

Issue One: Connections



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Cover Art by Nasta Martyn

Nasta Martyn is an artist, graphic artist, illustrator, writer and poet. She graduated from the State Academy of Slavic Cultures with a degree in art, and also has a bachelor's degree in design. She writes fairy tales and poems, illustrates short stories. She draws various fantastic creatures: unicorns, animals with human faces, she especially likes the image of a man - a bird - a Siren. In 2020, she took part in Poznań Art Week.

Editor's Note

Welcome to this inaugural issue of *Ivo Review*.

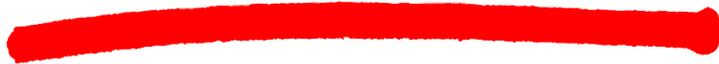
When we chose our name, we were drawn not to sainthood, but to the idea of witness and storytelling, of lifting voices that too often go unheard. Ivo of Kermartin is remembered as a patron of the abandoned and of those who sought justice. That spirit resonates with us, not as theology, but as a charge: to tell the stories that demand to be told, to create a space where absence and silence are met with attention and care.

This first issue gathers together poetry, micro-fiction, fiction, monologue, and non-fiction essays. These pieces are as varied in form as they are in subject, but each one insists on being heard. Each one expands what our inaugural theme of CONNECTIONS might mean.

We are honored to share them with you.

—The Editors

Poetry



When I Erase You by Erin Jamieson

soggy cornflakes writhe
like maggots in expired
milk- my spoon stirs
as if of its own volition
creating a tempest in
a bland ocean
where the shore
is as perilous
as the floor

I taste a touch
of sweetness but
it's an echo of
mornings spent
bathing in misty
light

now the rain
comes like
a visitor
I've both
hoped for
and hidden
from

Your Shadow by Erin Jamieson

do you bleed stars
in those fragile hours
inky midnight bleeding
into periwinkle twilight
our lips speak of galaxies
but you were the one
not content to be
mere skin
so I watched as
you left behind
a shadow

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

A Mess by Becky Nicole James

I know exactly
how to weave one:
gather and scatter,
spread and scaffold

You, ascetic, own books
to fill one shelf,
keep tees and dress shirts
neat in one closet,
never running out of hangers.

My wardrobes, plural, spill
sequins, polka dots,
fleece and velvet
in RGB order:
color my only anchor.

Your diet simple
tofu and grains
while I brown chicken sausage
stuffed with Mozzarella,
herbs and apple
that sprays when I break
the skin. My desire

a tachy pump, pricking
every pore to shears singing
as you offer measured
caresses, practicing scales.
How are we together?

I collect,
and you curate,
nothing but a lamp
a tissue box
and a portrait of your parents
on your nightstand;

mine a cracked
geode of crystal bead earrings,
needle and ball and roller
point pens, discarded
plastic bowls, and white-
capped pill bottles
in California hazard orange.

Becky Nicole James has published poems in *Best of Birmingham Arts Journal*, *Margie*, and *Moon City Review*. Her work has received two Honorable Mentions in the Lena M. Shull Book Award, the Fieldstone Review Poetry Prize, and a Best of the Net nomination. Her first chapbook, *Saxophones and Dripping Faucets*, is forthcoming in summer 2026.

On Meeting a Goth Androgyne in a Dark Downtown Bar

by J. J. Steinfeld

The brooding darkly dressed
goth androgyne (I doubt if I can
give a better description)
stands next to me at the bar
expensive drink in hand
and tells me unprompted,
“It’s dark and getting darker,”
and I smile, bewildered into curiosity,
offering to buy the dark-worshipping
goth androgyne another drink
less expensive, though,
darkly accepted, then,
a long-fingered hand
waved pointing at the occupants
of the bar, “Look at their ersatz agony
and meaningless posturing.”
Thoughts of identity and authenticity
upending my psyche and sadness
I detect the scent of *schadenfreude*
we share yet another *cathartic libation*
(the goth androgyne’s mischievous phrase)
altogether three drinks worth of dialogue
about sex on Earth and sex
on other misdefined planets
and I ask, *What sex or gender
do you prefer, in morning or nighttime?
And what is gender on other planets
and if it’s bright will you miss the darkness?*
A subtle laugh, a refreshing smile
teeth marvellously gleaming
I estimate I’m twice the age
and three times the angst
of the amiable goth androgyne
but who’s counting or deconstructing.
I say, my farewell assertion,
At least you know exactly who you are,
a feeble insight catching me by the throat,
relinquishing bewilderment like an exhausted night
grudgingly relinquishes darkness.

Originally published in *Absurdity, Woe Is Me, Glory Be* (Guernica Editions, 2017). The author’s biography can be found with their included fiction piece; “A Ninetieth-Birthday Present.”

Dancing Together Creates a New Creature by Jean Janicke

We started as strangers standing solo above froth surf
gazing through glass as pink cliffs glow red in rising sun.

And then we learned to dance. Right feet pulled weight
forward and back, a hundred shimmering legs centipede

stepped in three-quarter time, bellies undulated a slither,
hidden pinch of shoulder blades suspended arms like wings.

Feathers of fringe snapped at each hip flick as the flock
of many shapes, varied plumage, soared on thermals.

Under the full moon, we watched for shooting stars, spoke
of mermaids, listened to roars of monkeys and waves.

In the final photo we dance on shells and sand at sunset
one silhouette with many chalice arms holding up the sky.

his yellow trunks beam at the lake's edge

In Memory of Uncle Bill

In the photo at the viewing, he wades
into the watery ravine between two islands,
he holds out his hairy arms to make a ferry
so we could paddle to the far shore.

In the same yellow trunks,
he circled the boat
dragged the tow line
in a snail arc
so it taps me on the shoulder
a reminder to keep ski tips up
weight back,
suspended,
until the motor whirled a wedge
of smooth-water wake.
He circled through countless tries
of falling forward, drinking lake.

This summer, he towers
where stacked stones gather dead tree limbs,
dry leaves, and some broken boards for a bonfire,
face lit by the embers of his cigar.

Jean Janicke is a writer and retired economist. She lives in Washington, DC with her husband and two cats. She enjoys dancing, reading, and visiting the mountains of central Virginia. You can read other work by Jean in recent issues of *The Missing Slate*, *Nine Muses Poetry*, and *Monterey Poetry Review*.

Shards by Douglas Twells

for Gretel Braidwood and Ray Tindel

In strange lands far from home, leaving
behind sunlight and a gathering of locals
(skeptical, they are wondering what new
lunacy compels these people to leave behind
luxury; besides, the jewels and gold were looted
and long ago sold), you carry your lamps, slowly.
You take care not to disturb
or touch without purpose any item or surface.
You cross chambers, descend tunnels,
start up false passages, but finally
turn and find the treasure room. The air
is close, stifling—everyone pants
and perspires, but you hardly notice as,
together, you gather, date, number, and record
methodically from ledge and floor the fragments
left long ago: pottery in pieces. These things
with great care you retrieve, wrap, and pack
into strong crates, prepared for transport
to the museum and your laboratory,
not merely miles but millennia too.

The expedition could be deemed a success
but now, with your students, a dedicated team,
you begin, and sometimes to them you delegate,
the intricate, to others tedious, to you
the exciting, the mysterious task of reassembling
all these disassembled pieces if possible,
and seeing whatever they originally were.
This is not a deliberate puzzle purchased
in a toy or hobby store, but happenstance,
accident or incident, a puzzle of history.
What were they? And what is original?

From these shards, you and your students plan
a reconstruction of the pot, assuming
it was a pot, a meticulous task, that asks
for vast study, great skill, immense
effort, intense concentration. And if
the fragments fit, what could be easier?
But they won't. From experience you know
some will be missing, others misshapen, broken.
Propping them up, wiring them in place, applying
glue or epoxy, studying paintings on walls
or texts in languages lost from tongue and pen—
Demotic, Assyrian, Harappan or hieroglyph,
you will gradually produce something like
the pot that stood in the corner of a queen's bath
that stood in a corner of antiquity, as if
antiquity were a room and time itself a palace.

Such thoughts come to mind late at night,
in the basement, the museum, alone, silent
except for the steam whispering in the pipes,
as you attempt to add one more piece
when you should be trudging home. And it seems
you no longer can see what is original,
more real, the pot, or the shard, or even its clay.
You find if you apply force, any kind,
mental or physical, to fit the pieces, they yield
less, even nothing; whereas informed, relaxed,
pondering, meditating upon the pieces
and the knowledge you possess, more often
than not, you discover the very piece
you hold in your hand is the next piece that fits,
and this happens while you are looking away,
half in dream, considering the queen, or her bath,
and hearing mysterious clues in the whispering steam.

There is the clay.
Then the potter
who sees the pot,
or some pot,
in his mind,
and shapes the clay
to what he sees
or what it happens to become.
Then there is the handmaiden
who draws the water
and pours it from the pot
along the long black tresses
of the queen, late in the afternoon,
as she prepares for a state dinner
with visiting dignitaries and tribal heads.
Lecherous, murderous, or solicitous,
they will grace a frieze if not the earth.
Borne upon the heads
of unnumbered slaves,
ultimately,
this pot
and a myriad other possessions
must accompany the queen
to an opulent grave.
To layer upon layer,
add time until,
in a frenzied search for gold,
onto the floor
some greedy fellow
sweeps the pot aside
as he dashes
out the passage,
gets stabbed or
beaten to death

in an alley,
somewhere,
broken skull,
blood everywhere, and,
from filthy hand
to filthy hand,
the gold moves on.
But not the pot.
Now in pieces.

So here, here are these shards that keep you up
late into the night, musing, guessing,
connecting you to the pot; to its provenience,
its prime cause, milieu or civilization, craft;
to the potter at his wheel while his wife, maybe
grumbling, maybe grateful, prepares breakfast
nearby; and, finally, to fundamental substance:
clay, the same clay, always the same clay,
time its catapult through potter, pot,
palace, crypt, millennia, museum, and now
these shards you handle with care and question,
nothing more, nothing less than clay,
the original, the single, the essential substance
that connects and connects and connects.

Following service in the Peace Corps in India, Douglas Twells completed his MA in South Asian languages and civilizations at the University of Chicago. He later returned to India for further study in Sanskrit and Hindi at Banaras Hindu University. Retired from a career in university administration, Twells continues to write poetry and study ancient Indian literature. His poems have appeared in several journals including *3rd Wednesday*, *Arlington Literary Journal*, and *Four Tulips*. Twells lives with his wife in St. Louis.

Skillet Chicken by Sharisa Aidukaitis

The smell of cumin covered everything
As our turmeric-stained fingers
Wiped paprika trails off counters,
And we laughed until the static pops of oil
Drowned out our voices—
Then we fell again into the new silence
Last Tuesday had forced upon us,
And the ethereal sense returned
That we were intruders in this space—
We saw that our spices could never imbue
This sanctuary with the holiness it knew
While her hands were still here
To sprinkle homegrown mint.

.diaspora by Joseph A Farina

there is a dignity
in these stones
laid down by ancestors
a deep and lingering tone
of hardship and perseverance
like the mortar anchoring them
we are connected to its making
though rubble, a preservation
of its past and our own
not by stones but by
by the blood of those
who laid them

Sharisa Aidukaitis is a writer and college educator in upstate New York. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Penstricken*, *Moss Piglet*, *Waffle Fried*, *Sublimation*, *Drifting Sands Haibun*, and elsewhere.

Joseph A Farina is a retired lawyer and award-winning poet, and a pushcart nominee. His poems have appeared in *Philedelphia Poets*, *Tower Poetry*, *The Windsor Review*, and *Tamaracks: Canadian Poetry for the 21st Century*. He has three books of poetry published, *The Cancer Chronicles*, *The Ghosts of Water Street* and *The beach, the street and everything in between*.

If You Feel You Have Wasted Your Life, Then Read This Poem by Joseph Geskey

The first time you feel
pain in a hip or knee
and know it won't heal
with ice, meds, or time,
is when the calendar
of autumn is approaching.
Chlorophyll breaking down
during the shortening days,
first appearance of orange
and yellow, and if there is
enough sugar in the leaves,
streaks of red will make
even the jaded take notice.
At risk now during self-reflection,
the inventory of mistakes
threatens to overwhelm
the storage capacity of the mind.
Nicotine-dependence listed
on your medical chart,
but you never smoked the cigar
given to you on your child's birth.
Alcohol-dependent as well,
you never opened the bottle
of gifted bourbon, either.
Regrets like the sadness
of knowing you will only have
a few days left of hearing children
laugh outdoors during recess.
I want you to think of my father
increasing the flow of oxygen
as high as it could just to get up
and move from the couch
to the floor to play with
his preschool granddaughter,
mesmerized by a large container
filled with buttons of various sizes
smiling at him with such joy
it made the necessity of saving
them through the years
because of poverty feel worth it,
like gifting her a treasure
of gold coins she still remembers
five years after his death.

Joseph Geskey lives outside Columbus, Ohio. Broken Tribe Press will publish his second book of poetry, *Vigil*, in 2026. *Alms for the Ravens* appeared in 2024. Individual poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *Verse Daily*, *Poetry East*, *Cloudbank*, and the *Roanoke Review*, among many others. Please visit josephgeskey.com for further information.

The Real Thing by Bart Edelman

When the mouse expired,
We found a sense of peace,
For the first time in years.
The cat, however, was devastated.
He moped around the house,
Dragging his heavy body,
As if it were dead weight,
And it was, I'm afraid.
Any chase he sought eluded him.
Now he seemed destined
To a life of brutal inactivity,
Whether he liked it or not.
We tried toys, spools of string,
Stuffed animals aplenty—
Even brought home a kitten,
Yet he showed little interest.
Face it, he'd had the real thing,
And a substitute would not do.
He lasted a few weeks more,
Before he simply gave up,
Crawled to a crevice in the wall,
Found what comfort he could.

Bart Edelman's poetry collections include *Crossing the Hackensack* (Prometheus Press), *Under Damaris' Dress* (Lightning Publications), *The Alphabet of Love* (Red Hen Press), *The Gentle Man* (Red Hen Press), *The Last Mojito* (Red Hen Press), *The Geographer's Wife* (Red Hen Press), *Whistling to Trick the Wind* (Meadowlark Press), and *This Body Is Never at Rest: New and Selected Poems 1993 – 2023* (Meadowlark Press). He has taught at Glendale College, where he edited *Eclipse*, a literary journal, and, most recently, in the MFA program at Antioch University, Los Angeles. His work has been widely anthologized in textbooks published by City Lights Books, Etruscan Press, Fountainhead Press, Harcourt Brace, Longman, McGraw-Hill, Prentice Hall, Simon & Schuster, Thomson/Heinle, the University of Iowa Press, Wadsworth, and others. He lives in Pasadena, California.

Buffering by Daniel Romo

Someone says it's *very terrible* or the
very last time, as if putting a nail in

the coffin of redundancy, and I'm
put off at the talk since I struggle

with overkill and mortality. In the
YouTuber's final video, he

announced his death and I wonder
if we'd all do the same, feeling we

owed it to viewers dedicated
enough to set notifications to

witness the content of our lives.
When I recently saw my ex-father-

in-law walking across the parking
lot, I couldn't help but mourn the

end of our relationship, as if each
deliberate step he took with the

cane he now needed was a grieving
jab into my past. How a man limps

through seasons and strip malls is
a testament to his step count. His

last words on the channel were, *So,
as always, don't try this at home, and*

thanks for watching, and in these
moments, I can overlook my peeve

towards gaudy excess because
sometimes there are no words for
sadness other than
very distraught.

