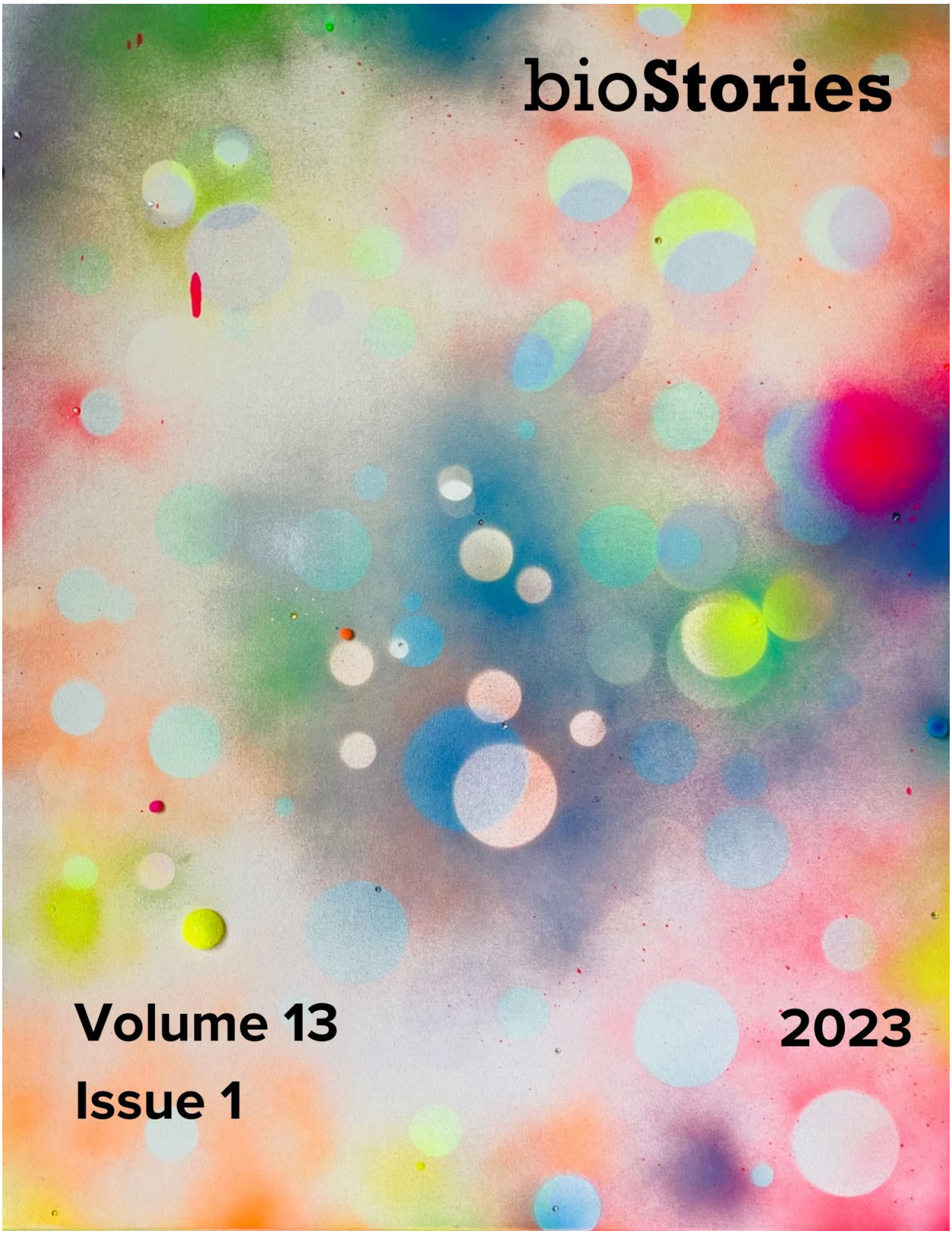
bioStories
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bioStories is conceived in the belief that every life can prove instructive, inspiring, or compelling, that every life holds moments of grace. We believe stories harbor the essential architecture of biography and that slices of a life properly 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.

We strive to publish the kinds of essays that stay with the reader like whispers in the dark. Our objective is to showcase the widest variety of writers, perspectives, and experiences as possible, always looking for excellence and subtlety and with an eye on those ideas and experiences that connect all of us as humans.

Cover Art: 2021 by Bradley Wester

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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134 Days

by Phil Cummins

March 6, 2020

Our eldest son, having been supported by us for years and now recently graduated, has finally commenced gainful employment as an architect with a Dublin-based firm. We decided to broach the thorny issue of 'rent' with him.

"But that's a quarter of my salary!" said P—, clearly shocked at our proposal of €100/week to continue living under our roof.

Parents and son have since taken a step back to allow time for reflection on these new pecuniary arrangements, although I suspect he's hoping that such talk of rent will dissipate. We'll give it a few days before completing that sentence for him: "That's a quarter of my salary... for room-with-ensuite, electricity, gas, cleaning, laundry, groceries, Wi-Fi, parental taxi services, Nespresso capsules, and Chinese takeout. Cash or IBAN, son. It's your choice."

March 7, 2020

Everyone is talking about the coronavirus. Italy has just quarantined millions of people but I suspect the horse has bolted. My sister called to enquire if we'd all still be travelling to the US in June for a family wedding. I had no answer.

March 10, 2020

P— has decided that his hard-earned wages would be better spent renting a flat in Dublin rather than lining his parents' pockets. He arranged to view a place along the North Circular Road this evening. F— and I took a peek on Google Street Maps. Having bought our first place together in Stoneybatter many years ago, we pleasantly reminisced over a glass of wine about how some houses along the North Circular Road were actually quite nice. One quick glance told us this was *not* one of those houses, a fact P— later confirmed using his extensive palette of urban linguistic skills.

“I’d be afraid to take me shoes off in that fuckin’ dump!” he declared, showing us the photos on his mobile. “It’s a converted hallway with a bed, cooker, and shower unit all in the *one* room.”

“I think that’s what they call compact and bijou, son,” his mother chimed in.

“The toilet’s basically in a wardrobe. *A wardrobe! For 850 quid a month!*”

We let him rant on and nodded our heads understandingly as good parents do. (I’ve always said the best thing you can do with an infected boil is to just let the pus run out.) Crude variations on the f-word like fucking shyster, fucking bastard and, my personal favourite, thieving fuckhead, flew around our living room like angry bats. The poor slum landlord’s ears must’ve been burning. Our man-cub has clearly been traumatized by the Dublin flat-hunting experience, so we’ve settled on €10/day for him (and his lovely partner, A——, the other half of love’s young dream) to continue availing of the five-star accommodations being offered up by his parents here in Kildare.

March 12, 2020

The pandemic seems to be raging. This thing’s going to burn the world. Children seem to be resistant but older people and those with underlying conditions aren’t faring too well. Antarctica seems to be the only safe haven. All European flights have been banned from entering the US. The Irish education system has ground to a halt and a nationwide lockdown has been announced. Terms like ‘self-isolation’ and ‘social distancing’ have become the new mots du jour. Love’s young dream have suspended their flat-hunting and we’ve promptly reeled in our youngest lad, D——, who was staying on campus in Limerick. It appears that all five of us will now be working out of home for the foreseeable future. How uncanny that this lockdown is coinciding with Lent, a traditional period of quarantine and repentance, a time to express remorse for our collective sins. When it comes to Mother Nature, we have much to atone for.

March 14, 2020

Despite my innate anxiety, I feel compelled to click on my various news links for a daily dose of pandemic gloom. Civilisation seems to be pausing. Planes are grounded, borders are sealing up, the hospitality industry is bolting its doors, and entire sectors are being

laid off globally. A new recession is being talked up. The message is clear: stay in your homes, practice social distancing, don't congregate, scrub your hands, don't touch your face, beware the bug. Hand shaking has morphed into this weird little dance that involves elbow tapping. I find I'm constantly scanning myself for Covid symptoms, checking my forehead for a temperature, feeling my neck for signs of a sore throat. It sounds like an absolute wanker of a dose to catch. In my mind every cough is laced with coronavirus, every headache has Covid's insidious fingerprints all over it. It's emotionally draining. I've never washed my hands so much.

March 16, 2020

Running has become my antidote for pandemic anxiety. I went out for my daily jog along a nearby deserted country road only to have two squabbling crows fall out of a tree and land on the ground right in front of me. I almost tripped over them. It felt like an omen, like I was living inside a chapter of Stephen King's *The Stand*.

March 17, 2020

There's something about Irish pubs remaining closed on Paddy's Day that screams 'THIS IS SERIOUS SHIT!' It's like the entire country has been placed under anaesthesia. F and I went for a drive but stayed sitting in the car with our coffee and sandwiches, chatting quietly and admiring the scenery.

Our Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, addressed the nation on the evening news and didn't pull his punches. The situation was grave, he said. Everybody had to play their part to help 'flatten the curve' and avoid overburdening our health service. Never will so many ask so much of so few. His tone was calm and dignified, his message brutally honest: the worst was yet to come, many will get sick and some will die. I never thought I'd say this but the days of Brexit seem positively halcyon. We ended up watching *Four Weddings and a Funeral* on Netflix afterwards for about the tenth time. After Leo's sobering words, we needed something to cheer us up. And it did.

March 29, 2020

F— has transformed our conservatory into an online classroom from where she continues to educate her secondary school pupils. In an effort to maintain domestic harmony as the lockdown grinds on, she's also prepared a 'To Do List for Bored People' and hung it on the kitchen wall in an effort to motivate the three young adults also living under our roof. My personal favourites:

- Fill a coal bucket
- Clean a toilet
- Groom a dog (outside)
- Grab a duster (and use)
- Music – please don't deafen yourself if using headphones
- Go into the garden and get some air
- Write a letter to anyone stuck at home (p.s. that's everyone!)
- Clean the oven (you don't have to go the whole hog, but every little helps)

April 1, 2020

P—— emerged from his architectural workspace set up in our living room and solemnly announced that off-licences were to permanently close by 9 p.m. this evening because the government no longer deemed the sale of alcohol to be an 'essential' service.

"The stupid gobshites!" I barked. "Folks need booze to make life under lockdown tolerable. That'll cause public unrest." In my mind I'd already begun contingency planning for an off-license raid that very afternoon in order to protect the line of supply, thinking perhaps I could empty everything out of the car boot to make a bit more room. I broke into a sweat. I even imagined a Sunday morning-style barricade being erected across either end of the supermarket booze aisle.

"That would be an April Fool's joke, P—," said his mother without looking up from her jigsaw puzzle. Tragedy averted. Ever the cool head is our F—.

April 4, 2020

I read with admiration how one chap in England is running the length of a marathon in his little back garden to raise money for charity. Another is pacing up and down his stairs until he's covered a distance equivalent to the height of Mount Everest. Mad!

April 7, 2020

Social distancing feels like having to unlearn one's primal impulse to touch. The human compulsion to hug or shake hands is as innate as breathing. It's as if everyone has been rendered negatively charged, electrostatically repelling one another if they come within two meters.

To stave off cabin fever, F— produced a set of magic markers and encouraged us to write a 'word-of-the-day' up on the kitchen dresser windows, ideally one defined by the events of the day. Here are a few samplers:

- Scrofulous—just popped into my head whilst listening to a cringeworthy TV interview with UKIP right-winger, Nigel Farage.
- Gustatory—in reference to gustation (tasting), something we're doing a *lot* of to help us cope with lockdown.
- Banjaxed—that would be our broken downstairs toilet seat. (There's an obvious link here to Gustatory.)
- Flimflammery—whenever Trump or any member of the GOP speaks.
- Zoonotic—the author of our collective lockdown misery, Covid-19.
- Sequestration—when your entire world shrinks to a house containing two corgis, a cat, and the same five people day-in-day-out.

April 10, 2020

Bottle recycling banks are overflowing. This is a snapshot of life under lockdown, oceans of booze sluicing down people's necks to help them cope with being indefinitely house-bound. Livers being marinated and kidneys pickled so that brains can be numbed.

April 11, 2020

Stillness is all around now as towns and cities have retreated into a sort of hibernation. I read that conflicts have abated and skylines are clearing of smog, fish are once again becoming visible in urban waterways and people claim that birdsong has never seemed louder. As I jog out early along the Carnalway Road, feeling like the only person on Earth, the morning is eerily calm and yet I sense a quiet hysteria thrumming beneath everything.

April 13, 2020

I went out to the back garden to write this afternoon and get away from the general noise of the house. In one of the nearby housing estates, however, some git chose that exact moment to kick off with an electric guitar and a big speaker to croon out some corny showband numbers in an attempt to cheer up the unhappily sequestered denizens. An appalling din. My already fragile mood plummeted.

I'm also desperate for a haircut. Human hair clearly didn't get the 'cease-and-desist-from-growing-until-the-pandemic-is-over' memo. With barbers closed, hair growth has been proceeding unchecked. P— has already taken the electric shaver to his younger brother's head and has been eyeing up my own increasingly shaggy locks the same way a lion eyes up an ageing wildebeest.

April 15, 2020

We've renamed our postal van the 'Green Van of Happiness'. When most daily human contact beyond the front door involves Zoom, the sight of a real live postman is a reminder that the world continues to turn, even when he's only delivering bills. Today he dropped in a nice shiny bandwidth-chewing Xbox for P—, the very same lad who railed against the unfairness of his parents charging him rent.

April 16, 2020

I picked out a new toilet seat from the window of our local hardware store. I spotted it as I was passing and immediately called the number posted on the locked front door. Once I'd paid by credit card over the phone, the front door opened a tiny crack and a new toilet seat slid out on the pavement in front of me before slamming shut. If I was buying drugs,

I bet this is exactly how they'd sell them to me. The downstairs loo now rejoices by the way.

May 2, 2020

Coming home from Tesco (where, annoyingly, very few people were socially distancing), I spotted a Zimmer-framed old man scraping loose paint off the capping stone along his waist-high garden wall. He was inching along at a pace just south of continental drift. Christ! Folks will do *anything* to keep busy. The sight of him reminded me of my own father, whose thirty-second anniversary falls today. He would've turned eighty this year. A tradesman to his toenails, he wouldn't have coped well with the inactivity imposed by this lockdown. I called my mother, who is cocooning in her apartment in Ontario. She told me how much she hates this day.

May 9, 2020

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I paid my son €15 to cut my hair using a beard trimmer and nail scissors. P— donned an ankle-length butchers' apron especially for the task, looking not unlike Sweeney Todd. The others laughed and took pictures on their mobiles. Even the two hounds enjoyed the spectacle. This was primetime entertainment.

May 25, 2020

Going out for my walk this evening I spotted our three young adults laughing and playing frisbee just across the street from our house. My heart sang! It was such a life-affirming thing to see. They weren't scrolling on phones or binging on boxsets, just occupying themselves with this innocent pastime, their way of coping with the boredom of lockdown. The sight of them made me smile and filled me with hope.

May 26, 2020

Letter to the *Irish Times*:

Sir, – President Trump has been sternly criticised for a recent trip to his golf course as his nation struggles to contain the Covid-19 outbreak. However, given the widely reported

flaws in his handling of the US federal pandemic response, in conjunction with the steady diet of misinformation that he appears to openly peddle with apparent impunity (hydroxychloroquine cures and Chinese conspiracies to name a few), one could argue that it might actually be better for everyone if he 'remained' on the golf course. – Yours, etc.

Unfortunately, my insightful observations on Trump's golf outing didn't make the letters page today. The *IT* did, however, publish the views of some readers who were complaining about the unrealistic height of the sexual bar in the new TV adaptation of Sally Rooney's *Normal People*.

In other news, our overburdened Wi-Fi committed hara-kiri today. As P—— and I stomped around the house complaining about the impossibility of getting work done under these conditions, F——_ calmly resolved the situation by lifting the phone to switch broadband providers. We've now jumped to 100-mbit/sec. Our internet's moving like shit through a goose now. Yay! F—— strikes again.

May 28, 2020

Whilst out walking, I was hailed by a friend strolling in the opposite direction with his dog. We spoke briefly to one another from opposite sides of the road when he reminded me to enjoy the forthcoming bank holiday weekend. It stuck in my head all the way home: *There's a bank holiday weekend coming up? How did I not know that?* The days are all homogenous now, I suppose, indistinguishable little pockets of time to be lived through, each one its own little Groundhog Day. This lockdown, like gravity, seems to be bending time.

May 29, 2020

Race protests are flaring up across the US following the death of an African American man, George Floyd, during an arrest in Minneapolis a few days ago. Whilst handcuffed and lying face down on the ground, a police officer kneeled on his neck for up to five minutes during which time he was repeatedly heard to say, "I can't breathe." The entire incident was captured on a mobile phone and came with a double warning on YouTube.

It was one of the most distressing things I've ever seen. I couldn't bear to finish it. Didn't these guys learn *anything* after LA?

June 2, 2020

Our eighty-seven-year-old neighbour has gone stir crazy. Cocooning for the last three months under the watchful eye of his daughter, he attempted to make a break for it with his walking stick on the pretence of needing to buy butter in the local corner shop. Luckily she managed to intercept him before he got too far beyond the garden gate. He wasn't the least bit happy: "I'm sick and tired of all this bloody cockatooin'," he snapped. His word for cocooning (cockatooin'). Absolutely priceless!

June 6, 2020

D— is twenty-one this weekend. Obviously he can't have a party, so we've decided to celebrate amongst the five of us. F— ordered in catering and included meals for six other local families. She delivered a family-sized meal and bottle of Prosecco to each house along with a bag of party favours and typed instructions that they celebrate our son's twenty-first in their own way and video the proceedings for us on their mobiles. This is one of her superpowers: spreading joy.

June 12, 2020

I've pulled something in the arch of my foot whilst out running and now it's absolutely killing me. I've spent the day hobbling about the place, trying to disguise the fact from F. She'll only call me a feckin' eejit for not changing my trainers sooner. (I've had them for two years and the toes are poking out, but they're comfy.) She'll insist that I rest up for the week but the thought of not being able to run for that long is unbearable to me. Running has become my Ctrl-Alt-Del button during this lockdown.

June 14, 2020

After three months in lockdown with us, P— and A— are understandably desperate to get their own flat. They've been scanning Rent.ie on a minute-by-minute basis as vacancies grow. Having lined up some viewings, they hope to vacate the upstairs love

nest soon. D— is already eyeing their larger bedroom and expects to take up residence within minutes of their departure.

We took them for an apartment viewing. En route, a Tesla went belting past us on the M7. We spotted it pulled over a few miles later getting ticketed. Clearly delighted that justice had been properly served, P— laughed triumphantly and made some amusing comment about the miniscule dimensions of the Tesla driver's penis.

The apartment itself was located near the Royal Canal, not the most salubrious part of Dublin it must be said. Situated directly behind Croke Park, the area itself was beshitted with litter. As they went inside to view the apartment, F— and I waited in the car. Moments later a ten-year-old scamp wandered past leading a bedraggled looking donkey before turning down one of the old council house streets. He probably stables the poor nag in his back shed and races it around the streets at the weekend. I decided not to tell P— about this.

June 24, 2020

Working from home continues to be a challenge. My attic workspace is flanked by two angled Velux roof windows facing east and west, respectively. Unfortunately, the afternoon sun from the west beams right in on my computer screen. I tried to remedy this today by pinning up a large piece of poster board to the window frame (not recommended when you're standing on a rotating chair with wheels.) As I was logging in for my staff Zoom meeting, the whole thing detached and came flapping down on top of me. I should really buy proper window blinds.

June 29, 2020

After months of keeping us physically and psychologically propped up, the pressure finally got to F— today. She's given so many tiny fragments of herself away to others: fragments of comfort to those who are ill or who've suffered bereavement; fragments of advice to those with worries; fragments of time to those who need listening to. She suddenly turned to me from the top of the stairs all flustered and teary: "I'm tired of trying to hold up the sky. I want my Mammy." I thought my heart would crack. And so I mammied her for the

rest of the day in my own clunking husbandly way, but I'm a pitiable substitute for the dearly departed real thing.

July 6, 2020

D—— has passed all of his first year college exams. Hearing the bellow out of him this morning after checking his results online, I thought he'd awoken to find a severed horse's head in his bed.

Later on, I watched in horror as RTE news showed footage of a jam-packed Temple Bar last night. Now that restrictions have gradually been eased, crowds of thirsty revellers were staggering about the streets in close proximity brandishing pints. We humans are hard-wired to seek release but this seemed so fucking selfish: grog and social distancing cannot co-exist! Healthcare workers must be howling in frustration at seeing all their courageous labours treated so contemptuously. New infections are going to surge. It's inevitable.

July 11, 2020

After multiple viewings, love's young dream have finally found a little place in Dublin and are moving out next week. F—— decided to give them an old coffee table of ours to help get them started with some furniture. Emptying out its drawers, she got an attack of the weepies when she found an old primary school Mother's Day card from D— with a teabag stuck inside informing her that she deserved a nice cup of tea for being such a great mammy. This next week will be tough on her as her first chick leaves the nest.

July 15, 2020

The Green Van of Happiness delivered a new pack of hand-sewn face masks of varying sizes and colours today, all made by my sister. They looked like little bikinis, the latest must-have facial fashion accessory for humanity's new normal. As I now get used to wearing one, I wonder if the world will ever spin the same way again.

July 17, 2020

I lay awake in the early hours thinking about how the morning would bring our son's final day living under our roof. Every parent expects (and hopes) that their kids will eventually move on, but nobody warns you about the emotional sucker-punch: how you will reminisce and stress and worry; how you will have to learn to navigate the echoes they leave behind, their departure a reminder of your own spent youth. Since graduating from college we've come to know P— as an adult, one who fledged his architectural career in our living room during a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. This altered world is not the one we expected to launch him into, with all its threats of viral surges and recessionary gloom, but I believe we have a moral obligation to remain hopeful, to not abandon ourselves to apathy and despair. The future will bring what it will bring and we will meet it with our heads raised.

July 18, 2020

Moving day. Rising at dawn I found F— writing a letter to our son, words of wisdom to be read only after he'd moved into his own place. Was it only 134 days ago since we first broached that thorny issue of rent with him? Seems like a lifetime. Tears were spilling down her cheeks as she told P— how she loved him all the way to the moon and back. Reading her letter, I visualised the cuddly figure of Little Nutbrown Hare that survived his childhood and is now permanently perched (minus an ear) on the bookcase beside my attic work desk, its arms spread wide in a fearless and joyful embrace of life. She expressed incredulity that the elder lemons of the family, parents and relatives now passed on, didn't prepare her for the unique heart wrench of this day. It defies preparedness, I suppose. But as with so many other things that have befallen us all in recent months, it can be tempered with resilience and love.

Phil Cummins is a Dublin-born academic and writer living in County Kildare. His fiction and essays have been long/short-listed in various international competitions, including honourable mention (2020) and shortlist (2022) for the Fish Memoir Prize. His writing has featured in various anthologies and literary magazines.

I Dream of Dave Barden

by Brian Huba

I asked my uncle Dave if we could speak in private. He told me to come over but only if I brought him a Labatt's twelver and deck of Marb Reds. "The cover charge," he called it. After using my fake ID to buy the requisite items from the Haji Mart, I pulled into Dave's driveway, demarked by a mailbox that read *The Barden's* in grammatically incorrect stick-ons. The house was a ranch style in West Rexville, about five minutes from my parents' house, where I still lived. A lopsided shed anchored the driveway. The above-ground pool was half-covered in tarp. I parked my Probe GT between Aunt Nora's Taurus and Dave's Escort wagon with the dealer plate. Even though Dave was management at Orange Ford, he never chose a high-end demo. Other managers drove Eddie Bauers, Crown Vics, F-Series with the bells and whistles. Bells and whistles didn't matter much to Dave.

In the kitchen, Nora sat on a backless stool, smoking a joint while talking on the phone. Scattered about the countertops were tins of Chinese food. Into the cordless, she said, "Deb, hold on a sec, my handsome nephew just walked in."

To me, "Hi, hon, he's downstairs."

The stairs began behind a wall that held matching glamor shots of Nora and her twelve-year-old daughter, Courtney, both wearing feather boas and too much makeup. Five steps down was a landing where Nora kept litter boxes for her four cats. A second stairwell went to the semi-finished basement, and there was Dave, beer in one hand, half-smoked Marb in the other, standing near a sliding door that led outside, one pane of which was cracked. Classic rock blared from a woodgrain speaker.

Nora met Dave when he was twenty-four, fifteen years younger than her. Back then he was a rail-thin salesman, whose black-soled shoes were worn through from walking the Orange Ford lot. Now the rail-thin version of Dave was gone. At thirty-two, he was sixty pounds overweight, and his fleshy face was shadowed in stubble. On that night, he wore a Dolphins sweatshirt over jeans and beat-up Reeboks. Dave never did t-shirts or shorts, on account of the sores that blanketed his body. He'd been diagnosed with psoriasis, prescribed countless creams to treat it, all of which worsened his condition.

Seeing me, then seeing the beer, Dave said, “Enter.”

For the next half-hour we talked and drank, taking turns using the bathroom, as the empties collected, and the music played.

Finally, Dave said, “Okay, what’s up?”

“Umm…well…” I took a deep breath; told Dave I’d been gambling on NBA basketball. “Just a few bucks at first--”

“How deep?”

“Sixteen hundred. But I got four hundred in savings.”

“You need twelve?”

“Yes.”

“When ya need it?”

“Today. Tomorrow at the latest.”

“Of course.” Dave finished his beer, then went to the basement laundry, where he kept his suits. To be perfectly accurate, Dave’s suits were in a wrinkled heap on the floor in front of the dryer, while the rack held empty hangers. I heard him rummage around. When he came back, he handed me a wad of rolled bills.

“I’ll pay back every penny.”

“You better. I know where you live. *And* where you work.”

“Thank you, Dave,” and I hugged him. He smelled like cigarettes and sweat. He didn’t move a muscle. It was like hugging a sack of flour. Because it was nighttime, the sliding door doubled as a mirror. And because of the cracked pane, our reflected embrace had a jagged, funhouse effect. My mouth at Dave’s shoulder, I said, “I love you,” and it came out muffled against his sweatshirt.

Dave let me work for him at Orange Ford only if I stuck with college. In high school I’d been an average student. My only extra activity was to pen a few cheesy articles for our school paper*,* my star piece being a fake interview with O.J. Simpson entitled “Do you still work for Hertz Rental Cars...*Not Exactly.*” During senior year, I grudgingly applied to a few colleges, places with huge acceptance rates. I got denied by every one of them, including SUNY Cortland. After graduation I did what every non-academic in New York’s Capital Region does: I went to Hudson Valley Community College in Troy. I hated HVCC.

It was too big. There were too many students. It was college with none of the fun. I convinced myself I wasn't wired for higher learning. Dave disagreed. He said I was too smart to walk away. He said I'd regret not getting a degree. Then he said if I quit, he'd fire me. "You'll be a dropout with no job. Good luck getting laid after that."

The spring '99 semester I took three courses. Independent Cinema met on Tuesday nights, Intro to Ethical Theory on Thursday nights, and my third class: English 200, which met three times a week at noon. On those days, Dave allowed me an extended lunch. I'd leave Orange Ford at eleven-thirty, speed out of Albany to HVCC, look for a parking spot (most times striking out and having to park at Wendy's), then dash across campus to the humanities hall. After class, I'd race back to work, zipping in and out of highway lanes at 75mph while shoving fast food down my throat.

Off the highway, through a series of traffic lights, to Albany's Auto Mile, where a network of new-car dealers framed the busiest strip of Central Avenue. Dodge, Pontiac, Chevy, Chrysler, Honda, Hyundai signs as far as the eye could see. I craved the action. The predatory excitement. I never wanted to be anywhere else. Perhaps it's weird to wax romantic about the car business, but I loved it.

When I pushed through the showroom's double doors, a swirl of A/C met me. The brightly lit space smelled like coffee and lemon-lime freshener, and the retail reps' desks were arranged in a Cube Farm. From leather swivels on a dais, Orange's five floor managers looked down like titans staring from Olympus. On the wall behind them, a dry-erase board listed every salesperson, followed by a row of squares representing total vehicles sold that month. The longest line was next to *Barden, D*.

A narrow stairwell led to the attic office, and a sign beside that stairwell read *Commercial Accounts* with an arrow pointing up. Four years before, Dave had left the showroom to start the department from scratch. He cold-called companies and introduced himself as the newest face in fleet sales. The first year was lean. Year two wasn't much better. Year three he submitted a longshot bid for the state contract and won. Suddenly, Dave was charged with supplying every unit required for New York's myriad of services. The scope of such a thing was unthinkable. Dave recruited a salesman named Greg Betts to play wingman. Greg worked hard and possessed a micro-knowledge of the Ford line. Then Dave employed a team of retired truck drivers, dispatched them to deliver units all

over the state, so many deliveries he brought in an assistant to coordinate the action. By 1998, Dave had the busiest fleet team in the city. If you saw a pickup, Econoline, or sedan with business markings and an Orange Ford plate bracket back then, it was sold by Dave Barden Jr.

Once upstairs, I flung my school bag aside. Greg was on the phone, the receiver tucked between his jaw and shoulder as he worked some credit rep for a lower rate. My desk stood next to Greg's, an L-shaped veneer job with deep file drawers. I refused to admit "administrative assistant" and "secretary" were synonymous. I hated the idea of being anybody's secretary. I preferred to see myself as a salesman-in-training. But when I came to work on Secretary's Day, the week before, an overflowing bouquet of daisies waited on my desk, the card signed *Dave & Greg*. They were total ballbusters like that. One time Dave made me do pushups for money, a dollar per, while he and Greg watched. I cranked out forty-five, rolled over red-faced and winded, but forty-five bucks richer, at which time Dave declared mine weren't "regulation military pushups," so no dough. (Later on, in private, he gave me the money.) They'd rip on the way I dressed, my dyed-blonde a la Eminem hair, the music I listened to. When I confessed my dream was to one day write a novel, Greg made a jerking-off gesture, and Dave said, "Dream in one hand, shit in the other." But the worst abuse, by far, was when Dave sent me to the archives room above the body shop to find a file from some long-ago deal. The low-ceilinged space was crammed with rickety file cabinets caked in dust. It always took me hours to locate anything up there.

If I came back with the file and complained, Dave would say, "Welcome to life without a college degree, kid."

It was obvious Dave had no plans to coddle me because I was his nephew. One time, when I accidently dropped a customer's call while transferring it from my phone to Dave's, he called me "shit for brains." Another time he said I was so dumb I should be watered twice a day. He never praised me. Never said I did a good job. Dave believed compliments were for wimps. "Obedience," he once said, striking a palm down on his desk, "is a prerequisite to independence." I told him I didn't know what that meant. He "'splained" it in simpler terms, "Me the boss, you the bitch."

I once pumped unleaded gas into the diesel engine of a just-sold F-350

I got a dealership demo towed from the fire zone outside Bruegger's Bagels

I accidentally sent two drivers to Johnson Ford in Kingston, when they were supposed to go to Johnson Ford in Springfield, Massachusetts.

By then Dave had a decade of sweat equity into Orange Ford. Now here comes his moronic nephew screwing up. So why didn't he fire me? I think he got a kick out of my nonstop blunders. Dave prided himself on solving problems, and I definitely provided him with ample opportunity to put this skill to the test.

