

# **Ivo Review**

**Issue Three**

**Confession**



# Included In This Issue



## Poetry

- The Journey by Jane Berger Herschlag
- As She Lies On Her Deathbed by Jane Berger Herschlag
- I'm Not Embarrassed That I Watch Bull Riding by Donna J. Gelagotis Lee
- it's not painful, this dying by Allison Whittenberg
- Mother on Dreams of Becoming a Writer by Ronja Vieth
- Cistern Sisters, Istanbul by Ronja Vieth
- Forever 33 by Elisabeth Harrahy
- If Only by Elisabeth Harrahy
- Vision by Elisabeth Harrahy
- Wasted by Lynn White
- The Little Yellow Bell by Anne Rosenberg
- Dark Days Fume by R.H. Nicholson
- The Temptation to be the Bad Man by Thomas Reed Willemain
- Nevalny by Thomas Reed Willemain
- Five Stages of Decomposition by Jamez Terry
- Now by Rikki Santer
- Fears and Feelings by Edilson A. Ferreira
- Confession to my Muse by Diane Kendig
- Dad, Where'd You Go? by Darius Harris
- Jumping Off the Shoulder of God by J.J. Steinfeld
- Grizzly Man by Jean-Luc Fontaine
- In honor of Peggy, who died as a teenager by Cynthia Gallaher
- My Personae on the Bookshelf by Cynthia Gallaher
- Absurd (Regards to the Man from Italy) by Ashe Baileigh

## Fiction

- Learning Civics by Ken Poyner
- Public Involvement by Ken Poyner
- Safely Terrorizing by Ken Poyner
- Late Show by Jon Fain
- Outback by S.L. Wallach
- Hungry Grass by Judit Hollos
- Penance by Thomas J. Misuraca
- Jump by Maya De La Rosa-Cohen
- L.A. Fried by Chella Courington
- The Baby Walk by Sarah O'Connor
- Red Sock by Leslie Hayertz

## Non-Fiction

- Confession of an Appalachian Motorist by Frances Figart
- Stars by Patty Somlo
- To Dream Again by David Ferguson
- Getting it Right by Katherine Roth

## Cover Art by Herb Herschlag

Herb Herschlag studied art at Pratt Institute in NYC. His diverse career was as a designer for advertising, publishing, ABC-TV, and textiles. He works in watercolor, pen & ink, graphite, colored pencil, and acrylic. He has a passion for language and also writes poetry and flash fiction. An ekphrastic poem by his wife, Jane, in response to this piece of art, is included in this issue.

## Editor's Note

Welcome to the third issue of *Ivo Review*.

This issue gathers work across poetry, micro-fiction, fiction, and nonfiction that leans into the act of saying aloud what has been held back. Together, these pieces widen what our theme of CONFESSIO can mean: not only admission or absolution, but the charged space of risk and vulnerability that requires us to confess to one another.

We are honored to share them with you.

Ivo Editors  
*April 2026*

# Poetry



# The Journey by Jane Berger Herschlag

Cliff shadow and my shadow,  
my only companions  
in this monochromatic world;  
not even a tree or dog,  
just barrenness,  
insurmountable black hill  
jutting up from  
an expanse of blinding white  
wilderness,  
desert of singularity,  
changeless,  
except for the growth  
and contraction  
of our shadows,  
yet I walk forward,  
perhaps to meet something  
at the horizon.

Jane Berger Herschlag's full-length poetry collection, *When the Mouth Can't Speak the Body Will*, is published by Finishing Line Press. *Bully In The Spotlight*, her 40-page docu-poetry chapbook is published by Pudding House Publications. Jane taught creative writing/poetry and curated the open mic reading series for the Writer's Voice, NYC. Forthcoming August 2026 from Awatum Press is *Overcoming, A Philosophy of Resistance*. Jane is one of the six writers included. You can also find *Returning to the Scene of the Crime* on Sky Freight Publishing. In Ivo Review, you can find *An Accounting on Turning Away*. This poem is an ekphrastic response to this issue's cover art by Jane's husband, Herb Herschlag.

# As She Lies On Her Deathbed by Jane Berger Herschlag

Sitting on the bed edge,  
I bend my torso over hers,  
lean my ear to her mouth  
but cannot decipher  
her less-than-whispers.  
I want to know  
does Mother need morphine, water,  
to be turned over.

Her incapacity, her silence  
add lighter fluid to the coals of my hatred.  
I withdraw to the daybed across the room,  
gaze at her—  
my own child-silence punches me in the gut.

The muteness Father imposed—  
Mother was as silent then,  
perhaps moved her lips  
as vacantly as now.

If Dead-Father were to waken,  
lay voiceless, dying,  
I'd stay on the daybed, stare  
as his silence fertilized his needs,  
made them prosper unmet,  
each pore of my skin would tingle.

A smile would form in my gut  
as he tasted the bile of speechlessness,  
and I'd hope Death was slow to come.

Here, in this room, now,  
I hope Death takes Mother's hand,  
dismantles her suffering  
and my obligations.

# **I'm Not Embarrassed That I Watch Bull Riding by Donna J. Gelagotis Lee**

Should I admit that I watch  
when the cowboy settles  
onto the big-humped bull  
and secures his grip, the bull  
strapped at the flank to help its  
buck—should that matter?

Why, we use animals  
for all kinds of sport.  
We even eat them! So  
for eight seconds of relative time,  
the cowboy rides, or tries to.  
To the ground he'll jump, slide,

or fall. The bull could kick or  
go after him. But the clowns  
will step in. It's not really  
funny, this pursuit. The cowboy  
climbs the gate, gets out  
of the way. The score will go

up. And we'll be relieved as  
the animal trots away. It's  
exciting. I'll admit it. I just  
have to see. Look at that  
cowboy with so much guts.  
If only that were the rest of us.

Donna J. Gelagotis Lee is the author of two award-winning collections, *Intersection on Neptune* (The Poetry Press of Press Americana, 2019), winner of the Prize Americana for Poetry 2018, and *On the Altar of Greece* (Gival Press, 2006), winner of the Seventh Annual Gival Press Poetry Award and recipient of a 2007 Eric Hoffer Book Award: Notable for Art Category. Her poetry has appeared in numerous anthologies and journals, including *Cimarron Review*, *Ivo Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Midwest Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Women's Studies Quarterly*. [www.donnajgelagotislee.com](http://www.donnajgelagotislee.com)

## it's not painful, this dying by Allison Whittenberg

shunting blood away from limbs  
hours to days, or  
days to hours  
time marks leaving no stain  
cold, primal  
gurling, swallowing  
not quite non responsive  
but quiet far spaced breaths  
each inch left  
lapses

Silence

Allison Whittenberg is an award-winning novelist and playwright. Her poetry has appeared in *Columbia Review*, *Feminist Studies*, *J Journal*, and *New Orleans Review*. Whittenberg is a six-time Pushcart Prizeminee. *They Were Horrible Cooks* is her collection of poetry. Her main influence is Kay Ryan.

# Mother on Dreams of Becoming a Writer by Ronja Vieth

I proved her wrong and  
proved her right.  
And I am stuck in limbo.

I've learned to write  
professionally now. Copy,  
academic, and "creative,"

as if a separate category  
somehow. But I digress  
like leafs blowing

in this French,  
autumnal wind. My mother  
still minds my dreams.

But not in a good way.  
With words worth less  
now more than ever,

the scale tips in favor  
of my failure.  
Erasing success in academe

like rubber over leaden,  
curly strokes on paper.  
My pencil marks

may vanish, turn  
into typed prose and  
poetry yet. My hurt

of proving her right  
by not doing myself, my  
heart's desire wrong –

it wrenches.  
And fuels the craft  
she so despised.

Ronja Vieth, PhD, specializes in American Gothic Literature, and some of her poetry reflects that. Otherwise friendly and joyful, her writing has appeared in national and international journals and calendars, such as the *Cincinnati Review*, *Otherwise Engaged*, *Southern Poetry Anthology: Texas*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Collective Humanity: An LGBTQ+ Anthology* 'metamorphosis,' *The FEEL Magazine*, *Book of Matches*, *ROAR Magazine*, *The Southwestern Review*, *Whispers of the Seasons – A Contemporary Haiku Anthology*, and others. She works as writer and life-coach all over the world. Her latest non-fiction guidebook, *Pet Sit Like a Pro*, is available on Amazon. <https://sites.google.com/view/ronja-vieth-phd/home?authuser=0>

# Cistern Sisters, Istanbul by Ronja Vieth

I used to swim here, as a  
mermaid. First woman  
and naked I grew another  
scale each time I kissed

you, Medusa. Back then  
already you were tilted –  
I thought to better receive  
my lips as I lay long

in the flat water, coy  
like the carp surrounding me.  
Your lips parted willingly with  
hunger on your tongue, your hair

held back by other fish. Always  
fish, initiators of evolution.  
So I grew my tail as my love  
for you. Reverence,

deliverance until I knew  
too late your sister was killed  
by you. Standing on her head,  
incapacitated and thus blind to see

me or us, my trust shattered  
when it was too late. My feet  
were fins, my legs no longer able  
to part for covenants with men.

So I swam haunting the water,  
alive yet cold as the tears  
I cried drained my body's warmth.  
Still, I float, tiny particles

encased in stone  
columns' crevices, layers  
of lime, and precipitation  
of time through time.

## Forever 33 by Elisabeth Harrahy

Up ahead

I spot a red Chevy Cavalier  
with a black convertible roof  
that looks just like Kurt's  
and I feel compelled to catch up  
so I can look and see who is driving  
though I know it can't really be Kurt  
because his car was sold off at auction  
after being found in a parking lot  
in Rocky Mountain National Park  
right where he had left it  
before hiking up Baker Mountain  
in search of bighorn sheep.

When he did not return  
a search party went out  
and spotted his body  
at the bottom of a 900-foot cliff.  
Roped backcountry rescuers carefully  
maneuvered over cobbles and boulders  
empty litter in tow  
because the bottom of that cliff  
was the top of a steep talus deposit  
and I imagine upon reaching the spot  
those brave souls looked up  
to picture an unbroken Kurt  
sailing down—  
nothing but blue as backdrop—  
perhaps even laid awake that night  
as I have so often done,  
stumped  
at the cause of the fall.

But I speed up anyway  
and follow the red convertible  
down a lovely Wisconsin road  
lined with quaint family farms  
envisioning along the way  
the shock that will spread over his face  
when I pull up next to him  
and he realizes that I am really  
right there  
and that he is really

right here  
and holy cow he will say  
after we put our windows down  
it has been so long  
but look at you, still beautiful,  
but with maybe a little gray hair  
and a few more laugh lines.  
And then he will smile that smile  
and I will say yes,  
fifteen years will do that.

But when we get to the stop sign  
the red car turns left  
and I can see that it is not Kurt  
but rather  
a woman with bright purple hair  
and as I watch her car pull off into the distance  
I imagine Kurt  
sitting in the front seat beside me  
chuckling at my silliness.

Elisabeth Harrahy's poems have appeared in *Zone 3*, *Sky Island Journal*, *The Cafe Review*, *Rust & Moth*, *Passengers Journal*, *Ghost City Review*, and elsewhere, and have been nominated for Best of the Net. She is a biology professor and environmental toxicologist at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

# If Only by Elisabeth Harrahy

On *This American Life*, Ira Glass  
is talking to a physicist about parallel universes.  
Apparently, there is an app for that now, too.  
Ask the Universe Splitter a question,  
and a reaction is triggered in which a photon  
goes either left or right, and in less than a  
millisecond, returns an answer.

But as the good scientist points out,  
the photon *really* goes left *and* right.  
So, while in this universe,  
Ira Glass must shave his beard,  
he knows that in the one  
simultaneously created by the app,  
he gets to keep it.

Sometimes, a person makes a wrong choice  
and someone dies—  
a coin flip with cosmic consequences.

I wish this app was invented sooner.  
I could have asked it whether or not  
to call the police for a welfare check  
on my dad.  
The photon goes left, and I go to bed.  
The photon goes right, and I make the call.

Because at least then I would know  
that in some parallel universe,  
my dad was found just in time  
as he lay shivering on his floor  
and that right now, he is warm in his recliner  
watching the weather channel, about to call me  
regarding the tornado warning for my area.

Or, perhaps my dad could have used this app  
himself, after he grew too dizzy to drive  
while he waited to hear from me—  
the daughter who was too busy  
to talk about the weather.  
The photon goes left, and his daughter will realize  
she made the wrong choice.  
The photon goes right, and his daughter will not.

So that even if, in this universe  
I will forever know I chose  
to go to sleep for the night

while my dad went to sleep  
forever, in some alternate reality  
I am going about my business,  
just living my life,  
oblivious.

# Vision by Elisabeth Harrahy

you are late again

this time wrapped  
around the tree  
on the corner  
you failed to

negotiate  
a timely solution  
a bloody end  
to the love

i pretend  
you are gone  
shattered  
like windshield

i burst free  
as the blood  
running  
from you

and slip  
beneath the guardrail

## **Wasted by Lynn White**

How many candles must I light  
to commemorate all the dead souls,  
all the lives wasted in wars without end.  
So many that candle making  
became a profitable industry,  
its candles even surviving death.

I have never lit such a candle.  
My time wasted has been  
in protests for peace,  
in dreams of peace.  
My voice has been wasted  
in words of peace  
in poems of peace.

And now I wonder  
if there be anyone left  
to waste a candle for me.

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She has been nominated for Pushcarts, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award. <https://lynnwhitepoetry.blogspot.com> and <https://www.facebook.com/Lynn-White-Poetry-1603675983213077/>

# The Little Yellow Bell by Anne Rosenberg

When it's two a.m.  
and you sleep on the couch in the living room,  
two rooms away from your mum,  
she calls out,  
but you keep sleeping.

Because the condo is too big  
and her voice is too small.

Sometime after three a.m.  
she creeps out of bed,  
shuffling into the kitchen,  
searching for her pills—

the green one,  
the red one,  
yellow,  
and blue.

They  
scatter  
    across  
    the tile floor.

She bends to gather them,  
knees against the hard tiles.

You wake up,  
stand in the kitchen doorway.

“My head hurts,” she tells you.  
“I know, Mum.”

You bend down, with her,  
scooping up  
the green and yellow and red,  
and the little blue pill  
hiding  
underneath the counter.

“Here Mum,” you say,  
“take my arm.”

Together, you steady yourselves  
against the counter.

