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bioStories

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

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

We publish new essays weekly and then gather them in digital editions like this one twice a year. We hope you enjoy this eclectic volume of outstanding essays.

Cover Art: “Home” 2024 by Anup Saswade
Digital painting, 9” x 9”

bioStories
sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

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Memories without a Home

by Nicole Alexander

Homelessness haunts us all. One of the reasons we walk so nervously around the homeless on our streets is that we don't want to get too close to something we fear so deeply. —J. Edward Chamberlin

A disheveled man hobbles toward me wearing tattered jeans and a dirty cap. He holds a plastic bag, which I assume contains all his possessions. I become aware of the designer sunglasses on my head, keeping the hair out of my face. I push them down over my eyes. Disdain fills me and expands into rage. I lower my eyelids for a moment, and he disappears from view. When I lift them, our gazes meet and I peer into familiar, wounded eyes. They steal the air from my lungs. I never fully understood the phrase "It took my breath away" before a soccer opponent, back in high school, slammed into me. I dropped to the grass, stunned and listless, as I waited for oxygen to return to my lungs. My own teammate, unaware of the hit I had taken, shouted at me to get off the field if I couldn't play.

According to science, the brain stores painful memories to keep us safe so we can prevent similar experiences from occurring again. My teammate's words stung more than the physical hit.

Get off the field if you can't play.

When my father's father died, my Papou, I cried myself to sleep at night for weeks, remembering the reasons I loved him and all the things I would miss. But I was twelve then. At twenty-six, I can't cry for my father, who is not dead but like a cat with many lives, is testing fate. Sometimes my emotions surprise me, though, and sorrow wells up inside a place that feels too small, like when I'm passing a stranger who lives on the street in San Francisco, the opposite side of the country from the place I call home.

I want to tell you so many things.

I want to tell you but I don't know how.

I'll start here:

I used to beg my father to take me to the park. He'd promise to but there were other things competing for his attention. One day, when he made good on his promise and brought my best friend and I to the playground—my favorite one with the twisty tunnel slide and spinning platform that I spun around and around on until the world disappeared—I realized after just a few minutes that I had to pee. This was a dilemma; I knew if I told him, we would have to go home and then we'd never return. I couldn't risk that. My best friend, incidentally, had to use the bathroom too, so I convinced her that we should pee in our pants. My dad didn't get mad often but when he did it was startling and confusing. "Why did you do that?" he asked sharply, shaking his head, line creases emerging on his forehead, a sternness I wasn't accustomed to. He announced impatiently that we were going home. I was devastated; my plan had backfired.

I also want to tell you about this memory:

In Westchester County, New York, a couple years before I moved to San Francisco, my father sat on a bus stop bench, waiting for me. When I spotted him, a scowl hijacked my face, profound irritation swelling inside me. It spread like fire through my heart and belly as a thought that would later haunt me entered my mind.

On his way to nowhere. My father is on his way to nowhere.

I stared at him with interrogating eyes: *Why are you waiting for me at the bus stop?* When he opened the car door, revealing a toothless smile that stabbed me with forgiveness and shame, my face softened. "Hi, dad," I said in a gentle tone. I understood then why he was sitting on the bus stop bench: to protect me, to shield me from the homeless shelter across the street.

We drove to a crummy diner for lunch—one in a series of diners we visited throughout this time period, culminating in my father's mysterious death, which not even an autopsy report could explain—exactly how he would have wanted it. It was a sunless winter day and my mood matched the gray. We ordered coffee and scrambled eggs and talked about inconsequential things as I moved food around the plate with my fork and reassured my dad that I was doing fine, slightly exasperated by the question, because I was not doing fine; I was dangling by a precarious cord that felt like it was about to snap. I didn't admit this to anyone, though, not even myself.

"Life is what you make of it, baby," my father offered, his ability to hold the bigger

picture still intact. His eyes retained a bit of their spark but his face looked like it was caving in on itself, all the years of suffering written in its creases.

I also want to tell you that my dad used to be a magician. He would roll up his sleeve and lower his elbow onto a table as if preparing to arm wrestle. With his other hand, he picked up a shiny quarter. I watched with wide eyes as he slid the quarter up and down the back of his arm. He stared at his forearm to indicate this took great focus, but despite his effort the quarter repeatedly escaped his grip, bouncing and settling with a clank on the table. He would shake his head to feign frustration each time the quarter dropped, that signature sparkle in his eyes. I had seen this trick many times throughout my childhood, but it never failed to fascinate me as he slowly opened his *empty* hand. The quarter had vanished. “Where did it go?” I’d ask, mystified.

“Magic,” he’d announce with an amused grin.

My memories of my dad are blurry. He wasn’t home often but when he reappeared from wherever he had been, he cut vampire fangs out of paper and chased my cousin and I around the house to our chorus of squeals and yelps. He took me on adventures, like to the town of Sleepy Hollow to search for the headless horseman.

I also want to tell you that I sometimes idealize the father of my childhood, which according to psychology, is a common trait for a child of an alcoholic.

Back at my father’s new “home,” I stopped the car on the side of the road, but I didn’t want to drop him there, so I steered the car down the shelter’s driveway with a rapidly beating heart. *My father lives in a homeless shelter.* These were unfamiliar sounds, like a foreign language I was forced to dissect but still could not understand. I pushed the words away and pulled them closer, like a dysfunctional relationship. We sat in the car for another moment, faced with this concrete building where my father lived, which was hidden from the road but on a familiar street—one I had known since childhood.

We called the restaurant Wings. It was on the same street as the homeless shelter, located inside the small county airport. Despite the connotation that an airport restaurant might have, Wings was upscale and, on occasion, catered parties for celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor. My dad would tell me about the color theme chosen to match her violet

eyes and about conversations with Richard Gere, who wanted to know why my father thought the character he played in *An Officer and a Gentleman* was one of his best.

At Wings, the corner table was ours. My mom and I would sit on the burgundy, bench as I sipped my pink bubbly drink with the cherry on top and watched the planes, through the big window, ascend and disappear into the sky. If Rosemary was on duty, my life was complete. If she wasn't in sight, I'd ask my father, anxiously, where she was and he'd encourage me, a smile forming, to go find her. I'd wind my way through the kitchen, basking in the attention of the kitchen staff, to the adjoining diner where Rosemary also worked. She'd make a big show of my arrival, pulling me toward her and wrapping her soft arms around me, enveloping me in her affection and floral scent.

I was an adolescent when Dorothy, my dad's boss and friend, decided to sell Wings. My dad attempted to buy the restaurant but a stranger outbid him and renamed it the Star-top Express. This seemed to mark a turning point in our lives; a pivotal loss for my father in a growing list of missed opportunities and failures—some self-inflicted, such as gambling away his and my mother's life savings and subsequently causing an unexpected eviction that my mother never fully recovered from (for most of my life, my mother lamented about the beautiful things she once owned), and some not self-inflicted, such as the loss of his true love, stolen by his best friend and resulting in an illegitimate son (and brother I have never met).

My father once told me that his new career, after losing Wings, was betting at the horse track and that he used a method passed down to him by elders, which worked for about six months until he lost everything ... again.

My father reached for the car door, catching himself before showing his teeth, conscious of the missing ones. As he opened the car door he said, "We have arrived at my castle"—an attempt to lighten the mood. And then, after noticing my pained expression**,** "Don't worry, it's not as bad as it looks." My father, with his big imagination and knack for storytelling, did not convince me this time. I knew it was *that* bad. I couldn't help but wonder—a fantasy of my own—if my father had bought Wings, if he hadn't been outbid, if our lives would have taken a different course. One without rifles and hospitals and homeless shelters.

But the practical side of me knows that you cannot buy wings. Those are earned.

I want to tell you about the dream I've had since childhood:

I start to fly but can't ascend. Every time I gain momentum, I lose speed and plummet to the ground. I'm being chased and flying is my only escape, but I can't take off. In my waking life, when I feel fear and shame, I escape from experiences by quitting, failing, and self-sabotaging. Once, I dreamt I was being pursued by a gunman inside a building with a long, spiral staircase. I ran for my life down the winding staircase and through a door to the outside, sensing I was still not safe. Along the way, I had grown wings—oversized, white, feathery angel wings. Heavy wings. Wings I couldn't fly with.

I want to tell you that I was twenty-four and working in a retail job, a dead-end path, and in a state of, what is referred to in psychological terms, as functional freeze … o*n my way to nowhere*. One day at the store, I overheard a couple of co-workers discussing a movement organized by Westchester residents, like themselves, to ban the homeless shelter, which, unbeknownst to them, my father lived in. I stared at the floor, my face burning with emotions I didn't fully understand.

I also want to tell you about this memory that is lodged the most deeply:

My dad's best friend's car rolls up the driveway. Butterflies invade my stomach. Time slows, like when you're at the end of a high diving board, wondering if you should reverse. My brother and his tribe of "lost boys" formed a mini-search team earlier in the day, traversing through the woods behind our house, after discovering the note on my father's bedside table, along with the missing rifle. This was the reason the police were now in our driveway in possession of a white square of paper with a scribbled message.

My dad gets out of the car and walks toward me apprehensively. My dad's best friend trails behind him. The police officers approach my father, who stutters and attempts a smile: "I wrote that a long time ago; it's nothing."

"Did you write that, Killer?" my dad's friend questions, creases of concern on his forehead.

My dad loses his footing and I look away; watching my dad lose his balance is like watching a dog being beaten. I stuff those emotions down my throat with the rest of them, as one of the officers grabs a hold of my father's arm to steady him. "It's okay," he says in a commanding tone, "You need to come with us now."

I made the phone call. I feel like a traitor because I did not believe that my father had harmed himself but because we needed help. I watch my father being lead, against his will, into the back of the police car and I stand, frozen and alone in the driveway. The way I will remain for a long time.

I also phoned my mother that day but she stayed at work. Her bosses admired her work ethic; she was the employee who arrived earliest in the morning and began cleaning the shop without even being asked.

The Banshees were a big part of my childhood. I want to tell you about them.

My dad, cousin, and I went on a search in the woods to find them.

“Where are they?” my cousin asked, eager to lay eyes on the creatures who lived in the forest.

“Be patient, they’re difficult to spot.”

We tiptoed, scanning the wooded area for signs, our feet crunching the leaves beneath them.

“Are we going to see them?” I asked.

“Shhh.” They must have heard us and disappeared, but if we’re very quiet we just might,” my dad smiled.

“Okay,” we whispered dutifully, looking up at my dad and the tall trees; in awe of an adult who had access to another world.

I also want to tell you about the time, on a summer evening, when we were driving home and I was parched. I requested juice and after, I imagine, hearing about it one too many times, my dad halted the car on the side of the road near some trees.

“Why are we stopping here?” I asked, eyes wide, the inky sky lit up above us. All was quiet except for the cicadas’ end-of-the-summer lullaby and the sound of my dad shaking a big tree branch. “One apple juice coming right up.”

I was convinced my dad could do, pretty much, anything, so I was surprised when he didn’t return to the car with my cup of juice. My mother let me in on the joke: “Daddy was teasing.” It took a moment to shake my disappointment. *So, you can’t get juice from trees?*

The man who stood behind a bar: his home and hell. I want to tell you about him. He had spaces where teeth used to be. And a different voice. A weaker, wavering one

that sounded like my uncle Gus, his sensitive and troubled older brother who struggled with an addiction to painkillers. I want to tell you that this shaky sound was not the sound of my father, a man named Achilles, a fitting name for someone who once sought out adventure and never backed down from a fight. A mythological figure of strength with one fatal flaw.

I want to tell you about a little brother who wore his hat so low his eyes were hidden as salty tears streaked his skin while the social worker asked pointed questions. I want to tell you about the lockdown ward with people who screamed out to no one in particular. About a little brother who saw too much and a mother who didn't see anything at all. I want to tell you about the private room we sat in with the social worker and how we heard, every few minutes, the desperate, frantic shrieks of a patient on the other side of the door--like a refrain—and how we glanced at one another uncomfortably each time, disturbed by the expression of agony. I want to tell you that when my mother remarked, "That poor woman; things could be so much worse," the social worker responded, "Actually, things are pretty bad."

I want to tell you that it was a relief to hear the truth. I want to tell you that I was both there and not there, like two versions of myself. I want to tell you that my brain focused on this complaint: How could they expect a person to get better in a place with heavy pad-locked doors and no sunlight?

I want to tell you about the tears that tumbled down my brother's face like they had no beginning or end, and how he glared at the ground, hiding under his baseball cap, and wiping at his face, half muttering and half pleading, "I don't know what's going on." I want to tell you that when the social worker asked about money my dad had taken from us, I shrugged it off, saying that it wasn't that much and he only did that when he was desperate, unwilling to share that my mother used to take her pocketbook with her into the bathroom. I want to tell you that my dad hated himself for stealing money, punching a wall when I confronted him.

I want to tell you that my mother used all her energy to hold everything together.

When my brother was a child and full of energy, he'd often break things. My mother shouted about it, her fury rising in an explosion of emotion, as if he had committed a

heinous crime—and then she'd get to work on fixing it. Once, when he accidentally knocked over an antique vase, the pieces scattering after the crash, my mother carefully and patiently put it back together with super glue, concealing the fault lines.

My mother was not known for her patience—except when it came to fixing things: untangling knotted necklaces; threading the lost ropes of sweatpants or hoodies back through the other side; erasing stains, cleaning floors. I handed her the broken or ruined things and she always accepted them.

It's different, though, when it comes to experiences.

I try to force the pieces of my story together, but I am beginning to understand that this method doesn't work for the type of material I am handling. And, so, I want to tell you about it, not to mend the jagged edges but to see them more clearly.

I want to tell you that my mother kept working at her day-job through all the chaos and dysfunction, unable to turn her head to the right or left due to severe neck pain, and sleeping on an old, beat-up couch because it was supposedly more supportive than the bed. I want to tell you about the time she said her deceased mother and aunt came to visit her in the middle of the night, shaking the couch cushions over and over and calling her name, trying to get her to make a move.

I remember questioning my mother at the age of four or five about the man in the moon. I saw the luminous globe in the sky and had spotted the outline of a figure inside it, an evil entity who would prey on us, a force threatening our safety. I was petrified and unsatisfied by my mother's flippant response: "The man in the moon? Who told you that?" She laughed. She did not understand the weight and urgency of the matter. "So, he won't come get us?" I persisted, unable to understand why she was ignoring me, since I was sure we were in dire need of protection.

I want to tell you that I was never sure why I was unable to move forward in life, like everyone else. I want to tell you that my life has been on pause, that *I* have been on pause. My familiar mantra: *What is wrong with me*?

In the movie, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Tom Wilkinson plays a doctor who has invented a mind-erasing machine for memories you would rather not hold onto. Without such a device, those of us with difficult memories need to find a way through.

The hunting rifle that rested against the wall of my father's bedroom was there long enough that it no longer seemed out of the ordinary—a bedside table, books, and a loaded hunting rifle. One day when my father wasn't in the house, a rare occurrence during this time when he was unemployed, I saw it as my opportunity to remove the rifle. I felt foolish, like an actor in a Lifetime movie, moving stealthily. I was also terrified I would accidentally set the gun off as I transported it to the garage. Later that day, when my father came home and realized the rifle was missing, he became enraged. His face was hard and mean when he shouted that it was his father's rifle, and he didn't want it to rust in the garage. As if this explained why a loaded rifle rested, at the ready, against his bedroom wall, a bedroom he barely left anymore.

The psychiatrist at the mental hospital had a 'heart to heart' with my father and explained to us that my father's depression over being "out of work" was natural. He prescribed medication for his depression and sent him on his way; my father was, once again, let off the hook. I saw the grief in my mother's eyes when she learned that my father was coming home, but I had the opposite reaction; I couldn't sleep at night, knowing my father was trapped in that sunless place.

Where in the brain do these memories go? Scientists say long-term memory processing and storage is complex and not well understood, involving the hippocampus, neocortex, prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and basal ganglia. Where in the body do the memories live? The jaw? Shoulders? Heart? Hips? Ever since I can remember, I have clenched my jaw fiercely, and ground my teeth at night, sometimes waking myself up with the cringeful sound of enamel being worn away. I habitually run my tongue over the edges of my teeth and feel the grooves and holes that reflect years of damage.

In graduate school, I used to say I was searching for the through-line in my story, the larger theme that would tie it all together and make it complete. A teacher who read one of my stories commented that it wasn't "coming together." She was correct, and in moments when I feel vulnerable or ashamed, I sometimes hear those words: *Not coming together*. On my computer I store pieces that have been rejected or haven't fully taken form, in a folder titled *Memoir*. They have been there for a long time like that: memories without a home.

I want to tell you that I have been working, slowly, on bringing these memories together, these disparate parts of my being, like my patella, destroyed in a car crash when I was in college. The doctor announced that there would be no surgery because the pieces of my patella were too fractured, shards and slivers that could not be put back together, not even by an orthopedic surgeon. They'd have to heal on their own, join awkwardly back together while I wore a rainbow cast, chosen by a good-natured emergency doctor (*look what I found*!) that covered my entire leg from ankle to thigh. The end result did not resemble a kneecap so much as an uneven and jagged surface. The surgeon informed me that since cartilage cannot be replaced and I had lost a lot of it, I'd have to just see how far I could get on the knee without it. He warned me to tread lightly—no running or high-impact exercise. I didn't listen.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken items "with gold," joining together the parts in order to see the imperfections and flaws in a new and beautiful form. I want to tell you that maybe when that happens, I will realize that nothing is wrong with me at all.

With a background in Trauma-Informed Yoga and Ayurveda Wellness Counseling, **Nicole Alexander** teaches and writes through the lens of healing. She is a graduate of Antioch University—Los Angeles' Master's in Creative Nonfiction program, and her writings have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Diverse Voices Quarterly, Open Salon, Breathe Repeat, Coffee and Sweatpants, Elephant Journal, Yoga International, Yoga Renew, Cozy by Sweet Starlight,* and *Westchester Magazine*. Nicole enjoys hiking and spending time in the great outdoors, cuddling with her feline babies, and learning to balance on her niece's hoverboard.

Breaking the Curse

by Sky Karam de Sela

When I see an old person sitting on a bench watching the world go by with a pensive smile, I find reasons to look in their direction. Their stillness, their attention, commands mine; it fills me with respect and longing. But I have to walk on. I am a descendant of travelers whether I like it or not. My childhood was filled with movement; stillness was a language I did not speak.

None of my grandparents ever sat on a bench and watched the world go by. If they had, they would have been frowning intently and it would have lasted a minute at most. A wild crossing of continents, languages, and social status is at the root of my grandparents' creative strengths but also at the nexus of their restless inability to provide security for their families.

All four were children of immigrants. Mama's parents: Elena Karam and Norman Schur, were Lebanese-Scottish and Polish-Lithuanian. Papa's parents: Carmen de Obarrio de Sevilla and Alejandro de Sela were Panamanian and Mexican, with roots in Jamaica and France. On one side, seven generations of Latin American nobility led back to landowners and conquerors. On the other, an impoverished Lebanese inventor/tailor who, as a boy of twelve, had stowed away on a ship and made his way to America where he met his future wife, a Quaker from a farming family in Missouri.

All four were brave, brilliant, charismatic—and self-centered. All were passionate about their work, all neglected their own children to varying degrees, and all were indifferent to us, their grandchildren. Whether writing dictionaries, playing concert piano, acting in movies, or running factories, they threw themselves into their chosen work with energy and discipline. Their sensuality and the romantic relationships in which they immersed themselves were central to their nature; because of their personalities, those relationships proved tempestuous and altered the lives of all who were in their orbits. They married more than once in an age—the 1930s and 1940s—when divorce was still scandalous; Papa's Mama married four times.

Vibrant, intelligent, free-spirited, there was much about how they approached their

lives to be envied, but those same qualities contributed to the neglect and absenteeism of how they raised their children. Over time I, one of their many grandchildren, came to see lack of protection as a family curse.

As children, my Papa and Mama were relegated to the outer circle of their parents' lives. "Disappear into the woodwork, darling," Grandma would tell Mama. "M'hijo, tengo mucho trabajo," Papa's Papa would say, before driving away for months and even years, at a time. As they grew into their teens, their place in the family circle was reduced even more drastically. To put it bluntly, Mama was locked up and Papa was kicked out.

Brought up by a maid in a cold, wealthy household, Mama's rebellious response to forced isolation led to stricter and stricter efforts to suppress and control her, until at age sixteen, her parents had her remitted to Roosevelt Hospital, Tower Nine, the psychiatric wing. This confinement led to another, longer one at Chestnut Lodge Mental Institution, where she spent a year before escaping over the roof and across a field.

Papa, meanwhile, was brought up by his mother, a concert pianist-turned teacher and a beauty turned bitter. She "did her best," as Papa would say, but "her best" included empty refrigerators and violent beatings. When Papa was fifteen and acting out, she emptied her wallet into his hands, saying tearfully, "That's all I have. I will pray for you, mi amor," before kicking him out. He lived with friends and among strangers, learned how to survive the seediest back streets and how to climb out of the darkest holes.

Three thousand miles from each other on opposite sides of the American continent, Papa and Mama were backed into arid self-reliance early, which led each to become first angry, then proud and creative.

When they met in Guadalajara, it was 1968, and Papa and Mama barely had parents to speak of. Absent guidance, they were both in the throes of intensive drug exploration, struggling against addiction. Mama was a beauty, tragic and sultry; she smoked three packs a day and drank tequila straight from the bottle. Papa was handsome, fractured, vigorous; he played a shakuhachi flute that he had whittled out of bamboo, rolled himself joints at breakfast and took regular trips up the mountain with his friend Gandalf to pick and chew on bitter mushrooms. They were both named Alex.

When they met, the solitude each held within recognized the solitude imbedded in

the other, and they fell headfirst into a love as hot and short-lived as brush-fire. In the beginning they followed each other everywhere. They understood that they shared two things primarily: their love for Mexico and their mission, a brave and difficult one—to break the family curse each had inherited, a curse involving old money and too little love. They understood wordlessly that to succeed in avoiding the curse they would create an entirely new sort of family. Theirs would be a unit. It would contain little money and much love. The loneliness, the grief they experienced, would be transformed. In the ultimate alchemical process, they would transmute their
longing into beauty. They had neither example, experience, nor any form of plan, but their inner resilience was extraordinary and their hearts had changed shape, expanded with the love they felt for each other.

Mama got pregnant right away. Their first years as parents were wild and unconventional. They experimented with a free-spirited lifestyle and radical childrearing. They loved us each tremendously, drank and smoked abundantly, ate indifferently. As a child, precarious was not a word I knew, but it was one I carried in my frame. I think I can truthfully say we all did.

Ayin was born in 1969, two months premature weighing two pounds, and had to live in a germ-free glass box with no human contact for the first thirty days of her life. Mexico City, where she was born, was still a medical backwater, and no one had heard of maternal contact helping “micro-preemies.” Mama and Papa could only visit once a day for two hours, and were only allowed to put their hands into surgical gloves attached to a hole in the box to touch Ayin’s tiny, frail body. During those visiting hours, the only person in the hospital room who wasn’t crying was probably the nurse who supervised the visits. Ayin made it through but became a troubled, fiery baby who demanded to be held at all times.

In 1970, when Ayin was one, Mama got pregnant with me. Papa, Mama, and Ayin were living on Staten Island then. I was born only one month premature, so although I was also skinny and frail, I was strong compared to Ayin, and although I had to spend a month in a germ-free box, Mama could take me out and nurse me twice a day. Soon after my birth we migrated to Acapulco. Papa and Mama decided to live on the beach near Pie

de la Cuesta. Barra de Cayuco. Not near the beach. *On* the beach.

My first memory is of a vast, sandy expanse, stretching out as far as I can see. My cheek is flat against damp, hard packed sand. I watch a crab make its way towards me. It stops inches from my face. It is as big as my head. The crab of my memory is alarming, but also funny and beautiful.

Papa was selling hot dogs and grass to make a living but this place they had chosen to settle in was a wild, empty place and there were few buyers here. Our nearest neighbors were a herd of thin pigs who roamed free and followed Papa or Mama down the beach whenever they went to dig a hole (we had no bathroom, which was good for the pigs, not so nice for us). Food was scarce, and Mama's milk dried up. They began to feed me Nestle's powdered formula, and this, combined with the difficult sanitary conditions, was the beginning of trouble inside my little body. I started to lose weight. They didn't have a scale or doctor's supervision and three quarters of my weight-loss went unchecked. By the time they understood how frail I had become, I was nine months old and weighed only nine pounds. They called Papa's Papa and begged him for help. He sent us airplane tickets to New York. At the Acapulco airport the attendants took one look at me and made Papa and Mama sign a waiver stating that if I died on the six-hour flight, it was not the airline's responsibility.

We went straight from JFK Airport to the hospital, where they hooked me up on IVs in the intensive care unit. Papa and Mama once again could not touch their own baby, could only visit two hours a day to look at me as I lay behind glass, with my tiny arms spread out to the sides and strapped down. I was diagnosed with FTT, *failure to thrive,* which was just a fancy way of saying I was on my way out. A month later, still strapped onto my hospital cross, I had only gained one pound and was still failing to thrive. Finally, Mama called Darrel, her psychic friend who had saved our family more than once with his intuition. Standing at a payphone, she waited anxiously while Darrel closed his eyes and did his work. After three long minutes of silence, Darrel said, "Get her out of that place. Take her to St Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia. Quickly."

When Papa and Mama told the doctors that they were taking me out of the hospital, the doctors refused, saying if I was removed from their care, I would die in less than a week. The IV was saving me. But Papa and Mama, without hesitating, shook their heads

and asked what they had to sign. Another waiver stating that if I died, it was not the hospital's responsibility. They signed this quickly and unceremoniously, gathered me up, wrapped my tiny, featherlike body in a warm cotton blanket and took me out of there. Mama held me in her arms for the two-hour drive from New York City to the hospital in Philadelphia, where they admitted me immediately. Two days later, after a battery of exams, the doctors put me on a diet of goat's milk, explaining that I was allergic to dairy products from cows. I began to gain weight immediately.

By the time Mama got pregnant with Lhasa in 1972, Ayin was a sturdy three- year-old and I was a wiry two-year-old. Mama and Papa were eating well and smoking less, but they were still cutting through convention, as determined as ever to find their own way to live. In the wake of the mythical Woodstock concert in 1969, the small towns around Woodstock were a haven for creative hippies and soul searchers of all sorts. Papa and Mama landed there, at number 5 Rock City Road, in a small one room apartment. After an initial period of comfort living there, Papa and Mama were evicted for defending all-too-eccentric friends. They crossed the street to an abandoned three-story Victorian to join a utopian squat/community that called itself *The Family*. We lived there for a few months while Papa worked without pay as a macrobiotic cook in the community's free restaurant. When they needed clothes or a blanket for us, they went downstairs to the free store where there were piles of wrinkled, dirty clothes to choose from.

A strong creative current ran through the place. While Papa spent time with the artists who pass through, he was putting away his welfare checks, saving up to buy us our first school bus—a little one, twenty-seater. By the time we left the *Family* house, Papa had transformed the bus into a cozy little home which we parked on the edge of the woods. A gentle interlude followed. Because it was a mild Indian summer, we had interesting neighbors and the woods around us were full of animals. But when the trees lost their leaves, the cold approached, and Mama's belly grew taut, they rented a cabin in a tiny town called Big Indian. Lhasa was born in the cabin, and they would have stayed there happily with the three of us, but a mean-spirited sheriff who had his eye on us made a fuss because our bus had an out-of-state license. That provided him a frail but legal reason to kick us out of town.

We began yet another long, meandering journey back to Mexico.

