

MULESKINNER JOURNAL



Grounded



Journal Eleven - September 2024



Grounded

We are grounded. We walk slowly, speak clearly, open our senses, accept beauty, seek communion, remain calm.

You are grounded. Saturday night will have to be “live” without you. It just ain’t fair, and you can’t wait ‘til you can get out on your own.

They are grounded. It’s kind of like punishing yourself, having the kids home all weekend, but they gotta learn that some things ain’t okay.

Everyone’s grounded. The planes won’t fly. Damn that weather. We were so ready to leave.

Grounded. Grounded out. Ground up. Ground down. Rumors of an underground. The daily grind that grinds you down. The daily grind that perks you up.

Our wires are properly grounded, but we still might be shocked. We might even like being shocked.

Dig





MULESKINNER JOURNAL

JOURNAL ELEVEN: GROUNDED

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 1, 2024
COPYRIGHT © 2024 MULESKINNER JOURNAL

ISSN 2771-7232

MANAGING EDITOR
GARY CAMPANELLA

EDITORS
PETER ANDREWS
THOMAS PHALEN
JOHN ROMAGNA
JUNE STODDARD
JULIA TEWELES

CONTACT:
MULESKINNERJOURNAL@GMAIL.COM



TABLE OF CONTENTS

9	MICHAEL LODERSTEDT, NIGHT FISHING THE INLET
13	KAREN TOWNSEND, THE SCULPTOR
17	JORDAN DILLEY, PROGNOSTICATING THE WALNUTS
25	MF DRUMMY, TO ANYONE WHO HAS EVER SAID THAT A POEM CANNOT TEACH US ANYTHING PRACTICAL
23	DAVID KIRBY, CHELSEA WEDDING
29	TRICIA KNOLL, GROUND TRUTH
31	AL ORTOLANI, BOWLING BALLS
33	KEN O'STEEN, GROUND CONTROL TO MAJOR TOM
37	JOAN RIVARD, MEETING
45	ALAN SWYER, BUDD
47	ANNE MARIE POTTER, SEQUEL TO "THE LAST PLACE HE SAW HER"
55	KRISTY SNEDDEN, ESSENTIALS
63	SUSANNA LANG, LA CHAPELLE DE SAINT-VÉRÉDÈME
67	NICOLE MARIE CURTIS, RIDING THESE WAVES
71	DANIEL BLISS, PARALLEL GHOSTS
73	CAROLINE MORETON, HOW THINGS ARE DONE AROUND HERE
77	PAUL LEWELLAN, THE STATE OF DISCOURSE AT THE BIG BOAR
85	JENNIFER PINTO, TETHERED
87	CONOR CHRISTOFFERSON, TOOTH
99	SAMUEL TEOH, STREETS OF JAPAN
103	KEITH HOOD, BUT, BEAUTIFUL
107	MARGE PIERCY, THEY CAME AND THEY WENT
109	LAO RUBERT, SPECKLED FISH

CONTINUED...



TABLE OF CONTENTS

111	MARNI E. HOCHMAN, SEARCHING FOR SOLID GROUND
115	PEGGY NEWMAN, THE PINK RIBBED SWEATER
121	ALLISON BURRIS, REASONS FOR THE WITCH HUNT
123	ELLEN DEVLIN, MONSTERS
125	HOLLY KARAPETKOVA, THE FIRST WAR WAS FOR LOVE
127	OSHR Y MOYAL, LOVE POEM IN THE KEY OF DUCHENNE
133	KATINA CREMONA, BANDA LANDRA
135	DAN MUENZER, EARTH TO ANTAEUS
149	SRIHARINI SESHACHALAM, WHAT'S LEFT OF YOU LIVES
153	ELLEN STONE, I TURNED TO FIELD WHEN YOU LEFT
155	AUTHOR BIOS







MICHAEL LODERSTEDT

NIGHT FISHING THE INLET

I.

Beneath fall's moonlight you backed
the buggy up to a shimmering ocean, a rushing
inlet to your right, the slough ahead
cut away by circling eddies.
Under lantern light

the gear laid out-- hooks the size
of crooked fingers, rods stout
as broomsticks, coffee can-sized
reels loaded with 50# test.
These no ordinary fish, these bull
Red Drum.

Chunks of mullet cut the size
of a boy's fist, meat-hooked
onto rigs. You wade up to your armpits
before each cast, rod settling
into holder. Cracking a Pabst,
you take a seat and wait.

II.

When the reel screeches
you know this fish will be
special, this no ordinary night.
A big fish knows how
to lose the hook, his last
memory still a throbbing
toothache never healed.
He heads for deep water,
a nearby hole, a channel
to saw your line against
broken shells.

You follow him, bent
over the sea, hoping

CONTINUED...

iyou can turn him.
But he is too strong.
He takes you 'round
the spit, your wife follows
beside, pumping the gas
lantern, hoping you'll
get a glimpse of red.

III.

You think of the barmaid
that took you back to
room #4, the kids
still in the car. You
think of her ankles,
stout as holly branches.

You think the tide may
come over the buggy wheels.
The gap between sea and dune
will close. This fish may never
tire, you think under
the lantern's light.

IV.

That's when she says
you never cared for me.
You see tears shine across
her face. You pretend not
to hear, hoping the fish
might drag you too into
the black water. Take you
to his hole, away from all
your living secrets.

When the hook gives way,
straightened like a paper clip,
you turn to her and walk
the mile back in silence. There
are no words, there is
no fish. There is only
this dark night, the moon
and the lantern,
each wanting to be
the better light.



KAREN TOWNSEND

THE SCULPTOR

"I've never seen one so lifelike!" Jenny murmured from the doorway. The six-foot sculpture dominated the corner of the room where Jenny's husband, Tom, removed his glasses and stood before his three-dimensional self-portrait, evaluating. He squinted, licked his thumb, and smoothed a rough patch on the statue's left cheekbone.

"He has to be perfect if he's going to wear my face."

"Well," Jenny said, "the gala isn't for another two weeks. Plenty of time." Her black stilettos clicked against the floorboards as she moved close to look into the sculpture's face, found his eyes. She'd been gazing into them for weeks. He never looked away.

Tom pulled a finger across the shoulder to refine the collarbone.

"Are you almost ready?" Jenny said.

Tom leaned in, face to face with his creation. "Hmm?" The sculpture's eyes were gray like his own. Expressive. How fascinating. I do have a rather masculine jawline. He glanced in the mirror to confirm it. And chiseled features... He looked back at the figure, then into the mirror again.

"Dinner," Jenny said. "Remember? We have reservations tonight."

All the best artists are tortured. And there it is on my own face—that beautiful mix of agony and intensity, sensitivity and despair. I've captured it exactly. An identical physical duplicate. Verbalizing it would be...unrefined. No one would understand, anyway. Not many are capable of such an undertaking. Few can even understand the importance of such a thing, let alone achieve it.

Jenny cleared her throat. "Tom?" She stepped into his line of vision, and he frowned, irritated. "You almost done?"

"He'll be ready in time for the gala," he murmured. He stroked the scruff on his chin, thinking. He didn't hear her soft sigh, and soon she was so quiet Tom forgot she was standing there. When she slipped her arms around his torso, he jumped.

"We could stay in tonight," she whispered.

CONTINUED...

"I'm working."

"We could talk through the snags," she said. "Like we used to."

He shook his head. "I'll be along in a while."

He didn't hear her leave.

Tom stared at his own image for another forty minutes before agreeing it could not be improved. He curled up under a blanket on the old studio sofa, gazing into his own clay face until his eyes grew heavy.

He didn't see the statue stare at him while he slept. Didn't see its eyebrow twitch. Didn't notice the shift in the temperature of its clay skin, hear the scrape of dried ceramic legs taking their first steps. He didn't see the body flush with new color like a chameleon or observe himself—once clay—now take hold of the pocketknife lying near the box he'd opened earlier that afternoon. He felt the plunge for only a moment—just long enough to lock eyes with his duplicate as the creature twisted the knife in his chest. He barely heard the familiar words it spoke as he faded: "He has to be perfect if he's going to wear my face." Tom saw cold reason in its eyes as it watched him die.

Jenny was almost asleep when her husband finally slid in beside her. She stiffened and her breathing slowed and deepened. But he wasn't fooled. He nestled his body up against hers, drew her into the warm circle of his arms, pressed her tight shoulders to his chest. He nuzzled his nose into her nape. Slowly inhaled. Slid his hands across her warm curves. Felt her soften. She rolled over to face him, and he tightened his arms around her in the dark.

"How did it turn out?" she whispered.

"Perfect."



PROGNOSTICATING THE WALNUTS

In 1963, Dr. Sam Beckett was beating himself up in the Parkland Hospital over his failure to save JFK. In 1998, I would have settled for getting my stepfather out of bed and into a clean shirt. If I'd had someone like Al whispering advice and truisms in my ear, I would have put up with the serial lechery. But Al was a hologram, whereas the tobacco stains down the front of Richard's Angels jersey were tactile and smelly.

He spent the afternoons sprawled out on the bed he shared with my mom, the electric flash of an old CRT TV squashing the peachy afternoon light as the cable station churned out reruns that weren't yet vintage, just sad. He rarely spoke, eyes fixed on the screen as if enthralled, though he'd already seen every episode. If he was feeling loquacious, he'd grunt as he slung his legs over the bedspread on his way to the bathroom. Eventually, I could interpret those grunts like a first language, shifting through intonations like a miner, each sparkling fleck an indicator of a change in his emotional state. I became a human barometer and a Scott Bakula fangirl in the span of one summer.

