
bioStories
2023
Vol. 13
Issue 2

2023

Volume 13, Issue 2

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: “Star Brush” 2019 by Bradley Wester
14.25 x 10 inches (unframed)
Glitter, acrylic, iridescent/holographic tape, stickers, rhinestones on konji paper

bioStories
sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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Gut Feelings

by Shawn Brown

Your heart was beating when you arrived on the cot from the ambulance. It had stopped when the paramedics were treating you, but it started again, surprisingly quickly. Your face was familiar. I thought at first that you worked in the department; you looked a bit like one of the social workers.

Every ER doctor has those moments. Those moments of fleeting panic when the call for a six-year-old drowning, a twenty-two-year-old overdose, or a sixty-five-year-old cardiac arrest comes over the radio, and we think to ourselves, where is my child/brother/mother tonight? Is it them? Our thoughts falter for a moment, though our feet do not. We continue our jobs without pause—walking, laughing, treating, caregiving—praying inside that when we look down in the resuscitation bay, it will not be the face of someone we love but cannot save looking back at us tonight. It is far easier to deal with death in anonymity. We hope never to be on the other side of the curtain, a member of the family and not the rescuer. When the ambulance rolls in and we see a face that does not belong to us, there is some deep, quivering part of us that has been caught up in fear that is suddenly released, even though we know now the grief belongs to someone else, and is no less terrible.

Your heart stopped again soon after you arrived. We did the things we always do, placed a breathing tube in your throat, did compressions. Your clothes—a pair of peach-colored satin pajamas like my grandmother would have worn— were cut open for access to put on the defibrillator pads. The nurses could not get an IV line started, so I ripped open the leg of those pajamas and drilled a line into the bone while my partner put a central line into your groin. While I slid another line to monitor your blood pressure into the artery on your wrist, I held your hand, its skin full, your arm just a little pudgy, the kind that would have given the best hugs. I suddenly realized why you looked familiar. I saw you as a patient yesterday.

The bounce-back is one of the most feared things for an ER doc: the patient who we discharge home, telling them all will be well now, and then they come back worse.

What did I miss? Is this my fault? What else should I have done? What would another doctor have done differently, done better? Often, we review these charts with our colleagues and console each other: “There’s nothing. There’s no way you could have known. I would have done the same.”

Illness is sneaky and pervasive. It winds and hides and creeps until it gains purchase. Part of what sets my mind at ease is knowing—beyond doing my best for every patient with every encounter—that ultimately I am not in charge. There is a larger force at work, and this larger force will decide when a life ends, not me. ER doctors act as the goalies of the pearly gates, but no goalie ever blocks 100%. We slow it down, we deflect, every once in a while we make a grand save, but eventually, someone scores one over on us. It’s the team that wins or loses—the team of life experiences and choices, family, friends, care-takers, genetics, everything that sums up a life—but it’s the goalie who feels the punch of responsibility when the score goes through.

You had a blood clot in your lungs when I saw you last. You hadn’t been feeling well for a week: nausea, abdominal pain, chest heaviness, cough. I thought at first you had COVID, but the test was negative. The D-dimer, a screening test to help detect blood clots, came back positive, and I had sent you for a scan that showed a clot in the base of your lung. I thought you had a virus that predisposed you to the clot, something that could safely be treated at home with blood thinners.

The answer at this moment when you arrive back in the ER would be to say that your heart stopped today because you had a bigger clot, something that sailed free from wherever the first clot had come from in your leg or your pelvis, and got lodged in your pulmonary artery. It’s a classic board question, an expected complication. I asked for lytic medication, a “clot-buster” to help break up any blood clots in your body. The medicine has its dangers, bleeding being top amongst them, but if a clot was causing your heart to stop, there was really no other choice.

The pharmacist brought down the medication; it was unusual to order and dangerous to give, so they came in person, flustered by the walk with their white lab coat askew, to ensure there were no errors in the plan. As the nurse prepared to push it, I stopped her, staring at you, at the monitor. There was no reason for stopping; it was logically the right step, but a tingling sense whispered that we needed to take you to the

CT scanner first. When we got there, we looked at your brain and saw it: a subarachnoid hemorrhage, bright tendrils of blood coursing free inside your skull on the dull grey background of the computer images. You had an unknown aneurysm, living silently at the base of your brain, and it had burst.

Spidey-senses, intuition, gut feelings. Those are the difference between the science of medicine and its art. There are times when we veer off the beaten path, drop the algorithm and explore tangents that make the ultimate difference between discovering the truth and continued pain. Emergency Medicine is one of the most difficult areas to practice because you never know what a patient comes in with. The list of differential diagnoses goes on and on, and you have to choose, based on careful calculation and previous experience, the right path to head down. Sometimes that path surprises you. There's a saying in the ER world that we walk through minefields in clown shoes. Whole online forums are dedicated to discussing this, the phrase repeatedly making its appearance as we discuss—in a carefully anonymous fashion—surprising cases and events. Things are constantly popping up around us with potential horrendous consequences, and not every path leads us to the correct answer. It is by honing that sensation, that soft voice in the midst of yelling chaos, that we learn to develop our art.

Braindead. I had to say that word to your family. I hate to use it; it sounds cold and ugly. "Your mother is braindead." Your family was so lovely and kind. I could see the shock and frozen state on your daughter's face. She has young sons of her own, she must have known that she would have to be strong but in this moment she looked numb. The whole world was pulled out from under her. She was quiet, polite, understanding. She came back with her husband and children a little later to say goodbye before we removed you from life support. I wondered if her sons understood what was happening; they were so young. They cut locks of your hair to keep, the fluorescent lighting reflecting off the black strands in a way that made it seem almost blue, a hue that was reflected now in the tinge of your jaw, in the waxy skin that was devoid of the flush of blood and vitality.

Families react so differently to loss. People are detached, numb, disbelieving, enraged, distraught. I've always wondered if the way they react in that moment has more to do with who they lost, or who they are. Relationships are complex things to start with,

but taking them to the level of extreme emotions surrounding death exposes a whole new side of humanity. I've had patients tell me I don't know anything (as if I would make up the idea that their loved one had died for fun), or throw a garbage can at me. After that, I learned to put security on standby when I went into the consultation room to deliver news like this. I've had old women, newly widowed, take my hand and thank me for doing all that I could, telling me they were sorry I had to go through that. The worst is the mothers, no matter if they are stoic or screaming or fainting. Telling a mother that her child is gone strikes deep in my heart. It feels contrary to the nature of things, where we are trained to know that one day our parents could be gone, but never our children. Could I survive the death of my own child? Of course I could. I see women survive it every day; survival is not a choice you make. The deep, soul-wrenching despair that would cause, though… even bearing witness to it a hundred times, it's still inconceivable. There are times when I don't mind thinking of the family later, visualizing their grief, sharing in that deeply human process. But not a mother's loss. I don't want to carry that energy with me. On some level, I think that energy sticks to you, and I don't want to envision my own children following that fate.

As they were walking out, I stopped your family and told them how kind you were. I remembered that from our visit two days ago. Relating that seemed to shake your daughter from her numb state, just for a moment. We had had a hard time finding IV access on you then, too, and you had been poked over and over again, bruises appearing garish on your thin, white skin. It was hours into what should have been a relatively quick stay, and minor things just kept going wrong. The labs were delayed, the CT scanner was backed up from traumas. You were calm and kind, understanding. You told me that I had my job to do, and you had yours, and right now yours was to sit and be patient. I appreciated that, your willingness to give grace, and wanted to pass it forward. I saw that same kindness in your daughter, your grandsons. They thanked me as they left, even though I couldn't save you, walking out of the ER doors into a world that will no longer have you in it. I hope you felt the love they had for you.

*In order to preserve confidentiality, stories involving patient encounters consist of an amalgam of different interactions compressed into an individual illustration. Minor details may be changed.

Shawn Brown is a physician, mother of three, and aspiring homesteader living on the shores of Lake Superior. She has recently returned to a love of writing as a way to explore the human experience. “Gut Feelings” is an excerpt from an ongoing project entitled “Letters to my Patients.”

Pringles

by Nicole K. Sather

As a teenager, I remember watching from the passenger window of my dad's truck as we drove past a beautiful, cherry-red, 1973 Mustang convertible. It was parked in someone's front yard with a for sale sign.

"That's a nice car, isn't it?" my dad asked, with his trademark wily grin. "You should probably buy it." He knew that it was exactly the kind of car I dreamed of having, and pointed out that it even had the creamy white interior that I wanted. I tried to hide my excitement when he quickly pulled over so that we could take a closer look.

Since I only had the savings from my summer job to offer, I was shaking in anticipation of negotiating a price with the owner. I begged my dad to do all of the negotiating for me, but instead he pushed me to be brave and to ask for what I wanted. To my surprise, the seller agreed to my offer. That magnificent convertible was mine.

Like all older cars, it needed a lot of TLC. On the weekends, Dad and I would go out to the garage and tinker around with the engine while listening to old eight-track tapes on the car's stereo. While we may not have seen eye-to-eye on what time curfew should be or what university I should attend—and Lord knows we could fight like cats and dogs at times—we could always agree that five-spoke wheels look way cooler than the factory standard. After giving the Mustang a tune-up, we would drive it to the nearby gas station to make sure it was running perfectly and refill the gas tank. My dad almost never ate junk food, but every time we drove it to that gas station, he would buy a small can of Pringles for himself and a strawberry-kiwi Snapple for me. This was our reward for a job well done.

When I eventually went away for medical school, I left the Mustang in his garage. He continued to take care of it in my absence, so that the engine would be ready to rev whenever I visited home. My dad was a man who loved fast cars, loud music, smoky scotch, tough love, big parties, and hard work. My family and I would often joke that we could never imagine him growing old, because we couldn't picture that a man who "lives his life at 100 miles per hour" could ever slow down. It felt like cruel irony when he quickly and unexpectedly passed away while I was still away at school.

It took a long time for me to muster up the strength to drive the Mustang again, after all of the memories we shared in it; from singing along to the 1970s hits playing on the stereo, to all of the pep-talks he gave me when I didn't think I was good enough to become a doctor. By that time, after going so long without all of his tinkering and tune-ups, the car wasn't running anymore. I looked in the glove box for the owner's manual in the hope that I would be able to figure out what the problem was without my dad's help. I couldn't find the owner's manual, but I did find a small can of Pringles, half-eaten. He must have bought them the last time that he worked on my car. I closed the glove box with the Pringles still inside, as a silly sort of reminder that somehow he was still there in the passenger seat.

For my thirtieth birthday, my partner surprised me by revealing my Mustang out in the driveway, running like a dream and as shiny as if it were ready to be driven for the very first time. Unknown to me, he had been sneaking out to the garage for weeks, replacing rusted parts and polishing every inch of it until it was as magnificent as ever. As we took it for a spin around the block, he joked around about how he had found a *very* old half-eaten can of Pringles in the glove box.

"You didn't throw it away, did you?" I asked in a panic. He nodded and then looked completely deflated when I explained why I was so distraught. I didn't want to minimize how hard he worked or how loving of a gesture it all was, so I tried to reassure him (and myself) that it was *really not a big deal.* I know that the memories of my dad will never go away. I can imagine him riding in the passenger seat every time I drive. As silly as it is, though—I would still do anything to have that little can of Pringles.

Nicole K. Sather is a physician in southern Florida, specializing in the treatment of critically ill or injured children. She recently began writing as a way to honor her upbringing in northern Wisconsin and to reflect on the more poignant moments that shaped her as a physician and as a person.

A Relative Deathbed

by Yoon Chung

I was still half asleep when mom broke the news while leaning over the bed—*we have to go, now. Grandma died. Wake up dear, grandma died.* Hearing her tears, I rushed into my clothes in the cold.

The shock faded in half an hour. Maybe even less. By the time we arrived at the train station, I was hungry and ready for breakfast. Dad and I shuffled into a cafe for the embarrassing affair of eating in front of a grieving woman. I apologetically ordered a sandwich. The ham and lettuce were good. I told dad over coffee that it still felt unreal, perhaps to excuse my own indifference. I want to lie to make myself look like a better granddaughter, but the truth is that the whole affair was completely believable, as foreseeable as the last page of a queen's biography. An acceptable matter of course.

Once we got on the train, I was glad to have a seat to myself. Dad would sit with mom and hold her hand behind me. For the next 325 kilometers, the black blur outside the windows did not haunt me. I was more preoccupied with securing extensions on my school assignments. *Dear Professor Goodman, I am writing to let you know that I won't be able to make it to class . . .*

When we arrived at my aunt's, I was more nervous than anything else. They told us to come in. I pulled my shoes off my feet with what I hoped was the appropriate amount of gravity. What was I supposed to do? There was no obvious sign of distress I could hold up to prove myself. Looking up from my feet, I tried to appear as sorry as possible to make up for my dry cheeks, but I couldn't feel my face. Thankfully, they did not touch me or look at me for long. They were already crying too much to care that I wasn't. Relieved not to be noticed, I watched as mom broke down and flew to the bedroom where her mother lay. Dad and I trailed helplessly behind her.

I hung back between the door and the bed, hands folded and ears hot, uncertain of my place in the room. Not nearly distant enough to leave but not quite close enough to put my head on someone's shoulder, I just stood there, neither comforting nor intruding.

From there, I could just make out grandma's face on the pillow. She didn't look all that different than the last time I saw her. Was that a year ago?

People always talk about how being dead looks like being asleep, but once the paramedics have come and gone, it's impossible to mistake death for sleep. The blanket stretches too smooth over arms and legs that never show, betraying the lack of dreams or the occasional fit of insomnia. But what really gives you away is the mouth. It never stays shut when you're asleep, making you drool. Grandma's lips were neat and her face was clean, at peace.

Peace. It filled the whole room up to the ceiling like a scent, powdering the red eyes and lined faces within. Soft music played in the background. The glow of a night light fell on the creamy walls around us in buttery blocks of ivory. One wall was an entire gallery of oil-colors, covered in printed cut-outs of van Goghs and Monets. For all they knew, grandma could have been an apricot smudge of sun on a cloud. A large *Sunflowers* hung in a frame beside the bed, rising bright behind my aunt's hunched-up shoulders.

Death was our guest, and it was staying in the best room of the house.

"Here, come," another aunt said kindly, pulling me closer. "You should see her. You can hold her hand."

I was strangely grateful to be made a part of this. No longer a spectator, I approached my grandma. Sitting on the side of her bed, I slowly reached for her under the covers. When my fingers found hers, I held them very gently. Then, more firmly. She was stiff.

Out of nowhere—or everywhere—tears came.

Through the tears, I was led by some morbid, half-conscious curiosity to press on one of her fingers. Please, uncurl. It didn't. I imagined her finger snapping off in the middle and instantly returned to squeezing her fist. Sorrow was easier to name when I was eleven. I was sad, guilty, and regretful when grandpa died. Hadn't I learned from any of that? I was none of those things now. Grandma was gone. The news, so factual before, was at last, inexplicably, personal. She had never hurt me, but I was hurt. Even though her stiff hand in mine told me nothing I didn't already know, it added heat and humidity and breath to the words, *all true, all true.*

They say seeing is believing, but I don't know.

Touch is visceral. Instinctual.

There's something about it that truly brings home what is alien.

Sifting a pinch of moon dust through your fingers pulls the moon closer to the earth.

The night will lighten, the tide will rise, and the wolves, cry louder.

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

The State Champs from the Beginning of the World

by J.D. Kleinke

The girls from way out on the Makah reservation who won the 2023 Washington state 1B high school basketball championship may be, on average, half a foot shorter and two years younger than every team they beat on the way.

But first year Head Coach Cherish Moss—the twenty-nine-year-old with the thousand-yard stare who came back to Neah Bay to coach the team that she, her mother, and older sisters played on, the one her sisters and cousins play on now—has a matter-of-fact explanation that might sound like the usual gauzy coachspeak. “We believe in dreams,” she explains, with the unblinking, unflinching seriousness of the best coaches anywhere.

By “we” she does not mean just her two sisters or three cousins or the other six Lady Reds, as the sister team to the Neah Bay Red Devils are called. She is talking about their tribe, the Makah, the original inhabitants and once dominant maritime civilization at the extreme northwestern corner of Washington state. She is also talking about the 1,519 descendants and relatives of the tribe who still reside in or near Neah Bay, the fishing hamlet in the middle of the reservation that looks as if it had drifted down from Alaska and attached itself to the northwesternmost fingertip of the US mainland.

“Dreams carry messages, communicate, give us direction,” she says, echoing what many native religions around the US and Canada have always believed.

Revenge

Standing on a vast, deserted beach next to the Pacific Ocean just outside Neah Bay, in between fits of driving rain, wind, hail, and then sun, rainbow, and more driving rain, it is easy to slip into your own dream state. Alone among the sea stacks jutting form the ocean, massive tangles of driftwood, pounding of surf, and forested mountains to the north, south, and at your back, you can well imagine you are standing at what the Makah, in their origin story, have always called the “beginning of the world.” You might even start to believe that a scrappy bunch of undersized girls—including ninth-graders and one

eight-grader—could take on every high school their size in the state and win the state championship. With a brand-new head coach.

“My brother saw it in a dream,” Coach Moss continues. We are sitting in Neah Bay’s only sit-down restaurant, the Warmhouse, named for the traditional smokehouses where the Makah used to turn whales, seals, and fish into the bulk of their food supply. “The championship, all of it, in a dream. It was ten years ago, when he was playing. He saw me and the girls, with our own trophy.”

Making that dream come true at the ragged edge of the continent is another matter. Most of the teams on their road to the Washington state championship live along the urban corridor running north and south from Seattle—a four-hour drive *east* of Neah Bay—or even further east, in farm towns out on the high desert. Four hours…if the ferry crossing Puget Sound is on time. And if the narrow, serpentine two-lane road hugging the cliffs over the water has not been washed out that week by the 100-120 inches of rain and snow that fall on Neah Bay every year. And if the rez isn’t on lockdown, as it was for much of Covid—to protect their Elders from unvaccinated tourists—which wiped out a chunk of their 2021-2022 season.

But geographic obstacles can be managed, and schoolwork can be done from hotel rooms. The Lady Reds proved that in the 2021-22 season: despite a month-long shutdown in the heart of the season—thanks to Covid’s omicron surge, the road going out (again), and other factors beyond their control—they went all the way to the state’s championship game. And they did it with a roster of only eight girls, one of them injured and three of them eighth-graders.

Still, what do they remember most from that frustrating ordeal of a season?

They lost. By four points. In a championship against a full roster of girls from the Mount Vernon Christian School in Spokane Arena, an eight-hour school bus ride east of Neah Bay. (Or nine or ten hours, depending on the ferry.)

“Last year was hard,” Moss says, “coming so close.”

Last year, she was back on the rez from turns as a student-athlete at Haskell College and Evergreen State College, and had just signed on as an assistant to her old team. With barely 100 kids in the high school, the Lady Reds struggled to get even those eight girls suited up to play.

It was especially hard to forget that they lost that game, thanks to fans from MVC who chanted “Se-cond place! Se-cond place!” as the Lady Reds filed out of the gym after the game in tears.

Coach Moss recalls their departure, her voice clouded with emotion. “I understand victory celebrations. But taunting thirteen- and fourteen-year-old girls who just played their hearts out?”

The people from Neah Bay, unwilling to hide their “otherness” when in unfriendly gyms—they can’t afford cheerleaders, so their fans sing a pulsing, traditional Makah chant during clutch moments in the game—are used to bad treatment from opposing teams. Like kids from reservations across the country, they have confronted all manner of nakedly racist gestures from opposing teams and their fans: the war whoops and tomahawk chops; the pantomime after a big score of shooting them with bows and arrows; the football team that ran out onto the field and removed their helmets as group to reveal they had all cut their hair into mohawks. Ugly, inhumane fan opposition is nothing new.

At games far from Neah Bay, multiple generations of Makah families have been the targets of harassment, verbal threats, slashed tires. Coach Moss does not want to give any particulars—the episodes were painful and the proud and self-reliant Makah are the last people in the world to cry victim—but she tells me her own vehicle was once singled out for vandalism outside the gym at Evergreen State, a liberal arts school outside Olympia renowned for its free form curriculum and progressive politics.

