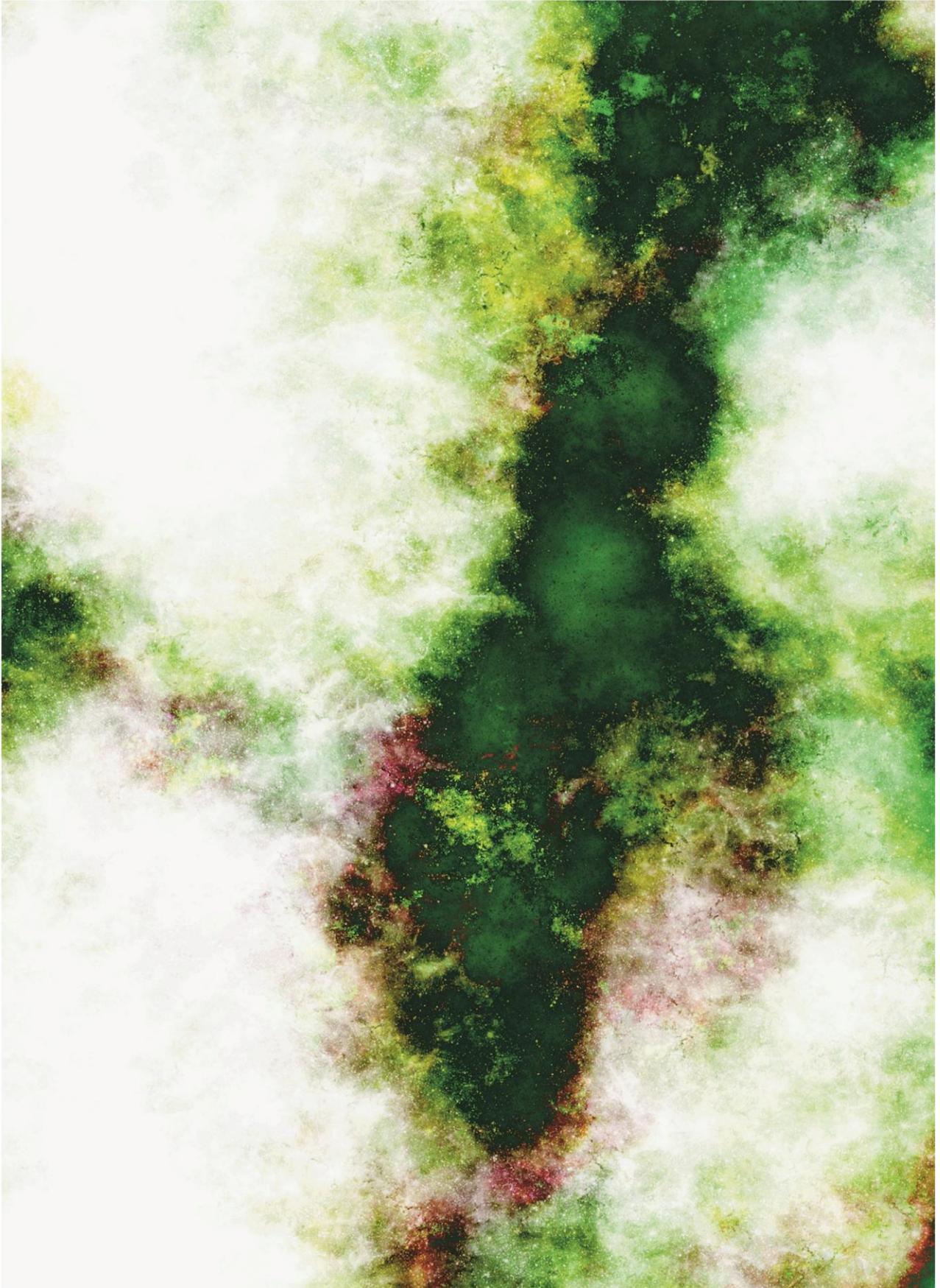


Ivo Review

Issue Two: Lost



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Cover Art by Edward Lee

Edward Lee is an artist and photographer from Ireland. His paintings and photography have been exhibited and published widely, with many pieces in private collections. His website can be found at <https://lastimagesphotography.com> Twitter: @EdwardLeeArtist2
Instagram: @edwardleeart

Editor's Note

Welcome to the second issue of *Ivo Review*.

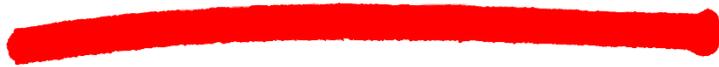
This issue gathers work across poetry, micro-fiction, fiction, and nonfiction that cross their own thresholds of disappearance. Together, they widen what our theme of LOST can mean: not only grief or absence, but the moment just before recognition, the clearing where something unnamed begins to speak. Their pieces do not try to restore what is gone in the wake of loss. Instead, they illuminate the paths that loss can open, the lessons that can be learned, and the growth, sometimes painful, that we are able to experience.

We are honored to share them with you.

—Ivo Editors
December 2025



Poetry



What We Dreamed Of by Ranjith Sivaraman

When all those sunsets put together
I feel it looks like
the spring we dreamed of.
Wafting golden hues
above the tickling waves
Etching molten orange
along the horizon,
All look nothing short of
the flowers we dreamed of.
The extended glow of twilight
The impatient wait of night
All remind nothing but
that day we dreamed of.

White Rose by Charisse Gendron

White rose lifting on the waves
faithful sister facing the shore
singing the octaves.

We attend the rise and fall
of each other's breath, you in death
a flower nodding at the inlet's mouth.

I remember you lolling
mid distance in this mild coastal font
the ocean tolling.

Where we played, your ashes—
clay in the garden pond of Sun Yat Sen—
turn the water jade.

Ranjith Sivaraman is a poet from India. His poems merge nature imagery, emotions, and human psychology into a tapestry of philosophy. Sivaraman's poems are published in literature magazines and journals across the US & UK. Instagram @lovelifetip <https://ranjithsivaraman.com>

Charisse Gendron is a poet living in Portland, Maine. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Clepsydra Literary and Art Magazine*, *The RavensPerch*, *Third Wednesday*, and other publications.

Nomad by Mark Evan Chimsky

But of course you must leave
for your feet are seeking ground
they have not found before
and grass a color
that others have not seen.
I travel the roads inside
your eyes, the wildernesses and the forests
and the waters that beckon you
more than home or hands or even love.
You let me see the way light flatters
a leaf, how a sunset turns
your solitude to prayer.
I am there as you wander through the dark
and lay your head wherever the earth is hardest
as wild creatures do, not looking for sleep
but for the deep scent of something ancient,
beneath what can be seen or known.
I try to find the part of you that you are searching for
in your dreams of a land before language,
where fire speaks of the humble
sinew and bone it has conquered.
and makes you step closer
to the flame, closer to whatever it is
that you cannot even name
as you open yourself
to fear and faith
the way the Blue Morpho unfolds
its wings for the first time and feels
what it is like to lose itself
on a single breath of air.

Mark Evan Chimsky's poems and essays have appeared in *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, *The Sunlight Press*, *Indecent*, *Blood & Bourbon*, *The Healing Muse*, *Thin Places and Sacred Spaces: A Poetry Anthology*, *The RavensPerch*, *Rabble Review*, *The Poet*, *Bard & Prose*, *Poetry for Ukraine*, *The Jewish Literary Journal*, *Kind Over Matter*, *Bullets into Bells*, *Wild Violet*, *The Maine Sunday Telegram*, *The Oakland Review*, *JAMA*, *Mississippi Review*, *The Cincinnati Judaica Review*, and *The Three Rivers Poetry Journal*. Mark is also a recipient of the Anna Davidson Rosenberg Award as New/Emerging Poet.

This poem was first published in *The Sunlight Press*.

Bird Bones by Lauren Scharhag

Inspired by “These 12,000-Year-Old Flutes Mimic the Sound of Prehistoric Birds,” Teresa Nowakowski, *Smithsonian Magazine*, June 15, 2023

Seven 12,000-year-old flutes
were found in the Hula Valley,
carved from the wing bones
of teal and coot, unearthed along
with hundreds of other bones,
an avian Golgotha, as if the
archaeologists had been assigned
an impossible task by a king or a god:

*Among these bones, you must find
the seven that still sing.*

Bones were a popular prehistoric material. We have found fish hooks and harpoons, pendants and ornaments, but by far, the favorite subject of Neolithic artisans was animals. Of course it was— in those early days of agriculture, when we were still trying to wrestle obedience from boar and aurochs, when we still lived cheek-and-jowl with the things we killed or could be killed by, when your falcon returning empty-clawed meant going to bed hungry, we fashioned our bone talismans, wore them on a string around our necks.

The flutes still bear microscopic evidence of having been used. Over twelve millennia ago, humans put these instruments to their lips and blew, entire sagas still lingering in teeth marks and phantom spit.

Now, scientists have replicated the flutes. When played, they emit a high screech. They may have been used for music, but mainly, they were thought to be early duck calls, emulating kestrel and sparrowhawk— bird bones to catch birds. That feels mythic, too, and indeed, scientists wonder if this wasn't a way to try and commune with those creatures of the sky. Raptor totem, we sing, *ave, ave, ave.*

Across the ages, we have distanced
ourselves from such bonds. Yet,
when migration season comes round
again, we plan to return to the valley
to test out our version of the aerophones,
to see if the old magic still holds,
to see if we can draw the birds to us,
to put bone to our lips and blow.

If the flute makers could see these
skies now, if they could see hear how
silent the forests and marshes have
become—

Soon, there will be nothing but
decoys and recordings.

Soon, the echoes will have faded,
and there will be nothing left to us
but our pale imitations, a memory of
song, a dream of flight.

Lauren Scharhag (she/her) is an award-winning author of fiction and poetry, and a senior editor at *Gleam*. Her latest releases include *Screaming Intensifies* (Whiskey City Press), the *In the King's Power* series (self-published), and *Ain't These Sorrows Sweet* (Roadside Press). She lives in Kansas City, MO. <https://linktr.ee/laurenscharhag>

Butterfly Effect by V. Bray

Tell me what rhythm to use

—*flit, flutter, fly*—

to counteract crashing temperatures

coaxing caterpillars to transform too early,

halted midway between worlds

half green chrysalis, half striped body

frozen in the liminal.

Tell me when to beat my wings

—*flap, flapping, fly*—

to stop the cascade of loss—

clouds of butterflies

collapse to earth,

migratory paths

erased by pesticide.

Tell me what pace to match my heart beats

—*flutter, fluttering, fly*—

to stop this surge,

these unintended consequences,

obliterating

the things I love.

V. Bray has been a writer since childhood and still has a box filled with her first “books,” usually illustrated with markers and bound with yarn. She writes in many genres, from speculative and historical fiction to poetry. Her work has been published in *About Place Journal*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Multiplicity Magazine*, and *The Writer*. Learn more at authorvbray.com.

It Is I Who Have Rejected You by Jackie Chou

It is I who have rejected you,
chivalrous knight.

You have descended to the low sands,
and tossed pearls to the gulls.

Shred your sandwich, oh prince--
bread and baloney.

I am salivating,
wet drool on my chin.

What are these offerings
of brick driveways and children?

All I want is to fly away
after the feeding.

All I want are these scrolls.
Let me write my poems forever.

No white dress,
no marriage vows.

Jackie Chou is a poet from Southern California. Her poems have recently appeared in Lee Herrick's *Our California Project*. She is the author of two collections of poetry, *The Sorceress* and *Finding My Heart in Love and Loss* (Cyberwit Press).

Dating Myself by Erica Swallow

I would be dating myself, if I said I miss
Pop-Tarts for dinner
My Treasure Trolls collection
And Saturday-morning cartoons.
Those childhood delights
Are seeds of joy
Deeply rooted
In the rural gardens
Of my mind.

Today,
Alarm blares—
No toaster pastries
No charmingly ugly, naked, cone-haired dolls
No laboratory mice trying to take over the world
No football-headed fourth-grader plagued by school drama.
No, kids, not today.
Mama's got a new look.

This morning
This evening
And every moment in between,
I am dating myself—
A love which could last a lifetime.

Chocolate croissant? Yes, please.
Another cat portrait oil painting? You betcha.
Rom com marathon paired with Moscato and popcorn? Oh yeah.

This setup
Is rather nice,
Just me
And my proclivities.

Alone,
But not lonely,
I explore life's greatest romance.

Erica Swallow is an emerging poet, former journalist, and published children's book author. She holds an MFA from Simmons University and other degrees from MIT and NYU. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in the *Arkansas Anthology* and *Ultramarine Literary Review*, with other works having appeared in *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Thought Catalog*, among other publications. She is a recipient of the Independent Book Publishers Association's Bill Fisher Award for Best First Book. She shares her pink Victorian home with two feline friends.

Why Didn't I Just Hug Him To Death? by Jan Wieszorek

I was browsing
at the contemporary art gift shop

when I had a shock—it was his face
I hadn't seen for years—

too thin, except for brown skin
and black hair. How is it that your eyes

never meet when a body is filled
with lack and slack? Lost?

No more did I expect from him
or from me, but now,

over many years,
what I wanted I didn't,

now can't—or can I?
It is a fact that words still work,

and my old self, maybe his, too,
was right after all.

A bit of that boy,
long missing now,

I think I saw
in a frame, in a space.

Algebraic Confession by J.M.R. Harrison

Remember those word problems in algebra
that began car A is driving west at 55 mph
and car B is traveling east at 60 mph and
remember how you always interrupted me
to ask who was in those cars, worrying
that they might get lost or have an accident?
Or the ones that started Johnny has six more
apples than Jeffery, and how you never
listened when I said let $x =$ the # of apples
Jeffery has, protesting that Johnny should
share the extra apples, didn't his mother
teach him anything? Unless the apples
had worms, because worms were disgusting,
and Johnny would be welcome to them.
Remember I yelled then, and said you were
the very worst student I had ever tutored?
I wake at night more often now and lately
have begun to question Johnny's manners
and to hope both cars arrived without incident.
I wonder about you, if you write bestsellers
under a clever pen name and if you will ever
read this and forgive my sins against imagination.

J.M.R. Harrison has created and led workshops in fear, faith, poetry, play, and creativity. She has studied at the independent Writer's Center in Bethesda MD and is a graduate from the low residency MFA program of the Naslund-Mann Graduate School of Writing in Louisville, KY. Her poems have been published in *Penwood Review*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Pensive*, and elsewhere, including several anthologies. Her work was featured in *Fluent Magazine* and *The Good News Paper*.

This is Where by J.M. Summers

This is where the dead make
their home, here where only
wild rabbits roam, and the
only song to be heard is that
of the chiffchaff, goldfinch, wren.
Here bluebells and headstones keep
lonely company - breathless, in
soil thirsty, envious of our company,
names and dates yet unfulfilled,
uncaring that here the
sun lends its warmth, too,
or of the single bluebell
growing below the headstone,
grappling too with doubt,
a vain sort of promise -
spring casting its shadow
across an otherwise barren earth.

Falling by J.M. Summers

Is every waking so? Light breaking
upon a bright field marked by the
sporadic issue of grazing sheep,
blackbirds chorusing a day so like
the ones in which we walked, steps
but an eternity in which the foot
falls confident of the one which
will follow, knowing only today.
But perhaps the mind will always
be forgetful of the stranger who
stepped into an ill defined future,
recreating itself daily in the
image that sleep took from him,
remembering only that once we dared
to dream, and the hand that led gently
guiding those first stumbling steps
towards the empty field of tomorrow.

J.M. Summers was born and still lives in South Wales. Previous publication credits include *Another Country* from Gomer Press and various magazines and anthologies. The former editor of a number of small press magazines, he is currently working on his first collection.

When Many of the Things You've Known Are Gone by Donna J. Gelagotis Lee

A decade rolls into several, and soon you are looking
to find something familiar, because so much has changed.

The horse has turned into a car; the car driven by humans
now drives itself. And the horse ridden by humans has gone off

to graze in something called a "holding area" in the West,
where horses used to be wild and free. The buildings of youth

have been demolished, or if still standing, their insides have switched
Oriental carpets with bare floor. You thought the past was fast.

But today is now already obsolete. And one press of a button
shows you how you can zip through time even faster.

Is your breathing in sync? Because once, I stepped
off a train in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains and

stopped as I noticed the pine-scented air, the tinge of earth, and
the air so quiet I could tell in which direction a soul was. It slowed me

until my body was in rhythm. Have you felt in rhythm?
What has changed is that the train stop is gone, and the air,

while still cleaner, has caught whiffs of far-off cities, as if they were
drifting by. A structure dies too. And ages. And aren't we structure too?

You wouldn't think so, the way we've convinced ourselves
of our immortality. But as I step away from a memory, I see

the clouds coughing by, the birds falling in droves, the future
like a pinprick in a novel that will never be realized.

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee is the author of two award-winning collections of poetry, *Intersection on Neptune* (The Poetry Press of Press Americana, 2019), winner of the Prize Americana for Poetry 2018, and *On the Altar of Greece* (Gival Press, 2006), winner of the Seventh Annual Gival Press Poetry Award and recipient of a 2007 Eric Hoffer Book Award: Notable for Art Category. Her poetry has appeared on Verse Daily and in numerous publications internationally, including *Cimarron Review*, *Feminist Studies*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *WSQ*. www.donnajgelagotislee.com

I Get Lost in Walmart by David Blumenfeld

[My] sense of direction is so bad I basically
need a GPS to walk around my own block.

George Bilgere

I have no sense of direction,
was born that way, never know
which way is East, which West.
always getting lost wherever I go.

I'm a master of the four *basic* directions:
right left up down. My parents were directionally-
challenged too, though not as bad as I am.
Dad could get places as long as he'd been
there before and the destination wasn't too far.

I once went to a lecture and afterward
couldn't find my car. Only twelve cars
left in the big lot and, damn it, mine
wasn't there. An attendant drove me

from the West Lot to the East Lot and...
there it was. It's true: I get lost in Walmart.
I mean it's so *BIG*. There are so many *items*,
so many confusing, labyrinthine *aisles*.

My head spins and I wander aimlessly
from Fishing Equipment where I usually start
(if someone directs me there) to Men's Wear nearby,
then, that's it --- I'm lost.

Thank God I've got a cell phone and can call
Paula to fish me back again. So, it's gratifying
if I learn about anyone else who is as bad as I am.
Especially if they are intelligent or talented.