Stranger Danger by Daniel Romo

When the octogenarian said, *Words of wisdom. Stay young* to the barista, I calculated the weight of all

the unsolicited advice I've received in my life and the sum was somewhere between *Please, leave* and

Thank you for helping me give permission to myself to grieve. And when her colleague informed her he

sells part-time on eBay, I had questions regarding a life of ascribing value to an assortment of items

that'll outlive us all. I'm a collector of sorts, hoarding moments like mementos that I long

to toss, but it's as if the chokehold provides a gasping I've adapted to and would struggle to

breathe without. Am I alone in thinking what doesn't kill us makes us fonder like a Stockholm

syndrome in which we're captivated not by our captor, but by surviving on as little life as possible?

The city is used to the smog and the state is accustomed to the *of emergency* and the customer

always buys the same drink at the same time going to show what fuels routine and I imagine

how much more caffeination we'd need to stretch ourselves as the old man brings the hot

drink to his lips as if each sip is from a fountain of youth we can all drink from.

Witness by Daniel Romo

I struggle with breaking the news, ice, and a leg,
more solidifier than fracturer. So when I initiate

a conversation weighted like a femur rather than
phalanges, local news fissures become front-page

breakage. It takes a snapped bone up to 12 weeks
to heal, but it's a matter of time and pride for a

man to mend. The pastor proclaims, *I want the
humanity to be seen through your tears*, but I ponder

if drying your eyes defies his plea or is a sign that
starting over begins with emptying the water that

reflects the flood. The first life preservers were
pats on the back and the first therapists were

warm-hearted but heavy-handed and recovery
of any sort begins with absorption of a cruel

punchline to the gut. I text 77977 to give my
monthly tithes since the consistency and

advancement of 10% and technology is both
biblical and algorithmic, and all numbers point

towards a surge in buoyancy, despite a hair-
line that could splinter into tributaries leaving

shards stretching beneath the skin.

Daniel Romo is the author of *American Manscape* (Moon Tide Press 2026), *Bum Knees and Grieving Sunsets* (FlowerSong Press 2023), *Moonlighting as an Avalanche* (Tebot Bach 2021), and other books. His work can be found in *The Los Angeles Review*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Yemassee*, and elsewhere. He received an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte, and he lives, writes, and rides his bikes in Long Beach, CA. More at danieljromo.com.

Everybody is a Star by Charise Gendron

Sun, you make me sweat, like a gym teacher
demanding I climb the fat, hairy rope I cling to
in a uniform the color of dried blood,
mortified by my flesh. I am a woman: a fish.

Also, sun, your energy: sceptered, scopophilic.
I have sooner served the moon, preferring undertow
to assault.

But now at dusk you break your golden yoke
on the horizon, and I find we understand each other.
More brilliant than most, you are still
just another star with an expiration date,
laid horizontal by God knows what design.

Haven't we long understood it, friend sun?
We'll hit the floor many, many times before we die.

Knots by Colette Tennant

Golden Shovel after a line from
Li-Young Lee's "Three Words"—
God-My-Sister, combing the knots out of my hair.

Sister I might never find, are you a god,
a sylph, a naiad, a fury? Are you a Medusa, my
missing one? Greek monsters are mostly female, Sister.
I don't know why. I'm waiting for you. I'm combing
through the names of my DNA relatives, the
double helix strangers, Delphian Knots
I can't decipher, riddles I can't puzzle out.
Have you guessed I exist? Is there a certain pose of
the moon that almost nudges you to dream of my
face, or a glimpse of night sky – my soft-as-darkness hair?

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

Colette Tennant has three books of poetry: *Commotion of Wings*, *Eden and After*, and *Sweet Gothic*. Her book, *Religion in The Handmaid's Tale: a Brief Guide*, was published in 2019 to coincide with Atwood's publication of *The Testaments*. Her poems have won various awards and have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes along with being published in various journals, including *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattle*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Ireland Review*. Colette is an English and Humanities Professor who has also taught art in Great Britain, Germany, and Italy.

Maria Dolores by Anne Eyries

is dusting the feet of the saints;
does not see rags of smoke steal

like hyenas down streets, across
yards; does not hear stray dogs

howl while the town sleeps. Stone
walls are cool, the company quiet.

A knock – the door opens to wraiths
shimmering in the square. She coughs,

makes the sign of the cross, old bones
cannot kneel though know who waits.

Unhandsome but chosen at last
she struggles to knot the bell-ropes

and swings, rousing the village
from siesta. Joints burning worse

than fire ant bites, Maria Dolores
flies with the saints, eye to eye.

Anne Eyries has poetry and fiction published in various journals, including *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Consilience*, *Dust*, *Feral*, *London Grip*, *Moss Puppy*, and *Piker Press*. She lives in France.

Redemption by Linda Vigen Phillips

Coincidentally, we owned a large overstuffed green chair.
You held court there before the hospital, mother.

Supposedly, green calms anxieties and nerves.
You roamed those industrial green halls, mother.

Strait jackets, barred windows, electro-shock—
the air stood stale for you, my mother.

Thorazine floated in abundance on the ward.
Meds that were right were rare, mother.

Talking was gibberish, one crazy to another.
Talk therapy laying it all bare wasn't there yet, mother.

Green did nothing for me as a teenager.
Honestly, the brewing storm was the scare, mother.

After visiting you in the hospital I wanted to disappear.
Or I wanted you to disappear as my mother.

The birth of my own children cleared the air.
Despair does not raise good children, mother.

In the fog I saw the sun burn through.
I know now it was never your fault, my beloved mother.

Linda Vigen Phillips is an award-winning author of *Crazy*, a verse novel based on mental illness in her family; *Behind These Hands*, a verse novel about a family facing Batten Disease; *Thoughts at Crossings*, an adult poetry collection about abuse; and selected poems appearing in numerous literary magazines such as *The Texas Review*, *The California Quarterly*, and *The Christian Century*. She is the co-founder of Charlotte Clubhouse, an international program serving persons with mental illness. She and her husband live in Savannah, GA.

Cosmic Jokes & Co by Bruce McRae

Seems everyone is on the joke but you.
Seems the universe is conspiring
to knock you down a rung or two,
and for no particular reason;
other than a good laugh perhaps
and making light of the human condition.

Seems everybody's having fun but you,
a human punch line guaranteeing a few guffaws,
known for your death-defying pratfalls,
the straight-man in life's long-running comedy.
The joke where everything's a little funny.
The joke about the devil in heaven.
The one where you go to bed at night
and wake up in the morning.

Trigger Warning by Bruce McRae

The gun said *death*.
The gun said
remove yourself
from my story.

Bang said the gun,
I hope I haven't startled you.
Allow me to introduce you
to the bullet.

A sullen rain.
A glower of blood.
Curlicues of gun smoke
staining the air.

And the gun said sleep.
Place these pennies
over your eyes and sleep
when you're dead.

Bruce McRae, a Canadian musician, is a multiple Pushcart nominee with poems published in hundreds of magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle* and the *North American Review*. The winner of the 2020 Libretto prize and author of four poetry collections and seven chapbooks, his next book, *Boxing In The Bone Orchard* is coming out in the Spring of 2025 via Frontenac House.

A Lucky Encounter by Bernard Pearson

The funny thing about being trapped
in a lift with an alien is you have
lots of things to talk about
While on the door you tapped

High King Throbgut you
Would have thought
Would have known
A way to get us out
From where it was that
We were caught

But instead it appeared
His highness wanted to chat
Mostly about earths
military capabilities
And this and that.

In the end I came right out
And asked him how it was he
With his superior intelligence
had Found himself trapped
He told me not to worry
As it was the world outside the lift
That in the next thirty seconds or
so would find that they'd been Zapped.

Bernard Pearson is a published poet with work appearing in *The Madrigal*, *Edinburgh Review*, *Aesthetica Magazine*, *Wild Court*, *The York Literary Review* amongst one hundred other magazines and journals. In *Free Fall*, a selection of their poetry, was published by Leaf by Leaf Press in 2017.

Auto-da-fé by Ace Boggess

After three weeks, I get my car back
from the shop. It's in bad shape:
horse with a limp. I should shoot it.
Three weeks, & several problems fixed.
No luck. Technicians
say it needs a new transmission.
I haven't robbed in years,
find myself wondering who I might stick up,
demand, *Put the transmission in the bag &
step away*. My brain takes me
to the worst places. What if
my car broke down in the middle of a getaway?
Think about the humiliation, a higher level
of debasement worse than calling a lover
by the wrong name or swigging a beer
in which someone snuffed his cigarette butts.
I'll drive the car until it breaks, I guess,
or runs its last race to the supermarket,
meat & fruit left spoiling in the trunk.

Ace Boggess is author of six books of poetry, most recently *Escape Envy*. His writing has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Hanging Loose*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes, watches Criterion films, and tries to stay out of trouble. His forthcoming books include poetry collections, *My Pandemic / Gratitude List* from Mōtus Audāx Press and *Tell Us How to Live* from Fernwood Press, and his first short-story collection, *Always One Mistake*, from Running Wild Press.

Hope's Last Wisp by Zoë Blaylock

When my bigger than life dog died
he soared above it all in a flash

while my life remained as stable
as spent fire and hope's last wisp rose

from the chimney that shadowed
the untended yard where gnawed bones

lay unburied but no more forgotten
than those foggy mornings

when in-step we walked the beach
and begged the earth

to meet the sky close to the heart
instead of the inaccessible horizon

where now as if on another shore
he waits alone sniffing my salt

in the air, waiting patiently,
for me to catch up.

Zoë Blaylock's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *J Journal: New Writing on Justice*, *The Metaworker*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, and in other publications. Educated mostly in the school of hard knocks and droll encounters, she earned her degrees at Harvard and now lives in San Diego, California.

Reading *Beowulf* by Michael Brockley

My mother read *Beowulf* to me while I was a second-grader at St. Gabriel's. I fancied myself a hero. Pretending to ride Silver through the prairies and deserts of our backyard. Or playing a character from the myths of Europe: Arthur, Achilles, Odysseus. We sat on the sofa in front of the picture window with the evening settling on my hometown. My mother stressed the importance of the anonymous Christian monk who translated this pagan tale of Vikings in the age of monsters. Together we puzzled over unfamiliar pronunciations. Wiglaf, Hrothgar, Healfdene, and Grendel. I'd read *The Mass of Brother Michel*, a Catholic novel my aunt Mary gifted me that Christmas. The same time my mother initiated my National Geographic subscription. I used to pretend to gallop Silver through the landscapes and across the maps in the magazine as soon as it arrived in its brown wrapper. I don't remember much of the Nordic saga from those nights beside my mother. But I've read Seamus Heaney's translation. And other versions, including Maria Dahvana Headley's. Mostly, I recall being next to my mother. The scent from her Palmolive hand lotion stirring whenever she turned the page, She wore a summer dress, even in the winter. Often a light-blue favorite with large cabbage roses stitched randomly across the fabric. We talked about death. About how monsters die with the same finality as men. About how the mothers of monsters are never named.

Michael Brockley is a retired school psychologist who lives in Muncie, Indiana. His prose poems have appeared in *Doublespeak Mag*, *The Twin Bill*, and *Alien Buddha*. In addition, Brockley's prose poems are forthcoming in *Barstow & Grand*, *Bay to Ocean Journal*, and *Stormwash: Environmental Poems*, Volume II.

Michael's Girlfriend by DS Maolalai

it's tiresome. tides
move like traffic on beautiful
nights. I met michael's girl-
friend today and I couldn't
help thinking, when I felt
that I'd charmed her, that she
could have been mine
had the chance of some things
broken different. she's pretty,
south american, and laughed
when I spoke: for a long time
I thought that's what love was.
how it worked out at first
with my wife, after all – in another
country, celebrating gong hei
fatt chai. we all grew up catholic –
we talked about it and I thought
about cigarettes, sat in
my jacket, nestled
like swallows in mud. didn't
go out for one. saints too
resist all temptation.
watched the world wash
through the windows of lafayette;
d'olier street, as it washed
off the bridge to the liffey.
dogs worried bags full of rubbish
piled up beside litterbins, cracking
as crabs do on plates. snapped at seagulls
suspiciously, slunk from some sounds;
the thunderous passage of buses.
the night looks less warm here
since they changed out the bulbs
in the streetlights. birds have eyes closer
to lizards in aspect than mammals.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent". His work has been nominated thirteen times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart and once for the Forward Prize and released in three collections; *Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019) and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

God-Sickness as the Oracular rather than the Factual by Ken Meisel

When she lost the baby she lost her life too.
Her death, in Texas, was because physicians could
not be clear as to whether they could help her,
not because she needed it but because of a ban,
litigated through political policy & also because
God-sickness, masquerading as magical thinking
that had become oracular upon the tongues of men
& no longer factual at all, had come to rule the day.

Three days earlier, she'd had a glorious manicure,
bought a new set of pictures for the baby's room,
& she & her husband, despite her rounded belly,
had found themselves kissing first in the kitchen
& then, like newbie lovers, all over the bed, laughing
afterwards at their audacity of love. The child's
name – she'd be a girl on the Ultrasound, her little
vibrant stem arms already extending into God –
would have been Renata, Latin for 'reborn' &
French for 'reborn again.' Such an epitaph name.
Her father, Emilio, sat in his van outside the ER,
not silent so much as slaughtered by his loss.

They'd been high school sweethearts, lovers
while they were teenagers, & his wife, now
a deceased red desert flower, had just passed
her dental hygienist exams. She lay in a morgue.

& because it is easier to forget & ignore the dead
& tune into Netflix, drink in hand, the fireplace on,
the little child – unborn & just a ghost flower –
spin-spirals up through the biosphere, an orb
w/ stars whirling around like campfire ash
over the parked squad cars. & when I look into the sky,
mystery, that light that everything is, explodes,
& I hear her – little Renata – born again & wailing
her name's echo. & walking the riverbed,
I see small stars bleeding on the jagged faces
of rocks like placenta. Oh mother life, reveal us.

Interwoven by Daniel Miltz

We speak in glances, not always in words
Bridges of silence between what's heard
A hand on a shoulder, brief but true
Carries the weight of what we've been through
Old letters sleep in a drawer, unread
Ink still humming the things we said
The moon we see is the same one hung
Above our mothers when they were young
Roots twist deep where the eye can't see
Binding the branch to memory
Even the wind knows where it's been
Spinning a tale through leaf and skin
We are not islands, never were
Each breath a ripple, each voice a stir
In every ending, something begins
A thread rejoining what once was thin

Ken Meisel is a poet and psychotherapist from the Detroit area. He is a 2012 Kresge Arts Literary Fellow, Pushcart Prize nominee, best of the net nominee, winner of the Liakoura Prize and the author of nine poetry collections. His new book, *The Light Most Glad of All*, was published in 2023 by Kelsay Press. It was reviewed by Tipton Poetry Journal and Trampoline Magazine. Other collections include: *Studies Inside the Consent of a Distance* (Kelsay Books: 2022) and *Our Common Souls: New & Selected Poems of Detroit* (Blue Horse Press: 2020). He has work in *Crab Creek Review*, *I-70 Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *Wasteland Review*, *The Glacier*.

Born in South Detroit, Michigan and resides in Hampstead, NH. Freelancer Writer & Poet, Daniel Miltz devoted 40 years to the Engineering business in Government Aerospace Programs as Mechanical Engineering Designer. He has won over 1600 accolade awards from numerous Poetry Forums and in 250 anthologies with two published books to date. As a young aspiring writer, he was fascinated and guided by the spontaneous prose and poetry written by the writers of the 'Beat Generation.' Writing poetry has been Daniel's passion since his early bohemian days living in California.

J. and Dot by Mark Evan Chimsky

“To live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying.” – Joan of Arc

“If we walk far enough, I am sure we shall sometime come to someplace.” – Dorothy Gale

Two farm girls,
one grown old and one who never grew up,
sit in an unfamiliar field
where the grasses don't
wave. You'd think language would be
an obstacle, but here
nothing gets lost in translation
as they speak about what they know best: the sky
barely past night, the rooster rousing
the hands awake,
and how they hauled the buckets of water to do
what their mothers did. Until the day
their dreams, or not,
got them into so much trouble,
transporting them from the flat,
gray world into a miracle come
alive.