Was the especially cruel behavior after the Lady Reds’ loss last year to MVC more thinly veiled racism, or just high school kids acting like jackasses? Or does it have something to do with Neah Bay’s unique style of play? And not just the play of this particular girl’s basketball team, but the way the boys’ basketball team plays and, for that, matter, the Neah Bay boys’ football team. Subject to the same challenges—markedly smaller and younger, drawn from a high school with fewer than 100 students to field their rosters—the Neah Bay teams, no matter the sport or gender all compensate the same way: by attacking, relentlessly. Coach Moss’ girls run the floor the way the boys’ football team runs their defense: every other play is a blitz, and seemingly every other blitz forces a turnover. It’s almost comical to watch: a big, swaggering six-foot tall senior takes an inbounding pass under her own basket, then turns just in time to see a squeaky little

freshman materialize out of nowhere, tearing the ball from her hands. The big senior stands there befuddled, her face knotted up with an indignant “can she do that?” while the freshman squirts around her for the layup.

That’s how Neah Bay teams win games against older, bigger teams: by swarming them from the opening buzzer, rattling them, knocking them so far off their game plan that they cannot recover. The results? Tough, physical, high scoring games… and surly opponents and mean-spirited opposing fans.

So ferocious a style of play is not unique to Neah Bay, and in fact has a name in high school basketball circles: “rez ball.” It’s akin to the risky strategy of “run ‘n’ gun” — full court sprints on every play either straight to the basket or the first open shooter—and while it has much of the same shock value on opposing teams, it is also more disciplined and more nuanced, at both ends of the floor. Neah Bay’s girls can’t outjump anybody for rebounds, so they swarm them under both baskets. It’s meant to flummox and exhaust the other team, and it works. What they lack in size and age, they make up for with tenacity, ferocity, relentlessness. What they lose in rebounds for their height they make up for with forced turnovers up and down the floor.

That’s how the Lady Reds won state this year. Coach Moss may claim that the casual cruelty of MVC’s fans last year was one of several factors that inspired them to win the championship “for revenge.” With close to a full roster and their youngest starter now in high school, the Lady Reds went undefeated this season—*after* losing their season opener in December against Sequim, a school of 800-plus kids in the much larger 2A division a two-hour drive back toward Seattle. That loss apparently inspired more revenge: they went back and beat Sequim in February.

Reservation Dogs

The bittersweet savor of “revenge” would explain why the returning hometown hero coach allowed herself, after the community-wide celebration last month, a few extra laps around Neah Bay with the state basketball trophy buckled into the passenger seat of her pickup. And it’s five quick blocks from the community gym to the high school.

Most of the rest of the Makah world is maritime, and Neah Bay looks like a perfect working prototype for an Alaskan fishing village: a grid only six blocks wide and three blocks deep off the main drag, a waterfront road open to a marina.

Out here under the relentlessness of that 120 inches of precipitation, fresh paint doesn’t stand a chance. Fading memories of color cling to tough little houses shouldering

into the wind and rain and surrendering, not so slowly, to mold, rust, and gravity. Neah Bay sits at the epicenter of the Makah's ancestral homeland, where the Makah have lived continuously for the last 4,000-plus years, despite efforts by American treaty negotiators in the 1850s to move them all out and concentrate them on a "consolidated" reservation with other tribes in the region. The bulk of the tribe is still wrestling a living much the same way they always did: from the sea.

The beginning of the world, as they have known this place for those four millennia, stretches forty miles out to sea, to fishing banks at the edge of the continental shelf. It still supports what looks like a healthy economy of small commercial fishing operations. Only on a second-pass around the town's edges does Neah Bay look like other reservations: ramshackle trailers and pre-fabs falling in on themselves; unpaved side streets pockmarked with water-filled potholes; front yards given over to rusted hulks of cars, trucks, and boats; the stooped shadow of a person dressed in red, black, and mud, wandering in a daze.

But also wandering the frumpy streets are the usual reservation dogs, and they look healthy and fed. The busy marina is spiked with the masts and antenna of a hundred fishing boats. Lots of new trucks cruise the waterfront, slower than the twenty mph speed limit, their drivers waving at each other, at strangers, at whomever is walking or biking by on the road, because it is almost certainly someone they know.

The most striking difference of all, which won't meet the eye on a drive through town: the Neah Bay High School manages the nearly impossible, a 100 percent graduation rate since 2011. Most reservations across the US struggle to get that number to fifty percent. The number is easy to keep track of: in a town of 1,100, there are never more than 100 kids in the high school at a time, and every teacher and nearly everyone in town knows exactly who they are and where they should be on a weekday afternoon.

The other reservation dogs are here too, in particular the perennial reach of alcoholism and drug addiction, despite the well-publicized, reservation-wide prohibition of alcohol, weed, and illegal drugs everywhere on the rez. Coach Moss is highly protective of her girls' privacy, and while she credits family stability and support for much of the team's success, she acknowledges that the stability was hard won by many who dealt with the same demons that haunt reservations around the country.

She is also quick to point out the advantages of family life on the rez: everybody is an aunt, uncle, or cousin; even the kids from the most desperate circumstances get raised by some relative, and assisted in high school graduation by everybody.

Sit among the Neah Bay fans at any game and you will see for yourself: the babies go from lap to lap, up and down the bleachers.

“We are Family”

Those extra laps around town for the gold basketball globe in Coach Moss’ truck was her way of extending the community-wide celebration at the other end of town from the high school.

The night before, nearly 600 people had packed into Neah Bay’s cavernous community gym—designed like the great Makah ceremonial longhouses, with red and black touches everywhere—to welcome the trophy, share a meal, and honor the Lady Reds with traditional singing, drumming, and prayers.

The celebration began with an exuberant, ritualized processional around the great perimeter of the space. First, the drummers and singers, a dozen men and women chanting traditional Makah songs—a steady, pulsing, insistent drumbeat, one-two, one-two, like a collective heartbeat over the joyful wail of a song in the muted tones of their ancient language. Behind them came the team in their new matching red and black hoodies: skinny, gawky, and looking as self-conscious as teenage girls everywhere, not so much bathing in the adulation as showing up for it, appeasing their extended families’ wishes to shower it on them on and the shiny gold trophy in their hands. Then, taking up the rear, dancers, older ladies in red and black, twirling and swaying and stomping to the beat.

When the girls took their seats in their honored place at the end of the gym, the musicians gathered off to the side, their circle swelling with more people, voices, and drums, and then nearly all six hundred people lined up to greet, hug, high five every one of them. By the end, there were thirty or forty singers from four generations gathered around the team.

Saying your team is “like family” sounds like more gauzy coachspeak, an emotionally loaded term meant to align headstrong players and galvanize team unity. But in Neah Bay, the team actually is family. Coash Moss is not *like* a big sister to the team; two of them are her sisters, and three others are her cousins. It’s also the same team she played on with her older sisters—and the same team her mother played on in the 1990s with her aunt.

But while this may go a long way to creating the team unity the “we are family” cliché is meant to inspire, it is still a sensitive subject in a very small town.

“Yes, us being family is an advantage,” Moss says, a little defensively. “But it’s also a disadvantage. I am very aware of how everything looks. I think it puts more pressure on my sisters to perform harder, so it doesn’t look like I’m playing favorites.”

Pressure indeed. Because until this year, no girls had lifted that trophy in the Neah Bay High School gym. Coach Moss’ brother Ryan had, with the Neah Bay boys team in 2016. Her brother Robert won a junior college basketball championship while playing for Peninsula College. (“PC” as everyone on the rez calls it, is the junior college nearest Neah Bay and only an hour and forty-five minutes to the east in Port Angeles, a once scruffy logging town situated at the gateway to Olympic National Park and trying to re-invent itself around a tourist economy.)

Coach Moss herself won the same title—playing along with another sister, Cierra—for the women’s team while at PC. “Maybe that’s why I had that dream,” she says. “I’d experienced it, saw what it took, knew what it felt like.”

Like so many kids who grew up on reservations, she went away to college—in her case not just Peninsula, but to Haskell, a predominantly native school in Kansas, and Evergreen State—and then came back home with what she had learned.

“How to win,” is how she summarizes those lessons.

She also gives credit for the team's success to her assistant coach, Tony McCaulley. Fifty-six, as head coach for the Neah Bay boys football team, he took them to four state championships. He was also part of his own high school's state championship basketball and football teams in the early 1980s in Clallam Bay, the first town east of Neah Bay. His day-job is out in the woods, working as a logger, and he has the missing fingers to prove it. And yet, for all the mansplaining and coachsplaining one might expect from a white lumberjack nearly thirty years her senior, he remains off to the side during time-outs, coaching girls one-on-one, while Moss calls the plays, disciplines players, engages with officials.

"He really does let me run the team," Moss says, no matter how hard I press the question. "I can always count on his experience when something comes up, something complicated, like with a family, maybe a sensitive situation. He's seen it all, gives me great advice, and always knows what to say."

That too, of course, could be the same "we are family" effect: Tony also happens to be her second-cousin. Yes, he's a white guy, but he grew up just off the rez in Clallam Bay and married onto it in 1989 and has lived here ever since. His wife, Lauri, Moss' second cousin, also pitches in and feeds the team. And their daughter, Gina, is the second assistant coach. We are family indeed.

Back home, besides coaching the now state champion Lady Reds, Moss teaches kindergarten in the Neah Bay Elementary School. She also, like the traditional artists, artisans, and musicians all around Neah Bay, is actively involved with the cultural revitalization of the Makah, much of which revolves around the sea.

"We're doing this for our ancestors," Moss tells me. "I learned this from my grandmother. She is a warrior. We did not want to let her down."

For Our Ancestors

"There is something about this team," Neah Bay High School's principal, Lucy Dafoe, said to me last fall, before I had seen them play a single game.

Easy enough to write that off as obvious school pride, but she too has been on the receiving end of Neah Bay's style of play: Dafoe played basketball against Coach Moss'

mother and aunts back when she was growing up in Joyce, a tiny logging town an hour east of Neah Bay.

“There is something about this team,” she says again, after I have come to know the team. When pressed for what she means, she does not elaborate, as if she may or may not have her own theory, but leaves me to figure it out for myself.

Maybe it *is* revenge, and not just against the occasional racist gesture or unsportsmanlike taunt from opposing teams and their fans. Maybe it has something to do with those 120 years of attempted erasure, the after-taste of which Neah Bay fans often get at someone else’s school when they break out into that traditional Makah song. Unlike those teams, Neah Bay cannot afford to uniform or travel with cheerleaders—if they could, they would sooner spend the money on a trainer, which they also do without—but they do have loyal fans who log hundreds of road miles and dozens of hotel rooms with them. And a clutch moments in the game, those fans will break out into their song, another melodic chant over that steady, insistent one-two, one-two drum beat.

It sounds beautiful, haunting, even a little chilling—until it is drowned out by the chant of the opposing team’s fans: “We can’t hear you! We can’t hear you!”

It may sound fanciful to some cynical modern ears, but might this be what Coach Moss means about her team “doing this for our ancestors?”

Maybe this is what Dafoe means by the “something” about this team that turned them and their new head coach into state champs. It’s something that transcends sport and elicits profound, collective emotions about survival, recovered identity, and lasting strength. Something about a convergence of history and culture and family and spirituality unique not just to the Makah, but to all natives who have survived the predations of colonizers, missionaries, and other agents of cultural genocide. The Makah just happened to be blessed with the maritime bounty at the beginning of the world, and ever since have been uniquely positioned to endure, survive, and thrive, if in their own hardscrabble way.

Among native communities, there is—as there should be—a frank, difficult, and long overdue discussion about the long tendrils of inherited, inter-generational trauma. But what about inherited, inter-generational toughness? Guns, germs and steel may have been the bulwarks of the colonizing civilization, the drivers of outcomes in a world shaped by imperialism, conquest, and colonization, and the guns and germs certainly affected

the Makah. Three-quarters of their population was wiped out by smallpox in the early 1850s, the Neah Bay waterfront once lined with the bodies of people dying faster than the “Indian Agent” could drag them off and bury them in mass graves.

The collective memory of this horror is why the rez closed down during Covid. The Makah all got vaccinated, and knew better than to trust the outside world to do the same. Like other reservations who shut their borders during the pandemic, the Makah did it for one reason: to protect their Elders. While people around the US indulged in their political tantrums about masks and vaccine “resistance,” native tribes knew better than to mess around with a pandemic. Why was their Indian Agent willing and able to throw all those bodies into mass graves? Because he had been vaccinated against smallpox, which was readily available by then, but he chose to withhold it from the Makah as away of checking their then considerable economic power in the region.

Even after the 1852 wave of smallpox had wiped out an estimated 1,500 of the 2,000 Makah then living in or around Neah Bay—along with its two most powerful leaders—the tribe survived. And it managed to recover enough to push the treatymakers who showed up three years later back on their heels. Because what the Makah lacked in guns or steel, they had in the form of whaling canoes, fishing gear, and sophisticated trade networks for a hundred miles in every direction. They had economic and military control of a major maritime crossroads, where what would be called Puget Sound down in the US and the Strait of Georgia up into Canada ran out to the Pacific Ocean.

As a result, the Makah were the only tribe in the Pacific Northwest to force major changes in the boilerplate treaty crammed down the throats of the dozens of tribes to their east and south. They held on not just to their ancient homeland, but to the greater part of their geography—the sea—and they retained the right to continue whaling for food and trade, their defining cultural practice. They were not denuding the ocean of whales like the great colonial powers of the day; they whaled by hand and harpoon, from giant dugout canoes so far from shore they lost sight of the land. They stayed out there for days, hunted a whale, sowed up its mouth to keep it from sinking, and then towed it back to feed the village for the next month.

Those are ancestors Coach Moss is talking about. And maybe *that's* Principal Dafoe's "something about this team:" an inherited, inter-generational toughness that cannot help but befuddle opposing players trying to inbound a ball.

In Neah Bay, the Makah keep that inherited, inter-generational toughness alive through an active ocean-going canoe culture. In the 1990s, as part of their cultural restoration efforts, they were authorized by the International Whaling Commission—consistent with their 1855 treaty to hunt whales—to harvest five whales per year.

Five whales is a pittance next to the 1000-plus whales still taken every year around the world for purely commercial purposes. But guess which people of color is confronted directly, at sea and on the docks of their fishing village, by animal rights activists who clearly have no interest in their history, treaty rights, or culture? The Makah people and Neah Bay are right there at the far end of the continent, and they cannot afford the same corporate lobbyists and law firms to protect their rights, making them much easier targets than the government-sanctioned corporations of Japan, Russia, Denmark, and Norway.

Did the Makah back down? Of course not. In 1999, they went out and harpooned one whale, as they had for the previous 4,000 years or more, after undergoing the traditional preparations of fasting, sacred bathing, and praying to align with the spirit of the whale they would catch.

Today, the residents seem in a state of readiness for the next hunt. They build traditional canoes, and in annual cultural celebrations, race them on their home waterfront: little kids against each other; brother and sister teams; men and women in their 50s and 60s. Watching Makah of all ages with nothing more than a t-shirt, pair of shorts and paddle, racing in handmade canoes out to the maritime horizon may also explain that "something" about this team: they are the daughters of an ancient culture that values not just athletic prowess but absolute fearlessness.

The dominant narrative of native peoples across this continent is that they are victims. They are despondent, dependent living ghosts, embarrassing footnotes to an American history steeped in guns, germs, and steel, and written in the blood of quaint, pastoral people. Those who like to tell that story—to prove their sensitivity to racism or signal their progressive virtue—ought to watch the Neah Bay Lady Reds play basketball.

Next year, they will be the defending Washington 1B state champs.

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Shells

by Rasmenia Massoud

On the other side of my bedroom door, a daytime talk show's studio audience—Oprah or Donahue or whatever—chattered and whooped. I swung the door open and immediately my nostrils burned from the cosmetic cloud of baby powder, hairspray, and perfume.

Perfume. Musk had been her favorite. A lovely thing until I ruined it.

I took eggshell steps across the hallway to the bathroom, too eager to share my newly acquired seashell collection to resist interrupting her while she got ready for work. Smooth, shimmering bottles in clear and tinted glass collected dust on the bathroom counter. Fuzzy hot pink covers decorated the toilet tank and lid, while matching miniature shag rugs surrounded the toilet and sink. Various creams and liquids in shades of rose and amber gleamed and glinted next to her as she sat at her makeshift vanity: the closed toilet lid. Her makeup tray was carefully arranged on the toilet tank, and a light-up magnifying mirror rested on the edge of the sink. Not quite the glamorous setup she'd imagined back when she'd attended modelling school, but she hadn't imagined my existence then, either. The future sneaks up on everyone, I guess.

"Mom," I said, knowing the risk of speaking while she applied mascara with the patience and precision of a surgeon.

She leaned back, inspecting her artistry. Then she set to work smoothing her dark eyebrows with a tiny brush.

"Hey, Mom."

"What?" She flung the little brush into the sink. "You can see I'm busy."

"I wanted to show you my shells."

Mom pushed her fine black hair from her face, the curls still bouncing from a fresh spiral perm and the color glossy from a recent dye touch-up. She sighed. "What shells? What the hell are you talking about?"

"My seashells that I got in Florida." I held up the plastic baggie that contained my precious assortment of beach souvenirs. "Look at all the different kinds I found."

She glanced at my bag of treasures. "Oh yeah, that's really something else. Now get out of here. I'm busy. And I told you to stop wearing that terrible perfume. It smells horrid."

"It's Malibu Musk."

"It's awful. I can't believe they sent that crap back home with you. Besides, you're only twelve. You don't need perfume."

I returned to my room and sat cross-legged on the green shag carpet, examining the shells zipped up in their plastic bag. I wondered how many were. Like that game where you guess how many jellybeans are in the jar. Because I'd grown up landlocked at the foot of a rocky mountain, that rainbow of ocean fragments in blues, purples, grays, and maroons was a miracle of nature.

Mollusks, my father had called them that day on the beach. My younger stepbrother, the ten-year-old amateur marine biologist in the family, pushed his plastic scuba mask up on his head. He squinted at the tiny clamshells in my hand and said, "Coquinas." He pointed at each of the others. Whelk. Sand dollar. Scallop. Cockle. Staring down at the wonders in my hand, I repeated these astounding new words. Then I scampered off to collect more unknown things.

The entire summer had been day after day of different: a strange city with odd street names that led to who knows where, new flavors and textures like brisket and grits, a nonstop stream of sweet tea, a new house that smelled like flea shampoo and displayed photos of strangers on the walls, a new family and a bizarro father who had stepped into the skin of the old one. My old dad was a single dude quick to laugh and always in need of a haircut. An oversized velvet painting of Willie Nelson had place of pride in a one-bedroom apartment where he smoked weed while playing long games of Risk. My old dad revered iconoclasts like George Carlin and Bob Dylan.

This new summer guy was a body snatcher. He read Clancy and Grisham instead of Tolkien and Asimov. He didn't watch *Star Trek* or *Cheech and Chong.* He obeyed his wife in silence. He communicated in grunts and nods, chain-smoked, and kept his smiles to himself. He knotted ties around his neck, which he wrestled with each evening as he stomped through the front door in shiny shoes that clacked on the parquet floor toward

his bedroom until the door slammed behind him, his only audible responses to the confinements of this new life.

This body snatcher drove a big green Plymouth Volare during family trips and vacations, his eyes concealed behind cigarette smoke and mirrored sunglasses. Humidity and sweat made the backs of our legs stick to the vinyl seats. My arms and thighs were glued to the clammy limbs of my two new siblings, who pushed and nudged, insisting I stop touching them. It was my lot to forever be consigned to the middle seat. That's the way it goes when you're the summer sibling.

Temporary children learn to live with the uncomfortable seat.

The beach made the sticky, smoky voyage worth it. The ocean crashed and concealed dangers of deadly creatures and undertows. I trekked across the crowded expanse of shattered and scorching bits of shells and crabs and dead jellyfish in search of a place to spread a beach towel as a homebase for adventure. Each wave a dare. A gamble. Every inch farther from the shore a step into outer space. An outer space with gigantic, toothy fish and stinging things. The salty water left my hair and skin parched and gritty. But it wasn't home, and it was littered with new sights and textures. Different.

Like seashells.

My stepmom gave me an empty sandwich bag from lunch to collect my beach loot. Each sandy shell an exotic treasure. Fragments of the Florida coast. I seized my piece of the ocean and returned triumphant to my mountains, altering the American landscape forever in my own small way.

On the drive home from the airport, Mom passed the time by firing off a series of questions. She didn't ask me what I thought of Florida, its humidity, snakes, oversized bugs, and palm trees. She didn't ask about our trip to Busch Gardens or the books I'd read and movies I'd watched over the summer. She didn’t ask about the beach.

"How big is their house?" she wanted to know. "Are her kids brats? Do they call him dad? Because he's your dad, not theirs."

I answered each question the best I could, which was usually, "Uh… I dunno. I guess so." Then I tried to change the subject by showing my sweet tan lines or my brand-new Ocean Pacific Velcro wallet.