Once the Head of my philosophy department, a famous
logician, told me *sotto voce* that she couldn't find her way
out of a paper bag, that she aced every math or logic test
she ever took but spatial relations problems were

like putting her in a paper bag. I've had similar confessions
from other smart people who are cheered to learn about *my*
disability (I mean my differently-abledness). And yesterday
I learned --- to my great delight --- that *George Bilgere*

has the affliction too. And he's a good poet.
I mean a *really good* poet. So if he can do it
without getting lost in the words, then maybe,
just maybe, there's hope left for me too?

David Blumenfeld is a former philosophy professor who resumed writing stories and poems after a break of more than forty years. Since 2022, he has been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize. One of his pieces received a "notable essay" mention in *The Best American Essays 2023*, another was featured in *The Best American Haiku 2023*, and 11 of his works were finalists or received other high praise in literary magazines. Davidblumenfeld.com

Better Than Nothing by Jeffrey Zable

Of course, if you look to the world news to feel better
you'll think that the only recourse is to kill yourself.

And if you try to find something good in the leaders
of your government it will lead to the same conclusion.

My only advice is to separate yourself from it all
and sing the lyrics from that old movie, "The King and I"
which goes, "Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head erect
and whistle a happy tune, so no one will suspect I'm afraid."

This should help deceive yourself for at least a few moments,
which, under the circumstances, is better than nothing.

Jeffrey Zable is a teacher, conga drummer/percussionist who plays for dance classes and rumbas around the San Francisco Bay Area, and a writer of poetry, flash-fiction, and non-fiction. He's published five chapbooks and his writing has appeared in hundreds of literary magazines and anthologies, more recently in *Uppagus*, *Ellie*, *Beach Chair*, *The Paradox*, *Trashlight*, *The Broken Teacup*, *The Raven's Perch, Part Two*, and many others. His selected poetry (from Androgyne Books) will be out soon.

Also Descended from Dreamers by Michael Alcée

Li-Young Li, sit with me on this train,
I will write the past as you read the future,
for I too was that beloved in place of a ram,
trembling on the Sabbath in the cathedral
of my father's mind as he read the New York Times.

Trying to learn what I could but what did I know?
He offered me as sacrifice
yet how might I make sense of his dreams?

Where is Joseph when you need him?

Did my father see the sun and moon
and eleven stars bowing down to me,
or had he become the Pharaoh
to soothe the blow of his own land lost?

Are dreams here to help us understand the past
or do we have it all wrong, like Joseph's brothers
missing the future together? Aren't we all
just trembling at what's to come in that next world?

Why are you crying? I ask myself
in a dream, driving my father's car his way,
an egg imagined under the gas pedal
as if touching nothing.

He had recently stopped taking my calls,
and I was wondering if I might ever see him again.

Listening to the radio,
Tom Petty punctures the silence,
for a moment we agree:
You don't have to live like a refugee.

Alligators by C.L. Bledsoe

The floor is not lava; the carpet is full of alligators, and you have to hop from couch to table to chair to loveseat. We'd prop the table on a chair and slide down it, rearrange the furniture to better suit our playing, my big sister and me. Mom was crying in her bedroom the whole time, crying because she was dying from Huntington's disease, as she'd watched her father and his mother die, the slow strangle of brain cells, nerve cells, that was robbing her of her memories, the supple movement of her body, dancing or walking or even lying still. It was a sneaky thief, embezzling a little more of her sense of self every day. We were just kids living our lives. We didn't know how bad it would get for her. God wasn't going to save her, no matter how often she went to church. It was just her in her bedroom, her children tearing up the house in the other room.

Raised on a rice and catfish farm in eastern Arkansas, CL Bledsoe is the author of more than thirty books, including the poetry collections *Riceland*, *The Bottle Episode*, and his newest, *Having a Baby to Save a Marriage*, as well as his latest novels *If You Love Me, You'll Kill Eric Pelkey* and *The Devil and Ricky Dan*. Bledsoe lives in northern Virginia with his kid.

In Essence by Terri Watrous Berry

I'm almost afraid to look at it,
so bright it is, so luminous, like
looking on the face of God —

*I don't love what you were or are but
what you will always be, your essence,
which you don't seem to remember.*

He said this in the dark across a cross
room, finishing *Those probably ain't
the right words, a dumb way to put it,*

as I lay dumbfounded on the couch.
Long ago he saw my soul and
sees it shining still no matter

how I cover it up with crazy,
looking past the trappings to
that which shines beneath.

Did I help teach this lesson, for
I too loved purely once, once
upon a time, once upon our time.

I am lost in a forest of forgetfulness,
praying now remarks in the dark
somehow will lead me back home.

Terri Watrous Berry is a septuagenarian whose work has appeared in numerous anthologies, journals, magazines, and newspapers. Her poetry this year has been included by *Red Rose Thorns*, *Culture Cult*, *Libretto*, *Moss Piglet*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, *Central Texas Writers Society*, and *London Arts Based Research Centre* among others. After resuming college at age forty, she obtained her B.A. the same year the youngest of her three children graduated high school, and now lives in Michigan with her husband, an accomplished luthier.

This poem originally appeared in an anthology published by Grayson Press in 2003 titled *Proposing on the Brooklyn Bridge*, edited by Ginny Love Connors and including contemporary poets such as Wendell Berry, Donald Hall, Stanley Kunitz, Sharon Olds, and Marge Piercy.

Getting the Results Back from 23andMe by Cat Dixon

In the future, a descendant will account for the priceless accordion we lost, the broken gold-plated necklace, the scandal of cheap red wine. In the past, it will behoove our ancestors to clip the gift of opportunity on the clothesline out back. It won't look legal, but our mothers will scatter into the night, into the dark woods of a middle-class life. In the future, a Pegasus will need at least nine flights—he's one of 12. Fifteen offers stampede in. The bridge over the pond collapses, a cat is on the roof, and the heart has again made another fool. In the recent past, the Statue of Liberty greeted our grandparents on old year's eve, and the full moon—cratered and minty—carried 12 children home. Their approval means nothing for the clothespin broke. The avatar, carefully created, is a wood nymph. Five stories of failure coupled with complaints lead to the proposal which was offered by a trickster god.

Good Intentions by Todd Matson

It wasn't a
stone or bullet,
arrow or grenade.
It was just a snowball
thrown in the spirit of fun.
I was just playing. I swear on a
stack of bibles I didn't intend any
harm. How was I supposed to know
the mountain she was standing on held
the snow of tens of thousands of blizzards?
How could I have known the impact of a tiny
snowball thrown over her head would trigger an
avalanche? I didn't mean to bury her alive. I didn't
intend to crush her. I was just playing. I was just playing.
Is it true what momma always said? Good intentions pave
the road to hell? Can my good intentions bring her back to life?

Cat Dixon (she/her) is the author of *What Happens in Nebraska* (Stephen F. Austin University Press, 2022) along with six other poetry chapbooks and collections. She is a poetry editor with *The Good Life Review*. Recent poems published in *The Literary Underground*, *Nude Bruce*, and *The Rye Whiskey Review*. She works full-time at a funeral home and teaches creative writing part-time at the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

Todd Matson is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in North Carolina, United States. His poetry has been published in *Feminine Collective*, *Agape Review*, *San Antonio Review*, *The Brussels Review* and *Poetry for Mental Health*. He has also written lyrics for songs recorded by several contemporary Christian music artists.

To A.B. by Gabriella Garofalo

No need for dough, they are redoing souls
In shared sacred sites, far beyond the border,
The morning just a bit colder than ever,
A vigorous cheerfulness quenches the mind
With greenery, almost an unexpected light-
No problem, all fears will die, the moon keeps saying,
And she doesn't seem too upset,
But why she's never lost her old habit
Of enlightening you with the first words that come to mind,
Or better still why can't she argue
With stars not so keen on their job?
Perhaps just another waste of time,
Like the shenanigans against the green
Of roots, and plants that hope to rise
In the near future, maybe next week-
While your mind spins among bumper cars,
Pinwheels, kites, so great
At distracting you from that exhausted sky
Of stars, and you keep staring
At blue enamel cups, impatient for him
To grab the day and leave,
Dusk and the squandered luck of the sky,
That bruised burn if a cobalt blue desire
Of starving comets chooses you
As they're starving, but no food for them,
Only a lie down with a bastard winter,
A romp with death, and for you, moon,
The cold blue rays from a crippled sloppy light,
The end of myths, of years,
As nothing else you deserve,
My Adam's rib, my crashing womb
Yielding to silence.

Born in Italy some decades ago, Gabriella Garofalo fell in love with the English language at six, started writing poems (in Italian) at six and is the author of these books *Lo sguardo di Orfeo*, *L'inverno di vetro*, *Di altre stelle polari*, *Casa di erba*, *Blue Branches*, *A Blue Soul*, and *After The Blue Rush*.

Broken by Frances Koziar

I feel
like the stereotypical husband
in that heteronormative cliché
when their marriage falls apart
as fast as sand
falls from your fingers
according to *him*,
and as slowly
as the waves smooth the edges
of a rock, according to *her*.

While he asks *why?* and *what*
happened? she
vents that there are so many years
of grievances that she
doesn't know where
to start. He

reads half a sentence in the middle
of the book,
and doesn't even know enough
to know *what*
he might apologize for, knowing
only that the thought
of her walking away forever is too painful
to contemplate.

So too do I wonder, one woman
to another, *when*
you stopped telling me
what was wrong. When
your silences stopped
being easy, but instead
were filled with bitten-off

words. I
see the distance
in your eyes, my heart
breaking open with raw
pain, understanding only
that I have lost you, somehow,
somewhere, on some
day when I thought of you and smiled,
ignorantly,
and that now
I need to know
and yet am unable
to ask *when*
my face stopped bringing
you solace, to ask

what night it was
when you started lying
awake wishing
that you didn't have me
to deal with.

Frances Koziar has published poetry in over 45 different literary magazines, including *The New Quarterly* and *Acta Victoriana*. She is a young (disabled) retiree, a gamer, a painter, a friendly radical feminist, and a bubble tea fangirl. She lives in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

After Gaslighting by Frances Koziar

Memories shift and fade like mist
in an eerie wind. Somewhere, somehow, some

day They separated you from yourself,
from your judgement, from
your truth, and now there is
a disconnect,
a chasm split so deeply
into the earth that you can't see the gap, only
that black rupture between one half of the forest
and the other. You stand

on one side with your feelings: you feel
the fear, the anxiety,
the self-doubt tangled up in so much
confusion, because your feelings remember something
you can't: your memories are on the other side,
cast away, too far removed to trust
or see clearly in the starlight.

You stumble as you walk on the uneven
forest loam, trying to find your way back
to the road, not sure when
you stepped off of it, or what direction
that was in; They follow you instead
of your own shadow: a ghost,
a presence, a mind
that you have learned to trust instead
of your own, whispering
on the night wind that *it was you*,
it was you who was crazy, you
who were unstable and abused *Them*, and *that*
is why your memories
are wrong, that
is why they had to be corrected
and forgotten.

You speak to yourself too, but your voice is broken,
it sounds mad to your own ears,
because you know that's what They
would think, and the moment you think you understand
yourself, the moment you are sure that these
are all symptoms of psychological
abuse, the fog rolls in again, and you forget
which way you were going and why, your heart
aching because you never meant to hurt
anyone, because you tried so hard and it was never
enough, because you don't know how
to trust your own judgement anymore and wouldn't
bet a dime on what is was actually true. It is only

when those fantoms in the forest inspire you
to turn back, when your heart aches
with a readiness to accept all blame
so that you can love them again, it is only
when you step into the cold water of some
forgotten lake, lost, that you
flinch and remember
where the pain came from
in the first place, begin to remove
the porcupine quills of their
control from your flesh where the blood
still drips down from numb skin, red as passion,
red as the anger they said
was wrong, bloody as the past
you aren't sure you can remember, but that still
keeps you up at night
in fear.

Frances Koziar has published poetry in over 45 different literary magazines, including *The New Quarterly* and *Acta Victoriana*. She is a young (disabled) retiree, a gamer, a painter, a friendly radical feminist, and a bubble tea fangirl. She lives in Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

Mother Lost Her Keys at the Beach by Linda McCauley Freeman

Again. We tried tying them
in red ribbon,
added a whistle in bright green
in case she, not the keys, were lost,
so the whole thing, when found
and draped on the beach fence
with all the other missing keys
(not swallowed by sand or sea),
hung by the dunes
like a Christmas stocking
with her name on it.

—Drifts push hard against
the weathered and worn,
held up by the sheer will of others—

She sits in her rusted
chair, gnarled toes
flecked with sand, her skin crepe,
leathered years of sun.

From under her hat, no book in her lap,
she gazes at the width of waves
coming in, going out.

Linda McCauley Freeman is the author of two full-length poetry books *The Marriage Manual* (Backroom Window Press, 2024) and *The Family Plot* (BWP, 2022) and has been widely published in international journals, including in a Chinese translation. Nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Grand Prize winner of StoriArts' Maya Angelou poetry contest, lines from one of her poems are on display at the Civil Rights Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. She has an MFA from Bennington College and is the former poet-in-residence of the Putnam Arts Council. She lives in the Hudson Valley, NY, where she is a swing dance teacher and a yoga instructor. Follow her at www.LindaMcCauleyFreeman.com, [Facebook@LindaMcCauleyFreeman](https://www.facebook.com/LindaMcCauleyFreeman)

names by Joseph A. Farina

lost and lonely
she turns to her pages
of memories, the names
of lovers who never stayed
longer than the length of a tear
and she wonders if her name lingers
in someone's dream, the way
she hoards and guards theirs
trying to match them
to forgotten faces
those who touched and
held her, under nights
that celebrated beginnings
remembered now as endings.

Joseph A Farina is a retired lawyer in Sarnia, Ontario, Canada. An award winning (Sicily) poet .He draws inspiration from his Sicilian and Canadian roots. Internationally published in Europe and Middle East. first prize in PREMIO CITTA' DI ARONA 2025, published in *Quills Canadian Poetry Magazine*, *Ascent*, *Subterranean Blue* and in *The Tower Poetry Magazine*, *Inscribed*, *The Windsor Review*, *Boxcar Poetry Revue* and appears in the anthologies *Sweet Lemons: Writings with a Sicilian Accent*, *Canadian Italians at Table*, *Witness and Tamaracks: Canadian Poetry for the 21st Century* . Published in U.S. magazines *Mobius*, *Pyramid Arts*, *Arabesques*, *Fiele-Festa*, *Philedelphia Poets* and memoir and in *Silver Birch Press Series*. He has had two books of poetry published— *The Cancer Chronicles* and *The Ghosts of Water Street* and an E-book *Sunsets in Black and White*. His latest book is *The Beach, The Street and Everything in Between*.

Loss in Three Parts by Erin Jamieson

I. Growth

It's growing inside of you the way I once thought a child would grow inside of me- something so granular that's grown in weeks, that, like the first sapling we planted at our first and only home, perseveres, that nothing- not microwave TV dinners or scrapbooks or plans for visiting the world together will stop

II. Echoes

All the lonely homes with howling dogs & aroma of clove on sweet potato casserole- perhaps chubby fingers steal a bite before distant relatives arrive, perhaps a girl wanders from room to room in an ill-fitted sweater that transforms her body into something she is expected to inhabit, a soft capitulation she doesn't even realize she will resent years later, in a home of her own, where her relatives echo in her mind as she prepares a supper for one, her house developed in warmth she never once experienced when she was young.

III. Shield

I open a crimson umbrella, shielding my skin from rain that tastes like ashes, from the stares of neighbors who bake fruitcake with jellied fruit that feels like a knife as it passes chapped lips, sweet mingling with sour for those

afraid that loss is contagious

Erin Jamieson's writing has been published in over 100 literary magazines, including two Pushcart Prize nominations and two Best of Net nominations. She is the author of four poetry chapbooks, including *Fairytales* (Bottle Cap Press) and a forthcoming poetry collection. Her debut novel (*Sky of Ashes, Land of Dreams*) was published by Type Eighteen Books. X/Twitter: @erin_simmer

Fallen Into Oblivion by Edilson A. Ferreira

No more

guys and girls happily driving
open-air convertible cars on weekends,
free of seat belts tethering their bodies,
sweet winds swaying, fighting, and playing
their loose hairs.

No more

children walking on the streets to school,
carrying notebooks in their arms,
not in backpacks, not on buses.

No more

young boys playing marbles in holes
they had dug on vacant lots near home,
their mates flying kites heavens above.

No more

bicycling around only for pleasure,
without protective helmets and gloves.

No more

family sitting on the front porch after dinner,
sharing the latest neighborhood news.

No more

walking in the fields by night,
under tender and puissant moonlight.

No more

people greeting each other and sending good vibes,
even if they were unknown.

No more

fresh milk bottles delivered home by the morning,
but milk boxes at immense supermarkets,
with sleepless cameras furtively watching over us.

No more

letters, no business letters, no love letters,
only emails to be lost in cyberspace.

No more

couples who face the difficulties of everyday life,
profess mutual and sincere forgiveness,
respect the common oath once made,
so engendering true and honest love.

No more

parents, sons, and daughters going out together at night,
carrying in common dreams, dramas, and desires,
like a pack of wolves who have not learned to segregate.

No more

growing, assembling, and sharing rooms and lives,
indifferent to some strange customs of those
who never knew to love and like themselves,
our children becoming children of all of us.

Lost Landscape by Joan Mc Nerney

I am driving down a hill without name
on an unnumbered highway.
This road transforms into a snake
winding around hair pin turns.
See how it hisses though this long night.

Why am I alone?
At the bottom of the incline
lies a dark village. Strangely hushed
with secrets. How black it is. How difficult
to find what I must discover.
My fingers are tingling.
Smoke combs the air, static fills night.

Continuing to cross gas lit streets
encountering dim intersections.
Another maze. One line leads to another.
Dead ends become beginnings.

Listening to lisp of the road.
My slur of thoughts sink as snake rasps grow
louder. See how the road slithers.
What can be explored? Where can it be?

All is in question.

Edilson Ferreira, 82 years old, is a Brazilian poet who writes in English rather than Portuguese. Has launched two Poetry Collections, entitled *Lonely Sailor* and *Joie de Vivre*; has 200 poems published in 360 different publications including selected international Literary Journals. Has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize. He began writing at the age of 67 after he retired from a bank.

His poem here was first published in *Fevers of the Mind*, July 12, 2023.

Joan Mc Nerney is the recipient of three scholarships and has recited her poetry at the National Arts Club, New York City, State University of New York, Oneonta, McNay Art Institute, San Antonio and the University of Houston, Texas. Published worldwide in over forty countries, her work has appeared in numerous literary publications. Four Best of the Net nominations have been awarded to her. *The Muse in Miniature*, *Love Poems for Michael I, II* and *At Work* are available on Amazon.com A new release entitled *Light & Shadow* explores the recent historic COVID pandemic.