A few seconds after I sat down, Dave's phone rang from the other side of the attic. "Dave Barden, pick up 555." I punched a two-button code into my own phone and answered, "Commercial accounts," and that's when I heard Dave thunder up the stairs, shaking the sidewall as he came. He entered the office, huffing and puffing and hacking up phlegm. He wore a chalk-lined suit and plastic name badge. A pack of Marbs bulged from the breast pocket. I muted the line, told him, "Kurt at Enterprise." With a grimace, Dave said, "What's *he* want?" but the grimace was for show. Dave loved this. Dave lived for this. There was a legend about Dave that said during his first year in the attic, instead of hanging up on a client and losing a potential sale because he needed to use the bathroom, he shit his pants where he sat. When I asked if he'd really done that, he said, "Made the deal, didn't I?"

Dave plonked down in his chair, told me to hold the call while he ate lunch. Off the heap of file folders on his desk, he lifted an Arby's bag that one of the drivers had delivered, unwrapped the sandwich, devoured it in five hyper-fast bites. After slurping a sip of coke, he said, "Ready," and I transferred the call.

Whenever a salesman or manager got canned it was tradition to take the guy out and get him shitfaced. The more popular he was, the bigger his sendoff would be, and nobody was more popular than Orange's used car manager, JT Hawkings.

I was halfway home when my Nextel buzzed. I answered and could hear music blended with bar sounds in the background. Dave loudly asked, "Where are you?" I could tell he was drunk. I told him I was on the highway. He said, "Turn around. I'm gonna need you to drive me tonight." Dave never drove drunk, not anymore at least. In his twenties,

he netted two DWIs and totaled a Ranger pickup by smashing it into a guardrail, a wreck he was enormously fortunate to have walked away from.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled into the parking area behind Beff's, a bar one block east of the Auto Mile. Demos with Orange Ford dealer plates filled every slot. I walked around the corner, through the front door, and the place was a sea of salesmen, some standing, others riding stools. Neon Miller Lite signs blocked the windows. Beyond the bar, through a screen of cigarette smoke, I spotted Dave, his suit coat open, tie tugged loose, top two buttons of his shirt undone. As I approached, pressing myself between the crush of bodies, Dave put a Marb to his mouth, lit it under a cupped hand.

When I reached him, he said, "What took so long?"

"Came as fast as I could."

A few hours after I showed up at Beff's, the Goodbye Hawk party moved up Central Avenue to a topless joint called DiCarlo's. Twenty of us sat at a table near the main stage, where a leggy redhead in clear heels wound herself gymnastically around a floor-to-ceiling pole. When the other girls—those trolling to give lap dances or peddle private sessions—came to Dave, he'd pull a dog-eared bill from his suit coat, and say, "Not interested," and I don't think that had anything to do with monogamy. I'd heard Nora and Dave didn't sleep in the same bed. Was this because Dave crashed out on the couch? Or was it something else? I never saw him hold Nora's hand. Never saw him kiss her. On Nora's fortieth birthday, Dave gave her a t-shirt that said *I May Be 40. I May Be Fat. But Here I Is!* My aunt dismissed this as Dave's twisted sense of humor. Then she blew out her breath, "I know he loves me."

We drove home in silence. Dave continuously coughed up phlegm, then spit it thickly out the window. When I pulled into his driveway, the sensor light clicked on, bathing my windshield in brightness, setting the constellation of sores on Dave's hands aglow. "Some bad shit with Hawk today," he said, and I agreed. "What can I do? I'm stuck here. This's my fate." He lodged the last cigarette in his mouth, lit it. "Not you though. This ain't no life for a kid like you. Go to college. Get a degree. Do something great."

"Yeah right," I said.

"Why not?"

"Even SUNY Cortland said no."

“Fuck SUNY Cortland. There’re a thousand schools.” He sucked a deep drag, blew it out the open window. “I wasted my youth. I don’t want you to waste yours then blame me.” He looked at me, the sensor light illuminating the right side of his face, making it look like he was wearing a Phantom of the Opera mask. “There ain’t no happy endings in this business. Loyalty? Yeah right. That’s how you can treat people when there ain’t a college education in the place. Half the sales team didn’t even finish high school.” Dave often talked like this after a few beers. And I always chalked it up as a role he liked to play, the sad clown to conceal the fact he loved being Orange Ford’s commercial accounts manager. I wanted to see Dave as the greatest success story I knew. But that night his message felt genuine. Then he said something I’ll carry forever: “I’m telling you this because you’re like the son I never had.”

I nodded but said nothing. What could I say? He thanked me for the ride, then rolled himself out of my car.

Through the windshield, I watched him walk across the driveway, flick his finished Marb in the grass. When he disappeared into the dark house, I burst out in a loud, body-racking crying. And if I was still clinging to any small idea about going away to college, bunking in a co-ed dorm, pledging a frat, playing intramural Ultimate Frisbee, that idea died then and there. No way was I leaving. I was with Dave.

That September, I reluctantly signed on for three more courses at Hudson Valley CC, one of which met during the workday, prompting another sixteen-week stint of racing from Orange Ford to South Troy. But there was some good news. Somehow, I was on track to graduate in May of 2000. You must understand that back then I didn’t see college as the conduit to a better life. I saw it as an obstacle to overcome, the place that was pointlessly sinking me deeper into student-loan debt with every passing semester. I just needed to get through, and when I did, thus satisfying my quid-pro-quo with Dave, I could put college behind me. “Eight more months” became my motivating mantra.

September of ‘99 proved to be the most profitable month in the history of Orange Ford’s fleet department. Dave delivered seventy-six total units. Greg made sure the paperwork on every deal was airtight. I typed quotes, dispatched drivers. The phones never stopped. Dave was happy the whole time. Regardless of what he told me in his

driveway that July night, there was no denying how much fun he was having. He made sale after sale, moving a thousand miles an hour, promising the moon and stars to every customer, before handing the file off to Greg, “Button ‘er up, Bettsy.”

Dave was convinced that record-setting September was the start of something big. He talked about one day doing a hundred deals per month. To hit that kind of quota, he’d have to bring in another sales rep. I thought that rep could be me. I’d be good at fleet sales. And if I wasn’t, I’d have the best teacher in the biz to manage my learning curve. After so many years of thinking nothing worthwhile was in store for me, I saw a real future take shape. When all seventy-six sales were busting bugs, the General Manager, Burt Kendall, came upstairs to shake Dave’s hand and thank him.

The lump in Dave’s left armpit began small, roughly the size of a grape, but had steadily grown all summer. Dave repeatedly said it was nothing to worry about, surely because he didn’t want to miss work for a doctor’s appointment. According to Dave, doctors were the biggest crooks going, only interested in wasting your time and taking your money. By mid-November the lump had gone from a grape to a golf ball, so big it pained Dave to put his arm down, forcing him to hold it sideways, as if wearing an invisible cast. Finally, a week before Thanksgiving, Dave left the office an hour early to meet Nora at the medical park. The diagnosis was an abscess of some variety. An outpatient procedure was scheduled. Although there was no talk of the lump being anything serious, Dave was agitated about the time it was taking to deal with the lump, time better spent making deals.

Dave’s procedure was set for the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, yet when I arrived at work that morning, there he was, hunkered behind his desk with a cup of coffee, same way he was every other morning. I asked why he was in the office, and he acted like mine was an idiotic question. “Where else would I be?”

A half hour later, Greg showed up, then the drivers, and the department moved through its usual routines, until nine a.m. when Nora appeared and told Dave it was time to go. Indicating a random file folder, Dave said, “Can’t you see I have important shit to do?” He folded his arms across his chest, a childlike gesture.

Nora checked her watch, sighed loudly. “David, *please*.” Dave scrunched up his face, shook his head, kept his arms crossed. Greg and I followed their back-and-forth like a fast-moving tennis match. Finally, Dave said, “Jesus!” turned to Greg, and said, “I’ll be back in an hour.” Greg told him to take his time. When Dave stormed out, I wished him luck. His eyes skipped quickly over me, then he was gone.

At one-fifteen, I returned from Hudson Valley, and Dave wasn’t there. His desk chair was pushed aside the same way he’d left it, his unfinished cup of coffee by the rolodex. I asked Greg if he’d heard anything. He said Nora called. They’d opened Dave up. It didn’t look good. “Suspicious,” he said, putting air quotes around the word. The next step was a biopsy and Dave wasn’t coming back until tomorrow.

“Is a biopsy bad?” I asked.

“Depends what it is.”

“Do they know what it is?”

“They don’t know anything, pal.”

I didn’t see Dave again until the next morning, and by then he was tired of waiting around for answers. He called his doctor’s office, somehow persuaded the receptionist to get a nurse on the line. The nurse confirmed that Dave’s test results had been received and if he could schedule a time Monday. Dave had no intention of going through the weekend without knowing. Into the speakerphone, he said, “Please, you don’t have to say anything that’ll get you in trouble. Just…do I have cancer? Yes or no?” There was a long, pregnant pause. This nurse, whomever she was, weighing professional protocol against humanity. Then she blurted, “Yes.” I felt something in the fabric of the world rip away.

Greg and I stared at each other, both our faces holding a holy-shit expression. “See, that wasn’t so hard,” Dave said to the nurse, and right then his second line rang, “Dave Barden, pick up 555.” Before I could intercept the call, Dave disconnected from the doctor’s office, punched the incoming button. It was Kurt at Enterprise Fleet. When he said, “Hey, Dave, how the hell are you?” Dave answered with one of his recycled Bardenisms, “Finer than a frog hair cut five ways,” shifting back to salesman mode with a facility that shook me.

Dave hung up with Enterprise, and the office fell silent, save the sound of snowflakes slapping the attic window wetly. Greg squirmed in his chair, the casters groaning under his girth. “Umm, Dave,” he finally said, “I’m sorry. That totally sucks,” and I nodded. Dave studied the oozing sores that caked both hands. “Psoriasis they said? Fuckin’ crooks.” Again, Greg said how much this sucked. Again, I nodded. Dave said, “Well, better tell Nora.” He turned the speakerphone on, turned it off, wrestled a pack of Marbs from his pocket. “First a smoke.” He stood, walked past Greg, then me, then down the stairs. I asked Greg if I should follow him out, and Greg said, “Maybe he needs a minute.”

On Tuesday, November 30th, 1999, three weeks past his thirty-third birthday, Dave was diagnosed with non-hodgkin lymphoma. Because the medicine would undoubtedly drain his energy, the oncologists at Albany Medical Center suggested he take a leave of absence from Orange Ford. To this, Dave said, “I’ll run that past my union rep.” Even if Kendall okayed a medical leave, Dave had no interest in taking one. He saw his sickness as a bump in the road, something he could manage around work.

Thursdays were Dave’s chemo days. He’d leave Orange Ford at nine a.m., return at noon. As predicted, the heavy medicines drew the vitality out of him, like sugar being sucked through a straw. His skin turned pale and ashen. Droopy bags settled under each eye. His voice softened, as if the act of speaking required monumental effort. No longer did he thunder up the stairs or bounce out from behind his desk. He could stomach nothing but mac and cheese off the Friendly’s kids’ menu. He was insatiably thirsty, always chugging gulps of water from one of the plastic bottles he kept at the ready. He quit coffee, stopped smoking and drinking. “I don’t wanna be addicted to anything when this ends,” he declared. Several times a day he’d get so cold his teeth would chatter and his shoulders would shake, so he’d drape a trench coat over his suit. Then he’d take the trench off, doff his suit coat, crank the attic’s A/C to full blast. He forgot things. He asked the same questions again and again. He told jokes with no punchline. He’d dial up a customer, “Dave Barden, Orange Ford, returning your call,” only to have the guy awkwardly remind Dave they’d talked ten minutes before. I couldn’t make sense of what

was happening. It was as if one morning I woke up to a whole new reality, a reality where up wasn't up, down wasn't down, and Dave wasn't Dave.

January was cold and snowy. During those weeks, several classes at Hudson Valley were called off, a measure only taken when the weather is especially bad. Dave hunkered at his desk, trench coat buttoned to the throat. His phone never rang, a situation he blamed on the season, yet another example of his unwillingness to face what was happening. He'd lost ten pounds. He had no eyebrows. On a slightly positive note, the oozing sores that once blanketed his body had dried up and disappeared.

Dave did his business on speakerphone, so Greg and I were always privy to his negotiations. Dave began negotiating with a woman who did purchasing for a large furniture store in Albany for an E-van. Dave's once-sharp pitch was now sloppy. He made mistakes. He contradicted himself. They went back and forth for days. Dave couldn't close the deal. The Barden magic was going, going, gone.

His gift at sales was disappearing as fast as his hair, which was now coming out in clumps. Watching him succumb to baldness in real time was soul-crushing. He finally phoned the Denise Madison School, one of his long-standing clients, and asked them to send a beauty student. A few hours later, a bundled-up blonde with a nose ring entered the attic, hefting a bag of supplies and a nylon cape. Dave gave her fifty bucks to shave his head. When the job was done, he studied his new look in a little mirror she'd brought, declared his shorn locks "an improvement," but the next day he began wearing an oversized newsboy hat.

One afternoon that month, when I returned from Hudson Valley and was walking through the showroom, Burt Kendall called me onto the sales tower, "Giddy-up, boy." I went to him, and when I did, he glanced at the managers in their leather swivels, a hint of a smile on his face. Then he kicked two empty boxes at me, knocked over a trash can, spilling its contents across the industrial carpet. "Get this garbage outta here," he ordered. I looked at him in disbelief, then down at the empty coffee cups, wadded tissues, uneaten hash browns. "Move your ass," he said, so I got on my knees and hand-swept the rubbish back into the can as Kendall watched. I grabbed the boxes and brought them out to the dumpster by the body shop. When I made it back to the attic, Dave was face-planted on

a pile of folders but jerked awake when I flung my bookbag against the wall. Straightening his hat, he said, “Fuck’s wrong with you?” I told him what happened, and he stayed silent, rocking back and forth in his chair. Finally, he asked “Who saw Kendall kick the garbage?” His tone was cool, calm.

“They all saw it,” I said, trying to keep my voice from quavering. “*Everyone*.” Another swath of silence. More rocking. “Type an incident report,” Dave said, “I’ll take it to the Board.” I looked at him. He looked at me, his face full of resolve. Of course, I wanted to write that report. I was angry, humiliated, supercharged by the idea of exacting revenge on Kendall. But no way could I let Dave make waves on my behalf. Not now. Not like this.

“Never mind,” I said. “It’s no big deal.”

Years later, while having dinner with my wife, a bartender began tossing liquor boxes at his barback, and the memory of that day with Kendall on the sales tower sprang back. I confronted the bartender. “Excuse me,” I said, “please stop throwing those boxes at him.” He told me it was a joke and his barback agreed. “It’s not a joke,” I said, “it’s not funny.”

At some point in February, a few hours after Dave left for his weekly chemo treatment, he called Greg to report he’d been admitted to the hospital. “…some tests didn’t look good,” he was saying when Greg put the call on speaker. “They wanna tap my spine. Waiting on insurance.” My uncle’s voice was dry as tissue paper. Before Greg could respond, Dave said, “I gotta go.”

Greg hung up, started massaging his mustache with two fingers.

I asked, “Greg, is a spine tap bad?” When he looked up at me, his face was blank. He said, “It’s time to accept the truth about Dave, pal.”

After work that day, I drove to Albany Med. When I got off at the fifth floor, the air was saturated with a mix of disinfectants and hospital food. I asked a busty nurse where Dave’s room was. She pointed down the wing, “Just brought him up, honey.” I walked towards his closed door, glancing inside the other rooms as I went. Most were occupied by people hooked to tubes. Many had no hair. One woman wore a toucan-colored do-rag. When I entered Dave’s room, he was in bed on his stomach. I couldn’t tell if he was sleeping or pumped up on meds. He wasn’t connected to any machines. No monitors tracking whatever monitors tracked. A gown was tied loose at his nape. I stood there,

feeling awkward and unwelcome. Should I wake him? Should I stay a respectful amount of time then leave? I didn't know. And right then, I wondered where was the Dave Barden I knew, the guy who'd shit his pants to make a sale? Lying in bed at thirty-three years old? This was all wrong. I willed him to wake up, to say, "Let's blow this joint." But he didn't do that, which made me hate him, a volcanic hate I never knew myself capable of when it came to Dave. And standing there, I thought: if you're gonna die, just die.

On the second day of March, a clipper storm cloaked the Capital Region, the latest in that never-ending winter. One of those tow trucks with flashing lights rumbled past Orange Ford as I pulled Dave's Explorer up to the showroom. A moment later, the dark-glass entry door opened, and Dave walked out, snowflakes pelting his newsboy hat and trench coat. With his body bent against the weather, he asked, "Heat on?"

"Full bore," I told him, and he said, "I'm coming back, you know," but I could barely hear his words on account of the wind that whistled across the lot. I watched him drive off, under the oval Ford sign.

A few hours later, Dave called from the hospital. Greg put it on speaker so I could listen, and that's how I heard Dave say, "…shit spread. I'm gonna be in here for a while," to which Greg said, "Umm, Dave, I'm sorry, that sucks." When their call ended, Greg sniffed wetly, began smashing his phone with the side of his fist. I just sat there watching him pound that number pad to pieces. I couldn't move. I was numb.

The new plan was to zap Dave with an experimental kind of chemo. If it worked, his cancer would be wiped out. But the potent cocktail carried serious risk. They began blasting him on Friday, March 17th, and by the time I showed up at Albany Med that night, he was looking better than he'd looked in months. Holy shit, I thought to myself, could Operation Last Resort work? I sat in a stiff chair by his bed, then dug a hand in my pocket, retrieved a roll of small bills. "I got back two-fifty from taxes," I offered, still intent on settling the gambling debt he had covered.

Dave refused. "Pay me back some other day," he said. It was the fourth time I'd tried giving him part of the twelve hundred I owed him. It was the fourth time he'd refused.

About twenty minutes into my visit, Aunt Nora entered the room, wearing one of Dave's newsboy hats with a shamrock pinned on front. After closing the door, she lifted two cans of Labatt's Blue from her purse. Dave said, "Gimme! Gimme!" and Nora cracked the first can open, passed it to him. He took the beer with both hands, one of which was bandaged from his IV, slugged a big sip, then "aahhhhh." Nora opened the second can, poured some into a plastic cup, before giving me what remained. As the TV showed an Al Gore rally and a persistent rain soaked the window, we drank.

The next morning, I drove towards the hospital, and police crews were barricading roads for the Saint Patrick's Day Parade later that day. When I entered Dave's room, his bed was empty, and that's when I heard a toilet flush. The bathroom door opened, and a nurse stepped out. A beat later, Dave emerged, dragging an IV pole. And seeing him put a shock through me. I probably mouthed the words "My God." It looked like Dave had aged ten years in ten hours. He was concentration-camp skinny, everything flaccid, as if his body was trying to consume itself. The few wisps of hair that remained on his otherwise bare skull had gone grayish white. Even more jarring was the way his eyes looked. They were milky-pale and distant, like Dave, or the essence of Dave, was already gone.

The nurse helped him back into bed. He yanked the blankets to his throat. "I'm so fu-fu-fu-fucking cold," he said. A few minutes later, "I'm burning up," so the blankets came off. And this is how it went for the next hour. Blankets on. Blankets off. At ten a.m., Dave's breakfast tray came. He didn't want it. I tried to remember the last time I'd seen him eat anything. Days? Weeks? Maybe a month?

The sun reflected brightly through the window, dousing the room in translucent light. I still remember how that sun hit Dave's bed when he began to breathe arrhythmically, little half-breaths, as if he couldn't quite manage it. Between gasps, he said, "Brian, get a doctor." I sprinted to the nurses' station, told them what was happening. Two or three minutes later a doctor entered, trailed by a nurse. "What seems to be the problem, Mr. David?" He spoke with a heavy accent.

Dave explained he was having trouble breathing. "I can't…I can't catch my breath." The doctor directed him to move this way and that. When Dave tried shielding his eyes from the sun, one sleeve of his johnny slid down, exposing the skull-and-bones tattoo that

swallowed his sadly thin shoulder. The doctor sent his nurse to fetch some sort of medical equipment. “David, you MUST listen,” the doctor snapped, and the sharpness of his tone was it for me. I blew my cool. “Is there someone else who can help him?” I asked, approaching the bed, even though the doctor had told me to stand back.

The nurse returned, hauling this big peace-pipe thing. The doctor placed Dave on his back with the peace pipe in his mouth. The doctor was telling him, “Breath in. Breath out.” I saw Dave go wide-eyed, blowing with every ounce of strength he could muster. A minute or two of this and his breathing began to level off. When Dave was stable again, the doctor directed me to step outside. As I passed by Dave’s bed, I leaned down and fingered a ball of blanket at the foot. “I’ll see you real soon, Dave.”

On Tuesday, March 21st, 2000, Dave died at Albany Medical Center. He was thirty-three years old. Later that day, I went to Aunt Nora’s house, and she greeted me at the back door dressed in sweatpants and one of Dave’s worn-out flannels. Her living room was lit by candles, like something you’d arrange for a séance. Nora rolled a joint and we smoked. I asked her to describe the last few moments of Dave’s life. “Peaceful,” she told me, “Dignified.” She said it was just her and him in the hospital room. “I turned out the lights, closed the door, got in bed with him.” Around two a.m., Dave took his final breath. “I didn’t tell anyone he was gone. I knew they’d take him away.”

One of Nora’s cats, the fat tabby she called Butterscotch, dashed through the kitchen, crashed into the fridge, then raced away again. Nora said, “They’ve been insane ever since I came home from the hospital.” Then she said, “I married a man fifteen years younger. My second marriage. Not like the first one counts. This was supposed to be it. We’d be a family. He’d be a father for Courtney,” and she gestured to the back of the house where my thirteen-year-old cousin now slept. “Did I think we’d ever retire to the ocean? Probably not and that was okay. But I would’ve never… Married five years and the fucker croaks.” She snuffed out the joint, added it to the pile of roaches in the ashtray shaped like New York State. When she looked at me again, her expression had totally changed. “Brian, what am I gonna do now?”

♦

Almost every night I dreamed of Dave, or some version of him. Their central theme was always the same: Dave didn't die and now he's back. In one such dream, Dave walked into a lecture hall at Hudson Valley, told me he was starting a business selling "golf greens." In another dream, Dave revealed he'd been hiding out in South America, waiting for the perfect time to make his return. In one particularly vivid dream, I performed psychic surgery on Dave, pulling out long pieces of meat-like tumor as Dave lay awake on the table. No matter how deep I dug, or how much I pulled, the tumor just kept coming. I once dreamed that I sat in my car, staring out at the ocean, when Dave folded himself into the passenger seat. I told him, "You're dead." It was always my job to tell Dave he was dead. And each time he received this with disbelief before slipping away, at which point I'd wake up, a coppery taste coating my mouth.

I saw a grief therapist. She said, "Your brain's trying to process Dave's death. Having to watch a man you idolized, even mythologized, die the way he did, that's not easy."

I pressed her. "What if it's more than that? What if Dave's trying to tell me something?"

She considered my question. "If he's trying to tell you something, he'll eventually tell you."

Then…he did.

In another dream, Dave and I stood in the main atrium at Albany Medical Center. He told me, "The answer's in my camel-hair coat."

I called Nora and asked her, "Did Dave have a camel-hair coat?"

Nora said, "Yes. Why?"

I told her about my dream, then asked her to locate the coat and search its pockets. "What am I searching for?" she asked, and I said, "I don't know." An hour later, she called back. "Brian, I found the coat. There's nothing in any of the pockets." Convinced she'd somehow missed it, whatever "it" was, I drove to her house, rifled the coat myself, and stuffed inside the chest pocket was a wad of money. When I showed it to her, she said, "I swear on Courtney's life..." The wad was wrapped in a one-dollar bill. On the backside of that bill, around the border in blue ink, it read *Saint Lazarus, anyone who receives this*

bill will be blessed. I counted the cash. “Eighty-six bucks,” I said. When I offered it to my aunt, she refused. “It’s yours. The coat too.”

I did some research on Saint Lazarus, and that’s when I understood what Dave was trying to tell me. I learned that among other New Testament references, in the Gospel of John, Lazarus of Bethany is the subject of a miracle in which Jesus restores him to life after he has died.

Fascinated by my findings, I researched the subject more, and discovered that both Michelangelo and Sebastiano del Piombo composed paintings depicting Lazarus’s resurrection. The authors Truman Capote, John Knowles, Sylvia Plath, and T.S. Eliot referenced Lazarus in their works. The last song David Bowie released before succumbing to liver cancer in 2016 was entitled “Lazarus,” which includes the ling: “Look up here I’m in Heaven/I’ve got scars that can’t be seen.” Lazarus is sometimes referenced when political figures return to power in an unlikely fashion. The “Lazarus Taxon” describes organisms that reappear in the fossil record after a period of apparent extinction.

“The answer’s in my camel-hair coat,” Dave had told me, and now I held tangible, touchable evidence of that answer. Was Dave suggesting he was going to push his coffin open, dig out of the dirt at Saint Agnes Cemetery, zombie-style? Probably not. I needed more.

I returned to Nora’s house. She rolled a joint. I told her everything I found out about Lazarus. Of course, my aunt was dealing with her own difficulties around Dave’s passing, and deconstructing my dreams probably wasn’t her top priority. But I knew she’d understand. Nora always fancied herself a “spiritual being.” She frequently visited psychics and fortune tellers. She believed crystals possessed magic powers. Daily horoscopes were a must read. And every October she and Courtney spent a weekend in Salem, Massachusetts, so it was no surprise when she said, “Brian, just because someone dies doesn’t mean they’re dead.” She exhaled a ribbon of smoke. “David will always be watching over you. When you need him most, he’ll be there. That’s what he’s trying to tell you.”

♦

In February 2020, on a bitter-cold afternoon, we make the forty-minute drive to my Aunt Nora's house. I pull into the driveway, demarked by that same mailbox that now reads *T e B r n's* in papery, peeling stick-ons. I park our Subaru Forester next to Courtney's Honda Civic, which is thickly coated in road salt. There are slush-covered garbage bags, broken chairs, other odds and ends strewn about the property. Both the shed and above-ground pool have collapsed, as if walloped by a tornado. I follow Lynda over the un-shoveled path that leads to the screened-in porch at the house's rear, holding our three-year-old daughter, Annalee, to my chest.

We pass through the kitchen, to the living room, where Courtney sits with a few of her close friends on the afghan-covered couch. One guy has a shock of curly hair and thick-framed glasses. Another sports a sleeve of colorful tats.

A rerun of *The Office* plays on TV.

Since Aunt Nora is still asleep, we thumb through photos that Courtney plans to display at Nora's funeral service. We have no idea when such a service will take place, but we know it will be held at McVeighs in Albany, the same viewing room that hosted Dave's almost twenty years earlier. I see several images of myself as a baby, a few of me as a toddler and teenager. Then I'm handed a heap of Dave photos, and suddenly I feel everyone's eyes on me as I slowly go to work. After each one, I come to the same frustrating conclusion: Dave on film is less impressive than I remember him. In my memory, Dave is larger than life. But in these photos, he looks no bigger than 5'8" or 5'9," even shorter than his mother in a group shot taken on his wedding day.

Before I fully absorb this disconnect, Courtney announces, "Her Majesty has risen," and we laugh. Quieter now, to me, she says, "Mom's asking to see you."

When I stand to go, Courtney whispers, "She's only eighty-two pounds."

"Understood," I say.

I enter a small bedroom, and, despite my cousin's warning about Nora's weight, I'm instantly unnerved by how thin and frail she looks. Her jawbone protrudes dramatically. She appears to have no teeth. Her right hand is claw like and purpled with sores. Her body seems nonexistent under the heavy blankets. I walk my eyes around the room, see figurines on a windowsill, the Irish Blessing in a frame on a water-warped table,

a collection of crystals hung off the side of a wood-framed mirror. This is the room where my aunt's life is going to end. It seems unfair. Anticlimactic.

"My handsome nephew," she rasps.

I sit in a sagging recliner by Nora's hospital style bed, trying hard not to stare down at the commode between my feet. We both understand Nora is on borrowed time, as doctors predicted she'd be gone before the new year, and this will most likely be our final visit, so we spend the next hour just talking. Every imaginable topic is covered: Lynda, Annalee, Courtney, life, death, Donald Trump, Heaven, Hell, God. Nora is remarkably alert, recalling long-ago events with laser-like precision. I tell her about my students at Liberty High, an inner-city school, where I teach 12th grade English. "We're researching current events," I say. "Most of my kids are doing Kobe Bryant," and Nora tries to smile. "But one girl did her report on that Chinese virus."

"What Chinese virus?"

"I think it's called Covid."

Finally, we come to Dave. On this subject, Nora says the following, "Listen to me, Brian, my David loved you very much. He loved you like a son. He wanted to help you anyway he could. He wanted to protect you. And he knew how much you loved him. How much you looked up to him. And I know how much his death destroyed you. How much it still hurts you. But, Brian, I'm begging you now, *please* let David go, let all that pain go. You need to focus on your beautiful wife and that perfect little baby girl. You did it, Brian, everything David wanted you to do. You finished college, got your degree. Now you're a teacher. You're doing exactly what you were destined to do. And David would be so proud of you." She leans over the sideguard and slurps a sip of Vitamin Water through a straw. "You don't need David anymore. His work here is done. Let him rest in peace."

"Okay, Aunt Nora."

"I will miss you, Brian, but right now I'm tired and need to sleep."

Before leaving, I go downstairs, past the landing where my aunt once kept all those litter boxes, to the semi-finished basement. I turn right and see layered clutter everywhere, boxes and piles of clothes that look like nothing but slopes and shapes in the darkness. There's the little laundry room where Dave used to store his suits—suits that were surely moldering in some landfill by now. It's packed floor-to-ceiling with crates

of crap, and I think: whoever buys this house from Courtney is gonna have to bulldoze and start over, a complete rebuild. Then I stand near the sliding glass door with its cracked pane. I feel myself being teleported to the past, back to that April night in 1999, twenty-one years ago. I see Dave, donning his Miami Dolphins sweatshirt over jeans and beat-up Reeboks, half-drunk Labatts in hand. I see myself enter the room with his beer and Marb Reds, “the cover charge,” he calls it, and classic rock blares from a woodgrain speaker. I tell Dave I’ve been betting on basketball games. I watch him palm me that wad of money, then I hug him. I smell his cigarette-and-sweat smell. I want this moment to last forever. But I know it can’t. No matter how hard I hug him, how close I hold him, I know how this story ends. My mouth at Dave’s shoulder, I say, “I love you,” and it comes out muffled against his sweatshirt.

“Brian?” Lynda’s voice snaps me back to the present. I turn around and there she is, standing at the bottom of the stairs with Annalee. “What are you doing?” she asks, and I sort of shrug and shake my head.

“Ready to go?”

“I’m ready,” I say, and I am. Never again will I stand in this basement. Never again will I be in this house. That part of my life is over. As we start up the stairs, Annalee extends her arms, and says, “Daddy, I’m tired, can you carry me?”

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Luxury or Necessity

by Lynne Golodner

Every Christmas Day, I clean out the basement—pulling out plastic totes and rifling through them to see what we can toss. Most of the totes contain items that trigger memories I rarely access. Some of those bins hold old photo albums from my tumultuous first marriage, even though I divorced my children's father and have been remarried for more than a dozen years. When I consider what to keep and what to toss, I keep these images of the past not just for my children, who might one day want to envision their parents together, but because I want to remember that there were good moments among the bad.

