

The Best of
The Foliate Oak Online



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Editor's Note: The pieces appearing herein have appeared in our monthly e-zine over the course of the 2012-2013 academic year. While the selection process was agonizing, we feel that they represent the best of the best.

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Absolution

by Heather Adams

When I meet him, from the moment of shaking his hand, I know what it would be like to kiss him. I see into the future. I feel his hand on my back and I taste the scotch on his tongue. So that, when the kiss and the rest of it, what comes after, happens, it is as though it has happened before, and I am re-living it in a vague dream, half-asleep. On the flight home, I think only of how something small, like the freckle on his wrist, could have been an invitation, or even permission.

At home, Peter hands me a glass of pinot noir and reminds me that the De-Walts are coming over at seven o'clock. He says that Chelsea is upstairs with her door closed, and he confesses that she did not work on her college applications while I was gone. It is the one thing I asked her to do as I was leaving, and yesterday I texted Peter between meetings asking him to check in with her. I take a sip of wine and shrug, giving him a small smile. "It's no big deal," I say. "She'll get to them eventually." It takes effort, but I am rewarded when he raises an eyebrow, surprised to be getting off so easily. He asks me how the conference was. "Boring," I tell him. "Financial projections and budget stuff, you know how it is." And he nods.

A few days later, Peter and I start to argue about whether to change our pool maintenance package. They are over-charging us and I know it. They haven't been doing what they promised. Peter is surprised when I relent abruptly. Remembering, the guilt coiled inside me, a heavy thing at the bottom of my stomach.

Sometimes at night, instead of sleeping, I lie in bed beside Peter and think about what I've done. I am forty-six years old and I have traveled for work for almost twenty years. Nothing like this has ever happened before. It has seemed impossible, something that other people might do, but not me. Not to Peter. Until this time, when something about it felt inescapable, when I could barely stand up under the weight of the inevitability. And I know that blaming Peter for my mistake wouldn't be fair. It would be like waking up with a grudge against someone simply because of a bad dream you've had about them, not because of anything they've actually done.

At church, I pay particular attention to the confession. Even though I am speaking softly like everyone else in the pews around me, I mean

what I say, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed. The priest says “Almighty God have mercy on you” to everyone in the church and I imagine the words settling on my shoulders like a comforting blanket. But nothing happens; I feel the same way I did walking in. When we leave, the sky is low and cloudy and the air is hot. Peter asks if we’re ever going to get a break from the heat, and even though I’m aware that he doesn’t expect me to answer, I do. I say I don’t know. Because I don’t; I can’t see that far ahead.

Several weeks later I sit at the doctor’s office, looking around the waiting room at the other women flipping through magazines or looking at their phones. Somehow I know that, out of all of them, I’m the one who will get the phone call explaining that I need to come in for a meeting with the doctor. The kind of meeting where the doctor will sit at his desk, his white coat draped on the back of his chair, trying to create a more comfortable environment, trying not to be intimidating as he shares what he has seen.

Peter is there, tapping his foot because he’s nervous, even though he doesn’t want me to see it. The doctor points to a shadow on the picture, and Peter reaches for my hand. As the doctor taps a line on the page of biopsy results, I uncurl my fingers, meeting Peter’s. I can’t help thinking that there is something right about what the doctor is saying, what he refers to as the trials ahead. He stacks the papers on his desk over and over again, squaring the corners carefully, and I hear him saying phrases like “treatment options” and “state of the art.” Part of me knew this, or something like it, was coming. Like a judgment. Or penance. On some level I know that isn’t how it works, that redemption doesn’t look like this. But I can’t be sure, which is why, instead of railing against this dark thing, it is like a cool wind on my face and I rise up to meet it.

The Book

by Maggie Apple

I once gave you a book.
I had found it in a yard sale,
Gently used binding,
In good shape for a paperback,
And I remember how
My cheeks had burned,
thinking how perfect it was
for me
to give
to you.

I remember how
my heart had raced
as you tore back the wrapping paper
from its cover.
And for the rest of the evening
I'd smiled
like we shared a secret.

Just the other day I
was coming over to see your new
plasma screen tv
And as we sat,
there in the game room,
something caught my eye.
And there it was
It was
Wedged against
the leg of a card table
used as leverage
to fix a wobbly annoyance
And on the spine,
Dust gathering.

Oh symbolism,
You're no friend of mine.

Futile Plea

by Gary Beck

I cry for a moment of vision,
although a mere dust-bound speck
in an entre'acte diversion,
whose tongue alternates fate and time.
I no longer seek the hidden incantation,
as tainted as Niagara Falls,
that will no longer wash away
chemical stains from beggar's bodies,
whose souls have a tooth ache.

The Beast

by Graeme Brasher

Truth is we only do this once.
We make our choices,
Cast our sticks in the dirt
And peer through the fog
At a flickering wall;
We learn to improve our guesses
By screwing up our eyes
And stumbling forward with arms
Outstretched till
The thing we think is
The thing we find
And we know the elephant
By feeling its hide, inch by inch;
Until we are confident
Its trunk is not its tail,
The tiger by touching its teeth,
By its stale breath the whale;
And though we struggle of course
To essay its size (a kitten
Still scratches and spits) and
The proper magnitude of things,
This is the best we ever get:
The thrill of one chance,
Barely possible,
Exceptionally brief.

A Literary Romance

by Lisa Braxton

Not long after I became engaged, my fiancé and I began discussing plans for our future: where we would live, how we would set up our bank accounts, whether we'd rent a house for a while or purchase one, the type of wedding ceremony we'd have considering that we were a "mature" couple. Toward the end of one of those conversations it occurred to me that there was another important matter we needed to address.

"You should come home with me to meet my parents," I said.

It was mid October. My parents lived one state away. It was an easy two-and-a-half hour drive to their home. I visited them for all the major holidays and ometimes in between. The next time I planned to see them was Thanksgiving.

"Sure," my fiancé said, "I was thinking the same thing."

As I mentally marked off the days on the calendar I looked forward to Thanksgiving with a nervous giddiness I hadn't felt before. My parents would get to meet the bookish man I had met in my Adult Sunday School class, who I had fallen in love with over long talks about scripture, the novels we had read, the experiences we had had as journalists, and the respective writing projects we were pursuing.

My fiancé would become acquainted with my parents, who had celebrated 50-plus anniversaries and were a testament to what it took to make a marriage work. Through getting to know them he would develop a deeper understanding of me. He would also get to meet some of my extended family, which would offer him a glimpse of the type of gatherings he'd be a part of once we married.

I imagined that on Thanksgiving Day I would be in the kitchen helping my mother prepare the stuffing and candied yams while my father and my fiancé would watch football on the large-screen television in the basement.

At some point after the meal, my mother would pull out my baby album and be sure to show my fiancé the 1960s Polaroid snapshot of me wearing

nothing but a smile on a miniature bear skin rug. She'd regale him with stories about what a champ I was at filling up my diaper to indicate how pampered and well fed I was, and my penchant for sending my glass baby bottles crashing to the kitchen floor from my high chair once I'd finished with them.

But the week of Thanksgiving, my father came down with a cold. My mother insisted that he stay in bed and only get up when Thanksgiving dinner was served—so much for my father and my fiancé bonding over football. My fiancé had to cheer on his favorite teams by himself.

A cousin and aunt joined us for the meal. Afterward, we women gathered in the kitchen for pumpkin streusel, coffee, and an intense discussion about the decisions that needed to be made about one of my aunts being considered for hospice care. By the time the conversation ended, the football games were over. I went looking for my fiancé. I feared he was bored, wishing he had stayed home. I thought he might feel that I wasn't being a good hostess.

He wasn't in the basement. The lights and television were off. I jogged up the stairs to the second floor and found him there in my old room. He was stretched out on my bed, his brow in a knot as he read the pages of a book. He'd taken his glasses off and held the tip of one arm between pursed lips.

"Are you okay?" I asked softly.

He peered up at me over the top of the book. I moved in closer to see what it was, a soft-cover volume, *The Book of Psalms*. My fiancé's eyes were wide like those of a child who'd just discovered where all the Christmas presents were hidden.

"Can I borrow this?" he said, urgency in his voice.

I looked around him. The bed was littered with books. My books. He'd discovered them in my headboard that doubled as a bookcase.

They were all books I had read when I was in high school. I hadn't thought about them in years. It turns out that he thought they were refreshing, a treasure trove into my past. *The Art of Shyness*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*,

and *I Can Do Anything Career Book for Girls* were among them. Through the yellowed pages he discovered the shy, socially awkward teenager who spent long weekend hours with books that provided her with an escape, that helped her understand the world around her, that guided her as she explored the career possibilities she would pursue in the not-too-distant future. Through my old books, my fiancé got to know me as the girl whose passion for reading would grow into a passion for writing. He got to know me that Thanksgiving Day on a level that months of dating couldn't have accomplished.

We stayed up late into the night, lounging on my bed, books all about us, and talking— not about family or wedding details, houses or bank accounts—but about books.

Bottom's Up

by Marian Brooks

One day, Karen, the Bristle Nosed Catfish, lost her taste for trash. Boldly, she swam to the top of the tank where the rest of the gang were enjoying a breakfast of freeze-dried blood worms and algae wafers. The first to notice this aberration were the other two catfish, Bruna and Jean. They remained on the bottom, wedging themselves a little deeper into the gravel. Within days, the pecking order in the tank reversed itself completely. Big Al and Alice, the Kissing Gouramis, stopped kissing. Angel Fish, Duma and Dagiell, usually a docile species, began darting around the tank, surfing the glass walls and nipping at the fins of the goldfish. The playful neons grew pale and stalked guppies hiding in the hair grass.

When Anna noticed the Black Mollies swimming sideways, she knew something was amiss. Anna was 12 years old and the aquarium was her responsibility. Anna checked the pH and temperature of the water. She changed the filter. She saw no evidence of parasites. Anna decided to monitor the system for the next few days.

Gradually, the Tiger Barbs emerged from behind the rocks and the mollies righted themselves. The tetras regained their brilliance. Zebra fish, who were hiding in the small treasure chest at the bottom of the tank, ventured back into the light.

Bruna and Jean were also watching. Even though they were bottom feeders, they were tired of taking out the rubbish and doing double duty for Karen, who was getting very lazy and very fat. They were determined to make a run for the top once a day and help themselves to the dried shrimp appetizers. These little acts of rebellion caused a great deal of stress in the small ecosystem, disrupting the newly acquired tranquility. Once again the Red Tail Sharks were circling frantically or hiding in hollow logs.

Anna decided to quarantine all three catfish. After several days in lockdown, the offenders returned to the community. However, Anna noted that the scavengers had developed a taste for swordtail and no longer seemed to know their place.

What Birds Don't Know

by Heather Cadenhead

When I found a dead bluebird in the backyard
yesterday morning, I cried. I thought of my baby
napping inside and examined our Chinese sumac
for a nest, something left behind.

Soft fall, the hum of broken bones:
the sound of a bird determined to rise.

I gathered towels from the line
as the skies darkened to signal
a storm. It is fearsome to be alone
with something dead.

When I saw one dark blue line on the test,
I cried. I'd been certain I was this time.
Instead the process begins again.

Blind faith: the way we mix flour, eggs, and sugar
with the expectation that it will result in cake.

I read once that an egg always hatches
at dawn, every bird born hungry.

Look Again

by Jennifer Chow

Another town on this dusty road. The dots on the map crawled like ants. Michael pressed his thumb against the paper to pin them down. *She'd mentioned her hometown hovered near Route 66, but she hadn't given him the name.*

The new place, Serendipity, greeted him with a chill that attacked his bones. The sky wore the steel gray cloak that preceded a harsh rain. Like the storm that had brought Valerie to him. She'd stood under the room's overhang, dripping. He'd invited her inside the ceramics class out of pity and had met his destiny.

She brought in an exotic mango fragrance with her as she entered. Her hair shone pure gold, blinding him from the rain outside. They molded the mug that day against the pottery wheel, the clay yielding to the union of their fingers.

They lived together for three glorious months, sipping from that sea blue cup. He hadn't cared that she was homeless. He upped his income with odd jobs, so she could stay in his matchbox apartment. He deserted his own pottery-making, because he'd found a different passion in life.

He never knew why Valerie left. He came home to find her belongings gone, including the mug. He sold his pieces, one by one, to fund a search. In the beginning, he had looked for Valerie. Now, with hope dwindling, he hunted for the elusive cup, a shard of her memory.

It was easy to spot the second-hand store, the drab building sticking out among its modern, sleek companions. He walked into Look Again, where a woman in a peasant blouse and a giant bohemian skirt greeted him.

“Can I help you?”

Michael raked one shaky hand over his salt-and-pepper hair as he surveyed the ceramics area. He'd been forty to Valerie's twenty when their relationship began, and his hair had been jet black. “I'm looking for a mug,” he said. “It's a sea blue piece with two handles. My girlfriend Valerie and I created it as a symbol of our everlasting connection.”

A little girl peeked out from behind the woman's skirt, and the scent of mango assaulted his nose. "Where's your girlfriend?" she asked.

He crouched down. "I didn't see you there." The fruit scent grew stronger. "How old are you?"

"Seven and three-quarters."

Seven. Valerie left me seven years ago. A flash of memory hit him. A discarded positive pregnancy stick found in the trash the day she'd run off. She'd been pregnant with their little boy—or girl. He moved closer to the child. Her features were wrong; she didn't have Valerie's oval face or her soft brown eyes, but the hair was the same.

The gold called out to him, and he tugged a single strand loose, cupping his hands around the blond wisp. He walked out into the fierce November wind, where the ice breeze stole the golden thread away from his numb fingers.

Bi-Party Boy

by Spenser Davis

There was a time I thought I'd seen it all,
That nothing could surprise me further still.
But all that changed when my dear mother May
Announced that she would vote Republican.

She said, "I like their candidate the best.
I hope you'll join me as an elephant."
My father stood up from his seat, and then
he told my mother to go fly a kite.

Our fam'ly was always pro-gay marriage,
pro-choice, pro-mosque, pro-Earth, et cetera.
But now the world I knew was split in two:
One half was red, the other half was blue.

Word quickly spread about my mom's new choice.
At school, there was spray paint on my locker.
It said, "Loves Palin," "Tax Cuts for the Rich."
I hid inside the bathroom until 3.
In town, the women saw me, shook their heads.
To them, I was the poor bi-party boy.
The men outside the bar would shout at me,
"Your dad is such an ass to stay with her!"

Eventually, the day to vote arrived.
The car ride there was quiet, awkward, tense.
My mom and dad went into separate booths
and time slowed so far down, I fell asleep ...
I woke to find my mom kissing my head.
She said she made the vote she thought was right.
And then she walked out of the voting place
And vanished into the dark, election night.

She was gone before we got back home.
Her whole half of the closet nearly bare.
I left their bedroom, passed the TV set,
and found her Jimmy Carter bobble-head.
I picked it up and stared at Jimmy's face.

A candidate like him had turned my mom
against her husband, away from her kids.
That night, I prayed and wished that she was dead.

Years have passed, and still my father weeps.
He claims that it is his fault she left us,
and says that she's his hero, because she
stuck to how she felt so def'nitely.
He and I still don't see eye-to-eye.
He sees his wife, I see a mom who fled.

A week ago, I walked into my dorm
and found a letter slipped under the door.
It said, "I heard you study Poli-Sci.
I'm proud of you. I'll love you 'til I die."
My roommate hadn't seen who slipped the note
but heard the clomp of heels go down the hall.
At first, I wished the note came from my mom,
but then, I threw it in the trash ... I'm independent, after all.

The Call

by Holly Day

the old birch tree sends its long, twitching limbs through the damp earth, moist dirt, pushes aside crumbling concrete, old bones, metal boxes containing forgotten treasure, the skeletons of much-loved pets searches with tiny roots for other trees, crawls around fence posts, investigates the neighbors' yards, taps out

its own tree-version of Morse code against buried boulders, the foundations of houses, against the limestone bedrock, says, are you there? am I alone? busies itself with poking into drainage pipes, wrapping around telephone cables, waits for an answer, waits for another tree to find it.

Trash

by John Domenichini

One Sunday when I was eleven, I walked to church with Mother. I was dressed the way Mother dressed me, like the most proper of proper eleven-year old girls. We were walking by the Barasconi house when Angela Barasconi walked out onto the porch.

Angela was in her twenties. Her father had died the year before and her mother hadn't recovered from it emotionally. I'd seen Angela plenty of times before, but I'd never really noticed her. Of course, I'd never seen her dressed the way she was now, or I'd have taken notice.

Mother and I walked by as Angela just stood on the porch. She was wearing a red dress and white high-heeled shoes and holding a white clutch purse, and somehow, she looked real busy doing it. She stood out against the sad, gray house and the unkempt lawn.

Mother didn't even look at Angela, but I was mesmerized by her. Mother pulled me along by the hand. "Look straight ahead," she whispered. Her voice was stern, so I looked straight ahead. I didn't understand why, but I knew that voice.

When we were several houses away, Mother said, "That Angela is trash. Imagine dressing like that. Ever. But on Sunday? With her mother still in mourning? Trash. Pure trash."

I didn't say a word. I knew better. I also knew right then that I wanted to look like trash when I got older. I'd never seen anybody so beautiful. And if plain-Jane Angela could transform herself, so could I. Her dark hair was curled and layered. She had on bright red lipstick and otherwise a gentle application of makeup. Her nails seemed to be two-toned, white and red.

I had been too far away to see her nails clearly and I only got a glance at them, anyway. It took everything I had not to run from Mother to go take a look at Angela's nails to study the technique. I wanted to try to duplicate it. I wanted to experiment with nail polish as soon as possible, which would be never if Mother had anything to do with it.

Yes, trash was what I wanted to look like when I grew up. It clearly took a lot of effort to look like trash. A woman couldn't just throw on any old red dress and slap on some makeup. No, to look the way Angela did on that particular Sunday, it took attention to detail, and patience.

But I was determined. I'd put in the effort by studying magazines, television shows, movies. Whatever it took. I'd study Angela herself, whenever I got the chance. If any other women came along that looked like trash, I'd study them, too.

As Mother and I walked on to church, I started working out a plan in my mind. For sure, when I grew up, I was going to look like trash and nobody was going to stop me. And unfortunately, nobody did.

