



bioStories

Winter/Spring 2025

Volume 15, Issue 1



Winter/Spring 2025

www.biostories.com

Winter/Spring 2025

Volume 15, Issue 1

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

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. You can read all the work we publish at www.biostories.com.

Cover Art: “Flower” Katsushika Hokusai (1760 – 1849) painting; public domain from The MET Museum.

bio**Stories**

sharing the extraordinary in ordinary lives

Table of Contents

On Love, War, and Loss: A Life in Three Acts by Elizabeth Bird.....	4
When the World Shakes by Joanell Serra.....	16
Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night: West Meath, February 1976 by T.S. Ollerhead	22
Love Me, Love My Stuff by Barbara Belzer Adams	24
Poor Josie by Maria Hetherton	28
Singing: A Requiem by Gary Fincke	34
To Star Y, BioFather by Beth Cleary	39
Stating the Obvious by Paige Cromley.....	41
Summer Reading by Kevin A. Louderback	50
The Heat of the Why by John Thomson	54
Nostalgia: A Haunting of the Heart by Anne E. Beall.....	57
Brotherhood by Jeffrey B. Burton	65
Speaking of the Dead by Chris Vrontas	74
Contributors.....	81

On Love, War, and Loss: A Life in Three Acts

by Elizabeth Bird

Prologue

I watch over my father as he fades slowly into darkness. Nurses flit by, chatting quietly.

“We hardly got to know Tom, but he seemed like a lovely bloke,” says one.

“He told wonderful stories,” adds another. “So funny—and exciting!”

I ask what kind of stories. The family, his life as a doctor—surely the story of meeting my mother?

“Oh no, love. War stories! One about picking up stranded Dutch soldiers somewhere in the Pacific, I think. Quite dramatic!”

As his final hours drift by, I think on my father’s life—the joy in his roles as husband, father and grandfather, and the love and kindness he showed in his ninety-five years on earth. And how the legacy of war helped shaped that life, casting shadows and yet guiding him into sunlight.

I

War had marked his life from the beginning. He was born in 1919 in northeast England, less than a year after the end of the Great War that was meant to end wars. His infantryman father served in the muddy trenches at the Somme, where in five months, more than 300,000 soldiers died. He survived, his lungs forever scarred by mustard gas.

My dad remembered him as a distant figure, breathless and unable to play or engage with two growing sons. The family struggled in the Depression, but his ambitious mother pushed him and his younger brother to excel academically and win scholarships to selective schools, offering a gateway to the professional class. She seized on the idea of a doctor in the family, and his father’s service turned ambition into reality, when he won a scholarship reserved for the sons of World War I veterans. He became the first in his family to enter college, undeterred by the strings attached to his award: a five-year military commission. It was 1937, with Hitler on the rise in Germany, but at eighteen, he wasn’t

thinking about another war. Wasn't it less than twenty years since millions died to ensure peace? But war came, creating an urgent demand for medical staff, and at twenty-two, he began his Army service as a newly minted doctor, just after his father died. He had never set foot outside England.

The bare facts of my father's war are unremarkable. In late 1942, he was posted as a Medical Officer to the multinational force preparing to invade Normandy in what would be D-Day. Preparations would take months. But in Spring 1944, he and dozens more MO's found themselves on a troop ship—but not to France. In comic detail, he would always tell us how they “turned right into the Suez Canal,” and realized they were headed to India where “they already had MO's coming out of the woodwork.” The ship arrived not long before D-Day, and for months he shuttled from Bombay (now Mumbai), to Delhi, to Calcutta (now Kolkata), caring for troops and civilians alike.

Finally, in January 1945, his unit went into action against Japan, invading Ramree Island off the Burma coast. Manning beach dressing stations, the medical corps supported the six-week assault. With American bombers overhead, the Japanese were routed, and the unit braced to push on. But that August, on a troop ship in the Pacific, my father heard the news of Hiroshima. “I remember thinking it was the end of the world,” he once told me. Then Nagasaki, and the realization that though the world hadn't ended, the war had. His unit moved into Malaya after the official Japanese surrender, and then on to Singapore.

The war was over, but his service was not, and he headed back to India as the sub-continent barreled toward independence and partition. He watched the country break apart and dissolve into a bloodbath, as Muslims fled to the new nation of Pakistan.

He ended his service on a troopship, ferrying soldiers across the Pacific, seeing Hong Kong, Bangkok, Sumatra, Java, and on to the Seychelles and Mauritius. Somewhere along the way, he met an Army nurse and became engaged. As 1947 drew to a close, he went home to his mother's house in Newcastle and to a Britain forever transformed.

His 30th birthday in sight, he picked up his career at the city hospital, vowing to catch up on lost time. After a year in an entry level job, he applied for promotions in his preferred specialty. Passed over in favor of younger doctors with careers uninterrupted

by war, he was offered another junior post. Frustrated, he vowed to resign and move on, but when he walked into his superior's office to tell him, his life abruptly changed. It was a story he told for the rest of his life.

"A young woman was sitting on a table swinging a pair of the nicest legs I'd ever seen. And then I looked at her face and I just fell in love. It was the most important thing that ever happened to me."

Eileen was one of those young doctors who had moved ahead while he was at war. Suddenly this didn't matter; love-struck, he accepted a job in pathology, a less desirable specialty, and stayed.

His decision mirrored the mood in a Britain exhausted from six years of war. Winston Churchill, the hero who had saved the nation, was unceremoniously booted in favor of a Labour government that touted change. An array of social reforms followed—in education, social welfare, and the revolutionary introduction of the National Health Service. India's independence heralded the glimmer of sunset over the British Empire.

He too was ready to turn the page on war. First order of business was "disentangling" himself from his fiancée, still stationed in Germany. Next was persuading Eileen, who was seeing another doctor, to do the same. By Spring 1949, they were together.

That summer, Eileen left Newcastle for a short trip to Scotland. For years, she preserved the letters he sent her daily, giddy with love.

"The hospital has not been the same without you, but even the biochemistry department looked sunny this morning when I found your letter propped up against the microscope!"

In these faded letters, he ponders the last decade and where his youth has gone. Meeting her "meant the end of years of waiting, wondering and just faintly hoping." He tells her they will never again need to write letters; that October, 1949, soon after his 30th birthday, they were married.



Eileen and Tom, c. 1950

II

Within a year, my brother was born, followed swiftly by me, my sister and a few years later, our brother. My mother put her own medical career on pause to raise us.

This is where his story becomes mine too. I've read so many sad tales of childhood gone awry—abusive or neglectful parents, poverty, sadness. It's almost embarrassing to write about a family in which I felt unconditionally nurtured. For a father of that era, that wasn't a given—Dad was raised in a family where expressions of affection were scarce. He remembered his distant, war-damaged father, and he wanted something different for us. He never quite mastered the art of the hug, but he did learn to be a dad to us all.

I'm sure each of my siblings has a different story to tell. But for me, he was a dad who brought books back from trips and read them with me—I still have a shabby *Hobbit*, inscribed from 1962.

A dad who came to teacher-parent meetings and protested when teachers doubted my potential. "She is much brighter than you think!"

A dad who happily drove me miles to country churches to pursue my passion for brass-rubbing—perhaps the most inconvenient and Britishly nerdy hobby ever conceived.

A dad who told me it was just fine if I didn't want to go into science like everyone else in the family, telling me he secretly always wanted to be a historian.



Tom and Liz, Scotland, 1959

I knew a man who loved Scottish dancing and old ballads, who composed silly parody songs about medical procedures, who gathered with friends in our home, drinking wine and singing Tom Lehrer songs into the wee hours. Who loved my mother conspicuously and exuberantly. Who never raised his voice in anger—except the day we came home from the seaside to find our gaggle of

guineapigs slaughtered by a neighbor's dog, bloody corpses scattered across the garage floor. As our mother hurried us inside, he stormed down to their house in incandescent

fury. “No child should have to see that—they’ll remember it forever!” Which we did, of course.

In the early days, when money was tight, vacations were a month in Northern Scotland, where he would fill in for the local doctor, driving through the highlands to remote crofts, while my siblings and I played on the beaches or walked the hills with our mother. Sometimes he would take me along, visiting patients who spoke Gaelic and welcomed him with fresh fish or home-baked scones. In down times, he took us fishing; a favorite childhood photo shows us sitting by the water, his attention on me as I struggle to bait my hook.

When he no longer needed to work on vacations, we ventured further afield to France—to Brittany, Normandy, or the Dordogne. Our parents slept comfortably in our VW camper van, next to us in our tent. In the evening, around a fire, one of us would inevitably ask: “Tell us about the war, Dad.”

Our mother would roll her eyes, and off he’d go. In these tales, war was a great adventure, spun for maximum comedic effect. The unexpected voyage to India and the incompetence of military bureaucrats, one of whom had told him in Delhi he couldn’t possibly be Captain Bird, since he was shipped back to Blighty months before. “That’s the Army—things like that happened all the time—you’re nothing but a number. I was 254125,” he would remark.

He spoke of months of training and waiting, the discovery of spices and curry after a lifetime of meat and boiled greens. The hectic train rides across the continent to see the Taj Mahal, bargaining for the beautiful rugs now scattered across our home. Burly soldiers who keeled over at the sight of a needle. Cricket matches on the beaches of Mauritius, surrounded by the most beautiful women in the world (another eyeroll).

From the moment of its inception in 1948, Dad believed in the promise of the National Health Service. “This is what we fought for,” he would say. “But for the war, and the way it changed everything, it could never have happened.” He rose to head a lab in the area’s largest teaching hospital; one of his greatest joys was working with medical students and young doctors, many from India and Pakistan. Private health care did not disappear; it operated alongside the NHS for those that wanted to pay for a little luxury.

Sometimes, Dad's lab would do tests for a private patient, entitling him to fees. Instead, he chose to donate them to the hospital library.

He loved his job—even more so when our mother returned to medicine as my youngest brother moved into his teens. But later, with three of us grown and the last nearing college, Dad's thoughts began turning to another wartime moment, on embarkation leave before his deployment in 1943. Alone, he had traveled across country to the English Lake District, where in heavy Army boots, he hiked every day through the “worst bloody weather for twenty or thirty years.” Soaked and tired on the last day, he walked across a steep valley. “I came to look down on the Loweswater and Buttermere Valley, and as it swung into view, the sun came out, and I looked down into a little village nestling round a lovely lake, with high hills surrounding it. And I thought, this is paradise.”

That vision stayed with him through war and beyond, and almost forty years later, my parents moved to the valley of Loweswater, leaving behind three decades of friendships in search of paradise. Not long before, his brother had made the same move; Dad joked that after hearing the story of the rain-soaked hike for so many years, his little brother vowed to beat him to it. Now both couples lived in 17th century cottages by the lake, in sight of the fells with their mysterious names—Mellbreak, Carling Knott, Catbells, Darling Fell.

His brother, self-contained to the point of reclusiveness, had moved to escape people, preferring the company of his dogs as he strode the hills, and rarely interacting with anyone outside his family. My parents embraced a different life, creating a network across the valley. They both took jobs at a hospital in a nearby town, quickly connecting with fellow physicians. They became firm friends with the sheep-farming couple next door, their only neighbors. My mother missed her old life but joined a choir and brought new friends home. This had been his dream, but she accepted it with love, planting daffodils down the winding gravel track to the road, and heather in their rustic garden. From my new American home, I wrote letters and rejoiced at their happiness.

Barely three years in, my mother, a fit sixty-year-old, began to feel breathless on their hikes; a childhood brush with rheumatic fever had damaged a heart valve. It would be a routine fix. Days before the scheduled surgery, Dad settled her into bed with a mug

of cocoa while he walked the dog down the track. He returned to see the cocoa spilled across the bed. Despite all his efforts to revive her, she was gone.

III

And so began his final act alone, gliding from the depths of despair to a resigned happiness, and offering a thirty-year lesson in living with grief and hope. He gradually carved out a new reality, learning to cook and bake, and eventually winning prizes in the annual valley fair; his chocolate roulades, dowsed in copious measures of brandy, became the stuff of local legend. To stave off solitude, he postponed his planned retirement as long as he could. But when the inevitable moment came, he joined walking groups and took up amateur dramatics. He sang in the choir my mother had loved and always urged him to join. His neighbors were constant in their love and support, and he enjoyed quiet weekly dinners with his brother and the company of his dog, Ben.

And all the while, he nursed his grief like a fine wine. A healthy sixty-something widower is a coveted commodity anywhere, and I'd ask about the single ladies who sang in the choir or occasionally came for tea, taken in my mother's antique teacups and accompanied by his freshly baked scones. One hiked with him occasionally in the hills.

"She reminds me a bit of your mother; I can almost imagine it's her."

But none would get past the teacups or the hiking boots.

My new, American family—husband and two boys—visited as often as we could, falling in love with the lake alongside him. He found joy in the ten grandchildren he eventually had, even as he still struggled with overt affection. As my children grew up, and transatlantic flights became increasingly affordable, I visited more often, usually alone, or with one of my sons, as my husband tended to his own aging parents down south. Once, my son and I recorded his memories, a decision I treasure, but I learned just as much in our evening chats, sipping wine by the lake in Spring, or warmed by the wood stove in his timber-beamed living room in Winter. His thoughts would often turn to the past. Meeting my mother, for the thousandth time. Family holidays. Memorable moments in his long medical career. Walking the hills in their first golden summer.

And the war, of course.

It was then that the sunny tales of army mishaps, train rides, and cricket on the beaches gave way to darker memories never shared with us as children. Like the arrival in Singapore as the war wound down, where the survivors of the notorious Changi prison were brought on board for treatment.

“They were just skeletons, barely moving, barely alive. They were treated so awfully.” Changi had housed thousands of Allied prisoners of war, many of whom were tortured, starved, and subjected to forced labor. He never forgave Japan for Changi.

Or his assignment as physician to the prostitutes in the Calcutta brothels where soldiers lined up to take their turn with desperate Indian women who had nowhere else to go.

“I’ve never forgotten it—the worst weeks of my life. I’ve never felt so much sympathy for women, and it’s lasted, you know.”

Or August, 1947, in India when the friendly Muslim rug dealer, who had visited the barracks weekly to bargain with the troops, arrived in terror as he fled marauding Hindu neighbors, throwing his wares at their feet.

“He said he’d take whatever we could give; he was running for his life. We British created this mess, and all we could do was watch. I never saw him again.”

Or the futility of patching up casualties on the beaches of Ramree Island.

“You can’t do much with battle-field dressing stations. It’s first aid really. You never know if you’ve really helped.”

He told me once about a young soldier, who seemed about to die, though with only a small wound on his head. Dad recognized a rare allergic reaction and used an antidote to save the boy’s life.

“I can honestly say, he was the only person I *know* I saved, and I held on to that when I wondered if anything I did made a difference. But in the end, I couldn’t save the person who meant everything, could I?”

His grief never faded, but it hid behind happiness. He once said that if he had even the slightest belief in an afterlife, where he would see my mother again, he might have considered hastening his own journey.

“But I know there isn’t, you see. So as long as I can feel her around me, and you kids are with me, I want as much time as I can get.”

The valley sustained him. “I used to ask her: what will we do when we can’t walk up the hills? And she’d tell me we would walk in the valleys and look up at the hills. And when we couldn’t walk in the valley, we’d sit in the garden and look at the hills. And that’s what I do.”

For his 80th birthday, the village hall filled with friends and family for a joyful *ceilidh*, and he danced to the skirl of fiddles and accordions with neighbors, daughters, and granddaughters.

When he turned ninety, it was a more sedate affair, with a few missing faces. A soprano sang his favorite songs; my brother-in-law’s video camera caught him smiling through tears as he mouthed along to her words, transported to who knows where:

*I may be right, I may be wrong
But I'm perfectly willing to swear
That when you turned and smiled at me
A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square*

Afterwards he rose to thank the roomful of friends and family, cheerfully inviting us all to his 100th birthday party.

