# Chariton Review

Spring/Summer **2016**
Vol. 39, No. 1

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Spring/Summer 2016
Vol. 39 No. 1

ISSN: 0098-9452

Publisher: Truman State University Press
Website: charitonreview.truman.edu
E-mail: chariton@truman.edu

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Subscriptions
*Chariton Review* is published semiannually by Truman State University Press. All subscribers must pay in advance. Claims for missing issues made within six months will be serviced free of charge.

Order online: tsup.truman.edu
Phone: (800) 916-6802
Credit cards are accepted.
Send orders to *Chariton Review*, Truman State University Press,
100 E. Normal Ave., Kirksville, MO 63501 USA.
Make checks payable to *Chariton Review*.

Subscription Rates (US dollars / + tax for MO residents )

Single issue: $15 US; add $18 international s/h

Individuals

1 year (2 issues): $20 US; add $36 international s/h

Institutions

1 year (2 issues): $30 US; add $36 international s/h

Advertising
Advertisements are welcome. Half-page ad: $50; full-page ad: $100
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Financial assistance for this project has been provided by the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency.

US Postmaster: send address changes to: *Chariton Review*, Truman State University Press, 100 E. Normal Ave., Kirksville, MO 63501.

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# Contents

# fiction

*noun* fic·tion \'fik-shən\

: written stories about people and events that are not real : literature that tells stories which are imagined by the writer

: something that is not true

Chariton Review 2016 Winner
SHORT FICTION PRIZE

MASON BOYLES

# Cocooned

I was driving the Safari Sedan when Tyson turned off the PA system.

"You should be happy people are thinking of Dad," he said to me. He turned on the PA system. "To our left you will see some wonderful examples of island culture," he said to the tourists.

I turned off the PA system. "My dad, your uncle," I said.

Tyson turned on the PA system. "To our right you will see some wonderful examples of island culture with prices for specific items of culture conveniently located on your tour brochures." He turned off the PA system. "Semantics," he said.

I drove past Significant Beach 14 and took a left turn toward Significant Inland Monument 1. There was a dirt lane on the edge of the road for the Safari Sedan. I put it into park and the islanders came over in their Board for Creation of Indigenous Culture garments with piles of stock photos for the tourists. They handed them through the window, gave change in Shell Tokens, talked with the same pidgin lilt that the accent therapists taught in school. The photos had a picture of a tourist and an islander in front of a Significant Monument. There was a perforated circle over the tourist face. The Significant Monuments were perforated too. Everything was interchangeable.

Tyson rolled a tobacco leaf and I lit a cigarette.

"Where's your BCIC pouch?" he said.

"Where do you think?"

He gave me the same look he used when he caught me swapping the Traditional Island Soundtrack with Led Zeppelin records in the DJ booth. "Not protocol," he said.

I shrugged. "Report me."

This was what got to me: he put his hand on my shoulder. As if he knew better. "You need to start thinking of Leila," he said.

Which wasn't fair because I was always thinking of Leila, even if it was only peripheral—as in, "here's a great tree, it's a really big one, I should take Leila here so we can play kick the tree together." When I drove the Safari Sedan I thought of her. When I scrubbed seagull poop off the Significant Monuments I thought of her. Even when I was with Dad.

The islanders walked back to their stations. We drove some more, all the way up into the hills, and Tyson didn't turn off the PA to talk to me. When we got to the Hall of Islanders he sucked in a heap of air and started the spiel.

"We are preparing to enter the Hall of Islanders, the most unique and significant monument on Vacation Island. Here you will see the elders cocooned in their hammocks. Most are petrified, but a few might twitch or groan, so please don't be alarmed! This is a normal and inevitable part of the paralysis process! The petrified islanders are also available for sale! Prices are listed in the brochures."

Everybody got out. I went to the cave door and entered the passcode. The rock rolled back and the plastic reek of compressed air whipped out from behind it—I never got used to that part.

We kept the oldest ones in the front, the guys who were practically rock now. They'd grown into the cave wall, their reed hammocks had disintegrated. You looked at them and you had trouble seeing they were people. I bet the way I looked at those elders was the same way the tourists looked at me.

The cave went on for half a mile. The BCIC had put in a moving walkway with chairs and a vending machine. Tourists sat down, they sipped Coke and Sprite. Other tourists looked at the prices on the backs of their brochures. One of them came up to me.

"I'm from Fort Worth," he said.

"Great city," I said.

"More of a town," he said. He'd cut off the sleeves of his Vacation Island tee.

"I get what you mean, though. To you folks anything probably looks like a city, am I right?"

He slapped me on the back and laughed. I adjusted my fanny pack, which said TIPS in all-capital Sharpie.

"As a Christian I seen some weird rituals," he said. "I mean they showed us some Mormon stuff once at Sunday school and were like 'watch out for the bikes,' but this takes the cake. Oh boy, does it take the cake."

I glanced at Tyson, who was adjusting the Traditional Island Soundtrack volume and pretending not to glance back at me. "It's actually a genetic condition."

The walkway slid forward and the tourists started whispering to each other. Tyson cut off the music.

Elder 448 was groaning.

"An excellent example of the petrification process," Tyson said. "The body stiffens before cognitive processes slow. Elder 448 is sixty-one years old. He's been cocooned in the hammock since 1990."

Fort Worth wandered over toward Tyson. He raised his hand. "So this guy's still alive?"

"Matter of opinion," Tyson said.

"As a Christian, I got to ask if all of this is legal."

"Here and in every contiguous state."

Fort Worth nodded. He flipped to the back of his brochure and skimmed through the prices. I had them memorized. Elder 448 was 800,000 Shell Tokens, which meant 400 US dollars.

"I'll take it," Fort Worth said.

* * *

At lunch I went back to the hut to check on Dad. He didn't look good. Something green was growing on his neck—I reached out, brushed it, winced; moss.

"Want me to roll you?"

His mouth crunched when he opened it. "Nuh—," he said, and he took a breath. "—oh."

Broken speech was symptom three in BCIC Hall of Elders induction criteria. Five symptoms and they cocooned you in a hammock.

"Don't talk," I told him. I warmed up a washcloth and rubbed down his joints.

Behind me a palm tree was rustling. Most of it was rustling from the wind, but part of it was rustling from someone rustling it. How could I keep from grinning? I backed out of the hut, all the way up to the palm tree, and then at the same time Leila and I spun around and yelled "spooky!"

She giggled, I picked her up. Another one of her teeth was missing, and none of the permanents had grown all the way in yet. Soon she'd run out of them.

"School over?" I asked.

"For me," she said.

I pictured Tyson making his switching-the-records/this-isn't-protocol face. "Got any swag?"

She unzipped her backpack and showed me. Three towels, a pair of flip-flops, seven Vacation Island T-shirts with the sleeves cut off. We high-fived.

"How's Gramps?" she asked.

And I could have told her. I could have said, "Well, he's going to be wheeled into the cave soon. He's not long for this hut." I could have told her that every day when she asked about him, but how was I supposed to admit—what did you even—I mean, really, she was nine years old.

"What a cute kid," Todd said.

I looked up and obviously saw Todd. I also saw the camera Todd was holding.

"Leila," I said, "honey? Go play."

Todd watched her run off. He lifted the camera in front of his face and snapped a picture for the brochure. "Where's the pouch?" he asked me.

"Inside."

"You're breaking protocol."

I went back to the hut to get the pouch. Todd followed me.

"I was just in the neighborhood," he said, but no one from BCIC ever came to this neighborhood because they lived in a gated community. Todd was president now, head of Creation of Indigenous Culture, and I'd seen his house—it had a tanning patio and a pool on the roof.

My pouch was under the ration urn. I reached inside for a tobacco leaf but all of them were gone; Leila must have hidden them.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked. "Maggots? Fermented coconut water?"

He was standing by the hammock. He was standing by the hammock with his camera in front of his face, snapping pictures of Dad.

"Oh boy," he said, shaking his head. "Wow, this doesn't look good."

I wanted to grab the maize roller and use it on Todd's face. Instead I grabbed the Traditional Passtimes Kit. "He's just pretty pooped today. Earlier we were playing board games. He was sitting up and everything."

Todd held the camera over Dad's neck. "How long has the moss been here?"

I sat down, cross-legged on the dirt. Todd's face dangled below the brim of his giant sun hat. He wore long sleeves and zinc oxide on his nose—he must not have been getting much use out of that tanning bed. He pulled Dad's gums back with his fingers, put the lens into his mouth.

"I don't know," I said.

Outside Leila was playing kick the tree. I watched her through the doorway, chewing my lip instead of the tobacco.

"Tell me a joke," Todd said.

"This."

He didn't laugh. "I was talking to Elder 523."

Dad opened his mouth. You had to look at his neck—at the tendons floating up through the skin—to see how hard he was trying. Everything else was stuck in neutral. "Thrrrr—," he said.

"Yes?" Todd said.

"Eeeeee meeeeen—"

He snapped one more picture, pulled a clipboard out of his backpack. "Not good. Broken speech is symptom three. We need two more to induct him."

That's the word he used—*need.* Like it was a business exercise.

"Then again," he said, "the process can be expedited in exceptional cases."

I picked up that maize roller and squeezed it hard. I was third last year in the Traditional Island Blood Sport Tournament; I knew how to put my hips behind the hurt. Todd had his back to me, his pen on the clipboard. His hands were as pale as a burial sheet. How would they look holding his nose to his face?

Leila hopped inside. "Owie!" she said. She was squeezing her toes. "Don't kick the big tree."

I dropped the maize roller.

Todd turned around. He slid the clipboard back into his bag and took out a bottle of hand sanitizer. "Well," he said, "this has been insightful."

He smiled down at Leila squeezing her toes—who was he, to smile at my daughter? To pretend the whole fiasco with my wife had never happened? To refer to that particular incident in official BCIC documents as a fiasco?

I stood up. "I have a lot to do."

"Me too," Todd said. Instead of shaking my hand he dumped out more hand sanitizer.

"I'll walk you to the door."

I took two steps, then I was at the door. Todd left; he didn't say anything. I watched him go. He was whistling.

* * *

It was my turn to do the PA system.

"At least try to use the accent," Tyson said.

I held the mouthpiece in front of my face like Todd's camera, pretending to snap pictures of the tourists. "Drive, don't talk," I said.

In the back the tourists were sticking to each other. Too much sweat, too much sunscreen, too much cascading blubber.

"Hands and feet in the vehicle," I said. "I'm Mio, your tour guide," I said. "No flash photography. Save the questions for later."

I cut off the PA. The Sedan quivered forward—according to protocol, islanders had to be shaky drivers.

Tyson's leg was twitching. He got that way when he was trying to put something together in his head. "Todd thinks it's an honor," he said.

"Todd's from Cincinnati. He can't get hammock sickness."

"Either way, you're punching the ocean."

He slowed down the Sedan. I lifted the mouthpiece.

"On your left you'll see something. On your right you'll see something else. Both things are noteworthy." I cut off the PA. "I'm not fighting anything," I said, and that was the part that made my lungs burn when I stared at the thatch roof of the hut every night, waiting to slip into the same dreams. The same ending.

"It's shit," Tyson said. "Sure. But it's shit for everyone. You don't think I get ideas about my wife sometimes? How it could be different?"

Tyson's wife was in the hospital. Everyone's wife was in the hospital. They had the Traditional Wedding for the tourists to watch, then the BCIC took them away to the Fertility Research Unit. The scientists wanted to find out why 90 percent of islanders were males. Husbands got to visit every other month—six times a year, that's what big Leila and I were promised. Then we had little Leila, and Todd put my wife in quarantine for intensive testing. No visits. No hanky-panky. I'd only seen her once since then, and it hadn't been good.

"I think of lots of things," Tyson said. "But then I remember how quick I could lose the things I have left."

* * *

The hut was empty. The hammock—gone. Dad—gone. Sunscreen pooled in the dirt.

"Oh no," I said. "Oh no, oh no, oh no."

I ran outside. The road was crowded, hospitality and monument maintenance coming home after second shift. All of them moved together. They kicked up dirt and sand high enough to choke on it. I grabbed Tyson's bike on the way by his hut and bombed down the hill, turned inland at the harbor, bounced past the rock and the smaller rock all the way up to the school.

*You worry about that girl,* my wife had said the last time I'd seen her. *Follow protocol and teach her the rules.*

I ditched the bike at the playground. The gym doors were propped open. Even from back here the AC lifted the hair off my head. My ribs pushed right up into my throat. I was shrinking, condensing, and I swore I could feel something locking up deep down in the marrow of my joints.

*You take care of her first. You'd better be petrified.*

The Traditional Dance instructor called out cues. Bare feet slapping on vinyl, the warp and throb of Traditional Island Instruments. I fell through the

door and there (inhale) was Leila (big exhale), Band Aids on her toes as she weaved by the edge of the bleachers. She waved. I blew her a kiss. I blew her a thousand kisses.

So that was the first thing I had to do.

I walked back to the bike with my fingers noosing together. I bombed past the smaller rock and the rock, turned left at the harbor and pedaled up the coast past the Significant Beaches. My shoulders were burning just like they did at the Traditional Island Blood Sport Tournament.

A BCIC truck was parked in front of the Hall of Islanders. Todd leaned against the door with an imitation Cuban. His hat drooped down past his eyebrows so he had to bend forward to look at me.

"Can't let you back here," he said.

"I'm full protocol."

He chewed the cigar instead of his lip. "We're making an installation."

My fingers were full of cement. I dug them into my sides to keep them off Todd, but it was right there. "I want to watch."

"Not a good idea." He squirted sunscreen on his face. He could have been a hotdog. "Considering your history, I mean."

Had he seen the blood? Had he seen my wife walking bow-legged, the holes in her arms where the tubes and the needles went? My hands vacuum sealed. I didn't even need the maize roller.

Then someone slid their arm across my shoulder.

"Congratulations, brother," Tyson said. The Island Tang deodorant sealed his armpit hair to my side.

So my cousin was here. So he was helping. Bastard, I was thinking, but also he was giving me the this-isn't-protocol look times a hundred. "Where's Leila?" he asked.

My fists went soft.

"This is what I'm here for," Todd said. He'd worked his cigar down to penny-thin but he was still biting it. "You have trouble seeing the big picture, so they brought me in to run this place because I'm a big picture guy. I can step back and see everything at once, all of you in the trenches. And let me tell you, this picture looks a whole lot better with your dad out of the trenches and in the gift shop. I see you guys too, working hard in your own trenches, and I even see little Lisa—"

"Leila," Tyson said.

"Lilly?" Todd said. "I see your daughter and think how lucky you are to have a family that can contribute so much to the creation of your culture. What higher purpose could there be?"

I had an idea of one for Todd with a rope and a palm tree, but my voice sank right into the same stinging part of me where it had fled the last time I saw my wife, the first time I saw what later might be like for my daughter. That was the biggest picture. That was the whole museum.

Todd's smile oozed like his sunscreen. His lips were as big as his damn house in the gated community. I bet he never used that rooftop pool. Tyson squeezed my arm a little tighter, but I was already letting my hard parts loosen.

"I'll see you later," I said.

* * *

I laid on my back in the dirt and dissected the thatch roof. Dad had built this hut, I'd helped him. He'd put up a curtain when I got older; he always slept on the smaller side. His hammock was gone but a new one was fastened to the walls—it might as well have said *you're next*. I had fifteen more years if I was lucky.

The last time I saw my wife I'd been lying right here. My face was turned to the wall—Dad and baby Leila already sleeping—and when the feet had slapped into the hut they were sweaty and swollen enough to be a tourist's. I lit a match.

"God, no," I said. My brain dove straight down my spinal cord.

She stood like she was strapped onto a horse. Legs splayed, gown billowing. Blood all over. I didn't let myself look where it was concentrated.

I moved toward her but she stepped back. The gown was thin as water—I saw the smiles of scars across her stomach, the top one fresh stitched.

"You worry about her," she whispered, and she pointed at Leila sleeping in the corner. "You forget me. Don't even touch me."

I knew better than to ask what they were doing to her.

When the BCIC sirens had started whirring up the hill, she'd waddled out of the hut and sat down in the road, waiting. I needed to hold her but I held baby Leila instead, I swallowed the stinging and squeezed her into me. If I could fit her under my ribcage I'd never lose her.

I rolled to my side and stared at the wall. I imagined the feet coming in, the reek of sweat and medicine. Big picture, Todd had said. He looked at the big picture from the pool on the roof of his house.

My wife. My dad. Both still alive—that was what scared me. My hands were doing the cement thing again. This time I picked up the maize roller.

Down the hill. Past the significant beaches. The sand was splattered with pink blubber, fat tourists spread out on towels like uncooked chicken. The Traditional Island Soundtrack lolled out of loudspeakers at every corner. It was set on a thirty-minute loop; every day the same songs played forty-eight times.

At the far side of the cove, everything was hedges and pastel vinyl siding. Twice a year they had to import sod from California to keep the grass growing. It wasn't supposed to be in sandy soil, but neither was the BCIC or their damn gated community. I squinted at Todd's house—the last one before the water—and saw a little sunscreen-colored silhouette by the pool. I waved my maize roller, like *I'm coming for you*.

Tyson didn't get it. He wore the garments and he used the accent. He might as well have let them go ahead and cocoon him in a hammock. Plus, the hand on the shoulder? The this-isn't-protocol look? Everything was bleeding together. Blood on my wife's gown, blood in the dirt of our hut, blood in Tyson's nose after the other kids found out he took extra pidgin lessons on Saturdays. "You're doing the right thing," Dad had told him when we came home that day. He'd just gotten in from monument cleaning duty, and the torn callouses on his hands bled into the seagull crap stuck in the divots of each finger.

I had an aching swelling up in me like the shore break at Significant Beach 14. I needed to bonk someone the same way I needed to sneeze. I was in the

belly of the cove now, a mile from the gated community. The golf hotels were here. Pink people laid around on golf carts instead of towels. I started jogging.

I passed the hotels and I passed the palm trees. When I got to a bigger palm tree, someone yelled "spooky!"

I spun around and there was Leila. Barefoot, Band-Aids on her toes. She smiled like my wife had smiled before they took her away to the fertility research unit—it was how you smiled when your whole world could be siphoned down to one person.

"Is dance practice over?" I said.

"For me."

She grabbed my hand. She hadn't been home yet—she didn't know about my dad. "Play me."

I followed her to a palm tree.

"You first," she said.

I was a little rusty, but I coiled back and put my hips into it. I was picturing Todd's stupid sunscreen smeared all over the trunk, then I was picturing little galaxies of hurt shooting up from my foot to the insides of my eyelids.

Leila giggled. She kicked the tree. "You're rusty," she said.

If Leila ever had to go live with Tyson, he'd never play kick the tree with her. He'd make her memorize the Safari Sedan tour and wear the BCIC garments even when she was sleeping. My shoulders started burning again, but not like they did before the Blood Sport Tournament. This time it simmered all the way down to my gut. I dropped the maize roller.

"Come here," I said, and I hugged the breath out of her.

* * *

In the morning I walked Leila to school. I had on my garments and my BCIC pouch.

"Love you," she said, then she bent over and kissed my Band-Aids. "Love your foot."

I stood on the playground for a long time after she went inside.

When I got to Tour Departures Tyson wasn't in yet. I sat in the front of the Safari Sedan, looking at my busted-up foot. I'd never been great at kick the tree; Tyson always beat me when we were kids. It wasn't about ignoring how much you hurt—the secret was moving with the pain. You knew your foot was broken, but you just had to put your head down and follow the rules.

Tourists were starting to climb into the back of the Safari Sedan. None of them noticed me. Tyson would be here soon. We'd go by the Significant Beaches, we'd drive up to the Hall of Islanders, and I wasn't going to let myself think any farther than that.

I took out a cigarette, then I threw it away. Todd drove by in his golf cart. He waved. I nodded.

KATHIE GIORGIO

# Solitaire

Dinah never wanted to be married, but she always thought it would be nice to be a widow. She saw what widows were like, how they always had an air of fragility around them, even if they were solidly built, and they seemed a mix of whimsy and wistfulness too. One minute, their faces were a burst of smiles and laugh lines, a joy as pure as clear water flying sudden from a rusty faucet, and then a shadow fell. As if happiness itself was fragile. Thinner than a shadow.

People always treated widows well too. Doors were opened. Voices were softened. Shoulders were patted frequently and hugs were given freely. Widows were invited to dinners and socials and everyone always made sure they were danced with and not left alone to sit at a table with that fragile shadow over their faces like netting.

It would be nice, Dinah thought, to be treated that way.

It was hard to achieve widow status, though, if you were living in a place where everyone knew you were never married. Dinah never moved on from her hometown, and she lived in the same house where she was born, inherited without a mortgage when her parents died. She'd gone out with plenty of boys, then men, but honestly, none of them ever made her want to give up always having a cool pillow to switch to when coming alert and warm in the night, then waking fully in the morning at the hour that she chose, for a plan that was always her own, having breakfast without brushing her hair or her teeth or even pulling on a nightie over her sleep-soaked body, and not having to speak until after coffee, and really, always having her say on everything because there was no one else to have another say. She never did like to share. And with a husband, you were supposed to share everything. Dinah couldn't quite fathom that.

But still. The other day, walking into church, the nighttime manager of the Pick'N'Save opened and held the door for Mrs. Harrison, who'd lost her husband a year ago, and then the manager smiled at Dinah, but walked behind Mrs. Harrison into the church, leaving Dinah to grab the God-heavy ornate door and heft it open again for herself. Even the infrequent looks of sympathy Dinah received, looks of, "Poor woman, never found a man," were so different than the looks directed to widows, to Mrs. Harrison, for example, of, "Poor woman, she's lost her man."

It would be nice, sometimes, to have a door held open.

So since she was now retired from over thirty years of teaching in the public schools, Dinah decided to sell the house and finally move away, to a place where no one ever knew her before. She left the Midwest and headed down to Florida and a gated community and a small but comfortable apartment, close enough to the ocean to smell it through her window and to walk to it every afternoon. And she made the decision, as she posted her name on her

new mailbox, to become a widow, to lose that elusive husband that she never wanted anyway. No one here, after all, had to know who she was before. Who she'd always been.

Every Friday evening, she was told by the realtor, the community had a social, with drinks and chips and fresh fruit platters, music on an ancient jukebox and some dancing on the corner dance floor. Dinah went to her first one, widowhood well in hand, a wedding ring on her finger. She found the ring, far past its shine, at an antique store. At the social she was quickly descended upon by the women, like a flock of true ocean seagulls, and a few men too.

One woman reached over, patted her wrist, and said, "I saw only your name after the Mrs. on your mailbox. I'm so sorry. How long has your husband been gone?"

Dinah took a deep breath and dove in. "Six months." Half a year, she figured, was enough to be over the fresh grief and transitioned to a more staid, social grief, one that she could wear in public and no one would fault her. At six months, she could still be called brave, yet not lingering on morose. She knew what the next question would likely be, so she volunteered her fictitious information, hoping to appear open and ready for comfort. "He died of lung cancer. Oh, horrible. A lifelong smoker, unfortunately. I always encouraged him to quit; I never wanted to lose him, I told him." She sniffed, made to wipe her eyes. "I still miss him so."

"What was his name?" another woman asked. The men stood close by, attentive, listening.

"Burt," Dinah said, and smiled, she hoped wistfully, as if just saying her departed's name was enough to bring on a fresh bout of loneliness.

The first woman sat back. "That's funny, isn't it. Dinah and Burt. Didn't Dinah Shore and Burt Reynolds date for a long time?"

The others murmured and nodded.

Dinah wondered if that was why the name Burt came so easily to her, when she was trying to decide on a name for her husband. "Yes, isn't that a coincidence? Burt and I laughed over that one a lot." She chuckled, making the sound go up at the end, as if she was trying to control an underlying hysterical sadness, one that could overtake her, she imagined, at any moment. "I was no Dinah Shore. I'm not blonde, never have been, and I sing like a crow. But Burt . . . oh, I think he was every bit as handsome as that Burt Reynolds!"

The women laughed with her and some of the men drifted away. Dinah wondered if she raised the bar too high. But still, she wasn't looking for a rest-of-her-life partner, after all. She just wanted to be treated nicely.

On that night, Dinah never had to get up to refill her glass; it was done for her. Plates of fresh food and chips and salsa appeared at her table. And when it came to dancing, she was on that dance floor all night long, with the exception of a break here and there to catch her breath.

It was marvelous. Dinah couldn't remember the last time she had so much fun. When she went to bed that night, the window open in her new bedroom to let in the sea breeze that smelled nothing like the Ocean Scent air fresheners in the Midwest, nor even like Lake Michigan, she thought, Oh, yes. I could get used to this.

* * *

And she did. The first few months went by and Dinah went to lunches and dinners, movies, and shopping expeditions. When she was with the women, they all laughed and nudged each other, but when one widow or another lowered her chin, or wiped her eyes, or stepped away from the group for just a few moments, the sympathy spread like a beach blanket and all the widows were patted and hugged and comforted. The widows, even Dinah, shared special looks, looks she'd never shared with anyone before. Of a knowledge that only they had. Which Dinah was supposed to have, but didn't, but she shared in anyway, even though she never liked to share. This, a solidarity, a sympathy chain, she liked. When the widows were with the men and with couples, there was always someone from the male gender to sit by, laugh with, talk quietly to, dance with. She traveled, local jaunts and ocean cruises, to St. Augustine and Disney World, to Alaska and Mazatlán, and she never had to travel alone. She still slept alone in her hotel or her cabin, but there were always people waiting for her the next morning, after her solitary naked coffee in her room, after brushing her teeth and her hair, and there was always someone calling her name.