The Test

by Leighanne Ellenson

“Bennet, Hannah!” The voice was called out through the full waiting room from one of the nurses shielded behind plexi-glass windows. A hand squeezed hers tightly and she pulled away from it, not looking at the person that tried to comfort her. She pulled in a deep breath and let it out slowly, then went into the back hallway, looking for the door she’d gone to three months prior, all to be told that she would have to wait. She knocked on the heavy wooden door and it opened a moment later.

The older woman that opened the door looked down at the waif of a girl, barely old enough to even need these services. This appointment had been haunting Hannah for the last three months and every day of it showed on her face. “Good morning, Mrs. Bennett.” She tried to speak as calmly as she could, tried to hold back her own hope and worry for Hannah’s test.

“Dr. Hall,” Hannah greeted, forcing a smile that came out as more of a grimace. Dr. Hall moved back and Hannah stepped into the office, sitting in the stiff-backed chair that the clinic provided. Dr. Hall busied herself with going through cabinets, pulling out a small white package, about the size of a small book, then gloves. The gloves were blue, the thick kind that was hard to rip. The ones that she’d seen other doctors use with other people that could have diseases. The gloves practically screamed, ‘infected,’ at her, so Hannah looked away from them.

Dr. Hall opened the package by ripping down the ‘tear here’ line and set the two tests out on the movable tray. She rolled it to Hannah, the package still on the table. The blue words, “HIV -1/2 Antibody Test,” were bare for the entire room to see. “Open your mouth, dear,” Dr. Hall requested. Hannah licked her lips and opened her mouth, watching Dr. Hall. A blue glove lifted a white stick. It looked like a pregnancy test to Hannah, but the results were more permanent with this stick. Hannah felt the thin end of the test scraping against her gums and cheeks, so she closed her eyes. The first one was removed and then the second stick replaced it, sampling from the other side of her mouth. When she felt it leave her mouth, she curled up in the chair, her part done.

“How long?” She spoke quietly, wrapping her arms around her legs. She looked up at Dr. Hall, but the woman was just staring at the tests that she had put into little vials of a solution.

“Twenty minutes. There will be a line beside the C on both, that’s the control line. It’s normal. The T-line is the one that shows the results. If the T-line appears...”

“I know,” Hannah nodded, cutting her off. She looked down at her watch and watched the slim hands move in the circle, a gift from the same man that had put a ring on her finger. The same man that sat in the waiting room, waiting to see if he had infected her with the disease he swore he hadn’t known about. The second hand slowed, then stopped completely.

The Belly Dancer and the Old Man

by Grant Flint

I'm 80 now. The Match.Com personal ad women responded much more when I was 79. 80 means they will be a widow again soon, if they pair with me.

Which means my ad "profile" must be written much better than before. I can no longer afford to be honest.

When I was 79, I asked for a woman like "C". Demanded her. "C" was a belly dancer/artist/author who took hormones, looked and acted 15 years younger than her real age. We made love 10 hours a week. I demanded that any woman who answered my ad must be like "C".

The women were intrigued, but intimidated.

"I can do some of that," a wealthy lady from San Francisco offered, "but I'm not a belly dancer."

When I was with "C", there was no past, no future, only now. A moment, an hour. An hour, a moment.

"I love you," I told her. "I love you," she told me. We said the dear words like a charm, a prayer, a cross to scare away the Devil, over and over, a dozen times, a hundred times, with fresh fulfilling joy every time.

Our true age showed only on our necks. Our necks were loose and corded, out of control. Otherwise our bodies were weirdly young, eyes sparkling, her firm high full breasts a young woman's breasts, ample, pneumatic. I was tanned like a gray-haired Tarzan from swimming every day. She had the sensuous, rounded belly of a belly dancer, the glorious legs of a ballet dancer, the buttocks of a Greek peasant woman, full and firm yet gently wiggling.

We were a handsome couple, naked. Dressed, people said of us: "What a striking couple!" She had a Spanish face with Indian cheekbones and nose. I looked like the Kennedys and Jimmy Stewart when the world was young. I was tall, lean enough. My gray hair was wavy, uncut for five months, Cara's request.

“You’re beautiful,” Cara told me.

“You’re beautiful,” I told her. “You’ve always been beautiful. Men have always told you that, haven’t they?”

She smiled a little, said nothing.

“And they’ve always told you how sexy you are, haven’t they? And guess what? Men in the supermarket, I’ve seen it -- they watch you. They follow you sometimes, also. Just to watch you. That rear.”

Cara smiled. She was happy, heart calm. And modest.

Her womb was removed long ago. My sperm, I suspect, packed no potency, hadn’t been dangerous for some time. Maybe a long time.

We lay naked on her little bed in her little second-floor apartment, Mount Tamapais filling her western window, Willie Nelson on the CD player, alabaster and turquoise candles ready for night, her paintings swirling on all walls. She fed me huge chunks of expensive pink salmon every Wednesday night with an organic baked potato and a large bowl of salad, red tomatoes, green avocados, orange carrots.

We drank white wine, iridescent, \$10 a bottle. Sometimes I forgot to offer to wash the dishes until she was finishing them while we talked joyously about life, writing, how sexy she looked in the kitchen light, how I loved her.

The Viagra pills worked, but not spectacularly. Cara and I never gave up, and after all those months together we had made peace with my mechanical problems, my tongue a young man’s tongue, firm, agile, wicked, enormously wise. Our love was lovely. Warm and considerate, enduring and naughty.

“How many women have you -- been with?” she asked me once.

I hesitated. Considered the pluses and minuses of an honest answer.

“About a hundred, I guess.”

She grinned. “Beat you! I’m a one-man woman, one at a time. But I’ve been with 124! Kept a record.”

I didn't like that. Hid it fairly well. Managed to forget it, mostly, over our time together. Brought her flowers I hand-picked every time I came to see her.

We ate pot brownies, melted into each other in bed, her arm my arm, her heart my heart.

We went on this way, my Cara and I, for two glorious years. But something – my son, 33, paranoid schizophrenic living with me – or maybe my lingering commitment phobia – or both – started poisoning our Eden.

My son meant everything to me. I'd nursed him through the divorce, through the removal of his brain tumor when he was six, through all the years of his being almost all right, then suddenly dangerously mentally ill.

We had survived everything, walked an hour a day along the shoreline. San Francisco, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the Bay Bridge startling to the west.

"I love the Bay Bridge," my son often said. "Better than the Golden Gate."

"Why?"

"Don't know. I just do."

He also suffered from Attention Deficit Disorder. He overate, drank, played video games to assuage the terrors. Meds were no help.

We understood each other. Survivors.

Cara was afraid I would never leave my boy, could never live with her. Impossible for the three of us to live together. No one could put up with him as I did.

"I'll teach him this new business I'm learning," I told her, "which he can do at home, and he'll be able to be independent." She said nothing. One afternoon she wanted us to look for a house we could share, just the two of us. We drove to the little towns and countryside beyond Petaluma, drove gently, almost drowsily, in the spring-time haze along the narrow pastoral road, tires crinkling, grass smell, sweet cows clean-skinned as

though hosed off, udders filling, standing in communal groups, some lying down as though rewarding themselves, the sun warm on the car but not too warm.

My sweetheart, Cara, beside me was quiet, but our thoughts jived gently, she wanting me, gently of course, hardly a want, instead a holy plea, compassionate in its earnest, pure “whatever is good for you” even-keeled earnestness, forgiveness before the fact, she wanting me to move here with her to the countryside, the end of the earth, Hell, to live out our sweet lives.

“If you want to,” her dear mind whispered to mine, “only if you want to, if you want to...”

I wanted to shout out to her a fury of anguished squealing, “I’ve been here, I grew up in a place like this, only it was Nebraska, hell of nothingness, endless vacuum of space, no life, no God, no humanity, just...”

“I’d forgotten,” I lied out loud, told the truth a little. “The peace. It’s scary, but wonderful.”

She grinned at me gently, gently touched my face.

“It’s all right,” she said. “It’s all right.”

It wasn’t all right, we both knew, suffered silently, as we drove and drove along the dreaming, lovely roads, country smell, country silence.

An hour later, defeated, we started back toward the freeway. Escape. Cara was silent.

We continued on, the problem unspoken.

I wrote a poem for her to dance to. Her request. It was like a test. It was improbable I could write a poem to recite as she belly danced before 1500 people.

But we did it. Higher and higher stakes. More and more required to maintain paradise. The microphone went off, then came on, I recited my two-minute poem, all about her, as she shimmied, twisted, undulated, skipped, swooped, delicately, proudly, a pro.

Success. Renewed romance for a while, but harder to stoke the fire.

Then came another crisis. She and four other women were about to read their sensual short stories, prior to publishing their combined work in a book. I was sitting with her as she waited to go to the stage.

Suddenly an unknown man came up to her, ignored me, put his arm around her, kissed her neck. She embraced him in turn.

Sick, I staggered to my feet, went down stairs, roamed around, mindless. Stupefied. Unbelievable. 124 men.

I left, went to her place, used my key, took anything that belonged to me, left a cold note.

All a mistake. "He was just a friend!" she told me the next day, as astounded by my reaction as I had been by her perceived treason.

"An old friend," she said. "We've known each other for years!"

I believed her, somewhat. Then almost totally believed her later. One-man woman.

It didn't matter. I could never leave my son. I just wanted everything to stay the same.

We died in spurts. Pain, recovery, anguish, recovery, misery...

At Christmas time when she returned from visiting her daughter in the Midwest, I was waiting for her at the airport.

She was different. Very polite, like a fire recently aglow. But cold.

Finally she gave up on me, on our ever living together. She went back to Michigan to live with her daughter.

All my life I'd been afraid of commitment, but with her it had changed. I wanted her forever. The harsh loss, knifing pain, stayed on top of me. Ruined me. Day to day to day.

I pined, denied reality, remembered every moment with her. I tried the

personal ads in a desperate stab to drive her out of my memory. Met only one woman. The woman saw it all in my eyes, nicely said goodbye.

Three and a half years after Cara moved away, my son jumped off the Bay Bridge. Just the day before, he'd informed me the Mafia were after him again, really bad this time.

The police gave me the telephone number of a witness. I called her. The young woman was crying.

"I saw him go over the barrier. Fast. Then he stood on the ledge. He raised his arms --", the young woman sobbed, "-- like making a victory sign. Then he jumped. Like a child does. Into a pool."

That was the first time I cried. My little son. "Thank you," I told her. "Thank you."

Seven months later now. Everything he was, is, remains here with me in the house. I cry, alone, only when I hear music he loved. Miss him, miss our walks, miss watching Letterman with him on T.V., miss watching the movie *Rocky* over and over with him. Miss even the hard times. Miss him every day.

His ashes are in the garage. Can't bear to part from him. Maybe later, someday, I will go to the trail along the Bay where we walked together. Will stop at the place where we could best see the beautiful Bay Bridge, graceful death arches. "This is far enough, Dad, for today," he would always say. Will bury my dear son's ashes there. Someday.

Two months ago, Cara came out here to visit her many friends. I was one of them. She and I met at one o'clock over in San Rafael at an Indian restaurant. She always loved Indian food. We both did, in our time together.

It was strange meeting her. She looked wonderful. The Midwest, her new love back there -- it was all very good for her.

"You're as handsome as ever," she said, eyes glowing. She touched me. All through the meal we unconsciously, impulsively, touched each other's hands, moved closer together, laughed, loved, it was exactly as it used to be.

Except it was too late. She didn't say, "Now we can live together."
And yet there was love in her eyes, her touch. She loved me. Not like the
new man, back there in Michigan. Always faithful, for her it is one man at
a time.

But she loves me.

The belly dancer is gone, my son is dead, I'm 80. That's a story which can
be written on the palm of a hand. A "palm story."

Marooned on an island, I send this message in a bottle. "I know you're
happy, I'm glad you're happy. If anything changes for you, I'm here."

Maybe the belly dancer will change her mind someday. If miracles hap-
pen to old men who love.

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Zen and the Ultimate Truth

by Philip Goldberg

For Zen Brubaker, little mattered as he cruised west at 100 mph on I-80 in a cream-colored '98 Corvette convertible with the top down. The summer sun blazed in a cloudless sky, and the hot breeze, magnified by the speed of the car, played havoc with the 33 year-old's long blond hair. At this moment, in this car, the myth of the road's freedom was the ultimate truth for Zen. It was as valid as the fact that the car in which he was racing west was stolen. He had stolen it just last night, when the idea to pick up and go had hit him hard.

The endless Great Plains highway, which ran straight to the horizon, reflected on the dark tinted lenses of his aviator sunglasses. Zen broke into a half-ass imitation of Mick Jagger on "Sympathy for the Devil". The thought came to him as he sang. It was an obvious thought, yet like so many things with him, he kept it buried deep. He had no idea why he had left Pittsburgh (at least at the moment he couldn't recall), but he knew where he was going. He was heading to Vacadale, California, the small town where he would find Tara. There she'd be in the same house where he had left her three years ago. Young Jeb would be there too.

Zen pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator pedal and pushed the speedometer past 115 mph. With the manic buzz of speed ringing his ears, he thought about plowing through the highway divider and smashing head-on into an on-coming car. The sound of twisting metal and the blazing image of exploding hellfire gave him a tingle in his groin. But it was too pretty a day to waste on dying.

As he drummed the steering wheel with both of his index fingers, he tried to remember why he had left Tara. He couldn't recall (another momentary mental block). Their love had been strong at the time, and he was certain that she would still feel the burn for him that he still felt for her, and that she would open her arms and her home to him. Jeb was another story. But he'd deal with the boy when he had to, and not now. Instead, he raced his new car, felt the sun's sting on his skin and licked the torrid breeze with his stuck-out tongue.

The highway sign ahead advertised a place to eat at the next exit. Zen was starving. He hadn't eaten since last night. He had sped into Kansas an hour ago, and Pittsburgh, to him, was a lifetime ago. With the old steel

town, he had also left Kelly.

Twenty-four and drop-dead gorgeous, Kelly had healed him after Tara. He had met her at a bar weeks after he had arrived in the steel town. His Brad Pitt looks always had the right effect on the ladies; and Kelly with her sandy hair and freckles had wanted him within minutes after laying her emerald green eyes on him. Within hours, they were in bed, making enough noise to wake the neighbors. In a matter of days, they were living together, arguing enough to concern anyone within earshot.

Killing the 'vette's engine in the parking lot of the bullet-shaped diner, Zen left the car with the top down. He headed into the eatery; its neon lit name, *Lawson's*, blinking.

Inside, he took a swivel seat at the counter. The place smelled of burnt coffee, sizzling cooking grease and ammonia. A buxom waitress with a million-dollar smile greeted him with a steaming pot of coffee in her hand.

He nodded for her to pour him some.

"That your car?" She asked in a friendly voice, tinged with too many years in a very small town, as she poured the steaming brew into his cup.

"You bet," he replied.

"Must be nice?"

"Heaven-sent, especially on a day like this."

"Giving out any free rides today?"

"Depends on how good your food is."

She smiled and said: "Then I've got no chance in hell."

They shared a laugh, and then he said: "A plate of scrambled eggs and bacon with white toast, please."

"Good manners, too," she said, walking off with his order.

Zen watched her ass bounce right to left, left to right with just enough jiggle to keep his eyes glued. She must have sensed his stare, because when she

reached the cook's station, she glanced back at him and smiled.

He smiled back and then saw something reflected in the mirrored wall on the other side of the counter. A state police car pulled up next to his 'vette and parked. He looked over his shoulder and watched as the brawny, square-jawed trooper stepped out from the patrol car.

The man's knee-high boots gleamed in the sun; and he appeared transfixed by the 'vette, walking around it, studying it, and finally glancing down at the license plate. Then he turned away and entered the diner, waving at the waitress and saying: "Hey, Gwen."

"Hi, Taylor," she answered. "The usual?"

"Old habits die hard," he said.

Both laughed, and Zen listened, thinking the joke was lame. He played with his coffee spoon and noticed that the cop took a stool two seats away from him. The trooper looked at him and smiled. "Your car?"

Zen thought about lying, but he realized that he and the trooper were the only two eating in the place. He nodded.

"Always wanted one myself, but I can't afford it. Three kids, a fourth on the way, a home, well, you get the picture."

"Two jobs, no kids is how I do it," Zen lied.

"I'll bet."

Gwen returned with Zen's toast, eggs and bacon and said, "Hey, I'm trying to wrangle a free ride out of this guy." Then she placed his food on the counter before him.

Taylor looked at Zen. "Bet a lot of ladies hit on you for a ride in that car?"

"I get my share of requests."

Gwen placed a cup of coffee in front of the trooper, and he took a sip from it. "Where you from?" Taylor asked in a friendly tone and then took another sip.

“New York,” Zen said through a piece of bacon he was chewing.

“Boy, you’ve been on the road a long time.” Gwen chimed in.

“Less than a day,” Zen said, realizing his mistake too late as it took more than a day and a half to drive this distance. He wanted to leap off his stool, grab the man’s gun and put a bullet between the eyes. But then he’d have to kill Gwen, and he didn’t want to do that.

“Whew,” Taylor said. “You must’ve been burning rubber to go from there to here so fast.”

“Yeah,” Zen chuckled as if to bury his mistake, his rage, in laughter. “You won’t hit me with a ticket, or throw me in jail.”

Taylor smiled. Then he grew silent.

Gwen placed a plate before the trooper. On it was a slab of meatloaf and lumpy mashed potatoes, drowning in gravy.

Something clicked inside Zen’s brain. It was what he had felt every time he needed to move on. Maybe it was fear. Maybe it was a need for survival. Whatever it was, Zen shoveled some more eggs into his mouth and gulped them down. Then he finished his coffee and wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. Looking up, he said to Gwen: “How much?”

Gwen faced him. “A fast drive in your car.”

“How fast?”

“Real fast,” she purred through her parted lips.

He smiled. “It’ll have to be on my way back, sweets.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Three bucks then, babe.”

He plunked down a Lincoln on the counter top and said: “Enjoy the day.”

“Good trip,” Gwen said, retrieving the money.

“Likewise,” Taylor said.

Zen walked out of the place, unaware that two hard eyes were fixed on his back. He got into the ’vette, ignited the engine and drove out of the parking lot. In a minute, he was back on I-80 heading west to Tara, but thinking about the trooper. “No way he could’ve known about the car,” he mumbled. Somehow these words allayed his fears for the time, and soon he was imitating Bob Dylan on “Highway 61.”