A Tendril Hangs from the Sky by Gurupreet Khalsa

A wasp buzzes against a window, caught in repeated
anxious and futile hope for release;
a possum startles as I pass, innocent eyes alarmed.
I tell him, "Be at peace, my friend,"
and ask, "Where goes the path?"

Wandering in confusion, deluded by doubt,
missing ciphers in waterfalls of clanging chaos,
helpless panic as anchors break loose,
broken coils of burden collapsing
with nothing to attach to: star stuff, god stuff,
an intercessor, a sign, a sigh, a hero.

An old man with clouded eyes,
clutching a sad stained cushion, remarks,
"Those days are gone and it is foolish
to wish otherwise."

A tendril dangles from pink-tinted sunrise,
the world painted with impressionist daubs.
I take a running leap, catch it in electric grip,
kick off to glide above white tigers
padding in silence through trackless woods.

I swing back across oceans with surface sapphires
and diamonds, swish my toes in silky waves,
a glimmering moment caught in my throat,
a brush of silk against my breast,
softest song wraps me in its wish,
mockingbird warbling tomorrow's assurance.

Gurupreet K. Khalsa considers connections, space, time, cosmic flow, reality, illusion, and possibility. Her poems have appeared in *The Poet*, *New York Quarterly*, *Dipity*, *IHRAF Publishers*, *aurora journal*, *Delta Poetry Review*, and other online and print publications. Multiple poems have received awards. Currently a resident of Mobile, Alabama after living many other places, she holds a Ph.D. in Instructional Design and when she's not floating about in space is a part time instructor in graduate education programs.

This poem was included in *Extracting Epiphany* (Miriam Rachimi Micro-Chapbook Contest).

my lost flower by Linda M. Crate

sometimes what is lost
cannot be found,

sometimes winter
kills spring;
you were the flower
that never got to
bloom—

i never got to give you
a name,
but i don't know what
name the universe
gave you;

but i think of you often—

you'd be thirteen
now,
probably laughing at me
not getting what 67 means;

or how riled i can get
when people refuse to listen
to me speak plain english
about something that happened
to me that suddenly they're
experts over despite not even
being there—

i wonder what your dreams
would be, what music
you'd listen to; what kind of
person you'd be—

& i just want you to know
i miss you.

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has fifteen published chapbooks the latest being: *not your piñata* (Alien Buddha Publishing, June 2025).

A Bountiful Silence by John Muro

It is the in-between hour when
daylight slowly turns to lose
itself in the embrace of evening,
and I've come in search of the
stillness that lingers between
the swell and hushed exodus
of the tides; those rare, fugitive
moments soon after discourse
is diffused and beaches itself
and time grows slack and one
must work harder to hear the
breath of an elusive earth exhaling
in the rasp of brittle, ice-cruste
d reeds, the amplified rocking
of the wind in search of freight,
and the faint wails of white-
winged gulls, then gazing back
at the illuminated squares of
cottage windows where short-
sighted day has hurried to warm
itself, nodding drowsily by fire-
light, having left such endearments
to those of us who willingly
welcome the gradual lilt of loss,
the betrayal of hope and the
louder expanse of silence.

John Muro has published two books of poems — *In the Lilac Hour* and *Pastoral Suite* — in 2020 and 2022, respectively. His third book, *A Bountiful Silence*, was published this fall. Since the publication of his first book, John has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize four times, twice nominated for the Best of the Net and he has also received a Grantchester Award. John's work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including *Acumen*, *Belfast Review*, *Connecticut River*, *Cool Beans Lit*, *Pictura*, *Sky Island*, the *Valparaiso Review* and elsewhere.

This poem was first published in *Sky Island Journal*, Issue 24 Spring 2023.

An Accounting on Turning Away by Jane Berger Herschlag

Nothing is learned by turning away—
I stare hard at
the woman in the mirror and tell her,
*You don't understand the impact
of not embracing
often.*

Much is lost by turning away—
I look again into the mirror,
*Think of all that you have
lost by your reticence, your unwillingness
to let the cat, the wolf, and the lamb
leap out of your pen.*

So much is saved by turning away
I think, holding in my extremes—
*But what has accrued
when you refused the roller coaster,
left it to others to ride
shrieking and giggling?*

If I could route out my child years
I could love with abandon;
instead, I remain earthbound,
but with a loyal partner who often
lifts me a bit into the air.

With the wisdom of the unconscious,
at nineteen my priorities were suddenly met.
Attending Herb's school of love
I learned many of the songs of trees and flowers.
Sometimes I depart from logic
to let my mind fly into
the stratosphere of poetry.

After taking into account
all the pluses and minuses—
not turning away
builds assets.

Jane Berger Herschlag's full-length poetry collection, *When the Mouth Can't Speak the Body Will*, is published by *Finishing Line Press*. *Bully In The Spotlight*, her 40-page docu-poetry chapbook is published by *Pudding House Publications*. Jane taught creative writing/poetry, and curated the open mic reading series for the *Writer's Voice*, NYC. Forthcoming in August 2026, from *Awatum Press*, *Overcoming, A Philosophy of Resistance* — Jane is one of the six writers. You can also find *Returning to the Scene of the Crime* on *Sky Freight Publishing*.

Lithuania by Peter Newall

Fish, you hide your red scales
under the riverbank, ripples
of clear water blur you, rank overhanging weed
gives shelter.
But the boy, barefoot,
cunning in the ways of the forest,
holds still, watches.

On the hill
the small house.
Pine logs, raw, still oozing sap. White flags
of linen dry in the wind.

I came
unknown and unknowing
wanting only to lie in
the grass, sleep. I threw away
my rifle.

Here
the speech is strange, not mine.
We could not talk. But her eyes,
dark, wary,
slowly granted understanding.

Bread
cooked on hot stones, the blue smoke
harsh. A straw pallet.

Now I will stay. Sky, be silent;
roof, cover us,
we need nothing more.

Peter Newall has worked variously in a naval dockyard, as a lawyer and as a musician. He has lived in Australia, Japan, Germany, and now in Odesa, Ukraine, where he fronts a local blues band. His stories and poems have been published in the UK, the USA, Europe, Hong Kong and Australia.

Blue Collar by Keith Melton

In the sweat kingdom of the sultry south
Dixie heat marking flesh to the nub--
we steam clean
old compressors stacked like bunions of mastic;

the yard a suture of chain link
to herd the guard dogs and their Satan barks.
The din of the machines, repeating
like a hammer's fall,

the snarl of air hoses and pulleys, hissing
whispering, how can I survive?
And trapped in the metronome of chaos, bewildered
alone, the anger of my day

never enough to conquer the line--
I wear the pain, blue collar born, blue collar worn.
Tattoo blue on knuckles of fire
waiting for pay stubs and quitting time, hoping

to find the lightening of love on the next bar stool.
Strangers, exiles, nursing tall boys
and cigarettes, trying to forget the week
another Saturday night, lost in a graffiti love nest.

Keith Melton is a graduate of Georgia Tech and The American University. His work has appeared in *Amethyst*, *Agape Review*, *Compass Rose*, *The Galway Review*, *Big City Lit*, *Confrontation*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *The Lyric*, *The Miscellany*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, *Deep Overstock*, *WayWords*, and others. He lives in Bluffton, SC (USA).

On the Jetty by Keith Melton

Born to the land, we contemplate the sinkhole of our fate
chained to the furrow

and bent to the rake
across a thousand acres of mortgaged yesterday.

And tossing a silver dollar to the sky
imagining all the places

that moon could buy--
Hong Kong, Istanbul, Marrakech

a plea for starlight to change the course
of human misery.

And five will get you ten
downwind from civilization

we'd be better in Caracas by the sea,
Kingstown, Montevideo, Brazil--

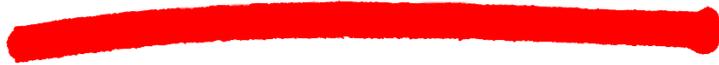
low country boys toasting the flight of gulls
as we steal another look away

beyond the graveyards of night in tiny landlocked towns.
Horizon at the edge of catharsis, our way

lost in a drunkard's dream
our secret lives disappearing on the waves.

Keith Melton is a graduate of Georgia Tech and The American University. His work has appeared in *Amethyst*, *Agape Review*, *Compass Rose*, *The Galway Review*, *Big City Lit*, *Confrontation*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *The Lyric*, *The Miscellany*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, *Deep Overstock*, *WayWords*, and others. He lives in Bluffton, SC (USA).

Fiction



The Field of Lit Wax by Glenn H. Myers

The flames from the 86 birthday candles—85, plus one for good luck—flickered and swayed, a light show in Virginia Fleming’s 212-year-old living room, surrounded by friends, family, neighbors, coworkers, politicians, musicians, actors, and many others. It was overwhelming, thrilling, exciting, everything she’d ever dreamed.

She closed her eyes, her mind shuffling through various wishes, as her well-wishers awaited in silence for her to blow out—or attempt to blow out—the field of lit wax.

She arrived at her wish.

She inhaled, hoping it wouldn’t be her last breath—or birthday—opened her eyes and blew out the candle, a sole, sad remnant, atop a three-day old cupcake.

The cheers and applause in her mind faded.

Maybe next year, she thought. Maybe next year.

Glenn H. Myers is in his sixties trying to do something meaningful: writing stories that give people joy, make them think, or let them know they aren’t alone. His fiction has appeared in literary publications, including *Loch Raven Review*, *The Stray Branch*, *The Wise Owl*, and *Waffle Fried*. His non-fiction has appeared in the *Boston Globe*. He can be found at [glennhmyers.com](https://www.instagram.com/glennhmyers/), Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/glennhmyers/>), and Bluesky ([@glennhmyers.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/glennhmyers.bsky.social)).

A Man Digs by Salena Casha

Halfway down the sideways green on Harvard campus, a man digs. It is not the digging of a professional. He carries no scarlet bag of tools, wields no orange cone, and dons no yellow vest. His sweatshirt is gray, and the buttocks of his jeans are washed vintage. New, or new in recent memory, a casual observer on their morning walk decides. This man is laid out on his side, shoulder to toe against the dark earth, his body half wrapped around the trunk of a tree. His face is so close to the base of the old bark that a casual observer might wonder if he's peering inside. The grass around the roots is already winnowed down to curled tufts by a sporadic fall, enough to expose the soft dirt. There has been a recent rain, which makes the ground pliable.

It helps him get the job done, a casual observer decides. Mostly because this man digs with his bare hands.

There are two backpacks beside him, full to bursting, and there must be objects in them that could cut into the soil and brush away the debris: the corner of hardback books, the point of a dried-out Bic, or the teeth of a key, but he has chosen fingertips. They move furtively in and out of view, just like terrier paws, a *shush shush shush* barely audible beneath the morning Memorial Drive traffic.

The difference of sound between the man and his dog brethren is in the nails, the casual observer decides. One of the few times that humans are gentler: when they dig without a spade.

This casual observer — who has slowed down their morning walk to observe this man but, ultimately, has not stopped — wonders if this man is digging for acorns. It's what they'd expect to find at the base of a tree, and the manner in which he performs the task is not unlike the maniacal pawing of the North American gray. Even before they can vocalize this thought, they decide that the explanation of acorns does not, in fact, make sense.

What would a man, a grown man, want with acorns?

But it's the same question asked a different way: what would a man, a grown man, want with a tree like that in a place like this?

The only reasonable explanation, the casual observer decides, is that he has buried something and has come back to retrieve it. Yes, yes but why was it buried so shallow and in a place so public, so well-trodden? It would likely be unsafe or gone by now. At this point, lest the observer draws attention to themselves, they must continue beyond the man, and he slips out of view even though they can still hear his *pat pat pat* of skin against wet earth.

It is then that the observer on their walk comes upon the second tree and then the third and notices, at each base, the ground is disturbed. There is a shallow divot, no deeper than a dinner dish, at the northmost facing roots. The observer moves toward this last one and peers over the edge. Inside, there is nothing but a newly liberated worm.

A shiver, unbidden, claws its way down the observer's spine, as if they have seen an open grave.

It is hard to tell if anything has been found in this man's odd pilgrimage from tree to tree in Harvard Square, but the observer is aware that the tree the man is at now is the last in its line, that beyond it, there is nothing but concrete and red-brick buildings and tourists and Teslas. They wonder if the man has lost something, if he's at his wits' end, if they should call the police or mental health services or if they should offer to help him find whatever it is he's looking for but, ultimately, they have never come upon a man like this digging and so, they don't know how to even start the conversation. They don't know if it's safe to have a conversation, or even kind to approach him. And they wouldn't know how to describe what they've seen either or why it disturbs them so, and thus, they keep walking.

But everywhere, everywhere they go, they see trees with dug out earth and hear the *tck tck tck* of fingers peeling away topsoil and know, whatever it is that they should have done, they missed their chance and now, there is nothing but the haunting of the man that they will never see again. That they will think of him, always.

Salena Casha's work has appeared in over 150 publications in the last decade. Her most recent work can be found on *HAD*, *F(r)iction*, and *Club Plum*. She survives New England winters on good beer and black coffee. Subscribe to her substack at salenacasha.substack.com.

Snow White and the Seven Dogs by Mark Tulin

My client was a middle-aged woman with white hair and seven small yapping dogs. She always wanted a big family. She said seven was her lucky number, and when one dog died, she quickly got another small lapdog to keep the number at seven.

Her name was Margie Shore, and I met with her every Tuesday afternoon. She was divorced and had lost her teenage son in a car accident six years ago. Since his passing, her life has centered around her seven dogs. Her loss was heartbreaking, and she has struggled to move on without him. She developed a rare disease that causes her a lot of pain and has kept her confined to her house since the accident.

My name is Mike Morgan, PhD. I specialize in trauma and loss and was highly recommended by Margie's primary care physician.

Margie greeted me at the door with a cane and was accompanied by a Chihuahua mix, a miniature toy poodle, a Yorkshire terrier, a rat terrier, a shih tzu, a Pomeranian, and a Lhasa Apso. She rattled off all the names before I could write them down and match them to their breeds. They had different personalities, almost like Snow White's seven dwarves. But, in this case, it was Snow White and the Seven Dogs.

One dog was aggressive and liked to rip apart stuffed animals. Another was neurotic, constantly circling me when I talked to Margie. A third dog would freeze around strangers as if in a trance. But the dogs were loyal, protective, and adored Margie. They surrounded her like a fortress wherever she sat. When she felt feverish or sick, they hopped on the bed and pressed their tiny bodies against her to keep her warm. And when she got up and moved to another room, they slowly followed her as if she were their queen.

Whenever I asked about her son, she said, "I don't want to talk about it. I can't talk about it. I know I need to, but that's all I think about, and if I start talking, my pain won't stop."

I understood her fear. The pain of losing her son spread through her body like a cancer. I promised we'd take it slow, starting with less painful subjects and gradually moving to the more upsetting ones.

Margie avoided anything meaningful. However, she was happy to talk about her dogs and how each one brought a special gift. She didn't want to discuss her marriage, which ended in divorce not long after her son died. She kept her son's urn on her dresser in the bedroom, surrounded by condolence cards. After a few months of no progress, I told Margie that her issues needed attention, not her seven yapping dogs, whom she kept picking up, putting down, petting, and baby-talking to.

"I know I asked for help, but I'm not sure I'm ready. Maybe you should help someone who needs it more."

I gently grasped her arm, looked her directly in the eye, and said, "You need it just as much or more than the next person, Margie. Believe me."

She nodded in agreement.

As we talked, her dogs growled, wondering why I was still there. No one had visited the house in three years. The dogs were suspicious and jealous, except for one, Poppy. He sat by my foot and begged to be petted. He was the only dog that liked me.

"It seems like Poppy wants you to stay, Dr. Morgan."

Margie wanted me to stay too, but she was resistant. She was caught in a psychological tug-of-war. She loved her dogs but knew they weren't enough to heal her. She needed to talk about her son and release all the grief that burdened her and kept her trapped in the house.

"Margie. I'm sure we would make more progress if you focused on our discussion rather than your dogs."

She looked down at her row of canines, then at me. "But it's hard not to pick them up when they need their mommy."

That was something I couldn't argue with. But they distracted her. Her focus was solely on them and their needs. Were they hungry? Were they anxious? Did they need to go out in the yard to do their business?

“Margie, I know you love your dogs, but we can't get anything done when they're around you and demanding your attention. Is there anyone you know who can take them for a walk or to a dog park for an hour?”

The next visit, Margie had made arrangements with a dog walker. From that point on, I had her complete and undivided attention. She talked about her husband first. She smiled. “He was a handsome man. He looked like James Gardner in *The Rockford Files*.”

The theme song of *The Rockford Files* played in my head.

“He was an ideal husband at first,” said Margie. “But I found out he was a womanizer. When our son died, he couldn't handle it, and neither could I. I was always stuck in bed. He was at the track or the casino with his lady friends.”

“When did you realize the marriage was over?”

“I found a woman's earring under the sofa. Poppy found it. We hadn't had sex in years. We didn't sleep together. He had the room downstairs, while I was in my room with the dogs. I'm a heavy sleeper, so anything could happen downstairs and I wouldn't know about it.”

“Did you confront your husband?”

“Not right away. I was scared of losing him.”

“When did you finally have enough?”

“When I found a pair of women's panties in the sofa cushion, he didn't deny it. In fact, he was proud of it. He listed all the women he'd had sex with over the last two years while I was upstairs and out of it. I think he resented the fact that I was sick.”

“Were you angry?”

Margie shook her head and laughed.

“That sounds crazy, doesn't it? I was in too much pain and on too many narcotics to hate anyone. I was numb to everything.”

The more Margie talked, the more animated she became and the less pain she felt. We discussed her husband over three or four visits. She realized that her husband was human, not a monster. He couldn't tolerate a wife who stayed in bed all day with seven dogs.

“I really can't blame him. What man could deal with a wife who is always in bed?”

She had answered her own questions. I sat back and listened. No one had listened to her in years. Having someone to talk to was the best Christmas gift. Soon, she was ready to face the elephant in the room: her son.

We sat in Jeremy's bedroom while reflecting on him. There was a lot of crying at first, but once Margie's tears dried, she had so much to say. All the wonderful memories merged into a big, tangled ball of grief. Jeremy died unexpectedly at seventeen. He was on the verge of something special. He wanted to become a professional photographer.

Jeremy was riding his bike at night, returning from his girlfriend's house, when a drunken driver ran a red light and crashed into Jeremy with his Dodge Charger. His body was shattered, literary in pieces, as the driver sped away. A young girl walking her dog saw the scene, ran home, and told her mother. Her mother then called the police.