And Burt grew too. Dinah told her friends that Burt was five years older, and he worked all of his life as an electrical engineer. Yes, Dinah said, Burt was flummoxed with the amazing new abundance of technology before he died, but he was fascinated by it too. She laughed over her memories of the first computer, the first cell phone, their first night together on the Internet when she hit something funny and all sorts of pornography popped up (that really did happen, it was just by herself and it was horrifying at the time). There were no children, they tried for a few years, but then found out that Burt had a low sperm count (the problem couldn't be with Dinah, after all, she had enough grief already without being barren too). They considered adopting, but then they decided they were more than enough for each other. Burt, Dinah said, always claimed she was everything he needed to make his life complete. The other women murmured and smiled at each other and Dinah tucked her chin and needed a moment to pull herself back together.

There was a photo, faded in color and framed in silver, on her bedside table. It was actually a picture she found in the same antique mall where she found her ring, which she decided was appropriate. She and Burt met in an antique mall, after all, in Rockford, Illinois, on a summer weekend away during college. He went to Marquette and she went to the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. The photo looked, she thought, just the way Burt should. It was Burt, since there was no name printed on the other side. She checked before placing it on her table. She wasn't surprised; she knew it was him. When she had friends over to her apartment and they saw the photo and then a few of the more curious asked to see any photo albums, she said they were still in storage as she just couldn't bring herself to look at them yet. Her shoulders were patted. She was hugged. The other widows looked away in understanding.

"Burt always wanted to come here," she said when the group splurged and took a trip to Italy. "Burt was a splendid golfer, I never tried, but I rode in the cart with him. I feel closer to him on the course," she said when she took up

golfing and filled in on foursomes whenever they needed someone. "You know, most men like the action films," she said, "but Burt really liked the dramas. We had the best time at movies together." And she bought a large popcorn just out of habit and laughed at herself with the others, even as she looked away. But there were plenty of hands digging into habit-formed buckets, and plenty more from other buckets when hers was gone. Dinah licked her fingers because she was used to sharing her popcorn only with Burt, and she laughed sadly when the others did too, used to sharing popcorn only with their missing spouses or blessedly sharing with them still. But even as she laughed sadly, she laughed honestly as well. This was all just so much fun.

She took to saying good morning to Burt and good night. A couple times, on the nights she ate alone, she found herself setting a second place. At first, she put the extra things away, but soon, she just left them there. "It makes me feel better," she said to her new friends. They told her how they still kept bathrobes hanging on hooks, or special chairs under ancient reading lamps, or kept subscribing to the *New York Times* or the *Chicago Tribune* or the *Cincinnati News*, even though they themselves never read it, but the lost spouses did. Soon, there was always an unfolded *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* on Dinah's coffee table, a loveseat that didn't match the rest of the apartment's furniture in the reading nook of her bedroom, and an extra-extra large Green Bay Packers hoodie hanging from a hook by the apartment door. She even wore it herself sometimes, on chilly days which were infrequent in Florida. Some evenings, when she was rarely alone, she wrapped it around herself as she watched old movies and ate popcorn. Licking her fingers. Missing brushing up against someone else's knuckles. Burt, she knew, had large knuckles, particularly the ring finger on his left hand, which was why she buried him with his wedding ring. Though he never would have wanted to leave it behind anyway.

Dinah herself never took her wedding ring off anymore. Not even in the shower. She often found her left fingers curled over in her lap, tips touching her palm, as if protecting that slender beaten-up plain gold band. Once, on a trip to the mall with a half-dozen others from the gated community, Dinah stopped at a jewelry store and tugged the ring off for a cleaning. The three minutes she spent waiting for it to come out of the strange steamy little machine were long. One of the other widows held Dinah's left hand, squeezed her fingers and talked about the day her husband proposed, until Dinah's ring came out, shiny, better than it ever looked, and slid easily back onto her finger. Like it always belonged there. As it did.

"Burt," Dinah said, "proposed on the shore of Lake Michigan. We went walking on the beach on a warm spring day and he found a piece of sea glass. Blue. Cobalt. He gave it to me, presented it to me on one knee like it was a gift. Tucked beneath it was my ring. A solitaire. Marquise, just like I always dreamed of."

"Oh," her friend breathed, the same one who noticed the coincidence of Dinah's and Burt's names. "Where is the ring? Where is the sea glass?"

Dinah felt disoriented. Where were they? Where did she keep such things? "They're hidden away in a dresser drawer," she said softly, tucking her chin and closing her left fingers into her palm. "I stopped wearing the engagement ring

when we got married. It didn't fit quite right with my wedding band. But it would be nice to wear it again, I think. Before Burt died, I kept it and the sea glass on a plain white dish underneath a special lamp I bought from an antique store. The same one where we met. That lamp made both the ring and the sea glass shine." Dinah looked away. "I haven't been able to get them out yet. I will. Someday."

She stepped out into the mall for a moment alone. Her friends respected that for about five minutes, then linked her arms with theirs and they moved on to the next store.

Later that week, Dinah took one of the solitary walks all widows took on the beach. She found a piece of cobalt sea glass. And in the antique store, she found a lovely marquis solitaire engagement ring. It looked suitably old, and it didn't fit on her left hand, but it did on her right. So she took to wearing it. Again. It felt like it always belonged there. Always, just like the wedding ring. She had it cleaned too. She also found a lovely small lamp, similar to Tiffany, with multicolored facets of glass. It settled in on her dresser and she placed the sea glass under it, on a plain white dish.

At the next Friday night social, she shyly showed the ring to the others and the solitaire sparked the light from the overhead disco ball. "It seemed right to bring it out now," she said. "The lamp and the sea glass are on my dresser again. It's time. It's been a year, you know." She'd lived in Florida for six months.

The others admired. Several winking diamonds made appearances, and as that particular week went on, more found their places on fingers left naked for too long. Even among the couples, rings came out of hiding and into Florida's dazzling sunlight, it was like the community became a disco ball all of its own.

Burt used to fix everything around their house, their little cottage, Dinah called it, and she showed her friends photos of her parents' home. He painted the shutters. He oiled the hinges. She and Burt owned a bicycle built for two. There were nice bike paths around Lake Michigan, where they rode and reminisced about their engagement. He spooned her at night. She still slept with his pillow. He made her coffee every morning after they retired, and before then, he left her love notes in her coffee cup. She wished she saved them now. On weekends, they gardened. He liked flowers, she liked vegetables. They grew wonderful pumpkins and gave them away to the children in the neighborhood. They read the same books, bought two of every one so they could read at the same time and discuss. They considered buying a Kindle or a Nook, but decided against it, liking the feel of book covers in their hands, of fanning pages, as they sat before the fireplace in the winter, or out among the fireflies on the patio in the summer. Sure, she and Burt argued sometimes, who didn't? Over money. Over what scent bath soap to buy (he thought hers was too girly and he finally bought his own, even though there really wasn't room on the ledge in the shower, what with their shampoo and conditioner and shaving cream). Over whether they should take in foster kids (he wanted to, but she thought that having children for a short time would just break her heart). But what she wouldn't give for one of those arguments now. Even hearing his voice raised in infrequent anger would be wonderful now.

Dinah tucked her chin. She looked away. When she looked back, she shared the shimmer in her eyes with the others. Even the ones who hadn't yet lost someone, but could only imagine.

"Burt meant the world to me," she said. The others nodded. Everyone had a world. Some had them still and Dinah looked at the couples and thought how lucky they were. She watched them pat shoulders, one widow after another, while tightly holding on to each other's hands. The widows tucked their chins. Their hands folded in their own laps, fingers curled around the solitary wedding bands and winking diamond rings.

Walking into church on a Sunday, the door was held for Dinah now. But at night, when Dinah closed and locked her apartment door until the next morning, when she woke at her choice of hour without anyone calling her name, when she still had her naked coffee and her unbrushed teeth and hair, until Dinah opened that door again, she was all alone.

She stood at her bedroom window one night, the light on her dresser turned out, the cobalt sea glass still gleaming with moonlight on its white plate, her covers turned back, the two pillows waiting for only her head. As they always had. She breathed in the sea air, saltier at night, she thought, and reminisced about the smell of Lake Michigan. How it looked from a bicycle. The scrawniness of midwestern seagulls.

"I miss Burt," Dinah said out loud. "Oh, I miss him so much."

Each hand curled its fingers over the wedding and engagement rings. Clenched them. The solitaire turned sideways and bit the tender skin between her knuckles.

CATHY MELLETT

# Greener Pastures

Her grandmother had been dead a year now, and as Ursula slept in the room she shared on the northwest side of Chicago with five other immigrant girls (from Poland like her, from Russia, from a place that sounded like a whip snapping) it made her sad that she could not remember her grandmother's face. Only a year and it was as if a lifetime had unfolded between the day she put one single white rose on the piece of earth where her grandmother lay and her trip to the United States. She and her grandmother had talked about America. Her grandmother never knew that Ursula was saving, saving, taking a little bit out of everything she made and putting it under her bed at night, getting it out and counting it when she heard her grandmother's sharp snore from across the room. The boat tickets, the plan: it was all going to be a surprise. But then she waited too long to tell her.

For as long as she could remember, she had lived with her grandmother and somehow, even though she was only twenty, she assumed she would live with her forever until someone came—some man she did not yet know—and he would be her new family. "My *drogi*," her grandmother would say, "I only want what's best for you. A man to take care of you. Someone to make you happy. I won't live forever."

Almost every day, Ursula sat by the window to wait for him. But she never saw anyone who even faintly resembled the image that played in her mind each night as she fell asleep: A man, tall, with black wavy hair and brown eyes with a glint of color in them, gold or orange perhaps. Whatever color it was, to Ursula it symbolized warmth. Though the looks kept changing what Ursula was really after was not some moving picture star but the warmth, the kindness expressed by the sort of man who would deserve her devotion. A kind man whose only sin would be to take Ursula away from her grandmother. It still amazed Ursula that her grandmother was the one who had left first, that instead of sharing a room with her grandma, she was lighting candles and saying prayers for her at St. Stanislaus whenever she could.

* * *

Greener pastures. That is what the other girls said they had come for. Ursula did not understand the meaning of these words until they explained it to her. It had nothing to do with fields but with trying to get something better for yourself. Not a farm but a life. That was it, Ursula thought, as she fell into bed one night. A nicer life. Green pastures. She twirled the long strands of her hair between her fingers as she lay on her bed, thinking of a farm with horses and lots of green, green grass, the kind of place she had seen in a book on Ireland,

too beautiful to really exist. She dreamed of that farm, imagined herself there, and imagined the black-haired man who owned the farm.

Now she had found that man. Only five months in America. Thirty-seven customers, thirty-seven houses or apartments to clean. One day after stopping at St. Stanislaus to light a candle, she knocked on a door, and there he was. She didn't recognize his warmth at first; it was his looks that caught her eye. Something about him seemed familiar. But as he introduced himself and as she stepped inside, she wondered, where could I know him from? She was amused at this, that such a worldly kind of man could seem familiar to her. She introduced herself and said her name quietly. She had found that this was the best approach with the customers. They didn't like girls who talked too much. She had found that out by talking with the other girls late at night. They all had similar jobs. She was blessed with fair skin, a serious not beautiful face, and blond hair the color of tapestry silk. It was her hair that made her think, Could not a man, even a worldly man, be interested in someone like me? All it takes is a kind heart.

One time, she was late because the trolley did not come on time. So she was still there when he came home from work. She had climbed high to dust the plant shelf that ran the length of his apartment. She wiped in circles, getting every speck of dust she could find. It must have been years since that shelf had been cleaned.

"Sorry," she said. "Excuse." She sounded the words out slowly. Aside from a few words to another Polish girl that morning, they were the only words she had said all day.

"Oh, no," he said. "It's . . . fine. Do you speak English?"

She nodded. "A little."

"You are from Poland?" He stood in the living room, briefcase in hand, looking up at her.

She could feel herself glowing from within. "How did you know?" She immediately imagined that he had lived there, recognized her accent. She scampered down the ladder and rushed to him, not even noticing that she was still holding the dirty cloth in her hand. She talked excitedly in Polish until he put up a hand to stop her.

"No, no," he said. "I don't speak Polish. I'm afraid I'm stupid when it comes to languages. I just took a guess."

"Guest?" she said.

"A guess. I thought you were Polish because they have so many Polish girls at the agency."

"Oh," she said.

"So, why did you come here? Why did you come to America?"

"Green pastor," she said, but as soon as it was out of her mouth she knew she had said it wrong, like the word for priest. "Past-*ture*," she repeated very slowly.

He laughed and said to her, "That's very good! Very good."

A year ago, she lived in her grandmother's house like a child. Today, she stood in a man's house in America, and they had a laugh together. It was too good to be true.

The man put down his briefcase. She started up the ladder again.

"Ursula," he said quietly, as if testing her name on his lips. And that was when it happened. She turned and saw him, saw how he looked at her so gently, as he said, "That's too high for you. I didn't want to scare you when I came in. You could have fallen from there."

"It needs to be clean. I clean good," she said, proceeding up the stairs, trying to shrug off how she felt about him.

But he walked up to her, touched her elbow gently, and said quietly, "Yes, you clean fine. But no, don't do that anymore. You could get hurt. You will fall."

And that was when her heart turned over for him. Suddenly it was as clear as if there was a sign over his head that read, "Husband." An answer to her prayer.

From then on, she was devoted to him. She knew they were meant to be together. If she was near him, one day he would notice her in that way. Love her, in that way. Her heart told her this as surely as if it had become a separate being, jumped out of her chest, and spoken to her.

You did all the right things and waited. You said nothing, and love came to you. Like God. Or like the Christ. It was that certain.

* * *

So she lived now in the city where Carl Sandburg lived and from English night school, she knew his little poem about the fog coming in and the little cat feet. She loved that poem. The fog comes in on little cat feet, she thought, as she walked to the streetcar.

Each night as she fell asleep now she thought of the man, her lover, who owned the apartment she cleaned every Wednesday. Of course, he was not her lover, really, and it was not a lover she really wanted but a husband, although she knew that lover was part of it too. Each night, as she lay in her burning bed of dreams, she thought of him, her husband-to-be. She believed that if you wished and wished and thought about a thing all the time, it would come to pass. If it was the right thing, of course. If God wanted it. And she knew that this man was the right thing. The right man.

* * *

She started lying upon his bed every Wednesday afternoon after she made it, replacing the cool week-old sheets with clean ones. She could barely bring herself to do it the first time. She sat upon the bed gingerly as if it would envelop her, take her to some underworld from which she would never be able to escape. She sat upright, thinking she had heard his key in the lock, and then she tiptoed to the door to listen for several moments. She laughed. She was so foolish. He wouldn't be home for hours. But what if he got sick and came home early? And so, putting a chair up against the door so that she might hear if he opened it, she took off her shoes, ran back to the bedroom, and jumped in, swirling the sheets around her, still heavy with the scent of him. It was almost a shame to replace those sheets, except for the fact that when she put on the clean ones she pretended she was dressing her own marriage bed, that he was indeed her husband, and this was her beautiful room. Ah, this was bliss. As

for the chair against the door, if it were discovered, she would simply tell him she was afraid of burglars. This was, after all, Chicago, a big city. The biggest city she had ever been in.

These thoughts burned in her just like the desire she had to come to America. She could hardly wait to get back to her room at night and go to bed so that she could be alone to think of him. In no time at all, it seemed her hands were moving discreetly under the covers as she lay with her back to the other girls just as she had lain with her back to her grandmother. She realized now that her grandmother must have known what she was doing. And perhaps the girls knew too, but she didn't care, she was so consumed with him. At night, alone in her bed, she felt more alive than she had been all day, walking through the big city to other people's homes. He became so real to her, and so perfect, that many nights she was startled to see the sky turn light outside the window.

She started bringing presents. First, a candy bar that one of her other customers had left for her, but she realized on the way to the trolley that it was a ridiculous gift. She walked back to the apartment, let herself in, and retrieved it. No, it must be something of beauty, she reasoned. She had nothing like that, she thought as she stood there in the doorway to his apartment. She had left everything of beauty she had in Poland, sold it all in order to come here and find him. Even her grandmother's little bird, Marek, she had to give away.

She waited until her next payday and purchased a bouquet of white daisies. Ursula found a clear bowl, filled it with water, and set the arrangement on the windowsill of his kitchen. She stood back and admired the simple beauty of the daisies against the burnt orange color of the window frame. She stepped forward to touch the glistening bowl. Something about it reminded her of her little grandmother, perhaps the roundness of her belly, which made Ursula think of those last days in the hospital when her grandmother seemed no more than a beating heart sewn together under skin and bones. Ursula had to leave the apartment then. Leave quickly in case he came home, so that she could come back the next time to find his note of thanks. Or maybe, even better, to find him waiting for her.

Every week she brought him flowers, even if it meant having a little less to eat that day and being able to light a candle only once a few times a week.

* * *

One morning, in her half-sleep, Ursula saw a gray bird that had somehow gotten into the room. It watched her from its perch, one eye on her with the gentleness of a kiss or a blessing. She watched it for a long time until she realized that too much time had passed for a bird to stand so still. She got up in the cold of morning, clutching the blanket to her, and watched. She hoped it wasn't dead, but why was one eye still open? She could not believe her own eyes when she came upon the object, not a bird at all but only a small glass tumbler one of the other girls must have left on the windowsill, still wet with milk that had touched some other girl's lips. She laughed at how silly she was, thinking this was a bird, and how interesting that a simple glass could look so different from just a few feet away. What a fool she had been.

After a particularly restless Tuesday night, Ursula went to his apartment, let herself in, and went directly to his bed, collapsing upon it as if it were her salvation. She was tired, so tired, and would rest only a moment. And then, just like the afternoons of her childhood, when she watched her grandmother adjust the curtains billowing into their room, one moment she was thinking of how comfortable she felt, how whole. And the next, she was opening her eyes to see her grandmother standing before her, saying quietly, "Get up, get up, now, Ursula. You've slept long enough. Get up and I'll make you *naleśnik* for supper. Pancakes. A treat."

Someone in the room now was talking about supper. Or *dinner* as they called it here. There were two of them. Her man, her husband-to-be, and a brown-haired woman who came into the room and stopped as if she had stumbled upon a rock in her path.

The man was discussing where they should go for dinner. The brown-haired woman said, "Look what we have here," and Ursula tried to remember her voice and where she knew her from. She tried to remember until she was fully awake and now fully ashamed, rubbing sleep from her eyes with the back of her hand like a child.

"Well," the woman said. "Now *this* is interesting." She had the cunning look of Chicago women. She looked from the man to Ursula and said, "Well, what have we been up to?"

Ursula said nothing. What was there to say? If she could have spoken at all, she would have said, "I've ruined my chances" because that was what she was thinking. But another part of her, like the doubled image of a mirror, made her stand her ground. She was not going to apologize. She was not going to apologize and she was not going to cry either.

The man stood over her now as if willing her to get up with his eyes. He looked embarrassed for her, ashamed almost, as he turned away, saying, "It's all right. You must have been very tired."

She sat up fully now and looked at the two of them. It seemed to be up to her to say something.

"I wish I never give you flowers," she said to the man.

"You?" Then he turned to the woman with the dark brown hair.

"Yes," Ursula said, crossing her arms. "Me. I give you flowers. I. I. That was me."

"Oh, Ursula," he said sadly. He waved his hand in the air as if to dismiss her, looking nothing like the man she thought he was.

And that is when the brown-haired woman made that little sound at the back of her throat, a sound like an old lady makes when a child or an animal does something funny. Ursula waited for the man to scold the woman, to take her side. But he didn't. When he didn't, she left the apartment and vowed never to go back, never to set foot in a place that had hurt her so much.

Whether she wanted to or not, she knew she wouldn't be going back. She'd lose that job, which the old owner confirmed when she went to his office that afternoon, but it wasn't for the reason she thought. The man had simply told the agency he didn't need her services anymore.

"Did he say anything else?" Ursula asked. She was terrified he would have told the owner about what she had done.

"He said your work was good. Not to worry, Ursula, we are lucky. There are more customers waiting for our services. Always more customers." Ursula pictured the customers alighting and flying away, like so many birds on a wire.

* * *

That night, as the Polish and Russian girls—and even the new girl from Germany—rubbed Ursula's back to comfort her as she cried, she thought she saw the bird on the windowsill again and felt so much better, as if her pain were taking flight. "Come on," one of the Polish girls said. "In the morning, we'll take you for *naleśnik*. Like your grandma used to make, yes?"

Even though she felt much better in the morning, the girls insisted on paying for her breakfast. "A gift," the German girl said, as they divided the bill, each one dipping into her purse, counting out coins as if they were talismans.

The girls sat and talked awhile, each one recounting stories of their customers.

"These Americans," said the Polish girl. "Too 'busy' to clean their own houses."

They all agreed. "One man, when his wife is not there," said the tall Russian girl, "he tell me, 'Come here and give me a kiss,' and I tell him, 'Come any closer and I'll give you this.' And I waved toilet brush under his nose."

They tumbled onto each other like kittens, clutching each other as they laughed.

They finished breakfast, each going her separate way as she left the diner. Ursula turned the corner onto Division and saw the wide street, full of people, trolleys, and cars. Her belly was full and she had friends. Before she went to the first job of the day, she stopped at church to light a candle. The prayer was all for her now, all for herself. It was still greener pastures here, just not in the way she had imagined. She knew she would learn other words, thousands of them, piled upon each other like dust upon a sill, and she would be the one to wipe them away, to make of them what she wanted.

ERIC RASMUSSEN

# Prices So Low, They're A Steal

I had never met a real-life Canadian, until I met Brian. He was one of my assistant managers, and we were introduced during my second training shift at Down Home Shoes in the mall. He looked like a regular American guy, but he sounded so over-the-top Canadian that I thought he was doing an impression. Every time we worked together, all he talked about was playing hockey and drinking beer, and he pronounced all the words funny that Canadians were supposed to.

My other assistant manager at Down Home Shoes, Tony, insisted Brian was from Michigan and he claimed he had proof on Brian's application, but he would never unlock the personnel file cabinet in the office to show us. He said that would be a "serious breech of business ethics." But ethics never bothered Tony when he raided the Humane Society donation jar by the register to buy Orange Juliuses for whoever worked on the slow nights.

Brian was also an asshole, but I had met plenty of those before. He took every chance to make fun of me, like one Tuesday night, when an old lady in navy blue pants and a floral blouse hobbled through the store's entryway.

I put my leg up on the arm of one of the chairs by her and smiled. "Anything I can help you with this evening?" I asked.

She startled like I was about to mug her. "No, just browsing." She looked at the wall of shoes, then back at me. "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," I answered.

Brian stood behind the counter and flipped through inventory sheets. "Baloney," he said from across the store, without looking up. "You're sixteen."

"Why did you say nineteen if you're only sixteen?" the woman asked. She pulled her purse closer to her body, and grabbed the strap with both hands.

"Well . . ." I removed my foot from the chair. "I don't know."

Brian came out from behind the counter, all excited to make me look like an idiot. "D-bag, tell her what year you were born."

"No, that's okay." I crossed my arms.

"Come on, tell her."

The woman smiled at Brian. "D-bag?"

"His name's Dan, it's just one of our little nicknames for him." He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me down to his level. "This kid was born in 1980. Can you believe that? He's our little baby around here."

"My word," said the woman. "You're younger than my grandkids."

"We all take turns changing his little diapers." Brian had claimed his territory, asserted his dominance. "Can I get you a size in anything?" he asked the woman. They talked about her grandkids as she pointed out styles of tan orthopedic Aerosoles. I waited for Brian in the backroom.

"If you keep stealing my customers, I'm going to tell Tony."

"Lighten up, D-hole." He meant to run into me, to bash his wide, hockey-playing shoulder into mine, but he saw my face. He paused. "Relax, okay? It's no big deal. You get the next customer."

"You do this all the time."

"You want me to make it up you?" he asked. "I'll buy you a beer after work."

"But I'm . . ."

"That's right! You're only sixteen!" He stuck his lip out to make fun of me. "Alright, then you'll come to the gym with me. I'll pay for you to get in. We'll shoot some baskets. Then we're even."

I'd never been to a gym before.

* * *

In the locker room after Brian beat me in one-on-one six times, I could see him, but he couldn't see me. And I didn't mean to watch another guy change, but he was so muscled. I stood around the corner of the long row of metal lockers, and he took off his shirt, but then he did something weird. He closed the locker that held his gym bag and took a step to the right and opened the next locker. Some other guy's wingtips, maybe Rockfords or Hush Puppies, expensive ones that shined like they were polished regularly, sat on a folded pair of pants. Brian moved so fast it looked like a magic trick. He flicked his wrist and taa-daa! There was a brown wallet in his hand. Then, poof, the wallet turned into a thin stack of cash. Then, abracadabra, the wallet leapt back into the stranger's pants' pocket, the locker closed, and Brian took another step to the right.