I dust off books and games, mop behind the couch, categorize and organize the stuff we've accumulated and stashed away. I look forward to this cleanse with great enthusiasm, but my husband and four nearly grown children do not. They surrender to my demands wishing I would forget this ritual. But when I clear things out, I can breathe again, like a weight has lifted off my hunched shoulders. I have space to think.

That space often feels precious, for every room of my 2,500-square-foot house, not just the basement, is filled with stuff. Photographs and paintings cover walls and counters, and all manner of bric-a-brac clutter surfaces. Just the other day, I removed several of my kids' canvas creations from the basement wall and tossed them in the garbage. They were mostly decade-old abstract swipes of color that young children call art. With no idea who did which painting, and no claim from my kids, it was time for them to go.

Had I forgotten the lessons of the past? When I was a child and wanted something in a store, my mother would ask, "Is it a luxury or a necessity?" I took this question seriously, for my mother was always serious. If I truly needed something, she would buy it. But if there was an inkling of want behind the request, well, then perhaps we could simply walk on and reserve the desire for another day, or never.

We went through my closet twice a year, spring and fall, the seasons when new clothes replaced those I outgrew. "If you haven't worn it in a year, it goes," Mom insisted.

When I moved away, she came to wherever I was living and offered the same service. Mom discouraged me from shopping at mark-down knock-off stores to get a good deal because they usually carried clothing no one wanted and which matched nothing. “If you don’t know what you’ll wear it with, you’ll never wear it,” she said. “Buy outfits, not pieces.” So many times, I ignored her advice and bought a shirt that I loved but could not figure out what to pair it with, so it remained on a hanger, often with tags, until I dumped it in a bag of clothes to donate. I might not have labeled such clothing as “luxury” items but the act of purchasing them certainly was. Had my mother not insisted on seasonal donations of such items, they merely would have accumulated.

When my father died, my mother opened drawers and cupboards to find them overflowing with forgotten papers of Dad’s long-shuttered company, rubber bands and paper clips grown so brittle they snapped in half, remote controls and cords from machines discarded ages before. Dad died two months before the pandemic, so my grieving mother, alone in the home they built when I was a baby, distracted herself from the rising case counts by clearing out Dad’s accumulated junk. She filled double-thick trash bags with all the stuff she didn’t want—which was all the stuff—and left them in various upstairs rooms for my husband and sons to lug to the curb. Whenever she thought she had finished, she discovered another drawer or shelf crowded with useless junk.

His bulk purchases always seemed practical: two or three bottles of shampoo, multiple bars of soap, family-sized tubes of toothpaste, huge packages of toilet paper. It was important to have “backup,” he said, which seemed like good planning. Dad was born to Depression-era parents who likely impressed upon him their unspoken fears of never having enough. Dad wasn’t a materialistic person, and he cared little for clothing. My mother guided his fashion decisions, telling him when it made sense to buy a tuxedo and ushering him away from the kelly-green pants.

Both of my parents grew up with modest means. Dad’s father, my Grandpa Sid, drove a milk delivery truck along the streets of Detroit. Grandma Sarah didn’t work, and they lived a quiet life in a small house. Once, Dad showed me the three places he’d lived as a boy—one was an empty lot, the other two overrun with graffiti and broken windows. It wasn’t just a modest life; at times it was a tough one. He recalled how at age six his

mother sent him to the corner bar to bring his father home for dinner and how as a teen, he got into street fights when kids made antisemitic comments.

Grandpa Artie, my mother's father, cared more what the neighbors thought than what his family truly needed. But he had little career success as a job-hopping bookkeeper, and there were appearances to keep up, so his debonair, beloved father-in-law, my great-grandfather, Grandpa Louie, made sure Mom and her siblings had everything they wanted.

I imagine Grandpa Artie's childhood home was sparse. His parents were Polish immigrants with seven children on New York's Lower East Side. They likely lived in a tenement, and I've seen those two- or three-room apartment walkups where kids slept on floors and in corners because there weren't enough beds or even space to hold them. Grandpa believed he deserved bigger things and once grown, he lived like it. I learned later that people were always bailing him out—my aunts and uncles, my parents, a wealthy cousin. So perhaps her father's overspending made my mother the practical one, and my father's family frugality made him a collector who couldn't let go.

Because in clothing stores, Mom always intoned, "Luxury or necessity?", I love thrifting, finding new life for cast-offs that cost no more than $10 or $20. And I think long and hard before making a purchase.

But clothing always disappoints me. I expect transformation with the feel of a fabric or the look of an outfit, yet the reality falls short. The cloth doesn't hug my curves or caress my shoulders. The pants are too tight at the waist. The shirt sleeves shrink in the wash, and the colors fade. Mom taught me to be happy with what I have, not to think that a new item will somehow make my life better. Perhaps heeding her advice, I don't own a lot of clothing. I am careful, now, with those acquisitions because I realize their limitations.

In contrast, I have way too many books. That's because when I was young, my father took me to bookstores and said, "Anything you want, Lynnie! Books are knowledge, and you can never have enough." I can't seem to let go of the strong spines or careful words, even though I rarely reread them. I survey my packed shelves with titles not cracked in decades, pledging to pull them down but never actually doing so. I rationalize that books are a comfort: brilliant revelations surrounding me, words to discover, stories

that might change how I see myself. Was that why Dad held onto all those old bills and outdated remotes? To cling to all the versions of himself as the years passed?

But if I don't read the books over and over, what good do they serve? I could gain equal insight and wisdom from library books, borrowed, cherished, then shared with another. Holding on to all these books may be a way of keeping my father alive. But as I think back on those dusty months when my mother dug out all the forgotten items from the hollows of her home, I know I don't want my legacy to be that I couldn't let go of the past.

I live in a nice house with walls painted deep, rich hues—peacock blue in the living room, royal purple in the family room, warm brown in the basement. Every room is filled with furniture and rugs, tables and bookshelves, and a rarely played piano my mother-in-law shipped from Washington, D.C. dominates the living room. The closets are full of old coats.

The kids are leaving now, moving into their own lives. The rooms will soon whisper with echoes. Most of the furniture has been replaced with newer choices. Just this year, I dismantled the stained and streaked dining room table and fraying chairs that I'd bought with my first husband and installed a gleaming new set of upholstered chairs and dark wood table. It has taken years to transform the phases of my life rather than cobble together moments of the past and the joy of my present. And while I love this place where we melded into a family after heartbreak and divorce and remarriage and blending, I am ready to say goodbye to what I no longer need and choose a small and cozy spot, with tall trees and land to walk on, near to a river or a forest where I can contemplate what really matters.

Luxury is defined as "great comfort and extravagant living," while necessity is about being required, indispensable. True comfort is a deep and abiding love, even in the throes of anger or frustration. Holding on to the past reassures me that I've made a mark, created a legacy, built memories that will linger long after me.

My real treasures are a dog-eared cookbook I inherited from my grandmother and the tiny black and white photos of my parents as children—more precious than the tufted velvet Arhaus couch that I never sit on or the crystal vases growing dusty from neglect.

I don’t need a big house to be happy. When my youngest graduates from high school, we’ll find a quiet place, with just enough space. My husband and I will donate most of our belongings and take only what we really need: a couple sturdy sweaters, my favorite blankets, the comforter with the little leaves that keeps us warm on the coldest nights. A set of skillets and two deep pots to make soup or pasta. One good knife. Over the years, I’ve collected mugs from my travels and filled a closet with cookbooks, but I’ll take only a few favorites, the ones I actually use. We rarely return to cramped storage units and crowded corners anyway. Leaving them for others to wade through after my life is done would be the most unwelcome gift, as my mother experienced.

And as for the boxes of memories in the basement, I will summon the courage to let them go, like my mother taught me. It is a luxury to keep things for which we have no use; the real necessity is to live simply and well while we can.

A former journalist, **Lynne Golodner** is the author of eight books and thousands of articles and essays. Her first novel *Woman of Valor* was published in 2023. With an MFA in poetry from Goddard College, she lives in Huntington Woods, Michigan with her husband and a rotating combination of her four kids. She works as a writing coach and marketing consultant, helping authors build their brands and promote their work. As host of the Make Meaning Podcast, Lynne interviews authors and people in publishing.

Daddy’s Girl

by Ria Parody Erlich

Before I was my mother's daughter, I was Daddy's girl.

For much of the first six years of my life, my father was my best pal, my playmate, my everything. In fact, I was so afraid of losing him that when I sang *My Country 'Tis of Thee* at school and came to the line "land where my fathers died," I stopped singing in order not to cry because I took it literally.

My father was more available than my mother, who was the family breadwinner and devoted to her job as office manager at an exclusive women's clothing store on downtown Canal Street, the premier destination for shopping in 1950's New Orleans. Mama worked six days a week and often came home late, too tired to give me the attention I craved.

But Daddy set his own hours. He owned a cramped, dark, second-hand store, which some family members sarcastically called a junk shop and "Herbie's hobby." In my eyes, however, on the rare occasions I was allowed to visit, it was an irresistible wonderland of used books, clothes, dishes, furniture, even some real antiques, all of which I imagined held exotic, fascinating secrets about the lives of their original owners.

Most days, my father opened the store at 7:30 a.m. and closed no later than 5:00 p.m. Occasionally he closed earlier, either complaining that business was lousy or, in winter, that he didn't feel safe after dark on that rundown, seedy block of Dryades Street, which numbered several noisy, twenty-four-hour bars among its retail establishments. But no matter what his mood when he came home, he always found the energy and time to play before and after dinner with his little girl.

My mother sometimes watched, but she did not join in our games. She seemed content, perhaps relieved, to leave us to our play, except to remind Daddy to be careful and not to let things get rough. He would promise, then wink at me to signal that we weren't going to let Mama spoil our fun.

My earliest memory of Daddy—of anything, really—is when I was three years old. He would walk beside me as I happily pedaled my toy car from our faded yellow apartment

building on Milan Street to the massive live oak tree half a block away at the corner of St. Charles Avenue. The sturdy, Spanish moss-draped sentry stood silent watch over the neutral ground, the uniquely New Orleans term for the wide, avenue-dividing median, where cherrywood and olive drab-painted streetcars regularly rumbled past on their tracks, bells clanging, brakes squeaking—the soundtrack for our unfolding scene.

"Fill 'er up, ma'am?" Daddy said.

"Yes, Herbie," I said. I didn't call him Daddy then.

With a magician's flair, Daddy pulled a pretend hose from the tree trunk and pumped pretend gas into the car's pretend tank. With a flourish, he extracted a pretend rag from his pocket and cleaned the pretend windshield.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said with a snappy salute.

To me, he was much handsomer than any of the crisply uniformed chorus of Texaco gas station attendants on the Milton Berle Show—one of several television programs Daddy and I watched together that inspired the games we played. Sometimes we pretended we were ballroom dancers like Arthur and Kathryn Murray, who suggested that viewers should put a little fun in their lives and try dancing. I would stand on Daddy's feet and expectantly hold up my arms as high as I could in the proper female dance partner position.

"Not too fast, Herbie," Mama said. "She'll get dizzy."

"She'll be okay, Sonia," Daddy said.

He would grab my hands tightly, softly sing "Casey would waltz with the strawberry blonde," and gently, sweetly, slowly waltz me 'round and 'round the living room. I don't remember feeling dizzy—just giddy with the romance of it all.

The game I loved to play most with Daddy was cowboys. We straddled horses made from chairs turned backward, clicked our tongues to urge our trusty steeds forward. We puffed our cheeks and blew out air through our teeth to mimic the sound of guns—*puh-CHEW puh-CHEW*—when we shot our silent toy pistols (no cap guns allowed). And we defied my mother's no-rough-play order by pantomiming fistfights with phantom bad guys, trading blows and knockdowns until we ultimately prevailed.

I imagined myself Roy Rogers or Wild Bill Hickock, the brave, clever heroes. Daddy was Pat Brady or Jingles, the dimwitted, jovial sidekicks—parts he played with gusto, his

often-hidden sense of humor on full display. And though I relegated him to supporting roles, Daddy was unquestionably my hero, my shining star.

I never thought it unusual that I was closer to Daddy than to Mama in my early childhood until a friend who knew my history recently said, "You know, children are supposed to bond with their mothers first, not their fathers."

Her comment jogged the memory of my late, great shrink's reaction to my mother's version of the day I was born.

"The nurse held you up and told me I had a beautiful baby girl, " Mama said. "'That's nice,' I said, and promptly fell asleep."

My shrink peered at me owlishly over his tortoise-shell frame glasses.

"So, your mother fell asleep before she held you for the first time," he said.

I briefly considered how Mama's failure to perform such a crucial act of infant-mother bonding might have affected me and influenced my initial parental loyalty, but quickly banished the thought from my consciousness. After all, I had told my shrink in our very first session that I now had an extremely close relationship with my mother, and that I was in therapy to talk about why my relationship with my father had collapsed.

It was the night of the haircutting incident when things seemed to change forever. My father, mother, and I were in their bedroom in the upper duplex on Octavia Street they rented the previous year, further from the noise of the streetcar tracks, but closer to my elementary school.

Daddy and I were preparing to play barbershop—another of my favorite games. Mama was in bed reading *Harper's Bazaar* magazine. Daddy was sitting in his mahogany rocking chair, towel draped around his shoulders. On the spur of the moment, I begged him to let me use his professional barber shears with the "pinky hook" instead of pantomiming cutting his hair with two fingers.

"I'm six years old, and I learned how to use scissors last year in kindergarten," I said, accidentally on purpose forgetting to mention they were the blunt kind.

"She's going to put someone's eye out," Mama said to Daddy with one of her searing I-don't-think-that's-a-good-idea looks.

"She'll be okay, Sonia," Daddy said assuredly to Mama. Then sternly, but with a confident gleam in his eye, he said to me, "You be careful, you hear me, little girl?"

I did not put anyone's eye out. However, reckless with the thrill of victory over my mother, whom I saw as the enemy of fun, I impetuously snipped off a lock of my father's hair. It drifted to the floor while the three of us watched in stunned silence.

"R-i-i-i-a," Daddy said, extending my name to five angry staccato syllables overlaid with nervous laughter as he leaned over to pick up the black and silver evidence of the crime.

Mama slammed down the *Harper's Bazaar* and said, "Give me those scissors right now, Ria Charlotte Parody," using all my names, which meant I had committed a serious offense. "You may never play with them again."

I looked to my steadfast partner in crime, my champion, my Daddy, for solace and support, but got none. Feeling unmoored, awash in a tidal wave of embarrassment, guilt, and humiliation, I solemnly handed Mama the offending instrument—finger holes first, cutting end closed and resting in my folded palm, like my kindergarten teacher taught me.

After that, things were different between Daddy and me. The changes in his attitude and demeanor came swiftly, like massive storm clouds fueled by fierce winds signaling the arrival of a catastrophic hurricane. We never played barbershop—or anything else—again.

Child's misunderstanding or not, I truly believed our games ended abruptly because I had betrayed Daddy's trust by cutting his hair, as evidenced by his silence, and because I had betrayed Mama's trust, as well. Their disapproval was terrifying since I had not yet felt anything but the glow of being their perfect daughter, the daughter I thought they wanted. I imagined all sorts of cataclysmic consequences.

No longer could I be, would I be, Daddy's little pinup girl, posing in my bathing suit on a Biloxi beach for a vacation photo Mama gave him captioned, "I thought you might enjoy seeing what a future Miss America looks like." No more Daddy being my hero and preferred protector, like the day I ferociously screamed, "I'm going to tell Herbie on you," when Mama and I were holding hands on the concrete seawall steps and she fell, grabbing me more tightly instead of letting go, pulling me down with her, which resulted

in painful injuries for both of us. No more Daddy as my gas pump jockey, ballroom dance partner, or TV western co-star.

Grown-up reality had overtaken childhood fantasy. Overwhelmed with sadness, I made a momentous decision.

"I'm going to call you Daddy instead of Herbie from now on," I said.

Vanquishing my most cherished expression of our intimacy was an abject admission to myself that I was hopelessly resigned to the new relationship. We were no longer Herbie and Ria, best pals and playmates. We were now merely father and daughter. I didn't know it at the time, but I had learned the most important rule for survival in our family—Mama always wins.

The likely origin of that rule came into sharper focus years later. A few days after my mother died, I was sorting through some of her legal papers and unearthed a family secret like the kind that intrigued me about objects in my father's store when I was a child. The deed to Joseph Street revealed our house was owned by Sonia Sherman Parody, a once-married woman, and Herbert Louis Parody, a twice-married man. I was not only shocked, but angry and frustrated because I couldn't confront my parents with this newly discovered, somewhat unsettling information that my father once had a wife who was not my mother.

I soon learned the whole family knew about Daddy's first marriage and that I had been kept in the dark for forty-six years—since birth—due to a promise exacted by my mother. No one was to tell me for fear of adversely impacting the image I would have of my father. But now that both my parents were dead, several relatives were willing, albeit reluctantly, to break that promise, though I've never been quite certain I got the whole story from any of them.

I was told that after my parents became engaged, my father began a secret affair with a woman he met at a bar, who he somehow got the impression was wealthy. She somehow got the same impression about him, and because each was impatient to share the other's imaginary fortune, they hastily eloped. However, they soon found out the financial truth about each other, and the union was swiftly annulled. Daddy, according to family lore, "came crawling back" to Mama and vowed never to disappoint her again. It

didn't seem too far from that promise to abdicating all power, including when it came to raising me.

Once my father and I stopped playing together, our few interactions were reduced to brusque, clipped exchanges. He left for his store before I got up in the morning, and we rarely even said hello when he got home. After his shower, he would put on a fresh white t-shirt and clean blue work pants—the only color and kind he wore—then wordlessly sit on the living room sofa and fall asleep.

My energetic, playful Daddy, who I thought would be my constant companion forever, had abandoned me in plain sight. I felt devastated—that it was hopeless to wake him up to play with me—to pay any attention at all. I wonder if he felt devastated and hopeless too, choosing sleep as his means of escape.

During the rest of my elementary school years, I retreated to my room as soon as Daddy got home to avoid the sadness and tension I felt. I escaped as I usually did from the real world by immersing myself in books, mostly biographies of headstrong girls who became successful women, like Louisa May Alcott and Clara Barton. And I discovered how much I enjoyed playing solo, because I got to act all the parts.

I was able to put more physical distance between my father and me in the house my parents bought on Joseph Street, further still from the streetcar tracks, but across from the junior high I'd be attending in a few months. My new hiding place, which was called "Ria's bathroom" because it was attached to my bedroom, was at the very back of the house. And though the warped bathroom door didn't shut tightly and had no lock, I felt private and safe in my black and white-tiled sanctuary, and spent hours of blissful solitude perusing teen fashion magazines and reading coming-of-age novels with strong women protagonists.

My father woke up when Mama got home, though he would forego his after-work snooze if we were having his favorite sirloin steak for dinner, confident he was being helpful by cooking it himself "so your mother doesn't have to do it when she gets home." Daddy would fry the steak to death on high heat in its own rendered fat, then turn off the flame under the ancient club aluminum pan, where he left the now gray meat to get hard and stone cold by the time Mama arrived an hour or so later.

"Why didn't you fix anything else?" my mother would say, dumping a frozen brick of broccoli or cauliflower into a pot of boiling water and reheating the hapless, almost inedible sirloin.

"I didn't know what else to fix," my father would say, one of myriad aggravating, maddening refrains that Mama and I used like cement to build and strengthen our growing alliance.

I also emerged when Mama got home and followed her into her bedroom, settling comfortably on whichever color chenille bedspread, blue or pink, she favored that week. While I breathlessly told her about my day, Mama changed from her professional clothes—a black knit tailored dress or suit with a skirt, never pants—into blue Bermuda shorts and a colorful print sleeveless shirt to be cool and comfortable fixing all or part of dinner.

I trailed after her into the kitchen, which, no matter the home, was always relentlessly hot and humid. I eagerly accepted jobs she assigned me—making cocktail sauce from ketchup and mayonnaise for oyster or shrimp cocktails, mixing oil and vinegar dressing for lettuce and tomato salads. And by studying the black and white photos in Mama's *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook*, I learned how to properly set our dining room table, which was always covered with a white linen tablecloth. If I couldn't be Daddy's little girl, I would be Mama's little helper.

During dinner, Mama and Daddy talked mostly to each other, while I ate quietly and, if I were allowed, read a book, sometimes a comic book, which was easier to handle at the table because I could fold back the pages. After dinner, my father would fall asleep again on the sofa, then wake up a few hours later and go to bed.

Mama and I became best pals and playmates. She taught me to play Monopoly and Scrabble, which occupied many of our evenings while my father slept. We attended concerts, movies, and theatre, none of which interested my father. And she took me to some of the city's finest restaurants, including Galatoire's in the French Quarter, where I dined like a grownup on oysters Rockefeller, trout almandine, and burnt caramel custard for dessert. Dining out together was one of the activities Mama and I most enjoyed, because my father hated eating anywhere other than home.

"You never know what's going on in somebody else's kitchen," he said, "or where their hands have been."

Mama and I also vacationed without my father, because he didn't want to close his store for even a week for fear of losing money, and he did not trust anyone else to take care of it. Every summer for seven years starting when I was five, we spent a week at the same ante-bellum style hotel in Biloxi, where we lounged on the beach or at the pool, played endless games of "Go Fish," and wrote letters and postcards, mostly to Daddy, in the comfort of the ornate, luxuriously air-conditioned lobby.

But our best vacations together began when I was twelve, and my mother became the manager of her company's newest store in the up-and-coming New Orleans suburb of Metairie. "I've got to go on a two-week buying trip to New York this summer," my mother said. "Do you think you'd like to go with me?" She had been promising to take me to New York for years, as soon as she felt I was "old enough" to appreciate it, and I was beside myself with joy that the time had arrived.

We made four trips to New York over the next eight years. In the mornings, we went to her company's headquarters on Seventh Avenue in the bustling Garment District, where she was treated like a queen and I like a princess because I was Sonia Parody's daughter. She usually was finished with business by lunchtime, and our afternoons and evening were whirlwinds of landmarks, museums, restaurants, and theatres, where in the darkness of magical places with names like the Imperial and the Majestic, my ambition shifted from becoming a pediatrician to becoming not only an actress, but a Broadway musical comedy star.

And though I'm not sure exactly when it happened, I shifted full loyalty to my mother, who took me firmly by the hand and—not falling this time—led me to the promised land, a brave new world of seemingly limitless opportunities, where it felt like we were not just parent and child, but equals. Not just best pals and playmates, but best girlfriends, perfect companions, intimate confidantes in a world she seemed to navigate comfortably and with ease. A world where she seemed to belong and was happy. A world where, when I was with her, I felt I belonged and was happy, too.

♦

As Mama and I grew closer, my father and I grew further apart. I began to see him as a collection of contradictions, some of which were benign, not too hard to reconcile. He might have ruined many sirloin steaks, but he also concocted an evocatively memorable seafood gumbo—a thick, viscous stew teeming with blue crabs and shrimp fresh from the Gulf of Mexico, and fragrantly seasoned with gumbo filé (pronounced *FEE-lay* in Cajun dialect), a mandatory ingredient made from crushed dried sassafras leaves. And starting the summer I was thirteen, Daddy agreed to close his store for a week's vacation in Biloxi, but instead of a room in our usual hotel, we rented one of the tiny, tumbledown bungalows with a kitchenette where Mama fixed all our meals so my father didn't have to eat at a restaurant.

Daddy's literary taste leaned mostly toward lurid detective magazines with salacious covers, which he stashed in the trashcan next to the toilet, perhaps thinking it was an effective place to hide them from me, which, of course, it was not. But he also religiously read the morning and two afternoon newspapers so that he could vigorously argue with Mama about current events, hoping to wear her down until she converted to his point of view.

He loved the banjo strumming and clarinet licks of Dixieland jazz, but he hated classical music, which Mama swore she taught me to love by taking me to so many concerts when I was *in utero*. Daddy thought the prevalence of strings, especially violins, sounded mournful, no matter what the composer intended the spirit of the piece to be. And he abhorred opera, which he characterized as "a bunch of screeching," gleefully teasing Mama and me by imitating the singers while she and I watched the *Voice of Firestone* opera series on television.

He also insisted all the best popular songs were written before 1940 and despaired at my insatiable appetite for the Broadway musical albums Mama gave me, which I spent hours listening to in my room, memorizing, and singing in their entirety. Yet he was a gentle-voiced crooner and deft ukulele player who performed when he was younger with a local musical group. And I clearly inherited my ear and gift for music from him, certainly not from Mama, who admitted she "couldn't carry a tune in a bucket."

Some of my father's contradictory behavior, however, was not so easy for me to reconcile. He relished his prowess as a body builder and wrestler in his younger days, blaming marriage to Mama for his now nearly sedentary existence and portly shape.

"Your mother swore she'd never marry an athlete," he said.

But he still thought of himself as a tough guy and bragged about the fistfights he won when he was serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II. He also enjoyed recounting the tale of how he kicked out a window in the stifling hot barracks to let in the frigid fresh air the winter he was stationed in Idaho.

And likely because he felt it was what a tough guy would do to protect his family from bad guys, he kept a revolver and bullets in his nightstand, a terrifying discovery I made on one of my snooping expeditions when he and Mama weren't home. I never told anyone I found it, but I lived in fear that if my father were awakened from a sound sleep by the slightest suspicious noise, he would leap out of bed, adrenaline pumping, grab the gun, and accidentally shoot my mother or himself.

In contrast, one of my most treasured images of Daddy is part of a home movie I shot with my 8mm Kodak Brownie. He is admiring a fragile, hand-painted, porcelain bowl while balancing it delicately on his fingertips. This Jimmy Cagney wannabe so loved the antique glassware and pottery he bought at estate sales to sell at his store, he often couldn't bear to part with them. So he added them to his overflowing collection on the dusty shelves and red steel dinette table in our breakfast room, which Mama often grumbled was no use having since we couldn't eat in it.

"Well, that's just how Daddy is," Mama said when I complained about the less tolerable aspects of my father's behavior. "I wish you were more like me and just let those things roll off you. I wish you'd at least try to get along with him better."

To please my mother, I tried to be more like her, but some things were impossible to let roll off me, especially my father's virulent racism, which increasingly widened the gulf between us until it became unnavigable. It was not only a completely intolerable, irreconcilable difference, but a point of no return.

Daddy was a racist of Archie Bunker proportions long before Norman Lear even thought of creating Archie Bunker. My father's catalogue of intolerance contained an infinite list of offensive labels for almost every nationality, including Chinese, German,

Irish, and Italian. He also despised all religions, but particularly Catholicism, which he complained was ruining the city because "they're building a Catholic church on every corner."

And though we were Jewish, Daddy was not shy about vehemently criticizing the religion he hadn't practiced in years, while vigorously defending it from aspersions cast by others. When I asked him to justify this obvious contradiction, he said, "It's okay for Jews to say bad things about Jews, but it's not okay for anybody else."

Daddy reserved his most venomous wrath for those whom he called the "n" word. I was five when I remember first encountering it. We were stopped for a red light during one of our "just the two of us" drives in the old blue pickup truck he used for his business when I heard him mutter disgustedly, "Look at the roaches crossing the street," as a group of black people walked in front of us.

Even then I knew he was wrong and was able to muster up the gumption to protest.

"But Daddy, they're people, too," I said.

He seethed in stunned silence for a moment, then with his eyes straight ahead, unable or unwilling to look at me, he said, "Someday, little girl, you're going to see."

That I had not seen what he was sure I would by the time I became a teenager must have been on his mind the night he roared into our living room clutching my copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which he found on his own snooping expedition into my nightstand drawer.

"Sonia, did you know your daughter was reading this trash?" he said. "It glorifies a n****r."

One night during a freak New Orleans snowstorm, he surprised me by offering a ride home to Mamie, the Black woman who took care of me and our household from when I was seven weeks old and Mama went back to work until I graduated from college, even though she lived in a neighborhood where he would never have gone otherwise, even in broad daylight. But that turned out to be a one-time gesture of situational kindness, not a beacon of hope for change.

I barreled headlong into my teens just as the world was plunging into the turbulent 1960's. By that time, any conversations Daddy and I attempted turned into fierce arguments about everything from my pro- vs. his anti-integration stance, to my liberal vs.

his reactionary politics, to my moral objection to the Vietnam war vs. his hawkish agreement.

The most perilous topic for us was one we avoided for as long as we could. Daddy never seemed ready for me to "become a woman," euphemistically or otherwise. On the same night as his *Mockingbird* rant, he displayed outrage about *Joy in the Morning*, another of my hidden novels he'd found and at least partly read, declaring it "filthy" because it contained some mildly graphic sex scenes and one messy passage in which the heroine discovers she has her period.

One afternoon when he came home from work, I was watching the film *Blue Denim* on television.

"Why the hell is she crying so much?" he said, referring to Carol Lynley's character.

"Because Brandon DeWilde wants to have sex and she doesn't," I said, which resulted in a deafening silence from him that spoke volumes.

But when I began dating, Daddy apparently felt obligated to discharge what he thought was his fatherly duty. He sent me on each date with an ominous warning, delivered, thank goodness, before the boy arrived.

"Remember, little girl, I was a boy myself once," he said, "and I know what boys want."

Perhaps feeling nostalgic the night before I left for my freshman year at the University of Florida, Daddy and I revived our long-abandoned tradition of a just-the-two-of-us drive. We cruised the neighborhood and stopped at a popular local stand for our favorite grape snowballs. But our conversation, while mercifully civil, remained lukewarm and strained.

I returned home summers and holidays during my years at Florida, less so when I was in grad school in Ohio. When I moved to Los Angeles in 1978 to seek my fortune as a screenwriter, I stopped visiting entirely, blaming it on fear of flying, from which Daddy also suffered, and on not wanting to negotiate long drives and train trips.

Mama, who was not afraid to fly, visited me occasionally on the West Coast, but when Daddy died in 1981, I hadn't seen him for three years. I last spoke to him on the call he and Mama made after my adult bat mitzvah in December. Knowing how he felt

about religion, Judaism in particular, I was apprehensive about what he would say not only about the ceremony, but also about my choice to become a more culturally active and religiously observant Jew.

After a quick hello, Mama promised she'd return for a longer chat and handed the phone to Daddy.

"Congratulations, little girl," he said. "Your Daddy's proud of you."

He had a heart attack and died six days later.

Before I took her to the airport at the end of her first visit after Daddy had died, Mama and I had breakfast together in the coffee shop of the Holiday Inn near the Santa Monica Pier, where she'd stayed for years, not only because it was convenient to Pacific Palisades, where I lived at the time, but also because it was across the street from a McDonald's. It was one of the easiest, most pleasant visits we'd had in years, which I attributed to the work I had done in therapy to disentangle myself and separate from her. To no longer be co-dependent. To finally reclaim my autonomy.

I don't remember why it came up. Maybe Mama was bemoaning, as she often did, how disappointed and sad she was that Daddy and I did not get along better. For some reason, I mentioned the ill-fated haircut and how Daddy's and my relationship seemed to have dramatically changed after that.

Mama looked up from replenishing her longtime favorite lipstick, Revlon "Fire and Ice," closed her compact, and returned it to her purse.

"Oh, that was when I decided it was time to maneuver you away from him. I was afraid he had too much influence on you," she said matter-of-factly, then picked up a clean napkin from the unused place setting on our table for four to blot her lips.

