

# Umbrella Factory Magazine

Issue 61

June 2023

**The garden is so much smaller than it felt as a child, but then everything is smaller when you realise what life looks like from six feet tall.**

*New writing from  
Douglas Steward  
Claire Davies  
Ed Patterson  
Ronan Cartwright  
Juanita Rey  
Mykyta Ryzhykh*



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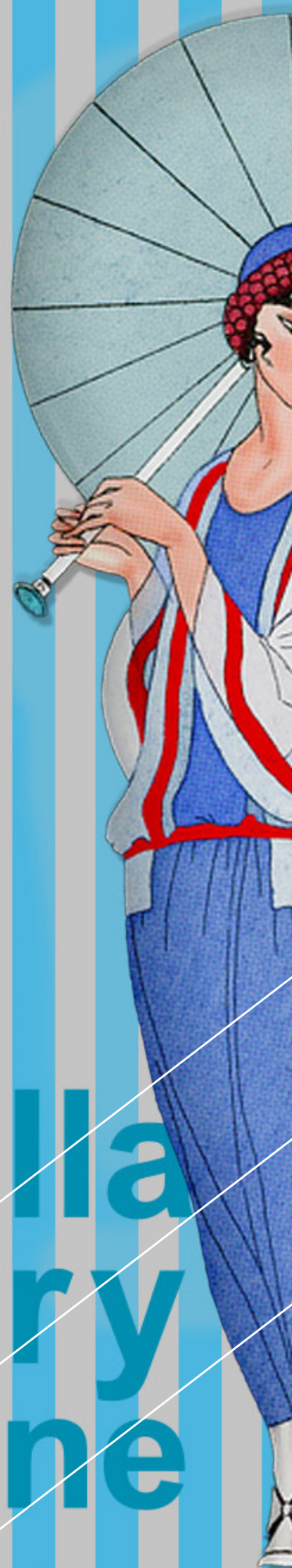
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**We are a small press determined to connect well-developed readers to intelligent writers and poets through virtual means, printed journals, and books. We believe in making an honest living providing the best writers and poets a forum for their work.**

We consider ourselves at *Umbrella Factory Magazine* as a cooperative forum to connect readers to the best writing available.

All writers and poets retain all rights to their work.



**Umbrella  
Factory  
Magazine**

Read. Submit. Tell Everyone You Know.

# Submissions



## Fiction

Sized between 1,000 and 5,000 words. Any writer wishing to submit fiction in an excess of 5,000 words, please query first.

Please double space. We do not accept multiple submissions, please wait for a reply before submitting your next piece.

Your work must be previously unpublished. We encourage you to submit your piece everywhere, but please withdraw your piece if gets published elsewhere.

## Poetry

We accept submissions of three (no more and no less) poems. Please submit only previously unpublished work.

We do not accept multiple submissions; please wait to hear back from us regarding your initial submission before sending another. Simultaneous submissions are accepted, but please withdraw your piece immediately if it is accepted elsewhere.

## Art

Accepting submissions for the next cover of Umbrella Factory Magazine. We would like to incorporate images with the theme of umbrellas, factories and/or workers. Feel free to use one or all of these concepts. Image size should be 980 x 700 pixels, .jpeg or .gif file format. Provide a place for the magazine title at the top and article links.

We also accept small portfolios of photography and digitally rendered artwork. We accept six pieces (no more and no less) along with an artist's statement and a third person bio.

Your work must be previously unpublished. We encourage you to submit your piece everywhere, but please withdraw your piece if gets published elsewhere.

# Douglas Steward



TROPICAL  
Candy  
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# NOW AND LATER

*Douglas Steward has been published in Blackworks, Brief Wilderness, El Portal, Euphony Journal, Louisiana Literature, October Hill Magazine, SLAB, Summerset Review, and Waxing & Waning. Semi-retired from a career in the automotive industry, Douglas now devotes his time to writing and taking care of his two collie dogs.*

I'm sitting in marriage therapy with Tina, my pissed-off and brooding wife. I know I should be fully engaged, but I'm distracted by something else, something enticingly sweet.

"Any small amount of progress we make now," Dr. Kim says, "can prove to be valuable later."

I nod. Whatever it takes to keep Tina happy at this point.

Dr. Kim turns to me. "Let's roll back to the beginning," she says. "Can you pinpoint when these unhealthy sexual obsessions began?"

Tina leans in close, expectantly. She's clearly interested in this.

I'm not sure what to say. If I answer truthfully, it might startle both my marriage partner and our marriage counselor.

I know exactly when it all began. It began in the sixth grade, thanks to "Honest John" Bunting and his box of Now and Laters.

Sixth grade can be a tough time in the life of a young man. My adrenal glands went haywire, causing my voice to crack and hair to grow in places I didn't want it to. Our octogenarian math teacher, Mrs. Troyer, threw strange and puzzling ideas like ratios and fractions at us. Girls, like the flaxen-haired Leslie Warner, caught my attention but remained a mystery, deeply entrenched in their all-girl social cliques and totally inaccessible. And then there was the hunger. My metabolism remained stuck in overdrive; the hours between meals were endless. That's where John Bunting and his indispensable supply of candy came into play.

“Honest John,” a moniker he gave himself, bought up the sugary treats in bulk, then sold them at outrageous markups to ravenous sixth-graders.

He carried his wares in a cigar box, stashed away in his backpack along with a few textbooks and perhaps a pocketknife or a clutch of blunt No. 2 pencils. Before math class we covertly approached him, and an underhanded deal was struck.

We were buying Now and Laters from him.

Now and Laters, for the uninformed, are colorful little candy squares that come individually wrapped. They're rock hard but become chewy and easy to masticate after they sit in your mouth for a bit. The manufacturer conjured up this catchy advertising slogan: “Eat some now, save some for later.” Hence the name of the candy.

They come in packs of six, and back in sixth grade they cost only ten cents a pack. That's if you bought them yourself at the drugstore. Honest John's prices were considerably higher. I didn't understand about profit margins then. Nor could I fathom the intricacies of price gouging and the principle of supply and demand. I could have just bought my own pack to carry with me at school, but that simply did not occur to my still-developing mind.

The idea was to let them soften on your tongue, allowing the imitation fruit flavor to seep over your taste buds. I was much too impatient for that; I chomped down hard as soon as I popped one into my mouth. Often my jaw became cemented in place by a still-resilient candy square, rendering me unable to speak for a few minutes. I was forced to shake my head when Mrs. Troyer asked me to find the least common denominator in problem number twelve.

“Math is cumulative,” she said. “If you don't master this lesson now, you will have trouble tackling more complicated problems later on.”

I should be paying more attention during therapy and not allow my mind to wander. We're trying to save a marriage here.

“You know how it is,” Tina says. “These Grosse Pointe guys never grow up. He hasn't changed since elementary school.”

I am silent. Silence is the best measure of defense in these moments.

“Can you give some specific examples?” Dr. Kim says.

“Do you know they talk about all the girls they slept with in high school? What those girls did between the sheets and everywhere else?”

“I've never mentioned anything about an old girlfriend to you.” A mistake. I should have stuck to silence—a much better way to play this.

“What about Leslie Warner?”

“Leslie Warner never gave me the time of day.” Decades later the mention of her name still sends a shockwave of electricity through my body.

“You know what I'm talking about. Her type.”

“A lot of guys got past second base with her, no problem.”

“You know that because all of you Grosse Pointe assholes talk to each other about it.”

“Women don't do the same thing?”

I receive a withering glance from Tina. And from our therapist.

“Women share their feelings with each other,” Tina says. “We don't brag about our sexual conquests.”

“Perhaps, if I can interject,” Dr. Kim says. “Tina, can you sum up what you're feeling right at this moment? Try to do it succinctly so he understands.”

“Easy. I don't want to be *that* woman. The long-suffering wife standing by her sex-addict husband.”

