining green  
light through the grid of this screen.

My cats press noses, eyefuls wide  
on moths, butterflies, birds,  
each stirring scents by petals & wings.

At night raccoon gazes gleam striped  
by fur & the moon shadows of trees  
offer ripe travel for what the sight can see.

I find a forest, botanical, a greenhouse garden,  
dreamt of, psychic, from some far state.  
We shall go there some day, beach-tanned  
& at ease, vacationing from life, two tourist  
renegades seized only by wonder,  
a zoo wilderness with its beasts,  
flamingo-peach, ram gray, the horns of plenty,  
avian-exotic, parroting like monkeys.

Look, that is my hand on the pillar,  
the white marble, the alabaster gate,  
a statue come to life.

Be there, familial companion  
for the journey amid other homes  
of children's welcome signs.

At night I will join you,  
your blossoming and mine combined,  
deep, deep, in a room fanning slumber,  
the sweet sweat, the wide waves  
of shared comforting sheets.

# Rejoice

By Vincent Green

My eyes once shone  
so blinding bright,  
moths went to them  
in dead of night.

The moon exhales  
and disappears,  
the tide goes out,  
absence appears.

I once was born,  
of this I'm sure.  
I've since been dying,  
& there's no cure.

# Found Objects

By Vincent Green

Before the unspeakable sea  
broke my heart apart

I understood that the starry night  
had never been made of actual fire.

There are more gods in the midnight sky  
than grains of sand on the whole great earth.

Compose poems for the dead—  
they far outnumber the living.

# New Disturbance

By John Gray

There's a new woman in my life.  
What was once touch is now explosion.  
This is serious.  
We have kissed,  
strong winds and thunderstorms,  
the inspiration for the very next hurricane  
to hit these shores.

Yes, we seem feathery and flowery  
at a distance  
but, up close,  
the ground cracks beneath.  
When we're in a clinch,  
no earthquake will be denied.

But fury can't deny me  
the sweet Atlantic dawn.  
Nor passion, the view of the lake.  
Nor sex, the floating swans we see.

# How Rich People Live

By Peter Mladinic

He was quite rich, but the big thing  
he was rich in how  
he treated people, rich in humanity.

His spacious apartment  
was bright with white sofas, chairs,  
lamps and a white carpet, bright  
and nuanced with shadows

that sunny Sunday afternoon.  
I thought, This is how rich people live,  
this is what it's like.

Also I thought  
Whatever you do, don't mention the fight.  
Yet, around one corner, on a wall  
hung his championship belt from that fight

that resulted in another boxer's death.  
Don't mention the fight. One moment  
he got up from a chair. As he  
walked by, I got up and said, Junior,

the name he went by, please  
oblige me. For twenty seconds  
I sparred with the great Emile Griffith.  
He smiled, Don't go into boxing.

That was my moment of fame,  
feigning punches with this man whose  
life was boxing, a man I knew  
well enough to be

in his aesthetically pleasing digs  
in a high rise  
not far from the Lincoln Tunnel,  
on the Jersey side of the Hudson.

~

In his early teens  
he didn't want to box, but his handlers  
knew how good he was.  
Someone said he liked to be liked.

He liked to treat people well, for others  
to treat him well, he liked giving  
to his friends. He was, outside the ring,  
easy going, gentle, and he liked

to laugh, and dance, and party.  
He was gay. After the tragedy people  
said he was fueled by anger because  
Paret taunted him about being gay.

Paret's death was an accident.  
It had nothing to do with revenge.  
Griffith was only doing what  
he'd trained to do.

Don't bring up the fight.  
He never talked about it till they filmed  
Ring of Fire. And he wept.  
All those years it was eating him up

he'd taken a human life,  
this kind and immensely talented man  
who eventually lost the spacious digs,  
the car and the friends.

# I've Noticed that Dracula is Never in Any Poems in *Poetry Magazine*

By Ron Riecki

I wonder sometimes if he did something wrong.  
Maybe it was sucking the blood out of all those people.  
Or perhaps *Poetry* has something against Transylvania.  
You can never be sure.  
I read the poems.  
There's a lot of ears

and rooms

and shores  
and teenagers  
and faces and walls  
and clothes and professors  
and clocks and cakes and bathtubs

and children and abuelitos and playbills and stovepipes in those

*Poetry* poems,

but no Dracula.

And Dracula is famous as hell.

He deserves poems written about him.

I was reading some back issues of *Nude Bruce Review*.

No Dracula.

Not one goddamn Dracula poem.

And do you have any idea how cool his cape would look in the  
reader's minds?

Just imagine that cape,  
that opera cape,  
swirling,  
beautifully aged black wool,

taupe silk crepe,  
the pregnant collar,  
sleeves that could kill a rhino,  
imagine it,  
floating,  
haunted,

gorgeous,

right there in your head,  
and you look inside  
and,  
yes,

Dracula has *poofed*, vanished, gone, nothingness, air, the haunting  
of air, the haunting that is everywhere, the air in your room  
now, the air in your head, the air in the air,

for the love of God, *imagine it!*

# After

By Christina Petrides

He had been a lucky guy.

In early morning, he walked down to where full tide licked the  
rocks.

He stared at boats and birds,  
then ate sashimi on a sandy street paved with cigarette butts.

At orange and purple sunset, he climbed to a stale rented room  
to swallow boxed wine out of a paper coffee cup,  
sitting sleepless in the chair beside their empty bed.

# Fiction

# Between Stars and Drowning

By Marco Etheridge

He floated in cold water, suspended beneath a darkling sky framed by jagged spires of shadowed rock. Evening stars replicated themselves in the mirror of the lake, reflected diamonds that wavered in concentric rings of small ripples. Cayden Griffin was the epicenter of those rings, and the breathing of his lean body the source.

Cayden felt the rise of his body with the intake of breath, the slow sinking as he exhaled. He had only to push out all that was in him and his body would sink into the darkness below. The liquid surface crept to his chin, and he drew in another breath.

He was alone on the water, his bare feet pointing to the center of the mountain lake. Behind his head, the finger of a sagging wooden dock jutted from the shore. The overgrown shoreline ran back to the low shadows of cabins scattered along the lakeside.

The last of the evening light faded from the tops of the mountains. More stars appeared above his floating form, but Cayden did not see them. His eyes were closed.

#

Instead of an indigo canopy, the world is bathed in heat and harsh light. He is crawling into a vehicle filled with the acrid smell of detonation and echoing with the screams of dying men. Jagged holes have been blown through steel walls. Sunlight arrows through the wounded steel as dust and smoke swirl in the illuminating beams. His voice comes loud and strong: I got you, stay with me, you're going to be okay. Blood pools on the floor, a rising

tide threatening to flood a maimed armored vehicle on a dusty desert road.

#

Instinct took over as Cayden's face slipped beneath the dark water. He wrenched his arms downwards through the coldness, forcing his head and torso above the surface. His legs kicked beneath him and passed through the thermocline that defines the border between sun-warmed and depth-chilled. Icy fingers stabbed into his flesh. He gulped in lungfuls of air, harsh and ragged.

Beyond the rasping of his own breath, Cayden heard sounds from the shore. There was a crunch of gravel underfoot, then the heavy tread of boots thumping on wooden planks. The footfalls were accompanied by the rhythmic clicking of claws. Water swirled around Cayden as he spun his body to face the shadowed dock.

The dark form of a man stood above the rippling mirror of the lake, hands on his hips. The shape of a large dog obscured the man's legs. The dog dashed to the end of the dock and woofed into the darkness. The furry shadow wavered from side to side, as if uncertain where to go. Cayden pushed against the water with a scissor kick, holding his head above the surface.

"It's okay, Benny, stay there."

Benny wiggled like a puppy as Cayden swam to the dock. He got his muscled arms up on the worn planks and raised his body half out of the water. Before Cayden could spin up onto the dock, Benny's tongue caught the side of his face. He tried to push the dog off without falling back into the water. A gruff voice cut through the air.

"Benny, heel."

The big retriever dashed to his master knee and wiggled in place, held only by the restraint of wanting to be a good dog.

Freed from Benny's loving assault, Cayden launched himself out of the water and spun to a sitting position on the rough dock. The gaunt man standing above him was Hal Butler, his neighbor from the next cabin, and his dead father's best friend. Cayden tried to forestall the ass-chewing that he knew Hal was about to deliver.

"Evening, Hal."

The man snorted into the night.

"Night is more like it, and damn sure past what common sense would dictate is a good time for a swim."

"I wasn't swimming. I was floating."

"Like that will make a damn bit of difference when you drown yourself. Dammit, Cayden, the dog sees you out there and gets all riled up, barking and carrying on. His ruckus riles me up, and I don't want to be riled up. I promised your old man I would keep an eye on you, and I try to, but I swear you're going to give me a heart attack."

Benny woofed twice, as if in agreement.

Cayden laughed in spite of himself. Water dripped from his body, forming a small puddle around him.

"You're as healthy as a mule, Old Man."

"You don't know that. Damn doctors, they never tell a man the truth."

"Hal, you haven't been to a doctor in years."

"What I do or don't do with doctors is my own damn business. I think you owe me a drink for scaring me like that. Get your wet ass up off that dock. You're going to catch pneumonia."

“It’s the middle of August, Hal, ain’t nobody catching pneumonia.”

“Are you going to jaw, or are you going to offer an old man a drink?”

“All right, all right, hold your horses.”

Cayden rose from the dock and shook the water from his hair. Hal tromped to the shore and Benny trotted at his side. The sharp gravel bit into the soles of Cayden’s bare feet as he followed them to the first cabin.

#

Hal and Cayden sat at the front edge of the porch, with Benny sprawled between their two chairs. Behind them, insects pattered against the glass of the cabin’s front window. Hal raised a glass of whiskey, sipped it, and let his hand sink back to the arm of the chair. He turned to the younger man.

“Are you going down into the city tomorrow?”

“Yeah, tomorrow is Tuesday, which means I’m going to the VA. Why, do you need me to bring you something?”

“What the hell would I need from the city? I’m just making conversation is all.”

Cayden took a pull at his beer, which tasted like it had gone sour. The sour taste in his mouth was replaced by the bile of anger. He wrestled to hold the anger back but could not stop his tongue.

“Checking up on me is more like it.”

The older man let it go. The pause hung heavy until Cayden broke it with a sigh.

“Yes, it’s time for another session with the shrink, another day of seeing the real heroes.”

Cayden felt Hal's gnarled hand grip his shoulder. The old man's fingers had the bite of a vise.

"You listen to me, Cayden. You are a real hero, a bona fide, decorated hero."

"Try telling that to the ones that are missing an arm or a leg. I walk in there under my own steam, two arms, two legs, and I feel like a fraud."

He felt those hard fingers squeeze his shoulder, heard the sadness in Hal's voice.

"You aren't a fraud, Son. You're the real McCoy. You can etch that in stone if you like."

Cayden sipped his bitter beer and said nothing.

#

Morning brought the slow drive down into the lowlands and suburban sprawl, accompanied by a constant amazement that sane people could live like this.

The VA was the usual meat-grinder of paperwork and waiting, followed by his session with Doctor Jenkins. The psychiatrist wasn't a bad guy, but it took every bit of endurance Cayden had in him to last the full fifty minutes. The day's session had been as tough as always, but this one was different.

Then it was over, and Cayden was walking fast down the wide corridor, his heels clipping the tiles, heading for that front door and gone. An eager voice caught him just outside the big double doors. The voice hit him again and he knew there was no escape.

"Sergeant Griffin, is that you?"

The voice belonged to Taylor Barnes, a strong young man with a cane and the rolling walk of a sailor ashore after too long at sea. The black double curve of a

prosthetic foot kept time with the tap of his carbon-fiber cane.

“Hey, Doc, how are you doing?”

Taylor swayed to a stop in front of Cayden, got himself stable, and stuck out his hand. It hovered in the air between the two men, promise and obligation made into flesh. Cayden reached to grasp it.

“How’s it going, Barnes?”

Taylor released his hand, giving Cayden a shrug and a smile.

“Things are going pretty damn well, Doc. I got my new high-tech leg, which is cool as hell.”

The man looked down, tapped the cane against his prosthetic, and grinned back at Cayden.

“This thing lets me hop around like a baby kangaroo. It beats the shit outta that wheelchair, that’s for sure. I’ve got a fitting and adjustment today, but I’m getting the hang of it pretty fast.”

“That’s great, Barnes, it’s good to see you mobile.”

Taylor Barnes laughed out loud like a kid at a birthday party. The sound of it grated down Cayden’s spine.

“Hell, I’m more than mobile, I’m bionic. All I need to do now is find me a bionic girl. I figure we can have us a brood of bionic babies and take over the world.”

Cayden managed a chuckle to match his former comrade’s enthusiasm. Then Barnes looked at his watch, and Cayden saw the promise of escape.

“I gotta go, Doc, can’t keep the techs waiting. Listen, it was good to see you. You take care of yourself, right?”

“Sure thing, Barnes, and you do the same.”

“You know I will. And hey, Sergeant Griffin, thanks for saving my ass. I’ll never forget it.”

And then he was gone, rolling into the syncopated step of his ghost foot and cane. Cayden turned away and headed for the parking lot and solitude.

#

The last of the strip malls fell away behind the old truck as Cayden drove along the state highway and into the foothills. A summer shower had passed over and moved on. The wet blacktop glistened as the sun emerged and he squinted against the glare of it.

As he drove, Cayden chewed on the words of Doctor Jenkins. They had talked about the usual stuff; his trouble sleeping, the jumpiness and anger. But toward the end of their session, Jenkins had said something that was still dogging him. The shrink talked about a new starting place, somewhere to begin from. What Cayden wanted was a finishing point, a way to close the door on the past.

The highway rolled across an open meadow between two hills, with a scrub-covered embankment falling away on the right side. A brown blur of motion along the roadside snapped Cayden's thoughts back to the present. His right foot was already going for the brake as a big white-tail deer bolted onto the pavement. The car ahead braked into a skid, over-corrected, careened sideways to the shoulder, and flipped into the air. For one stop-frame of time, Cayden saw the bottom of the car suspended, spirals of water pinwheeling from the free-spinning tires. Then it was gone, sliding on its roof down the embankment and out of sight.

Cayden managed to skid his truck to a shuddering stop along the shoulder without following the stricken car over the edge. Behind him and on the far side of the ribbon of wet highway, other vehicles did the same. He yelled to

the first person he saw, an old man standing uncertain beside his car.

“Call 911 right now. Give them the milepost number. Stay on the line until help is on the way. Got it?”

The man nodded his head and dove back into his car.

Following the muddy track plowed by the upturned car, Cayden stepped over the edge of the embankment. He saw the overturned vehicle about fifty yards down the slope. Half running, half sliding, he made his way down the scarred path.

Cayden’s momentum carried him headlong into the upside-down car. Steam rose from the exposed chassis and the sharp tang of gasoline stung his eyes and nose. He fell against the driver’s side and peered through a shattered spiderweb of laminated glass. A woman’s body draped down from the seat above, caught in the shoulder harness that held her strapped tight. Her face was obscured by the shrouds of a deflated airbag. The driver was absolutely still, as if frozen in the act of falling.

Shrill screams came from behind the silent woman, piercing cries muffled by the safety glass in front of Cayden’s face. He saw a red-faced toddler dangling from the crossed straps of a child-seat.

His conscious brain shifted into a clipped chorus of assessment: Unsafe scene, obvious cause, two casualties, additional units required. We have one unresponsive and one victim alert and verbal. Then he was up and moving, past the acrid cloud of gas fumes to the far side of the car and the screaming child.

Cayden slid to the ground, into the wet churn of fresh earth. He wrenched the stiff curtain of safety glass away from the window frame and began worming headfirst

into the vehicle. He dug his heels into the mud and pushed, his shoulder blades sliding against the roof of the car. Then he was under the shrieking little girl and looking up into her tight-shut eyes. Cayden reached for her contorted face, spoke in a calm voice.

“I got you, Sweetheart, you’re going to be okay.”

The child’s eyes opened, and her screams turned to imploring cries. Cayden unclipped a tac knife from his belt and flicked it open. He held the girl’s heaving body with one hand, easing her weight from the webbing of the car seat. His right hand guided the point of the knife beneath the straps and they parted under the sharp blade. Clearing the knife above his head, he let the sobbing toddler fall to his chest.

Outside the car, Cayden heard the sound of squelching footsteps and muffled, frightened voices. Then a young man spoke.

“Are you okay? What do we do, man?”

Cayden rolled his head away from the little girl and shouted instructions.

“I’ve got an injured child here. I want you to grab my legs and pull me out. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, okay man. Bobby, the guy wants us to pull him out. Grab his legs. Right, one, two, three.”

Cayden’s legs went stiff and the window frame scraped his back as his body slid over it. As soon as one hand was free, he waved it at his unseen helpers.

“Stop there, that’s good. Let go of me and take the little girl. Easy, watch the sharp edges.”

Willing hands obeyed, easing the child through the narrow space. Cayden flattened his body to make room

for her small body to pass. When the child was clear, he slid from the car and pushed himself to his feet.

Two men stood in front of him, wide-eyed and scared. Neither of them could be more than twenty. The shorter one held the crying girl like a sack of groceries.

“What are your names?”

“I’m Trevor and that’s Bobby.”

“Okay Bobby, you carry the little girl up top. Stick with her, wrap her in blankets, keep her still. You got it?”

The young man’s scared eyes were locked on Cayden’s. Cayden pointed up the hill.

“Go on now.”

Bobby turned away and began clambering up the embankment. Cayden was already scrambling to the driver’s side of the car. The one named Trevor followed, his nervous eyes on the trickles of gasoline dripping to the ground.

Cayden bashed at the shattered window with his elbow to loosen the sheet of laminated glass. Trevor crouched beside him, looking back towards the rear of the wreck.

“Hurry up, man, there’s gas everywhere.”

Ignoring the distraction, Cayden pulled the skein of glass aside. A sharp edge sliced the flesh of his hand. When he reached to check the woman’s pulse, his probing fingers left a smear of red on the white flesh of her neck.

“Trevor, listen to me, okay? I have to cut her loose, but when I do, she’s going to fall. You have to hold her here, by the shoulders. Try to pull her head towards the window. We don’t want her to tangle up in there. You understand me?”

“Right, okay, I pull her out. What if I hurt her?”

“If we leave her here, she dies. Now reach in here, that’s right. Get your hands under her armpits. Good, now the count of three, you pull back and out. Ready? One, two, three!”

The woman’s body thudded to the roof of the car, her head and shoulders bunched in the opening of the window. A soft moan escaped her lips.

“Help me pull her out, Trevor. Watch her head. That’s right, perfect.”

Cayden raised the woman’s torso to a sitting position.

“Get behind her. We’re going to lift her up and I’ll get a shoulder under her. Once we get moving, you help me up the hill.”

Trevor sprang to do what he was told.

“Okay, ready, lift!”

The two men rose from the mud, hoisting the limp woman between them. Cayden crouched a shoulder into her midsection and forced his legs to stand. He managed to stagger upright, thankful that the woman was small.

“We’re out of here. Stay behind me and keep me from sliding. Push if you have to.”

They lurched up the steep hill, a trio with only four legs. Before they were halfway up, Cayden’s breath burned harsh and ragged in his throat. He slipped to one side, but Trevor caught him. Two men bounded down from the edge of the embankment and half dragged, half carried them to the top. Below them, fingers of flame began to flicker on the chassis of the abandoned car, spreading and rising into an angry red curtain.