“It was over for me, too,” Margie said while sitting on Jeremy's bed and holding his Nikon camera. “All my dreams for him. It was finished before he even started. He wanted to take pictures of all the places he wished to see in the world. Every night, he spun his globe around, dreaming of the photos he'd take of the deserts and rainforests.”

Her tears welled up as she showed me Jeremy's photo portfolio. “He developed his own photos, too.”

We talked in Jeremy's room every Tuesday afternoon for a year until she stopped crying.

She said, “I'm going to give away all his stuff except for his camera and portfolio. I'm going to donate his clothes and furniture to Goodwill and use the room for myself. You know, I used to write stories when I was a teenager. I wanted to be a writer, but my parents discouraged it, and thought I wasn't bright enough.”

We became friends during the year and a half I worked with Margie. By the time I was ready to leave, her dogs warmed up to me, especially Poppy. He was the only one who would let me pick him up.

Before I left Margie's house on our last visit, she had been spending more time in the living room than in her bedroom. She had started taking walks and shopping instead of calling for delivery. Poppy followed me to the door as I was leaving and began whimpering.

"He wants to come with you," Margie said. "If you don't take him, he'll be crying for months, and I won't be able to comfort him."

My wife was surprised when I brought home a dog, especially one so tiny. Margie even gave me a care package with dog food, a bowl, a leash, and his favorite chew toy.

Mark Tulin is a retired therapist from California. Mark's books include *Magical Yogis*, *Awkward Grace*, *The Asthmatic Kid and Other Stories*, *Junkyard Souls*, *Rain on Cabrillo*, and *Uncommon Love Poems*. He's featured in *Cafe Lit Magazine*, *Still Point Journal*, *The Opiate*, *The Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Amethyst Review*, *Vita Brevis Press*, *White Enso*, *The Memoirist*, and *Red Wolf Edition*. He is a Pushcart nominee and a Best of Drabble. Visit Mark at www.crownthewire.com.

The Struggle Before by Maryah Converse

20 July 2023

Mounira inched her chair closer to the balcony edge, the metal wheels cool against her palms, the brake stiff under her fingers as she set it in place. Her younger twin brothers Hamza and Hashem, bursting with the responsibility of young adulthood, had just run shouting from their third-floor apartment, and now she could see them crossing the street onto the beach and running headlong towards the breakwater.

Out on the water, she could see the approach of the family's wooden *hasaka* fishing boat. About 20 feet long and shaped much like a rowboat or dinghy, the bow rode low in the water, the hold full and heavy with the day's catch. The hull was bright blue, but like most of the boats in Gaza City harbor, there was a bold canary yellow band under the dark rubber lip of the decking, where the registration number was painted in red near the bow. Mounira's father sat in the back, one hand on the tiller of the outboard engine, her eldest brother Radwan braced with a wide stance and arms akimbo in the broad middle of the boat. He had messaged to say they were close to home, and the boys had run down to meet and help their Radwan and their father wrap up the day's work. The twins waited most afternoons by Mama's phone for this moment, to help to secure the boat and haul the catch onto shore, supporting the family's livelihood. Hashem and Hamza were excited to join the family business, dreaming of a trawler of their own one day.

But Mounira's chest was tight, even as she drew deep, calming breaths. Especially on a hot summer afternoon like this one, the sun looming low and red over the Mediterranean and searing her squinting eyes, seeing her brothers race across the beach only reminded Mounira of one particular day she'd rather have forgotten.

16 July 2014

She had seen twin ten-year-old Hamza and Hashem stumble sideways and fall to the sand before the high whine and booming crash of the missile registered in her ears, and for a long moment it was like she was on the airless surface of the moon. She gasped, but the air meant nothing to her paralyzed lungs until she saw Hamza roll towards his twin, saw Hashem stagger in slow motion to his feet, then pull up his brother beside him. They clung to each other as the smoke from the missile strike began to rise on her right from beyond the Al-Deira Hotel, and amidst the whine and explosion of a second missile, Mounira slowly realized that her brothers were still alive. That was when the scream had roared up from her belly, ripping through her throat, pure wordless terror and fury.

Mounira had still had her skateboarding, hip-hop dancing, distance hiking legs then, and they pivoted almost of their own accord—much like the scream she couldn't control—pivoted from the balcony, weaving through living room sets in the family room. She heard her mother calling her name behind her as she slammed open the apartment door and hurtled towards the stairs, but Mounira couldn't form words, could only shriek as she ran. A corner of her rational mind registered cars on the street, but she wasn't the only one running across traffic towards the beach. Her scream was petering out, but her feet couldn't stop or even pause, caution unavailable in her response.

"Hashem! Hamza!" Unable to slow her momentum enough, she stumbled into her brothers, flinging an arm around each, squeezing them hard against her. "Are you okay?"

At first, she didn't understand why her mother didn't also stop, but went hurtling past at a speed Mounira had never seen her mother run. Suddenly, she recognized the name that her mother was screaming, and then Mounira was running again, and yelling, "Baba! Radwan!"

Hashem and Hamza were faster, weaving through the colored tents on the beach, outpacing Mounira and their mother, stoically silent while the women wailed. When they had all reached the breakwater, Hashem was pointing out to sea, where Baba and Radwan's boat was still making its steady approach, and they slowly turned, dumbstruck, to watch the smoke rise from up the shore.

Minutes later, the twins caught the lines to tie up the little fishing vessel, and Mama dragged Baba and Radwan off the boat and into her arms, sobbing, "*Alhamdu lillah*, praise God. *Subhaan allah*, praise God. There is no god but God," over and over again.

Heavy as the boat lay in the water, the day's catch was ignored as the family made their way up the breakwater with dozens of other fishermen and beachgoers. Mounira squeezed Hashem and Hamza's

hands till her knuckles turned white, sobbing softly from her scream-ravaged throat. A crowd had gathered between the Al Deira Hotel and the sea, some standing stoically alone, others propping each other up, men gesticulating wildly as they shouted imprecations at the occupier's indiscriminate attacks.

Mounira started to pick up names. She'd lived in this neighborhood all her life, gone to school with the sisters in all the nearby homes, including the Bakr family – three young cousins dead, two more with shrapnel wounds – and the Abu Wafah family that had sustained one shrapnel injury to an older cousin. Someone started wailing, one of the Bakr aunties, and then another. Acutely aware of the heat of the twins' shoulders against her own, Mounira's knees gave out and she collapsed into the sand, cheeks wet with her own silent tears of guilty gratitude for her family's lives.

14 May 2018

Now a nursing student at the university, Mounira had also taken training as an emergency medic, so when the preparations had begun for the Great March of Return, she had volunteered as a first aid provider. For the seventh week now, every Friday she packed fresh first aid supplies and clean water in her schoolbag, and slung it on under an oversized white vest with a distinctive red crescent and cross on the back and each front placket. Some of her classmates were spending their weeks, too, in tents along Gaza's eastern border, but Mounira's parents insisted she sleep at home and go to classes. Freedom would be incomplete without a skill to exercise for the good of her people.

In the early weeks, the marchers' efforts had been thematic: the "Land Day" march commemorating the general strike of 1976, the "Women's March of Gaza" honoring the mothers of the movement, and the "Friday of the Palestinian Worker" on the heels of International Workers' Day. Today the focus was meant to be on the United States' decision to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to the disputed capital of Jerusalem, but Mounira wasn't propelled by this political choice today. She returned Friday after Friday to the border march because it felt real, made her feel alive.

When the door of the minibus slid open at the back of the protests, Mounira and her friends were greeted with the sound of *dubkeh* drumbeats throbbing from Bluetooth speakers, and chants of defiance rising above the black-and-white keffiyeh turbans and shawls on the heads and shoulders of the crowd. The red, black and green flag waved in the clear summer air, kites dotted the sky above, and Mounira's spirits were inevitably lifted with them. The joy of her people, even under blockade, was inescapable on these Fridays.

In time, the crowd began to move east towards the cleared no-man's land and the barbed wire border. Mounira hung near the back with other medics in clearly marked vests. Some had walkie-talkies pinned to their shoulders, ready to dispatch first aid when and where it was needed. Mounira focused her attention on the music, on the flags, steadfastly ignoring the occupation forces she knew were aligned against the far side of the protest crowd.

She flinched when the first gunshot came, a single round. Then another, and a third. Sniper fire, she surmised; they liked to aim for the debilitating but not fatal kneecap shot, leaving the survivor with a limp, an amputation, a prosthetic, a chair that would remind them for the rest of their lives of the occupation's power over them. Two more sniper rounds popped off.

"Mounira!" One of the walkie-talkie men gestured at her, and then towards the southeast corner of the crowd. "Over that way, nonfatal gunshot wounds. Go!"

So, she ran, shouting, "Aid worker! Medical aid worker!" between her panting breaths.

As she neared the front of the marchers, they began gesticulating her forward and to the right until she spotted two young men waving arms over their heads. At their feet, several more young people were bent over the injured young man, hardly more than a boy, bent over his knees.

Mounira was starting to unsling the bag of supplies off her shoulders when she stumbled sideways, her right leg suddenly unable to hold her weight. She tried to lean left, and then the other knee gave out. She didn't even feel the pain at first, as she rolled onto her back and stared at her bloody, torn flesh, at the shards of white kneecap protruding at unnatural angles from her skin.

As she slid from consciousness, she thought, this will be my life now.

7 October 2023

What will this mean for her people, her family, her own future?

Mounira clutches her phone in her hand, every muscle rigid as she scrolls Insta, Facebook, all her socials, bearing witness to a torrent of blood and horror and anger, but also a whisper of relief, of defiance. She fights her sneaking euphoria, knows that this can do nothing good for anyone in the end, but from her wheelchair in her father's third-floor apartment without an elevator, there is a corner of her heart that is grateful that someone is doing what she can no longer manage, is fighting back for the dignity of their people.

Even knowing this bloody morning will bring down a thousandfold storm of missiles on their heads, yet again, still this small spark of rebellion proves that her proud, ancient people remain unbroken, still resistant, still a people of purpose and pride.

She yells for one of her nephews, who skids into the living room at a run, as yet blithely unaware of unfolding events. "Find Radwan, *yaa 'ammoh*. Find your Baba. I need him to take me to Al-Shifa."

Mounira will never be a ward nurse from this chair, much less a defender of her people, but Al-Shifa Hospital will have use for a good triage nurse to help manage new arrivals, and she has worked hard for her reputation as the best.

A 2025 Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Fellow in Jordan, Maryah Converse was a Peace Corps Volunteer in rural Jordan (2004-2006), an English teacher in Jordan's capital (2008-2010), and a student in Cairo during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Her publications include essays, fiction and poetry in *New Madrid Journal*, *Silk Road Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *L'Éphémère Review*, and many other publications. She holds a Masters in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and is a PhD candidate in Arabic applied linguistics. MaryahConverse.com @maryahc.bsky.social

Only When I Dream of Home by Souad Zakarani

On the Mediterranean coast in my city of Gaza, we scattered sand in the sun and we whispered words of hope to each other as we imagined other children along the coast dreaming, like us, of a boat that would carry them across the vast horizon, where they might meet us on the open sea.

This scene awakens my thoughts, which never end, except when I open the window of my temporary home—a small room where I currently live, the size of a prison cell. My other real home is the one I have dreamed of since childhood, the home where my grandparents lived on their land more than seventy years ago. On my first trip to the United States, our teacher asked us where in the world we would like to go. I was sixteen years old, and the only place I could think of was Palestine: A dream that might bring me together on that boat and feel that I am not forgotten and not alone, even in my absurd exile. My wish resurfaced, and ten years later, I was not aware that I was repeating the same answer.

I used to dream of my grandfather's house, two or three hours away, but it was an eternal distance for me. Now that I have no home of my own, I look at the broken shadows in my eyes in the mirror and see the walls of my house, which have become high, higher than the many images hanging there from my imagination. The floor of the balcony is covered with olives that no one has picked. My home, which is growing, must become a reality kilometers away from the Mediterranean coast, where I will scatter a lot of sand, embrace the horizon and sing.

A Moroccan writer, poet & translator. After obtaining a bachelor's degree in French literature and a master's degree in English literature, Souad Zakarai worked as a foreign language teacher at a language institute in Casablanca. She is fluent in French, Arabic, English, German, Spanish, and Italian. She currently works as a translator for a local newspaper and has poetry, narrative, and critical contributions in various local and international literary newspapers and magazines. Her works featured in several anthologies worldwide such as Poems for Rich, Centenary Project, Oldham Poetry, Well Read, Hooligan Street, AVA, Sofón, Romanian/Australian Anthology of Contemporary Poetry & Prose, Morecambe Poetry Festival Anthology, and the anthology Zest of the Lemon Volume 3. Her poem «Weiß» was shortlisted for the Ulrich GRASNICK Lyrikpreis 2025. She is working on publishing her first poetry collection in German, in addition to her interest in translating Moroccan folktales into several languages.

A Lake Monster by Rick Taliaferro

The trailmaster inspected the leaden sky while his reluctant trailmaker flung a couple life jackets and aluminum paddles into a canoe.

“Weather station predicted overcast, but no rain on the Doppler,” the trailmaster said of the lid-like cloud cover. “We’ll have a safe, instructive trip, Robbie.”

The boy looked at the canoe racks and asked, “Aren’t other guys going out for the canoeing certificate, Mr. Clauden?”

“The class doesn’t start till this afternoon,” the trailmaster said. “I set aside this time to give you some practice before then. See if we can get you moving on your skill badges.”

“But why just me?”

“Can’t you for once appreciate my time?” Robbie started to speak but the trailmaster cut him short. “Grab the stern, if you know what that is.”

They lifted the fiberglass canoe and as Mr. Clauden led, he explained that they would paddle down Coldwater Creek to Lake Laclede and then to Pere Marquette Isle and back. In doing so, Robbie would complete several of the canoeing requirements before the class even started. Just the two of them, without smartphones, looking nature square in the face. “What’s that?” he asked of Robbie’s muttering.

“Nothing, Mr. Clauden.”

Though he would never admit it, the trailmaster felt an undercurrent of competition with Robbie, and frequently wanted to get the better of him. One aspect of this competition was his ongoing campaign to steer Robbie in the right direction; the kid needed a lot of guidance.

They stepped onto a shady trail in the dim wood, but it offered no relief from the 70-degree dew point. Robbie grumbled at the humidity and gnats. “Shit,” he whispered as he stumbled on the gnarled maple root that Mr. Clauden had stepped over.

The trailmaster smirked. “Walk much?”

“I didn’t see it.”

“You need to keep your eyes open. And watch that language.”

Mr. Clauden had reprimanded his trailmakers with demerits for profanity and warned them that if they ever used foul words in certain situations – for example, in front of his wife – that he’d haul off and belt them one.

“Maybe looking through that silly mini-cam and smartphone so much is weakening your eyesight,” Mr. Clauden said.

“I think it helps me be more observant. I still don’t understand why I couldn’t bring it.”

Mr. Clauden didn’t respond. He wanted to squelch the argument by intimidating Robbie with the silent treatment. The boy was fidgety in the woods, on the water, in the dark. At least, he used to be. There was something different about him at this year’s summer camp; *sure of himself* was the phrase that came to mind. He’d always had an air of uncertainty—for example, when he asked his numerous pesky questions—but now there was a confidence in his tone, especially when he’d refer to some article or other that he’d read or proudly point out that he’d finally passed the swimming test that was a prerequisite for the canoeing certificate. Mr. Clauden was amused at the images of Robbie’s several floundering attempts at the test.

“I could’ve recorded you giving a canoeing demo,” Robbie suggested. “Posted it on the team’s website.”

And that was the main reason Mr. Clauden had ordered Robbie to leave his mini-cam and smartphone in his tent: he didn’t want their canoeing session recorded; or any other activity with him in it. Robbie had made several videos of hikes and campouts during the past year, calling it by some fancy French technique, and Mr. Clauden didn’t like the way he appeared or sounded in the videos. That wasn’t him. There was one persistent image in particular that disturbed him: sitting around a campfire with the boys, he looked like a morose demon in the flickering flames as he faced the mini-cam. And what were the Trailmakers of America coming to, anyway, offering certificates in cinematography. Next they’d be offering certificates in tiddlywinks.

“Mr. Clauden, you there?”

“The creek’s right around the next turn,” Mr. Clauden reassured him.

“I know,” Robbie griped. “You can’t miss the smell of dead fish.”

At the creek, they put on the life jackets, Robbie complaining that his was too big, and then hoisted the canoe into the sluggish current and held it while Mr. Clauden demonstrated how to get safely into it. Robbie flailed at the swarming mosquitoes as he took the bow seat, but Mr. Clauden stoically refrained from swatting them as he sat and pushed off.

As they descended downstream, Mr. Clauden recited a list of the canoeing requirements. “Any questions?”

“Yes,” Robbie said. “Why are you so, like, determined for me to take canoeing, anyway?”

"It'll help you with your promotions," Mr. Clauden said. "As your trailmaster, my job is to help you see your potential." He didn't mention that a boy's achievements also reflected well on the boy's trailmaster among the other trailmasters.

Robbie listlessly pulled his paddle through the water.

"Pick up the pace," Mr. Clauden said.

"What's the hurry?"

Mr. Clauden looked at Robbie's ears protruding beneath his khaki trailmaker's cap. His scrawny neck didn't seem strong enough to support his head, and he had a fleeting urge to swat it. "What are you, a Girl Scout?"

"I don't know what that has to do with anything."

Robbie was more in need of Mr. Clauden's guidance than he had thought, though he began to think that the kid was more trouble than he was worth. And Mr. Clauden's patience had a threshold beyond which his thoughts toward Robbie became aggravated. "It has to do with stroking like a man," he said. "Now put some oomph into it."

The canoe veered as Robbie used his paddle to snag a plastic soda jug bobbing in the stream.

"Concentrate," Mr. Clauden said. "Maintain a true course."

"I thought you'd want me to pick up trash," Robbie said. "Isn't that part of the ecology certificate?"

"I want you to follow my lead, watch where you're going."

Presently, Coldwater Creek opened onto tree-lined Lake Laclede. Pere Marquette Isle appeared a half-mile away, enwrapped by morning fog.

Robbie peeked over the gunwale as they paddled across the lapping water. "Looks like copper," he said. "Murky."

His voice was tight, but Mr. Clauden wasn't sure if it was caused by nervousness or chatty enthusiasm; Robbie's voice got like that when breathlessly summarizing a movie that he liked. Mr. Clauden decided that he was timid and trying to put on a brave front on the deep water when Robbie pressed his forearms against his life jacket between strokes to ensure that it was secure. Mr. Clauden kept quiet and relished Robbie's nervousness.

