

PULSE & ECHO

A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Prose

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Danville, Illinois

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PREFACE

During a time of conflict and uncertainty, this journal of contemporary writing is a celebration.

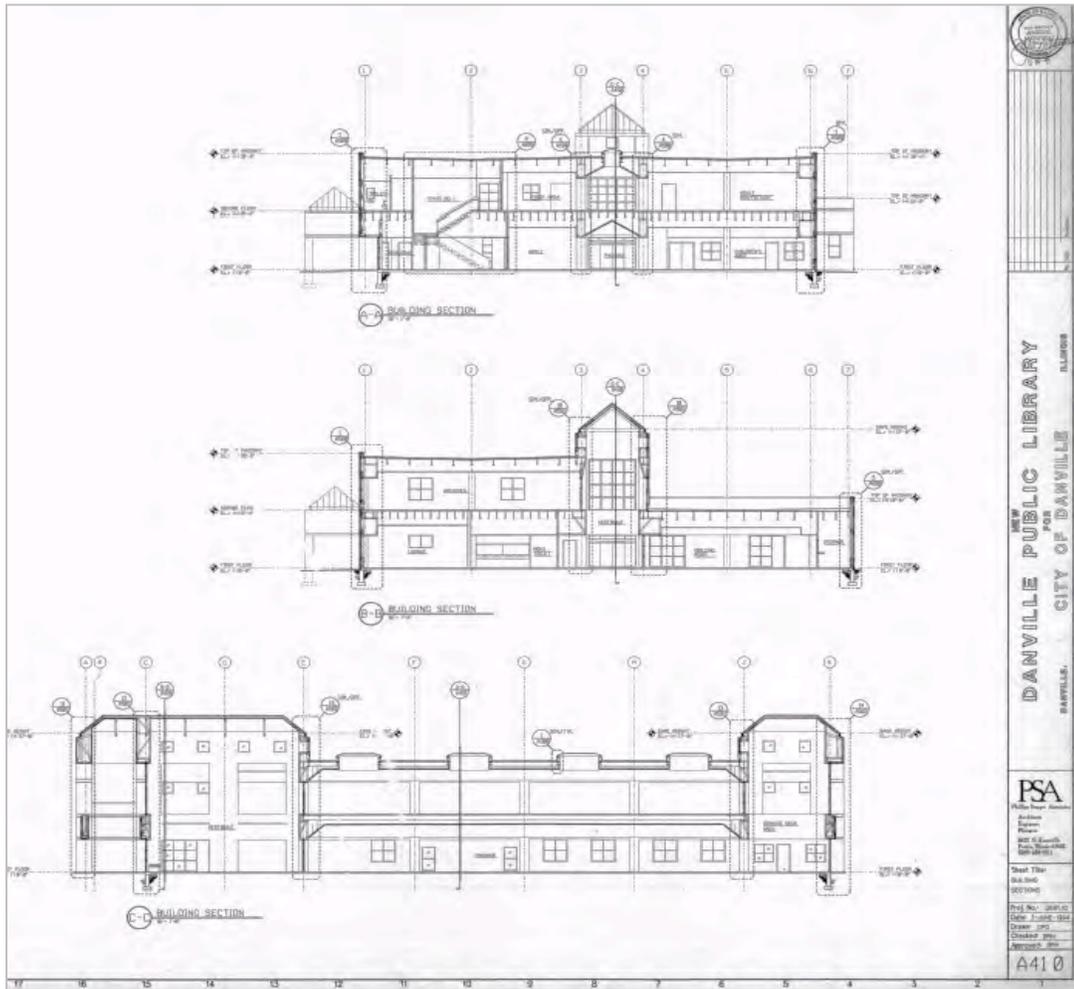
We proudly present the first annual Ampersand Awards for Poetry and Prose, selected by guest judges, Bruce Weigl and Scott Russell Sanders. The award is named for the 27th letter in the alphabet (until 1836) because it binds together a new community of writers spanning seven decades, nine states, and three continents.

Ours is a multi-generational and international gathering of poets and storytellers. In addition to new work from several Danvilles (Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, California, Georgia), we include poetry from as far away as Lagos, Nigeria as well as translations of several Eastern European poets. Inside, you'll find poems and stories of worry and delight, anger and mystery, woe and wonder, leaves held and leaves fallen. On one page, someone grieves a lost partner; on another, an old man makes tea.

My sincere thanks to Bruce and Scott, two renowned Mid-western writers whom I consider both mentors and friends - for their generosity of spirit and for their conscientious service as judges for the 1st annual Ampersand Awards.

May each reader find, among these eclectic styles and curious perspectives, a few words worth remembering.

Stuart
Danville, Illinois
November 2022



Architect's rendering of Danville Public Library, 1995

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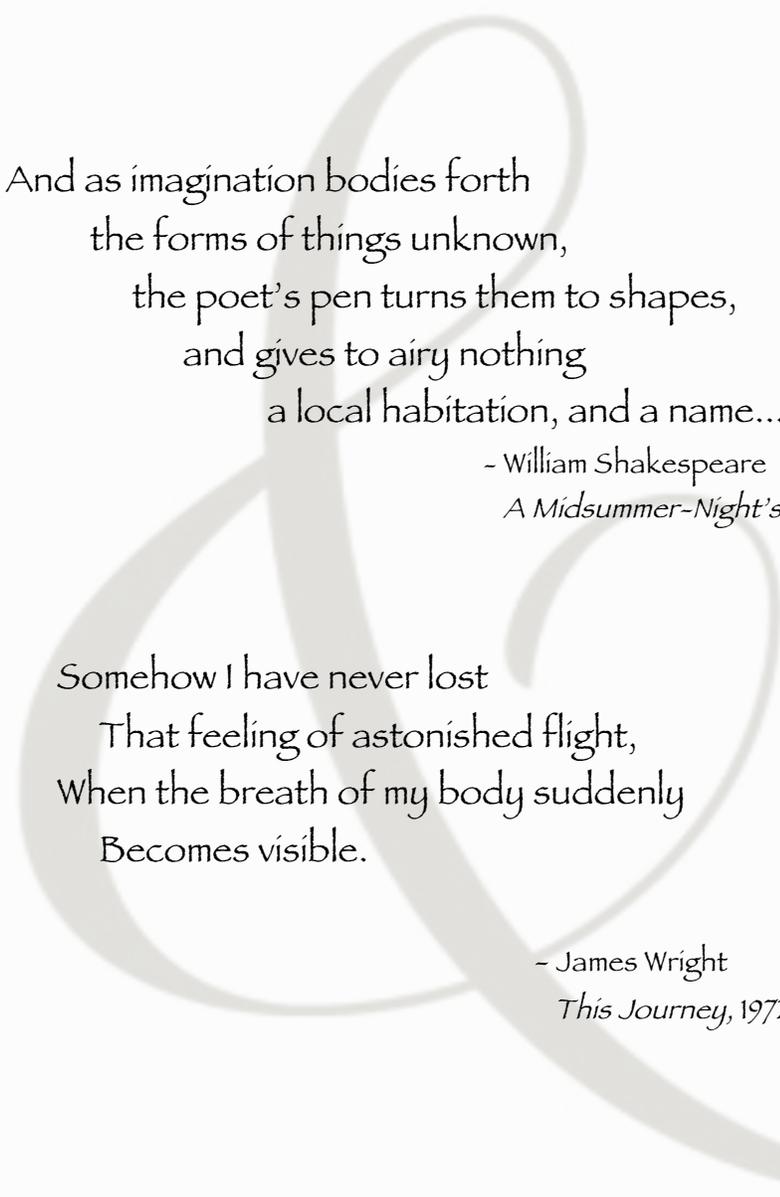
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~ Ampersand Award for Prose ~

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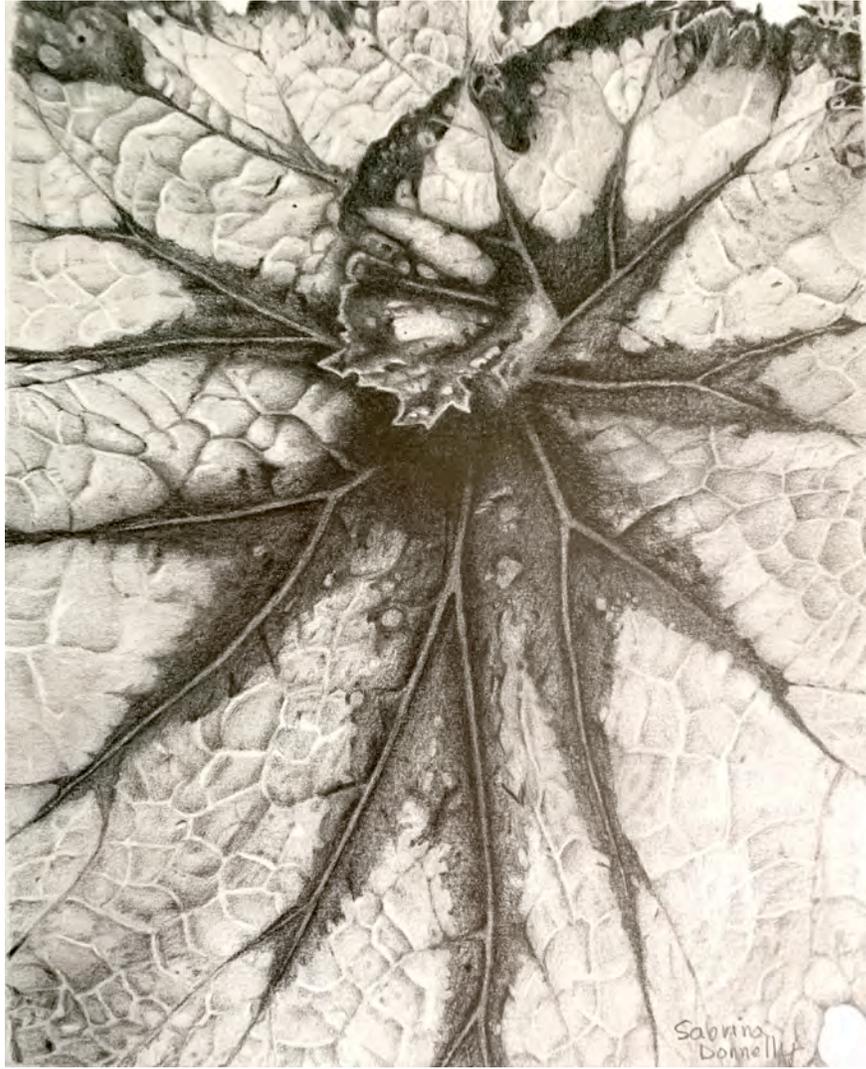


And as imagination bodies forth
the forms of things unknown,
the poet's pen turns them to shapes,
and gives to airy nothing
a local habitation, and a name...

- William Shakespeare
A Midsummer-Night's Dream, Act IV

Somehow I have never lost
That feeling of astonished flight,
When the breath of my body suddenly
Becomes visible.

- James Wright
This Journey, 1972



Drawing by Sabrina Donnelly

- Ampersand Award for Poetry -

OUR WAGONS WERE MADE ENTIRELY OF WOOD

Dzvinia Orłowsky

- after Oleksander Dovzhenko¹

Iron hubs attracted restless skies,
lightning strikes that split sin

from sinner, seedy chatter
from swampy gossip,

desolation from everyday sorrow's
slumping silhouettes—

they could make hair stand
on heads or arms,

but by then it was too late.
The angry rumbling called out

hungry, aggressive dogs with black leathery bodies,
scaly patches of fur,

who barked hoarsely behind each filled wagon
halted now and then by a hidden rock,

tiny avalanches of grain spilling
onto the dirt road.

¹ Oleksander (Alexander) Dovzhenko, 1894-1956, was a Ukrainian filmmaker and memoirist.

Because breath was wasted on isolated,
lofty thoughts,

some waggoners chose to keep
the iron, the thunderheads'

pressed fists, rickety wheels
rutting the ground.

THE WHISPERER

Dzvinia Orlowsky

Lately, the whisperer found himself sleeping alone. His dog wouldn't share the bed. He preferred to sleep on the stairs or on the sagging futon.

The dog stopped greeting him when he came home after work. Back so soon?

The squeaky plush donut once offered as prey gathered dust on the kitchen floor.

The more the whisperer brushed his dog, the more the dog seemed to disappear. Thick wads pulled from the metal-toothed Furminator lined like tumbleweeds along the kitchen counter.

I could stuff my pillow with it or use it to make a loose-knit sweater. When the dog's stomach gurgled, the whisperer heard laughter.

I've lost my touch, the man whispered to himself. This isn't much of a pack.

He imagined a half dozen trained rescues jumping through hula hoops.

He couldn't focus on the editorial he was writing; he burned his coffee. The dog leaned against the wall, watching.

I'm not a leader, the man realized. He's here because I'm his last hope for a meal, nothing more. The dog's eyes stared into him.

It's never as complicated as it seems.

Love's just one more thing worth learning a trick for.

THE APOSTLE OF DESIRE IN HO CHI MINH CITY

Bruce Weigl

The brightest green parrot
squawks from the marbled floor living room
where no one lives

style over function

lost on me and

whatever seductions
went way over my head
at the dinner party

busy with servants.

All morning long it had rained
so hard even the toad

took refuge in my room,
the purple sky.

THE AMBIGUITY OF HIS INTENTIONS

Bruce Weigl

I waited in a bar in Cambridge for my teacher
while he did some poetry business at Harvard, lucky
graduate student I was after the war
who had found someone who took an interest
in my work and in the man I hadn't yet
become. I was killing time and thought I might
as well drink my way through the long afternoon.
Later, I would be driven home by my teacher, and I had no other chores.
I was drinking Irish Whiskey and cold
draft beer, slowly, as I watched a baseball game
in black and white that had gotten suspended in time
by the rain. I sat alone among others. We shared
a little baseball over drinks, but no one
said too much or even said their names.
A black and white cat walked across the room.
The door swung open. Someone else had come
to drink. He sat two stools down from me
and that was fine. I feel better when people
don't get close. He joined us to watch the game
and threw down two vodka shots before
he took his hat off. He chased the shots with a bottled
beer and tapped the bar with his empty shot glass

for another. We were on our way. What did I know about anything. He bought my drinks throughout the afternoon. The bar flies came and went. He asked me questions about the war. Someone played an accordion in a back room. I didn't know how drunk I was until I tried to stand up to find the head and fell directly onto the floor with my face. My new friend helped me up, nameless, he wiped the blood away with his handkerchief, and gave me another drink. He moved to the bar stool next to mine and he put his hand on my leg. He asked me if I'd been wounded in the war. I told him that was none of his business, but because he still wasn't done with me he asked if he could see the place where the wound had healed. I led him like a woman towards nothing but the end of the long afternoon, a lesson for us both, from disaster.

THE WEIGHT OF RAIN

Bruce Weigl

I return to become a wanderer.
I borrow her lipstick's stain
of love affairs which float and drown
onto this shore
before the thousand flower petals
and the storm
fills the dust.

LOST EPISODE

Bruce Weigl

Rain settles in like a pack of
guests
just back
from the dusty road

and more rain on the way drops
big as rice bowls
swept across the South China Sea why

promises must be kept
to the empty

HOMAGE TO THE GECKO

Bruce Weigl

Grateful for the swift work she
makes of mosquitoes and flies
I wait for her to come out
from behind things
where she fits her slim body
to stay cool I imagine
until the sun goes down

she is thin as an envelope
she is brown going to green
and we have chosen
to live here together

our dark rooms
more than enough
for the two of us
to hide from everything
except the dust of worlds
crumbling far away in space
that always finds you in the end.

GRAFFITI OF LOTUS

Kristin Roahrig-Malloy

Cigarettes and urine
steel and fire
smells of the city
trace themselves across beams
of unfinished buildings

-A woman

formed by the city
fashioned in dark contours
treads over mud
clumps turned at the
construction site, past
the silver beams
graffiti already etched
graffiti
of lotus

JUST TWO OLD CARS

Kristin Roahrig-Malloy

One eye opened, the other missing,
two cars look blindly ahead
rusted from disuse, long
settled in their graveyard
the pines unknown markers

doors hang open, stale
air settles while moss
creeps, attempts to
return the metal to earth
and one can only stare

Stare- at this burial, mirroring
our own selves the subtleties of change,
waking up one day and find skin marked
as a strangers, when stale breath
departs without notice

a sigh

MANDALA OF LEAVES

Kristin Roahrig-Malloy

Autumn shrouds the woman's skin
leaves tinted, burnished bronze
red as ripened fruit.

A season of travel from
the outer husks
through inner layers.

Cacophony of brittle leaves.
Beautiful
but as a mandala of sands

disintegrates
dissolving
into dirt.

LOT'S WIFE MOURNS

PAULA GOLDMAN

Why was I punished?
It is a sin to look back?
I was a good wife, not
To be given a name.
To be called Lot's wife
For eternity.
I turned into a pillar of salt,
The salt that flavors the earth.
The past is no longer alive.
My young heart hardened.
This was my home
My family, my friends.
To come out into the light,
I refused; I couldn't help it.
My longing was so great
For the happiest moments.
I made the meals, cleaned
our box-like house, sewed
for my daughters, lay
with Lot whenever.
Why was I punished?
Because I wouldn't give the angels
at my door salt?
It is a bad custom.

Why alone on a mountain top
To be mocked forever
for looking back?
My daughters needed a mother,
No sleeping with their father,
a sin that was yet unnamed.
What kind of God— “no kind”
can be said next to his unutterable name.

A CALLING

PAULA GOLDMAN

Old photographs
hurt, call out
from drawers, cabinets
shelves, boxes, "I'm not here,
don't know when
I'll see you again, if
I'll see you again."
Why have I no place to hold them?
What's missing in me?
Is it you?
I've held on for so long.
Do I need a picture?

~

Like roiling dark
winter Atlantic waves, a tide
of emptiness rides
through me, as when

I walked with Mother
to the pier near our house,
As I grew, so did her bulky weight.
There was no shape.
Do I need a picture?

Mother wears an aqua gown
borrowed from a friend

for her engagement, holds
long stemmed roses.
A sad, pretty face.
Elegant, and sad.
A whole life shot through:
Many unhappy returns.
Depressed, ill- treated,
The young woman might
Become me.

ICE FLOES
PAULA GOLDMAN

Late sun atop firs
Seasoned lovers' braided arms
Nighthawks not the lark

The garden withers
Days linger, calls stop coming
The script on the lawn

The trees stand naked
Ice floes on the frosted lake
Lone fireside nights

Snowdrops by the rose
A cool easterly wind blows
Through a pining heart

PLUMS
PAULA GOLDMAN

I cannot reach.
I cannot feel.
I can only reproach
 you for the promise you held
 and took away like a plum
 leaving me with a damson stone.
Your pale body on the beach,
mine snuggled into the crest
 of your arm,
the water splashing us
 with its insistent chill.
The small briefs you wore.
I wanted to cover you
 keep you
 warm.
You wanted no more.
Eyes closed and I beheld
The emptiness of summer's now,
The fullness of winter snow dunes.

VAN GOGH'S BOOTS

PAULA GOLDMAN

after "A Pair of Boots" by Van Gogh, c.1885

So many boots and shoes Van Gogh painted,
muddied in the rain, worn down. Too poor,
he got them from flea markets, or
people whose portraits he finished,
to show these wedded pairs, artifacts
of his loneliness and despair, except
for the faithful love from his brother, Theo,
in whose arms he died after his suicide
attempt, the journey of his life in these shoes,
untied laces, tops turned over, hobnailed soles,
precious to him, he painted repeatedly.

My white sneakers lie on the floor
beside my desk. They exude sadness,
shadows, worn down heel corners,
the deep creases across the wide toes.
Where have they taken me? My troubled
mind uncertain of the shaky ground I walk
upon. Sorel boots, handcrafted, tire rubber,
waterproof, fur trimmed taken to the basement
with so many others closed in the dark.
A lifetime of bitter searching
black shadows of boots,
tired soles, undone curled laces,
shadows behind every life
as one walks this earth.

BODY, a Calligram
(Homage to G. Apollinaire, 1880-1918)
Elizabeth Appleby

hair
eye eye
nose
lips
neck
>fingers hand arm SHOULDERS arm hand fingers<
CHEST
tummy
waist
hip hip
leg leg
leg leg
knee knee
leg leg
leg leg
foot foot

I DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT MUSIC

Paul Hostovsky

but when I heard that interview
with the famous conductor
of the metropolitan symphony orchestra,
and the interviewer asked him
what kind of music he listened to
when he was driving alone in his car,
or just hanging out in his kitchen,
or kicking back in his recliner,
and he answered that music was
his work, his life, his life's work,
and when driving or just relaxing
he preferred the silence, actually—
somehow that struck my untrained ear
as dissonant. And resoundingly sad.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR HIS NEXT LOVE POEM

Paul Hostovsky

If you write me another love poem, jeez,
keep me out of it, will you please?
And whatever you do, no mention of
my breasts. Try writing about love
instead of my lips and hair and eyes.
And keep it simple. If it simplifies
half as much as love simplified
before it got complicated, I'll have lied
if I say it isn't any good. And it'll be very
good if I can read it without a dictionary.

