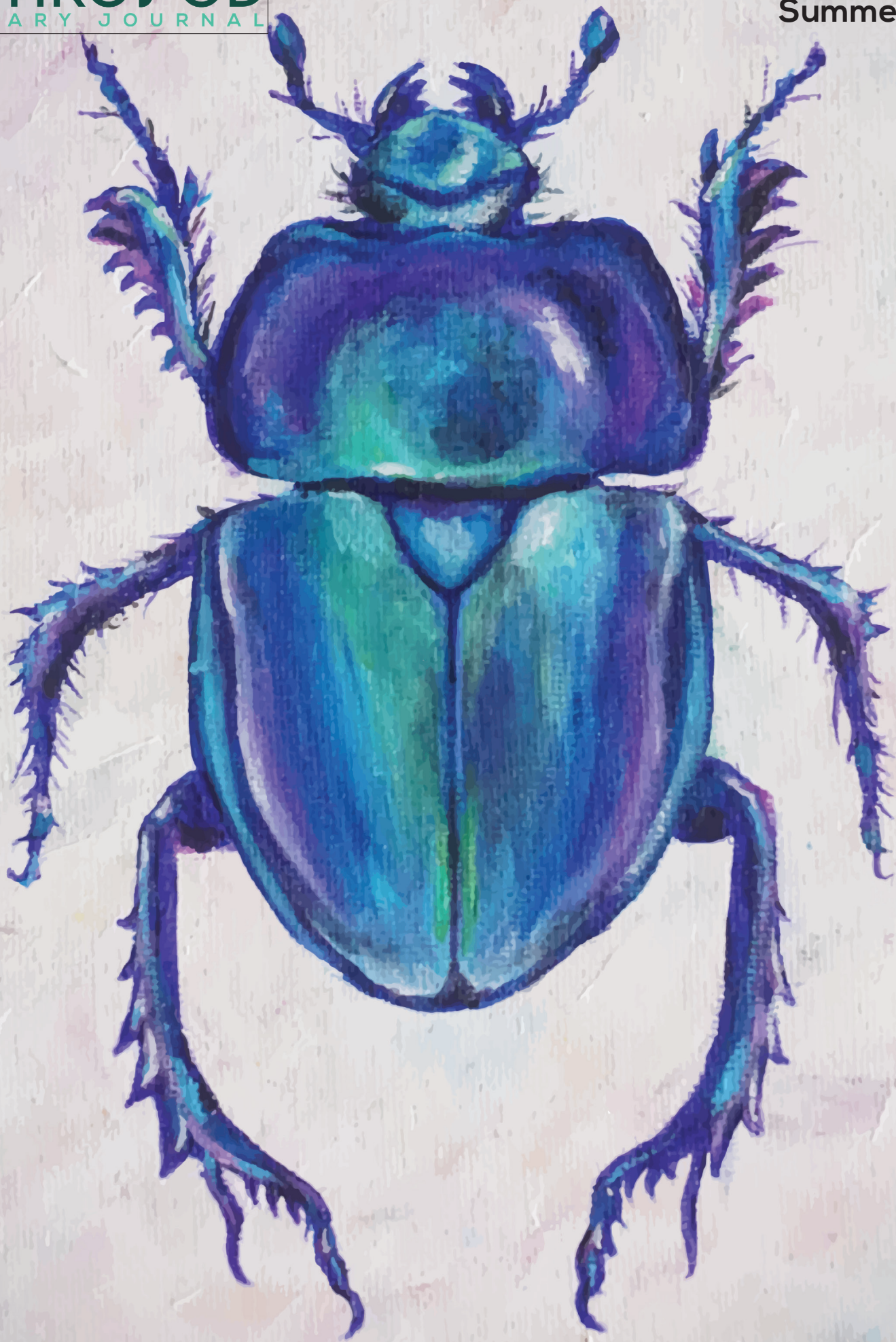
ARTHROPOD
LITERARY JOURNAL

Vol. 1 No. 1
Summer 2021



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SPECIAL THANKS TO
Dr. Grant Tracey
Dr. Jeremy Schraffenberger
The North American Review
The Community of Literary Magazines and Presses
Submittable

AND OF COURSE
An extra thanks to everybody who has submitted to Arthropod and will submit in the future. We truly can not have a journal without artists willing to share their work, and we are so lucky that such incredible artists have chosen to share with us.

Want to submit to future issues of Arthropod?
Find us on the web at www.arthropodlit.com
Submissions are handled through the Submittable platform; please find our submittable at arthropod.submittable.com

"If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

~ Toni Morrison

Dear Readers,

This is, obviously, not a book. Nor did I write it. So perhaps the quotation is a bit misplaced, but I think the spirit of the thing resonates with the story of Arthropod.

In December of 2020, I was sitting at my desk and trying to put together a list of goals for the coming year. One of these goals was to be rejected fifty times. In service of this goal, I went digging through various submission platforms to find journals that might accept my work. While I found a number of journals that fit the bill and sent my babies off to be lovingly curb-stomped by editors, it occured to me that there was something missing amongst these journals: a genuinely open-ended journal. There are amazing journals out there focusing on science fiction, literary fiction, pop art poetry, and everything else imagineable, but I wanted to see a journal that was just about art for art's sake, unconcerned about the constraints of genre or style, but just looking for good art from diverse artists.

Now, nearly eight months later, I am absolutely blown away by the response we've received. In the following volume, you'll find work by writers from multiple countries, continents, personal backgrounds, gender identities, racial identities, and so on and so forth. With Arthropod, we set out to create a diverse literary community, and this first volume has blown away our wildest expectations.

I have also learned a lot in these eight months. Namely, putting together a literary journal is hard work. Much harder than I ever anticipated, in fact. This volume was intended to release in March, and here we are about five months late. (Sorry about that, by the way.)

But I feel confident about a few things:
(1) The writing contained in these pages is well worth waiting for.
(2) Future editions of Arthropod will be on a more regular schedule!

At any rate, thank you all for bearing with us while we got our feet under us. Thank you to the authors who patiently waited to see their work published. Thank you to my staff who worked so hard to make my life easier going through hundreds of submissions. Thank you to potential readers who have continued reaching out and checking when the volume would be ready. It's finally here!

I hope you enjoy reading these pieces as much as I have.
Thank You
Keegan Bosch
Founding Editor

Poems by Edwin Williamson

Meditations on Rat Kings

A rat king is a collection of rats whose tails are intertwined and bound together. In folklore, rat kings are often seen as a bad omen, particularly associated with plagues

i wake up i am not right anymore
my reflection has five eyes no bones a
hundred teeth no skin

apocalypse (n.) revelation; uncovering;
the complete and final destruction of the world.

rats were not responsible for the black death

test:
1. a man meets a man meets a woman meets a man
question: what do they have in common?

a. disease
b. no rats
c. all of the above

an unmasked man in cvs asks me if i
am chinese (i am korean)

white boy from tinder asks me if i
eat bats ...this is familiar

bored boys tie together innocent rats they call it monster
rat kings are bad omens rat kings are killed by
being drowned in boiling water

one billion six hundred eighty million one hundred sixty
seven thousand eight hundred people live in east asia

are they all chinese now?

apocalypse (n.) a great disaster.

i go to sleep i seem to have misplaced my ethnicity
the white man is right i am a monster with five eyes no bones
a hundred teeth no skin i eat bats i am going to cause
the complete destruction of the world

Life As We Know It

The scientists say fungi are more closely related to animals—to
us—
than multicellular plants. The truth: the shiitake in your fridge
would treat you better than half the men in the bar
tonight,

and it'd taste better too.

I won't cry when the Anthropocene ends.
Instead, I'll breathe in the spores and thank God.

You're calling it the apocalypse,
and I tell you that it's lifting the veil—

I tell you this thing is ancient—a revelation. This is the last or-
gasm.
It's Eternity. The soft skulls of the mushrooms are pushing
through our pores

and I tell you they're loving us like men would—
eating us raw, swallowing our bones, cherishing our bodies—
only, it's better than men.

But when the mycelium fills my mouth, I want to tell you
you remind me of the moon; to tell you

I'm still here,

and it's inescapable.

You're looking at me with eyes that ask
if this is the end. I wonder:

if this is the end, why does it feel like
coming home?

Edwin Williamson (he/they) is a poet from Metro-Detroit. Recently, he's been enjoying lying in bed, staring at the wall, and staying in the shower for prolonged periods of time. Occasionally between all the staring and sleeping, he will write a poem or two. He is heavily inspired by writers like Zachary Schomburg, Franny Choi, and most importantly, his friends. Edwin is heavily inspired by fungi, the sea, and his irrational fear of teeth.

The Demons, The Darkness
Omar Essa

Ron does not care much for people. He believes speech is a currency with which he is frugal. He enjoys black coffee and Old Golds. The logo on the top flap of the pack peeks out of a chest pocket on his worn-out denim button-up, reading Old Gold upside down when facing someone. He has a shaggy head of white hair that hangs down past the brim of a trucker hat. His face is stained by the sun. He wears thick glasses with wide frames, and he has an overgrown gray beard. His white moustache is browned by tobacco. He would vote Republican if he were not a felon.

Jim loves women. He appreciates them all indiscriminately. He could take or leave a drink and is fond of betting on the horses, but more fond of cocaine. He likes to laugh and tell stories with the misty eyes of a man aware his grand times have ended. He speaks about the world with a levity uncharacteristic of his 54 years. He is a tall Irishman, about 6'3", with brown, wavy tufts falling over his forehead and a well-groomed, distinguished salt-and-pepper goatee. He shaves around it every morning with a straight razor. The blade is dull now and leaves marks, but it is the only item he has kept from his father's possessions. He is well-dressed, considering his fiscal limitations. He wears collared shirts and the same aged loafers every day. Each night he cleans his shoes and trims the frayed threads with a nail clipper.

Mark loves his teenage daughter more than I will ever love a person in my lifetime. I know this because he told me, and I had no difficulty believing him. He is the shortest and fattest at our table, and he is the product of a lifetime working in kitchens. He has burn scars on his arms and the sweaty complexion of having just been in a sauna. Years ago, when his hair started to thin, he exchanged his mullet for a short, spiked style that requires frivolous amounts of gel. He still has a mullet in the photo on his driver's license. He speaks with a booming showman's bellow that fills a room, and he laughs loudest at his own jokes.

I am quiet and grateful to be in their company. I mix a few drops of hot sauce into a dollop of ketchup on my plate with a french fry as I silently make a tally of the hearts I've broken. I suspect the french fry has been baked. I only speak in short responses. I am fearful of the intrusive thoughts on my current reality, but I respect them.

I have not eaten much these first three days at the City Mission. There was an apple the first day. It was small and tasteless. I waited in line with the others in the cafeteria. I even took a tray. When I reached the serving window, I was noticeably surprised. I had imagined a gray prison-slop. I worked one summer at a bakery. Each night we would donate the leftover bread to our local food bank. I expected chunks of meat in an unidentifiable sauce with stale bread. I was impressed when I saw spaghetti, meatballs in a hearty marinara sauce, and freshly baked garlic bread, golden and glis-

tening with melted butter. As soon as I smelled the food, however, my stomach issued a warning. I followed the line, mouthing the words "No, thank you," to the cook and continuing on. There was a table against the wall that had a bowl of fruit and pastries on it.

I snatched the apple and planned to leave the cafeteria, but Jim was beckoning to me with a gratuitous hand gesture. Observing the trio, I did not want to meet them, but I would not dare to be rude to anyone on my first night. I walked over with my lonely apple on my plastic tray and sat down in the empty chair. There was barely enough space on the square, wooden table for all four trays.

"Great!" Jim said joyfully, raising both hands shoulder-height. "We needed a fourth at our table because Alexander left over the weekend," he said to the others at the table and not to me. He leaned in and said more quietly, "You know, I couldn't stand the way he insisted we use his full name." Ron snorted and Mark rolled his eyes. I hadn't learned their names yet, and I remained silent, hoping to skip customary introductions. I had planned to keep entirely to myself. I took a bite of my apple and absorbed the room. They resumed a conversation about specific players of the New York Jets and I was grateful to be ignored. I finished my apple and placed the core on the tray. Ron- having not spoken yet and startling me with his gravelly baritone- pointed and said, "There's coffee over there. It's shit but it's strong." I nodded, stood up, and went to the large carafe on its own table. The plastic cafeteria mugs were small enough to be perceived mocking, so I filled two and returned to my seat.

"Straight black?" Jim observed, impressed. "I can't do that. I need, like, ten packets of sugar to get the job done." I shrugged and sacrificed my silence to respond, "I've taken it this way since Grade School." He raised his brow and grinned a coy approval. Ron looked at me from under his trucker hat and asked, "What's your name, kid?"

"Elliot."

"I'm Ron. This is Mark. This idiot is Jim, don't encourage him." I smiled politely and nodded. I thought the generic nature of these names humorous. He looked at my barren tray and asked, "Are you sick off dope?" I shook my head and answered,

"No. I just can't think about food right now." I inhaled deeply and looked bashfully at each of them as I said, "The last few days have been really rough and this place is... a shock, I guess would be the word." I took a sip of the coffee. It was like gasoline, extremely hot, and coated my tongue with coffee grinds like sand.

"This place is alright once you get used to it," Mark said.

"Did Mommy and Daddy kick you out? A kid your age, I would think you would be able to crash on someone's couch. You can't be more than, what, twenty-five?"

"Twenty-one," I confirmed. "It's a long story." Ron nodded the understanding that he wouldn't be understanding.

"Well, hey!" Mark said brightly. "Let us know if you need anything. Just don't ask us for money," he added and chuckled.

The second day I ate just slightly more. There was an ambitious granola bar that required three mugs of the diesel coffee to finish. I took the food they served for each meal and gave it to one of the others at the table. Jim will eat anything offered to him. My only interaction with the other residents occurred during the meals. I met with a social worker who explained how the Mission operates and their rules. She aggressively encouraged me to attend their "faith services". I spent most of the day at the library applying to jobs online. Today, I had gone downtown to apply at all the restaurants in person. I was hungry enough to eat by the time I returned for dinner.

"What are you guys doing tonight?" Jim asks the table. Ron shrugs. He does the same thing every night. He sits under the wooden pavilion in the park across the street and chain-smokes while he watches people play dominoes at a picnic table. Mark has work. "I'm taking a walk downtown. It's such a beautiful evening," Jim says to no one in particular.

"Can I join you?" I ask.

"Sure," he decides nonchalantly. "But don't get me in any trouble," he adds with a grin. I laugh. It feels unfamiliar and weightless.

"I should be worrying about you. Aren't you one of those men that cat-call women on the street and try to flirt with waitresses? I know your type," I accuse him, waving a french fry in his direction.

"Not me," he gasps defensively. "I don't have the confidence for that behavior. I don't know how some guys can just talk to random women on the street. Put me in a bar with a few drinks and a girl on her own, I can work some magic. But now that I'm sober and have no cash, I can't even look at a pretty girl without feeling inadequate." He says all this with a smile. I notice the way he alleviates sadness with a grin and wayward hand gestures. It is an admirable skill I would like to learn. It is as if he is assuring us life is not all that serious and nothing he could say is worth feeling upset over.

"What time are you heading out?"

"Not sure. I have some affairs I should tend to first. If you're around I'll let you know when I'm leaving." I nod in agreement and eat my french fry. It had been baked. I gather my things onto my tray and stand. Ron offers me a cigarette that I gratefully accept, though I have my own. I smoke alone against the side of the building for about an hour until Jim comes into the parking lot. He notices me and continues to walk onto the sidewalk as I join him.

We walk in silence for a couple of blocks until we come to a small

park in front of the City Hall building. It is a small, forgettable building with plain columns on the facade. The park has one walking path that meanders in a winding pattern and exits on the other end to a bus stop. At the center of the park, there is an inactive fountain with a marble statue of a local historical figure inside. An elderly couple share a bench and a crowd of twenty-something bums huddle at the far corner, surrounded by smoke.

"Let's take a break here for a bit." Jim says. He sits down on a park bench and I join him, lighting a cigarette. "There are no women out tonight," he declares as he scans the empty park.

"Not in this town," I respond. I loathe this city. I do not belong to it. I just ended up here. I try very hard not to think about the circumstances that led me here.

"Don't speak poorly about my city. I've lived my whole life here," he says. He adds, somberly, "But I think you're right about the women. Limited choices here. It takes a miracle to find a decent girl in this town."

"You should leave. Forget this place," I declare.

"I will once my mother dies."

"Where will you go?"

"My brother lives in Virginia. I want to start a business with him. I have some ideas. I just need to get my affairs in order first." I notice he is concentrating on my cigarette. I take one out and offer it to him wordlessly. He shakes his head. "I quit. I only used to smoke when I was drinking."

"Is that how you ended up in a shelter?" I ask. "The drinking?"

"Among other things," he says. He looks down at the grass that is mostly brown. I can see his thoughts becoming unwelcome. His face reveals him, thoughts float before him like the wisps of smoke from my cigarette. "No," He decides solemnly.

"I don't mean to pry." I am very cautious with people these days. Although I have gained dining companions, I don't know how any of them could be provoked or how that would manifest. I decide to let the matter dissipate, but often I do not adhere to my own decisions. Impulsively, I continue, "How about this: I'll tell you my story if you tell me yours. My curiosity is unbearable."

He smiles but does not look up. He enjoys striking deals with people. "Alright. I spent three months in County. I lost my Section 8 apartment, so my probation officer sent me to The Mission."

"Why did you go to jail?"

"Now, that's the real story. I was involved with this bad-news girl and the police came to my place with a warrant on her. I had quite a bit of coke in my apartment, and she told the cops where to find it. It was out of spite, I think. I'm pretty sure she had been drugging me for months, too. I kept ending up in the ER with drugs in my toxicology I had never taken. Barbiturates. And some

others. I only take uppers: that's how I knew I was being drugged. It was a crazy year."

"Wow. I'm sorry, man." What else could one say? I feared any opinion I offered would be damaging.

"Yeah, thanks." He assumes his smile again. Shaking his head, he chuckles and says, mostly to the dead grass, "Women, Man."

Sometimes, I feel as though moments are never improved by my thoughts. I try to value all the inexpressible feelings being held as perfectly placed brush strokes on the canvas of our experience. I watch the elderly couple walk past us toward the park's exit. They hold hands and move silently. I admire their resilience. I cannot imagine finding someone who is able to be loved in such an awful place. I despise the suffering, untended lawn of the dilapidated park. I am disgusted by the trash that accumulates along the curbs. I hate walking along the uneven, cracked, neglected sidewalks lining empty streets. Most of all, I am tormented by the people, good or evil, that have been defeated by the city. Jim, like a child abandoned in a desert; the youthful bums, each ashen leaves of a once vibrant and hopeful plant; Ron, content simply with bad coffee and cheap cigarettes, without anything to wake up for but not strong enough to let go; and myself, lost, broke, and finally alone in a place that is not my home. We are all the remnants of a dying thing.

"It's your turn," says Jim, looking at me now with refreshed eyes. I can not think of a way to tell him the truth that is worth anything.

"There isn't really a story. I was living with a girl. She kicked me out. I had nowhere to go."

"That's not the whole story."

"It really is. Without the useless details, I suppose." I say simply. Jim reaches out to my hand and takes the cigarette from between my fingers. He puts it to his lips and takes a long drag. Eventually, he says,

"The details are the story. Your whole life led you here. Whatever you did- I don't care what it was, I am not one to judge- all your actions since you were a kid brought you here. If I was wrong, you would have had somewhere else to go." I sigh and nod my head. I light another cigarette.

"You're right, I think." I fill my lungs with smoke, let it pour out my nostrils, look at him, and say, "The last few years have been rough." Jim drops his hand on my shoulder compassionately.

"It's okay, kid." He says. "You can only go up from here."

We leave the park and walk past the restaurants downtown, admiring all the people that are enjoying an evening out. We wander back in twilight through dirty alleys to the Mission, returning just before curfew. The residents are watching the NBA final in a crowded communal room. Most are filthy and asleep in plastic chairs. Jim and I head straight to the large open room

where everyone sleeps. There are thirty-five beds, each with a cabinet and two drawers next to it for personal belongings. The bathroom is much like a gym locker room, with toilet stalls on one side and a row of showers on the other. I wash the city off of me. There are certain habits I hold on to which help me resist defeat. Getting into bed clean is one of them.

I had not slept the first two nights and I expect the third to be similar. I am most scared in my life of the moments before sleep when all I can do is think. All my life I have tried to put it away from me. I have stood in beautiful places and kissed women who could moderate the beating of my heart. I have stopped breathing for a number of reasons. I have experienced polarizing lives in the same year and from minute to minute. I have constantly sought to separate myself from it, and I have yielded as many times as I have attempted.

I tried to fall asleep to music, but it alters the way my blood explores me. Then I tried to hide from myself by reciting poems in my mind. I've memorized poems about many things; life, love, aging, dying, drugs, even forgiveness- but never any about happiness. That worked for a time. It is always difficult to reach the twilight moments before sleep that blur reality. In those moments I imagine everything that happens is neither real nor unreal. Memories become dreams and the world around me seeps into my unconscious to be imprinted. I believe whatever I witness in those moments can be more honest than the truth. Sometimes the ethereal twilight never comes. Sometimes I cannot put it away from me and the thoughts keep me awake. I stare at the ceiling and watch my whole life acted out by the shadows. I make decisions for my life to be forgotten in the morning. I review the tallies I have made in my head of disappointments; of broken hearts and wasted chances; of dead friends and dead pets and other dying people that I know. I examine the records of pain I have witnessed in my life. I exploit every emotion I have until there is nothing left to feel. Sometimes, if I am lucky, after all this I am tired enough to sleep.

But tonight I am not fortunate enough. The men come to their beds and the lights are shut off. Soon undulating snores fill the humid air and I put my headphones in. I listen to soft acoustic songs that might promote sleep.

Hope defers. Bloodshot eyes and the unbearable absence of cause or consequence pull me from my bed. Times in the night like this I would usually smoke, but once the doors lock they remain so until sunrise. Sometimes I feel an urge to write about God and all his burdens, but I remember I don't believe in anything and I can't allow myself to acknowledge it or Him in my art. The idea is attractive, though, and it would be so easy to credit someone else for Everything.

But souls cannot be eternal. In fact, it is their mortality that gives them value. If things lasted we wouldn't love them. Certainly this must be true of souls if nothing else.

What do I do with these thoughts? Every opportunity in my life has been lost in the same way. Very easily, I decide in the depth of this insufferable and ordinary night to resolve everything. Online, I purchase a train ticket to Penn Station. Tomorrow I will jump off the Manhattan Bridge. Enough scotch will offer the final nerve I need. I suddenly feel so much lighter as all my concerns dissolve.

I decide to take another long, hot shower as everyone else sleeps. Silently, I gather soap, clothes, and a towel from my locker. The bay of beds is both deafening and silent, for no noise is being made intentionally but the room is filled with the rhythmic hums and horns of thirty-five sleeping men. We have all effectively failed at everything. God departed from here ong ago.