My mother, sensing this tenuous affiliation (to my stepfather, not Scott Bakula), did her own mining, substituting the backdrop of a 90s anachronistic sitcom for aggressive feather dusting.

Swishswishswish; Is Richard still in bed?

Where else would he be?

Lemon polish. Spritzzzzz, spritzspritz: What do you two talk about?

Nothing. We just watch TV.

Feather duster falls, wooden handle clatters against the hardwood. At least he could change that dirty jersey. I swear to God, I'm going to burn that thing one day.

She delivered this promise to the living room, gaze bouncing from the black TV screen to the oak side table, looking for a morsel of unmolested dust. Finding none she glanced at me,

CONTINUED...

daring me to say something. She should have known better; I would never object to passive-aggressive arson even if the Angels were 20-12 that season. Brown ostrich feathers waved me out of the room.

I drifted into the courtyard where Gigi, an appellation given to her by my stepfather even though she wasn't his grandmother, was cracking walnuts. Empty shells were scattered around her on the stone terrace, their gnarled grooves complementing the ones in her own brown feet. She didn't acknowledge me, she rarely did. On the special occasions when she noticed me sitting across from her at the dinner table, or next to her on the couch, she recoiled as if from a spark of electricity. Mom and Richard called it dementia, tossing the word around like a hot potato as if they agreed whoever was caught holding it when the timer went off had to finally cave and call the nursing facility.

"Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay, Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay," Gigi warbled. She looked at me and patted the spot next to her on the bench.

I sat down, wary of such easy acknowledgment. She began the ditty again, her feet tapping out the rhythm. When she got to the second verse, she nudged me.

"Come on," she said, "you know this one."

I didn't. I'm not sure who she thought I was, but I'm not someone who knows the second verse of this Victorian dance hall ditty.

"I'm sorry," I told her, "But I don't know the words."

"But you do, I taught them to you!" She said, throwing an uncracked walnut behind her shoulder where it landed in an empty birdbath.

"Sorry, but—"

"You never pay attention," she whined, her face scrunching until wrinkles competed for standing room.

"I'm not sure who you think—"

"You never listen. Not when I teach you songs, not when we learned our catechism, not when I stayed up helping you with algebra so you could graduate!"

She's crying, flakes of walnut shell mixing with tears as she smashed her balled-up fists into her eyes. I looked toward the house, wondering if I'd be blamed for upsetting her.

"Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay," I began, trying to match the melody.

CONTINUED...

Gigi's hands dropped from her eyes and her face morphed into a happy moon as she picked up the tune. We sat there, legs dangling above the bleached stone, repeating the same line, close to, but never attaining harmony. Walnut tree branches and leaves shifted in the afternoon breeze, dappling our faces with shadow and light.

Raised voices crashed into us from the house. A door slammed, and then another. I looked at Gigi. She was cracking walnuts even though she already had enough for a feast. I crept toward the house, pockets swinging full of Gigi's provisions. I patted them as if they contained guidance and protection, a protein-rich talisman or medicine bag. I looked back at Gigi, wishing there were pearls of wisdom lurking in the hollow walnut shells at her feet or the curls of gray hair that covered her head. But there was none.

The vacuum cleaner is running full blast in the living room. Couch cushions lay scattered on the brown carpet. My mother is lost in the vacuum's vibrations. Dust and dirt are sucked up, more and more until the bag is bursting, and still, she keeps pushing the vacuum across the carpet. Her Walkman is clipped to the belt loop of her jeans, the din of whatever cassette silent in the pursuit of cleanliness. The whites of her knuckles are my cue to retreat.

Halfway down the hall I vacillate, tempted by my room where a stack of library books waits unread, or Scott Bakula. For reasons I'll only understand after two separate bouts of therapy, I choose Scott Bakula.

As usual, the TV's blue flash illuminates the curtained room. Ads for diamonds, car insurance, and turbaned psychic readings preamble my favorite time-jumping scientist. Richard looks up as I enter and I notice his Angels jersey is gone, replaced by a green t-shirt he wears when he mows the lawn.

"Your mom said if I didn't change my shirt, she'd stick it in the gas tank of my truck."

I guess that's one way to commit arson.

"She's never appreciated baseball, not like we do," he says, the green light of a car insurance gecko bathing his face. He smiles, face dripping in self-pity.

My insides squirm. I want to tell him he's wrong, I'm no more his ally than I am Mom's or Gigi's. But here I am, sitting at the foot of their bed, instead of vacuuming or cracking walnuts. I'm grateful when Sam appears on screen in a montage of him looking in the mirror not recognizing the person whose body he inhabits.

An hour later, Mom walks into the room and tells me I'm coming with her and Gigi to Wendy's. If she notices Richard lying there, not bothering to look up, she's good at hiding it. She doesn't bother extending the invitation, only the most necessary reasons get Richard to leave the house; burgers and Frosties don't make the cut.

CONTINUED...

I sit up front in our Cadillac sedan, an inheritance from a family friend who died after making it big in the oil fields. The asphalt glimmers and my skin bakes in the heat that radiates from the beige velour seats. The metal seatbelt buckles are unforgiving and the old towel we use to protect our hands when we strap in does little today. The vents on the dashboard are going full blast, but it isn't enough to prevent Mom from glancing in the rearview mirror at every stoplight to make sure Gigi isn't overheating. But Gigi is oblivious as she passes her tongue back and forth across her teeth in anticipation of the burgers and fries, or perhaps just because she likes the feel of enamel against her tongue.

Despite the heat, we order at the drive-thru and eat in the car; Mom mentions something about the sticky tables inside. What she doesn't mention is how the last time we ate inside a restaurant Gigi left the handle down on the soft-serve machine. It took two employees to clean up the mess. Mom was red-faced as she pressed ten-dollar bills into their hands as we left.

I've plowed through half my lunch before Mom breaks the silence so far punctuated solely by the crinkling of hamburger wrappers and ice cubes jostling in paper cups.

"I don't know what we're going to do with Richard," she says, squirting ketchup onto her fries.

The cheeseburger feels like a lead weight in my stomach, and I wonder if I'll make it through this conversation without needing to go to the bathroom. But before I can psyche myself up to use the fast-food bathroom, my seat thumps forward, and my back slams against the velour.

Mom turns around. "Gigi, knock it off!"

Gigi grins, lips rimmed in chocolate frosty.

"How long can he go on just laying around watching TV every day? He hasn't worked in months; our savings won't last forever." I instantly regret ordering a medium fry; I should have gone with the small size. A list of my recent expenditures tumble through my head, the guilt accumulating: one pair of jean shorts, a tube of ChapStick that smells like cinnamon rolls, and the third installment in my favorite fantasy series. I can see Gigi in the rearview mirror happily slurping away, with no regret over the dollar twenty spent on her airy dessert, and I hate her for her innocence.

"—and it's not like they pay me for cleaning the sacristy or washing the altar clothes. I have enough to do as it is what with you and Gigi to take care of."

I think back to the walnuts, to us warbling off-key to that old song, and wonder how much trouble we really are. Years later I will remember how when they met Mom bragged about Richard's good job working for the water treatment plant. Back then he drove a late model

CONTINUED...

Lexus and took her out for three-course meals. I stayed home eating mac and cheese babysat by Stacy, a teen from our church who had a mole that looked like Ohio on her forehead. I can't remember when Richard exchanged the glossy sedan for his truck, maybe when Gigi came to live with us, and a cluster of gray hairs sprouted at Mom's temples. "—I feel like I'm at my wit's end. He won't talk to me. Do you think you could talk to him?"

Mom's request drags me back to the warm car, a melting frosty, and the churning pit in my stomach. She's staring at me, expecting acquiescence. I wonder when I became their defacto go-between, a union of referee and negotiator, my role as a daughter a footnote.

"I'm not sure if that's—"

"TA-RA-RA BOOM-DE-AY!" Gigi kicks mom's seat. Mom's Diet Coke goes flying out of her hands and smacks into the windshield. Brown splotches polka-dot the beige seats, my jean shorts, and mom's linen shirt.

Mom whips around before I can register the soda dripping off the dashboard and into the stream of cool air blowing through the vents, baptizing us with aspartame and caramel color. She grabs Gigi's Frosty, rolls down her window, and lobes it across the parking lot where it lands on the softening asphalt. Mom revs the engine, and we leave Wendy's before anyone can yell at us for littering.

Gigi stares out the back window as the brown puddle grows smaller and smaller. She doesn't cry; her face is frozen between longing and shock.

When we get home, I lead Gigi to her bench, to the pile of walnut shells. Without asking, she fills my pockets with the walnuts she keeps in an old bucket, the kind sold in plastic fishnets for kids to use once at the beach. I pat her hand, trace the deep grooves, then the dry patches around her knuckles.

Inside, Mom is wiping down the kitchen counters. When I close the door, she looks up, and stares at me for a moment, her eyes adjusting to the light streaming in behind me. Finally, she blinks, looks pointedly down the hall, and then back at me. I want to argue, but then I remember ordering a medium fry instead of a small and wonder how many more medium fries are in their savings because if Richard doesn't get back to work soon there won't be any. My stomach hurts again, and my forehead feels damp.

