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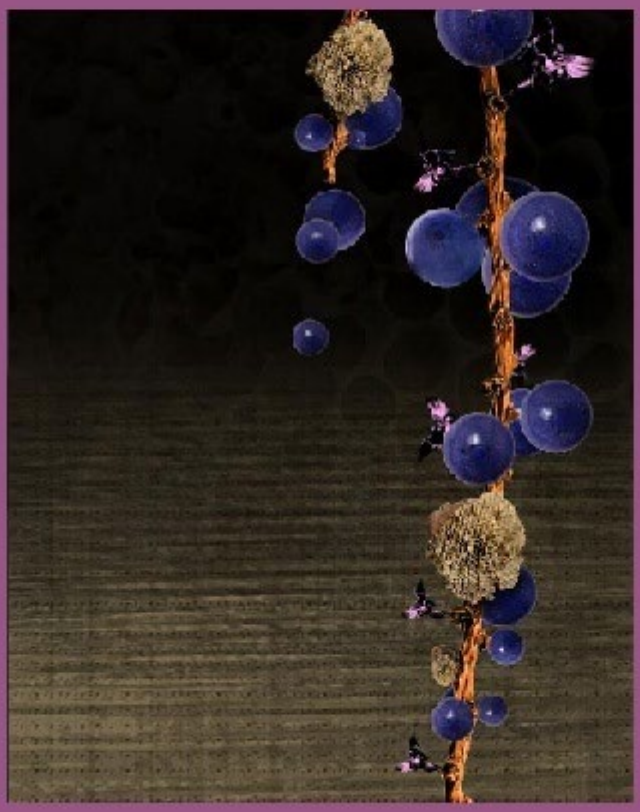

Sangam | Literary Magazine

Robert Beveridge · Emily Brown · Susana H. Case · Jennifer Dias · Deborah H. Doolittle

Jo Angela Edwins · R. Gerry Fabian · Livio Farallo · Esta Fischer · Karen Guzman

Amy Haddad · Elena Harap · Lorraine Jeffery · Susan Johnson · Jeanne Julian · Onyinye Kalu

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Sangam Literary Magazine

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Sangam Literary Magazine

Sangam features and represents works by established as well as emerging writers, irrespective of age, sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin.

In this way, *Sangam*, a Sanskrit term for **joining together**, is, in fact, a coming together for all.

Sangam typically publishes biannually through the Department of Languages and Literature at Southern University and A&M College's flagship campus in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As Louisiana's largest Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Southern University is situated in a bend of the Mississippi River, a locale with important literary significance, most recently home to Louisiana's previous Poet Laureate, John Smith, who is among its Baton Rouge campus faculty.

Masthead

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Summer 2025 Introduction

J. Michael Norris, MFA
Chief Editor, *Sangam*

Here at *Sangam*, we are always striving to keep things fresh, trying our best to make sure each edition brings together diverse voices—some new, some returning—in our ongoing attempt to give our readers an experience that uplifts while provoking thought and reflection. We try to choose works that resonate with the things we feel are important in our world, a world that only has one constant: Change.

To this end, we have decided as a team to rotate our editorial staff every three editions, so that the person steering our literary ship comes with fresh eyes when looking upon the ocean of work that comes with each reading cycle. This way, we can be certain that we avoid becoming sunk by stagnation, stifled by familiarity.

This will be my final voyage as the Chief Editor of *Sangam*, stepping back so someone else can take the wheel. I have had a wonderful time at the helm, and I cannot extend enough thanks to those on the editorial staff for their help, nor can I fully express the appreciation I have for all of the wonderful submissions by so many talented writers that have come our way over the past three years.

But enough about me.

For this collection, we have put together one of our largest editions to date, representing dozens of writers, poets, memoirists, and essayists. This edition is an extraordinary conglomeration of different voices and different themes, something that truly embodies *Sangam*'s Sanskrit meaning of "joining together."

Though our last edition seems so long ago, we still face a world that oftentimes makes little sense. Every day we are confronted with unfathomable loss of life, whether it be in Sudan or Myanmar, Ukraine or Gaza. With each news cycle, we must grapple with ongoing, mounting political turmoil, something that has sadly become the norm here in the US.

Perhaps we can take comfort in the knowledge that one day, these things will change. Wars will end. Politics will shift. Things will, somehow and someway, settle.

So, we again offer a collection of voices, a confluence of ideas, in hopes that this edition of *Sangam* may resonate with you and your world. Perhaps you will find a poem that will bring you joy. Maybe there's

a short story that will help you understand yourself just a bit better. Possibly you'll read a slice from someone's life that changes how you view the world.

Hopefully, you'll find some things in the following pages that you come to love as much as we have come to love the works we have assembled for you.

J. Michael Norris, MFA
Chief Editor, *Sangam Literary Magazine*

POETRY

Robert Beveridge

Goodnight Nobody

"Time is the despotic master of our faces",
you said as you stared out the window
at the snowstorm all the weather channels
predicted, but that refused to show up.

I stirred the chili some more. "What does that
even mean?", I asked. I shook in a little more oregano.

"Things don't have to mean things.
Things can just be." You opened the window.
"And some of the things that can just be
happen to be despotic masters of our faces."

I admit, I had no reply to this.

Robert Beveridge

Moe

Someone replaced the notched
shaft with a ball-and-socket. And

so here we are, surrounded
by tea brewed in sweat, three
chords, throwaway slogans.

There is a map, but it leads
us away from the turnpike,
from the business district,
from pavement altogether

by the time we realize
we either turn around
or leave the car in the swamp

and strike out on foot
to try and find the nearest
convenience store.

The pedal comes unhinged,
lugs stripped like Jayne
Mansfield as a live altar

and we are left with naught
but an empty building, rotten
beams visible through decayed
drywall, shattered slats.

Robert Beveridge

A Subtle Pause

He turns his head once,
twice:
resists going back to work.

The bones in his neck
crack like November twigs.

Why is it wolves
always howl “off
in the distance”?

I want this one
right next to me,
and so it is.

* * *

He paused before dying.
A kiss would be too cliché.
She wiped the sweat
from his cheeks
as if she cleaned a rose.
The fertilizer scattered
around the mattress
couldn't save him.
He'd refused
any medication
wanted to go out
“like a man” he said

* * *

In the end
he cannot help it:
his hands
return to the shovel

Emily Brown

Thesaurus, I am
– and other lost promises

Abandoned;
(*left behind, cast aside*) so many words for
our lack (*finished with, jilted*)
of goodbyes (*dumped, ditched,*
forsaken)
but none of them describes
(*forgotten*) the sensation of waiting, (*thrown*
away, deserted) this
perfect emptiness.

> "i will never leave you, i hope
> you know that"

Numb;
(*frozen*) the way all the rationalizing
gets (*anaesthetized, paralyzed*) stuck
in a flurry of (*stunned,*
immobilized) snowflakes that never
(*without sensation*)
relent (*dead*),
and I am left
(*unfeeling*)
trapped.

> "i'm proud of you – you
> matter to me. always"

Broken;
(*smashed, shattered*) my
heart (*in bits, in*
pieces) after it is torn
(*damaged, disjointed*) in
two –
and nothing (*fractured, defective, out*
of order) can ever
put it (*destroyed*) back together
(*in smithereens*) again.

"i'll always be there for you. no one
can take that from us"

Time;
(*heals all wounds*)
(*is money*)
(*waits for no man*)
(*is the wisest counselor of all*)

"i miss you"

Healing;
who could have known?
(*mending*)
these wounds (*repairing*)
have left scars
(*rebuilding*) that will never truly
leave, but (*rectifying,
reconciling*) some things, it seems,
are worth (*recovering*)
keeping.

"i love you.
no matter what"

Susana H. Case

Sleuth

The folks who used to live in the apartment
directly across from me hardly
ever spoke to one another. My kitchen

window faced all their windows—a little thing
like architecture can turn a person into a spy.
She sat at her computer or slept.

She even ate at her computer. I'd wake up
at sunrise and she'd already be there,
a mannikin tied in place for the night.

This went on for years. I never saw her out
on the street. He would leave the apartment
at varying times—it wasn't clear to where.

I was fascinated by this predictable woman.
It was the pandemic. I needed adventure.
During the lockdown, she would go out, but just

for a few minutes, onto their terrace and bang
a pot. I banged a pot too—to honor the healthcare
workers—and we waved as we stood

across from each other with our kitchenware.
What was she doing at her keyboard
is what I wanted to know. Did she never

get bored? Then they moved. I examined
the possibilities: divorce, a too-expensive
city, a new job at—her computer.

A new couple moved in. They sit on the terrace
toward evening with wine glasses and talk
to one another. They unroll a movie screen

onto its brick wall and project
sports events. Friends visit for dinner.
They laugh. I have become an excellent

sleuth. Soon, we'll cross paths
on the street. I'll find out what kind of wine
they drink and why they like sports so much.

Deborah H. Doolittle

Donald Hall Dreams of Digging Wild Hyacinths

After a day of digging lilies,
dirt caked under each fingernail,
we nestle down in our bed, sheets

stiff from having been hung
to dry on the line and smelling
of sunshine. One more time,

we sift through packets of bulbs
and seeds, crinkling the bed
with dreams of the perfect garden.

But in the woods where wild
hyacinth rises up on asparagus-like
wands, the real magic happens:

these celestial beauties burst
open, with the twinkle and the sparkle
of a gazillion little stars, having woken

from their winter slumber, fresh
and vibrant and green in a language
I can barely glean that so bedazzles
my sleep, inhabits my dreams.

Jo Angela Edwins

Midnight Aubade

In every dream dusk is close.
People I love meander. Most
I will never see again in life.

Things are about to happen:
this house is expanding like a womb,
my mother or father may soon leave,
the man I loved most will approach,
look in my eyes, and walk away.
Hope and dread, cruel shapeshifters,
linger in shadows of the trees.

At this age, I have lost all sense
of circadian rhythm. I awaken
to light or dark, for hours asking
which worlds are sure, are real.

R. Gerry Fabian

The Implements Of Sorcery

I begin in Mount Lawn Cemetery
Section C, Lot 26, Grave 3
and sing “After You’ve Gone”
as a ritual passage rite.

Several long days later,
I am standing at midnight
at the intersection
of route 61 and 49
paying homage to the fire sprite.

In Memphis, I fill my red mojo bag
with high john the conqueror root,
a cinnamon stick, a 1937 copper penny
and allspice berries.
Later in the day.
I visit Mr. Handy’s home.

Finally, riding the swollen, brown Mississippi
to the Big Easy trombones and trumpets
I walking to Basin Street,
where I place roses by Marie Laveau’s tomb
and whisper a short hoodoo chant.
That evening I buy a small silver
gris-gris amulet
from a back alley juju woman.

Bring those spells and incantations –
Your love no longer scares me.

R. Gerry Fabian

Infinite Measurement

After the initial flirtations
and date probing,
we fell
stone cold, dead dog in love.
You told me then
that this love
could have no limitations,
no secrets and no regrets.

I break rule number two daily.

I am not able
to express the depth
of my love for you
in any measurement
known to the scientific community
as it exists today.

Livio Farallo

in every tattoo is this cry for summer

13th of august: the first
leaf discolored yellow and
red; twelve eggs of a
forgotten insect stuck
on its bland side.
i go back later
in the day and push it
through a crack
in the porch floor.

this is why i try to look across only
this room and play with
my toys where

i would be rather secured and
shaded with small
windows.

expect me
to make a
child of no one else
in this aged grotto
or translate anyone's
future.

Livio Farallo

the year's odd rising

the burning forest
watered down to ash
while the coal burns
white and powerless,
i am sweating
like an old man
run hard and fat; the
heart, a springboard
to jack-knifing blood.

a stalk of luck
pushes your hand out;
a sweaty cowcatcher
on a thin green train.
a blossom drips petals
like clumps of hair
from an arm coaxing
a sad violin.

and then muscles hatching
through skin. my doll's
head pulled from its body.
the stuffing from my talking
bear follows its voice
to the floor.

my doll's head with the
blinking eyes.

Amy Haddad

Ballerina in the Alley

a crisp morning amid dead soldiers
you lean hip to hip
inside her jeans, your hands

your thumbs draw slow circles
under your drab green camouflage
your days-old beard

earthworms undulate
in puddles of rainwater
you look beyond her shoulder

a caul of sadness encloses
her top knot tilts to the left
she elongates into an elevé

trash cans in a row
behind the bar
her perfect ass

her pink leotard peeks
delicate head tucks into
her bad boy, decades older

escape the concrete exile
starving for dirt and air
toward the end of this affair

the hunger on your face
holds her as in a duette
for a parting kiss

Jeanne Julian

The Loneliness of the Mortal Coil

Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.
—Rainer Maria Rilke

Husband and wife would sometimes find
evidence of the small dead by the river
bordering their homestead. Feathers, a leg, a tail.
Of bird, rabbit, turtle, snake. But one morning
they saw in the brown water a carcass entire.
Gradually, they discerned *mammal*
in the half-submerged mass haloed with stink.
Species indeterminate. Hacked or bitten,
patchily furred, bloated and blanched
beyond meatiness. Like a hyena—
but *here*, in their domestic hemisphere?
Dog? Pig? Or head of horse?

Then they recognized stubby antlers.
The sluggish waters would not soon shift
the dead deer from their lawn's edge.
So with a long pole, together they struggled,
casting not to catch, but to repel, this sodden piñata,
to goad it away from snag of trailing branches,
past the traps of cypress roots poking up
in shoreline shallows.
At last, a mild current ushered the pale remains
downstream. In silent relief they watched it
drift away at bridal pace, bearing its bouquet
of decay toward an absence eternal.

But—as if the mass that had been its brain
still could muster fickle thought—
the corpse altered course, came gliding back
against the current, against the nature of things,
toward the pair determined to reject it.
Perhaps sensing their prodding as a tug
on the sleeve of solitude; perhaps mistaking them
(lacking fangs or guns) for seraphic shepherds
who with gentle crook guide the wild lost
to some easy forest beyond predation, barbed wire,
or pearled gates, it sidled, shyly, closer.
Closer. She heard this:

Waylaid by your touch, I come to nestle
within your warm-knit herd of two,

my essence invading the sanctity of your oneness,
curse of mortality curdling in your memory.

The closer it came, the more urgently they resisted.
She clutched his sleeve.
“Go away,” she whispered.
“Oh love can’t we make it go away.”

Jeanne Julian

Streetcorner Love

A convivial cluster of oldsters dances
on the corner of a major intersection,
Congress Street at High and Free—
and free and high they are, holding aloft
posters in pastels and neons, some heart-shaped,
bobbing and swaying like marketplace cobras,
the celebrants bouncing and two-stepping,
skirts swirling, shirttails flapping,
to an amped-up disco song, a song
about love, their signs proclaiming love,
their smiles and waves and welcoming words,
hear us, join us, proclaiming love,
harmonious staccato car horns echoing
love love love, and even sunlight—angling
through hardscape to halo the graying heads
of the dancers, embrace their wistful mission—
bespeaking love.

Let us love their earnest joy, their push
to counterbalance all that's glum, greedy,
and vicious. And let us love the guy walking
across the street from the giddy group
with a hitch in his gait and a compact umbrella
clutched in one hand, just in case:
the guy who says, in passing,
They don't even know what love means.
Fake-ass people.

Dani Kuntz

Killing Machine

I was driving home with my partner when *thump*
resounded in the cabin of the car— *What*

the hell was that? he asked, and thank God
he didn't see it. I knew what had caused

the sound, what hit the windshield,
oh yes, this was not an insect

whose guts snapped upon the glass,
but a small bird killed by my car on the overpass.

Three-hundred yards from home and already
I imagined the tiny skull, the brain bleed,

loop-de-looping through the sky to land
somewhere in the grass, and maybe the air

carried the scent of death to its family.
The metal beast with no heart but a debt

that keeps compounding. I said to my partner
Now I'm really depressed, but I'm further

from death than that bird. I live
another day against my heart.

V. P. Loggins
1963

I remember your careless ease
beside the pool in your backyard
where you sat to sun yourself
watching butterflies lighting
on your pedicured toes. Lord,
you would say, can someone
get me a little drinkypoo? And

out before we knew it you had
an ice-laden gin and tonic crowned
with a deep green ear of lime
that seemed to appear by magic.
Your help, as you named her,
was always at the ready to meet
your needs. I used to watch as she

would iron and fold your clothes
as I fiddled round the laundry room
asking questions like any child.
And she would remind me that I
was not to know everything but
only those bits that suited me.
Her life was off limits to white boys,

no matter how rich their aunties were.
You remember now, don't you?
The way she kept to herself, dignified
as she hummed a treasury of hymns
while cleaning the rooms in your house,
dressing your bed, serving drinks,
your pool reflecting the blinding sun.

Kathy McGoldrick

In these times: March

listen little sister
angels make their hope here
in these hills
***Appalachian Elegy*, Bell Hooks**

Spring flags are flying
over the broken cradles
legless tables
deflated plastic christmas angels
piled around the places,

pastel half-shell flags
from which cartoon chicks wave
in the wildling wind
above mounds of meconium mud forced up
between gushes of the let-go snow

that warms, finally, in spotty pools
with frog spawn from where
finally full-grown frogs will come

and in the orchid dawn
under the calliope of first spring birds,
braless, pendulous,
these women,
humanity's 1st brigade
out in early shorts
round up the winter dog shit.

Kathy McGoldrick

Rite of Passage

Uvalde, Texas, 5/24/22

To see her emerge
finally

face powdered
in drywall dust laced
in tears

and tattooed
in the running red
borrowed from a friend

this person walking
who had been a child

Dave Morrison

Hope

came back like a
sparrow, small and
dun-colored but
quietly singing a little
two-note song, just
enough.
I had not welcomed it
or lured it or attracted it
or trapped it.
I had simply left
the window open.

Dave Morrison

Love Games

You be the Traveler, and
I'll be the Innkeeper.

You arrive weary, hungry,
footsore and likely discouraged,
perhaps you've witnessed
troubling things on your journey
and you long for home.

I will welcome you, set the
table with something simple,
warm and filling. I'll rub your
feet, listen without comment,
and when it gets late I'll turn
out the lights and add a blanket
to your bed.

Tomorrow I'll be the Traveler, and
you be the Innkeeper.

Dave Morrison

Saved By Rankins

I read the news today (oh boy),
the wrong way to start the day,
and I didn't know if I could
bear it, I didn't know if I could
go through one more day with
a tightly clenched fist in my
chest, the hopelessness rising
to my chin, the geyser of bullshit
that is modern life, the ridiculous
flaming shitshow of our own
making, the embarrassing
needless chaos of it all.

Rankins saved me.

The lights were on in the ancient
hardware store and the doors were
open, the woman behind the counter
helpful and kind, they had exactly
what I needed at a fair price, and
the sun was rising as I drove away with
my stuff, off to work, and I felt the
fierce small seed of hope pushing
up through the black dirt.

Lauren Oertel

Signs of the Apocalypse

It's fall in Texas, but the summer heat still grips us—coating our lungs, sliding down aching backs. It's how we know we've reached the end. We gave it our best but fell short of building something to last. Maybe the constant constructing, tearing down the natural to put up the sparkling excuses for what we think we need, what we promise ourselves is progress, is how we got here. Sitting in traffic on the soul-sucking parking lot of a highway, I remember—I'm in a container pumped with artificially cool air while those lifting the beams, pounding the nails for our stability—are drenched in sweat and denied water breaks. I can't pretend I had no role, that my hands came out cleaner than the rest. Two things hit me at once. Glowing swirls of tangerine and magenta streaking the sky—bitter-sweet recognition that beauty is part pollution. A flash of silver strikes at the same time as my headlights illuminate the peeling-and-faded-but-still-there bumper sticker. "I hope something

good happens for you
today." The temperature
ticks down one degree.

David Sahner

After she died

Her face
lacked its accustomed
assertiveness
you might say:
a screw
that knew the wood
it had to bite.

And later (much later):
arguments
among the leaves.

Who has this woman's bones?
Her veins are parted so rakishly
in this uneven light.

My tomorrows are largely empty
you see – so I can dwell upon this.

A lone star come home
to roost among the blades
and the lambent light that glorifies them.
No matter how bitter the days
that preceded this one.

No matter how bitter the days.

David Sahner

Time swallows her charred tail

while rumors of fresh air
north of here
make the rounds.

Meanwhile
needle-shaped skyscrapers
with their empty (dead-empty!)
offices

prick at the sky.

But no rain falls from the holes.

Atlas heaves the world
from his shoulders.
I am so done with this
he groans.

Although I've never tried,
if you cook the algae
from what is left
of the reservoir some say
you can eat it.

Mostofa Sarwar

Zelensky's Dream

So many speechless nights
He tries to look
through the night sky
in the starry jungle

Is there anyone named Dream
that can magically transform
hope into something real?

He is tired by the blows
of this unjust world's
days and nights

Can there be
a bed of sunflower leaves
under the blue sky
where he can lay his tired soul?

Traverse the desert of doom
find an oasis
a gentle stream
that grows on its banks
dreams

Dreams blossom into flowers of hope
Hope metamorphoses
into butterflies
that he can touch
can caress
can love

So many speechless nights

Leslie Schultz

Poem in Which My Parents Get Tattoos

They become trendy
decades too late—
in Dad's case, he has been reanimated somehow.
Is he a Zombie? Anyway, they go in
together, through the worn door
of the tattoo parlor. Mom examines
the cleanliness of the space with a gloved
finger, enquires about procedures. Oddly
neither of them—both so thin-skinned—
asks about the pain.

Now they are pouring over design books.
The ink artist is patient and nearly silent.
He is working on another man,
finishing up a glistening red rose
on a muscle-bound shoulder with many
short bursts of buzzes from his electric needle.
Painful paint-by-numbers, yet freehand
and somehow freeing.

Finally Dad decides on a Möbius strip
placed over his heart, under
the greying hairs on his chest.
He likes the elegance of two sides
of a ribbon, like a commendation,
twisting in three dimensions
into one non-orientable surface, glyph
of eternity.

Mom dithers on, talking and talking,
hearing nothing but her own voice
and the iron wheels of her fear turning.
She considers a dollar sign
on her forehead. Or a blue bird
on her left ankle. Finally, though,
inveterate bridge player that she is,
she settles on the King of Hearts
overlain by the Ace of Clubs, trump
cards better than most. She opts

for the inside of her right forearm,
and she keeps chuckling to think that now
she will always have a little something
up her sleeve.

Leslie Schultz

Silent Films

Black and white with shades of grey,
or smeary colors bordered white.
Each square a small story
cast adrift from its teller,

its tongue gone wagging
down the lane. No order
discernable. Family lost
now, these photographs

unassembled, jumbled,
like heaps of slag somehow
mounded, heavy evidence
of something. But what?

No one is talking now.
No one is saying a word.

Mike Shepley

fundamental comparison

in the Cathedral
hushing echoes
in The Tube underground
while thunder burns
through the town
everyone prays
for daily bread
and a new breath
without the mustard
of acid smoke
and unholy ash

down there in
the candle dark
where the clocks
have all become
mirrors of our fears
shattering in lookingglass
tears and tomorrow,
the tomorrow we
always believe in,
is now just
a pretty myth
locked inside castles
of sheep's wool cloud

the ants are
new military targets
their labor the
beating heart of
the enemy beast
so charcoal burnt babies
become that new coin
of valorous victories
in the frozen calculus
of bullet beancounters
as hawks have
their stone etched math
the ants their
left behind religion

Survival
by hook, by crook,
or pure dumb luck

that was then,
WW II London,
but now we're stuck
the clocks come round again
when we see Gazans
swarm a food truck

Christopher Stewart

The Arborist

Outside the psych clinic, the city planted
a column of sugar maples in a skinny strip
of parkway. I can see these trees
from the waiting room, their bony bodies
like foals stiffening in the November wind.
I am here to see a man about quitting
these pills, these days that became decades
at a liminal edge between water and air, root
and willow. In the seat across from me,
a teenage girl with lenticels of scars across her wrists
stares down at her shoes.

The arborist knows these trees spread a root flair
three times wider than the crown. Boxed in
by the sidewalk and curb (should they survive
the rock salt and road spray from Mattis Avenue)
they will grow to only a fraction of their size.

The girl is led through a doorway by a woman
in ankle boots and a lanyard that says physician.
I hope she is here to ask questions as well,
like will she be waiting in this lobby
as I am in thirty years, root-bound
though assured she's grown.

Marc Swan

Windblown

That he not busy being born
is busy dying **…Bob Dylan**

Body parts spring to life
when we share
our latest medical
treatments, concerns—

what we can and can't control.

We talk of family, friends,
legal documents, material
things that seem so important.

What will become of them,
who will want them?

Will our children,
grandchildren remember us
for who we were

or who they imagined
we should be?

We're flipping through
the last chapter, not knowing
how many pages remain.

The room settles
when we talk of those
who have left, those
on the cutting edge
of joining them.