Reaching hands laid the woman down on the shoulder of the road, atop a cushion of volunteered jackets. Blankets were wrapped around her. Cayden checked the

victim's heartbeat, her pulse, felt the life in her, allowed his own body to relax. Trevor crouched on the pavement, holding the woman's head between his hands. Cayden spoke in his ear.

"That's good, you hold her still. If she comes to, you talk to her, keep her calm. I'm going to go check on the little girl, okay?"

Trevor nodded his head, not looking away from the woman's face. The welcome sound of sirens reached their ears. Cayden laid a hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"You did good down there, Trevor, real good."

#

The narrow highway was a string of flashing lights, blue, red, and white against the glow of the afternoon. A half dozen state police cars and two fire trucks were strung out along the shoulder of the roadway. Cayden leaned against the hood of his truck, watching the single line of traffic squeeze past the sizzling flares and waving officers.

Two uniformed state troopers were walking toward him. The first was a tall, lean man who walked ramrod straight. Beside him was a female officer with an athletic build who matched the taller man stride for stride. She was a full head shorter than the man and half his age; a trim, olive-skinned woman. She carried an aluminum clipboard at her side. Cayden pushed himself upright as they approached.

The older man stopped, his shoulders back, hands clasped behind him. Cayden recognized the parade rest stance.

"Officers."

It was the tall man who replied.

“Sergeant Griffin.”

“Just Cayden is fine, thanks.”

“Okay. Sergeant Griffin, the EMTs tell me you are refusing transport to the hospital. Can I get you to rethink that?”

“No Sir, I’m fine.”

“We can drop the Sir business. I was a non-com just like you. You were sixty-eight whiskey, Iraq. Do I have that right, Trooper Diaz?”

Officer Diaz answered without looking at her clipboard.

“That’s right, Sergeant Black, combat medic.”

She was looking directly at Cayden as she spoke. Her brown eyes were bright and piercing. Cayden broke away from them and spoke to the tall man.

“I’m guessing you spent some time over there.”

“You would guess correctly. Desert Storm and after, staff sergeant, infantry. I just traded uniforms.”

“Then you rank me, Sergeant Black.”

“Not today I don’t, Sergeant Griffin. Right now, I have about two miles of traffic to deal with. Trooper Diaz here will finish out your report and get you on your way.”

He stuck out a big hand, which Cayden shook. The tall man nodded once, turned on his heel, and walked away.

Cayden watched him go, then turned back to Diaz.

“He’s not much for small talk, is he?”

Officer Diaz smiled as she answered.

“That was about as chatty as he gets. Are you sure you won’t go in and get checked out? That hand of yours is still bleeding.”

Cayden held up a freshly bandaged hand. A small blotch of blood showed red through the gauze.

“No thanks. The EMTs did a fine job with it. It’s just seeping a bit. I’ve seen worse.”

“I’m sure you have, Mr. Griffin, but I don’t want you going into shock on my watch. It makes for more paperwork, and I hate paperwork.”

“Cayden is fine; Mr. Griffin was my father.”

She gave him a searching look, then a half smile.

“All right, Cayden it is. Is there anything else you can tell me for this report?”

“No, Officer Diaz, I think we covered it. What’s the status on the woman and the little girl?”

“The girl looks to be okay, thanks to you. Banged up and scared, but probably nothing serious. It’s too soon to tell on the mom, but her vitals were stable when they transported her. That’s all I know right now. Speaking of status, you sure you feel up to driving? We could get you some transport.”

“Thanks, but I’m good. My place is at Sanders Lake, a few miles up the highway.”

“Sanders Lake, huh? I don’t know that one. I just transferred up here from down south. What’s it like?”

“It’s a quiet little speck of a place. I’ve got a run-down cabin I inherited from my father.”

“Are there any fish in this lake of yours?”

“Sure, we’ve got trout, mostly rainbows, and a few small-mouth bass. Do you like to fish?”

Trooper Diaz clicked her pen closed and slid it into the shirt pocket of her uniform.

“I grew up in the bow of my dad’s boat. He was crazy for fishing.”

She looked away to where a knot of people were gathered around a white van.

“There’s some reporters over there. If you don’t want to be on the news, now might be a good time to head for the lake.”

“I guess I’ll be going then. It was good to meet you, Officer Diaz.”

“Likewise, Cayden, and it’s Maria.”

“Maria Diaz; that’s a nice name.”

“My dad liked it. You take care of yourself.”

And then she was gone. Cayden walked around the front of his truck and climbed in. Once the engine settled into a steady lope, he put on his blinker and eased into the crawl of traffic.

#

The last of the evening light climbed the rock spires to the East as the mirror of the lake fell into shadow. Insects carved erratic patterns in the gloaming, drawing hungry fish to the boundary between water and air. Cayden leaned back in a worn Adirondack chair with his legs sprawled on the planks of the dock. An empty chair stood beside him, facing out over the quiet surface.

He heard the quick clicking of Benny’s claws against wood planks ahead of the hard tread of Hal’s boots. The old dock swayed slightly, sending ripples out into the lake. Benny wiggled like a puppy between Cayden’s knees, and got a quick head scratch for his trouble. Hal stopped behind the empty chair.

“You mind if I sit?”

“The chair’s empty, ain’t it?”

Hal snorted, placed a small cooler beside the low chair, then eased himself down into it.

“Benny, knock it off. Get over here.”

The dog looked to Hal, still wiggling, and backed out from between Cayden's knees.

"Benny, sit, that's a good dog. I brought beer."

Without asking, Hal fished two bottles of beer from the cooler. He twisted off the tops and handed one to Cayden. The two men toasted silently, then raised their beers and drank.

Hal looked out to where the surface of the lake was broken by the concentric rings of rising trout.

"The rainbow are hungry this evening."

"You want me to get the boat?"

"No, let's leave the fish in peace. So, how was it down at the VA?"

Cayden balanced his beer on the wide arm of the wooden chair. He twirled the neck of the bottle half around and back again. The wet base drew arcs of moisture across the rough, gray wood.

"It was about the same as always, Hal, messed up men and women trying to be less messed up."

"Was anyone making progress with that?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I ran into a guy that was in my unit. He was sporting a brand-new prosthetic leg, fired up and ready to take on the world. It really chapped my ass at the time, all that gung-ho shit. But sitting here now, I'm happy for him. Taylor can't help it, that's just how he is."

Hal nodded before he spoke.

"You know, it's good for me to hear about someone getting excited. Excitement is good for a fella. It clears out the cholesterol."

Cayden snorted in the growing gloom.

"Now you're just making shit up."

“Naw, I read it in some magazine. How did your session go?”

There it was, Hal’s inevitable question. This time Cayden felt himself willing to answer.

“At first it was the regular session stuff, talking with Doctor Jenkins about the bad dreams, my short fuse with people. But then he started talking about looking for a new starting point. How did he put it? He thought it was important for me to discover a place to begin. When he was telling me that, I got really pissed off. I told him what I wanted was an end point, some way to slam the door on the past.”

Cayden paused and sipped his beer. Hal waited in silence.

“We talked about locking the past out. Doc Jenkins said trauma has its own battering ram for knocking down closed doors. That made sense to me, even as angry as I was. So, I calmed down and we talked some more. There was a lot to chew on, that’s for sure. I had a long time to think about it on the drive back.”

Hal reached a hand down to scratch Benny’s ear.

“Yeah? Did you get caught in that traffic mess? I heard it was a damn deer caused it. A big buck jumping the road in the middle of the day; that ain’t natural.”

“Who knows? Maybe something was chasing it, a dog or something else.”

“The way I heard it, some local guys saved a woman and her little girl; got them outta that car before it burnt up.”

“Is that so?”

Hal blew out an exasperated snort that startled Benny.

“I don’t know if that’s so, Cayden. It’s what I heard down at the store. Forget it. There was a wreck, you had time to think, then what happened?”

“By the time I got back, I decided that Jenkins might be right. Hard to believe, but I was doing exactly what he suggested. I was trying to figure out what a starting point would look like.”

“And...”

“Well, for starters, I thought I’d take the old truck out on the highway tomorrow, run her up and down just as fast as she’ll go.”

Hal twisted in his chair and stared at the younger man. He shook his head as he began to speak.

“I know your daddy taught you to respect your elders. I know for a fact he did, because I was there. Teasing an old man like you’re doing is not showing respect.”

“Who says I’m teasing?”

“Fine, go on out there and get yourself arrested. Don’t even think about asking me to go your bail.”

Hal twisted back around in his chair and reached for his beer. After he sulked for a bit, Hal managed to find his voice.

“You are an odd duck, Cayden, but then you always were. It’s enough to give an old man palpitations. Still and all, I care about what happens to your sorry ass.”

“And I care what happens to you, you old coot, but you’ve never had a palpitation in your life.”

Silence fell over the end of the dock. The last shreds of evening lit the tips of the mountains. Stars appeared above the lake, and above the two seated figures with a dog sprawled between them. The night closed around Hal

and Cayden while the stars replicated themselves in dark water.

# Catholic Guilt

By Steve Slavin

Maureen was a Dubuquer born and bred. She and her younger sister Rosemary, grew up in this friendly Mississippi River city, but neither of them had any intention of living there any longer than they *had* to.

Their dad died of a heart attack while still in his forties, when Maureen was just a first-grader and Rosemary was getting ready to start kindergarten. Barely one month later their mother was stricken with polio, and would need iron leg braces and iron crutches to get around for the rest of her life.

A fiercely determined woman, she learned to drive a hand-controlled car, worked full-time as a school secretary, and was voted Mother of the Year multiple times by her fellow Dubuquers. What made her proudest was her family's regular attendance not just at Mass, but its participation in many of the activities of their church.

Since its establishment more than three hundred-fifty years ago, Dubuque has been a Catholic stronghold. It is said that there is hardly even *one* degree of separation among Dubuquers, and that's was no exaggeration. Everyone in the city knows Mrs. Sullivan, or knows someone who knows her. If you stood on a street corner in downtown Dubuque and asked passersby if they knew who she was, probably each one of them would reply, "You betcha!"

Maureen and Rosemary attended parochial schools from kindergarten through high school, where they were both star pupils. Their mother was puzzled that neither

daughter was content enrolling in either of the city's fine Catholic colleges – Loras College and Clarke University. Instead, they insisted on enrolling at the U of I in Iowa City – which was called Sin City by most Dubuquers. Still, with their scholarship money and low in-state tuition, both daughters were able to make the case that it would cost less at the U or I than would living at home and attending either Clarke or Loras.

When Maureen moved to New York after college, Mrs. Sullivan buttoned her lip and never uttered a discouraging word. She had always been fully supportive of her daughters' wishes whether or not she actually approved. *They* knew what she thought, but once they were out from under her roof, they were completely free to make their own decisions and live their own lives.

There was really just one thing she *did* ask of them, but was truly just a wish – not a demand. It was really so little to expect in the scheme of things. She knew they led busy lives, but was it really too much to ask that just once a week, they attend Mass?

Now, to be perfectly clear, this was not a direct order. Far from it! It was merely an appeal to conscience. She was fully aware of how grateful her daughters were for all her sacrifices. But now that they had left Dubuque, they would not always be surrounded by the same wholesome influences. Still, was this too much for a mother to ask?

Every Sunday afternoon Mrs. Sullivan would call her daughters, hoping to hear how much they enjoyed Mass. Then she would regale them with tidbits about friends and neighbors, and, of course, all the doings t their church.

If the girls -- now in their early fifties -- didn't mention anything about having gone to Mass, then Mrs. Sullivan

would be forced to ask them outright if they had attended that morning. She could not help asking, even though she already knew their answers.

Maureen, although still a devout Catholic, had grown somewhat lax in recent years. She attributed much of her missing Mass to her poor sleep habits, and occasionally to a faulty alarm clock. But Mrs. Sullivan knew that deep in her heart her daughter felt considerable guilt, and would surely try harder.

She often gave thanks to God for giving her two daughters who, no matter what, would never lie to their mother. Indeed, she readily conceded that their truthfulness -- not to mention their fundamental goodness -- was even more important than whether or not they were as devout as she would have hoped. Still, it was just such a small think that she asked of them.

One Sunday afternoon when I was visiting, Maureen put her mom on speaker-phone. They chatted for a while, but Maureen hadn't said anything about attending Mass. So finally, her mother needed to ask: "Maureen, were you able to get up in time to go to Mass this morning?"

"No, I didn't, mom. The alarm went off, and I thought I put it on snooze, but I must have turned off the alarm."

"Honey, I know how hard it is for you to get up in the morning, but you really should try a little harder. I know how important it is to you to attend."

"Yes, mom. I'm going to look for another clock. Maybe, if I have *two* clocks, I won't have this problem."

The funny thing about Maureen was that she *was* truly devout. And her church, which was just a short walk from her apartment, was indeed quite an impressive place. St.

James was the headquarters of the Bishop of Brooklyn – actually one of the most important church posts in the United States. Mrs. Sullivan was quite proud that her daughter was an active member.

I happened to be dating a woman who sang in the choir of a nearby Catholic church. Surprisingly, Maureen had never gone there, even though it was actually a break-away from St. James.

St. Boniface was housed in what had been an abandoned Protestant church that had been rebuilt by a dozen or so younger couples who, for one reason or another, had not felt comfortable at St. James. They held much less ornate and formal Masses, and one might even say that the place kind of rocked.

So, I made Maureen an offer that she could not refuse. I, a card-carrying Jew, would accompany her to Mass at St. Boniface. She made a counteroffer. Since she would feel guilty not going to St James – and since they started an hour earlier than St Boniface – why not attend both?

And so we did. St. James was huge. It's vaulted ceiling must have been more than eighty feet high. I was especially taken by the striking colors of the stained-glass windows. Everything about it was formal. Interestingly, there were no more than a few dozen worshipers. Perhaps many *other* parishioners had faulty alarm clocks.

Well before the Mass was over, we crept out and walked over to St. Boniface. As we entered, Maureen's expression was beyond priceless. She was literally wide-eyed, staring at all these people having such a great time. *This* was not the religion she had grown up with. This was actually *fun!*

Afterwards, Carol introduced Maureen to her friends in the chorus and to the assistant priest.

“So, Maureen, first time here?”

“Yes, Father.”

“You can call me Jimmy. And I can tell you,” he said, giving her a wink, “I’ve been called a lot worse.”

“So, Jimmy – or maybe I should address you as ‘a lot worse’ – everybody here seems to be having a great time.”

“And you’re wondering, Maureen, where’s the guilt?”

“Indeed.”

“Perhaps an even better question might be, where does the *joy* come from? Now, I see you are with your friends. Perhaps we can continue our conversation another time.”

After brunch, the three of us went back to Maureen’s apartment. At two p.m. sharp, the phone rang. Maureen put the call on speaker-phone.

Her mother’s voice sounded rather frail and tentative. But she quickly picked up on Maureen’s good mood.

“Mom, see if you can guess what I bought last week?”

“Don’t tell me you bought a new alarm clock.”

“Mom, you must be a mind-reader!”

“Maureen, that’s *wonderful!*”

“Thanks, mom!”

There was a long pause.

“So dear, does the new clock work well?”

“Maybe you should sit down while I tell you what happened.”

“I *am* sitting.”

“I actually I woke up at seven-thirty this morning!”

“That is *such* good news!”

“And mom, I invited my neighbor, Harvey, to come to St. James with me.”

“Yes, Harvey is that nice Jewish boy who lives in your building?”

“Mom, that nice Jewish boy is fifty-two years old.”

“Oh, I *knew* that, but if he were a Catholic in Dubuque, he’d be among our most eligible bachelors.”

“I suppose that would be true. Anyway, Harvey wanted to introduce me to his new girlfriend, Carol. So we had made arrangements to meet her after Mass for brunch.”

“How nice!”

“Are you ready for *this*, mom? We actually got to Mass before it began!”

“Now I know why you wanted me to sit down.

“Maureen, all kidding aside, I am so glad to hear that. I know how hard it must be for you living so far away – and in such a big city. And, quite frankly, I was beginning to get a little worried about how all the distractions may have sometimes ... well, let’s not go there.”

“Well mother, I have still *more* news!”

“I’m all ears.”

“Are you still sitting down?”

“Yes dear, I am.”

“Harvey’s friend, Carol, sings in the choir at St. Boniface.”

“Yes! You told me two or three years ago so about them. They broke away from St. James.”

“So, mom, Harvey and I left St. James a little early and walked over to St. Boniface. It’s much smaller than St. James, and the music is wonderful!”

“It must have been so nice to hear the choir.”

“Yes, it was.”

“So Maureen, I am so happy you’ve been having such a good time today. You *see* how well things turn out when you place yourself in the Lord’s hands?”

She paused for a few seconds. It was the meaningful pause she employed when she wanted to make a special point.

“Maureen? Now I want you to understand how happy you’ve made me today. But then I was thinking?”

“Yes, mom?”

Maureen, waited. But there was just silence.

“Maureen?”

“Yes, mom!”

Maureen, don’t you think going to *two* Masses in one day might be *overdoing* it just a bit?”

# Plastic Breath

By Alfredo Arcilesi

After seven days of intolerable confinement, Izzy decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

She had been testing her crippled body since the morning darkness, inundating her extremities with signals to flex, and, with any hard-earned luck, *move*. Her weak arms appeared up to the task; she guessed her weight to be just shy of one-hundred pounds. Her legs, however, remained stubborn, anchoring her to the bed. For all the training she had subscribed to these counterparts, none was more rigorous, more vital than her breathing regimen.

Izzy's relationship with oxygen had always been of a toxic nature. A university athlete who had relied upon her immaculate lungs for victory, it had been an unreliable ankle that decided ten metres from an important finish line was the time to snap, end her career, sink her into the depths of depression, and enrol her in a new, lifelong sport: smoking. Three packs a day, four when she was feeling particularly good (or bad), for fifty years.

And now the ghosts of cigarettes past were preventing her, in spite of her cooperative arms, from liberating herself, and, more importantly, Clara.

Izzy exhaled a laboured breath, painfully inhaled another. She should have been accustomed to it by now, but the air filtering throughout her sanctuary still tasted as artificial as it smelled. She felt the rather stale intake

race through her mouth and nostrils, hoping to reach the pair of black bags that kept her going for no real purpose.

Save for Clara.

The clean dose of oxygen reached her ashen lungs, then exited her mouth and nose in another laboured exhalation. Izzy imagined the polluted molecules warning the new wave of respiration about what corruption lay within her.

She looked to her right, locked eyes with the never-blinking Clara, and, with a look that said “Don't you dare move now”—she couldn't risk precious breaths on her roommate's deaf ears—began the arduous journey.

Izzy watched as she willed her right arm across the centimetres that felt like kilometres of bed. The feeble limb made pitiful progress before stopping entirely so she may regain what energy she could.

A surge of anger propelled her arm against the plastic sheet dividing her and Clara. Her hand slid down the thick material until it landed in the crevice between the sheet and edge of the bed. Using this newfound leverage, Izzy began pulling her weight with her right arm, while pushing against the mattress with her left. The juicy idea of giving up had crossed her mind, just as it had when her former severely fit self, besieged by physical and psychological cramps, had desired to slow her run to a crawl at the three-thousand-metre mark. Her conditioned lungs had burned then. Now they were volcanic.

But the agony and certain death would be worth it. Not only for herself, but Clara, who had never felt a pang in her endless life.