Like the six-year-old who shouldered the blame for an innocent mishap during a childhood game, I remained silent. I had unearthed the shadowy secret in therapy that Mama was jealous of that early, seemingly unbreakable, bond between Daddy and me, but I did not understand until that moment the lengths to which she had gone to pry him and me apart and have me to herself. That she had staged a successful coup—a covert battle of Armageddon with Daddy for my heart and soul—at the expense of the relationship she constantly claimed she wished were closer, even, to that end, carefully

concealing my father's betrayal of her with another woman so as not to tarnish his reputation in my eyes.

At that point, when I realized that Mama had stolen from me the sweetest part of my childhood, I was too stunned to react at all, let alone cry. Mama always wins.

I didn't cry about my father's death until a year later, when I saw the film "On Golden Pond," in which father and daughter actors Henry and Jane Fonda, who had a stormy relationship, play a father and daughter who have a stormy relationship. Late in the film, when Jane Fonda's character successfully completes a backflip into the lake, a metaphor demonstrating the courage and strength her father thinks she lacks, she is finally rewarded with his elusive approval.

As the characters enjoyed a warm, demon-exorcising hug, I began to cry, imagining the longstanding rift between real-life father and daughter also had been mended. And suddenly I realized my tears were for Daddy and me, as well.

Maybe it was because that scene reminded me of the stinging comment my lapsed athlete father made when I proudly showed him my first set of junior high report cards with all A's but one: "How the hell come you got a C in gym?" Or because it reminded me of another of his particularly hurtful criticisms: "You're book smart, but you've got no common sense."

Maybe it was because I regretted not knowing sooner my mother's role in the split between my father and me. Or because I understood that while my father wasn't wholly a hero, he wasn't wholly a bad guy either.

Maybe it was because I remembered how often I resisted Daddy's embraces, pushed him away. Or because I ached for, longed for, one last demon-exorcising hug.

Maybe it was because I wondered if a reconciliation might have been possible, but now it was too late. Or maybe it was because I was mourning the loss not only of Daddy, but of Daddy's little girl.

Ria Parody Erlich is a retired educator and public relations professional who is delighted to now be able to devote herself full time to her longtime passion for creative writing. Ria's writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *The Circle Magazine* (r.i.p.), *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Litbreak Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Paddle Wheeler*, her high school alumni literary magazine. Ria's short story, "The Goodman Girls" was included in *Halfway Down the Stairs* "Best of 2021" list and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In October, 2022, her short play, "Toast" was presented as a staged

reading at the Alliance for Los Angeles Playwrights fall conference. A proud New Orleans native, Ria currently lives in Santa Monica, California, with her husband Shel.

A Simple Eviction Case

by Anthony J. Mohr

The tenants and the landlord shared common features. Bodies that stood straight once but, in the sixth decade of their lives, had begun to arc. Deep lines crisscrossed their faces. They—we call them “the parties”—represented themselves. And we needed interpreters. Spanish for the tenants, Mandarin for the landlord.

The tenants: I bet the husband rose at sunrise in order to arrive at the foundry on schedule. His wife took a bus in the opposite direction and rode for an hour to the six-bedroom house she had to clean. I stopped myself. I had to focus on what I knew.

The landlord: He was a big man, rotund with a bulbous nose and an unsteady voice. I shouldn’t have let him say he’d immigrated to this country a generation before his tenants, which gave him years to save for the duplex where they lived—the tenants on the ground floor unit, the landlord upstairs. Recently his wife died. My guess is he spent weekends tending the plants, changing the outside light bulbs, scrubbing the walkway… I stopped myself. I had to focus on the testimony, which was what I knew.

Me: For over two decades, a judge. Not much hair left, creases across my forehead, and a resting expression some would call a scowl—unless I’m smiling, which a few claim I do too often. Wearing my black robe doesn’t bore me yet.

The tenants paid their rent late, the landlord said, triggering a “three-day notice to pay rent or quit,” a legal warning that if they didn’t hand over what they owed in three days, he’d evict them. He had that right even if the tenants paid at one minute past midnight on the morning of the fourth day. The notice’s wording cleaved to each detail the law required. Had it not done so, I’d have to dismiss the case. I wondered if somebody helped the landlord prepare his notice, then stopped myself. The answer was irrelevant.

The tenants had no bank account. For six years they’d paid with money orders made out to cash and purchased at the post office. The landlord gave them receipts, which, before stopping myself, I imagined them tucking into a corner of their top dresser drawer.

The landlord said his tenants paid, but not within three days and not before blurting

out that he needed the rent to cover the mortgage payments. Without it, he'd lose the building. I struck that last clause from my mind. It was as extraneous as my knowledge that following an eviction, the landlord could raise the rent to any amount he wanted. Or my assumption that over the past six years, his costs must have gone up—maintenance, insurance, repairs.

Controlling my thoughts was not easy because, like most people, I tend to speculate. And while I may be a judge, like most people, I have feelings, which were starting to bubble up. The landlord sounded friendly. I liked him and felt sorry he'd lost his wife.

Here's what the tenants said: At 6 p.m. on the final day the rent was due, the husband's employer, about to go out of business, paid his salary, in cash. They ate dinner as soon as the husband arrived home. Following their meal, the tenants said they handed the cash to the landlord. It was late; they were tired; they'd neglected to ask for a receipt.

Here's what the landlord said as he waved his hands: "No. That never happened." I imagined the landlord stashing his rent money into a bottom drawer or the back of his refrigerator, then, maybe the next day, peeling off a few of his tenants' dollars and going to the market to buy himself a precooked chicken for dinner. I stopped myself. It was time for our morning recess.

My clerk trailed me into chambers. As he laid pleadings from another case on my work table, he said, "Judge, I don't like this landlord. Did you know he—"

I raised my arm, palm facing him. What my staff thought had nothing to do with the case. In fact, seeking their input could violate California's Code of Judicial Ethics.

"Oh, right," said my clerk, his face full of apology. We'd worked together for several years, but I had to keep the boundaries firm.

In the quiet of my chambers, I imagined: The husband shambling into the apartment, his wife asking, in a thin but loving voice, if he was hungry, and after he nods, placing food on the kitchen table. Chicken, maybe. I stopped myself. The question on the table was: Did the tenants pay their rent within three days of the notice? They said they did. The landlord said they didn't.

I, too, had received a notice to pay rent or quit—in 1973. I was six months out of

law school.

“Life’s tough,” said the manager of my West L.A. complex when I asked for two more days because cash was a little short, which it was. My clerkship with a judge paid less than big law firms. The holiday season had been costly, and—I admit—I’d treated myself to a weekend in New York, my gift to me for passing the bar exam. I had to take off from work to drive to the bank, withdraw money from my savings account, and—with an hour to go—drop a certified rent check down the slot.

I shook my head. My remembrance had nothing to with the case.

Whom would I harm? If I believed the landlord, the sheriff would lock out the tenants in a few days. If I believed the tenants, the landlord would have to keep living with people he didn’t like. I stopped myself. It was wrong to consider the consequences of my decision. I had to focus on the law, the law I was grateful for because, as in every case, it served as my guide, even though the law could be cruel.

Not for the first time in my career, I wished one of the sides—the parties—had demanded a jury, freeing me from the duty to choose the word of one person over another’s. That the governor appointed me to the court didn’t provide me with any more insight—“perspicacity,” as one of our veteran judges put it—than I had as a lawyer.

Fifteen minutes later I returned to my bench.

I had a fifty-fifty chance of being right. But judges don’t play odds. We decide. The law says so, right there in the California codes. “A judge has a duty to decide any proceeding in which he or she is not disqualified.”

They call a trial a search for the truth. The truth? I couldn’t tell who’d told it. Fortunately, the law offers a pathway out of this dilemma. It’s called the burden of proof. As plaintiff the landlord has the burden to prove his case, meaning he has to prove it’s “more likely to be true than not true” that his tenants failed to pay on time. If you don’t know who’s right, the person—the party—with the burden of proof loses.

All three parties stared at me—we call it “the look”—normal while people wait for a judge to rule. I used to flinch when, new to the bench, I witnessed “the look,” but as the months passed it stopped worrying me. Some colleagues told me “the look” made them sense their authority. Judges do wield power, I guess. But no sense of power materialized as I announced my decision. I felt vulnerable. I’d taken an oath to serve the people of the

state of California. Was I serving them if I believed the wrong person?

I let the tenants stay. Their tears didn't make me happy nor did the landlord's hangdog look.

Before he left for the day, the bailiff knocked on my chambers door. He was husky enough to pass as a football star, with eyebrows so thick they almost met above his nose, distracting me from focusing on his shaved head.

"You did the right thing, Boss," he said. "The poor guy lost his job. Where would they go?"

I nodded. My bailiff hadn't crossed a boundary since I'd already ruled, but I wanted to be careful. That's not why the tenants won. The tenants won thanks to my ignorance of the truth. The tenants won because the law steered me to the right result even if they'd lied.

My wife made chicken for dinner. We talked about the day before watching a good movie on Netflix, with our Lhasa Apso snuggled between us. By ten we crawled into bed. I slept well. There's something magic about a night spent safely at home.

Anthony J. Mohr's work has appeared in, among other places, *Brevity's blog*, *Cleaver*, *Commonweal*, *DIAGRAM, Eclectica, Hippocampus Magazine, North Dakota Quarterly, Superstition Review,*ZYZZYVA*,* and several anthologies. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize five times. For almost twenty-seven years, he has sat as a judge on the Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles.

Attachment Theory

by Maria Hewett

"Attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another person across time and space."
(Ainsworth, 1973: Bowlby, 1969)

It wasn't supposed to turn out like this. The cliché runs like a ticker tape through my mind. But it's the best description for the past three years, which have passed like a series of car crashes. Each crash renders a new appendage inoperable. Eventually, every limb is damaged, and I become immobile, paralyzed in a reality I do not recognize but cannot escape. *It wasn't supposed to turn out like this.*

It has been three years since he joined our family at age thirteen. Three years since he boarded a plane for the first time and landed 9,000 miles from the only place he had ever known. My husband and I had waited so long; we wanted this.

Now, every morning, I balance a banana and bowl of cereal in one hand while unlocking the deadbolt on the hallway door with the other. I set the bowl on the floor and rap firmly on his bedroom door. "Okay, time to wake up." My voice is intentionally robotic. The sheets on his bed rustle. I slip out of the hall and return the deadbolt to the locked position.

Six months ago, he returned from a supposedly therapeutic boarding school for troubled, violent, out-of-control boys. Which means my routine with the doors and locks is six months strong—one locked door between him us at all times. Six months of navigating the house with a wristlet of color-coded keys that I begrudgingly dub my warden keys. Six months of being perpetually on edge. I can feel my nerves fraying, but I need them to be sharp, alert, aware. Six months in, and the ordeal still feels as absurd as it sounds.

♦

Growing up, the only adopted kids I knew were of a different race than their adoptive parents. My five-year-old brain concluded that this was true of all adoptions. Childish ignorance aside, I never—even then—wanted biological children. If I were to become a mother someday, it would be through adoption. One Christmas, I begged my parents for the American Girl doll, Addy. It was 1994, and Addy was the brand's only non-white doll. I took Addy everywhere, pretending she was my adopted daughter. In hindsight, I'm shocked that my mom obliged the wish.

For the entirety of my childhood, any viewpoint I held that diverged from my mother's was quickly dismissed as a phase. "You'll grow out of that—wait and see," was my mom's chorus. In my teen years, I mentioned that I wanted to adopt some day and was met with an eye roll. "Why do you have to make everything so difficult? Always drawing attention to yourself. What's wrong with living a normal life?" she bemoaned. I assume she filed the interaction under O*bstinate Teenager Phase*.

When my husband and I adopted, my mother's opinion had not changed, but she could no longer shelve my deviance as a phase. And now my husband was an accomplice. Two villains for the price of one. Time had sharpened her words from condescension to daggers. Time had sharpened her words from condescension to daggers. But I had donned armor to blunt her attacks. More importantly, her critiques taught me a valuable lesson: Biology does not guarantee a bond. Her disapproval and viciousness helped prepare me for what awaited. For that, I owe her gratitude.

Never let your guard down. Never show weakness. He'll see you as soft. The refrain has echoed from therapists, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, my husband…over and over. The words are branded in my brain. *No softness? But I'm his mother*. I want to disagree with them, but then my memory fires. It jolts me back: me in a fog lying on the pavement while he glowers from the top of the porch steps. The flashback ends. My cheeks burn—from anger? Shame? I'm unsure. My heart races, and I want air. No. I need air. So, I agree. No softness. Got it.

At first, therapists and social workers did everything they could to squeeze our family's "growing pains" into the tidy box of attachment disorder issues common among adoptive families. I wanted our experience to fit in that box. Attachment is the process of

a child bonding to his or her caregiver. The optimal window for forming secure attachments is the first two years of life. At thirteen, our son was long past the optimal stage. Add trauma into the mix, and the attachment process becomes even more complicated. All the right ingredients were there; the attachment disorder explanation made sense. Struggling to attach was a hurdle we had anticipated. Before he ever set foot in our house, I read every book available on the subject. But sometimes you mix the same ingredients together and get a different result. As it turned out, his ability to *form* an attachment was not a problem.

He bonded to me almost immediately. Internally, I celebrated our attachment win. In fact, when we met with the social worker for our first mandatory post-adoption meeting, she raved about his "secure attachment." She shrugged off his dishonest and sneaky behaviors, rebranding them as resourcefulness. My husband and I nodded amiably. Other warning signs were beginning to flash, but we stayed tight lipped about those. He'd only been with us for three months; our level of cautious optimism remained high. At least attachment—which we expected to be one of our largest hurdles—was one less thing to worry about.

We did not yet understand the threat that his version of attachment posed.

I'll never forget the day when he realized that American men don't habitually and openly beat their wives. It was nearly Thanksgiving. He had been in our home for about four months. I don't know why or how this epiphany struck him, but something sparked the question, "Why Dad no hit you?" I put on my best I'm-not-shocked-face and explained why violent behavior was never acceptable. He did not buy it. Instead, he asked, "No, really. Why? Because Momma is too strong?"

Thinking of my spaghetti-noodle arms, I choked back a laugh. "No, because it's never okay," I replied.

Still not convinced, he tried again. "Because Momma is too fast?"

I explained that despite what he saw in the village where he grew up, it is never okay for people to treat one another that way. Hoping to drive home the theme of respect, I added sternly, "Men and women are equal."

This prompted hysterical laughter, thigh slapping, and vigorous head shaking. The way he saw it, a man must show a woman that “he is the boss” (which apparently means that he beats her). Tracing his logic, he crossed his arms and smiled smugly. “That means Dad isn’t a real man.”

In that moment, I found this exchange to be ridiculous and mildly comical. Sure, it upset me, but a boy who was raised by Catholic nuns and grew up without male role models was attempting to educate me on the definition of manhood. It was at least a *little* funny. Apparently, my very large, former special ops husband didn’t pass the manhood test. Why? Because he does not beat me.

Later, the gravity of his worldview sunk in. A woman is an object to dominate and control, and the idea of treating a woman as an equal was utterly disgusting to him. Knowing that his dad held an opposing view was inconceivable, and he lost a perceptible amount of respect for my husband as a result. While I found this disturbing, another of his takeaways posed a more immediate threat. He concluded that if my husband wasn’t in charge of me, then no one was. And a woman displaying independence was both repulsive and absurd. He struggled to articulate this belief, but his actions spoke volumes. He was determined to right the wrong himself.

This was when the possessiveness began. I was his. Therefore, I belonged to no one else. He desired to choreograph how, when, where, and most importantly, with whom I spent my time. It became a frantic, daily attempt to guarantee that nothing competed with him for my love and attention. The less successful his attempts were, the more desperate and out of control his efforts became. Shouting. Throwing objects. Breaking things. A toddler’s tantrum in a fourteen-year-old’s body. His rage-filled fits were awful, but the subtler moments unnerved me even more. Whenever a friend hugged me hello or goodbye, he shot her a look that could pierce body armor. *“No. She’s mine, not yours,”* he communicated wordlessly. His behavior sent chills through my friends, and some were so unsettled that they distanced themselves.

But his jealousy of my husband was the worst of all. He loathed weekends and evenings when his dad was home, when my time and attention would not exclusively be his. Any signs of affection between my husband and I were met with his icy, piercing stare. But his frustration with his dad’s audacious desire to spend time in his own home was

always directed at me, never at his dad. While he may have questioned my husband's manliness, the male stature and gender were inherently more respected and feared than any female. I didn't even need to speculate about his jealousy; he'd confirmed his feelings multiple times during furious diatribes, one of which shattered a recently assembled Star Wars Lego set. Another resulted in shredding family photos featuring the three of us. Multiple times, I fled his flying fists already feeling the throbbing ache of not-yet-visible bruises.

I was initially so grateful that he formed an attachment that it gradually blinded me to reality. I trusted that the jealousy would subside. Eventually, he would stop seeing external factors as threats. But this emotional naivety burned me.

Things deteriorated quickly. The more his character came into focus, the less comfortable it was to be alone with him. Then, when he had been with us for nine months, he turned everything upside-down. The curveball of all curveballs.

The scene is chiseled in my memory. He had just come inside from jumping on the trampoline. Then, between sips of water, he recounted in vivid excruciating detail how he'd molested younger children, both boys and girls, while he lived in the orphanage. Stated as fact and without a flicker of remorse. I can picture his expression clearly—the distant coldness of his eyes and a self-satisfied smirk. The smirk made me nauseous. He felt *power* in the retelling. Shivers ran up my spine; I couldn't move. The human before me morphed from boy to monster with every sickening detail.

Patterns of abuse are especially high in institutional environments such as orphanages. Data suggests that he was likely a victim of similar abuse. When asked, he has repeatedly denied that anything of the sort happened to him. It is possible that he was never abused or that he was too young to remember. Or maybe, his denial preserves the power he feels from *his* version of the narrative—one in which he is the perpetrator only. Abuser equals power; victim equals powerless. He had grown up a victim of his world, whether or not he was the victim of another abuser.

And then, recounting how he had abused other children, he provided the gut punch, the five words that changed everything and shaped every day of my life since: "I

will do it again," he said. Then, as if issuing a challenge, he added, "when Momma's not looking."

My brain froze, echoing my body's inability to move, as if yet another limb had truly been severed. Was this a power play—an empty threat in search of a reaction? Or did he mean it? I could not know for certain. If he ruined someone's life on my watch, I would never forgive myself. The dangers he posed inside our home now paled in comparison to what he threatened to do beyond it. When I could form words, I told him that he could ever hurt or touch someone like that again, and refusing to let him see me upset, I left the room, the only action I could summon. Away from him, I collapsed under the gravity of his words. I felt crushed by the weight of his past actions. Of these new threats. How could I call such a person my son? I contemplated his attachment to me. My attachment to him. Both felt sickening. I had a new job: to *never* let him act on his threats.

After that day, I have never looked at him the same way.

It was about a month later that I woke up on the concrete patio after he shoved me from the porch stairs. When I regained consciousness, his silhouette towered above me. He had lived in the home we had tried to create for almost a year, and the incident was the proverbial last straw for my husband. The debate was over: Our home was now officially unsafe. My husband thought that a boarding school for troubled boys seemed like the best of the bad options. I was hesitant, but after he was kicked out of two local schools, we'd run out of choices.

A few weeks later, we dropped him off. I expected to be sad. Instead, I felt relieved.

Things did not improve at the boarding school. Rarely did he interact or participate in earnest; an ulterior agenda was always close at hand. He often sat alone surveying the room, homing in on weaknesses to exploit, like a lion assessing the herd. He returned home more out of control than when he left—more violent, angry, volatile, calculated. During one of our scheduled check-ins, the onsite therapist bluntly described him as "dangerous, manipulative, and predatory." What every parent wants to hear about their child.

After months at the school, he hadn't made a single friend. "A bully. Not a nice kid," the dean said. We waited and prayed for something to click, for some sort of breakthrough. None occurred. Because he'd not shown any progress, after eighteen months, the school kicked him out. He left a path of destruction in his wake. His list of documented wreckage was lengthy, including injuring another student so severely that the boy needed reconstructive plastic surgery. The other student's family opted not to pursue charges. Sometimes, I think they should have. Being expelled let him off easy.

While away, he'd grown into a man's body and was now six inches taller. He towered over me, and he knew it.

Almost overnight, the psychologists' and psychiatrists' language shifted; the vocabulary associated with attachment disorders and repeated trauma disappeared. Scarier words like sociopathy and antisocial personality disorder replaced them, spoken with the practiced distance and ease of seasoned diagnosticians, as though his conditions were simple and resolvable like an ear infection or a fractured wrist. One clinician pointed out minute differences between the two conditions. The other equated them. I wasn't interested in minutiae, but I did want to know why two independent professionals abruptly arrived at the same conclusion at the same time. Sociopathy was a far cry from an attachment disorder. What had they seen? What changed? Neither would address my question directly. Both offered diluted explanations that an official diagnosis wasn't possible prior to age eighteen. "Why not?" I contested. "That's ridiculous!" There would be no psychiatric diagnoses until then, I was told. "But teens are diagnosed with depression and anxiety all day long," I pushed back. "How is that any different?" Based on one clinician's tired sigh, I sensed that he agreed but was too professional to admit it.

Manipulativeness, narcissism, desire for power and control, volatility, dishonesty, inability to make friends, lack of remorse, uncontrolled anger, impulsiveness…the same ingredients, different recipe. The human brain is less of a math equation and more of a choose-your-own-adventure. However, this adventure wasn't what I chose.

Sociopath. What does one do with that information? There's no medication. No vaccine. No proven treatment. I want someone credible to lay out a plan and say, "Here's what you do…"

♦

Attending functions with family and friends now poses too high of a risk. So, I politely decline invitation after invitation. When pushed, I sidestep an explanation. “Trust me, if you knew the whole picture, you wouldn’t want us to come.” I force a laugh for levity’s sake. I am always assured that we are welcome, but by now, the evidence is stacked in my favor. The few who know the whole picture no longer extend invitations open to all three of us. Then they reach out less frequently all together. Some admit they don’t know what to say. I get it. I don’t know what to say either. With few places for us to go and the reality and fear of what could happen if we did, I am tethered to the house. *“I will do it again.”* His words haunt me.

My house has become a labyrinth of locks, keys, protocol, precautions, and cameras. So many cameras. Kitchen knives, scissors, nail files: locked away in a safe. Any object big or hard enough to cause injury if thrown or wielded: removed. The ever-shrinking list of harmless objects has depopulated shelves and emptied drawers. The number of items that, in the wrong hands, could be sharpened into a weapon or used for other nefarious purposes is staggering. Security cameras in every room document bouts of rage, violence, and sneakiness. The one benefit of a narcissistic personality is a hatred of being held accountable, and the cameras hold him accountable. He despises them, which also makes them a moderately effective deterrent.

I used to love this house. Old and charming, I thought we might live here forever, or until the stairs became too much for our knees. When we remodeled the kitchen, I had tile custom-made to replicate those uniquely found in my family’s ancestral Sicilian town. The tiles create a bright colorful pattern that covers an entire wall; the next owner will probably rip it out. I used to love that wall, but now, like the rest of the house, it is tainted. I will not grow old here. Our craftsman bungalow is now a prison, of which I am both its warden and prisoner.

When is a parent no longer responsible for their child’s actions and choices? The law says eighteen. That answer is too simple. Sometimes my dreams play out impossible scenarios where I desperately race to protect the kids in the orphanage from him. In each iteration of the dream, I never make it in time. I think of the boy at the boarding school who he beat to a bloody, unconscious pulp. The incident feels as much my fault as his,

yet I wasn't there. If he hurts someone again ten years from now, twenty…I doubt I will feel differently. Will I ever?

I am his mother. I am the reason he now lives 9,000 miles from his birthplace. One moment, I am terrified of him; the next, I am terrified for him. Attachment is not a one-way street. It's a connection. Neither a choice nor automatic. It can soothe; it can sicken. It is a double-edged sword that defies logic, time, and space. Weapon or comfort? Even biology cannot guarantee which form it takes. Yet, once forged, the bond is inseverable. Attachment, the thing I worried he might never develop, now permanently binds us. Him to me. Me to him.

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The Time of Spring

by Paolo Paciucci

The attack was over in seconds. The young man in the bed lay drenched in sweat, inert, motionless, like a breathing dead person. The nurse I had called with the buzzer tied to the bed rail came in too late to witness the seizure. The soaked linens had to be changed with fresh sheets. Other nurses came to help. After a while, the young man opened his eyes and quietly looked around, disoriented by the return to consciousness after being adrift in the mysterious world of the mind. His mouth still awash with foam, he attempted to say something but couldn't.

The episode had happened during my morning rounds. I was intrigued by this young patient, perhaps nineteen or younger, who had been transferred to our unit from an affiliated hospital in Queens. His only visitor had been a well-dressed, collected, and unquestioning older woman, probably his grandmother. But she might not have been even a relation: she always quietly left the room whenever I came in as though not to interfere with the confidentiality between doctor and patient. I had never noticed people of his age visiting this young man, whose name I have long since forgotten. Other than for wisps of blond ringlets around the ears, he had already lost his hair after an unsuccessful attempt at chemotherapy at the other hospital. He never complained; whenever he answered my questions, he whispered. He never inquired about his prognostic outlook, as though he were not concerned about improving his conditions or remaining alive.

At the time of transfer, the most critical issue I had to confront was his bone marrow suppression, with blood counts persistently low after a period when most patients would have recovered theirs. He had already experienced an episode of sepsis with gram-negative organisms and was on a cocktail of antibiotics. Despite repeated blood transfusions, his complexion remained waxen, lunar.

His diagnosis was Burkitt's lymphoma, a rare form of cancer first described in Ugandan children by Burkitt in 1959, a disease that tended to grow explosively, almost overnight in extra-lymphatic organs, especially the jaw, causing massive deformations,

and just as rapidly regressed after a single treatment with cyclophosphamide, a drug derived from mustard gas. According to the accompanying report, his axillary and paracervical lymph nodes had increased in size despite aggressive chemotherapy. I had never found lymph nodes as hard as his other than in some patients with Hodgkin's disease.

During my training or in the early years of my practice, I had never seen a case of Burkitt, a type of cancer extremely rare in the Western World, but I remembered from medical school how pathologists described a cell pattern of a "starry sky" at the microscope, each star a Burkitt cell. It brought to my mind the night sky Van Gogh painted at St. Remy de Provence, where the darkness of his countryside asylum revealed to him the ineffable motions of celestial bodies. I used to spend my lunch breaks at the Metropolitan Museum, a few blocks from the hospital. I was particularly riveted by "Starry Night," which soon became like an old friend one visits habitually.

Despite his dismal presentation, I could tell this boy was of unusual beauty; the delicate features of his face and his not yet manly forms were possibly the same as those of the Greek ephebes who inspired the many effigies of the favorite of the gods, Ganymede, who on account of his beauty, was carried away from the world of the living by Zeus disguised as an eagle.

The association of these ideas, starry nights and the love of gods for ephebes, led me to ask myself a different set of questions. Those were the early years of the AIDS epidemic, and a quick trip to the library confirmed my suspicions. Besides the then prevailing Kaposi sarcoma and fungal and viral infections caused by commensal organisms usually not pathogenic for humans, a few isolated case reports showed Burkitt lymphomas in populations at risk for AIDS. Unlike the African variety described by Burkitt, the condition did not present with massive jawbone lesions, but the "starry sky" pattern at pathology was identical. The disease was reported to be resistant to any form of treatment.

Those were also the days when a reliable HIV test was not clinically available for diagnosis. Testing was only used to screen blood donations. The delay in mass-scale testing for diagnostic purposes resulted from prolonged, shameful recriminations between

American and French scientists who were jockeying for recognition as discoverers of the virus causing AIDS. All the other parameters we were using to assess the immune function of patients at the time, the quantitation of two subsets of lymphocytes, CD8 and CD4 cells, were useless because my patient's blood counts were still dangerously depressed after his initial chemotherapy. The only way to assess if the young man possibly had AIDS was to ask him if he had sex with men, which I couldn't bring myself to do. His lack of visitors of age close to his suggested he was isolated and intensely closeted: I decided I would have to think of a way to pose the question in terms which would not make either of us uncomfortable. I sensed I had little time. After his first attack, he began to drift between semi-consciousness and stupor. Was the clear blue of his eyes, his quietness, or the loneliness I had seen surrounding him the reason I held back my question? I believe it was the fear I might cause the resurfacing of deeply repressed shame.

Later in the day, his nurse came to me with other concerns; the patient had not touched any food in the three days he had spent in the unit. I stopped by again and, noticing he was more alert, asked him if there was anything he might like to eat.

"A triple-decker," he managed to answer. When I returned with one from the corner Greek greasy spoon, his eyes widened, and, like an eager child, he extended both hands. He was beaming. After he began taking small but voracious bites, I left him to answer a call in a different room.

I came by again later. As soon as our eyes met, he began to weep. In silence, without sobs. He reached to touch my hand. His fingers were like those of a child. "Thank you very much for the sandwich," he said, tears rolling down his face.

This is what I wanted to tell him but did not: leave, leave the false safety of this room, run to Central Park below, inhale deep the fresh air, disavow the ghosts in your closet, turn your back on the murderers of your soul, shed your shame, let go the old dead leaves, clear the way for Spring.

The infectious disease consultant I had called to adjust his antibiotic regimen suggested we should do a diagnostic lumbar puncture since all the blood cultures had been non-diagnostic. And so I did; I explained the procedure as clearly as possible and

reassured him I would numb his spine so he would only likely experience the quick prick of the local anesthetic. But please, I begged him, don't move during the procedure. All went well, and as I left the room he thanked me.

The day after, before the microbiology lab sent us a report, my beeper went off. I called the unit, and the nurse who answered said my patient had developed a serious breathing problem; she had called the intensive care team, and now they were working on him.

I ran to his room: his pale complexion had turned bluish. Gasping and breathless, hooked up to EKG electrodes, he was resisting intubation. His modesty had been violated, and he was lying in bed completely naked, surrounded by the overzealous residents from the ICU. As soon as he noticed me, he tried to sit up and managed to ask me if these maneuvers would save his life.

"They will prolong it until we know what is making you so ill," I said.

He locked his eyes with mine with a presence and firmness of mind I had not yet discovered he possessed.

"Do you mind if I don't do this? No need to prolong this kind of life, is there?"

I struggled to find words to alleviate his justified despair. Before I contrived a suitable answer, he added:

"No more days like this, no more. Spring is coming, and what better time than this to move on?"

When I encountered this young man, I was a young man myself, prone to hide my misgivings, vulnerabilities, and self-doubts behind a facade of bluster. I call them my piss and vinegar days, those days. The continuous confrontation with the dying of others had already taught me how greedily the gods love the young, and we physicians, overcome by lack of knowledge, comfort ourselves by attempting to unearth Nature's never-ending secrets.

Those days I was too young to know how nothing really dies, preoccupied as I was to avoid the inevitable. I had not grasped how the dead soon manifest again in all that thrives in the loam and the splendor of new leaves and blossoms. Reminiscing about this

young man, only now, as my life is entering its wintry season, have I become less fearful of the unimaginable.

Paulo Paciucci is an oncologist-hematologist and research scientist whose work is published in medical and scientific Journals. Now retired, he writes non-fiction and memoirs drawing from his professional experience. He lives in Old City, Philadelphia.