Some of us talk of flames
that will create ash
to cast upon the wind
at a special place—

you know the one.

Sam Woods

Questions to Ask a Lover

What poisons did your
mother feed you? And

what flowers did she
place on your temples
like a crown?

Why did you pick rough ropes
and chains to bind us? And

why do we wear the
marks like badges?

Did you ever know your
father? And

did you ever
want to?

When was the last time
you weren't sad? And

is that the same as being
happy to you?

Daniel Zhu

With the Flow*

I flow from the park five minutes away
with slides, steps, and stone-climbing walls
daring my four-foot self to scale them;
from Jerry's house down the street,
I still love more than my own.

I flow from spacious kindergarten classes
with scattered toys and noon dismissal
to the hell of First Grade
with 30 students for each teacher
and zero attention for each student.

I flow from the music of gyms:
whistles trilling, balls bouncing,
and Coach's voice rising above all else,
from math classes I attend right after,
still sweating and trying to catch my breath.

Late nights, I bury my head in my hands, refuge
from constant click-clacking of my keyboard,
and focus on the flow of the slow breeze
in and out of my open window, then surge
with my heart toward tomorrow.

*George Ella Lyon's esteemed poem, "Where I'm From," inspired this one.

Cary B. Ziter

ROADKILL

roadkill mounts near the curb.
if only squirrels, rabbits,
lizards or dogs
pissed off at the world

could find a better way to argue
and disagree instead of

jumping
in front of a tractor trailer
moving at 70 mph.

as the mutilated bodies pile up
savvy crows clean the bones,
pick at bulging eyes.

and we,
the sicker breed,
pass by,

failing to embrace
the sadness of it all.

FICTION

Esta Fischer

Weed

The Commissioner of Louie lived in his parents' old rent- controlled apartment on the Lower East Side, the one he grew up in. His parents had retired to Florida. He was supposed to go to law school and become a big-shot lawyer for major cases you saw on t.v. but he had other ideas. His real name was Marvin.

Marvin was my cousin. He was a year older than I was. Our mothers were sisters. Our families lived a few blocks from each other and got together often. Marvin and I went to the same junior high and high school and until we each started dating we were a convenient "couple" when situations called for that: the Junior Prom, parties, skating at Rockefeller Center. Marvin was goodlooking and funny. My friends dubbed him Mister Wonderful and Baby Blue Eyes. They reminded me I couldn't marry my cousin, and I suspected they wanted to marry him themselves. When we got to junior year of high school we went our separate ways, and mostly heard news about each other from our mothers if we were even paying attention.

I was forced to pay attention when Marvin was accepted to college.

"Harvard!" my mother shouted. She was on the phone with Marvin's mother. "Marvin got into Harvard!"

This fit right in with his legal life plan, which was his parents' plan for him, and not his own.

I was not impressed. I'd heard via the high school grapevine that he was not only smoking marijuana but dealing it, from his green bookbag. Nevertheless, off he went to Harvard and

graduated summa cum laude. So much for the theory that smoking weed destroyed brain cells. He also learned to play Screwy Louie.

In case you don't know, Screwy Louie is a card game. Marvin threw parties in his dorm room that consisted of playing Screwy Louie and smoking weed. Thus he became known as the Commissioner of Louie.

I was accepted at Cornell, where I was supposed to get my MRS degree as well as my BA. That was my parents' life plan for me, but I preferred Marvin's legal plan. I fantasized that he and I would have our own law firm. By the time I finished college and returned to New York, Marvin was throwing parties and selling drugs. He didn't have a job so he must have been making enough to support himself. My mother probably told his mother I was back in town. He called me and invited me to a party.

A party. To my thinking, a party meant you got dressed up. Drank cocktails. Made clever conversation. So there I was in my totally inappropriate attire (designer skirt, silk blouse, and heels) knowing nobody except Marvin. The Commish.

The first thing that struck me was the relative lack of furniture. There was a threadbare carpet that might have once been an Oriental but you couldn't really tell anymore. The couch was probably left behind by his parents. Nobody sat there. The foyer contained a large wooden table surrounded by four chairs. A pile of marijuana was heaped in the center of the table, and two young men were busily rolling joints.

I'd smoked marijuana a few times in college, with my roommates. One of them knew someone who knew someone in town and we chipped in for a supply. Of course it was very hush-hush, being illegal; it being illegal was part of the charm of doing it. I'd gotten high—sort of—but didn't see myself becoming a regular user.

A girl dressed in torn jeans and a t-shirt walked over and handed me a glass of wine.

"I'm Sharon," I said, thinking to introduce myself. "I'm Marvin's cousin."

If I thought being Marvin's cousin would give me a certain cachet, I was wrong. The girl gave me a half-smile and walked away.

"Sharon!"

My name was bellowed from across the room. Marvin rushed over to me and gripped me in a bear hug. I hardly recognized him. He was thin and sported a bushy black beard. His hair curled over his ears.

"Hey, everybody, this is my cousin Sharon!" he announced to the room. "She's going to law school! Someday she'll be the attorney general!"

How did he know about law school? The mother connection.

A few heads had turned in our direction, then turned away. Nobody smiled.

"So you're here for our Louie tournament," Marvin addressed me. "You do know how to play, right?"

I shook my head. For a moment Marvin looked stymied.

"No problem," he said. "I'll team you up with somebody."

He looked around the room. So did I. Everybody was smoking, and a haze of smoke filled the air. At that moment I became aware I was in the midst of something totally illegal. What if Marvin's neighbors smelled smoke and called the fire department? What if the police came? I pictured myself hiking up my designer skirt and clambering down the fire escape. My legal career would be over before it started. I wanted to leave immediately but then I realized this was not the first pot-smoking party Marvin had thrown. His neighbors must have been clued in. Maybe they were even here at the party. I realized I was rationalizing. I felt split into two selves: my future legal self, who

wanted out, and my past cousin self, who wanted to accommodate Marvin, just as he'd accommodated me in the past.

He took my arm and led me over to a young man standing alone by the window.

"Matt," Marvin said, "this is my cousin Sharon. She's never played Louie before but she's really smart and she'll catch on fast. Take her on your team."

It was an order, not a request. Marvin was the Commish.

Matt nodded.

"We'll start in a few," Marvin said, and he walked away.

I ended up sitting on the carpet with Matt and my two other teammates. I kicked off my shoes and sat cross-legged, my skirt tucked around me. The other girl on my team wore a long denim skirt.

"I'm Laura," she introduced herself. "I'm Marvin's girlfriend."

"This is a privileged team," Matt remarked.

Laura rolled her eyes.

The other man with us laughed.

"He's Tom," Matt said. "Tom is interested in fairness and equal treatment. No nepotism."

"Is he going to make sure our team loses?" I asked.

"If he's stoned enough, he won't remember to lose," Matt assured me.

He was handed a lit joint. He took a drag and handed it to me.

"You smoke?"

"Sure," I said. I took the joint, inhaled, and passed it to Laura.

Marvin gave the signal to start. The clickety clack of multiple decks of cards being shuffled echoed through the room.

Screwy Louie is not brain surgery. I caught on. My team won a few rounds but not the ultimate round. A joint kept circulating and I was pleasantly high.

"We play every Saturday," Laura told me. "You're always welcome."

"So how's Marvin?" my mother asked. "What's he doing?"

"Marvin's fine," I reported. "He's in some kind of sales."

"Sales of what?" she asked.

I paused. Obviously I couldn't tell her.

"Pharmaceuticals," I finally got out.

"Really? I wonder how he got interested in that."

I shrugged.

"So was it a good party?" she continued her interrogation.

"Very nice, he has one every week," I said.

"You should keep going until you leave for Yale. It's important to stay in touch with Marvin. You're both only children, you're all each other has."

"I'll keep going to the parties," I assured her.

Every Saturday evening I went to Marvin's apartment, smoked weed, and played Screwy Louie. I became quite proficient at the card game and won more than I lost.

"It's your legal mind," Matt told me. "Anticipating your opponent's next move."

He was a high school history teacher, going to school at night toward a doctorate so he could upgrade to a university position. He'd asked for my phone number but I'd finessed my decline. I'd be out of town soon and didn't want to date long distance. And once I started law school, I wanted to leave the weed scene behind.

I went to Marvin's party the night before I left for Yale. Matt kissed me. Marvin gave me a

bear hug.

"Attorney General!" he shouted as I headed for the door.

I called my parents after I was settled at Yale. Two weeks later I called again.

"Marvin is in jail," my mother announced.

"What happened?" I asked, already suspecting what happened.

"I don't understand it," she said. "He was such a brilliant boy. Now he's in jail. He had illegal drugs! Drugs!" She paused. "Did you know? Did they take drugs at his parties?"

"We just played cards," I said.

"They have to hire a lawyer," she continued. "Too bad you're just starting law school."

"Too bad," I agreed.

But what I was thinking, Marvin had achieved his parents' legal life plan, just not the way he was supposed to.

***

Twenty years post law school, on a Saturday afternoon, I was out shopping in my Upper West Side neighborhood. I walked past the usual stores: deli, dry cleaners, pharmacy, pet supplies. Then I stopped. Since when did we have a marijuana dispensary? Marijuana had become legal, but I hadn't noticed a proliferation of places to buy it. I had two teenagers at home and they'd been talking about trying pot. After peering in the window, I pushed open the door and went in.

The man behind the display case was tall, with a salt and pepper beard and thinning hair. He wore glasses and looked up from the magazine he was reading.

"Can I help you?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just thought I'd check it out."

"Sure," he said. Then he gave me a penetrating look. "Sharon?" he asked. "Sharon Mossberg?"

I returned his stare. He was Marvin.

"Marvin!" I exclaimed. "Oh my God!"

He came out from behind the counter and gave me a bear hug.

"It's been forever," he said. "What's happening?"

I gave him a brief summary: husband, kids, now working as an assistant D.A.

"So you really did the legal thing," Marvin said.

"What about you?" I asked.

"Long story," he said, and he frowned. "Right now I've got this shop. Licensed," he added. He paused. "Let's meet for coffee tomorrow. I don't open until the afternoon."

We agreed on a time and a place and I left.

Back at home, I told my husband about running into Marvin. They'd never met, but Bob had heard about him, mainly how Marvin had graduated from Harvard but never reached his potential. No one spoke about Marvin's being in jail except with close family. His parents sent him care packages. By the time I got married, Marvin was out on parole. So Bob didn't know about my cousin's illegal past.

"To get a license for that, don't you have to have a former pot conviction?" Bob asked.

I hadn't really kept up with the details of the marijuana business; I worked in Civil Court.

"Well, I heard he smoked pot when he was in college," I said.

"So you're going to reconnect with him?" Bob asked. "Were you ever connected with him?"

I thought of all the Screwy Louie parties.

"When we were kids," I told him. "We were sort of each other's steady date, until high school."

"So is he married?" Bob asked. "What's he been up to? You know," he said, "you're a public

prosecutor. Marijuana is legal now, but you don't want to get caught up in it."

"Right," I agreed. "We're just having coffee."

Marvin and I sat opposite each other in a booth at my local diner. It reminded me of middle school, hanging out in a pizza joint with Marvin and his friends. I had coffee and a toasted English muffin. Marvin had an egg white omelet.

"Watching your cholesterol?" I asked.

"I've been trying to reform in some respects," he admitted. "Watching my diet. Keeping everything legal."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"Somebody ratted me out," Marvin said. "We heard the police sirens, and I told everyone to leave on the fire escape. Matt knew how to disappear through a back alley. I took the rap." He shrugged. "Somebody had to."

I took this in as I ate my muffin.

"I did okay in jail, though," Marvin continued. "I got some decks of cards and started Louie tournaments. Kept the guys occupied. Some of the guards played, too. And I made good contacts."

"How long have you been out?" I asked.

"Long time," he said. "Impossible to make a decent living. I mean besides being a jailbird, I have no job skills," he pointed out. "No work history. No references."

"But you have a college degree from Harvard," I said. I remembered my mother's announcement. "You could have gone into a training program. Got qualifications."

Marvin shrugged.

"Harvard counts for nothing," he said, "because I never did anything with it." He paused. "But then I lucked out. Made a good contact from jail. Somebody's brother-in-law knew somebody.

You know how it goes. So I got the license. Of course, I had no money to open a business," he went on, "but one of my jail buddies made a deal. If the business is a success, I can pay him back."

"How long have you been open?" I asked.

"Two weeks," Marvin said. "It's a one year lease. So I've got time." He ate the last bite of omelet. "I'm used to time."

I smiled. A waitress brought us more coffee.

"I think it was Matt who ratted on me," Marvin suddenly said. "Remember him?"

I nodded.

"He was a teacher, right? Going for his doctorate at night."

"Right," Marvin confirmed. "Thought he was better than the rest of us. Liked his weed, though."

"Why would he rat on you?"

I remembered Matt asking for my number and my finessed refusal.

Marvin shrugged.

"Something happened," he said. "He put the moves on my girlfriend Laura. She told him to get lost."

"He asked for my number," I said.

"Yeah, he asked for all the women's numbers, I found out. They all turned him down."

"That's a stupid reason to rat you out."

"You never know with people," Marvin said. "All's fair in love and weed. I heard he's an assistant professor of something at the city university."

"Lots of women," I said.

Marvin laughed.

"Do you still play Screwy Louie?" I asked.

He perked up.

"Sure. I've got a little place in Jersey City. Every Monday night there's a card party, like old times. I keep the shop open late on the weekend but I'm closed Mondays. You and your husband are welcome."

I had a vision of a newspaper headline: Assistant D.A. attends pot-smoking card marathon.

"My husband's not a smoker," I said, "and I've got underage kids at home. I think we'll have to pass."

Marvin nodded.

"I totally understand."

"Are you in touch with your parents?" I asked. "You were supposed to be a big shot lawyer," I joked.

Marvin chuckled.

"Yeah, my parents are okay. That lawyer thing was never my idea." He paused. "My idea was to be a big weed seller. Drug lord kind of thing. Actually, it still is. I'm in contact with the people I met in jail. I'm working something out with the guy who financed me. We're looking for the right people to apply for licenses. We'll finance them, and take a cut of the profits. All legit."

I laughed, then finished my coffee.

"You'll be the Commissioner of Weed," I said.

"Oh, I think the State already has one," Marvin said. "But who knows. With the right connections I might get there too."

I pictured Marvin in a fancy government corner office, a marijuana plant growing on a window sill.

“Well, it should only happen,” I said.

We paid and left. Out on the sidewalk he gave me a bear hug.

“Stay in touch,” he said.

“I will,” I promised, and we parted ways.

Karen Guzman

Another Black Hole

Anyone except Joyce's witless daughter Hope would have seen straight off that this guy Joe was trouble. Just another black hole. That was Joyce's category for all the lost causes, the idiots and disasters and hopeless cases that had—in her mind—sabotaged her life. *You pour yourself in, and they take and take and give nothing back.* Joyce dubbed Joe a black hole for the final time right after he died. During the eight preceding years Joe spent in the Northern New Hampshire Correctional Facility, Joyce said it every chance she got. She loved to pick through the debris of dead love. First her own, and then her daughter's.

Hope knew this. She understood who her mother was. What she had not understood was the grip her mother's poisonous talons had in her own heart. She would only begin to understand long after Joe was gone, when it was just Hope and her baby boy Twig living off one of the dirt roads beyond Mirror Lake.

Hope had first laid eyes on Joe at Mirror Lake, on the public beach at the end of the season when the summer crowds were departing, and the lake began to feel like hers again. Not that she really wanted the lake. She was finished with these New Hampshire mountain towns. She wanted a life beyond the freezing winters and swarms of summer black flies and the sting of Joyce's sharp tongue. At nineteen, Hope imagined such a life existed. The summer tourists were living proof

when they filled the hotels and rental houses around the lakes. With their shiny SUVs, their kayaks and jet skis, they were proof that there was life out there. Hope just wasn't sure it was a place she could reach. Joyce had taught her this much: no matter how smart you are or who *you think you are*, this world is going to roll you.

On the beach at Mirror Lake, Joe looked like a kindred soul. In his Hawaiian print board shorts and dark sunglasses, he had an air of chic that Hope associated with reality television shows set in places like Los Angeles. She tugged at the seat of her one-piece bathing suit as he approached on the sand.

"Wanna go for a swim?" He smiled. The mountain sun had given his skin a pink tinge, and his curly dark hair glistened with droplets of lake water. An easy patience lit his face. Time slowed as she gazed up from her towel, his invitation teetering between them.

Joyce met Joe a couple of months later at the Hi-Lo diner on the interstate. She had to meet him sooner or later. Hope's hands were damp with sweat beneath the table. Joyce nodded when Joe mentioned that he had graduated from the automotive course at the vo-tech high school and now worked at Tiny's Garage. Hope took the nod as a good sign.

But riding home alone with Joyce—Joe had gone to smoke weed with a couple of buddies—the good sign evaporated.

"Another black hole," Joyce said, her lips puckering with the same grim certainty they had when she told seventeen-year-old Hope that her prom dress made her ass look fat. That comment had reduced Hope to tears, but she sat silently beside her mother now. Love was Hope's shield. What did this bitter old woman know about Joe's tenderness, about the way he cupped Hope's chin when they kissed good-bye or how he had agreed to move down to Concord with her when the time was right? Joyce, with her Wal-Mart flip flops and nicotine fingertips, what had she ever

known about love?

There was no wedding. They eloped. The thought of Joyce at her wedding was surreal, and Hope couldn't have a wedding and not invite her mother. It was better to play it safe.

And then a truly shocking thing happened. "You can move in with me, you two, for a while, if you're saving for a house," Joyce said over the phone. Hope grew dizzy at the words. She had to sit on the edge of the bathtub in the tiny apartment that Joe and she shared. The thought of bringing her love, her chance, to live *in Joyce's house*, frightened and angered her.

"We've got it covered, Ma," she said.

"You do?" The sound of Joyce dragging on her cigarette. "Him at the garage, and you working part-time at that tattoo place?"

"One more year and I'll have my associate's," Hope said. The plan was to finish a bachelor's degree in nursing down in Concord, something Joyce didn't need to know about yet. "We're fine, Ma," Hope said.

"Oh, I can see that." Another drag. Hope could picture her mother on a landline in the kitchen. Who used landlines anymore? Old people. With some of them it was quaint and charming. In her mother, it was just obstinance.

"What I don't see is cash." Joyce said.

"We're fine."

"Cold, hard cash. That's what makes the world go around, daughter of mine." Joyce chuckled. "Let me know when you get that figured out?"

The hatred Hope felt for her mother in moments like this was truly seismic. She was surprised the phone didn't blow up in her hand.

"She's a nihilist," Joe said that night in bed. He had recently ordered a book about Nietzsche

from Amazon. Joe was smart in his own way, another thing that Joyce didn't understand. "There's no meaning in Joyce's life, and she can't stand for anyone else to have it either," he said.

Hope knew Joe was right. But she had never been able to criticize her mother outright to anyone else. Not to her girlfriends in high school who roasted their own mothers with cruel casualty, not to the few relatives Joyce and she had scattered across the White Mountains, not even to Joe who didn't seem to realize Hope's reticence. Say nothing but do what you want. This had always seemed a better strategy to Hope, and it did not betray Joyce's rare tender moments—the birthday cake she baked every year, the battered string of pearls pressed into Hope's hand after the elopement.

In the morning, she drank coffee with Joe at their kitchen table. Joe drank Gatorade in the morning. The orange flavor with three ice cubes in a glass tumbler he kept in the freezer. The bang and crack of the ice cube tray was like their morning alarm clock. The apartment was three rooms above a hardware store with two parking spaces in a gravel lot around back. The parking spaces had sealed the deal. One for Joe's truck, the other for his motorcycle. Hope parked her rusting Honda Civic on the street.

"See you at lunch?" Joe drained his glass.

A tingle of joy ran up Hope's spine. She was twenty years old and she was meeting her husband for lunch, this kind and handsome man who rubbed her shoulders when she got home every night. They sometimes had sex after lunch, a quickie in his truck. Hope was needed and loved. This was her life now, and next year they would be in Concord, Joe at a bigger garage—the twenty-minute oil change places were always hiring he'd said—and Hope finishing her nursing degree. Cold hard cash was on the horizon.

***

Glenda at The Ink Spot had a crush on Joe. It flattered Hope. Glenda was a skinny, bespectacled seventeen-year-old who couldn't wait to study computer science in college. Hope and she shared the front desk reception and clean-up duties at the tattoo shop. Glenda had one tiny tattoo on her shoulder, a golden butterfly. Hope had none. The needles frightened her, the commitment to have your skin forever stamped did, too. But she liked the inky smells and the vague air of rebellion that hung over the shop.

Glenda had a quiet way of listening before she spoke that Hope liked.

"People get murdered in Concord, you know," Glenda said. "I don't know why you're so hot to go down there." They were in a lull between clients. It was nearly four o'clock.

"People get murdered everywhere," Hope said. "Most people are murdered by people they know."

Glenda thought a moment. "That, I believe." she said. "Statistically speaking, I bet it's true."

"Numbers don't lie." Hope pulled on her jean jacket. "Hey, you mind if I slip out early?"

"No problem," Glenda said. She liked to say "no problem" to whatever people put before her. It made her feel important and capable. "Hot date with hot Joe tonight?"

"Ha, more like a hot date with my biology textbook."

"Good luck," Glenda said. "And, you know, I'd still rather be murdered here than down in Concord."

You're not me, Hope thought, giving her friend a wave and stepping out into the cool air.

***

Joe was restless in his sleep that night. His thrashing legs woke Hope.

"What is it?" she asked.

"A dream," he said. "Owls hunting in the dark woods."

"A nightmare?"

He was half awake. "It was beautiful and…and eerie. Owls were hunting in the ravine. I saw them flying through the branches. They came so close I could reach out and touch them."

Joe's words lodged in her mind, and in her dreams that night, Hope saw the owls, too. They were extraordinary, like messengers from the spirit world, flashing through the dark, their piercing eyes trained on movements invisible to her.

***

The lottery tickets were probably the first sign that something might be wrong. Joe played both Powerball and Mega Millions. Hope enjoyed it at first. Brushing her long dark hair in the evenings while Joe hooted and hollered as the numbers were called on television. He never won.

"My anatomy exam is tomorrow," she said one night.

He snapped off the television. "You'll rock it, babe."

And she did. She nailed an almost perfect score. With grades like hers, transferring to the college near Concord would be easy. Then two years later and, bam, she'd be a nurse in a hospital. Not a bank teller like Joyce, sneering at customers in the drive-through window, but a degreed professional.

Joe brought home a cake to celebrate the exam. It was a vanilla cake with layers of coconut cream and "Congratulations" swirled across the top in red gel letters.

"I had to charge it to the credit card," he said. "Forty bucks at that fancy new shop in town."

Hope could not believe how blessed she was. But they didn't have forty spare dollars in their account? Joe must have seen something cross her face, because he said too quickly, "I got some extra Mega tickets, so we're a little tight. I have a feeling about Mega."

Hope didn't respond. Living with Joyce had taught her the wisdom in saying nothing and

thinking things out on your own later. When she checked the balance in their account, she realized they wouldn't be able to make the upcoming rent. She was stunned. Then a coolness came over her. Something inside took note, whispered to pay attention. Hope pushed it away. She could make up the two-hundred-dollar difference from her tuition savings. Just this one time.

Joyce had a different take. "He's a meth-head," she said, "That's where your money is going."

Hope instantly regretted saying anything. She still suffered from occasional weak moments when she lifted the veil to confide or seek assurance from her mother.

"Ma, he's not a meth-head. What a thing to say."

Joyce dragged on her cigarette and eyed her daughter as they sat in Hope's little kitchen. Joyce had stopped by to drop off some two-for-one frozen vegetables she'd bought on sale.

"File it away," Joyce said. "And keep your eyes open."

Hope wanted to say, "And you keep your mouth shut." But she didn't. Joyce had that restless edgy thing going. Her glance darted around the kitchen, looking for something to seize on. Joyce was the one who looked like a meth-head. The drug was everywhere in New Hampshire, it seemed. Everyone either knew someone or knew someone who knew someone who'd overdosed or died.

***

Sitting on the edge of the bathtub, Hope couldn't deny the proof before her. She was pregnant. The test in her hands, two little dark lines, clearly positive. This wasn't supposed to happen. Her shoulders sagged. Joe was asleep. It was four o'clock in the morning. Hope hadn't been able to sleep because she was late and she was never late, and she'd had a bad feeling.

She had one semester left before getting her associate's degree. Concord was becoming more real every day, the life they would have there—a funky, airy apartment on the top floor of a refurbished mill building, new friends coming and going, weekend trips to Boston. A baby did not

fit.

In the morning she told Joe. Tears slid down his face. He looked at Hope with eyes full of liquid love. “We’ll be awesome parents.”

Maybe everything would be okay. Hope wanted kids one day. They’d just jumped the queue a little.

She sat on the bed next to him. “We’ve got to get some medical insurance.”