I do not turn on the lights in the bathroom. Small windows near the ceiling seep moonlight onto the mold-stained walls. I turn the corner and slip in something that makes the ceramic tiles of the floor hazardous. My tailbone lands first, then my elbows. It was a heavy fall. I groan in the silence, and it sounds orchestral against the walls in the empty air. I pick myself up and turn on the light.

This story and I both end the moment the light comes on and the sanguine floor glistens. Sitting up against the wall, Jim is unmoving and inanimate. His arms laid out at his sides, the veins in wrists are opened vertically. His father's straight razor is open on the tile next to him. I never thought much about the origin of the term "deathly pale" until this moment.

The demons and darkness reside in all of us. This is an affliction that will speak in your voice and convince you it is absolute.

I am silent and expressionless and unfeeling. I kneel in the blood and hug Jim's head against my chest. His curly tufts of soft gray hair brush my chin. I cannot think of anything else to do and I think of nothing at all. The fluorescent lights dissolve as I close my eyes. In here is paralysis. In here there is no world. Out there is unchanged. Suddenly, I am certain of nothing but the undeniable love forged from the unbearable pressure on the soul of shared pain.

I sit holding Jim's head against me for a long time, feeling the physical contact will aid his soul in reaching peace. Eventually, I slip into sleep, but only after I decide to remember this for the rest of my life.

Omar Essa is an aspiring writer and poet from New York. The son of an Egyptian and and an American, His work focuses mainly on emotional and social conflicts explored through accounts of personal experiences. His short story 'Summer Storms' was recently published in the Adelaide Literary Magazine. His short story 'The Lighthouse' was recently featured on Modernliterature.org.

Poems by Sreyash Sarkar

It Was All Too Much

I don't know how
But bodies under my window
Managed to open the seal of poppies.
How further they were,
In their life of bloom
Bodies, were guessing.
Yellow, white or red ?
It's a game, we have to play
To direct strict shapes of affection
At those, who remain.

Keep an eye open, said the bodies
As I peered from inside
For those with whom you can sit in water,
Jeered the bodies
As I sit in my bathtub, unable to move
Thinking
Silence missed me, by a toilet brush.

Middle C, strike the Middle C, said the bodies
As the piano
Shudders at the touch of a non-author
Like me,
Scurrying to smell music
Over homelessness.

Find your seasoning, the bodies clamour
I don't find any.
Only eggs boil boisterously
As smokes reflect on
Tarnished tiles
A stillness, in time
Rushes in
And like a long-lost love
My neck pain returns
To say hi.

In and Out of the Woods

After aloneness,
My grand
Coming-out-of the-woods
Stopped a deer on track.
Piercing eyes, heavy in altruism
Beside it, a tree
Moss growing on its sides
Moss lifting a veil
And moss, remaining.
On it an insect. Waiting.
Mutually exclusive.
And small.
Heartbeats. River. Forest.

I, the river-noise
I, the forest chirp
Promise each other windows
Spaces, so thick
That if cracked open
They would let out
All the flux of my injuries,
Butterflies in arms.
We dare not.
We acquit ourselves
Of this hiddenness
To finally prove
That my breath
Was white-
A description of silence.
Heartbeats. River. Forest.

I, the heartbeats
In between spasms
Of light
Saw
The curve of exile
Of these eyes
That are washed
Clean of bliss
The retina's
Lack of solace.
We render
Arithmetic, incompetent:

There is zero promised land.

There is zero promised year.

Life equal to life.

Arrest

I had been there
Believe me when I say
I had seen that
Seeing with me
That I can sing that
Shouts from
Nowhere
When I can spin that

Hues depart
When I mind that
My sky
In shame
When I read that
Spring
Unpacks
To tell that
Flowers
Sneeze
To smell that
Songs
Cannot hurt
To claim that
Windows
Lie
To hear that
I'm fine
And all that.

I cannot breath
In words
That spot that
Age is
Shape
That write that
Fear
Flew down
To croon that
A final
Fall
To save that
If I
Throw stones
To mark that
The wind
Also
Scribbles that
I'll blow out
The candle
To remind that
Erase
Clarity anyway
To stop that.

I am stunned that
At first light
Families died that
Free of its rules
Clocks tick that
Nowhere to go
I sit in to sing that
Not in love
But to say that
I am.

Sreyash Sarkar(he/him), is a poet, painter, Hindustani Classical musician, and an aspiring researcher in Microelectronics and Nanotechnology. Having been nominated and won a plethora of literary and art prizes, he is the youngest polymath to be featured in Education World magazine, Le Mauricien. He takes pleasure in identifying rare Indian scripts, composing, cooking. He is working on an album–Mois–featuring 12 compositions based on each month. He divides his time between Kolkata and Paris, where he is pursuing his doctoral studies. He can be reached at sreysarkar.weebly.com.

Flipped
Daniel Deisinger

Meghan's seat belt cut into her stomach as she drove to work. She fiddled with it, trying to get it to sit the right way as she sat at a stoplight. She got it after a second, the light turned green, and she kept driving.

***

A week later, something jumped onto her bed as she slept in her apartment. It shocked her awake and bounced her up. Her heart pounded as she looked for the intruder. Someone had broken in. She flipped the light on, and it burned her eyes.

No one. Nobody stood on the bed or next to it. The covers twisted around her legs, and she sat at an angle, turned ninety degrees, staring at the wrong wall. She spun on her bed and took in her empty bedroom.

She grabbed a gymnastics trophy off her dresser and spent ten minutes hunting through her apartment, testing the locks on windows and doors and peeking into closets. She held the trophy like a cudgel, upside down. She found nothing. A nightmare. It must have been. No one would break into an apartment on the tenth floor of a fifteen-floor building. She went back to bed, setting the trophy on the nightstand next to her phone.

***

A few days into the next week, she headed to an account manager's office. She had to talk to him about the new accounts for Q2, and then she had to speak with the marketing director about the Q1 ad campaigns. She hummed "Free Fallin'," which had come on in the car.

Her tan flats left the floor as she turned a corner. Her body shot upward, she pitched forward, and her back slammed into the drop ceiling. She punched through a panel before she fell back down to her stomach, skinning her knees on the brutal, unyielding office carpet. She chomped her tongue hard enough to draw blood.

Voices approached, and co-workers found Meghan sitting on the ground, rubbing her head and looking up, face a twisted mask of surprise and confusion. Dust and broken ceiling pieces littered the ground around her. "I...I flew up and hit the ceiling." "What do you mean?" a man said as he helped her to her feet. "You jumped?"

"No, I...." Meghan looked at the gap in the ceiling. "It was like gravity had reversed. And then I fell."

"Fell? Haven't you learned how to fall after all those years of gymnastics?" A woman said. She looked up as Meghan glared at her. "It looks like a piece of ceiling fell. Did it hit your head?"

A few minutes later, Meghan sat at her desk, ice pack pressed against her head. She spat blood into the wastebasket and glared at the ceiling. Maybe a panel had fallen onto her.

***

Three days later, on Saturday, Meghan carried a box of old cookware down to the storage of her apartment building. She took an elevator to the parking garage and crossed to the storage area. She balanced the box on her leg while she fished the key out. Key in, pull open door, enter storage space. Once she found her apartment's closet, she had to rearrange things to make space for the cookware and spent the next ten minutes playing Tetris with old Christmas decorations from her mom, clothes she meant to donate, and a surfboard she had never used.

If I move this box of ornaments over here, that means I can put this bag of old jeans on top of it. Ah, dammit, the surfboard fell over again. Have to...prop it up...in the corner. At last--enough space. She stood up, picked up the box of cookware, and fit it into the space she had made.

She dusted off her hands, closed the door to her closet, fished her phone out to check the time--plenty of afternoon left--and flew up until her body hit the ceiling.

Her head hit first, and then her body crumpled into a fetal curl. Breath blew from her lungs. The shock jolted her hand open, and her phone crashed to the cement floor, nine feet below her as she lay on the ceiling. Her body pressed against the dirty surface, and she let out a painful cry. She rolled her back against the ceiling and looked down at her phone. The screen had a deep, flickering crack.

Her stomach bucked. Her vision spun. White dots flashed. A lump on her skull pushed her hair aside. Her right wrist shouted at her, and her hip stung. Something pulled up onto the ceiling. She ran her hands over her clothes but found no wire, no rope, nothing to lift her. She rolled to her hands and knees on the ceiling. Dust flew down her throat, and her stomach twisted as she coughed. A fluorescent light blared a foot away. She rubbed her eyes and tried to stand.

She collapsed back against the ceiling, eyes shut as the world spun on every axis it had. She groaned and whimpered, pulling her sore body toward the door. She pushed herself to her knees and reached for the doorknob; a full foot separated the handle from her fingers. Hands pressed against the wall, she put one foot flat on the ceiling--her legs shook and failed her. Meghan slumped to her side. She looked over her shoulder, at her phone, on what used to be the ground. Panting, swallowing, Meghan turned around and pulled herself until she laid over it. She got to one knee.

She fell, striking the cement ground next to her phone. Several minutes went by; her body lay under grimy fluorescent lights, motionless.

The door to the storage area opened, and a black middle-aged woman came in, carrying a box. A moment later, she found Meghan and ran to her side. "Miss? Miss, are you all right?"

One of Meghan's eyes cracked open. She shifted and grabbed

the woman's wrist. Everything hurt. "What on earth happened to you?" the woman asked.

Meghan tilted her head back at the ceiling. She picked up her phone, squeezing it tight. "I got stuck to the ceiling," she said. "And then I fell."

***

The woman, Cynthia Anderson from the sixth floor, helped Meghan limp back to her apartment. The elevator, as it sped to the tenth floor, sent her into nauseated spirals. Meghan collapsed onto a chair as Cynthia ran around, finding painkillers and something to pack ice in. Meghan's wrist swelled, her knee bled--again--and thoughts bounced inside her head like rubber balls inside a bathroom. Crashing everywhere. "Meghan, I need to get you to a doctor," Cynthia said. Meghan looked at her. She'd been sitting in the chair for an hour. Or a minute. "I'm a nurse, and I think you have a concussion. You said you fell?"

Meghan looked up at the ceiling. A popcorn ceiling, with millions and billions of tiny, jagged stalactites. "No, I...." She swallowed a lump in her throat. "Something happened and I was lying on the ceiling, and then I fell and hit the ground."

"That concussion must be worse than I thought. Let's get you to my car."

***

She had a concussion. The doctor recommended sleep. "No, you don't have to wake up every two hours. Just sleep." Meghan hung on to Cynthia like a high bar as they went up to her apartment. Cynthia offered to check on her in the morning. Meghan agreed, holding tight to the counter.

***

Pain rocked Meghan from one side to the other, splashing over her like waves on a ship. Fragmented thoughts and vivid, feverish half-dreams boiled her skin.

She stood in the center of her bedroom. Her bed floated over her.

She stepped over the lintel to get to the hallway.

She looked out the window, up at the distant ground. A friend beckoned to her from far below.

She woke up the next morning in the center of her living room.

***

"I'm really sorry," Meghan said Monday morning. She sat on the floor under the kitchen counter, one hand squeezing it. "I feel awful. I've...I've been lightheaded for a few days now, and I fell really bad on Saturday. I got a concussion." Her cracked phone flickered in her hand as her boss spoke. "Because of the ceiling tile? Uh...maybe. I feel a little better, but...I don't even think I should be driving, much less working on sales reports." She let a long breath out as her boss went on. "As long as I can get a little extension for the Q3 after-report, I'll have enough time. I hope to feel better by tomorrow."

She said goodbye and hung up, rubbing her forehead. She replaced the ice pack atop her head. The swollen lump had shrunk, and she shivered, but it weighed her down.

Twice more since waking up on Sunday, confused and cold in the middle of her living room.

The first time as she showered, minutes after Cynthia had called to check on her. She had grabbed for the shower handle, and her wet hand had slipped. She crashed to the ceiling--the popcorn ceiling had sliced hundreds of tiny cuts up and down her left side. She reached out and grabbed the shower curtain rod, counting the seconds. She'd spent her entire childhood grabbing bars, and she focused on her landing. At her best guess, she spent five minutes on the ceiling as the shower ran, gusting steam up onto her. When it ended, she swung on the rod. Her hands slipped off the warm, slick metal, and she crumpled to the hard tile. She gasped as more new pain shot through her.

The water ran on, crashing onto the floor of the shower. She stretched her body out, bracing herself between the shower stall, the toilet, and the wall, breath coming faster and faster, heart swelling in her throat. Steam stung her eyes. The cold tile dug into the marks on her side. She inched herself across the floor until she curled herself around the toilet, shivering, dripping, hurting, and crying.

The next morning, in the kitchen, she maneuvered to the sink as she held tight to the edge of the counter. She wrapped her arms around the edge of the sink and pried open a cabinet with the tips of her fingers. By tenths of inches, she worked a mug out and turned the water on.

The second time had come at night, before bed. She had called Cynthia again.

"It happened again. In the shower. I was on the ceiling for five minutes, Cynthia, you have to believe me!"

"Oh, hon, you poor thing. Confusion and dizziness are common concussion symptoms--it just felt like you were on the ceiling. My husband is home right now, he could come up and help you out. If you're okay with that, of course."

Meghan's eyes had been on the ceiling. "I guess that's okay."

"Okay, he'll be up in a few minutes. I'll have him bring some oatmeal cookies. They might not help your head, but they'll taste good."

Ten minutes later, a short, middle-aged black man appeared at the door to her apartment, beaming and holding a plate of cookies. "Meghan, right? By God, you look...." His eyes flicked up and down her body. "Uh, Meghan, you live with anyone? Boyfriend?"

"No, no." Meghan turned around and led him in. "I'm here alone."

"But...you have a boyfriend?"

Bruised. Fearful. "Mr. Anderson, I'm single. No one is doing this to me." She sat on the floor, near her cof-

fee table. She reached out and wrapped her arm around its leg.

"Oh, good. Good. Because, you know, I've seen that kinda stuff a few times. Here." He held out the plate of cookies. "Go on. Cynthia's a dynamite baker."

"Thank you," Meghan whispered, taking one of the cookies and slipping the edge between her teeth.

Mr. Anderson--Boyd--had asked her about possible triggers for dizziness and falling. Slips? Momentary losses of thought? Meghan didn't know. She tried to explain what had been happening. It couldn't be, of course. She had hit her head. She nibbled the cookie down to crumbs as she hung on to the coffee table. Boyd told her to be careful, get some rest, and to call him or Cynthia if she needed help. He left the plate of cookies in the kitchen and said goodbye.

Meghan sat, clinging to the table. She swallowed hard and slipped her eyes shut. Darkness spun around her. She let the table go. She remained on the floor. Staggering into the kitchen, she stood in the center until she grabbed the edge of the counter. Moments later, her feet flipped over her head. She lost her grip and crashed to the ceiling, at least escaping another head wound. A few moments later, the tenant above her stomped on his floor.

Meghan stared down at the plate of oatmeal cookies on the counter until she fell ten minutes later. She ended up on her back on the kitchen floor, crumbs scattered around her, after bouncing off the counter and rolling.

The next morning, the mug she held ran over with water, soaking her hands, and she dropped it into the sink as cold struck her. She slapped the faucet off and sank to her knees in front of the sink.

A jagged crack ran around where she had hit the ceiling the night before. Enough force to almost punch through to the apartment above hers.

She put her hand to her pocket for her phone. It still rested on the counter after she talked with her boss. She shoved it into her pocket. With one arm over her head, she made her way to her bedroom, clinging to the refrigerator, the couch, and her bed. She wrapped herself in a duvet and balanced a pillow on her head. After creeping to her dresser, she took out a belt and began to find a way to strap the pillow down. She got as far as looping the belt around her throat before throwing it into the corner, shaking her head. She took her phone out and sent a message to Cynthia, asking if she had a bike helmet she could borrow.

And then she sat in her bedroom, holding the pillow over her head, sweating under heavy blankets, staring up at the ceiling.

She jolted awake, poison slicing through her veins. She looked around and found herself still on the ground, sleeping on the pillow she'd been holding over her head. She pulled her phone out. Almost noon.

She sat back against the edge of her bed, clutching the pillow to her chest. She buried her face in it, and her stomach woke her an hour later. She grabbed a fistful of carpet and took a deep breath.

Crawling across the carpet, pillow and duvet covering her, she returned to the kitchen. From her spot on the floor, she opened the fridge and grabbed the closest item, a tub of yogurt. She pulled open a drawer and grabbed a spoon sight-unseen, and huddled under the open drawer as she ate.

And nothing happened. She emptied the tub of yogurt and tossed it toward the garbage. Soft food in her belly strengthened her. She closed the drawer she hid under. Licking her lips and breathing out, she stood. Everything spun. The ground quivered under her feet. Afternoon light shifted through the window, but she didn't go anywhere.

Until she bent for her pillow.

Her hands caught the edge of the counter, hanging on this time. The entire length of the countertop cracked and separated from the cabinets underneath it, groaning as it pulled away.

It held, attached at the end against the wall, and for a moment, Meghan hung under the ceiling. It waited a foot below her; she released and landed on her feet. She'd ruined her countertop. At first, it had been a minute. Then five. Then ten. How long this time?

She walked to her bedroom, stepping over the lintel, wincing every time her foot came down on the popcorn ceiling. She stood over her bed. Her gymnastics trophy remained on the nightstand. When she fell, how hard could it be to summon those championship skills back and keep from hurting herself? As she fell onto her bed, of all things? Even softer than a mat!

She knelt and then laid on her stomach--when she fell, she flopped onto her back without pain.

A laugh escaped her. It turned into a roar and a scream. I've been flipping and grabbing bars my whole life! It's not like it's anything new! Laughing until her stomach hurt, she laid on her bed, hair spread out around her head and sheets in disarray.

She sat up and put her feet on the floor, curling her toes into the carpet. A foot away, the golden gal on top of her gymnastics trophy applauded her. She picked up the trophy and held it to her body.

But what next? She could keep herself safe--now she had to figure out why. She'd call Cynthia and Boyd and try to convince them. What about her friend Marie? Marie would back her up. She'd be there to he--

She hit the ceiling hard enough to punch through it, cracking through the plaster and wood and shooting into the next apartment, an empty bedroom. She screamed and clutched the gymnastics trophy as she continued up. Her body turned, and her back hit the next ceiling first, denting it as she came to rest and

forcing all the breath from her lungs.

Pain rolled down her spine. She squeezed the trophy to her chest, eyes shut tight. They have to believe me now. How else could I do something like this? As long as they look--

The pressure pulling her up surged; she crashed through the ceiling, shooting upward into the next apartment, smashing apart a bed and the next ceiling, shrieking as she plummeted toward the top of the building. She gained speed, crashing through two more levels until she entered the penthouse. The old woman who lived there jumped out of her skin when Meghan shot through her floor and crashed into the ceiling, crumpling into a ball.

Meghan looked up. She curled around her trophy. Years of taking falls hadn't left her just yet. She spotted the old woman. "Help."

A force yanked on her, and the final barrier between her and endless sky cracked. "Help! Help me!" Meghan shouted. "I need help! Call someone, please! Do something!" The ceiling crackled, crumbling dust to the floor. "Please! Please!"

It gave way, and bright blue sky greeted Meghan.

She fell up with nothing to stop her. Arms and legs spun. Buildings flashed in and out of her sight. The sun carved arcs in her eyes. Her trophy caught the light and turned it to golden spears, attracting attention from anyone near windows.

She glanced off the edge of a cell tower on top of the building, and it knocked the scream out of her mouth. Her thigh struck a dish, and she cried out in pain, still climbing. Her shoulder hit something, and numbness filled it to the fingertips as she twirled into the sky.

You spent your entire childhood grabbing bars!

Her numb fingertips caught part of the tower, and she jolted to a stop. Her toes hung up toward the sky, her hair gusted around her face, and her right arm cradled the gymnastics trophy to her chest. Her left hand squeezed the metal bar with all the strength it had.

Breath pounded in and out of her. She craned her head up, taking in the immense height of the cell tower and her building. Distant, tiny cars drove through streets far under her head.

The cell tower creaked. Metal squealed and bent. The bar Meghan clung to twisted, pointing upward. Meghan's fingers dug furrows into it.

It snapped; the sky grew, and the ground shrank. The cell tower's final segment flashed closer and closer, a red light atop it glowing every few seconds. She reached out her hand as she spun, and her shoulder pulled out of its socket as her fingers wrapped around the final rung on the cell tower's metal skeleton. Pain tore across her back, and she let out a howl. She looked up.

Endless sky waited to swallow her--licking its lips as she hung under it, pointed straight down its throat.

Gnashing its teeth, spittle flying, tongue darting out and in.

A circular opening widened past her feet. Crackling red static ringed it, and bloody darkness waited inside. Moans and howls and screams poured out. The opening in the sky grew around her, and her separated shoulder lost strength. Her hand squeezed harder, just like when she swung on the bar in high school.

Black light surrounded her. A small opening let the cell tower through and showed her world. Alien color dug into her eyes. Flickering figures appeared--stretched and narrow, three fingers on each hand as long as her arm, and they reached out for her. They stood on the sky. The closest one's boiling hand touched her face.

Bellowing, Meghan snapped the base of the gymnastics trophy through its head. It turned to a red smear. Blazing beams of white light shot out from its body, blinding her, and screams drilled into her head.

Whistling air replaced screams. Her eyes cracked open--blue sky replaced red. She hung from the cell tower, toes pointed toward the ground, waves of pain from her shoulder washing over her. Red powder covered the trophy's base.

She turned her head. Pain and flipping perspectives dizzied her. Light reflected off windows, each one containing starring people. Her toes found cold metal. She groaned as her shoulder redoubled its painful argument. She wrapped her other arm around the cell tower, still holding the trophy, and eased herself down.

After a few minutes, she had to work her way around the tower to a small, narrow set of metal rods--the tower's ladder. Her stomach rolled inside her, and every time the cell tower's red light flashed, her head snapped up, looking for a red wound in the blue.

Her foot touched gritty cement, and she lost her balance, yet her feet kept her upright. Open sky swirled around her. The door to the roof pounded open, and people rushed for her. She cradled her wounded arm. The gymnastic trophy base's sharp, stained corner pressed into her collarbone. They had all seen her.

Daniel lives in Minnesota and writes for work and fun. His work has appeared in more than twenty publications, including 'Havik,' 'White Wall Review,' 'Castabout Literature,' 'Defenestration Magazine,' and 'Ripples in Space.' His book "Smiles Under the Moon" is available on Kindle. His twitter is @Danny_Deisinger, and his website is saturdaystory-Time.weebly.com.

Poems by Brian L. Jacobs

Oystering

weave gambles
and texture me

the weave
to entwine me

no margins
realm

in the refracted
mad state

hemorrhaging me
and oystering me

onto
the open road

Brian L. Jacobs resides with his husband in California, has been teaching English thirty years and is working on his PhD. Brian was the assistant to Poet Allen Ginsberg while earning his MFA. During that time he walked half way around the world while on a peace pilgrimage. Brian is also a three time Fulbright Scholar an NEH grant recipient and poet.