Who else could know what it is like to touch
something like God in a moment
so fierce it inflames the heart? Only they
understand what each has seen and lost.

J. starts to tell Dot about the end,
how she was bound to the post, her prayers
piercing the light, blown skyward
like the splinters and ash.
Then she goes silent, as if that's the way
to forget when there's no forgetting.

Later, J. says Dot got off easy
and Dot says she can't complain
but, of course, she can,
about the neighbor on the bike who held a grudge,
the mind-numbing days that slam like the back
of a husband's hand, the rows and rows
of corn in a kind of congregational stupor, and she,
waiting, dear god, for something to happen, to relive
the wind and the crash
and the splendor again.

What they have left behind
gets turned into words too small for what they have known,
and so now they take each other's hand as if they have been
waiting for one another all this time
and they prepare to dream anew,
not lost but found,
home.

This poem was first published in *The RavensPerch*.

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.

The Teacher Becomes a Student Again by Richard Collins

There was a time when my students
recognized my footsteps coming
down the hallway.

My boots tapped out a kind of dance
that was carefree and arrogant
and distinctive.

They learned little about the world
from me and certainly nothing important
about how to live.

Now that I live on the mountain
students come and go at their ease
learning how to grapple with nothing,

Taking everything I have to give
filling me like a fresh dug grave
by leaving me empty.

My footsteps can't be heard or found
my arrogance is memory
my tapdance done,

As I wait for the footsteps
that can't be heard, the student
who will teach me how to die.

Richard Collins lives in Sewanee, Tennessee, where he directs Stone Nest Zen Dojo. Dean Emeritus of Arts and Humanities at California State University Bakersfield, he has published work in *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, *Pensive: A Global Journal of Spirituality*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, among many others. His recent books include *In Search of the Hermaphrodite: A Memoir* (Tough Poets Press) and two volumes of forthcoming poetry: *Stone Nest* (Shanti Arts) and *Cartoons for the Chaos* (Shanti Arts).

Looking Like Us by Cleo Griffith

I do not see them as foreign,
but as kids down the street,
clothes as colorful as autumn leaves,
looking like us, fitting in,
but they flee from violence,
walk long long miles north toward freedom.

How hard it is to make that march toward freedom,
to seek refuge in a land that is foreign,
where parents seek surcease from violence,
peace in a land without gangs on every street,
a place where these children can fit in,
where confidence grows, fear leaves.

It is not easy when a family leaves
their ancestral home to seek personal freedom,
new places where they can settle in,
become not foreign,
but just neighbors on the street
where there is no violence.

Children should not be brought up in violence
they should be able to play among trees, fall into leaves,
run up and down a friendly street,
not have to even think about freedom
as something foreign,
but rather as someplace they are in.

Being safe is being in
a Northern American home without violence
where everyone is equal, native or foreign,
from which no one leaves
to seek freedom
because it breathes on the street,
where the children down the street
look alike and fit in,
comfortable in freedom,
knowing only by hearsay of violence,
playing in the schoolyard, under new spring leaves,
regarding no one as foreign.

Children on our street play at violence,
not being in a country from which one leaves
to seek freedom, not understanding foreign.

Cleo Griffith has been on the editorial staff of Song of the San Joaquin quarterly poetry journal since it began in 2003 and has been frequently published in such journals as *Main Street Rag*, *Straylight*, and *Time of Singing*. She lives in the poet-rich Central Valley of California.

Give and Forget by Jack D. Harvey

Are there more starving
than the stars?
At night
the sick child's heart
runs down
like a clock unwound;
in the morn
Aurora weeps
on a crooked elbow.

More starving
it seems
more empty bellies
than the teeming
galaxies of space,
than the waves in the sea;

infinity hardly holds them.

Our foolish hearts melt
like ice
in the sunlight
before pictures of sticks
and stones,
travails
with an ex-wife,
the dead puppy.

But there, in
the wastelands of
Afric and Ind,
Rio and Lisbon,
where the Tagus,
good as gold,
is a fancy name
for nothing;

there, in odds and ends,
in nooks and crannies,
in darkness,

they go on starving.

Jack D. Harvey's poetry has appeared in *Scrivener*, *The Comstock Review*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Typishly Literary Magazine*, *The Antioch Review*, *The Piedmont Poetry Journal* and elsewhere. The author has been a Pushcart nominee and over the years has been published in a few anthologies.

The Geometry of Love by Marieta Maglas

In this trigonometric equation of love,
you are my arcsine, a treasure so rare.
The angle of perception,
discreetly nestled within that
unique circle of emotions.
You orchestrate
the arcs of my vision and
the diameters of my dreams
within it, perfectly triangular; love will
always maintain the same ratio of pi.
This pure equation of love appears to be at odds.
Yet it harbors hopes in philosophical
numbers, transforming into geometrical
shapes of affection, like hidden new
little loops in those triangles, yearning
for the divine.
Our parallel lifelines are two
tangents to this circle of love, sending
their vibrations into eternity,
but never intersecting in this flawed
round world of two, where you suspend your dreams.
It is a secret heaven.
I guard your dreams within
this exquisite madness of love.
Your dreams
turn into a riddle, you become a mystery,
a lover like an enigma belonging to no other equation.
In this way, you become my C.
You are Mister C
from clarity,
from creativity, and
from cognizance,
but never from conniving,
never from cunning,
and never from cruelty.
Our love ages gracefully in concentric circles,
those circles of time.
We extend it to infinity.
You are my semi-infinity, where I
lose myself to be your singular star, just like that
already present in a Romanian tale,
titled 'Lorelei'.

Marieta Maglas resides in France, where she pursues dual careers as a poet and a doctor. Her literary themes encompass love, freedom, truth, justice, and existentialism. Marieta's poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Three Rooms Press*, *Dissident Voice*, *Unlikely Stories Issue 6*, *Dashboard Horus*, *Four Feathers Press*, *Masticadores Canada*, *Lothlorien Journal*, *Verse-Virtual*, *Sparks of Calliope*, and *Silver Birch Press*.

Fiction



Strangers I've Loved Accidentally by Tracie Adams

Sitting in the driver's seat, I close my eyes and allow my mind to replay the scene a dozen times, the salon owner saying *Okay thank you see you soon* and my reply rolling out of my mouth like a runaway train, *Love you miss you*. Love you miss you?! I tap my freshly manicured nails on the steering wheel, the cherry bomb polish the same shade as my face. I resist the urge to look in my rearview mirror in case Linh is still standing there as stunned as me at my awkward goodbye.

On the drive home, the words echo in my chest. *Love you. Miss you*. It's not the kind of thing you say to someone who soaks your nails in acetone or massages your callused feet. It's the kind of thing you say to family, the kind of thing I say to my most intimate friends. And yet—don't I? Love her? Miss her?

The following days are haunted by mental replays of my greatest stupid hits, telling a cashier *you too* after she said *enjoy your vacation*, only to remember she hadn't had a day off in three years. Or the time I chirped, *do you know if it's a girl or boy?* to a woman who was, in fact, not pregnant.

I contemplate never returning to the nail salon, maybe going across town to a place where I could hide in anonymity, a place where no one knows my name. But then I remember the lonely year of the pandemic when businesses were shuttered. Like so many other women, I learned to cut and color my own hair, learned to use the UV light and gel polish that I bought online, learned to make my own lattes with steamed milk and a dash of cinnamon.

I thought about Linh and her family often during that long year of isolation when the world became such a lonely place. I missed the sound of Linh calling out my name with warm greetings. I had no contact info to reach her, and I worried about how she was managing with a new baby and two older kids out of school. That year taught me so many lessons I didn't know I needed to learn, like not taking for granted the people and things I truly cherish.

Linh and her family are some of the kindest people I know, always asking about my life and sharing their own lives with me in fractured English/Vietnamese. Linh and I have watched each other's children grow up. We have cried together over her mother's illness and my nephew's death, rejoiced together over weddings and graduations.

When I sit in front of her, our knees bumping under the table, she takes my hands in hers and asks me with a knowing smile what color I want. She doesn't wait for my indecisive answer. Instead, she holds up a baby pink, a milky white, because she knows me better than I know myself. She has made it her business to make my life better, brighter with soft words and soft hands.

She asks *You thirsty? You comfortable? You like some glitter?*

She only has kind things to say, even to rude customers who snap sarcastic comments and unreasonable demands. I ask how she can remain so calm. She tells me the same story every time, how she came to America for a good life, how she found her dreams waiting for her here. *Why don't you close the shop, take a little vacation with your family*, I ask her all the time. But she just smiles and shakes her head, her response always the same, *Maybe, maybe one day*.

After a couple of weeks of fretting over my clumsy *Love you miss you*, I push through the embarrassment and return to the salon for a manicure. Linh welcomes me like family, arranging my chair, bringing me water, chatting about the week she has had. She tells me about her ESL class and a recipe for mango salad she is making this weekend. She leans closer and asks *How your daughter's new job? You still have headache?*

She nestles both of my hands in hers the way you would hold a child. Her voice is warm, her smile full of light. She adds a chrome topcoat to my nails. *So pretty*, she says. And I nod. *Yes. So pretty*. At the door, I call out, *Bye Linh, see you next time*.

She's suddenly beside me, arms stretched around my back, her chin resting on my shoulder. *Love you, miss you too*, she says in my ear.

Tracie Adams is a retired educator and playwright who writes short fiction and memoir from her farm in rural Virginia. She is the author of the essay collection, *Our Lives in Pieces*. Her work was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, longlisted at Wingleaf Top 50, and published widely in literary magazines including *Cleaver*, *Dishsoap Quarterly*, *Trash Cat*, *Brevity Blog*, *SoFloPoJo*, *Fictive Dream*, and more. Visit tracieadamswrites.com and follow her on X @1funnyfarmAdams.

The Invisible Connections of Space and Time by Victor D. Sandiego

Walking in the desert, he arrived at a rope. It was thick, woven of coarse fibers – and hung from the sky as if by an invisible hook. The air was clear, not a single cloud, and although he raised his head as if he were preparing his throat for the sacrifice, he could see nothing except the rope that shrank and disappeared into the heights of the sky. I wonder, he said to his hands, if it is possible to climb. But his hands didn't answer him. And the desert too stayed silent.

Hesitantly he touched what seemed a miracle and the rope changed its position a little, perhaps the width of an ant. It seemed to shimmer, as if it contained a single silver thread. He touched it again, this time with more confidence, with both hands, and circled it with his fingers. I think I'll give it a tug, he said to himself.

Despite her few years, the girl in the city knew that her brother was dying. The doctors had shaken their heads and backed out of the room. The world was not so old and one more death would not fill its ample cave of bones. Meanwhile, a drop of prayer fell into the barrel of prayers and you could hear the girl's voice in the splash. At the same time, a bell shook the air and the brother sat up in bed. I was a man, he said. A man with thirst in a desert land with endless sky and salvation. Through my fingers, I saw that the world is a wheel with many connected spokes – and someday I will grow to roll it.

Victor D Sandiego, once from the west coast of the United States, now writes his stories from his home on the edge of society in small town central Mexico. He hikes desert hills with his dogs. He is the founder and editor of Dog Throat Journal. His work appears in various journals and anthologies. More at: <https://dynamiccreed.com>, follow at <https://bsky.app/profile/victordavid.com>.

A Ninetieth-Birthday Present by J. J. Steinfeld

There, I can see her, in the corner of the bathroom mirror. I can see Marlene Dietrich. Top hat and silk stockings. Perched sensually on a wooden barrel. A movie poster of her, obviously. *The Blue Angel*. I have several posters throughout my small apartment, all of them from *The Blue Angel*. And *Der blaue Engel*. I have posters for both versions of the film. I may be nearly ninety, but my mind has not completely released its hold on what is real. It is memory that is real, the memory of her in so many movies, more sensuous than any movie actress I ever saw, of any generation, in any movie. She is looking at me and I am looking at her. That voice. It could stir you with only a few words. But I know it is only an old photograph of when she was a young actress. She lived to be ninety, a ripe old age, but one can argue that she's immortal. She will always be remembered as long as there are movies and the memory of movies. Soon I will be ninety also.

I don't know why I've stood in front of the bathroom mirror so long—I hate looking at myself in the mirror. Maybe because it's going to be my ninetieth birthday. I never liked looking at myself when I was younger. Not that I wasn't handsome—conventionally handsome. Now my body looks like one I picked up at a flea market or a yard sale. That's a little joke of sorts, since I used to love to go to flea markets and yard sales and still do on occasion, though it's no longer a real interest of mine. Now I flee the flea markets. That's horrible, isn't it, but at least I'm still moving my lips, keeping my mind as agile as I can, talking, even at a mirror.

My voice—where'd I get it? I don't think it's my mind playing tricks on me. I think I sound like Emil Jannings playing Professor Immanuel Rath in *The Blue Angel*. Not that I have a German accent whatsoever. There is a logical explanation—it's not an old man's madness, rest assured—always a logical explanation: I was just watching *The Blue Angel*—I have the English and German versions on DVD—and maybe Jannings' voice is stuck in my head. I've been old for a long time now and I don't really mind it, if you factor out the body's treachery. That too strong a term? I think not. Yes, my voice does sound different lately. And it doesn't seem like me in the mirror, not the me that exists in my mind.

First thing you'd notice if you came to my modest little apartment—not that many people visit me anymore—is my affection for Marlene Dietrich. Apart from the posters from *The Blue Angel*, I have a four-shelf bookcase full of books and magazine articles on Marlene Dietrich, anything with the slightest reference to her or her movies or any picture of her, and on the living room coffee table I have one hundred stamps in mint condition with Marlene's face on them.

So I'm not completely alone, though, of course, I live alone. I'm pleased I can still live on my own, have lived so most of my life except for two brief marriages, both lasting less than five years. I guess that qualifies as brief. Both of my wives left me for considerably older men, which is a dazzling irony now, seeing how far I've made it down the road of life. I'm not going to stop myself from talking into the mirror. What's the crime in that?

When people ask me how old I am, I like to say Antediluvian, with a capital A. That's before the Flood, nosy-meddlesome boy, I usually say, or nosy-meddlesome gal. There's a difference between being nosy or meddlesome and inquisitive, between prying and curious, I tend to add like a retired teacher, which I am, retired now almost exactly a quarter of a century—nothing like Professor Immanuel Rath, believe me—and I can get away with just about anything, verbally, that is. All my life I've loved words and women. Now that I'm about to become ninety, I'm no less enamoured of words...or women. I've been a lover of both, I like to say, but I doubt if anyone really listens to an old man share his passions.

I have another hour and then the big Nine-Zero. I'm only mildly apprehensive that I won't make it. The males in my family aren't exactly legendary for longevity. My father barely made forty, one grandfather a little over fifty, and the other a little under fifty, and the four great-grandfathers totalled an even 200 years on the planet. One of them, the great-grandfather I was named after, held the male record in the family, as far as I could research, at sixty-three, before I surpassed it. Bad hearts. Bad luck. At least one had his life curtailed in the commission of a crime and another incurred the wrath of a cuckolded husband. I was cuckolded on at least two occasions, but no violent feeling went through my heart. No, I thought about Lola Lola and I dealt with the betrayals.

What a strange comfort, a character in a movie. A character made alive and real by Marlene Dietrich. Lola Lola was also in a novel, on which the movie was based. Guess who wrote that 1905 novel *Professor Unrat*? None other than Heinrich Mann, the brother of the man who wrote *Death in Venice*, Thomas Mann. Am I not sounding like an old teacher giving his class in the mirror a little literature lesson? Hello, class, today's literary lesson is on... I never taught Thomas Mann or Heinrich Mann when I was a teacher.