OSIP
Paul Hostovsky

Osip Mandelstam wrote a poem making fun of Stalin. It got Osip in a lot of trouble. He recited it at a salon where it got some laughs and then someone informed on him and he ended up dying in a Gulag in the Soviet Far East. I wrote a poem making fun of Donald Trump and it got no attention because this is America where nobody listens to poets or reads their poems. And maybe Osip would say I should be grateful I live in a country where nobody listens to poets or reads their poems, a country where you are free to say what you want to say, no matter if it's false or hateful or hurtful or divisive or throwing gasoline on the fire that OK maybe you didn't exactly start or exactly yell in a crowded theater, but you're fanning the flames and it's not only legal but politically expedient, and all the snow in Siberia won't put it out.

A POEM BY
OSIP EMELIEVICH MANDELSTAM

-translated by Dzvinia Orlovsky²

Take from my open hands
A little sun,
Honey
Like the bees of Proserpine
No one
 can free a boat
 unanchored
 hear the shadow
 shod in fur
 track down fear
 this dense forest.

We are left with kisses,
Tingling
 tiny bees that die
On leaving their hive
Rustling
In translucent underbrush of
Their night.

² Osip Mandelstam (1891-1936) was born in Warsaw and lived in Russia until his exile. This translation originally appeared in the Plum Creek Review, 1974, and is reprinted here with the permission of Dzvinia Orlovsky.

THREE BY MIECZYSLAW JASTRUN
Translated by Dzvina Orłowsky and Jeff Friedman

WEIGHT

I see you through closed eyes
like water in a glass, transparent
as though without history---
the memory of you diminished by time.
How much water has been drained from the lake?
The loss carries the weight
of granite mountains,
and the lake is now a shipyard.

LATE

In a white dress and straw hat,
she is like a sunspot on sand,
flashing a wide smile.

But in an instant,
her image disappears
and flames burn across the desert sand
and the dead river splits.

What remains of memory?
The ruins of Troy dissolve
into the ruins of Warsaw.

The black wind kidnapped
the straw hat and a cloud
stole the white dress.

Now the rain comes
and she runs naked
and a whole century drowns
in shadow.

HIGH TIME

Now we must decide
and the weight of our decision
is greater than holding August stars
in our hands. But to whom
should we answer if not ourselves?

Though you may think you can dream
people back to life, they come to you
with the precise meaning of death.
And their message is clear:
We can't leave this world
without losing everything.

But in me, time and space become one
and the rain knocks on the door of a leaf.



Frozen Leaf on Asphalt, 2021

CAN WE KEEP HIM?

Elena Carrillo

The winter breeze fills the air.
The snow so white, is cold and bare.
The fire's warmth is soft and soothing.
The whistle of snow is light and moving.
The dogs all bark at the swirling snow.
So gentle, yet rough; That's how it blows
I get up from bed with a great big yawn,
and look out the window. It's the break of dawn.
I rush to my closet to get ready to play.
Outside in the snow is where I shall stay.
When I am dressed, I hop outside,
to see the snow so white and wide.
I look to the forest to the right of my house,
and that's when I saw a cute little mouse.
I followed him out to the forest without care,
when suddenly, I was aware...
I was lost.
I looked for home for what felt like an hour.
The cold winter breeze was bitter and sour.
I followed the trail of my little mouse friend,
and off in the woods we started to descend.
I looked in the eyes of the little white mouse,
and realized he was taking me back to my house...
When I got home, I hugged my mom,
and I realized the mouse was waiting for me patient and calm.
So, I turned to him and called him Tim.
I looked at Mom, and said, "Can we keep him?"



Untitled
Photo by Bade Fuwa

THERE ARE NO BUTTERFLIES IN HEAVEN

Bade Fuwa

There are no butterflies in heaven.
I was awake but I was dead.
The tales were all lies.
There was no song but a deafening ring the blind would hear
I took a walk and all the faces were blurry
Everything was blurry
Oh! We are not supposed to see
Then I could feel a soft landing on my shoulder
A giant boulder
Then a silent whisper...
There are no butterflies here.

UNTIL THE WINDS OF A WARMING DAY

Wilbur Bolton

I sat alone
In the early hours of this morning
Writing your name
With my index finger
In the dust of memories
That had collected
On every tangible surface
In rooms still filled with you.

I sat alone
In the early hours of this morning
Silently surveying
The calligraphy of your name
Until the winds
Of a warming day
Erased it once again.

SOMETHING YOU SAID

Wilbur Bolton

Something you said yesterday hurt me.
Not a lot, just a little.
Your few words, quickly spoken then forgotten,
Brought me just a little pain.

I remember saying to myself,
"It's no big deal, really."
Nothing more than if I had cut myself shaving
Half asleep, early in the morning.

Your words, like the quick nick of my razor
Were just enough to sting,
Were just enough to burn,
Were just enough to draw a single drop of blood.

And while I told myself, "It's no big deal, really."
I spent yesterday wondering
How long it might take someone to bleed to death
A single drop of blood at a time.

THE TRUTH

Wilbur Bolton

He drinks her beauty in full measure
from deep, full cups of vision.

And ever so gently he kisses her
with handsomeness that is his mind.

But she, being pretty, struggles
and he, being ugly, holds her.

She is by far the poorer.

By far the richer, he.

for he knows truth is beauty.

But she only notices skin.

THE DAY BEFORE THE WORLD ENDED

Wilbur Bolton

The day before the world ended,
I went grocery shopping,
buying ingredients for meals
that would never be prepared
for menus that would never be served.

The day before the world ended
I checked expiration dates
on canned soup and cottage cheese,
not knowing everything in my cart
would expire the next day.

The day before the world ended
I paid by credit card
intending to pay the balance
at the end of the month.
I received no more statements.

The day before the world ended
I meant to tell you "I love you,"
but I didn't, thinking
I had all the time in the world.

A POCKETFUL OF MEMORIES

James G. Piatt

The yellow leaves on the old sycamore tree in the patio seem to be shivering as the blue jays and mockingbirds jump from one branch to another fussing over bugs, a photograph of avian disputes. I hear the warbling of colorful birds, and the droning of cars far in the distance as time continues to erase precious memories

I smell the faint aroma of scented roses in the garden the last of her plants to continue without her.

I only feel the thorns pricking at my sorrows. The fall breeze is colder now, awakening a numbing agony in my heart, and I am feeling a sense of permanent loss screaming through my aging mind.

At night, as I am sitting in the library, I am feeling sad

As memories struggle through my melancholy mind.

The old piano near where I am sitting is mute, chords that once streamed from it like a mountain brook are now hidden inside, and silent. The beautiful notes that once filled the air are silent, like the beloved hands that played Beethoven's Fur Elise and Chopin's haunting nocturnes. Those special musical hours captured in time have faded now.

The night's moon is sending cold beams across

The North window, and as I shiver, my mind senses
a faint voice echoing in the shadows of an old mirror.
As time pauses, briny tears fall helplessly down my cheeks
covering oceans of time, never to return.



selected from a photograph by Dante Dellamore

NEST

Kate McCarroll Moore

Today I will rise slowly
while two treetop robins
trill their wake-up song
harmonizing with the house finch
patiently waiting outside my window
 he's watching his mate tear metal strands
from my bedroom screen, one by one,
steadily gathering reinforcements,
building their nest, thread by thread
atop the wisteria – a bullet-proof nest,
 it seems,
woven protection
from whatever predator
waits in darkness

And I can't help but wonder,
do the birds feel it too–
this sense of foreboding
piercing the daylight, yet
somehow still able to carry on

with the stuff of life,
the simple joy of waking and singing
and building, defying the odds,
hoping beyond reason
that all will be well

277 MILES OF DESPAIR

Kaileigh Oldham

The Arizona sun filters in through the shades in
my friend's apartment.

A smile forms on my face.

We're going to see the Grand Canyon today,
a sight I've longed to see for much of my life.

Nothing can ruin this vacation...

or so I thought.

I roll over to reach for my phone
and feel the earth crumble beneath me.

I knew this was coming.

Roe V. Wade, a right we've had for nearly 50 years,
a right I've had my entire life,
ripped from me
by men who will never face the
horrors of pregnancy and childbirth.

It's 2022,

but I feel like I'm living in the past.

Are we back in the 60's?

Did nobody watch Dirty Dancing?

I look up to see my emotions playing in
real time on my friend's face.

We vent our fear and our anger,
we try to shake it off as we prepare for our

drive.

Neither of us wanting to ruin our time together, but
it hangs over us like the Grim Reaper,
a shadow of death ready and waiting.

A long drive up, I cycle through the
stages of grief.

I will never reach acceptance,
Just denial, anger, bargaining and depression.
Stepping out of the car, walking up to an expansive
canyon of red rock.

I should feel nothing but awe, instead I'm
filled with fear and disgust.

As I stare out it begins to pour as though
the sky mourns with me.

Seeking shelter in a nearby building, surrounded by people,
but alone.

Does my life not matter?

Do the lives of the 400,000 children in foster care not matter?

Why should a non-existent organism have more rights than I do?

I want to scream, "I'M RIGHT HERE!"

Stop lying to yourself, you're not pro-life.

Once babies are born the world stops caring.

They end up in the system,

they're shot in schools.

STOP LYING.

This is just a ploy to control our bodies.

Force birth upon us.

Do you want to be the one to tell a 12 year old girl,
raped by her own family member,
that she has to carry the baby?

When she should be out with her friends,
having sleepovers,
playing soccer.
Instead she'll have to go to ultrasound appointments,
throw up every morning,
be forced to endure the painful experience of childbirth.
The rain stops finally,
but my thoughts, my anger,
continue to spiral.
We walk the edges of the canyon before us,
forcing a smile on my face I try to
enjoy this miraculous place.
But how can I feel good, when I know
there are women whose lives are shattered and
ruined?
I am lucky to live in a state that will continue to
protect me.
My friend is not so lucky.

We step out to the edge, taking pictures,
Looking out at the 18 miles across, 277 miles long.
Wind whips up around us, growing fiercer
With each passing second.
277 miles of despair,
277 miles of outrage.
The day has dragged, yet somehow it's time to drive
back,
back through the mountains to my friend's apartment.
A sad smile forms on our faces, as she tries to lighten the mood.
"I'll never forget this day,
We saw the Grand Canyon."

TRAIL OF TEARS

J. C. Rammelkamp

I couldn't get away from Danville fast enough,
even though I only moved about thirty miles down the road,
to the University of Illinois in Urbana,
taking the Greyhound past Oakwood, Ogden, St. Joseph,
my freshman year; my new start, my break.

My teenaged mind exaggerating the significance,
I thought the trip as monumental
as the 1838 Potawatomi Trail of Death,
but in reverse, towards my liberation,
rather than the shameful removal of the tribe –
ethnic cleansing, almost a thousand people –
from Indiana to Kansas, the forced march
going right through Danville, four buried there.

Once the Kickapoo and Miami called the area home,
along with the Potawatomi,
now our rundown former mining town,
about two-thirds White, one-third Black,
slowly dying, the population down a quarter
from what it was thirty years ago.
Nothing much to keep people here.

But the real reason this felt like fleeing?
My girlfriend Kate trying to get me to settle down,
raise a family, take a job at the metal-stamping plant.

HONEY WINE

Kaighla Rises

Mistrust the mirage of years
marching out before you
(The Poet lied—there is no
tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow)

Sweetling, look!—
The grasses burn up and the grapes
wither on the vine
while you waste away
your finite breaths, weighing
whether the fruit is worth the reaping—

Darling, drown,
drunk on wild joy, belly-full
of Love's honey wine
whose sweetness lingers
long after the bottle is dry.

SLIPPAGE

Kaighla Rises

She's fading.

"Two days more," they said, three days ago.

"Two days more," they said, this morning.

I am my mother's daughter. I won't let go either,
damn all our suffering to hell—mine and hers and theirs.

I'm floating through the living world
in a timeless void, sipping my lukewarm coffee,
waiting for the sure thunder, for the phone call.
I'm falling, endlessly, straining
to hear the sound
of my heart colliding with the bottom of the well.

So I went to the woods, as I do
(for I am a creature of habit)
and the trees listened to my sorrow.
They empathized, in their way.
And, of course, they did—
They're dying, too, after all,
waiting, too, after all, for the sound
of their trunk cracking and crumbling to splinters.

LINEAR

Edward Supranowicz

I stood in line
at grade school.

Stand in line each Sunday
for Holy Communion.

Stand in line
for the latest movie.

Stood in line and uniform
for basic training.

Get in line, stay in line,
wait in line, stay in line.

Even when there is no line,
I feel I am in one.

THIRST

Edward Supranowicz

In a dark river, water flows.
Over me, through me, there is thirst.
I wait for morning, I dive into it.



"Monday Monsters 4" by E. Supranowicz

FORBIDDEN (the complete poem)³
Carol McCullough Santos

Dare we?
Dare we even to look
towards tomorrow
when they've only just
allowed us to have today?

May we
trust in mankind
to be kind
or should we remain constantly
on guard?

Your eyes
shine, gazing into mine
and you whisper
"blue"
it makes me smile

For we,
we are a contrast in colors
of pinks, blues, whites, reds

³ During our hardcopy production cycle for the previous issue, Ms. Santos' poem was not printed correctly; we are reprinting it here, in its entirety, with our sincere apologies. -SR

and browns

Blended
together creating a
collage
a variety of fragments
in union

Not us
we aren't begging anyone
for anything
but equal chance
for love or

Whatever
may occur between us
when we are together
when we laugh
or cry

We hold
outstretched in our hands
happiness, fragile
it would shatter if we should
grab it

Because
of this, we have no way
to protect it
from others' destructive
hands

We wait
breathless to see
each minute's loveliness
knowing that tomorrow
it may be
Lost Forever

EARLY MORNING WAIT

C. C. Wills

We rose on this morning to wait out our quarry,
In the darkness of the pre-light stillness.
Walking down the fire trail that travelled the forest floor,
We saw a shower of shooting stars in the heaven's southern sky.
Making our way deep into the Shawnee's rolling hills,
Our walk was a long one stopping only to catch our breath.
Finally reaching our destination I found a spot for her to sit,
Quietly waiting in anticipation of what was yet to come.
I stood positioned by a thicket off to her right,
Not wanting to block her view of any possibilities.
The darkness around was thick and noisy,
As the nightly creatures made their way through the underbrush.
After waiting a short time the dawn began to break in front of us,
Morning light coming on saying good-by to the night's darkness.
The stars were replaced by hues of yellow, rose, pink and red,
Sunlight peaking ever so slightly from behind a distant hillside.
A distant rustling of the brush coming from our right,
Told us a sizeable body was making its way in our direction.
It wasn't long and we noticed the movement in the trees,
A white-tailed buck was following the trail crossing right in front of us.
The sun was now up and full, resting just above the distant trees,
Silhouetting the form of the young buck that stood before us.
Early morning frost clung to his whiskers glistening in the sunlight,
His breath rising from his nostrils showing the warmth from his travels.

He turned momentarily and looked right at my wife sitting like a statue,
And knew nothing of me standing yards from his hairy form.
His rack though incidental goes all but unnoticed,
It was the fact that he stood there before us that kept us in awe.
The beauty of this young buck was amazing and unquestionable,
We shall forever remember the image that Nature and God afforded us.

DEATH COMES IN THREES

C. C. Wills

I only have three seconds to think
Before I drown in the smoke from your burning body
 Three seconds to peel away
 The metal from your corpse
And three seconds to take in the scene before me;
 As Dionysus dances on a bed
 of burning blacktop coals
He is drunk on hedonism and agony as the cuts on his feet
 stain the broken glass beneath
 because he revels in the sadism of the chaos
 His lions and his leopards crowd around me
Their roars fill my ears as they cry out in chorus:
 "O death, is this your victory?"
 "O death, is this your sting?"
They shatter the pottery filled with black oil wine
 and bathe the alter for the final offering
Where your spirit follows the phoenix flames on the funeral pyre
 to the horizon of the setting sun

THERE WILL BE A LAST TIME

Sarita Jain

I pass through the swaying cornfields and admire the pleasant site

There will be a last time

I indulge myself with one last cup of coffee at my favorite place with delight

There will be a last time

I walk the streets downtown, gaze at the painted alley walls for a while

There will be a last time

I sit by the lake, touch the waves and tell myself "everything will be all right"

There will be a last time

I say goodbye to a loved one, pretend to smile and hold my feelings tight

There will be a last time

I shed a last tear and ask myself to emerge from the plight

There will be a last time

I look at The Tree in my backyard, grateful for the lesson it taught, "Let go to hold on."

There will be a last time

I step out of the house I have called home for many years, stare and sigh

There will be a last time

I meet you in my dreams and remind you to hold on to every memory until we reunite

There will be a last time

I look at the stars and narrate the same story to them every night

There will be a last time.

THE GOODBYE POEM

Sarita Jain

Goodbyes are hard and writing about them is even harder. I have been trying to write this Goodbye poem for days but it always seems incomplete no matter how much I try.

As the departure date approaches, my anxieties are increasing. I have been imagining my last day in this town. I've been thinking about the places and people I will not see again.

It is not the first time I am moving from a place, so why I am so upset upon leaving this city behind? I literally hated this place when I moved here for the first time.

What has changed? What is holding me back? Is it the Tree, which has always been there for me, listening even when I don't utter a single word?

Or is it this slow, small city pace life? I am going to miss that, too, as the next city is quite the opposite. My favorite part of the pace is having "everything on just one street"

Or the lake which calms me, the train siren which says you are not awake alone?, or the chipmunk on my porch? Or my workplace and the girl I love working with?

The one thing I am sure about: I am going to miss all of this. Everything. Looking back from my car window one last time as we drive away, I want to say...

*Dear Danville, I never imagined this but in last two years, we came so close
You gave me more than I expected, and from now onwards we are always connected
Rain drops and a little sunshine in my eyes, some colorful leaves and memories
There's a suitcase of emotions I am taking with me.
No matter where my nomadic life leads me from here
You hold a special place in my heart and will always be with me.*



Ceiling view of auditorium chandeliers, Danville Illinois
Dante Dellamore

GO WITH ME (*Vade Mecum*)

S. A. Robbins

We don't think about the roots of words anymore. Out of style, it seems, like rumble seats and the sonic boom. Interested in the etymology of erotic art, or the etymology of war? Our attention ebbs, I'm sorry to say. And yet, there's something about this Latin phrase, reaching from its forgotten place and imploring me to make something with it, as Georgia clay speaks to potters, or a grassy field to young boys with two baseballs and a bat. From the 1629 translation: "*Vade Mecum*" says: *Carry me in your pocket, take me to dinner barefoot on the beach, hang me on your doorpost beside your father's mezuzah, hold me in your heart when you kneel at Mass to pray.* There's more going on here than etymology, that's why we lift our scissors, snip each word of a favored poem, and place them in a jar where such meaningful things are stored, as if our only purpose is their preservation. Then we let the words spill across another blank page, forming and re-forming in ever new combinations. Hold that page to your ear as though it was a conch and you'll hear this whisper: *Go with me.*

JUST BEFORE MIDNIGHT IN THE LIBRARY OF SOULS

S. A. Robbins

It is said the Dead hear
what the Living cannot:
not merely silence
(the absence of sound)
but a stillness of Place,
a presence pressed
between ageless pages,
as if this entire
structure has been filled
by the exhaled breath
of every character
in every book ever written.
Such is the odd and unlikely
midnight when we inhale,
by small portion, this rarified air,
and in that moment,
we hear their chorus
the hushed jazz of archived lives,
almost audible, the presence
of dead voices rising
like Lazarus from darkness,
all the unseen, uncertain things
found in stillness
when stillness sings.

3 STANZAS BEGINNING WITH A LINE BY BRUCE WEIGL

S. A. Robbins

I am looking for something that isn't there.

Words crossing pages are footprints crossing snow-covered lawns, imprinting our mind like a monk's collection of relics once touched by someone who was once touched by God, as if Divinity could be found inside a geode brought home and split open, revealing from shadows this impossible Light.

I am looking for something that isn't there.

Each dawn reveals what dusk tries to hide, and impish truths remain hidden in our memory, like that stack of WWII ration coupons hidden in an attic by my father when he was a boy, waiting to be found. Schrodinger's cat would surely be dead by now, left too long inside that airless box.

I am looking for something that isn't there.

This, then, is the Seeker's Dilemma when what they seek is behind them (they can't be certain something, once adored, is no longer there unless they keep looking.) Their dilemma reminds me of certain modern dance techniques – how dancers lean left before turning right, or reach toward us, even as they move away.