Not that it matters to her, but none of it truly satisfies, be it pornography or even that greatest of addictions, sugar. There's initially some exhilaration but it doesn't last very long.

But even that fading euphoria can be a brief respite from the domestic pressures facing an eleven-year-old.

I began each sixth-grade day with one goal: survive while encountering as little drama as possible. School was challenging enough but nothing like the nightly theater production at home, where my parents were just beginning the first steps toward separation and, ultimately, divorce. Every evening was punctuated by arguments and recriminations. So much that it was easier to barricade myself in my room, usually with a filched *Three Musketeers* bar from my father's dresser drawer. That was enough to take the edge off, even if it wasn't as powerfully saccharine as a Now and Later.



You would think that John Bunting wouldn't need all that extra scratch from selling candy to his classmates. His family was the beneficiary of a large newspaper fortune. He didn't ride the bus; instead, John and his sister, Fay, were dropped off at school by the family caretaker. At Thanksgiving he was allowed three extra days off because his family was booked on a Mediterranean cruise. I had no idea where or what the Mediterranean was but it sounded exotic. I imagined him reclining in a lounge chair on the deck of a large ship.

If he sold other brands from that cigar box of his, I can't recall. It might have been that he could pick up the Now or Later so cheaply that just one product line made sense. He did a bang-up business in those colorful candies. Even Mr. McGee, our English teacher, was an avid customer. He denied it later, saying we must have been mistaken, but there it was, compelling evidence in Honest John's ledger.

*Mr. McGee—1 Grape Now or Later.*

"Another satisfied customer," John said.

John operated surreptitiously at his desk right before class, his wares hidden by the sizable tome Mrs. Troyer referred to as our *Mathematics Primer*. Students would pass by with their nickels and dimes, and he would disburse the candy into their expectant little hands. Then he'd duly mark it down in his journal. "Keeping track is good business practice," he said.

He had to be careful. Outside foodstuffs were strictly verboten at Mason Elementary School in Grosse Pointe. Not to mention running a profiteering business on school grounds.

For a brief time he tried to expand his business. He used runners to sell the candy, usually fifth-graders he talked into being distributors. But he was forced to cancel that program abruptly.

"Too much shrinkage in those long-range transactions," he said.

"Shrinkage?"

"Sometimes the runners eat the candy and just take off down the hallway without paying."

I never saw him sample his own product.

"Never borrow from your capital stash," he said. "It's a good way to go broke early."

It's easy to go broke when you have an addictive personality. Self-talk doesn't seem to help.

*Get ahold of yourself. It's only one little sugar square infused with questionable artificial flavor.*

Except there's more than just the candy at play here and I know it.

They say that one addiction leads to another. Some people end up gambling. For others it's alcohol that takes over. I've heard that bass fishing can be addictive. Don't laugh. You should see all the cash those guys shell out for expensive gear, just to catch a fish.

Nothing really replaces sugar but there are other sensations that mimic its effect. It's all dopamine when you get down to it, an emotional pain suppressor, brief in duration but potent all the same.

At eleven years old it's near impossible to recognize emotional suffering for what it is. You're already acclimatized to it. The stress at home seeps into your soul and becomes your constant companion. Your parents bicker every night, and your pubescent mind can only fathom that it's you they're arguing about.

I carried that internal burden with me to school. A failing grade on my math quiz, a scornful look from Leslie Warner's girlish cabal, and soon I was craving that sweet, syrupy burst of pleasure to ease the pain. And then that's all I could think of.

Is candy a gateway drug to more dangerous addictions? I would turn that around and ask if there's anything more lethal than sugar. Think about it.

I'm sure Dr. Kim thought her sofa cushions were soft and inviting when she bought them, but to me they feel uncomfortable as hell. I'm clinging to the armrest on the right side of the couch with only a throw pillow to console me.

Tina's sitting in the matching chair next to me, arms crossed, staring straight ahead.

"Do you find that it helps to self-medicate?" Dr. Kim said. "I mean, what does it do for you?"

I have a lot to say on that subject, but for now I want to keep things on a level playing field. No need to risk Tina blowing up at me.

"There's some pleasure in it, but there's no substitute for the real thing," I say.

Appeased by that answer, both Tina and the therapist nod. I'm relieved.

"It's the genuine thing that I'm after," I add.

"Authentic," Tina says, nodding again.

That answer buys me a grace period but probably not for long.

“Let’s continue on to how Tina feels about your addiction.”

God, I could use a fix right now.

There’s nothing authentic about the flavor of a Now and Later.

Take, for example, the watermelon variety. It comes in a soft-pink color, tempting with the promise of watery melon goodness.

That promise is inevitably broken because it tastes more like concentrated fruit juice on my tongue, but still achingly sweet on my back teeth. Regardless, it was one of my favorites. When he ran out of watermelon, Honest John would try to fool me with a cherry Now and Later. Although identical to the watermelon variety when unwrapped, it tastes darkly medicinal and not satisfying at all. I ate it without complaint. It was pure sugar and I hungered for it desperately.

For most students it was a simple equation. Buy an egregiously expensive candy that kept you awake during math class. Then deal with the inevitable hypoglycemic crash at lunchtime, satiating it with the school-provided fish sticks or sloppy joes. But for me there’s no appeasement of the sybaritic pleasure demon. It rears its ugly head again and again. To make matters worse, what momentarily satisfies one day might barely move the needle the next. I chased that elusive high right down into a deep, dark abyss. You know you’ve hit rock bottom when you find yourself washing down a golden-hued Twinkie with a chocolate milk chaser and a handful of candy corn.

Later in life this gives way to more sophisticated and adult means of self-medication. Scores of sites on the Internet are available at a moment’s notice, waiting patiently for me to sign on. I’m not sure anything can take the place of that first flush of excitement that sugar provides, but there’s substitutes that can culminate in the same sweet and sticky fashion. A quick and easy hit doesn’t necessarily hold up, but it can hold you over in a pinch.

Still, nothing compares to the immediate sensation of biting into a small, colorful candy square.

I kept close to the enabler of my candy addiction, Honest John, in math class. Otherwise, I would never find myself anywhere near Leslie Warner. Leslie Warner had all the markings of a sixth-grade dream girl: her

wispy blonde locks reached down below her shoulders, and her alabaster skin radiated softness. She signed a history paper we had all worked on, and I snatched it later, taking it home with me. In the evenings I mooned over the way she connected the legs of her ‘W’ and the swoosh she gave to her ‘Rs.’ She and Tina Zwiers, inseparable, ruled our little sixth-grade community.

The two of them queued up in front of John’s desk as math class started, content to purchase just one candy each to keep them occupied until lunchtime.

Leslie unwrapped hers slowly, with amazing patience. She popped it in her mouth, letting it dangle on her tongue, soaking up the experience. I was enthralled.

“What are you staring at, creep?” Tina Zwiers said.

I could never exhibit that kind of willpower, letting the candy dissolve there on my palate. I probably didn’t even possess a palate, just a gnawing desire for more sugar.

Against my better judgment, I risked engaging them.

“You two buying the watermelon or green apple?”

Leslie peered down at me with disdain. At that age most of the girls towered over the boys, who hadn’t seen their adolescent growth spurt yet.

“You’re speaking to us?” she said.

“I thought so.”

“That’s your first mistake. Thinking,” Tina said.

“I bet you that’s green lime,” I said as Tina made her purchase.

“I bet you it’s none of your business,” she replied.

“Wanna shake on that? I think it’s green lime.” I held out my hand, perhaps a little too near to the front of her blue knit sweater.

“I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole,” Tina said, recoiling from me. She turned and the two girls glided by, as if suspended a few inches in the air. Leslie’s soft hair swept past my face. I can still feel its silky touch, even to this day.

“Wow,” John said. “That was harsh.”

I bought a watermelon Now and Later. I let the hard candy crack under my back teeth and took solace in its sugary rush.

Honest John profited mercilessly for three straight

months, buoyed by his classmates' craving for pure, unadulterated sugar.