(he, him, his, they, them)

The Proof is in the Pudding
Meredith Lindgren

If the Morrisons couldn't come together as a family in life, they would come together in death. Annette, the matriarch of the Morrison family, had decided and would execute this on her own and without consultation.

She was making two pies. One would be served after dinner. The other would not.

After weeks of aimless longing and efforts, months really, having a plan made it impossible to get a handle on her mood. She would swing from giddiness to preemptive remorse before obsessing over how they got there in the first place.

She was so distracted that while shopping for the ingredients to make the pie and the dinner she had almost forgotten the vanilla. And the roast. But not the poison.

Passing the papers and the magazines she imagined that the four of them dying would be a front page story. The children's teachers and James's secretary would be interviewed. Perhaps it would be revealed whether or not James was having the affair Annette suspected.

Better that this was revealed post-mortem. If he was, he was awful for his betrayal. If not, she was awful for her suspicions. She swung back for the items she needed, feeling foolish for she had been in the aisles where they were kept.

The limitless potential of her children would be covered journalistically. In an instant, all their unrealizable dreams would have been able to come true and all their limitations would be washed away, the reasons for them being impediments having become obsolete in death.

Annette would be a monster. Any of her flaws could be touted, they would all be made to point to the evidence of her one big flaw.

Her aloof manner at James's office Christmas party would become a warning of homicidal tendencies that she had been hiding all along. Her role as a stay at home mother would be twisted and integral in driving her toward her awful deeds. It would become that she lacked the competency to perform in the workforce.

Her inability to build rapport with Martha Petersen as a volunteer at vacation bible school would become an inability to get along with anyone. The warning signs all there.

She smiled at the cashier. Perhaps they would trace the credit card receipt and interview him. He would say that she seemed nervous or too calm or he would make something up because she suspected that he wouldn't actually remember her in five minutes.

Driving home, passing perfect hydrangeas and embarrassing dandelions, she imagined that she wasn't the only one. She couldn't be. There had to be other women in other houses, wanting to bring their families together. Frustrated to the point of drastic action. Desperate to the point that even survival is secondary. There had to be others somewhere.

She had always used food to achieve her purposes and secretly feared that no one liked her much at all, but they loved her muffins. Her wellingtons and tarts. She could make anything.

She had always felt bad for really beautiful girls whose looks mattered more than anything else about them. She was beautiful but had learned skills, household skills and how to politely establish boundaries, in order to be more than her face. Looks fade and talent remains, but she had tricked herself, expertise wasn't the same as being liked.

And while she could cook as well as ever, better even, her recent attempts to bring the family together to enjoy the fruits of her labor had not gone as hoped. In the past month, she had made dinner every night, and she had made special dinner thrice. None of the meals, special or otherwise had been eaten together as a family.

It didn't matter tonight. She had told Jeanette that she would sign her permission slip for drama camp that evening, after they had dinner together and only if they had dinner together. She had taken Brody's game controller while cleaning his room and would not return it until they had dined.

As for James, his secretary must have had something on Wednesday nights. He kept bringing her super-

market flowers on Wednesdays, she suspected that he wanted to be seen doing so. He would park in the driveway instead of the garage or otherwise find a reason to go around the side and use the front door. Better than giving a gift, being seen doing so.

Annette wondered how her flowers compared to the ones he got for his paramour. Maybe he liked her because she didn't require gifts, not that Annette did either. She had once told him that the greatest gift would be his presence at home. He'd accused her of being ungrateful for all the work he did and she never brought it up again leaving him to give to each woman as he felt appropriate.

Part of the appeal of the household arts was that, so long as they were valued and respected, they gave her a domain over which she would have control while at the same time letting her offer a comfortable and comforting environment to her family. She hadn't anticipated that her family might not be so obliging.

Her butterscotch meringue pie was challenging and detailed which meant that it was unique. She had given out the recipe before, but had always been told that the recipient was unable to execute a final product comparable to her own.

The pie was the ultimate product of her finesse and her family had never refused it. And if they couldn't manage to eat together, it just made her decision that much easier. She would offer them the poison pie.

If they had dinner together, well, she would see how it went.

She took out the mixer and the paddle attachment to make the crust. Part of her wanted to do it by hand. She enjoyed cooking and it could be her last chance to do so, but it would take longer and there was dinner to prepare as well.

Besides, James had bought her the mixer for Christmas. He had written on the tag that it was from Jeanette and Brody to be cute.

She put in the dry ingredients first. Flour, salt, sugar. The mixer had been on for just a few seconds when it all looked the same. Passing through the holes in the paddle, despite how it looked, it was best to mix it for a minute.

Cute had been put away, a childish thing. If James still did cute it wasn't for her.

Next she put in the butter. Three sticks of the real stuff.

As long as pies were made of magic, instead of real ingredients, no one's doctor or coach could protest. She could imagine lying, telling the family that she'd used healthy alternatives and achieved the same results.

She imagined saying the words, egg substitute, butter alternative, and holding either pie. The only difference was that when she imagined the clean pie, she was looking at herself from outside her body. When she offered them the poison pie, it was right there in her hands.

She tried to imagine holding the clean pie and telling them the truth. She got so far out of her body that she saw her roof. She saw the earth from space.

The paddle had broken apart the butter. Now little pea sized bits coated in flour shifted through the holes as they went around.

For one of the previous meals, a Wednesday when Jeanette had been at Kath's, she'd put butter out with the biscuits. James asked if she was trying to kill him. She'd stared at her plate, filled with buttermilk fried chicken, okra and mashed potatoes, none of which had caused him pause. Just the butter.

Seeing her sad he said he was only kidding. That one of the things he loved about her was how sensitive she was. He kissed her head on the way to the kitchen to get a beer she hadn't seen him bring into the house. Another thing the cardiologist had recommended against.

When they had courted, he said her sensitivity meant that she'd be a good mother. Emotionally compelled to extra devotion.

It was part of the reason he asked her to marry him. She'd said yes because it felt like he appreciated the tacit parts of her being, not to mention her cooking.

She strained the ice water until nothing solid remained and mixed in the vinegar. She drizzled it into the mixer. The balls transformed to become larger and more connected.

Little bits of butter could still be seen when she removed the single ball of dough, halved it and wrapped the balls in plastic wrap before placing them in the refrigerator where they needed to chill for an hour. She decided to get herself a glass of Riesling, even though it was only ten a.m.

She and James had brought home a case of it from the Finger Lakes. Almost a case, he'd taken more than one business call during that trip, leaving her with not much else to do but drink. An hour gave her time for a second glass.

She put the oven on 400. While it heated, she rolled out the crusts. She placed them in the pan and pinched the edges into perfection. She brushed them with egg whites. The oven beeped ready. She cooked the crusts for about ten minutes until they were light and crisp. Not so much that they would burn when they went back in the oven with the filling and topping. Not so little that they would come out soggy.

Few things could be timed so cleanly. A watchful eye was key.

The first time she ever made a butterscotch pie was Jeanette's fifth birthday, Brody still on her hip. Jeanette had insisted on pie rather than cake, always wanting to be different.

Sometimes Annette loved and sometimes she hated that about her daughter. She'd given up on it being one or the other.

The birthday pie had had a whipped cream topping. At the time Annette had been intimidated by meringue, which made for a better pie.

It was Jeanette who had talked her into her first attempt at making meringue as an adult, after having failed to as a child. She had made cookies. It was the same concept. The same steps were taken. There was the potential for the same failures.

That was ten years before. Jeanette was five. What she had said was that Annette could cook anything. My whole life that's been true, she'd said, looking up at her mom with huge adoring eyes that had since been eclipsed with squinting, disdainful lids.

When she was young, Jeanette was so sure of Annette. Much more than the elder had ever been of herself. It had given Annette a boost, but when Jeanette's light left her the buildup seemed kind of pointless.

Plus nostalgia was a beautiful distortion. Those years weren't all easy. Children always grew heavy to the arms that they returned to.

The butter melted. Annette separated the eggs. When she was learning how to make meringue, she'd needed three bowls. One for whites, one for yolks and one for ruined eggs which she would put in a Tupperware for future use.

She just used two anymore. She put the whites in the copper bowl where she would mix the meringue. The yolks were set aside for the filling.

The most common reason meringue falls flat is because of fat. Even the tiniest bit of yolk dooms the thing. If it can at all be avoided, a plastic bowl should never be used. No matter how clean it is, plastic has tiny cracks in its surface where fat can hide.

For a month Jeanette had refused to eat eggs, milk or meat, claiming that she wanted to lose weight and it had helped one of her friends. Was it Megan? Sarah? Hannah? Was she even friends with those girls anymore?

Annette used to have all of Jeanette's friend's names along with their mother's phone numbers. That had been years ago and they'd drifted away one by one. To better neighborhoods, worse ones, into more hidden parts of Jeanette's life.

After insisting that Jeanette needed to eat eggs, milk and meat, Annette had found that she couldn't force her daughter to do anything. To try to make peace, she made a full meal that abided by her daughter's restrictions. Aloo gobi, basmati rice and naan.

Jeanette had come in, passed everything and said that she was done with all that. She'd gotten a burger on the way home.

Brody and James were politely unimpressed by all the vegetables which they pushed around their plates, claiming small appetites which they found again when she brought out the rice pudding.

Annette put the brown sugar into the melted butter. A true butterscotch was defined by this time which allowed the two flavors to fuse into something singular.

If she was only making the one pie, it would be right after this was achieved that she would put the arsenic in. This was only because she was worried that if she added it at the end the poison pie might have a slightly grainy texture, but it was a risk she had to take.

She stirred as she added the evaporated milk. She did not stop as it boiled. There had been a time when it had felt so hot doing that. When Brody was young he'd watch wide eyed as her hand remained down in the steam. Not much could make him look up from his phone anymore.

She added vanilla, switching to the whisk. She added the yolks and cornstarch. She poured half into a crust. She stirred the arsenic into the other mixture and continued stirring with the whisk. It was her habit to taste after adding any new ingredient. She resisted the impulse.

The poison pudding went into the other crust. They looked identical. She pressed a fork into the crust of the poison pie, four times, until there were twelve little divots, one right next to the other. They would not be obscured by the meringue.

She anchored the meringue to the crust, covering the filling completely. Otherwise, it would pull into the middle.

The filling would scorch, the meringue would be inconsistent, harder in the middle and squishy on the edges. It wouldn't do anything negative to the crust, but at that point it would hardly matter. The pie would be ruined.

She added sugar to the egg whites. She used a copper bowl and cream of tartar. She whipped the mixture with everything she had. She did it by hand because, while it was faster and easier, to use a mixer risked overbeating and the whole mixture would be less stable.

It was a time sensitive process. To pour a meringue over a cold filling was to cause it to weep. And a weeping meringue would slide. Time was also a factor because it was hard to look at the poisoned pie.

At ten, Brody's main transgression was inattentiveness to all but the electronic world. His life had only begun. Perhaps he would come around.

Yet, when Jeanette was ten Annette had felt the same way and the child's shortcomings had just grown more pronounced. She couldn't imagine Brody as a successful adult, nor did he seem equipped to have meaningful relationships.

In her last attempt at togetherness, she had ruined the lasagna. She'd burned it on purpose in order to draw her family's criticism. Better that they come together against her than not at all.

When it had just been Annette and

Brody at the table, it wasn't just that he had not pretended to like it. He had pushed it around and mentioned that it was burnt enough that it was hard to eat, which was somewhat of an exaggeration.

Later that night when he had mentioned to his father and sister that they hadn't missed much at dinner, he said it without looking up from his tablet. He said suggested that James talk to his wife, find out what had her off her game. He'd suggested that James check with his woman to find out why she was off her game. He was mean and mouthy.

She whipped harder. Dinner would decide which pie she would serve, but she didn't want to look at them. Once they were covered with meringue peaks, everything would be better.

The mixture stiffened under her hand. She spooned it onto the filing, creating downy peaks that would turn gold in the heat. She put them into the oven.

She was careful not to overcook. That would cause beading, which wasn't such a disaster as weeping, but was still unappealing.

She put the finished pies in the fridge. The fork marks faced out.

Under the pretense of a nap she went and laid down. She stayed that way until she heard both children come in, at which point she got up to cook dinner. Beef wellington and risotto. James got home on time, which was a good start to dinner.

She had Jeanette set the table. She had Brody wash his hands. They all sat down together.

"Shall we eat?" she said.

The fridge hummed with anticipation.

Meredith Lindgren's work has appeared in Progenitor Art & Literature Journal, Toasted Cheese Literary Journal and Gateway Review. She graduated Summa Cum Laude from Metropolitan State University of Denver with a bachelor's degree in creative writing.

Poems by Marianne Lyon

Morning Duplex

Dawn portraits through kitchen window
I gaze fixed moments pass idly

leisurely moments pass by I stare
Rinse my mouth with long breath

Long breath cleanses my mouth
Sun tithes my thoughts with gold

Sun anoints rays golden thoughts
Breeze whirls around fiery maple

Breeze invites autumn maple to dance
Shimmering leaves clutch gangly elbows

Caring boughs clutch glittering leaves
What does swaying maple notice

What does waltzing maple imagine
Watching me watching through kitchen window

Eden's Song

Do not mourn the loss
when your voices become quiet
it does not matter

remember a space
a deep place where all is chime
all is yearning trill

your sweet soprano
your grounding bass harmonized
resounded holy hymn

burning silence may arrive
but hidden in your hearts
timbre attends sonic spark

a humming profound
holy sound of nakedness
awaits so deep

remember garden
forbidden apple's aria
temptation tempts

cruelly banished
you wallow sing to children
wet faces dimple barren ground

choke of your riddance yet
you hear Yahweh's distant hymn
hear Eden's soft song

*Where Everything Is Music
Inspired by Rumi

Marianne Lyon has been a music teacher for 43 years. After teaching in Hong Kong she returned to the Napa Valley and has been published in various literary magazines and reviews. Nominated for the Push-cart Award 2016. She has spent time teaching in Nicaragua. She is a member of the California Writers Club, Solstice Writers in St. Helena California. She is an Adjunct Profes-sor at Touro University Vallejo Cali-fornia. Will be official Napa Country Poet Laureate 2021 on March 9 2021.

Chase Me Down, Traveller
Rachel Racette

A young man named John wished, not for the first time, that he didn't understand why he was here, and not still where he was ten minute ago. Sitting on his comfortable chair, eating take out and watching re-runs of an old sitcom.

(Regardless of how sad it might seem to an onlooker. It's his life to live. Plus, his work was more than exciting enough.)

He stands before the flickering forms of the League of Guardians council; the twelve heads that dictated the use of Time Travel throughout the universe. Old men, women, nonbinary creatures, those of both sexes and of various species that had invented and perfected the nearly incomprehensible technology (he'd seen first hand the technology, used it, scanned through the programming. It shouldn't work, and yet – Well, no one said the universe had to make sense all the time). They had banded together, were revered as masters of technology and science, were seen as Gods. Were spoken of as if they were cold calculating beings, devoid of care and emotion, except by those that worked for them. They were people still, who could be as happy at a job well done and as sad at the loss of a life as anyone else could be.

(He'd seen too many of them laugh and cry and feel guilty to think otherwise.)

The Council could not be together in any one place or time, given that they were scattered through both the timeline and the universe as a whole, this of course made quite a bit of sense, time travelling abilities not-with-standing. It did, however, make meetings such as this "a touch awkward", at least on John's end. Talking to beings long since dead and not yet born – it was a trip, that was for sure. Not that he'd ever say anything out loud, he liked his job, even if it did drive him to the brink of insanity sometimes.

Still, it's weird, basically talking to holographic ghosts. But hey, beggars couldn't be choosers. (And he had been chosen. Plucked out straight out of his parents home after graduation, dragged before the same flickering beings, and told he would be given a task that so many dreamed of. A glorious fate that fell upon so few, blah blah blah. They had hyped up the position so much, and even now, he was still a bit bitter that they hadn't lied, even if their words had become twisted over the years.

(The fact that he'd had no choice but to accept hadn't been brought up before, but it had been heavily implied.)

John sighs, head held high, shoulders back, pretending to exclude some form of presence in a room technically devoid of any life other than himself. Returning his attention to the Council, still talking, probably going into more detail than required for his next assignment, he wondered for a moment what he'd be tasked with this time. A subtle as-

sassination, a secret marriage, the return or loss of a child, anonymous tips to the authorities, the break out of a criminal – he'd seen the best and worst of his people. John was just an average human of twenty-seven years, younger than all the other agents he knew, not that he knew many, and none on a personal level. Thankfully, he had been left to deal with his own races shortcomings and victories, no strange aliens or world-ending dramatics to re-balance.

His wonderful job came with a variety of situations, and he had to be prepared for every possible and impossible situation, regardless of personal feelings. Upholding the Laws of the Guardians was serious business, one wrong misstep in the timeline could result in catastrophic consequences, and his immediate termination. If, of course, he wasn't wiped out of existence by said catastrophe.

Or by the Council themselves depending on how monumentally stupid your mistake was.

"– you understand, of course." Says one of the Council, an elderly woman named Martha, human, but from centuries in the future. John hums, nodding his head absently. Another member sighs. Lyx, given the exaggerated motion of his shoulders, an alien species from the far future that John had never seen the face of, always hidden behind an obsidian glass helmet.

"Please, pay attention John." He growls. "This mission is of the upmost importance. A mission we would normally leave to a senior officer, but given your track record..." He trails off, ducking his head. The visions of the Council flicker violently, and for a moment, John wonders if any of them wish they could be corporal together, if only for the option of physical comfort.

John sighs, crossing his arms and relaxing his stance. He knew it. Had felt it coming in his bones; calcium and cartilage rattling with a phantom-remembered cold. His skin tingled, and he rubs his hands, shoulders heavy, as he fights the pressure building behind his eyes.

He doesn't even need a calendar to tell him the date anymore. (Not that he uses them all that much these days) He just knew now. Like an uncomfortable sixth sense.

Again John hums, gaze subtly softer. He knows what this particular mission does to the Council. To him, to everyone. A day no one forgets, and simultaneously a day no one would remember or understand. Except for the members of the Council, and their operatives. Like him, unfortunately.

(Well, at least he had someone to share in the pain, the grief and the anger. Not that he talked or really knew the other operatives, but hey, it was nice to have the option.)

"All our other eligible agents are busy and will be for some time." Martha says, sharp like a drill sergeant. "Even given the fact that you have dealt with this situation previously," Martha pauses, her spectral visage flickering again, nearly blink-

ing out. She coughs, an attempt to disguise the hitching of her breath. As of anyone would call her out on her moment of reasonable emotion. "The simplicity of the task aside, we are aware of how distressing this mission can be. The Council would understand if you chose to decline." Martha sniffs. "I am certain we could find someone else just as capable." John huffs a quiet sigh and sweeps his gaze over the sight of his superiors shifting in their seats, most attempting to stop the tears from running down their faces. (Well, those that had faces he could see.)

"We need you to... attend, to Maya Cross." The Again, went unspoken, as it always did, Martha said, meeting Nathan's gaze, her dark eyes shinning with unshed tears. John's chest grew tight, and he bit his lip to avoid the same fate as his superiors. The weight of the sentence was still hefty, despite him knowing it was coming. Despite having already dealt with the situation before, the words grimly familiar to his ears.

(Knowing what he did. Knowing what awaited – could he really place such weight on another's shoulders? Did he have the strength to refuse this time?)

(He supposed it hardly mattered.)

John nods once, sharp, firm, and pretends not to notice the relief in the ghostly eyes of the assembled Council.

"Thank you, John. We will await your report." Martha nods back, and with a single gesture and a flash of light, John is left alone within his dull (and now too quiet) apartment once again.

(No. He could not refuse. No matter how much it hurt. He knew this loss intimately, and, for all his attitude, would not dare let anyone else suffer for it.)

Maya Cross. An enigma of a woman, a wasted bright life, a loss the universe felt on a level no one could comprehend or explain. A woman everyone knew, loved, and mourned, even if very few had actually met her during her lifetime. Even when fewer remembered her for more than a single, devastating moment.

Maya had been ... a nobody, honestly. Another average human life amidst millions, a drop of water in the ocean of the universe, until March seventh. Where she stepped onto a street on a rainy day and died. No one knew what it was that killed her, all anyone knew was that technically, upon March seventh, Maya Cross ceased to exist. Her presence erased from the collective minds of all those who had known her previously.

Which was, well, a problem in and of itself, one John still had no answer too, but one that should have remained in singularity. Maya Cross should only have existed and ceased to exist once. Not the hundreds of times she continued to reappear on that street and die again and again and again. Over and over, she appeared randomly over centuries – over a millennia, to cross that same street on a similar rainy day. To die, for a reason no one could fathom.

Of course, no one outside of John and the Council knew that. The truth of the matter was that Maya Cross had never been properly dealt with, couldn't be properly dealt with. Regardless of what the records stated. A fact that could never come to light, for fear of what that would mean for the Council, for the defense of time itself. John gave his reports to the Council, and they were never spoken of again. At least until the next time he would be called in to "attend" to Maya.

Whatever had attacked or saved or caught Maya, made it so she would never die completely. On that day, Maya Cross became nothing more than a moment in time. A picture pulled from a set before the rest of the photographs were burned. Never to return, unable to move forward or backward in time or location. She simply appeared, walked down the sidewalk, around a corner, to stand on that street as she must have dozens of times before, as if that moment of her life was all that she was, and had always been. Then, she would take two steps, an indescribable light would flash, or a bizarre sound would echo, (John could never decide which) and she would be gone. As if she had never existed in the first place.

And her loss would echo throughout the universe, throughout time itself for exactly five seconds. Then, everyone would forget her. Except, of course, for the Council, who were long since immune to any form of forgetfulness, instilled when they tasked themselves with attending to time anomalies (in a way that was never explained, and John hoped never would be), and John.

(He would remember. He always remembered. Whether he wanted to or not. But that was not so strange, agents usually remembered their cases, even when the rest of the universe's inhabitants, did not.)

There had been many attempts to reclaim Maya, or to stop whatever insane event had taken hold of her, but any and all attempts (from now until infinity, John had been oh so helpfully informed) to stop or reverse the event, resulted in failure. Which resulted in Maya Cross dying over and over at the same time and location, without fail, regardless of what anyone did or didn't do.

But such a situation should not have happened, could logically not be happening ever. Or so he'd been told, the Council hammering it in with unnecessary intimidation and a frightening unison, voices deep and hollow and grave.

(Not that John could say anything. He did not have the luxury of opposing the Council. Not to mention he didn't even have a way of explaining what they meant if anyone did ask. Those philosophical, paradoxical thoughts were meant for higher beings to question and debate, not for one young man constantly teetering on the fragile edge of mental stability to ponder about. He would rather curl up in his bed than dare to stand and call out the universe on it's strangeness.)