"Do they get along? Like are they, you know…holding hands and kissing and all that? Do they joke around with each other?"

"Jeez, Mom. I dunno." To deflect, I presented her with my new bottle of Malibu Musk, making her sniff it to fully appreciate its value.

"That doesn't smell good. Did she buy that for you?"

"Yeah. It's musk."

"No. I like musk. That smells like dog shit."

"No, it doesn't," I said, smelling the bottle to be sure I detected no canine feces.

"Is she prettier than me?"

"What? Who?"

"You know. Her. His new wife."

There was only one possible response. That didn't make it any easier to answer. The fact that it had even been asked, that my mother had placed her self-esteem in my twelve-year-old lap, was too much weight. I couldn't hold it. I couldn't move out from underneath it.

The kids who bounce back and forth learn to live with the uncomfortable seat.

"She is, isn't she?"

"What? No. No way. Not at all. Don't be weird, Mom."

"Do you like her better than me?"

"Gawd, Mom. No. You're so much prettier. And you're my mom. Don't be a dork. She's like…totally annoying. And fat. And super religious. It's so weird and creepy," I said, assuming this would be enough to satisfy her. My mouth continued throwing things out there, hoping the right words would reach her and we could end the conversation. I searched for whatever she needed to hear to move on so I could tell her about the plastic charm necklace I'd bought at the mall in Jacksonville with my own money, even though they seemed clunky and childish when I first saw them. I scored a purple toilet charm and an abacus charm and wanted to show them off. But now something burned inside my mother. I'd fanned the flames when I thought I was snuffing them out. A smile began to form in the corners of her mouth. The twinkle reappeared in her hazel eyes.

"Annoying? Annoying how? Does she annoy your dad?"

"I…I don't know?" The thing I didn't know how to articulate, because I hadn't noticed it much in the whirlwind of stepsiblings, southern accents, and palmetto bugs, was that I didn't know anything about him. When I thought of him, he was a necktie, a cloud of cigarette smoke moving among us. Who knew what was inside? I had no idea.

A few weeks later, summer fell from the trees in golds and browns. The plastic charm necklace that I'd believed was so east coast and unusual turned out to be just one of many in the halls at school. My super-cool corduroy OP wallet turned out to be useless. I never had money to put in it or anywhere to carry it to. I stuffed my bag of Coquinas, sand dollars, and seashells into a box. Sometime before the autumn turned to ice, the rot began to creep out. The stench wafted from my room, out into the hallway, contaminating the rest of our home.

"It's that godawful perfume," my mom said.

As the odor increased, becoming more foul and evil, it seemed like it might drive her mad. "You'd better throw that goddamn musk in the trash." Occasionally, she would poke her head into my room and scream, "How is it still smelling this bad? What did you do? Did something die in here?"

On phone calls to my father, she told him, "Your daughter had a terrible summer out there. She doesn't even like your wife. She's annoying. She's too religious and your own kid finds it weird and creepy."

And the stench grew worse, the smell of something rotting.

As I sat on my bed, doodling in a notebook, I wallowed in the stink. Tossing the notebook aside, I searched the clutter on my dresser for the bottle of Malibu Musk. I gave it a whiff. Still chemical, fruity musk. I ferreted out the shoebox that contained the bag of my beachy bounty. I tiptoed all the way out the front door, careful not to disturb Mom in the bathroom as she performed her precise ritual of painting and sculpting her flawless exterior.

Peering over the edge of the green plastic dumpster in the driveway, I examined my little handful of the Atlantic Ocean. My alteration of the landscape. Some of the shells had cracked open, revealing the dead things inside. Fragile, living things I hadn't been aware of. I'd only just begun to understand the decay of beautiful things.

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The Bargain

by Sherrie Dulworth

Whenever my dad left our house for any reason other than for work, we never knew what he would bring home: a wood lathe, antique clocks, a live goat, colorful fishing tackle, a gigantic victrola horn—those are among the cornucopia that I recall from my childhood. On occasion, he would return with something truly spectacular like a running Model T Ford.

Bargaining was one of his favorite past-times. He seemed to enjoy the banter, and the give and take of the barter, as much as he did his eclectic acquisitions. Yet our family didn't hear about my father's final, and perhaps finest, bargain until just days before he died.

"I don't have much time. What's the cheapest thing you've got?" I envision him half-asking, half demanding while speaking with the man he had just met, a part time funeral director, part-time minister.

Their encounter took place in early June of the new millennium. As the story goes, the two men exchanged a quick handshake and names, once my dad explained that he *literally* didn't have much time.

Despite his seventy-nine years, Dad stood like a 5'8" version of John Wayne: broad-shouldered and muscular—a rugged, weathered oak. But just a few days earlier, doctors had delivered grim news of an aggressive, late-stage brain tumor. It seemed that with or without treatment, he was operating on borrowed sunrises. He had rarely been sick and hated being cooped up, so he opted to go home and focus on things he wanted to do—tend his garden and spend time with family and friends.

Summing up his prognosis, Dad continued, "I'm price-shopping funerals. My family will get in here and they'll get all emotional. I'm trying to save them from that," he explained. "Besides that, they'll pay too much."

BINGO! There it was.

Whenever any of our immediate family negotiated a purchase, whether a yard sale trifle or big-ticket item, Dad would inquire about the asking price and then how much we had *actually* paid. While he wasn't a miser, his mantra was 'never pay retail.'

Invariably, our answers were met with incredulity. Dad's slow sideways headshake left no doubt what he thought—we were amateurs, not to mention spendthrifts. "You paid too much," was his almost automatic reply. He stated this not as his opinion, but one that he deemed as fact. Even if we had managed to strike a bargain-basement deal, the unspoken undertone and his verdict was that *he* could have gotten a better price.

I suspect that being an adept haggler was a useful talent growing up in rural Kentucky during the era of the Great Depression. It was certainly a skill he honed his entire life. He even had a cheap business card made up with his name, our phone number, and his straight-forward message:

BUY. SELL. TRADE.
ALMOST ANYTHING

For him, trading stoked enthusiasm that the long hours spent repairing the inner workings of power plants did not. It was more akin to his pride as he pitted wits against other checkers' champions or as he deftly solved mind-puzzlers, like the Rubik's Cube.

Dad awaited the answer to "What's the cheapest thing you've got?" The undertaker, no doubt schooled in the art of politeness replied, "Well sir, we have a cloth covered particle board that we can sell you for $300."

Dad let the air hang heavy between them, then deadpanned, "Not *that* cheap!"

The ice was broken; Dad was just warming up. He wasn't going to let the untimeliness of his own looming death rob him of a chance to bargain.

He wandered around the open displays and stopped in front of an ornate steel-vaulted box, one with an expertly carved hardwood exterior and a plush bedding. "How much is this one?" he inquired. It was a Rolls-Royce of caskets, carrying a heftier price tag than Dad had ever paid for a car. He whistled.

Although he wasn't the most patient of men, on the better side of that equation, Dad wasn't pompous or pious. He played the jester with a confident charm that let you know it was an act.

"Tell you what—let's make a deal," he proposed. "How about if you put me in this fancy one for the showing. Then right before you bury me, you can do a little '*switcharoo*' and put me in that cheap one for burying."

It is likely that this pitch was part jest and part hope—just how *much* it was of each, we will never know—but he smiled a big smile. The two men philosophized a bit more, buddies now. Dad opined about the lack of merit in buying an expensive casket. He said he wasn't worried about his body *or* his soul. It was ashes-to-ashes for the body, and he was comfortable with where his soul was going.

They didn't settle on a deal but on his way out, Dad asked if he could have one of the promotional baseball-style caps by the front door. He had dozens of caps and often wore one for shade. He took a white one, the name and a likeness of the building printed in red above the bill.

The two men shook hands again and Dad thanked him for his time and the cap. He came home for dinner in an upbeat mood, a new mesh ballcap atop his wavy gray hair.

In rural communities, like the one where my parents lived, funeral homes are as much a part of the community fabric as churches and often better attended. Dad lacked strong allegiances to either. Over the years, he had paid plenty of respects to folks in plush-carpeted funeral parlors, but he didn't lean toward a favorite.

He told Mom that he had stopped while coming through town to check out some funeral options and no, he had not made any decisions. In fact, he had decided that *we*—meaning she, my sister, and I—could decide and make the arrangements. *That* was a surprise.

Yet each day, he wore the cap.

Over the next couple of weeks, our family feigned normality during a time when nothing was normal. Dad's mood swings were no doubt intensified by the pressure

exerted by the tumor. He ran a gamut from being stoic, to loving, philosophical, funny, angry, and sad. We all did.

It wasn't long before Dad took a turn for the worse. Bedridden, he drifted in and out of consciousness, being gradually less responsive as the days passed. We had already arranged for Hospice support; and close family members took turns visiting, helping with bedside care, and keeping vigil.

But there was still the outstanding matter of funeral plans. My sister and our cousin drove the twenty miles into town to check out the few available choices. When they stopped in the place signified by the ballcap, the two women met the funeral director, a friendly fellow with a shock of silver hair. He was surprised to hear that dad was so quickly close to death. He shared the story of their encounter from just a week or so earlier, offering the kind of detail that allowed them to feel as though they had been present.

They returned, eager to recount what they had learned in a, "You aren't going to believe what he said," kind of way. Except that we all could believe it. It was so quintessentially *him* that we could almost hear his bass voice resounding. Death may have had the final word, but Dad had triumphed with the last laugh.

For a moment, the grief that we had all been carrying splintered and gave way. We doubled over with uncontrolled laughter, in unity with him and with each other. We laughed until we were giddy; we laughed until we were breathless; we laughed until we cried.

As part of his final trade, Dad got a new ballcap. And in the end, he lay in repose in a lovely-enough, modest-priced casket that we chose, even if we did get all emotional and might have paid too much.

The funeral director got a colorful yarn of an old horse trader who became a new customer, not to mention some free advertising. We asked him to share the story as one of Dad's eulogies, to which he happily obliged.

And our family got something far more priceless.

Whether it was intentional or not, Dad's parting gift to us was this story, one in which he contemplated and confronted death, certainly with sadness—but with a greater measure of wit and wisdom, grace, courage, and love.

All in all, it was a good bargain.

Dad and his Model T Ford, 1960's. (Sherrie Dulworth)

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Wanderings

by Sydney Lea

My wife and I enjoy a slew of retirees' freedoms, one of them being that we can make spur-of-the-moment decisions. Within reason, that is. We have three dogs, and while I dote on them for the most part, I do sometimes resent them. Our spontaneity can't include, say, a departure for Montreal, to our minds the most beckoning nearby city. A few unplanned days in May there might have been lovely.

We have an excellent local vet, and a timely phone call could have gotten our pets boarded at her practice; that would not have been the same as immediate indulgence of an impulse, but it'd be the next best thing. Unfortunately, we ignited our most recent spark of wanderlust one of her closed weekend days, so even that was out.

Along with so much else in Montreal, we're especially fond of the Musée des Beaux Arts. Its permanent collection doesn't dazzle, but it often has intriguing guest exhibits: I think, for instance, of an exquisite Vuillard show a few years back and of another featuring the stage settings of Chagall, of which we'd been unaware. He also painted the ceiling of the Paris Opéra; but I knew that.

Onward, and on a less hifalutin level. We always look forward to lunch at the museum's restaurant. The chef prepares his paté, to name a favorite, even more skillfully than I remember in France, back when I used to go there a lot. I even worked in a Paris suburb one summer, where I sometimes yearned, counterintuitively, for a greasy burger from the United Diner in my college town. The United operated all day and night, and there were some, well, memorable wee-hour outings there, with friends or alone. But never mind all that, another irrelevant detour.

We also enjoy Montreal's Botanical Gardens, its Biodome, even its Insectarium, where I've eaten not burgers but larva cookies. Depending on the show, the Imax cinema down by the St. Lawrence River can be entertaining, and merely strolling around the Vieux Quartier is time well spent: the Old-World feel is palpable, and available fewer than three hours from our house.

Yes—digressions galore in my opening paragraphs, but again, that's unsurprising: for better or worse, I'm well known within the family and elsewhere, precisely, for going off on tangents. I can't seem to cure myself. How did I start all this anyhow?

Oh yes, retirees' freedom to honor impulse whenever they choose. Two days back, however, spontaneity took us, dogs in the backseat, no farther than a village thirty minutes north. We traveled there on a big highway that ends at the Québec border, which may well be what spawned my musings at the outset. Interstate 91 is the first step toward Montreal.

The hardscrabble former mill town we chose to visit instead lies in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom and is home to a bakery where we've become regulars. It has an incongruously Upper West Side feel, but the shop produces a rustic sourdough loaf, now a staple at our house, as well as good sandwiches, coffee, and cookies. It was close to noon, so we bought a take-out lunch there.

We made our short trip on one of those gorgeous upper New England days before the blackflies arrive but after the north-country chill seems truly to have vanished. All along the way, we'd been treated to the radiant bloom of shadbush, our earliest tree to flower, on the verges of fields and dirt lanes and above all to ridges showing so many shades of green they were beyond counting.

My wife had been reading a book that includes a chapter about various species' capacities to see. When I exclaimed over that plethora of greenness, she informed me that humans see more shades of that color than any other. At the same time, there are certain birds that perceive thousands more degrees of *any* color than we can. There are also fish that are able to detect ultraviolet and infrared light. Dogs, on the other hand, while blind to yellows and oranges, can see movement more acutely than we do. I could go on. The point, though, is the nearly infinite variety of visual experience among sentient creatures.

Where were we?

We were back in our car and too hungry to wait until we got home to eat. It would have been a crime to have lunch anywhere but outdoors that day anyhow. So instead of taking that lightly used interstate highway we'd driven north, we headed toward home on

the even less traveled state road along the Passumpsic River, thinking it more likely to offer a good place to picnic.

There's a little red barn on that road, perfectly round, Shaker-style. For whatever reason, I've always found the building and its streamside location very appealing. Because I've never seen any human activity there, I can find myself imagining a reclusive single, male inhabitant. Our late, beloved Neighbor Tink joked that the original owner died "lookin' for a corner to piss in." Farther south, there's a property belonging to a railroad enthusiast: he does live alone in the old station, though I can't remember how I learned that. Four archaic train cars and one steam locomotive stand on the rusted tracks running through his yard. I wonder how he came by that rolling stock?

No matter. Our picnic place, the Passumpsic Cemetery, presented itself before we reached either landmark. The burial ground lies just west of Vermont route 5 in a well-tended meadow, from which we could look across the river to the White Mountains of New Hampshire, many of which I used to climb with passion in younger years. The Long Pond trail was a favorite.

First checking that no one was visiting a grave, we drove in and parked. The sun warmed our faces the minute we got out. Shirtsleeve weather at last! We stopped by a grassy hummock marked by a set of headstones and footstones memorializing a member of the Hale family, all born in the middle to late 18th century. Patriarch Thomas married two women, the first of whose names I can't fetch now; she died at a fairly young age. The second, Abigail*,* lived just shy of a hundred years. What changes and upheavals she witnessed, including the American Civil War, two world wars, and a moon landing among innumerable others.

Less epically, I thought of a woman whose husband was Harlan Hale; he had the memorable name of Walborg. I wondered if Walborg had been born in what, as of 1791, had become the state of Vermont, had she immigrated from one of the Scandinavian countries? Her distinctive name prompted my curiosity. On closer inspection, I saw that her family name had been *Olsen*, so I guessed her ancestry was Danish or Norwegian, the Swedish equivalent being *Olson* or *Olsson*.

How do I know that, and why? It's maybe because one of my very closest friends is an Olsen.

Since the grass was still a bit wet from recent rainfall, we each chose a footstone to sit on. Mine was Abigail's, just because it looked a little larger than the others and would better accommodate my considerable rear end. As the granite's warmth seeped into me, peace settled on my soul. Songbirds trilled in the surrounding woods, a graceful trio of turkey vultures coasted on thermals high above, scarcely a car passed on the highway, and unaccountably, even the nattering ravens suspended their racket.

The feeling in body and mind took me back to a place my father inherited from his own father. We called it The Cabin, a treasured family retreat 400 miles south of where I've lived all my adult life.

Even before my grandfather bought the property, a dam had been built to create a three-acre pond. Lush hardwood forest crowded the house. There was a spring cluttered with pond lilies a little way back among the trees, and it was always full of frogs. We used to lure them out of the water with a strip of red flannel tied to a string, a trick taught to us by an aged Pennsylvania Dutch neighbor. Mr. Fusschlugger trapped frogs for food, but we just did it for fun, my younger brothers and I competing to see who could fool the biggest specimen. I wonder now if the color of the flannel really mattered. Can frogs even *see* red? I should ask my wife. It's more likely that the fluttering of the cloth was what drew them. Or sometimes drew them. Frogs turn out to be fickle.

Our paternal grandmother had planted a small bed of perennials, bordered by four once well-trimmed cedar hedges, in a tiny clearing near the Frog Hole; we called it The Secret Garden. The flowers, which my mother casually weeded once a year, were still blooming in our childhoods. In fact, some had leapt from the original bed and meandered wherever they wanted, even while berry canes and beech shoots grew over more and more of that tiny dell as we children grew too.

Now that I think about it, how did my dad's mother do her planting? Multiple sclerosis had pinned her to a wheelchair very young. Either she tilled that soil before the disease got to its more disabling stage or, by an immense act of strength and determination, she left the chair and dragged herself along the ground to complete her task. Of course, her husband may actually have made the Secret Garden, though my father always insisted his mother had. I never asked either grandparent; I was only five in the year they both died, but thinking of my mother makes me consider a cherished Irish

friend of mine whose MS quickly did cognitive damage. He doesn't know who I am at this point in his illness. The whole thing breaks my heart.

Our Burial Ground sort of day came earlier at the Cabin. We three brothers and eventually two sisters loved a ritual, almost always in April, that marked the genuine onset of spring. Our father would cook hot dogs on an open fire down by the pond, and we kids would eat them sitting on the dam's sun-soaked apron. Sunfish, appropriately, nibbled at our toes as we dabbled them in the water. After lunch, we'd go chase each other around on a wide field of glacial-erratic boulders, working up the sweat we'd purge in the first swim of the year.

One event marred the celebration when I was ten. Just before lunch, I climbed a big rock and put my hand right on a copperhead snake, which had been warming winter out of its system at the flattened top. I remember a rattling trip in Dad's '48 Chevy wagon to a doctor's office in a postage stamp-sized town nearby. The GP injected me with anti-venin and the poisonous bite's only memorable effect, apart from lingering pain, was a stiff neck for ten hours or so. I do remember that I'd never loved my father as much as I did each time I woke up; there he'd faithfully be through the wee hours, squinting in lowered light at some magazine, barely rocking his chair.

There I go again.

Back to Abigail's stone where I perched well after we finished our meal. Meanwhile my younger, less lazy, and more inquisitive wife took a tour of the headstones, several of whose inscriptions implied a common misfortune: the deaths of a mother and infant on the same day, no doubt in childbirth. When she came back, my wife reported some of the tales those markers told, ones among other things to check my aged man's penchant to regard the Good Old Days as—well, good.

Her accounts of those inscriptions put me in mind of a time when, as a fit young hunter, I came upon the 19th-century headstone of a certain John Goodridge in the upper White River valley. I wondered if anyone ever visited that site, because it stood so far back in the woods; I couldn't even make out the ghost of a track leading to it. Who had performed the burial, set up the monument? A nearby cellar hole suggested that a farm once stood here, and that the farmer lay buried under that slab of white marble.

But he didn't lie there alone. Below the carved dates showing his lifespans of five dead before him: four children, whose dates were tragically close together. The last showed the names of the youngest child, *Sarah*, and surely enough, perished on the same day in the same year, *Elizabeth Goodridge, Beloved Wife.* I whistled up my dog, bushwhacked to the truck, and drove back home where I'd started—and where I'd be glad to end my day.

Good Lord, it's time to get back to now.

Yet without wanting at all to sound more philosophical than I am, I wonder what we mean when we say *now*? Or when I do. Though my efforts on the page or simply as a raconteur tend to be full of natural and physical detail, I can't seem to stay fixed in my thoughts, can't root myself in a single geographical or psychological place, in anything called *here*.

As I inspect my own wanderings, I recognize—hardly for the first time—that reminiscence, even elegy, is somehow my stock-in-trade, and, as with one of my literary heroes, William Wordsworth, this is not a late development. It's a habit I cultivated early. Why? It's not as though my childhood and youth were pure idyll, after all. It's only that the past is such a repository of material. How can anyone resist it? I couldn't, not even in my twenties, when I launched what would evolve into a half-century's writing career.