The sun had dropped in the afternoon sky, and the glare had increased. Zen squinted through his aviator shades to see the road ahead, which was cast in a bright heavenly white light. He half-expected to see Jesus appear on the shoulder of the interstate, hitching. He chuckled to himself, and then his thoughts returned to Tara and Jeb. He still remembered the sadness in her blue eyes, the desperate pleas and the endless tears on the day he had left.

She had grabbed his arm and had tried to stop him but he’d had none of that. After he had silenced her, he had slammed the door on the way out. Jeb’s pitiful screams had filled his ears, only to be drowned out by the pick-up truck’s engine.

He tightened his grip on the ’vette’s steering wheel, knowing that he owed them both a big apology. He would give them that. Another thought crossed his mind. He should call before he got there. He mulled it over for some time. Then he shook his head, as he wanted to surprise them and give them no chance to deny him the reconciliation he so badly wanted.

What he saw in the rearview mirror brought a quick end to his thoughts. The state trooper’s car (he assumed it was Taylor’s) was about fifty yards behind him. When the car’s siren and lights started, Zen believed his gig was up. But the thought of Tara, and the knowledge that he was driving a ’vette, blinded his reason. He stomped the gas pedal as if it was a big, ugly roach.

The ’vette raced off, and the trooper’s car followed in pursuit.

The chase sparked a primal thrill in Zen, who felt like a NASCAR racer. His Daytona was the interstate. He avoided other cars at the last split second, changing lanes on a dime, using the narrow shoulder road when no other lane appeared clear before him. In the rearview, he watched Taylor match him move for move, which made his heart race faster with excitement. He thanked the ’vette’s owner, whom he had only known for a heartbeat, on

taking such good care of the car. “Catch me if you can, copper,” he shouted in his best James Cagney imitation, and he hit the gas pedal even harder. *Could he drive this car any faster*, he wondered. The speedometer answered by topping 125mph. The acceleration made him feel higher still. It was how Tara made him feel in bed.

He had been on top of her, feeling euphoric. Every nerve in his body had been on high alert. She had only to look in his eyes, or run a finger on his glistening skin and he would explode like a billion firecrackers on the Fourth of July. When she finally dug her nails into his shoulders, he screamed with all the fury that his vocal chords would allow, knowing full well that Jeb was awake in the next room, smothering out the screams of pleasure with a pillow wrapped around both his ears.

Suddenly, a pair of terrified eyes fogged this memory. They weren’t his. They belonged to someone else. He quickly shut them out, feeling the cold wetness in his pants. Before him, the traffic on I-80 was slowing down. He swerved hard, causing his tires to screech. The sweet smell of burning rubber filled his nose. Up ahead, he saw the wall of state patrol cars. A feeling of invincibility filled his V-8 heart. In his rearview, he still saw Taylor. A harrowing scream echoed through his stainless steel soul, and then he shouted to the cloudless sky: “Tara!” And he spun out and crashed the ’vette through the guardrail, bouncing down a small embankment onto a country road.

On the highway, troopers scurried back to their cars, and sped off to pursue Zen.

Taylor followed Zen down the embankment and onto the country road.

With sirens ringing in Zen’s ears, he turned off the country road and onto a dirt road that cut a cornfield in two, sending a billowing, blinding wall of dust into the dry air. He banged on the steering column in glee, seeing Taylor’s car get swallowed up by the mini-dust storm and disappear thirty yards behind him. It was only moments before the dust cloud engulfed the ’vette, and Zen was also blinded. When one would have experienced fear, Zen felt even more exhilaration. He let loose a scream of pure pleasure, and then he went flying through the car’s windshield upon crashing into something very solid.

As he flew through the dusty air, he heard Amy’s muffled screams as he had

strangled the young woman in her 'vette last night. Then he saw Kelly's terrified face moments after he had stabbed her repeatedly the same night. A rapid succession of nameless frightened faces followed. Then he remembered something that he had buried deep in his subconscious, along with all of the grizzly truth: that Tara would never take him back. Not now. Not ever.

As Zen hit the ground hard, he saw Tara's bloodied body after he'd beaten her lifeless the night he'd left. Near her corpse, he saw Jeb's battered and lifeless body after he had returned from the truck and silenced the boy's screams by stomping him. Then everything in his world stopped cold.

Taylor and the other troopers gathered around Zen's broken body. He crouched down in a squat position and studied the dead man with the movie star looks. He noticed a tear rolling down his cheek. Then he looked up at the totaled 'vette and the wrecked tractor that had been parked on the dirt road. He gazed at the other troopers and said: "Finally, we got the bastard."

They stared at him without saying a word.

Taylor stood up and walked a few yards, stopped and stared into the setting sun. He lit a cigarette and walked over to the wrecked Corvette, knowing that he had been instrumental in taking down the nation's worst serial killer in decades. Then he studied the car's extensive damage and mumbled to himself: "What a waste." He paused and then added: "Of a great car."

Cold Calling

by Anne Goodwin

When the phone rings, Muriel removes her tortoiseshell reading-glasses and places them carefully, along with the *Radio Times*, on the occasional table. She rubs her right hip to goad it into action and shuffles towards the telephone table in the hallway.

“Good morning. Is that Mrs. Archer?”

“Yes?”

“My name is Simon.” His voice is warm and soothing, like a bowl of chicken soup. “I’m making a courtesy call from Alliance Soffits and Fascias.”

“A courtesy call, how nice,” says Muriel. She has often remarked that there isn’t enough courtesy around these days.

“I’m glad you think so,” says Simon. “I’m ringing to tell you we’re going to be in your area next week ...”

“What a lovely accent,” says Muriel. “Where are you from?”

Simon seems to hesitate. “We’re not supposed ...”

“I’m sorry. You have to stick to your script, don’t you?” Muriel eases herself into the tattered armchair beside the telephone table. “Do carry on, dear.”

“We’re doing a special promotion. Twenty-five percent reduction if you get the whole house done.”

“That sounds nice,” says Muriel. “I always like a bargain. You have to watch the pennies, you know, when you’re on the pension.”

“I’m sure,” says Simon.

Muriel smiles. The young man sounds so sympathetic. Such a contrast to those scruffy teenagers who hang out in the precinct shouting abuse.

“I was wondering, are you in India, by any chance? A lot of the call centres are in India, or so I’ve heard.”

“No, Mrs. Archer, I’m in Croydon.”

“Croydon! Well fancy that! I used to live there when I was first married.”

“Really?”

Muriel nods at the black and white wedding photo beside the hallstand. If she had one of those videophones she’s heard about, Simon would be able to see it too. “Yes, indeed. I could tell you an interesting fact about Croydon.”

The young man laughs. “There’s nothing interesting about Croydon.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. The very first supermarket was in Croydon. Sainsbury’s. 1950.”

“Really?” Simon doesn’t sound impressed. Perhaps his mother does all the shopping. Or his girlfriend. “Anywa ...”

“Anyway, here I am prattling away when you’ve got your script to work through. You’d better get your skates on or you’ll have the supervisor on to you. I wouldn’t want to get you into trouble.”

“We are allowed a bit of leeway.”

“That’s good. All work and no play, you know.”

Simon clears his throat. “So you might be interested?”

“In what, my dear?”

Muriel hears Simon sigh. For a moment she’s afraid he’s going to hit the disconnect button. But he recovers himself. “In replacing your soffits and fascias.”

“Soffits and fascias?” The words sound as delightful as a child in a bubble bath.

“You do know what they are?”

Muriel rubs her grumbling hip with her free hand. “Of course, my dear.”

“They need replacing every few years,” says Simon. “And the guttering.”

“Now you mention it, I did notice one of the gutters leaking in that heavy rain we had last week. Although maybe you didn’t have it. The weather’s probably different in Croydon.”

Simon seems reluctant to discuss the weather. “So I can arrange for one of our surveyors to call round and give you an estimate?”

“Oh, I’m not sure about that, dear.”

“Just a quick survey while he’s in the area. No obligation. No hard sell. But if you were interested in getting your gutters done, next week would be a good time. There’s that twenty-five percent discount I mentioned.”

Muriel sighs. “I’m sorry, Simon, I don’t mean to waste your time. It’s just that my husband has always dealt with that kind of thing.”

“I’m sure we could arrange for the surveyor to call at a time that suits him.”

Muriel’s hand shoots up to her chest as she lets out a sob. “I only wish you could. You see, Bernard died exactly six weeks ago today.”

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Archer.” Simon sounds genuinely concerned. “I didn’t mean to upset you. Maybe this wasn’t the best time for me to call.”

“Don’t go.” She squeezes the receiver as if it were the young man’s hand. “It’s so good to have someone to talk to.”

“Well, I ...”

“People are so busy these days. You can’t imagine how lonely I feel.”

“Yes, well ...”

“It’s such a help to talk to someone who cares. You’ve a lovely manner. Your mother must be so proud.”

“Mrs. Archer, I ...”

“They say it’s supposed to get better in time, but I can’t see it. Sometimes I wonder if I shouldn’t just end it all. My life’s lost all meaning without Bernard.”

“Don’t do that,” says Simon, urgently. “You must have lots to live for.”

“I shouldn’t tell you this,” Muriel whispers, “but I’ve been saving up the pills the doctor gave me ...”

“Mrs. Archer?” Muriel is startled to hear a woman’s voice now at the end of the line. “This is Lisa, Simon’s supervisor. I’m very sorry to hear about your bereavement, but I don’t think we’re the people to help you. Is there anyone I could contact for you?”

“There’s no one,” Muriel moans.

“Don’t you have any relatives? Friends? Children?”

Muriel sniffs. “A daughter. But what does she care? Never comes round. Won’t even let me see my grandchildren. I might as well be dead.”

“There must be someone,” Lisa pleads.

Just then, Muriel hears the back door open. “Well, Lisa, it was nice talking to you, but I’m going to have to go.”

“Are you sure? You’re not going to do anything drastic?”

Muriel replaces the receiver just as Bernard steps into the hallway, holding up a bunch of carrots from the allotment. “Hello, love,” he says. “Who was on the phone?”

“Nobody special,” says Muriel, hauling herself up from the chair and ushering him back into the kitchen. “Let’s put the kettle on and have

a cup of tea. And then we'd better be getting ready for Abigail's play. I'm so looking forward to it."

Bernard puts down the carrots on the worktop and turns to his wife. With a grubby finger he wipes a tear from her cheek.

"What's this? Who's upset you?"

Muriel stoops awkwardly to get the cups and saucers from the cupboard. "Don't fuss. It's nothing."

"It was one of those call centres, wasn't it?" Bernard shakes his head. "What game were you playing this time? The grieving widow? You'll have the police after you one of these days."

"It's just a bit of fun," says Muriel. "It doesn't harm anybody. Why should I have to give up my amateur dramatics just because of an arthritic hip? Our granddaughter isn't the only one in this family with a theatrical bent."

Finals Week

by Kip Hanson

Darius Fletcher woke from a dream of Elvis Presley in a leotard. *Don't be cruel*, sang the King of Rock and Roll. Lisa's ringtone. The blue glow of the cable box said 3:55 AM. Why was she calling?

Fletcher gently slid his arm from beneath the mass of blonde hair lying next to him. Mary Beth was a light sleeper. He picked up his cell phone and padded out to the living room.

"Hello?" Light from the Starbuck's sign across the street filtered in through the blinds, painting the apartment's shag an ugly fluorescent green. It reminded him of Saint Patrick's day. "Good morning, sleepy head." A dark chasm of dread open at the sound of her voice.

"Lisa. What's wrong?" She was halfway across the country, at the University of Chicago. "Why are you calling?"

A sharp squeal of laughter. "Oh, no! Did I wake you? Gosh darn it, I forgot about the time change thing again."

"What's wrong?" he repeated.

She emitted a huff of impatience at the question, like a miniature freight train. The little engine that could. "Nothing's wrong, Honey. It's just that...well, I have some good news, and I have a little bad news."

"What is it?" He heard Mary Beth stirring in the bedroom, and he quickly covered the mouthpiece.

"Nope, I'm not telling you, Darry. You have to guess." She only called him Darry when feeling playful, or planning some new way to screw up his life.

"Is it your finals?" He said. "Did you pass?" The hum of his electric toothbrush came from the bathroom. He had to go shopping today. He might love Mary Beth, but that didn't mean sharing his toothbrush with her.

“No,” she said. “I mean, yes. I passed.”

Afraid he already knew the worst, he pressed on. “Then what is it?”

“Don’t get cranky, Darius.”

“I’m not. Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Well, I talked to my guidance counselor. Since I have so many extra credits, he said I can graduate a semester early. I’m coming home, darling! Isn’t that great news?”

Over the droning in his ears came the sound of Mary Beth gargling, followed by the flush of the toilet. “So what’s the bad news?”

“The bad news is you have to clean your apartment, you messy boy. Daddy was so anxious to see me, he had his secretary book a flight for today. I get in to LAX at 4:15.”

“That’s—” Fletcher noticed a tiny blot of color at the edge of the couch. He tugged a pair of Mary Beth’s panties from between the tattered cushions. “That’s great news.”

She rolled on. “After my parents pick me up, we’re coming straight over. I hope you don’t mind.”

“What?” He’d promised Mary Beth to help pack this afternoon. She was moving into his apartment—this apartment—in three days. “Why?” he asked.

“What do you mean, why? They’re taking us to dinner, so we can discuss the wedding arrangements.”

“Oh—” Mary Beth stood in the hallway, wearing only a grin. She crooked a finger at him as he sat stricken on the couch, his cell phone clutched like a gun against his ear.

“Darling, are you okay? You don’t sound very excited.”

“No, that’s not what I...it’s just that it’s all so sudden.”
You are going to clean up your apartment before we get there, aren’t you?

You know how my mother is.”

Mary Beth stood in front of him, hands on her hips. An Italian pizza chef leered up at Fletcher from between her thighs; last night’s empty pizza box. For the first time, he noticed that one of her breasts was smaller than the other. Her eyes narrowed at the sound of Lisa’s voice. “I thought you told her—” she hissed.

“Darry, are you listening to me?” Lisa’s voice took on the rich girl tone she got when he watched baseball. “Pay attention to me!” She paused, suspicious now. “Is someone there with you?”

“No!” he said. “No. It’s just the TV. Hold on a minute.” He covered the phone and waved violently at Mary Beth. “Just give me a minute, would you?”

She glared down at him. “You’re an asshole,” she said, then stomped back to the bedroom. He’d dreaded this moment for weeks, had postponed it since the day he asked Mary Beth to move in with him. He was breaking off the marriage with Miss High and Mighty Lisa Richards, despite her family’s millions.

“Okay, I’m back. Listen, I have to tell you something.”

“Yes? What is it, Darry?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

“I’m all ears,” she crooned, playful again.

“I—” Fletcher found it difficult to breathe.

“Darry? Are you okay? You’re scaring me, honey.”

He tipped his head back on the couch. A cobweb dangled from the ceiling. A few flies and bits of dirt hung suspended there. The sound of Mary Beth’s weeping came down the hall. Fletcher steeled himself for the inevitable.

“Lisa...I’ve missed you. I’ll see you tonight.”

“I love you too, dear. I can’t wait to see you. Big hugs.”

Fletcher hung up the phone. Now what? In twelve hours, his high-school sweetheart—the love of his life—would be at his door, with her arrogant, prickly parents at her side.

“Mary Beth?” he called.

No answer. “Honey?”

From the bedroom came the thump of her overnight bag. “What do you want?”

“Is there—?” Fletcher took a deep breath. “Do you have room at your place for my stuff?”

This is Me

by Billy Harfosh

I perk right up
When she comes around
All of a sudden
My shirt is pressed
My teeth are white
My shoes are polished
My posture firm
My smile big and bold
She never fails
To impress me
She never fails
To amaze me
and I try
To be fake me
and I try
To look my best
and I try
To be on my best behavior
I never let her see me drunk
I never let her see me down
But that is me
That is me
She's too good
I'm not brave enough to show my dark colors
My inner demons
She loves me
The fake me
Then, in a flash
The others come out to play
I cannot control
When they come around
She sees my Lucifer
She's too good
and now I'm too brave
I perk right up
When she comes around
All of a sudden

My dark colors are exposed
I push her away
Because she is too good
I'm free
and I push her away
Because she is too close
 This is me
 This is me

Culley's Pub: An Elegy

by Kelly Hitchcock

Today I walked by the bar we used to frequent
Every weekend and pre-weekend.

I peered through the vacant film that coated
The windows that used to advertise
Mickey's grenades in bright green neon
And saw the wavy walls, lined from floor to ceiling
With the empty Jager bottles we drank with
Your friends, now occupied by spiders
Hiding behind the peeling labels, yellowed
By age and cigarette smoke.

The drink ledge I used to sit on
To better see the irreverent-yet-catchy
Cover band that played every Friday and Saturday night
While you sympathy-flirted with the damaged coeds
Was warped by years of inattention and water damage.

The only thing more faded than the once-blood red sign
Above the boarded-up green door
Is any feeling I might have ever had for you.

My Brain Is Off

by AJ Huffman

My brain is off
today. I will probably need a sticky
note to remind me to breathe. I bounce
from misunderstanding to miscommunication
and back. Apparently, my tongue has gone
on strike. I am tripping over
my own thoughts, spouting
uncensored sarcasm at every corner. Come back,
my beautiful ability for bodily control. I long to paint
verbal pastiches across polygonal planes of muted white.
A complete portrait of comprehension. Instead, I hang
here waiting to remember if I am supposed to
hit the nail
or the frame.

The Ice Palace

by Christopher James

The Ice Palace was not, as Rosie thought it would be, made of ice. The tour guide explained that before they'd even pulled into the coach-park. The guide had dry lips that stuck together, adding extra sounds to words, which was funny for about like five minutes. *The name-pa of the palace refers-pa to the freezing of the fountains in the-pa sumptuous grounds the year the palace was-pa built, in blah blah-pa blah.* Rosie switched off, took Nancy Drew out of her bag.

Nancy Drew was about to solve the case of the tapping heels when Rosie's Mom brushed her fingers through her hair and said, "Hey ho, Blossom." Mom reminded Rosie to behave. Behaving meant putting Nancy back in the bag, pretending to pay attention, and making the right noises at the right times. Rosie knew the drill.