Dad kept a clear mind his whole life, but even as we celebrated his birthday, he was mourning his younger brother’s descent into Alzheimer’s. He told me about a frantic call from his sister-in-law—her husband was raging at the “strange old woman” in his living room. When Dad arrived, his brother turned his anger on him. “Who are you? My brother is a young man—please bring him here!” “Wish I could have,” he remarked sadly. Not long after, his brother died, leaving Dad wondering anew. Why did he live on, while so many did not?

When broadband finally reached him, he discovered Skype, and we talked often. He couldn’t quite get over the technology that brought us together. “Your voice is clearer than a phone call across the valley, and I get to see your face. Bloody marvelous!” Each year I would visit once or twice, often in December, when I’d join him as he visited my mother’s grave to bring Christmas wreaths. He fretted that her hillside gravestone,

battered by the cold lake winds, was almost illegible after thirty years. “Promise me you’ll put up a new one when you drop my ashes in with her.”

Finally, the trek to the barn for logs grew harder, and the hazards of driving on country roads became more real—although he was secretly proud of his first ever speeding ticket, acquired at the age of ninety-four. He reluctantly put the house on the market, moved to a flat in a nearby town, and sold his car. He grumbled that the complex was full of “old ladies,” and his windows had no view. One weekend, with the sparsely furnished house about to sell, he gathered supplies and took a taxi across the hills to his home. In a flurry of frantic emails we siblings, from our distant locations, shared our exasperation.

“What is he thinking?”

“He’s determined to go while the weather is good. He promised if the phone isn’t working, he will get straight back in the taxi.”

Between our anxious phone calls, he cooked and drank wine, while walking in his garden and gazing at the sheep-studded hills. For one last time he lit the fire and climbed the stone staircase to the bedroom that overlooked his beloved Loweswater.

Later that year, a cancer diagnosis signaled the end, and my transatlantic trips grew more frequent, as we took turns to care for him in his flat, bonding as our visits overlapped and we shared his decline. As his independence crumbled, he muttered against his failing body. “My own daughters helping me shower—you should never have to do this!” Growing ever weaker, he agreed to the move he knew would be his last.

One evening, after my sister left and we awaited the arrival of my brother, who would supervise the transfer to the nursing home, I sat with him, flipping through family photos on my laptop. He mused about his life, and its three almost equal parts—before Eileen, with her, and grieving her. He wondered about the youth he never really had: “But I was lucky really—I had a pretty good war. There are times you can’t stop thinking about it though. So many people dead, so very many. You’ll probably say I’m daft, but I think it somehow made me a better person. Does that seem awful to you?”

No, Dad, it doesn’t.

The doctor had said he may have months left, and I flew back to teach my classes in Florida.

Curtain Call

Just a couple of weeks later, I returned to find him sliding into twilight, barely acknowledging my presence.

“He was in pain, and he asked for the syringe driver,” my doctor brother explained.

The driver is a small, battery-operated pump that delivers a steady flow of medicine to the body, through a thin tube under the skin. It may be used at any life stage, but loaded with morphine, it is a tool for dying. Dad knew exactly what it meant, and he was content.

My sister had said goodbye and left for her long drive back to Scotland. My brothers and I agreed it made sense for them to go home to their jobs and families, hours away. Now so far from home, I would stay to watch over him until the end, as the nurses shared those last tales he spun.

The body is stubborn, and he held on. “It may be a couple of days,” the nurses told me. Each day stretched to another; every time I left for some brief respite, I expected to find him gone, but he was still there, shrinking before my eyes.

On the fifth evening, I returned to his flat to get a bite to eat. The jangle of the phone told me it was finally over.

“Your Dad’s passed, love.”

“Was anyone with him?”

“No, we saw when we popped in to check.”

I headed back to his room, where he lay in fresh pajamas, eyes closed and sparse hair combed.

I silently thanked him for organizing everything in advance—there would be a cremation with a God-free service and a final gathering in the village hall. And a brand-



Tom at Loweswater (91 years old)

new, marble headstone. The head nurse chatted on: “You know, sometimes they wait until there’s no-one there—to spare you. We’ve seen it often.”

I don’t want that to be true; it would mean he knew he was alone.

All those days, as I waited for the morphine to release him, I wondered what was playing in his mind, as I do still. I’m certain the shadows of war, seared into his young mind, still lurked to haunt him. But surely there were brighter, shimmering scenes that nudged out those shadows before the inescapable fade to black. My mother’s face, smiling on their wedding day. His sons, daughters, and two more generations of children. And the moment the sun burst through the clouds on the fells and led him to the valley of Loweswater for his final, bittersweet act. I hope so.

When the World Shakes

by Joannell Serra

When the magnitude seven earthquake hit Northern California in December, I was at home, chatting on the phone with my oldest son in New York. My phone spit out a high pitch blaring alarm with an announcement: EARTHQUAKE NEAR YOU, SEEK COVER.

I dropped the phone and ran to check on my husband, Harry, who is fighting a tough cancer battle and had just headed out with the dog for a backyard rest.

I'm fine. He called out. *I'm staying out here.* I looked around—a wide grassy area, no trees above him. Good call. I squatted down as well and waited, but other than the slight shudder of an aftershock, we didn't feel it. I called my son back, but within minutes the screaming sound from my phone started again: TSUNAMI WARNING IN EFFECT. STAY AT LEAST ONE BLOCK INLAND.

This was not a problem for us—we live high on a hill nowhere close to shore. Because we travel back and forth from San Francisco for my husband's cancer treatments, my phone is set for alerts in both counties.

I scrambled to reach our two other adult children, both in San Francisco that day. My daughter lives about a mile from the ocean. I urged her to stay inside for the next hour just in case. My youngest had just arrived downtown for his shift at a retail store on Market Street. Our messages went from: *I'm at work. Can't talk,* to *They are closing the store and sending us home.* That meant crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. I jumped on the phone and implored him not to cross the bay in the next hour. He sighed.

My buddies are at the beach and they say it isn't anything yet.

I almost suggested he say goodbye to his surfing buddies, but I held back.

Just promise me you won't go near the beach.

In the two years since my husband's diagnosis, we have faced chemo, radiation, emergency brain surgery, and more treatments. He is doing fairly well, but we carry a constant sense of waiting for the next crisis. Whenever I call one of the kids and they don't pick up, I quickly text a follow up. *Everything is fine! Just saying hello.* I know they'll worry when they see the missed call.

Before the diagnosis, if I had asked my youngest to avoid the beach on the day of a potential Tsunami he would have pushed back, telling me these waves would be the experience of a lifetime. Now he instead responds, *Sure. I'll stay inland. Don't worry.* We treat one other like we are all one bad day from a breakdown. And that's not totally wrong.

The tsunami warning rolled through the Bay Area. BART trains that cross under the bay were stopped. West Berkeley prepared to evacuate. Businesses closed. I saw a tweet that the zoo had closed and started moving the animals "to higher ground," something I couldn't quite picture. Elephants and tigers strolling uphill?

And then another announcement came: *No tsunami today after all. Nothing to see here.* I felt a collective sigh of relief. But also, I found some comfort at how prepared the emergency system seemed to be, in how quickly all three kids were in touch, that they now make rational choices.

My son went back to selling jeans about a block from his dad's old office. My daughter headed out to walk her dog in the same neighborhood she lived in as an infant. It's strange and wonderful to have them spending their twenties in the city where I spent mine, and it brings up memories constantly. I met their father the day I arrived in San Francisco and lived in the city for my first real job out of college, working with the homeless on the streets of the Tenderloin. I lived there for two years of graduate school and through the milestones of getting married, having our first child, then our second. It's where so much of my adult life began. We moved out of the city years ago to raise the kids just outside the city, and then moved further North, to the wine country, to wait out the pandemic surrounded by nature. But for the last eighteen months we have been in San Francisco almost full time, in an apartment just across from the hospital. On our chemo free days we walk in waterfront parks Harry helped plan, see a Giants game at the ballpark he spent fifteen years negotiating, belong to museums for which he fought diligently. It's a literal walk down memory lane.

When I arrived in San Francisco, I had just finished college in New Jersey. A lifelong east coaster, I planned to move Manhattan after a year or two in San Francisco. I envisioned a cute apartment in the West Village for a few years, then imagined raising a family in the Catskills. But as I was falling in love with my husband, I was also falling for

San Francisco. Ironically, my relationship with both the city and Harry solidified on the day the earth below us liquefied.

When the Loma Prieta earthquake hit in 1989, the graduate psychology class I was taking was on a “process” break. The professor was covering the effects of trauma in early childhood, and she felt the class needed many breaks. My friend Jill and I were drinking tea and commiserating about our perceived fragility. I split a Snickers bar in two for us, noting that at this rate we would never get through the chapter that day. Jill agreed. Then she pointed at the window:

What is happening out there?

I looked up and caught my breath. Valencia Street rippled, as if the asphalt had turned into a black pond, and the streetlights were swaying like trees in the wind. Car alarms up and down the block rang out as the couch beneath me shimmied. I did not connect the word “earthquake” to these events. The earth crumpled; the city shimmered. Solid became not solid. Things flowed; other things crashed. And eventually, yes, a shudder, as if the world was a merry-go-round and it had suddenly stopped.

But earthquake? I had never been in one, and this is not what I imagined. The professors spilled out into the lobby, calling for everyone to gather in the classroom, to *process what’s happening*. Jill’s eyes rolled like a cartoon cat. *Seriously? Now? Do we have to?*

Once it became clear that this was indeed an earthquake, and that our program had no real plan to manage this emergency, Jill and I tossed our books into our backpacks and left. We needed to get back to our neighborhoods—the Upper Haight for me—which was three miles from our campus. The buses had stopped, and this was long before Uber. We would walk, we decided. Phone and power lines had collapsed, and we skirted live wires bouncing and sparking in the streets. Traversing the city on foot seemed foolish, but what else was there to do?

The three-mile journey included crossing Market Street with no streetlights, and surmounting several enormous hills. As we walked, we witnessed humanity in its various shades: People crying, men in tight muscle shirts outside gay bars drinking beer and joking, children whining at their mothers like any other evening, cops shoos us away from areas with cavities in the ground. There were streetlights down, storefronts

smashed, dogs peeing right into the newly widened cracks in the street. Some people took their garbage out, as if the trucks might come by the next day, and other people came out and offered us water, as if we were crossing the Sahara. It was a normal-not-normal type of crisis.

No one seemed sure just how bad things were. We didn't know that the part of the Bay Bridge had collapsed or that the Marina was on fire. We heard sirens, but also the sunset was beautiful. I became increasingly worried about Harry, still a boyfriend not a husband, but a boyfriend I had recently moved in with. Older, more experienced in life and the possessor of self-confidence I envied, I generally thought of him as invincible. But he had gone to a World Series game that day. Could he still be there? Would a baseball stadium be a safe place to ride out an earthquake? Then I thought of my sister, who had recently moved an hour away and was now nine months pregnant. And my parents, who were visiting her while waiting for the baby. I worried about the homeless clients I worked with, about my acupuncturist and my friends and my friends' dogs and...and I froze. For the first time in my twenty-four-year-old life, I considered everyone I knew being unsafe. My loved ones, I realized, were vulnerable, human, and mortal. Now I wished I had stayed for the process group back at my grad program.

Jill peeled off at her place, and I walked the last thirty minutes alone. By the time I arrived home it was dark, and there was no power in our building. It took two laps of walking through our tiny one-bedroom apartment to accept that Harry was not there. My heart hurt as I scrambled through jumbled drawers to find a candle. There was a lighter in the little bag where Harry kept his weed. There was fresh water in a bottle on the counter. I took stock, trying not to panic.

I ate an apple sitting by the bay window, the candle flickering on the table, staring at a gorgeous view of the dimming city. The phones were still dead, leaving me utterly cut off from everyone I knew. I was not scared for myself. But I needed to know that my people were all still on this planet, unharmed. I needed it so much I could not swallow the bites of apple. I curled around my hungry, hard, stomach and waited. An hour later, I heard Harry at the door, and I ran into his arms, smelling his shoulder, touching his bristly hair. Inhaling him. Alive. Alive. Alive.

He told me that the ballpark lost power, and the game had to be canceled, a first for a World Series game. He had stumbled out of the park with a few friends, dazed. They walked through the Bayview neighborhood for a few blocks before a total stranger picked them up and drove them all the way across the city to their respective homes. An angel stranger. We sat in one chair together, breathing in and out our relief, staring into the darkness outside, where usually there were lights dotting the horizon.

My niece was born a few days later. Because the Bay Bridge was out of commission, we weren't sure how to get to Sacramento. California was still a large land mass to me; one I didn't understand. We opened our road maps and figured out a circuitous route, which included passing miles of marshland. I watched gorgeous birds I'd never seen before—Egrets, Herons and Ibises—coast over the wetlands. I wondered what the earthquake had felt like to them.

When we arrived at my sister's, I stood in the adorably adorned nursery, holding my tiny, perfect niece. I didn't know yet when I would be married or pregnant or a mother. But I sensed in my bones that I would hold my own child someday, and that it would be Harry's child too. Even if he wasn't so sure yet.

The landscape of the city was forever changed after the earthquake. Harry went on to work as a lawyer on projects throughout the city—museums, schools, hospitals, and even a new baseball park—all that need to be retrofitted or built fresh, because of the day the city became a pond.

I didn't take my touchy-feely graduate program for granted after that day. Nor the building it was in that stayed strong, keeping Jill and I and our snark safe inside while the earth shook. I appreciated everything that held—the firefighters, nurses and doctors who rushed in to help, the strangers who drove other strangers home, the mothers who carried their children across bridges, the journalists who jumped into helicopters to film the city so the rest of the world knew what was happening—everyone who brought kindness to a nightmare.

This was the day that San Francisco became my home, instead of a place I was living. It's the point I realized that disasters happen collectively and that the Bay Area was a pretty decent place to face disasters. Also, after that day, I wrote Harry's name down

whenever I was asked for my emergency contact. Because ultimately, he was the one I needed most to come home.

Thirty-five years later, I put my phone down, today's emergencies passed. Two weeks ago, our phone blasted a flash flood warning. Four years ago, we watched our phones every minute for wildfire updates and counted the number of Covid cases hospitalized. Life seems to have gotten more precarious for all of us. Or maybe it just feels that way, because our family journey has edged along so many cliffs.

Facing the possible loss of my favorite person means that there are personal "aftershocks" every day. Memories lie dormant until I turn the wrong corner in San Francisco and remember diagnosis day, the night of the brain tumor surgery, or the time I brought home Covid to my fragile spouse. From that perspective, there is something almost validating about an earthquake. When the outer world shakes and everyone recognizes how unstable this experience of living really is, I want to say, "See? Life is dangerous game! Even the ground beneath us can dissolve." Also, the person you love most might have a tumor no one noticed. Also, that hint of smoke in the air might be someone's house burning. And those waves barreling towards the coast? They could sweep us all away.

But, I could add, that person standing across the room on the day you step off the plane in a new city might be the love of your life. And also, he is still here. I can hear him humming to a John Prine song in the kitchen and feeding the dog. That happened today too.

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night: West Meath, February 1976

by T.S.Ollerhead

I caught up with her beyond the fallow field, hoar frost glistening blackened elms, ryegrass stems rustling to her listless tread, and in the corner of the next field, seeking the comfort of an overhanging blackthorn, a small group of heifers nuzzled closely for warmth, their condensing breath heavy in the chill morning air. As we walked in silence towards the stand of skeletal oaks, a solitary raven, late to catch the flock, flapped clumsily away from a high branch.

She had been this way for nearly eight weeks, fifty-something days of self-imposed silence, a deliberate personal catharsis. We headed for the gap between the dying hawthorns and the fallen gate, twisted and neglected, decaying into the land itself. I held her arm as she cautiously picked her way over its mud-slickened crossbeams, her eyes glazed, fixed now on the derelict cottage. It was silent as we approached, quiet in its heavy winter stillness, a chapel-like reverence. She held the blackened roof beam, twisted and weathered from generations of neglect, steady in her watery gaze.

As on many mornings, I would stand a little behind her, careful not to intrude on her silence, her pain. Faded wildflowers, baby's breath, meadowsweet and fireweed, their newspaper wrapping long gone, lay dead and scattered across the time-worn threshold.