By the time we children arrived, the thread leading back to our powerful, wealthy ancestors was pulled thin and tenuous. Instead of a grand house with a butler, we lived in a bus without running water or a toilet. Instead of being landowners, we were familiar with eviction. In a few generations our family had dropped from the top rung of the social ladder to the bottom. On Papa's side our grandmother had contributed to this shift with her disorganized extravagance, but the final and most radical drop was Papa and Mama's. It was neither an accidental descent, nor a calculated one. It was a downward leap of faith. Somehow they knew: Old curses are hard to break, and the only way through, is down.

Like Alice in Wonderland, Mama and Papa plunged and tumbled deliberately down, down, down, having all sorts of realizations as they fell, transforming along the way depending on their encounters and the books they read, falling into their ever-deepening beliefs and convictions.

We tumbled with them.

When their fourth daughter Miriam was born, she was delivered in a home birth without either a doctor or midwife. We had returned to New York and little Miriam was born into the very center of a radical community called the Catholic Worker Farm, led by Dorothy Day.

Among Dorothy's many passions, voluntary poverty was a powerful guiding element, alongside regular prayer and radical pacifism. For Papa and Mama, who were both fleeing their parents' wealth, voluntary poverty became loosely woven into their hippie philosophies. This contributed to a form of child rearing that was eccentric and inspired.

For example, Mama didn't mind if we didn't go to school, but she insisted on good grammar and fine spelling. For three years while on the road we "did school" in our converted school bus. No matter that we ate out of the garbage occasionally; *we* were not trash, and we shouldn't speak like trash. She wouldn't stand for it if we answered "good" to the question, "How are you?" She believed in leather shoes or no shoes at all. We were vegetarians, but if someone offered us meat, we were to eat it and say, "Thank you very much." Even if it was goat, which made us want to cry.

No pickiness allowed. Gratitude was, in fact, the foundation of their beliefs. We were never to take anything for granted. When we really wanted to insult each other (before graduating to “disgusting pig”), we would say, in a low and spiteful tone: “Spoiled *Brat*” because we had absorbed the fact that a spoiled-brat was the lowest form of life.

Occasionally, Papa took us to one of those metal clothing bins outside of shopping centers. There he hiked us up on his shoulders; we dove in headfirst one by one, until all four of us were fishing around happily, elbowing each other and laughing, emerging victorious, each with “new” clothes. We were small but had already absorbed our parents' taste; we did not choose anything acrylic or pink or anything with Barbie on it. The expression *beggars can't be choosers* did not actually make sense to us because we were both.

I remember meeting a woman named Tearsa at one point in our travels. Her last name was Joy. Tearsa Joy. My sisters and I managed to choke down our giggles and keep straight faces, but we laughed about her for years. “I'm Tearsa Joy, Praise the Lowered!” we would howl. We thought that names like Rainbow and Moonbeam, were hilarious. We had no idea we were part of a movement, a current. Our names: Ayin, Sky, Lhasa, and Miriam, were not *hippie* names. They were—*us*.

We also did not realize our parents were spiritual searchers, choosing a path that led away from material comfort. All we knew was that Papa disliked stuff. He was always sweeping our things into a big pile and calling to us: “Get your stuff or it’s going straight into the garbage.” We came fast because he wasn’t kidding. He had nothing he cared about, except his portable altar which featured a wooden statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe and a framed photograph of Paramahansa Yogananda. And his bamboo flutes, which he had made himself. And his stash of grass, but that’s not a thing, is it?

Mama, on the other hand, owned a few large objects that really mattered to her. These things travelled everywhere with us. They made our buses, camping spots, squats, and *palapas* beautiful, made them home. The ornate Irish harp with leaves and flowers painted carefully in gold and green. The carved wooden couch. And our table. The surface of the table was a chaos of burnt coffee rings, scratches, and stains since Mama never used table cloths, but the table legs were graceful, sculpted with swirls, and the tabletop was a piece of dark cherrywood. A connoisseur would be able to tell at a glance that it

was a rare Spanish antique. Yet if we received a pen for our birthday and nothing else, it didn't occur to us to be disappointed. I loved pens. Pens were the best.

Although school was an option, education was a treasure, second only to creativity. And beauty was primordial. "Always, always leave a place more beautiful than when you found it," Papa drilled us. "When you walk away from somewhere don't leave garbage, even if it's not yours. Put the trash in your pocket if you have to. Clean the space, leave a flower, something."

I realize now, beauty was so essential to them, that instead of safety, they gave us art. We were brought up in precarious, even perilous circumstances at times, but a poetic and esthetic world was abundantly at our disposal. We had no Legos, no Playmobiles, nothing made of plastic. In fact, as I remember, we had no toys, but I also do not remember missing them. We were taught to read at home, given books and kept away from television's language, its images and colors. Starting at a very early age, we were trained to lean towards the lyrical rather than the cheerful.

The only movie we saw in our early childhood was an adult art film. This was while we lived at the Catholic Worker Farm. Mama had seen and loved a movie, called *Kwaidan, Japanese Ghost Stories* by Kobayashi. She wanted us all to see it, so our whole family piled excitedly into the old Chevy, the one that belonged to nobody. To this day I will not forget the film's images, which were both fascinating and terrifying. Long wispy black hair continuing to grow on skeletons. Minute calligraphy covering a man's body in black ink. Tiny perfect ideograms everywhere. The ears were forgotten, unpainted, and so they were cut off with an axe, and their owner could not make a sound, because if he did, he would be killed on the spot…so he sat still and mute as he agonized, and for me, age seven, that muteness was the most terrifying thing of all.

On the way home, when we told Mama that we thought it was *such* a scary movie, she was mortified. She had not thought of it as scary. She had thought simply and truly that everyone would love it as much as she had: the living poetry, the strange and haunting beauty of it. And even though she felt bad, she wouldn't have it any other way. A Disney movie was her idea of hell, with its Barbie-shaped ladies, its swirling pink and yellow balloon landscapes.

Somewhere in my forties, I realized that I innately mistrusted the words *fun* and

nice. To Mama they were both synonyms of *vacuous*. *Fun*, she would say, shaking her head, I don't need *fun*. Of course this did not mean she didn't need joy. But for Mama, both joy and beauty had to carry weight. Otherwise, they were like a person without a shadow.

Luckily Ayin and I shared a bunkbed (and a quilt), in the Mansion so after seeing *Kwaidan Japanese Ghost Stories*, we warded off the nightmares by holding each other. We saw only one live performance that I remember. An Indian sitar player was giving a concert, and an Indian dancer named Indira accompanied him. The audience sat on cushions on the floor. We were the only children in the audience. We sat cross-legged and listened with rapt attention for the first two hours. At intermission, an adult came over to us and said, “You little girls are so well behaved. Do you like the music?” We nodded adamantly.

“And, you’re not bored?” she asked.

Bored? We had spent years on the road listening to the deep rumble of the bus motor under us as we crisscrossed the United States and Mexico. Without school, without friends, without extended family. Just us, and the world passing by outside our windows. So were we bored now, by Indian music and a live dancer? To that nonsensical question we only grinned and shook our heads. Bored, no way, José. In fact, as I watched the dancer intently, I could feel the seed of something planted deep inside of me beginning to grow. Somewhere between my heart and my mind.

After the concert the dancer signed posters in the lobby. I edged as near to her as I dared and stared at her velvety brown belly, spilling just slightly over the belt of her embroidered skirt. At her bare foot with its cascading silver anklet. Mama, who was watching me watch her, asked gently, “Do you want a poster, Sky?” I nodded with wide eyes. As Indira signed my poster, I gazed at her beautiful, composed face. I decided then, without even telling Ayin, that I would be an Indian Dancer when I grew up.

Once, when we were very little living in Guadalajara, friends gave us a television, out of pity. Without a moment's hesitation, Mama threw it out the window. It broke into ten pieces on the sidewalk below. We stood at the open window and looked solemnly down at the pieces.

With all of these eccentricities, Mama and Papa were teaching us what to look at. What to listen to. And although from the outside it might seem that our family was lazy or lacking in structure, in fact there was great discipline, even severity, to our free-spirited education. Beauty and poetry were to be found in our own lives in the midst of material poverty and chaos. Period. In the life they made for us, there would be very little sugar. No anesthesia. The search for meaning would be thorough. There would be nowhere to stop on this road. Papa and Mama disagreed violently about many things, but agreed wordlessly on this.

Our parents did not do things halfway. They poured intense idealism into our upbringing. But no matter how much they loved us, no matter how fusional we were, one-two-three and four did not make a family. Not ours anyway. Because of five and six. Or rather, one and two: the first daughters, the eldest. The unspoken reason for our fifty thousand miles on the road. The source of our ceaseless uprooting and Mama's terrible restlessness: my two missing sisters.

In a custody battle as brief as it was tragic, our sisters had been taken away from us before we were born. Our entire nomadic childhood had been defined by their absence. Our deep instability was as emotional as it was geographical and had carved out of a dark, anxious place at the center of our family's heart. For the idealism Papa and Mama harbored to truly take root, for the curse to be broken, we would need to get them back.

Sky Karam de Sela was raised off the grid throughout Mexico and the United States. She joined San Francisco's Pickle Family Circus as an apprentice in 1984, where she learned the basics of trapeze, juggling, and acrobatics, and six years later studied in Montreal's National Circus School. After time with "Circus Circus" in Belgium, "Circus Flora" in Missouri and two summers of street performance in Quebec's festivals, at age twenty-four she co-founded "Pocheros" in France and toured extensively through Europe, Cambodia, and Australia. With the arrival of her children, she moved into clowning and the production of an autobiographical show. For the past fifteen years she has primarily been dedicated to teaching clowning while also directing shows in France, Chile, Iceland, Mexico, Sweden, and Switzerland. After a trapeze related injury developed into debilitating arthritis, she has found inspiration in the written word. Her autobiographical saga, told in three volumes, is titled *Driftwood*. "Breaking the Curse" is excerpted from the first volume. A mother of three, she lives near two of her siblings in Burgundy, France.

Gone Missing

by Mark Cyzyk

Long ago, a high school classmate of mine disappeared.

There was no reason to believe he had run away or committed suicide. No apparent connection with illegal activities. He just disappeared.

As the years passed, our County Police came to investigate his disappearance as a homicide. They had a suspect but not much evidence, nor did they have a body.

They did not find the body for eight years.

I've often thought, then and now, how excruciating those eight years must have been for my classmate's parents. Your son has disappeared from your lives. There is no body to indicate that he's dead. He's simply gone missing. The terrible abyss of loss yawns open, right to the tips of your toes. And this is something you stare into, day after day after day.

In his late forties, my brother-in-law Dave started to go blind, as had his father before him. Knowing what to expect, he enrolled in a special school in Colorado where he would learn how to be blind.

If my brother-in-law were to be cast in a Shakespearean play, he would be billed as the Genial Rustic. His unkempt hair and beard perfectly framed his persistently smiling, knowing eyes and impish grin. Under his halo of good humor, he was super-smart, genuinely gregarious, a master carpenter, with rockstar skilz on the guitar, and was one of the coolest guys I've ever known.

I cannot imagine him ever being angry, and while I know going blind must have depressed him, he did not wallow. He headed West to prepare for living without light.

Reports from school in Colorado were that he was every bit the character there that he was here. And every bit as beloved too. He was apparently one of the older students in class and had a sort of fatherly presence there.

On a mid-December day when the sun had barely risen, Dave met two friends outside his apartment at the bus stop. Three classmates huddled in the cold sunrise.

The driver turned the corner at the bus stop. Black tires on black ice. She panicked as the SUV hurtled toward them.

Freeze frame: How fragile goodness is, so reliant on luck. How often is human agency impotent? In that instant, no intention, no effort, nothing she did could have altered the inexorable centrifugal force of physics. In that instant, she was captive of a merciless momentum. Metal and motion.

The two survivors reported that Dave shoved them both out of the way, just in time.

He died a hero.

That's Dave.

My childhood best friend was the youngest of a large family, one of the few African-American families in our rural school district.

On the way to register for kindergarten, my mom saw my soon-to-be-best-friend and his mother walking across the open fields to do the same. My mom picked them up and drove them there and back. And so our friendship began.

Somewhere there are pictures of us playing on the front lawn. We were like two puppies. My mom deposited us there and we commenced to scramble and play in the country sunshine.

We became like brothers. As our school years passed, we never lost that connection. I think of him as a brother to this day.

But sometimes brothers take radically different paths.

Through the early part of high school, my friend had an ambition and a plan: He intended to go to university on a full wrestling scholarship and ultimately become a veterinarian. He was smart, had good grades in our high school academic program, was one of the top wrestlers on our high school team, and his interest in becoming a veterinarian was no doubt because his father was a trainer of race horses. He grew up feeding and caring for the various animals on their small farm.

But in late high school, he dropped out of the academic program, went on work-study, and as far as I can tell, started doing drugs.

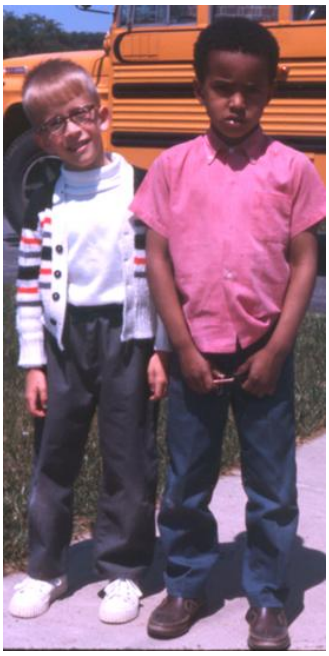
I only saw him twice after high school graduation.

He moved to the city, was in trouble with the law, was imprisoned.

Decades later, my brother informed me: “Did you hear that Andre was stabbed to death?”

I looked up the mention in the police blotter. To some I’m sure he was just another Black man bleeding out on the unforgiving streets of Baltimore. To me he was a long-lost brother.

I remember wailing with grief. There are times when sounds of anguish erupt from deep inside and you surprise yourself. You did not think yourself capable of making such sounds.



Mark and Andre, 1969

I always thought I would see him again.

Twenty-one years ago, I endured a surprise and vicious divorce.

It broke me.

I was able to muster enough strength to demand joint custody of our three-year-old daughter. This was granted, more out of the convenience for her mother than the fact that I fought for it. I remember asking to adjust the schedule and being told no, “Not so you can have more time to play Daddy.” I eventually got an additional half-hour, every two weeks.

I spent the next fifteen years raising my daughter, as I had her first three years, driving her across the county to school for nine of those years, doing everything a single parent does: Making breakfast, dinner, packing lunches, bathing, going clothes shopping, braiding her hair, reading every night, seeing that she was smartly dressed and had appropriate gifts to bring to all those birthday parties, helping with homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, orchestra and chorus performances, encouraging her to attend Social Friday Nights at the middle school, driving her to camp in the summers, making sure her mom got a nice present from her for her birthday, for Christmas, for Mother’s Day. We chilled out with pre-sleep music: Pink Floyd, Nick Drake, Genesis, Over

The Rhine, sang along at the top of our lungs with Aladdin's "A Whole New World" in the car on the way to school, dried tears in the theater watching "The Fault In Our Stars." I taught her how to tie her shoes, how to ride a bike, how to drive, how to cook. All the other joys of parenthood.

We were close. When I decided to remarry, she was the first person I told, and it was our secret for the few weeks before I actually proposed. After school, we would take Walk-n-Talks around the neighborhood. During the era of video stores, on a Friday evening we'd walk down to pick out two videos for the weekend and bring home Chinese takeout, chit-chatting all the way and back.

I remember, around the time it was to be expected that she would be getting her first period, we were in a store walking past the Feminine Products section.

"Is there something we may or may not yet need to buy for something that may or may not yet be happening now or in the near future—or not?"

Her wry grin always let me know I had gotten through.

"*Dad*, I will tell you when it's needed!" (Which she did.)

"Good talk, Dad. Good talk."

She was a total and utter joy, not just for me, but also for her many friends, her teachers, and as the only grandchild, for her extended family. Smart, witty, beautiful, charming, shy but often the center of attention in her diverse circles of friends, deeply thoughtful, kind, content.

In middle school she had a boyfriend. I remember going to pick him up so they could have a formal date at a local restaurant. They were the cutest. His parents and I made them pose for pictures, then we dutifully faded away for the evening.

But like my childhood friend, in high school her path took a sharp turn.

Just before her junior year something horrible happened. It's not clear what. As the months, then years passed, it's not something she confided to me, to her mother, to her teachers or school counselors, therapists, or psychiatrists. I know this because four years later she confided in a single person, my mother, her paternal grandmother, then swore her to secrecy. That secret has been kept.

That surreptitious divulgence was the last time anyone on my side of her family had contact with her.

To back up, as she entered her high school junior year, it was clear that something was wrong. And so began the weeks and months of therapist and psychiatrist appointments culminating in a leave of absence from school and enrollment in an outpatient treatment program at a local psychiatric hospital. There is nothing quite like the feeling of dropping your precious little one off at the mental hospital.

None of these measures had an effect.

Thus began the harrowing year and a half of home school and suicide watch. The County sent a harried teacher out to the house. The goal now was just to get my daughter through school. But even with pared down requirements, she was consistently failing. Some days the teacher would arrive but my daughter would not get out of bed. I'd call in to work—another day on suicide watch.

After a year and a half of this, she did end up graduating from high school, barely. I remember purchasing her maroon regalia but seeing only pictures of her in it from the graduation celebration at her mother’s house.

A week of vacation with me followed. It was clear, though, she wanted no part of it. I cut vacation short, we had our first major argument, and I dropped her off at her mother's house for chill down. It was the first time I can recall being angry with her.

She was a week short of turning eighteen.

Ever since, she's gone missing.

For years thereafter, until the death of her grandfather, neglected and heartbroken over her loss, I texted or emailed her on a daily basis. No response.

It's been seven years without her. For the first few, I tried not to think about her disappearance too much for fear I would go insane. Here, at seven years, it's become the new normal. I often wonder if I'd even recognize her now. I often see young women her age strolling around our small city. I look and look and wonder if one of them is my daughter.

It is a horrible thing to think of your own child as a stranger.

These four vignettes are in chronological order, told by date of disappearance. They are also in order, from least to most, of how large a role each person played on the stage of my life. Looking back, the disappearance of my high school classmate was an

ominous portent of things to come. That my brother-in-law and childhood best friend died so suddenly and violently has forced me to dispense with any naive notions I may have had about cosmic justice.

That my daughter has gone missing for so long through her own volition has unmade my world. Now the world seems unreal, hostile, unreliable, undesirable, not to be trusted. The estrangement from her has opened my aged eyes, only to see the intrinsic ugliness of the world.

I always thought I'd see my childhood best friend again; I fully expect to never see my daughter again. I'm not even sure I want to.

The first half of life is about fullness—fullness of friendships, fullness of potential, fullness of romance, fullness of family. The second half is about emptiness—the void left by the death of grandparents, of parents, in-laws, aunts and uncles, of dear friends, the demise of marriages, the wake of emptiness after the children are gone. Maturity consists, in part, in coming to terms with this emptiness. Maturity consists, in part, by carrying on despite being haunted by all that has passed.

Suddenly, or so it seems, we are alone, surrounded by ghosts.

Mark Cyzyk writes from Maryland, USA. He turned sixty-one in May.

Bowling Lessons

by MerriLee Anderson

On a Tuesday evening in 1969, Mrs. Donald L. Anderson was not making dinner for her three daughters and husband. She was not stuffing laundry into the avocado green washing machine. She was not sewing a dress from the McCall's pattern book. She was not preparing a Sunday School lesson. She was not ironing dress shirts and pillowcases. She was not vacuuming the green shag carpet of her San Antonio home. She was not thumbing through *Vogue* pondering the latest dress style. Jeanne Anderson was bowling.

Tuesday nights were the only night of the week when the Anderson family's plans revolved around Mom. League play started around dinner time, so Dad was charged with feeding my teenage sisters while I accompanied Mom to the bowling alley. She hoisted her gray hard-sided bowling bag with the gold "B" Brunswick logo into the Pontiac Bonneville and we headed ten minutes down the road to Oak Hills Bowling Alley.

If you ran into Mom at the grocery store, you would think "country club" sooner than "bowling alley." She knew the latest fashion trends and found ways to dress accordingly within her limited budget. She carried her tall thin frame with grace, walking upright with a characteristic swish of her narrow hips. She loved bright colors and feminine lines. She carried handbags that matched her shoes and nail polish. Her thick hair was regularly styled and frosted, sporting blonde swoops and curls and twists sprayed into place. But Mom's flamboyance was quieted by insecurity. She did not breeze into a room with the confidence of a fashionista, but rather sashayed in, head cocked, eyes gazing down. Then, someone would say, "I love your pantsuit! That orange is magnificent on you" and she would appear surprised by the

Jeanne Anderson c. 1967

attention. “Oh, thaaaank youuu” she’d drawl, almost apologetically, as she briefly met their eyes before smiling, squirming, and looking away.

Mom did not own a monogrammed bowling shirt. On bowling night, she wore comfortable pants with a brightly colored floral blouse, her hair twisted in a French bun. She walked through the parking lot purposefully with short, quick steps. I skipped to keep up with her, excited to eat a cheeseburger at the bowling alley rather than go with Dad to Luby’s cafeteria. Mom was a “looker,” and I was proud to be in her orbit. She opened the big glass doors to the sound of crashing pins and fervent loudspeaker announcements along with that familiar bowling alley smell of lane oil, fried foods, and cigarette smoke.

Mom was not an athlete, but she was a competitor. She loved games of any kind and cared about winning. When playing cards, she had a *Rules According to Hoyle* book nearby, ready to chastise anyone who broke the rules. She approached bowling with intensity and commitment but no previous athletic experience. Bowling leagues have a way of leveling the field by offering handicaps for players. So, in a sense, Mom competed with herself every Tuesday as she tried to help her team win. While others hurled balls down the lane using powerful spinning strokes, Mom used a consistent down-the-center release. She did a slight flutter step before taking three strides to the foul line, pulling the ball back, and launching it. She did not bend her knees nor throw one foot behind the other, so when the ball was released, it made a loud “thud” as it hit the wood, rolling straight down the lane slowly enough that one could see the pink swirls revolving on the gray ball.

While sipping a Big Red soda and munching french fries at a table behind the pit, I watched Mom stand with tilted head as she urged the ball down the alley. If the pins split or only a few fell, she would turn, head down, fists clenched, muttering to herself as she retreated. If, however, the ball hit the magic spot to the right of the head pin, sending all the pins crashing, she’d wheel around laughing, fists near her face, torso dancing, hips swishing. Boy did I want her to make strikes, because if Momma was happy, so was I.

On Tuesday nights, how many pins fell was the most important thing in the world. Bowling quieted all the other voices in Mom’s anxious head. She wasn’t thinking about her brother fighting in Vietnam. She stopped worrying about her secretarial job, and she

paused caring if people thought she was a good preacher's wife. Bowling erased every worry in her life.

In the 1960's bowling popularity was booming due to the introduction of the automatic pinsetter. Prior to that, young men in knickers were charged with setting up pins for bowlers to knock down. With the new technology, Brunswick stocks rocketed, and the number of bowling alleys in America increased from 6,600 in 1955 to 11,000 in 1963. At the same time, the number of people in bowling leagues increased from less than three million to seven million. Bowling was one of the first sports that allowed men and women to play together—one reason leagues became popular. Bowling dominated Saturday afternoon television during the 1960's and 70's, further increasing its popularity. Richard Nixon even built a bowling lane at the White House.

The people on Mom's team were largely blue-collar and from the north side of San Antonio. There were military men who chain-smoked Marlboros, heavyset women wearing monogrammed shirts adorned with patches, women with tight brown curls in skirts, and Mom. A designer among mechanics. But the truth is, Mom grew up in tough places and felt fully at ease in that crowd. These people didn't care that she was a preacher's wife or a secretary. They just cared that she showed up to win. I suspect they also enjoyed her fresh scent, colorful blouses, and boisterous laugh. I know I did.

Mom saw none of her teammates outside the bowling alley, but on Tuesday nights they were family. They didn't call her "Don's wife" or make her write "Mrs. Donald L. Anderson" on the score sheet. At Oak Hill Bowling Alley she was just Jeanne. They smiled when she arrived, cheered when she bowled strikes, and commiserated when she had a bad night. She drank Coca-Cola through a straw while talking earnestly with Dub as he smoked a Marlboro. She shared fries with Margie between games. They didn't talk about politics or religion or marital stress. They talked about the latest tv shows, the weather and well, bowling.

Some Saturday afternoons Mom took my older sisters and me bowling. Oak Hills Bowling Alley was brighter and less noisy on Saturdays. While Momma unpacked her size 8'1/2 bowling shoes and gray ball with pink swirls, we picked balls from a rack.. Once

our balls were placed on the ball return, we donned well-used rented bowling shoes. We all approached the game seriously, understanding that winning was important.

While we played, Mom instructed us on bowling etiquette.

“Never start your approach until the bowlers on either side of you have bowled.”

“Stay in your own lane.”

“Don’t talk when you are standing on the approach.”

Basically, be considerate of others. Always.

She taught us how to score the game using a grease pen and clear scoring sheet on a glass template while seated at the console between lanes. The scoring sheet projected onto a screen above the lane. One big “X” for a strike with the following two balls added to this frame. A big “/” for a spare with the following ball added to this frame. And a big fat “----” when you threw a gutter ball. In elementary school, I had lots of “----“. There were no gutter bumpers back then. Bumpers didn’t come along until the 80s when adults grew worried about kids’ self-esteem. A softhearted Dallas Dad got concerned about kids crying when they rolled gutter balls so he invented bumpers by placing big cardboard tubes on the gutters. Prior to that, no one cared that kids were throwing gutter balls seventy percent of the time. I suspect that even if there had been bumpers in 1970, Mom would not have let me use them. She was a purist who felt everyone should follow the same rules for any game, be it cards, Yahtzee, or bowling. As the youngest in my family, I learned early on that losing was part of playing games. My sisters and parents never “let me” win nor did they alter the rules so I would think I won. But on the rare times I did win, I felt jubilant, certain I was THE BEST.

I was never THE BEST at bowling. Mom always won. She sat smugly watching us, sipping Coca-Cola with crossed legs, her foot swinging rhythmically. She offered only one piece of advice: “Thumb to nose,” while raising a manicured right hand until her red thumbnail met her nose. Then she’d stand, grab her gray ball and roll it down the middle of the lane, hitting just to the right of the headpin.

It’s impossible to know what made Mom choose bowling as her favorite pastime. Maybe she liked the climate-controlled environment. She is the only person I have ever known that never sweats. She used Tussy cream deodorant, rubbing it on her armpits

like eau de parfum. Bowling would not have stretched the effectiveness of Tussy. I am also guessing that seeing her favorite celebrities bowl on TV added to the allure. Celebrity Bowling was a wildly popular show in the 70s and featured stars, like William Shatner and Angie Dickinson.

But one thing puzzles me. Mom did not like loud noises and bowling alleys are LOUD. The crash of balls hitting pins, loud exclamations from bowlers, heavy balls rolling, and constant conversation. Unlike golf, no hush falls over the crowd. No announcers talk in whispers as the bowler steps to the line of a quieted alley. No siree…bowlers are a tough bunch. They must find inner focus amidst the clamor.

Mom was not a “cool operator.” If our family was seated at a white tableclothed restaurant talking animatedly and a waiter dropped a plate on a tile floor, Mom would jerk rigidly, rise out of her chair with hands raised, flash terrified eyes, and audibly inhale. Her reaction to loud noises was so extreme that a restaurant manager might check on her with a worried face then bring her a complimentary piece of cheesecake.