So if you assume that my divagations and sketches of earlier life are ways of dodging the notion of capital-D Death, I'll resist *you*. At my age, I know, I don't have all the time in the world; it would make perfect sense for me to feel mortality's cold hand more keenly with each passing season, and yet somehow I don't. To me, death is a very clear concept, but I can't make it real to me personally.

As if I were immortal, I go on writing poems, stories, even novels, a few of whose characters can be death-haunted. But I was far more haunted myself at forty than I am at eighty, so as I sat on Abigail Hale's grave, I did not make that plot, as might be expected, into any sort of *memento mori.*

This may be because seven years ago, I had a dress rehearsal for death. Though the symptoms were surprisingly mild—more a pinch in my chest and upper back than a crush, more deep fatigue than lightheadedness and shortness of breath—it turned out that my right coronary artery was one hundred percent occluded.

My most vivid recollection of that day and night is how unterrified I felt to confront the Reaper. I veered instead toward practicality, somehow grasping that panic or any other mental turmoil on my part would impede the efforts of professionals whose expertise, unlike mine, was crucial here. Whatever was meant to happen would happen. The doctors hadn't knocked me out completely, but I was sedated while the surgeon ran a stent up from my groin to my affected artery. Modern medicine to the rescue, as, sadly, it couldn't be for my poor, adored father, dead of a heart attack at fifty-six. So, virtually at the moment my grogginess passed, my gratification over the operation's apparent success blended with a deep sadness. Fifty years before, confronting the same crisis as my own, Dad had proved beyond saving. Modern medicine was not yet modern enough.

Good Old Days? I ask you.

One lesson did emerge from my cardiac event. *Seize the day.* Things I'd scarcely noticed before seemed suddenly wondrous: the ritualism, for example, involved in my barber Paul Tétreault's giving me a haircut: the sameness of his comments and gestures each visit, his courtliness and gentleness.

I hadn't forgotten certain other details, but now they had a kind of robustness: a photo on the shop wall of a huge black bear at his feeder; hair tonics on a shelf that were so ancient they stopped being manufactured, I think, in my boyhood; Paul's horseshoe pitching and ballroom dancing trophies. These were icons both of stability and reiteration.

Paul himself, sadly, died of his own heart attack within a year of mine, so any suggestion that my remembrances of him exemplify *carpe diem* won't hold. He sprang into my past as boldly as those posies leapt from my grandmother's Secret Garden.

My life, as implied by that blessed interlude at the Passumpsic graveyard, in the best company I know, on as lovely a day as any Creator could create, eating as good a sandwich as that shop could create, thinking about imminent visits from our creative children and grandchildren—my life is far richer than I could claim to deserve.

So why all these wanderings into the past? Am I searching for milestones, toting up experiences, sorrowful and jubilant both, as I approach the end of a long life? Perhaps. But finally, as I've indicated, I've been involved in such reverie from very early in my existence. I can't, then, authenticate any reason why I elegize—except that it's the nature of the man.

Army Specialized Depot #829, 1942

by Sydney Lea

I take down a formal photo of my father, seated together eighty-one years ago with his so-called colored troops, backgrounded by a grim-looking fort in Alabama. For the Yankee company commander of people whom townsfolk—if they wanted to sound broad-minded—referred to as *nigras,* the place was a threatening one, especially because he now and then had groups of his soldiers in for meals or drinks. That made for local fury and once, for a cross burned outside his bungalow.

Of course, those soldiers of his had faced far greater perils—and they'd face more when they got overseas. But back to the picture: Dad's there with eighty troops and two other white officers. "We were a busted flush," he joked.

I don't need to mention that, however old I may be now, I never knew those men, but these ages later, as I contemplate their expressions, each at least outwardly stoic, I feel some odd combination of flame and lead in my guts. Is there anyone left to remember the person to whom each face in the photograph attests?

Their lives amounted to unfairness and often enough pure terror. Then anonymity. Doesn't human vileness sometimes move you to think that our species' elimination might truly be something to hope for?

There I go, as bloated with righteous indignation as any adolescent, addicted to simplification, intent on black and white. But for the love of God, there *are* certain unforgivable evils. Agreed?

Perhaps not. Consensus these days seems almost quaint.

Here, a mid-winter blow commands each tree to salaam. A different world. No, not entirely. After the war, I would come to know my father's gentle command at home. I can replicate the sound of his laughter in mind, how he'd soothe me after some minor injury or insult, the way he'd whistle when he walked through the door from work.

What sort of work? Who knew? Who cared? He made waffles on Sunday. He hugged me. He sang, "Three Times Round Went Our Gallant, Gallant Ship." I won't forget all that and much, much more.

Outside, dark gathering, Dad's image seems almost to blend with his soldiers' in the photograph. Then they all disappear. My mother is long dead too. I have younger brothers and sisters, none young any longer, of course. Does any of them, like me, recall the very scent of this good man's sweat, or am I the last?

(Photo caption: Sydney Lea, Sr. is the white man left of center in the second row.)

A former Pulitzer finalist, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. In 2021, he was presented with his home state's Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. He has published twenty-four books: a novel, five volumes of personal and three of critical essays, and sixteen poetry collections, most recently *What Shines* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2023). His sixth book of personal essays, *Such Dancing as We Can,* is due in early 2024, and his second novel, *Now Look,* in spring of that year.

Final Conversations

by Mirinda Kossoff

In the short space of a month, my two oldest and dearest friends died: one of cancer three days before Christmas and the other suddenly in the first month of the new year. The first death, even though it was anticipated, sent me into deep grief and the second, so shocking, devastated me.

Tessa never married and had no children but had a successful career in the top echelons of journalism. Alice had two sons and four grandchildren and a change-making career in higher education. Alice and Tessa didn't know each other. Had they met, they would have liked each other. Both had fierce intellects. Though we didn't live close geographically, I traveled with each of them, visited back and forth, and phoned regularly. I could go to either of them for support and advice and they could receive the same from me. Each in her own way was the sister I would have chosen had I the choice.

I shared thirty-six years of history with Tessa. She had endured more than three years of surgeries and several different rounds of chemo. During that time, we both hoped her cancer could be conquered and that our friendship would pick up its old rhythms.
By December Tessa was dying. I couldn't write. I couldn't think of much else but Tessa and how her day was going, whether her pain was under control, if she had the strength to make it to the bathroom. If she knew how much I loved her.

I was dying with her. I struggled to keep myself separate from her dying process, but I sleepwalked through my days. I went through the motions of prepping for the holidays, buying presents for the grandchildren, and sending cards, but my thoughts were always with her. Every conversation was precious, every exchange of information crucial, because I knew it could be our last. I thought that if I could lighten her day and help her feel less alone in her journey, then I was doing the best I could to support her.

As she grew sicker, she moved in with her brother Sam, who lived in upstate New York. The two had been close since childhood. I was relieved that she was with him. Tessa's local friends and I kept each other up to date on her condition and her mood. Through it all, she never complained, never asked "why me?" or expressed a fear of death

Tessa did not believe in an afterlife and was matter of fact about her approaching end. She told me, “When I’m gone, I hope people laugh.” At one time, angry with her brother, she related that she told him, “If I weren’t’ dying already, this would kill me.”

A native New Yorker who lived and worked in Manhattan, she loved the ballet and was an incisive critic of dance performances, the theater, and the movies. On my annual visits, I stayed in her one-bedroom apartment. She always gave me her bed and slept on the sofa, which she often did when alone, falling asleep to the sounds of the TV. I know this, because once she fell asleep while talking with me on the phone, the TV mumbling in the background.

On one of my visits, we were at a Sam Shepard play on Broadway, when she said in a stage whisper, “This is crap. Let’s go.” We were sitting in the second row but that did not stop Tessa from rising in the middle of the first act and heading for the door. Embarrassed as I was, I followed.

I visited Tessa twice in the last six months of her life, once at Sam’s house and once at her Manhattan apartment where I helped her organize the art and sculpture she’d spent a lifetime collecting. While I was there, she hosted a restaurant dinner with a select group of friends, perhaps thinking it was a goodbye dinner but not saying so.

Each time I saw her, she looked thinner and frailer, bald or with hair growing back. Toward the end, she was in hospice care at Sam’s house. When she could no longer climb the stairs to her second-floor bedroom, hospice set up a hospital bed in a room on the main floor. We spoke by phone almost daily. I told if she didn’t feel like talking, she shouldn’t pick up. There were times when she didn’t answer, but most days we talked. It was our last tenuous connection.

I dreaded the day that seemed to arrive alarmingly fast, the day Tessa said she was fed up with being bedridden and needing powerful drugs to keep the pain at bay. “I can’t take much more of this. I want out,” she told me.

“I know you’re suffering, and I can let you go when you’re ready, I said, as I squeezed my eyes shut to lock in the tears.

A couple of days later, on December 22, I phoned Tessa and Sam picked up. “The hospice nurses are tending to Tessa. Call back in fifteen minutes,” he advised.

When I phoned again, Sam picked up a second time. “Tessa is having a hard time,” he said. “I don’t think she’ll last the night.” Hearing our conversation, Tessa asked to speak to me. I knew what was coming and my gut froze.

“I’m going to die tonight,” she told me in a papery thin voice.

“If you’re ready, then I’m at peace because you will be at peace, I replied. “But I cannot say goodbye. I will tell you one last time that I love you dearly and that you will leave a big hole in my life.”

Sam said he would phone me when it was over. By the next afternoon, I hadn’t heard from him, so I phoned. He told me Tessa had died fifteen minutes before I called. We both cried. I was glad her suffering was over. But I was bereft.

In the following difficult days, I took comfort in knowing that I still had Alice, my close friend of sixty-four years, the passionate advocate for education who knew everything about me. We grew up together, shared the same history in the same small southern town, attended the same schools, knew each other’s parents, and roomed together for two years in college. I still remember playing with her in her family’s three story pink Victorian house and our mutual loathing of frat parties in college, especially after some frat boy called us FFFs, short for frightfully fertile females, when he saw us sitting together on a bench. We both had two sons and two marriages. Alice loved travel as much as I and we both loved books, often sharing recommendations.

After her divorce, Alice relocated from within driving distance of me in Virginia to Phoenix to be close to her son and granddaughters. COVID had kept us apart for three years. I visited her In Phoenix in early December 2022 and except for sleeping, we never stopped talking. Words between us were so easy and one story or memory provoked another. We discussed everything from books, ideas, and travel to family, friends, food, and our shared history. Alice had an easy laugh and, in the southern tradition, was one of the best story tellers I knew. She remembered the names of friends’ families and what each member was doing, who they married, and what their offspring were up to.

The day after Christmas, Alice travelled to Japan to visit her son Pete, her daughter-in-law, and her two grandchildren. When she returned, after some jet lag recovery time, we set up a time to talk on the phone. I wanted to hear all about her trip.

She didn't complain about the fourteen-hour flight to Tokyo or the additional travel with her family to ski country. She emphasized the best parts of the trip, like being able to spend one-on-one time with her busy son and how gratifying it was to have that alone time with him.

On the phone, Alice had a clipped cough and a sandpaper voice. She said she couldn't get past the jet lag. I asked if she'd seen a doctor. She emphasized how much she hated going to doctors. She was in tip-top shape, exercised regularly, ate a healthy diet, and was on no medications. Her mother had lived to 104 and I knew Alice would outlive me. I did, though, suggest she see a doctor soon.

We talked for our usual two hours and when we were ready to sign off, I thought of how precious her friendship was, especially since I had just lost Tessa. "I love you Alice," I said, feeling that love deep in my belly.

"I love you, too, Jean," she replied. She had a pass on calling me by my middle name, the one everyone used when I was young. She said this with the kind of tenderness I hadn't heard in her voice before.

The next day she was dead, a likely deep vein thrombosis from the long flight, lying in wait to assault her heart. The news came from a former high school classmate who learned about it from Alice's first husband, also a classmate. Seeing Alice's name together with the phrase "we've lost another classmate" felt like I was being tasered.

"No," I wrote on the email chain. "It's not true. I just talked to her yesterday." Then I got Pete's email and I had to accept the devastating fact that she was truly gone. I screamed and wept and wanted to shake my fists at the universe for this cruel trick.

I had a video call with Pete and his daughter Claire in Japan. We wept together. We wept again at a video memorial service her sons had organized. I was the second speaker behind Alice's brother, because, of all her many friends, I had known her the longest.

Grief paralyzed me. I took no pleasure in my normal activities. Life lost meaning. I obsessed about death and was riddled with anxiety about losing yet another friend or family member or dying suddenly myself. Why bother to do anything because nothing mattered. At the doctor's office for a minor malady, I started weeping. The physician

prescribed an antidepressant to add to the one I'd been taking for years. I never took the prescribed pills.

Neither Tessa nor Alice was religious. They didn't believe in an afterlife, nor did I. But now I desperately wanted to. My two best friends were so alive to the world. How could such vibrant, intelligent minds dissolve into nothingness? Where does the energy and the essence of my beloved friends go? My science-based, factual approach to death did not stop me from looking for signs from each of them. In the week after Alice died, I saw an angel-shaped cloud. I asked Alice to send me another, but after months of looking in the sky for signs, I saw none.

As Maria Popova wrote in a beautiful essay on dying: *Whatever our beliefs, these sensemaking playthings of the mind, when the moment of material undoing comes, we—creatures of moment and matter—simply cannot fathom how something as exquisite as the universe of thought and feeling inside us can vanish into nothingness.*

The physicist Alan Lightman has written lovingly about death. In his book, *mr g*, Lightman gives us a narrator who creates time, space, and matter from the void. But creation raises the question of its opposite—dissolution/death. Toward the end of the novel, mr g sorrowfully watches an old woman on her deathbed, her memories spooling out as death approaches.

"*How can a creature of substance and mass fathom a thing without substance or mass?"* wonders mr g as he sees one of his creations succumb to his laws. *"How can a creature who will certainly die have an understanding of things that will exist forever?"* When she dies, mr g notes the incomprehensible number of atoms in her body and breaks them down into the major chemical elements plus a smattering of the ninety-odd other chemical elements created in stars.

He tells us that in cremation these elements combine and recombine and then scatter into the wind and soil. Having chosen cremation, in two months, Tessa's atoms will spread and diffuse throughout the planet. Her borrowed atoms now belong to everyone and everything. We share those atoms. It comforts me to know that her atoms might slip into the atmosphere I breathe.

Alice, as was typical of her thoughtful and generous nature, donated her body to a tissue bank. At some point, her unused remains will be cremated or put into the soil to begin a new cycle of life.

Deep in my grief, I nevertheless realized that each of my friends had left me something more than treasured memories.

Some of Tessa's friends have become my friends. A portion of Tessa's treasure trove of art, clothing, and jewelry, carefully collected over the years, came to me: She purchased some of the items when we traveled and shopped together. I remember our last trip to Santa Fe when she bargained with a well-known Navajo jeweler. She wanted to add another carved sterling bangle to her collection. Now I wear that bangle—and two others she bought at other times—every day, a threesome I had once admired on her wrist. Sometimes I wear a pair of her earrings, a necklace, or a jacket. I feel I am taking her with me as I go about dressed in her finery.

Alice has left me the unparalleled gift of a relationship with her son, Pete, and granddaughter, Claire. Alice had been helping fourteen-year-old Claire with her essay writing. Ever the educator, she had suggested books for Claire to read and topics to write about. On one of my video conversations with Pete and Claire, I mentioned that I knew about this collaboration.

"I know I can never replace your granny Alice," I said, "but I'm a writer and would love to help you with your essays."

Without hesitating, Claire said, "I would like that," and we agreed on a date and time to have regular video meetings.

Now, Claire and I talk regularly about her life and her observations as much as we do about her essays. Like her grandmother, she is a thoughtful and observant person. I treasure her as much as my own grandchildren because she is an extension of Alice. In helping Chloe, I hope to further Alice's legacy.

Pete has told me that he plans to bring the family to the States for the 2023 winter holidays and will be within driving distance in Virginia. Meeting them in person will be my best gift of the year.

Despite the gifts my friends have left behind, the question remains: How do I go on with my life without Alice and Tessa? Every day, there comes a moment when I think

of them. I must stifle the reflex to pick up the phone to talk with them. Instead, I talk to them in my mind.

When I left for a trip in August, I keenly felt their presence. Instead of thinking about what to tell them later about the vacation, as I would normally have done, I felt they were experiencing it with me. Tessa approved of a white rain jacket I bought. Alice was intrigued by the Abraham Verghese novel I was reading.

The essence of these two loving influences in my life are ingrained in me, carried forward as I go about my daily life with a deep knowledge of who they were as people and how much I absorbed the things I cherished about them.

Mirinda Kossoff is the author of *The Rope of Life: A Memoir*. She regularly writes essays and blogs. Kossoff has been a chameleon in her work life, from hospital social worker, assistant managing editor at a large newspaper, communications director in academia and nonprofits, freelancer, to artist, metal smith and jewelry designer. She has written and published essays and articles throughout her life, including a few for national magazines. She penned a weekly column for a local paper, was an essayist/commentator on regional public radio, and taught essay writing at Duke University continuing education.

Biology: A Memoir

by Gary Fincke

1

Mr. Freitag, your biology teacher, was fond of seeding his lectures with quotes. "'Some insects are generated spontaneously out of dew falling on leaves,'" he read to your class one February afternoon. "'Others grow in decaying mud or dung, some in the flesh of animals.'" He paused, his gaze moving from desk to desk as if he was trying to make out who wanted to laugh and who wanted to say "Amen." Finally, with a flourish, he closed the book and said, "That, class, is an observation by the famous Aristotle. He wrote *The History of Animals* and fancied himself a creation expert. We're about to make a fool of him."

2

Fifteen, you thought you knew all about superstitions, how the plots of ancient myths were full of holes that needed to be covered by faith. You had a grandmother who was fond of telling you about the ways people misused the ones you'd learned from Genesis. "Near Galesville, Illinois," she said, "some thought it was possible to discover where the Garden of Eden rose and fell. Those people thought you could walk right up to where the borders were and imagine Adam and Eve getting kicked out." Like she always did, she waved one hand up toward the sky as if what she was saying was being overheard. "That's because they believed what the Reverend VanSlyke preached," she said. "Can you imagine? He thought God started right there in Illinois with the Garden. And him still preaching about it when I was born."

3

After Mr. Freitag snickered about Aristotle's mud, you thought about the soft bog behind the lot where a neighbor's house stood a few doors down from your house, a patch of wetlands that looked like something that would digest you if you tried to walk from one side to the other. Somehow, when you were alone there, you half-expected upraised

hands or at least a riot of worms to emerge. Your neighbor's dog seemed spooked as well, always skittering when she was anywhere near the swamp. That quagmire, by late winter, always showed an early sign of spring. "That fellow down there," your father said more than once, "he should keep an eye out to see if that swamp is spreading. And here we are downhill from his place." You hadn't quite outgrown half-expecting the gurgling of just-born voices thick with slime, their mythical bodies slipping under your door, bubbling and multiplying like ancestors.

4

A few days after the Aristotle lesson, Mr. Freitag offered a biology riddle. "What do you get if you place sweaty underwear in a barrel and cover it carefully with husks of wheat?" When nobody raised their hand, he said, "What if you wait three weeks, giving all that sweat time to penetrate those husks?" Mr. Freitag paused, looked the class over, and said, "Mice. You get mice that emerge from the wheat." You and everybody else are more puzzled than amused, but Mr. Frietag seemed almost giddy. "Remember the most important thing, class. The mice are created only if the sweat is intimate."

5

Becky Flynn was your lab partner. Earlier in the year you'd stared through a microscope at paramecium and scrapings from the inside of your mouths. You'd examined worms, slicing them lengthwise and pinning back their skin. Her uncle, a fisherman, raised them, she said, creating the proper soil for them to thrive in. "If he knew who Aristotle was," she'd said, "he'd believe every word."

"Sure, he would," you'd said, eager to agree with her, thankful her last name followed yours in the alphabetical class roster because you loved being near her. You didn't volunteer your ongoing twelve years of perfect attendance at Sunday school where every teacher you'd had insisted all of the stories in the Bible were literally true. And you didn't confess that even though your father required you to attend, it had been five years since you had believed those teachers.

6

An extended thaw teemed the south face of your grandmother's yard with birth. Crocuses bloomed. The stems of daffodils poked up weeks early. Then, March about to begin, deep snow fell. Your grandmother's body seemed to thicken, making the stairs a trial of labored breathing. From the third floor of her house you could see the Allegheny, Monongahela, and the Ohio where they met. Your grandmother said that Pittsburgh had more chance of being the site for the Garden than any place in Illinois. The triangle where its three rivers converged would remind anybody, she said, of the Bible's description of Paradise. "Wouldn't that be something?" she said. "Paradise getting its start in a place that turned to hell with all the mills and smoke and stink down that way." She paused as if talking caused her to be out of breath. "But don't you forget," she finally added, "there's only that one Garden of Eden where God began us from mud and bone."