Joe nodded in a way that made Hope believe he understood.

“I can’t bump up to full-time hours with school,” she said. “Can you get a policy through the garage?”

“Dunno,” he said. “I’ve never needed one.”

“Well, we’re going to need one now.”

“A new era is dawning.” He yawned.

And Hope thought, it’s called growing up. A tickle of irritation rose in her. “It’s not like we can go the rest of our lives without medical insurance.”

Joe’s face was a blank mask, showing her that he had never in his life thought about medical insurance or considered needing it. Still, he said, “I’ll look into it.”

But he ordered a game theory book from Amazon instead. Hope found the package on their stoop two weeks later. Joe believed he could break the lottery algorithm and “game the system.”

“The lottery is random,” Hope said. “How do bouncing ping-pong balls have an algorithm?”

Joe heaved a sigh and spoke slowly. It was all Hope could do to stop from smacking him. Right there, in their postage-stamp kitchen, smacking his clueless face. Pregnancy was bringing out a new edge in her. She was surprised by her growing sense of impatience and bluntness.

“Randomness doesn’t exist as a concept,” Joe said. “That’s the lie *they* tell us.”

"Who is they?" She stared at him. "The lottery overlords or do you mean everyone, every force in the universe that's got us trapped under its thumb?"

He laughed. "Are you feeling hormonal, babe? With the pregnancy and all?"

The coolness crept over Hope again. The forty-dollar shortfall. The checkbook. Did he even know what an algorithm was? "No, I'm fine," she said. "It's fine."

***

It was late autumn, Thanksgiving just over, when Hope felt the first kick. He—the baby was a boy—was due in six weeks.

"A little Christmas bundle," Joyce had said. "You two do right by this child." As if she were anyone to talk. Though to her credit, Joyce had taken an interest in the baby. After Hope passed the first trimester, Joyce bought a crib and a changing table. "I'm the kid's only grandmother," she said. "And God knows he's going to need me."

"Lucky him," Hope had said. They were in Joyce's car. "What more could any baby need?"

Joe's mother was dead, and his father had divorced his mother and left the area long ago—just like Hope's. Hope couldn't remember the last time she'd heard from her father. "Is he dead or alive," Joyce liked to say. "Who cares?"

In the car, though, Joyce was stung. She didn't like this new edge in her pregnant daughter. "I've been meaning to ask you," she said, flashing Hope a smile that was patently fake, even for Joyce. "What leads a person to get pregnant when she's got no money and her circumstances leave, shall we say, something to be desired?"

Hope smirked. This kind of crap had been bouncing off her. "I don't know, Ma," she said. "Why don't you tell me? You ought to know."

Joe loved the story of this exchange when Hope shared it with him that night. "The old

bitch," he said. "She got what was coming to her."

Hope laughed. Why had she ever hesitated, ever felt guilty, at the prospect of slamming Joyce when it felt so good?

But Joyce's comment touched a nerve in Joe, some masculine notion of himself as provider. He asked Steve at the garage for a raise the next day. Steve turned him down.

Hope was disappointed but impressed. Maybe this would mark a turning point in Joe. She was eight months pregnant, carrying high and out front. She looked like she had swallowed a basketball.

"I'm not giving up," Joe said. "Joyce is gonna eat her words."

He found a job at an old talc mine over the border in Vermont. It was about an hour's drive, and they put him on the night shift, but the pay was substantially more than the garage. "I'm doing it for my family," he said. Hope wrapped her arms around him and felt, for the first time in a while, a sense of promise.

Joe lasted two weeks in the mine. Hope came home from class to find him on the couch.

"When we go down the hole, it's dark outside, and when we come up at two a.m., it's dark," he said. "I go home and go to bed. I never see the light of day. I never see the sun." His dark eyes pleaded. "I can't take it anymore."

This made sense to Hope. Imagine never seeing the light of day. That would make anyone a little crazy. She had gotten a cheap insurance policy through the community college, a student deal. It covered just her and the baby, which Joe didn't mind.

***

Her labor began before it was supposed to. Four weeks early. That isn't much, the cheery obstetrical nurse assured Hope in the maternity ward. "Your little guy just wants out."

Maybe so but when he got out after ten hours of mind-bending pain for Hope, pain so bad she felt like she was hallucinating, the baby didn't look ready. He was skinny and shriveled with a mop of ratty dark hair on his head. His face wasn't chubby and cherubic. It looked geriatric, wasted. His fingers were puckered nubs.

He was barley in Hope's arms when an alarm went off and a nurse whisked him away. Hope's heart seized. "What is it?"

"We need to check his breathing," the nurse called on her way out the door. There was a commotion in the hall, a cart thumping along, a doctor paged.

Hope could hardly breathe.

"He's okay. They're just checking," Joe said, but his eyes were haunted.

Hope's empty arms ached, as a terror she had never known took hold.

Sitting in the corner, Joyce was uncharacteristically quiet. Then she said, "He's a preemie." She shrugged. "This comes with the territory. But he's a tough little twig." She turned to Hope. "You were a preemie, too."

"I was?" Hope never knew this. It was crazy, her not knowing such a basic thing about herself, but it didn't matter now. Joyce's words quieted the panicked flapping inside. If Hope had survived, her son could, too.

"See?" Joe muttered. "Everything's gonna be fine."

The door swung open. A nurse armed with a breast pump strode to the bed. "Let's get you started," she told Hope. "We don't know when he'll be able to latch, but you can still feed him."

Joyce and Joe left the room. They hadn't been at the birth, either of them. Joe wasn't good with blood, and the thought of being naked and in pain beneath Joyce's critical stare was intolerable to Hope.

"Andrew," Hope told the statistics person who came later with a clipboard and asked for the baby's name. "That's what I'm calling him."

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The baby stayed in the hospital for three weeks. He improved slowly but steadily. As he grew stronger, Joe grew more jittery. Hope was too immersed in the baby, in late night feedings and bleary days and her own aching body, to worry about Joe. The garage had agreed to rehire him after the talc mine debacle, but not until the first of the new year.

"We can't wait," he said.

"You're a big help to me for now," Hope said.

Joe was staring out the living room window that overlooked the street. His fingers twitched restlessly at his sides. "What I need to be is out in the world making money," he said. "There are people who set up college accounts before their kids are even born…and look at us. We haven't got squat."

His words pierced Hope. She had never seen him take anything as seriously as he was taking this baby. Joe wanted to do the right thing. He just didn't always know what it was. This was something Joyce could never understand.

Lying on the couch for a blessed afternoon respite while the baby napped, Hope struggled for the right words, the ones that would reel Joe back in and reassure him. "We have eighteen years until college." She sat up and held out her hand. "Let's go check on him."

That night Hope dreamed again of the owls. Only this time, they were not in the woods. They were in the apartment. She was sitting alone on the living room sofa. The tabletop lamp beside her threw a soft light that filled the corners with shadows. She heard the flap of wings. Two or three owls, a flurry of brown and white feathers in constant motion, swooped in and out of the room,

brushing the walls. Hope felt the woosh of energy in their wake. One passed by the window in a determined flash. They had made a hole, a burrow, in the wall near the window. A big owl glided in, disappeared for a moment, and then arranged himself so that his bold, imperious face could survey the room. His round eyes fixed on her, and Hope understood, through the unspoken rules of dreams, that she should not approach the owl. This plan was already in motion. He would emerge from the burrow from time to time. She had no say in the matter.

***

Hope was asleep when the call came. Her cell phone jingled to life on the nightstand, and she sat bolt upright. She knew it was bad news. She grabbed the phone as her bleary mind registered Joe's absence. They had gone to bed together. The baby was sleeping in his crib in the corner.

"Hello?" she sputtered.

"Baby, it's me. I screwed up bad. You've got to come get me."

"Joe? Where are you?"

"Lock-up at the police station. We…I…it went wrong and we got nailed."

The dark room spun around Hope.

"That new bakery, the expensive one—we held it up."

"You what?"

"We broke in—the guys and me—just to grab some cash. We figured it would be empty at night. A bakery, right? The owner was in the back. She grabbed our gun away and called the cops."

Hope struggled to picture Joe held at gunpoint in a bakery as the lights and sirens of police cruisers arrived.

"What are you saying?" Hope began shouting. Her mind could not catch up with his words.

"It was for Andrew," Joe said. He was crying, sniffing.

The desperation in his voice frightened Hope. “I’m coming.” She jumped out of bed.

Joyce came to stay with the baby. Hope was forced to reveal what had happened. Joyce clucked her tongue, shook her head. “I always knew he was bad news. Just another black hole—a big one this time.”

A tremor passed through Hope, a simmering rattle she could not contain. “Hey, Ma,” she said, heading out the door. “For once in your wasted life, why don’t you just shut your stupid mouth?”

At Joe’s arraignment, Hope could not post the fifty-thousand-dollar bail, so Joe waited behind bars until the day his bumbling accomplices and he were given seven-year prison sentences. There was the possibility of parole for good behavior.

Hope waved as Joe, handcuffed, was led away to serve time. She had promised she would visit every week. She would look into an appeal. She would work nonstop to get him out. She believed she would be able to do all these things as a new mother, a single working mother.

But Joe would miss Andrew’s babyhood. There was no way around that.

“This little twig won’t need him,” Joyce said later.

Twig. Despite Hope’s resistance, she’d begun calling her baby “Twig,” too. It was endearing and it made her feel close to him, to his initial struggle to survive.

Life fell into a rhythm: school and The Ink Spot and dropping Twig off at Joyce’s house on the days Hope needed a little help. She regained the ability to tune out her mother, so much so that she could sometimes watch Joyce’s lips move and not hear a single word. The Ink Spot let Hope put up a playpen in the back, so Twig was a regular there. Glenda adored him. But Hope lived for the moments at home, in the tiny apartment where it was just Twig and her. His babbling and smiles were a lifeline. When she held him close, a warmth settled over her and she thought, all that

matters now is this.

When she finished school in the spring and got a phlebotomy job in the regional hospital, drawing blood out of people all day, she decided to forget about Concord—for the time being. Maybe when Joe got out, when Twig was older, they'd get back on track. Hope took out a mortgage and bought a place in a mobile home park not far from Mirror Lake where Twig and she could spread out a little.

The owls appeared in her dreams one night, gliding through the narrow mobile home, roosting on a curtain rod in the kitchen. Joyce appeared too, unfazed, at Hope's side. "Its name is Inevitable," Joyce said, as if this were the most natural and normal thing in the world, an owl in a mobile home named Inevitable. Hope did not respond because it was just as easy to ignore her mother in dreams. But what a stupid name, she thought. Joyce of course was wrong. This could not be true.

The next day at The Ink Spot, Hope took a seat in one of the client chairs and asked the best artist on staff to ink her lower arm. She explained what she wanted: a discreet four-inch design on the inside of her arm. Something she would know was always there.

"Now we'll match!" Glenda chirped, but Hope shook her head. "No butterflies for me."

The artist got to work fast because he had a paying client coming in an hour and he was doing Hope's tattoo for free. He cocked his head to the side and then meticulously sketched out and filled in the lines of a tender twig—a tiny branch with two leaves the color of spring grass.

Hope closed her eyes as he worked. It was better if she couldn't see the needle. She needed to stay calm. She wanted him to get it right. The buzz of the tattoo gun filled her ears. Her shoulders dropped as she exhaled. But she winced now and then because, despite all the reassurances she had heard the artists give countless clients, it really did hurt.

Lorraine Jeffery

Razor Wire

Helen Winder kept both hands firmly on the steering wheel. *I'm so close to Will,* she thought. As the car came around the curve and straightened out, she looked to her left, and gasped.

The prison fence glistened in the early morning light and the razor wire on the top glittered like thousands of sequins. Helen stared and eased off the gas pedal. *It's beautiful. Who would have thought that a prison fence could be beautiful.* Her thoughts were interrupted by an insistent honk from the car behind her, and without even glancing in the rearview mirror, she stepped on the gas.

Every morning for the past three months Helen had studied the imposing five buildings that stood only three hundred yards to the east of the two-lane highway, trying to estimate how many inmates each two-story building could hold. Trying to imagine what was happening inside them, wondering what Will was doing.

Ten minutes after passing the prison, she arrived at the Ace Hardware store, pulled into a parking space behind it, and knocked on the back door. A stocky man with sandy hair and a moustache opened it.

"Hi Brian," she said. He nodded as she walked past him to the break room. After depositing her lunch in the refrigerator and purse in the locker, she walked to the front of the store and began straightening the checkout area.

Helen had worked at the hardware store five years and she liked her job, which was only half an hour's drive from her home in Circleville, Ohio. It was a welcome supplement to her husband's early retirement check. Steward hadn't planned on retiring early but the closing of the Circleville General Electric Plant had changed that.

Besides putting food on the table, the money from Ace Hardware had provided the extras Helen had wanted to give their only son, Will. She had enjoyed buying things for the bright-eyed little boy. In the beginning it has been computer games and a skateboard, but soon it had progressed to tapes and music CDs. Helen didn't like Will's music or approve of all of the lyrics in his hard rock songs, but she had happily purchased whatever he asked for. He never really thanked her, but his crooked grin was all the payment she needed.

As Helen put her change drawer in the register, she thought back to Will's junior year in high school. It was then that he began asking for money instead of CDs and whatever she gave him was never quite enough. He stayed out later and his grades fell dramatically. But he still managed to graduate with his class, even after flunking two subjects his senior year, and Helen had taken dozens of pictures of him in his blue and silver cap and gown.

But things didn't improve after graduation. Will didn't go to college as she had hoped, and he didn't get a job like his father wanted. He started staying out all night and stumbling home, smelling of alcohol. She talked to Stewart, but he had been stoic.

"He's been drinking for years. You just didn't want to see it," Stewart said, shaking his head. "He'll be all right. He just needs to get a job, start paying for things himself and figure out how to get off the booze."

But he wasn't all right, and when Stewart yelled at him about his late nights, Will moved out, and went to live with Jim Lawler, his high school buddy. In the months that followed, he let his hair grow, got a tattoo, and rumors of drugs circled him.

Helen was brought back to the present when she heard the front door of the hardware store open, and a woman in jeans and a pink sweatshirt walked in and stood uncertainly, glancing around.

"May I help you?" Helen asked.

"My husband sent me in to get a couple hinges for a cabinet door he's replacing in the garage. I'm not sure what he wants," the woman said.

"Hinges are over this way. Does the door open from the right or the left?" Helen asked.

"Does it matter?"

"Well, sometimes it matters, depending on what kind of hinge he wants," Helen replied.

The woman pulled out her cell phone. "I'll call and ask."

* * *

Four hours later, as Helen ate a cold chicken sandwich and drank the can of Pepsi, she had brought with her, she thought again about Will. *He's close—less than five miles away. and yet there's so little I can do for him.*

Will was arrested three weeks before Thanksgiving and spent the holiday in jail. Helen couldn't bring herself to cook a Thanksgiving turkey, so she and Stewart had eaten a silent meal of chicken casserole.

A month later, Will and Jim Lawler were convicted of burglarizing a home in Jim's neighborhood. The prosecuting attorney had stated that they were looking for drug money. Will was sentenced to thirteen months in prison. Helen hated the bright lights and gaiety of the Christmas season and was glad to finally see the browning fir trees leaning against the black garbage cans.

In a strange way, she was comforted by the bleakness of January. And it was in January that Will had been transferred from Columbus to the prison facility in Chillicothe, sixty miles to the south on Highway 104, the route Helen drove twice a day, on her way to and from work.

It was also closer for the three prison visits she and Stewart were allowed each month. When Helen had been notified of Will's transfer to Chillicothe, her first thought was that it was a special blessing for her—something Stewart did not share. But she was ashamed of that thought and quickly brushed it aside.

Helen folded the Ziploc sandwich bag, put it in her purse and dumped her Pepsi can in the recycling bin. She thought back to their last prison visit. She had been groping for conversation topics when she asked Will what he did each day.

He had seemed irritated. "Why do you want to know, Ma?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said shifting on the gray plastic chair. "I just like to know what you're doing."

"Eating, sleeping, exercising in the yard—the usual stuff. Starting next week, I'll work in the kitchen on Tuesday and Thursday mornings."

"That's wonderful," she said. "Will you be learning to cook?"

Will frowned. "Nah, I'll just clean up."

"Well, you'll be developing a good work ethic and helping out. Right?" Will stared at her and then shrugged his shoulders.

Helen had glanced at the clock on the wall and Will scooted his chair back a little from the table. "Ma, I need some money for shampoo and toothpaste and stuff," he said. Stewart shifted in his chair but said nothing.

Will asked me, Helen thought proudly. “You’ve already gone through the money we gave you last month?” she asked.

“Yeah. I shower every day. I can’t believe I have to buy my own shampoo and conditioner. They cheat us every way they can. Even the food’s lousy.”

Helen felt a warm rush. Will had always liked her pot roast. “What foods do you miss the most?”

Will ran his hand through his curly black hair, glanced around the room and nodded to a swarthy man talking to a pretty young woman at the next table. “Oh, I don’t know, just home cooking I guess. So, will you send it?”

Helen nodded. “Do I write a cashier’s check and send it to the prison, like last time?”

“Yeah,” Will said. “But be sure you put my inmate number on it so it will go to the right place.”

“Will ten dollars do?”

Will had pulled a face and shook his head. “They squeeze whatever they can out of us. You’d better make it twenty.”

* * *

It was just yesterday that we visited, Helen thought, *and yet it seems like so long ago*.
She checked her purse to make sure the envelope with the cashier’s check for thirty dollars was still in it, and smiled. *The extra ten dollars will surprise him.*

When Helen got off work, she walked to her car, climbed inside and feeling warm, rolled down her windows. She drove by the post office, dropped off the envelope with the cashier’s check and then headed north on Highway 104. As she neared the prison, she could see the exercise yards full of men in black sweat pants and white tee shirts. She noticed a black or dark blue car parked next to a covered picnic table which was up close to the fence. She could see a head in the driver’s seat, but nothing more. *Was that a mother or family member watching a loved one?*

She checked her rearview mirror, and seeing no cars close to her, slowed down. Somewhere in that group was Will. She could see bodies, but no faces. Again, she glanced in her rearview mirror, and this time saw a car approaching. Stepping on the gas, she headed home, but her thoughts stayed at the prison. *Is Will outside in the yard? What is he doing right now?*

Tuesday morning, she looked at the empty exercise yards and wondered if Will was helping in the kitchen. She pictured him expertly flipping pancakes, as she had seen on television.

At work that day, Helen couldn't concentrate and she kept looking at the clock. On her way home, she slowed down again as she approached the prison, saw the inmates in the yards, and studied the same dark car that had parked by the picnic table, driving slowly down a road she couldn't see. *That road must run parallel to the fence*, she thought. *If I drove down that road, maybe I could see Will.* As she continued on her way home, she mulled over the prospect. And if she saw him, then what? It seemed silly to wave.

Thursday morning, she saw the glistening razor wire again. *It must be the angle of the sun in early spring*, she thought. She didn't slow down that morning, but on her way home, she pulled into the prison entrance and drove through the visitor parking lot toward the prison buildings.

As she approached the fence, she saw the sign, "Sheriff and Police Parking Only." She stopped the car and surveyed the parking lot. There were three police cars parked on a small concrete slab, and just beyond the concrete was the road that ran parallel to the fence. *The road isn't a parking lot*, she reasoned, and drove slowly through the lot until she reached the fence.

Turning right, she proceeded down the narrow one-lane road. Some of the inmates stopped walking and looked at her. Something about the way they stared, told her that this was not a common sight, and she knew instinctively that she shouldn't be there. She did notice though that there were two

fences, not just one, with razor wire between them, the rolls stacked three high near the outside fence. That explained why the fence had glistened so brightly.

Helen looked up the road and saw the dark car, a late model Chevy, parked next to the covered picnic table. *I'll pull off there*, she thought, *and say "Hello" to the other family.* She had planned to look for Will, but the stares of the inmates unnerved her and she kept her eyes forward. As she reached the picnic table, she drew in her breath. There were no family members in the car— only a prison guard who glared at her.

Of course, Helen thought, *of course. Who did I think it would be? How could I be so stupid? What if he stops me? Will they take it out on Will?*

As Helen drove slowly past the guard, she could see a turnaround ahead of her. Without moving her head, she looked in the rearview mirror and saw that the dark car was following her. She pulled into the turnaround and the guard drove slowly past her. Then she turned back onto the one-lane road, going toward the entrance. The guard followed her to the sheriff's parking lot, but he didn't stop her.

Helen drove slowly back to the highway and headed north. She kept glancing in her rear view mirror, but no one was tailing her. *I've watched too many detective movies*, she thought.

When she visited Will the next Sunday, she mentioned that she had driven down the road that ran parallel to the prison yard, looking for him.

Stewart stared at her. "You didn't tell me you did that," he said. Helen shrugged and kept her eyes on Will.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh, I just wanted to see you. You know, to see you walking in the yard or whatever you do."

Will screwed up his face. "We don't do nothing out there. I don't want you hanging around just looking. It's weird. And besides, you're not supposed to be on that road."

Helen's nodded and her fingernails bit into her palms.

"Do they have workout equipment here?" Stewart asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah, it's old stuff, but I'm developing some pecs," Will said, flexing his muscles.

As they talked, Helen waited for Will to thank her for the money, but when he didn't mention it, she did: "Did you get the money I sent?"

"Yeah, now I have shampoo," Will said. "Thanks. It wasn't enough to buy paper and stuff so I can't write letters or rent a TV, but I guess I don't need them anyway."

"You can watch TV?" Stewart asked.

"Well, yeah, we can watch in the commons room, but you can't watch what you want. Some other guy always has it. If you rent one for your cell, then you can watch what you want."

"Sounds like a luxury," Stewart observed.

"I know it's extra money," Will said leaning forward and dropping his voice, "but if I had my own TV, I'd stay in my cell, away from the other guys, and it would keep me out of trouble. Remember when I got locked down for fighting in Columbus?"

They both nodded.

"Most of the fights start in the commons area—too many guys all together. If I stay out of the fights, it will go better for me at the parole hearing."

Stewart looked dubious, but Helen was already planning how she could squeeze extra money out of their already tight budget. "How much does it cost to rent a TV?" she asked.

"Thirty dollars a month."

"We'll talk about it," Stewart said, as he stood up to leave. Helen hurried over and hugged Will. He draped his arms around her, but she felt no pressure. Will nodded to his father and walked through the door into the lockup area, without a backward glance.

"He doesn't need a TV," Stewart stated on their drive home.

"But if it keeps him out of trouble," Helen said, her voice trailing off.

"That's supposed to be prison, not some kind of resort," Steward fired back.

Helen didn't reply to this last statement of fact. They rode a few miles in silence and then Stewart spoke again. "That was a damn fool thing to do—driving around the prison. You hang around there much and they'll run your license plate and tie to you Will. That won't help him any."

Helen looked at the floor of the car. "I won't do it again," she promised.

* * *

On Monday evening, after work, Helen turned into the prison lot, drove to the center of the visitor parking and parked next to the twenty cars already parked there but she left the engine running. It was a cool evening and many of the men in the yards were using the hoods on their black sweatshirts, but not all.

She could see all five yards, but she could only see the faces of the inmates in the first one. She searched for dark curly hair and broad shoulders. Nothing. But after half an hour, her eyes fastened on a stocky man with a hood over his head in the second yard. He was talking to a slim, blond-haired man and there seemed to be something familiar about the hooded man's gestures.

It might be him, she thought, but she couldn't be sure. She knew better than to get out of her car and walk over to the fence for a closer look.

She watched the other men as they milled around the yards. They seemed peaceful. She knew they were inmates, felons, some were violent criminals, since Ohio's death row inmates were housed here, at least the males. But she knew those inmates wouldn't be out in the yards with the others.

The men in the yards seemed to stroll and talk comfortably. There were no fights, no loud threats. There was something about the prison yards that seemed idyllic. She thought it was probably because the place was tightly managed and contained.

Helen noted that most of the men were in groups of two or more. *What social creatures we are*, she thought. Of course, there were always men walking the fence line—usually two of them, talking. She remembered the Jersey cow her family had owned that checked the fence line, at least once a day—just in case. *Is that what these men are doing?* She wondered. *Or are they just young men in the process of learning, and hopefully, changing their lives?*

Helen was started by a shrill whistle. The men in the prison yards stood up and started walking towards the back gates. She quickly lost sight of the man who might have been her son as he blended into the flow of white, black and brown faces. Then the gates closed and the yards were empty. That was when she became aware of the swish of cars behind her on Highway 104 and she glanced at the clock on the dashboard. She was surprised to see it was six o'clock. She had been sitting for almost an hour, using gas that she couldn't afford to waste.

"Sorry, I'm late," she said as she hurried into the house to start supper. "I pulled into the prison parking lot and looked for Will."

"You promised you wouldn't do that again," Stewart said, following her into the kitchen.