Darrel, Mom's new boyfriend, was at the Palace gates already, waiting for them. Correction – waiting for one of them. It was apparent from his face, unsuccessfully camouflaged, that neither he nor Rosie understood the purpose of her inclusion in today's tour.

"What a bummer, hey?" said Darrel. "I thought it was gonna be made of real ice."

Mom laughed, which was annoying. Darrel hadn't even said anything funny.

"No," said Rosie. "It's named for the freezing of the fountains in 1864. The owners of the palace were so enchanted by the sight of the crystal icy water that they commemorated it in the naming of the palace."

"Blossom," warned Mom. Quoting the guide was not behaving.

"Well, I feel like I've learned something already," said Darrel. He head-nodded at the group gathered by the side of the bus around the guide, who was stressing the importance of being back at the bus at twelve sharp. "Shall we join them?"

"Mom, do you think they would leave without us if we came back at

twelve oh five?”

“Definitely,” said Mom. “Now behave. I’ve already asked you nicely.”

Rosie sighed. Darrel made a face, trying to bond with her. So tiresome. The guide started walking towards the palace gate’s ticket counters and Mom led the way behind him, one hand pulling Rosie, the other pulling Darrel. Rosie wondered why Darrel hadn’t brought tickets already, while he was waiting for them to arrive, but she didn’t say anything. She was being a good Blossom. When everyone was ticketed up the guide took them under the arched entranceway and across an eternal gravel driveway into the palace’s grand hall.

The guide drew his group’s attention to a big table in a room protected by a red rope. “This table,” he said, “was blah blah blah-pa blah.” Darrel noticed the guide’s speech impediment for the first time and started making fun of it. Quietly, just to Rosie and Mom. Mom laughed, and somebody nearby must have overheard because they laughed a little bit too. Darrel took his joke to a larger circle of the guided tourists, and finally, encouraged by the odd furtive giggle, to the tour guide’s face. “Is this all pa-part and pa-parcel of the proper-pa pa-palace-pa tour?” Rosie thought it was mean, but Mom laughed, so Rosie laughed too. The tour guide didn’t look very happy, and nor did some of the guided tourists.

“It’s funny,” said Rosie to Darrel, “because he has a speech impediment.” Luckily for Blossom, Darrel didn’t recognize biting sarcasm. Rosie tried to send apologies to the tour guide with the power of her mind. Darrel was a douche and Mom was simpering. Why did Rosie have to be here again? Nancy Drew wouldn’t have agreed to this. But Rosie weren’t no Nancy Drew. She switched off.

Since Mom and Dad’s separation, Rosie had discovered the gift of autopilot. It came in handy in all kinds of situations. Ten minutes passed, or maybe an hour, or maybe two. Under autopilot, Rosie wasn’t sure. They could’ve been through ten grand palace rooms or a hundred. Darrel could’ve said one more stupid thing or a thousand. Mom could’ve laughed at all his dumb jokes or just some of them. Rosie, blissfully, didn’t know. She didn’t know, either, when they’d made it into the garden, but she ‘woke up’ when she realized they were standing in front of the fountain that had frozen a hundred and fifty years ago. The fountain had given the palace its name. It had to be something worth looking at.

Hmm. It wasn't amazing. It was okay, but nothing special. So-so. She'd seen better in the mall. But it was interesting that something so insignificant could turn into something so beautiful that the entire building was named after it. Rosie switched herself all the way back on – she wanted to hear what the tour guide had to pa-say about this. But the tour guide was already moving on to a rose garden down the way.

Having been in zombie-mode for the last ten minutes question mark hour question mark two, Rosie had turned invisible. The guide went to the garden. The tour group went to the garden. Mom and Darrel, holding hands now, Rosie noticed, went to the garden. Yuck, even the way he held hands was stupid. Only Rosie stayed at the fountain, unnoticed by everybody else.

How was it possible for a fountain to freeze? Rosie knew the answer to that, vaguely, which suggested she must've heard at least some of the tour guide's chatter. The running water of the fountain took longer to freeze than the still water of the lake, because the movement kept it warmer, but if the air outside was cold enough then eventually the water, running or not, would all reach zero degrees. When that happened, the fountain froze, mid flow. One second shooting water into the air, the next a wave of ice.

Rosie heard them talking from the rose garden and looked over. Darrel was patting Mom on the butt, and Mom was letting him. They hadn't even noticed she was gone yet. God.

First Rosie sat on the edge of the fountain. Then she swung her legs round, so her feet were in the water. Then she slid off the edge and put her butt in. It was warmer than she'd expected. She lay down, and let the spray from the fountain rain down all over her. She stayed like that, looking up at the sky, imagining herself back in 1864 when this was all frozen still.

Mom's was the first raised voice, followed by Darrel and then the tour guide and everybody else. Rosie heard, but did not see, them searching for her. They started in the garden, and some of them moved indoors. They called her name. *Rosie! Rosie!* People who didn't know her, looking for her. *Rosie-pa!* Some of them were in the room with the big table. Some of them were out by the coach.

They would find her soon enough. Maybe Mom would spot her, or maybe even Darrel. It could be the tour guide. It could be anyone – there

were enough people looking for her. They'd all be relieved because she was 'safe' and angry with her for frightening them so. Darrel would sulk because he'd been upstaged. They might have to return to the hotel because Rosie's clothes would be dripping sodden through. Rosie didn't care.

She imagined the water getting colder and colder, little by little by little by little until it froze completely, taking her with it.

Expulsion from the Garden of Eden

by Bryce Journey

My wife, Laura, and I took our seats at one of the freshly wiped booths in IHOP and picked up our laminated menus. Laura grinned at me. “I don’t know why I’m looking at the menu already. It’s going to take you ten minutes to read through the whole thing anyway.” Laura and I had already been married several years and she was well aware of my idiosyncrasies. I like to study a menu thoroughly before ordering. That way I can make sure to carefully weigh all my options, agonize and debate myself, then spend the rest of the meal wondering if the other choices might not have been superior after all.

This particular Saturday morning promised to be no different. I opened up my menu. My strategy is to first read the items marked with a star, which denotes items new to the menu. Then I go back and read all the classic items and compare the two before narrowing down my choices. The first new item was the Butterscotch Rocks Pancakes, described as “Four fluffy buttermilk pancakes filled with pecans, granola and butterscotch chips, then topped with whipped topping and drizzled with caramel sauce.”

I put down the menu. “I’m ready to order,” I announced.

Laura’s mouth fell open and her eyes widened in surprise. She looked at me with a small frown, concerned. “Are you sure?”

I nodded. “Destiny has called and declared my breakfast.”

She couldn’t argue with that.

It turned out that the description was a little misleading. The pecans and granola were sprinkled on top with the caramel syrup on top of the whipped cream. The only thing baked into the pancakes were the butterscotch chips, which melted just a little and flowed outward into the settled batter. This was just fine with me, though. Butterscotch should stand on its own and it’s appropriate that the rest of the advertised ingredients were relegated to garnish. Butterscotch is the greatest of all flavors. Some people are vanilla people – plain and boring. Some people are chocolate people – trendy and popular. I count myself amongst the butterscotch people – a little different from everyone else.

I cut my pancakes into a grid of sixteen squares like I'm fond of doing and stabbed the first stack of four squares with my fork. I put the stack in my mouth and immediately closed my eyes. I felt compelled to blind myself to the outside world. Nothing must interfere with the savoring of this bite because I could tell right away this was something deserving of savor. The toppings melded with the thick pancakes in an agreeable mix of textures, complementing the flavor of the butterscotch like a lonely man finding love for the first time. The butterscotch cut through the buttermilk pancakes to my taste-buds like a spatula icing a cake. I imagined an angel toiling over a sizzling pan, mixing up the ultimate joy of spiritual enlightenment with some buttermilk and flour.

I let out a contented sigh and opened my eyes. I pointed at the stack of pancakes with my fork. "This is the greatest thing ever," I declared. Usually Laura likes to steal one of my perfect stacks of pancake squares right out of the middle, just to mess with me, but she didn't have the heart this time. The pancakes remained pure, unblemished, as I devoured them starting from the upper left and working my way in a serpentine pattern through the pancake grid.

I resolved to write a poem honoring and praising the greatness of the Butterscotch Rocks pancakes. Food is one of my favorite topics for poetry. The first poem I ever had published was the tragic, long-lined "How I Got Hosed By the Vending Machine." Recently, I'd written "Ode to Mrs. Buttersworth" and "Ode to the Cheesesteak" and I'd been pondering various culinary candidates to complete my trilogy of food-inspired odes. The Butterscotch Rocks Pancakes were like a gift from the hungry muses.

A month later we returned to IHOP for another Saturday morning breakfast. I didn't even pick up a menu. I'd been thinking about those pancakes all month and even dreamed about them once. In that dream, instead of the pancakes being set on a table, the pancakes were the table and I ate the entire thing so that no food could be served there again. I hadn't written that poem yet but I had a few good lines floating around my head and I was looking forward to a second experience to inspire my creative de-constructive carpentry. When the waitress brought us our drinks and asked if we were ready to order, I replied at once: "I'll have those heavenly Butterscotch Rocks pancakes."

The waitress turned big sad eyes on me. My breath caught in my throat. "I'm sorry," she said. "Those were a temporary item and they're not on

our menu anymore.”

I tilted back my head and moaned. “Noooo!”

My cry echoed in the restaurant and a few heads turned my direction from across the dining area. Laura shook her head, chuckled under her breath, and tactfully and nonchalantly covered up her wedding ring with her right hand. The waitress took a couple of careful steps backwards.

I opened up the menu and started to peruse the boring old options. My thoughts were heavy and full. One thing I knew for sure – I’d never write that third ode. It would be just too sad and depressing to think of my Butterscotch Rocks Pancakes lost forever. To think that Earthly paradise is available for a limited time only.

The Voice

by Steve Karas

George Pittman would never forget where he was when The Voice, as it came to be known, revealed itself. It was similar, although of certainly far greater magnitude, to the 9/11 attacks and the assassination of JFK. It was a Sunday morning in June and the heat of the day was just beginning to rise. He was rocking on his front porch, thumbing through the *Times*, one eye on his great grandson racing back and forth across the burnt lawn. Sweat was climbing up the roots of the boy's blonde hair. The street was quiet, but for the trill of song sparrows and the chirping of crickets.

The Voice came suddenly and without warning and blanketed the Earth like a net trap. George carefully stepped off the porch and looked up to the pale sky. The boy wrapped his arms around George's bad leg and did the same. Neighbors peered through window blinds and then began spilling out and onto the street. At first, George thought it must have been a local hoax. A loudspeaker, perhaps. But the sound was all-encompassing, no less than the air's embrace. Then neighbors who had checked their televisions and phones began spreading word that The Voice could be heard, not only in their city, not even just through the country, but across the globe. There was one broadcast for all. It awakened New Zealanders at 1:30 A.M.; it stirred Russians preparing for supper at 5:30. The voice was decipherable in every language. In Tokyo, they heard Japanese; in Nigeria, The Voice sounded in over 500 tongues.

The Voice began by announcing it had indeed created the universe. It created man too, and given him the breath of life and dominion over the Earth. Among George's neighbors who now filled the street, there was a cacophony of triumphant cries and applause because at that moment there was a collective agreement The Voice was that of God. George's age-spotted hands shook. He shut his eyes and whispered, "Hallelujah." By then, his great-grandson was running around again, repeating things. It's a miracle, he said. It's glorious!

But just as strangers were throwing themselves into each other's arms, The Voice continued that, despite being dynamic and powerful as a whole, human beings as individuals were insignificant. The Voice

said once we died, our journeys ended. Once we died, we no longer continued on in any form at all.

George struggled to breathe, the Hand of God strangling his lungs. It couldn't be; his whole life, after all, had been built on the premise of resurrection. It was like being told he wasn't really George Pittman. Or that Bloomington, Illinois, his life-long home, didn't exist on any map. His thoughts rushed to Ellen. He then stared through the boy.

The Voice said, "Now go back to your lives." And then it was gone. The birds and crickets could again be heard. No one moved or spoke until Mrs. Wurthington, George's neighbor, fell to her knees and cried.

George Pittman had always been a Man of God. For over forty years, he had served as senior pastor at The First Christian Church; his father was pastor before him. George had been witness to countless miracles: the healing of Sergeant Samuel Hayes, who was told he would never walk again after being struck by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan; Baby Mabel, who was found unharmed in a cornfield, a tornado having ripped her home from the ground; Jennifer and Kathy Bender, twin sisters separated at birth who discovered each other fifty-five years later living only three miles apart.

For George, there had always been signs his late wife, Ellen, was near too. A week after she passed, he heard music coming from somewhere in the house. He finally pinpointed it to the attic where he dug through old boxes and Christmas decorations until he came upon a music box given to them on their wedding day. And not long ago, his great-grandson was having a conversation, alone in the basement. When George asked him who he was talking to, he said his mama (who had died of cancer at only thirty), Grandma Ellen, and a handful of other deceased relatives the boy couldn't possibly have known.

George had waited fifteen years to see Ellen again. For a long time, he wondered if she would be waiting for him, fearing she may have instead chosen to reunite with her first love who died in World War II. Now did he have to fear she wasn't out there at all? He knew The Voice couldn't have been God's, that there had to be some other explanation, but he still found himself wondering, *What if?*

George thought about his great-grandson, the family member he had grown closest to after the boy's mother passed. He couldn't bear the thought of not watching him from above, maturing into a fine young man, finding a nice wife, a good job, having a family of his own.

He desperately wished his death had preceded The Voice. In eighty-five years, he never had questioned his life beyond. Never had any doubt about it. He was infested with guilt for having even such fleeting thoughts now. He opened the Holy Bible for strength, but had difficulty keeping his mind focused. He listened to songs he and Ellen would dance to – “Wake Up Little Susie,,” and “Yakety Yak.” He longed for a sign from her that she was there with him. Maybe a skip of the record. He waited.

After The Voice revealed itself, the world descended into a universal depression. Of course, there were those who reacted in anger, using it as an opportunity to ignite cars on fire and shatter storefront windows. Others stockpiled water bottles and canned goods and hid in storm cellars. George just stayed indoors. Each morning, neighbors gathered outside their homes expecting The Voice to return and share more, but the skies were silent. What could the purpose of such a dreadful message have been? No one could make sense of it. Within days, speculation began to grow, through city streets and on television news programs and radio talk shows, casting doubt that The Voice was really God after all. And even if so, was He merely testing mankind to see how easily its faith could be shaken? It couldn't possibly be of human invention. Was The Voice an alien life form playing with the shared Earthling psyche? Or worse, Satan attempting to deceive Man and crush his frail spirit?

The morning headaches and nausea George had been experiencing just weeks before The Voice, had by now become intolerable. But it wasn't until he suffered a seizure that he finally went to see a doctor at St. Joe's. He underwent a battery of tests.

“We found a lesion in your left temporal lobe,” the doctor said. George didn't speak. He went numb.

A second MRI a month later showed that the lesion had grown. Glioblastoma Multiforme Grade IV tumor was what they called it. The

doctor recommended radiation and chemotherapy. He said, “George, I’m going to be honest with you – the average length of life for someone with a tumor like this is ten months.”

George had always told himself, long ago, well before The Voice, that he would decline treatment if circumstances such as those ever arose. That he would pray and let the Lord’s will be done.

“Can I please have some time to consider my options?” George asked.

George couldn’t sleep for days. He read scripture. He walked around with a black-and-white photograph of Ellen in his hand, as yellow-stained as his old teeth. In it, she stood against a rail overlooking the Niagara Falls. She had smooth skin, big brown curls, and a smirk, as if she feared nothing and would always remain young.

Days later, George called his doctor. “Nothing?” the doctor said. “Are you one-hundred percent sure?” George was sure. He would pray.

The Voice hadn’t returned in months. Maybe it never would. Folks stopped listening for it in the mornings and, slowly, life went back to the way it was before. George figured people born after The Voice would likely never perceive it as a real event. It would be as foreign to them as Neil Armstrong walking the moon to Generation Y. They would know of it only from the special television events on its anniversary. Man was resilient, after all, and knew how to suppress discomfort. And fear was an emotion that couldn’t sustain its intensity for long.

George wanted to live normally for as much time as he could. He pushed himself to keep up with the church choir, even though he couldn’t remember the words to hymns anymore or even read them for that matter. They sang “Jesus My Lord, My God, My All” and there were enough voices that George felt he could still follow along okay without being a distraction. He was tired all the time. Bruises covered his body like leopard spots. He was losing his speech. They were all symptoms of the illness.

To George’s surprise, hallucinations were symptomatic of it too, particularly auditory ones, and he became convinced The Voice and even the conversations he had about it with his family and neighbors

were all just fantasies of his diseased mind.

The Voice wasn't God's. It wasn't Satan's. It hadn't been the game of an extraterrestrial being. That's what George would tell himself whenever fear would grip him. Whenever he would reconsider clamoring back to the doctors for medications and miracles, he would tell himself The Voice never really happened. That it was no more real than Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds*, which caused widespread panic of its own. He told himself that soon he would be at peace.

Ellen came to George on his deathbed. He was sure of it.

While Death tugged at his ankles, his fingers instinctually clawed for solid ground. He was nine-years-old, building forts and foxholes with his older brother, Jack. Then he was twelve, sitting on the living room floor in front of the Zenith console radio listening to "The Shadow" with mom and dad. At last, he was a young man being introduced to Ellen for the first time, when he and his family had gone to Chicago to visit long-time friends. Even though she was far more worldly and educated than he would ever be, George knew immediately that he would marry her. The feelings from that moment were still as real and alive as the pain he was enduring that day.

George longed to be with everyone again, to let go, to be at peace with the Lord like he always imagined he would be. But would they be out there? Would their existence continue beyond the threshold? That's when Ellen came to reassure him. She appeared as a deer peering through his bedroom window. George tried to get the attention of his family, of the nurse, but he couldn't speak anymore and couldn't lift his arm to point. He looked at the deer and knew it was her. The deer nodded and turned as if inviting him to come along.

In his final memories, George saw the brilliant white light so many described. He could see his relatives crying over his body and his great-grandson touching his cold foot. The boy looked up at George departing and he waved. George's daughter said, "Don't leave yet, Dad, don't go." And he considered holding on longer. But then he saw Ellen walking towards him, her hand extended until it reached his.

"Of course I've been waiting for you," she said. "Of course I've been right here." Hers was the only voice he heard.

