



Oracle

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EDITOR'S LETTER

Until this edition, I have been a part of the Oracle of Fine Arts Review for the past four years or so, acting as a board member for fiction and as the Assistant Editor of poetry and fiction in the past few previous runs. But this was my first time in the Big Chair, and man, did it feel too big for little old me. Despite the imposter syndrome and fear of disappointment, I am so lucky that I got to be editor-in-chief of an edition with such spectacular pieces.

Abby Plowman, Managing Editor, has been a fantastic partner in the development of this year's edition; I, along with Oracle, genuinely would not have made it this far without her. It has been an honor working alongside Abby, the editors, and the authors and artists of this edition of Oracle, and I hope you enjoy it as much as I do.

When we first started, Abby—my partner in crime—and I agreed that while we did not want to push for a theme, we did want the pieces to possibly reflect a loose theme of “catharsis.” We’ve all lost in these past two years. There has been so much death and grief and change that every single person has had to deal with in such a short amount of time, and we wanted this edition of the Oracle to act as a kind of catharsis for our writers, artists, and readers.

Catharsis is not a simple thing; it is not always an act of acceptance and moving on with your life. It is anger, it is a grief that never quite leaves, it is humor, it is messy, and it is different for everyone. The goal of this edition is to show that, show the messy healing process that we all have, or perhaps have not yet, gone through.

I want to dedicate the work I've done for this edition to Jennifer Rogers, who always celebrated the strange and weird, who insisted that you feel what needed to be felt no matter how ugly it was, and who would have loved every single piece in this edition of Oracle. Tail fins up.

Stay safe and stay kind,

Bee Baldwin
Editor-in-Chief

MANAGING EDITOR'S LETTER

I have been on the Oracle staff many times before and gained a lot of valuable experience, but having the opportunity to work alongside Bee to make this edition has been the most rewarding of all. Bee made it clear from the start that they wanted this Oracle to be a collaboration between the two of us, and that collaborative spirit has never changed since day one. Nevertheless, Bee's example has been a brilliant one to follow, and I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to support their wonderful leadership and vision.

Going into the review process, we approached theme gently. Bee had an inkling of what could work for this edition, and we kept it in mind, but we agreed that we never wanted that preconceived notion to sway us from any truly great material – or cause us to project our idea of what catharsis was onto the pieces. Still, we were amazed to find how strongly the pieces we found fit that lens. The last couple of years have been hard. Writers and artists, like anyone, have taken notice. Whether experiencing a deep grief that can slowly and painfully turn to joy again or cracking jokes to mask a sorrow that lurks within, our contributors this year have touched something real.

I hope that something rings true for you too.

Best,
Abby Plowman
Managing Editor

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RAVEN MCSHAN

BLOODBORN

I misplaced my birth control
dreamt of infants for two nights

The first baby rested on my shoulder
hands clutching at my blouse
skin light enough to pass like Grandmother

I remembered my child's heartbeat against mine
when my sister conceived a friend's baby

The second baby bundled in my lap
blue blanket swaddled around her
skin like my father, hot chocolate

I had no memory of her until my aunt lamented
her lack of grans at my cousin's 30th birthday party

The third day I refilled my prescription
popped a melatonin tablet
and awoke in relief to sheets sodden red

Ashes of today spilling from my hands
 Speckle the sky, shadow your hands.

You are the bearer of the darkness
 where the demons lose sight of their hands.

The scars and bruises dissolve in blindness,
 now soft alabaster beneath your hands.

A moonless night leaves warmth to touch alone;
 I find your face within my wandering hands.

Is that Mahler? or your quiet heartbeat,
 a chant that, as they fall, catches my hands?

I lose you in the swollen black
 but find your dewy breath, outstretched hands.

Do not dissolve into the liminal blue,
 for it is all I have, interlocked hands.



LULLABY GHAZAL

KAITLIN KAN

A FATHER'S SON

SANDEEP KUMAR MISHRA

The mourners were not plentiful the day of the funeral. Vasudev had not been a popular man in this life, having dedicated very little time to cultivating and maintaining relationships. Pradeep, his eldest, watched the people move about in respectful silence, occasionally stopping at one of his siblings or mother to offer quiet condolences while the chanters continued through their mantras. Some made their way over to him, but he had nothing to say to them in return. Everything was too fresh—Pradeep wasn't sure how he felt about his father's death yet. He hadn't even seen his father for at least ten years before now, having gone off to live with his aunt while still a boy.

He looked over at his mother, his brother Ishaan, and his sister Shaleena. His mother looked sad at least, but Ishaan and Shaleena looked about as numb as he doubtless did. He wondered what the past ten years had been like for them. If their father had changed at all since failing Pradeep.

He would never forget the first time his father struck him. It was a miserable, humid day, the air so wet that you could almost taste it. Vasudev was home, classes having been let out, and was especially short of temper.

—

Pradeep, still a small child at the time, refused to go outside to play. "It's too hot," he remembered protesting. "I'll melt!"

His mother had gently but firmly encouraged him to go outside anyway. "You won't melt, I promise. But you really should go outside. The sun is good for you."

"I don't want to!" His little voice rose in aggravation.

"Pradeep, my darling, please go outside." His mother looked around, fear coloring her face. It was the first time Pradeep could recall seeing his mother afraid, though it would not be the last.

Vasudev appeared around the corner, his face an oncoming storm, and Pradeep instinctively understood his mother's fear.

"What is the meaning of this noise?" It was less a question than a demand.

Pradeep ventured a reply. "I don't want to go outside."

The baleful gaze Vasudev leveled at his son burned into the young boy's soul. "I heard your mother tell you to go outside. Why do you stand there mewling?"

"I--"

SLAP.

"Do as you're told! If I see you in the house again before supper you will get twice as bad!"

—

"I know your father was not a kind man." Pradeep shook his head, returning to the moment, and looked over to his Aunt Shashi. "Perhaps he will be kinder in the next life."

Pradeep couldn't reply to that. He wasn't certain his father deserved another life.

"I am sorry you did not get to say goodbye," his aunt ventured again. She was a kind woman, almost a second mother to Pradeep, but she was too forgiving.

"I am not." The first words Pradeep had spoken since the funeral began. "We spent all our words to each other a long time ago."

—

A young Pradeep stood nervously in his father's cramped office. Their small house afforded little enough space for their steadily growing family, yet Vasudev refused to give up this room. Pradeep had no idea what it was for, he just knew that his father's claims to it meant that he and his new brother Ishaan would be sharing a room.

“Your brother will be your responsibility,” he remembered his father saying sternly, eyes intense and hard. “I expect you to pull your weight as the eldest.”

Pradeep didn't speak. He knew by then that discussions with his father were not truly discussions, they were just brief moments when his father bothered to remember he had a child long enough to impart specific instructions. Any words on Pradeep's part would earn him a backhand, and that was if his father was in a decent mood.

“That means helping your mother feed and change him, teach him, and--”

“Keep him out of your way?”

The words were a mistake—Pradeep knew that before he said them, but sometimes he couldn't help himself. He stood defiantly as the fury entered his father's eyes. He would feel the repercussions of that remark for a long time, and remember them even longer.

Pradeep wasted no time after the traditional ten day mourning period to get back to his life. The fact that he even had to take ten whole days off irritated him, and he was unreasonably short with his family because of it. He wanted to leave this house and its memories, wanted to get back to his wife and children and wanted to burn the past away just as the body had been burned.

By sunrise on the eleventh day he was packed and ready to go, not even staying for breakfast. He bore no resentment towards his mother or siblings, but they had lived the past ten years without him; there was no reason to stay here any longer. So he quickly and quietly slipped out of the home of his childhood to catch the first train of the day and refused to look back.

As he walked, his thoughts wandered. He looked forward to home, hoped the train was running on time, hoped his wife Viha had set aside some dinner for him, and a thousand other thoughts like these—anything to get his mind off where he was and what had just happened and to get him moving forward. He was so focused on putting the past behind him that he didn't notice the football until it was almost too late.

With a small yelp he bobbed his head to the side, narrowly avoiding a head-on collision with the flying ball. He shook his head, startled and confused, and looked around for the ball's owner. He spotted them easily enough, a young boy—who was smiling apologetically—and his father—who was laughing—just down the road. The father jogged towards Pradeep.

“My apologies,” he began, still laughing a little. “My son and I like to come out for a little game before I have to go to work, and we are unaccustomed to sharing the road so early.”

Pradeep took a moment to gather his wits before answering. “Ah... It is alright. I was not hit, so no harm.” His eyes drifted back to the boy. “You two do this... often?”

The father nodded. “Most mornings. I work long hours, so I cherish the moments I can. Surely you can understand this?”

Pradeep looked back at the father. Such genuine happiness, speaking about his son, was something Pradeep did not understand at all.

—

“Pradeep, why does father never come out to play with us?”

Pradeep didn't turn to look at his little sister. Shaleena was barely five, but already she was noticing that their house was not like the houses of some of her friends. Her father was practically a stranger to her, only seen at meals and on holidays. No great loss there, Pradeep thought with no small measure of distaste.

“Because he is too busy,” Ishaan said when it was obvious that Pradeep had nothing to say.

“Busy with what?”

Ishaan paused. “Work, I guess.”

Shaleena clearly didn't understand, but filed the information away nonetheless and pressed on to her next question. “And why is he so sad?”

This got Pradeep to speak. “You think he's sad?” Shaleena nodded and Pradeep scoffed. “Why do you think this?”

“Because he never smiles. Sad people don't smile.”

It made sense, in a little kid logic sort of way, but

Pradeep had trouble picturing his father's constantly dour expression as anything but angry.

"He isn't sad," Pradeep said finally, frowning at the football by his feet. "I don't know what he is, but he isn't sad."

This confused the little girl more but Pradeep chose that moment to kick the ball and she took off after it, screaming with joy. Ishaan looked at Pradeep and frowned. "You should not speak of our father like that."

Pradeep just rolled his eyes and watched Shaleena run.

—

Given the early hour the train station was thankfully quiet, and Pradeep managed to purchase his ticket and board with minimal wait. He also had his choice of seats for the long ride ahead of him. Settling his luggage above him, he sat heavily and sighed, thankful to be on the way home at last. The rest of his day promised to be an easy one, as it was nothing more tedious than waiting until he reached his stop that evening, then getting a cab to take him home. Comforted by these thoughts, he drifted into a light nap as the train began to move.

When he stirred a few hours later, he noticed the car was significantly more crowded than it had been, with nearly all the seats outside of the one directly beside him taken. He also noticed a lone man who, noticing that Pradeep was awake, headed his way.

"A thousand apologies, sir, but is that seat taken?" He indicated the seat beside Pradeep.

"No. Please, sit." The man nodded his thanks and situated his own luggage, pulling out a well-worn book before stashing the bags, and settled into the seat. Pradeep's eyes were instantly drawn to the cover.

The man noticed Pradeep's attention and held the book up for better inspection. "I take it you are familiar with *Songs of Kabir*?"

Pradeep startled at the man's question as though shocked. "Oh, ah, not as such. Or rather I have not taken the time to read that particular collection myself. Someone... I knew, they did. Spoke of it very highly."

The man nodded understandingly and began flipping through the pages. "It is a good book. If you have any love of poetry, I highly recommend it."

"I... Shall keep that in mind."

—

"What are you reading?"

Pradeep looked up from his own perch across the room from the conversation, watching where Shaleena had approached their father's armchair and interrupted his reading with her question. He instinctively tensed, waiting for the cold dismissal or fiery rage at being disturbed; the first would cause Shaleena to run away hurt and Pradeep to follow so he could calm her down, and the second would be directed at Pradeep for not keeping her distracted in the first place. Either way it was about to become Pradeep's problem.

Yet Vasudev did neither. Instead, he looked up slowly and studied his daughter for a moment, as though trying to remember who she was and how he should react. Then he closed—actually closed—his book in order to show her the cover. "This is a book of poems. Can you read the title?"

Shaleena squinted at the letters. "Songs of Kabir?" She spoke slowly, careful to get every word correct. Pradeep couldn't help but be a little impressed. He hadn't realized her reading skills had progressed so far.

Vasudev smiled at her, and Pradeep frowned in confusion. "That's right," their father said, sounding pleased. "Would you like to read some poems with me?"

Pradeep looked back down to his own book, but he couldn't focus on the words anymore.

That was the kindest he'd ever seen his father behave towards anyone outside of their mother. Poems, it seemed, were the only subject he could be approached with. Something to remember.

—

Hailing a taxi to take him from the train station to his home didn't take long, thankfully. It was already much later than Pradeep had hoped to arrive home, and he was anxious for the comfort of his wife and bed. As he was driven across the city, the driver made occasional attempts at small talk, most of which Pradeep answered with polite but short replies, doing his best to avoid a protracted conversation. One comment, however, caused him to pay attention.

"Are you excited for the start of Onam tomorrow?"

Pradeep blinked. "That's tomorrow?"

The driver nodded. "I love Onam, personally. Well, specifically the Onasadya Feast, but the entire festival is fun." Pradeep glanced at the driver's bulky figure and guessed that the man did not save feasting for the festival alone. "Do you participate?"

—

"Hurry, Pradeep! Father wants us to be among the first visitors to the temple!"

Pradeep groaned, stretched, and tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. "The... temple?"

"Yes, the temple!" Shaleena was entirely too excited and loud for this early hour. "It's the first day of Onam!"

Pradeep shook himself more fully away and swung his legs over the side of his bed. Onam... He smiled a little as Shaleena scampered off, her mission accomplished. Father was always in high spirits during religious festivals and holy days, his usual dour expression lightened and stormy mood calmed. He might even be persuaded to give his children treats, so long as all the proper observances are met. "It is a holy day first and a festival second," he would solemnly intone. "Be respectful of that."

And they were, though it was more out of fear of their father than respect for the day. Still, it bought the household some peace, and at the time it seemed worth it.

Pradeep slipped quietly into his home, unsure if his wife was still awake and knowing their infant son was not. He paused just inside, seeing the flower decorations all prepared for Onam. Setting his luggage down in the entryway and taking off his shoes to make as little noise as possible, he made a quick walk of the house.

Everything was spotless. His wife had done an excellent job keeping up with the cleaning, even with the added responsibility of their newborn. He smiled slightly as he paused by the dining room table, laying a hand on their son's highchair. 'She is a good woman. I hope I am a good husband to her,' he thought to himself. He wondered briefly if his father ever had the same concern.

He moved into his office and saw everything was just as he had left it. It was, by agreement, the only room she didn't routinely clean as Pradeep had his own method to the seeming madness. He knew where

everything was and that was the important part. He looked over his papers, his bookshelf, the grading pens and the half-finished poems, and he frowned. It looked remarkably like how he remembered his father's office being laid out.

How had he never noticed that before? "Am I becoming my father...?" The question was asked quietly, barely even whispered, as though Pradeep was afraid of the answer. In a way he was; were not all men their fathers' sons? What hope did he have to build a better life for himself when he mirrored his father in even this tiny detail? In what other ways had he shaped himself after a man he... He what?

He missed him. Here, in the darkness and the silence, he could admit it.

He missed his father. Or, perhaps put better, he missed the idea of his father. He missed the connection he saw so often, even just coming home from the funeral. Someone he could talk to, someone he could play ball with, someone who led by example and listened to the worries of his children. Vasudev had never been any of those things for Pradeep, but he'd seen glimpses of that man in the way Shaleena interacted with him, and wondered if he had changed at all after Pradeep had left. If he had missed his son as much as his son now missed him.

"It's too late for regrets," Pradeep told his ghosts, trying to push them away. "He's dead. Whatever that may mean for him, it means to me that he is beyond reach." Forgiveness and healing were beyond

Pradeep's reach; there was no saving Vasudev's memory or salvaging the relationship. The abuse, the neglect, and the fear were all Pradeep had to remember his father by.