You fetch her a glass of water,  
put the little yellow pill and glass in her hand.  
She waits.  
“Mum?” you cup your hand around hers,  
“How about a sherry instead?” she asks, laughing just a little.  
So do you.

Together, you walk back to her bedroom.  
You pull the blanket up over  
her shoulders,

open a kitchen cupboard  
and find the small yellow bell,  
bright against the dark wood.

You lie down outside her door,  
on the thick white carpet,  
fibers crushed from the wheels of her walker,  
curling your hand around the little yellow bell.

Sometime after four a.m.  
you hear her snoring,  
and drift off,  
your hand still curled  
around the little yellow bell.

Anne Rosenberg is a Toronto-based writer and playwright. Her work has appeared in *Stone Highway Review*, *Jelly Bucket*, *Intermission*, *Hamilton Magazine*, *The Globe and Mail*, and the *National Post*. Her play, *A Window Full of Sun*, placed third in the 2024 Toronto Fringe New Play Contest.

## **Dark Days Fume by R.H. Nicholson**

Dark days fume like  
factory smoke,  
infecting everything,  
emotional soot coating our lives,  
kind words are beat into  
spears,  
stabs rather than comfort.  
Concern becomes ridicule,  
Love is twisted into mockery.  
I dread what waits behind that closed door.  
Will I be jabbed with a dinner fork,  
suffocated in my sleep,  
pushed down the stairs?  
I haunt the halls  
of my own home in  
trepidation,  
catch my breath  
before I enter a room,  
hunch like a spelunker,  
crawling through the hours  
on all fours.  
Am I flying low enough under the radar?  
Will the punch land this time?  
The headbutt?  
Will I be pinned to the wall,  
scratched like a cat post,  
bruised like a boxer?  
Will I rise (yet again),  
calm the quake,  
defuse the dynamite,  
empty the chamber?  
Will I wait for the demons to  
retreat,  
for the venom to  
drain,  
for the adrenaline to  
subside,  
for the frightened child to awake from the  
nightmare?  
Will I forgive (yet again),  
turn my face to God and pray the  
pharmaceuticals kick in

before the baseball bat  
swings,  
before the carving knife  
thrusts,  
before the house  
burns down?  
Will I call 911 (yet again)?  
The police?  
The hospital's  
mental health hotline with  
helpful/less operators  
available 24/7, 365  
press 2 for Espanol,  
while his eyes flame with evil,  
his voice spits  
vulgarity,  
his fists clench,  
his arms flail,  
and he terrifies us  
anew?  
Will I hold him (yet again) when he  
collapses in regret,  
trembles in fear,  
cracks with confusion?  
Will I tuck him into bed  
and watch him sleep  
as in infancy?  
I honestly  
don't  
know.

R.H. Nicholson is a professor emeritus of English who taught writing for forty years but is now (finally) focused on his own work which has appeared in *Ignatian Magazine*, *Adelaide Literary Journal*, *Echo Ink*, *The Blue Lake Review*, *Big Window Review* and elsewhere. His debut novel *Justice House Shadows* is now available from Main Street Rag Publications. His play *The King and Queen of Foggy Flats* won the 2025 Chickasaw Writing Prize. He and his wife live in a small Ohio River Valley town with a striking and reclusive Russian Blue rescue cat named Steinbeck.

# **The Temptation to be the Bad Man by Thomas Reed Willemain**

We all underwent the training  
Back when we were young  
And somewhat pliable.

Theory said it was better  
To become Good Kids not Bad Kids,  
To grow up polite, kind, generous.

But those who trained us  
Are mostly long gone so it is  
Safe and maybe proper to rebel.

Grumpy, growly, gruff –  
These have their own charms now  
Because fighting spirit is needed

When you can barely crawl out of bed,  
Dread flights of stairs -- up or down,  
Prefer taking naps to swimming laps.

So one way to power through your day  
Would be to play Grumpy Old Man  
And enjoy frankly sharing your opinions.

To walk away from boring conversations,  
Dismiss your neighbors' petty concerns,  
Tell off waiters when they screw up.

There would be Cumulative Effects  
Which would be just the ticket  
If you've had it with other people.

Mutual repulsion is a quick way  
To achieve a kind of peace  
While updating your self-image.

Dr. Thomas Reed Willemain is a lifelong academic, serial software entrepreneur, and former intelligence officer. His poetry has appeared in *From Whispers to Roars*, *Two Thirds North*, *The Lake*, *Dillydoun Review Poetry* and elsewhere. He holds degrees from Princeton University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

# Nevalny by Thomas Reed Willemain

Alexei Anatolyevich,  
you poked the bear in the eye,  
you slapped Vladimir Vladimirovich  
across his ugly public face.  
Then you got what you knew you'd get.

Alexei Anatolyevich,  
you showed us courage,  
cleverness, humor,  
integrity, persistence.  
You showed us how to live.

Must I follow you now?  
Stir up trouble?  
Call out all that is wrong?  
Shrug off this retirement,  
this longed-for time of rest?

What should I tell my daughter?  
To steel her daughters as you did yours?  
To nudge them toward the rough path?  
Or to send herself to the front line,  
to shift from nurturance to confrontation?

What should I tell my son?  
That if he ever took me as a model  
he should replace me with  
Alexei Anatolyevich who,  
it seems, has lived the more noble life?

Tomorrow I will awaken  
Sub-arctic, warm and alive.  
I promise to wear a black shirt  
bearing your name in Russian.  
I promise to remember you one more day.

# Five Stages of Decomposition by Jamez Terry

## I.

To make an applehead doll:

1. Take a perfectly healthy apple and denude it. Deny it protective skin. Ensure it is fully exposed.
2. Press in knife and spoon. Work out your anger with deceptively patient hands. Chisel away flesh until a familiar face peers from this perishable mirror.
3. See that your plan has failed, you've hollowed out the wrong bits, the expression is beyond recognition. Despite best intentions, hold not masterpiece, but mess. Try carving more without taking anything off, as if the right slant of blade will bring back what is missing, an unlikely bargain.
4. When there's nothing more to do, sink needle into side. String it up, see it shrink and wither away. Watch each depression deepen, the face gaining what some will kindly call character.
5. Accept whatever form you're left with. Dress it up, and give it a home. Call it a folk tradition.

## II.

To make an applehead doll,  
lush fruit is pierced to the core,  
then hung up and strung out  
to shrivel and dry, become something new,  
desiccated and almost unnaturally aged,  
reshaped in unpredictable ways  
but still (usually) useful, even charming.  
I thought grieving might be something like that.

Ignore an apple on the shelf long enough,  
it goes from fresh and crisp  
to pungent and mushy, leaching juices  
before succumbing to  
catabolism, humification,  
transformation into minerals  
ready to nourish new growth.  
It could have been something like that.

But I am not, after all, an apple.  
My trajectory will run from flesh through  
bloat and decay to the finality and starkness  
of dry remains, nothing but  
bones that lie next to your bones,  
and there's a reassuring clarity  
in this one-way process,  
coherence absent now  
while I'm alive and only  
you are breaking down.

Should have buried you with an apple.  
I'm sorry. Sent you off empty  
handed, while your last leftovers  
molder here in arm's reach.  
I watch their predictable progress  
through initial decay, putrefaction, advanced decay,  
unable to identify the moments when one  
stage ends and another begins,  
no way to prove it's not happening all at once  
in this fridge full of chaos and stench.

You used to pack apples in your lunch,  
green and sour, same every day.  
The last two uneaten now spoil in the bowl  
and fruit flies gather in lazy loops.  
These will never be folk dolls  
but I stab them anyway, leaving crude eyes  
and mouths to jeer at my pain.  
They have no bones. They might be immortal  
or gone tomorrow. This grief is a madhouse.  
I thought it might be something like that

### III.

I imagine your bones like seeds in the ground  
sprouting roots, sending tentative tendrils  
that hunger for the sun,

eventual blossoms that call to the bees,  
pink petals giving way  
to sun kissed fruit, perfect and round.

I imagine bones that won't stay buried  
but find their way back to feed me,  
bones that remember how to dance.

We used to skip through the orchard,  
a tradition for two. As long as apples  
keep growing, maybe you're not really gone.

IV.

I confess: I always hated  
your applehead dolls, creepy  
collection of goblin faces that resist  
decomposing as an apple should  
I confess: I want to make more,  
give every one your name,  
your crooked grin, your ears,  
make a version of you stable  
enough to last  
I confess: I want to smash them,  
expose what sweetness  
is left inside,  
touch it with my tongue

V.

I thought there were supposed to be stages.  
Turns out there is no order.  
This apple ripens in fragments.  
The puckered face looks almost like mine.  
Everything falls apart.  
I am lost in this orchard anew.

Jamez Terry is a queer and trans poet, novelist, zinester, parent, chaplain, and rabblrouser. His poetry has mostly been published in DIY zines and spit from stages across North America. His debut novel is forthcoming from Generous Press. He lives in Alaska.

## Now by **Rikki Santer**

when I say I don't know anything anymore I mean the compass  
is confused by its own magnetism, road ahead or road behind?  
and when I say magnetism I mean the safety lock forgot  
its password and all words have passed their expiration date  
but I do hold a key, many thanks, because my eyes  
are bloodshot from snickering and when I say snickering  
I mean what else can one do when guns are long as arms  
and tongues are greedy forked and when I say forked I also  
mean the heart of all the fast food chains is beating faster  
than the world and when I say chain I mean the uniformed  
who work there serving up what won't be guaranteed and  
it seems that we're all just furniture that can't make room  
for each other and breaking the fourth wall is never enough  
hinged to this broken experiment, so pass the gruel or  
your sticky love poem and when I say love poem  
I mean what the wizard tried to convince us of  
and yes colonel jessup I can't handle the truth and when I say  
truth I mean where will the last of us be going  
and what does the sore eye moon think of us now.

Rikki Santer's poems have appeared in various publications including *Ms. Magazine*, *Poetry East*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Slab*, *Slipstream*, *[PANK]*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *RHINO*, *Grimm*, *Hotel Amerika* and *The Main Street Rag*. Their work has received many honors including 2023 Ohio Poet of the Year, Pushcart, Ohioana and Ohio Poet book award nominations as well as a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The collection, *Resurrection Letter* was grand prize short-listed for the Eric Hoffer Book Award and their most recent collection, *Shepherd's Hour*, won the Paul Nemser Book Prize from Lily Poetry Review Books.

## **Fears and Feelings by Edilson A. Ferreira**

There are certain weekends and holidays  
when I feel somewhat insecure.  
I worry if walking ghosts have occupied  
the void of empty streets and closed doors,  
looking at me as an intruder or suspicious  
on their walks.  
I miss hearing the sound of hammers and  
hoes, the strident come and go of saw blades,  
the brushing of pens on paper or keyboards  
being typed throwing feelings to the world.  
I love the imprecations of painters and artists  
when they can't find the pure art, they look for.  
I love children screaming through the sidewalk,  
running endless races only they are capable of.  
I love the noise of people in the streets and alleys,  
corners and places,  
as they move to destinies only they are aware of,  
struggling hard to make their lives a story.  
I love hearing someone making something,  
even if it is the buzzing of bees.

First published in the March/April 2018 issue of *Indiana Voice Journal*.

Edilson Afonso Ferreira, 82, is a Brazilian poet who writes in English rather than Portuguese. Has launched two poetry books, *Lonely Sailor* and *Joie de Vivre*; has 380 different publications in international literary journals, and is a Pushcart nominee. He began writing at the age of 67 after retiring from a bank.

## Confession to My Muse by Diane Kendig

I am sorry for the mornings I did not show up,  
and I am so sorry for my dead metaphors  
and the clichés that crept in, living on  
through revisions when I should have  
wrung their necks and given them both  
CPR and sent them off in new vehicles.

I do not apologize for what one critic called  
my “tin ear.” She was, after all, a surrealist.  
Please. I won’t sell out sense for sound,  
though I do agree with Pope on the whole  
echo thing, and I love the word *mellifluous*,  
though I promise not to use it in this poem.

I apologize for my long titles, and I blame  
James Wright. I apologize for not  
always getting line endings right,  
the turn and counter-turn, and what?  
What I am talking about: not confessing  
to the worst, missing the meat, the beat,  
not getting the last word

in even edgewise or pounding past it,  
burying it in verbiage. Dear muse,  
forgive me for picking up prose  
because you are slow, admit it, you are slow  
and haiku doesn’t count nor cute rhymed couplets.  
In my defense, which is the defense of poetry,

no longer legislator of the world but  
surely its white blood cells, healing,  
I’ve remained in your thrall since age two  
when I chanted, “the horsie and the water  
and the horsie went to bed” the tragic lyric  
of having to ride in a car instead of in the saddle.

So that sad sound work relieved my narrative,  
which I am not sorry for. But I *am*  
sorry. I’m sorry, I know, as I know  
this poem itself is so sorry but defiant,  
cajoling, holding out for April, NaPoMo,  
when we poets are forgiven and feted,  
as though we are gifts, rapping  
and wrapped, fit to be tied.

Diane Kendig’s latest books are *Woman with a Fan: and Prison Terms*, and she co-edited the tribute anthology, *In the Company of Russell Atkins*. Kendig led a prison writing workshop for 18 years and now curates Cuyahoga County Public Library’s weblog “Read + Write” and writes for “Free Poetry Cleveland.”

