THE VIRGINIA NORMAL

ISSUE 7
SPRING 2021

The Virginia Normal is a publication of Virginia State University's Department of Languages & Literature.

www.thevirginianormal.com

The Virginia Normal
Department of Languages & Literature, Box 9072
Virginia State University
1 Hayden Drive
Petersburg, VA 23806

Submission Guidelines
Complete guidelines are available online.

The Virginia Normal

Associate Editors
Faith Cunningham
Nia Stevens

Assistant Editors
Sha-Keiya Culzac
Deja Farquharson-Carter
Brianna Feggins
Lameerah Rasheed

Designer
Bryné Grissett

Faculty Editors
Ann Rudy Franklin
Michael McClure
Latorial Faison
Claire Boswell

Acknowledgements
The editors extend special thanks to Dr. Sheikh Kamarah, Dr. John Holmes, and Cheryl Stewart for their support, as well as to Dr. James Capozzi for his efforts in establishing the journal.

Table Of Contents

POETRY ●

Carla Sarett
● JOAN DIDION GOT IT WRONG **11**

Timothy Dodd
● LOVE --- IS/ NOT A SEASON **13**
● OLD MARGARETHA'S HAND **15**

Kelly R. Samuels
● BLUE HOLES **16**

Carol Everett Adams
● ARGUING ABOUT THE MOON WITH A FIVE-YEAR-OLD **20**

John Grey
● THING **22**

Yvonne Higgins Leach
● THE BONE-COVES OF MY MOTHER **35**

Carson Pytell
● PRIDE **38**

Doris Ferleger
● BRIEF TREATISE ON THE POST-IDEALIZATION PHASE OF TWO LOVERS **45**

Matt Zambito
● LOVE POEM BECAUSE OF FLOWER FISH **47**
● POEM I'M WORRIED YOU WON'T FINISH **49**
● POEM TO ALSO BE PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY **51**

Emily Hyland
● GOING TO THE BATHROOM IN CENTRAL BOOKING **63**
● OUT TO DINNER WITH MY HUSBAND FROM WHOM I AM SEPARATED **70**
● THE BEDROOM AT YOUR MOTHER'S **73**

J. H. Hernandez
● FOR THE LAST TIME **77**

Gannon Daniels
● RUNNING **78**

Shawna Ervin
● MORNING **80**

Will Walker
● WHO KNEW? **82**

Patrick Pfister
● STRAW BROOM IN A CONVENT **83**

David Habib
● RAPUNZEL **92**

Gene Laskowski
● SHE DOESN'T KNOW **93**

Gwendolyn Jensen
● FIRE ALARM **94**
● THE URBAN CROCODILE **95**

Lisa Low
● SUBURBAN ENCOUNTER **108**
● ON LAST VISITING MY SON **109**
● CANADA FERRY **111**

Eva-Maria Sher
● MIDNIGHT COMPUTER **116**
● COME NAKED **117**

Cash Myron Toklas
● EMOR: CHIPPING AWAY **118**

Peter Leight
● ESSAY ON GOODNESS IN THE EVERY DAY **130**

Catherine Stansfield
● CHECKOUT LINE PRAYER **131**
● SAYING GOODBYE DURING A QUARANTINE **132**

FICTION ■

Trish Annese
● AERIE **17**

Susie Potter
● FEVER DREAMS **24**

Dinah Cox
● ANTIFREEZE DREAM **52**

Kathleen Glassburn
● RITUALS **97**

Eric D. Goodman
● COMMENTS LEFT **113**

Frank Richards
● SINGAPORE SLING **120**

NON-FICTION ▲

Cyndy Muscatel
● ACT YOUR AGE **39**

Cynthia Yancey
● MY GOD, MY FATHER, SUCH CONFUSION **84**

JOAN DIDION GOT IT WRONG ●

Carla Sarett

Joan Didion got it wrong.
There's no pretending.
No illusions.
After cancelling the credit cards,
closing the bank accounts,
signing that final tax return,
the last one with your name.
And the closet, with shoes and ties and plaid shirts that
anyone can buy from The Territory Ahead,
it's just a closet.
There's no magic in it,
Nothing at all.

Funny though, I can't give up your garment bag.
Not after those trips to Zion, and Yellowstone
and the Olympics.
And the Cascades where the main road in was closed
so we took the long way around.
We were alone at the inn.
We ate peanut butter and blackberry pie in our cabin.
It rained when we hiked Pyramid Lake,
and soft mist enveloped us.
We scrambled over slippery rocks and
we talked of paintings by Thomas Moran.
It wouldn't have been half as nice in sunshine, you said.
We were lucky to catch the mist.

At King's Canyon, we sat for hours
holding hands in silence.
We watched the great river, so wild, so desolate.

And if I return alone, I know what everyone else knows.
None of us meets the same river twice,
No river meets the same self.
The alternative is impossible.

But if I returned, I wonder if King's River
would seem tame and diminished,
if I'd be afraid to face my reflection
Or if the timeless current
would pull me along.

LOVE --- IS/NOT A SEASON ●

Timothy Dodd

The rains come thick
as crocodile swamp, me
crouched under a Pasay
awning watching water
swirl and gulley. Sliding
out, the greatest scamper
cockroaches: war-steady,
lightning bolts on backs
like umbrellas, air-poke.

Where is my street? Might
it near? Am I of patience
when she stalls me each
time? Or is it foolishness,
rain? Wait you, wait, me,
shoe-fear, your downpour
out, or dash off in traffic
and rising streams? Lights
and signs contradict and I

struggle despite asking
her, you, rain, do I hold?
Between actions and answer,
yes, go, you say, then drench
mercilessly. No, remain ---
until ... something readies
or drizzles, she, you say.
This, as the water soaks:
passport, sneakers, cash, bone,

too cleanses a wound, today's
flash. You must believe fruit
grows in season, before home
reach. Drowned, but pure,
a taste may come, a stranger
may merge into your body ---
that ghost learning not to think
in return, reward. Fruit grows
for them too. So offer. Hold.

OLD MARGARETHA'S HAND ●

Timothy Dodd

grabs me, the right one; a 1661 grip
stopping my stroll. I gaze at execution
of the arms dealer's wife, Van Rijn's
commission in millstone ruff. Motors

fade, footsteps mute, I pass myself
to her. Under the sky roof, clouds
milk the sun, the locus a fragment
of her canvas. That hand, parched

skin running veins like graveled streets
as evening falls, doors following
the last departed; her guards gone,
lights never known. Through the night

I stare, awaiting guidance, a touch
of dark ether. Comes when she rotates
her wrist, shows the palm, and closes
on my heart. Rembrandt's foreclosure.

BLUE HOLES ●

Kelly R. Samuels

The mangrove leaf will be dated
after being brought up from the depths.
And we'll come to learn something
about not only it but what bore it
there alongside the sand and the coral
and the gravel and the shells – this
sediment core like a granite slab
in a fancy kitchen, the kind of counter
you run your hands over while talking
of Italy and how you've never been.
The light there and there, and a color
neither of us can get enough of
and how there will be a sea but one
without hurricanes and roads leading
to beautiful ruins pictures of will never
do justice. Divers dive deep into these
blue holes, loving them for their clarity.
And now, knowledge 1,500 years back.
An understanding that there are periods
of calm and periods of activity
and that the current lull is just that:
a temporary interval before the wind
picks up and we say what we'll regret
saying while the windows rattle
and then smash. What kind of quiet
comes in that descent, I wonder.
In the photo, the lone person floats
and somewhere from behind, intimation
of more than.

AERIE ■

Trish Annese

Beneath the antiseptic blue of a new mountain sky, we wander among rows of silk-laden stalls, sliding our palms across piles of tapestries embroidered with the likenesses of gods. Astrid lifts a string of brown mala beads to her nose, inhaling their rich, woody scent before returning them to their place at the table where she fingers them gently, loathe to let them go.

We had come as pilgrims to this rocky, pine-scented place, seeking prayer and alms for our crash-and-burn souls; like pilgrims disoriented from the voyage, however, we are confounded by the back-breaking difficulty of sanctifying new ground.

That morning, I'd awakened to Astrid standing before the window, her feet bare against the slate tile.

"What's happening?"

"I don't know," she conceded, and I thought that was probably right.

On the road, a chill breeze rifles the colored flags strung among the barren brown branches of trees, and I find myself delighted, in spite of myself, by their confetti blink and flutter amid the tall cedar green.

"You fill me when I want to be empty." Astrid's voice is too loud behind me, but I check my impulse to scan the space for eavesdroppers; that particular brand of vigilance doesn't

set well with her. “Who cares if they can hear?” she asks, but it is rhetorical. She doesn’t. Nor, does she think, should I. When I turn to face her, she retreats from me. “I want to be empty,” she repeats, her voice a thin hiss, her flair for the dramatic intact. She stares into the middle distance, rolling the ring that matches mine between her bony fingers. A bell sounds in the distance, its pristine clarity piercing the bright morning air.

I wonder if she remembers eating dinner in the Thai restaurant up the street from the apartment she used to share with that husband of hers. We’d laughed as I set up the joke about women who love other women: What does a lesbian bring to a third date? She’d issued an unlikely giggle, shaking her head, her silver curls bouncing against the edges of a self-conscious smile, and I’d winked, lifting rough chunks of tofu dripping with green curry and coconut to my hungry mouth with the slim wooden chopsticks before delivering the punchline: A U-Haul. I’d thought she would laugh, chuckle at least. Instead, she’d placed one hand across my forehead and the other to the side of my face, the pad of her thumb pressed against my lips, and I’d leaned into the consecration I’d sought.

But now here we are.

The low thrum of the monks’ meditation hums from the halls of the gilded temple nestled at the foot of the steep mountain road. I close my eyes, picturing the lush collage of saffron and gold within, the red cushions steeped in incense and the smoke from lonely travelers’ gifts of prayer and light.

Thunder roars beyond us and the leaden gray clouds descend, filling the pale bowl of sky.

ARGUING ABOUT THE MOON WITH A FIVE-YEAR-OLD ●

Carol Everett Adams

is a fruitless endeavor.
No, honey, the moon is not plugged in
to anything. Do you see a cord?

But the truth is I once believed
the moon hung on a hook
in heaven, where God

asked Jesus to place it
by climbing a tree.
My mother never denied

this version, and my father
was delighted. So who am I
to be my daughter's authority

on celestial lights and other cosmic matters?
I am still dubious about the moon
and whether or not it's lit from inside.

But I am nothing if not a dutiful mother,
so I said what had to be said:
Let us never write the moon

into a poem, dear,
or affix it to the ceiling
as a piece of glow-in-the-dark décor,

and nor should we
follow it, dance under it,
raise a glass to it,

kiss a lover in its light,
or howl while it's rising.
Just spy on it
through your little fingers,
frame it in your hands
and ask, how tall was the tree?

THING ●

John Grey

She had put it away
in a rusty metal cupboard,
in the cellar
but so often seen in passing
that it did not feel to her like
it was put away at all.

So she removed it
from its basement home.
stuffed it down below
the photo albums, wedding dresses, baby shoes,
in a trunk in the attic.
Good place for it, she told herself.
May as well be on the moon.

But, for all the days
she never once climbed
that step-ladder
through the hole in the ceiling,
it was still in the house.
No denying it.

Tear it to shreds
and the pieces would
flutter about the room for a lifetime.
Bum it and she'd have the ashes.
Give it away but who would take it.
Throw it in the trash
and what would stop it
coming back to her.

Eventually,
she put it in the most prominent place
in the house,
on the kitchen table.
She hid it away
by getting so used to its presence
she forgot it was there.
Visitors would point at it
and ask, “What’s that?”
She spent her waning years
not knowing what
they were talking about.

FEVER DREAMS ■

Susie Potter

Avery Graham was nine years old, and she was precocious. The first time she'd heard someone call her that, she'd thought they'd said "precious," but she'd wondered why they said it so funny. She'd used her mom's tablet to Google "word that sounds like precious," and she'd figured it out, kind of. Precocious basically meant she was smart for her age, too smart according to her parents. It meant that she knew things she shouldn't.

Avery guessed that was kind of true. For instance, right now, she was in the backseat of the minivan, her little brother Jackson strapped in his carseat next to her, and she was doing something her mother thought she wasn't or couldn't, something she did a lot lately.

She was listening to the "Murderers" podcast her mother was listening to, the one her mother thought she didn't pay attention to on the long drive to school. There was another school close by, but Avery's parents said she had to go to the Christian school, even though it meant almost an hour's drive every morning.

In the morning, on these long drives, Avery was allowed to watch Youtube videos on her mother's phone, a treat reserved only for these moments. Her mother would hand her the phone, the earbuds already plugged in, and tell Avery to "have fun." But, one morning, when Avery had been trying and trying to find a "Try Not to Laugh" video she hadn't seen before, she'd started listening to her mother's podcast.

It was pretty interesting, and Avery wondered why she had never listened before.

"Avery," her mother had said, glancing at her in the rearview mirror, "what are you watching?"

"Just finding a video," Avery said, but really, she'd kept the earbuds in without playing a video. She made sure to keep her eyes glued to the phone screen. That way, her mother would think she was immersed in something else, something allowed and safe.

The podcast Avery had first heard had been about a lady killer. The lady was named A-Lean, which Avery thought was an awfully weird name. The lady had had many bad things happen to her before she became a killer. Those things made Avery feel kind of bad for A-Lean, and she was confused. How could you feel bad for a killer?

When anyone said anything about criminals in her house—robbers or shooters or drug dealers—her dad would say things like, "That fucker deserves to die. He's exactly what's wrong with our country."

Her mother would say something like, "Language, Henry." Then, more quietly, "But I agree with you. These people are ruining everything."

The fact that Avery felt bad for A-Lean, a killer, made her feel like something was wrong with her. Her parents didn't feel bad for anyone. Everything was always someone's

fault, their "own doing," as they liked to say.

Avery's parents didn't like illegals, whatever that meant. They didn't like criminals. They didn't like the lady at McDonald's when she was hard to understand.

Once, her dad had yelled through the drive-through speaker, "You shouldn't be allowed to work here if you can't understand enough English to take an order!"

Avery had gotten her Happy Meal real fast after that, but it hadn't made her feel happy. It made her feel sad.

She'd also felt sad when she'd learned Happy Meals came from cows.

"I don't want to eat cows," she'd said. "I like cows."

"Don't be silly," her mother had said. "God put animals here for us to eat."

Avery didn't really know if she thought that was true. God was born in that barn-thing with all the animals around. In the books at church, God or Jesus—but they were the same thing, weren't they?—was always posing with lambs and stuff. He must have liked them all right. Avery couldn't imagine Jesus eating a lamb or a cow. But maybe he did?

There was a lot Avery didn't understand about Jesus and church and God and her parents and how it all fit together.

At church, they were always talking about loving people.

