

**Volume 12,
Issue 1**

2022

bioStories



2022

Volume 12, Issue 1

bioStories is conceived in the belief that every life can prove instructive, inspiring, or compelling, that every life holds moments of grace. We believe stories harbor the essential architecture of biography and that slices of a life properly conveyed can help strangers peer briefly within its whole, hold that life momentarily in their eye, and quite possibly see the world anew through that lens.

Cover image: eclipse shadow

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

Table of Contents

Naked Facebook Friday by Nancy Deyo.....	4
A Postcard from the End by William Keiser	15
Aunt Aggie, Bobby Kennedy, and My Parents’ Summer Theater by Gretchen Roselli	18
Ida Ziegler by Nancy Smith Harris.....	25
Better Left Unsaid by Jae Nolan.....	31
Speech and Debate in the Time of Covid by Neil Cawley	36
Give That Dog a Bone by Kristen Ott Hogan	40
Buck by Al Czarnowsky.....	47
Grammy’s Secret by Andrew Yim	53
The Ballet Barre by Aminah Wells	61
Summer’s End by Suzanne Ketchum Adams	65
A Death in the Family by Ruth Spack	70
Jackie, Nina, and Me by Anika Pavel.....	74
Letter To a Phantom by Jean Ryan	81
The Museum of Chalkboards Never Erased by Liza Wieland	85
Sitting in It by Gary Fincke	89
The Second Mistake by Liz Olds.....	92
What Time Was It? by Sydney Lea.....	97
The Last to Go by Julia Van Buskirk	99
Contributors	110

Naked Facebook Friday

by Nancy Deyo

Dr. Edsall peeks her head into the open doorway of the waiting room. “Nancy, Chris, great to see you both.”

I have been under a psychiatrist’s care before, but this time, the experience is not overshadowed by a physical health crisis. Fifteen years prior, a serious spine injury left me bedridden for a decade, recovering from failed surgeries, dependent on opioids, and taking an antipsychotic before finally weaning myself to a full recovery. For reasons I do not yet understand, my husband believes I am now in a crisis of a different sort.

This is my third session with Dr. Edsall. Chris is joining me for this visit. He is keenly aware of my ability to seem perfectly healthy when I am not, a situation we encountered more than once during my rocky recovery. We are here to discuss increasing the dosage of Abilify, which Dr. Edsall restarted after my first session. This increase is an adjustment that Chris desperately wants, and I do not. I feel fine. Also, I want to hang onto the exuberant feeling I am just discovering, that I am connected to the universe.

“Nancy,” Dr. Edsall begins, “how have you been feeling?”

My response is instantaneous and unfiltered. “*Great*. I’m really *great*.”

Chris gives me a penetrating look. It feels like he is policing me. His vigilance makes me edgy.

“Actually,” I say, making myself repeat the words that Chris and I negotiated together earlier, “it’s been a hard few weeks for Chris and me.”

In retrospect, the first sign that something was amiss came in the form of an automated message from Facebook. The message popped up as I raced to “friend” hundreds of new people, literally as fast as my fingers could type.

Slow down, you are going too fast. We think you may not be real.

Whatever, I thought. I was obsessed with my goal: to get to 5,000 friends by the end of the day. A Friday, in fact. I had been a light Facebook user for years, and mostly,

a voyeur. But during my decade-long convalescence, using social media had become one way to keep in touch with high school classmates, and after that, my younger grad school friends, who grew up with social media, sharing everything about their lives in a way that made me feel less lonely.

Something, however, had shifted inside me that morning as I had stayed logged on all day, compulsively “friending” people. I knew that this sort of thing happened—was even programmed into a social media business built on making connections and monetizing the data that followed—but the more friends I amassed, the more I felt I needed. I had started that morning with 350 friends and was now on the verge of a miraculous feat, 4,500 friends, which I knew had to be a world record.

The acceptances came fast and furious; friends of friends of friends of friends from around the world, all wanting to be my friend! Then an explosion of likes, and welcoming messages. A rush of well-being coursed through my body, a feeling of floating on a higher plane. Suddenly I understood: Facebook was about more than connecting people. It was about *global love*.

I, alone, had discovered the secret of social media.

I glanced down at my watch. It was 3:30pm. Yikes. I had promised Chris that I would be packed, showered and ready to go at 4:00pm. After a tumultuous week at work—my last I would later learn—and no sleep, Chris had made reservations for us to spend the weekend decompressing out of town. And yet, I was so close to my goal. I *had* to finish. And I could be ready in time if I really hustled.

I had felt so inspired and so productive, and so at home in my push to *just fit it all in*, that I had been running late for weeks. The fact that lateness was my pet peeve somehow did not strike me as paradoxical.

Again, the automated warning:

Slow down, you are going too fast. We think you may not be real. Your account is at risk of being shut down.

Did Facebook somehow sense that I was in trouble? It seems uncanny to me now that Facebook's algorithm detected my "abnormal" behavior, much less tried to discourage it.

Either way, I needed to let Facebook know that I was not a bot, and besides, I had my new epiphany to share. So, I crafted an enthusiastic email to a colleague who ran Communications, offering a testimonial about what I saw as Facebook's compassionate mission: *enabling global love* in a hate-filled world. I proposed posting my testimonial and suggested that Mark Zuckerberg (my "friend" request to him pending) could then share my revelation with his millions of friends. It was a brilliant marketing move, sure to rocket Facebook into the stratosphere. Best of all, I would be along for the ride. I pressed send. As I did so, Chris walked through the bedroom door and stopped dead in his tracks. I was stark naked on our bed, furiously typing on my laptop.

At age nineteen, I was a camp counselor in northern Michigan, madly in love with the tennis pro. What started out innocently enough became extreme: not needing food or sleep (I became anorexic), possessing boundless energy (I began long distance running), singing in a rock band (I cannot now, nor could I ever, sing), wearing skintight leather pants (I did look good in skintight leather pants), and insatiable lust (we were caught having sex in his cabin with kids running in and out). I can still remember that intense feeling of euphoria, a high that started in my brain and went down to my toes. I was fired from the gig, but I was never diagnosed. Instead, the anorexia consumed me, and I crashed by summer's end.

In short, my behavior had been off the charts before.

"Nancy," Dr. Edsall asks after we settle into her black leather chairs, "why was Chris surprised to find you naked in your own bedroom?"

Part of me is relieved that this is her question, rather than digging into my admittedly peculiar Facebook activity, which I do not yet see as connected.

Chris jumps in before I can respond.

“Nancy,” he says with some exasperation, “is uncomfortable being naked, even in her own presence, much less in mine.”

This much is true; I have always been modest, even self-conscious, to the core. I put on a towel before I step out of the shower. I get dressed without looking in the mirror. As Chris talks, I can feel my face getting hot. So, I stretch the truth to defend myself.

“I had just gotten out of the shower,” I say quietly, “and was sending a quick email before I got dressed.”

Do Chris and Dr. Edsall need to know that I had been naked all day?

The last thing I want is more Abilify. I am already lamenting the start of its dampening effect on my mind and body, not to mention the weight gain, a side effect that the recovering anorexic in me hates almost as much as the brain fog.

“Come on, Girl,” Chris says emphatically, using his most heartfelt nickname for me, which feels like a trick. “In thirty-three years of marriage I’ve never seen you work naked.”

I squirm in my chair, not sure it is wise to let him have the last word.

Chris has never used social media. He thinks it is a waste of time at best and addicting at worst. I did not think then that my attachment to social media was unhealthy, but after I boasted to him about both my thousands of new friends and my Facebook epiphany, he had made me promise to stay off the platform. He even took my laptop and cell phone with him the following week on a business trip to New Jersey. I was off the grid and none too happy about it. Chris was treating me like a child, and I didn’t need another father, much less a policeman holding my technology hostage. How was I going to connect with the outside world? How would I reach my people?

In retrospect, Chris was acting in my best interests. He couldn’t dispense the additional drugs I may have needed, but he could remove the technology temptation, and in so doing, limit my own vulnerability to suspect feel-good epiphanies, but also, to the web of third-party apps, pornographic images and random marriage proposals from new Facebook friends, not to mention the message-hidden identity thefts, into which I had fallen prey. I liken his action now to a sponsor taking liquor bottles out of an alcoholic’s home, and maybe also, hiding the keys to keep the addict from getting behind the wheel.

Still, at the time, I felt like he was trying to control me, I did not like it, and I did not want him to win.

I was frantic much of the day until I realized we had an old iPad down in the basement. Convinced that Chris would access my email and social media accounts to keep me on the straight and narrow, I changed all of my passwords before I got down to work. Eyes glued to my iPad, I breathed a sigh of relief, certain that the blue light and scrolling activity would calm my frazzled nerves. As the sun dropped below the Golden Gate Bridge, unnoticed, I selected an unread LinkedIn email.

Send LinkedIn invitations to your entire Facebook contact list with the press of a button.

My curiosity was piqued. My LinkedIn network was roughly the size of my original Facebook friend base prior to the big acquisition drive. What harm could come from merging these worlds? The mere thought of thousands of new contacts triggered a burst of soothing dopamine. I was online again and making progress. And I wasn't breaking my promise to Chris. This was LinkedIn, not Facebook: professional networking, fully justifiable for someone in between jobs.

Mark, the text to my personal trainer read at 6:45am the next morning, I'm going to be 5-10 mins late for our 7am session. Late night.

No problem, Mark replied, see you when you get here.

Strung out from pulling my all-nighter on LinkedIn, I was ever more fixated on expanding my network. I had upgraded to LinkedIn Premium, which enabled a ten-fold increase in my professional contacts. All puffed up, I made my way into higher and higher echelons of power. This was even better than making new Facebook friends. I was building social capital by the minute.

As I readied to finally head to the gym, my hands flew across the keys.

Thx for accepntign my invitationnn n n. Youand i needa a a conversation.

?? was the reply from a Silicon Valley venture capitalist I had wanted to meet for years.

I slowed myself down and typed with more intention.

Sorry, typing too fast. My iPad couldn't keep up.

My new LinkedIn contact went radio silent. My stomach rolled. I didn't like feeling this way: loose, out of control, and anyway, why wouldn't he write back?

I had to try to salvage the situation.

But now I was seriously late.

Mark, I texted, I'll be there at 7:30am. Not feeling great.

Okay, but you better not blow me off.

I sent five more messages in rapid succession to the venture capitalist, who "unlinked" me later that morning. For the first time in six years of weekly sessions, I missed my workout with Mark.

"Nancy has been keeping things from me," Chris tells Dr. Edsall near the end of the session. "It feels like she's lying."

"That is *not* true," I blurted, my blood pressure rising. "I did not lie to you. I promised to stay off of Facebook."

"*Come on, Nanc,*" Chris says, clearly frustrated but still on top of the facts, "you're off Facebook, but you go on a LinkedIn rampage. Not to mention setting up accounts on Twitter and Instagram. But you don't share this with me. I have to find out from your best friend."

Chris and I never used to fight, not even in private. Now we are arguing in front of Dr. Edsall, and Chris is on the offensive. I counterattack.

"Yeah," I strike back at him, "because you asked Kathleen to rat me out."

He is unfazed. “Kathleen and I are worried about you.”

I try to keep a poker face, but the grimace, like my speech, is uncontrollable.

Dr. Edsall looks calmly at us both. I pray she is on my side, but I know how convincing Chris can be when he makes an argument.

“I understand that things have been strained between you two,” she begins. “Chris, is there anything else you wanted to share?”

Chris always comes to a meeting prepared, as do I. But I am unprepared for the barrage that follows. I cringe as he describes the additional shifts in my behavior: the weird food combinations I now eat (peanut butter and sriracha on crackers was my “go to” snack), the fact that I have changed all of the car radio stations from soft rock to technopop (goodbye KFOG, hello the now-defunct WiLD), the use of hair conditioner on my body instead of soap (I was convinced the conditioner would moisturize my dehydrated body), the Amazon charges for downloading hundreds of eBooks (including *Love the One You’re With* and *Good in Bed*) onto my Kindle, and the lack of filter between my brain and mouth (I told a black cashier that I could “tame” her wiry hair). In a final psychiatric clincher, the words “grandiose,” “pressured speech,” “oversharing,” and “argumentative” shoot out of him in rapid fire.

Writing upside down and back to front, in a script only I could decipher, was the best way to keep the book I was writing private. While Chris had never read my journal without permission, I did feel exposed to his increasing scrutiny of my everyday behaviors and took what felt like justifiably evasive actions. His various confiscations were not going to slow me down, and he certainly didn’t get to edit my freaking book. So, I filled up one journal and then another, consumed by the need to *get my story out*. It calmed me to write, in much the same way that iPad scrolling reduced my anxiety.

My famous cousin, the renowned economist and adviser to the U.N. Secretary General, would write the forward, a brilliant move, I thought, linking my star to his. I would pitch a well-known literary agent in New York who exclusively represented women authors and send the first chapter to a former colleague who was now a Random House executive. The writing flowed out of me like a river that had risen well past its banks, and I saw that I clearly had the connections to get it published. I didn’t understand why writers

had such a hard time getting their work out into the world. But, then again, publishing, like anything else, was all about who one knew.

I was feeling fabulous—sharp, exhilarated, productive, creative—and no longer spinning out of control. My brain and my body balanced, I was in sync with the universe. Dr. Edsall would later describe this energized, in-between state as “hypomaniac,” which from my layman’s point-of-view meant I could experience the good parts of mania without the bad. If Chris still thought I was in trouble, I had, or would have fairly soon, a best-selling book, with thousands (upon thousands) of social media contacts to make a virtuous circle of sales, promotion, and validation.

I told Chris that I was *going* to write my book, advise a venture philanthropy firm, teach at an Ivy league school, and speak at TEDWomen. All in the coming year. I had set up a range of meetings with powerbrokers in each segment of my new “portfolio life.” It was all part of my grand plan, which I now called my “Grand Plan,” and I was fixated on making it happen.

It is curious, looking back, that for all the speed and acuity with which my analytic brain was making connections and blazing a path forward, I could not see how my behavior was out-of-the-norm, and even, plainly outlandish.

“This isn’t who you are,” Chris told me in one of his plaintive attempts to yoke me to some sense of reality. “Yes, the girl I married is smart and ambitious. But she is humble and vulnerable, too.” He paused. “And right now, you are neither of those things.”

“I take that as an insult,” I shot back. “Why would I want to be either of those things?”

“Well,” he said, picking his words carefully, “because they make you...you.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped, and stormed out of the room.

Chris started sleeping in the guest bedroom: his choice, not mine. He said he no longer knew who I was. For the first time in thirty-three years of marriage, we argued long and hard. We said hateful things that we regretted. I told him that he was controlling. He said that I needed to be managed. As our relationship faltered, I figured the less he knew about any of my activities the better. I was determined to live a bigger life. I was executing

the Grand Plan. Shortly before my third visit to Dr. Edsall, I was certain that Chris was going to leave me, and to be honest, I could see a path without him. If Chris could not understand what I now understood, about how the world worked and my place at the top of it, why let him slow me down?

Chris slammed the bedroom door one night after a particularly nasty exchange. It stung, but I was resolute. The silence that hung in the air loomed as large as the distance between us. For the first time, I understood how once-happy couples ended up divorced.

After a few minutes, I heard a light knock on the door.

“I’d like to try this again,” Chris said quietly, and climbed into bed next to me.

Is there really an unmedicated version of me that is the “real Nancy,” and if so, is it Chris’s version of me—belligerent, grandiose, and unfiltered—or is it the version I experienced in my head during those weeks leading up to my third session with Dr. Edsall—confident, connected, and fearless?

I tell myself that the “real” me is all of those things, wrapped up in a complicated package. I have since learned from Dr. Edsall that I am bipolar, a condition which typically manifests in much younger people. Unmedicated, my condition rapidly escalates into mania, and I act in ways that more closely resemble the person Chris described. I take risks that endanger myself and others: befriending online strangers, falling asleep at the wheel, crashing my car, and exchanging personal information with random Uber drivers because we liked the same books and music.

My medicated present is filled with shame and embarrassment for my manic behavior. I replay the scenes over and over in my head, hoping the endings of each moment will change. I will not send the second, fourth, or sixth LinkedIn clarification to the venture capitalist. I will not stop random strangers on the street in a moment of déjà vu, claiming I knew them in a past life. I will not lie to the police officer, accusing the other driver of veering into my lane after I fall asleep and sideswipe his car. Like any person recovering from herself, I know that there are no do-overs in life. I can only look toward the future and try to be a better person, an understanding I can only come to, ironically enough, looking back.

I did not live that bigger life and I still haven’t written my book.

At the end of my third session, Dr. Edsall prescribed a higher dose of Abilify, and my brain began the slow process of regulating to the drug increase, which meant experiencing a slowdown that, in retrospect, saved my life. Chris and I found our way back to each other, at roughly the same pace. I ate well, started sleeping and exercising again, stopped wasting so much money and time on passing fancies, and for the first time since my spine injury, I felt fully in control of my mind and body, for better and for worse.

Dr. Edsall and I spoke recently about my diagnosis. I was surprised to learn that after my third visit she was neither convinced I was bipolar, nor that I was in the middle of a manic episode. She told me that I presented as energetic, enthusiastic, and generally stable. My Grand Plan seemed big but was within the bounds of reason. It was Chris's longitudinal perspective that convinced her my behavior was off of the charts, despite being within the normal bell curve for many people. And that range of acceptable behaviors continues to puzzle me. I wonder what would have happened if Chris had not joined me for that fateful session. In my heart of hearts, I know Chris was right, but part of me would have loved to have experienced that unbridled joy for just a while longer, though I know it goes hand-in-hand with the crash that was racing toward me.

For two years, I have been off social media entirely. I now realize how it enables vulnerable people to engage in risky, even dangerous behavior. I do not experience FOMO. It turns out that Facebook friends are not the secret to global love, nor are LinkedIn contacts the key to social capital, book publishing, or the apex of any pyramid, at least not for me. I have an abundance of love and connection in my life. I communicate with most of my friends in person.

Dr. Edsall still oversees my care with a compassionate clinician's eye. While I am long past the acute phase and we chat like old friends, she asks about sleep, stress, life changes, and always, how the medication is working. Chris no longer participates in our sessions, but my care requires constant vigilance, and reminds me that wellness is a process.

Often, I wrestle with the decision of whether to taper the Abilify or to stop taking it entirely. But as tantalizing as mania is for its highs, when I can think clearly about the tradeoffs, I choose a stable, medicated, albeit less thrilling life, with all of its benefits. If I wanted to live drug-free, I would be living a life that does not include Chris, and that is a

trade-off I am unwilling to consider. At least some part of love requires compromise, a road that I know runs in two directions. I am forever grateful that Chris did not leave me. In return, every morning and again every night, I recommit to love, and reach for my meds.

Nancy Deyo began writing memoir in 2020 as a Fellow at Stanford's Distinguished Careers Institute, following a first career in technology and a second in women's rights. Her work has also appeared in *The Vault*. In addition to writing, Nancy is an active board member of a women's empowerment and social justice organization in Santa Fe, NM, where she lives with her husband.

A Postcard from the End

by William Keiser

A week ago, my grandma stopped eating. She is ninety-seven and a half years old. On the phone with my parents, I shriek: “Can we get her on an IV?” My flight to Florida is in a few days, and, okay, I get it. She is ready to die. But if she’s going to starve herself, couldn’t she at least wait until I get there? I’m a really selfless person.

My mother, ever serene in the face of screeching adult man-children, calmly replies that humans can live almost a month longer without food than without water. When I hang up the phone, my family puts grandma on hospice. Two days later, she starts eating again.

Upon arrival, I formulate a plan to spend every moment I can with her, to say goodbye. But I actually end up spending about seventy percent of my time floating on a noodle in the Atlantic Ocean, twenty percent of my time driving in afternoon thunderstorms, and ten percent giving her back massages while she falls asleep. When I first get there, she is very happy to see me. Her face lights up, and she cries out from her chair across the room, “Oh! My brother!” Her brothers died years ago. But then I get closer. “Oh, Robbie,” she exclaims. “It’s wonderful to see you.” Robbie is my cousin, a different grandson.

To be honest, I don’t quite recognize the person I’m visiting. Her body, which was always petite, is now skeletal, doll-like. Her salt and pepper hair is just salt, and its signature swoopy sides hang limp. Two aides sit at her bedside around the clock. They crack jokes and coax teaspoonfuls of piping hot soup and mashed-up chicken into her mouth, which she (mostly) refuses. Then they hold napkins to catch the bits she spits out. It’s hard to believe that this body once founded a college that became the largest employer in the state of Florida. That this body went to work into its nineties. That it bore children and went through divorce. Now it has trouble swallowing grains of rice.

The sleepy creature I see before me is familiar, but it’s not grandma. Trying to engage her in the conversations she would have loved even a few months ago is as futile as demanding a three-year-old sell you a mortgage. Creature-formerly-known-as-

grandma has two main moods: gratitude and fear. The former is nice, but a dead end, conversationally. “Oh, I’m so lucky. What a beautiful day.” Yes, it is a beautiful day. “I’m so happy to see you.” I’m so happy to see you too, grandma. The other mood, fear, is harrowing. “I’m scared.” What are you scared of, grandma? “I don’t know. I’ve never been scared like this before. I have to move.” When she says this, I look at the aides with fear in my eyes; she wants to move! It’s as if she is waking up, as if the past years of incapacitation are a terrible phantasm which is now lifting. The aides are unimpressed. “Ok, you want to get up, mama?” I hold the wheelchair. The hospital bed, which replaced the four-poster, is more decked-out than James Bond’s Aston Martin. It whirrs and lowers her perfectly down at an angle. Then we position her in the wheelchair. “You moved! Do you feel better now, grandma?” But she has forgotten the terror of moments before. Now she wonders why she’s in the chair. Why am I here? Where am I going?

You’d think someone at the precipice of death might have a certain wisdom to share about the next life. Instead, when people get old enough, they seem to unlock a special bonus phase of life, a hidden deluxe feature. They become desiccated toddlers. Instead of telling you secrets of heaven, they look at you and ask, “Can I pee?” as if their twenty-five-year-old gay grandson holds the keys to the functioning of their bladder. You become brother, masseuse, son, therapist, catheter. If there is a next life, it doesn’t send seniors a promotional postcard.