# Dad, Where'd You Go? by Darius Harris

Dad, what happened and where'd you go  
I can't teach because I don't know  
I never learned so I can't grow  
I've been torn but I can't say so

I've got a bike but I can't ride  
I'm standing on ice but why do I slide  
How do I run how do I glide  
How do I do it I swear I tried

Want to swim in the ocean but what's the tide  
You said you'd come back maybe you lied  
Did you have anything or something to provide  
Maybe you're in jail or maybe you died

I cried last night while it rained thinking of you  
I don't know if I'm sad or if I feel blue  
I hope you don't stay gone I hope it's not true  
I hope you're missing me and thinking of me too

I graduated elementary today and the kids were wild  
I feel different and my feelings were mild  
Grandma and mom screamed my name they both were loud  
They say they believed in me and I made them proud

My school had a battle of the bands  
I scored a touchdown and now I have fans  
I looked up and all I saw was people's hands  
I looked around and didn't see you in the stands

I saw my teacher principle and people who clean our school  
I saw a couple of guys and girls I met at the pool  
I saw the furniture guy that sold grandpa his stool  
I even saw the guy we helped that ran out of fuel

I graduated junior high today and the kids were wild  
I feel different and my feelings were mild  
Grandma and mom screamed my name they both were loud  
They say they believed in me and I made them proud

Tonight I took a girl out on a date  
We went bowling and afterwards we ate  
She seemed to barely touch anything on her plate  
It took a while for her to say yes but it was worth the wait

For the first time at school I've been suspended  
My life has been a game you've never attended  
Everyone's turning they're back so I guess this whole time they just pretended  
He threw the first punch and I just defended

I graduated high school today and the kids were wild  
I feel different and my feelings were mild  
Grandma and mom screamed my name they both were loud  
They say they believed in me and I made them proud

Well Dad I'm searching for you while in this cell  
I never thought one day I'd be in jail  
I've never seen heaven but I'm living in hell  
Fractured heart, lost mind, I'm not doing well

Dad what happened where did you go  
I never learned so I didn't grow  
I can't teach because I don't know  
Living in this cell torn but I can't sew

Darius Harris is currently housed at the Northpoint Training Center in Burgin, KY. He is doing a multitude of things like, taking up Business Administration as a student at Kentucky State University. He is employed as a Unit A sanitation worker, a member of multitudes of things such as church, Pioneer Playhouse/Voices Inside, and an impactful group of people known as The Lifers Club. Through this group, money has been raised for children, most notably for the Ronald McDonald House in Cincinnati, Ohio. Darius has some published work and he enjoys writing plays, poetry, articles, short stories, and memoirs.

## Jumping Off the Shoulder of God by J.J. Steinfeld

*I hide on roofs—  
I have a range of city buildings to choose from  
from two storeys to breathtaking heavenward—  
going there as retreat, as respite,  
to read, maybe write a little,  
be above the clutter and swirl and urban sprawl,  
not quite escape, but tasty illusion all the same.*

On this particular day, not a cloud in the sky,  
the temperature normal for this time of year  
nothing inclement, nothing unseasonable,  
on a rooftop I'm reading a book of poetry  
a minor poet who could have gone further  
had she not slept with too many immodest prophets  
nonetheless, I like her images and lavish sexuality.  
Then, in love with her words  
about to appropriate her flesh and form  
in a most fragile courtship,  
I see an intruder, nicely dressed,  
walk to the edge of the roof.  
"What are you doing here, on my roof?"  
the intruder asks, his voice nervous,  
his face beaded with sweat  
like a cornered convict in a film noir.  
"I needed a tenth-floor reading room,"  
I say, caught out at something,  
wanting to confess  
yet uncertain as to my exact misdeed.  
"Leave me alone," he screams,  
and I go back to my reading  
not being in the least disputatious.  
"I could stand the bullshit," he says,  
beginning an oration to the cloudless sky,  
"I could even stand the betrayals of love  
and the loss of money and reputation  
and the lack of loyal friends  
but I cannot bear that God forgets my name  
ignores my aspirations and dreams and desires  
whenever we chat in the night."  
For once, I wish I had a cellphone,  
when a second ago I wanted to be incommunicado  
with everyone and everything, even God,  
this God who would forget a pained soul's name.  
As I read, I think,  
do I say, *Don't jump*,  
or, *You have everything to live for*,  
or, *I will be your friend always*?  
All lies, stammering at meaning,  
swelling the insufficiency of honesty.  
Instead, I read aloud from the book of poetry

and the intruder attempts flight  
during a poem about a woman  
who burned her poems  
and jumped off the shoulder of God.

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.

# Grizzly Man by Jean-Luc Fontaine

I watch as my father stumbles  
back into the living room,  
the small ember of his mouth  
ready to blaze a,  
*Who the fuck are you?*,  
throughout our house,

because he is convinced  
there's stranger  
sitting in front of him.

As a child, I trembled  
at the burble of his breath,  
the pounding of his jack-  
hammer feet against  
our wooden floors,

but now, I sit on  
his kelpy-smelling couch,  
vowing to take care of the man  
who I so desperately  
wanted to escape growing up.

On the television in our living room,  
there's a documentary on

about a man who decides to forgo  
the usual rigmarole of life  
to live among  
the bears—  
those brown-furred locomotives.

He stands by a riverbank,  
now deglazed by mousy rainfall,  
and looks so confident and brash  
being close to his new,  
dangerous family—so calm

he might as well be  
a pile of rocks or a crossing guard  
trying to help the bears  
traverse the water safely.

I know the ending, though.  
He will soon be mauled

by a newly alpha bear,  
and just like the man  
in the documentary,  
I'm trapped in the maw

of my trauma,  
but no longer do I want to get out.

I swallow back each outburst,  
                  like a volunteer cook  
at a homeless shelter  
                  testing the meatloaf—  
each forkful forcing me  
                  to become a little more  
kind and patient, capable  
                  of keeping anything down.

I go over to my towering father  
                  who is swaying in the doorway  
and say, *It's your son, dad,*  
                  and I pray, like I did as a child,  
  
                  that he doesn't decide  
to hollow out my insides  
                  in the belly of the night.

Jean-Luc is a Tucsonian poet. He enjoys cold coffees and staring at oddly-shaped cacti.

# In honor of Peggy, who died as a teenager by Cynthia Gallaher

Hey Peg, remember the Dick Tracy two-way  
wrist radio from the comics?  
we have one now, and also hold one  
in our hands and call it a cellphone.

They never did come up with smell-a-vision.

Remember how we wore  
side-buttoned Ben Casey  
and ruffled Elizabeth Taylor blouses?  
Yeah!

No one today knows old Ben Casey  
from Dr. Strangelove, and all we have left  
of Elizabeth Taylor are half-used bottles  
of her Passion perfume.

We still have chalk, hammers, nails and sidewalks,  
nearly everything else has changed.  
tomatoes taste really different, and they  
switched banana species on us, due to a plague.

You'd like them as they don't have nearly  
as many little brown seeds inside,  
but taste kinda grainy,  
somewhat like the tomatoes.

I finally had the guts to pierce my own ears

A few months after you died,  
no ice, now the holes are so large  
you could park your dad's old truck,  
at least in the left one.

We always took so much effort  
to sneak record albums  
into our house that our parents  
wouldn't approve of.

Now kids buy songs one at a time  
as if from a gumball machine,  
pulled from thin air, at least we had  
a flip side, the B-side on 45s.

It's hard to explain the technology,  
as I'm sure it's difficult for you to tell me  
what it's been like in deadsville  
all these years.

Believe me,

there are days, weeks,  
even years when it's nowheresville  
here among the living, especially when  
a republican is in office.

Remember how you were so worried  
your dad would catch you making out  
with Mike D'Allesandro  
in your basement?

Now, being long married,  
my husband and I still get pangs of terror,  
but it's when we hear our son's key in the front door,  
while we're in flagrante delicto upstairs.

I think of you more often than just your birthday  
or Halloween. Your dad is still alive  
and tells me to this day he wishes  
it would have been him instead of you.

He has no grandkids.

Your brother, Buddy, finally came out  
when Madonna had that hit song, Vogue.  
as if we hadn't had an inkling,  
right girlfriend?

Buddy said he felt like both Dietrich *and* DiMaggio,  
the Vogue that served as his inspiration  
somewhat like the magazine, but with more rouge  
and fishnets, along with stubble in the bathroom sink.

Cynthia Gallaher is a Chicago-based author of four poetry collections, including *Epicurean Ecstasy: More Poems About Food, Drink, Herbs & Spices*, and three chapbooks, including *Drenched*. Her award-winning creativity guide is *Frugal Poets' Guide to Life: How to Live a Poetic Life, Even If You Aren't a Poet*. One of her poems will be sent on NASA's manned flight to the south pole of the moon later this decade.

## **My Personas on the Bookshelf by Cynthia Gallaher**

I sometimes become  
the people housed  
on my bookshelves,  
as I read each volume,  
I transform into  
one of its characters,  
exude emotions they feel  
even ifn't my usual emotions.

I've taken on personas  
of Madame Bovary and Sister Carrie,  
though could never venture  
where they've wandered,  
or suddenly I'm Elizabeth  
falling in love with Mr. Darcy  
in Pride and Prejudice,  
he's riveting, of course, but also  
mysterious and distant enough  
for me to paint him with  
my own secret details.

I'm the woman at the well,  
the woman with the issue  
of blood, the adulteress Jesus  
saved from stoning,  
the wife of Pilate,  
all the unnamed women  
in the Bible whose  
stories, nonetheless,  
echo through millennia.

I have a friend,  
a performance artist,  
who dresses in various  
costumes and wigs,  
changes personalities,  
when as Birdie  
dressed like a snow queen,  
is filmed handing out ice cubes  
downtown on a winter's morning,  
or as blue-haired Frankie,  
in vest, striped shirt and tie,  
poses among hikers  
at a national park,  
while in real life,  
her personality turns  
more camera-shy,  
introverted and quiet.

As mine tends to do,  
until I comb through  
vast arrays of words  
and respond anew inside  
the next book I read,  
or recall selected snapshots  
from vivid dreams,  
or uncover new parts  
of myself  
through my own  
hand-written  
drafts  
of poems.

# Absurd (Regards to the Man from Italy) by Ashe Baileigh

Voice notes came through my phone—  
He's like a hymn from another country.  
The sound curls through my kitchen – espresso steam.

“Belissima” – that's what he called me.

Immediately, I am searching:

*What does Belissima mean?*

“Very beautiful” – at least that's what my iPhone tells me.

But still, “Belissima,” – that's what he called *me*.

Like I was some soft museum thing

He'd found in the red dust

Reflective metal beneath old rust

Or maybe a wildflower pressed

Between pages of La Divina Commedia.

And in our own sort of divine comedy,

We're meeting the very next night.

“Don't we look quite nice together underneath these street lights?”

“Oh, my favorite thing to do in my free-time is write,”

“Maybe it was weird to invite the Italian guy to a winery in hindsight,”

“I'm so glad we we're able to meet tonight,”

*(God, does every Italian look this good in the moonlight?)*

We talk about the wind here

The way it gets under your skin, here

He says, *in Italy, the air is softer than here.*

And I think about how I have to learn to love the hard things, here.

For days after, his words find me

between daytime emails and nighttime cocktails

Sweet notes in a wine that I'm used to being dry.

He says: *When I think of our night I can't help to smile.*

And all at once I am enormous,

I am boundless, and immeasurable – tremendous

In such a lovey feeling that's so stupendous,

So much that I don't even know what “stupendous” means,

But I know the feeling well enough to know that it describes me.

When he speaks, I think it sounds sort of like gospel—

Except I think I know this story; it will be short

This isn't love,

*God, I wish it was,*

and I'm not in a rom-com – this is sport,

And his flight's already written in two weeks on the calendar.

I think it's the sense of running out of time

that brings us back together in only a few nights.

Even in my den of an apartment, he looks divine,

Like this man wasn't made, he was designed,

But also I think I've had too much wine,

Do you think there is an Italian word for the verb “pine?”

Can you show me what it feels like to be on cloud nine?

We talk for some time, and then for some time, we *don't*.

I think feelings like that can't ever truly be wrote.  
For a while it felt as if the world was squashed and then folded in half  
So that Tulsa and Milan might sigh together—  
to share the same breath.

But then there's the after,  
The quieting of that previous laughter,  
The staring at the ceiling rafters  
While you find your coat in the next room.  
It's what lots of my poems are about – this type of after.  
In the after, his hands felt sort of quiet,  
I thought his eyes turned to doorways  
Instead of towards more ways to praise me.  
Like his mind was already heading back south,  
And I swear I felt the goodbye on his lips  
Before it ever left his mouth.

Now there's no sound, just his text.  
It sits cold in my phone  
Like a leftover coin I can't spend.  
And once again I am miniscule,  
I am short, and slight, and microscopic.  
Italy is no longer my go-to conversation topic,  
And the loathing of wondering why I care so much towers over me.

Still I sit here under the same fluorescent lights,  
Him and I drive home under the same blue sky.  
And despite all we shared,  
    The wine  
    The late nights  
    The goodbye that, in our bones, felt as if it might not be the last time—  
I worry that he'll forget soon enough,  
While I stare at my boots and their scuffs,  
Reminding myself that real yearners know that  
Getting what you want is never a part of the game.

But damn,  
I wish he'd say it again.  
“Belissima” – that's what he called me,  
That's all I'd ask him to do.  
That word that means beautiful in his language,  
And (*someday?*) maybe mine too.

Ashe Baileigh is a Tulsa native and Literature teacher in Oklahoma. When not portraying her writing on stage, she fills her time writing poetry and short plays. She's been a featured poet at the Woody Guthrie Festival as a part of "Woody Poets" with her piece "1,019." Her works have been published in *The Talon* and Tulsa's own *Empire of Missed Chances*. She's also known for her pieces that explore LGBTQIA+ identities and education.

# Fiction



## **Learning Civics by Ken Poyner**

When I was six or seven, Mother began to take me with her to town park to watch our politics. Everyone, except the very young and the very old, would be there. The very old and the very young by then had ceased to matter. Townsfolk would be discoursing in small amen groups, or hollering at one heretic or another. Always a buzz was whether the day would merit an execution. Half the crowd bet one way, half the other. Confessions were everywhere, the more lurid the more entertaining. Even then, I believed I could make my confession the best.

## **Public Involvement by Ken Poyner**

Tuesdays we go to our town square to see who has confessed. It is an occasion. Food trucks take station on nearby cross streets. Balloon vendors wander through the crowd. Parents see it as a safe first date, unlikely to expand beyond mere appreciation of the event. There is a sound system, so no one needs to push uncomfortably close. Those who have confessed are paraded along a stage, with their names and date of confession read at the microphone. No one knows what has been confessed. No one asks. Food truck vendors race to offer specials in their names.

## **Safely Terrorizing by Ken Poyner**

The interrogation at first is cordial, often beginning as unsuspected small talk. Practiced witches know precisely what is soon coming. Buried in all the sweetness will be the question: are you a witch? Sometimes, anticipating the question, witches will cut the interview short, be direct or fanciful, admit to gathering the tools of witchery around her. If she does not own it, we go into sterner measures, understand we can use the awful instruments of confession. But we eliminate first the actual witches. They have arts that can be used to harm us. Compulsion is safest applied to the innocent.

The latest of Ken's twelve 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](http://www.kpoyner.com).

## Late Show by Jon Fain

What if the lightning bugs are taking pictures of us? she asks.

We sit on the deck, watching the flicker and dance, until the beers are gone.