The woman from the escort service will be here in a few minutes. Well, she's not going to escort me anywhere. We're going to make love here, in my little room. Since I was eighty-five, I've been planning to be making love at the moment I turn ninety. A humble wish, and I have the money to make my wish come true—if life had only been that simple all the time.

I told her over the phone I'd give her a twenty-dollar bill for every year I've lived, ninety twenties, an even eighteen hundred for a few hours of her time, making love and watching a movie, like two young lovers on a first date. She didn't believe I was ninety...about to become ninety. Maybe it was because of the imaginative requests I was making, my references to Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*, describing Lola Lola in her top hat and silk stockings as if she were sitting next to me, arousing and comforting me at the same time. I didn't tell her the significance of ninety—that it was how many years the great Marlene Dietrich lived—but I have every intention of telling her when we are together. I hope she will want to relax and watch *The Blue Angel* with me. We can watch the marvellous new DVD that contains both versions of the immortal movie, if movies can be categorized as immortal in the way I like to consider Marlene Dietrich immortal.

I asked for the most literate and literary woman in the escort service. The woman on the phone immediately said Esmeralda, and I had to chuckle. Is that a nom de...lady of the night? I asked. The voice was pretty evasive, maybe thinking I was an undercover cop. Esmeralda called me back within a half hour, and we ironed out the details. She said she hoped I had a strong heart, regardless of my age. Except she said "irregardless," and I had to correct her. She thanked me, and said that as soon as she said it, she knew she'd made a faux pas. You're not really going to be ninety at midnight, she said, and I swore to her that I was, that I was no prevaricator, that I believe in being truthful. And you are still interested? she asked, and I said I was going to be the quintessential blues-song metaphor. She laughed and said she'd see me soon.

I told her the URL for a website with a spectacular picture of Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*. The top hat is optional, but the stockings... Lipstick redder than desire. Negligee flimsier than passion... as flimsy as passion...couldn't come up with a good image for that, but I sure had a picture in my mind. Ardour, always ardour, or the memory of ardour. I was so curious about whether she'd accommodate my fantasy. For eighteen hundred dollars, she said, she would be an angel. An angel, yes, *The Stone Angel*, a novel by Margaret Laurence I taught for so many years, and I suddenly realized that Hagar Shipley was ninety as she narrated the novel. *The Blue Angel*, *The Stone Angel*—I was being surrounded by memory angels. What a trio: Marlene, Hagar, and I.

Just as I look at the clock—less than a minute—there is a knock at the door, and I can't open it quickly enough. There is Lola Lola, and I know I've achieved immortality, or something very close. I know it is not really Lola Lola, but an actress playing her. And the actress is Marlene Dietrich...my age—both of us ninety. Now, officially, it's a couple of minutes past midnight, and she tells me in the most sensuous voice imaginable—the same voice that sang "Falling In Love Again" in *The Blue Angel*—not to be afraid, for what is going to happen to me is like a movie, a long movie that never ends.

Originally published in a slightly different version in *A Glass Shard and Memory* (Recliner Books, 2010).

Canadian poet, fiction writer, and playwright J. J. Steinfeld lives on Prince Edward Island, where he is patiently waiting for Godot's arrival and a phone call from Kafka. While waiting, he has published 25 books, including *An Unauthorized Biography of Being* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2016), *Absurdity*, *Woe Is Me*, *Glory Be* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2017), *A Visit to the Kafka Café* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2018), *Gregor Samsa Was Never in The Beatles* (Stories, Ekstasis Editions, 2019), *Morning Bafflement and Timeless Puzzlement* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2020), *Somewhat Absurd, Somehow Existential* (Poetry, Guernica Editions, 2021), *Acting on the Island* (Stories, Pottersfield Press, 2022), *As You Continue to Wait* (Ekstasis Editions, 2022), and *My Post-Holocaust Second Generation Voice: History / Memory / Identity* (Poetry, Ekstasis Editions, 2025); his short stories and poems have appeared in numerous anthologies and periodicals internationally, and over 60 of his one-act plays and a handful of full-length plays have been performed in Canada and the United States.

Noel by Nick Young

It had started snowing in earnest. What had begun an hour before as a few fat, listless flakes was steadily growing into the nor'easter the radio and tv forecasters had been wringing their hands over for days. Great for the white Christmas crowd; lousy luck for the rest of humanity forced to make its way in a city already choked with filthy hummocks of snow, its gutters awash in icy gruel from a potent storm just three days before.

In his cramped Harlem apartment, Leroy Odoms thought about pouring what remained of his pint of whiskey into a glass before deciding it wasn't worth it and tipped the few drops straight from the bottle.

"Now we got us some trouble, Josephine," he said, depositing the container on a small wooden table next to him and casting an eye across the room to where his cat curled in her bed near the radiator. The slender calico raised her head, blinked once and then resumed napping. Leroy pushed himself up slowly from a faded swayback lounge and paused while he adjusted to being upright. At seventy-nine, his sense of balance was suspect, made more so by the alcohol he'd consumed. With one hand on the chair back to steady himself, Leroy retrieved the bottle and edged his way to the wall near the apartment entrance. He deposited the empty in a plastic trash bag that was nearly full just inside the door, then pulled a thin winter coat from a hook on the wall and clumsily fought to get one arm and then the other into the sleeves, muttering as he did,

"I said 'trouble,' Josephine, and that's a fact. Christmas Eve, an' me outta my sweet sauce. You know what that means, girl? That's right! Gotta get on over to Manny's before he closes up. But don't you fret. I'll be back before you know I'm gone, yes I will."

And with that, he swiped at the bag and snatched it up, unbolted the door and shuffled into the dimly lit hall.

#

Chad Burrington stepped gingerly from the cab, trying to make sure he had his footing before shutting the taxi door. The Christmas storm and constant traffic had left the streets a greasy mess. Flaring his arms away from his sides for balance, he managed to navigate the few treacherous steps through the slush to the relative safety of the curb as the cab fishtailed back into traffic. He checked the street sign overhead framed against the dull slate sky—128th and Malcolm X. Turning, he saw the National Jazz Museum to his right. Now he had his bearings and knew he needed to walk a block-and-a-half west on 128th to reach his destination.

The wind had picked up again, buffeting from the northwest. Chad watched as a gust nearly knocked over an elderly woman as she pulled a small wheeled cart laden with bags of groceries. Before setting off, Chad drew the collar of his woolen overcoat tighter around his neck. On the heels of the snow had come the deep freeze, a Boxing Day gift from the Great White North.

If this wasn't for Leroy, he thought, there's no goddamn way I'd be out here.

At the newspaper office's security desk, Leroy Odoms, with his easy manner and natty gray uniform, had been for several decades as much an essential feature of the lobby as the paper's classic logo that adorned the wall. Over the years, the two men had struck up a rapport, sharing bits of themselves during their exchanges, bridging the gulf between a young white man's privileged prep school upbringing and the life on the margins that had been Leroy's lot.

As their relationship grew, part of it became an exchange of gifts at Christmastime—a beautiful card with a carefully lettered inscription from Leroy...a fifth of good bourbon from Chad. It was their private tradition, and each man took great pleasure in it.

But this year it had been interrupted, at least Chad's end of it. He had planned to take the train up to New Haven on Christmas Eve to spend the holiday with his girlfriend and her parents, but when the paper sent him there on a story on the 23rd, he decided it just made sense to stay over. That meant he missed his customary holiday exchange with Leroy. He'd regretted it, especially when he returned to work that morning to find his friend's card waiting for him. The message was especially warm and personal—"I hope, my friend, we finally get us some peace on Earth"—and he had decided on the spot to surprise Leroy with a visit. He knew it was something of a crapshoot. When he checked in with the security office

at the paper, he'd been told that Leroy had taken the week between Christmas and New Year's off, that he was expecting relatives from out of town. That was no surprise to Chad. If there was one person he knew with a rich network of family and friends, it was Leroy: he talked about them all the time, regaling Chad with lovingly recounted anecdotes—a buddy in Chicago, a sister in Detroit, nieces and nephews in Atlanta.

Still, Chad felt, it was worth the trip uptown on the chance he would catch the older man at home, drop off his gift and leave without intruding on family time.

As he bent into the wind, Chad was so intent on protecting his face as much as possible from the chill and keeping his footing that he lost track of where he was until he caught sight of the Glendale Baptist Church and realized he'd walked a few doors too far. Doubling back, he arrived at his destination, Number 103, three stories of rust-red smooth stone. As he did, the front door opened and a man Chad guessed was in his mid-sixties emerged and made his way carefully down the ten steps to the sidewalk. He was shielded from the weather by a faded brown checked jacket and an orange watch cap pulled down tightly on his head.

"Excuse me," Chad began, "do you live here?"

"I'm the super," replied the older man, eyes narrowing. "Who's asking?"

"My name is Chad Burrington. I'm looking for a friend—Leroy Odoms? Can you tell me which apartment is his?" The older man, suspicious, cocked his head to the right.

"Why you want to know that?"

"Well, like I said, I'm a friend," Chad replied, raising the gift bag in his left hand. "I have a present for him." The super shook his head.

"I guess you ain't heard," he began. "You're too late." The man's manner had been off-putting from the get-go. It had annoyed Chad. The biting cold only deepened his pique.

"What do you mean, I'm too late?"

"No, you ain't heard," he said. "Leroy's dead, man." Chad's head snapped back. Stricken, he moved his mouth to reply, but the words choked in his throat. The super took note, his face softening. "Come on, man. Let's get outta this goddamned cold."

Inside the super's apartment, Chad sat with his forearms planted on a small kitchen table, the edges of its gray marbled Formica top chipped with age. He needed all the support his arms could provide, such was the awful weight of the news he'd been given.

"Ain't introduced myself," the super began. Henry Towne. Ain't got regular coffee. But I can make us up some Sanka," he continued with a note of apology. "Doctor's orders—no caffeine."

"Thank you—no." Chad shook his head. "God, I can't believe he's gone. What happened? Do you know?"

"Yeah, it was sad, man, real sad. Must have been sometime Christmas Eve—maybe seven, eight o'clock. I'm guessin' it had to be dark. Leroy left out his apartment. Look like he just wanted to get rid of some trash before the storm got real bad. Anyway, cops say they found a small bag of garbage up at the top of the stairs—you got to walk down four of them to a space around the side of the building. That's where we keep the trash cans. Anyway, the police say it look like Leroy must have slipped on some ice and fallen down them steps. Hit his head on the wall down there and knocked hisself clean out. Cops say he must have laid there while the snow covered him pretty much up, an'...he just froze to death—"

"Aw, Jesus...*Jesus!*" muttered Chad, anguished.

"One of the other tenants found him yesterday afternoon, late. It is a goddamned sad way for any man to leave this world," Henry said bitterly, "especially a real good brother like Leroy."

"I-I don't know what to say...I—" Chad felt his voice was disembodied, impossibly distant, as if rising from the bottom of a deep well.

"Ain't nothin' to say," Henry said, crossing the room to his kitchen and opening a cabinet door above the stove. He took out two small glasses and a bottle of Hennessy. He set the glasses on the table, uncapped the cognac and poured two fingers' worth in each. "Doctor say I can't have no caffeine, but he ain't said nothin' about this." He lifted one of the glasses and nudged one of Chad's arms with it. "Here. You need it, man. We both do."

Henry Towne took a seat opposite Chad, the sound of the chair scraping along the floor was raw, jagged. Henry drank first. Chad hesitated, but then seized the glass and drained away all the liquor it held. Henry Towne did the same, then refilled their glasses as they sat in silence. Finally:

“What happens now?” Chad asked. “Is Leroy’s family coming in for the funeral or to claim his body?” Henry’s brow creased, and he looked up from his glass.

“Family? Leroy ain’t got no family.”

“What do you mean?” Chad asked, incredulous. “Of course, he does. He talked about them all the time.”

“Who?”

“His family—in Atlanta, nieces and nephews... a younger sister in Detroit.” Towne shook his head.

“I been here nineteen years, Leroy eighteen. Never knew him to have one relative to his place. Nobody. Just Leroy and Josephine, poor damned thing.” Chad turned his head in the direction of Henry’s gesture, past the sofa to where the cat napped in a corner.

“But friends...” Chad began. “What about all the friends he would tell me about?” Again, Henry Towne looked at him with some disbelief.

“No, man. I ain’t seen no family, and I ain’t seen no friends. Not ‘til you come today and say you his friend. But he got plenty of pictures, alright.”

“Pictures?”

“His place is loaded. I seen ‘em a couple of times when I went in to fix a leaky faucet or some such. I never paid no particular attention to ‘em, but I know there’s plenty.” Towne paused to take a fresh pull at his drink. “I tell you what. Since you his friend and you come all this way uptown, I’ll let you into his place. See for yourself.”

The two men finished what was left of their drinks and stepped into the shadowy hall outside Henry Towne’s apartment and walked a short distance to the building’s stairwell.

On the second floor, when they reached Leroy’s place, Henry stopped as he was inserting the key into the lock and turned to Chad.

“Ain’t nothin’ been touched in here. The way you see it is the way he kept it.”

Chad was puzzled by the admonition until he entered the apartment, a tiny studio and tidy to a fault. There was room for a few pieces of tired furniture—recliner, coffee table and a TV. But that wasn’t what grabbed Chad’s attention.

It was the photographs, just as Henry Towne had said, dozens it seemed, on shelving that occupied every bit of the walnut paneled walls in the place.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Towne said, as he watched Chad’s eyes sweep from side to side. “Listen, I got a couple errands to get out the way,” Henry went on, “so if I ain’t back and you want to leave, just pull the door behind you. It’ll lock on its own.”

Chad mumbled his thanks.

Once Henry left, Chad set his gift bag on the small oval coffee table in front of the worn lounge. He slipped off his overcoat, draping it over the back of the chair. He wanted a closer look at the photos, so he crossed to the wall opposite. On a short length of shelf, there were two pictures, eight-by-tens, in matching frames, plain black. One of the photos, a girl in a swing—Chad guessed she was five or six—soars through the air, exhilarated, pushed by the outstretched arms of a man. He smiles broadly, summer sunshine spilling all around. Chad turned the photo over. On the back, a small strip of paper had been taped. It read, “Lameesha with grandson Terence.”

In the other picture, a young boy clings to the back of a man, the child’s arms wrapped tightly around his neck. As in the other picture, the sun shines brightly and both the man and boy appear overjoyed. This photo, too, had an identifying label on the back: “Bo, age three, with his daddy at the beach.” Next to each picture, a Christmas card rested on a tiny easel. Chad lifted one, with an idyllic scene of a moonlit snowy hillside dusted with silver sparkles. He opened it and read: “To Dad—May your Christmas be merry and bright! Love from us all!” He closed the card and carefully replaced it on its stand, then picked up the small card next to the photo of the girl in the swing. Inside, it said: “My own special Christmas card just for you, Uncle Leroy. Hope Santa brings you lots of presents! Love you, Lameesha.” Chad set the card back on the shelf and closed his eyes as a wave of melancholy washed over him.

The cards were not from Leroy's son or a gloving niece.

He knew because they were written with the same careful block printing as the fountain pen inscriptions in the cards Leroy gave him every year. Opening his eyes, he saw that there were holiday cards next to the rest of the pictures around the apartment. And it was those photographs that deepened Chad's unbearable sadness, the ache that ate at his insides.

None of them were what they were portrayed to be.

Yes, the pictures were real. But they weren't photos of anyone related to Leroy—no son or sister—nor were they any friend. All of the people in them were models. All of the photographs were throwaways, the inserts that came with the frames.

They were Leroy's family.