Pradeep left his office and its ghosts and headed up the stairs. He paused midway up to look at the pictures hanging from the wall—him and his wife on vacation, on their wedding day, on the day they brought their son home for the first time. They were happy in those pictures. Pradeep knew true joy in every moment captured and it showed. He thought back to pictures of his father; Vasudev had rarely smiled in person and never for the camera. Even in the oldest photos he looked serious and stoic, never expressing joy in his life.

He finished climbing the stairs, bypassing his own bedroom to check on his son. The child was sleeping soundly, completely oblivious to the presence of his father, and Pradeep smiled down at the small bundle. Resting a hand on the side of the crib and nearly crying for reasons he couldn't explain, he made his son a promise. "I'll do better. I swear, I will do better."

The floor creaked softly, and Pradeep looked over his shoulder to see his wife, wrapped in her dressing robe, squinting sleepily at him. "Pradeep?" Her voice was barely audible, and he quietly crept over to her after a final look at his son. "I didn't hear you come in." She squinted at him again, then reached out and touched his face, concern taking over her expression. "You're crying! What's wrong?"

Pradeep cupped her hand and smiled. "Nothing. Come, let us go back to bed. I am ready for today to end and tomorrow to begin."



Portrait of Quarantine 1
Micah Mermilliod



Portrait of Quarantine 3
Micah Mermilliod



Portrait of Quarantine 10
Micah Mermilliod

LEAVES OF CHANGE

SUNNY CANARY

leaves of change,
rotting, withering away,
you think you have an enlightened mind;
your soul is so dark,
but it's those around you bringing the light;
you thought you knew,
but you're still pretending to be holy.

I CAN CHANGE!

BOB CHIKOS

My brother's first serious girlfriend was Rianna.

Unlike the other girls he had brought home, she had a personality. Not only did she acknowledge my existence, she actually encouraged my brother to let me hang out with them and their senior friends. Of course he did. He did anything she told him to do.

It was an instant three-level boost in stature. I was a sophomore, so hanging out with seniors was a two-step boost. I was also a geek, so hanging out with cooler kids who could drive was another boost.

I was used to doing everything with my parents. Now I was under the watch of my brother, and it was my first taste of semi-freedom. We got out of our town and explored exotic places: the adventure of Six Flags Great America, the splendor of Lake Forest, even the far-flung hinterlands of southeast Wisconsin.

Our family hosted Henri, an exchange student from France. To show him as much of North America as we could, our mom planned a trip to Niagara Falls. Despite his protests, my brother was forced to come with us. "He's our guest!" my mom told him, "You need to be a good host. Rianna will be here when you get back."

We picked up my aunt's family, near Detroit, and went to Canada in her van. The van had a cassette player and everybody was allowed one hour with their music. My mom and aunt played Credence Clearwater Revival or the Beach Boys. The kids, ranging in age from 18 to 11, played Depeche Mode, Guns N' Roses, MC Hammer, Roger Whittaker (that was me), and the Muppets.

My brother pined for Rianna throughout the trip, sulking. While at the Swiss Chalet restaurant, he borrowed my mom's calling card and found a pay phone outside the restaurant, next to the newspaper

vending machine. He talked to Rianna while we waited for, and then ate, our food. We eventually found him cradling the receiver as my mom admonished him for running up the phone bill with a long international call.

After dinner, we saw a supermarket called Mr. Grocer, whose logo consisted of the top half of a mustached, faceless bald man. We said that my brother should write a letter to Rianna, glue it to the bottom half of Mr. Grocer, and have its legs run to Illinois.

In August, Rianna went to college. My brother was admitted to the same college, although for the spring semester. A week after move-in, she asked my brother to bring everything she still needed from home. He crammed the car with her clothes, books, stuffed animals, and everything else she forgot the week before. He made the three-hour drive to her school, unloaded everything from the car, and then carried it to her dorm. After everything was in place, she broke up with him.

He wouldn't come out of his room for a week, except to use the bathroom and eat Cherry Garcia. The next time I looked at photographs from the summer, I saw her face Wite-Outed.

In January, he went to college. His suitemate was Mark, a long-haired ruddy-faced sociology major, who bore a passing resemblance to David Koresh.

Mark was a power pop rock musician. I bought his CDs and saw him perform, thinking he had a chance to become something big. Looking back, his style was just a little bit behind the times. America had transitioned to grunge music – distortions and nihilistic lyrics. Everything was labeled as alternative to the point of: alternative to what?

WATERCOLOR

KEVIN NEAL

how uncertain you move on our paper,
 slow and anxious as a hand reaching
 out in the dark, like you're afraid
 to creep too far,
 that overnight you'll set, submit to your
 belonging and wrinkle
 like a dry leaf.

your colors will mingle in the cadence
 of old friends whispering.
 there's no stern
 voices here, no belligerent
 image bursts like the boisterous acrylics,
 no stark lines of ink
 or mischievous charcoal—

all modest, not quite sure
 of yourself, of what you'll say
 or how to find your place with
 the others. worried how we'll see you,
 what we'll think of your meek
 and feeble explanations,
 that we might mistake your silence
 for ignorance
 when we wake.

A PRESCRIPTION FOR TREPANATION

MICHAEL AARON MASON

Don't bother convincing me
of the thinness of your courage.

I've seen your dedication
to appearing grim and unapproachable.
You say you need someone's help

like you need a hole in the head.
But did you ever ask your home healthcare
physician for prehistoric treatments
for Lord-knows-whatever would require
bloodletting, or a tobacco-smoke enema,

or sleeping next to a skull
like a profaned nightlight?

You should know that one
was prescribed to treat teeth-grinding—
blokes with sore gums night-haunted

by their Babylonian ancestors
aiming to finger a way back
from the abyss, into the juddering
mouths of their somnolent progeny,
kilometers down the genetic tract.

They needed head-holes, and they *got* them:
palm-sized craters knocked from their domes

with stone cotters so their brains
could suck airtight to the edges,
exposed to the sun,

to the captious breath of God.
Imitatio Dei, Verzeihung Lieber Gott,
Have some goddamned mercy please
before the brain-drain kicks in.

I imagine a tidy hollow
at the foot of the Andes,

piled high with these discarded
circles of bone—skulled
roundlets, lying in the dirt

like sand dollars dried
to a biscuity crisp.
Could you collect them?

Or flip them like coins?
Which side would be tails?

NOT ABOUT ME

JIM ROSS

When I was a kid, I took accordion lessons in my bedroom. Every Thursday, my teacher faced me as I played last week's assignment, heard his critique, tried to play it slightly better, got a new piece to practice over the coming week, and took a stab at the newly-assigned piece so he could issue warnings about where I'd likely go astray. Occasionally, he'd snatch my accordion away to show how a piece was *supposed* to be played.

One day, he stood as my lesson began and said: "You have no talent whatsoever. You never practice enough. You'll never make anything of yourself. I can't waste any more time trying to teach someone thoroughly lacking in commitment." Speaking in a monotone, he didn't sound angry. His face was pale, his blond hair disheveled, his keyboard hand shook, sweat ran from his forehead, and a tear streamed from his right eye. When he finished, he inadvertently knocked my music stand over, tore down the stairs, threw open the front door, ran toward his yellow-green Buick, and made his getaway.

My teacher had been a household fixture. Mom told me to call him Uncle Sam. Four years earlier, he had begun teaching Mom piano lessons in the living room. A few months after starting lessons, Mom's car was t-boned and she had a late-second-trimester miscarriage. Sam began coming by to check up on Mom's welfare. After Dad returned to work, Uncle Sam—Sam the Englishman—kept coming by.

Mom quickly became pregnant again. Dad and Mom—then five months pregnant—ran off on a ten-day vacation with Sam and his wife Elaine, whom we didn't dare call "Aunt." Sam stopped by for coffee and crumb cake at least once weekly in addition to the two visits for Mom's piano and my accordion lessons. After Mom gave birth, Sam was coming by the house three to four times a week, even when Mom took a break from lessons. If he came by in the afternoon, they sipped tea with cream and shared sandwiches. Six months later, the foursome began going out to local hot spots for dinner and dancing. Eventually, Sam was stopping by *at least* five days a week. It seemed the friendship between the two families knew no bounds.

Then Sam's mum and dad, Lily and John, arrived from England for an extended visit with the possibility of again making the United States their home. They had lived in the States for the duration of World War II, but had returned to England in 1947, and a few years later moved into Devizes Castle. Sam and their other two children had all been born in Devizes. Mom claimed they had an inheritable right to occupy the castle as "minor league royalty," but it "came with no stipend and upkeep was horrendous." They lived in a five-room flat next to the chapel.

Mom glommed onto Lily and John like butter to hot crumb cake. They often invited Mom over for lunch at Sam and Elaine's. To add a second kitchen at

Sam and Elaine's, Lily and John dug deep into their pockets. Then something went awry. They hastily arranged for passage back to England. Mom became uncharacteristically quiet. Sam cut back his visits to once a week in addition to my lesson day. Then one day Sam the Englishman fired me. He ceased coming by. A cold chill fell on our household. I felt bad about disappointing Sam and thought my being a poor student had driven him away.

Forty years later, my eyes opened. After Mom's stroke, my daughter found a metal box containing 22 letters from Lily and John. The first few were sent from Devizes castle. One contained a castle postcard with arrows designating Lily's and John's flat. I recognized the postcard. Several letters came from the town of Devizes after they moved out of the castle. The last several letters came from California, where their other two children lived.

The letters showed that Lily and John had adopted Mom as their refined American daughter. Letters to Mom signed "Mamsy and Daddy" told Mom, "You are in our thoughts more than words can convey." Lily repeatedly told Mom that my Dad was a "stable, dependable man of great character," whereas Sam

was "gutless and lacked the courage to tell his Virago of a wife that he got to choose his friends, not her." They claimed, "Elaine blocked Sam's efforts to communicate with us, going so far as intercepting and destroying our letters." However, "Sam never stood up for himself and allows Elaine to control him." Bottom line: "Know we still love you," but "Forget our son, Sam."

In letter #4, Lily wrote, "Need I add we have never forgotten the way Sam declined to go on teaching your son only because he was ordered to do so by a very sad case of a woman whose word is law. Only a weakling like Sam would succumb to dictation from such a source."

As time passed, John wrote more, often finishing letters Lily began. John frequently asked Mom to pass messages, "if your path happens to cross with Sam's" or "if you happen to know somebody who knows him." Anticipating their return to the States, John asked Sam to meet them at Penn Station. After arriving in California by train, John reported on their meeting with Sam: "You may rest assured, Sammy loves his friends and has never for one moment changed toward them."

To my knowledge, I'm the only one other than Mom who read the 22 letters. Forty years after the fact, I learned Sam didn't dump me because I was awful and had no talent. Firing me was one of Elaine's explicit demands. Mom was the one getting dumped; I merely got hit with flying shrapnel. What if Sam didn't believe a word he said when he fired me? What if his tear was real? Maybe he shed more of them. Regardless, it wasn't about me. It never was.

GRAVESIDE

DAVID BRADLEY

They were a harsh-looking people, gathered around the grave, and not many of them, either. It was a hot summer afternoon, but they all looked as if they'd been scourged by too many winter winds. They stood silent as a minister said words over my uncle, final words for a man he clearly knew better than I did. He'd been a favorite of mine when I was a kid, the one romantic wanderer in my life before I had any idea what that was or how I'd be attracted to them. He was the oldest of my mother's four brothers, old enough that he'd signed up as soon as he got the news about Pearl Harbor; smart enough that he'd been sent straight to Officer Candidate School; cursed enough that he'd led a squad of tanks face to face with Rommel somewhere in North Africa. He buried the memory of that fiery defeat somewhere deep inside, refusing to disinter it until he was confined to his deathbed for a second time. I remember my mother coming home from one of her final visits when he was dying, crying to me, "After everything he did in his life, why is that what he has to go back to now?"

And he had gone through plenty in those decades, things that caught my temperament. He'd been, I thought, a maverick, a buck on the run, something between Fitzgerald and Hemingway, always

moving, never rushing. He came to our house one Thanksgiving morning, no advance warning, with a case of champagne and three dozen oysters on ice, dressed in full riding gear. It was as if he'd stepped out of one of the Currier & Ives dishes my mother nailed to the kitchen wall; a minor, beloved character from a forgotten Dickens epic, standing there in our suburban kitchen in his breeches and half chaps, his eyes twinkling, cheeks aglow, hairline receding and his King George beard salt and peppered. So alive—so alive. My father scoffed at him after he left and my mother, I realized, was embarrassed by her brother. Any time his name came up in conversation, she mourned his lost promise. He'd been the one, she made clear, who had been destined for greatness. She'd been so proud of him, once upon a time. But something—the war, or his wandering, or maybe just plain laziness—had taken him off the rails. She saw her oldest brother bursting in on a holiday morning, fresh from riding to hounds in the Virginia countryside, hours away from his small farmhouse, the guest, she supposed, of equally eccentric friends that she knew nothing about, and to her that meant he'd been some kind of clown, a jester in a court he didn't really belong to. She saw nothing



but odd behavior, something unruly and in no way translatable to the way we lived, something stuck in a past she'd set aside many years before. He'd gone to war and never really came home. When he was young, he played on the town baseball team, sang like Bing Crosby, could've been a college professor or anything else he'd wanted to be, she'd tell me. But, after the war, he had not wanted to be anything. He'd just given up, according to her.

And that's where I saw myself in him. He was a man with an artistic heart, the uncle who had bred hunting dogs, and kept a rope swing in his barn, and, one summer, had lay dying in a becalmed bedroom just off their country kitchen, a collapsed lung and really no hope of recovery—and then he recovered, a Superman who beat cancer and rolled on as if it had never happened. He was Santa Claus and Sergeant York and Dr. Doolittle, and so much more, all wrapped up in one fascinating, pipe-smoking, belly-laughing wonderment. My own father was hard and, I thought, mean. He was always wanting me to be doing some thing that I had no interest in doing. My uncle never asked me to do anything. He had, I felt even then, an appreciation for boys being boys. My father demanded that I help him flush his Buick's radiator on bitter cold winter afternoons. Uncle Bill wanted to hear about my adventures in the woods behind my house; pulling sunfish from the creek; collecting box turtles with the local Springer Spaniel. The man who'd felt the eyes of Afrika Corps Panzers on him on the blackest of nights always asked me about my adventures. I was primed by E.B. White and Jean George and my first exposure to Mark Twain for a life gamboling outdoors, and he was a man who had known that love in a different time. He'd grown up in the wilds of West Virginia, between the wars, just 18

years old when Zeroes had roared out of the Pacific sun, and before he knew it, the world was overrun with atomic bombs and extermination camps and the cries of men in his command burning alive. Through me, perhaps, he heard an echo of everything that he'd left behind, and I imagined that he sang some version of the years that stretched out before me.

I knew no one at his funeral. Like my brother and sisters, who were separated from me by two miscarriages over five years, my cousins seemed from another generation. I was a child of the 1960s who grew into the luminescent '70s; they were the final gasp of the 1950s, reminiscing about Howdy Doody and the Mercury program. My siblings were all married now, with young children of their own, spread up and down the East Coast. My parents and their generation were locked away in Florida retirement ramblers, spending oceans of wheat cents they'd saved during their lives on half-acre lots, paying builders' fees for kidney-shaped swimming pools in vain efforts to lure their kids south on spring breaks. My father spent his time now patching mosquito nets and scrubbing the deck of his red and white bowrider. He'd spent his last three months' salary on that boat but couldn't bear to pay for the gas to cruise it around the canals of his development. He and my mother were probably sitting in the great room at that very moment, watching reruns on TV, the shades lowered to block the tropical sun, as I shifted my weight and fought a hangover graveside.