We have a movie in mind. Playing down at the local.

It's an indie, so probably a love story full of snide remarks, she says.

Lazy from dinner, I'm thinking not.

What if the lightning bugs are making movies of us? I ask.

She says, What if, whatever they're making of us, they're going to take and show Mark?

It's Mark's house, Mark's beer, Mark's grandmother's dishes.

Hope he has popcorn, I say.

Originally published in *Flash Fiction Journal / National Flash Fiction Day (U.K.)*, June 2020 and in *Scribes Microfiction*, March 2021.

Jon Fain's publications include short stories in *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Feign*, and *King Ludd's Rag*; flash fictions in *Shooter*, *Bulb Culture Collective* and *Pulp Noir*; and micro fictions in *Blink-Ink* and *Molecule*. Other short stories of his are included in anthologies from Running Wild Press, Murderous Ink Press, and Three Ravens Publishing. His chapbook *Pass the Panpharmacon! (Five Fictions of Delusion)* is available from Greying Ghost Press. He lives in Massachusetts.

## Outback by S.L. Wallach

I was nine years old when I killed the boy, pushing the knife between the soft bones of his chest with both hands. I held it there, then pulled it out slowly, not realizing at first the finality of what I'd done. "What's your name, boy?" I whispered. But it was too late.

He had been in the woods behind the motel, just beyond the barbecue grills and picnic benches, out of sight of the pool where both our mothers were sunbathing. Their heads tilted up, eyes closed against the heat, they had no interest in us. "Go on, find something to do for a little while," my mother had said. I was, after all, nine, not in need of constant attention.

I had been the one who had begged for this trip, this one last weekend out of the city as a family before my sister's wedding. "I want to go to the farm," I'd said to my father. "You promised we'd go someday. I want to see where you grew up." And so on the Thursday before school started, we went—a four-hour drive on two-lane back roads.

In my mother's mind, that was reason enough for me to leave her alone to make do as best she could without her bridge games and canapés. My father had gone into town—this being the town in which he'd grown up, he had friends to see. My sister, twelve years older, was in our room with her marriage manuals and bride's magazines, gifts from her mother-in-law-to-be. The chain was drawn across the door, so even though I had my own key there was no getting in.

I had gone around to the back of the motel, and that was where I saw him.

He was younger than I was and slight, with straight hair like mine but cut very short. He had a stick in his hand and was poking at the blackberry vines, their canes thorny and tough, that twisted around the bushes.

"You won't be able to cut those with that stick," I said.

"It's not a stick," he said, holding it up in the air. "It's a light saber."

"Some light saber with no lights on it."

"You just can't see them," he said, turning back to the vines, which were thick with fruit. His hands and lips were already stained.

I thought for a moment. It was so still where we were, with no one else around. "I have a real light saber in my room. Would you like to see it?"

He looked at me then, gauging whether he could trust me. "Sure. Go get it. I'll wait."

I ran back to the pool, slipping out of my sandals before I reached the pavement so I could sneak up behind my mother's lounge and take the key from the table beside her. I glanced back to where the boy had been, relieved to see him again occupied with the berries, thwacking the stick against the bushes and tables, calling out to foes only he could see. My parents' room had a kitchenette and I'd seen the knife there in the morning, long and thin, with a sharp tip and fine edge. I rolled it up in the newspaper, first centering across one of the corners and rolling diagonally, the way the woman at the flower shop did when my father and I went to get my mother's weekly bouquet, peonies and mondo grass or, for special occasions, white roses.

"Hmmp," the boy said. "That's no light saber. No real one. That's just a roll of paper." He pawed at the dirt with his sneaker, shaking his head. He was humming a little to himself, as if I wasn't even there, slashing the stick from side to side as he started back toward the motel.

"No, wait," I said. "I wrapped it up so that no one but you would see. Come here, and I'll show you." I moved off a little, so I was standing by the thickest of the trees. It was easy to maneuver so that the boy was leaning against it while I carefully unwound the newspaper, hoping the anticipation would keep him distracted and silent. I could feel the cool weight of the haft as I let the newspaper fall away and lifted the knife high above both our heads, his eyes following until the very last moment.

When my father found me, he turned my bloodied arms this way and that, looking for the wound. "Did you do something, Anna?" he said, some agitation in his voice. "Show me what you did." I pointed to where the picnic tables were.

"Stay here," he said, as he started to walk down past the tables, stopping for a moment a little farther on, then turning and walking quickly back.

He pressed his lips together and didn't say anything, just took me hard by the elbow. There was a spigot at the back of the motel, and he pulled me over to it. The water was icy enough to make me gasp, but he held my arms under, rubbing at my skin with his hands until my arms looked pale again, though chafed for all his rubbing. When he was done he stepped back and looked me over, head to foot. The look on his face was of such concentration that I was afraid even my breathing would be an interruption. I held my breath for as long as I could. My blouse was a deep rose with small orange and pink flowers—it was my favorite and the small red flecks barely showed, but he told me that I'd have to give it to him later.

"Go on now. Don't talk to anyone. Tell your mother that I need to pick up some things in town and will be back soon." I'd started to skip away when he called me back. He bent down and scratched up a handful of dirt, rubbing it into his hands onto my hair, blouse, shorts with both hands. "Tell your mother that you fell, that you need a shower and a good hair wash, too. Put these clothes in a pillowcase and keep it with you. Can you remember all that?"

My mother had gone upstairs and changed into a bright yellow and white sundress. I could see her through the window as I walked past her room, standing in front of the mirror while she put her earrings on, swaying to the music coming from the television set. I knocked on the door to my room.

"Go bother Mom, dummyhead," my sister said.

"She's busy. Just let me in."

I could hear her muttering as she slipped off the chain.

My sister opened the door and immediately stuck out her hand. "Oh no you don't. Not looking like that. What happened to you?"

"I fell," I said, crossing my arms over my chest, sure now that it was the boy's blood that she'd seen.

"You fell? Not likely. Looks like you rolled. You're not coming in here. Go knock on Mom's door. You can use her bathroom. I'll bring you something clean to wear."

"And a pillowcase," I said, before even realizing that I'd said anything.

"A pillowcase?"

"Yes." Why, I thought, why? "Dad said to. He said to put my clothes into a pillowcase because they're so dirty."

"Yeah. Sure. Anything. Just go."

My father still hadn't come back. It was another hour before he did. I had on a new dress and twirled around slowly for him, but he did not look at me. He just looked at my mother as if he wanted to say something to her but couldn't find the words. He had a bag of groceries and a six-pack. "Arthur," she said. "What's all this? You don't think I'm going to cook dinner here, I hope."

"Nope. Thought I'd try one of those grills in the back. You know the restaurants around here aren't any good. Anna, do you have your dirty clothes? Let's get them into the car." He twisted the cap off one of the beers and carried the grocery bag out with him. I followed. But we didn't go to the car. When we got to the foot of the stairs he stuck the pillowcase, my clothes inside, into the bag and shooed me away. "Go help your mother with the plates and things," he said. "We'll eat at one of the picnic tables. Tell your sister to come down, too." He shoveled some charcoal into the bottom of the grill, sprinkled it with lighter fluid, and threw in a match. I didn't see that pillowcase again.

Even as we were eating, we could hear voices out in the parking lot. Cars came and went. A woman sat by the pool, crying. As we started upstairs to our rooms, we saw people moving all through the woods, their flashlights like fireflies filling the warm night. Every so often a man would shout a name I couldn't quite make out over the air conditioning. At one point, I hear a siren and started to tremble. Had they found him? But no, the siren went on past down the road.

In the morning, I could hear my parents talking in low, angry voices outside the door. It was my father who knocked, and my sister who answered. "Your mother wants to get going back now," he told her. "A little boy disappeared here yesterday, and it has her spooked. So get your things together and be quick about it." He looked tired, as if he'd been out there, too, one of the men searching the woods.

"But it's so early," she whined.

"What about breakfast?" I asked

"We'll stop on the road," my father said.

Instead, we stopped in town. My father told us to wait in the car and crossed the street to the police station, his shoulders hunched, his gait uncharacteristically slow. When he got to the door open, he brushed his hair back with his fingers, then pushed it open. My mother turned in her seat to face us. “Oh, I could tell you stories about your father and his brothers,” she said. “How on Saturday night the town police would round up half the boys in town so they could sleep off their poor judgment in the jail house, so they wouldn’t get into any trouble. Those boys are probably running things in there now.”

After a while my mother got out of the car and bought us all sodas. We had the windows open and the breeze was just cool enough to keep us comfortable. My sister and I played tic-tac-toe over and over, my mother closed her eyes and leaned back on the headrest, as if she were still at the pool. When he finally came back, my father didn’t offer any explanation, just slid onto his seat, started the engine, and pulled carefully into the light weekend traffic. “Too bad about that boy,” he said. “The way the woods are up here, they don’t think they’ll ever find him.”

Work by S. L. Wallach appeared recently in *Empyrean*, *Broad River Review*, *Black Herald Press*, *Ariel Chart*, and *Solstice*. Her opera “Elijah’s Violin” was performed in San Francisco several years ago. She has an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts, which makes her poor but hopeful. [zanscribe.com](http://zanscribe.com)

## **Hungry Grass by Judit Hollos**

Through squiggling corpse roads I carried her inside me, long after the almond petals turned to ashes and the last members of the funeral procession got married.

When my back crisped under grief, I rested my burden on coffin stones, adorned it with moonlight lace and enshrined it in wooden lychgates. I weeded her out from my chest but she grew back like hungry grass. And when even that liminal space was not enough to house the inherited memories, to capture the screaming wraiths that lurked in all corners, I just got myself entangled in my very own winding maze.

Judit Hollos is an emerging playwright, poet, essayist and journalist. Her short stories, poems, translations and articles have been featured in English and Swedish in literary magazines, periodicals and anthologies. She is the author of two chapbook collections of Japanese-style poetry and short prose. Some of her monologues and short plays have been staged at scratch nights and festivals in Glasgow, San Francisco, London, Leicester, Liverpool, Leeds, Birmingham, New York and Kyiv.

## Penance by Thomas J. Misuraca

Forgive me father, for I have sinned. It's been...

You know how long it's been, Father Francis. I hope you had a nice week. Wasn't the weather delightful? I was able to get out of the apartment a couple of days, and my hip didn't act up at all.

Agnes took me to the mall on Tuesday. She had the nerve to ask to borrow four dollars for lunch. She hasn't paid me back yet. I hope she mentions that she stole from me in her next confession. Which is on Saturday, I believe.

I wouldn't mind if I had the money, but I'm on a fixed income. I got a package in the mail saying I may be the winner of a million-dollar sweepstakes. I filled out that form and sent it in immediately. I hope that's not considered greed. All I want is enough to get by. And a nice funeral. When I win, I'll make a big donation to the church.

Rich, that nice boy in my building, came by yesterday to change a light bulb. He had to stand on one of my chairs. His bum was right in front of me, and I couldn't help but stare at it. I tapped it playfully, but I don't think he noticed. Is that a sin, father? I would never do more than look. I'm so old, I wouldn't remember how.

Anyhow, Rich agreed that our apartment complex has gone to pot. The new manager is terrible. She rents to all these lowlifes. I thought I smelled marijuana the other day. I asked Rich if he knew what marijuana smelled like and he said it smelled like pumpkin pie. It didn't smell like any pumpkin pie I ever baked.

I used to bake all the time, but now I'm too tired. And who'd eat it? If I eat anything out of the ordinary, it upsets my system and I'm in the bathroom for an hour with diarrhea.

Is it a sin to say diarrhea in confession, father? I mean it is something natural. God must have given us diarrhea for a reason.

I'm turning 83 next month. I still have plenty of time left, my mother lived to 95. I wonder if my daughter will call to wish me a happy birthday.

She probably doesn't remember what day it is. I thought about calling her, but she may hang up on me again. Isn't there a commandment not to hang up on your mother?

It sounds like there are more people out there waiting to talk to you, so I won't keep you. It must be fascinating listening to all those people. Much better than anything on television. Those afternoon serials are nothing but people having sex, and those nighttime shows are too violent. Not like it used to be. I miss shows like Jack Benny. But you're too young to remember that. Well, I should let you go. Have a nice week, Father Francis.

If Agnes comes to confession, remind her she owes me four dollars.

An earlier version of "Penance" was published in *Elegant Thorn Review*, October 2006.

Over 160 of Tom Misuraca's short stories and two novels have been published. His story, "Giving Up The Ghosts", was published in *Constellations Journal*, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2021. His work has recently appeared in *Exquisite Death*, *The Southern Quill* and *SIAMB! Editors Picks Flavors and Futures for Paris Ass Bookfair, 2025*. He is also a multi-award winning playwright with over 170 short plays and 15 full-lengths produced globally. His musical, *Geeks!*, was produced Off-Broadway in May 2019.

## Jump by Maya De La Rosa-Cohen

There were three rooms in the hospital that she knew about: the dying, the accidentally injured, and the infectiously ill. These were not the official names, of course, but what did she know? She stood in an exception to the rule, one without the sounds of life-saving monitors or violent coughing, but in an open space made private with flimsy blue paper curtains and a large hanging light, probably for inspection. Any other day, Paige would have made an excellent patient. She would have listened to the nurse's orders, eaten the jello, and waited a respectful amount of time before asking for her IV to be removed. But today, she was distracted. She had no visible injuries, though her legs had not stopped shaking since they arrived.

He was there too, though he looked like deep sleep, the kind you have a hard time waking up from. The kind that's usually induced by drugs but hardly disturbed by them. She didn't get a good look at his face in the water, the waves had distorted everything, filling her eyes with clouds. Now, in the pale fluorescent hospital lighting, he looked approachable. Like the man you want serving your coffee or selling you a Honda. His beard was brown with bits of grey in it, his lips almost hidden behind the now dried tufts of hair. She looked at his hands poking out from the oversized hospital gown; they were average and unassuming. This was disappointing. She had expected signs of superhuman grandeur, like swollen sausage fingers or overly hairy knuckles. Perhaps the muscles hidden under the blanket would prove her assumption correct. There was still the possibility for an overwhelmingly colossal frame. A magical giant from Homer's epic tales. She should have remembered something specific, she should have memorized his moles, freckles and birthmarks, just in case.