Frickin' Canadians. I knew it.

The next locker held a pair of jeans hanging on one of the side hooks, but no wallet. The next two lockers were locked, so he returned to his locker and moved to the left, which was brilliant. If he was caught, he could just claim that he opened the wrong one, and holy shit, I'm sorry, my locker is actually 77, not 78, silly me. He checked twelve lockers total in less than two minutes, and found cash in three of them. Then he took off his shorts and I decided I didn't really want to see anymore of his rippled white body.

I tried to untie my Reebok Kamikazes, which I got super cheap because they were mismatched sizes that still fit my feet pretty well, but the knot wouldn't come out. I was still fighting with it when Brian, red-faced and back in his work clothes, came up behind me.

"D-face, what's taking you so long?" He punched me in the shoulder. "Didn't anyone teach you how to untie your shoes?"

"Yeah. I just can't get this knot."

"Hurry it up a little. I'm supposed to meet a girl."

"Your girlfriend?"

Brian smiled to reveal his big Canadian chipmunk teeth. "No, just a girl I call when I need a little action. A little tail."

The knot loosened and I pried the shoe off my foot. I looked up at Brian for a few seconds, then decided not to ask, and went after the knot on my other shoe.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"You can't look at me like some little gay-rod and then say 'nothing.' What?"

I lowered my voice, now that we were partners. "How much did you get?"

"How much did I get from what?"

"From the lockers."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just now. I was watching you."

"You were watching me? Now I know you're a queer."

"I'm serious. Did you get more than a hundred?"

Brian shook his head with his eyes wide in total shock, total confusion. "D-munch, if I had any idea what you were talking about, I'd tell you. Are you talking about basketball scores? I really have no clue . . ."

But he did something with his eye, not quite a wink, more like a twitch, that let me know where we stood. I was in.

* * *

The women's canvas shoes came packed with plastic tubes, like straws but thicker, bent at one end into an "L" that wedged into the heels of the shoes to keep them from collapsing. Tony figured out how to use the thick rubber bands that held the lids on the sandal boxes to hook the plastic tubes and fire them like missiles. Tony regretted the discovery almost as soon as he made it, when one of the college guy employees cracked one of the full-length mirrors with a powerful shot. But nothing could stop us. On the slow nights, we hosted Down Home Wars. The guys from the Radio Shack next door sometimes joined in. We gave each other welts and dove around like action heroes and chipped the paint on the display walls.

On a dead Tuesday night, Brian retreated to the back to reload, tearing through the boxes for more ammo. I crouched behind the pillar that held the extra shoelaces and shelves of waterproofing spray. Brian leaned around the corner and fired one right at me. I dodged back and the blast hit the tins of shoe polish, which clattered to the floor. I got low, on my belly, inched around the corner, and fired. I heard the plastic rocket hit the tile of the walkway to the backroom.

"That was a close one, D-stank!" He cackled like an evil wizard. "Why don't you show your cute little face again so I can knock out some of your baby teeth?"

And then there was a mom and her hot daughter standing over me. I think the girl went to my school, and the mom crossed her arms. "Is this your idea of customer service?"

I couldn't get off my stomach before Brian made it around the corner. "Dan, what the hell are you doing? Get off the floor." He crossed his arms and stood close to the mom. "These high school boys are so immature."

The girl snorted and rolled her eyes.

Brian pointed at her and nodded. "Right? You know what I'm talking about. You have to deal with these knuckleheads every day." Brian held out his hand to help me up. "D-store, why don't you finish collapsing those boxes?" He turned

to the customers, full of seduction, like this was the start of a porno. "What can I help you two ladies find tonight?"

And it totally worked on mom. She softened, and touched him on the arm. "Katelyn is interested in Doc Martens."

"I'll bet she is. You came to right place."

I waited for Brian around the corner of the stock room again. This time he came back vibrating and giddy. "Did you see how hot those two are? Holy shit, D-stick, you think I can nail them both? A little mother-daughter action?"

"Actually," I said, "you should give me this sale."

He paused. What I had suggested was ridiculous, inappropriate, offensive. Docs were $120. That made or broke an evening's individual sales goal. He glared at me, his face abandoned of all joking and all camaraderie. "Fuck you."

I crossed my arms. "It's just . . . I was just . . . thinking about that time at the gym. You know, since you found some extra cash, I thought maybe I could have this sale."

His glare hardened. "I still don't know what you mean, and I'm getting pretty pissed that you keep bringing it up." He walked ten feet down the dark aisle of shoes and grabbed the box the girl had requested. He slammed it into my stomach. "You better drop it. Right now. Okay?"

"Yeah. Of course. I appreciate the gesture."

The women didn't like me anywhere near as much as they liked Brian. But they bought the boots.

* * *

Down Home Shoes had twelve employees, eleven guys and one girl named Heather, and I liked her a lot. More than a lot. She was in high school too, but not the one I went to, and she had straight hair and a tiny voice and she was adorable. She got weed for me, twice. And I think she liked me too.

On a Saturday she and I paused behind the counter together in between sales.

Brian had two customers, Tony had one, and Heather just finished with a couple of big muscled sports guys who bought baseball cleats. She must have been feeling pretty good about the commission, because she came up next to me and squeezed my thigh pretty high up. I looked at her, and she smiled, and I smiled back while Tony and Brian competed in volume and sales facts from opposite sides of the store.

"The soles on these are a polyurethane blend that will wear five to six times longer, and you feel that arch support? That's because they have a what's called a negative heel . . ."

"I can tell from your old shoes that you supinate pretty bad, so the double-density outer sole here is going to make a world of difference, plus, they have this hard plastic support across your lateral arch. Just try to twist that shoe, you can't do it, and that's all extra support . . ."

Heather said, "Hey, I've got something to show you in back."

The office room was dark even with the lights on. One corner held the computer, another held the table where we custom-dyed satin wedding shoes.

She stopped in front of the old couch where everyone threw their coats, but we didn't sit. Heather and I made clenched, animal eye contact, and then she pulled my face down to hers for a hard kiss, like girls weren't supposed to do, or at least had never done to me. I put my hand on her back and we mashed our bodies together, and then I let a finger slip under her shirt, just to check, just to see, and she didn't say anything or back away, so I went in with the whole hand, which was second base, technically, although I wouldn't get all the way there until we separated a little, and then suddenly Brian stood in the doorway.

"What's going on back here?" he asked, sing-songy, with a terrible grin and lecherous eyes. "Look at you, Dan Juan. Are you going to turn in your v-card right here in the office?"

Heather giggled and stepped back. My cheeks got red. "Sorry," I said. "We'll get back on the floor."

"You mean I don't get to watch?"

"You're such an asshole," said Heather, although she didn't mean it, because girls all loved Brian, no matter how much of a jerk he was.

"Come on," Brian said. He shook his head and tried to stop himself from laughing and looked at me. "I think this is great. Great for you two, and great for me, because I'm going to tell everyone how red D-train's face was, and how I could see his little wiener trying to poke out." He pointed his finger into the air and wiggled it. "Let me out, let me out!" he said in a Kermit the Frog voice.

"Actually, you're not going to tell anyone anything."

"Sorry, buddy, but wild horses couldn't . . ."

"I was just thinking about the gym again," I said. "And something about that trip makes me think that you'll just keep this to yourself."

When I was kid, my friends and I were playing kickball at the elementary school down the street when a bunch of older kids wearing all black came up to us. Their leader's voice cracked when he told us to give him our ball, which we did, and he told us they were going to need the whole park and that we needed to get on our bikes and leave, which we did, and he yelled after us to watch out, because he didn't want to see us in his park again. I said, with electric, poisonous sarcasm, "Okay, we'll be careful." The leader ran to me and before the fear registered on my face he shoved me off the bike and demanded I get back up, which I did, and he punched me in the stomach. I cried until they left, and wondered for years what would have happened if I had punched back.

"And your break is coming up pretty soon, right?" I asked. Brian looked like he wanted to punch me, but he wouldn't. "Could you get me and Heather something for lunch when you go? That'd be rad. Thanks."

* * *

The Airwalks cost $60 originally, on sale for $50. With my discount, they were $35, but if I took them out the back in the stack of cardboard boxes bound for the crusher, hid them under a bush and picked them up after the mall closed, they'd be free. So, that's what I did.

Brian was up front with some white-haired old guy with a big gut. The man had bought a pair of $220 Ecco boots because he was promised they would last

for years. After two months the seams split, the soles cracked, and they smelled like a dead animal. Brian told the guy he couldn't offer a refund because it wasn't the shoes' fault, then the guy started swearing, and I saw my opening.

"I'm going to crush the boxes," I said. Brian waved me off without looking. He'd argue with the customer for twenty minutes before he gave in, so there was no chance he'd wander back. I didn't have to pull a magic trick heist. I just had to walk out.

The flattened planks of cardboard sat in a waist-high pile by the office. I grabbed a third of the stack, wrestled them through the back door, and dragged them across the parking lot to the giant garbage and cardboard compactors. The cold drizzle threatened to turn to snow. I wished I had grabbed my coat.

All my friends worked regular high school jobs. They bagged groceries in their aprons and white-collared shirts, or they manned drive-thru windows and industrial fryers in their stained polos. Working in the mall was supposed to be better than all that, glamorous and prestigious. People were supposed to envy me.

The second stack was as unruly as the first, and my new pair of shoes came out with the third. The garbage compactors sat back in a corner of the parking lot where the grounds crew didn't trim the bushes. My shoes fit right in the middle of one, supported by the lattice of branches and hidden by the solid layer of leaves. I checked to make sure no one was watching me. I was clear.

The customer with the wrecked boots had ruined Brian's mood, so we didn't talk the rest of the shift. Two hours later we left, at closing time. Normally on our way out, he told me about the girl he was going to lay, or which bar he was going to close down, or the hockey game he was going to play in that weekend. Instead we just walked down the white service hallway together, even with each other, both tired from a long day, sick of the mall, and eager to get going.

"See you later," I said as I pushed through the door.

"See you," Brian replied.

I drove around the parking lot twice before I came back for the shoes. The radio played too loud no matter how far I turned it down. I followed the 15 MPH parking lot speed limit around the whole circle, even on the racetrack curve in front of the movie theater. My parents and teachers had led me to believe I would regret moments like this, but I didn't. It was like my first beer or first toke or the time we spray painted penises all over the elementary school down the street, the same one where I got punched. The expected guilt never arrived.

I turned my lights off as I pulled around the corner of the building, slowed way down, flipped off the radio. I crept past the handful of cars left in the lot up to the corner with the dumpsters, and saw something I never anticipated. Brian stood next to the cardboard crusher with the box of Airwalks in his hands. Turning around quick and speeding away would have been smart, but that's not what I did. I pulled up and got out of the car and stood behind the open driver's door. "Hey man," I said. "I think those are mine."

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm just using my employee discount. It's no big deal."

He ran his hand through his drizzle-soaked hair, which released droplets to trickle down his face. No smile this time, no big Canadian teeth. "I can't let you steal from the store. I'll put them back, and we'll forget about it."

"No, that's okay. I'll just take them."

"I have to turn you in then. This is a bad idea. You don't want to start this."

My voice wavered and my hands shook. I felt like a fucking superhero. "I don't know, man. If you turn me in, I'd have to share our little gym secret. Which one of us do you think would get in more trouble?"

Brian shook his head. His red tie faded to maroon from the rain, and his white shirt clung to his thick chest. "You really don't want to do this." He dropped the shoes on the concrete and walked away.

My next shift was at the end of the week on Saturday, and when I got there, Tony kept running to the phone to have intense, hushed conversations. The mall stayed quiet on Saturdays until lunchtime, so I manned the floor, sold a pair of Eastland boots to some old lady, talked with the girl who worked the earring kiosk in the hall, and shot plastic tubes at the wall of socks.

"What's going on?" I asked Tony when he paused at the counter behind the register.

"I can't tell you. Wish I could."

"Oh," I said. "Is it about Brian? Isn't he supposed to work today?"

Tony was tall, and he put his hands on the counter and leaned forward with his head down in exasperation. "Okay, but you can't tell anybody else, alright?"

"Yeah, for sure, my lips are sealed."

"Brian was caught stealing money from people's lockers at his gym."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah. They think he's been doing it for months. He might have walked away with a few thousand dollars."

I opened my eyes as wide as I could. "How did he get caught?"

"Anonymous tip," said Tony.

"No way," I said, then paused. "So, what does that mean? Is he fired?"

Tony laughed. "Oh yeah. He is very fired. I'm sure you won't see him again."

A couple girls walked past the front of the store, all grunged out in overalls and ratty hair, but instead of shirts under their jean straps, they just had these little tops, sports bras or whatever, and one of them looked at me, and I smiled. She pointed out our wall of Doc Martens to her friends and they kept walking, taking nips off their Sbarro cups and swinging their Victoria's Secret bags.

I shook my head, like it was so unbelievable that anyone would steal like Brian did, like it was sad, because he was such a good guy, but at the same time like it was scary to think that someone like him could be a criminal. Just shocking.

"Is he going to move back to Canada then?" I asked.

"Michigan," said Tony. "He's from Michigan."

# ²essay

*noun* es·say \'e-ˌsā; *senses* 1, 2 & 4
*also* e-'sā\

: a short piece of writing that tells a person's thoughts or opinions about a subject

ANDREW FOWLER

# Night Out

I spend the week in solitude and after work, I come home to my little apartment, to eat dinner alone in front of my computer screen, to read a book on my balcony, my place marked with a Burmese 50 kyat note, to scan the city at sunset, the wispy clouds that hang over the western horizon and the first lit windows of the parade of skyscrapers that marches down the skyline.

So on a Friday, I wound up at a Thong Lo nightclub, located like everything in certain trendy sections of southeast Bangkok, in something not terribly unlike a strip mall, a planning aesthetic borrowed from the sun-kissed suburbs of Los Angeles, with the same glass-box sushi bars and gelaterias, the same boutiques with pictures of the same Slavic models, the same palm trees waving in a light breeze on the median strips and along the margins of the parking lot, and it's the sort of club where the DJ is some hot hi-so girl with dyed auburn hair but who isn't bad, and we have our little circular table like everyone else and like everyone else it has its ice bucket and its central bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label or Finlandia, and we stand at our table and dance a bit and drink whole fields of distilled grain, it's far, far better than most other options, the women I'm dancing with aren't sex workers, I'll leave that to the faded nightclubs in hotel basements and grim industrial suburbs, frequented by the older expats, the lurkers, the sex addicts who have the tucked-in polo shirts and the glasses and the bad haircuts of Nebraskan engineers, the young tourists with their backpacks back at the hostel, the Arab and Indian men that you see in uncomfortable looking quartets around the Nana metro stop, the technical school kids who shoot at each other on bleak concrete back alleyways.

Instead we dance with wasp-waisted girls who wrap themselves in flowing fabric, faces made ever more sylphlike by assaultive batteries of whitening cream, exotic skin treatments, and plastic surgeries, floating on the dance floor wreathed in mentholated cigarette smoke, their car keys dusted with stepped-on Asian coke, they take a sip of their vodka tonic and chase it with a neat yellow pill of one kind or another, which is of course the habit of rich kids from a not so rich country, most of them third or fourth generation Thai-Chinese whose surnames are freight trains of auspicious nouns strung together, children of a somebody in a silk tie who owns the largest aluminum extrusion factory in Southeast Asia, employing a few hundred people who left their rice fields in Nakhon Sawan or Chaiyaphum and whose labor funded the European childhood and the airport codes—LAX, CDG—that dangle from the suitcases of the same girls whose false-colored eyes are now blinking open, two generations after their snaggle-toothed grandfathers sailed out of Hainan and Amoy on angular junks towards the port of Bangkok in a day when the turbid brown river

that bisects the city was cluttered with a thousand boats of bamboo and wood and the city was shielded from the sea by impossibly thick mangroves.

And at the end of the night, I'm probably not going to sleep with anyone, and I step out into a side street, under a starless sky, lined with walls of dense green foliage, punctuated by hibiscus in full bloom, I get a bag of chips to eat on the way home and flag down a taxi, and try to keep my eyes open as I try to give my driver directions to my obscure little street, my headphones in, volume turned up, drowned in distortion, but we're going along some viaduct over Phetchaburi or Rama IV, where I can see the glitter of countless red beacons flickering atop buildings and the endless, giant, glowing signs for Toyota and Deutsche Bank and Samsung, until we get off on my street and I tell the driver to stop outside my building, next to the smashed glass left over from the shirtless and tattooed younger guys who spent the evening drinking on the side of the street, but they're gone now, and the security guard to my building is nowhere to be found, I walk across the empty parking lot to the cold, fluorescent-lit elevator lobby and go up eight floors, a CCTV camera staring at me unblinking, and I wonder who is watching me, if anyone, and what they're thinking, if they're thinking, if they give a shit.

I step into my apartment. I drink a glass of water in the kitchen. I brush the chip crumbs off my shirt. The air conditioner hums. When I brush my teeth, I look into the mirror, deep into my irises. I lay my head down on my single pillow and wait for sleep to come.

ANDREW FOWLER

# The Tea that Strikes the Dust

This is how it went every morning. In little shops, selling samosas and noodles and instant coffee, the waiters, often no more than ten years old, went through the same ritual. A few drops of green tea are poured from the carafe into white porcelain cups, swirled around to remove the stray grit and dead insects, and then tossed out into the street, slightly wetting the red dust that blows about.

What can I tell about a trip I took? To put it all in chronological order would make it plodding and false, to merely snatch impressions here and there would betray the material reality of the route I took. My traveling partner, Ms. H., captured photographs of temples and lizards, whereas I stuck to my notebook, and hoped that, somehow, I'd be able to convey to my friends back in Bangkok, America, wherever, what I felt about the benighted country wedged between Thailand and India.

Myanmar is a country of dust and iron—it is embodied in the clatter of horses' hooves on a dirt road, black exhaust clouds from World War II-era Willys Jeeps, the intricately patterned ground sandalwood that graces the cheeks of the children, the disfigured old trucks cut down to mere chassis on wheels and dragged by men in wifebeaters and checked sarongs, the red brick pagodas that jut from the plain, their teak Buddhas too dried out to rot, pressed with gold leaf by the faithful, and the cast aside pieces of bamboo and crushed sugarcane. Its color profile is olive and gold and beige: sunlight and statuary, cacti and woven rattan, tea leaves and cigar butts, the thin layers of spice-colored oil that float on top of the food in the steam trays.

The visitor is left dehydrated, urine turning thick and saffron-colored, the inner tissue of the mouth drying out with every breath. Your only respite is in the tea shops, where strong black tea is served viscous and sweet with condensed milk. Even the drinks seem somehow deprived of water, like the last fruits of summer withering on the vine.

Amid this, the local religious doctrine makes absolute sense: all life is suffering and decay, and the only way to escape the endless cycle of samsara is to release attachments.

I saw it embodied in a wooden folk-art statue on Mandalay Hill, of the four sights which Siddhartha Gautama was forbidden from seeing, the faces having the sort of misshapen harshness you see in Grünewald's famous altarpiece. Inside a dusty cubicle, we see an old man, a sick man, a sadhu, and a corpse, vultures devouring its flesh, maggots writhing in its eyes. All is watched over by the young prince who would become the Buddha, who, sad-faced, has to leave the idyllic palace grounds of his childhood.

Start in Yangon, the previous capital, since replaced by Naypyidaw—a sort of military-Buddhist Brasilia of pagoda rooflines and empty condos, opened at

an astrologically auspicious time—lies at the junction of the Yangon and Bago Rivers, a city dug deep into the muddy Ayeyarwaddy Delta, a tropically Gothic place of broken spires and caved-in porticoes, clock towers that haven't told the correct time in forty years.

And above all else, it is a city of secrets, its narrow streets lined with six- and seven-story colonial apartment buildings, steel grates on shop fronts half shut, dark faces puffing cheroots and staring out at you, hot, late-afternoon sunlight alternating with remarkably cool shadows. In every building, a steep, unlit staircase leads upstairs to quiet, darkened hallways, open at one end, crows nesting in mildew-darkened Victorian moldings. There are the quiet, clean-swept steps that lead up to the half-decrepit Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue, where the Iraqi Jews who once came east to make their fortunes as *boxwallahs* for the British Empire prayed. There is the infinite tangle of pagodas and mirrored tiles at the Shwe Dagon, forming a set of infinite reflections in the equatorial sun. And there are the gilded hallways that form an eight-pointed star inside the hollow stupa of the Botataung, each angle concealed, hiding a woman in deep prayer, or a young monk in glasses poring over the Pali religious classics. As night sets, the handful of streetlights turn on, but mostly it remains dark, groups of men sitting in the shadows, smoking Ruby Red cigarettes and drinking tea, a sole candle flickering at the shop where a woman in a sari wraps betel nut and loose tobacco into pungent, loose quids. The power flickers twice, then goes out. Hers is the only light.

* * *

We cross the vast chaparral of Lower Burma to the town of Kyaiktiyo, and climb the trail that goes to the top of the mountain in the Tenasserim Hills. We jump over tumbling, rock-strewn streams, stop at massive ceramic water jars left along the side of the trail for weary pilgrims, and pass shrines, built with fragrant blocks of sandalwood, adorned with flayed snake skins, preserved giant centipedes, and the complete heads of Himalayan deer, perched atop bamboo baskets like the heads of French aristocrats.

And at the top, men with folded hands pray to the stupa that sits atop a massive golden boulder perched on this mountainside, the first emergence of real topography after the ironed-flat lowlands. Balanced, in legend, by a hair of the Buddha, it is, as the structuralists would say, a microcosm, a metaphor for all sacred space in the form of a vertical structure, balanced and swirling around the idea of the Buddha—represented by an object and emphatically not an image—on the rupture point of the mountains and the plains.

The pilgrim-tourists are camping out on bamboo mats on the massive marble floor for the night, scooping rice from massive pots and unpacking tiffins of fish soup and tea-leaf salad.

You smell the rich curries cooking, see the smoke rising from the little charcoal braziers and the palm oil burbling in cast-iron woks, and imagine yourself reclining in one of the canvas deck chairs on a high mountain aerie, the taste of a cold bottle of Mandalay Beer almost touching your lips, and think about how, at some point, you could stay here for a very long time, stretching your weary

limbs, staring out over the soot-clouded sunset, under a sky filled with emerging equatorial constellations, over the chanting of the monks, the birdlike songs and laughter of the Burmese girls that giggle as you walk by.

But it is not meant to be. We race down the mountain to get back before dark, practically running, past the deer heads that glower at us in the half light.

* * *

As we moved up and down the country, we charted our course by moving from remnant to remnant, leapfrogging back and forth across centuries.

In a town once called Maymyo—"May's Hill," for the English colonel who founded it—we drank plum wine at a lakeside restaurant, looked at the dried butterflies in an Edwardian botanical garden where the men wore pith helmets and the women wore broad-brimmed straw hats with silk daffodils. As we walked to the center of the town, we passed red brick churches and half-timbered summer lodges and horse-drawn white coaches, before arriving at the tidy campanile, the bells of which still play Anglican hymns.

At Bagan, we cycled through the desert from decrepit temple to decrepit temple built during the reigns of—and eventually bankrupting the empire of—Kings Anawrahta and Kyanzittha. Despite the intermediary years of war and strife, they have survived, many complete with whitewashed walls and graceful paintings of war elephants and charging buffalo, sky nymphs and angels blowing trumpets, monks gathered around a radiant Buddha, his head surrounded by nested halos in the colors of the rainbow.

And we went to the old city of Inwa, stranded on a low-lying, marshy island in the broad Ayeyarwaddy, one of the last capitals of the Burmese Empire before its final capitulation to the British Raj. Tourists are taken to see the damaged palace tower that leans perilously to one side and the teak monastery of Bagaya Kyaung. But outside further ruins lurk, unmarked and seemingly forgotten. This place was burned and captured, reburned and recaptured, by the Shan, the Bamar, the Brits, all leaving their traces. Who built these? From what dynasty, what era? Someone more knowledgeable could comment on lintels and ogive arches, but I am left with nothing. Among the piles of brick, I mumble the words softly under my breath.

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

* * *

As we traipsed across Myanmar, we entered into another era of travel, one before ATMs (the first ones were being installed during our trip, but weren't yet online) and the Internet (which functioned, but only sporadically). The unpaved roads that crisscross the country go over remote brooks, where the

traffic is slowed by parades of white bulls, their horns garlanded with jasmine and chrysanthemums, a procession of the town's virgins carrying golden vases. It wasn't so much that the technology was more primitive—this was something I'd anticipated—it's how obviously entrenched each town was in its local culture, in its rituals and traditions, its superstitions and conventions.

The tourists are slowly trickling in. You see the kids with backpacks checked into cheap guesthouses on 25th Street in Mandalay, on Mahabandoola Road in Yangon, in little towns like Kalaw, Hsipaw, and Nyaung Oo that are starting to develop a reputation for mellow vibes and cheap beer.

If you believe the press, the country is in a "state of transition." Sanctions are being lifted and political prisoners released. The Tatmadaw, the military government that deposed U Nu in 1962, is out, and things that resemble what the international community thinks of as elections are being conducted.