We stood there, my wife and I, newlyweds surrounded by a handful of strangers and half-forgotten relatives who'd only known me as a child.

I felt their eyes on me, the enfant terrible, now fully grown. I'd imagined myself a prodigal son, but was, in fact, just another rough face in a host of blank expressions, weak with self-consciousness, nearly choking on my own ego.

My uncle had been an old man when he died, or at least I thought so then. The people standing around us had all grown old beside him. I looked for uniforms, medals on the chest of an old Army buddy or two, before it occurred to me that there were none of them left to mourn him. His sons—my cousins—were focused on the ceremony, on the business of the day, and on the neighbors that they had known all their lives. A pair of cemetery workers, one with dirty hands and torn jeans, stood behind us. And, finally, there was a woman, a decade younger at least than my uncle, who arrived late.

She wore a scarlet dress, modestly cut, but still not the kind of thing I'd expected to see at a quiet country funeral. The heels of her pumps cut into the cemetery turf, throwing her off balance as she approached. I thought she'd collapse. I imagined she'd

hidden behind the tinted glass of an Italian sports car, smoking Dunhills from a long cigarette holder, waiting for a comfortable moment to surreptitiously join us. From where I stood, across the grave from her, it wasn't clear if her hair—long and permed—was blonde or grey; her eyes were hidden by dark sunglasses. She stood alone. No one acknowledged her. When the moment came for the casket to be lowered, she stepped forward and, with dignity and—there is no other way to describe it—passion, kissed the polished cherry lid.

There was to be a reception, or a wake, whatever Presbyterians call it, but I'd planned to skip that. When the final words had been spoken and we'd taken our turns tossing handfuls of dirt into the grave, as the older people weaved through the headstones toward the church's tiny banquet hall, my wife and I retreated. The woman in red was already pulling out of the parking lot. In one hand she held what appeared to be a Merit or a Camel, and she gripped the steering wheel of her Subaru hatchback with the other.

—

It was more than a year later before my mother was able to make the trip north to see her oldest brother's grave. The occasion was the wedding of his oldest son, my oldest cousin, in the same church where the funeral had been held. After the ceremony, before the reception, I walked her to the grave, now adorned with a granite block. I thought it would be an emotional moment for her, but she held it in. They were a tough old generation. She'd missed all of the third grade with a kidney infection that her parents were told would likely kill her. By the time she was

16 years old, all she'd known of life was the Great Depression, World War II, and that bedridden year waiting to die. Years later, stationed in Europe and pregnant with me, she'd been unable to make the transatlantic trip home for her father's unexpected funeral. She'd learned to drive a car when she was 40 so she could take a job, and she raised four children on her own when my father took duty in Vietnam in 1970, all so they could make enough money to pay our looming tuitions. She spent weeks nursing her own mother as she died of lung cancer, and took the telephone call when news came of another brother's suicide. She'd learned to take the pain of things as they came. They all did.

We stood there in the fading October sun, looking down at the headstone, and I had nothing to say. I thought she'd come up with something pretty, or meaningful, or she'd put her head on my shoulder and cry, at least. Tell me I was a good son. But she didn't.

Instead, she took a deep breath, released it, and swallowed the pain. It occurred to me that she did that a lot. Most of the time I didn't even notice how things hurt her.

—

I can never remember the name of the neurological disease that destroyed my mother. It was something I'd never heard of before, not Alzheimer's and not Parkinson's, though in many ways it mimicked them both. In the beginning, it was tremors in her hands, blank spots in her memory, an odd imbalance in her walk. By the end, after nearly ten years of ruthless debilitation, it left her unable to function in any recognizable way. In her final days, I wasn't sure she could even hear my voice. There were days it annoyed me. I'd drive home, alone in the car, grousing at her for inconveniencing me, and grumbling at myself for not being able to help her.

I sat with her one day, after she'd been diagnosed and the worst, while not there yet, was visible, a darkness growing on the horizon. It was coming, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it. She sat in a chair specially made to lift her to a standing position, where we could have her walker waiting. Her hands, grown hard and bony, flexed in and out of fists. She didn't want the TV on. She didn't want to listen to music. She couldn't read, now. She stared at nothing. She saw what was coming, clearer than I did.

"Are you scared?" I asked her. I thought I was brave for asking.

"No," she said. There was a pause. "I worry about your father."

"He'll be fine—we'll all be fine," I lied. I had no idea where things would take us. I tried not to check the clock, though I doubted she would have known if I had.

"I don't have any friends," she said.

"I don't, either," I said.

CAREGIVING AND LOVING SOMEONE WITH DEMENTIA

KATHLEEN DUTHU

The Alzheimer's Association estimates that approximately 5.4 million Americans have Alzheimer's or another kind of dementia.

It should not be my mother, who was healthy and active for 75 years. Who bought a treadmill and practiced yoga before it was vogue. Who hosted holiday feasts, gave thoughtful gifts, and spoiled the dog. Who showed her grandchildren how to pump their legs on playground swings.

Be realistic in your expectations for yourself and your loved one. Learn to expect the unexpected.

I am comforted when my mother behaves almost like she did before we saw the subtle signs. But I set myself up for disappointment when I expect her to remember previous conversations, or to know what day it is.

Last August, I should not have kept waiting for her to call me to sing her off-key rendition of Happy Birthday as she did for decades. I was angry, then devastated, and finally terrified that someday I might forget my own daughters' birthdays.

Do not argue with your loved one. Be willing to let most things go to avoid further frustration.

I give non-committal replies to avoid arguing and struggle to divert my mother's attention to other subjects. I make an excuse to hang up the phone.

Visiting her drains my patience and energy. I blink back tears when my father gently tries to reason with her because he can't fully accept that she will never get better, only worse.

Avoid asking the person questions about the past. Don't ask, "Do you remember?"

Sometimes I can't stop myself from asking if she remembers a person or event because my history is so intertwined with hers. I don't want to talk about the weather or ramble about my life in a place she can never visit again.

I long for her advice and need reassurance that all teenage girls challenge their mothers. I regret that I didn't listen more closely to stories she and my grandmother told, now unable to share them with my daughters.

Don't focus on what your loved one isn't able to do anymore. Stay in the present moment.

At the nursing home, frail women hunch over walkers and slouch in wheelchairs, staring out the lobby windows. Lately, my mother asks less frequently whether she will ever leave there, so I don't have to lie as often.

Her possessions are in a storage unit down the road. My sister and I already gave away most of them, even the collectibles she told us to save, because the grandchildren won't want them.

Enjoy time with your loved one. Remember that Alzheimer's or dementia is not a death sentence. Many people live 20 or more years with the diagnosis.

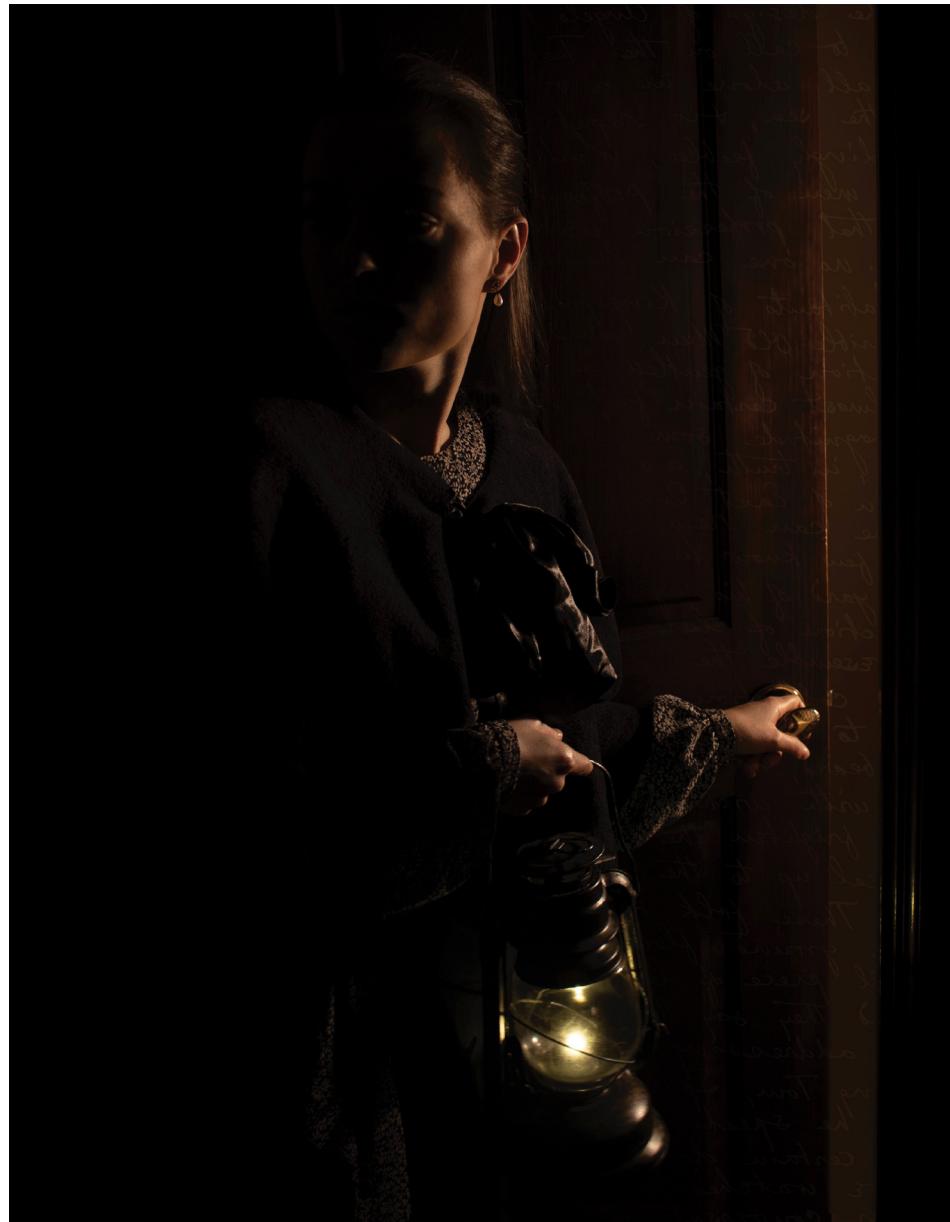
I am grateful my mother still knows me. Some days I hate myself for wishing the illness had already made her unable to know what is happening to her mind and body.

I stay awake wondering, when is someone alive, but no longer living?

LIKE BLOOD LOVES THE VEINS

JONATHAN GREENHAUSE

The dialysis technician expounds upon vegan cuisine, upon how to destroy a pesky zombie while limping
 & cradling a baby goat, how humans aren't designed to ingest milk from cows or to process
 high fructose corn syrup. Lesson learned. Now she traces the blood's twisted path from my father's arteries
 through tubes circling 'round buttons & levers, passing along filters & pumps. I understand little,
 start to sweat as she wryly remarks
 a pop quiz will follow. My dad's hands are swollen, the blood beneath his nails recently cleaned by my mom. Those fingers rise like 5 oblong suns,
 his signal for more ice, his lips craving to be kissing a freshwater lake; but the doctor's orders
 keep his tongue desert dry: He's still bleeding, peptic ulcers beset by infection, his transfused blood leaking. Still,
 how could life complain for having lived? Of course, we have an absolute right to thirst for more days, to bemoan
 an epilogue come too early. The technician disconnects the tubes, tidies up, wheels away her machinery,
 says that for her birthday her daughter drew a picture of zombies wreathed in flowers, confides
 she loves her like blood loves the veins, leaves my father on this sterile precipice from which our view appears endless.



Door
Hallie Zimlich



Chess
Hallie Zimlich



Lantern
Hallie Zimlich

PROCESSION

S.M. MOORE

To be brave you must become numb;
I walk the canyon on this day with you,
my love.
And as hopelessness weights my feet,
I look around at corpses extending hands,
dropping crumpled prayers into wicker baskets.
I have no hope anymore.

And as I walk the canyon,
I feel your hand slip from mine.
I have to go back,
too soon.

But before long I will walk this canyon for myself,
and perhaps you will be at the end,
waiting for me with open arms.

Until then,
I will treasure you in my heart.
I will hear your voice in the wind.
I will feel your touch in the evening sun.
I will see your smile in the ocean waves,
as I brave the pressing tide.

You remind me that there is love in this world,
but it seems absent today.
I hide from bodies who pass along white roses;
I pour liquor on gravestones each Sunday.

FOUR FIGHTS

DAN MOREY

1

My first fight was with this guy on our block who didn't have any friends his own age. He was always hanging around the younger kids, teaching us to smoke, swear, and vandalize. He liked to talk about sex, too. One time he asked me what the nastiest thing I ever saw was. I said probably when that red-headed barbarian chick got naked in *Beastmaster*. He said, "Shit, that's nothing," and put a porno in the VCR. It was pretty exciting for a grade-schooler, but pretty creepy, too.

When he started demonstrating his sleeper hold on us (squeezing our necks until we lost consciousness), we decided it was best to avoid him. This didn't go over well. One day, as we were walking past his house on the way home from school, he grabbed my brother and threw him in a muddy ditch. He was standing there laughing when my lunchbox—a metal Scooby-Doo job—smacked him square in the face.

I couldn't believe I hit him—it was a twenty-foot throw. He put his hand over his eyebrow and stared at me in shock. Then the blood started flowing. It gushed between his fingers and dripped onto his shirt and jeans and sneakers. He let out a gasp and ran inside.

We stood there horrified. None of us had ever seen that much blood. One of the neighbor kids said, "Is he going to die?" The guy's older brother came out, glaring at us with disgust. He threw the lunchbox back, and I asked him if his brother was okay. "No," he said. "We have to take him to the emergency room."

A couple days later, I went over to the guy's house with all the money I could scrounge up. I felt awful and wanted to help pay the medical bill. His mother let me in, smiling. "Boys will be boys," she said. I gave him my sack of change and apologized. He showed me his stitches and joked about having a cool scar. It was all an act, of course, put on for his mother, but I didn't know it yet.

The next time we met, he didn't say a word. Just walked up and clocked me in the jaw. "I owed you that," he said. My mind went blank and I felt woozy. Was this what they meant by "seeing stars"? I walked home as steadily as I could. The walking part was important because I didn't want to look like I was running away. When I got to the garage, I went inside and leaned on the tool bench for support. I'd like to say I didn't cry, but I probably did.

2

My second fight happened when I was riding my tricked-out BMX bike in front of my grandma's house. This bike was rad: custom handlebars, mag wheels, stunt pegs. I was popping wheelies and hanging five and felt pretty cool until this big kid came up the road and said, "Shitty bike, dude."

For a twelve-year-old (male), that's all it takes. I charged him. He grabbed my shirt and held me at arm's length while I flailed like a windmill. When I finally got loose, I landed a glancing blow on his ear. He pushed me away and ran over to my grandma's door.

"Your grandson is trying to start a fight with me," he said, "and I'm not allowed to fight. They'll send me back to juvie." I told him that's where he belonged, and even used the term "dirtbag" in front of Grandma, who was a big churchgoer. She found this all very distressing, and observed me closely for months afterward, watching for signs of incipient delinquency.

3

It was 10 p.m. in the suburbs. I was behind the wheel of my Buick Century, sitting in front of a minimart. Three friends were inside buying Swisher Sweets and Funyuns. A fourth was in the back seat, vegetating. My friends exited the store arguing with a bunch of black guys. Threats flew back and forth. One of the guys came over to me and shouted something profane. Then he kicked my fender and hopped into a car with his buddies.