I love my grandma. I love the woman who would chuckle conspiratorially with me at the end of the table, the person who could tell you about hemoglobin and rhesus monkeys and her trips to South Africa and the Solomon Islands, the person whose reply to my anxious coming out was “I wish I were gay. My problem is that I like men.” This woman, this person, no longer exists, in the same way that the six-year-old version of myself has vanished into the ether. Do I love this ancient child? Do I feel love when I hold her hand? Yes, so much. But what to do now? How to be when there’s nothing to do?

Most of the time, the moments we commemorate are major life events and accomplishments—weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, funerals. We get a script and a

role for each: Wedding? Happy. Funeral? Sad. Baby shower? Anticipatory. But for this stage, we don't have a script. The goal in life seems to be to keep living, but if you live long enough, no one is actually prepared for what you become. No one is prepared for you to act eerily similar to the way you did at the beginning of life, or for all the things that that signified your personality to change. Perhaps this stage makes accepting death easier. Or perhaps it makes it harder, making loved ones go through a thousand demi-deaths before the body finally lies still. All I know is that for what it's worth, there's a child in grandma's apartment that is still alive.

William Keiser is a TV screenwriter and associate story editor of *My 600-Lb Life* on TLC. Prior to *My 600-Lb Life*, he was a professional dancer with the Dana Tai Soon Burgess Dance Company and appeared in work by choreographer Britta Joy Peterson at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He currently lives in Austin, TX.

Aunt Aggie, Bobby Kennedy, and My Parents' Summer Theater

by Gretchen Roselli

I was ten, finished with camp, enduring a New Jersey summer and alternating between sweating on the plastic lounge chairs that left marks, reading Nancy Drew, and running through the sprinkler with my brother. We swatted away horse flies that seemed to get bigger and more aggressive as the summer went on. My parents happily escaped to their vegetable and flower gardens. I'd sometimes help but was afraid of the garter snakes that would sunbathe in the rock garden. My mother gave them names and didn't let them deter her from her love of tending flowers. When the humidity retreated slightly in the evening, she'd bake pies from whatever berry we had picked that day. No matter how careful I was, I'd end up with bloody scrapes from the long thorny vines. When I'd shout out after getting pricked again, my mom would remind me that blackberry was my favorite pie. At night while my brother and I watched TV, my mom would read Edgar Cayce books and my dad would read Carl Sagan and books on UFOs. Some nights we would play with a Ouija board as a family.

At a lazy late breakfast, mom announced she wanted to go beyond asking questions using the Ouija board and have a séance. My dad, who would normally roll his eyes at her ideas, was excited and said he'd clean out the shed so we could have it there. Mom wanted to have a proper séance and invited the neighbors to come over that night. My parents had mutually agreed they'd try and make contact with Aunt Aggie because she had a sense of humor.

"Who's Aunt Aggie?" my younger brother asked.

"She was your grandma's sister who died in her sleep," Dad answered.

"Did she have kids?"

"No. She never married."

"Like the Old Maid game?" my brother asked. We both laughed.

"She was ahead of her time," my mom said.

I didn't know what that meant. I wondered if there was a disease you got if you were born too early.

“She lived in the old homestead, the house where your grandmother grew up in Boonton and then in the same house in Whippany,” my dad said.

“How did she live in the same house in two places?” my brother asked.

“Because the state needed the land to make a new highway so they moved the house.”

I couldn't imagine how they picked up a whole house and moved it. It was hard enough moving my Barbie Dream House from one end of the playroom to the other without it becoming a mess and leaving a trail of clothes and furniture.

“Aunt Aggie was a career woman. She was very stylish and always dressed in the latest fashion. When I was younger and started working, she'd cut the designer labels from her old clothes and showed me how to sew them into my jackets. She told me that I needed to look like I had money.”

I pictured my mother getting dressed up on a Saturday night looking elegant, my dad locking elbows with her as they followed a maître d' to a fancy table where my dad would help remove her jacket and she would drape it on a chair, casually looking about and then slowly sitting down after everyone had gotten a good look at her and what she was wearing.

I remember going to Aunt Aggie's house after she died. I was only six. It was mysterious and creepy going to a dead person's house. I had no recollections of her. It was a big two-story house. All of her belongings were on display for an estate sale. I was mesmerized by the number of clothes neatly hanging in her closets, including furs. I thought she must have been rich. My mother was looking through some of her clothes, trying to find something that might fit her.

“Look at the ornate buttons on this one from Epstein's.”

She had me try it on so I could feel what it felt like. It was huge but fun playing dress-up. Perhaps my aunt had met someone famous in this jacket. I looked in every nook and closet in the house. There were collections of figurines, artwork and plates



Agnes Glaab

everywhere. Anyone with that many plates must have had a lot of people for dinner. One set had a few chips and I imagined that would be the set she used every day. If I had visited her as I heard my cousins did, she would have let me use those dishes to have tea parties with my doll, serving chicken salad on Parker House rolls and Pepperidge Farm Cookies.

“I tasted my first pineapple on that plate. Have you ever had a pineapple young lady?” a man’s voice asked.

“I’ve had it from a can,” I answered.

He laughed. “No, fresh pineapple. It was very hard to get but Aggie managed to get her hands on it. We ate so much our mouths would burn.”

Shiny sterling silver pieces covered the dining room table. I went to pick up a miniature pitcher and was told not to touch it, that all the silver had just been polished. There wasn’t much to play with for a six-year-old. Everything was very shiny and fancy. I went to the living room and sat on a fabric step stool with bright green tassels. Two women were looking up at the chandeliers talking about the chandelier parties Aunt Aggie hosted.

“What a spread she’d put out for us,” one of them said.

They talked about taking the chandeliers apart, one crystal at a time, cleaning them and putting them back together piece by piece. I had imagined a chandelier party was when people hung from the chandeliers and swung around like I had seen in old movies. Now I pictured her table set with the blue and white China, fancy food on the buffet like my mom would put out for parties, people drinking Champagne from the crystal glasses in the China cabinet and telling stories while they polished each piece.

“And the time Uncle Ted got drunk and didn’t properly affix the metal hanger back to the chain and the whole thing almost came crashing down before we all lunged to save it,” the other lady said.

There was a vanity in her bedroom, where I pictured she had sat and made herself beautiful. It had drawers and shelves displaying large jewelry. My mom told me I could pick something to take. I picked a gold flower pin with a big ruby center. It was tarnished but I didn't mind. I thought it meant she must have liked it a lot. I wondered when she had worn it last. It was much too big for me to pin on anything and wear but it captured my imagination.

I walked down the hall. I heard the words independent, self-sufficient, activist, caring and entertaining. I wondered if she could hear what was being said about her.

The study was crowded with lively people. They talked mainly in words I didn't understand, like when my parents watched the evening news. Many of them were looking at a framed picture that sat prominently on the coffee table between her desk and sofa.

"Thank God for Agnes' hard work or we'd never have carried New Jersey. Kennedy got 49.96% of the vote to Nixon's 49.16%, a margin of .80%. We all paced like mad that night, Aggie keeping us in drinks and food between shouting at the radio in the kitchen and the TV in the living room."

I watched them raise their glasses. "A toast to Agnes Loretta Glaab, one of the hardest working Democrats in the country."

I'd seen grown-ups make toasts before but I didn't understand what they were toasting. I did recognize the name Kennedy though. As many of them left the smoke-filled room, I imagined my aunt as part of some powerful secret club. Much more powerful than the ones my friends and I would make up for the treehouse. I walked into the room and over to the silver-framed photo. I was afraid to pick it up so I kneeled on the floor, got close to it and tried to figure out who the people were.

"Are you a relative?" A tall woman was looking down at me. She smoked a cigarette, wore a tight dress and had her hair in a bun.

"Yes. My father told me Aggie was my great aunt."

She knelt beside me. "Do you know who that is in the photograph with your great aunt?"

My aunt stood tall and looked serious but happy. She had a coat on with a huge fur collar. She stood next to two men. One was young and good-looking like a movie star;

the other was older, balding and larger. I recognized the man in the large poster they were standing in front of. It was President Kennedy.

“That is your aunt with Bobby Kennedy. He’s the one standing next to her. We all hoped he would be the next President of the United States. He died three months ago. I don’t think Aggie ever recovered from the news.”



Aunt Aggie and Bobby Kennedy

She put her cigarette out in the overflowing ashtray.

“I know I haven’t,” she said quietly.

She stared at the photo for a few seconds before standing up. “I’m sorry for your loss. Everyone loved Aggie. It’s a big loss in many ways.”

She tried to smile, but couldn’t, then walked out of the room

My mother loved drama. On the day of the séance, she kept saying she was sure Aunt Aggie would come to visit. Neighbors started to arrive as it got dark, well after dinner. My mom announced it was time. We all walked with flashlights from the house down the path, past the rose garden, the blackberry bushes, and the tall grass to the shed. She and my father seemed excited about bringing Aunt Aggie back. I hoped that she wouldn’t be mad at me for taking one of her brooches. My mother asked that everyone sit down in a circle on the dirt floor that my dad had partially covered with hay. She lit a hurricane lamp and asked everyone to turn off their flashlights. We all watched the light flicker in the center of the circle. My mom asked that we all hold hands. The shed was full of mice and my imagination felt them scurrying around me though I knew it was just the hay rubbing against my bare legs. My mom became a different person as she called for Aunt Aggie. Her trancelike voice took on a tone that I had never heard.

“Hello, spirits. We come in peace. Please hear us spirits. We are requesting to speak to dear departed Aunt Aggie.”

The only sounds were the mosquitos, crickets, and frogs from the neighbor's pond. I squeezed my neighbor's hand hard and she squeezed back. I guessed she was as scared as me.

"Aunt Aggie, can you hear us? Are you there?"

Silence.

"Aunt Aggie, if you are there, please tap twice on the roof."

There were two taps on the roof of the shed and we all screamed.

"Quiet!" my mom instructed. "Aunt Aggie, thank you for visiting with us. We miss you. We want to know that you are okay. Please tap once if you are at peace."

There was no response. The quiet was only broken by our heavy breathing. My mother repeated the question. There was one tap on the roof. All of the kids and a few adults jumped. One of the grown-ups said, "Well, at least we know she's at peace." My mother shushed her and continued.

"Aunt Aggie, is it possible to see you once again?"

I dreaded this question. I had no desire to see any ghosts. I was scared to death of what might appear in front of us. Kids and adults alike screamed as a shadowy figure flew across the ceiling of the shed. We ran out of the shed, down the path and back into the safety of the house. We were all talking at once and catching our breath when I heard someone scream.

"There's a cat in the house!"

We didn't have a cat, no one brought a cat, and none of the doors were left open. Some of the younger kids started crying, a few of the adults were running around trying to catch the cat. Someone opened the front door and the cat bolted by and out into the night. Most of us were shaking. I held back tears and just wished everything would go back to normal. I longed to go up to my room and crawl into my bed but was too afraid to be alone. The kids who weren't with their parents jumped on the sofa and we huddled together sweating.

My parents entered the house laughing hard. The kind of laugh where my mother could hardly catch her breath to talk. My dad was telling everyone to calm down, that everything was alright. They explained between giggles that the whole thing was set up. My dad had tied a rope to the branches above the shed so when he pulled on it, he could

make the tapping noise. The ghost was a homemade prop he made that day he had attached to a wire. The adults started laughing. Most of the kids were mad that my parents had played such a dirty trick on us that we practically peed our pants. Someone asked, “How did you manage to put the cat in the house?”

My parents looked confused and said “What cat?”

Gretchen Roselli had a career as an actress, dancer, singer, and model and owned a performing arts school in New York. She now writes plays and non-fiction. Her articles have been published in *Red Rock Life Magazine* and *The Colorado Sun*. She has had two plays produced and is a member of the Playwrights Group. She loves theatre, competitive running, belting out show tunes, dancing, tumbling, and fostering dogs.

Ida Ziegler

by Nancy Smith Harris

It was one of those mid-August days when Duchess, our mutt, languished in the shady rectangle of our carport. On the seared lawn, box turtles scrambled in the grass, clawing their way to cool relief along the tree lined bank of Beaver Creek. My father knelt on the carport roof with a row of roofing nails held between his narrow lips. In profile, he appeared to have the bucked and piercing teeth of a dinosaur. He crouched, one knee and one foot on black tar paper like a sinner asking forgiveness. Dark crescents clung to his white shirt beneath his arms.

It was 1973, not Dad's favorite year.

That was the year in which the Supreme Court ruled against states prohibiting abortion. I remember that to me, back then, trying to see it through Dad's eyes, I imagined his uneasiness with the subject, so clearly did it seem linked to women on television who'd become dissatisfied with the nuclear family model he'd grown up with. Many were name-callers. "Male Chauvinist Pigs" became the requisite identifier of men among them. Such women smoked their own, exclusive brand of cigarettes. They were on the pill. I think my father was not so much a misogynist as he was someone comfortable with the world order as he knew it and scared by what changes might disrupt his modest life. His own mother was first a quiet wife, then a quiet widow. His wife was someone who trusted the Bible on most matters and believed in her wedding vows, though even she was not immune to the spirit of the times, as Dad had discovered.

Another disappointing event in 1973, in my father's eyes, was the departure of the last U.S. troops from Vietnam. It had been a confusing war from the start for someone like my father, who thought wars were fought against established enemies, not in jungles where opponents used guerilla tactics and were often invisible. In Vietnam, the enemy and the collaborator looked the same and spoke the same language. My father appreciated the clarity of World War II; there were few doubts about who was who. No heroes emerged from the ranks of those who fought in Vietnam: no Audie Murphy, moving on from decorated combat veteran to film star; no George Patton, spawning an award-

winning biographical blockbuster. Who ever heard of a war with no heroes? For Dad, a hesitant man who found a small measure of courage in reliving the battle victories of his countrymen, the American retreat from Vietnam was nothing short of shattering. The country lost its swagger; Dad lost his already tenuous confidence. It somehow became a personal defeat.

On that day in August, after coming down from the roof to eat lunch, Dad, perhaps silently enumerating the many recent and profound indignities of a changing world, sat at the kitchen table with his face downturned, lingering just that much longer over his coffee. His movements slowed. He placed his spoon with a touch more deliberation on his saucer. He pressed his lips a little longer with his napkin before folding it exactly twice, as always, and laying it down in the middle of the plate. There was an air of resignation in his movements.

This was the state of things on the blazing day he chose to be alone on the roof. When he climbed back up the ladder, Ida Ziegler's Impala was beneath him in the cool shade.

Ida Ziegler couldn't have known how much my father was made uneasy by her brand-new sedan, her confident walk, her ability to look him in the eye as if they were equals—as if she were a man. Man to man. That's how Ida Ziegler looked at my father. And my father, always ill-at-ease and deferential when this lady showed up to visit my blind and elderly Aunt Viola, could generally relax and joke about her at the table later, after her departures, in the safety and privacy of his own kitchen, in the seat of power at the head of the table.

"Ida Ziegler walks like a combat soldier but she can't be—the Goddamn Swiss won't fight anybody," or, "I think she had a sex change operation but it backfired."

On that particular August afternoon, I reclined on a rusty glider tucked beneath the stairs that led to the porch and the kitchen door. I was painting my nails with polish stolen from my sister's bedroom.

Ida Ziegler burst through the downstairs door of our two-story rancher, did not acknowledge me, and stood glaring up at my dad on the roof, waiting for him to cease banging with his hammer.

Ida Ziegler, like Aunt Viola, was a single woman, a retired nurse. Ida came from a long line of Anabaptist Mennonites, flinty sharp-featured Swiss refugees who had been clustering for centuries in small farming communities along the banks of the Conestoga River. They carried chips on their persecuted shoulders one century after another, many of them modernizing their way out of horses and buggies and shoulder-to-floor black dresses but continuing to carry the belligerent attitude of a put-upon group. They spoke in the clipped accent of their ancient clan. To me, Ida Ziegler sounded like a commandant savagely shouting at Allied prisoners of war. My dad, an enlisted man who spent two seasick years on a tin can in the Pacific, and I had watched grainy footage of these men staggering through muddy fields at gun point as the commandant glared and hissed at them.

“Hank.”

I saw him pause without looking up from the roof’s surface. I knew what he was thinking: that he would like to pretend he hadn’t heard her. But he would never be able to do that. He didn’t have the nerve. I was the same way. We were both chickens, my dad and me, and we always felt bullied into doing the proper, if unpleasant thing, with little fuss. It was a curse.

“Hank, I need a word with you.”

He placed the hammer on the tar paper and came down the ladder slowly, as if taking his time on the descent might provoke Ida Ziegler’s impatience and send her fleeing. But Ida Ziegler stood there in her tan slacks and ice blue cotton shirt with the collar turned up toward her permed gray hair. She had glasses with points at the corners. The points had little rhinestones in them and these flashed in the sun. Her cheeks were swabbed with too much rouge. She smelled overwhelmingly of scented talcum powder.

“What seems to be the matter?”

Dad’s tone was more highly pitched than usual. He’d once said that talking to Ida Ziegler was like talking to a teacher right before she gives you detention.

Sweat streamed down his cheeks—twin rivers merging at his chin, dripping onto his shirt. Rivulets meandered down his neck, disappearing into his open collar forming a tiny pool of moisture that glistened in the hollow of his throat, a reflective disk that flickered like the surface of a pond. He mopped his face with a shop rag.

“You need to do something about Viola. That poor woman sits in that bedroom and cries herself to sleep in the middle of the day. Your wife won’t talk to her. Never takes her out. It’s downright abusive. Her life is no better than a dog’s.”

“Dog’s” sounded like “dawk’s.”

My dad, who had been studying the top button on his white shirt, looked up. His mouth dropped open. He emitted that nervous little two-beat chuckle of his, then, “Me?” in a trilling falsetto, raising his hands as if in surrender. “Ida, that’s between Madge and Viola. I don’t interfere in—”

“You need to intervene, here. Hank. Talk some sense into Madge. She’s ruining what little time that poor woman has left on this earth.”

I watched the color retreat from Dad’s face. His shoulders rose and fell with the exertion of breathing. I imagined his heart pumping, slamming against his rib cage. He mopped his forehead again, then white-knuckled the rag in his fist.

Ida stood relentlessly erect.

Dad sighed. He looked at the line of laundry, stiff and baked, that cordoned off one half of the yard from the other. He looked at Duchess, whose head rested on her paw as she dozed unaware beneath the drone of a beehive in the overhead rafters. Ida Ziegler did not know what she was asking of him. She knew nothing of the unspoken pacts between husband and wife, the silent but understood agreements that took place in a marriage.

Dad looked up and I saw his expression change from that of helpless exasperation to sad resignation. From my berth under the stairs, I knew that what he saw up there was my mother’s face, tight with tension. She would have been listening at the open window.

“Hell, I don’t get into it with them.”

“You must talk to her.”

Cicadas, throbbing in the high grasses at the end of the driveway, turned up their volume. Dad put his hands on his hips and shook his head at the ground.

“We’re done here, Ida. That roof isn’t gonna take care of itself.” He waved to the roof with the rag and turned his back to her.

“Then I’ll speak to her myself,” Ida Ziegler barked and turned toward the stairs.

Dad blanched, his face growing even whiter. He looked stricken, and I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd clutched his chest and fallen to the ground like a dying cowboy in gun fight. Instead, he stepped between Ida and the stairs.

"Over my dead body, Ida," he said, in a low but quivering voice. "You mind your own business, lady."

That's when Ida Ziegler spun around and clacked down the narrow stretch of sidewalk to her Impala, got in, and floored the gas pedal in neutral. Duchess lurched to her paws and scampered away with a whimper. A cloud of hazy smoke blew from the exhaust pipe. Ida backed out and barreled up Greenwood Road, pebbles ricocheting rapid fire from beneath her tires, a trail of dust clinging to the air behind her Impala.

My dad stood gazing at the dust cloud hovering over Greenwood Road.

"...No way to treat an engine like that," he said mournfully before climbing back up the ladder and kneeling to his work.

"Hank?" My mother had waited until Ida Ziegler's car was up the hill and safely out of sight on Route 39 before emerging from her kitchen sanctuary. She stood at the top of the stairs on the porch, drying her hands with a dish towel. "What did she want?"

"Huh?"

"I said what did Ida Ziegler want?"

"I don't know," he said, dropping his shoulders and shaking his head, "I just don't know."

To make things worse for Dad, a new minister had arrived at the church in the spring and he made deacons of some of the female congregants. My mother was one of the first to break that glass ceiling. She began attending meetings on weeknights, leaving dinner on the table on her way out the door. My sister and I took advantage of Mom's absence and swept our plates into the family room, slung our legs over opposite ends of the sofa and watched tv. Beyond the tv was a wood-burning stove, beyond the stove, the kitchen. From our vantage point, we could see Dad take his seat at the head of the empty table, muttering something about "holy rollers" as he meticulously sliced a brick of meatloaf into manageable bite-sized bits and stabbed peas with his fork.

On those nights, Aunt Viola, a victim of a botched cataract surgery, took her meals on a tray downstairs in her room.

Sometimes I'd knock on the door and she'd say, "come in," in a falsely cheerful voice. I think that improvised optimism is what made it hard to go in there and sit on the bed and make small talk with her as she sat with her eyes closed, an ear turned to the Phillies game on tv. There is nothing like the helplessness of a fourteen-year-old watching a lonely woman paint a pleasant smile on her lips, speaking in a forced light-hearted tone, her shoulders sloping inward toward her chest, the white down above her lip growing thicker every day.

Back then, a realization never occurred to me explicitly and yet the message was clear: this is what happens to women who choose careers over marriage and children. There is no one there who loves them when they finally need love most. They end up in the care of relations who are ambivalent or worse. Even though Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Helen Reddy, and their like would shape a convincing message to the contrary, it was a message that did not work for everyone. What does any of it mean to people who witness the rougher facts of life, who live at the end of a dirt lane outside of a small town?

Ida Ziegler continued to visit Aunt Viola every other weekend for the rest of my aunt's life, but she never again said a word to my father. She let herself in through the door downstairs, stayed for an hour or two and departed. She wore a drawn lip look of disgust and walked without glancing from one side or the other.

My parents remained stubbornly complicit: my father ignoring the cold manner of my mother in all her dealings with my aunt; my mother coldly doling out sandwiches and clean laundry to a blind woman between choir practice and consistory meetings at Saint Thomas.