7

Serious at last, Mr. Freitag said, "You'd think people would get over it, but for two thousand years, some of Aristotle's ideas about spontaneous generation were accepted. Plenty of time to observe more closely. Years of microscopes being in use. There was a menagerie in the soil. The earth was filled with the unborn. And so was dung, and cheese, and bread. The dew itself seethed with miracles, each morning giving birth to insects. It's hard to dislodge what people want to believe." Francesco Redi. John Needham. Spallanzani. Swammerdam. Mr. Freitag seemed sad when he mentioned those scientists no one had ever heard of. "Their experiments included at least one small flaw that kept them from producing the kind of proof that would shut up the ignorant." Mr. Frietag sighed, then smiled. "Pasteur," he said triumphantly. "You know why he's remembered? He conducted his experiment correctly, that's why. Now everyone had to see what was true. But before you feel too smart, remember that was just one hundred years ago, just one century of truth."

8

That week, you and your friend Jack launched an experiment of your own. You made a stew of leftover cafeteria food, bits of bread and fruit, filling a paper condiment cup and

sliding it into the hollow of one spill-stained leg of the small table where the two of you always sat during the third lunch period. Extra credit, you said, laughing at the recipe for the spontaneous generation of anything at all. You decided to wait a week for something to be born, able to eat lunch above that brew each day without disturbing the fussy demands of science.

9

Mr. Freitag read one more old-time recipe before your class moved to the lab stations: "'Lead a young bull into a carefully-dug pit. When you are sure the depth is suited to his size, kill the bull and fill that hole until only its horns protrude from the ground. Wait a month before opening. A swarm of bees will fly from the corpse.'" Mr. Frietag didn't smile this time. "Those people had to sacrifice something very valuable to generate bees," he said. "That should tell you how important bees must have been to anybody who put stock in the recipe." You wanted him to keep reading from that book. It was more interesting than the heavy textbook you lugged home every night because Mr. Freitag assigned homework at the end of every class.

10

One afternoon, your father walked you to the three upstairs rooms where you'd lived until you were seven. You noticed there wasn't a door, that anyone who entered downstairs could walk into those rented rooms. The Kunard's lived there now, at least for a few more weeks, because that house and the church next door were about to be razed and replaced by a new house of worship. The Kunard's let you tour those doomed rooms filled with furniture, some of which your parents had left behind. The iron radiators hissed as if they recognized you.

After that brief look-around, your father took you to the church cellar where he told you he was the janitor there when you were born, that he added coal and subtracted ashes right where you stood. "Look close," he said, like he expected the faces of the dead were on the scattered chunks of coal. "For extra income," he said. "For you and your sister, but each morning it was God first, then family," trying to teach you to wear his fierce faith on

your back like a hump, and you nodded and shoveled a load, substituting cooperation for agreement.

11

During lab, along the classroom's smooth black counter, you and Becky Flynn arranged your flasks like Pasteur had, openings straight up or s-curved, some covered, some sealed. You boiled broth and poured. You watched for days until that broth clouded and stunk or stayed clear, refuting the presence of what Mr. Freitag said people called "life-force" in air. That test was so simple that every pair of students in the class succeeded, though Ron Eck, standing next to you and Becky, said his father was going to demand equal time for talking about how God's hands had guided everyone's beginnings. Instead of laughing, Becky looked thoughtful. Her father, she said, had told her more than once she was selling her soul for an A in biology. Even when Ron Eck turned away, her expression didn't change.

12

In Latin, you translated the stories of gods and goddesses, and everybody, including Ron Eck, agreed they were myths because what those ancient gods could do was impossible. Nobody mentioned the mythologies of the present.

13

On the seventh day, you and Jack bolted your sandwiches and milk before you raised that table while your small desserts stayed sealed. Jack used his shoe to nudge that tiny womb into the light so you could observe the fine hair of mold and whatever else your recipe had grown with darkness, time, and heat. A flurry of fruit flies lifted from that soggy cup as if you'd fathered them with leftovers. They rose and dispersed, sons and daughters disappearing among three hundred third-shift-lunch-hour students before you and Jack unwrapped your cakes and stood, giddy, hurrying into the hall like missionaries carrying gifts.

14

At the end of your street, one property owner had somehow refused being hooked up to the sewer system that had been installed five years earlier. One late afternoon a few weeks after the fruit flies were born, you cut through that neighbor's yard to save a few seconds walking home from school. You'd missed the bus because Becky Flynn seemed interested in talking to you, and you were so excited about the possibility of going out with her that you nearly walked through the soft ground where the neighbor's cesspool drained. What had warned you was the brilliant green of the grass that surrounded where it was buried.

"That's nothing to mess with," your father said when you described the landscape at dinner. "You could pick up anything there if you're not careful." And though you understood that the "anything" he meant were the consequences of invisible bacteria, the extraordinary shade of green seemed to signal that someone like Ron Eck's father or Becky's uncle would be right to believe that saturated earth was capable of giving birth to more than grass.

15

At the spring sophomore party, you danced with Becky Flynn for the first time, both of you dressed as if you were twenty years old in the Roaring 20s. She was a flapper in a dress she'd found at a thrift store. You wore your grandfather's silk vest and watch chain. The music was early 1960s. There was no Charleston to make a fool of you, and you managed a passable Bristol Stomp. When the music slowed, you shuffled to late doo-wop hits like "My True Story" and "Daddy's Home."

"I hate biology," Becky said during the pause between records, but she stayed pressed against you. "Mr. Freitag talks like the Bible is a book of fairy tales." Your favorite slow song, "Lover's Island," began, and you wrapped both arms around her, dancing with her the way you'd noticed couples going steady did.

16

During May, Mr. Frietag lectured your class about how organisms change over time because of heredity and behavior. “Those who better adapt survived more often and had more offspring,” Mr. Frietag said. “Think descent with modification,
one of the best substantiated theories in the history of science.”

Though science, sometimes, made you sad, you decided that people like Ron Eck’s father imagined hell because they needed to believe everybody they despised would be punished. Religion was for people who hated being mortal, so they made up another kind of life, becoming simpletons who experienced nothing but happiness.

17

That summer, finished with Mr. Freitag and biology, you were called from Sunday school because your grandmother had died suddenly just after dressing for church. There was a three-day flurry of phrases like “crossing over” and “God’s will.” Your relatives and family friends provided variations on the certainty of paradise.

18

Ron Eck, at the viewing, said his father was working on compiling a book of “begats” through every century in the six thousand years since human beings had sprung from dust, everybody a distant cousin to everybody else descended from a pair of parents. He said his father had already spread all of the Bible’s fathers and sons across rolls of butcher paper, taking care of the first 4,000 years. Now he was working his way back from the twentieth century. He’d reached the 1700s and expected to fit the newer generations to the Bible’s roll call like two ends of a pipe meeting each other after circling the earth. “He’s going to prove everything the Bible says is true,” Eck said, before he drifted away, and you thought of how, instead of finishing geometry homework one weekend, you’d calculated Pi to one hundred places on paper taped together for a panorama of numbers, using up so many hours on proving or disproving the infinite that you had a headache for three days from pounding your head against the mathematics of chance.

19

The night before your grandmother's funeral, Becky Flynn, a few months older than you were, had a brand-new driver's license and her father's car. She flicked the headlights on, then off, sending some signal into the game lands where she'd parked, creating, she said, the evening and the morning of the first day. "We're alone as Adam and Eve," she said, reciting the passages about God's simple, yet perfect recipes for births from clay and rib. She flicked the lights again as if she wanted God's finger pointing at you as you opened her blouse and found her breasts in the dark, secretive as your long-ago, newly created ancestors. And though she didn't allow you to do anything more, you were so in love with the partial knowledge of her body, you said "yes" to whatever she believed about dirt and bones.

20

After the funeral, searching through your grandmother's house, you tried to hear her voice over the nearby construction, a water line's network of underground pipes being dug up for repair. Nobody followed you upstairs where you opened drawers and examined the decades-old lingerie and negligees. Where you sat on her bed and imagined her and your grandfather, half a century before, lying down together after returning from a weekend's honeymoon. And then you told yourself that if only the work crew would leave, if only there was no traffic, if only the relatives downstairs would shut up and sit and hold their breath, you might hear her distant voice confirm the location of the extraordinary site of Eden.

Gary Fincke's newest essay collection, *The Mayan Syndrome* (Madhat Press, 2023) includes the essay, "After the Three-Moon Era," originally published at Kenyon Review Online and selected to be reprinted in *Best American Essays*, 2020. An earlier collection, *The Darkness Call*, won the Robert C. Jones Prize (Pleaides Press, 2018).

The Healer

by Angela Townsend

You don't get to feel your life change in real time. Looking back, you see the big moments. They wear brilliant disguises, brown grocery bags labeled "Errand" or "Inconvenience."

But when you are twenty-six and trudging to your annual physical, you do not glimpse a before-and-after that will change everything.

Living with Type 1 diabetes since age nine, I have seen enough doctors to staff a cruise ship. Grad school gifted me with one of the best, a ball of radiance with a red beehive. Upon my graduation Dr. Zitzman consulted the university to determine if there was any way she could keep me as a patient, but Princeton had no respect for our bond. So it was off to find my first real, adult doctor. If I can prevail upon him, he will also be the last.

You don't hear a name and know that you've just met one of your main characters. I only knew I had an appointment with Dr. David Fableman, founder of a three-location practice in our nook of New Jersey. Shiny-headed and shorter than me, Dr. Fableman was a frisbee of energy. In that first two-hour extravaganza, he glittered with fascination, a student not of diabetes but of *my* diabetes, empathetic about the co-occurring anorexia and emphatic that I was doing just fine. When I admitted my exasperation with endocrinologists, he corralled a smile. "Egos. Not always helpful. You and I can manage your diabetes together if you'd like."

As he grinned behind round glasses, he was concerned that I felt good about having chosen him as my doctor Mind and mouth moving at a pace I'd only previously seen in the mirror, Dr. Fableman rattled off his own history, a "good, happy nerd" who graduated high school at sixteen. Insurance companies belonged in the inferno, but otherwise he loved his work . Every day brought the unexpected.

We were both in for the unexpected.

I must have gushed my whole way home on the phone to my Mom, my voice hitting an incomprehensible warp-speed that only bats can understand. She knew why this was

such a big deal. Given my knapsack of chronic conditions, it had been a craggy odyssey finding a doctor I could trust, as both a body and a person.

We had no idea.

I could tell you how Dr. Fableman helped to break the bronco of my hemoglobin A1c, or how we taught my thyroid a thing or two. But the best medicine came elsewhere. When the insurance company declared my brand of insulin “non-preferred,” Dr. Fableman grew ten times in size. So proud was he of his “physician’s appeal” that he sent me a copy, underlining highlights such as, “even in the absence of natural compassion, I should hope your relentless profit motive will lead you to acknowledge that it is in your interest to provide her insulin rather than foot the bill for hospitalization with ketoacidosis.” There may or may not have also been a colorful line including the words “her death on your hands.”

I was granted my insulin.

When I found myself five smitten years into an unexpected career, writing and fundraising for a cat sanctuary rather than pounding through a Ph.D. in ethics, I blithered the guilt I experienced at Dr. Fableman. Was I being complacent to stay at this post, lazily happy doing something that came too easily? Should I not be pushing myself?

Dr. Fableman did not have to think his response through. “It sounds like you’ve found what most people look for their entire lives. So have I. Shouldn’t we be happy?”

When I had a sinus infection, a routine check-up, or a sudden fear of osteoporosis, Dr. Fableman gave me an hour instead of fifteen minutes. When he had ten other patients waiting, he gave me quotes from his favorite Broadway musicals and promises that “we’ll get through this together.”

When I had any doubt that the axis of the world tilts towards mercy, I had Dr. Fableman.

When I wore a ridiculous red blouse that ruffled in all directions, Dr. Fableman declared, “that is the most perfectly Angie garment I can possibly imagine.”

When I announced my impending nuptials, Dr. Fableman waxed fatherly. “I trust you. It’s inevitable that he’s unworthy of you. But I trust you.”

He hesitated. I hesitated.

“We’re only inviting six people to the wedding,” I blurted. “It’s just a tiny little thing on the river. If my fiancé was open to anyone beyond immediate family, you would be there.”

His smile escaped. “That’s a relief. But if you happen to see a little bald gnome in a kayak, you’ll know it’s me.”

When I went on and off birth control, Dr. Fableman was my sherpa. When I dabbled in Catholicism, he suggested it was “a very intellectually satisfying world for a mind of your caliber.” When I un-dabbled, he agreed that “you need a more expansive faith. Speaking strictly as a guy who has nearly none.”

When I cold turkey-ed my antidepressant of twenty years, Dr. Fableman admitted, “Not the path I would have chosen, but you’re not the average patient. It’ll get bumpy, but you’ll be fine.”

When I became manic, tripping over my sentences, he told me. “Movin’ a little fast today. It should subside, but we’ll keep an eye on it. ‘Hypomanic’ is the word.”

When I told him I would miss working from home after COVID, he was incredulous. “If it’s good for you, do it forever. Go in one day a week. Tell them this is how it’s going to be. You are a linchpin!”

When I turned forty and challenged myself to write forty thank-you letters to people across my lifeline, Dr. Fableman was an obvious choice. He was the only recipient who answered with a lengthy hand-written letter of his own, beginning, “Now let me tell you why I’m grateful for you.”

When middle age leered at me and my arms were empty, I uncrossed them in Dr. Fableman’s office. “I was never someone who definitely wanted children,” I gurgled, “but somehow I always assumed it would happen. I feel vaguely guilty about the whole thing. I have no idea what I want.”

Dr. Fableman buzzed the nurse to cancel his next appointment. “Listen.” His usual vibration slowed to grandfather speed. “You know me. I’m not a religious guy. AT. ALL. But I’m gonna kinda speak your language today.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. And if you should somehow get pregnant, I’ll quote Jeff Goldblum in *Jurassic Park* and say ‘life finds a way.’ We’ll get through that

together. But…" he leaned forward on his little rolling stool. "…I think maybe God or the universe speaks through our bodies and our histories."

He took a deep breath. "Don't get me in trouble for saying too much here."

"I would never."

"I think, if you look at the diabetes, and the low weight, and the age at which you got married, and all the little stories that have made your story, you can have peace. Call it the Spirit or destiny or anything you like, but I think it's okay to rest in these clues that you already have your answer. Does that make any sense?"

It was the first thing anyone had shared with me that had ever made sense of this question.

His counsel came back to me like the refrain of a musical when the music stopped and I had nowhere to sit. My marriage was coming to an end after five secretly volcanic years. I broke the news in a late-night email, scarcely hitting "send" before the phone rang.

"Angie. Dr. Fableman." He was calling from home. "Listen. I hope it's not too late. I just had to call. I'm so sorry. I can't imagine. I mean, I can imagine"—Dr. Fableman and Mrs. Fableman were an eon divorced—"but, well, I'm just so sorry."

We both blithered. He said, without saying it, that he'd smelled the smoke of my pain, wished I would say something so he could say something. "But we're going to get through this together."

"That's why you were one of the first people I told. You're one of my anchors in this life, Dr. Fableman." It was an understatement. "You're one of my best friends."

I didn't see this coming sixteen years ago. But here he is, on my side and forbidden to retire. Dr. Fableman is a gift, the healer who happens to be a doctor. He takes care of me. He makes my faith bigger. He reminds me to keep my lens wide, for all the minor moments that have yet to make my life.

As Development Director at Tabby's Place, **Angela Townsend** bears witness to mercy for all beings. Angie has an M.Div. from Princeton Seminary and a B.A. from Vassar College. She has lived with Type 1 diabetes for thirty-two years, giggles with her mother every morning, and delights in cats and the moon. Her work has appeared in *Braided*

Way, Fathom Magazine, Feminine Collective, oddball magazine, and *Young Ravens Literary Review*, among others. Angie loves life dearly.

Among the Blooms

by Brady Rhoades

It begins with my neighbor Bala, an old man with a high, singing style of speaking. He's from Romania, somewhere around Galati near the Black Sea. His yard is dense with trees—orange, lemon, pomegranate, apple. Dense, come to think of it, is an understatement. It's a maze of stalk, stem, and bloom, dwarfing his small home. He grows homeland grapes. He's proud of them, brings me bowls full, too many to eat before they go bad. He also brings store-bought chickens.

I know four things about Romania: Dracula, Nadia Comaneci, Bucharest, and the phrase *Nu mai bea mâța oțet.* The last I learned from Bala in the early years of our acquaintance.

I greet Bala every morning at the fence separating our properties while he shuffles around in his robe, checking on all the life he parents. Lately, I've noticed his eyebrows have designs on his temples and forehead. His eyes peak out like wood mice in a forest. His fingernails are black, and I wonder why his daughters never visit.

In return for the grapes and chickens**,** I buy him cat food. He makes a home for what looks like three or four Siamese and tabbies, and feeds strays. When any of his brood wanders off, he stands on Pico Road, calling their names, moaning, "Oh, nooo, ah, no, no, no..."

He serenades all the wild creatures and pets in the area, including my dog, who adores him.

One morning, during another Southern California heat wave that promises a one-hundred-and-five degree high that day, he tells me one of his cats is pregnant and can't deliver.

"She does not look good."

I'm heading out and he is, too, so the exchange is brief. Neighbors roll their trash bins to curbs, assess their gardens, drive to the 91 Freeway, or the 5, or the 57, to get to where they're going and do what must be done. Lacy, a Brooklyn native who's made a

luxuriant ecosystem of her plot of land, is filling the bird bath and putting out shelled peanuts. An egret she named Lenny is there, as usual, having made the three-mile flight from Laguna Lake. Next door to Lacy, two women, one a heartbroken judge, the other a county clerk, both addicted to painkillers, have started their hysteria; by afternoon, they'll be brawling. The neighborhood is like a klatch of third cousins. There are more unknowns than knowns; we want to know more and don't want to all at once.

The sun is going down over Fullerton Airport. Banking planes look like silhouettes against a peach sky. After a nine-hour day in the newsroom, I pull into my driveway and see a portly cat who won't budge, which reminds me for the first time since dawn, of the pregnant cat and I make my way to Bala, who I find in his garden.

"How's she doing?"

"She does not look good."

"There's an animal hospital that did a good job on my dog."

"How much does it cost?"

I ask if I can see the cat. I don't know why; I have no special affection for cats and wouldn't know what to do. He's reluctant. He tells me his home needs cleaning. "It's okay," I say.

"No, no," he says. He wants to clean up first.

Some journalistic instinct kicks in and I keep pressing, walking toward his place to gin up momentum. Behind me, I hear muttering. He's got another gear, it seems, because now he's at my side, then edges ahead. Fifteen feet from his door, he says, "I have more than twenty cats."

The front of his home is crowded with trash bags as tall as a half dozen preschoolers. Friskies cans everywhere, to lure in outsiders. Flies, like tiny fighter pilots, zoom up, nosedive, crisscross.

I can't compare the smell to anything I have ever encountered. I foot-shove the trash out of the way. Through a shut window the size of a 1960s TV and secured on the inside by chicken wire, I see four cats peering out.

Inside, it's sauna-hot, and there's feces, urine, cat food, curdled milk. One room and a bathroom. Four hundred square feet at best. Fungi grows from pizza boxes. Insects feast like poor kids at lunch, more competitive than cooperative. Cats zoom up walls and across the littered hardwood floor. Siamese, tabbies, Siberians. Dozens of eyes on me.

Some are kittens. A handful are approachable, but don't allow touching, their curiosity losing out to their fear.

The gal who was front and center at the window is prominent again on a dresser. One ear is tipped, meaning she's spayed, meaning further that she's probably missing from her owner. She's white with a gray streak on her forehead, big paws, big eyed. She jockeys for position. Bala tells me her name is Katarina.

The pregnant one burrows on the highest shelf in the bathroom, with a foot of space between her head and the low ceiling. I can't tell what kind of shape she's in, and Bala can't get her down.

I hear faint meowing and track down the sound. Three newborns are curled up in a cardboard box. One is hairless, skeletal, a nub of umbilical cord stuck like a scab on his pink belly. They're all cold to the touch.