The Council should be able to fix this, end Maya Cross permanently. But they couldn't. They weren't even

sure if those stolen five minutes could even be considered Maya Cross. What they were sure of, was this; whatever it was, those five minutes of Maya Cross's life were being projected, were a snippet of a long since fractured soul. (Which, admittedly, didn't sound very scientific, from beings who had made their lives and a very strategic and specific business out of science, but who was John to judge.) She became just a moment, a faded, and constantly fading, picture. She wasn't even a person anymore, just a memory.

And John's job was to "attend" to that spectre. To watch and wait and collect that fragmented moment. Bringing the intangible, impossible shards to the Council's waiting hands.

Perhaps for the first few dozen times it had been her; this charming, lovely quiet woman who just wanted to cross a street. Who should have walked home through the rain, unmarked, unbothered. To perhaps curl up with a good book, or cook herself a warm meal, or dance away the night with the partner of her choosing.

Or perhaps Maya had been a cold or cruel person, and that sweet face and soft-spoken demeaner was a disguise. Maybe she had been on her way too, or from, a grizzly murder. No one knew, and no one would ever know.

Still, John had accepted his assignment, and did what he always did when assigned this mission; the same thing he did every mission.

Collapse in his favorite comfy chair, breathe deeply for five minutes, rise, collect his gear, and his coat. With one exception; his sleek black umbrella. Like the ones used for funerals in films. (John refused to think too deeply about that similarity.) Then, standing in his living room, after running through his mental checklist, he would breathe deep once more, raise his hand and activate the strange edgeless wrist watch device strapped to his arm. He sets the time, clicks the button, and raises his foot to take a step.

Tick. Tock. Click.

He steps down, and in the next moment, before his foot falls upon the creaky floorboards of his apartment, John blinks from his time-period. Silently, with barely a speck of dust stirred.

The time is March Seventh, 2033. Five past two. The street is quiet, calm, no heavy traffic, vehicular, mechanical or people -wise. The road isn't even that slippery yet, but still, standing here on the concrete sidewalk, John can't help but notice a heaviness in the air that does not have anything to do with the weather. As if the world, as if time itself, were holding it's breath.

John wonders if the universe understand what is about to happen. If it knew, if it too had tired and failed to stop the anomaly of Maya Cross. If reality was already bracing itself for the coming storm, that violent ripple John would be forced to face head on and weather.

Again.

John sighs, leaning back against chilled stone, eyes sweeping over the strange familiarity of the street. Thoughts spilling and splattering against his skull like the rain against the concrete.

Normally he wouldn't bother with thoughts of death and existentialism. People lived and died. Stars formed and exploded in arrays of heat and radiation and light. Empires rose and fell. Stuff happened. The universe moved on. You could be sad about it and let it drag you down or you could learn to accept the fragility of life and remember and move forward.

But standing underneath his black umbrella, watching silently as the rain pours down, awaiting a tragic inevitability, John can't help but let his mind wander. Can't help but mourn and hate and love the one person who had convinced the universe that she was important. That Maya Cross was worth remembering, whether the universe wanted to anymore or not.

He does wish it wasn't raining though. It was always raining when it happened. She made the rain sad, made him hate the cleansing storms he thinks he might have once loved. (And no, he would not acknowledge how petty it was to assign negative emotions to a weather phenomenon and rest the blame entirely on a long dead girl.)

Or perhaps that was what happened when one grew up. Children loved the rain, played and laughed and found joy in getting drenched, but adults? Adults hated the way it drained the color from the world, made everything uncomfortably wet, made roads a little less safe. Feelings of adventure and joy, became feelings of drowning when one grew older.

Thankfully, John is saved from any darker ponderings by the sound of measured steps echoing down the sidewalk. Maya Cross's measured steps precisely.

John pushes off from the wall exactly three seconds before Maya turns the corner. The second she comes into view, John sets the five minute countdown on his watch, and quietly follows. At the minute and a half mark, Maya stops at the edge of the sidewalk and rolls her shoulders, huffing as she pulls her purse closer to her body. She looks down the silent street, left to right, and rolls her shoulders again.

At the two minute mark, John stops three feet behind her, and without thinking, slides his gaze over her body, taking in the details he has long since memorized. The soft wavy blonde hair falling just past her shoulder, the fair skin of her wrist peaking out between her sleeve and dark gloves, the welcoming blue of her coat, and the eye-catching bright red heels tapping against the sidewalks edge.

At two and a half, she notices John. Bright blue eyes beckoning him without a word as she glanced over her shoulder. She smiled; expression warm as she half-turned to meet his eyes. She waved and said; "Hello.

Lovely weather."

At three, John breaks the Council's rule, and engages Maya Cross. He smiles back, nods, and steps forward to stand at her side, three inches between him and the concrete edge, a measly foot from Maya herself. Their umbrella's bump, and she giggles, exactly the same way she always does, and it is the most beautiful sound John has ever heard.

(There were things John left out of his reports. Purposefully, but without malice, and nothing that he believed impacted the Council's investigation. Because they never mattered in the long run.

In this terrible repetition of Maya Cross's ever ongoing death, John, somewhere along the line, whether out of pity or boredom or curiosity – started talking with Maya Cross. Just to see what would happen. He started with simple greetings and meaningless small talk. Conversations that barely qualified as conversations, and her answers were always the same. Always polite and soft and kind, but she always spoke as if she actually cared about those little, unimportant things. As if those words were as important as any others.

When he stated that no one knew who Maya really was, he wasn't exactly telling the truth, nor was he lying. He knew this Maya; he had all the time in the world to know the Maya who had lived those five minutes. This fragile broken shell could not really be who Maya Cross was, for it knew nothing beyond this moment, and would remember nothing of it after.

John had proven this. Maya never remembered their conversations, regardless if they were inconsequential or not. John could pour his heart and soul out to her, or be cruel and hurt her, and face no consequences. Faced with such a treasure, how could John not talk with her?

How could he not speak and learn and fall in love with a woman he knew more than himself? How could a person connect with someone who did not live longer than five minutes?

Simple; he had thousands of five minutes to work with.

There were only two downsides; he couldn't tell anyone about his experiences, lest he face the wrath of the Council, and he had to watch the woman who had become the love of his life, whether she knew it or not, die. Over and over again.

Well, he supposed no relationship was perfect.)

"Hello, Maya." He says, offering his hand with his best smile. "My name's John." Maya blinks, a flicker of fear and confusion flashing in her eyes. He watches her mind whirl as precious seconds tick by, but then, as always, she calms. Perhaps some echo in her fractured soul remembers, perhaps she rationalises his knowledge of her as a friend she forgot. Regardless, she doesn't pull away. (John doesn't think about how she probably can't. She is

bound to this moment, she can't leave.) She shakes his offered hand, the former fear falling from her face, forgotten like a leaf on the wind. John savors those few scant seconds of contact.

"You like the rain?" He asks, as he had dozens of times before. The rain was often a good starting point for conversation, regardless of his own feelings on the matter. Maya nods, still smiling. She was always smiling. She had such a beautiful smile.

"I love this kind of weather." She says, closing her eyes and breathing deep. "Everything feels sharper in the rain if you can believe it." She giggle again, returning that wonderful blue gaze to him.

"Like it's cleansing the world." John says. "Washing away the grime and preparing for a better tomorrow." Maya beams, and John praises the repeated phrase. So he needed a happy moment, sue him. She loved it when he said poetic and seemingly insightful stuff like that.

"Such an elegant thought," Maya hums, blinking sweetly up at him. "Is that how you normally think, John?"

"No." He answers, comfortably honest in her presence. "Not really, but it seemed like the type of thing to say to impress a lovely woman." He says, embarrassment lost several conversations back. But to Maya, this is new, so she blushes, gaze dropping to her bright heels. "Is it working?" He jokes, chest falling to something just a touch gentler than 'constricting' at her laugh.

"Perhaps." She says, shifting her purse to her other arm. Settled once more, she flicks back a lock of her hair and – and suddenly, it's all too much. John can't breathe, can't believe he let himself come back here. Maya is so beautiful and perfect, and as his eye catches the clock ever-ticking down, he can't help but wonder how many more moments he has.

(Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about – His mind screams.

It's too late to stop the rising tide of emotions. John is spiraling downward into a trap of his own making, and he won't be able to claw his way back out by himself.
But – but she is still here. He still has now.)

Maya raises her head, mouth parted, words on the tip of her tongue, but then something new happens. She blinks, squints her eyes, and says, in her softest tone;

"Do I know you?"

And John freezes, blinking down at her. Pulse racing as the pressure behind his eyes makes itself known anew. He checks his watch. Two minutes left.

"Why do you ask?" he asks, licking his lips. In the whirlwind of his head, he threatens his heart. (Don't you dare make me hope. Don't you dare.)

"John," She begins, eyes shining with something he hasn't seen before. Why? Why is this happening? Why

now? Maya raises a hand to his cheek and brushes her thumb under his eye. It comes away wet. "Why are you crying?"

He knows why, but he can't say. He meets her gaze, and he thinks she knows that, and John wonders if she will rip herself away from him because of the strangeness of him, or at the siren call of a universe than has condemned her to an endless death.

She does neither. John thinks that is a very Maya thing to do.

"Tell me why you're crying." She says. A command, not a plea or a question.

And John, for all his usual brave and calm appearance, caves at her request. It won't matter after today, he tells himself. She won't remember anyway, so what's the harm?

But I'll remember. His heart protests.

But Maya, sweet Maya who holds his heart without knowing, without care or malice, is stronger than both his heart and head.

"Because you're not real." He weeps, smiling down at her, blinking away the beginnings of more tears. "Because you will never be more than this moment. We have had hundreds of meaningless and meaningful conversations," He stops, shaking his head, chest tight. "And you will never remember them. Can't remember them because you are not a real human being. You're not alive." His breath hitches, and John wonders if he'll be the one to run, to disappear this time. "I am here to watch you die. I hate it and I can't stop it. It has to happen. I'm sorry. I am so sorry." He cries, letting the tears fall.

"Am I not a person?" She asks, soft, patient, expression unchanging but for her eyes; blue burning, whirling like a well-oiled machine. Like a scientist on the precipice of a discovery. And her sheer acceptance of words that should result in her screaming and running away, of cursing or fighting back, throws John for a loop. He shakes his head, this time in disbelief, and dares to let that spark of hope in. If nothing changes...

(He tries not to think about that.)

A minute forty stares up at him, the pale glowing numbers much more threatening than they had any right to be.

"You are the after-image of a person." He answers, rubbing at his nose. Maya frowns, tilting her head much like a curious bird. She pauses, as if actually thinking over his words. She can't be, of course, there's nothing left of her to think about anything beyond this moment.

And yet –

"Like a memory?" She asks gently, like the rain pitter-pattering around them. John bites his lip, he should stop now, let whatever-this-is run it's course, like he has dozens of times before. Another mark to record, then he can go home. But – but her eyes have never looked like

this. She has never responded like this – this, this moment is another anomaly, and it's his job to chase anomaly's like this.

"Like a picture." He says, falling all over again for the way her eyes light up, cursing the hope that blooms prematurely in his chest. Heavy and fragile, and something he knows will shatter under his hands. "A well-worn and faded picture from ages past." He tells her, raising his hand to meet her falling one halfway. They lace their fingers, and if he is squeezing too hard, she says nothing of it.

"Worn by love? Or faded from too much sunlight?" She asks, just as breathless. John pauses, and Maya turns, shifts away from the edge, away from her terrible predestined fate.

"Love." He breathes. His veins singing a sweet unfamiliar tune. "Definitely worn by love."

The universe lets out it's long held breath, and John steps towards this fragile unknown, and presses his lips to Maya's.

And she presses back.

She tastes like sunshine, like the light that bursts from the clouds after a storm. Like warmth and joy and safety – Maya Cross tastes like home. Then they stumble back, drenched in rainwater, umbrella's lost to the wind. They stumble back onto the street –

(John realises there will be no report this time. He hopes the Council won't be too upset and will forgive him.)

And John discovers and experiences what happens to Maya Cross. And he lets it happen to him too. He thinks it is not such a terrible thing after all, to be caught in this strange anomaly as long as he's with her.

Rachel Racette, born 1999, in Balcarres, Saskatchewan. Interested in creating her own world and characters and loves in writing fiction. She has always loved books of fantasy and science fiction as well as comics. Published in the anthology; The Spelunkers: A Chipper Press Anthology, Route 7 Review Issue 8, Underwood Press' The Purpled Nail, Underwood Press Online Journal.

Poems by Linds Sanders

Organ Donor

Her phone rings when people die.
Typically not the elderly, kids on occasion.
Suicides are best. Motorcycle crashes too,
if they're not too mangled.

I checked that box,
but she won't come when I die
[friend-to-deceased conflict].
Maybe I'll get her co-worker,
the one who fasted for a week
after scalpeling a triple-decker patty,
of bubbling marigold fat cells.
I imagined her working around them
like eating around too-thick butter frosting.

My friend scolds me when I call it harvesting.
The company she works for is slogan-less.
Entrust us to redistribute your leftovers.
Garnering Detritus since [insert founding year here].
You give a kidney, and you give a kidney!

I imagine her a gardener
washing dirt from lumpy vegetables.
The homegrown kind always ugly--
carrots split in two, miming legs,
always a nob suggesting manhood.
No, they don't harvest those.

I'd like to winter in my skin,
seeing my organs into retirement.
Contrarily, like all desires, I want
my tissues/tendons/retinas to travel.

Serve another human's motivations,
learning movement
and a new shade of crimson.

Would my lungs miss the curvature of my cavity
or relish the different rhythm, brine on the breeze,
performing the in-and-out like a hobby rather than a job.

Would dying once scare my heart out of the ephemeral--
latching its fibers and veins to chest walls with such ferocity,
it grants the new owner immortality.

With my left hand I flick Morris code into my sternum. You in there,
tap-tap-tap, thanks for spending your naive days with me.

On Turning Thirty

Your hair
was never noteworthy.

A fast car
and long hair:
goals for thirty.
Two years to go.

Willing those forgettable carbon
waves
to pass the breaker of your clavicles
and wash up against your back.

Bound, they failed to wet your
shoulders.

What would
the water of you
have shaped into

if the days of you
soaked in your skin.

Did I look away,
when you brushed
your ambitions behind your ear?

Four days after candles we forgot
to light.
Four days and a note you forgot to
write.

You tried thirty on and returned it
with tags still attached.

I'll remember you
at twenty-eight:

long hair
and a fast car
was all you needed.

Linds Sanders (she/her) habits in saying "yes" to things that scare her. She yessed herself into whitewater kayaking, working with preteens, and saving house spiders. She repurposed her BA in Journalism into an equally underpaying pursuit in poetry and art, which she does from the road while living in a 60-square-foot van. Winner of the 2021 Icebreaker Prize from Sparked Literary Magazine, her work is published or forthcoming in The Wayfarer, Rising Phoenix Review, The Dillydoun Daily, and at LindsSanders.com. She can be found on Instagram at @resounding_bell.

High Farm House
James Roderick Burns

1

BARKER HADN'T THOUGHT of the lingerers in a long time. Since he was dead drunk, in fact, at the last office party. Everyone was so busy sucking up to the boss he was longing for escape two minutes into each conversation. When had he last thought of them, really considered them, he wondered: the labourer, the milkmaid and the stable boy? Was it when he saw them last? He took a drink and closed his eyes.

He ought to be out celebrating, with the house purchased unseen, not mithering away in his armchair. But sometimes the three figures came when he thought of them. As though called by the turn of his mind, one or all would walk through the nearest aperture – doorway, gate, once the half-window of an underground carriage – and stand mute but companionable until there was something to say.

But not tonight, it seemed.

He opened his eyes and swallowed the last of the whisky. Tonight he'd taken a huge step towards High Farm House, and he imagined they would put in an appearance if the time was right.

2

It was the place where he had grown up, he and his brother. A stout red-brick Victorian farmhouse, squat and handsome in fields a few hundred yards from the village, at the end of a winding track. Barns, a paddock with two dusty old donkeys – Ted and Edward, he remembered – and beyond the black iron fence that ringed the garden, a long view across the Cleveland plain. His parents were dead – his brother, too – and he had never married. Business had taken good care of him, but it was time to retire.

As he turned seventy he itched for the certainties of the old place.

3

'Are you sure, David?' his solicitor asked, concerned not for his fees but that a client might overpay out of nostalgia. 'It's not Kensington, you know!'

'I don't care. A million, with the land. I'm sure they'll accept.'

They did. Now he felt bound, cuffed with a set of his own industrial cable ties, the snaps ratcheted up tight against his heart. The Americans called them snap-cuffs, apparently, a fact his brother pointed out ten years ago in his pedantic fashion. A thriller arrived in the post. Each time the gruff-but-righteous detective applied snap-cuffs, his brother highlighted the text orange.

Barker fumed, not certain what the gesture was meant to impart, but then with his own kind of sudden, inexplicable knowledge – whole and unsought – called a contact at police headquarters. With a fat union

jack stamped on the packet, they sold a few million units every year.

4

He had mothballed his other property, stored what he'd need to furnish High Farm House in the spare style he remembered, then taken off on holiday. Meantime, the movers worked. As he rolled up the drive in his Range Rover, there was no sign of them. But still he goggled at the shapes revealed in the running-lights: houses, all over his land! One – two, three – a fourth, fifth! And not proper dwellings but ticky-tacky boxes with thin walls, and thinner style. Five carbuncles marring a much-loved face.

Barker slowed till he heard the gravel crunching, flicked the high beams. The old place was still there, blocky and sombre as ever. Even in the first spasms of rage he thrilled to its roofline, the line of oaks rising above the fence.

What was Gerald thinking? Had these excrescences escaped his mind? He would get on the phone immediately. As soon as he thought of the phone, however – that great, silent leveller – the heat in his chest faded to the accustomed glow of victory. There would be a way.

He pulled the car around the turning space in front of the kitchen window. Backlit by a warm, wavering light, three faces looked out through the glass.

5

The place was much as he remembered: high walls, solid white door-jambs and windowsills, rooms square and reassuring. He dropped his bags in the entryway and went straight to the kitchen.

They turned from the window. He recalled, now, that their presence was always solid – fleshy, almost. The labourer made a slight bow, pitch fork glinting in the lights; the milkmaid a brief curtsey; the stable lad a twitch of his cap.

Barker looked them over slowly, back and forth, his mind vaulting over hurdles, then sat down and smiled.

6

He was eleven when they first appeared, or possibly when he himself first crossed their path. He'd been told to avoid the slurry-pit in the corner of the farmyard, where the leavings of the beasts washed about thick and silent as estuary-slime, but the graver the warning, the greater the fascination. He stood by the crude rail, an experimental step wavering on its ladder.

Halfway up he saw a small, insistent movement in the corner of his eye. On the far side was a boy of his own age, standing cap in hand, shaking his head. He wore a leather jerkin and curious, high boots.

David dropped off the fence and walked across the thick matting of mud and straw, but as he ap-

proached the boy nodded and walked through the barn door. Inside all was cool grain and gloom, the flutterings of a small bird trapped in the rafters, but no stable boy.

Somehow he didn't mind. The boy would return, David thought, for one purpose or another. But on his way to the farmhouse he skirted the slurry-pit, all the same.

7

'Hello, Gerald – what can I do you for?'

The kitchen was quiet. He had things as he liked – surfaces uncluttered, toaster, kettle and microwave squared up ready for use. It had been that way for a month. Barker looked out of the plate-glass window. It was did not appear so tranquil amongst the ticky-tacky boxes.

This morning, he'd watched with pleasure as the matriarch of number five came tearing out, screaming, in her nightgown. This afternoon, every light in the place blazed through the gloaming. He could hear the squawk of radios, the blare of televisions through the tinny walls of three and four. Two was lit up like a sinking liner, and if he wasn't much mistaken, one had already been abandoned. Limp net-curtains flapped like bat's wings through a broken window.

'Sorry, Gerald, let me change rooms. Bit noisy across the way. What? No, nothing to worry about. Did you have good news on that front, by the way? You did? Marvellous! Pop it in the post, then. Cheery news is too good for e-mail.'

In the dining room he glanced at his watch. A few more days, he thought. From somewhere came another scream, though of course it could have been an owl returning early to the barn. He spread out his palms on the polished wood and thought fondly of the fields.

8

The money left his account – five instalments, large enough to notice, but not really hurt – and the wreckers were in by month's end. Quickly the plots became little more than dust and rubble. Soon enough they were ploughed back to bare, expectant earth. He warmed his hands at the clearance, tipping the workmen lavishly.

9

A few weeks passed. He rose each day, alone but not unhappy, and walked the flat land of his youth. He touched solid tree trunks – thankfully Gerald had remembered to exempt the garden, though he subsequently felt the rough edge of Barker's tongue and cringed away a chunk of his fee in recompense – and wondered who he might invite to a house-warming when his silent satisfaction ran its course.

In the end some former colleagues made the effort, the new man

he'd appointed to run things and his latest filly, an acquaintance of his brother's from the university, Gerald. After setting the caterers straight and doing the rounds, he took his solicitor's arm.

'Come outside for a minute, would you?'

Gerald was on his third Lagavulin. He followed meekly in Barker's wake.

'There it is, you see – the result of all your, ah, fine work, and my money.'

'The house?'

'Yes, the house, man, but everything else.'

'The village?' Gerald struggled to satisfy his client. The whisky wasn't helping. 'The view? Well, there's not much of a view now, is there?'

'Exactly. Nothing. There is nothing whatsoever.'

Gerald looked over his shoulder at the ordinary sloping fields. Between two oaks stood a group of people, half masked by their shadow. A man and woman, he thought – a child?

'I see your other guests are enjoying it!'

But when they turned to look between the trees, there was nothing to see but the view.

The lingerers waited, it seemed, till the very apex of his headache to appear. The caterers had finally left, their infernal next-day banging and scraping far worse than the earlier cacophonies of demolition. One girl tripped on a tablecloth, sent an armful of cutlery sailing across the tile.

They stood before his brown leather settee. The stable boy fidgeted with his cap for a moment, but stopped at a glance from the labourer. The milkmaid looked on from under her cap.

'Thank you for your help, sir,' said the man at last, when Barker could take no more of the deep throbbing of his head.

'My help? Hah!' Though it hurt, still he laughed. What could they want? 'It's me who should be thanking you, surely, for – ah, for facilitating the removal of unwanted guests.'

He looked at the clean lines of the fence and fields, the vague reassurance of the village clear in the distance.

'We feel as though the house has been returned – almost – to its right state,' the labourer continued. He shifted the pitchfork between his hands, and Barker noticed for the first time its clean and rather wicked solidity, the wood-grain sparkling on its handle. 'We wished only to enquire, subject you will understand to some small notice, when you will be leaving?'

Barker goggled, then winced and al-

most giggled in the quiet, cold emptiness of the living room.

'I beg your pardon?'

'When you will be leaving, sir,' chimed in the milkmaid. The boy moved as though to add his tuppenceworth, but she cuffed his ear. 'We feel a day's wait is warranted.'