Fertility and Femininity

by Alli Mancz

I run beside the Hocking, feel its energy plunging me into the next moment. Mid-November, and my bared shoulders glisten with sweat. The river meanders and flashes through Ohio's Appalachian hillsides. Blood pumping in my ears, thighs clenching with each step, I taunt the autumn water and leaves rushing about me. I can outlast them, going farther, faster.

63° and sunny, I can't remember the last time I traded in gloves for shorts. A tank top. The last time the river was this low. But the grass, it gleams in the wind. The slopes, they shine with an afternoon glow. The land and I look healthy, from a distance.

I forget about my latest prognosis, explained at an afternoon visit to the ob-gyn while office doors and floors creak, and nurses call out first names. I feel the concavity of my stomach as other women fidget and rest hands over their proud ballooning midriffs. A nurse escorts my mother and I to an exam room. She checks vitals (*all healthy though your pulse seems high*) and glances over bloodwork (*normal range for my age?*). She shrugs; the door snaps shut behind her.

We wait.

In *Refuge*, Terry Tempest Williams reflects on her relationship with the natural world, speaking to her preference, among other desires, for solitude. "It is what sustains me and protects me from my mind," she writes. "I am desert. I am mountains. I am Great Salt Lake."

As I run along the river, I think only of this moment, a fleeting journey. No doctors, no needles. Just one mile, two miles, three, each evaporating with the sun.

Hours after running, day approaches night. A down jacket envelopes my arms, cocooning me from swirling flurries as I walk home. Hard to believe it's still the same day, now 25°F and snowing. Jeans and a sweater nestle tightly against my body.

Sun and sleet, fever and chills.

Sickness is in the air, without any promise of planetary healing.

♦

I have never questioned the connection between women and nature, seeing myself reflected in the way we converse about her, our metaphorical Mother Earth in the media descriptions of *fertile* or *barren lands, virgin forests*. Our bonded, female bodies echo each other, and these descriptors only enhance linguistic associations. Take the romance languages, gendering nature as female: *la natura* in Italian; *la naturaleza* in Spanish: *la nature* in French. The list goes on.

But this analogy is older than language. Deeper, divine roots ground our present in her past. The Greek goddess Gaia is referenced as one of the "female spiritual incarnations of the Earth" by Sarah Milner-Barry, her words advancing a religious solidarity.

Our souls understand biological and geographical mothers as one.

My mother, having brought me into this world twenty years ago, occupies a chair nearby. I feel like a child, shifting on parchment paper as it crinkles and scuffs my thighs. My ob-gyn has joined us, and her hair bobs with anxiety as she types.

I try not to notice her ticks, choosing instead to stare at an office logo on the wall in front of me. Maroon and pale pink, shaped like a lotus in bloom, it fails to fully distract. Her head won't stop shaking.

Doctors and scientists affirm natural connotations of the earth's interconnections as feminine and pulsing. To James Lovelock, such qualities were embodiments of Gaia herself. A name "redolent with mythic, poetic, and religious resonance," *Gaia* became an obvious choice when Lovelock labeled his planetary theory—a hypothesis which posits earth as one living, global ecosystem that functions in the manner of a vast self-regulating organism. Like the human body itself.

Fertility and femininity as inseparable:

Lovelock preferred Gaia, not Uranus. Goddess, not god.

"If this doesn't fix it—well, I don't know if you'll be able to have kids."

Her hair stills and she sighs, as if it's a relief. Bad news delivered, job done, my gynecologist can now wash her hands of my hormone deficiencies. But I can't shake her words, staring straight ahead, tears blurring the flower before me. It feels safer than looking away.

I sense my mother's eyes, the doctor's secondhand embarrassment, but I don't know what to say, practically apologetic for my emotions. All I'm feeling is loss. All I'm hearing is that phrase:

I don't know if you'll be able to have kids.

My mother steps in and does most of the talking. I close my eyes, hoping to bar the petaled logo from my mind. But the tears get shut out too. My strength, emotions, femininity each drain from my body, and I look down, perhaps expecting to see something staining the plastic below. *It's leaving me, isn't it?* Why can't I reach down, scoop, and swallow it back into my being?

I know it's too late. The lotus has lost its livelihood.

Society blends "the productive and reproductive qualities of women and the environment," Milner-Barry suggests, furthering our tendency to fuse the two without question. Motherhood and childbirth connect human ecology to natural ecology, both of which depend upon life cycles only capable of cultivation within female bodies.

Natural logic. How could I dare to defy it?

Woman to woman, I see how our world is under siege. Of the nine planetary boundaries, reports estimate that we have already transgressed three. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and the disruption of the nitrogen cycle are just the start of nature's worsening imbalance. And she has us to thank for that as we blindly speed into a new geological age manipulated and molded by insatiable hands. We have entered the Anthropocene and still, we cling to our consumption patterns, our status quo.

But our great acceleration gives the planet fever chills. Temperatures won't stop climbing as fires rage across the globe, the Amazon charred and record-breaking flame counts climbing in California. This infection can't be contained—it isn't localized—and it's spreading faster than nature can adapt.

There's only so much that can be suppressed by feminine will.

After my appointment, mom suggests we talk over lunch. My face indicates a desire for silence and a lack of appetite. Twenty minutes later, I'm picking at mix of kale and tuna as my mother explains how I could mend over time, just needing a pill or two each month to compensate for low estrogen levels. She says that I could heal by gaining back some of the weight I'd lost coming into college and eating more healthy fats. She squeezes my hand.

For now, not forever.

I nod, pushing wilted leaves around at the bottom of my bowl—a sad consumer of this sad salad. It turned out that we had left the gynecologist with very different understandings of my health, and I couldn't admit to her my takeaway: a loss of identity and future family plans. So instead, I listened to her consolations, agreed with her logic, and took my leftovers to go.

But ever since that afternoon, my doctor's words reverberate whenever I see my nieces swaddled in their mothers' arms. I smile and dote just the same. It's all I can do, my sisters believing this to be my destiny as well: that I will hold and nurture and resemble my very own pink, blooming child one day.

But there's a potential inability to carry on such tradition.

Biologically, this could be my forever.

Run after run, I watch the continuing change in landscape, note how my physical body mirrors nature's seasonal shifts—in autumn especially, as the earth reflects my mental unrest. The leaves redden and ripen and fade, leaving bald patches in groups of maples and oaks lining the river.

The trees, thinning like my hair. The river, dropping like my weight.

Yet, these leaves always fall. Rivers are subject to seasonal rises and drops. A fluctuating cycle, indistinct from the nature of female bodies. Slowly changing, ours waxing and waning with the moon. But are women's shifts expected? Or are they more gradual, hidden until some threshold is reached? A few pounds lost, meals forgotten here and there. Can't amount to much.

Can it?

Our approaches to healing the earth embody the problematic thinking employed when it comes to our own health. Of course, people want a cure-all, a quick fix. We look to science, and science looks to fiction. People have proposed placing mirrors in space, pumping sulfate into the stratosphere, scattering nutrients in the ocean—and Pandora's box sits, waiting for our excitement to surpass our logic. Perhaps, it already has.

The attraction, or what Dianne Dumanoski coins as "the temptations of technofix," positions us and our disillusionment at the heart of the problem. They're simply other forms of human-centered compromise. We overwhelm our earth with plastics: just one of many prized, and non-biodegradable, contributions of human innovation. We continue to give her pesticides—chemicals pregnant with PCBs—and test other forms of scientific tinkering aimed in boosting her fertility, her productivity. Her worth.

But Rachel Carson was right. These pesticides are *biocides*, or chemicals that might just kill us all if we aren't careful. And plastics? They'll simply break down into smaller and smaller bite-size pieces for all creatures to digest, eventually becoming the microplastics seeping into our bottles and later collecting in human bloodstreams.

The science is here—it's been here—but we can't fight what we don't acknowledge.

Ob-gyns and endocrinologists have told me I potentially can't follow in my mother and grandmother and great-grandmother's footsteps. But I don't want doctors' words to shape me. One doctor said I shouldn't run more than five miles at a time. Another specialist: I'm not eating enough proteins. *What about fats? Too heavy. Too thin. Take calcium and B12 and iron* (even though calcium inhibits iron absorption). *Maybe you should try this dosage instead?*

I see their framed degrees on the wall, their name plates and boxes of latex gloves near at hand. They are the medical professionals; *why can't I listen?* Let them sell me on some magic medication or modified exercise regimen? But my sister says one day my body will balance, that my hormones will naturally regulate.

Women see hope.

Still, I can't deny that I may not want kids anymore, fearful of what it would mean to mother in this century. Cowardly? Maybe so. Still, I'll refuse to believe doctors' warnings until proven true because they merit identity. My pride. I am a woman first, mother second. Kids or no kids, my femininity will persist.

If nothing else, my understanding of it will.

I am place. I am placed. I am this place.

The wind ripples through my hair, sunshine searing exposed limbs, and I stop to catch my breath. Pain floods my body, but my mind remains with the river. My chest heaves, knees throb, and I run on.

Alli Mancz is an emerging writer, essayist, and advocate. Her work is forthcoming in prose.on and has previously appeared in *Scribendi*, merging matters of a Midwestern self and meditations on sexual assault with surrounding ecologies. She currently studies as an MFA candidate at Northern Arizona University, teaching English Composition and Creative Writing while serving as the Editor-in-Chief of *Thin Air Magazine*. Her portfolio contains pieces that intertwine research and medical memoir in a hybrid format, combining lyrical prose with scientific data and self-reflection. Mancz lives in Flagstaff, Arizona and she can often be found hiking amidst the ponderosa pine.

Digging in the Dirt

by Madison Christian

My pick-axe sinks deep into the tread of the trail with a satisfying “thunk.” The soil gives ground easily to the blade now that rain has finally fallen. It’s almost dark and I’m alone on the hill. The mountain bikers, hikers, runners, and dog walkers have retreated for the night leaving me with the coyotes and the crescent moon. I take another whack. The ground, heavy with blue clay compacted by a parade of tires, feet, and hooves, splits to reveal the dark, moist soil beneath. A promising sign. That wouldn’t have happened a week ago. Then, impregnable to the steel in my hands, the surface would have simply shattered like broken pottery. That all changed with the rain. Now the earth is malleable. It bends to my will. And to my axe.

Ideally, a trail should have about a 5-10% outslope so that water from above can sheet flow across it. A steeper gradient will cause erosion. The path here slopes considerably more than the optimal because users are walking and riding the outside edge which is now failing. I shave material from the upslope to shore up the collapsing edge and realign the tread to push folks back to center where they belong. As I rearrange the dirt, a late hiker comes by and gingerly crosses the area I’m working. She asks me if I’m repairing the road. I tell her I’m trying. Perplexed, she turns and disappears down the trail and into the night. I finish what I started by tamping down the loose soil with my feet and shovel. Bikers and hikers will do the rest of the compacting for me the next day.

I’m working with some urgency to take advantage of the transient conditions. Aridity has already returned with the sun to steal what little moisture the ground has absorbed. The forecast is bleak. Nothing but warmth and sunshine for the foreseeable future. If conditions don’t change, it won’t be long before the tread returns to concrete.

It wasn’t always this way. Water used to regularly drop from the sky during that brief interval between fire season and tick season, between the howling Santa Ana winds and the springtime explosion of black mustard. During that three-month period, the jet stream would muscle the stubborn high pressure out of the way so that inclement weather could come ashore. Now bad weather is just an occasional curiosity, a nostalgic memory that

is being slowly erased by an endless summer. Long days of heat and short days of water. This is the new reality.

I try to not focus on that depressing fact. It feels good to be in the local hills. Alone in the fading light. Digging in the dirt. Moving rocks. Clearing water bars. All without authorization, sanction, or blessing from the bureaucracy. A guerrilla campaign undertaken to counter governmental indifference and neglect. And if I'm honest, to salve my own conscience. I've been walking this trail four to five times a week for almost two decades. In the summer, when the sun hangs in the sky long into the evening, I'll climb to a sandstone prominence with a can of beer to watch the daylight fizzle on the horizon. During the winter months, I'll skip out of work early to get in a quick romp before the light fails. Or I'll venture out for a stroll in the blackness with a headlamp. That was once an unnerving experience. Now I'm quite comfortable with it.

I've received substantial benefit from all those trips up and down the trail. Something beyond the pure physical. I'm not much of a mystic, but I've experienced the palpable thrum of the universe in these hills. Sometimes the humming is so intense my ears ring. I've had similar experiences on other trails. One time, as my daughter and I were traversing the trail from Cerro Noroeste to Grouse Mountain, we stopped briefly where the path dips to the Puerta Del Suelo. The energy there was almost electric. It was as if we had stumbled upon a vortex where the ley lines intersect. We left some quartz on a log to charge in the sunlight as we continued to the summit of Grouse. On the return, the Om or chi or 'elan vital was still present and so intense that I hesitated to pick up the stones we'd left for fear of burning my hands. These experiences don't occur with any regularity or consistency. They are rare and fleeting, like a flash of clarity. You have it and then it's gone. And the more you strain to regain it, the further it recedes from you. The universe divulges its secrets in drips not buckets.

Aside from the twenty plus years of fun and recreation, that is the gift these trails have bestowed upon me. A glimpse of the unseeable. An understanding that there are phenomena that cannot be understood. The realization that the phrase "there's more to it than meets the eye" is not just an old saw, but a statement of fact. For all of that, I'm obligated to provide some form of recompense. That is why I'm standing on the side of a

steep slope with my pick-axe, shovel, and rake. Restoring the trail, one short segment at a time, is my contribution to the collection plate of the universe.

I'm out of time and out of light. I pack up my things and leave. My flashlight shows the way. On the descent, I make mental notes about other sections of the trail that need attention. There's a lot of them. The alms dish will overflow with my offerings. Near the bottom, just before the vacant parking lot, a water bar has filled with sediment. It's become useless. I stop and pull out my axe and shovel to clear it. I can't help myself. I scrape the debris away and then retrench it. Satisfied, I put my tools down, look up at the starry sky, and hope for rain.

Madison Christian is a lawyer by trade. He is a nature activist, beer elitist, outdoor curmudgeon, and dharma-bum wannabe by birth. As a writer, Madison focuses on creative non-fiction, including memoir, personal essay, and travel (or what he likes to call "vagabond"). He dabbles in poetry.

Oko

by Sydney Lea

I smacked my foot against a table leg this morning and scolded myself: *Watch where you're going!* A blood-bead stood below the nail, whose jaundiced color puzzled our grandson, here for the weekend. He asked, "Grandpa, how come you're gold?"

But he quickly turned his attention to that little globe of blood. Our interest in pain, or so it seems to me, develops early. We may take whatever measures we can to avoid it and yet it intrigues.

I recall, for instance, a hornet's stinging that child's older brother a summer ago. The two still speak of the incident now and then. The pains, or rather for the most part griefs, that hold my own attention now tend to be psychological rather than bodily, however hard they often are to identify exactly.

This grandson of ours owns a little plush dog named Oko for whatever reason, and the child loves to say he's been stolen by what he calls *billains*. Or sometimes the dog's simply lost. I know it's feigned, yet I still wince at his look, precisely, of pain.

Oko's never gone for long, however, and I rejoice with the boy when he's found.

Speaking of loss, at my age I'm losing friends, some to the Reaper, some to scrambled brains. I wish I could find *them* again, celebrate their return. One of the brightest men I've known, for instance, an estimable poet and critic, is now so overwhelmed by multiple sclerosis that he can barely talk, let alone move; another longtime friend, this one Irish, a man with whom I've shared woe, delight, and absurdist humor for decades, is in a seaside institution, and doesn't even know my name; yet another has just been informed that she has incurable stage four cancer of the throat, and she's arranging for hospice care; two springs ago, my very best friend on earth—marathon runner, non-smoker and -drinker—himself contracted irremediable cancer of the duodenum and was gone in less than twelve months. The list seems all but infinitely extensible.

As for me, at last I've become my family's oldest member, apart from two of my own first cousins I haven't seen in decades. Both my grandparents and parents, one

brother, all my aunts and uncles are long since gone. So when Oko disappears and our grandson expects me to make a sorrowful face, I do have resources.

I struggle against dwelling on my own mortality. I don't always prevail, but when I do arrive at a saner frame of mind, I conclude that so long as I'm not dead, I'm alive. Instead of trying to reckon how long I'll keep them, I concentrate on my capacious blessing.

Of course, I'm experiencing natural physical decline, but I can still hike, row my shell, and in fact do pretty much what I've always done, at however stately a pace. My short-term memory is not what it was, but I can still write and think pretty clearly (at least I *think* I can). A subtle bittersweetness has taken up permanent residence in my soul, but far better that than dejection.

Before we carry him up to bed, our grandson, plush dog in hand, dictates words to us for a postcard we'll send to his mother and father and that hornet-stung brother.

Grandpa's toes are gold. Today he bleeded. I lost Oko but Grandpa found him. He's happy.

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.

Nights with E.B. White

by Sally Carton

Shortly after my mother died, I started reading *Charlotte's Web*. Or, I should say, listening to E.B. White read it to me on Audible. His reading is a marvel: gentle, playful and shot through with his affection for his characters—for Wilbur and Charlotte; the irascible rat, Templeton; and for a little girl's love of a pig. There is a deep humanity in each character and a love of place and time that can break my heart. The feel and smell of the barn are particular pleasures and took me back to a friend's barn in rural New Jersey: the magic of a barn swing, the delight of a hay loft. I could carry on for pages. Suffice it to say that I love every morsel of that book because I have savored every morsel of it probably over 250 times.

I had not thought about *Charlotte's Web* since my seven-year-old daughter (who is now an adult) wandered into the kitchen and told me that she had just seen Templeton in our back yard. While not enjoying the arrival of a Chicago alley rat, I adored her report. As our children grew up, I lost my connection to the poignant magic of children's literature. Then Covid hit, and I was separated from my mother, who was dying in an assisted living facility in Boston. Little did I know, *Charlotte's Web* would call to me.

Audible founder Don Katz related in an interview that Steve Jobs, when he first heard E.B. White read *Charlotte's Web*, "wept copiously." This detail was offered to illustrate how deeply Jobs got what Audible was offering all of us—and why the first iPod arrived "Audible ready." No longer attached to boxes of jumbled tapes or clunky devices plugged into the car lighter, we would be free to listen anywhere we wanted, dipping in and out of chapters and stories at will while jogging, gardening, riding to work. But it is the listen-under-the-covers that hooked me. Snuggled in the dark after my mother died, I felt connected to the safety and wonder of being read to. The little girl in me reemerged. She wanted to be read to, and here was the kindly E.B. White whispering in her ear.

But before I rediscovered White, before Covid, I had been staying with my mother and managing her care. We still played scrabble and watched TV around her increasingly long naps, the steady thump and whir of her oxygen machine marking time, but now I was

engaged in rounds of advocacy with the doctors and gate-keepers who could deliver more care. At last, the call came in that she was accepted for in-home hospice. I can still hear her clicking her tongue as she celebrated the moment, her index finger and thumb circled to signal perfection, as though announcing her pleasure in a crème brulee. “I’m in!” she smiled. She knew she needed more care and the relief was massive. With the pieces in place and my nearby Boston family encouraging me to “take a break,” I stepped away, reluctant to leave but deeply itching for the week in Florida with my husband, our kids, and their spouses. I kissed her goodbye and left for the airport, confident that I could grab a flight back if she needed me, still not imagining that we were close to the end. After all, she had already graduated from hospice twice. She always got better. Little did we know that just as Covid was spreading its tendrils, her heart was quietly but steadily weakening and the arc of these two events would converge in a family catastrophe.

Covid slammed the door on my return. It’s hard to remember now, but in those opening weeks as bodies piled up in cooler trucks in Central Park and panic and confusion reigned, there were no road maps. There weren’t even decent masks. Day after day as I desperately hatched plans to get back to her, the next day’s news would defeat them. I was split in half, levelled by grief and powerlessness. I did not know then that I would soon be part of a keening community of those separated from dying loved ones in 2020. It was Covid, week 1.

After learning that Covid would prevent my brothers and me from visiting her, my mother decided to stop eating. As a woman always capable of making firm and unalterable decisions, she was calm and clear when she called to deliver this news. If I ever doubted her strength and resolve, I would be convinced now. She had spent years preparing us for this moment, handing out copies of books about assisted suicide. But how could I hear that my mother was choosing to hasten death because she was without me, us? I was insane with impotence. The family spun its collective wheels, and then my beloved and nearby niece, Alexandra, stepped forward to go to her. Alexandra self-quarantined before reaching the retirement home, where she was allowed to stay two nights. The next day, she held the phone to my mother’s ear so that each grandchild could say their goodbyes. Her time up, she fled, gripped by fear of infecting others or being infected. Her gift was monumental.

The only remaining lifeline was a cell phone. Thanks to an extraordinary hospice worker and her iPhone, I read and talked and sang to my mother for many days. We all did. What I read and said is now a jumble. I landed on *Winnie the Pooh* for a time, but it sounded like such nonsense that I moved on. We were all groping. My brothers read poems. I'd sing the lullabies that my mother sang to me as a child while I stared intently at her on a tiny screen, curled and motionless. I made up stories in which she and every member of our family were piled into my father's little red motor boat for a picnic at a favorite beach. I tried to wrap her in my voice with images of Dad, her beloved long-departed Navy man, out on the other side of the sandbar, waiting for her. But it was the absence of touch that was our shared deprivation. Sequestered on the third floor of our house, I yammered on and then would hang up and wail, hopefully safe from the ears of my husband and daughter.

And then the miracle happened. In the final days of her dying, a routine had developed. I would call one of the hospice aides and ask if I could talk to Mom. The aide would get situated, and I would call back on FaceTime as she positioned herself beside Mom. As always, the aide's gentle voice guided me: "Okay, here she is. She is resting. Go ahead now." Mom was curled on her side, her ninety-nine-year-old hands, relaxed and deeply veined, resting on the sheets, her baby-thin white hair floating like down over the pillow. Thanks to the morphine, she was peaceful in her ancient maple bed with its four low posts. It was a tiny double bed that she and my father had bought as newlyweds from a Sears catalog just after the war. When that bed made its last stop in her retirement apartment, the string of the medical emergency call button dangling overhead, she happily taped up a laminated copy of her Do Not Resuscitate Orders directly above her pillow, insisting, "Well, If the ambulance people come to get me here, I want them to know that I do not want to be resuscitated." The bed was as familiar to me as anything from my childhood. As a little girl I used to crawl into it to cuddle with my parents, who made a "Sally Sandwich" by spooning with me—my mother's body cupped around mine, and me with an arm around my father's back. Just weeks before, I had lain there, stroking her head as I helped her relax into sleep. Then, my luggage packed for Florida, my hand pausing to caress the familiar wooden knob of the footboard, I had tiptoed backwards out the door.

Now, my perch on the bed was occupied by this kindly aide, who, through the magic of FaceTime was drawing me back to that room. The awkwardness was always there. Where to begin? “Hi, Mom. It’s Sally. I’m here.” The aide’s voice cut in with unusual vigor: “Look!” she exclaimed, “Her hand is moving. She hears you.” I was rivetted. The aide pivoted the camera down to Mom’s hand, and I could see her fingers moving ever so slightly. All my senses intensified around the glowing rectangle I clasped in my hand when, beneath my own hand, I saw the aide’s free hand slide into my mother’s hand. The illusion was dizzying. It was as though my own hand had reached out to my mother’s. The aide drew me deeper, guiding me, linking us. She spoke clearly and calmly, “Now she can feel you holding her hand.” It had happened. I was there. Enthralled, desperate. I was mesmerized by the illusion while my own senses experienced the warm touch of my mother’s soft skin. The aide moved the camera from our clasped hands back to Mom’s face. “Talk to her,” she whispered. Her eyes still closed, I say, “Mom, it’s me, I am here. I am holding your hand.” I was holding her hand. I had a profound awe-filled sense of connection, of touching the hands I knew so well. I was there, on the bed. A channel opened, and I knew it is time to tell my dear mother that she could go. I told her, and, again, I wove stories of her life with my father and three generations of offspring until sleep took me, too.

Later that night, the aide called me to say that my mother’s breathing had worsened. The camera was positioned, and I lay with her again and murmured comfort. More of the miraculous awaited. The aide interrupted and said that they needed to change her but would call back shortly. Like those in-person at a death bed, I was asked to step out of the room. Ten minutes later the aide called back and told me that my mother had died. And with a jolt of clarity, I came to know this: If the dying often wait for their loved ones to leave the room in order to let go of their hold on life, then I could take comfort in knowing that my mother knew I was there and had died in the moments when I was asked to leave the room.

After her death, *Charlotte’s Web* kept coming back to me. I needed it but I had no idea why. And then I found the Audible version. Night after sleepless night, I popped in my earbuds and sank into White’s level warm voice and the world of the barn. Fern saves

Wilbur, Wilbur grows and explores the Zuckerman farm, and the spell sweeps me away. Soothed at a 70% reading speed, I luxuriated in the comforting belief that White wanted to minimize my distress with his slightly slurred gentleness. A little voice in me was saying, “Thank you, Mr. White. Please don’t leave yet. Stay with me until I fall asleep.” At first, I was unaware of Audible’s sleep timer and let the book run all night. Then, I found the timer and would wait until the night-waking, slide down under the covers to shield my husband from the glow of my iPhone, estimate how bad a night I was having, and set the timer accordingly. I’d even get that little jolt of pleasure that one gets when finally breaking down and taking a sleeping pill, knowing that relief is in sight. This was my pill: the predictability of the seasons, the innocence of Wilbur, the comfort of Charlotte, and the pleasure of being read to.

Our enclosed urban garden was our Farm during Covid. It protected and enriched, but it also imprisoned. In Chapter 3, “The Escape,” Wilbur is lonely and despairing about the confines of his life. The goose starts shouting instructions at him to break free from his pen. White uses a sort of pressured gobble-speak for the goose, who shouts at Wilbur to make a break for the orchard: “You don’t have to stay in that dirty little, dirty little, dirty little yard. One of the boards is loose, push on it, push push push on it and come on out.” Escape you must! White’s goose gobble pulled me out of whatever slumber was starting to shelter me from the unbearable guilt of not having been with my mother as she was dying. I wanted to shout at that goose that I did push and push and push. Then I gave up. Why did I give up? I should have been there, beating down the door to get to her, but I was trapped in my little pen and couldn’t get out. Sometimes, I had to laugh at White’s delightful silliness, but other times the drama of Wilbur’s life helped me to name my predicament.

Death is everywhere on a farm. In the opening lines, Fern’s father heads out to the barn with an ax to do away with the runt of the pig litter. The goose’s egg does not hatch and is rolled away as a treat for Templeton. And, of course, after being saved by Fern, the sheep informs Wilbur that, as a spring pig, he will most certainly be killed and eaten in the fall. Goodness! I thought, such news in this book for children. But of course, that is the point: Wilbur, like all children, like all of us, must find out about death, and it is White’s great gift to have found a way to bring this truth so gently to his readers.

Wilbur is terrified of dying. And White himself seems to find death unbearable, his voice wailing in desperation as he reads Wilbur's cry: "But I don't want to die!" It is Charlotte's sweet, confident maternal voice from above, reassuring Wilbur that he will be just fine, that she will find a way to save his life, that soothes every time. What I had forgotten was the problem that Wilbur faces: He cannot be with Charlotte when *she* dies. He had to leave her at the fair and return with the Zuckerman's to the barn. She will die alone. This slayed me.

Charlotte says very bluntly to Wilbur, "I will not be going back to the barn…I'm done for…In a day or two I will be dead." Hearing this, Wilbur "threw himself down in an agony of pain and sorrow. Great sobs wracked his body. He heaved and grunted with desolation." It is the cry made at the moment when a truly horrible loss penetrates to the core for the first time. It is the cry at the hospital bed, or after the phone call comes in. It levels us. How odd, I thought, that these three sentences describing a little pig's abject misery could reach me more deeply than countless Covid stories of worldwide grief and loss. I felt so young. I needed White to name it all for me.

A few days before the end, in total desperation, I had found a possible way to fly to my mother. Although uncertain about the logistics and about Covid infection, I told her that I would come. The response was swift and definitive, delivered with a force I had not heard in weeks. "No! No! You mustn't do that. Do not come." Then she fell silent, tired from the energy spent to speak those words. It took me weeks to register that she had been protecting me. I finally heard the echo: You must return to the Barn, Wilbur. My ever-practical mother, faced with this awful pandemic, knew what it meant: She would be dying without family. Never once did she cry out for me to be there. Never once. My god, the strength in that.

In the year after my mother's death, my nighttime listening was not a cure for insomnia; it was a cure for grief, a vessel on to which I could hop and ride out the waves of sorrow or dive into them and sob. During all the hours of listening, my greatest comfort came from the chapters that White devoted to the seasons and the stunning beauty of the moments when one season gives way to the next. These interludes mark the progression of time and hold the chord that is always vibrating: that winter and death will come but they are not an end. The poetry of those chapters soothed me and reminded

me that the world is a beautiful place and that, if we pause and see and smell and hear and feel it, we will be enriched. The tremors in my body would still. And on a late summer evening when I'd step into the garden and hear the crickets, I'd think of little Wilbur marveling at the universe. Then I'd have more room to remember my mother's wonderful life.

Sally Carton is a psychotherapist living on the south side of Chicago. She came to psychotherapy through her love of literature and has used her training in psychoanalysis and a body-centered approach to trauma to help children and adults over the past thirty years. Now retired, she welcomes the opportunity to write essays drawn from her personal experiences and to spend more time throwing pots on a wheel.

Scraps

by Pamela Kaye

Cairo, Egypt. July 2005. 98°F

I was in Egypt during the hottest and most humid time of the year. In Egypt, I had experiences unlike any I'd known before. I struggled to find a way to write about them.

> *"Collage" is a term derived from art and refers to a picture made up of pieces of found objects: scraps of newspaper, bits of old cane backing, a gum wrapper, lengths of string, and tin cans. [Writers] perform a similar act.*[1]

My guide, Ramez, was a young man who graduated from American University. His English was good, and he had connections to people I wanted to interview for my research on the status of Egyptian women and girls. He told me he had wanted to be a guide since he was seven.

As we walked through a traditional market in Old Cairo, Ramez said, "Those three policemen have been following us. Let's buy a slice of watermelon for each of them for protecting you."

"Why are they protecting me?"

"Last week, a bus of American tourists was bombed."

I dug my Canadian flag pin out of my backpack and pinned it on.

Poverty Pimps: Photographers that exploit people in the worst conditions.[2]

At the end of my appointments and interviews, Ramez asked, "Do you want to go to Garbage Village? I can't take you there as a guide because the agency I work for only allows preapproved tours, but if we meet on the corner, I can take you there on my day off."

"Sure," I said. "What is Garbage Village?"

"Coptic Christians live there—they've been persecuted in Egypt."

"Okay. But why is it called Garbage Village?"

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1 Definition Examples of Collage Essays - ThoughtCo. https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-collage-1689762

2 https://sbynews.blogspot.com/2015/10/thomas-sowells-poverty-pimps-poem.html

“Cairo’s garbage ends up there. The people who live there sort and recycle the garbage.”

We made arrangements to meet the next day. It was so hot in Cairo, and I had hot flashes on top of the searing heat. I was embarrassed by how wet with sweat I always was. That night I went swimming under the stars that night at my hotel, hoping for the soothing cool of the water. A woman swam next to me in a hijab that covered all but her hands and feet.