"I said I wouldn't drive down the road that runs next to the fence. I just sat in the parking lot. Nobody's going to worry about that."

"Why?" Stewart asked.

"Why what?" Helen said, stopping on her way to the sink.

"Why look for him? It's not like he's going anywhere."

"Oh, I don't know. He's there and he's close and. . . "

"And you just sat in the car watching the inmates?"

Helen thought of the many times she had stood at the backdoor watching Will play when he was three or four, running across the lawn on his short dimpled legs. She had watched the wind blow his hair and noted the quick movements of his inquisitive hands as he explored his world. Hadn't she watched him for hours?

"Yeah," she said. "I guess I lost track of time."

Stewart just looked at her.

* * *

The next Sunday, when she and Stewart visited the prison, she didn't mention her idling car in the parking lot to Will, nor did she tell her husband about the cashier's check for Will's TV.

Thursday, she stopped again in the prison parking lot. This time she pulled into a space closer to the prison fence, and turned off the engine. She had time. She had told Stewart that the employees at Ace Hardware were taking inventory and it would require some extra hours. After a few minutes, she again saw a person she thought might be Will, but he was in the yard that was farthest from the parking lot and again, Helen wasn't sure.

She stopped several times during the next few weeks, but one evening, after about twenty minutes she was startled by a knock on her car window, and looked out to see a man in a guard uniform. Where had he come from? She turned in her seat and saw the white security van parked behind her. The guard looked to be in his fifties with hair graying at the sides and the beginning of jowls on his fleshy face. She lowered her window.

"Visiting hours are over," the guard stated looking at her curiously.

"Yes, I know. My son is in there," Helen said pointing at the prison yards. "I'm just watching. I'm not going to get out of the car or anything."

"This is visitor parking Ma'am. You can't park here unless you're visiting," the officer said.

"But I was just sitting," Helen protested.

"I know Ma'am, but for security reasons, you can't just sit here."

Helen sighed, glanced at the exercise yards and then nodded. She started her car and drove slowly out of the parking lot.

It's not fair, she thought. I wasn't hurting anybody. She wanted to complain to Stewart, but she couldn't. He thought she was working late.

The next Sunday, Helen asked Will about his time in the exercise yard.

"You have to be a level three to spend time in the yard," he said. "Two hours for level three, four hours for level two and up to six hours for level one, if you want it."

"Each day?" Helen asked.

Will nodded.

"What are you?"

"Three."

"Can you work to get up to a level two?"

Will wrinkled his forehead. "I guess, but I'm okay with two hours."

"But wouldn't you like to have the option of more?" Helen asked.

Will shrugged. "I'm not a fresh air nut. I'm okay where I am."

* * *

Several days later, Helen pulled into a small turnout area on Highway 104 where she had noticed cars pulling over to change drivers or check tires. She faced the car east and stared at the prison. She sighed, realizing she couldn't distinguish any faces from that distance, just moving figures.

Will's only out there for two hours, she told herself. *Maybe he isn't in the yard right now. Maybe he's reading in his room, or watching TV, keeping out of trouble.* But somehow it comforted her to know he was close. She turned off the motor and settled down in her seat staring at the prison.

She wondered about the mothers of the other inmates. *Did they remember the tousled hair of their sons as they slept on the Hot Wheels pillowcase? Did they wonder what they might have said or done to change the way things had turned out?*

Helen remembered Will as the bright-eyed boy who had held her hand tightly the first day of school. *How could he have ended up here?*

"Still, it's nice to know that he has enough to eat, and a bed at night," Helen said out loud as she sat in the warm car staring at the exercise yards.

During the next two months, Helen managed to spend one or two hours a week sitting in the car across the highway from the prison. Sometimes she told Stewart she was working over time, sometimes he was gone and didn't know when she came home.

* * *

On a Wednesday evening in the middle of July, Stewart came to meet her as she climbed out of the car. He was holding a piece of paper.

"What is it?" she asked.

"A parole hearing for Will."

Helen blinked and reached for the official looking letter. "Oh that's good," she said. "That's good. I didn't think he would have a hearing so soon."

"It's next Tuesday morning."

Helen tried to read the letter as she walked toward the house. She put her purse and lunch bag on the table and sat down. She smoothed the paper, read it and handed it back to Stewart. “Next Tuesday,” she said. “He could be out right away?”

Stewart nodded. “Maybe this month. He’d still be on parole though.”

“It’s so soon,” Helen said. Stewart looked at her sharply.

“I mean the hearing,” she said quickly, running her hand over her mouth and chin. “I wish I had more notice. I might not be able to get off Tuesday.”

Stewart stared at her. “This is Will’s hearing. You have to get off.”

“You could represent both of us couldn’t you?”

Stewart jerked his head back. “I think having his mother there would be important.”

“Um,” Helen said noncommittally. “He still has almost four months left. I didn’t think he could get out so soon.”

“Well, he isn’t yet,” Stewart said sitting down across from her. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I’ll try to get off,” Helen said, standing up and walking into the kitchen. “What do you want for supper?”

“Who else should we invite to his parole hearing?” Stewart asked later that evening as he cut up his pork chop.

“I don’t know,” Helen said, swallowing a mouthful of green beans. “How many people can we have?”

“Up to four. I’m thinking about asking Skip.”

Skip was Will’s scout master when Will had been twelve and thirteen, by fourteen he had lost interest.

“He might be a good one,” Helen said.

Stewart took a swallow of water. “Barry would come, but after that fiasco with Will’s loan, he might not be the best character witness.”

Helen nodded. Will had borrowed a hundred dollars from Barry, their long-time friend and neighbor, without their knowledge and then failed to pay it back. Helen and Stewart would never have known anything about it, if a red-faced Barry hadn’t come over one night to broach the subject. Stewart immediately wrote him a check and apologized. Barry didn’t want to take it, but Stewart insisted. It had strained the friendship and although both neighbors still waved, their relationship had cooled.

Helen stopped eating. “When Will gets out,” she said, “do you think he’ll still hang out with Jim and Doug?”

“Probably,” Stewart said.

“But do you think he’ll be different?”

Stewart swallowed and shrugged. “I wish I could tell you he’ll be different, but I don’t know. He says he’s learned his lesson. He says all the right words, but I don’t know. Maybe he’ll just be smarter.”

Helen nodded, and got up to clear away the dishes.

The next morning she asked for Tuesday off, telling Brian it was for family business.

“That’s no problem,” he said smiling at her. “You never ask for time off.”

That evening, she stopped at the pull-off on Highway 104, realizing that soon there might be no reason to stop. She fidgeted in her seat. She thought about the things she had to do at home, and pulled back on the highway fifteen minutes later.

* * *

Sunday’s visit was taken over by Will instructing them on how to dress, when to be at the hearing, and what to say and what not to say if they got a chance to talk. He was pleased that Skip Sherman was

coming and thought that a former scout master would strengthen his position. He finished by saying, “If you look like solid people, the judge is more likely to okay the parole.”

“How do you know that?” Stewart asked.

“That’s what the guys here say, and they know how the game’s played.”

“It’s not a game,” Stewart stated flatly.

“Yeah yeah, I know,” Will said. “It’s just a saying. I just want everything to go okay so I can blow this place,”

“When you get out, what are you going to do?” Helen asked.

“I’ve been writing to Jim and we’re thinking about starting a car detailing business,” Will said. “He knows a lot about it. He’s even got some customers lined up.”

Helen stared at him.

“What?” Will said throwing his arms out. “He’s a good guy. We’re not coming back here.”

She nodded.

Helen was quiet on the drive home and her eyes didn’t see the soy bean fields. She was thinking about Will, the prison, his friends, and his crooked smile. She was surprised to find her eyes dry and her head clear for the first time in many months.

Tuesday morning Stewart woke her at seven. “Skip’s riding with us,” he said. “We need to leave in forty-five minutes.”

“Um,” she mumbled. “I don’t feel so good.”

Stewart looked concerned. “Pepto might help. You’ve probably got a nervous stomach.”

Helen nodded, but she moaned softly. Stewart went downstairs and twenty minutes later, she could hear him opening kitchen cupboards. *Now*, she thought. She got up, walked into the bathroom, sat down on the tub and put her fingers down her throat. She started to gag and pulled them out. *How do*

bulimics do it? She wondered. She took a deep breath and again, put her fingers down her throat, and wiggled them.

Vomit boiled up into her mouth, and she threw up into the bathtub instead of the toilet. Yellow bile and half digested green beans ran down the ceramic side. She wiped her mouth and called to Stewart.

If her moaning hadn't convinced him, the stench in the bathroom did. He grimaced but made one more plea. "Maybe you'll feel better now that you've thrown up."

Helen shook her head and unscripted tears made her eyes smart. "I feel awful," she said. "I'm sorry I'm going to miss the hearing, but you'll have to go without me."

"Maybe I should stay with you," Stewart said.

"No. You have to go. Maybe I'll be okay after I get some sleep."

Stewart looked unconvinced, but he went back downstairs. Fifteen minutes later she heard the crunch of tires on the gravel driveway. Helen pushed back the blanket and swung her legs off of the bed. She walked slowly into the bathroom and looked at the mess. But instead of cleaning it as she had planned, she walked down the hall.

Will's room was empty now, except for the rock band posters he had left on his bedroom walls when he moved out. There was no sign of his younger life—no beloved teddy bear or worn out car. Helen sighed, walked to the window, and looked south toward the prison she could not see.

Onyinye Kalu

WHEN WE FELL IN LOVE IN OCTOBER

Your hands grip the steering wheel, knuckles nearly bloodless as cold air rushes through the open windows. Slouched in the passenger seat, I can't seem to erase the image from my mind—standing over her sprawled frame coated in pooled blood. I have done it to myself again, reeled into the aftermath of one of your episodes, this one the worst yet. And you, in the middle of it all.

Your eyes are fixed on the distance in an expressionless stare, one long minute after the other. You're lost in your thoughts, but not about me staring at you. Or even her, covered under mounds of earth.

If I didn't know the small expressions of your happiness—that tap your fingers make on the fine surface of the stirring wheel every few minutes—your impassiveness could have been sold to me as having a conscience or even the tense worry that this is an incident of second occurrence, surely suggesting the chance at another. But it's none of that. That triple tap of your finger is counting the success of compounding this situation, of the pride your parents may finally accord you.

The volume of the radio station muffles with the assault of the rushing wind and the sound of the car's tires running fast on the quiet tarred roads of Central Area. The keywords to the only trump card we hold to getting away with this ring through every other sentence on the radio—

COVID-19, Lockdown. It is all anyone can talk about. It is all I heard when I sat in front of your TV hours ago with my head buried in my hands, trying to figure a way out. You were sunk into the textured rug, stare fixed on some immaterial thought, and she lay still a few feet from us.

The atmosphere is considerably less tense than it should be, as if there isn't a pressing conversation we are supposed to have.

I would not readily participate in conversations that have her as a subject. I have become an expert in navigating those land mines amid our circle at the launch events, but it hangs tersely in my throat now—her name, her olive skin and shrill laughter, her eyes as they sat open in utter shock before I pressed her lids shut.

I should not have answered the call when your name flashed on the screen of my phone, but my curiosity has always gotten the better of me. I should have walked back out the door when I trailed your footsteps from the open space after your front door that constitutes the modern rustic furnishing of the living room and dining, through to the kitchen area where her lifeless body lay against the earthy tiles.

With every hour that has since passed, I have itched to call your brother and lay it all out for him. I can't fully trust this plan I have come up with, but he would be able to close in on any loose ends, bare his teeth till the biggest looming scandal ebbs away like smoke.

But I don't. He would certainly kill you this time.

Raking over your features spurs the memory of seeing you again, it squeezes in from the back of my mind—the recollection of letting Mum talk me into coming home to witness the execution of her brainchild. The last of the orchestrated calls with her and my elder sisters had led here. The zealous bunch of them had worked hard at coming up with this entire charade and the subsequent successful product between your family and your wife's. My family's marketing

enterprise made a big hit with it and the launch called for a week-long event.

They had batted their genuine-looking lash extensions over FaceTime and I wasn't any match for their synchronized speech and the distracting resemblance that runs in our family. They had all sworn to police me as best as they could, keep me from you, and if need be, from your new wife too. I should have taken back my acceptance to them booking me a flight home while they squealed happily.

Except for the breathtaking restaurants, halls, and spaces, everything else was the same. Smiles and pleasantries exchanged with, dare I call them, friends we had grown up with, and the drawl of missing me and thinking I would never set foot in the country again. The calculated looks and cunning smiles that asked if we had met yet.

My replies were sharp, avoiding, and sickly sweet. It's a dance we all learned to play from our years together in school. Forced into friendships by our parents to seal deals they needed to make with each other, we were made to appear as who we weren't for the public's eye.

Slithering through greeting Aunties and Uncles, parents of these friends, who asked when I would settle down, why I came back, and what was next, I found myself at the bar. Your brother was just about to storm off from speaking pointedly at you, his face dangerously close to yours and his voice menacingly low. He walked past me in an airy fit, and anyone who noticed—which was everyone—pretended not to.

His eyes and mine met, and then looked away with no acknowledgement. It seemed like only yesterday he stood by your apartment's door and we'd had our longest conversation yet with the last of my stuff in my bags. His deep burrowing eyes had massaged over your deflated frame behind me, and he'd asked if whatever I had going on was worth breaking another person like that. I had

managed a small smile despite my stinging eyes and tear-stained face before continuing to my car. It's still surprising you called him, of all people, to pick the pieces.

You both have the same smile, tightly lifted lips at their corners, obviously fake but overlooked as charming for the good looks that run in the family. He plastered it on as the air of his stride wisped past me, and joined in with the circle of the First Sons. Drink in hand and muscled bodies against finely tailored and pressed Senator attires, the deep chortle of their laughter travels the elegantly decorated rooftop space. Their eyes stay observing their mingling wives and everything worth noticing for later. Their shoulders are chipped constantly with a responsibility to prove themselves to their fathers.

It would explain whatever it is that had you both airing grievances right there at the party. If not necessary, those scenes are left for later, right after the doors of privacy have been shut on each brightly smiling face present. You have never been an easy pill for him to swallow despite being the apple of both your parents' eyes. He has to carry the burden of their expectations for the family while you laze. He glosses over your hunched form, destitute and in shame, whenever you try and your parents look away.

I was then left with your clearly agitated frame leaning on the bar, trying to fix back whatever version of perfect you had on before that altercation. You seemed to be steadying your breathing by counting just like I taught you to, and I was staring at you with a fondness I hadn't realized till you straightened up, ready to rejoin the party. I whipped around to escape it, but my name traveled like a breath in the air from your lips to my ear. Your hand gripped my elbow, determined to keep me from walking. I turned to face you, sucking sharply on my teeth before you got the message, and your hand dropped.

It was too late, anyone who had eyes had already noticed. I maintained a few feet's distance

to salvage the story the waggling tongues would tell.

"You're here." Your brown eyes bore heavily down on me.

"I'm only visiting for a while." I was looking everywhere but at you. The real nosy eyes were still trained on us, meeting my gaze from behind their flowing weaves and cocktail glasses with knowing smirks.

"For how long?"

My attention was back on you, resisting the urge to kiss my teeth again. I stared down at your solemn expression for long seconds before deciding that you clearly didn't understand the difference that stood between us now. Or maybe you just didn't care. Outside of your family, I am not sure many other opinions matter to you.

When I looked away, I unconsciously searched for her in the crowd. Your wife's piercing eyes met mine from across the floor, monitoring the situation, despite conversation with some other women. There was this look about her stare. I had never liked it.

There were too many eyes. There always are. I turned and walked away from you, "You know better than this."

It wasn't much of a defense, so it wasn't like I hadn't been expecting your call when it came. I created excuses for myself to keep away from that look in your eye, like you could breathe better by just seeing me. Yes, you had to have only been agitated by your brother, only overwhelmed. Though I let myself pose a momentary wishful memory at how much easier we used to be before I wished better for myself.

The call came two weeks later, your voice quiet on the line and skipping over your words distractedly. My feet had been moving before my mind caught up. What I didn't expect, though, was

to walk in on the image of your wife dead in the kitchen.

I collapsed onto the sofa, head in hand, “Why?”

Your head hung on your sleeves, voice muffled when you spoke, “I’m sorry.” Still quiet like on the phone, your thoughts detached from me, who sits here with you, to however your family would respond to the situation. It stirred an annoyance in me that you have stayed the same. We broke up, and you didn’t even try to work on yourself for me, try to fill more of me into that space in your head. It annoyed me that I still searched for a reason to stay, and you gave me nothing.

“I asked why.”

You looked up at me now, your familiar grimace reappeared whenever your faults nagged at you. I hope that you noticed something in my tone, in the expression my stiff stare conveyed. I hope you understood that I hated you even more at that moment because you could never love me enough.

“She was blackmailing me.” You seemed to think that was all you needed to say, that I would swallow first the little you always seem to give me and get on with giving my all in place.

I tried not to let the deep sigh that clogged my chest out, there was no time for those emotions. I didn’t need to ask though, there was only one thing that could lead to this escalation, and I bet I know how it all went down.

How she had gotten the information about your first incident, I am not sure. I am not familiar with the inner workings of your family, but it has to be one of your family’s best-kept secrets.

If I hadn’t been involved in the circumstance of it, maybe I never would have known. We don’t talk about it—never these types of things. Not your therapy sessions or the medications you take for your mood and impulsivity. Or even how you developed the disorder in the first place. And

I never asked. Just like you never commented on the strain my relationship with my family suffered because of ours. We kept the heavy topics that could shatter us at bay.

Without you sharing the details, I know that the student that day had aggravated you. He had a knack for making passes at your unresponsive gait, taunting for your uselessness in your family. Your brother, who had already graduated from our secondary school, had been the face of the family right from those walls.

It was the first day we met, past acknowledging that we existed in the same school. There was hardly anything that joined an SS3 student to an SS1 like me till I approached the heavy grunts, panting, and strained wheezing I'd heard in the empty corner of the new building long after school had emptied.

You were squatting across from him, head burrowed, with your stare trained on the ground. It was the first instance I had where I knew I should have walked away from you. But when you looked up at me, you were broken with eyes that could barely register what you had done between your ruptured bloodstained knuckles and his barely breathing frame. I'm not sure how long I stood staring at you. When I reached out my hand and you grabbed on with all of you, it was the beginning of something that should have never been.

I called your brother almost immediately. As the head boy, he had encouraged all of the student body to have his number in case they needed his help. He has always been shiny and glorious, and there's very little space for you to exist.

My driver took us to your house, there was no one home but the staff, and every other time other than planned dinners with your family was the same. I cleaned and treated your wounds, made you shake out of your soiled clothes, and left only when I was sure you were okay.

That student never came back to school. Rumors went around, but there was nothing that

ever suggested you or your family's involvement. His family also kept silent, and I can only imagine the deal that went down behind closed doors.

That wasn't the start of my problem but it was the sole aggravator. Exempted from the overachieving trait my family has, I lacked anything to emit from my insides. And when broken things—the homeless dog I brought home, the friends that needed saving—clung on, it exhilarated me. Like I was some broken-whisperer.

I listened without judgement when you spoke about your brother from then, offered sympathy and understanding, and all of my time. I saw the look in your eyes as you fell at home with me, it was a sacrifice your parents who only cared from afar didn't give to you. I learned to identify your trigger—your brother—and isolated it. When I fell in love with you and let it consume me, there was nothing my mother or anyone else could say to stop it.

"How did she find out?"

Your sigh was heavy and I knew the only other source could have been your brother. "He had an intoxicated night with one of her friends and let it slip." Your head was in your hands, ingers tugging at the thick coils.

"What did she want?"

You missed a beat with the answer this time. Your gaze held a certain softness when they reached mine, "For me to offer myself entirely to her and forget about you, or she would hand over the classy information to her parents."

The look in your eyes wants me to believe a lie you have ingested till you believed it too. It is the lesser half of the truth, and it feels good to be able to acknowledge that now. I can't know how your mind works, can't fathom how you looked over my unhappiness, convincing yourself everything was fine, that you hadn't intentionally perpetuated any hurt my way. And when I came

at you, dangling all the times you could have done more to make it better, I became the one who walked away.

After much traveling, I was volunteering as an English teacher over the coast of Southeast Asia when my sisters called me with the news of your engagement to her. I knew immediately that it was an act of service, that your family could cajole you to any action under the guise of 'doing it for the family', and you would. Mum chipped in, and all the cards were laid on the table. She wouldn't give up such a business prospect, and not for a relationship the family was never a fan of.

Your family thought to take the wellness enthusiasm further than owning a well-revered hospital and chain of branches, but they weren't looking to taint that successful-yet-contented role the public adored them for. It was your time to play the big role that you had always wanted ever since you were the little boy who watched as people marveled over your brother, unconsciously ignoring you, who stood in the corner of their periphery.

Your family is known for their damn near perfectness. But you, the moon in their sun's rays, are far from it. They, and you too, have always known it. It drives that itch for perfection you have, to emulate your brother. But there is something cold, even in your smile, that you can't fix. And when they reached out for your help, a task your married brother couldn't take on, you gave in with all you had.

An 'unplanned' synergy of lovebird children between her family's Alternative Therapy business and holistic lifestyle, and yours reputation for medical expertise could only develop into successful health and wellness products, a powerful brand that resonates with health-conscious consumers. It's a despicable play on the gullible nature of the public's interest in a picket fence story bigger than their own and consumerism. A game our families' circle plays all too well.

So I bet there wasn't love in this marriage you had, just a certain level of coexistence that

didn't infringe on each other's private lives. That much is obvious from the lack of a baby's squeal, the way you still look at me, and the look in her eyes when she watched us speaking at the event. She had always been good at getting whatever and whoever she wanted, so you posed a challenge that didn't sit well with her. Her friends must have teased her endlessly about it.

I bet she stood over the sink, gloating in self-satisfaction at making a headway with you. She must have never thought ahead to you being able to hurt her, so when you moved to her with the same knife she'd used in cutting up the vegetables for the dinner of fried rice, she fell in shock.

You said she ran into your knife like you needed to give me an excuse. You stopped speaking when I asked about the second stab wound that looked like you needed to make sure she died.

I shudder at the cold wind from the rolled-down windows of the car and take my eyes off you. In the approaching distance, I notice a police checkpoint and breath hitches in my throat. My hand clasps around your arm in panic. It's then I feel the tremble beneath your skin, the first of the signs of jitter to come on your features.

My mind had skipped over the possibility of their presence even though it is a common occurrence to find them on distinct roads as night falls. Their flashlights beckon for us to slow down as we approach them. Their faces are already spread into wide grins at noticing that they have flagged down an expensive-looking car. The junior officers are saluting from afar while one walks up to your window.

"Morn Sir," he greets, never mind that it is almost midnight. His grin stays on even though ours are only terse smiles in return. I know there is not much reason to be agitated with Nigerian police. It is the last night before the nationwide lockdown and they must only be looking for as much *chop* as they can get before being stuck at home. But we've just had a dead body in the back of your truck and anything could go wrong.

It should have felt more guilt and conscience choking when we wrapped her up and stuffed the body in the car, or while we dug her a spot at one of the isolated, uncompleted estates on the outskirts of LifeCamp. But it is only now that I can hear the sound of my heart beating wildly in my chest. I can't tell who I have turned into for you.

"Anything for your boys, Sir?" He looks old enough to have walked with your father in another life, but here and now, he is your boy. His smile grows ever wider when he sees you reach into the middle console and come out with a bundle of notes.

He starts saluting. The junior officers emulate the same with joy as they notice the exchange. His eyes meet mine for the first time as he collects the money, "Shun sir, Shun ma." I hold his stare till you pull back so he doesn't notice the dirt covering your hands and encrusted under your fingernails.

I start breathing again when you nod off his greeting and ease the car back into drive, their ecstatic waving becoming tiny in our wake. I hate this feeling. I never wanted to feel this again after the news of that student's family's fall from grace went around school sometime after the incident. Whenever someone brought it up close to me, my heart would pound loudly like they would somehow know I had a hand in covering you up.

The entirety of our relationship had started to weigh heavier much later on, feelings of dissatisfaction creeping in like trickles that fill a well. And one day when I looked around, I was completely shrouded by you. It was like I could hear my mother from the back of my skull; you had completely consumed me. There was a hollowness, a blank canvas you recognized and filled. Our relationship was more of you than it was of me.

You looked away in guilt when I brought it up—you'd understood this long before I did, but it did not stop you. I filled a need, put you first, and you loved me for it, entirely. Your parents had

questioned our interdependence at intervals through the years. It was the only time you had ever shut them out. Ours was just ours, and it was all you.

We are nearing your house now and I check within my mind for if I have done everything I can to keep this wrapped up till now. It is not foolproof but it is a good plan. As soon as I leave, you will call two of her closest friends to ask her whereabouts, playing the concerned husband at the fact you would like her to come home before the impending lockdown. You will imply that she is probably still mad at you after a disagreement you both had earlier today.