This particular morning she took longer than usual, lost somewhere deep, struggling with an inner torment. Walking slowly forward, hesitantly, as though crossing an unseen barrier, she reached out, her pale, frail hand steadying against the rotting door frame, the crushing of underfoot glass the only sound in that cloying silence. It was the first time she had entered the cottage. Instinctively turning, half-shuffling, she ran her fingers along the edge of the overturned table, then slowly, deliberately, turned her gaze to the heavy roof beam, its sombre silhouette stark against the grey morning sky. I felt a

desperate need at that point to hold her, to reach out and comfort her, knowing instinctively that it would be wrong. She needed this moment, needed it so badly.

I waited over at the broken fence, sitting splay-legged on the twisted stile. The harsh alarm-call of a blackbird sounded somewhere along the bare hedgerow and a small spider-web delicately silvered in morning frost, slanting sunlight catching the top of the far hill. My cigarette smoke hung unsure, slowly rising into the still air, my presence in this place little more authority than a shadow.

We walked back towards the farmhouse, her step somehow now a little more positive, a subtle change. She stopped walking and turning to me, placed a firm hand on my arm, grey watery eyes, weather-beaten outdoor face.

“He never told me, not once, but I know in his own selfish way that he had some feelings for me.”

She held my gaze, defiantly. I slowly nodded my head, and that was it, the moment was gone, the soft trickle of water in the ditch, the only sound. The first time she had spoken his memory aloud since that fragile mist-filled autumn morning when the neighbour and his two boys had unfastened the clumsy barbed wire from around his neck, supported him, lowered him reverently from beneath the blackened roof beam.

Love Me, Love My Stuff

by Barbara Belzer Adams

Hank decided it was time for me to do my Swedish death cleaning—a method for getting rid of the cherished objects around your house your heirs probably won't want—so he jump-started the process by breaking three thirty-year-old holly green glass vases I'd found on vacation and a raku bowl I'd spotted at an art festival two decades ago. I should probably mention that Hank is a cat.

A feisty grey tabby just past the kitten stage, Hank paved his initial path of destruction in the early morning hours, three consecutive crashes startling me awake. In fairness, he probably had some help: I had put the vases in a kitchen cabinet for safekeeping and my guess is that another family cat opened the door (it's a unique ability that you have to see to believe: he stands on his hind feet, his claws engaged over the top of the door, then pulls it open by walking backward), giving Hank unfettered access. In less time than it took me to run out of the bedroom, a pile of shattered glass lay on the floor and next to it was a remorseless Hank. He took care of the raku bowl later that day, knocking it off a low shelf WHILE I WATCHED.

Four items down (literally), how many hundreds to go?

Nothing Lasts Forever, Not Even Us

They say the average American household has more than 300,000 items in it, but the figure has never been substantiated and I'm not sure how you'd even measure it. Should a box of lightbulbs count as one thing or four? But enough quibbling. The fact is, I have a lot of stuff. I like my things and people like adding to my collections. That's how the single, dark purple glass telephone pole insulator I picked up—imagine something so pretty having such utility, no pun intended—eventually became more than a dozen, how the creamer and sugar bowl set that was once my parents' is now one of too many to mention.

To keep things somewhat under control, I do make a regular practice of clearing out cupboards and closets, generally without feline assistance. Still, I have a long way to go to achieve bare-bones Swedish death cleaning nirvana.

For the uninitiated, the idea behind Swedish death cleaning, also known as *döstädning*, is simple and pragmatic: declutter now so your loved ones won't have to do it after you're gone.

That last part, of course, makes the concept as painful as it is practical. No one really likes to imagine the inevitability of not being here.

Sure, we write our wills, make notes about what goes to whom. My aunt was listing the items she intended to leave her kids when my uncle asked what I would get. "My best regards," she said. Hey—at least I wouldn't have to worry about hanging onto something out of guilt, trying to squeeze a few dollars out of it online, donating or tossing it, or trying to pass it onto one of my adult kids, who have accumulated their own things and generally don't want mine.

And there's the rub. Most of the time, the people who love us don't necessarily love our stuff.

I'm not talking about the woman on the TV reality show who was finding it difficult, perhaps understandably so, to offload her collection of wooden penises.

Instead, I mean the more mundane things that have given us joy: the dishes we wished for when we got engaged, our highly curated collection of kitschy cookie jars, the old metal typewriter ribbon cases we hunted for ... even three holly green glass vases and a raku bowl.

Belongings=Belonging

Emotion plays a big part in what we get, what we keep, and why we hope the next generation will care about them too.

Our belongings fill a deep-seated need, psychologists say, often to the point that we see them as an extension of ourselves, wooden penises aside. For that, we have evolution to thank.

British psychology professor Nick Neave, who directs the Hoarding Research Group at Northumbria University, told *Scientific American* the comfort we derive from our possessions goes back to early humans' desire to keep enough food, weapons, and tools on hand to survive.

Granted, there are few circumstances where glass paperweights or old postage stamps might be the difference between life and death. However, the evolutionary holdover is that our possessions make us feel less vulnerable. Inanimate objects comfort and even define us, helping us find like-minded community, which can give even more meaning to our lives.

Enmeshed as we are with our "stuff," it can sting when our kids reject it. Don't want my souvenir spoon collection? When did you stop loving me?

Of course, in most cases, love (or lack thereof) has nothing to do with it. Maybe our kids are avowed minimalists. Maybe it's an issue of storage or lifestyle: Who wants twelve place settings of gold-rimmed, hand-wash-only bone china when dinner is at the coffee table in front of the TV? Or maybe it just comes down to different tastes. To be honest, even I no longer want the Queen Anne-style china cabinet I was so proud of forty years ago.

Consider the Samovar

I do think there's another factor involved in our adult children rebuffing what we consider heirlooms (and I don't mean polishing them to a sheen): not just a lack of connection to the things, but a lack of connection to the people behind them.

Hear me out.

One of my mother's most prized possessions was a brass samovar her extended family brought from Rēzekne, Latvia, when they emigrated en masse to the U.S. in the early 1900s.

Why the family never imagined there would be tea-making apparatus in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, their ultimate destination, is beyond me. But I'm grateful the samovar, with its dents and scorched wooden handles, made that long boat journey

across the Atlantic. I can't help but think those relatives, who were elderly by the time I came along, were a little dinged up by the trip, too.

After my mom died prematurely in 1966, my dad held onto the samovar with fierce pride, although I do have a photo of it being pressed into service as a vase for plastic flowers (remember, it was the 60s). It's been in my dining room for decades.

While the samovar reminds me of the people who used and loved it, my own kids are three generations removed from them. They never knew my parents, much less my great-uncle Sam, who was briefly jailed for refusing to fight in the Russo-Japanese War, wound up trading his boots for his life fleeing to England, and lived to be ninety-six but lied about his age, saying he was only ninety-five. I adored "the old man," as we called him, and can picture his younger self drinking tea at a lace tablecloth-covered table, the samovar steaming nearby. To my kids, he's more or less an abstract concept, a brave man they might as well have read about in a history book.

It probably goes without saying that neither my son nor daughter wants the samovar after I'm gone (and being metal, even Hank the cat can't really destroy it). I can't bear the thought of it winding up in a second-hand store, though.

So, I think I'll take a page from my mother-in-law's playbook, who told me "You spend the first fifty years of your life acquiring things then the rest of it trying to get rid of them." About twenty years ago, she started masquerading her heirlooms as wedding and birthday gifts. (One year, she gave me a silver tray her parents received on their 25th anniversary, engraved with their friends' names, including two men called Bub.) The old man's namesake great-grandson is getting married soon and the samovar might be the perfect present.

But I'll ask first.

Because if I want him to keep loving me, I won't try to make him love my stuff.

Poor Josie

by Maria Hetherton

I met Noreen in Cork, the year after my mother died. She welcomed me around a table crowded with cousins I'd never met, all of us drinking tea and eating cake and the men sipping whiskey. Everyone laughed when my husband confused a salt cellar with a sugar bowl and put salt in his tea. A few well-placed f-bombs made our discourse pop. We discovered a shared failure as children to keep our mouths shut during school. It all added up: these were my people.

My mother rarely mentioned these cousins in Cork, and was mostly mum on the subject of her childhood in Ireland. She told me her family were among the poor given baskets from the grocers on Boxing Day, and that pregnancy made her mother very cross. The eldest daughter, she was often charged with the care of younger siblings. Sundays, she'd earn a penny escorting her blind aunt to Mass, a penny she refused to relinquish when nuns at school asked alms for children in Africa. A few of her memories bordered on the political, like the rhyme she and her friends enjoyed as children: *Colman's Mustard, Colman's Starch, tell Mr. Colman to stick it in his arse*, Colman's, of course, a British brand.

Noreen and I still correspond. We exchange cards at Christmas, our families' latest traumas scribbled into the white space, and emails at random times of year. She'll share memories of growing up alongside a river in a mill town near Cork. Sometimes we exchange insights from ancestry profiles. *Did you know our grandmothers share DNA with the Somerset Cheddar Man?* And sometimes, Noreen reveals stories about poor Josie, my mother's mother, a woman I never knew.

*

Cissie was Noreen's grandmother, and Josie was mine, sisters raised in Tralee, County Kerry. The only photo we have of Josie includes Cissie and her husband, taken perhaps on Cissie's wedding day. The young couple sit while Josie stands centered behind them. A brimmed felt hat frames Cissie's pleasant face. Her hands clutch a pair of gloves.

The brim of Josie's hat bisects her crown at a jaunty angle. Her eyes project a hint of defiance. Her right hand rests on her new brother's shoulder, pulling him in, telling a story all its own. Josie hasn't yet met the man she'll marry, a half-English veteran of World War I. Her hand on the new brother's



shoulder conveys a sense of protection. All things considered, there is also a prescient sense of *Cissie, you got the good one*.

The sisters came of age during the Irish War of Independence. The 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty marked its terminus. Britain agreed to withdraw its military and police presence and accord Ireland the status of a Commonwealth country like Canada or Australia. Yet Britain would continue to maintain naval bases along Ireland's shores, and require the sworn allegiance of Irish Parliament to the monarch. The northern counties of Ireland would be partitioned to Great Britain.

Only a small majority within the Irish Republican Parliament approved the treaty. Civil war ensued.

In the years Cissie and Josie became young mothers, Kerry was a hotbed of guerilla warfare and reprisal killing among the Irish themselves. County Kerry would tally more violence and fatality than any other county in Ireland during the Irish Civil War.

In a series of emails, Noreen introduces an image of her grandmother Cissie, the fireside raconteur. Cissie warms her porter by inserting a red-hot poker into her mug. She doesn't hate the occasional pinch of snuff. Huddled close to the hearth, she regales the children with stories of ghosts. The ghosts are loved ones who wandered into alternate histories and never returned. One such ghost is poor Josie.

I read Noreen's emails and forget I'm in front of a computer monitor. My focus is that fireplace in a simple Irish home, Cissie narrating the story of my grandmother. It all begins to make sense.

Noreen writes: *Cissie's description of the War of Independence in Tralee frightened me as a child. She described a woman showing her son's chopped off fingers to Noch in a bloody white hankie.*

"Noch" was Honora, Cissie's and Josie's mother, a woman twice widowed and from whom war took two sons. First Tadgh, who died in France at the end of the first world war, and then Patrick, the activist who disappeared.

Noreen writes: *Cissie always maintained that if her brother Pa could get six good men, he'd have freed Roger Casement as he was brought into Tralee.*

"Pa" was Patrick.

And Casement was a knighted official in the British Foreign Office. He grew to reject British colonialism and took up the Irish cause. Britain exposed his plot to arm Kerry rebels with weapons smuggled from Germany. He was hung for treason in 1916, around the time Cissie and Josie worked the woolen mill as young teens. Their brother, Pa, a republican activist, went away.

They never heard from him again.

And then, the civil war.

Noreen writes: *Cissie talked of the Ballyseedy ambush, but I don't remember why. It is quite possible that family connections were related to those killed in the ambush.*

In March of 1923, Irish National Army officers removed eight Anti-Treaty prisoners to Ballyseedy, a remote area outside of Tralee. They tied the prisoners together with rope and detonated a land mine in their midst.

A few weeks later, Josie gave birth to my mother.

The Irish Free State was established later that year, but troubles in Kerry prevailed to the brink of the Second World War. Josie's oldest son, my mother's favorite brother, fled Tralee to join the British army. He feared retaliation after refusing a mission IRA associates had assigned him, one he could not in conscience perform. Josie saw him to the train, late at night, and never saw him again. How it must have compounded her grief—first two brothers and now a son lost to war.

These events help me understand Mom's mood the evening we saw my brother off to basic training and then Viet Nam. I was seven.

"Why are you crying?" Mom asked me. Her tone conveyed a hint of scorn. I reckoned the answer was obvious.

Dad tried to reassure me. "Don't worry. He's a noncombatant. He'll probably be on a typewriter the whole time he's over there."

We watched my brother disappear through a gate at LAX, and waited at the window until his plane ascended from the runway. I wiped my nose on the sleeve I'd pulled taut over my wrist. Call it stoicism passed from Josie to Mom and then to me, when the only choice is to wish goodbye and godspeed to a brother or a son.

Noreen's serialization of Josie's life begins to merge with small stories my mother told.

Noreen writes, *Cissie always referred to her sister as "poor Josie." She said Josie never wanted to leave Tralee, and it upset her so much she got sick and never recovered. She blamed Josie's husband for taking her and her family away.*

Josie's family inhabited a dark and crowded apartment in a barracks vacated by the British. My mom remembered her pulling coin from the coffer she earned knitting fair isle socks so her husband could go buy a pint, while he repaired the occasional bicycle. Irish men struggled to find work in the years between the Irish Civil War and the Second

World War. It is possible his half-English heritage made him less employable than most. It is true he'd enjoy a better future in England.

Josie had no say in the family's move to London. When they arrived in England, she left the boat on a stretcher and died the next day. Mom said it was Bright's Disease, kidney failure.

Mom never spoke of Josie's death without the deepest sense of sorrow. I doubt she could absorb it then. Her father soon met a woman with no interest in Josie's children. Mom shouldered Josie's role, managing seven younger siblings in the basement of a home in Kilburn. Her father and the new woman lived upstairs.

Like Josie, Mom navigated family survival in times of war. They gave the tunnels a try when the air raids commenced but could not abide the dark and the cold.

"We decided to stay home. If we had to die, at least we'd die together," Mom said.

And, like Josie, my mother married a soldier, a sweet-natured Canadian she'd meet in a London dance hall. He was sent to the front in Belgium, while she gave birth to their first child during an air raid. She hated the way washed diapers never dried, hung outside in that dismal climate. When the war ended, she shipped out to Canada with other military wives.

Her husband returned, carrying the baggage of war. Rage and panic supplanted his sweet demeanor. For a time, they spoke of parting ways, by now a daughter and a son between them. But she stayed, adding three more children to the family after my father moved them to Los Angeles. She loved their little house in Vancouver with a view of Mount Baker, but like Josie, she had no choice except to go.

Mom used to wait with me for the bus that took me to kindergarten. My timing was perfect, waiting for the doors to hiss open, and then bolting down the street. Instead of chasing me, she'd wait on the sidewalk in front of our house. Once the bus resumed its morning roundup, I'd turn back home. Wordless, we walked up the driveway and into the house.

She would put me in front of the TV to watch *Sheriff John* after equipping me with one of my father's handkerchiefs draped over a fork—a flag to hold as the sheriff pledged allegiance to a country mine, not hers.

The sheriff and a long nap were all my antics gained me. I didn't dare argue a case for more mom-time. I knew I'd encroached enough into the routine of her day. Confiding in me decades later, Mom would distill in one story her role as oldest daughter of an overwhelmed mother raising nine children. That's when Josie tasked her with taking her infant twin sisters out in a pram. Because the pram was dirty, Mom pulled it through a stream of water. When the babies contracted pneumonia, Josie berated my mom for the negligence she believed made the babies sick. Mom was just a kid. She couldn't win for trying.