Unrelieved unease lay in the air in those days. People, usually visitors from milder climates, complain to this day about the hot humid summers of the region, but for my family, in that time and place, the weather was not a problem. We hardly noticed it.

Nancy Smith Harris earned her MA in English Literature at San Francisco State University and lives in northern California. Her stories have appeared most recently in *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *funny pearls*, and *Passager Journal*.

Better Left Unsaid

by Jae Nolan

I'm working on my boundaries.

I have limits.

I refuse to be trapped.

So why are you flying across the country right now?

I'm also working on this voice.

'Because she asked,' I reply. 'Because that's what family does,' I reason. 'Because,' I falter, 'What other choice does she have?'

Trapped, the voice sneers.

Like anyone in their seventies, my mother's health isn't what it used to be. Her hearing was the first to go. The hearing aids help, but they don't stop her from tuning out the parts of our conversation she'd rather ignore. Next were her teeth. She's finally able to eat more than soup, although she did brag that the lack of solid food reduced her down to a size two. Now it's her eyes. Nothing too serious, just the natural consequences of aging.

Unfortunately, all these predictable ailments don't correspond with an equally predictable way to pay for them. In a humane world, each setback should be manageable. But in the world my family knows, poverty is the thief of humanity.

It took me a long time to accept the truth of what we were. Even now, I slip up. It turns out getting your first lesson in debt from the school lunch lady who takes away your food or using the public library as free daycare weren't universal experiences and are terrible jokes at parties. I blame my lapses on the fact that words like 'poor' or 'poverty' didn't exist in our household. Instead, the curse followed us like shadows, creating a superstition that simply forming our lips around the words would breathe them into existence.

When I turned eighteen, I let the curse fall from my mouth and left. I thought I was alleviating some of the pressure. I thought I was helping. In my mother's eyes my departure was the ultimate betrayal. But how could I stay when I uncovered the first lie

about poverty? It didn't matter how hard my mother worked, how fiercely she loved her kids, or how desperately she believed her bad luck was temporary. Grit, love, and faith aren't currencies that banks recognize. Now, every necessary, short-term decision she made over the past thirty years is calling in its debts, culminating in a morbid game of chicken. What goes first, my mother or the roof over her head?

'That's why I'm sitting on this plane,' I explain.

"The total today is \$3,350," says the receptionist.

"I thought the surgery was covered by Medicare?" I ask aghast.

"This specific procedure isn't. If you want to switch to the partially covered Medicare procedure, we'll have to reschedule." She types quickly into the computer. "The next opening would be in six months."

Another six months while my mother can't see. Another cross-country plane ticket so I can take care of her.

What other choice do you have? The voice asks. I sigh and hand over my credit card.

"Thank you, sweetie," my mother says, squeezing my arm.

"Don't worry about it," I assure her. "I'll see you in a few hours, okay?"

She waves to me as she follows the nurse into the waiting room.

In the car, I call my wife.

"I'll pay for it," I promise through my sobs. Even though I've been unemployed for the past year, I still have some savings left.

"She isn't your responsibility," I scream, "She knew Medicare wouldn't cover it, and she knew I couldn't refuse. The whole thing was a setup!" I slam my palms onto the steering wheel. The car shudders with the force. Dammit, I can't afford to replace this too.

"It's okay," my wife soothes. She's heard a version of this rant before. "We'll get through this together. What other choice do we have?"

Why should she pick up the tab for a mother-in-law who thinks she 'turned her daughter gay?' The voice interjects. *Why do you let your mother shun her brown daughter-in-law until she needs her money? And finally, are you really enough for your*

wife to keep putting up with your family? I swallow hard, pushing down the guilt. The voice says everything my wife never would.

The next morning, I find my mother typing quickly on her laptop without magnifying the text to a comically large size. Modern medicine is amazing.

“What are you working on?” I ask. The computer is used almost exclusively for Facebook and addictive games targeting Boomers, so I expect her to proudly show me her high score on Candy Crush. It’s one of the only safe topics of conversation between us.

“My unemployment was denied again,” she mumbles. “This is the fourth week in a row. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“Here, let me see if I can figure it out.”

Over the course of six hours, the unemployment website crashes a dozen times. Questions with simple answers lead to missing links and pages of legal jargon. Finally, I admit the ultimate Millennial defeat and call the helpline. The automated call disconnects three times before I slam the phone down. All this work for \$275 a week? The conservative monster who built this system is succeeding at his real goal: forcing people to give up.

You mean the conservative monster she voted for twice? The voice whispers.

“I don’t know why it’s so hard,” my mom says, panic rising at the realization that the problem is bigger than her lack of computer literacy.

“It’s intentional. The Governor publicly said he wanted to make this process difficult. He doesn’t want to help people; he wants to punish them.” Usually, I moderate my political opinions around her. She’s learned to do the same. It’s the only way we’ve been able to talk to each other for the past three presidencies. But I’ve lost my patience. She needs to know that her actions have consequences.

“I haven’t done anything wrong,” she whines.

“To them, being poor is wrong,” the voice and I say together.

“I’m not like those people who are just trying to take advantage!” she yells.

“How are you different?” we respond.

Her lips form a hard colorless line. When they finally open to respond, the small voice behind them shakes. “I’m so ashamed.”

Now you know what it feels like. The voice says with righteous indignation.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of,” I say with forced gentleness.

No one deserves to feel humiliated by a system that should be there to support them; not even someone who cheered it on.

I dreaded coming, but now I’m terrified to leave. The longer I stay the clearer I see the decay. A thousand cuts made over a lifetime. With rest and care the wounds would have healed years ago. Without it, I see the rot in the piles of boxes filled with the false promises of quick fortunes. I smell the mold in between the yellowing paper of unpaid bills. I hear the strangled breath in the ancient car when it struggles to turn over. This life is held together with haphazard stitches and hidden behind soiled bandages. It’s only a matter of time before it all comes undone.

“Thank you for everything,” my mother says, hugging me as tightly as she can, the envelope clutched in her hand.

I wish I could hug her the way I used to, but she is frail and small in my arms. Can this be the same body I ran to for comfort, the body I shrank from during her drunken tirades?

“I was worried you wouldn’t come,” she says smiling.

The tone is gentle, but the message is clear. It wouldn’t be a visit home if it didn’t include one last veiled insult. In her eyes I’m still the daughter who ran away, the one she can’t rely on. Sometimes I just want to scream and ask her what she really thinks of me. Sometimes I just want to say what I really think of her. We never have, and the more entwined our financial futures become, the more I realize we never can.

“You’ve worried enough for a lifetime; you deserve a little peace of mind.” I smile back, giving her a final reassuring squeeze.

At the airport, I call my wife.

“Did she take the money?” She asks.

“Yes. She’s proud, but not stupid,” I respond.

“Will it be enough?”

“It has to be. When I get a job, we can give more.” I pause, letting the weight of the last few days fall. “I love you; I can’t wait to get home.”

“I love you too. Don’t worry, we’ll get through this together.”

Get through what? How do you get through something that never ends? It’s the question I’ve asked since I left home. I told myself I was helping by becoming one less thing for my mother to worry about. Now I’ve uncovered the second lie—poverty isn’t temporary, the escape is. I didn’t leave to help her, I left to save myself.

I wanted to have boundaries.

You ran away.

Everyone has limits.

There is no depth to suffering.

I thought I could escape.

This is who you are.

When the only constant is chaos, how can you imagine the future? If a single mistake brings catastrophe, how do you learn to forgive? If everything can be lost in a moment, can you live without fear? What happens to your body, your mind, your love, if those are the only things holding up your fractured world? I saw the answers etched into every line of my mother’s face, the paranoid shadows gathered behind her eyes, the poison edging her words. The stress seeps into your bones, burrows into your brain, and speaks with your mouth.

Trapped, it hisses.

“Please,” I beg, “I don’t want to hear it.”

Jae Nolan is an emerging writer focused on exploring the complicated connections we hold with ourselves, each other, and the world. She is currently working on her first novel. When not writing, she works to advance social justice issues and explores the beauty of the Pacific Northwest with her wife.

Speech and Debate in the Time of Covid

by Neil Cawley

“Two down?” the teenager in the suit and tie asks. He stares at me through my laptop. A long silence.

“Um, sure. That’s fine,” I respond. He’s on to me, I know it.

“Two down,” he calmly explains, “means that when I’ve spoken for five minutes you hold up two fingers to indicate that I only have two minutes left, then one finger when I have one minute. Then display a fist if I reach the time limit, which I won’t.”

I’m being lectured by a high school student. At an online speech and debate tournament.

It’s not that I don’t know what “two down” means. I was involved in speech as a competitor and volunteer judge for over twenty years. “Two down” is our *lingua franca*, like “pick off” in baseball, or “onside kick” in football. I understand the term. It’s just that I’m unsure of myself because it’s been many years since I’ve done this so I’m struggling to remember how it all works. Plus, the kid’s standing in his family bathroom. The strangeness of evaluating these students in their homes from my computer is a little disconcerting.

“Ready when you are,” I say at last.

The New York State Forensics League held its annual high school championship remotely, like all such contests in the time of Covid. Yes, speech and debate is also called forensics. I have no idea why. Some competitors, like the kid lecturing me about “two down,” perform in cramped bathrooms, or unfinished basements. Others speak from spacious, well-appointed living rooms that dwarf my house.

The great thing about forensics was that you never knew where the kids were from. Was the girl with the lilting Irish accent the daughter of a diplomat or a carpenter? Was the boy in the blazer from an elite Manhattan program like Regis or Stuyvesant, or a more blue-collar outer borough school? The competitors don’t wear team uniforms. They’re supposed to be relatively anonymous to keep things fair. But because of Covid you learn

a little about them from being invited virtually into their homes. So you strive to put aside any preconceptions and just listen.

The boy's speech is excellent. He starts with a creative introduction. His three areas of analysis are logical and well-developed, with support from important publications like *The Economist*. He does a nice job analyzing the economic impact of President Biden's climate initiative, speaking crisply and entirely from memory. As he finishes, it strikes me that there are hundreds of smart young people just like him all across New York performing in bathrooms, family rooms, bedrooms, basements and attics, in unison. They're reciting poetry, debating the issues of the day, acting out scenes from Tony Award-winning plays, and delivering their own orations, which they've been honing all year. They are undeterred, and betting on normalcy to make a comeback.

If you've ever stumbled upon an army of well-dressed teenagers with backpacks and briefcases streaming into a high school on a Saturday morning, chances are there's a speech and debate tournament taking place. The competitions last all day and by the time the awards ceremony rolls around, the seriousness has lifted. You'll see the kids socializing with one another, sharing music, exchanging numbers. These were the special friends you'd see only once or twice a month during the school year.

Speech kids are a bit clannish. They keep a mental list of the competition in case they meet in the future, and they remember every celebrity who has ever participated as a point of pride. Brad Pitt did speech. So did Oprah Winfrey. She was nice enough to have some students perform on her show. Even *The Avengers* got in on the act. Chadwick Boseman, aka Black Panther, finished 8th in the nation in 1995 in the category of Original Oratory. Paul Rudd competed in two national championships long before becoming Ant-Man. Scores of notable politicians, journalists and business people also participated, including three sitting Supreme Court justices.

Aside from paving the way to success—and even stardom—forensics also comes in handy in everyday life. In my senior year of high school, the AP English exam featured a question on Sylvia Plath. I had never read any of her poems in class, but I'd competed all year with someone who performed a monologue based on Plath's tragic life and work, so I knew her poetry well. From memory I jotted down line after line in my exam booklet.

I sometimes wonder about the grader who read my essay and must have thought, “who cribs Sylvia Plath?”

During the tournament I “run into” old friends I haven’t seen in years, still at it, still dedicating so much of their lives to the students. We reconnect and start texting. Then the subject comes up, the reason I’m here in the first place.

“I’m really sorry to hear about Joe,” they say.

“It was a shock,” I tell them. “The funeral is next week. The kids are devastated. The school reached out to see if I could judge. A new teacher set up a call for me to give the team a pep talk. He’s been really helpful.”

Coach Joe Russo was the heart of the Cathedral Prep speech program. Cathedral is a small Catholic high school in the middle of Queens. Many of its students are first generation like me. Their families come from all over the world, reflective of the incredible diversity of the city. We graduates like to boast that Vince Lombardi went there. Actually, Vince Lombardi attended the other Cathedral Prep on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn, transformed now into pricey condominiums. Why he transferred before graduation remains an unsolved New York mystery.

The speech team started in the early ‘80s but had fallen on hard times when Joe got there twenty-five years ago. He rebuilt the program, convincing parents and alumni to give up their weekends to help. Not long after sunrise on the day of a tournament, Joe and the team would pile into school vans, parent cars, or the subway to get to a competition somewhere in the city. They’d return by nightfall exhausted, many with trophies and big smiles. Joe was behind it all. His sudden passing has left an enormous hole in all our hearts. Joe had an infectious sense of humor that kept everything light. He’d find it comical to see me sitting in my Massachusetts home, remotely judging the New York state championship in his place.

I don’t know what to expect from these teenagers at first. They should be self-centered, entitled, damaged by social media and video games, right? But what I see here shatters my prejudices. They are earnest and dedicated, much more so than I was all those years ago. They talk compellingly about what’s meaningful in their lives. It’s all so complicated now: the pandemic, racism, depression, the environment, the downside of technology. There’s an underlying sadness here, an unspoken fear that what has been

lost might never return. All I can do is say thank you, rank them from one through five, and type brief comments about how they did. If only I could tell them that they've opened my eyes.

Interest in speech and debate is on the decline today, and that's a shame. The time commitment for coaches is enormous, and finding schools generous enough to host weekend competitions is no easy task. Public speaking is a direct medium based upon the ideals of classical rhetoric, the stuff of Aristotle and Cicero. For centuries rhetoric was considered an art, a centerpiece of formal education at all levels. Maybe that's impractical today when shallow talking points have replaced thoughtful conversation, and dialogue is reduced to short bursts of information. Rhetoric is no longer art, but has become artifice.

Thankfully, these kids never got the memo. Despite all the fates that conspired against them this year they've persisted, undaunted. There's one team, a girl and a boy, who perform selected scenes from *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Although they're standing in different screens, unable to see one another, I'm almost moved to tears by the beauty of their acting. For a moment I forget we're all somewhere else. There is transcendence in a story well told, and a speech well delivered. I now know why Joe worked as hard as he did for so many years, why he sacrificed so much for these students. What he received was every bit as fulfilling as what he gave.

After the tournament I reach out to the helpful teacher at Cathedral Prep to see how the team fared. I'm hopeful he'll continue the tradition of speech and debate at that small high school in the middle of Queens. Everyone is proud of what they accomplished, even if they didn't win any trophies.

"The national championship is coming up," he tells me. "Maybe you could help us prepare? We have two competing this year."

"Be glad to," I say. "Let's do it for Joe."

Neil Cawley is a lawyer and writer who followed the tide from Queens to Cape Cod. His "Requiem for a Strip Club" won second prize in the 2021 Seán O'Faoláin short story competition and will be published in the Irish literary journal *Southword* this spring. Neil is currently working on a series of stories about first generation New Yorkers in the years before 9/11 titled *Outer Boroughs*.

Give That Dog a Bone

by Kristen Ott Hogan

We stood on a bridge in Costa Rica taking in a scene straight out of Jurassic Park. It had taken more than a minute to see them in the trees, their skin camouflaged in the foliage. But like an optical illusion, the dozens of creatures perched in the branches suddenly blazed into view. With mini-stegosaurus scales, their fish-like eyes blinked lazily in the sun.

My husband tilted the camera for another shot. “Wade,” I whined, “don’t use all the film on these guys.”

It was March of 2001, the abeyance before 9/11 changed the world. Wade and I had been married less than two years, no kids, no pets. Our tiny apartment cost \$425 a month, and I wouldn’t have been surprised to see mushrooms sprouting from the carpet. We’d saved, penny-in-a-jar-style, to make this trip.

“You know the pictures won’t do these guys justice,” I said. “I’ll be surprised if we can even see them in the prints.”

Back then, photos were finite. When someone cautioned, “Don’t use up all the film,” they were thinking of their wallet. Each press of the shutter button consumed one of the twenty-four to thirty-six frames of film in a roll and each roll cost money both to buy and to develop. In other words, no shooting fifteen pictures of your daughter perched on the Sinclair dinosaur or the umpteenth buffalo in Yellowstone National Park. You picked your shots wisely, not knowing the quality of a photo until the roll of film was developed at a photo shop. A crisp envelope of glossy prints constituted all your memories of an event. No Instagram or Facebook to document your life. No hard drive or iCloud to save your memories from fire and misplacement or loss. The only half-baked solution to this scarcity was ordering “double prints,” an extra copy of each photo to hoard or give away.

My fussing did nothing to stop Wade from snapping more pictures even though we’d only purchased a few rolls of film for our entire trip. I envisioned photos of us,

hand-in-hand, on a beach or beneath a volcano or kneeling by a wayfaring sloth, not an assortment of iguanas roasting under the sun among tree limbs.



Recently, I spread all the photos from our Costa Rica trip on our kitchen table, soaking in the scenes. The anomalous plants, Wade’s curly hair, my pre-pregnancy hips, tiny crabs on the sandy beach, the feathery sugar cane plants hugging the road. And treetops with lizard-shaped green patches lurking in the branches. This batch of slapdash images is all I have of the trip twenty years ago. When I look at the photos, I want to inject the richness of a twenty-year-old relationship into the scenes and the interactions. But our history was in the making then, our foundation still hardening in the tropical sun.

A month before the trip, I’d given Wade a poem for Valentine’s Day. It featured lines about how I loved his hair in the evenings and something about camping with him in the mountains and passing the extra-terrestrial highway on our way to Yosemite because we both loved *The X-Files*. In the last line, I elevated him above the mushiness of *Reader’s Digest* love poems by proclaiming that “Anything more would be unearned, wasted, lost on you.” What that meant exactly, I still don’t know. I gave up writing poetry.

But I continued to write essays and stories for the next twenty years, and although Wade has made cameo appearances, the sole focus of these pieces has never been about him, our courtship, or our marriage. Recently, Wade addressed the elephant in the room: “Why don’t you ever write about me?” It was a good question.



In the tourist town of La Fortuna, we rented a room at a roadside inn. According to my Costa Rica pocket guidebook, the landscape changed overnight in July 1968 when a nearby wooded hill exploded into an active volcano. For months, I’d imagined us on a hotel balcony, leaning against the railings as bursts of lava sprayed out the top of

the volcano before landing almost at our feet. We would capture the moment with our no-frills Canon camera.

Instead, I collapsed into one of the lawn chairs on the back patio while Wade hunkered down inside the doorway to smash the bugs parading around our room. Despite my husband’s gallant efforts, I felt certain a cockroach or two would be hiding under my pillow or fall from the dusty light fixture. The clouds hugged the volcano all evening, not a glimpse of the conical top or a splash of red lava to be seen. I took a few photos anyway, misty shots of a hill splattered with greenery beneath a bridal veil of clouds. There was no indication of a volcano in the photos, nothing that caught your eye.



A camera records an instant of time through a reaction with the light particles bouncing around in any given moment. Photography is about capturing light, capturing moments, capturing memory. These instances of captured light are called exposures.

If I write about Wade, which image should I develop? What would it expose? How do I capture his light?



On our second morning, we traveled to the Frio Rio for a boat tour into the depths of the Negro Cano Refuge. Our guide led us onto a canopied boat with white plastic chairs and a diesel engine at the back. My husband requested the seat next to the water.

“That way, I can protect you from the crocodiles.”

The murky water ate at the bank, washing away the dirt around the tree roots until they clutched like exposed fingers on the shoreline. Turtles flopped into the water

when the boat approached, and a Jesus Christ lizard scurried across the water. The guide pointed out an azure bird, standing straight, with delicate legs like strings of thread. Monkeys howled in the towering trees on the right.

“They howl to protect their territory and their family.” Our guide mimicked a howl in his microphone. A monkey echoed the sound. Wade snapped pictures of the trees, hoping to include a monkey or two in the shot. Later, I searched for their question-mark tails in the printed photos but unearthed only green foliage and a reckless sky. Capturing them in a photo was like trying to capture light.

We wield our cameras during joyful moments but rarely during dark and difficult times. But a photo tethers both light and darkness, the contrast is what creates the image. We develop film in a darkroom to protect the film from damaging rays of light. Without the darkness, the exposures flash empty, a shadow of something undefined.

By today’s standards, twenty years is a long time to spend with one person. In a few years, I will have spent more of my life with Wade Hogan than without him. The years melt together, fused by so many conversations and emotions, disappointments and joys. Darkness and light. Memories blaze in my mind like sepia snapshots in a scrapbook. Wade holding baby Drew in the hospital recliner. A dollar-store straw hat protecting his red nose while planting a tree. Guiding his mom through the hallways of the memory care facility. His plaid shirt screaming against his red reindeer flannel pants. A glass of juice resting on his tummy while watching a low budget film. His race to spread the grass seed over our acre before the sun sunk into the Great Salt Lake for the day. Darkness and light shaping the image of our life together.



My parents and sister joined us for a few days of sightseeing on the Costa Rica Pacific coast. Wade captained the six-seater rental van as we travelled down a narrow highway peppered with potholes the size of firetrucks and bridges hemmed with crocodiles. At the Manuel Antonio National Park, we trudged through the tropical rainforest toward the beach, vulnerable under the sun. As the others dillydallied in the forest, but my husband and I beelined for the ocean. Wade ran ahead, the back of his T-shirt drenched with sweat. He dove into the waves. I followed, pushing through the flow with my thighs. The water cooled my skin like lemonade. My mom took a picture of



us walking back up the beach, hand in hand. When she handed me a copy a few weeks later, I gaped at the picture-perfect scene. Our heads bent toward each other, our feet emerging from the frothy water, the enameled blue of both sea and sky stretching behind us like a parachute guiding a safe landing.

“I knew you would like it,” she said.

It’s true. I have shied away from writing about Wade. I worry some might find our steadfast marriage boring or even worse, lacking in some way. I cannot risk overexposure. And although abiding love makes a good marriage, it rarely translates into interesting narrative. We do share a rich, packed history but it’s disorganized and jumbled like the shoeboxes of photos in the closet. The task of sorting through the hoarded memories feels irreverent somehow. It also feels impossible.