Bala doesn't know who the mother is but she's in the house because the animals are never let out—not evenings, not in the afternoon heat. I'm later told that a sick mother feline will forgo a newborn if it's diseased, fearing it will spread the illness. Mothers with mastitis—an infection of the mammary glands that causes extreme pain during nursing—might abandon them all.

The situation could be worse. There are news stories and agency reports of cats stacked on one another in cramped cages, stories of skeletons grave-yarding rooms or entire homes.

Inter-aggression is common among cats in close quarters. So is hypersexuality. Bear in mind that female cats give birth in about two months and can be impregnated again and again, putting them on a wheel of birthing three, four, five times a year.

Agents at the national Animal Humane Society open twenty-five or so cases of hoarding annually. About two hundred and fifty thousand animals of all kinds, including rats and reptiles, are hoarded every year.

Even when seized, cats are a long shot for re-homing because they're unsocialized, unfixed and, often, sick. Hoarders are known to kidnap fixed, healthy cats from their rightful homes**,** too, and those cats devolve in every way.

You've heard of the so-called cat lady, and it's not untrue. According to the Humane Society, most cat hoarders are women in their fifties.

Hoarders suffer from anxiety, depression, delusions, impulse control problems, obsessive compulsive disorder, and something called attachment model, according to International Cat Care, a cat welfare charity. In the past few years, "Hoarding Disorder" has been added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Model of Mental Disorders (DSM-V). The recidivism rate is almost 100 percent.

Bala is not malicious. He fawns over his cats. But he is isolated and, it seems, neglected. Who lets an eighty-year-old man go out in public in such a moldering way? But who knows the family dynamics.

"In my experience, all hoarders feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility to protect their animals from society," Ashley Pudas, an agent for the Humane Society, tells me. "So removing animals from someone's home can be an extremely difficult event to get through. It requires a lot of reassurance and patience."

Six neighbors agree to intervene. On a Thursday. At 8 p.m. With three requests: 1) Clean up; 2) Run a fan and open a window; 3) No more tuna outside to lure in more cats.

"How do they exercise?" asks my physical therapist friend.

"Do you have air conditioning?" asks another woman.

Bala says he does.

"Where is it?"

He says it's broken.

Everyone is talking at once. Two of the neighbors slide past Bala, reach his front window, and take photographs. One removes the food tins. Bala is upset, defiant.

It happens that a cop is tending to an issue down the block. It takes ten minutes, but we convince him to call Orange County Animal Care and to confront Bala, if only to shake him up. Bala intercepts him on the street. There isn't much the cop can do,

apparently. We thank him for the effort. He makes the finger-circling-ear gesture. *Cuckoo.*

By then, we know. During the fray, Bala claimed he'd worked for the CIA and personally saved the lives of presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump. He leaned in and squinted, as if to say, *Don't you get it?*

About a month after neighbors initiated the intervention, Animal Care confiscated twenty cats. The pregnant one was euthanized. Her kitten did not make it. Four who were also sick died in the kennel. Fifteen were transferred to a no-kill shelter, where they were adopted out. Katarina was one of them.

It's been more than a year. No more morning hellos, no more Romanian grapes, no more chickens. I feel sympathy and anger. Increasingly, anger prevails, an anger that might well harden, like that of a journeyman boxer.

After the cats were taken, Bala began locking the gate at the front of his lot and he installed lights. I'm smelling that smell again, and I hear serenading. An uninvolved, unnerved neighbor said the “old guy” had asked about trapping techniques. Bala used to walk north, past my home, bag in one hand and a stick in the other. Now he walks south.

“Nu mai bea mâța oțet” translates from Romanian to English as, *The cat won’t drink vinegar anymore,* meaning someone who's been tricked once will be very careful the next time around.

Brady Rhoades’s work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Times, Orange County Register,* the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune, Black EOE Journal, U.S. Veterans Magazine* and other publications. He lives and works as a news editor in Fullerton, California.

Bugler

by John Thomson

Dad was fifty-four when I was born. As a boy, I was often asked by other boys if he was my grandfather. I'd say, "No, that's my dad," and the face of the questioner would twist into mocking disbelief, something as a child I didn't really understand. Back then my dad seemed like other dads. He played catch with me on the street. He took me camping. He taught me the difference between right and wrong. All with what seemed like youthful energy.

But by the time I started high school, I was forced to confront how much older my father was than the fathers of my peers. I began to see it in the way he'd fall behind me when I'd walk and I'd hear the rasp of his shuffling feet, or when he'd ask me the same question over and over again, or when it became difficult for him to rise out of his chair. And then, a month after I'd turned twenty-one, he died of stomach cancer at the age of seventy-five. Many attended his funeral. All of them, I believe, were from the last life my father had lived. None were from his former lives, which would finally come to me as a kind of ghost story, a bizarre tale I'd share with my wife and children, siblings and friends, and now with people I've never met. In doing so I've learned something beyond the story's surreal coincidences, and have come to appreciate the care we must take when judging the people who've loved us.

I'd learned a few things about my father while he was still alive, coming to me in fragments and from some sources I can't recall. I knew he was born in Salt Lake City in 1900. His parents divorced when he was very young, perhaps when he was only three or four. He probably lived an impoverished childhood. His birth name was John Albert Morris. He acquired the last name of Thomson when he was adopted by his stepfather during what was his mother's short-lived second marriage. He had three siblings, an older brother and two sisters.

I knew he'd had a career in law enforcement. I still remember pieces of stories he told me: getting his palm sliced with a knife when he confronted smugglers at the Mexican

border; seeing a dead body fall from a closet; hitting a horse while driving his patrol car on a country road; being a motorcycle cop on the rural highways of Arizona.

But he never really shared much else about his life, and as I grew older I sensed there may have been a reason for this. Surely a man who'd lived for nearly half a century before meeting and marrying my mother would likely have been married before, and perhaps had another family.

So this, whether Dad had been married before, was the first question I wanted to answer. It didn't take long before I found a record of at least two of Dad's previous marriages on a free family history site run by Mormons. There was one in 1928. The woman was twenty, Dad was twenty-eight. All of this was spelled out on an official marriage certificate. And then, soon after, I found an obituary of a woman who was the only child he'd had during this marriage: a half-sister I didn't know about. She was eighty when she died in 2008—old enough to have been my mother. The other marriage was in 1931, just three years after the first. I could find no evidence of children being born from this marriage. Then I went back to the first marriage and looked more closely at the certificate. Under my father's "marital status," it indicated, "divorced," leading me to believe there was yet another ex-wife out there somewhere, the first of three marriages before marrying Mom.

I pursued finding this woman, Dad's potential first wife. I searched the Mormon site more thoroughly, trying an array of filters. I went on to state and county record sites in California and Utah and Arizona, but found nothing.

I began to accept I'd never learn of this alleged first marriage, until my youngest daughter found something. The investigative nature of her job, along with her own curiosity about the grandfather she never knew, led her to a newspaper clipping, dated August 23rd, 1920. Pressed into the local announcements section was a brief description of a wedding, identifying the groom as John Albert Thomson, from Salt Lake City, Utah.

There was no doubt this was him, only twenty at the time, living in the world of prohibition, the Ford Model T, the start of jazz and Mickey Mouse and telephones and radios, and just after the end of World War I.

Within a matter of days my daughter came upon another newspaper article, dated July 31, 1924. In it was the announcement of the baptisms for my father's two infant children

born of that marriage, a son and daughter, two more half-siblings I hadn't known existed. The daughter's name was Joyce. The son's name was John, the same name as my father.

The same as mine.

Then came the shock, the dismay and anger. The disbelief. Dad had given me the same name as a son he'd already had, born thirty years before.

So who was this half-brother of mine who bore my name? Where was he? Was he still alive? Did he look like me, or my father? Once again it was my daughter who'd make the discovery, locating a newspaper article telling of my half-brother's death.

He was killed in a tanker fire in San Francisco Bay in 1942. The article referred to him by the last name he'd acquired from his stepfather, who'd adopted him, just as my father had been adopted by his own stepfather. It said his body was never found. Then I located his draft notice. I'd learn he was to report to the Army to fight in World War II, just days after he died in the fire. This draft notice, along with a death certificate, recorded his date of birth: the same day, though a different year, as mine: June 6th.

My father had a son with my same name, born on the same date in June, only a whole generation earlier.

I realized Dad must have known this other son he'd named John had died 12 years before I was born. I imagined he must have grieved when he'd gotten the news of his son's death, even though they'd been estranged. Then I began to wonder if Dad gave me this other son's name as a way of carrying on his memory, especially since I was born on the same date in June. How could this not have jarred my father? Perhaps when my Dad looked at me, he saw a piece of the John he'd lost, still living.

But I don't know, and I may never know. My discoveries came after all the characters in the story were dead. There was no one to ask, no one to tell me what my father was like as a young man, why he'd had so many other wives and had, it seemed, abandoned his other three children. And I will probably never learn whether I got my name because a brother I never knew had died before me, and I became his ghost and a second chance for my father to show the commitment he'd once abdicated. But I'm at peace with not knowing these things. I've wondered if it's better they remain undiscovered. Over time, the revelations have coalesced into simply an amazing tale, the kind of thing you might

watch on Dateline. When I tell people of the half-brother who bore my name and birth date, they often gasp with amazement, as if they've just seen something they can't believe is really there. Then the story, even with all its implications about my father's character, becomes more like a harmless dream.

I've often wondered if it would've been better or worse if my discoveries about Dad were made while Mom was still alive. I've considered how difficult it may have been to tell her about the secrets he might have kept, if they were secrets at all. During her life, my mother never shared with me or my siblings any of the things I'd later learn, and so I'll never know if it was because she didn't know of them herself, or if she was trying to protect us.

Mom was fifteen years younger than Dad, and so she lived well beyond his passing. She embraced a full and resilient life into advanced years, walking daily, praying the rosary, watching "The Golden Girls," getting jokes wrong and humoring us all with her word malaprops, like saying she was going to go sit in the Hibachi when she meant the Jacuzzi.

It took a few years after her death before I discovered all of these things about my father. My search was prompted in part by the records of Dad's military service Mom gave me before she died. These records helped me realize the great span of time and culture that separated me from my father and the parts of his life that remained unknown.

Among Dad's enlistment and discharge papers, was a commendation he'd received. It was a War Service Certificate, marking his honorable service in the U.S. Navy from 1917 to 1919. He was commended for his service on a ship during World War I, and at the height of the Spanish flu pandemic. Under his specified rank, it said: *Bugler*. When I read the word I remembered Mom telling me how Dad had to play Taps for all the sailors who'd succumbed to the sickness and were buried at sea. I envisioned my father on board that ship. He might be only seventeen. According to Mom he'd lied about his date of birth so he could enlist, and was actually serving before he was of legal age. I imagined Dad, a boy, really, playing Taps on deck for the many young sailors who'd died from the flu as their bodies were cast into the ocean. I pictured him pressing his bugle against his mouth as he swayed with the roll of the ocean. I imagined the blow of his horn, music meant to

overcome tragedy with virtue. I imagined him pushing his breath through his trumpet as a way of affirming he was still among the living.

Whenever I'm tempted to judge him, I see him as that bugler on the Navy ship, playing Taps. And I remember a time in the living room of our little house. Mom and Dad had a party, a lot of drinking and arguments about politics, religion, what kids should be learning in school. Then, out of nowhere, it seemed, a bugle appeared in Dad's hands and he stood in the middle of the room, swaying from too much drink. He tried to play, his cheeks swelling red, his forehead erupting with sweat. Out came the weak burst from his trumpet, a raw and desperate song about the universal struggle of the living.

My father, like all of us, participated in that struggle. But for him it began at a very young age during an arduous time: poverty, war, disease, death on the open ocean. This is not an excuse for his failures or derelictions, but it is a truth I empower to lessen condemnations of him. Now I simply live knowing my life is *my* life, no matter what my father did or whether I'd once had a half-brother who shared my birthday and name. I consider my own mistakes, and how I owe my existence to Dad's desire to start another family after he'd lived for half a century, after he'd already tried to have a family three times before. And when latent judgments rise in me, I remember how Dad appeared to me when I was a boy, how he was a father like other fathers, for as long as he was able.

John Thomson's novel for young readers, *A Small Boat at the Bottom of the Sea* was published by Milkweed Editions, and his short fiction has appeared in several literary journals. His story, *Out of Good Ground*, won Terrain.org's Fiction Contest in 2018. He is a retired wildlife and land conservationist and lives with his wife in Northern California, close to their two grown daughters and three grandchildren.

No Geezer Left Behind

by Richard Wainright

Having cheated death and avoiding academic fraud, I graduated from Coastal Carolina University in December 2022. I graduated from high school in the class of 1970. If I'm doing the math right, that's fifty-two years between graduations. Even the mathematically challenged, like myself, will realize that I was a nontraditional student.

The path to my second graduation started in 2013. I was a sixty-year-old retired man living at Myrtle Beach, and I was bored. I had golf and fishing to fill my time. What I lacked was stimulating conversation. It was winter, or what passes for it on the Carolina coast, and I was spending way too much time alone, inside my way too comfortable condo, on the internet, on my way to becoming a reclining couch potato. There had certainly been no outlet for erudite exchanges on Facebook until I virtually "met" Joyce Barnes.

I was voicing my woes in a Facebook status update and Joyce, a friend of a friend, showed up and made a comment in the thread. She had been a lurker. She had "liked" some of my statuses and comments and had even graced my ramblings with an occasional happy face but had never made a comment or private messaged me before. Evidently, Joyce was also experiencing a dearth of stimulating convo, so she invited me to lunch.

Lunch was amazing. Joyce and I hit it off. That Joyce appreciated my sense of humor was my first clue that I may have found someone special. I don't have a filter and can affront people simply by being me. The darkness of my humor tends to range from shadowy to ecliptic and I am incapable of carrying on a conversation without being sarcastic. I like to laugh and often inappropriately. But I was also skeptical of my newfound friendship because as Groucho once said, "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member."

Joyce and I became fast friends with slow metabolisms, both being built for comfort. We went to the movies or out to dinner a couple of times a week, taking turns treating each other. It was the absolute best relationship I have ever had. Totally platonic,

Joyce was the yin to my yang. Not even my curmudgeon shadow could eclipse her eternal sun.

Joyce was a professor at Coastal Carolina University. During one of our conversations, she told me about a program at Coastal that provides free tuition for senior citizens, aged sixty and over, I was at the magic age for inclusion. I was immediately excited at the prospect of an academic environment and potential conversation with someone other than my old beagle, Skooter.

The very next day I drove twelve miles to the campus and presented myself to the admissions office. I was given an application packet just like a real student. I was accepted almost immediately and was allowed to begin classes during the upcoming “Maymester.”

I enrolled in an "Introduction to Creative Writing" course. I have always enjoyed writing but I have never had formal instruction. Nor had I received any honest appraisals on the quality of my compositions. Friends and family are poor sounding boards. Everything I write is the best thing they have ever read.

My instructor was William “call me Hastings” Hensel. The class was what is called an Experiential Course, and in this particular class, the experiential part was paddling a kayak on a series of trips on the Waccamaw River and writing pieces about the experience. I was both excited and scared shitless. Not because of any fear of water, I had grown up on the water. My fear was because I weighed about 320 pounds and hadn't done anything more physical than drive a golf cart in search of poorly directed golf balls and fishing those balls out of ponds.

I asked Hastings if there was a weight limit for a kayak. He verified that the capacity fell somewhere between me and Gilbert Grape's mom, but it could keep me buoyant. I discovered that he was not totally honest with me.

The day of my first "paddle" (that is what experienced kayakers call it) arrived. I love when a noun becomes a verb. I met the class at Riverfront Park in Conway. My classmates all looked like they could scull their perfect twenty-year-old bodies effortlessly through the whitest of rapids. I selected a bright orange kayak (easier to see by search helicopters) and drug it to the launch area. It was the kayak with the highest weight limit. All the other students had blue kayaks. Hastings and the kayak guy wrangled me into the

cockpit, which fit me like a Jell-O mold. Then Hastings handed me the little plastic bag of shit that I brought along containing: sunscreen, Chapstick, sandwich, energy bar, water bottle, and camera. He passed me the paddle and I was off. Well, not quite. It took several more hands to slide me down the hillside and into the river, as I was doing more plowing than sliding. I did not mention to the kayak master or Hastings that I had never paddled a kayak. I have been in a lot of boats but never one that was form-fitting. Turned out, I didn't have to tell them, they discovered it as soon as my bright orange kayak and all its contents entered the black, reptile-infested water of the Waccamaw.

Upon splashing into the water, I immediately made a series of uncontrolled weight shifts, spastic, ineffective paddling motions. After nearly swamping, eventually I coerced the kayak to move somewhat in the direction it was pointing, a welcome improvement over the side-to-side action that had threatened to become a barrel-roll at any time. My bright orange kayak, I am certain, though constructed for heavy duty, had never been so burdened, and if it could talk, it would use a lot of profanity.

I managed to hang my prized Fuji camera around my neck. With that simple motion resulting in another series of incontinent oscillations, I realized that I was never going to have the mastery of balance and the confidence to take my hands from the paddle long enough to retrieve and unzip the supply bag. Sadly, the sandwich would go uneaten, and my skin and lips would be at the mercy of the sun, shaded only by my Yankees cap. In a small test of my adroitness, I found that simply reaching for the bag sent the kayak out of control. The moment I wasn't fully focused on paddling, I either drifted into the bushes or into other kayaks.

With a little practice, I began to propel my craft successfully forward, or at least not simply in the direction of the tide. My confidence buoyed, I attempted to make a defensive maneuver that was above my sub-neophyte skill level. I found out later that my mistake was putting too much of the paddle in the water.

As in every catastrophe of my life, events occurred in slow motion, but also as in every other mishap, the slowing of time by my brain did not prevent the ultimate outcome. As I started to roll, both the sky and my life flashed before my eyes. Suddenly the bright orange kayak was upside down and floating on top of me. And everything it contained

was spit out, including me. Unceremoniously discharged just when I thought my lovely orange kayak and I were beginning to bond.

There is a frightening flushing sound in the ears when one is submerged that I don't know how to describe but I believe it is common to everyone. As I surfaced, I waited for the breathless shock that did not come. I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, and in my experiences in those more northern climes, May river water was glacial and raw and would cause immediate involuntary gasping and Costanza-like shrinkage. My first thought was how wonderfully warm and soothing the black water felt, followed closely by whether I had stayed in the kayak for the eight seconds required to earn a score.

My young float-mates became rodeo clowns, their sleek blue vessels drawing attention away from my upended orange tug, and policed up its dispersed contents: paddle, Yankees cap, and a floating bag of inaccessible and unnecessary shit. They up-righted my kayak and tossed all of my gear where I was supposed to be.

It was a unanimous decision that I would swim to shore and not further my embarrassment by attempting the impossible task of remounting my kayak as it floated. It had taken two people to get me into the cockpit on dry land. I am pretty sure that in open water it would take a Seal team.

I can swim but I had never tried to swim at 320 pounds. Michael Phelps would struggle to swim at over three bills. That is lazy river weight class.

So, they tugged my kayak back to where we came from for a restart. The only casualty of the episode was my favorite Fuji Camera that was still festooned around my neck. It was removed from my neck and taken to the beach to be resuscitated.

"Is it waterproof?"

"Nope."

I invented freestyle strokes trying to dog-paddle back to the launch, but in spite of my thrashing and splashing, I was getting no nearer to the bank. The tide was moving against me and about all my tired arms could do was hold my position and keep me from floating downriver and eventually joining the sea, fifty miles south. I was wearing my loaner life vest, which was probably designed to float a normal sized human, so only my inherent buoyancy and treading water skills kept me afloat. Jeff, one of my young, fit, kayak companions, noticed my struggling and offered to tow me in. I gratefully grabbed

on to an appropriately named grab handle and he dragged me in, like a wounded manatee.

As this hopeless sexagenarian finally made it back to dry land, I looked into faces that I could not read. Could have been schadenfreude I saw, could have been schreckenerregend.

Day one was an epic failure, but I had subsisted to paddle another day, with my newfound knowledge of how not to kayak.

With each successive trip onto the Waccamaw that month, I became more comfortable with the kayak and could relax a bit more, enjoy the amazing environment, and even take a few pictures with my new favorite Nikon camera, number three in my rotation of favorites when number Nikon number two joined the Fuji in the murky depths.

The river was very calming and exciting at the same time. I enjoyed the quiet serenity but also anticipated what I might discover around the next bend or at the mouth of the next creek. I enjoyed paddling off on my own to challenge myself to spot snakes and other river-dwelling creatures on the riverbank before they were pointed out and sometimes captured by the guide, Paul, the poor man's Steve Irwin. He offered us all opportunities to hold snakes that he had pulled off of a bush. I never acquiesced. He assured us that they were harmless. I once watched a harmless snake bite Steve Irwin in the face.