The doctors in their white coats rushed past Brown Beard's room, where there was a bed for her too, though she didn't feel like lying in it. They rushed back and forth with their clipboards, their papers, their large silver probes slung around their necks. They shuffled like game pieces across a sterile floor. She could hear their deliberation, their tepid exchange of phrases like "evidence of internal distress" and "dehydration." The rest sounded like a mumbled mix of medical jargon, the language people like her were never meant to understand.

Across from his bed hung a rectangular mirror. She leaned toward it to catch a glimpse of her reflection. What a horror he must have thought of her! She wouldn't have saved herself, had the roles been reversed. Her skin was sand, scratched and uneven, and her hair looked a different color, lighter from the minerals maybe, and dried out from the hospital paper. She could have propped herself up on the edge of the bed to see the full view of damage done to her face and body, but she chose not to. Nothing hurt more than discovering a secret that everyone else already knew.

"He's dead," Blaine scoffed, his voice suddenly appearing. "You killed him."

"Don't be silly. He's breathing! Look, you can see his belly move under the gown." She pointed to his stomach covered in thin paper. It grew in waves.

"You could have, though. You could have killed him."

"Well, I didn't."

"It was pretty fucking stupid."

"It was an accident."

"You don't believe in accidents." He was right. She didn't believe in accidents, she believed in charging fate.

"The circumstances that preceded the accident," he corrected himself, "or whatever we're going to call what happened here, were stupid. You had choices, and you chose poorly." He paused, pursing his lips the way she never could. He was enjoying this. "He is handsome though."

"Gross."

"The tufted hair, big forearms, just barely visible stubble—"

"Would you just shut the fuck up?" She could hear her blood boiling.

"Oh, honey." He straightened his bowtie. She never understood the bowties.

"Plus, one of the nurses might hear you." She looked for signs of the white coats.

"Nobody is going to hear me. You need help."

"That's what you're here for."

"I'm talking psychological. Some serious capital 'P' psychological help."

“I think I just saw his eyebrow move. Help me unplug this thing.” Paige reached for the white box in the corner.

“You’re joking.”

“We need to get him out of here.”

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” Blaine exhaled loudly and on purpose. “I can’t watch you do this.”

“You can’t leave me here,” she chided. “Even if you wanted to.”

“Well, *you* cannot carry a two hundred and ten pound stranger down the emergency staircase by yourself.”

“He’s not a stranger.” Paige said defensively.

“Paige,” He rarely spoke with such sweetness. “Please don’t make me say it.”

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Hours earlier, Paige had been flirting. She never considered herself a particularly good flirt, since she was easily flustered and clammed up at the easiest question.

“You alright?” The young man with the necklaces asked.

The two boys sat on the riverside bench watched her in a mix of curiosity and confusion. The cute one, at least according to Paige, wore a pair of beaded necklaces. His smile was easy, too familiar. He probably gave the grocery clerk the same smile he gave his mother.

“Alright?” Paige hated the vague insinuation.

“Care for a beer?” His friend asked, too bashful to make eye contact, as he extended his arm as if making a peace offering.

“It’s raining,” she said, suddenly unsure of why that mattered. “Yes, please.”

The friend handed her a warm beer and she drank it, even though she knew she probably shouldn’t. It had been a while since someone had offered her a drink free of charge.

The bench provided little cover from the rain, but neither Big Smiles, his friend, nor Paige seemed to care. They talked about London weather and drank as the drops grew thicker and heavier. Passersby increased their footing, most of them running underneath the bridge for cover. When the underpass got too crowded, the unsheltered walkers became desperate for any sort of protection. She saw shivering adults and their children hiding clumsily under tree branches and city signs. Summer storms were funny that way, they caught everyone unprepared. Paige let her shorts soak in the rainwater as she watched the river grow like sludge. And then she saw him. He was sitting on the other side of the river, eating a large sandwich wrapped in clear plastic and pulling up the collar of his shirt up like a wrinkled deli awning. That gut feeling, the one confidants always referred to when giving advice, hit her unexpectedly. The rain made things blurry, but she knew. Her gut told her this was the moment she had been waiting for.

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“You should be in bed,” the nurse said, pulling back the paper curtain. “You’ll catch a cold. Were you speaking to him?” The nurse nodded in the direction of Brown Beard, who laid still like a sleeping giant.

“No,” Paige replied, suddenly self-conscious of her bottom and its generous exposure from the large opening in the gown.

“You should. Familiar voices can be helpful.” She hoped the nurse didn’t catch Paige biting her lip. “Here are the effects they found on his person—”

The nurse took out a clear plastic bag filled with withered belongings, the usual remnants of modern life. A travelcard, chapstick, keys, wallet. No phone, though.

“Did they find a phone?” Paige asked.

“Afraid not,” the nurse replied. “I expect it sank in the water. You were both submerged for a while.”

“Is he sleeping?”

“Technically, yes.” Clearly, the nurse didn’t want to elaborate. “You shouldn’t have anything to worry about yet.” The word “*yet*” hung like a dense balloon above their heads.

“Is he in pain?”

“We don’t know.” Paige didn’t believe her.

“How long will you keep him here?”

“Until he wakes up.” Good, Paige thought. That will buy me some time.

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Paige watched as the nurse pulled back the curtain and left. She glanced outside the hospital window and saw that the storm had stopped. They were on the ground floor, which normally she’d hate, but tonight gave her comfort. She could see straight across the parking lot as the sun set behind them, casting warm shadows on the pavement. It was her favorite time of day. Paige stared at the sleeping body beside her and wondered if he had someone at home waiting for him. Someone opening the door to an empty house or anxiously cooking dinner while refreshing the family text thread.

“I think we should leave,” resurfaced Blaine’s voice. He was nervous.

“We need to get him out of here before he wakes up,” Paige answered.

“You need to get out of here before someone hears you talking like that.”

“What if he doesn’t recognize me?” She was nervous too.

“Alright,” he cleared his throat, “here it is, darling.” Blaine loved trying on his affectionate voice.

“You have to make a choice. You can be here when this man wakes up and doesn’t recognize you or even know who the fuck you are. You can be here when he tells the doctors that you’re not related and that he has no idea why you said you were. You can be here when they carry you out in handcuffs like limp spaghetti. If you’re ready to fight or plead insane, you can wait for that. The other option is to run. I want to make it clear that I am strongly in favor of the second option.”

Paige stared at the space in front of her and asked, “If I run then what was the whole point of this?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

“If I leave, then he won’t see me and he won’t know I’m here or why I did it...” she knew she was rambling.

“Say it.”

“He has a picture,” she interrupted. “Look,” she whispered, holding the plastic bag the nurse had given her in just the right way so that a small corner of an old and well-loved photo was visible, peeking out from Brown Beard’s wallet.

“Oh no,” Blaine put his non-existent head in his non-existent hands.

Paige opened the plastic bag, grabbed the wallet, and gently pulled the photo from its worn leather slot. “Seven months. On the back it says seven months!” She was glowing now.

“You’re slipping.”

“The edges are soft and browned, that must mean he looks at the photo often, right?”

“Or that he almost drowned with it in his pocket,” Blaine rebuked.

“This is an old picture.”

“You don’t know that.”

“The eyes,” Paige insisted.

“You’re seeing what you want to see.”

“Those are my fucking eyes. Those are my fucking eyes!” Paige shoved the picture in his direction.

“I’m peacefully protesting.” Blaine said, looking in the opposite direction.

“You don’t believe in protesting.”

“I believe in whatever you want me to believe, remember?” Paige hated when he reminded her of this.

“Will you just look?” She waved the photo in the air like a flag. “Please?”

“No. If this doesn’t end the way you want it to—”

“Stop doing that. Stop pretending that this isn’t real.”

“Of course it’s real. That’s why it’s going to end badly. He’s gonna ask you what happened and then he’s going to be furious. What if he doesn’t want anything to do with you?”

“I’ll tell him the truth. I’ll tell him that I’ve been looking for him for years.”

“He’s the only one that saw what happened. From far away it looked like a fall but it wasn’t. He saw you jump. He looked you right in the eyes when—”

“See! It’s in the eyes! He recognized me, I know he did.”

“Wow. You’re really losing it.”

“No. I’m finally on target. I know I am.”

“And what will you tell him? That you jumped in on purpose?”

“Yes, because I knew he would jump in after me.”

“Which makes you sound even crazier. Besides, it’s so embarrassing, this white-knight fantasy of yours. You needed to be rescued, and for what? To award yourself paternal love? It’s demeaning.”

“Says the imaginary friend to his inventor.”

“Ha! Friend, you wish.”

“You’re the made-up monster to my Dr. Frankenstein,” Paige finally admits. “Built to keep me company when I can’t get a handle on my own thoughts. What could be more demeaning than that?”

“Oh, I don’t know, jumping off a bridge in a thunderstorm in hopes that the old guy on the riverbank who *kinda* looks like your biological father will jump in after you and the two of you will live happily and familiarly ever after? You’re smarter than this.”

“Am I? It took me two years to get to the right city. I jumped because I needed more time. You can’t just walk up to a stranger on the street and say *‘I can’t know for sure but I’ve got a pretty good feeling you’re my father.’*”

“Why not?”

“Because he could throw coffee in my face or run in the opposite direction, or call the authorities, I don’t know! It’s just not how I wanted it to happen.”

“And this was your dream alternative?”

“It’s kind of heroic, I guess.”

“It’s unnecessary and extremely irresponsible. Plus, he could die.”

“He’s not going to die!” For a moment she forgot about the nurses and doctors and patients on the other side of the blue paper. She looked back at him, her Brown Beard, relieved to see his belly continuing to ebb and flow. “He’s alive.”

“And unconscious.”

“We’re circling.”

“This is all you, babe.” Blaine smiled at her the way you smile at someone you’ve known for a very long time.

“OK. I’m ready now.”

“You sure?”

Paige took a deep breath and moved towards the emergency alarm. She placed her hand on the lever after one last glance at her hero sleeping.

Maya De La Rosa-Cohen is a writer and playwright from San Francisco. Her work has been selected and developed with The Ground Floor Residency at Berkeley Repertory Theatre, SFBATCO, LABA Bay Area, and Coastal Roots Farms. Her play, *The First Three*, based on the true story of her parents’ legal battle to become the first queer family in California to share equal parenthood, showcased at the 2024 New Roots Theater Festival and was a 2025 Finalist for the Playwrights Foundation BAPF47. She received her BA from Columbia University and MA from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and University of London, Birkbeck.

## **L.A. Fried by Chella Courington**

The break chair is in the alley by the back door. I used to sit here and vape. Even that small pleasure has been taken from me. Flies hover like vultures above the dumpsters stuffed with chicken scraps—gizzards, livers, bones, and skins. On my lap is this monstrous head with white plastic eyes under a red felt crest, three inches high. Its beak yellow like yolks eyeing me from a hot skillet. I swelter inside deep feathers reeking of burnt grease. Sour odor clings to my skin like a stranger's cum.

“Back out on the sidewalk,” I heard the boss holler from inside.

How did I end up with my baby at mama's and another on the way?

*Step, step, step, cluck, turn. Step, step, step, cluck, turn.*

"L.A. Fried" originally appeared in *Sledgehammer Lit* (2021).

Chella Courington was born and raised in Southern Appalachia in a storytelling family who taught her how to value the word. Courington's creative publications include one novel, one novella, several chapbooks of poetry and fiction, and innumerable poems and stories in journals and anthologies. With teaching as her livelihood, she moved from Montgomery, Alabama, to Santa Barbara, California, twenty-three years ago, giving her the space and distance to understand her past.

# The Baby Walk by Sarah O'Connor

I was fourteen when I had my first kiss. He was thirty and liked blondes. At least, that's what he told me.

## First base:

We had our first date at the back end of my small town, near the ravine, a place called The Baby Walk. I'm not sure who named it that. No mothers pushed their babies in strollers through the dense brush and long grass littered with butts and crushed beer cans that caught the light of the moon. The only objects resembling life were a shredded plastic bag draped sensually between the bushes and an abandoned tarp that used to be someone's home.

I shivered in my belt-length skirt and metallic snakeskin top with one skinny strap, my feet sliding in too-big heels, teetering on the rocky sections. I rolled an unlit cigarette between my fingers hoping it gave me an air of maturity, occasionally bringing it to my pursed lips painted a Femme Fatale red. That was the name of the lipstick. I had applied two coats to be certain.

We strolled hand in hand, not saying much because he was thirty and I was fourteen. He stopped and bent his head to connect his lips to mine. Breath quickening. A sharp inhale. Hints of stale coffee, mints and something else? I opened and closed my lips the way I'd practiced on my hand. Sometimes rolling my tongue around his but then missing and licking his teeth instead.

My eyes focused on a freckle on his right cheek—or was it a speck of dirt? I wondered where to put my hands. I settled on entwining them through his belt-loops. Under my fingers I could feel the smooth leather of his wallet as it stuck out of his back pocket.

After our shared saliva had dried to a white crust at the corner of my lips, my attention drifted to my hand, bitten nails nestled in his. This was the best part. I hoped he thought so too.

## Second base:

He had a car and none of my friends' boyfriends had one yet because he was thirty and I was fourteen. It was red with shiny silver handles. I often saw him take a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe smudges off the metallic chrome, then quickly pocket it again, as if he were doing something wrong. He would park at the back of the local Co-Op, deserted on a Sunday evening. Pushing his seat back as far as it would go, I would straddle his lap hoping my thighs didn't look too big when they were on either side of him. The steering wheel awkwardly pressing into my back.

Our tongues were more in sync now; I only missed his mouth once. A suggestion of more when his cold hand reached under my sweater: a tingling feeling, new to me. One of my hands drifted through his hair as I glanced over his shoulder to see a child's car seat with an abandoned red crayon beside it and a discarded juice box on the floor. I thought about those sticky red fingers as he grazed the flimsy material of my bra, dipped a finger inside—furtive, certain—and panted in my ear.

*Was I certain?*

## Third base:

He rented a second place at the end of the town above the newsagents just for us, a thought which caused my heart to beat a little faster because he was thirty and I was fourteen. I often picked daisies on my way there to put in the vase we owned together. A formica aquamarine kitchen table on silver spindly legs was the first thing you saw when you pushed the flimsy door inward, a threadbare green couch its only

companion. Old takeout containers, an ashtray and two glasses with brown liquid often lived there too, one with a faint lipstick stain.

A second room held the bed and the only bathroom. As he took my hand to lay me down, I noticed black mould blooming in the corner of the ceiling, spreading in the shape of a bunny—or was it a constellation? Orion's Belt, maybe?