Barker got to his feet, moved to assert his rights.

'I – well, you can't just – !'

In this new position, the weak and wintry sun fell upon the tines of the fork. They shone as though polished, though was that the faintest rusty-brown lacemark, there at the tip? The man gestured with one hand to the doorway; the milkmaid smiled. The boy looked at the gleaming implement and grinned like a woken hobgoblin. It appeared he must surrender or perhaps be invited to linger, himself.

'We shall see you on the morrow, then, sir,' said the labourer, and they walked as one towards the window. As the last of the sun departed the living room, the faint screams of an owl rang through the rafters of the empty barn.

James Roderick Burns' work has appeared in The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature, Flash Fiction Magazine and La Piccioletta Barca, as well as a short-fiction chapbook and three poetry collections. His story 'Trapper' (Funicular Magazine) was nominated for Pushcart 2020. He lives in Edinburgh and serves as Deputy Registrar General for Scotland.

Poems by Leigh Fisher

Monochrome

To take the color out of the world
Render the dark blue of the sea into a dismal gray that consumes the foam and waves
Change the clouds and their creamy tint to a white mass with little definition
Shift the sand from the color of tiny, weathered bits of stone embracing yellow and orange
Into an unclear mass of white tinted gray, with a texture barely discernable
It sounds almost like a crime, to take such elegant, natural beauty
Cut down a tree to print it on paper, sever another to give it a plain white border
Trap it in cold, silver metal then hang it up on a wall
It sounds like it could be a crime
But really, it's just corporate being kind enough to put pictures on the office's walls

---

Leigh Fisher is from Neptune. No, not the eighth-farthest planet from the sun, but from the city in New Jersey. She has two cats, Ash and Misty, who serve as her editorial assistants in the wee hours of the night. She works as a writer and instructional designer on an undisclosed, odd-numbered street in New York City. She's working on her Master's in Integrated Digital Media at New York University.

She has been published in Five:2:One Magazine, The Missing Slate, Rising Phoenix Press, and others. She also shares poetry on Instagram as @SleeplessAuthoress. She's an active content creator on Medium, a book nerd on Twitter, and goes by @SleeplessAuthor on both.

Windward
Peter Wakeman

I have no need to remind you of the squabbles, whether academic or potatory, that spiral up on the question of just when it was that the first ship left our port to seek land across the sea. But I've been reading about the topic and have discovered a few of its schools of thought: Some contend that the answer to the question of when can be found by determining the number of days by which the ship currently at sea is bound to return, and splitting that number in half as many times as will reach thirty days.

We say traditionally that the first ship's voyage was thirty days long: the voyagers were to sail west for fifteen days, and, if they glimpsed no land in that time, to return. This is all fine with me, though tradition isn't especially convincing on its own, but the fact is that the ship currently at sea has been gone for longer than anyone can persuasively recall. Let me emphasize that I'm not a part of these squabbles one way or another.

The ship, named after a racehorse, returned on the thirtieth day, and while many of the voyagers were ready to try again as soon as their feet hit the boards of the dock, some in disappointment, they say, never even looked in the direction of the sea again. There that latter group leaves the record of history. The more hopeful voyagers outfitted the very same ship with victuals for sixty days, and determined to turn around after thirty.

These voyagers, too, discovered only more sea. On their return, a cartographer printed a map with an arrow pointing west, with the legend "sixty days long," which as you'll see, proved short-sighted. This isn't to make fun. We will all prove ourselves short-sighted at some point.

In school I must have read about subsequent voyages -- the volumes about them in this library don't contain as much as I remember. It occurs to me that anyone convinced by the abovementioned method of day-division should remember that the time our city waited between voyages is unrecorded, even by that most lucid witness, tradition. Besides, the breaks between each voyage could not possibly all have lasted the same amount of time. There was a 120-day voyage, a 240-day voyage, a 480-day voyage, and so on. None of these were successful, and I imagine that the cartographer had to cross out parts of his map rather regularly.

Over the course of these eventually countless voyages, once in a while a ship would not return, and those accustomed to stroll along the dock, wait patiently, and stand in the rain, would wonder why.

A possibility often proposed was that they may actually have found land, and not just any land, but land so intoxicating that they couldn't tear themselves away to come back here and tell us about it. This cheery view could only last until the absolutely inevitable return of the next voyage: after all, if a ship crossing the sea for a thousand days doesn't come upon any land, certainly its

predecessor, which was never heard from again, couldn't have come upon any after traveling for only five hundred days. And so that optimism had a bleak sort of limit.

Another possibility was that the missing voyagers had gone off course, but found land all the same, but this notion strains credulity, and ventures into the realm of denial. What course is there to lose? The course is west. Just go west.

Another possibility, one taking human nature into account, and as a result being rather grim at the very outset, began by supposing that the voyagers, at the half-way point of their voyage, considered that they had five hundred (or however many) more days'-worth of rations. There the impatient thought infected the entire ship, bilge to crow's-nest: that perhaps they needed only to journey one more day to find land, and wouldn't it be such a pity if they turned back now, leaving the land, on which they might set foot in a day, to remain undiscovered for the time it took them to return and for the next voyage to reach where this one already had reached. What's another few days?

But it wouldn't be a few days. They couldn't help themselves, and as they consumed ever more of the food intended to keep them during their return journey, they thought, what's a few more days of half-rations on the way back? The further west they sailed, the surer they became that those unspoiled lands of fruit and pigs were far, far closer than their old lands, the memory of which was kept only in the few loaves of old fur-covered bread that remained in the hold. Such behavior could not but lead to the starvation of all aboard.

This third possibility is the only one that we know, at least once, actually occurred. First, we waited for that doomed ship at port until it was clear that they had either found land, or run out of food. We sent the next ship with enough to last twice as long. And they found the ship of the starved, floating aimlessly at sea, driven only by the captain's fifty-pound cadaver lashed to the wheel. The voyagers who made the discovery turned back at once, though they were months away from their own halfway point. The lesson they learned about patience, while examining the shadowy decks of that crumbless ship, can be readily imagined, and we all would have turned back too, had we discovered it with them.

When they returned, far too soon, a law was passed that all ships making this voyage must turn back after half its victuals have been eaten. The enforcement of this law required that a sheriff, with no interest whatsoever in land or sea, be given a key to control the rudder, in case the captain refused to turn back. The jibs were the real arbiters of the ship's fate, but the measure of sending a sheriff with a mystical key was intended to provide less of a physical power than a mental assurance, which my memories of history class, and my more recent perusals at this library, suggest was effective. It was a certain sort of madness that these sheriffs were to prevent, a madness of hope and

will. It's a madness that we surely have all undergone, though perhaps not to the point of bringing about our own starvation.

The time between each voyage had to increase as each of their lengths increased. The time required to supply a ship with ten-thousand days' worth of food is far greater than that to supply a ship for just a month. And this isn't even to mention the size of the ships themselves. We read that the first several voyages were carried out all by the same ship, that of the racehorse's name, but when its stowage finally proved insufficient, they built a new ship twice its size. After only one voyage, neither could that one do any longer, so it was taken apart and added to the piles of lumber for the next ship, four times the size of the first. Forests full of big fat trees disappeared as ever-larger ships were built to make ever-longer voyages.

We read that, once, so much rain came down from the mountain east of the city that it flooded the remains, still quite extensive, of one of the forests whose wood had been used since the beginning. Decades passed before the waters receded from that place, and when they did, they revealed a forest of trees all turned into driftwood, or something akin to it, because in fact the wood hadn't drifted anywhere, but had remained for decades floating on its deep, dead roots.

The ages over which all these voyages must have occurred is hard to reckon. The records are not clear on the subject, so focused were the chroniclers on the more practical matters: we know that several ships embarked on the first voyage after the drowned woods resurfaced, all built partially of those soft and twisted trees. We know that calculations were made, combining the length of the voyage, the size of the ship, the number of crew, and the quantity of rations. A careful increase in one resulted in unruly increases in the others, and so instead, ten smaller ships were built, each one with a skeleton crew, and all of them collectively with enough rations for a 4,096 day voyage. This of course must mean that these "smaller" ships were not exactly small, as each carried years' worth of food for God knows how many people. What is a skeleton crew on a ship with that sort of stowage?

All ten of those ships returned exactly 4,096 days after embarking, and the fact that ten sheriffs had been among the voyagers must have accounted for this good fortune. It's almost pointless to reveal that they had found nothing but sea. They had traveled directly west for nearly six years, returning with a few not-especially-young children born on the ship who had never in their lives walked on land, and who, on their first few attempts, became dizzy and fell.

In the meantime an instrument had been invented here that could measure the speed of a moving object. How informative it would have been had they taken this instrument on the ten-ship voyage, but before they had gone, the most exciting new invention taken aboard was the sail that could -- without the

arduous and protracted rigging of numerous jibs -- make a ship travel windward. How desperate we all were to learn the sea's minimum breadth. There's no doubt that many more voyages set out (we are, after all, waiting for one's return), but a massive lacuna appears in all the annals I have consulted, and most of them resume with records only of racehorses, floods, and forests.

If they return, they can tell us how far they traveled; I'm certain they took one of those instruments with them, though there are only empty pages where we might otherwise learn that information. People in bars think the voyagers finally found land, but didn't return, because of all the fruit and pigs. This will remain uncertain at least until another voyage is sent out, and there's no record of the intended length of the current one, nor have I ever heard of any old person who remembers its departure.

Some are thinking it's about time to begin another voyage. Forests abound to the east of the city. They must have grown back since the last time we built a ship. If no one else wants to, I'll write down how long the voyage is to take this time, if anyone can figure out how long the last one was supposed to take.

I don't think the librarians will let me do anything but read the books, however. I can detect a little spite: I've spent enough time in the library, and have become comfortable enough in my conversation here, such as with you, for example, that the librarians have surmised my secret belief, which they staunchly oppose. There simply is no land to the west, and no voyage can be conceived that will ever change that.

The fiction of Peter Wakeman (H/H) is forthcoming in TEXLANDIA. He lives in Philadelphia.

Poems by Robert Rene Galvan
Ancestors

A rift in the Songline –
The persistent mantra
falls silent,
voice of the heat itself
blown from hollow
branches
and the lips
of stone faces,
the Dreamtime
drawn to an alternate
world of pallid beings
that they supposed
to have been spirits,
that they painted
themselves
the color of death,
encountered
the interlopers,
the Empire's
forsaken,
bringers of
concrete
and the detritus
of civilization,
feral cats
and insidious
toads,
the doom
of fantastical
creatures,
and the first
peoples
trapped inside
the loom,
or banished
to the edge
of the red clay
as if they had
never existed.

Robert René Galván, born in San Antonio, resides in New York City where he works as a professional musician and poet. His last collection of poems is entitled, Meteors, published by Lux Nova Press. His poetry was recently featured in Adelaide Literary Magazine, Azahares Literary Magazine, Gyroscope, Hawaii Review, Hispanic Culture Review, Newtown Review, Panoply, Prachya Review, Sequestrum, Shoreline of Infinity, Somos en Escrito, Stillwater Review, West Texas Literary Review, and the Winter 2018 issue of UU World. He is a Shortlist Winner Nominee in the 2018 Adelaide Literary Award for Best Poem. Recently, his poems are featured in Puro ChicanX Writers of the 21st Century and in Yellow Medicine Review: A Journal of Indigenous Literature, Art and Thought. His forthcoming books of poetry are Undesirable: Race and Remembrance, Somos en Escrito Foundation Press, The Shadow of Time, Adelaide Books and Standing Stones, Finishing Line Press.. His poems have been nominated for Best of Web and the Pushcart Prize.

A Girl Named Laughter
Anastasia Jill

"Laughter is the language of the soul."
--- Pablo Neruda

Blythe bought a five-dollar swimsuit and a book of poetry for her afternoon at the public pool. She sat in her plastic chair with the book on her lap, slathering aloe on her skin, looking anywhere but the pool itself. She cacophony didn't evade her; she could hear children horse playing, women sucking in their breath, thrusting out their chests before slithering like noodles from one end to the next. Blythe knew she should have joined them, easily could have a good day. The proximity to water make her stomach sore as the Florida heat blistering her bare belly button.

Her therapist would say this exposure was of benefit. "Just be by the pool," Dr. Erwood said countless times in her weekly appointments, building Blythe up to this very day. "Try your best to be in the moment. The sky is full above you and the water has its own language and it will not harm you."

Blythe did not believe that. "I'll go, but I refuse to swim."

"Well," the good doctor said. "We'll see about that."

Dr. Erwood hadn't understood because doctors never understand that hydrophobia that had come to rule her entire life. She didn't go to pools or beaches, avoided hot tubs at all cost. Even bathing was a feat accomplished with sponges and moist towelettes.

Thirty years later, and she still had her stepfather to thank for that. Because of him, she could not swim, smile, or laugh.

Blythe tried to unwind, opening her poetry book. Just being near the pool – one small boat in the community bay – made her feel like the same young girl who had been groomed to fear the water.

"Be in the moment. Focus on the concrete things," Dr. Erwood would say. "It'll remind you that you are present and safe."

Blythe gave it a try. It was two in the afternoon, perfectly warm at 75 degrees. The sun baked her cheeks like bread, and perspiration dripped like butter down her face. The smell of suntan lotion and bleached seasoned the otherwise blighted city air. And there were people, lots of them. An after-school program littered the pool with children. The deeper end was occupied by a water aerobics class, old ladies and gents waving their bat wings, collecting sunspots in their wrinkles and pockets of arm fat. Ridiculous? Sure, but it looked fun. Everyone in the pool was having fun.

Fun is okay, she thought. Maybe I should get in the water now.

White strips reading "3 FEET" were just beyond her heels; two steps and a skip away.

Not yet.

Soon.

But not yet.

There was no need for nervousness; there were hardly any men at the pool, and those present were hairy, feeble, and uninterested. They didn't know her. They wouldn't hurt her. She had no way of knowing that for sure.

Tension circled her mental drain, flashbacks of skin on skin and leery grins. Bodies and memories clumsily morphed together into a blur that reflected off the water as Blythe stared in the shallow end.

She hated this – all her stepfather had taken from her.

A longing surged through her body like the wave after a dive. Before her stepfather, she loved to swim. Love itself was an understatement—swimming was summer, it was fun, one of the only things she looked forward to in her young life. The earliest days of childhood were spent in lakes, ponds, and city pools, good days and grins bought with her two-dollar in quarters allowance. When her mother re-married, water became scary. Water was the enemy. Because she could not be safe when hands were invisible, diluted beneath bikini lines. Her mother would go to work, and her stepfather would take her and her older brother Brad to the pool. Even on rainy, thunder-stormy days because there was little else to do with two children in Fort Lauderdale. Brad would run off with his friends, who were always nearby while young Blythe would be stuck with her stepfather.

"Stay close," he would say in his croaky voice. When she wouldn't, he would always bridge the gap. He would smile and laugh as he chased her around the pool. "Our special game," he would say, but it wasn't a game. His hands would find her always, and her laughter turned to silence.

He would then tickler her sides. "You need to smile more."

The Florida summers never, ever seemed to end.

Blythe would go home crying. Her brother would not care. She tried to tell her mother, who would shove her out of the room and snap, "I can't stand when you do things like this." Over time, her stepfather grew bolder, cloaked in the knowledge that he would not be stopped. The pattern continued until she moved out the day after her high school graduation. After that, Blythe never once set foot in any body of water. Some things had changed in the years that passed. Blythe now had C-PTSD and several anxiety disorders. Her brother had died in a car accident. Her mother had breast cancer. Through it all, her stepfather remained a fixture in the home. Blythe skipped the funerals, the hospital appointments, birthdays, and holidays to stay home and clean herself with the cheapest baby wipes. Seeing him would be a crack, a fault line in the ceramic she laid like tile around chest and the grief would flood her lungs, ribs and heart.

Dr. Erwood was the first person who thought she shouldn't feel bad. "If they wanted you in their lives, they should have treated you better." Blythe would argue, "They are still my family."

The doctor said, "Blood is blood. A thing in your body just like water. But too much water will poison you. Too much of a toxic family will do the same."

This was not the prolific advice Blythe wanted for two-hundred dollars and hour but started to think Dr. Erwood was right. Maybe it was as simple as that.

She opened eyes that involuntarily shut, blinked back the brightness to see a man.

"Hey girl, smile a little. It's a beautiful day!"

One of the men from the shrew of the elderly stood a few feet away, nodding at her with the most well-meaning intentions. He laughed and shielded his face from the fading heat. "Isn't it beautiful out?"

Blythe surprised herself by saying, "Yes."

The man eventually walked away, and Blythe felt her muscles unfreeze and give into the relief that she was, indeed, safe. The moment was just a moment, and the man was just a man paying her a compliment, making conversation as it was just another day.

It was a sad as it was a revelation— she was able to face a fear without it ruining her entire day.

Blythe was here, present tense, surrounded by those her senior and junior. She read Spanish poetry, wore red bathing suits, bared her belly button like other people in the pool with no business doing the same. The difference between Blythe and the rest of them? She was timid, and they were enjoying the day. Blythe could have been one of them, because she wanted to swim. Even when thunder rumbled behind the clouds, Blythe was excited at the prospect of being stronger than the water. Her book, long forgotten, tumbled to the ground with a splat. Cerise words looked up from yellow worn pages, raised by the itchy wind.

The bodies in the water scattered as the youngers fled the rain, but old folks lingered, sagging skin buoyant as they floated about. One of the lifeguards put on an oldies radio station. The edge of pool near her was empty. This was, somehow, less scary.

When she hit the concrete, she stared down at her toes, minorly pruned and coated with red polish that would soon be sacrificed to the chlorine gods. Her breath came sharp like vapor rub. A giggle, fresh and clumsy.

That was her voice.

She was laughing.

It was easier to be fearless hiding behind a manic laugh.

She hit the water then descended, laughter dissolving into bubbles that grasped for solid air until she was of water and laughter alone.

Her whole body swooned with this sweet, sweet release.

Anastasia Jill (she/they) is a queer writer living in the Southeast United States. She has been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Small Fiction Anthology, as well as several other honors. Her work has been featured with Poets.org, Pithead Chapel, apt, Minola Review, Broken Pencil, and more.

Poems by Ace Boggess

Advice for Doing Her Laundry

Speak up. Ask what she likes.
She has preferences.

It takes more than putting in work
for her to adore you
after. You hope

to leave no complaints
about her undergarments
stained to pink or shrinkage
among sweaters
(hang-ups, drip-dries).

She wants you to succeed.
She's rooting for you.

Get past embarrassment &
say the words,
admit you need instruction
on handling delicate things.

Not the Heat, It's the Humidity

Not the thunder, it's the lightning.

Not the tornado, it's the straight-line winds that learn to bend.

Not the strip-mined flats, it's the Garden of Earthly Delights.

Not the politicians, it's the cash.

Not the indigent passers-through, it's the dirty needles,
smashed car windows; it's the guilt.

Not the potholes, it's the dented rims & broken axles.

Not the complaining, or it is.

Not the accident, it's the missed text messages.

Not the goddamned lying son of a bitch,
it's the TV set that gives him voice.

Not the rifles, it's the missing roses.

Not the cancer, it's the toxic fumes.

Not the Kentucky, it's the West Virginia.

Not the America; of course it's the America.

Not the gruesome theater, it's the unsuspecting eyes.

Not the country-western music, it's the ruse
these sharps will share.

Not the flooding, it's the graying rain that never ends.

"Can People Escape Their Childhoods?"

[question asked by Andrea Fekete]

I drank the last grape soda once
although my mother wanted it.
Set it down, wasted half, &
I've felt guilty ever since,
been guilty. There are crimes
you walk away from & spend your life
searching for a prison to accept you.

Ace Boggess is author of five books of poetry—Misadventure, I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So, Ultra Deep Field, The Prisoners, and The Beautiful Girl Whose Wish Was Not Fulfilled—and the novels States of Mercy and A Song Without a Melody. His writing has appeared in Michigan Quarterly Review, Notre Dame Review, Mid-American Review, Rattle, River Styx, and many other journals. He received a fellowship from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts and spent five years in a West Virginia prison. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia. His sixth collection, Escape Envy, is forthcoming from Brick Road Poetry Press in 2021.

Poems by Nola Woodland
Futility

is a woman without footprints, without photographs.
only frames with empty mouths.

Futility has taken to drinking
and leaving supplications in lipstick
on bathroom mirrors
because she despairs of no one's eyes ever seeing her

once she let a man stick his body in hers
and absorbed his emptiness as it gasped
its dubious release

she helped him take everything;

whatever choice ever existed
disappeared a long time ago
and what wasn't hers could not be taken,

so in the meantime
she lies on her side, with a painted,
cylindrical grin, and watches the light
in lozenges slide down the wall

her blood dries up
the scorched spots of her eyes go out
she is a gallery of empty spaces
cargo around the holes where men
have stuffed themselves.

she believes in the holes now
how hollow can serve
to hold a body up

she keeps a garden
but cannot make it grow.
the soil is too starved; no

amount of addendums will do.

she knows all about trying to turn a fallow plot
fertile, no longer believes in the seeds that she plants
but presses them into the dust no matter,

adding compost and leaf, on her knees
she turns the soil anyway
though it and she be leached.

centuries of penetration and plunder
defined her, drew over her skin a map
that they demarcated and claimed

she came to exist between His lines
at bequest of his breath
he'd convinced her so well
she was only deserving of his emptiness

At least, at the end of the day,
it was something
to wrap the body around.

Nola (she/her) is a poet, painter, and displaced person of a different century currently living in the Bay Area, CA, who pays the rent working with adults with developmental and physical disabilities. She is previously unpublished (due principally to crippling self doubt) but not giving up on her dream to change that. Her work examines themes of mental/societal illness, addiction, queerness, power & disenfranchisement--while ever searching for beauty and hope in unexpected places.

SUBWAY
Byron Spooner

I

By 1977 my father, one-time New York hand, no longer rode the subway, choosing instead to drive in over the bridge from Jersey when he came to visit me. It was depressing, another mile marker on his road to old age.

Back when I was a kid and my old man was still a full-time functioning madman, he taught me to love the subway as much as he did. He'd take me on the Eighth Avenue Express, the A, down the spine of the city.

"We're riding the longest, regularly-scheduled non-stop subway route in the world," he would tell me, as we pulled out of 125th Street. Next stop 59th Street. It was a pronouncement he made every time, without fail.

The train cars in that era—the Sixties—had been put into service way back in the thirties and forties. The old cars had a courageous charm; they'd been reliably hauling passengers all over the City for decades. The walls were built sturdy, nothing fancy, in the fashion of the Depression years, riveted together and painted a glossy forest green. The seats were cushioned, upholstered in tightly-woven wicker, comfortable for the passengers. They held up remarkably well, all things considered. The newspapers dubbed commuters 'straphangers' because overhead dangled canvas straps you could hold onto if all the seats were taken and you had to ride standing up. There were ceiling fans that didn't do much, especially when it got real hot in the summer, but to my father it was the thought that counted.