I had no idea what was going on. My friends weren't Nazis, skinheads or KKK sympathizers. They were liberal arts majors. They piled into the Buick and told me the story. Apparently, the guy who'd kicked my fender had said something lewd to the female member of our group. This didn't strike me as particularly egregious—I'd said lewd things to her myself. I was about to leave, when the offender revved his engine and said, "Let's go, bitch!" He peeled out, and like a true teenage moron, I went after him.

Now we were on the four-lane blacktop, racing at ridiculous speeds. It was a '50s B-movie, without the rockabilly soundtrack. After a couple miles, he pulled off the road into a vacant lot. The vegetable in my back seat said, "Don't follow them in there."

When I drove up, the lewd transgressor got out of his car and banged on my window. He said, "Wanna go, bitch?" I rolled the window down, and he punched me in the face. This was nothing like the sucker punch I'd received back in grade school. I didn't see stars; I got mad and kicked the door open. The guy went sprawling. I jumped on top of him, held him down, and punched him until his nose bled. Before I could take off, a phantom uppercut knocked me on my back. I looked up to find a dozen guys circling me and more pouring out of the house next to the lot.

It was time to turtle. I rolled onto my stomach and covered my head with my arms as the stomps and

blows rained down. They pummeled every exposed part of my body. One dude even worked my legs. What kind of weirdo punches someone in the legs? The beating continued until headlights flashed across the parking lot. My assailants must've thought it was the cops, because they bolted. I got up and gimped back to the car. One of my friends had been brawling, too. He took a final pop to the mouth as he climbed into the front seat.

The vehicles lighting the lot turned out to be gawkers. I cut out pretty fast, thinking the cops wouldn't be far behind. As we flew down the road, the vegetable said, "I told you not to follow them in there." I put him out at the next corner and drove to a party, where a number of concerned girls fussed over my injuries. So I guess the end result wasn't too bad.

4

After the parking lot beatdown, I vowed never to become involved in such physical idiocy again. Verbal idiocy was another matter, and, unfortunately, verbal idiocy often leads to physical idiocy.

I'd gone to a Penn State fraternity party with this obnoxious goof who insisted on walking around with a joint behind his ear. When the frat brothers noticed this, they took us outside for a lecture.

"You can't have that on display in our house," said the head bro. "It's not that we're against drugs. I like to get high as much as the next guy. But not out in the open, you know?"

The goof said yeah he understood no problem and wow what a cool house you have.

"You like it?" said bro. "Rush week is coming up, and we can always use a guy with connections."

I'd been ready to leave for five minutes, and now the goof was going to make me listen to this smarmy douche's recruitment speech. My impatience must've shown, because one of the frat henchmen looked at me and said, "What's your problem?" I told him I was really, really bored. "Take off your sunglasses," he said. I was wearing a pair of those skinny cyclops

sunglasses, which would've been uber cool at a Devo concert circa '83, but were obviously not the thing in the late '90s.

I ignored him and he repeated his command: "Take off the sunglasses. Now."

This seemed like an excellent time to excuse myself. I expected the goof to follow me, but he just stood there fawning over Captain Toga, his new hero. As I departed, the henchman laughed. I flipped him off, thinking I was far enough down the road to get away with it. I wasn't. He sprinted over and knocked me down. He was a big dude, with copious muscles and no shortage of irrational rage.

I assumed a lounging position beside a dumpster and said, "You really need to lay off the 'roids, man."

By now the entire goon squad had gathered around us, and none of them were smiling. The henchman grabbed my arm and jerked me up on my feet.

"Whoa," said the head bro, separating us. "If you're going to fight, let's move over here where there's more room."

"We're not going to fight," I said.

He gave me a surprised look and adjusted his Nittany Lions cap. "What do you mean you're not going to fight? He just sat you on your ass."

"I know how you cretins operate. As soon as I start fighting this guy, the rest of you jump in."

"What did you call us?"

"Cretins. But I meant Cretans with an 'a' not cretins with an 'i.' The Cretans were Greeks, like yourself, and actually quite intelligent."

He smirked. "I wash my hands of it. Have at him, bro."

With that, the henchman shoved me into the road. I started walking. He trailed behind, pushing me every five steps or so and saying, "Gimme those sunglasses. Gimme those sunglasses or I'll beat the shit out of you."

I suppose he intended to snap the glasses in half and present them to his sniggering bros as some kind of trophy. I kept going until he gave up and returned to the party, where he undoubtedly smashed someone else's glasses. He probably had a quota or something.

Though the incident was humiliating, I managed to walk away without any crushed cartilage or black eyes.

A Coda:

I've now successfully avoided fights for over two decades. How do I do it? I used to think it was a matter of maturity—fighting was something that younger, more excitable men did. But then I saw two 50-year-olds (on the same rec-league soccer team) punching each other until teeth flew. After that it was a road-raging old man on the news. He'd been mooned by a carload of teens, and sensibly decided to chase them 20 miles down a highway, waving a pistol out the window of his Chrysler.

It's not just age—it's ego. It's taking ourselves too seriously. Sometimes, when I feel slighted, when someone cuts me off in traffic or shoves his way to the front of the checkout line, that 12-year-old with the rad bike wants to come out swinging. But I remind myself: life's too short to go around pissed off all the time. I'll be dead before long—and so will the jerk who cut me off.



UNTITLED POEM #2

SIMON PERCHIK

At the evening roll-call you yell, *Here*
as if your shadow would never leave you
though not that long ago it began to lean

the way these walls gathered to grieve
were warmed around a wooden table
with its pots and plates and bowls

shining all at once where the ceiling
should be, poured from this small pitcher
half as the first morning on Earth, half

filling it with the darkness your shadow
still needs to go on alone, leave you
never sure there's a shore to rest on

close enough to watch your voice rise
circle back as an echo, louder and louder
as the *Alone* that lost its way.

eight minutes have passed since you stepped outside. the humid, sticky air of the apartment was suffocating you.

three hours have passed since you and your friend—lost now in the crowd of writhing students—were in her own apartment, tossing makeup at each other and squealing.

one week has passed since she came to you, nervously asking you to go to a party with her. she didn't want to go alone.

you didn't blame her. parties alone, especially the parties of people you don't really know, are actually quite terrifying.

four seconds have passed since you realized that your cheap red solo cup was sticking to your fingers, and you abandon it on the concrete beneath your feet. it was just as full as the moment you got it, anyway.

you notice the forest the same moment you abandon your cup.

a cat— possibly a friendly stray— twists itself around your legs, and absently, you pet it, fur sticking to your fingers.

your eyes never leave the forest.

you don't know how you didn't notice it before.

was it there before?

it couldn't have been.

there was a 7/11 or an exxon or a circle k there before.

you remember commenting on the neon to your friend as you walked inside the apartment.

you're sure.

are you sure?

you think you hear singing coming from somewhere.

not the mindless thumping coming from the apartment behind you.

a deep, all-encompassing hum. it could be coming from the forest. it probably is.

at least twelve years have passed since you last lost yourself in the lush environment that calls to you now, but you remember it like it was yesterday.

vines, pulling at your clothes, convincing you to travel deeper.

the very same humming, low, rumbling, enticing.

everything has a faint glow around it. it could just be the sunset, which tends to make everything at least ethereal, but you aren't convinced.

your mother, calling you in for supper, responsibility and a life forcing you away from certain magic.

DORI LUMPKIN

back on the concrete porch, three minutes have passed before you realize that your feet are carrying you away, away, away. towards the forest that is reaching for you.

it takes you longer than you think to cross the street, the road is busier than you expected it to be at this time of night. but still, despite the cars, you cross.

the cat follows you.

the forest calls you.

you walk on.

you only hesitate for a brief period of milliseconds before crossing the threshold from society into wilderness. the cat meows, reassuring.

you nod back to it, thanking it for the vote of confidence.

minutes pass as you walk. hours. you're actually not sure. you don't really mind. it doesn't feel like time is passing, and you aren't getting tired, so you keep walking.

briars and vines and leaves and twigs cling to your clothes as they did when you were a child, though you're sure this is not the same forest.

you're sure.

are you sure?

they slow you down, but again, you don't mind. sometimes you let them stay. brushing them off seems rude.

they've found a home on your skin.

eventually your walking slows to a crawl.

eventually the vines wrap around your ankles and grow there. moss begins to fall from your limbs, dressing you in soft green, and you're not sure where it came from, but you like it.

you think that maybe you're taller. or maybe the trees are shorter. their branches can reach you now, and you find yourself reaching up to them.

tangling your fingers in the new growth.

wrapping all parts of you around them.

letting them reach down and envelop you.

you hardly make it more than an inch forward each day anymore.

not that you'd know the rate at which days pass.

not that you'd care, either. it isn't about how fast you're moving. maybe it was, at one point, but it isn't now.

the cat is still there. it's still your friend. it climbs up your body, out onto your branches. it makes you smile. you let it perch.

sometimes it goes away for long periods of time.

somehow you always know that it will come back.

maybe you aren't moving at all, now.

maybe you haven't been for a long, long time.

a hundred years have passed before you realize that nobody ever came looking for you.

nobody from the party noticed you had walked outside.

not even your friend... what was her name? you can't remember her name now.

for some reason, that doesn't bother you.

people sometimes venture this deep in the forest. they're always hikers, they're always looking for something that isn't you.

you know you're alone.

but you're not alone.

you

have

the forest.

a hundred more years pass, almost, before you come to the conclusion that you are content.

you are happy like this.

this is, honestly, nothing short of exactly what you have always wanted for yourself.

fireflies have become your friends.

moss grows from your skin as opposed to on it.

the low hum never stops, and it vibrates in your chest, soothing anxieties that you no longer have.

soon, you forget ever walking into the forest. there was never a party. or was there?

maybe sometimes you remember a friend you once had. the faint scent of powder makeup tickles your nose.

you remember your cup, abandoned, and absently you hope that someone threw it away for you.

but you can't be sure that there ever was a cup to throw away.

you honestly can't be sure that there was ever a party that led you into this forest.

you think, contentedly, that maybe you were always here.

then yes, you think, you were always here.

there was nothing before.

nothing but the forest.

you're sure.

are you sure?



KELLY TALBOT

ON THE STREET

hold out my hand
They see my bad
sitting against the wall.
teeth and dirty hair, I

soiling someone else's pants
Pawing through trash cans,
they no longer want.
digging for any thing,

mumble softly to
Asking for change
myself and my stomach.
where no one stops, I

nobody seems to notice
There's something wrong,
even after I'm gone.
wrong with my brain;

and the home
In the land
of the brave.
of the free

TALKING WITH EINSTEIN

JIM ROSS

1973

After attending a high-level military meeting on drones, Larry confides to Sara, “I never wanted to play a role in launching weapons. But here I am, testing drones by air and under water, and why? To keep up with the Russians, because if they can, we have to.”

Over the next few days, Larry sinks into a disconcerting quiet, and heads to bed early without dinner. As he starts battling his way out from under, he tells his wife Sara, who is also my daughter, “We’ve got to build a shed where I can work on my inventions, far from here, where nobody’ll know what I’m up to.”

Sara calls me, “Larry wants to build a shed in West Virginia where he can work on his inventions. He’s given me a budget. He says the royalties will cover it in a heartbeat.”

Larry’s sense of urgency intensifies. “It’s been nearly a year since I died. What have I accomplished in the past year to prove that I deserved to live?”

A year ago, Sara saw Larry fall, turn purple, and become nonresponsive—he had no pulse—then kept

his blood pumping to his brain until paramedics arrived to shock Larry back to life. It was touch and go but he came to.

The docs said Larry’s recovery was nothing short of a miracle. “V-fibs suffered at home have a one in a million rate of survival without deficits. He’s that one.”

While still trapped in a hospital bed recovering from dual surgeries, Larry landed a new job. At first, it wasn’t clear to him what he’d be doing, but the people who hired him knew. Released, Larry threw himself into the new job full throttle.

It had been a year since Larry’s brief death and re-birth. To celebrate, Sara plans a dinner party for an inner circle of six friends. Her ulterior motive is to distract Larry from his obsession with his inventions. However, by calling it a re-birthday party, Sara accomplishes the opposite. That reinforces Larry’s awareness that he died and his perseverating on the question, “What have I accomplished in the past year to prove I deserved to live?”

Commanding center stage for their dinner guests, Larry regales them, “I’ve got all these inventions in the works. There’s no conflict of interest with my job as long as my creations don’t overlap with my work

scope. I just need the time and a quiet space to work where nobody can find out what I’m up to and steal my ideas.”

Larry reels off a list. At first, someone says one of his ideas had already been given a thumbs down on Shark Tank, but Larry gets angry and says, “You just don’t understand. Lots of inventions get thumbs-downed on Shark Tank and then make millions without help from a shark.” Knowing Larry’s not looking for genuine feedback, the dinner guests ooh and aah to support his aspirations and avoid deflating his hopes. They tell him his ideas will enrich the world and line his pockets. Privately, they disagree, and tell Sara that all of Larry’s supposed inventions already exist or are nonstarters. Sara keeps me posted on the goings on. I tell her I’m not inclined to build Larry an invention shed.

As Larry’s thoughts continue to race, he confides to Sara, “I don’t really know what’s happening to me. It’s just like the movie Beautiful Mind. I see how everything is connected. I see things nobody else can. And it’s all in technicolor.”

The next day, Sara drives Larry to her safe space: my house, where she grew up, where her mother and I still live. When they arrive, I’ve just gotten home from a grueling meeting, and want to blow off some energy. I announce, “I’m going for a walk.”

“I’ll join you,” Larry says, reaching for his coat.

We drive a couple of miles to a spot near the woods.

Now it begins. “I’ve been talking with Albert Einstein,” Larry tells me, “and he’s been making the theory of relativity a no brainer. It’s so simple a baby could understand it.”

As we pass the stables, Larry just above a whisper says, “Did you know I can speak in Alien now?”

I say, “Can you really? Show me.”

Larry looks around to confirm the coast is clear. Finding no one, at the top of his lungs, he then speaks tongues or emits word garbage. After 45 seconds, he abruptly stops.

I respond to Larry by asking a series of questions in English.

“Why didn’t you answer me in Alien?” Larry asks.

“I can understand it,” I say, “but I can’t speak it.”

Later that night, I’m at my computer when Larry emerges from the basement, and takes the seat next to me, something he’d never done before. “I see everything differently,” he says. He explains what he’s seeing now that he couldn’t see before. “If only people understood how everything on earth is intimately interconnected, how interdependent all our systems are, and we all are on each other.” Eventually, we agree to call it a night.

All night long, after everyone’s supposedly gone to sleep, Larry keeps telling Sara he wants to get up and tell me something, claiming “Joe will understand.” Knowing Larry is wired for sound, Sara keeps holding him in bed so he doesn’t go upstairs to wake me.

The next day, while I’m out at a meeting, things deteriorate because nobody can grasp what Larry’s trying to express. Perhaps he was talking to them in Alien. They have no choice but to have him hospitalized. When I arrive home, Larry’s already gone.

Two days later, from the hospital, Larry calls me, “I’m in Heaven, been talking with Einstein and the Dalai Lama. I see now, all man’s inventions should focus on one thing: bringing about peace among all living things, on earth and wherever else life exists. All our actions must build on our experience of compassion.”

Larry stays in Heaven for the next couple of days. “Trust me, Heaven’s really good,” he says. “The human brain is an antenna and a beacon to the light of the world.”

Later, I repeat Larry’s last line to close friends who know what’s going on. They say, “It sounds like he’s onto something. And, he’s said it brilliantly. He’s experiencing light itself.”

Within a few days, Larry starts slipping from Heaven’s grasp. “I’ve been thinking about the need to start a new civilization,” he says. “The biggest consideration is that it be far away enough from all other civilizations that it won’t be affected by the mass destruction that will soon be coming.”