But the people's trepidation remains. "The generals have just changed their uniforms," a Shan princess told me in the parlor of her decaying palace. "In my country, no reason, no democracy," a boozy Tamil-Catholic surveyor told me at a restaurant in the frigid hills of Pyin U Lwin.

A video plays for us on the bus, repeated Buddhist prayers in sung Burmese and whispered English, thirty minutes of a dharma talk filmed on a Camcorder, an anti-drug use anthem, followed by a military parade down Sule Paya Road in Yangon: stultifying religious dogma followed by something that looks cribbed from every American's elementary school D.A.R.E. seminar, washed down with a healthy dose of paranoid fascism.

And in Mandalay, the old royal capital memorialized by that great imperial apologist Rudyard Kipling (who never visited the city), you see the traces of the profoundly antidemocratic: boulevards that can accommodate tanks, Orwellian concrete nightmare buildings falling to pieces in the oppressive heat, bronze statues of generals smeared with pigeon shit, and the surviving banners: TATMADAW AND THE PEOPLE COOPERATE AND CRUSH ALL THOSE HARMING THE UNION!

And beyond the central state, there are the multiple civil wars on the fringes, the many flavors of ethnic strife that occur when groups with long, bitter histories—Mon and Wa, Rohingya and Rakhine, Chin and Kachin, Kayin and Kayah—together have to deal with finite resources. It occurs in waves, with the current horror being the purges of Burmese Muslims.

Visual media have made the image of violence universal and distant. But then, as I pass through the burned-down remnants of what was once the Muslim Quarter of the town of Meiktila, and see a girl staring out from a charred doorway, all of that universality and all of that distance collapses into immediate delirium and nausea.

* * *

Yet the persistent violence only existed on the peripheries of my trip, making itself known through palimpsests. And in my personal interactions, it all melted away, and I was greeted by a consistently kind-hearted and generous populace.

I spent much of the trip reading the travelogues of Patrick Leigh Fermor, who wandered by foot from the Hook of Holland to Istanbul, on buses and trains, and it felt a little like we were in the old Europe of inscrutable tradition and generous curiosity towards the few travelers who passed through. And, as with Fermor along the Rhine, there were the constant small gifts en route. We were given plates of chicken and rice at a Yunnanese temple, a cup of coffee from an old man, preserved plums from a group of schoolgirls, jellied candies from a shopkeeper, the bowls of rice wine offered to us by Shan villagers, a tube of epoxy to fix a broken shoe. And, after a day of hiking, we were offered a ride back from a waterfall outside the little village of Anisakan.

Up around that part of Myanmar, it gets quite chilly at night, even in the sweat-drenched hot season. And in the back of the truck, with the wind sweeping our faces, I sheltered myself behind a canvas flap.

On one side of the road, a bright vermilion sun sank into the haze of the burning rice fields in the valleys far below. And on the other side, an equally vermilion full moon rose from above the pines.

* * *

There will always be that next valley, that next river, that next point on the map—a town with an inscrutable name, the triangular symbol representing a mountain, the slightly different shade indicating a new province where the people's palms are tattooed with mandalas and compass points, or where they eat oxtails simmered in a thick turmeric sauce, or where the laurel trees sway in the high winds at the base of a snow-capped mountain.

For the map isn't just a diagram, it is a web of possibilities, a reminder of the million pathways that spiderweb out from the point at which you stand.

BARBARA HAAS

# Is There Ever a Breath You Draw That Doesn't Have Leningrad in It?

During the 900-day Nazi Siege, the city of Saint Petersburg, then known as Leningrad, was forced to designate willy-nilly a colossal necropolis, the Piskaryovskoye Memorial, and lay to rest a half million ordinary citizens who died of starvation.

My friend Sergey and I stopped there on our drive up the Neva River a while ago and walked the avenue before the well-ordered mounds, 186 of them altogether, each the length and width of a football field. Shostakovich's "Leningrad Symphony" played from hidden speakers. A towering Motherland statue guarded one end of the cemetery, an eternal flame the other. Arranged on either side of the long central avenue the mounds were identical—broad, deep, massive earthen structures approximately three feet high. They were neatly leveled off across the top and beveled at the corners, as if abiding by an aesthetic that might govern the tidiest way to present mass graves. Carpets of grass blanketed the mounds—boundless emerald expanses, a delirium of green that would spread cheer in a park-like setting but served here as a monochromatic veneer for sorrow. The mounds held many thousands of deceased residents from each particular siege year.

*500,000 ÷ 186*, I thought.

It was tempting to use the calculator tool on my cell phone, but I fought the urge to be so precise.

Precision couldn't matter in a place like this where souls had relinquished to the earth all pretense of individuality. Death would force that on every one of us at some point, true—but typical cemeteries, cemeteries that were of normal proportions, maintained the illusion of individuality and originality in one's final repose, whether through uniquely carved sculptures marking the graves or custom tombstone photos depicting the deceased as they were in life. Death could be simple or extravagant in cemeteries of ordinary dimensions. It was as possible to bury the dead in plain pine boxes handcrafted by chanting monks as it was to bury them in bacon-themed caskets. An illusion of control governed the choice—and the normality, the modest and typical size of these Memory Gardens, allowed that illusion.

Abnormally humongous, Piskaryovskoye had no margin for illusions, nor the vanity that necessitates them. The scale disallowed it. The place had long ago reduced everything to its lowest common denominator.

A swell of strings and timpani surged through the hidden speakers. The music expressed urgency. It was that part of the "Leningrad Symphony" known as the "Bolero of Shostakovich," a pounding, relentless, high-intensity passage to rival

Ravel. It made me want to pick up my pace, maybe even go dashing down the central avenue toward the mounds, as if reaching them quickly were important.

One hundred meters or so away a young couple with a four- or five-year-old child had stopped. Both adults looked to be fiddling with their cell phones while their daughter frolicked about. She twirled down the avenue, perhaps feeling the music, and then all at once scampered up the sloping grassy side of one of the mounds. Neither parent glanced away from their devices. Predictably, the little girl did what children do. She lay lengthwise in the grass at the beveled top of the mound and rolled on down.

The incongruity struck me, this display of whimsy. It was something I'd failed to factor in, the way life and its indomitable joy might occasionally stride step for step alongside the gravity of this place. It didn't seem like a breech of decorum though. A child could behave here as children do whenever they encounter grassy open spaces in the city.

Granite slabs as big as barn doors abutted each of the mounds. Sergey pointed to them. "There was no way to acknowledge individuals buried, only the year." I looked at the slabs and the dates carved into them:

1941,
1941,
1941.

And then

1942,
1942,
1942.

If a family had lost someone in 1943, survivors could come here and choose one of the huge mounds marked "1943" to stand before and grieve.

"Impersonal, it's true," Sergey said, "but there was no other way." He didn't have to shrug. His tone was shrug enough. He had propped his sunglasses up on the top of his head, and the mirrored lenses reflected the sky. My translator, my guide, my first friend in Russia. Sergey was a musician, classically trained, a graduate of the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. For two years I had come here every six months in an effort to learn enough about the collision of history, nature, and culture in this one-time Communist nation to write credibly about it. When I needed a translator, someone at the university in Saint Petersburg pointed me in Sergey's direction.

"As you can see," he said, "1942 was the worst year by a mile." His sweeping gesture took in several dozen mounds marked 1942. "Over 10,000 people buried on Easter Sunday that year alone. And the next day? Nine thousand. Day after day. Just like that."

Statistics were easier to tally than actual individual deaths. That was not the most horrible thing about this atrocity, however. Mass graves, by definition, underscored the abstract and anonymous quality of the loss. They emphasized the collective aspect too, the group dimension. I cast my gaze across the tran-

quility, noting a dense stand of leafy birches delineating the northern border and also birches along the southern border. They bracketed the necropolis, as if to define a subset in a math problem: a line of demarcation that separated the living from the dead. I looked from mound to mound, each as symmetrical as the one before.

Math always asked you to perform functions within the brackets first before attempting to perform those functions that lay outside the brackets.

I had seen a wartime photograph of a woman pulling a makeshift sled through the snowy streets of Leningrad, the tightly shrouded body of a dead child tied to the sled. She pulled it through the snow to a destination such as this. Multiply that times all the Leningrad losses. The sheer numbers alone forced one into math's bloodless realm, its nameless, faceless, fleshless realm—which was Piskaryovskoye's realm too.

The move here had moved everything and everyone to that realm—without pride, without identity, scarcely recognizable any more as human. Starving people weren't just skinny with bones protruding. Starvation left bodies misshapen, distended here, swollen there, caved in, withered, the skin surface oddly blue. I had read enough of historian Anna Reid's *Leningrad* to know that a starving person's last hours were spent in an agonized pantomime of eating—fingers to the lips, mouth working, tongue flitting as if tasting, tasting.

Sometimes math helped us make an exchange, especially when dealing with very large numbers. Math helped us place one particular thing—like a human being—within something more comprehensive in order to make the enormity of the sum manageable. A daughter, for instance, was no longer a daughter but got subsumed into the domain x, which contained the Leningrad half million. Piskaryovskoye had had the unenviable but necessary task of managing the enormity of its sum. A deathscape of this immensity could only be understood mathematically.

I glanced at Sergey. He had dropped the mirrored shades over his eyes and was gazing off toward the Motherland statue at the avenue's end. He had shared the story of how his grandmother, hardly more than a girl at age twenty, had escaped Leningrad. This was three months into the Siege, during that first brutal wave of the blockade, when the mortality rate was rocketing: 8,000 dead on Monday, 7,000 on Tuesday. I noted my knee-jerk tendency to round up or round down, as if to simplify the numbers since what they denoted was anything but simple. Sergey's grandmother fled across frozen Lake Ladoga northward, to Murmansk, and that's where she stayed.

The Siege eventually lifted, 1944. The war eventually ended, 1945.

And she never came back. In Murmansk she married Sergey's grandfather. Sergey's mother was born there, and a couple decades later Sergey too. He alone of his family had returned to Leningrad. By then it was Saint Petersburg once more, its original name from the imperial era, and the conservatory offered him a scholarship in choral conducting. His grandmother had a good long life. She was treasured and revered by her children and her grandchildren alike. She forged a living lineage for her progeny that had nothing to do with mass graves like this. The woman lived to be ninety and was blessed in being able to hold several great-grandbabies in her arms.

Sergey was here today, at Piskaryovskoye, the way I was, as a visitor to a historic site, like an onlooker at an exhibition, someone peering into the sorrow from the outside, separated from it by grass and soil, cordoned off from it by life itself, saved by the pulse that leapt in our own bodies.

I placed my hand on his shoulder. He turned the mirrored shades on me, and his expression was of course unreadable. I pressed my lips together and found myself nodding. It was like being in a zoo for sadness.

The Motherland statue held her arms outstretched, a garland of oak leaves, plaited and braided as a mourning banner, draping from them. All of this was gigantically cast in bronze. Her eyes gazed placidly over the well-ordered rows of mounds, ninety-three to the left, ninety-three to the right, as if she were well-pleased with the pragmatic arrangement. The effect was of the Pietà, but on an overpoweringly massive scale—the Pietà to the 10th power. Unlike the Madonna cradling her crucified son, this Motherland could not clasp any of her dead to her. Her arms would be empty save for the rigid mourning banner. Nonetheless, she appeared to be striding toward the graves of her children.

Carved into a stone wall at the base of the statue, a poem by Olga Berggolts reinforced the unknowable character of the dead:

Here lie Leningraders—
Here are the citizens—men, women, and children.
They defended you, Leningrad,
With all their lives.
We cannot list their noble names here
There are so many of them under the eternal protection of granite . . .

I stared at the Cyrillic letters and pondered. In his novels, Tolstoy lavished loving attention on Petersburg and didn't neglect any of its splendor: opera nights at the Mariinsky, fountain-splashed parks, magnificent marble palaces along Nevsky Prospekt, the latticework of rivers and canals that laced its way through the city. In *War & Peace*, the protagonist Pierre Bezukhov played a mischievous prank once as a young man—tying a small black bear to a Petersburg policeman and tossing them both into the Moyka River. Scene after scene featured the imperial city's elegance. The formal dinner parties Tolstoy chronicled lasted all night and were as luminous as chandeliers.

But even a great literary genius could not imagine the horrors that would devastate this place. The horrors transcended human imagination, genius or not. Scarcely thirty years after Tolstoy's passing, the cherished playground of his literary kingdom was a cityscape altered and enlarged by death on an industrial scale.

The last lines of the poem by Olga Berggolts were inscribed on the granite pedestal at the feet of the Motherland statue: "Know this, those who regard these stones. No one is forgotten and nothing is forgotten."

I studied the words and thought about the stonecutter who had struck the letters. In my mind's eye I could see his hand gripping the iron chisel. A reasonable man, hardworking, third-generation mason, son of Leningrad, his hammer

poised to strike, an artisan surrounded by stone. It seemed to me even if you couldn't read Russian you'd nonetheless know what these words meant. They meant the dead would always be present among the living in Saint Petersburg now, a compelling census in ratio even to the current residents. Piskaryovskoye was a shadow city, a ghostly doppelganger forever attached to the spirited living one, a city of silence occupying the same zip code. As much as the art, architecture, ballet, and opera were solidly here, undeniably here, so too were the mass graves.

"You know, she spent the entire 900-day Siege in Leningrad," Sergey was saying. He nodded to the poem. "Olga Berggolts." He told me that during the bombardment she broadcast daily over the sole radio station that was still functional. She became known as the "Voice of Leningrad." In 1971, a Soviet cosmonaut named a planet in a distant galaxy for her, 3093 Berggolts. A crater on Venus was named for her, too.

I smiled at our inadequate attempts to immortalize somehow, in our quite mortal way, events that blew the doors off anything we could comprehend.

Dwarfed by The Motherland statue, Sergey and I stood there. I tried to focus on the information he was sharing, tried to fathom the quite heroic calculus of Olga Berggolts.

"She received the Order of Lenin," he let me know.

But it was difficult, very difficult, to hold onto his words.

Piskaryovskoye asked death to be at once abstract and hard to conceptualize ("500,000") but also palpable and present ("never forgotten.") It occurred to me that we thought about things "not forgotten" in very specific ways even when they denoted absurdly large numbers.

Let 'x' represent the subset of things forgotten, I thought.

Something not forgotten was thus expressed:

$-(x)$.

Being here now was a way of not forgetting. Bringing a flower on Victory Day or laying a plastic poppy on the graves—also, a way of not forgetting. *It's not that we need to remember*, I thought. *It's that we won't forget.* I turned to Sergey. "*Not forgetting* is different from *being remembered*." I pointed to the word "forgotten" on the pedestal: забыт. "Do you know the etymology?"

He stared at the letters and took a moment. "If it were a musical term, I could probably tell you." He was the choral director of an a cappella group called Nevsky Style. "Of course, if it were musical, it would be in Italian."

If we didn't ever think again about the Siege of Leningrad, that wouldn't mean it had ceased to exist. This was not like that tree falling in the woods: *Did it make a sound?* The Siege of Leningrad functioned apart from us. It was not reliant on us to reconstruct it.

I turned to Sergey. "'Not forgotten' means they are always in the back of our mind. They're *with* us. We don't have to summon them up. They are *not forgotten*."

"Not quite present," he said, "but . . ."

"Sergey—your son is nineteen. He grew up with all this practically in his backyard. But you know how it is with kids today, distracted by cell phones and devices. I mean, my son is twenty-two, my stepson sixteen. I get it. They

spend a lot of time on social media. How real is any of this for your son? Does he think about it?"

"The suffering was personal for the ones who lost someone but also for the ones who survived it. And the ones they knew. And the ones they knew. Think of my grandmother. Think of her children, her grandchildren, her great-grandchildren."

I took this in and nodded. Exponentiality. If everyone who died had at least one surviving family member who went on to have two kids, that would be 1.5 million. If everyone who survived, 1 million people, went on to have two kids—and so forth. More than the population of Saint Petersburg by now. More than a living city full of people who were connected palpably to this place. Multiply those people by the ones who had cousins or who had a friend or who had merely heard about the Siege, like me—someone who had come from half a world away. The progression had a House That Jack Built kind of feel.

Sergey watched me do the math. "Social media can't touch this, Barbara. In fact it is beside the point. Technology? No impact."

What he meant was, the Siege would never belong only to Time or to the Ages. What he meant was, there would never really come a moment without Leningrad.

Rename it. Call it Saint Petersburg. No change of name could change a thing. Math could not reduce it. It was absolute and sacrosanct.

A few more visitors drifted into Piskaryovskoye. Others, like me and Sergey, drifted out. We drove in silence along the Neva River embankment, past the marble palaces and stone mansions fronting it, past the pleasure boats and Jet Skis out on the sparkling water.

Maybe the inhabitants of the planet 3093 Berggolts in that quite distant galaxy would scan the null darkness tonight and find us, a tiny blue glow amid the stars. They would of course have no way of knowing how we had charged them with the task of holding a celestial space for their poet namesake. Her words honored those who sometimes could do nothing more valiant than curl up in a dark desperate corner, like winterkill creatures—their organs failing, each breath weaker than the one before, defending Leningrad, defending Leningrad.

DAN SHIFFMAN

# In Tashkent, Off the Map

The morning after returning to Tashkent from visiting family in the US, I went out for an early run as traffic was just starting to fill the streets. Tashkent, a city of three million people, in a multiethnic police state of nearly thirty million that produces 5 percent of the world's cotton—with the help of child labor—is where Jessica and I have lived for the past year. The city is a crumbly and somewhat cowed but not quite destitute place—the same cannot be said for much of the rest of the country. Tashkent is scattered with cranes rising above cookie-cutter unfinished modern apartment buildings and with covered bazaars, dreary in winter, bursting with color in the late summer and fall. Despite Uzbekistan's gas reserves and cotton production, the city has yet to muster up a true skyscraper; the tallest structure is the sad, cosmonaut-era television tower. But the air here in Tashkent is often translucent and dappled with the sunlight that once led painters from cosmopolitan Moscow to pack their bags and head southeast. Most dawns in Tashkent are still and pleasant, even in summer when the temperature soars during the day.

Tashkent never lets you feel settled about how secure it is. There are no credible emergency services in this city; it seems the same 1960s-era fire truck responds to every conflagration, small or large, in our part of the city. I have seen police stand indifferently by grotesque traffic accidents and more recently have observed them near Chorzu Bazaar picking people seemingly randomly off the street, holding them by their collars and pushing them into squat, caged busses. On the other hand, our friend Murod has no worries ignoring police who come knocking on his door with questions or offers for security systems. At the same time, Uzbeks tell us they have little way of knowing what the laws about many things actually are. Tashkent is in some ways as much a mystery to many who have lived here their whole lives as it is to me. Islam Karimov—a man widely accused of having dissidents boiled alive—has recently been reelected (by 91 percent of voters, apparently) and it remains safe to walk the streets at any time of day or night. If you put your hand out by the curb, within thirty seconds, a private car with a usually quite pleasant driver will pull to the side of the road and take you anywhere in the city safely without hassle and for a fair price that everyone knows. Tashkent is full of conflicting messages like these.

Something was off as I took the first few strides of my run, passing a taxi driver asleep in his car. I didn't even get beyond the Kazakh Embassy, which is less than a quarter mile from our apartment block, when I had to stop. I was breathing so hard that a street sweeper rested her long twig broom and looked at me for a moment. So too did a cop who paused from texting on his cell phone. Why was I so suddenly exhausted? A heart attack didn't make sense because I felt more or less OK after I stopped running. I was jet-lagged. It was hotter than

usual. It was nothing. I started running again—thirty seconds and I couldn't go any further. Dripping with sweat, I walked the rest of the route, stepping over the ubiquitous ridges and potholes created by Tashkent's dramatic seasonal temperature variations.

Back at our apartment, I opened my laptop and attempted to diagnose myself. As I scanned all the horrible things that my failed run might have been telling me: lung cancer, pulmonary fibrosis, heart failure, my wife, Jessica, heard my hyperventilated wheezing and walked over to my desk, handing me a glass of water. She thought that maybe the dusty street and haze had triggered my allergies and made me promise to go to the international clinic next to the school where we teach. Fortunately, the clinic had just reopened after being shut down for a week by the Uzbek government for a fabricated health code violation. The clinic, invisible from the street and available only to the expat community, is surrounded by a drab beige fifteen-foot brick wall and barbed wire. Although staffed by kind and knowledgeable doctors, it has nothing much to offer patients beyond imported drugs, relative cleanliness, and help with evacuation. Dr. Dilya told me that she heard "diminished breath sounds" and ordered an x-ray, which clearly showed that my right lung had collapsed—a "spontaneous pneumothorax"—requiring emergency treatment at a local hospital. "You must go right now," said Dr. Dilya, placing my x-ray in a large envelope and handing it to me. My situation, she continued, was too dangerous for me to be transported to a country with more advanced health care, not—at least—until I was stabilized. Changes in air pressure could collapse my lung completely (it was already 80 percent shriveled) or put pressure on my heart. Unfortunately for me (and thirty million others), health care in Uzbekistan is abysmal. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, many doctors left the country. Today, there are still good doctors in Uzbekistan, but there as many who make superstitious claims and prescribe medications indiscriminately. All work in a doomed system with very poor hygienic standards and limited technology. Even the propaganda billboards we pass every day on the way to work show rather sparse-looking hospital rooms with dated equipment. During school orientation week, all the new teachers were told that the clinic's goal is to minimize our contact with the Uzbek health care system.

When I called Jessica from the clinic, my hands were shaking so much that I had trouble pressing the right buttons on my cell phone. Only a few hours ago, I was getting ready for classes, not wondering if this might be my last day above ground. Why did my breath now sound like tightly wound guitar strings? Jessica pulled into the glaring, sunbaked, dusty parking lot behind the clinic in a thirty-year-old orange Lada driven by Murod. Looking pale and dry-lipped, she extended her hand out of the passenger-side window toward me: "I guess it wasn't allergies." I explained to her what Dr. Dilya told me: a spontaneous collapsed lung is pretty rare—although more likely in men younger than I am—but not unheard of and often there is no specific cause or underlying health problem. It just happens sometimes, and if not treated immediately, it can be "fatal." Her word.

I got into the Lada and we drove to Number 16 Emergency Hospital where Nargiza, a nurse from the clinic, was already waiting for us. She said with a

thin smile that Number 16 is the most prestigious hospital in the city. In her hands were one-time-use sterile supplies for my protection against Uzbekistan's healthcare doom. As a foreigner, I was not even legally allowed to be treated at this hospital, so we handed Murod enough soms for him to pay the "special fee" before we were let inside.

The hospital, like most of Tashkent, was full of post-Soviet crumble. I sat in a strangely quiet, ragged waiting room in a dusty chair under a dated photograph of President Karimov (he has been in power for more than twenty-five years), while Jessica and Nargiza filled out some paperwork. If there was an emergency room at this "Emergency" hospital, it wasn't here. After about thirty minutes, an orderly appeared with a wobbly wheel chair and rolled me down the hall. Jessica and Nargiza followed. We stopped in a tiny, cluttered alcove, and as a nurse was about to take a blood sample, Nargiza handed her an alcohol swab from the clinic, which was waved away. Next, we went up a floor in a creaking elevator, and down another hall. I rolled into an un-air-conditioned room with a single, cracked window pane. The door was left partially open and I could see Jessica and Nargiza standing outside, whispering to each other urgently. A doctor, who had a cell phone tucked between his neck and shoulder, gestured toward a bare vinyl table. I was not sure if this was an examination room or a threadbare operating theater. My heartbeat echoed off the walls, as the doctor said something very quickly in Uzbek, then Russian; I couldn't follow either. He made an unbuttoning motion. Realizing that no one was about to hand me a hospital gown, I got out of the chair, climbed up on the table, and opened my shirt. The doctor was still talking on the phone: I heard my name, some numbers which I gathered were the results of my blood work—and words I couldn't understand at all. A moment later, something was scratching at my chest—rough swabs of iodine—and then a cold flow of Novocain entered into a space between my ribs. The nurse unbundled surgical equipment from a faintly stained white cloth and then wrapped a mask around the doctor`s mouth and nose. Next, a cold, stinging pressure pinched my sternum. Then, with a decided shove that caused me to gasp sharply and black out for a second, the doctor pushed the tube into me. I held my breath, waiting for some sudden pain to attack or to lose consciousness again. But as sutures twirled through his hands; the cracks in the wall, the bloodstain on the lamp above me and the twitching of the skin across my chest didn't bother me so much because my breathing—suddenly—felt expansive. I tried to prop myself up on my elbows, but the nurse pushed me back down onto the table. She held a large, fraying notebook for me to sign. This was to prove that I had agreed to this procedure and would pay for it.

I woke up in the hospital the next morning, surrounded by three snoring roommates, one of whom was shockingly yellow. I had a horrible headache but didn't feel warm, so I had probably dodged infection, for now. The room contained several glass cases, almost completely empty, except for dusty clamps, blood pressure cuffs, and some cockroaches. A teenager, who nodded in my direction when he saw that I was awake, stood by one of the beds, fanning his grandfather with a large towel, which rhythmically fluttered then snapped. He offered me a slice of melon. Jessica had gone to get my medical records from the clinic and was finalizing plans with the International SOS to fly me

fourteen hundred miles to Dubai on an air ambulance for further care (our employer provided evacuation insurance, thankfully). My surgeon stopped by. Now bolder about his limited English, he encouraged me to try a short walk in order to help my lungs expand further.