The bedroom door is open, and Richard is laughing. Al is plunking away on his handlink, cigar dangling from his lips. He has that look on his face—tobacco-stained lips turned up in a perfect smirk—he has after he says something crassly sexual. It doesn't occur to me to think less of Richard for laughing at something like that.

CONTINUED...

"Good lunch?" Richard asks, eyes still glued to the TV.

I think of the hot car, of the spilled soda, and of Gigi's frosty probably still seeping into the asphalt parking lot. "It was okay," I lie.

He nods just as the station cuts to a commercial break. A local hot tub seller is walking around his showroom trying to convince the residents of our hot, arid town that what they really need is a human-sized boiling cauldron. Maybe it's the sight of Dan Graham the Hot Tub Man jumping into a hot tub fully clothed, or the fries I finished in two blocks flat, but I excuse myself to use the restroom.

I stay seated longer than I need to, the warm wooden ring leaving deep welts. Magazines with pictures of cheetahs and rhinos on the front, periodical for kids, but purchased for Gigi, lay scattered on the tiled floor. I pick one up and flip to an illustration of a gorilla dangling from some tropical tree branch. A doodle of two girls in frilly dresses, done in purple ink, dances next to the gorilla's back. Hands intertwined, they seem to be skipping in a circle, to what tune I'm not sure, though I can guess. Their legs are kicking, gamboling, and tripping. The breeze they stir ruffles their skirts, or maybe they're spinning around in circles on purpose to see how wide a bell of fabric they can make. They both fall, becoming a clump of happy tears and hiccupping giggles. The gorilla is flat at their side, unaware and immune. When I pull up my shorts, Gigi's walnuts cascade across the floor. I stare at them, trying to divine a pattern in the spread that spans the base of the toilet to a wicker cabinet that houses hand towels. My foray into osteomancy lasts five minutes before I gather the walnuts and dump them into the wastebasket.

Richard is where I left him, remote in his hand, poised as if he'll change the channel. I gather my courage and try to find an opening to broach the subject of his unemployment. The anxiety I've carried with me since lunch propels me forward. I'm filled with dark energy, and the pores on my forehead and palms leak potential. I ball my fists, ignoring the churning in my belly even though I just emptied it.

"I was wondering—"

"You know what sounds good right now?" Richard asks, interrupting like he didn't hear me. "A chocolate milkshake, even a Frosty. That would hit the spot."

I exhale and feel my chest deflate as all the stored-up energy is expelled in one breath. I leave before the next commercial break, Sam whining at Al while Al hammers away on the handlink.

Mom is in the hallway pretending to wipe down picture frames. "What are the lyrics to Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay?" I ask before she can probe me on Richard's lack of employment. She's so shocked by my odd request, she looks up the lyrics and prints them out for me. I take the

CONTINUED...

sheet into the courtyard where Gigi is swinging her bare feet, one of her big toes dragging across the stone.

"Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay," I begin.

Gigi looks at me, eyes blank.



MF DRUMMY

TO ANYONE WHO HAS EVER SAID THAT A POEM CANNOT TEACH US ANYTHING PRACTICAL

you have not read
Donald Platt's "Boundary Waters" because,
if you had,

you would have discovered,
as I did,
that a rollator is not the same as a walker.

A walker
typically has hard rubber feet on the bottom of
each of its four

hollow aluminum legs for exceptional stability and which,
with every step taken,
needs to be lifted forward by the gait-impaired individual

who then steps into the area
where the walker was just a moment before.
It can be slow going.

By comparison, the sporty rollator, as
the name implies,
is an assistive mobility device that rolls along the floor,

gliding effortlessly
in synch with the person's every movement.
Brakes are used

to stop the thing and it often includes
a convenient seat
on which the person can rest.

Many rollators
have a small storage basket or case
for the individual to

CONTINUED...

carry essential personal items, such as books,
or perhaps an
electronic tablet. Walkers rarely include

any of
these features, but both devices allow for ample
height adjustment.

Having recently been diagnosed with
idiopathic peripheral
neuropathy myself, and making a fruitless trip

right before Christmas to
the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota,
where the dozens

of tests I underwent all proved inconclusive,
I found Donald's
mention in passing in his poem of his

body with its nerve
pain, unable to walk anymore without its rollator,
somehow oddly comforting.

I can see my future now: Rollator, walker, wheelchair,
bed.
And that is if I'm lucky.

The boundary waters
in northern Minnesota that Donald dreams of navigating in a canoe
with his wife

are off limits to both of us now.
My whole life
I have pushed up against, and sometimes through, boundaries,

of my own creation
or those that, for whatever reason, appeared before me
seemingly out of

nowhere, circumscribing my life in
a dizzying array of
situations and beliefs and decisions that,

CONTINUED...

today,
seem peculiar, petty, and simply irrelevant.
Already unsteady

on my feet for one who, until just a few years ago,
ran half marathons
every other weekend, I know that I will find it

increasingly difficult
to walk, and then to walk at all, and then to be able
to sit up,

then to feed, dress, bathe, and toilet myself. I will decline.
I will require care
from nurses or, perhaps, my partner in life if she is still here with me

and able to do so.
Friends and family will visit me, if I am so fortunate.
And then I, too,

will begin to dream of crystal-clear boundaryless waters that straddle
the border between
the United States and Canada, where the rocks on the bottom can



DAVID KIRBY

CHELSEA WEDDING

I—we are gathered together, do you, yes I do,
and so on. The pastor was a pleasant-looking 30ish fellow
who also had an MFA in poetry so not too pastor-y.
But when he ran down the whole list of do-yous, I'm sure
I wasn't the only guy on that lawn and certainly not the only
married guy to review his own performance as the pastor
worked his way through one potential pitfall after another:
do you promise to protect her (sure!), to fulfill her needs
(what are those?), to not eat the last of the ice cream
(B- on that one), to cheer for her sports teams (what?),
to protect her from elephants (what?). Then Chelsea and Jack
washed each others' feet, which was a mystery to me
and will always remain so since we were sitting
in the back and couldn't see them, though I imagined Chelsea
sliding her slipper off and putting it to one side as she gazed
dreamily into the distance and thought about the joy to come
and Jack struggling with his shoe laces and regretting
that he had double-knotted them that morning and then
pulling off a sock, giving it a sniff, popping it a couple
of times so it'd be easier to put back on when the foot washing
was done, and so on. Then it was over. Then everybody
went up onto the porch and had cocktails. Then we went
inside and danced. Boy, did we dance. We did the Jerk,
the Fly, the Shingaling, the Boogaloo, and the Mashed
Potatoes. A baby waddled onto the dance floor, and when
the baby began to do baby things, we tried to do them, too.
When the baby fell backward and landed on its bottom,
we did, too. Half of us yelped because the baby was wearing
a diaper and we weren't. The other half were drunk
and didn't yelp. Later I learned that a lot of couples wash
each other's feet these days. Martha and I didn't do that.
We just went down to the registry office and had the guy there
marry us. Same guy had a stack of applications for fishing licenses
on his desk, but I didn't take one; I don't like to fish.
Also I could have called this poem "Chelsea's Wedding"
but it wasn't Chelsea's, it belonged to all of us.



TRICIA KNOLL

GROUND TRUTH

My new neighbor believes in surveys, pink tapes
on a bramble I thought was mine. Where I've pulled
a thousand blackthorn babies to make room
for native forest – ramps, red maple,
Virginia creeper, sumac and chokeberry.

The rock wall is his. Barbed wire
hanging from a fencepost is mine. So too,
morels, from cooled earth,
timed to erupt when oak leaves emerge
as big as a mouse ear. My morels.

He doesn't see them. Or the daffodils.
I tell him what he thought were peonies
just stabbing out
are hostas, even as I know
his deceased wife loved peonies.
Did I ruin his memories? His delusions?

I keep secrets. Where the garter snakes hide
In the rock ledge, where turkeys stir up dust bowls
in dry heat, ephemerals the forest offers
after snow melt, proliferation
of trout lilies.

He's planting peonies and loves the yard art
of his rotating blades, must hear my temple bell
ringing to the bobcat, the coyote, the squirrels,
the owls and ravens crossing. No attention
to dotted lines.



BOWLING BALLS

I feel betrayed by thrift stores.
The gag gifts I buy each Christmas
are costing more than I can afford,
the price of humor rising
steadily like gas at the pump.
I need fifty, maybe sixty white elephants
as the family grows. This one job
that was my father's he passed on
to me as the oldest son. It is
like being willed a bankrupt dairy farm
or the Ford that needed to be towed
out of the driveway. The joke is on me.
One year I bought everyone
a bowling ball, all with a bag, some
with shoes, misshapened, dirtied
by years in someone's garage
or basement. It took me a summer
of garage sales and consignment auctions
to find dozens of used balls.
The truth is we have enough of everything
except time. And that was my point
with the bowling balls. They're clumsy,
clunky like memories. They take weeks
to find and months to get rid of. After
the laugh, the dry smile, the shake
of the head, most of the bowling balls were left
at my sister's house. For months they
sat in her closet, under her bed,
behind the couch. She considered giving
them away on Easter, before that
on Ground hog's day and at a Super Bowl

CONTINUED...

party. One by one she carried them
out to the trash, each time unable
to dump them, our father's quips
lined up next to the recycling.
Balls with blue or green or red swirls
were planted in the flower garden
like gazing balls. My sister gathered
petunias and marigolds
around them, you know, for laughs.