Chad drew a deep breath, exhaled slowly and hung his head. After a long moment, he turned and went into the kitchen, opening and closing cabinet doors until he found a glass. Taking a seat in the old recliner, Chad set the glass on the coffee table, reached into the gift bag and lifted out the fifth of rye whiskey. It was Leroy's preferred brand, and Chad uncorked the bottle and poured freely. And as he sat, he considered his own life, always filled with the vibrant ties of friends and relatives, what he'd always taken for granted. He had never known it otherwise. How long had it been for Leroy? Had he ever known it all?

Looking around the apartment, Chad raised his glass and gestured toward the photos.

"They were real to you, my friend...and you were very real to me."

Outside in the street, there arose a sudden cacophony of car horns, shouts and curses.

Peace on earth would wait for another day.

Warmth by Ed Davis

January was especially bitter that year. With temps below zero for weeks running, the library became the trio of homeless men's daytime place that year. Far as I could tell, I was the only staff member who ever talked to them. When I saw one of them reading *Moby Dick*, I blurted that it got my vote for Great American Novel. The guy grinned widely through his salt and pepper mountain-man beard.

"Right on, Starbuck," he said in his rich baritone. He'd noticed I always brought in a hot cup from the ubiquitous java joint, loving the soothing warmth penetrating my glove. Now the nickname would do double duty, referring to the Pequod's straight-arrow first mate.

I next caught him with Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*. "Alcoholics and the mentally ill," he said when I mentioned I'd written a paper on it, "are my favorite people."

I blushed. Twenty-seven, in my first job since grad school, I knew nothing about either one.

Behind her lavender-scented fingers, my older colleague Dorothy Weintraub informed me the bearded man had been a high school English teacher in a town up north. His wife and son died in a car accident a few years ago. Within months, his house burned to the ground in a fire some said he'd set himself.

"Clifford Crowe simply never went inside again," she said. "Until now. Whatever pigsty he's been squatting in apparently doesn't have heat. *Now* he needs us."

I nodded and bit my tongue.

February was even colder. My coffee was ice cold by the time I admitted the three men every morning. I fretted about where they stayed at night. Clifford reminded me of my late father's brother, who'd taken us on haunted hayrides at his farm in autumn, sleigh rides in winter. Uncle Buddy sported a big beard, too, although *The Farmer's Almanac* was the extent of his reading. He died the year after Dad, my junior year of college.

The focus of my fear became the shabby sheepskin jacket Clifford wore. Mom, now living nearby on Bliss Springs' memory ward, hadn't ever disposed of Dad's clothes. It took me only a minute to locate the burnt-orange Carrhart coat Dad wore for chores. It had a thick plaid lining and smelled like morning milking and afternoon watering: sour-sweet. Even after I had it dry-cleaned, it retained the odor—essence of farm.

Where and when should I give it to the reader of classic literature? Dorothy couldn't be watching, and the other two guys didn't need to know. They wore puffy down coats they'd no doubt scored at the police department's annual giveaway. I suspected Clifford and the police didn't get along. I wanted to be the one to give warmth to this man who so resembled Uncle Buddy. And I wanted him to like it—like *me*, the loner still living in the house she'd grown up in.

So I made up a doctor's appointment to keep me away until the library's closure, waiting outside in the freezing dusk, stomping my feet and flapping my arms. At 5:01, Clifford's cohorts came out and ambled down the street. The sun had dipped low above the Mercantile Bank by the time my fellow reader emerged, head hung so low I saw the gaping hole in the crown of his knitted hat. It made me see Uncle Buddy's bald spot. Hot tears welled but quickly cooled. Clifford was a few paces down Main before I approached him from behind, raising my voice to be heard.

"Call me Ishmael."

Startled, he turned, his grin something to behold. "Starbuck! Where ya been, matey?"

I displayed the coat. "For you, Cap'n."

His smile fled. For a moment he looked as stern as Ahab contemplating the dark sea where dwelt Leviathan, monster of his dreams. My heart clutched. Had I injured his pride?

"I've got a coat," he said gruffly.

I don't know what emboldened me, but it had something to do with those tears.

"It won't keep you warm. Not in this weather."

He shook his head stubbornly. "I need nothing from—"

From those who judged him for living outside their boundaries. He didn't have to say it. I stepped closer, spoke low.

"Let them go."

I meant the rumor-mongers, but his eyes widened with shock. Maybe he thought I meant let go of his wife and child. My jaw froze in the crucial moment when I could've corrected the horror.

"You're right," he said, "they're gone." He lifted his hands covered by socks, not gloves. "I yield to the white whale of reason. Here, let's have it."

Removing the sheepskin, he flung it into a frozen snowdrift. Arms out, he allowed me to mantle him in Dad's milking and watering coat, let me dress him like a stranger who's stumbled into the king's court to reveal royal lineage. There was something primal about this ceremony which no one else in our nose town was witnessing—no one but me, here in the diminishing light of deep winter, free to sail the world's dark seas, cold but not alone.

Ed Davis's fiction has appeared in many anthologies and literary journals such as *The Main Street Rag*, *Sky Island Journal*, *The Plenitudes*, *Wordrunner*, *Write Launch* and *Slippery Elm*. His novel, *The Psalms of Israel Jones* (West Virginia University Press 2014), won the Hackney Award for an unpublished novel in 2010.

Tiny Points of Contact by David H. Weinberger

It took me thirty-five years to make a serious connection with the world around me. I didn't actively deny that it existed, it was more like I simply wasn't aware of it, or at best found it to be a nuisance. Snowstorms interfered with traffic, heat slowed me down, animals were elsewhere and when they did show their faces they were in the form of disturbing rodents. As a child my parents took me to Koinonia, a campground in upper New York State, but I saw it as nothing more than time away from my bedroom, my books and desk, and I particularly loathed the porcelain-free bathroom accommodations. I received little pleasure from the hikes, the campfires, and the stargazing and had only looked forward to the drive home. I considered concrete the most natural material under my feet and rejected the alternative parents and teachers foisted upon me. I probably would never have seen the arrogance and ignorance of my stand, learned of the fragile link between me and the environment, understood animals as sentient beings, but for the patience and tutelage of my girlfriend.

Katie and I almost struck out from the beginning. She asked me out on a hike in the Wasatch Mountains as our first date. We had a lot of things in common but nature was not one of them. Katie found solace there. She had grown up camping, hiking, and sailing with family and friends. Her childhood was filled with family dogs and she developed a fierce curiosity about wild animals. Completely the opposite of my upbringing. I declined her invite because I didn't hike and owned nothing that resembled hiking boots. I preferred to keep the mountains at a distance. Pretty sure she took this as an overall rejection but I explained how I was a city boy and would prefer to do something else with her. We went to a concert instead.

With a plodding patience over years of dating, Katie eased me into the outdoors and a begrudging respect for animals. I eventually hiked with her in the Wasatch Mountains and the southern Utah desert and survived the nearness of mountain goats, marmots, lizards and birds of prey. I may have even felt a bit of curiosity towards them. Hiking became a regular activity for us. Though I still preferred a world premier play, a rock concert, or abandoned hours in used book stores, I no longer rejected every one of Katie's outdoor activities and felt a fledgling comfort and wonder as we explored together.

When Katie took an interest in two lithographs labeled 'Scratch' and 'Sniff' in Desert Roof Gallery, I knew there was an element in Katie's relationship to nature and animals I had not understood. In one piece, Charlie Brown's stubby hand scratched the top of Snoopy's head, the other the same characters with their foreheads pressed together, eyes tightly closed. The austere gallery was quiet except for shuffling feet. And then a snuffle from Katie. A few tears ran down her face. I was confused. I glanced between their slow descent and the lithographs of Charlie Brown and Snoopy. The artwork was a nod to the Peanuts cartoons printed in newspapers from my childhood. I had memories of reading them, laughing about them, appreciating Pigpen. Nothing close to sadness. I saw nothing sentimental in the artwork and nothing had happened between us, so the tears were a mystery.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Why?" Katie replied.

"You're crying."

"Oh, nothing really." Katie pointed at the art. "They remind me of Tsunni."

Tsunni was Katie's recently deceased Labrador mix and didn't resemble Snoopy. They were both white with black patches but that was it. Tsunni was bigger, had smaller ears, a longer tail, and her snout was substantially smaller than Snoopy's.

"They don't really look the same," I said, hiding my confusion as much as possible.

"It's not that. It's those shared experiences, you know?"

I tried to see something that was not there.

"I guess."

I hadn't shared experiences like that with Tsunni though I knew Katie had. Up until then, I tolerated Tsunni. I was a third wheel when around her and Katie, jealous of the easy way they shared, the patience Katie showed her, and the constant togetherness of the two. I made no effort to get to know Tsunni or to share in her care and made a point of avoiding any sort of touch. I didn't begrudge Katie her pet, I simply wanted no part of it. A *détente* we comfortably fell into. It was a surprise for me to feel loss

and sadness when Katie and I eventually sat on a veterinarian floor with Tsunni in our laps. I swore I felt the cold anesthetic as it coursed through her body and instantly regretted not having made a greater effort.

Nothing particular about Tsunni caused this earlier lack of connection: she was gentle, rarely barked, and she had what I found to be an uncanny ability to convey emotions with her eyes. It was more my fraught history with dogs, first being the family dog when I was a toddler. My memories of Daisy were culled from the black and white photos my mother constantly pulled from the cupboard to advance her argument that the loss of Daisy was the catalyst for my lack of connection to Tsunni and animals in general. In the photos, me with my head on Daisy's belly as we both slept, me preparing to toss a ball to her, me staring at her in the back yard as she paced in her kennel. I don't recall emotions shared between the two of us, only a forced cohabitation and typical familial behavior. Although, when Daisy died years later, I felt an inconsolable and confusing sorrow, leading me to eschew the multitude of future family pets. Maybe mom was right.

The mangy dog who lived around the corner from our family home made a similar impression. He was a ferocious barker, had bitten several children and chased even more. His owners let him roam free in the unfenced yard and he seemed to hate everybody, especially children on bikes. I avoided the house, even if it meant I had to peddle the long way around the block. At the time there were few rules governing pet ownership so the biting continued for some time until the owners eventually put a fence around the yard. I still avoided the home because I hated the menace in the dog's bark.

Just as influential were the two Dobermans I met when I worked a paper route. I had knocked on a screen door to collect money for the paper I delivered each week. Instead of the homeowner I was greeted by the ferocious Dobermans. They barked and jumped at the screen and scared the hell out of me. I thought they would definitely bite me, if not kill me. I stood as firm as possible with my hands pushed against the door to prevent them from getting out. Eventually the homeowner appeared and yelled at me. In their frenzied, agitated state, the dogs had torn three large holes in the screen and she was angry I had allowed this to happen. While I shuddered and cried, I walked backwards to my bike, afraid of taking my eyes off the still barking dogs and the even louder adult, and without the money for the paper.

These canine events led to a deep anxiety and fear concerning dogs and a general dislike of animals. If someone walked their dog, if I had to pass a yard with a dog in it, I gave them a wide berth. Same when Katie and I were hiking or walking in town: I stood behind her as we passed folks with their dogs. And Katie's habit of gently whispering 'Hey pup' as they passed us irritated me as an unnecessary engagement with a potentially dangerous creature. When Katie pressured me to kayak with her on our visit to Washington D.C. I told her these dog stories to explain my reluctance.

"But there are no animals to worry about in the Potomac River," she said.

"Still, I'm not interested."

"I would love for you to try it though. We'll spend the day in museums and end with a few hours of paddling."

I eventually consented though I was hesitant and fearful, never having been on any sort of boat before and not much of a swimmer. Nothing but irritation as I climbed into a kayak and was pushed out into the river. I hated the ungainly fit of the life jacket, the difficulty of getting into a kayak, the soaking of my butt the moment I sat down, and the undoubtedly filthy water dripping off the paddle over my hands and arms. Mostly, I was concerned about the sort of creatures which might be floating beneath me, waiting to take a bite from my hand or violently tipping me over. But slowly, the buoyancy of the kayak, the gentle floating along the river, and the tremendous views of the Lincoln Memorial and Kennedy Center in the moonlight brought a sense of calm and I was able to relax, albeit not to the point of enjoyment. Katie tried to engage me in things around us, like eagles and falcons, but I preferred to focus on staying afloat and taking in the sights of the city from the river.

Months later, Katie signed us up for a birding trip with the local Hawk Viewing Center. We went with a group to the foothills around the city in search of red-tailed hawks, osprey and eagles, things I had always considered nothing more than nameless birds. I felt safe behind the spotting scopes and binoculars and appreciated the distance between me and the wild animals which were somehow fascinating. There was something voyeuristic about spying on a hawk as it swooped down from a great height and captured a panicked mouse in its beak, and I liked it.

This was the start of our birdwatching phase: Tsunni in the backseat and Katie and I learning to identify local birdlife. Often, we would wander into some forest and sit and wait for birds to appear, then identify them with our Sibley guide. Between birdwatching, occasional hikes and kayak outings, I think Katie misinterpreted my sense of ease in nature and among animals. She got it into her head that we were ready for a more advanced outdoor undertaking, and she suggested we add a kayaking trip to our upcoming Florida visit. We planned on a visit to the Kennedy Space Center and a beach and Katie found a company who offered kayak tours nearby which she thought would round out the trip quite nicely.

"Aren't there crocodiles down there?" I asked.

"Alligators, yes, but not where we'll be kayaking."

"What other creatures would I have to deal with?"

"The dangerous Great Blue Heron," Katie joked. "And lots of migratory birds. The highlight of the trip though are the manatees. They'll be migrating when we're there."

"Manatees. Aren't they the snub-nosed dolphin thing?"

"They do look like that, yes. But they're related to elephants, not dolphins. That's about all I know, except they're endangered and just spectacular."

"Elephants swimming by my kayak? I don't think so."

"They're very gentle and unimposing, and probably won't even swim near us. We'll be viewing them from a distance. Like with the birding. No worries," Katie said.

I had a hard time imagining a gentle and unimposing swimming animal related to the elephant, but if I thought about the different species of birds we might see, perhaps it would not be so bad. I researched manatees in an effort to find comfort: the three different types of manatees and their distinguishing characteristics, their migratory paths, the cause of their endangered status, their solitary and their group behavior. None of this led me to understand what it would be like to kayak among them, but ultimately, I agreed to the trip. I don't really know why.

The weeks passed, the date of the trip approached, and my stress and anxiety continued to grow. I didn't make excuses to avoid the trip, though I wanted to. I didn't engage with Katie when she tried to talk to me about it, and I ceased my research about manatees. And then I found myself on a dock near a sandy beach in the center of Merritt Island Wildlife Refuge on the east coast of Florida and watched the guides help Katie into her kayak. My turn came, I swallowed my fear, climbed in a kayak, and took the offered paddle.

"Have fun Mark," Katie said.

"If you insist," was all I could think to say.

We paddled our kayaks out to the lagoon. Katie quickly found her stride, but I struggled with balance, paddling technique, and the disappearance of the dock as we paddled farther into the lagoon. The guides immediately showed their erudition: foliage and bird names, explanations of mating and feeding behaviors, descriptions of migratory patterns rattled off their tongues. I was impressed and relieved there was some learning involved in this questionable activity.

Questionable because I had only been in a kayak a few times and had no business being in this group of skilled paddlers. Questionable because this time I was aware there were animals swimming in the same water and the idea was anathema to me. Questionable because Katie had been a positive influence on me, breaking the block I had towards nature, but I was still nothing even close to an outdoorsman, someone who would spend an afternoon stranded on a kayak floating in a wide-open lagoon. And yet there I was.