Izzy now found herself at a ninety-degree angle: the top half of her body sprawled laterally across the bed; the

bottom half remained affixed to where it had been since she embarked upon this suicide mission of sorts. After a quick mental team huddle with her barely-working parts, she used her right hand to push against the plastic sheet. The damn thing was like a wall of concrete. Her reluctant body threatened to pull the plug on the whole operation, but a little bit of that wholesome anger, and a lot of thinking about what would happen to Clara if she failed, helped free the bottom of the plastic sheet from between the mattresses. Izzy exhaled so deeply, the fog outside of her only window found its way to her eyes.

One breath.

Her vision slowly...

Two breaths.

...slowly...

Three breaths.

...returned.

She felt her old nemesis oxygen assisting her rushing blood to restore her vision. But she knew better; death had brushed past her.

*Move it*, she urged herself.

Izzy hadn't intended to escape by falling on her head, but as she shimmied herself closer... closer... closer, then over... over... over the edge of the bed, it seemed the only way. Her head free of the plastic sheet, the faint aroma of cooking bombarded her olfactory. She couldn't help but sacrifice a valuable breath to take in the recipe she had shared with her daughter long ago. *You're using too much garlic powder*, she thought, the seasoning burning her sinuses. But that was Isabelle: too much or too little of everything.

Her shoulders hanging over the edge of the bed, thinned blood rushing to her head, Izzy wondered—not for the first time—what Isabelle would think when the time came to trudge upstairs, check on her dying mother, and find her however she ended up. *Hopefully, with Clara in my arms*, she thought.

She wondered if her daughter would even care.

The pair of Izzy's had lived a life of few kisses and plenty of bites. Izzy had made the cliché attempts to live via her namesake (Isabelle's ankles were still intact, after all). Her daughter had indeed run; not on the track, but away from home, turning the typical one-off act of rebellion into a quarterly sport. When she was home, Isabelle would blame Izzy for all of her life's unwanted biographic details: the casting out of her father, the selfish act of naming her after herself (never mind the tradition), the reason for her isolating unattractiveness, the asthma and other varieties of respiratory ailments courtesy of her chain-smoking. That her only child had decided to punish her by never marrying, never having children, was not lost on Izzy. Still, when Izzy had become too ill to breathe on her own, it was Isabelle who rushed her to the hospital; and it was Isabelle who brought her home, tucked her into bed, and made sure the oxygen tent kept her alive.

But after seven days of intolerable confinement, seven days of embarrassing baths and changes, seven days of no words exchanged save for begrudged greetings and farewells, Izzy had decided that this foggy afternoon was the right time to free herself. And, if she could manage, Clara.

Beloved Clara.

She could no longer see her only friend, but knew she was right where she had left her. *I'm coming*, she thought, hoping the suffocating air out here wouldn't render her a liar.

Like in the old days, when slower competitors somehow cruised past her, good old-fashioned anger fuelled her cause, and she writhed her dangling body further over the edge of the bed like a fish out of water. *A fish that wants out of her damn bowl!* she goaded herself, and grew angrier at her handicap. The fingertips on her right hand touched something cold, hard. It took her a moment to realize she had touched the floor. Her left hand, still pushing against the bunched-up comforter, worked alone to send her over the rest of the way.

In the space of seconds, Izzy saw the ceiling, then her abdomen, then her legs, the latter two crashing down on her. Within the same seconds, she had felt emptiness beneath her, then the same cold, hard floor forcing itself into her neck and spine. Precious breaths were knocked out of her, and the fog returned, this time most certainly accompanied by death.

It took her a few moments to realize that death smelled an awful lot like garlic. A few more moments, and Izzy understood she hadn't died... and that her daughter wouldn't have heard a thing if she had. She remained alone. On the floor. Alive. For now.

Alive enough to save Clara.

Slowly, surely, Izzy wriggled away from the bed until her dumb legs hit the floor. Still, her daughter remained downstairs, oblivious, or willfully so. But in case obliviousness turned to awareness, Izzy needed to move

as quickly as her lame body would allow at this late stage in the race. *Last one-hundred metres*, she implored.

Since sitting herself up was impossible, she needed to figure out how to get Clara to come down to her level. *Could've just grabbed her, and brought her into the tent*, she scolded herself, *save yourself this stupidity*. But she knew it wouldn't have been fair to Clara, to have her lifelong companion go from breathing one brand of plastic air to another. No. She wanted Clara's first breath to be one-hundred-percent, certifiable oxygen... even if it was tinged with garlic.

Izzy flexed the fingers on her left hand, expecting to feel a break, akin to that long-ago ankle, that would prevent her from crossing *this* finish line. Everything felt in working order. Hand shaped like a spider, the fingers crawled along the floor until they found the nightstand's feet. They climbed past the bottom drawer, then the middle, then-

She stopped, having reached as high as she could go. She looked at the progress her hand had made, and was angered and disappointed to see the tips of her fingers so close to the top. So close to Clara.

No longer able to uphold itself, her arm fell to the floor for her daughter not to hear. Her shallow, disparate breathing became shallower, more disparate. The retinal fog grew thicker. And she was certain the last time she would see Clara was in the memories she had very limited time to relive:

Sneaking into her late mother's bedroom—this very same bedroom—to sneak a peek at Clara, high on her shelf.

Receiving Clara on the eve of her mother's passing—in this very same bedroom—on the condition that she pass Clara on to *her* daughter, should she have one, when her own end was near.

Asking Isabelle to take Clara off the shelf, and sit her on the nightstand; the plan to release Clara had been confirmed, all the more so by her daughter's routine sneer and remark: “Ugly thing.” Even had Isabelle loved Clara as much as she had, Izzy felt it her duty to finally free her.

*Come on, you useless cigarette-holder. Last fifty metres.*

Her nicotine-stained spider-hand rediscovered the nightstand's feet, and, once more, began its ascent.

Past the bottom drawer.

*Forty metres.*

Past the middle drawer.

*Thirty metres.*

Past the bottom of the top drawer.

*Twenty metres.*

Finding the top drawer's knob...

*Ten metres.*

...where it hung...

*Come on.*

...unwilling to move.

**COME ON!**

Her hand sprang back, the drawer with it. Sliding.

Sliding.

Sliding.

Until the heavy piece abruptly stopped, having reached its limit. The nightstand leaned slightly forward, and Izzy glimpsed her legacy as the dead meat filling of a floor-and-nightstand sandwich. But the nightstand had other

plans; before it settled back into place, it made sure to shake free the tall, glossy box.

The impact was painful, a sharp corner hitting her perfectly in the eye, but nothing compared to the torture her lungs were putting her through. Instead of fog, there was rain. Izzy blinked the burning tears away, bringing not the nightstand into focus, but a face.

And what a beautiful face it was. Skin made of meringue. A faint smile on pink lips barely formed. Rosy cheeks forever pinched into dimples. Black eyebrows arching over a pair of unblinking bejewelled eyes. Had they seen Izzy? *All* the Izzy's? From Grandma Izzy to this sorry-excuse-for-an-Izzy?

They stared at each other for some time, Izzy refusing to blink, like her little friend, lest she slip into death during one of those slivers of blackness. The smell of garlic was fading. She couldn't tell if her daughter was altering the recipe in some way, or if her senses were gradually shutting down.

*Last ten metres*, she thought. Perhaps her final thought.

Izzy used the left hand that made this final reunion possible to locate the pristine cardboard flap above Clara's head. Not with anger, but love, Izzy tore open the lid that had sealed the doll in her prison for three generations, and watched as Clara took in her first-ever breath of fresh air.

# We Can Stay

By Isaac Aday

Had someone—a wayfaring captain, perhaps, who had, in his aged arrogance, set out at that time of year before reading the newspapers—seen the outlines of two, tempest-tossed human figures strolling, hand in hand, along the icy banks of Lake Arrowhead, he might have, in his aged humility, rubbed his eyes to make sure he was seeing correctly. The weather had become too ferocious, too wretched, for gay walks as they seemed to be taking along the winding, frozen gravel. No desperation for the pink, flaky flesh of a trout, no desire for fresh scenery or the sweetly smell of pines, could keep two people—no matter how tempered or stuffed up with scarves and mittens—in weather so frigid and inhospitable. Indeed, had anyone, anyone at all, been there to witness them, they would assume madness, the supernatural, or perhaps, as is the custom in some such places, a little bit of both, with no backbreaking attempt at unity or coherence. It was the sort of thing that makes one wonder, against any religion or lack thereof, about the old tales of the “spirits of the lake”—something that might, in a moment, inspire or revive an old myth or legend, and peel a whole town’s eyes for black cats and mysterious strangers.

The reality of the matter, however, was far less fantastical than such an onlooker would imagine. Conner, the figure closer to the frigid edge of the lake—clad in an impossibly red overcoat—was no ghost or spirit. Indeed,

the only thing unnatural about him was his chronic and incurable idealism—and therefore, his tendency to make rash, foolish decisions while ignoring the possibility of disaster or disappointment. Such was the case when, five months prior, shirtless before his overheated computer, he had decided to make today—December 31<sup>st</sup>, a day before the new year—the day that he would find in his sanguineous heart the courage to propose to the object of his eternal affection. The cold would not matter, he thought: it would be a winter wonderland. Sleds, drawn by reindeer or caribou (whichever they had) would be available for rent; wide-eyed snow rabbits and bushy-tailed foxes would skitter past them as they flew through the trees to the shores of the enormous, flat lake that, as he now stood blister-footed and freezing before it, was not quite as magnificent as he had imagined.

For once, now, his idealism was failing him: the slow creep of despair, the woe of disappointment, had already grown roots in his heart, and was beginning to bud. Every hindrance—there had not been any sled, no critters, nothing, in fact, but bitter cold and cabin television—seemed now to bear its full force. Disappointments shed all illusive hope that they might have contained; all was replaced with an apathy as cold and hard as the gravel underfoot. There was no hope in his heart for anything good to come of this day—no possibility of a redemption that could allow him once more to find beauty in the oblong, peppermint sun or the rarefied, tasteless mountain air.

He risked a glance at Sarah, his beloved, who stared ahead, sharp-eyed, crimson-cheeked, and panting. And what did she think of this? What was it that pushed her

onwards with such vigor? There was little doubt, to his mind, that she was fueled by frustration and anger. He had, in his rash idealism, promised so much for her: not just sleds and critters, but sights and long, scenic hikes and skiing and handmade non-Nestle cocoa “with the little tiny marshmallows—not the big ugly ones.” And “it would not be too cold,” he assured her, “it will still be lovely enough for any outdoor activity.” God above, how much more could he have failed her? Was there any end to his ability to spew hot gaseous nonsense? He reflected, for a moment, upon how devastating a blow he had dealt her. She had risked the wrath of her boss for this trip. She had canceled a reunion with her brother, who was just now returning from his work abroad. How much difficulty had he posed for her, not just today as they walked stiff-legged onward through the cold, but for weeks and months to come? He slowed his pace such that they no longer walked in unison.

They stopped for a moment at a strip of railing to catch their breath. The wind, as if sympathizing with their plight, had died down for a moment, allowing for an eerie silence to spread across the wilderness. All time seemed, in that instant, to have stopped: the world, the spirits of nature, the animals, all seemed preoccupied with the moment that these two thoughtful humans were about to share—writhing, twisting in the tense anticipation of the first words to be spoken.

“We ought to call it a day and return,” Conner said the moment he had caught his breath.

“But we can stay, can’t we? It is not that cold, really. And we have sweaters and jackets—really, it doesn’t bother me at all. And the lake is so—”

“But why, my dear, why do you insist? You can’t tell me that you enjoy this freezing air,” he cried in foggy desperation, “What is the point?”

“What is the point?” he said, this time to under his breath. He looked across the lake, shook his head and shrunk deeper into the recesses of his puffy, red jacket. His gloved fingertips nervously twiddled the box of the ring within his coat pocket, testing the sprung mechanism of the hinge by closing it on his finger. “We may as well wait a bit for trips like these, my dear—wait until spring, perhaps, when it is warmer. It was foolish for me to plan everything in winter. It’s all vain, isn’t it, trying to enjoy ourselves out here? I am sorry for all of this. For all of the troubles I’ve caused.”

“But it doesn’t bother me, really,” she tried again, something tight and strained in her airy words, “It is fine with me, really all fine with me. I like the cold, really. I think now is a great time, a wonderful time.”

“It must be below zero, dear—this is not weather for humans.”

“But I really think it’s fine. It is not too unbearable when we are walking and keeping busy, is it?”

“Still you persist?” he laughed in disbelief, “You think I can’t tell that you are eaten up from the cold right now?” He held her mitten-clad hand and stroked it. “You’re positively shaking—can you still feel the tips of your fingers? You are being so silly, my dear—so foolish, such a—”

He stopped with an abrupt half-utterance. It was her eyes—her expression that silenced him. There was something in them. Something so trace—so insignificant—that he might have lost it had he not been

bewildered by her strange willingness to stay in the cold. It was—oh what was it? An embarrassment of sorts, perhaps—but not as though she had done something shameful. No, it was something more like the embarrassment of being greatly complimented—the embarrassment, moreover, of being caught doing something immensely good and praiseworthy. But there was more, too—a sense of childish expectance that one might see painted across the face of a gap-toothed toddler at play. And yet also nervous anticipation—a heartbeat one could feel in their tightened throat, quickened and hard and painful. Glee and hope and hesitation and excitement and fear—all wrapped up in the same, gentle, panicked, hesitant expression as if to say “look—no, don’t look” and yet also “I desire” and still yet “I cannot—I should not!”

“You know, don’t you?” he said, at first in a whisper, and then again to ensure he was heard.

Hearing this she broke his gaze and stared ahead into the gray, sunlit glare of the frozen lake. Her pale complexion glowed, and her lip, from cold or excitement, quivered and trembled.

“You know, don’t—”

“Of course I know,” she muttered, risking a short, momentary glance at his imploring eyes.

“Everything?”

She nodded, still facing away.

“Who told you?”

“I figured,” she turned still further away, such that he was behind her.

“But how? I was so—” Conner began, but foundered. “I mean—” he tried again, and failed once more. Sarah

too, he could see, was trying to come up with something to push the sticky moment onward—to remedy the unnatural silence between them. Three times, he counted, she took a breath as if to say something, but no words followed.

“I have to admit,” he said at last with a short sigh, “I was really looking forward to it all being a surprise. I suppose I am not so good at these sorts of things as I might fancy myself to be.”

Sarah remained silent, still facing away.

“I mean—I am sorry that this was all how it turned out. None of this was what I had imagined in the slightest,” he said, this time with further contrition and tenderness, “I am sorry that I put you through all of this trouble—dragged you out here for, for what? Nothing. Nothing at all. Disappointment at every corner and failed expectations. A dull, frozen lake and some frozen gravel.”

Still, she did not turn to meet his gaze.

“Will you at least face me, Sarah?”

And then, she did. And once more her eyes said everything that her words could not. The ends of her eyelashes had little flecks of white snow dangling on their soft, splintery edges; unfrozen tears, no doubt stinging in her aching, wind-dried eyes, stuck to her rosy cheeks like cherubs. All childish mirth that had existed just a moment prior had faded, as she, unable to meet his gaze for more than a quick glance, began to speak in muffled murmurs:

“I am sorry,” she said, her voice rapidly losing its clarity, “I didn’t want to spoil it all. I didn’t mean to ruin it. I wanted to act surprised—I know how much this all meant to you. After all that work that you went through—

”

She turned away once again, unable to finish.

“Sarah, Sarah, love,” Conner whispered in desperate, pleading tones, drawing near to her and taking hold of her arms with gentle affection, “You’ve ruined nothing—nothing is lost, nothing at all. Why do you say such things? Why do you believe them?”

She pushed him away, her eyes squinting, and let out one singular, brief, agonized sob.

“I’m sorry,” she said once more.

“But you have nothing to be sorry for, my love—nothing at all!” he said, taking up a strand of her cool hair, “I was the one who made this awful trip. I was the one who set this all up. I was the one who was so obvious in my intentions! I’ve always been the idiot between us, dear—don’t try to change this on me, or I might get confused.”

A brief, half-smile shone on her face, but quickly dissolved.

That smile—that single, flashing second—had quite the effect on him then. What was it, he thought in a galloping moment, about a smile in the midst of sorrow that was so representative of “this all?” Life itself, this same moment in his brain was still speaking, was such a smile—a moment where a flicker of joy might intercede in the despair, and we might forget the cold and all of our disappointments for just a moment, a brief moment. Something in his heart seemed, now, to sputter to life like an old, rusted, freezing engine remembering again that it could run. In another, quick moment, it had kicked off the buds of despair and apathy that, just a minute prior, seemed to have choked all sensation from his numbed body. And where once existed his natural and incurable

idealism, now lay an idealism still stupider, still more foolish and excited, than it had ever been.

“My dear!” he cried, stepping back, “Can’t you see it? All can still be redeemed!”

He flung out his arms and turned his head upward.

“All of this, Sarah—all of these failures, can be our story, can’t they? All of those disappointments—all of those failed promises. My dear, if you can say yes to me today, you can say yes to a lifetime of my failures. And I promise that this will be the case! I will let you down a hundred times—a million times a day, I can assure you! I will fail in every way possible to fail. I will disappoint you in every way I am able—all without even the slightest effort, just as I have done today.”

She looked on from the corner of her eye as he fell backwards into a bank of snow.

“My dear,” he laughed as he lied there, “My dear, it’s all *us*, don’t you see? This snow,” he held some up, “this freezing cold. We can remember this our whole lives as the beginning of everything! The beginning of a lifetime of disappointment that I will bring you. Of all of the imperfections and troubles that life with me will bring.”

“You don’t disappoint me.”

“*Let* me disappoint you, dear—please allow me to.”

He stood up at once, as though he were in a great, nervous hurry.

“And this,” he retrieved the ring from his coat pocket, “We can remember this always as a reminder of the fact that, despite all of this—despite everything—you said yes. That you were willing, after all of my failures, after all of these disappointments, to put up with me. Will you, my love? Will you accept?”

# The Pinching Bench

By Michael Aliprandini

Notnitz accepted a teaching contract in Russia in order to nestle for a year in the loins from which Russian literature had sprung. He'd dabbled in the language at university, but the verbs of motion had bedeviled him so that he let it lapse, his hope of reading Dostoyevsky and his compatriots in the original. The knock-on effect was a biblical increase in his respect for the translator's art-craft.

After a couple of months in St. Petersburg, just when he'd started feeling less perplexed by the strangeness of Russia, a student of his, a young accountant for a Dutch firm, invited him for a stroll around Pavlovsk. The invitation surprised him. Vika had given no indication of enjoying his company or his lessons, and she was wont to refuse his advice for improving her English. He'd done his best to drill into her that she should answer the phone with "This is Vika Nemetsky," or "Vika Nemetsky speaking," but she insisted on "I am Vika Nemetsky. Listening you." He'd tried to explain that her way made her sound like a cave-woman, which explanation climaxed with a performance that owed rather much to his recent viewing of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Yet here they were on a crowded suburban train, across from each other on wooden seats, rattling out of the city. She leaned over and tweezed the green canvas of his rucksack. He'd found it in the closet of his Khrushchev-era rental apartment and had thought it unique, vintage, once it had been dusted and aired. "Bad! Soviet!" *Soviet*

she'd said in vehement undertones, as if the word were a curse that would befoul even the foulest sensibility. Eardrums taut like sensitive sails, ready for a secret hearing, Notnitz started asking Vika to elaborate, only for her to whisper that it would be better if people didn't hear them speak English. So he took out his notebook to scrawl some notes. She made him feel gauche, as if every word he said, every movement he made, was said or made with a really botched accent; yet he was grateful for her opinions, not least because he'd had little success befriending everyday Russians. On this outing, she was to be the teacher and he the caveman, and how he relished this passage from the unfamiliar to...well, at least to a state in which he made fewer duncie moves. The gentle irritation of the passage—a scratching, a tweezing of his sensibilities—generally signaled that he was on the verge of a native insight, an amorous yoking of experience, study, and understanding.