What a shock it must have been, not only Josie's death, but assuming full responsibility for her siblings—in a war zone.

If I could talk to the little girl that I was, I'd try to reassure her. *Your mom's just tired. She's been taking care of children all her life.* But I don't think she'd understand.

Noreen writes, *Our great-grandmother, Noch, instilled a love for religion and the ritual of religion in Cissie and Josie. Cissie prayed morning and evening. She used her prayer book for this. When I was young, she prayed the Angelus at noon and at six pm. She always finished with, "My Jesus, mercy. Mary, help."*

And maybe Josie did the same. My mother had her own routine, praying beside a stone-cast statue of the Blessed Mother in our living room, an end-table shrine. She clutched her rosary, and stared with no attention to external distraction. It is the most grounded act of contemplation I have ever witnessed, a grounding in the mystery of a suffering mother.

It was a retreat into a realm we children never dared interrupt. Had we gained entry, we might have felt what it meant to lose a mother young or be three countries removed from the motherland.

But in a house with two bathrooms and a yard for children to play in bright California sun and with plenty of food to eat, surely her life was better than poor Josie's.

Singing: A Requiem

by Gary Fincke

Mr. Bell was the elementary school music teacher. He had a raspy voice and used a small round tuner he blew into to get us searching for the correct pitch twice a week when he visited our room while our teacher Mrs. Sowers disappeared for forty minutes. We sang "Dixie" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "The Marine Corps Hymn" from the stapled book full of uplifting songs we stored in our desks between his visits. In September, Mr. Bell had told us we were all blessed to be born under a fortunate flag. For our first sixth-grade music exam in October, he'd listened to us sing, one by one, "The Star-Spangled Banner" from memory, placing us exactly under the flag for our performances.

There was more to it than moving our mouths, he'd explained, showing us the proper posture for singing the National Anthem, his back as straight as a soldier at attention. All of us learned to keep eye contact with a spot slightly above his head so we looked patriotic and proud, working our way through the a cappella praise for what he called "our home."

What I remember most clearly about Mr. Bell is that in January, for a PTA meeting, he chose eight sixth graders to sing "America the Beautiful" and "Beautiful Dreamer" for a room full of mothers and two fathers. By late summer, my singing voice would turn tentative and tenor, but on that January night I confidently carried those tunes in close harmony with Paula P, Nancy H, Jim D, Dave S, and three others, all of us soprano and alto. Mr. Bell introduced us by name, and we were a hit.

Upstairs, after we finished to applause and were allowed to leave so we wouldn't have to sit through the "business meeting," five of us watched the *Tennessee Ernie Ford Show* on the television that was kept on a cart in our classroom because Mrs. Sowers was also the principal. Tommy Sands, the newest "Elvis," was the guest. He sang "Teenage Crush." Jim, Dave, and I sang along, but Nancy and Paula stared open-mouthed at Tommy Sands until the hit song ended in a chorus of girlish screams from the studio audience. "He looks so cool," Nancy said. Jim wished Mr. Bell would hand out a

rock and roll song book instead of one filled with the second, third, and even fourth stanzas of those patriotic tunes, verses that we never sang.

After she came home from the February PTA meeting, my mother announced, "Mr. Bell has cancer," her tone making it sound as if Mr. Bell was as good as dead. She hung her coat in the guest closet before she added, "Isn't it something that he's always had such good posture, and here he has it in his spine?"

We finished sixth grade without any more music classes. Mrs. Sowers stayed in the room all day except for Friday afternoon art and taught us something she called "enrichment social studies." We learned all of the Presidents in order from Washington to Eisenhower; we learned the names and dates of our country's wars right up to Korean (1950-1953). To keep us busy, she had us memorize the states and their capitals, beginning with Albany, Atlanta, Annapolis, and Augusta. One Friday in May I stood in line with half of my classmates to receive my final polio shot. My mother hugged me and said, "Thank God" when I got home.

A few weeks after school ended, using a stack of fully filled-in S&H Green Stamp books, she gave me a record player for my birthday. When I was alone, I sang along to my new Elvis and Little Richard records. When anyone else was around, I sang every verse perfectly in my head. A month later, my voice began to crack.

Shortly after school began, just after I stopped singing out loud in seventh grade music class, moving my lips like the rock stars on the Saturday night Dick Clark Show, the Asian Flu cleared out nearly half the students in every class. "We don't have a quorum today," Mr. Wargo said in history one morning, but nobody knew what that meant.

A few million people around the world died from the Asian Flu, but everybody in my school returned within a few weeks, that health scare forgotten quickly because the big news, for most of October, was the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik. The world's first man-made satellite seemed to spread anxiety through the teachers and administrators of the school like a second, longer-lasting pandemic, one that couldn't be ended with a vaccine.

Jim and Dave and I didn't worry about Communism, but we were all fascinated when our former school building, well over half a century old, was declared hazardous.

Its fire escapes were cited as unsafe, something we'd all known the year before, but now a corner of the roof had torn loose and fallen into the playground ten minutes after recess ended.

The next time the three of us played basketball there, stuffing balls through the eight-and-a-half-foot-high hoops we'd been happy to touch with our hands the year before, we looked up at the missing corner in awe. We talked about where we'd stood for buckeye fights during fourth and fifth grade, when it was cool to smack drilled horse chestnuts threaded through by a shoestring against each other until one of them split and fell to the ground. It looked as if those bricks would have fallen right about where those buckeye fights usually happened.

During January, everybody in the seventh grade took a "special test," and by March, thirty of us were assigned to advanced math and science, chosen to challenge Communism with our brains out of the nearly three hundred in the seventh grade. I never had another math or science class with any of the other members of that PTA octet.

Mr. Bell, my mother heard, had returned to teaching. "A miracle," she said, but by May the talk of miracles had dissolved because Mr. Bell had suddenly "retired." Jim, Dave, and I had stopped going to the grade school playground. We had all played junior high basketball with hoops sporting nets that were set exactly at ten feet. We practiced jump shots and free throws only on regulation baskets that older neighbor boys' fathers had put up on nearby streets.

Mr. Bell died before eighth grade began. Nancy moved to Michigan. The chosen thirty of us took algebra and physical science. Jim and three boys from another neighborhood school sang as The Coachmen in the school talent show. Wearing matching chinos and shirts, they took first place, and girls crowded around them in the hall. In Cuba, Fidel Castro was winning an undeclared war our physical science teacher worried about. "He's with the Communists, just you wait and see," he said. "He'll be right next door."

I listened to the radio from noon to six on New Year's Day to hear the Top 100 songs of 1958. I sang "For Your Precious Love" and "Little Star" in my head where I still sounded exactly like Jerry Butler and the lead singer of The Elegants. Tommy Sands wasn't mentioned. When school began again the following day, I walked out of the locker

room after basketball practice with Jim and Dave, making fun of the whiz-kids in my science classes, especially the boys who, with one exception, didn't even try out for basketball, boys who probably couldn't even touch the rim of the baskets at our old school playground. But after basketball season ended, I hardly talked to either of them.

Of the five of us who had watched Tommy Sands together, only Dave and Jim were at our 60th class reunion. Nancy and Paula had been dead for decades. Dave approached me shortly after my wife and I arrived. "I finally saw somebody I recognized," he said. I knew what he meant. I'd been secretly trying to make out the nametags of classmates, even ones with whom I'd been friends and had recognized at our 50th from across the room.

I picked out Jim as well, though he looked shrunken and told me, after a minute of catch-up, that he had to sit because he was weakened by a recurrence of cancer. "I'm starting chemo first thing tomorrow morning," he said. "I think all of it started because I had a landscaping business after I retired from teaching. RoundUp, you know, or something else I used."

The day after the reunion, I drove to my old grade school. The building, now well over a century old, had been converted to offices while I was still in high school. What went on in those offices had had time to change and then change again and then, even gone unoccupied. A few appeared to have been closed for years, but about half were still in use. There were ancient photographs of class pictures on several walls, and I was disappointed that none from any of the five years that I attended to be deemed old enough to be displayed. A radio was playing "classic rock," the songs so familiar that I knew all the words as I mentally sang along. Every one of those classics was recorded since I'd graduated from high school.

What seemed miraculous was that the asphalt playground, more than sixty-five years since I'd walked on it, was the same surface, one that was confirmed by the faint outlines of a dodgeball circle, kickball bases, basketball free throw line, and even the hopscotch diagram near the fire escape on what passed for the "Girls' side" of the building where the bricks did not fall.

Eventually, Dave sent me a photograph of our sixth-grade octet singing, mouths open, heads up, the boys in coat and tie, the girls in dresses. All of the audience that's included is seen from the back, no one distinguishable, not even my mother, but the photo reminded me who the other three singers had been—Ann H, Diane M, and Cam Y. Ann had been unable to attend the reunion; I have no idea what had happened to Diane and Cam since we'd graduated.

What surprised me most was that Dave, whose mother had kept the program, said it showed that, despite our attending a public school, we had sung the hymn "Beautiful Savior," not "Beautiful Dreamer" as I had imagined. "Different times" is the expression that came to mind, a phrase that covered an enormous spectrum that ranged, in that school, from daily readings from the Bible by our teachers to routine corporal punishment to having all-white classmates created, I discovered years later, by red-lining. The Coachmen, I remember now, switched from doo-wop to folk music, harmonizing through "Greenfields" in the following year's talent show, but none of the members of our PTA octet sang in the high school choir.

According to the reunion program, only four of the thirty students selected for advanced science and math to fight Communism had pursued careers in a related field. None of the six octet members reporting had done any organized singing as adults. Less than seven months after that 60th reunion, despite the chemo and advanced medical science, Jim has died.

To Star Y, BioFather

by Beth Cleary

To Star Y:

This letter hails you in the outer reaches of my firmament. You throb there but are not visible, will never be visible—like a boson star collapsed into nothingness but still exerting gravitational pull. My words pour through my fingers and, for the first time, I give you a name—Star Y—and sense the nearly imperceptible tether threading me, mortal daughter, to you, far gone not-father, hapless and possibly violent co-maker of me.

I think often of the constellations in my sky. Parents, of course, they who adopted me, now each again of the stars. I wouldn't say I'm guided by them, as some say of stars, but they gave me the sextants, sights for navigating this life. Now gone and dim, their tow still startles me: mother's quick gait in a stranger's walk, father's kind voice at the grocery store, *Ramblin' Rose* on the oldies station. When I pick up a hammer, my father hefts the tool. When I set a table, my mother worries where the spoons go. They are polestars in my *Alpha Centauri*. Family, friends, dogs, teachers who've left this world—they are there, too, brightest on anniversary days and seasons, sometimes whizzing like comets through my heart when I hear a certain song, pass a particular restaurant, see an idle fetch ball in the garden. Here below, gravity holds me alongside beloved husband, sister, friends, earthly stars. I twirl, tend, and cry with them. Like all stars, they contain light and reflect it beyond themselves. Like all stars, except the failed ones, they are life itself.

It feels like the job of memory, citizen-scientist of my imagination, to travel the tiers, the temperatures and resultant colors of the near and far, mortal and celestial, in my life. And so, in this letter, I account for you, furthest star gone dark. Star Y.

When I came into this world through Star X, I was thrown through a hole in the firmament and eventually materialized as me, caught by Stars P1 and P2, my adopting parents. Star X is almost as far away as you, Star Y, though she blazed into visibility once. I trained a scope toward her general coordinates and, through that star catcher colony known as Catholic Charities, located her. She was a cold star, in our meeting at a restaurant with Christmas tinsel and blinking lights—faux celestial. She was skeptical.

“You don’t look like me.” It’s true, I didn’t, and this fact lay like grease of unknown origins on the table, to be avoided. “My father?” I asked, with too much heat. Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not talking about him. I won’t say his name. We were both drunk. It was rape.”

Rape. Thud. Me? Abhorred. So. Dead star. Thud.

So.

Star Y, you are cursed by Star X whose path you crossed one June night in Charlestown. I haven’t much contemplated the little bang that made me—especially now, *how to navigate this?*—but I know in June, in the northern hemisphere above the bar, the alley out back, the chain-link fence where you collided, the brightest constellations are The Little Bear and The Herdsman. Polaris, Arcturus, bright as day. I doubt you knew, either of you, in the drunken push, the frantic pull, the breaking, the unmaking and unwitting making.

She wouldn’t speak your name, the regret and shame were so deep. She carried its train of fire with her to the elements below ground. In her life after you, she hoped to forget—you, that night, me. Despite that hope, there is no black hole of fully forgetting.

All adoptions are disasters. Some of us find navigation tools and light our way forward, chart constellations of a kind earth. But many many don’t. That the human-wrecked world goes on. That I survived it is no redemption for you or your kind. The gravity you exert in your laws, your threats, your taking and demeaning, menace us women and threaten to detour us off course. We huddle and shine apart, we in the havens of Pleiades.

Goodbye, Star Y. The sun, nearest star to earth, suffuses this Spring day, encourages the first rue, columbine, and blazing star. Today, I’ll pull weeds in the garden. I’ll breathe the earth, hear the birds, and tug on all the filaments that thread me to sky.

Abidingly --

EarthStar031461

Stating the Obvious

by Paige Cromley

Like most things about myself, I only realize the obvious when someone points it out.

“You talk like a kid,” my friend says. It’s finally warm, and he’s in a t-shirt, shorts. We’re sitting on a stretch of grass, idly wish-hunting from a blanket of clovers.

I’m immediately offended. I was a late bloomer in high school, always a little wide-eyed for my year, always a bit behind. At college, I’m sensitive to such things. I want people to think I’m serious, or at least that I have serious things to say. I ask Jonah what he means.

“You just say silly things sometimes.”

I glance down at my hands. They’re deep in clovers, gently parsing through leaves. I press back. When’s the last time I said something silly?

“Just now. You were like, ‘There goes a cloud.’”

I had said that. But only because a cloud had, in fact, passed over us.

“That’s just me pointing things out,” I say. My voice is defensive and a bit whiny. I sound young, even to myself. “You pointed out the dog in the boots.”

But that was different. A dachshund in slippers is unusual, noteworthy. The cloud I’d mentioned was just a fluffy old thing, dragging through the sky like any other. It wasn’t even shaped like a bird, or a lopsided Florida.

“You say things sometimes that you don’t need to,” Jonah says. “It’s not a bad thing, you’re just excitable.”

I curl my fingers into a tangle of grass. Jonah is turning remarks into compliments. Usually, his whole mannerism works to smooth my self-consciousness. But when I get up, brush off my knees, I’m hyper-aware of the words I let slip.

Over the next few days, I start to notice it for myself. Phrases spill from my mouth, instinctively, all the time. Always about incredibly basic things, whatever I encounter on my strolls outside.

“Flowers,” I report, walking past a patch of buttercups with my roommates.

Later, gesturing towards an average Joe of a squirrel scampering around the base of a tree. “Look at that tail!”

And when it starts to rain, as I’m staring at a puddled sidewalk and its squirmy inhabitants. “Whoa,” I murmur, solemnly. “Forgot about worms.”

It’s especially true in the morning, when I first step out of my dormitory building. My mouth works faster than I can rein it in.

On Tuesday, it’s raining. I open the door. “Mm, wet!” My umbrella was already in hand; I’d looked out the window right before.

Wednesday, drier. “Sky is blue,” I announce. As if it were news. But this, too, I’d known.

Thursday. Not much to say on the weather. I look to the leaves on my right. “Oh, a bush!” I say this with an element of surprise, although it was there the day before.

It’s like I’ve been cursed to forever commentate on my surroundings.

Sudden awareness of this habit puts me in a tough spot. I’m hyper-focused on how uninteresting I sound, how simple my shared thoughts are. But I’m unable to stop myself.

On Friday, my friend and I are walking down the same road we do every day, twice a day, heading to lunch after class. We’re in the middle of a conversation- nothing important, just a normal enough back-and-forth. And then my brain interrupts.

“What a tall tree.”

She glances to the elm towering above us, the elm we pass every day, twice a day. She nods, and continues talking.