KEN O'STEEN

GROUND CONTROL TO MAJOR TOM

I hadn't left my apartment building in four years. Before that, I'd stayed out in that muck as long as I had only in order to serve the requirements of my multifarious addictions, ingested respectively with needles, straws, pipes, and auto parts if necessary. I'd gone sober. But it was not a world out there fit for vermin or crocodiles, much less a bookish ex-doper with raw nerves, and refreshed perception.

Furthermore, it was too hot. I cocooned inside with my memories of air temperatures fit for humans. After proper baking, LA's erstwhile paradisaical Mediterranean climate had transformed into thirsty desert, the air sizzling enough to boil pigeons.

The tenth floor, where I lived, remained literally above the fray, half the apartments uninhabited, the hallway as quiet and placid as the Pacific Ocean. I had never set foot on the bottom nine, using the elevator for trips to the lobby in order to get the mail. The solitariness of the few of us who dwelled on the tenth floor caused us to be designated as the hideaways. We were an apartment floor of Boo Radleys.

Before burrowing in, I had lived my life as a hyphenate: user-dealer. Daily business affairs included meetings in parking lots, packets exchanged through the windows of cars, storing cash in lockboxes, precision work with scales, and moving bundles from the trunk of one car to that of another on the sides of freeways, or cul-de-sacs on canyon roads. My golden parachute when I cashed out was formidable, and supported my later insularity, as did investments in stocks and mutual funds. The markets remained dear to the prevailing plutocrats, and the dividends were as safe as milk.

Then it happened. The one thing that could force me to leave the building. My ex, Cindy-Rose, needed me.

It had been more than a year since I'd seen her face-to-face. She was every bit her usual self then: hair still platinum blonde, black spider-web eye paint, silver lamé jacket, and skyscraper red pumps. But now Cindy-Rose had her troubles. Her kidneys were on their last leg. She needed a new one to stay among the living, and the waiting list was longer than the Nile. Because there was no one else she turned to me.

First, the nephrologist would have to test my blood and tissue for compatibility. Thus, I'd need to venture beyond the sanctuary of my building.

CONTINUED...

The morning of departure I wore an old pair of shoes that I could prodigiously vomit on without concern if anything I encountered induced revulsion. When I reached the elevator, there was a cardboard sign affixed to the doors bearing a huge question mark in magic-maker indicating the elevator was out of order. The only way down was to take the stairs.

I entered the stairwell with its oriole yellow plaster, and started down, pausing momentarily on the landing. Coming up the steps was the building's super, Dr. Olaru. A sexologist back home in Romania, in America he lacked the credentials required to continue working in his chosen profession. And so, rather than the mysteries of arousal and bodily fluids, Dr. Olaru dealt now with home plumbing, and the penetration of locks with keys. Olaru was a substantial man with a shrub of bushy brown hair on his head, and a pencil mustache that resembled a stripe across his upper lip. I explained Cindy Rose's medical crisis, and my need to venture out in order to have my blood siphoned. "I'll walk down with you," he offered.

As we walked, he said, "I see your lady friends coming and going every once in a while."

"I'm a hermit, not a monk," I told him.

I inquired as we descended the stairs, how the job was going, and about the current state of the building. "In the last few years," he began, "tenants have seemed to congregate geographically according to their cultural and political predilections. For instance, on the sixth there's a bunch of Southerners, or Southerner wannabees. I call them goober peas. A couple of them have Confederate flags on their door, and the hall is always full of biscuit crumbs. I'd swear I heard a rooster in one of those apartments once."

When we got to the seventh-floor landing, he stopped, and took a small bottle out of his jacket pocket. "Little popper," he said, referring to the amyl nitrite. "Takes all my strength and a little more these days to stay alert."

When we arrived on the sixth-floor landing, we had to squeeze around a mini-bike that was parked there. Olaru said, "the entire hallway down the sixth floor is congested. There are Segways, rascals, skateboards, shopping carts, kid's pedal cars. These damn rollers." Olaru had a somewhat exhaustive taxonomy for residents of the building. It was he who had originated the label hideaways for residents of the tenth.

When we stepped on to the second-floor landing, Dr. Olaru said, "I refer to the second-floor as the Second Amendment floor because a bunch of these dementos are packing. Hopefully mayhem can be contained on the second floor if the weaponry comes out during neighbor disputes."

When we reached the ground floor, I thanked Olaru for his service, and he headed for his apartment in back.

CONTINUED...

The lab was in a medical building several blocks away. When I stepped out onto the sidewalk, I cringed like an old vampire shoved onto the Venice boardwalk at high noon. The outside was rather more pungent than I recalled. It smelled like a stale gas station and rotting fruit. The sun felt like a power saw lacing into my retinas. I was an indoors human only now, a reader of books, a watcher of Netflix, and had no place in such racket and sprawl. I walked at a pace just short of a trot, breathing hard, as much from the storming anxiety as from the respiratory and muscle atrophy resulting from lack of exercise.

The medical building was the generic sort, the elevator carriage as shiny as a stainless-steel surgical sink. I went into the small waiting room and gave my name at the desk. When I was called inside, I was directed to a chair where the blood was drawn. The woman in the white coat had to notice looking at my outstretched arm that I had been a naughty boy once. The damage around the veins was extremely subtle now, but I was certain it was evident to a medical person. Once the blood had been collected in tubes I hurried back to my building, no less discombobulated than earlier by the amplitude of the outdoors.

It was the following morning when the call from the lab came: I couldn't donate a kidney to Cindy-Rose. My blood type was incompatible. So, I made the call to Cindy Rose, giving her the shitty news.

*

I had met Cindy-Rose while we were students together at USC, for me an unremarkable run of mediocrity. She was a major in communications, before dropping out to perform in the adult film business, for which she was physically, temperamentally, and libidinally suited. After several years, she used the money she'd earned publicly fornicating to buy a house, benefitting from the freewheeling home loan promiscuity of the early aughts. She eventually set herself up as a one-person talent agency, especially keen to represent former adult performers hoping to make the leap into mainstream acting.

A year after my rejection as a kidney donor, I was still ensconced with the hideaways, Cindy-Rose was still without a kidney, and growing ill. Her creatine levels were ominous, her stamina all but kaput. Her doctor had prescribed oxygen to improve her dwindling saturation levels, and tanks of it were delivered to her house. She called, and asked if I would do her a favor. "What?" I asked.

"Kill me," she demanded. And she was serious.

By then it was woefully apparent no kidney would be forthcoming from the stingy donor list soon enough. She was adamant in her intent to preempt the final stages of suffering and debilitation. She was forty-five, and doomed.

CONTINUED...

The plan was for me to stay for a period of days at her house, allowing us to spend time together before the final sayonara. It wasn't going to be an execution, rather a collaboration that would send her off smoothly.

When the time came, I walked downstairs and knocked on Dr. Olaru's apartment door. He'd agreed to drive me to Cindy-Rose's house in the San Fernando Valley. Olaru drove a bisque-colored Mustang convertible that looked like a crouching animal. As we crawled along Wilshire Boulevard with the top down, our lungs gulping helpings of carbon particulates, and wildfire soot, I could see that little had changed. It was still a blur of apartment buildings and strip malls chocked with nail salons, fitness centers, and franchise sandwich shops.

Cindy-Rose's house, which I knew well enough from before, was a medium-size stucco with an arched portico. The small front yard was bare, the front room of the house sunny and open. The back however was leafy, the rooms decidedly cooler and darker. Cindy-Rose's bedroom, and a den were there. She answered the door clad head-to-toe in glitter-drizzled black spandex, with an oxygen mask hanging off her ears. Her personal style was still a cross between Ziggy Stardust and 'La Dolce Vita'.

The first thing I did was learn how to change the oxygen tanks, so she wouldn't tire herself any longer with that chore. I brought each new one in as needed from the back porch. Cindy-Rose dozed on the couch a lot. She still had a good appetite, and I cooked up clam linguini, and chicken marsala, both specialties of mine. Dinner time was when we talked the most.

On the third day Cindy-Rose finalized her date of departure: two days hence, in the early evening. I had the feeling it was customary to say something of a philosophical or spiritual nature at such times, and that I should appear open to theological discourse. With that in mind, I asked, "I wonder what happens after death?"

"Fuckall is what happens," Cindy-Rose said. "Nada." So, I could check that one off the list.

That night at diner she told me something truly shocking: she was leaving me the house. In response to my amazement, she said, "Why not? It would only go to the state of California otherwise."

"I don't know if I'm the suburban type."

"Get over it. If you keep paying rent, you're a schmuck. In any case, you can turn this place into just as ironclad a hermitage as your apartment, if that's what you want to do. Honestly though, I'm hoping you don't. Either way, the papers already have been signed, sealed and notarized."

CONTINUED...

I thanked her sincerely, told her I wanted to live in the house, and assured her I would “do right by the place” with no clear idea what I was saying, or what I would do.

Each night we sat on the navy sofa in front of the television streaming movies, almost all of them favorites from our preferred era, the Seventies. We went through ‘Shampoo,’ “Brewster McCloud,” “Barry Lyndon,” “All the President’s Men,” “Dog Day Afternoon,” “Nashville,” “Mean Streets.” “A Clockwork Orange,” and “The Long Goodbye.”

On her final day, Cindy-Rose puttered around with what little strength she could manage, and blasted Bowie. I had called in a delivery from Vendome’s Liquors, which arrived a little after noon. It was a couple of packs of Blackened Voodoo, a beer made in Louisiana that allegedly inflicted a hex. Now was the time.