It's public information to those who want to know that she has a couple of lovers, ones that she sometimes takes bouts of intoxicated disappearances from friends and family to hang with. It will be her friends' first guess, and they will lie, attesting to her being with them to cover up. It will buy time and credibility to your story whenever her true disappearance is discovered long after it will be kept hushed by first her friends, then her family, before being placed into the incapable hands of the police.

"We should let him know," I say. It's the last thing you'd want, but your brother knows how to tie everything in a neat little box.

There is exasperation in your voice as you park the car and turn to me, the first set of true emotion you have shown this evening, "There's no need for that."

"The friend that told her about the incident is a loose end."

"I'll take care of it."

I look at you from the corner of my eye, taking in the earnestness to prove yourself still amidst this situation. You want to prove you sealed up the entirety of this problem to your parents whenever you decide to tell them about it. It's stupid, considering you're not the only one involved in this, but as always, it's all you.

I nod quietly, stepping out of your car and reaching into the pocket of my sweatpants for my car keys. The first thing I will do on my way home is to call your brother, and when I get home, I will make up some excuse for my mother and sisters. In a few days, I should be back out of the country—Mum will find a way around the lockdown. I never should have come back. You, and this situation, have shown me that there is nothing left here for me.

"I'm sorry…"

"Let's end this here," I cut you off. There's conviction in my voice and sternness in my gaze. I love that it shuts you up and puts that helpless look I hate on your face.

To avoid more words, I bound out and begin the short walk to my car. I had parked far away from your house just in case. It was a good guess and one of the few this evening I trust. I don't notice till I settle into the car, but there is a certain lightness on my shoulder, and I can only manage a small smile amid my guilt as I drive away.

Fabiana Elisa Martínez

Memories

> If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks. What you have discovered is a recipe not for memory, but for reminder.
>
> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 274c-275 b, Reginald Hackforth, transl., 1952.

"**Y**ou will have to sign page four and make three copies. One for us, one for you and... I'm confident they will require one at the funeral home, Sir," the big blonde hospital administrator with one missing fake nail pronounced matter-of-factly.

"Could you pass me a pen, please?" Ted mumbled trying not to look too intensely at the inadequate finger. He grabbed the offered pen but not the blank Post-it and proceeded to write on the palm of his left hand: "Page 4--Sign-Three copies" He was used to the quizzical look the

administrator gave him since he had renounced writing important notes on tiny pieces of paper many decades ago on a sunny afternoon like this one.

Ted read the words on his skin one more time when he started his truck and left the hospital parking lot carrying on the passenger seat the shabby bag his wife had carried the day of her stroke and the pristine sense of emptiness that people tend to call widowerhood.

He drove home breathing slowly, squinting his eyes at the blaring reflection of the sun in the windshield. He desperately wanted to invoke sweet memories of the forty-two-year marriage that had abruptly ended some hours ago and of which he had been the surviving half. Before making all the pertinent calls to his sons and relatives, Ted needed to sense the taste of a new state dictated by destiny through a benign tumor that Angela had carried since childhood like a forgotten seed in the depth of her skull. The secretive bulb of cells had decided to stretch its domains one day after their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary on a Sunday morning when Angela's left eye saw two angels in the church atrium which was one in reality.

Strangely, instead of the sad images of Angela being carried away in an ambulance two days ago or of their clumsy first dance at a wedding that had happened too fast and too long ago, Ted could only remember the sad eyes of a woman he met a week before he had to marry Angela.

The sun's reflection on the crowded jewelry store window blinded young Ted's eyes like today through his windshield. Ted was terrified by a future with a girl he barely liked who had announced in a mess of tears and snot that they were going to have a baby. After the Greek-style diatribes in Ted and Angela's respective religious homes, Uncle Richard drove Ted fifty miles to the city with a very drastic plan: to help his nineteen-year-old nephew buy a cheap engagement ring, a

black suit on sale that he should be able to wear for a couple of future town funerals, and a pair of leather shoes that the rest of the family refused to spend money on alleging the superiority of boots in fieldwork. The acquisition of the garments was calculated and boring. The purchase of the ring, on the other hand, left Ted with a bittersweet memory and the quirk the hospital administrator could not understand some minutes ago.

The name on the store clerk's tag read Suzanna. She had sad eyes, a musical voice, and translucent nails that tapped delicately at the fake diamonds as if they had been cut from moon pebbles smuggled back to Earth by Neil Armstrong. She seemed a little older than Ted and a lot more interesting than Angela. Uncle Richard commanded the enterprise. Ted looked at the many silver settings through the tears that he tried to dab with trembling fingers before gravity took charge. He wanted to swallow the tears, to dissolve in their salty solution the knot of frustration obstructing his throat. Suzanna offered a good price to Uncle Richard and iced water to Ted. One of her polished nails brushed against Ted's left hand when he returned the empty glass to her.

Uncle Richard drove his nephew back to town with a whimsical smile and some wise words: "You know, Ted, this happens. You will be fine. She will be fine. The baby will be just fine. Your old man will forget. Your mom already did. One day you will remember this ride and laugh."

Despite his uncle's wisdom, Ted forgot those words the moment he brought out the plastic box with the ring from the jewelry tiny blue bag. Angela extended her left hand to her fiancé and a thrilled smile of anticipation before her imminent change of status. She immediately frowned at the piece of paper that fell from the bag, "Oh my, so sorry," Ted quickly grabbed it and shoved it into his pocket blushing at the idea that Suzanna had included the ring's receipt in the bag.

While Angela ran to show her shiny adorned left hand to her sisters, Ted unfolded the pink piece of paper and read on the back of a blank order note: “Don’t marry her if you don’t want. I’m running away from this shitty city. Come with me to NY: ZV-5-3158.” Ted’s hand was faster than the beat of his heart. The note was sleeping back in the pocket of his pants when Angela returned and kissed him like never before, hungrily pressing him against her body populated now, as she liked to repeat, by the fruit of their love.

Three crucial things happened in the following weeks: the cherished note was allegedly lost when Ted’s mother did the laundry the morning after the engagement, Angela and Ted got married in the same church where the bride would see a multiplied angel many decades later, and the groom promised to never again keep crucial forgettable information in random pieces of paper too prone to disappear. A fourth event distracted Ted during their honeymoon weekend, Angela said she had lost her pregnancy the morning of the wedding. A cloud of doubt followed Ted for some months until their first real baby came and time paved their lives with oblivion and chores.

Ted parked the truck outside the home that would be full of mourning and the aroma of caring neighbors’ apple pies for the next weeks. He went through the contents of Angela’s bag in search of the front key. Ted’s written-on hand stumbled upon a red felt pouch that seemed like an old miniature album. Some yellowish pictures greeted him from behind cracked plastic frames: forgotten images of constructed happiness, a wedding kiss, their two sons, the many dogs that had guarded their house with severe dedication, and, tucked in the very last fold, a faded pink piece of paper with a very old phone number and a message that could have changed the course of a man’s all possible recollections.

Terry Sanville

Escape to the Lowcountry

Cordell crouches behind a dumpster in Newark's South Ward. He fingers the package, feels the weight of the .45 stuffed into his jeans, hidden by his High School football jersey. *Ma first big sale for Mr.K, bettuh go down smooth o' he blow me away.* He grins at his unintentional rhyme and wonders: *if I'd tried rappin', I might be ridin' in a limo 'stead of dealin' blow for a taste*.

The alley stinks of rotting garbage and vomit. Cordell checks his Rolex knockoff just as a tricked-out Honda pulls in. The boom-chukka-boom from its sound system causes the glass to rattle and hum. As he stands, the car pulls even and a tinted window slides open.

"Hey, ma man, Cordell. How's yo mama doin'?" A middle-aged man wearing a flashy jacket grins at him.

"Jus shut yo face about ma Mama, Leroy."

"Last time I was bangin' her, she said you was takin' real good care— "

Cordell uncovers the .45.

"All right, all right. No time for flappin' gums. You got the stuff?"

"Yeah. You got five large?"

"I gotta taste the blow first." Leroy extends a hand and draws in the package. The window slides shut.

Cordell lays a hand on his pistol, fingers twitching.

The window opens and Leroy wipes his nose.

"That's good shit." He passes an envelope. "Tell Mr. K we're even after da last time he fucked me."

Cordell opens the envelope and counts the bills. "Dis is less than a grand."

"Yeah, well that's all I'm payin'."

"Ah, come on, Leroy. Mr. K's gonna kill me if I don'—"

"Tell 'em to take the difference outta yo mama's ass."

Cordell yanks the pistol from his belt. The driver's door snaps open. A banger raises a MAC-10. Bullets ping across the face of the dumpster. He squeezes the .45's trigger. A splash of red appears on the gunman's chest. Cordell flings himself to the ground as Leroy opens fire. There's yelling and slamming doors. The Honda's tires squeal. He stands and fires wildly at the retreating car. The bloodied brother lies at his feet, eyes half closed, unblinking.

Something wet flows down his side. Cordell shudders and raises his jersey to inspect an oozing red crease cut across his ribcage. He ties the shirt around himself.

Shit, dat muhfucka near killed me. He hustles down the boulevard lined with rundown buildings, slipping inside one of them. Five flights up, he pushes into a stifling loft. Against the far wall, a woman sprawls across a bed. Approaching quietly, he pulls the sheet over her scarred nakedness.

"Mama, wake up." He shakes her gently.

"Wha… what you want? Why ain't you in school?" Her eyes stay shut.

"I'm 16, Mama. School's fo punks."

"You know all about punks, don'ch?"

"Look, Mama. I gotta go."

"You gotta get your black ass in school." With cracked nails, she scratches the inside of a bruised arm.

Cordell nudges her. "Listen, you gotta get the hell outta here."

"Why? Dis is ma place. I ain't scared of no—"

"Mr. K's gunnin' fo me. You gotta go to Aunt June's."

"Now how am I supposed ta—"

"Take this and go."

He pockets a couple bills from the envelope, then places the rest in her hand. She opens yellowed eyes and pulls the money under the covers. "Thank you, Cordell. Yous always good to yo Mama." She rolls onto her side, eyes shut.

"Mama, no mo sleepin.' You gotta go." He pushes her roughly.

She bats at his arm. "Damn it, leave me be."

He listens as her breaths turn into whispered snores.

"Damn, Mama, I gotta go."

From a cardboard box he retrieves another jersey and pulls it on over an improvised bandage. The bleeding has slowed but his ribs ache. Stuffing his knapsack with clothes and the

pistol, he stares out a bank of windows onto the South Ward. *Mr. K's got connections everywhere, gotta disappear. Gotta go now.*

Taking two stairs at a time, he descends to the street and runs. A turquoise Mercedes with chrome rims approaches and he ducks into a doorway. *Gotta make it to the highway, fast.*

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The tractor-trailer's rear door groans open. Morning light floods in, catching Cordell curled amongst boxes. He struggles to his feet.

"Where, wa…"

"This is as far as I cun take ya," the driver drawls.

"Thanks, mista. Where da fuck . . ."

"You in South Carolina, boy. Stay on this road an it'll take ya to I-95. Savannah's jus' over the border."

Cordell's side throbs. A chocolate stripe of dried blood stains his jersey. The truck trailer is oven hot, but the outside air feels hotter. He grabs the knapsack and jumps down, almost collapsing.

"I need to get somethin' ta drink. Is there some . . ."

"Yeah, at the truck stop." The driver points down a two-lane road that disappears into oak woods.

"Thanks fo the ride."

"Shouldn'ta done it. But I can't blame nobody for gettin' the hell outta Jersey." The driver laughs, climbs into the cab, and rumbles away.

The sun beats on Cordell's cornrowed head. He shuffles along the highway, glad for the trees' occasional shade. A café crowds the freeway interchange, surrounded by vehicles, including a couple police cruisers. Three State Troopers, wearing Smokey-the-Bear hats, exit the restaurant. Cordell fingers his bloodied shirt and yanks on the rear handle of a pickup's camper shell. Finding it open, he scrambles inside just as the cops pass. Crouching on a ratty mattress amongst boxed goods, he stares though the side window, trying to clear his vision.

Shoulda ditched ma piece . . . wonder how Mama's doin' . . . shouldn't have left her like . . .

The cops sit in a patrol car, talking. Cordell stretches out and closes his eyes. He doesn't hear the pickup's engine, the clop-clop of its tires running over highway seams, or the driver's soft singing as they motor eastward toward the Sea Islands and the Atlantic.

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He opens his eyes and gazes across a waterway bordered by salt marsh and woods. Dappled sunlight flickers across his face and he glances up through the limbs of a vine-covered oak, its branches draped with wispy moss. Nearby, the pickup is almost hidden in the trees. A brother in denims kneels on a dock and tinkers with an outboard motor strapped to a flat-bottomed boat.

"Hey, man . . ." Cordell calls and the guy looks up, then joins him.

"I'm glad you're awake. I didn't discover you until I got here."

Cordell touches his side and winces.

"That gunshot wound needs to be treated. It's not bad. But in this climate, it'll get infected, fast."

"How'd you know 'bout . . . so where da fuck am I, anyways?"

"Good Hope Landing, but you won't find it on a map."

"How'd you get me outta dat . . ."

"I carried you, fed you sugar water. You were dehydrated."

Cordell grabs his knapsack and feels the weight of the pistol.

"Don't worry, I didn't mess with your stuff."

"So, you live 'round here?"

"I'm visiting my family. I've been in L.A., interning at Good Samaritan Hospital. But I grew up along these inlets."

Cordell stares at the man and lets out a deep breath. "So where is dis place?"

"We're ten miles from the coast and Daufuskie Island."

"Daufu . . . what?"

"It's one of the Sea Islands."

Cordell walks to the dock and stares outward. Marsh and mud flats extend to a green line of trees in the distance. "Is dat the island?"

"Yep, home to maybe 400, most living in resorts."

"So what *you* doin' there?"

"My family and a few others still have homes back in the woods."

"What they do there?"

"They live, ah . . . you never told me your name."

He stares at the man's outstretched hand, then grasps it. "Ma names Cordell."

"Outsiders call me Jordon, but my Gullah nickname is Jabbo."

"What's dis Gullah stuff? Some kinda gang?"

Jabbo chuckles. “Hardly. The Gullah were slaves brought to the Sea Islands from West Africa.”

“Do Gullah women go ’round naked like dem Africans on TV?”

Jabbo’s face cracks wide. “God, I hope not. It would not be a pretty picture seeing my Mammy nude.”

Cordell remembers his own mother and stares at the horizon, thinking.

“Rest easy while I load the boat,” Jabbo says.

“You goin’ now?”

“Yes.”

In a short while Jabbo has transferred the boxes from the truck to the skiff, carefully placing each to balance the load.

“So how da fuck do I blow this dump?” Cordell asks.

“Well, you can stay here. In a day or so somebody’s likely to come along, including the Sheriff.”

“Dat ain’t gonna work.”

“You could try walking back to Highway 46. It’s only a few miles. Or, you can come with me to the island. I’ll be there a couple of weeks before making another mainland run.”

“What if I jus boost yo truck and drive the fuck outta here?”

“You’ll find it difficult without this.” Jabbo grins and pulls a distributor wire from his pocket.

Cordell sizes him up: a full head taller than him and built solid. He’d have to use the pistol. He remembers the last time . . . the blood, the pain. “Okay, you callin’ da shots.”

They clamber aboard. The outboard roars to life and Jabbo steers outward along a serpentine channel, through a vast steaming marsh dotted with long-legged white and gray birds. He deftly navigates around snags and sandbars. The inlet bends and twists so often that Cordell loses direction. A strange scent fills his head, carried by the hint of a breeze.

"What's dat smell?" he asks.

"That's the sea. Haven't you ever smelled the sea?"

Cordell snickers. "Hard ta do in Newark." He frowns, mad at himself for giving away his hometown.

The waterway widens and the island fills their vision. Jabbo points to a short pier and flat landward shoreline. "We'll tie up there." He turns the boat hard to port and guns the engine. They speed toward land. At the last second, he cuts power and yanks the prop out of the water. The boat slides across the mud, just nudging dry ground before stopping.

"You've done dat before," Cordell says.

"Only a few thousand times. Bigger boats use the pier, but Bertha here can go anywhere."

"Huh."

In the afternoon stillness, they climb out. Jabbo pulls the boat to a mooring post. He retrieves a wooden cart with wire-spoked car wheels and offloads. Cordell stands in the airless September heat, swaying. The surrounding trees look fuzzy.

"You'd better rest." Jabbo clears a space on the cart. "Here, lie down…drink more water."

"Yeah, no sweat man. Jus give me a minute."

Cordell stretches out on his back. His breath catches as pain racks his body. He shields his eyes from the sun and the cart begins to bounce along the rutted tract. It slides beneath a canopy of

mossy oaks and tall pines. Birds and squirrels scold them from above. He closes his eyes and listens to Jabbo's rasping breaths. *Wish I had some blow for the pain . . . this bouncin' 'round's killin' me.* Finally, they move again into full sunlight and the cart stops. Cordell pushes himself up, groaning.

"This is our yard," Jabbo explains. "My parents, brothers and their families live here."

Cordell stares at three whitewashed cabins clustered amongst the trees. A collapsed house trailer, half overgrown with vines, lies beyond. The families slowly emerge: men and boys dressed in denim coveralls with close-cropped hair, women in printed skirts, the younger girl's hair tied back with colorful scarves. They look like field hands from another time, or maybe a foreign country.

Jabbo moves to greet them and there's a fast jumble of conversation. The group stares at Cordell and moves toward him. He clutches his knapsack but they pass without speaking and unload the cart. The hot afternoon silence returns.

"What's dat they talkin'?" Cordell asks.

"It's Gullah, some 17th century English mixed with African. People call it Sea Island Creole."

"Sounds like singsong nigga talk ta me."

"Yes, well, you'll sound just as strange to them. Come on, I'll introduce you to my parents, then I'll dress that wound."

"They be able ta understand me?"

"The families speak plain when they're dealing with outsiders. Everybody here is bilingual."

They climb onto a porch and enter a shadowy front room with a muttering TV. A couple with graying hair sits on straight-backed chairs watching *The Price is Right*.

"This be Cordell," Jabbo says. "He'll be staying with us 'til I goes back ta Savannah."

"Please ta meet you, Cordell. I'm Edna and dis here is Harold." They smile at him.

"Please ta meet you," he mumbles.

"Mama, Cordell's gots himself shot and I gotta dress da wound. Could ya please bring me som' water and ma bag?"

"Sure, son. You go ahead and I's be right there."

The stout woman pushes herself up and moves through an opening into the kitchen, humming something slow and sweet.

Jabbo leads him down a short hallway to a bedroom. "This was my brother Elijah's room, but he . . . he's no longer with us. Take off that jersey and lie down on your right side."

Teetering, Cordell peels off the sweat-soaked shirt and collapses onto the bed. His wound burns, the pain constant. Jabbo touches his flesh and he flinches.

"Infection's already started. I'm going to clean out the wound and leave it open. It'll take longer to close…but less chance of the infection getting worse."

"Jus do somthin'," Cordell groans.

Edna enters with a basin of water and a sports bag.

"You gonna give me a shot?" Cordell asks.

"A tough guy likes you? I save ma meds for *real* emergencies." He laughs and scrapes the wound with coarse white pads.

Cordell bites down hard.

"I'll give ya some broad-spectrum antibiotics. You gots to take them fo ten days."

"Ye….yeah," Cordell grunts.

Jabbo stops wiping. He unscrews the cap from a brown bottle and pours clear liquid into the gash. It foams up and burns.

"God damn, wa da fuck?"

"Take it easy… it jus hydrogen peroxide."

"Don't you use the Lord's name in vain in dis house," Edna scolds.

"You're lucky ma Mammy don' douse you wid her special liniment."

Edna laughs. "I don' gots no turpentine fo it anyways…but you use da Lord's name like dat again and I be sure to get some."

Jabbo fashions a loose dressing over the wound and gives Cordell a pill. "You rest now."

They remove his shoes and pants and leave him curled in a fetal position. Forest sounds and the buzz of insects fill his mind as his body burns. He slips into a deep fever dream, running down Newark's back alleys, clutching his splitting side, his Mama yelling after him*, leave me be, Cordell, leave me be.*

***

Four days later, Cordell slumps onto a front porch bench. Edna and three other women surround a stack of dried reeds or grass.

She glances up from her work. "So look who's finally got his lazy bones outta bed."

Cordell stares at her dully.

"Jus rest easy. I'll gets you som' coffee." She rises and disappears inside.

The women, all younger than Edna, cut glances at him and smile. "Only our girls wear hair like dat," one of them says and they laugh, all the while their hands deftly weaving strands of rich brown, tan, and gold.

Cordell scowls and leans back against the wall. Their singsong conversation fills the morning. He closes his eyes.

“Come on now, no mo sleepin’.” Edna hands him a mug.

He sips from it and grimaces.

“It’s da chicory. You northern boys know nothin’ ’bout good coffee.”

“Thanks. Don’ suppose you got a Starbuck’s ’round here.”

“Star what?”

“Never mind.”

Edna rejoins her group. The chatter quiets as they work.

“What is dat stuff?” Cordell asks, pointing.

“It’s sweetgrass,” Edna replies. “Our men used ta gather it from the dunes. But now, dem beaches are private. So we gots to scrounge all over dese islands.”

“What ya makin’?”

The women laugh.

“Baskets. We sells ’em in Savannah.”

Cordell watches the women work, breathing in the humid morning air. He gently peels back the bandage. The pink lips of the gash have started to close, the burning has quieted.

“Where’s Jabbo?” he asks.

“Shrimpin’ with Harold up island. They be back for supper and the meetin’.”

“Meetin’?”

“The families are gatherin’ at the Praise House to settle some trouble. Yous bettah come along ’cause yous part of it.”

"What kinda trouble?"

"I'd bettah let Jabbo 'splain it to ya."

"But I ain't done nothin' . . ."

"We have som' bad history with outsiders. Some families don' want that again."

"What kinda trouble."

"Law trouble."

Cordell's mind spins at city speed. *Shit, somebody drop a dime on me already?* "So what kinda law trouble you talkin' 'bout?"

Edna lays her weaving down and joins him on the bench. "Our oldest boy, Elijah, used to make the runs to Savannah. One time he brought back this pretty gal. Said he'd met her months before and dat they'd gotten married. She had a little money, so they bought a house trailer, that one fallin' down back in da woods."

"She was an outsider?"

"Yes, just like yous." Edna pauses and stares into the yard, as if deciding whether to finish the story. "We didn't know nuttin' 'bouts her, but Elijah was crazy in love. They lived here four years. She 'come part of dis family."

"Why'd they leave?"

"Don' knows 'xackly. But one day they never came back from Savannah. We found their boat at Good Hope. The truck turned up in Birmingham weeks latah. After dat, the Jasper County Sheriff started comin' 'round lookin' for 'em. Said somethin' about bein' wanted for sellin' drugs, smugglin', or some such mischief."

"How long ago was dat?"

"Three o' four years . . . but the Sheriff still comes 'round hopin' ta catch 'em. Should be by any day."

"Shit."

"Men don' use bad words like that 'round ma family, Cordell."

"Sorry."

"We'll talk about it with the Wise at da meetin' tonight."

"Who are these 'Wise'?"

"They be old men, lived on dis Island all their lives, know the Gullah way. My Harold one of dem."

Cordell sips his coffee. *Man, the cops are comin' and no way outta here. Better ditch ma piece . . . better git ready ta run . . . but how . . . and where?*

The hoot of a boat horn echoes through the trees and Cordell jumps.

"Easy there, son," Edna says, laying a hand on his tattooed arm. "Nobody comin' fo yous jus yet."

***

Near sunset, Jabbo and Harold return with a load of shrimp. It's divided among the families. While the men stow the handmade nets, the women clean the catch. The peppery smell of shrimp frying in cooking oil wafts through the trees. At the kitchen table, Cordell stares at huge bowls filled with breadcrumb-crusted broccoli, a dark rice with chunks of meat, crunchy shrimp, bread served in an iron skillet, and other mystery dishes.

The family bows their heads and recites a prayer he can't understand. Food is passed.

"What's dis slimy green stuff?" Cordell asks, looking into a bowl.

Harold grins. “Dat’s okra. Yous never ate okra?”

“Nah. Name sounds like dat bitch on TV.”

“Watch yo mouth,” Edna scolds.

He tastes a spoonful, frowning.

“It’s an acquired taste,” Jabbo mutters.

They gulp orange soda from mason jars and make short work of the meal.

“So what they gonna do to me at the meetin’?” Cordell asks.

Jabbo grins. “Sounds like Mammy’s got you scairt already. Don’ worry, us Gullah don’ lynch nobody.”

“Huh.”

“But if they thinks yous a troublemaker, they could send ya packing on da first boat outta here.”

“I ain’t gonna cause no—”

“It ain’t you. It’s the attention you cun bring. The families value their privacy, their own ways, what little that’s left.”