And, when Avery had first heard the podcast, she'd felt like she could love that A-Lean lady, but that wasn't right. Killers were supposed to be killed. Criminals weren't supposed to live.

But … at church, they just said love everyone. Weren't killers everyone?

All of this was really confusing to Avery, and the thing was, she would have liked to talk about it with her mom and dad. But, if she did, if she brought up the A-Lean thing, they would know that she was listening in on the podcast. They'd make her stop. And, for some reason, she liked listening to the podcast. Yes, it was scary. Sometimes, it kept her up at night, especially if the episode was about someone who came in through windows or someone who mashed out teeth, but she still liked to listen. She liked to learn about people for some reason.

On this particular morning, though, a blustery Wednesday when Avery had woken up feeling a little dizzy and thirsty- a feeling she hoped would go away soon- the podcast did something different than it usually did. It started talking about the killer way, way before he was a killer, way back when he was just a little boy.

The killer was named Ah-Tis Tool, as far as Avery could tell. The podcast guy was talking about how Ah-Tis was a little boy. He was four or five and playing with his toys, and his dad decided to sell his body.

Avery wasn't really sure what that meant- sell his body.

At first, she thought it must be the same as the way people sold cows for meat, and it made her shudder. But, then, she wondered, how could this boy grow up to be a killer if he got sold to be killed away?

Thinking about all this, her stomach turned as she looked down at the McMuffin in her lap. She'd felt a little funny, a little off this morning, and the sandwich, which she knew was made of dead pig or cow or something, was making it worse. She balled up the remainder of the sandwich in the wrapper as quietly as she could. She'd told her mom she didn't like these sandwiches or really anything that came in the yellow wrappers, but her mother didn't care. She'd said that Avery needed her protein and she would learn to like it.

The speaker on the podcast explained how the man, the man who bought Ah-Tis, had taken him into a room. Avery couldn't really understand what the man had done to Ah-Tis, though she had an inkling- some kind of feeling like it had something to do with how babies were made, even though she didn't know how a man and a boy could do that thing, that thing which she only vaguely understood. That thing no one was allowed to do unless they were married.

Oh, how Avery itched to ask her mom, but she couldn't let her know she was listening.

Avery sighed, catching herself in the middle and turning it into a yawn. She didn't want to alert her mother to anything.

She tried to sort through all she'd heard. She was fuzzy on

the details, but she could tell something awful, just awful, had happened to little Ah-Tis, and she knew she felt bad for him. This was okay, she reasoned, because Ah-Tis wasn't a killer yet. He was just a little boy, a little boy whom something bad had happened to.

Why was it okay, she wondered, to feel bad for the bad person before they became bad? It seemed to her that it was still the same person. And probably the person did the bad things because of the bad things that happened. Her mind was getting so jumbled her head was starting to hurt.

And it hurt even more as she listened to something really bad Ah-Tis did when he was grown up. The fact that he'd done something bad didn't surprise her. Grown-ups were always doing bad things. Just the other day, Ms. King, the science teacher, had gotten in trouble for wearing a necklace that showed Jesus still on the cross.

A boy in class had said, "My mom says it's bad to wear things where Jesus is still on the cross."

"Why?" the teacher had asked.

"Dunno," the boy, called Matthew, had said, shrugging, "but it is."

By the end of the day, the story had spread all around school. Ms. King had gotten taken out in the hallway. There had been raised voices, and then Ms. King wasn't allowed to come back to class anymore.

Avery knew that grown-ups had done something bad to Ms. King, but, as she listened to the podcast, she realized Ah-Tis had done something much worse.

He had taken a little boy out of a store, a little boy named Adam. Adam was a name Avery knew, a name from the bible, a name of two boys at her school. It was so much more familiar than the name Ah-Tis, and she wondered for a tiny moment if familiar could mean better. But that didn't seem quite right for some reason.

Avery forced her attention back to the podcast, the strong, masculine voice. She almost wished she hadn't because … oh no …she wanted to cover her ears as she understood the words, now spoken so plainly, as if the man on the podcast didn't know how to explain it in big, hard to understand words. The man said that Ah-Tis, the same little Ah-Tis who had been the boy she'd felt sorry for, had cut off Adam's head. He'd thrown the head out the window and sped away, leaving Adam's parents crying.

Avery didn't get to hear any more after that, and she was glad. Her mom let her off at the school, kissing her cheek. Avery noticed she felt a little funny, even more dizzy, as she walked into school, but she didn't tell her mom. Her mom would just say, "Buck up," or, "Stop trying to get out of school." She did that a lot when Avery felt bad.

All day long, Avery thought and thought. She thought so much she didn't know the answer when she got called on in math class, and she earned a demerit. That was five demerits for her now. When you got five- and Avery was

always racking them up without meaning to- you had to go in a little room alone and read the bible, if you could read. If you couldn't, you had to look at pictures of Jesus in a big book.

Walking into the little room, Avery wished she had the picture book. Sometimes, one of the nicer teachers would give it to her. It was better even though some of the pictures were sad. But, today, she'd been given the big, black bible, so she flipped to a random page. The verse said: "As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross."

Avery stopped reading because she knew what came next, and she didn't want to read it. The word "cross" reminded her of some of the sad pictures in the picture book, the ones where Jesus was all bloody and crying.

Thinking about all the blood- the blood on Jesus, the blood that she pictured as Ah-Tis chopped off Adam's head, the blood that might have been ketchup on her morning egg McMuffin, she felt her stomach churn, and she was sick, the gross stuff spewing onto the bible, which she was sure must be a sin.

The teacher wasn't mad when she came in a few minutes later.

Instead, she said, "Oh, you poor thing, you're not feeling well. Let's call your mom."

"Okay," Avery said, nodding her head weakly. For she

suddenly felt very weak.

The teacher, her soft words, the cool touch of her hand to Avery's forehead, reminded Avery of what she knew came at the end of the story in the bible, the part where Jesus said it was okay that the men killed him. The part where Jesus said to forgive them.

At this point, Avery's head was feeling muddled and confused, and the room felt a little spinny. Everything was getting all mucked up in her head. Adam and Ah-Tis and Jesus, all dancing there together in a way that she couldn't comprehend.

Avery was vaguely aware of her teacher and some other woman coming back into
the room, though she couldn't remember when they'd left.

"Just sent her in there a couple of minutes ago."

Mumbles.

"Yes … fine … then sick all over."

Something was suddenly in Avery's mouth.

"Oh wow, it's high."

Avery felt herself slipping into a weird sleep. It felt like sleep, but different, hot, restless. She couldn't tell what was real exactly.

In her dream, at least she thought it was a dream, she saw Ah-Tis. He was scary at first, big and mean, and she wanted to run away. She was scared that she would be like Adam, that Ah-Tis would chop off her head.

She felt herself rustling, clutching at her throat, making sure her head was still on.

"Never seen anything like it! Food poisoning? What could take her over so quickly?"

"I think she's going to vomit again. Her mother's on the way. Should we call …"

A droning sound came from somewhere. Was that real? Was the dream real? Which part, exactly, was the dream?

Avery was still muddled, but her eyes drew back to scary Ah-Tis, and she realized he wasn't scary anymore. He was almost dead now, like Jesus. But Ah-Tis wasn't on a cross. Instead, he was lying in a bare room, clutching a place on his stomach, saying, "I'm not sorry. You're not sorry." He was saying it like it was to someone in the room but to someone he could not see.

And then, Avery felt relief because she must be the person he couldn't see … although why would he say those things to her? Maybe he wasn't talking to her at all? Maybe he was talking to Adam or bloody Jesus.

Something weird started to happen to Ah-Tis, as Avery watched him in the corner of the strange gray room, a tiny

room with a bathroom in it like she had never seen before. He started to shrink down, morph into a little child.

Why, he was little Ah-Tis now! He was back to the little Ah-Tis the bad man had taken into that room.

And suddenly, Jesus/God was there, a lamb by his side, and his arms wide open.

"Come here, little Ah-Tis," Jesus/God said. Little Ah-Tis smiled, and he ran into the arms of the figure. They swooped him up, and Ah-Tis started to cry.

Other cries filled the weird room. One of them sounded like a little boy. No, two of them did. They were two distinct cries, connected somehow. And then, there was a cry that sounded like her mother's.

It was Avery's mother, her mother rushing into the room and swooping her into her arms.

"She's so sweaty. What … how did this hit her so fast?"

"I'm okay, Mom," Avery tried to say because she felt like she was starting to wake up, like some coldness was at her forehead, something cold and white and clean, but her mother didn't hear her.

THE BONE-COVES OF MY MOTHER ●

Yvonne Higgins Leach

My daughter walks into the room
and it's the first time
I notice the roundness

of her belly. I see a baby
backlit in watery nutrients.
I too had once been a baby,

a heart beating fast
like bird wings
inside my mother.

In the genetic pool of her DNA
I formed liquid eyes and skin
sculpted bone and limbs

blue mouth gaping
suddenly able to swallow.
I could hear muffled voices

and on occasion see
a blurry bright source
of light.

My only intention
to grow
into a familiar shape:

ten delicate fingers and toes
organs tucked into tissue

into bone-coves that became

the machinery of what
is human. Oh, and I was to know
nothing of the promise

my mother made not
to pass on her trauma.
She tried to keep

the burn of the lonely nights
from going deep. The burden
of caring for four children

alone; father absent another night.
The anguish in her bloodstream
like some terrible drug.

It poured into my veins
buzzing like an insect on fire.
Today, I suspect it lies there

like a watchful animal, like
some nameless disease.
I feel it on my tongue,

under my fingernails, in my follicles.
I relive it in the moments of
my first marriage:

his culture, a different language
rolling off tongues, our first child born

in the heat of August.

When I sat alone at parties
not understanding the topic
poking at saucy rice on my plate.

I feel it again in the moments of
my second marriage
child #2, campfire coals burning

and my husband passed out
in the camper before dinner.
And in the moments

among friends and family
yet alone, burrowing deeper.
It has always been like this:

I am my mother
looking out the living room window
waiting. And then my daughter

says they are thinking
of boy names and I see
what great hope she has for him.

PRIDE ●

Carson Pytell

I remember once, at a fourth of July party,
You mentioning to me how proud your daughter
Made you when, after she didn't make the final cut
For the softball team, she begged and pleaded with
The coach to reconsider, to assign her any position
At all, even as benchwarmer. Eventually he caved.

You said it was a display of her drive, of her passion,
Her undeniable desire to play the game she loved
Which brimmed you with such pride and satisfaction,
Oblivious to the fact that all she really wanted was
To socialize. All her friends made the team.

It struck me as odd that you really were downright gleeful
About it, that an embarrassing moment to anyone else,
Or at least to me, was to you a cause for joy.
Honestly, if it had been my kid who tried and failed,
I'd have been more than content, probably proud as you,
Knowing my child knew when they just weren't good
enough.

ACT YOUR AGE ▲

Cyndy Muscatel

Since I was five, people have been telling me to act my age. In my seventies, it still goes on. I realized this when I went on a health kick a couple of months ago.

First, I signed up for Weight Watchers, keeping track of what I ate. That was good but nerve-racking. There are never enough points for my martini. What got me in trouble was the exercise component. I read an article that said interval training was the only way to go—that I should add running into my walk. So I did. I also increased my steps to 13,000, started working out with a trainer, as well as doing Pilates and yoga.

All was good for about two weeks. My shoulders hurt from doing the plank, but it was bearable. Then I got plantar fasciitis. (Now, we're talking painful!) The podiatrist made me a brace, gave me a cortisone shot, prescribed Aleve and a physical therapist.

I got better. Feeling invincible, I went back to my routine. A week later, my left knee and hamstring started to hurt. I ignored the pain even though it woke me at night. When I went to the physical therapist, she kindly explained interval training for a senior.

"Cyndy," she said, "your joints are in their seventies. Leave them alone. At your age, just getting mad at your husband can raise your heart rate enough."

In other words, I should act my age.

She told me to rest my knee, use ice, and get a knee brace. For three weeks, I followed her advice exactly. I became the sedentary couch potato I was afraid of, but slowly the pain lessened.

Meanwhile, I tried making a deal with my Higher Power. "I know I've overdone it. I get it now," I said. "Please, if I can just get better, I won't do it again."

After a month, I returned to my walk—more slowly and less far. But at least I was outside and moving. Even if it hurt, especially at night when I turned over, I could deal.

One day as I was walking the dog, my neighbor stopped to ask why I was wearing the brace.

"I hurt my knee about six weeks ago," I said.

"Have you gone to a doctor?" he asked.

"The acupuncture doctor. I don't want to go to an orthopedic surgeon because they always want to cut," I explained.

My neighbor rolled his eyes. "Go see Dr. Anderson. He's good, and he won't suggest surgery unless you really need it."

Going to Dr. Anderson was **Reality Check #1**. (Truly more like that slap in the face they do in the movies to wake a person up.) First, it was the X-rays.

“See how close your bones are? We call that kissing cousins,” Dr. Anderson said, pointing to my svelte bones on the X-ray.

When the MRI showed three meniscus tears plus the arthritis, even I could see positive thoughts weren’t enough. The truth? My joints are in the late autumn of their years, even if my mind said they were in midsummer. After having my first Synvisc shot, I left the doctor’s office wearing the Medicare-prescribed brace that’s so large it needs its own seat on an airplane. Synvisc, BTW, is a gel that supplements my synovial fluid, which has gone bye-bye.

Next stop on my **Reality Train** was going over my physical’s test results with my new primary care physician.

“For your age,” the doctor told me, “you’re really quite healthy. Your carotid artery is only 25% blocked. And your left ventricle is functioning at 65%.”

That didn’t sound so good to me. I’ve always been a 100% kind of person.

“For my age, what about any age?” I asked.

“You have to be realistic. You’re doing great for your age,” she said.

In other words, act my age and don’t expect so much.

I looked at her. “How old are you?”

“I’ll be fifty pretty soon,” she said as if she would soon be the Ancient Mariner.

Okay, I thought, I’m beginning to get the picture. Statistically, I fall into the category of elderly, and that’s how the doctors respond. While I was thinking old age started at ninety, the U.S. Census defined it as seventy-four. So if I have indigestion, the docs insist I have an echocardiogram. If I have headaches, they order a brain scan.

In our society, we treat aging as if it’s an affliction, like you have something wrong with you. “The English language seems to lack appropriate, positive terminology for referencing aging in a way that recognizes the strength, wisdom, and often privilege associated with chronological age,” Alison Taylor, on the October 2011 British Columbia Law Institute website, said. She suggested using the term OLDER PERSON instead of ELDERLY, and presented three categories of aging: younger old (65-74), the old (75-84), and the oldest old (85 plus). “…the practice of dividing aging into three categories reminds us of the diversity of the experience of aging and the misleading aspects of using one term to denote age,” she explained.