One concern was that, though I had learned to stay afloat for the rest of the month, I could not paddle my fat ass fast enough to keep up with the group and sometimes they would float out of sight. That was not worrisome, as they had to pass my location on the way back to that day's launch/recovery area. As I became separated from the flotilla, the thought of what I should do in this landless region, if I should overturn my kayak again, get caught up in the tide and have to abandon ship, or hit a widow-maker, was not a comforting one.

Hastings gave me a whistle to wear around my neck, which I would be too embarrassed to blow and signal my inadequacy. I never felt more geezerly. Knowing I could never successfully climb back onto my kayak, if dislodged, my plan was to paddle or swim to shore and try to find solid ground between the snake-infested, thorny brambles

and cypress knees. I knew that eventually the class would return and see my bright orange kayak wedged into the bushes like a runway beacon or misplaced construction cone and search for the corpulent kayaker lodged between two types of quagmires. I was also certain that as soon as the class flotilla was out of sight the laughter was uproarious.

I survived the class, but the experience was an "aha" moment for me. Accustomed to the comfort I felt with Joyce, my fellow slow metabolic friend, and although my blue-kayak compatriots never said anything about my weight, I was embarrassed that I had deteriorated so completely. Decades ago, I was one of these fit, wrinkle-free youths. Part of the benefit of being a student at Coastal Carolina is free access to the finest fitness center in the county. I immediately began a daily workout regimen while paying attention to my diet. I read the nutrition facts and was disappointed that the portion size for bacon is not a pound. I hired a personal trainer. I had three in all because they kept graduating. This morning I weighed 247.4. My status has been downgraded from morbidly obese to just obese.

I learned from Hastings that I was not as good of a writer as my friends thought I was but not as bad I thought I was. This class encouraged me to take every creative writing course that is offered at CCU. Just as I was inspired to improve my health through the self-loathing that came from a dozen, fit twenty-year-olds circling me like sharks in their perfectly paddled kayaks, I was enthused to develop my writing skills.

I am often amazed by the way that seemingly unconnected events transpire that combine to totally change the course of my life. I am convinced that the chain of happenings that began with a simple discussion with a friend probably saved or extended my life; at the very least, enhanced it.

You might question why it took me ten years to complete a four-year degree. The “No Geezer Left Behind” program only allowed me to take two classes per semester for free. Even a numerically impaired English major knows that those credits do not add up very quickly. Particularly when I did not even declare a major until after year eight.

In December, when I graduated, I did not walk because I didn’t have a single person to whom I could give one of my six allotted tickets. My friend, Joyce had died peacefully in her sleep in 2016.

An old man graduating from anything is not the attraction you might expect. Joyce would have come, though. She would have cheered when they called my name, even though they ask to hold your applause until the end. That was not her style.

Richard (Rick) Wainright is a retired disabled veteran residing in Myrtle Beach, SC. He graduated, magna cum laude, with a degree in English, from Coastal Carolina University in 2022 at the age of seventy. Rick grew up in northern Idaho and spent twenty years in the Air Force fighting the cold war. He has three children, three grandchildren, and two narcissistic tabby cats. His hobbies are photography and creative writing.

Weeding through the Wreckage

by Mary Billiter

I've been thinking about weeds a lot lately. Not the weed that's smoked, though that's entered my mind a few times. I'm referring to the weeds that have overtaken my back yard.

It was inevitable. Last summer, instead of watering and tending my yard, I was tethered to an IV bag of 5FU. For those unfamiliar with chemo shorthand, 5FU, stands for fluorouracil. An oncology nurse explained that 5FU stood for the five different chemicals that comprised the chemo treatment. All I know is that fluorouracil, or 5FU, is aptly named. Fluorouracil is given intravenously for aggressive cancers—colon, rectum, stomach, and pancreas. I fell into the latter. 5FU has one purpose—to stop the growth of cancer cells. It also stops life as you know it.

I've always taken pride in my yard. But when I became a single parent, it became my sole responsibility. Mowing my yard—the front and back—was an outward sign that I was holding it together. Even if life was going sideways, my yard reflected otherwise. Plus, there was the sense of accomplishment. The clean, uniform rows and raked clippings made my lush lawn look like it'd been properly cared for. Whenever I pulled up to my house, my groomed lawn made me smile. It brought great joy. The payoff was worth the sweaty hair and grimy, grass-stained sneakers. When I looked at my lawn, I saw progress. I saw beauty from ashes. I saw what it meant to hope.

Labor Day weekend 2021 marked an entire year of mowing my lawn following my unexpected divorce. But as more time passed, and the more I mowed, the more I realized that I had often taken my husband's yard work for granted and most likely the balance of our marriage.

As the season wrapped up, I changed out my front planters from colorful annuals to a harvest of autumn gourds. September rolled gently into a long fall. It was as if Mother Nature herself ensured I was on solid footing before winter hit.

Winter was late arriving in Wyoming that year. I was more than happy to keep my snow shovel tucked behind the front door as long as possible. While mowing provided a great sense of achievement, shoveling snow had the opposite effect. No sooner would I

clear a path from my front door to the street when the wind and snow would instantly erase my efforts.

By mid-November, an impressive amount of stacked firewood awaited my fireplace, the outdoor faucets were capped and covered, and the fall wreath on the front door had been exchanged with a wreath of winter white. I was set.

I wasn't thrilled to start another winter without the love of my life beside me, but my outlook, like the weather, slowly changed. Instead of feeling like a victim of circumstances, I felt like a victor. After all, I had successfully mowed every week of summer and my yard was spectacular. In that area of life, I was winning.

But then, on a Friday night after a long workweek a sharp, piercing, unrelenting pain radiated below my left shoulder blade. I thought I was having a heart attack. I was raised by a nurse and an investigative journalist. I had to be bleeding to death or unconscious before they'd even consider taking me to the emergency room. One made me think I could walk off anything—pneumonia, fractured bones, or in this case a heart attack—while the other made me weary of hidden hospital costs.

But since neither of my parents were alive to ask, I waited it out.

"Clearly, this will pass," became my mantra. But it didn't. The pain continued all weekend until I heard my mom's voice as clearly as if she were in my bedroom beside me.

"Referred pain."

Simply put, referred pain can make someone think they're having one thing, like a heart attack, when in reality it's something else.

Was it a heart attack? Or was this shoulder pain something else?

I did the only thing I knew to do and called Ron, my former husband. We were on good terms and the only alternative was my fifteen-year-old teenage son, who couldn't drive.

"I think I'm having a heart attack," I said when he answered my call.

"Well," he said calmly, "We won't know until we go to the ER."

I watched the first snowfall cover my front yard as Ron drove me to our small community hospital. It was Sunday night after a full day of football games, and the emergency room was teaming with sick people. When I quietly told the intake nurse that

I thought I was having a heart attack, the locked double-doors behind her instantly opened. That's when it hit me—what if I *am* having a heart attack?

My dad died suddenly of a heart attack when he was sixty-two. He was a runner and was returning home from a 5k race when he died while driving on the 405 freeway in California. Besides his brown hair and brown eyes, did I inherit his weak heart too?

I was immediately attached to an EKG and waited while it spit out a long tape. I watched the nurse to gauge her reaction. She was good and wore neutrality well.

When she removed the electrodes and asked me to follow her, I turned to Ron.

"Well, I'm either not having a heart attack or they're stealing a move from my mom's playbook and want me to walk it off."

The thing about Ron is his crooked smile radiates up to his blue eyes. For a moment, I relaxed in the warmth of the familiar.

I knew the ER team of doctors couldn't give me anything for the pain until they knew where the pain originated and what caused it. So, while they ordered a CT scan, blood draw, and other tests, I lay on a hospital bed and Ron sat on a chair beside me. Of all the things I could think of, the only thought that swam through my mind was my yard.

"I forgot to wrap the tree trunks," I said of the two new trees I had planted to replace a diseased pair I had lost. "They're hot wing maples." I found myself laughing. "Hot wing maples. But that's what they're called."

Ron smiled.

"But they have to be protected."

Ron rested his hand on top of mine. "We'll do it this weekend."

Only I didn't go home. I remained in the hospital and then a series of hospitals when what was thought to be pancreatitis ended resulted in the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. I was fifty-three, looking down the barrel of a cancer with one of the worst survival rates. But I wasn't alone. Ron never left my side.

I didn't see my front or back yard until late spring. Even though I was at home—the weekly, three-day, 5FU chemo treatments kept me in a permanent state of nausea, with an added dose of neuropathy. Certain chemo treatments, like 5FU, can cause damage to the nervous system. Neuropathy affected my hands and feet. First, there was

numbness that gave way to a tingling sensation that felt like my feet were always asleep. But, when the neuropathy spread to my legs, so did the symptoms. Sharp, jabbing pain shot through my legs, feet, and hands. The mere act of walking to the bathroom was excruciating. When I wasn't throwing up or hooked up to chemo, I slept. I slept to avoid the pain. I slept through the winter and most of spring.

And yet I was one of the lucky ones. My tumor was caught early, making me eligible for the Whipple surgery where the tumor was resected along with most of my pancreas. It was a long, slow, painful recovery with more chemo to follow.

This time when I returned home, my head was as bare as the limbs on my maple trees. And my body was equally as thin and brittle as their unprotected trunks.

"I think they died," I said to Ron, who steadied me against him.

"They're strong," he said, "They'll make it. You'll see."

When the last frost of the season gave way to warmer mornings, the neighbors on either side of me, took turns mowing my front yard. They made sure my front yard maintained its appearance. But the backyard, which was fenced, was left unattended. After work, Ron would water the trees in the front yard. Collectively, they kept my front yard alive. And in turn, my spirits.

By the end of summer, I rang a bronze bell that I walked past every time I went to the infusion center. It wasn't a big bell, rather it was small, inconspicuous and hung from a stand on the nurses' station. What it lacked in size and demeanor, it made up for in strength. It was the sound of hope—for me, others still on their journey, and my family. It rang the conclusion of chemo and the hardest battle of my life. I had soldiered through nausea, surgery, and nerve damage to get to this point. However, I remained weak and exhausted. I didn't have the energy to mow or even the drive to retain the manicured appearance in which I had taken such pride, which saddened me.

When would I return to life? Or was *this* my life? Thanks to the efforts of my neighbors and former husband, my front yard was in good shape, but when I finally saw my backyard, I stood in shock. The prairie had taken over and went wild. Weeds stood a foot high. They choked off the grass and trapped in heat. Standing in this weed patch felt suffocating. The weeds appeared seemingly out of nowhere and were as invasive as cancer. They spread and continued to spread, consuming my back yard and my thoughts.

Any time I stepped outside, I turned and walked back into the house. There were too many weeds. It was just too much.

Still, every time I passed a window, I couldn't stop noticing the toxic takeover of my back yard, which made me mad. The emotions that rose in me were as ugly, thorny, and as unwanted as the weeds. Because what I *really* wanted was someone or something to blame—for the deterioration of my yard, my body, and my marriage.

Buried anger is tricky that way. It seeks a culprit, like a weed, rather than deal with the underlying issue—the root cause.

My marriage and my yard were no different. I had stopped tending to my marriage with nurturing words and actions. Over time, our relationship overgrew with resentments, anger, and loss.

It took surviving cancer for me to sort through the debris and find my way back to my former husband. Ron is my best friend, my hospital hero, and the love of my life. Again, I was one of the lucky ones. I was given a second chance.

The only thing that remained in need of repair was my back yard. The more I stared at it, the angrier I became. I finally had enough. I laced up my grass-stained sneakers and headed outside. It had recently rained and the yard was still wet. I reached for a weed and firmly grabbed the thick base of it, expecting a good fight. I was ready. *Bring. It. On.*

Instead, the weed came out root and all with such ease that I shook my head. That can't be right. *It can't be this easy.*

I reached for another weed and yanked so hard I threw myself backwards, the weed still clutched in my hand. Weed after weed—ground ivy, stinging nettle, thistle—I ripped until my yard was as clear as my last CT scan.

And then I lay on my patio and wept.

Mary Billiter writes about beachside resorts, romantic mis-adventures, and second chances. She also writes psychological fiction as "M. Billiter." Collectively, Billiter's books have received starred reviews in *USA Today, Romance Times, Forward Reviews*, and *Barnes & Noble*. Mary is a two-time cancer survivor—breast and pancreatic. In 2015, during treatment for breast cancer, she wrote six resort romances on her cell phone. In 2022, while undergoing three-day chemo treatments for pancreatic cancer and the subsequent Whipple surgery, Mary escaped the pain by writing her first political thriller—

also on her phone. Mary's living her own Happily Ever After with Ron, her unabashedly bald man, Daisy, her sweet golden lab, and Super Cooper, her youngest son. She does her best writing, in her head, during her daily walks in wild, romantic, beautiful Wyoming.

Vira's Instruction

by José de Jesús Márquez-Ortiz

We left our cars at the red dirt parking lot at the bottom of the hill on a bright Sunday morning, walked past a few houses, and climbed the worn-out rock steps that Texcocans—responsible for the advancement of law, engineering, and arts; counterbalancing the military might of their allies, the Aztecs—had been climbing for many years before the Spanish conquest. Cuauhtémoc, our colossal brother, was the last one—asthma—to reach the flat trail for the last leg towards our destination; he bent over, resting his hands on his knees, while the rest of us stood around waiting for him to catch his breath. Other than that small setback, we brothers and our families walked quietly to the man-made stone terrace—no railing—that extended above a cliff. Allende, our baby brother, handed me the box.

Ever since we were children, my four brothers and I were instructed by my mother to—in case she died—"Just throw me in the garbage," she'd say, meaning the landfill. This instruction was known by only a few more: my father, her close friends, and a couple of her in-laws.

My brother León kidded our mother about the inconvenience of her instruction to throw her in the trash, because we might end up being arrested for committing a felony based on a health hazard or illegal disposal of one's mother's body. "We are going to get in big trouble," he said to her while a trash truck—an inspiration, I guess—was waiting in front of them at a stop light. León assured me that that conversation made her agree to be cremated. She adjusted her instruction: ashes into the landfill, please.

It occurred to me that her instruction may have been inspired by the last scene of Buñuel's *Los Olvidados*, *The Young and the Damned*, where Meche—played by Alma Delia Fuentes, a Mexican actress who, oddly enough, looked like my mother—and her grandfather, dump Pedro's—the hero of the story—dead body down a slope covered in garbage, a shanty town's landfill. My mother made a slight, dismissive, but affirmative gesture when I asked her, jokingly, "So, you just want us to dump you in the garbage like

Pedro in *Los Olvidados*, right?" I wish she had replied, "No, you blockhead! It's just a joke, get a clue!"

When she died, due to kidney failure in a tiny private hospital in our hometown, I was not able to say good-bye to her because I live in Kansas and the uncertainty of her condition's severity did not allow me to gauge when to visit her. Only a box containing her ashes greeted me when I entered her home.

A couple of times someone asked us if we were going to throw her remains over a field of garbage. At least once, just for the shock value—and for fun as well—we said yes. We weren't quite sure about what to do, aside from the instruction, but needed to act soon. While her ashes waited on a shelf in the living room, my four brothers and I sat around our mother's dining table, together with two of her daughters-in-law, her grandchildren standing behind our chair backs, like mafiosi henchmen.

"We could scatter her ashes in Veracruz," said Cuauhtémoc, since our mother grew up there. The rest of us said it would be inconvenient—logistically and financially—to take a trip to the Port of Veracruz in the Gulf or Mexico, at least five hours away by car, from our hometown twenty miles east of Mexico City, then rent a boat or stand on the beach to perform a farewell ritual. I also remembered, but kept it to myself, that our mother did not like the tropical heat and humidity of the Port of Veracruz, and that was the reason she only visited my family in Kansas in the fall or spring.

I said that one time I had asked our mother what she thought about scattering her ashes at the Tláloc, the 13,000 feet mountain that began ascending to the east once you stepped outside her house. I added that I took her pensiveness at the time as an implicit acceptance of my suggestion. Some of us had climbed up the Tláloc—the namesake of the Aztec's rain deity—when we were young, but there was some risk involved, since we were all presenting hypertension issues inherited from both our parents.

"What about Tezcutzingo?" suggested León. The hill of Tezcutzingo, also known as "The Baths of Netzahualcóyotl," was a local open archeological site known for the remains of a pre-Hispanic botanical garden and an intricate aqueduct system designed and built around the fifteenth century by the ruler of Texcoco—The Tlatoani Netzahualcóytl—as his place for rest and relaxation. It was a site often visited by locals

as well as tourists off the beaten path. After a brief climb, a hiker could reach a trail that went around the middle of the hill to explore what was left of different stone-carved or built water-controlling structures and pools: a hidden archeological and engineering jewel. Without hesitation, we all agreed that that was the best idea. We would scatter our mother's ashes in Tezcutzingo on Sunday. The only ones attending would be the five brothers, together with our wives and children.

We may have agreed as a family on an appropriate site to scatter her ashes, yet I remained perplexed by my mother's original request. "Why the garbage?" asked my wife. It never occurred to me to ask my mother why. My drama-queen mindedness made up an explanation. Tossing aside the need for clinical evidence to support my hypothesis, I concluded that my mother had depression. First, I wrongly recalled her saying, "Black, like my soul," when someone asked how she wanted her coffee. I considered this a glimpse of a darkness that she never shared with us. But, recently, my four brothers—I am the oldest—set me straight. "No," their text messages almost sang in unison, "*Papá* said 'Black, like my soul,' not *Mamá*, she always drank her coffee with milk." They missed adding the traditional "*Pinche* Chucho"—you are such a blockhead, Chucho—brotherly adjective before my nickname, that, admittedly, I deserve whenever I do or say something stupid. And no, my father did not have depression; but, like most of us do, he had his own demons to fight.

My error made me wonder why I tend to board the train of thought toward the town of Drama. The first thing that came into my mind was a day of real drama. My parents were quarreling, with my brothers and I—youngsters—standing on the sidelines. It got to a point that my mother packed a suitcase to leave for The Port of Veracruz to stay at her godmother's home. This I remember clearly: she walked out the door and stopped on the sidewalk, vividly upset, but with enough resolve to ask her sons who was going to leave with her to Veracruz, whose team were we going to choose? Mom's or dad's?

I walked towards my mom and stood next to her while my dad, almost apoplectic, said, "What are you doing? Come back here!" I thought it was fair that, being the oldest, joining my mom's team would level the opposing forces for whatever happened from then on. After further arguing, all standing at our marks like movie actors, I followed my mother

back into the house, where our parents kept bickering until they made peace before dinner.

But it was not only the black coffee detail, which I got wrong, and my tendency towards drama that directed my reasoning towards an empirical—if not plain stupid—diagnosis of depression for my mother. She never met her father and lost her mother at sixteen. Her only brother studied away at government-sponsored room and board schools. She worked long hours cooking—each day she turned 200 pounds of corn dough, *masa*, into *tortillas*, *empanadas*, *picadas*, *gorditas*, and other traditional treats—for her godmother's restaurant, and she carried out chores at her godmother's home, all mantled by the humidity of the tropics. "How could this not be fertile ground for depression later in life?" I thought.

"Is not necessarily so!" sang my brothers in barbershop's quartet fashion. They pointed out, and I cannot disagree, that even when her blood relations were absent, she did have a family: her godmother, Cruz, together with her husband, Chico, who adopted and loved her. Yes, she worked very hard, but so did everyone at the restaurant in order to make ends meet, and, eventually, to prosper. Her stepsister had two children who, occasionally, were not the nicest to my mother, but we witnessed forgiveness and peace between them that only the passing of time can bring. Our mother finished secretary school. In the end, she made the best of a difficult life while blooming into an attractive young woman.

So, if depression was not the culprit for my mother's request to be disposed of like a bag of trash, what was the reason for such a request? My brothers insist that it was all a joke, a dark one. My mother could be very funny, and I am the epitome of gullibility. I surrendered to the truth of my brothers' points: our mother was a strong, dignified woman who attacked problems head on and came out victorious most of the time. Although I accepted my brothers' defense of her mental health, she never provided a straight answer to the question we failed to ask: Why the garbage? With time, my drama-oriented mind learned to live with the mystery of the matter.

Standing atop the terrace with my back to the cliff, I opened the box with our mother's ashes and, being the oldest, said a few words about how she would likely be in

heaven by now—for the believers in our group—and that, also, she was now part of the universe's infinity—for those of us who were agnostics and atheists.