"Backyard/Winter" from an original painting
by Julie Colby

The arts are not a way to make a living. They are a very human way of making life more bearable. Practicing an art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow, for heaven's sake. Sing in the shower. Dance to the radio. Tell stories. Write a poem to a friend, even a lousy poem. Do it as well as you possible can. You will get an enormous reward. You will have created something.

- Kurt Vonnegut

A Man Without A Country, 1995

What would I be doing if I were not writing, right this minute?
I'll tell you what. I would be riding a wheel all the way to town,
to the Public Library...or I would be in the backyard of this house...
and I would be noticing that the almond boughs of four trees
Have buds that have opened into blossoms, and I would be
smelling the blossoms for the very fine but faint scent...

- William Saroyan

Obituaries, 1977



"Bare Vines," mixed media on canvas with charcoal
by Karen Orton Katz

- Ampersand Award for Fiction -

EVRYN, THE LIGHT

Selection from a novel

Kaighla Rises

I hear them best at dawn, as the morning mist dances across the mountains, or when the young trees lean, to and fro with the wind. Sometimes it sounds like they're standing right next to me, whispering in voices heavy with urgency.

Aunt Tabitha taught me how to listen to them, and when to ignore them. "They can't know everything, after all," she would say, smirking.

It was Tabitha, too, who taught me how to identify the herbs best for attracting a lover and quickening his seed in my womb, or repelling it—or rather, attempting to, anyway. "Not even the strongest herbs can stop fate," Tabitha said.

Despite the eagerness of my lovers, I've never carried life in my womb. It could be Tabitha's herbs or it could be fate. Or, maybe Mother is right. Maybe nothing good can take root in me.

"Your mother knows nothing of true goodness, Evryn," Tabitha used to say, "neither its roots nor its leaves."

Where Aunt Tabitha was honeysuckle and welcome spring rain, Mother is all thorns and frost.

"Don't pull the thread so tight, Rue," Mother admonishes me, bringing me back to the present. "You'll snap it."

“Rue,” Mother calls me when she’s frustrated with me. Rue, like the regret she feels over not taking Tabitha’s expelling herbs sooner.

I lay my sewing down on my lap and sigh, drawing a tsk-tsk from Mother. I wonder if she will finally give up and send me out into the sunshine and freedom if I continue failing at being the daughter of her dreams.

‘Unlikely,’ Aunt Tabitha whispers in my ear.

My family lives in the cottage I was born in nine months after the herbs failed my mother—the same cottage Papa died in when I was twelve years old. I lost what little remained of my mother that day, too. To escape her gnawing grief, she threw herself into her duties as Chief of the Sanctum, so the rearing of the little ones fell to me and Aunt Tabitha.

“Morning,” Ari says, crossing the room to slip his boots on. His wavy blonde hair is hanging in his eyes, so he takes out a comb and pulls his hair back with a strap of leather.

Ari, the middle child, is a wildling, and I wonder if he’ll ever grow out of it. He straddles the line between this world and the next, and not always with grace. Many a night I’ve laid awake with him, begging the gods to release him from the grip of fever or to relieve the pain from yet another broken bone.

“Happy morning to you, my dear,” Mother smiles, pulling him in for a kiss on the cheek after he finishes lacing up his boots.

I am her eternal regret, but Ari is her dear.

‘She loves you, you know,’ Papa chimes in.

Yeah well. She could show it, I think.

“Where are you going this early?” Ziva asks Ari as she scrubs away at the dishes.

Ziva was little more than a year old when Papa died and Mother abandoned her post. She called me “Mama” longer than I should have allowed, and she is still never far behind me. Ziva sees the best in everyone, and she suffers for it.

“Wear something warmer, Ari! It’s cool this morning,” Halline commands as Ari grabs the door handle.

Halline should have been born first. She keeps us all at an even keel. Halline, the stoic, the strong, the sturdy. Always the picture of poise in a sea of chaos, my little sister. If any of us resembles Papa, it’s Halline.

“And can you bring back some water from the well when you finish... whatever it is you’re going to do this early?” Mother asks him from the chair next to mine.

Ari just smiles and turns to open the door, winking at me as he closes it behind him.

I laugh under my breath. I know exactly where Ari is going. Lyra’s Bright Ceremony is this evening, after all, so I know he must be heading out to prepare her gift.

Having reached the age of seventeen, Lyra Minara will officially become a Kenozarian woman tonight, along with all the other girls who’ve reached that milestone this month. She’ll receive gifts to mark the occasion—dresses with a more flattering cut than the simpler ones she’d worn as a girl, perfumed oils to keep her skin soft and supple, and various other gifts to mark the occasion.

More precious than anything else, though, Lyra will be given access to the wisdom of her ancestors and other loved ones who’ve passed into The Bright Lands, a gift she can only access atop Mount Zaria—one that all Kenozarian women can only access atop Mount Zaria.

All but me and Aunt Tabitha, anyway. Just like when Tabitha was young, I’ve been hearing the whispers for as long as I can recall. They’re my constant companion, and I can hear them everywhere, all the time—even when I’d prefer silence.

Seeing the wry smile on Ari’s face as he slips out the door makes me swell with pride as his big sister, but it also stings me deep in my gut. I can’t help but think of the morning Torek went out to prepare my Bright gift, no doubt smiling as he left his house the same way Ari just did. Torek’s Bright gift to me—a rose opal—still hangs on a string of leather around my neck.

But Torek is gone now, like Papa and Aunt Tabitha. Last winter, our band raided a nearby village for much-needed grain, and Torek somehow got separated from the group. After the fires died down, they found him dead, his armband still clinging to his charred remains.

I stayed in bed for a week after we received the news, until Halline came to my room one cold winter day, carrying a tray of cider and some stewed potatoes and carrots she’d helped Mother prepare. “I don’t mean to alarm you, but you’re

starting to smell, Evy," she said, laying the tray down on the end of my bed and crossing her arms.

I sat up and sighed weakly, putting my face in my hands.

"I know, honey. I know," she said, sitting down next to me, gently pushing my dark hair behind my ears and stroking my cheek in that way she does. "But I promise you'll feel just a little better if you bathe."

"I'm so sad, Hal. I just can't," I moaned, laying back down and pulling the covers over my head.

"Let's make a deal," she replied, standing up to rummage through my drawers for some clean clothes. "You take a few bites of this stew and then wash off that stench in the hot bath I've just prepared for you, and I'll eat the rest of the stew and tell Mama you ate it. Deal?"

I took her up on the deal, and she was right: I did begin to feel better.

It's been six months since Torek died, but losing him hurts on a deeper level than any other death I've experienced. Because unlike Aunt Tabitha and Papa and the others whom I've loved and lost, Torek's voice is missing from the cacophony of whispers that guide me, day and night.

Had it not been love? Did I overestimate his attachment to me? I often wonder. That would explain why I can't hear his whispers. Only blood or true love can connect two souls across the chasm of death.

The sound of the oven door closing loudly brings me back to the present. I force Torek's memory from my mind and busy myself, helping Mother and Halline prepare our contribution to the feast tonight.

The day flies by in a flurry of activity. It's sunset when Ari comes back in, looking worse for wear, covered in wood shavings and sweat. He's carrying a big bucket of water.

"There's another outside," he says, setting the bucket down on the counter next to Halline.

In thanks, Halline hands him a small dish with a slice of cinnamon cake, fresh from the oven. He takes a bite and swoons.

"I assume your little excursion went well?" I ask, tousling his hair.

"Oh yeah. She's gonna love it," he replies, wiping his brow and smiling as he walks into his room to strip his filthy clothes.

Halline stands over the feast we've prepared—analyzing, it seems from the look on her face, whether we've made enough.

"It's fine," I assure her. "We're not the only family preparing the feast."

"Yes, but we're Ari's family, and Ari is Lyra's betrothed."

"Supposed betrothed," Ziva pipes up from a chair in the corner, looking up from the book in her lap.

"Yes, well. Halline is right. We will do our best to show our support for Lyra. We love her, betrothed or not," Mother replies, wiping her hands on her apron and brushing her long graying hair away from her face.

"Speak for yourself," I say, drawing another sound of disapproval from Mother.

In fairness, it's not just Lyra. I'm not sure I much care for any of the women my age. I feel so out of place among them, uninterested in the glib discussions and happenings that seem to consume their day-to-day thoughts. And they don't much seem to understand me either. So I often find myself drawn out and away, into the woods and mountains surrounding Kenozaria. I can hear the whispers better that way, anyway, unburdened by the sights and sounds of village life.

People may not understand me, but they respect me well enough. I am Chief Korina Freya's eldest daughter, after all, and my mother is a force to be reckoned with. It's generally assumed I will vie for her position when she passes into the Bright Lands, but I have no such plans. Halline will, maybe, or even Ziva. But not me.

All I want is to build a simple home of my own, just outside the village. I want to plant things and watch them grow, commune with my ancestors in peace, enjoy the simple pleasures of raising my own family—if I ever have one, that is.

But that's not enough for my mother. Nothing is enough for my mother. "I scold you because I believe you can do better," she often says when she sees the effect her incessant nit-picking has on me. She makes sure I know that I am not what she hoped I'd become—which is, essentially, an upgraded version of herself. And I've given up on trying. So I am 'Rue' more often than I am 'Evryn' to her.

I wish she could love me as I am—not as Rue, the private disgrace, or Evryn Korina, the heir-apparent, but as myself: plain Evryn.

As the night begins to settle in, we all head down to the village green with our gifts and food in hand.

The feast is set atop three long, oak tables, each large enough to seat fifty people. Lyra and the other girls sit at a separate table, positioned long ways, facing the others.

Lyra was always the most beautiful girl in town, just as her mother, Minara, had been when she was young. Tonight, though, Lyra is positively breathtaking, her auburn hair glistening with perfumed oils and topped with a wreath of wildflowers.

Ari beams at her from his seat at our table, something Mother doesn't fail to take note of.

"That girl will be the death of him," she says quietly to Halline at her side.

"Mama, can't he just enjoy the night?" Halline asks.

"She's so pretty! I can hardly look away!" Ziva remarks from her spot beside me.

"I'm just saying. A young man shouldn't be so smitten with a girl, at least not so openly," Mother says, taking a bite of roast chicken. "He should let her worry a bit! Keep her on her toes!"

"She won't be a girl much longer," I point out. "Just a few hours more, actually."

"And wasn't father just as smitten with you, Mama?" Halline asks, taking a sip of mead.

Mother sighs and closed her eyes—her only admission of defeat—so we drop the subject.

Just then, Mother's oldest friend, Rayyan, approaches her from behind. "Hey, it's a party! Lighten up, Korina!" Rayyan laughs. "You look like you did on my wedding day—like it was the end of the world!"

Mother eyes her for a moment before rising and embracing her. The two of them go off to gossip with their friends at another table.

Ari takes a long drink of strawberry wine and a deep breath. I smile at him. "You can do it, bro," I say, patting him on the back. "Be brave!" He smiles and gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze before standing to address Lyra.

As he approaches Lyra's table, she stands and invites him closer. Even from a distance, it's clear that the love I've seen in his eyes burns in hers, too. When Ari offers her his Bright gift—a delicately carved wooded dove—she admires it and thanks him sweetly before placing it to the side with the pile of other gifts she's received. Then, Ari solemnly offers her his hand and she takes it, blushing, and rises from her seat before walking around the table to embrace him.

I thought that was the end—just an invitation to dance. But then the two of them stand very near one another and Lyra pulls him in, placing her forehead on his and taking a few deep breaths in tandem with him.

"I guess it's official," Ziva whispers.

The couple walks together down to the dancing ring. The small band strikes up a lively tune and the two of them begin to dance. Soon, other couples join in the merriment.

"Here he comes," Halline says under her breath, tilting her head in the direction of Koyran, who is approaching our table with a small bouquet of wildflowers.

Anyone but him, I think.

"Blessed Bright, ladies," he says, looking at Halline and Ziva briefly before turning to me and handing me the flowers.

"And to you, Koyran," Halline replies, trying to be polite while she kicks me under the table.

"Uhhh, thank you for the flowers," I say, trying to mean it.

"Would you care to—" he begins.

"My sister... is not well tonight, Koyran," Halline cuts in, saving him the embarrassment of yet another rejection.

He looks down at his feet and back at me. "Forgive me. I know you may still be mourning Torek."

He cannot be doing this, I think. Not still. Koyran has been smitten with me since we were children and has never gotten over the fact that it was Torek I chose.

'Give the boy a chance,' I hear Papa whisper.

I choose to ignore him. "Thank you for the invitation, Koyran. I'm honored by it, but I am not ready," I say.

'That's my girl,' I hear Aunt Tabitha whisper.

Koyran turns away, defeated. He begins to walk away from the table but Ziva stops him, standing up so fast she nearly knocks over her cup of mead. "Koyran! Wait! I'd love to dance!" she cries, running after him. Koyran smiles weakly and takes her hand before walking her to the dance ring.

"You won't be able to make that excuse much longer, you know?" Halline says, patting me on the shoulder.

"Milking it as long as I can," I mumble under my breath, just as Halline stands up to accept a dance invitation from Thura, Rayyan's eldest daughter.

Sometime later, Lyra and the other Bright girls leave the dance floor and begin walking toward Mount Zaria. That's our cue. The music stops and everyone rises from their chairs to follow them up into the hills.

When we reach the top of Mount Zaria an hour later, the full moon is at its peak in the night sky, casting long pine tree shadows. The bonfire is raging now in the center of the clearing. Mother and the other members of the Sanctum stand next to the bonfire, decked out in their Bright garments. They embrace Lyra and the other girls, one by one.

"We are gathered to witness the Bright Walk of these beloved daughters of Kenozaria," Mother says to the crowd. "No more will each think as a girl, dress as a girl, live as a girl. With the blessings of Keno and Zaria and the guidance of her ancestors, each girl will enter into the second phase of her life—her Bright years, the years between girlhood and motherhood."

Ziva's eyes are alight with excitement, knowing that her own Bright Ceremony is only a few years away. Halline cries with joy, wiping her tears away quietly with the hem of her sleeve.

Mother turns to Lyra, who is the first girl in line. "As we uplift Lyra, daughter of Minara, she humbly opens her mind and heart and requests the guidance of her ancestors," Mother continues. "Repeat after us, Lyra."

As Lyra begins reciting the ancient words along with Mother and the Sanctum, the crowd falls silent in awe and solemnity.

“Zaria, make me a blessing to my people, a supportive friend, a loving companion to my future partner, and a bulwark of refuge to my future children. Keno, help me move without fear or force and teach me to know when to rush forward and when to take my time.” With each word that falls from her lips, Lyra’s face begins to glow brighter and brighter, liquid amber radiating from the center of her chest through her body. “Ancestors, share with me your sacred wisdom that I may be a lamp unto my people. Guide me in serving my family and our community with honor and integrity.”

There’s a low hum that begins to swell in the air. Lyra’s ancestors are drawing nearer to her. It almost feels as if the trees, too, are bending lower to witness the scene.

Lyra then removes her ceremonial dress and throws it, along with the flower crown and the healing herbs she’s been carrying, into the bonfire. Her naked skin radiates a warm glow that envelopes her form and vibrates with her every movement.

Ari sits silent, dumbstruck.

“She’s really something, isn’t she?” I murmur to him. He doesn’t answer, just smiles and takes my hand in his, squeezing it.

Lyra begins walking slowly around the bonfire, thanking her ancestors for the wisdom she is about to receive. With each cycle, she glows brighter and brighter still.

Her head is thrown back now and only the white of her eyes is showing. She is chanting in an ancient tongue only she understands, receiving the wisdom of her ancestors from her own lips.

Soon, it looks as if she isn’t walking but gliding above the soft earth, like she is being pulled around and around the fire by some outside force.

Having completed her thirteenth circumambulation, Lyra falls to the ground and is met by her mother and sisters, who clothe her with a new dress before guiding her a short distance away from the fire. She is in a trance-like state, unable to walk without assistance, and will remain that way for some minutes.

The ceremonies for the other four girls continue, much like Lyra's had. When everyone has received their guidance from the Bright Lands, it's time for the onlookers to head back down the mountain to the village. Lyra and the other Bright women will spend the remainder of the night on the mountain, processing the wisdom they've received from their ancestors and passed-on loved ones.

Ari takes one last look at Lyra, who stands staring into the fire, unaware of him, drunk on the flurry of whispers surrounding and filling her.

Suddenly, I feel a tightening sensation in my chest. 'They're coming,' Aunt Tabitha whispers.

Who's coming? I wonder, but no further message arrives.

Just then, a sound erupts far below us, on the western edge of the village—a cry like that of a child in pain. Turning, we see what we'd been too distracted to notice before—thousands of torches, marching from the northwestern shore of the island, crossing the Keno river.

'Evryn, don't go home,' Papa whispers urgently. 'Run into the forest.'



"On Memory," collage, mixed media
Danville, Illinois 2019

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS
Selected from "Staying Put" 1993 ⁴

There is more to be seen at any crossroads than one can see in a lifetime of looking. My return visit to Wayland was less than two hours long. Once again several hundred miles distant from that place, back here in my home ground making this model from slippery words, I cannot be sure where the pressure of mind has warped the surface of things. If you were to go there, you would not find every detail exactly as I have described it. How could you, bearing as you do a past quite different from mine? No doubt my memory, welling up through these lines has played tricks with time and space.

What memory is made of I cannot say; my body, at least, is made of atoms on loan from the earth. How implausible, that these atoms should have gathered to form this I, this envelope of skin that walks about and strokes horses and tastes

⁴ From *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Beacon Press, 1993) by Scott Russell Sanders; © 1993 by Scott Russell Sanders; reprinted by permission of the author.

apples and trembles with desire in the branches of a sycamore and gazes through the windows of a church at the ordinary sky. Certain moments in one's life cast their influence forward over all the moments that follow. My encounters in Wayland shaped me first as I lived through them, then again as I recalled them during my visit, and now as I write them down. That is, of course why I write them down. The self is a fiction. I make up the story of myself with scraps of memory, sensation, reading, and hearsay. It is a tale I whisper against the dark. Only in rare moments of luck or courage do I hush, forget myself entirely, and listen to the silence that precedes and surrounds and follows all speech.

If you have been keeping count, you may have toted up seven mysteries, or maybe seven times seven, or maybe seven to the seventh power. My hunch is that, however we count, there is only one mystery. In our nearsightedness, we merely glimpse the light scintillating off the numberless scales of Leviathan, and we take each spark for a separate wonder.

Could we bear to see all the light at once? Could we bear the roar of infinite silence? I sympathize with science, where, in order to answer a question, you limit the variables. You draw a circle within which everything can be measured, and you shut out the rest of the universe. I draw my own circles with these narratives, telling

of rivers and tornadoes, house and family, dirt and dreams. I lay out stories like fences to enclose for myself a home ground within the frightening infinities. Yet every enclosure is a makeshift, every boundary an illusion. With great ingenuity, we decipher some of the rules that govern this vast shining dance, but all our efforts could not change the least of them.

Nothing less than the undivided universe can be our true home. Yet how can one speak or even think about the whole of things? Language is of only modest help. Every sentence is a wispy net, capturing a few flecks of meaning. The sun shines without vocabulary. The salmon has no name for the urge that drives it upstream. The newborn groping for the nipple knows hunger long before it knows a single word. Even with an entire dictionary in one's head, one eventually comes to the end of words. Then what? Then drink deep like the baby, swim like the salmon, burn like any brief star.



Abandoned train car, by Rick Decorie

THE THIEF

Jane S. Creason

The thief is ubiquitous—traveling quietly from place to place, choosing his victims in ways no one has yet to understand. Not skin color nor ethnicity nor gender nor sexual orientation nor social status nor political or religious affiliations seem to matter. His victims include heads of state and the homeless on the streets. They come from the arts and entertainment, the white-collar professions, and the blue-collar trades and from those who produce our food and run our businesses. His only preference seems to be for the gray-haired ones.

Though ubiquitous, the thief's "modus operandi" is unique. There are no major break-ins, well-planned and orchestrated, to accrue a large haul. Instead, he slips in and takes something small, something so insignificant that the victim may not realize it is missing. Months later, the thief returns to take something else and then something else until, over years, all that the victim ever had is gone.

A tiny woman with curly white hair and a high, musical laugh attracted the thief's attention. She loved to write poetry, read political articles, and tell stories about her students from long ago. She lived in Southern California, close to two of her daughters but far away from a third one back in the Midwest.

During a visit there one summer, she stood in front of the microwave with a cup of lukewarm coffee in her hand and laughed. "You'd never know I have two degrees from the University of Illinois," she said. Her son-in-law warmed up her coffee.