Then the unthinkable happened. Honest John got busted.

The principal was waiting for him at the beginning of Mrs. Troyer's class. He asked John to empty the contents of his bookbag. They didn't teach civics until tenth grade, so there was no way John could have known that this was a clear breach of his Miranda rights. He was forced to open his cigar box, revealing a colorful inventory. Even more damning was the black-and-gray composition book with a detailed account of every sale. In the end it was his own diligence in record-keeping that did him in.

The only question at that point was whether John would be suspended or not. His candy-dealing days were certainly over.

More important to me, my source for on-demand candy had been eliminated. I watched in despair as the principal confiscated the cigar box and sales ledger and left Mrs. Troyer's classroom.

"Turn to page eighty-one in your *Mathematics Primer*," she said.

I was too distracted to focus on how to multiply fractions. I felt tears welling up in my eyes and looked over at John. He sat slumped in his chair, staring at the ceiling. Neither of us was going to remember much from the day's lesson.

I swallowed hard and told myself I could live without my math-class sugar fix.

That resolve lasted for all of two hours.

After lunch I didn't head over to my social studies class, as I should have. I slipped out the cafeteria door and walked a mile to the drugstore, purchasing their last pack of grape Now and Laters. I ate all six candies on the trip back, savoring the sweet, artificial-grape Kool-Aid flavor. I walked right through the front door of Mason Elementary, expecting to head back to class. Instead, Mrs. Troyer was waiting for me just inside the front hallway. She raised an ancient eyebrow, took my arm, and hauled me over to the principal's office. I sat there while he called my mother.

I should have figured that, of all my teachers, Mrs. Troyer would be the one to suss me out. She was always power walking through the hallways. I can't remember her ever needing a substitute. That old crone had the

constitution of a tank.

I got off easy. My parents grounded me from any extracurricular activities for a month. I wasn't sure what that meant. I didn't have any extracurricular interests, other than my beloved jaw-breaking sweets.

"That candy might seem worth the trouble of missing class right now," was Mrs. Troyer's parting shot as I prepared to leave for home that day. "But later this kind of thing can be your undoing."

Mrs. Troyer retired that spring, after thirty years of service. Her prophetic reputation has remained intact. My addictive personality, as Dr. Kim refers to it, has come damn close to ruining my life.

I have a stealth credit card that I max out regularly, purchasing virtual quarters to stuff into cyber-coin slots on Internet chat rooms. The cam girls who parade past the screen on my laptop feign interest in hearing about my troubles. I swear I spend more money asking them to just listen to me than for anything else.

Once I said "I love you" to one of them. Not my finest moment. She responded politely, asking if I could purchase more online time so she could pay her rent.

The rest of the day I think about when I can take my next "hit" and experience that familiar flush of neurons pulse through my brain. It's gotten to the point where I can't stop even if I wanted to.

I don't expect Tina to understand any of this. She's too keyed up emotionally to be rational about it. I don't blame her; she's humiliated and hurt. I know this because she has stated so repeatedly during our therapy sessions.

Leslie Warner ended up marrying Honest John Bunting a few years out of college. That's how things work in Grosse Pointe; you never stray too far from your roots. She divorced him after they had their first child. They currently live a block away from each other, shuttling their teenage daughter, Emily, back and forth between houses every week.

And I married Tina, née Zwiers, years after she told me she wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole. If she remembers that conversation, she's not letting on. Come to think of it, there's no way she remembers; she would have hit me over the head with it in therapy by now.

I don't see much of John; our paths cross occasionally, often at the drugstore, but that's about it.

I heard he let his Country Club of Detroit membership lapse after the Bunting family fortune well ran dry. Tina says the Buntings aren't worth a quarter of what they used to be.

Our therapy session ends and Tina announces that she needs some time to herself. She's probably heading off to a coffee date with childhood friends. That's not exactly spending time alone, but I don't argue the point. I tell her that I'm heading back to work. But I'm not being honest either.

There's a bulk candy store in Eastpointe, a blue-collar neighborhood across I-94 from Grosse Pointe. I drive over to their location on Nine Mile Road, and sure enough, they're loaded with treasures from the distant past. Cherryheads, Blow-Pops, and of course, Now and Later. They're sold out of my old favorites, green apple and watermelon. The only flavor remaining is banana.

I purchase a pack anyway.

It tastes nothing like a banana, more like someone spilled acetone fingernail polish in my mouth. Still, it packs a sugary punch. I manage to eat the entire pack while sitting in my car as it idles in the parking lot.

And I reminisce about sixth grade with mixed emotions. When all that was at stake was my math grade.





**NOW and AFTER**

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# Mykyta Ryzhykh

*Winner of the international competition Art Against Drugs and Ukrainian contests: Vytoky, Shoduarivska Altanka, Khortytsky dzvony; laureate of the literary competition named after Tyutyunnik, Lyceum, Twelve, named after Dragomoshchenko. Finalist of the Crimean Ginger competition. Nominated for Pushcart Prize.*


My green throat has turned into a garden  
I have to be silent a lot  
I have to drink a lot so that the trees grow  
I have to breathe quietly so as not to frighten the birds  
I don't want to scare those who are happy

damp forest  
how does the butterfly come out  
heat from the clip



Shh shh she she she along with your hoarse cough  
Leaves fall to the ground and you don't understand  
Will tomorrow knock on your door again  
morning...

# Ed Patterson



*Ed Patterson was a finalist in Bellingham Review's 2021 Tobias Wolff Award for Fiction. He received his bachelor's degree with an English minor from SUNY Plattsburgh. He lives and writes in Glastonbury, CT. His work has been published or is forthcoming in Umbrella Factory Magazine and Voices De La Luna. [stirringthe strange.com](http://stirringthe strange.com)*



# Skipping Stones

Mark Jacobs ran along the sunny shore of Owasco Lake, bordering the city of Auburn, New York, with his teenage Boy Scout mates, searching for flat stones. “Here’s a good one!” Mark said.

“How many skips can you do?” said Tommy, his Badger Scout patrol buddy.

Mark held a three-inch, asymmetrical, light gray, flat stone with pointed edges. *This is perfect.* “Let’s see!” he said.

Mark aimed and whipped his right arm sideways with full power. The spinning stone flew with precision. It danced on top of the blue, glistening lake, skipping at high speed over the small waves until it died. “Six...seven...eight...nine...ten!” he shouted.

All the boys cheered and were in awe of Mark. They threw stones of their own, big ones and little ones, not achieving the length of ten skips. Their fun turned into who could make the biggest splash. As the champion of his patrol, Mark found a big square rock, almost the size of his arm, and launched it from over his head. *Ka-plunk!* Everyone joined in and roared as their dark, heavy rocks splashed and sank to the bottom of the lake.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mark stares out through the prison bars of the three-inch-thick window. He forgets his place searching the windy, heavy clouds over Emerson Park shore and Owasco Lake.

“Mr. Jacobs...are you with me?” the annoyed female probation officer says.

“Did you ever skip rocks as a kid?” Mark says, trying to count the whitecaps on the windy lake. *...two, three, four, five...* Mark imagines his famous skipping stone flying over the waves.

“What?” The officer looks at Mark. “Can I *please* have your attention?”

Mark slowly turns around, takes off his faded blue New York Giants cap, rubs his peppered goatee with his right index finger and thumb, and sits down at the cold gray table.

\*\*\*\*\*

“You boys go play by the lake. Mark’s dad and I are going to

get us all a treat.” Diane and Mark’s dad left the picnic table by the warm stand-up grill and walked toward the singsong ice-cream truck on the upper road. Diane’s son, Jason, said, “I can beat you to the boulder.” Mark and Jason raced down to the lakeshore.

“I won!” Mark said to Jason as he touched the big boulder first on the beach.

“Shut up. You cheated,” Jason said, out of breath.