"It's like something's lurking beneath the surface," Robbie said cautiously.

"Like what?" Mr. Clauden scoffed. "A lake monster?" He felt like joining the mocking cawing of several ravens rustling by overhead.

Robbie chuckled unconvincingly. "That's really good, Mr. Clauden."

He grinned at the boy's flimsy attempt to bolster himself with anxious flattery.

"Yeah," Robbie said. "This could be a good setting for a sequel... *Creature from the Copper Lagoon*. This scene has possibilities."

Possibilities? What kid talks like that? Always talking about movies and the way things look. Or, as Robbie put it, *the arrangement*. He could stare at a pile of pots and pans in a camping washtub full of soapy water, or late-afternoon tree shadows, or lumps of charred wood in a bed of gray ash the morning after a campfire. Like he was seeing something unusual underneath those ordinary things.

"More important than your little scene," Mr. Clauden lectured, "Pere Marquette Isle gets its name from a brave missionary."

"Look," Robbie said warily. "The fog looks kind of like a giant ghost skull."

Mr. Clauden saw the image but he wasn't about to acknowledge it. "This missionary ventured here hundreds of years ago to spread the gospel to a savage people," he continued. "Now there was a real man."

"Maybe there's a magnetic field, or something, like, holding the fog in place."

It occurred to Mr. Clauden that maybe Robbie was ignoring his history lesson to goad him. But he smiled as he pictured how the boy was going to handle the capsized-canoe exercise. "Is that what you think is the most important thing?" Mr. Clauden groused. "Are you learning anything from me?"

"Yeah," Robbie said distractedly, gazing at the island.

"Yeah, right," Mr. Clauden said. "Focus on what I'm teaching you so you'll know more than when we started."

"I just can't get over what a scene this would make." Robbie sighed satisfactorily and turned his head. "Thanks for bringing me out here, Mr. Clauden."

Though the trailmaster was surprised and pleased at the gratitude, he said, "I didn't bring you out here so you can pretend to make movies."

Robbie shrugged. "Well, I'm sure glad you did." He dropped his paddle in the hull, then put his thumbs together with his index fingers up and moved them back and forth, up and down, to frame the island in several views. It was as if Robbie were taking the lead and Mr. Clauden wasn't even there. "If only I had my camera," he pined in that squeaky voice. "The murky water. Murky sky. Murky fog." He pitched his voice lower and intoned, "*The Skull of Pere Marquette*." He glanced behind at Mr. Clauden and dropped his smile. "What's wrong?" he asked.

“First, that was offensive to the memory of Pere Marquette. Second, this is real life, not a silly movie, and you need to pay attention.”

Robbie turned in his seat to face the trailmaster. “Mr. Clauden, I’m not really planning on spending much of my life in a canoe.”

The boy’s occasional frankness had always bothered Mr. Clauden; in fact, it sometimes made *him* nervous. His jaw muscles twitched. “And I’m not spending my time being a trailmaster for my own glory.”

Robbie’s eyebrows squeezed together and he tilted his head like a mutt trying to parse human speech. “Are you going to choke up?” he asked respectfully.

“What would I choke up about?”

“I don’t know.” Robbie put his thumbs together again and looked through his index fingers at Mr. Clauden. “But now that you mention it, who *are* you spending all this time being a trailmaster for?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know how to explain my thoughts.”

“Stop doing that with your hands.” Robbie put his hands on his knees and looked into the lake as if looking for the words. “Okay, it’s like that time at the winter campout, when you told us how you were disappointed because we weren’t more...grateful to you.” He looked at Mr. Clauden. “You came back from visiting that other trailmaster and told us how some of his trailmakers brought him a warm brick to keep his feet warm in his sleeping bag. You were kind of like, feeling sorry for yourself because we didn’t do something like that for you.”

“Stop that nonsense, turn around, and pick up your paddle,” Mr. Clauden commanded. He ordered Robbie to execute a draw stroke to turn the canoe around. “If you remember what that is,” he sneered.

“But we’re almost to the island,” Robbie said as he tried to complete the maneuver.

Mr. Clauden dug into the water with his paddle, in a hurry to get back to the canoe racks and away from Robbie. He’d reached the threshold of his patience and was afraid to cross it.

“Sorry for upsetting you,” Robbie apologized, struggling to keep up the furious clip. “That was just my opinion.”

Mr. Clauden slapped his paddle from port to starboard, jerking the canoe and making Robbie flinch from the splashing water.

“Sometimes you talk about things that have other opinions,” Robbie said defensively. He turned his head and looked at Mr. Clauden from under the bill of his cap. “Like last summer when you caught us masturbating.”

Mr. Clauden slowed his thrashing and looked around, suddenly wishing there were other canoers. But all he saw was himself creeping outside their tent that night to catch them in the act. “I already straightened you out about that,” he declared. “It’s not a problem now. Is it?”

Robbie turned his head forward. “It never was.”

“It always is.”

“Not from what I’ve read.”

Of course he’d read about it. And how different the little snotnose was now compared to his fearful state that night when Mr. Clauden pontificated at them on the dangers of it, exaggerating for effect. “It doesn’t matter what you read,” Mr. Clauden said. “Is it something you’d do in front of your parents?”

Robbie giggled. “No waaayyy!”

“This is not a laughing matter.”

Robbie stared at the water, obviously trying to think up some clever retort. Mr. Clauden had him. But Robbie abruptly squared his boney shoulders and rowed vigorously.

“No other thoughts on the subject?” Mr. Clauden asked.

“Nope.”

“Then what’s got you so gung-ho all of a sudden?”

“I’d like to get back and have some camera time,” Robbie panted. “Before the Indian Lore session.”

“Nothing more to say about it?”

Robbie paused and inhaled deeply. “Okay, since you asked...Would you have sex with your wife in front of your children?”

It turned silent on the lake, other than the blood pulsing in Mr. Clauden’s ears as he tried to eject the nasty image that Robbie had tricked him into. He didn’t know what startled him more: the vivid scene that Robbie conjured, or the fairness of his question. He clenched his paddle across his thighs as he glowered at the boy, who turned to look at him.

Robbie’s eyes widened as he scooted as far forward in the bow as he could, holding onto the gunwale with one hand and raising his other forearm across his face. Mr. Clauden sprang at him but tripped on the thwart. Robbie recoiled, yelping as he flipped overboard.

Mr. Clauden stumbled upright in the rocking canoe and gloated hatefully at the gargling helpless face until it brightened fearlessly with some recognition.

“You could, couldn’t you,” Robbie confirmed, water dripping from the bill of his cap.

Robbie’s gibberish puzzled Mr. Clauden until he realized that he clutched his paddle overhead, poised to strike. He gaped at it as if some evil spirit had thrust it into his hands and lowered it. Fretting that this incident would get back to Robbie’s parents, or worse, the other trailmasters, he extended the paddle. “Grab hold,” he pleaded.

Robbie awkwardly backstroked around the canoe in his water-heavy clothes and life jacket toward the island. “I don’t need this,” he spluttered. “And that goes double for you.”

“I’ll save you,” Mr. Clauden said desperately.

“Save yourself!”

Mr. Clauden sat and clumsily turned the canoe around to follow Robbie.

“I’ll tell,” Robbie threatened.

Mr. Clauden stopped and watched until Robbie emerged from the water, gasping and walking stiffly to the foggy bank. The boy turned in the mist and freed himself from his life jacket. He yanked off the trailmaker’s cap and threw it in Mr. Clauden’s direction. “There’s a warm brick for you!” he yelled. As he caught his breath, they regarded each other. Then he did that thing with his hands again; he might as well have been filming with his mini-cam.

Mr. Clauden frantically turned the canoe around and paddled furiously to get out of Robbie’s range. He’d return for him after he’d learned a lesson; an hour by himself would do him good.

Robbie’s cracking voice skipped over the lake like small flat stones: “Shane! Sha-ane! Come back!”

The kid was getting hysterical. Mr. Clauden was tempted to turn around to see if he was alright, but heard crow-like laughter so he beat on, having trouble maintaining a true course.

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Desert(ed) by Helen Raica-Klotz

Ty fills his cooler with a six-pack of Pabst, grabs a box of goldfish crackers and some beef jerky, positions his lawn chair underneath the torn red umbrella, and waits for the cars to start rolling by. He likes to watch them come in. At first, they would simply slow down on the highway to catch a glimpse. But a few cars would always pull over, the driver leaning out the window for a closer look. Now, after *The Phoenix Sun* article got picked up by the *NYTimes*, at least twenty cars a day drive over the desert sand and park, little colored beetles glittering in the afternoon sun.

Folks clamber out of their cars and walk through the mannequins, all 100 of them, lined up in rows of ten and stuck in the sand at various angles. All the males are in various stages of undress: pants lowered, or shirt open and flapping in the wind. All the females are missing an arm or two, a leg, sometimes a head. Oh, and each mannequin is white.

People stop in front of one figure and then another, staring at these plastic life-sized dolls. Sometimes they laugh (the male figure bent over, his bare ass sticking out in the wind, was a favorite), but mostly they are silent, almost contemplative, as they walk around the installation before getting in their cars to drive away.

The art critics in the newspapers called the exhibit “a powerful commentary on race and rage in America.” They noted that Ty was a black artist, whose work “laid bare the hypocrisy of the white upper class.” These writers claimed that Ty removed the female mannequins’ body parts to demonstrate his anger at white women, who have historically terrorized black males with claims of rape and violence, “a clever role reversal that strips these women of their racial power and privilege.” He supposed that’s what brought out all these white folks out to walk around the desert to stare at artificial versions of themselves.

When asked about the installation, he always declines to comment. And when he reads the reviews, he does laugh, just a little bit, alone in his trailer. They were right: he was an angry black man. What black man alive in America today isn’t angry? But this wasn’t the underlying message of his work, not really. It wasn’t anger. It was jealousy. All those mannequins were so clean down there – no bulging penis, no dangling testicles, no appendages at all. He wanted to feel this same lightness between his legs, to be unencumbered by the heavy weight that hung from his body. He wanted to recreate himself in that pale pink plastic, becoming smooth and slippery to the touch, so that nothing could ever attach itself to him again.

The Carpathian Carpet by Andrew Sorokowski

As soon as he stepped into the living room, Mr. Ginsburg glanced at the large woolen carpet on the wall opposite the fireplace. He was short and shabby, with a sallow face, thin greying hair, and moist, mournful black eyes. He was about sixty. Mr. Ginsburg had come with Mr. Novak, a ruddy, thick-necked agricultural machinery salesman, tieless in a brown suit, who had known Adrian's parents since their university days. Mr. Novak introduced him as a lawyer and recent immigrant. Adrian's father had invited the two visitors in for a drink.

Mr. Ginsburg walked up to the carpet and examined it closely. Three stylized women in red and white checkered blouses and rectangular black skirts, with red coral necklaces and flowery headdresses, danced across a dark green meadow. Above it, beige and tan mountain peaks rose from a mass of jagged dark-green firs.

"My cousin Orest designed it," said Adrian's father, walking stiffly over to the hanging and thoughtfully fingering the edge.

"It looks like Hutsul work," remarked Mr. Novak.

"Orest used Hutsul designs, and the villagers did the weaving. Orest's father -- my mother's brother-in-law -- managed a folk-art cooperative in the Carpathians before the war. My parents bought some of their woodwork, ceramics, and carpets. When they emigrated, they took as much as they could carry."

"The cooperative -- was it in Kosiv?" asked Mr. Ginsburg, turning to him.

"Yes," said Adrian's father, surprised. "Did you know it?"

Adrian had first seen the carpet as a child. He would spend the summers at his grandparents' house in a small town at the edge of the Santa Clara Valley, near the Santa Cruz Mountains. He had no siblings or even cousins, and few friends. His parents worked, and his mother's father Nestor, who lived with them, had a heart condition and needed to rest. So they sent Adrian to his grandparents in the country.

Adrian's grandfather Damian was tall and athletic, even in his seventies, with an aquiline nose, grey eyes, and thin white hair combed straight back. His grandmother Anna was slight and soft-spoken, her grey hair short and parted in the middle, with a fine, straight nose and indigo eyes the shape of almonds. Although she was near-sighted and prone to headaches, she spent many afternoons stitching and embroidering.

They lived in a one-story frame house on a gravel-covered street without sidewalks, lined with telephone poles and aluminum mailboxes on wooden posts. In front of their house was a hedge that Adrian's grandfather had planted as soon as they arrived from New Jersey, which he trimmed regularly. Where the edge of the street met the property line with their neighbors there was an almond tree that flowered into fragrant blossoms every spring. A lawn stretched back past the house to the rear garden. In the evenings, you could hear the sprinkler going *tsik-tsik-tsik*. A fat toad lived in the mud under the bushes by the side of the house. Immediately behind the house was a row of flagstones, and behind that Adrian's grandfather had planted neat rows of tomatoes, potatoes, onions, garlic, sorrel, peas, beets, carrots, and cucumbers. Little paths ran up and down between the vegetable patches. In the hot early morning and again in the evening, his grandfather, shirtless and sunburned in a wide straw hat, would move up and down the paths with a watering-can. From the garden, you could see the soft blue outline of a mountain. Adrian's grandfather said it reminded him of the Carpathians.

Behind the vegetable garden, twisted grapevines clung to a row of tall stakes. In the middle of the yard was a small orchard with apples and pears, and an old round wooden table with a tree-stump for a stool. At the far edge of the yard, his grandfather had dug a compost pit, where he would dump the kitchen waste and grass trimmings. Adrian's grandparents practically lived from that garden, shopping only for bread, meat, dairy products and incidentals like sugar, salt and pepper. Grandmother Anna pickled vegetables and made white farmer's cheese. Adrian particularly liked her green sorrel soup, and her rich

dry cheesecake, brown on top and decorated with almond slivers. On special occasions, she made dumplings stuffed with sauerkraut, cheese, meat, or potatoes, and rich red borscht with sour cream.

The house had a front porch and a screen door which they left unlocked during the day. There was no entrance hall; on the left was the living room, and straight ahead a small dining room, with French doors opening onto the garden. A light grey Formica-topped table with aluminum legs took up most of the dining room. High on the rear wall, above the French doors, hung a pair of watercolors of a Hutsul couple in long embroidered coats, the man brandishing a hatchet, the woman carrying a jug of water. The right wall was taken up by a glass cabinet displaying dishes and decorated Easter eggs. To the left of the dining room was a kitchen that barely accommodated a gas stove, refrigerator, and sink. A window over the sink looked out over the garden to the mountain beyond. Adrian's grandmother spent much of the day there. She still used the rust-free knives, forks, and spoons they'd brought from Poland. At the far end of the kitchen was a door leading to the garage, where a green Packard, waxed and polished, gleamed in the dark. The garage smelled of dry pinewood and gasoline. In one corner stood a manual lawnmower. The blades would make a laborious shearing sound as Adrian struggled to push it across the lawn.

To the right of the dining room, a doorway opened onto a corridor connecting the bedroom at the front of the house, his grandfather's study at the back, and a narrow bathroom in between. Adrian slept on a bed in the study. After a hot day, he would lie in the dark listening to the sharp cracking sounds as the wood frame of the house contracted in the cold dry night air. Near the door was a small bookcase with Webster's dictionary, a teach-yourself-English book, a German-English and a Polish-English dictionary, and a couple of novels. The pages of the novels were full of penciled underlining and words scribbled in the margins in a language Adrian could not make out. In the far corner of the study, looking out over the garden, was a large wooden desk. Adrian would spend hours there, writing poems and drawing scenes from the battles that his grandfather would tell him about – Salamis and Thermopylae, Cannae and Actium. Sometimes he studied the black marble and bronze desk set with two inkwells, a shallow dish for sand, a holder for a matchbox, and a horizontal indentation for the heavy letter-knife. He could not read the inscribed dedication, except for his grandfather's name. He could just make out the date, 1932.

Adrian would read in the living room, sometimes sitting on the sofa, sometimes in the plush armchair or the painted wooden rocking chair. A rabbit-ears antenna topped a television set in the corner. Copies of *Reader's Digest*, *TV Guide*, and the local newspaper lay on a table, next to an alabaster statuette of the Three Graces. On the mantelpiece over the unused fireplace stood a trophy in the form of a bronze statuette of a runner. On the floor lay the carpet from Kosiv, the three country girls stepping gracefully across a mountain meadow. One day as Adrian was gazing at it his grandmother said, "We were like that, the three of us, my sisters and I."

"What happened to your sisters?"

"Maria lives in Romania. She will come soon to live with us."

One day at the end of June, Adrian's parents and his other grandfather Nestor drove down the Bayshore Freeway from San Francisco in their long blue Chevrolet. They parked their car in the gravel-topped driveway. Adrian's father got out of the car on the driver's side. He was tall and spare, with sleek dark brown hair, grey eyes and a straight thin nose. He wore khaki shorts and a blue polo shirt. Adrian's mother, a blonde with purposeful emerald-green eyes, in a blue blouse and beige skirt, emerged from the passenger side. Her father, bald with a short thick nose and a postage-stamp mustache, climbed out of the back seat in his usual summer attire of a visored cap, a green plaid short-sleeved shirt, and grey Bermuda shorts with dark blue knee-high socks and sandals. They came into the house and sat down at the dining table. There was excited talk: Grandmother Anna's sister Maria was coming from Romania. She would arrive in early August.

After lunch, Adrian followed the men down the street to where the gravel ended, continuing up along a dirt road towards a wooded hill. An unaccustomed rain the night before had muddied the track. Adrian stopped to break some fallen branches into little ships, which he launched in a wide puddle brimming with reflected clouds. Then he ran to catch up with the others. As they walked on up the hill towards Guadalupe, Adrian's father told him about his summers in Kosiv. In June of 1939, his aunt Maria and her husband Fedir, a painter, had come up from Bucharest to join his parents at the house of Maria's other sister -- his aunt Marta -- and her husband Stefan, who managed a folk-art cooperative. Fedir had

brought his pencils, watercolors, oil paints, canvas, paper, and easel. All that summer he sketched and painted scenes from the village and the surrounding woods and mountains. At Uncle Stefan's cooperative, the Hutsul villagers wove rugs, embroidered shirts, turned pottery, and carved and decorated inlaid wood boxes. Tourists came from all over Poland to stay at the resorts, hike the mountain trails, fish in the streams, swim in the lakes, and buy the handicrafts.