During a Christmas visit, she repeated for days, "I'm a little green candle," a line from a poem one of her fourth-graders had written years before. Her little great-grandchildren laughed at their funny grandma.

Back at home, she quit writing poetry. She forgot to pay the monthly bills sometimes or do the laundry. The dust accumulated on her many Asian wood carvings. Little piles of tissues became hidden in drawers, sometimes with a candy bar or a special pair of earrings or a favorite snapshot. She spent hours in her rocking chair, staring at a photograph of her mother, tears running down her cheeks, as she mourned a mother she had never known.

The victim's daughter, the one who was far away, did not witness these things, but when her mother asked, during one of their weekly Sunday afternoon phone conversations, "What is your name?" the daughter knew that the thief had come.

The thief continued to come for years until his victim was completely dependent on the caregivers who gently washed her face every morning and combed her hair, dressed her and fed her and put her in a comfortable chair before a television. She giggled at sitcoms she could no longer understand while cuddling a soft white lamb that had once belonged to a granddaughter. Finally, after fifteen years, the thief stole her last breath, and her loved ones knew "the long good-bye" was over.

Ten years later, the thief crept into the daughter's Midwestern home—at first unnoticed, then unacknowledged, for maybe a year as she helped her husband find his phone or his keys or his glasses. He could not get his credit card to work at the gas pump where he regularly filled up his red pick-up truck. He had trouble writing a check and balancing his checkbook. He no longer surprised her with a pot of chili or ham and beans when she got home from work or made the coffee in the morning before she awoke.

During that first year, she told no one what she was seeing because doing so would be disrespectful to a man who had been so strong, so hard-working, so independent, so loving, so kind, and so funny all his life. But the fear crept in as she wondered if the thief had come into her life again.

One day he came home, very shaken, after getting lost in the countryside, after spending hours trying to find his way back to a familiar place. More and more often, she needed to tell him who people were when names no longer evoked memories. She knew for certain that the thief was there, taking more and more.

She first told a long-time friend who had lost her husband to the thief about what she was seeing and later her daughter and son-in-law when they came to visit one Labor Day weekend and finally her son.

Then, on the next Mother's Day, he tripped and crashed into rocks around a flowerbed. The gushing head wound led to an ambulance ride to the hospital. He suffered two black eyes, ten stitches above the left one, and a minor concussion.

On the last night of his four-day hospital stay, he called his wife. He demanded that she come to another city to rescue him from the people who had kidnapped him. She tried to tell him that he was safe in the hospital, but he yelled and cursed at her. She sobbed that night for the first time, knowing that she was losing her beloved husband.

Since then, the thief has returned again and again. He has stolen his victim's ability to drive his pick-up truck and to mow the acreage around his once cared-for pond. He has stolen his victim's interest in his massive collection of antiques. He no longer spends hours outside, pattering around his yard and his garage. Instead, there is only boredom.

The thief has stolen his optimism and his sense of humor. He rarely smiles. He is fearful, wondering who will hurt him or poison him. He cries for the four brothers and sisters who have died, reliving their deaths over and over because he forgets that they are gone.

The thief has stolen his control. Sometimes the man becomes angry and aggressive—kicking the kitchen cabinets, slamming doors, using curse words he had never used before, and throwing whatever is close at hand.

The thief has stolen his reasoning and his ability to communicate clearly. Instead, there are delusions and the demand for logical answers to illogical questions. He becomes angry when his wife will not feed the chickens (they do not have) or find the “cylinder for the frogs” (she has no clue what he means) or jump start the truck (he no longer owns) or go count the orange buckets in the garage (there are none) or tell him where the kids are (they became adults over thirty years ago) or explain what he should do with bags of seed corn (he is retired) or tell him where his “real” wife is (he has had only one).

When she responds, “I don’t know,” he yells, “You’re so stupid.”

The thief has not yet stolen his victim’s life—only its quality, its value, its joy. But the thief has stolen even more.

The wife, the sole caregiver, is losing herself, too, as her husband becomes a man she hardly knows. Her goal each day is to neither yell nor cry, but there are too many days when she does both. She does not mind the searches for things he cannot find. She does not mind helping him dress and bathe and brush his teeth and spread peanut butter on his toast and change the television channel and count the money in his pocket and turn off the faucet when he washes his hands.

But there are the hours when the prescribed medicines do not help him stay calm, when he rants and paces and swears and becomes aggressive. That is when she knows the thief has stolen from her as well because she sometimes loses her self-control. She yells and cries in anger and hurt, "I am not poisoning you. I am not stupid. I do care what happens to you."

She knows that he is not purposefully trying to hurt her. She knows that he has no control. But the thief has stolen her ability to always be patient and loving. She becomes someone she is ashamed of being, someone she wants no one else to see or to know. She fears that she may fail to keep the vow she made many years ago—to love and cherish in sickness and in health.

And she knows the thief is not finished with either of them—not yet.

*

BUBBLE

Jeff Burd

We are sitting on the great lawn in a pair of faded and creaky beach chairs I pulled out of storage in the basement of the apartment building I live in. My cooler sits at the edge of our blanket, and I've placed snacks and a vase of daisies on a low table in front of it. She's holding a glass of red wine. More like balancing it on her fingertips so delicately that she might drop it at the slightest agitation. Yet her hand looks firm and confident.

The symphony starts in half an hour and I'm vacillating between expressing my enthusiasm for the music and keeping a cool, detached demeanor. An outward expression of excitement might spark some heat between us. Or it might give Marylou pause to think I don't know what about how her date is going with me, the guy she met two weeks ago at the social the sailing club held for new members.

I look again at the wine glass in her hand. She gives me a quick look. I smile at her. I try to read her face behind her Kate Spades, but I'm getting no clues. She's slowly drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair while she surveys the park. The place is filling up with the tanned and toned crowd setting up their evenings the same as we have. Couples are popping open coolers stuffed with bottles of

Bollinger and Krug and laying out charcuterie on their tables. They look established, like this is de rigueur in their lives. Like this process is some sort of generational procedure stitched into their DNA that they walk through instinctually, never having to think about it. They are self-assured in what they are doing without ever having to look at each other. They are so smooth I'll wager their confidence spreads beyond pre-concert setup in the park that they carry it with them to post-concert intimacies in their walk-up brownstone townhouses and high-rise condominiums until they fall asleep in each other's arms.

I look at Marylou and I think about potential.

Children are laughing and running through the park, their elastic bodies and shrieking voices weaving between staked-out territories. Bubbles float through the space between our chairs, over our blanket and across the top of the grass, and then rise into the air.

I slide my chair next to Marylou's. I slowly and gently take her hand, mindful of the wineglass-balancing act she's still managing with her other hand.

"Are you ready to eat?" I gesture to the salsa and chips I've laid out next to the daisies on the table and beyond them to the treasures on ice in the cooler. Fried chicken, Bing cherries, and a chocolate mousse I hope tastes as good as the picture looked on the recipe box.

"Not really hungry," she says in a flat tone that says I'm being too pushy.

A blonde little girl stops in front of us, her toes on the edge of our blanket. She fingers a glowing green necklace hanging down to her belly. When she's sure she has our attention, she slides a purple bubble wand out of a matching bottle, mindless to the drips of soap that plop around her bare feet.

She holds our eye contact like she's about to amaze us with a magic trick we've never seen. Raising the gleaming wand to mouth level, she blows gently through the hoop. The thin soap membrane catches her wind and bulges toward us. The park falls silent to my ears as I watch the bubble expand by the second.

The bubble detaches from the wand and wavers in the humid air. It swells and wobbles amorphously before adjusting itself and snapping into a perfect iridescent globe mirroring the park buzzing all around it.

Time stops.

The floating orb reflects our picnic setup with Marylou and me sitting side by side.

Her eyes are on her wine glass.

I feel Marylou release my hand, and I look away from the bubble. It's going to burst.

The pressure will prove too much as it rises. Maybe if I don't look at it. Maybe if I don't think about it. Maybe it will sustain itself there in perfect balance.

THE HEART OF THE WOODS

Courtney Fancil

Emma dug her nails into the dirt and pulled herself through the driver's window of the car, shards of glass jabbing and cutting into her body as she emerged from the turned-over vehicle. Groaning, she slowly dragged herself away from the vehicle. The stench of blood and gas filled her nostrils. She struggled to her feet, stumbling away from the wreck.

She'd been driving to her sister's house, struggling to keep her eyes open. Half a second of sleep caused her to miss the sudden curve in the road. Emma's car had rolled down the cliff. Slowly, she examined herself, brushing fragments of glass off. Besides the cuts from the glass, there was a gash in her head that dripped blood down her face, and black and purple bruises trailed up her ribs, but she was still alive. Emma looked behind her, back at the car. She had no idea how she was still alive. The cliff was tall and steep, and there was no way she could climb back up. She faced forward again. Trees, grass, and dirt surrounded her.

She reached into her pocket for her phone but the screen was broken and when Emma clicked the button, nothing happened. She yelled in frustration and hurled the phone into the woods. There was a thud, then silence.

Her ribs throbbed from throwing the phone and she doubled over, clutching her sides. It took a few deep breaths for her to calm down. She tried to think. In all the

books she'd read about people trying to survive, they always tried to find water first. Then, they followed it back to civilization. Emma figured that was as good a strategy as any, but it would be much harder to find in the dark. There was a red haze covering the sky that Emma might have otherwise appreciated if she wasn't alone in the woods. She was pretty sure it was supposed to storm later tonight, according to the weather app when she checked it earlier. Maybe she could find shelter before the storm. There was a bit of light from the moon and stars as Emma began moved in a direction parallel to the cliff.

Emma only heard crickets and the occasional sound of wings flapping. She leaned to the left as she walked, her ribs still throbbing with every step she took. Her breath came in short, quick gasps. She slowly eased herself onto a fallen tree nearby.

A high-pitched howl came from deep in the woods. Goose bumps prickled up her arm and she shivered. Her sister always told her she was too easy to scare. She wrapped her arms around herself and looked toward the sound, but she couldn't see anything except trees.

A breeze rustled through leaves. She could hear the faint sound of moving water. She stood up and quickened her pace. It wasn't long before she spotted a small creek and she decided to follow it in the direction the water was flowing. She and her sister used to love hiking and finding creeks like this to follow, but they hadn't gone hiking in years.

Emma followed the creek for what seemed like hours before she came across a cabin on a low-rising hill. The windows were covered in a layer of grime that turned them dark brown. The steps leading up to the porch were sinking inwards and the whole cabin leaned slightly to the left.

"Hello?" she called out.

Nothing.

She turned in a small circle.

Nothing.

Leaves crunched nearby. A stick snapped. Emma turned in the direction of the noise, squinted, and thought she saw a shadow darting between the trees.

She turned back to the cabin. Her steps quickened as she made her way toward the porch. Grunting and clutching her ribs, she forced herself onto the steps.

There was a crack her ankle fell through the top step. Wooden shards dug into her ankle and she screamed. She slammed her hands on the porch, sending shockwaves up her arms.

Emma gritted her teeth and pushed herself up, pain shooting across her ribs. Twisting her ankle, she pulled it free and forced herself to stand. Her foot felt damp and sticky as she reached for the doorknob.

The door was locked. Emma slammed her fist against the door, over and over. But stopped because it wasn't going open. Emma rested her forehead against the door. Then, she heard what sounded like heavy breathing behind her. Emma's hands were shaking as she turned around.

A man with a dim flashlight clipped onto his overalls grinned at her with yellow and black teeth. Blood dripped down his chin. One eye seemed bright yellow while the other had a creamy white film over it. His nose was crooked and abnormally large for the man's face, covered in dirt.

"H-Hello?" Emma said.

She wanted to move, but her legs were trembling, knees knocking together. The man cocked his head to the side, grinning. He took one shuffling step toward her. One foot had a boot on while the other was bare, twisted and.

Emma felt bile rising in her throat and she ran. She bolted to the side of the porch and hopped down, stumbling as she hit the ground. Footsteps continued behind her, but she couldn't look over her shoulder. The man let out a high-pitched laugh.

Emma was leaning even more because of her injured ankle. Heart racing, she knew the man was gaining on her.

A sharp pain shot up her injured ankle and she felt her leg buckle. She yelled out as she hit the ground and she herself forward with her hands. Emma tried to get to her feet, but her body collapsed again.

His hand gripped her hair, forcing her head back. Emma kicked with her good foot. He tore fistfuls of hair as she shook her head back and forth. The man pushed Emma onto her back and straddled her. She pounded his chest with her fists, but the man didn't move.

The man's yellow eye was shining bright and a stream of drool dribbled down his chin. He gripped Emma's hands with one hand while the other reached an overall pocket.

Emma jerked her hands against his grip. The man's grin widened. She whimpered as his spittle dripped onto her shirt. Her feet kicked feebly at the dirt. A sob escaped her as he pulled out a knife, covered in dirt, rust, and what looked like blood. The man cackled. He raised the knife.

One of her hands yanked free as he brought the knife down.

The knife slashed across the back of her arm and her shoulder. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Eyes wide, she stared up at the man.

The man laughed and prepared to stab Emma again but she yanked her other hand free as the man raised the knife.

The knife was coming toward her as she reached up with both hands and gripped the handle, Emma's hands on top of his. Her teeth were grinding together as she pushed the knife back upwards. The man pushed back and the knife came closer and closer to her chest.

Her hands were sweating. She could feel the knife slipping out of her grip. Her ribs throbbed and there was a burning pain where the knife had cut her. She screamed and launched herself to the right; the man rolled over with her and the knife fell from their grasp.

Emma forced herself to stand, picking up the knife as she got to her feet. She moved away from the man fast as she could away. She felt blood trickling down her arm and Emma was too weary to fight him off again. She forced her legs to move faster, adrenaline pumping through her body. Emma ducked behind a tree. Her whole body tensed and she held her breath as she heard him approach.

Crunch. Snap. He was getting closer.

She clutched the dagger in both hands.

Emma didn't hesitate. Her body uncoiled and she leapt toward him. She put all of her weight behind the knife and plunged it into the man's chest. A scream, more like a growl, tore from her throat. His blood spilled onto her hands. The man's eyes widened.

He coughed. Blood splattered onto her face. She gasped and let go of the handle. The man clutched for the knife as he fell back into the dirt. He turned onto his side and coughed more blood. Emma's stomach churned.

Her breath came in ragged gasps as she began to step away from his body. It wasn't long before his breathing stopped. Emma remained still for a moment.

She turned back. She approached his body. Carefully, she unclipped the light from the man's overalls, half expecting him to grab at her again.

The body didn't move.

Emma used one hand to clutch her ribs; with the other she held the light. She shined it around her. She had no idea where the creek was and chose a direction at random.

The red haze still covered the sky as she stumbled deeper into the woods.

A SCATTERING OF STARS

Nancy Harris

When neighbors on South 13th Street heard Emory Smith had plunked down two months' rent in advance on a dump in Heidelberg Gardens, it was assumed he was sick and tired of his two snot-nosed grandkids running and crawling wild in the house. In truth, Emory was only tired of his daughter-in-law Madge who vanished five mornings a week to cook and ladle soup at the Salvation Army on Reilly Street, leaving her elderly mother-in-law to chase the kids up and down two flights of stairs all day long—Carrie, with her bad knees and lumbago, Carrie, who'd raised six of her own with no thought of dumping them on somebody else so she could parade around helping the poor.

"Helping the poor," Emory muttered to himself as he hoisted an oatmeal-crustured high chair and a secondhand stroller into the bed of Hank's pickup. Hell, Hank and Madge were poor themselves.

"It's a step up from the city," Emory said, hands on his hips, watching Hank load a crib mattress.

"Yeah, Pop," Hank agreed "City's going to seed all right."

Was it a step up?

Madge, rocking on the front porch glider with Patty on her lap, wasn't sure.

The Gardens, a stalled attempt at residential development, kept its back to the faltering city southward and its envious gaze fixed on the sleek, new suburbs to the

north. There were no gardens in the Gardens. It was a scattering of structures laid out helter-skelter like the random pattern of railroad cars tossed about by a derailing disaster. The Gardens languished in a gully fringed by a tributary of Swatara Creek. When rain pummeled the Gardens, its dirt lanes melted into a tide of mud stalled by threadbare bath towels rolled up and stuffed in the gap beneath thin plywood doors. City services—sidewalks, paved streets, garbage collection—didn't exist. Lawns, wren-filled trees, and community swimming pools were the stuff of dreams.

Hank and Madge Smith had one vehicle, a Chevy 3100 pickup, available to Madge for church on Sundays and for grocery shopping and the laundrette on Saturdays.

Residents in the Gardens fortunate enough to own washing machines displayed them by the front door, hiked up on cinder blocks, and pegged their clean sheets and underwear, dresses, pants and socks to rope lines out back. Wilma and Harry Cline, four doors down, had a washing machine. Wilma, a housewife, and Harry, a police officer, lived in a barracks-style, fiber cement structure laid down on a concrete slab exactly like the Smiths' place and back then it was just the two of them plus Adelaide the cat. Wilma was a scrawny woman with skin as white as Casper the Ghost and rust-colored hair short and thick as weeds. Her eyes, a shade of green hard to name, were large and as wide as those of a guileless child. When she spoke, it sounded like her voice was traveling through her nose. Harry was a tall sturdy man with a strong handshake and an attentive, restrained manner. Harry was good-looking and Wilma was, well, she was Wilma.

"Maybe they met in the dark—in the backseat at the drive-in," Hank said to Madge one night while pulling his white t-shirt over his head as she brushed her teeth.

"Be nice. Poor little thing," replied Madge, purring the way some people purr when mention of another's shortcomings reminds them of their own relative superiority.

*

It was early August, just two months after the Smiths had moved in, when Wilma showed up looking for Adelaide the cat. The knock on that screen door sent Madge's heart into a gallop. She was hoping it was Paulette McEvoy and her boy stopping by.

Madge was going a little bit mad, stuck in the Gardens without a car. In Harrisburg, Hank's mother had been a reliable babysitter and Madge could escape to her soup kitchen a short bus ride away.

Madge recognized Wilma as the woman who dug through neighbors' side yard debris piles at twilight. Once, when Madge and Sandy were pushing Patty's stroller through the dried ruts in the narrow dirt street, they spied Wilma in the McEvoy's side yard, yanking on a cabinet with three of its four legs intact. Wilma showed no embarrassment; there was nothing stealthy or furtive about her pulling the cabinet out to the edge of the grass, her thin bowed back to the street. She heaved the burden up against her belly with a grunt and turned toward home, staggering on wide-apart legs, looking like the last drunk to leave the bar. Was it stealing when it was something thrown away? Madge was pondering the moral implications of this act so deeply she hadn't noticed Patty's sippy cup falling to the ground or Sandy's runny nose.

No, she told Wilma, she hadn't seen the cat. She invited Wilma in for a glass of iced tea and a bowl of lime Jello.

"Sorry there's no more whipped cream," Madge offered as she set the bowl in front of Wilma, who looked down at that wobbly square of green dessert as if she might cry and at first Madge thought she was disappointed about the whipped cream. Then she thought maybe it was because she was so worried about Adelaide the cat, but then realized that Wilma was almost pushed to tears by nothing more than the simple act of being served without having to ask. Madge could not have been more gratified.

It was summer, humid, but on that particular afternoon, a breeze wafted in by way of the window, made its way through the kitchen on its brief journey into the living room and quickly escaped through the cracked-open front door. Sandy and Patty prowled beneath the kitchen table like caged animals, Sandy in little cotton briefs, Patty in a diaper. Sandy pretended to be a cat and made mewing sounds.

"Pet me, I'm a kitty," she directed Patty, who threw herself down on one chubby leg, the other extended in front of her. She smiled around the four fingers stuck in her mouth.

Wilma told Madge she and Harry hadn't made any friends in the Gardens. It was not that kind of neighborhood, she said; people did not extend themselves easily.

It was the way the tiny houses sat at odd angles with fields of crabgrass and bumpy dirt lanes between them. There was no real place for congregating. Only young mothers gathered by somebody's mailbox with their kids running wild in the nearest front yard.

"Once we have a baby, we'll make friends," Wilma said.

"Of course you will," Madge said, laying another slab of Jello in Wilma's bowl.

But Madge knew better.

It had only been a couple of days since the McEvoy's were over to the Smiths' to play gin rummy while their boy sat on his knees next to Sandy who supervised him in the building of a skyscraper with wooden blocks. Patty sat behind the two, sucking on a raspberry Popsicle. Paulette McEvoy told the Smiths about the day Randall had come home from work and found Wilma Cline knee deep in their trash pile on the side of the house, fingering a torn lampshade.

"Randall stood there with a smile plastered on his face." Paulette paused to study her cards. "He acted as though it was the most normal thing in the world to come upon a neighbor rooting around in our junk pile."

Randall dropped his cards onto the table.