It was a more innocent time, less pressure, less anxiety. Before ASAP became a word. When lunch could stretch to two hours. A time when you had to stay alert on the trains and around the stations, but you didn't have to be constantly terrified the way it got to be later.

"You're pretty safe down here, all in all, but they say you should always carry a five-dollar bill with you whenever you're in the city," he said, "Something to appease the muggers. Also a cigarette so if some tough asks you for one you can give it to him and he'll leave you alone. I think this is all pretty apocryphal, myself, but..."

Apocryphal or not, imagining getting mugged was very exciting, although probably something to be avoided in real life, but where, at the age of twelve, was I supposed to get a five-dollar bill? Or a cigarette for that matter? He didn't stop to explain.

Through the second half of the sixties and into the seventies the City made the transition to newer cars. The wicker seats were getting routinely slashed and ripped apart and had to be replaced with something vandal-proof. The City equipped the new cars with bright yellow and orange benches made of molded fiberglass. The straps no longer dangled conveniently; now everyone was supposed to hold onto cold

stainless-steel tubing. Gone were the ceiling fans as well, supplanted by air conditioning that within weeks started to regularly go on the fritz. Most New Yorkers welcomed these new features, greeting them as upgrades. Not my father; he hated each and every 'improvement' and rode the subway with less joy than ever, waxing nostalgic about the long-gone fans to his fellow riders.

"They just couldn't leave well enough alone," my father said, "They say these trains weigh less than the older ones, and they're easier to maintain so it'll save the city a lot of money, I say it's no small thing to sacrifice comfort on the altar of the almighty dollar."

When he'd gotten home from the war the world, the city especially, had been perfect. He talked about how glamorous the city had been when he'd first blown in, some mostly-imagined era when he was still a bachelor. How elegant and beautiful it had been: the New York of Dawn Powell; the Carlyle Hotel; Fiorello La Guardia; a striptease at the Olympia; a movie at Loew's State; dancing with a date to the Dorsey Brothers at the Grand Ballroom at the Roosevelt Hotel. The faded glory of New York's past, of his lost youth, was the central myth of my upbringing, carefully handed down to me, intact, like some creation myth from long ago.

I always loved that moment when we emerged from underground, eyes sun-dazzled, having been underground, to discover the world aboveground was still intact and functioning. My father would smile with the same pleasure. Maybe it had stopped raining or gotten dark while we'd been down there but the people, the streets and buildings, the important things, remained unchanged, unaffected by our absence.

The subway offered fewer such pleasures and became more dangerous as the seventies slogged on.

The whole city had gone broke, you couldn't get a cop unless you were, at that very instant, being murdered. The muggers, emboldened by the cover the painted-over windows provided, treated the subway as their own hunting preserve—they were the Neandertals, we were the sluggish, bewildered mammoths. It was a weird time; my father felt like everything was being turned upside down and there was nothing to hold onto, no handrails.

He rode the subway less and less. Came into the city less and less. And when he did, it was mostly to get away from my mother's 'perpetual bitching.' And who could blame him given the state of the subway, the state of the city? The state of his marriage.

He was nearly sixty. I was only twenty-five and I only rode the subway when I couldn't avoid it. Otherwise I just took it on the arches.

II

Outside my building in the East Village, in his deteriorating top-down Cadillac, my father idled at the bus stop. Although he'd always believed driving a Caddie was a sign he'd 'made it' all he could ever scrape

up bought a fifteen-year-old piece of junk that clackered and smoked and jittered. Grinning, all long legs, suit and tie. Who knew how long he'd been waiting? From under the brim of his dove-gray hat, he eyeballed the action on the sidewalk. Guys in leather jackets, spiked hair, safety pins in their ears and noses, stomped by in motorcycle boots. My father tracked girls—a particular specialty of his, call it a lifelong study—in torn net stockings; obscenely short skirts, raggedly hemmed; garishly-smeared lipstick; hair green, blue, red. The whole street chain smoking. No one who wasn't obviously broke. Music blasted competitively out of every storefront—Patti Smith, I Wanna Be Sedated, Richard Hell.

"There's no place to fucking park," he hollered as soon as I walked up. As if I could solve the problem for him.

"All these guys found a space," I said, waving at the cars lining the curb in all directions.

"Smartass," he said, "They've been in the same space for twenty years; they hand them down, put codicils in their fucking wills once they find a good space."

"Would it unman you to just stick it in a garage?" The idea that he still could find his way around, that he knew secret alleys and little-known side streets where one could reliably park free, endured, if only in his mind. He hadn't worked in the city in years.

He tossed his hat in the back seat. He'd shaved his mustache and started slicking his hair straight back. Grecian Formula that wasn't fooling anybody. He looked like Nixon.

"Get in," he told me, leaning over and flipping the door handle so the giant Lucerne Blue door swung open, so big it threatened to block the whole Goddammed sidewalk, "What're your thoughts on lunch? C'mon, I'll take you out, I know a place."

"I have stuff upstairs," I told him. I'd brought lunch home from work; bologna and bread, bagels, mustard, mayo. Ruffles. But it had already been decided; any time he asked what your thoughts were you knew he'd made up his mind ahead of you. Your thoughts were irrelevant.

"I'll treat you!" he said, big grin; Diamond Jim Brady my mother called him. He was unemployed again and as usual gave less than a frog's dick about groceries, the mortgage, anything like that. He always figured if he got to the end of the day with more than two bucks in his pocket he'd fucked up somehow.
I'd been unemployed all summer too—Like father, like son, right?— and I was still short, worried about putting food on the table, staying on top of the rent.

As I got into the front seat the heavy pocket of my Levi's jacket swung sideways and bonked the door with a dull but weighty clunk. My father gave me a curious look.

"My pistol," I said, as if no more explanation was needed.

It was a nice little Italian job; a .22

Berretta Model 70S. It weighed just over a pound, enough to pull that side of my jacket lower than the other. It was small enough to fit the pocket, six inches long or so.

"What're you doing with that?" he asked.

"They say its gonna rain."

I said this just to break his balls a little, I mean driving around the Lower East Side in an ancient Caddie with the top down like he was in Miami or something.

At Union Square Fourth turned into Park and he eased us up toward Grand Central at a pace commensurate with his eminence, snarling and giving the finger to everyone passing us on both sides.

"Fuckin' freak show, down there, where you live," he said, "Looks like they're trying to look ugly, like they hate the world. The girls look like Morticia Addams auditioning in a strip joint."

He was baiting me. Given the state of the city—the state of the world—nihilism seemed to me an appropriate, logical, even healthy, response.

I said nothing. We'd had one version or another of this conversation since kids started growing their hair out back when. During Vietnam. He'd say 'the hippies'—a term he applied to anyone under thirty-five and not dressed like one of the Eisenhower offspring—smelled bad from poor personal hygiene and looked like morons to boot. So it's obvious why I didn't want to get into a debate with him about punks.

"They're ruining it for everyone, goddammed punks, slashing things with their switchblades, painting over the windows in the fucking subway, sticking people up with their zipguns. That horrible noise they call music."

He knew even less about punks than he did about hippies. He sounded like the Dean of the Hippie Studies Department at Harvard compared to what he knew about punks.

"'Punk' means something different now from the way you used to use it," I said, "It's not an epithet anymore. It doesn't mean 'criminal.'"

"You can't go around changing the meanings of words on a whim," he said, "just because you're kids and it suits your stupid purposes. It doesn't work like that."

"It wasn't my idea," I told him, but he didn't give a good Goddam.

"What's the matter with Glenn Miller? Artie Shaw? Louis Armstrong?"

"Well, to start with, they're all dead," I said.

He laughed.

"Artie Shaw's still alive," he said, "believe it or not."

"So, how'd you end up so near the top of this particular food chain?" my father said after a while. It was pretty funny that someone who'd spent as much time doing crap jobs and standing in the unemployment line as he had was waxing sarcastic

about my employment status. I was managing this crummy deli in the Village; nothing gourmet, not even close, nothing even especially Jewish—the boss was Irish, married to an Italian. All day we slapped sandwiches together. Ran the slicer. Roast beef, corned beef, tongue, turkey, salami. All that. Doled out potato salad and coleslaw in little buckets. The rest of the stuff—Coke, Doritos, Ho-Hos—was on the other side of the counter where the customers could help themselves. No mess, no sweat. After a couple of days you could sleepwalk through it. Half the counter people stayed halfway plastered all day. They spent their break time in the alley passing quick doobies, shoring up their buzz.

"Look, I know it's a dead-end job," I said, "No future at all." In my head I heard Johnny Rotten caterwauling, No future, no future. No future for you.

I knew he thought the whole thing was somehow beneath me. 'You're selling yourself short,' he'd told me ad infinitum. He used to say that to my brother all the time until my brother hit the road on what everyone had come to accept as a lifestyle choice rather than just a phase he was going through. Now he keeps it around to use on me, 'You're selling yourself short.' I suspected he didn't like having to tell his buddies his son was working in a deli, slinging sandwiches at sidewalk level; it embarrassed him. Especially after the way I'd 'squandered my chances' at NYU. His own resume didn't exactly qualify him for a seat on the Supreme Court either. He'd flamed out in the ad game almost a decade before. Since then he'd held a crazy quilt of jobs; driving instructor, White Flower at Macy's, encyclopedia salesman, Amway distributor, rack jobber for a sleazy tool company, and co-founder of a couple of vaguely fraudulent non-profits and two or three half-assed pyramid schemes of his own. The resume he used all the time, clipping it to job applications and mailing it to companies he imagined might hire him? That one was unadulterated bullshit.

"Plus, my boss killed a guy," I said.

"Come again?"

"Yeah, shot him" I said, "That's where I got the gun. I'll lay it all out for you once we get settled."

"Once we get settled and I have a drink in me," he said.

III

We continued up Park, the Pan Am Building looming straight ahead, straddling the avenue. At 40th Street he hung a lane-crossing left into a Kinney garage. He was too good to park in a garage in my neighborhood, but up here he didn't give it a second thought.

"These guys are mob, these parking guys," he told me in a loud voice as he took his ticket from the guy in the booth, "Parking and garbage, that's all the mob controls anymore. And also drugs and girls and such. Parking, garbage, drugs, girls, what have you. I hate to give them my money but they're the only game in town."

"What about gambling? The num-

bers? Loan sharking?" I said.

"Yeah, parking, garbage, drugs, girls, gambling and loan sharking," he said, "That's it."

"My boss is into those motherfuckers pretty substantially." I said, "You know that Savings and Loan they have on TV?"

"Hudson Home?"

My father closed up the roof and locked the Caddie as we talked.

"Yeah, Hudson Home Savings and Loan," I said.

My father sang a verse of their jingle.

"That's all mob, my boss says. They come around and talk to him," I said, "they call themselves 'bankers.' But I mean what kind of banker comes around to collect a loan payment in person? And brings a second guy with him? And has another guy double-parked outside?"

"They're hell on double-parking in this city," my father said.

The truth was the cops didn't care about anything anymore, you could park your car on top of the Empire State Building and they wouldn't give a glittering fuck as long as you could get it to balance up there.

"That boss of yours?" he said, "What does he tell those ginzos when he doesn't have any money?"

"He tells them to 'pound sand,'" I said, "Calls them 'Guinea bastards.'"

"He sounds like a fine upstanding member of his community, a model citizen, I mean, Jesus H. Christ. Hanging around with the Mafia? Killing people? You can't do any better than that?"

He wasn't exactly 'hanging around' with those guys, but I let it go.

We walked past blinking neon dives advertising LIVE NUDE GIRLS. A guy stood in the doorway of each, one sleazier than the next.

"Christ," my father said, "It isn't even noon. Who goes into a strip joint this time of day?"

"Maybe they work graveyard and just got off work," I said.

"You really think guys like that have jobs?"

We sat in the back of this place my father said he used to come to all the time back when he was a hotshot on Madison Avenue. He said the place was historic, it had been there since the Revolutionary War or Columbus or something.

"Did they miss out on the era with the whole Edison thing? The incandescent light and all that?" I said. You could hardly see your hand in front of your face much less read the menus. The waiter who'd plopped them in front of us looked like he'd come over on the Mayflower.

My father thought maybe we'd run into some of his old buddies—what a thrill that would be. Besides, all that was back in the caveman days,

I figured his buddies were long gone; retired, dead, what have you.

"So what goes on in this dump you work in?" my father said into the menu which could have freelanced as a billboard.

Back to that.

IV

Chuck, the boss, was a little chubby guy who wore faded short-sleeved shirts year-round. The same dumb-looking yellow windbreaker every day, unzipped to his navel. He must have had ten pairs of non-descript black slacks in his closet because that was all he wore. He chain-smoked Luckys all day, lighting them one off the next. His wife, Jackie, was also a fixture in the place.

"If she hangs around here much longer she's gonna turn into a salami," he was fond of saying. She would smile.

Jackie made sure she knew all our names. She dressed plain like her husband; modest skirt, blouse, flats. "She takes care of the books," Chuck told me, "after a fashion, but there's always cash more or less laying around, if you get my drift. Cash she don't know about."

Once in a while we could hear the two of them arguing in the back room. It was hard to miss—Chuck with his unrivalled command of profanity; you could light a match on Jackie's voice. But those fights were infrequent; mostly they were both affable and easygoing, dyed-in-the-wool schnooks, trying to get ahead but losing ground every day. Jackie always with a book in one hand and a spare in her purse. Chuck all glasses and cardboard attache.

"Frig-a-dig," he would say merrily, "Two steps, forward, three back."

"That's alright," I would say, "Just so long as we're working as a team."

I liked them and they liked me.

On a long shelf on the wall behind the prep area, was a display of various brands of condiments. Tabasco, mayo, ketchup. About forty kinds of mustard.

Chuck filled me in on my first day, "People get real snotty about their mustard, see, 'I want this' and 'I want that.' Like it's wine or some shit. They're not that picky about ketchup or hot sauce."

"Or mayonnaise," one of the many attending wisenheimers said.

Every few days one of us would have to go in the back and 'do the mustard.' This entailed ladling great, goppy masses of the world's cheapest mustard out of a bucket the size of a beer keg and into an extra-large pastry bag. The bag held a surprising quantity of mustard which you then extruded into the half empty bottles and jars—all with their original gourmet labels—until they were full. You'd finish the task by sponging them clean, bringing them out of the back and lining them up neatly on the shelf over a handwritten sign that read, 'Mustard Boutique.'

"Most of these people can't tell Gray Poupon from cat shit," Chuck told us proudly. It had been Jackie's idea.

Under his yellow windbreaker, in a holster, Chuck carried a nickel-plated snub-nosed .38 caliber revolver. He concealed a smaller pistol in a smaller holster strapped to his ankle, and, in his attache, accompanied only by a fifth of Old Grand Dad, a military-issue forty-five caliber automatic that looked like it weighed thirty-five pounds.

"I can go anywhere I want in this fucking city, day or night—Bed-Stuy, the Bronx, the subway, the bank with a load of cash—and nothing scares me,"

V

"Generally three or four times a year someone sticks up the place," I said to my father once we had ordered.

His eyes grew big, "Really? Were you ever held up?" There was excitement in this voice; suddenly the job that until a few seconds ago he considered far below my station interested him.

It came with the territory, the city, the times. In those lawless days the sidewalks were home to all kinds of con men, swindlers, quick change artists, snatch-and-runners, muggers, bamboozlers, shoplifters, card sharps, dope peddlers, shills, burglars, car thieves, smash-and-grabbers and general hustlers. They were a constant everyone had to deal with along with the junkies, drunks, nutjobs, hookers, pimps and stumblebums, all on the make as well. People, me included, got pretty casual about these characters, not just with the nonchalance historically affected by veteran New Yorkers, but with an offhanded fatalism, accompanied by a shrug, that in those days marked the true denizen of the jungle.

"Just once," I said, "so far."

"What does your boss have to say about this? Putting you in harm's way for his profit."

"He says to just give the guy the money and not look him in the eye."

"Good advice," my father said.

"Yeah. He's not exactly Isaac Asimov but he's not stupid."

"Apparently," he said.
"But sometimes he gets into a mood and says one of these days he's gonna catch someone holding one of us up and he'll 'blast the motherfucker.'

"And I say, 'Please don't, the last thing I wanna do is get caught in a crossfire between you and some terrified kid.' But most of the time this shit happens late at night, after he and Jackie have gone home."

"Jesus, you sure know how to pick 'em," my father said.

"So this kid comes in," I continued, "Puerto Rican, looks sixteen, tops..."

"They all look younger than they are," my father said.

"Whatever," I said.

"It's merely an observation," he said, "I'm not stereotyping. Generalizing. Whatever."

"Anyway, it's busy, lunchtime, we're all humming along," I said, "and this kid comes in. It's strange because, yeah, we're busy, but it's like ten after twelve. The smart thing to do would be to wait until the registers get full, later in the day, after lunch, then hold us up."

"So is the kid stupid? Hopped up on drugs? What?" my father said.

"I go up to the counter and ask if I can help him. He says nothing, just pulls out a pistol and points it right at my heart."

"Smart. 'Aim for the middle,'" my father said, "That's what they taught us in the service. That way you're pretty sure to hit something important."

"I don't bother raising my hands or any of that corny-ass stuff, I figure I know what he wants so give it to him."

The waiter slid our lunches in front of us so smoothly, like a ghost, we practically didn't know he was there.

"Jeez," my father said, "Jack Benny with the steaks."

He didn't even wait for the poor bastard to leave.

"Just then," I said, "the old broad who runs the jewelry place down the street walks in, sees what's going on and screams, 'Oh my God! He's got a gun!' All hell breaks loose. Everyone in the place starts screaming. The kid only has about half the cash at this point, but he sees the jig is up, shoves what he has in his front pocket and splits."

"They're fast," my father said, "Kids, I mean."

VI

Chuck was in the back with Jackie when he heard the old battle axe shouting and knew instantly what was going on. He came tearing out of the back struggling to unholster his .38, not exactly Matt Dillon. He caught a glimpse of the kid through the front window as he ran past and away, all of us pointing and shouting. He got hung up for a second unlatching the half-door that lets you out into the customer area, it always stuck just when you needed it, and then took off after the kid. Not more than fifteen seconds later we heard shots and then people screaming. We could see them running past the store in the other direction.

"So, I still don't know why, but I run out onto the street and in the general direction of where the shots came from."

"You were always a nosy kid," my father said, "sticking your beak where it doesn't belong."

"I see there's a crowd gathering down at the corner. University Place. Gawkers, rubberneckers. I push my way through the crowd. The kid is lying face down in a big pool of his own blood, full-length in the street—the gutter—his gun still in his hand,

covered with blood. You can see two holes in the kid's back.

"One guy says, 'The sonofabitch was just standing there.'

"Another guy laughs and says, 'He was waiting for the WALK sign, the dumb moron.'

"The first guy says, 'If he ain't dead yet he soon will be.'

"And then another guy says, 'Well let's make sure,' and kicks the gun and it skitters away. It doesn't sound right, it sounds hollow, something's wrong.

"The first guy picks it up, 'Look at this,' he says, laughing in disbelief, amazement, 'It's plastic, it's a fuckin' water pistol.'"

The rubberneckers all went silent. I stood next to Chuck, holding his .38 at his side. I could feel him trembling next to me without touching him.

Chuck said, "I guess I killed the little bastard."

You could hear sirens approaching. The two neighborhood beat cops, guys we knew and who knew us, sauntered up to see what all the hubbub was about, shouldering their way to the front the way cops do. The older one, Miller, spotted Chuck still with the gun at his side and said, 'Is this your doing?' and Chuck nodded, 'yes.' Miller held out his hand and Chuck handed him the gun, butt first. The other cop, Sanchez, told the guy holding the bloody toy gun to hand it over. Miller talked to Chuck and then to me perfunctorily, asking us what happened and all, blah, blah, blah, eliciting mostly matching stories from both of us. It was all very friendly; we saw these guys nearly every day, gave them sandwiches on the arm whenever they came in. Chuck slipped them some cash once in a while, saying, 'Get your kids something nice for Christmas.' He called it 'The Policeman's Benevolent Christmas Club.' They kept an eye on us.

Meanwhile Patrolman Sanchez checked the kid's body—turning him over, checking for a pulse, searching him for ID. The kid's chest was a major mess. The bullets went in clean but took out guts and blood and hunks of bone with them as they exited. The money the kid had taken was sticking half out of his jeans' front pocket.

Cop cars screeched up, an ambulance. Fresh cops got out of the prowlers and stood around gawking. Rocking on their heels, telling jokes and snickering. Laughing at one of their buddies who was barfing into a trash can. Waiting for the detectives to show up. Sanchez rolled the kid back over the way he'd been.

"Anybody got a sheet, a blanket we can cover this kid up with?" he said. A chair cloth from the barber shop materialized and Sanchez spread it so it covered the worst of the gore.

A couple of detectives hauled up in an unmarked car and started looking the scene over, shooting Polaroids, talking to the same witnesses Miller had, throwing their weight around, telling everybody to move back. Patrolman Miller introduced

them to Chuck, 'Here's the hero of the week,' he said.

"I just wanted my money back," Chuck said.

VII

"They talk to me and Chuck all over again and we tell the same story we'd told Miller and Sanchez," I said, "The detectives are just as unruffled as the beat cops. Chuck looks pretty green."

My father had thrown back a couple of martinis. We hadn't bumped into anyone he knew. We'd polished off our miniature steaks.

"And then here comes Sanchez," I said, "walking up to one of the detectives bold as anything. He gets real close to him so they're shoulder to shoulder, so no one can see. Sanchez puts something bloody in his hand. It's wrapped in a handkerchief. Sanchez's.

"Sanchez steps back and says, so everyone can hear, 'Clearly a case of self-defense,' The detective unwraps it and sees it's a gun."

"Which gun?" my father said, "I'm afraid I've lost track. Your boss's gun or the toy?"

"That's the thing," I said, "That's the point. It's neither one! Sanchez switched a real gun for the toy gun right under everybody's nose."

"Jesus," my father said.

"And the detective says this. He says 'Yes, yes. Clearly, clearly a case of self-defense.'"

The waiter came out of the gloom and placed the check on the table. My father pulled the tray toward him quickly, making it clear he was buying. Stranger things had happened, but not recently.

"So they take down our names and addresses and all that shit and send us on our way," I said.

"Did they at least confiscate your boss's gun?" My father said. He was a lifelong Republican but believed in strict gun control. When I was little he'd told me all about New York's Sullivan Act, severely restricting gun ownership. Passed during the Tammany Hall era, it required registration and stuff like that. Like he was worried someone would sell me a gun. In New York. To an eight-year-old.

"No, they treat him like a fucking hero," I said, "Miller even gives him—and me!—a pat on the back, if you can believe that."

"Fucking cops," he said, "they're the same wherever you go."

"I thought they were going to give us the key to the city next," I said.