We move on, in both step and conversation. But inside, my brain is looking at itself, shaking its head. My shadow stays back, stuck under the elm, neck craned towards the serrated green leaves.

Oh my God, I think, with full force. I do talk like a kid.

It is a humbling thing, to wake up at twenty-two and realize you are no more profound than when you were five. I find myself double thinking about the value of my words.

In my head, I keep turning over all the times I've made my friends look at the moon. There is always something I feel the need to say about it—how it is bright, a crescent, full, or even just *there*.

Well, the moon has been bright, crescent, full, *there* my whole life. Can I not say something interesting, something new, instead?

I think of the last time I went to the ocean, how I stood on the shore as my friends ran into the waves. My toes dug into cold sand; I eyed the horizon, turning my head from left to right.

"Ah," I said, after a moment. "It's big."

Surely, I can find it within myself to make more novel observations than that.

I begin to ruminate frequently on the usefulness of my language. How much information do I actually convey, and how much of it is worthy to be spoken aloud? I focus my efforts on thinking before I speak.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a passage from a book stirs. I read *Winter*, by Karl Ove Knausgaard, for a course last fall. It's a collection of meditations on the mundane, poetic essays on things like otters and snowfall and trains. At the time, I thought it contained a sweet perspective on the world; I even lent it to an ex-boyfriend, Dylan, who left doodles and notes in the margins.

I pull it from my bookshelf and flip past the drawings to page 177.

"A conversation about something that has intrinsic value, where what is said is both important and interesting in itself, occurs so rarely that it clearly isn't the main objective of human intercourse."

This is good news, actually. My platitudes fall within the majority of human speech. Maybe I'm no more boring or vapid than everyone else.

"'It sure is raining outside' is a fairly common statement, and clearly perfectly meaningless since everyone who hears it can see the rain for themselves."

But that doesn't matter, the essay continues. Because the statement isn't about the rain. It's about the people it is passed between. Are they strangers, hoping to convey their good nature on a train? Had they made eye contact before? Had they flirted? Were they good friends who'd just had a fight? Really, such a statement about the weather outside isn't about weather at all.

My ex has scrawled two words at the bottom of the essay. "Phatic language."
Thanks, Dylan. Hope you're doing well. Still, I Google it.

Phatic language: Language meant primarily to establish a social connection.

Fancy terminology. Most people would call that small talk. They claim to hate it, but squirm in discomfort without it. They eye suspiciously those who refuse to stoop to participate.

No wonder I speak so much about nature, I think. I'm just making small talk. Sorry...phatic language.

Honestly, the moon is a great thing to connect over. Unlike sports teams, we all share it. I mention passing scenery like last night's baseball game.

How good to know that I'm not too silly, not too easily excitable for my age. I'm just participating in the expectations and customs of polite society. I tuck the book away, and drift to sleep.

The next week, I drive to Vermont with two friends. It's a long trip from New Jersey, inadvisable in a single day, but whatever. We want to see the total eclipse along with millions of other Americans.

Seven hours, though. That's far. It means three bathroom stops, strategically overlapped with two gas refills. An extra pull-over into an empty lot to switch drivers, watch the view. A drive thru.

It's a day full of passing encounters with strangers. Each time, spirits are high. They know where we're heading.

"Have you seen one before?"

"I saw the 2017 one in Charleston."

"How's the traffic been?"

We make friendly at the McDonald's on I-87. We smile and laugh easily in line at the gas station. We're all on the same team, the family of four, the eager old couple, and the stoned teenage cashier.

Ah, I think. Knausgaard was on to something. We ease up when we speak. An eclipse offers a convenient excuse.

In Vermont, at the park we've chosen to watch from, everyone is equally friendly. Strangers pass around glasses. They talk about how the moon and Sun overlap so perfectly. They mention the article they read about what the birds will think during the eclipse.

As we wait, we become companions, people with a spoken bond as the moon inches across the Sun.

And then the chatting stops. The two circles above us align perfectly. Sunlight hides behind the moon, and our words fall with the night. In the dark, we watch quietly.

The birds swoop over the lake, off to their nests, someone had said. The horizon flickers the orange of a sunset.

The moon inches forward once more, and the moment passes. The Sun shines again. We break the silence, stand around chatting, and eventually head home.

On the drive back, it's the same thing. Conversation with everyone, everywhere. What we thought, where we went.

How nice to have something to talk about, I think, in a chatty line at Subway. Look how nature brings us together.

Then again, it's only the extremes that do. Eclipses and earthquakes, bear sightings and double rainbows. I wish we could just talk about the Sun. I wish we didn't have to wait for the moon to pass in front of it.

Back on campus, in the library. I Google phatic language again, click a link out of boredom or maybe curiosity.

The term, technically "phatic communion," comes from a 1923 essay by anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski. I click a little further. My library has the essay, as an addendum to another book, called "Meaning to Mean," or the "Meaning of Meaning," or something equally obscure. Linguistics always eluded me. It's shelved on the third floor, not too far from where I'm sitting. I walk over, stand on tiptoes to pry it from its place. The burgundy cover is plain, empty and serious the way old books are.

The pages, tinged yellow with age, fold over nicely. I come across a chapter on the meaning of beauty. I've forgotten what I'm looking for exactly, but that feels related. My

platitudes always revolve around nature somehow. Trees and stars and flowers. Beautiful things, even if common.

I flip to the chapter and skim the pages. The essay meanders, just like it says the exact meaning of beauty does. But then it hits on something.

“The emotive use of words is a more simple matter,” I read, than language that conveys information.

“If we say ‘hurrah!’ Or ‘Poetry is a spirit’ or ‘Man is a worm,’ we may not be making statements, not even false statements.” Instead, we’re accomplishing a number of other things, like establishing a personal connection or setting a mood.

That’s it! I think. Just like Knausgaard wrote. More confirmation that I don’t talk like a kid, I just generate a friendly atmosphere.

Satisfied, I check out the book, and tuck it into my tote bag. Later that night, I walk home alone, feeling good. Above, the moon is a crescent, a wood shaving littering a black workshop floor. I pause to admire it. “Ah,” I say. “Man is a worm.”

The next morning, after I’ve woken and checked the weather out the window and greeted the bush outside, I start reading the 1923 essay I’d meant to last night, the addendum at the back of the book. To my disappointment but not my surprise, considering the little I know about twentieth century linguistic studies, the text is laced with racist undertones. I flip ahead, skipping over Malinowski’s fake hierarchy of languages. I’m losing confidence in his coinage of terms.

But there it is: “...the breaking of silence, the communion of words is the first act to establish links of fellowship, which is consummated only by the breaking of bread and the communion of food.”

These phrases, often regarding the irrelevant or the perfectly obvious, serve to fill the space, “...to get over the strange and unpleasant tension which men feel when facing each other in silence.”

And then Malinowski endeavors to name the phenomenon, to label it as a social instinct. Academics were always claiming things back then; I wish I had the confidence to christen the abstract.

But how can I relate this to my own habits?

Malinowski's description sort of matches my chatter. I like sharing in nature's quirks and its routine. I like talking about beautiful things, setting a friendly mood. I like to fill the space.

Then again, I think of myself at the ocean, standing alone on the shore. Talking to myself about the size of the sea. Something there is different.

I think of opening my doorway and announcing the weather, of bending over flowers and stating their color. I'm all alone in these moments. There is no one to speak to.

Am I uncomfortable facing the ocean in silence? Am I trying to establish social connection with daisies? *Maybe I am*, I think. *Maybe I am*.

I'm walking with my friend, the one I'd told about the tall tree, heading this time towards dinner. I tell her about how silly I've been feeling, how I don't feel I add much to conversation and do nothing but state the obvious.

"Remember when I pointed out that tree? That was silly," I say. I'm trying to get ahead of my own self-consciousness, showing her that I'm aware of my habits.

But she seems surprised.

"Oh," she says. "But I hadn't noticed how tall it was before."

"We walk past it every day."

"Well, I guess I knew it was tall, but I hadn't noticed quite how tall."

At her words, something settles in my stomach. The weight of being an annoyance, a talkative burden to conversation, slides off my back. It's like I'm in line at Subway and everyone is just as eager to talk about the Sun as me.

Just like last time, my friend and I keep walking and talking as, internally, my brain balloons with the sensation of realization. I decide in that moment that my friend is very wise, that she is smarter than Malinowski and probably all the other twentieth century linguists. Because there is phatic communion, and there is emotive use, but there is also such a key difference between 'know' and 'notice.' My chatter, my platitudes, are born in that gap.

When I was a kid, I failed my eye test. The doctor gave me a prescription, and I cried. A week later, we went back, where a shiny new pair of lenses waited for me. I had chosen a rather bizarre frame, thin wires that drew huge circles around my wide eyes.

Outside, wearing my new glasses, I pointed at the tree tops. "The leaves!" I cried. No one laughed, or looked at me like I was stupid. They knew it had been a long time since I'd been able to make out the outline of leaves in branches, a long time since a tree was more than a green blob.

Had I known, in the meantime, that a tree was made of individual leaves? Yes, of course. But had I noticed it? Not at all. The reacquaintance came with the full wonder of a first meeting.

Jonah said I talk like a kid. Maybe I do, just a little. In the way kids are always stating the obvious because it is not so obvious to them. They are meeting things for the first time, or trying to commit them to memory the second, or encountering them again after a long stretch of time without a pair of glasses.

The natural world is so wide, I can't hold it all in my head. The crook of the constellations, the squiggle of a worm, these are things I forget between glances. And when I see them again, I am sometimes hit with the remembrance of a long-lost friend. Words spill out in these moments.

The more I think about it, I do not believe it negative at all to be in a constant state of reintroduction to the world. It may be childish, but it's not silly. In fact, it's quite fun.

Whenever I see the moon, it's been a full day, sometimes even two, since I saw it last. Have I really remembered how bright it is? Not in the way I do when I'm standing underneath its glow. The moonlight moves me to speak. If I'm not stating the obvious, I'm not paying attention.

And maybe nothing is a reintroduction; maybe, in a way, I'm meeting everything for the first time. You can only step in the same river once. Maybe that requires a verbal greeting. Plunging your feet in cold water, it's hard not to make a sound.

There's another scrap of words I read in class. A Margaret Atwood poem, from a 1974 collection titled "There is only one of everything."

"Not a tree but the tree / we saw." It starts off, and the whole poem can be understood in those eight words. I read the rest anyway.

“When my / eyes close language vanishes.”

I speak to hold it there. A little longer, because my memory will fail. The words, hung like a portrait, or like the crescent moon in a lonely sky. Every time I see the ocean, I think it is the first time. And wow—it sure is big.

Summer Reading

by Kevin A. Louderback

I have a problem. It's a serious problem because I can't ignore it, rationalize it, or forget about it, and it has fundamentally changed how I engage with the world.

My eyesight has rapidly degraded over the past decade. And while I don't know for sure that blindness is in my future, my problems go beyond simple eyestrain or acute light sensitivity or anything an ophthalmologist has been able to help me with beyond recommending stronger and stronger prescriptions. I'm forty-five years old, and my vision has gotten worse with age, as it does with every human, but apart from that, I experience a throbbing in my left eye and a burning sensation in my right. It's a pain that migrates through my skull, radiates through my teeth, and will escalate into a spiteful demon fever if I don't simply stop reading. Sometimes, for relief, I have to wear a cold mask—think Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, when he's telling us about his morning routine—and for the rest of the day strive to look at absolutely nothing closely, just stay behind dark glasses inside dark rooms, if possible. I've been living on a steady diet of black coffee and fat blue Naproxen gelcaps.

My right eye has always been astigmatic, but a few years ago, I noticed that it was perpetually dry and often cloudy. Due to this, I see everything with that eye through a grey wash. With the healthier of the two, everything looks like a garishly oversaturated film, like a Will Farrell comedy from the mid to late 00's. The glands in my right bottom eyelid have stopped working, an irreversible condition, and one many people suffer from. A few prescription treatments, unobtainable because they are prohibitively expensive, could help, I have been told, and I've tried every brand of eye drops with little to no success. At best, the drops slough off and give the flesh around my eyes a pink rheumy look, and many of them make the burning worse, especially the cheaper concoctions that are full of glycerin.

At my last eye exam, I learned that my left eye is astigmatic now. So, teamwork at least. My ophthalmologist's comforting words were these: "Your eyes will fall off a cliff over the next ten years."

But the real problem is that my life is almost entirely textual. I write constantly. I read, reread, and revise all day, and even through amber, blue-light-blocking lenses on a monitor set to nine on the brightness setting, nothing really helps the pain.

I hate to dramatize something so ultimately trivial in a world as beset with genuine tragedy as ours is, but writing is what makes me *live*. And to write, I must type and reread and scribble and revise and all that goes with it. Even if I abandoned all other reading, I'd still revise and edit. Also, I teach Basic Writing, Intermediate, and First-Year Composition, which equates to hours of reading, commenting, planning, and staring at screens.

I had to make a lifestyle change; one I didn't want to make. I had to change my reading habits where I could in order to slow down the degradation of my eyesight, to try, if not avoid the cliff, not go barreling over it, hellbent.

First, I gathered my towering to-be-read stacks and loaded them into my car. I sold some, donated others to free libraries, kept essentials—critical texts, instructional guides, and my desert island books: Shakespeare (I'm not made of stone), Merwin, Anne Sexton, Etheridge Knight, John Berryman. Poetry has been a lifeline during days when I could only manage a few minutes of reading. I kept very few novels.

This move made more sense as I realized that most of what I'd been hoarding could be checked out with the library cards in my wallet. More importantly, I recognized that I should have done this long ago, eyesight issues or not. I realized that I'd been building a tomb for myself out of these books for years, and what's worse, I was unable to focus on any one piece because my mind was always looking ahead to what to read next. Even when I thought I was reading for pleasure, I was really only digging a hole to hide in, crafting my mask in an Earnest Becker *The Denial of Death* kind of way. Making the proverbial 'educated fool' out of myself, quite literally.

So, in the summer of 2024, I did what would have been unfathomable a year earlier: I spent the summer purposefully not reading. Or, more precisely, reading in small increments while paying careful attention to how doing so affected my eyes. Some days, after five minutes of reading, they were shot. Other days, I could manage an hour, most of this time spent working to one degree or another.

Yet, I realized something more profound: my obsession with accumulating books was a romanticized hobby, an identity marker that had been eating up my life for more

than two decades. I'd spent years searching for life and living a life within books while, in a sense, neglecting the life I was living. And if I'd not been neglecting it, I damn sure hadn't been looking closely at it or admiring it at all. The more I looked, the more I noticed the much more fascinating clockwork of life.

To put it another way, when I stopped trying to get lost in the words of others, I started reading my life and the world around me.

I read the clipped rhythmic hooing of the blue-grey mourning doves, an unmistakable sign of spring's ever-returning greenness in my corner of the world.

I read the purple lilac bushes blooming in the thick windbreak that lined the farmland next to my yard—Whitman's lilacs.

I read the many blue jays and occasional cardinals, no white snow to stand out against, diving into the hedgerows and slipping through the branches, as slick as ribbons. I read the three-foot-tall cranes that glide over the fields to the creek, but haven't yet read one standing on the twiggy legs that stick out straight when they're in flight.

I read the hawks with blood in their eyes that wait, perched on power lines, scanning the fields for small things to kill like cruel gods.

I read my black-and-white tomcat, "Tuxedo Joe," as he dashed into the first row of soybeans and leaped out at me, paws flailing like a jungle cat. I read him pretending to hide as I taunted him with *"I hope no wild animal savages me as I walk out here defenseless."* I read him as he sprung out and slap-boxed my pant legs and house shoes. I read his cousin/brother, "Thom Thumbs," my polydactyl grimalkin, built like a pit bull, with seven-toed paws that look like catcher's mitts. I read Joe's tough-guy act—his snorts and growls when Thom gets too close. I read Thom's silence as a sign that he's not worried in the least.

I read the love triangle between Joe, Thom, and their girlfriend, Crooktail and the battles I broke up with a bucket of water more than once.