I stood staring out the window, as Bowie’s “Golden Years” thumped away in the background. It was the season of June Gloom, when banks of clouds in for the night from the Pacific Ocean remained lodged in the sky well into the following day. When the sun began burning them away, it brought a sulfuric quality, as if by dispatching the clouds the sky was seared with chemical burns. “Who loves the sun? Not everyone,” Velvet Underground had intoned, incisively.

During the cocktail hour, Cindy-Rose told me, “I’m getting out at a good time. The grass is dried up and brown almost year ‘round now, and the sky is orange half the time from fires. These days, when you watch the news, up is down, and down is up.”

“Yeah, objective reality is a futile argument at this point.”

Cindy-Rose’s self-delivery plan was simple. She would die from ingesting a heavy portion of Nembutal. We would load it into a helping of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, which she was crazy about. If people could indulge themselves with comfort food, why not a comfort suicide?

We decided to put on the Altman classic MASH for the big finale. We sat on the sofa, me sipping on Blackened Voodoo, Cindy-Rose eating her mac n’ cheese. The MASH theme song “Suicide is Painless” was melodically pleasing, and lyrically on point. There was the Last Supper scene, when following the meal, the dentist, Painless Pole Waldowski, climbed into his coffin, and swallowed his “black capsule.”

When Cindy-Rose finished eating, she sat close, and rested her head against my shoulder. She looked up at me and said, “I don’t know why, but I love you.”

“Same to you,” I said. And then she closed her eyes.

CONTINUED...

I mowed the grass regularly, and it returned with an insolence I found infuriating. Other things came out of the ground, like weeds, that I was forced to contend with, lest the yard resemble a Cambodian jungle. If you didn't spruce up things on the outside of the place, it would look like a haunted house. I was trying though, loath to look Cindy-Rose's gift-house in the mouth

I leased a Chevrolet Spark, with an option to buy, and occasionally ventured out to buy provisions. I'd engaged in several conversations with the neighbors. As Cindy-Rose had suggested I was feeling the world out again, if warily. I had forgotten what a tribulation small-talk could be.

After a couple of months, Dr. Olaru came to the house one evening and we barbecued in the back yard. He showed up wearing paisley Bermuda shorts, and a pair of Ray-Bans, even though it was getting dark. He was toting a thirty-pack of Stella Artois.

We stood near the grill chatting, the Steely Dan album from the Seventies, "The Royal Scam" playing in the background. Olaru would intermittently inhale one of his amyl nitrate poppers. I asked him how the job was going, and he told me he'd spent time earlier in the afternoon on the fourth floor, pestered by a pair of tenants while he was trying to work. "A lot of tenants on that floor, obviously bitten by the fame bug, have an inordinate desire to be seen," he said. "These two were trying to record themselves watching me snake a sink pipe, and put it on their Instagram or something. I call the inhabitants of that floor the locusts after 'Day of the Locusts'."

Olaru asked me if during the time I had been going out and about again I'd bumped into people I'd know from before, or had seen regularly in my pre-seclusion past.

"Twice," I told him. "One person said they were shocked to see me, assuming I had died from an overdose, or rotted to death from physical neglect. The other one said they suspected I had got married, and vanished into a connubial black hole. I expect the next person will tell me they assumed I had gone to prison. I mean, none of these are wild guesses. I was expecting to encounter a funk stew of the micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions I've been reading about while cloistered. All I've seen is the same old garden variety assholia."

"There is," Dr. Olaru said, waxing philosophical, "something to be said for observing the trainwreck of humanity up close. It's a shame to be a part of producing so much tragic failure, and then miss out on the opportunity to gawk directly at its manifestations."

"One good thing about being outdoors again," I said, "is the California sunsets." I didn't

CONTINUED...

mention that the air sometimes smelled like a crawlspace of decomposing rats. And going out into the heat could make you feel as though a double layer of North Face parkas had been forcibly stitched around your torso.

We both looked up to see another infernal helicopter strafing the rooftops, either the LAPD or a local news channel, a reminder the world remained an annoying place. At that point, Dr. Olaru took out a cigar the length of a Subway footlong, and the girth of the Goodyear Blimp, and fired it up.

*

I was returning home one afternoon from the grocery store in the Chevrolet, listening to the radio, when I heard for the first time about a new disease spreading like Beatlemania throughout China. I was prepared, and when the Great Sequester came, my phone already was chocked with the numbers for deliveries from my earlier Howard Hughes days. Cindy-Rose had been right: holing up in a house wasn't all that different from stashing yourself in an apartment.

I felt somewhat vindicated in my previous aversions to the world at large. The virus hopping from person to person seemed to exemplify the general menace of the species, and the rebuffing by so many of medical science the declining rationality of my fellow citizens. The Church of Sobriety had opened my senses and my intellect to the acuteness of the decomposition around me. I might well have continued orbiting without interruption in the remote outer space of my apartment on the tenth floor, had I not been called down by my Cindy-Rose in need.

So, during a time of widespread trauma and stark upheaval, for me it was in many ways, same as it ever was.



JOAN RIVARD

MEETING

good luck sweetie

unbearable, the little flicker
in my moms eyes as she begins to hope
again. i slam the car door hard
that flicker i just cant deal with its weight.
hardpacked snow squeak-squeaks a few people
hunch in the doorway grabbing a quick cold smoke
i havent been to meetings in a while.

welcome

but i dont answer cant find my words
i dont know why i failed at rehab and failed again and
its clear i am a lousy human being
but today i aim myself once more at sobriety.
inside warmth chairs being dragged into place
smell of sour old coats and rock bottom. movement seems slow
stuttering disconnected from sounds i might still be high.
someone drops hard into the plastic chair beside me
erupts into phlegmy coughing momentarily unable to speak
lifts a hand and gives me a wave her aluminum crutches
clatter to the floor insanely loud we all flinch.

you ok? i say peachy

we snicker this warm battered room this respite
from clean shiny people so exhaustingly
eager to help confusion doesn't matter maybe its normal
just sharing an unthreatening moment cups
of bitter coffee helping us stick our landings.



ALAN SWYER

BUDD

Only once in the last twenty years or so have I seen even a piece of the Oscars, and that led to quite a stir. It was back in 2013, and I'd reluctantly accepted an invitation to a watch party, figuring I could make show up, chomp on an appetizer or two, then slip out to watch basketball at home.

A series of conversations elongated my stay, which meant that through the corner of my eye I happened to catch the "In Memoriam" segment, hosted by George Clooney. Meaningful names scrolled across the screen – Nora Ephron, Ray Bradbury, Richard Zanuck, Ernest Borgnine – plus others less familiar. But unless I missed it, one important name seemed to be missing.

Early Monday morning, I called the Motion Picture Academy and asked to speak to the person in charge of those honors. After close to five minutes of sitting on hold, a woman came on the line.

"Did I not see it," I asked, "or was Andy Griffith's name omitted?"

"He didn't belong," she answered.

"Because?"

"We consider him a television actor."

Dumbfounded, I took a deep breath. "Can I ask a question without your taking offense?"

"I suppose," she replied dubiously.

"Ever seen A Face In The Crowd?"

After a moment of silence, came a hesitant answer. "Should I?"

"Only if you care about film. Please take my name and number, then promise you'll call once you have."

"It's sounds like this is personal," she said. "Was he a friend or family member?"

CONTINUED...

A few years earlier, after making a documentary about the Latinization of baseball, both on the field and in the stands, I decided to address boxing in a similar way. Because of other commitments – an exploration of the criminal justice system, then a look at a Black cultural mecca in Los Angeles – my plan was to use off days to shoot as many interviews as possible so as to stockpile a library.

Despite the frustrations of filming only sporadically, I was slowly assembling a Who's-Who – Oscar de la Hoya, Sugar Ray Leonard, Julio Cesar Chavez, Larry Merchant, and others – when a producer I'd worked with informed me that one of the world's greatest boxing fans wanted to meet. The name he mentioned floored me: Budd Schulberg.

To my mind, Budd Schulberg was a giant as a screenwriter, as well as an acclaimed novelist. What I didn't learn until then was that he had once managed a couple of fighters.

When a lunch was suggested, I was thrilled. Getting to the restaurant early, I was already seated when a frail-looking older man approached ever so slowly. But all signs of frailty faded once Budd and I started talking.

First and foremost, Budd asked if I had ever spent time in the ring. Far too often, he explained, people use boxing in fiction or films without any real connection to the sport. When I answered that I'd boxed at two different stages of my life, Budd pressed me for specifics.

The first, I told him, came at the Police Athletic League in New Jersey, where I was mentored by a middleweight contender named Gene "Ace" Armstrong.

"Topnotch fighter," said Budd approvingly. "But what made you start?"

"Jewish kids didn't play basketball in my high school."

"And you knew you'd get hazed?"

When I nodded, Budd smiled. "And the second time?"

After my second year of college, I recounted, I got a job writing the Paris section of a travel guide for the youth market, then wound up living in a place without a shower. That led me to the Paris University Athletic Complex, where my attempt to join the basketball team was spurned. Sports that were alien to me – tennis, golf, soccer – were suggested, leading me to ask if there wasn't anything else.

Only if you box, I was told dismissively. When I said yes, I immediately acquired fifteen friends, plus the opportunity to swim and shower six days a week after practice.

CONTINUED...

"I love it!" Budd exclaimed as a waitress appeared to take our orders.