When I turned seventy, I think it freaked my kids out. They had T-shirts made with a picture of me at forty-one and the slogan, “The Future Is Still Bright.” That said it all: They thought I was done for. In their eyes, all I could look forward to was the dimness of senility along with the

loss of memory, height, ability, validity, and vitality. I felt ashamed of my aging self and went into denial. Seventy was the new fifty, right?

But **Reality Check Three** was waiting. It occurred recently in Seattle, where I grew up. I was having coffee at Starbucks when I looked over and saw an old woman smiling at me. I smiled back, and she came over.

"I thought that was you!" she said.

My eyes bugged out as I recognized her. It was my old friend Barbara from high school. *The old woman was my age! Could it be that I looked like an old lady too?*

I've fought off the signs of aging for years: a little nip, a little tuck, Pilates, yoga, and workouts to keep me fit and flexible. I eat healthy, and play brain games on the computer to keep my mind sharp. Being a writer, I can continue to ply my craft, which keeps me sharp and engaged. I also try to stay current. (I'm so cool, I text my five grandkids rather than call them.)

But facts are facts. I'm a half-inch shorter and a half a step slower. I can't multitask anymore, I drive like the little old lady from Pasadena, and I'm loving my power nap. When I'm overwhelmed, senior moments aren't far behind. Also, I'd much rather stay home with a good book and watch the sunset than go party.

I guess these last months have been a good learning experience (sort of like the Ice Bucket Challenge). I don't

love any of it, but it's made me stop avoiding the truth: I'm older. I used to say that aging was about accepting limitations without letting them limit you. Now I say it's about accepting reality and going with it. In life there's always give-and-take. I'd like to age nicely and sensibly—I don't want to be marginalized. I want to keep being me, not be seen as part of a statistical category. This is where it can get confusing—sometimes I feel that I've lost myself and who I've always been. My self concept didn't include being elderly.

But I can be old without being elderly. I will stay engaged in life and keep relevant. (Luckily I have grandchldren who help with that). I'm also going to learn how to ask for help and accept it. If someone offers me their seat on the Metro, I might even take it. Or if someone wants to help me with my groceries, I can say yes, without being offended.

By accepting I'm entering the winter of my years, I have a freedom I've never had before. I grew up in an era where women had to be beautiful, smart, and as capable in the workplace as in the kitchen. We were Superwomen who thought we had to do it all. Now I can slow down. I don't have to prove myself anymore, so I can stop pushing myself to the limit.

I've found one of the best things about being older is I don't really care what others think of me. My attitude is: *This is who I am. Like me as I am or don't.* My task is to let go of my middleaged self image and embrace the newest version of Me—to act my age. I need to be one of those who likes me as I am. It's a work in progress.

BRIEF TREATISE ON THE POST-IDEALIZATION PHASE OF TWO LOVERS ●

Doris Ferleger

My love craves connection.
Other times loneliness
covers him like his childhood

blanket—animal warmth
of his own body
taken back into himself.

I, too, crave connection.
Though it's the first time
I've known it.

We ride swells as if the sea
had precipices to fall from—
we are fiery, dangerous

and safe all at once.
Other times the sea calls me
and I dive in

leaving my love shipwrecked
on an island we have
been building together.

Each of us imagines there is time
to hold a grudge. Hold back.
Race to the finish line

of blame. We say we want the other
to be who they are. Each has a vision
of how that should look.

I do not know how to hold
his anger lightly.
Or mine. I find it hard to breathe.

It is said without rage
there is no ache of longing
for connection.

It is said sunlight
penetrates each tight bud
to reach the center of the rose.

LOVE POEM BECAUSE OF FLOWER FISH ●

Matt Zambito

Because I know what
to be doubted out is, I know
there's no doubt about it: We
could chat for hours tonight
about the murky world
of truck-stop sex workers,
but a few hours ago: *I named it*
"flower fish," our littlest said.
I'd made a note of it.
But what fish? What flower?
What was her antecedent?
When half of a metaphor
falls in the proverbial forest
and there's no one even imaginary around—
to read or hear,
to have it become part of one's memory
no disease or over-medication can wash away—
does it matter
but for the possible comparison itself?
I'm not asking for a friend
other than you, my love, the best
guide human this dog could have.
The gall of my last lame analogy
in light of hers earlier!
She had no choice—what with
chaos, and total free will, and every
transmitter bumping around her
neurons as if a speed-of-sound
pinball, and riboflavin, and poison
ivy that one time, and Mercury's gravity

moving dark matter—but rename
something that's swimmingly
variegated in blossoming
waves! What if
here "fish" is a verb, "flower"
the thing sought, and together: seeking
out the most beautiful
in a beautiful land; and giving
it a gorgeous name; and being glad.

POEM I'M WORRIED YOU WON'T FINISH ●

Matt Zambito

There's a marching band
blatting and tooting and banging
like a Dr. Seuss story right through
the middle of this poem's
earlier drafts, alas they've left
behind a vacuum where
a marching band once was
and it was a sight to behold,
let me tell you, and the sounds
were amazing as sex in a nice hotel
lobby bathroom stall
sometimes sounds good drunk, but surely
ain't. The conductor wasn't,
thankfully, a real stickler
for tradition. She had sousaphones
booming flute parts, percussionists
juggled pudding pops
between head-butting bass drums
to the rhythm of typical hiccups,
while the rest of 'em fell in line
with the melody to "Only Happy
When It Rains," changing
from the unrecognizable shape of
an appendix into a tonsil,
or so it seemed to the untrained
eyes and ears. None of this happened.
This poem is just a figment
of the way I imagine you
wish someone would finally write
about music's temporary nature.

I could be wrong, but I bet
you'd dig listening and watching
this dreamed up thing of mine
come true. I could be wrong,
but if you got this far, I'm not.

POEM TO ALSO BE PUBLISHED POSTHUMOUSLY ●

Matt Zambito

We don't know yet: *this*
might turn out to be
the most significant poem in even
the prehistory of poetry.
Don't shake your head.
You'll die before you know.
When history writes itself
like an alcoholic's dry
autobiography about drinking
and the saddest happy hours,
the protest and picket lines
made by Oklahoma City's
striking mimes will stretch
around the block and remain
so peaceful the police will
only shoot seven children
on purpose. There's still a chance:
this *might* be the poem
that convinces God to stop it
already with this death nonsense.
We get it! We're jerks!
Sorry. We'll try harder. Please stop
unless the rest-in-peace
of this selfish, eponymous
existence is forthcoming
posthumously, unless
some rest is all we get for grief.

ANTIFREEZE DREAM ■

Dinah Cox

One of the customers ran over Susanna's dog. Only recently had she become what they called a dog person, though she was ill, recovering from a stay in the hospital for broken bones and a secondary infection, forced to hire a friend's teenaged daughter to walk the dog and bring in the mail. Growing up, though, she had never been a dog person. Neither was she what they called a "people person." She enjoyed the dubious distinction of rising every day before the sun came up, a morning person, though she kept it a secret so as not to appear puritanical or dull.

She was up in time for the early show the morning after her dog died in the street. Anger rose in her chest when she thought of the lemonade-drinker puckering his lips as he stomped on the brakes late, too late to notice her Australian Shepherd dashing after a squirrel, his leash trailing off like a kite's tail behind him. She didn't know which customer had been responsible—could have been anyone, really, the line was so long—and her injury kept her from undertaking the fruitless pursuit of criminal investigation. The whole set-up was strange, too, since most normal people didn't like to drink lemonade in December. It was one of those rules: fresh vegetables in July, hot chocolate in January, red wine in winter, and lemonade stands run by greedy, pint-sized capitalists, their hand-painted signs advertising watered-down refreshment in June, July, and August, a rip-off and a smile all summer long.

To run a lemonade stand in December seemed to her not only ill advised but also stupid and inconsiderate, like those

parents who tried to sell their sons' Cub Scout popcorn at work. And now that one of the lemonade-drinkers had killed her dog, she nursed a grudge against the neighbors, the neighbors' children, all the customers, and lemonade itself, a poison, like antifreeze or gasoline.

Her dog-walker was named Lynette. Lynette was sixteen and serious, the daughter of a co-worker, an honors student, the star goalie on the citywide soccer team and an intern in the office of a democratic state senator. She had seemed trustworthy enough. The morning after the dog's death, Susanna sent the girl a text message to deliver the bad news, her walking papers so to speak, her services no longer required, thanks, she said, for all your help. Had the girl sense enough to hold tight to the leash or even run in the opposite direction, the dog would have obeyed and kept his life. Susanna had told her this much right after it happened. She had been watching a tasteless "Holidazzle" Christmas parade on television, and, hearing the screech and scream just ten feet from her bedroom window, she scrambled for the door and hobbled outside on her crutches to see her dog's motionless body in the street. The car drove away. No one thought to check for the license plate number, and Lynette, crying and gulping with great, voluminous waves of panic, drew more attention from sympathetic onlookers than did either Susanna or her dead dog. But the dog did not suffer, and he was old, in any case, almost too old to be chasing after squirrels in the first place, and when the car slammed against his chest, his breath was taken from him in an instant, like an exploding light bulb on the cobwebbed ceiling of some old garage.

Still, Susanna missed him, and it was not lost on her that while she herself had been hit by a car and lived, the dog had been hit by a car and died. Three months before, she'd been on a bicycle, riding illegally and in the wrong direction on the shoulder of a state highway, when the twentysomething farm kid driving bales of hay to his grandpa's cattle ranch reached for his sunglasses in the cup-holder of his truck before grazing her rear tire. It was the fall into the ravine that broke her collarbone and fractured her femur—and she ultimately concluded he'd been lying about the sunglasses and was in fact reaching for his cell phone—but she had lived to tell the tale, and she felt guilty, somehow, because her poor old dog, out for a jaunt in his very own neighborhood, had not.

Now, it turned out, the driver of the truck—the boy who not three months ago had sent her to the hospital and, strangely, visited her every day clutching a single, helium balloon—was also her dog-walker's new boyfriend, an unsurprising coincidence in this backwater town. Stuff like that was always happening: the mayor who also drove the school bus, the accountant who moonlighted at Walmart, the police officer neighbor who should have given you a break but didn't when he pulled you over for speeding. Worse, the dog-walker's mother, Susanna's only close friend from the public library where they both worked, offered to pay Susanna three hundred bucks plus a sizeable Walmart gift card to photograph the happy couple for the dog-walker's senior prom. Though the girl's name was Lynette, Susanna, both in the privacy of her own thoughts and in public to the girl's own mother, called her The Dog-Walker and her boyfriend Balloon Boy, named after a flash-in-the-pan

media sensation, the seven or eight-year-old boy whose father had lied about his disappearance in the basket of a weather balloon with the hope of scoring the family's own reality television show. The nickname, a dual nod to the young man's odd, daily presence at the hospital and the duplicitous nature of his original scam, did not seem to bother Susanna's coworker, since she admitted to thinking her daughter could do better. And now that Susanna was out of the hospital, he visited her at the library on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, still clutching his single, strange helium balloon, which he never offered to Susanna but called on her to admire nonetheless. Judging from the hair falling into his eyes and the cowboy hat he always wore, even indoors, Balloon Boy probably didn't even own a pair of sunglasses, much less keep them in the cup holder of his stupid farm truck. But a cell phone? These days you rarely met someone without one.

Now Susanna's leg had improved to the point she no longer needed crutches, and she wondered if hiding behind the camera, poised and ready on a tripod, might keep Balloon Boy from feeling the need for his customary prop. But her history with The Dog Walker would only add to the tension, so that the room would fairly well buzz with resentment and dread. But Lynnette would pretend to be happy to see her, offering an insincere hug, making false attempts at flattery with sweet-sounding observations about Susanna's outfit or hair. Lynnette's mother had arranged to conduct the photo shoot in the alcove of the public library, an odd, but neutral choice, since the photographs were bound to feature either a bust of some dead white man or a map of the world somewhere off in the background. But Susanna

felt confident she could make the happy couple appear glamorous, on the precipice of some unnamable success, like young stars making the leap from their roles on the Disney Channel to mainstream movies and leading spots on the talk show circuit.

For Susanna, photography had started off as a hobby, but she was good enough to score a summer full of weddings and the occasional commercial gig shooting stuff like the Parade of Homes and bowls of cottage cheese.

"You look beautiful," she said to Lynnette, and she meant it. She refused to meet the gaze of Balloon Boy. "That dress is a stunner."

"Thanks," she said. "I got in on Ebay."

"*I* got it on Ebay," Balloon Boy said. "Connections."

Lynnete's mother made small talk about the cost of the dress, the cost of the shoes, the cost of the steak dinner before the prom. Susanna was used to people bragging about their expenditures, but she surprised herself by joining in. Together, they spoke of the cost of chicken versus steak, the cost of the corsage, the cost of hair and make-up, the cost of the prom's rental space, the cost of hiring teachers to chaperone, free, it turned out, since they were made to volunteer. Twenty minutes had passed, and Susanna hadn't taken a single picture.

"You're slowing them down," Lynette's mother said. "Who would have dreamt a photo shoot could take so long."

“You want to get your money’s worth,” Susanna said. “I don’t come cheap.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“Mom,” Lynette said. “Could you please leave?”

“Shut up now,” her mother said. “I’ve spent eighteen years and nine months waiting for this moment.” Today, it turned out, was Lynette’s birthday.

“Great,” Susanna said, taking the first photo. “Now you can vote.”

“She’d better not vote,” Balloon Boy said. “Not for Obama.”

“He already won,” Susanna said. “In case you haven’t noticed.”

“I know,” he said. “But in case he runs for dictator or head of the one-world government or something.”

“Smile,” Susanna said. “Say cheese.”

“Fontina,” Lynette said.

“Velveeta,” Balloon Boy said.

“I taught them that joke,” Lynette’s mother said. “They love me.”

Things went on for a while in the usual fashion—Susanna asked them to sit, stand up again, stare at the ceiling as if it were heaven above. She took a long series in which Balloon Boy pretended to tie the corsage's ribbon around Lynette's slim white wrist. The truth was the whole thing was boring, like watching a PowerPoint presentation or entering the end stages of a game of Scrabble you knew you were going to lose. She was more or less confident she had enough shots to put together a pretty good package when she had an idea.

"Oh no," she said. "My memory card."

Lynette and her mother both froze in terror, but Balloon Boy, who seemed to understand this as a sign to take a much-needed break, departed for the vending machine in the library's break room. Lynette's voice rose in panic, and her mother grabbed the camera from Susanna's hand.

"Everything's gone," Susanna lied. "They'll have to come back tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Lynette's mother said. "But the prom is tonight."

"They'll have to come by after their little—parties—then," Susanna said. "I'd planned to stay here all night to do some re-shelving anyway."

"This is crazy," Lynette said. "We can't take our prom photos *after* the prom."