I read Thom Thumb's twin sister lying in the field on Memorial Day, her still body surrounded by turkey vultures. I read the four kittens she left behind, and later, I read Reddit kitten forums and labels on kitten milk. I read the flea comb and traced verminous black dots all through their fur. I read three of them as they grew up too fast and disappeared, off to make their fortunes. I read Slowpoke, a long-haired ragdoll with a

swatch of grey encircling his right eye, who stayed at home to live with Dad just a little while longer.

In my mind, I drafted, revised, read, and reread *Memoirs of a Single Cat Dad* many many times.

At dusk, early in the summer, I read Venus as it chased the setting sun—a bright jewel in pursuit of the fading light, a sight visible for only a few days each year.

I read the corn spiders in their lethal webs spin up grasshoppers. I read a mother carefully suspend an egg sac far too late in the summer for it ever to hatch. I read it still clinging to the back of the garage.

I read the disembodied hind leg of a rabbit, the bloodied pigeon feathers, the gory single outstretched wing left beside the driver's side door of my car by Joe, Thom, or Crooktail.

I read the King Woodpecker who battered the top of a telephone pole in the driveway looking for fat wood bees and their larvae—the same one, I suspected, who hammered on my deck at sunrise, making a bass drum out of my bedroom wall.

I realized that I had been reading to escape, using books as a narcotic to distract myself from a reality I didn't want to face. And in doing so, I had been missing the very thing all creativity seeks to capture—the colorful minutiae of life itself.

With care, I might slow the decline of my eyesight. But strangely, making this change may be one of the best things ever to happen to me. It revealed a narrative more vivid, more alive than any that could be imagined by a writer or consigned to the pulpy dead body of a book.

The Heat of the Why

by John Thomson

I hadn't seen his mother in over fifty years. But I had reason to visit her again during a heat wave near the town where I grew up.

It was one of the hottest days ever recorded there. We sat inside the stuffy living room of her mobile home and began talking about her son, my friend, whom she still called "Stevie."

At first, we reconnected memories, like sagging fence wires. She listened as I recalled how I met Steve in elementary school, how he and I stayed connected through all the intimidations and pressures of high school and marriages and different politics and the barriers of geographical distance. Recounting the history of my relationship with Steve helped his mother talk more freely about her son's death, just a month prior.

The awful manifestations of his illness had seemed to come out of nowhere: incoherency, hallucination, paranoia, aggression, the loss of body control. Different doctors had different diagnoses. One said "accelerated vascular dementia." Another proposed Lewy Body Dementia, the disease that'd afflicted the comedian Robin Williams. It was remarkable to me how Steve's mom talked so clinically about what'd taken her son. It was a good thing, I thought, how she'd subdued it in this way and was able to reduce it to something out of his control and beyond the reach of his will and strength.

For me, what happened to Steve was observed from far away. We'd grown apart over the years, but he'd still call maybe every three or four months. In the last call I'd ever receive from him, he'd seemed disoriented, lost. He'd asked me when I was coming over to his house. It was as if we were twelve -ears-old again, and he'd planned a game of whiffle-ball and expected me there. I'd reminded him I lived 600 miles away, as I'd had for the last thirty-five years. "But you said you were coming over," he'd said. And he hung up. Then I felt the force of all the years that bound us. Realizing just then that my friend was losing his mind made the memories more vivid. I saw the short kid with the white hair on the playground at our elementary school, and then in the dirt alley behind my house

when he was on a bike with raised handlebars and a banana seat (he was the first to have one), and then in high school when he played banjo and I played guitar and I'd coerced him into learning Bob Dylan songs. And he's there at my wedding. He was one of my groomsmen, and that white hair of his still stands out in our wedding pictures.

After his call, I phoned our mutual friends, who lived in much closer proximity to Steve. "Steve is in a very bad place right now," one of them said. A "bad place" could mean different things, but in the following months the depth of Steve's mental illness became evident to all of us.

His family tried to keep us informed. Their own struggle to deal with Steve's incapacities created space and mystery about his fate. A few months later, Steve's sister arranged for me to call him on his birthday. During our conversation I wondered if he understood what I said to him, or if he even knew who I was.

He died a few months later. The news of his death didn't come as a shock. But what would be the most difficult part for me was what his mother shared on that hot day inside her mobile home, when she described what Steve's life was like during his final weeks. He could no longer bathe or shave himself. He had trouble controlling his bodily functions. He couldn't be left alone for fear he'd wander off in an incoherent daze. She recounted how he'd once done this. They'd searched for him for hours. They called the sheriff. A helicopter circled the sky, looking for him. He was finally found face down where he'd fallen by a passerby. He was taken to the hospital. The calamity of the incident made my mind escape into the shelter of denial, and his mother's voice turned to nothing but sound.

The living room of her mobile home became intolerably warm. Steve's mother explained there weren't enough registers in the ceiling, and so the air conditioning didn't work like it should. We arose and she led me to the door. We embraced, and I told her what a dear friend her son had been to me, despite not seeing each other but every few years.

The day had become hotter. The heat outside her mobile home was like nothing I remembered growing up. The combination of the almost unbearable warmth and the knowledge of my lifelong friend's suffering before he died cast me into an indescribable gloom. Why was my friend tortured like this? And why did his family suffer so deeply,

forced to witness and deal with his illness? The Buddhist believes suffering in life is unavoidable and universal and that it is empowered and made worse by a desire for pleasure and immortality. The Christian believes suffering is the reality of a world broken by our past departure from the will of God. On that day, neither belief made any sense to me. The heat of the why was more oppressive and disorienting than the material atmosphere.

It would remain hot during my stay in my hometown. The discomfort was inescapable at times, persisting with my bitterness and bewilderment about what'd happened to my old friend. It seemed the whole world was burning up.

But, a few days after my visit to Steve's mom, my wife held up her phone to show me the latest video of our infant granddaughter. She resembles no one in our family, only herself. And for some reason, I like that.

In the video, the child's eyes searched the topography of her mother's face. Her arms stabbed at the air as if she was grasping for something she couldn't see or that was too far away. And somehow, I was able to feel the breeze she created with her hands and rid myself of a question I couldn't answer.

Nostalgia: A Haunting of the Heart

by Anne E. Beall

Nostalgia (Noun): a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition—Merriam-Webster.com

Dear Nostalgia

Lately, you've been visiting a lot. You slip into my life uninvited, then vanish before I can confront you. You wait for the perfect moment to latch onto me and pull me backward. By the time I realize what you've done, you're already gone.

And I have some things I need to say to you.

You're a collector, Nostalgia. You gather my life's most fragile moments, carefully cataloging them like artifacts. But you don't preserve them to cherish—you sharpen them, turning them into weapons. Then, at the worst possible times, you wield them against me. A song, a photograph, a familiar scent—it's all you need to strike. What might seem small and harmless becomes unbearable in your hands, as you remind me not just of what I've lost, but of how I'll never get it back.

Last month, you crept up while I was loading the dishwasher, my hands submerged in warm water as I rinsed a mucky plate. My thoughts wandered idly to the brown water stain streaking the cream-colored stucco of my neighbor's house, the way it stood out like a tear track on an otherwise pristine face. I was glad we'd removed those rust stains I found on our home last month. I thought about how thankful I was for my husband's dinner that night as I scraped the remnants off our plates. Scallops and mussels sautéed in garlic butter, served over spaghetti. The richness of it still lingered on my tongue.

Isn't life good? I thought.

And then, without warning, there you were. You didn't announce yourself. You never do. You simply appeared, sweeping me into a memory of my daughter when she was seven. I was no longer in my kitchen but walking hand in hand with her. She was gazing up at me, her eyes wide and bright, the way they were when she was young. She had a

lovely, optimistic way of seeing the world, as though every day held a secret waiting to be discovered.

She always smiled when we walked down the street, skipping slightly to match my stride. Her sticky fingers gripped mine with a trust that brought an ache to my chest even then, though I didn't fully understand it. She took comfort in my presence, in having her mom close, and that simple bond was the foundation of her world.

But you didn't stop there, Nostalgia. You never do. In a blink, you whisked me away to my bedroom years later. She was older, perhaps thirteen, and we were sitting on my bed, watching *Little Women*. The movie flickered across the screen, a sweet story of mothers and daughters, of love and loss, and we were both drawn into its world as if we were part of that family.

She clung to my arm during the saddest parts, her head leaning against my shoulder as if to protect herself from the ache of it. At thirteen, she was on the cusp of independence. But just then, she was my little girl. I wanted to freeze that moment, to hold onto the warmth of her against me, knowing it wouldn't last forever.

My suitcase waited to the right of the TV screen, a reminder that I had to leave for a business trip later that afternoon. I tried not to look at it, tried not to let its presence steal the moment from us. I hated leaving her, even though I told myself it was necessary. Duty called. Work demanded it.

As the movie played, we both cried when Beth died, as though we, too, were mourning the loss of someone we knew. I remember glancing at her through my own watery eyes and wondering how I'd ever gotten lucky enough to have such a wonderful daughter in my life.

"I hate to leave you today," I said softly when the movie credits rolled across the screen.

"Oh, Mom, you'll be back soon." She wrapped her arms around me, holding on as if to anchor me before I stepped out into the world.

And then, just as suddenly, I was back in my kitchen, my hands still wet from the warm water. But the moment lingered, as sharp and vivid as if it had only just happened. Her confident, reassuring look remained etched in my memory, but now it felt bittersweet. Because now, years later, I know that moment was fleeting, as they all are. My daughter—

my little girl—was gone. Not to school, not to a friend's house. Gone. A grown woman now, with her own life, her own world, no longer needing me in the way she once did. The weight of that realization settled heavily in my chest. You, Nostalgia, stole my contentment and left nothing in its place. I took a deep breath, but it felt hollow—like the wind had been knocked out of me. The rest of the evening passed under a heavy pall, everything muted and gray, as I tried to reconcile a past long gone with a life that now feels so different. The lightness that had filled my rooms had vanished.

For a while, Nostalgia, I didn't hear from you. But then, out of nowhere, you appeared again, as you always do. I passed an old photo of my father and me taped on the basement refrigerator. I must walk by that fridge dozens of times each week, but this time you made the photo sting. Memory rushed back. The picture was taken on the day of an awards ceremony. I'm standing next to him outside the university president's house, the sunlight catching his grin. His glasses are off because they darkened in the sunlight, and small red marks on his nose remain where the heavy frames usually rest. He looks happier than I'd ever seen him. His smile couldn't be any wider.

Later that day, we went to a fancy restaurant that my father had promised we'd visit. We sat in the soft glow of dim lighting, surrounded by white tablecloths and polished silverware. My parents had dressed up for the occasion: my father in a tweed jacket, my stepmother in a navy silk dress. My grandparents were there too, leaning in close to tell me how much they would miss me.

I remember the pride in my father's voice as he spoke. "So, you're going to Yale for graduate school," he said, almost as if he couldn't quite believe it himself. "You've really done it."

He rarely said he was proud of me. Those words never came easily, but I knew he meant it.

But now, decades later, he is gone—dead at sixty-four from lung cancer, although he never smoked a day in his life. And once again, you yanked me back into the present, Nostalgia. You remind me I'll never see his big, crooked smile again—the one where one of his front teeth slightly overlapped the other. I'll never hear his tenor voice or feel one of

his rare meaningful hugs, the kind that conveyed what he did not say easily: that he loved me.

You make me relive the joy of that day, only to remind me that it's out of reach forever. Because now, no matter how hard I try, I can't go back to that restaurant or see the pride in my father's eyes. All I can do is remember and feel a terrible longing.

You never stay long enough for me to tell you that you're selective—that you only ever show certain moments. Your scenes aren't a true reflection of my life. You curate memories, offering only the highlights: friends on the front stoop, drinking and laughing in summer; long dinners with people I love, where the conversation stretches late into the night; the thrill of unwrapping the exact gift I'd hoped for on Christmas morning. You show only those fragments of joy, gilded in hindsight.

Last week, you took me back to a department store with my mother when I was a teenager. She told me I could choose anything I wanted, and she would buy it. But she didn't want to visit any other departments—we were in housewares. I wandered the aisles, looking for something I might want. On a shelf, I spotted a small kitchen timer with an orange flower on its face. I didn't cook, but maybe one day I would. She bought it for me, and that little timer became important. It felt like her way of saying: *I care about you*. But you never stay long enough to remind me how rare those good moments really were—how strained our relationship was most of the time. You leave out how she left my college graduation early, and how I waited by the large boulder outside the auditorium where we agreed to take pictures.

I stood there in my cap and gown, under the hot sun, but she never showed.

"Where is Mom?" I asked my sister.

"She left... said it was hot in there."

You never show me the way she favored my younger sister: the money she gave her, the airline tickets, the frequent visits. Visits where she flew in with live lobsters. Even up until the day she died, it was clear: I was never the priority.

Your curation is so good, I sometimes question my life decisions. You conjure my ex-husband, leaning toward me in a dimly lit bar, his voice low and earnest as he whispers, "I've never loved anyone as much as I love you." Vulnerability pools in his brown eyes,

and for a moment, I feel his love—tremendous, overwhelming—and remember how certain I was that we were meant to be together. I'm there again, bathed in his affection, warmed by the sincerity in his voice.

And then you vanish, Nostalgia, leaving me alone with the sharp sting of regret—for all the ways I failed him. I find myself wondering how I could have left someone who loved me so deeply. But you're a master of illusion. You take moments that were messy, complicated, even painful, and airbrush away the struggles, the flaws, the chaos, leaving only the shimmering highlights.

Nostalgia, you never show me how my ex-husband and I could never agree on how to parent our children. How we fought over his embarrassing jokes, the ones he kept telling even as shame flushed my face. You leave out the flirtations with other women—"just joking around," he would say. You skip over how he quietly undermined my relationship with our children, how he always seemed to take more than he gave. You don't show how he emotionally flattened me during our divorce, or how he walked away with the bulk of our assets. You erase the nights he shouted "Shut up!" when I asked a question, making our meal in the kitchen while he sat in the next room, surfing the Internet. I go for a walk to escape you, Nostalgia. But, of course, you follow—I can never seem to leave you behind. I glance at a house that vaguely reminds me of one I used to live in, and suddenly I'm not on the sidewalk anymore. I'm standing inside *that* house, the one I bought when my children were little.

It seemed like a dream house back then—over a hundred years old, with sturdy gray stone walls and an air of history. But you, Nostalgia, take me back there in your usual, selective way. You cast a warm glow over the place, as I stand in front of the huge picture window overlooking the old tree-lined street—the towering oaks arching above the rooftops. You show me how deeply I loved that home, and all the happy moments tucked inside its walls. You bring back the dinner parties with close friends, laughter rising over pizza spread across our long wooden table. You remind me of family dinners—the kids swapping school stories, gossiping about who went where for spring break, all of us gathered around home-cooked meals. You show me how much love lived in that house—and how much of it I still carry with me.

What you refuse to show is the chill that crept into that house as my marriage unraveled. You don't show how the home shifted from light to shadow, or how the warmth drained from the walls once I was alone. I tried to keep the feeling alive, to restore what the house once held, but it was futile. By the end, it felt ice cold, and I could no longer bear to live there.

Nostalgia, you taunt me with the realization that I no longer think or feel as I once did. Recently, when I heard a song from my college years, you whisked me back to my dorm room—one quiet afternoon when my best friend Jeff and I were talking about the future. Jeff, full of energy and drive, was a brilliant math major who only had one notebook for his entire four years of college. "I'm gonna design supercomputers—machines that'll solve problems we can't even touch right now," he said, his eyes sparkling. I nodded, swept up in his conviction. "And I want to do research on gender stereotypes—stuff that actually helps women."

Back then, optimism filled me completely. I believed in our dreams—wholeheartedly. You reminded me how I used to see the world: with boundless curiosity and deep trust in my professors and mentors. I truly believed life would unfold beautifully and steadily, if I just worked hard enough.

I remember sitting in the campus cafeteria with Jeff, complaining about the state of the world.

"We'll be running things one day," he said. "Think of all the crap we're gonna have to fix."