My father put a credit card on top of the check on the little tray. I wouldn't have been more surprised if he'd tossed a flapping halibut onto the table. I'd fully expected him to suddenly realize he was short on cash and ask me to pay, telling me he'd reimburse me next time we saw each other.

He'd always been a cash man, distrusting financial institutions and

credit card companies. Which came about mostly because they distrusted him even more. The kind of lunatic who would give him a nickel's worth of credit I couldn't imagine. "Diners' Club," he said, knowing what I was thinking, "it's the easiest one to get. People think it's some kind of exclusive club, that it's hard to get into, so they don't bother applying, but the fact is they barely check." I picked up the card. Alexis S. Whitehead, Esq.

"I guess it's even easier to get when you don't use your real name?" I said, flipping it back into the tray. I knew, if anyone asked, he had a wallet-full of driver's licenses and Social Security cards in the same name to back it up.

"Well, yes, there's that," he said.

We walked back to the garage and got the Caddie out of hock. I volunteered to take the subway back downtown, but he wouldn't hear of it. It took him about three hours to get the top down and stowed away again. My father paid cash for the parking, but not until after he'd asked the attendant if he'd take Diners' Club or maybe a personal check.

"So, finish your story?" he said, "You can't leave your audience hanging with a corpse in the gutter and a gun no one can account for."

"Well, obviously the gun Sanchez gives to the detective is his throwdown piece," I said, "The one every cop carries for just such an occasion."

"I've heard of that," my father said, "I always thought it might be one of those urban legends. But it doesn't surprise me."

"And Sanchez, he must've dipped the gun in the blood and pocketed the water pistol, to make it look kosher.

"And then, just as we're getting ready to go back to work, Sanchez throws his arm around Chuck's shoulders and hands him the wad of bloody bills."

"They don't need that for evidence?" my father said.

We motored down Third Avenue. Back to the East Village.

"Chuck told me the funniest thing about it is he only got about half back. Sanchez kept the other half."

"Fucking cops," my father said again.

"No shit," I said, "But let me finish."

VIII

"Later in the day, these same two flatfoots—flatfeet?—Miller and Sanchez, come in and Sanchez goes into the back room with Chuck, leaving Jackie out in the serving area to keep Miller entertained. Right away Miller's scarfing Fritos out of a family-size bag.

"'I'll never understand why he did this," Jackie says, " But he just had to go running out there, didn't he? There was no earthly reason for it.'

"A while later they come out again, looking smug, like they just signed

the Treaty of Versailles. Sanchez helps himself to a couple of packages of Yodels and root beers and they walk out.

"'So what did that cost us?' Jackie says."

My father said, "Smart woman, your boss's wife."

Apparently, our buddy Sanchez laid it out for him; did Chuck want to go through all the rigamarole of explaining, possibly in court, how he'd lied to the cops, tampered with evidence, shot a kid who was armed with nothing more than a squirt gun? Sanchez had kept the blood-covered toy for 'safekeeping' and if Chuck wanted it to stay 'out of reach' he could make sure by tipping Miller and Sanchez for keeping it that way. Chuck figured it had to be worth a yard a week just to lay it all to rest. He would just have to think of it as a bigger version of The Policeman's Benevolent Christmas Club and live with it.

"Jackie said, 'That's the smartest thing you've done in weeks. Hell, months.'"

IX

"So the day after that Chuck buttonholes me in the back where I'm doing the mustard, and hands me this pistol. One I've never seen before. He presses it in my hand like it was some precious family heirloom he doesn't want me to lose.

"'Take this,' he says, 'Use it for your own protection. You should only use it to get yourself out of trouble, never in. And don't believe all that bullshit about how you never pull it unless you intend to use it. This won't stop anyone or even slow 'em down much, but you'd be surprised at the reaction you'll get just by hauling it out.'"

"So now you're running around thinking you're Charles Bronson," my father said, "patrolling the streets, fighting crime, mowing down miscreants?"

"Hardly," I said, "I only carry it if I'm gonna be on the subway and sometimes if it's late at night. And I barely use the subway at all anymore. I walk everywhere."

"Do you have it with you now?" my father said. He already knew I did. I reached in the pocket of my Levi's jacket and pulled out the gun, thinking I'd give the crazy old bastard a cheap thrill.

I held it out for him and he took it from me and looked at it as if it warranted his entire concentration. "Watch the road," I said. He was enamored of the thing, looking at it and veering all over his lane. He was intrigued by all things man-made, from alarm clocks to subway cars to dirigibles. I was afraid he was going to crack us up, run us into a taxi or something.

He waved it in the air like he was John Wayne charging into Apache Country with his cavalrymen thundering behind.

"I haven't held a gun in my hand since the war," he yelled, grinning like a maniac.

He pulled the trigger twice and the shots, even in the ongoing twenty-four-seven din of the city, amplified and doubled by the narrow canyon the buildings formed, echoed off the buildings, the plate glass windows, the pavement, everywhere; there was no mistaking them for anything else. It's easy to mistake a backfire for shot, but there's no mistaking a shot for a backfire. Second Avenue was suddenly bedlam; pedestrians on the sidewalk were diving for cover, running, yelling.

My ears rang.

"Jesus H. Christ," I yelled, "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"I wish you wouldn't take that tone with me," he said, "I'm still your old man, after all."

He handed the gun back to me. It was hot. Still smoking a little, but I may be imagining that part. I shoved it back into my jacket pocket. I could barely keep myself from throwing it down a storm sewer or something. And he was laughing his ass off. Laughing harder than I'd seen him laugh in years. Gasping. It pissed me off.

"I was trying to give you a little treat, you know," he said, breathless, panting, "just to let you know your old man's still got it when he needs it."

"Jesus Fucking Christ in a whorehouse," I said again. I was trembling all over.

I felt conspicuous, like the center of the world's attention had been focused entirely on me and my father at that moment. People all around us were in a panic; most of them had no idea where the shots had come from.

"Welcome to Dealy Plaza," I said and he either ignored it or didn't get it or some combination of the two, cruising along with the traffic, steering with one wrist draped over the wheel, casual, blending in.

His eyes danced and he kept laughing. What should I have expected? His whole life had been one sixty-year-long in-joke. He didn't mind if you didn't get it, but if you in fact did get it, well, so much the better. He was going to continue down his own path either way.

I turned around in my seat, eyeing the street behind us for the cops. The local wisdom said there was never a cop around when you needed one; nowadays there was never a cop around, period, which was currently working in our favor. It looked like we were pretty much in the clear. In a matter of seconds we'd left behind the chaos we'd caused, the shouting faded into the distance. A tiny cloud of smoke hanging over the avenue was the only sign we'd passed through at all. It rotated slowly like something alive, carefree, until the tiniest breeze snuffed it out. Without warning my father stomped the accelerator and jumped the Caddie through a gap in the traffic only he could see and swung onto Eleventh Street. It was suddenly peaceful in the way only a side street in the Village could be in the middle of a weekday. We glided west. Unperturbed.

"She still has a little giddy-up left in her," he said, patting the dash affectionately.

I didn't have anything to contribute. He was still laughing, catching his breath. I glared at him the best I could, but I felt the beginnings of a smirk around the corners of my mouth. Mostly I felt happy, now that the shock was wearing off. Happy to see that under the suburban complacency and the mellowing of age there still existed, deep down, the madman he once was. The madman I remembered from my growing up. The madman my mother had finally ground down to nothing. Or so the thought.

"Didn't that idiot boss of yours ever tell you to never hand a gun to anyone without unloading it first? Jesus."

"Not that I remember," I said, feeling like New York's biggest lame.

"See? Look what you've become," my father said, "Walking around with a gun that obviously scares you more than anybody else."

"It would scare anybody," I said. Lame, lame, lame.

"Look what this city has become," he said, "You can shoot off a Goddammed gun in the middle of a major thoroughfare and no one gives two shits. It's a hell of a pretty pass. It wasn't like this back in my day."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," I said. All his Myth of the Golden Age bullshit could get on your nerves pretty quick if you let it. Especially when you were already upset with him.

X

"About a week or so later, Chuck and Jackie and I take the A Train down to Chambers Street."

"Two stops from West Fourth," my father said, still trying to prove he wasn't totally out of it.
"Yeah, so we get off and walk over to City Hall," I said, "They've got a line of maybe fifty citizens, waiting for some flunky Second Deputy Mayor to give them a Certificate of Outstanding Service, or whatever it's called, personally signed, in ink, by the mayor. Each of them is being recognized for some achievement or service that benefitted the city in some way."

"Not all of them particularly outstanding, I would imagine," my father said.

"Precisely," I said, "They have this thing, third Monday of the month except for Monday holidays when they have it the next week. Jackie and I sit with the other relatives, witnesses, the usual menagerie. When Chuck gets to the head of the line, after about twenty minutes, this flunky Second Deputy Mayor shakes his hand and gives him one of these certificates, Chuck's name written in fancy script. It couldn't have looked more like a visit with Santa if Chuck sat in the Deputy's lap. They hustle him away. Five seconds, tops; others were waiting after all."

"So that's how that bastard of a mayor lets himself off the hook," my father said.

"You probably read about it? The local rags named him The Sandwich Shop Six-Shooter?"

"I did. That was this?" he said. "I didn't see any mention of a cap gun or anything."

"They kept most of the details out of the press," I said, "The story had the life span of a fruit fly and once the public's attention moved on, the mayor wanted nothing more to do with the whole mess—no more publicity, no more controversy."

"Yeah, I get it," my father said, "It sounds like one of those political third-rails nobody wants to touch; the little shit is probably petrified of looking like he's soft on crime."

I said, "Or worse, some kind of bloodthirsty knuckle dragger."

"So some underpaid genius in his office comes up with this idea," my father said, " to make the whole thing go away, completely unnoticed, the very insignificance of the whole drill working to his advantage? Amazing."

"Yuh gotta love it," I said. "So, on the way back, Chuck, who's normally the cockiest bastard around, seems fidgety, jumpy. Nervous. He says we should take a cab. Jackie puts her foot down, saying why do that when the subway is cheaper and faster. He says he just wants to take a cab and that's all there is to it.

"Jackie rolls her eyes and says to me, 'He doesn't want to ride the subway anymore. Not since that kid got shot. He's doesn't carry his guns with him. He told me he doesn't want to kill anybody ever again.' "And he says, 'Why'd you tell him that?' He's embarrassed and they bicker about it the rest of the way back. On the A-train."

"Holy shit," my father said.

XI

Somehow, by following a circuitous, back-alley, gas-station-apron-crossing, stop-sign-avoiding short-cut only my father could've concocted, we made it back to the East Village. It was like he'd never left the city. I was still as hyperalert as he was nonchalant; thinking any second we'd hear the short whoop of the prowl car and see the cop gesturing for us to pull over.

We pulled up in front of my building, double parking. I got halfway out and, as was our habit, we exchanged promises to not go so long between visits, blah, blah, blah. Both of us knowing all the while none of it was true, all bullshit like always.

My father was smiling to himself, so subtly you never would have detected it if you'd known him for any less than twenty-five years.

"I'll see you, son," he said. I swung the enormous door shut as the Caddie trundled off.

I watched his beloved Cadillac as it navigated its slow way down the garbage-strewn street. Back to Jersey, back to my mother. All I could see of my father was the back of his head silhouetted in the afternoon sun, just enough to see

how tall and straight-backed he sat. He had his dove gray hat on again. He wore it as a statement, a declaration, that announced he was a man of a different time, a time before everything went all to hell. Every time he crossed the bridge; feeling more and more like he was outside looking in. It was as if he'd awakened in a different city after a long sleep—a city he barely recognized—standing frozen and blinking as the past rushed by him, like the 'A' Train, and disappeared into the sooty gloom of the tunnel. He was there, yes, but somewhere else entirely, from a different time. When men wore elegant hats and women walked in high heels. When people read Hemingway instead of sneering at him. Before the punks and the hippies and all the other beatniks and weirdos took over and fucked everything up. He looked proud. And terribly alone.

Byron Spooner is recently retired after twenty-one years as the Literary Director of the Friends of the San Francisco Public Library where he produced literary events including a weekly poetry series with San Francisco Poet Laureate Emeritus Jack Hirschman. Additionally, he ran the Friends' book sales operation which grossed $1.5 million annually. He founded and edited of The Readers Review, the Friends' literary blog, where he wrote about books, music, film and bookselling. With his wife, writer Judith Ayn Bernhard, he co-edited Arcana: A Festschrift for Jack Hirschman (Andover Street Archives Press, 2014). His writing has been published in the Manifest_Station, Passengers Journal, San Francisco Examiner, the Anderson Valley Advertiser, Autobiography and Isis. He has written introductions to several anthologies published by FSFPL. His short story, A Book for Christmas was published by Red Berry Editions in 2011. He has served on the San Francisco Poet Laureate Nominating Committee and the One City, One Book Selection Committee of the SFPL and on the Boards of Litquake. California Public Library Advocates and the Advisory Board of the Beat Museum.

Poems by A Whittenberg

Katrina

Changing leaves
Colored
Cruel luminous
Red
Then yellow
Was it all a confused dream?
That week when August
Tripped into September
People trapped in a sports stadium
A woman carries
A collie to safety
A thirsty child
Begs
A man gains
A television
A rescue worker
rubs his aching eyes still hearing the screams
Six dolphins
Safe in a hotel swimming pool

That Peculiar Institution

To simulate, lock yourself in a closet for four months
Except, there's too much room in a closet
Maximum, 28 inches
Lie in a bookshelf
The boat pitches
Planks lined with upchucked, salt water, and shit
Urine runs down the slats
Blood clots in your limbs
The diarrhea stricken manacled to the sea sickened
Chained to the impregnated
The boat tossing
A baby being birthed
Think of a sardine can with envy
The sardines are dead

A 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.

The Black Bear
Chris Belden

I.

Mrs. Pinsky, the oldest resident in the neighborhood, and the earliest riser, was the first to spot the bear. While sipping her coffee at the kitchen table and admiring how the predawn light had turned the lake a fish scale shade of silver, Mrs. P. noticed a large dog lumbering down Tawaba Lane. Her eyes may not be what they used to be, and there are times when she gets a little confused, but it didn't take long for Mrs. P. to determine that this was no dog. She went down the list: fox (nope; too big), coyote (ditto), mountain lion (too dark), wolf (ditto). Oh, Lordy, Mrs. P. thought, because the closer this thing got, the more certain she became that it was a bear. An adolescent, she figured from the size of it, and as black as new tar. She immediately picked up the telephone and called her son Nathan, who lives next door. Nathan does not typically rise until ten or so, but when he saw his mother's caller ID on the phone, he picked up right away.

"Nate, honey," Mrs. P. said before he could ask what was wrong, "look outside your window."

By this time, the bear, in no hurry, was just passing Nathan's house.

"What is that?" Nathan asked as he peered out the front window. If anyone's eyesight could be worse than Mrs. P's, it's Nathan's, and he had not bothered to put on his glasses. "Is that Natalya's dog?"

His neighbor Natalya Macek's pit bull mix, John Paul III, was known to escape his "invisible fence" and wreak havoc in the neighborhood.

"It's a bear!" Mrs. P. said.

Nathan didn't believe her at first. Last year his mother mistook a raccoon for her cat, Jingles (since deceased), and let it into her house, where it proceeded to eat the telephone wires. And Nathan, of course, was the one she called to remove the raccoon. But this time, when he put on his glasses, he could see his mother was right—it was a bear.

Nathan had once spotted a bear while hiking in the woods many years earlier, but he'd never before seen one traipsing down Tawaba Lane. "It was like he owned the place," he remarked later. "Like he was out for a morning stroll."

Nathan wanted to call the animal warden, but his mother forbade it. "They'll just shoot the poor thing," she said, "or capture him with tranquilizer darts and put him in a zoo." She told Nathan to let the bear go. "He's not hurting anyone." Which was true, as far as Nathan could tell—the bear just seemed to be traveling through. So he put down the phone and, after watching the bear turn the bend, climbed back into bed, where he dreamed about his ex-wife, Janice. Later, of course, he would insist that his mother had been the victim of sentimental propaganda from Humane Society mailings, and that he should have called the authorities.

Natalya Macek encountered the

bear moments later, just as she was headed out to walk John Paul III. After the bear had passed by and moved on down Tawaba Lane, Natalya rushed back inside to tell her husband, Tomás, who was sleeping off another hangover. "The bear came around the corner," Natalya told him in her thick Polish accent that the reader will have to imagine, "and I froze, and most amazingly, John Paul froze also." John Paul III had long been known for his reckless enthusiasm, but faced for the first time with such an imposing creature, he'd turned reticent. "I, too, did not know what to do," Natalya continued, "so I did nothing, I just stood there like a fool as the bear passed us by. He was only five meters away, and did not even bother to look at us as he passed. Not even a sniff."

Tomás first cursed his wife for speaking in English so early in the morning and then made it clear that he did not believe Natalya's story, insisting between moans and bursts of indigestion that she had made it all up so that he would feel envious of her experience. This infuriated Natalya, who would later tell her divorce lawyer that it was "the straw that broke the camel."

The bear was next spotted by Billy Conley, as he prepared to do some fishing on the lake. He had just placed a Styrofoam cooler loaded with Budweiser and ice in his rowboat and was about to search for the car battery that powered the electric motor and which he'd stored somewhere he could no longer recall. Billy grew up on the lake, and he'd seen just about everything walking down Tawaba Lane at one time or another—snapping turtles, swans, wild turkeys, frogs, raccoons, even a fisher cat once—but never had he seen a bear.

"I nearly shat my drawers," he said later, his eyes still wide with the wonder of it.

Billy lives by himself in the house he inherited from his Aunt Reba. He has no steady job to speak of, but with a diet of rice and beans and Budweiser, his overhead is low. "And I never been sick a day in my life," he likes to say, "if you don't count the DTs."

The bear, true to form, nonchalantly ambled past the rickety wooden dock where Billy moors his rowboat. "Looked like he was smiling almost, like he'd just had himself a big ol' salmon or something. Not a care in the world." By the following night, however, Billy's tale would stretch all out of proportion to include the bear's attempt to climb into the rowboat, which Billy put a stop to by offering the animal his tuna sandwich. No one believes this part of the story, and for a time Billy's exaggeration sowed enough doubt in people's minds that the entire episode came into question. Did Billy see the bear at all? Did anyone? Was it a collective hallucination, as Tomás Macek would later call it—a vision conjured to explain an unacceptable tragedy?

"Well, *I* certainly saw it," Hank Lester claimed later that day, when all anyone could talk about was the bear. Hank is an attorney, but nonetheless generally trusted in the neighborhood, so when he insisted

that the bear had passed his house just as he was climbing into his Audi to go to the office, folks were inclined to believe him. "It was black, maybe two hundred pounds, four feet from snout to tail," Hank said, "moving slow but steady, headed south on Tawaba Lane." This is how Hank tends to talk, as if testifying in court. Something of a playboy, he even recounts his amorous adventures like a cop describing a criminal suspect: his most recent lady friend, for example, was "about five-foot-two, maybe 110 pounds, brunette, with a little tattoo of a honeybee on her left bicep."

Hank waited patiently for the bear to pass—"He looked like he knew exactly where he was going"—then headed off to work. It didn't even occur to him to call the animal warden. "He was harmless," Hank said of the bear. "I still think so."

Most people believe that the last person to see the bear that day was Daisy Winterson, ten-year-old daughter of Jake and Martha. The generally accepted story goes that Daisy woke up early, as usual, and went outside to play with her dolls while waiting for her parents to rise. Martha said later that she'd forgotten to set the alarm, but the eagerness with which she offered this explanation indicated to many that she had not so much forgotten to set the alarm as she (and Jake) had probably gotten too high the night before and passed out without preparing for the following day. In any case, little Daisy—as sparkly and good-natured as the child of crystal meth addicts could be—must have been happily surprised to see a real live bear ambling down her road, and perhaps lulled into naïveté by the hundreds of cartoons she'd watched, ran out to pat the adorable critter on the head as she would a dog or a cat.

That's one theory, anyway. Another, less likely, theory is that Daisy taunted the bear with a stick later found in the middle of the road. Yet another is that Daisy did not approach the bear at all, that the lost and hungry animal mistook her for a fawn or some other vulnerable woodland creature, and chased her down. In any case, Daisy Winterson disappeared that day, leaving no clues as to her fate. And not long after, Jake and Martha moved away.

II.

But before the Wintersons moved away, the bear sightings and the disappearance of Daisy Winterson brought the residents of Lake Tawaba together in a way that only a novel tragedy can. Once word got out that Daisy was missing, neighbors clustered at mailboxes to conjure tales of the wild, murderous animal and the innocent little girl with the good-for-nothing parents. The next day, a number of locals volunteered to help the authorities comb the woods, and that night, after no trace of Daisy had been found, several spontaneous gatherings erupted around the neighborhood, an opportunity for folks to ponder the mystery while grilling burgers and drinking beer. It was at one of these gatherings that Nathan Pinsky berated himself for not calling the animal warden the minute he saw the bear, and his mother for

talking him out of it.

"If only I hadn't listened to her," he said, "Daisy might still be alive."

Those present went through the motions of consoling Nathan, assuring him that he was not to blame, but many thought that not only was he correct—he should have ignored his mother and called the animal warden—but that he seemed to be reveling a bit too much in all this attention. Nathan's ex moved out west with their two children a few years back, and while some divorced fathers—especially if not tied down by gainful employment—would relocate to be near their children, Nathan went in the other direction, staying behind and renting the house next door to his mother. Over the years he has found and lost a number of jobs (Costco, Home Depot, Trader Joe's, Target), which embarrasses Mrs. P. to no end. Still, as she often says, she does love having her boy right next door.

At a separate gathering, Billy Conley was the first to put forth the theory that the bear was not the culprit at all. "I wouldn't be surprised," he said as he and the others sat on logs around a fire pit in his back yard, "if it was some pervert who nabbed little Daisy."

Last year, the neighborhood was up in arms when a registered sex offender moved in several blocks from the lake. As word spread, outraged parents emailed and texted one another, using lots of capital letters and exclamation points to warn everyone to keep their children inside until the sexual predator could be run out of town. Then Hank Lester took the time to look into the matter and discovered that the sex offender's crime had been "urinating in public," which came under the heading "Indecent Exposure," and that he had never in fact molested anyone. Everyone was relieved, but the paranoia still lingered, so when Billy suggested that Daisy Winterson may have been abducted by a depraved pedophile and was perhaps being held in a dark basement somewhere, at least a few were inclined to believe it.

Ralph Sligo expressed skepticism about this theory, citing Occam's Razor. "After all," he said, "a bear was seen by several people on Tawaba Lane, on the same day, at around the same time, that Daisy disappeared." But Billy responded that he was one of those who had seen the bear, and in his opinion the animal had not been at all dangerous, even to a child.

"That bear," he said after a long slug of Bud, "was as mellow as a lamb."

That's when Billy launched into the extended version of his tale, in which the friendly bear partook of his tuna fish sandwich, and at that point his entire testimony came into question.