"I was embarrassed for the poor gal. Stealing a busted lampshade, for Pete's sake. She looked pathetic. Besides, why didn't you come out of the house? Why were you in there spying on us from behind the curtain? What could I say? She was about to walk off with the thing when she spotted me getting out of the car."

Wilma told Randall she'd been admiring the pattern in the lampshade fabric, how it reminded her of a dress her mother once wore.

"They stood there for an eternity," Paulette said, laughing, "Randall gulping air like a fish out of water, Wilma smiling like an idiot. Those weird eyes of hers! Finally, Randall told her to take it home."

"She was so grateful," Randall said shaking his head, "it was pathetic."

"Does Harry know his wife is a klepto?" Hank asked over his shoulder. He'd left the table to wipe the Popsicle slop from Patty's face with a damp tea towel. Patty thought it was a game and laughed, taking a clumsy swipe at the towel.

Paulette's eyebrows shot up, gaze steady on her cards.

"Wilma Cline gives me the creeps," she said.

Wilma, Madge decided, watching her guest spoon Jello into her mouth, needed a baby. That would put an end to her snooping and stealing. And maybe people would start to like her a little bit. Here was a woman who needed help.

*

"I found a baby for you and Harry."

On a Saturday in the middle of September, Hank and Harry kept an eye on the girls while readying the baby's room: putting together a crib on loan, hanging a curtain Wilma said she had found somewhere. The curtain had a small hand-stitched repair and smelled faintly of dishwashing liquid. Madge and Wilma drove to Lancaster General Hospital. It was an Indian summer and the car windows were rolled down all the way, hot air blowing around in the car, the pastel fabric of the ladies' knotted scarves rippling in the stifling breeze.

The baby belonged to Madge's sister-in-law. When Madge's brother returned from a two-year stint in Korea to find his wife pregnant, he told her she could not bring the baby home from the hospital.

Wilma said she didn't want to know about the baby's circumstances.

"Let him start his life with a clean slate," she'd drawled through her nose at the time.

Harry had not agreed. It went against his inquisitive nature, his need to solve mysteries. There was something dangerous about bringing a child into a family without knowing certain things about him. In the end he reluctantly went along with Wilma, who acted as though this child coming into their lives was a preordained event.

Harry appreciated Madge for her good humor and her friendship with Wilma, who did not seem to have any other friends. Still, there was something grating about the whole thing. After all, he and Wilma were doing someone a favor—probably some young girl in trouble. And there was Madge, coming out a saint on both ends of the bargain. Why was he so bothered? He thought it might go back to memories of some women in his mother's church—those scrupulous women, charitable with abandon, but not so much for charity's sake.

Baby Jimmy had a tuft of black hair that spilled over his forehead like an inky birthmark. His eyes were muddled; they were neither light or dark, blue nor brown. At

first, he didn't seem to know he had been born; he moved his arms and legs in slow motion, as though continuing to float in amniotic fluid. He couldn't settle into life outside the womb; the very air around him seemed a source of irritation and he cried with great anger as if asking why he'd been born. As a toddler, Jimmy didn't smile; his anger was no longer expressed in tears—it permeated his thin dark face. As a kindergartener he was sullen, unwilling.

Testing, the school said, Jimmy needed testing so they could best understand how to help him. Harry and Wilma were exhausted and perplexed, other children frightened, teachers dismayed and grim.

"Poor Wilma," Paulette McEvoy sighed over her cards at the Smith's one Saturday night. "All this time she's been lucky, dealing in ill-gotten goods from our junk pile with no consequences..."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Madge demanded.

"That ill-gotten child is giving her a run for her money, wouldn't you say?"

Randall laughed.

"Yeah, a busted lampshade is one thing...but a busted kid."

He whistled.

"Not funny," Madge fumed later, pulling her slip over her head and shaking it as if to dislodge the McEvoy's tasteless comments from the garment. "It could happen to anyone, a child like that."

Hank kept mum. He lay awake that night, listening to tires thumping over the bad concrete joint on Eisenhower Boulevard.

"...into each life some rain must fall."

And the rest of the line:

"...but too much is falling in mine."

No, he thought, his disappointments were small compared to Harry's and Wilma's. He'd been disappointed that his mother had only cared for him with a dogged determination having nothing to do with affection. He'd hoped Madge would somehow make that up to him, expecting she would devote herself to the girls and to him. They'd had a good start. After the girls were born, she'd grown restless, distracted. And now, this thing with little Jimmy Cline. She'd shared little about his background, replying to Hank's questions that the less he knew the better. He felt a

kind of remorse, thinking that if he were the sort of man who could attract more of his wife's attention, she might have been content to cater to her own family, she might not have interfered in the lives of their neighbors. Hank drifted off on that thought.

*

Madge couldn't shake the McEvoy's remarks. Thoughts of Jimmy, of Wilma and Harry dogged her through three cycles of laundry (they'd finally purchased their own washing machine), and all the way to the grocery store and back (Madge now had her own 1948 Plymouth coupe). She needed to return to her work at the Salvation Army, Madge decided, to get her mind on something else. And maybe they wouldn't get together with the McEvoy's quite so often.

The girls were in school all day now, and could ride the school bus finally assigned to the Gardens, now that the neighborhood was bursting with children. Over the next five years, the get-togethers with the McEvoy's would fall off without completely disappearing and it was at these occasional gatherings that Paulette shared more news of the Clines.

"He's had to leave three or four schools already," Paulette offered. "They say he frightens the other kids and the teachers don't know what to do with him."

Another time, she reported that the Clines had tried everything they could think of to get Jimmy to interact.

"They bought him a puppy. They took him to Niagara Falls. Wilma makes one King Sugar cake after another. He just sits there and seethes."

"I've seen him riding a bike," Madge offered hopefully.

"Yeah, that's all he does," Paulette said, "but he never rides with the other kids. Creepy."

Madge was silent. The boy rode his bike with a fury, never with the joy most young kids find when they are finally set free on their own wheels, pushing through the wind on a mild day. Well, soon she wouldn't have to see any more of Jimmy Cline. The Smiths had plans to move as soon as Sandy was ready for junior high. They already had their eye on a subdivision with two-story brick homes and sparkling new paved sidewalks.

When the first night in their new home finally arrived, Madge stood at the window, admiring the graceful arch of the streetlights and realized they were now too far away from the Gardens to get together for those card games.

*

Madge didn't see Paulette until they ran into each other at the A&P Market several years later.

Paulette was jubilant.

"Finally out of the Gardens," she announced, radiant with the news, "a split-level on Fremont Street—we're neighbors again! Come over for cards—it'll be just like the old days."

They chatted about Sandy, who was beginning her junior year at the new high school, and Patty who was in ninth grade. Paulette and Randall's boy was a freshman in the same school as Sandy. Madge pretended to write down Paulette's new number on her shopping list and backed slowly into the bakery section. She sighed and turned toward a table of sticky buns.

"Oh ,Madge," Paulette chimed up, "did you hear Jimmy Cline ran away?"

*

In a dark kitchenette the woman opposite Harry Cline was preoccupied with her nails; frowning at a cuticle, she started working it between her teeth.

"I was hoping you could tell me about the boy's father," he ventured, trying his best to sound like an interested party and not a police officer. "Birth certificate says Father is unknown."

She shrugged, shaking her blonde hair over her ears.

"We only met the once," she said without looking up, "I don't even know his name."

"What did he look like?"

"Hmmm. Big guy. Tall. Shoulders were wide. Black hair, dark eyes. Big Adam's Apple."

"Any identifying marks?"

"Like what?"

"Tattoos, scars..."

"Not that I recall."

Harry gazed at her steadily until she looked up and met his eyes.

"What." She said, "It was just the once, I told you."

After he'd been on the road several miles, Harry realized she'd had the same sullen expression as Jimmy and that she hadn't once asked how the boy was doing. The visit had rattled him and he took the rest of the afternoon off. Maybe Wilma would have a pot of soup on, he thought, and they could sit down and talk things over before Jimmy got home from school. As he pulled up to the house, he spied Jimmy coming around the corner. At fourteen, he was taller than Harry.

"Why aren't you in school, son?"

"Don't know. Ask Mom."

"They said he frightened the kids," Wilma said, rubbing her hands fretfully, pacing the kitchen floor, "but when I ask them what he has done, they have no answer! No answer. Just because he's quiet."

Hank touched her shoulder, "Wilma, he's fourteen years old. He can barely write his own name. He can't read a book. The only thing that makes him happy is that damn bike. We have to get him into a home."

Wilma fled into their room, Harry following. Neither heard Jimmy come in and hover outside the doorway.

"I can't put him in a home," she said, "that's what they did to me."

This was not what she'd told Harry when they met. She'd told him her parents were dead and she had no brothers or sisters.

Now, she told him about her years at the York Children's Home, foster home placements that never seemed to work out for one reason or another, and how she'd aged up and nobody wanted a teenager, so she spent the rest of her years in the home until reaching eighteen and graduating from high school.

"You know what they do then?" She said, "They call you an adult and throw you out."

They sat on the bed and Harry laced his fingers in hers. Seventeen years they'd been together. He'd worked the graveyard shift back then, a rookie stopping in at the

Front Street Diner for coffee on his way home. She always put on a fresh pot, gave him the first cup. He'd wanted to see that flame of hair, like rich copper, set free from the net cap she wore at work. Her skin was smooth and white as sun-bleached stone, her wide eyes were clear and green as beach glass. He thought about the way she walked as if not wanting to disturb the air, those thin legs and tiny feet moving noiselessly across the floor. He touched her cheek.

"There aren't orphanages anymore. They're called group homes; smaller than orphanages. When he's eighteen, we'll put him in an adult care facility. I'm gonna make Lieutenant pretty soon. We can afford it."

At dinnertime, Harry stepped outside and saw Jimmy off in the distance popping wheelies against the setting sun.

"Let's go ahead without him," he said to Wilma, "when he gets good and hungry he'll come home."

They stared at an episode of *The Wild Wild West*, followed by *Hogan's Heroes*, neither of them hearing one word of dialogue or absorbing one scene of either show. Harry silently calculated the cash flow of their household in light of decisions agreed to over dinner. Wilma imagined herself visiting Jimmy on weekends and holidays until he was well enough to come home. Several hours later, when they went outside together to look for the boy, a scattering of stars had fallen on the sky and the boy and his bike had vanished.

*

On a warm June afternoon, having spooned a pint of chocolate ice cream into her father-in-law's slack mouth, Madge spied Wilma Cline on the patio of the hospice residence off Colonial Road. Wilma, her bristly hair now spotted with bald patches and her skin more pale than ever, sat in a wheelchair facing a grove of laurel trees. An IV ran something into the back of her scrawny bruised hand.

Wilma told her that the day she'd come to Madge's for the first time, she had been sitting in the quiet for as long as she could stand the sound of her own breathing. She'd seen Madge and the girls the day before: Madge sitting on the door stoop, Sandy and Patty on a blanket in the sun, Sandy blowing bubbles, Patty batting them out of the air with two hands.

"The idea of pretending Adelaide was lost just came to me." She picked a bit of lint from her terry cloth robe and looked into Madge's eyes. "Child's play was written all over your place. I couldn't resist it. I remember the little wading pool, and the bucket and shovel in that patch of sand. There was a doll whose face was covered in crayon."

Wilma's face, lusterless a few minutes earlier, glowed with animation. Her eyes, expressionless before, now glistened. "I don't believe I've ever been happier than I was in that instant you came to the door," Wilma said, "or maybe it was when you gave me the green Jello. Remember? You put it right down in front of me. With iced tea."

That night, Hank was watching Madge, her face set hard as cement, dry the last dinner plate and slip it into the cupboard.

"What's the matter?"

She'd been remembering how she'd stopped going to the door when Wilma came by with the boy. How she'd avoided walking past the Cline's place with Sandy and Patty, and always kept her eyes on the road when she had to drive by.

"Did you ever feel like a balloon with all the air gone out?" She tossed the damp towel on the counter.

They held each other in the quiet. Over the years, with the girls and the bills and all the other joyful and calamitous comings and goings of family life, they'd forgotten how to take care of each other. It was like waking up one day, Hank thought, pulling her closer, and wondering why you couldn't remember when you'd stopped saying your prayers.

The next day, returning from the Amish market on Route 39, Madge saw a young man on the roadside, sprawled against a mailbox post, touching the side of his face and inspecting the spot of blood on trembling fingertips. Nearby, an upended bicycle was bent like a pretzel, one of its tires spinning on a misshapen wheel. Up ahead, a van stormed into the horizon, taking the next curve on two squealing wheels.

She'd been thinking about what a nice day it had been, how pleased she was with the giant pots of hydrangeas, all lavender and blue, purchased from the Miller woman, with her sweet, lawn-capped little girls who helped carry the flowers to the car. And the apple butter from the Zimitz farm, and the homemade shoo-fly pie she'd surprise Hank with—his favorite dessert.

She was right beside the boy, now, and slowed down, gazing at him, at the mangled bike, taking in the scene like people do when there's an accident. She thought she would roll down the window and ask if he was okay, then pull to the side of the road. She wanted to pull to the side of the road. She wanted to stop, but the car just kept going.

DON'T PROMISE ME TOMORROW

From the Series - Lessons in Love

Eliza San Juan

Chapter 1

The sun started its descent into the western sky of Marrakech, Morocco, ruining the perfect view Bruce had of the city. The stone streets stretched out before the restaurant he occupied with brown stone buildings lining either side. It was reminiscent of a scene from a movie he made in Turkey years back. One tall spire stood watch in the distance. Bruce wondered if it was a cathedral, a government building, or an ancient castle. It jutted above all else in the city like a beacon.

He pulled his cap down farther down to block the intrusion of the sun burning with intensity on the scene laid out before him. Thankfully, it was about to disappear behind that tall tower in a few moments, leaving behind its warmth, with none of its glaring effects. It was a perfect day for people watching. The temperature was hot, but not stifling, and the beauty of this unknown country captivated Bruce even more after he stepped off the plane than it had in its photographs.

Bruce's friends thought he was crazy to set out on vacation alone. He didn't tell them where he was going. He just needed a change of scenery. He traveled so much with work but was never able to enjoy all of the places he visited. Final editing and scoring was currently taking place on the sixth installment of the movie franchise Bruce was a part of, and although he loved the films, and what they meant to him, being a superhero on the big screen brought certain complications to his real life. People saw him on the street and expected him to be the same tough god-like superhero in real

life. When, in reality, he was just a guy who was dealt a lucky break, an extremely lucky break.

Women literally swooned when they met him. It was too much for any man. Nothing ever seemed to pan out anyway, not with the career types he occasionally dated, and definitely not with an adoring fan who couldn't see past his famous face and name. Bruce didn't really have time for complications in his life anyway.

But, as his mother liked to remind him, he was pushing forty, and more and more, her voice echoed in his head: Slow down Bruce. Take time to enjoy what you have.

With each new blockbuster that was released, his paycheck and notoriety increased. Yet, the lines in Bruce's forehead deepened along with the relentless echo of his mother's words.

So, when this latest installment concluded, and Bruce's best friend, Jenn, who played one of the female heroines, asked him what he was up to next, he simply replied, "Vacation, Jenn. Vacation."

Bruce lounged back in his wicker chair and sipped his Casablanca as his eyes roamed from side to side. He was fairly certain that no one had recognized him. He wore dark aviator style sunglasses over his iconic crystal blue eyes. That, coupled with his tan worn-looking ball cap and short-cropped beard seemed to be enough in Northern Africa to stave off unwanted attention. He fidgeted at the button-down white shirt that began to cling to his chest. His westward descending friend started making him sweat, but he wasn't quite ready to move from his spot at the restaurant.

He lounged adjacent to the outside wall in the open-air patio with more than a dozen or so empty tables neatly positioned before him. Only a handful of them had patrons basking in the afternoon sun. Many women donned black headscarves, but not all. An elderly man was draped in a floor length white striped robe and sported a small "kufi" cap atop his head. All seemed to be in a cheery mood and in no hurry to return to the worries of life.

Bruce observed everything, from the food on everyone's plates to the bicycles and model of each car passing by on the city streets. The place was alive with shouts of friends and the occasional honk or bell from a bike or scooter. The savory and peppery smells of the spices wafted from the kitchen each time the glass door swung open near

him by the waiters carrying trays of meats and vegetables seasoned to perfection. A man sat at a small two-top table to the far left of him. Like Bruce, he wore a pair of dark sunglasses. But instead of a kufi, the man sported a large black-rimmed hat that concealed much of his face. Bruce could tell he was a local, with his dark curled hair peeking from under the hat, a mustache, and his olive-colored skin. The man seemed to be people watching as well. Bruce leaned back in his chair and scrubbed at his beard. He began making up ridiculous backstories in his mind; casting the man as a character in one of his movies. The local seemed to be waiting for something, or someone...searching the passersby with interest.

Bruce sucked down more of his Casablanca and eyed a small white charter bus with red Arabic lettering pulling up to the curb by the restaurant. One by one about a dozen excited teenagers made their way off and lingered at the curb chatting. He could hear them from where he was sitting. Great. Americans. The last thing he wanted was to draw the attention of a bunch of star struck teens while just beginning his vacation. Bruce scooted his chair farther back into the shadow and looked for his waiter.

Bruce couldn't speak Arabic, and retrieved his Google translator just to double check the word for "waiter." He didn't want to be rude, but the quicker he left unnoticed from this place, the better. Just as he typed in the word and held the phone up to his ear to check his pronunciation, a group of women caught his eye. They were traveling with the horde of teenagers. Bruce paused in his Google search and had to chuckle. What possessed any sane person to travel, outnumbered, with a mass of hormonal American kids? He decided to sit back and watch a little while longer.

There were three women. One was tall with curly, honeyed hair, fair skin, and long legs. She was the kind of woman Bruce was usually attracted to. The next woman, who seemed to be taking charge, was medium build with black hair streaked with blond highlights. She was speaking in English to the two other women, pointing to some tables on the patio. Her English had a definite accent, however, and Bruce tried to imagine where she might be from. She didn't appear to be a local.

The last woman was huddled around the teenagers and a bit more difficult to understand. She wore a huge straw sun hat and oversized orange-rimmed sunglasses that made her look like a praying mantis. He had to chuckle. Her accessories were in style but the fact that her glasses were orange made her look sophisticated, in a

ridiculous sort of a way. She wore skinny jeans and a white cotton sleeveless blouse. She was more petite than most of the teenagers gathered around her. But it was her stance that caught Bruce's attention, like a mama bear guarding her cubs. She stalked from side to side inspecting the alley to his left, then glancing down the street. She made sure everyone was on the sidewalk and not in danger. She eyed all of the patrons at the restaurant, one at a time.

Out of instinct, Bruce pulled himself farther back under the awning. Her patrol made him feel uneasy. He wondered if her senses were as keen as his, and he found himself investigating his surroundings, as well.. Something felt off. He noticed a shadow of a man in a hat move behind the group, but he couldn't see it exactly. Bruce stood slowly as he surveyed the patio, and discovered that the man in the large black hat and sunglasses had disappeared from view. Bruce's heart rose to his throat and he felt his palms begin to sweat.

The group of students started finding their seats on the patio. As they did, Bruce spotted him. The man was on foot behind the group, eyeing them from the side of their bus, apparently concealing himself. The man in the hat shoved something into his front pocket.

The women were speaking multiple languages were getting the children settled, talking to the maître d, and saying goodbye to their bus driver. Bruce was trying to keep his eyes on the man in the black hat while listening to the women. What was the guy doing? Was he a threat? The bus driver yelled in Arabic to one of the women as he boarded the small charter bus, and the man in the black hat tipped his head down and sauntered back to the restaurant, through the sea of youth and local patrons.

Bruce watched the man swiftly pluck his hand in and out of backpacks and purses quicker than he thought humanly possible while casually strolling by them. Bruce wasn't a superhero, but he also couldn't sit idly by, witnessing this either. He slowly inched from behind his table. As he did, the woman in the orange glasses also rose, unintentionally bumping into the pickpocket. Bruce heard her apologize in multiple languages, and observed her clutch her purse. As observant as she had been, she hadn't noticed that this man was robbing her students.

The man held out his hand out to allow her to stand and pass. She dropped her straw hat onto her seat and Bruce's breath stopped as he watched her chestnut hair

tumble down past her shoulders in waves. Then, she and the pickpocket casually made their way toward Bruce, side by side.

The woman was standing between Bruce and the thief, thus blocking Bruce's path. He observed the pickpocket's every move. The man's fingers fidgeted at the woman's side as he strolled casually beside her, then leaned forward to open the door to the restaurant. He was directly beside Bruce. The woman placed the strap of the purse over her head in cross body fashion and, slightly bowing her head away from Bruce, and nodded toward the man as a thank you.