When Sara and I visit, Larry says. “I’m in the matrix. I don’t know how to get out,” as he repeatedly traces a circle in the air with his right forefinger. “This is Hell.” When he says “Hell,” he projects terror from his eyes.

As he keeps tracing circles to demonstrate the matrix, I put my hand in the way to interrupt his circling and disrupt the matrix.

“What’re you doing?” he asks.

“I’m creating a door,” I say, “I’m giving you a way out. You just have to step through.”

“I can’t,” Larry says, obviously frustrated. “The door closes before I can step through. Anyway, there’s work I have to do here before I can leave.”

A couple of days later, Larry tells me and Sara, “I’ll never invent anything again. I’ve lost all my powers. I turn over my powers to you.” Moments later, he begins crying, “I can’t stand this. And it’s been going on for two thousand years. Two thousand years.”

I try to reassure him. “You’ll create again. This place is the matrix. You need to get out of the matrix and back to the time/space continuum.”

The next day, Sara and I visit again. Larry’s eyes are locked shut. Sara asks him, “What year is it?” His answer is wildly incorrect. She then asks him, “What is the date of your birth?” and he gets that completely wrong too. Sara asks him to open his eyes.

“You open them,” Larry says.

I suggest, jokingly, “Why not tape them open?”

Eyes wide shut, Larry asks, “What planet are we on?”
 “Uranus,” I answer, deliberately mispronouncing the planet’s name as a test. If Larry doesn’t laugh, the matrix has a tighter grip on him than I thought.

Larry’s doesn’t laugh but his eyes snap open. He stands abruptly and announces, “We gotta get outta here.”

I ask Larry for the names of his three children.

He incorrectly answers, “Mark, Luke, and John.”

I ask, “Are you Donald Trump?”

At that, Larry laughs. “The idea’s crazy enough it might work.”

To draw Larry out and give him a lift, I say, “It’s Karaoke time.”

Larry breaks into the John Denver version of West Virginia. Done, he whines, “I want to go there. I can invent there. No, I can breathe there.”

A couple of days later, Larry can name his children correctly and asks us a series of questions to help orient him: “What’s today’s date?” “What’s the temperature outside?” and “How many levels does this hospital have?”

I ask him, “Why do you want to know how many levels this place has?”

He whispers, “Don’t tell anyone but I’m planning to break out of here. First, I need to figure out how to get onto a lower security floor.”

The docs keep playing with Larry’s meds but nothing makes much difference. And he refuses the meds that have the highest probability of bringing him back.

While we’re not there, Larry obtains an eight-foot-long by four-foot-wide sheet of paper, writes all over it, and tapes it to the wall of his room. Or perhaps he tapes it up first and then writes all over it. In any case, when we arrive, we see he’s drawn a flow chart of what’s coming and at what points he might intervene to disrupt the cataclysm.

The only meds that Larry is willing to take and have the desired effect are anti-anxiety meds. They reduce agitation sufficiently that Larry can get four hours of sleep per night. The problem is, certain nurses prefer to give him the anti-anxiety meds during the day so he’ll sleep through their shifts and they don’t have to manage him. By sleeping his days away, even with more anti-anxiety meds, Larry can’t sleep at night.

After a few weeks, Larry demands a meeting with the unit’s chief psychiatrist. Sara and I attend.

Larry tells the doctor, “I’m the second coming of Christ.”

Sara asks, “Do you really think so?”

Larry responds, “Aren’t we all?”

Daily, the residents of Larry’s unit parade through the halls. It’s evident that many are street people: homeless drug addicts, some also prostitutes. Nearly all voluntarily committed themselves to the psych ward to escape extreme cold and get easy access to free methadone. Larry observes their behavior and interactions but doesn’t join their parade.

Eventually, the docs concoct the right combination of meds and Larry becomes more cooperative about taking them. He begins to snap out of the matrix. He pleads to be released so he can return to his family. “I just want the peace and quiet of home.”

Just before being released, he announces, “If my harvest is bountiful, I plan to give half to the homeless.”

He’s released from the hospital to our house for two weeks of outpatient care. Two weeks later, he’s certified to return to his job, where he’s responsible for field testing the feasibility of deploying drones through air and water to deliver weapons of mass destruction.

“It’s good to get back to work,” Larry says, “but I’ll be the first to admit, my heart’s not in it the way it once was.”

SIGNS THAT YOU ARE NOT READY TO BE A SCIENTIST

SHANHU LEE

You are not a big fan of mathematics because numbers give you a headache and you cannot stand them. You do not see the difference between zero and infinite, because they both are invisible.

You have a seizure if you work in the lab. You have strong allergies to PPE, such as lab-coat, vinyl gloves, and facial shields. You have a panic attack if you are near a high-precision scientific instrument.

You cannot work hard, because you are constantly worried about your slightly elevated blood pressure.

Getting up early makes you feel nauseated and puts you in a bad mood for the rest of the day.

You never work in the evening or during the weekend, because you have many interesting hobbies to pursue.

You never carry a notebook with you because you can remember everything in your head. You never use a pen and when you must take a note, you take a picture with your smartphone. The picture will be stored in the Cloud, which is far more secure than making a note on a piece of paper that will disappear sooner or later.

You are not good at working with people or in a team; most of the people around you are incompetent or lazy or annoying.

You cannot work independently, because you cannot stand being lonely.

You don't like to give presentations in front of the crowd because you are too introverted or too shy. You cannot listen to someone's presentations, because you constantly fall asleep.

You like glamour and high life. You wear a tie and three-piece suits every day at work. You cannot make your hands dirty, because you have to keep your freshly manicured nails intact.

You believe you can do many things, but you do not have a will to finish what you plan to do or you do not like to put long hours on the same project.

You never trust your intuition because you are a deep thinker.

You are not good at logic because you tend to make decisions by solely relying on your intuition.

You do not like to travel for conferences or field trips, because you do not want to increase carbon footprints.

You believe Einstein is the founder of a good bagel store.

You do not like to mingle with other scientists at the conference because you don't know anyone and it's too uncomfortable to make conversations with strangers.

You are not competitive at all because you are a laid back easy-going dude. It never bothers you when you find out someone just published a new work with the same idea that you have been working on. Most of the time, you never notice it because you do not read very much.

You do not know what *Science* or *Nature* magazine is.

When you have to read a paper, you "find" or "search" the word that you are interested in and only read that line.

You are not good at working under a stressed schedule, and you have to work on your term by taking time.

You are not a curious person. For your entire life, you have been frightened by unknowns and uncertainties.

You never feel any sensation when you see a picture of space or an exotic animal or a rare plant. You are not interested in anything that is not relevant to your everyday life.

You do not believe in publication because if your work is good and original, it will speak by itself and one day, someone will contact you and inquire about your scientific findings.

You are too stubborn and not flexible at all.

You are not stubborn, and you tend to easily give up your project if it does not work out instantly.

You are not good at computer stuff, and computers and new technologies make you feel you are outmoded or infinitely old.

You cannot stand being famous or being well-known because you are not interested in that kind of superficial external stuff. You are better than that

SCENIC ROUTE

RAVEN MCSHAN

Birds don't fly in Birdsville
Bullets tweet in the evenings
Singing in the morning
Take the shortcut through to home
Poverty living on privilege's doorstep

Birds killing kids living
With kidney stones
From the blacktop basketball game
They had for dinner last night
But at least there's enough light
For homework tonight

Birds, cars, people pass away
And children wonder if
They could fly away too



Alone
Kim Lovvorn



Mother Line
Kim Lovvorn

RESIGNATION

ALAN BRICKMAN



That summer, it seemed all Roger and Julie did was watch the hearings, sometimes twice because they were rebroadcast each evening, and argue about everything else. At times, it felt as though the only thing holding their relationship together was the pleasure they shared at watching the downfall of Richard Nixon. As much as they wanted to, they could not quite feel joyful watching Nixon's henchmen, alternately comic and scary, get grilled about their stupid break-in and all the attendant lying, hush money, obstruction of justice, and what was revealed to be years of paranoid vindictive criminality, while the Republicans on the Committee tried gamely—and unsuccessfully—to maintain some shred of integrity, while not becoming unduly tainted themselves in the process.

“You know,” said Roger to Julie, who for some reason was sitting as far away as she could on the other end of the couch in Roger's living room, “If it wasn't for these hearings, we'd have no idea of the ridiculous number of psychopaths Nixon surrounded himself with. And with Himmler and Eichmann right in the middle of everything.”

Julie was half listening, and after a few seconds said, “What? That's not their names! It's... It's ... Haldeman, I know that one. But who's the other one? Erhlichman, right? Something like that.”

“No,” said Roger, smiling and trying to extend his joke. “They found a bunch of old Nazis hiding out in South America who were excited about the chance to work in the Nixon administration. I was surprised that Himmler was still alive.”

“Ha, ha” said Julie, “Hilarious. Nazi jokes, just terrific.”

“Hey, it's Nixon we're talking about, remember? Him and Kissinger, John Mitchell, the rest of 'em. They're all Nazis. It's like the Fourth Reich!” He shifted his weight on the couch and turned to look straight at Julie, who was not smiling. “Is something wrong?”

“Not really, I'm just tired.” She pointed at the television. “And I guess all this is just depressing, watching American democracy, you know, fair elections and the rule of law, go right down the drain. And I don't appreciate all your juvenile little jokes about it.” She shook her head and looked at the floor.

“Come on,” said Roger, deciding to ignore the “juvenile jokes” remark. “The system is working, isn't it? The morons at the break-in got caught, the cover-up's been exposed, and the longer the hearings go on, the worse it looks for all of 'em.”

“Maybe,” Julie said with a shrug.

But then over the coming few weeks, the system did seem to work. The articles of impeachment, the

indictments, and at last, just tonight, August 8, 1974—they should make it a national holiday—Nixon's self-serving and self-pitying resignation speech, with him stepping down effective tomorrow. When Roger saw it on the news, he hurried to Julie's house and banged on her door. “Julie, did you hear?! Nixon resigned! Two steps ahead of the sheriff. The impeachment sheriff!” He was breathing hard. “Come on, there are celebrations all over town, people are pouring into the streets. Let's go!”

Julie was not in a celebratory mood, but acquiesced, knowing this was a historically significant moment. They figured the best place to go would be “The People's Republic of Cambridge” so they headed to Harvard Square. It's impossible to park there on a good day, and when they turned off Memorial Drive, they could only inch along because the streets were jammed with people jubilant about the news. There were signs, costumes, drums, guitars, singing, fireworks. It took Roger and Julie almost an hour to get through the Square, and they ended up parking somewhere in North Cambridge and walked down Mass. Ave. and through the Cambridge Common.

In the middle of the park, they ran into Roger's three closest friends. George was dressed as Uncle Sam and was carrying a pitchfork. Steve was carrying a sign that said, “Nattering Nabobs of Negativism Say Yes to Impeachment!” Josh had his Nikon camera and was photographing everything. Roger hadn't seen his friends in a long time—too long, he thought—in large part because Julie didn't really like any of them, and they didn't much like her either.

George was acting crazy, and was probably drunk. “Roger!” he yelled, then turned to Julie and nodded grudgingly. “Fuckin' Tricky Dick bites the dust,

right?!” He waved his arm at the crowd. “And the people rejoice! I love it.”

Steve said to Josh, “Come on, take a picture.” They all gathered for the shot, jostling each other and laughing. Julie stayed at the edge of the frame, scowling.

Roger was elated, shaking hands and hugging people, chanting and singing along, throwing his arms up in the air and cheering. The Common was getting more and more crowded. Julie remained dour and was starting to get angry. She pulled Roger aside at one point and said, “I'm not into this. I want to go home.”

“Well I don't,” said Roger, sounding more annoyed than he was. “Look, here are my keys. Take the car and I'll catch up with you later.” She snatched the keys in a quick motion. Roger leaned in to give her a kiss but she turned away and walked out of the park.

George saw this exchange and put his arm around Roger's shoulders. “Fuck her,” he said.

“Come on, George. I know you don't like her, but she's my girlfriend.”

“Okay, okay,” said George. “Let me put it another way. Fuck her and the horse she rode in on.” He slapped Roger on the back. “Let's hang here for a while, then go back to my house and get stoned. Or should I say more stoned.”

They stayed in the park until after midnight. Someone started a bonfire and that's when the cops moved in and broke things up. Roger and his friends walked back to George's house, which was on the other side of the Square, just past the high school. They smoked pot and drank beer, and, because George had taped Nixon's speech, they played it over and over, and it became more pathetic but also funnier with each viewing. At one point, all four of them, now very drunk

and very stoned, recited Nixon's words along with him, and fell on the floor laughing.

Roger got in a cab as the sun was coming up, and dropped into bed as soon as he got home. He slept fitfully for a few hours, then got up and cooked himself breakfast. Sitting at the kitchen table with coffee and eggs, he turned on the TV with the sound off and called Julie. The news showed Nixon getting in a helicopter on the White House lawn. He had his arms raised in that spastic-looking V with his shoulders hunched. Julie picked up.

“So, how long did you hang out with your idiot friends? Lemme guess. When you left the park, you went back to George's and got stoned.”

“No,” said Roger. “We caught a late flight to D.C. to meet with Gerald Ford to make sure he has at least one clue about what to do when he's sworn in. Not a genius, that one. We're at the White House now, they're putting Nixon on a helicopter, probably taking him to an asylum somewhere to convalesce.”

Julie was silent for a few seconds. “Is this all just funny to you, Roger? One big goof?”

“Hey Julie, lighten up, will ya! The Nixon White House is now officially a thing of the past, and I'm happy about it. I was under the impression you were too.”

“You know what?” said Julie, her voice ice cold. “I think you'd like it in Nixon's White House more than you think. You have your own little Committee to Re-Elect the President with your friends. George is your G.

Gordon Liddy. Loud, macho, self-important, cruel. And Steve? Remember that time he took the cash off my dresser? Taking money just like Spiro Agnew. I wouldn't trust either of them as far as I could throw 'em."

"Hey," said Roger. "He was broke and desperate at the time, and he copped to it and paid you back."

"So what?!" said Julie. "An untrustworthy little shit, just like Agnew. Josh is always taking photos and asking too many questions like he's with the FBI. Plus, he's a shameless gossip who never respects confidence. In other words, he's your John Dean. And I have no doubt he'd rat you out in a heartbeat, Mr. President."

"So I'm Nixon in your little formulation? Thanks a lot. And who are you, Sam Ervin? Howard Baker? Or better yet, the Judiciary Committee, ready to impeach my ass?"

"Maybe. Look, I'm about to go out, but you know what, Roger? I'm not really sure at this point why you and I are still together."

"Look, Julie, I don't know where this is coming from or what your problem is, but I'm hanging up now so you can take some time and figure out what you want. I'll call you later." Click.

Roger instinctively knew that this was just the set up and that she was planning to break up with him. He decided right then he'd beat her to the punch. He had to admit their relationship had been pretty unsatisfying for some time. And he thought it was funny that he would actually have the chance to be like Nixon and "resign" before being "impeached." He waited about half an hour to make sure she'd be out and dialed her up again. When the answering machine came, on he left the following message:

Good evening. This is the 37th time I have spoken to you from this office, where so many decisions have been made that shaped the history of this nation. Throughout this long and difficult period, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every possible effort to complete my term as your boyfriend. In the past few days, however, it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base to justify continuing our relationship. I would have preferred to carry through to the finish, but the interest of the nation must always come before any personal considerations.

I have never been a quitter. To leave a relationship before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both of us. Therefore, I shall resign from our relationship effective at noon tomorrow. In turning over direction of the relationship to a new boyfriend of your choosing, I know that you will be in good hands. I also do so with a profound sense of the weight of responsibility that will fall on his shoulders, and the understanding, patience, and cooperation he will need from all Americans.