> *Dark tourism, black tourism, morbid tourism is tourism involving travel to places historically associated with death and tragedy. Sites that are so marked by trauma that they cannot be fully recuperated for normal, quotidian uses.*[3]

The following day I met Ramez, and he drove me to Garbage Village on the city’s outskirts. It was early morning, but steam was already rising from the hot ground. When we got out of the car, I was knocked back by the stench of Garbage Village—rotten meat, mangy dogs, chicken excrement, donkey dung—all manner of fecal matter. A young mother sat with her child in a pile of trash. I stayed close to Ramez. He casually said hello to people we passed and gave small treats to the children. I felt like I’d stumbled into a fifteenth-century painting by Bruegel; all of the colors were black or brown. It was a busy place with animals, children, men, and women going about their business—men repairing cast-off appliances, building ingenious items from scrap, women selling bread or other food, children playing. The heat was oppressive.

> *Poverty Porn: A distinct mark of poverty porn advertisements and photographs made by non-African photographers is the lack of decency, dignity, or virtuous character. These types of photos are often used by charities to guilt people into giving.*[4]

As we walked further into the Village, we saw that people had their specialties. The sorters, including older children, opened the large bags of trash hauled there by oxcarts and separated food scraps to feed the wandering animals. Clothing and fabric went into

[3] Dark tourism - Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_tourism

[4] The dangers of poverty porn | CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/08/health/poverty-porn-danger-feat/index.html

a pile. Metal went to another space. Paper and things that could burn were used for heating. Appliances that could be repaired or repurposed were moved to another site within Garbage Village. Smiths melted down metals and made products to sell; one site used scrap materials to make bicycles. Everyone found a way to reuse the garbage.

Ramez took us to a clean, bright room where little girls were taught their colors by sorting fabrics, and they learned to count by making piles. Older girls washed the fabrics and learned to read through their embroidery. The teenage girls learned how to make items they could sell and learned math through the process. I bought two small embroideries and a purse they had made.

Now I smelled fresh bread made by the women in Garbage Village. The streets and alleyways were not paved; they were covered with trash. And yet, after years of persecution, the inhabitants of Garbage Village, using a preexisting cave and the slope that leads into it, constructed a church that seats 20,000 people around a central pulpit, It is the largest Christian church in the Middle East.

> *Collage at its best actually countermands much of the discontinuity and fragmentation by revealing, by the time a composition ends, a synthesis and wholeness that might not have been suspected at any station along the way.*[5]

As I was taking a photograph out on a street in Garbage Village, a woman walked into the frame and gave me the finger. I can't blame her. I wished to be a respectful and socially conscious tourist. Clearly, I could have done better.

Pamela Kaye's work has been published in *Mixed Mag, Penmen Review,* and *The Sun.* She earned a certificate in Creative Nonfiction Writing from Stanford University. Pamela is a botanical watercolor artist and enjoys collecting sea glass and biking.

[5] Definition Examples of Collage Essays - ThoughtCo. https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-collage-1689762

Dancing

by Michelle Cacho-Negrete

Today, driving down I95 in Portland, Maine, I heard Nancy Griffith's wistfully nostalgic song, "Dancing at the Five and Dime" on the radio. Ages ago, her words had transformed a low-income palace of necessity into an after-hours location romantic as a South Sea island. I drifted back to sixth grade and dancing with a friend after school, also at the Five and Dime, but in our Brooklyn ghetto, a different kind of island. Our single mothers were at work, and since nobody worried about where we were, we stayed at the Five and Dime as long as possible. The latest rock music echoed through the store when we swung open the door. We'd stand a moment admiring the cheap treasures lined up like offerings to the gods of want, then jitterbug down the aisles, immature bodies weaving together, hips shaking, fingers snapping, twirling each other as we mouthed the words or boldly sang out loud.

My immigrant mother always bought plants here, examining each leaf, holding up the plant to look beneath it before finally deciding. Periodically, she tried on lipsticks, though she always bought the same one, a Revlon bright red; I don't remember its name. We, however, examined *everything* as we spun past it: underwear, plain white cotton back then, make-up displays of powdery eye shadow, clumpy mascara, off-toned foundation, glittering jewelry, neatly stacked candy bars, toys we were contemptuous of now that we were graduating elementary school, brightly colored house dresses with varied designs, even cleaning products. We danced until the glare of the counter girls warned us they were out of patience, sick of worrying we'd bump into the counters and break something. We usually had a dime each, although it didn't matter as long as one of us did, and we boogied our way to to the high stools and refreshment counter and ordered hot chocolate, briefly lifted from poverty by the rich dense beverage, the swirled whipped cream that topped it, but especially from swirling down the aisles, our worries briefly transformed to joy.

♦

My granddaughter Micaela danced as soon as she could walk. She greeted every day with the same arms-spread-wide twirl, her hair a curtain of light flying around her. Her love of dance was boundless and not limited by place or setting, though living in Chicago she heard wonderful music everywhere. Whenever we crossed the street, a spill of rock and roll from waiting cars evoked impromptu choreography. She stopped for every street musician, no matter how off-key, an appreciative hoofer who drew an audience the music had failed to attract. Once, while visiting her, we took her to a Border's bookstore, one of those places where people from every walk of life are drawn together by their love of books, she caused a flurry of laughter and applause as she danced to Madonna played over the loudspeaker. Her flashing sneakers created a display of tiny strobe-lights that highlighted her complicated dance-steps. In blue jeans and red striped shirt, she was a whirling dervish of color. Micaela was born the summer of my first semester in an MFA program. My fellow writers, a United Nations of color and ethnicity, followed my daughter-in-law's childbirth progress through my son's hourly phone-calls. With news of his reports, I thought of a particular Hopi dance signaling the journey of a newcomer up through the three underworlds of fire, air, water, finally arriving at this fourth world where we live our lives. I imagined my grandchild dancing up that ladder. It was very hot that day, a thick, heavy heat peculiar to New England, where spring appears and vanishes overnight, and summers are short. I was coated with a slippery sheen of perspiration but bursting with joy at the final phone call: *girl…mother and daughter doing fine.* I slid into a hip-swinging grind from my teen-age years on the Brooklyn streets. How beautiful the world was, despite the wars, poverty, and hunger. Another student brought out a radio and, caught up in the universal celebration of a child's birth, we all danced on the lawn. The cook, alerted to the festivities, brought out a hastily decorated cake. We dropped to the grass to eat it, including the cook, and a few of us discussed dance as ritual. The Chinese student spoke about the dragon dance, used to drive evil spirits from the harvest. A few African students spoke of dances to commemorate an adolescent moving into adulthood. Two students from India spoke about dance as worship. I recalled a Native American dance in a dusty village reenacting the brutal conquering of their tribe by Spanish explorers. Dance, whatever it commemorates, seems a universal response. The icing on the cake, a swirl of chocolate and yellow, created rich sweetness that ran down my

fingers, which I licked with the open joy of a child and thought of Ram Das telling us of the only dance there is, the dance of life.

The California day was too warm to remain indoors for my husband Kevin and I, Mainers determined to take advantage of warmth and brilliant sun during a visit we'd wedged between snowstorms to that same granddaughter, now in college. While Micaela was in class, we wandered the streets of a low-income neighborhood so like my childhood one: rundown buildings, convivial rivalry between men playing dominos in front of stoops, children skateboarding or playing ball, careful to avoid tipping the domino boards and incur their parents' irritation. We were drawn to the sound of panpipes coming from a park that was edged with a homeless encampment. We wandered over to a bench to listen, surrounded by homeless men and women, some with shopping carts filled with their belongs, others with worn knapsacks, and still others who seemed to own nothing; people with faces ravaged by poverty, hard luck, drugs, or alcohol. The setting suggested desperation, a point of no return, But I knew from my own life experience, and from working with the homeless after completing a master's degree in clinical social work, that even in desperation there can be moments of joy. Friends and I, with nowhere to "hang out" when we were teenagers, spent nearly all our free time in the streets, blasting a radio, dancing, often stealing food and eating it on stoops, not getting home until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. We'd never had live music, however, like this musician, the best I'd ever heard on the panpipes. His music rang through the amplifier like a mournful cry. He looked happy to play for whoever listened, shoulders swaying, feet rhythmically tapping. He couldn't have had a more appreciative crowd. Many of my fellow listeners were dancing, some perhaps stoned or drunk but all living inside the sound and motion, a blur of wild color and ragged edges like a woven shawl.

We spoke with a man who'd settled, with his lady friend, onto the bench beside us. He asked why we weren't dancing and I explained that I'd recently had a knee replacement that left me unsteady on my feet. I told him that if my granddaughter were here, she would be in continuous motion He laughed and said something about the energy of the young then shared that he needed a knee replacement but couldn't figure out how to get one and even if he could, he lived in a tent under constant threat of being

confiscated. Before I could reply, the musician swung into a song I'd considered an anthem, an invitation to gather together and change the inequality of our county, "Dancing in The Streets." Martha and the Vandellas were summoning us. *"The time is right for dancing in the streets,"* their call to occupy the streets of Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, L.A., New Orleans, New York City; *"It doesn't matter where you are, just as long as you are there.* We did come out: we marched, we sang, we danced. Music and dancing have been the background, in my experience, to every major movement: the protest songs of Vietnam, the civil rights movement, women's rights. But they also signal celebration.

In this California park I watched the swaying the rambunctious twisty dance moves, the laughing faces and, yes, the joy. Years seemed to slip away from everyone and I thought of my granddaughter, currently taking a civil rights course, and of my own adolescence. Many in the crowd seemed to know the words, we were not a young group after all, and the voices rang out: *"It's time for dancing in the street."* The man beside us, leaped up and, taking the hand of his friend, turned to me and insisted, "You have to dance. The time is right," then held out his hand to me as well. I let him pull me to my feet and reached for Kevin's hand. The man smiled and twirled his partner while I moved stiffly, but gamely.

"The time is right for dancing in the street," the man sang as he twirled beside me.

The panpiper swayed to his music, this benediction to those who had so little, and joyously, hopefully, we all danced!

Michelle Cacho-Negrete is a retired social worker from Portland, Maine and the author of *Stealing; Life in America*. She has more than 100 publications, including four among the Most Notable Essays of the year, two Best of the Net, and five in anthologies. Her work has appeared in, among other magazines, *bioStories, Able Muse, North American Review, Solstice, Under the Sun,* and *The Sun.*

Appleing

by Andrea Abbott

Appleing, that's what my dad called it, a fruity version of hunting. We'd drive, though we could have walked, less than a mile, but the backpacks would be heavy afterwards and my dad took pity on me. He could walk miles and miles with huge loads on his back, this ability courtesy the U.S. Army and WWII.

That history also gave us our backpacks. Sometimes it seemed like most of what we owned were Army leftovers. Our backpacks were worn canvas, his khaki and on a frame, mine a faded red-brown, a bag with grommets with a string through them at the top to snug it up. Sacred vessels these, indispensable for our quest.

We'd drive past where the paved street turned into a dirt road, past the last house in the village, a house that had barns and outbuildings and a stable where the owners boarded a few horses. After that, it was all overgrown fields and stunted trees, a barn falling in on itself and willows stitching the path of a small creek. There had been farms out there at one time but even the foundations of the buildings were caved in and covered with grass and thorns. The houses had disappeared long since, maybe when the West opened up, or some other event lured hardscrabble farmers away. Those vanished houses were the reason there were abandoned apple trees.

We parked at the edge of the dirt road. Right off the road was a small graveyard, perhaps twenty graves at most, guarded by a steel "rope" looped through iron posts. Despite their age, most of them from the middle to the end of the 1800's, the stones were still amazingly straight and unbroken. They stood as upright as I imagined their inhabitants had stood in life. No slouching was allowed in their world. All of the graves were for the Smiths, and my father said that Clint Smith, who lived in the village, was related to them. Clint was well in his 90's and we still saw him mowing his lawn, fixing his roof, shoveling his path in winter. Straight, firm, upright. They used to say that if a man didn't die in his forties, he'd live forever. Clint seemed to be working on that.

After I'd had a chance to read the names on the gravestones, we rolled under the loose barbed wire fence that kept the apple trees from straying, slipped our backpacks

on and set off to cross the quarter mile or so of pasture that stood between us and the trees.

It seemed as if every year the weather was the same. There must have been sunny days and it must have rained sometimes, but in my memory it is always a hazy, cloudy, dry day with a low cover of clouds and slight drift of smoke from burning leaves. Our boots released the smell of dead grass and leaves underfoot, a dusty brown scent, so different from the green smell of spring. Somehow the grey sky and the hint of smoke combined to make me sleepy. I fought to keep my eyes open, as if I had fallen under an enchantment. I was entering nature's great drowsiness, the inward folding of autumn.

My father never seemed affected. He marched briskly across the pasture with me stumbling in his wake. We crossed the land between the graveyard and the twisted old apple trees that stood half in, half out of the woods. The trees at the edge of the woods were young and thin. They were marching, as trees march, generating a forward movement with each sapling, gradually conquering the old pasture.

The pasture itself was harder to cross than it looked. From the road the grass looked like a level plain but close up revealed itself to be tussocks and hummocks, with little channels between them that were sometimes filled with water. Progress toward the apple trees involved stepping from one clump of grass to another as they rocked under my feet.

It was a good thing I had on my special boots, the boots that I always wore on any adventure. My father bought them for me at the general store where they hung beside sneakers and slippers and above bolts of oilcloth and drawers of nails and screws. For some reason, they were called packs. They were rubber and came half way up my calf. The feet were wide so I could slip a pair of wool socks in them, soles deeply treaded for a firm grip on ice or snow. With them, I plowed through deep puddles, thick mud, and the worst snowdrifts. Every farmhouse had nests of them at the backdoor, ready for milking or cleaning gutters. Usually, boys wore them. I was a girl and a village kid so the fact that I wore them was considered odd but I loved them. My father called them my seven league boots and when I wore them, I felt as if I could stride miles in one step. I felt powerful. I suspect I tried to swagger.

I don’t remember how many years we went to gather apples, perhaps from the time I was eight or so until I went to college. Like most things seem to children, it was something I always did, something with no beginning and no end. Over those eight or nine years that I hopped from one hummock to another, the rituals were the same. Every year we would reach the first few trees and begin to pick whatever apples we could reach. It was a mixed orchard and my father would name the apples as we picked them. Russet, Pippin, Rome Beauty, Baldwin, Winesap, and my favorite, Northern Spy. I imagined a skulking figure with a black cape and mask whenever I heard the name.

You wouldn’t see these apples in the grocery stores. Grocery stores stocked the familiar MacIntosh, Cortland, and Red and Yellow Delicious. These apples didn’t look as appealing to consumers who were becoming accustomed to standardized food in the late 1950’s and ‘60’s. Perhaps that’s why my father felt compelled to pick them, to keep them from being completely forgotten.

When we’d picked all that we could reach readily from the ground or from some easy climbing, my father would tell me to stand back. Then he’d climb up whatever tree we’d been picking from, grasp its trunk firmly and shake it. Apples would fall in all directions and I’d run to pick them up. Windfalls, he called them, only he was the wind.

These weren’t like the apples in the store in another way. These trees hadn’t been cared for in decades. They were never sprayed or pruned. The apples we picked were small hard balls, pocked with worms and insects. When we got them home, my mother would pronounce them only fit for applesauce and would mutter over the work it took to find a bit of apple that could be cooked. When the applesauce was made, however, my father and I would pronounce it the best in the world. Mom would admit that these apples had character, lots of character.

We’d pick and shake and gather until our packs were full. The little knobs of apples pressed into my back through the canvas, and the straps cut into my shoulders but I would never, never have complained. My father trusted me to be strong, and so I would be strong. Then we would pick our way over the rough field, me balancing against the weight of the pack.

There was always something interesting to see. My father would point out animal tracks and ask me to guess what made them, or find a feather and ask me to name the

bird that had dropped it, or he'd show me a leaf or flower to identify. The world was a never-ending story for my father. He was appalled at people who never looked at what was around them and, as he said, wouldn't have noticed if a cow flew up in front of them. I knew that not being attentive to nature was a great sin and I strove to watch and listen carefully.

One time stands out for me. My father was ahead of me by a few feet as we were leaving the orchard. Suddenly, at the last tree before the pasture, he stopped. He gestured for me to come closer and be very quiet. I balanced carefully from one hummock to another, hoping desperately I wouldn't fall and make a noise. As I got to the tree, he pointed to a cleft in the trunk. There I saw a small white face with two black eyes like blackberries, a twitchy nose with white whiskers.

"It's a weasel," Dad whispered, "A weasel in its winter coat."

I stared at the weasel, and it stared back at me. Though I didn't move a muscle, suddenly, he seemed to tire of us and whisked into a hole in the tree. One second he was there, the next he was gone. I relaxed my tense body and breathed. My father's eyes shone with excitement.

"That's one of the few times I have ever seen one," he said. "We're lucky. They're good at hiding."

I knew he was trying to give me some of his awe at encountering the weasel but, in truth, I couldn't really grasp that what I'd seen was so remarkable. I thought that I would see weasels and all kinds of things again and again. I was too young to understand that the world doesn't deliver little miracles every day.

We went under the fence, past the graveyard with the sleeping Smiths, and returned to the car. I tried to act as enthusiastic as my father seemed to expect me to be.

I never saw another weasel. I learned two things that day, though it took me a long time to understand the lesson. You never know when you'll see something for the first time. You never know when you'll see something for the last time.

Andrea Abbott lives in Central New York with her husband, one of their sons, and a grandson. She worked in a variety of occupations in the human services field, including serving as a librarian in a men's maximum-security correctional facility. Following

retirement, she became the minister of a small Unitarian-Universalist church. Now retired, she has returned to her earliest desire, which is to write.

A Cuban Kitchen in Greenwich Village

by Dina Alvarez

At eighty-two, my Cuban mother complains her taste buds are off and that she doesn't know what to eat anymore. She has a host of health issues including a thyroid condition and high blood pressure that she manages, but the one she speaks most about is her lack of appetite and frustration over enjoying food. "One of the true delights of life," she says.

Most phone conversations are a blow-by-blow description of everything she managed to eat that day and any hints of flavor that came through that reminded her of a dish she used to make when cooking didn't feel like such a chore. Although she goes out less after a recent fall, she never misses visiting the farmers market at Abingdon Square on Saturday searching for the freshest ingredients. She may not be able to fully savor those market finds, but her Greenwich Village kitchen, the same one since 1966, still manages to serve up some of the best Cuban fare when she's feeling up to it. Just as if she was back in Cuba. Muscle memory.

My mother legally immigrated to this country in 1966 with my six-year-old sister in tow. She didn't know the language, a single person other than my father, or what a cold front felt like until she stepped off that plane on a bitter March day. But the warmth of our kitchen never lacked a hot Cuban meal. While she could have landed in much worse neighborhoods than Greenwich Village, she was still blindsided by the music, a downtown hippie vibe along with a dirty subway, hotdog stands and the smell of pretzels outside Radio City Music Hall. One of the few remnants of home lived in the Cuban Chinese restaurant called "La Rampa " on West 14th Street, the only place we would eat out on the rare occasion.

Around the holidays, my mother never veered from her personal menu of "Lechon Asado" for Christmas. It took all day to cook in our tiny oven. Roast pork bathed in a garlic

and olive oil rub baked until the skin, scored with a ¼ inch deep crosshatch pattern crackled and crunched against your teeth like hard candy. We would pull pieces and pop it into our mouth before it even made its way to the table. On New Year's Eve there was seafood paella and if we were lucky, a few extra lobster claws thrown in for good measure. It was the only time of year lobster made an appearance in our small apartment.

Since we never had a real tree, the smell of Christmas always centered around these two meals, spiked with the scent of Lestoil, her favorite disinfectant used exclusively during December. It was the only way to get the house ready to ring in a spotless New Year along with twelve red grapes that were to be eaten at the stroke of midnight to ensure good luck for every month of the incoming year.

Dinners on regular days included: steaks pounded so thin you could almost see through them, sauteed with onions and tucked into a soft white hero bread; pork chops served with black beans, white rice, and sweet plantains or "tostones;" green plantains twice fried to perfection and lightly salted; ropa vieja, the traditional shredded beef dish of Cuba; or picadillo, a ground beef meal made with onions and pepper and white rice, somehow appeared magically within the hour of her arriving home. Even though she had a full-time job at a factory sewing bedwear for Gloria Vanderbilt (located in the building that is now Chelsea Market), my mother always managed to have a meal on the table. TV dinners, so coveted by my sister and I, never had a chance, but to my mother's credit, she did eventually graduate to making meatloaf and spaghetti although they were never her strong suit. She always made a great turkey for the holiday, replete with flan for dessert.

My mother no longer cooks for the holidays, but our weekly Sunday afternoon meals entail lunch at either Anton's or Bus Stop or Mémé's. All are located on Hudson Street near her home of fifty-six years, where our conversations revolve around how much the neighborhood has changed and about her early years in Cuba. In these restaurants,

I watch my mother clean off her plate, sip a glass of wine like a pro, and happily take in the restaurant ambiance as part of our Sunday together. Taste buds or not, I know that the social setting, having someone else do the cooking, and our weekly outings filled with conversation drive her desire to eat. I tell her that her appetite seems fine and joke that she eats like a horse. She always replies, “In good company, everything has flavor.”

On cold wintery days mom will invite me upstairs for a meal, the chore of cooking suddenly forgotten. This year, just a few days before Thanksgiving, she asked if I could come over so she could show me something. A surprise, she said. She’d made Cuban ajiaco, my personal all-time favorite meal, an elaborate dish that is half soup, half stew made with root vegetables, corn on the cob, and dried cured beef. As I was fawning over how truly delicious (and unexpected) it was she told me, “If I would have told you I was making it, I bet it wouldn’t have come out as good.” It felt like an old Cuban proverb when she said it.

As we sat together eating our Cuban meal, I asked her if she ever regretted leaving her entire family for a new country, waiting fourteen years before she saw any of them again and seeing them only a handful of times since. Did she imagine a country so different from her own, one with customs about which she knew nothing? “I never thought of going back and living there again. Not even for a minute,” she said. “This is home.”

Sitting in the apartment where I grew up, I realized that there’s nothing a Cuban mother won’t do for her daughter, especially in the kitchen. Muscle memory or not, even if she can’t taste a thing. I asked her to make arroz con pollo next time she was inspired to cook. “Of course,” she said.

Dina Alvarez was born and raised in New York City. She holds a BA in Film and Media Communications from Hunter College and has spent most of her working life in Corporate America. In 2004, she launched SomosPadres, the first bilingual parenting publication for Latino families in NYC. Dina resides in NYC with her husband and son.

Losing Streak

by Joshua David Lane

"It happens sometimes. Friends come in and out of your life, like busboys in a restaurant" – the Writer, *Stand by Me*

I have spent the past 1,545 days communicating with a woman I barely know.

She sends me a picture of herself every day at a random time. Her phone is held at an angle, obscuring the specifics of her surroundings. I do not recognize the room, and her choice of a sepia filter makes the environment even more indistinguishable. She wears a blank face—an expression on the border of disinterest and indifference. A slightly wrinkled UMass crewneck adorns her torso, and I struggle to recall if she attends that institution. Hell, I struggle to recall anything about her.

Regardless, I respond like clockwork; without a moment's hesitation, I send her a blurry, low-effort selfie without a word of accompanying text. No pleasantries or small talk. I won't communicate again with this stranger for another twenty-four hours.

Okay, perhaps "stranger" is a misrepresentation. The woman in question, Kristin, is an ex-girlfriend of an old friend (to whom I hardly speak anymore). I reckon they were still dating 1,545 days ago, but the exact chain of events grows hazier with each passing year. Yet, our streak remains. It's an odd, superfluous ritual, one with no apparent value or justification, but I stay committed to it, nevertheless. Four years' worth of commitment. Hell, come to think of it, that's the longest I've ever been reliable for anything.

For those of you unfamiliar with this bizarre process, I implore you to research a little messenger app known as Snapchat. Should you be unacquainted with the concept of a Snapchat "streak," allow me to briefly explain. When two users "snap" each other for multiple days in a row, they develop a streak; a streak records how many consecutive days they have spent in correspondence.

Throughout my teenage years, I managed to develop, maintain, and inevitably lose more streaks than I can remember. It's difficult to recall all of the people I communicated with, and perhaps this demonstrates the triviality of many of these "*connections*." I shared

streaks with classmates and groupmates and teammates and team captains; friends of mine and friends of friends and friend's friend's friends and friend's girlfriends and girl friend's boyfriends; girls who I liked and girls who liked me and girls who liked no one except for themselves; boys in my grade and boys with failing grades and boys who skipped a grade and boys who skipped school altogether.

I felt, at the time, that I had a bond with all of these people—a weak, superficial, quasi-bond to be sure, but it was enough to make me feel less alone. High school tends to be a period of quantity over quality; I desired as many friends as possible, regardless of how often I talked to them. Lonely, angsty nights of puberty were momentarily quelled by a quick scroll through my Snapchat account. Witnessing all of those names idling before me, each one representative of a person who deemed me worthy of their time, quieted the insecurities that occasionally grew too loud.

Although, perhaps the accumulation of all these streaks served as an overcorrection of sorts. Rather than feeling insecure, I too often felt like *the man*. I wanted to be popular, to be liked and admired and envied, and Snapchat enabled this silly delusion. I could juggle a dozen different conversations at once, trading small talk, gossip, and comedic observations. Most of this back-and-forth seems superficial in hindsight, but that mattered little to me at the time. Having a lot of streaks meant I had a lot of connections. Having a lot of connections meant I had a lot of friends. How "real" these friendships were never seemed relevant.

Nobody on Snapchat was particularly real anyway. Looking back, I reckon we were all moonlighting as imposters, playing the role of the person we wished we were. We hid behind filters and manipulated camera angles, positioning half our face out of frame—all in this vain attempt to present a falsified version of ourselves. Messages (when there even were messages) could be written, proofread, and rewritten before they ever saw the light of day, ensuring that we always said the right thing at the right time. Sure, it lacked authenticity, but what teenager gives a damn about being authentic?

I even recall weekend hangouts that were derailed by Snapchat difficulties. There was nothing more obstructive to one's mental well-being than the inability to take a half decent selfie, especially if a particularly attractive girl was on the other end of the phone.

My buddy Dylan, well-versed in the art of persuasion (deception), would advise us in the subtle art of angles, lighting, and photograph manipulation.

“Damn, why does my nose look fucked?” I’d ask, preparing for a fifth selfie attempt.

“Your nose always looks fucked,” Dylan would say. “We just need to find the right angle to hide that from her. Try it without the flash.”

Dylan seemed to accumulate streaks at an unmatchable rate. His Snapchat resembled a spam folder, cluttered with messages from people he scarcely knew. He took photo after photo of his grinning face, showcasing the pearlescent teeth that won him a “Best Smile” superlative. I envied him, wishing that I, too, could engage in as many wordless, vapid conversations. Dylan must’ve held at least twice as many streaks as me, and this disparity sparked a bizarre sense of competition. Friendships at the time were a numbers game, and I was losing.

Dylan even maintained a streak with Greta, my high school’s German exchange student. She spoke broken English, whereas he spoke nonexistent German. I cannot imagine what their conversations were like. They may have resembled the spiritless photo exchanges shared between Katherine and I. Perhaps they just helped pass the time.

Even my in-person communications—y’know, the ones where you use the app to talk to a person in real time—felt more palpable as soon as a screen separated us. This isn’t to say that the relationships were better thanks to Snapchat, but they certainly felt more official. The little streak counter beside a person’s name created a propped-up air of credibility. Our friendship officially had weight, and the streak counter proved as much. It proved that I was known and that I knew people, regardless of how well I really knew them at all.

“Oh yeah, I know them. We have a streak together,” is a phrase that frequently left my lips over the course of high school. I now recognize the lack of logic that accompanied my line of reasoning.

Even romantic prospects could be tracked through Snapchat; how could you expect to get a girl in your bed if you couldn’t even get her on your best friend list?

Speaking of romance, there’s a unique experience on Snapchat, one that has undoubtably traumatized many of my generation. It occurs in the hours after a breakup when all is said and done. Tears have been shed, varsity sweatshirts have been returned,

and family members have been informed. Everything connecting you and the ex has been dismantled, deleted, and destroyed. Well, everything except the Snapchat streak. You probably sit alone in your room, in a self-appointed bout of solitary confinement, staring soggy eyed at a dying streak. An hourglass emoji flashes next to their name, signifying the inevitable. Tick. Tick. Tick.

I know it sounds trivial. It's difficult to explain why the loss of a tiny three-digit number evokes a somber sensation. Perhaps it's just a product of dramatization, something at which teenagers excel. That's a valid theory but not my preferred one. I argue that the streak represents something greater, something much less superficial.

My thesis: the disappearing streak signifies two unbearable truths. *One*: something has been lost. Something that was consistent for weeks or months or years on end. A slate wiped clean. A period of your life erased. *Two*: that something, the thing you felt slip from your grasp, will likely never return. You will never set eyes on that growing number again.

Sorta sad, ain't it?

Breakups aside, I managed to lose the majority of my streaks without waxing philosophical. I lost most of them by accident and many of them without even noticing. However, I must admit that there remains a melancholy aftertaste to every lost streak. It's a bittersweet feeling, one that accompanies an even more bittersweet realization: *dang, I guess I'll never talk to that person again.*

Classmates and groupmates and teammates and team captains; friends of mine and friends of friends and friend's friend's friends. I'll never remember all of them, but I reckon I enjoyed their company for as long as it lasted. I've been privileged to meet many great people over the course of my life—charming, talented, entertaining people who knew me for a spell before moving on. They continued down their path, and I continued down my own. I like to think we both share fond memories of one another. Memories of a fleeting period in which we occupied each other's company, ever so briefly, before embarking towards the next stages of our respective lives. Fond, bittersweet memories of something lost. Your circle shrinks as your nostalgia grows. *C'est la vie*, or so I've been told.

It’s certainly a pretty thought, though I’m not sure I believe it. Reflection tends to unravel rose-tinted notions. I can’t help but think that maybe my circle was never that large to begin with. Maybe the “connections” were hardly connections at all. Maybe I foolishly became preoccupied with a three-digit number over meaningful conversations. On Snapchat, I specialized in photography and small talk rather than friendship and discussion. I could have asked about hopes or dreams or passions or interests or fears or traumas. I could have listened. Maybe that would have built something worth maintaining.

And what did my “friends” on Snapchat truly “lose” when our streak fizzled out? A daily low-effort selfie from yours truly.

I reckon that loss doesn’t keep many of them up at night.

Maybe I should ask Kristin. Afterall, she’s been in my life for the past 1,545 days. Four years of blurry, wordless pictures. Four years of impulsively outrunning the hourglass emoji.

Hell, I wonder if she even remembers me.

Joshua David Laine is a senior at Emmanuel College working towards a degree in Writing, Editing, and Publishing. His passions include reading, writing, gaming, boxing, weightlifting, and hiking. Though he studies in Boston, Joshua hails from Hudson, New Hampshire. He desires to one day pen enough best-sellers to put that town on the map.

Home from the Barber's

by Yoon Chung

The flash of confusion on his face is not off-putting. I had prepared myself for it. Smiling, I ask the barber for a haircut.

"I'm sorry, but this is a barbershop."

"Oh, I know."

"I only do men's hair."

You could hardly tell mine apart from a schoolboy's. I keep on smiling.

"That's what I want. A soft undercut?"