“Yeah, I cun dig that, but . . . ”

The sunlight fades into a sticky blackness. After dishes, the four leave the house, flashlight beams bouncing in the night. Other families join them as they walk along a dirt track through the trees. Conversation is subdued. Ahead, light pours through the doorway of a plain wooden building with whitewashed walls. “Praise House” is painted across its front.

“Is dis your church?” Cordell asks Jabbo.

“No. On Sundays, we go to First Union up island. We pray here during the week and use it for meetings.”

They enter and sit on a wooden bench, except for Harold who joins a half-dozen older men up front. One of them rises and leads the group of maybe fifty in prayer:

Our Fadduh awt'n Hebb'n, all-duh-weh be dy holy 'n uh rightschus name. Dy kingdom com.' Oh lawd leh yo' holy 'n rightschus woud be done, on dis ert' as-'e tis dun een yo' grayt Hebb'n. 'N ghee we oh Lawd dis day our day-ly bread. 'N f'gib we oh Lawd our trus-passes, as we also f'gib doohs who com' sin 'n truspass uhghens us. 'N need-us-snot oh konkuhrin' King een tuh no moh ting like uh sin 'n eeb'l. Fuh dyne oh dyne is duh kingdom, 'n duh kingdom prommus fuh be we ebbuh las'n glory. Amen.

Harold steps forward. “Thank yous fo comin’. I ask that we speaks plain tonight so’s that the outsider cun understand.”

There’s a rumble of consent.

“Few days ago, dis young man come to ma house from up north. He be shot, gots his side split wide open. Ma son doctored him up good.”

The crowd rumbles.

“His name’s Cordell. Some of yous have told me dat him being here will bring the law snoopin’ around and he should quit dis place.”

“Dats right,” a huge man in coveralls says. “The sheriff already houndin’ me’s ’bout trespassin’ on dem private beaches. I don’ need him ta have mo reason ta come ’round.”

Again, the crowd rumbles.

Jabbo stands. “I brought Cordell here. He be shot. I don’ knows how, didn’t ask. But he needs ma help.”

A slender woman with snapping black eyes glares at Cordell. “Folks who gets demselves shot usually doin’ the devil’s work.”

“Dats true,” one of the wise men says. “Cordell should tells us how he comes to be shot like dat.”

A crowd of faces turns on Cordell. Harold motions him to come forward. The room quiets.

“Tell ’ems da truth,” Edna whispers.

Cordell’s heart pounds, his mind races. *Shit, dis like some muhfuckin’ trial. Gotta stay cool.* He sits on a chair, knees bouncing, and stares into their serious faces.

“So, how yous gets shot?” a wise man asks.

“Don’ know ’xactly. Some muhfucka drew down on me.”

“Why’d he do dat?”

Cordell pauses, trying to think. Flash images of the Newark alley play behind his eyes. “There was three of dem, rippin’ me off. So I . . . I pulled ma piece and . . . ”

“Yous was gonna shoot dem?”

“Yeah.”

“Didja?”

“Yeah, som’ fool with a MAC.”

“He dead?”

“Ye . . . yeah.”

A rumble goes through the crowd. “Why you do dat?” another man asks.

Cordell sucks in a deep breath. “Dey was rippin’ me off and . . . and Leroy was bad mouthin’ my Mama.”

“Yo Mama?”

“Yeah, I lives wid her.”

“What dey steals from you?”

Cordell hesitates. His hand remembers the weight of the cocaine as Leroy took it. “Half a key o’ blow.”

“So yous a murderin’ drug dealah?”

“I . . . I . . . ”

The crowd is silent. Cordell stares at the floor, trembling.

Edna pushes herself up. “Why yous sellin’ drugs, boy?” Her voice is brittle as glass.

Cordell swipes at his eyes. “I gotta gets money fo . . . ”

“Fo what?” she demands.

“Fo my Mama . . . so we cun live and she cun stop . . . ”

“Stop what?”

“Whorin’ ’round.”

The crowd groans. Edna sits and clasps her hands, as if in prayer.

“Where’s yo Mama now?” a wise man asks.

“Don’ know, probably still in Newark. I gives her money to get lost but . . . ”

“How old you?”

“Sixteen.”

"Why didn't ya go to yo family?"

"I only gots an aunt and cousins in Detroit. But my . . . my drug boss gots too many contacts there."

"Is all what you say be true?" Harold asks.

"Yeah."

"You cun go back to yo seat."

Cordell shuffles down the aisle and slides next to Jabbo. He shakes so hard that the bench vibrates. Jabbo lays a hand on his forearm, "You done good."

The beach trespasser stands. "It be worse den I's thought. We should run dis . . . dis gangsta off island, NOW."

Jabbo stands. "His wound needs ta heal first o' he get sick and nevah leave dis place."

"He gots no place ta go, no ones ta go to," Edna says. "Let him stay till he mo bettah."

"But that sheriff be here tomorrow," the man says.

A teenage girl stands. "Dis fool black 'nough ta pass. Jus gotta change dat hair and dem clothes and ole' Sheriff Wooden nevah know nuttin'." She gives Cordell the once over. Some of the crowd chuckles.

"We's cun say he's a cousin from St. Phillips," Edna offers, "call him Bala."

"I don' like it," the beach trespasser says. "One slip and we's all be in trouble."

Everyone talks at once. Cordell cuts a glance at the girl and finds her staring at him with sad eyes. The wise men have pulled their benches into a circle and talk animatedly. Finally, they stand. The uproar quiets. Harold steps forward, his creased lips pulled downward. Cordell holds his breath.

"We's decided dat Cordell, ah, Bala, cun stay . . . but jus 'til his side heals. Then he's gots ta go. For as de Lord says: 'Blessed be de merciful, for dey shall gets mercy.'"

There's a roar of voices, some angry, others consoling. The crowd stands and drags the benches against the walls. A young woman sings, and the rest respond in chorus, shuffling in a counterclockwise circle, never crossing their legs. They clap hands, stomp feet, and rattle brightly painted gourds. Some slam walking sticks against the wood floor, creating a complex rhythm.

"What's dat?" Cordell yells at a grinning Jabbo.

"Dis be a ring shout. Nobody does dis no more 'cept us and a few Geechee down Georgia."

As Cordell watches, he feels the weight on his heart shift, sees his Mama climbing onto a Greyhound bound for Detroit, being welcomed into the arms of Aunt June, safe, beyond the reach of her old life.

The circle spins. The teenage girl passes in front of him. "I sees yous tomorrow. Fix ya right up." She laughs and slides away, her voice high and clear in the hot island night.

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The next morning, Cordell stumbles into the kitchen and finds Edna seated at the table with the girl, drinking coffee. Jabbo and Harold are already up and gone.

"Bala, you rememba Fatu from da meetin'?"

He eyes the girl's stretched tank top and tight jeans. "Yeah, sure. How you doin'?"

"Better than you," she says, pointing. "That looks nasty."

Cordell glances down at his bare side. The gunshot wound still looks angry, but doesn't hurt. "You shoulda seen it when I got here. My muhfuckin' guts was—"

"Bala!"

"Sorry. My whole side was fuc . . . was messed up."

Edna smiles. Fatu laughs, her compact body shaking.

"Go gets mo clothes on," Edna orders, "whiles I makes you breakfast."

"Yes, ma'am." *Jeeze, can't say a fuckin word 'round here without gettin' ma ass chewed off. But then, nobody's made me breakfast fo 'long time.*

When he returns, the two of them are talking fast in Gullah. Cordell listens closely but can only make out a few words. He's sure they're talking about him. Edna serves eggs with thick bacon and a mound of mealy stuff.

"What's dis?" he asks, pushing at it with a spoon.

"Grits. If yo gonna eat southern cookin', yous gotta eat grits."

Fatu retrieves a bag from the floor and removes a pair of hand-operated hair clippers. "When you're done, I'll git to it. Jus call me Delilah, ya know, from da Bible."

"Took ma Mama hours ta cornrow ma hair. She'd cry ta see me turned into some slave nigga."

"We be slaves once, but we's a lot freer than you." Fatu glares at him and sips her coffee.

Cordell ignores her and gobbles his breakfast. He decides the grits aren't half bad after Edna tops them with brown sugar and raisins. She clears the table and leaves them alone.

Fatu holds up the clippers. "I gotta get ta school. So we'd better do this."

She wraps a towel around Cordell's neck, leans his head back, and clips away. Fine braids with beaded ends fall onto the linoleum.

"So where you go ta school?" he asks, wincing when the clippers catch.

"I'm a senior at Hilton Head. We take the ferry to Melrose Landing, then a bus."

"Dat a big school?"

"Near two thousand. Plenty of dudes like you hangin' 'round."

"You like it there?"

"Yeah, I's got friends. But I'm glad ta come back here at night."

"Why?"

"Dis ma home, da families are like kin. I like quiltin' with them, feels safe, ya know."

"Yeah." *Safe . . . haven't felt safe since . . . fuck . . . maybe nevah.*

"What's your home like?" she asks.

Cordell thinks about Newark, trying to find something to boast about, but decides on the truth. "It sucks."

"Why?"

"Don' know, jus does."

"Why you stay there?"

"I got ta take care of my Mama."

"You go ta school?"

"I did, but quit when I turned 16."

"Why?"

"Can't make no money goin' ta school."

"Yeah, but dealin' drugs?"

"I know, I know. That last muhfuckin' buy almost got me kilt."

"So what about other jobs?"

"Hey, what are you, some social worka? I don' need mo bitches tellin' me I got . . . got potential."

"You call me a bitch again and I'll slap yew silly." Fatu stands in front of him with her hand drawn back. "Maybe up north you cun get over with dat. But down here, you bettah show respect."

"Shit, I can't say nothin' right."

"Jus quit tryin' ta act so tough. There be a big difference between actin' tough and bein' strong."

"You'd better 'splain it to me," Cordell says, grinning. "Us big city niggas jus don' get it."

Fatu smiles weakly. "Don' have time now…maybe after school."

The sky has lightened to a pearl gray. A steaming mist floats through the trees. From the landward side of the island, the rumble of a boat's engine penetrates the fog.

"Dat sounds like the sheriff's launch," Fatu says. She yanks some clothes from the bag. "Here, put these on . . . and keep dem sleeves rolled down. Those gang tats are a dead giveaway."

She hurries to sweep up the hair, pushes out through the screen, and disappears into the woods. Edna drags him into the back bedroom to help re-dress the wound and pull on a denim work shirt, dungarees and wide suspenders.

She hands him one of Harold's old hats. "Here, wear dis. We's sit on da porch. Don' say nothin' unless they ask . . . and watch yo mouth."

"Yes ma'am."

Edna takes up her weaving, a broad basket nearly finished.

Cordell runs a hand over his newly shorn head and leans back against the wall. He pulls the canvas hat over his eyes; it smells of sweat and the sea. The sound of men walking through the

woods grows louder. He forces himself to hold steady, sucks in deep breaths. *Damn . . . they bettah not go lookin' inside . . . got no cause, but still . . .*

The footsteps stop. Tilting his head back, he cracks his eyes. Two deputies dressed in khakis stand in the yard. One is a brother, middle aged with graying temples, the other looks like every southern lawman portrayed on TV: pink, overweight, with wet patches under his armpits. They swagger toward the porch, gun belts squeaking in the heat.

"Good mornin', Deputy Fuller, Deputy McMasters," Edna greets them cheerfully. "What brings you to da island?"

"Good mornin', Edna," the black deputy says. "How's Herold doin'? And that son of yours, he still visitin' from California?"

"They're both doin' jus fine. They out collectin' palmetto."

The deputies climb onto the porch. Cordell sits up and feels their eyes studying his every detail.

"Well that's what we wanted to talk with y'all about. We've been gettin' complaints from the golf course owners that someone's been comin' ashore on their beaches and pullin' up sweetgrass and choppin' on their cabbage palms." He points to the stack in front of Edna.

"Oh, no suh. Don' know nothin' 'bout dat. We gets dis grass from Prichard's Island or down Georgia."

"Don't suppose you know anybody else who might be collecting at the golf course?"

"No suh. They know it 'gainst da law . . . even though the families been collectin' there for generations."

"You should talk to the owners, try to work out a deal."

"We's tried, deputy. But they say us usin' dat land hurts their property values."

"The families never should have sold it in the first place."

"I knows dat. But times were tough and dem taxes kept goin' up. They had ta live, ya know."

The deputy nods and looks around. "Well looks like you're doing all right. But who's this young fellah here?"

"Excuse me fo bein' so rude. Dis my Sister Helen's boy, Bala, from up St. Phillips."

The deputy steps forward and reaches down to shake his hand. "Good to meet you, son."

Cordell grasps it. "Please to meet you, suh." His shirtsleeve slides up, exposing the tip of a tattoo.

The deputy continues to grasp his hand. "Well, they must not be workin' him too hard. His hand's softer than ma wife's."

Edna laughs. "I don' know what you's havin' yo wife do, but dis boy goes ta school, gettin' ready for college, jus like my Jabbo."

"So why aren't you in school, son?" the deputy asks.

Cordell glances at Edna's deadpan face. "Well, suh, my . . . my Mama and Daddy ain't been . . . been gettin' on so good. They sent me here . . . while theys work tings out."

"Well, good luck to them. So, what do ya want to study in college?"

His mind races. *Jesus. Don' know shit 'bout no college.* "I . . . I don' knows jus yet . . . but was thinkin' 'bout studyin' music. I gots some ideas of my own . . . about da music from dese islands."

"Yes suh," Edna says, grinning, "we took 'em to the ring shout last night. Shoulda seen him stompin' dat floor."

The lawmen continue to stare, then back off the porch. “Thank you, Edna, for your time. Say, you haven’t heard from Elijah, have ya?”

Edna’s smile fades. “No suh, can’t says I have. Don’ expect ta see him any time soon.”

“And you wouldn’t tell me if ya did,” the deputy says, grinning.

“No suh, prob’ly not.”

They watch the deputies walk into the woods. Cordell lets out a deep breath. “I know he saw ma tattoo.”

“I saw him starin’. Bettah call ma sister and gets our story straight. They live next county over, but dem sheriffs all talk among demselves.”

“Look, Edna. Maybe I should jus split. I don’ wanna get you folks in trouble.”

“Nah, dat sheriff jus bein’ nosy. Dey have no cause to suspect you of nothin’. Do ya think da Newark police knows ya kilt dat man?”

“The fools that know are drug dealahs. If the cops squeeze ’em, they might talk.”

Edna frowns. “I’ma goin’ up island to use Mrs. Johnston’s phone. Jus rest easy… and stay away from dat pecan pie . . . it’s fo suppah.”

She ties on a straw sunhat and hobbles out of sight. He goes to the bedroom and retrieves his .45. Following the dirt track through the woods, he walks out onto the pier, looking in all directions. Circling gulls bear witness. He heaves the gun as hard as he can into the channel. *Strange, I usta feel strong wid dat pistol. Now it feels good to be rid of it. Maybe Fatu’s right . . . acting tough is bullshit, jus get me kilt.*

He retraces his steps. As he moves through the woods, Jabbo steps onto the road.

“Thought you wid Harold,” Cordell says.

"We just got back. I saw you out there. You did the right thing. You would do well never to touch a gun again. At Good Samaritan, I worked on too many boys that—"

"I gotta carry a piece to sell blow."

"Maybe that's something else you should change."

"Yeah, maybe I should retire."

They laugh, the sound dampened by the sticky morning heat. Back at the house, the men sit on the porch and sip lemonade. Harold tears palmetto fronds into strips. He speaks of the Gullah way, of their sense of belonging no matter where family members end up, how grown children from New York City spend vacations on the islands, fishing, quilting, and eating slimy green stuff. Cordell thinks about his mother and the worry returns. *Hope she's at Aunt June's. I can't get to her now . . . maybe not fo a long time . . .*

***

It's late afternoon before Edna returns, her face drawn. "Lord, those deputies and dem cell phones," she complains and climbs onto the porch. "Theys already talked ta my sister before I's could call."

"What she tell 'em?" Jabbo asks.

"They wanted ta talk ta Bala and she tell's 'em she don' have no son named Bala. I knew I's shoulda called her last night . . . "

"What else dey say?" Harold asks.

"Nothin' much. But they be huntin' for somebody, dats fo sure."

"Damn, I gotta go," Cordell mutters. "I already got you in trouble."

"We be fine," Edna says, "but you bettah leave with Jabbo, unless ya want dat sheriff runnin' you in."

"Nah, I ain't ready for dat."

Edna packs provisions. Their goodbyes are short, words spoken with trembling lips. The sunlight fades as they set out, Cordell carrying his knapsack stuffed with food, clothes, and medicine, Jabbo lugging a five-gallon can of gas. They launch Bertha and motor out to the Atlantic. The onshore swells bounce the little boat wildly. Cordell turns ashen and bends over the side.

"We won't be doing this long," Jabbo assures him. "Once around Tybee Island, the sea smooths out."

Cordell nods. The evening air is cool. For the first time in months, he shivers. A wave smacks his face and chest and he yelps. But Jabbo doesn't let up, holding Bertha to a southern course into Georgian waters.

Near the entrance to a deep-cut sound, the blast of a boat horn startles Cordell. "Who's dat?" he asks, pointing.

"Probably the Coast Guard."

They watch the speeding inflatable gain on them.

"Ever since 9-11, they patrol this area," Jabbo explains. "There's military bases nearby."

He turns the boat hard to port and charges toward the sound's southern shoreline. The pursuers follow, lights flashing. On the craft's bouncing bow, a helmeted sailor stands strapped behind a machinegun.

"Where we goin'?" Cordell yells over the roar.

"Dead Man Hammock."

Their boat shoots into the mouth of an inlet, the Coast Guard within fifty yards and closing. At full speed, they push inland, turn down a tidal channel that twists through broad savannahs and groves of pines, mossy oaks, and palms. The sky deepens to indigo. Jabbo kills the motor.

"Keep quiet and listen," he whispers.

The telltale burble from their pursuers' boat approaches. Jabbo yanks on the starter cord. Nothing happens. He tries again. Nothing. On the fifth attempt, the outboard snorts to life. A spotlight pins them against the bank. Cordell is jerked backward as they accelerate into the darkness. Two flares illuminate the sky. The machinegunner fires a short burst.

"Muhfuckers shootin' at us," Cordell yells.

"Just a warning. Stay down."

Bertha skims over the water. At an oxbow, Jabbo tugs at the tiller and they speed down a side inlet no wider than their boat. He cuts the motor. They slide onto a mud bank, pull Bertha into the waist-high grass, and stretch flat against the muddy ground.

The pursuers approach the inlet's mouth, not more than a football field away. Their spotlight scans the savannah. More flares are fired. The boat pauses.

"If they come, run for it," Jabbo whispers, pointing to a grove of trees.

"I . . . I's stayin' with you," Cordell says, his voice shaking.

The spotlight continues to play across the swamp island. But the boat moves on. Moonlight glints off the tops of swaying grass. Marsh animals croak, chatter, and grumble in a blackness filled with the high whine of mosquitoes. Something big splashes nearby and Cordell jumps.

"Wha da fuck . . . "

"Shush," Jabbo hisses, "Just an ole gator. Stay quiet and he'll leave us alone."

The silence deepens and Cordell rolls over, side throbbing, and studies the stars.

"So we gonna get outta here?" he asks finally.

"No. That Coast Guard boat needs to turn around and come back this way."

"So why don' we jus split?"

"Bertha can go where they can't. We'll wait for them to come back out, then head through Long Island to Ossabaw Sound."

Cordell snorts. "This is Long Island? Don' look nothin' like New York ta me."

"Yes, well that's another part of the country you should stay away from."

"What you talkin' 'bout?"

"Listen, Cordell. Have you thought about where you might go?"

Cordell stays quiet and listens to the night sounds before answering. "I was thinkin' maybe go ta som' big city, where I could, ya know, get lost."

"Bad move."

"Why's dat?"

"Look, I've lived in LA for years, and Dallas before that. Big cities have gangs, drugs, and people who won't give a shit about you, will suck you up and spit you out."

"Sounds like Newark."

"If you're on the street, that's what's going to happen. You've got to find a job, go to night school, make some money, and no drug-dealing shortcuts."

"So where I find a place like dat?"

"I don't know. But you made friends with me and my family, you can do that someplace else."

"But my Mama . . . "

"Send her money, call her . . . but don't go back . . . at least not until you can really help."

"Yeah . . . dat may be nevah."

"Maybe so."

The rumble of the Coast Guard boat approaches. They flatten against the ground and watch the overhead flashes of its spotlight. As the sound dies, they slip Bertha into the water and, taking up paddles, push her along, passing under huge limbs of oaks that blot out the moon. An alligator thrashes the water and Cordell jumps. Jabbo chuckles. He guides them through a watery maze, some inlets only inches deep. They reach a larger channel. Jabbo starts the engine, keeps it running in a slow growl. They enter another deep sound.

"I'm taking you up the Ogeechee to the Highway 17 Bridge. It's an easy passage, and there's a park nearby where you can get your bearings."

Cordell sits quiet, staring sullenly at the ghostly forms of trees with strange swollen roots, at platoons of ducks bobbing on the surface, their heads tucked under their wings, or the bumpy back of an alligator as it floats past. The river smells of decay, of primitive things hidden in the swamp. He shivers.

"We come here to collect bulrushes and to fish," Jabbo murmurs. "Catch all we need."

"What I need I won' find in dis damn river."

"Give yourself a chance, Bala, just give it a chance."

The moon is almost down by the time they reach the bridge. Jabbo noses Bertha into the bank and quiets the engine. They sit listening to the occasional car whoosh by on the highway.

"You need to keep taking those pills I gave you until they're gone. And if that wound starts to burn, don't screw around, go to a hospital."

Cordell extends his hand. "Thanks, bro. You saved ma ass."

"It's time you save your own."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it."

They shake, then bump fists. Cordell steps out of the boat and brushes dried mud from his Gullah clothes. He scrambles up the bank to the bridge and looks down on the river, barely picking out Jabbo's outline as Bertha slips eastward toward the growing light.

***

Dr. Jordan Mariama brushes the snow off his overcoat and enters the elevator to his Chicago lakeshore apartment. Getting off at the fifteenth floor, he keys the door and enters. From the kitchen, his wife, Judith, shouts a welcome. Four-year-old Emily looks up from watching TV and waves. He moves to the window and stares at black Lake Michigan.

"How was your day?" Judith asks, handing him a cocktail.

"Too long, too many cases."

"Why don't you rest and I'll bring you some dinner?"

"No thanks. Already ate at the Clinic."

"Well, then, come sit. You've got some mail from your Mama."

"Christ, I've been meaning to write . . . "

The envelope is square shaped, light, and is covered with his mother's unmistakable lettering. He rips it open and finds a compact disc case and a note:

Dear Jabbo,

I got this in the mail the other day. It came with a note that said I should send it to you. So I did. Hope you, Judith and Emily are doing fine. Are you coming home for a visit soon? It be almost two years. Let me know and I'll have Poppa get things ready.

Love

Your Mammy

Jabbo stares at the CD case. The artwork is a river scene with bald cypress, alligators, and herons crouched in salt marsh. He doesn't recognize the recording artist's name nor the studio in Slidell, Louisiana. He flips it over and runs down the play list. The third tune from the bottom is titled *Bala's Bounce*.

"Well I be damned," he whispers.

Grinning, Jabbo slides the CD into the player. A modern version of a ring shout fills the room, blotting out the TV.

He hugs Judith. "It's time we takes a trip ta visit ma Mammy. I gots a hunger fo' som' of her slimy green stuff."

Mark Spann

Afterimages

My grandparents, who lived in a tidy southside bungalow just inside the St. Louis city limits, had a sun porch with a well-used wicker loveseat just long enough to accommodate my six-year-old frame. As an only child I'd learned to be content for long hours with my own company. One of my favorite games on sunny afternoons visiting grandma was the shut-eye game. I'd lie on my back on the loveseat and stare up through the sunroom windows at the trees, the detached garage behind the house, anything I happened to notice, for as long as I could without blinking. With my eyes shut tight I'd see a kind of negative image of whatever I'd stared at. The game was to control the image, make it persist as long as I could.

My father, whose favorite magazine was *Scientific American,* said I was experiencing afterimages. He explained the physiology of vision, the rods and cones of the eye and their sensitivity. I told him about the bright, squishy shaped spots I saw sometimes. "They're called floaters," he said. "Everyone sees them." He said the intensity of the light could affect the duration of the image and emphasized the importance of protecting my vision.

My grandmother, who took the *National Catholic Register,* had a religious and, to an imaginative six-year-old, more mysterious and compelling explanation. “That’s your soul,” she said. “Those little spots are the bad things. We all have some.” She emphasized the importance of protecting my soul, to keep those little spots from growing larger or more numerous.