“You’re a momma’s boy. Don’t cry about it,” Mark said, looking for flat rocks on the beach. “You know how to skip stones?” Jason secretly went behind Mark. He threw a dirt clod, hitting Mark in the back.

“You little fucker!” Mark said as Jason laughed.

Mark found a big rock and threw it, nearly hitting Jason. “Hey! No fair.” Jason picked up a stone and hurled it wildly, missing Mark. Mark grinned, pulled back, and threw another rock, hitting Jason in the leg. “Ouch! Stop it! I’m *telling* my mom!” Jason rudely gave Mark his middle finger as he ran back to the picnic table.

*That’s it!* “It’s war. You baby!” Mark yelled. He found a flat, sharp-cornered stone, placed it between his right thumb and index finger, and slung it. Hard. Jason went down thirty-three feet away.

Yes! “That’s what you get for hitting *me*, ya little pussy,” Mark said.

Jason didn’t get up. His arms and legs twitched on the freshly cut grass.

“Are you...okay?” Mark said, running up to Jason.

Jason tried to speak as blood pumped from his left jugular. Mark went down to Jason’s neck. He frantically placed his right hand over the large gash under his jawbone as the blood poured out through his fingers. He took off his white T-shirt and tried first aid to stop the pressure. “I’m sorry. Sorry,” Mark said as he stared at Jason’s dying eyes until they went still.

“WHAT...HAPPENED!” Diane screamed. She and Mark’s dad dropped the ice-cream treats as they ran to Jason’s bloody body dead on the park lawn. “JASON! JASON!” Diane ran into Jason’s blood pool and tried to lift him.

“Don’t touch him!” Mark’s dad said. “I’m calling the police... Oh, my God! Don’t touch him!” He turned to Mark, pointing to the picnic table. “Go sit over there! SIT! Holy shit!”

Diane’s arms hovered over Jason’s dead body. She turned to Mark with her tears washing the mascara down her face. “You killed my boy!”

Mark’s dad approached Mark at the picnic table. “Jason made me, Dad,” Mark sobbed. “He started it and hit me. I...didn’t mean to hit him...like that. I tried to

stop the bleeding.”

“Do you know what *this* means? You *killed* Jason,” his father said.

\*\*\*\*\*

Mark takes off his coat and lights up a cigarette. His dark blue, handmade tattoos run up and over his hard knuckles like varicose veins. He sits down at the worn mahogany bar inside the crowded Unicorn Bar and Grille.

“Hey, Pat. A shot of Jameson and a Bud draft,” Mark says to the bartender in the crowded dive bar. Mark looks up at the football game playing on the nearest TV.

“Yo! Mark. What’s up? Got an extra smoke?” Dave Kinder, Mark’s ex-wife’s boyfriend, says, with his greasy smile, holding half a beer. Mark rolls a cigarette to Dave on the wet bar. “How was *it*?” Dave asks, picking up the moist cigarette.

“How was *what*?” Mark says before he takes his whiskey shot.

“Did they give you visitation?”

“Shut up. I don’t want to talk about it.” Mark raises his right arm and pulls on his cigarette.

“You owe Jenny. Time to *collect*,” Dave says.

“I don’t owe *you*,” Mark says, keeping one eye on the game and a watchful eye on Dave from his peripheral vision.

“You owe *us*. Interest!” Dave slams the last of his beer and bangs his empty mug on the bar. Mark stands and raises his right fist within inches of Dave’s face. Mark’s crude prison drawings of knives, spiderwebs, and tears on his clenched right hand and forearm make Dave step back.

“You’re a *deadbeat*...” Dave says, backstepping out of the bar.

Mark lights another cigarette. “Pat! Fill me up.”

“If I were you, I wouldn’t take his shit,” Pat says.

“Sometimes, it’s best not to throw stones,” Mark says as he sits back down at the bar.

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Mark comes home to his one-room apartment. He sits in the dark and watches the blue glow of his fish tank. The lid of the little, plastic, gold, toy treasure chest rises and falls as the bubbles rise to the top. The soft sound of gurgling water fills the room.

*Where’s Fred?* Mark gets up and walks to the tank. He sprinkles in the flaky fish food. “Hey, Fred. Where are ya, little buddy?” Mark says in his boyish voice. The other colored fish hurry to the top, feeding on the flakes, except for Fred, the goldfish. “Hope you’re not dead,”

Mark mutters, tapping the glass.

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Mark Jacobs stands waiting while looking out past the prison bars of the thick window. The visiting room door opens behind him. Mikey, Mark's son, sits down at a table with handcuffs in an orange jumper. The correctional officer checks with Mikey and Mark and walks to the other visitors' tables. At the next table, a mother sits across from another inmate as her little boy plays with his Easter eggs and chocolate.

"How are ya?" Mark says.

"Okay, I guess," Mikey says, averting his eyes.

"Yeah. Okay... Happy Easter," Mark says.

"Can I have a butt?" Mikey asks. Mark opens his pack and hands a cigarette to his son. Mark tries to light Mikey's cigarette from the soft book of matches. "They're goddamn wet," Mikey says to Mark as the dry cigarette hangs from his mouth. "What's the rap? How long 'til I get probation, Dad?"

"They said your attorney is working your case, but you can have visitors," Mark says as Mikey takes the cigarette out of his mouth.

"I want out! It wasn't me—this time. If there's one thing you told me, over and over, it was 'don't kill.' This is messed up." Mikey lowers his head.

"Can you see the lake from your cell window?" Mark asks.

"I don't care," Mikey says. He stares at the lonely cigarette on the table as he slowly rolls it back and forth with his childish fingers.

"I believe you. I know you're innocent."

"You're full of shit. Thanks anyway," Mikey says.

"Time," says the correctional officer. Mark takes out his half-crumpled Marlboro pack and slides it to Mikey on the table. The correctional officer clears his throat and eyes Mark.

"I'll see you next Sunday," Mark says as he backs out of his chair. Mark walks out. As Mark walks past the guard station in the hallway, he says, "He needs a light."

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"I'll take a pack of Marlboro reds, and put the beer in a paper bag."

Mark walks downtown Auburn to Emerson Park on Owasco Lake. He puts on his sunglasses and sits on a park bench. He lights up and takes a swig of beer. Down by the lakeshore, he spots a father and his two children. He watches the little boy lob large rocks into the water for big splashes. Standing next to her daddy, the older sister learns how to skip stones. Her father shows her how to hold it and throws one. It bounces three times

on the surface of the lake. Mark laughs and coughs to himself. He takes another swig of his beer and a long drag.

The daughter holds a flat rock and tries. It flips in the air and makes only one splash. "I can splash bigger than you." Her brother laughs.

"I don't want to splash it; I want to *skip* it," she says.

Her father goes behind her and shows her how to hold the flat, gray-edged stone. He flicks her wrist in practice and steps back. She takes a second, aims with intention at the end of the lake, and whips her arm sideways. The spinning, flat stone skips across the top of the sparkling water three times. "Yay!" she screams and jumps up and down.

"Watch me!" the boy says. *Ka-plunk!* Lake water surges to the top as the heavy stone sinks to the bottom.

# Juanita Rey



*Juanita Rey is a Dominican poet who has been in this country five years. Her work has been published in Mixed Mag, The Mantle and The Art Of Everyone.*

## WINTER WORLD

I feel like one of those early settlers  
who lost half their number to the cold.

I drape foreign skin over  
the large brown organ I was born with.

My second floor apartment is like a cabin  
erected so slapdash in advance of the coming chill.

I can no longer go south. My work is here.  
My friends are here. I am an immigrant.

Distances uproot my past. I tie messages to  
pigeons' legs but the birds die on route.

So now my breast cannot heat up on its own.  
I wrap it in cheap layers, await the deep freeze.

And, seated by radiator, I lose the self,  
become just the temperature needed to survive.

My face is sunless, my darkness pales.  
My touch, born harmless, now must be gloved.