At an alfresco restaurant near the beach, we sipped tall glasses of lemonade. I ordered pollo and arroz for the umpteenth time, but Wade ordered a T-bone steak.

“It’s only three dollars!” He grinned.

Our sunburns raw, we stuck to the vinyl chairs. My mom and sister ordered ice cream bars while Wade ate his grisly, gaunt steak.

“I guess I understand why it was only three dollars,” he grimaced. “I’m going to keep the bone for some lucky dog.”

He wrapped the bone in a napkin and slipped it into the pocket of his cargo shorts.

Writing about the love of your life is dangerous. You must walk the tightrope between saccharine on one side and disloyalty on the other. No one wants to read cheesy lines laced with hyperbole nor a housewife carping session over the back fence. Both extremes skirt the truth. Even in good marriages, pain and disappointment burrow in with the love like a rat in the rabbit hole. The panorama of marriage exposes the muddy middle *and* the magenta sunset. To communicate this conundrum is like explaining the art of subtlety to Lady Gaga. It’s just easier to write about childhood shenanigans or the Federal Reserve.

But there’s another reason I balk at writing about Wade. A singer once said she always performed certain songs, really poignant and personal songs, from a distance as if she was a different character than herself onstage. It was too difficult, she explained, to visit that emotional space every time she held the microphone to her lips. As they say, it hit too close to home. After Priscilla left him, Elvis Presley reportedly fudged the bridge to “Are You Lonesome Tonight?” every single time he performed it.

Likewise, the words escape me when I try to write about Wade. Always a blurred photo. Always underdeveloped with bad lighting. Always the printed image failing to do the scene justice.

On our drive back to San Jose, Wade suddenly steered the van into a dirt parking lot.

“There is the dog that wants this bone.”

I looked out the window and saw an anemic collie-mutt sniveling by a sign that read Vivero Fruta De Orod. A banner of multi-colored flags stretched from a tire to the front door of a shop. As Wade swung open the door, the dog leapt up, eyeing him with distrust. My husband crouched down in his white socks and Doc Martens and stretched

out the bone to the motionless dog five feet away. I fumbled with the camera, snapping a picture of the scene. Time stalled, as if the click of my camera rendered the subjects frozen in their poses. Finally, the dog inched forward, then stopped again. Wade coaxed and cajoled the dog forward. When the mutt finally reached the bone, he nabbed it with his teeth and scurried to his spot by an abandoned tire. Driving off, we watched the dog settle down to his feast.

If I had to pick an image to capture Wade, I would choose this picture. The one of him offering a T-bone to a miserable dog in Costa Rica. The image exposes his simple kindness, his unfeigned belief that the bone would be like manna from heaven for the dog. He acted without the cynicism that ruins such moments. Without the suspicion his effort might be pointless because tomorrow the dog would still be starving, still hungry for the bone now buried like lost treasure.

He just wanted to give a dog a bone.



Kristen Ott Hogan lives in Syracuse, Utah with her husband, Wade, and their four children. Her work has appeared in *Segullah*, *The Ravin Perch*, and *Aji Magazine*, *Literary Traveler*. She co-authored, *Phoenix Flame*, a memoir chronicling her nephew's battle with mental illness. She loves to read more than Netflix—her favorite novel remains *Jane Eyre*. Her husband is waiting (patiently) for her to write a bestseller so he can quit his job.

Buck

by Al Czarnowsky

The banging noise woke me from a sound sleep on a mid-July Sunday morning. I was twenty-seven years old and lived in a small house on the dead-end section of Spruce Street in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, a town better known in 1978 for its surrounding ranching and mining activity than for the skiing that would convert the town into the upscale resort it is today. I worked as an assistant engineer at a nearby surface coal mine. The day before, I had spent a long twelve hours to conclude the expansion plans that my boss, the chief engineer, intended to present to the company's management in Denver on Monday.

A string of cuss word words accompanied the banging outside. I slipped out of the covers, walked to the bedroom window, pulled back the curtains, and spotted my obnoxious neighbor beating on a galvanized metal trash can. "What's he doing now?" I muttered. I glanced at my alarm clock. It was fifteen minutes after six o'clock.

When I turned back out the window, the fellow booted the can, tipping it, which allowed his golden retriever to escape and sprint down the street. More obscenities followed from my neighbor.

I abhorred bullies and being mean to a dog topped my repulsion list. I opened the window and yelled, "What the hell are you doing!"

My neighbor jerked his head toward my house. "That son-of-a-bitching dog got in the trash this morning."

"That's no way to treat a dog."

He flipped me the middle finger and retreated into his house.

There are people who should never have a dog. My neighbor topped that list. He kept the beautiful retriever tethered on a chain in the front yard. I had previously heard from the mine's surveyor, who had lived next to my current neighbor at another place across town the previous winter, that he had left his dog outside at night in the cold, chained to a tree, and even failed to regularly feed the poor dog. I should have put my

pants on, gone outside, dragged the bastard out of his house and thrashed him. But I didn't.

That evening, at a downtown dinner with friends, I explained the morning's scene. They all were disgusted at my neighbor's behavior. The wife of one of my friends was saddened that anyone would treat one of God's sweet creatures like that, reminding all of us that dog is God spelled backwards. Yet, she abhorred violence, saying a fist-fight with my neighbor would do nothing to help the dog, and might make it worse. She suggested that I suppress my anger and take a course of action that would benefit the dog, in spite of the neighbor. "Like what?" I asked, while thinking I still preferred a fist-fight.

"Maybe ask your neighbor about walking his dog when you get home from the mine."

I rolled my eyes and groaned. "Maybe I should bring him a six-pack of beer and a bouquet of red roses too."

"No flowers," she said and frowned at me. "Beer is okay."

The next Saturday afternoon, I saw my neighbor bent over the open hood of his car. Remembering the advice of my friend's wife, I suppressed the anger that had seethed me the previous Sunday, grabbed two bottles of Coors from my refrigerator, and went next door. The dog wagged his tail when I approached, and I petted him. When my neighbor looked up, I said "Problems with the car? Thought you might need a beer."

He snatched the offered Coors without a thank you, and complained about his situation. "This damn car. Must have a short somewhere in the wiring. Lights aren't coming on."

I wanted to say he had a short in his brain, but instead responded, "Did you check the fuses?" All the time thinking he should check his own short temper fuse.

"Didn't think about that." When checked, that was the problem. He gave me a short thanks. His dog barked, and he shouted, "Shut up. No barking." The dog laid down, still tethered to the chain.

“I had a dog growing up,” I said, looking for the opportunity my friend had suggested. “Used to take my dog for walks. I miss that. I know you work at night. Mind if I take your dog for a walk when I get home from work?”

He looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. “Whatever.” he replied and took another swig of beer. “Just chain him up when you get back.”

That was the permission I reluctantly sought. I bought the dog a bright red collar and myself a retractable dog leash. For the rest of the summer, every evening after I arrived home from work, the dog and I went for a long walk. In the nearby school playground, I’d throw a tennis ball, which he loved to retrieve. Sometimes, I’d take him in my open-air 1975 CJ-5 Jeep, and we’d get ice cream cones. He liked vanilla in a waffle cone. His whole rear end shook in joy when I came to get him. We grew to be great pals.



Al and Buck, 1978

As summer waned into fall, the mountain nighttime temperatures dipped. In early October with the first snowfall and below freezing temperatures, I heard the retriever whimpering when I arrived home after dark from the mine. This time I didn’t seek approval from the neighbor, went next door, unleashed the retriever, and brought him into my house. That became my habit every night. I bought good dog food and treats.

On cold nights, he curled up next to my wood-burning fireplace on the dog bed that I bought for him. Sometimes, he’d follow me into my bedroom and find a spot beside the bed. The next morning, when I left for work, I’d take him outside and re-attach him to his chain. One morning, my neighbor saw me, questioned what I was doing, and I curtly told him his dog stayed inside with me at night. My neighbor responded with another “Whatever,” but he said that dogs belonged outside.

I should have stolen that dog. I considered that possibility the night before I left for my Christmas vacation to Montana to see my folks. I had invited the furry fellow to sleep

on my bed that cold and snowy night, and he moved several times during the darkness, each time making sure he rested right against me.

Early the next morning, I fed him a bowl of his crunchy dog food, punctuated with small pieces of left-over steak and sprinkled with shredded cheddar cheese. I filled his water bowl, and he enjoyed a long drink.

I left him inside my house while I loaded my duffle bag, briefcase, a canteen of water, and my sleeping bag in my Jeep, now with its winter top on. When I returned, the dog greeted me at the back door. “Time to go,” I said, and he barked, with affirmation that his answer was yes to either a walk or a ride. I pulled a dog biscuit from the box on the counter. I knelt next to him, fed him the treat, and then hugged him. He nuzzled against my shoulder and licked my face. “You can’t go with me this time,” I told him, but the word “go” was met with a wagging tail.

As much as I wanted to take him—steal him—and transport him with me to Montana, I didn’t. My dear mom would tell me that stealing was stealing. A sin. She would demand the retriever be returned to his rightful owner, just as she had made me, when I was five years old, return a pack of gum that I pocketed from the local drugstore and apologize to the store’s owner.

I could lie to her. Tell her the owner gave me the dog. But lying was a sin too. So, I took the retriever outside, hugged him again, and chained him to the tree in his front yard. “I love you buddy. You be good. See you in a week.”

As I drove west on State Highway 40, I felt an empty sadness. I almost turned back, to “borrow” the dog for the week, but didn’t and rationalized that we’d resume our routine when I returned. I remember a tiny flicker sparked somewhere deep inside me as I drove northward in Wyoming that my neighbor would decide as a new year’s resolution that the dog would be best with me. It was a comforting feeling but one I knew arose simply from wishful thinking.

A week later, when I returned to Steamboat Springs and went outside to greet the dog, he was not tied to the tree. The chain was gone. There were no dog paw tracks in the snow. The neighbor’s car was missing as well, and there were no tire tracks in the driveway or footprints to the front door. I walked through the snow and knocked on the

neighbor's door. No answer. I peered in the front window. The place was dark inside and empty. The elderly lady who lived across the street came out when she saw me. "He skipped town," she shouted to me from her porch. "He left last week without paying his December rent."

"And the dog?" I shouted back.

"Haven't seen the dog. Probably went with him."

"Where'd they go? Do you know?"

The lady shrugged. "My husband thinks they went back to Texas."

I loved that dog. As darkness engulfed town and my sad heart, I started a fire in the fireplace. I found a can of Campbell's tomato soup in the cupboard, but had no appetite. I opted for a mug of hot tea. The box of dog biscuits remained on the counter. I walked to my front door and opened it, harboring a desperate hope to hear the dog bark. The neighbor's house was dark. I returned to the fireplace and sat in my old wooden rocking chair. As I slowly rocked, I stared at the empty dog bed illuminated by firelight. Buck loved that bed. That was the dog's name. "Oh Buck," I said, closed my eyes and cried.

I never learned what happened to my former neighbor or Buck. But I promised myself that someday I'd get a dog of my own. I'd name him Buck, and I'd care for him with all the attention and love I could muster.

Author's Note:

In the summer of 2007, I welcomed a beautiful yellow Labrador retriever into my life. He became my second "Buck" and lived with my wife Sally and me for fourteen years. Throughout his life, he was our constant companion. He found his heavenly reward in 2021, but not before receiving all the attention and love I promised many years earlier.



Al and Buck, II

Al Czarnowsky is a 1975 graduate of the Colorado School of Mines with a degree in mining engineering. He has worked at operating mines and on mining projects throughout the western United States, including Alaska, as well as at mines in Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Colombia. Although his work demands considerable technical writing, Al also pursues non-engineering writing. His novel *Dear Katy, Love Dad* was released in 2005. He is writing a historical novel based on the life of the engineer John F. Stevens.

Grammy's Secret

by Andrew Yim

I am three years old in the photo, taken at the end of the Easter weekend, just before Grammy heads back home from New York suburbia to the outskirts of Boston. It is a slap dash portrait—brothers with hair tossed by wind and play, Mom and Dad weary with the holiday effort, framed by the backyard forsythia and violet in first bloom. I stand at Grammy's side with tears running down my cheeks, distraught and aggrieved that she is leaving. My maternal grandmother was the only grandparent I knew, and I adored her.

I knew my Korean grandparents as black and white photos on the living room wall. Their photos held court like austere religious icons, both blessing and reminder of another place and seemingly another time. Grandma Yim was only a distant voice on late night phone calls from Korea. Though she often made the case for relocation to the United States, Dad argued that, without her church community and friends, she'd be lonely and unhappy. So she stayed in Pusan, South Korea, and we never met. Grandfather Yim died just a few years after my birth. Mom's father, Grandfather Donovan, died just before she graduated from college.

Which left only Grammy, and she was fun. With a half-smoked Parliament in hand, a Buick with soft leather seats, and a seemingly insatiable love of card games (Uno, cribbage, hearts, and Russian bank), she was, for a grandchild, easy company. She was a connoisseur of simple pleasures: a buttered roll for the grilled hot dog; large, soft pillows on crisp cotton linen; and long summer evenings on her enclosed porch with endless games. She seduced my three brothers and I with these pleasures, reveling in her role as the indulgent grandparent.

In late summer, my three brothers and I visited her for a week. Located in the toney Boston suburb of Belmont, her house was elegant and sumptuous. What remained of the family's fortune after the Weisbrod brewery, a prosperous Philadelphia establishment, went bankrupt with prohibition, paid for construction of the Pennsylvania Dutch style house. Her father, a first-generation émigré from a farm in northern Germany, threw silver dollars into the crowd of the Mummer's Day parade to mark the loss of his business, driven by despair to near madness. My great-grandfather eventually moved the family

north, to Boston, where Grammy met her husband, a third generation Irish American from South Boston, during her first year at Wellesley College.

The house was a museum to Weisbrod's brewery. The stairway wall to the basement was lined with black and white hunting photos of my great-grandfather at a lodge in the Poconos, sitting with his entourage in front of a half dozen deer hanging from hooks, waiting for the butcher's knife. He was a rotund brewer with a handlebar moustache. Posters, platters and other tchotchke with the Weisbrod name and brand decorated the walls and shelves of the parlor. Ornate, Bavarian style steins and porcelain figures from German fairy tales filled in the empty spaces. Half of the basement had been converted into a parlor, part bar, part poker room, and part tribute to her German heritage. My favorite element was the music box below a mounted deer head. Just a bit larger than 2 x 1 feet, the 19th century antique featured bells with bees and butterflies as hammers, nymphs and sybils with trumpet, flute and lyre next to the list of songs on the inner lid, and a shiny steel cylinder with hundreds of small needles. From the distance of decades, I hear the cascades of tinny notes and then click of metal on drum and bell.

Some nights during our summer visits, Grammy pulled the cloth and leaf off the two, green felt, Atlantic City style poker tables in the basement for penny poker—five card draw and seven card stud (dealer calls the game). She had a naughty pack of playing cards with illustrations of 1950s cover girls in see through raincoats and skimpy lingerie. “You wouldn't be men if you didn't like 'em,” she said as Cousin Johnny and I giggled. Under her tutelage, I learned to ante up, hold a poker face, and bluff with a pair of twos.

She was a hostess extraordinaire. Happy hour started in the basement parlor with whiskey sours and gin and tonics for the adults and RC cola for the kids. The music box melodies were background to Grammy's raucous, infectious laughter, a strong, clear, crescendo of an alto. We opened the wooden bench next to the bar, pulled out the toys, and melted into the chaos of play, oblivious to the adults and their boring banter. Then we went upstairs to the dining room, which featured a crystal chandelier and mahogany table with ornate, carved, Romanesque decorations. A table made for feasts. Though robbers hit the house twice over the years, the dining room cabinets were still full of silver and porcelain with 19th century motifs and designs.

Most of life took place in the kitchen rather than in the basement. The kitchen table was where Mom and Grammy chatted through breakfast coffee, English muffins and eggs sunny side up. My brothers and I lunched on chips and sandwiches between ping pong and swims in her neighbor's in-ground pool. Some days Grammy would settle into the kitchen with a romance novel and cigarettes, whiling away the long New England summer afternoons to the sounds of grandchildren in play and then the Westminster chimes of the grandfather clock.

From the distance of decades, I see her joy in grandparenting within the trajectory of her life; mother, then widow just as my mother and uncle left for college, careers, and parenthood. She went to church, more habit than devotion, and had a small but steady circle of friends for cards, drinks, and nights at the Boston pops. Jessie, her housekeeper and confidante, came once a week to clean and chat. But other than those occasions and her grandchildren's visits, her life was spent more in solitude than company. As a child, I never thought about Grammy beyond the cards and laughter, trips to the movies and ball games, Howard Johnson hot dog lunches, and hot fudge sundaes at Bailey's Ice Cream Parlor.

As far as I knew, she read mostly romance novels and the occasional best seller. Her library consisted of three shelves along the reading room wall with a modest collection of best sellers and the occasional classic. In boredom, some afternoons I'd browse the books, looking for something even plausibly interesting, an Encyclopedia Brown mystery or Peanuts comic. There was an odd title in the collection that didn't seem to make sense. *Mein Kampf*. It seemed an odd work, a glorified pamphlet of no interest. I didn't even think to open it. It was just, well, weird. *Mein Kampf*. What the hell was that? There were no illustrations, symbols or designs on the cover. Just two words in a spindly, no-nonsense font. To the eight-year-old, it looked like a dull adult book. Later, in adolescence, I looked at the book, now aware of its origins, and thought that perhaps it was read and kept as a sort of historical artifact. I never asked Grammy for an explanation. I was oblivious to any connection between the book, the consequence of its words, and Grammy's life.

Grammy was a Reagan Republican, perhaps a Goldwater one too. By the age of ten I was already a committed Democrat, and so we argued about welfare moms birthing

babies to increase the dole and other hot-button issues. She was racist to the extent that mainstream conservative politics of the time had racist undertones. But she was interested in the world beyond affluent Belmont, with an appreciation for the subtleties of foreign cultures and intricacies of cross-cultural communication. She participated in a Boston-wide program that matched university students from abroad with Boston families. Hosting them for holidays and the occasional weekend dinner, she welcomed them like family and so they became. Loubob, a Lebanese student at Wellesley, Polivius, a Syrian engineering student at MIT and Jenny Koo, a Korean violinist at the Boston Conservatory, were household names, often remembered in fond reminiscence. Polivius became a life-long friend of my uncle, with joint family ski trips and eventually a funeral eulogy. Grammy gave them the love and comfort of a second home, happy hours before Thanksgiving dinners, card games on late summer nights, a safe harbor in a foreign land.

When Granny passed, contrary to her buoyant personality, her funeral was a modest affair, held at the local Lutheran church and attended by close family and friends. My cousins gave the readings and I played “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desire” on the trumpet. It was a grey, January day, just beyond the last gasp of the holiday season. We gathered in her basement parlor after the ceremony, surrounded by beer steins and platters with the Weisbrod Brewery name, at the tables where we once played penny poker. I remember turning the crank of the music box to cue the tinny, 19th Century marches and ditties. We remembered, with much laughter, our time with her. She had done her best, as grandmother and friend, and went to her rest, it seemed, without regret.

Several weeks after her funeral in 1990, my mother and uncle returned to the house on Juniper Road to clean, sort, and then divvy up the estate. In the attic, Mom found a box with an ornate swastika flag and other paraphernalia. I found it bizarre to learn about a swastika flag in a house that contained so many dear memories. While *Mein Kampf* was a curiosity, a swastika flag seemed less ambiguous, more graphic representation of the horrific past. But Mom laughed when she told us about discovery of the flag that had seemingly almost jumped out of the box in the attic. The laughter seemed like resolution, even absolution, as if a symbol of genocide and Holocaust was a quirky souvenir or eccentricity. But I wasn’t ready to let Grammy off the hook. A serious and sensitive young man, I’d just read Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* at college. I pressed

Mom for an explanation. “Oh Andrew, it was just a thing before the war. Lots of German-Americans were hanging the flag over their doors. It didn’t mean anything, really. How could they have known?” We never talked of it again.

The German American Bund movement, founded in 1936, initially consisted mostly of German Americans whose cultural pride grew and grew until it latched onto Hitler’s toxic, genocidal brew of German nationalism and antisemitism. The movement swelled quickly into the tens of thousands, culminating in a Madison Square Garden rally in 1939, a “pro American” rally which really was a promotion of Hitler and Nazi Fascism. Black and white photos in an article in *The Atlantic* show earnest Americans in crowds as if at a Fourth of July parade, just before watermelon and fireworks. But swastikas and iron crosses took the place of stars and stripes. Instead of right hands on hearts pledging allegiance, their hands extended upward, straight as arrows, to the fingertips. Did Grammy wear one of the pseudo-military uniforms? Was she all in with a swastika arm band and martial cut of cloth? Certainly, her deep family ties with Germany might have drawn her to the Nazi movement.

Had Grammy been caught up in the fever of the fascist backlash against New Deal politics, an understandable revolt against the progressive movement that banned alcohol and destroyed her father? Or did she feel a deep solidarity with the impoverished, humiliated German people? Was she just an impressionable housewife flirting with extremist politics? Or was she a true believer, in full embrace with the Nazi ideology and its thirst for purity, supremacy, and fascist domination? A deep dive into ancestry.com reveals that Grammy traveled with her mother to spend the summers of 1925, 1930, and 1931 in Germany, presumably with family. What conversations did she hear on the streets and in the kitchens as an impressionable teen in the Weimar Republic? Did she feel or understand the wounded pride, the humiliation, and poverty of the Germans in wake of the Treaty of Versailles? Did she return home with a copy of *Mein Kampf* and swastika flag? The flag and other paraphernalia couldn’t have been her father’s, as he died in 1919. She never mentioned those trips to me, and so they are guarded in secrecy. Grammy didn’t speak of her childhood.

How odd, then, it must have been, in 1961, to meet her future son in law, a gaunt Korean just a few years removed from war and dislocation. In a dog-eared photo, Dad stands with an axe next to a woodpile, dressed like a New England farmer, taking a break from studies at Dartmouth College. He moved quickly from a rice farm in what is now North Korea to the Ivy league via service as a military translator during the Korean War. On the next page of the family album, the bride and bridesmaids pose in white, satiny dresses with Jackie O haircuts, while the men stand gallantly in tails and tuxedos with hair waxed and neatly parted. It is a fine Boston wedding, Dartmouth groom weds Wellesley bride. The groom, though, seems an anomaly; Asian but well-integrated with a PhD in political science and tenure track appointment.