When he rolled toward me and his breathing got quiet and steady, I slid out from under his arm to use the bathroom. A brown stain encircled the sink. I ran the water and scrubbed it until my hands were raw. Looking into the chipped mirror, my face a puzzle of disparate parts, the lipstick around the many mouths the mirror gave me, smudged. I wiped it off.

### **What happened next:**

He knew what to do because he was thirty and I was fourteen. He rubbed my back and muttered platitudes in my ear. I curled in on myself, stunned, the pain threatening to tear a hole in the universe, watching the blood snake down my legs in little rivulets. Eventually it slowed, drying sticky and tacky on my inner thighs.

After that he made excuses. He was busy, probably with the sticky-red-fingered owner of the crayon in his other house. I'd walked past once—a vase full of daisies on the windowsill. Something always came up. And he no longer answered my calls.

Until all that was left was the echo of my hand in his and the lipstick I kept hidden in the back of my sock drawer. By then I was fifteen and decided it was time to kiss someone else.

I still wear red lipstick on date nights. Femme Fatale, two coats, to be certain.

Sarah is a writer from Cork, now living in Vancouver, Canada with her husband, four children, and her dog. Her work has appeared in *The Closed Eye Open* (Mayas Micros, Issue 36) and *50 Word-Stories*, with forthcoming work in *Bending Genres*, *The Martello Journal* and *Beyond Words*.

## Red Sock by Leslie Hayertz

A red sock lay limp on the bedspread, as socks are prone to do, hapless as a dejected penis, there on the white chenille. It belonged to my husband, the sock did.

I hated that bedspread. I'd bought it because 1.) it was cheap; 2.) it was practical—whatever apartment or duplex we found ourselves in, it would not clash with whatever paint job surrounded us, and if it got stained I could bleach the hell out of it; and 3.) I had always admired the chenille bedspreads at my friend's house when I was in third grade. My mother found them tacky, but I thought they were cozy and breathed a comforting conformity into the house. You know—fuzzy toilet seat cover, glass fish on the wall with glass air bubbles—old-time Sears-catalogue respectability and domesticity right off the shelf, or rather right off the page.

But there, under the red sock, the chenille bedspread looked like a worn-out towel, common and slovenly. And it turned out I hated the glaring contrast with anything it came into contact with, like that red sock, that lifeless gaudy sock with the sheen of acrylic, a beached tropical fish, pilled with navy blue.

I picked it up to join it to its mate—I was folding laundry on the bed—and its snapping offended me, all those tiny fibers suddenly erect and quivering with electricity, like a cockroach you thought dead suddenly reclaiming life.

I knew at that moment, with sickening clarity, that I was in the wrong life. I mean, what was I doing with a man, that man, who requested I buy him non-natural, neon-colored socks, socks I had to couple in a small dingy bedroom—military housing this time, with concrete walls and steel doors hung on steel door frames. On the other side of the wall, my pleasant, friendly neighbors (not one of whom had an acquaintanceship of more than two years with any other pleasant, friendly neighbor) argued, watched TV, made love, screamed at their kids, moved in and moved out.

Surely in high school, or at least in middle school, I must have dreamed of Cape Cod cottages with rose bushes or Victorian houses with wisteria, or something more than this, and surely whatever it was must have been situated across the street from my best friend's ranch-style house with the mid-century Danish-modern furniture. And weren't there babies involved? Or wait, was it a garret in France with a sidewalk cafe for a living room and literati soul-mates?

I was tempted to sit down and puzzle this out, how I got wherever it was I was. Like one of the games I played as a child while trying to go to sleep, letting my mind wander and trip and meander and jump its creek bed, and then at some point stop and carefully trace back its flow, amazed at the synaptic leaps and bounds my idle mind had taken. But my gut told me if I sat down now and went back over my life to figure out how I got here, I would lose it, this surreal sense of being in a dream. It was too fragile. My whole body hummed with an altered mental and physical state, and if I stopped to marvel at it, it would be like dousing the crackling red socks with fabric softener—they would return to their dead fish status, and who knew when or if they would be resuscitated.

The French have a term, *le petite mort*, for intercourse or orgasm or whatever, which I have never really understood, but that's another story. What I felt holding that sock by its tail fin was *une petite* "birth." The light bulb in my thought bubble was so palpable, I could have reached up and unscrewed it—I knew that I could do that and ponder it, and thus turn on the darkness, or I could use that flash of light to cross the dimly lit apartment and escape.

God, don't let the phone ring, don't let the neighbor start thumping next door, don't let a lawn mower start. I knew this almost out-of-body experience, or rather my out-of-life experience, was a most delicate gift. I breathed shallowly so as not to disturb the air.

It's fire, I told myself. You can't get bogged down trying to pack a suitcase, find those papers, box those heirlooms. It's fire, and whether you've got clothes on or not, you get out, and quick. And I did. I grabbed my coat, which was hanging by the door. My wallet with my driver's license nested in the pocket—ID might be useful when I found my right life.

I couldn't go to anyone because I would have to puzzle out at what point my real life left off and when it became an unpleasant wakefulness, and as I said, I sensed I didn't have the luxury of reflection. So I took the bus to the airport, praying, God, don't let anyone talk to me, and took my husband's trusty credit card up to the first counter and read the board of destinations.

I bought a one-way ticket to Albuquerque because the airline flew there and because I thought it would be dry and crisp and full of light. I paid for the ticket with the card and threw the card away. I mean, when you wake from a dream, you're not clinging to the giant pear you were trying get home so you could make poached pears for 75 people who had already been waiting for their dessert for an hour because of all those complications with the scanner not working at the supermarket and the car not starting and getting on the wrong bus and trying not to bruise the pear in the crowd, only to remember you forgot to get wine to poach the thing in. I mean, thank God, when you finally wake up from that, you still don't have that damn pear to protect. So I tossed the card in the first garbage can.

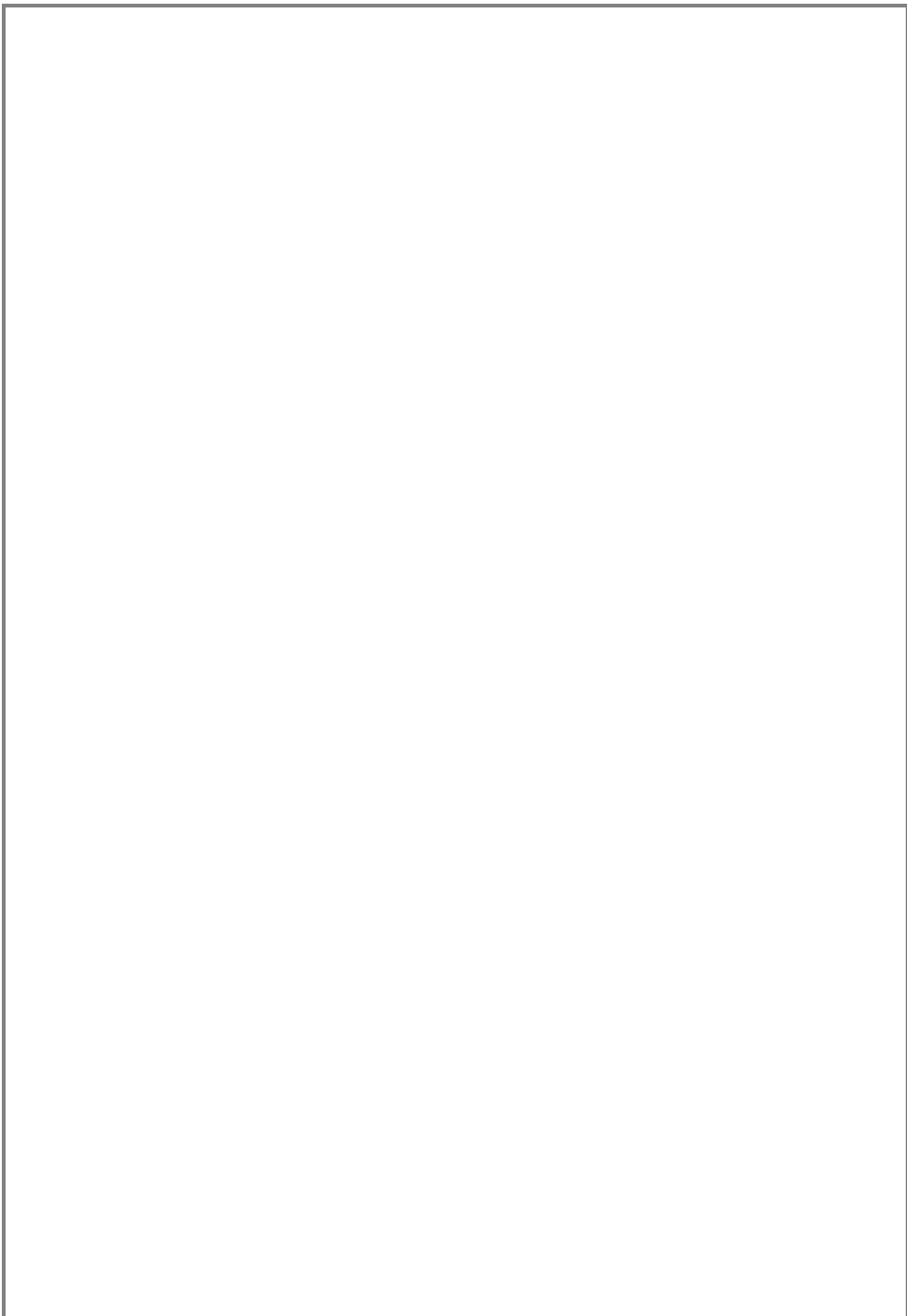
I still tried not to make much eye contact, talked as little as possible, which I hoped would not make me look too suspicious going through security, because I was sure confrontation by a TSA agent would wake me. I forced myself to make careful eye contact with the uniformed women as I put my keys and shoes in the tray. I didn't want the keys back, but I imagined the officer calling after me, louder and louder as I walked away. I might break into a run and she would sprint after me, tackle me to the ground while alarm bells screamed around me. So, I took hold of the keys gingerly and then dropped them, discretely, into the next garbage can—clink, clank, they ricocheted down through the pinball machine of paper cups.

I avoided a lot of pitfalls while I waited—religious solicitors, friendly grandparents, airport custodians, bored and/or curious children. I adopted a sullen slump to discourage approach and finally made it on to the plane. Inside I could feel my mind's eyelids twitching. I feigned sleep next to a businessman, who also feigned sleep. The plane felt like a protective carton, a moving birth canal, and take-off and turbulence soothed me.

The plane landed and I left the airport, my eyes wide open to all the faces, to the string of taxis, to the dry, cloudless dusk. I looked up at the Sandia Mountains. The warm light of sunset drenched the high-desert vegetation in a five-o'clock shadow of pinkish-purple.

Far off, someone who was not dreaming would be, about then, finding an asphyxiated sock lying beached on a threadbare but stark-white bed cover.

Leslie Hayertz is the author of two novels, *Down to the Soul* and *The Lady Photographer's Sister*, a book of short stories for mid-grade readers, *You Can't Pick Your Ghosts*, and a Spanish grammar workbook, *The Subwhative?*. Her short plays have won awards and been produced, and her prose has appeared in various print and online publications, including *Calyx* and *Red Rock Review*. A northwesterner by birth and inclination, she lives near the confluence of the Tualatin and Willamette Rivers and teaches Spanish in the Portland Metro area.



# Non-Fiction



# Confession of an Appalachian Motorist by Frances Figart

“Are you alright?”

“Yes,” I say, staggering on the pavement and uncontrollably, inconsolably sobbing in the face of four kind elderly strangers peering out of their sedan at me.

“We saw the whole thing,” says the man in the driver’s seat. “There was nothing you could have done.”

“I think it’ll be okay,” says a woman in the backseat.

Lunch had ended on the first day of the annual writers conference I help facilitate in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Author workshop leaders were having one-on-one sessions with some participants while others went on a hike in Walker Valley, a pristine cove in the heart of Appalachian temperate rainforest.

Rust-colored leaves spiraled down onto the narrow two-lane road as I made my way into town to do a bit of work. I was listening on Audible to the penultimate chapter of David Joy’s “Those We Thought We Knew,” which was appropriate because I was sitting in on David’s workshop, scarfing up crumbs of wisdom from the prize-winning lone wolf of Southern gothic fiction.

Suddenly a dark shadow loomed in my peripheral vision, shooting up the riverbank. Thump, thump. Under my car, I felt something being violated. I stopped the droning narrative so I could focus. I knew I’d run over a living being.

Eternity hung in the split second before I raised my guilty eyes to the rearview mirror. There, to my horror, was the furry black form I expected—a cub not more than four months old, tumbling and disoriented on the concrete. Dazed, I braked now, though I’d only been going 25 mph. Consumed with dread, I continued to watch the tiny form in the mirror. Was it badly injured? Was it crushed, pinned to the road? Would it die there? Seconds felt like years. I spent them praying for forgiveness for our human transgressions against our animal sisters and brothers.

And then, as my conscience drowned all thought, a miracle unfolded. The cub gathered itself and sprang up the steep embankment. Whether its injuries were slight or pure adrenalin carried it, I would never know as it became lost forever in the dense rhododendron and mountain laurel.

I put my car in park and stumbled out. The Middle Prong of the Little Pigeon River crashed below me as I hobbled toward the low-slung coupe that had been following me at a distance. Four tourists, all seniors, looked at me, compassion filling their eyes: my first priests. Love and mercy they bestowed upon me, a stranger, saying they had witnessed the cub darting up from the water, and running underneath my car. They shared comforting words of praise and blessing, absolution, agreeing the mishap could not have been prevented, joining in a hopeful chorus of “it seemed to be fine.”

But I couldn’t get the “thump thump” out of my mind. I believed the little feller was hurt, possibly badly. I pulled off the road and just sat a spell, staring glassy eyed at the sign of the cross created by the intersection ahead. “This is all I can remember,” as they say in the confessional.

Back in my reproductive years, I would cry at the drop of a hat. No so much since menopause. But this occurrence on Tremont Road broke me open completely. I hadn’t cried this way, with complete abandon, since my father died in 1992. In traditional confession, a penitent will concede, as an act of contrition, to “avoid whatever leads her to future sin.” Yet, penitent though I was, I could make no firm resolve not to sin again—because to operate bone-crushing metal boxes coursing at breakneck speeds is what it means to partake in our current form of modernity.