## THE CLIPS IN MY LIFE

clips,  
cheap plastic,  
once baby-sat my hair,  
now chaperone,  
are sworn to  
loosen their grip,  
set free the curls,  
for the right man only –

they've a tenseness  
to match mine,  
yet collude  
so wonderfully  
when release is  
called for –

they go on in the morning,  
are taken off when I go to bed –

in between,  
we can be quite a pair



## THE JOY OF OTHERS

the joy of other people  
hunkers down on a bench  
in the park across the street  
from my third floor window –

the doctor  
looked down my chart,  
a list of all the times  
when I was just my body  
and my body was me –

“You need to rest,”  
he told me –

what he did not say was,  
“You need to sit by  
your window,  
stare out at  
the lives of others,  
be reminded of what’s  
not happening for you” -

but I know better  
what is wrong with me -

I won’t be healed  
until they leave.

# Ronan Cartwright

*Ronan Cartwright is a playwright, poet and fiction writer. His work explores issues surrounding grief, family dysfunction and solitude. He lives in London.*



# The Goldfish

When I was a child, there was nothing I loved more than going to see my grandparents. Their tranquil cottage was a home away from home, my memories of it forever filled with the colours and smells of summer, mainly because we'd go there during the holidays when the Dorset seaside could substitute for a trip to Disneyland and the days were long enough for a car ride back to Surrey in the early evening light. According to my mother, I'd jump out the car the moment we arrived, and rush to the front door, waiting for what felt like an age for my grandmother to answer. Then my sister and I would dart inside and track down my grandfather, while my parents made a cup of tea and engaged in small talk with my cousin, who made an art form of turning up unannounced.

The house itself was something of an old curiosity shop. There was a room devoted entirely to my grandfather's amateur golfing trophies, while another was filled with models of historic ships he and my grandmother had collected over the years, even though neither of them had sailed a day in their life. Then there was the garden, lined with palm trees they'd planted on a whim in the sixties and a pearl-white playhouse they'd built for my sister, and by the time I was old enough to enjoy it had become a storage unit for lawnmowers, hedge trimmers and Calloway putters.

It's at the end of this garden where most of my memories take place — by the goldfish pond, a place I'd so often sit, alone in my thoughts, watching streaks of bright orange and yellow flash beneath the shallow water. It was here I'd idle away the long afternoons, snatching at the fish before dropping them back in so they could live to fight another day, only to carefully scoop them up with a net as I grew older, in those difficult years when my grandfather would forget to feed them.

Now, as I return to the house for the first time in a decade, the site has an altogether different feel. I call it a site, as that's how it's been discussed in countless probate documents, legal tangles and estate agent sales pitches. I ask the Uber driver to stop at the side of the main road, as I want to walk down the driveway myself. I wait patiently for the memories to attack me, stabbing my senses with nostalgia and regret for lost youth. Yet nothing stirs. I keep walking and waiting, for I have

rehearsed this trip down memory lane ever since I first learned I'd have to make the arduous journey down south a fortnight ago.

Instead, I smile politely at the locals glaring at me through their ground-floor windows, unable to put a face to the name clogging up their outbox with countless threats concerning rights of way and century-old covenants that they've used with all their might to block the sale. As I approach the house and see the gutter dangling off the roof, I remember something only triggered by the sight and smell of actually being there, in the moment, the here and now. It occurs to me how, in fact, I didn't used to rush in at all — how my mother must have used this as colour for her anecdotes at the funeral to help ease the pain. The truth is that I'd knock at the door, quietly, as though waiting outside the headmaster's office, hoping never to be called in, dreading the lunch that would be eaten in stone-cold silence, the antipathy that would simmer between my sister and cousin, the quips my grandfather would make about how my mother married beneath her station and how my grandmother would sit by herself in the kitchen, smoking herself to an early grave that never came.

I'm the last to arrive, and what greets me is exactly what I expected: a house that hasn't been touched for a generation, that's stale, squalid, left to rot as the rest of us get on with our own lives before we too find ourselves diced up for the inheritance tax sweepstakes. I step inside and find my mother dusting the curtains, which makes little sense since the house is being bulldozed next week and we're only here to talk the agent through the boundaries. She pretends to be cleaning out of respect, when really she wants to wipe away her guilt, having checked out at that difficult age when parents stop being parents and slowly become problems. It's a long and winding road that I too am beginning to take — when a child is no longer willing to pass messages between parents like a double agent; when the doctors' appointments pile up and spill over into false alarms at A&E; when visits are relegated from summer holidays to a pop-in at Christmas and then, eventually, a quick phone call on Boxing Day.

She glares at me in a way only mothers do, and then tries her best to look betrayed, as though tutting that famous line of hers: *you'll regret it when I'm gone*, a mantra used to get me to visit on weekends. It seems she successfully managed to blackmail the rest of the family to get here at the crack of dawn and tidy, a tragic fiction I wanted no part in, because by the time we drive

away, this home will no longer exist, apart from on my mother's mantel, where she keeps a photo of her parents standing by the front porch, watering dying flowers.

Then there's my father in the conservatory, eyeing up my grandfather's golf clubs. There's a hole-in-one trophy on the window sill, from 1977, when my grandfather struck it lucky on a local par three. I pat Dad on the back and give him a hug, for unlike my mother and I, there's no latent hostility between us, no mutual disappointment at our failed family unit. Instead, I see a face eroded by my mother's venom, a poison I tried so long to protect him from, until one day I ran out of antiserum and left home for good.

It's sad to see my father now studying the golf clubs as though learning a first principal. His recent diagnosis is a topic of fierce debate within my family. I still find myself justifying his daily calls to congratulate me on graduating from a university I left fifteen years ago as nothing more than slips of the tongue, while my sister uses them as evidence to up his dose in a hopeless attempt to reverse the irreversible. Meanwhile, I have to contend with my mother's resolute stance that it's all an Hamlettian act, his madness a studied ploy — as if my father has *chosen* to wander blissfully into the cold winter of old age in order to disguise his true purpose, which apparently is to escape a lifetime squandered as her household stooge.

Upstairs I hear my brother-in-law hammering away, tasked with fixing a bathroom that will be rubble this time next week, probably keen to ignore my mother, due to an off-the-cuff comment she made at Easter about his receding hairline. The sound is quickly drowned out by the playful screams of my nieces outside, running amongst the overgrown garden weeds as my sister tries to corral them back into her embrace. I'm not surprised to find my sister standing outside, as this house must be a constant reminder to her of chronic childhood underachievement, when my grandparents would lavish me with praise for my school marks and flying colours, while she would spend her schooldays smoking round the back and letting spotty boys play with her gullibilities. How the tables turned when she became a television producer with a loving family of her own, while I swipe right for a living, measuring my hours in Costa cups and trips on the Metropolitan line as I go in search of experiences to write about, bereft of the work ethic required to do a proper 9-to-5.

'Mr Norris?'

A hand on my shoulder and a sweaty shake of my palm. I'm startled that this stranger has let himself in,

yet I'm quickly reminded that, technically, this house no longer belongs to us. As I try to identify just who this Lynx-soaked trespasser is, the penny drops. The hapless demeanour. The ill-fitting suit. This must be the estate agent.

"Sorry for your loss," he sighs, which is strange as he knows my grandparents passed away three years ago. "Shame it has to go — it's in a lovely state."

With that, he hands me a brochure. It's for eight luxury flats that will soon replace this crumbling mausoleum, but for which we were told they'd never get planning permission, so didn't up the asking price.

As I study the CGI plans for *Sea Breeze Homes*, I hear a car pulling up outside. At first I think it's the builders, but I can tell from my mother's reaction that it must be my cousin. This is what we feared. Cue a constant stream of crocodile tears and spiteful asides, all the while politely forgetting that she twice tried to sue my parents as executors in order to take sole control of this very building.