I seemed to be on the floor of tubes and drainage. A few other patients walked the halls, their tubes emptying into recycled plastic Coke bottles. A worker passed by, pushing a dingy wet rag along the floor with a wooden pole. Cradling the air bladder extending from my chest tube carefully with my left hand, I walked by rooms catching glimpses of patients playing cards, piles of dried apricots and almond shells, and a group of softly murmuring doctors wearing tall, chef-like white hats. They surrounded a sleeping woman who had long grey braids. One of the doctors rested his hand gently on the woman's shoulder. I kept walking. Patches of sunlight scattered on the walls and lit up a metal cart left by the nurse's station. I walked onto a breezy balcony overlooking a shady park. Below, a deeply cracked and dusty asphalt path led to monkey bars and a seesaw that were both dangerously rusty and painted in cheery crayon colors. For a moment, I forgot that I was in Tashkent.

When I got back to the room, Jessica was packing up my things. We had been cleared to fly to Dubai. An hour later, on the ambulance to the airport, we bumped along past the bug-like white Daewoo Matizs that swarm Tashkent's streets. The ambulance had no medical equipment to speak of, other than a dented oxygen tank with peeling paint. We slalomed around potholes; I rolled over my chest tube, temporarily blocking the slow flow of air. We wove past bicycles on their way to Askia Bazaar carrying bobbing palettes of doughy *lepyoshka* and by groups of police in their park-ranger-green uniforms. The police in this city are seldom paid and rely on bribes. Pointing orange batons—their "*pazhaslta* sticks"—they pull cars to the curb, approaching drivers with mocking salutes and fake smiles. They now ignored us completely.

We sped by internet cafes, a few customerless high-end clothing stores, and a statue of Amir Temur, the vicious Mongol conqueror adopted as a national hero for the newly emerging Uzbekistan more than twenty years ago. Behind the stores featuring European brands are winding neighborhoods with corrugated-tin roofed homes and chickens that roam in and out of courtyards. I felt like I was taking a recording, imprinting these sites and memories, just in case I didn't return. The insurance company had already made some noises about my recuperation in the US, "if needed." Finally, approaching the airport, we passed the government billboard with the less-than-comforting message in English wishing us "Good Luck" and then stopped near the gate to the runway guarded by soldiers with machine guns. The young man sitting by me (there was nothing even remotely medical about him) plugged his phone into the dashboard and then opened the back door. As the techno music spilled out onto the street, he walked over to the curb, took out another phone, and started yelling. We thought he was demanding that we be let through the gate so I could be on my way to Dubai, but then realized he was arguing with his girlfriend. The music thumped as the heat inside of the ambulance thickened. I couldn't seem to take a completely full breath. Between tracks of the music, I heard the intermittent hissing of defective water sprinklers that dribbled along the edge of the parking

lot. In Tashkent, water is used carelessly, like a bottomless resource, when in fact the country is mostly desert and suffers from chronic water shortages. The smell of gasoline filled the air inside the ambulance. An hour and a half later we passed through the gate. A sleek Learjet—the air ambulance—sat on the runway surrounded by tired, hulking yellow and blue Uzbekistan Airlines 757s and among potholes.

We pulled alongside the jet and walked up a narrow staircase into a cabin just big enough for me to recline and for the ISOS physician, paramedic, and Jessica to sit. Pristine monitors and plastic-wrapped tubes, gauzes, syringes, and vials now surrounded me. As the equipment hummed and blinked, I felt like I was trapped inside a computer game but was somewhat reassured by the twenty-first-century technology and the fact that everything smelled like hand sanitizer. The Austrian ISOS doctor pressed against my abdomen to check for inflammation, while his French paramedic colleague stuck an IV port into the back of my wrist. He gave me a sedative as we taxied down the runway. "We need to keep a close eye on you, especially going up and down," the doctor said listening to my chest. This sent a wave of anxiety pushing through the sedative. The jet shuddered for a moment as the wheels left the ground and then the cabin became abruptly quieter, except for the shrill beep of my heart monitor.

As we rose over Tashkent and arched toward the southwest, sunlight poured into the cabin. I squinted. The doctor now looked very tired to me. He explained that he had just completed another medical evacuation, from Dubai to a German hospital. Great. So someone was just airlifted *from* the safe haven to which I was now headed. What if the doctors there had all the best equipment but no real expertise or experience? I knew so little about Dubai.

I listened to the pilots' chatting from the cockpit and placed my hand at the bottom of the small window near my head. The cool plastic vibrated steadily against my fingertips. My vital sign monitor showed that my pulse had settled down to 60 beats per minute and my blood pressure was 125 over 80. This was low for me; my blood pressure runs high, even though I am a runner. Jessica pulled the blanket over my toes and took out a book from her bag. The doctor fiddled with his iPad while the paramedic ate a sandwich. My eyelids were heavy. I turned my head away from the monitor and when the jet's wing dipped, I saw a desert of low, shadowy mountains stretching to the horizon in the dim violet light. Where were we exactly? Turkmenistan? Afghanistan? Iran?

Uzbekistan is so far off of the map in most people's imagination that for Jessica and me it makes the idea of living anywhere else seem like a step back or entanglement. This is part of the reason we moved here. That and my inclination to act as if movement itself—to a new job, city, or country—offered a kind of protection from feeling stuck or from anxieties that I couldn't really name or didn't want to acknowledge. This compulsion of mine had, for the last fifteen years, made it difficult for us, especially me, to stay very long in one place on the map. Our plan now was to experience central Asia for two years and come back to the US. I had been granted a leave of absence from my university and, hopefully when we returned, the job market for Jessica would be better.

Now, we seemed cut loose even from maps. There were no electronic flight routes for passengers to follow in this small, whispering jet. No safety

instructions, no announcements about turbulence or updates on our estimated time of arrival, no concerns about missing a connection—nothing, for the moment—to fuss or worry about in this strangely calm in-between passage. Jessica's eyes were closed, her face turned slightly toward the small window. It was almost completely dark outside. We still hadn't heard which hospital we were going to.

* * *

I spent six nights in the ICU at the American Hospital of Dubai while my Johns Hopkins-trained Syrian pulmonologist pursued the stubborn air pockets in my chest cavity. When I first arrived just after midnight, Dr. Salem was waiting for me with a chest tube kit in his hands that he had already started to tear open. He wore a Calvin Klein tie and jeans; unlike my Uzbek surgeon, he didn't wear gloves or a mask while inserting my new, larger, and considerably more painful tube. A portable x-ray machine was wheeled into the room. Dr. Salem checked the image, grimaced, stepped decidedly in my direction, cut the suture that he had just made and guided the tube higher up into my chest wall. I pressed my feet into openings in the bed railing and pushed until I could hear the mattress buckling against my back. My eyebrows itched with sweat.

Despite the intensity and surprising crudeness of the procedures—this was high-tech Dubai, not crumbly Tashkent—they ended suddenly and left me with virtually no lingering pain. I was breathing normally and felt fairly strong and well rested most of the time, even in the ICU. Yes, I had a bloody tube attached to a "Sahara" air leak meter coming out of me, but this bubbling, plastic device was light and could be carried around like the last thing you forgot to pack in your suitcase. I had never experienced such physical anguish in my entire life, and yet, after a few days, I was able to walk out of the ICU with two almost fully inflated lungs, only a slightly sore rib cage, and some irritating bandages.

For the next two weeks, I was released from the hospital but had to stay close and return for regular for x-rays to check that no new air pockets emerged. The insurance company booked us into a hotel very close to the hospital that had a grand atrium swarming with various sports teams and businessmen. After breakfast, Jessica and I usually spent an hour reading by the pool canopied from the fiery air, then visited a chilled mall—there didn't seem much else to do. On one floor of many of these malls is a wider range of consumer products than can be found in all of Tashkent (which has more people). We spent afternoons walking around Festival Mall, Mall of the Emirates, Wafi Mall, Lamcy Mall, and Marina Mall, but most often returned to the Dubai Mall. There is something less sanitized, even soothing about this one—in addition to endless shops and restaurants, the Dubai Mall has a four-story cylindrical waterfall that reflects natural light, an enormous aquarium with self-contented rays, sharks, and tropical fish, and an ice rink where children and homesick adults from every continent skate on wobbly ankles. The Dubai Mall, like most of the malls we visited, also projects a mosque and minaret symbol at prayer times on multiple screens on each floor, which are ignored by all but a handful of men and women who trickle to the prayer rooms tucked aside Louis Vuitton or The Cheesecake Fac-

tory. Not that I was tempted to go to a prayer room, but this routine, and the muted hum and tranquilizing colors of the mall as a whole, steadied me somehow. Of course, in Tashkent there are no such screens and the active mosques tend to be tucked away within neighborhoods, not because they interfere with commerce but because the government wants them to remain as apolitical and inconspicuous as possible. After Jessica flew back to Tashkent—she needed to get back to work and I was no longer in any immediate danger—I went to the mall once but it felt lonely.

Air whooshed through my lungs as Dr. Salem studied my latest x-ray. His office smelled like alcohol swabs and his computer was slow to load. Either the remaining air bubble had diminished further, disappeared, or I still had an air leak and would need more complex surgery.

"It's gone."

Relief, then a flood of anxiety: Could it come back? Dr. Salem showed me some "blebs" on my currently pneumothorax-free right lung, sort of blisters that could rupture someday. "They're too small to remove surgically. Still, you could go your whole life without a recurrence." This made it sound like I'd be lucky if it didn't happen again.

Despite missing Jessica, part of me wanted more days in Dubai for safe measure, but a few hours later I was informed that the insurance company had already booked a commercial flight for me for the next day to Tashkent. Again, I scanned the internet, trying to decipher medical articles about pneumothorax recurrence rates and air travel safety for pulmonary patients. One consistent point I gleaned from these articles was that recurrences are much more likely to happen within the first three years. I was about to go back to Uzbekistan where another trip to the hospital was risky, to say the least. I thought of the upcoming plane trip back to Tashkent, imagining sinister air pockets burgeoning inside of me, an illuminated flight attendant call button, an announcement from the captain that the flight was being diverted, then another ambulance waiting on the runway, lights flashing. These thoughts faded quickly because after hours palpitating in my hospital bed wondering if Dr. Salem was again about to walk through the door, cut open my sutures, and push my chest tube into a new and agonizing spot, I better understood that prolonged panic is useless and unsustainable; eventually the body tires; heart rate and blood pressure lower, adrenaline wanes—it's physiologically inevitable.

Since coming back to Tashkent, I have altered my running route slightly. Rather than passing by the Kazakh embassy—an unlucky spot—I now take a small side street that runs parallel to it. The smooth pavement is strikingly free of potholes and ridges. The only consistently well-paved major street in Tashkent is the one that Karimov takes to and from the airport, but it is not jogger friendly. For this new short part of my run, I don't need to memorize the holes in the road for the coming days when the sunrise creeps later and it gets harder to see what is ahead. In Tashkent, streetlights turn off (but not always) about forty-five minutes before sunrise, sending the dog-walkers and handful of joggers like me into darkness. My new piece of road is a respite for now—a comforting illusion of security, not really unlike the gleaming hospitals of Dubai or my sleepy university campus.

TONY WHEDON

# Windfall

I stumble out of the rain into the grim little office at Maple Leaf Farm in the town of Underhill and sign the insurance and registration forms. On the bedside table between my roommate and me lies *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the AA bible. I don't skim more than a few lines before there's a clap of thunder. I look out through the café curtains past the Maple Leaf van to a group of smokers under the cafeteria eaves, most of them guys in their early thirties.

"This your first time in here?" my roommate asks. "Not me. I know this place like the b-back of my h–h-hand." But the back of his hand is trembling. And I'm still high. Unshaven, in dirty jeans and mud-caked boots, there's nothing about me that says I'm not an alcoholic. My roommate has a trimmed military mustache, pressed chinos, and a sleeveless muscle shirt. You wouldn't notice him on the street, wouldn't have seen in the line at Walmart the pudgy long-haired guy dressed in chinos and a muscle shirt puking his eyes out in front of me. It goes without saying that when our dinner finally arrives I touch none of it. Just before dark roomie and I attend our first AA meeting; then we go on the porch to a splintery picnic table and our counselor-social worker, Kate, plump, fiftyish, and red-headed, sets out some watercolors and asks us to paint an image of our drinking lives. Tim paints a purple-and-black "Cookie Monster," all hairy with sad bulged-out eyes and a red Santa Claus nose. But I'm imageless. Tim's painted in lurid sprawly reds and blacks the story of his childhood—a stick-figure child wanders frightened and amazed through a junkyard of beer bottles and crashed cars, but I'm running on empty, and suddenly, flames lick and leap onto the paper, I'm standing in a burning house, completely naked, a self-immolating alcoholic crazy man.

"That's really f-fucked up," roomie says, glancing at my artwork. Meanwhile, he's pouring out scene after scene from his drinking past.

"What does that make you feel?" the social worker asks him.

"It makes me feel p-pissed off."

"How pissed off? What kind of pissed off?"

"None of your goddamn business," he says.

Next morning it's raining hard. The little brook behind Maple Leaf has overrun its banks and the driveway is slathered with mud. I shower and shave and plot my escape: I'll go out for a smoke, hit the road, and hitch back to where there's a still part of that quart of gin. But instead Tim and I shuffle off to the main hall and the day's first "step meeting." None of us here has more than two weeks sobriety and the room crackles with low-level delirium. The subject of the first step is "powerlessness"—"We realized we were powerless over alcohol," that we couldn't stop drinking, not without getting abjectly down on our knees.

The utter banality of this proposition makes me feel even sicker.

As we settle into our chairs I'm praying, *make me whole again*. I'm praying for Tim too, who's had a bad time of it since he painted his autobiography, which is where the chairperson of the meeting comes in, a girl of around twenty-five, pretty enough to keep all the male eyes—and most of us are male—glued on her. The softness in her voice (*hi I'm Helen and I'm an alcoholic)* tells you she's long since graduated rehab. After the formalities—the Serenity Prayer, a reading of the Steps—Helen "briefly qualifies" with her own story. Her father was a Hollywood stunt man who in the late '80s fled with his family to Vermont and died after a heroin overdose, leaving Helen and her mom penniless. Helen's mom began to drink and died herself in a few years from liver disease; Helen drank through junior and senior high and by eleventh grade was an unwed teenage mother with a fetal alcohol syndrome baby. She hit bottom one below-zero night when police found her passed out in the snow in a Burlington park. I can't keep my eyes off Helen, who's risen from alky angel to rehab Madonna. (Not that she's turned the place into a revival tent). A few guys doze off in the back while others count the minutes till their next smoke. But there's an attentive group of listeners of which Tim and I are a part. "This is my third time in here," he says. "I'm triple-retreaded." A sad sigh goes through the room as he tells us about his last lost weekend ending in a small-town jail where a kindly old AA guy coaxed him through the shakes and drove him through the rain next morning to Maple Leaf.

We stand outside in the rain after the meeting, alkies under a pine tree, druggies beneath a leaf-turning maple, and there's wood smoke in the air, the wet mulch smell of early autumn. Tim's not his usual self, not that I know what that is, but this isn't it. Having offered up his story after Helen qualified, he wants to talk more, but he can't finish a sentence without stuttering into apologies. Having been through rehab before, he's scared silly that when he gets out he'll "pick up" again. It's the choice moment of choice when he's peppered by rationalizations that lead nowhere but to a nearby bar that frightens him.

"I guess nothing's to be done about it." He laughs and rubs his regretful nose.

It's raining even harder now and the others have gone in, leaving us in the parking lot by the roaring brook behind the detox building. "What I got to do is think about the things I enjoy, like hiking; those th-th-things I used to love to do."

"Hiking?"

"Yeah, hiking," he says. "Been into the woods and mountains all my f-f-fucking life."

I wander off and return to my room to spend the half hour before our next meeting in mindless mental hair-splitting. What is it about this "program" that makes me angry? After some cogitation, I attribute it to the fear—like Tim's—that I'll die drunk, that I'll have this needy drunk's personality till I die. Unlike lucky Helen, who lived and found AA, I might not get a second chance, and if I live, I might end up half-sober, needy like I am now, expiring eventually of some alcoholic disease and blaming everybody but myself. But I'm more at home here among the discards and retreads than anywhere else.

"At least the wheels are turning," Tim says, after I share my thoughts. He's come to fetch me for the next meeting on the porch of Maple Leaf's main building where the others sit around with their coffee and cigarettes talking about ACCEPTANCE. A dark, skinny mid-thirtyish gal tells how she was given

a leave of absence from her job at a local junior high after she chased a student around the gymnasium with a hockey stick. "I didn't know how God-loving helpless I was till the kids dragged me kicking and screaming to the principal's office. Problem now," she says, "is I'm thinking too much. Am I supposed to think or not think?"

Helen says sagely that it's not a matter of thinking, but how one thinks. One should avoid "stinking thinking." But which is it we're supposed to do? AA urges us drunks to make bold moves to change our lives while cautioning restraint and forbearance. These contradictions are hard to wrap my mind around, and the idea that I'll have to live with them all my life keeps me from going into this with an accepting heart.

I've spent most of my life analyzing things, and for what? I'm curious about things spiritual and have known moments of boundless contemplation, but deep thought is nothing without meaningful action. I've dithered in the introspective backwaters, avoided the crowd with nothing to come of it; gone to meditation retreats—but I'm still empty.

I mope around till lunch, fighting off the screaming meanies.

Now it's twelve-thirty, just after lunch, and I feel better. Actually I feel terrific. I'm on a pink cloud of AA LOVE and see myself as an insignificant piece of shit and as a recovering success story. *How long will these mood swings last?* I take a catnap in a porch recliner and dream I'm in a bar where everyone's speaking a foreign language. The bartender offers me a frothy mug of beer and before I bring it to my lips, Tim shakes me awake.

I follow him into the common room where an old robust-looking guy, one of the Maple Lead grounds crew, takes the podium. His story starts in New Jersey with a hair-raising tale of driving the wrong way on the Garden State. "I was flyin'," he says. "Oncoming cars dodging me, troopers chasing me in the opposite lane. You know how that highway dips and curves, the prettiest highway in Jersey, that's where I am at four in the morning with my blood alcohol three times the limit. I come out of my blackout as I swerve to avoid oncoming traffic and end up in the center island. I stumble out of the car and don't know where the fuck I am. I'm booked and thrown in a drunk tank all the while insisting on a lawyer, I need a goddamn lawyer! I am this important person, a bank executive! So gimme a lawyer." He mops his brow, looks out at us fellow sufferers. "And that's what my story's all about—pulling strings, wielding influence. Over the years I snuck out of a thousand chances to get sober!" The guy's story is so alive I have a hard time accepting he hasn't had a drink in thirty years.

Here's another contradiction: To keep the illness at bay you've got to hang it in all its ugliness where you can see it the rest of your life. At the same time, you need to remind yourself that you've undergone a radical transformation.

Meanwhile, the rain pounds down. Someone had a hard time of it after the last meeting—seizures, convulsions, the works—and the van spirits him or her away with a blatting horn. We're on the porch watching a dim sun exit into the hills west of Mount Mansfield, and the woods are soft and purple, the wind turns up the leaves, exposing their pale undersides. After dinner, Tim tells me about his job with the Department of Fish and Wildlife. "A glorified game keeper is what I am," he says and goes on to describe his average day monitoring the level of

beaver dams and slapping mosquitoes while he fights skirmishes with the federal bureaucracy. "It's a good job—too bad I screwed it up so b-b-badly," he says.

* * *

The road from Underhill is washed out and since the van left no one can come in or leave. Another dirt road climbs over the Mount Mansfield foothills to Stowe Village: that too is impassable. A backhoe makes its way up the road and plows a dike along the brook. More thunder rolls, lightning flashes and the lamps blink inside the common room.

A couple of hours before dusk, Tim and I break Maple Leaf rules and walk into the woods behind the farm. The rain stops, a north wind comes up, and the air holds the threat of a damp cold night. At the top of the hill there's a weathered old sugar house with rusty sap buckets stacked around. An almost-full moon glints through the clouds and darkness sweeps up from the hollows. We follow a logging road along a stone wall that brings us to the crest of another hill, and the valley's spread before us—the flooding river, the lights of a few towns, and some lowly mountains beyond. We stand quiet awhile and then walk on through more sugar bush; then we're back into the pungent softwoods and we both know we're lost, inconsequentially lost if not for the fact that we risk suspension from the program for being AWOL. We try to retrace our steps down into a gully, slogging through acres of sumac and thickets of swamp alders. Tim stutters something about the two of us being crazy, we're crazy as coots, he says. Is madness an innate condition of the alcoholic soul? Is it curable and how do we know when we're cured? We ascend the gully and rest on another hilltop, but the valley is obscured by the trees, and Tim's talking about the afternoon a few days ago when he drove over Gus, his beloved basset hound. He'd been drinking at Eden Lake with game warden friends and got in a row with one of them. A few fishermen were out on the lake, trout were jumping at the fly hatch, and the two wardens were having a grand old time beating the piss out of each other when Tim charged off in his pickup and a half-hour later slammed into his little dog who stood out in his driveway to greet him. The anticlimactic short end of this is that Tim and I ford one more mountain stream, hump it past a tumbledown farmhouse and find ourselves in a cow pasture behind The Farm. At past ten o'clock people are wandering off to bed. "When an idea comes into my head I don't let it go," a woman named Ella in a dirty pink jersey mutters to no one in particular. "But I haven't had an idea in the last twenty-four hours." And then a minute or two later she says, "No, that's not true." Four of us stay up past curfew, Tim, me and two other recovering drunks cursing the day we were born while the moon lifts into the righteous heavens.

Tim keeps talking long after we head back to our room and I've signed off for the night. He's a talker, I'm a reader, I absorb things better when I read—AA literature in this case—than I do through the spoken word, but my problem is that I concentrate on the *messenger* rather than the message. It's past midnight. I breeze through a biography of Bill W., co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. Not everyone's lucky as Bill W., who had a mystical experience that caused him to stop drinking the last time he was drying out. He sat up in his hospital bed,

the room filled with dazzling light and the craving was lifted from him. Such blessings are rare. Most of us obsess over booze long after we get sober, and not all of us including Bill Wilson, who was a depressive all his life, keeps his "serenity." In his last years, he searched for more God-filled moments. He read William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, corresponded with Carl Jung and became friends with Aldous Huxley. Looking for a way out of depression, he experimented with LSD; this did not stop him from crippling guilt and night terrors. On his deathbed he cried out for a drink. What does that say about our own progress toward accepting our condition? The thing is, *I* don't want a drink, not now, maybe never.

I sleep a few hours and wake at six with bed-spins. A fusillade of coughs accompanies my first morning cigarette. Then a rushing shot of vertigo and full-bore adrenaline as I pull on my running shorts and Maple Leaf T-shirt. I take a deep breath, do a couple of manic knee bends and say the Serenity Prayer, then sit cross-legged on the hard cold floor and try to meditate. In my mental condition, a state of total spiritual bankruptcy, I'm incapable of little but weird semi-hallucinating thoughts.

* * *

The next half hour I pace around the common room porch waiting for the coffee machine to fire up. There's a pots-and-pans clatter in the kitchen, two stray mutts tussling out on the wet grass; and me stricken by early morning terror as I watch the dawn come up. The Unitarian Church where I first had an inkling of the mystical was on a tree-lined street in a big white house with a wide sagging porch like this. On summer mornings, Sunday school classes were held on the porch where we watched sailboats tack across Long Island Sound. I liked going to church services more than Sunday school. I sat in back with my little sister as the choir led by a local opera singer celebrity burst into the song "Trees"—"I think that I shall never see / a thing as lovely as a tree," they sang; and then the minister's voice rose in rolling cadences. I loved how the minister mopped his brow and gazed out past the congregation at a willow tree in the courtyard and I loved the way he pronounced "Gawd" and grimly smiled. Reverend Weary (his real name!) was barely in his forties and gone bald and gray. I liked the elevated way the words drifted from his mouth. While I didn't understand them, they made me feel bigger than myself. Who knows what I got out of Weary's long-winded sermons that posed more questions about God than they answered—but I felt very big-hearted when we left church. Sometimes we'd stop at Louie's Bar on the bay for a late breakfast, and while my father drank his morning cocktail I wandered the tide flats with my sister and hold onto the warm feeling I had in church.

Some people have a bottom lower than mine and find peace, but I can't find it myself. Those who survive get past the contradictions of control and its release easily—or not so easily—but I have a hard time letting go. At the same time I want to be loved, I crave it. With drink in hand, I crave another drink and to get it I represent myself as the most wronged and wretched person on earth. For every rich man there's a hundred poor ones, and for every million ungener-

ous souls someone out there cares about the world. But if you're not helping yourself, you're backsliding; likewise if you're dreaming of a drink rather than having one you're not in *that* much trouble.

That's what Kate, my social worker, tells me at breakfast. "As long as you keep your eye on that drink, keep it in your headlights, you're doing all right."