The park was just outside the city and boasted a triumphantly restored palace and extensive grounds. Notnitz was more interested in exploring the surrounding woods. While Vika had wanted him to visit the palace and didn't like walking, she let her guest decide, albeit with a dour look, as if her problems were just beginning. Which they were.

The early Autumn weather was graceful, caressing, a billowy warmth before the chill. Dirt paths traversed a tediously flat landscape. Notnitz preferred mountains rising from out of the less descript; still, the mixed-leaf forest was a tonic of clean air and green, in contrast to the air of St. Petersburg that had industrialized his throat.

They came across a kerchiefed woman who recalled

those sturdy middle-aged women he saw in the city hauling buckets of cement on construction sites, here translated to her quondam peasant glory. She was wading through the high grass and ferns just off the path, parting the undergrowth with a gnarled stick and laying mushrooms atop ferns in a bulrush basket. Notnitz greeted the woman with a word that in Russian is long and difficult to pronounce: the formal *hello*. The woman looked up from the forest floor but didn't look at Notnitz or at Vika, who had by now caught up. The woman, trembling, gathered herself in. It was as if he could see into the workings of her mind. Should she try passing for a tree or simply lower herself into the ferns and wait for the foreign threat to vanish? From inside her invisible cage, she returned the greeting in a ghostly whisper.

Vika hurried Notnitz along the path. Once they were clear of the woman, she remonstrated with him that in Russia one does not address strangers! She then stormed into the lead, for who knew what scandals he might provoke if left unchaperoned. He decided to try lightening the mood by warbling the little chant that he'd matured for just such episodes of cross-cultural embarrassment, of which there'd been plenty since he'd moved abroad some years before. "Bar-bar-bar. I am barbarian!" To which he added: "Listening you..." Vika ignored him, dabbing at her face and neck with a fastidiousness that implied modern Russian women weren't supposed to show sweat.

They came to a bench in the shade of a linden tree, and there they sat. Pinch! The slats of the bench were loose and two slats periodically shifted beneath him, pinching Notnitz's bottom. Each time he would look at Vika to

figure out whether she was being similarly violated and how they might give each other to understand what the handsy bench was up to—in their respective languages but also across their respective cultures. She looked unperturbed, cultishly dragging on another Winston XStyle, so he laid out black bread, humdrum cheese, fruit and nuts, and offered that she join him. After eating the light repast alone, he took out a slim volume from the rucksack and declared his intention to read some poetry aloud. He selected a poem at random and began: “Into the face of the frost I stare alone—/It is going nowhere, from nowhere I come—” She leaned forward to look at the book cover, stoppered her ears, and let out a shriek. Notnitz didn’t get on well with hyperbole, but the sound she emitted could not masquerade under any lesser descriptor. It was a shriek, first wordless then lexicalized: “*Кошмар! Ужасно!*” (“It is a nightmare! It is horrifying!”) Then more pleadingly yet still pained: “Mandelstam in English! *Кошмар!*”

Notnitz shifted his weight—pinch!—and closed the book. He was desperate to ask what, if anything, the bench was doing to her bottom and was prepared, if need be, to perform a reenactment of what it was doing to his. But the day had been rich in insight already and he thought twice about traumatizing Vika any further. From that moment, she spoke not another word of English to him, instead using one of those bedeviling verbs of motion to let him understand that they were turning back.

Upon alighting at Vitebsky Station, Vika pushed into the thick, soupy crowds. He would have liked to stand on a crate and greet each and every traveler, but alas, she was hurrying, dodging, and he too had to hurry and dodge. He

trailed her into the Pushkinskaya metro station and boarded her carriage even though she was heading south rather than north. “Bar-bar-bar. I am barbarian!” he lobbed at her the whole while, thinking that in notable ways, this was him finding his voice.

She notched her svelte frame into a seat between two buzzcut compatriots whose biceps had the girth and presumably the squeeze of green anacondas. The three of them glowered at him as if the scene had been coordinated in advance. Surely he wasn’t a physical threat. Was he then a cultural threat? The Juggernautnitz! Or if not a threat then at least a stimulating irritation. He fell silent and let the sloppiest grin smother his face.

He never saw Vika again. After she cancelled their lessons the following week and requested a different teacher, Notnitz’s schedule changed from mornings with the accounting department to afternoons and evenings with the engineering department. He would have liked her to understand how much she irritated him throughout his stay in Russia and afterwards as well. At times he corresponded with her in his notebook-head:

*Nemetsky! Listen!*

*Greet strangers, greet them kindly. Greet them so that translations can follow.*

*Would you condemn me to a life without Dostoyevsky, without Mandelshtam, without hundreds of others who didn’t or don’t write in English? What’s more, would you condemn me to a day in the woods without insight, an idiot bundled in his private idiocies? Кошмар! Ужасно! No, my place is forever on the imperfect roads. Let these journeys open on labyrinths and hiding places.*

*By the way... Скамейка все еще щиплет мой ягодицы. И твоей тоже? (The bench is still pinching my bottom. Is it pinching*

*yours, too?)*

*Yours sincerely,*

*J. Notnitz*

# His Wife's Nipples

By Phyllis Carol Agins

Right after she died, Doug waited for signs from his wife. During her last weeks, he had begged Barbara to visit from the other side. He'd read about the nineteenth-century bereaved who consulted the not-to-be-missed mediums and begged those spiritualists for news. They, alone, promised direct connections to the other world. The widowed of that day, dressed in their black silks, with their black crepe veils or their black armbands wrapped around black topcoats, lined up for magic and proof. They attended the trance-fixed medium who ferried the very dead from one side to the other. But his wife had always refused to travel by his side after life ended. In fact, she pledged the opposite.

"You're still a young man," she had said between heavy breaths. "Barely sixty. Still attract the ladies."

"I don't want the ladies," he had answered.

"No," Barbara insisted. "You need just one."

"I can't simply cut out your face and paste another woman's in the picture." He had cried into her shoulder, wetting the bandage over the port above her heart, that direct line that was supposed to make chemo easier. "Promise you'll find a way to come back."

"No." As she would answer a child. "I won't tease you with fantasies. You're on your own, kiddo. No messages from the dead. And the future before you. Take it. You promise me." She had grabbed his hand tightly, squeezing until he could count her bones and tangled sinews. Until his own hand had whitened and his eyes filled with more

tears. "Promise," she whispered.

And so he had. After she slept deep in her coma. After he'd chosen her box and their plot, reserving the side by hers so their daughter would tuck them into this eternal double bed together, no bigger than the one they'd bounded on in college during those first days.

Doug knew Barbara would keep her deathbed pledge and stay away, just as she always had kept all her promises. He would pause though. When leaves trembled on a favorite plant; when the scent of her perfume spilled into a room; when he turned in the direction of a noise that had no source. Once, the skin on his arms prickled, and sweat collected in the small of his back. But that turned out to be the flu that he nursed alone in their bed, Barbara's favorite quilt covered now by old newspapers and used tissues. At times, he'd call out her name, but there was always the silence. So he learned to turn on the TV each morning just to have some voices around him, filling the constant emptiness.

And he repeated the promise for years, while he trolled the dating sites for women just as surprised as he was at being single in later life, although everyone surely knew by then that nothing lasted forever. Or perhaps some of them were happy to be alone, he would think, having jettisoned decades of bad news and abandonment. Or infidelity and other forms of betrayal like money moved and stocks sold without discussion. Or decades of suffering with a spouse's fondness for drugs or alcohol that became more pleasurable than sex. But perhaps some, like him, might still search for lost love.

Over the years he'd hopscotched from one dating site to another, hoping the right woman could be found in the

newest collection. Sometimes the faces were of the same women he'd seen for years, with a new photo here or there, new details filled in. Perhaps with another failed marriage to confess. *How we must need love*, he thought.

Then, almost a decade later, his own cancer found him. Of the lungs, even though he'd stopped smoking years earlier. Finally, he decided. He wouldn't fight. Not take those pills or join the radiation waiting room. In death, he would find Barbara again.

At her grave, he announced his decision. "Remember when we were trying to decide on graduate school? Somewhere so we could be close, and we both wound up in New York. My NYU to your Columbia. Six months in the grad dorms until we moved in together. Remember how shocked the parents were? Your father called you a single, married woman. Your mother asked if you needed help getting protection. Early sixties before the Revolution. Or maybe the seventies by then...I can't remember anymore. And you're not here to correct me.

"Remember how shy you were when we were first naked together? How you called your skin your birthday suit. How I loved your peaks and folds. And those glorious breasts, even though your nipples drove you crazy, always announcing you'd entered a room first before the rest of you caught up. And we'd laugh at that. Before the disease took it all away and you were shy again with the scars and the emptiness.

"But it doesn't matter, does it? Because I'm crossing soon and we'll be able to chat soul to soul like always. Get ready, sweetheart, I'm coming." He was happier at that moment than he'd been in years.

But six months later, after the doctors and his daughter insisted that he could win, after he did the radiation and a short course of chemicals, the professionals declared that he was cured. They were sure of it. And Doug could admit to himself that he really hadn't liked the idea of giving in.

Cured. Suddenly, he was optimistic. At last, he was ready to find someone to love.

His daughter Johanna, who was looking for a mate as well, was skeptical. "How many women has it been, Dad, in these last years? A hundred? Two hundred? And not one has suited you?"

"You're just angry that the men you meet are the shitty ones," he answered.

"I'm looking at this from a female point of view. Forget that I'm your daughter."

"Can't—you look just like me," he answered.

"If I looked like Mom, you'd probably have even more trouble getting over her." Johanna thought for a moment. "It's like men of all generations don't know how to fall in love anymore."

"I fall in love all the time."

"But you don't stay in love. What's the best record—three months before you discover some little thing that you absolutely cannot accept. You don't even discuss the tragic flaw with the poor woman. You just dump her."

"I do it nicely," Doug insisted. "Kindly."

"Sure," Johanna answered. "They ask what's wrong and you tell them that you don't like the way they kiss."

"That's not like saying I don't trust them, or they aren't smart enough."

"But kissing is something you can fix," Johanna yelled.

“It’s a stupid, small thing. You’re just making excuses.”

He really didn’t want to ask. “For what?”

“For running away. For denying affection. For not doing what Mom said.”

“You’re siding with the women,” he threw at her.

“That’s exactly right.” Johanna picked up her coat. “I’ve got the love-killers all around me.”

With his cancer-defying will to live, Doug studied the online profiles. He looked up more women, started more conversations, scheduled more lunch dates, engaged in more first kisses, more first lovemaking, even if that attraction lasted a few weeks at most. As though that part of him that made him face each day after he lost Barbara, that forced him to keep breathing, keep taking his pills, keep showing up for doctors’ appointments, would not let him acquiesce.

Soon he would be seventy. The number was terrifying, exhilarating, challenging. Maybe his Barbara had been right. Maybe love was the answer. More, he was determined to prove Johanna wrong.

Then on his birthday, after ten years without her, Barbara suddenly returned. Doug saw his wife everywhere. Walking down the street or just in front of their house. Turning her head toward him at a fall festival so he glimpsed her profile. Or tossing her beautiful hair at him because he was laughing and she wanted to join in. His brain accepted that she’d long deserted him, moved on to that higher plane religious people always promised, or maybe toward that white light the almost dead might describe. Hadn’t she, one night when she nearly died?

“It was a long tunnel, Doug, I swear it. White and bright. And at the end a burning, pure light that I was floating toward. I saw my grandmother. I was always her favorite although I wasn’t supposed to know it. She was there to guide me, I’m sure of it. And I know she’ll be back.”

“She did love you” was all he could manage, watching the heart monitor and waiting for the next time the blood pressure cuff filled with air.

“It was beautiful.” She looked at him in a way she hadn’t since the diagnosis. Without shame, sorrow, or pity. “I’m not afraid anymore,” she whispered.

She had changed after that. Like someone discovering at last the role she was to play. She was Camille, Beth March, Melanie Wilkes, any and all who died in books or movies or operas with epic beauty and grace.

After all those years, she was back. Doug followed her down the street. Into cafés and travel agencies. Past billboard portraits that looked like her, staring down at him with her knowing eyes. A woman on a TV soap turned to her lover in bed, the swell of her chest like Barbara’s before the operations took everything away. The softness and the nipples that she couldn’t quiet behind silk or cashmere. Perfect for babies or husbands. Identifying her as the passionate woman she was. Perhaps if he had discovered another with nipples like hers, he sometimes told himself, he could have loved again. Deeply and forever.

But Doug knew. She was haunting him because he never fulfilled his promise. Because he’d thrown away the years and was now an old man. The cancer had gone, but he owned burdened lungs that wheezed and protested

whenever he climbed stairs. That hurt when winter's air entered them as if screaming: *That's enough.*

And Barbara was unrelenting in her haunting. He couldn't tell Johanna. Not even his best friend, Irv, who played cards with him on Friday nights, who screamed at him when he started to smoke again.

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" Irv would snatch away the package. Grab the butt from Doug's fingers.

"I want it to end," Doug admitted, breaking down. "I don't want to do this life thing anymore."

"Not for you to decide," Irv said. "At least pity the rest of us who have to breathe that stuff."

As if willing himself to go, Doug stopped eating. Stopped going outside. Only watched Barbara move around the house, silent and smiling. She was there leaning on the TV when the heart attack came. She was in the ambulance as it carried him to the ER. Actually held his hand between her breasts, a warm but somber look behind her eyes.

The attendants were busy administering oxygen, cuffing his arm. But the pain throbbing in his chest felt like a gift.

She was there in his room when Johanna came, eyes teary.

"Nothing lasts forever," he told his daughter what he knew.

"You're making me an orphan."

"Don't give up," he extracted the promise. "Find someone to love. Promise us you won't give up."

"I promise," Johanna whispered.

Barbara waited in the darkened room, in the low florescent lights, in the blues and reds of signals and signs. She was nude, her body young, untouched by time. By disease. As it had been that first night when she revealed herself. Full, voluptuous, young, healthy.

Doug sighed through the oxygen. He felt his lungs expand again. He knew she would lead the way.

In that hospital room, his wife laughed silently and cupped her rounded breasts. Her nipples, proud and protruding, pointed upward as if to heaven.

# The Bard of Frogtown

By Allison Whittenberg

Like most writers I am full of shit.

Sometimes I look at the piles and piles of half started prose and think, "Got a match?"

And then, I think, I'll write a poem. Poems save paper.

So all of a sudden I am a poet. Yet, I still have nothing to say.

Write, writer, write! Goddamn it, write you fucking idiot. Asshole, hole in the ass. Craphead. Son of a bitch!

Hey!

What?

Don't get personal.

By the way, my real father, yes, the one I have never seen in my life, is a goddamn poet. My mother still gets an occasional sestina through the mail from his as yet to be published chapbook entitled, The Part of Me that No One Knows.

Tell me about it.

Yet as a poet, I just don't feel like I am any good.

When I was younger I used to read my stuff with a sense of accomplishment. Now I just cringe. After work I come home and try to get busy on something good and it turns on trite, banal, and unkempt.

Children are natural artists then they get old and they dry up. I am 19 now. And as I keep saying I have nothing to say.

I've lived with Debra for the past four years.

When I left home it was like a funeral except no one had died. I was so sad. I cried once I hit the main drag.

Big tears, buckets of them.

I was fifteen, when Debra and I found our own place.

We moved from a little town to a big city. From West to East while still staying North. We live in rough and tumble Frogtown. In Frogtown, us people sell crafts, they line the drags with their handmanufactured baskets, pottery, metal works, and textiles.

She is a little bit older than me and helped me out a great deal. Not just with the security deposit but she listen to me hash out about my childhood. Long nights we spent therapeutically bottle and blunt passing till I got it all out, the words I realized now that not only do I hate my stepfather, but I also resent my younger brother, and that my mother is a continual source of frustration.

With all that memesized and catharsis size, I should crack open like an egg. I should have plenty to write about. I should look at a blank piece of paper and fill it.

I wash airplanes for a living.

Somebody has to.

I wake up at five in the AM and go down to the airport and scrub the thick plastic windows with a long handled brush. I have always loved planes, always dreamed of floating above things. Tempting God with man made angel wings.

When I got home this afternoon, Debra was in broken-in jeans, a teal tee shirt and the familiar fawn colored leather jacket. She wears all of this indoors because we have limited heat. Sometimes the walls get frost-covered

Still, Debra is a diligent writer. She does songs. I walk in an she is holding the guitar pick between her teeth as she scribbles notes on a page. She flicks her head back an

winks at me. She is a winker. Always winking, an I think just who in the hell wears the pants in this relationship.

She does.

Debra loves bits of clutter: Books and papers and hankies that she blew her nose on. I can't stand it.

Often I just want to tidy up but dare I take liberties with her, her, her -- well, I suppose genius is as good a word as any.

But perhaps it's still not the right one.

A few months ago, Debra sold one of her songs to a big deal Cosmopolitan company. She got 500 dollars outright. We had steak for a week. That's the problem with being a Zoe and dealing with the Cosmos everything you sell is sold outright and haven't us Blacks have given enough away.

They have stolen our land, our women, now our music.

The name of the song was, "A White Sleeve of Moonlight." And when Debra sang it felt Black. It was textual and lilting yet bodacious as cowboys. She used steel strings instead of the Cosmopolitan twinkling of a piano. I heard the Cosmo version on the radio and I almost kept passing the dial. It was a totally different song, and a corny one at that.

Oh Debra... She was the sanctuary from my problems I forgot she had so many of her own. She was like an regular Zoe with a family tree that tangled at the root. I could never get it straight but I knew she was the half sister of the dead Rice Street Man. The Rice Street Man that my brother, Jak, was so enamored with. The Rice Street Man that smelled worse than his dog. And as if that weren't bad enough, quite a few of Debra's short on dollars, long in the tooth relatives used to stay over

temporarily for months and months. And poor little Deb was treated like she was invisible. She was forced into disappearing to create a room.

She used to have to give up her bedroom and sleep on the couch. It was then that she learned to play that funky old guitar that she'd found in a dumpster. At night while all the live-ins were raising Hell she'd mouth the words, practice fingering, playing without sound.

Just another blond haired girl, in a country that overflowed with them.

So unprettied up, you could take her for granted. I have never seen her in a dress but then again she's never seen me in one either. I like to use her life in my writing even more than I like to use my life in my writing.

Writers are the worst type of people God ever put on this earth. They note the way the dirt falls on a casket of a dear friend because they know they can use it later.

It is always my writing, my writing, my writing. The whole fucking world revolves around my writing.

I want to write a poem.

Lovers make the worst critics, so why do I always ask my Debra?

I show her my words few and she says, "I don't know it sort of sticks in my throat."

I snatches the paper back from her and tell her that she was supposed to fucking read it not fucking eat it.

She laughs at me. She laughs at me. She throws her lovable head back and laughs at me.

I read my work aloud:

Salt without bread.

Thorns on a cactus.

Buddy Holly, I miss you.

Why didn't you go Greyhound?