Bruce heard her gasp, then he saw the glint of a knife. Bruce moved toward the man, but the woman was quicker. Before he knew it, the three were tumbling through the entryway into the restaurant. Bruce expected the woman would be sandwiched between them, but as he charged toward the man, Bruce fell, and caught only empty air. He landed with a thud then scrambled to his feet, grappling with the twist of bodies in front of him.

Bruce looked up. The woman's knee was pressed against the throat of her pursuer as she tried to reach for the knife. Money and wallets spilled from the man's pockets as he rolled from under the woman. Bruce reached for the knife, and clasped the woman by the wrist.

The pickpocket, in a predatory stance, looked at Bruce for only a second, as if sizing him up. Then the man bolted out of the restaurant and away.

Selection from
HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY
June 1905, Nagykanizsa, the Austro-Hungarian Empire
Wendy Teller

The sun had barely risen over the horizon as three peasant women carried baskets on their covered heads, baskets heavy with early summer fruits: cherries, raspberries and apricots. Their stout figures, enlarged by their broad skirts and black shawls, walked north and east, to Nagykanizsa. On market days the path was filled with such women, their leather boots kicking up the road's dust. But today was not market. Today two rich Nagykanizsa families would be joined in matrimony and only the finest fruits, the most perfect flowers were good enough for the occasion.

A flower-filled cart, which had started out before the peasant women, stood in front of the Church of the Sacred Heart, where the aunt of the bride directed the parish women in the decoration of the chapel. Father Joseph, who would preside over the wedding, stood aside, scowling, impatient with the intruders.

Once the roses, the daisies, and the baby breath had been properly placed, the half empty cart traveled several blocks to the City Club, where the wedding dinner and reception would be held. There the remainder of the cart's cargo joined the fruit brought by the peasant women.

Having delivered their goods, the peasants retraced their dusty path to their thatch-covered homes, leaving the cobbled streets free for the citizens who would attend the wedding, the bankers, the factory owners, the merchants – the important men who made

Nagykanizsa the business center of Zala County. Of course Count Batthyány would not attend – he was an aristocrat who did not mingle with businessmen – but there had been rumors that the father of the groom, the late Mr. Herczeg, might have been ennobled. He had constructed many important public buildings: the railway station in Piski, the church in Kaposvár, the courthouse in Subotica, and more. The emperor himself had visited the construction site of the barracks in Csáktornya.

Those who would attend the wedding, the families of the well-to-do, were getting ready, the ladies putting on their best dresses and fixing their hair in fine dos, the gentlemen wearing their Sunday suits, combing their beards, and waxing their mustaches.

Mr. Weisel, owner of the iron factory and the machine works, inspected himself in the mirror: his plump face; his hair, still dark, but receding; his trimmed beard on his heavy jowls. He was a substantial man, in stature and in his community. He had hoped his daughter would be the bride today, but the groom was ready to marry and his daughter was still too young. Mr. Weisel sighed. There would be other fine men for his Ella to marry.

But Ella was not getting dressed.

She stood against the wall, her fingers at her back running up and down the laces, searching for a bow.

The red in Mother's face highlighted the dark mole on her chin. "Turn around this instant!"

Ella shook her head.

"Miss, it just needs to be a little tighter." Therese held up her hand, her fingers indicating a tiny space.

The bone stays cut into Ella's ribs with each trickle of air she sucked in. She found a knot rather than a bow. Her fingers worked to loosen it. She exhaled, slackening the laces. Her fingers rolled the ties back and forth, finding a loop. Sliding her forefinger between the laces, she pulled the knot open and, running her hands up the corset back, she loosened the ties. She inhaled deeply, ignoring the oppressive sweetness of Mother's perfume.

"You impudent girl. Turn around and let Therese do her job." Mother's lips pursed.
"You will make us all late!"

Ella shook her head. She took another deep breath, fully expanding her rib cage and filling her lungs with air, glorious air.

Ella's little sister Clara, dressed in her party clothes, tugged at her mother's sleeve.
"Mama?"

"Clara, what are you doing?" Mother's stormy face looked down at her other daughter.
"Oh, never mind. Go get your father!"

Ella looked after Clara with envy as she ran out the door. She was still young. She was allowed to wear loose clothing. How Ella longed for those more comfortable days.

Ella's hair, swept up in a complicated style, felt like it was being pulled out, centimeter by centimeter. Why did being properly dressed amount to torture? She released an auburn lock and twirled it, feeling her shoulders relax as the silky strand slid across her fingertips.

"Ella! Stop!" Clara gone, Mother's glare returned to Ella. "You are ruining your hair and Therese worked so hard to make you look pretty!"

Ella dropped her hand by her side and stared at her mother. Would she be like her mother twenty years from now, angry and sputtering? Ella promised herself that would not happen.

"What is going on?" Father stood at the door, his walking stick in his hand, his tie just so.
"This should be a good day, a holiday, a festival day. So what's the fuss?"

"Deal with your daughter." Mother spat the words at her husband. "She won't let Therese dress her."

"Why not?" Father's eyes glimmered merrily. He was ready for the ceremony and, more important, the party ahead.

"Ella, my princess, why won't you get dressed?"

Ella sighed and then took another deep breath.

"My dress doesn't fit."

Father tucked his chin and frowned.

"Doesn't fit?"

"Of course it fits!" Mother sharp voice cut through the moment of peace between father and daughter." She just won't let Therese tighten her corset, so the dress can be buttoned."

Father glared at his wife, then turned his attention back to his daughter.

"Ella, my dear, be a good girl. Put on your clothes, so we can go to the wedding."

"Father, I can't breathe when the corset is tightened."

"Don't you want to look pretty?"

As Father approached her, Ella inhaled his scent of tobacco and mint.

He tucked the loosened strand of Ella's hair behind her ear.

"You're eighteen and beautiful. The most beautiful girl in Nagykanizsa. Maybe the most beautiful in all of Hungary."

He lifted her chin.

"It's time to look for a husband for you and you want to find a good rich fellow. You need to look pretty."

Mother's voice rose from behind Father. "The sooner we get her married, the better."

Ella locked her gaze on Father. "The dress is too small."

He shrugged. "Then wear another dress."

Mother snorted. "You think we have another party dress for Ella?" She shook her head. "I certainly don't have enough money for an extra dress for her."

Father scowled at his wife. "Mrs. Weisel, enough."

He turned his attention back to his daughter. "Ella, you may come to the wedding if you get dressed. If you don't want to get dressed, you will have to stay at home."

He turned and walked out of the room, the tap of his walking stick punctuating every other step.

Mother looked at the empty doorway, nodding. "All right. Ella, we have no time to

waste. Let Therese fit your corset properly."

Her eyes fixed on her mother, Ella shook her head. She would not wear that thing. She didn't want to sit through the wedding mass anyhow.

"Very well. Ella, you are to stay in this room while we are away. No dinner. No books. A good chance for you to catch up on your mending and needle work."

Mother turned to Therese. "And you are to stay with her." Mother nodded her head as she formulated her plan. "To make sure she does as she is told."

Ella knew Mother was punishing Therese too, to make the hours ahead even more unpleasant for both unhappy women, forced to miss a party, each resenting the other. And compliant Therese would forgo food if Mother commanded it.

"Mother, can't at least Therese have something to eat?"

Therese glanced at Ella.

Mother's lips smiled, but her eyes were stony. "Oh, I suppose she can find something in the kitchen." Mother turned toward Therese. "Cook has banked the fire, so nothing warm, but I am sure you can find something there."

Mother's skirts swished as she left, pulling the door closed behind her.

"Help me out of this thing!" Ella couldn't wait to get into her skirt and blouse, back to her real self, not the doll Mother and Father planned to marry off.

"Yes, Miss." Therese did as she was asked.

Oh, Ella thought, does this woman – for she was a good ten years older than Ella – does she have no backbone? Why does she not rage against the injustice? It was not Therese's fault the dress was so small.

Therese was a nuisance, this companion Mother thought so necessary. No, she was not a companion. She was a guard, a prison guard, to make sure that Ella did not misbehave. It didn't matter that all eligible young women had "companions". Her friend Zsuzsi had one, too. But Zsuzsi was the perfect young lady who got along with her minder.

Ella threw the corset on the floor, gratefully buttoned up her bodice, and slipped on her

blouse and skirt. She loosened her hair, placing the pins in a box at her dressing table. Massaging her scalp, she sat on her bed, looking around the room she shared with Therese, her prison for the next several hours. So pretty, with its pale green walls, translucent white curtains, and white brocade bedspreads. So perfect with the cherry wood inlaid with oak in the bed's headboard, the wash table, the chairs, in every piece of furniture in the room down to the frame on the mirror. So prettily, perfectly awful. The sound of raised voices penetrated the door.

"Mother, it is simply not fair!"

"Well, you don't have to keep my unruly daughter under control, so you might think it unfair, but that's too bad."

"But Therese has done nothing wrong!"

Ella had to smile. She rarely agreed with her brother, Miklos, but today he was making perfect sense.

"Just because Ella is impossible, why should Therese suffer?"

"Because she is paid to suffer!"

Therese moved closer to the door, her ear nearly touching it.

Miklos's words grew louder. "Mother, that is not very Christian!"

Miklos had as impudent a tongue as Ella's, but her mother tolerated him. Because he was six years older? Maybe. Because he was male? Probably. Mother always wilted in front of men.

His voice took a sweeter tone. "Besides, Clara will be happier if Therese comes. Therese always entertains her."

"Miklos, we don't have time for this. We are going to be late as it is." Mother's sigh was audible through the door. "Maybe you're right. Therese can come. But tell Ella she is to stay in her room. No dinner."

The door burst open, framing a grinning Miklos. "Put on your good dress. You're coming to the party!"

He smiled as he turned to his sister. "But no party for you. And no dinner."

Ella returned his smile. "Who wants to sit through another mass? We have to do that once a week anyhow."

"No doubt the mass will be splendid, not a prayer or a hymn left out. But the party! It will be exquisite! Endre Herczeg loves to show off his...." Miklos rubbed his thumb against his first two fingers. "You can bet there will be the best food, and wine, and I hear Csárdás dancers will come. And there will be a Viennese orchestra, so we shall waltz!"

He twirled in place, his arms around an imaginary partner. He looked back at his sister, his lips twisted in a smirk. "Too bad for you, but you'll have a great time with your needle work."

Ella's smile remained. "Eat yourself sick. Drink yourself dumb."

Miklos snickered. "And, of course, you won't get to see your friend Ede." He understood his weapons, leaving the most lethal until last.

Ella turned her gaze to the window, so her brother couldn't see her face.

THE POWER OF SUPERMAN

Suzanne Morgan Williams

Ed Mayberry's knee cracked with a pop as he lowered himself to the ground behind a wall of overgrown junipers, using the stock of his 22 like a crutch. His nose wrinkled. "Damn cats using my yard for a toilet." He brushed at the dirt under the plants, smoothing a spot he hoped would accommodate his body as he stretched out. His back relaxed with a feeling that is half pain and half relief. He adjusted his gun along his side and sighed. "I'll teach you to ruin my dahlia beds. Dig 'em up like they were nothing, nothing. That purple beauty would have won my Angela a prize." He coughed. "Teach you."

With that, he tucked his arm under his head, sucked in a deep breath and waited. The warm summer air wrapped him like his grandmother's afghan or a shroud. She was the one who taught him to mind the dahlias, dig the roots when the time was just right, choose the best buds to nurture and snip off the rest. But it was Angela, God rest her soul, who loved the pink, orange, and purple blooms. He was doing this for her. And the flowers. And the whole street. He wasn't the only one with a yard turned to rubbish by cat shit. Mangy, flea-bitten feral cats. They yawned all night then bred like bunnies - but not so cute. Just as destructive. Where were the suckers? Did they know he was lying here, smelling their pee, getting stiff by the minute, waiting for. . .

There it was. The big ugly tom cat. He aimed, steadied the rifle. Drew a breath and held it. Felt like hunting deer back when he could get himself out to the woods to track 'em. The tom cat looked up, yellow eyes reflected something - a

spark of the moon. The old man didn't breathe. He focused. Squeezed the trigger, and POP.

The cat's head jerked backwards before. His matted gray body flew into the street.

"Now tell your friends. Don't pee on my dahlias." Ed Mayberry pushed off the ground, backing his hands up one and then the other until his frame made two legs of a triangle. With a grunt he heaved himself upright, swiped the dirt off his worn khakis and went inside.

He left the tom in the street where it landed.

"Come on Henry, we'll be late to school," his mother took his backpack from the hook by the wide front door and held out her hand, waiting.

Henry sat on the stairs, staring past her.

"You know you'll see Miss Lena. Maybe you'll paint."

With that, Henry got up. "Paint. Paint. Paint." He grabbed the backpack from his mom and looked inside.

"Your superhero is in there. I made sure," Kelly said.

"Superman."

"Yes, that one today. Let's go."

Henry marched past her counting, "One, two, three, one, two, three." Head down, always counting, He avoided the cracks in the broken concrete as he advanced on the SUV. Then he stopped. Frozen.

"Henry, we have to go. You know what to do. Get in the car."

"No. Nooo. NO!" He pointed at the street, staring, and then he dropped the backpack ran to it.

"Stop. You can't run into the road," his mom yelled.

Henry knelt in the street, then rose slowly, cradling a stiff furry gray ball.

"Mine."

His mother's mouth dropped open. "What is that? Oh no, put that down. Henry, you can't." But then she saw the tears, glistening at first in his eyes, then welling full and dripping down his cheeks onto the clean shirt – the one with the

alligator logo that he insisted on wearing on Mondays. It was Monday. They were really late for school. And Henry was crying for the first time in maybe years.

Kelly Marsh took a beat, as her therapist had taught her. She visualized physically pushing back the wave of nausea that was rising to her throat as she looked at the mangled cat. She stopped her revulsion with an imaginary wall of will and transparent glass, then shoved it back into her stomach.

Henry was crying. Looking straight at her. Holding what was the rest of the cat. "Mama. Mine."

"OK. School can wait. Shall we bury it?" She could do this. Where did her husband keep the shovel? She wished he were home to inter the cat instead of wherever his meetings were this week. "Bring it in the back yard. We'll give it a funeral."

Henry eyed her.

"With flowers. Follow me."

Her son lowered his head, walking again, counting one, two, three. Was the moment over? The flicker of emotion? Kelly dared not guess. Maybe it was a breakthrough. Henry was actually crying – over a dead cat. What had happened to it anyway? She'd averted her eyes, but she was pretty sure the thing had lost the back of its head. That might not bother Henry, but it was too much for her. "Where is that darned shovel? Henry, put it down. You can pick a flower."

"No. No!!"

Kelly cocked her head. She knew that tone of voice. She had to think quickly, or Henry would go of control. The morning had gone so well, the routine just the way he needed it. Even sitting on the stairs had been exactly what he liked. And now this cat business. Was that a gunshot she'd heard last night? Who would shoot a poor cat?

"Mine," Henry said. His legs crumpled like the plain spaghetti he ate on Wednesdays, until he sat on the concrete petting the body.

"Honey, we have to bury it. And go to school."

Henry pushed the cat deeper into his lap, pulled his knees to his chest, and wrapped his arms around them, making a pen for the corpse. He began to rock.

"Shouldn't be dead. No." He looked at his mother, catching her eyes for once.

"Make it breathe."

"Oh, honey. . . I. . ." Kelly reached for her cell phone. She called the school. "We're going to be late." Then she texted her husband. "Henry is rocking a dead cat. Crying. Won't let go. Shit." Then, instead of prying the cat from her son, which was sure to start a meltdown, she pulled a lawn chair into the shade of the big buckeye tree and opened a solitaire game on her phone. She should be digging the grave. But Henry was oddly calm. The cat-thing was already dead. She could wait. "Henry, we have to bury it."

"Why? Not right. Not right." He hugged the body tighter. Sniffed. "Make it breathe."

Kelly shuddered. Darn, who'd do that to a cat?

"Did you say someone shot it? Don't we have laws against firing a gun in Danville?" Her friend, Gerry, turned her Tesla onto Hartz Avenue and began trolling for a parking spot.

Kelly shrugged. "You'd think so. There's a parking place."

Gerry cut off a Mazda and slid between the faded white lines. She pulled on the parking brake. "Or PETA. What about calling PETA? There are laws against animal abuse, you know."

"But it was one of the wild cats. I don't know if there are any laws about them. All I know is that Henry keeps asking about 'my cat.'"

Gerry chewed her bottom lip. "Did he know that cat or something?"

"He always watches them out the front window. It keeps him calm. . . maybe. . ."

"What if the guy shoots another one? What if he misses and hits Henry? Oh my God, Kelly, he could kill a kid!"

Kelly sucked in her breath and opened the car door. The summer heat blasted her face. Luckily the restaurant was right across the street and air conditioned. "I doubt it. But it's creepy."

"You have to report it," Gerry said. "Maybe to the sheriff? Or animal control. Try animal control. They'd take the cats to the Humane Society. This's crazy weird."

They stepped into the restaurant and cool air enveloped Kelly like a welcome breeze. "You know they euthanize the cats that aren't adopted. Who'd want some straggly old feral cats? And how would they even catch them? Those cats are clever."

"Your table is ready, ladies."

They walked under hanging ferns and fuchsias, carefully tended in the natural light that poured in. The garlic and olive oil smells from the kitchen didn't match the floral display.

"Here you are."

Kelly adjusted her knees beneath the crisp tablecloth and perused the menu. "Like I said, animal control will just kill the cats."

"But solve your problem."

"What cats?" A woman from the next table interrupted.

"Excuse me?" Kelly was not used to strangers butting into her private conversations.

"You're talking about killing cats. I can't bear the idea. What cats?"

Kelly assessed the woman. She was plain, short, and gray. Non-descript. She reminded Kelly of a scout leader or a bird watcher. No threat. Oh, whatever. "We have feral cats on my block. And someone shot one a couple of days ago. We're trying to. . ."

"Figures!" The woman half rose from her chair, shaking the petite vase of mini carnations on her table. "That's not all that happens to those poor creatures. People just dump them . . ."

"I don't know where they came from, but my son loves them." Kelly's nose tingled as she held back tears. For some reason she wanted to tell this strange woman everything about Henry and how he watched the cats, and talked to them more than to people, how she'd had to wait until he fell asleep to pry the gray body from his arms. "He thinks I can bring it back to life." The tears dripped. "He still looks for it. Every morning."

"Let me find my card." The stranger rummaged through her canvas bag and finally pulled up a wrinkled business card. "Here. Your son sounds like a good boy."

We love cats too. You call us. I belong to an organization that rescues the feral cats. We'll trap and spay and neuter them."

"What about tracking down the person who shot the. . ." Kelly paused. It was hard to think of the bloodied body, "cat?"

"That's up to you. But we can trap your cats. Of course you'll have to pay some veterinarians' fees."

"Are you ladies ready to order? Can I tell you the specials?"

Kelly ordered without thinking. If the bird watcher woman trapped the cats, would she take them away? That would devastate Henry too. She smoothed the card and tucked it carefully into her wallet. And if the cats stayed, even if they were neutered, would the reprobate shoot more of them? She'd have to think about this.

The knocking roused Ed Mayberry from his favorite chair. He moved slowly and pulled back the shade that covered the glass squares in his front door. "Do I know you?"

A woman stood, feet planted firmly on his front porch. She held a clipboard – never a good sign. "Open the door please. I have a question for you. About the cats."

Ed squinted. Was that the neighbor boy's mother behind her? That kid was strange. He thought he'd seen him pick up the dead cat the morning after he shot it. But then Ed decided his eyes were tricking him. Nobody would do that – at least without a plastic bag or something.

"Mr. Mayberry, it's Kelly from across the street. We're taking a collection to help the feral cats. I'm talking to all the neighbors. Do you have a minute?"

Ed angled the door open and stepped toward the two prying women. "So the cats? Help them?"

"We're going to trap them. . ." the sturdy woman started. He didn't recognize her.

"You can take 'em up to Mt. Diablo as far as I'm concerned. Let the coyotes and the wild boars have 'em." Ed stared at the older woman.

She didn't blink.

Her eyes were steely blue. Reminded him of Angela's, his wife – back then.

"No, we're not willing to feed coyotes with innocent cats. We'll neuter them. It should keep the numbers down."

Ed tilted his head. "Why are you here?" He nodded to Kelly.

"My son was traumatized, you might say broken hearted. Someone shot a cat – his favorite. Now he wants Superman to come and punish the shooter." She smiled, just a little. "Of course, I can't find Superman." Her smile broadened then disappeared. "But I did meet Helene and I promised him we'd help the rest of his kitties. That's what he calls them."

Ed frowned. He hadn't thought about how the kid felt. "Trap 'em? How you going to do that?"

The woman, the almost Angela woman, said, "We need to set traps in various places. Maybe on your property, for one. Do you know about live animal traps?"

Was this a trick? What if he did know about trapping and guns? "Hmm."