"I'm assuming you know," Budd then said, "that I wrote a novel about boxing that was made into a film."

"The Harder They Fall," I replied. "Based on Primo Carnera, plus mobsters like Frankie Carbo and Blinky Palermo?"

"Inspired by," corrected Budd. "Did you watch the fights growing up?"

I stated proudly that I never missed the Gillette Friday Night Fights: Sugar Ray Robinson vs Carmen Basilio, plus the likes of Dick Tiger, Emile Griffith, and Nino Benvenuti.

"When boxing was boxing," Budd said approvingly. "So tell me the focus of your film."

"As you know better than anyone, boxing has always been about chauvinism – people supporting their own as group after group fought its way out of poverty."

"Jews, Irish, Italians, Poles" said Budd. "And, of course, Blacks. Joe Louis knocking out Schmeling on the eve of World War II made him the first African-American hero."

"So my film, El Boxeo –"

"Spanish for boxing –"

"Is about the Latinization of the sport in the ring and in the stands."

"Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans," said Budd. "Nicaraguans like Arguello, Panamanians like Duran –"

"And at the same time a migration west from Madison Square Garden to LA and Vegas."

"Can't wait to see it," Budd exclaimed.

"Me, too. But it's a long way from finished."

"You'll get there," Budd assured me.

As we dove into our food, Budd quizzed me about the people I'd interviewed. He was particularly curious about Sugar Ray Leonard, whom he had in his Top Ten of all time, and Oscar de la Hoya, the first Latino crossover star. Then he asked for my impression of Larry Merchant, whom he called "the last of the great sports columnists" before transitioning to HBO, where he became the resident boxing expert.

CONTINUED...

By the time we finished our meals, Budd's energy was beginning to fade. "I'd like to do this again, if it's okay with you," he said as he got up from his chair. "And I'd love to see anything you're willing to show me – individual interviews, rough cuts, or whatever."

"I'll send some interviews to you."

Budd smiled, then grew pensive. "With me showering you with questions, I never gave you a moment to ask me. Anything you want to know?"

I nodded. "But not about your writing. Tell me about the Watts Writers Workshop?"

Budd beamed. "Truthfully, that's what I'm proudest of, even more than my own work."

"But how did you get it started?"

"After the awful riots, I wanted to help. The only thing I knew something about was writing, so I started a writers' workshop."

"Was it strange driving down there?"

"My friends thought I was out of my mind. But think of the talent that got its start there. Quincy Troupe, who wrote that great biography of Miles Davis. The actor Yaphet Kotto. Poets like Wanda Coleman and Ojenke. Plus the Watts Prophets, who were the West Coast equivalent of the Last Poets. But I'd bet anything you've got an activist side. Right?"

It was my turn to nod. "I'm on the Board of CBATS, Compton Baseball Academy Training," I said.

"Getting kids off the streets and onto the ball field?"

"Yup."

"And?"

"The Board of one of the Historic Black Colleges."

Budd grinned. "I could tell we had more in common than just boxing. And?"

"Together with the Chief Probation Officer and the Presiding Judge of Juvenile, I created the LA County Team Court, in which first time offenders can face a jury of their peers."

"Which, if I remember correctly, is called front-end intervention. Mind if I ask you one more thing before we go our own ways?"

CONTINUED...

Please –"

"Among the films and books I've written, do you have a favorite?"

"I love all of 'em," I said.

"But if you had to pick one –"

"A Face In The Crowd."

"That's mine, too," Budd gushed, giving me a hug. "Let's do it again sooner rather than later."

Sooner wasn't possible since I was soon off to San Diego to film interviews for what would come to be called *It's More Expensive To Do Nothing*.

Before leaving, I sent Budd the unedited footage I'd shot of Sugar Ray Leonard, Oscar de la Hoya, and Larry Merchant lunch date.

"Great stuff!" Budd asserted when I finally returned his call from San Diego after several days of marathon filming. "I can't wait to see how it cuts together. But tell me about what you're doing down there."

I was documenting, I explained, a pilot program emphasizing remediation rather than incarceration. With the recidivism rate at nearly 70 percent, prisoners upon release were getting loaded, getting laid, then getting into more trouble. The solution, it was felt, was to treat chronic criminality in the same way as a chronic disease. That meant overcoming illiteracy, substance abuse, and an absence of job skills, with the belief that productive citizens would make for a safer community. With that in mind, I had already interviewed not just the Presiding Judge and Chief Probation Officer, but also several ex-cons whose lives had been turned around.

"Beautiful!" blurted Budd. "My kind of stuff."

Before hanging up, the two of us made a date for another lunch soon after my return to LA.

That date, however, wound up being postponed because of what I was told was an unexpected medical emergency.

Apologetically, Budd called a few days later to reschedule. When our get-together was delayed another time it, was clear to me that Budd, who was in his nineties, was rapidly declining.

CONTINUED...

That was reinforced during subsequent phone conversations, in which the strength of his voice progressively diminished.

Still it was rewarding to get his comments about El Boxeo sequences I sent him, and even more exciting when I could get him to talk specifically about his own work.

One Tuesday morning, he spoke about how and why in *On The Waterfront* he made Terry Malloy, the Marlon Brando character, an ex-boxer. Then he informed me that Brando's famous line – “I could've been a contender” – was something Budd overheard in a bar near New York's legendary Stillman's Gym.

A week or so later, after getting him to discuss his documentary about Joe Louis. I asked why he considered him, rather than Muhammad Ali, the greatest of all heavyweight champs. “Without Joe, there'd be no Ali,” replied Budd. “68 wins, 54 by knockout, and only 3 losses. 25 consecutive title defenses – still a record for all weight classes. Plus the longest single reign as champ of any boxer in history. Not to take anything away from Ali, who was a great champion and an even greater man,”

As much as I admired Ali, I wasn't about to argue.

The best phone call came ten days later, when I finally got Budd to talk to me about *A Face In The Crowd*, his parable about a small-town con artist who uses radio to attain the power to sway the country. When I asked if it was true that the Lonesome Rhodes character, portrayed by Andy Griffith, was modeled on a radio personality named Arthur Godfrey, Budd chuckled.

“Only if you throw in some Huey Long,” he replied, “plus a dose of Billy Graham.”

When I wondered if a charismatic so-called populist could rise to power for real in contemporary America, Budd groaned. “The question is not could it happen,” he stated emphatically, “but will it happen.”

Though Budd made me promise that I would give him an advanced peek at *El Boxeo* before its first festival screenings, that was not to be the case. Sadly, he passed away just as I was finishing post-production.

But I did eventually get a call from the woman I'd spoken to at the Motion Picture Academy. She apologized profusely, then proceeded to rave about not just the film, but especially Andy Griffith's performance.

“I hope the film's not prescient,” she commented. “I'd sure hate to see a con man use radio or TV to rise in politics the way he did.”

CONTINUED...

Unfortunately, we now know all too well that the woman's fears were not unfounded.



ANNE MARIE POTTER

SEQUEL TO “THE LAST PLACE HE SAW HER”

And now the God-damned dog was wearing his mother's scarf.

The tornado that carried his mother away took her house as well, and Gavin's father had come to live with them. The old man never returned to his position at the bank. Instead, he'd spent hundreds of hours driving the rusting, storm-dented Buick from township to township, staring at branches and peering into ditches. The only thing he'd ever come home with was a half-dead dog.

Natural disasters in Pennsylvania normally ran the gamut from floods to fires, with an occasional blizzard or nuclear meltdown. Nobody had expected the F4 that tore the town up by its roots on that Remembrance Day. Iris Wyn had never been found. Two days after the tornado, investigators from three agencies met with Myrin and Gavin in the high school cafeteria turned command center. Stretching an area map across a table where Gavin had once eaten his tuna-fish sandwiches—a table that had served as a morgue gurney the night of the storm—a pair of weather scientists used compasses to map trajectories and make debris predictions. Best guess, his mother's body was caught in the top of a tree or floating in someone's livestock pond.

Days of uncertainty had stretched into months of unrelenting grief for Myrin Wyn. It had been hard watching hope die in the old man's eyes. An arthritic stoop started folding him in half and he grew so thin that bones threatened to poke through rice-paper cheeks. When his heart began to fail, Gavin and Diedre started looking at nursing homes. And then Myrin Wynn had taken a drive down Pennside Road and found a dog in a ditch—a filthy half-crippled skeleton with listless eyes and festering wounds full of burrowing grubs. The vet recommended euthanasia, but the old man had become so agitated that the veterinarian relented and began tweezing out wriggling white larvae and disinfecting wounds. Myrin had refused to leave the dog at the clinic and the nurse sent them home with best wishes and a paper bag full of doggie drugs and vitamins.

The dog recovered and then flourished at the center of Myrin Wyn's world. Diedre supervised the medication, but it was Myrin who watched the clock and helped the dog swallow pain

CONTINUED...

pills and antibiotics on a strict schedule. She slept in a soft bed beside the old man's chair, close enough for his hand to rest on her patchwork of red fur and bald pink skin. Soon she was able to lift her head and began watching him with big brown eyes, the cartilage in her ears twitching at the soft sound of his voice.

"All he does is sit in that room," Gavin complained to Diedre, "him and that damn dog."

"That dog is keeping your father alive, Gavin. You should be grateful."