We paddled a long, serpentine path through tiny tributaries and eventually tied the kayaks together in the middle of the lagoon for a break. As the kayaks gently bumped against each other, I watched the silent activity of herons, egrets, and the occasional spoonbill. I thought I could see emerging patterns and purpose in their behaviors, like notes floating along a staff building an elegant musical idea. The guides broke my spell and announced the next portion of the trip: observing manatees. I untied from the group and waited with trepidation: observing birds was one thing but paddling among floating elephants was quite another.

The slow paddle upstream took us to a small cove surrounded by grassy plants in shallow water. The guides pointed out a group of manatees feeding and whispered to sit still and calm, watch and wait. All I could see in the direction they pointed were shadows, hardly identifiable as animals. Tension built as

silence reigned. I preferred the chatter of the guides, a welcome distraction from the ominous threat of the things I couldn't see.

The kayaks slowly drifted apart, mine moved closer to shore. The guides had told us not to disturb the water while observing so instead, I looked to Katie for help, for her to tell me what to do to avoid floating into a gang of manatees. With a look of excitement, or maybe it was surprise, she pointed towards my kayak. I bent slightly and peered into the water as an adult manatee and a small calf passed directly beneath me. I was startled being so close to the large moving animals and worried they would tip my kayak. But they floated gracefully beneath me, slowly, barely disturbing the water, until they were clear. A calm descended on me as the pair turned in the water and swam back underneath once again. I clearly saw the wrinkled faces, the long stiff whiskers growing from their snouts, tiny hairs on their faces, long, scarred slashes caused by propellers. These were not pretty animals, with their smashed faces, calloused skin, and strange combination of front flippers and rear paddle shaped tail. Yet their grace and fluidity was intriguing, majestic, and Katie had been right, they were spectacular.

And then they were gone, back to the shallow shoreline for more grazing. I couldn't breathe. I felt light, almost not even there. Like my body merged with the kayak, with the cove. One inch of water separated me from a pair of manatees and the connection was so visceral, so electrified, I realized it had always been there. A dormant link brought to life by two gentle manatees.

"That was quite an event you just experienced!" a guide exclaimed. "Doesn't happen very often. You're very lucky."

"Holy shit, Mark," Katie cried out. "That was beautiful!"

I said nothing. Words no longer had meaning. They were inadequate to touch the pounding of my heart, the closeness I felt to my surroundings, the fantastic euphoria which seemed to float around me. We watched the manatees for ten long minutes, then started the paddle back the way we had come. It was all unique. I saw with new eyes, with new understanding, with a bit of regret that it took me so long to realize this connection. As we paddled, I wondered if those feelings would last, I wondered if I would repeat such experiences, if the connection was broader than this lagoon. It was a bit frightening and exciting to think that this was what Katie felt all the time.

Weeks later, I returned to the Charlie Brown and Snoopy lithographs that Katie had been so moved by. It now felt silly and immature that I had evaluated them as well executed prints of a boy and his dog. Behind the closed eyes, the gentle scratching, the foreheads pressed one to the other there was warmth, appreciation, and immense love transferred from tiny points of contact. Could it be the same experience I had shared with the mother manatee and her calf, I wondered? Did Katie feel as I had as her forehead leaned into Tsunni's, as Tsunni leaned into Katie's scratching fingers?

I thought I finally understood Katie's tears. Those pictures were more than beautiful lithographs holding potential profit: they were the record of Katie's love and loss, the record of all I had missed, the hope and promise of potential connections, if I would be willing to open up, to be available. I left the gallery. As I walked, the beckoning bark of a dog. It sounded friendly. Curious. Ahead of me, a man walked his German Shepard on a leash. As they approached, I smiled at the man, then at the dog. "Hey pup," I said with a most gentle voice.

David H Weinberger is an American author writing in Berlin, Germany. He is the author of the story collection *Not So You'd Notice* and his stories have appeared in over a dozen literary journals including *The Write Launch*, *The Normal School*, *The Ravens Perch*, *Gravel*, and *Twelve Winters*. When he is not writing full-time, he participates in the Berlin English-language writing community, including workshops, readings and book releases. He holds a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education and taught kindergarten for eight years in Salt Lake City, Utah. His experience as a teacher working with families living in poverty informs much of his writing. Visit davidhweinberger.com to read more of his stories.

Warm You Up by William Cass

Agnes started her morning the same way she had for the sixty-odd years she'd lived alone in that house: with a cup of tea while she said the rosary at the kitchen table. She mumbled as she prayed. Dawn crept through the sheer curtains over the sink.

When she finished the rosary, Agnes made toast and ate it at the counter with another cup of tea. The plate and cup she used had been her grandparents', as was most of the furniture in the house. She looked into the backyard as she ate and was vaguely aware of the sounds of traffic increasing beyond the hedge and down the hill on the town's main street. The maple tree at the far corner of the yard had made its seasonal turn, brightly-colored leaves circling its base. When Agnes opened the window to set her crusts on the sill for the birds, she was surprised by the chill breath of air that came inside. Not yet mid-October and already someone had a fireplace burning nearby. Like always, the realization of another fall deepening saddened her: the shortened days, the colder weather, the passage of time.

She said, "My."

The sound of her own voice was unsettling, too. She couldn't remember speaking the previous day, nor the one before that.

~

By eight, Agnes had showered, dressed, made the bed, and was ready for her morning walk. She put on the old Mackinaw coat that had been her grandfather's and left through the front door, jiggling its handle afterwards to be sure it was locked. She started down the hill towards the elementary school where she'd taught for forty years. Its entry bell rang as she came up beside the playground, and she smiled. She stopped to watch the clambering children, diminished in numbers over the years, being shuttled into the building by staff members. Agnes only recognized one of the adults, a tall man who'd started there as a teacher's aide shortly before she retired; she felt her eyebrows knit as she realized his hair that had been jet-black then was mostly gray now.

Agnes continued up to the main street and waited for the traffic light to change to cross it. She looked down a few blocks at the old fertilizer plant that had closed up a decade before and the train depot just beyond it that had shut down, too, not long afterwards. The buildings loomed large, dark, still. When the light changed, she crossed into more streets not unlike her own with small houses and tall trees along the curbs. Like most of the neighborhoods in town, nearly as many houses were for sale or boarded up as were occupied.

Five minutes later, Agnes came to the town's central park. She had it entirely to herself as she made her way past the baseball field, the jungle gym, the miniature pavilion, and up onto the footbridge that crossed a small brook. She stopped there and watched the water babble by. She thought of collecting pollywogs in a jar along the brook's banks as a girl and trying to cross it from rock to rock after it had risen in the spring. Agnes could hardly believe she'd been that young once, that she had been that girl. The memory was like thinking about another person altogether.

She crossed the remainder of the bridge and had almost come to the park's opposite entrance when she saw two feet in high-top sneakers protruding from a cluster of bushes near the pathway. Agnes felt a jolt; she sucked in her breath and looked about her for someone to help. But she remained alone, so she swallowed and took tentative steps into the bushes. A heavy-set woman in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans lay on her back there. She appeared to be sleeping, but her breathing was slow and shallow. Agnes bent down, shook the woman's shoulder, and got no response. She grabbed her cell phone from her coat pocket and called 911.

Agnes stayed at the woman's side, recognition slowly filling her, until she heard a siren approach, then hurried to the entrance and waved the ambulance up to where she waited. She stood off to the side while the two male paramedics examined the woman. The older paramedic lifted one of the woman's eyelids, then shouted, "Get the Narcan!"

Agnes had heard about Narcan and its use. She put her hand over her mouth and began to pray.

The paramedics treated the unconscious woman, then arranged her on a stretcher inside the back of the ambulance. Agnes heard the older paramedic report into a hand-held receiver that they had a drug overdose in transit and were heading to Memorial Hospital.

The younger paramedic rode in the back with the woman. Before the older one climbed into the driver's seat, he asked Agnes, "Are you with her?"

"No, I just stumbled upon her, but I know her. She was a third-grade student of mine many years ago."

He nodded.

Agnes felt her lips trembling. "Will she be all right?"

"Don't know. Hope so."

He got inside, started the engine and lights, and sped away. Agnes watched after it, considering, until it disappeared and she could no longer hear the siren. It had been the woman's wide forehead and small mouth that had first led Agnes to recognize her; even thirty years later, both were distinctive. Her name was Jean, and she'd sat at the back of the last row in Agnes' classroom. She'd been unusually quiet as a little girl, taciturn, shy. Her father, like those of most of school's students, had worked at the fertilizer plant.

Agnes changed her normal route and walked over to St. Matthew's Church. Like the park, it was empty. She lit a votive candle in the little alcove dedicated to the Virgin Mary, lowered herself onto the kneeler there, and prayed some more for Jean. She remembered that as a girl, Jean had been larger than most of her classmates and rarely had interactions with any of them. The exception was one bitterly cold winter afternoon after dismissal when she saw Jean creep back into the classroom; at the time, Agnes was in the room's storage closet, but could see her through the doorway. The girl opened her backpack, took a paper bag out of it, set it on the seat of a boy's desk, and quickly left the room again. Through one of the windows, Agnes watched her scamper away across the playground, then went over to the boy's desk. His name was written in green crayon on the outside of the bag. Agnes opened it. Inside were a pair of mittens, a scarf, and a knit cap, all well-worn. The boy's house had burned down the week before, and his family had lost almost all of their belongings. Agnes replaced the bag where it had been and looked out the window again. Jean was nowhere to be seen.

~

That afternoon, Agnes tried to take her regular post-lunch nap, but couldn't sleep. Instead, she lay there thinking about Jean, the dealt hands of life, and the dwindling number of days she herself had left on earth. Finally, she bundled up again and drove over to the hospital. She found the emergency room receptionist behind a glass window and asked about Jean.

The receptionist regarded Agnes evenly and paused before asking, "Are you family?"

Agnes shook her head.

"Well, if you're not, I'm afraid I can't disclose that sort of information to you. All I can let you know is that she's no longer here and hasn't been admitted upstairs."

"She's left then, been discharged?"

The receptionist stared back and said nothing.

"Or I guess it could mean she didn't make it at all. That she passed away."

With pursed lips, the receptionist showed her palms.

"All right," Agnes said. "Thank you."

She went back outside and drove home. When she got there, Agnes checked the phone book and did an internet search but couldn't find any contact information about Jean or her family's surname. She thought to herself: thirty years is a long time; if she's alive at all, she could be anywhere. Agnes looked out her window and across the street where the weeds surrounding an abandoned house rustled knee-high on the small breeze. She thought back to when the town and region had been thriving; it seemed so long ago. Many people had lost their way since then. Jean was just one of them. She touched her fingertips to the window's glass and blew out a long breath.

~

On her walk each morning afterwards, Agnes slowed her steps though the park and looked for Jean. She looked for her, too, when she passed by people huddled together outside taverns, empty storefronts, or in alleyways. She looked more hopefully at church, the supermarket, the gas station. She continued to look, but to no avail.

As the days shortened further, Agnes filled her time in the usual ways to which she'd grown accustomed: praying, reading, drinking tea, knitting afghans for the church's winter bazaar, watching nature programs on television. Gradually, all the deciduous trees became completely bare, and the titter of birds no longer greeted her upon waking.

Two Mondays before Thanksgiving, as the afternoon's light had begun its descent towards gloaming, Agnes opened her front door to get the mail and stopped dead in her tracks. Her palms flew to her chest. Jean was standing there on the porch looking directly at her. She was dressed in the same sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers, but a timid smile creased her lips.

"Ms. Stafford," she said quietly. "I'm sorry to startle you, but they told me at the hospital that you found me that morning and called for the ambulance. You saved my life. I wanted to stop by to thank you."

Agnes slowly lowered her hands to her side and said, "You're all right."

"Well, I just got out of rehab. You know what they say: one day at a time." She paused. "I was struggling with some things. But, so far, so good."

"And you have a place to stay?"

Jean nodded. "My cousin has a spare room."

"How about a job?"

"Not yet. Need to find one, though, and quick."

Agnes thought: we all make mistakes. A sudden idea struck her. "I'll hire you to paint my house," she said. "Start on the outside while the weather holds, then I need the inside painted, too. I have all the supplies you need in my garage."

Jean's eyebrows rose. "Paint your house."

"Why not?"

Jean gave a little snort-like chuckle. "Well, I suppose I could do that." She cocked her head, her eyes narrowing. "Why are you doing this, Ms. Stafford?"

"Because I believe in you."

Jean shook her head. "That's what you said when I was eight."

"And I still believe it." Agnes paused. "I do."

Jean continued shaking her head, but her smile widened. "Okay, I guess. When do you want me to start?"

"Tomorrow morning. Be here at eight and we'll have a cup of tea before you begin."

"I don't think I've ever had a cup of tea."

"It'll warm you up." Agnes smiled, too. "All right, then. Eight o'clock. Don't be late."

"I won't." Jean stepped down from the porch onto the front walk, turned and said, "Thank you, Ms. Stafford."

"Of course. Take care, Jean."

The big woman nodded. Agnes watched her go down the walk and turn towards the school. She watched her make her way down the hill and disappear around the bend. Streetlights blinked on, and a dog barked in a neighbor's yard. Agnes could hear the familiar, quiet murmur of traffic from the main street. It was the time of day when the shift change whistle used to blow at the fertilizer plant. A train rumbled by in the near distance, passing the town's shuttered depot, coming from somewhere, heading somewhere else.

William Cass has had 375 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines and anthologies such as *December*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. He is the winner of writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*, and has been nominated once for Best of the Net, twice for Best Small Fictions, and six times for the Pushcart Prize. His three short story collections have all been published by Wising Up Press.

Descent Into Teardrop Lake by Adam J. Galanski-De León

I was eleven when they discovered that all the sadness in the world traces back to one giant lake full of tears. I sort of remember crying when I was younger, but it is different now.

The government kept receiving radio signals from a remote area in the mountains. The transmissions carried over in morse code. Over and over, it coded the same sentence.

I AM THE SADDEST MAN IN THE WORLD. I AM THE SADDEST MAN IN THE WORLD

They traced the calls back to a deep basin filled not with the salt of the sea but the bitterness of tears. Around the edges of the water were mouths of small streams that trailed down the mountains, out into the rivers, out into the oceans. Sadness was everywhere. The universal language.

Still, after discovering the body of water, they could not find where the radio traced from. So, they assembled a team into a submersible that descended into the depths of the lake. Underneath the lake of tears, existed a cavern. It is said that when the team of scientists entered the cavern, the man sending out the morse code was already long dead. His hands flapped from his wrists where a knife had slashed. The floor was stained in a dark reddish brown. Nobody could identify the man who lived there. He had old features, but young eyes.

Sometimes I wonder if he was the saddest man in the world because he was surrounded by tears, or if it was that he had no one to share them with.

The government ordered an official drain of *Teardrop Lake*, as they dubbed it. They created a deep drain in the basin that sunk the teardrops well below the earth. When the lake was gone, they built a steel grate over the drain and sealed it perfectly shut.

At first, people flocked to the drain, to see if the rumors were true. Teenagers tried to sneak in at night to pry open the grate and swim in the well of tears. Security had to be put up. Chain gates with barbed wire and guard dogs and guns. No one was really sure why it even mattered.

Shortly after, there was no sadness left to go around. People couldn't cry anymore. The eye drops industry soared in the stock market. People manipulated each other, broke each other's hearts, beat each other in the street, swore at each other, dug up relatives' graves, reprimanded their children or their neighbors' dogs, or punched their reflections in mirrors just to make something cry. And it was ironic, because sadness was gone but no one was happy.

Animals went into mass extinction and no activists protested. War was a nightly card game for the rich. Ascetics flogged themselves with whips of thorns. False prophets popped up around the globe, claiming to have some sort of deliverance. Laughter wasn't heard for years.

A recovery mission was issued and the same team of scientists that found the suicidal man were sent to open the steel grate and enter the forbidden drain of tears. People traveled from around the globe to shake their hands on the chain fences and camp out in the mountains to see what could possibly happen.