I follow her out into the sunlight where we're joined by Tim. The morning clouds have worn off—it's going to be a beautiful day. Kate asks if anyone's up for discussing the BIG BOOK before we drive to an AA meeting in St. Albans, and we sit down on the porch to read AA co-founder Doctor Bob's story of becoming a drunk in a straitlaced Vermont family. Each of us reads a paragraph. Meanwhile, my mind's still going a mile a minute. If I were a less imperfect person, most of my pain would come by reflecting on the suffering I've caused others. But the truth is, all my life I've focused on how I've been done in and who did it to me. Spiritually speaking, I'm bone dry.

At the end of Big Book Discussion, I drift into a first-drink reverie: it's one of those after-church Sundays and we're again at Louie's. My father's drunk and my mother has gone back weeping to our station wagon. It's getting toward noon. The fishermen have arrived. The jukebox blares out Sinatra and my father digs into a basketful of juicy clams. I'm there but I'm not there—Sinatra's singing, my father's grinning, and when the whisky he's made me drink hits my stomach I reach for another swig just to prove I can do it.

"I can't get that moment out of my head," I tell Kate as we head down to the van with our gang of Maple Leafers. "I can *taste* the whisky—like I just drank it."

Kate slides into the van's driver seat, takes a swig of her coffee, and shakes her head. I get in next to Tim on one side and Ella on the other. We're on our way to that AA meeting in St. Albans, and I push my baseball cap over my eyes, wary of being out in the world again. Our Lady of Perpetual Snow sits on a hill overlooking the town square. The church annex is thick with cigarette smoke and the muskiness of AA meetings. But it's a good meeting. Afterwards Tim and I go into the church: the incense candles flicker and on the cross above the altar hangs a bleeding wooden Christ, his eyes smoldering red. Once I believed that we all worship the same God, but here I feel cut off from the warm accepting religion I grew up in. For starters, I was told that Jesus was a man of reason, and while such men are rare, as a kid I thought we all could be just like he was.

* * *

Back at the farm a few hours later I have a dizzy spell. I mope around after dinner, catching pieces of conversation, and what I hear makes little sense—especially my infernal internal monologue. Tim says I'm in denial. "Your mind and body have slipped gears and sent you back to the emotional starting point of your sobriety," he says. "Most of us deny the past, but you're denying your f-f-future." A quick self-diagnosis tells me that I *am* denying just about everything, and I lean back in the porch recliner and listen to the late summer rain as Tim carries on. "See those guys over there?" And he points to a new bunch of recruits on the porch of detox. "That's w-w-what we used to be. Three days makes a difference. You gotta *act* like it does." I puzzle over Tim's AA philosophy. In a nutshell,

it means "Dreaming Makes It True." But I not only deny that I have a drinking problem—I deny the dream that I'm getting better each day I don't drink.

At the evening AA meeting, I can hardly sit still, filled as I am with cold anticipation. Just before twilight the rain stops. I walk up the road past a field grown over with burdocks. There's a beaver pond down in a hollow and a neglected orchard where a pair of white-tail are munching windfall apples. The sight of me doesn't disturb them, and before the road dives into spruce forest, I see a young girl, no more than eleven or twelve with albino-white hair leaning on a stone wall, and I'm gravityless. She appears so suddenly out of nowhere, is so pure an extract of memory (rather than a memory itself) that for a moment I doubt what I see.

Two days later on Friday, Tim's AA handshake can't convince me I've made the right choice leaving Maple Leaf early. I slump into our Subaru beside my breezily friendly wife; and when we stop at a convenience store, I'm awash in quandaryness. Past the beer and wine cooler I go and then retrace my steps and regard the bottles with dread. At home I kiss my wife, murmuring that I just don't want to leave, that I belong here, I don't want to go. "But you have to," she says, "that's part of the arrangement."

I'm a real nutcase. I pack a bagful of clothes and bid my wife farewell and head off in my truck to my buddy's empty cabin on the other side of the mountains.

* * *

I walk in and brush some mouse shit off the table and then load up the stove to burn off the damp. Peter's off teaching in New Brunswick and has loaned me his place as long as I want. The cabin looks the same, same piano (out of tune), schoolroom chairs and a loft upstairs with a little window looking on a weedy pond. After dark, I climb up to the loft and sleep comes easy to me. Very early next morning, I walk to a meadow and pick a coffee can of late-season blackberries. I eat the berries and take the tarpaulin off Peter's canoe and tote it to the landing and push out into the reeds and open water. Right away a pair of loons with a little one shows up. The male dives and emerges near my canoe; the female trailing her baby in her wake. The pond, a couple of miles long, is all shallow warm water with marsh grass, blue and green water lilies, and a view of silvery mountains.

Out of the cove and midway across, I look out on a shore lush with paper birch and poplars, my eyes shifting to a rocky cliff where two ravens circle their nest. I see a clump of muddy branches on an overhang, then the scrawny, ugly-headed body of a fledgling raven. Then his squawky, baby raven voice, the sudden flutter of black wings, and he's out of his nest, floating.

It's late afternoon when I got back to the cabin. I found a note from my wife in the door. I ignore the note, do nothing about dinner (it's too warm to light the cook stove), and make a campfire. I'm hungry. I eat the rest of the blackberries by the fire. Everyone deserves a second chance, and I forgive myself for what I'm about to do. It's raining again. I go into the cabin and listen to the rain and raise a glass to the loons and the ravens and to the next day when I plan to get sober again.

# poetry

*noun* po·e·try \'pō-ə-trē, -i-trē also 'pȯ(-)i-trē\

: the writings of a poet : poems

: something that is very beautiful or graceful

TERRY ALLEN

# There Are Monsters in the Rain

It is raining on the 1957 Ford
Custom 300 four-door sedan
and on the Bates Motel
as Marion Crane pulls up outside
seeking shelter from the storm.

It is raining, too, on the tiny house
in Kansas City North
and on the 1957 canyon coral Chevy
easing into the driveway.

We hide at the top of the stairs
in the dark. My little brother
crouches in the corner
as I flatten myself
against the hallway wall.

It is 1960, the year everything changed.
1960. Not yet the '60s.
That will come later.

Camelot has not yet been shattered
into a thousand pieces
in the back of a 1961 Lincoln Continental
stretch limousine.

And "I Want to Hold Your Hand"
is yet to fill the airwaves
and climb to number one for seven weeks
to the great concern of one
GI in Oskaloosa, Kansas,
who'd actually heard
much worse in Iwo Jima
and the Philippines.

In the summer of 1960,
the 50s still hold on, as unrelenting
as cigarette spokesmen that
insist without the slightest sense of irony

that "Lucky Strike
Means Fine Tobacco."

Billboards demand that passersby:
"Be Happy—Go Lucky Today!"

My brother and I wait in the dark.
for our father to open the door
and come inside. He will
shake the rain from his hair
and maybe take off his jacket,
before climbing the stairs.

We will be there in the dark,
unexpected, of course,
ready.

*Psycho* opened that summer,
when I was fourteen.
My older cousin Sharon had seen it
and told me how scary it was.
"I've seen scary movies," I said.
"I watch Shock Theater with Gregory Grave:
*Frankenstein, Dracula, The Wolf Man.*"

"They're not like this one," she told me.

After that I had to go.
My mother took me.
She loved movies so.

Scarier than mummies
and the undead?
That was a big deal to me
and the topper was the film
was condemned by the Legion
of Decency. It had to be good.

After all, *Spartacus* was condemned
that same year and *Some Like It Hot*
the year before. Wow!

It was there at the Paramount Theater
that Hitchcock asked us
not to give away the ending.
"It's the only one we have,"

we heard him say over the sound system
as we left, shaken and laughing
like six-year-olds at a fun house.

I didn't entirely honor his request.
I told the whole movie, scene by scene
to my little brother,
playing all the parts myself:

I was Marion Crane driving
at night in the rain
only to see the neon sign
for the Bates Motel ahead.

I was a nervous and overly polite Norman
explaining that mother
"isn't herself today."

And I was Detective Arbogast climbing the stairs
of the Bates house,
one slow, careful, guarded step at a time,
until I got to the top.

"The camera shifts," I told my brother,
"to an overhead shot
and we hear shrill screeching music . . ."

That may have been when we got the idea.
We talked our father into going to see
*Psycho*. He wasn't the movie-goer
that my mother was, but she even
chimed in and told him he should go.
"John Wayne's not in it, but it's really good."

And he did. And he returned at night
in the rain. And my little brother and I
waited at the top of the stairs:
our chance to scare the hell out of him.

Even though we'd practiced running out
and screeching like crazed birds.
we backed off at the last moment
and slid up the stairs unnoticed to
our attic bedroom.

We told our father later what we had planned.
It's a good thing, we didn't do it. He said
he'd probably have killed us.
And he might have too.

After all, this was an era when parents
could beat their children in public
and no one would interfere.

And it would take five more years before
I stepped between my father and my
brother when he was about to lay into him.

After that summer in 1960,
we knew, I certainly knew
that the real monsters were not vampires,
wolf men, mutated insects, or giant fire-breathing
reptiles rising from Tokyo Bay. No.

The real monsters were those who could
pull up in a 1965 midnight blue Buick Riviera
and in spite of being warned never,
ever, ever, ever to do so,
the driver could get you to step inside.

Like Norman in the rain. He could hand
you an umbrella and you'd take it.

I have a fantasy today of driving across country
in the rain and seeing a string of billboards.
Mile after mile, the same picture
of the same cute baby on each one
revealed for a moment in the blurred
swish of the wiper blades:

I had hiccups . . . even before I was born.

Before I was born I could smile!

I was born in a home for unwed mothers.

I was handsome and charismatic even as a boy.

I chose to be alone as an adolescent.

I grew up to become the most cold-hearted
son of a bitch you'll ever meet.

I confessed to thirty homicides in seven states.

I decapitated at least twelve of my victims.

I received three death sentences.

I died in the electric chair on January 24, 1989.

"Be Happy—Go Lucky Today!"

I once thought / about giraffes / so much / I believed / I accidentally / ate one / but / it turned out / I had / only eaten / a biscuit / which is strange / because / biscuits don't look / like giraffes / how many biscuits / can a human / do / in their mouth / at the same time / I guess / we'll never / know / at least / not until / all the biscuits / or / humans / are dead

I can't remember / what word / is the
real word / and what word / isn't /
there is a real word / somewhere / in
history / that means unintelligible / or
maybe it was voted / most unintelligible
/ in high school / but / deep down / it
always wanted / to be / remembered /
as / the word / so popular / our parents
/ were afraid / to say it

A video / of a crying man / with swastikas tattooed / under his eyes / was projected / on my face / at an art gallery / I was paid / by the artist / to stand very still / and not make / any facial expressions / there was free popcorn / in the lobby / sometimes / it was very difficult / not to cry / but / I had been told / I would not / be paid / if I cried / so / I worked / very hard / at not doing / anything

CLAYTON ADAM CLARK

# Self-Portrait with Leap-Second Vigil

Snow halts, so I can see beyond
the weather outside: across the street
    my building is reflected
        in the gold-sheened windows

of another building. Six months ago a second
was added to this day, and I just found
my window in the reflections.
Whoever first observed summer turn autumn

then winter must have felt abandoned in those,
the longest months ever. Now we know to add
a second once or twice a year to keep our time
    aligned with Earth's rotation,

        what with it dragging
water against space and not keeping up
with the frantic oscillations of caesium-133.
No way that first witness devised guilt—

what fear to watch the ground die beneath
your feet. Who could shoulder such blame,
    the out-and-out demise?
        With Earth never turning

faster than time, it must be monitored:
an earthquake in the ocean knocks us
out of sync. Each body is a building.
I didn't feel the crack across the globe,

all 2.68 microseconds Earth stood still,
but others learned the weight of leveled buildings,
and here I am straining to see my silhouette
across a span of street. My wristwatch

keeps on ticking, too, but it suffers
    clock drift like everything else.
        Earth may have created
the sins, but man called them, fixing them

outside our buildings to point and gape at.
I peer through a one-way mirror
    to see my own golden eyes,
        like I could conquer the space

between my selves. No, it's a single body
marked on the granite with two dates:
this body moved this many winters.
If we're not vigilant, noon slides

into midnight or vice versa
    and the dates lose meaning
        because the ocean doesn't quit
grasping for all it doesn't hold, and astigmatic,

I will not see myself. There never was
    a single first person
        who beheld winter alone,
but it's easier to understand a lone man,

balled up beneath leaves in a gulley
uphill of his river, who learns the need
to build while crying out against the fire
    burning beneath his fingers' blistered skin.

NOAH DAVIS

# Reincarnation Too Close to Death

—after Jamie Wyeth's "Sloth" (2007)

The blue sky is being swallowed by
a cloud of gulls, as I see my once-tongue
slide down one of the bird's throats.

I shouldn't have to witness my intestines
spilled across what used to be my lap;
beaks ripping through sun-kissed skin.

I shouldn't feel a pang of want as the smell
of my day's-old blood hits this new nose.
God must be what the preacher said,

an impatient, demanding father. One
who thinks the boy shouldn't sleep
until nine and rushes in with his belt

to save him from sin. Floating
on this raft, the other gulls begin
lifting my limbs toward the sky,

raining loose strips back down
to earth. Leaving behind a smear
of red on an otherwise

brilliant yellow.

JEFF EWING

# The Love of Fire

If it hadn't been given or taken but left
to burn across the valley among other
sleepless children, would we have embraced it
as we did, let it lick up the hairs of our arms,
along our napes to softer fuel?

Would we have taken the trouble of
naming it if we didn't love it so? Our little
crackling son run amok, gone bad in spite
of our best efforts. Can we be blamed
for the insistence of his flames?

Shhh now, leave the branches in leaf;
enough, enough now.

Safe in the middle of the lake we feel
the ash light on our hands and upturned faces.
Beyond the ridge the fire beats his fists
against rock and unswayed earth,
a child still searching breakable things.

Was it love that was the problem—
too much given too freely, the wrong kind
recognized as counterfeit? The smell
of smoke makes us turn our heads the way
crying does, or the wind coming up.

The sunset, little one—it's beautiful, yes.
Affection breeds such a callous red.

JEFF EWING

# A Wedding in Bee Country

The teenage bride poses
by the Portuguese church
hesitant to be remembered here
with bees swirling about her head
the hiss of wings everywhere
like the sizzle of batter on cast
iron or sweat on new sheets
(she wonders, does it burn?).

The bouquet set to trembling
only riles them more—they sting
a groomsman, burrow into
the hived coif of a bridesmaid.
This isn't the dancing
she had in mind, feet stamping
on dust, arms spasming, hands
swatting out of any rhythm.

Each click of the shutter
she takes for a coming attack.
Her eyes go wide as a horse's.
Lifting her dress high she gallops
off into the parish orchard
past the hat and booted relatives
flinching under a chicken-wire
arbor's honeycomb shade.

The bees enfold her in a halo
of sparks—but she's
secreted her strength for years,
cup by cup in her little room
barred with moonlight,
and speeds on through the branches
plucking at her veil, the buds
shaking their fists at her back.

GARY FINCKE

# Recurrence

My sister names another experimental drug,
Describes one more miracle protocol, and
Reports our cousin's third operation, his flights
To a Texas hospital for the latest trial,
His prognosis three months, maybe less.
So thin, she says, his pants want to fall down,
His shirts hang like curtains, laying out
His cancer the way, every late August,
My mother held up what he'd outgrown,
What I'd grow into, dressing me for school
And church for a year, two if we were lucky,
Showing me why I needed to study,
Teaching me to control my pride and envy,
To overcome sloth, to manage gluttony, greed,
Anger, and lust, launching into her sermon
On the seven sins that ended with the promise
That I'd thank her for the lesson of the threadbare,
The ill-fitting and the out of style, learning
What was good enough while she'd handed down
Her bad eyes, judgments, and chronic depression.
A third recurrence, my sister says, but still
Standing on his own two feet, wearing
Her hand me down language, adding
He's in our prayers and he's a fighter like
A litany, like I should say amen or sing
The doxology before a recessional hymn of hope.
My sister, who learned to sew her own clothes,
Who wore homemade, but new, who needed
To perfect the careful cut and stitch because
She was older than every cousin, declares
"Our time will come" like some minister
For fatalism. She's at the window of the spare room
Where I've slept, saying the weather, so sunny
And mild, is heavenly while I try to ignore
The sewing machine, the half-finished skirt
And the thick file of patterns collected
In the good light I have to tear my eyes from.

GARY FINCKE

# Other People

After science, this afternoon,
says Tylenol may reduce
existential dread, the anxious
crowd the drugstore, privately
guessing the necessary dose.

Already the pharmacist
has heard of false remissions,
the familiar hysteria
of suggestion, faith healing
and its old testimonies.

Now, just before closing, the late,
empty-handed who decide
to experiment with aspirin,
Bufferin, and ibuprofen
to relieve the absence of God.

*Everything*, he's read, *has been*
*figured out, except how to live*.
They're swallowing two, with food,
at four-hour intervals. A pair
at bedtime to manage their dreams.

Locking up, now, is impossible,
the aisles swarming with demand,
no matter the fine font for warnings
or the price of prescriptions
he's filled for a hell of strangers.

KRISTIE LETTER

# Medicinal Applications of Marijuana in Colorado

> "No medicine in the world can do thee good."
>
> —*Hamlet* V.ii.314

As a kid, hard to know pot was illegal. Family bong, square center of coffee table, beside scented magic markers. Guests centered there, lowering faces onto caramel tube of smoke, singing along to simple choruses of seventies rock anthems.

Now cancer necessitates poisons, but not smoke. Mom's best friend pushes the pot, the smoke. I stop opening the garage because smoke rolls out, laughter rolls out, a vision of two women, one bald, the other with full curls, one in a wheelchair, the other pushing, one dying, the other mourning. Both laughing.

PETER MAKUCK

# After Hurricane Earl

—for Mark Brazaitis

When police reopened the bridge
and let us back on the island,
there was a low orange sun in the east,
a gift assortment of clouds on the move.
No branches, trees, or power lines down,
no shingles missing as expected,
no roof leaks, ruined carpets
and furniture,
but the beach was different.

The low-tide sand was crowded,
not with bathers,
not a single person in sight,
but with hundreds of tires,
some peppered white with barnacles,
broken loose by the surge
from offshore artificial reefs,
the whole scene looking like a Magritte,
a limbo of lost dark souls,
or the work of teenage pranksters—
I couldn't say which. I just looked
at the absence of pattern
disappearing in the distance,
and down at the great company names
now barely readable:

Bridgestone Goodyear
Cooper
Eagle
Firestone
Wrangler . . .

But I'd been facing west,
and up the beach behind me idled
three high-sided trucks

followed by men in orange jumpsuits
from the county jail,
    tossing up tires
to their workmates in the truck beds.
One of them grinned and said *Hey*.
I asked him how it was going.
    He laughed
then yelled that it beat the hell
out of another day in the slammer,
    his buddies now laughing too.

I watched them move down the sand,
    turn into silhouettes,
heaving tires against the sun,
and thought that today,
maybe only today,
we had all lucked out.

PETER MAKUCK

# Barrier Island

The lighthouse beacon reaches
across the moon-raked water to our upper deck.
I'm soaking up the quiet,
the repeated phrases of waves,
a breeze on my sun-red skin.
You make not a sound coming out,
    so my breath stops
when you touch my back, as if an avenger
had come to heave me over the railing.
For a few minutes you hug me goodnight,
then drift away to our bed
as the soft rap rap
of a Coast Guard chopper gets louder.
I watch it follow the shore, stop
and hover half a mile out,
its spotlight searching the swells.

One summer-school night in Québec
after drinking at a dive called the Chien d'Or,
I smuggled Renée into my room.
Three floors up on a narrow street
in the *Quartier Latin*,
we did what we wanted,
and afterward joked about our Jesuit professor.
With peerless memory,
Renée could recite Baudelaire, whole poems,
but one line lingers:
*Je veux creuser moi-même une fosse profonde—*
because after a few beers on another night, she told me
about her mother's death,
her father's whores,
her brother jumping from the Pont de Québec.

In the morning, I woke up squinting
at a sun shaft slanted through the open casement.
She was gone.
A breeze ghosted in the gauzy curtains.
From the cobbles below came

the clip-clop echo
of a horse pulling tourists
toward the sights of Basse-Ville.
I went to the window.
The walkway was empty below.

Years later,
at a language conference,
Monique, a mutual friend,
told me Renée had twice married and divorced,
lost a teaching position to drink
and ended as barmaid in a beachfront grill.
Early one morning a jogger
discovered her purse
and neatly piled clothes on the sand.
Days later,
her body came up in a fisherman's net.

The helicopter's gone
but not the long reach of moments
no barrier can stop,
arriving like the beacon's light
that finds me so easily across the years,
a swimmer caught in a riptide
of his own making
until I leave the deck
and turn my back
on the spotlight moon in our casement.
At bedside, I pause over your peaceful sleep
then try the same for myself
but lie awake
and watch the fan blades turning above us.

GREG MOGLIA

# Soldiers of Doubt

My male students come to philosophy class with a complaint
We cannot understand women

And I give a shrug say neither do I
Certain that I belong with them

Of a group understood—we males
But here I am a day later wondering about

That nod of mine agreeing—women the difficult . . . the tricky
But what of ourselves—the men

How we take to the altar with tender feet and fickle hearts
More fun to boast when we fall—done in again

When a look in the mirror exposes us as foot soldiers of doubt
Striving to conquer uncertainty with easy word and funny play

Only to lose the world in a breath
Left trying to stand tall in the softest sand

GREG MOGLIA

# Late Love

Oh, I don't know what it is
Let's start with what it's not
When the muscle spasm of sex gets old
Not bedroom compliments

Not birthday, Valentine, holiday gifts
No grand reflection on a shared future
Or the desire to report to friends
*How grand it all is—this love*

Or the furtive glance in the theatre
Not even the midnight kiss in falling snow
No, now it's about what once seemed small
Or once not recalled at all

Let others ask for details
I give them nothing
Since nothing is what I know—I'm open
No grasp for what might be next

I used to wonder what
Johnny Mercer in "Moon River" was doing
When he says . . . *my huckleberry friend*
I'm getting closer

GREG MOGLIA

# The Woman with the Broom

I came from her womb, ate all her meals
She cleaned and pressed what I wore
Met my fevers and nightmares with comforting holds

There's the couch I slept on
No room in the one bedroom
There's father . . . the radio . . . the ballgame

And that woman knitting a winter blanket
Always there she falls to backdrop
In my college days I put her in a story

Given my no-risk childhood
Heading to a no-risk life
I present to girlfriends

A "take-a-chance dreamer"
Whatever I missed out on I'd say
*Oh that woman smothers me so . . .*

But look here's her yellow rose dinnerware
A favorite—bite to it—sweet be damned
The day she learns of father's workplace fling

With some hidden strength
All of it thrown
At the kitchen wall

On the gurney for her operation her last words
Remember take care of your father
I don't believe in witches

Yet she's more than
Cook, clean, nurse, and smotherer
She commands to be better

Frees me towards care
Mother, your story has opened
And somehow it opens mine

KURT RASMUSSEN

# this poem owes you five dollars

this poem has been avoiding you lately
because it owes you five dollars.
this poem has been picking through the butt cans
instead of bumming smokes from you as usual.
this poem is crazy for love
and is therefore dating a homeless woman.
this poem is homeless also
and so the dating transpires behind bushes.
this poem seems to know a lot
about a lot of useful stuff and if queried
will regale you concerning it however
this poem is not one of these road dogs
who just will not shut the fuck up.
this poem is cool like that.
this poem has earned a high degree
of status in its milieu; in fact
this poem is a big fish indeed
except the pond is a droplet of sweat
on the cold neck of america.
this poem is king of the nobodies
and who the hell are you?
this poem once wondered what it meant to be alive
while tasting the galvanized metal
on a broken-down trailer in which it absently
climbed while looking out over endless fields.
this poem once wondered et cetera
but not in a long long time.
this poem would just laugh if you told it
things could be radically different.
this poem would laugh and laugh
revealing the brown stumps of its teeth.
this poem regrets to inform you
it will never pay you back the five dollars.

this poem elucidates further
    that with five dollars and a little more
    it can score an entire pack of cigarettes
    and see that hungry look
    in its lady's eye.
this poem admits quite freely
    that it never could pass that up.
this poem wants to know:
    could you?

KURT RASMUSSEN

# lines in praise of a certain darkness

You talk about the light but now your dark eyes pull me nightward.
I rummage through my cellar heart to find the deepest shadows
wanting only to lose myself in a wet universe of charcoal.

You bring these words of light in a language twisted by pain.
Both of our brains have been seared by tungsten glare,
and you know better than I do that black things often shine.

Brightness has no mercy; you need darkness to be healed.
The wounded thing will seek soft grass in a night thicket
and lie with watery eyes shining like distant drive-in movies.

We have felt the chlorine sting of too many bleached-out days,
the interrogation of a single lamp for far too many hours
to sit here mouthing praises of sweetness and of light.

The only thing we need to do is find a soft place in the night.

LEE ROSSI

# Naked

## I

—Mount Desert Island, Maine

When you stripped in the woods,
and dove, naked as a naiad, into the chill
green waters of a pond, I could not follow

your example, but waded in my underwear
into the murky shallows, the bottom
clotted with stones and the muck

of my own misgiving. Every step
tested something sharp. Glass?
Tin from careless campers?