"Yeah, there's a lot," I said. "But we'll get it right."

Nostalgia, you showed me that bright, hopeful version of myself—and reminded me that she's gone.

I know what you're up to now, even when I can't feel you nearby. You're cataloguing everything: every laugh, every walk, every seemingly ordinary moment I take for granted. You're storing it all away, filing it under *to be used later*, ready to unleash it on me when I least expect it.

Take the walks I share with my husband, the man I found later in life—my soulmate, the keeper of my happiness. We stroll through our neighborhood, talking about his

research or my latest writing project. It feels so simple, so unremarkable. Just another part of our life together. But I know you're there, Nostalgia, watching with that calculating gaze.

One day, when I can no longer walk with him, when I can no longer hear his voice as he shares his thoughts or laughs at mine, you'll fling these moments back at me. What feels ordinary now will one day feel extraordinary in its absence, a painful reminder that the smallest details of life hold the most weight.

That's your trick, isn't it? You force me to see what I didn't fully appreciate at the time: the conversations I can no longer have, the people I can no longer hold, the laughter I can no longer share.

But the truth is, you collect what time might otherwise erase. You store away the smallest, most fragile pieces of my life. The sticky hands I once held, the heart-spilling conversations, the laughter that once echoed around my dinner table. You preserve these, cataloging them with a care I do not.

And yet, you do not protect these memories out of kindness. Your purpose is not to comfort me but to confront me, to make me ache for what I can never have again. In doing so, you also ensure that none of it is lost. You are a record-keeper—one who safeguards what I can no longer touch, who carries the weight of my life when it feels too heavy. That is the gift within the ache: the chance to recognize what truly mattered.

When you arrive, you remind me of time's fragility. You make me keenly aware that this moment will never come again. And because of that, I savor it just a little more. I see the faces of those I love with clearer eyes, knowing they are still with me, and I hold them closer. You show me the lives and loves I have lost, but in doing so, you sharpen my gratitude for what remains.

Nostalgia, you remind me of what I still have—the people I can still reach out to, the moments of happiness still within my grasp. When I play a game of Yahtzee with my older sons, I resist the pull of distraction and the work that seems to call me away. When I walk with my husband or talk to a good friend, I feel lucky because I don't know what the future holds. This could be the last time. And so I cherish it more. I am not rushing the way I used to. Because of you, Nostalgia, I am making my time matter.

And your presence, for all its sorrow, is proof of how fully I've lived, how deeply I have loved, and how many beautiful experiences I have had. You remind me that my life has not been just a blur of passing days, but a collection of meaningful memories. The people I miss mattered—not just because I loved them, but because they loved me. And if their absence still aches, it is only because I was lucky enough to have them in my life, no matter how briefly.

So, thank you, Nostalgia.

Brotherhood

by Jeffrey B. Burton

[Note: the italicized passages that introduce sections of this essay are text messages between the author (Jeff) and his close friend (Eric)]

Don't tell anyone I'm going on hospice. My family will just fuck up the works. – Eric

I met Eric in third grade when my family moved suburbs. Our introduction was abrupt and memorable. Eric's bully-prick of an older brother set the two of us up to fight for the enjoyment of himself and his friends. Eric's brother invented the "Thunderdome" rule before the *Mad Max* movie made it famous—"two men enter, one man leaves." Fortunately, the seventy-five-year-old recess lady broke it up before any damage could be done, but Eric's brother dragged us aside and whispered, "You two are going to fight tomorrow until we get this thing settled."

I've never been sure exactly what Eric and I needed to get *settled*, but his brother was adamant about it. Terrified, I didn't sleep that night and at recess the next day, I headed toward Eric, where he sat near the tetherball court, as though I were walking the plank.

"I guess we're supposed to fight," I mumbled.

He glanced at me, then looked up at the sky, and said, "It's too sunny to fight."

I exhaled with relief and nodded in total agreement. *It was too sunny to fight.* Fortunately, his brother was nowhere to be found. Maybe he'd moved on to fresher prey.

As kids do, instead of fighting, we became friends.

And, like all kids, we couldn't imagine a future where Eric would be in a fight for his life.

I wouldn't mind the cancer; I'm just so effing tired of dealing with my shit morning, noon and night. Shit has become my life ... my life is shit. – Eric

Eric lived in Colorado, where he spent the bulk of his career working for the railroad. He texted our friend group last fall that he'd been diagnosed with colon cancer along with spots on his liver. Eric immediately underwent colostomy surgery. A colostomy bag became part of his daily life.

Eric had always been a head turner. He grew several inches in high school and by the time he headed off to college Eric looked like a six-foot-five Brad Pitt. He got into weightlifting soon after and muscled up like Arnold Schwarzenegger, only without the hint of steroids.

The colostomy bag hit Eric hard.

It would hit anyone hard.

6 months Jeff, that's what they're giving me. I go bed now. – Eric

I love ya, Er. Get a good night's sleep. – Jeff

Eric was Mr. Popular at our elementary school—dating the hottest girls in our sixth-grade class. Of course, dating in grade school meant you sat by them during lunch or on the bus for a week or so until one of you looked at the other askance, and then it was Quitsville.

I attended our most recent class reunion and called Eric to provide an update. “Kelley was there,” I said. “She’s still a stunner.”

“Kelley hasn’t spoken to me since I stuck underwear in her mailbox.”

“You did what?!”

“When we broke up, I stuffed a pair of my underwear in her mailbox.”

“How come I’ve never heard this until now?”

“If I’d told you back in the day, it would have spread like wildfire.”

I couldn’t argue with Eric’s logic. “Were they clean?”

“Of course they were clean,” he replied. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“What’s the matter with me? You’re the one shoving underwear in someone’s mailbox.”

I’m almost down to 200 pounds!!! This chemo makes everything taste the same. – Eric

I liberated *Playboy* magazines from Jerry's Market, the grocery store across from our junior high, ironically shoving them down the front of my pants to sneak the issues out of the store. Since I was only thirteen, the bouffant at the register would never sell them to me. I didn't consider it shoplifting. I was being denied access—it was a Civil Rights issue.

Eric would borrow magazines, which he snuck home in his jacket and, when not in use, hid between his mattress and box spring. Once I accumulated a dozen or so copies, concealed behind my stash of Mad magazines on my closet shelf, I got worried. It'd be only a matter of time before my parents tripped over them in their semi-annual search of my bedroom.

So, Eric and I figured it'd be best to place the magazines in a garbage bag, seal it tightly, and hide them in the woods near Mount Villa's bunny hill. It took a mere twenty-four hours for us to come to our senses—*My God, what have we done!?* We ran like hell back to Villa to retrieve the Hefty bag . . . but it was nowhere to be found.

Where our boyhood memory ended, someone else's began.

That Go Fund Me page Mike setup for you has been going great guns. Todd's been able to put a deck on his cabin, Dick's got a new pontoon boat, Mike's got another FIAT, and Cindy and I are off to Europe. – Jeff
Now that's fuckin' funny!!!!!! – Eric

A year or two out of high school, Eric discovered they had *Playboys* at the local library. He shoved a copy into his backpack and, on his way out, the alarm went off. Some poor librarian had to jog out to the parking lot and retrieve the magazine from him.

I doubt Eric returned to that library anytime soon . . . if ever again.

Remember my UofM girlfriend, Debbie? Our last date was the evening after I'd thrown dad into the X-Mas tree. I told her everything, thinking she'd understand, like a girl in a John Hughes movie. Alas, her family celebrated the birth of Christ with love and worship.

My family celebrated Christ's birth with domestic violence. I never had a fucking chance.
— Jeff

Aaawww, c'mon now, I never had the balls to chuck Lar into our Christmas tree. I just told God/Jesus that my death will wipe your slate clean!!! NOW you've gotta fucking chance!!! Don't waste it. — Eric

Thanks for wiping my slate clean. It's a long effing slate. — Jeff
Aren't they all? — Eric

Eric and I grew up in the Seventies, back when dads could knock their kids around with impunity. Our close friend Todd's father came home intoxicated one night, got out his gun, and threatened to shoot everyone in the household. The police and the pastor showed up outside with a bullhorn to talk him out of it. When he surrendered, the cops let him sleep it off as though he were Otis on *Mayberry RFD*. He even got to return home the next day.

Hell, the cops probably oiled his gun for him while he slept.

My father could fill a chapter in a Psych book—possibly bipolar, perhaps short man syndrome, most certainly depression—and would lash out emotionally and, every so often, physically, at the tiniest of slights, either real or imagined. Quite the mystical power dear old dad yielded—the ability to seethe for seasons at a time. His was a brooding presence, lumbering about the household, making everyone's life miserable.

We learned early on to set the thermostat per his mood-du-jour.

Even after the inevitable divorce, dad came over and harangued my mother, which led to an unpleasant and certainly unforgettable yuletide celebration.

All things considered, it's a miracle I don't eat with my feet.

Eric had it worse.

First off, Eric's father—Larry, truncated to Lar—was a much bigger man. I'd heard the stories about him and always scampered away before he arrived home from his shift at the milk plant. Lar never had an encouraging word, not a one, for any of the five kids they raised in his thousand square-foot rambler. Instead, he called them "Dunkies," which, to this day, I haven't a clue what it means, but knew it to be the opposite of a compliment.

And, if Eric or his brother ever looked at Lar wrong, the belt came out.

I get the old spare the rod and spoil the child adage, but it presupposes there's some kind of Solomonic wisdom at play. I've also heard many a man wax fondly about their father; how whenever they did something wrong, their father reluctantly brought out the belt or paddle in order to teach their son a life lesson. For me or Todd or Eric, it was impossible to grasp the master plan involved—much less decipher what in hell we'd done to merit such *life lessons*.

Just when I think Cut-butt (Eric's brother) is returning to his old self, he turns into Lar and I wanna kill him. – Eric

What'd the effer do? Is he with you right now? Just cough if he is so he doesn't know we're talking about him. – Jeff

The asshole ain't here. I had written him off a while back, then he starts being nice again, and I get sucked in AGAIN!!! No more!!! He's angry at the world and himself. That's why I'm gonna kill him. – Eric

Er-remember when we visited that old lady in the room next to you who kept singing Happy Birthday to herself as though she were in some creepy M. Night Shyamalan movie? When Cut-butt comes to visit, and no one's looking, get him into her room, stab him in the throat, give her the knife, then sneak back to your room, take a handful of gummies, and act all confused when they come to tell you what happened. – Jeff

That "old lady" across the hall is gonna have my child in about a month, but good idea!!!! – Eric

As much as Eric despised his father, he worshipped the ground his mother walked on. "Me Mum" he called her. She was so sweet and kind and thoughtful whenever I came over.

Once, Eric teared up as he recounted a recent altercation with Lar. He told me when his father left for work the next morning; he quizzed his mother on why she stayed with the son of a bitch.

But even as kids we knew why. Where would she go with five kids? Would her parents be willing to take this on? If not, what would she do for money?

She was trapped; same as Eric.

Doc call went well. Chemo's shrunk the tumors. 1st step; remove tumors on liver, 2nd step; radiate rectal tumor, 3rd step; removal of rectal tumor. – Eric

Meaning surgery to take tumors out and Eric lives to fight another day? – Jeff

Sumpin' like that. Don't get too excited, God only knows what they'll find when they start rootin' around in my butt. – Eric

Remember that pet rock I lost when we were roommates? Let me know if they find that. I'd like it back. – Jeff

I think your pet rock is in my colon!!! It sure feels like it!!! – Eric

I always thought with his size and good looks, Eric should have beelined it to Hollywood. He couldn't act worth a damn, but what would it take to get killed by James Bond in one movie, then have *Indiana Jones* take you out in another, or have Bruce Willis pop a cap in your ass in a *Die Hard* sequel?

Although, once upon a time, he and I did put on a show.

I dodged into the middle of Elmer Street. The car's headlights were maybe fifty yards away. I held up both palms as though to wave the driver down, a look of terror smeared across my features. I glanced back from whence I'd fled; from the lakeside—from his lair—and saw the madman gaining on me. There'd be no time for help from a passing motorist.

I tore across the street.

The man in the potato-sack mask sprinted after me, axe held high above his head as he flew past the car I'd tried to flag down.

It was the summer after eighth grade. I was a bit tall for my age, but Eric was way tall for his, ergo he got to play potato-mask killer for *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* scene we put on for the benefit of oncoming vehicles.

We staged half a dozen performances that night before becoming bored. No vehicles swerved to the side of the road, no foot chase ensued, and no squad cars were summoned. Either the drivers knew they were being pranked or they recognized me and figured: Bout time that kid got chopped into kindling. Been wanting to do it myself.

*Tomorrow at this time I'll only have half of a liver!!! I'll try to get word to y'all after surgery.
Thanks for being the best friends a guy could ever ask for. – Eric*

Eric was a neat freak. I've never lived in apartments cleaner than the two we shared. While eating dinner one night, I glanced over at Eric and said, "Let's see how deep this runs," and tossed my napkin onto the carpeting beyond the kitchen. We resumed eating for another few seconds before he shook his head, got up, retrieved the errant napkin, brought it back to the table, and said, "You're right. I can't let it go."

In one dump we lived in, Eric figured out if any of the tenants below—a flock of busboys from a nearby restaurant—took a shower at the same time we did, it screwed up the water temperature. The place was cheaply made so we could hear whenever any of the busboys showered. Upon hearing a victim start the shower, Eric dropped everything, ran into our bathroom and cranked the cold water so the shower-taker would get a blast of extra-hot water. We'd hear a shriek from below, and then Eric would crank the hot water so their shower would turn into a blizzard.

In a different dump, we had a family above us where their kid was always bouncing up and down as though he lived on a pogo stick. With Eric's height, he took off his boots, put them over his hands, and pounded on the ceiling as he marched down the hallway. "Here I am walking to the bathroom," he'd bellow and pound, and then, "Now I'm heading to the kitchen."

Alas, that episode ended with a less-than-pleasant visit from the facility's landlord.

*Hi Jeff. Eric moved from the ICU to hospice today at 2:00 pm. He developed an infection at the surgical site. He's been withdrawing more each day. They are keeping him comfortable with all the meds. I know his friendship with you guys meant the world to him.
– Eric's sister*

*Heartbreaking. I've loved Eric for nearly half a century. We all had such hope when the chemo appeared to work for surgeries to take place, but he's been through so much. –
Jeff*

There was an abandoned house—haunted, we reckoned—in a patch of woods near Rice Street. Windows smashed in; dilapidated siding; lawn neglected. Kids were able to squeeze through the chained door on the detached two-story barn/garage. Eric and I played there. We even nailed an ancient hose to a wall stud on the second floor and strung it out a busted window in case we ever needed to make a hasty getaway. Eric tested it out, scaling down the siding as kids flew past on their bikes below, miraculously not even noticing him.

Bored with the barn/garage, one day we decided to go inside the abandoned house. So, we suited up—pocket knives and flashlights—and headed out. On our trek to the house, we began chatting about *The Night Stalker*, which we'd caught on TV, and how Kolchak found the vampire's coffin in the basement and about the creepy ending of *Psycho*, which we'd also seen, and about *The Last House on the Left*, which we'd heard about but not seen on account of being a half decade too young for R-rated movies.

As we approached the decaying structure, Eric came to a stop. "I don't want to do this anymore."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I don't want to wake up any vampire."

We wound up back at my house, lying on the grass of the front yard, trying to think up something else to do with the day. "You got anything, Er?"

He shook his head. "You?"

"My mind's a complete blank," I said. "I've got no thoughts."

"So is mine," Eric replied. "No thoughts at all." He then added, "Feels kind of good, doesn't it?"

Big Eric passed away at 9:12 a.m. mountain time this morning. Minutes later the train whistle blew. RIP brother. – Eric's sister

I read the final text to my wife and then called the gang to let them know Eric had passed. After completing the calls, I sat on the bed for fifteen minutes, working my way through a box of Kleenex. The decades spun past. Eric and I had seen less and less of each other throughout the years, but the memories washed over me, wave after wave.