***

I recalled my father’s physiology lessons and grandma’s mysticism as I sank into a too-soft mattress in a motel room ten minutes down the interstate from the county courthouse. I couldn’t sleep; afterimages of what I’d seen in the courtroom earlier in the day were tattooed on my rods and cones. It was my first time serving on a jury, and I’d drawn a murder trial.

I hadn’t expected to be selected for the jury. Two of my uncles are police officers in St. Louis, and I’d met the county prosecutor several times at events at Sadie’s school. His little boy was in our daughter Sadie’s class. Bridget and I had moved to the county only a year earlier, lured by the lower housing costs and good schools. Bridget had learned of an opening in respiratory therapy at the community hospital, and I worked at home for a regional bank’s IT department. Sadie would start kindergarten in the fall. The timing for a move seemed perfect. Because I was the only potential juror who hadn’t been born in the county, and because the murder occurred before we moved to town, my relative unfamiliarity with its residents and recent history recommended me to both sides.

At the time there hadn’t been a murder in this small town, also the county seat, in quite a few years. The local newspaper covered the brutal crime extensively. Emotions in the community were running high as the trial date for the alleged accomplice drew near.

The opening arguments made clear our verdict would be based less on evidence than on whose version of events we were more inclined to accept. The killer had been captured within hours of the murder and immediately confessed. To avoid a capital sentence he agreed to testify against the only witness to the crime—his best friend, who he said helped him.

The prosecutor provided some basic information about the victim. Amanda was nineteen years old and worked at the local Wal-Mart. She'd had a boyfriend—the killer. In the senior portrait the prosecutor passed to us we saw a young woman with coffee-brown hair, subtly highlighted and falling past her shoulders; a slender face, frameless glasses, compact close-mouthed smile. The rest of his statement detailed the murder and the actions of the killer and his accomplice immediately after. By the end of it we knew, if anything, too much of the last minutes of Amanda's life and not enough of the years preceding those minutes.

Next came the crime scene photos. The killer, we were told, would testify the defendant held Amanda during the assault, that he knew of the plan to kill her and take her car. We passed the photos around the jury box as if they were infectious, each of us glancing at them just long enough to be horrified and to affirm if challenged that we had indeed looked at them.

The defense attorney argued the killer struck without warning. His client had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He'd been in the shower, heard a commotion, and stepped into the kitchen as the killer stabbed Amanda, then threatened the defendant with the knife if he didn't help him get away. The killer tossed the murder weapon, a long, full-tang carving knife, into the river as they drove out of town. There were no other witnesses.

The defendant sat motionless as his attorney spoke. Fleshy faced and pale, he looked like a little boy dressed up in his father's suit.

His parents sat in the first row behind the defense table. His mother clutched a tissue and dabbed her eyes during the opening arguments. I wondered if they knew the victim's parents. Had they gone to the same church, bumped into each other at the Wal-Mart or the CVS?

***

"Kids today," juror five muttered from the other bed. We'd been sequestered for the trial, two jurors to a room where possible. I expected him to launch into a number from "Bye-Bye Birdie," but he left his observation hanging in the space between us, as if those two words expressed everything that needed saying.

I flipped on the television, hoping for distractions from thoughts of the day's testimony and crime scene photos. On the screen a young woman stepped into her dark apartment as a shadowed killer lurked. I flipped through the channels until I found the ball game. "Not much better," juror five commented. The Cardinals were in a slump and losing this game by a half-dozen runs. "But leave it on." Between innings he talked about his two kids, both boys. One in the Navy, the other working in IT in California.

I told him about Sadie.

"Just watch out for her," he said. "I'm glad I didn't have girls. I'd worry about them all the time."

"Same with boys, isn't it?" I said.

Juror five shook his head. "My boys would never do anything like this."

"I didn't mean it like that." The game ended and we muttered goodnights. I chased sleep though images of the ballgame, of the crime photos, the defendant on an aircraft carrier, or sitting at

a computer. What did the killer see when he closed his eyes? Whose explanation would he prefer, my father's or my grandmother's?

***

We met the killer on the second day of the trial. The prosecuting attorney took him through the events of the morning. His motive was shocking in its triviality; he'd wanted to borrow Amanda's car. She'd said no. There was a struggle, and he grabbed a knife from the butcher-block knife holder. He described the murder with the matter-of-factness of a world-weary TV detective. How many times had he told the story to be so callous? The killer swore the defendant held Amanda for him, then driven Amanda's car as they fled. The defense attorney caught the killer lying twice about attempts to influence friends to lie for him. Confronted with his contradictory testimony, the killer patiently explained he had been confused by the questions, that he had a lot going on in his life.

In the afternoon, the defendant took the stand in his defense. In contrast to the killer's emotionless recitation, this boy seemed genuinely terrified. He couldn't believe what was happening, he said. Shocked by his friend's brutality, he was sure the killer would stab him if he didn't follow directions.

The third day of the trial started with closing arguments, followed by the judge's instructions. We couldn't find the defendant guilty of a lesser charge. We'd decide murder in the first-degree or acquittal.

Juror five was disappointed with the narrow instructions. "If not manslaughter, how about being an idiot," he joked as we settled around a table in the jury room. "Or having poor decision-making skills. Something."

Juror seven, a teacher at the community college, declined our request he serve as foreman but gave us a starting point for deliberations. “Arthur Conan Doyle said, ‘any truth is better than indefinite doubt.’” He said this with an air of profundity that may or may not have been genuine but was definitely irritating.

“A bit glib for a murder trial,” I muttered. Juror seven chuckled, then suggested I serve as foreman. The others nodded their assent or looked at the table noncommittally. I agreed.

We broke for lunch after an hour of deliberation, during which our collective uncertainty became apparent. Henry the bailiff, a trim, retired patrolman with a salt-and pepper mustache, entertained us with a couple of card tricks. Henry was eager to show us how the tricks worked, and we took turns practicing them.

After lunch we reviewed our recollections of the testimony. We agreed on two things: with no other eyewitnesses and no physical evidence we couldn’t be certain what really happened, and no amount of discussion was likely to bring more clarity.

I cleared my throat. “It comes down to this. The killer’s word versus the defendant’s. I have no idea whether he’s lying. I can’t tell. But the one who struck the blow has already confessed and been sentenced. He’s lied at least twice. Who do we choose to believe?”

We’d run out of points to make and counterpoints to parry. We scribbled our selected truths on ballot papers. The first vote was unanimous for acquittal.

***

The trial ended in time for the verdict to make the local newspaper’s weekend edition. I knew the paper would be on newsstands all over town, and avoided them. I didn’t have to look to know the trial would be the lead story. I planned to keep a low profile for the weekend and avoid

any conversations about the trial, which wouldn't be difficult. Working at home I had little day-to-day contact with anyone in the community. I'd scanned the spectators every morning and saw no one I recognized. I was confident none of our neighbors knew I'd been on the jury. We'd told Sadie I'd be away on a business trip. Soon enough, I believed, everyone would move on and the trial would be forgotten by anyone who wasn't involved.

The downtown district was a short walk from our house, and I'd gotten into the habit of taking walks around town on Saturday mornings. Rain overnight had settled the pollen and freshened the air, and in the early morning sun the damp sidewalk and the brickwork on the old buildings downtown glistened in sharp relief. Laughter spilled from the open door of a barbershop. It had been a hard week, and the laughter was refreshing. I stepped into the narrow space and noticed a group of older men relaxing in chairs facing the unoccupied barber station. I turned to leave, but one of the men called me back. "Come on ahead, young man," he urged. "We're just visiting."

The barber brushed the chair with a hand towel and smiled. He asked how I'd like the cut, nodded, and set to his task. He laughed at something one of the waiting men said, nodded in agreement at observations about the weather and the Cardinals. As he worked, a disappointing number of grey strands nestled among the loose clumps of sandy-brown hairs tumbling down the cape.

"You want a shave?" he asked.

The waiting men continued telling stories as they surveilled the street through the open doorway. They weren't in any hurry. I coveted the time that was theirs to waste, envied the ease with which they indulged themselves.

"Sure." It'd been a while since I'd had a professional shave.

The barber lathered me from cheekbones to Adam's apple, then opened the razor with a quick flick of his wrist. One of the waiting men splayed the local newspaper open in front of him. I could make out the headline reflected in the mirrors: JURY ACQUITS ACCUSED MURDERER. "How about that bullshit verdict?" he said.

"I knew that girl," the barber **sai**d. "Amanda graduated with our Holly. They ran track together freshman year." He paused his work and addressed the waiting men. "Holly said she got in with the wrong kids after that."

"It happens," one of the waiting men mused.

The barber changed the subject, asked about my weekend plans. I said something about a trip into the city to take Sadie to the zoo.

"A little girl, that's nice. You enjoy this time. It goes fast."

The waiting men kept chewing on the verdict—it was gristle they couldn't swallow. They speculated as to the depths of depravation and degrees of idiocy that no doubt afflicted the jurors. "What the hell trial were they at?" one asked.

"A bunch of dumbasses," another spat. The rest muttered their assent.

Typical, I thought. These old wrecks had nothing to do but sit around and condemn people, pontificating on things they knew nothing about. Which meant they needed to be educated on the facts of the case as a public service.

"I was on that jury," I blurted. "There was no evidence. We had to acquit."

The waiting men glared at my reflection. The man holding the newspaper asked my name. In the adrenaline-induced fog of my outrage, I stared into the mirror and obliged without thinking.

"Yep," he reported. "His name's right here."

The newspaper, breaking precedent, had published the jurors' names.

My heart raced; I felt light-headed. "We did the best we could," I muttered.

"I guess you knew what you were doing," the barber said. "If you were on the jury, I guess you got all the facts."

There was the cold blade, the tickling scrape of the razor as the barber swept it downward. "She was a sweet girl," he said. "It's going to be hard on her folks, seeing that kid out free, carrying on around here." He could do it with his eyes closed, I thought. With one flick of his wrist.

I studied the waiting men reflected in the mirror. What might they say—that they'd been shocked, frightened? In the wrong place at the wrong time? That they couldn't have imagined the barber, their friend, moved to such a violent, brutal act?

The barber executed a final upward stroke, a precise curl away from the skin with a wincing tug at my jawbone.

"I'm sorry." He'd nicked me slightly. "Let me get that." He wiped the blade, then dabbed the spot with a towel before applying a bit of styptic.

The waiting men looked away; hands draped over their mouths. Were they embarrassed on the barber's behalf, or hiding their amusement?

I paid the barber and left the shop without a word. Up and down the street the craft boutiques and antique stores put up their "Open" flags and propped their doors to welcome visitors from the suburbs come for a taste of rural, small-town charm. Passersby nodded and smiled, and I was glad of my anonymity. It wouldn't last. No doubt at least some of our neighbors took the weekend paper or regularly checked the online edition.

The town spilled upward away from the river, with the residential areas occupying the high ground above downtown. As I neared my yard at the crest of a hill, I noticed Sadie sitting cross-legged in our driveway, hunched over a chalk drawing. Neighbors and teachers used words like *delightful* when they spoke of her. She fit right in, as they say, much more so than I. This town was her home already in a way it would never be mine.

"That's beautiful, Sadie." I crouched down as she explained her artwork.

Sadie stopped drawing and smiled at me. "It's not gonna rain, is it?" she asked. "I don't want my drawing to melt."

From the driveway I could see over the low buildings downtown, across the river to the bottomland beyond. Stratocumulus clouds bundled in the distance. The morning's weather report had predicted storms later today. The meteorologist cheerfully previewed the dramatic clashing of air masses likely to occur overhead. An intriguing kink in the jet stream was even now pulling moisture north from the Gulf of Mexico.

"Maybe," I smiled. "Maybe not."

The sun was behind her. I backed away a few steps and asked Sadie to look up at me and smile. For an instant I was time-traveling. I saw the young woman she would too soon become.

I opened my eyes wide. Sadie moved to stand. "Just sit there for a minute, Sadie girl."

"What are you doing, Daddy?"

"Taking a picture," I said, squeezing my eyes shut.

"With your eyes closed?"

"It's a game, Sadie." I told her about my grandparents' sun porch, how I used to see how long I could make the afterimages last. I told her about the eye, what my father said about the rods and cones, and what my grandmother said about the soul.

I opened my eyes. Sadie was smiling, her eyes squeezed shut. "I can still see you!" she shouted. "How long did your picture last?"

"Not long enough, Sadie girl."

Sadie opened her eyes and rubbed them. "That was so cool," she said as she turned back to her chalk rainbow. "Who's right, do you think?"

"Maybe both." I thought this might be a 'moment' for us, but Sadie had already moved on to a different section of her artwork.

Rain would come, eventually. Sadie's chalk art would last for a while, but eventually the rain would come, or I'd wash the car or water the lawn and this moment, and her lovely artwork, would dissolve. I closed my eyes tight again.

"You should take a picture on your phone," she said.

"This will last longer." I picked up a stick of red chalk and helped Sadie finish her rainbow.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

Jennifer Dias

I Don’t Have Mail, Email or Otherwise

The events in this essay really happened and I have done my best to share them truthfully. This personal essay is my own perspective and isn’t intended as advice in any way, shape or form.

When I hear of love, I think of my mémère and grampa, plain and simple.

I think of the light in my mémère's eyes when she says "Oh *Russell*," with that exasperated sigh as she looks at his overstuffed armchair. I think of the calendar out in front of the tv stuck on March of 2022, when she says time stopped for her. I think of them standing together, watching the evening news as Grampa puts his arms around Mémère and they sway. I think of their names hand-painted onto the little dogs that hang on the wall at the beach. I think of them each in their overstuffed armchairs in the living room, the way they’ve been in each other’s lives so long they fit together like one of the thousand-piece puzzles they have stacked in the cellar.

Maybe that’s part of the enduring love of an older generation, the one that stays no matter the weather. How has all of history impacted the way we date? How has it all come to this? Not to say modern romance is dead or dying or in any kind of danger, but I believe we can agree it has markedly changed since going online.

My grandparents met in a dancing hall. A *hall*. Not a club, nor a school dance. They met around 1957, each in their mid-twenties, and got married a year later in 1958.

Theoretically, I could still follow that track. Not that I *have* plans to marry in only a handful of years. I have no prospects. I am unaware of any dancing halls in Boston (not that I've looked, and not that I *know* any dances besides the foxtrot Grampa showed me in the kitchen when I was nine and could step on his feet without fear of injury to either party). Instead, I am thrust into the modern scene of *sliding into DMs* or, god forbid, going to *parties*. I open a dating app only tangentially better than Tinder and promptly overthink everything. This isn't getting up the courage to talk to a pretty girl across the gym, or meeting someone new who's a friend of a friend. It's a cold call hoping someone with a compatible profile sends a message back.

I suppose dating apps can't be that different from the personal ads of yore. The Piña-Colada song could easily be reformatted to fit a Tinder profile. I've gone on a handful of dates with fellow app-users and they go on well enough, but in the back of my mind it feels like settling for something lesser than.

Maybe I'm spoiled by Disney movies and growing up next to such unconditional love that was tempered by four kids and ten grandchildren, through jobs and houses and wars and everything else the last sixty-something years has thrown at my grandparents together. But for everyone else outside the minority, how do they forge on? Do they bend their lives around each other or just one day let go? Of course, this implies there's only two choices––marriage or bust. If there's one good thing about the dating scene today, we know this isn't true (There's definitely more than one good thing, but my point still stands).

But the fact is that they've been married for sixty years and no one has ever heard them fight. Strangely enough, that's not one of the things I'm aiming for. I'm not interested in some over-romanticized version of a relationship––what they have seems hopelessly out of reach, despite me

seeing it up close for almost twenty years. I just want something real. Not that this isn't unusual, a hope shared by virtually everyone looking for a relationship. We're simply thrown a bunch of adages and proverbs to navigate romance in this new digital landscape.

That's not helpful.

I've curated a playlist specifically to slow dance in a kitchen with someone late at night and I'm not just putting that on the backburner because I've been ghosted. Maybe it's because I'm an introvert, but it's tiring after a while to manage conversations in text-by-text increments over the course of a day. I'm impatient, which is something I'd never thought I'd be. Maybe it's because I'm terrified to talk to anyone I don't know in person. That's definitely something that's changed, or maybe just something I have to grow into alongside getting used to phone calls for ordering takeout.

There are countless theories on why our idea of romance is ruined today, that dating just isn't like it used to be. But there's always some idyllic age to look back upon, whether it was personal ads in the newspaper or boomboxes on shoulders or courtship and thoughtfully put together flower arrangements and fan language. It can't be better or worse, it just *is*. Maybe I'll still romanticize Mémère and Grampa's version of love in my head, some relic of a more peaceful age decades ago, but I can't trade. And I guess I wouldn't want to––I'm not about to get rid of the simplicity of texting.

Maybe dating today is scary because everything is presented as a choice, as a series of snap decisions. The older I get, the more I realize life is just a very long series of decisions that get increasingly difficult. I don't want to decide what to eat for dinner, never mind whether I should swipe right or what I should say when (if) they respond. Of course, this is all coming from a critical

overthinker. I've been told by my horoscope that I consider love as a transaction, which is a bit bleak to think about. Good thing I don't really believe any of it. No matter what my house in Venus says, I believe love is a bit of a choice and a bit of a free-fall, if any of the Meg Ryan rom-coms are to be believed. Not that I've had anything remotely close to that brand of romance. It's odd to think about how love seems to be the topic people will always find something to talk about and yet we aren't in it all the time. But maybe that's the point, maybe it's like happiness––we can only chase it and nothing more.

Elena Harap

Turn, Turn, Turn: Louis Harap's Radical Legacy

This essay depicts actual events in the life of the author and actual and imagined events in the life of individual relatives of the author. The author writes strictly from her own perspective and does not speak for anyone else in the family.

He was my father's youngest brother, the last of nine siblings, a slight, wiry man with reddish hair and unending curiosity about politics, language, and culture. Uncle Louis married late and had no children, but loved to welcome his nieces and nephews as contemporaries, asking about our interests, challenging us to question our choices and privileges, recalling the working-class Orthodox Jewish immigrant household of his parents in New York's Lower East Side. He'd left that world for a Harvard degree, a career in writing and editing, and an ardent, lifelong commitment to socialism.

Louis met his wife-to-be, Evelyn, in the street in Greenwich Village, the story went, while they were both out leafleting for a community meeting. An urban romance, I thought with some satisfaction, but the myth was finally dismissed when I found the "vita of Louis Harap" among his papers after he died. "Although many times in love, I did not marry until 1957," he wrote. "I met Evelyn while she was canvassing me for the ALP dues!" Although I don't know the details, I embellish this moment in imagination: it's fall, mid-1950s; Evelyn's graying hair, piled in a soft

bun, blows in wisps around her face. Her short, compact figure, neat yet subtly sexy in a tailored jacket, silk scarf, and pleated skirt, and her smile full of intelligence and humor, attract Louis as he answers the door; at the same moment she notices him—dapper but casual in a well-worn Shetland sweater; maybe he is wearing his favorite Harvard tie, having just come from an editorial meeting. They chat about the American Labor Party, sharing leftist sympathies. Louis invites her out for coffee and it turns out their apartments are around the corner from each other; they plan to meet again. (Louis lived on Horatio Street and Evelyn on Jane Street, a coincidence he relished.) Did this meeting kindle a sense of destiny and delight? Having arrived at middle age, still single, each now found in the other a worthy partner. My uncle ended his "vita": "My marriage was without question one of the best things that happened to me in my life."

Over the years they welcomed me as a student, a young mother, a middle-aged performer and writer, fully and without reservation. I returned to their comfortable rooms cluttered with newspapers and plants, in New York City, and later to their Vermont farmhouse, as a lodestar from which to take my personal bearings.

After Evelyn died, Louis, now 90, moved to The Meadows, an assisted living complex in Rutland; "I'm being put out to pasture," he said. I helped him go through their record collection, disk by disk, as if undoing the stitches of their life together.

"Take the ones you want," he told me,"I don't listen to them any more." I was fascinated by the names on the 78s--Enrico Caruso, Jascha Heifetz, Ella Fitzgerald, Marlene Dietrich; on long-playing albums I found the Beatles and the Weavers.

On the cover of the 1980 Weavers' twenty-fifth reunion album, a portrait captured the four musicians in a final get-together: Pete Seeger and his banjo, his beard gone gray; frail, white-haired

Lee Hays in the moment of singing; plump, middle aged Ronnie Gilbert, immersed in the music; Fred Hellerman on guitar, his shiny bald forehead catching the light. They seemed to be singing both to each other and to an unseen audience, perhaps the young people of the future, perhaps to the singers they were in the Forties and Fifties, when"Kisses Sweeter than Wine," and "Goodnight, Irene" became popular hits. As a 1950s college student I'd sat mesmerized in a hall packed with young people as Pete Seeger sang "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore." We threw back our heads and joined in, the banjo's rhythmic, joyous backup supporting us, belting out "Alleluia!" as if that boat alone would carry the human race to a place of authentic unity.

"The Weavers were very significant politically," Louis observed. They had been banned from concert halls and forfeited recording contracts for refusing to sign a loyalty oath. Seeger had been blacklisted. Louis himself was harassed and interrogated during the McCarthy era, enduring isolation from his family for fear of reprisals. Evelyn had lost her job as a doctor's receptionist, no explanation offered; she found another job at the Sanger Clinic on West 16th Street. Sometimes, these recordings seemed to be saying, there can be no compromise: the freedom of an arching line of melody; the statement resisting tyranny; the refusal to be intimidated by the shadow of the FBI.

* * *

My hi-fi turntable was useless for 78s, yet I could not bear to throw away the old disks, once resounding with the Red Army Chorus, "Galway Bay" sung by Bing Crosby, and Fritz Kreisler playing "Flight of the Bumblebee." For months I kept the stash of records in a shed along the north wall of my house, where objects in transition gathered––empty egg cartons, clothes destined for flea markets, bags of dried grapefruit rind for wood stove kindling. What could be done with these Deccas, Victors, and lesser known labels: Majestic, Coda, and Vox?

Only in memory could I crank the Victrola in the house where I grew up. A formidable piece of furniture in its wooden cabinet, the Victrola possessed gracefully curved legs and double doors with small brass knobs, opening to a shelf where albums and singles were filed between wooden dividers. The cabinet's lid could be set at an angle, like a large authoritative mouth. Under the lid was the turntable with a spindle at its center and a shiny metal arm equipped with a flat-topped screw, to be loosened when we changed the needle. My sisters and I would set a record on the spindle, gingerly lower the steel needle, and summon forth Winnie the Pooh rhymes or Dr. Seuss's "The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins." The brittle voices did not strike me as a shortcoming; hi-fi came later. Musical accompaniments elongated and dropped weirdly in pitch when the Victrola ran down; to restore proper speed, we placed a handle into an opening on the side of the cabinet and cranked it around, as one would wind a watch.

During my teens, LPs appeared and we played musicals like "Oklahoma" and "Annie Get Your Gun" incessantly, until we knew all the lyrics by heart. In my aunt and uncle's collection I witnessed the same progression from 78s in heavy, dark albums to slim 33s in decorated cardboard sleeves. Audio cassettes and CDs came in the years when Evelyn was ill and dying of cancer. Louis was losing his hearing. Their record-buying days were over.

Music must have been a given in Louis' life, from the cantor's chants on the Sabbath and folksinging with his siblings in their Astoria apartment to Harvard's Glee Club and Greenwich Village's folk and jazz scene. As an undergraduate he would have been drawn to the Glee Club, with its brilliant conductor, Archibald T. Davison, and sophisticated repertoire, singing in the chorus for Stravinsky's "Oedipus Rex" in 1928. This American premiere, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was so successful that that the concert was repeated at Carnegie Hall.

In the 30s Louis contributed articles to the scholarly journal *The Musical Quarterly,* "all of which," he later wrote, "turned out to be somewhat pioneering…one on the Greek theory of music, one on the nature of musicology… and one called "The Case of Hot Jazz," which created a little stir because of where it was published, the premier, high class music publication." I remember his pleasure in going with my husband and me to the Bach Festival in Marlboro, Vermont in the 90s.

I couldn't ask Evelyn what the records meant to her; I have to imagine her humming along with Pete Seeger while she's cooking or listening with Louis to jazz players they might have heard live at the Village Vanguard. I see their collection as a vital part of their marriage, music that echoed through the lives of a twentieth-century couple who knew the pain, peaks of enjoyment, and ironies inherent in being Americans of radical politics and eclectic taste.

* * *

One afternoon in Brattleboro I saw a storefront sign calling for old records. I asked the owner about my 78s and he allowed that they might be of some value; he would have to look at them. Hauling my box of plastic voices from the shed, I wiped each disk clean of dust and mildew. Most had clearly been played and cared for. Despite the fine tracing of random scratches there was an appealing solidity about them, a capacity to distill from the needle's vibration sounds for dancing, transform silent rooms with Verdi opera, Schubert lieder, Dixieland jazz. Packing the albums into cardboard cartons, I told myself I was setting them free to be collected and enjoyed by someone else. On a clear winter day I drove to town and tentatively approached the record store.