It was Hank Lester, at yet another gathering, who theorized that Jake and/or Martha Winterson had done away with Daisy. "I see these kinds of things all the time," Hank said, reminding everyone that he'd started his law career as a prosecutor. "Those two are junkies, bottom line, and they'd do anything to simplify

their lives to the point where it's just wake up, get high, sleep, wake up, get high, sleep—on and on and on. Daisy got in the way."

"You think they killed her?" Natalya asked.

"Maybe," Hank said through a mouthful of tortilla chips. "Or sold her into white slavery."

"That seems farfetched to me."

"Think about it," Hank went on. "No body, no blood, no sign of a struggle, no nothing. The kid just—" He snapped his fingers and motioned like a magician with his hands. "Poof! Gone."

"Maybe she was abducted by aliens," Tomás said. He had drunk a lot of potato vodka and that always tilted his Polish accent more toward Transylvania, so that everything he said sounded somehow both more ominous and ridiculous.

Natalya, still incensed at her husband, swatted him on the arm. "He doesn't even believe there was a bear," she announced to the others.

Tomás then recounted a story that had been popular in Lodz when he was a child, in which several residents of his neighborhood claimed to have witnessed the Virgin Mary riding a donkey down the road at dusk. "First it was one child who saw this this, then two, then the adults," he said. "Of course the whole time it was the Widow Wadja on the donkey they saw," Tomás said after a dramatically timed slug of vodka. "But once someone sees something unusual, however mistaken, it is only human for people to want to be a part of the same experience."

"But I saw the bear!" Hank said, and Tomás just shook his head and muttered in Polish to Natalya that, as a lawyer, Hank was not to be trusted. Natalya grimaced in embarrassment and secretly looked forward to leaving him.

Of course there was no party going on at the Wintersons' that night, though the house did glow, all its lights switched on, as if that might bring Daisy—or her spirit—home in the dark. A police car came and went, and some believed that Jake and Martha's arrest was imminent, but they never were taken into custody, and as far as anyone knew, they were never even officially suspected of a crime. The next night, the lights remained on, and the night after that, and every night for a week until one night the house went dark—so dark it disappeared against the woods out back—and the lights never came on again. Like the bear, and Daisy, the Wintersons had gone.

III.

But before the Wintersons left, Mrs. Pinsky stopped by their house with Nathan and a deep pot of lentil soup. Martha opened the door wearing a fluffy blue bathrobe, "looking like hell," Nathan reported later, but he couldn't say whether her appearance was due to grief or drug abuse, or both. She thanked them but did not invite them inside.

"Is there any word from the police?" Mrs. P. asked, and Martha shook her

head no.

Nathan thought that, despite her haggard appearance, Martha looked rather fetching in her blue robe. Her bug-eyes and sallow skin screamed "Danger," a quality Nathan had always found enticing. Sure, her hair was greasy and uncombed, but that held its own kind of allure, as it meant she may have been just lying in bed. He tried to peer past her into the house, but Martha had pulled the door nearly shut behind her, blocking the view.

"Well, if you need anything," Mrs. P. told her, then did not finish the sentence. Martha thanked them again and, bearing the soup as if it were a filled chamber pot, disappeared into the house.

On their way back up Tawaba Lane, Mrs. P. once again told Nathan the old story about losing track of him at JC Penney's. "You were about the same age as Daisy," she said, "and I just knew you didn't have the wherewithal to find someone in charge who could help you."

"Mother," Nathan said. He hated this story.

"I know I've told you this story, Nate honey, but I never told you what went through my mind before I finally found you in the lady's lingerie department."

"*Mother*," Nathan said.

"It pains me to admit this," Mrs. P. went on, "but for about thirty seconds I fantasized that you were lost for good."

"*Mother*!"

"Nathan, dear, you don't know what it's like—your children, my grandchildren, are on the other side of the country—but parenthood sucks the life out of a person."

Nathan was about to interrupt, but his mother put up her hand to stop him. "You ask any parent, and if they're honest they'll tell you it's crossed their mind: What if Junior disappeared? It's a pleasant thought, so long as it remains a fantasy."

"Mother, why are you telling me this?" Nathan asked.

She stopped walking and looked up at him. "When I found you in the lingerie department," and here Nathan slapped his forehead, "I was the happiest mother on earth."

Nathan smiled and turned to continue up the lane.

"But that woman," Mrs. P. said, grabbing Nathan by the arm. "That woman, I'm afraid, would not be so happy to find little Daisy."

Natalya also visited the Wintersons that week. Not that she'd planned to—she was out walking John Paul III around the lake and, when passing by, impulsively decided to stop in. She had never spoken to Martha or Jake—there just hadn't been the opportunity—but she couldn't ignore such a tragedy right in her own neighborhood. As she approached the front door, John Paul dug in with his powerful rear paws, and Nata-

lya had to drag him up the walkway. The dog hardly ever behaved this way—only at the veterinarian's office and the home of Tomás's friend Rafael, who owned a combative tomcat.

Again, Martha answered the door wearing her bathrobe. "Yes?" she said, eyeing the dog. John Paul now had the leash in his mouth and was tugging as hard as he could, his bottom jutting high into the air. Natalya explained that she was a neighbor and asked if Martha needed anything. Martha, in a drowsy monotone, thanked her and said they were fine. "She was neither friendly nor unfriendly," Natalya told Tomás later that day. "She was just . . . blank."

"She was probably on drugs," Tomás declared as he poured himself a glass of potato vodka.

"If I were her," Natalya said, "I would be on drugs too."

But she couldn't tell, as she stood outside the Wintersons' doorway, if Martha was on drugs or not. She had heard the rumors, but what did she know about such things? The woman was numb, that much was clear, and who could blame her? Behind Martha, Natalya made out a sliver of the house—stairs, a narrow hallway. She wondered where the husband was. How could he leave his wife alone at home at a time like this? But then she thought of Tomás, who would probably run straight to the Corner Pub if this happened to them and wouldn't return for days.

"I am not a very good cook," she told Martha, "but I can bring you something from a restaurant."

She was thinking specifically of Chinese food, for which she had a sudden craving, but Martha said no thank you, and it was clear she didn't want to talk, plus John Paul III was now growling as he gnawed and tugged at the leash, nearly pulling Natalya off the stoop.

"Do you think she killed the little girl?" Tomás asked her after another shot.

"I cannot accept that," Natalya said. "Maybe the father, but not the mother."

"That," Tomás said, "is where you are wrong. It is always the mother."

And once again Natalya felt grateful that she and Tomás did not have children. She reminded herself to call the lawyer a friend had told her about.

Billy Conley, too, had no plans to stop by the Wintersons', but a few days after Daisy's disappearance, while taking his daily stroll around the neighborhood, he passed by the Wintersons' place just as Jake pulled his rusty Subaru into the driveway. Beer in hand, Billy paused to watch Jake climb from the car with a bag of groceries.

"How ya doin'?" Billy called out from the road.

Jake, who looked to be in a rush, stopped to take in Billy's question. He was scrawnier than ever, lost in

a faded Dave Matthews t-shirt, his arms like two pink sticks. When he didn't answer, Billy said, "You want a beer?" and pulled a spare can of Bud from his pocket. "It's still pretty cold." Billy liked to drink beer on his walks, which he measured not by miles but by the amount of beer consumed ("I walked a six-pack today," he might say).

Jake looked at the front door, then back to Billy. He set down the bag on the gravel driveway and walked across the lawn.

"Yeah," he said. "I could use it."

Billy handed him the beer. When Jake opened the tab, foam sprayed out.

"Carbonation," Billy said, shaking his head, as if acknowledging an unfortunate fact of life.

Jake was half finished with his beer before anything else was said.

"So, how ya holdin' up?" Billy asked.

Jake thought about it and said, "Poorly."

"What did the police say?" Billy asked. He knew several local officers who frequented the Corner Pub.

"They don't have a clue," Jake said.

Billy did not share with Jake his theory about Daisy being kidnapped by a sexual deviant. He knew it must have crossed Jake's mind, so why rub it in? He would talk it over with his police buddies next time he saw them.

Jake quickly downed the rest of his beer, let out a rancid burp, and crushed the empty can with his hand.

"Thanks," he said before heading to the front door. He made it as far as the stoop before he remembered to collect his groceries.

"Was he high?" people asked Billy later.

Billy had been the first to put it together that the Wintersons were "druggies," as he called them.

"As a kite," he said, then told again the story about the time he stopped by last year to invite the Wintersons to the annual block party.

"First of all," he said, "I knock on the door and it takes 'em forever to answer. I hear the TV going inside, so I know they're in there, and it's like they're pretending no one's home. So I knock again, and when Martha opens the door her pupils are like wells, and there's that smell on her—it's like ammonia, but worse. And I think, Ah, now it makes sense: they're meth heads. And meanwhile the little girl is in there watching cartoons."

Billy, while clearly not the world's most reliable witness, does know his drugs, and his assessment seemed to click for the rest of the neighborhood. The perpetually drawn curtains, Martha's vacant look when spotted at Stop and Shop, the increasingly unkempt state of the yard—it added up. Invitations ceased to be extended. Some wanted to

call the authorities at the time, but Hank Lester pointed out that Daisy would end up in foster care, which might land her in an even worse situation. Of course, after the bear incident, people regretted not having reporting the Wintersons, since even foster care would have been better than Daisy's assumed fate. But who on earth could predict such a thing?

Several other neighbors put aside their negative assumptions about the Wintersons and paid their respects in one way or another in the week following the disappearance. But Hank Lester was not one of them. He still believed the Wintersons may have killed their daughter and was prepared to cite cases of filicide to any and all who were interested, having researched articles in law journals and People magazine.

"It happens more than you think," he said. "People are animals, just like that bear. Worse, even."

But most did not agree with Hank, including Ralph Sligo, who took the Wintersons a tray of his gluten-free kale lasagna and found Jake to be profoundly and sincerely grief stricken.

"Sure he was grief stricken," Hank said. "Wouldn't you be if you'd murdered your own kid?"

Then, before Ralph could even get his Pyrex lasagna tray back, the Wintersons up and left. To some, like Hank Lester, the Wintersons' sudden departure was proof of their guilt, while to others it made emotional sense that they would want to leave the place they would forever associate with Daisy's disappearance. To others, it just showed how lost the Wintersons were.

"They never did fit in," was a common refrain. When they'd first moved in, Martha and Jake seemed like any other young couple, if a bit on the scrawny side, and shy. You'd drive by and there would be Martha and Daisy getting into or out of their Subaru, or Jake half-heartedly raking the leaves. If you waved they might wave back or they might not, and most thought, Okay, not so friendly, but they'll come around.

After the Wintersons drove off forever, but before the bank padlocked the door and taped a notice of foreclosure on the front window, a few curious neighbors walked through the house. Jake and Martha had left the door unlocked and most of their possessions, including furniture, rugs, and appliances. Virtually all of Daisy's things remained, as if her tiny room awaited her return. Most expected the place to be a shambles, given the state of the yard, but their home was as tidy as could be inside, even charming, with its matching drapes and neatly painted walls.

Ralph Sligo commented that Martha must have been the one to keep the place presentable. "She was always nicely dressed, even when she looked strung out," he said as he searched (in vain) for his Pyrex lasagna tray. "She probably came from money and couldn't help having good taste."

Before they left, Hank Lester an-

nounced he would inspect the basement for any signs of foul play. "That's where crazy people always kill their victims," he explained. The others, curious, followed him, all but Ralph, who considered Hank's theory distasteful.

The basement was accessed from outside, via metal storm doors. Inside, they found the furnace, the water heater, the oil tank, and little else. The rough cement floor was spotless, as were the cinderblock walls. Still, Hank refused to rule out his grisly theory. "All it takes is a ten dollar tarp. No fuss, no muss."

IV.

But, before the Wintersons moved away, Martha Winterson dreamed of little Daisy and the bear, the two of them walking past the house on Tawaba Lane, like old friends out for a stroll, or a girl walking her dog. In the dream Martha sat on the front stoop smoking a cigarette as they ambled by, and she waved at Daisy, who waved back, and the bear turned its big head and acknowledged her before carrying on.

Martha woke from this dream one hundred percent certain that Daisy was alive. When Jake got home from Stop and Shop she told him all about it, but he didn't put much store in dreams. To him they were just chance, nonsensical combinations of real life experiences and wishes. Why, just last night, he told her, he'd dreamed that Daisy was hiding behind a tree in the woods and talking to a squirrel. Does that mean she's alive? he asked, or does that mean he was simply high?

"I think it means she's alive," Martha answered.

After putting away the groceries, they both sat down on the sofa and Jake produced a bag of crystal. Martha retrieved a glass pipe from the end table drawer and fidgeted in anticipation. Just last week, before Daisy went missing, she and Jake had promised each other to stop the drugs, but then this thing happened and now neither could tolerate the intense quiet in the house without getting high. Martha considered refusing today, now that she'd had the dream and was convinced of Daisy's well-being, but since it was already on the table . . .

"I smell beer on your breath," she said.

"Yeah, that guy Billy or Bobby or whatever his name is was going by just now and he gave me one."

Using the scoop end of a 7-11 slushy straw, he transferred a large crystal from the bag into the pipe.

"God, I wish people would leave us alone," Martha said.

"He was just trying to be nice."

"I guess. But I can't talk to people now. I feel all hollowed out."

"Then don't," Jake said.

He pulled a lighter from his pocket and held the pipe a few inches away from his face. He positioned the flame beneath the bowl and watched, his eyes nearly crossed, as the crystal began to liquefy.

"Maybe we should get out of here," he said. "Just up and move."

He tilted the pipe, left then right, evening out the heat beneath the bowl, and the smoke began to work its way up the clear pipe stem.

"Here we go," he said once the stem was filled. He offered the pipe to Martha, who leaned in, wrapped her lips around the pipe end, and inhaled.

The room went blue, as if the window shades had been drawn against the strong afternoon sun. Martha's heart moved up into her head and began to pound between her ears, and she could feel the blood flowing just beneath her skin. She felt more alive now, more connected to her body's functions, and she knew that she would never truly die. Maybe this was the message of her dream—that Daisy had moved on to another plane, that while her little heart may have stopped pushing blood through her body, her soul carried on. This came as a great relief to Martha. With the superhuman strength that now flowed into her, she proceeded the clean the house.

"Where could we go?" she asked as she briskly mopped the floor.

Jake, lying on the sofa, cracked open his eyes. "What?"

"If we leave here. Where to?"

"Maybe we can stay at your mom's," Jake said.

Martha thought a moment. "Well," she said, "we wouldn't have to pay rent."

V.

On the day after she disappeared, and before her parents moved away, Daisy Winterson huddled inside a rotted-out tree trunk as her neighbors wandered through the woods calling out her name.

"Daisy!"

She hadn't considered this possibility when making her plans—she hadn't really thought much beyond the point where she ran away.

"Daisy!" someone called, not too far off. "Daisy Winterson!"

She resisted the temptation to answer. Last night she'd been afraid of the dark, having never been in the woods after sundown. She knew that people had seen or heard coyotes and foxes, but she didn't believe the animals would hurt her—everyone always said they were afraid of people—but she didn't want one to crawl into her little hiding place while she was sleeping either. The thought of waking up to see two red eyes in the pitch black terrified her. But no wild creatures had sniffed her out, and while she didn't get a whole lot of sleep, she woke up feeling rested and ready for adventure.

"Daisy! . . . Daisy!"

She plugged her ears and waited for the people to move on.

Daisy loved the woods. Most summer days she explored the trails blazed by weekend hikers, up and

down hills, over creeks and streams, wishing she could live here all the time, away from her parents who never even noticed she'd left the yard. One day she discovered this hollowed-out trunk and adopted it as her hideout. Over the past few weeks she'd brought from home a few cans of fruit, some peanut butter and crackers, and other snacks to eat during her sojourn into the wilderness. Yesterday, after deciding to leave for good, she brought a hairbrush and a tooth brush and tooth paste, along with a blanket. She knew her parents would not notice any of these items missing, just as they didn't notice so many other things. But she'd never thought that so many people would come looking for her.

One day, months ago, Daisy had overheard hikers say that these woods were once a farm. She couldn't quite imagine a farm on this land, row after row of corn or wheat stretching across these rolling hills somehow stripped of all these maples, oaks, and pines. But there were a lot of stone fences built by someone. She pictured a cart drawn by a mule, the long-bearded farmer hefting each stone, one at a time, day after day, until the fence reached as far as the end of his property. That's the kind of man she'd like for a father—patient, painstaking, able to plan far into the future. Her actual father was none of these things. He had two ways of being: either angry and silent or oblivious and silent. Daisy had learned to avoid him either way, but when she was younger she hadn't known not to pepper him with questions—"the why why why's," he called them—which he ignored until they stacked up like those fence stones and he couldn't take it anymore and told her to shut up or else. Now, here in the woods, with the searchers finally gone, she emerged from her hiding place to sit on one of the stone fences and pretend to talk with her new, bearded father:

"Why do you build these fences?"

"How long does it take?"

"Where do you get all these stones?"

"How does the fence stay up?"

"What is your mule's name? And does he like apples?"

The bearded farmer paused in his labors to answer each question in a quiet, calm manner:

"Because they're pretty."

"One hundred years."

"I find them in piles, perfectly stacked by fairies."

"The stones stay together like magnets—you just have to know how to place them right."

"Jasper. And he does love apples, and carrots too."

After a while, she and the farmer shared her peanut butter crackers while sitting on the stone fence. She fed Jasper crackers, which he grabbed with his big teeth, his ears twitching at flies.

When the crackers were gone, Daisy was still hungry. She went to her stash and pulled out a can of pears. She yanked the pull-off top and took a gulp of the sweet juice before fingering out, one by one, the soft, slippery pear slices and dropping them on her tongue.

VI.

The bear smelled the food. He had wandered through these woods for days eating berries and insects, but this was something else. His nose led him to a tall tree. The sun was falling, sending long shadows across the ground. In the tree was a hole, and in the hole was the girl and the food.

The girl was not afraid of him. She did not scream or run. She knew what he wanted.

VII.

One week after the Wintersons moved out, the bear returned and, just as it did the first time, slowly made its way down Tawaba Lane early in the morning. And, again, Mrs. Pinsky was the first to spot it. This time she knew immediately that the animal was not a dog, and rang up Nathan.

"It's back!" she shouted into the phone. "And it's bigger."

Nathan put on his eyeglasses, just to be doubly certain of what he was dealing with. Indeed, the bear was nearly twice the size as before, as if Daisy Winterson had climbed inside its belly whole.

He told his mother that he needed to hang up and call the animal warden.

"Oh, are you sure, Nate, honey?" she asked. "What if we're wrong? What if it's not the same bear?" She didn't want the authorities to capture or kill the wrong bear. She wasn't even sure she wanted them to kill the right bear. After all, it was just being a bear.

That's when Nathan noticed that the bear was not alone. "What the hell?" he said, and his mother, still on the phone, said, "What is it, Nate?"

But Nathan had hung up and called the animal warden's office, where he left a message after listening to an interminably long recording. Later he would find out that the warden had been on another call to rescue a baby flying squirrel from a chimney. A photo of the squirrel appeared on page one of the local newspaper with the caption *Rocky the Flying Squirrel Rescued.*

"The bear is back!" he shouted into the telephone once the recording had ended. "A large black bear on Tawaba Lane! And so is Daisy Winterson!"

Sure enough, Daisy Winterson was marching down the lane right beside the bear, like Mowgli or some other cartoon character, her clothes filthy, her face covered in dirt, the two of them like old friends.

While Nathan Pinsky was on the phone with the animal warden's office, the bear and Daisy continued down Tawaba Lane. By this time

Natalya Macek had left her husband, and Tomás was on a historic bender which the night before had taken him out onto the front lawn, where he'd howled at the moon before passing out on the folding lounge chair on which his wife had sometimes sunbathed. One can imagine the bear, alongside Daisy Winterson, and with nothing more than a wrinkle of its nose, making its unhurried way past the unconscious man. Later, Tomás would again refuse to believe the story, insisting that it was a concerted effort to torture him for his ill treatment of Natalya, who was now living with her mother and John Paul III in Lodz.

But the bear was very real, according to Billy Conley, who that morning just happened to be standing at the toilet, gazing out the window at the lake and contemplating whether or not to go fishing just as the bear and the girl sauntered into view.

And it was without a doubt the same bear, he later insisted. Bigger, yes, but he had that same look in his eye—mellow but determined. Unlike most everyone else, Billy was not the least bit surprised to see Daisy Winterson accompanying the bear. He knew the animal had not eaten her, and it only made sense that Daisy, given her home situation, would have chosen to run away and live in the woods. They both looked content, he thought, and if he'd had a sandwich made, he would have gone out and offered it to them. Instead, he went back to bed. He'd spent part of the previous night at Tomás's house, where he'd overindulged. "Remind me to steer clear of potato vodka," he said later to whomever would listen. "I'm strictly a Bud man."

Hank Lester, too, saw the bear a second time, and provided a typically detailed description. "Three hundred pounds, easy, but the same deep black fur, the same oddly contemplative look on his face."

Hank had already started off in his Audi by the time the bear arrived in front of his house, and "there was a bit of a Mexican standoff," as he put it, with the bear refusing to yield the right of way. The bear and Daisy just stood there patiently, he said, until finally Hank backed up into his driveway and let them pass. Normally, Hank would be angry about having to make way—he was an attorney, after all, driving an Audi—but something about the bear's countenance defused him. "He was just so nonchalant about it all, even polite. That might sound nutty, but an experienced observer of behavior can tell these things." As for the girl, here Hank's powers of observation failed him. Perhaps he was so surprised at seeing her alive that the details of her appearance did not register. All he could say for certain was that she wore a smile "as mysterious as that of the Mona Lisa."

By this time, Nathan Pinsky, thwarted by the animal warden's absence, had made some calls, and several neighbors gathered near the dock and watched as Daisy and the bear continued on their way down Tawaba Lane toward the Wintersons' house. Even from a distance, people could see that the bear conformed to the descriptions of eyewitness-

es. It moved slowly—yes, nonchalantly—its large haunches wobbling, not a care in the world. Beyond the Wintersons' house lay a long stretch of road with no homes, just wooded hills on either side, with many opportunities to disappear into the trees. That's what everyone expected the bear to do—to return to its den in the woods after delivering Daisy back to her deserted home.

Everyone held their collective breath as Daisy and the bear neared the house, but then they had passed it without even a glance at the place, and continued around the bend. Some wanted to follow, to see where they were headed, whether back into the woods or along the road toward town, but the consensus was to let them go.

No one would ever know for sure what went on in Daisy Winterson's mind that would lead her to join up with a bear, but of course there are theories, none of them any more or less plausible than Billy Conley's. Meanwhile, Tomás Macek still says people made the whole thing up. And maybe they did, for neighbors need stories to tell and ways to explain unacceptable tragedies. But whatever the case, they all lined up when the animal warden arrived an hour later and told him of how Daisy and the bear had ambled down Tawaba Lane, as casual and contented as could be, before disappearing around the bend.

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