A Bow for Love

by Robert Lamon

Canadian Geese honked overhead, and I stopped to watch them as they flew by in perfect formation. I always stopped to look as they flew, or grazed in a field, or strolled with their goslings. Their existence seemed so orderly, so sensible—and most important of all, they each took a single mate for life.

My own life had come apart more than once, which likely explains my fascination with the geese. Twice I married the wrong girl. I blame myself for this, of course. The mismatch in each case should have been obvious, but the beauty of both women, each a distillation of the purest physical femininity, blinded me. I dare say, this often happens to those unsung creatures—American men. But I'm rich through inheritance and should have realized I might easily be married for my money. I knew I lacked charm, though, if I may say so, I wasn't all that bad looking.

My first wife, Ruth Ann, was a writer of sorts. I made her comfortable and provided what she needed for her writing, and she no longer had to fish for grants. She had a pleasant study overlooking the woods and the very best IBM Selectric typewriter. When a computer became an essential tool, I bought her a state-of-the-art model. She was svelte, willowy and desirable, and when she wasn't writing, or sleeping beside me, she was making wine lists for her friends, or trading recipes, or advising couples about weddings.

I truly loved her and admired her versatility. But one day, shortly after our seventh wedding anniversary, she announced she was leaving me. One of her old flames had shown up at a wine shop where she happened to be browsing. He was a writer himself and, as they say, hungry for experience. And so, off they went together. After the divorce, our two children visited me each week, and I agreed to pay for their college education.

A year later, not having learned my lesson, I married again. I met my second wife, Melissa—blond, beautiful, and poised—at my dining club where she was a regular. Without realizing it, I had done the chic thing—I had joined a club and hardly ever gone there. Thus, when I did show up in my blazer and bow tie, usually with a business partner, the other members were surprised, and I got attention. Here I should mention that I wasn't content to live on the returns from my inheritance. I had invested in two

local automobile dealerships, a beer distributorship, and a luxury apartment complex. I was well known in the local business world.

Anyway, Melissa and I got married—much too soon—and settled in my same old homestead. She was skilled in the art of lovemaking, and having her beside me provided some passionate moments. But properly dressed in the daytime, we hardly ever spoke of anything of importance, beyond what I should buy next. After five years and one child, Melissa declared us incompatible, took our child, and went to live in our second home in the mountains—she later got it in the divorce settlement. I agreed to pay for our child's college education. I was doing my part in populating the educated elite.

After my second divorce, I decided I was simply out of step with the wedded world. I had always thought of myself as a pretty good guy. I was fair in my business dealings, contributed money and time to the local mission, and donated to the usual charities. Despite my two divorces, I had thoughts of running for mayor. But as for women—I was now determined to avoid them. Oh—I must admit, I did consider sneaking out of town to some high-class whorehouse, or making a discreet call to one of those escort services. They were the simplest and cheapest ways to satisfy the needs of a still-vigorous male. Yet they were seedy, however discreet I might be. After all, I would know what I was doing—even if the world didn't.

In any event, there I was, in my forties, in good health, with my waistline still firm and narrow. My businesses were all doing well. I drove a BMW for workaday missions and a vintage Corvette for fun. My only concerns about women were the two monthly checks I sent to Ruth Ann and Melissa. Then I got that letter from the Sheriff summoning me to Jury Duty. As always, I was willing to serve.

I was sitting in the Jury Room, when the Clerk of the Jurors announced that a trial was about to begin. All the prospective jurors filed out of the room, and down the hall, and into the Superior Court room. I was seated as Juror Six—Juror Seven was an attractive, but not beautiful nurse. She was talkative in a very pleasant Southern way, and we seemed to hit it off, though at first, I wasn't paying her much attention.

Anyway, the defendant in the court case was an immigrant hero, who had a wife, a mistress, and a part-time girlfriend, and decided to enjoy sexual

freedom at the expense of his nine-year-old daughter. As the trial dragged on, we heard all the awful evidence establishing the nature of the crime and the identity of the criminal. And needing a pleasant interlude, the nurse, Effie Jamison, and I began having lunch together. After our jury's verdict was read and the defendant put in handcuffs, Effie and I agreed to get together sometime, and we dated and eventually married. And as amazing as it seems, our marriage lasted, and lasted.

Now here is a curious thing about our union. I have always preferred bow ties, a taste I inherited from my father—neither he nor I ever wore the phony clip-on kind. But I often had trouble getting them neatly tied, and when I did, my patience would desert me. On the other hand, Effie could tie a bow tie to perfection. She always got the tie straight and the ends exactly even. And so, before I went to my office, and whenever we went to a banquet, or to a friend's wedding, or later to a friend's funeral, Effie would always tie my tie just right. Then she would gaze at me with her gentle eyes and kiss me on the cheek, and we would embrace. And each time she tied my tie, our love was somehow renewed. I think our long romance was sustained by those lovely moments—and my bow tie.

The Watcher

by Jennifer MacBain-Stephens

today's adventure and tantrum time:
winter coats catapult themselves
down horn hill bypassing security
like gum drops getting smaller
melting in bath water by mistake
racing to a slow finish surrounded by play time's bars

cheeks fall prey to
perfect red circles
due to fallen hoods
the view from the top of the hill:
fleeting and fleeing

one chose not to participate
instead, thrusting the plastic red dish
solo, rider-less
down the small mountain

an amazed smile
emerged on his little face
watching the red ramp waiver and float
and crash down to blanketed earth
I wanted in on this secret- a mystery and pleasure
only he could feel
and he did it again and again

Playing Guitar

by Joe Marchia

I did not know how to play guitar. It was one of those things, like falling in love, that some people just seemed to know and others didn't. And if you're one of those people who don't, you tell your friends you're really going to learn it this time and they say, "Hey good for you." But the whim is never enough and you call it quits when you hear yourself plucking like an idiot.

It is, despite this, one of those things you tell people you play at parties or social gatherings. "Dude, I forgot you play!" You don't play. I do not know how to play guitar when they hand it to me. I can position it on my knee- this is the easy part. Before one strums everyone could be Hendrix.

"Play *Hey Jude!*" Someone will always want to hear *Hey Jude*. Someone will also want to hear a song they think you do not know. They almost ask you, but they put their cups into their open mouths.

"I don't know *Hey Jude*," I say, and it's the honest truth.

"Play something we'll all know," your friend will say. They're hoping you play their favorite song.

I take a sip of my drink. Everyone thinks I'm loosening up for the performance.

"No, I don't think I feel like playing," I say. Everyone goes nuts.

"Just play," someone annoyed says.

You have options now. You can cop out to not knowing and everyone will glare. You can play something you've made up on the spot and pray your company is comprised of exceptionally good-looking yet hard of hearing senior citizens. These are all the choices that are socially viable. Anything else and they will know you are a liar.

I start out playing slowly, a note here and there. Then I position my fingers in total mocking position of a guitarist and strum down. It's good enough to be a chord. I do this in rotation- on the spot- several of them

sound good enough. I pray on that. That mediocrity saves me. I stop.

“That was not bad,” says some girl. She knows nothing of guitar but she has just unintentionally saved me. She takes a sip of her drink and she must be drunk. Others grumble agreements. I take off the guitar and someone else picks it up. If you have ever been saved like this - by blind chance - you will believe in fate, if only temporarily.

Someone else picks up the guitar and starts to play. I walk to the kitchen with relief in my luck. I start to make a congratulatory drink.

“You’ve never played guitar before have you?” someone asks. I immediately turn expecting the world to be behind me, I’m ready to surrender to the cat and mouse game of the universe.

“I didn’t mean it like that, shit,” he says. “Sorry.”

“I suck at it, I know,” I say.

“You just don’t play,” he says, “You have no idea what you could do.”

“Neither do you,” I say smirking.

“You’re right, I don’t,” he says smirking.

Egg Sandwiches

by Suzanne O'Connell

I am from rogue waves.
From Coppertone and ripe plums.
From the black asphalt of a tennis court.
Splinters, sweat, and the smell of egg sandwiches.
I am from the pepper trees and the Meyer lemon,
whose fruit is sold for 5 cents a glass by my sister and me.

I am from the Sunday comics and the Catholic pews,
the red hair, one curly, one straight, of Ruth and Bill.
I am from the heavy hand and the lightweight heart.
From the Look At Me and the Because I Said So.
I am from Stanford Street in Santa Monica,
the golden land where the alcohol flowed.
Appetizers, barbecue, and martinis.

I am from my selected family of friends,
John Coltrane, chili dogs, and driving around.
And *The Catcher In The Rye*, who caught me
before I went over the cliff.

I am from the Air Force Colonel and the nitwit.
He who served with McArthur in the South Pacific.
She who had a big chest and threw great parties.
And a little girl who made friends with the strays and got ringworm.

I am from the photos pasted into the black album.
Black-and-white pictures of a little girl
wearing a dress matching her mother's.
An ancient book with vaults and chambers
where my family tree once grew.
I am from the faces in the album I no longer recognize.

I am from the golden land where the alcohol flowed,
a place I have yet to go.
From the black-eyed Susans growing in the garden.
From pepper trees and Meyer lemon,
from the memories of children swimming in the ocean
then eating ripe plums and egg sandwiches on the hot sand.

Diamond District

by Irene O'Garden

You gave me, when we got engaged,
a ring of baby sapphires 'round a baby
diamond. A violet of gems. What came
over me? Bridal magazines? Life-long sparkle
of my mother's solitaire? I'd never cared
about a diamond ring, but now the icon
blinded. Discontent with sapphires and myself
for saying nothing would sneer forever
on this finger, so I feared. Begin marriage

honestly. I asked you to take it back.
Pick a single diamond. Its imagined dazzle
obscured your hurting face, hid your shame
returning what so glowingly you'd chosen.
(The American mistake, prizing symbols
over what they symbolize.) In the district,
we bought the diamond ring on the Monopoly
board from a man with a flesh-curdling twitch.

When your sapphire eyes sparkled joy tears
at our wedding, my ring finger sizzled regret.
Although you never said a thing, each day
I saw the scar I gave you on my hand.
I apologized from time to time, making you return
that sapphire ring. One day, stupefying clemency.
Alone in a Bermuda shop, I gasp. Its perfect replica.
Later on the Moongate threshold, I present it to you.
Tears faceted your sapphire eyes again. Shortly
afterwards, to our great relief, my diamond ring—
prongs bent, stone cracked—was stolen.

Feeling a Twitter of A Connection

by Ania Payne

*“I love that moment when you make eye contact with a dog and he slyly smiles and nods to let you know he’s secretly a tiny man in a dog suit”
-@heymikehenry*

Wow. Deep. That’s what I love about Twitter.

“Why do you tweet? Your homepage just looks like a bunch of strangers typing the first thing that comes to their mind,” Josh groans as he peers over my shoulder to get a better glimpse of my Twitter. “You hated the chicken Alfredo in the caf today? And you think this is worthy of announcing to the world?” A look of disgust creeps over his face.

Josh is jealous that I have this social outlet that doesn’t involve him. I don’t want to argue so I say, “You don’t have a Twitter. You just don’t understand. Twitter is almost therapeutic. It’s a place where I can empty my thoughts freely as they enter my stream of consciousness.”

This sounds nauseating. I wish Josh tweeted. It would have sounded profound as a tweet.

People seem to either become obsessed with Twitter or they disregard Tweeting completely. Jack Dorsey created this social networking site six years ago, but people failed to appreciate Twitter until much more recently –when smart phones became a necessity, when celebrities started tweeting their every emotion, and especially when Oprah tweeted on-air in 2009 – resulting in a 43% increase in Twitter users.

But why did Facebook gain so much more popularity than Twitter? As of September 2011, Facebook had roughly 800 million users, while in that same year, Twitter only had about 175 million users. Ask anybody between the ages of ten and sixty and they can probably tell you with confidence, “Who created Facebook? Mark Zuckerberg, of course,” and then continue to elaborate in detail about the sob story of how Zuckerberg stole the idea from his classmates and ripped off his best friend. But hardly anybody knows who created Twitter. Dorsey’s less than scandalous life and introverted tendencies kept him out of the limelight, which contributed to Twitter’s snail-like climb up the social networking

popularity scale. *Vanity Fair* refers to Dorsey as a “purist” who has “one of the lowest profiles in tech.” The way taxi drivers briefly exchange information over the radio fascinated Dorsey so he suggested that Odeo (the software company where he worked) create a service that would allow anybody to write a couple lines about themselves on a smart phone and then send the message to whoever wanted to receive it, thus creating Twitter.

“I just want people to accept me for who I pretend to be” -@yoyoha

When Twitter was first created, many considered the site to be nothing more than a tool for the self-centered masses to broadcast every trivial detail of their lives to the universe, but once celebrities began downloading the Twitter App on their iPhones and tweeting every trivial detail of their lives, Twitter became important.

Twitter allows anybody to gain a sneak-peek into the lives of the rich and famous. Unlike Facebook, unless a Twitter account is privatized, anybody can follow whomever he or she likes. How many people do I know who are friends with Rihanna on Facebook? Zero, but how many friends of mine follow her on Twitter? Probably twenty, at least.

“Did you hear? Katy Perry and Russell Brand are getting divorced!” my roommate shrieked as she ran into my room last fall.

“Really? How do you know?”

“Katy just tweeted it! Her followers were the first to find out!” she responded smugly, as if being one of Katy’s 16,404,498 followers meant that she and the celebrity were clearly bosom buddies.

Reading tweets by celebs makes them seem more human, more like us. “George Clooney is eating a mushroom pizza? I’ve eaten a mushroom pizza!” We establish connections, though not necessarily the most meaningful connections. Quality isn’t important. It’s quantity. We want to feel connected to everyone, and feeling connected to the rich and famous certainly boosts our own morale, even if these celebs have no idea who we are. And, obviously, the celebrities like to boast about their incredibly large number of followers, so it must do something for them also.

“In the gym” -@justinbieber

Bieber’s profound statement resulted in more than 500 favorites and re-tweets. And his 18,731,712 followers long to hear tweets just like that - they want to know what he does every second of every day. If only Bieber could have provided more detail in that tweet, his followers sigh to themselves. Which machine was he using at the gym? How many pounds of weights was he lifting? More imagery, please, Bieber! Since that many people on Twitter want to know about Justin’s life, surely someone will want to know about mine.

“Psychic said I’d meet my husband in March, so goodbye forever, you guys” - @MrsRupertPupkin

Who needs the awkwardness of face-to-face speed dating when you can sit comfortably in your plush office desk chair and find a soul mate with the click of a mouse? The world of Twitter is an arena of endless romantic possibilities.

During Valentine’s Day 2009, hundreds of singles attended “Flitter” parties across Canada where the guests each wore a number and “flittered” on their iPhones and Blackberries in an attempt to catch the attention of other tweeters who were attending the event. “Flitterers” discovered love via the hashtag #twittercrush, where they tweeted sweet nothings about the person they found the most alluring, hoping to receive an affirmative response attached to the same hashtag. Even though they were in the same room, the “flitterers” preferred to communicate with the other singles through the safety of their LED screens.

Twitter has shown us how to refrain from human contact for as long as possible. Why pay for a therapist when you can tweet your complicated mess of emotions for free? Why go out and search for a partner when you can stay at home, create an online identity, and let your Twitter account lead you to true love? And all in 140 characters or less!

“There’s something oddly therapeutic about tweeting a tweet with exactly 140 characters” – Josh, two months after his Twitter conversion.

About one month after criticizing me for my addiction, Josh converted to Twitter. The power of Twitter is too strong for even a past non-believer to withstand. Obsessive Compulsive Twitter Disorder is sweeping the

nation. Do you have a neurotic desire to stay within a three-foot radius of any device connected to Twitter? Do you throw a mad fit of rage when anybody disturbs you mid-update? Rest assured, scientists are working on a cure to this neurological disorder. When the cure is found the results will be tweeted.

My own case of OCTD has definitely taken its toll. I get a thought. I tweet. Twitter really is a weird form of therapeutic thought cleansing. I feel relieved knowing I've shared this brilliantly composed tweet filled with unique wisdom to the world --at least to my 200 followers, although unfortunately half of them are Indian spammers and maybe twenty of them are people I honestly know. My true friends feel compelled to give me the needy star or re-tweet so I can feel like my intelligence is appreciated. And, I know, I am expected to reciprocate by re-tweeting and starring their brilliant tweets.

Sometimes I agonize over how my tweet is ignored. I know it has been read, but it isn't liked. The therapeutic effects backfire. I compulsively check my phone waiting for that affirmation. I struggle to camouflage the failed tweet with something outstanding, hoping I won't be judged by my previous mindless thought. I want to be viewed as clever and witty, not as a twat. I'll end up paying a therapist for help if I don't get immediate positive reinforcement.

"I tweet, therefore I am."

No one responds. Therefore, I am not.

Twitter has become the wasteland of my thoughts.

"Writers, like cuttlefish, shoot ink to protect themselves" -@TheBosha

We view the world in a Twitter mindset. How can I write the most profound tweet in 140 characters or less? How can I make the mundane marvelous? My head is feeling like a pinball machine, slamming through images and thoughts while calculating word counts. It's happening so fast it's maddening.

"Being concerned for one another should spur us to an increasingly effective love. #Lent" -@Pope2YouVatican

Some try to justify their Twitter obsession by claiming that Twitter makes them worldlier. “I follow @DaliLama, @Pope2YouVatican, and get my news from @CNN. There’s nothing wrong with this addiction!” Tweeters feel well rounded by following Huffington Post, Dr. Oz, Oprah, Flixter, Guns and Gardening, and every possible literary organization. In less than 140 characters, they can keep fully abreast of our worldly culture and politics. Anything more than 140 characters and our attention is lost.

If the Pope tweets, you know it can’t possibly be considered a waste of time. 27,467 people eagerly await his 140 character messages. I suspect those with short attention spans and limited time may enjoy these daily religious encounters. Surely, Tweeting with Pope Benedict counts for a missed church service or confession.

“Compassion is a mental quality that can bring us true lasting inner peace and inner strength” -@DalaiLama

The Dalai Lama, a man who steers clear of all fads and material goods, must carry a smart phone so he can share his brilliant thoughts on whim. Tweeting is a serious business. The Dalai Lama follows nobody but has 3,909,694 followers, which awes the rest of us tweeters who follow six hundred people but only have twenty-eight followers. How did he do it?