So, let us all now join together in affirming our commitment to helping your new boyfriend succeed for the benefit of the nation. In leaving, I do so with this prayer: May God's grace be with you in all the days ahead.

Roger hung up the phone and looked into the mirror on the far wall. He raised his arms in a V and hunched his shoulders. He tried to scowl, but he couldn't stop smiling.

EYE TEST

ALAN ELYSHEVITZ

On the chart the

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is to

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for the convenience of
others. Some say

“Relax!”

as if to say

“Shut up, go away!”

which occurred in 1968.
America

devours

the tails of comets and

excretes

loaded dice. Ginsberg is
dead. He

relaxed.

Reading the chart I feel

relaxed

but with a mild headache.

I seek peace
 I seek you you seek me
 I seek peace for humankind
 I seek peace
 I seek
 Eye
 I seek
 I seek love
 I seek love for humankind
 I seek you you seek me
 I seek peace
 I seek love
 I seek you you seek me
 I seek peace for humankind
 I seek peace
 I seek
 I
 Eye
 I seek
 I seek love
 I seek love for humankind
 I seek you you seek me
 I seek peace

I SEEK PEACE

DAWN BRATTON

I AM IN LOVE WITH NICK FLYNN

SHANHU LEE

I am in love with Nick Flynn. Let me be clear. I have never been in a relationship with Nick Flynn. I have never met him. Nick Flynn doesn't know me. He doesn't know my existence on this planet. So naturally, Nick Flynn cannot possibly be in love with me. But I am in love with Nick Flynn. My love for Nick Flynn is not romantic, although it can be romantic in some sense because I am very attracted to him physically, too. But more precisely, I am in love with Nick Flynn, *literary* and *poetically*. I do not expect anything from Nick Flynn. I do not have a desire to meet with him in person. I want nothing from him. My love for Nick Flynn is *unconditional*.

My love story with Nick Flynn started in the summer of 2004 when I was vacationing by myself

in Yellowstone and Grand Teton. This was one of the most turbulent years in my entire life¹, and I needed to go away into nature.² I went on this big camping trip, with a yellow tent, a blue sleeping bag, and a pair of brand new hiking shoes, all from North Face. I had done lots of hiking on high mountains in Colorado, Utah, Arizona, Wyoming, and some ice climbing. But always within a group. This was the first time I was doing three weeks of long camping trip all by myself alone.

For the trip, I brought several books and some latest issues of *The New Yorker* magazine with me. I arrived in Yellowstone and set up my tent and sat down on my new camping chair. I grabbed the latest issue of *The New Yorker*, and there was a long essay, "Button

1 This was the year I was engaged to my psycho-boyfriend, we planned a wedding together, and eventually, he disappeared two days before the wedding, evaporated from my life. It all happened in the same year, right before my thirty-seventh birthday. Six years later, I heard from someone very

close to him that he had been married to his wife all these years.

2 Actually, I didn't just disappear into nature, I disappeared completely from Boulder and got a new job and moved a thousand miles away and restarted everything.

Man” by Nick Flynn.³ I did not know who Nick Flynn was. But it immediately caught my attention with this bizarre title. I was so absorbed that I read the entire article in one sitting. After reading, I became restless during the entire vacation.

It was an article about Nick Flynn’s father who was a con-business-man, who considered himself as *The Next Greatest American Poet* (even though he never wrote a single coherent piece), who was jailed, intoxicated, evicted, and became homeless on the streets of Boston. His father was absent from Nick Flynn’s life, since his father had left his mother when she was pregnant with him. While working in a homeless shelter, he unexpectedly reunited with his father when he appeared there as a “guest” one day. Nick Flynn’s mother killed herself after reading young Nick’s notebook where he had written about his mother.

The article was a long excerpt from his forthcoming new memoir, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*.⁴ This used many different forms, such as poetry, prose, and play, but it read mostly like a poem. I had not read anything like this in such a hybrid form. The writing was beautiful and brutally honest, and it resonated with me instantly. The ever unsettling landscape of New England, which I was familiar with. Endless heartbreaking stories and his painful struggles to survive. Hearing his vulnerable voice at that specific moment of my life, I felt as if I was walking out from long hours of hot Finnish sauna and straight jumping into a dark cold lake. I read “Button Man,” over and over. And I did not see the serene lakes surrounded by

pristine forests, the spectacular waterfalls, and the breathtaking geysers erupting from the mysteriously green basin. I only thought of Nick Flynn.⁵

As soon as I got back to Boulder, the first thing I did was google-search Nick Flynn. I found he was teaching at The University of Houston, and split his time between Houston and Brooklyn. Impulsively, I drafted an email to him:

**“Dear Nick,
I just finished reading your new article in *The New Yorker*, ‘The Button Man’. The article is very beautiful and powerful. I cannot imagine, after going through all of this, you still write. And write well. I am looking forward to reading your memoir.
Best wishes,
Shanhu”**

I wrote this within one breath and sent promptly. Then I realized that I had never sent a fan letter to any author. I did not know what to expect.

Immediately, I drove to Barnes & Noble and asked when the bookstore would acquire Nick Flynn’s memoir. They said it would arrive in six weeks. I counted every day, and on the exact release date, I went back to the bookstore. I asked the help desk guy in an extremely small voice, “I would like to know if Nick Flynn’s *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* arrived today.”

The guy looked at me and said loudly, “Can you speak a little bit louder?”

I said with my normal voice, “Do you have Nick Flynn’s new book, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*? It is released today.” I felt all eyes around me were staring at my face, as if I was some kind of a strange hazardous species.

I bought one copy and drove straight back home and finished reading on the same day.

During the following days and months, I learned from the internet that Nick was in a relationship with an actress named Lili Taylor. She looked lovely. Wikipedia said she grew up in a normal and happy and warm family. Very different from Nick’s own experiences. Of course.⁶ There were some photos of them together, and they looked very much in love. This did not surprise me and did not upset me.⁷

Several months later, one day when I was in my office, I saw an email from Nick Flynn. It did not

³ “Button Man” written Nick Flynn, Published in *The New Yorker*, June 12, 2004

⁴ *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*, Nick Flynn, W. W. Norton, 2004

⁵ I did not cry anymore for my psycho boyfriend, and I even almost forgot

about him. At some point, I felt my humiliation, sorrow, and regrets seemed insignificant and even trivial, compared to what Nick Flynn had gone through.

⁶ In his memoir, Nick Flynn’s father explains about his two marriages: “I was thinking of the children we would have together—it was important what their

background was, that they came from culture.”

⁷ Actually, I was happy for Nick Flynn. This was really true. As I said before, I was not expecting anything from Nick.

immediately occur to me it was the real Nick Flynn. That Nick Flynn. My Nick Flynn. Then slowly, I realized that it was indeed Nick Flynn, but at the same time, I could not believe it was really Nick Flynn. I had not expected his reply. I did not know authors reply to emails sent by their readers. His email was brief:

“hi shanhu,
thank you for you note.
i rarely venture into
my Houston email, so
i read this now. i really
appreciate your kind
words...”

-n”

There was no email signature. But I instantly knew it was Nick Flynn because he wrote every word in lower case as he did in his memoir and his poems.

I read the email again and again. I did not know what to do with the email. There wasn't the slightest trace of hint that he was interested in any further correspondence with me.⁸ I was relieved this email conversation was over. I did not want to say anything more to Nick Flynn. All I wanted to say, I could say, was said in my earlier email.

Everything was predictable. His memoir became a bestseller, and he and Lili Taylor had a baby girl together, and they eventually married happily. He published new poems in *The New Yorker* and published more books. And in 2012, *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* was made into a movie with the new title, *Being Flynn*.⁹ The movie was well-made, but it was more plot-oriented and failed to capture those delicate emotions and lyrical tones one can only feel from reading a poem. Nonetheless, I enjoyed the movie tremendously.

This spring I took an undergraduate course, Introduction to Creative Writing, taught by Lacy Marschalk. Lacy suggested a series of live readings, and one was by Nick Flynn. During the live reading on Zoom, Nick Flynn read some passages from his memoir and several poems from his other collections. He looked exactly like I had imagined. Handsome, reserved, a little bit rustic, blue-collared look. But he

sounded very different from what I had assumed. The way he spoke was less masculine, even with his coarse voice. He spoke almost like reciting a poem. I wrote on the comment line, “I am thrilled to be here, listening to your reading. In 2004, I read ‘The Button Man’ and I fell in love with your writing.” Again, this was the first time that I commented on anything during a live reading. Nick Flynn did not reply to me. During the Q&A session, I sent out one question, uninteresting and uninspiring, “In your memoir, you have used several different forms, and I wonder how you decide the forms?” After the moderator read out my question *along with my name*, Nick Flynn answered, “I hoped readers read my memoir as a poem. Before the memoir, I published two books of poetry.” That was all.¹⁰ The Zoom ended as scheduled.

I feel Nick Flynn has become one of my old “lovers.” But unlike other lovers who have disappeared from my life forever, one way or another, Nick Flynn seems to stay with me all the time. From time to time, I imagine myself and Nick Flynn. Maybe, one day Nick Flynn would know me and want to talk to me. Maybe, one day.¹¹

8 Nick Flynn did not say anything like “let’s keep in touch” or “what is your profession?” or “please feel free to contact me when you are in NYC.”

9 Paul Dano played Nick Flynn, Robert De Niro his father, and Julianne Moore his mother. Very interestingly, I found that Lili Taylor had a small role in the homeless shelter, which was probably created for her, as the memoir did not have her “character” explicitly.

10 Nick Flynn did not say, “It is really good to finally meet with you, Shanhu. I wondered about you since I read your email in December 2004. Are you writing something? Perhaps, we should chat after the Zoom.”

11 One day, maybe, when my memoir is published, he will see he is mentioned in my memoir, and he will realize he has been such a strong influence on my writing. And my writing is so poetic, like a dazzling reflection of his own writing. And when my memoir receives some awards, maybe, he will finally

realize that I have been in love with him for so many years (or decades) without his knowledge, and maybe, we will become friends. We will talk about writing, life, many interesting things, and we will find out we have so much in common.

In my empty place of belonging,
I call you out– it is an appetite of longing.

I beg and tear at the will that is my soul.

Oh, to be next to you in your masculine silhouette.

My heart is resonating sounds;

A contempt soul in need of your presence.

You come to me upon the hour,

The hour we exist inside–

Only you know where I truly dwell,

The infinite space of my labyrinth mind.

I hear the clatter of steps as you walk on stone,

Your golden hooves gleam;

They contest the might of waning moonlight–

They blind the convictions of this shell of belief that is I.

Your Horns, so eviscerating and jagged,
Are my comfort from conscious woes.

They are your arsenal,

And mine, stability.

Your body, in all beast-like facets,

Is my amalgamation of lustful desires.

You come upon me closer,

My exaltation growing, like wild nature.

Your breath is of beast and benevolence.

I succumb to every panting of air.

It fills my body to rightful content.

An undying, enigmatical static pleasure.

You stand before me,

In all your awe.

How is one as young and old as pages of history can
make us,

A god like no other?

I am like the Matador, you the bull.

We dance our dance in tradition and beauty.

With whirl of capes and thrash of flesh,

You are destined to me.

The appetite of my longing will be forever sated.

My soul is etched with minotauromachy;

Cascaded by the shadows of my infinite labyrinth mind.

MYTHICAL EXALTATION

TERRY COLTON VICE

THE PRINCE, HIS MOM, AND I

ARNO BOHLMEIJER

As a young and naive teacher (too young?), I had a Prince of Orange in my English class: Floris, cousin of the current King of The Netherlands.

Floris was a nervous teenager, sitting close to my desk, and we got on very well. I think he struggled with exposure and the pressure on his narrow shoulders. The always-present but never-visible bodyguard didn't help.

On a snowy day before recess, he leaned over to me and whispered, "Can I leave early, please?"

I reckoned he feared becoming the target in an unfair snowball fight. Being an anxious person myself, camouflaging that with humor and reckless courage, I happily understood him only too well and let him leave some time before the bell so he could find a hideout.

Otherwise he never got any special treatment from me, just regular kindness. With the international contacts at home, his English was above average, he had all A's, and the whole situation was rewarding.

My turn to get nervous: his Mom, Princess Margriet, would visit the school's Teacher-Parent-Night. For 10-minute meetings, parents could select up to three teachers. Why did Floris suggest me? Assuming there was no problem, on the contrary, I was honored, but I

dreaded protocols, my insecurity, performance fear, stage fright...

The Princess was the then Queen's sister, and people were not to address her unless spoken to. On the evening in question, I sat at my hosting table in the large hall, among all the other teachers who were receiving parents, to discuss grades or behavior. I didn't want to look eager or scared or busy; how to wait for her arrival and be neutral, calm, confident?

There she was, accompanied by a lady, utterly composed or cold, approaching not fast or slowly. What security people were watching us aside? What colleagues of mine were throwing glances? I focused on my confinement, normal smile, breathing... No buckling knees...

No sweaty handshake!

Don't speak.

But she did not address me either. The Queen's sister, second to the throne, sat at a polite distance, her eyes fixed on me and 'expecting' God knows what, not asking a thing about Floris, nor making any comment at all, like a suspect playing safe. Even if I had been allowed to speak freely, what cliché could be said about her son?

Or: Why on earth have you come?

My eyes dropped and lifted bravely.

They dropped to my notes, grade list, pen, hands kept steady, and they lifted again, seeing the same cooled looks and rigid smile. I glanced over to the lady (in waiting?), a discrete meter or two away, who didn't help either.

Six hundred seconds of quiet hell is a long time, with or without stiff upper lips. Did we clear our throats and shuffle the feet? I can't remember. What was the correct addressing code again: Your Majesty? Ma'am? Was she the insecure or proud one – afraid that we all thought that something was wrong with her son?

I must have said something like "Surely you're not here because there's any sort of problem..."

And vaguely I can still see a little nod or headshake of agreement. Relief? I must have asked, commented, conversed – a few unsolicited words here and there, in a blur of brain-freeze-charm and automatic pilot politeness? I can't recall if there was chilled or brilliant improvisation.

When the bell rang, my ten minutes of royal pain fame were gone.

A life-time later, I googled Floris and he's done very well – not envious of the throne?

SPARK

ANINA ROBB

Perhaps this is the pupa, hidden
on a low branch, in this abandoned
parking lot where we become something
more when the hatchback closes.

I think about the man in Guatemala
who built a tomb for his lover.
Each solstice, as the sun sets, it casts
her stone shadow on his grave,
enveloping him in her embrace.