His wife was right, as usual. His father was no longer a walking corpse. The old man stoop and shuffle was gone and, as long as the dog was close by, he ate decent meals. Before long, old man and mutt were making daily journeys to the mailbox at the end of the driveway, although both needed to stop for an occasional rest. Gavin's daughters adored the dog. Brit snuck her snacks while Tatie whispered pre-adolescent secrets into her red floppy ears. Baby Iris clipped handfuls of plastic barrettes into the dog's long red fur and more than once they'd found her using the dog's soft round belly for a pillow. The dog took it all in stride, seeming to have an affinity for small, energetic things. She was a sweet-tempered, beautiful animal and Gavin loathed her.

He'd hated the dog since the morning he walked past his father's room and heard "I love you" spoken in the old man's timid voice. Gavin's feelings had been fish-tailing ever since. He refused to believe that it was simple jealousy, although he had every right. His children never lit up when they saw him, never threw themselves at his feet. And his father sure as hell had never said "I love you" to his only child. Gavin doubted if his father had ever said those words to anyone before, and now he was whispering that mushy crap to a damned dog, of all things. Suddenly, Gavin was seeing something soft in the center of his father and it unsettled him. Everything Gavin had ever learned about being a man—the no-nonsense focus on the important things, the air of strong, silent authority—he learned from watching his father walk through the world. It was funny that Gavin had become a lawyer—a professional mouth-piece—because if he knew anything, it was that real men kept their mouths shut until they were ready to say something important, something world-changing, something God-damn empire-building. Chitchat was for girls, and everyone knows that girls are weaker than boys. Weaker, and not as smart.

Gavin threw himself on the couch, loosened his tie, and kicked his shoes off. Nobody would dare bother him here. It was his den, his bear-cave, his man-cave. No women, children, or dogs allowed. He took another swallow of scotch. He didn't drink often, so it didn't take much to get him mullered as a newt. Five fingers into the bottle and his world was disintegrating at the edges.

Who was he kidding? He'd been losing chunks of himself since he fell in love with Renee What's-her-name at fourth-grade band camp. Every time he thought he had it figured—that

CONTINUED...

whole male/female thing—somebody came along and stuck a fork in his guts. A God-damned spaghetti fork...

About three minutes after he'd met Diedre, he'd known that she was both stronger and smarter than he was and, truth be told, that was why he'd pursued her. He was sure that, given enough time and the right circumstances, she'd fall, and he'd prove what he had known all along—that he was, by nature, superior to any woman...to every woman. He needed to prove it, by God, because if he didn't, or couldn't, he'd lose the place he'd so carefully carved out for himself...ruler of all, master of everything. Men were supposed to be better at everything; it was simply the way of things, the natural order. If he waited long enough, everyone would know that he was king of the whole shebang and Diedre was only playing second fiddle in the Wyn band. But he'd been waiting for fifteen years and now he had a wife who didn't need him for anything but sex, three iron-willed daughters that were smart enough to become president, a fly-away mother, and a father who babbled nonsense to furry things. Even the idiotic dog ignored him, for Christ's sake.

God hated him.

Movement in the doorway caught his attention, a small hand twirling a Barbie doll by its hair. So much for the man-cave. Gavin did his best to look sober and not slur his words. "Hello, Tatie, my Tatie."

The ten-year-old sucked on her lower lip and regarded him through narrowed eyes. After a moment, she filled her lungs to capacity and yelled, "Mommy, Daddy's sozzled!"

Gavin watched her run down the hallway toward the kitchen and waited for the inevitable second act. It didn't take an oracle to predict the next cave-crasher and, sure enough, a minute later, Deidre was standing in the doorway. She didn't look angry. She looked... beautiful. Even dressed in baggy sweats and carrying the thirteen pounds she'd gained with Iris, she looked like she could step right into a Greek painting. Maybe playing second fiddle to a Goddess wasn't such a bad deal.

"Where did our daughter learn a word like 'sozzled?'" he asked, doing his best to look dignified. Hard to do when you're on a slow slither between chartreuse couch cushions.

"Word Hippo. She and Brit are obsessed."

Gavin tried to extricate himself from the couch, but only succeeded in spilling his drink. "Seems like only yesterday they were obsessed with boobies and boogers. I suppose we better start saving for medical school."

"For Tatie, definitely. Brit seems to think that what you do is pretty cool. Although with her personality, I'd be looking for her at the plaintiff's table."

CONTINUED...

Gavin was surprised that his daughter even knew what he did for a living. Surprised, but pleased. "Remind me to retire before that happens. I'm not sure I could survive the humiliation of getting trounced by my own kid."

Diedre laughed: a soft wind-chime. Gavin remembered the days when she had played the flute in the Drexel Symphony Orchestra, her long blond hair put up with a fancy comb. How, after the concerts, she'd held on to him to keep from falling in her high heels. How she'd burrowed into his overcoat to keep warm during the frigid Philly winters. He hadn't always been superfluous.

"Mommy?" The voice came from the doorway where all three of their daughters were lined up like little Russian nesting dolls. At the end of the line, like a furry red stepchild, the dog panted and stared. "Iris got a splinter," Tatle announced, "I think you have to do surgery."

Little Iris held up the offending digit and sniffled.

"Oh dear," Diedre said solemnly. "Shall I get out the medical magic wand?"

Three heads nodded in unison, and they left Gavin sitting alone in his man-cave. He missed them immediately. The dog was the last to go, but not before overturning the scotch bottle with a solid thwack of her long red tail.

Then the dog was back, this time with Gavin's father in tow. The old man pointed at the wet spot on the carpet. "Your bottle tipped over."

"With a little help from somebody's tail."

His father grinned and patted the dog's head. "Good girl."

"Dad, I think we should go hunting before the weather turns. Just you, me, and the redhead." Gavin wasn't sure why he'd said it. Maybe it was the booze. Maybe it was Diedre's unspoken reminders that his father was an old man and old men didn't live forever. Maybe it was the way his mother had left without warning.

His father grinned even wider. "We'd like that, son. We'd like that a lot."

Bumping over back roads with his old man, dressed in matching camo, Gavin was bitten by nostalgia. "Just like when I was a kid, huh, Dad?"

Myrin Wyn smiled. "As long as we're cold, wet, and miserable, and don't manage to kill anything bigger than a mosquito."

CONTINUED...

Gavin laughed. "Yeah, we were never very good at this, were we? And I don't know about you, but I'm too old to sleep on the ground. That's why I borrowed this little Airstream. It'll be the perfect size for the two of us." Sitting between them, the dog whined in a pitch that could have shattered glass. Gavin rolled his eyes. "Okay, okay, it'll be the perfect size for the three of us." He could have sworn the mutt was smiling. Really.

A half-hour later, the trio was moving slowly through the gentle slopes and gullies that characterized the Erie Drift Plane. In a month or so, this corner of Pennsylvania would be buried under lake-effect snow, but today was glorious. Morning was moving across the woods, briefly highlighting silver maple and yellow-poplar in soft October sunlight. Even the jo-pye weed and bull thistle looked delicate and regal in the autumn cabaret. After the tornado, people watched every dark cloud with anxious eyes, but days like today made people want to trust God again.

"I don't suppose you know anything about hunting birds?" Gavin asked the dog.

She stared up at him with brown liquid eyes and wagged her tail.

"That's what I thought," Gavin said. For the first time, he noticed that she was graying around the muzzle. He'd had to help her out of the truck, but he thought it was because she'd been sick and weak for so long. But now he realized that the dog was just old. Please hold on, he thought. My father couldn't stand it if you died. His heart would fall right out of his chest. Gavin had spent a lifetime battling sentimentality. It was so weak, so female. These days, though, his mental filter was riddled with holes and the thoughts clobbered him with bouts of sadness he could barely endure.

As they stepped from field to forest, things grew dark, and it was easy to think about the end of the world. The tornado had saved its wrath for town and there hadn't been a forest fire in the area since 1922. Nothing held the vines and sucker trees in check and overhead was a tangle of final-growth vines dying to sticks. Poison ivy climbed trunks and competed with the oak and maple leaves for brightest patch of red. The pines and hemlocks were still dropping cones and the chipmunks and tree squirrels were moving their fattening bodies from pile to pile. As Gavin helped his father over logs and down embankments, he thought about how time changed lives. He hadn't touched his father since he was a little boy—a big hand holding a little hand to cross the street—and now they were holding hands again, a beefy hand with manicured and polished nails holding a Halloween decoration—a skeleton hand sheathed in paper Mache.

It had been a wet year and the forest floor was thick with rotting leaves and logs. The wild grape and blackberry brambles were still hanging on to their leaves and the poison sumac was turning an eye-searing orange. Gavin had bought the acreage from a farmer who had run Herefords on the property for thirty years. The herd had left mud and manure slicks running down the creek beds into the stream. The last of the cows had gone to auction long

CONTINUED...

ago, but their sharp, heavy hooves had cut permanent paths down to the water. A good three inches ran over the fossil-pocked shale in the streambed. Gavin watched the minnows dart and the water striders skitter across the surface of small pools. He wondered if his daughters might enjoy an occasional afternoon down here. Maybe they'd like to look for crawdads and newts. Maybe they'd just enjoy spending the day with their father.

They had a little while before the impending darkness would turn roots and stumps into leg-breakers, but his father looked tired. It was a good thing the mini-fridge was stocked with cold-cuts, because they hadn't fired a shot, much less bagged dinner. The dog had flushed a rabbit and, with great contentment, sat down to watch it nibble grass. Empty-handed, the trio made their way back to the trailer and by sundown were staring at a campfire, drenched in mosquito repellent and utter laziness.