This vehicle is what gets me to my job in the park, where I’ve ironically branded a road ecology movement called Safe Passage in the Smokies, written an award-winning children’s book to help teach families about the need for wildlife crossing structures to be installed on Appalachian highways, and even composed a song and produced a YouTube video called “Safe Passage: Animals Need a Hand.” And all the while, even though I am one of “the watchers,” constantly scanning every road for signs of life, no matter how much good I’ve done for our region’s wildlife, I’m equally culpable in this young critter’s injury and possible death. As many as a third of all wildlife–vehicle collision victims leave the roadway only to suffer and die unfound.

Back at my hotel, no blood or fur stained my RAV4. I called my husband and then a few of my staff, who dutifully doubled as further priests, hearing my confession, and reminding me of the likelihood the cub survived, found comfort in its mother, and learned to fear vehicles through the harrowing jolt. But my fear of the worst lingered as the sun headed down and a videographer kindly drove me to the night's event.

Bless me, Creator, for I have sinned. My last confession was . . . never, since I'm not Catholic, but the concept is cross-denominational, (isn't it?) extending even to those who see themselves not as religious but as spiritual beings all the same.

Southern Appalachia is late to the road ecology party. Every day my work involves an exchange with a wildlife biologist or conservation scientist trying desperately to make up for lost time, striving to be more like our European role models who have made wildlife consideration and mitigation part of their road building for half a century.

On our roads, every day, I see dead bears, dead deer, dead coyote, dead fox, dead opossum, dead raccoon, dead snakes, dead turtles—and so many more. We know this isn't right. Yet we all go out and get behind the wheel, hoping impotently not to do it, helpless when we do, every single day. No prayer of absolution, no confession, can ultimately save us, or our furbearing cousins, from ourselves. Our challenge is to keep trying to move the needle on an implacable, intractable problem. Our challenge is to accept the horrible truth and somehow sleep at night.

I hit a bear cub. I confess. May all sentient beings be free from suffering. Amen.

Frances Figart (Fié-gert) manages a team of writers, editors, graphic designers, illustrators, and videographers creating books and other interpretive materials for Smokies Life, a nonprofit partner organization supporting Great Smoky Mountains National Park since 1953. She is the editor of *Smokies Life Journal*, codirects Tremont Writers Conference, and runs an annual writers' residency in the Smokies.

## Stars by Patty Somlo

When I started this piece, my intention was to write about the stars. I pictured myself that night, at a charming lodge, in the jaw-dropping red rock country outside Moab, Utah. The vague idea I'd had before putting words on paper was to revisit some of the thousand times I travelled outside the city where light pollution was gone and looked up at the sky.

Instead of diving into what might have been a glorious subject, cracking open spiritually rich moments, I mentioned my having drunk too much wine. That steered me right off course, as happens in writing, crashing straight into a wall, what I had no plan of thinking about, let alone writing. That was a piece about my mother.

To back up a moment, I was outside Moab, Utah, with a group of strangers, on a multi-day hiking trip, traversing several of this country's most awe-inspiring paths. On the night I was about to recount, I didn't know we would end up the following day on what would become one of my favorite-ever trails, which is saying a lot. I have been a dedicated hiker for decades, in national and state parks and monuments, wilderness areas, national forests, and on high cliffs overlooking the ocean, in places as varied as the Grand Canyon, the Three Sisters Wilderness in Oregon, Texas's Big Bend National Park, and the often wet and gloriously green Kalalau Trail on the Island of Kauai.

We arrived at the lodge late in the afternoon, following a hike up slickrock, then a short way along a scary, exposed ridge, to see an arch sculpted by water and wind, which all the shots I clicked with my Samsung phone couldn't replicate. The moment I stepped into my room, I knew I was exactly where I belonged.

The best part awaited down blue, gold and red-tiled stairs. A sliding glass door led to a patio. There, I discovered what I'd come for, all the way from my home in California – a clear, unobstructed, breathtaking view of the green Colorado River, surrounded on three sides by towering slabs of red rock.

It hadn't yet occurred to me that I was far enough outside the city to also be enchanted by the stars. I was simply grateful for the cute room, the stunning, postcard-perfect view, and the smart, friendly and funny folks I'd gotten to know on the journey so far. By this time, I had slogged my way through the often-impenetrable grief following the death of my beloved husband Richard. I had signed up for this trip in hopes of taking in a measure of healing that nature usually provides and finding a way to travel and hike, now that my companion for those favorite activities was gone.

We were a small group, seven guests and two leaders. For our first evening at the lodge, we had time to ourselves. Four of us met in the bar for a drink before dinner. I ordered a glass of white wine.

Moving to the subject of drinking, I'll explain. I am, at most, a one glass of wine girl, never a big drinker. As I've gotten older, even sipping a small amount of alcohol causes me to be lethargic and headachy the entire next day.

I should add that my mother was a cautionary tale. Though her consumption of alcohol every night was never a subject of conversation in our family, the youngest child (me, the truth-teller) tossed angry grenades at her, such as "You're a drunk," way more than once.

Four years after my mother's death from cancer, my brother-in-law quietly suggested that my mother had had a drinking problem. Other than my furious taunts, this was the first and only time anyone in the family would come close to admitting that my mother had a problem. In truth, my mother was a devoted alcoholic.

While beginning this piece and writing that my drinking too much wine made me think of my mother, I have to add that she wasn't the only member of my family who had a drinking problem. My father was afflicted with the problem as well. But when it came to my thinking, and that of my two sisters, my father's drinking occupied a different place.

A key difference was that my father lived away from us for significant periods of time. He was a career Air Force officer, and his family couldn't accompany him for certain assignments. By the time I was in high school, I had grown accustomed to life without my father. Times he was home, he seemed more like a temporary guest than a close relative who belonged.

That wasn't the only reason we could overlook his drinking but not my mom's. He wasn't involved in our day-to-day lives, enforcing rules about curfew or what we could and couldn't wear or the dress we

wanted to buy, which my mother insisted her budget wouldn't allow. We were also privy to my mother throwing down tall glasses of Seagram's Seven whiskey and ginger ale, making her slur her speech and repeat the same unintelligible phrases all night. I could hear her vomiting, many mornings in the bathroom before work. Fifty-minute sessions with my kind therapist helped me recognize that I had created a fantasy father, in place of the real one I'd been assigned, making him special, almost a god. That perfect guy couldn't possibly have a drinking problem, at least anything remotely like that of his wife.

All this is to say that when I left home for college and considered who I wanted to be after growing up, I knew precisely what I didn't want. I did not want to be like my mom. That meant staying as far away from alcohol as possible.

Ironically, I live in one of the country's premiere grape-growing and wine-producing regions, Sonoma County, California. A sizeable portion of the population works in the wine industry or in hospitality, serving visitors who come to taste wine. Driving beautiful two-lane, winding roads outside town you pass vineyards. We worry about weather here, certainly as it's altering due to climate change, but especially over its effect on the grapes, and therefore, the wine.

I like the taste of a buttery Chardonnay, in the same way I love that first cup of dark French Roast coffee in the morning. I also enjoy the mellowness that follows a first few sips, especially if I'm feeling edgy, which is, unfortunately, much of the time. The comfort of being with this friendly group of people, after spending so much time alone as a widow, and the startlingly gorgeous surroundings, made sharing a drink, or even two, seem fun.

By the time dinner was done, I'd gone over the line, drinking two glasses, when I am accustomed to one. I found myself feeling a bit drunk.

I should add that the death of a spouse leaves a void so enormous, it's as if a several-ton bomb detonated in your house. Yes, the person you love more than you think possible is gone. What you couldn't have anticipated before he sailed out the door was that he would take with him your very life.

The ripping away of how you've spent your days, of simple habits, meals you ate, and familiar activities you enjoyed, turns you into an alien dropped down onto a frighteningly strange planet. There I was after dinner, a tad tipsy, walking from the hotel restaurant in the dark, with Robert, the only solo male on the trip old enough to not fall into an age where he could have been my son.

Robert was the opposite of my type, tall, large-boned, with pale skin, while I had always been attracted to men like my husband -- slender, of medium height, with dark hair and olive complexions. Outside of his looks, Robert was friendly and interesting, asking questions and listening to the answers, as much as he spoke. He was also married, with three grown children, but had come on the trip alone, claiming his wife didn't like to hike.

There wasn't a hint of romantic interest from either of us. But here we were in this remote place, without many lights, under a black sky. I couldn't see my feet as I walked on gravel that substituted for pavement. Nevertheless, I struggled to keep my eyes glued to the ground, in hopes of avoiding a fall.

The hotel rooms started a short distance past the lobby, restaurant, and gift shop. Doors faced a narrow, paved walkway that ran parallel to the gravel drive.

Robert's room came before mine. He threw out a quick, "Good night," crisp as the air had become, and scurried away. I said, "Good night" back, feeling I'd lost something, but wasn't sure what.

Then I remembered to look up at the stars.

As most people know, and especially those who spend time in places where Costco and Walmart, Safeway, and malls are nowhere to be found, you can see way more stars when it's darker. If a bit unsteady after one too many glasses of wine, it's a good idea to plant your feet, especially when standing on uneven gravel, before leaning your head back to get a better look at the stars.

I did just that, even though I experienced a momentary stab of fear I might topple over. Once I'd stretched my neck as far as it would safely go, I saw what had been waiting for me during the walk. The sky was ablaze with an untold number of tiny, bright white, shimmering lights.

My husband Richard had left this life just shy of a year before this moment. In between the dark times when I sobbed like a child, happy memories, one after the next, appeared on the movie screen in my mind.

So, here I was outside Moab, Utah, standing alone on a wide gravel drive, close to a meadow where earlier that day, I'd seen handsome horses swishing their tails against the flies, and I could hear

Richard's voice, as he pointed out the planets, constellations and stars. In the memory, we are sitting in a bubbling hot tub, on the deck of a favorite vacation cabin, a few miles outside Point Reyes National Seashore, where we had hiked that day on a favorite trail and now were gloriously tired. Instead of being drunk on wine, I was high on love and life, marveling at both, along with the awesome power and expanse of nature Richard and I had ventured out of the city to enjoy.

I had no one's hand to hold now, as I stared at the stars. Rather than feeling wrapped in the warmth of my husband's arms, I felt cold.

Yet, sad as I was and knew I would be at times for the rest of my life, I felt washed in gratitude for the years I shared with Richard and the life I was beginning to create now. Taking in the beauty and wonder of the night sky outside Moab, I was reminded that you can marvel at the vastness and splendor of the universe only in those moments when it is very, very dark.

Previously published in *Fiery Scribe Review*.

Patty Somlo's most recent book, *Hairway to Heaven Stories* (Cherry Castle Publishing), was a Finalist in the American Fiction Awards and Best Book Awards. Previous books, *The First to Disappear* (Spuyten Duyvil) and *Even When Trapped Behind Clouds: A Memoir of Quiet Grace* (WiDo Publishing), were Finalists in several contests. Her work has appeared in *Guernica*, *Delmarva Review*, *Under the Sun*, the *Los Angeles Review*, and over 40 anthologies. She received Honorable Mention for Fiction in the Women's National Book Association Contest, was a Finalist in the J.F. Powers Short Fiction Contest, had an essay selected as Notable for Best American Essays, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net multiple times.

# To Dream Again by David Ferguson

## Reincarnation Forged through the Crucible of Incarceration

Dreams are mysterious, powerful phenomena diving deep into our well of emotions, memories, hopes and fears. They pull from our past, present and unwritten futures, weaving their own story lines that move our souls or paralyze us in our tracks. But what of our waking dreams? Our greatest hopes and wishes for our future? It has been said that when we stop dreaming, we stop living. I believe it is true based on the experiences of my own life.

The world of incarceration is full of broken men with broken dreams. Behind these men are many different stories. For some, the dream killers came early in life; haunted by a childhood littered with dysfunction and trauma induced by addiction, abuse, neglect or violence. They are living out the cyclical adage: "hurt people - hurt people." Others went down a bad path as juveniles and have been in trouble with the law since. Many still cling to the same juvenile mindset that brought them to prison, like a ball and chain that defines them. Others yet, committed a violent crime in a drug induced fog or fit of rage. Then, there are those plagued by mental illness, for which prison offers very little to help them.

There are also those men who were law abiding citizens and productive members of society. Perhaps they were successful family men. At some point, however, they veered off course, drifting into a downward spiral of bad choices and eroding character. They may have stumbled into the grip of addiction and shame. Ultimately, they broke the law. Their dreams were derailed, and they left a trail of pain and broken hearts in the wake of their downfall. This is the group that I fall into.

I grew up in a good home and was driven to dream and excel. I went to college, earned a bachelor's degree and married my high school sweetheart. We were blessed with children and, as our family grew, we were fully engaged with our faith, friends, and community. My business career thrived. I was promoted many times over, eventually holding high level management positions in a well-known global company. I traveled the world, experienced tremendous diversity of cultures, and fostered friendships and respect at home and abroad. My life was very blessed and my family flourishing. However, there was an ominous storm on the horizon, a storm of my own making fueled from within. The dream killers were lurking in the shadows ready to lead me down a dark path that would shatter my dreams and my life.

Amidst a beautiful and blessed life, I gradually became complacent and self-focused, taking my blessings for granted. I slowly drifted away from the person I had established in my youth, trying to fill perceived voids in my life in unhealthy ways. My integrity and moral character eroded. I became a lesser version of myself, living carelessly, behaving shamefully and compartmentalizing my life. Caught up in denial and delusion, I convinced myself that I was still the authentic person I used to know, but I was living a double life.

Eventually, I broke the laws of man. Even more grievous, I broke the laws of God and moral character. Most heart-wrenching of all, I wounded the most precious people in my life - my family and friends. I broke their hearts. The dream killers were wringing their hands with glee as I teetered on the edge of a great precipice, about to plummet into the pit of hell and consequences that lay before me. Those consequences came in drowning waves. Waves of exposure. Waves of shame. Waves of loss. Waves of pain. Waves of despair. They kept coming and piece by piece I was losing everyone and everything that mattered in my life. All my dreams coming undone.

The final wave of consequence was my arrest and incarceration, spending eighteen months in county jail before coming to prison. Those eighteen months were the bottom of the pit. Never have I felt so humiliated, worthless and alone. Never have I experienced such isolation, darkness, toxicity, and despair. I thought my life was over. The dream killers had finally snuffed out the last embers of hope... or had they?