Mom’s exaggerated startle reflex was like that of a war veteran experiencing PTSD. The involuntary reaction had roots that stretched back to childhood. Her early life was like a war zone, with a violent and unpredictable father. Mom’s nervous system never recovered. Yet she never startled at the bowling alley. In fact, she appeared at ease there. Pins crashed and bowling balls dropped while she calmly sipped her Coca-Cola.

My mother came into adulthood when most women’s primary goal in life was being the wife of a successful man. Being Mrs. Donald L. Anderson was central to Mom’s identity. When my father was preaching, she sat in a front pew, hands folded in her lap, attention rapt on every word he spoke in his booming baritone voice. She starched his shirts, straightened his ties, and smoothed his hair. She poured his coffee and brought him the newspaper. She made sure dinner was on the table at 6:00 and dishes were clean. Never mind that she worked full-time as a secretary; her primary job was housewife. She also took impeccable care of her appearance, understanding that our father cared how she looked, and perhaps believing her beauty was important to his success.

Had this traditional feminine identity been the only model for womanhood that my sisters and I witnessed, we may have been doomed to pursue MRS degrees, diminishing

ourselves in the process. But Mom showed us something different. Long before self-care talk became part of our cultural identity, Mom demonstrated self-care by reserving Tuesday nights for her own fun. Through bowling, she reminded us that she was her own person. She introduced us to Jeanne Anderson, the woman who was separate from the preacher's wife. On Tuesday evenings in 1969, Jeanne Anderson fed herself. We watched and learned that there are limits to self-sacrifice. We learned that women can be caretakers without losing themselves. We learned to reserve space for our own joy.

MerriLee Anderson is a clinical psychologist who is beginning to consider herself a writer. Her essays have recently appeared in *HerStry* and *You Might Need to Hear This*. She lives in Dallas, Texas with her wife, Jill, and mutts, Rosie and Daisy. She finds joy in connecting with people, be it through writing or conversation. She is still a lousy bowler.

I’ve Got You Covered

by Sharman Ober-Reynolds

When I turned five, I won the Bozo the Clown Home Birthday Prize. A girl in a red shirtwaist dress and Cat-Eye glasses picked my name out of a barrel spun by one of the show's participants on TV, and I felt like a star. KTLA-TV must have notified my mother when the truck was scheduled to deliver my toys because, somehow, I knew. That’s why I faked a stomach ache. I wanted to be home when they arrived.

Mom settled me in bed with a dinner tray, crayons, and drawing paper and went off to sell magazines over the phone. She was a natural salesperson, likable, trustworthy, lively, and forbearing, listening more than she spoke. My dad used to say, “Your mother could sell bikinis in Alaska.” I heard her voice rise and fall in a reassuring sales pitch, so I slipped out of bed, crept into the living room, and kept a lookout for the Bozo the Clown truck. Before long, boredom, dull, and self-imposed enveloped me. So, in my pink chenille bathrobe, I wandered the house and poked through the kitchen junk drawer until I found a box of matches. Pushing open the small square box, I picked out a broken, slender piece of wood tipped with a perfect green bulb. In my bedroom, I struck the broken match against the wall, and it sputtered to life. I dropped the broken match in the trash when the flame reached my fingers. Within seconds, a fire blazed, incinerating the discarded pictures of horses and ballerinas I’d drawn that morning.

Darting into my mother’s bedroom, I yelled, “I need to show you something!” as if I'd done something remarkable instead of setting the contents of my wastepaper can ablaze. Mom held up her hand, indicating she was not to be disturbed while completing an order for the *Saturday Evening Post*. But then, seeing my panicked face, she made some excuse, slammed down the receiver, and followed me to the trashcan inferno, where the greedy flames reached for my sheer yellow curtains. She heroically smothered the fire with my bedspread. I schlepped a bowl of water from the kitchen, which I dumped unceremoniously onto the sooty mess.

My five-year-old’s sense of justice told me I deserved to be punished. I was rarely spanked, but then again, I’d never started a fire in my bedroom before. Instead, my mother

enfolded me in a crushing embrace. Luckily, the aluminum trash can had contained the flames. When the metal can cooled, my mother carried it outside and heaved it into the trash can at the back of the house. Black charred paper flew up like insects, escaping the bin before my mother clamped the lid firmly in place.

We surveyed the damage in the bedroom I shared with my older sister. A perfect black oval was seared in the gold nylon carpet. Hiccupping between sobs, my face smeared with tears and snot, I pleaded with her not to tell my father and sister. My father would have forgiven me, but my sister would have tortured me. My mother looked at the soggy, burnt carpet, then at pathetic me and said, “We’ll buy a bigger trash can.” Her willingness to cover for my crime astonished me. It was more remarkable, even, than winning the Bozo the Clown birthday prize.

What was it about this incident that has stayed with me all these years: my first experience with hubris, wrongdoing, dangerous consequences, guilt, and unearned forgiveness? It was about family.

No matter our intentions, sooner or later, we'll find we have fallen into a ditch as a result of carelessness, wrong directions, or an imbalance in the insecure, displaced, and transitory universe. Despite well-managed lives and proud schemes, sooner or later, everyone goes through this inevitable humbling. If we’re lucky, a mother, brother, sister, father, or friend jumps into the ditch with us and covers our wounds with a kiss.

My family and I tumbled headfirst into that ditch when we were told our son had autism and years later when my husband was diagnosed with Parkinson’s. Both times, we roused ourselves from our sad stupor, climbed up the damp and rocky incline, poked our heads over the side of the abyss, and checked out this chilly new neck of the woods where a wind of fear was blowing. There was a barrage of new tests, new doctors, new possibilities, new hopes, and new anxieties; we read memoirs, scientific tomes, and self-help books. We spoke with fellow travelers. Finally, we took a deep breath and recognized this was who we were going forward. Sinking into a chair, I contemplated our troubles for a long time. “I’m not sure I can do this?” I wondered aloud." Hermoine’s voice whispered in my head, “You can. ‘It’s in your blood.’” Yes, I’d seen this drama before and knew what to do. It was almost an instinct.

By the time my sister and I were teenagers, we were experienced in testing our parents' limits. This was especially true of my sister, who recently confided to me with some pride that her counselor told her she has oppositional defiant disorder. I wasn't better behaved, but I was less stubborn and sensibly didn't flaunt my misbehavior. My sister's rebelliousness was pretty tame; she wore white lipstick and rolled her skirt up to mid-thigh. Sometimes, she met boys behind the bandstand at the park. She got drunk with friends and snuck back into the house late at night. This was not unusual adolescent behavior. Still, we were raised in a hybrid Mormon home, and my mother, a five-generation adherent, was hoping we would adhere as well.

I could have continued to tag along after my sister during her defiant adolescence, but when I was twelve my grandmother, who sometimes lived with us, suffered a massive stroke, and my parents no longer had the time or energy to care about our escapades. This was a tricky time; my mother was in menopause, my sister and I were in puberty, and our hormonal fluctuations buffeted my older father. My sister and I experienced a forced early entry to adult responsibilities.

Luckily, if one can say that about a debilitating brain attack, Grandma's speech center was unaffected, so she could talk and read. At eighty-two, she still found putting sentences together tremendous fun and cherished conversation. She talked her way into, out of, and through everything with fluency and panache. When she needed help getting into her wheelchair, Grandma rang a little bell. She wasn't willful or abusive in her requests but affectionate. We could smell the baby powder she dusted herself with every morning when she gave us a quick hug and said something like, "I'll stand on my good leg. You move my dead one." By the time she was eighty-seven, she was tired of being an invalid. Her left hand was contracted, and so was her life, so to test fate, she ate even more sweets in spite of her diabetes. My grandmother was a bold, unpredictable lady who possessed a revolutionary spirit, which may explain my sister's impulse for opposition. When she inhaled a few crumbs of chocolate cake at my aunt's home, her "sugar problem" proved dangerous. At first, the resulting pneumonia made her chest hurt. A few days later, she was confused and developed a fever and shaking chills. Then, her respiratory rate accelerated, and her body temperature dropped. We all wept. My mom

and aunt embraced their mother, comforted her, and held her when the light of her life went out. Her shuddering body was finally still, completely different, and yet barely changed. I became aware that a moment is all that stands between life and death. Time was the only distance, and her life felt close by.

My dad wasn't with us when my grandmother died because a few months before, he'd also suffered a massive stroke, and my sister was caring for him at home. How could life be so unfair? Working from the age of fifteen, he'd finally retired and ceremoniously thrown away his alarm clock. Months later, a blood clot traveled to the left side of his brain, obliterating his speech center and motor control of the right side of his body.

It felt as if something had left our house, some measure of hope. I could feel my father's weariness and resignation after months of therapy provided slight improvement. There were a few things I could do to help. I could settle a blanket on his lap when he was cold, prepare soft, bland meals, unzip his pants, transfer him so he could use the bathroom, and zip them back up when he was done. Our eyes would meet briefly in shared embarrassment. Sometimes, I would exercise my dad's lifeless right side while he reclined on the couch, gently moving his tight, spasming leg. We'd been told this would help circulation and maybe muscle tone, and there was some small hope of restoring use. Words would come out of his mouth, indecipherable words, and with frantic gestures, he communicated his pain. Gradually, it became clear that nothing in his leg would change. Sometimes, we sat together on the living room couch and watched cartoons, my arm around his increasingly frail shoulder.

In the midst of all this, my father was also being treated for cancer, which appeared on the inside of his cheeks and tongue as lacy white patches, like curdled milk. Chemotherapy, which made him ill, and surgery, which mutilated his tongue, gave us another five years together. When his cancer recurred, my mom covered for the nurses and became his hospital caregiver as well.

I watched my parents through the window in his hospital room. My mother looked bereft, lovely, and unimaginably calm. When my father was distraught, in pain, and afraid, she would comfort him, covering his vulnerability with her presence. She laid her hand on his arm and held it there, not saying a word. His face changed when he looked at her, a shy look of gratitude. At the same time, he dabbed at the saliva that had collected at the

corner of his mouth with a white handkerchief. All the while, my mother was there, her hand the lightest thing you can imagine, so light it was like a bird on his arm, so light that I'm sure he barely felt her touching him. Still, he knew she was there, and somehow, I felt her hand on my arm too and was comforted, and that, as it would be so many times after, made all the difference.

The oncologist had placed radium implants in the tumor, and they slowed the weedlike cancer rooted under the remnant of my father's tongue but also decimated his immune system. His nurses wore radiation dosimeters and limited their time in his presence. My mother ignored the danger. He was in shambles. The night before he died, his breathing was labored. When I embraced him, he was sharp-boned, so different from his muscular, solid, responsible self.

He was a modest man, and the fuss of illness embarrassed him. It was summer in Los Angeles, and the air conditioning chilled us all to the bone, so my dad draped the blanket from the foot of his bed around my mom’s shoulders, making sure she was well covered. This was so like him, surrounding his wife of fifty years with warmth and affection. The body may change, but the mind does not. When we got up to leave, he held her hand tightly and locked into her gaze. His eyes communicated so much. It was his “hello” and “goodbye,” his "thank you" and "I'm only teasing," his "I'm sorry" and "You're beautiful," the vocabulary of his new language.

The next day was the bicentennial, July 4, 1976, and we were distractedly watching an international fleet of tall-masted sailing ships gather in New York Harbor when my dad went into respiratory arrest. Unlike my grandmother’s quiet demise five years before, everything about my father’s last few minutes seemed dramatic: the fireworks on TV, the alarms and flashing lights, the nurses and doctors running into his room and replacing us around his bed. As we let go of his hands, we were overcome with grief as he struggled and then stopped breathing. His dying was inevitable and shocking, but it never robbed him of his sweetness.

I've mourned my grandmother, father, and now my mother, who died uneventfully at ninety-four, only haplessly, accidentally, by surviving them. Their absence is not absolute but insidious. In some ways, I mourn them by becoming them, especially my

mother, whether I want to or not. My sorrow in losing her has been a farewell but also my destination.

I am now older than she was during the eleven years she was a caregiver for my father and grandmother. I often think of her while I care for my oldest son, who copes with autism, and my husband, who struggles with Parkinson's. Over the years, they have had no choice but to be brave. We miss the future we thought would unfold, and we all experience an anticipation of grief. Since my son's diagnosis thirty-three years ago, we've come to realize there are things he may never do, like have a career instead of a job. He loves his job as a supermarket courtesy clerk, so who cares? He may never have children of his own, but he will be the most devoted uncle ever. Since my husband developed a tremor in his right hand fifteen years ago, there are things he will never do again, like hike Havasupai, write another book about skepticism, or be our family's designated grocery shopper. This is grief in stages, terraced grief.

Sometimes, in this unexpected but familiar role, I feel a mixture of rebellion and connection. Rebellion, for all the obvious reasons. Connection because it's natural to resemble our parents, not just physically but sometimes in our experiences as well. This is a rerun with a new cast. Like my mother, I've got my family covered. I've become the cook, the driver, the shopper, the banker, the gardener, the person who relights the pilot on our gas fireplace, the keeper of passwords, the dog washer, and the person who locks up at night.

Not only am I a caretaker like my mom, but I embody her eccentricities and physical traits, not intentionally but by design. When my hay fever is acting up, I sneeze the same way she did, with a kind of theatrical whooshing sound. I hear myself speaking to my grown children, just as she spoke to me, in precisely the same tone with the exact phrases and with the same mothering melody. I am both comforted and dismayed by the inevitability of inheritance. How unoriginal can one be? Just the other day, I recognized a pattern of purplish spider veins on the inside of my right thigh that, when I was a girl, I found alarming on my mother's pale leg. I can be surprisingly calm at times of crisis, as she was when smothering the fire in my bedroom when I was five. I'm not as religious as she was, but I go to church hoping to find something good during a time of anger and despair. When her picture pops up on my skyframe, an image from beyond the grave, I

see her round face with its pointed chin, creased in all the same places as mine. She is wreathed in smiles, cheerful as an elf, and I hear her say, “We’re all in this together.”

Like my mother, I make plans, come what may. Having been in and out of hospitals when I was a girl during my father’s nervy fight against cancer, it seemed, somehow, that I belonged in a hospital. So, I became a nurse. When I discovered I didn't like hospitals because I wasn’t caring for *my* sick people, my career shifted to autism research. I joined the efforts to fill in the ditch before more kids fell in.

Of course, there are other differences between my mom and me, too; I am less decent, less generous, less plump, and never lived through the Depression, so I have accumulated less stuff. There is no junk drawer in our kitchen. But I’ve got the mahogany desk my mother sat at when she sold magazines over the phone for the Curtis Publishing Company, the very desk I ran to when I burned a hole in the carpet in my bedroom, and my mother covered my childish guilt with a bigger trashcan.

Sharman Ober-Reynolds was born in Los Angeles and completed a master’s in fine arts at Arizona State University. For over thirty years, she worked in health care as a family nurse practitioner, primarily in autism research. She is primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. In 2023, Sharman was the first-place recipient of the Olive Woolley Bert Awards and has published creative non-fiction in bioStories and Adelaide Literary Magazine. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle.

The Pugilists

by Sharman Ober-Reynolds

My husband and I attend a boxing class in Mill Creek, Utah, three times a week. My husband has Parkinson's Disease, and the class is designed to make us “rock steady” to fight against it. Our coaches are mostly young and enthusiastic. To keep us motivated and help us get acquainted, they ask silly questions at the beginning of each class. Some of our answers have included: “What would you be if you lived in the ocean?” Dory and Marlon. “What historical figure would you be?” Fred and Wilma. My husband, a retired philosophy professor, loves questions and comics. He has large compilations of *Pogo* and *Krazy Kat, w*hich he reads almost daily alongside philosophers Quine and Putnam.

The boxing class is more practical than philosophical. It reminds me of kindergarten for seniors in slow motion. There are lockers and mats, and the gym is festively decorated for the holidays. Strings of colored lights hang between punching bags in the winter, brightening up the gym, which is tucked away in an ice-encrusted strip mall. On Valentine's Day, we saran-wrapped pictures and words of things we want to fight against onto our punching bags; political tyrants, various exes, insomnia are popular targets. Ours is Parkinson's.

Our warm-up consists of Frankenstein walks, butt-kicker walks, and pretending we’re stepping over a bucket walks. Moving in the same circular direction, flapping our arms, each of us high-stepping to our internal rhythm, we look like we’re from Monty Python’s Ministry of Silly Walks. We box to the Beatles and Elvis and do core strengthening exercises to Louis Armstrong. It is an arduous hour, and we all work up a sweat.

Boxing comes naturally to me since my dad, the son of vaudeville performers, was also a pugilist. His was a short and not an illustrious career. Still, we have the muscle-man pictures of him flexing in boxing trunks to prove he put in the work to look the part and his report of having once been a sparring partner for Jack Dempsey. When it comes right down to it, though, for both my dad and us, boxing was and is therapy. My husband and I signed up online. There was a more torturous journey for my father to the boxing

ring. But I am getting ahead of myself. I have to go back to my dad's childhood, which I have puzzled together from overheard conversations.

Working with trained animals, magicians, ventriloquists, pantomimists, and jugglers may sound alluring. However, this was a difficult life, especially for families who sometimes traveled forty-two weeks a year. In 1913, my grandmother had had enough, or not nearly enough, of what she needed. So, Rosalia took her six-year-old daughter and left for a more permanent home with her sisters in Seattle, leaving my dad and uncle with their father in Salt Lake City. Unable to perform his soft shoe act in the local vaudeville circuit and care for his ten and eight-year-old sons, my grandfather boarded his boys at St. Ann's Orphanage. This was an act of love with a good deal of desperation thrown in. St. Ann's, built to care for the destitute children of the city, was a sturdy, three-story red brick building with wings on each side enfolding a grassy courtyard on fifteen acres in South Salt Lake. Overlooking the courtyard was a cupola with a white statue of Our Lady Beauraing of Belgium, her arms outstretched, and a plaque admonishing children to "kneel and pray."

At the orphanage's cornerstone ceremony in 1899, the Salt Lake Tribune quoted Thomas Kearns as saying, "the accidents and deaths inseparable from the hazardous occupation of men engaged in mining throw upon the hands of the charitably disposed many helpless orphans." Mr. Kearns, a mining magnate, understood the risks of digging for copper, and as owner of the newspaper, he made sure everyone knew he was one of the "charitably disposed." And, of course, the disposed of were in need of charity. His wife made the initial $55,000 contribution, though he spoke for her at the commemoration. "Her daily dream and thoughts were ever devoted to the welfare and comfort of those little orphans, who have forever been deprived of a single moment of a parent's love."

St. Ann's was both a blessing and a curse for my father and his brother, providing sustenance though "not a moment of a parent's love." There were about ninety-two young children at St. Ann's under the supervision of five Sisters of the Holy Cross. Given all the work the nuns had to do, I'm surprised they found the time to convert my father into a right-handed boy despite God having made him a leftie. At the orphanage, my father's clothes were too large and then too small, but never comfortable. He was often cold and

worried about his sickly little brother. When Duffy wasn't sick, he was angry and started lots of fights. My dad had to end them, so he developed his boxing skills early.

When my father had enough of the nuns at St. Ann's, he ran away to the leafy green eighty acres of Liberty Park, a few blocks away, to work out on the playground equipment. After a few trips, he improvised a gymnastic routine and became an eleven-year-old ambidextrous fugitive orphan with a plan. He waited until a crowd gathered, then showed off a variety of circles, holds, and beats on the uneven bars. Sometimes, this earned him a nickel. Escaping from St. Ann's gave my dad a moment of control over his life.

Three letters my dad wrote his mother while at the orphanage survived and found their way back to our family. These neatly written pages were business-like and uncomplaining, itemizing the number of eggs he collected each morning and describing how he'd fertilized the vegetable garden by mixing in chicken poop and compost after weeding the cucumbers, onions, and carrots. Grandma Rosalia kept these letters for over forty years. The envelopes were worn enough to make me think they had been read and reread many times; the corners crumbled if you pinched them too hard, like old crackers. I'm sure my grandmother wrote back with encouragement. One of her notes probably conveyed the sad news that his little sister had died of appendicitis, and my grandmother was now alone. But my father never kept any of his mother's letters; he must have let them go just as she had let him go.

What does it take to leave your children behind? For me, it would take everything, which suggests how miserable I believe Grandma Rosalia was. I think my father and his mother came to some understanding. Or maybe not. It is said that to understand is to forgive, but it may be the other way around. Until you forgive, you guard against the possibility of understanding. And even if you forgive, you still may not understand. My dad, who was as silent as a tree, rarely talked about his mother, so I can only guess what went on in her mind, how she recorded, reordered, and reconciled those events, or what they came to mean to her.

*

My father and husband have more in common than boxing; they are both tender-hearted and wouldn't kill as much as time. Of course, there are differences as well.

Despite the nun's best efforts, my dad never got more than an eighth-grade education, while my husband went to school for twenty-four years. Fighting could have injured my dad's young brain, while our boxing class claims to provide neuroprotection to our old ones. We hoped to improve our balance while my dad aimed to knock his opponent on his keister for a count of ten.

In Rock-Steady Boxing, we maintain a particular stance. Our left legs are advanced, our left arms are tucked next to our bodies, and our right arms are drawn back, ready to strike. This is our pose as we move around the room, hoping to improve our stability. During the fight, it's crucial to remain standing, whether your opponent is in the boxing ring or Parkinson's. If you're knocked down, you can take Our Lady Beauraing's admonition to kneel and pray. Then, you must get up and jab, block, parry, bob and weave, duck, clinch, counter, peek-a-boo, slip, cross, roll, hook, and land a solid uppercut. Our instructor yells, "Guard your face. Protect your money maker," and we remember when we were pretty like Ali.

After several years at St. Ann's, my dad and his brother joined his father, uncle, and grandfather on a dry farm in Ryrie, Idaho. My dad was no longer a child and his adolescent body was awkward and restless with the onset of adulthood. Fate crept through his veins, and hormones surged, making him an image of his parents and a stranger to himself. Remembering his youth, my dad used to say that he never had enough of it and that it was over before he was done with it.

How big is the world when you're thirteen-years-old? Both infinite and infinitesimal. It's all your wildest dreams but also a cramped bunk in a frontier cabin. Sometimes, the family traveled with the carnival during the long Idaho winters, and my dad's performances at Liberty Park proved to be good training for the gut-clenching stunts he executed as a catcher on the trapeze. Hanging upside down by his knees, his chalked hands would grab the wrists of the flier unwinding from a double somersault, one second before the aerial artist seized my father's wrists. My dad was reliable, 100 percent. Once so vulnerable, my father and uncle now demonstrated feats of strength, tearing telephone books in half and lifting Model T cars. He did not live a contemplative life. Instead, my dad

cultivated a belief that if he was strong enough, he would be able to find and hold onto all the good things he didn't know he was looking for. And I think he did.

How big is the world when you're past middle age and have Parkinson's? If you are a philosopher, the world moves from infinite, passionately argued questions like, "What are we?" "What are we doing?" and "What ought we to do?" to infinitesimal daily changes you use all your diminishing strength to fight against: small steps, small handwriting, small appetite, small energy, and small concentration. One of my jobs is to stand close by and say, "Big steps, sweetie!" so my husband can navigate doorways.

My husband cultivated the belief that if he knew enough, he would find answers to questions even he didn't think to ask, and the world would make sense. We both assumed and were educated to believe that we lived in a world of expanding comprehension. And we do, but our expanding understanding is about things we're not so keen to learn about, like deep brain stimulation, fistfuls of pills, and unending physical therapy. These are my philosophical questions. "Is heartache in your heart or in your mind?" and "Is accepting the fact that I cannot accept what is happening to my husband a form of acceptance?"

With both illness and poverty, there is a feeling of being left out and left behind, as if the afflicted and indigent are stragglers, and people can't quite remember to stay back and help. We have family, friends, and coaches rooting us on, but really, it's up to us. So, we go to Rock Steady Boxing because our lives have been reorganized, and we need to learn new skills. My husband is throwing punches to build up his strength, and I'm concentrating on spine windmills, shoulder pass-throughs, neck-half-circles, stretching exercises to improve my flexibility. My husband is hoping for superhuman powers, including not falling down, and I'm aiming for resilience. The next time our coaches ask us who our heroes are, we'll say, Mr. Incredible and Elasti-Woman." I'm my father's daughter; I've learned that sometimes we have no choice but to fight back.

Sharman Ober-Reynolds was born in Los Angeles and completed a master's in fine arts at Arizona State University. For over thirty years, she worked in health care as a family nurse practitioner, primarily in autism research. She is primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. In 2023, Sharman was the first-place recipient of the Olive Woolley Bert

Awards and has published creative non-fiction in bioStories and Adelaide Literary Magazine. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle.

A Good Cup of Chai

by Hailey Duggirala

Making a really good cup of chai takes practice.

Ash perches on the countertop of our house-share kitchen, watching me work. It is one of those rare, quiet moments of life in a college town, when all of our roommates are out and we can play house; pretend that we are five years into some invisible, idealized future, in which my poetry and their novels can pay the bills on our own place. I toast cardamom pods, star anise, and cinnamon on the stove and imagine my father moving around the kitchen.

My imprecision drives Ash crazy. *Write down the recipe,* they scold me, every single time. Every time, I just smile. Making a really good cup of chai takes knowing what to write down and what to memorize.

In my mind, my father is pulling jaggery off of the high shelf above the stove in my childhood home. Across the country and years away, I follow his steps, grabbing brown sugar from the shared pantry. I always forget to buy jaggery, but the dark brown sugar works nearly as well, especially if you let it bubble in the pot with the spices before you add the water. Making a good chai means knowing when to bend the rules and when to honor them. Being a good daughter means learning that, too, but it's a skill I am still honing.

I scoop the tea out of the bag. It's a loose-leaf from the tea shop in town, and my father would never be caught dead buying it, but I do. He calls me a "yuppy," and he's half-right. I still keep an emergency store of Lipton black tea bags in the cupboard, but I'd never tell. On days when home seems especially far away, I pull them out—half-sentiment and half-summoning. I think that if you waved a Lipton tea bag in the air and whistled Tracy Chapman loud enough, my dad would appear in your doorway like a poorly-groomed vampire.

I pull out my favorite cup, with the wide pink handle, and fill it with water from the tap. I pour it over the tea, stirring to help the sugar dissolve. I grab the half-peeled ginger nub from the fruit basket on the counter, and the lemon zester resting haphazardly beside

it. I grate just enough ginger that it fills the room with scent, directly into the pot. I think of my mom—this was her addition—and the way that my dad rolls his eyes at us when we do “extra” things to chai. I imagine them both in the kitchen with us, so tiny that we would all barely fit. I think of the nights I spent with my father in the kitchen of my childhood home, watching him cook from my favorite kitchen table chair while he made tea after work. Sometimes we spent the whole time laughing, making playful jabs at each other. Other nights were spent in tense silence, both of us still fuming over a now long-forgotten disagreement. He would often choose that moment to scold me, stapling me to the chair with a disapproving look and stirring the boiling water with perhaps more force than strictly necessary.

He always saved me a cup, anyway.

Making a good cup of chai takes patience, and so does being a good father. When people ask me about him, I tell them that my dad makes good chai, and hope that they understand what that means.

My father was difficult, sometimes, in the way that fathers are. I was constantly on trial, constantly atoning for the sins of childhood and the petulance of adolescence. My father’s own petulance somehow withstood his upbringing, and we were always competing to be the most bull-headed in the house. I’m still not quite sure who is winning on any given day, even from thousands of miles away.

His silence, when it came, was a stony entombment. Being out of favor with my father was the most painful thing I ever experienced. It was like looking into a mirror that refuses to make eye contact. Like I couldn’t even recognize my own reflection.