Tweets from the Pope and Dalai Lama are words of wisdom. I scroll through my daily tweets; there are hundreds. Most are frivolous. It’s time to improve the quality of my personal tweets. Time to incorporate poetry into a worthwhile tweet. The Dalai Lama and the Pope are probably hoping their reflective tweets will inspire us to become more contemplative.

*“Profound enlightenment
spiritual wisdom flutters
tweet delivers all”*

Now, surely, the Pope and the Dalai Lama will want to follow me.

Surely.

Shoebox Depths

by Richard King Perkins II

Every now and then
I slip into your twisted panty of home
uninvited, subliminally witnessed,

sleep in the charcoal of your oven,
finger the crumbling grate of your cheese.

It is my lone ability, this power of absolute grey,
given to the bitterly lame,
stolen intermittently by glove-handed dilettanti.

I rub the bristles of your toothbrush over my eyelids,
vanish the purr from your restless cat
juggle the humming circus of your sex toys

set your entire world slightly askew
just because I can.

In the bright define of solararity
you will see me, but not notice
that you've spilled a little coffee on my head

as you blindly throw a few coins
into my familiar shoebox depths.

A Stubborn Watch

by Brenn Roorda

Unlike a person, the watch was born in pieces. Its golden case was poured gently into a mold. Heat seeped into sand, leaving the final form behind. Gears were lovingly crafted by hand with repetitive caresses with the abrasive touch of a file. A precisely painted face was created as fine hairs left trails of the blackest ink. The spring was tightly and properly wound, boundless energy imbued in steel. When all the pieces were assembled by skillful hands, its first tick was akin to a heartbeat.

The watch was born a very long time ago. It does not know exactly when, no one bothers to tell a watch the time. Also unlike a person, the watch measures the length of its existence by the lives of those who carried it.

At first, the watch lived in a glass case bathed in the light of the sun. Faces would peek out from the other side and stare at it. Sometimes they would even pick up the watch. They would feel the weight of it, the smooth metal finish, and the twist of the knob. The watch would then be handed back to owner, who quickly wiped the evidence of their touch, and put it back behind glass. This did not bother watch, all the watch wanted to do was tick.

The first person who took the watch was a woman. Her fingers were soft and her touch softer. She had a smile that illuminated the dingy little store and smelled faintly of lilacs. The woman had the owner scratch what the watch assumed was words on the inside of its case. The watch was just happy for fresh air, right until it was placed inside a small dark box.

Not long after, the watch came to its second owner. He was overjoyed when he opened the box and found it inside. His hands were rougher and his eyes filled with mirth. Holding the watch, he gave the woman smelling of lilacs a peck on the cheek. The watch spent several hours enjoying sunlight before being delicately set into a pocket.

Such a festive scene was not to be again. What the watch did witness was something far different. There a symphony of loud booms, small ones that cracked and popped, and others that rolled like thunder. The air was heavy with the odor of wet earth and blood. The watch did not like this new place at all.

Sometimes the man with the mirthful eyes seemed to forget the watch was there. It stayed safely in his pocket, while the world around him was anything else. Other times, he clutched so tightly to the watch, as if his grip would protect his life from the shears of fate.

It did not.

The man lay in stunned silence, covered in mud and barbed wire. The watch sat quietly in his hand, mournful, but grateful that its own hands were continuing to move. What else mattered in the end?

The sun had passed across the sky once, before the watch had been found again. It was another man, dressed in a different uniform and speaking a strange language. He pried the piece of gold from cold fingers and hastily stuffed the watch into a pocket.

After a few more noisy battles, the watch traveled across a dark tempestuous sea. Life then became very routine for the watch. The scratchy uniform was traded for fine silk lined pockets. Booms were replaced with laughter. Memories of odorous fumes were overpowered by cigar smoke and high-end liquor.

One day, the watch was put back into a box. It was opened by a young man that looked a great deal like the one in the suit. The boy was gracious and subdued; the man smiled appropriately.

From what the watch understood, the boy decided that the timepiece was good luck. To maintain a positive relationship with fortune, he held on to the watch constantly. Years went by with his hands in a pocket, fingers wrapped protectively around the watch. The watch witnessed as those fingers slowly became gnarled and withered. Yet their grip never wavered.

Decades later the watch found itself a room the smelt of chemicals and was glaringly white. There were no pockets to comfortably rest in, only the bony fingers to clutch. Oddly, there was a second, louder, ticking in the room. The watch felt superior in the knowledge that its tick was perfectly rhythmic and constant, unlike this newcomer.

People came and went, filling and emptying the room. Some cried, others spoke softly, a few even laughed with the man in the bed. The

man remained still and held tight to the watch. One day when the second ticking had gotten slow and followed a strange beat, the man held the watch high and spoke. He whispered sagely of the unparalleled persistence of time. As silence grew in the room and the watch was again the sole sound, it could not help but agree.

Into the West

by Robert Rothman

Each day near dusk I see them flying into
the west, a flock of birds of six or eight
that individually peel off and make
sweeping circles, but always return to the
tight V-formation. Silhouetted against
the dying light, their moving wings become
more indistinct until all I can see
are dots of dark, and then they're gone. I'd like
to know where they fly and why. Beyond the hills
is sea. There is no place to rest. Not even
the swiftest bird can keep pace with the sun.
One day, and soon, I'll go out on a boat
alone and sail into that dark and see.

Sacred Dogs

by Yvette Schnoeker-Shorb

India has its sacred cows, but the USA has its sacred dogs.

—Anonymous post on a blog in response to a letter in a local newspaper

It was not that Adriana disliked dogs. She hated them. The barking was almost deafening. Adriana, a petite, mousy, middle-aged woman, remembered a time not long ago when public dialogue about dogs had been allowed on newspaper blogs—the days when the department of sanitation prohibited all but “service” animals in shopping carts, when dog owners used to have to sneak them into restaurants, when the first visual impression people had of city parks and courthouse grounds, upon arriving, was not of hundreds of unleashed dogs urinating and defecating on lawns and curbs. But in 2020 the public dialogue in open media, such as newspapers, was made illegal and these sources were held liable for any “inappropriate” public criticism of dogs, which was now against the law.

Not coincidentally, there were few options to view wild canines in urban or even rural areas, as most of the coyotes and wolves throughout the country had been eliminated. All the wolf reintroduction programs failed because agencies simply could not prevent the incessant shooting by the public. Thus the wolves were having a quick journey to extinction.

But for the coyotes, the journey to the end of the species was literally torturous. Because of the newly adopted prohibition on killing any domestic dog under any circumstances, humane societies (now combined with rescue centers) were now legally obliged to find homes for the multitudes of dogs that continued to come their way. To handle the particularly vicious ones, newly formed, for-profit organizations found a lucrative societal niche by offering the service of “wildlife control.” Dogs were trained to tear apart the unfortunate coyotes who had been aggressively trapped and placed in small pens, where packs of dogs were instructed to attack the targets, one at a time. The coyotes, deprived of their pack instinct, and individually placed in the pens, were easy bait for the teams of dogs whose instincts were encouraged to play out.

Within the following years, and because the general population had been manipulated by the media to accept the cruel turn of events as normal, reality shows with this gruesome theme, and primarily sponsored by the pet industries, became quite popular. In fact, there was a curious but direct

correspondence between the diminishing of coyotes and the proliferation of doggie carriages, doggie hats, doggie jackets, and other accessories, including a special, designer line of Doggie-Doo-N-Go™ toilet paper and bags. It was a shame, Adriana had thought when it all first started, being that coyotes retained their evolved intelligence. Way back in 2014, Adriana had bonded with a coyote who had been shot in his left leg. She remembered how the coyote would actually come up into the back yard to drink from the water pan she had placed under the brush at the edge of the yard. For the first few days, before drinking, he would timidly check with quick swipes of the paw of his good leg the lower branches near the pan for trip wires that could trigger a trap. What Adriana could not know at that time, she now realized, was the extent to which this whole mania would make its mark on the lives of those who remained oblivious to the socially manufactured benefits of dogs that provided the comfort and a sense of infantile control to the psyches within a psychologically frustrated and failing society. Now, behind bars, she attempted unsuccessfully to block out the echoing of yapping, yelping, howling, growling, and barking. She replayed in her mind the incident that had landed her in “The Pen,” as the facility, one of many, was known.

It had started as a small incident, really and relatively speaking, involving what looked to be a four-year-old child. Adriana had been waiting in line at the grocery store. Directly in front of her was a stout woman pushing a rather smelly cart with two dogs riding as passengers in the main part, a German shepherd and a well-groomed, white toy poodle. The woman was eating from an open bag of chips placed in the upper basket of the cart while she concentrated on the cigarette case. In front of the dog-filled cart, a mother holding the hand of a little boy pushed her cart filled with groceries forward. Adriana just happened to look as the a boy and the German shepherd riding in the cart behind that of the child’s mother both started to make a grab—snout with teeth bared paralleling the grasping little hand—for the same candy bar, one of many placed temptingly and predictably in the racks bordering the checkout line. Perhaps it was indignation at the foul odor that triggered her action. Maybe the fact that the shepherd’s owner, like many, took advantage and did not immediately use the required (and taxpayer provided) Doggie-Doo- N-Go™ bags to clean up after the shepherd had left a pile in the cart. Or, more likely, it was out of compassion for the child, not wanting to witness those little fingers undergo ripped skin and the resulting rain of blood.

Before she could stop herself—and quite uncharacteristic of her somewhat introverted nature, Adriana suddenly pulled the cart containing the two dogs out of line and sent it wheeling down a nearby aisle, where it crashed immediately into a row of nicely stacked, plastic accessories. The startled shepherd jumped out and took advantage of the first exit to outdoor freedom. The equally frightened poodle also attempted to jump over the side of the cart, but the little dog's collar did not follow, effectively breaking the small dog's neck. The dog's owner, an obese woman with dyed blond hair and sunglasses, immediately used her cell phone to call the police. Both women then waited, the heavier woman clasping and unclasping her hands and alternating between sobbing and crying out, "My babies! What will Mama do? What will Mama do?... Oh, oh ..."

The obviously distressed, wailing woman began receiving sympathy and consolation from other shoppers, mostly those who also had various breeds of dogs in either the basket or the main portion of their carts. Adriana remained calm and appeared emotionless to those who wanted to see her as such; however, she was aware of more than a few shoppers who seemed to find the disruptive incident amusing, although they kept their heads down to hide satisfied smirks as they left the store. Adriana had planned, when the officers arrived, to use the opportunity to say that she simply did not want to see yet another child added to the five million (a figure she had just read in her insurance company's newsletter) children bitten that year in this country alone .

But she had gravely underestimated the social climate. The child's mother had quickly and fearfully ushered the child out so as to not be involved in the incident. The rotund blond, when pointing out Adriana, had accused her of harassment and interference but, primarily, of murder. Adriana was arrested for involuntary dog-slaughter. Because dogs were involved, the standardized penalty for this class of crime, regardless of the two minor semantic distinctions, was the same.

2022 came around quickly. Adriana had been on death row for almost a year, but she knew that she would not be seeing the welcoming in of 2023. Of course, fireworks had been banned throughout the country in 2017 because the majority of people felt that the noise was too painful for the sensitive ears of dogs. Reality shows now dominated networks, computers, and smart phones, so most people didn't feel too deprived. And the shows were now particularly spectacular on New Years Eve. Parades were passé. The media had found better accommodations to appeal to the cravings they

had created within the culture. Adriana's life, like dogs, would become an organic commodity—but only temporarily.

In the hard economic times of 2014, the prisons could simply not be expanded, although there initially had been plans to do so. With the dilemma of so many crimes being committed by humans and so much leftover space from the old days of confining “condemned” dogs, the solution became as obvious as the few remaining coyotes became elusive. By economically expanding the hold-for-adoption areas with galvanized steel, some clever administrators discovered that it was also sufficiently less expensive to include more holding cells for certain types of criminals—and specifically for those who could serve an unusually useful function.

Thus, a special wing within the confines of some of the designated humane society/rescue centers housed certain criminal types like Adriana. They were kept in large cages that occupied the same spaces that once were reserved for the animals to be euthanized. This had the benefits of saving taxpayer dollars, and it was efficient. But most of all, it avoided waste and provided moral guidance. Once the putting down of dogs was banished, there was an enormous amount of sodium thiopental, paralytic substance, and potassium solution to be utilized. Televised and social-media displays of lethal injections proved particularly profitable for a number of corporations.

So it came to be that on the evening before the death of each old year, on New Year's Eve, a selected group of human prisoners from various facilities were marched out from “The Pens” to adjacent, brightly lit areas containing rows of medical tables, complete with constraints. The rooms, originally small but now extended such that they resembled miniature warehouses, had once been used for euthanizing shelter animals. Now they were used for the same purpose, but the animals had been replaced with unwanted humans. Additionally, cameras and spectator walks had been installed to enhance the drama and to further appease the appetites of panting audiences.

This “event” was held only once a year due to the country's fear of intervention by international objectors to the spectacle. In most countries, both the literal and social climates were such that, in order to adapt to the growing worldwide famine, nations had begun to meet their protein needs by eating the abundance of dogs. Some countries had also incorporated dogs into the work force as beasts of burden. Nonetheless, the rest of the

world still tolerated this peculiar annual agenda of what was perceived as an impoverished and, more importantly, idiosyncratic and volatile country. Other nations seemed to sadly understand that Adriana's country, along with all its other coping mechanisms and quirks, evolved to adjust to its diminished global economic power, clung even more so to its mass psychological projections. Unfortunately for Adriana, it was indeed a country that fiercely and obsessively preserved its sacred dogs.

Ordinary Magic

by Caryl Sills

In the spring of 1950, when I was eight years old, Zaideh Abe was up to “K” in the encyclopedia. If I had been behaving especially well—helpful to my mom and her mom, Bubbeh Bessie—he’d let me sit beside him on the couch, open the chosen volume, and take a turn reading out loud. If I stumbled over a big word, Zaideh helped me sound it out.

I remember one rainy, dreary Sunday when we read about a magician named Harry Kellar, who was internationally famous at the end of the nineteenth century. The article mentioned his most popular stage illusions but gave only a few details about how he did them. It was little more than a list headed by his top acts: The Levitation of Princess Karnack, The Vanishing Lamp, The Floating Head. I thought the latter sounded like the silliest of his tricks and told Zaideh so.

“When I was little,” I explained, “I used to believe in magic, but now I know it’s all just trickery. That’s because my dad took me to a magic show where a lady in a box was sawed in half and put back together again, but she wasn’t hurt one bit. Dad said she was scrunched up in one end of the box, and that’s why she didn’t even get a scratch.”

“Oh, my,” Zaideh Abe said, feigning horror, “I certainly agree that’s not real magic. That’s only someone performing tricks for money. But I can assure you there’s real magic all around us, and even if you can’t see it, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist. Can you see happiness, sadness, anger? No. But you can see the consequences—a smile, a tear, a frown. Remember when Bubbeh Bessie summoned Freileck? What else could that be but magic?”

Freileck was Jake Finklestein’s cat. I knew that when it went missing, the whole neighborhood searched. For two days, Jake sat on his front steps and cried while everyone else peered into cellars and garages or poked under porches and every bush in every yard. But no Freileck.

On the third day, Bubbeh Bessie got up from her afternoon nap and walked to Jake’s house. “Can you guess what I have in my apron pocket,” she asked little Jake in her slightly accented English that mispronounced “w’s.”

Then she gently pulled out a tiny, furry thing who protested with a loud Meowww.

“We searched every inch of everywhere for that cat,” Zaideh Abe told me now. “He wasn’t anywhere. So how come your bubbeh all of sudden found him?”

“Lucy,” I said. “He was going home just as Bubbeh went outside.”

“Nonsense,” Zaideh said. “When Bubbeh Bessie saw how sad Jake was, she used her magic to summon Freileck home. Maybe no one saw her work her magic, but the result proves she did. I can tell you for sure that luck is one thing, but magic is quite another.”

“Stop filling her head with silly stories,” my bubbeh said as she came into the room from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. She was only five feet tall and as round as Zaideh Abe was thin and all angles, and she was always smiling.

She extended her hand to me. “It’s lunch time,” she said. “I made beet borscht and there’s black bread fresh out of the oven to smear with sweet butter.”

I hopped to my feet and was following her into the kitchen when she turned half-around towards Zaideh Abe. “If I could do magic,” she said softly, “I could have whisked away the family I left behind before those Nazi murderers... before....” But Bubbeh Bessie didn’t finish her thought. Instead, she leaned down and kissed the top of my head. “No more sadness,” she said. “I’m here and you’re here and my foolish husband is here and ve’re all hungry. So let’s eat lunch.”

One day, years later after Zaideh Abe had passed away and I was in high school, I joined my mother and aunt to watch Bubbeh Bessie make kuchen for the Yom Kippur break-fast. We took notes from the moment she began to knead the yeast dough to the final sprinkling of cinnamon sugar over the fat pastry rolls she’d stuffed with apples, coconut, raisins, and chopped nuts.

Bubbeh never measured anything, so we decided to watch her bake in order to quantify in standard measurements what a handful of this and a pinch of that was equal to. Her amazing desserts were our family’s legacy, and we wanted the recipes to live on as long as there was a sweet tooth to savor them.

That afternoon as the kichen baked and a buttery, yeasty aroma filled

Bubbeh's kitchen, I had the sudden thought that maybe Bubbeh Bessie could do magic after all. Not the spectacular kind that rescues lost cats or whisks people across an ocean and out of danger, but the everyday kind of magic that transforms ordinary things like flour and eggs and apples into an almost otherworldly experience.

I know Zaideh Abe would agree.

Welcome to Florida

by Kristen Snow

It was a cool, early spring night in northern Florida; the sky was blanketed with eerie grey clouds that shrouded the stars and seemed to devour the thin sliver of waning moon. It was a Saturday night—one of the first ones I didn't have plans for in a long time, which was rare for a sixteen year old girl—and I just wanted to relax and enjoy the peace and quiet. I had decided to go out for a breath of fresh air and I was standing on the front step of my miniature-sized guest house. My parents had graciously agreed to let me move into it when I got a job so I could have a little freedom—plus they could collect some rent. It was situated in the back yard of my family's larger ranch-style home, attached on the side by an open breezeway that we used for outdoor storage. The in-ground swimming pool lay only a few feet in front of me.