"In the morning," Susanna said. "I work best in the morning."

By this time, Balloon Boy had returned with a Mountain Dew and a bag of Cheetos, his fingers coated with a fine, orange dust. "What's going on?" he said.

Lynette began to cry. For a moment, Susanna saw herself in the girl's despair, and she remembered, in a flash, the desperate and sudden pitfalls of the required rituals of young adulthood. Only no one had asked *her* to go to a prom, not once. Always on prom night she'd rented a movie or taken a walk around town alone. Later, in college, her first serious boyfriend would take a dubious pleasure in her dateless high school years, as if he'd been the first to climb not a mountain but a rocky hill littered with bottle caps in some boyhood friend's backyard. Now she wanted revenge, not on her first serious boyfriend, not on all those high school boys who'd failed to notice her, not even on Balloon Boy's negligence that day on the highway or Lynette's stupidity in allowing her poor old dog to get killed. She wanted revenge on youth itself, its heedless stretch across the cultural landscape, its hunger, its all-pervasive need. That she herself wasn't getting any younger might seem like a sign of mere envy, but it was more than that; she was angry, and she knew she deserved some lasting attention, or at least a nod in her direction. No one noticed her in youth, and no one noticed her still.

After a series of negotiations in which Susanna would not budge, Balloon Boy and Lynette finally went off to the

prom, and Lynette's mother went home. They all agreed the happy couple would reappear at the library's back door at exactly 5:30 the next morning. During the prom itself, Susanna went shopping. It took her eight trips to and from the grocery store, eight trips in which her backseat was completely full and the view from her rearview mirror was impossibly blocked, but by the time she was finished, the library's alcove was packed with the electrified energy of exactly 55 helium balloons, all of them red with silver ribbons, and all of them pulsing with the live-wire energy of an Easter parade. She made a final trip to the store and back for straight pins, a quart of antifreeze, a plastic pitcher, a wooden spoon, a small bag of sugar, and, of course, a packet of lemonade.

"Let us in," Lynette said from the alleyway. They were early by an hour or more, but Susanna was prepared, and having Lynette's mother out of the way would liberate the process from the prying eyes of adulthood. "Our pictures," Lynette said. Her pounding knock was like a cop's. "We're ready to make memories."

"Speak for yourself," Balloon Boy said after Susanna had unlocked and propped open the door "I feel like shit." His face was puffy and his eyes were bloodshot, both obvious products of the evening's revelry, rented hotel rooms, maybe, a punchbowl spiked with something stronger. Lynette appeared more or less preserved, like a doll enclosed in glass. She was the driver, she told Susanna; always she obeyed the rules of traffic.

"Of course you do," Susanna said. "So responsible."

Balloon Boy's rumpled clothing reeked of cigarette smoke, though Lynette seemed neither to notice nor care. She doted on him as much as or more than she had before the prom, and her cooing attentions hardened Susanna's resolve. Bypassing the alcove, she directed them to the reference section, a row of tasteful dictionary stands in the background. For a while, she pretended—the memory card *and* the batteries removed from her camera—to take the standard set of romantic tributes, the usual poses of the young and in love. She directed Balloon Boy to hold Lynette, kiss Lynette, kneel in front of Lynette, gaze into her eyes. So far, the helium balloons in the alcove remained hidden from view.

"The alcove," she said finally. "I need you two lovebirds to see what I have set up for you in the alcove."

They followed her into the crowded hallway; the balloons took up so much space it was difficult for the three of them to stand for very long without ducking or shifting. The whole thing was very funny, and before long they all began to laugh.

"Pop them," Susanna said, handing each one a straight pin. "Pop the balloons."

Lynnette spoke first, "But why?" she said. "I'm sorry, Susanna, but this is weird."

"Pop the goddamned balloons," she said. "This is part of the photo shoot."

"I'm not going to pop them," Balloon Boy said. "You pop them."

"Look," Susanna said, grabbing her own straight pin and taking the first stabbing shot. "It's easy."

POP, went the balloon, and all three were stunned into silence.

"Now," Susanna said. "Your turn."

They were reluctant at first, their hands shaking in rhythm with Lynette's nervous laughter. But they complied with her wishes: *pop, pop, pop,* the pinprick attacks no longer hesitant, more confident now, becoming frenzied and rushed. After the last burst of energy, all the balloons were finished off, dead soldiers on the alcove floor, like the final day of the circus or a clown's precursor to suicide. Susanna, though she would never be beautiful, never again be young, had this one moment of triumph, the satisfaction that came from the gunshot-sound of each balloon's last, lifeless spark, the pleasure of taking the only actual picture she would take all night, the comic photo of the boy's stone-faced silence and the girl's perplexed awe, the two of them standing among the red rubber ruins in the alcove. And with her vision of the photograph came the knowledge she'd made something happen, for once, and she grew calm with the true fact of her power. Now she took up the pitcher and two Styrofoam cups. If only she'd thought to buy bendable straws.

"Pucker up, you two," she said. "You must be thirsty."

GOING TO THE BATHROOM IN CENTRAL BOOKING ●

Emily Hyland

When the officer walks me
into the cell, I

see the metal toilet
in the open

in the left corner
by the bars. It is not even

in the back. There are
twelve bars. When I tried to

remember everything, I
counted the bars

to remember
twelve bars. Eighteen

other women when
I arrived, two benches

both taken, the
vent amassed with dust a

lint trap thick. I
sit on the floor. Come to

be again, gather myself, touch
my wrists, blood

bangles from cuffs. Remember
my body, the

brush of air on my skin, the
pressure of urine

above and behind my
pubic bone, I look again

at the metal toilet and
my bladder remembers it has

now been hours
and I decide to hold it because

how long can this
possibly take,

someone must have
told my sister, there must

be some
lawyer on the way. I know

there is a lawyer on the way. The
lawyer must be on the way. The

only place to really sit is
near the toilet; the

unit is particularly
full of rancor on this

muggy August day; the
soldered alloy

calls to my guts, a
magnet for release and

I admit to myself how
badly I need to go; I

tell myself we are just a bunch
of women sitting on the floor.

Someone in here has
pulled down her pants and

let the urine flow. I'm
almost sure.

I'm going to have to
do this soon so I

might as well as do it now, so I
sort of ask to no one at all

what do we do
when we need to go? A

cellmate tells me
yell to the CO

for toilet tissue and she'll
bring you

some from the roll. I
thank my friend and

press my body to the bars,
it feels

unnatural to shout
not like to Mom from

the TV room when
she'd call for dinner and

we'd call back. The group is
amused by

my soft caw out so
someone hollers

and I am grateful
her voice

booms and bellows for me
down the hall

and the CO comes and
gives me a few sheets. Thank

god I only have to pee. I

study the

toilet, my
complete foe, and

see the gook and crud and film
around the seat. I

plan to squat. I
take a breath and look around,

unbutton and
unzip my jeans, and

slowly pull the denim down and
as I start to feel the stream

I start to feel
a fart come out

I can't control, it's
loud and long,

a foghorn blow
and thick with shame

and on the beat
one peer roars out loud

hot damn this bitch has
got some gas

she could
shoot a car across the state

another cackles loud and
slaps her leg. The whole cell

is rolling on the ground.
Indisposed, I

wipe so quick
I feel the wet all

down my thigh.
I sort of roll my eyes

then smile too,
realize the glue

in this long short spell,
any chance to break

the buzz of dwell and
hot ennui an act of craft. I

have more left so
toot again, and

we all laugh
so hard it hurts,

almost as much
as our bracelets of bruise

or concrete floor
where we all will

together later lay our heads
and wait our turns until we go.

OUT TO DINNER WITH MY HUSBAND FROM WHOM I AM SEPARATED ●

Emily Hyland

Every time we dine together now,
we dress up like readying

to renew our vows. My normal hum:
barefooted, home, in a holey and oversoft sweater,

but I take time to dislocate a dress
from the back, deep closet socket;

I pull apart and poke contacts
into my eyes so that glasses become

lesser a shield between us; I paint
my features that I've never felt like painting.

I blend and I brush the gray dust and the other
lighter gray dust—this chroma of dyes,

gloss on the sticky, viscid pinkish goo
while I think of you, readying too.

And we meet at some fancy city spot
set aside for seminal nights in other lives—

anniversaries and birthdays alight,
but for us what's become

another Tuesday—a place to look across a schism
of starched napery and toile of countless threads—

to watch a taper candle flicker and dribble
in the dread of its own knowing and avowal—

our conversation, testimony to a wanting
to not be like the candle,

but to be all the parts of the rabbit
gutted and cooked, unrecognizable

as a creature perhaps anymore
yet so fucking delicious in its sauce;

we slide our fingers around the sides
of our plates like animals

to reach through the thicket and grove
of tableware and tulips of wine:

russet, burgundy, blush—into the wellspring
where space has been cleared for our marriage

and lick the flavor off of each other's fingers,
wanton and wayward, yet still not able

for our hands to hold upon leaving
or to return to a common home to disrobe

and eat more carnally in love, just now to know
we can share a car back over the bridge

wherein you will get out first
and I will continue on,

unable to touch
what is aching.

THE BEDROOM AT YOUR MOTHER'S ●

Emily Hyland

If mourning is affection I am
still in that room

I am in that corner
bundle of dust

my cells my
decomposing hair my

things are in the
broken bottom drawer

albums from my
birth albums from our

early life there is
even a VHS and

sleeves of film
that's how far

we go back.
When the

next woman
comes to your

mother's and you
slide into

the place with her she
will open the dresser

one morning while you sleep and
looking for you

find all of these pieces of me
a coloring book *One*

Hundred Years of
Solitude my

striped beach throw with the
ribbon on its waist

these artifacts
picture of us

on a paddleboat
the poem I

wrote for your
mother the jar

of pink Bermuda sand.
Maybe this woman will

not want
so much of me there

will take
the canister of sand

in her soft hand I
imagine her hands

to be soft and
let sand go

to shore once more to
continue wearing down to talc.

Maybe she will
touch the sand maybe

she will
put some in her mouth. I

think she will put some
in her mouth to

taste your past to
pretend she has

a history with you but
she will never

hold Evan
as a newborn never

be seen by your
mother with clear vision

since glaucoma
has taken over

she will
never know

your father for
he too is the sand.

FOR THE LAST TIME ●

J. H. Hernandez

A father in fatigues is drinking coffee
for the last time folding his napkin,
handing in his tray, knotting his boots,
belching in the barracks
saying *pardon me* for the last time,
slightly blushing the way he blushes
when he hears his wife whisper
their whisper at home.
He stands at attention
wonders for the last time if the shine
on his boots will pass inspection.
In the blue-black sky outside,
dawn drifts like an unhitched dinghy.
His hair will keep growing,
toenails keep growing for
the last time. But this time
he boards a truck, jumps off,
steps into the trees, bends,
touches the dust above an IED
the way he touched his daughter
for the first time, minutes after
she was born, her skin soft as water.

RUNNING ●

Gannon Daniels

It was when she went into the bathroom
that she thought of taking a bath
She never takes baths but the cleaning
girls had just left the house leaving
the tub holy and inviting
She smiled to herself and opened
a jar of bath salts her friend had given
her for Christmas what three years ago
Such a beautiful cobalt blue
brown lettering a cream cloth cover
always just sitting there on the sill
never useful—she would change that
She ripped the ribbon pulling at the cork
stopper—poured half the jar into
the stream as it rushed full speed
from the spigot to the rising pool
She thought about being naked
in the pale water and turned toward
the mirror to see herself smiling
She reached for her zipper to undress
but noticed what she was wearing
She was dressed for a run
That's what she was going to do
The recognition of a plan was pleasing
Looking out the window she remembered
the lovely day outside the sunny crisp air
the whimsical wind the sounds of leaves
letting go their lifeline dancing
through the air her feet making all
kinds of noise as she kicked and crushed

them beneath her weight
She even had her new running shoes
on that she had obviously tied
all by herself so she headed downstairs
with an air of confidence to the hall
that leads to the garage pressed
the button that opens the big
automatic doors pulling them upwards
until horizontally above so loud but
then letting in light she noticed her car
and felt like she hadn't driven in ages
or had she— Why am I here in the garage—
Do I need to go somewhere— Does some-
one need me— Should I go get them—
A whirl of jagged thoughts fleeting
Of course I need to go to the store she
touched her hip realizing no
pocketbook so turned to go back
in but the dog was blocking her
way as if waiting for something
so she gave the dog a sweet greeting
I know what you want
The dog wagged her tail in response
You want a walk and spinning around
toward the open-air taking a deep
sensible breath in she tucked her
arms at her sides calling Come on girl
moving to her own renitent rhythm
forgetting doggy bags water bottle
keys codes leash time
and the warm blue bath
running upstairs.

MORNING ●

Shawna Ervin

He greets me by the edge
of my bed, the same as yesterday, the day
before. This our moment in the dark,
his head barely past the mattress. “What are we doing

today? What’s for breakfast?” His round
face, the same perfectly round face I first
met when he was one, toothless, bald. He has
thick, black hair now, the same piercing

eyes that want answers: *I am*
your mom. I am here.
You are safe. Safe. I will keep
you safe. He reaches for my hand,

swings it around, up, holds
my focus. He’s stronger now. *School today.*
It’s Tuesday. Do you remember
what special you have? You have speech. You’ll see

Ms. Abby, Ms. Michelle. You can
check the lunch menu on the fridge
when you’re ready. Today
is the 18th. Do you know

what that looks like? 18?
Do you know what you will be
like at 18, if you’ll live
here, with me

or somewhere else? Will you need
me to go over the day?
Will I hope you'll make it
through another day, worry

you'll have a meltdown, hurt
yourself? Will you still
come to me, hold
my hand, ask, assume I know?

"Mom, when will you pick me
up? What will we do after school? What's
for dinner? What will you do
today? Where will you be if I need you?"

WHO KNEW? ●

Will Walker

The world doesn't need me, I think.
Like a spurned suitor, I love it all the more.
Not frantically, as if ready to win it back
or take it hostage, but tenderly, the way you love
the land when setting off on a long voyage,
the way you watch the women on shore and feel
an urge to wave, a commingled sense of gaiety
and sweet sadness, knowing tomorrow
they will have forgotten you, and your ship
will be crossing the great water in a dream
that goes on for days, nothing but ocean,
till you reach the other shore.

I stroll without obligation, unfettered to this plaza
and its pure afternoon light as if hovering
among the passersby to bless them
for their busy dockets that keep them scurrying
past me to so many secret destinations, so many
important conferences, so many pressing appointments.

The silence of their passing is a wonder.
Who knew life could be so perfect, so mysterious?
Who knew the noiseless play of light on a brick wall
could overflow and flood my heart? Joy breaks in
on my afternoon, unplanned, and I say, *Welcome,*
what took you so long?