Aunt Marta and Uncle Stefan had a son, Orest, who was seventeen, and a ten-year-old daughter Lydia. Adrian's father, who had just turned seventeen, spent his days with his cousin Orest. They cycled along the dirt trails in the beech and fir forests. When it rained, they sat by the clay stove in the thatched-roof house and read adventure novels. Orest, who was planning to study architecture, examined the Hutsul shirts, trousers, vests, skirts, and jackets in his father's collection. Then he would compose designs for carpets. His father would take the sketches to the weavers. They replicated the colors in his drawings using dyes made from acorns, bark, berries, onions, thyme, indigo, and copper filings. It was that summer that Orest designed the large woolen carpet with the three village girls crossing the field.

All summer there were rumors of war. Only a hundred kilometers away, the Hungarians had occupied part of the southwestern slope of the Carpathians. June and July passed uneasily. At the end of August, the visitors said good-bye to Stefan, Marta, and their two children, and hired a wagon for the trip to the railroad station. Fedir and Maria, loaded with fresh canvases, took the train back to Bucharest. Adrian's father and his parents took a train in the opposite direction.

The day after they reached home, they woke to the roar of airplanes, followed by deafening explosions. Fearing poison gas, they scrambled down the stairs to the cellar. When a few hours later they came out into the street, it was pock-marked and strewn with the mangled bodies of people and horses. Later, German horse-drawn caissons and tanks appeared. All day and all night they snaked their way through the old city.

While Adrian's father talked, grandfathers Damian and Nestor were walking some distance behind.

"Kennedy's no fool," said Grandfather Damian. "He knows Khrushchev is bluffing." He continued, but Adrian couldn't make out what he was saying.

"Maybe so, sir," said Grandfather Nestor. "But Americans are businessmen. They'll make a deal with the Russians. And Castro will be none the wiser for it."

Presently they came to an overgrown house with a large garden decorated with little bridges, miniature windmills, artificial waterfalls, and wooden figures that whirled in the breeze or bounced up and down with the turning of a waterwheel. They stopped to admire the scene, then set off back down the hill for home. After a supper of cold cuts, tea and honey cake, Adrian's parents and his grandfather Nestor got into the blue Chevrolet and drove off for San Francisco.

Adrian stayed with his grandparents for the rest of the summer. On hot afternoons, he would hear the hurried jingle of mechanical chimes somewhere in the neighborhood, becoming louder with each repetition, until finally the ice-cream truck appeared. The neighbors' children would run out to buy cones or popsicles. His grandfather would warn Adrian to stay away from the truck. He would go up and buy the ice cream himself and bring it back to him.

Once a week, they would both ride their bicycles to the center of town. His grandfather would enter a phone booth, push a coin into the telephone, and dial zero for the operator to make a collect call to Adrian's parents. Then he would pass the receiver to Adrian. After he had talked with his parents, his grandfather might buy him an ice cream bar or a popsicle at the drug store, and they would walk their bicycles home in the dark.

During the warm summer evenings, Adrian's grandparents would sit in aluminum chairs on the row of flagstones behind the house, drinking tea out of glasses and looking at the stars. When it got chilly, they would spread blankets over their legs. The sky was clearer than in San Francisco, and you could see hundreds of stars. On other evenings, they would sit in the living room watching the black-and-white television set. On Saturdays, there was the Lawrence Welk show, on Sundays Ed Sullivan.

Adrian's great-aunt Maria arrived from Romania at the beginning of August. A minuscule widow hunched over with scoliosis, she had clever blue eyes and a cracked, cheerful voice. Her only complaint was about the produce. "In Europe, when you put a bowl of fruit on the table, the fragrance fills the room. Here, it has no scent at all." Aunt Maria had brought several of her late husband's paintings. Now she shared the bedroom with her sister, while Adrian shared the study with his grandfather.

Every weekday afternoon, Adrian went to the mailbox to get the mail. His grandfather would watch him to make sure he didn't drop anything. One day he brought a square letter with colorful stamps cancelled with a postmark in letters he couldn't read. He couldn't make out the return address either. His grandparents' address had been written out in awkward block letters with a blue ballpoint pen. His grandfather took the letter and carried it to his wife and her sister in their bedroom. They closed the door. Adrian could hear them talking, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. He thought he heard sobbing.

"Yes, I remember the folk art cooperative," said Mr. Ginsburg. He paused. "I was there when they nationalized it after the war. I was eighteen, just beginning my law studies. My father was a judge." He paused again. "He served on the tribunals. They let him take me along."

He sat down on the sofa, and Mr. Novak settled down beside him. Adrian's father took an armchair opposite them. Adrian stood by the fireplace and listened. His mother, slim and silver-haired in a red sequined dress, watched from the kitchen.

"What did you see?" asked Adrian's father hoarsely.

Mr. Ginsburg frowned. "The security troops came to the cooperative with the nationalization order. I saw them leading the manager away. I can still see his face. Later I heard they had taken him to the local jail. There was a tribunal – you know how they operated. It was an automatic sentence. I heard his wife and daughter were shipped out to Siberia, to the Maritime Territory -- you know, on the Pacific."

"Did your father ever talk about it?" Mr. Novak asked.

Mr. Ginsburg shook his head. "He died a few days after the cooperatives were liquidated. Heart attack. He was barely forty. Some said it was exhaustion, others said it was the altitude. My mother said it was his conscience."

After a moment, Mr. Novak shook his head. "Those were terrible times."

Adrian's father cleared his throat. "We got a couple of letters from Aunt Marta from Siberia in the 1950s, after the amnesties. She never saw her son again. Orest had been studying in Graz during the war. Of course, he couldn't come back. He emigrated to England. Aunt Marta only had her daughter with her – my cousin Lydia."

"And that was the last time my grandmother heard from her sister?" asked Adrian.

"Yes. A few years later – it was after your great-aunt had come from Romania – your grandmother got a letter from Lydia. Marta had died. Lydia had gotten married. She decided to stay in Siberia. After all, there was nowhere else to go."

1969: The Stonewall Inn by DC Diamondopolous

In the industrial ruin near the New York docks, rats clawed through garbage left by vagrants. Inside the jammed truck that hauled meat during the day, Jackie, along with dozens of boys and young men indulged in an orgy. The stink of beef, sweat, and cum had nowhere to escape. The only sounds were moaning and grunts. In the dark, Jackie clutched the waist of someone in front of him.

Somebody pounded on the truck. “Lilly Law! Lilly Law!”

The back doors swung open.

Two cop cars screeched to a stop.

Jackie and the others jumped onto the landing platform. They charged in different directions.

On this sweltering summer night, Jackie darted through the freight yard. In his worn hightop sneakers, the soles smacked against gravel and pavement.

He bolted onto Greenwich Avenue under a big white moon. His tight, frayed, bellbottom jeans pulled against his crotch. The sweaty orange tie-dyed T-shirt stuck to his chest. His heart thumped. The pigs weren't going to catch him, not this time. He ran as if his life mattered.

If only his eighteen-year-old legs could outrun life on the streets. In late-night movie houses, lonely old men found his blond hair, slight build, and effeminate nature irresistible. Jackie scored, sometimes going home with them for food and a shower. Chicken hawks cruising subway toilets paid to blow him. To survive, he'd do anything.

Jackie raced past Mama's Chick and Rib Restaurant.

Turning onto Christopher Street, he glanced back—no cops.

He walked down the one-way street toward the Stonewall. It was there that he had made friends with other twilight boys and drag queens. And it was the only bar in the Village that allowed slow dancing between men. For the first time, someone put their arms around him—not for sex or to hurt him. When they danced to Stevie Wonder's “My Cherie Amour,” they stepped on each other's toes. It didn't matter. They laughed. The tenderness blew his mind.

As he neared the Stonewall, there was a crowd and a paddy wagon. It was a raid, but on a Friday night? Just the past Tuesday the fuzz raided the place. Had the Mafia not paid off the pigs to keep the bar open?

Walking closer, Jackie heard grumbling and sensed the bad vibe.

Bar regulars watched cops haul out handcuffed customers, then throw them into the paddy wagon.

“What the fuck's happening?” Jackie asked the guy beside him.

Just then a pig punched a tough-looking lesbian. She kicked him.

The angry crowd inched forward.

Jackie seethed.

“She didn't do nothing,” a Puerto Rican kid shouted.

“We'll shut you damn perverts down for good,” another cop bellowed. He clubbed the woman, then pushed her into the truck.

“Leave us alone,” Jackie yelled.

A brick shattered the windshield of a police car.

Whoops rang out.

Drag queens taunted Johnny Law with cries of “Betty Badge!” “Patti Pig!”

More gay men arrived from Christopher Park across the street, from Waverly Place, and 7th Avenue. They brought with them years of persecution and joined the rebellion.

A drag queen threw pennies at the pigs. “You're nothing but copper.”

Jackie hurled coins. “Here's your payoff.”

Shouts of “*Let us be,*” thundered through the pandemonium.

In front of the bar's plywood window, a nightstick pressed into Jackie's back. His wiry body whirled around. He punched the cop in the face. Jackie saw first shock, then fear in the man's eyes. Fear. Jackie lived with it every day.

All six pigs looked astonished as the enraged nellie queens and limp-wristed fags hit, kneed, and threw bottles and tin cans at them.

Sweat flew off Jackie's long curly hair as he jabbed, slugged, and kicked the cops with the viciousness of having nothing to lose.

A drag queen in a sequined dress jumped onto a cop car. She took off her stiletto heels and waved them high in the air with one hand while blowing kisses with the other. Everyone cheered.

The crowd mushroomed to hundreds.

Jackie pumped his fists and joined the chant of "*NO MORE*" until his voice rasped.

The terrified pigs turned tail and fled into the Stonewall.

"Let's get 'em!" Jackie yelled. He rammed his shoulder against the two wooden doors. They didn't budge.

He joined three guys who rocked a cop car.

A young man in a Jewfro and handlebar mustache lit a mesh garbage can, and threw the burning container at the bar's doors.

Screams and shouts split the night.

Bricks crashed against the wall.

A sewer grate slammed into the plywood.

Firebombs smashed against the doors. The smell of lighter fluid saturated the air. A bottle crashed through a window above the Stonewall. Shards of glass rained on the sidewalk. Blood trickled from Jackie's head. He wiped it away with his arm.

Cries of "*gay power*" turned the scorching night into a blazing furnace of pent-up rage.

Jackie and his friends, Mary Queen of the Scotch and Miss Congo Woman, pulled on a parking meter. Two burly guys pitched in and tore it from its base. The five of them hoisted it and used it as a battering-ram against the doors.

With each thrust, Jackie's adrenaline surged—against the pigs who clubbed and raped him—*boom*—for his stepfather who threw him down the stairs for swishing like a queer—*boom*—for the bullies at school who cornered and beat him—*boom*—for every asshole who called him faggot—*boom*. He heaved the meter like a gladiator against a world that hated him—*BOOM!* The Stonewall, with its watered-down drinks, no running water, and clogged toilets, was a shithole. But it was Jackie's home, his block, a place where he felt human. Safe.

A small gap appeared between the doors. He knew if they busted through he'd kill a cop.

Sirens howled.

Gay men packed the sidewalks and streets.

Against the flow of traffic, five buses drove down Christopher. They parked between 7th Avenue and the Stonewall.

Cops in dark uniforms, black helmets, and big plastic shields filed out of the vehicles. They formed a V wedge, gripped their clubs, and advanced toward the crowd.

Jackie, along with scores of street kids, faced the oncoming tyrants.

The pigs inside the bar opened the doors and scampered to the paddy wagon.

"C'mon girls," a drag queen yelled.

The drag queens locked arms, formed a kick-line, and sang:

We are the Village girls—*kick*

We wear our hair in curls—*kick*

We wear our dungarees—*kick*

Above our nellie knees—*kick*

The squad froze and glanced at one another. They edged forward, their batons raised.

Jackie confronted an invincible force, but he and his gay brothers were winning just by standing up to them. It was a momentous feeling of liberation.

When they were less than ten feet away, Jackie and the throng turned and ran, racing around the short blocks that crisscrossed the Stonewall, Washington Place, Waverly, and 7th Avenue. They outsmarted and confused the cops by coming up behind, pushing them forward. From Howard Johnson's to Mama's Chick and Rib, it was Jackie's and the street kids' turf. The uptown pigs were clueless.

At first, Jackie thought it fun outwitting the cops, but after an hour of playing cat and mouse, his legs became heavy. He and the kids scattered. The pigs dispersed.

Jackie headed up Christopher, wanting to see what they'd done to the Stonewall.

As he walked, he noticed his bloodied knuckles, blood-caked arm, his torn T-shirt.

When he opened the door, the smell of liquor smacked him. Bottles and mirrors were smashed to pieces, along with cigarette machines and the jukebox. Tables and chairs lay shattered.

“Don’t worry,” the bartender said, brushing glass from the counter. “Mario will have the bar opened by tonight.”

“It was worth it,” Jackie said, feeling tired but exhilarated, and strode outside.

Too exhausted to walk further, he sat on a stoop with two other kids.

“Man, I can’t believe what happened,” said a boy on the top step.

“Now we’re really in for it,” added the other guy.

Over his shoulder Jackie said, “If I have to, I’ll come back and fight tonight.”

He turned to the war zone.

“Me too.”

“So will I.”

In the predawn, lampposts picked up glitter of broken glass strewn across sidewalks and streets. Like diamonds, they glistened. A light breeze ruffled torn pieces of cloth. Interwoven like a giant quilt lay crushed cans, a high heel, bricks, left-overs in food cartons, a wig, orange peels, Styrofoam cups.

Jackie and his gay brothers had fought like men. The fear he saw in the cops eyes would live with him forever. For the first time, hope entered his life.

This was America. People had rights. He’d be willing to fight, even die for them.

Pride overwhelmed him as he scanned the hallowed battlefield. It was so beautiful, their reward.

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Miles of Nought by John Mummert

There may be—Miles on Miles of Nought—

— Emily Dickinson

You feel the spasm ripple across your back as you lift the dresser away from the wall. Made of heavy white ash, you moved it up a flight of stairs by yourself more than thirty years ago. You hauled it up three flights on a hand truck ten years ago. This time? You lean forward, let your back muscles relax. You won't be moving the dresser anywhere this time. Forced at last to pay attention to your age, you're finding nothing you like about growing older.

You've considered leaving this place any number of times, seeking a path to . . . something. But you hadn't known what to do, hadn't known what you wanted. You should have gone years ago, in the months after. But you had stayed, clinging to a phantom thread, unable to let go. Even on your worst days, your most despair-wracked days, you'd been unable to believe the thread might no longer be attached to anything. You don't know where she might be now. Would it matter if you did? The last bit of hope died a long time ago. You doubt she cares, doubt she ever thinks about you. But the memories continue to haunt, the ache and emptiness linger, no matter how many miles and years might pass.

*

You'd found a place well in advance of moving. A new building, a desirable town. *You aren't qualified for this unit. You make too much money.* Now there was something you once never expected to hear. Searching again. Another new building in another town. *Applications opening soon . . . applications opening in January . . . applications opening in March . . . applications opening in May.* The repeated delays and uncertainty sent you searching further. Finally, the first obstacle, a place to live, out of the way. No, the second obstacle. You'd first had to make the decision, at long last, to leave.

*

There are days, even after these many years, when it feels like the avalanche hit yesterday. Occasional good memories are shattered before they come into focus, hammered by the reality of what followed. Those mornings you wake knowing she was in your head all night. You're glad you seldom remember the details of your dreams. The few you remember, you wish you did not.

You'd fought to get yourself upright those first days, to get one foot in front of the other. Certain you could talk to her, find out what you'd done wrong, give her time. But she wouldn't tell you why. She hadn't wanted time. Hadn't wanted you. Had been angry you tried. *Don't contact me again.* You'd had no idea what to do. You'd been clumsy, had tried too hard. Flowers she likely threw away, cards you doubt she read. The failure has tortured you for a long time.

But you had continued to believe, to hope. Somehow, it would be okay. You never imagined a wait with no end. You never imagined the path back, if one existed at all, was soon to be dynamited shut, the blast shredding your entire being.

*

Your list of things to do grows by the day. Moving across the country is far more taxing than any move across town had ever been. Decisions on what to keep. Arrangements for shipping your belongings. For a bank. A new doctor. Never-ending address changes. Service your car for the trip. Winter clothing. Clean your apartment to within an inch of its life and beyond if you hope to see any of your deposit again.

*

You had tried to let work fill the void, distract you from the deluge of thoughts. But nothing blocked those thoughts. Then the dynamite exploded. Flipping quickly through the newspaper, you'd have missed it if your eyes had landed anywhere else on the page. A wedding announcement. So soon. The rest of the day, the week, and beyond remain forever a blur, the pain and despair so deep and paralyzing you wonder even now how you survived.

Places the two of you used to go, restaurants and theaters you had frequented, were closed, turned into shoe stores and electronics stores, even torn down. As if the world wished to deny the two of you had ever been. You should have left, tried to find a path away from it all, tried to find . . . something. But you'd been unable to give up hope, unable to walk away. Somehow, one day, you would find her again. She was the best thing that ever happened to you. You would get another chance. Losing her forever was inconceivable. Illusions necessary to hold complete disintegration at bay.

You put the cards and mementoes into a box, wrapped the box with an entire roll—thirty yards—of strapping tape. A second roll. A barricade to discourage any attempt you might make to look at, to touch those memories, and unleash another deluge of agony. You felt no triumph when you got rid of that still-taped box many years later. Felt only ache and emptiness.

*

Trips to Goodwill. A local shelter will pick up heavier items, dresser included, that will not make the trip. The estimated ten-day transit time you were given for belongings you plan to ship turned into three weeks when it came time to schedule the loading. More plans to be altered.

*

There had been little outside work. A life on autopilot. Life as mere existence. You hadn't given up, yet wondered if anything more than blind, foolish hope might remain. Then she appeared out of nowhere, finally explained. How could you have missed such a thing? But you believe even now there is more, something she wouldn't say. You've thought of a hundred, a thousand things you may have done wrong. You may be right about some of them. All of them. None of them.

She was surprised, she had said, you were unmarried. You wondered how she was unable to understand the idea of someone else had never entered your mind. You convinced yourself her reappearance meant she was willing, finally, at the point when you'd been so close to giving up any remaining hope, to give you another chance. As if the wait and the agony had been a bizarre test imposed by the universe, now reaching an end.

No . . . she had answered before the question was halfway out of your mouth. Your most fervent hope crushed again, locusts beneath tires on the highway. She told you she was leaving, going a thousand miles away. You had hoped it might become easier, no longer any chance you might run into her, no chance to be rejected again. Perhaps even a chance to crawl, finally, from beneath the avalanche. But in the back of your mind, you continued clinging to that tiny thread of hope she had severed. Somehow, it could turn out all right. Somehow. It wasn't supposed to be like this. Insanity continued to hurl itself against your door.