"I was thinking we could set traps here and you call us when you have a cat or two and we'll take them in for neutering."

"And then? Where do they go?"

Kelly answered. "They'll come back to our block, but the colony should stabilize. Not so many kittens."

Ed Mayberry scratched his head. They could trap the beasts in his backyard but how would they know what he'd do with them. Well. . . "Okay. Set your traps."

"Here's my card. Call when you have one," the cat woman said.

Ed tucked the card in his pocket. "Helene. We'll see." And he closed the door.

This time, it wasn't knocking that wakened him but the yowling. And it was the middle of the night. Ed rolled out of bed and, still half asleep, reached to close the window. "Damn cats." Then he remembered. The woman's people had set traps. The cats wouldn't shut up as long as they were stuck. He stepped into his slippers and turned on the porch light. He thought about taking the 22, but if he shot one in the cage, everyone would know that he'd killed that first stray. And the kid – he liked watching the kid – and somehow he liked knowing the boy was watching the cats. Even if they did crap on his dahlias.

He padded outside in his skivvies. The air was velvet this time of night. He drew a long breath. Thoughts of Angela bubbled up. He'd been thinking about her a lot since the cat woman appeared. It wasn't logical. Why would that stranger's eyes open the vault of all those old memories. The walks in his dad's walnut orchards. The soft night air. The crash of the accident. "Damn." Those eyes brought things to the surface.

The cat yelled again. Ed squinted to see the trap in the thin moonlight. There. It was a kitten. No, it was two. Where was the mother? She was probably too smart to get caught. But these little ones would starve without her. Maybe he should finish them off. They were small. They'd disappear in his trash bag. He felt a chill run down his back. "Angela?" Stupid. But he couldn't stop thinking of her. "I know, they're innocent. Like the kid. I know." Now he was talking to her. Did that make him crazy? Talking to a ghost. Whispering at least. He sputtered. He was talking to the air, and some kittens, and probably a frog or two. That was it. No Angela. No spirit. Nothing.

One of the kittens mewed, softer, more pathetic. "All right. All right." He lifted the trap and carried it inside.

Milk in an eye dropper. That should shut it up. That's what Angela would have done. He'd not get anymore sleep tonight anyway. Not with the images of her floating around in his head. Was he losing his mind? He warmed the milk in the tin pot he took camping. Eye droppers? He had one in the medicine cabinet. There were two kittens. They'd have to take turns. He'd call the cat woman in the morning. Helene somebody. Maybe she'd send someone else to get them. Someone with less disturbing eyes.

He pulled the first kitten from the cage. It was gray with a white stripe down its forehead. Its body was tiny, fuzzy and supple like the night air. "Moony. Here." He squeezed the warm milk into its open mouth. Its eyes were still blue. Probably hadn't been open long. Ed never had liked cats, but recently they'd made him so angry. That old tom? Maybe it was this one's father. Why'd he decide to shoot it? Well, it deserved it, fathering all the kittens and ruining his flowers. The kitten mewed and opened its pink mouth. He dropped in more milk. The kid across the street was waiting for Superman to avenge the scrawny old cat's death. Superman.

Ed laughed. Did he see what had happened with his X-Ray vision? "I am a crazy old man," he said out loud.

He sighed. Maybe he shouldn't have shot it. But it felt so good to aim, fire, take control of something, anything that was so damn bothersome. He had power for once, not like the nights he sat waiting for the doctors to say Angela was rallying, that she'd wake and smile at him again. Not like that night when he had to stop the life support, choose a funeral home for her. He'd had to decide how to dispose of her body – like a dead cat. Ed Mayberry's eyes flooded with tears. He dropped milk into the kittens' mouths automatically. One of them began to purr. He wiped his face a couple of times but then decided to feel the tears fall onto his arm. One kitten, the black one, fell asleep in his lap. He stroked its forehead. "Let's just call you Superman."

He caught two more grown cats, one in each of the traps. They hissed at him when he peered into the cages. He hissed back. Then he called up the steel eyed woman. "This the cat rescue?"

"It is."

"I've got two cats for you, and a couple of kittens. The cats are obnoxious."

"Well, don't do anything you'll regret."

Ed laughed. "If I was going to off them, I'd have done it already. Just come get the animals. I don't want them in my yard."

"Someone will be by this evening."

In fact, it was that same woman who'd upset the careful balance he'd built after Angela's death who drove up to the curb. She hauled two cat carriers out of her van. Ed met her as she came up the walk. "They're out back."

He led the way around the house, past the dahlia beds and the rose bushes, across the lawn to where the traps had been laid under a big red gum eucalyptus tree. "There. They're all yours. You get any others?" He didn't really care, but he wanted to talk to her– for just a minute. Did he want to pretend she was like Angela? Or maybe convince himself she was entirely different. He didn't know which.

"Yes, we've picked up nine now from the colony." She knelt by the live trap and clicked her tongue at the big tabby inside. It did not hiss. "Just wait, now, little

one. This is good for you, I promise." She covered the trap with an old beach towel, opened the door to the cat carrier, sprung the door on the trap and tipped the cat into its new container. Now it yowled.

"They never like that." She clicked the latches closed on the carrier. She repeated the process for the second cat, then straightened up.

"Where'd you catch all those cats? Nine you said?" Now Ed didn't want her to leave. He tried catching her eye, but she glanced away.

"We set traps up and down the street. They're getting dewormed, vaccinated, all that. We look after their health."

"Hmm."

"I didn't think you'd care about the cats."

"Long as they stay out of Angela's, I mean my, dahlias. . ."

Now she met his gaze. Her steel eyes softened around the corners. "What about the dahlias? Is that why you did it?"

"Did what." He'd deny it. There might be some damned law. . .

"Killed that cat."

Ed looked at his feet. He couldn't look anymore. Those eyes.

"It was you. I can tell."

"You don't know. It wasn't me."

"Of course it was you. Just stop. I could see it when you talked to Kelly. I know a guilty look when I see one." She waited for his answer.

It took a while but then Ed said, "They were ruining the flowers. Sometimes I don't think. I was mad – for Angela – maybe. But then the kid wanted the cat back."

She lifted her eyebrows.

"You killed a cat that did nothing to you but live."

"And pee in my yard." Did he feel like arguing with her?

She lowered her voice. "You said the little boy loved him."

"I didn't know. I'm sorry for that. The kid has enough troubles. And I guess it was his favorite of the mangy bunch. Go figure."

"So, why?"

"I just needed to do something. . ."

He looked into Helene's eyes. "Sometimes I hear Angela's voice."

"Does she tell you to kill things?"

"Don't even say that." And then he was crying again. Tears and more tears. Helene dabbed his eyes with a hanky. "Shhh."

"You must hate me."

Helene shook her head. "I know something about ghosts." She pulled back. "But you aren't planning to shoot any more of them are you? I would turn you in for discharging a gun in the town of Danville."

Ed smiled slowly. She was direct. He could appreciate that. "No. Not today anyway. Do you want a drink?"

She cocked her head. "No, I need to get these cats to the vets. Another time."

"What about the kittens?" He'd keep her just a minute longer. "There are two, inside. I've been feeding them milk." He opened the sliding door to the kitchen. The kittens were napping in their box.

"Oh, they're young. I'll have to make a call and find someone who can foster the babies." Her lips tipped up, almost into a smile. Was she teasing him? "You've been getting up in the night to feed them, have you?"

Ed shrugged.

"It's hard finding someone who can take that on. But if you could keep them, just for a few more days until we can put them on solid food?"

Ed drummed his fingers on the Formica counter. "You'll come check on them?"

"I will, if you need me to."

"If you'll come back. For the kittens. Then yes."

The woman had a name and it wasn't Angela. It was Helene – a good name with a solid sound. She was a little nutty when it came to cats, but then Ed figured he was the same about dahlias. As she'd said, she dropped by every few days to check on the kittens. Each time he managed to stretch the visit out a little longer. First there was a tour of the garden, then some black tea – none of that hippy-dippy herbal stuff. One afternoon they talked about the 49ers since the season was about

to start. She was a fan. Ed began to think of asking her out, just for lunch, maybe at an outdoor spot when the weather got cooler. He wondered what kind of food she liked. As long as it wasn't sushi, he'd be good.

But on the day he planned to ask, she came with a carrier again. "Those kittens are ready to go. Let's get them neutered and they're young enough someone will want them. We'll put them up for adoption."

Ed's mouth dropped open. "Already?"

"I thought you'd be pleased." She leaned forward. "Are you getting soft, Ed Mayberry? Do you want to keep them?" She almost whispered, "If you're lonely, without Angela, I know a little about that."

"No. Well, yes." Did she know how much she'd reminded him of Angela – at first? That was awkward. "It's just." He stopped. "I have an idea for the black one."

"Superman?"

"That one." He almost winked at her. "I have to visit the kid. Want to come?"

"Are you going to confess?"

He hoped she was teasing. "No, atone. Come on." He scooped up Superman and tucked him under his arm. Ed Mayberry walked across the street with a purpose. This was not like the night he lay waiting for the offending tom cat. It wasn't like anything he'd done in a long, long while. He strode across the street, hoping Helene was following, but right then, it didn't matter. He needed to see the kid. He took the single step up to the front door, rang the bell, then turned to the left so he wouldn't be staring when Kelly or the kid answered.

"Yes." It was the man. He was never around.

"Um, I'm Ed. I live across the street." Helene joined him. "And this is Helene. Is Kelly here, or Henry?"

The man almost closed the door but called up the stairs, "Kelly, some guy's here to see you."

The man planted his foot obviously behind the door. Did he think Ed would push his way in? Is that what the guy thought of him?

“Oh, Mr. Mayberry. How can I help you?” Kelly stepped in front of her husband and opened the door wide. The sofa was piled with pick plaid pillows and a fish tank glowed on a table behind it.

“I came to see – your son. Henry is it?”

Kelly’s eyebrows dipped for a moment, making a crease above her nose.

“Why?”

Ed pulled the kitten from under his arm.

“I think this gray is tom cat’s baby. I’ve been feeding him. . .”

“Yeah, well, I call him Superman. . . you said Henry was waiting for him to . . .”

“Oh yes, yes! Henry, come down. This nice man has a surprise for you.”

“Kelly, we should talk,” the husband interrupted. “Isn’t that the guy you thought shot the cat?”

“Shhh.” Kelly pointed to Henry who was sliding down the stairs on his butt.

Ed didn’t say anything, only held the kitten out. Henry touched its head, then stroked it from its ears to its tail. He took the kitten in both hands and cuddled it to his chest.

“Mine, mine, mine,” he whispered.

Kelly turned back to Ed. “You named him Superman?”

Ed grinned. “I thought it might solve a problem of – well – help. You never know what Superman can do.” Then he nodded to Helene.

“Come on. There’s a place on the hill I want to show you.”

Kelly whispered, “Thanks.” Ed shrugged.

As they started down the walk, Helene reached over and touched his hand. He did not pull it back.



123 North Vermilion Street, Danville Illinois, 1952

99 FIREFLIES

A Lucid Kollinger Story
by S. A. Robbins

One

If our bodies are the dwelling-place for our souls, and each soul a repository for the stories of our lives, where do those stories go when the body is gone? If each memory is a building block for the soul like bones for the body, what becomes of those bone-memories when we are gone?

Lucid paused to re-read what he'd so far written, and sighed aloud, loudly and with some degree of suspicion that the fledgling story was already off track.

He intended to write something lighthearted, even fun to read – not the story itself, but for the fond recollection of having read it, that a reader might remember turning the first page with heightened anticipation for what comes next, and so on, nourishing the suspension of disbelief, allowing the reader to be entertained, and later perhaps, delighted by the memory of reading it.

Who doesn't remember the day we read a favorite story, how we followed each clue, uncovered each object buried by the author as though the pages were part of a mysterious, multi-day treasure hunt in which the reader might, if lucky, comprehend the incomprehensible and possess the penultimate?

Lucid was thinking about writing an avant-garde detective story, thinking about clues – where to hide them, when to reveal them - when his literary

reverie was interrupted by the sound of someone opening and closing the backyard gate.

TWO

Hers was a magnificent hesitation – there was always a pause between the first and second knock, as if she had misgivings. And yet, upon unlocking the door, her ambivalence evaporated, replaced on that day by an eager focus upon the task at hand as she rushed past.

“Sorry,” he said as she blew by. “I was at my desk.”

“Of course you were.”

“Did we have something scheduled...?” Lucid was embarrassed as he always was by his adolescent awkwardness in her presence, and humbled, too, by his forgetfulness.

Such is the Law of Coordinated Opposites, as though they were dancers on stage - one in constant motion while the other remained still. Her appearance that day held true to pattern: Lucid remained motionless at the open back door as she flew past him and bounded up the stairs to read what he was writing.

First, he made tea.

He could follow her movement above him by the creaking floorboards - she was pacing back and forth. Desk, to book shelves, back to desk. By the time he arrived with tea for two, with honey and brown sugar, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor, following his new storyline (originally intended as a

gift for his mother in celebration of her 75th birthday, the unfinished project preceding today's idea for a detective story), written in Cheever style.⁵

"...nice idea," she said, "but actually I came today to tell..." then she paused, and took a breath. "...wait. What? Did you say a gift for your mother? I thought she died years ago."

"Correct," he said.

He poured her tea, then sipped his own. It was too hot.

"The story's about her birthday present," Lucid explained, "something I might have written for her, IF she were alive at 75."

Lucid's muse was often his first (and sometimes his only) reader, but at that moment, her mood was not literary. She sipped her tea and carefully chose her words. "I have something to tell you..."

Foreshadowing, Lucid thought to himself. No one introduces good news reluctantly. He braced himself.

"...yes, I know 'retirement' sounds ominous," she apologized. The ever-present music of her voice was soothing even as her unexpected announcement felt as if he was being slowly clubbed to death. Lucid thought about baby seals.

"This doesn't have to be a catastrophe, LK. I'll be in Peoria, it's not so far away, and besides, staff transitions happen all the time..."

"I didn't know Muses could retire." Then Lucid asked, "...And what do you mean by transitions?"

⁵ In revision, Lucid considered a minor adjustment: "John or Susan?" she might ask.

Lucid reached for his notebook and scribbled a reminder to re-read the major Greek poets (Homer, Sophocles, Euripides) for any reference to Muses retiring from active duty, and being replaced, as needed.

"Don't forget Sappho," she said, "...although she's no Susan Cheever."

She was making a joke.

They both laughed.

That sound - her laughter - was his favorite sound and he told her so. "I know I've said it before. Sorry..."

Actually, he wasn't sorry.

"...Actually, I'm not sorry."

According to their original contract, their negotiated protocol (he made another note to research Muse protocols) would include a final (transitional) project, howsoever modest, to ensure that the client's story-in-progress is allowed time for a proper ending. The idea seemed to Lucid less like a relay runner's baton hand-off and more like shopping for one's own casket with a stranger. That's when she proposed her "transition idea" - something she'd always wanted to do one day, though she also admitted that her supervisors thought it was too experimental to ensure closure.

"What do you think?"

"About?" Lucid recognized his thoughts had wavered, and he tried to adjust.

"Oh, my goodness, I'm an idiot," She exclaimed, her hand mid-air as sudden punctuation. In turn, the cup in her hand sent cold tea flying through

the air like water from a water cannon.⁶ "I haven't told you my idea yet. How silly."

Lucid wanted to debate her choice of words - "silly" seemed uncharacteristically colloquial, (unlike "painful" which was literally accurate, as if a baseball bat had been used on his skull, then quickly hidden). He also realized that the story was wildly off track somewhere between the third and fourth page, an ever-widening gyre of disappointment. She was saying something about Yeats as he returned to his notebook to scribble a few words:

Bittersweet, incomplete.

Must re-write.

Then, he became suddenly exhilarated.

Maybe I could entirely re-write this story, Lucid thought to himself. In the revised story, she might alter her notions of retirement. That's it, he thought, I could re-write my entire day to prevent this conversation from happening...

"Are you listening? I said: nice Yeats reference, you know...the widening gyre..." she repeated while toweling the tea from his desk, then from the wall, and the inside of his left slipper that was under his desk.

"We may need a disaster recovery plan for my slippers," Lucid said, trying to be funny.

But there was nothing funny about this situation, nothing funny about the tiny fist expanding quickly in his chest. He slumped to the floor and leaned his head between his knees, trying to find some air to breathe. Lucid closed his eyes and waited, waited for the tiny, zigzag bursts of light to appear inside his

⁶ "Simile," she would say in normal circumstances, "not metaphor. But you know that."

eyelids, a familiar but painless migraine blindness. The symptoms were becoming all too familiar. Anxiety, waning ability to concentrate, an apparent absence of oxygen, a waning sense of time and place, then flashes of light...

"Put me in your story," she asked softly.

Lucid tried to breathe regularly in the airless room.

"Say that again?"

Bright lines of light flickered like a digital advertising panel losing power and displaying partial letters, broken hieroglyphs. Lucid once imagined a novel written entirely in broken letters. On that day, however, he was on his knees again.

He wanted to freeze the scene in his memory - hand on hip. She was standing in perfect afternoon light shining through the nearby window, skin glistening along one side of her neck, one wisp of hair pressed to her forehead. When she tried to wipe her face with the towel, a brown stripe of tea smeared her forehead beside the still-rogue lock of hair. No other person in this, or any world, could better inspire him to find finer words to describe this vision than the woman standing before him, looking downward as he stared into her very green eyes.

Then he vomited onto her bare left foot.

Three

Her dress was the color of fresh lemons and she entered the parlor of his parents' condominium like a dancer spinning across the parquet stage of Radio City Music Hall - windswept, flouncy, playful in a practiced way.

Lucid watched her swish-lift-kick both shoes from her feet, watched her curl cat-like into the overstuffed cushions of his mother's living room chair. Her rhinestone-and-ribbon neckband reminded him of Christmas lights, and her two Bakelite bracelets clicked whenever she moved her hands. Yes, he thought to himself, she knows how to make an entrance. He admired her zeal. It was also the first of her attributes his father noticed.

"Hello, Mr. Kollinger," she sang, "so nice to meet you. I know everyone says that, but in my case, I mean it.... My name is Annie."

Lucid wondered if his hearing had been impacted by his recent panic attack – what did she just say?

The two, father and costumed muse, shook hands while remaining seated, an awkward choreography that required both to stretch and lean far forward. Her Bakelite bracelets happily tapped Nice-to-Meet-You in vintage Morse Code.

"How do you do, Annie? I hope you won't mind if I sometimes call you AnnaBelle? My sister was named AnnaBelle, but we never called her Annie. Oh no. I must say you remind me of her..."

Lucid's brain was muddled, as if they were speaking a secret language. What did she just say?

"Morty? Oh Morty," Lucid's mother sang from her kitchen. "Can I borrow your arms, dear?"

His father pushed himself up and away from his armchair, smiled approval in his son's direction, then slipped to the far side of their recently remodeled condominium, renovated to convert a screened porch into a second bedroom, because of snoring. Lucid knew his parents both snored, but his mother blamed

his father, and his father claimed it was his mother. A second bedroom solved the problem, caused others.

“Oh, don’t be silly,” the woman-who-called-herself-Annie declared while simultaneously twirling into a small leap, “you stay right where you are...” It was a small leap, not a big leap – not the kind that would seem out of place, more bounce than launch, “I’ll help Mrs. K. in the kitchen...”

Lucid watched as the woman named Annie (Why did she say her name was Annie?) glided in bare feet toward the kitchen where his mother would certainly say something embarrassing – what son knows what mothers say behind closed doors? Who could know? Will she narrate her family’s lineage to the Hapsburgs? Will she bore her new visitor with the collection of antique Mason jars, dozens of empty jars that filled an entire cabinet? He imagined his mother’s traditional rationale for the collection, how each jar holds memories that would otherwise be forgotten without a container for them.

On her way toward the kitchen, the woman-who-called-herself-Annie turned her head and glanced, ever so slightly, over her shoulder and winked at him, brown hair shadowing her face and the line of her neck. She turned her head and glanced, ever so slightly, while, at just that moment, Lucid’s mother pushed the door open from the other side. The near collision was athletically dodged by the woman-who-called-herself-Annie, then dodged again as a tray of finger sandwiches flew past and scattered across the tiled floor.

“God, Mom, careful!” Lucid called out, “Someone could’ve been hurt...”

“LooHooo,” his mother said, “my boy’s such a worrier. Always with the catastrophes, this one...” She knelt onto the carpeted hallway and pieced little sandwiches back together again.

Lucid's father was chuckling to himself. "AnnaBelle, you should've seen him the day that door broke, now, THAT was catastrophe."

He appeared from the kitchen, towel over his shoulder in that debonair-David-Niven way, eager to talk about the difficulty of replacing a double-acting hinge for butler doors. "They were all the rage back in the day. Everyone in our neighborhood envied our two-way door...Did you know that the invention of this door's hinge – it swings both ways, withstands great weight and friction from use over many years – altered family lives, and the lives of their servants?...Point of fact, we tried to install them at the Store, but the City said no, and that was that at Morton's..."