The growing pains of our relationship are passed, for now; either I am grown or we both are or neither of us ever will be. Now, the pain of my father is in missing him; I am a long-distance daughter. Phone calls and text messages and his valiant attempts to use GIFS make up the Lego house of our time together these days.

It doesn’t feel fair; my father didn’t even become my father until I was eleven, and the ache of years that we could’ve spent together—the family that I got to have, but for far less than I wanted it—is sharp and unwelcome.

While I ruminate, the tea blissfully boils down, strong and ready for milk. I pull the half-gallon out of the mini-fridge, too small for a whole gallon, and add another cup full from the pink-handled mug. I watch the milk darken into a rich brown.

I let the tea simmer for a while before straining it into mugs over the sink. I watch the small freckles of spices, far too small for the strainer to catch, swirl at the top before disappearing, sinking inevitably to the bottom of the mug to be rediscovered later.

I take the first sip, nervous.

No matter how many cups of chai I make, I always suspect that I will do it wrong; I will make it too sweet, or I will forget the cardamom to cinnamon ratio, and I will be further from home than I've ever been. When the tea hits my tongue, almost too-hot to bear but perfectly-sweet, I heave an internal sigh of relief.

I'm learning.

Hailey Duggirala is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist based in Syracuse, New York. Her writing is interested in transmuting ordinary experiences onto strange contexts, and in the spaces between truth and perception. You can find her work in Syracuse University's *OutCrowd Mag*, jotted on napkins, and waiting tirelessly in her email drafts.

The Plaza

by Doug Hoekstra

I recognized the Plaza in Santa Fe from the movie
Two-Lane Blacktop, the one with James Taylor and Warren Oates
racing down Route 66. Dennis Wilson was in it, too.
Warren Oates was underrated.
I'd been there once before with my ex-wife.
At the time she wasn't my wife yet, but Uncle Felix died
left me a little money, just enough for a vacation
so we drove from Chicago to New Mexico, although…
we didn't take Route 66 because I wasn't nostalgic at the time.
I think I thought I knew everything back then.
Which may be one of the many reasons we wound up divorced,
although I'm sure that wasn't the only one.
Most of the time we spent in Taos at a bed and breakfast,
but we visited the Plaza one day because among other things,
there was a showing of D.H. Lawrence's paintings I wanted to see.
Lawrence was and is one of my favorite writers
although one could argue he was overrated.

This day, the Plaza was filled with tourists, as it often is.
The Pow-Wow on the square had just gotten underway,
tribal Nations from across the country gathering to honor
Indigenous People's Day, with vendors selling paintings and
jewelry and anti-colonialism merchandise, which I loved.
Standing on the sidewalk across the street watching, waiting,
a woman stepped out of a storefront, grabbed me lightly
by the arm and said it would only take a minute, tugging
pointing to a chair, motioning me to sit. No time to say no.
She put something on my face, despite my protestations.
"Are you married or are you happy?" she asked.
"I'm single, how about you," I replied. "I'm happy too."
She smiled, quoting me a price. Outrageous.
It made me like my wrinkles, which really weren't that bad
After I declined, she said, with a sharpness in her tone,
"I hope that you spend more money on your future girlfriend,
than you do on yourself." And that was that.

Back on the plaza, there was drumming and dancing
and fry bread with strawberries I bought from a food truck
and girls dressed in traditional clothes, beadwork
hoop skirts accessorized with tricked out high-top tennis shoes.

They held their cell phones, scrolling, and texting
whispering to each other, telling secrets of the young.
I met a Hopi artist who came from Albuquerque
selling paintings, whose work I really liked. He said,
“I use a lot of traditional shapes and colors
but I add contemporary stuff, because that’s where it’s at.”
We took a picture he amplified on social media, smiling
as I left the plaza, carrying my painting under my arm
I took it all in slowly, to remember. Wondering why
the last time I was there, I never noticed the way people
sat together under the trees turning colors, a touch of gold
holding off the winter gray that would soon be coming.
I think I thought I knew everything back then.

Doug Hoekstra is a Chicago-bred, Nashville-based writer and musician, whose prose, poetry, non-fiction, songs, and records, have been featured all over the place; *Ten Seconds In-Between*, his latest collection of short stories, was a Royal Dragonfly Award Best Short Story Collection of 2021 and Next Generation Indie Book Award Finalist 2022. To learn more, visit his website.

My Forgettery

by Paul Graseck

Born and raised in Brooklyn, my parents loved New York, and they knew the city from the inside, frequently taking me on outings throughout its five boroughs. In the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan, we moved about the city underground, by subway.

Returning home from one excursion, the commuters on the stairs we climbed pushed passed us, seemingly unconcerned about me. On foot, New Yorkers move quickly from place to place; I felt small inside the horde of people on the move. Looking up at their feet racing ahead, I lost contact with my mother whose hand shortly before tightly gripped mine. Only four- or five-years-old, now suddenly alone and bewildered, I felt penned in, unsafe, nervous as I stumbled forward in the press of people. I panicked. Anxiety flooded my system. Lurching upward with the crowd, I felt a tug on the back of my shirt collar. I turned and saw Mom and Dad. Secure again, our threesome made its way to the top step where we stopped, and I cried.

Through the years, whenever I think of that period of separation—a brief flash in my life, undoubtedly no more than several seconds—I relive the experience in memory, adrenaline pours through me, my heart races, and my face broadcasts fear. I still recall with horror losing touch with Mom.

That scary stairwell moment evolved into a core memory, becoming a story I tell often in situations that provoke me to shake it loose from the filing system in my brain. It grew into a piece of my larger life story, the personal legends or lore that I use to help define myself. Perhaps more poignantly, in the class on Death and Dying that I taught for thirteen years, I used this story of separation from my mother as an example of what research psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton dubs a death image, an experience that evokes in children a primitive awareness of the meaning of death. Aware of the research on the fallibility of memory though, I began to wonder if I had the details of the legend that I created correct. How much of the original memory remained intact?

Studying eyewitness accounts, researcher Elizabeth Loftus conducted trailblazing experiments revealing the unreliability of eyewitness accounts. A recounted experience,

she discovered, consists of “reconstructed memory.” The reconstruction sometimes omits facts, infuses new details, or exhibits an inaccurate record of a particular sequence of events. Errors in recall may occur because the brain’s system for storing a memory appears to divide the content of a memory into several parts, sending the components of a deconstructed memory to multiple sites to await the request for recollection, the retrieved memory, in effect, a re-created memory.

Retrieved memory typically includes content from the original experience, but sometimes we find incorporated into the re-created memory additional material previously consigned to storage but unrelated to the recollected event. The imprint of my fear of separation and subsequent panic remains intact, although I wonder, knowing what I do now about the unreliability of memory, if the recollected particulars of that event are accurate.

Add to reconstructed retrieved memories the process of shaping. We all shape memories. Developing an actual memory to share, we stamp onto it a story involving emotion, prejudice or judgment, and tone—the personal baggage the “rememberer” brings to a memory. In my case, was I panicked or only bewildered, becoming panicked only after reuniting with my parents who themselves may have been more panicked than I? Were the commuters truly rushing or is that just a prejudice inserted from my adult vantage point? Is the suspense of my story invented or simply a tone applied to the narrative as a means to creating a good story to share with listeners? Imponderables indeed! Nonetheless, such memories, now reconstructed and likely shaped, cease to exhibit factual accuracy. They devolve quickly into fiction. Perhaps, all history, personal or the academic variety, tampers with the truth, if truth means an exact rendering of the facts.

Teaching history in the 1980s, I sought to make this point to a group of high school students in my Ancient History class. The elaborate set-up I devised for the experiment, involved prearranging an ostensibly shocking event, one that would garner my students’ attention, an event they would *want* to recall. With the aid of the school’s principal, I orchestrated a memorable classroom event. I started by providing each student with a blank piece of paper. I told them they were to use it to answer several quiz questions that

I would provide momentarily. Just then, according to plan, the principal barged into my room wearing a wolfman mask, saying, “Mr. Graseck, I need to talk with you right now.”

My predetermined response, “What’s going on here?”

“I need to talk with you, Mr. Graseck. Stop what you’re doing and come into the hall.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m in the middle of class. Please leave! And what’s with that crazy mask?”

The subsequent scene in this foreordained scenario went something like this: Grabbing my shoulders the principal began to lead *me* to the door. He then reiterated, “Come into the hall with me *now*, Mr. Graseck. This is important.”

Feigning anger, I barked, “I’m sick and tired of your shenanigans. If you don’t get your hands off me, I’m going to send someone to the front office to get help. This is outrageous.”

Loudly, the principal then yelled, “Do you know who I am?”

I said, “I don’t care who you are. Get out of here now!”

The principal then tore off his mask, and I blurted, “Get out of my room,” forcibly pushing him out the door.

With the principal gone, I turned to the class and said, “This is the kind of thing that ends up in the courts. Using the piece of paper on which you were about to answer my quiz questions, I want you to record exactly what you saw. I will collect your eyewitness testimony when you are done.”

My students, now visibly perplexed, unhesitatingly accepted my instructions and began writing. After collecting their written accounts, sitting on the edge of my desk, I started reading them aloud. Wide variations in their accounts existed, especially in the sequence of events, their telling of who said what, and the vocabulary the principal and I used. No two recollections were alike. Some contained critical errors. I then explained that the class had witnessed a set-up, each step in the unfolding drama choreographed. “Having heard the eyewitness testimony,” I asked, “What lessons can we draw from this experience?” Immediately, the utter unreliability of such accounts emerged as a key takeaway.

“Memory is fragile, unreliable, even memories of recent events,” I preached. Students shared examples of inaccurate recollections from occasions in their lives. I, too, related how once I stated passionately and with absolute confidence that I had put my book on a particular counter, even accusing my mother of having picked it up while straightening the kitchen, only to find the book on the bathroom sink, then recalling that I had indeed put it there. I also explained the research on eyewitness accounts that reveals the fallibility of memory.

At seventy-four, I maintain a healthy regard for the untrustworthiness of memory. Today, I will read a book, put it down, and upon returning to the book, having lost my place, reread a section that except for a phrase or two seems utterly new to me. But even as a much younger person, I experienced this phenomenon. And when I was in my thirties and forties, I recall telling friends on multiple occasions that for my entire life I have rushed into a room on a mission to accomplish something on my mind, only to arrive there having forgotten why I was there. I also shared with them reflectively, “When I am in my seventies or eighties, people observing this behavior will accuse me of showing signs of Alzheimer’s, even if that same behavior has defined me for decades.” True enough, but I suppose in my old age, I must leave space for second opinions.

Do fallible, reconstructions of memory blind us to behaviors we might otherwise disapprove in ourselves? Does the repeated sharing of emotion-packed stories to which we pay homage for shaping our adopted worldview blind us from expanding or adjusting that worldview? The centrality and power of a core memory transmuted into a locked up, hackneyed tale may imprison us as well as serve as a useful means to interpret our experience.

My father-in-law, upon straining without success to recollect a word or incident or when learning of his failure to fulfill an obligation to which he had agreed, would often smile, then say, “My *forgettery* is getting better and better.” Although understanding his meaning, I wondered if he invented the term or if “forgettery” made an appearance in standard dictionaries. Merriam-Webster defines it thusly—*a faculty for forgetting: a poor memory.*

It is fashionable to say we should *live in the moment*. I can think of no other way to live, but those moments elicit memories—perfect, inaccurate, or irretrievable—and from time to time such moments involve circumstances that confirm, whether I like it or not, that my forgettery, too, is improving.

Paul Graseck taught high school for twenty-nine years, then served as an administrator for fifteen more, including curriculum director, principal, and superintendent. As a sideline, he portrays Gandhi and Socrates, drawing his audiences into interactive dialogues with these figures from the past. Paul also plays clarinet in a Providence-based, street band, The Extraordinary Rendition Band. Although retired, he now teaches reflective writing inside a state prison in Connecticut. He has published in *Kappan Magazine*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *History Matters*, *Quaker Life*, and elsewhere. Paul lives in Pomfret, Connecticut.

Island Party

by J Bryan McGeever

It's my daughter's first school dance, an informal gathering of parents and students at an elementary school playground in East Setauket, Long Island. Tonight's event has an 80s nostalgia theme. Songs from various John Hughes films blare from the DJ's speakers, transporting this bustling suburb back to a simpler time of big hair, MTV, and voodoo economics. Along the edge of the ad hoc dance floor stands a solitary fun-dad in an Adidas tracksuit and Kangol bucket hat. The party is just beginning.

As more people arrive, a pleasant carnival-like atmosphere takes over, kids zigzagging between the playground and the dance floor. Frankie Goes To Hollywood tells everyone to *Relax* as security guards in yellow windbreakers sift through the crowd. Some are retired NYPD. I discreetly eye their waists and the linings of their jackets. I don't think they're armed, and it troubles me that I wish they were.

Most parents chat amiably while their children roam the grounds. I trail mine from a comfortable distance like a devoted member of her Secret Service detail. The prospect of her vanishing into a crowd gives me short panic attacks. Her crew wants to know why she keeps pointing to different sections of the schoolyard, and I overhear her saying, "My dad needs to know where I am." One of her cohorts looks at me, raising two fingers in the shape of an *L* before scampering off. Fair enough, Junior, but some situations call for excess.

Once Aubrey was born, my partner Tiffany and I decided to buy a house. Our apartment in Brooklyn was lovely, but owning a home in Ditmas Park's Victorian Flatbush was pure fantasy.

After several years of searching, we decided to move to Suffolk County at the tail end of 2020. I'd grown up in the Setauket/Port Jefferson area and knew every deli and pizza place within a ten-mile radius. I climbed every tree and swam in every pool. This homecoming was going to be rather cozy.

Tiffany is a native of Coney Island. Setauket was nothing to her but an unusual sound that needed to be Googled. Aubrey is biracial and considers herself “Black like mommy.” Before moving, Tiffany researched the town’s demographics to see how many people in Setauket would look like them.

“1.27%? Are you freaking kidding?”

“One-of-the-oldest-Black-churches-in-America-is-in-Setauket,” I quickly argued.

“With a choir that sings to no one. Forget it.”

“Look, she’ll have a fantastic childhood. Your information is from the 2000 census. I’m sure things have changed.”

They hadn’t. Long Island has quietly been this way for as long as I can remember. One would think an area nearly 120 miles long, packed with over eight million people, would be under more scrutiny, but living in the shadow of the largest metropolis in the US has provided deep cover for generations. Its demographics change as quickly as the zip codes. Make a left at the Expressway or a right at the train tracks, and not only will the size of the homes change but so does the American experience. Name a town, I’ll tell you who lives there. Segregation is as natural to Long Island as learning to swim in the Sound.

My first experience with race relations on Long Island occurred at a drive-in just ten minutes away from my daughter’s school. On June 11, 1982, Heavyweight champ, Larry Holmes, had agreed to take on challenger, Gerry Cooney, for the richest purse in boxing history. Infamous fight promoter, Don King, immediately said the hushed part about the fight out loud. Cooney was a Great White Hope. There’d not been a White champion in over two decades and the prospect that it might occur that night was thrilling. At the time it was the biggest closed-circuit pay-per-view production ever.

My father and I stood in the gravel staring up at a movie screen along with several hundred other Long Islanders. Make no mistake, we’d come to scream our heads off for the big Irish brawler, the gigantic Catholic kid who’d grown up just thirty minutes away in Huntington.

The atmosphere was electric. Whenever any part of Cooney’s glove touched any part of Holmes’ body a roar tore through the crowd, and our accents grew thicker.

“Yeah, dat’s what I’m tawkin’ ‘bout!”

“Lez go, Cooney, ya big, goofy bastid!”

Ours was the sound of desperate hope. Within several rounds, the better fighter took over. The crowd grew quiet and gloomy. Behind us, a small group of Black men jabbed the air, cheering and celebrating the way we’d done moments earlier. Why were they so happy? Long Island was losing. I nudged my dad and nodded to them.

“They want Holmes to win,” he said casually. “That’s just how it is.”

Why bother rooting for the ‘home team’ when it’s never felt like home? It would be decades before I understood this.

Slightly north of my daughter’s school lies the Incorporated Village of Old Field South, an upscale enclave of Setauket. A visit to the community’s history page claims the neighborhood was founded in 1929 by the Suffolk County Development Corporation, owned and operated by wealthy philanthropist Ward Melville. Once its design was complete, strict rules were established for its inhabitants. “To this day,” the page explains, “our community is governed by covenants that run with the land and preserve a sense of architectural and natural dignity.”

A resident of Old Field South recently emailed me a copy of these covenants, presented to him upon purchasing his home in 1976: “No part of said premises herein conveyed shall be used or occupied in whole or in part by any person of African or Asiatic descent or by any person not of the White or Caucasian race except that of domestic servants….”

The current website doesn’t mention the document’s original contents, or why they were issued as late as 1976. The updated edition is available for perusal but makes no mention of race. Its abracadabra-like absence without explanation is eerie. Clicking between the scrubbed version and its original leaves the reader feeling dazed, the icy proclamation of the first, the slick, polished veneer of the second.

Old Field South is just five minutes from our home. Aubrey attends The Three Village School District and is completing the fourth grade. One day she’ll attend a high school called Ward Melville.

So, is a beautiful place still beautiful when it fails to reckon with its past?

These past three years I'd given Tiffany my word that statistics were unimportant. The lack of diversity in Setauket was worth it, I maintained, because this Ward Melville High School had absolutely everything—acres of gleaming turf for championship teams to win in perpetuity, formidable drama, and music programs, a marching band that played the theme song from *Frozen*, and a nationally recognized science department. To put it in 80s nostalgia terms, Ward Melville was the James Spader of public schools, an army of world-beaters in slicked-back hair and popped collars, something sleek, imposing, and glittery, so why not my kid and others like her?

I'd known racial covenants had been used during the development of Nassau County's Levittown—America's first suburb!—but the realization that it had been done here as well was personal. The irony of tracking my daughter's every move on the playground when I was the one who may have put her in jeopardy, turning her and Tiffany into unwitting social pioneers, was troubling.

Yet despite these concerns we're still here, and our decision to stay runs through a gauntlet each morning getting to work, 118 miles roundtrip. We're NYC school teachers. Tiffany's building is in Brooklyn. Mine's in South Jamaica. She sleeps soundly in the passenger seat, while I see taillights in my dreams at night. During the afternoon commute, we like to chat about our day.

"Watch it, slow down!"

"I'm just keeping up with the pack. It's Thunderdome out there."

"This song is so old."

"Please. Simon's a poet and Garfunkel sings like an angel."

The next morning, four a.m. arrives and we're back at it.

"The Springsteen channel again? How many times can a *screen door slam*?"

Whenever I receive unexpected calls from the school nurse over bellyaches, I leave work early to pick up Aubrey. "The nurse said you should have been here a half hour ago," she tells me.

The nurse has never driven the *Van Wyck* at noon.

We wouldn't do this unless our girl was thriving. Just prior to moving, Aubrey's education was nothing but dubious Zoom meetings, performing singalongs and jumping-jacks by herself in our living room, while her new school in Setauket was offering safe, in-

person instruction with plexiglass guards on each desk. Had we remained in Brooklyn throughout the pandemic, there's no telling how much of her development would have been hindered.

She's also affectionate and loves to swing her arms between us as we move through a crowd. Invariably, there's a shifting of eyes from onlookers, a quick scan of her parents followed by a dip to her, then back up again, which is fine. Curiosity is natural and we get it. A pretty, Black woman conceived a beautiful child with a guy who looks like a middle-aged version of the blond villain from an 80s teen flick. It's not something one sees every day so take us in and have a blast. The Setauket reviews are in and they're overwhelmingly positive:

Oh, you've made my day!

Wow, you've given me hope!

Look, I've got one, too! (White woman presenting her biracial kid for viewing)

Awkward, strange, and downright goofy always trumps hate. It was Brooklyn, after all, where a classmate told Aubrey she was too light to be Black, not Setauket. Notions of who gets to live where on a shared planet have endured forever, but we're simply too busy to fret over it now.

It's a familiar story in America. A wealthy man did some good with his money, donating property for schools, a state university, and a major hospital. He built villages and beautiful parks. He also got things wrong, but if we refuse to tread where bias has occurred, there will be no places left to stand.

No one's calling for the man's name to be removed from buildings and historical landmarks, leaving blank spaces and hard feelings all over town. There's no total solution to our parental concerns regarding Melville's original covenants, but there is this—one day Aubrey will attend the school named after him, on the land he bestowed to the community, and there's nothing his ghost can do about it. My family lives in East Setauket, on the North Shore of Long Island, and we trust that our child will live her best life here.

Back on the playground, my daughter's friends see me panning the crowd like a searchlight and cry out to me. "Hey, Aubrey's Dad! She's over here!"

My girl is on the swing, pumping hard and soaring high, until the chains start to buckle, and her old man tells her to quit showing off.

J Bryan McGeever is the author of *Small Rooms and Others*, a collection of essays, and the forthcoming collection, *The Town Crier of Long Island*, both published by Unsolicited Press. His nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times, New York's Daily News,* the *NY Post,* and *The Christian Science Monitor* and his fiction in The *Southampton Review, Writer's Digest,* and *Hampton Shorts*. He teaches in NYC and lives with his family on Long Island.

The Collectors

by David Newkirk

There is a box in the basement of my parent's house that says, "Old Toaster – Doesn't Work." It is one of a hundred or more boxes that line rows of shelving or hide in closets, carefully packed for possible future needs. My sister and I have dreaded the eventual day we must meet these boxes in combat, waging a war of (hopefully rapid) attrition as they are reduced by sale, donation, or dumpster.

The *dies irae arca*, the day of box wrath, drew closer when my father passed away. The boxes now hang on to their tenuous existence in a part of the house that my mobility-limited mother cannot enter, the stairs forming a sort of vertical moat. It is not likely that she will ever bend her now-hunched neck to peer under the lids again. For her, the memory of the boxes has faded, lost in the fog of age, and they have become talismans of the past, of years successfully navigated, of a family successfully raised.

To be clear, my parents were *not* hoarders. They *were* children of the Depression, a time when things were much more precious because they were so much harder to acquire. Children of a farmer and a mechanic, they avoided the worst. But the shadow of the dustbowl and the memory of how things had gone so wrong so quickly for so many loomed large. Each item acquired was an upraised middle finger pointed at poverty, a fervent declaration that "I will not go without." With that came the excitement, or perhaps relief, of a life that became ever so slightly easier with each acquisition.

One of my first memories is walking the long blocks from the off-campus student housing near Denver University where my family lived to a thrift store. Sure, there were other stores that the beat-up Nash Rambler could have taken us to—the Joslins, the K-Marts, the F.W. Woolworths—names that are mostly forgotten. But why when the thrift store was there? Wouldn't buying from those name brand stores be wasteful?

Most of us who are alive now do not understand the Great Depression. Not really. We lived through the crash of '08, the pandemic panic of '20, and arguably, the greedflation of '24. But we did not see ubiquitous bread lines of educated, trained workers exiled into near or actual starvation. The stock traders of '08 did not leap from the windows, they fled for Cancun. The pandemic briefly brought fourteen percent

unemployment—not the sustained twenty-five percent of the thirties. Ration coupons are as alien as distant Mars. We may have experienced uncertainties and economic worries—but not those.

Their memories of the Great Depression makes getting rid of broken toasters all the harder. After all, it could perhaps be repaired, and it will always be waiting if the worst should come again.

There are memories in the boxes, too. There are Christmas decorations that call forth times long gone, like a friendly ghost of Christmas past. Times where their three children barely slept in anticipation of the surprises that were under the tree. Times where the planning, the toy-buying, the surprise-scheming would reach their joyous climax, an affirmation that “Yes, we can do this for our children. They will not lack this.”

The box of the broken toaster still sits in that basement. My sister and I have agreed that we will not begin the desperately needed decluttering until my mother joins my father. It would, I told my sister once, be like taking pieces of my mother away. They were things that once meant something to her, things that in a way were still part of her. Things that preserve the memory of seeing her children grow. Things that recall the eras of her life. They are a part of her, and we will not inflict that additional loss.

It was not greed that filled those boxes. Rather, it was a combination of survival, love, and hope. The things in them are not merely objects, they are dreams, fulfilled, remembered, and memorialized.

They can sit on those shelves, a testament to her protectiveness and love, for as long as it takes.

David Newkirk is a retired attorney living in Kansas City, Missouri. His fiction has appeared in *Amazing Stories, Literally Stories, Dark Horse, Night Picnic* and other journals. His non-fiction has appeared in *Number One*. In his spare time, David is unlearning thirty years of writing like a lawyer.

My Final Christmas with Mom

by Alexandra Loeb

My mother's ashes sat on my sister's mantel in North Carolina, a location of temporary convenience and that in no way fit with my mother's wishes. I needed to scatter her remains in order to gain closure—or maybe even gain a better understanding of our complicated relationship. With four siblings—all now technically orphans—I figured we could grieve and process together. I envisioned a family gathering where we all actually *gathered*. My vision bore no resemblance to the loose band of fiercely independent people that we all are—a group of people that seldom *gather*. Eighteen months after her death, we were still struggling to find the right time and place to scatter her ashes, leaving me untethered.

Sibling conversations had turned frustrating at best, hurtful and full of recriminations at worst.

"Mom moved from the south to San Diego the first chance she had. She was happiest in the Southwest and assumed she'd be scattered there," my younger sister and I proclaimed.

"Mom should be in North Carolina where most of her kids and grandkids can visit," the eldest two responded.

"I'll be back in the states three weeks this entire year, so whatever we do, it has to be then," the middle sibling, who lives in China, added to the mix.

Our judgements were fierce.

"Did you not *know* Mom?

"Do you not *care* about Mom's wishes?"

"You *don't* understand, you don't have children."

It devolved from there.

Finally, the elders won and we decided to scatter Mom's remains in Winston Salem, North Carolina, a town with no direct flights to anywhere close to my rural hometown in British Columbia. "Fine," I agreed. "I can do any time but Christmas." The overbooked flights, multi-legged journey, crappy weather all but assured I'd arrive late,

missing any ceremony and any hope of a joyful holiday. Yet my siblings decided the family would gather at Christmas, in North Carolina, and I was left to decide if I would join.

Around the time these conversations were swirling, my husband Ethan and I decided to take a road trip to the American Southwest, looking for warmth during a cold, wet Canadian spring. An annual road trip is a bit of a tradition. We take our lab-mix, Bosco, our bikes, hiking boots, and our van, which is mostly a big bed and a camping kitchen.

As we organized our trip, it occurred to me that we were headed to the exact place Mom loved best. This was an unconscious choice, but there was no coincidence in my being pulled to the place filled with my best memories of Mom—the place where she had formed the best memories of *her* life. With my mother's ashes sitting on my sister's mantel in North Carolina awaiting action on the "family decision," they would not be traveling with me. As our departure date got closer, I mulled over alternate ways I could use this trip to find closure.

One soggy afternoon, a few days before we left, I was in the basement on our stationary bike. My legs spun circles as I cycled through feelings of anger and frustration but mostly hurt. Pity is an emotion I work hard to avoid, and I was wallowing in it. *You are not a person to fixate, to have looping thoughts*, I scolded myself as my mind spun faster than my legs. Finally, I yelled out loud, "Come on, Alex. You're a problem solver. Solve this problem."

And then it came to me. I didn't need Mom's physical remains. Her ashes were far removed from the actual person who was my mother. I just needed something that symbolized her. I mentally catalogued any possession of Mom's I might have that could serve as a tribute. Not her clunky nut grinder that she used to make chocolate hazelnut tortes on Sunday nights. Not her ancient red Coleman cooler. Not her prized painting of two old men sharing a drink at a table. After I grew tired of spinning in place, I moved to the floor to meditate, which I clearly needed.