Another photo, in muted colors of the 1970s, shows us at the Thanksgiving table. Dad stands at the head of the table with carving knife and turkey, surrounded by his White sons with Eurasian eyes and cheeks. I remember the moments before and after holiday dinners. Dad pours Grammy one of his signature whiskey sours as he talks about faculty politics, and then shares an after-dinner cigarette with her in solidarity against Mom's protests. Their relationship never seemed difficult to my child's eyes until, in adolescence, I was angered by a comment she made while discussing Reagan era politics. I don't remember the specific content of the comment but remember clear as day my own response: "Well, I'm a mutt of all nations," I yelled and then stormed off to my bedroom. Dad followed me and asked me to return and make peace with Grammy. "Just ignore her," he said. "I've had to tolerate decades of that nonsense. I get tired of trying too. She has a way of making me feel the foreigner." I returned to the dining room. Grammy stood and hugged me and told me she loved me. The scent of cigarettes on her breath was intoxicating.

In the end, the question still stands. Was Grammy really a Nazi sympathizer, or even member of the Bund? Or did she, as my Mom defended, just hang the flag in solidarity, as if a clover on St Patrick's day? The evidence against her is circumstantial but I find it persuasive. To me at least she displayed no overt, virulent antisemitism. Yet still she kept *Mein Kampf* on the bookshelf and the swastika flag and paraphernalia in the attic, as if she still harbored a lingering sympathy towards the Nazi movement and ambivalence towards the Holocaust.



In adulthood, I discovered that my mother's politics veered beyond stereotype, into conspiracy and even antisemitism. Like the small book in the library and the flag hidden in the attic, Mom's views were for familial consumption only. When the subject of the Holocaust or World War II comes up, Mom argues that the Holocaust wasn't specifically an antisemitic event. Gypsies, homosexuals, and even Catholics were sent to the camps. Israel and its supporters, she insists, have appropriated the event to advance their political agenda. Yet she worked for many years as a physical therapist at a nursing home managed and populated by orthodox Jews in Monsey NY, a mostly Hassidic town. One of her favorite patients, Mrs. Horowitz, was a Holocaust survivor. I remember the tattooed numbers on Mrs. Horowitz's forearm when I visited Mom at work. How to explain the paradox of my mother? A woman who broke racial barriers with marriage to a Korean harbors prejudice against a people she served and befriended.

Like Grammy, Mom had strong attachments to her German heritage. She sent care packages to cousins in Germany after the war and went with Omama (her grandmother) to visit family the summer before her first year at Wellesley College. In contrast, she rarely mentions her Irish grandparents. During her visit to Germany, she bonded with Günter, a third cousin close to her in age, and so began a life-long friendship, with transatlantic visits and attempts to pass the relationship to the next generation. "Don't forget," she'd counter during our arguments, "how badly the allies bombed Germany. That was a war crime too."

I analyze the paradox. Her effort to downplay, even deny, the Holocaust seems at once a defense of family, her grandmother, mother, and relatives from Cologne and Karlsruhe who still send Christmas cards, and some sort of old grudge. Is it prejudice, bad politics, or a sense that swift judgement of Nazi Germany implies judgement of family as well? I don't think I'll ever untie this gordian knot of politics, family, loyalty, and life experience.

Mom's annoying comments and justifications mostly stopped with the appearance of my wife Lina. Her Soviet passport had "Jewish" printed on the line for identification of ethnicity. Lina came to the United States in 1992 as a religious refugee. Her Great Aunt

Vera arrived a year later. Aunt Vera was a survivor of the “Holocaust by bullets” in Ukraine when Nazi “mobile units” roamed from village to village, gathering Jews and then shooting them en masse. Aunt Vera’s protector, a Ukrainian who hid her when the Nazis searched the village of Shatura, is listed among the righteous on the Wall of Honor in Jerusalem. Lina is family now, and with family, it seems, other rules apply. Mom cares enough to keep her comments on Jews and Israel to herself.

The antisemitism winds paradoxically through my family like a stubborn vine in the backyard garden, a creeper or holly that takes deep root, flaring and then receding with seasons and weeding. After a point, you hardly realize it’s there. It’s part of the landscape. But when is the time to confront the vine, pull it all out to the root? How to draw the lines in the craggy landscape and so spare judgement of my own? Can I distinguish between casual, off-hand, or conspiratorial antisemitism and hard-core Nazi, master race, Aryan zealotry as if movies, one PG-13 and the other XXX? Where is the line between bad politics and prejudice? If I forgive, justify, or simply turn a blind eye, am I complicit?

Over time, now decades, the presence of *Mein Kampf* and the swastika flag among Grammy’s things seem an odd footnote to an otherwise decent life devoted to her family and friends. The Easter photo in the backyard garden as I cry next to Grammy, the happy hours in the parlor, trips to Fenway Park, and smell of Buick leather occupy much more of my memory of Grammy than those profane souvenirs. But, in the wake of January 6, 2021, when a mob propelled by neofascist slogans rushed the capitol like a medieval horde caught in bloodlust, I am left to wonder just how far did Grammy’s antisemitism lead her astray? Did she march to Madison Square Garden in Nazi regalia? Did she struggle to reconcile love of her German family and their culture with the Holocaust and horrors of World War II? Why did she leave *Mein Kampf* on the bookshelf? I ask the questions as if clear answer would allow me to love her again as I did in childhood, without reservation or qualification.

Andrew Yim traveled and worked in the republics of the former Soviet Union in the mid-1990s before graduate school and then a career as a primary care nurse practitioner in the community health clinics of south-central Connecticut. He writes before the commute. His essays have appeared in *The New Haven Review*, *Trailer Runner Magazine*, the “Modern Love” column of the *New York Times*, and *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities*.

The Ballet Barre

by Aminah Wells

There is a ballet barre in my living room. There isn't much room for it, but I make it work. You see, just before COVID-19 arrived, I took my first ballet class. I felt awkward and gangly trying to waltz and pirouette across the floor, but there was a sense of belonging at the barre. The barre was smooth to the touch and securely fixed to the wall, a reminder to keep my core stable while attempting the unfamiliar movements and positioning of my feet, legs and arms. When the world shut down and my classes were canceled, barre work seemed easy to replicate at home and a good form of exercise. My kitchen counter, however, wasn't cutting it—I felt like I should be cooking, not pliéing—so, I bought a barre.

I never took ballet as a child but I have always loved to dance and the way music makes my body move. In middle school, my mom enrolled me in African dance classes where I learned how to move to the beats, colors and textures representative of my ancestors; my feet bare, my body clothed in bright fabrics, my heart beating in time with the drums. But the teenage years came, along with self-consciousness and self-determination, and I gave up these classes to be like my friends, which meant sleeping in and playing sports and chasing boys.

My Saturday morning classes were replaced with Saturday night mixers and the droning beats of hip-hop and R&B. Dark gymnasiums filled with sweaty kids were now my dance studio, the twisting of my hips calling to the boys looking on. I'd eventually lose myself with those boys while pressed together in crowded spaces, teasing at an intimacy belonging to adults. But in the daylight hours those boys were less interested (and less interesting) and so we'd go our separate ways. In college, school gyms were replaced by clubs and bars and young men who would become my friends. Sometimes we'd test boundaries and flirt around the edges of being something more, but in the end, they only wanted to dance with me.

It's not uncommon for children to give up their hobbies but adult eyes look back on these decisions with regret, and I've often wondered what if I didn't quit dance? What if I

learned modern, tap, or jazz? I ponder these questions, thinking about the joy dancing brings me and the things I admire about a dancer's body—their long lines, graceful movements, strong posture, the way their body always seems to remember that it is a dancer. So, I entered the world of ballet as an adult, hopeful that despite being in my forties and heavier than my sixteen-year-old self, I might still be able to capture a piece of what I gave up all those years ago.



I learn from a simple Wikipedia search that: *Ballet originated during the Italian Renaissance in the 15th century. It spread to France where it was formalized, resulting in most of the terminology used today. Ballet is French for “to dance” with origins in the Greek work Ballizo which means “to dance/jump about.” Barre is French for bar—a handrail used to maintain balance. Nothing surprising there.*

A barre helps dancers by providing a means of stability and balance and barre work often comprises a significant portion of the beginning dancer's classes. It is an essential tool when first learning foot placement technique. Barre work helps dancers prepare for partnering, with the barre simulating the support of a real partner.



Of all the things one needs to survive twenty-five months of a global pandemic, something supportive, stable and balancing is high on the list. Here I was thinking I bought the barre because it was a good form of exercise for my aging joints. And this bit about preparation for partnering ... can a barre really do all that?

I've often joked that when it came to dating and relationships, I must have missed a class that everyone else took. I watched friends marry and have kids while the patterns of high school and college followed me into adulthood. The support and stability I sought

seemed to constantly evade me as I danced from partner to partner, accepting too little and bending too much. Was the class I missed ballet?



In ballet, a pas de deux, French for "step of two", is a dance duet in which two dancers, typically a male and a female, perform ballet steps together. A grand pas de deux has a structured five-part sequence, consisting of an entrée (introduction), an adagio, a solo for each dancer, and a coda (conclusion). It is effectively a suite of dances symbolic of a love story or the partnership inherent in love. During the adagio, the ballerina performs slow and sustained movements while the danseur supports her. The danseur, in turn, strives to maintain a display of poise and seemingly effortless strength while providing support for the ballerina. This includes lifts and offering a steady arm for her to use as a "virtual barre" when she performs balancing feats that would be difficult or impossible without assistance.



My boyfriend of five years would tell you I'm great at dancing solo. It's a consequence of years spent mostly on my own. I don't see my independence as a bad thing and I'm proud of what I've managed to accomplish, the pain I've survived, and obstacles I've overcome. But when there's someone in your life who has no intention of leaving, who expects a partnership and stepping together, being a soloist does not make that partnership easy.

At times, I'm unsure of how to position myself and I struggle not to simply do what my body wants to do vs what our duet needs. I'm unsure about how to show the well of love in my heart which lives behind awkward words and misunderstandings. I'm unsure how to balance the different parts of myself, when they all seem to want something different from me. But I'm working on it. I work on it every day because he's my best friend

and I can't imagine life without him. I work on it every day because his poise and strength aren't effortless, so I need to carry my own weight. Apparently, I'm also working on it each day when I'm at the barre in my living room, building the balance, strength and muscle memory needed to be a better dancer.

Aminah Wells is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice and a native of Baltimore, MD. She attended Loyola University where she majored in Psychology and minored in Creative Writing. She holds a MSW from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Writing has been a passion since she was a child and her niche is poetry and creative non-fiction. She believes writing is a powerful tool for healing and she uses it for her own self-reflection and in her work with clients. In the coming years she aspires to write a book from a little bed and breakfast by the beach.

Summer's End

by Suzanne Ketchum Adams

Viewed from the water, my grandparents' summer cottage at The Cove stood tall and spindly, like Grandfather himself, poised right on the brink where the lawn dropped off six feet to the rocky beach below.

Like us, my grandparents lived year-round just five miles away, but they were old by the time I came along and seldom came to The Cove anymore. My siblings and I spent every fair summer weekday of our childhoods at The Cove, often with friends in tow, my mother driving us there in the station wagon from the farm where we lived. After we'd left the main road, we bumped along on the dirt one that led down to the shore, past rocky outcroppings and small cottages nestled in the woods, until we came to a hand-painted sign my older cousin Mark had posted years earlier which read: "Dangerous Curve. Speed Limit 100. 95 Night."

After my mother had negotiated this sharp turn downhill, passing treacherously close to a ledge, we could smell the salty spruce-tinged air, and seconds later, after she'd pulled into the grassy parking spot, we tumbled out of the car and ran to the rocky beach to see whether the tide was in or out. High tide was better for swimming, low tide better for finding shells and starfish.

After we'd run up the creaky porch steps of the old cottage and entered its dank interior, we stowed our bologna sandwiches in the 1940s refrigerator. The sweet scent of the spring-fed water wafted up from the rust-stained sink, mingling with the smell of must and mold from the oilcloth floor.

After climbing the stairs and changing into our swimsuits behind an old-fashioned dressing screen, we clambered back down. If it were low tide, we opened the door to the "back kitchen," releasing an overwhelming stink of stale sweat, seaweed, and mildew. Among the black inner tubes and orange life jackets, dozens of salt-encrusted sneakers in various sizes, faded to grays and dull pinks, were scattered about in pairs. Though lined with gravel, and frequently, spiders, we shook them out and wore them into the

water. Barnacles and sea urchins were plentiful underfoot at low tide; the sneakers, despite the potential spiders and foul odor, protected our feet.

The bay was always cold, but westerly breezes brought the chilliest water of all. Sometimes, when the tide was on its way in, we'd sit on the stony beach, our legs straight out in front of us, just inches from the water's edge, waiting for the tide to gradually drench us. Just when we thought it would never reach us, the water lapped at our feet, our calves, our thighs, until we were sitting in an inch of water. The tide slowly rose higher, acclimating us to the chill. We were in no hurry. Each day at The Cove, and the summer days collectively, seemed to stretch out endlessly.

We knew where all the large rocks were, even when they were submerged at high tide. One of them was covered at just the right depth for us to climb and sit on as the waves lapped around us. My father, as a boy, had once drilled a hole a few inches deep in the top of this rock, planning a diving board that never materialized. The hole filled with water every high tide, which I plunged out with my index finger, a ritual like so many others.

When we tired of swimming, or our mother insisted we get out because our lips were turning blue, we often played "restaurant" on the solid rock shelf that we called The Ledge, stirring the algae-filled tidal pools as if they were pots of soup, scooping up tiny yellow periwinkles and pretending they were corn, and serving them to our imagined guests on platters made of large clamshells.

Between swimming and playing, we visited with relatives whose cottages bookended that of our grandparents. Aunt Alice, my father's oldest sister, summered next door in a cottage with a long, glass-enclosed porch that looked out on the bay. She lived the rest of the year in Bangor, where we usually joined her for Thanksgiving. Aunt Alice was a tall, patrician-looking woman with white, upswept hair, who had been widowed in her fifties. She generously invited us to use the playthings of her now-grown children, including the swing in her garage and a croquet set. She and my mother got on well, despite an age difference of seventeen years, and on weekends there were often family suppers on the porch of either cottage.

A narrow path on the left side of my grandparent's cottage led to Cousin Ruth's. She was about the same age as Aunt Alice, and cousin to Alice and my father. She lived

the rest of the year in upstate New York where she was a librarian. Her cottage was trimly kept with a welcoming, wrap-around porch and a bright flower garden. Ruth was lean and plain, with heavy-lidded eyes and a mild smile, and could usually be found on her porch on summer days, surrounded by a coterie of guests, unmarried women like herself and people she knew from her library.

Though not one to gush, Ruth always seemed pleased to see us. She listened more than she talked, and she offered us the use of her colorful hammocks, introduced us to any young guests she had, and, if the timing was right, allowed us to raise the flag on the pole attached to the porch.

Once, when I was eight, Cousin Ruth asked me to go beachcombing with her. The damp, salty stink of low tide was thick in the air as I skipped along the beach, naming for Ruth all the large rocks in front of our relatives' cottages. After showing her The Chair Rock, and The Giant Clam, I ran ahead to a smaller, angular boulder.

"Here's The Sandwich Rock." I touched its ridged edges. "See? These layers are lettuce, bologna, and cheese."

Ruth bent down for a closer look, her skinny legs poking out from her knee-length skirt, while she balanced, a little pigeon-toed, on the rocky beach. She ran her crooked fingers over the ridged edge, and a smile spread over her face

"It's even cut down the middle," I said, pointing to a big crack across the top.

"A lovely sandwich." Ruth's grey eyes popped out a little from her thin face, scanning the beach before she picked up a round rock the size of two fists and placed it on top. "An olive for your sandwich!"

I lay down across the warm surface of The Sandwich and pretended to take a bite. Then I stuck out my tongue and licked the rough surface of the rock-olive.

"I bet it's salty," Ruth laughed, and she was right. In a minute we continued our walk, picking up the faded orange shells of crabs, and the flaky ones of razor clams.

The Cove, I was certain, would always be as perfect as it was that summer day. Like everything else in my well-ordered, sheltered little life, I took it for granted, just as I believed the grown-ups, buildings, and natural world around me would continue, forever, just as they were.

But things did change. First, Grandmother died. Then, a year later, when I was ten, after a terrifying quarrel in which my father hit my mother—something that had never happened in our house before—she left him, taking the three of us children with her. Aunt Alice helped my mother escape, sheltering us at her house in Bangor for a few days. It was June, just before the start of our usual summer days at The Cove. Mum moved us in with her mother in Pennsylvania. In the sweltering heat and cataclysmic upheaval of that summer, The Cove seemed like a distant dream, almost a fantasy.

When the divorce was final, Mum was awarded full custody, Dad the right to have us at Christmas and for the entire summer. Though we were happy to see Dad and our old friends when we returned to Maine, the atmosphere at The Cove was entirely changed.

Dad never forgave Aunt Alice for her role in helping our mother leave with us, which he called “kidnapping.” Trips to The Cove became painfully awkward, as Dad now referred to Aunt Alice as “that witch,” and refused to speak to her, adding to my confusion about how and whom to love in my newly remapped world.

Alone among our relatives and family friends, Cousin Ruth did not ask the uncomfortable, prying questions about our mother or our situation, to which I was becoming accustomed. Though we saw her less than before, her porch felt like a safe harbor in the raging family battle.

The farm where we’d grown up remained unaltered in its appearance but was a different place without our mother. And at the same time that my pubescent body began erupting in unwelcome and alarming ways, it seemed like every structure I’d ever counted on was disappearing.

Our grandfather died a year later and his big old house, which like the cottage housed so many memories of my childhood, was sold and divided into efficiency apartments. That same year, the old church, which we’d once attended, was torn down.

Despite all this destruction, I’d maintained a certain trust that, just as the tide would predictably ebb and flow, the cottage would remain as it was. But my father, who inherited the place at The Cove, soon announced his plans to tear it down.

It was too close to the water, he said, in bad repair, and a nor'easter could knock the whole thing into the bay. He promised he would build a new cottage further back on our lot.

And so, while we were back in school in Pennsylvania, he emptied the place of its furniture, stashing it all in our barn. We arrived the next summer to find the cottage half gone. He'd taken off the roof and walls where the bedrooms used to be, and as we walked up the rickety old stairs, he joked that we now had a penthouse view. I tried to laugh, too, but I felt stricken when I saw it.

When we were younger, Dad had sometimes taken us into houses under construction, where I'd been fascinated to see the skeleton of a new building rising, fresh with the promising smell of sawdust. But standing in the fog on the spot where we'd once put on our swimsuits, I wanted to cry. This was not a home under construction, but one being systematically destroyed, and its destruction echoed everything else in my life—once-safe places ripped apart, the locus of childhood memories disappearing into sky. If I stepped wrong, I could go over the edge.

Suzanne Ketchum Adams grew up in Maine and Pennsylvania, and has worked as a librarian and archivist. Her short story “Misplaced” won first prize in the online fiction contest *On the Premises* in 2014. Suzanne has performed at several storytelling venues in the Boston area, including *The Moth* GrandSLAM and WGBH's *Stories from the Stage*.

A Death in the Family

by Ruth Spack

A feast for the eyes. That's what I wanted my two young grandchildren to discover at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. But the specter of death loomed over our visit. More than a feast, we needed a balm for the soul. Zachary, almost eight, asked to see the mummies first, and so we headed toward the steep staircase leading to the ancient world. Refusing to hold my hand, his three-and-a-half-year-old sister, Annabelle, started the climb by herself. Zachary walked up a few steps in front of me, then stopped. I stopped too. I could see from his expression he had something serious on his mind.

Zachary pushed his long dark bangs away from his eyes, as if to clear a path for his thoughts. "It's too bad Lauren died," he said. "She was only twenty-eight."

Lauren, our beloved cousin, had overdosed on painkillers three weeks before. It was hard to talk about. "She had a rough life," I said.

"Now she has no life at all," said Zachary.

For much of Lauren's life, at least whenever I saw her, she wore a long ponytail, like the horses she loved to ride. Her sporty hairstyle complemented her perky personality. Lauren grew up in a playful but dysfunctional family. From a young age, her body became a site of uncommon transformations. Born with light brown hair, Lauren became a blonde in preschool, when her mother apparently began rubbing hair dye into her scalp. In her early teens, she suffered from a mysterious convergence of damaging medical events, initially presenting as acid reflux. At sixteen, she underwent radical lung and stomach surgery in a procedure lasting twenty-two hours. Post-surgery, Lauren remained in the hospital for two months, as multiple, sometimes inexplicable, complications arose to plague her.

Annabelle had made more progress on the steps than I'd thought possible for a preschooler. With my eyes fastened on her speedy gray leggings, I resumed my ascent. Zachary trailed after me.

When she was in her early twenties, Lauren's parents divorced, remarried, and moved away, one to a distant state, the other to a distant country. If not for her devoted younger brother, Will, her soldier in arms, Lauren would have been left alone to deal with her compromised physical and mental health. Her weakened lungs triggered labored breathing, which robbed her of a comfortable night's sleep, which deepened her clinical depression, as did an unrelated diagnosis of systemic Lupus the year before she died. Nevertheless, with a near constant smile and seemingly cheerful outlook, she hid her profound emotional stress, sometimes even from her brother and closest friends. Despite her limitations, Lauren lived a life of consequence as a caretaker on a horse farm, her favorite place to be, and as a loving mentor to children in need.

As Annabelle neared the top of the steps, I questioned the wisdom of taking the children to an exhibit of Egyptian sarcophagi. Annabelle was unlikely to understand what she was seeing, but Zachary might be disturbed by it. His anticipation at seeing the mummies had stirred up unsettling thoughts about Lauren's passing. Or perhaps it was the other way around, that her dying had stirred his desire to see the mummies. Either way, he was preoccupied with death, as he had been from an early age.