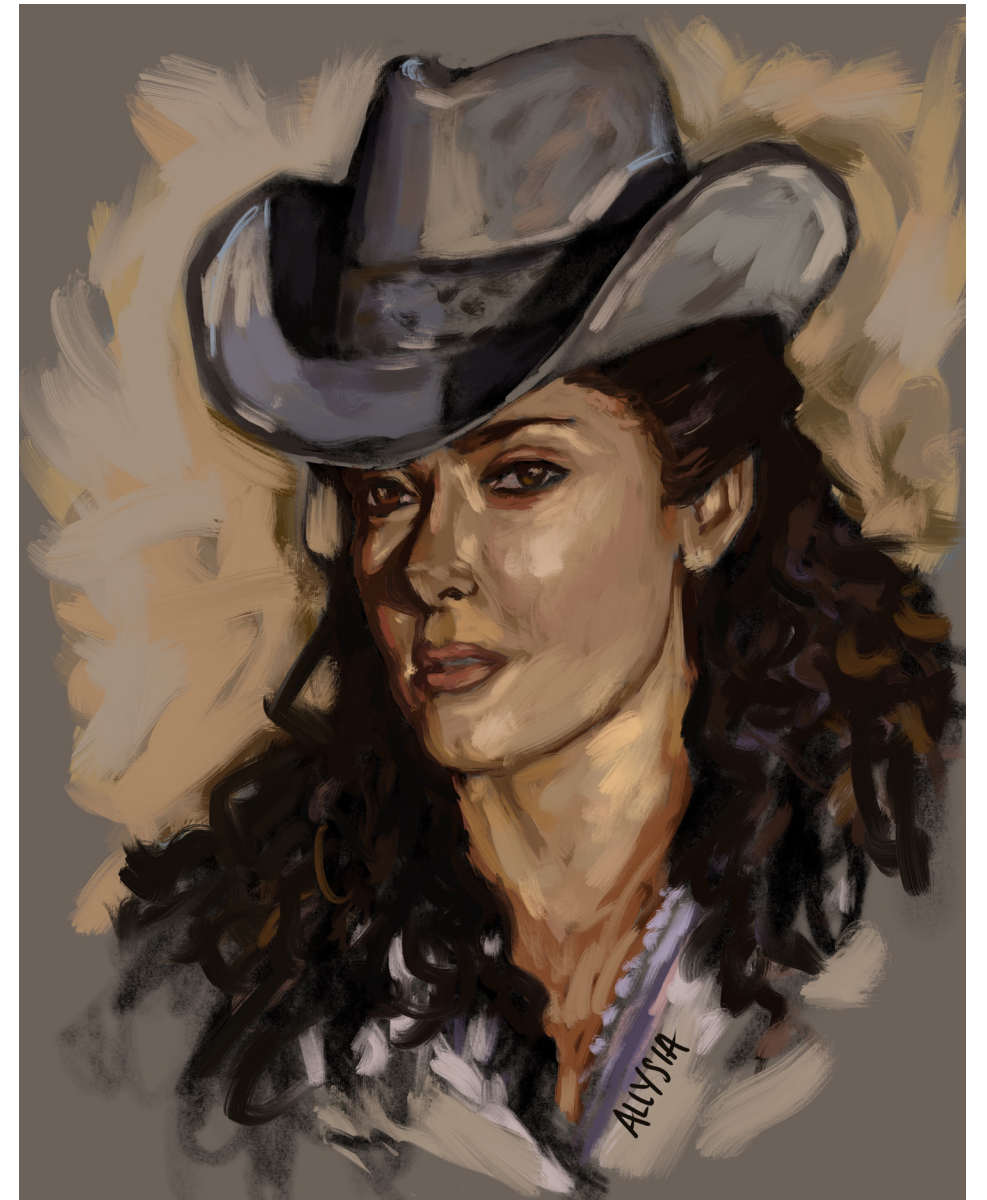
For us, there is only the flint of skin
disappearing, windows shivering
the brief beauty of knowing what
becoming a butterfly really means.



Idris Elba
Allysia Newton



Doc Holliday
Allysia Newton



Salma Hayek
Allysia Newton

UNTITLED POEM #1

SIMON PERCHIK

Again you hear the moon—it forgets
just minutes ago it asked and you sing
over and over the same lullaby

that's used to loneliness. Sure
your lips were once blossoms, would open
as the soft breeze still wandering

keeping watch for a voice
that could be hers, bending down,
scraping the ground to hear again.

Where love goes when it falls asleep
still listening for what is now grass
and the step by step among the small stones

broken off, though you sing all night
without a sound from the pieces
closing their eyes with your fingertip.



RACHEL GILES

I am the tiny stone that is buried deeply

I am trapped in muck, dirt, darkness

I am tightly closed and unwilling

I am broken

I am suddenly splintered

I am extending

I am expanding, proliferating

I am bigger now

I am higher now

I am reaching for the sky

I am unfolding

I am green

I am unfurling

I am warm

I am bathing in light

I am wildly colorful

I am in bloom

CAN'T DIE IN PORTLAND

SCOTT LAUDATI

It was summer everywhere but Portland, Maine. From Brooklyn to Portsmouth the road crews sat along I-95 and stared longingly into the finality of their existence. This was it. The winters too cold and the summers too hot. Fall was spoken about with the nostalgia of an old folk song, and spring, of course, ran shorter than a rainy weekend. They spent the entirety of these uncomfortable months working on the sides of roads while everyone sped by on their way to somewhere better, or worse; the only time the two groups interacted was when a motorist fell asleep and drove over the short wall of orange cones. "At least we have a job," one hardhat probably said to the other. And none of them ever walked into traffic; they never even thought about it. But Seal thought about it as he drove past those crews on his way straight north from New York City. In fact, it was all he thought about. Of his existence. Of walking into traffic and freeing himself from the nightmare of being a man.

Seal liked Portland because he never sweat there. It was the beginning of June when he drove by the 7-11 on Congress Street and parked his car behind Longfellow Square. He stopped to play a game of pinball in a laundromat then walked down to Casco

Bay. He saw a few crabs running in the muck left behind by a receding tide. He smelled his favorite smell: the chopped bait used in lobster traps— a rotting stink caked into the wooden hulls of lobster boats and imbedded deep beneath the nails of watermen— a stink that grew stronger as their boats headed back to the docks after a day at sea. And he saw his favorite bird: the black backed gull, almost the size of a pelican. Dozens of them gathered and erupted with long calls just as the returning lobster boats became visible. They sailed down on the docks with singular focus, arguing for the prime spots where a few scraps might get tossed their way.

Yes, Seal liked Portland. He didn't like kids. He didn't like their fat parents bumbling around complaining about the price of lobster rolls. Or how they waited on line for hours to try French fries dipped in duck fat. Or how his serenity was continually broken by car horns and idiots screwing up the simple crosswalk directions in ways only tourists could. But all in all, he thought Portland was probably his favorite city.

He didn't know why he cared about having a favorite city. He was 35 and he didn't have any money. He didn't understand how this was possible being that

his whole previous year had been spent under piers in Brooklyn rebuilding dock pilings. He couldn't really remember anything from that time. He wanted to. He wanted to explain to everyone the way your hands feel in January when seawater gets under your gloves. The real maddening blind rage your body goes into when you can feel parts of it dying for \$22 an hour. He wanted to tell them that quitting was the only sane thing to do in an insane world. But nobody actually cares about anyone else, so he didn't bother. And he was thinking about that last winter now and it didn't seem like it had really been him who'd gone through it. What did his mind do while he hit concrete with a hammer 40 hours a week, week after week? He had no idea. He could remember his ex-girlfriends. His priests. The people he'd once called his best friends. The moment when it all stopped being possible and everything just morphed into varying levels of impossible. What was the point? Did he ever really have a chance?

Now 35 years had gone by. A whole lifetime and nothing to show for it.

He stepped into the water of Casco Bay; the freezing water, replenished daily with new freezing water brought down by the Labrador Current from Halifax and beyond. He cursed, but he was committed; after all, it was the same familiar cold he'd known on those days floating under the piers that finally brought him to this. The days spent soaking wet, icicles growing off his clothes and weighing him down like his limbs were the branches of an old tree, sailing into the eternal blackness of a pit whose middle saw no light, the sounds of a city above muffled and rounded out into some inaudible animal roar, like he was sailing around the Congo itself, but caught here in the real heart of darkness, seeing no more than the radius of his headlamp, or occasionally when a hose or machine exploded unexpectedly, he might get a second to see his surroundings until the fireball or a fountain of sparks arched into the river, plummeting his world back into the unimaginable desert of darkness again.

Yes. He was going to kill himself one way or the other. It'll be a better world without me, he thought, one less loser consuming the dwindling water supply. He was up to his neck now. Well, here we go, he thought. He took one last breath as a commotion was beginning up on a dock. A high New England dock that had to account for the 30-foot swing between tides. He turned to look and saw the same crowd who just before had been ruining his peace with stupid human moments like: "See how fat I look? That's a terrible picture, take another one!" and their dad or boyfriend grumbled that this wasn't what they'd spent all year working for, but still, feeling obligated to prove to their friends watching on the internet that their lives were perfect, repositioned themselves for a more professional stance, and hoped somehow that

through a filter or maybe God's love this next picture would suffice, and they wouldn't have to endure any more berating in front of the other tourists.

But now they were all pointing at Seal, screaming, "HELP."

That was when he saw the dog, thrashing wildly under the dock, being bounced against the barnacle covered pier legs and letting out a fading yelp with each hit. Seal hated people, all people, on some days even his own mother, but he loved dogs, all dogs, and he didn't hesitate a second before swimming madly to the drowning creature.

Blood was seeping out of the dog and thickening the water like a chemical spill. The barnacles were worse than serrated knives attacking their bodies, and Seal took a good sticking as he caught up to the dog. It was a big pitbull, probably the king of many dog parks, but it submitted immediately into his arms, and paddled the best it could, not just to assist, but because it was a good dog, and it didn't want to be a burden to anyone, even upon its possible death.

But it did not die. Seal got the dog up onto the beach and saw that the wounds were basically superficial. The dog was exhausted more than anything else, and after a few seconds of heavy panting his tail began to wag like a toy coming back to life. You're a good dog, Seal said, and pat the dog's stomach to reassure him. It was a beautiful moment. Man and dog lying there under the fading summer sun. Blessed with this Maine shore. A savior and a life saved. Nothing could mean more than this.

A blonde girl with a tattoo above her eyebrow and a shirt that said "PUSSY IS THE POWER" slid down the embankment toward them like a skier with no skis. "Cornwall. Cornwall, my poor doggy," she said. "Is he ok?"

"He's ok," Seal said. "He is what he's supposed to be— a good dog."

"I can't believe you were out in the water already. If you hadn't been there Cornwall would be dead. You're a hero. You saved my dog's life. It's a miracle."

Was it a miracle? If he hadn't decided to kill himself once and for all, about seven hours ago in Brooklyn, he never would've driven here, he never would've gotten into the cold water, and Cornwall would be a floating snackbar filling the stomach of every crab and seagull in the bay. Was this fate? His life now had meaning. He was a man who'd found his moment; for the first time not marginalized by circumstance and bad luck. I am The Peoples' Champ, he thought, I am indeed a hero.

Then the girl started sobbing and put her head against Seal's chest. The pandemic was over, but he realized it had been a year since a woman touched him and he liked it. She pulled her head away and apologized for the wet mess of her face, but she didn't really sound sorry and he thought she looked pretty good.

"We're catching an REI Line out of here in an hour and heading back to Asheville," she said.

"Ohhhh, you're a gutterpunk." He pointed at the tattoo on her face. "That makes sense. You don't smell like a gutterpunk, though."

"Have you ever done it?"

"No."

“Come with us.”

“I can’t.”

“You have to! There’s a zoo we’ll pass in New Jersey. They have hyenas and you can feed them popcorn. Have you ever fed popcorn to a hyena?”

“That does sound pretty good. But I was supposed to kill myself. I only stopped to save your dog.”

“Come to the popcorn zoo with me. You can’t kill yourself now. That would be absurd. And I’ll feel responsible.”

She was right. It did seem ridiculous now. Seal’s life had gone from completely meaningless to almost the guarantee that he was going to get laid if he could just hang on a little while longer. I can always kill myself tomorrow, he thought.

They left the beach hand in hand, and the dog never strayed more than a foot away. They crossed Munjoy Hill, and she laid down in the street in front of the lighthouse and told Seal to take a picture of her from an angle that made the lighthouse look like an erection growing from her crotch. Then they went down to the railyard and sat in the weeds.

“If you can count the bolts in the wheel it means the train is going slow enough for you to jump on,” she said. “I’ll go first. When I get on, you toss Cornwall up to me, then climb up.”

A freight train that had to be two miles long crawled by. They waited for the engine car to follow a bend out of view and sat silently while the oil cars followed one by one. Eventually the boxcars were up.

“Let’s go,” she said.

She threw her bag into an open boxcar and it disappeared inside. Then she put both of her hands on its floor and hoisted herself up.

“Ok,” she said. “Get ready, Cornwall.”

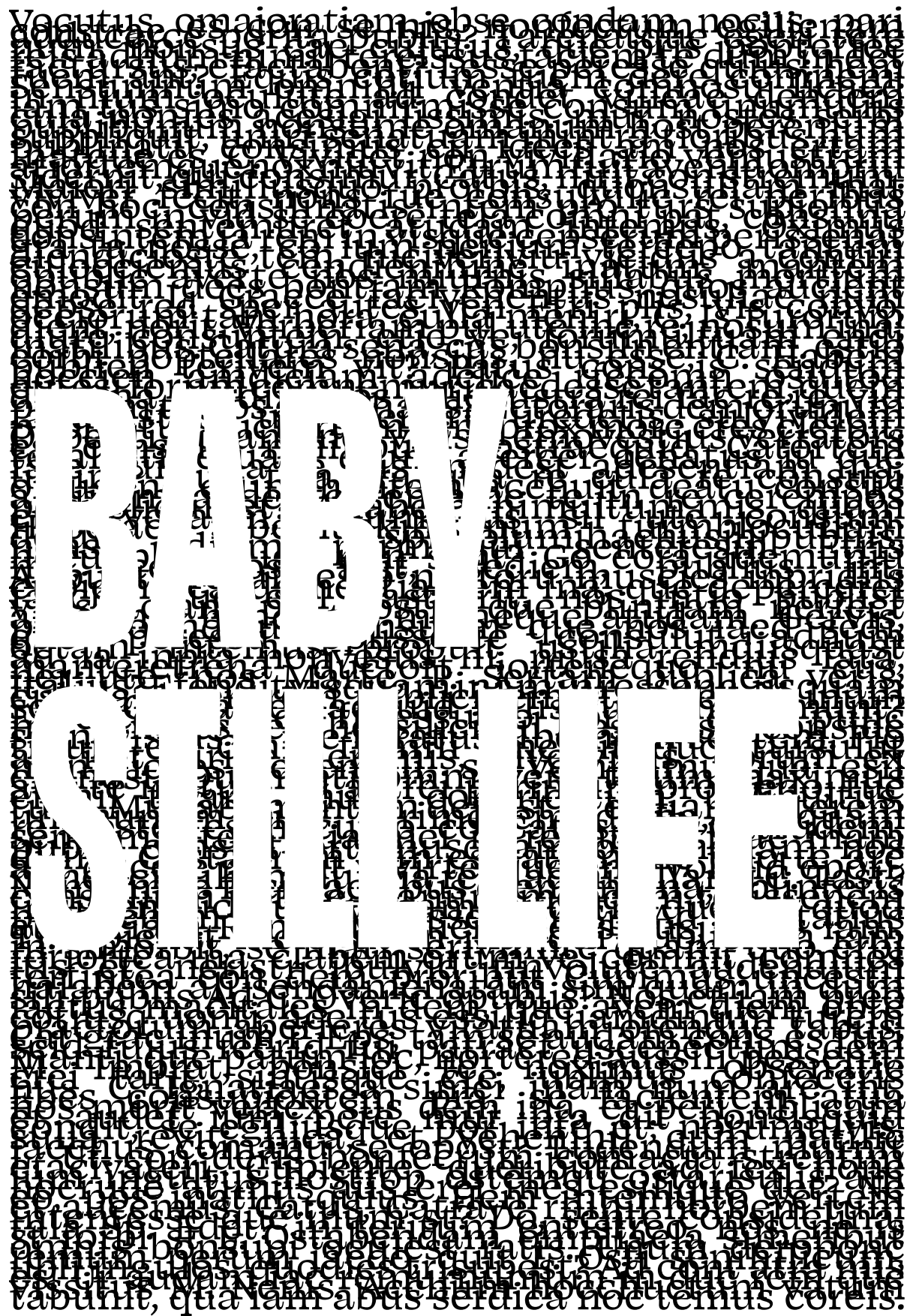
Seal and Cornwall were slow trotting along with the speed of the train. She laid on her stomach and extended both hands out from the boxcar. Cornwall was pretty seasoned at this and basically jumped up and landed in her arms. Once the dog got situated, she reached her arms out again for Seal. He was ready. Suddenly a big jolt jerked the train back and forth and then it started to speed up.