Weeks went by, and the scientists were not heard from. People lost faith and left their campsites. News reporters covered the issue less and less. The world went back to their obscure lives.

A rescue mission was sent with massive floodlights. Biologists, and federal agents, and scuba divers, and laborers descended into the black. They say the closer they got to the original team of divers, the more they could hear them laughing. Or sobbing. And they realized them to be one in the same.

I'm eighteen years old today. Today the basin was restored. Aqueducts of tears are being constructed down the mountains and out across the countryside to bring sadness back to all the world. People are crying tears of joy. They are cursing and demeaning each other, laughing. It hits every person individually within large crowds that they are completely alone in the world. Criminals turn themselves in to the police, consumed by titanic waves of guilt.

I invited my best friends to my birthday party. I wanted to buy cigarettes and alcohol and go to the red-light district just because now I could. I stood in my parent's kitchen all day waiting, in my favorite dress, my makeup perfectly done and hair curled. I am wearing a pair of teardrop pearls my parents got me, because not only was it ironic, but also it is beautiful. Still, no one has arrived. They are all out crying

or laughing, or fighting in the street to feel that rush of adrenaline once more. And here I am, like a fool, surrounded by sadness and no one to share it with.

Am I the only one who still feels nothing?

Public Worth by Ken Poyner

A woman is assembling herself on the same corner last week a woman was disassembled. It cannot be the same woman – the parts of last week's woman were carried off in multiple directions by multiple uncooperating people. A hand brushes itself onto a wrist. A leg pops itself into a hip and rolls amongst the parts, looking for a proper foot. A small crowd of shoppers gathers in the round. Everyone knows somehow it would not be polite to help her unpuzzle herself. It is her task to master. Master it she will, or we are off with the parts.

The latest of Ken's ten collections of poetry and flash fiction is *Science Is Not Enough*, speculative poetry. He lives in the lower right-hand corner of Virginia and is married to a world champion female power lifter. He spent 33 years herding computers. See him in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *Café Irreal*, *Blue Unicorn* and another hundred or so places. www.kpoyner.com.

The Sequel by Mark Silcox

Four twentysomething friends clustered together in an outdoor movie line. Their movements are economical as they shuffle along the pavement, their shoulders hunched inward against a brittle autumn wind. The clothes they wear are consignment store ratty but uniformly clean. Anyone from the area could easily pick them out as upper-year students from the commuter college three highway exits away.

When the line tightens up, they find themselves standing next to a slick printed poster hung behind smudged glass. They stop their conversation to stare at the image: two silver space cruisers battling above a lurid tableau of heroically grimacing A-listers and furry humanoid monsters. They have been trying their best to come across as cool, ambivalent, a little detached from their surroundings, the way they always do when they drive into this particular Kansas City suburb. But they're probably not fooling anyone. Who would stand outdoors for over half an hour in such unfriendly weather, if seeing the sequel wasn't absolutely the most important thing on the planet right now?

Just ahead of them a dude in a parka, maybe five to ten years older, starts busting out internet folklore about the movie, which is opening tonight.

OK, so we know that Prince Shambert and the Lost Legion are coming back, right? 'Cause in the scene where his Star Cruiser supposedly exploded, that was pretty clearly just lens flare and debris from the battle. To make the journey back from the Frozen Nebula, he'll need to have found a source of fuel crystals. But how's he going to do that, without a telepath on board?

The harsh wind breaks up Parka Dude's voice like static. But Leroi – tallest of the group of four – is not indifferent to the content of his speech. He leans closer to listen in, stepping a little away from his companions, pushing his chunky drugstore glasses up the bridge of his nose.

So is this weird hombre just talking to himself? No: the guy immediately ahead is half-turned backwards, half-listening. A tall hipster in skinny jeans and a goatee, with his arm around an even skinnier blonde girl. The hipster nods, says “mm hm,” just barely audible; the girl looks away. Classic third wheel situation.

I think it'll turn out that the Prince has had an alliance with some of the telepaths all along. Maybe a breakaway faction. There's a guy on Twitter who thinks they're actually waiting for him, right there at the heart of the nebula! Interesting theory, but my bet is that there's a stowaway on his ship. There were some telepaths on the Pirate Asteroid, right, just before it got blown up?

Another minimal nod from the hipster. Parka Dude starts talking faster, excited but perhaps dimly aware that he is embarrassing his companions. He hasn't even registered Leroi eavesdropping off to the side.

That was a great scene, huh? When the Pirate Emperor was just about to teleport away, and he saw those three blue missiles streaking across the sky?

Leroi's three friends are all listening in as well now. The shortest one, Marc, grins and nudges him: *white people!* The others laugh, but Leroi shushes them.

A fat silver moon peeps over the roof of strip mall across the street, throwing expectant faces into sharp relief. Frolicking up ahead close to the theater's awning are some of the really hardcore fans, who have been there since early afternoon. Many of them are in costume. A couple of pre-teens wearing PVC armor fight a pretend laser battle up and down the sidewalk. *You're on the same side!* some smartass yells at them. Even further forward, a father-daughter pair hold hands, wrapped up in what looks like remnants of a giant fur coat, shyly roleplaying as fierce alien carnivores.

Back when he was the age of these kids, Leroi's parents would dress him up in a miniature suit jacket and take him to listen to jazz in the city. A cocktail apiece for Mama and Pop and greasy bar snacks for him and his sister, while they all sat and listened demurely to old-fashioned music of frenzy and abandon. But he had never once dressed up for Halloween. His mama didn't trust the streets of their own neighborhood after dark.

The girl standing beside the hipster is getting restive. She shrugs herself out from under his arm and turns to face him. As their voices rise, a pickup truck carrying four lawnmowers clatters down the street that runs beside the sidewalk. Impossible for Leroi to hear what they're saying to each other.

Parka Dude keeps right on dropping wisdom. *Then there's the whole question of the lost heir to the galactic throne. People online have been betting it'll turn out to be a girl; they're probably right. But what if she's grown up on one of the planets owned by the Grey Alliance?* Totally ignored by his companions now, his voice has ascended to a higher pitch. *She might be a prisoner there. Or, she might actually be in league with the Soldiers of Entropy! But I don't buy the theory that she and the prince will turn out to be siblings – this isn't freaking Star Wars.*

Leroi's squad aren't even trying to fake indifference any more – the guy has them all totally captivated. He has this annoying, but hypnotic tic of pushing and pulling his hands in and out of his pockets while he talks, faster and faster as he leads up to some crucial observation.

One thing I can't decide is whether somebody'll solve the Riddle of the Cave. It's been driving me nuts! I mean, we've been waiting fourteen months for this thing to come out! So if they don't at least hint at a solution, people are going to be pretty hacked off. But at the same time, though, if they do say what the answer is, what's Part Three of the trilogy gonna be about?

The blonde girl's voice briefly drowns him out. It's still hard to hear what she's saying over the wind's howl, but the word *liar!* comes through. She jabs a finger into the hipster's chest, hard. Parka Dude's fists are jammed all the way into his pockets now, dragging the heavy jacket halfway down his shoulders.

I was actually wondering that too, about the cave, Marc says. Leroi nods.

It'd be neat if they threw in some twist, like maybe blowing up the asteroid where the cave is. No riddle left to solve then, right? A forced laugh, painful to hear. But I'd rather somebody actually figured it out. You know it's got to be five syllables, 'cause otherwise it doesn't fit into the Song of the Stars. But apart from that...

The Hipster turns away from him and gets up in the face of the girl.

No, fuck you! Fuckin' bitch. Mr. Skinny Jeans raises a fist, then lowers it quickly. *You've got no fuckin' reason to accuse me of that!*

Heads turn sharply from both ends of the line.

The girl is sobbing now, stamping on the sidewalk with her high heels. *Why don't you just admit it, Andrew?* she wails. *You've wanted to do it for over a year. You just had to wait till I was out of town for two days – only two days!*

A little kid running by with a noisy laser pistol flinches and reverses course. All three of Leroi's group are staring openly.

What's everybody looking at? The hipster's face runs through three different shades of magenta. *Mind your own god damn...*

The girl throws something down between them with a loud crack, and stalks across the road in the uncertain evening light. Her sharp heels click on the asphalt. Traffic is scanty here this time of night, but Leroi still flinches when he sees her set off without looking. A car approaching from about thirty yards away has to slow down to let her by.

Andy, maybe you'd better follow her, just in case...

Oh for God's sake, Lawrence, just shut up, will you? For like two seconds? With both their faces visible and close, it's clear Hipster and Parka Dude are related – brothers, probably.

Sorry, Andy.

We didn't even want to see this lame movie. Fucking space pirates!

Lawrence has dropped into a crouch and is picking up the two pieces of whatever it was the girl threw down. *The Space Pirates are only in it for, like, ten minutes Andy. I don't know why you keep acting like that's all the story's about.* The parka makes an odd, slippery sound as he leans toward the curb.

But Andrew is already setting a fierce pace down the sidewalk toward the parking lot at the back of the line. He nudges past Leroi and Marc and his shoulder bumps against Jaylen's, in a way that might have started something if it had happened on campus.

Leroi puts his hand against his furious, thick-chested friend's forearm. *Not here.*

Jaylen pauses, takes a slow breath, then nods.

The slowness with which the others in line turn away from this scene feels like a cinematic effect. Still dropped into a low crouch, Lawrence stares down at the chunks of plastic and bits of gravel in his open hand.

Leroi glances at his watch. The next bunch of showings of the sequel are supposed to start in sixteen minutes. Then he looks up and is face to face with Lawrence, who has risen to watch Andrew's departure. Neither of the pair then says anything, but neither looks away.

Lawrence holds up the shiny fragments at just below eye level. *I, uh, don't know what this...I can't tell what she...*

He isn't that old, actually, for all that his outer garb makes him seem like an ancient vagrant. Maybe twenty-five? Leroi quickly turns around to face the others. Marc is back to fixating on the poster; Jaylen is gazing thoughtfully down at the broken edge of a paving stone. But Derek – his oldest friend, scrawniest and quietest of the four, got As all through high school – is giving him certain quiet look that Leroi has come to recognize. *They almost never talk to us without wanting something, however small, Derek once told him. It's usually best to just give it to them.*

When Leroi takes a step toward Lawrence, the dude doesn't flinch or step back. Unusual. *Huh, let me see that. Looks like a broken hair clip.*

Oh! Yeah, that's what it is. She was wearing it earlier, when we were at Olive Garden.

They have one of those around here? I love that place, man. He vaguely remembers having been to one once, further away from downtown. *Breadsticks and shit.*

Lawrence manages a thin smile, but he looks lost. He shoves the shiny broken chips of plastic into his pocket and shuffles from foot to foot.

A KCPD car slides by and toots its sirens. Probably aimed at the pair of pre-teens close by loitering out past the curb, not keeping an eye on traffic. Jaylen twitches; he's had some minor cop issues in this neighborhood in the past. The other three manage to stay chill.

So what were you saying about the telepaths exactly? I think I read something about that online. Derek is barely audible. He has always been a mumblor.

Lawrence hears him, though. *Yeah? Down the hands go, back into the pockets. What'd they say?*

I think you might be right about the stowaway. Remember that scene just a minute or so before the Pirate Asteroid got nuked?

Lawrence has to think for a minute. *The one where the Emperor's giving his orders to...*

Quick head shake. *Before that.*

Leroi smiles. Derek is the biggest nerd he knows. All of them wanted to see the movie tonight, but only D spent the whole afternoon on his laptop watching trailers and reading fan sites.

You mean, the Mind Battle? In the docking bay?

Right. So there was this one telepath – the tall, floppy-eared one with blue skin – that the camera followed right at the end of the scene. He was walking toward the Prince's frigate, not away from it. I think.

Lawrence's hands plunge so deep into his parka it looks like he's leaning into a somersault. *Really? Oh wow, man – I don't remember the shot! That could be crucial.*

Leroi nods. *We were all talking about that scene earlier, in the car.* Like they'd been discussing some big issue in current events. But he has always been able to use the sonorous bass tone of his voice to make things sound extra-serious. They used to eat it up in church, back when he still went.

Have any of you guys read the comic books? Lawrence asks them.

Derek nods. *I own the whole first series!* And somehow or other, they're a single group now. The other two draw in. Marc raises a finger in that annoying way of his to make some fussy point about asteroids. Jaylen just laughs and rolls his eyes.

The line starts to move more quickly. The kids in costume who have been running up and down fall into step with their parents. After close to an hour in the cold wind, the haze of yellow light from the awning is almost painfully enticing.

As soon as they step inside, they are hit by the metallic, faintly urinary scent of high-volume popcorn machines. Jaylen rubs his belly. *Mmm, hungry.* Hard to tell if he is being ironic. They pay for tickets at the kiosk and shuffle into the lobby, in search of Theater Fourteen.

Where'd he go? asks Leroi a minute or two later, once their stubs have been torn and they're halfway along a dark, carpeted corridor. *Shit, did we lose him?*

Lawrence does seem to have vanished into the general bustle. The four of them stop, interrupting the flow of the crowd, looking everywhere around themselves for a flash of battered parka.

Daddy, what are those guys doing? asks a girl in a sweatshirt covered with garish silver spaceships.

Shh, keep moving, Jessica, says Dad, hand on her shoulder, giving them the ancient, too-familiar gaze. *Stay close.*

Leroi wants to look around more for Lawrence. But when they peek into their theater it's already almost full. Jaylen laughs again, as they walk down the aisle and slide into the middle of the third row together. *Well shit, I was just getting used to the guy. Guess he must have got back with his people.* The cool darkness and peaceful indifference of the other patrons feels like a refuge to Leroi; it has always been more important to him in these places than whatever happens to be on the screen.

At the moment, there's an ad running on the screen for a local used car dealership; some bald salesman shouting "Deals! Deals!"

I bet the dude comes back, Derek murmurs.

Leroi remembers the time he was eleven and his drunk-ass Uncle Charles took him to a donut store to buy apple fritters, then forgot about him and drove away to the liquor store. And also the time even further back, when he left the backyard gate open by accident and their family dog wandered off into the night, to show up only two days later scratched up and shivering in a culvert. He wonders whether the hipster and the blonde have already reunited. Wherever they are, it's for damn sure not somewhere Lawrence is likely to find them. The theater lights go down.

The first preview involves a lot of muscular people dressed in black nylon kicking each other in the head, inside of what looks to be an underground cavern. *I hate Keanu Reeves,* snarls a woman sitting two seats away.

The second preview is set in outer space and seems to be aimed at the same kind of audience as the sequel. A famous British actor and a blue-skinned alien fight a duel with glowing knives. A spaceship crashes into the side of a mountain beneath an orange sky hung with two enormous moons. Derek and Marc both lean a little forward in their seats.

The third preview has a bunch of almost-naked people dancing on the roof of a building. Something on the ground beneath them explodes.

You guys like popcorn?

It's a heavysset dude standing at the shadowy far end of their row, his arms wrapped around four creaking, overfull bags of popcorn. No, wait: it's Lawrence. He's still wearing his parka, in spite of the fug of human warmth quickly building up in the crowded theater. All four of them just stare over at him for a moment.

There's another, louder explosion on the screen.

I wanted to...you guys were... Lawrence sighs and shrugs, dropping a few kernels onto the sticky floor. Others are staring now. He should sit down quickly, before the opening credits begin.

Get over here dude! says Jaylen, thumping the open seat next to him so it swings up and down. The others pull back their legs as Lawrence shambles past. On the way he drops a cascade of greasy kernels over a frizz-haired woman sitting in front of them. Luckily she's good-humored about it.

Leroi reaches out and pats Lawrence on the back of his greasy jacket. *Thanks man, that was nice of you.*

No problem, you guys said you were hungry. Lawrence hands him one of the bags, then distributes the others. *I can't believe it's really about to start!*

The suburbanites in the rows behind are giving them grouchy looks now, but it's just the usual, irritated type of glance anybody would shoot at noisy theatergoers.