Even dazzled by the restless water's
beads of light, dapple or shade,
I could not settle my fear,

and so I swam to the far shore,
with each stroke inhaling chill
mist into my heaving lungs.

I guess you forgave me.
I haven't changed, nor have you,
shifting from pajamas to skin to blouse

in full view of your daughter and even
your son. You wait for me, while I hide
in the bathroom, afraid to look

over my shoulder at the blur of white
gathering cloth about its frailty.

## II

—Braunschweig, Bundesrepublik Deutschland

After a night of dancing and beer—
an almost endless night, sundown

at three, dawn at midmorning—

we went to the sauna. Not my idea,
and even though it offered a chance
to see the women naked, I had no desire

to let others gaze at me. But still
I went, don't ask me why. I couldn't face
my empty room, or what I'd bring

to that cold and functional space.
I was an asteroid flying through
the vastness of my life,

all interactions at a distance.
It was that or catastrophe, wasn't it?
After showers, we met in a large, warm pool,

staving off drunkenness with the crawl
or breast stroke, the bodies pink and pale,
muscles loose now after the cold.

The sauna next, dry heat sucking
moisture from lips and nose,
and then the hot tub, breasts floating

like aquatic potatoes, penises wagging
like tube worms. By now the beer
had leached from our pores,

and what was left was a warmth,
something like love, and yet we were not
done, but like our Neanderthal elders

we shuffled past a heavy wooden door
and onto the garden porch,
its railing heaped with snow.

It could've been twenty-five or thirty degrees,
but in the glow of our common bravery,
we forgot the cold and listened

to the silence gathered placidly above us,
snow sifting out of the dark
like sugar onto shoulders and hair.

LEE ROSSI

# Ant Arctic

Where are the antipodes, the ant arctic?
Where ants churn, chilled, through mountains of ice.
Glaciers six miles thick.
A lace of highways and low ways, a filigree
of chapels and glass cathedrals?
Each glacé carapace a pulse of darkness,
transparent, trembling like crystal
tuned to earth's inaudible rumble?
What color are they?
Plain as White Out in blanc surroundings?
Or rainbows, prismed by the heart's tiny torch?
All their generations, marooned on an island of ice,
who once roamed cold jungles—
think Tierra del Fuego—
harvesting moss and fern?

If I traveled there, what would I see
in their false, forgiving mirrors,
that ants, invisible, nocturnal,
had swept away my hair,
their jaws, sharp as chainsaws,
clear-cutting the dark old growth,
leaving only pale stalks.
That they had gnawed my flesh
with their chisels, gouging canyon and crevasse,
pitting, slicing, etching, reducing me to art
or apothegm? When the exterminator comes,
they will have to leave—
but then so will I.

CLAIRE SCOTT

# Rented Breath

Our breath is rented
From a sightless god
A lease we never signed

Addressee unknown
Expiration date
Left blank

God playing roulette
On a board of braille
Fingers wandering
Over raised dots
Listening to Bach
*A mighty fortress*
Sung fortissimo
The orchestra blaring
*A bulwark never failing*

Smothering our pleas

Sudden raises in rent
Catch us breathless
We grab albuterol
Oxygen masks
Plead with a blind god
For borrowed breath
Promising to repay
With interest
Knowing full well

Breath can not be
Stored in cardboard boxes
Shelved for future use

And so we drag
Sacks of bones and
Fingernails from

Tree to tree

Breathing
Our rented breath

Sighing our
Rented sighs
Sobbing rented tears

Hoping our lease
Won't expire
Any time soon

*His kingdom is forever*

The roulette ball
Won't settle in the
Slot with our name

Paying ever more
For each breath
Until

CLAIRE SCOTT

# Harry's Bar

i love the sensation
of scotch
coursing through
my body
me
so sexy and alluring
i want the world to stop
freeze frame
me
with my
mascara'd eyes
creamy skin
scanty dress

the bartender
tuxedo shirt
sleeve garters
black tie
*is that a tail?*
offers eternal youth
in exchange
for the twenty-one
grams of my soul

a done deal
sealed in blood
a scar on my wrist
*pitchfork leaning*
*against the wall*

me
sitting
decades later
at Harry's bar
still twenty-three
friends pass through
and disappear
into lives of

florists
firefighters
farmers
magicians
mediators
marriage counselors

while I sip scotch
in a scanty dress
frozen in time
by a harrowed
oath made in
the pit of
Hell
*horns poking*
*through his hair*

MICHAEL SPENCE

# Constant Companion

The road you travel
Ends at a wall:

The only tunnel
Through is his cowl,

Black as the robe
He now wears. The rib

He started from
Is yours—the gleam

On the scythe, curved
As that bone, carved

The edge of the blade
He once carried

(Both of you then
Were just young men)

Deep in the pocket
Of his hood jacket

Grayer than rain
In mist; had shone

On the small clasp
Shaped like a wasp

That pinned the clothes
Dull as snow

Falling through ash
To the child whose flesh

Absorbed your light
A little bit

Each day until—
Reaching this final

Boundary—
You lean and see

His grin in that dark
Has the scythe's arc.

MICHAEL SPENCE

# Latah

Maples splotched the page
With shadows, jostling the air—
A crackle low like static—

As I sat at a picnic table
In the small park, bent
Over my comic book.

Mother said I'd been good
Enough to buy it for me.
Summers, she and Dad

Would drive us across the Cascades,
Traveling fifty years
Into the past to visit

Aunt Joy and Uncle Guy.
In T-shirt and shorts, I felt
The coolish wind flow

Around my arms and legs
As it kept trying to turn
The page before I was through.

My gaze in that flickering
Of black and green sharpened
When the Human Torch yelled:

"Flame on!" And *splat*!
A splash of whitish gray
Speckled with bits of grit

Landed on my page,
Putting his fire out.
I jumped up as if shocked,

Staring at this censorship
From on high, then ran to Mother
Who sat in the sun, smoking—

As though she might "flame on" too.
I sputtered and held out
My ruined fantasy

For her to see. The light
Caught the teeth of her smile
And upturned face. Her laugh

Startled me like a burn—
I felt my throat constrict,
My eyes sting. The pages

Of the comic book fluttered
When she snatched and sailed it
Into the steel-ribbed trash.

At the sound of my squeaky *Huh*!
A disk small as a charm
Glittered in her hand.

Eyes closing as she laughed
Harder, she held it out:
*Try a different one*.

MARJORIE STELMACH

# Why I Can't Sing

The few remaining juniper berries shimmer with singular depth
in the late sun. Each tree in the easement davens, encased

in a golden aura. On a bare forsythia whip, a titmouse lights and
lifts away. Gold slowly yields to a lattice of low-lit grays,

and borders fail in the dusk. From the cluster of houses
uphill from here, fires erupt—a high window flares

a square of white phosphorus, copper flashing on a chimney pot
glows. It's as though our dubious world were at last

ratified, an official seal impressed on our earthly moltenness.
But it's only the sun, changing its grip, slipping farther off.

Mine's an average heart—seventy beats a minute. A songbird's
in flight might approach a thousand: if I can't fly,

it's not alone for lack of wings; I haven't the heart for it.
Much less, these recent weeks, for song. Everyone's leaving.

Pulses of memory flash from a past when we were together—
all of us. Tonight, it's our campfires I recall, sparks

falling up, red-gold, into darkness, a ring of faces
stamped with the family features we never doubted

would outlast our lives. We'd sing the old camp songs,
each plucked string of your guitar slashing silver, a tracer

from across the fire. Even here, alone in my own time, knees
drawn up, hugged tight to a slow, pedestrian heart,

I can almost taste that marshmallow sweetness, its sugars
walled in a crust burnt on purpose so the fragile shell

might collapse the instant my teeth broke the surface,
releasing strands of syrup to burn my lips and tongue—

a sear that has never healed, not in all this time
and must be the reason, tonight, I can't sing.

MARJORIE STELMACH

# ’rivers Wanted

Here’s a fact: every time you strike *B-flat*—oboe, cello, flute, whatever—
alligators bellow in flat-out joy. That’s how they phrased it: *flat-out joy*.

Here’s another: deep in the heart of the Perseus cluster, there’s a black hole
transmitting a cosmic Om—*B-flat* again. Okay, it’s fifty-seven octaves

below middle C. And true, it pulses only once in each ten million years.
And yes, to hear it you’d need an ear the size of a galaxy, not to mention

a length of life no gator has yet achieved.
But still.

And still: there are days I can’t shake this sadness. The world’s
unjust, unkind, undone. The news gets only worse.

Or outright weird: in a recent study, musicians were asked simply
to breathe and, when deeply relaxed, to sing one note, whatever came.

North Americans sang *B-flat*. Europeans, *G-sharp*. No exceptions.
Of course, there’s a logical explanation: electrical currents.

America works on sixty cycles per second—*B-flat*.
In Europe, it’s fifty—*G-sharp*. Apparently, we are hooked up

and hummed to, thrummed through from birth.
Or, maybe not.

Maybe the universe loves us. Today, up ahead on the highway,
the usual semi, bearing the usual personals ad—*RIVERS WANTED*.

One letter gone missing and abruptly I’m struck with love—*the rush
of muscled currents, heart-crushing desire*—the trundling world,

all eighteen wheels, singing in pure *B-flat*. And yes,
I’m stuck in rush hour on a highway lined with slush,

behind a truck I can’t see past. But the universe loves me,
wants me, is pulsing my personal frequency.

So what if life's a cosmic code I mostly can't break?
So what if I'm broken myself? Why not bellow?

What can I lose? Only, my heart again, as if
it were spring. As if I were young.

MARK STEUDEL

# like two ships

something like desire
still fuels the limbs of body and soul

shivers the trees until

something like hunger

sits full atop us
(causing something like
the wringing of hands)

hard to believe

how chemistry proceeds

after all these years

how the face of a lover
can become fixed

like a star

our memory aching
like the planks
of some old wooden ship

dusk breaks and spreads across the world
darkness smoothing like a wave

something like our heart
burns and churns in the tides of the night

sings a song to wayward sailors

and longs for their return

MARK STEUDEL

# The Last Days of Pompeii

This is the beginning of the end. Strange as it seems,
this is how the end begins. You awaken
normally. The market stays brisk with activity.
The day still completes its circumference.
The sun is bright in its attentions.

These days, however,
you might feel a slight tremble in your sleep,
you might even mistake it for a nightmare,
something to be shaken sharply away, forgotten,
before the bustle of morning begins.

These days,
you might start to wonder, without even
knowing exactly why, what it is that goes on
one hundred feet beneath the ground,
you might feel a shiver at the tip of your spine,
a curious sensation, something you might
even mistake as love for the first time.

Yes, these are days of strange feelings, of neighbors
reporting neighbors to the authorities, of things being
dragged unwillingly to startling conclusions. These are days
of domestic unrest and vague dissatisfaction,
of suddenly not knowing what's going on.

But now is not the time to make much of mortal matters.
No, these are the times for explosions and paradigm shifts,
for things moving swiftly underneath your feet,
for the earth's latest, greatest reconfiguration.

So as you take a bite of your last meal,
and as you thirst and pray and lust after one another,
and when the calculations are closed,
the judgments passed, and we all
have been cast, at last, to the lions,

then, perhaps, things will begin to surface
that never were there before.

WILLIAM TROWBRIDGE

# After Surprising Conversions

They're aired between evening TV
sound bites of homicides, suicides,
fratricides, infanticides, fires, floods,

and pols. Befores, pajamaed or in undies,
look old and lonely in their ills, one
with a headache big as her living room.

They buckle with pain, sneeze and cough
staccato, rush to the toilet, nod off
at their desks, snap at their worried spouses.

Afters jog together at Big Sur, cavort
with their now-adoring grandkids. Mates
hold hands in twin bathtubs, renewed

and busy at their sponsor-vetted
foreplay. A former-wetter guffaws
worry-free at the Improv, while side-effects—

dizziness, rash, fever, constipation,
incontinence, delusions. thrombosis, stroke—
slip by, all snickers and high-fives.

WILLIAM TROWBRIDGE

# Mowing

I tell myself it's for the good, this grueling
roar around the yard to squelch it from
rebellion back to lawn, to get each blade

flush with the others for a perfect carpet,
as pictured on the Scott's bag. I do it
for the exercise and beauty. But could it

also serve the petty tyrant in me, who
wants the world to line up at attention,
ready for the white glove, detractions

to be neutralized, as with Stalin's railroad
across Siberia to nowhere, the Trans-Polar
Mainline, part of his Great Plan for the

Transformation of Nature, to be built by
"enemies of the people." 100,000 corpses
later, it's known as "The Dead Road."

Or Pharaoh's attempt to square the desert up
with giant plinths and pyramids built on
the backs of the usual square pegs. Or Hitler's

master plan for tidying his Aryan inner
landscape, those half-mile panoramas
of *sieg heils* erect and straight as bayonets,

those Auschwitz barracks neatly aligned.
"Mow them down," ordered General Vargas,
when striking workers for United Fruit

and their families assembled, after Mass,
in the main square of Cienaga. An action
echoed at Baba Yar and the Katyn Forest,

at Wounded Knee and Sand Creek,
at Granada, Yangzhou, Batak, Nanking,
Hue, and Mi Lai. "Exterminate the brutes!"

cries Mr. Kurtz to his inner mower. "Yes,"
peeps a voice, as I watch a pair of rabbits
picnic on my freshly clipped hibiscus.

DAVID TUCKER

# Baptist Sundays

Even thunder is gentler than Brother Harve
when he gets warmed up in that white
clapboard church by the river. Souls are sore
from a week of farming and the lust
is rising and everyone is all jammed together,
aftershave and slicked-back hair, the women
bright and edible in their flowery hats
with their big cleavage showing. Break out
the cardboard fans, my brother, the ones with Jesus
on the front, nailed up like a water drop.
It's hot and will soon get hotter.
And here comes Brother Harve striding to the pulpit,
tall and fanatic thin, his white hair sticking out
in electric wisps as he begins, hitting the air
and saying his favorite words:
"And God Smote Them!"
And we all jump—as awake as breaking glass!
"We are not worthy," he hollers,
"not worthy of God's love!"
And Wham! goes his fist because our sins run deep.
And he staggers around weeping about the grace
of God so lost on us. Women cry. Men stare
at the backs of their hands, saying Amen.
What a mess.
Just hang on the best you can.
When it's over there will be dinner
on the ground, fried chicken, baked beans
and iced tea in big jars under the trees.
But we have to go through this to get to that.

TONY WHEDON

# The Cultivation of Hatred

There's a kind of hatred some white people have that's clearer
than water, that's so pure nothing but hate lives in it.
Today the Southern Gentleman part of me wears it
like a rose in my boutonniere because Rick Perry's running for president!
The news flashes across the screen just as four-and-twenty
blackbirds settle in—caricatures of birds,
not birds themselves, tunelessly
gossiping while my neighbor Calvin passes by.
Rick Perry's running for president!
I shout and the news doesn't dazzle Calvin
like it dazzles me. For a moment, sure as clockwork,
my heart skips into the gaps between here and there,
and the afternoon's clouds of hate can't help but disappear.
Meanwhile, fifty feet up blackbirds are devouring what remains of my
kumquat tree.
Calvin, woebegone from pulling crabgrass
and cleaning clogged gutters all day, passes, woebegone, by.
Poor little old kumquat tree, and poor Calvin!
I catch my breath. Rick Perry is running for president
and nobody, surely not Calvin, cares.

JOANNA WHITE

# Tree Lessons

Down the canyon trail below the school,
into eucalyptus haze we filed,
Mrs. Lily—our pied piper—halting, hands on hips.
We plopped in front of the live oak,
brushing aside lumpy acorns, plucked
spiked eucalyptus leaves to weave
like the construction paper placemats
strung above our classroom. And all the pages
of the textbooks we had read were no match
for the real live oak. Two squirrels scuffled
while Mrs. Lily spoke of acorns—how creatures
carry them off in their cheeks,
release the seed to start a gnarling oak,
their children's children's playground.

Years later, I climbed the trail above the school
with Melissa. Reaching the top we paused,
ribs like bellows, and she pointed at Mrs. Lily's
brown stucco house. The story we knew.
In the glint of October, she hiked High Sierra trails
with her husband, John. On the third night,
they heaved off their packs, set up camp, and he left
to collect wood. When the horizon purpled
like a planetarium sky, Mrs. Lily laid out sleeping bags,
zipped the tent flaps, her lanterned shadow flickering
through the canvas. At dawn she descended
the fog-wrapped mountain and for weeks the rangers
combed the trails. Not until spring did they find her husband
lying near the peak, well above the tree line.

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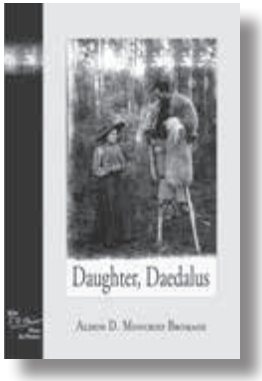


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# et cetera

*adverb* et cet·er·a \et 'setərə, ‘setrə\(also etcetera)

: used at the end of a list to indicate that further, similar items are included

: indicating that a list is too tedious or clichéd to give in full

# About the Contributors

**Terry Allen** is a professor emeritus of theatre arts who has recently begun exploring poetry. His poems have been widely published both nationally and internationally over the last few years. When not writing, he can be found playing pickleball.

**Mark Baumer** lives in Providence, Rhode Island. He works in a library. His website is thebaumer.com.

**Mason Boyles** is a bee activist and part-time surf instructor. His work has appeared in publications such as *Cutthroat*, *Temenos*, *Kansas City Voices*, *the Gateway Review*, and others. He graduated from University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill in May of 2016.

**Clayton Adam Clark** lives in Saint Louis, where he works for Health Literacy Missouri and volunteers for *River Styx* magazine. He earned the MFA at Ohio State University and is currently working on his first poetry collection. Some of his poems are forthcoming in *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Blue Earth Review*, and elsewhere.

**Noah Davis** has published work with *Poet Lore, Natural Bridge, The Fourth River,* and *Chiron Review*, among others. In 2015, Davis received Pushcart Prize nominations for poetry from both *Poet Lore* and *Natural Bridge.* When not confined to his dorm room at Seton Hill University, he spends his time on the mountains and streams of his central Pennsylvania home.

**Jeff Ewing** is a writer from Northern California. His poems, stories, and essays have appeared, or are coming up, in *Sugar House Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *Willow Springs*, *Crazyhorse*, *Arroyo Literary Review*, *december*, and *Catamaran Literary Reader*. You can find him online at jeffewing.com.

**Gary Fincke**'s latest collection is *Bringing Back the Bones: New and Selected Poems*, published in June 2016 by Stephen F. Austin University. Earlier collections are from Arkansas, Ohio State, BkMk, Zoland, and Jacar. He is the Charles Degenstein Professor of Creative Writing at Susquehanna University.

**Andrew Fowler** is a Bangkok-based writer and editor. His subjects include the relationships between landscape and political economy, collective memory and individual memory, and experience and perception.

**Kathie Giorgio** is the author of three novels, two story collections, and a poetry chapbook, including the newly released "Oddities & Endings: The Collected Stories of Kathie Giorgio" and "True Light Falls In Many Forms" (both published by Main Street Rag). She is the director and founder of AllWriters' Workplace & Workshop, an international creative writing workshop located in Waukesha, Wisconsin, where she lives.

**Barbara Haas** has had prose published in *The Antioch Review, Glimmer Train & Western Humanities Review*. She is a repeat contributor to *The North American Review, Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. Her MFA is from UC-Irvine. She has essays forthcoming from *Able Muse, The MacGuffin*, and *Wapsipinicon Almanac*.

**Kristie Betts Letter**'s work has been selected for Best American Small Fictions 2017, published in *The Massachusetts Review*, and will be featured at the PAMLA 2017 conference. KT literary represents her novel *Snow and White*.

**Peter Makuck** is twice winner of the annual Brockman Campbell Award for the best book of poetry by a North Carolinian. This fall BOA Editions, Ltd. will publish his sixth volume of poetry, *Mandatory Evacuation,* and Syracuse University Press will publish his fourth collection of short stories, *Wins and Losses*. Peter also founded and edited *Tar River Poetry* from 1978 to 2006, the year he retired from East Carolina University.

**Cathy Mellett**'s short stories and memoir pieces have been published in *The Yale Review, Confrontation, The Literary Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Greensboro Review, Midwestern Gothic*, and other literary magazines. She is working on a memoir.

**Greg Moglia** is a veteran of twenty-seven years as adjunct professor of philosophy of education at New York University, and thirty-seven years as a high school teacher of physics and psychology. His poems have been accepted in over 300 journals in the United States, Canada, England, India, Australia, Sweden, Austria, and Belgium, as well as five anthologies. He lives in Huntington, New York.

**Eric Rasmussen** teaches high school English in western Wisconsin. He is pursuing an MFA from Augsburg College, and his work is featured or upcoming in *Souvenir Lit*, *Mulberry Fork Review*, *Hapax*, and *Volume One Magazine*.

**Kurt Rasmussen** lives, lurks, and writes in Ogden, Utah, taking inspiration from the city and its inhabitants, sometimes even including himself.

**Lee Rossi**'s latest book is *Wheelchair Samurai*. Recent poems have appeared in *Poet Lore, The Arroyo Literary Review,* and *The Paterson Literary Review.* A member of the Northern California Book Reviewers, his interviews and reviews can be found on thepedestalmagazine.com, Poetry Flash, and elsewhere.

**Claire Scott** is an award-winning poet who has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize (2013 and 2014). She was also a semi-finalist for both the 2014 Pangaea Prize and the 2014 Atlantis Award. Claire was the grand prize winner

of *The Maine Review's* 2015 White Pine Writing Contest. Her first book of poetry, *Waiting to be Called*, was recently published by IF SF Publishing.

**Dan Shiffman** is a secondary English teacher at the International School of Hamburg. He has previously taught at universities and international schools in the US, Japan, and Uzbekistan. Shiffman is the author of *Rooting Multiculturalism: The Work of Louis Adamic*. His second book *College Bound: The Pursuit of Education in Jewish American Literature* is forthcoming from SUNY Press.

**Michael Spence**'s first poems for *Chariton Review* appeared in 1977. He was awarded a 2014 Literary Fellowship from Artist Trust of Washington State. His fifth book, *Umbilical*, won *The New Criterion* Poetry Prize and was recently published by St. Augustine's Press.

**Marjorie Stelmach**'s first book, *Night Drawings* (1995) was selected by David Ignatow to receive the Marianne Moore Prize. She also published *Bent upon Light* (2009) and *Without Angels* (2014). A selection of her poems received the first Missouri Biennial Award. Her poems have been published in *Arts & Letters*, *Boulevard*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Ellipsis*, *The Florida Review*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *Image*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, *New Letters*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Tampa Review*, and other magazines, and have been featured twice on PoetryDaily.

**Mark Steudel** lives outside Raleigh, North Carolina, where he works at a nonprofit that raises funds for cancer research. His poems have appeared in such journals as the *Atlanta Review*, *Poetry East*, *Main Street Rag*, and the *Cape Rock*.

**William Trowbridge**'s graphic chapbook, "Oldguy: Superhero," was published by Red Hen Press in March. His seventh full collection, *Vanishing Point*, is forthcoming from Red Hen in 2017. He teaches in the University of Nebraska low-residency MFA in writing program and is currently Poet Laureate of Missouri.

**David Tucker** is the author of *Late for Work* (Houghton Mifflin) and *Days When Nothing Happens* (Slapering Hol Press). He was awarded a Witter Bynner fellowship from the Library of Congress. A career journalist, he edited two Pulitzer Prize winners for the *New Jersey Star-Ledger*.

**Tony Whedon** is the author of four books of poetry and a collection of creative nonfiction. His poetry, critical essays, and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Harpers, American Poetry Review, Agni, Ploughshares, Prairie Schooner, Salmagundi*, and over a hundred other literary magazines.

**Joanna White**, professor of music at Central Michigan University, studies poetry with Robert Fanning and Jeffrey Bean and has works appearing in *The MacGuffin, Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *The Examined Life Journal*, *Ars Medica*, *Cape Rock*, *Emrys Journal*, *Glassworks*, *The Lyric*, *Ember: Journal of Luminous Things*, *Hummingbird*, *Pulse: Voices from the Heart of Medicine*, *Temenos*, and *Minerva Rising Literary Journal*, among others, and in the *Naugatuck River Review* as a finalist in their poetry contest. She lives in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, with her husband and has a daughter and son in college.

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# End Table

Last fall we asked authors about beginnings. But what about endings? When you are writing, is there an ending, a finishing, a sense of completion? Leonardo da Vinci wrote, "Art is never finished, only abandoned." And William Faulkner said, "The work never matches the dream of perfection the artist has to start with."

> Do you start out with an idea of where you are going—or where you want to go—with a piece? Has anything ever come out the way you thought it would in the beginning? What happens on the journey to change things?

*Joanna White:*
"Tree Lessons" is fictional but sprung from something that has haunted me since childhood. It always struck me that people talked little about a tragedy that changed life in such a fundamental way for another person. The poem was my way of trying to get inside that. Writing it brought forth the irony of it happening to one to who illuminated nature for children.