Before the chime rang, I opened my eyes: *Christmas. Christmas ornaments.* In my mother's final apartment, she had very few personal belongings beyond the bare necessities. Mostly just family photos and a few pieces of art. But she had boxes of Christmas decorations. Even with dementia, Christmas was her holiday, a time she

insisted on the family coming together. On my last visit to see Mom, when she clearly was not going to make another Christmas, I returned home with a big box full of decorations.

I uncrossed my legs, ran to the guest room closet, and lugged out the Rubbermaid box. Inside was a treasure trove of trinkets, including a badly bent Mexican straw wreath and dozens of glass bulbs. I pushed aside the fragile and bulky to uncover scores of wooden figures and a few other delights. They were perfect: quintessential Mom in their aesthetic, plentiful enough that I wouldn't miss a few, a clear reminders of our Christmas trees growing up. Selecting a handful that seemed both meaningful and expendable, I packed them carefully into an old cookie tin.

Bell

My mother was an alcoholic. There is no polite way around that fact. She was what I labeled a "social alcoholic," with rules around when and how to drink: After 5 p.m. Preferably with company. Definitely with a bowl of nuts beside her.

And Mom enjoyed a good party, throwing an epic one every New Year's Day with football on several televisions throughout the house, a huge spread of cold cuts in the dining room, and her famous eggnog. Mom skipped the eggnog. Her drink of choice was gin. By the time she moved to her retirement home, each "martini" (really just gin poured over ice) contained six ounces of the stuff. Over the course of an evening, she'd have three of these behemoths.

To state the obvious, this was in no way healthy. But she was amazingly resilient, rarely showing signs of a hangover or an abused liver. The worst was when she combined her favorite hobbies: drinking and driving. "But everyone does it," she told me, referring to the hundreds of retirees in her sprawling complex. I responded by securing her car keys: "All the more reason I'll just wait and have a nightcap when we get home."

Most of my siblings didn't drink with her, which I suspect was the normal and healthy action. But once safely back in her apartment, I rummaged through her liquor cabinet, selecting something I didn't drink at home. I obliged her request for a drinking partner because it was the only time she opened up to me. Often that was painful. She'd confess her difficulty in loving her children, forgetting to acknowledge that I was one of

those offspring. She would show no memory of the conversation in the morning and would repeat the haunting confessions the following night. But she also told me stories that revealed how she became the person she was. I slowly sipped my Cognac while she—outwardly emotionless—told me her sad tales. Like how her mother didn't appreciate her sense of humor or much of anything else about her—she only connected with her father. And most tragic: she told of the time she was in the car with her father, going to pick up her mother at the airport when the driver swerved and my grandfather was thrown out of the car, dying instantly. Mom had to tell her mother, who then blamed Mom for the accident. Mom never cried, barely even blinked while telling these stories. She usually summed them up with some line about how maybe that was why it was so hard for her to love her own children. In no way would she leave an opening for a consoling hug afterwards—a hug that would have served us both. The best I could do was mutter something like, "That must have been hard." Then, I'd switch my drink to herbal tea, needing all of my remaining faculties to process what I'd heard.

As my husband drove into northern Arizona, I rummaged through the cookie tin filled with decorations and thought of those nights with Mom. We were entering "mom terrain" and I needed a plan. Or at least a next step. My collection of ornaments suddenly seemed random, disjointed. I held up the most fragile item: a glass bell. My practical mind instructed me to find a home for it first—while it was still in one piece. I studied the bell in the light streaming through the windshield. Turning to my husband, I asked, "Doesn't a bell remind you of a party?" He was non-committal. But the idea anchored in my head. As much as drink was an issue for Mom, I still loved the memories of her hosting a party for her friends, buzzing between people, a rare time when she was constantly smiling. And maybe I thought of those evenings in her apartment—her confiding, me sipping my Cognac—as a private party of sorts.

That night we stayed in a campground near a mountain bike trail. Ethan set out for an evening ride while I organized the campsite, slipping our blue flowered tablecloth over the cement picnic table. Lounging with Bosco, I noticed that our view of distant mountains was framed by evergreens. The ravine separating us from the neighboring site was full of Juniper trees, which produce the berries used to make gin. *Ah-ha.* What's a party without

gin? For Mom, it would be a grave disappointment. I scampered over to the trees to find the perfect branch. It was covered in berries and out of sight from other campers. I hung the bell, stepped back, and admired my handiwork.

Homemade Tree

A few days later, I was biking in Sedona with another of Mom's ornaments in my pack. Up until this point, I was having a shitty ride. I felt fat. I was hot, our 9:00 a.m. start too late to beat the heat. I had no flow on my bike. The night before Ethan had declined my request to ride with him, explaining that he didn't want to wait for me in the blazing sun. I interpreted that comment to mean that I sucked and I had lost my riding partner forever.

After showing me to the trailhead, he pointed in the right direction, listing five connected trails I might enjoy, and we went our separate directions. Somewhere on the third trail I was forced to call him. I forgot the order, convinced the trail was an uber technical one he had not recommended. I was wrong. It was apparently an easy trail. The problem was me, not the trail. I got back on my bike, rode a short distance, then spotted a bench, and suddenly wanted to stop again. The bench was in a beautiful shady spot, complete with a view of the red-layered cliffs Sedona, Arizona is famous for. Amidst that beauty I was still unmercifully criticizing myself. But it wasn't only *my* inner voice I heard. My mother could be incredibly judgmental. On that bench I could hear her clearly as well: *Maybe I felt fat because I was fat. It really wasn't that hot—I always was a heat weenie. And my long hair—too long, especially at my age—wasn't helping. As for my lack of confidence in my riding, I was too sensitive. And face it: I was always slow.* Mom had constantly reminded me of when I was fifteen years old and was prescribed running to hold my scoliosis at bay. She'd run with me and tease me relentlessly that at fifty, she was faster than I was. And I shouldn't forget, I was also always a scaredy-cat, needlessly scared of rattlesnakes, mountain lions, bears—and trails that were too hard. On this point she was wrong. Cautious? Yes. But at least I was out there.

As I caught myself arguing with her, trying to convince her of the strong woman that I had become, I reached into my pack. I pulled out one of her ornaments: a flat, sparkly Christmas tree. In the bright sunlight, it was clearly homemade and tacky, maybe

one she made in the dementia care arts and crafts. (I can be judgement as well.) I carefully hung it on the tree shading the bench.

Soon after, Ethan pulled up wearing a big smile, clearly happy to see me. I let go of the argument with my mother's ghost and allowed myself to be thrilled to see him. We rode the rest of the way together to the trailhead. The ride was fast and flowy. My pack was one ornament—and a few judgments—lighter.

Golden Angel with Red Wings

During the months that I wrestled with my siblings, I became more aware that I wanted to honor the woman who happened to be my mother, rather than honoring her role as mother. As her daughter, I would never know the entirety of the person my mother was, but as we drove into New Mexico a week later, I knew I wanted to celebrate what I *did* know.

In her early twenties, Mom lived in Albuquerque with her best friend, Francesca. Outside a few short vignettes, this chapter of her life was a complete mystery to me. But she often referenced them as some of the best years of her life, when she was happiest and felt the freest to be herself.

Later, she moved to New York City to pursue her MBA at New York University where she met my father. By all accounts they were a socially gregarious couple, the life of the party. Within four years they had moved to New Jersey, an hour away, and had three children. Again, by most accounts she was happy. Then, they moved 800 miles south to Georgia to support the expansion of my father's business. My father once said to me, "You remember your mother, right? When she was happy? Before we moved to Georgia?" No, I didn't remember because I was born in Georgia. They moved South while she was pregnant with me and my mother stayed for twenty-four years. From my experiences, it was never her happy place. Maybe her drinking in New Jersey was festive, but in Georgia it was melancholy. Sober or not, she had resting frown face. She confessed to me later she found the southeast suffocating.

Our first stop in New Mexico was Albuquerque. A hot, busy town with a wild mix of ugly strip malls, beautiful petroglyph monuments, sprawling ranches, and a bustling Old Town. After lunch at a trendy converted warehouse filled with bars and restaurants, we walked to Old Town searching for a good spot to enact my new ritual. The last time I was here with Mom she wanted to visit a church, although I couldn't remember the exact one. My mother's religiousness was a mystery to me. She was a selective but devoted Catholic. Her church attendance was straightforward, but she didn't discuss her faith. She promoted birth control, never blinked about premarital or homosexual sex, but she also tithed regularly, abstained from meat on Fridays during Lent, and infrequently missed Mass. I don't recall ever seeing her with a rosary. I have no idea if she prayed to Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or simply God. Walking the narrow streets of Old Town, I googled "old churches." There was one just across from the plaza. The San Felipe de Neri Church was clearly not the one I had visited with Mom years ago, but it was quaint and one of the oldest in the city. In front was a small garden with roses surrounding the Virgin Mary. I took a moment to admire the courtyard. And then, when no one was looking, I tucked Mom's golden wooden angel with red wings deep into the rose bush. It seemed the perfect place to honor the mystery of Mom.

Red Giraffe with Yellow Ears

My visits with Mom were three days long. Fewer, and it didn't count as a full visit. Longer and Mom would say, "Company is like bread, after three days they get stale." Vacations together were no exceptions, but in those three days Mom and I had fun in ways we hardly ever experienced in her home. The change of scenery helped with the conversation—instead of the normal dour drunken conversations, we could gossip about other tourists, plan where to eat, browse shops. We traveled to San Francisco, Coronado, Santa Catalina Island, Vegas, Zion. But my favorite was Sante Fe. Watching Mom eat spicy chili rellenos, sweat dripping off her brow, washing it down with a margarita seemed celebratory rather than moribund.

Mom and I visited Canyon Road in Sante Fe multiple times. She loved the street, a half mile dedicated to some of the country's finest art. I still treasure the two square blue

terra cotta platters she bought for me there years ago. I always felt close to Mom in Santa Fe. I'd catch glimpses of the fun gal I never really knew, yet who felt closer to me than the mother I grew up with. She seemed lighter, younger, happier. Now that I was in Santa Fe again, I felt more convinced than ever that it would be a betrayal if we were to leave her ashes in North Carolina where she had felt suffocated, surrounded by people she didn't bond with. Before she succumbed to dementia, I had asked her where she wanted to be scattered after she died. "Somewhere warm and dry," she said. I interpreted that to mean the desert of the Southwest.

It was a cold morning as I bundled up for my Canyon Road walk. Mom's sense of art was sometimes refined, fairly traditional, and objectively beautiful. Other times it was a bit kitschy. I stuffed a decoration in my jacket pocket that was a prime example of the latter: a red giraffe with white dots on its neck and big yellow ears. This giraffe had no hanger, so after walking the length of Canyon Road scouting for a prime location, I nestled it deep in ivy across from a gallery that she would have enjoyed browsing. That night at dinner, I told a local person at the table next to us about my project. He assured me that the people of Sante Fe would recognize and respect these as totems and leave them in place.

Pink Cherub with Broken Wings

The next day, I visited the Indigenous jewelry makers in front of the Palace of the Governors, remembering the times that Mom and I had walked this row of incredible artisans, admiring their work and discussing what we might buy as presents for other family members. On this visit I bought a beautiful silver bracelet for myself and one for Ethan. Content with my purchases, Bosco and I crossed the street and settled on a bench in the center of Santa Fe Plaza.

There, a couple was playing a bass and a banjo. No fan of music, Mom would have tolerated the spot for the collection of humans they attracted, especially the three-year-old boy enthusiastically dancing along. Bosco and I absorbed the energy of the place. He settled on the ledge with a constant stream of people approaching us to pet his soft fur. Mom was also no fan of dogs. But the people he attracted helped me initiate

conversations similar to the ones Mom would have struck up. She would have had asked these strangers questions, inquired about their lives, their jobs, their children, and listen to their answers with a full attention she scarcely ever did with her kids.

I had brought along Mom's pink cherub playing the guitar. The wings had broken off years before, with just a spot of glue left on the back. Given its guitar, I decided it belonged among the sounds of the plaza. In a moment when onlookers were distracted by the music, I reached into my purse and stealthily hung it on a bush behind me. With no wings, the cherub couldn't fly away. It reminded me of how, when I would visit Mom in San Diego late in her life when she had limited mobility, I would set her up on a bench while I'd go off for a run or a long beach walk. One of Mom's favorite harmless hobbies was to people watch. She invariably claimed she was happy, and I should take as long as I wanted. Relieved of the pressure of making conversation with a woman who rarely seemed interested in what I had to say, I took full advantage of the opportunity to escape for an hour. When I'd return a book would sit unopened beside her and she'd be watching the passersby from beneath her straw hat, mesmerized by their behaviors and imagined lives. I wondered now if it was the anonymity that allowed her to be free and open to them in a way she struggled to be with her children.

Guard in Sentry Box

Mom loved to ski. She'd hunch over slightly, and slowly but confidently, carve big S-turns down a blue groomed run. Her last run was in Park City, Utah where she owned a timeshare. She left the slopes in a sled that day, her knee busted, leaving the surgeons to glue her back together. As she recalled that event, her memory was only of enjoying skiing, happy she had given it all she had.

In the last years of her life, when I visited Mom in Memory Care, we'd flip through old photo albums. In those pictures was a woman I didn't know at all. It was one thing to not know Albuquerque mom. I wasn't even born yet. But these photos were taken when I was an adult. There were photos of her and her friends dressed up in silly outfits as they readied to go skiing. They posed for the camera in flirtatious, hilarious positions. What struck me most was that the photos were almost identical to ones I have taken with my

friends. Goofy, fun. In her pictures and my own, the people were often caught mid-laughter. Mom didn't know that side of me either: silly with abandon, no fear of judgment. In dementia care these were the only photos where she could remember all of the people's names. They consistently made her smile.

My last ornament was a guard in a sentry box, like the guards outside of Buckingham palace. If I stretched my imagination, I thought it could be a skier getting on a lift. As I wrapped up my road trip, my plan was to leave this ornament in Park City. Broken into two pieces, I bought some super glue at a fuel stop along our route and repaired it. But a late spring snowstorm forced a change in plans. After almost four weeks on the road, I was content with my ritual, ready to go home, not willing to risk icy roads for one last ornament placement.

We drove into Salt Lake City traffic. Squished between tractor trailer trucks, it occurred to me that I put all of the decorations in places surrounded by needles and thorns or tucked deep out of reach, which now seemed fitting. Mom was prickly and protected her emotions. The first time I remember her telling me she loved me, I was in my early twenties. I hugged her, one of the most awkward hugs of my life. It wasn't until she was fully into dementia that she was able to blow me a kiss at the end of a call and tell me she loved me. It was then, in her senility-induced free expression of love that I realized how much I craved my mother's affection. Sad for what I had missed, I greedily accepted all the blown kisses she had to offer. By the time she passed away, it had begun to almost feel natural.

The sentry was alone in the cookie tin as we approached our small Canadian town. My mother didn't understand the appeal of my town, nor did she ever visit. She never skied at our local resort, which I have enjoyed with my girlfriends in much the same way my mother enjoyed her ski trips with friends. As Ethan and I drove up the steep hill to our mountain home, I caught a glimpse of the snowless ski runs and knew what I needed to do. This winter, when snow returned, I would place the last ornament among the trees that line the slopes. At our local ski area, the best blue runs are in an area called Paradise, my favorite named Southern Comfort, an irony I am fine with.

Alex Loeb writes, loves, and plays in Rossland, British Columbia. Her short stories and nonfiction essays have appeared in *The Sun, The Globe and Mail, Cleaning up Glitter, The Write Launch, HerStry,* and *Jelly Bucket*. She is currently querying her debut novel.

Gabriel Fauré's Requiem

(In seven gentle movements)

by Gerald Kamens

Introït et Kyrie (Lord, Have Mercy)

This Friday summer night, the work starts slowly. The orchestra begins, playing alone for just one measure, before the large choir, behind the musicians, softly enters the drama, requesting, in Church Latin, eternal rest and lasting light for the soul of the departed one—possibly a deceased parent or other family member, or, maybe, some long-ago king or other potentate.

I sit alone, crouched down in an end chair, in the last row of that ancient cathedral, far back from the performers. I'm not supposed to be there. Just a worn down American, clandestinely absorbing that sublime music rising from these intense, earnest Swiss men and women, mostly young, but some middle-aged or even gray-haired. They're mostly dressed in jeans and chinos, for this is a rehearsal, called the dress rehearsal in the U.S., despite the casual clothes. The scores of singers and instrumentalists are preparing for the real performance—which will take place on Monday, since rehearsals, I discovered, are not allowed in the cathedral on Saturdays and Sundays. Alas, I can't be there on Monday, as, my work in Geneva done, I return to Washington, and my family, tomorrow.

This first movement ends with the choir calling to Christ several times, first urgently, then more quietly, until, finally, there is a very soft request for mercy.

Offertoire (Offerings)

The choir sings "may the lasting light shine for them" and "free the souls of the departed from eternal punishment and the deep lake." Heavy stuff.

Nobody in the building seems to care that I snuck, through a side door, into this cathedral, John Calvin's long ago church home, behind the songsters and instrumentalists, who'd arrived outside in buses, cabs, and private cars. The only other non-performers visible to me are two gray-haired women meticulously sweeping the worn stone floor behind me. Down in front, a young baritone soloist is singing, beseeching God, all in Church Latin of course, to make departed souls transcend from death to life. His singing reminds me, also a baritone, of how and why I got to this place tonight.

The choir voices again pray that the departed souls may not fall into darkness.

Sanctus (Holy)

The choir gives praise in the highest to the departed one.

I suppose I'm feeling a bit sorry for myself. I can't imagine anyone giving me much praise for my labors these last four weeks, at the old League of Nations building in Geneva, a looming many decades-old attempt to attain a world peace that never came. I'm concluding my month-long stay, where I've been helping the U.S. prepare for its participation in the forthcoming "Earth Summit," the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), laboring five days a week on position papers and talking points for use by our high-level delegation to Rio de Janeiro next June. The announced purpose of said conference is "to reconcile worldwide economic development with protection of the environment." It was a painstaking task for us laborers in the Geneva vineyards, endless word smithing, punctuated with several often-combative evening forums with other countries' delegations.

A dreamy harp is heard, then the organ, the sopranos and altos joining in, singing Holy.

Pie Jesu (Holy Jesus)

Again the choir asks for "eternal rest."

I go over again in my head how I got here tonight. One of my fellow worker bees said she'd read in a Geneva paper—her French was much better than mine, that there'd be a rehearsal the next night, at some church, of a choir singing *Fauré's Requiem.*

In years past, I'd sung in that *Requiem*, along with several others, like Brahms' and Mozart's, in my church choir back in Arlington. I even knew what the Latin words meant in English. I also knew that baritones were sometimes in short supply in choral groups. So, with enormous chutzpah, I figured maybe I could ask this singing group, if I, a visiting American baritone, could join their rehearsal for one night.

Once I found the "church," I discovered it was actually an immense ancient cathedral, *Cathédrale Saint-Pierre*. Next to its locked front door, was a sign in French announcing the Monday performance of *Fauré's Requiem.* To be performed by the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, which I'd heard was one of the world's leading international orchestras. Mortified, I decided I had to flee the place as quickly as possible. But, at the last minute, hearing faint strains of voices inside, I changed my mind, and decided to put on a cloak of invisibility, and try to creep undetected into the building

Agnus Dei (Lamb of God)

"Light eternal shine for them"

I'm often a lazy singer in choirs and other choruses, particularly if I'm not too keen on the music, where I depend, I guess, on the mass of voices to pull me through, or my relatively good sight-reading abilities, or that I'll be standing next to someone who, whatever their vocal qualities, knows the notes better than I do. Or counts the beat better. I imagine I don't always feel the effort put into my singing in choruses, particularly in church choirs, is worth the rewards. Sounds selfish, I know. Mea culpa!

I study the bright attentive faces of the young men and women in the choir. Not looking at all lazy, they seem about the same age, which makes me suspect they're a chorus from a local university or music conservatory—often where professional orchestras, like this one, get their choruses. At the age of nineteen, I sang, with the Penn glee club, in the chorus of Beethoven's glorious Ninth Symphony, in German, with the Philadelphia Orchestra, and, later that year, again with that Orchestra, in the chorus of a concert version of *Carmen.* But my singing career was all downhill, prestige-wise, after that.

Libera Me (Free Me, God)

The baritone soloist sings alone. "Free me, Lord, from eternal death on that terrible day when the heavens will move and the earth, when you come to judge the world with fire." The choir then sings "I am trembling," followed by the very loud "day of wrath.'

Earlier this week, I took part in a heated debate with representatives of Zimbabwe, India, and a few other countries. Some nations wanted to have a world goal of eradicating poverty in the next twenty-five years. Speaking for the U.S., on instruction from my bosses, I said such a goal was impossible, and unwise to promise. Afterwards, the Indian Government delegate said to me in private that he knew that goal was impossible, but that the people of his country needed to hear it. To give them hope. Or something like that. The whole discussion depressed me.

The choir ends softly, singing, "May the light always shine." Finally, the soloist and the choir again repeat, "Free me God."

In Paradisum (In Paradise)

The choir sings, in concluding the *Requiem*, "May angels lead you to paradise."

I wonder, not for the first time, about the meaning of paradise—paradise for the deceased individual for whom this Requiem was composed, for the singers, and the players in the

Orchestre de la Suisse Romande that night, and for me. I come to no conclusion, for, as my church going mother-in-law once told my wife, nobody really knows what happens after you die.

As I listen to the soaring words, tears suddenly fill my eyes. I realize then how emotionally parched I've been feeling these last few days in Geneva. Is this why I ended up here tonight, to be liberated by this glorious music?

Finally, the choir sings, gently, about finding "eternal rest." It is over.

Donning again my cloak of hopeful invisibility, I hasten down a side aisle to a rear door exit, getting there before the performers. Outside, hailing a nearby cab back to my hotel room, I finish packing for my departure tomorrow, fortified by a few glasses of cheap red wine.

Gerald Kamens has worked in a mental hospital, the White House, the U.S. Senate, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, but spent most of his government career in the U.S. Agency for International Development, focused successively on Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and global environmental issues. He later worked for an international conflict resolution organization. In retirement, he acted and sang for six years in musicals. Now, at age ninety, he continues to provide support for people grieving the loss of a loved one and writes short adult and children's fiction and personal essays, some of which have appeared in national publications. Other than that, he and his wife, parents of four grown children, most days meditate, and play Scrabble and pool. They live in Falls Church, Virginia.

I'm Having Sex and I Will Die:

On (Nearly) Overcoming Purity Trauma

by Zoe Lambert

I'm sixteen and touching myself. Not even skin to skin. Through pyjamas and cotton knickers. "Masturbation," Mum says. "All your problems come from that." She must be right because our book *Questions Young People Ask, Answers That Work* argues that surely, masturbation is an unclean habit, even though it's not mentioned in the Bible. *Think consequences*, I tell myself. *Think how you're hurting Jehovah*. Masturbation is mentally and emotionally defiling. It leads to fornication, the book tells me. "Eww!" I write in my diary. "How gross!" But still, I can make myself come through thick fabric. Even though Mum has been in bed for days in the room next to mine. I lie on my back under my duvet, legs squeezed together, and use just one finger. Wipe my hand on the sheet because it's dirty. Listen, in case anyone can hear my silence.

I'm twenty, I'm having sex, and I will die. All my life, I've attended three meetings a week. I learned that we are separate from the world, that I should not yolk with unbelievers. But only three weeks into my student exchange in Paris and I'm in bed with a Worldly man who tastes delicious—of mint and Lipton tea. I made a vow to Jehovah to remain clean, to not engage in fornication, but this hot student I met in French class played melancholic Italian songs on his guitar.

If I give into this temptation, it will feel like dying when I'm forced to confess my sin. Three Elders, indistinguishable from each other with their paunches and receding hair and dull suits, will judge my broken vow to Jehovah of no sex before marriage. I will be dead to my family when I'm disfellowshipped, when they cut me out of their life and home. It will be a living death to lose everyone I know. Shit.

Outside, a police siren blares through Oberkampf. My thighs clench together as he hitches up my denim skirt. Maybe, if I stop now it won't count? But he has such long eyelashes and his shirt is off. Jeans flung to the floor. He's really quite hairy. Reasonably muscular. He turns over to open his bedside drawer. I will die with all the Worldly People

at Armageddon. I will be struck down by Jehovah while Mum and Dad will be safe in a Kingdom Hall in Manchester, ready for the paradise where Mum won't need her wheelchair.

He seems to be having trouble with the condom. I lift myself to see, but he turns over and we kiss, his stubble scratching my chin, his thing already pressing against me. I hear my mum's voice: "You're following your selfish desires." I know, Mum. But I hate being the uncool religious girl. How can you be so spiritually weak? I'm weak and hate myself for it. He is touching me down there. I make some kind of noise, but it doesn't feel as good as I expected. What am I? Rubber? Plastic? Part of me isn't even on the bed. She's a mannequin in the window. Eyes wide. Her body rigid. At Armageddon the ground will crack open and swallow me up, like the drawings in *The Watchtower*. He presses against me. Harder. Harder. A terrible stinging pain. He sighs and asks if I'm a virgin and I shrug and laugh. We flop on our backs, joking that life is never like films, but my heart is pounding at my crimes. Later, after we eat slices of baguette with Nutella, he tries again. Part of me watches from the window while he can't get it in.

Over the next few weeks, we go back to his apartment and have sex again and again and again. Each time there's blood on my thighs, on the sheet. Each time it hurts like a ramming stick. But he's so gorgeous with his dark curly hair and scientific ideas. Am I a bad person for wanting a different life from my one of Manchester meetings and ministry? I want to live. Not only in the Paradise, but now. And living means saying yes. Living means moving with him and making noises like in films and gritting my teeth. Living means doing what he wants. He asks me what I want. I shrug, laugh. He cracks on with what he hopes I want. Fornicators will not inherit God's kingdom, will they? He rubs me too hard, but I don't want to make him feel bad, so I gasp like it's great. He enters me again and I smile and breath through the pain, through my selfish desires.

Later, we lie there. It's late and he's asleep. He says he's falling for me, that he likes my open mind and spirit. I think we're falling in love. But there's a gnawing under my ribs. My eyes sting. I've started having sex and stopped sleeping. No one else among my friends is as moral as Witnesses, so no one gets what I'm going through. I try to explain to him, this student, but he says my religion is an anachronism and out of date. I look away and don't say what I think: surely, sex is less sinful if you don't enjoy it.

I'm twenty-one and gulping red wine to get me in the mood. I've moved to Florence to be with the love of my life, the student I met in Paris, like I'm the star of my own romantic comedy, so come on, I mean, I'm happy, right? So why does my stomach feel hollow yet full of stones? *You brought this on yourself.* Check my phone. No call from Mum. She's only just home from hospital after more steroids, though she will be fishing to find out what I'm up to. She found out last time, said, "You will tell the Elders or I will." Finish the glass. Pour more while he's in the bathroom. Nothing calms like wine. The Duomo is at the end of via dei Servi, but my room smells of damp and pigeons. Mould sprouts on the wall.

Being in that room where three Elders, three middle-aged men asked over and over, "How many times, Sister, did you have sex?", has stripped me of my body. I can't eat. I take laxatives when I do. My hair is falling out. *The Watchtower* magazine reasons that the Judicial Committee is needed "to keep the congregation clean,' but I said nothing to those men, nothing more than they already knew. I sat there, the plastic chair digging into my thighs. Knees pinned together. Face hot with shame. My stillness mistaken for repentance. At least I was not disfellowshipped. At least my family can still speak to me.