STRAW BROOM IN A CONVENT ●

Patrick Pfister

First thing. Before wakeful thought. A nun sweeps cobblestones soon to be bathed in sunlight. The narrow alley must be swept. Smooth stones reflect the day, the dusty clouds. Faint shadow of a branch. Faint sound of the broom. *whsk. whsk.* Her steps are light. She does not yawn. Or she yawns immensely, like a baby. Bent bristles gather grit and leaves. Small twigs too. First thing every morning. The wooden handle against her calloused palms. Cool air on her ruddy cheeks. Fragments of a dream, perhaps a memory. Her family, perhaps her brother. No, the neighbor boy. He had a sweet smile, a sweet nature. Fragments dissolve into particles, into dust perhaps. A tern flies by overhead. *Kee-arr. Kee-arr.* The call lingers, fades. Is gone.

MY GOD, MY FATHER, SUCH CONFUSION ▲

Cynthia Yancey

At the Women's March on Washington in January 2017, I took a sip of what it's like for a voice to no longer be silenced. In so many arenas, I saw expression of the need to stop accepting oppressive attitudes. For me personally, the fire that burned within was for the community of repressed little-girl voices and stories, stuffed down far too long into near oblivion.

Yet I begin this exploration of my father with tremendous trepidation, coupled with deep longing to move from a space of extreme weakness to one, at last, of strength. I believe the time is finally ripe for me to see my father in all his prowess and goodness, alongside all of his vulnerability and brutality to the little girl left behind when his lovely wife, my mother, died young. Thus commences a journey of voice finding, a search for what snuffed out that voice, what caused a lifetime of numbness, a search that in the end might allow a coming into a body, in order to finally be capable of feeling, rising up, and crowing out a story of awakening…

* * *

I don't know how often a little girl's image of God is actually that of her dad, but I do know that when this little girl was two and three and four, when she got down on her knees at night to pray, and when God came to her in her dreams, He wore a farmer's cap and khaki work clothes; my God was my father. My dad was the head of Heaven. I tell this fact because it surely compounds the confusion that

goes very deep down into the little girl's, as well as the big girl's, the now aging woman's soul.

My father, I believe, may have splintered into several parts as a severely traumatized little boy himself. He was not planned, and by all accounts, was never really wanted as a child, never well nurtured. A key story rumbling in the back of my head, told laughingly, I'm afraid, by his mother, is one of how he would run home from school as a little boy of six or so, and would hide behind the kitchen door to suck on a bottle. His mother, who surely should have seen this as a tragic expression of unmet needs, instead chose to ridicule him for it. Another story is of how that same mother once sang at Carnegie Hall, rode the train back and forth from the farm in Kentucky to New York City, then suddenly found herself pregnant, and without choices in the matter.

My grandmother found herself stuck early on in the role of farmwife and mother, a role she would never have chosen for herself, except for having succumbed to her husband's carnal desires and perhaps to some of her own, though that is quite difficult to imagine. The two years I lived in their home, just after my mother died, I never saw my grandparents speak a single word to one another, much less demonstrate any sort of affection or tenderness toward one another. Now as I age, having parented four children of my own, and working ever so diligently to help my grandson grow up to be strong and independent, a critical thinker above all else, I see what my grandparents did to my father through a different lens. And I cringe to think what it must have been like to be raised by those two, who begrudged

my father's very existence, who daily bemoaned the adverse effect on their lives of his.

But, my goodness, was he ever able to encourage me as his only daughter after my mother's death. So many from my close and extended family have told me so. "If he did anything right, it was to love you so dearly. YOU were the veritable apple of his eye." And I know I was. On so many levels, I have never doubted that.

After my mother died, people said he saw HER in me. Having had her lovely physical life ripped from our family, we necessarily, each of us, turned to something else to fill a void, the way one must after death. I dreamed sometime shortly after her untimely disappearance from our lives that she came back to us. She walked into our old country kitchen, the one with the potbellied stove, no longer used for cooking, but rather just to heat the room. This stove was in the middle of our kitchen, close to the table where we were sitting, taking a meal. It was the same stove we would go to, to warm up a new calf or lamb that was especially fragile after birth.

In my dream, my mother walked in from the dining room, with a bright, brilliant, blinding halo around her entire body. She was even more beautiful then than before, and utterly unreachable. In the most intense longing of my life, I had to simply sit there and admire her with a cruel and unquenchable desire to feel her arms around me. In the dream, I knew I could not have her anymore. Each of us sat there. I was only aware of my own unique helplessness, being the littlest among us. Then I woke up.

In the light of day, my dad turned me into his sidekick, setting me next to him on the bench of his truck, driving out to count the cows at dawn. Surely there was mutual benefit in this arrangement. My father definitely had a playful side. Though he could be dismissive of my annoyance at his cigarette smoking in the little cab of his truck, he could also snort and croon with a big smile spread across his face, a twinkle in his eye, over any silly thing that an animal or person had done, with his little Cissy by his side.

In the light of day, there is no doubt my father gave me the most valuable gift of believing I could do the impossible, from getting into medical school in the 70s as a young woman in Mississippi, when such was not at all the norm, to raising a family while becoming a doctor in those circumstances, mostly without the support of my children's father by my side. I achieved that surprising feat with my dad's words ringing all the while in my head: "You can do it, girl! You're the best! I know you can…"

So let us look back to the farm fields of Kentucky where that gift was first bestowed, in the hayfields of my youth. Out in those quintessential rolling fields of wheat and hay that were the backdrop of my family's life, there were tractors and wagons; the sweet, dark-skinned field hands, Willie, Milton, John, and their children. My father was often driving the tractor slowly beside the bales of hay so that the other men could throw them up onto the wagon where they would be stacked, prior to driving them to the barn for storage. One of the men was always up on the wagon, quickly arranging those recently baled blocks of

pungent, hot hay, the cows' food through the long, cold winters, while others were on the ground throwing them up.

On this particular day, I was six; I know because that was the year I graduated to full-fledged team member. I sat that morning between my father's legs on the tractor seat, with my little hands on the steering wheel *driving the tractor,* as he was teaching me to do. Little did I know that the big girl I thought I was, in this passive position, was just about to become a whole lot bigger. Likely a cigarette was dangling from his lip that he took one last long drag on before flicking it to the ground just before he separated from me that day.

Perhaps a storm was coming, or the lunch hour approaching with still an entire field of hay bales to be gathered, but for some reason, my father, the big, beautiful, hardworking man that he was, decided to jump down from the tractor to help with the loading of the wagon, leaving me there up on that big old tractor all alone. We were on a long, straight row, so hardly any skill was required for the steering. Still, I was feeling pretty grown-up in the tractor seat all by myself, as it slowly moved down the row of hay bales, with just me behind its big steering wheel, little legs too short to touch the ground. The wagon being pulled behind was getting loaded ever so much quicker with my father working on the ground.

There I sat behind the wheel, quite sure that when the time came to turn the corner, my father would jump right back up behind me, to accomplish the feat of the real driving, like he always did. But instead, on this day in

those redolent fields with the sun burning down on us from the blazing blue sky, my shirtless father ran up to me and shouted from the ground his words of encouragement, to be more than I thought I could be. At six, he said to his daughter, looking through the steering wheel of that relatively huge Ferguson tractor, "You can do this, girl! I'm sure of it…just turn that steering wheel really hard!"

As startled as a little girl could be at this sudden, utterly unexpected promotion, I pulled that tremendous steering wheel hard to the right with all my might, and kept on driving, with heart racing, limbs trembling, for an entire other row of hay. At the end of it, the wagon was loaded, and my father, in his sweaty, happy face, ran up to me with outstretched arms for my proudest self to jump into, hearing his constant chant, "You did it, Cis!!! I knew you could do it!" This tender, loving father believed in me by day like no other.

Our nights together are a whole different story. And yet as I plunge back to those moments that seem to have locked me down sexually for nearly a lifetime, I seem to hear my father's long-hushed voice saying, "You can do this, girl; I know you can. I never meant to hurt you." I now believe, after a lifetime of mystery and discovery, and finally listening to and dissecting my dreams, I believe he may have splintered young into at least two parts, and that he was no more there than I was when the damning moves were made; that we may have both dissociated around whatever exactly happened between the grown man's and the little girl's bodies those long, dark nights.

And his phosphorescent genitalia sways eerily, hauntingly, still, in my mind in the wee hours before waking.

* * *

In van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score,* the wise doctor tells us no one really wants to hear or know these stories, neither ourselves, nor our families, friends, or acquaintances. Then he goes on to say that they are nonetheless necessary, to reconstruct the map of our lives. He says we must relive the memories, in order to make them just that, no longer the driving subconscious forces of our lives, but rather just memories that the little children within us had no control over. We must integrate these truths into our daily lives in order to not be ruled and overcome by them.

After thirty years of working in public health, primarily caring for poor and uninsured women, I wonder if there is not perhaps one out there who will, in fact, want to hear it, because she will resonate so soundly with this story of a lifetime of repression of the hardest-to-look-at truths. I wonder if there might not actually be legends of us who have wasted decades reenacting our traumas, for never having looked at them straight-on. I wonder if my own daughter has not been doomed to also reenact my trauma, by watching my choices and ways of being all of her life.

And so I set out to unravel my life from the very beginning, to untangle the long-taut knots, then to knit it back together again, hopefully much more whole and healthy this time. I tell this story in all its baseness and all its beauty, for

anyone who might need to join me in this search for our long-suppressed strength that has been there waiting, wanting to bubble up all our lives.

RAPUNZEL ●

David Habib

Was there not a door?
I can't remember—
a witch, a brush,
a hero.
Probably a curse.

Poor Rapunzel, though.
Tracing time by its shadow,
scraping her shoulders
on the walls of her childhood.

Seeing suitors shatter on the stones.
(Where did the path lead
if there was no door?)
A pile of almost.

The future,
when it deigns to show,
will pull her hair.

SHE DOESN'T KNOW •

Gene Laskowski

She doesn't know
that I am watching, she
in her armchair
by the photo of
        Yellowstone bison
        quiet, slow in the river-running
        meadow. With her bowl of raisin bran
and berries, walnuts and skim milk,
she eats her breakfast mindfully.
        Perhaps it's not so strange, my watching
        tenderly still toward her
        after nineteen years.
Or in the early moist chill
I'll watch her tending trillium,
        like Monet caressing light
        so intense on the tip
        of his brush that I know
for sure this day's fresh as
the First Morning,
        me watching her,
        mindfully,
        with a spoon

FIRE ALARM ●

Gwendolyn Jensen

Their room was on the ninth floor of the hotel, the handicapped floor. When the alarm sounded they went to the stairs and began to descend

as if obsessed, slow,
one step after another,
twisting down and deep.

Others were on the stairs, quickly leaving them behind, and the two of them were last—

slow, far, very slow,
seemingly useless bends and
ever sweeping fears.

And then a family entered the stairwell on the sixth floor and stayed with them. The teenagers took the man's arms and, half helping, half carrying, brought him down with them.

Gratitude is hard,
harder still accepting help,
but the tears felt good—

the resting center
of a need, as if nothing
were left unspoken.

And so they went together.

THE URBAN CROCODILE ●

Gwendolyn Jensen

moving slowly
to the park
its rope is long
enough for all
the children holding
on in pairs
one each side
teachers walking
front and back.

The crocodile keeps
the children safe
connects them to
the rope and through
the rope connects them
to each other
by their choice
or failing that
by command.

The crocodile's made
of many races
and bold jackets
bolder hats
the crocodile speaks
many languages
some for chatter
some for tears
some for silence.

The crocodile says
you can't have one
without the two.

The crocodile says
you can't have two
without the many.

RITUALS ■

Kathleen Glassburn

Traffic stalls on Bannon Road in Woodinville going west toward Seattle—twenty miles away. More summertime construction must be causing the delay. Monica's happy about this. It gives Lyle a paycheck. Or maybe the tiny house being hauled on a semi several vehicles ahead is contributing to the hang-up. Bright yellow, the house stands tall. Monica likes the idea of these tiny houses. So much better than the mini-mansions on multiple-acre lots nearby. She and her current husband, Lyle, a road worker, rent an apartment half a mile from here. Her nine-year-old daughter, Haley, whom Lyle recently adopted, lives with them.

It's an August Friday and Monica's driving home from the canine shelter where she works. Walking dogs and playing with puppies eases her stress—even working with the difficult ones like a growling German shepherd that was mistreated. Monica knows she can do something to help these animals, if only give them attention. The new-car smell of her dark-blue Honda Civic makes her smile. This is the first new car she has ever owned. On the right is St. Bridget's. Straining to see the top of its red-brick steeple, she crosses herself. Since her divorce seven years ago, she hasn't attended Mass. Every day she passes this Catholic church, and a momentary twinge sets in. Monica misses the music, the incense, and most of all Communion. Through caring for her now-deceased, alcoholic parents, as well as enduring the violent behavior of her first husband, Darrell, St. Bridget's offered consolation. Despite yearnings, Monica always tells herself, *Too many broken rules:* dead-

end relationships, an abortion, a remarriage. She's found other ways to cope.

"I'm okay just the way I am," she repeats.

A sedan follows the semi carrying the tiny house. It has a sign she can barely read: *Wide Load.*

Monica glances at her dashboard clock: 3:20 p.m. She told two women friends from the shelter—Susan and Pam—that she would meet them at The Coffee Bean by 3:30. It's at the mall across from the apartment. She rubs her aching left arm. The muscles have tightened because her rotator cuff never healed properly.

This stretch of Bannon Road accommodates two lanes of traffic, one going in each direction, with shoulders about the width of bike lanes on either side. *Time to fix it.*

Her car radio plays Monica's usual music on The Wolf—an FM country station. Trying to relax, she listens to Miranda Lambert's "Gunpowder & Lead." Her friends will wait if she's a bit late.

On the left side of the road is a tattoo parlor, a gun shop that Darrell probably still goes to, and a mini-mart. It's a sweltering day with a hot wind. A cool drink would hit the spot, but she doesn't have any idea how long she'll sit in this jam-up.

All of a sudden the Honda lurches with a bump from behind…then another bump. She grips the steering wheel.

Oh shit! A domino collision? Monica braces for another jolt, all the while telling herself, *Tension will only make injuries worse.*

No more hits. She says a quick "Hail Mary," then wonders, *What do I do?* Moments later vehicles ahead start to move, and Monica searches for a place to pull over, hoping the driver who ran into her will follow and that nothing will fall off her car. With paper and pen on the console, she readies herself to write down the license plate number if this driver zooms away. She can't see any intersections, so Monica pulls into the parking lot of an auto repair shop. *Maybe someone can check out my car.* A gray Dodge Ram rolls in behind her. She jumps out of her Honda and from the Ram lumbers a balding, fair-skinned man.

Strands of blond hair blow into her eyes. She brushes them away, catching a snarl. "Ouch," she says.