*Greg Moglia:*
For my poem "Late Love," I had no sense of an ending but I knew of an uncertainty with late love and that it was okay. That okay with uncertainty was the unique touch and then came the mystery thought that troubled me but in a strangely happy way for years: "Moon River"—Mancini music and Mercer's lyric—my Huckelberry friend, uncertain yet so happy about it.

*Tony Whedon:*
I've found in both prose and longer poems there are often two endings: a plot climax and a denouement, or a falling-off movement. The first ending concludes things, wraps things up; the second permits the reader to exit a poem, essay, or story. The denouement resembles a coda, the concluding passage of a musical composition, forming an addition to the basic structure. Frequently I'll start with an ending and then figure out the rest of my poem or story. Or I'll begin at the end, circle back to the beginning, and loop back to the finale where I actually started. Often, I feel a need to provide a sort of "speed bump," a plot divagation, a brief wandering-off, before I conclude, as well. If the diva-

gation is strong enough, it eliminates the need for a denouement. The basic rule for me is "All's well that ends well."

*Jeff Ewing:*
I begin most new poems with a specific first line, but about a quarter of the time I begin with a last line, or a last couple of lines. They don't always make it through to the final version. If they do, it's often at the expense of the opening—one end or the other seems to have to give. As the poem develops, its view (with any luck) widens and those original lines can turn out to be restrictive. I have to be careful not to hold onto them too tightly—Faulkner's "darlings." Above all, the ending has to be both inevitable and a surprise, a tricky proposition.

*Noah Davis:*
On my computer I have different files with my poems. The poems that are in the early stages are placed in the "Progress" folder. Poems that have promising lines or images but are not successful as a complete verse are placed in the "Scrap" folder. And all poems that I feel are worthy enough to send into the world are placed in the "Abandoned" folder. I would agree with da Vinci because in a pragmatic world the artist cannot spend their entire lives on one piece, but continue to create. I have yet to have a piece of writing come to the conclusion or even the rising action that I predicted. When writing is based on vivid images and associative leaps there is great opportunity for creative growth even between a few lines. How cliché, but the process of creating is much more important than the product.

*Michael Spence:*
Of course, da Vinci and Faulkner are, if we merge their two comments, right: art can never be completely finished unless it matches the artist's dream of its perfection. Egotistical as writers can be, I think few are so convinced of their abilities that they believe what they've written can't be improved, if even just a little. We're human, after all.

I've sometimes started a poem with an ending in mind, but this isn't my standard method—more often, I begin with an opening line or image. If I come up with a potential ending first, it's usually a phrase or scene that intrigues me enough to see how I can "write my way" to it. Maybe this is what murder mystery writers deal with regularly: they may know from the start "whodunit," but they're more concerned with relating the tale that leads up to and explains the murder.

I remember a writing workshop in which someone asked how "valid" a poem was if the writer already knew the ending before she/he got to it—the "no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader" argument. Colleen McElroy, the poet leading the workshop said basically, "The reader doesn't know the ending till the writer reaches it." So I don't think a piece is automatically to be scuttled just because the idea of its ending has occurred to the writer beforehand.

Though I would agree that some of the most successful pieces I've written were ones I had no ending for when I began them, I've also written some with

"earlier arrived at" endings that work well. Every poem, as all poets know, is a special case. And, just to verify that there's no set formula for success, I've also had poems I was sure would end with a certain image/action/phrase but then took an unexpected turn that became more engaging as I followed it to a different ending.

And let's remember that the cosmos sometimes offers us enigmatic endings: phrases or actions that still retain their ambiguous facets even after being set down on paper. A bus-driving poem I wrote grew out of a phrase that just came oddly to mind and became the title: "And Don't Forget the Fruit." I had no clue as to what the piece would become, but the phrase caught me up enough to pursue it.

If a poet wants to surprise her/himself, even with an ending already in mind, I'd suggest trying to write a more formal poem. My habit of often working in rhyme and meter tends to throw some rocks into the course of my river, forcing me to navigate around them and thus leading me to other words and images I might not have considered on my way to the "falls" of the poem's end. The surprise of these restrictions can bring the piece to a different ending too, as a stream can fork in an altered direction if it encounters a pile of boulders or a logjam.

I simply feel that if you can make a good poem even if you know the ending before you reach it, you should follow your instincts and keep at it. A poem's being good erases damn near any kind of "wrong" the writer engaged in to write it.

*William Trowbridge:*
I agree with da Vinci and Faulkner about completion or, rather, lack thereof.

When I start a poem, I have a general sense of where it's going to go. But as I write, the poem usually wants to change direction. I follow along because it almost always leads me to something more interesting than what I originally had in mind. I tell my poetry students to go where the poem tells them to go. That's where the treasure's buried.

*Marjorie Stelmach:*
I have two different takes on your question: there is a sense in which a draft arrives at its finish and a very different sense in which a poem reaches completion. Since I tinker with most of my poems for months, even years, before sending them out, and then tinker more before including those published poems in my books, I have to align myself with the "never finished, only abandoned" camp.

More interesting to me, however, is the way a poem in the drafting stage winds through material I never anticipated and then, by a hidden path that seems to open mysteriously in the language-thicket, leads me to a clearing where the ending has been waiting.

I know it when I see it.

Where my confidence comes from that this is, indeed, where the poem needs to stop, I'm not sure. And I concede that sometimes—usually months later—I might lop off that perfect ending because it's really too perfect and now sounds didactic or sentimental or pre-ordained or something. But that's rare.

For the most part, when I arrive at that clearing, lift my pencil from those words, I am startled. The white space that follows must, I see, remain white space. Every time there's the little thrill of ambush. ("No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader." Robert Frost, right? Another quotation I can endorse.)

After experiencing this pattern a hundred times, I know enough to stop. The draft has ended. Then it's time to go back and prune the pathway. As I work my editing-way toward the ending over and over, it will still feel like the only ending possible. Oh, I'll play with its syntax, its diction, rhythm, line-breaks—all the usual tinkering. I might change a statement to a question or shorten a sentence to a fragment. But the ending remains the ending—yet another ending-out-of-nowhere that something in me has recognized. Only when I read the polished poem, might I get a glimmer of what led me here and why.

*Lee Rossi:*
Beginning an Ending: Very often I won't know where a poem is going. Maybe I expect my poems to be as unpredictable as my friends, or maybe I believe—obstinately, mystically—that only the poem knows where it should end and that I don't dare end it until I get to know its exact personality and temperament. And yet, even if I don't know what the poem wants to say, I often have a sense of its dimensions: it's the size of a table or a bookshelf, a chifforobe, or a picture frame. Even more important I might already know something about the poem's rhythms and soundscape. So even if I don't have an ending which seems exactly right, I'll cobble together words and phrases (call them pseudo-lyrics) which suggest the size and shape of this particular poem's ending. Songwriters do this all the time, using nonsense or doggerel to create a vocal trace, a template for the rhythms and arc of their music. What about all those unintelligible lyrics from Yes and Procul Harum? Surrealism maybe, but maybe they never got beyond the nonsense stage. At any rate, if I stare long enough at that meaningless but evocative mess, repeating it like a mantra, something truer and more eloquent might emerge. Patience is required, and faith, not just in the poem, but in one's self.

*Gary Fincke:*
If I can anticipate where a story or a poem is going, I usually abandon the work. I begin in image or incident for poetry, or upon hearing a voice in fiction. The rest, when things go well, is surprising. Writing is a joy for me because it's discovery; if it isn't, it's work that merely needs to be finished or put aside.

*David Tucker:*
I began writing "Baptist Sundays" years ago and never thought much about what the end of the poem might be for a long time. I try to just get out of the way and let the end develop almost on its own. Somewhere around the 100th revision it may arrive.

I seldom write the poem I originally intended. Intent is a poem killer for me. I usually can't write sad poems when I'm sad or happy poems when I'm happy. I try to just write with the hope that the words will surprise me.

*Dan Shiffman:*
When writing "In Tashkent," I knew I wanted to end with a scene about me once again jogging through the streets of Uzbekistan's capital city after returning from medical treatment in Dubai, but why my morning runs mattered so much eluded me. This is partly why I wrote the essay to try to figure out. What draws me forward toward an ending in my writing is a desire to get something clarified and to uncover something unexpected.

*Mark Steudel:*
Poems I start with an end product in mind are the ones I'm least likely to finish. I just don't work that way. It can be frustrating, especially since I have some subjects in my back pocket that I think would make spectacular material for poems, if only I had the requisite inspirational fodder at my disposal. Sadly, I do not.

Rather, I work best when dropped off in a poem's middle of nowhere with only the vaguest sense of which way to go. The less locked in to specifics, the better. It may sound a bit cliché, but you have to let the poem take you where it wants. You may end up far away from where you initially thought you were heading, but that's fine. Poetry is a lot like life in general in that it's only in relinquishing control that you find all the happy little accidents, pit stops, and detours that give it its meaning. You may also find that the journeys that teach you the most are the ones you never even finish.

*Kathie Giorgio:*
There are few words that strike more terror in a writer's heart than "The End." I often have to beg my students to please type those words and let their poems, stories, memoirs, books go. And, I have to admit, they're hard on me too. The End means you've done your best, it can't get any better, it's time to start submitting.

So scary.

I never know an ending to a story or a book until just before I write it. I believe thoroughly in what I call writing blind—you start with the first word, first sentence, first paragraph, first page, and you just see where it takes you. As I work on a new project, often multiple possibilities for endings will present themselves. But until I reach those last few paragraphs, I can never say for certain how something is going to end.

I can't remember what story it was anymore, but I remember writing the first draft and getting to where I thought the ending would be. I hit the proverbial wall. All words, all thoughts, stopped, and I sat there and sweated and waited. Nothing. I gave up, figuring the next day would be a fresh start that would provide a new end. Instead, when I sat down to work again, I realized I'd written the ending. The words wouldn't come because there weren't anymore. I just hadn't recognized it.

In my novel, *Rise From The River* (Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2015), my main character had to choose between three very different, very controversial, very intense choices. Until I ended the scene where she made that choice, where there was no going back, the choice had to be made, I didn't know

what she was going to do until those words came out. Until she told me, I had absolutely no clue.

And I like it that way. It feels to me like that is the way to let a story grow organically. When we conceive our children, we don't know how they're going to turn out either. We just guide and watch them grow. Writing feels very much the same for me.

As to how do I know I've reached the end, I actually watch myself for very physical cues. As I get to the end of the story, my fingers start to slow down on the keyboard. There's always a pause before that final period. And then I sit back and I feel my shoulders release and drop. There's a satisfied sigh, the same kind of sigh that comes at the end of a glorious meal, or a glorious day, or a glorious round of love-making. The pause, the period, the release, the sigh, all happens in the space of a couple minutes—a couple minutes of great physical and self-satisfaction—before the questions start coming. Is that it? Have I done it? Does it work? Could it be better?

But those two minutes tell me everything I need to know. The story's done. The End.

*Eric Rasmussen:*
Only awful people read the endings of books first, or look up spoilers on the Internet for their favorite shows, which might make me an awful person. For me, the appeal of a great story is not in finding out where the characters are going, but in figuring out how they get there. Knowing their destination ahead of time allows me to focus on the journey. The same is true in my own writing. All of the stories I love have endings that last, endings that matter, whether they are unexpected or unclean, incredibly happy or terribly unhappy, so I try to create those types of scenes first. Whatever situation I am able to concoct will recommend a certain type of character, which makes the writing process an exploration of how that sort of person might arrive at that sort of instance. Things change all the time; that original ending may make a better beginning, or detours the characters take are cut or become the main focus of narrative. But if I can lead readers to a dramatic moment and some sort of emotional reaction, whether they read straight through or skip ahead, then I like to think I've done my job.

*Kristie Betts Letter:*
For me, poetry is the opportunity to carve sharp endings from the long and unwieldy. My first version of "Medical Applications of Marijuana in Colorado" spent pages and pages on medical details. When the poem finally rose to the surface from all these unnecessary words, the ending appeared first. The image that I want to retain, to clarify, and to celebrate is two women doubled over in laughter, not cancer's inevitable tragedy. On a different note, I wrote this piece when marijuana was only legal for medicinal reasons in Colorado. Now that it's fully legal, the resonance of the poem shifts slightly, but the final word "laughing" says it all.

*Kurt Rasmussen:*
When I hear a writer describe her process in a few facile sentences, I'm pretty sure she is full of something other than veracity, and I certainly would be if I attempted it. If the creative process did not remain essentially mysterious to me, I think I would stop wasting my (and the reader's) time. In fact, when I feel as though I am in complete control of things, it's a sign that I am producing dreck and that it's time to begin again. Every artist must develop her own set of tools of course, but when you reach for a recipe instead of a wrench you are a mere technician and not an artist; a walking, farting, posturing device for the reproduction of past creative episodes, and no longer a wellspring for new ones. That's easily said, of course, and much less easily avoided. I find myself falling into that trap quite often, and especially when I'm trying to work out the ending for a poem. I still do the old unnecessary wrapping of things up, and repeating things in a simpler form to make sure you get the point. I also go to the other extreme and just leave things hanging—poeticus interruptus. All I can tell you is that each poem is a new attempt to deal with the problem of endings. The one thing I know is, the first reader it has to both move and surprise is me.

So, okay, now that I've gotten the honesty out of the way, here's my facile answer:

Poetry is not unlike tennis. The title and opening lines comprise your serve. It should be strong and unpredictable, and the more crazy spin you can put on it, the better. Your opponent is now slightly off-balance and very focused on what you are doing. You are in control (you hope!) and if your inner game of poetry is working as it should, you will know the ending when you see it. The best feel like clean winners—put-away shots. And to achieve those you have to "hit it where they ain't." And while you're at it, hit it where *you* ain't too. Because of course the real opponent is you.

*Andrew Fowler:*
I always start out with a fairly simple, crystalline idea, but it rarely stays in one place. More often than not, I diverge wildly. Whether that's an easy, natural process, or whether it involves a few martinis and me punching the wall a couple of times depends. But at some point, there is inevitably a little epiphany at some point, I figure out where I'm going, and I'm always at least a little surprised.

*Mark Baumer:*
In high school I was the guy on the baseball team who came in for the last inning and tried to make sure the game ended the way our team wanted it to end. I was okay at making sure it ended pretty good but in the last inning of the last game of the year I didn't do things correctly and the game ended the way the other team wanted it to end so me and all my teammates cried a lot. I guess you could say this is a metaphor or something. I guess sometimes a story or poem will end how I want it to end and other times it will end how other people want it to end and then there are all those circumstances where it ends and everyone looks at the ending and thinks, "I don't know if anyone wanted it to end like that."

*Peter Makuck:*
In grad school, getting a new single lens reflex camera made me look more intensely at what's around me. My first published poem was about taking photos of an abandoned farm house. I like poems that appeal to the senses. My poems don't come from abstract ideas, rather from my own personal experiences, things I've seen and done. As for beginnings and endings, perhaps it's best to talk about drafts and the process of revision. A poem in process has a mind of its own. You have to take off the leash and let it go, at least for the first draft. When revising, you might discover the best opening hook is line seven, eight, or nine. And what you originally thought was your closure turns out to be a whimper, not a bang, and the poem best ends ten lines earlier. Two things: 1) I've never been satisfied with the first draft of anything I've written. 2) And I don't have any preconceived ideas about where a poem should go. I think Frost said, "No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader."

*Barbara Haas:*
Writing is a process of discovery. I like to begin with an image or with something that will appeal to the reader's senses. I obey Flannery O'Connor's idea of materiality in this. It's on us to deal with concreteness, with "matter." Not only will this fire up the reader's imagination, but it will fire mine up too, as I engage in this elegant process of discovery. During the period when I don't really know what my essay or short story is about (which may be five weeks in duration), it's necessary for me to have this degree of investment, confidence, and belief.

*Mason Boyles:*
A draft to me is something organic. In my initial approach, I always find myself feeling as though I'm pruning something that's too big for language. Once that inciting energy of the story has clarified itself, everything else is extrapolating from that point. In other words, I rarely feel as if I'm inventing. I will write until I've siphoned off the momentum. Endings are the most instinctual aspect of the story for me. Logic is important, but I give equal precedence to the rhythm of the language and that nod-to-yourself feeling when finding my end point. More than once I've imagined two or three scenes ahead before feeling the tug of the ending in a preliminary sentence; that's something I want my fiction to elicit in others, as well. I strive to write settings and characters that will continue existing in readers' minds long after they've set the story down.


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# Works Sighted

(what recent *Chariton Review* contributors have been up to)

**Edward Hamlin**'s story collection, *Night in Erg Chebbi and Other Stories*, winner of the 2015 Iowa Fiction Award, recently won the Colorado Book Award.

**Alison Cundiff**'s second full-length book of poetry, *Otherings*, was published through Golden Antelope Press.

**Teresa Fazio**'s work will be forthcoming in three anthologies (two nonfiction and one fiction) in fall 2016 and spring 2017. She also won the *Consequence Magazine* prize in fiction for 2015. Readers can check out links to her writing on www.teresafazio.com.

**Daniel Lusk** received a 2016 Pushcart Prize for his genre-bending essay "Bomb" (New Letters, 2014) and his new collection, *The Vermeer Suite* (poems inspired by works of 17th-century Dutch master Johannes Vermeer and images of the paintings) was published in October 2015 by Wind Ridge Books, an independent nonprofit literary press. *The Vermeer Suite* is his fifth full-length poetry collection. Daniel shares his poetry website, www.carraigbinn.com, with his wife, Irish poet Angela Patten.

**Michael Spence**'s fifth book, *Umbilical*, which won *The New Criterion* Poetry Prize, has recently been published by St. Augustine's Press. There will be a book launch in NYC on September 8th at 900 Broadway, the office building of *The New Criterion.* And speaking of *The New Criterion*, a navy-nightmare poem of Michael's, "Undertow," which appears in its June 2016 issue, was selected as the featured poem for *Poetry Daily* for June 23rd. The latter occurrence shows that even part of one's life that took place nearly forty years ago can provide material for one's writing.

Since February **Kendra Green** has been managing Deep Vellum Books, an independent bookstore with an emphasis on literature in translation and a dedication to independent publishers. In April, Anomalous Press published "The Stone Collector," the second chapbook in her series on Icelandic museums.

**Gary Fincke**'s collection, *Bringing Back the Bones: New and Selected Poems*, was published in June by Stephen F. Austin University Press.

**Pat Corbus**'s book of poems, *Finestra's Window*, was published recently, and it won the Off the Grid 2015 Poetry Prize.

**John Smelcer** has several books due out in 2016. Most importantly, after twenty years of work, his novel *The Gospel of Simon*, is coming out in the fall. His poetry book *Indian Giver* and his historical novel *Stealing Indians* were both published this summer.

**Enid Harlow** has a new story that will appear in the summer 2016 issue of *The New Guard*.

**Alexandria Peary**'s essay "Holes and Walls," published in the *New England Review,* was named a Notable Essay in the Best American Essays, 2015. She has had poems published at the *Yale Review, Boston Review, Juked, Bombay Gin, Zymbol,* and *New American Writing.*

**Mary Soon Lee** had a poetry book published in 2015, *Crowned: The Sign of the Dragon, Book 1* (Dark Renaissance Books). The book is the first part of an epic fantasy in verse.

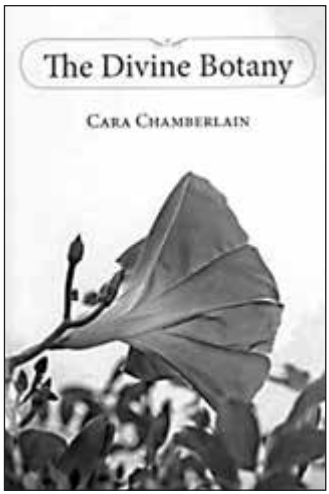
**Sarah Odishoo** has had essays published in *Michigan Quarterly Review, Shenandoah Journal, Shenandoah Journal, Serving House Journal, Diverse Voices Quarterly, Stirring: A Literary Collection, The Griffin, Crack the Spine*, and *paperplates*. Her essay "Euclid's Bride" was nominated for the 2014 Best of Net anthology, and "Germane German: A Lesson in Dispelling" was nominated for a 2015 Pushcart Prize.

**Michael Lewis-Beck** has had poetry published in *Apalachee Review, Alexandria Quarterly, Pilgrimage, The Cortland Review*, and *Seminary Ridge Review*.

**Jody Azzouni** published three stories in 2015 and one in 2016, in *Lost Coast Review, Rock & Sling, The Listening Eye*, and *Map Literary*. She published three poems in 2015 in *Off the Coast, Vision International*, and *Slant*. She has two books in philosophy coming out, one with Oxford University Press.

**Elaine Ford** (Fall 2013) is current writing fiction about historic persons. Her short story "To the Border" appears in *Iron Horse Literary Review* 16.3 (the Freedom issue, June 2014). The story involves Jewish relatives of her husband and takes place in 1892 during the flight from Baltic Russia. Elaine has completed a manuscript, "God's Red Clay," about the lives of her great-great-grandparents, Thomas and Anner Ford, in nineteenth-century Alabama and Mississippi. She has also written two articles about the genealogical research into her Southern ancestors that underlies "God's Red Clay." These articles will appear in the September and November 2014 issues of the magazine *Family Chronicle*.

**Philip Dacey**'s fourteenth poetry collection, *The Ice-Cream Vigils: Last Poems*, will appear this year from Red Dragonfly Press.



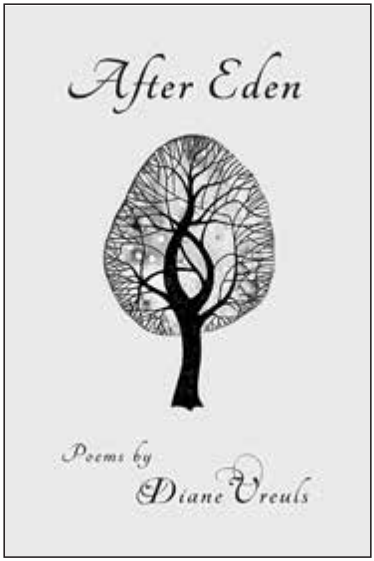

**Cara Chamberlain. *The Divine Botany.*** WordTech Communications LLC, 2015 (ISBN 978–1625490858), 102 pp., $18.00, paperback.
Reviewed by Kevin Manley

As Dante began his journey through the dark wood midway through life, Cara Chamberlain's book of poetry, *The Divine Botany,* begins in a shadow. What follows are three sections and an afterward musing upon various floras through the arc of *The Divine Comedy*. Yet that simple structural description cannot contain Chamberlain's originality or her inspired poetic identity.

Several of Chamberlain's poems are composed of simple couplets and tercets and rely entirely on imagery to create meaning—though original images paralleling a silvery city with a pus of clouds are rich enough to do so—yet other poems, such as "The Marsh of Ruined Souls," do not demand a particular reading. Rather, the loose form invites a reader to trace the journey of the idea through the words to create an experience as unique to each reader as blossoms being discussed.

While Chamberlain's writing is fresh, some readers may be put off by the floral jargon the collection relies upon; however, the poet has prepared for this. Following the fourth section is a glossary of technical terms. Like the direction of the poetry itself, by providing a glossary we as readers are once again allowed to get as much or as little out of the poetry as we would like. It is possible to appreciate the poetry through context clues, but a devoted reader has the opportunity to sift through carefully constructed levels of subtext to find new meaning. Chamberlain has managed to craft a collection of poetry that is both accessible and lofty.

As the collection begins in the dark woods looming before the Inferno, it ends by bathing the reader in light images. Chamberlain resists the temptation to remain rooted in the dark imagery of Hell, and rather has crafted a collection that manages to play. It has a sense of wonder evident in both subject and language. It dreams, and it encourages its readers to do so as well.




**Diane Vreuls. *After Eden*.**
Pinyon Publishing, 2015 (ISBN 978–1936671342), 88 pp., $16.00, paperback.
Reviewed by Kira Chatham

In her new book of poems, *After Eden*, Diane Vreuls' writing radiates with both a tender approach and precise craftsmanship. Vreuls takes us on a spiritual journey, neither pushing nor pulling the reader where they'd rather not follow, but softly nudging them in a hopeful direction.

The first poem of the collection is short and to the point; like a newly formed bud in spring, it's a promise of what's to come- lush blooms of lyricism and gentle verses. The poem is called "If," and continues on with "I / learn / English / the / first / word / will / be / You." While Vreuls' longer poems give more space for deft imagery and illustrations of the passage of time, her most succinct poems are where she truly shines.

"Botanicon," with only one or two words per line, is stark and eye-catching on the page, but the images Vreuls' creates are even more striking: "not pale / firstlings / of green growth / but wine- / red tendrils / of carmine whips / a blush / of buds / burst from / earth's blood / announcing / Resurrection." The connection of the natural and personal with an exploration of faith is continued throughout the collection. In "Pilgrimage," Vreuls addresses how the Divine can be found in unexpected places, such as in a "tree with a hole in the trunk / the shape of an owl." While she doesn't find the owl, she finds a nest and the possibility of new life waiting to be born.

Vreul's poems are not show-stoppers aching for attention, but rather a familiar and friendly beckoning, a voice on the wind saying, *Come here, let me show you something*. And if you choose to follow, you won't be disappointed.

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