Only on completing my remarks did I notice that Cuauhtémoc was holding me by my belt. Concentrating so hard on not saying anything stupid among my august remarks, I had stepped close to the edge of the cliff, and Cuauhtémoc didn't want to climb the hill again, later, for my funeral.

I took a fistful of ashes and threw them away to the vastness beyond the cliff. The wind threw them right back at me, making me swallow part of my own mother's remains. I coughed, feeling the grittiness of her ashes in my teeth, the same sensation I felt when I ate oysters during our vacations in Veracruz. A little embarrassed, but not grossed out at all, I expected to hear the classic "*Pinche* Chucho!" from my assembled family. But I encountered only silence.

Our mother loved fiercely, her friends, her in-laws, and—especially us—her family. She moved mountains for the tenants of her heart.

Growing up, we lived in a social interest housing project town. We called it "*El ISSSTE,*" the Spanish acronym for the Institute of Security and Social Services for Workers of the State. As a professor of a Ministry of Agriculture-sponsored agricultural university known as U. A. Chapingo, my father, being a federal employee, qualified for a house to be paid in installments deducted from his salary. That house became my mother's headquarters.

About a mile west from our home was the university, where my mother gave her best as the wife of an agronomy professor who, briefly, became the president of the university. She provided guidance and care—information about schools, recipes, even driving lessons—to the wives of newly arrived professors or grad students. She hosted different impromptu events at home for one or dozens of guests. She and my father welcomed the Russian ambassador and his wife during an official visit at the university. I remember the wooden matryoshka doll that the ambassador's wife gave my mother, a fascinating artifact.

In Texcoco, the town a couple miles north of the university and the official headquarters for the larger municipality, she became the power behind the throne for the

best public elementary school in the area, which stood adjacent to city hall. As the leader of the school's PTA, she lobbied local businesses and state representatives to receive financial support to remodel the school's old auditorium and carry out other improvements.

Despite our mother's vision and fortitude that allowed her the ability to lead projects such as these for the school, our family, like most, had its share of problems: she had endured an unfaithful husband and the divorce that resulted. She had mourned those she had lost over the years. And like anyone, sometimes the battles of life brought her down. My brothers and I were not the best at comforting her when she was down. Sometimes, when she felt defeated, we would point out all the great things she had accomplished: raising five boys into relatively decent men while rising to be a pillar in her community, the sort who others sought out, often referred by those who knew her to individuals seeking help or even temporary refuge. Always independent and resourceful, she was a woman who had taught herself English and then taught it to others. She was loved, appreciated, and respected by many. No matter our meager attempts at comfort by reminding her how much others valued her, the inevitable decision to get back on the horse and, again, give her all, was always hers alone.

Having kept me from plunging to my own death, Cuauhtémoc took a fistful of ashes and threw them, better than I did, down the cliff, as did my other brothers: León, Gerardo, and Allende. Then I invited my daughters, nieces, and nephews to take some ashes and

send their *abuela* away. After my wife, the last to join in the ritual, scattered her fistful of my mother there was still a significant volume of ashes left.

Spontaneously, León exclaimed, “One for *papá*!”

I threw some ashes on behalf of our dad, who lived in the western city of Guadalajara and could not be with us that day—they had made peace years earlier—due to frail health. After that, whoever came up with the name of a friend or relative that my mother held in her heart, just yelled it out loud: “Cony!,” “Pilar!,” “Zita!,” “Marielena!,” “Yola!” In response to each name, I threw a fistful of ashes from the cliff. At some point, Cuauhtémoc and I saved some ashes in a small plastic 35 mm film canister for his daughter Daniela, who was at home recovering from surgery; the idea was for her to come later and send her *abuela* to the wind. We ran out of ashes before we ran out of names.

When we were done, we all just sat quietly for a moment. Unexpectedly, Diego, the youngest child, started crying, triggering others to cry as well. We all hugged each other, whether we needed comfort or not. I took a long look from the cliff. I realized that, from that point, it was easy to see El ISSSTE, Chapingo, and Texcoco.

“How do you like that?” I thought. We had just scattered our mother’s ashes from a place where you could see the wide stage in which most of her life took place. Without modesty, I concluded, “We made the right decision.”

After we came down from the hill, we stopped nearby on the way home to have *quesadillas* and *tlacoyos* at Doña Vicky’s modest *antojitos* restaurant. Doña Vicky knew my mother, and, by extension, us. This was irrefutable proof of my mother turning the town into hers. We all sat at a long table enjoying our meal and even tastier conversations—like our parents and us kids did every day at breakfast, lunch, and dinner when we were growing up, we were that lucky—until it was time to go home.

The ashes we set aside for my niece never made it back to Tezcutzingo, because she passed away from her condition. Three years later, we mixed those remaining ashes with my dad’s, to scatter them over a plot of corn—another instruction—at the experiment station of his beloved university. My childish wish that my parents would get back together after their divorce, weirdly, came true.

As for me, thinking about a practical and easy way to dispose of my ashes when I die, I casually told my American WASP wife to scatter some of them at our deceased son Gabriel's tree and to dump the rest in the nearby Missouri River. My sappy plan was that my ashes would reach the Mississippi River, which in turn would take them to the Gulf of Mexico, where, with some luck, a current would deposit them on the beach at the Port of Veracruz, thus completing the circle that my mother started, landing me in my country of origin. I also wished to be cremated with my faithful, cheap, and beat up guitar—that is starting to look like Willie Nelson's "Trigger"—which has been my loyal companion most of my life.

She agreed with scattering some ashes at our son's tree, but not with the other plans. "But these are my wishes," I whined.

"You won't be able to do anything about it," she asserted. "You'll be dead."

José de Jesús "Chucho" Márquez Ortiz grew up in Texcoco, State of México. He's been a research specialist in alfalfa, househusband, primary caregiver, and data analyst. He is currently a software and documentation translator. His writing has been published in *Molino de Letras*, *Agradecidas Señas*, and *The Sun Magazine*. Fully empirical in the arts of fatherhood, piano, guitar, and baking maize tortillas or wheat bread, he is a budding writer when time allows it. The son of Elvira and Fidel, he lives in Kansas.

How to Feed a Child

by Christine Overall

Beside my bed the ticking of the alarm clock is as steady as a metronome. In time with the ticks, the little metal horse attached to the clock face clicks hopelessly back and forth. In my world, time doesn't fly; it gallops, though it gets nowhere.

I've been lying awake for long, empty hours. It's now 1:20 a.m. My parents and my younger brothers are asleep. In the darkness of my room, I push back the covers, reach for the floor with my bare feet, then open the door. We children are not supposed to get up in the night. I must be very quiet. Our parents need their rest.

The house isn't silent. The steady warm wind from the basement furnace rushes through the grate in the wall. As our home breathes in its sleep, mysterious pops, creaks, and snaps arise from the floors.

I creep across the hall and into the bathroom. After closing the door, I don't turn on the light. The sole illumination is from the streetlamp outside the window.

A fat bar of soap rests beside the hot water tap. Five toothbrushes stand like soldiers beside the drinking cup. Dotted in the sink are spots where my family spat out their toothpaste. In the bathroom mirror my face looks back at me—round, babyish, and alert.

I take the bar of soap and wet it under the cold-water tap. Then I smear it on the open palm of my left hand. Round and round I draw the soap, making a thicker and thicker scum on the smooth skin of my palm. Next, I pick up the toothpaste. With only my own right hand, I can't squeeze the tube from the bottom as we've been taught. I'm hoping my pinch in the middle won't be noticed. Half an inch of toothpaste oozes onto my left palm, on top of the soap layer. Then I put the toothpaste down and use my right pointer finger to spread the toothpaste and smear it around. I even doodle a couple of designs, finger painting in the muck.

Finally, I'm finished. My entire left palm is shiny, slippery, and greyish white in the light from the window. For a long moment I look at it.

And then I begin to lick my hand. I lick and I lick until all the soapy toothpaste is gone, until my hand is bare, and I can no longer taste anything. Then I wipe my damp palm on the seat of my blue pyjamas and creep back to bed.

Many times that year I made my late-night forays to the bathroom. I was never caught or stopped.

But why? Why did I eat soap and toothpaste?

Not for the taste, that's for sure. I still remember how my tongue sought out the grainy bittersweetness of the toothpaste, but recoiled from the greasy soap, which stung my throat when I swallowed it.

I ate it because I was hungry.

My mother fed us well, by the standards of the time. Meat at almost every supper; only poor people—and my parents didn't consider themselves poor—could not afford meat. Occasionally breaded fish sticks appeared on our plates, though not on Fridays. The Catholics in the neighbourhood might give up meat for fish on Friday night, but they were not to be emulated.

Along with the meat there were potatoes—mashed, boiled, fried, or roasted. When my mum was a girl, she told me that her mother calculated the number of potatoes for supper by counting "two each and two over." For our family of five that would have meant twelve potatoes every night. But we never had close to that many. Perhaps Mum couldn't face peeling twelve. Or perhaps we just couldn't afford it.

In addition to the meat and potatoes there were cooked carrots, canned corn, or canned peas, all of them mushy. Sometimes cauliflower or mashed turnip, rarely broccoli. More often the much-despised brussels sprouts. Never salad.

Yet I was hungry all the time that year. During the day, when my mother wasn't looking, I would wet a finger down to the knuckle, plunge it into the canister of sugar, then suck all the sweetness off. I would have taken other food too, but I was afraid of being caught. My mother knew exactly how many apples and crackers were in the cupboard. Or so I believed.

I'm not sure why I was hungry late at night. What I do know is the mixture of soap and toothpaste was so repugnant, it stopped me from thinking about food and let me get to sleep.

I also know our neighbours called my younger brother "Skinny Dugan." His stomach was concave, and his ribs lay like fingers right under his skin. He was always asking for more Kool-Aid or Velveeta slices.

We were the children of people who had survived the Great Depression and the Second World War. Our parents lived on the edge of their budget. Our father was sometimes unemployed. Our mother was always counting coins and trickling them into small brown envelopes, each one, she said, for a different expense.

So they limited our portions; oranges and bananas doled out; biscuits restricted; snacks forbidden. Despite the meat and potatoes, we were not well nourished.

Our kitchen has black linoleum on the floor, with a pattern like small, thin, yellow worms. The table and chairs are made of wood and painted pale green. My mother says she hates the table and wishes she could have one made of Formica and metal, more up to date. The kitchen smells of the crumbled hamburger and diced potatoes my mother fried for supper. She doesn't like cooking.

My parents are fighting. Not physically, but verbally, shouting at each other. Saying, "I don't care" and "You never …" and "I don't know why I bother" and "You always …" and "What's the point?" The anger and tension in my parents make me feel untethered, unattached, and unsafe. Before this year I never noticed my parents fighting. It started when our baby was born.

Now the baby is lying in his carriage nearby. My brother and I sit in silence at the table. My brother is eating, but slowly. His laboured pace annoys our parents. At seven he's barely tall enough for the table, and he's hunched over, sheltering himself from the familiar disaster unfolding in our family.

I've almost finished my dinner. I don't like it much, but I'm always hungry, so I seldom have trouble eating. It's digesting that gives me problems. My stomach feels as if it has stones in it, which roll around and bump each other and press against my insides.

I often need to run to the toilet. This trouble started just after our baby arrived, six months before I started eating soap and toothpaste.

The battle between my parents reaches a crisis. Slamming his knife and fork on the table, as if to bury them in the wood, my father stands up. He shoves his chair back so hard it judders against the linoleum. Grabbing his jacket, he hurls himself out of the house. The front door bangs shut, then the door of our old car, and he backs out of the driveway so fast that gravel flies up and pelts the sides of the car.

My mother hasn't moved. She's crying. So is our baby, but no one goes to comfort him.

Two decades later I became a mother myself. I wanted to raise my children in a better way than I was raised. I wanted to know what their feelings were, what they thought and hoped. And I wanted to give them lots of good food. Red and green peppers, their skins shiny and taut, cut into ribbons. Slices of cucumber or apple. Canned tuna or salmon in casseroles, salads, or sandwiches made from bakery brown bread. Pizza with tomatoes, cheese, mushrooms, and pepperoni. Brown rice, gooey and slightly crunchy at the same time. Spaghetti, macaroni, and when I was especially tired, Kraft Dinner with chunks of hot dog. Apple juice or orange juice to drink, but never Kool-Aid.

At supper one day, quixotically, I asked my small son, "What do you think the meaning of life is?"

He was a thoughtful, serious child. With his eyes closed, he contemplated for a moment. Then he looked up at me and said, "To make sure all the kids are fed."

I have a vision, an embedded primeval fear. It may be imagined, yet it feels like a flashback.

I'm sitting by a fire with a few members of my clan. The flames send arrows into a darkness so thick it's almost solid. We are together for warmth and community, only a few of us, sheltering from the wolves and snakes and spirits that skulk in the forest just beyond our sight.

We're waiting for the clan's gatherers and hunters to return. We hope for berries, blue or green. Walnuts, chestnuts, or hickory nuts, hard to open, tough to chew, but filling.

Leaves, roots, and mushrooms, only those known to be safe. Crunchy insects and succulent grubs. Sometimes a delicacy: honey, fish, or even a little meat and juicy bone marrow.

Will the foragers find the food we need? Will there be enough to eat for even the smallest and least important of us? We lean against each other, we do not talk, we watch the flames conjuring light in the impenetrable dark. Some of us sleep, but I do not. I watch and wonder. They may find food this time. But what about the next time? How long will it be until we can eat again?

All this could be a species memory, a ghostly trace of the past. It's not so very long since people like me and my clan were only one meager hunt, one unsuccessful search, one failed crop away from hunger. And still today, starvation is a common plague.

But the fearful apparition of my clan around the fire may also be a glimpse of years to come. We humans have leveled the forests and grasslands and bombed the fields. We've covered the ground with asphalt and cement, poisoned the soil and water, and multiplied the numbers who must live on it and from it.

Someday there may be nothing to ease the hunger of a small girl in the night.

Now, as an old woman, I share dinners with a man who is gentle and steady. I eat baked salmon topped with olive oil and lemon juice. Edamame sucked one by one from their pods. Sweet potato fries, so much better than white potatoes. Pasta with grass-green basil pesto. Maki, uramaki, and nigiri, small artworks of raw fish, seaweed, rice, and cucumber. Pizza topped with avocado, eggplant, and artichoke hearts. Arugula and kale, bosc pears and pomegranates.

Feasting like this is a privilege. I waste very little. I eat up all the leftovers.

I no longer need to eat toothpaste or soap. Not now.

Not yet.

A recovering academic, **Christine Overall** has published extensively in philosophy. For thirteen years, she also wrote a weekly feminist column for her local paper. Her short story, "Dragon," was published in 2022, and in 2023 her personal essays, "Lost Ring," "Boxes," and "Warts," were accepted for publication. She's written several short

monologues for local theatre groups, some of which she performed herself (probably badly). Her latest adventure is in improvisational theatre.

Contributors

Mary Billiter writes about beachside resorts, romantic mis-adventures, and second chances. She also writes psychological fiction as “M. Billiter.” Collectively, Billiter’s books have received starred reviews in *USA Today, Romance Times, Forward Reviews*, and *Barnes & Noble*. Mary is a two-time cancer survivor—breast and pancreatic. In 2015, during treatment for breast cancer, she wrote six resort romances on her cell phone. In 2022, while undergoing three-day chemo treatments for pancreatic cancer and the subsequent Whipple surgery, Mary escaped the pain by writing her first political thriller—also on her phone. Mary’s living her own Happily Ever After with Ron, her unabashedly bald man, Daisy, her sweet golden lab, and Super Cooper, her youngest son. She does her best writing, in her head, during her daily walks in wild, romantic, beautiful Wyoming.

Shawn Brown is a physician, mother of three, and aspiring homesteader living on the shores of Lake Superior. She has recently returned to a love of writing as a way to explore the human experience. “Gut Feelings” is an excerpt from an ongoing project entitled “Letters to my Patients.”

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Sherrie Dulworth is freelance writer whose stories cover healthcare, work and careers, and human-interest topics. She began her career in healthcare then ultimately followed her heart to journalism. She is a graduate of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism and resides in New York’s Hudson River Valley. She is an avid bibliophile who believes that all good writers are first good readers.

Gary Fincke’s newest essay collection, *The Mayan Syndrome* (Madhat Press, 2023) includes the essay, “After the Three-Moon Era,” originally published at Kenyon Review Online and selected to be reprinted in *Best American Essays*, 2020. An earlier collection, *The Darkness Call*, won the Robert C. Jones Prize (Pleaides Press, 2018).

J.D. Kleinke is the author of five books, most recently *That Golden Shore*, a novel about the competing myths, stressed landscapes, and indigenous peoples of California. His work has appeared in *The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Huffington Post, The Surfer’s Journal, Freeskier,* and other publications. He lives and works on a native plant and tree farm on the land of the Chemakum and S'Klallam, on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state.

Mirinda Kossoff is the author of *The Rope of Life: A Memoir*. She regularly writes essays and blogs. Kossoff has been a chameleon in her work life, from hospital social worker, assistant managing editor at a large newspaper, communications director in academia and nonprofits, freelancer, to artist, metal smith and jewelry designer. She has written and published essays and articles throughout her life, including a few for national magazines. She penned a weekly column for a local paper, was an essayist/commentator on regional public radio, and taught essay writing at Duke University continuing education.

A former Pulitzer finalist, **Sydney Lea** served as founding editor of *New England Review* and was Vermont's Poet Laureate from 2011 to 2015. In 2021, he was presented with his home state's Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. He has published twenty-four books: a novel, five volumes of personal and three of critical essays, and sixteen poetry collections, most recently *What Shines* (Four Way Books, NYC, 2023). His sixth book of personal essays, *Such Dancing as We Can,* is due in early 2024, and his second novel, *Now Look,* in spring of that year.

Rasmenia Massoud is the author of three short story collections and several stories published in places like *The Sunlight Press, XRAY Lit*, and *Reflex Press*. Her work has been nominated for The Best of the Net and her novella *Circuits End*, published by Running Wild Press, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2019. A second novella, *Tied Within*, was published by One More Hour Publishing in 2020.

A recovering academic, **Christine Overall** has published extensively in philosophy. For thirteen years, she also wrote a weekly feminist column for her local paper. Her short story, "Dragon," was published in 2022, and in 2023 her personal essays, "Lost Ring," "Boxes," and "Warts," were accepted for publication. She's written several short monologues for local theatre groups, some of which she performed herself (probably badly). Her latest adventure is in improvisational theatre.

José de Jesús "Chucho" Márquez Ortiz grew up in Texcoco, State of México. He's been a research specialist in alfalfa, househusband, primary caregiver, and data analyst. He is currently a software and documentation translator. His writing has been published in *Molino de Letras*, *Agradecidas Señas*, and *The Sun Magazine*. Fully empirical in the arts of fatherhood, piano, guitar, and baking maize tortillas or wheat bread, he is a budding writer when time allows it. The son of Elvira and Fidel, he lives in Kansas.

Brady Rhoades's work has appeared in *The Los Angeles Times, Orange County Register,* the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune, Black EOE Journal, U.S. Veterans Magazine* and other publications. He lives and works as a news editor in Fullerton, California.

Nicole K. Sather is a physician in southern Florida, specializing in the treatment of critically ill or injured children. She recently began writing as a way to honor her upbringing in northern Wisconsin and to reflect on the more poignant moments that shaped her as a physician and as a person.

John Thomson's novel for young readers, *A Small Boat at the Bottom of the Sea* was published by Milkweed Editions, and his short fiction has appeared in several literary journals. His story, *Out of Good Ground*, won Terrain.org's Fiction Contest in 2018. He is a retired wildlife and land conservationist and lives with his wife in Northern California, close to their two grown daughters and three grandchildren.

As Development Director at Tabby's Place, **Angela Townsend** bears witness to mercy for all beings. Angie has an M.Div. from Princeton Seminary and a B.A. from Vassar College. She has lived with Type 1 diabetes for thirty-two years, giggles with her mother every morning, and delights in cats and the moon. Her work has appeared in *Braided Way, Fathom Magazine, Feminine Collective, oddball magazine*, and *Young Ravens Literary Review*, among others. Angie loves life dearly.

Richard (Rick) Wainright is a retired disabled veteran residing in Myrtle Beach, SC. He graduated, magna cum laude, with a degree in English, from Coastal Carolina University in 2022 at the age of seventy. Rick grew up in northern Idaho and spent twenty years in the Air Force fighting the cold war. He has three children, three grandchildren, and two narcissistic tabby cats. His hobbies are photography and creative writing.

Bradley Wester (cover art) 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.