Ever the fierce pirate or brave storm trooper, Zachary spent much of his play time wielding plastic swords and rifle blasters, yet he would not allow anyone to step on an ant. He worried about plants that wilted and leaves that fell from trees. From the time he was four until he was seven, he refused to eat anything that had been killed for food. One day, as he passed by a man smoking a cigarette, he mumbled, "You're going to die." And now I was taking him to view a room full of embalmed bodies and stone coffins, including those of small children. Would the experience haunt him?

Lauren's brother, Will, suffered from acute grief, not only because Lauren was gone, but also because he felt guilty for not preventing her death. He'd known toward the end of Lauren's life she was living on the edge. He'd observed, for example, the drastic drop in her weight and atypical indifference to her appearance. Tirelessly, heroically, Will did everything he could for his sister; he was only twenty-six himself when she died. But in his mind, he'd also contributed to her demise.

Annabelle reached the top landing and disappeared from sight. I bounded up the rest of the steps, with Zachary close behind. Annabelle was running through a vast hall,

her pink sequined sneakers rising and falling against the tiled floor, her slender arms pumping beneath the puffy sleeves of her gray-and-white striped dress. Turning her head, she giggled when she saw me in hot pursuit. Winning the race, I stooped down and gathered her into my arms.

“I have three really big questions,” said Zachary. His eyes widened, emphasizing the magnitude of his inquiry. “Really big.”

“What are they?” I asked, hoping I could hold onto his squirming sister long enough to answer. I lifted Annabelle off the ground and held her tight.

“Number One,” said Zachary, “Who created God? Number Two: When God created Adam, did he come out a grownup or a baby? Number Three: What does it feel like to die?”

An image of Lauren’s last moments burst into my head. I saw her on the couch, or was it the floor (they’d told me but I couldn’t remember), surrounded by empty bottles of drugs and booze. Did she kill herself deliberately, or was she too intoxicated to know what she was doing? Did she slip away peacefully, in a state of sleep, or was she wracked with pain?

Annabelle was bouncing against my hip and pointing energetically toward the arched glass ceiling of the cavernous hall. “Look, look!” she shouted. “He’s flying!”

Way above our heads hovered a wooden sculpture of a barefoot young man. Dressed in a red shirt and blue pants, his arms and legs outstretched, he had the appearance of a comic book hero endowed with supernatural powers.

As Zachary gazed up at the suspended sculpture, his solemn expression brightened in astonishment.

“How did they do that?” he wanted to know.

I could have told Zachary about the attached wire, imperceptible to his child’s eye. I might have speculated that a team of installers had used a crane to fasten the wire to the ceiling, or that the artist had found a balancing point, making the sculpture appear to be floating in space. But I didn’t answer immediately. In a matter of minutes, Zachary’s mind had journeyed from the finality of death to the magic of illusion. There would be plenty of time for him to confront the realities and practicalities of life. For now, while he could, I wanted him to enjoy the wonder of it.

Ruth Spack, a retired professor of English, currently teaches writing in the Myra Kraft Transitional Year Program at Brandeis University. Her previous publications include *The International Story* and *America's Second Tongue*, which was awarded the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize by the Modern Language Association. After a long and fulfilling career as an academic writer, she now focuses exclusively on creative writing. She has short stories forthcoming in *Streetlight Magazine* and *Jewish Fiction .net*. "Death in the Family" is her first published work of creative nonfiction.

Jackie, Nina, and Me

by Anika Pavel

“Travel is the university of life,” my mother said with regularity. I thought about her words as I looked out the window into the night, one that started no differently than any other. The moon cast a pale light on the unattractive buildings built quickly by the communist government in the years following World War II. Speed, not beauty, was of essence as the nation rose from the ashes.

As a young teenager, every Friday at 8:00 pm, I listened to the one radio program that broadcast music and poetry the young people in communist Czechoslovakia wanted to hear. I listened to *Ave Maria* sung by Charles Aznavour, followed by a poem beautifully written by a fellow teenager. It spoke of love and of hope found in a sliver of a blue sky by two young people trapped in darkness—and in that moment it fostered in me a palpable need to write.

My mind was still processing the words of that poem when the radio program was interrupted by a somber announcement:

“The American president, John F. Kennedy, has been assassinated in Dallas, Texas.” It was 8:45 PM.

A single bare light bulb hung from the ceiling of our small family room. It cast a somber glow over the white, freshly ironed tablecloth covering the table where I sat. Above the wooden radio hung a black-and-white photograph of President Kennedy, his wife Jackie, Soviet Premier Khrushchev, and his wife Nina Petrovna. I had cut it out from *ZENA* (“WOMAN”) magazine and pinned it there after reading an article about the two women—though it was mostly about Nina Petrovna. Jackie was described as “a beautiful woman” and it was implied that, as such, she had no substance. The photograph was taken at a



Jackie Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, Austrian President Adolf Schaerf, Nina Khrushchev, John F. Kennedy



summit held in Vienna more than two years earlier. I stared at the picture in shocked disbelief.

That image has remained in my mind. The visual contrast between the two women is marked. Jackie is tall, slim, young, and elegant. She exudes beauty and femininity. In contrast, Nina Petrovna looks matronly, an older woman who has seen hardship, death and injustice. It was easy to ascribe one word to each woman: to Jackie, beautiful; to Nina Petrovna, babushka.

Looking at the photograph on that November night, I wondered how the two women felt right then, at that tragic moment immediately after the assassination. I imagined Jackie grieving and frightened. But what about Nina Petrovna? Did she close her eyes at least briefly and let the world go dark for a moment so that her heart could go to Jackie?

I knew from the *ZENA* article that Nina Petrovna was born in Ukraine, attended a private boarding school for girls and received a first-class education. The school normally did not accept the children of peasants, but Nina was able to study at Maryanski Girl's School—writing in her notebook, “I chanced to be there because of the special circumstances of war.” She studied political economy in Moscow and later taught it at the State University in Kiev, among other places.

After the war, Stalin maintained tight surveillance; everyone was potentially an enemy or a victim. An estimated one million individuals perished without a trace as “enemies of the people.” Nina had learned to observe people carefully and to evaluate a room full of strangers while maintaining a calm friendly demeanor.

For different reasons, Jackie Kennedy also learned early to keep her thoughts and feelings to herself. She was known for her ability to keep her composure, a trait in evidence throughout the heartbreaks that she endured, even before she lost her husband. Khrushchev was impressed with Jackie. In his memoirs, he writes that he found her energetic and pleasant, quick of tongue and a resourceful conversationalist. “Don't mix it up with her,” he warned. “She'll cut you down to size.”

So Nina was no babushka and Jackie was no simple starlet, but the press judged both women chiefly on their appearances. During Khrushchev's visit to the US the two women developed a strong relationship, communicating with ease because Nina Petrovna spoke English.

Americans who lived through the Cuban missile crisis, I am told, still shudder at the memory. The feeling was no different on the other side of the Iron Curtain. I remember 1962 vividly, how we were marched out of our classroom to the streets where, it seemed, our whole town was waving Soviet flags. We were told to celebrate the greatness of Nikita Khrushchev, who had averted a nuclear war with the United States by exercising statesmanship and restraint. He won a guarantee from the US, we were told, not to attack Cuba, and, in exchange, he removed the nuclear warheads from that island because they were no longer needed.

When I came home from school that day, I saw my father, who was a tailor, chuckling over a pair of pants he was ironing. "Kennedy whipped his butt and Khrushchev had to go home with his tail between his legs."

My father, despite coming from a very poor family, built a successful business through hard work and employed six other tailors in his shop. When the communists came to power after the war, they confiscated his business and labeled him a parasite of society. Naturally, he hated the communist regime. He often quoted, "When it rains in Moscow, we have to carry an umbrella." But I did not especially care what the truth was. I was glad that the immediate danger had passed. In the days leading up to the resolution of the crisis, my heart had pounded in fear every time I heard the sound of an airplane.

"It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to decide to bring an end to civilization," President Kennedy said soon after. Khrushchev put it in a way that was even more chilling: "In nuclear war, the survivors will envy the dead."

President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev reached an agreement on the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, with Kennedy signing the treaty on October 7, 1963.

In her last letter from the White House following her husband's death, Jackie Kennedy wrote to premier Khrushchev: "The danger which troubled my husband was that war might start not so much by the big men as by the little ones. While big men know the

need for self-control and restraint; little men are sometimes moved more by fear and pride...” Jackie concluded with the words: “I hear that Mrs. Khrushcheva had tears in her eyes when she left the US Embassy in Moscow after signing the book of mourning. Please thank her for that.”

The relationship between President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev was the start of a dialogue. But the damage caused by an assassination in Dallas along with the removal of Khrushchev by Soviet hardliners in 1964 meant that we in Czechoslovakia had to wait until 1968 for the warmth of the Prague Spring.

Did I sense a wind of a change in the fall of 1967 or was I just lucky? At that time in Czechoslovakia, it was unheard of to travel abroad, let alone to a capitalist country. People in my town thought I was crazy when I applied for an exit visa to travel to England.

But it was thanks to the most important woman in my life, my mother, that I took the plunge westward. She never missed an occasion to give me a book about some far-away country. Ignorance, she insisted, breeds fear.

I knew in my heart that when the opportunity to travel came, I had to take it. Only when the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague’s Wenceslas Square on August 21, 1968 and crushed the Prague Spring did I realize how important it had been for me not to waste it.

In November of 1967, the image and the strength of those two vastly different women I admired, Jackie Kennedy and Nina Petrovna, carried my spirits high even before I boarded the plane that would take me to the big open world. Armed with a small Slovak-English dictionary, a parting gift from my brother Pavel, I was ready for the challenge.

When I landed in London, my lofty teenager’s dreams awoke to the reality that although I had taken lessons in English, I did not understand spoken English. I squeezed my dictionary for comfort and visited the restroom. Right there in front of the door marked “LOO”, my youthful optimism was seriously tested. In England then, to use a bathroom one had to drop a penny in a slot to open the door. But I had no money. I had a job lined up as an au pair but, at that moment, in foreign country and unable to communicate, across a cold war from anyone I knew, I could not “spend a penny.”

My first night at the house where I was to work was a mixture of excitement and apprehension. I curled up in my bed and waited for fatigue to overpower the adrenaline.



Next day, with the help of my dictionary, I started to learn. Fast. No lifelines, only the one I was looking at in the mirror. In time, people's conversations no longer sounded like gibberish. Words became clearer and eventually I was able to converse with ease.

Time and fate led me to a job at a solicitor's office located opposite the Marlborough Court, in Great Marlborough Street. From my perch in the office I watched Paul McCartney entering that very court to marry Linda Eastman. London in the early 1970s was a mixture of burned brassieres, protests against the Vietnam War and psychedelic music. I was eighteen years old and wanted to be part of it. I shed my bra, listened to the Beatles, and for a while I put Jackie and Nina on the back burner.

Still, I looked for guidance in my past. Back when Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space, I was taught that all women in communist countries were emancipated. But by my senior year in high school I also learned the narrowness of the Communist conception of an emancipated woman. Not unlike my daughter and her classmates many years later in America, girls in my class were focused on prom, hairstyles, dresses, and shoes. Make up was not available, but to our delight we discovered that one of the crayons we used in an art class could double as a make-up pencil. One day, I volunteered to be the guinea pig and let another girl, the best artist in the class, put liner on my eyelids during a break between lessons. My literature teacher walked into the room; she had always liked my work and said I was a talented writer. She took one look at me and told me to stand up. "You look stupid. Go and wash your face," she said.



With time and perseverance, I mastered the English Language well enough to venture into the world that surrounded me. Ten girls were selected by the London's *Daily Mail* newspaper in a competition to discover international models. I was lucky to be one

of them. But even after I saw my face looking back at me from magazines, I could not, as much as I wanted to, ignore the voice of my teacher. Had I betrayed all that I was taught?

By the time I exchanged Big Ben for the Statue of Liberty, I returned to my first love, writing—a place outwardly anonymous yet in which I would bare my soul. I wondered: Who was behind the face in the magazines? That thought would bring me once again to Jackie Kennedy and Nina Petrovna. Because of the marked difference in their physical appearances, the photographs seen all over the world failed to reveal the closeness of their inner lives and similarity of their inner strength. The irony of people underestimating Jackie because of her beauty and Nina because of her lack of it made me realize that the way others perceived me did not change who I was behind my photographs in those magazines. There I found my mother who had the audacity to believe that an eighteen-year-old girl could successfully navigate a world she knew only from books. I found a determined young girl who grew up in a hurry yet who remained a dreamer destined to write. I found a poem penned long ago by an unknown teenager that always provided me with hope in the darkness.

Today my hair appears to match Jackie's perfectly, but under the coloring, it is as much salt and pepper as Nina Petrovna's in that aged photograph pinned above the wooden radio. Now I have a large television on which I see the events unfolding in Ukraine. Images of destruction and cruelty bombard us as lifeless ash replaces the once beautiful cities. As I mourn with the rest of the world, I tremble at the memory of Khrushchev's words following the Cuban missile crisis.

Nina Petrovna, who was from Ukraine, materializes in my mind, and I also think of Jackie, who worried about the little men moved by fear and pride—and I feel trapped in darkness. But then I look closer and I see the grit, the grace, the dignity of the women long gone. Presently I see a little boy traveling alone from Ukraine the length of Slovakia to meet up with his brother, who is a student in Bratislava. I focus on this story from my homeland. With nothing more than his brother's cellphone number written on his wrist, I see his bravery, and I see beauty in the actions of kindness he encounters on his journey. As the boy is interviewed, a little piece of blue sky is visible behind him, and I am

transported back to my family's communist era apartment and a poem that once again inspires hope in me.

Anika Pavel was born in Czechoslovakia. She became a refugee when the Soviet Union invaded her homeland. She now lives in New York City. Her essays have been published in *bioStories*, *Tint Journal*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Ariel Chart*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Scarlet Leaf Magazine* and others. The essay "Power of The Violin" has been selected by the *Potato Soup Journal* for their anthology. Her essay "Finley's Gift" has been selected by *Living Spring Publishers* for their annual book of short stories. Her essay "Encounter with the Future" was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Letter To a Phantom

by Jean Ryan

I see your bedroom. First, the slanted ceiling angled over the twin beds, Sam's on one side, yours on the other. Sassy, your beagle, dozing on a blanket on the floor. One small window, a view of the snowy yard below: the burn barrel with a few blackened aerosol cans around it; a listing swing set; Elizabeth trundling about in her blue snowsuit; Rick leaning against the fence, smoking.

"Get out," you'd say to Sam; being the younger, he would leave without protest. (This impressed me, the straightforward way brothers interacted. In my family of all girls, every request was negotiated.) We'd kiss for a few minutes—you loved to kiss—then take off our clothes and fall into your unmade bed, where we would leave the world behind and thrill each another with endless, steamy foreplay. You were the best sex I never had. At last we'd notice the time and pull on our clothes before your mother, if we were lucky, pulled into the driveway. Afterwards, you would escort me home along the half mile of abandoned railroad tracks that separated our houses. You did this unflinching, whatever the weather. On the days it snowed, I would pause at the edge of my yard and watch you fade into the white distance, waving at me just before you disappeared. Although I could not see your face, I knew you were smiling.

Every two weeks the church left a box of provisions on your front porch, donations you begged your mother not to accept—as if she had a choice. She cleaned houses during the day and waited tables at night and still could not feed and clothe four teenage boys and one toddler. What striking red hair she had, what pretty, albeit tired, eyes. Whenever she saw me, she smiled, absently, her mind on other things. I used to marvel that her small frame gave birth to you and your strapping brothers.

You were a beautiful boy: blue eyes, blond hair, broad shoulders. You were fit in the effortless way boys used to be, with muscles that came from school sports and simple chores.

Having reached the age of humility, I am shamed by the recollection of our break-up. You had been in the park the night before, you said, drinking beer with your buddies, and you got drunk and wound up kissing a girl who had even let you “feel her up.” You were sick about it, even teared up when you told me, but I was unmoved by your remorse—what did I know then of mercy? The girl you had kissed had impressive breasts and a sketchy reputation, and all I felt in that moment was righteousness. I was a woman wronged, a brand-new role that made me dizzy with power, and I told you I never wanted to see you again. I must have thought there would be plenty of boys like you and plenty of time to meet them.

Those hours we spent in your bedroom— did they stay with you? Remember your navy-blue blanket with the roping cowboys on it? The cracked “Little Ben” clock ticking away our time? Maybe those details, those afternoons, didn’t linger in your mind. I can accept that possibility, reluctantly.

In any case, you are gone, leaving me with sole ownership of the year we were together. It feels like a responsibility, holding onto this copy of you. We fell in love at fifteen, built ourselves into each other. Your wife is grieving the man she was married to for forty-seven years; I am mourning a phantom.

Given all the years and distance between us, we were lucky to reconnect. I can’t recall who found who, only that we began writing letters, real letters, typed and tucked into envelopes. You were married and working at IBM; I was cooking in restaurants, living in Berkeley, in love with the woman I would one day marry (as soon as the law allowed it). Your letters were earnest, your focus familial. You wrote about your three children, the ways they made you proud, the fear you had when your youngest daughter left for Europe. Your wife, Margie, was in daily pain and needed a hip replacement. You wished

she wanted to spend more time with you; she lived, you said, for the kids. You enjoyed hunting and skiing, didn't much like your job. Your mother had died of lung cancer. You had still not seen your father, nor forgiven him for deserting his family.

When we finally arranged to meet for lunch during one of my trips to Vermont, I was nervous, exhilarated. You were standing at the bar, grinning at me in that boyish way, your eyes squeezed into crescents. There was a settled look about you, a solid heft to your frame. You were still handsome, still Tim, but in a grown-up version that excluded me. I was struck by the rights I had lost, the knowledge turned useless.

We ordered lunch, though I don't recall eating, and shared our middle-aged almanacs. We worked over some common ground—news of our siblings, a few old friends—before offering up the people who had become our loved ones. I had only a faint recollection of your wife, and hearing you speak of her sent a gust of something that felt like jealousy through me, as if my teenage ghost had risen up and shaken her fist. You did not seem surprised that I was with a woman, and I silently credited you with that. I mentioned that I had dated several men in college but probably shouldn't have bothered. "None of them held my interest. You must have ruined me for other guys." We both laughed at this and, studying your smile, I wondered if it wasn't true.

I asked if you were happy, and you said, "Pretty much," and shrugged. "Nothing's perfect, right?" You said you were planning to surprise your wife with a vacation in the Bahamas, hoping that a trip to paradise would help. There was a co-worker, you added, who liked you, a lot. "It was a few months ago. I liked her too, but I couldn't do that to Margie, you know?" I winced inwardly, thinking of my own indiscretion. Here was your goodness, plain as day, and what it said about me. Honestly, I was annoyed with Margie—couldn't she see that you were a god?

We talked on. Every so often, I looked at your hands or lips, marveling that they once traveled over my skin. Did you think about this too? At one point while you were talking about your children, I saw us lying behind a glossy privet hedge not far from my house;

it was our hide-out. When sofas and bedrooms were not possible, nature turned to clemency, a place to disappear, and you and I were as much a part of it as the plants we hid among, all of us getting the same sun and rain. I remember the spent white flowers that drifted down around us, the bits of fall leaves that clung to our coats. Sometimes in winter you would shove open the unlocked window of a lakeshore cabin, and we would brush the mothballs off the beds before slipping between the frigid sheets. How odd it was now to see you now, to regard you without need or urgency.

In a surprisingly short amount of time, we had exhausted every topic. I looked straight into your blue eyes, wanting more—but what? What could you give me? What did I need from you? A lunch could not bear the weight of my yearning; I'd expected far too much from it. There was nothing to do but get up from the table and hug, awkwardly, and promise to write more often. We did and then we didn't.

They say you died in your sleep, a heart attack, which sounds peaceful, lucky, though not for your wife, who tried to wake you. I keep starting to send her a card, but I'm not sure there's any point in a sympathy card from a stranger. I do feel sorry for her, and the kids, and their kids, and everyone else who knew you far better than I did.

But I knew you then, when you lived in a rundown house with a broken swing set and had a dog named Sassy and a weary, overworked mother who was always pleasant to me. There you are in the yellow kitchen, making a bologna sandwich for your little sister, dropping a slice into Sassy's mouth, grinning at me. Ask me anything about that year and I'll pour my heart out.

Jean Ryan, a native Vermonter, lives in coastal Alabama. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies. Nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize, she has also published a novel, *Lost Sister*. Her debut collection of short stories, *Survival Skills*, was published by Ashland Creek Press and short-listed for a Lambda Literary Award. *Lovers and Loners* is her second story collection. *Strange Company*, a compilation of her nature essays, is available in digital form, paperback and audio.

The Museum of Chalkboards Never Erased

by Liza Wieland

Einstein's chalkboard lives on in the Oxford University History of Science Museum. The lecture captured in chalk was on cosmology, and the measurements on the blackboard estimate the density of matter in the universe, its radius, and the time span of its expansion.

Recently (ten years ago—is that recent? Or has the universe expanded enough already to elongate time?), another scientist discovered a statistical error in Einstein's measurements. That the error is now preserved makes the chalkboard seem less like science and more like art.

In museum terms, the blackboard is called a *mutant*, because it no longer serves the philosophical purpose of a blackboard. It can only regain its original purpose by being wiped clean. There was in fact a second chalkboard used by Einstein, but a museum custodian accidentally cleaned it, thus returning its purpose.

Objects can exist in one of two ways. They can function or they can be possessed.

Which would you prefer? To be used or to be owned?

Use is beauty. That is all ye know. That's what the custodian thought. Also, *my job is to clean*.

Is a job an object? Maybe.

Every few years the Oxford University History of Science Museum mounts an exhibit they call *Bye Bye Blackboard*. They invite ten or twelve famous Britons "to chalk" on blackboards exactly the same dimensions as Einstein's. Last year, Brian Eno drew a map of the world and on it charted the history of music, proving nearly every last note we hear or play descended from Arab song. Glenda Jackson invented and wrote out an equation for how women got the vote. A pianist, Joanna McGregor, illustrated a connection between the bass line of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Bach's contemporaries, and modern musicians. Cornelia Parker, an installation artist, wrote something unsolvable and impenetrable while blindfolded, and called it *Navigating a Cliff Edge in Darkness*. The Chancellor of Oxford University bemoaned in chalk the squeaks the chalk makes on the board. A footballer, Bobby Robson, illustrated the anatomy of a corner kick.