I show the agent around the house, and cringe at every turn. Part of me thinks I'm taking him on a viewing, the other half a forensic specialist walking a detective through a crime scene. All the telltale signs of death are there. The pile of unopened mail. The decaying bathrooms painted in that awful, sickly green I hoped my childhood memories had exaggerated but had evidently underplayed. The kitchen wallpaper, once a dazzling citrus, now a dirty yellow from years of chain-smoking and chip-frying. The plastic sheets covering the carpet. The stairs my grandmother fell down. The chair my grandfather never got up from.

'I knew your grandparents, briefly. I tried to convince them to sell before...well. They looked very much in love. Right until the end. I can't imagine the pain they went through, losing one another so quickly.'

*What pain?* I ask myself, thinking of the strict instructions in their wills to not buried in different cemeteries.

'Hello, one and all!' announces my cousin at the front door, notebook in one hand, tape measure in the other. She hugs me and then my mother, who smacks the duster against the curtain as if trying to swat a fly. My cousin goes straight for the dining room where there's a giant set of cabinets that nobody can get out of the house. It makes sense now. She's not come to start a fight. She's come to collect, to rescue the priceless artefacts before they're turned to dust, for everything here is up for grabs, and we're the only bidders. It's strange how we fought over every penny here, how the

contents of this house caused so much hardship — and yet, when push came to shove, everything has remained exactly as my grandparents had left it. Nobody wants the rug, because it's too heavy. Nobody wants the porcelain, because it doesn't go with the twenty-first century.

I leave the agent to pester my cousin about the boundaries, knowing that the ink is dry on the contracts and the deed cannot be undone, and decide to take a stroll out into the garden, where I hope the pangs of nostalgia will finally take their grip. I approach my sister and begin to reminisce about who we once were, then gradually turn to lament who we've all become, drifting apart like tectonic plates, breaking then sliding, tearing then splitting. But the bond between my sister and I remains steady. I'm happy for her: how she's built a family of her own, a foursome who do their bit for the rest of us but always put one another first. And in her own way she is happy for me too, knowing that I still have that all to come, when I finally get off the apps and out into the real world.

Then I take a moment to myself and make my way to the back of the garden, to the goldfish pond, where my well of emotions runs deepest. As I approach, I think of the way I'd use the grass to clean the sand from between my toes, or when a wasp once stung me after I helped fish it out the water and how that episode may explain the trust issues that have unravelled my relationships ever since. And finally, I'm reminded of how I would come here to avoid having to meet my sister's early boyfriends and cousin's awkward one-night-stands. It was always just me, here. Me and the goldfish.

When I at last find it, I await the wash of memories to lodge in my throat and pour out my eyes. But then I realise, of course, the water is gone. The fish are dead. All I see is stone, dried out by the sun, hollowed out like a half-dug grave.

'Hey! Who the heck are you?'

I look up, startled. It's a disgruntled neighbour craning his neck above a fence, no doubt terrified I'm a potential squatter.

'I used to live here. Well, my family did.'

'Oh. It's you lot,' he grumbles, gnashing his chipped-pottery teeth at me. 'I've heard all about your plans here. Mark my words: I'm going to make your life a living hell over it. I have friends at the council. Just you wait.'

*Good luck with that*, I joke to myself, for little does he know that the soundtrack to the next eighteen months of his life will be a crescendo of tractors, drills

and scaffold alarms tripping in the middle of the night.

I sit on its edge and breathe in my surroundings, trying to conjure up the sadness I was expecting to have overwhelmed me by now. The garden is so much smaller than it felt as a child, but then everything is smaller when you realise what life looks like from six feet tall. And then there's the palm trees, once bright with a flourish of green and brown, now wilting, waiting to be uprooted and put out their misery.

'Come on, old chap.'

It's my father, who has wandered out whilst unattended. He stands beside me with a sense of authority, which I'm pleased to feel. Perhaps the familiar surrounds have helped him roll back the years, to slip back into old family roles.

'The builders are here,' he adds. 'So we're going to make a move.'

'No problem.'

'Visit more often? And bring that lovely girl of yours, we'd love to see more of her.'

He's referring to Priya, a brief attempt at falling head over heels I had when I was in my early twenties, but who left for pastures new before I had a chance to offer her a key to my flat.

'I will,' I reply, bringing a smile to his face and sadness to mine.

As we trudge back to the house, I wave goodbye to my brother-in-law, who's busy chatting to the builders. My nieces hug my legs and run off to my sister, while I shake my father's hand one final time. All that's left now is to say goodbye to my mother. I realise I haven't exchanged a single word with her since I got here. She's sitting on the front steps, her hands pressed against the paving stones.

'I'm really sorry, Mum,' I mumble, my bottom lip trembling, just like it used to, back when she could make it all better.

'You'll regret it,' she replies. 'When I'm gone.'

I ease her into the car and watch my parents drive off in one direction and my sister in another. I nod to the builders as they make their way inside, while I wait for my Uber to connect so I can make my train. Then, as I turn to wave goodbye, to put the past behind me once and for all, I see my cousin with the rug, trying in desperation to drag it out the front door.

'A little help?'

'Sure', I reply, smiling through the tears. 'Why not?'

**Claire Davies**



# Unfamiliar Eyes and a Surplus of Jam

*Claire Davies is currently studying English and Creative Writing at Clark University. From St. Paul, Minnesota, Claire hopes her writing provides more warmth to her readers than the weather back home. She looks forward to living more, loving more, learning more, and writing all about it.*

Vern studied the eyes of a woman he didn't believe he'd ever seen before. Tapping his trembling index and middle finger alternately on the table before him, the man tried to think of something to say. Nearly 80 years old, Vern had seen plenty of faces in his life; how could he be expected to recognize this one?

"May I sit?" the woman asked, gesturing from the doorway to the chair across from him.

Vern never had guests and was unsure why this woman, who introduced herself as Ethel, would want to enter his home. The man couldn't remember the last time he had even spoken to another human, his only companion being a blush red colored betta fish which often greeted his bony finger at the glass at the front of the tank. Having been alone all his life, Vern was always weary of strangers and their inexplicit intentions. However, something about the woman standing in his doorway did not cause him significant worry. By no means was he comfortable allowing this so-called Ethel into his home, but just like everyone else, old Vern got lonely sometimes.

"Okay," Vern replied after a brief hesitation, the wooden chair creaking as he shifted.

"Wonderful."

Vern carefully followed Ethel with his eyes as she made her way over to the empty chair across the table. Despite her cane and slow hobble, she carried herself with a confidence unfamiliar to the old man and his fish.

Ethel sighed as she sat, relieved to be off her feet. "These knees, I tell you," she said, placing her purse on the table. The bag made an unexpectedly loud *thunk* as it met the oak. Vern froze, eyes shooting towards the purse. *What was that? What is in there?* The woman in front of him looked no younger than he and fairly unthreatening, but she was still a stranger who invited herself into his home, so who knows what she was capable of.

Seemingly ignoring his staring, Ethel spoke again, "How was your day today?"

“Why are you here?” Vern’s gaze upon the purse was still unbroken.

The woman pushed a thin, white strand of hair behind her ear and pursed her wrinkled lips ever so slightly.

“Why are you here?” Vern was louder this time and felt his breath become shallow.

“I’m just visiting. I, um, I just wanted to say hello.”

The afternoon sun began to descend, and its rays peeked shyly through the apartment’s kitchen window, illuminating half of Ethel’s face. Vern looked up from the purse and met the woman’s eyes. His eyebrows unfurrowed somewhat as he observed the woman’s face, for the darkness of his doorway had concealed an interesting fact: Ethel had one bright blue eye and one the very color of coffee.

“I don’t mean to frighten you, deary, I just wanted to see—”

“I think I would like you to go,” Vern interrupted. “I do not know who you are, and I would like you to leave my home.”

No one spoke for a moment. The wind whistled softly as it made its way through the window and caressed the cheeks of the pair at the table.