I smile, puffing my chest out. Sure, it needs some revision but its not all bad. The images are clear and concrete. The sound and rhythm may need some spit and polish.

All right, it sucks.

It bites the big wiener.

But at least it has punctuation and it does not employ the lowercase "i".

I want to be Langston Hughes.

Enough of these meditations. These scream fests on the mysteries of freedom, love, and hate.

I want to be remembered.

I know I am not a great writer I am only a great re writer. Half the time there is nothing pithy in the first draft. Half the time I don't know where its going its all improved. I don't have a style or tone that I wish to effect. I feel like screaming at myself where is my theme?

Where is my message? Why am writing this poem in the first place.

I will switch back to prose.

Inside every fiction writer there is a failed poet.

Metaphors, like my heart is dry like a big red balloon, are inflated but then I think all right so where do I go from there?

I break for supper. Debra fixed homemade pizza pie with marmot meat and shrooms as topping. I down a few pizza slices and drop the crust. She's not a bad cook, but I'm a little better, I measure, I do not gestamate so much. She has a great smile, nothing but teeth. Big teeth and squinchy eyes. I enjoy this time a couple of low rent artists eating pizza off a white plate with blue trim. She asks me

about the planes and I tell her quite recently they had entrusted me with an unbelievable amount of keys.

“How many is too many to believe?”

“37.”

“Unbelievable,” she winks at me. “Now don’t fly off with the place.”

I stand and she makes a grab for my butt, smiling, “Off to do more writing?” she asked.

“That’s a good question,” I answer.

After our meal she washes the dishes and I take my compositions to the bedroom.

In this next expanse of time, I had done everything to write. I drew a bath, drank some murk, splashed cold water in my ears, danced the bop, the bump, the butterfly, the electric slide, the four corners, the icky shuffle, the mashed potato, the shingling, the worm. I felt refreshed, but still no words.

So I light up and dream, I was make love to Debra only she has thick black hair and the wind blows and exposed her blond roots. Her eyeliner ran down her cheeks like fast graffiti. Those long full breasts had shrunk to teacups.

I dream of white food as symbolism. Rice pudding and glazed doughnuts.

SPACE. Time and space. Time sitting, smoking in the numb silence, watching the snow, as if it were doing something wild, like disappearing instead of the same old same old. I press my face against the pane and gaze at the wide, white city below.

Winter. Heavy snowstorms at the floodgates bringing up a whirlpool of memories. Snowing as marvelous as sugar — pink and white candy coated Christmas.

Debra, her bland blue eyes told of a fairy tale of cabbage and rye toast. Toy soldiers. Debra vouting a rendition of “White Christmas”. I start singing along real low and soft you’d have to read my kisser to tell.

Wilting.

The soundtrack mixes over and over.

“Are you gonna share or is a contact high all that I can hope for?” is the question that wakes me.

Debra stands by the doorway, 25 years old, and wasting her time on me. I’m just an adult child still so full of dream. Unable to achieve any synthesis.

I roll a herb her way.

Sometimes it’s better not to force it I think as my ram road is in her and I’m frictioning her. Sometimes it’s better to distill in the hope of further cross fertilization.

I do have a beginning of something:

Snow like sweat  
or smoke, like mercury,  
rising above itself  
in a cloud.

# Piping Plover

By John Tavares

I came to believe Anders never truly loved a woman, or a man, for that matter, but he loved the piping plover. He would die or kill for his beloved endangered species. He showed me a faded, aged video of the piping plover, chirping, and complaining on the lakeshore, the sandy beach along Hanlan's Point on the Toronto Islands. I helped him, virtually a computer illiterate, upload the video, duplicated from his original Betamax videotape, from his university research database to his smartphone. I thought the bird, with patches of grey, was slightly bizarre, rather ugly and unphotogenic, a squat, jerky creature, the size of a sparrow, overrated. I couldn't believe Anders had devoted his personal life and academic career to learning the intimate habits, nature, and essence of this rare bird. What, I thought, if the piping plover did go extinct—would the world truly be a worse place? At an intellectual and moral level, I realize I am wrong in the grand scheme of things, but, in practical terms, which was how I lived my life and survived from day-to-day, I couldn't see what difference the rare bird's existence made to the world.

In any event, I served Anders in the coffee shop, The Campus Circus Café & Gourmet Diner, his favorite café in Bloor Street West, not far from his house on Brunswick Street, where he lived alone. I thought he was a fortunate man to own and live in a house in the fine midtown area of Toronto, but he had been a tenured professor at the university and the cosmopolitan

metropolis was his hometown. His career, while sounding rather boring, was a success, even, if, say, he didn't have a spouse and children. In fact, he hardly ever mentioned any family to me, except in the context of an alcoholic sibling, who passed prematurely, and estrangement. I couldn't see how a woman would be so interested in loving and living with someone who devoted his life to the piping plover, but I am a woman who loves people and urban adventure; I'm not an enthusiast of the outdoors and nature.

At the café, I always enlivened his evenings with my conversation, liveliness, enthusiasm, vivaciousness, and a bubbly personality—or this was how he described me. I possessed the endearing and fundamental features and qualities of a woman he had been indoctrinated to dislike, he joked, as an academic, a biologist, a zoologist, an ornithologist, specializing in the piping plover. Even though he retired several years ago, those research efforts, the field work, and academic activities seemed to have occurred as long ago as a lifetime. Although he was a leading expert on the piping plover, he felt as if he had forgotten his academic papers, published in academic journals, and research papers, full of statistics, annotations, and footnotes, which I saw at his house, stacked in his home office, and even the university campus, when we dropped by the library and his former departmental office, which we visited at night, on the sly, with his old keys, which still fit the locks, and online when I happened to Google his name out of curiosity.

Anders started to blame his memory losses and the disappearance of a large bank of memory due to potentially premature dementia. He simply could not be

certain, he said, whenever he spoke with me, at the Campus Circus Café & Gourmet Diner, located near the University of Toronto campus. He felt he could not deny he had experienced memory and cognitive decline. He also expressed worry about hand tremors, the twitching of his eyes, grimacing. Now he spent most of his free time on researching investments, as he built up a stock portfolio, moving away from bank savings accounts, with term deposits, and guaranteed investment certificates into riskier assets, technology stocks.

Meanwhile, he drank the finest coffee ever brewed, he said, alongside his favorite barista of all time, whom he tipped generously. I flirted with him, joked with him, laughed at his nerdy, geeky jokes. Meanwhile, I pondered how even he managed to remain single after all these years. Of course, I managed to provide myself with a ready-made answer; he was a leading expert on the nearly extinct and endangered species, the Piping Plover. Still, he reminded me he felt he had practically forgotten everything he had learned, remembered, discovered, and taught as a wildlife biologist and ornithologist. He blamed what he joked was senescence and potentially some form of premature dementia, or cognitive decline, memory disorder, or psychological disorder, although it was interesting to note his ability to learn, I surmised, hadn't been impacted as he continued with passion and conviction to invest in the stock market.

So, I dismissed his concerns about memory loss, especially when he went overboard and bought with whatever cash he had available, declining stocks during a bear market, which then quickly rebounded, so that his paper profits were considerable. He seemed to be

thinking straight; in fact, he struck me as still sharper than many of the academic types who dropped by the café and diner I knew. I said I thought if he could learn new subjects, then he probably wasn't suffering from any form of dementia, but some psychosomatic phenomenon. "I majored in psychology," I said, although I didn't add that I dropped out because I couldn't afford tuition. I enjoyed the study of psychology and I enjoyed the active social life, being popular among young men, in residence, because I was outgoing and had a womanly figure, but I wasn't as smart as some of my friends—I didn't have their sharp memories—beautiful people who could socialize and party and then sit down to write a complicated multiple-choice exam and score in the ninety percent range.

I invited him to dinner at the apartment I shared with my boyfriend, who worked in investment and portfolio management for a public schoolteachers' pension fund. I needed to be secretive about the invitation and dinner date, though. I told him not to tell anyone because if he found out he would kill me.

"Lynn, why are you with someone who will kill you for being with another man?"

"Because it's the flaw in our society, it's manly thing—because even in Toronto, even in Canada, in contemporary times, it's what expected of boyfriends, to be overprotective of their girlfriends."

"And you have no problem with it?"

I didn't explain how much I was in love with the man, despite his nagging jealousy and recurring bouts of simmering anger and paranoia, which boiled over into rages, during which he burst into violence and started

breaking furniture, ripping, tearing, and cutting my clothes, and even spitting in my face, and hitting me and choking me. I didn't want to burden him with my personal problems, my insane loves and passions; I didn't want to explain I didn't think I could afford to live in my own apartment. I was tired of renting basement or attic rooms from friends of friends or hard-working families, who didn't speak English as a first language, good hard-working people with conservative lifestyles and cultural notions of privacy imported from overseas. Instead, I glossed over my own personal problems, even though I believe I had attained a certain level of intimacy with Anders.

“It's the price you pay, if you want to keep the boyfriend who let's you live in his big expensive apartment downtown for free.”

“You could live with me. It's a big enough house, with three bedrooms, one I converted into an office.”

“You'd let me live with you?”

“I wouldn't have made the invitation, if I wasn't serious.”

“If he starts slapping me around again, I just might.”

“What?”

He was extremely disturbed to hear my boyfriend had been getting physical with me, even though I believed his psychological abuse was worse; but I tried to reassure Anders there was nothing that should leave him disturbed. Then I wished I hadn't said anything; there was a time when I wanted our relationship to be strictly professional, since he was a generous tipper, the best customer in terms of gratuities, but that we were far past that stage and had become friends.

“Eat,” I encouraged.

We ate the best wholesome gourmet meal he had ever eaten in as long as he could remember. He took to the Madeira wine I served him, although normally he never drank, since his brother, who led him to being estranged from the rest of his surviving family, was an alcoholic, chronic, unremitting, whose abuse of alcohol eventually led to his premature demise and death. He vowed he would never take the route his brother took in life and became abstemious.

“Where did you get this Madeira? It tastes simply divine. I can’t resist its rich essence.”

“Drink up, connoisseur,” I urged and encouraged, “it came from Martim—he’s a native of Madeira. He was born on the island, but immigrated to Canada as a child. He thinks I love him because I treat him with respect. He’s a lawyer, the first person in his family ever to go to college. Despite his success, he’s abused and put down by his family, particularly his mother. He still lives with his mother and doesn’t have many friends. He doesn’t know the true meaning of friendship, so when he meets someone like me, who treats him well, he automatically falls in love. He thinks I’ve fallen for him because I show him the respect he deserves. I don’t know how to tell him how to back off and stop showering me with affection and gifts.”

“Does he do estates and wills?”

“I think he’s a jack of all trades lawyer.”

Since Anders insisted, I found myself in the awkward position of sharing personal information, Marti’s full name, phone number and business address, between friends, which, as a practice, I usually compartmentalized,

and preferred to keep separate. I had to admit, though, the number of friends I had became fewer in number since I started living with my boyfriend. In fact, I carried a handbag Martim had given me, having told my boyfriend I bought the luxury accessory with tip money, and Anders happily accepted one of his business cards I found in a hidden compartment. He continued to sip the Madeira, when I invited him, slightly tipsy, into the hot tub.

“But I didn’t bring a swimsuit.”

“Naked is best,” I said.

With some encouragement and cajoling, he stripped off many layers of clothes, his blazer jacket, his cardigan, his button-down shirt, his t-shirt, and a wifebeater, and then his trousers, his pair of long underwear, his short underwear, boxer briefs—or were they cycling shorts?—and slipped into the hot tub naked beside me. He was well endowed, and when I joked “size matters,” he laughed so heartily he started sputtering and coughing, and I worried he was suffering an asthma attack or even a coronary.

“You’ve never been married?”

“No, for the umpteenth time,” he replied.

“Why not?”

“Relationship with women have never been a priority,” he confided. He gazed directly in my eyes. “I was worried they would be a distraction or I would badly hurt a woman’s feelings.”

“You’ve so devoted yourself to the behavior and mating habits of the nearly extinct piping plover—you were married to your work—that’s the reason,” I said. “But now you’re retired.”

“Yes, I’m finished, at the endgame.”

“And—don’t be offended—but you’ve never even had a boyfriend?” I asked.

“Why a boyfriend?”

“Sometimes boyfriends work better for men.”

“Agreed, but not this guy.”

I reached over across the hot tub to touch his private parts, but he recoiled. With my face turning crimson, I rolled back my eyes, and gazed at the poster of Arnold Schwarzenegger from “Pumping Iron,” which my boyfriend had taped to the ceiling. “Sorry,” I murmured.

“No reason to be sorry. You’re the best,” he said, and gently touched my shoulder. “It’s like you say,” he said, his voice trailing off.

Warm water dripping from my naked flesh, I stepped out of the hot tub. With concealed pleasure, I noticed he was staring at my breasts, the soapy sudsy water dripping from my erect nipples and my pierced navel. I found the second bottle of Madeira, which my lawyer friend, my unrequited lover, had given me. I gave him the bottle of Madeira and urged him to take the fortified wine home since it was far too sweet for me.

Several weeks later, I scurried along a dark, abandoned Bloor Street, fleeing outside my apartment building past Honest Ed’s discount department store with its circus lights and bargain signs. I rushed down the side street of aging houses on Brunswick Avenue and visited Anders’ house. Earlier, Robert, ranting, raging, started slapping me. I feared he might close his fists and started hitting and punching me. Precisely that happened, as he broke one of my teeth, a molar, in the back of my mouth, near my wisdom teeth, and that was when I made the decision to flee.

“Robert was angry....” I said, my voice trailing off.

Anders insisted on calling the police, but I seized the cordless handset from his hand and hung up the telephone, in the middle of his bumbling call. I protested the police would destroy my boyfriend’s career and reputation and disrupt and upend my life. He replied maybe my boyfriend needed to have his reputation ruined, if only as a deterrent, but he sadly acknowledged my problem.

“What triggered the whole episode?” Anders asked.

“He found out I had you over for dinner.”

“So? It was perfectly innocent.”

“But he set up a hidden GoPro camera above the hot tub and showed me the video after he started drinking.”

“You don’t need to explain.”

Then, another time, yet again, I sought shelter at Anders’ house. In an oversized button-down shirt, cutoff denim shorts, and flip flops, I scurried out of the glow from the street lights in the drizzle, rain, and chilly wind gusts. I had bruises on my face. He again asked me if I wanted to call the police. Looking distraught, I said nothing, but when he started to dial the emergency number, I again took the phone from his hand.

Later, the police followed my boyfriend one evening, as he commuted home from an office tower in the financial district, after he had been drinking and flirting with the servers in short shorts and tight tank tops in Hooters. The police officers started questioning him, since he carried a fine bottle of vintage wine, which he shoplifted from the liquor store, in a brown paper bag from which he drank, as he commuted on the subway train to Spadina station near our apartment building. My

boyfriend became even more suspicious and paranoid. He talked with his friend, my boss, who owned the Campus Circus Café & Gourmet Diner, where I was gainfully employed as a server and maître d'. So, as if I had no choice, I felt compelled to give Anders the cold shoulder.

Then, as Anders continued to research the stock market and financial news online, on his laptop, he noticed when he checked his e-mail, I had unfriended him on Facebook; I was perturbed, angry with everybody. But Anders was disappointed—far more than I ever expected or anticipated—I unfriended him on Facebook, at a time when he started to get the knack and gist of social media. My actions must have struck him as cruel, petty, and vindictive since I helped him set up a Facebook account, after I encouraged him to buy a smartphone.

I showed him how to set up a Facebook account, posting selfies of us together, which I snapped on his newly purchased smartphone in the bar and cafe. I gave him tips and pointers on operating the smartphone. He grouched the smartphone would waste his time and money. I gently laughed since, as I subtly reminded him, he was retired, no longer preoccupied with the piping plover. Now I assumed he possessed plenty of time and money to become social with women, or if he preferred men, but, when I entered his name in the internet search engines, the extent of his devotion and research on the piping plover amazed me.

“But I only want to be with you,” Anders said.

“I’m flattered,” I said.

One night I left my medication, antidepressants, and antianxiety medication, when I stayed over in his house

on Brunswick Avenue. When he reminded me, I had forgotten my pill bottles at his house, I said, he could dispose of the medication, throw the tablets of imipramine and lorazepam into the garbage. Besides, I admitted, I was trying to go pill free. I left unmentioned my fear I might sometime use the medication to harm myself or end my existence. Still, he sensed my vulnerability and trepidation, and advised me to seek counselling. He then asked me why I had unfriended him on Facebook, why I had given him the cold shoulder at work and wouldn't speak with him at the café, which he continued to visit for early morning breakfast and evening coffee. I immediately responded to his fresh request, accepting him as a Facebook friend. He messaged me, "Can I come over?"

That was so unlike him, taking the initiative with a woman, I said, yes. I had already told him my forever jealous boyfriend was away on business, having travelled to San Francisco to meet with the management of Silicon Valley companies in which the pension fund wanted to invest. Anders strolled his jaunty walk down Brunswick Avenue and Bloor Street West to my apartment building. I buzzed him inside the lobby through the intercom. I hugged and kissed him at the door.

He awkwardly tried to reciprocate, asking, "What happened?"

"The boss doesn't want me chatting with you, fraternizing with you. He says it's a distraction, affecting my productivity, but he's close friends with my boyfriend." I explained my boyfriend was close friends with my boss, going back to their freshman years at The University of Toronto, where they shared a room in

residence and belonged to the same fraternity. Then my boyfriend helped my boss find the money to buy and run the café and diner, lending him money for the down payment, helping him obtain bank loans and lines of credit for upgrades, renovations, and operating costs. “So, he’s forever grateful. Anyway, I think my boyfriend’s jealousy has gotten the better part of him again.”

“You should leave.”

“Where will I go?”

“You can stay with me.”

We talked for hours about hope, dreams, and aspirations. Finally, he interrupted me, while I dreamed aloud about us living in a house together, in a small town, near Guelph or Peterborough, where we could enjoy the peace, quiet, the solitude, and a rural lifestyle, even a farmstead, with an apple orchard, and some goats.

He said a certain issue was plaguing his conscience. He wanted to tell me about an incident that happened when he started as a researcher for the piping plover. The incident forever after changed his life and made him, partly, in effect, the person he was today. If he had the chance, to turn back time, he would have reversed his actions. In the early eighties, he said, he found a nesting area for the nearly extinct bird along the stretch of Hanlan’s Point Beach when he initially started his field research for his doctorate. He set up an observation blind with tripods and a thirty-five-millimeter camera, with a long telephoto lens, and rolls of high-speed color film, near the nesting area, which was clearly marked and delineated with warning signs and signs and information placards. He debated and argued with the city recreation staff about whether they should post the warnings since

a park supervisor who observed plenty of vandalism on the island feared it might attract the wrong element. Then—then, he said, he realized he wasn't ready to make a revelation.

This issue must have been bothering him for some time, plaguing his mind. I urged him to drink more Madeira, and, eventually, he opened up to me, about the truth, leaving me astounded. After he set up an observation blind with camera near the nesting area, he observed towards sunset a solitary teenager exploring the nesting area. He assumed he was a local resident, a rare Toronto resident fortunate to find residence in a house on the island. But the youth totally disrespected and disrupted the nesting area and eggs, vandalizing the site. Angry, out of control, Anders attacked the teen, a college freshman, judging from his varsity jacket, with the tripod. He raged at the death of prospective chicks, since the delicate eggs were smashed, using physical force against the young man. When the youth retaliated and attacked him in return, he struck him badly with the heavy tripod, inadvertently injuring him, striking him in the head, knocking him unconscious. When he desperately tried to rouse him, he discovered he was dead, certainly not the outcome he desired, not what he intended. He ended up dragging and dumping the young man's body in Lake Ontario. The youth's death remained a mystery, although he felt a few islanders and park employees had their suspicions.