Jon Snow, a journalist, chalked on a black globe the words GLOBAL WARMING OUR GRAVEST RESPONSIBILITY. Another visual artist, Richard Wentworth, gave a statement: “The physicality of the blackboards of my childhood sprang to mind immediately – their sense of landscape, as if text were a horizon, their sounds, their beautiful receptive surfaces, and their fog of palimpsests,” and imagined the blackboard as a kind of landscape, chalking the alchemists’ epithet: *as above so below*.

The blackboards of my childhood. My mother installed a blackboard in the kitchen, on the door leading to the basement, which stood at right angles to the door through which we entered the kitchen from the rest of the house. The purpose of this blackboard was to remind: appointments, chores, where some or sometimes all of us needed to be, and when. I don’t remember writing on it, though I’m fairly sure I did.

On the other side of this door was a life-sized poster of Mr. Hudson, the butler from the BBC drama *Upstairs Downstairs*, here forever caught in the act of greeting your ascension from the basement. My mother and I loved the show. I was the one who bought the poster and chose where to hang it.

She wanted to like *Downton Abbey* in the same way, but by that time she was starting to go deaf, and the speed of the conversations and the accents made watching depressing and finally unbearable.

Now I live in a renovated red brick schoolhouse. For atmosphere, or to appease the ghosts, the design team left two artifacts: a chalkboard and a globe. My chalkboard functions in some of the same ways as my mother’s, a repository for tasks and reminders, my daughter’s class schedule for her last semester in college, a future dentist appointment. I look forward to erasing all of it: I want my daughter to graduate, I want to be done with writing letters of recommendation for my students, I will remember to take the feta to my husband’s house. The goal of the chalkboard is emptiness. That’s its use. But I also like owning it. I enjoyed the amusement of others during Zoom meetings, until my boss told me she knew I was going to quit when she saw my approaching appointment with HR. My husband suggested green screen, but I didn’t like the way it erased parts of people’s heads and torsos without their knowledge or consent.

I once saw an exhibit of paintings by Rita Ackerman called *The Coronation and Massacre of Love*. Gigantic canvases primed with chalkboard paint had been washed with white chalk and pigment and smeared to give the impression of erasures and deletions of vague figurative drawings and landscapes. These emerge out of the background as ghosts, caught between construction and destruction, emotional and actual. Ackerman's process struck me as a step away from madness: drawing the figure or the scene, erasing it, as if the artist had changed her mind or become disillusioned. Then she draws it back, more or less the same, and erases again. Again, the drawing. Again, erasing. After some time, it becomes clear that the original scene can't be completely erased or obscured; in fact, it seems to emerge more vividly, with more force.

After our mother died, I asked my brother about the chalkboard in the kitchen. Did he remember anything our mother had written there? Did he ever write on it? Were we forbidden to do so?

I don't know what you're talking about, he said at first, cautiously, after a long pause. There wasn't any chalkboard. There was a poster, I think, in a blue frame. Something soothing. Monet's water lilies maybe.

I felt as if I were drowning, a whirlpool, a vortex, all the breath spun out of me. What about the other side of the door? What about Mr. Hudson? Remember? When you came up from the basement?

I don't know, he said. Maybe that was after I went away to school.

Truthfully, I can't remember a single date or list written on the chalkboard in the kitchen of my childhood home. In my mind's eye, I can see every other wall and corner of that room, the white Parsons table, the shelf of cookbooks, the radio, the eight-inch television, even the last thing I watched on it, Muhammad Ali lighting the Olympic torch in Atlanta, trying to coax coherent speech from the blank, beaten, erased places in his brain.

Liza Wieland has published five novels, *Paris, 7 A.M.*, *Land of Enchantment*, *A Watch of Nightingales*, *Bombshell*, and *The Names of the Lost*, and three collections of short fiction, *Quickening*, *You Can Sleep While I Drive*, and *Discovering America*, as well as a book of poems, *Near Alcatraz*. She has won two Pushcart Prizes and a fellowship from

the National Endowment for the Arts. She has recently retired from teaching and lives in eastern North Carolina.

Sitting in It

by Gary Fincke

“You left him sitting in it,” my wife said, angry because she’d returned from running errands to discover I hadn’t changed our six-month-old son’s reeking diaper. I didn’t argue. The baby was crying. The evidence of my selfishness entered through smell, touch, sight, and sound. No one could have ignored it but the self-absorbed.

I didn’t lie and say he must have just filled that diaper as she walked up the stairs, but I didn’t apologize either as I handed our first-born to my wife and told her I had to leave. I rushed out as if I’d somehow not had a few minutes to spare before keeping a set of afternoon appointments with commuter students at the branch campus of a large state university where I was an English instructor.

My wife would never say things this way, but I knew there was an adult corollary to her expression, one that fit me perfectly—I had shit the bed. Just like my infant son, I was sitting in it, an embarrassment to reflect upon, for sure.

Our son grew out of diapers. He became old enough to sit in his own secure car seat, belted and harnessed in a way that would prevent harm or at least mitigate it. My wife was pregnant again, but still working. I was the one with the flexible schedule, the one who dropped him off at the babysitter and picked him up. I’d grown into some semblance of reliability. I never missed arriving on time. But finding an acceptable baby sitter was elusive.

One took our son to the grocery store without strapping him into a car seat. Her apology was unaccepted. One watched two other toddlers at the same time, and our son came home twice with bite marks on his arm. She didn’t even offer an apology. The next one lived in a large house with a yard that bordered a creek that emptied into the Ohio River a couple of miles away. That proximity was worrisome, but our son was the only child the woman, recently separated from her husband, watched for extra income. Her house was large and clean, everything in its place in a way that suggested responsibility.

The arrangement worked well. For nearly two weeks, no matter my erratic schedule, she was waiting with our smiling son in her living room. Our son even seemed

happy when I dropped him off, no longer crying like he had at the apartment where the bite marks occurred.

Friday afternoon of the second week I parked, as always, where the driveway ended at a patch of worn grass near the back door. I knocked. Then I knocked again. While I waited, I noticed how full and deep the late-spring creek was running less than fifty feet from where I was standing.

I turned the knob and the door, unlocked, swung open. My son stood there smiling. I picked him up and hugged him. I called “Hello?” twice before I began to search the house, finding the babysitter asleep in an upstairs bedroom, sprawled in a way that made me think she’d been drinking.

The woman didn’t seem to recognize what the problem was. “He’s two years old. He can’t open the door.”

“He’s three in July. He’s opened doors before.”

The woman followed us downstairs to the kitchen where I put my son down at last. “Maybe at your house, but not here,” she said. “He knows not to touch so there’s no problem.” I started to list disasters encouraged by a sleeping babysitter, all of them preceded by opening a door—falling down the cellar stairs, pulling cleaning products from under the sink, but mostly, drowning in the creek.

“That’s extreme,” she said. “He would never go near that creek.”

While I counted out what I owed her, my son turned the knob and opened the door for us to leave. For sure, I thought, she’d just seen that she’d shit the bed.

Before I’d finished explaining how I wasn’t bringing him back on Monday, my son ran straight to the car. “See?” the woman crowed, as if that proved something.

On Monday, I spent more than a few minutes at the newest babysitter explaining my concerns and settling my son down in yet another living room. I taught my classes, picked him up, and saw him cheery in a way that made me turn up the music on the radio as we sped along the four-lane highway with the thin, raised, median strip that took us to the bridge back across the Ohio River to the campus where I’d forgotten a set of student essays I needed to grade. I passed two cars, still accelerating as I closed up the distance on the trailer truck ahead of me, the radio playing the Rolling Stones’ “Brown Sugar.”

As I began to pass the truck, a moment too long in its blind spot or else the driver careless, that semi pulled left, and I punched the brakes hard, locking my fastback in a four-wheel drift up and over the median into the oncoming lanes of the late morning freeway. I didn't shout or swear or do anything but grip the wheel and slap the brakes again until I stuck, the fastback rocking, but staying upright and facing the oncoming traffic on the opposite shoulder.

I stabbed the radio off and looked back at my son. He seemed dazed, but not terrified. I gave thanks for how young he was, took three deep breaths to settle myself, and thought about the odds for the perfect spacing of the heavy, high-speed traffic that allowed us to skid through two lanes untouched. There seemed to be nothing to do but wait for a clear stretch before I angled back across the oncoming lanes and humped over the median to finish the trip, getting off at my exit where, I discovered, the truck I'd begun to pass was waiting at a stoplight with only two cars between us.

The truck door opened. The driver, a burly man who looked to be about fifty, maybe twice my age, walked back and leaned close to my open window. For a long moment, he stared over my shoulder at my son. Still looking into the back seat, he murmured, "I'll bet you're sitting in it."

"No," I lied, so calmly and so softly, that it sounded something like gratitude for his appreciation of our peril.

The light turned green, starting a horn chorus from in front and behind us, but the trucker held his ground. "I didn't see you there," he said. For another few moments, the driver's eyes stayed fixed on my son in his car seat. At last, his eyes met mine as he held out his hand to me. I reached through the window to receive it. For a few seconds, the horns still sounding, he held my hand in his grip, the two of us silent, breathing together.

Gary Fincke's latest collection of personal essays, *The Darkness Call*, won the Robert C. Jones Prize. A new collection, *The Mayan Syndrome*, will be published early in 2023 by Madhat Press. The lead essay, "After the Three-Moon Era," was selected to appear in Best American Essays 2020.

The Second Mistake

by Liz Olds

The University of Idaho theater scene shop smelled of cut lumber and cold cream, a smell that made me feel at home, reminding me of my small scene shop in high school. The difference was scale—this hangar-sized room contained a bounty of plywood, two by fours, a radial arm saw, a band saw, a table saw big enough to accommodate plywood, and tools hanging on pegboard with outlines of those tools drawn around them in black magic marker so they would always be returned to the same spot on the wall. In my high school shop we made do with one hand-held power saw, a drill, and a bunch of hand tools—we fought over the ratchet we had bought.

The first time I entered the Idaho theater shop, a woman sat cross-legged on the floor painting a sign on canvas. “University of Idaho Theater presents *Guys and Dolls*” in bright red letters. The group of us, six first-year theater students, stood silently, nervous, shy, expectant.

“I’m O.B.” she said in a Texas accent. “Y’all must be the freshmen.”

We mumbled uneasy affirmatives.

O.B. wore a plaid flannel shirt, brown hiking boots, and a wrench attached to her jeans with a white cord. She seemed tough but also feminine with long brown hair, makeup, and eyes you could swim in. She reminded me of those camp counselors I had crushes on, and I was not so far away from those crushes to avoid getting one on her, instant, intense, and cemented by her Texas accent and that wrench hanging from her belt loop.

I attached myself to O.B. pretty much as tight as the wrench in the ensuing weeks. I followed her around the shop badgering her for things to do. She would find me something menial, sorting bolts by size or mopping the stage floor. I felt overwhelmed—there was so much to learn. Even mopping the stage floor had rules—not too much water and swirl the mop in figure-eight patterns. Mopping in straight lines produced streaks that would show in the stage lights. O.B. apparently knew everything and, other teachers notwithstanding, hers was the brain I wanted to pick.

I must have driven her crazy with my, “O.B., what do you want me to DO?!” My eagerness resulted in some hazing. O.B. was swell, but not above having some fun at a freshman’s expense.

She told me to get a piece of four by four and cut a block of wood from it equal on all sides. After I measured and cut the block, I brought it to her for her approval.

“Here it is,” I said.

“Okay, now go sand the edges so they’re all rounded smooth.”

I set to my task.

“Here it is.” I held my creation aloft.

“Okay, now get some stain and stain it. Stain it red. Be sure to clean your brush. That stuff is hell to get off after it dries.”

I did as I was told, working the brush clean until hairs came out of the handle.

“Here it is.” I now held in my hand a red-stained cube of wood. There may have been more stain on my hands than on the block.

She smiled. I waited for my due praise. I said, “What do you want me to do with it now?”

“Oh, I don’t know, use it for a paperweight I guess.”

I knew then I had been hazed, but on the other hand, I did learn how to use the radial saw, the power sander, and the wood stain. And something in her eye gave me the impression that she had a paperweight in her possession as well.

Another afternoon we were sorting through some props and I came upon a set of handcuffs. As a joke I put them on my wrists. O.B. reached over and closed them tight.

“Yeah, that’s pretty funny. Give me the keys so I can get out of these things.”

“I don’t know where they are.”

“Hah! Good one O.B. C’mon now, give me the keys.”

“I’m serious. I don’t think we have the keys.”

The guys at the Latah County police station thought this was pretty funny. Especially when they looked closer at the handcuffs and realized they were old and they didn’t have the keys either. The locksmith was similarly amused.

O.B. did apologize for that one, and I think she was a bit chagrined, but she chuckled when the locksmith finally got them off.

As my first fall in Idaho turned to winter, I received my own wrench on a cord to attach to my belt loop. This arrangement of wrench and cord served a purpose—it kept the wrench from falling and crashing onto someone’s head if you dropped it while working in the catwalks high above the house seats. To me it was a symbol. The hazing, the blocks of wood and the sorting of bolts, was over. I was one of the crew. I ran the follow-spot for “Guys and Dolls”. I worked hard to get it right, and after the run was over O.B. said in her headiest praise, “Ya dun good Liz”.

The ultimate symbol of my arrival came just before Thanksgiving. O.B. was designing the lights for the dance department’s fall concert and she asked me to be her assistant. This was the real deal, not making a paperweight.

It took us two days to hang and aim the lights. There wasn’t time or space for kidding around. She trusted me, even letting me make some of the decisions about her design. I was feeling a bit cocky as O.B.’s assistant.

Finally came the night of the technical rehearsal when we would bring O.B.’s complicated and beautiful lighting design into fruition. I had been in the light booth before, but had never touched the board—now I ran my fingers across the buttons and dimmers with my tongue sticking just out of the corner of my mouth, like a marble player lining up to shoot. As O.B. chose the lights and levels for each dance I watched, entranced by the colors as they reflected off the dancer’s lithe bodies. The rehearsal flew by, all a blur to me. I had never witnessed anything as intricate and lovely in my young theater experience.

At the end of the rehearsal O.B. said, “Wow, that went by a lot faster than I expected, you being new and all. Ya dun good Liz.”

Opening night, a half hour before curtain, O.B. turned to me. “Let’s get started setting these levels for the first dance. Give me your cue sheets.”

“Cue sheets?”

“You know your notes for the levels.”

“Uh, notes...I didn’t take any notes...”

“What...you what...”

“I don’t have any notes.”

O.B.’s eyes grew wide as my feelings sank.

“You didn’t write down ANYTHING?! Oh shit.”

“Well, uh, I didn’t know, I mean, was I was supposed to write...”

“STOP,” she said, not yelling exactly but firm as her Texas accent could make her. “Don’t make excuses. When you make an excuse, you’re making your second mistake. We don’t have time to talk about this right now; we just have to fix it.”

I noticed she said “we” and we did fix it. Mostly she fixed it, her fingers nimbly gliding over the light board as she recreated her design on the fly. I stood by terrified while she worked. I madly scribbled down the levels and dimmers I had neglected to scribble the night before.

I expected the worst dressing down I had ever gotten. And I expected I’d be sorting bolts until I graduated.

Instead, we didn’t talk about it at all. She just looked at me at the end of the night and said, “Don’t forget.”

And, funny thing it seemed to me at the time, when Hume Cronin and Jessica Tandy came to do a show at the Performing Arts Center two weeks later, O.B. asked me to be the stage manager.

As the semester wore on, O.B. smiled less and less, and she got snappish, although she didn’t snap at me. She didn’t tease me anymore, though, and that made me sad. I knew she hadn’t been enjoying her work much, but it never occurred to me that she would leave.

She told me she was leaving a few days before the end of finals. It was a sudden blow to me—one day we were closing up the shop for the winter break and the next day we were saying goodbye over a cinnamon roll in a green vinyl booth at the Varsity Café. I was confused and hurt and angry, and sad, crushed, and I didn’t know what to say to her. So I said nothing. People didn’t hug much in the 70s. We just said goodbye, and I walked away towards the Greyhound bus station at the edge of town to go home to Maryland for Christmas.

O.B.’s lesson of the second mistake has stayed with me over the years to good effect. I’ve noticed people appreciate a straight-forward admission when I screw up, which I still do with frightening regularity. I’ve also learned that apologizing only goes so far.

Sorry is mostly a waste of time—the light levels and cues must be recreated and the show must go on in any event.

As for O.B., ten years later I was finally graduating in theater from the University of Minnesota and I tracked her down and wrote her a letter sharing this story. She sent me a good, solid, O.B.-style letter back. She remembered me and was glad to hear from me. She said I ought to become a writer—she had enjoyed the writing as well as the content of my letter. More encouragement from a voice of the past, which has also born fruit. We lost touch again—the last I heard she was a pilot living in Hawai'i.

Friends often ask me why I didn't get angry at O.B. for not telling me to write the cues down, for assuming I knew what to do when I was just a freshman. Perhaps they are right, that there were flaws in her teaching methods. She was only twenty-four and new at the teaching game. I'm sure there were flaws. But the lesson I did learn is so much more important—it has proved useful in far more situations than merely designing lights for a theater production.

“Don't forget,” said O.B.

I haven't.

Liz Olds is a writer and banjo-player living in Minneapolis. She wrote the monthly column “Banjo Noodles” in *Inside Bluegrass* from 1998 to 2000, and was included in the *bioStories* anthology *Encounters* in 2015. She has taken many classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, culminating in her participation in the Loft's Foreword Mentorship Program from 2009-2011. She is currently working on her memoir. This is her second appearance in *bioStories*.

What Time Was It?

by Sydney Lea

That long-legged woman was not you, though she was almost as striking, almost as tall. We stood together for mere moments on the sidewalk, having come out of a Rothko exhibit. The paintings were hung on one floor only. How had I missed her indoors?

She seemed rushed. I saw her hail a taxi and flee, as I inately put it to myself. In that mere instant, I noticed her beauty, but although they never met mine, it was more specifically her eyes that intrigued me. Unlike yours, they seemed full of sadness.

She shook out her hair just before getting into the cab. The gesture was brisk, but it made me sigh, because it too revealed certain fascinating, if indefinable traits, ones I now know were of my own invention.

Tell me my sorrow at her disappearance was plain silly, and I can't argue, yet to a desperately romantic and lonesome young man it felt profound.

Music, cuisine, dance styles, fashions and a million further things have changed since she escaped, as I absurdly put it that May afternoon. But just after she rode off, I turned—and there you were. Of course, you weren't, not for years, but my interior time is forevermore elastic.

You were there, and, incredibly, still are. Thank God the other woman got free so quickly, I say to myself, no matter nothing indicated she gave me a passing thought as someone to be dodged—or even noticed.

If there's a god, then he or she or it uses coincidence to get things accomplished while remaining incognito. That deity forced my fancied paragon's rapid retreat, and prompted a number of other things. Otherwise, you and I would never have met.

I'd been offered that job in the northwest, had even been sent the airplane ticket to come look around the college campus. A day before going, though, I got an offer in upper New England and accepted it. What might life down in New York be like for you? Or Charleston? Or San Francisco? That's the sort of thought you may have been entertaining in those days. You had so many capacities, as you'd go on to prove, and I'm sure the opportunities would have been legion.

We two are together, four decades later. How right in hindsight, that taxi cab's speeding away.

At one point, I saw the young woman examine her wrist, which was naked. How right in hindsight, her not asking me, say, what time it was.

A former Pulitzer finalist and winner of the Poets' Prize, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. He is the author of twenty-three books, the latest "*Seen from All Sides: Lyric and Everyday Life*," essays; fourteen of these volumes are poetry collections, the most recent of which is *Here* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2019). In 2021, he was presented with his home state of Vermont's most prestigious artist's distinction: the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts.

The Last to Go

by Julia Van Buskirk

Outside in the garden, a scrawny robin tugged at an uncooperative worm until it got just the right tension and then, with a frenzied slurp, snapped it from its' hole. Grandmother did not see it. The distant look in her eyes told me she had not seen what went on around her for a long time.

"It's sunny out today, Grandma. What do you say we take the winter chill out of our bones?" I pushed her wheelchair from the solarium towards the lobby. "Let's go for a drive; maybe we can go by the cemetery."

But we only got as far as the vestibule door where she grabbed the brake on her wheelchair and abruptly locked it in place.

"Grandma," I implored, "we should really change the flowers on Dad's grave. The cemetery people don't like it if you leave the plastic winter wreaths past Memorial Day."

And then, from a place so deep inside her, so guttural she barked. "No!"

I reached down to unlock the brake. She was his mother, for God's sake. I was not going to allow her to pretend he never existed. His memory was the fragile link that bound us; without it, she would be alone. I pulled up on the brake as forcefully as I could.

A hard slap met my hand.

I took a deep breath, leaned back against the wall, and closed my eyes. It wasn't supposed to be like this. My grandmother would never have allowed her hair to turn to the charcoal gray tufts that now framed her sagging jowls. She would not slouch in a wheelchair in a faded floral house dress. She would not lie in bed and stare blankly at the television all day. My grandmother would not forsake the memory of her own son.

The grandmother I had known lived on a brick-paved street in a rambling, mustard yellow clapboard house in which China cabinets and aromatic cedar chests virtually burst open with dozens of treasured possessions collected from a lifetime of adventures.

My grandmother was a fat, laughing alto with sky blue eyes and chestnut hair, whom my father described with the greatest respect as "a great old broad," usually just after he had made her laugh, which was often. My grandmother donned frilly floral

polyester dresses on top of piles of lavender-scented lingerie and stockings with garters and black patent leather pumps too small for her swollen feet. She smelled of drug-store face powder beneath a slash of crimson rouge for which my father teased her. Her nails glistened blood red under the weight of diamond rings on fingers that were short and stubby like my father's. Her lips puckered for grandmotherly pecks on the cheek of each of her eight grandchildren. A sensible if exuberant talker, she was funny, even witty. My grandmother loved crossword puzzles which she did in ink, card games, a good slightly off-color story, and one highball with two unpitted green olives right before dinner. Just like my father.

Except my father is dead. And the vacuum his absence created, along with that of the two other sons and three husbands she had buried, gnawed at her sense of purpose until the grandmother I had known became less and less recognizable, and then ultimately, disappeared.