He waves me away.

"Go see a hairdresser."

I hadn't expected him to be this stubborn. Somehow, though, his tone doesn't hurt me. It can't. I'd spent one too many days gathering up the courage to step into his shop to turn back now. I make him look up from his scissors.

"I've tried hairdressers, but they don't really get what I want. I want the kind of haircut you give the other customers here. See?" I gesture at my cropped hair. "It's practically the same thing."

"Well . . ."

He hesitates. He hadn't expected me to be this stubborn, either.

"Well, I'll give it a try. But I'm warning you, I don't do women's hair."

The big guy with the tough crew cut isn't a prick. Just nervous. I'm not. His thick sausage-fingers are gentle as they comb through my hair. I'm more comfortable here than at any chatty salon, clippers buzzing across my scalp.

Money makes strangers kind. After all, I'm paying customer. Even though barbers are taken aback at my soft voice and pink eyeshadow, I get my way with a few dollars and a polite smile. This one does a fantastic job. I go home happy.

Mom isn't.

"Are you out of your mind? Those places aren't for girls!"

"It was just the barber's!"

“What’s wrong with the hair salon?”

“They suck at short hair!”

“Then grow it back!”

“No.”

A few dollars and a polite smile does not change a mother’s mind. After all, I’m a daughter, and daughters are supposed to look like pretty little copies of their mothers’ glory days. My cropped hair tickles a latent anxiety in her heart.

“Are you sure you’re a daughter? Because you sure don’t look like one.”

At first, she hid her disappointment well. But once I got into hair clippers, she couldn’t stop asking, when are you growing your hair back? She would show me actresses with chic bob cuts and gush over my old pictures, as if the new me wasn’t the real me and just someone else with whom I was having a summer fling. It’s okay, she seemed to say. It’s okay to have some fun—as long you dump her in the end.

I wasn’t dumping her.

Mom couldn’t understand her. Androgyny is supposed to be a gimmick. Hot K-Pop boys can wear makeup and lace onstage and people won’t bat an eye because it’s only a costume for raking in millions of dollars and getting the world to love our country. Once it becomes an identity for a flat-chested high school girl wearing glasses, all the fun is gone and suddenly the ambiguity is too serious to be likeable. Apples and oranges should be apples and oranges. Oranpples freak out the grocers. My brother used to touch up his shoulder-length hair in front of the mirror for half an hour before school every day. “He looks like a girl,” dad complained. “Could you stop looking at the mirror for once? I don’t know what a man’s got to do with all that spraying and ironing.”

I had it better. Pixie haircut? Suit yourself, hair grows back. Baggy pants and combat boots? Cool, they look good on you. Handsome boy, that son of yours—oh, it’s a girl? That’s okay, I get that a lot. And everyone laughs because it’s a funny story, useful as a joke to crack at a party. I wonder if my brother would have laughed?

Maybe not, considering what he said to me at one point: You won’t get a boyfriend looking like that. Had he told himself something like it, too? It makes me wonder if he got his girlfriend after cutting his hair and going to the gym. I don’t ask, and he doesn’t say

any more, but I can sense the rest unsaid—you should like men, and since men like women, you should be more like women. As if I wasn't one already. As if I didn't fall for all those girls and all those boys didn't fall for me. But then again, I would hate to comfort myself with the fact that I'd dumped a man who texted me for weeks and asked me out to the movies. If looking like a guy makes me less of a woman, should dating a guy even the score to make me whole? Like men, like women, like men, like women . . . the words start to lose meaning after a while, like saying your name over and over again until it becomes weirdly detached, sounding as unfamiliar as another language.

Back in my room, I strip off my pants and underwear. Bare from the waist down, I march into the living room. Mom and dad are watching TV. I make them watch me. I hold up my underwear, red with my blood.

I am your daughter.

I am your girl.

That was four years ago.

Now my mom's hair is almost as short as mine.

Not quite. But almost.

Yoon Chung is an emerging writer based in South Korea. Her works are forthcoming in *Hobart* and *Fairlight Shorts*. She studies intimacy at her desk and comparative literature at college.

Little Mary

by Cathy Fiorello

We had a secret in my family when I was growing up. Her name was “Little Mary.”

Little Mary was born before I was, to an aunt I never knew. Her mother, my Aunt Mary, died in childbirth. This aunt’s life was, and still is, a mystery to me. The few photos I’ve seen of her reveal that she was the prettiest of my mother’s sisters, but give the impression that she was more reserved. She appeared to be neither as flamboyant as Aunt Anna, nor as feisty as Aunt Grace, and certainly not as formidable as Aunt Susie, whose edicts neither child nor adult dared defy. When Aunt Mary was spoken of, it was in whispers, cloaked in sadness. When we kids asked, “Where is Little Mary’s mother?” the only response was, “Be kind to your cousin.” We did as we were asked and we shared our beds, shared our meals, shared our toys, but our cousin’s history was never shared with us.

Motherless, Little Mary was cared for by my mother and her sisters for the first two years of her life. The infant was passed from one aunt to another, each trying to give her the love she would never know from her mother. When her father, Uncle Frank, remarried, it was to a woman who wanted him but not his child. Forced to raise Little Mary, she could not find it in her heart to love her. She abused her, both emotionally and physically. Whenever this reluctant stepmother’s abuse escalated in its severity, Uncle Frank brought Little Mary to her aunts to heal. Bruises and scars marred her young skin. Once she arrived with evidence of a cigarette burn on her arm. But the hurt in her eyes, her guarded manner, told an even sadder story. When she arrived for a stay, she was wary at first and it took days of her aunts’ gentle care before she began to behave like she was safely out of harm’s way.

The aunts were outraged each time Uncle Frank arrived at their door with his battered child. They demanded that he leave his wife or leave the child with them permanently. He refused to do either. Little Mary, a powerless pawn, spent her early years shuttling between the stepmother who broke her and the aunts who put her back together.

We never knew when she would leave us. When Uncle Frank reappeared, without notice, we knew our cousin's visit was over. My mother hurriedly packed her clothes and gathered the children to hug her goodbye. None of us knew when, or if, we would see her again. In time, the separation became permanent. When she was four years old, Uncle Frank moved his family South and Little Mary moved out of our lives. Uncle Frank, eager to sever relations with his dead wife's family, never sent them his new address. The aunts never heard from her again. With time, our memories of her faded.

In those early years I was too young to understand anything except that my cousin was visiting for a while. Now, decades after she left us, I am haunted by questions that I wish I had asked. My mother, who was close to her sisters all of her life, never talked about the sister she had lost. Her silence wasn't because that's how death was dealt with by my family. I have vivid memories of my grandfather, who died long before I was born, because my grandmother kept his memory alive for all of us. One of our regular Sunday excursions was to St. John's cemetery to visit Grandpa's grave. We knelt in the grass, and everyone whispered prayers for Grandpa's soul, everyone except Grandma. She just stood there and talked to him as if he were standing before her. Though I had never met him, my grandfather was very much a part of my young life. Yet I have no memory of my mother, my aunts, or my grandmother talking about Aunt Mary.

Thinking about this so many years later, I am consumed with sadness for my cousin. All these years later, I still have a vivid picture of her fair-skin and her straight, chin-length brown hair, bangs cut to rest on her brows just above her sad brown eyes.

All my mother's sisters and their children were vivid characters in my childhood. Writing about them reminds me that there are two vacancies in my memory bank: the aunt whose unique traits should have been stored there, waiting for me to call them up, and the cousin who became a blank in my family history.

Her aunts knew nothing of Little Mary's life after she left their care. They died not knowing what became of her. At reunions of the cousins, we remember her only in sadness and wonder why she has never tried to reconnect with us. The cousins are scattered all over the country now; maybe she's tried and can't reach us. Or maybe she has chosen not to remember her traumatic beginnings. Maybe by not looking back, she was free to move forward.

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My Inside Passage

by Julie Lockhart

DAY 1: I've kayaked in this vast, stunning seascape before, yet memory is such a mysterious thing now that I'm in my sixties. Like an accordion, when the bellows are contracted, my past is all scrunched together—bits and pieces emerge in a mixed-up chronology. When the bellows expand, I can breathe into the vistas of past events and their timelines, putting the pieces of my story back together.

The bellows are expanding today. I'm seated on a steel-colored fishing boat with twelve other people about to begin a guided group kayak tour in Johnstone Strait and the Broughton Archipelago—the inside passage of British Columbia.

The last time I encountered this area was twenty-five years ago with my now deceased former husband Michael and our good friend Sam. That trip was supposed to include four other friends who backed out at the last minute. The expedition, without the assistance of a tour company, would become an athletic feat through the Broughton Archipelago, then northeast to the end of Kingdom Inlet, a fjord into the mainland of BC. Very few kayakers, including tour companies, brave the Inlet because of the inherent danger of a narrow waterway when bad weather hits. Michael and Sam had originally planned to leave me with the rest of our group in the Archipelago while they braved the Inlet for a vigorous side excursion. Now they would have to tolerate me coming along. I vowed that I wouldn't hold them back from an amazing adventure. Besides, I'd already packaged delicious meals for the trip. Although reluctant, they said yes.

Today, as I look out at the open water and islands in the distance, clouds dot the sky while sunrays streak through, casting an enchanting silver glow on the calm sea. Threads of memory from the expanding accordion bellows enter my consciousness. The chart on the fishing boat's table shows Hanson Island on the right. I see a beach that looks like the one where Michael, Sam, and I had camped on the first night after kayaking across Johnstone Strait. I envision us back then hooting with joy as a pod of orcas jumped and played all around us during the crossing.

The boat driver is a man named Bruce. I look past his profile to get a good view of where Michael, Sam, and I kayaked all those years ago. Bruce. His name tugs at my memory. He's balding, with scraggly shoulder-length, reddish hair. I remember that hair. As I look at Bruce, our lead guide Dan asks him a question. Bruce's voice draws another piece of recognition to the surface. He answers Dan's inquiry about weather and they discuss the number of kayaks that Bruce has waiting for us at Paddler's Inn. In my mind's eye, a reclusive character from twenty-five years ago stood on a wooden platform as we paddled around a spit. Could this be the same guy? I don't remember the name "Paddlers Inn." Regardless, that place felt like a refuge for me after the rigorous paddle into Kingcome Inlet and the storm that could have dumped me out of my boat. Bruce's plot of land included a platform for our tents and an on-demand hot shower fed by a lake above his property. I had shown up there cold in my bones, and that shower is still the best I've experienced in all of my years. I remember staying under the hot water for twenty minutes or more, washing away the chill and grime, gathering strength to paddle for another week. Coming back to this exquisite seascape so many years after that unforgettable storm and the tension it caused between me and Michael and Sam, gives me an opportunity to recognize how the wisdom of years has given me perspective. I welcome the bellows expanding my memory of that time.

I turn around to look for Asha, my partner of nearly six years. He's the most supportive man I could ask for. Adventures with him are mellow and exciting, and we work well as a team. I can feel the contrast from my difficult relationship with Michael, and feelings of gratitude wash over me as I look at Asha's bearded face.

Bruce says he's spotted a humpback whale in the distance. I stand next to Bruce, hoping for another sighting. I'm scanning the horizon when I see the spray. Everyone on the boat cheers. Although I'm feeling a bit timid, I ask Bruce how long he's been at his place, and he says, "Since 1980." I tell him that I think I was there in the mid-1990's when it only offered a platform for our tent and that magnificent shower. He cracks a reserved smile and says it has changed a lot since then.

When we arrive at Paddlers Inn, it has indeed changed. There's a big house on the hill, and on the floating platforms, a kitchen building with rustic rooms on the second floor where we'll sleep for the night and a bathroom with an on-demand shower. Quite

deluxe for the middle of a sparsely populated set of islands in a harsh climate. I wander around to make sense of this place as it now exists, and see a painted wooden sign, which reads “Paddlers Inn.” On the backside it reads “The Buffer Zone.” That’s the name that lingers in my memory.

Day 2: It’s raining large drops on the metal roof. Today we will pack our gear and kayak to the first campsite. I’m tucked in my sleeping bag thinking about that saying of my mother’s: “Rain before seven stops by eleven.” *Not too likely in this place*, I say to myself. Rain like this can be chilling, and I’m worried we will get as cold as I got on that trip up Kingcome Inlet.

As I lay in my cozy bag, my thoughts drift back to that day Michael, Sam, and I traveled up Kingcome Inlet in single kayaks. I remember that we had awakened to nonstop drizzle on calm water. On the previous day I had a tough time keeping up with the guys as we paddled through the Broughton Archipelago and across Fife Sound into a powerful headwind. High walls flank Kingcome Inlet, a fjord, with waterfalls and lush green mosses and ferns dangling from cliffs. I wore a good quality yellow paddling rain jacket, yet had a naiveté about chilling rain in that ecosystem. The waterfalls seemed to draw me in, and I kayaked under one of them. I loved the feel of the water coming off the rocks above splashing on my head and shoulders, soaking my hair. I loved making the guys laugh by deliberately paddling underneath it, even though it turned out to be a poor choice on such a damp day.

That day had seemed endless—an inaccessible shoreline with no place to get out of the boats. As our paddling drew on, I felt colder and colder, in spite of the heat I was generating inside my raincoat. When we neared the top of the inlet, we saw a dock and a dilapidated graying wooden shack. We searched around for possible campsites, but nothing looked likely on the rocky, thickly vegetated shore. The shack would have to do. We rolled our bodies up onto the dock, tied down our towlines, and walked into the room, empty save for some old fishing nets piled around the floor. It reeked of dead fish—years’ worth.

Sam and Michael wanted to paddle up river to the small Indigenous village that still existed in that harsh place, but I was done for the day. They seemed happy to be rid of

me for this part of their adventure, and I needed to get warm. Neither of them thought to give me hot tea or soup before they left, yet my body was screaming for warmth. The cold left my brain too foggy to understand that I should ask for help. After the guys left, I laid out my pad and sleeping bag on the uneven plank floor and crawled in with all my clothes on except for my soaked raingear. My weary body kept shivering in the dark stench of that place while they were gone.

As I look back, I feel sad for my younger self being left like that. What if the wrong person happened upon the shack? What if I didn't ever warm up? My predicament was a mirror of what my relationship with Michael was like. Compassion and teamwork were not qualities we embodied as a couple. At that time, we'd been together for five years. We struggled to find healthy ways to communicate and connect, even though we shared similar values and passions, including outdoor adventure. Each of us had been divorced, and we both recognized that our relationship was so much better than our previous experiences. But as I reflect, I suspect we stayed together by inertia. Low self-esteem also wedged me in a stranglehold. I was terrified of being alone, and my pleaser tendencies kept me from speaking up for myself.

Shaking the memories from my head, I roll to my left side to face toward Asha. I hope that today's rain will stop and we'll all have a good time. His eyes are open. We clasp hands, pulling close for a quick morning kiss. Our caring connection fills me with gratitude. I then crawl out of the bed in this rustic wood-paneled room. In the kitchen we find others in our group drinking coffee, joking around. I tell them what my mom used to say about rain and they laugh. Our guides are cooking, and the smells of bacon, eggs, and fruit float up my nose.

After breakfast, the rain lets up a bit, lifting our spirits as we figure out how to pack the gear into our kayaks—personal gear and sleeping bags, cooking equipment, safety gear, tents, sleeping pads, water, and food. The guides know from experience that all of it will fit. So do I. Everyone else is skeptical. After an hour of stuffing and re-stuffing gear, we lift our heavy boats off the floating dock and into the water. The guides stabilize the kayaks to keep us from tipping as we get in. Pulling away from the dock, I take one last look around Bruce's place.

I'm at the back of the white and green tandem kayak that will be ours for the journey. Asha sits in front with his paddle ready. We set off in our fleet of eight boats with the rain softly bouncing on the water in sparkling splashes. I pull my raincoat hood over my sun hat and paddle.

I've kayaked only a handful of times since Michael's death. A couple of years after Kingcome Inlet, we married and had a baby girl. But our marriage began deteriorating, as did his heart. A cardiologist diagnosed Michael with a mitral valve prolapse. What Michael didn't tell me is that doctors had recommended surgery. On a hiking trip in high elevation Utah when our daughter was three, Michael's inability to catch his breath scared me and he fessed up. By the time he went under the knife, the surgeons declared his prolapse to be the second worse they'd seen. Earlier challenges in our relationship had pulled us together, but this one dragged us apart. I withdrew into tax returns, house chores, my new management role at work, and childcare. I watched him withdraw into food excesses, his job and volunteer roles, and taking risks in his kayak. Couples counseling didn't aid our ability to meet each other's emotional needs. The fragile container of our marriage was shattering.

Rainwater pooling on my sun hat brim trickles down my nose, jolting me back to today's paddling rhythm. A great blue heron squawks and flies past us. Its vast wingspan and prehistoric shape remind me of why I love kayaking in the wilderness. As we navigate along the shores of the first two islands, time appears to have stood still in the Broughton Archipelago. What I'm experiencing today seems as pristine as it was twenty-five years ago.

The guides point to a rocky beach and suggest we take a break. Rowan, the younger of the two guides, hands me a chocolate bar, asking me to break it into pieces for everyone to share. I love being the bearer of good dark chocolate. My companions break into smiles as they each get their piece. The smooth flavor lifts our soggy spirits. After my chocolate fix, I duck under a large cedar tree to pee, and look back into a magical forest dripping with moss. I long to merge with the beauty of this area so that it will always be with me. Dan says that we have another hour of paddling, and the guides will make us a late lunch while we set up our tents. I shiver at the thought of setting up camp in the rain.

Back in the boats, my steady paddling elicits the accordion to expand my recall. Twenty-five years ago I did wake up warm that next morning in the smelly fishing shack. Sam made us a quick breakfast of oats and coffee before we got into our boats for the paddle back down Kingcome Inlet. Leaving that horrid cabin calmed me. Yet the wind blew steadily and the weather radio scratched out a forecast of a storm approaching with winds up to “five-zero knots.” I remember thinking that five-point-zero miles per hour didn’t sound too bad. Sam and Michael didn’t say anything to rectify my misinterpretation. The previous day’s paddle had been strenuous, but not dangerous, so I expected more of the same. As we left the protection of the cove, following winds kicked up, pushing us along at a good pace. I performed well through swells that lifted my boat, like surfing. Unlike the challenging previous days, my stamina was strong, and I placed each paddle stroke with confidence. The winds increased as we travelled, but still my boat-handling skills felt amazing.

Later that morning, the winds began building to gusts and howls. Then I noticed that the walls of the fjord on our left gave way to another inlet. High waves with whitecaps loomed in front of us. Before I could discern what the sudden change in conditions meant, we were in it—I was in it, because I felt completely alone in the steepest waves I’d ever seen in a kayak. The front of my boat dove forward and then lurched back up onto the next wall of water, which sent me into the trough again—and again and again. I paddled fast, frantic to keep upright while the winds kept propelling me forward. The rapid drumbeat of my heart felt like it might burst and my mouth went dry.

I can’t tell you how long that terrifying situation lasted. On my left, I felt something slam into my boat—Michael’s desperate effort to raft up and keep me from tipping. I reached my hand out to grab his boat, which steadied my kayak in the swells. The first thing he said was, “Jules, why didn’t you brace to slow yourself down?”

“You always told me that in danger to just keep paddling,” I muttered.

Then I felt another strong knock to my boat, as Sam rafted up on the other side, equally struggling. Our practice sessions in the calm lake at home had not adequately prepared us for the reality of trying to do this rescue technique in such treacherous waters. When the fjord had opened on our left, the winds from that direction mixed with the winds from behind us created a life-threatening situation.

With the guys on either side of me, I could finally catch my breath, although tension trembled throughout my being. The three of us stayed connected as the storm continued to push us to safer waters past the side inlet. My agitation continued as Michael and Sam talked me through what I should have done. They were shaken as well, although they laughed about how my boat looked like a balloon with the air just let out. I suppose I also mustered a laugh to release some of the anxiety. Yet fear racked me. I felt reluctant to have them let go, even after the winds had calmed. I couldn't stop the continual replay of what-ifs. What if I'd tipped over? Trauma had sunk into my belly.

I begged the guys to stay connected a bit longer, and when the sun peaked out from the ominous sky, reluctant calm crept through my limbs. Our boats no longer made progress without the help of our paddles. I coached myself into being ready to paddle on my own again. Michael got out trail mix to give us all energy, and soon I put my paddle back in the water.

Looking back, I don't know why I didn't flip over. There's no way I could have survived the frigid high waves of the unforgiving sea. Did I have guardian angels or just a great boat? I can only say now that I had an experience of *grace*.

I shiver at the memory. Asha's even paddling matches mine. With no wind today, I am safe. As we paddle the double toward our next campsite on Tracey Island, I see a boat wake heading our way and practice the bracing technique that Sam and Michael had chastised me for not doing. I remember practicing that technique a lot after the Kingcome expedition, making sure that should I ever get in danger again, I could handle the situation with strength and calm.

DAY 3: A drip on my cheek wakes me up. A haze of light washes into the tent. I rub my eyes, slip on fogged glasses, and wiggle my toes. My feet were soaked and cold when I got into my sleeping bag last night, but they feel warm now. A fine mist of condensation covers my bag. I check the time and listen for rain; it's quiet. Yesterday drenched us all, but today might be better. Setting up camp with cold raindrops running down the back of my neck chilled me. Our group huddled under a leaky tarp for the remainder of yesterday, but there's a sense this morning of having survived the worst.

This feeling of accomplishment and relief reminds me of that evening after the storm in Kingcome Inlet. The sky cleared as we set up camp for two nights. Sam and Michael recognized that we needed to land for a couple of days after our traumatic incident. I felt relief at the coming downtime after pushing so hard for the previous week. That next morning, they paddled out on their own to explore the area. I puttered around the campsite.

As the September sun warmed the shoreline, I took out my bottle of SeaSuds and washed my hair. While brushing out days of tangles, I heard a loud crashing through the forest. Remembering that our camping spot on Simoon Sound was on the mainland of BC, I imagined a large grizzly bear bursting out of the trees into my serene spot, just as I had finally felt my body relaxing. Thinking fast, I grabbed a cooking pot and started to pound on it with the end of my hairbrush. At the same time, I began throwing equipment and supplies into my boat. With my hairbrush and pot still in my left hand, I plopped into my kayak, pushing away from shore. After paddling into the calm bay, I listened and heard nothing more. It was amazing to feel safe in my boat after the previous day. Renewed courage trickled into my chest after days of being soaked and scared. I put the paddle across my boat and ran fingers through my fluffy hair. I peeled open a snack bar, chewing slowly to make it last. The deep blue of the sky caught my attention, and joy rose in my throat while gazing around that amazing place.

I took out my fishing pole. Wouldn't Michael and Sam be surprised if we got to feast on a fresh salmon? After attaching the lure, I cast out beyond my boat and waited. I wouldn't call myself a skilled fisherwoman, but it seemed like a good thing to pass the time while I let whatever large animal wander away.

And then I felt a strong tug. Elated, I reeled in, holding the pole with a strong grip. It felt big, really big. I wondered how I would get it into my boat. Then I saw it—the horrid toothy grin of a dogfish, the small sharks that inhabit these waters. I shuddered and my adrenaline kicked in for the second time that day, as I rifled through my dry bag for my knife to cut the line. Before I could grasp it, the shark darted out to my right and broke my pole clean in half. Reaching the knife at last, I cut the line and set myself free.

I paddled back to shore reviewing the challenges of the past few days—pride at accomplishment mixed with feeling overwhelmed at the unpredictability of nature. Back

on land, I stretched out on the small stones near the shore and let their sunbaked heat ooze into me.

The next day, Sam, Michael and I paddled south out of Simoon Sound, eventually following the shore of Gifford Island. That's where we startled Bruce standing on his platform that would become our next campsite. Even the smallest of creature comforts in the wild can brighten a weary spirit, and Bruce's endless shower made all the difference in my attitude—my buffer zone for the night.

After breakfast, the group needs to get all of our gear and the boats down the rocky shore to the water at low tide. This tour is anything but cushy. We must work together to get camp packed, cleaned, and then ready our kayaks—a two-hour process. Each of us needs to take a portion of the group gear. Getting boats in the water at low tide requires six to eight of us per boat, as we make our way carefully through the slippery rocks to prevent a fall or ankle twist.

Once in the kayak, Asha and I paddle out into the bay to wait for everyone else. To our left and beyond a small island, we can see the current ebbing in the direction we are going and I hear the distinct puff of a blow. Our guides tell us that a humpback whale is traveling the same direction. We all keep our eyes focused and catch the next blow as we head west, keeping a good distance from the whale, who then disappears farther down the channel. With the clouds breaking up, the sun's rays sparkling on the water, and the sighting of a whale, I feel energized for the day.

Our first crossing of the narrow Arrow Passage requires that we angle to the left so that the ebbing currents won't take us too far off course. A seal pops its head out of the water, notices us, and slips back under. Seagulls fly overhead, chattering to each other, while a few stand in a group on a log slowly moving with the current. The mountains of the mainland rise in the distance. I breathe in the sea air, elated to be right where I am.

We make our way to the next crossing. My spirits soar as the sun warms my damp sunhat. To my right, the north end of Vancouver Island with the open ocean beyond evokes a longing inside my belly. God, I love this wild and sacred place, and I can't get enough of its staggering splendor.

I recognize the familiar cry of an eagle. Looking up, I notice hundreds of eagles above, one-by-one heading toward the islands ahead. Squeals of delight erupt from my traveling companions, as everyone looks up. Soon we are close enough to the islands to see eagles perched high in the trees. This glorious nature astonishes me.

As we near Owl Island, the guides direct us to paddle around to the west side to a campsite. I spot another bald eagle in a cedar tree rising from the shore. This will be home for the night. As we unpack, we spread tents, sleeping bags and wet clothing across the large logs scattered along the shore in the warm sun. One of our friends pulls out a liter of wine and the guides prepare a late lunch.

Our group chatters happily while munching on cold cuts, cheese, cut up fruit and veggies. Occasionally one of us gets up to flip a sleeping bag or tent fly drying in the sun. Someone asks the guides if they've ever run into a bear. I spout out that bears can swim between the islands, and everyone stops to look at me, eyes wide.

"When I was in this area twenty-five years ago, we had a bear come into camp on an island. My partner Michael and I awoke one morning to our friend Sam yelling wildly. We scampered out of our tent to see Sam, buck-naked, throwing rocks and shouting as the bear tried to bite open the back hatch of his kayak where our food was stored. The bear scurried away. It was the funniest thing."

Some people laugh, but others look freaked. Rowan jumps in to say, "The tour company has never had an encounter. It's good to remember that the bears really don't want anything to do with people." *Except for good-smelling food*, I say to myself.

We encountered the bear the morning after Michael had caught a salmon. I can still remember the succulent bites after cooking the fish over a fire. Yet the smell of salmon lingered, tempting the ravenous bear into our camp. I had also caught a salmon during that sixteen-day adventure. Even though my fishing pole was useless after the dogfish experience, I also carried a drop line. On a calm afternoon, the three of us put lures on our lines and dropped them into the water. Sam and Michael paddled behind me. Soon, they began yelling that I had something on my line. I looked back to see a salmon jumping and following my boat; I pulled the line in, but the only place to put the large salmon was into the cockpit between my legs. I remember feeling it squirm, not knowing what to do

next. My mind blanks when I try to remember how we killed the fish, but I do recall satisfaction when we ate that juicy salmon for dinner.

DAY 4: I wake up to the smell of breakfast cooking and wiggle out of my sleeping bag. The tent sags with dew despite all the work we did yesterday to dry it. Nothing stays dry in this environment. Out beyond the beach, thick fog blocks the view. The guides look nervous, since we have a long way to travel to our next site.

Once on the water, our lead guide radios ahead to let all boats know we will be crossing Knight Inlet. We paddle close together. After passing through the main channel, the fog lifts its heavy skirt and we spot the sunlit Swanson Island ahead and travel east along its shore. As we near the end of the island, Dan stops us to warn, “We are about to head into a flooding current.”

I’ve experienced fast currents in a kayak. It takes a lot of arm and back strength with a steady forward momentum. The guides instruct us to paddle single file as close to the shore as possible to keep away from the faster flooding in the main channel to our left. A surreal feeling washes over me as adrenalin floods my system—the sensation of fast, hard paddling doesn’t match what looks like little movement forward when compared to the shoreline. This current is strong. Yet I feel high with the challenge. As we move into calmer waters, I savor the sense of momentary respite.

We are about to round Swanson Island when I see a small island on the left with an opening that we will paddle between to get into Fresh Water Bay. I recognize where I am.

Michael, Sam, and I had rounded this island on what was supposed to be our last day. We woke up that morning to cloudless, sapphire skies and a steady wind from the north—the first strong winds since Kingcome Inlet. The previous days of paddling had been calm. But that day’s winds scared me. I said as much to Sam and Michael, who waved their hands to brush me off. We had planned to head across Blackfish Sound and Johnstone Strait. As we made our approach to the crossing, fear squeezed my chest. When we entered Fresh Water Bay, I could see huge whitecaps in the Sound and declared to myself that I would not be heading into that kind of danger. Yet what could I do about my enthusiastic paddling buddies, who looked giddy at the prospect of a great

adventure in the throttling seas? We landed on the beach only to be greeted by an older woman who said the beach was her property. Georgia stood about five foot eleven with uncombed scattered blond-gray hair and wore a rugged look of long-term wilderness isolation. Sam and Michael talked her into letting us pull our boats up to look at our route across to Telegraph Cove. In exchange, they would help her lift a few large beams for the house she was building. I stepped out of my boat onto a pebble shore and turned to look at the churning waters beyond the bay. I blurted out, “I am not going across that today. You two can go if you want. Send a rescue boat for me, because this is not the day I am going to die!”

I have often reflected on taking a stand for myself, and how the guys reacted—as though what I had said was inappropriate. Perhaps they couldn’t reconcile the usually sweet and compliant woman with such a strong statement. Michael expressed his disapproval and Sam turned away, but I didn’t care. They could risk their lives, but not me. To cool off, I wandered the shore and woods while they helped Georgia lift the heavy beams. That’s when I found it—the most amazing eagle feather I’d ever seen. Black for about half of it, white the other half. I picked it up. The decision to stand up for myself was black and white. Risking my life bore no shades of gray.

We did not cross that day. Georgia appreciated the help so much that she let us camp in a spot away from her living quarters. The next morning, we woke up to smooth, silky waters as far as we could see. I felt relieved, but Michael and Sam complained; flat waters weren’t exciting enough. The tension between the men and me hung like the heavy bows of the cedars along the shore. They made me feel that I had been wrong to say “no.” Yet a few weeks later, Michael admitted that he also thought the danger that day had been life threatening. Why he didn’t stand up to agree with me, I will never know.

My paddling feels light and easy as we approach the shore where Georgia had lived. After getting out of the boats, we wander up to the grassy area to look for a campsite for the night. I see the paving stones and a few remaining beams still standing upright from Georgia’s house. Flowers grown out of control grace the surrounding area—most likely planted by Georgia as she created her homestead. I tell the guides the story of meeting Georgia twenty-five years earlier, and they tell me that she still owns the land,

leasing it now to the kayaking company. We all chuckle at what a tough character she is. She must be over eighty years old by now.

Day 5: I wake up to the sound of a boat motor zooming across the water near our bay. Asha is still asleep, lightly snoring. Turning onto my back, I gaze at the orange and white panels of the tent converging above me. Droplets of water hang from the rainfly. A boat wake surges onto shore, that very shore where I stood up for myself twenty-five years ago.