The vinyl liner had come loose again in the shallow end, and water had filtered in between it and the exposed concrete. Something about it just irked me—it was like skin peeling off after a nasty sunburn... it just didn't seem natural. I wondered how many spiders it housed.

It wasn't warm enough to start swimming yet, and through the winter we didn't bother trying to maintain the pool. There were too many leaves to scoop and nobody was using it anyway. Now the water was green and murky, and I half expected to see some roaring swamp beast rise out of it at any moment. It even had a raw, sulfuric stench to it, like after a hot summer rain.

Thick fog crept slowly across the surface of the water like a scene out of a low-rate horror film. I felt this overwhelming sense of dread as I stared at the image before me. I'd had nightmares about this pool before, and it usually looked exactly like this—just plain creepy. I stood there pondering the many terrifying things that could be lurking beneath the surface of the algae-infested water: toads, most likely; a snake, maybe; dead bugs and spiders, definitely.

I decided to do something incredibly stupid and check the trap on the side of the deep end to see what kinds of gifts it had in store for me. It was usually one of my dog's tennis balls or a mass of downed helicopter seeds—the ones that spin like propellers when they fall from the trees. I

lifted the square plastic lid and peered into the hole; the small yellow light on the corner of my porch shone just enough to mark the outlines of a toad bobbing in the water. I picked up the little net that hung on the nearby wall and gave it a dunk into the water to scoop out the toad. It was dead. I dumped it onto the concrete, scoffed in disgust, and nudged it into the grass with the tip of my shoe.

A sudden splash in the water drew my gaze sharply back to the pool.

What was that?

It couldn't be a fish. There's no way. Fish don't just randomly show up in swimming pools, right? It had to be something bigger—a snake? It wouldn't be the first time. We lived within half a mile of Doctor's Lake, so of course there was some sort of monthly ritual of a snake showing up in the yard, moon-bathing in the driveway, or venturing into the pool. They were annoying, but unfortunately if one of the cats didn't get rid of them, it was left to us humans.

I stepped closer to the edge of the water, though my mind screamed at me to stay away. I felt compelled to find out what was splashing about in my pool while it looked like Swamp Thing's nest. This would have been the moment in a scary movie when I'd be shouting at the television, "No! Run the other way, dumbass!"

Cautiously, I crouched down and squinted, waving a hand through the fog in an attempt to clear it up enough so I could see deeper into the water. I could see movement: a dark shadow barely shifting beneath the greenish murk. It had to be a mass of leaves on the bottom of the pool. Or maybe just shadows. There was a subtle breeze which caused the fog to creep along in its slow journey over the water's surface and off into the depths of my yard. Whatever the dark shadowy thing was, it was way too big to be a snake.

But leaves and shadows don't splash in the water like that...

To my sheer horror, the entire dark mass twisted suddenly and darted upward from the six-foot depths. I let out a surprised yelp and stumbled back, fought my way over the short distance to my doorstep without looking away from the water. It broke the surface and I wanted to scream at what I saw, but when I opened my mouth nothing came out. The intruder

circled around the deeper end of the pool once, then splashed back into the water and disappeared beneath the thick screen of algae and fog.

My pool wasn't just a death bed for leaves, twigs and insects; it wasn't just a nesting place for spiders and too-curious toads; it wasn't even infested with water moccasins like I suspected. It was much worse than that.

“Hoooooly shit! There's a freaking alligator in my pool!” I shouted, practically squealed, as I finally managed to find my voice again. I was wedged between panic and awe. One part of me thought this was the coolest thing I could imagine; the other feared for my dogs and cats. If there's an alligator in my pool, it clearly found a way into my yard, didn't it? We couldn't have alligators roaming about in our backyard all willy-nilly!

I began to pull myself together and stood up with my back pressed firmly against the guest house door, then took a few deep breaths in an attempt to calm down. I needed to do something...but what? I began running through a mental checklist, deciding I should call someone. Mom was at work; Dad was on sea duty, probably floating around in the Mediterranean somewhere; my sister was staying the night with one of her friends; my boyfriend was an idiot and he'd probably do something stupid like jump in the water and end up losing an arm or leg; it was probably too late at night to call animal control, but I had to try.

I turned the doorknob behind me and all but fell backward into the guest house, then slammed the door shut. Who knows? The gator might have escaped the pool and tried to follow me inside. Having an alligator in my living room would be so much worse than having one in my swimming pool!

I grabbed my phone and dialed 4-1-1 so I didn't have to hunt down the number for animal control through the phone book—did they still make those? When I was finally connected to the animal control office, the woman that answered had a slow southern drawl and didn't seem to be in any hurry, and I was too busy waiting to explain the situation to listen to anything she said.

“Thank you for callin' Clay County Anim—” I interrupted her before she could finish. She could have been a recorded message, for all I knew, but I

also didn't care at the moment.

“There’s a freaking alligator in my swimming pool and nobody is home and I don’t know how it got there and what if it ate my cats? I mean I have dogs too, but what if it ate my cats? I can’t get it out because I don’t think I have a net big enough, but my dad might because he likes to fish so can you send someone?” The whole request came out in one extremely fast, giant sentence—or was it a question? I nearly panicked all over again while I was trying to explain. The lady on the phone didn’t seem to know either, so she just sighed.

“Allllright honey, jus’ tell me yer address an’ I’ll send one of th’ boys out to ya.”

I relayed my address as soon as I could remember it, and then hung up the phone. What was I supposed to do now? Sit around and wait for them to show up like a normal person? Pah!

I should do something—keep it distracted, maybe. I went to dig through my closet and found some old, muddy boots I used to wear when we would take the quads out to Keystone. Surely wearing boots would be safer than flip-flops. I marched outside, feeling much more invincible since I had a thin layer of rubber covering my toes, and made sure the dogs were locked in the house before I swung the back gate open. I wouldn’t likely hear if the animal control guy decided to do a dingbat thing like ring the doorbell, so this way he could let himself in.

I stood near the shallow end of the pool, waved my arms in front of the motion-sensitive light on the corner of the breezeway so it would switch on, and peered into the water through the fog.

Where is it now?

It must have still been at the other end of the pool, hiding within its greenish-brown depths. I felt like I should do something. If I could get it into the shallow end, it would be easier for them to catch, right?

Meat! Alligators love meat! I could bait it, and then they could catch it! But what would I bait it with? A fishing pole, maybe. That made sense.

I ran into the main house and hunted down one of my dad's fishing poles, then scavenged the refrigerator for some gator bait. All we had was a selection of lunch meat and half a package of hot dogs, so I grabbed all of it. While I was still in the kitchen, I quickly wrapped slices of turkey and honey ham around whole hot dogs, shoved a few toothpicks through them so they would all stick together like one big hunk of meat, and rigged them onto the three-pronged fishing hook. This could work!

Armed for my battle with the gator, I headed back outside just in time to meet up with the two guys from animal control. They eyed me with my lunchmeat-hot-dog-baited fishing pole and my rubber mudding boots, while I eyed them and their spiffy tan jumpsuits with nametags identifying them as Dave and Brian, their giant roll of duct tape, and Ketch-All pole. After a moment of awkward silence, one of them burst into laughter. Like they'd never seen anyone fishing for alligators in a swimming pool before!

"Best let me handle this one," the man labeled Dave suggested while Brian continued to chuckle.

Dave gave the pool a quick once-over, and then hopped right into the shallow end with a sploosh. It took them all of five minutes to hook the gator, pull him out, and tape him up. He wasn't big, thankfully—only about four feet long, so he was still young. Obviously there was a breach in our fence somewhere that would have to be found and blocked off.

I thanked Dave and Brian while I followed them through the gate and to the front, Brian carrying the gator tucked under his arm like a purse, and Dave squishing through the grass with a half-soaked jumpsuit and boots full of water. I was almost sad to see them go. They hopped in their pickup, keeping the little gator in the cab with them, and drove away while I stood there waving farewell with hot dogs dangling from my fishing pole.

The Basement Door

by Dan Upton

Tuesday.

I can smell the sweet scent of mother baking her famous chocolate chip cookies. The rich morsels melting so deliciously as the dough begins changing to a nice golden brown. I can hear my father's voice as he returns home from his shift at work. He got louder as he explained to my mother and older brother how the mainframe at work unexpectedly shut down causing a severe delay in the workload. He told them how his boss was very upset and had given him a hard time at work. My brother tried to cheer up my father by telling him how he made the varsity rowing team and that the coach was thinking he would make a great coxswain because of his build. I can now hear my mother walking down the hallway towards the basement door where I was seated very quietly as to not make a sound. The top stair was narrow. So narrow that only my right butt cheek fit, so I shifted all my weight as to not make any noise as I sat perched with my ear turned to the door. As my mother walked back and forth from the kitchen to the living room where my father was now reading aloud the obituaries from this morning's *Poughkeepsie Journal*, I felt a spider crawl up my sock onto my bare leg. As the spider's fangs penetrated my calf, I let out a low cry. As the warm tears ran down my cheek, I held my right hand firmly over my mouth so my mother wouldn't hear me perched at the old basement door. As I rubbed the throbbing welt on my leg, I heard my mother inform my brother and father it was time to wash-up, as dinner was ready.

The occasional thump of the furnace kicking on and the drip of the old wash-basin were the only sounds that broke the silence. The light over the stairs flickered out 6 meals ago so I washed the old chipped plate from the leftovers my brother snuck down to me in the dark and quickly placed it in a box with the others so mother wouldn't notice I had eaten. As bedtime soon approached, I try to refrain from thinking about the time or day of the week. Instead I thought about the last day I went to school. I came home from school late that day because I had lost my tiny gold heart bracelet that my mother's sister had given me for my 11th birthday. My friends and I searched the entire school grounds for it with no luck. I remember how mad my mother was. She screamed at me the entire night. When my father found out how irresponsible I had been, he decided I should spend some time alone to think of what I had done. I knew I disappointed my parents. I seemed to, on a frequent basis, but I didn't realize exactly how upset they

were until I heard the click of the lock on the basement door.

Wednesday.

The sunlight is teasing the corner of my eye as I wake. I can hear my mother and brother in the kitchen walking around. My father has already left for work so I think it must be around 7:30 or so. As the smell of eggs and bacon whiffs through the house I glance through an old photo album I found 3 meals ago while looking for a flashlight in the old boxes under the stairs. As I flip through the tattered book, the old musty smell of Polaroid pictures and dust overcome the smell of my brother's breakfast and suddenly my stomach stops rumbling. As I glance at each page I see the snapshots of my parents' trip to Florida last year. The endless photos of Disney World my parents had taken. I stared at the one of my mother and brother standing in line at the Tower of Terror. My brother loved Halloween as a child and he and my parents would often watch scary movies together. Then there were a few of my father and brother at Sea World right in front of Shamu the killer whale. They had been splashed, and if you flip through them you can see the water coming over the tank and eventually drenching my father. As I came across the photo of the three of them with their mouse ears on I felt the scar on my right forearm. I still remember how angry my father was when he saw me wearing my brother's Mickey ears hat. First he screamed at me. Then he grabbed my arm and lifted me so high in the air I grazed the ceiling fan with my shoelace. When the Dr. said my arm was broken, my mother screamed at him because I needed a cast. Then he screamed at me because my mother screamed at him. Now every time it rains or is cold out, I remember not to touch someone else's belongings. Lesson learned.

Thursday.

This afternoon my father came home early from work. I heard my parents talking in the living room but couldn't make out the muffled conversation through the fancy berber carpet my mother had installed last year. I remember lying on that carpet watching television with my brother until my father was angry one day and ripped the cable wire from the wall. I never set foot in the living room again.

As I stood under the dining room I could now hear more of my parents conversation. It sounded like my father had bad news. I couldn't really make out what he was saying over my mother's screaming so I looked into another box under the stairs. I found my mother's wedding dress. It looked so beautiful. I remember seeing the picture on the mantle of my

parents on their wedding day. My father was so happy. My mother looked as elegant as ever with her long gown flowing down onto the floor. They were the happiest couple I had ever seen and often dreamed that one day I too would find someone and grow to be as happy. Next to the box with my mother's gown was an old hat box with a heart and my father's name on it. As I opened it I found countless letters, valentines and pictures of my father. As I read through the valentines one by one I couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of my father being such a sap and couldn't imagine my parents being so in love that my mother saved all of this stuff. At the bottom of the box I found a small cardboard red heart shaped box. Inside were several chocolates that appeared suddenly almost like a creamy cocoa oasis. As the sweet goodness went down my throat I thought to myself how angry my mother would be if she caught me eating her candies that she saved. Overwhelmed with guilt, fear and now a bit of a stomach ache, I tucked the box back under the stairs hoping no one will notice.

Friday.

This morning I awoke to a loud slam. I heard no voices, hardly a footstep, and only one last slam of the front door. I patiently waited for the smell of bacon and eggs. Maybe I over slept and missed my parents' morning chats? Perhaps my brother had already left for school and my mother was out running errands? As I wait on that loose, rickety top step with my ear firmly placed against the door, I hear silence. The occasional thump of the furnace even stopped. I rush over towards the warmth of the sunlight beaming in through the slight crack in the plywood covering the lone window. For hours, it seems, I pace between the top step and the area under the kitchen, holding my breath as to be ever so silent. I focus on listening so hard that I can now hear my heartbeat in my ears. As I wait anxiously for my family to return, I didn't notice the sun go down. Now I wait in the dark without even the sound of the furnace to keep me awake.

Saturday.

This morning I woke with my head leaning against the basement door. As I heard the footsteps come closer I rushed down the old stairs and hid behind the boxes in the far corner next to the cold furnace. I hear the latch click, and with a creak I now see light flooding the basement from the open door. With my head tucked between my knees, I sit behind my cover shaking and praying my mother doesn't notice I went through her belongings. I try to remember if I put the boxes back in the exact spot or if I left a photo out in plain sight. As the footsteps got louder I heard a strange voice. Suddenly a flashlight was aimed right at my face and blinded me

with white stars. As I tried to understand what was happening all I could hear was the man saying, “Oh my God!” over and over. He helped me to my feet and then carried me up stairs. As he rushed me through the living room and out to his truck I could see the furniture was gone. The walls that were once decorated with endless photos now stood naked with only a slight outline of the old frames that hung there. As the man called the police from his phone, I heard him say that he was from a realty company and the owner left in the middle of the night. He then kept repeating that he just found a girl locked in the basement of the empty house. I remember only thinking how the air smelled so much different outside. I couldn’t remember the last time I saw the sunshine so bright and, although it was cold enough to see my breath and I sit only in a t-shirt and socks, how warm I felt inside this stranger’s truck. The thought of my parents leaving me made me upset and extremely relieved at the same time. I felt abandoned, as I had been most of my childhood. The gross realization that my parents could actually leave me didn’t sting as bad as my worrying about my brother. We had always been close and I knew he was terrified that if he spoke up to my parents he would be treated as awful as I was. As I watch the police and ambulance pull around the corner towards my parent’s house, I start to cry. I cover my mouth, afraid to make a sound.

Removing, Refitting

by Catherine Batac Walder

Chairs, heavy TVs predating flat screens, and even the occasional snooker table that would take five people to disassemble and move are all right. But boxes, I hate boxes. Six years on this job made me dislike wardrobe boxes most of all. They were like bloody upright coffins. I brought the last wardrobe box to the master bedroom upstairs. Mrs. Baker thanked me but the look that she gave, however lacking in consonants and vowels, told only of disgust. She seemed to have a problem with my tattoos, ponytail, and piercings, as though the removal company I worked for also planned to move in with her and we'd see each other every day. I knew she thought that I was up to no good just because I looked a certain way.

The Bakers appeared young to me but all their years seemed to be peppered with stuff. Opening the door of the van was like letting loose of contents that wouldn't be exhausted. Box after box after box – and perhaps Mrs. Baker's disgust was reasonable, even at the rate we were going she might have to see me everyday till the work was done. God how I hated them. I threw the boxes marked “fragile” into a corner when I knew that nobody was watching. My back ached and I wanted to eat my lunch just to get hold of that cold drink in my satchel because they didn't offer us any.

Nobody else wanted to empty the wardrobe boxes; not Mrs. Baker who owned most of the contents, not Mr. Baker whose mind didn't seem to be in this ‘moving houses’ affair, not Max the leader of our team who was showing off again by directing everyone and chatting up the couple with his removal company experience. I could tell he was just stalling for time and trying as much as possible to excuse himself from helping lift the heavier furniture. He was always on at me, shouting my name into my ear, “Peter!!!” If I stopped working even only for a second, “Peter do this,” and “Peter do that,” he'd say.

Mrs. Baker had so many clothes but her hangers were of the disposable kind, the kind you get when you have your clothes back from the dry cleaners, made of wire and knotted into a sharp edge just below the hook. I managed to cut my palm with one of the knots. It bled and I wiped it on one of Mrs. Baker's jumpers. What kind of people spend so much on stuff without buying a proper hanger?

I was angry as I filled up the upstairs oak wardrobe with the dresses. It wasn't my job to arrange her fucking clothes for her. Hundreds of dresses made of cotton, satin, silk, viscose... I had to admit they were pretty but I couldn't find any remembrance from this outing. At one point I got attracted to an embellished brocade dress with puffed sleeves. The sleeves puffed more as I moved closer to touch the dress, as though it were crying out, *take me, take me*. I threw the dress up on top of the oak wardrobe to separate it from the others.

The last one I put in the wardrobe was a nude lace v-neck evening dress. I thought, now this is more like it. I let it off the hanger and put it inside the wardrobe box again, this time on the floor in the corner where it wouldn't be noticed. Max shouted from downstairs to ask what was keeping me, trying to impress again at my expense. He asked if all the wardrobe boxes were now ready to be brought back into the van. I called yes and he told me to hurry. If you would hurry yourself, I wanted to yell back but I stopped myself. I would get the dress later at the depot, once everybody had gone.

I threw the hanger of the lace dress under the bed. Poor Mrs. Baker would probably wonder what it was doing there. I could already picture her asking my boss about her missing lace dress, if she would notice that it was missing at all. She would probably think it was the man with tattoos and ponytail and piercings who took it, the one who had unpacked her wardrobe, for he seemed strange and that she wouldn't be surprised if he would be found out soon with a box of lace dresses stashed somewhere. She would probably realize it was missing at one in the morning, for she seemed to be the type who would think of dresses at one in the morning, and scream to absent-minded, clueless Mr. Baker, "That removal company robbed us of one lace dress!" She would imagine me wearing that dress at night and she would suspect I'd wear it clubbing. and no one would guess it didn't even belong to me and I wouldn't have any nose rings and I would wear my hair down, and I would be a box with my lid shut and maybe people wouldn't look at me at a certain way because I would look the same as everyone. I would fit in it, yes, I would fit in.