"Are you okay?" The harmless-looking man is over six feet tall.

"I'm fine. My watchband got tangled in my hair." She goes through a quick assessment and does feel fine except for old aches.

The man wears a Polynesian-design flowered shirt, rumpled khaki cargo shorts, and backless rubber sandals. *Did his foot slip off the brake, making him hit me twice?*

"I'm sorry. My fault…the accident." He looks like a huge, chastised yellow Lab. The man offers this apology and his

responsibility two more times.

Are his words slurred?

"Traffic seemed to move so I ran into you twice." He pauses before mumbling, "I live down the road. We're leaving for our condo on Maui tonight."

Monica's never been to Hawaii. She studies the front of his Dodge Ram but can't see any damage. Turning to her Honda, she takes in that both taillights hang low, and the bumper looks as if a good shove could send it crashing to the ground.

"Show me your papers," she says to the man.

He ambles back to his truck, losing a sandal on the way, and fumbles to put it back on before fetching his information.

She goes to her glove compartment to get her own proof of insurance. Moving a rosary off the papers, Monica questions why she has to show him anything. Flustered, she leaves her passenger door open but quickly notices and turns to close it as a big, orange pickup drives away from the auto repair shop, missing her door by inches. *He could have gone around!* The pickup sounds as loud as a jet, and its fumes make her sneeze.

A man in the shop's window glares at Monica with an all-too-familiar expression. An expression that, thank God, she never sees anymore.

The other driver, Gary Medkin according to his registration, says, “We can take photos.”

“Good idea.”

He can’t get his iPhone camera to work. “Mary bought this for me.”

Monica doesn’t ask who Mary is. She shows him how to operate it.

About this time the man in the window, small and sandy-haired and in a denim shirt, swaggers out. He walks like Darrell but isn’t anywhere near as big. A tag on his shirt says *Mack.* He reminds her of a nippy cocker spaniel.

“I own this place of business,” he barks at her. “You can’t park here.”

Why’s he picking on me and ignoring this bimblefuck?

“Let’s hurry,” Monica tells Gary Medkin.

The shop owner goes back inside, and they carefully place their information on the Ram’s hood in order to stabilize it from the wind. Monica can barely reach the hood. One of Gary Medkin’s papers blows under the truck.

His bleary blue eyes make her question, *Can he kneel down?*

Monica says, “I’ll get it.”

He ignores her and hunkers under the truck, looking like he’ll keel over as he rises.

Monica stands ready to grab his arm.

Is he drunk? She can’t smell alcohol. *Has he been using marijuana? Is he on opioids?* He acts passive and almost frightened, as if he expects her to start yelling and kicking him.

After retrieving the paper he stammers, “I’ll give you my telephone numbers too.”

She puts these in her iPhone notes.

As they wrap up the exchange and head back to their vehicles, Mack, the auto repair shop man, comes out again and snarls at Monica, “You’re trespassing!”

“I got rear-ended! There’s no place else to pull over. You never even asked if I was hurt.”

“Sassy bitch.” Mack pulls out his iPhone and takes a picture of her license plate.

She slowly drives away, wondering, *What is he planning to do with that?* In her rearview mirror she sees him talking to a silent Gary Medkin…and sneering.

How’s he treat other women? Monica’s mind goes back to

the way Darrell behaved right before he exploded. After a third trip to the hospital for broken bones, with the help of A New Path For Women, she summoned her courage to leave.

Ten minutes later she arrives at The Coffee Bean and checks out the rear of her Honda. Nothing has fallen off. She should be able to make it home. Inside the cafe she flops into a booth where Susan and Pam are sitting. She tells them what caused her to be late and how mean the auto shop owner was where she pulled over.

They commiserate about the damage to her almost-new car.

“What about the other driver?” Pam asks.

“Really disoriented. He had some sort of problem.”

“Maybe that guy shouldn’t be driving.” Susan shakes her head.

“Maybe…what’s the shop owner going to do with a photo of my license plate?”

“He can’t do anything at all,” Susan assures her.

“There’s no other way to go. I have to drive by there every day!”

Pam pats Monica’s arm. A loving gesture that sends a pain up to her shoulder. “He can’t do anything to you. He just wanted to intimidate you,” Pam says.

When she returns to the apartment, Monica immediately calls her insurance company and reports the accident to an adjuster, Stella, a young-sounding woman.

The woman says, “This should be an easy one. You’re obviously not to blame.” She takes the claim information and gives Monica the name of a local auto repair shop. Even though it’s close to the apartment, the woman never mentions that shop where Monica and Gary Medkin parked.

Next morning she takes her Honda in to be fixed.

A week later she picks the car up. It looks good as new. She writes a check for the $1,000 deductible, hoping she and Lyle will have enough money for rent and her car payment this month. The total bill for the Honda’s damages comes in at more than $6,000.

Stella calls a few days later. “I’m glad your car is fixed to your satisfaction.” She pauses. “There is a problem with the claim.”

“What kind of problem?”

“Mr. Medkin’s wife, Mary, called and told us they were in Maui when this accident occurred.”

“He said they were going that night, but he certainly was on Bannon Road earlier and hit my car—twice!”

“I could hear him in the background, saying a few words to his wife as we talked, but I’m not sure what he said.”

Then Monica tells Stella about the nasty shop owner. “Do you think he has something to do with this lie?”

“I’ve seen people falsify details before.”

Two weeks later Stella calls again and tells Monica that Mary Medkin has changed her comments about the accident. “She said on further discussion with Gary, the conclusion was reached that he did hit your car at the time you reported. Apparently Gary has been sick and that caused the confusion.”‘

“I guess it explains the way he acted. He must be on drugs.”

“I assume so.”

“What’s going to happen? Will he continue driving? He could have caused injuries, even deaths.”

“Our company will determine his abilities in the future.”

“That’s a relief.”

“A check for your deductible will be in the mail within the next few months.”

“Thanks for your help and understanding.”

With a payday loan, Monica and Lyle have enough for their bills. The Honda's working fine with no sign of an accident. However, her anger hangs on, like a slow-burning flame. Rightfully or wrongfully, she doesn't resent Gary Medkin. Maybe he and his wife lied, trying to avoid a boost to their insurance cost. Maybe a communication problem caused the discrepancy. Monica chooses to believe the second explanation, even though a Google search has revealed that they live in one of the Woodinville mini-mansions worth over $2 million. It's the auto repair shop owner's attitude that still infuriates her.

Each day when she drives by Mack's shop, Monica glares in that direction and says things like: "Hex on you." Or "I hope this place burns down." Or "You asshole, Mack!"

She thinks about sending a rant to the *Seattle Times* describing the shop owner's rotten, territorial attitude. She considers writing a horrible review on Yelp, detailing his unhelpfulness and saying that no one should trust him with a car. She pictures herself going to his lot at night and spreading nails around.

One day, when she doesn't have enough money to buy Haley a birthday present, she thinks, *I could go in Darrell's gun shop and get one to blast that guy to kingdom come.* Or maybe she should blast that brutal Darrell, who's never paid a dime of support. Or maybe she should go get another tattoo.

Instead, as each day passes, the clench in her stomach and pounding to the back of her head worsens. Monica

remembers something she read in one of her many self-help books: “A strong woman never seeks revenge. She moves on and lets Karma do her dirty work.” With this thought her antagonism temporarily floats away. It returns the next day when she drives by the shop. Monica considers going to a doctor but knows that her symptoms are caused by bad feelings. She remembers an act that is part of the Mass and tries it, and finds that with repeating the words, over many weeks, she begins to feel better.

She looks at Mack’s shop and says, “Peace be with you.” Then she adds, “And peace be with me too.”

SUBURBAN ENCOUNTER ●

Lisa Low

With what my kids want for supper in mind,
I swing into a grocery store parking lot
and almost hit a baby. I slam on the brakes
and hum, stunned. One inch more and I might
have hit that baby, I think, splashing it, thin
as buttermilk and broken eggs, across
the pitted asphalt. "Excuse me, sir," I
cry to a boy packing groceries into the
back of his truck. "I almost hit your baby!"
A woman in a long skirt follows, flying
straight as an arrow in my direction.
"Then you should learn to drive, BITCH!"
At that the baby screams and the mother
rips it from its carriage. "You touch my kid
and I'll murder your ass!" The baby
screams again and she smacks it, stuffing
it into her husband's arms. I cut the
engine and slide off snakelike, ease into
a faraway spot; go the long way around
to avoid them. At the grocery store
entrance an old woman holds the door
for me, bowing her head low to allow
the kindness to occur. I confess I like
the nice world better. It's the one I'm
used to. Regarding that other world, where
the streets are mean and life is short; where
even a baby hasn't got a chance in hell,
conscious of my good fortune in avoiding it
(shamefaced; SHAMEFACED!), I want no part.

ON LAST VISITING MY SON ●

Lisa Low

For Sam

He doesn't hate me. That much I know
is true. It's true, he doesn't have pictures
of me on his walls, but his room is filled
with aspects of me: as if he wanted to
think of me indirectly, like Plato's
shadows on a wall. His shelves are lined
with the types of vases I long ago
collected, and art is everywhere,
bought at the kinds of shops I used to
love to haunt, finding beautiful things
that, hung on a wall, or placed stylized
on a table, made the life of a single
mother that much less unbearable.
Speaking of beauty—my son. I want
to put my arms around him. I want
to hold him close. I want to whisper
in his ears how sorry I am for all
the things I've done: how I ran to the
top of the stairs once, and dragged him by
one arm down; how I ripped a toy from
his hand and tore a string of flesh from
his thigh; how once, in a rage, I slapped
his face, though he stood no higher than
my knee. Recently, at the back of a
drawer, I found an old tape recorder,
and sat delighted to listen to the past,
at first remembering how we used to
sit: he in the arc of my lap, my heart

beating in his ears; my chin at rest
against this head; his feet in sneakers
swinging freely. Thus we used to sit
reading from his favorite books.
But on that particular day he must have
done something wrong: moved a glass or
touched a table mat carefully set, for
my habit of rage struck out and I snapped
at him and might almost have bit him,
my voice changing suddenly from something
soft and low to the sound a devil must
make when he reaches up from hell. In
slow words, through clenched teeth, furious
as a witch, I howled: “Put that back!” How
terrifying that voice, making tears spurt
from my eyes to hear it now. How far
more terrifying to the tiny ears of a child.

CANADA FERRY ●

Lisa Low

Scrawny legs strapped into Birkenstocks.
Knobby knees spread wide, deliberate
for standing firm. A wig of gray-brown
hair, wire-rim glasses pressed to a slab
of sunburnt nose. Someone thin flown in
from the sixties, now probably seventy-two,
looking into the fog from the ferry-
boat floor. I sit in a white plastic chair
beside him. To my left, a good-looking
man leans on a rail with a thickset neck;
a tattoo of eagles flying east-to-west
on his upper arm, and the burnished lips
of a god. I could kiss those lips forever.
Our eyes meet briefly, but he vanishes
quickly into a cruise-ship porthole, my
flash-in-the-pan romance gone now, over
forever. Of course, I had to find
the smokers' corner. Come to the back
of the boat for a bit of fresh air and
find myself parked among smokers in
the last-left chair. A railing in front
holds the people back. They have to have
a smoke. It's rude, I think, like stuffing
litter in at heaven's gate. Next comes
a three-year-old, held up high in her
mother's arms, her shirtwaist blowing back,
her face strapped into an oxygen mask
attached to a clear-running tube of air.
Beside her, an old woman with clumps
of hard-looking hair; next, a couple; the

man, older, his free hand dropping to cup
the sagging strip of middle-aged bottom
beside him; next, a family of three.
The daughter, a beauty, ducking her
head in under the lifted wing of her
father's sheltering arm while the mother
stands back to snap the remembering shot.
The daughter smiles, unconceited, the
fiat of her pure, white smile lighting
up the world. My loneliness and her
happiness in this never-to-be-repeated
hour: unforgettable.

COMMENTS LEFT ■

Eric D. Goodman

"That ain't all that. I seen better."

Harry stood on the New York side of Niagara Falls, listening: 43.080 degrees north, 79.071 degrees west.

"This is stunning. It really is one of the wonders of the world."

Harry had come here from his Baltimore home for a little peace and quiet.

"I proposed to my wife at this location."

But the comments rang in his head. Even here.

"You should go to the Canada side. It's even better, eh?"

Harry thought of the relative peace and quiet of Times Square. There was a time when he found Times Square intimidating with its flashing lights, imposing advertisements, sleepless persistence. But the city's ban on audio comments made Times Square one of the last protected locations in the civilized world. Even Baltimore's Inner Harbor, Hampden, and Towson were all busy with ongoing audio commentary.

"This is where I'm ending it. If anyone who hears this gives a shit, someone jumped right here where you're standing."

Did anyone give a shit? Harry didn't. There was a time when he would have cared. A time when he would have geo-tagged audio comments of his own. But what was once an exciting new medium had become the Facebook or Twitter of a new generation. He continued to walk along the sidewalk, the mist of the fall encasing him.

"Hey, stop here for a minute. I've got a story to …"

Harry didn't stop for the longer commentaries. He didn't really want to hear any of them.

"Looking for a nice place to stay, but trying to save a Benjamin? Say "yes" for directions to The Twin Falls Inn, your escape …"

Harry escaped the advertisement. Yes, the marketers were not far behind the egoists. Walking anywhere these days was like submerging yourself in the blogosphere of yesteryear. It was almost enough to make him turn off his iChip. Almost. How could anyone unplug completely?

Sometimes there was beauty. Once, when Harry was visiting the undeveloped lands of Michigan, strolling through the woods, he stumbled upon an unexpected geo-tag. "Hello friend," said a warm, grandfatherly voice. "Stop for a moment, take a load off. Let me tell you a story. A story about how things used to be."

That had been worth hearing, Harry considered now as he tried to ignore the comments all around him. That had been unexpected, without an agenda, simply the sharing of a

story, the initiation of a conversation between generations, the marking of an era and a space. That was what geo-tag audio comments had been intended for.

“Kay-Kay was here.”

Now, they had become intrusive graffiti in the air. He needed his iChip to stay in touch with the world, to know where his friends were, what the news was, where the next event was taking place, what time it was, what the weather would be. He needed to stay connected. But sometimes he wondered what it would be like to turn it off. To disconnect. He imagined what life would be with the iChip turned off, the comments left.

MIDNIGHT COMPUTER ●

Eva-Maria Sher

That woman in her
blue robe
 crouched
in the dark
against the pale
luminescence
of her terminal—
shift-deleting, shift-deleting

wireless
often clueless
keeping up with upgrades
kidding
about her yearning
to downgrade—
that woman, does she

(out of the corner
of her eye)
notice
the fleeting
shadow
of her soul—
beating its wings
against the screen?