“Okay,” Ethel said reluctantly, “I’ll go.” She smiled sadly at Vern, appearing quite disappointed by his request. The man and his fish watched intently as their uninvited guest reached for her purse. She flung it over her shoulder, smiled again at Vern, and headed towards the door. Suddenly, Ethel stopped midway, planted her cane on the hardwood, and spun around to face Vern.

“Oh my, I nearly forgot!” She exclaimed. “I have something for you.”

Vern’s fingers began tapping the table once again. He felt his heart’s pulsing increase in speed and strength as the woman reached into her purse. He never should have let a stranger into his home. Surely whatever was in that purse wasn’t good. Surely Vern would regret the day he allowed the woman with a confident hobble and two-colored eyes inside.

“Ah! There it is.” Vern flinched as Ethel drew out a small glass container. “I made Jam! Raspberry jam,” Ethel proudly announced. She returned to Vern and placed the jar on the table before him.

“Have a lovely evening,” was the last thing she said before leaving the apartment and closing the door behind her.

Vern sat, shocked, looking to the door, then to the jar, and finally to his fish.

“By golly, she brought us jam.”

—————  
The sun awoke Vern around six o’clock the following morning. As he entered the kitchen, he eyed the jar of jam resting on the table where he had left it but continued walking to the counter where his betta fish resided.

“Good morning, Fish. Are you hungry?” Vern’s fish had lived with him for over a year, but the old man never could come up with a name that suited her, so “Fish” it was. “Well, you’re in luck,” Vern said as he shook a small cylinder labeled ‘Tropical Fish Flakes.’ Fish excitedly swam to the top of her five-gallon home and gobbled down her breakfast. Vern poured himself a glass of orange juice and pulled up a chair in front of the tank, as he did each morning. He sat in the morning sunlight, listening to the birds calling to one another as Fish glided peacefully through her deep green plants and around the bubbles created by the humming filter. Often Vern found himself feeling sorry for the little fish. Each day she lived the same life, surrounded by the same things. He wondered if Fish dreamt of exploring a slow-moving stream or devouring a fresh bloodworm. He hoped she was happy. Perhaps she didn’t know of any other world outside of her tank and was, therefore, content. Vern could never know for sure, but what he did know was that he was hungry.

Vern glanced at the jam again. “Wouldn’t hurt to see if it’s any good, right?” he said aloud. He grabbed the jar and examined it. Its lid had a piece of twine delicately wrapped around its circumference, tied into a bow. The word ‘enjoy’ was written in perfect script on a sticky note on the jar’s quilted crystal.

Vern toasted two slices of bread and slathered them with Ethel’s raspberry jam. It tasted marvelous. Perfectly sweet and not too runny. The old man was thoroughly impressed. After finishing breakfast, he placed the jar in his refrigerator door, where six jars of homemade jam already sat. Vern adored jam, and somehow the strange woman he met yesterday knew this and that raspberry was his favorite. Strawberry-rhubarb and blackberry were close contenders, but raspberry jam served a nostalgia almost as sweet as its fruity contents.

He could not recall exactly how or when he learned to make jam, but Vern knew it reminded him of a time he felt at peace. Maybe it brought him back to the raspberry bush in the alley of his childhood home or the smell of summer air, or maybe it didn’t bring him back anywhere at all; it was just delicious. While his hands were losing strength and standing tired his legs quickly, Vern still made jam at least once a month.



Often he'd wake up with no recollection of mashing the berries, melting the sugar, canning the jam, or cleaning the dishes, but alas, fresh jars of jam would be filling his fridge and freezer. In the mornings, he'd exclaim, "Fish, I forgot that I made jam yesterday! Oh, I love when I surprise myself with jam."

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Many days had passed since Ethel had sat at Vern's dining table, and Vern had long finished the jam she'd left with him. Autumn was quickly approaching. A large oak tree swayed outside of Vern's second-story window; its branches often danced in shadow form on the inside of his bedroom walls. Vern was moving slower these days, and simple tasks became difficult for a man his age living alone. Through the algae that softly coated her glass, Fish watched him begin to spill juice as he raised the glass to his lips and observed him trying to use a fork to spread jam on untoasted bread. Occasionally, Fish would see small droplets glide down the old man's cheeks as he sat facing the fish tank, sometimes for hours at a time. Many nights, Vern would call out from his room.

"Help me! I'm trapped! Help!"

Vern's own voice and volume would startle him as he rarely spoke anymore, not even to Fish. His eyes would dart across the room, watching as moonlit tree branch silhouettes tried to wrap their sneaky arms around him. One particular night, Vern had left one of his bedroom windows open. The window sill was home to a small blue ceramic vase that held a fake sunflower. The October air was cool and powerful. The wind howled outside, dancing with the trees, harmonizing with the occasional rumble of cars on the streets below. An especially strong gust knocked the vase from the windowsill, sending a shattering sound echoing throughout Vern's apartment.

The old man nearly fell out of bed with how violently he awoke. His hands shielded his ears, and he squeezed his eyes closed as if the sound was attempting to travel through them as well. The room was dark, too dark to see what could have caused such a horrible noise.

*Somebody is breaking in, the helpless man thought. Somebody is after me.*

As fast as his aching bones would allow, Vern left his bed and walked out of the bedroom. The apartment was still dark, so Fish was confused when she saw her friend walk past her and proceed straight through the front door. Fish didn't think Vern remembered there was a world outside of their one-bedroom apartment. Regardless, all she could do was watch through the open

door as Vern's shadow glided slowly across the hallway floor into a world unknown to both of them.

Vern knew not what he was running from nor where he was running to, but there was no time for contemplation. The hallway Vern found himself in had many doors, and the patterned carpet made him dizzy. He reached a staircase and grasped the railing with all the strength he could muster before beginning to descend the stairs. Unable to move as fast as his brain was telling him to, Vern felt a burning sensation in his eyes, followed by the welling of tears.

"No, no, no, no, no," he whimpered aloud. "I need to get out of here!"

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Vern pushed open a door, and the night air surrounded him, nearly pulling him outside. Barefoot on the sidewalk, he began to walk, still terrified of whoever or whatever had made that loud noise in his apartment and what they wanted from him. Vern hated how strangers never told you what they wanted. The strong wind dried the man's cheeks as quickly as he wet them with tears while he stumbled through the night.

The streetlights hurt his blurry eyes, the wind pecked at his face and challenged his balance, his feet were numb, and his ears could make out nothing but the wooshing of the air and the sound of his frantic heart. The sky was so dark, or was that the ground? His feet were on grass now. A car was going by. Did they say something to him? The trees were taunting him, their real branches this time, not their shadows. Was this his house? Was his mother home? Why wouldn't his eyes focus? His nose was running. He opened his mouth, but no sound escaped, or maybe it was stolen by the wind, taken to some distant place where no one but she would hear it. Where was he going? Who was behind him? His legs were giving out, his head was spinning, no breath went in or out. Vern fell to the ground, and the world around him finally stopped.

---

Sat in a familiar, creaky chair, Vern stared into Fish's world. Fish swam back and forth at the front of the glass, hoping a bony finger would greet her in return. One never did. Entranced by the soothing trickling of the water filter and the mesmerizing motion of the betta fish's fins, Vern was oblivious to the rest of his surroundings, including the conversation occurring outside his front door.

"Grace found him wandering by Juno and St. Mary's. She left immediately after hearing the back door's alarm, so we think he was outside no longer than

ten minutes before Grace picked him up.”

“My God...You said he’s doing okay?”

“Yes, ma’am. His feet were very scraped, but he suffered no major injuries, even from the fall. He doesn’t remember anything from last night, but his anxiety does seem more heightened than usual.”

“Okay. Well, thank you, sweetheart. I appreciate everything you all do around here.”

“You’re very welcome. Vern is quite the special man.”

“I think so too. You have a lovely day now.”

“You t– hey, I actually have a question for you.”

“Oh?”