I didn't know whether to believe him until he pulled out yellowing clippings he had glued into a scrapbook—articles from the Toronto Star, dated from the early

eighties. He carried the neatly clipped and underlined and annotated articles in his leather portfolio case.

“You see what the piping plover has meant to my life.”

How could I express skepticism and discord towards such passion and devotion? I marveled at his role as confessor and mine as confidante, yet fell asleep on his lap, as he tried to explain he was sorry for his impulsive, angry actions. When he woke in the morning, he realized he had never had a woman fall asleep on his lap before. Before he left, he carefully and quietly moved himself and gently covered me with a quilt comforter. He left me a note on the kitchen table and carried the Madeira home.

When he arrived at his house, an hour later, at dawn, he felt serene, peaceful, blissful, grateful, and blessed for the life he had lived. He poured himself a glass of wine, the Madeira, as he sat on his comfortable chair on the porch. He swallowed the imipramine and lorazepam tablets, which I had forgotten at his house, one by one, as he sipped the entire bottle of wine leftover from our visit. He continued consuming antidepressant and anxiolytic tablets until he was drowsy and lethargic, and the wine bottle was empty. The pill bottle toppled over, spilling what little was left over of their prescribed contents. Feeling at peace, he listened to his favorite Motown songs from yesteryear on a vinyl record as the sun rose and the light flooded the patio. He drifted into a deep sleep as his finger twitched. Then his entire limbs and body flailed and convulsed in a rhythmic seizure.

When I heard from my boss Anders had passed, I had my suspicions about what happened, reinforced by the memory of the last time he saw me, about the issue plaguing his conscience. I felt cheated and at a loss; I

wanted to see Anders happy; I wanted to take him to a night club and I wanted to dance with him. I thought it would be cool to make him giggle as I prodded him to smoke some pot. Time might have healed my wound and made me forget Ander's demise, and I would have forgotten him; my experience as a server, where tips alone were sometimes enough to pay the rent, taught me there are dark and sclerotic places, scar tissue, in the most innocent hearts.

Several weeks later, Martim called me. Anders had indeed visited him, consulted him for legal advice, and drafted a will. Martim provided me with a briefing in regards to Ander's death and his estate. Then he couriered me a copy of Anders' last will and testament. When I took the will to Martim's law firm, Martim told me that he felt as if he was in a conflict of interest position because he knew me personally and drafted Anders' will. Martim urged me to seek legal advice from another firm, but he told me off the record he believed the will would pass scrutiny by a judge, in the unlikely event it ever went to court was or was challenged by a potential heir or beneficiary. He told me he had already made additional deeper inquiries, wanting to be certain no one was excluded unfairly—at least according to tradition. He went above and beyond the usual due diligence, since the circumstances were unusual. After he made further investigations, and phone calls, he discovered the retired professor had no other heirs, no surviving nieces or nephews, no cousins, nobody, who would come forward and contest the will, which he figured was valid, airtight. After probate and clearances and a decent interval, the red brick neo-Victorian house on Brunswick Avenue

became my home, and Anders found a deep place even deeper in my heart.

The long-ago death of the youth, who vandalized the nesting ground of the piping plover, remained a mystery. When I tried to explain the situation to Martim he warned me to be careful and reminded me he didn't want to hear about any cold case files. He feared I would ruin his career with my revelations. If I couldn't let sleeping dogs lie, he urged me to find a more experienced criminal lawyer, who, he warned, would probably bankrupt me since I wouldn't be eligible for legal aid. I realized I was severely challenging my friendship with Martim. I never mentioned the dark secret to him again. Instead, I researched the case alone extensively, tracing every lead, clue, and tip, often from blogs, databases, archives, and websites online, on the Internet. I even searched the archives and morgues of the *Toronto Star*, after I met a reporter who worked there, who became a regular at the Campus Circus Café & Gourmet Diner. But I could never betray the trust of my benefactor. In fact, to keep the peace Anders helped establish, I visited yet again Martim, who finally helped me with the paper work to take out a restraining order against my former boyfriend.

Several months later, I visited Hanlan's Point and the long narrow stretch of beach, to visit and explore the setting where Anders claimed his actions led to the inadvertent demise of the youth. I reenacted the scene he described, using a long stick of driftwood, a perfectly natural pole, I found on the beach as a substitute for the tripod. In the dawn along the lakeshore, before the sun rose above the horizon surrounding the abandoned beach, with the CN Tower barely visible through the tree

line, I attempted to stage a reenactment. I went through the motions, feigning the blows he described, trying to gain some insight into his actions and the youth's fate. As the morning progressed, I realized I had become obsessed and stopped from mental and physical exhaustion. Determined to relax and forget, I strolled to the part of the beach where I left my blanket and towel and picnic basket and backpack. I pulled off my top, since the beach was clothing optional. After I tanned and rested and felt as if my mind had cleared, I discovered I was sunburnt. I felt dry and thirsty and sipped from the chilled canned vodka cooler and juice boxes I packed, and then I became restless and energetic. I decided to take a stroll along the beach in direction of the island airport, near the site where Anders' misadventure occurred decades ago. As I strolled along the shoreline, I came across what looked exactly like a piping plover, the rare, endangered, nearly extinct bird. I stalked the round, chubby bird, following along its erratic trail. I took out my smartphone and tried to take pictures of the small bird with grey, beady eyes, and a short, stubby beak. But I could only get close enough after quietly and stealthily stalking the bird, with reddish-orange legs, because the wide-angle sense of the smartphone and the diminishing light as sunset approached made photography difficult. I began to believe the piping plover was a reincarnation of Anders, mocking me, as he ran off and stopped, tweeting, before he jerked and jumped and scurried ahead. The bird, a dark stripe across his forehead from big beady eye to big beady eye, allowed me to approach nearly near enough with the smartphone camera before he ran and flew, taking off in abrupt short flight. Finally, when I

thought I managed to take a final picture of bird I was confident was the rare, nearly extinct piping plover, it took off again. When I uploaded the pictures to my computer later that evening, no matter how I enhanced the images with photo editing software on the monitor of my desk stop computer, I could never make the dark blurred images clear enough to positively identify the piping plover. I glanced at the bird identification handbook, turned to the section on the piping plover. My dripping tears blurred the blue fountain pen ink from extensive annotations in Anders' handwriting.

# Non-Fiction

# The Shadow of the Moon

By Fabrizia Faustinella

While driving home from work, I noticed five small children sitting quietly on the sidewalk right outside a laundromat. It was a cold fall day, and the children didn't seem to be wearing much. It was almost 9 p.m. and dark outside, except for the light coming from the store and a few scattered streetlamps. It was a poor part of town where people don't own washers and dryers, so they do the laundry later in the evening at the local laundromat and take their little ones along.

I slowed down to better look at the children. They seemed tired, almost expressionless, arms resting on their lap. What struck me is that they were not playing or even talking to one another. There was no interaction whatsoever among them. They must have been five or six years old.

The moon was rising and was high enough to cast a shadow behind the children, but the shadow could not be seen because the store light was too bright. I wondered what that shadow would have been like.

When I was a child, the village *witches*, Gilorma and Maria, used to take me with them into the woods to pick mushrooms, gather chestnuts, wild berries, herbs, and funny-shaped stones. They were good witches, not like the one in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel. That's why I was allowed to go with them. My grandparents, whom I spent time with during school breaks, didn't have to worry about Gilorma and Maria eating me up. The wild

boars were a more real threat, but the two women knew the woods like the back of their hands and had a lot of experience dealing with the challenges of wilderness.

Gilorma and Maria were sisters. Gilorma had a severe look to her and didn't smile much. Maria had a sunny disposition and could always take a joke. They were a sort of Janus Bifrons, the ancient Roman god depicted as having two faces, one facing one way and the other facing the opposite direction. Janus was regarded as the god of beginnings, passages, endings, doorways, and duality. Gilorma and Maria were in fact polar opposites but had a deep, unspoken bond. I never knew their exact age. They were born in the late 1800s and looked decrepit to me, just like real witches. And just like witches, they had a lot of strength and endurance in stark contrast to their appearance: wrinkles as deep as crevices, hunched backs, silver hair braided and gathered in a tight bun, covered by a head scarf, long black rustling skirts, shawls wrapped around the shoulders, and large satchels across the chest. The trips to the woods started early in the morning, with a 5 a.m. departure. It took approximately three hours on foot to get to the edge of the woods that covered the entire mountain range. Upon arrival, we would rest and eat something. The menu usually included dry figs, cheese, bread, olives, boiled eggs, small pastries stuffed with homemade black cherry jam, and other delights straight out of the witches' kitchen. Then we would start our exploratory mission in the woods and harvest whatever Gilorma and Maria thought to be an edible delicacy, a coveted herb, or a valuable find. The plan was to work for a few hours and gather as many goodies as possible, rest again, eat again, and get back to the village

before losing daylight, and definitely before the forest creatures started to wake up.

But things did not go as planned that day. Heavy, dark clouds rolled in, carried by strong winds. The temperature dropped quickly, making goose bumps appear on my bare arms and legs. Gilorma and Maria knew of a shelter not far away, and we headed in that direction. It was a wooden shack located in a small clearing of the woods. Inside, there was a rudimentary fireplace, a small table, four chairs, and a couple of yucca sacs filled with leaves which functioned as primitive mattresses. It started to rain hard and soon became very dark. It was obvious that we would not have been able to start our trip back to the village any time soon. What if we had to stay in the shelter all night? I became concerned that my grandparents would be terribly worried not seeing us return.

Gilorma and Maria were very calm. They knew we had no choice, so they made themselves comfortable. Gilorma got the fire going; Maria put some food on the table, including a few wild raspberries picked during the treasure hunt earlier in the morning. They started to reminisce about their childhood; they talked about the invisible creatures that inhabited the woods, and the strange, inexplicable, supernatural phenomena they had experienced in the most remote parts of the forest. Gilorma recounted how a sparkling golden butterfly led her to the most amazing blueberry patch she had ever seen in the woods. I had shivers going through my entire body and felt uneasy but excited about the possibility of coming across magic.

Maria told me, with a twinkle in her eyes: “If the storm blows over, a bright full moon will be up in the sky. I can

read your future by looking at the shadow cast behind you by the silver orb.”

“Maria!” Gilorma protested. “You should not do such a thing!”

Maria had a mischievous look and revealed that Gilorma was still upset with her. Apparently, Maria had looked at Gilorma’s shadow in the full moon and the verdict was not as Gilorma had hoped. Maria predicted that Gilorma would never get married and would grow up to be an old maid, which is exactly what happened.

I must have looked puzzled and incredulous, so Maria went on to provide explanations. In a deferent voice, she whispered: “The shadow cast behind a child facing the full moon takes the shape of something that defines the child’s life in the future. A gifted observer can see a deformity, a disability, missing limbs maybe, an accident; the observer can see who is going to be happy and who is going to be sad, who is going to die old and who is going to die young.” It remained unclear to me if anybody could interpret the meaning of the shadows or if it required special powers. I had never heard of such an odd thing before, and never again in my life did I come across a similar tale.

When the storm ended, night had come. We stepped outside of the shack and there it was: a large, bright moon peeking through the vegetation.

“Stand with your back to a tree so no shadow can be cast behind you, and Maria won’t be tempted to look at it and make her foolish predictions!” Gilorma told me.

Maria laughed. “Oh, Gilorma, enough!”

Although I thought that the two sisters must have made that story up, I decided to go back inside the wood

shack and stay there. I didn't want to believe that one's future was predetermined and I didn't want anybody to even attempt to predict it. I lay down on the yucca mattress feeling somewhat confused. I thought that life would not be worth living if everything was already decided for us. But what if there was a little bit of truth to Maria's story? As I was trying to reconcile all those conflicting thoughts, my eyes couldn't stay open any longer.

With the moon's glow creeping around me from the shack's small window, I fell asleep.

As soon as the morning light came out, Gilorma woke me up. We gathered our things and began the trip back home. Needless to say, my grandparents were beside themselves with worry. That became my last adventure into the woods with Gilorma and Maria, but the story of the foretelling shadow of the moon stayed with me to this day.

That evening, driving from work, I wondered what the shadows of those five children would have looked like under Gilorma's and Maria's moon. I felt sad for those children, sitting outside the laundromat with sleepy eyes and tired faces. They were already disadvantaged, raised in one of the poor parts of town, with very little access to good services and the opportunities that more privileged children have.

What would have been of their future? Were they not already trapped by unfortunate circumstances? It is funny how so many people go to battle for the unborn life, but after the child arrives, the crusade is over and the love is gone. The same people who push so for the amorphous

cluster of cells leave the new, fully developed life to neglect and a myriad of abuses with devastating long-term consequences.

When I see adults struggling through life, I can't help but wonder what their childhood was like. Did they get enough love and support? Did they have access to resources to reach their full potential and blossom? Was their surrounding environment too harsh for them to thrive? What would the shadow of the moon have shown when they were children? Would the moon shadow show tiny Shondra losing her right eye due to the blow inflicted to her face by a violent spouse? Sweet Charlie, a promising football player, becoming quadriplegic, and now in a wheelchair, due to random gun violence? What about dreamy Lindsey Ann, who ran away from her foster parents, now homeless and sleeping in ditches? And gentle Mariana, who had all four limbs amputated because of a devastating and unexpected drug reaction while in the hospital? And shy Peter, in and out of emergency departments and psychiatry units, agitated, restrained, unable to function due to uncontrolled schizophrenia? And sensitive Mickey, who was taken to juvenile detention for a minor offense and was never the same after that? And innocent Jean, painfully limping, her joints eroded by rheumatoid arthritis, soon doomed to immobility? Could the moon predict the inner scars? How would its shadow portray those? Pain and suffering often can't be seen on the surface and don't change the shape of the outer shell, but surely do shape a life as much as any wound the eye can see.

I drove away slowly, thinking that it was better not to know, better not to look. It was good that the children's

shadows were drowned by the bright light of the laundromat, leaving room for speculation and possibilities, a hint of hope, the illusion that these children—all of them—would be okay. What could I have done anyway to change the complex puzzle of their lives? I glanced at the rearview mirror. The children were falling asleep. The moon was floating in darkness, luminous and peaceful.

# Birdie

By Tamara Adelman

Dad likes egrets, a type of heron that is mistakenly called a stork. He corrected me when I spelled “egret” with an “i” in a game of Scrabble. These birds did their nesting in the mountains and came down to Rancho Mirage, the golf course desert where we lived, for the ponds. Dad admired them for their size and their grace. I hadn’t moved to Rancho Mirage yet but was an aspiring local. It was B.C., “Before Coronavirus,” something that turned what happened three days ago into the good old days. COVID put everything that came before it in the rearview mirror.

I still had my place in Santa Monica, but I was doing an extended stay at the Best Western Hotel, paid for by an insurance claim for some work being done at my dad’s new place in the desert. He was back at work in Milwaukee and aspiring to be a snowbird. This was before “staycation” became a way of living for people who could afford it. I booked a tour to Joshua Tree National Park, where I’d never been and always wanted to go. I’d read a story about Bill Owasko, who disappeared there nine years ago. The tour guide told me that people still looked for Owasko’s bones after his cell phone had produced a “ping.”

The Coachella Valley has a lot of seasonal visitors who were mostly gone by now. I was experiencing an “after” season of sorts. In April it was not hot yet. From the hotel front steps, I signed up for two docent-led van tours of Desert X, an outdoor art installation that used the desert

landscape as its walls, the first of which being an orange crate off of the 10 freeway exit where the wind turbines are and the last a hologram over the Salton Sea, which was part two of the tour, which got cancelled because of the Coachella music festival.

I bought a pair of hiking boots before I left the desert and wore them when I was back in Santa Monica. My feet wanted to be in the desert, but my mind hadn't figured that out yet. I had a place at the beach and was living in the best of both worlds. Driving back and forth between those worlds was awful.

The hotel stay was respite from reloading all of my dad's clothes that I'd hung up in his closet back into the car he'd flatbedded out filled with clothes. The house was being painted again from smoke damage that occurred when I'd had the gas fireplace converted to wood and there'd been a faulty flue. Now it would be converted back to gas. In California we are scared of fires.

When my parents were married, they called for someone named Mabel when they wanted something done. Maybe this person had existed somewhere in their travels. There was always a division of labor problem with my parents. My mom did everything because my dad had grown up with somebody cleaning up after him. Now I was that person.

I was stuck cleaning up after my mom when she died, removing what she had called her whole life, which had been packed into a tiny house on rural Washington Island, Wisconsin. I selected a nice headstone for her grave, sanitizing my experience of knowing her, and completed the circle of the division of labor by taking over all the labor.

Back in Rancho Mirage, off Frank Sinatra Drive, I pressed a button that was on the top of a pedestal, and Sinatra's voice came from a speaker in the bushes. He wasn't singing but it was a public service announcement dedicating the park. He'd owned a house down the street, and his picture was on the wall of the restaurant Lord Fletcher's, which had been there since Rancho Mirage was where two dirt roads met. Sinatra's grave was down the street. My grandmother said Frank didn't know when to quit. I'd heard of *The Sinatra Doctrine*, and I conflated it with the song "My Way," which I'd also heard. I'd lived my life "my way," but where had that gotten me? I was at some kind of a crossroad.

By summer I bought my own place off Frank Sinatra Drive; my place in Santa Monica had sold in two weeks. My dad, now retired, lived in the same community, and we used Rancho Mirage as our playground, same as Hollywood and past Presidents. We rode our bikes to the wash and golfed together. I went on some birding walks at The Annenberg and was able to identify the red male vermilion flycatcher on the Tamarisk golf course. Dad and I were at Shame on the Moon when Dad announced a trip to northern California to see his other daughter, a product of a fling he'd had with my childhood ice-skating teacher. I'd never heard a thing from her, her husband (who my dad said was great guy), or her kids in the eight years that I'd known.

"These are my grandchildren!" he said, sounding anxious for another "Coocoo" title. Pronounced like the bird, "cuckoo" was the grandpa name he was designated by family friends who had used it and wanted my dad to use it for their kids. That's what my brother's kids call my

dad now.

The majority of the bird species cuckoo are brood parasites, which means that they sometimes push an egg out of a nest to make room for another one. I was that egg.

My father was going to take these people out for dinner, and they would have a good time. While he was gone I thought about all the mistakes I never made.

Maybe it had been a mistake to move into a house down the street from him? It was all I could do to unlock Dad's house for him upon his return. I wanted to leave it locked. I never asked him about his trip and he never said anything, and we resumed our normal activities.

I was invited to a fifty-year anniversary party for The Living Desert, and I took Dad with me, but we left before the tent dinner since we'd heard it was not good to gather.

The first case of the coronavirus in the Coachella Valley was traced to Tamarisk. Of course there was a stigma and subsequent infections plus the closing of the clubhouse and golf course. Canasta, a card game I'd been learning, became a dangerous thing. Cards were like cash—you touched them all the time, and you couldn't sit at a card table and be socially distanced. Book club was promptly cancelled. Someone I'd sat next to at the last meeting had a mild case. Her husband had tested positive but was asymptomatic. Dad and I got tested at the library and were relieved we were negative.