COME NAKED ●

Eva-Maria Sher

forget your pajamas
your toothbrush, boots
thermal underwear
wool socks, fur-lined parka
ice axe, goggles, and gloves.
Come as you are.
Abandon passport
visa, maps, and compass.
Quit the voice that drags
its feet along pavement.
Come naked. Bring nothing
but your pen as your guide.
Ride your words bravely
into those empty fields of white.
Ride them home.

EMOR: CHIPPING AWAY ●

Cash Myron Toklas

Leviticus 19:1–20:27

Michelangelo once described his method as *chipping away everything that is not David.* Let us agree: there is too much

in this broken world that is not David. But my slant differs: in the studio of imaginary, where the idea of white marble

joins longing for the body electric, I chip away at everything that is not you. I chip away in hushed reverence for what lies

beyond. Whole forests & cumulus clouds & continents that back to me, facing only you, I chip their backs. Fronts, I

cannot see. Stars that bright the sky but leave the world unlit, I chip. I chip it away & all the sky & all the air that

hums around but is not you, I chip it. Though it caresses you, I chip. Space-time as it bends around substantiality of your

hips, even to the tips of fingers that you extend into the world, chip. Then, from the soundtrack of yearning moment, I chip

the sounds that are not you, names that are not yours. The wind that blows through migrant boulevards, whispering

names that are not yours. Names of birds technologies & diseases, chip. Names of oceans heartaches & boundaries,

chip. The names of everything that when summed up, and their sum subtracted from everything there is, so that the

difference is nothing but you. Chip. And then all there is is
You.

SINGAPORE SLING ■

Frank Richards

I sat at a table in the Long Bar at the Raffles Hotel, watching the overhead fans move back and forth, wondering who designed them. The fans were shaped like individual palm fronds projecting from a long rod that moved them back and forth, as if a line of servants stood waving the fronds up and down. Singapore was an odd place.

As I waited, I sampled a bright red drink, a syrupy, ultra-sweet blend of liquors. I wondered whether I should order something else. At last, Chris Pierce, our head of operations, sauntered in, just like he owned the place. We would be attending a business conference beginning with a dinner that evening and had both arrived about 2:30 a.m. local time. It hadn't given me much time to adjust.

"How are you doing, Devin? Did you get any sleep?"

"I think this is the worst case of jet lag I've ever had," I said. "Terrible headache." I held up the drink. "This is just making it worse."

"A Singapore Sling? No wonder. Let's get some food in you." Chris waved at the waitress who'd brought me the drink. "You can't beat the food in Singapore. And let's get a couple of beers. You'll feel a lot better."

The waitress brought us small menu cards. Chris pointed to the third item on the list. "I've had this."

“The Singapore Sampler. Vegetable Samosa, Fried Chicken Wings, Spring Rolls, Curry Puffs, Lamb Satays, Chili Sauce,” I read out loud. “That’s eclectic.”

“That’s Singapore. Wait until you taste the chili sauce. The population is eclectic. People here are from all over this part of the world. But they are a practical and materialistic people. This is, after all, one of the world’s great commercial capitals. Everything seems to come together here. You never know what you’re going to find.”

The waitress came back with our beers and stood ready to take our order.

“Look, I’ll prove it to you.” He turned to our waitress. “Miss, can you tell me, what are the five C’s?”

She smiled. “Car, cash, condo, credit card and country club. The Singapore Dream.”

“I rest my case,” Chris said.

After we ordered, he unfolded a map on our table. “I assume you saw the main part of the city, the ritzy stores and such, from your taxi on the way over here.” He pointed to the middle of the map, then looked up. “You did take a taxi, didn’t you?”

“No, I thought we were close enough to walk.” It had only been eight blocks. I hadn’t counted on the heat and humidity. It had been a mistake.

“No wonder you look drenched. You may be used to the heat, but you’ve got to watch out for the humidity. This isn’t Phoenix, you know. Anyway, I’m gonna go out of the city to visit some tropical fish farms. They’re off the map, right about here.” He pointed to his napkin. “Want to join me? You’ll see most of the island.”

Chris had several fish tanks in his study at home, stocked with colorful fresh and saltwater fish. No one knew why he put a massive fish aquarium in the lobby of our North American office. Then one morning we had several visitors from corporate. When I came down from my office to greet them in the lobby, they were all gathered around the aquarium.

“Look at that. Can you believe it?” one asked.

“Just perfect,” another said.

They’d noticed all the fish in the tank were blue, black, and white, our corporate colors. Attention to detail like this was part of our culture. This deft touch impressed our visitors and got their review of our operations off to a great start.

Having nothing better to do, I agreed to the excursion. I always like to see as much of the country as I can whenever I travel, and this would be my only chance to see Singapore, as I was heading on to Osaka the day after the conference ended.

“We’ll leave from here.” Chris attacked his Singapore Sampler with gusto. He shook a chicken wing at me. “Give

us more time at the farms."

#

We left right after lunch, in a taxi without air conditioning. The driver had rolled down his window, so at least we had warm air blowing in our faces. We were soon driving down an unpaved country road, lifting a cloud of dust behind us. I was disappointed at the lack of jungle. I expected jungle in this part of the world. I always think I might see a tiger in the wild. I remembered driving through Malaysia, the country just to north of Singapore, and being disappointed at the palm oil plantations that pushed the jungle back and away from the highway almost out of sight. I wasn't going to see any tigers today, either. Nothing dangerous here.

The driver stopped at a cross street in the middle of nowhere. We got out. Chris paid the driver and the taxi drove away. We were alone.

Some sort of emerald-colored sawgrass covered the ground. It was a couple of feet high in most places. Tall, skinny trees poked up here and there, as if they were fighting a losing battle with the grass.

"The driver said the farms were up this road." Chris began walking, and so I followed. It seemed even hotter here than in the city. We came to a house set back from the road on the right. The house was surrounded by deep-green trees. I wondered where all the fish were.

I followed Chris up to the door. Chris knocked, and we

waited in the silence. There were no city sounds, no traffic; not a bird chirped, not an insect buzzed. What did we think we were doing at this strange house out in the middle of nowhere? I checked my cell phone to make sure we had service. After all, I was going to have to call a cab or book an Uber back to the hotel.

God, it was humid. And it was still hot, even though we stood in the shade of the porch.
I felt the sweat trickling down my face and droplets of water seemed to be forming on my forehead from the steamy humidity.

A slender, small man opened the door. He wore a white, lightweight shirt and tan pants. His black hair receded from his forehead. His mouth was a slit. His face bore no expression whatsoever.

Chris spread his hands. “We’re here to see your tropical fish.”

Without a word, the man came out and went around the side of the house toward the back. Chris and I looked at each other and followed. We walked down a sidewalk under the shade of trees, and then came to a line of very large aquariums or fish tanks under a low hanging canopy. We stopped at the first one. The tanks were labelled in Chinese characters. The tank contained dozens of bright orange fish, darting here and there around in the tank.

“I’ve seen this kind before in the States,” I said.

“Common platies.” Chris gestured toward the man, who had continued down the line of aquariums. “I want to ask him about an arowana.”

Chris left, and I followed slowly, looking at the aquariums. The next one also contained platies, but these were slightly smaller, I thought. Then the next tank, yes, definitely, these were smaller than the first. As I walked the line, each tank contained smaller fish of the same type, until I got to the end. The fish in the last tank were little more than a pair of black eyes, like two flakes of pepper, fronting a transparent fish.

Somehow it had gotten even more humid under the canopy, and I realized all that water was adding something to it. I thought the humidity must be approaching 100 percent.

Chris had been speaking to the man. He pointed to the tank in front of me. “Those are the fry. They breed them over here.” This time he pointed to a concrete pond with raised sides. It was parallel to the aquarium tanks. The water in the pond seemed full of barf-green algae. I looked down a whole row of such ponds, one at the end of each line of aquariums. The place was laid out in a grid of lines.

Chris continued his tropical fish conversation with the old man. Deciding to get back under the shade, I headed down the second line of aquariums. They were laid out in the reverse of the previous line; starting with the smallest fish and getting larger with each tank. I recognized a kind of fish I thought was called an angelfish, but it was silver with black vertical stripes, so perhaps it was a zebrafish. The

Chinese characters were of no help.

I began to feel a bit light-headed. I felt my forehead. Dry. I'd finally stopped sweating. I suppose I was getting used to the heat, although the thickness of the air made it difficult to breathe. When I got to the end of the line, a woman, probably the man's wife, as she wore the same sort of clothing, stood holding the hand of a little girl, six or seven years old. The woman smiled and handed me a bottle of what appeared to be a soft drink. The bottle had odd writing on it and contained a vermilion-colored liquid. I thanked the woman, and she walked back toward the house. The little girl followed me down the next line of aquariums. These fish were a smaller species: cerulean-blue backs and tangerine bellies.

The little girl's eyes were fixed on the bottle in my hand, so I gave it to her. I wasn't thirsty. I felt nauseated. I wondered why I had given her the drink.

The girl took my other hand and led me away from the aisle toward a shed. Beside the shed stood another aquarium, this one larger than the others. Murky water obscured whatever might be inside. She led me up to the tank and tapped on the glass with the side of the bottle.

At first, I saw nothing. My vision was obscured; the tank seemed to move in and out of focus. Then something appeared in the murk. A tiny horse's hoof at the end of a conical leg. Some sort of impossible creature bounced up and down from the bottom of the tank as if its leg were a pogo stick. Its head appeared duck-like. I looked closer.

The body was not a fish's body; soft, down-like hair rather than scales covered a circular torso. The creature had three tentacled arms ending in tentacled hands, two of which now pressed against the glass opposite my one hand.

I heard the man cry out. I felt an electrical shock. The girl jerked back and tugged the edge of a tarp over the front of tank. Chris and the man seemed to be running toward me, but I felt woozy. I swayed as I reached out to the girl. Later I was to remember the sensation of falling, not carefully, as one does when slipping, but more like the dead weight of a huge tree falling in a forest. I also remembered the pattern of the gravel coming up to meet my face.

#

I awoke to the hee-hawing of an ambulance. Two men dressed in white fussed over me. Cobweb-like lines obscured my vision. "What was that thing?" I mumbled, but they didn't understand me. I think Chris was there too, riding with us in the ambulance.

When I was gurneyed into the hospital, the cobwebs worsened. Some lines receded in the distance; others turned at impossible angles away or toward me, getting bigger and thicker. They sported dark colors, mostly emerald, purplish-violet, and flat black. It was as if some sort of colored map hung in front of my eyes. I looked closer, and saw things moving along the lines, more crazy-looking things. I tried to blink them away, but they only grew stronger in my sight. I saw another world superimposed over this one. Had this other world been here all the time and I had been blind

to it?

I awoke again to tubes and wires connected to my arms and chest. A doctor bent over me. “You suffer from heat stroke,” she said. “Very dangerous.”

“No,” I grabbed at her arm. “A thing did this,” I shouted. “In the tank.”

“You were hallucinating. An effect of the heat stroke.”

“But there are lines, I see lines—”

“You must rest.”

#

I missed my meetings in Osaka. I realized if I continued to talk about the lines, they would think I was still sick and never let me out of the hospital. So today I told the doctor the lines had disappeared.

“You are apt to be able to leave tomorrow,” she said.

I still see the lines, of course. I’m watching one now. There’s something on it, hopping toward me. It is the same type of creature I saw in the aquarium tank. Maybe it is the same one. It stops, leans forward, and looks at me, perhaps in disbelief, seemingly surprised that I can see into its world. But I do see into it. I even reach out to the place of lines and grab at a tentacled arm. Alarmed, the creature pulls back its arm and bounces away along the line that

brought it toward me.

“Yes, I can see you.” I say. “And next time, I’ll catch you.”

ESSAY ON GOODNESS IN THE EVERY DAY ●

Peter Leight

Today I'm going to be good to everybody I know, and also everybody I don't know, I'm serving everybody first, before I do anything else. Letting my lips relax, I think they're sweeter, and also softer, today I'm saying "good morning" to everybody I know and also to everybody I don't even know, or just "good," as long as it's good it doesn't matter *when* it's good or how good it is, as when you squeeze yourself in and everybody else has more room. I mean there's no reason to pretend something is good when it actually is. Picking up my hands and holding them in front of me where they can go either way, like a form of interpretation. Today I'm looking into all the cases, not thinking *it's okay the way it is*—of course it's better when everybody has a good case, if it's good it's good enough *for everybody*, and if it's not good enough I'm going to apologize right away, before it gets any worse. Sometimes I think it's only good enough if it's better than anything else, better than anything you can think of, as long as it's better there's usually something that's even better—after a while you notice it's cumulative, as in those Renaissance paintings composed of layers of varying degrees of transparency, giving the appearance of depth below the surface.

CHECKOUT LINE PRAYER ●

Catherine Stansfield

She scanned a bag of frozen peas
and recited, dutifully,
Hail Mary, full of grace
With another beep came the last roll
of paper towels on the barren shelf
the Lord is with thee.
She said the prayer with every
item all the way through.
They did not interrupt her to
show their rewards card.
She said: *You know, my*
daughter is a nurse, and
I'm working more hours than her!
They said: *Thank you both*
for your service.
She saluted them, smile.
They said: *Don't touch your face.*
She laughed and her mouth was
the comedy, but her eyes
held the horror.
She said: *Have a blessed day.*
and she took the next customer.
Hail Mary, full of grace—

SAYING GOODBYE DURING A QUARANTINE ●

Catherine Stansfield

It was a closed-casket and closed-door service.
An immediate family affair. We sat in every
second chair, so there would be no whispers.
Father wore a mask as white as his collar.
As he spoke, we could not see the curves
of his mouth, so he traced the words syllable
by syllable with his gloved hands—
a mime with holiness and sound.

Most of us cried, but we couldn't touch our faces,
so we wore our grief in the wetness of our cheeks.
Our bodies remembered the calming
presence of a hug and the warmth shared
between two sets of hands joined,
but our backs were already heavy
and our necks were bent from struggling to
remember the bellow of a laugh now lost.

We could not hold the ones
who needed to be held the most.
The hymns we sang were a siren's song—
longing to stretch out and fold around
loving arms. Our voices broke when we
realized, one at a time, that after the burial
the one we yearned to meet the most
would always be at least six feet away.

CONTRIBUTORS

Carol Everett Adams writes poems about Disney theme parks, organized religion, UFOs, and other topics. She lives in the Midwestern United States and works in the tech industry. Her poems have been published in *California Quarterly, Euphony, The MacGuffin, The New York Quarterly, Owen Wister Review, Quercus Review, Soundings East, Sweet Tree Review,* and others. You can read more of her work at caroleverettadams.com.

Carol writes: I wrote this poem because a professor in my MFA program once told us that the moon is a trope we should never attempt to tackle in a poem. I'm a rule breaker, so I had to give it a shot. Plus, I really was inspired by how vehemently my daughter insisted that the moon was plugged in somewhere like a giant nightlight.