Then, piece by piece, her treasured possessions were taken away by daughters-in-law and grandchildren until there were but a few—her youngest son's honorary discharge papers from the Navy signed by the President of the United States, a high school football trophy her star athlete middle son had earned, and assorted framed photographs of three great-grandchildren she had never met. A seamstress cousin took the fur coats for safe-keeping. And the rings were put in a safe deposit box at the bank; they would bring enough to bury her.

Once she was settled into the county nursing home outside of town, the possessions that remained from her lifetime were only enough to fill a shoe box. There was nothing of my father's. Like the puddles of urine, I had sopped up from beneath her wheelchair during visits past, she refused to acknowledge him as well.

I looked down at Grandmother. A cloth harness was wrapped around her chest and tied to the back of her wheelchair to keep her from falling forward onto the tile floor. Her head drooped forward like that of a ragdoll's. A trickle of saliva trailed down her whiskered chin and onto her baby blue nightgown. Her hand was frozen on the brake. She was snoring.

I did not try to wake her. I did not call her back to me. I did not try to reason with her or insist she go to the cemetery. A shameful ache of betrayal clutched at my heart, but when I released the brake on the wheelchair, I turned her around and pushed her back to her room.

For the next eight years, I still traveled the 450-mile round trip to see her every two months. I still refilled her candy jar with the peppermint candy she so loved even though I knew the nurses ate them. I still took Valentines on Valentine's Day and pumpkins at Halloween and her favorite angel food cake for her birthdays. I still brought her updates on her life-long favorite team, the St. Louis Cardinals. I still carried a pack of playing cards in my purse—just in case. But even though I sat with her through those long, uneventful afternoons, trying to start a conversation, desperately hoping to spark an interest, helplessly watching life slowly seep out of her—her eyes never met mine and I never spoke my father's name.

When the nurse warned me over the phone, "There's been a change," I challenged her. "I was just there in April. Is there really that much of a difference?"

She replied solemnly, "Yes."

I couldn't imagine it. Grandmother's deterioration had been gradual over the years; the loss of hair, the loss of weight, and finally the loss of light in her eyes. She had indeed changed. But the nurse's explanation, "She has not taken solids for over a week," was unsettling.

"She gets her fluids," she informed me. "She has a cannula twenty-four hours a day. We keep her clean, of course, and comfortable, and then, a bit defensively, without me even asking, "You must understand, we do not let them suffer."

'You must understand.' I wished I did understand. I wished I understood why the look in my grandmother's eyes was so far away. I wished I understood why I kept going to see her even though, visit after visit, she did not acknowledge my presence. I wished I understood why the bleak landscape that framed the ribbon of highway I traveled to see her was appropriate company for my loneliness. Why, on that desolate road, the sight of bare tree limbs etched against bird-less skies washed away all thoughts but those that prepared me to enter her world. Why the change of seasons did little to alter the landscape within my heart.

Would this be my last visit? I trudged the narrow hallways that connected the dark, stench-filled cubicles of rotting flesh; past rows of hopeful eyes trapped in fragile, aged bodies; past heads too heavy to lift even if those they waited for ever did arrive. I cursed the absent sons and daughters for whom those lonely souls waited in vain.

My stomach cramped as I approached her room. From the doorway, the small heap on her bed appeared to be nothing more than a tangled pile of sheets and blankets waiting to be folded. It was Grandmother, though, lying in the fetal position that, I was informed, had come to be her only pose. Her head delicately rested upon the crisp white pillowcase. She couldn't have weighed more than sixty pounds.

Her only remaining personal memento and the only testament to the fact that a life was once lived before these walls imprisoned her was a framed needlepoint which hung over her bed and simply read "G R A N D M A" in big colorful pastel block letters on a lime-green background. Each of her eight grandchildren's names was interwoven into a different letter of the moniker. It sagged beneath a crude hand-made sign that demanded my attention: "Turn me at 2:00 o'clock."

A nurse's aide I didn't recognize, whom Grandmother would have called a "big girl," followed me into the room. She drew back the heavy black-out drapes and cranked open the louvered window next to Grandmother's bed. She went right to work.

"I'm the Beth in the 'N.'" I introduced myself to her and pointed to the needlepoint. She was busy tucking in the sheets that encased Grandmother. "My sister, Ruth..." I paused until she looked up, "the one in the 'A', needlepointed that."

"Well, that's nice." she said, not paying much attention. She was immersed in the work of finding Grandmother's blood pressure. "Honey, if you don't mind, I have to close the door to hear it. Miz' Thornton is banging on her chair again and it's just too soft to hear it otherwise."

I watched Grandmother lie as still as a possum playing dead, oblivious to the breeze that played across her forehead and eased the sweat on her brow. I tried to reconcile the fact that this was the same woman who, in her own plush, rose-colored living room, sheltered from the summer heat by frigid air conditioning and behind fluttering curtains, regularly entertained the ladies of the bridge club with slides from all of the forty-eight states she had visited. That this was the same woman who served delicious hand-

made finger sandwiches and delicate desserts on her rose bouquet China tea plates and piping hot Earl Grey in her matching tea cups to the Daughters of the American Revolution as they swapped stories about their children and children's children. None outdid my grandmother; she made sure of that.

But she had lived in this nursing home for eleven years, during which time the ladies of the bridge club and the D.A.R. had either died, moved into similar homes in other counties, or stopped coming to visit when they were met with indifference, when there was nothing left to share.

Her family stopped coming when she stopped apologizing for not having any freshly-baked cookies to offer, when she stopped planning what she would do when she got "out of here," when she stopped talking about going back home. By that time, though, whether she knew it or not, the old house she once called home was not there for her to go back to.

I stopped sending cards and letters when I learned they weren't being opened. At the end of each visit, I stopped making promises to return. I tried to stop caring when I thought she had.

"Callie, Beth's here." I heard the aide say as she brushed back tufts of Grandmother's gray hair with a child's hair comb and tried to tame them into manageable clumps. Grandmother would have hated being called "Callie." Her Christian name was Calandra. But she did not protest. Save for the torturous breaths that rocked her wizened torso, she lay motionless as the aide ministered to her.

"You know it's Beth, don't 'ya, Callie?" The nurse's aide spoke loudly yet she sounded reassuring, like a mother cooing to her baby. Her statement sounded absurd. Even if Grandmother knew who I was, she had acted as if I wasn't there for eight years.

"Well, let's see if we can get a reading on this arm." The aide almost shouted. And with that, the sheets and blankets that kept the extent of Grandmother's deterioration a secret from me for years were pulled asunder. I had seen her shoulders, been warned of the sharpness of their angles as they jutted out from beneath the rim of the chenille bedspread that always covered her, but I was not prepared for the decay that now lay before me.

Great accordion folds of bruised purple flesh hung in wattles from underneath Grandmother's arm. I remembered how frightened I was by a small strange red spot on that same arm I first saw as a child. I didn't know at the time it was a tiny nevus and I feared I would acquire one just like it in old age. That birthmark was lost now amidst yellow and orange bruises. I searched for it until my eyes came to rest upon her hands. They were my father's hands. The curve of the nail, the half-moon of the cuticle was identical to his. Had I not grown with the changes in her face, and had come to see her for the first time after many years, I would have recognized her when I saw her hands; his hands.

"Hmmm." The aide mumbled to no one in particular as she saw to her chore. "I guess I'll see if I can get a reading on her leg." And with that statement, she yanked the bedclothes further back, pulled away a large soiled diaper, gently spread Grandmother's legs as if they were those of a marionette's, and inserted a thermometer. I had to see the act completed before it registered in my brain what I was looking at. Surely, she couldn't have taken her temperature through normal means; Grandmother's jaw lay askew on the pillow, the bottom a good two inches out of line with the top. Yet, save for a flimsy pink and white checked hospital gown, Grandmother lay naked before me in a way I had not ever seen her, had not ever thought of, and did not ever want to.

The aide adjusted the blood pressure cuff around Grandmother's thigh. I tried to look away. I tried to remember Grandmother's once taut flesh, firm in its own construction, if for nothing else but that the weight of it stretched amply across her bones. I looked at her legs now and saw limbs three times older than my own, limbs that had once spread to give forth life—my father's life, the life she refused to acknowledge.

The words, "Cleave unto me." whispered through my brain.

I tried to imagine how this same body could have, at one time, given pleasure to another, birthed three sons and nursed them, hugged spouses and children and grandchildren, only to come to the point of acting like she had never done so. But as I stood over her, monitoring her every movement, I saw that this was not the same body. Like the child in her whose essence had to die before she could be transformed into the adult she was to become, perhaps, now was the time for her to cast off the confines of her physical body in order for her spirit to be rendered free.

The aide stopped fiddling with the blood pressure cuff and said aloud to no one in particular, “I just can’t get a reading.”

That, too, seemed hard to imagine. I had always envisioned the blood that coursed through Grandmother’s veins to be as strong and determined as she was. Now, her labored breath was painful to listen to. She gulped air in great gasps as if she was drowning. Each gasp seemed so final yet each gulp of air worked its way in and out of the aged lungs that had kept her alive for ninety-four years.

“Have you told her you’re here?” the beleaguered looking aide addressed me. “You know”, she continued, matter-of-factly, as she examined the thermometer, “Their hearing’s the last thing to go.”

I realized I hadn’t spoken to Grandmother since I arrived.

“Their hearing’s the last thing to go?” That aide couldn’t be right, could she? And, if she was, and Grandmother could hear me, why didn’t she respond?

The aide sighed, shook down the thermometer, slipped it back in its case, and wrapped up the blood pressure kit.

“Well,” she said as she lumbered out the door, “I’ll see if the nurse can get this reading.” Then, as an afterthought, she turned her head and as if she was warning me, said, “We’ll be back.”

“Cleave until me.” The words echoed in my head.

As I monitored each of Grandmother’s exhaled breaths, I grew more and more aware of how arduous the process of dying can be. The next time I would see her she would no longer be laboring to breathe. Hints of the death rattle would no longer emanate from her throat. Death would have come and taken her in my absence. Like it took my father. And it would not have mattered that I tried to be with her when it happened no matter how compelled I was to be there, by her side.

The nursing staff buzzed in the distance. Grandmother’s roommate, Mrs. Thornton, blocked the doorway with her wheelchair. She stared wide-eyed at the silenced metal cup she clasped in her gnarled hand.

I sat motionless for several minutes, studying Grandmother. My eyes flashed back and forth—from her to my watch—and back to her again. 1:00 P.M. 1:08 P.M., 1:22 P.M.

The tick of each minute was excruciatingly long. But I couldn't leave. Not yet. She could die any minute.

I riffled through the metal night table beside her bed. Amidst plastic cups and aspirators, Polydent, greeting cards and dentures, there was a book. It resembled the Bibles placed by the Gideon Society in hotel rooms except it contained only Psalms. I ran my hand over its cover and opened it, gently.

I scanned the index, hoping to find something familiar. But this book was indeed like much of the religious material I had seen in the past—brutal in its unforgiving nature. I searched for the only Psalm I knew and then, read each word carefully. The words offered the same comfort and reassurance I felt when, at Grandmother's insistence, the minister recited them at my father's gravesite.

I leaned to within inches of her face. My voice was low and hoarse at first; it came out a raspy whisper. I began, *"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want;"* and I envisioned the Jesus I learned of as a young schoolgirl, the kind man in a shepherd's garment, staff in hand, gathering in all of the lost souls.

*"He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul."*

"Cleave unto me." rang out all around me.

*"He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no
evil;
For thou art with me;"*

Grandmother wheezed and sputtered.

*"Thy rod and thy staff,
They comfort me."*

I heard it echo again. "Their hearing's the last thing to go."

*"Thou preparest a table before me
In the presence of my enemies;"*

Grandmother's eyes flew open,

*“Thou anointest my head with oil,
My cup overflows,”*

And locked onto mine.

*“Surely goodness and mercy shall
Follow me
All the days of my life;”*

I knew then she was looking at a stranger.

*“And I shall dwell in the house of the
LORD”*

Grandmother had not been pretending. She had made me a part of her past, a past she had buried with my father.

“Forever.”

But I also knew; Grandmother *could* hear me. I bowed my head and silently began to pray. I prayed that she would know that it was I, Beth, Cal’s daughter, in the room with her. I spoke softly, partly in shame, for I was asking help from a source I had forsaken; beseeching that greater force to empower Grandmother to release her tenuous grasp on all that bound her to this earth. For even though this most private and primal of journeys had to be made by her alone, I believed that this was not an end, after all, but simply a horizon.

Like the hand Jesus promised would guide her through the “*valley of the shadow of death*,” I knew then that some part of me must have believed all along that the closer she was to death, the closer she was to him; that she would soon see him; that he would come to take her hand, as his father and brothers had come for him, and deliver her to the same Jesus in a shepherd’s garment I had envisioned as a young girl.

And though I could not form the words, as I laid my hand on hers, my heart cried out, “Let go.” I wanted my grandmother to die. I had wanted her to die since the day she refused to go to the cemetery, but I hadn’t known why. Grandmother’s breaths fell across my arm. They came now in great gasps. I could tell, each one weakened her more.

A shaft of early afternoon sunlight poured in through the opening in the drapes and burst from behind my shoulder onto Grandmother’s face. Once again, her clouded blue

eyes swam back and forth in yellow pools behind half-closed eyelids. I stroked her tattered gray hair.

The image of a deer I once saw lying mortally wounded on the side of the road flashed through my mind. That sad and lonely frightened doe, stunned by the headlights of passing cars, had filled me with a sorrow so deep, I ached. I ached for her agony, for the destruction of such a majestic creature, for the offspring that would wait in vain for her return. I ached because I was helpless to release her from her torment.

As I cupped Grandmother's hands in mine, I felt just as powerless to bring her peace. But for the first time, I saw it was not up to me to end the struggle within her because she did not seek salvation from her surroundings. She wanted to die there.

I, too, wanted her to die when I saw that she had forsaken the memory of my father. Yet, the serenity of acceptance that belongs only to the dying allowed her to surrender that which I could not. As long as she was alive, she had to abandon the memory of my father, for, like the doe, her anguish could only be resolved in another world.

"Cleave unto me." I wrapped the words around me. They soothed the sting in my heart. But whose voice guided me? Whose words did I hear? Was Grandmother's fragile spirit still strong enough to offer me hope?

In that last quiet moment, there was to be between us, I let myself believe that it was her voice inviting me. I let myself believe that her silence had been tacit approval of the communion I sought. I let myself believe that she knew I had cleaved unto her in the hope of accompanying her to the edge of that beckoning abyss, and with only a heartbeat to separate us, touch my father one more time.

Her cold limp hands were still, entangled in mine. They were my father's hands, aged in a way his were never meant to be. I stood up and leaned over her. My cheek rubbed against the whiskers on her chin.

I whispered in her ear the words I had not known I had come to say, the words that had lain beneath the shameful ache of betrayal that clung to my heart for eight years, the words I believed she could hear.

"Tell Dad I was here." She had to abandon him. But I did not.

I freed her hands. She did not stir. The ugliness of the necessary ritual of dying would keep its pace. Its own rhythm had to be honored; my timing was inconsequential.

Death would come as peace, or as access to heaven or hell, but it would come on its own terms and in its own time. I walked out of the room. I did not look back.

She had not wanted to see what she had already said goodbye to and I did not want to say goodbye to what I had seen for the last time.

Julia Van Buskirk began her writing career in the fifth grade when she penned her first play, which she also directed, produced, and starred in for hundreds of attendees from local school and community groups. Since then, she has focused on essays and short fiction. She has been published in *The Chicago Sun-Times* as well as in numerous publications in the business world. “The Last to Go” is her first national publication.

Contributors

Suzanne Ketchum Adams grew up in Maine and Pennsylvania, and has worked as a librarian and archivist. Her short story "Misplaced" won first prize in the online fiction contest *On the Premises* in 2014. Suzanne has performed at several storytelling venues in the Boston area, including *The Moth* GrandSLAM and WGBH's *Stories from the Stage*.

Neil Cawley is a lawyer and writer who followed the tide from Queens to Cape Cod. His "Requiem for a Strip Club" won second prize in the 2021 Seán O'Faoláin short story competition and will be published in the Irish literary journal *Southword* this spring. Neil is currently working on a series of stories about first generation New Yorkers in the years before 9/11 titled *Outer Boroughs*.

Al Czarnowsky is a 1975 graduate of the Colorado School of Mines with a degree in mining engineering. He has worked at operating mines and on mining projects throughout the western United States, including Alaska, as well as at mines in Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Colombia. Although his work demands considerable technical writing, Al also pursues non-engineering writing. His novel *Dear Katy, Love Dad* was released in 2005. He is writing a historical novel based on the life of the engineer John F. Stevens.

Nancy Deyo began writing memoir in 2020 as a Fellow at Stanford's Distinguished Careers Institute, following a first career in technology and a second in women's rights. Her work has also appeared in *The Vault*. In addition to writing, Nancy is an active board member of a women's empowerment and social justice organization in Santa Fe, NM, where she lives with her husband.

Gary Fincke's latest collection of personal essays, *The Darkness Call*, won the Robert C. Jones Prize. A new collection, *The Mayan Syndrome*, will be published early in 2023 by Madhat Press. The lead essay, "After the Three-Moon Era," was selected to appear in *Best American Essays 2020*.

Nancy Smith Harris earned her MA in English Literature at San Francisco State University and lives in northern California. Her stories have appeared most recently in *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *funny pearls*, and *Passager Journal*.

Kristen Ott Hogan lives in Syracuse, Utah with her husband, Wade, and their four children. Her work has appeared in *Segullah*, *The Ravin Perch*, and *Aji Magazine*, *Literary Traveler*. She co-authored, *Phoenix Flame*, a memoir chronicling her nephew's battle with

mental illness. She loves to read more than Netflix—her favorite novel remains *Jane Eyre*. Her husband is waiting (patiently) for her to write a bestseller so he can quit his job.

William Keiser is a TV screenwriter and associate story editor of *My 600-Lb Life* on TLC. Prior to *My 600-Lb Life*, he was a professional dancer with the Dana Tai Soon Burgess Dance Company and appeared in work by choreographer Britta Joy Peterson at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. He currently lives in Austin, TX

A former Pulitzer finalist and winner of the Poets' Prize, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. He is the author of twenty-three books, the latest "*Seen from All Sides: Lyric and Everyday Life*," essays; fourteen of these volumes are poetry collections, the most recent of which is *Here* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2019). In 2021, he was presented with his home state of Vermont's most prestigious artist's distinction: the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts.

Jae Nolan is an emerging writer focused on exploring the complicated connections we hold with ourselves, each other, and the world. She is currently working on her first novel. When not writing, she works to advance social justice issues and explores the beauty of the Pacific Northwest with her wife.

Liz Olds is a writer and banjo-player living in Minneapolis. She wrote the monthly column "Banjo Noodles" in *Inside Bluegrass* from 1998 to 2000, and was included in the *bioStories* anthology *Encounters* in 2015. She has taken many classes at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, culminating in her participation in the Loft's Foreword Mentorship Program from 2009-2011. She is currently working on her memoir. This is her second appearance in *bioStories*.

Anika Pavel was born in Czechoslovakia. She became a refugee when the Soviet Union invaded her homeland. She now lives in New York City. Her essays have been published in *bioStories*, *Tint Journal*, *Nixes Mate Review*, *Ariel Chart*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Scarlet Leaf Magazine* and others. The essay "Power of The Violin" has been selected by the *Potato Soup Journal* for their anthology. Her essay "Finley's Gift" has been selected by *Living Spring Publishers* for their annual book of short stories. Her essay "Encounter with the Future" was nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Gretchen Roselli had a career as an actress, dancer, singer, and model and owned a performing arts school in New York. She now writes plays and non-fiction. Her articles have been published in *Red Rock Life Magazine* and *The Colorado Sun*. She has had

two plays produced and is a member of the Playwrights Group. She loves theatre, competitive running, belting out show tunes, dancing, tumbling, and fostering dogs.

Jean Ryan, a native Vermonter, lives in coastal Alabama. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies. Nominated several times for a Pushcart Prize, she has also published a novel, *Lost Sister*. Her debut collection of short stories, *Survival Skills*, was published by Ashland Creek Press and short-listed for a Lambda Literary Award. *Lovers and Loners* is her second story collection. *Strange Company*, a compilation of her nature essays, is available in digital form, paperback and audio.

Ruth Spack, a retired professor of English, currently teaches writing in the Myra Kraft Transitional Year Program at Brandeis University. Her previous publications include *The International Story* and *America's Second Tongue*, which was awarded the Mina P. Shaughnessy Prize by the Modern Language Association. After a long and fulfilling career as an academic writer, she now focuses exclusively on creative writing. She has short stories forthcoming in *Streetlight Magazine* and *Jewish Fiction .net*. "Death in the Family" is her first published work of creative nonfiction.

Julia Van Buskirk began her writing career in the fifth grade when she penned her first play, which she also directed, produced, and starred in for hundreds of attendees from local school and community groups. Since then, she has focused on essays and short fiction. She has been published in *The Chicago Sun-Times* as well as in numerous publications in the business world. "The Last to Go" is her first national publication.

Liza Wieland has published five novels, *Paris, 7 A.M.*, *Land of Enchantment*, *A Watch of Nightingales*, *Bombshell*, and *The Names of the Lost*, and three collections of short fiction, *Quickening*, *You Can Sleep While I Drive*, and *Discovering America*, as well as a book of poems, *Near Alcatraz*. She has won two Pushcart Prizes and a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. She has recently retired from teaching and lives in eastern North Carolina.

Aminah Wells is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in private practice and a native of Baltimore, MD. She attended Loyola University where she majored in Psychology and minored in Creative Writing. She holds a MSW from the University of Maryland School of Social Work. Writing has been a passion since she was a child and her niche is poetry and creative non-fiction. She believes writing is a powerful tool for healing and she uses it for her own self-reflection and in her work with clients. In the coming years she aspires to write a book from a little bed and breakfast by the beach.

Andrew Yim traveled and worked in the republics of the former Soviet Union in the mid-1990s before graduate school and then a career as a primary care nurse practitioner in the community health clinics of south-central Connecticut. He writes before the commute. His essays have appeared in *The New Haven Review*, *Trailer Runner Magazine*, the “Modern Love” column of the *New York Times*, and *Hektoen International: A Journal of Medical Humanities*.