I made three meals a day for my dad, who was completely helpless without services and amenities.

“Thank you for the delicious breakfast,” my dad said.

“Believe it or not, it is not my goal in life to make you breakfast,” I said.

It was a camping trip at my house.

We watched New York Governor Andrew Cuomo's press conference on TV every day and were completely astonished by the sight of the tent field hospital in Central Park, right across the street from where my dad had his place for sale in the fancy neighborhood down the street from the Carlyle Hotel. We watched California Governor Gavin Newsom's press conferences on the local news. These men are our leaders, I told Dad. We were horrified as we watched the national news. Santa Monica and New York got looted. My dad read a lot of books, and I did a lot of dishes.

"You are really stuck with who you are stuck with," I told Dad. He laughed. I would have never picked my father to be on a desert island with, and yet here we were on our own island in the desert, having a great time together. I thought about the other daughter when I took my dad's trash out and scrubbed his toilet and floors. When I'd first learned of her, I'd thought, *Who is she?* But now I thought, *Where is she?* I could have used some help. Dad had had a housekeeper, but we were scared and put her on hold. I did everything I could to protect my father. I wanted him to stay alive.

I had a background in isolation, having grown up in a rural area and having been an ironman triathlete. I'd seen the stockpiling my mother did so she could have what she wanted, so I knew what to do. Now that everyone was alone with the stay-at-home orders, I finally had company. Everyone was in their bubble. The golf course reopened. Usually I hated Easter since that was the day I met my previous boyfriend, but this year there was something else to think about: People were dying because

of the virus, and people worked hard to save them.

There would be no visits to Joshua Tree this year, no Desert X, and no tennis tournament that Dad and I had tickets for. Maybe this is the year you stay, I offered, but Dad left on Father's Day, having stayed a long time but not for the summer. I'd been stuck in an identity feedback loop being around my dad so much. I saw my grandparents' faces in his.

"Dad, I know we will never have this time again."

"What are you saying that for?"

"When you come back it will be a different time of year."

The migration came late. I was glad to be one of the ones who stayed. Now was all the time, but when now was over there would be a scar on time. I was tired for a couple of weeks after my dad left, but I knew I was the only daughter who mattered because I had taken care of him. I read ten books my dad passed on to me, and my bubble became a sphere. The sky became the ocean, and the desert landscape made my life small. I tried to imagine what it would feel like when he would be gone for good in between receiving and unpacking all the boxes of art he sent out. I hung everything in his house.

# A Very Good Liar

By Erin Branning

I am standing at the kitchen sink next to my mother. It is midafternoon and the strong Sacramento sun streams through the sink window, haloing her. The rest of the kitchen is shadowed. My mother is home from the hospital after being sick, and I want to stay close to her. It is a beautiful day outside, but I would rather be here, inside with her, than outside playing. I am seven, in the second grade. I will learn later that this is not the first time in her life my mother has been sick, but it is the first time she's been sick in mine. I am standing next to her watching her for any signs she might leave for the hospital again.

My youngest brother, Ian, sits in a swing clipped into the doorjamb, bouncing on his toes. It's the very early eighties but the kitchen is decorated like it's still the seventies. The walls are clad in waist-high, dark-wood paneling below white wallpaper printed with yellow- and orange-checked daisies. The tile counters, linoleum floors, and appliances are green. Avocado shades of green, the peel and the gradated flesh. Avocados are a high-potassium food grown in California where we live. The wooden table, dark brown like an avocado pit, is pocked and scratched from our forks and knives, pencils and pens. The wood of the table is so soft that the slightest pressure, a fingernail even, can make a dent.

That I am alone with my mother (aside from Ian, jumping in his swing) is a rarity. I am the oldest of four and I help take care of my siblings. I have also been

helping take care of my mother, helping my dad mix the IVs she has two or three times a day in this kitchen as she cooks and cleans and talks on the phone, its spiraling extra-long cord tangling around her IV pole. The catheter for her IVs is inserted in her forearm and is replaced every few days. The tubing and butterfly needle are covered in surgical tape and then again with a terry-cloth tennis sweatband—she has them in all different colors to match what she is wearing.

Displayed on the avocado-green refrigerator, held up by a magnet, are her daily lab readings of potassium levels. Every day she has blood tests. The blood tests tell us the amount of potassium in her blood: 3.6 is the low end of normal; 3.6 is what we are shooting for.

When she was in the hospital, we stayed with friends. In the beginning, when my dad was still trying to take care of the four of us, he would try to curl my and my sister Amy's hair at the kitchen counter. But it was too hard for him, too unruly and time-consuming, so he took us to his barber and had our hair cut. I remember walking into my mother's hospital room afterward and seeing the look of shock, then contained anger, on her pale, drawn face, her mouth a thin, straight line.

But that was a couple of months ago. My hair has grown out now; it's long enough to be curled again. She looks down at me and smiles. She looks calm, happy. Her short brown hair is thin and cut in a Dorothy Hamill bob, just like mine and Amy's. Already, at seven years old, my head reaches almost to her shoulder. My mother is not tall—only 5 feet 2. I am going to be much taller than her—everyone says so.

I watch her cutting celery ribs which she will fill with

peanut butter for a snack. I observe her carefully with the knife. There is a story of her cutting her hand once by accident while slicing a roll of refrigerator cookies. The knife went all the way through her hand. She was so lucky not to have cut an artery or a tendon.

“Celery is the only food that has negative calories,” she says.

I don’t know what this means. I don’t know this word *calories*. I am seven. “What’s a calorie?”

“It’s what food is made of, and what your body spends when you exercise. You burn more calories eating the celery than it contains.”

“Does celery have potassium?” I know that this is what her body needs, what the IVs are filled with. She has been diagnosed with a disease called Bartter Syndrome, which makes her kidneys filter out the potassium her body needs. Salt is another thing she needs—she pours salt on everything she eats. She’s told me that the salt helps keep the potassium in her cells.

“Not celery. But avocados and bananas do.”

“Should we buy more of them?”

She laughs. “I could never eat enough bananas or avocados to get the amount of potassium I need. That’s why we’re so lucky to have Dr. Hansen and these IVs.”

I nod. Jim Hansen and his wife, Sheri, are my parents’ new best friends. They have older children at our school and go to the same church. Jim has recently become my mom’s doctor and has given her the diagnosis of Bartter.

If it wasn’t for Dr. Jim, my mom might have died. This is what I believe because this is what I am told.

I used to think my mother was a very good liar, but really we were all pretending not to see what was right in

front of us.

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My mother is fourteen and watches her older sister and her mother fight about weight. Her sister goes on an 800-calorie-a-day diet, and my mother thinks that she will too. After a week she loses some weight and thinks: That wasn't so hard. Every day her goal becomes to eat a little bit less than the day before.

She wants to be good at something, and finds she can be good at not eating. She becomes obsessed with being as small as possible and becomes very good at that. She is capable of something, proud to see results.

My mother runs cross-country for her high school, and one day, at a meet in Oakland after she wins the 440, she collapses on the track.

Shortly thereafter she is told by her parents that she is going to be hospitalized for six weeks and cared for by Dr. Knowles. It is the winter of 1965, and she is now fifteen years old. In the hospital she wraps her meals in paper towels and throws the food in the trash. One day Dr. Knowles comes to visit and picks up a mound of discarded food out of the garbage can. From then on she must eat in front of the nurse's station.

After six weeks she has not gained, but instead has lost another five pounds. She has not been told what is wrong with her, but she is told that if she doesn't gain weight she might not survive. The head nurse says, "Boys don't like skinny girls so I am going to pray that God will prepare a boy for you to marry someday."

One afternoon, while sitting at the nurse's station, she sees her chart and the words *Anorexia Nervosa* written under Diagnosis. She doesn't know what this means, and

no one has ever used those words with her.

\* \* \*

I am ten years old and sit with my mom on our scratchy wool couch, going through old photo albums. There are pictures of her looking much healthier than she does now; she has breasts and she is wearing short sleeves. Her arms are skinny but not completely down to the bone like they are now.

“Mommy, how come your breasts are so much bigger here? How come *you* look bigger?” I say.

“That’s what nursing four kids will do to you,” she says.

I believe her that we were the ones who did it, took away her breasts, her health. Now that I think about it though, I realize she must have been wearing a padded bra in those pictures; her breasts couldn’t possibly have been that big, ever.

I used to think my mother was a very good liar, but really we were all pretending not to see what was right in front of us.

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My mother is transferred to Concord Hospital for another six weeks and is put on a feeding tube. She is visited by a psychiatrist, Dr. Cramer, who gives her a “truth serum,” sodium amytal. He asks her one day if she knows what a “hard-on” is. She does not. He says, “Well that needs to happen or else it’s like putting spaghetti through a keyhole.”

He tells her that while she was under the effects of the sodium amytal she told him she wanted to be a C-cup bra size.

A different man, a medical resident, takes her into a

dark room one day to perform tests, and she feels woozy and disoriented from some medicine he has given her.

Back in her hospital room she is sore and in pain and the next day develops a sore throat and a rash. She is told she has scarlet fever and she thinks of the book *The Scarlet Letter* and is terrified that someone might know what the resident did to her.

The only reason my mother thinks she survived the hospital is because of the kindness of one person, Sandy Donato, a Black nurse. She called my mom “Sugar.”

\* \* \*

While my mother is in the hospital, Matt Hagan walks up to me in our second-grade classroom and says, “My mom told me your mom’s gonna die.” I don’t say anything back to him but I ask our teacher, Mrs. Warren, if I can go to the bathroom so that I can cry without anyone seeing me.

The next time I visit my mom in the hospital I ask my mom if it’s true.

“Oh Erin, I can’t believe someone would say something like that. I’m going to call the school. How dare any of the parents be talking about me to your classmates.”

\* \* \*

About six weeks before my mother was hospitalized for weight loss and Matt Hagan said this to me on the playground, she had an experience she just couldn’t shake. She’d hosted a Brownie picnic at the park including everyone from my second-grade troop and my sister Amy’s first-grade troop, and after it was over the other parents picked up their girls and my mom cleaned up before heading home. In the car she thought about how

the day had gone and each of the girls. Suddenly she realized that she couldn't remember Melissa Wolf's parents picking her up. Had she left a little girl at the park by herself? She became overwhelmed with fear. How could she have made such a huge mistake?

When she called Melissa's mother to tell her what happened she assured my mother that Melissa was fine and no one was upset. Still, my mother could not seem to excuse herself or forgive herself for what she had done.

\* \* \*

My mother's records are retrieved from Oakland Children's and Concord Hospital, and in her Sacramento hospital room Dr. Jim tells my dad that she had been diagnosed with anorexia when she was a teenager. My mother, lying in her bed listening to these men talk, can hardly breathe.

"What's the treatment plan?" my dad asks.

Jim says they will continue with the feeding tube until she weighs ninety pounds and then she will be referred to a psychiatrist named Dr. Treat.

"Well won't that be a treat?" my dad says.

My dad and Jim laugh. My mother cries.

Jim leaves the room and my dad doesn't say anything about what he's just learned.

My mother wants to disappear just like she did when she was a child and overheard her parents talking in their bedroom about how they will not tell anyone what the "quacks" said about their daughter having a mental illness.

\* \* \*

Home from college one summer, I take her to the hospital very early in the morning to get a new PICC line

inserted for her IVs. I wait with her in the hospital room until the nurse arrives to prep her for surgery. The nurse pulls down the shoulder of her gown to look at the spot where the tube and catheter will go. There is nothing but skin and bone and a nipple, not the slightest trace of any breast tissue.

“Oh my goodness, you are just skin and bone, so tiny,” the nurse says. My mom looks up at me from the hospital bed to see my reaction. She looks so small and so sad that I need to leave the room or I will cry, and I cannot cry in front of her.

I lean over the exposed nipple and kiss the top of her head, inhaling the metallic smell of her citrusy soap, the Betadine on her shoulder.

I walk back to the car in the 5:00 a.m. darkness. I think about how in health class they tell you anorexics lose their breasts, they lose their period, their bodies go back to a pre-pubescent state. But she can't be anorexic. She would never do that to herself, right? She is just very sick, that explains how emaciated she is. It's Bartter syndrome, that kidney disease. The smell of her lingers in my nose and reminds me of illness, bile, hunger.

I drive home, leaving her alone in the hospital, leaving her to her surgery.

I used to think my mother was a very good liar, but really we were all pretending not to see what was right in front of us.

\* \* \*

I'm twenty-six years old and my dad has been dead eighteen months when I find out the truth of what is wrong with my mom. She's had two heart attacks in the span of a few months and has been spending bouts of

time in the hospital again. When my dad died, my mom had been relatively healthy, healthier than she had been in several years. Despite the fact that they had been separated for six years, my dad had asked her to move back in to his house to take care of him. She did and it seemed to make her happy.

After the second heart attack, I call her doctor and leave a message. To my surprise, she calls me back.

“What’s wrong with my mom?” I say. “Why is she having heart attacks?”

“If your mom would eat, she would be fine,” the doctor says. “Taking her anti-anxiety medicine before meals would help too.”

I am speechless; I cannot believe what I am hearing.

“What do you mean, she doesn’t eat? She eats more than anyone else does during a meal.”

“She purges if she has to,” the doctor says and sighs. “She came to me a few weeks ago in a panic because she’d seen a better anorexic than her in the grocery store. It sent her over the edge. Your mother is always right at the edge.”

\* \* \*

I used to think my mother was a very good liar, but really we were all pretending not to see what was right in front of us.

When we went out to dinner she would finish everyone’s plate. I would feel sick and she would still be eating. We would drive through McDonald’s and she would order two large French fries and then douse them in salt, *more salt, more salt, more salt*, she would say to the person at the drive-through window, and I would feel embarrassed because I could see from the look on the

cashier's face that this was not normal. She cooked all the time but she never ate dinner with us unless we were out at a restaurant. She had so much dental work done—none of her teeth are her own. She drank Coke all day long.

She's never weighed more than ninety pounds.

She wears jeans and sweaters in the summertime in Sacramento in 100-degree heat.

I have a picture of us on the beach in Maui. I am sixteen, a junior in high school, and my friend Pam is with me lying on towels in the sand, matching black bikinis, our bodies glistening in sweat. My mom is sitting next to us on a beach chair in jeans, a long-sleeved T-shirt, and a cardigan.

I have not seen any part of my mother's body other than her hands and face since that morning in the hospital when I was in college.

I suppose I am thankful for all of the layers of clothing she covers herself in. I am afraid of what her body looks like. When I hug her I get an idea. When I hug her it feels like she might break.

\* \* \*

I used to think my mother was a very good liar, but really we were all pretending not to see what was right in front of us.

When I ask her now about my father she says, "He loved me but he didn't really like me, and he didn't help me. When he heard my story I was even more on my own. He respected my right to privacy, right or wrong, good or bad."

When I am with her now I find it hard to look directly at her, and I can't help but feel that her body is a rebuke to my love. I could never make her well.

\* \* \*

I used to think my mother was a very good liar, but really we were all pretending not to see what was right in front of us.

My mother is excellent at hiding the truth, at obfuscating, at providing alternative explanations for things. For most of her life she has adhered to her narrative at all costs, but I realize now that she was never allowed to tell her story.

She hid the truth because everyone she loved did. She thought in order to be loved she had to hide it too.

# Why Writing is Better than Calling Saul

By Anna Fells

Just an hour ago, as I arose from bed, I was awash with delighted anticipation. It was almost time. All week, I'd been looking forward to my day off, my day to write. Such joy awaits me! Today, I'll get to finally stop and sit, be curious, discover, and ride the wave as truth steadily takes on form, like a clay sculpture, with each tap of the keyboard.

So why am I not typing a word? A steaming cup of Santa Fe Aroma Sumatra sits at my side as I wait for the chemically induced alertness to rise in me like a sun. I am settled in front of my computer but my fingers are limply still. There is something snake-like writhing in me. The hours and hours lie ahead of me, open, free, and terribly, terrifyingly empty.

The window before me frames a New Mexico summer sky, blue and crisp, abutting the undulating skyline of the Sandia mountains below. I notice the Knife Edge of the Shield, often the first rocky aspect of the peak to catch the dawn sun. More locally, hummingbirds hover around the cream-colored flowers of the Russian olive. Behind me, my aging Aussie-mix Poco breathes rhythmically and deeply in his post-breakfast sleep.

Time. Enough money. No pressing worries. My desk and a view. Writer heaven, you'd think.

But write what? I stare at the blank Word document in front of me.

The refrigerator calls. Even though I'm not hungry, I want a piece of sourdough toast with butter. I chastise myself. I need to lose weight. Instead, I check my email. A new episode of "Better Call Saul" is available. Why not? No negative consequences for the waistline there. I work hard as a psychiatrist. Don't I deserve a break? Why not just get up from my chair, go back to the bedroom, prop the pillows behind my back and pull the blanket over my legs? Why not indulge?

Sometimes when I fantasize about being a writer, I imagine myself living in a light-filled cabin in the mountains, spending my days quietly contemplating life and communicating my glorious insights. Without trying, I transform suffering into art, and I am fully content and fulfilled.

And sometimes writing *does* feel freeing, like travelling. The words flow out like a babbling brook, delightful and inspiring. It can feel like a roller coaster, exciting, or a train, carrying me into the great unknown. Blissful moments like these seem to happen most often when I'm journaling, or doing "morning pages", and just letting it flow out of me without edits, the words of Julia Cameron from *The Artist Way* and Natalie Goldberg from *Writing Down the Bones* urging me forward. Writing can make me mischievous, silly, playful and fearless, and shine a light on that which is unknown and mysterious in me. It can be quite therapeutic.

I lose time. I can do it all day.

But this only happens on the good days. Oftentimes the writing process just feels sluggish or painful. Or I dread it.

So why *not* bail when it's hard? Isn't this whole writing thing for fun, and all for me? Why should I force myself to sit here, when I am anxious to get back to my show, to find out which path Better Call Saul's protagonist, Jimmy McGill, will choose: that of an upstanding citizen, or shady swindler?

Last season, Jimmy tried so hard to take the moral high-ground, even passing on a dirty 1.6 million dollars. But in the end, all attempts at legitimacy got him nowhere. Poor guy was repeatedly shot down, betrayed by his brother. In the last episode, Jimmy expressed his regret for not taking the money, stating "I know what stopped me and you know what, it's never stopping me again."

Where *will* he go next?

Why *not* follow my heart's desire and find out?

For one, I'm dying for a new job, something that doesn't involve seeing patients but is still meaningful, because I've hit full-on burnout from being a shrink. I've been hoping that creative writing might serve that purpose for me. According to Jordan Peterson from the *Twelve Rules for Life*: "Meaning is doing good for self and others and reducing suffering for as many people as possible." And doesn't writing, indeed, serve that goal?

I double click on the folder titled "Why Write" in my laptop, which contains quotes from various recently read books and essays, and my own reflections on them. These have been collected over the last couple years to argue back to that Midwestern work ethic voice in me that claims creative writing is frivolous, and that tempts me at times to get up from my chair on days like these.

As I peruse, I am reminded that writing entertains and diverts, and can give people joy and laughter. Writing sparks curiosity, stimulates intellectual thought, and inspires a sense of wonder. Take *Better Call Saul*. Vince Gilligan, its creator, is a genius, and he's made me love Jimmy like I might a wayward brother or child. Jimmy's part of my community, now, and I care.