My boyfriend comes back. The blow-up bed squeaks against the floor as he sits down to unlace his shoes. I sip my wine while he gets undressed, my back against the cold wall. He takes my glass, places it on the floor, and kisses me. At least it doesn't hurt anymore. At least I'm working out what I like. I open my mouth to say, "Can you…" as he tugs my pyjama bottoms down, but the Elders' lined faces ask again: *How many times, Sister, how many times?* My desires are unclean. I am unclean. I wash myself every day with Femfresh, but still, I feel dirty. I want him to go down on me, but what if I smell? My boyfriend asks if I'm okay and I say, of course, and to prove this, pull up my top. The damp air pricks my arms. Making love is what you give to the other person, and that's what matters, right? Not your own selfish pleasure. Not my selfish desire. *You'd be happy if you obeyed Jehovah*. I grab my phone again. Still no call. It will be tomorrow now.

"Switch it off," he says. "Don't let your mother run your life."

"I told you," I say. "I'll never be in that room again."

He sighs and says I'm an adult and it's ridiculous that I pretend to never see my boyfriend, lying like a teenager.

I look away. A shutting down feeling, my throat closing up. But some knowledge deep inside: I will not let my chronically ill mother have to choose between me and the religion. He strokes my hair from my face and says he's sorry he's upset me again. We kiss and he pulls down my knickers. Later, in my diary, I write, "I don't think I want "it" anymore. But I don't say anything. I can't move."

I'm a twenty-two-year-old MA student and snogging an undergraduate in the student union. He's cute and two years younger than me. An ageing DJ plays eighties music.
I ended things with my first boyfriend on the phone. Refused to see him. Said, "I need to be on my own." Not the truth. Left him broken with not knowing, unable to admit I'd slept with him many times when I didn't want to and now, I can't bear to see him. I sway, drunkenly, to Kylie Minogue. At the bottom of my vodka and lemonade, I see everything clearly. I need to start again. Not have sex for a long time, not until I know I'm ready. Not for a religion or family. But for me. Over the music, I shout, "I'm not sleeping with you!"

"What, what did you say?"

"I'm not sleeping with you!"

"Oh, right, of course."

My chest feels more expansive. We dance over to my housemates. Later, we kiss again, like it's the school disco.

I'm twenty-three and at a new guy's flat. He's beautiful and has an attractive swagger. He wants to become a director. He knows he will. I can pick up anyone I want, and I like the feeling this gives me. The tingling thrill on my skin. We're kissing and he's stroking my thigh. His hand edges to my thong. I push it away playfully. I say, "I told you I'm not sleeping with you." We laugh and drink for hours. He walks me home in the early hours of the morning. He says, "That was fun, but I'm not seeing you again. I want you to know that." I blink, confused. I hadn't thought that far ahead. I close my porch door behind me and sink onto the step. The morning light is grey through the frosted glass. Some feeling of being put in my place. Like I had to be reminded of something. For some reason, I start

to cry. He's just a dickhead. But I can't stop. Gulping tears. I experience some kind of grief, but I don't know what for. For something that keeps getting lost. For my pitiful attempts. I cry for my first partner and his emails saying he's heartbroken and doesn't understand what's happened. I don't answer them. I cry for the fact I can't even research my faith without panicking that I'm an Apostate, without my brain shutting down. I go into the kitchen, eat what I can find in the fridge and vomit it up again.

I'm twenty-four and on top of the guy I've been dating a few months. We're in my room in Manchester, my housemate singing along to Blondie in the shower. An orgasm is building in me. What a relief to find I can. Two ways now. I reach down and touch his face. He sucks my thumb. I come and then he does. We lie on the pillows. His eyes close. I place my hands over my face. All I want is to put what happened behind me. It wasn't that bad, was it? At least that terrible guilt over sex has faded. My mother's multiple sclerosis gets steadily worse. She needs me. Now I feel bad when I don't visit, don't help out. Nothing I do feels enough.

I reach over and take my morning citalopram. He asks why I even need those. My back goes straight and I swallow more water. My phone rings. He's muttering behind me, "Why do you always answer. We're in bed, for Christ's sake."

"Something might have happened," I hiss. "She's ill. I'm a carer!" I answer, "Hi Mum!" while pulling on my dressing gown. "Aha, sure, yeah, I'll be over later. Do you want to go to the Trafford Centre?"

"Who is that?" Mum asks.

"My housemate. I'm in the living room. One sec." I go into the hall while she asks if I went to the meeting on Sunday and I say I had a cold and stayed home. I will definitely tell her soon that I don't go to meetings anymore. Definitely.

When I come back in, he's getting dressed. He announces I have a problematic relationship with my family, that I always answer the phone to my mother, no matter where we are—the other day in a restaurant. "It's just rude."

"But she's ill," I say. "Something might be wrong."

"Why did you lie to her?'

I turn away and fold my arms.

Behind me, he says, “This isn’t going anywhere, is it?”

“No,” I say. “It’s not.” A headache stings behind my eyes. He might be a lecturer in classics and ancient philosophy, but he knows little about what people must do to survive.

Later, I help my mother put her shoes on, fit her feet on the pedals of her wheelchair, and something in me is soothed.

I’m twenty-seven and having unprotected sex with a man who’s always angry. It’s early morning in a London hotel. “You were funny,” he says, like he’s proud of me. “The whole hotel could hear you shouting while we were arguing.” He smiles and kisses my breast. I’m wet, and he slips inside me, and we come at the same time with no effort. Shocking, really, the disapproving voice in my head says, because this is awful. But the cycle of our arguments really is my fault. He left his partner for me, and I won’t even tell my family he exists. And yes, I left my family’s religion, but that was a while ago. I’m using religion as an excuse. I argue with him in angry texts. He won’t answer my calls to explain. Nothing I say seems to help. There’s always something I haven’t thought of that hurts him. Now, however, he snuggles up to me, kissing my jaw. His sperm drips between my legs. “I’ll have to get the morning after pill,” I say.

He pulls away and the air shifts. My chest clenches. Silence. The brief happy interlude is over and I already yearn for it.

When we get back to Manchester, he sends me more angry texts, saying all he wants is for us to have a baby, He’d been hoping I’d get pregnant this morning. He needs children. He needs solidity. “I can’t believe you’re having a mini-abortion,” he says on the phone. I put the phone in my bag and take the pill anyway.

I visit my mother and break down crying. “It’s a man, isn’t it?” I shake my head, giving them nothing. I told them I don’t go to Meetings now, but the threat of that room and those men is always something that might still happen. “Here,” she says, her voice kinder, more maternal than it’s been in years. “Have one of my Valium.”

Soon the boyfriend who shouts leaves me for someone else. While he is still with her, we have unprotected sex again.

I'm twenty-nine and having unsatisfactory sex with a barman in his single bed in Whalley Range. We snorted cocaine off the disabled toilet seat in a lock-in while snow flickered on the window. A pang strikes as I think of my mother, of the many disabled toilets we've squeezed into together by gaining entrance with her radar key, of the smell of urine in a catheter. "Your hair's still falling out," she said recently. "Why don't you look after yourself?"

The barman and I went back to his house. I'm hoping for more cocaine, but there isn't any. He sleeps. I don't. My eyes sting, but I'm too lethargic to get up. In the morning, I walk home through thick snow, sickened with myself. This doesn't stop me from sleeping with a journalist, an actor, another barman, another barman. Get a coil to keep me safe. Have guilty, shameful STD checks because I no longer bother to say "Use a condom." I wake up, not sure where I am. Lost my handbag. Lost my phone. Restarted my PhD three times. Paused my studies for months because the angry guy broke me, though he says I was already broken, and he had no chance. Instead, I go to parties on a Friday and come home on a Monday, where time stretches into ribbons and I feel deep connections to people I've just met. Fuck that guy. Fuck everything. Dab or snort or swallow. My veins ache with what I can't speak of. Only briefly will the clench around my chest loosen. A handsome Scottish Tory tells me off for sleeping with him too soon. Fuck him, whatever. Still, I feel sick, ashamed. See another barman covered in tattoos who is gentle and only listens to the Beach Boys, then a musician, an ex-musician, a publicist. Sometimes for a night, a few weeks, sometimes on/off for months. Best to end things before they do. Scrape back some power. A threesome with a friend and her ex in a hotel while I'm on my period. This is it; I've broken all my taboos. Am I free now? But I'm too embarrassed, some deeper liquid shame. "I want to watch," I say. So, I do. She's beautiful. I wonder what it would be like to be more into women.

I'm thirty-three. It's a damp Monday morning, and I've done it again. Sleeping with someone and then regretting it. Met on OkCupid. Our second date on Friday, watching a band, The Sheep Dogs, at Night and Day in Manchester. He was happy to go home, but some mischief took over, my old need to live in the moment. "Come back to Chorlton," I said. There are late-night bars. "Come back to mine," I said. There's wine in the fridge.

Now it's raining and my flat is silent. For the next couple of weeks, he's busy, he says, fighting fascists. His organising job has long hours. Does it, though? Really? Are there that many fascists in Manchester? Checking my phone over and over when I should be marking student work. Can't bear it anymore. Text him saying it's over. Phew. Breathe. I tell a friend I've bravely ended things again and she says, "Why? I thought you said you liked him?" I have no answer. Am I the problem? I am finally earning enough to pay for therapy. When I tell the counsellor I was brought up a Jehovah's Witness, he says, jokingly, "You're going to need a lot of therapy!"

"I'll need a female therapist," I say.

My OkCupid date and I bump into each other at a political event a month or so later. I have a new strategy. How about honest communication. How about taking things a bit more slowly. We do, and it works. Only half a lifetime to get here.

I'm forty and my OkCupid date-now-partner asks, "What do you fantasise about?" Together for years now. "Oh, you know," I mumble. "Stuff." I close my eyes. I'm not being honest again. "What about you?" I ask. He tells me. "Great, let's do that then."

Later, I drink some wine and write in my journal. I have never fantasised about sex. How can I when I've been told my desires are bad? I share this with him because I've learned that shame thrives in the dark. We spend hours researching ethical feminist porn to give me some ideas. Turns out I really like porn, even shit porn. I stop being so vanilla. I decide I like how I smell. We breathe, 'you're dirty,' to each other, but that doesn't mean 'unclean'. I read novels where characters confidently have sex. I admire this younger generation of writers, their lack of prudishness. How do they do it?

It's lockdown, and Mum is dying. Every week, I drive to her house and take over the night shift so Dad can sleep. All night, I turn her in her bed so she doesn't get sores. In the morning, I shower her. I wash her vagina and this, this act, this one thing is beautiful.

My mother dies believing she's going to paradise without me. I calm myself with the Valium she left behind. Grief rips me open, but I start writing about the first time I had sex. Trying to capture what that was like. Words roll in my mouth. I want to spit them out. My stomach hurts with what might happen if those words are read. I end scenes coyly. Use flowery metaphors. Write my experience of sex like it's a romantic comedy. Delete,

delete, delete! Try again. I start to have sexual dreams, like I'm a teenager, of boyfriends from the past, of now. In the spaces between memory and dream, something shifts in me. I wake, horny and jump on OkCupid partner. "This," he says, "is unusual."

I'm forty-something and wanking furiously. I pause to search in my bedside drawer. I've had a lot of sex, and I won't die. But my mother is dead, and I'm alive with rage. There are words for what I went through. There are terms and diagnoses. There are theories and studies. Words like purity trauma, religious abuse, high-control groups, narcissistic abuse. There are words like freeze and fawn. Fight and flight. It wasn't just me. In the nineties, unmarried pregnant women in Ireland were still being abused in laundries. In the US, little girls were pledging their purity to their fathers. Across the world, people are killed for being gay. Your sexuality is only a part of who you are, but if it's stamped on, it crushes all of you. Like Orwell's boot stamping on a face forever. There it is. My vibrator. I can write the words "my vibrator" without a shiver of shame. No, that's not true. A bit of shame, but not enough to stop me writing it. Not nearly enough.

Zoe Lambert is a writer based in Lancaster, UK. Her current work explores the religious and purity trauma of growing up as a Jehovah's Witness. She has published numerous short stories and is a lecturer in creative writing at Lancaster University. She is interested in the formal possibilities of fragments and moments in narrating lives and is currently working on a fragmented memoir exploring these questions through the lens of mothers and daughters.

Question Marks

by Sydney Lea

Because I crave the dawn, at 5:30 this morning I walked a dirt lane in Vermont, the sun having just breached the eastern ridges. I saw my first butterfly of the year, spotlit by a beam, perched on coyote scat.

The scene didn't typify what most people think of in conjuring butterflies. Even lacking its marks on either wing, we might label this insect Question Mark. In a season of renewal, the sentimentalist (like me) longs for flowers and nectar, or at least for things non-repulsive; but when it isn't feeding on feces, the Question Mark likes a carcass or sap oozing from a tree, the ranker the better. I silently challenged it: "You're an icon of spring! Can't you *act* like one?"

A few yards on, I noticed an earthworm, wet with dew, a small dash of light. The scientific name for its pale saddle is the *clitellum,* which secretes slime to protect worms' eggs in mating. *Both* worms exchange sperm in the sex act; both harbor those eggs. Such matters seemed as baffling as a shit-loving butterfly. If the world couldn't be beautiful, could it not at least make sense?

No one includes excretion, slime, and decay in daydreams of spring. We want twittering warblers, wood frogs quacking like ducks, familiar calls of returning geese. When these yearnings were canceled this morning, I remembered my Grandma's frequent protest: *Let's think about something more pleasant!*

So I thought of a favorite lake, its ice run out by now. I could go launch my canoe there if I chose. I almost felt water resist my paddle, saw the bow crease the surface, which reflected sky, cloud, bird, and the blossoms of bowing shadbush in upside-down detail along the shore. Foulness couldn't encumber me. The world stood unrent, harmonious.

A mile down, I decided to rest on a stump above a cellar hole from a more pastoral epoch. In that moment, I knew my fantasy was another mere product of yearning. Honest observation wouldn't lead anyone to read the natural world as harmonious, let alone gentle. It was, as the poet said, red in tooth and claw. I envisioned the fisher I watched

eating a snowshoe hare alive last fall, the prey screaming until it could no more. Oddly disinterested, I noted the hare's legs had started to whiten; its body would never reach its full winter pelage.

Despite, or more likely because of such an example, along with infinite others noted over eighty-one years; despite or because of racism, vitriolic politics, war, and rape, I've resolved to value beauty, whenever and wherever I find it.

And so, on my way home, when I re-encountered the Question Mark, in full sunlight now and still perched on its clump of dung, I forced myself to salute it. As for the earthworm, it had slithered off somewhere.

A former Pulitzer finalist in poetry, **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* and his second novel, Now *Look*, were both published earlier this year.

Stigmata

by Angela Lam

1981

I'm ten years old, home alone with my sisters.

Five-year-old Elizabeth grabs seven-year-old Cynthia's ballerina doll.

"Give her back!" Cynthia yells.

Elizabeth tugs so hard, she twists off the doll's arm.

Cynthia screams. "You're trying to kill her!"

I burst into the bedroom.

Elizabeth drops the doll and scales the shelves of the corner bookcase. Her eyes peer over the ledge like a cat ready to pounce.

"Make her get down," Cynthia says, cradling her broken doll.

I'm not about to climb. But my mom is still working at the bank for another half hour. Fifteen minutes ago, my father left for work at the grocery store. I tell Cynthia to wait until Mom gets home. "She's not going anywhere," I say, tilting my chin toward the towering bookcase.

Thirty-five minutes later, the door between the kitchen and the garage opens.

Cynthia scuttles down the hallway. "Mom-mee! Elizabeth broke my ballerina."

My mom hustles back to the bedroom and glances around. "I don't see her," she says.

I point. "Up there."

My mom's gaze travels up the length of the floor-to-ceiling bookcase. "My word, Lizzy, how did you get up there?"

"I'm not coming down," she says.

My mom shrugs. "Go ahead. Stay up there." She leaves to change out of her power suit and heels. But instead of making dinner, my mom calls my father at the grocery store. "Elizabeth climbed the bookcase. She won't get down. I'm telling you something's wrong with her. She doesn't think like the other girls. We need to get her help." My mom listens. She purses her lips and curls her free hand into a fist. "No, you don't understand. She's

troubled. She needs to see a psychologist." She slams down the phone. A moment later, it rings. She picks it up. "I'll take her. You don't have to go. It's not a shame on the family. She needs help. We're her parents. We need to help her."

Elizabeth comes down from the bookcase while the rest of us eat dinner. The next day my father lectures us about playing nicely with one another and not getting into dangerous situations by climbing furniture. The peace lasts for less than a week. But no matter what Elizabeth does—draws on a doll's face with a permanent marker, steals our clothes and hides them under her bed, or rips pages out of books we are reading—no one takes her to see a psychologist.

1990

I get a call from my mom during the week. I answer in the living room of my apartment that I share with my boyfriend.

"Do you have a minute?" my mom asks.

I do. It's late in the afternoon before my boyfriend comes home from work and I leave for my night class. I take a seat on the day bed, one of the only pieces of furniture in the room. "What's wrong?" My mom only calls when something is the matter. My father calls all the time. Just to talk. To see how I'm doing. Because he misses me.

"Do you know who called Child Protective Services?"

I gasp, and my lower back tightens. "What happened to make someone call?"

My mom launches into a story about how my six-year-old sister, Sylvia, was making a sandwich and Elizabeth took the knife out of her hand and accidentally cut her. I know I will get a different version of the story if I ask either Sylvia or Elizabeth.

"Someone named Fran reported abuse," my mom says. "Isn't that your best friend's mother's name?"

Why would Laura's mom call Child Protective Services? I never talk about my family with anyone. I know better. Save face, as my father always says. Not even my boyfriend knows how violent Elizabeth can be. "Laura's mom doesn't know anything. I don't know who Fran is."

Hours later, as I sit in my English class, the truth surfaces. Fran is the first name of the psychologist who treats my insomnia. An uneasy feeling tingles in my toes. I will

have to cancel my next appointment and find someone else who can help relieve my night terrors.

2002

Elizabeth drives my parents two hours to attend my daughter's second birthday party. After most of the guests have left, Elizabeth tells my mom and my father it is time to go home.

My father wants to stay a little longer. "One more piggyback ride," he tells her, as he hoists my daughter onto his back. He trots down the hall and my daughter giggles.

"Let me use the bathroom first," my mom says, waiting for my sister-in-law to finish using the facilities.

A muscle twitches in Elizabeth's jaw, but she does not say anything.

Later, my mother-in-law watches the three of them leave the house. They are parked down the street. "Did you see that?" my mother-in-law asks, pointing to the window. "Your sister pushed your dad into the car."

I glance outside. "Maybe he tripped."

"No, she clearly pushed him," she says.

My husband touches his mother's hand. "Don't get involved."

"But someone needs to do something." She strides toward the front door.

By the time she reaches the parked car, Elizabeth has pulled away from the curb.

My mother-in-law does not chase the vehicle.

Elizabeth is the only sister who still lives at home. She wants to dedicate her life to God, but she can't pass the psychological tests to become a nun. She won't share her results with anyone. It is a secret she keeps.

After the birthday party, Elizabeth quits her job as a nurse and enrolls in the police academy. A photo of her graduation ceremony graces the mantle in my parents' house. Whenever I see it during a visit, I wonder what tests she had to pass and why they weren't as stringent as the ones administered by the church, but I know better. I don't ask.

2010

The call comes while I am sitting at my desk, reviewing a loan file at work. My youngest sister, Sylvia, breathes into the phone. “Dad broke his back. Lizzy pushed him down the stairs in the garage. He’s in the hospital. They won’t release him until they have someone at home who can care for him full-time. Can you take time off? I’m working and going to school, and I can’t quit either right now. And Cynthia lives in Texas. She doesn’t want anything to do with us. She’s never forgiven Dad for kicking her out after high school.” Sylvia’s voice breaks into a sob.

My father has Parkinson’s disease. He falls all the time. Why does Sylvia insist he was pushed?

Sylvia gulps so much air she starts to hiccup. “Mom needs help. She’s addicted to this video game called Second Life where she flirts with young men and spends money buying clothes and houses. I need you. Will you come?”

When I arrive at my parents’ house, I am alone. I use the key my father sent me years ago to unlock the front door. But the key doesn’t fit. I call Sylvia at work. She says, “Elizabeth changed the locks.”

A half hour later, Elizabeth pulls up in her car with my parents. I help them into the house. My dad hobbles using a walker. He is stooped and silent and suddenly older than I’ve ever seen him. I don’t comment. I just help however I can. Making meals. Keeping my mom company while my father sleeps. Leaving Elizabeth alone as she dresses in her police uniform for her beat.

A few years ago, Elizabeth bought a house, but she spends most of her time here with my parents. I believe that she needs to control them like they once tried to control her. But she will never admit it. No one will admit anything. We are complicit in a painful silence that aches to be broken open.

Over the next few weeks, I set things in motion. First, I arrange for a nurse to visit part-time for my father. Next, I arrange for a respite worker to visit every day to give my mom a couple of hours to relax.

By the end of the twelve weeks, my father’s back has healed, my mom’s time at the computer has decreased, and Elizabeth’s temper has lowered to a simmer.

Sylvia clutches my hands and tells me I can't go. "I don't trust things will stay this good," she says.

But I have a family waiting for me. A son who can't talk. A daughter who talks constantly. A husband who loves me too much. Who will take care of my life if I stay?

So, with trepidation, I hug my father and my mother goodbye. I promise to call once a week and bring my family every other weekend to visit.

Elizabeth is sleeping in after a late shift. I let her sleep rather than wake her to say goodbye. She looks so peaceful when she rests.

2015

My life is unraveling as quickly as my father's body is falling apart.

After twenty-three years of marriage, I am getting a divorce.

When I call my mother to tell her the news, she reprimands me. "Who will take care of you when you're older if you're all alone?"

I ask to speak to my father. He'll understand.

But when he gets on the phone, his voice is so faint, I can't make out the words. I know it's a symptom of his Parkinson's, which is only getting worse. He needs help with the tasks of daily life. My mom and Elizabeth do the best they can, but the twenty-four-hour care is exhausting.

I'm stuck, two hours away, battling through mediation to avoid divorce court. I am distilling my life into the essentials, leaving everything behind except what I can haul in one truck—my clothes, my books, and my art supplies. Each day, I find myself unspooling. Sometimes I fear I'll snap. My ex has custody of the children. I wonder if I will ever see them again.

When I get the call from Elizabeth that my father has fallen in the bathroom in the middle of the night, I drive to see him in the convalescent home. The nursing staff have forgotten to change him. Elizabeth says he's in a lot of pain between the broken bones, the urinary tract infection, and bedsores the size of golf balls.

When I sit beside my father's hospital bed, he tells me he was wrong about telling us when we were children to put him in a nursing facility when his body started to fail. "I

want to go home," he says, squeezing my hand. "Lizzy takes better care of me than this." His eyes are blurry with tears.

I know Elizabeth has a violent temper, but I also know my father has learned to navigate her moods, speaking up and being quiet at the right time, the master of nonconfrontation. I think of my own life, the handful of times I've voiced my concerns, and how everything fell apart as a consequence of my assertion, from my career to my marriage. I marvel at my father's ability to toe the line to get his needs met while staying safe and wonder if it is a gift or just an act because I'm not around him enough to know the difference.

2018

My father is diagnosed with lymphoma. The oncologist says it is too advanced to treat.

On the morning of my father's death, Elizabeth calls. Her voice is shaky and hard to understand. "He passed in the middle of the night," she says between sobs. "He sat up and looked at the bedroom doorway. I followed his gaze. Someone was beckoning, then he was gone."

I am shocked. Not by the apparition, but by the depth of Elizabeth's grieving. I worry how she will go on living when the one she has been living for is no longer with us.

What shocks me more is Elizabeth doesn't attend the funeral although she wrote the eulogy printed in the pamphlet my sisters and I hand out to guests.

"She doesn't want anyone to see her," my mother says when my sisters and I ask.

"Why not?" Cynthia asks.

"She's not feeling well," my mother says.

"That's too bad," Sylvia says.

Later, after my father's casket is lowered into the ground and my sisters and I toss roses into the gaping maw of earth, I drive my mother home. My sisters follow in their rental cars.

Inside the house we grew up in, we gather around the kitchen table. I brew a pot of coffee although it is late afternoon. I fill each mug to the brim and bring them to the table. Sylvia removes the creamer from the refrigerator, and Cynthia stretches on her toes

to reach the sugar in the pantry. We sit and sip and reminisce, sharing our favorite stories about the man who loved us.

In the midst of our conversation, I hear the garage door rattle on its hinges.

My mother jumps, almost spilling her half-full cup of coffee. “You guys need to leave.”

“Why?” Sylvia asks, topping off her mug of coffee.

“Elizabeth is home.”

“I thought she wasn’t feeling well,” Cynthia says, narrowing her eyes.

My mother gulps, backing toward the door that separates the kitchen from the garage.

As she opens her mouth, the door opens, and Elizabeth strides into the room.

A collective gasp emits from us. Elizabeth is gaunt, bone-thin and weary, with a haunted look in her too large brown eyes. She dumps her bag of groceries on the tiled counter and glowers at my mother. “What are they doing here?” she demands. “I told you I didn’t want anyone seeing me.”

My mother takes two steps back and lifts her hands in surrender. “I didn’t think you were here.”

“I told you I was going grocery shopping. You want dinner tonight, don’t you?”

Cynthia slips between my mother and Elizabeth. “Calm down,” she says. “We were just having a cup of coffee and talking.”

Elizabeth grabs the nearest coffee mug and slams it against the floor. The ceramic shatters. Milky brown coffee puddles around the jagged pieces. She points to the front door. “Go, or I’ll break every one of them.”

“You can’t make us leave,” Sylvia says, standing. “It’s not your house.”

Elizabeth puffs out her birdcage chest. “What are you going to do about it?”

Sylvia removes a cell phone from her purse. “I’m calling the police.”

“Go ahead,” Elizabeth scoffs. “I’m in charge of the department. Your complaint will go nowhere.”

Cynthia tugs on my mother’s arm. “Do something.”

My mother trembles. “Sylvia, get off the phone. Right now.” My mother nods toward the front door. “Everyone, please go.”

Speechless, my sisters and I gather our purses and leave.

My mother locks the door behind us.

Standing in the searing afternoon heat, my sisters and I stare wide-eyed and worried.

“What just happened?” Cynthia asks.

Sylvia lowers the phone from her ear. “The dispatcher won’t send anyone.”

“Why not?” I ask. “Didn’t you tell them about what just happened?”

“I did,” Sylvia says, “but no one was hurt. They can’t do anything.”

Frustrated, I stand by my car and call Adult Protective Services. The woman who answers the phone tells me there is nothing she can do unless my mother is the one seeking help.

“But what about what we witnessed?” I ask. “Doesn’t that count?”

“I’m sorry,” the woman says. “But we can’t do anything unless the occupant of the house wants help.”

My eyes blur when I end the call. “They can’t do anything unless mom wants help.”

Cynthia throws up her arms. “She’s too afraid to get help.”

“What else can we do?” Sylvia asks.

A long moment of silence wraps around us.

I am the first to speak. “We wait until Mom decides she wants help.”

Sylvia sighs. “What if she never wants help?”

“Then we do nothing,” I say.

I’d rather be complicit in a pact of silence than risk my mother’s well-being by unintentionally provoking Elizabeth, even if nothing is resolved.

Now

This story doesn’t have an ending.

No resolution, no denouncement.

No happily-ever-after.