In that dark pit, surrounded by chaos, stripped of everything, with no place to look but up, there came a whisper saying, "you are not alone, your story is not over." In that timeless purgatory, under the crushing weight of it all, there came peace. A small ember of faith and hope started to glow and burn. Deep inside of me, personal and profound, a redemption process began - a reaching up and a reaching down. I knew I was going to get through this. I was going to live again. Barely, just barely, I started to dream again. I was being reborn from the ashes.

The day I shipped to prison, my eyes had to adjust to the blinding daylight as the transport van pulled out of county jail. I had survived one hell, but was filled with anxiety and visions of Shawshank Redemption running through my mind. A couple hours later, I was overwhelmed with sobering dread at the sight of the approaching gun towers and razor wire laced perimeters. Yet, I was relieved to be turning the page. Below my fears a deep sense of determination and hope stirred.

Once in the state prison system, I began finding my lane in prison culture. I cautiously avoided pitfalls and dangers, and selectively built meaningful friendships. Prison can be a very dark, dangerous, brutal world. I've seen it first hand. However, there are more resources and opportunities compared to county jail. It is possible to carve out a meaningful existence. Step by step, I began to build purpose back into my life. I have become a tutor, helping men obtain their GED. I've completed vocational programs, learning new skills and receiving credit against my time. I've been able to focus on lifelong passions in writing and music; therapeutic vehicles to express, connect and create art. I've joined creative groups such as Shakespeare Behind Bars and Pioneer Playhouse Voices Inside, connecting with other creative souls and honing my crafts. I lead a great music team in my faith community with a mission to encourage and build men spiritually.

My dreams have been redefined. My focus is pursuing and promoting transformation and growth in every dimension. The experiences in my own life, good and bad, have given me a perspective to offer. I am finding purpose in my pain, and helping to heal others through my own healing. I am grateful for every small blessing, taking nothing for granted. I have seen steps of healing and restoration in important relationships in my life. All of this breathes hope, fanning the flame of my dreams. Of course, I long for the freedom to pursue dreams in open spaces again. Until then, I will continue on this journey that begins within and lights the path forward.

Everyone's story is different. However, there are basic principles woven through all our lives. Those principles got us here and guide us forward. They determine whether our dreams come true or if the dream killers prevail. They are at work regardless of which side of the razor wire we live on. Those principles involve choices. We do not have control of circumstances and what others do, but we choose how we respond. We always have a choice. We choose to live in delusion, or to face our demons and hold ourselves accountable. We choose to hold on to bitterness, or to forgive others and ourselves. We choose to perpetuate hurt, or to promote healing. We choose to stagnate in the status quo, or to aspire to grow and become more. We make choices today that define our tomorrow, our future.

Worthy dreams and wise choices fuel meaningful lives. In their pursuit, we bring value to our own lives and to humanity around us. When reached for, worthy dreams reveal better versions of ourselves and make the world a better place. No matter where you are or your situation in life, whether you are living in freedom or behind bars, a life without dreams is its own type of prison. We all have choices. My choice is clear. I choose to dream again.

David Ferguson is a writer, singer-songwriter, and musician incarcerated at Northpoint Training Center in Kentucky. Like the Phoenix, he is rising from the ashes on the wings of authenticity, healing, transformation, and redemptive ascent. David uses artistic expression to share experiences and perspectives to heal, connect, grow, and dream with other human beings who dare to believe that, together, we can make the world a better place.

## Getting it Right by Katherine Roth

I went to the hospital early on that day, that day I would not forget, that day when I was a young doctor. I'd made the trek just two months earlier from Miami to Seattle in my corolla station wagon to begin my training. Medical school was behind me and yet it felt odd to hear nurses call me *Doctor*, the way they placed it before my familiar name. The hospital felt new like everything, like my apartment, like the city with its unfamiliar streets, like how to sign my name.

That morning the long hallways were empty and linoleum freshly mopped, reflected morning light. The first patient that came to mind was the man admitted two days earlier. He'd complained of terrible stomach pain, a reoccurring problem and he'd been unable to work, to sleep, to drink even a glass of water. He'd had pain before but never this bad. He admitted to heavy drinking over the past month while his wife sat in the chair next to his bed with her stone face. The only way I knew she was listening to his belly aching was when she rolled her eyes just as he promised, for real this time, he planned to quit. His diagnosis was recurrent pancreatitis. He seemed a little better after a day of fluids and pain meds... and no alcohol.

I knew something about alcohol and how it affected people differently. I'd seen how a person's health could be destroyed with cirrhosis and liver failure, like my good friend from high school, how he became wrapped in addiction, how it ended marriages and careers. But what did I know about this person and his dilemma? William Osler, 'the father of modern medicine', a physician I admired and hoped to emulate, taught that it was much more important to know what sort of patient has a disease than what sort of disease a patient has. What sort of person was my patient? I'd spent some time with him as his pain lessened and learned about his work as a gardener in the city park near where I lived, how he valued being outside and setting his own schedule. Yet he struggled every day to stay away from what he loved, or thought he loved-- alcohol. Somehow, it had placed a grip on him since the first taste. Maybe he could quit but what did I know about how to set him free? My job was to treat his pain and send him home.

But that morning, I stood in the doorway to his room. I could see his large body filling the narrow bed. He was lying still, so still, too still. I knew something was wrong. I called out into the hall, "Help!" I dropped his heavy chart onto the floor and yelled a second time. "I need help!" and ran to him. I placed my hands over his silent chest and knew the worst. He was dead. My mouth sealed over his blue lips and I pushed all my breath into his stiff lungs. My heart was racing. My mind was racing. I heard feet racing. And yet, there was an unalterable stillness in his body. The bed sagged as I leaned into him and braced my arms and began compressions. I knew how it would end even as I began but I had to try. I had to do whatever I could to say I had tried to bring him back, to reach for him beyond death. Another doctor and nurse joined in the resuscitation but our efforts did not last long. From the coldness and stiffness of his body, he had evidently died hours before I found him. There was no hope of his return and no place for my horror. What had gone wrong?

I called his family asking them to come as soon as possible. My mind was blank. I was barely breathing and my blood felt icy. Then they were there, his wife and daughter, standing in the hallway, hesitant outside his room. I went to them and we stood for a moment without words. My tear-streaked face said it all. Soon we were in each other's arms holding each other up, holding each other together. We cried for all the things that could not be fixed. By the way his wife nodded her head again and again, it seemed she had known this would be the last time for her husband. But for me, the young doctor, this was my first.

After a shared wave of anguish lifted and we loosened our arms, I looked around, reorienting like someone coming out of a dream. I noticed Steve, the senior resident and our program director standing a short distance down the corridor watching me. They were making rounds on their patients, had heard the commotion and now stared at me. I saw the look on their faces and how they held themselves apart from the confusion. It was as though they belonged to a universe where everything was in its' rightful place, free of heart break and complications, free of the messiness of caring and failing. My grief became displaced by shame. I should not be crying, not sobbing, with this patient's family. Where was my professionalism? Where was my detachment? This was wrong upon wrong.

Later on, as that long day inched forward, I combed through his chart searching for an answer. It was then I found the results from blood taken in the early morning, hours before I arrived to work, hours before his death. I saw the number, staring at me, lifting off the page in black on white. Potassium 1.2. Oh no! His potassium had fallen to a dangerously low level. Years ago, I learned that small and important medical fact; in severe cases of pancreatitis, enzymes poured into the blood pulling electrolytes out, electrolytes like potassium. This level would dangerously affect a heart's rhythm. I should have known. I should have checked earlier. This had killed him. There was no one else to blame. *I had killed him!*

Our program director asked to meet with me. I walked toward him at the end of the hallway where he now stood alone. I noticed his hair was greyer than I remembered. He was silent as I confessed.

“I never thought this would happen... I thought he was getting better but he wasn't... I could have checked on him sooner... I should have tested his blood yesterday.” He sighed and tugged at his long sideburns for a moment. He lowered his voice.

“Your patient was extremely sick when you admitted him. This was the end of a very long road of alcohol abuse. There is more than one reason when someone dies.” He looked at me like he had been here before and as he sighed again, he drove his hands deep into his pockets. There was a flicker of kindness in the steely grey of his eyes. “We must find a way to sort out our feelings. We cannot burden the family with them. They have enough of their own to navigate at death.” He straightened the black strings of his bolo tie. “Let me show you a few places where you can go.”

This was a Catholic hospital and I'd passed the stained-glass door of the chapel many times on the way to the elevator. I'd never thought to go inside. He opened it and we silently entered the small room. The air was still, like it was holding its breath. My eyes adjusted to the dimness and then traveled over a mahogany altar that held a bible and a small crucifix. Two wooden pews with burgundy cushions, both with a wooden step for kneeling, waited for us. He raised his eyebrows like a question, then seeing my blank face, motioned with his head to the door. This was not my place and he seemed to know it. I felt no comfort here. We stepped out into the bustling hallway and he said without emotion or judgment, “I'll show you another place. It's where I sometimes go.”

I followed him to an unmarked door, one I'd never noticed before, and as he opened it discovered we were in a staircase. In silence, we climbed four flights of stairs until we came to the red glow of an exit sign. He pushed the metal bar and a flush of cool air rushed in. We were on the hospital's roof! So surprised and compelled by this view of the city, I walked ahead of him. A brick wall, chest high, protected me from the busy street below and I rested my arms upon it. It was dusk and grey clouds with streaks of lavender lingered across the horizon. There must have been a recent rain as the sound of car tires splashing thru puddles added softness to the moment. I looked at him and then away as tears, the sacred salty wetness of them, once again sprung to my eyes. This time I let myself cry for all of it.

No one ever spoke to me again about this man, his death, or my young mistake. In another world, there would be a place for understanding all that had gone wrong. Perhaps, he was more ill than we realized and needed intensive care or maybe his quiet death was as it was meant to be but what I learned that day was that there was no way to be *too* careful. The path I had chosen was as wide as life and death and I would need to learn to walk upon it.

Months passed and soon it was July. As the Fourth approached with its fireworks and picnics, I chided myself that I should be celebrating. Damn it! I'd almost made it through the first year of this three-year program and done my best in the rigorous world of conventional medicine. Yet I felt I was missing the mark and I'd always been a good aim. Instead of gaining, I was losing confidence.

I met with Steve, my senior resident, for an evaluation. We'd worked together for the past six weeks in the hospital and our conversation began friendly enough. We sat at a small table in the cafeteria and it was quiet as the dinner crowd had yet to arrive. Our Styrofoam coffee cups, half empty, rested between us. He was eating an oatmeal cookie and cleared his throat with a sip of coffee before he launched in.

“You've been reliable and hardworking. I can always count on you to be kind to the staff and the patients. You are definitely thorough, maybe too thorough. My main concern...”

I looked at him. Why did he always seem so accurate, so chill and put together? I tugged at my shirt to cover the stain on my pants from last night's soup. There was always this gap between these doctor guys and me. I thought back to the day my patient had died and how he had stood calmly with the director and stared at me. I thought about the countless times when I raced to morning report, that grueling affair where all the older community doctors came to hear about patients we'd admitted during the night, and I felt just like this. No, ten times worse. The conference room invariably smelled of aftershave and everyone looked like Steve...so composed while I worried how I smelled and, so sleep deprived, if I'd combed my hair. Then, in a state of subterfuge panic, I'd present my patients trying to remember all the minutiae while they ate their donuts the way Steve munched on his cookie.

“My main concern”, he repeated, “is that you need to start viewing yourself as the doctor in charge. Step up. Make your own assessment and treatment plan.” He popped the last bite in his mouth. I nodded and looked out the darkening window. It was getting late. I thought about my empty refrigerator and how this was supposed to be my day to get out early. I didn't want to eat one more meal in this cafeteria. But then he continued, “You can't always wait for someone above you to tell you what the next step should be.”

He was right. I was being extra careful, maybe too careful like he said, second guessing myself, taking extra time. I watched my colleagues dash off their patients' admission notes in twenty minutes while I took an hour with the patient and family, rechecking their history and the details of my exam. I wanted Steve's reassurance but was too proud to admit it. I wanted him to value the time I took, the care I gave, the humility I had for what I did not yet know. I wanted him to acknowledge the high bar I had set for our profession. Without warning, there was a fullness in my throat and I felt the sting of tears rising up. My long hair fell to hide my face but then I quickly pulled it back behind my ear and set my lips together in a firm line.

“Thanks Steve. I’ll definitely keep your suggestions in mind. It’s been super helpful working with you.” I stood up and collected my things deliberately leaving my empty cup between us.

After working a thirty-six-hour shift, I was beyond tired but I’d learned that sleep would not come easily if I went straight back to my empty apartment. I pulled into the nearby community pool parking lot, resigned to swim some laps. I needed the breathing and the way the strokes stretched the knots from my shoulders; the immediacy of cold water more than the endless lists in my head. I began the rhythmic pull of arm through water, turning my head for a quick breath, the muffled quiet of my cap and pushed past all the stimuli of the day. As I let myself enter the water in an undefended way, I thought back to my conversation with Steve.

He was right. I’d become hesitant in my patient’s care. I could chalk it up to being a fledgling intern but I sensed there was something more. I flip turned against the pool wall and realized what that something was... I was disillusioned with how we cared for people.

Day after day, I witnessed the unspoken belief that patients wouldn’t change. Perhaps they were wouldn’t but we never took the time to find out. And then, what would we offer? I thought back to my patient and his drinking. Couldn’t I have done more? Instead, we lorded our authority over patient’s and their fundamental will. I thought of Osler again, how he taught at the bedside, emphasizing the importance and the power of the doctor-patient relationship. One hundred and fifty years ago, it had been revolutionary. And it still was. Could it be just as critical to know the patient as to know their potassium? To me, it was. I had taken the time to know him and part of me felt justified in the care I had given.

I was frustrated by the overuse of medications and elaborate, expensive testing. And yet, I was cautious to speak out, to show my hand, to admit that I wanted to do things differently. As long as I was simply acting out someone else’s orders, I could hide my own contradictory feelings, could second guess my instincts. For now, hiding was a way to stay alive. In fact, it was my only freedom. I needed to learn what I was here to learn, keep my head down and take another breath.

I swam half a mile, thirty-six laps, one for each hour I’d spent in the hospital and then took a quick shower walking to the car with my hair still wet. I was exhausted yet I knew why I hadn’t been more honest with Steve. I didn’t want to tell him I needed to be careful, to take my time, to get it right. And more importantly, without that time, I was afraid I would hurt someone .

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