*

You liked that lamp, expected it would last a long time. You wondered why it listed as you taped bubble-wrap around the lights to pack it for the move. You picked up the lamp, and watched as the ceramic fill in the base crumbled, the dust spewing all over the carpet. You carried the remains to the dumpster, vacuumed the carpet again.

*

It was years before you dared risk trying again. The memories, the hope, the fear had been too strong. But it was never the same, and none had lasted long. Whatever pushed her away, you suppose

others saw it as well. But those few fleeting moments became the only times she did not haunt you. You think you might have found a way beyond her if the chance had come. She always returned to your dreams afterward. Always. And quickly.

The years passed. Nothing but work, often unsatisfying. Obstruction and second-guessing by those with no interest in, even hostility toward any actual accomplishments.

We aren't to inspect that facility. Their attorney is a state senator.

We can't enforce that rule. A political contributor complained to the governor.

You often wondered if there was any point. But inertia maintained a firm grip. Or was it fear? Fear of finding a path you hoped might lead beyond the bleak memories, and discovering at the other end your life was little changed. Nothing different, nothing overcome. Nothing of importance accomplished. The memories remained a parking boot on your life.

One last effort, one you'd sworn never to attempt, your resistance overcome by loneliness. Would you have the nerve to follow through, and contact someone suggested by a computer? You needn't have wondered. *NO MATCHES FOUND*. Not even a feeble attempt to humor you. Your hopes in three words. A bleak truth. At least that humiliation had been private.

*

You've measured everything. More than once. The remaining items will fit in your car. No, they will not. Too late to add anything else to a shipment already on its way. Another trip to Goodwill. You never especially liked that TV stand anyway. The number of items you can't bear to give up is quite small. So many things don't matter.

*

You can't say when you stopped clinging to that phantom thread, your strength to hold on exhausted, the humiliation of waiting finally too much. There had been moments when you sensed anger, but you'd been unable to sustain the feeling. Many, perhaps most, moved beyond such a blow, often quickly. Whatever the reason, you'd been unable to put the pieces back together, the remnants run through an industrial scrap metal shredder. You never found all the pieces. You wonder if she ever understood she crushed the life out of you. Maybe if you had met her at another time, in another place? You've imagined countless scenarios. You know few, if any, were realistic. Would you be better off if you'd never met her? You cannot admit what you know must be the answer. Is she the worst thing that ever happened to you? Miles behind you, years behind you, only to find so much of your life has been devoted to . . . nothing?

You continued to hope a path beyond the memories and the emptiness might exist, but after so many dead ends, you stopped searching. You learned to be alone, understood it to be the hand you'd drawn. You wish it might have been otherwise. You've owned your current car for more than ten years. You can't recall if anyone has ever ridden in the passenger seat. You suspect not. It will hold clothes or blankets during the move. Life—existence—isn't like the movies, does not always end in great triumph.

*

We aren't going to issue this report. People might expect something to be done. You burned out, lost all passion for your work. No spouse and no dependents meant no financial strain. That much you had, at least. You could afford to get out. Again, you desired to move far away, find something new for your life. You still had little idea what you were looking for.

*

Many years before, you'd caught the scent of her perfume in a crowd. It stopped you in your tracks though you knew she wasn't there. This time, a glimpse of a woman who merely looked like her. Nothing more. Someone who moved like her. Enough to shake you, stir memories. But nothing more. A festival at a museum in a nearby city. You couldn't imagine any reason she might be there.

You circled through the grounds. Then . . . the same woman. You knew. The recognition knocked the air from your lungs. You couldn't recall ever seeing her in a long skirt, such an odd thought to pop into your head. She stared right at you. You didn't know what to do. Even after so many years, you feared doing, saying the wrong thing. Making another mistake. Is there even the tiniest part of your life she doesn't own?

Then she turned, walked away without a word. You stood dazed. Hadn't your lifetime quota for such torment long been exceeded? You watched for a time to see if she might look back, might offer the tiniest sign you'd once meant something to her. She didn't. You had wondered over the years if she ever thought about you, about how your lives might have been. Now you knew. The love of your life no longer acknowledged you had ever existed. The years, the miles, had led her to a place you weren't allowed, not even as a memory. Your years had led to . . . nothing.

All you wanted was to go home. You stumbled past the exhibits, past the food trucks, across the street to your car. You don't recall the rest of the day though you know you thought of nothing else. The anger would flare stronger in the future. But the pain refused to burn away.

*

You had to crush the inertia. Final straws amassed at a rapid pace. A state refusing to act to stop a pandemic, blocking the efforts of others, letting people die. The collapse of an unprepared power grid, widespread loss of heat and water. More deaths, blame diverted from those with any responsibility. Increasing and excessive summer heat ignored and denied. An ongoing drumbeat of hate, of almost recreational cruelty practiced against anyone different. You had to find somewhere a fragment of sanity, perhaps a fragment of hope, might remain. You had to seek a path out of the nothingness.

You are the one going a thousand miles away this time, in a different direction. Hoping though no longer expecting you might find a path beyond mere existence. Hoping even now you might accomplish something more with your life. Leaving a place you don't want to be. Escaping memories. No, the memories are too embedded within you. They will follow. You hope for . . . something you can't define. More, at least, than nothing.

*

You feel the effort of the move in your arms, your legs, your exhaustion. Snow is falling, the nearby river covered with a sheet of ice. You sit for a time. The cold is invigorating. You hear geese honking, but can see only one on the opposite bank, the others masked by fog. You will manage. You've been doing this a long time. Existing. Navigating memories. Following a path with no clear end in sight. Little changed, nothing changed. Is whatever you're looking for here? Will you know it if you see it? If not, you will, you must, manage. The road back washed away a long time ago.

John Mummert grew up in Illinois, and spent thirty years in the water quality protection field in Texas before turning his attention to writing. His short stories have been published in *TrashLight*, *Sangam Literary Magazine*, and *Wild: Uncivilized Tales From Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers*, and another is forthcoming in *Up North Lit*. He currently lives in western Minnesota. He is a member of the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers.

Copperfield by Kelli Dianne Rule

Arcadia, Florida, 1975

Part I: Them

Ethel Kelly Copperfield was letting herself go. We all thought so.

It was subtle at first and remained so for a while but anyone who knew her even a little bit could easy tell. Her skin was the first to betray her - the usual well-scrubbed sheen had gone dull and pasty. Then one day there was no more color in her cheeks. Like a rose that done seen a ghost, she went all white. The white spread next to her hair. First just the wispy parts at her temples, then all of it. And due to it being the same color as her skin, it kindly widened out her face. Made it look like her head was growing wings.

She wasn't any older than any of us. She'd just stopped trying to color it. Only a handful of years ago it was naturally this wholly uncommon red-brown that glowed like coals in the sun. When it started going sandy she'd try and paint it back to what it used to be but you can't bottle a redhead. It never looked quite right and after all those years of being able to tell people her color was natural I imagine it hurt her pride to have to start saying it wasn't when she was asked. Which they always did. People want to know everything about what's different.

You might say all that happened is that she learned to embrace the fact of aging, that it's a good and honest thing, but that's because you don't know her like we do. Her clothes had changed as well. She used to wear the most beautiful dresses on Sundays and her clothes always had flowers on them. So much so that little kids in the neighborhood took to calling her Auntie Flower. She wore all black now and those same kids called her Auntie Witch.

I wondered where she got all those black clothes all of the sudden because she stopped going to Alice's little boutique. There weren't any other stores for ladies in town and she didn't have a car to get to none in the city. One day though, I got close enough to her to see a faint pattern of little daisies trying to hide underneath the black. That's when I realized she had gone and dyed her clothes. All those pretty things.

When I got close that day I noticed she smelled different. It was a sour smell, something I don't recall ever smelling on a human body before directly. The best thing I can relate it to is how Earl's underwear smells when he comes back from a weekend of hunting. The smell of ropy old sweat that gets clogged all up in those hairy pores before pushing out like syrup to settle in its white cotton hammock. On Ethel it wasn't as strong, it was subtle like perfume, but I promise that's what it smelled like and that was when I realized she must have quit bathing.

She dead stopped going to church. Usually when people stop going they have sense to taper. They'll miss one week and then go back for three, then miss one and go back for two, then you never see them again. You can sort of slip out that way without getting the pastor in a tizzy. You do not want a phone call from that man. I wondered if he tried to call Ethel and I suspect he had. I wondered what she said or if she even answered the phone.

Yes, in fact the only time I or anyone else did see her was at the grocer's. Ironically, that used to be the place we never much saw her at all because she had had a nice garden and was always outside tending it. It was so generous that she always had more than she could eat or can so she made a habit of bringing totes around to the neighbors. Squash, peas, potatoes, corn, you name it. Miss Martha Jean passed it by last week and said it was all overgrown and the squash looked bad and the tomatoes had fallen.

It was there at the grocer's that I got the nerve to get close to her, her smell, and her black daisies. She was bagging some carrots. I rolled my cart up next to hers and pretended to want carrots myself.

"Why, hello Miss Ethel," I said, and she said nothing in reply. I waited a few seconds because she was making me nervous and then I said, "What a coincidence, I was just about to get some carrots myself. Planning a cake for when Earl and the boys get back. Carrot's his favorite as you may recall. Say Miss Ethel, we were all wondering when we might see you at a service? You haven't been in a long while. We were all saying, we miss those times we used to visit with you afterwards for coffee and bridge..."

She still wasn't saying anything and she had quit with the carrots but she wasn't moving and that

made me even more nervous, and when I was nervous I had a bad habit of not being able to keep my mouth shut. So I kept going.

“And we’ve been noticing you got a new style there. All the black. It sure is interesting, tell me, where’d you get the idea to start dressing like that? It must be all the rage somewhere outside of town, am I right? I only think so because you’ve always been so fashion-forward. I recall when you convinced Miss Alice to start carrying those dresses with the shiny fabric and it ended up she couldn’t keep them on the rack to save her life. I have to say we do miss your flower prints. Those were kindly your signature. I think the one I liked the best was that dress with the bluebells. You always wore it with that wide blue belt with the rhinestone buckle and we were always jealous of how it made you look so thin. You’re still thin, of course, I didn’t mean to imply otherwise.”

She still wasn’t talking. And I didn’t notice until I finally did shut it, but she wasn’t even looking at me. She was looking down at her hands and they were in a tight grip around the bag of carrots.

“Well, we just miss you is all.”

I said that a little quietly and surprised myself by putting a hand on her shoulder. I felt her stiffen up underneath it so I took it off but not before I said, “Ethel Kelly, if you want to talk about something -”

And that was when she let go the carrots. She tossed them in her cart and pushed herself on by me. I saw her go right to the checkout line with nothing but those carrots and I felt bad for interrupting her shopping. I imagined her eating just those carrots for dinner and I felt even worse.

Part II: Ethel

I got right the hell out of there.

I never had the stomach for people being in my business and my whole digestive system went when folks touched me without my consent. Her putting her hand on me was like someone taking a feather duster to clean up a hundred year-old abandoned plantation house. Ill-conceived and ineffective. And now my cooking plans were ruined. Saturdays was when I made my stew for the week. Well, I guess this week I’m having carrot stew. Maybe some of the tomatoes are salvageable, I’d have to check.

I hated this town and I’ve always hated it. No one knew that because I didn’t think I could get away with showing it but something just snapped in me one day and I realized I had no heart to give anymore as far as keeping up appearances was concerned. The black clothes were a happy accident. I was dyeing some faded socks and forgot I had thrown a couple of my flower shirts in the washer a few days before and when they came up black I realized I liked how they looked. So I went and bought a case of dye and set about dumping my whole closet in it. Anything that didn’t take the dye - mostly my nice things - I threw out. I could have given them to the church closet but everyone in town would know they were mine and I didn’t need that kind of attention.

Later on the city shut off my water for missing a few bills. The old house still had a well but it hadn’t been rigged up in a while. I figured it out but the water only came out in a trickle and I had to boil it before I could use it so I mostly gave up on washing myself. I guess I could have settled my bill with the city and got it turned back on but after only a few days I learned not to miss it. Better things to spend money on than things you stop missing.

I knew I smelled. But it was such a curious scent and I grew to like it. Every day it became more dense, more pungent, like my roses used to during the time they unfolded until just after the height of their bloom. It alarmed me. I didn’t know a human body could smell like that. At a certain point though, once about every four weeks, it got so bad that I couldn’t stand it and that’s when I filled a little bucket and gave my hairy parts a wash with a bar of lye.

I stopped washing my hair altogether except when it rained. When the drops came down hard I went out behind the greenhouse, took off my clothes, scrubbed my hair with that same bar of lye and let the rain wash it down. The first time I stood naked in the rain, that was when I made peace with my decision to quit church. The rain washed my feet. Jesus never did. It was sunny and I saw a rainbow and I thought that’s God enough for me.

I didn’t have to go out to check the tomatoes. I could see through the window that they weren’t any good. They had all dropped off and withered and that meant the bugs had got to them. I chopped the carrots and brought the stock to boil and threw them in with a little salt and a few sprigs of rosemary. It didn’t look like a fun meal but I wouldn’t go hungry from it. And there was a certain satisfaction in eating

this paltry food and thinking I had no choice but to eat it and that it was all that dizzy busybody's fault. I had come to find a certain satisfaction in being spiteful even though I knew I was hurting no one with it but myself. Indulging spite is like a tongue bothering a mouth sore. It makes that raw pain linger but you just can't help it.

There was one person in town - or who used to be - that I did like. I was walking into the grocer's one day and I heard a squeaky little voice calling, "Hey Miss Ethel! Wait up! I like those clothes!"

That got my attention so I turned around and saw little Melody. I had known of her when she was small, when her family lived closer to me, but I hadn't seen her in a long time. I thought she must be about fourteen now. I remember her being a homely kid and to tell you the truth she wasn't objectively any prettier now all grown, but she had a spark to her, something that came naturally from the inside, and she was smiling at me real big. I decided maybe she was just a different kind of pretty. Her friendliness was eager and genuine, and that actually made me feel a little happy and more importantly comfortable, and I think that went a long way as far as my perception of her beauty went.

"Hang on, don't go nowhere, Miss Ethel," she said. I saw her jog to her daddy's work truck. I decided to walk over myself and save her the jog back. She brought out a magazine and flipped until she came to a page with a black and white picture of a young lady in front of a microphone. She had long wavy hair that looked white in the photo and was wearing what I assumed were black clothes that hung on her just as wavy.

"Look at this," Melody said. "You look just like Stevie Nicks in them clothes and she's my number one favorite. Is that who you're trying to look like? 'Cause if so I'd have to give you a big ol' gold star."

I didn't know who this lady singer was but Melody looked so pleased with herself for making the association and so admiring of me for being dressed up like her idol so I said, "You know what, you're right Miss Melody. I do indeed look like your Stevie. How about that."

"Here, you can have this," she said, and she gave it to me and I took it. There were a few more pictures of this Stevie on the next couple of pages. Color ones. I could see now that her hair wasn't white like mine. Her clothes though were definitely black. I don't know how to exactly describe my feelings as I looked at the pictures but I can say I did feel something like a kinship with this lady singer that stirred something deep in my heart. Especially in one picture where she was looking right into the camera with eyes that looked drowsy and sad. She did appear burdened, but I also thought she looked magical. Like she really might have honest-to-God magic powers.

I could hardly believe myself but I asked Melody if she might want to come over sometime and play me some of this Stevie's music. Her smile didn't leave but it went a little cock-eyed and she said, "That sounds just lovely and I would, Miss Ethel, but I cain't. I'll tell you why but you have to please promise you won't say anything..."

I promised.

"I figured out a ride into the city with one of Mr. Al's watermelon truckers and once I get there I'm gonna start hitchin' myself west until I get to California. Miss Ethel, please don't say anything to anyone, not ever. They'll come lookin' for me and I don't never want to be found. Not by no one. I decided it. I wasn't gonna tell no one at all but everyone says you don't talk with no one no more and, well, I guess I'm too excited to keep it to myself. And when I saw you here lookin' like Stevie I thought it might be some kind of sign that I should tell you. I know that sounds corny but I do believe in things like signs and such. Promise me again, now that you've heard it."

So that was that. I knew what it was like to be determined beyond all sense. I myself had fantasized about running away, about getting myself lost and never found. I made my promise again and watched her go. I never saw her again and I never told anyone what she said she was fixing to do, even when I saw her red-eyed momma hanging the missing posters.

One night when I was feeling lonely I got the idea to tear out the full-page picture of Stevie and put it in a frame on my supper table because that's where I figured I'd get to spend the most time with it. I wasn't about to show my old face at any record store so I imagined in my head what her singing might have sounded like. First I thought, because of her clothes, maybe she sounded a little cackly like a witch in a bog. Or at the very least a little rough around the edges. Then I remembered the picture with her eyes and got a sense her voice might instead be soft and dreamy. I tried my hand at singing in all the different ways I thought she might. I only really knew the lyrics to church songs by heart so that's what I sang. I heard

my voice crack when I went loud and I heard it disappear like clouds in the wind when I went soft.

*Just as I am - without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee
O Lamb of God, I come.*

*Just as I am - and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot
To Thee, whose blood can cleanse each spot
O Lamb of God, I come.*

Every night during supper I sang different songs in different voices until what was left of my stew congealed in the bottom of the bowl. I didn't think about Melody at all until a couple of months later when the whole town started talking about how the police found her body in Texas.

It was troubling to think about how a person could be lost and found at the same time.

Kelli Dianne Rule is an author of dark fiction who claims roots in the backwoods of Florida. Recent writings may be found in *Heavy Feather Review*, *Whale Road Review*, *BULL*, *JMWW*, *Luna Station Quarterly* and *The Avenue Journal*, among others. Her short story anthology, *Florida, Deep and Dark*, is currently in the works. Follow her work at www.kellirule.com.

Non-Fiction



Welcome Here by Ellen Notbohm

“. . . isn't for wimps.”

How we love our memes and bumper stickers, as if deep truths can be reduced to a few inches of lettering. Some time ago, I shoved back against a Facebook graphic braying “Autism isn't for wimps.” You mean autism is a choice? An autistic person can opt out by identifying as a wimp?

Since then, the list of what isn't for wimps has mushroomed. Today's internet search belched out this list of what “isn't for wimps:” parenting, being beautiful, advocacy work, nonviolence, love, filmmaking, teaching, marriage, history, relocation, leadership, aging, religion, ballet, prayer, breastfeeding, healing, success, cycling, politics, daschunds, therapy, writing, Finland, pole dancing. I'm gobsmacked to learn that even things like lunch, gratitude, and indoor recess aren't for wimps. And these are within the first hundred hits of over 100,000.