Once a week, I call my friend, Daniel, in North Carolina, during my six-mile run in the predawn cold. With my headset snug against my head and the phone tucked securely in my zipped jacket pocket, I steady my pace as I listen to the phone ringing. When he

answers, he tells me about his growing concern for his elderly mother who is married to a man who will cook for himself but not for her even though she is bedridden from a recent surgery. “No one can do anything,” he says. “I met with the head nurse before my mother was released to talk about my mother’s abusive husband, and do you know what she said?”

I do, but I pretend I don’t.

“She said, ‘There’s nothing we can do unless your mother wants to press charges.’” He huffs. “And you know what? She won’t. She says she loves him. Even though he treats her like shit.”

My heart pounds in my chest, not from running but from fear. My gloved hands, usually cold from the early morning mist, are warm with sweat. I could keep quiet, say nothing, like I’ve done time and time again. But I don’t. After slowing my pace to a brisk walk, I confide about Elizabeth’s erratic behavior and how it impacts the entire family, especially my mother. I tell him about how my sisters and I tried to intervene, once a long time ago, and how nothing changed. “We’ve been silent ever since,” I say, the guilt competing with the relief of breaking my silence.

For a long moment, he is quiet. “I wonder how many of us are there.”

I rattle off statistics I’ve memorized over the years: ten percent of adults sixty-five and older are subject to elder abuse with sixty percent of abusers family members. One in twenty-four cases of abuse are never reported, mainly for reasons of dependency or fear of retaliation.

“My mom’s totally dependent,” Daniel says.

I tell him I’m scared of Elizabeth. I’ve witnessed her violent outbursts over her entire life, and I’ll do anything to avoid them. Sometimes I can’t believe the sacrifices I’ve made to keep the semblance of peace. Like not seeing my mother. I call her once a week, and she always ends the call as soon as Elizabeth enters the room. I’ve stopped asking my mother when I can come visit. I’ve stopped hoping she will attend any event I’ve invited her to, from my fiftieth birthday to my daughter’s wedding.

Tears clot my throat, and my voice grows hoarse. I can’t say any more, so I say goodbye.

“Take care of yourself,” Daniel says.

After I end the call, I shorten my stride and pump my arms. As my feet pound the pavement, I feel my heartbeat settle beneath my ribcage and my breathing even out. The sun breaks through the fog, and faint yellow streaks shine through the murky gray. As I round the corner to my street, I feel the expansion of my lungs and tightening in my legs, and my burden lightens because, for a passing moment, it was shared with someone who understands.

Angela Lam is the author of several novels, two memoirs, and two short story collections. Her memoir, *Red Eggs and Good Luck*, about growing up Chinese American won both the Mary Tanenbaum Award for Creative Nonfiction and the She Writes Press Memoir Discovery Contest. *The Fool and the Magician*, a midlife memoir, was longlisted for the Memoir Magazine Book Award. Lam is also a visual artist, specializing in acrylic landscapes and mixed media abstracts. She currently teaches at Gotham Writers Workshop.

Pitching Pinch Hitters

by Mark Lucius

I was twenty-five that June of 1977, still in journalism graduate school. I knew not one single thing about public relations. I knew little more about Manpower, which called itself the world's largest temporary help firm. My new boss there, a couple years older than me and far better dressed, looked past my ignorance of his "profession." As Director of PR, he liked my writing and hired me part-time.

A little before noon my first day in the company's Milwaukee headquarters, with my PR experience at three hours and counting, my boss called me into his office. He posed a question that surprised me, because I could answer it with a certain authority.

"Have you ever heard of the Rolaids award for relief pitchers?"

"Yeah," I said, "I do know about that award."

He asked for details, perhaps to test me, perhaps to educate himself. It turned out he was not a big baseball fan. I told him that the previous year, 1976, Rolaids had teamed up with Major League Baseball to present the inaugural "Rolaids Relief Man Awards" to the top relievers in the National and American Leagues. I owned up to what I didn't know, like who actually won the first awards.

Winners, schminners. It was the campaign my boss liked, for the antacid whose slogan claimed to answer the question: "How do you spell relief? "R-O-L-A-I-D-S."

"Here's the thing," he said in a low, conspiratorial tone, leaning forward across the round oak table he used as a desk. "Manpower has a 'Pinch Hitters' campaign for industrial temporary workers, who work in warehouses and the like. We can do the same thing as Rolaids. It's a perfect baseball tie-in."

Small Bats, Big Balls

I didn't know it then, but my boss was embellishing by calling Manpower's "Pinch Hitters" a "campaign." The company's advertising and promotional budget was reserved

mainly for its expanding office services area. The industrial effort amounted to a few print materials proclaiming such sentiments as “Our ‘Pinch Hitters’ are good in the clutch.” There was also a customer “leave-behind,” a five-inch-long wooden pencil shaped like a tiny baseball bat.

The miniscule industrial budget mattered little to my boss. He believed that most ideas born small could be grown big. He was hired, he had allowed, “To put Manpower on the map.” Although a product of journalism school himself, he resembled an old-fashioned publicist. In his previous job, he had promoted such events as “The World’s Tallest Man in the World’s Shortest Parade.”

I took him at his word when he told me Manpower would introduce a “Pinch Hitter of the Year” award that summer. With or *without* the cooperation of Major League Baseball. And he wanted me to work on it.

That afternoon, we got down to business. Why, he asked, would we have a “Pinch Hitter of the Year” contest if Manpower couldn’t stage the presentation at the World Series? I held my tongue. The World Series seemed a reach, but it was my first day. I made a note to put the World Series into a plan. When I reminded my boss that Major League Baseball at that time had four divisions, two in each league, he quickly decided we’d present awards to the best pinch hitter in each division.

More brainstorming. He wanted a contest with both statistics *and* judges. The stats would determine the four divisional awards. The judges would choose the “ultimate” Pinch Hitter of the Year. If it seemed excessive to round up a posse of judges to determine what the stats would likely reveal, my boss was unperturbed.

At our next meeting, I shared my concern about obtaining pinch-hitting statistics. No problem, he said. “If we can’t get them from Bowie Kuhn (then Commissioner of Baseball), we’ll get them someplace. I know a lot of people.”

I didn’t “know a lot of people,” but I knew baseball. If we were to have judges, we would have to include great pinch hitters or risk losing credibility. He told me to find some.

I pored through books and records, made calls, began to know a few people.

To represent the National League, my research turned up “Smoky” Burgess. I knew the name well. While playing for five teams from the late 1940s into the 1960s, Ol’ Smoky accumulated 145 career pinch hits—then the most in major league history. For the

American League, I selected a lesser-known baseball journeyman named Dave Philley, who had set a record of his own. In 1958 and 1959, playing for the conveniently named Philadelphia Phillies, Dave Philley knocked pinch hits in nine straight at-bats. Nine different games, nine consecutive hits.

I tracked down the addresses of both players and wrote oh-so-enthusiastic letters of invitation. “We would like you to attend the World Series at our expense and help present the 1977 Manpower Pinch Hitter of the Year!” When I followed up by phone, I found Burgess coaching for a minor league team in North Carolina and Philley in his hometown of Paris, Texas. Both were reserved, polite and delighted at the prospect of an all-expense-paid trip to the World Series.

All this was fine with my boss. Almost. “Those guys are good,” he said. “But we need big names.”

Make No Little Plans

“Big names” were different. With rare exceptions, big names are not pinch hitters. I went looking for times when a big name might have hit a pinch-hit home run, say, in an All-Star game.

And I found one. In 1971, representing the Oakland Athletics, Reggie Jackson clubbed a pinch-hit home run 539 feet, the longest in All-Star history. The ball slammed into a light tower on the roof of Tiger Stadium in Detroit. But now, in 1977, Reggie was an active member of the New York Yankees. It appeared he might play in that year’s World Series. (Famously, he did.)

With no other options, I decided that our judges wouldn’t have to be pinch hitters at all. They could just be *all-time* great hitters. By then, I didn’t even ask my boss. I knew he would approve.

Over the next few weeks, I went after names that even casual baseball fans would recognize, players whose statues were, or someday would be, in the baseball Hall of Fame. As a college reporter, I’d found it intimidating to pick up the phone and ask someone a question I feared might not be well-received. But there was something freeing

about following the trail to find Ted Williams, Willie Mays, or Stan Musial. Who would expect me to reach them?

Ted Williams's phone number wasn't in any book. I called the Boston Red Sox, where Williams had spent his entire career. One contact led to another, and to another, and then…

Someone told me that to reach Ted Williams, you had to leave a message with one of his fishing buddies. Somehow, I got a number, and somehow, left a message. A week later, the fishing buddy called back from a boat off the coast of Nova Scotia. With the background sounds of the ocean, wind, and a clamorous motor, I shouted an invitation. Something like, "To all our friends in the North Atlantic, it would be our great pleasure if Mr. Ted Williams would help us salute pinch hitters." Another week later, the fishing buddy called back and declined on Mr. Williams's behalf.

I never did reach Willie Mays. Stan Musial, though, wasn't difficult. I learned that to track down Mr. Musial, you sent a letter to a St. Louis restaurant named Biggie's. Musial was a co-owner.

"Did you hear from 'Stan the Man'?" My boss must have asked that question a hundred times. He loved saying "Stan the Man." Sadly, I later received a formal letter on Biggie's stationery informing me that "Stan the Man" had other October plans.

There were many other declinations and dead ends. Then one day, purely on impulse, I lit a cigarette, a nicotine boost for courage, and called the Atlanta Braves. I asked to speak to Henry Aaron. Aaron had retired at the end of the 1976 season after spending the final two years of his career as a Milwaukee Brewer. I'd read he had begun working for the Braves in their Atlanta front office.

An assistant put me on hold. Then I heard a voice I knew by heart.

"Hello."

"Hi, is…is this Mr. Aaron?"

"Yes." His tone, no-nonsense.

I stammered from the adrenaline surge. I was talking to the man who had broken Babe Ruth's career home-run record, the man I'd grown up idolizing when the Braves played in Milwaukee before moving to Atlanta. I explained the reason for my call in greater detail than necessary.

“As you know, Manpower is located in Milwaukee, and we were really hoping, that is, as one of the greatest hitters of all time…” (Should I have said “greatest hitter of all time?”) “Uh, we would be honored if you would help us judge our ‘Pinch Hitter of the Year’ contest.”

I held my breath, hoping Henry Aaron would not detect my nerves. After a moment, he said, “I’d really like to do it if it works.” He sounded more subdued than excited, but I told Henry Aaron I would call him back when we had more details. He said that would be fine.

A tentative “yes” from a “big name.”

Another Brush with Fame

As my boss was leaving his office, I caught him and told him about Henry Aaron. By then I knew to follow him for a meeting on the run. My boss often dashed from one appointment to the next as if he was trying to steal second and third at the same time. When those short meetings ran long, we walked in circles for a while.

He was impressed by Henry Aaron, but by then had moved beyond judges to awards. He told me we needed something way cooler than a trophy or plaque to present to our ultimate “Pinch Hitter.” What would I think, he wondered, about a painting by Leroy Neiman?

Another big name. Neiman was then one of the world’s most popular painters, certainly the most prominent sports artist. Some of his works sold for tens of thousands of dollars. He seemed out of our league. But as long as we were brainstorming, why not add another flight of fancy?

Neiman’s fame, or infamy according to many art critics, stemmed from his instantly recognizable style. His explosions of color lit up *Sports Illustrated*, *Time* and other publications. He was the official artist of the Olympics five times. You really weren’t anybody in sports unless Neiman painted you.

I wrote to Neiman and shared our proposal. My boss and I even offered a concept. “We hoped your painting would include all four nominees for ‘Pinch Hitters of the Year,’ with the winner featured with the greatest prominence.”

Whatever else Neiman was, he was a nice man when I reached him by phone a week or so later. I could picture him in his New York City studio, with his long handlebar mustache that ventured into Salvador Dali territory, and his even longer cigar. I asked Neiman what he thought of our proposal, and well, how much would it cost?

“I do things for friendly prices sometimes,” he said. He indicated what we had in mind would cost about $1,000. But he also pointed out, more gently than he might have, that my boss and I didn’t know much about art.

“It’s just a bad artistic concept,” he said about placing multiple pinch hitters in the same frame. “What I’d do is paint you a portrait of the winner.”

And then I could envision Manpower’s “Pinch Hitter of the Year,” in slashing and garish hues—reds, blues, purples, yellows, greens and who knows how many color combinations. Neiman’s painting would hang on a wall in the winner’s house for the rest of his life.

Leroy Neiman was a resounding “yes.” And we could get him for a mere thousand dollars? Maybe I could tell my boss I had negotiated.

Damned Lies and Statistics

The Elias Sports Bureau has been official statistician for Major League Baseball since World War I. So it was in 1916, so it was in 1977, and so it is today. Elias considers its baseball data proprietary and rarely shares it with anyone but Major League Baseball. Because the use of baseball analytics has increased dramatically over time, teams and researchers now assemble their own databases. But in 1977, Elias was the only game around.

I’m not sure how my boss ever believed that Major League Baseball’s statistical vault would open sesame to a couple young PR guys bent on a guerilla award presentation. Whatever I said when I called the Elias representative, it probably came across like this: “Yeah, this is a man from Manpower, the world’s largest temporary help firm. We’d like to steal a few stats that you compile for your best client to present an award without the knowledge or approval of that best client—until reports of the award show up in the sports pages of every U.S. newspaper. Is that something you could help us with?”

Don’t let the doors to the vault hit you on the way out.

Late Innings

It was late August 1977. I’d been working on the “Pinch Hitters” award for more than two months. By then, I’d become a full-time Manpower PR staff member.

I wish I could say that as the summer wound down, reality hit a wicked-hop ground ball we could not handle. Truth is, reality arrived in the form of a fly ball that had been hanging in the sky all summer. As that ball began falling, we were in no position to snag it. Reality said, “The World Series is a few weeks away. Do you have tickets? Do you have accommodations? Will you build tents in the bullpens for your pinch hitters and judges? And what about your judges? Do you have contracts with Smoky, Dave, and Henry? Matter of fact, who are your damn winners? Their names may not be solidified until the final day of the season. How are you going to get *people* you don’t yet know to *places* you don’t yet know on short notice? Your boss can call all the ‘people’ he knows or wants, but unless you’re going to stage a D-Day invasion of the Elias Sports Bureau, unless you’re going to kidnap Bowie Kuhn, you’re standing on the mound like the relief pitcher who’s given up five runs and his manager keeps him out there only because he doesn’t want to waste a good arm in a losing game.”

So, my boss determined that Manpower’s “Pinch Hitter of the Year” award would be postponed until 1978. Because Manpower was then owned by the Parker Pen Company, my letters of regret to Burgess, Philley, Aaron, and Neiman included expensive top-of-the-line pens. I don’t recall if we also sent each man a five-inch wooden Manpower “pencil bat,” but we probably couldn’t resist.

It was time for a different approach. My boss ordered me to call Major League Baseball to gauge their interest in our idea. I talked with Seth Abraham, who then managed promotions for Commissioner Kuhn. Soon, my boss received a courteous letter confirming our meeting with Mr. Abraham for the morning of Monday, November 28, 1977, in New York City. My boss forwarded me a copy of the letter, with his familiar handwriting.

“Let’s go to the Big Apple!”

I was to learn that even more than he loved saying “Stan the Man,” my boss loved saying the “Big Apple.”

The Final Pitch

We entered the offices of Major League Baseball in downtown Manhattan for a meeting my boss had not wanted. He had craved a ceremony he could stage without the blessing of Bowie Kuhn or Seth Abraham, the man who greeted us that November morning with a countenance as sober as an umpire. Abraham and my boss talked directly to each other from chairs positioned on each side of Abraham’s desk. My boss scribbled notes furiously. I was, more or less, a bystander.

Though the subject was baseball, I watched a slowly unfolding tennis match between the two men. Questions were lobbed, statements volleyed. What if Manpower did this? Well then, Major League Baseball might do that. But the match point remained unasked. How much would this cost?

After thirty uninspiring minutes, we parted with nothing decided. Seth Abraham returned to his real work. My boss and I went to FAO Schwartz to buy Christmas gifts for his four-year-old son.

On the flight home, we sat in adjoining seats and discussed the meeting.

“What are the chances we might actually do something like that?” I asked, referring to the pinch hitter award.

“Probably not good,” said my boss.

I’m not sure when he gave up the pinch-hitter ghost. Was it after that meeting or earlier? I know now that seasoned PR people would have told us that “putting Manpower on the map” with such a campaign was, at best, ill-conceived. There was Manpower’s CEO, investing millions of dollars to fill U.S. offices with temporary *office* workers. And here was his PR team, building an award program promoting temporary *factory* workers.

Maybe my boss was just trying to impress his own boss, the VP of Marketing. Look, Walt, see what we can do—with no money! Or maybe he was testing me. How big could I grow this small idea?

Even with my lack of experience, I knew my boss was unconventional. Manpower employees often would roll their eyes whenever he sprung a new idea. But looking back, I was damn lucky to start my career working for such an unconventional guy.

Would a more conventional boss have given me a germ of an idea (on my first day!) and time to develop it, without even a dot or jot of a plan?

Would a more conventional boss have pushed me to progress, as much as I could then, from ignorance to confidence? And without looking over my shoulder, let me represent the company by reaching out to a well-known artist and athletes? Would I have learned the valuable lesson I did, that you can ask just about anyone for just about anything? They might say no…but they might say yes.

And maybe the most important question of all. Would a more conventional boss have hired me, a guy with long hair, mismatched dress clothes, and no experience in PR, in the first place?

When he finally told me the campaign was kaput, I was neither surprised nor disappointed. In a way, I was relieved. You see, Manpower had already consummated a successful award program at the end of the 1977 baseball season. At least it had in my mind.

Fantasy Baseball

At the awards ceremony in the "Big Apple," just before the first game of the 1977 World Series between the Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers, Henry Aaron wore a fine suit and reached out to shake my hand. Later, over beers, he recounted for me his story of the night in September 1957 when his home run clinched the National League pennant for the long-ago Milwaukee Braves. The team carried him off the field. The city of Milwaukee went crazy.

Then Smoky Burgess, with a pouch of his favorite tobacco within easy reach, recalled another night at Milwaukee County Stadium. On May 26, 1959, on the mound against the Braves, Harvey Haddix of the Pittsburgh Pirates pitched the most historic "perfect game" of all time. Twelve consecutive innings, no hits, no walks, no hit batters, no errors. "You caught that game?" I asked. "Every pitch," Burgess said. And then he

added, shaking his head sadly, how the game was still tied, 0-0, after those twelve innings. While he wedged another pinch of tobacco between his cheek and gum, Aaron picked up the story. Aaron recalled how he reached first base when the perfect game finally ended in the thirteenth inning. The Braves' Joe Adcock hit a home run that sent Haddix to a bitter defeat.

Dave Philley, well, he thanked me, in his distinctive Texas twang, for including him in the festivities.

The winning Pinch Hitter of the Year at first seemed hesitant, but he warmed up considerably when we presented him with Leroy Neiman's portrait and told him it would appear in color in the next issue of Sports Illustrated*.*

For a few years into the 1980s, I sought out reports of winners of the Rolaids "Relief Man Awards." But until I decided to preserve these memories, I missed the fact that the award disappeared after 2012. A French company bought the Rolaids brand from Johnson & Johnson and retired the award.

I worked in public relations for forty-five years. But I never again would be engaged in anything quite as fanciful as Manpower's "Pinch Hitter of the Year."

Which is why I recall today, with a mix of embarrassment and pleasure, the first PR campaign I worked on: when a rookie PR guy played an early version of Fantasy Baseball.

At work.

Mark Lucius worked in corporate communication for forty-five years, which included twenty years as speechwriter and consultant to two chief executive officers. His personal work has appeared in *Cowboy Jamboree, Great River Review, Hippocampus, On the Premises* and many other publications. His long-form memoir about caddying for pro women's golf pioneer Patty Berg was selected for inclusion in *Best American Sports Writing*. He lives in Milwaukee with his wife, Barbara.

Slipstreamed

by Leanne Phillips

We enter the Salinas Valley from the south. As we drive into King City, California, it feels as if we are passing through a heavy curtain—the air feels old somehow, the way nostalgia might if it had an odor. It smells of mild onion and sweet dry grass and freshly-turned soil. John Ernst Steinbeck Sr. helped settle this town in 1890, and his son and namesake set his novel *East of Eden* here in 1952. He felt it, too, what I am feeling now. “I remember … what trees and seasons smelled like,” Steinbeck wrote. “The memory of odors is very rich.” This is the place where I was born, the place I reluctantly came home to when I had nowhere else to go.

King City is a small town at the southernmost end of Monterey County, population a little over twelve thousand. Not much has changed here since my mother graduated from King City High School in 1959. Many of the buildings on the south end of downtown are the same buildings that stood over a century ago—squat, square structures painted off-white, beige, red-brown. There are taller buildings with false ceilings and high, arched facades to make them look more majestic. The Reel Joy Theater, a movie house built before 1922, now accommodates a market; the marquee still towers over the entrance, but today it is a blank slate, and the theater’s poster cases act as community bulletin boards. The newspaper, *The King City Rustler*, was founded in 1901, its name drawn from a hat in the local barbershop. Fast food restaurants, gas stations, and a shopping center are exiled to the west side of town.

My three grandchildren and I are passing through on our way to northern California for spring break. We are taking things slowly, breaking the trip up to make the driving easier on me and the traveling easier on Gavin. Gavin will be fourteen next month. He is prone to motion sickness. He is a replica of his father, my oldest child, my son Tim. He has the same dark brown eyes, the same sweet disposition, the same smile—kind and loving. It lights up his entire face. His sister Abigail is eleven. She is my mother’s namesake (her middle name is Vicky) and she looks the part—brown hair, brown eyes, olive complexion, a sweet, shy laugh. Hunter is thirteen. His father is my middle child,

Robert. Like his father, he is cursed with an artist's soul. He has sandy brown hair and a mischievous grin and has worn wire-framed glasses since he was a toddler.

My grandchildren have never been here. My parents, their great-grandparents, were gone before any of them were born. This town that holds so much meaning and memory for me is nothing to them. It feels strange to think that.

We drive past the shopping center on Canal Street, and I point out the Mexican restaurant where my sister Lisa and I used to sneak away for secret tacos, under the pretext that something was needed from the grocery store, while our mom was preparing Thanksgiving dinner. My sister and I were not close growing up. We were seven years apart in age, and I left home at sixteen, when she was only nine. During those brief shared moments as adults, we laughed and tried to recapture a bond we'd never quite forged.

"There is the hospital where your dad was born," I tell Hunter as we drive past Mee Memorial Hospital. Hunter is in the back seat and has been playing a handheld video game the entire eighty-mile drive from San Luis Obispo, his head bowed, earbuds blocking conversation. But he is interested now and sets the game aside. "Aunt Moose was born here, too," I tell them. Aunt Moose is their nickname for my youngest child, my daughter, Melissa.

"Was my dad born here, too?" My grandson Gavin is sitting in the front passenger seat. His voice sounds hopeful.

"No," I tell Gavin and Abby. "Your dad wasn't born here, but we lived here when he was little for a while, out in Lockwood. He went to kindergarten there. And when he was sixteen, he took his driver's license test here, right on this very street." Gavin and Abby are excited to hear this. Their faces light up.

"Wow," Hunter says. "Our family has a lot of history here."

"Yes," I say. Then I am quiet. So much of our family's history is hidden away in the things I will not tell them. This is also the hospital where they took my mother to die when she was only fifty-two. We took turns sitting alone with her after she was transferred to a hospital in Salinas and taken off life support. The nurses moved her into another room and treated her body as if she were already dead, allowed her hospital gown to ride up her legs, her blankets to be pushed aside. I wanted to scream into her ear to wake up, but I didn't. Instead, I rearranged her gown, covered her with blankets, and spent my

allotted time speaking softly, telling her how beautiful she was and what a wonderful mother she had been, how proud I'd been to be her daughter. That last thing I don't think she ever knew or believed.

We stop in King City for breakfast, then go to the new Safeway and pick up two bouquets of Easter tulips, orange and yellow. The "new" Safeway is more than twenty years old. When they lived in Lockwood, my parents shopped at the old Safeway on Broadway, and I think of this every time I am here, my mom sending my dad to the store on her every whim, her rules for what could or could not be purchased off-brand. Every so often, one of my mother's grocery receipts falls out of an old book—she used them for bookmarks. Last week, a receipt dated February 24, 1994: Facial tissue, a bunch of bananas, low fat milk, black plums, Anjou pears, something hot from the deli, total $10.51. I keep them all. I cannot bear to throw them away.

We take the flowers to the King City Cemetery. It is a warm, sunny day. The air is uncharacteristically still and quiet. We make our way to the headstones above my parents' graves, using a tree that my parents loved as a marker to guide us. Once we find the headstones, we place the flowers and stand together, quiet. The flowers will not last the weekend, but they are lovely, and my mother would have enjoyed them, especially the yellow ones. Yellow, she once told me, is for remembrance. The south county winds have not been kind. They have gradually washed away the engraving on my mother's headstone, which is nearly twenty-five years old, smoothing the letters out. Soon, my mother's name will be erased. In my mind, I silently introduce my parents to their great grandchildren. Thinking of all that my parents have missed breaks my heart. I watch for a hummingbird—I've come to see them as a sign of my mother's presence—but none come.

On our way out of King City, I see the exit sign for Jolon Road, the road that leads to my parents' last home in Pine Canyon. To Lockwood, where we lived when I was in my early twenties. To Fort Hunter Liggett, the military base where my dad worked after he retired from the Navy. To the Ruby Mine Saloon, where I met my children's father. But those aren't the things I think of when I see this exit. I think of a single, rainy night when I

was nineteen, a camping trip to Lake San Antonio with friends, huddled next to a campfire with a boy named Ronnie, drinking soup out of paper cups.

We merge onto Highway 101, and it feels as if we are gathered up by the south county winds and blown up the valley, carried along by the strong, northwesterly current of the Salinas River. This section of the 101 is bounded by agricultural fields on either side, then mountains. Beyond the mountains to the east is the Central Valley; beyond the mountains to the west is the Pacific Ocean. No matter how early in the morning or how late in the day, migrant farmworkers are in the fields. No matter the weather, they are covered head to toe—hooded sweat jackets, billed caps, rugged boots, bandanas tied over their faces to slow the inhalation of dust. I crack open the car windows to feel the breeze. The air is full with the earthy smells of dark, wet soil and mowed hay, with an almost imperceptible finish of freshly grown lettuce. Overhead, a flock of seagulls caws and flies west, proof of the sea's proximity.

We pass the exit for Arroyo Seco, a river that runs through the coastal Santa Lucia mountain range. I remember going there with Ronnie when we were young, climbing on the rocks, drinking beer on the riverbank at Miller's Landing, getting into our first big fight because I was flirting with another guy.

A welcome sign just outside Soledad reads "Gateway to the Pinnacles"—this sign recently took the place of the funky, rainbow-colored sign I grew up with, "It's Happening in Soledad," an inside joke because nothing is happening in Soledad, ever.

"Somewhere way out there is my grandparents' house," I tell the kids as we drive into Soledad. I point in the general direction of the house, beyond the overpass that runs across the Salinas River, toward the Pinnacles, a mountain range born of the extinct Neenach Volcano. The mountain range was once located in northeast Los Angeles County, but it has gradually and consistently moved two hundred miles northwest over the past twenty-three million years. It continues to move at the rate of an inch per year, with each shift of California's infamous San Andreas fault. Its current trajectory will put it in the San Francisco Bay by the year 23,002,019. The riverbed is usually dry under the overpass, sandy and dotted with vegetation, but an extraordinary rain season has the water running as it did when I was a child. I played on the river's banks then, in the place

where Steinbeck set *Of Mice and Men*, oblivious to the hidden dangers of quicksand and mountain lions.