“Did Vern used to help you make jam? He’s been showing me all the jams you’ve brought him and saying he made them. It’s very sweet. I was curious if he was mistaking a past event for his current life.”

The woman giggled. “You know, that is too funny because, in our old house, I always asked Vern if he wanted me to teach him how to make jam, but he said he liked watching me make it instead. Sometimes he’d help mash the raspberries, but he mostly watched while we chatted.”

“Well, he certainly associates jam with delight. Have a good visit, ma’am.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.”

The door handle rattled, and the hinges let out a groan as they opened. Vern turned in his seat to face the entryway.

“Good morning, deary. It’s Ethel,” the old woman said with a kind smile.

Vern studied the eyes of a woman he didn’t believe he’d ever seen before. Her eyes were quite interesting, one blue and the other brown. She seemed nice, but what was she doing standing in Vern’s home?

“I see little Rhubarb is still swimming along! Has she grown even more, or have I lost my marbles?”

Vern looked to the fish and back to the woman in his doorway. Often the fish found herself feeling sorry for the old man. Each day he lived the same life, surrounded by the same things. She wondered if Vern dreamt of exploring a busy city or hiking the peaks of mountains. She hoped he was happy. Perhaps he didn’t know of any other world outside of his room and was, therefore, content.

“May I sit?” Ethel gestured towards the chair by the table, “My knees are just killing me.”

“Okay,” Vern replied. “I think I would like that.”

“Wonderful. Me too.”





# An Afterword

*Anthony Ilacqua,  
editor at large*

**Read  
Submit  
Tell everyone you know**

Welcome to Issue 61 of *Umbrella Factory Magazine*. I, and I hope I'm not the only one, am very glad you're here. It's been my pleasure to be a part of this magazine since its inception in 2009, and I've been a part of every issue in some capacity or other. In all the years we've been at this, I have marveled at the process, the community and the longevity of it.

As I was preparing for these remarks, I typed "are literary journals still important" in that all knowing and constantly waiting Google search bar. I guess I wanted to see what others thought of this question. I guess I've been thinking about this because of all the recent developments made available for anyone with internet access. AI is out there composing all sorts of writing. I realize that oftentimes, even AI needs a little coaxing from a human. I also wonder if AI will be able to write poetry and fiction in a way that feels perfectly coherent, somewhat flawed and humanly delightful. Those things may be the next feature in AI writing, but now, I think we would all prefer to read something generated by one of us.

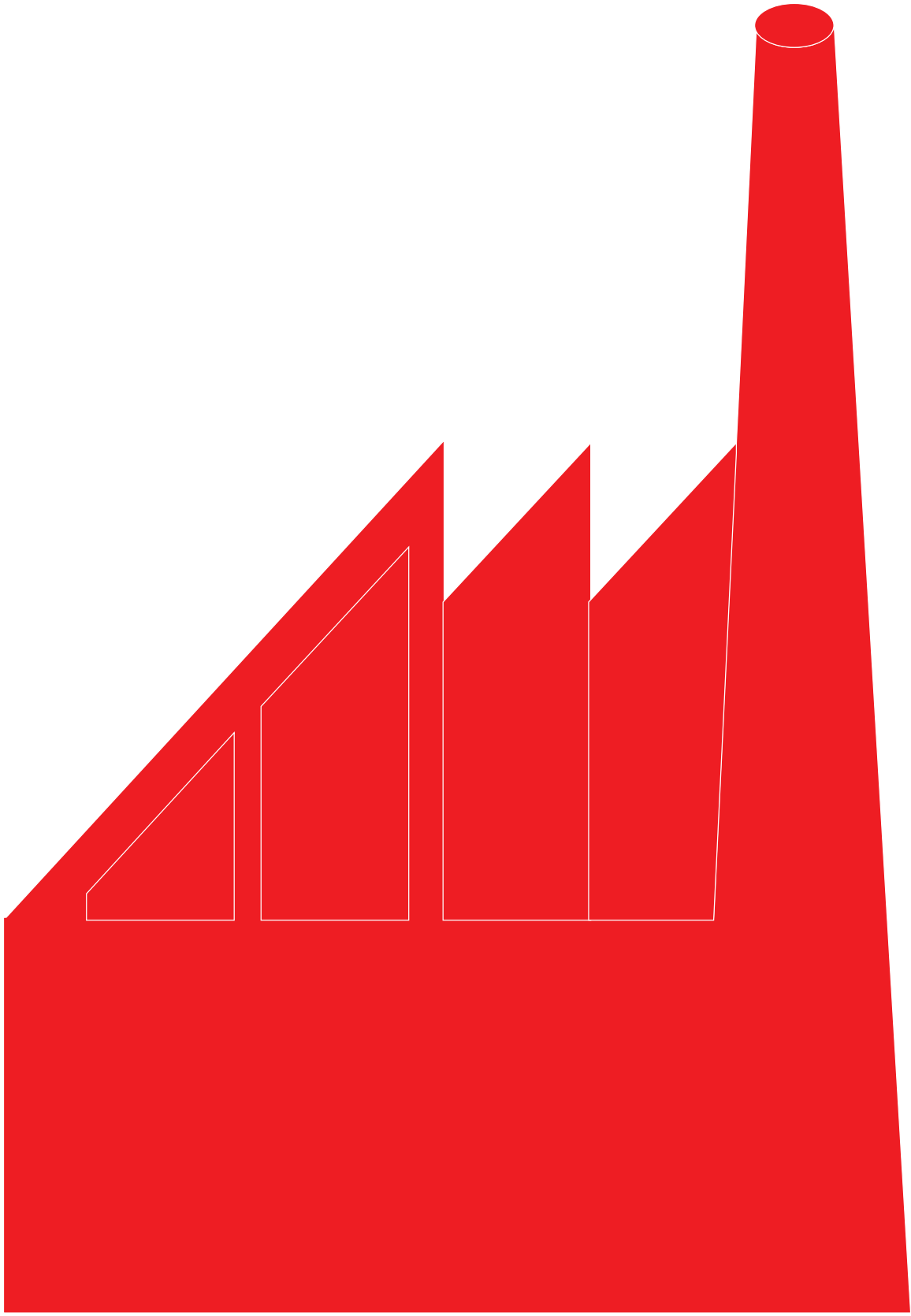
I've long held to the belief, and rightly founded, that literary magazines are really for writers and academics. I've always understood that the readership is very small. Even at the smallest consideration, the readership may only be the editor who reads a submissions, likes it, and puts it into a magazine. Even that small of a relationship is very important. It gives the writer the encouragement, the validation, that yes, to endeavor a piece of writing is a worthwhile venture and one to be undertaken.

Literary magazines, and *Umbrella Factory Magazine* is no different, is a small scale operation. Our staff has fluctuated over the years. We've had as many as six of us at a time and as few as one. Our current staff is two, the editor-in-chief, Sharyce (say that fast) and myself, an editor at large. No one on our staff has ever been paid. Our operating budget, being very low, was designed for longevity which is why we're still here.

Why do it? I think it's important. After all, I had the opportunity to read new writing, short stories like Douglas Steward's "Now and Later," Claire Davies's "Unfamiliar Eyes and a Surplus of Jam," Ed Patterson's "Skipping Stones" and Ronan Cartwright's "The Goldfish." I wasn't the first reader of these pieces, and I probably wasn't the first editor either. But as I read these short stories, they delighted me, I was inspired to share them and I knew they would work well together in a curated issue. I feel the same way about our poets: Juanita Rey, Mykyta Ryzhykh and Elias Kerr. As I see it, we are eight people, and even if we worked independently and none of us have ever met face to face, we produced something that is tangible. We produced an issue of a literary magazine.

And that Google search? I'll leave you with what Evan J of *Cloud Lake Literary* has to say about my question, are literary journals still important:

“Effectively, literary journals create the moments when literary correspondence, friendships, and even future mentorships begin. These are moments that define community.”



**Stay Dry.**