The proprietor, a short man with a halo of pepper and salt hair, steel-rimmed glasses, and an intelligent, sharp-featured face, looked through the carton impassively as I chattered on about its contents. The absurdity of my position bore in upon me. *What was I doing*, *selling a piece of my*

family's cultural history? In the wrong place, in the wrong company, I had come seeking some expression of appreciation, some enthusiasm inspired by these black disks with their red and blue labels. But the owner's job was to make an offer. At last he said, not unkindly, "Most of these are not worth anything, to me or to you. You might try the store up the street."

So be it; I lugged my box half a block to a second-hand store where the owner, a young woman with red hair and the bustling manner of an entrepreneur, chatted with me among her aisles of satin evening gowns, dressers with mirrors cocked at random angles, out-of-fashion sweaters, mother-of-pearl cufflinks. "You might get a dollar-fifty each for the Caruso records," she said cheerfully. "The others--sometimes people buy them to break onstage." I had thought of this possibility: Louis and Evelyn's records as theatre props in the climactic scene from Clifford Odets' *Awake and Sing.* In a fit of rage and desperation, the impoverished Bessie Berger smashes her scholarly father's classical record collection and subsequently the old man commits suicide, knowing that his life insurance can rescue the family.

"You can leave them here," the owner went on," our appraiser will be in tomorrow. He'll look at them and give you a call." I went to get the second lot. Returning, I passed the storefront, where the pack-rat proprietor stood talking with a visitor. This time he stopped me. "I might as well have a look," he said. "Maybe I can lighten your burden." The two men shuffled through the albums noting the dates. I felt renewed hope for the Caruso arias, circa 1906. Someone, somewhere might listen to the voice my encyclopedia described as "a flow of golden tone."

"I will give you ten dollars for these," the owner said at last. He took a pile of disks and albums inside and handed me a green bill, a piece of paper that might purchase one cassette or CD. The locked-in music was detaching itself from the disks, like two sides of a Velcro fastener

reluctantly parting. It wasn't the release of actual sounds I wanted after all. It was the presence of my aunt and uncle: their honest way of being in the world; the conversations in their living room lined with books and records, where a large golden cat lay napping in the sun. I pocketed the ten-dollar bill and delivered the remaining records to the secondhand store. A tall clerk in shirtsleeves wrote up a receipt. The turning was complete and those orchestras, jazz bands, violin virtuosi, blues divas, and anti-war folk singers were gone.

And yet their legacy is irrevocably mine. I place the hand crank in the Victrola of my family inheritance. Louis Harap and Evelyn Mann, who listened, argued, voted, protested, advocated, rejoiced, and loved to the end, re-turn every time I go to the polls, watch live-streaming at the Met, stir myself from complacency to action.

In 1998, as Louis lay dying, my husband and I brought a cassette player to his room. He had become increasingly disoriented and had moved from The Meadows to the home of a care-giver, then developed pneumonia. After surgery to clear a blockage in his bladder, his resilient body had no more strength. He was discharged to a nursing home. At first beset by terrors we couldn't understand, Louis finally became calm; he said, "Tell her"—meaning Evelyn, I was sure––"we are no longer in danger." Not long after that he suffered a convulsion and lapsed into a coma.

It was early May. Lilacs were blooming in great banks of purple and white along the roads I drove between Putney and Rutland, to take turns with friends and family as we kept a vigil by Louis' bed. He seemed unaware of visitors, but moved restlessly from time to time. The nurses administered painkillers. Someone had suggested playing music, and on the day my husband and I brought our cassette player I had selected Bach's "St. Matthew Passion." We came into Louis' room and plugged in the player. I slipped the cassette into place and started the tape.

At the first imploring notes Louis seemed to relax. It was as if the music he remembered from concerts, maybe seventy years ago with the Harvard Glee Club, entered and enveloped him. Almost imperceptibly his breathing slowed. I opened the attendants' notebook to read reports from the last shift, and when I turned back to the bed, the breath had stopped. "To everything there is a season, turn, turn turn..." Pete Seeger had sung, in the words of Ecclesiastes. Bach's lament for a radical young Jewish teacher eased Louis' passage to timelessness as the cassette reel turned, turned, turned.

Susan Johnson

Encounters XX: A Simple Walk

This work presents actual events encountered by the author described from her point of view.

What I encounter says more about me than what's encountered.

I want a Welsh Tidy Mouse to put things away at night, like the one described in today's NYT. Actually, I don't. Once we had a Peromyscus hop through the cat door and give birth to baby mice under our staircase. After locking the door, mama mouse, raging with hormones, climbed up the outside screen, desperate to get in. It was a disturbing sight: she staring at us, us glaring back. Nothing tidy about it at all. We like to think we've created a barrier between wild creatures and ourselves, but really, we're all in this biosphere together, in each other's spaces, breathing the same air. We never found the nest tucked in some corner, which, like everything else, has now turned to dust.

It's shotgun season so I've been staying away from my favorite hike. But after not seeing any hunters for a week, I decide to play Mrs. Dalloway and Plunge into the woods, putting on my orange vest and going into the forest myself. I see no one, only a great blue heron at the dam where the fishing must be good, though it seems late for it to linger. It feels wonderful to be free of my house-

bound life and back in the woods. Maybe not quite as exciting as street haunting in London, but intriguing nonetheless. The light in the trees is as orange as the leaves that emboss the ground.

What season is it? Fall or spring? Sometimes we get flowers when we shouldn't. I spot lilacs blooming on one bush, then they're everywhere. I count ten different houses with bushes in bloom. In October. How seriously strange this is, I think, as I bend to sniff, holding the stem with thick-mittened hands. It's like a bizarre art installation. Physicists have strange quarks. My town has strange lilacs. In May there are insects to pollinate them, but now? Wait, *there is* a bee out in the autumn cold as well. How off kilter is this world? And what does kilter mean? I look it up but it says source unknown. It's the same with these lilacs. What's the source of this blooming in autumn?

I'm walking up mountain road under a blue sky when suddenly there's a white out. I stop to pull up my hood and continue. As quickly as it arrived, the squall disappears and I'm under blue sky, gazing out from the summit. On the way down, same thing. I'm consumed by snow sticking to my boots, my thoughts. A lesson in meteorology, cold fronts, the physics of light. "Well that was an adventure," I say, a simple walk up a road.

Grocery shopping is usually a simple task, which is why I find it strange when a woman runs over to me, as I place a container of ice cream in my cart, and exclaims: "That's my favorite flavor, isn't it great?" "Sure," I say, though I'm anything but sure. It's not something I think much about. Now the same woman's at the checkout. "Remember last time I dropped my card?" she says to the cashier, who obviously doesn't remember. I wonder why this woman needs to assert herself so. Or rather, insert herself, into our lives, the day's weave. Pushing my cart through the automatic door, it's nothing but relief to get back outside where I only have to deal with the weather.

On this cold snowy morning I see: a woman with bare hands, jacket unzipped, exposed shirt soaked through, taking photos, her facing practically beaming; a man in shorts and sneakers, standing at a crosswalk, each hand holding a reusable grocery bag full of supplies as if he is heading to the beach; and a student sitting on a stone bench waiting for a bus, a pair of strappy sandals beside her, stocking-covered toes tucked inside her backpack. And they all see me, a woman in two pairs of tights, big winter parka, thick waterproof insulated boots. All of us in this together.

Last week, at a friend's house I walked along the rocky coast. There were people everywhere though it was bone cold. I think we're drawn to the ocean because it's so impossible to comprehend. We can't comprehend the trees in our backyards either. All in all, we're barely able to comprehend the thinnest layers of what we meet.

I'm the second daughter of a second daughter of a second daughter of a second daughter. It's meaningless but fun to say. I'm not taking it back any further though, not putting my DNA online and finding out some distant cousin is a murderer. Instead I hike up an old farm road that follows a brook that traces its way to an overgrown meadow where an abandoned cellar hole sprouts enormous pines. Someone's ancestors started here, I think. Now coyote tracks lead to an abandoned well where a squirrel caches acorns.

I'm not the first to hike to the summit, but I am the first to descend the other side, splashing through snow. Did I hear something? I turn, but there's nothing. Well, not nothing. There's deer tracks, squirrel, and coyote. There are hundreds of trees, insects in their bark, seeds planted under frozen leaves, hibernating chipmunks, and many many mice. I'm not alone at all.

The geese below the falls, where a sign warns "Thin Ice," are celebrating under the frozen spray that glazes the branches around them creating shiny stalactites. They honk and honk,

drowning out all other sound. Come make a splash, they seem to say. It's a party. Look, there's open water.

A cop pulls over a car for speeding. In the long term, he's making roads safer for people like me, out walking after a snow storm. But in the short term, it's dangerous as hell. My choices to get around the cruiser are either climbing over an icy snow bank or walking into the road where cars are lined up trying to avoid the blue flashing lights. Treacherous uneven ice or treacherous traffic, which will it be?

A statie pulls up to the trailhead as I get back to my car. The window rolls down and out comes a whiff of weed. It's legal, but come on guys. Aren't you supposed to be working? You could make better choices here.

I read about a woman who chooses to go a whole week without her phone, trying to reconnect with "the real world." Most days I check my email in the morning and that's it. The rest of the day is spent in the "real world" where I wear a watch to make sure I'm out of the woods by 4:45, which, in winter, is when it gets "real" dark.

There are four Canada geese in the river. No, wait, they're decoys but the hunters are real, sitting quietly hoping some real Canadas will land so they can shoot and kill them. I'm a little embarrassed to be taken in by the plastic floaters and hope the local geese are keener observers and able to identify these "deep fakes." There's more at stake than embarrassment for them, of course. They need to avoid deception to avoid detection, and being roasted for dinner.

In the morning, after a light snow, I see a string of possum tracks by the front door, their delicate tiny fingers not made for New England winters. We know she likes the drip pan under the grill and the crawl space under the deck. Ghostly while alive, her gray body slips in and out of sight,

keeping to the perimeter of our lives. She's even more ghostly dead. The next morning, her spooky head stares out from under fluttering fur in the middle of the road.

The river's gray as a corpse today, a skein of ice, dull and flat. Yesterday it was clear black liquid that couldn't flow fast enough, like people escaping a flash flood, grabbing what they can. Broken docks and raucous ducks line the banks.

A man comes up behind me on the trail out of a dense fog and immediately starts talking. He tells me he remembers watching me walk after I broke my leg, when I spent weeks limping along the sidewalk. I suppose this makes sense, since my limp was pretty obvious but I didn't know my progress was the object of some stranger's attention. He tells me his daughter gave him her old Peleton and he rides it every day but nothing beats hiking and next week he's off to Costa Rica to hike there. Then he disappears into the fog ahead and I'm left wondering what to make of all his talk, his need to tell me these things. When I meet someone hiking I usually just say "Hi, enjoy your hike."

I pass another man hiking who's humming some familiar pop song. I can't quite place the tune but find myself humming it as well. It's an old classic, but still remains fresh here on the trail, surrounded as we are by roots and rocks that have never heard it.

"You're late," a neighbor says, reining in his dogs that want to leap in this rain turned to snow. Though I walk just for me, it's become part of other people's routines. "What am I late for?" I want to ask him. It's never too late to go for a walk.

Contributors

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Emily Brown is a teen Christian writer and musician. She has been published in various places, including *Write the World Review, Valiant Scribe,* and *Pure in Heart Stories.* Further, she can be found on YouTube where she shares her songs under the stage name Emmi Byrd, or on her Substack blog, *The Bookwyrm Corner.*

Susana H. Case is the award-winning author of nine books of poetry, most recently, *If This Isn't Love*, Broadstone Books, and co-editor with Margo Taft Stever of *I Wanna Be Loved by You: Poems on Marilyn Monroe*, Milk & Cake Press. The first of her five chapbooks, *The Scottish Café*, Slapering Hol Press, was re-released in an English-Polish version, *Kawiarnia Szkocka* by Opole University Press and as an English-Ukrainian edition, Шотландська Кав'ярня by Slapering Hol Press. https://www.susanahcase.com

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Deborah H. Doolittle has lived in lots of different places (including the United Kingdom and Japan) but now calls North Carolina home. An AWP Intro Award winner and Pushcart Prize nominee, she is the author of *Floribunda* and three chapbooks, *No Crazy Notions*, *That Echo*, and *Bogbound.* When not writing or reading or editing *BRILLIG: a micro lit mag,* she is training for running road races, or practicing yoga, while sharing a house with her husband, six housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

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Esta Fischer's short fiction has appeared in numerous print journals and ezines, including *Evening Street Review*, *Ginosko*, and *Imitation Fruit*. She received her MA in Creative Writing from Boston University.

Karen Guzman is a fiction writer and essayist. Her most recent novel, "Arborview," was published in 2021 by the Wild Rose Press. Her debut novel, "Homing Instincts," was published in 2014 by Fiction Attic Press. Karen's short fiction has appeared in a number of literary magazines, including most recently Bryant Literary Review, Variant Literature and *Gargoyle* magazine. Her story collection, "Pilgrims," was a finalist for the St. Lawrence Book Award. Karen is a recipient of a 2024 Writing Residency at the Vermont Studio Center and a 2021 writing fellowship at the Collegeville Institute.

Amy Haddad is a poet, nurse and educator who taught in the health sciences at Creighton University where she is now a Professor Emerita. Her poetry and short stories have been published in Journal of Medical Humanities, Bellevue Literary Review, Persimmon Tree, Annals of Internal Medicine, Aji Magazine, DASH, Oberon Poetry Magazine, and Rogue Agent. Her chapbooks include, "The Geography of Kitchens" published by Finishing Line Press (2021) and "The Most Potent Weapon" Published by Bottlecap Press (2025). Her poetry collection, "An Otherwise Healthy Woman," was published by Backwaters Press, 2022. The collection won first place in the Creative Works category of the American Journal of Nursing 2022 Books of the Year Awards.

Elena Harap is a writer, teacher, and editor, living in rural Vermont; she holds an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts and has attended the Joiner Institute Writers Workshops, UMass/Boston. Her essays and poems have been published in *Bayou, Amoskeag, Jewish Currents, Brattleboro Commons* and other journals and newspapers. She has contributed essays to the anthologies *What Does it Mean to be White in America?* (2Leaf Press), *Metaphors Are Not Enough* (Streetfeet Press), and to NPR's Commentaries. She is a member of the Boston-based writer-performers' ensemble, The Streetfeet Women, whose public readings have resonated with diverse audiences.

Lorraine Jeffery's prose has appeared in many publications, including *Persimmon Tree, Focus on the Family, Elsewhere, Ocotillo, War Cry, Exponent II, Utah Senior Review* and *Mature Years.* She has published three books of poems: *When the Universe Brings Us Back,* in 2022, *Tethers*, published by Kelsay Books in 2023 and *Saltwater Soul*, 2024, also published by Kelsay Books.

Susan Johnson's poems and creative nonfiction pieces have recently appeared in *Woven Tale*, *Abraxas*, *The Meadow*, *Dash*, *Front Range Review*, *Aji*, and *Trampoline*. She lives in South Hadley, MA, and her commentaries can be heard on nepm.org.

Jeanne Julian is author of *Like the O in Hope* and two chapbooks. Her poems are in *Kakalak,Panoply, RavensPerch*, *Gyroscope, Silkworm,* and elsewhere, and have won awards from *Reed Magazine, Comstock Review,* and *Naugatuck River Review.* She lives in Maine and reviews books for *The Main Street Rag.* http://www.jeannejulian.com

Onyinye Kalu crafts stories that reveal the hidden depths of everyday people. She creates narratives that explore motivations and vulnerabilities, making readers see the world through another's eyes. Her ideal story offers fresh perspectives and sparks empathy.

Dani Kuntz, originally from Arkansas, is an MFA Poetry candidate at UNR Lake Tahoe (formerly Sierra Nevada College). She manages *Sierra Nevada Review* and reads and writes for *ONLY POEMS*. Her work appears in *The Talon Review, infinite↓scroll, A Thin Slice of Anxiety, AuVert Magazine,* and *eMerge Magazine*. Using their poetry & essays, Dani hopes to achieve a sense of unity with readers. You can follow them on IG@daninkuntz and learn more at danikuntz.com.

V. P. Loggins is the author of *The Wild Severance* (2021), winner of the Bright Hill Press Poetry Book Competition, *The Green Cup* (2017), winner of the *Cider Press Review* Editors' Book Prize, *The Fourth Paradise* (Main Street Rag 2010), *Heaven Changes* (Pudding House 2007), and two books on Shakespeare, *The Life of Our Design* and *Shakespeare's Deliberate Art* (co-author). His poems are in *The Baltimore Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Poetry East*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Southern Review* and *Tampa Review,* among others. He has taught at several institutions, most recently the United States Naval Academy. For more, visit www.vploggins.com.

Fabiana Elisa Martínez is a linguist, a language teacher, and a writer. She speaks English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian. She is the author of the short story collections *12 Random Words* and *Conquered by Fog*, and the grammar book *Spanish 360 with Fabiana*. Other short stories of hers have been published in five continents in publications like *Rigorous Magazine*, *The Closed Eye Open*, *Ponder Review*, *Hindsight Magazine*, *The Good Life Review, The Halcyone*, *Rhodora Magazine, Mediterranean Poetry, The Writers and*

Readers Magazine, Automatic Pilot, Lusitania, Heartland Society of Women Writers, and the anthology *Writers of Tomorrow*. She is currently working on her first novel.

Kathy McGoldrick is a mature writer. Long ago she received a BA in English and an MFA in Creative Writing at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Not long after, Kathy became responsible to raise two daughters on her own. She had a decades-long career in social work administration of one kind and another. Between her work and raising her daughters, there was, unfortunately, little time to write. She has now retired and has been writing again for a few years. She has been widely published, including in the *Gyroscope Review; Oberon; The Comstock Review;* and *Humana Obscura*. One of her poems was selected as one of two winners in *New Millenium*'s 2025 contest, *America: One Year from Now.* Other publications include *Buff*, *Buffalo News Poetry Page*, *Cape Rock Journal*, *Brushfire*, *Midwest Review*, *Earth's Daughters*, and *Hags on Fire*.

Dave Morrison has been hailed as 'A hearty weed in the garden of American poetry' (Dispatch Magazine), his poems having been published in literary magazines and anthologies, and featured on Writer's Almanac, Take Heart, and Poems from Here. Morrison has published eighteen books of poetry including *Clubland* (poems about rock & roll bars in verse and meter, Fighting Cock Press 2011) and *Cancer Poems* (JukeBooks 2015). *Sprinter Runs the Marathon* (Rain Crow Press 2025) is his most recent collection. After years of playing in rock bands in Boston and NYC, Morrison now lives on the coast of Maine.

Lauren Oertel is a community organizer and passionate supporter of authors, books, writing communities, and local bookstores. Her work has been published in *The Ravens Perch*, *Evening Street Review*, *Steam Ticket*, *The Bluebird Word, The Sun Magazine*, and more. She won first prize in the 2021 MONO. poetry competition, she was a winner of the 2022 Writer's Digest short story contest, the 2022-2024 Mendocino Coast Writers' Conference poetry contests, and a finalist for the 2023 Prime Number Magazine Award for Short Fiction. She lives in Austin, Texas, with her partner Orlando and their tuxedo cat Apollonia.

David Sahner is a poet and physician-scientist whose verse has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Steam Ticket*, *Connecticut Review*, *Catamaran*, *The Sandy River Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Blackbox Manifold, Mudlark, The Raven's Perch, Tears in the Fence*, *Agenda*, *Eclectica* and elsewhere. He is the author of a book-length collection, *Hum*, and his work has been anthologized in several multi-author collections, most recently in a release from Anhinga Press.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His stories have been accepted more than 550 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including The American Writers Review,Bryant Literary Review, and Shenandoah. He was nominated four times for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

Mostofa Sarwar PhD, MS, MSc, authored three books of Bengali poems (*Binosto Rupantorer Bikartotto, Anulipi: Antorongo Muhurte, and Prarthito Nirbasoner Unmad Podaboly*) and published poems and literary essays in Bengali and English magazines and reviews in Bangladesh and USA. He was recognized for his literary contribution by the World Literary Center of Bangladesh at its North American Conference in New York in 2003. For his literary contributions and community leadership, he was awarded at a reception of over six thousand people in Madison Square Garden (New York) by the Federation of Bangladeshi Associations in North America in 2000, during the Annual International Meeting. His recent opinion work has been published in *The Advocate* of Baton Rouge, *The Times Picayune* of New Orleans, *The Daily Advent – Opera News* of New York, *The Daily Star* and Bdnews24 of Bangladesh, *The Straits Times* of Singapore, *The Statesman* of India, *Phuket News* of Thailand, and *Newsbreak* of Philippines. He regularly writes opinion editorials in Bengali for newspapers in New York and Dhaka. He is also a weekly commentator on politics and current affairs at TBN24 and NRB TV (two Bengali

live television channels broadcasted out of New York & Washington, DC), and occasionally appears as a commentator on Ekattor TV, DBC TV, Channel I and Independent TV (news channels broadcasted out of Dhaka). He co-edited a book on geophysics published by Springer Vieweg of Germany and received distinguish associate editor award for journal *Geophysics*.

Mostofa Sarwar is professor emeritus of geophysics and former Associate Provost at the University of New Orleans, former dean, and interim vice-chancellor of academic affairs & college provost at Delgado Community College, and former commissioner of the governing board of Regional Transit Authority of New Orleans. He also taught at University of Innsbruck – Austria, University of Pennsylvania, Indiana University, and Dhaka University - Bangladesh. He worked as a scientist at Shell Technology Center Houston, and senior research fellow at the US Naval Research Laboratory in NASA's Stennis Space Center.

Dr. Sarwar's research resulted in many published peer-reviewed papers. He has presented over 100 talks in seminars at universities, research laboratories of multinational corporations, government research laboratories, and annual international meetings of professional societies. Over the course of his career, he has been invited to speak in various countries in Asia, Europe and North America, including Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Russia, Sweden, and the Netherlands. He could be reached at asarwar2001@yahoo.com.

Leslie Schultz (Northfield, Minnesota; winonamedia.net) has six collections of poetry; of these, *Geranium Lake: Poems on Art and Art-Making* (Kelsay Books) is her most recent. Her poetry has appeared widely, in such journals as *Poet Lore*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *Blue Unicorn*. She serves as a judge for the Maria W. Faust Sonnet Contest. In addition to poems, she publishes photographs, essays, and fiction; makes quilts and soups; and happily mucks about in a garden plagued by shade, rabbits, and walnut trees. See her poems, essay, and photographs at www.winonamedia.net.

Mike Shepley is a writer who lives and works in Sacramento, CA. Over the past 25 plus years he has had the luck to see some 120 of his poems published. Most recently in *Trajectory*, *Blue Unicorn, Tipton, Blue Bird Word, Creosote*, *Jonah*, among others.

Mark Spann is a writer and educator in Washington, MO. His work has been published in *GNU Literary Magazine, Everyday Fiction, Ink Babies, Watermark,* and *Cape Rock*. He has written juvenile non-fiction for Harcourt's Reading 2000 series.

Christopher Stewart is the author of *What Came After* (The Calliope Group) and co-author (with Quraysh Ali Lansana) of *The Walmart Republic* (Mongrel Empire Press). His poems have appeared in *RHINO*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Oberon*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Eastern Iowa Review*, *Atlanta Review*, and elsewhere. He is the recipient of the 2025 RHINO Poetry Founder's Prize and was a finalist for the Iowa Review Award, among other recognitions.

Marc Swan lives in coastal Maine. Poems recently published or forthcoming in *Gargoyle, Nerve Cowboy Anthology, Misfit, Crannóg,* among others. His fifth collection, *all it would take,* was published in 2020 by tall-lighthouse (UK).

Sam Woods is a full-time janitor, perpetual student, lifelong writer, avid reader, and lover of all things creative. She is currently studying English Literature and Pop Culture at Toronto Metropolitan University and has previously studied law and criminology. Her work has been featured in numerous literary publications and recognized in several competitions, including a first-place win in the Whitby Public Library National Poetry Month contest and multiple finalist placements.

Daniel Zhu from Silicon Valley has written poetry without AI's assistance for five years now. Fortunate to have won a number of awards for his work, he has also received publication not just in CA, but five other states! These publications/awards include 1st place in CFCP, CA's oldest poetry organization; the Light of the Stars Annual Poetry Contest and Amulet Magazine, in their 16th year under the leadership of Perry Terrell; and a Silver Key in Scholastic Arts and Writing Awards.

Cary B. Ziter is the author of several published books for young readers. Prior to his retirement he worked for the New York State Tax Department, Exxon and IBM, including long-term assignments in Paris and Hong Kong. He earned his master's in literature from Bennington College. His poetry has appeared in *Action, Spectacle, Killer Nashville, Blueline, Front Range Review, California Quarterly, The New Croton Review* and many other literary journals. He and his wife, Jozi, live in New York's Hudson Valley region.

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