Dinah Cox's two book of stories are *Remarkable* (BOA Editions) and *The Canary Keeper* (PANK Books). Her stories have appeared in *StoryQuarterly, Prairie Schooner, Cream City Review, Copper Nickel,* and elsewhere. She teaches in the Creative Writing program at Oklahoma State University where she's also an Associate Editor at *Cimarron Review.*

Gannon Daniels is a teacher of writing in the LA area and has had several poems published in journals over the years. She is especially proud of this poem that was inspired by her lovely sister-in-law, Lisa, and she'd like to dedicate it to Lisa's children.

Timothy Dodd is from Mink Shoals, WV, and is the author of *Fissures, and Other Stories* (Bottom Dog Press, 2019). His poetry has appeared in *The Literary Review, Modern Poetry Quarterly Review, Roanoke Review, Broad River Review,* and elsewhere. Also a visual artist, Tim's most recent solo exhibition, "Come Here, Nervousness," was held at Art Underground in Manila, Philippines. His oil paintings can be sampled on his Instagram page, @timothybdoddartwork, and his writing followed on his "Timothy Dodd, Writer" Facebook page.

Timothy writes: Both of these poems seek to "capture" actual experiences as they transformed from "real" to "irreal" moments, moments eclipsing logic and self: "Old Margaretha's Hand" is born from being with Rembrandt's portrait of Margaretha de Geer in London's National Gallery, and "Love --- Is/Not a Season" from a sudden rain and flood while walking in Manila.

Shawna Ervin is an MFA candidate at Rainier Writers Workshop through Pacific Lutheran University where she is studying nonfiction and poetry. Recent publications include poetry in *Sanskrit, Rappahannock Review, Burningword Literary Journal, Tampa Review, Euphony, Evening Street Review, and Hiram Poetry Review;* and prose in *Sweet: A Literary Confection, The Delmarva Review, Summerset Review, and Superstition Review.* Her poetry chapbook *Mother Lines* was published in January 2020 by Finishing Line Press. She lives in Denver with her family.

Shawna writes: This poem tries to capture some of my experience trying to reassure and soothe my autistic son.

The world is often a terrifying place for him and I am also scared about what the future holds for us.

Doris Ferleger, winner of the New Letters Poetry, Songs of Eretz Prize, Montgomery County Poet Laureate Prize, Robert Fraser Poetry Prize, and the AROHO Creative Non-Fiction Prize, among others, is the author of three full-length volumes of poetry, *Big Silences in a Year of Rain* (finalist for the Alice James Beatrice Hawley Award), *As the Moon Has Breath, and Leavened,* and a chapbook entitled *When You Become Snow.* Her new book, *As for the Kiss,* has been a finalist for the Washington Prize, the Cod Hill Prize and the Marsh Hawk Prize. Her work has been published in numerous journals including *Cimarron Review, L.A. Review,* and *South Carolina Review.* She holds an MFA in Poetry and a Ph.D. in psychology and maintains a mindfulness based therapy practice in Wyncote PA. New Letters Poetry Prize, Judge Aliki Barnestone writes of Ferleger's work, *These memorable poems keep singing with their insistent beauty.*

Kathleen Glassburn is a fiction writer. Samples of her published work can be seen on her website: www.kathleenglassburn.com. She is also managing editor of The Writer's Workshop Review: www.thewritersworkshopreview.net. Her novel *Making It Work* was published in 2017 and her short story collection *Where Do Stories Come From?* was published in 2018. Both are still available. She is hard at work on a new novel set during WW2 as well as new short stories. She spends lots of time these days with her husband, her horse, three dogs, and two cats.

Kathleen writes: Where did the story come from? As shown in my collection, this is always a question I wonder about with other authors. I was in a similar car accident in a new vehicle and pulled over in an auto repair shop with a snarky owner like the guy in my story. Much of the story is nonfiction, however, I do not have the money worries that this young woman has, nor do I have an abusive ex-husband, or any tattoos for that matter. I was very angry with that shop owner and would drive by his place of business several times a week, always thinking hostile thoughts toward him. I have Catholicism in my background and used the Peace Sign to get over my anger.

Eric D. Goodman is a full-time writer who lives in Baltimore, Maryland with his wife and children. He is author of *Setting the Family Free* (Apprentice House Press, 2019), *Womb: a novel in utero,* (Merge Publishing, 2017), *Tracks: A Novel in Stories,* (Atticus Books, 2011) and *Flightless Goose,* a storybook for children (Writer's Lair Books, 2008). More than a hundred of his works of short fiction, travel stories, and articles about writing have been published in literary journals and periodicals. When he's not writing, Eric loves traveling, and most of the settings in his new thriller, *The Color of Jadeite,* are places he has visited. Founder and curator of Baltimore's popular Lit and Art Reading Series, Eric can be found at www.Facebook.com/EricDGoodman, www.Twitter.com/Edgewrite, and www.EricDGoodman.com.

Eric writes: I'm as guilty as the next person of spending too much time checking my phone for emails, social media posts, and news flashes. But as someone who enjoys

unplugging for travel and hiking and writing retreats, I also know that when you unplug for a few days or weeks, you normally don't miss nearly as much as we all miss by staring at our phones. In "Comments Left," I tried to imagine a new trend that could be as altering as smart phones have been over the past decade. Let's hope it doesn't come true, but if it did, at least we might not be staring at our phones as often.

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

David Habib is a writer and photographer living in Virginia.

J. H. Hernandez's work has appeared in *Chaffin Journal, Deus Loci, Green River Review, The MacGuffin* and *Portland Review.* J.H. lives on an island near Seattle and brews stinging nettle soup.

J.H. writes: As a veteran I am sensitive to the trials and the losses that other veterans experience. The loss of the simple things for someone doing his duties and the love he has for his family has been told over and over, but the true loss is as real as ever.

Emily Hyland's poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Apple Valley Review, armarolla, Belle Ombre, Belletrist Magazine, The Brooklyn Review, Mount Hope Magazine, Neologism Poetry Journal, Sixfold,* and *Palette Poetry.* A

restauranteur and English professor from New York City, she received her MFA in poetry and her MA in English education from Brooklyn College. Her cookbook, *Emily: The Cookbook,* was published by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, in 2018. She is a member of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers and studies writing with Mirabai Starr. Emily is the cofounder of the national restaurant groups Pizza Loves Emily and Emmy Squared Pizza.

Gwendolyn Jensen began writing poems when she retired in 2001 from the presidency of Wilson College (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania). The places where her work has appeared include the *Beloit Poetry Journal, the Harvard Review, Salamander, Sanskrit, Whistling Shade,* and *Measure.* Her first book (*Birthright,* Birch Brook Press, 2011) is a letterpress edition, now in its second printing. Her second book (*As if toward Beauty* also Birch Brook Press) was published in 2015. Her third book (also published by Birch Brook Press) is *Graceful Ghost,* a letterpress edition published in 2018. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Gene Laskowski, PhD retired from 25 years of teaching in the English Department at the University of Michigan. He holds an AB (UCDavis) in history and Latin, an MDiv in psychiatry and religion (Union Theological) with clinical training at the Topeka State Hospital/The Menninger Foundation, an MA (Middlebury) in literature, and a PhD (Michigan) on Melville's critique of 19th century masculinity. More recently at the C.G.Jung Institute of Chicago, he has taught seminars on the use of writing

creative nonfiction to address trauma. He splits his time between his home in Ann Arbor and winter stays in Carmel, California.

Yvonne Higgins Leach spent decades balancing a career in communications and public relations, raising a family, and pursuing her love of writing poetry. Her first collection of poems is called *Another Autumn.* Her latest passion is working with shelter dogs. She splits her time living in Vashon and Spokane, Washington. For more information, visit www.yvonnehigginsleach.com.

Yvonne writes: I knew there were years when my parent's marriage wasn't the best, especially for my mother. After having two failed marriages of my own and learning about the research that says trauma can be passed from the parent to the child, even invitro, I became intrigued and wrote this poem.

Peter Leight lives in Amherst, Massachusetts. He has previously published poems in *Paris Review, AGNI, Antioch Review, Beloit Poetry Journal, FIELD, Matter*, and other magazines.

Lisa Low's poetry has appeared in or is forthcoming from *The Valparaiso Review, Good Works Review, The Potomac Review, Tusculum Review, Delmarva Review, Evening Street Review, Green Hills Literary Lantern, American Journal of Poetry, Spillway, Streetlight, Phoebe, Crack the Spine, Broken Plate, Lit Break Magazine, Boomer Lit Mag,* and *Intro 11,* among others. She is one of the editors of *Milton, the Metaphysicals, and Romanticism* (Cambridge

University Press in 1994). She spent twenty years as an English professor, teaching at Cornell College; Colby College; and Pace University and was a theater critic for Christian Science Monitor. Learn more about Lisa Low at https://lisalowwrites.com.

Cyndy Muscatel has written for several publications including *The Seattle Times and The Desert Sun.* Her fiction, non-fiction, and poetry have been published in many journals including *The MacGuffin, Main Street Rag, North Atlantic Review, Quercus Review, riverSedge, descant, Existere, and Jet Fuel Review.* Her collection of published short stories "Radio Days" is available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble. She is working on a memoir of her time teaching in the inner city of Seattle during the Sixties.

Cyndy writes: Fortunately, right after finishing "Act Your Age" I went to a doctor who uses PRP and stem cell therapies to treat injuries. I had both injected into my knee and now I'm back walking three miles a day. I feel a lot younger than I did a year ago! And because of COVID, I'm embracing my elder stateswoman status even more. While being as wise as I can to help my bewildered kids and grandkids in these unprecedented times, I've learned having someone go the market and Costco for me is WONDERFUL! Instacart is my best friend.

Patrick Pfister's recent books—*Far From Home and North Beach Hotel*—are available from Spuyten Duyvil Press. His poetry book, *El Camino and Other Travel Poems,* was published by Literary Laundry. His poems

have appeared in many literary magazines, including *Gargoyle* and *Juked.* He lives in Barcelona, Spain. www.patrickpfister.com

Susie Potter was the first in her family to graduate college. After earning a degree in English from Meredith College, she went on to earn an MA in English and an MA in teaching from North Carolina State University. Past stories, dating from 2009 to the present, have been published in *The Colton Review, Raleigh Quarterly, Broken Plate Magazine, Big Muddy: A Journal of the Mississippi River Valley, The Chaffey Review, NoD, Existere,* and *Grasslimb.* When she's not busy writing, Susie loves taking ballet lessons, participating in competitive figure skating, and doing everything else people think she's too old for. She is actively seeking representation for a memoir and several novels. Connect with her at SusiePotter.com.

Carson Pytell is a writer living outside Albany, NY whose work has appeared in numerous venues online and in print, including *The Virginia Normal, NoD Magazine, Artifact Nouveau, Rabid Oak* and *Runcible Spoon,* among others. He serves on the editorial board of the journal *Coastal Shelf* and his short collection, *First-Year* (Alien Buddha Press, 2020) and chapbook, *Trail* (Guerrilla Genesis Press, 2020) are both now available. In December 2020 he is participating in the Tupelo Press 30/30 Project.

Frank Richards is currently working toward an MFA in fiction. His short stories have appeared in literary reviews such as *The Menda City Review, War, Literature and the Arts, Sanskrit Literary Arts Magazine* and *The Penman*

Review. Portions of *Soldier of a lesser War,* his novel in progress, have appeared in *The MacGuffin, Village Square and O-Dark-Thirty, the Review.* He and his wife live in rural Virginia, where they care for an assortment of rescued cats and German shepherd dogs.

Kelly R. Samuels is a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee. She is the author of *Words Some of Us Rarely Use* (Unsolicited, 2019) and *Zeena/Zenobia Speaks* (Finishing Line, 2019). Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Salt Hill, The Carolina Quarterly, The Pinch,* RHINO, and *The Massachusetts Review.* She lives in the Upper Midwest.

Kelly writes: Blue holes (submarine caverns) found in the Bahamas are helping scientists better understand the history of hurricanes and possibly predict future activity.

Carla Sarett's recent work appears in *Prole, Third Wednesday, isacoustic, Neologism, Hamilton Stone Review, Halfway Down the Stairs* and elsewhere; her essays have been nominated for Best American Essays and the Pushcart Prize. Her debut novel, *A Closet Feminist,* will be published in 2022 (Unsolicited Press). Carla has a Ph.D. from University of Pennsylvania and lives in San Francisco

Carla writes: "This poem grew out of meditation, a practice I started after my husband's death. The seemingly mundane process of clearing his closet led me to reflect on what we keep and we lose."

Eva-Maria Sher was born in Germany a year before the end of WWII. At seventeen she emigrated to the United States and currently lives on a farm in Clinton, Washington with her husband Ron and their two Leonberger puppies Minnie and Tasha. Her poems have appeared in *Euphony, Prism Review, Soundings East, Westview, Willow Review* and others. She recently published her first book, *Chewing Darkness,* the love story of her parents during the Hitler regime.

Catherine Stansfield's work is featured or is forthcoming in *The MacGuffin, Mount Hope Magazine, Open: Journal of Arts & Letters, Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry,* and *The Virginia Normal.* She has a BA in English from Caldwell University in New Jersey. Currently, she works as a publishing assistant and graphic designer.

Cash Myron Toklas is a new, young American poet, in precisely the way that Umberto Eco once described himself as a "young novelist" well into his fifties, because he had started so late. Otherwise, Toklas is quite hoary. His work has lately appeared or is forthcoming in *Cold Mountain Review, J Journal, Midwest Quarterly, Penn Review, Potomac Review, Red Rock Review,* and elsewhere.

Will Walker lives in San Francisco with his wife and dog. He is a former editor of the *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal.* He has two books of poetry available: *Wednesday after Lunch,* and *Zeus at Twilight.* He's working on a third collection, currently titled *The World Until Yesterday.*

Cynthia Yancey was an English major before a mother and then a medical doctor. Now after working over 30 years in the trenches of public health, from the Himalayas to the Andes to her downtown clinic in Asheville, NC, she is getting back to her roots and is writing the stories of her life. She has published a children's picture book entitled *Zak and Niki: A First Look at Rising above Racism.* She has also published personal essays in *Entropy, Streetlight Magazine,* and *The MacGuffin.* Other essays are forthcoming in *Broad River Review* and *Evening Street Review.*
These essays are all parts of her memoir entitled *Love Songs to My Children: a Medical Mother's Musings from Blues to Rhapsody. My God, My Father, Such Confusion* is one of its chapters.

Matt Zambito is the author of T*he Fantastic Congress of Oddities* (Cherry Grove Collections), and two chapbooks, *Guy Talk* and *Checks & Balances* (Finishing Line Press). News poems appear in *Slipstream, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Hiram Poetry Review,* and elsewhere.