I can still see my grandparents' old house if I squeeze my eyes closed and block out distractions. It was a box-shaped, mint-colored, clapboard house with a dark gray composite roof, a dank, musty basement, and a mud porch with a heavy, cast-iron sink. On the mud porch, my grandfather knocked the fields from his boots and scrubbed the dirt from his hands with Lava soap each night when he got home. I don't know if the house is still standing—there has been a lot of development in the ten or so years since I last saw it. It was likely razed, but I don't want to know that.

My grandparents' house is a beacon to me. When I stayed there as a child, I felt safe and secure. My grandmother made hot meals every night, bathed us in the giant clawfoot bathtub, then tucked us into clean-smelling, white sheets that felt cool and pleasantly rough, like a kitten's tongue. The room I slept in had been my mother's bedroom when she was a child. Her dresser was still in it—a waterfall pattern with a large, round mirror that I loved to look into. There was a window next to the bed, facing west, and at night, I lay still and looked out through the sheer curtains. I could see the bright stars, vivid pinholes against the rural black sky, and hear the railroad trains in the distance. When I was just turned thirteen, my mother sent me to stay with my grandparents for the summer as a punishment for a failed attempt at running away from home. I was sad to be away from my friends, but lying in bed that first night, I heard the mournful sound of a train's whistle in the distance. Somehow, my own loneliness paled in comparison. We understood one another. I live next to a section of those same train tracks now—they stretch from San Diego to Seattle—and while neighbors complain about the noise from the trains, I find it comforting.

I was raped a little over a year after that last summer in Soledad. I was fourteen.

The rape itself was a trigger—a relatively small event compared to the things that expanded outwardly and exponentially from it like a ripple on the surface of water. I had been more traumatized in those few minutes than I could have known at the time. Out of a sense of gratitude and survivor guilt (I made it out alive, others did not), I became a certified sexual assault and intimate partner violence crisis counselor some years ago. In

my work as a crisis counselor, I learned there are repercussions to experiencing that kind of violence, especially at such a young age. Those repercussions almost always include drug and alcohol abuse, promiscuity, self-destructive behavior, and assorted bad decisions. I experienced them all. I am lucky to be alive and to be as relatively normal as I've managed to be. But those few minutes defined my life.

When I went through the training to become a crisis counselor, I learned that so many of the problems that followed me throughout my life were residuals from that single instance of violence—nightmares, sleep disorders, panic attacks, failed relationships, memory loss, depression, suicidal thoughts, trust issues, sex and intimacy issues. I leave healthy relationships. I cling to unhealthy ones. I've experienced dissociation, something that has been pointed out to me for years as my seeming cold and uncaring about people and things that actually mean a great deal to me. Sometimes, I am unable to cry, even when I feel I must, once for a stretch of five or six years. It also manifests in me talking about traumatic events in a very matter-of-fact way. I may be doing so right now; it is difficult for me to tell, because this has been me since I was fourteen years old. I've experienced a crippling kind of social anxiety that comes off a little creepy at times—I feel uncomfortable and awkward, I don't know the right things to say, and this makes people feel uncomfortable and awkward around me. Alcohol used to take care of that—I'd emerge from too many drinks a sparkling conversationalist, a vivacious reveler, an unruly risk-taker, or an asshole. It was a crapshoot. Without alcohol, it can take me years to feel at ease around someone, to feel able to be myself. In the meantime, I try to fake it with mixed results.

We meet my sister-in-law Gina for lunch in Salinas. My grandchildren talk about things that are happening at school and in their young social lives. Gina and I listen, laugh, ask questions. The kids' conversation inevitably veers to video games and inside jokes. Gina and I move to a different table to catch up. After we part ways, I am left alone with my thoughts and my iced tea in the city where, as a young woman, I fell in love. This trip with my grandchildren was long planned, but the feelings it is stirring in me are wholly unexpected.

I met Ronnie here. We met on his eighteenth birthday, New Year's Eve 1979. Local garage bands were playing at the Portuguese Hall. I was nineteen. I wore a red party dress. My long, strawberry blonde hair was a mass of loose curls—my cousin had done my hair for me. I felt beautiful that night, filled with the kind of confidence a girl has when she's nineteen and is wearing a red party dress. Mutual friends brought Ronnie over to meet me and whispered that he had a crush on me. Ronnie looked a lot like a young Sam Shepard—a tall, lean build, long brown hair, an easy smile that made him look like he knew a juicy secret and was going to share it with you. He had a scar on his right cheek from a car accident he'd been in on his way to Arroyo Seco the year before—it was perfectly positioned and made him look badass. He was soft-spoken, sweet, quick to laugh. Our friends told me it was his birthday and asked me if I'd kiss him at midnight. I did.

I saw Ronnie again on a rainy February night a couple of months later. I'd started dating a different boy, and we'd gotten into a fight at a party. I'd refused to sleep with him, and he refused to take me home. Ronnie offered to give me a ride, over my date's shouted insults about him being a "knight in shining armor," and I accepted. I rode on the back of Ronnie's motorcycle. It was late at night, and the roads were empty and silent. The rain was coming down on us softly, a light Pacific Coast mist, and the streets were wet and shiny, the moonlight reflecting off them. It was romantic, holding on to him tightly on the back of his motorcycle. I felt something for him that night, a stir of feeling for this boy who treated me with respect. But I didn't know what to do with a guy like that.

Ronnie and I started seeing each other a few months later. We were both at the same party out in Prunedale. I was drunk. The band talked me into coming up on stage with them to play bass guitar on "Breakdown" by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. I can't imagine myself so bold, but back then, I was confident, at least on the outside and at least when I was drinking. I didn't understand then that alcohol was one of the things I used to fake normalcy. Afterwards, Ronnie asked me if I wanted to go out back to smoke a joint. I'd never liked pot, but I said yes just to be with him. We walked away from the crowd and talked, our first real conversation. I remember standing in grass up to our knees, and I remember he made me laugh, but I was wasted and can't remember anything we talked about. I wish I could. I do remember he didn't try to take advantage of me. A week or so

later, he called to ask me out on a proper date. We went out for a burger and a drive, listened to Bad Company, and drank some beers. He stayed over, and we were together after that.

Rain figured heavily in our romance. When the kids and I drove past the exit for Jolon Road, I remembered the night Ronnie and I went camping at Lake San Antonio with friends. The two of us squeezed together into one sleeping bag in a tent. It started raining and our tent had a leak, so we ended up sleeping in an inch of water, limbs tangled. In the early morning, we sat by the fire. He made coffee and wrapped a blanket around us. We watched the sun rise over the campsite while the others slept.

Ronnie was exceptionally cool, but he was also a good man. He was kind. He was strong. Everyone liked and respected him. I've never met that combination of tough and tender since. I've found bits and pieces of him in other men. One had his temperament. One had his build. One had a similar sense of humor but was much less kind. But the piece I've never found to the same degree in anyone else, not even close, is the way he loved me just as I was.

When I was forty, my father told me that no man had ever loved me. He was mostly right, because I mostly chose men who were assholes. I never blamed those men because they only saw in me what I saw in myself, and they only took from me what I threw away with both hands. But my father was wrong--I know Ronnie loved me. There were men who accepted me, but Ronnie celebrated me, and not only the good parts of me, but my faults and insecurities, even the way I talked, my conversation peppered with curse words. He marveled at the big voice that sometimes came out of such a little person. It is a gift to be loved like that.

I didn't understand or appreciate that then. I was too young, and I was too damaged. I had scars, too, but unlike Ronnie's, mine were hidden and had formed over still-gaping wounds. I had a hard time believing Ronnie could love me. I was scared of losing him every minute of every day. When I felt like I cared too much, which was most of the time, I pushed him away, either physically or emotionally. Sometimes both. I was mean to him. I said cruel things. I embarrassed him in front of our friends. I broke up with him, then begged him to take me back. I cheated on him and didn't try to hide it. Friends told me I was playing with fire, that Ronnie wouldn't put up with it. But he did for a little

while. He tried to understand me. He tried to be strong enough to love a girl like me. He was solid and he was patient for much longer than I deserved.

Eventually, my fears were self-fulfilling. One night, Ronnie got off work early and came over to my apartment to surprise me. The month before, he'd done the same thing, and I'd been thrilled to see him. I ran to the door and leapt into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck, and he'd laughed and kissed me on the mouth. But my alcohol-fueled moods were mercurial. This time, I had friends over drinking and playing cards. I'd been flirting with another guy when Ronnie walked in the front door. I continued to flirt and ignored him. He finally reached his limit that night and broke up with me. No amount of apologizing could change his mind. He sometimes sought me out at parties after that, even when he was dating other girls, and he went out of his way to throw a wrench in me dating anyone else. "Watch out," he told a new boyfriend right in front of me. "She's a wanderer." I think he still loved me then, and I know he still wanted me, but he wouldn't take me back, no matter how much I begged. My self-destructive behavior spiraled. When it reached dangerous proportions, some shred of an instinct for survival sent me back home, to Lockwood, in the coastal mountains outside of King City.

Before we leave town to head north, I show my grandchildren the last house I lived in when I returned to Salinas in the early eighties. I lived here with my children—their parents. The house is a duplex off San Juan Grade Road with a little patio where I tried to grow peaches and strawberries. Tim hosted his first sleepover here, fell in love with comic books here, bought his first record album here. I picture Robert as a toddler here, stuffing a grilled cheese sandwich into the VCR to see what would play on the television screen. This was Melissa's first home, the place where she took her first steps, the place where we held her first birthday party and she fell in love with cake.

My son Tim has requested I recreate a picture I took when he was a child while we are here in Salinas. The picture shows my three children, Tim, Robert, and Melissa, lined up outside the front door of this house wearing paper Burger King crowns, Melissa in the middle, chubby-kneed, sleepy-eyed, and leaning back against her two big brothers. But I was standing inside the house when I took the original photograph, so it's not possible to

get it exactly right. I line Gavin, Hunter, and Abigail up on the sidewalk in front of the house for the picture, only we've brought paper hats from In-N-Out and the children wear those. They laugh and enjoy being in on the joke. "Burger King is so 1980s," I type when I text the picture to my children. I take a last look at the house. It is almost the same as I remember it from more than thirty years ago, but it has been painted blue. It was brick red when I last saw it. This house is the last place I saw Ronnie. By that time, I was twenty-six years old.

In Monterey, my grandchildren and I visit Cannery Row and the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and I remember the feeling of being in love with a place. Monterey Bay is the most alive place I know, and it is the place that feels most like coming home to me. It is early spring, sunny, but the air is crisp and cold. Summer used to be my favorite season, but the season I grew up calling summer doesn't exist anymore—it's increasingly too hot. Only bits and pieces of summer remain, little hints that come and quickly go, like the now-rare smell of cut grass. Few people in California have grass lawns anymore because of drought—instead, they have lawns made of dirt, or rock, or succulent gardens. I miss grass. As a child, I loved to lie in the grass by myself, looking up at the clouds and seeing what shapes I could find in them. Now that summer has forsaken me, I've come to relish the chill air in Monterey and the early fog that burns off midmorning amidst the pines.

Here, I am hit with an even deeper sense of loss. My grandchildren and I have an arrangement—they sleep in while I go downstairs to the hotel lobby for early coffee and to write, and when the first of them wakes up, he or she texts me (always he—Abby likes to sleep in), and I come back to the room to gather them up for breakfast and the day's adventures. In Monterey, I take my paper cup of coffee out for a walk along Cannery Row, soaking in the flash of early morning sun on the sea, the sounds of the waves and the gulls, the ocean smells that are so much more intense here. The walk starts out as something peaceful, but a mind emptied of work and worries can be an inviting thing, and the combination of time and this familiar place means mine is gradually visited by memories.

When I was twenty-five, I called Ronnie one night. I was living in Salinas again. I'd never stopped aching for him. I hoped enough time had passed that he could forgive me,

and I believed I was changed. He was happy to hear from me and told me he still thought of me “now and again.” He said it in a slow, amused drawl that was infused with sex.

We met at a pizza parlor with a group of old friends. He’d cut off his long hair. He was still Ronnie—he still had the same mischief in his eyes, the same soft, deep voice, the same slow and easy grin—but he was a man now. After pizza, we went out to the Barbary Coast and drank beers and slow danced. The last time I’d seen him, neither of us was old enough to get into a bar. It was romantic being out together like adults. I stretched my arms up around his neck and nestled into the softness of his shirt, the warmth of his chest. On the dance floor around us, there were couples hooking up, grinding, making out. But they faded into the background. Ronnie held me close to him, his hands at my waist, whispering in my ear, words designed to make me laugh. Despite the disappointment I’d been when we were together, despite all I’d done to hurt him, he treated me like I was something precious, as he always had.

When we said goodnight, he told me he’d really cared for me when we were together, more than I’d known, and that I’d hurt him. I remember feeling sorry for the things I’d done. I remember wanting to make it up to him and being grateful for this second chance. But the thing I remember most was being shocked to hear he’d felt that way about me, surprised to learn I could have possibly had that effect on him. I didn’t recognize my incredulity for the red flag it was—I still didn’t feel worth loving.

My grandchildren and I continue north, to San Francisco, where we walk along the Embarcadero and take a boat out to Alcatraz. It is sunny and warm. Abby scans the water for sharks and requests that we call her Inmate Number 16294 for the duration of the tour so she can immerse herself in the experience. On the island, the audio tour guide tells us that Alcatraz was a maximum-security prison that housed the most violent criminals.

“Why was Al Capone sent to Alcatraz when he was convicted of income tax evasion?” Hunter asks. “That’s not a violent crime.”

“Al Capone *was* a violent criminal,” I explain. “He was a murderer, but he always managed to beat the charges, so the FBI came up with a plan to convict him of income tax evasion. Those were the only charges they could make stick. Pretty smart, right?”

Hunter is not impressed. “If they couldn’t prove the murder charges, they shouldn’t have been able to send him to a prison for violent criminals. That’s their job.” I smile. He is a true believer. I see a career as a civil rights attorney in this kid’s future. Or as a mob lawyer. We stop at Ben and Jerry’s to get ice cream on the walk back to the hotel. The next day, we drive over the Oakland Bay Bridge on our way out of the city. I remember crossing that bridge in the opposite direction with Ronnie thirty years before.

In 1985, at the end of summer, my best friend Kathy and I went up to the Oakland Coliseum for Day on the Green to see the Scorpions, RATT, and Y&T. It wasn’t long after the night at Barbary Coast. Ronnie and I had started seeing each other. He’d invited me to go with him and some of his friends to the concert, but I’d already made plans to go with Kathy. I told him we’d see him there. Kathy and I didn’t have tickets, and it took us a couple of hours to buy a pair from scalpers, so we were late. There was no such thing as a cell phone then. Kathy told me we’d never find Ronnie in the crowd of probably sixty-five thousand people, but as we made our way into the stadium, there he was, standing under one of a hundred random archways right as we came through one of a dozen random gates. The odds were astronomical, but I wasn’t surprised. It seemed fate always led us to each other. He grinned when he saw me, and I felt as if my heart might burst.

We sat together in the sunshine all that day, Ronnie, Kathy, and I, up in the very top of the bleachers, listening to the music and eating chocolate malted ice cream out of paper cups with wooden spoons. It was the best day. When the sun went down and the lights came up, Ronnie held my hand as the three of us made our way down to the field. The stadium suddenly went pitch black, then the Scorpions took the stage to colored lasers sweeping back and forth across the crowd. I felt an electric current go through me. It was something more powerful than I’d ever experienced. The music permeated my body. The love of sixty-five thousand people surrounded me. And the love of one man, his hand warm and protective around mine. Finally, I felt safe.

I went home with Ronnie that night, and we made love for the first time, again. After that, my feelings for Ronnie continued to deepen. I was happier than I’d ever been. My life was beginning in so many ways. I was raising my children and going to community college. In the fall of 1986, I transferred to the University of California at Santa Cruz to

study English literature and creative writing. I wanted to be an English teacher. For the first time in my life, I'd refused the notions of what others wanted me to be and was pursuing my own dreams. Ronnie and I saw each other when my children were with their dad. We went to the movies. He came over for dinner. We played Trivial Pursuit, and he beat me every time. He took me for drives on back country roads and played music for me, our favorite bands or songs he thought I'd like. I will never hear the Scorpions' "There's No One Like You" or anything by Bad Company without thinking of him. I couldn't believe my life was turning out to be so perfect.

The last time I saw Ronnie, it was a rainy night in early February 1987. We had a date. I remember every detail of that night. If I had the chance to live one day in my life over, it would be that one, not only for the magic of it, but for the chance to get it right. Late at night, I remember the two of us lying in bed together at my house in Salinas. Ronnie told me how much he liked listening to the rain coming down outside, how the rain always made him think of me, how it made him want to make love to me. He didn't say he loved me. He didn't say he wanted to marry me. But he told me he looked forward to being married and having a family one day. I read between the lines of all the things he *did* say, and I believed it could happen.

So, I did what I always did. I left. This time, I put miles of physical distance between us. Gone, baby, gone. I dropped out of school, packed my family's belongings, and left Salinas. I felt both nothing and everything when I left. Like some wild animal chewing off its own limb to escape a trap, I wrecked every part of my life to get away from some nameless thing that terrified me, something I wouldn't be able to identify for many years. I moved south, and this time, I heard through friends that Ronnie left Salinas, too, and moved north to Sacramento. By the time I came to my senses and called him a year later, he'd moved on. Really moved on. I guess I thought he never would, not so completely. I never reached him that time. Ronnie's roommate Mark answered the phone. He knew me, and he knew my history with Ronnie. He told me Ronnie had met someone and I should leave Ronnie alone, let him go, and let him be happy. I knew I deserved to be told that. So, I did what Ronnie's roommate asked me to do. I gave up. I let Ronnie go. I tried

to forget him. But whenever I was sad, I shut myself in my bedroom and sat cross-legged in the middle of the floor, playing Bad Company at full blast and sobbing.

I talked to Ronnie one more time, nearly fifteen years later. I found his address online and wrote him a letter in 1999. We had the internet then, but no social media, so I didn't know anything about his life. Ronnie called me as soon as he got the letter—I came home from work one day, the phone rang, and when I picked it up, Ronnie was on the other end of the line. When I heard his voice on the phone, it was as if no time had passed. He told me he still thought about me, and I could hear in his voice that it was true. But he was married, and he had children, and he was happy. Life was peachy, he said. He told me to call him the next time I was in Sacramento visiting my sister and we'd get together for lunch. He said his wife was cool and would be okay with it. I did call him, when I was in town later that year for Thanksgiving, but his wife answered the phone, and she was not nearly as okay with it as he'd thought she'd be. That wasn't a big surprise to me—men can be so clueless.

We chatted a few times after that, on some early computer messaging program. Neither of us ever crossed a line—we only made small talk—but it was sad, and it was still present, the thing between us, only now it seemed dark and ugly, and it hung over us like a cloud. One or both of us finally let it go. I see through mutual friends that he is on Facebook now, but when Facebook suggests he and I be friends, I hide the suggestion, and maybe he does the same. I no longer delude myself that we had a manifest destiny, like some soap opera supercouple that always finds their way back to one another. By all accounts, he is happy with this woman he built a life with, this woman who was ready, who deserved him, and who gave him all the things I couldn't. This woman who I know has made him happier than I ever would have.

I am angry about the things that kept me from being with Ronnie. I am angry with the man who raped me. I am angry with the people who didn't help me or believe me. I wish that my parents would have let me see a therapist after I was raped, but I don't blame them. They did what they thought was best. In those days, dealing with family trauma was an in-house job. Mostly, I am angry with myself that I wasn't more courageous, that I didn't

seek help on my own, that I didn't work harder to overcome what had happened to me. I merely survived, and for a lot of years, I barely did that.

My grandchildren and I visit Sacramento last. We tour the state capitol and visit my sister Lisa in Roseville. She and I have grown much closer over the years. We talk for hours while her daughter—my niece Claire—plays with the kids. The next day, the kids and I drive up to Coloma in California Gold Rush country. This long and leisurely day is my favorite part of the trip. Without modern distractions or cell service, we walk from Sutter's Mill together, the four of us, stopping to read the signs and to talk about Mark Twain and fortune seekers and what it might have been like to have lived in this magnificent place nearly two hundred years ago. We explore the museum, then stop in at the mercantile to pick up mining pans and little vials to hold the gold we plan to find. It is peaceful and perfect as we walk across the bridge spanning the south fork of the American River to get to the beach. We roll up the hems of our jeans and set to work, tilting our pans into the cold current of the river to let the water rush in, then swirling the water out over the edges of the pans so the heavier flecks of sediment are left behind—gravel and some iron pyrite, also known as fool's gold, but we are excited to find even that. After a bit, I step back to watch as the children pan for gold. They help each other, love one another. My family. My life. So perfect, so extraordinarily perfect. *I regret nothing. I would change nothing.* The children tap the gold-colored flecks into their vials, and we walk back to the car, happy and hungry. We stop at the Coloma Club café for burgers and fries, then head back to Sacramento.

Our last night, before heading home, the kids and I go to a Sacramento River Cats baseball game at Raley Field. It is opening night, and we make our way from the parking lot to the stadium through throngs of people. I make no attempt to contact Ronnie while I am in Sacramento—we haven't talked for twenty years. But my body is aware of his proximity. I've heard through the grapevine that he has moved north over the years, first to North Highlands, eventually to Olivehurst, within thirty minutes of the stadium. He keeps moving farther north, and I have moved farther south now, to San Luis Obispo. The distance between us keeps stretching like a rubber band, and I feel it is about to snap.

But as my grandchildren and I enter the stadium, I half expect to see Ronnie standing there—past the gate, under the archway, against all odds, waiting.

Leanne Phillips lives, reads, and writes in San Luis Obispo, California. Her work has been published in *The Rumpus*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Kelp Journal*, and *The Coachella Review*. Leanne earned an MFA from UC Riverside, Palm Desert. She is currently querying her debut novel-in-linked-stories.

Contributors

With a background in Trauma-Informed Yoga and Ayurveda Wellness Counseling, **Nicole Alexander** teaches and writes through the lens of healing. She is a graduate of Antioch University—Los Angeles' Master's in Creative Nonfiction program, and her writings have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Diverse Voices Quarterly, Open Salon, Breathe Repeat, Coffee and Sweatpants, Elephant Journal, Yoga International, Yoga Renew, Cozy by Sweet Starlight,* and *Westchester Magazine*. Nicole enjoys hiking and spending time in the great outdoors, cuddling with her feline babies, and learning to balance on her niece's hoverboard.

MerriLee Anderson is a clinical psychologist who is beginning to consider herself a writer. Her essays have recently appeared in *HerStry* and *You Might Need to Hear This*. She lives in Dallas, Texas with her wife, Jill, and mutts, Rosie and Daisy. She finds joy in connecting with people, be it through writing or conversation. She is still a lousy bowler.

Mark Cyzyk writes from Maryland.

Hailey Duggirala is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist based in Syracuse, New York. Her writing is interested in transmuting ordinary experiences onto strange contexts, and in the spaces between truth and perception. You can find her work in Syracuse University's *OutCrowd Mag*, jotted on napkins, and waiting tirelessly in her email drafts.

Paul Graseck taught high school for twenty-nine years, then served as an administrator for fifteen more, including curriculum director, principal, and superintendent. As a sideline, he portrays Gandhi and Socrates, drawing his audiences into interactive dialogues with these figures from the past. Paul also plays clarinet in a Providence-based, street band, The Extraordinary Rendition Band. Although retired, he now teaches reflective writing inside a state prison in Connecticut. He has published in *Kappan Magazine*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *History Matters*, *Quaker Life*, and elsewhere. Paul lives in Pomfret, Connecticut.

Doug Hoekstra is a Chicago-bred, Nashville-based writer and musician, whose prose, poetry, non-fiction, songs, and records, have been featured all over the place; *Ten Seconds In-Between*, his latest collection of short stories, was a Royal Dragonfly Award Best Short Story Collection of 2021 and Next Generation Indie Book Award Finalist 2022. To learn more, visit his website.

Gerald Kamens has worked in a mental hospital, the White House, the U.S. Senate, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense, but spent most of his government career in the U.S. Agency for International Development, focused successively on Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and global environmental issues. He later worked for an international conflict resolution organization. In retirement, he acted and sang for six years in musicals. Now, at age ninety, he continues to provide support for people grieving the loss of a loved one and writes short adult and children's fiction and personal essays, some of which have appeared in national publications. Other than that, he and his wife, parents of four grown children, most days meditate, and play Scrabble and pool. They live in Falls Church, Virginia.

Angela Lam is the author of several novels, two memoirs, and two short story collections. Her memoir, *Red Eggs and Good Luck*, about growing up Chinese American won both the Mary Tanenbaum Award for Creative Nonfiction and the She Writes Press Memoir Discovery Contest. *The Fool and the Magician*, a midlife memoir, was longlisted for the Memoir Magazine Book Award. Lam is also a visual artist, specializing in acrylic landscapes and mixed media abstracts. She currently teaches at Gotham Writers Workshop.

Zoe Lambert is a writer based in Lancaster, UK. Her current work explores the religious and purity trauma of growing up as a Jehovah's Witness. She has published numerous short stories and is a lecturer in creative writing at Lancaster University. She is interested in the formal possibilities of fragments and moments in narrating lives and is currently working on a fragmented memoir exploring these questions through the lens of mothers and daughters.

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.

Alex Loeb writes, loves, and plays in Rossland, British Columbia. Her short stories and nonfiction essays have appeared in *The Sun, The Globe and Mail, Cleaning up Glitter, The Write Launch, HerStry,* and *Jelly Bucket*. She is currently querying her debut novel.

Mark Lucius worked in corporate communication for forty-five years, which included twenty years as speechwriter and consultant to two chief executive officers. His personal

work has appeared in *Cowboy Jamboree, Great River Review, Hippocampus, On the Premises* and many other publications. His long-form memoir about caddying for pro women's golf pioneer Patty Berg was selected for inclusion in *Best American Sports Writing*. He lives in Milwaukee with his wife, Barbara.

J Bryan McGeever is the author of *Small Rooms and Others*, a collection of essays, and the forthcoming collection, *The Town Crier of Long Island*, both published by Unsolicited Press. His nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times, New York's Daily News,* the *NY Post,* and *The Christian Science Monitor* and his fiction in The *Southampton Review, Writer's Digest,* and *Hampton Shorts*. He teaches in NYC and lives with his family on Long Island.

David Newkirk is a retired attorney living in Kansas City, Missouri. His fiction has appeared in *Amazing Stories, Literally Stories, Dark Horse, Night Picnic* and other journals. His non-fiction has appeared in *Number One*. In his spare time, David is unlearning thirty years of writing like a lawyer.

Sharman Ober-Reynolds was born in Los Angeles and completed a master's in fine arts at Arizona State University. She is the primary author of *The FRIEND Program for Creating Supportive Peer Networks for Students with Social Challenges, including Autism*. For over thirty years, she worked in health care as a family nurse practitioner, primarily in autism research. In 2023, she was the first-place recipient of the Olive Woolley Bert Awards. Sharman now lives and writes in an old house in Salt Lake City with her family and Cadoodle, Lizzie.

Leanne Phillips lives, reads, and writes in San Luis Obispo, California. Her work has been published in *The Rumpus*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Kelp Journal*, and *The Coachella Review*. Leanne earned an MFA from UC Riverside, Palm Desert. She is currently querying her debut novel-in-linked-stories.

Anup Saswade (cover art) is an artist working in both traditional and digital media. He enjoys creating stories through his paintings, with a particular passion for conceptual art and open-ended illustrations. He also loves exploring the relationship between text and visuals, bringing a unique dimension to his work. He lives in Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. To see more of his work, visit his portfolio site.