We Are All Made of Stars

by Clay Waters

I was driving Ashley's car home. Dallas to El Paso is a ten-hour haul if you're doing nothing else, and I wasn't.

A red Honda Accord. Bought with her own money, or anyway not mine. She'd worked at the mall for two years, her friend said. Her key-chain held a little white rubber Schnauzer toy and only a couple of keys. Too young for more. Far too young.

Before starting I'd dipped my hand under the seat. A sandal. Lipstick. A grocery list, which I folded and put in my pocket. A cup-holder full of pennies. Deep under the seat among the oiled parts was tucked a light, fragile-feeling object wrapped in newspaper. I put it back.

The handling in the Honda was stiff and sludgy, as if it was resisting me. Automatically I went to shift the seat back and stopped, as if fearful of displacing her. The radio was set to classical music. Had she liked classical? I let the violins wash through the car.

Her diary sat in the passenger's seat. A version of her, riding by my side. A booby trap, that could only go off if I opened it. I would have to open it.

I knew I-20 intimately and adjusted unconsciously, the way your body shifts in sleep, to the speed traps, the stretches you could open up, where the four lanes became ten and back again. In a couple of hours the handling smoothed out; it became my car. I didn't stop. Stopping would mean reading. The violins blurred into dissonant piano, into full orchestra, back to violin, my burning bladder a chronic condition, beyond cure or caring. Penance.

The sun fell, the sky went black: A bright clear night for stars. Ursa Major. Ashley had been right. It doesn't look like a bear at all. Did the stars look different in Dallas? I had only been twice, once to drive her to school, the other time for a weekend visit where she couldn't do anything right. What is wrong with me?

An exhausted noise humming below the violins drew my attention. I had neglected the vital thing: The gas gauge in the Accord was bottom right, not top left like in my truck, and it was dipped dangerously below the line.

Don't leave me here.

I lurched the car toward the bright green exit sign and curved sharply off I-20, bracing the diary so it didn't slide; immediately a blue and white poison snow-cone lit up in the rear-view mirror. I pulled over, still caught on the ramp, pulled out my license, her registration, straightening them for presentation. I blinked politely in the glare of the cop's flashlight.

"Sir, I notice you turned off when I came behind you. Can I ask why?"

"I didn't know you were back there, that's why."

A silent perusal of the offered material by flashlight, thorough enough to be insulting. "I see that this vehicle isn't registered in your name. Is Ashley your wife?"

"Ashley is not my wife."

Officer Friendly took the flashlight, looked over the backseat, checked the tags. Faintly from the main highway came the whirr of speeding cars and rigs. When he returned he had a pen. "I also see you're driving with an expired tag. Were you aware these tags had expired, sir?"

"It's not my car. It's my daughter's car."

"May I ask why you're driving your daughter's car?"

"This is bullshit."

The officer swelled up. "What was that, sir?" He put the pen away, perhaps considering an upgrade.

"You know I'm 49 and never been in a jail in all my life? Because I've always tried to be respectful. Or maybe I was just scared."

"This will be easier if you cooperate, sir." I thought of a white cell, bologna for lunch, and was surprised to discover I didn't care. "I'll ask you again. Why are you driving your daughter's car?"

"I am driving my daughter's car home from her funeral. What I will do after that I do not yet know but I shall certainly keep the authorities in the

loop.”

A pause. “Is that it. Well. I am awful sorry to hear that, sir.”

“I’m sorry about a lot. You know I’m not a criminal. Any more questions you’d like to ask me, or am I free to keep minding my own business?”

He hadn’t stepped off or stooped down, if anything had become more rigid. But now he looked like he wanted to take off the patrol cap and scratch his head. And now dammit I felt a little bad for him. Life pushes you against a wall and takes a photo and that’s who you are. It was all a damn shame.

The cop pulled off after mumbling something about getting a new tag (“when you can get to it”) and I sat there a while, the gas ticking away. I was two hours from the empty house. I must have sat there half an hour, not looking at the diary.

By the time I cranked up again the fuel was vapor. The only light up ahead revealed the bright orange gabled roof of what turned out to be a motor hotel.

I coasted to a stop in the parking lot under the one lamppost still leaking light and rounded up what Ashley had left behind. The thing in newspaper I dropped in a garbage can with a heavy lid.

I took a room on the second level. After a long piss I unhooked the toy dog from the key chain and placed it on the table along with the grocery list and the penny jar. The diary I laid softly on the bedside table. The air conditioner was dead so I threw open the door for a breeze and stood on the landing to take it in.

Those stars so serendipitously bunched together into constellations? Actually billions of miles apart. Only by chance do they line up to appear connected. Thinking of the gaps made me dizzy.

I went inside and propped myself up in bed. I would do it now, while my dread was just another odd shadow in my punch-drunk mind. I skimmed the tight cursive with wretched urgency for damnation or possible reprieve.

And finally, nothing of family. A police raid of a party, a few hours in lock-up. I burned with bootless anger. “Don’t forget the mustard!” twice, an inside joke that would never get explained. Ashley’s skittering over the pages. Some of the A’s curlicued into elaborate flowers with big smiling heads. Her work schedule for this week. Plans. We all make plans.

I laid my head down, and the universe fell in.

Through the singularity I emerged un-weighted, floating above the bed, through the open door. The sky was gleaming, milky with stars. I rocked my head back to see more and found I already could, the grand panorama effortlessly visible as I rose through white mist. But I recognized nothing. Had the constellations not come together yet? Had they long fallen apart? So what was I then? What was anyone?

I startled upright in bed, slapping at my tingling arms.

What is this world?

I bolted out onto the landing. The car was under the lamp, just where it had stopped. It was empty. It was just a car. It was the stars that had changed, a little.

Nocturne Composed in Backyard, Drunk

by Harold Williams

You would be the freshly-ploughed field sleeping
In a sunrise fog. I, a stray dog skulking, sniffing out

Cat carcasses along an unlit highway. The mockingbird
Trilling at 2 a.m.? The tulip tree with its beard of bees?

In each of these, you come to mind. You are the cloud
Shaped like you; the unexpected snowfall; the letter

From home - coffee-stained, jasmine-scented. You are
The undiscovered galaxy hiding behind that quasar

In our hallway & I am dark matter just outside your orbit,
Pulling you down to our filthy couch for some late night

Slap & tickle. You are the victory yell; the meditation bell;
A hymn I hum in the shower; the book I cannot put down.

At Fat Albert's, Sellwood

Kirby Wright

Happy birthday, Dadio. I'm playing counter boy in memory of you at this greasy spoon. I squeak on my vinyl stool and toy with a paper napkin. I try folding it into an angel. You'd tell me to act my age. My counter mates? A model-thin blonde in a Reed College sweatshirt and a bald man thumbing *The Oregonian*. The stink of fried eggs makes me nauseous. The waitress slides over a menu—she's doubling as the cook. I contemplate specials as steam fogs my cup.

Moments of indecision always summon you. "Learn to be decisive," you barked. I was your thorn, a chronic pain infected by the disgust of never making you proud. "Worthless," you mumbled one New Year's Eve. I learned defeat in our closed-door sessions, when screams and I'm-sorry-Daddy's joined the beat of the belt. I touched my wall and felt sorrow moving in waves through the redwood.

I vow to quit remembering. Memories send me beyond blue, into the indigo sky before twilight. Dadio, you carried hate into the hospital bed, where I spoon-fed you vanilla pudding and rubbed your feet under the sheets. Cold feet, I thought, icy heart. A nurse checked your pulse. "No more flowers," you scolded when my Christmas antheriums arrived. I swore you'd never die but, if you did, I'd lug you like an overstuffed suitcase into the future.

A coffee refill comes—steam rises like a ghost. The blonde leaves and I crumple the angel napkin. The bald man retreats to the restroom. I feel as if I'm not human at all but a cold-blooded creature propped on a stool. The truth? Dadio, I've been shaped by you, folded by a lifetime of disappointment into a wrinkled toad.

Elegy

by Elizabeth Yalkut

I have been trying to write
an elegy
for my grandfather.

This goes against all I have been taught:
my mother, his daughter,
is a teacher of English.

I have grown up
among the slippery definitions
of poetry.

An elegy is a lament
for the dead;
specifically for the beloved dead.

He was a man of many talents:
he was an artist of no little skill, he was a good dancer.
(Jesus he was a handsome man)

He is perched in his wheelchair
on the other side of the dining-room table,
but he's as gone as if he'd been tucked in his coffin these ten years past.

He isn't in that waiting coffin. He isn't here.
Whoever I am not writing about is
gone.

There is no one in that wheelchair,
carbon and oxygen molecules, iron blood, organic chemistry working,
or not working.

How am I supposed to write
a lament
when all I want to say is —

I wish
you'd died long ago,

back when we'd have grieved.

I can't mourn him now;
when he finally gives up the ghost
and becomes one himself, I'll be relieved.

No more worry that I'll have to watch him
be erased from the world
like one of his paintings doused in turpentine.

I'll finally be able to paint the doorjambs in the apartment
that his wheelchair has scratched and dented;
until he goes, I can't fix anything here.

We're waiting for him to die.
We don't say it,
we aren't so heartless.

I wonder, though, which would be crueler:
the heart attack, the fall down a flight of concrete stairs,
and the living, pulsing regret at the things left unsaid, undone.

Or the long, drawn-out, wish
for release, like the last exhaled breath, for ourselves
as much as him.

We're all trapped with him in that wheelchair,
strapped in, and we can't get out of it now,
can't escape it.

We've all become my grandfather,
subject to his increasingly-frail body,
attuned to his pain and frustrated by his inability to speak:

to say goodbye. Mozart wrote his own funeral requiem;
but I'm not Mozart, and I can't write
an elegy for myself.

About the Authors

Heather Adams lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she writes short fiction and practices law, not necessarily in that order.

Kevin Anderson is a Chicago-based Artist, illustrator and comic creator. He works primarily with inks and watercolors with occasional touches of digital color and effects. His main influences range from Hokusai, Hiroshige, and Schiele, to Frank Miller, Tim Sale and Jaime Hernandez. His greatest passion is to tell stories through imagery.

Maggie Apple is currently pursuing writing as a career for the future. Her interests in writing include children's books, poetry, and music lyrics.

Gary Beck has spent most of his adult life as a theater director. His poetry has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines. He currently lives in New York City.

Graeme Brasher is an Australian teacher working at an international school in Hong Kong. He enjoys football, cricket, and world peace.

Lisa Braxton has been published in numerous literary journals, including *Snake Nation Review*, *Meetinghouse: A Journal of New England Fiction*, and *Clockhouse Review*.

Marian Brooks, recently retired, has begun to write some short fiction. Her work has appeared in *Curly Red Stories*, *One Million Stories*, *Thick Jam*, *Linnett's Wings* and others.

Heather Cadenhead resides with her husband and son in Franklin, Tennessee. Her work has appeared in *Ruminant*, *Relief*, *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Blue Earth Review*, *Valley Voices*, and other journals. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Inventory of Sleeping Things* (Maverick Duck Press, 2010) and *The Education of a Girl* (Maverick Duck Press, 2011).

Jennifer Chow, an Asian-American writer, lives near Los Angeles. Her short fiction has appeared in *IdeaGems Magazine*.

Holly Day has recently appeared in *The Worcester Review*, *Broken Pencil*, and *Slipstream*. Her novel, *The Trouble With Clare*, is due out from Hydra Publications in 2013.

Spenser Davis is both an actor and playwright currently living in Chicago, where he has taken part in over thirty-five productions with theater companies across Illinois, Arkansas, Missouri, and Iowa.

John Domenichini is a technical writer living in Monte Sereno, California. His

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Leighanne Ellenson attends the University of Arkansas at Monticello. She likes killing zombies in her sleep and while she's awake, most of the time, she's plotting world domination in her head.

Grant Flint has been published in *Story Quarterly, The Nation, The King's English, Poetry, Weber, The Courtland Review, The Sun, Slow Trains, Northwind,* and 37 other print and online journals.

Philip Goldberg has had over 25 short stories published in literary and small press publications.

Anne Goodwin writes fiction, short and long, from flash to novels, and a blog that hovers somewhat closer to reality. She loves fiction for the freedom to contradict herself and is scared of bios for fear of getting it wrong.

Kip Hanson lives in sunny Phoenix, where his wife makes him watch Poltergeist while insisting that clowns are not scary. You can find his work scattered about the Internet, at *Foundling Review, Bartleby Snopes, Monkey Bicycle, Absinthe Revival,* and a few other places, proving that a blind squirrel does occasionally find a nut. When not telling lies, he makes a few bucks by cobbling together boring manufacturing articles for technical magazines.

Billy Harfosh currently lives in Chiang Mai, Thailand. He is originally from Syracuse, New York. For the last year Billy has been writing in Southeast Asia.. You can find his latest work published in *Ardent! Poetry Journal and Bewildering Stories Magazine.*

Kelly Hitchcock has been featured in *Clackamas Literary Review* and *Line Zero*, as well as various online anthologies and independent magazines.

AJ Huffman is a poet and freelance writer in Daytona Beach, Florida. She has previously published four collections of poetry: *The Difference Between Shadows and Stars, Carrying Yesterday, Cognitive Distortion,* and . . . *And Other Such Nonsense.*

Christopher James lives in Jakarta, Indonesia and writes, not necessarily in that order. He has been published in *The Times, Camera Obscura* and on *The Tin House* website.

Bryce Journey has appeared in *Blind Man's Rainbow, Scissortale Review, Apropos, Temenos, Red Clay Review, Fortunates, Aerogram, Paradise Review, Poydras, Hippocampus, and Cigale.* When he's not entertaining his three-year-old son, Luke Ender, he likes watching bad movies with his wife, Laura, satiating his passion for board gaming, and increasing his skills as an amateur yo-yo enthusiast.

Steve Karas lives in Chicago with his wife and daughter. His short stories have appeared in several print and online publications.

Robert Lamon has published short stories in print and online magazines, including *Aphelion*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Epiphany*, *One Million Stories*, *The Storyteller*, *Xavier Review*, and *The MacGuffin*.

Jennifer MacBain-Stephens is an emerging poet who has been published in *Superstition Review*, *Emerge Literary Journal* and *Red Savina Review*. She has also written three YA non-fiction books.

Joe Marcia is a journalist, creative writer and critic, published in *Intellectualyst*, *Instigatorzine Magazine*, *Elmore Magazine*, *The Beatnik* and *Milk and Sugar Literature*.

Suzanne O'Connell volunteers with the American Red Cross and was presented with the Candlelight Award as the District Mental Health Volunteer of the Year.

Irene O'Garden's writing has found its way to the Off-Broadway stage (*Women On Fire*, Samuel French), into hardcover (*Fat Girl*, Harper) into prizewinning children's books and into many literary journals and anthologies. She won a 2012 Pushcart Prize for her essay "Glad To Be Human."

Ania Payne is a creative writing major at Hendrix College. She has been published in *Imitation Fruit* and *The Rusty Nail*. On her free time, she enjoys petting cats and eating chocolate ice cream.

Richard King Perkins II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He has a wife, Vickie and a daughter, Sage. His work has appeared in hundreds of publications including *Prime Mincer*, *Sheepshead Review*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Fox Cry*, *Prairie Winds* and *The Red Cedar Review*.

Brenn Roorda is an inspiring writer from Iowa.

Caitlin Rose is an artist living out Lodi, California. She primarily paints with acrylic paint on canvas, and enjoys painting the creatures or her mind, the beasts she's become, the gargoyles in the mirror. She is influenced by Outsider Art, Caravaggio, Basquiat, wine, and music.

Robert Rothman has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Alembic*, *Cold Mountain Review*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *Front Range Review*, *Grey Sparrow*, *The Griffin*, *Mary: A Journal of New Writing*, *Pank Magazine*, *RiverSedge*, and the *Meridian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*.

Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb's work has appeared in *Epiphany Magazine*, *Dark Matter: A Journal of Speculative Writing*, *Pedestal Magazine*, *Slant*, *Midwest Quarterly*, *Jelly Bucket*, *Concho River Review*, and others. She is co-founder of Native West Press (which most recently published *What's Nature Got to Do with Me? Staying Wildly Sane in a Mad World*).

Caryl Sills has been published in *First Edition*, *Mobius*, *Blue Lake Review*, and *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, among others.

Kristen Snow is a Creative Writing major at the University of Arkansas in Monticello, Arkansas. She grew up in the suburbs near Jacksonville, Florida and severely misses having spontaneous "beach days" in Daytona. She is an aspiring author with a special interest in fantasy style fiction and children's stories.

Louis Staebler lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. He has had photographs appear in *Trigger*, *Camera Obscura*, *This Literary Magazine*, *OVS* and *The Fine Line*. His "Industrial Strength Nation" was a part of the 93rd Toledo Area Artists Exhibition, The Toledo Museum of Art. A few of his pictures are available on Etsy.

Dan Upton is a full time student and stay at home father of four. In his spare time, and surprisingly he does have some, he enjoys writing short stories and working on graphic novels with his oldest son.

Catherine Batac Walder's writing appears in *Fine Books and Collections*, *M-Brane SF*, *The Big Jewel*, and more. Born and raised in the Philippines, she moved across Norway, Finland, and Portugal for a European MPhil. scholarship.

Clay Waters has had short stories published in *The Santa Barbara Review*, *Liquid Ohio*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *Three-Lobe Burning Eye*.

Harold Williams is a native Alabamian working in library cataloging at the University of Texas at Austin. His first chapbook, *Waiting For The Fire To Go Out*, is available from Finishing Line Press, and his poems have appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Oxford American*, *Oklahoma Review*, *Slipstream*, and *Weave*, among others.

Kirby Wright was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. of the Ann Fields Poetry Prize, the Academy of American Poets Award, the Browning Society Award for Dramatic Monologue, and Arts Council Silicon Valley Fellowships in Poetry and The Novel. He was the 2011 Artist in Residence at Milkwood International, Czech Republic.

Elizabeth Yalkut is a writer in New York City, who attended Emma Willard School and Barnard College, Columbia University

Artwork by Kev Anderson



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