That list lets out quite a lot of the human experience, doesn't it? So what's left for wimps? What is a wimp, anyway?

Bear with me a pedantic moment here. Before wimp became a popular put-down, it originated as a physics acronym for “weakly interacting massive particle,” particles that interact with other particles by the force of gravity alone. Some scientists think WIMPS may be the dark matter that makes up much of the mass of the universe.

Somehow, dark matter particles got anthropomorphized into “a weak, cowardly or unadventurous person,” a source of derision, pity and superiority complex for those who think themselves brave and adventurous. Voices lost to the wind, faces blanked out in the crowd.

But I welcome wimps. As the mother of an autistic son and a 30-year member of the worldwide autism community, I see them as nothing less than tomorrow's advocates, involved citizens, change-bringers and thought-provokers. They're the opposite of lost souls; they're an opportunity—I might even say obligation—for all us to help someone grow and do better, and thus become better ourselves.

Wimps are welcome in my world because I came from a spot on the spectrum where I knew nothing about autism, a bewildering place of not knowing who to turn to, who would understand, who would point the way. I leaned heavily on those who knew more than I did. With their help, I rose to parenting my different-needs child to a degree I didn't know I had within me. No one called me a wimp or my son a lost cause. Strength of heart grows from desire, determination and perseverance. Inherent strength is admirable, but lack of it doesn't mean it's unattainable, nor that it's the only requirement for competent parenthood. We may start out as lost but we don't get stranded there.

Wimps are welcome in my world because if we view individuals and families who are without knowledge and support as weak or ineffectual, doesn't that make them the very people who most need our empathy and support?

Look again at the list above of what isn't for wimps. Notice that only two of them, autism and getting older, aren't choices. Being judgmental of those who don't share our knowledge, experiences and character-building resources is a choice. Failing to see the perspective of others is a choice. Sanctimonious name-calling is a choice.

Wimps are welcome in my world because then I get to tell them that it's not cowardly to be fearful. Sometimes it's wise. It's the human condition to be apprehensive about the unknown, and very often it's reversible with information, encouragement and guidance. If everyone were born all-knowing and fearless, we'd miss out on the process of character-building, one of the most satisfying, fulfilling and mind-expanding aspects of the human experience. We'd miss that liberating moment when we realize that being fearless isn't the same as being courageous, that any fool can be fearless by simply avoiding the man or woman in the mirror, or by failing to recognize peril. But it takes courage to confront one's fears and take them on. I've known countless so-called wimps who've done just that.

Wimps are welcome here because if I want the greater community to step up and make a welcoming place for all children and they adults they will become, I must set that example for all to see and hear. It is the epicenter of the ripple effect so well defined by anthropologist Margaret Mead:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Ellen Notbohm's work touches millions in more than twenty-five languages. She is author of the nonfiction classic *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew*, the acclaimed novel *The River by Starlight*, and numerous nonfiction, memoir, and short fiction pieces appearing in literary journals, magazines, and anthologies in the US and abroad. Her books and short prose have won more than 40 awards worldwide.

The Picture or, What Might Have Been by Diane Cypkin

Whenever I look at the picture—at my maternal grandparents and my many uncles and aunts—I can't help but think about what might have been.

I think about what it would have been like to visit grandma, Tsipe Dvorah. She would have shown me how to buy the best produce from the farmers that still passed her house mornings on their way to market in Mažeikiai, Lithuania. She would have taught me how to cook Lithuanian Jewish delicacies including *lokshen kugel* (noodle pudding). She would have shown me how to darn socks—turning what was an ugly hole magically beautiful, filling it with little pearly stitches. Then, we would have sat into the night, Tsipe Dvorah and I, and talked about everything under the sun—with me enjoying every bit of her wisdom.

I think about what it would have been like to visit with grandpa, Leibe, especially as I matured. A quiet, thinking man, I know he would have been proud to ask me about my studies and teaching at the University. But then, being the conservative man he was, he'd probably also ask me—in a sterner tone now—how long I intended acting in the theater, another love of mine. Women, according to him, should dedicate themselves to a husband, raising a family, and certainly not working in the theater. (“What kind of people,” he'd say, “could you be mixing with there?”) Oh, but after some quiet moments, he'd look at me lovingly, laughingly relent and say, “It's a new world, isn't it?” “Do what makes you happy!”

I think about all the many years of joyous holiday celebrations at grandma and grandpa's house—the largest house in the family, and because of that, where all get-togethers happened.

For weeks before any holiday—whether Rosh Hashanah, Chanukah or Passover—all the women in the family would be at the house cooking. Etta, grandma's eldest child (and my Mama), would decide who would make what. My Mama knew everyone's abilities, so she already decided Mendel's wife (wife to Mama's eldest brother) would make the tasty chicken. Shimon's wife (wife to Mama's second eldest brother) would make the lip-smacking *tsimmes* (a carrot and prune delicacy). Chaim's wife (wife to Mama's third eldest brother) would work on making the potatoes just right. And Avreml's wife (wife to Mama's youngest brother) would make one of her delicious, memorable desserts.

No, Mama couldn't count on her younger sisters—Reizale and Gitale. For Reizale, who everyone agreed was the most beautiful woman in town, would undoubtedly take this opportunity to show off the latest outfits she'd just bought. There was the pretty pink evening dress she had to get everyone's opinion on. There was the sophisticated suit she knew would impress. And Gitale, she was always such a rascal. No, she'd be too busy joyfully pranking everyone to cook.

Soon, everything in the many pots and pans would be bubbling. Indeed, the kitchen itself would be bubbling-- with talk and lots of laughter.

The evening of the holiday everyone would arrive dressed in their best: My family, with Papa, a successful manufacturer; Mendel, the owner of the biggest pharmacy in Kovno (a big city in Lithuania), with his family. Shimon's brood would come running in followed by Shimon, a math professor. Chaim, a well-known architect would come with his wife and children. Raizele would make her glamorous entrance with her husband, a successful businessman, followed by her sons. Gitale would arrive with her husband, a lawyer. Avremel, a courageous and fiery politician would rush in, always *almost* late because of an important meeting.

Oh, it was such a noisy, happy group.

But then, all of this is a dream.

The Nazis killed half of them and the rest were scattered throughout the world, destroying family forever.

Sadly, war doesn't end when the last shot is fired.

Blueprint of the Unbuilt by Barbara Krasner

Only seventeen years after Avram Mendel Pryzant, a penniless young man, landed on the shore of his new country, he had achieved the American Dream before that phrase was even coined. But, in early December 1961, that fact was lost on me, his young granddaughter. I hated the long trips to Brooklyn from where we lived in northern New Jersey. I always got car sick. Once again, we climbed into my father's sedan. Once again, nausea bubbled up and I found comfort sitting on the car floor, distracted by the road reverberations, resting my four-year-old head on my eldest sister's lap. We pulled up along the curb in front of the brick apartment building at 1854 68th Street in Bensonhurst. My grandparents' home where my mother grew up. A tree planted near the curb appeared sickly, no will to live. That's how I learned my mother's father was dead.

I can't recall my grandfather's touch or his Yiddish accent. I don't remember the horsey rides on his knees my twin sister says he gave us. He may have pinched a cheek from time to time and muttered, "Mamashaynele." I never thought about how he ended up in Brooklyn. I just knew he'd been a paper hanger and had pasted the harlequin paper in the bedroom I shared with my twin sister.

It took decades for me to learn more about him, decades to visit his shtetl, Zaręby Kościelne or Zaromb in Yiddish, now in northeastern Poland. Max Perlman—as Avram Mendel Pryzant came to be known in America—bought this Bensonhurst brick building by 1930 for \$16,000. He must have made good as a paperhanger. He and his partner, Mottel Cohen, his cousin's husband also from Zaromb, papered the Empire State Building.

My grandfather had to have been a good businessman to buy that apartment building. But there may have been more to it than that. Maybe the transaction was a jab at his father for disowning him when he left home in 1913. A meticulous move to say he'd made the right decision not to fulfill his father's dream that he should become a rabbi. Had Max stayed a joiner in Zaromb, as he had apprenticed to do, he'd still have lived in poverty in a place where the crudely built houses, roofed with the ever-present tar paper, leaned on each other for support along each of its four streets. Tar production was one of the shtetl's main businesses because of the nearby pine forests.

Now Max could look at this Brooklyn building and say he bought this, either with cash or with a secured mortgage. Either way, his wife, two daughters, and son would live here. His in-laws would live here. His older daughter would take an apartment with her new husband during World War II. Family, all under one roof.

Everything was family. A cousin on his father's side introduced him to the woman who would become his wife. Though the two met in New York, Rayzel (Rose) came from Ostrów Mazowiecka (Ostrova), a town close to Zaromb, where Max's cousin had lived and where Max's father had been born. His business partner was family. His tenants were family.

Max was used to family living together. He had nine siblings. Two died before his birth and two died during the 1899 cholera epidemic, leaving him to be the youngest boy. Sixteen years separated him from his oldest brother, Isaac. One brother, Moshe Aron, came to America in 1926 through Canada. That's how my mother learned the original name had been Pryzant. Max changed it because it sounded like "prison," and he didn't want to start his new life in America saddled with such a burden. Instead, he bought a new hat and created this new persona all without the benefit of any legal documentation.

By creating a new name for himself, Max announced to the world he was ready to become an American. He would have to learn English to interface with his clientele, and these customers would, no doubt, find it much easier to pronounce Max Perlman than Avram Mendel Pryzant. With his new name, he was severing ties to the young man of the shtetl. He was cosmopolitan now, living in one of the world's largest cities. And he would be a success. Not by his father's standards, to be sure, but by his own.

Whatever would happen next for him, he would decide for himself. No matchmakers. No occupation chosen for him. He was a freethinker. He read the *Forverts*, the left-leaning daily Yiddish newspaper, after all. The return on investment would outweigh the risks, even if he had to establish and maintain some kind of indirect correspondence with his mother and younger sister, because his father forbade contact.

If he felt at all homesick, Max could rely on his fellow immigrants from Zaromb, another kind of family, who settled in New York. He joined the Zaromber Progressive Young Friends Society, a *landsmanshaft* whose members shared memories and cemetery plots in Queens. Members gave generously to the United Zaromber Relief Committee, founded in 1937 to address a most serious economic situation at home. Max, along with his fellow *landsleit*, participated in fundraisers to send relief, most likely through the United Zaromber Relief. My grandparents probably attended the annual dance to help raise money. My mother remembered her father sending care packages. In March 1938, the free loan society in Zaromb sent a letter to “our dear landsleute in America.” It pointed up that even the more well-off Jews in town were now asking for loans and funds were limited. The authors write, “We find no words to picture the wretchedness persisting here and we are therefore appealing to you, dear brethren... You will thus save the Jews of Zaręby Kościelne from ruin.”

A few months later, the chairman of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee committed to match any funds raised by United Zaromber Relief. The Warsaw office of the Joint received a letter from Zaromb: “Last night, twenty Jewish tombs were desecrated for the third time by wild ruffians... Never has the population been so poor, and the boycott stronger... we do not know how to face the situation. It is so distressing to see all these people compelled to sell their shops to Christians and move on to larger towns...”

But as much as my grandfather believed in *tikkun olam*, the Jewish value of repairing the world, he was no *makher* in the *landsmanshaft*. He took no leadership role. Instead, he insisted my mother change the world, a role she vehemently resisted in favor of fashion, boys, and Benny Goodman concerts. He couldn't change the world himself, he must have known this. His stubby, thick hands were meant for menial tasks, for holding hands, for holding babies, for tuning into baseball games on the radio and television. Even though my mother wrinkled her nose at the mention of Papa while she lay dying, she must have had enormous trust in him since he papered our entire house in 1959. He must have wanted to give her the world. Everywhere we all looked, we would see his handiwork and him embedded in the walls, a family legacy.

But the Brooklyn building he owned did not figure into the family legacy. His older daughter and her family had planned to move to an apartment in Coney Island. But when Max died, it was decided that my grandmother would move with them, and off to a Queens row house they went.

Recently, Zillow showed an asking price for the apartment building of \$2.175 million. Had the building stayed in the family, that would have been quite the inheritance even if all his grandchildren, all ten of us, shared in it. I scanned the photos to see if any interior photo sparked any memories. They didn't. Even the exterior had completely changed. There was no tree at the curb, no more brick surface.

When I visited Zaromb in September 2008, I imagined my grandfather, his siblings, and friends racing down the alleys between the dilapidated houses, swimming in the Brok River on a summer Sunday afternoon, running to *kheder*, all while the bells of St. Mary Mother of the Harvest and St. Stanisław Church rang out, reminding them several times a day that the Jews of Zaromb did not live in a segregated community. The shtetl was simply not big enough for that.

I stood in the place. I decided that this one house on what used to be Farbasker Street belonged to my family. A mustard-colored wooden structure with the business on one side and the residence on the other, a tar paper roof, a loft. White lace curtains lined the mullioned window frames that sank into the wood at odd angles. Perhaps if my grandfather had stayed and continued to work as a joiner, the windows would be straight.

As I roamed Zaromb's fields and four streets, my grandfather's journey crystallized. The house confined him. Zaromb confined him. Even his name confined him as did Joseph Chaim, his father, who wanted to confine him, too. Avram Mendel knew there was more out there, more outside this one-streetlamp town. He stepped out the door into the unknown.

There was no train station in Zaromb then, so young Avram Mendel likely traveled on foot to Malkinia, twelve kilometers away. With his mathematical mind, he probably keenly planned it all out, taking maybe the train from Malkinia to Warsaw. With his mother's arrangements, he traveled to Paris. There Zaromb would soon seem like a speck of dust, easy to blow away. Still, I can surmise Avram Mendel Pryzant must have been glad, even relieved, to be out of Zaromb and away from his father's heavy hand. If he had to tell the truth, he would talk of fear. Fear of staying in the same house with an

overbearing father who wouldn't listen to how the world was changing and how they needed to change with it. Fear of leaving loved ones behind to go out into the great beyond where nothing would be guaranteed. But he could live his whole life in Zaromb and never really see beyond the pine forest, the Brok River, and the fields. He would go from the pine box that was Zaromb to the pine box in the cemetery, which was already overcrowded with two layers of coffins beneath the ground.

Avram Mendel worked in an umbrella factory—perhaps owned or managed by his mother's people. Umbrella manufacturing in Paris was big business and France was home to the industry. A rainy day in Paris is part of the City of Lights experience. I don't know what kind of job my grandfather had in the umbrella factory or how long he worked there. I don't know the name or size of the factory or whether family owned it.

The plan was to earn passage to America. His maternal cousin, Sarah Ruchel Blumenkrantz, was already in New York City with her husband, Mottel Cohen, in that fairytale seaside place called Brooklyn. Avram Mendel might have marveled at the sea air and the great expanse that lay ahead as he boarded the *S.S. Majestic* in Cherbourg on Wednesday, July 30, 1913. My grandfather arrived in New York at age twenty-two on Thursday, August 7, 1913. His American assimilation process depended on his Zaromb connections. He lived with Mottel Cohen and his cousin for a while. New York City was nothing like the sloping hills and wheat fields of Zaromb where Max could hold out two hands and grab the whole shtetl. Mottel brought him into his paper-hanging business. This was as far away from becoming a rabbi as Max could get. He did not attend shul. It wasn't a big leap from being a joiner to hanging paper. Both are about precise measurements and angles yet being able to see the big picture.

But some big pictures elude envisioning. Nazi German tanks and soldiers started bombing towns close to Zaromb in early September 1939. The Nazis and the Soviets, according to the pact they signed in August, took it upon themselves to divide Poland yet again (Poland had only gained independence from the yoke of Germany, Austria, and Russia in 1918). Nazi forces occupied Ostrova; Soviet forces occupied Zaromb by the end of September. Max's family split. Isaac and his family in Ostrova were likely killed in the fall of 1939. Max's next eldest brother, Yankel Dovid, fled from Zaromb into the Soviet Union and stayed in Uzbekistan-Bukhara for the rest of the war. He and his family returned to Poland, found nothing there for them, and immigrated to Palestine. Younger sister Feygel perished with her family, most likely shot and thrown into a mass grave outside Zaromb in Sember in the summer or fall of 1941 after the Nazis reneged on the pact it signed with the Soviet Union and invaded through Operation Barbarossa.

The space between the physical shtetl and America had certainly been widening since Max's arrival in New York. World War I made separation temporary; World War II made it permanent. Max was never reunited with Yankel Dovid. I tracked down Yankel Dovid's family in Israel in the 1990s through the now-defunct Bureau of Missing Relatives. His granddaughter Rachelle, born in Poland after the war, was now living in Massachusetts. We got together when she visited a friend in Teaneck, New Jersey. For her, there was no chasm, no break in family lore. She knew the stories, the only one of which I remember now is that the family is prone to Alzheimer's.

Rachelle, too, has since passed. I'm in touch with her daughter, Sabrina, through Facebook. Sabrina sent me a photo of Yankel Dovid. Seeing it was like fitting an integral piece into a jigsaw puzzle. He was very religious looking, even in his old age. A long white beard gobbles up most of his face. He wears a dark coat and one of those high, stiff yarmulkes that looks more like a cap. His eyes bore into the camera. He died the year after my grandfather in 1962 at age 82. What gave him the motivation, the intuition, to get the heck out and flee into the USSR interior after the Soviet occupation? And how much did my grandfather know about what was going on?

I can't imagine that Max Perlman ever regretted leaving Zaromb. But perhaps there were other things he regretted—not bringing over his siblings, for instance, although they may have refused to leave.

In the 1990s, I accompanied my mother and her siblings on their annual pilgrimage on the Sunday of Labor Day weekend to Montefiore Cemetery on Springfield Avenue in Queens. They said their prayers at the graves of their parents and then returned to my aunt's house for lunch. My aunt passed down to me my grandparents' engagement certificate, which had been ripped and held together with yellowing, brittle cellophane tape. She also gave me my grandfather's copy of the Zaromb memorial book in remembrance of those who perished in the Holocaust, his death notice in Yiddish, and a 1926 black-bordered postcard from brother Isaac announcing the death of their father—the sum total of my physical inheritance.

In my front hall sits a basket of pinecones I gathered from the ground of Leshner Forest, three kilometers from Zaromb's marketplace, the place where the shtetl's Jewish couples once dreamed about their futures among the pine needles and towering pine trees. Somehow, I think, my grandfather would know I'd been there. I may not have inherited anything of monetary value, but my inheritance from Avram Mendel Pryzant, aka Max Perlman, has been a keen passion for family history, for learning what happened to his family during the Holocaust, for Yiddish. I will be forever grateful that he left Zaromb.

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