His mother interrupted.

"Listen, both of you. Your poppa's exaggerating, as usual. And besides, the spring broke, that's all, remember? Loud as a pistol shot, metal everywhere. But if you want another funny story like the day I painted our house orange, how 'bout the day they named a women's clothing store 'Morton's'? Like the salt, can you just imagine?"

"Tangerine," corrected her husband.

"Tangerine houses, mom," Lucid said.

The eyes of the woman named Annie seemed momentarily caught between dueling memories and turned for some reassurance, a small gesture or shrug from him to convey that conversations with his parents were always bizarre. They meandered from This to That but she also knew she was committed to seeing this through. After all, she was the one who wanted to be a character in his stories. And it was true, she wasn't bored. Here she was, making an

appearance in one of his stories just as she requested, and she had to admit she wasn't bored at all.

One hour passed, two hours.

They talked about his childhood, although his parents avoided the most embarrassing moments, tiptoeing through minefields and didn't want to injure their guest, just in case a wedding was in their future. They touched upon world politics, though everyone honored the rules of Midwestern Polite. In fact, as the woman named Annie mused aloud about her plans to start a new career in Peoria, Lucid noticed that his parents, two of the most intrusive, boundary-blurring humans in the history of the universe, had both quieted themselves to whispers in the kitchen.

"Did she say Peoria?" his mother asked as quietly as possible.

"Who moves to Peoria?" his father called from behind the door.

Lucid and the woman named Annie stepped slowly toward the butler-style door to proffer their apologies, offering flimsy excuses for making it an early evening.

"If I told her once, I've told her a hundred times..." his father complained when the door swung open. He was still telling the old story of their first cottage on Fletcher Place. "It was tangerine. But look at them, honey, I think we're boring pretty Anna, maybe it's time to wind everything down. After all, we have a big day tomorrow, right?"

"Big day?" Annie said.

Lucid put one finger to his lips and whispered, "It's a surprise."

Good-byes and See-You-Soons were abruptly foreshortened, clipped, so much so that his mother would, later that evening, complain that their son's sudden departure was a deep disappointment.

"They could've stayed for desert," she said to the man already half-asleep beside her, "...either that or something's gone terribly wrong."

Lucid started his maternal complaints as soon as they walked across a faux lawn to their car.

"She promised to never embarrass me like that in front of visitors. You know I hate that nickname."

The woman named Annie had not forgotten his childhood misfortunes or the childhood stories they seeded - he'd been beaten on the way to school by older neighborhood boys who, later, they would chant *LoooHooo* in the lunch hall. There was an incident in the bathroom. And then there was the night someone burned a cross on their front lawn.

She half-turned in the car to apologize, but Lucid interrupted. Again.

"Wait! You haven't explained that Annie thing...why on God's good earth would you make up a new name on the day you met my parents?"

"What?"

"Why did you say your name was Annie? It's been bothering me all evening..."

She looked at him, and they stared at each other, though she knew he'd never "win" a staring contest because he'd eventually look back at the road.

Lucid tapped his fingers on the steering wheel with slow annoyance as though a metronome kept their argument in its consistently irregular rhythm. When she lowered her window for air, the Bakelite bracelets clicked up then

down then up again in an unintentional backbeat that punctuated their silence, as if they were young rhythm-and-blues musicians practicing for their first gig, oddly out of sync with each other while certain it was the other person's problem.

Lucid was waiting for answers. The woman sometimes known as Annie was apparently considering her options as though they were in a garden of forking paths and she was facing a Left <-> Right decision.

"OK, here I go," she said in her most sincere tone, wishing that she didn't have to explain what should have been obvious. "I've always wanted to be a character in someone's story," she began, "...LK, I know you believe the story tells you, not the other way around..."

"Accordingly," she continued, "I presumed each character is afforded a certain degree of autonomy...So, I made up a name as I introduced myself to your dead parents...Was that wrong?"

Wrong.

Wrong? "A lot of things have stopped making sense to me," he whispered, as though he was talking to himself. "Honestly, I don't even remember the last thing I published, or where..."

"You called it 99 Fireflies, Partially Illuminated. Remember?"

The woman who, for that evening, called herself Annie then recalled, word for word, the entire essay and recited it aloud...

In the heart of the heart of the country, there are 1900 species of firefly, distinguished primarily by their differing flash patterns. The dots and dashes and L-shaped brightening patterns allow males to announce themselves and the females to recognize, then respond in patterns that males can understand.

What is not known, and until the writing of this page, never documented, is the history of fireflies.

Until a sequence of divinely inspired events at a time coincident with the story of the Tower of Babel in humanity's past, there was only a single flash pattern shared by a single species of firefly – all fireflies spoke and understood all other fireflies.

Mirroring humankind's reach toward God, via tall towers that God eventually destroyed, there was an effort among many fireflies to learn how to synchronize their flash patterns so that they might, in a perfectly coordinated moment, flash simultaneously – thus, creating a light so bright it might shine through the clouds, and make visible the face of God.

His Judgment was swift, and much like God's success with humans whose sudden burden of multiple languages made the towers fall into disarray, God created 1900 different flash patterns among the fireflies, with varied exoskeletons to support such differentiation. At the time of His Judgment, there were 188,100 fireflies in existence throughout the universe.

His Will, then, was to limit their communication and, in so doing, created 1900 varieties so that no individual group of fireflies would ever include more than 99 individuals. Until this moment, their story remained untold.

"I don't remember writing that," Lucid admitted.

It was the first time he had confessed – to anyone – the extent of his illness, the damage done to his once-impeccable memory which was becoming entirely unreliable, so much so that he had lost any ability to distinguish imagined moments from remembered ones.

"I'm very sorry...but sometimes I confuse my reality and the reality in my stories..." At last, he had confided his secret to the one person capable of helping him navigate the confusion.

She did not respond.

When Lucid turned toward her, she was already gone, transitioning to the next chapter of their curiously imagined night.

Four

Lucid's many notebooks contained phrases written so long ago that he could not remember writing them, and now, whenever he read the entries, it seemed as if a stranger had broken into his home and scribbled incoherent messages as a practical joke.

So many stories within stories - like fossils within fossils, geological nesting dolls, stones inside of stones, bones inside bones - one story leading to another, and another.

That morning, for example, Lucid noticed an eggshell on the lawn – sky blue, fragile to the gentlest touch - once a dwelling for what may soon fly freely in any direction, with any wind. The eggshell was once a dwelling-place for the story of a bird that was no longer contained in the shell, and he had a vague recollection that there was a direct connection between the eggshell and the introduction of today's lighthearted story, but at that moment, he couldn't recall what it might be.

The lawn chair beneath him creaked from his weight, and he closed his eyes – less from physical exhaustion or weariness of spirit – rather as a means of settling his chaotic mind, his mind that now caused flashes of bright streaks of light to appear and disappear across the inside of his eyelids, as if they were a dark curtain pulled across the stage of his garden - - migraine-like bursts of light in intermittent, random patterns.

It was then, as Lucid opened his eyes again to focus upon the fireflies in the garden behind his home, then closed them to see similar scratches of bright light across the inside of his eyelids, that he noticed a pattern, as though fireflies in flight moved in similar patterns to the inner eyelid lights. So similar were the patterns, when his eyes were open and when they were closed, that for a brief moment, Lucid imagined they were precisely the same. Perhaps there was an a-causal connecting principle.

Perhaps each firefly's luminous arc outlined the shape of a specific story, he thought to himself, and perhaps these combined stories, orchestrated with eyes closed, were the simultaneous outlines of a larger narrative - each burst of intermittent light representing spirits unable to find their way home because the building where they once lived was long ago demolished and replaced, over time, by untended weeds and a few thin trees.

He leaned back into the lawn chair where they would later find him, and, for reasons he did not understand, Lucid thought of his father.

He remembered how, every summer, his father repeated the family's favored tradition: first, he would carefully carry the empty jars down and down, to the basement of their Vermilion home. Then, Lucid's father would pull a ball peen hammer and awl from his rusting toolbox ("...because it's awl you need..." his father would say with his Bad Pun grin) and carefully punch three holes in each metal lid.

His father then distributed the jars into the waiting hands of cousins and young neighbors, each jar soon to be filled with captured fireflies.

Lucid remembered the night's slight breeze of those summers, remembered the sound of bare feet clapping across cobblestone, of children running in that sweet evening air with jars of fireflies like torches in their hands, unaware, as they ran, of the implacable unfolding of history.

The air was warm, and the world on that night was partially illuminated.

*



"Illuminated," Fischer Theater
Danville, Illinois 2022

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Wilbur is a lifelong resident of Danville, Illinois and District 118 teacher (Northeast Elementary) for eighteen years. He earned a BS in Education from Eastern Illinois University and a Master's in Education from Olivet Nazarene University. His work also appeared in the Spring 2022 issue of *Pulse & Echo*.

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Born in Danville, Indiana, Jeff is a graduate of the Northwestern University writing program and works as an English teacher at Zion-Benton Township High School in Zion, IL. He spends a lot of time writing, thinking about writing, worrying about not writing, and thinking about not writing.

ELENA CARRILLO

Elena's poem, "Tim," recently won a school poetry competition as a 5th grade student at Central Intermediate in Washington, Illinois. This is her first publication in a national magazine. Elena is 11 years old, the daughter of Eliza San Juan whose work also appears in this issue.

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Jane is a life-long resident of Vermilion County, living in rural Fithian, and a graduate of the University of Illinois. She began her teaching career at Danville High School in the English department in 1963 and ended it at Danville Area Community College after twenty-five years in 2019. She has written three young adult novels: *When the War Came to Hannah*, *The Heron Stayed*, and its sequel, *All the Right Pieces*. She is currently working on a memoir.

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Courtney is a graduate student at the University of Illinois where she is studying Library Sciences, and when she is not writing or studying, she works at the Danville (Illinois) Public Library.

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Jeff has published nine collections of poetry and prose, including *The Marksman* (Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2020), *Floating Tales* (Plume Editions/Madhat Press, 2017), and most recently *The House of Grana Padano* (Pelekinesis, April 2022), cowritten with Meg Pokrass. He has received an NEA Literature Translation Fellowship and numerous other awards and prizes. His tenth book, *Ashes in Paradise*, is scheduled for publication by Madhat Press in April 2023.

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Paula Goldman's book, *The Great Canopy*, won the Gival Press Poetry award. She holds an MA degree in Journalism from Marquette University and an MFA in Writing from Vermont College. Former reporter for *The Milwaukee Journal*, her poems have appeared in numerous magazines and journals, most recently in *Cæsura* and *Arlington Literary Journal*. Paula was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2017, and her book, "*Late Love*" was published by Kelsay Books in February 2020. She lives in Milwaukee, WI with her husband of 56 years.

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Paul Hostovsky's latest book of poems is *Mostly* (FutureCycle Press, 2021). He has been awarded a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, and has been featured on Poetry Daily, Verse Daily, and The Writer's Almanac. He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter, and once dated someone from Danville, Connecticut.

SARITA JAIN

Sarita writes in her native language, Hindi, then translates her poetry into English. She moved to Danville with her family before the Covid lockdown, and during that time, the Library became "a second home." She now lives in Paramas, New Jersey with her husband, Rahul, and two wonderful sons (only 385 miles from Danville, New York, 187 miles to Danville, PA and 822 miles from Danville, Illinois.) Sarita is an honorary member of the Danville Public Library Writers Group.

MIECZYSLAW JASTRUN

Mieczyslaw Jastrun was born in Korolivka, Ukraine in 1903, and died in Warsaw, Poland in 1983.. A lyric poet and essayist, he published a dozen volumes of poetry between the two World Wars and is one of the most important Polish poets of the time. He translated many poets into Polish, including works by Lorca, Pushkin, and Rilke, and taught modern poetry at the University of Warsaw.

OSIP EMILIEVICH MANDLESTAM

Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) was a Russian poet. He studied at the Sorbonne and the University of Heidelberg, and his published works include *Kamen* (Stone), published in 1913, and *Tristia*, published in 1922. He spent years in exile and work camps, and died in the Gulag Archipelago.

KATE MCCARROLL MOORE

Kate lives in Danville, California. She served three terms as Poet Laureate for the City of San Ramon, CA. She holds a Doctorate in Educational Leadership for Social Justice, serves on the Board of the Eugene O'Neill Foundation, and is the author of two children's novels, as well as *Avians of Mourning*, (chapbook), and *Alphapoetica: A Poetry Primer for the Everyday Poet*.

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Kaileigh received her B.A. from Western Michigan University, then a Masters in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois. She is the Teen Librarian at the Danville Public Library. Her poem in our Spring 2022 issue has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

DSVINIA ORLOWSKY

Dzvinia received her BA from Oberlin College and her MFA in Writing from Warren Wilson College. She is the author of six poetry collections, including *A Handful of Bees*; *Convertible Night*, *Flurry of Stones*; and *Silvertone*. Her sixth, *Bad Harvest* (2018) was named a 2019 Massachusetts Book Awards "Must Read" in Poetry. Her co-translation with Jeff Friedman of *Memorials* by Polish poet Mieczyslaw Jastrun was published in 2014, leading to their 2016 National Endowment for the Arts Literature Translation Fellowship in support of continuing their translation of Jastrun's poems, three of which are in this issue. Dzvinia's co-translation with Ali Kinsella from the Ukrainian of *Natalka Bilotserkivets's* poems, *Eccentric Days of Hope and Sorrow* (Lost Horse Press, 2021), was short-listed for the 2022 Griffin International Prize in Poetry, the Derek Walcott Poetry Prize, and the ALTA National Translation Award and winner of the 2022 AAUS Translation Prize. She is Writer-in-Residence at the Solstice MFA Creative Writing Program. Dzvinia and her husband live in Marshfield, Massachusetts, 141 miles from Danville, Connecticut.

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James earned his doctorate from Brigham Young University, and his BS and MA Degrees from California State Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo. He has published five novels, and five volumes of poetry, most recently, *Solace Between the Lines*, (2019), and *Serenity*, (2022),

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Charles lives in Baltimore (153 miles from Danville Maryland). His latest poetry collection is *The Field of Happiness*, published by Kelsay Books. "A Magician Among the Spirits," his forthcoming collection of poems about Harry Houdini, is a Blue Light Press Poetry winner. His collection of flash fiction, *Presto!*, will be soon published in 2023 by Bamboo Dart Press as well as another poetry collection entitled *Transcendence* by BlazeVOX Books.

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Kaighla is a poet and storyteller, born and raised in Westville, Illinois. She is the author of four books and is currently writing for fifth, a novel entitled *Evryn the Light*. Her work has also been published in *American Road Magazine*, *Al-Jumuah* and the inaugural issue of *Pulse & Echo*. Kaighla holds a BA in English Language & Literature from Southern New Hampshire University. She is the Featured Poet in the upcoming issue of *Hyssop + Laurel*.

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Kristin has lived in Danville, Indiana for most of her life. She currently works at the Hendricks County Courthouse (Danville, IN) where she archives court cases and other legal documents.

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Stuart received his BA from Oberlin College and his MFA in Writing from Warren Wilson College. His collection of short stories about Silicon Valley, *The System as a Mirror*, was published in 2007 (John Wiley & Sons) and his collection of poetry, *Odd Man Out*, was published in 2022. Stuart's stories, poems, and essays have appeared in numerous anthologies, including *The Plum Creek Review*, *Having Been There* (Scribners & Sons), *Amazing Stories*, *Ararat*, *Berkeley Poets Cooperative*, *Aiki-News*, *PocketPal*, *Paragraph*, *Poetry NOW*, *ISM Quarterly*, *Creative Non-Fiction*, and most recently, *BaseballBard*, *TwinBill*, and "42." He returned to Danville, Illinois in 2019 and is the founding editor of *Pulse & Echo*.

SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

Scott was born in Memphis, Tennessee. He earned his undergraduate degree from Brown University and his Ph.D. in English from the University of Cambridge. He spent his teaching career at Indiana University, where he was a Distinguished Professor of English. Scott has received the Lannan Literary Award, the AWP Award for Creative Nonfiction, the Kenyon Review Literary Award, and the Indiana Humanities Award, among others; The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature named him the winner of their Mark Twain Award in 2009. In 2012, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. Among his more than twenty books are novels, collections of stories, and works of personal nonfiction, including *Staying Put*, *Writing from the Center*, *A Private History of Awe*, *The Way of Imagination*, and his most recent collection, *Small Marvels*.

ELIZA SAN JUAN

Eliza is a teacher in Washington, Illinois (118 miles from Danville, Illinois), and the proud mom of Elena Carillo, also published in this issue. Her story, Don't Promise Me Tomorrow is selected from her 3-volume series, Lessons in Love.

CAROL McCULLOUGH SANTOS

Carol came to Danville (Illinois) as a VISTA volunteer in 1966-67. The house in which she lived was on South Washington by the river. She lives in Rochester, New York (187 miles from Danville NY).

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Edward lives in Lancaster, Ohio. (61 miles from Danville, Ohio.) His artwork will soon appear in Fish Food, Streetlight, Another Chicago Magazine, The Door Is a Jar, The Phoenix, and other journals.

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Wendy's stories have appeared in Chicken Soup for the Soul, The Naperville Sun, and Rivulets. Her story Dusting the Towels received the Richard Eastman Prose Award. Her books include Becoming Mia, Hungarian Rhapsody, Hungarian Elegy, and her forthcoming book, Hungarian Legacy to be released in 2024. When she was six, Wendy lived in Danville, California, at the foot of Mt. Diablo. Now she and her husband, science fiction author Richard F. Weyand, live on a cliff in the woods near Bloomington, Indiana.

BRUCE WEIGL

Bruce served in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968, and upon returning to the United States, received a BA from Oberlin College, an MA from the University of New Hampshire, and a PhD from the University of Utah. His first book of poetry, A Romance (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1979) was written while teaching at Lorain County Community College in Ohio. Since then, he's published over a dozen poetry collections, including The Abundance of Nothing (Triquarterly Books, 2012), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; Archaeology of the Circle: New and Selected Poems (Grove Press, 1999); Song of Napalm (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994); Sweet Lorain (Triquarterly Books, 1996), and Among Elms in Ambush (BOA Editions, 2021). The poems appearing in this issue are from his forthcoming collection of poetry, The New Road Neighborhood Showdown.

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Suzanne Morgan Williams is the author of a dozen books for young people, including the award winning young adult novel, *Bull Rider*. Her articles have appeared in *Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators*, *SCBWI Bulletin* and *The Essential Guide to Publishing for Children*, as well as in *The Children's Writers and Illustrators' Market*, and *Nevada Humanities' Heart to Heart*. She lived in Danville, CA for nine years, and currently lives in Reno, NV where she is a Nevada Arts Council Artist in Residence.

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C. C. Wills lives in the country just south of Danville. He retired from Kraft Foods after 35 years, and moved to Danville with his family in 2002. Wills began as a self-published author through Friesen Press. *Treasure in the Shawnee Hills* was his first, followed by two sequels, *Shawnee: The Adventure Continues* and the third book of his trilogy *A Cherokee Wish*.

PHOTOGRAPHY/ART CREDITS

"Curving Coleus," by Sabrina Donnelly

"Bare Veins," by Karen Orton Katz

Winter Garden Scene, by Julie Colby

"Woman with Leaf," by Bade Fuwa

"Monday Monsters 4," by Edward Supranowicz

'Abandoned Train Car,' Rick Decorie

"On Memory," Stu Robbins

123 North Vermilion, circa 1952, Unknown.

'Piano keys' & 'Chandeliers' by Dante Dellamore

AFTER WORDS

Each published writer maintains a list of significant individuals to one day acknowledge - for lessons, for nourishment, for faith and patience, for support and a keen eye. Our gratitude list begins here:

Heartfelt appreciation, first and foremost, goes to our guest judges for the 1st Annual Ampersand Awards for Poetry and Prose - two renowned writers who are also exceptional teachers. Bruce and Scott: thank you for your time, and on behalf of your many readers, thank you for your luminous work.

Thanks to Peter Blackmon and Jennifer Hess for their steadfast support of the magazine – two community leaders with a relentless desire to enrich the lives of everyone in our small town. (Local legend suggests that it was Peter who coined the memorable phrase, “Everyone’s from Danville...”)

We also appreciate two national organizations dedicated to the welfare of literature, for the many services they provide to writers around the world: the Community of Literary Magazines & Presses, and Poets & Writers, Inc.

Also, our thanks to the team at BookBaby, Inc. for their diligent expertise on our behalf.

Finally, we sincerely thank each reader who opens a copy of Pulse & Echo, holds our words in hand, and, in so doing, gives us continued reason to do what we do.

- - -The Editors

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