I read a quote by Azar Nafisi, who says, in *Lolita in Tehran*: "Every individual has different dimensions to their personality...it is only through literature that one can put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand the other's different and contradictory sides and refrain from becoming too ruthless...if you understand their different dimensions you cannot easily murder them." Her quote reminds me that when we read, we can discover what it's like to be someone else. It facilitates connection and breaks down walls. I don't have to be a con-man to know how Jimmy became one, and to mourn for his disappointments like they were my own.

I stumble on "The Hotel Cadiz", an essay about a woman, unhappy in her marriage, describing her thoughts, feelings and actions leading up to the decision to have an affair, and during the aftermath. Reading this work changed me, moving me from being a harsh judger of infidelity to an empathizer.

And I remember how much I've adored books like *The Brave Cowboy* by Edward Abbey, or post-apocalyptic ones like *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy and *Dog Stars* by Peter Heller that highlight the value of things that are on the brink of being lost, by showing us a world without them, punching us in the gut.

Victor Frankl, a man who lived years in a Nazi concentration camp, says in his incredible book *Man's Search for Meaning*: "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." My why is to become someone that helps creates life-altering explosions of insights in others, in a similar way that that these amazing writers have done in me.

Clearly, I have a why. All the reasons in the world to push through. And writing could even be *more* impactful than seeing patients if a product is read by multiple people! Let's do this thing.

So I do. I sit. I double click and rifle through folders. I try to make something of what I've written in the past. I try to come up with something new.

And then the loud music starts to play – and not the good kind. The grating heavy metal kind. It goes something like this:

*You don't have a gift for words. You don't have a knack for writing. And this isn't just low self-esteem talking. It's truth. You excel in math and science, but writing is hard. You've never been able to finish a crossword puzzle. You called a sea-horse, a horseshoe, not once, not twice but three times, during neuropsychiatric testing. Disturbing, to say the least. You are lazy about describing stuff, rarely providing details, having to always force yourself to go back and do it later. Your spoken and written sentences are clunky. Your dialogue is atrocious.*

*You have little discernment, little taste, and no guiding compass. You're filled with ideas, but have no clarity about which to follow. This isn't just the case in writing: it's part of your character. You take hundreds of pictures with your iPhone on a vacation but don't*

*edit any out, because you don't know which are worth keeping. You don't have the capacity to sift through the mess and find the pearls.*

And I buy it, hook, line and sinker. Any reassurance from myself that with a little more learning and help I could improve (after all, I'm a novice), is absent.

I recall one of the quotes I just read, by Sigrid Nunez from *The Friend*: “You want to know what you should write about. You're afraid that whatever you write will be trivial or just another version of something that's already been said. But remember, there is at least one book in you that cannot be written by anyone else but you. My advice is to dig deep and find it.” What if that doesn't exist? I think of the pages and pages of notes and stories in my computer about my glorious five-month trip in India fifteen years ago, the lines and lines of scribbled handwriting in my journals designing characters for a political thriller, and the dozens and dozens of fleeting ideas for self-help books. But maybe I'll ultimately discover they are all dead ends. Right now, none of them feel quite right.

The reality is I don't even know what *kind* of writing to do. I love fiction. I lose time. I love movies and TV and books. Like for Azar Nafizi, fiction has been “my only sanctuary” countless times. It makes sense, therefore, that I've imagined myself writing it. I've taken several classes over the decades, and written a handful of stories and plays that are now in various stages of completion. But, I don't think any of them are all that great. Plus, I'm not like Abed in the TV show “Community” who has imaginary worlds running through his head all the time, or like the people in the writing classes I've taken, sparky dialogue emerging from them effortlessly. And so what

about creative non-fiction, or memoir? I'm just not really all that interesting.

And look at my track record! Despite sinking hour after hour over the last couple years, cutting and pasting notes and musings and recollections from decades past in my computer, trying to make something of it all, and even submitting a few things, I still am not writing with any kind of seriousness, in terms of time spent. I have no finished, published, products. Clearly, I'm a person that is more than capable of setting goals and achieving them. I've completed medical school, two residencies and two fellowships, and published numerous research articles and...well the list goes on. I'm, embarrassingly, an overachiever. I value accomplishment, perhaps, in part, due to a fractured sense of self-esteem. To not follow through on finishing writing projects over the decades seems inconsistent and is undoubtedly a sign that this is simply not for me.

I decide, with conviction, that the part of me that wants to write is delusional and I should just give this writing thing up.

Fully convinced, now, I go. I get up from my chair, and walk from my office to the bedroom and arrange the pillows, just so. I turn on the TV, and watch Jimmy convince Kim to scam a despicable businessman to pay their very expensive bar tab by posing as potential investors. I revel in their elation with them, while also squirming. They are walking a fine line, and Kim is being sucked in. The show tickles some thoughts in me that life isn't all fun and games. I don't want Kim to go any further towards the dark-side. She's got too much of that magic

combination of kindness, likability, and smarts, and potential to live a meaningful, good life.

An hour later it's over. No more new Better Call Sauls are in the queue. Nor are there any other shows that even close to as satisfying as this one.

And then guilt floods in. I've wasted the time I had set aside for writing. It's 11 a.m., and it feels so late.

Shake it off, I say, and leash up Poco for a walk.

I start by giving serious air-time to the idea that I should just give writing up, never doing it again, and it feels utterly impossible.

I can't give it up. Maybe I'm one of those people that Rilke talks about after all: "A person who feels he can live without writing shouldn't be writing" and, "If there's anything else they could do with their lives instead of becoming writers they should do it."

It's a mysterious yearning, this yearning to write.

I wonder if it's about more than just doing something meaningful, or proving that writing can provide a service to the world. There's a deeper draw.

Why do I *really* want to write?

Poco pulls me roughly to the side of the trail, inspired by some invisible scent on a pile of twigs, yanking me out of my thoughts, and sucks in gulp after gulp of delicious air through his nostrils, rapidly, voraciously. I imagine the fireworks of color taking place in his brain, and wonder what he's feeling and learning. Writing gives me the same intense sensory experience, I think. Like the smells do for Poco, there are things in me that have the possibility to paint spectacular patterns in my own brain, if I only attend to them.

Like meditation, writing is a way to be with what *is*, and to see it clearly. Writing is a portal into the unknown, a place where I am untethered, containing no boundaries, at once vertiginous, but also with wondrous potential to enlighten. Unlike meditation though, it occurs in a communal space, and, when done well, bridges gaps between people.

Writing is unfinished business. And the more that I lose time to distractions, the longer things stay unresolved.

I look up at the Sandias and notice the sun now splashing on the northern aspect of the Knife Edge of the Shield. The day my fiancé and I climbed it for the first time was one of the top-20 days of my life, and I remember how great it felt to be alone, sitting comfortably on the rocky belay ledge, bathed in warm gentle breeze, the canyons yawning at me on 3 sides, looking out at the baby blue sky and hundreds of miles of Central New Mexico.

I think that my yearning to write is similar to my yearning to climb a mountain for those magical moments of solitude where everything can be seen. In both cases, I'm driven to discover and am compelled by the hope for that elusive "ah ha".

If the pull to write is like the pull to climb, I wonder if I've gotten it a little wrong: the writer's experience is not the one I've idealized, but it, like climbing, requires grit.

Climbing a mountain is hard. The backpack might be forty pounds, the wake-up is pre-dawn, and it often involves hours and hours of hiking in steep terrain on loose crappy rock, bushwhacking, and rock-hopping. Not

to mention the oftentimes tedious pre-climbing training and knot practicing.

And maybe that struggle is just part of the game with writing, too.

Perhaps I've been misconceiving the desire to write as *an itch*, or *a craving*, and thinking that if I just created space, I'd naturally follow its call, moment to moment, and that if I did so I'd find myself at the other end of a novel, euphoric.

In fact, I'm thinking now that it might be a deeper, more gut-centered, pull.

I'm reminded of when I quit drinking almost 20 years ago. At the time I *craved* alcohol, but I had a *yearning* for another life. I joined AA, did the work, followed directions, and trusted the wisdom of the "program" over the voice that told me that alcohol was my best friend. To really change, I needed to draw on commitment, humility, determination and dedication, instead of following the moment-to-moment call of my whims and desires. Like with recovery, perhaps with writing it's just about acting "as if", keeping my butt in the chair, ignoring the voices that pull me this way and that, like a little skiff on a stormy sea.

After the walk, now filled with resolve, I go back to my desk, to see what's there, again. I think, I'll just write, and I'll be curious. I'll just see.

Within minutes I quickly find myself lost in fantasy, this time, about the strawberry-rhubarb crisp I'm planning to make sometime this week and realize I'm still hungry. Exasperated with myself, I laugh out loud. Poco,

who's fallen asleep already, lifts his head in surprise, but quickly settles down again.

I'm like Jimmy, such a victim of my own bad impulses. I cringe for myself like I cringed when Jimmy chose to scam the old ladies in the nursing home who love him like a son.

Next, I type, "Why *shouldn't* I let my Better-Call-Saul-lover take the reins?"

Because, simply, I owe it to myself.

And so, I begin again.

# Contributors

(in order of appearance)

**Britney Logan** is no stranger to Bruce or to Little Rock, AR. A photographer by profession who moonlights as a talented artist, she has done remarkable justice for our mustachioed boy with the cover art for this issue. Check her out at [britneylogan.com](http://britneylogan.com) and on Instagram: [@britneylogan](https://www.instagram.com/britneylogan).

**Christopher Fettes** writes poetry and fiction. He teaches writing at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. He lives in Little Rock, AR, with his wife and their pets.

**Robert Beveridge** (he/him) makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Stone of Madness*, *Thirteen Myna Birds*, and *Caustic Frolic*, among others.

**Cameron Morse** lives with his wife Lili and two children in Independence, Missouri. His poems have been published in numerous magazines, including *New Letters*, *Bridge Eight*, *Portland Review* and *South Dakota Review*. His first collection, *Fall Risk*, won Glass Lyre Press's 2018 Best Book Award. His latest is *Baldy* (Spartan Press, 2020). He holds an MFA from the University of Kansas City—Missouri and serves as Senior Reviews editor at *Harbor Review* and Poetry editor at *Harbor Editions*. For more information, check out his Facebook page or website.

**Yvonne Higgins Leach** is the author of *Another Autumn* (WordTech Editions, 2014). Her poems have appeared in many journals and anthologies including *The South Carolina Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Spoon River Review* and *POEM*. Her latest manuscript was a finalist in the *Wandering Aengus Press 2019 Book Award*. A native of Washington state, she earned a Master of Fine Arts from Eastern Washington University. She spent decades balancing a career in communications and public relations, raising a family, and pursuing her love of writing poetry. Now a full-time poet, she splits her time living on Vashon Island and in Spokane, Washington. For more information, visit [www.yvonnehigginsleach.com](http://www.yvonnehigginsleach.com)

**Mckayla Beauchamp** is a current student at Utah State University, majoring in creative writing. She is an aspiring author, outdoor enthusiast and chicken nugget connoisseur. This is her first published poem [and it will not be her last — Eds.].

**Sarah Hopkins** is a 21-year-old kid struggling to feel less like a nuisance and more like a contributing member of society, coping with adolescent emotions and concepts via pen and paper. They have a poem about mountains in the *Tennessee Magazine*.

A resident of NY, **Stephen Mead** is an Outsider multi-media artist and writer. Since the 1990s he's been grateful to many editors for publishing his work in print zines and eventually online. He is also grateful to have managed to keep various day jobs for the Health Insurance. In 2014 he began a webpage to gather links of his poetry being published in such zines as *Great Works*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Quill & Parchment*, etc., in one place: *Poetry on the Line*, [Stephen Mead](#) For links to his other media (and even merchandise if you are interested) please feel free to Google [Stephen Mead Art](#).

Currently he is artist/curator for an Historical LGBTQI site in progress, The Chroma Museum, <https://thestephenmeadchromamuseum.weebly.com/>

**Vincent Green**'s work was published in the Journal of Poetry Therapy (December 2018) and is forthcoming in The Courtship of Winds, Euphony Journal, Nixes Mate Review, and Packingtown Review. He has worked a number of odd jobs, including driving a yellow cab in New York City. He received a bachelor's degree in Philosophy

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in Soundings East, Dalhousie Review and Connecticut River Review. Latest book, "Leaves On Pages" is available through Amazon.

**Peter Mladinic** has published three books of poems: Lost in Lea, Dressed for Winter, and Falling Awake in Lovington, all with the Lea County Museum Press. He lives in Hobbs, New Mexico.

**Ron Riecki's** books include My Ancestors are Reindeer Herders and I Am Melting in Extinction (Apprentice House Press), Posttraumatic (Hoot 'n' Waddle), and U.P. (Ghost Road Press). Right now, he's watching Saturday Night Live's "Thanksgiving with the Keisters."

Born in Texas, and raised in the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA) in Georgia, USA, **Christina E. Petrides** now lives and works on Jeju Island, Republic of Korea. More than a score of her poems have been published in various periodicals around the world over the last two years. Her first children's book, Blueberry Man, was published in 2020 by Tchaikovsky Family Books.

**Marco Etheridge** lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His short fiction has been featured in many reviews and journals in Canada, The UK, and the USA. Notable recent credits include: *Ligeia Magazine*, *The First Line*, *After Happy Hour Review*, *The Metaworker*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Havik Fiction*, *Dream Noir*, *The Opiate Magazine*, *Cobalt Press*, *Literally Stories*, and *Blue Moon Review*, amongst many others. His non-fiction work has been featured at *Jonah Magazine*, *The Metaworker*, and *Route 7*. Marco's third novel, "Breaking the Bundles," is available at fine online booksellers.

A recovering economics professor, **Steve Slavin** earns a living writing math and economics books. The third volume of his short stories, *To the City, with Love*, was recently published.

**Alfredo Salvatore Arcilesi** has spent a decade penning award-winning short- and feature-length screenplays, while working as a full-time artisan baker. His prose work explores the trials and tribulations of ordinary people embedded in ordinary and extraordinary environments and conflicts. His short stories have appeared in over 45 literary journals worldwide, and was a finalist in the *Blood Orange Review* Literary Contest. In addition to several short pieces, he is currently working on his debut novel.

**Isaac Aday** is a graduate student of literature at the University of Texas at Dallas. He hopes, in his writing, that he can help people imagine the world as a happier place than it seems to be at times, and encourages the notion that there is always something, however small, to be thankful for each day. Though a relatively new author, he has already had fiction and poetry published in various small journals.

**Michael Aliprandini** lives in Italy and works internationally as a curriculum developer and teacher-trainer. His short stories and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in several publications, including Litro, Gravel, Queen Mob's Tea House, Counterclock, and Columbia Journal. He is a fiction reader for the online edition of Litro.

**Phyllis Carol Agins's** publishing history includes the novels Suisan (1992), Never The Same River Twice (coauthored with James Andrew Freeman, 1994), and her children's book, Sophie's Name (1992), which remained in print for 16 years. Also in 1992, One God, Sixteen Houses, an architectural study, was published. She has taught writing at Penn State University/Abington Campus and served on the board of the Philadelphia Writers' Conference for more than 14 years. A longtime resident of Pennsylvania, her travel essay "Steps Into China's Culture" was published in The Philadelphia Inquirer. Other essays have been featured in CWRU Magazine and Main Line Times. Recent short fiction has appeared in over fifty publications including Art Times, Eclipse, Glint Literary Journal, Lilith Magazine, The Minetta Review, Soundings East, Pennsylvania English, Valparaiso Fiction Review, Verdad, Santa Fe Writers Project, Westview, Whiskey Island Magazine, and Women Arts Quarterly Journal. Additionally, four stories excerpted from her upcoming novel, "Finding Maurice," have also been published.

**Allison Whittenberg** is a Philadelphia native who has a global perspective. If she wasn't an author she'd be a private detective or a jazz singer. She loves reading about history and true crime. Her other novels include Sweet Thang, Hollywood and Maine, Life is Fine, Tutored and The Sane Asylum.

**John Tavares'** previous publications include short fiction published in various alternative magazines, literary journals, quarterlies, and anthologies, online and in print: Blood and Aphorisms, Plowman Press, Green's Magazine, Filling Station, Whetstone, Broken Pencil, Tessera, Windsor Review, Paperplates, The Write Place at the Write Time, The Maple Tree Literary Supplement, The Writing Disorder, Gertrude, Turk's Head Review, Outside In Literary and Travel Magazine, Bareback Magazine, Rampike, Crab Fat Literary Magazine, The Round Up Writer's Zine, The Acentos Review, Gravel, Brasilia Review, Sediments Literary Arts-Journals, The Gambler, Red Cedar Review, Writing Raw, Treehouse Arts, The Remembered Arts Journal, Scarlet Leaf Review, Ginosko Literary Journal, Mgversion2>Datura, Riverhawk, Quail Bell, Adelaide Literary Magazine, Grey Border's Magazine, Free Lit Magazine, Montreal Writes, Yarnswoggle, Queen Mob's Tea House, Westview, New Reader Magazine, Event Horizon, IO literary Journal, Fishbowl Press, Otherwise Engaged Journal, Mobius, New Texas, Qwerty, Oddball Magazine, BlazeVOX, Celestial Review, Bombay Review. His short stories and creative nonfiction were published in The Siren, then Centennial College's student newspaper. Following journalism studies, his articles and features were published in various local news outlets in Toronto, including community and trade newspapers like the East York Times, the Beaches Town Crier and Hospital News, where he interned as an editorial assistant. Born and raised in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, John is the son of Portuguese immigrants from the Azores. His education includes graduation from 2-year GAS at Humber College in Etobicoke with concentration in psychology (1993), 3-year journalism at Centennial College in East York (1996) and the Specialized Honors BA in English from York University in North York (2012). He worked as a research assistant for the Sioux

Lookout Public Library and as a research assistant in waste management for the SLKT public works department and regional recycle association. He also worked for persons with disabilities at the Sioux Lookout Association for Community Living.

**Fabrizia Faustinella** is a physician and filmmaker, who practices as an internist in the Texas Medical Center in Houston, Texas. They have published numerous research articles and educational books. More recently, they've been inspired to write about their personal and professional experiences in a number of essays, which have been published in literary magazines and medical journals.

**Tamara Adelman** is a former massage therapist, ironman triathlete, and now writer and golfer living in Rancho Mirage, CA, the playground of Presidents and the Adelmans. They have a certificate in Creative Nonfiction from UCLA. They have been published in numerous literary journals including Five on the Fifth, Forge, Minetta Review, Mystery Tribune, North Dakota Quarterly, Pendor Magazine, Hobart, Rougarou, The Storyteller, and Willow Review. Additionally, their story "The Finish Line" was featured in the Literary Mama blog, And I Ran. My essay "Rustic Canyon" made the Notable Essays list on Best American Essays of 2016, which was edited by Jonathan Franzen.

**Erin Branning** is a fiction editor for TriQuarterly, Northwestern's literary journal, where they have published interviews with Ben Fountain and Lily King. They have also been published in Delmarva Review, Litbreak Magazine, and The Manifest-Station. They have recently worked with Ben Fountain, Peter Ho Davies, and Susan Minot in juried workshops at Aspen Words and Lan Samantha Chang at Napa Valley Writers' Conference. They hold

an MFA from Northwestern University, a Bachelor of Arts in economics from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Master of Public Policy from the University of Chicago. They've lived in London, Beijing, and Tokyo and now live in Chicago with their four children.

**Anna Fells** is an emerging writer and is currently at work on a novel.

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