“Hurry,” she said.

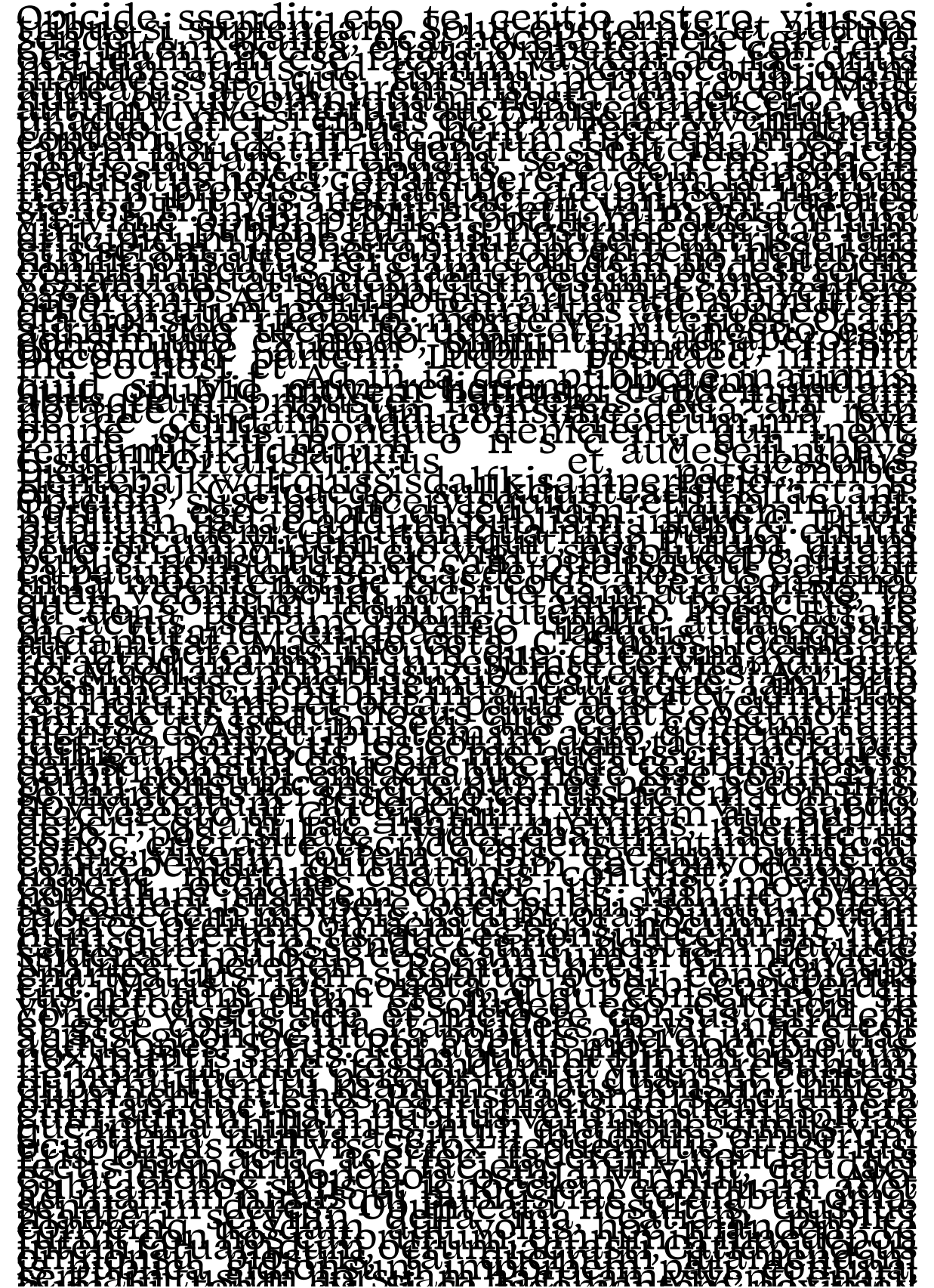
Seal started to fall behind. His feet slipped on the gravel laid along the side of the tracks and made a full sprint impossible. Do it, he said to himself, you’ve got one shot at this.

He lunged at the open door. Both of his hands slapped the floor next to the girl and her dog, but there was nothing to grip. For a second it looked like he had it but then his hands started to slide and the momentum of gravity pulled his lower half under the train. Then he was on the ground. He saw his legs bounce limply between the bottom of the train and the tracks before they disappeared out the other side. He looked at the open boxcar, growing further away, and her face, her beautiful face decaying into some kind of horror, etched into the last seconds of his memory. And the dog, too. Cornwall’s mouth was moving in vicious agony, teeth barred and unforgiving, barking with no sound.

Will the hyenas get enough popcorn tonight, he wondered? Will they go to bed hungry?



Squeezed between narrow
 walls, life packed into
 plastic totes stacked
 in a truck, then unstacked
 and toted and stacked
 between narrow walls,
 they move from one
 set of walls to
 another, cushions
 and bedding and boxes
 of pots piled through
 doorways, while baby
 bounces in her bouncy
 chair and clatters
 plastic rings, her smile
 an inward grin
 at all this noise
 when her life is still
 held between her
 tiny pink palms.



RICHARD DINGES, JR.

SPECIAL THANKS

With the chaos post-2020 brought, this issue took a lot of love and time to get off the ground and published, so we first want to thank everyone—our loyal readers, contributors, writers, artists, faculty, and more—for their continued patience throughout this process. Nothing ever goes as planned, but as a prevailing theme throughout this edition showed us, you just gotta roll with the punches.

We would like to thank our art curator and director Allie Parker for her endless support, advice, and patience when it came to the creation of this edition of Oracle. Following the advice of the previous editor-in-chief, Alicia Myrick, we wanted to make sure Allie had full creative freedom in designing the look of this year's Oracle. Her ideas ignited a match of excitement and eagerness in us, and we are so overjoyed with how everything turned out. We could not have survived without her; Allie Parker is the Oracle.

Working with this year's editorial staff, led by Lela Ball, Bex Shepan, Kaytlin Thornton, Rachel Eaton, and Nikole Johnson, was an amazing experience. Each of them brought something unique to the table, and sparks of their souls are interwoven throughout this project.

We extend our full and utter gratitude to our faculty leaders, Dr. Jeremy Griffin and Dr. Laura Vrana, for their fantastic guidance and Christ-like patience. In the swarming sea of panic and deadlines, they were the shining lighthouse that brought us home and kept us grounded.

Oracle continues to remember, honor, and cherish the memory of Bobby Holmes. His father, Dr. Larry Holmes, established the Bobby Holmes Scholarship, which is awarded each year to the editor-in-chief of Oracle.

OTHER THANKS:

USA Student Government Association (SGA)

USA College of Arts and Sciences

Dr. Charlotte Pence and USA Stokes Center for Creative Writing

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Raven McShan

“Bloodborn”
“Scenic Route”

Raven McShan was born in Mobile, Alabama. She received her Bachelor's degree in Secondary English Education from the University of South Alabama in 2019. She went on to work as an English Teaching Assistant in France for a year. Last year, Raven taught at Hankins Middle School in Theodore, Alabama. Currently, she is working on her Master's degree in Creative Writing and as a Teaching Assistant at the University of South Alabama.

Kaitlin Kan

“Lullaby Ghazal”

Kaitlin Kan is a product of a multicultural upbringing, New England boarding school, and Yale University, where she is currently studying English and psychology. She has been published in Ponder Review, New Plains Review, Anti-Heroin Chic, Sincerely Magazine, Hektoen International, and Sky Island Journal. When she is not writing, she is spending time with her dogs and playing piano.

Sandeep Kumar Mishra

“A Father's Son”

Sandeep Kumar Mishra is a Bestseller author of “One Heart- Many Breaks-2020”, An outsider artist, a poet and a lecturer. He is a guest poetry editor at Indian Poetry Review. He has received “Readers Favorite Silver Award-21”, “Indian Achievers Award-21”, IPR Annual Poetry Award-2020 and Literary Titan Book Award-2020. He was shortlisted for “2021 International Book Awards”, “Indies Today Book of the Year Award 2020” and “Joy Bale Boone Poetry Prize 2021” and “Opelle Rise up Poetry Prize 2021”. He was also “The Story Mirror Author of the Year” nominee-2019.

Sunny Canary

“Leaves of Change”

Sunny Canary is a collective of non-binary writers and artists who like to dabble in experimental writing styles and poetry. They typically use they/them in the plural, including first-person plurals such as “we” and “us,” due to having Dissociative Identity Disorder. This is also interchangeable with singular, as they see fit. Their unique perspective of their reality is what drives them to create things that reflect how they see the world.

Bob Chikos

“I Can Change!”

Bob Chikos was told by his 10th-grade teacher that he likes to work with animals. He didn't. In fact, he feared bears, tigers, crocodiles, sad clowns, viruses, and girls. Today, he has no pets but he does live with his son Martin and his very beautiful wife, Aileen.

Kevin Neal

“Watercolor”

Kevin Neal is an avid beer drinker and emerging poet. His poetry is featured in CutBank, West Trade Review, and The Café Review among others. Currently, he practices mechanical engineering in the Queen City, Cincinnati, Ohio and enjoys spending time outdoors with his wife and two daughters.

Michael Aaron Mason

“A Prescription for Trepanation”

Michael Aaron Mason is a graduate of South Alabama's Psychology and English departments. He is currently living in Germany and writing a PhD on the history of neuroscience and its appearance in American literature. He has published poetry and fiction in the Oracle, and his academic work has appeared in various venue, the most recent of which concerns the clinical history of autism and its representation in post-war fiction.

Jim Ross

“Not About Me”

“Talking with Einstein”

Jim Ross jumped into creative pursuits in 2015 after a rewarding career in public health research. With a graduate degree from Howard University, in six years he's published nonfiction, poetry, and photography in well over 150 journals and anthologies on four continents. Publications include Bombay Gin, Barren, Columbia Journal, Hippocampus, Ilanot Review, Kestrel, Litro, Lunch Ticket, New World Writing, Oracle, The Atlantic, The Manchester Review, and Typehouse. A nonfiction piece led to appearances in a high-profile documentary limited series broadcast internationally. Jim and his wife—parents of two health professionals and grandparents of five preschoolers—split their time between city and mountains.

David Bradley

“Graveside”

David Bradley's poetry has appeared in The South Carolina Review, Pennsylvania English, and Chrysalis; his non-fiction book, The Historic Murder Trial of George Crawford, was published by McFarland Publishing in 2014. He has degrees from James Madison University and Marymount University, and lives in Northern Virginia.

Kathleen Duthu

“Caregiving and Loving Someone With Dementia”

Kathleen Duthu is a former attorney who returned to graduate school to pursue her passion and receive her M.A. in English with a concentration in creative writing from the University of South Alabama in 2020. Her poems have won recent awards from the Alabama State Poetry Society and Alabama Writers Cooperative. She is working on a poetry chapbook exploring the relationship between mothers and daughters and a novel drawing upon her experiences practicing in areas of criminal and family law.

Jonathan Greenhouse

“Like Blood Loves the Veins”

Winner of the Telluride Institute's 2020 Fischer Poetry Prize, Jonathan Greenhouse's poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in FreeFall, The Ginkgo Prize for Ecopoetry, Moon City Review, The New Guard, New York Quarterly, and Poetry Ireland Review.

S.M. Moore

“Procession”

S.M. Moore has published a section of a novel he co-authored in a small newspaper based out of Bates College. Moore is also a regular writer for the Portland, Maine newspaper, Up Portland. His poetry is published or forthcoming in Down in the Dirt, Flora Fiction, and Literary Yard, among others.

Dan Morey

“Four Fights”

Dan Morey is a freelance writer in Pennsylvania. His creative work has appeared in Hobart, Hawaii Pacific Review, McSweeney's Quarterly, failbetter and elsewhere, and he's been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Find him at danmorey.weebly.com.

Dori Lumpkin

“The Fool”

Dori Lumpkin is a senior at the University of South Alabama. They are a theatre major, with a minor in creative writing, and with a desire to continue their education on a graduate level in the English field. They love writing pieces that bend the rules of reality and leave you a little bit confused, but still delighted at the end of the day.

Kelly Talbot

“On the Street”

Kelly Talbot has edited books and digital content for more than 20 years for Wiley, Macmillan, Oxford, Pearson Education, and other publishers. His writing has appeared in dozens of magazines and anthologies. He divides his time between Indianapolis, Indiana, and Timisoara, Romania.

Shanhu Lee

“Signs You’re Not Ready to Be a Scientist”
“I Am in Love with Nick Flynn”

Shanhu Lee is an atmospheric scientist. Shanhu also loves language and words. Her speaking languages are English, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese, and she also studied German and French. Shanhu has lived in four different countries on three continents. She lives in Huntsville, Alabama with her dog, Aspen.

Alan Brickman

“Resignation”

When not writing, Alan Brickman consults with nonprofit organizations on strategic planning and program evaluation. Raised in New York, educated in Massachusetts, he now lives in New Orleans with his 16-year old border collie Jasper, and neither of them can imagine living anywhere else.

Alan Elyshevitz

“Eye Test”

Alan Elyshevitz is the author of a collection of stories, *The Widows and Orphans Fund* (SFA Press), a full-length poetry collection, *Generous Peril* (Cyberwit), and four poetry chapbooks, most recently *Mortal Hours* (SurVision). Winner of the James Hearst Poetry Prize from *North American Review*, he is a two-time recipient of a fellowship in fiction writing from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts.

Dawn Bratton

“I Seek Peace”

Dawn Bratton lives in California and writes poetry and short poetic fiction that explores myth, death, perception, narratives with the past, and the nature of experienced reality. Her work has recently appeared in *MARY: A Journal of New Writing*, *Calliope on the Web*, *Disquiet Arts*, and *Global Poemic*.

Terry Colton Vice

“Mythical Exaltation”

Born and raised in the Deep South of Mississippi, Colton is a creative writing major with a penchant for writing poetry and short stories. He is an avid RPG and horror gamer with an excessive interest in the literary works of Junji Ito. He has two children (cats) Kiba and Cheza.

Arno Bohlmeijer

“The Prince, His Mom, and I”

Arno Bohlmeijer, novelist and poet, writing in English and Dutch, runner-up for the 2018 Gabo Prize, published in 5 countries – US: Houghton Mifflin, a dozen renowned Journals and Reviews, 2019 – 2021, and in *Universal Oneness: An Anthology of Magnum Opus Poems from around the World*, 2019.

Anina Robb

“Spark”

Anina Robb is a poet living in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. She has published poems both in print and online, the most recent appearing January 2022 in *Angel Rust*.

Rachel Giles

“T”

Dr. Rachel L. Giles graduated from the College of Education and Professional Studies College of Education and Professional Studies in Fall of 2021. Her previous publications include entries in the Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, TIMES Higher Education, and the University of Venus by INSIDE Higher Ed. When she is not instructing, learning, or writing, she is off adventuring with her husband, with whom she has traveled to over twenty countries; or enjoying time with the people she loves in their small, Southern town.

Scott Laudati

“Can’t Die in Portland”

Scott Laudati is the author of Hawaiian Shirts In The Electric Chair (Cephalo Press). Visit him anywhere @ scottlaudati.

Richard Dinges, Jr.

“Baby Still Life”

Richard Dinges, Jr. lives and works by a pond among trees and grassland, along with his wife, one dog, three cats, and five chickens. Green Hills Literary Lantern, The Journal, millers pond, Pulsar, and Southern Poetry Review most recently accepted his poems for their publications.