A cold drip from the top of the tent lands on my forehead at the hairline as I ponder how many times in my life, prior to that trip, I had asserted myself like that. Very few. Moving west when I was twenty-three against my parent's wishes stands out as one. Leaving my first husband when I was twenty-nine is another. Mostly, I was a pleaser, almost never standing up for myself. Because if I did, I'd get shot down—by my parents, my first husband, my friends. I rarely expressed my own voice.

My voice is strong now, but I had to break years of conditioning. Asha stirs next to me, and I'm flooded with thankfulness for having found a partner who is not intimidated by a woman's strong voice. These days, I am my own buffer zone. These days, I feel blessed.

We crawl out of the tent and amble toward the group gathering on a long log with a view of the bay. We can see across Blackfish Sound, our big crossing for today. The calm sea glistens as the clouds move in and out of the sun's rays. Once packed up to paddle, we head out toward Hanson Island. Two seals pop heads out of the water as we glide by. In the middle of the channel, we notice a pod of dolphins cruising toward a spot not too far away where seagulls are swooping and fishing. We stop paddling to let others catch up and I sink my hand into the silent water as if to grasp this exquisite experience and bring it with me.

When we arrive at our final campsite on Hanson Island, I recognize the beach. It's the same one on which Sam, Michael, and I camped on our first night. It stuns me that we are spending our last night of this adventure on the same beach. I can't help but wonder if Michael would be happy that I'm here again. After the anguish of our divorce dissipated, a sweet and supportive friendship replaced the gaping hole left from our

broken marriage. Forgiveness was about freeing my heart for what came next and co-parenting our daughter in a healthy way. I saw Michael for the last time when I picked up our girl at his apartment so he could fly to Mexico for a surfing adventure. He died on a northern Baja beach of heart failure—only a year after our divorce was final—leaving me with deep grief and the sole responsibility for raising our six-year-old.

I pull myself out of the kayak and turn to look at the view toward Johnstone Strait. An isolated place back when Michael, Sam and I had relished it, this last camp now serves as a regular site for the kayak tour company, equipped with a cooking tent, benches, and platforms for tents. Beautiful cedar and Douglas Fir encircle us as we set up for our last night. Rowan and Dan get to work on an early dinner so that those of us who wish to paddle one last time can kayak as the day blends into dusk. Tonight, we feast on a Thai curry dish that rivals my own.

Not everyone wants to kayak, so I slither into a single boat, feeling free and powerful as I propel myself forward. With light fog mostly lifted, we skirt around the point, heading into a narrow, long bay. Michael's image paddling his single boat seeps into my thoughts. He paddled like a true expert. In spite of the challenges of that trip, I appreciate his love of adventure and what I learned from being with him. Rowan is paddling next to me, and I tell him about that first evening twenty-five years ago with the orcas jumping while we crossed the Strait. He tells me about his adventurous mom, who taught him to kayak.

Then I see it: an eagle feather in front of my boat floating on the water. I grab it as my boat floats by. Finding one on this trip feels synchronous, like a gift. I put it under the deck lines at the front of the boat as we turn around to finish the last paddle.

Day 6: We wake up to another foggy morning. Yet today we don't need to kayak through it. We will safely cross the Strait in Bruce's fishing boat.

We begin to pack, separating our personal gear from the company's equipment. Everything is slathered in dew. The guides call us for our last breakfast—pancakes and fruit. I splurge on a cup of their delicious dark roast coffee. As I sip, I gaze out at the water and across Johnstone Strait, which is starting to clear with swaths of the small islands and Vancouver Island coming into view. I miss this place already.

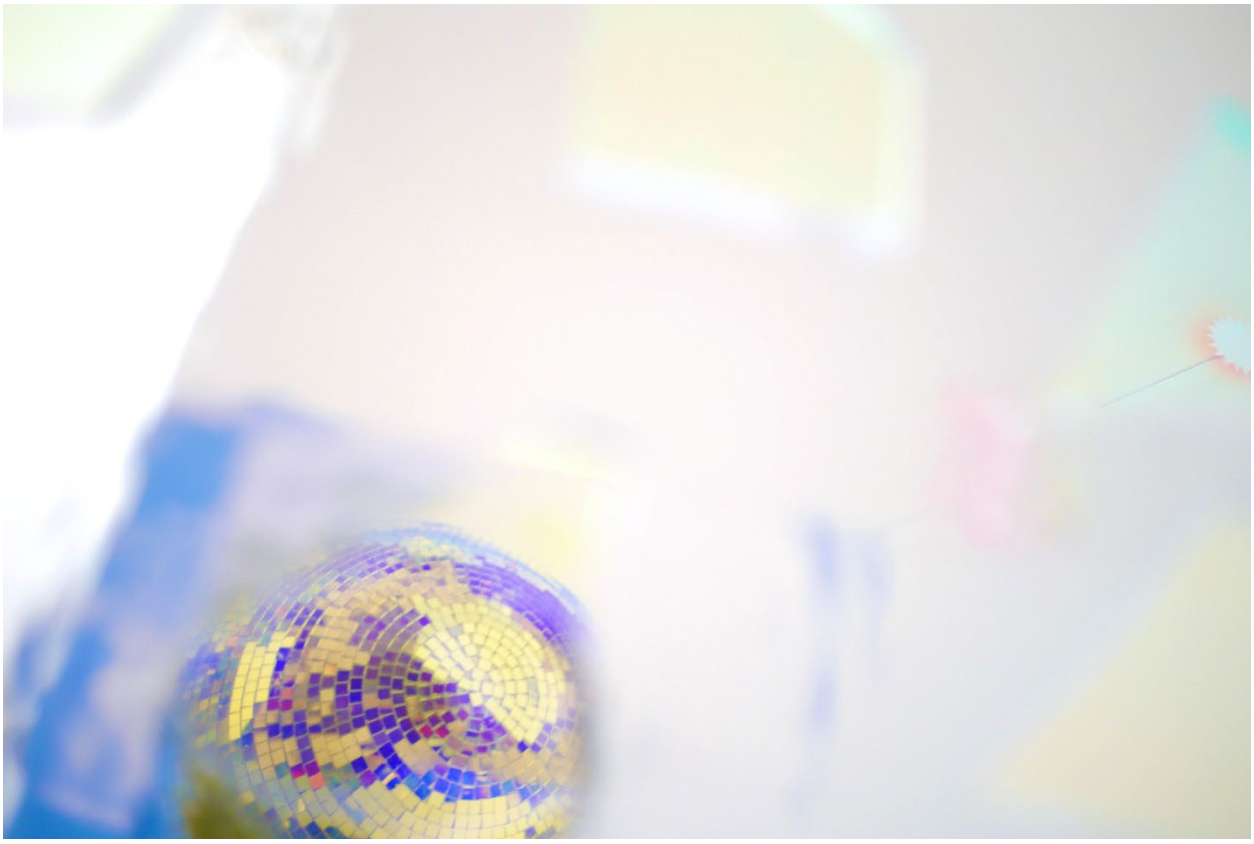
As we finish packing, I glance around one last time at the magical forest behind us. I lift my heavy bags down the trail to the rocky beach. Several from our group are already sitting on a big log chatting happily. As we wait, my cohort of kayakers begins to sing songs to pass the time. Notes float by as I savor being on this special beach again. Our group starts to sing “Amazing Grace,” and I feel tears on my cheeks. This was the song we sang at Michael’s memorial service. It seems fitting in the final hours of this healing adventure. No one seems to notice that I’m crying—for Michael, for our divorce, for our daughter who grew up without her daddy.

As we leave Hanson Island, I remember that in ten days it will be the fifteenth anniversary of Michael’s death. I stand in the wind at the back of the boat with tears coming again. I look back at the aching beauty of the Broughton Archipelago and experience the vastness of my heart: to love then and now and to see the depth of wisdom and strength gained over these many years.

Julie Lockhart loves an adventure in wild places. She spent most of her career in academics, where she published in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Critical Issues in Environmental Taxation*; and *Advances in Accounting Education*. During the last years of her career, she led a grief support nonprofit, where she discovered the beauty and depth of personal stories, writing about her experiences to help grieving people feel less alone. Her essays have appeared in the *Ashland Daily Tidings*, *Minerva Rising*, and the *Journal of Wild Culture*. She has twice placed in the top ten in the Women on Writing essay contests. Julie lives in Port Townsend, WA.

Shiny Object

by Bradley Wester



I changed colors like an exotic bird as I walked up the aisle at my eighth-grade graduation wearing a shimmering, iridescent green Nehru suit, its Mandarin collar not dissimilar to the clerical collarette worn by the priest handing out diplomas. But rather than an ecclesiastical reference, my collar made a counterculture one. The Beatles had recently returned from India with this exotic attire as the ultimate statement in Mod style. It was 1969, and my mother bought the suit with a discount from the boutique department store where she worked selling cosmetics.

I attended a Catholic school in a conservative suburb of New Orleans, where, except for graduation day, I was required to wear a khaki uniform every day for eight years. The suit finally set me apart, placing me in a rarified space I would attempt to occupy for the rest of my life—a shiny space where I could attract people while keeping them at a safe distance.

My shine obsession may have started with the water, held back by levees, surrounding the below-sea-level city of New Orleans like a mirror, that invisible but foreboding waterline waiting for the next catastrophic storm to bisect and reflect the city and its people. I spent much of my unconscious youthful energy keeping my head above it while looking into its imagined depths in search of myself. The upside-down, unbreathable world inside this water-mirror felt more like home. Out of its depths, I could occasionally rise, watery, reptilian, resplendent, as I did at fourteen in my shiny, iridescent green Nehru suit. A liberating act, which, in my mind, still represents the moment I began to leave conformity behind.

Standard color or pigment absorbs or reflects light waves. In iridescence—what we see as 'shine'—light waves combine and react, increasing or decreasing vibrancy, then changing hue as the iridescent object moves. This is called 'interference.' While no one is certain how iridescence evolved in nature, it's considered a feature that helps attract sexual partners of the same species. Its structure sheds water and reduces friction—like duck feathers. More recently, biologists have suggested that the alluring effect of iridescence has a purpose beyond mating, that it can also shield against enemies. For example, in the butterfly kingdom, iridescence camouflages its wearer from predators, the strategy to literally dazzle and confuse them.

Humans have adopted similar strategies. In a case of shielding identity, the homosexual closet is a camouflage prison where its occupant exists in public space—overwhelmingly heterosexual space—while remaining effectively invisible: safe from the straight predator. It makes sense that French artists invented early camouflage during World War I, designs to disguise and hide equipment and positions. What percentage of these artists, or 'camouflage officers,' were homosexual? Who better at *'the art of concealing that something is being concealed'* than a closeted homosexual artist? The defining principle: deception.

For at least four more years at my conservative all-boys Catholic high school, I would have to camouflage, hide in plain sight. I learned to distract my family, fellow students, and teachers with achievements, shiny reflective surfaces in which they could

see themselves. For others, my shiny surfaces would dazzle and confuse them, a deflection from what I knew people wouldn't like about me. I drew their likeness; I made good grades; I acted in plays. I stayed in constant motion, a moving target. If my iridescence failed to dazzle and confuse, at least a diversified phalanx of admirers could slow my enemy down while I made my escape.

I was the shortest boy in my freshman year, 4' 11", with dark curly brown hair and blue eyes. He was tall, eventually six feet, with red hair, green eyes, and a prominent nose and jaw—a new standard of beauty, entirely unlike anyone I had known. I saw Liam on the first day of Freshman class at his locker. We slammed our locker doors shut at the same time. He came my way, his walk a kind of rhythmic lope—long, sinuous limbs, the body of a long-distance runner. As he passed, I froze. Our eyes met, and he smiled. I fell instantly in love, a secret I would keep for four long years.

Liam and I joined the marching band during our freshman year. We both played the drums. Handsome in our militaristic uniforms, I got stuck with the cymbals while Liam, one of the guys, a golden boy, became the star drummer. I could never hope to be within his orbit. So I quit band my sophomore year to focus on art and theatre, where I could excel because I couldn't stand being mediocre at anything, especially in front of Liam. By senior year, I had developed my brand of Queer-shine-camouflage so well that I was known and respected by the student body for winning drama awards, placing my cartoons in the school paper, and painting the school mascot on the locker room door. Dazzle. Confuse.

The student body president came by the journalism room to ask my opinion on what we, the class of '73, should leave the school.

"A mural!" I suggested.

Brother Morton, the Principal, approved my Peter Max-inspired abstract design, a milestone for this conservative Catholic boys' school. Then, soon after, Liam came by the journalism room asking for my help decorating the school cafeteria for the senior band banquet. I could hardly believe he wanted to see me. Then he noticed my mural sketches and showed interest. I got up the courage and suggested a trade.

"Yes, I'd love to help!" he replied.

It started with paint fights, then wrestling on the scaffolding, then a tennis game after we'd worked for hours. When the mural was complete, the tennis continued—Liam picking me up for a game he always won, then stopping at 7-Eleven for a post-game Coke ICEE and brain freeze.

Once, when Liam drove me home after a game, I asked him in, knowing my parents were at work and my kid brother at school. I sat at one end of the den's corner sectional, and he sat at the other, an ocean of right-angle between us. Finally, he asked who I would take to the senior prom.

I had been dating two girls from two schools who wanted my ring. Janelle went to the all-girls Catholic high. Denise went to the public school for girls. I played one against the other so as not to commit to either. Now that senior year arrived, I would ask one to the ring dance and one to the prom.

"Denise," I answered Liam. "I'm taking Denise."

"Do you want to double date?" he asked.

I had secretly and shamefully thought the only reason the beautiful popular Liam and I were friends was that classes had ended, and there were no witnesses. Our double-dating to the prom would send a message and be evidence of my new status. He wanted to double date with me! Then Liam started talking about girls and kissing. Had I ever been French kissed? How far had I gone? My heart sank. This wasn't a date *with* Liam but a double date with him and his girlfriend. Although privileged to have so intimate a conversation with him, I felt crushed by the unbearable weight of my four years of secret love. I would forever live this lonely life.

"No, I've never been French kissed," I lied. "What's it like?"

"Well…," he said. He looked directly at me, considered the best way to elucidate, then stood up and walked over to my side of the couch.

What happened next was a hallucinatory jolt to my senses. I felt volcanoes erupting. Islands forming. Sun settings and sun risings. Sands shifting, snows melting, waters rushing. Seeds germinating into forests. Lionesses licking cubs. Magnificent birds riding thermals. Bees pollinating flowers opening in fast motion. Grizzly bears fishing the spawning salmon. And whoa…a great white whale breaching. All in the single moment of our tongues touching.

For the first time, I tasted genuine sweetness and grace, the potential of my every utterance, poem, and song. The ecstatic rightness of first love reciprocated, of finally being seen. The instant recognition that nature included my belonging with Liam sent shock waves through my body and triggered an immense and paradoxical release of shame.

I had been lied to. The sin did not exist.

Without a trace of awkwardness, we kissed and held each other like practiced French movie stars. Inexplicably, we proclaimed our love for one another.

Never had I become so enthusiastic about anything or anyone, ignoring the perpetual backdrop of social upheaval in our peripheral vision—the landmark decision of Roe v. Wade protecting the right of our sisters and girlfriends to have an abortion and, more relevant to us, the Paris Peace Accords officially ending the war in Vietnam and invalidating my draft number. Even the Watergate scandal at its crescendo didn't matter. I remember Nixon's face as he announced his dismissal of Dean and the resignations of Haldeman and Ehrlichman on Liam's mother's television the day he introduced me to her on April 30, 1973. But my life's focus in every aspect was on Liam, and he wanted me to meet his mother.

Nothing external changed for us. We would take our girlfriends dancing or to a movie, then to Café du Monde in the French Quarter for beignets and coffee. We'd end up at The Point, the end of Breakwater Drive on a spit of land hooking into Lake Pontchartrain, where generations of young lovers went to 'make out' in their cars as brackish waves crashed over the windshield during rough weather. Liam always drove because he had a coveted green 1965 Mustang, and I had an uncool yellow 1969 Opel Kadett. Making out with my girlfriend in his backseat, I would arrange our bodies such that I could view Liam with his girl. It's awful to recall the disembodied feeling of going through the motions with a young woman who wanted nothing more than for me to take it past second base. Our lips locked, her eyes closed in anticipation, mine open and aslant, the guilt unbearable. Every so often, Liam would meet my eyes in the rearview mirror, silently confirming that in a short time, all would be well and that soon *we* would be kissing, naked in each other's arms.

Liam's mom had divorced twice and was single again. While kind to me, her sad detachment gave Liam much more privacy and freedom than I had. So, we spent more nights at his place. At my house, we employed a counterintuitive, audacious strategy to flout the idea that there was something shameful to our intimacy. I'd make a point to kiss my parents goodnight in my underwear like I did any other night, as though returning to my room and sleeping with another grown boy in his underwear in a twin bed was an everyday occurrence. But these were only delay tactics.

On the afternoon of my eighteenth birthday, Sunday, June 24, 1973, just a few weeks after graduation, Liam stopped by with my present, a pair of nylon bikini underwear with a bold, all-over, yellow houndstooth pattern. In the privacy of my bedroom, I immediately modeled them for him. My instant hardon, exceeding the waistband, proved the gift's success. Before he left, we made plans for the following weekend.

That evening, after my birthday dinner, I sat with the entire family in the den, secretly wearing my new favorite underwear, when the news came on with a shocking and salacious story: arson at a French Quarter nightclub! TV cameras documenting the disaster scene showed a lamplit New Orleans street corner glistening with firehose water. Sheets covered bodies. Grown men cried. Then the announcer said these words, and you could hear a pin drop: "Police say the bar is a hangout for homosexuals, and homosexuals frequently carry false identification papers, making positive identification of the victims nearly impossible…two eyewitnesses, who would not allow their faces to be shown, told WWL TV newsman Bill Elder it was arson…this is Bruce Hall, CBS News, New Orleans."

The fire occurred on the corner of Iberville and Chartres Streets, less than ten miles from where we lived and just two blocks from where my father worked. The flames engulfed the stairwell and rushed into the club. Over twenty patrons managed to escape through a rear exit leading to the roof, while thirty-two others were trapped inside and burned alive. The Upstairs Lounge arson was the deadliest fire in New Orleans in 200 years and the largest mass killing of gay people ever in the U.S.—that is, until the Orlando Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016.

I felt the high-beam inner eye of each family member on me, the newscast a nightmare indictment of everything horrible they had suspected about me. In my hand were two pecans I had grabbed from the bowl on the coffee table. Slowly, and with the casualness of cracking a knuckle, I crushed the two nuts together. The sound allowed my family to look at me. I, however, did not look at them. Instead, I indifferently picked a piece of nut flesh from the broken shells and brought it to my mouth, then returned my gaze to the television set with the insouciant boredom of someone who has waited too long to watch “The Sonny and Cher Show.”

The *New Orleans States-Item* paper reported the next day, “… the heat had been so intense, many were cooked together.” Another, “…their bones entangled, seared to the floor.”

“The dead were piled knee-high near the windows in a twisted, charred mass of death—some a few feet from safety,” wrote a *Times-Picayune* reporter.

The most horrible and indelible image printed in the papers after the fire depicted a bar patron’s body, half-in, half-out of the club’s window, scorched and welded to its metal bars. His body’s charred remains were displayed for hours.

Later, the news falsely reported that “the bar was fire-bombed by a vigilante group that has declared war on homosexuals in New Orleans….”

One commentator on a live program sneered, “What do we bury them in? Fruit jars?”

The New Orleans Police Department didn’t acknowledge the fire as arson. Unsolved, the case was closed. The initial suspect, a local hustler known for his incendiary and unstable mental history, was released as unreliable. Yet he had been kicked out of the bar at least once that evening for fighting with customers. On his way out, he allegedly said, “I’m going to burn you all out!”

An unimaginable, annihilating, Queer shine.

This man married some months after the fire, then committed suicide the following year after publicly confessing to the crime on several occasions. His wife confirmed his confession and said their marriage was a sham because he was a homosexual.

When camouflage and shine malfunction.

I kept thinking: The men burned alive are not us. We are not like them. What Liam and I have is beautiful, innocent. Ours is not the depraved, wonton, degenerate lifestyle the media shows us.

Liam and I never discussed the fire.

The following Friday, we double-dated with our girlfriends as planned and ended up in my bed. That morning I woke to the smell of bacon. On Saturday mornings, it was Dad's turn in the kitchen. I nestled my backside in the spoon of Liam's long and graceful still-sleeping body. Heaven. Then I heard the rattle of my bedroom doorknob. Quickly I scrunched as close to the wall as possible, away from Liam. I could sense my father in the room, sneaking toward the bed, where he lifted the covers slowly. My eyes shut, I imagined him looking down at Liam's body in his son's bed, naked but for his white briefs, barely an inch from his son, also bare but for a pair of yellow houndstooth bikini underwear. He gently replaced the covers and backed out of the room. A few minutes later, he knocked on the door to wake us for breakfast.

I responded with confusion and rage. How dare my father steal a look at my near-naked lover. Yet how beautiful we must have looked. But I'm guessing my father had the image of young, burned bodies on his mind. He may have even walked past the fire scene the day after it occurred on his way to the office that previous Monday morning. Were they finally removing the charred remains from the window bars in the early morning light?

I believe it is on that street corner where my relationship with my father remained for the better part of his life. Him facing the worst-case scenario of his son's first-love iridescence, confusing my distinction with my extinction and too cautious to speak of it. Me, standing behind him, facing the opposite direction into the future, resentful of my father's timidity, with an overwhelming desire to burn love bright.

It took less than a year before Liam ended it full-stop. "We are committing a sin," he said, "and we're college men now." This was a time when homosexual acts were still illegal. The blow was devastating for all my college years, and then some—my surfaces losing their luster the more shine came to resemble shame. It took the courage to come

out of the closet, in incremental stages over five years, for my shine to return. And this time, from within, as nature intended.

Postscript:

It would be years before I learned the Upstairs Lounge arsonist's name: Roger Dale Nunez. Nunez, my mother's maiden name, and from bayou country near Abbeville—a distant relation! As I write this sentence, I am sitting in a bungalow on La Palma, one of the Spanish Canary volcanic ocean islands off the coast of West Africa, here to write this story in the land of my maternal grandfather's ancestors. I have recently traced my mother's family, the Nunez name, to the Canaries when in 1778, my fifth great grandfather, Manuel Felix Nunez De Villavicencio, brought his wife Josefa and his only son Estevan to the swamps of Louisiana. They and 6000 other Canarians were answering the Spanish governor's request to help protect the New Orleans territory from imminent British invasion. They became known as the Isleños, and the Nunez name became prominent in the swampland of southern Louisiana, a patchwork of bayou communities south of New Orleans hugging the sides of the Mississippi River along its final seventy-mile stretch before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. Roger Dale Nunez rests in a cemetery on the edge of this deep swamp zone.

Bradley Wester is a visual artist and writer who lives in New York and Rhode Island. His visual artwork has been exhibited extensively in New York, other parts of the U.S., and Europe. At MoMA, in conjunction with its "Club 57" exhibition, Wester read "GenderFuck" from his agented manuscript *Artist Underwater*. His story "Brothers Katrina" won the 2016 Fresher Writing Prize (UK) for Creative Nonfiction. Wester is a contributing art writer for Filthy Dreams and WhiteHot Magazine for Contemporary Art. Awards include Specialist Fulbright Japan, Visiting Artist American Academy in Rome, two MacDowell Fellowships, a Hermitage Fellow, and a Pollock-Krasner. He's taught or lectured at RISD, Dartmouth, Tulane, CalArts, and NYU. Wester has also designed sets for "V" formerly known as Eve Ensler, of Vagina Monologues fame, at LaMama, Music Theatre Group, and for producer Mike Nichols.

The image, "*DISCOlored,*" that accompanies "Shiny Object" is a digital photo by the author.

Note: “Shiny Object” originally appeared in June 2023 to honor those murdered at the Upstairs Lounge fifty years before.

Contributors

Andrea Abbott lives in Central New York with her husband, one of their sons, and a grandson. She worked in a variety of occupations in the human services field, including serving as a librarian in a men's maximum-security correctional facility. Following retirement, she became the minister of a small Unitarian-Universalist church. Now retired, she has returned to her earliest desire, which is to write.

Dina Alvarez was born and raised in New York City. She holds a BA in Film and Media Communications from Hunter College and has spent most of her working life in Corporate America. In 2004, she launched SomosPadres, the first bilingual parenting publication for Latino families in NYC. Dina resides in NYC with her husband and son.

Michelle Cacho-Negrete is a retired social worker from Portland, Maine and the author of *Stealing; Life in America*. She has more than 100 publications, including four among the Most Notable Essays of the year, two Best of the Net, and five in anthologies. Her work has appeared in, among other magazines, *bioStories, Able Muse, North American Review, Solstice, Under the Sun,* and *The Sun.*

Sally Carton is a psychotherapist living on the south side of Chicago. She came to psychotherapy through her love of literature and has used her training in psychoanalysis and a body-centered approach to trauma to help children and adults over the past thirty years. Now retired, she welcomes the opportunity to write essays drawn from her personal experiences and to spend more time throwing pots on a wheel.

Yoon Chung is an emerging writer based in South Korea. Her works are forthcoming in *Hobart* and *Fairlight Shorts*. She studies intimacy at her desk and comparative literature at college.

Madison Christian is a lawyer by trade. He is a nature activist, beer elitist, outdoor curmudgeon, and dharma-bum wannabe by birth. As a writer, Madison focuses on creative non-fiction, including memoir, personal essay, and travel (or what he likes to call "vagabond"). He dabbles in poetry.

Phil Cummins is a Dublin-born academic and writer living in County Kildare. His fiction and essays have been long/short-listed in various international competitions, including honourable mention (2020) and shortlist (2022) for the Fish Memoir Prize. His writing has featured in various anthologies and literary magazines.

Ria Parody Erlich is a retired educator and public relations professional who is delighted to now be able to devote herself full time to her longtime passion for creative writing. Ria's writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *The Circle Magazine* (r.i.p.), *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Litbreak Magazine*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Paddle Wheeler*, her high school alumni literary magazine. Ria's short story, "The Goodman Girls" was included in *Halfway Down the Stairs* "Best of 2021" list and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. In October, 2022, her short play, "Toast" was presented as a staged reading at the Alliance for Los Angeles Playwrights fall conference. A proud New Orleans native, Ria currently lives in Santa Monica, California, with her husband Shel.

Cathy Fiorello is a freelance writer based in San Francisco. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times, Still Point Arts Quarterly, Evocations Literary Review*. She is the author of *Standing at the Edge of the Pool: Life, Love, Loss and Never Learning to Swim*.

A former journalist, **Lynne Golodner** is the author of eight books and thousands of articles and essays. Her first novel *Woman of Valor* was published in 2023. With an MFA in poetry from Goddard College, she lives in Huntington Woods, Michigan with her husband and a rotating combination of her four kids. She works as a writing coach and marketing consultant, helping authors build their brands and promote their work. As host of the Make Meaning Podcast, Lynne interviews authors and people in publishing.

Maria Hewett is an unabashed word-nerd living in the Seattle area with her family of three humans and three dogs. A perpetual student of the natural world and the creatures in it, she draws no shortage of inspiration from her surroundings, whether close to home or across the globe. When she isn't writing Middle Grade fiction or devouring novels and memoirs, Maria can be spotted running with her dog at an unreasonably slow pace or exploring the trails of the Pacific Northwest by mountain bike, foot, or ski.

Brian Huba's creative nonfiction has been published on *101 Words*, in *Reed Magazine*, *The Griffin, Down in the Dirt, Literary Juice*, *Men Matters Online Journal,* and *The Storyteller*. His Op-Eds and essays have appeared in the *Superstition Review, the Satirist, the Sports Column*, on Yahoo.com, in the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, *the Democrat & Chronicle, the NY Journal News, the Syracuse-Post Standard, the NY Daily News*, and the *Utica Observer-Dispatch*. Brian currently teaches high school English in upstate New York.

Pamela Kaye's work has been published in *Mixed Mag, Penmen Review,* and *The Sun.* She earned a certificate in Creative Nonfiction Writing from Stanford University. Pamela is a botanical watercolor artist and enjoys collecting sea glass and biking.

Joshua David Laine is a senior at Emmanuel College working towards a degree in Writing, Editing, and Publishing. His passions include reading, writing, gaming, boxing, weightlifting, and hiking. Though he studies in Boston, Joshua hails from Hudson, New Hampshire. He desires to one day pen enough best-sellers to put that town on the map.

Julie Lockhart loves an adventure in wild places. She spent most of her career in academics, where she published in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Critical Issues in Environmental Taxation*; and *Advances in Accounting Education*. During the last years of her career, she led a grief support nonprofit, where she discovered the beauty and depth of personal stories, writing about her experiences to help grieving people feel less alone. Her essays have appeared in the *Ashland Daily Tidings*, *Minerva Rising*, and the *Journal of Wild Culture*. She has twice placed in the top ten in the Women on Writing essay contests. Julie lives in Port Townsend, WA.

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.

Alli Mancz is an emerging writer, essayist, and advocate. Her work is forthcoming in prose.onl and has previously appeared in *Scribendi*, merging matters of a Midwestern self and meditations on sexual assault with surrounding ecologies. She currently studies as an MFA candidate at Northern Arizona University, teaching English Composition and Creative Writing while serving as the Editor-in-Chief of *Thin Air Magazine*. Her portfolio contains pieces that intertwine research and medical memoir in a hybrid format, combining lyrical prose with scientific data and self-reflection. Mancz lives in Flagstaff, Arizona and she can often be found hiking amidst the ponderosa pine.

Anthony J. Mohr's work has appeared in, among other places, *Brevity's blog*, *Cleaver*, *Commonweal*, *DIAGRAM, Eclectica, Hippocampus Magazine, North Dakota Quarterly, Superstition Review,* ZYZZYVA*,* and several anthologies. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize five times. For almost twenty-seven years, he has sat as a judge on the Superior Court of California, County of Los Angeles.

Paulo Paciucci is an oncologist-hematologist and research scientist whose work is published in medical and scientific Journals. Now retired, he writes non-fiction and memoirs drawing from his professional experience. He lives in Old City, Philadelphia.

Bradley Wester is a visual artist and writer who lives in New York and Rhode Island. His visual artwork has been exhibited extensively in New York, other parts of the U.S., and Europe. At MoMA, in conjunction with its "Club 57" exhibition, Wester read "GenderFuck" from his agented manuscript *Artist Underwater*. His story "Brothers Katrina" won the 2016 Fresher Writing Prize (UK) for Creative Nonfiction. Wester is a contributing art writer for Filthy Dreams and WhiteHot Magazine for Contemporary Art. Awards include Specialist Fulbright Japan, Visiting Artist American Academy in Rome, two MacDowell Fellowships, a Hermitage Fellow, and a Pollock-Krasner. He's taught or lectured at RISD, Dartmouth, Tulane, CalArts, and NYU. Wester has also designed sets for "V" formerly known as Eve Ensler, of Vagina Monologues fame, at LaMama, Music Theatre Group, and for producer Mike Nichols.

The image, "*DISCOlored*," that accompanies "Shiny Object" is a digital photo by Bradley Wester. The cover art of this issue "DiscoLight Pink Drip" is also by the artist from the same series.