I scrolled through a private text chain with Eric, until I found the text he'd sent soon after he'd entered hospice . . . the one that broke my heart.

I'm gonna miss you the most. – Eric

Helpless.

That's how you feel when you can't do anything—not a damned thing—for a lifelong friend who's battling a terminal illness, so I defaulted to junior-high-school banter in the hope that maybe, just maybe, he'd get a chuckle.

You're Dorothy and I'm the Scarecrow (only with a bigger dick). – Jeff

But now it was over. My best friend had died.

Eric insisted we shouldn't grieve or mourn his passing, or even shed a tear, but I found that a bridge too far. Eventually, I took a couple of deep breaths and pictured Eric camped out near the tetherball court—as he'd been in elementary school, at recess on the day we were scheduled to fight—and I pictured him looking up into a cloudless sky . . . and I imagined Eric telling me, "It's too sunny to cry."



Eric (l) and Jeff

Speaking of the Dead

by Chris Vrontas

I am a grandson of immigrants from what some might have called a “shithole country.” My grandparents were poor, from poor villages, from a poor part of the world. They were not just data points wrapped in olive skin speaking a foreign language and cooking funny smelling food. They were husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, laborers and artists, lovers and mourners, leaders and failures, fighters and dreamers. They were people, like all other people. Yet, like immigrants today, my family and others similarly situated were viewed upon their arrival in the US by some American leaders as “new immigrants” who threatened to make “a great and perilous change in the very fabric of our race,” as Henry Cabot Lodge, the Senator from my home state, once wrote over 100 years ago. Sadly, very little has changed.

My immigrant grandparents are all dead now. But they continue to whisper to me. They tell me to open my eyes and open my heart. Listening to their whispers, I see the new arrivals at the southern border through their eyes. I see the threat to suspend *habeas corpus* through their eyes. I see the denial of personhood and citizenship guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment through their eyes. I see the pretextual complaint about “illegal immigration” through their eyes while their descendants demand changes to laws to keep new immigrants out of the country immigrants built. Looking through their eyes, I share their terror at seeing immigrants who have committed no crimes taken off the street in surprise arrests.

When my family first arrived in the US, they did not look so different from those being arrested today. It is deeply disappointing to hear the language that the descendants of immigrants use when talking about today’s migrants, people who just want the same chance to work for a better life. So many of these descendants, while they mostly identify as Christian, ignore the biblical injunction to “neither mistreat a stranger, nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Perhaps all non-indigenous Americans need to be reminded of their own immigrant story. Perhaps once they remember their common humanity, they will look upon contemporary migrants with understanding and compassion

rather than fear and hypocrisy. As my late grandmother used to say, “You’re not the first, and you won’t be the last.”

Visiting My Immigrant Past

Uncle Bill had been dying for years. He was one of the few family members left from his generation, the first wave of our family that came to this country near the turn of the century from Greece. On news that his health was failing, my mother called me. “Go see him while you have the chance,” she said.

He was ninety-six years old at the time, and he came from another world. I was just out of school. He lived in a row house on a postage stamp lawn behind a chain link fence with my aunt Zoe. She was a spry eighty-seven, and she opened the door with a young smile, hugged me with energy, and ushered me down the narrow hallway to the front parlor. Bill Loupos sat in his stuffed chair by the window, his walker beside him and his spit bag by his feet. His pajamas and bathrobe hung off his frame and his thin hair waved over his balding head. His chiseled face looked up as I entered the room. While he had supposedly declined, he looked no different than he had the for the last twenty years I had known him. To me, he was always old.

But he wasn’t always old. The sepia-toned photograph in the water-stained paper frame on the bureau in my office tells me so: jet black hair, piercing dark eyes, pronounced jaw framing his beefy face. His whole body leans back on the studio chair as he sits cross-legged wearing a gray suit, spats, crisp white collared shirt and a silk tie as he stares down the future that might dare oppose him when that photo flashed at least 100 years ago.



I sat on the couch across from Uncle Bill’s chair and Zoe offered me a ginger ale like she did when I was a boy visiting with my parents. I took in this room that always held

an air of formality. We didn't visit often. There was no playing here. Bill and Zoe had no children, and the house had the delicate orderliness of a place that was not used to kids. The parlor was heavily decorated with artifacts from their era, including dark wood end tables covered with white lace.

I didn't know a lot about my uncle Bill. I knew he left his home in Bambakou, a small mountain village in the Peloponnese, when he was just a boy to come to this country. He came with his brother Nick, who I never met, and my grandfather, Harry, who I barely remembered. Bill was the only one left, my only direct link to those early days when they first came over.

After the obligatory discussion mourning another Red Sox season, I asked him if he missed Greece or if he ever wanted to go back.

"No!" he said emphatically. "In Greece, I didn't have *shoes* on my feet! America is the greatest country on earth!"

Zoe interrupted, "Oh yes you did have shoes on your feet." She clucked at his exaggeration. "Life was hard, but you had shoes on your feet."

I asked Zoe what she thought when she first arrived in America. She recalled standing at the railing on the ship steaming into a cold, gray, and foggy New York Harbor. Dark, monstrous buildings of steel and concrete walled the water's edge. New York's sky hung thick and dirty like an old woolen blanket, and the air was soupy with mist and grime, slapping her face with an offensive wet wind. Between her and her brave new world spread the deep ponderous and impenetrable water of the harbor, bulging and hissing like gray molten rock. Even the Statue of Liberty, the mammoth symbol of promise to strangers in a strange land, loomed gargantuan and gray, implacably presiding over the driven herds of cold, huddled, immigrant masses. Zoe, the young woman from the small mountain village of Aghios Petros, could not accept it. She began to cry.

Bill had no romantic sentiments of the Old Country, and Zoe had no illusions about America. They told stories that challenged my very simplistic view of the immigrant story. And they added life to legends that had seemed so distant to me. I learned about the group of boys, teenagers and younger, who lived in a North End tenement on their own, selling bananas from fruit carts each one walked eleven miles a day from Haymarket Square to Arlington to retrieve. Their pay was pennies for commission and all the rotten

fruit they could eat when the sun went down. Tuberculosis and the broken window in their room winnowed the group's number during the winter. I learned how a young family survived the Great Depression, and how they endured a father's death and a failed business. There were stories about love, betrayal, war, murder, death, resurrection, triumph, and loss.

Zoe kissed me at the door after my visit and told me, "Don't become cold, like a cucumber." I shrugged and joked, "I like cucumber." She said, "It's nice, in a salad. But it's cold. They are cold. Don't be cold, like cucumber." I thought she was warning me about dating my girlfriend, a girl from New Jersey who was not Greek and who might not fit into our family.

I stepped away, annoyed at her comment. Who was she to say? Her house was so warm? When we visited when I was a boy, there was no playing, no ball outside, no games inside. Just everything in its place. We sat properly on the laced couch, accepting the ginger ale and *koulouria* offered by my great aunt.

But as I look back, she was not concerned about my girlfriend. She was concerned about my generation. "Don't become cold, like cucumber." The warning still whispers. Is that what we have become? Now, three generations in this country, have we become "cold like cucumber" to people like us who want a better life? Have we failed our immigrant stories? Have we lost our humanity?

We're No Better Now

It has become common to see people who once spoke proudly of their immigrant heritage demonize new arrivals who possess the same dreams and ambitions their ancestors did. Immigration has always been controversial, but it startles me how we as a people have not evolved. Americans still talk about "immigrants" as if they are a "problem," and we forget our origins when we do. We rage against foreigners while eating our Italian pizza and our Greek salad prepared by new immigrant hands from Venezuela or the Dominican Republic. We fail to realize that the change we resist will become the delicious normal in the future. An entire leadership class has shed its belief in Ronald Reagan's vision of America as special because "anybody can be an American" and because "we

draw our people ... from every country and every corner of the world” so as to “continuously renew and enrich our nation.” Even Senator, now Secretary, Marco Rubio, who not long ago exhorted America “not to give in to the fear” and to remember that “[w]e are the descendants of immigrants and exiles,” now adopts the atavistic politics of fear by following the current chief executive who argues that immigrants “are poisoning the blood of our country,” or that they “come from shithole countries,” and that such countries are “not sending their best,” that new arrivals have come as an “invasion,” and that they are bringing their “problems” as if America has ever been anything but a tumultuous salad bowl of nations. There was no perfect American moment in the past. No one was any better in the old days. And, sadly, we’re no better now.



If we could only speak to the dead, perhaps they would talk some sense into us. Their stories might snap us out of our fear. Their names that once sounded foreign and their DNA that made them look different when they arrived

have been passed down to us. All we need to do is look in the mirror. When I do, I see my father’s lines in my face and my grandfather’s eyes looking back to me, and I consider how the stern look that is returned to me masks the stories behind who I am and how I got here. I can faintly make out the grandfather I never met, the man who doted on his two young daughters and felt such pride in his son and loved his wife dearly, a man who died younger than I am now. I see my grandmother who was not just the laconic and dissatisfied woman she appeared to me when I was young, but a young and beautiful striver who married and crossed an ocean to fulfill aspirations she held. Looking in the

mirror, I can feel the sting my grandfather felt when the real estate agent wouldn't show him a house because there were "too many Greeks" in the neighborhood. I can feel the pit in my mother's stomach when she arrived in first grade without knowing any English and her self-consciousness at having only one dress to wear to school. The taunts from the other children will never leave her, but neither will the kindness of the one teacher who took the extra time to teach her English.

Lessons from the Dead

Uncle Bill was not just the haggard old man in pajamas who sat all day in his stuffed chair. He was the man who, among other things, worked at his diner for forty years, sold it, invested everything he had, and lost it all in the stock market. Instead of giving up, that shrewd, hard-nosed fighter literally doubled down and invested all he had left "on margin." The investment exploded and made him rich, but he never moved from his little house in Arlington. Within weeks of my visit, Bill Loupos died and left millions to stunned and thankful friends. The shoeless boy from Greece had given away a fortune.

What other treasures did our immigrant ancestors leave for us? Perhaps their example not to be afraid. People fear immigration because they fear change. They mistakenly believe that change means loss. With immigration the faces around us change, and we add new customs and new traditions, new flavors in the salad, but those new faces also bring renewal. With new influences and new aspirational energy, the whole of us grows.

I remember taking a picture of my girls when they were little, racing each other on the lawn with their arms wide like airplane wings, soaring in the total freedom that only children know. I wanted that time to never end. I still have the old photo, but they've flown now, grown into the fullness of themselves. Do we focus on loss or on growth? That change is constant is an eternal truth. We need not fear change but see that life's impermanence makes it beautiful and the potential for rebirth brings new hope.

I married the girlfriend I thought my aunt warned me about. Good thing I did. Yes, marrying her meant change, and we built our own lives and did things differently than our ancestors did, just as our ancestors broke away on their own. The immigrant experience

is a metaphor for life. We all must leave something or some place to move on to the next part of our lives. Some leave their country, others their hometown or family, some leave school or their old job, or even their youth to move on to later life stages. We all arguably are new arrivals on this planet, and we all eventually will need to leave it. As migrant souls in this vast universe, surely we could identify with and learn something from the immigrant experience.

This is not an argument for disorder at the border. It's just an argument for respect and compassion over fear and hypocrisy. Is it so hard to treat people fairly? To give people notice and an opportunity to be heard? To respect migrants as people as you would want your own grandparents respected? In doing so, we can remember where we came from and perhaps see the common humanity in others with some humility. In the process, we can be grateful for the continuing and evolving feast at our truly American table, filled with old favorites and delicious new recipes, nourishing all of us.

Contributors

Barbara Belzer Adams has a degree in journalism. She worked in public relations, corporate marketing management, and as ad agency copywriter before launching her freelance writing career twenty-five years ago. She inherited her sense of humor from her father, but as promised, got nothing from her Aunt Mildred.

Anne E. Beall is an award-winning author and social psychologist who writes about the emotional undercurrents that shape our lives. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in literary journals such as *The Write Launch*, *Minerva Rising*, and *The Raven's Perch*. She holds a PhD in psychology from Yale and is the founder and editor of *Chicago Story Press Literary Journal*.

A retired Anthropology Professor, **Elizabeth Bird** published many academic articles and seven books before turning to creative writing in 2021. Her work appears in *Under the Sun* (winner, Readers' Choice Award 2022), *bioStories*, *Streetlight*, *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*, *HerStry*, *The Guardian*, *Mutha Magazine*, *3Elements Review*, *Heimat Review*, *Witcraft*, *Summerset Review*, and elsewhere. Her essay "Interlude: 1941," was a Notable in *Best American Essays 2023*. Her website is: www.lizbirdwrites.com.

Jeffrey B. Burton's mystery/thriller *The Second Grave* (Severn House 2025) is the second in his Chicago K-9 series, following *The Dead Years*. Burton's critically acclaimed Mace Reid K-9 mystery series (St. Martin's Press/Minotaur) include *The Finders*, *The Keepers*, and *The Lost*. Jeff's short stories have appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies. His short story, *Liza*, appeared in *The Twisted Book of Shadows*, which won the 2019 Shirley Jackson Award for Edited Anthology. Jeff lives in St. Paul, Minnesota with his wife, Cindy, an irate Pomeranian named Lucy, and a happy galoot of a Beagle named Milo. For more about Jeffrey: www.JeffreyBBurton.com

Beth Cleary's essays are published in *Ninth Letter*, *The Maine Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Invisible City*, and *After the Art*, among other publications. She lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she taught at Macalester College for twenty-eight years and co-founded the East Side Freedom Library.

Paige Cromley studied astrophysics before she began freelance writing about science and nature. She's been published in magazines like *Hakai*, *Sierra*, and the *Revelator*. She recently moved from Texas to California in a grand endeavor to start her serious adult life (which keeps somehow being delayed).

Gary Fincke has published five nonfiction books including *The Darkness Call* (Pleides Press) which won the Robert C. Jones Prize for short prose. Individual essays have been reprinted in *The Pushcart Prize XXV* and *Best American Essays 2020*. *After Arson: New and Selected Essays* will be published in October by Madville Publishing.

Maria Hetherton is a retired teacher with a past in academia, focusing on women's oral narrative while earning her PhD in folklore from Indiana University. Having time to write has become the dream of a lifetime. Her nonfiction appears at *Discretionary Love*, *Herstry*, *Hippocampus*, *The Malahat Review* and the blog at *Dappled Things*, among others. She lives close to the Rio Grande in New Mexico, where she and her husband are sworn vassals to a pair of semi-feral house cats.

Kevin A. Louderback is a writer and educator from southern Ohio who teaches basic writing, first-year, and intermediate composition. They hold a BA in English and an MA in English Literature and are currently working on their debut novel. Their writing reflects a love for storytelling and literary analysis.

Born at the end of World War II in the destroyed dock area of Merseyside, **T.S. Ollerhead** left home at fifteen years of age, travelling the world and working in over twenty countries, eventually settling in Australia. Now in his relaxing years he enjoys writing and has had several pieces accepted in international publications and over a dozen poems accepted in one of Australia's best-selling school magazines.

Joanell Serra is a Northern California writer, with work published in numerous journals and anthologies. Her books include *The Vines We Planted* (Wido, 2018) and *(Her)joics Anthology*, a collection of women's essays about the pandemic (Regal House Publishing, 2021). She is currently finishing her MFA at Randolph College. More of her work is available on her [website](#).

John Thomson's fiction and nonfiction has appeared in several literary journals, including *Terrain*, *Broad River Review*, *The Dodge*, *Collateral*, *bioStories*, and others. His short story *Out of Good Ground* won *Terrain's* fiction award in 2018, and his novel for young readers, *A Small Boat at the Bottom of the Sea*, was published by Milkweed Editions. He is a retired wildlife biologist and land conservationist and lives with his wife in Northern California, close to their two grown daughters and their families.

Chris Vrontas is a lawyer and writer. He lives in Essex County, Massachusetts with his wife, who still laughs at his jokes after thirty-five years. He serves as a mediator of discrimination disputes for the Human Rights Commission. He grew up in an immigrant

faith tradition that has evolved over the years, and he writes about impermanence, hope, and rebirth.