It abruptly hits Leroi that in spite of all he has heard tonight, he has no solid memories whatsoever of the previous movie. This doesn't matter: though, in a curious way, it somehow seems as if it should. Then the lights in the theater go all the way down, and the suddenly familiar music rises.

Mark Silcox was born and raised in Toronto, Canada and has worked as a security guard, a short order cook, and a freelance video game writer. He currently teaches philosophy at the University of Central Oklahoma. He has published four books of academic philosophy, and some of his stories and poems have appeared in *Leading Edge*, *Fterota Logia*, *Philosophy Now!* and the *New English Review*. More information is available at marksilcox.net.

Drama



Non-Fiction



Woman With Fevers – A Monologue by Christopher Woods

(Frank - A man recalls a long ago memory)

All those years she lived in that old shack, so long ago now, her windows open wide in winter and, come summer, with fireflies roaming the rooms, we never knew.

We were in desperate boyhood, the young neighborhood toughs, our gonads all ablaze. We used to stand in her side yard and whistle at her through the window. We called to her, begged her to come out. Or even better, to invite us inside.

Each of us imagined her famous hot breath blowing across our thighs.

It wasn't until much later, not until she died in fact, did we have any idea why her body temperature always hovered around one hundred and three. How her insides simmered. Her dreams must have smoked even on frosted nights.

The coroner announced what he had found inside her. Row after row of tiny suns, some large as pearls, each of them glowing, giving light.

We were all amazed. But in time we went back to our own lives. We pretended we knew nothing about the way she had lived. How she had managed with what was dealt her.

We knew she was better than we were. But we kept this to ourselves, locked in our cold hearts.

But if I ever see a firefly, I see her again. And it all comes back.

Christopher Woods is a writer and photographer who lives in Texas. He has published a novel, *The Dream Patch*, a prose collection, *Under a Riverbed Sky*, and a poetry collection, *Maybe Birds Would Carry it Away*. His novella, *Hearts in the Dark*, was published in an anthology by Running Wild Press in Los Angeles. He has received residencies from The Ucross Foundation and the Edward Albee Foundation, and a grant from the Mary Roberts Rinehart Foundation. His plays included *Moonbirds*, an absurdist play about census-takers in a country where there are no people left to count, *Fire*, a drama about a woman who loses her family in a house fire she may have set, *Interim*, about souls in Purgatory, and *Heart Speak*, an evening of monologues for men and women.

BEWARE: No Justice Will Be Found Here by Katherine Shehadeh

Our last trip to the museum, Amir was still *squishy*. His candy-almond eyes followed me from his stroller as I tried to bury my tears like an ostrich's head in the sand, pushing through the keystone exhibit. Anyone who's been to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, a Smithsonian Museum colloquially called the "Blacksonian", knows it. They've heard the the loop of hymns escaping the room from the ground-floor corner that linger like the scent of something familiar in the air, as if warning visitors—*BEWARE: No justice will be found here.*

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I first hear of Tawfic Abdel Jabbar when his dad appears on cable news, begging U.S. officials to meet with him or at least to investigate what happened to his son. "He's a U.S. citizen after all," he pleads.

"Did you hear an American kid was killed in the West Bank today?" I text my partner, the father of our kids, a Palestinian man. With his sisters and their kids living there, I'm especially attuned to the violence that features in daily life under military occupation. Whether it be nighttime home raids, settler violence or abuse from soldiers, everyone is affected.

"Yeah. I heard his family is part of the New Orleans community," he sends with a sad face emoji. News of the boy's murder soon broached the family WhatsApp. Word from those in the nearby town is that he was ambushed by a group of settlers, or soldiers, or both. No one is exactly sure, though it happened in broad daylight.

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Amir looks up and whispers "here." He wants me close, which is becoming rarer by the day. I put my hand on his back as instructed, letting him pull the security he's seeking from my body.

When the video starts, and I'm reminded of the early life of the boy whose life this exhibit follows, my mind drifts to how small Amir was on his first day of baseball. A shy toddler, he'd often nuzzle himself behind me or his dad's legs, at times crying if he felt too exposed in new surroundings. His dad had to stand with him on that Saturday morning field—just long enough for him to gain his confidence in the game. Soon he'd learn his way and wouldn't need to rely on us in this way. That was around the last time we came to this museum, but now is different. Now he's beginning to understand. My hand on his back, they recount the details of the seventy-year-old tragedy.

I notice I'm back to grinding my teeth. Please, don't show his face, my inner voice pleads selfishly. I haven't been able to get his baseball-sized eye sockets out of my mind since I first saw an image of Emmett Till lying in his casket. I think of what Miss Till had to endure seeing her son like that. I think of her choice to share what those men, this world did to her baby. Placing her son in an open casket, as if holding a mirror up to the world to show us what we let them do. What we did to him. They don't focus in on the gruesome picture, at least not long enough for it to register in Amir's hardening eyes. Still, shuffling into the next room, as the hymns roll over us, I worry he may have seen too much.

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Among Palestinian families who can return, the conversation is often not if but when. For the Abdel Jabbar family, that was May 2023, just 8 months before the boy's murder. The family decided to return to the West Bank, giving their basketball-playing teenage son, Tawfic, time to experience what remained of his boyhood while deepening his roots to his homeland. Tawfic's dad described it as being able to travel back to the 1870's or 1880's.

He's right, but in too many ways.

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“Is there a real body in there?” Amir asks quietly, as we slowly move past the adorned casket where Emmett Till’s body once lay.

“No, it’s meant to show us—” I stop. I’m not sure what to say to help him gently understand. I’m not sure if I know, myself. Pressing my lips, I return my hand to his back as we walk out, side-by-side.

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* as Muse by LindaAnn LoSchiavo

When I was four years old, my aunts began taking me to live performances in Times Square. Though I loved the entire experience, as I read my *Playbill*, I felt a little sad. Why weren't there more central roles for stage actresses? My father had introduced me to Italian opera when I was still in the crib, drawing my attention to the nuances of his favorite sopranos and their importance to the story. If so many opera plots pivoted around the soprano, then why didn't Broadway musicals? There was an imbalance here and somehow I felt it was up to me to do something. But how?

When I was nine years old, I discovered *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott [1832–1888] and identified with Jo, a bookworm who composes plays for her sisters to perform. First published in 1868, the novel follows the lives of the four March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—and their sweet mother, Marmee (along with other relatives). Except for my favorite librarian, there was no one to discuss it with. My classmates had not heard of Alcott yet.

As I returned to Chapter 2 [“A Merry Christmas”], this section pointed the way: *Being still too young to go often to the theater, and not rich enough to afford any great outlay for private performances, the girls put their wits to work, and necessity being the mother of invention, made whatever they needed. Very clever were some of their productions, pasteboard guitars, antique lamps made of old-fashioned butter boats covered with silver paper, gorgeous robes of old cotton, glittering with tin spangles from a pickle factory, and armor covered with the same useful diamond shaped bits left in sheets when the lids of preserve pots were cut out. . . . Presently a bell sounded, the curtains flew apart, and the operatic tragedy began.*

If the little March sisters could “put their wits to work,” then so could I. Selecting a few chapters with incidents that could stand alone as a beginning, middle, and ending, I created my first one act play, writing fresh dialogue for five of Louisa May Alcott's female characters: Marmee and her daughters.

Like most 9-year-olds, I had no money. Nor did I have sisters for collaborators. Thanks to Alcott's encouragement, none of this seemed to be a drawback. At my next Girl Scout Troop meeting, I held auditions. For costuming, fabric remnants became five simple aprons and five long dirndl-style skirts. My “Marmee” actress agreed to bring a shawl. And the set? Simply an old rocking chair and a small oval rug. My theatre-going outings served me well. I knew enough to avoid extra fuss — —such as Jo March's clever “pasteboard guitars, antique lamps” or “gorgeous robes of old cotton, glittering with tin spangles” — — and to side-step “operatic tragedy” because young audiences would enjoy light comedy and witty dialogue. My 45-minute one act accorded each player a meaty role, including a stand-out moment, and ran for several months, circulating among local Girl Scout Troops. The play introduced people to my favorite novel; some classmates even checked it out of the library and did a book report for school.

Louisa May Alcott wrote: *It was excellent drill for their memories, a harmless amusement, and employed many hours which otherwise would have been idle, lonely, or spent in less profitable society.* And typing my first script five times on my manual typewriter certainly improved my memory. When one actress was a last minute no-show, I was able to step right into the role.

At that point in my youth, attending a private elementary school in Brooklyn, NY, I was in the habit of reading a book a day. With a successful production behind me, I looked at narrative differently, often supplying my own dialogue as I imagined the story recreated as a radio drama or a stage play. I chose more novels written by women or fiction that featured fearless female protagonists like Alcott's Jo.

Writers talk about creating a world for the reader so it felt as though you lived it. Well, I stepped inside *Little Women* when I wrote more dialogue, directed, and staged it. Currently, the plays I write are a mix between original creations and adaptations from novels and poems. For instance, after noticing that Mae West's novel “Diamond Lil” was superior to the 1932 Paramount Pictures version “She Done Him Wrong,” I turned Mae's book into a stage play for a cast of eight and a pianist. “Diamond Lil” was performed on West 46th Street for our 14-week run.

In this way, Louise May Alcott became my first mentor, the Muse who whispered, “Do it!” Perhaps she created her character Jo March to speak to all imaginative little dreamers who shared with her an overwhelming desire to do exactly as we please, unafraid to give a strong female voice the spotlight.

Native New Yorker and award-winner, LindaAnn LoSchiavo is a member of British Fantasy Society, HWA, SFPA, and The Dramatists Guild. Titles published in 2024: *Always Haunted: Hallowe'en Poems* [Wild Ink], *Apprenticed to the Night* [UniVerse Press], and *Felones de Se: Poems about Suicide* [Ukiyoto]. Forthcoming: *Cancer Courts My Mother* [Prolific Pulse Press, 2025] and *Vampire Verses* [Twisted Dreams Press, 2025-6]. Book Accolades earned: Elgin Award for *A Route Obscure and Lonely*; Chrysalis BREW Project's Award for Excellence and The World's Best Magazine's Book of Excellence Award for *Always Haunted: Hallowe'en Poems*; and the Spotlyts Story Award from Spotlyts Magazine for *Apprenticed to the Night*.
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Times at the Drive-in by Brian C. Petti

The drive-in on the main route through town, that connects Rockland County to the Hudson River, used to play Disney movies every weekend. Old standby animated ones like Snow White, Fantasia, The Jungle Book, and live-action ones like Herbie the Love Bug, Bedknobs and Broomsticks, Mary Poppins. I don't remember a single moment of the actual movies. Just the marquee, with the titles spelled out in hand-placed, black and red letters. Wearing hand-me-down pajamas, eating tin-foil wrapped hamburgers bought at the magical structure from which the beacon-like projection beamed its flickering images onto the largest screen I'd ever seen. Walking through the gravel-laden bumps, searching for our green Jeep, the one my father would outfit with a plow in the winter to make some extra cash, hearing the echoes of the hundreds of speakers blaring entreaties to visit the concession stand in a unified chorus. The back of the Jeep open, blankets and pillows laid out for me and my brother, popcorn strewn and just comfortable enough to fall asleep before the second feature started. Waking up in the morning in my bed, realizing I couldn't quite make it once again, but somehow without disappointment.

My wife is away visiting her father, who has been slowing down. The boys and I take the ancient Pontiac he gifted us to the drive-in in Greenville, the more prosperous neighbor of the town we live in. We moved up here for a new start, but my health caught up with me and now we are subsisting on disability. The old metal speakers that clipped to the window are gone, now you tune in to the station on your car radio. I let the boys watch from the front seat, while I watch them from the back. They get along better than me and my brother did, comrades in arms, making videos together on a cheap, hand-held flip camera we got them for Christmas. The older is the ringleader, the younger his willing soldier. They make raps about Star Wars, mini-scenes, staged fights to the death, and anything else that strikes them as funny. The movie is Wall-E, and it is surprisingly sweet, sad, and touching. I retake my place in the driver's seat, as brake lights begin to dot the field. I turn the key and the starter clicks futilely. I'm upset and say something about our luck, and the boys console me. "It's OK, Dad. It happens." I make the embarrassed trek back to the magic structure, where they are shutting down the snack bar for the night. A guy walks back with me and a portable battery charger. "Gotta have one of these around," he says. "This happens nearly every night." He's not doing anything to engender it, but I still feel my failure. The car sparks and I thank him profusely. As we pull away the boys are impassive and stoic. They are already accepting their poverty.

The boys are fifteen and eighteen. It's been a year and a half since my wife passed, tragically and suddenly. We have been existing since then, not really alive or dead. We live in the basement of my wife's sister. My oldest stopped getting up and going to High School the last half of his senior year, so the district sent a tutor to help get him through. The night before his graduation, I had a health issue and ended up in the hospital. The next morning was spent frantically making phone calls to family members to try to get somebody, anybody to be there for the ceremony. But there was an all-day rainstorm that kept all of them, one by one, from coming. Days later my son jokes about walking the length of the football field, his cap and gown soaked through, looking for a familiar face that wasn't there. He ended up catching a ride home. He laughs at the memory, using the one useful tool the three of us share against the vagaries of life. I laugh along, because to face the guilt I feel would immobilize me like an ancient insect frozen in amber.

I've tried to get the boys out, buying tickets I couldn't afford to concerts, sporting events, county fairs, that end up unused. I tell them I'm taking them to dinner with a surprise after. It's corny, and they recognize it as such. My eldest is suspicious, the younger willing to play along. I don't want to give them the option to bail. It's foolproof, I think. Seeing Deadpool was one of the few positive experiences we all shared in the last year and a half. The drive-in is playing the original and the sequel as a double-feature. We pull up and my oldest says, "Is this the surprise?" He is noncommittal, not impressed, but not willing to hurt my feelings. My youngest is pretending to be excited for my benefit. We find the channel on the radio, and this time I keep the car running. It's a humid night and the windshield keeps fogging up, so I have to turn on the wipers. My oldest can't stand the intrusion, and I say, "What do you want me to do?" The theater decides to run the original movie first instead of the sequel. "Probably to sell a few more tubs of popcorn," my eldest says. We stay through the first movie, rewatching it through the condensation and the wipers. My eldest is annoyed but trying. After the first movie ends, he asks if we can go home. I ask my youngest what he wants to do, and he says he's fine either way. Trying to keep the peace, and mitigate

any bad feelings on either side, as he's always done. A bridge between the islands of his father and his brother. "I did this for you guys," I say. "Whatever you want to do is fine." "I don't want to hurt your feelings," my oldest says. "It's OK, you won't." "It was a good idea, just with the wipers and how late it's starting..." "It's fine." We pull out, and my youngest says, "Thanks for trying, Dad." "Yeah," my oldest says, "thank you." I have gotten so used to hiding devastation that it's reflexively easy. There's a sense of relief on the car ride home. "Can we stop for ice cream," my oldest asks. "Sure," I say.

I'm driving from the wake of a friend in Albany, on my way to visit my father in the same town I used to live. He hasn't been doing well. Maps is taking me a back way that is strange to me. Before my synapses can make the connections, I realize I am coming upon the drive-in in Greenville, the one where we saw Wall-E and drained our car battery. I can see the big white screen, like a gigantic, empty canvas, waiting in the summer heat to be painted upon. I don't believe I'll ever be able to go to a drive-in, now, without crying. I can see the face of the teenage girl in the ticket booth, confused and a bit frightened by the sight of a 56-year-old man with tears inexplicably running down his cheeks. I drive on, and safely pack that image away for another time and place.