Gavin wasn't sure how he'd let it happen. He couldn't have been more surprised if a squirrel had pointed a rifle at him. Thinking about where he could take his family on vacation next summer—they'd never been to Yellowstone—he was absent-mindedly running his hands through the dog's silky fur. When she moved in and licked his chin and cheek, he said "Yes, yes...I love you, too." Unable to believe that his own mouth had uttered such mush, Gavin looked around to see if anyone had heard him. In the dim firelight he saw the awful truth—the dog and his father were both smiling at him. Really.



ESSENTIALS

I wish I still liked being high, doped up, baked
& buffered by fog, especially now it's legal
to go about my day half-stoned writing poetry.
I'm glad my parents drank, even though it gave me
loneliness. It was worth it to see the warm parlor light,
hear the ice cubes tinkle against the glass, listen
for my mother's harsh tone to turn soft, that moment
she tucked me into bed, careful wobbly feet in heels,
liquor scented dreams. I'm about to be wealthy.
I keep checking my accounts, list charities on the back page
of this book I'm reading. I'll give it all away I promise
that's a lie. I'll keep enough for my long list of life essentials,
mostly Microsoft on every device and money to renovate
this house of ghost rooms. Then I'll start on the rest
of the world everyone who needs a little something
to get through the day or their life, a mortared stone hut
buttressed with moss and soft beds, chickens and a well
in every yard, a little toke of this, a little smoke of that.



LA CHAPELLE DE SAINT-VÉRÉDÈME
SANILHAC

I hear the music, a radio
or someone's phone, as I walk
the gravel path to the river.
And then voices from above,
where I was going to climb
the stone steps to the chapel,
but find the way is blocked:
Chantier interdit au public.
Young men speaking Arabic
while they work. Agile
despite the tools on their backs,
they run down the path
at the end of their work day,
music still playing. In French now,
they tell me they're restoring
the hermit's chapel built on the site
of his cave, where he ate what
he could forage, slept on the stone
floor. It was the late 600's.
The workmen are not from here,
may not know the stories
of the saint's prayers bringing rain
to this dry land, the saint-less river
so low on this late summer day
it barely flows. They do not believe
in Christian saints, but they have faith
in stone, in work, in the restoration
of what was built to be beautiful,
and will be beautiful again.



NICOLE MARIE CURTIS

RIDING THESE WAVES

Virginia Woolf and I ramble down PCH.
Alongside the water, it's art and sense.

She guides me now that I'm alone,
and she's waited a long damn time for her moment.

The waves
are crashing at Bolsa Chica.

Home is here, and I am thinking about my first boogie board,
my first sail, and my first time kissed on a pier.

I ended up far away from formative things,
ignoring sand in the coochie of my suit.

On my wedding day, Virginia's in my ear.
She says, Not yet.

I spent so many years trying to contradict
something someone maybe possibly thought.

Child bride, gold digger, damaged, drunk,
bimbo, sad, daddy issues, you name it.

Until a breaker popped, and I could not remember why.
My sister says a lady knows when to leave.

This legend, my girl, isn't mad at me.
I was a little woman arrested in development.

CONTINUED...

Every time I thought of rocks,
Virginia sent a friend, instead.

You can get that room of your own.
She repeated it often.

In this noisy shack on Ocean,
I believe her.



DANIEL BLISS

PARALLEL GHOSTS

I'm brave enough not to ask
what we do outside each other's sight.

How delicate we seem, like a misstep
of affection will cause one of us to run.

Everything we promise each other
is limited to the end of my driveway.

I haven't found a way to admit how this year of you
redefined a decade in the Cumberland Valley.

Stay and give the left side of my mattress purpose.
I'll brew coffee the way you like,

late night, near white, too sweet,
from aerosol can cream.

If it's necessary to pretend, I'll set the clocks
for an earlier hour, prolong night

until we find what it takes,
to make it to morning.



CAROLINE MORETON

HOW THINGS ARE DONE AROUND HERE

Step out of the truck slowly. Put your cowboy hat on with one hand like they do in the movies. Kick the gravel with your boots like the other boys do.

It's one of those evenings on the cusp of spring where it's crisp but not cold. Still a few months before it's too hot to breathe. The air in this parking lot smells like horses and gasoline. The sun's just starting to set.

Take your time getting to the stadium's gate. Don't look around for anyone in particular. Walk past the rows of massive pickup trucks just like yours, the men stepping out of them like they own the place. When you're through the gate, let the woman walking in beside you go first because that's how things are done around here.

Walk slowly, like you, too, own the place. Make eyes at the rodeo queen hopefuls lined up at the entrance, handing out programs. They look so pretty with their makeup and their perfectly curled hair. Their sweetheart smiles. Smile back. Consider tipping your hat but don't because maybe that's too much.

Take a seat on the metal bleachers. Feel the cold through your jeans. For God's sake, stop looking around for Tyler. Stop thinking about him. You think he thinks of you this much? Forget about it.

People around you laugh. Women with long, curled hair and cowboy hats. Men with large belt buckles and boots. Guns proudly displayed on their hips.

Watch the rodeo clown set up and remember when you used to come here with your dad. Remember how hard he made you laugh. Forget how he looked at you when he caught you playing dress up in your mom's high heels.

Don't look at the guy in front of you or his holster. Don't wonder what he'd do if he found you out. Stand for the national anthem. Take your hat off and put it over your heart. Sing along.

The announcer says, "In this town, we let our boys be boys."

It won't be like this in Los Angeles. You're seventeen. You're almost out of here.

The rodeo queen hopefuls come parading out on their horses, carrying the American flag.

CONTINUED...

They race around the ring. The rodeo begins.

Look at the boy on the horse in the center of the ring. Tyler. Don't stare. Hold his gaze but don't let anyone around you see you smile. Hope they don't wonder who he's smiling at.

He loops a rope around a calf's neck then slams it into the dirt, tying its hooves together. Don't think about it. Don't think about last night. Stare at the sun setting over the hills in the west. Those calves haven't done anything wrong. But that's just how things are done around here.

Don't wonder how Tyler can be so rough out there. Don't think about his friends, the things he lets them say to you. One day you'll know it's okay not to forgive people.

Greet your brother with a handshake when he arrives. Hold his hand firm, like a man. Ask him to buy you a beer. Drink it like you like it. Two guys having a beer together.

When he asks, "Isn't that Tyler?" shrug. Stop checking out Tyler. Remind yourself to text him later that he looks good in that saddle.

The rodeo queen hands out signed headshots. Let your eyes fall down her body the way you've seen the other boys do it. Laugh at a comment your brother made like you think that way, too. Like it doesn't disgust you how he talks about a girl your age. Know that in a year, this will only be a memory.

Picture holding hands with a boy you're not afraid of, walking down Santa Monica Boulevard. Get lost in that for a moment but only a moment because around here you can't think like that. Taste it just enough to keep you going then bury it.

Tyler's out of the ring now.

Say, "He was good" to your brother but say it without emotion. "He puts on a good show, I mean."

The barrel racers shoot out one by one. It's only the women's event, but you think it's the coolest, how agile they are. Agree with your brother when he says about one of them, "She's a pretty young thing."

But tell him to knock it off when he asks the rodeo queen if horses aren't the only thing she can ride like that.

"She's sixteen," a woman behind you kicks his back.

Grab your brother's arm when he stands. Whisper, "Don't."

CONTINUED...

Hold his arm tighter when he tries to jerk it away. Borrow his language; tell him, "She's just a woman, what does she know?"

Watch for signs he'll escalate it. Add, "An old woman."

Wait for him to sit down then make an excuse to leave. Walk off the pit in your stomach. Tyler's heading straight toward you. Is he going to say something? Here? In front of everyone? Don't be surprised when he shoves you with his shoulder. Of course he wouldn't say anything. Forget about it. He's sitting with his college friends now. Avoid those guys.

Get a burger from the stand then go back to your brother. Give half to him because you feel sorry for him. He'll be here forever. The bull riders are about to start and he gets so excited.

Agree with him when he says, "I coulda done that too if Mom had let me."

Ignore your phone buzzing in your pocket. Tyler always wants you when it's the most dangerous. Avoid him. He'll end up married to a girl he grew up with. But you deserve to be more than a stop on a long drive.



PAUL LEWELLAN

THE STATE OF DISCOURSE AT THE BIG BOAR

Dr. Henry Simmons stepped out of his atomic silver Lexus LC into the thick night air. He unbuttoned his Hugo Boss sports coat, loosened his tie, and inhaled the blues spilling out of Big Boar Bar and Grill. Opening the frosted glass doors, a wall of sound assaulted him while a full-figured woman with short-cropped pink hair belted out Bessie Smith's "Down Hearted Blues." Hank inhaled the lyrics and all of life's complexities blew away.

He last visited The Big Boar a marriage ago with Millie his podiatrist. That was before the new fermentation tanks. His most recent ex-wife Ramona (the Heidegger scholar) didn't drink beer, hated the blues, and like Heidegger was a Nazi. Unlike Heidegger, she was double-jointed, oral, and monogamous.

The Boar's walnut bar and brass rail ran twenty-five feet to Hank's right with thirty-two craft beers on tap. Five years ago, they'd served Bud, Bud Light, and Corona. The band launched into "Hesitation Blues." The singer wore baggy jeans, a sweat-drenched tank top, and beaten down blue Justin boots. Her eyes reminded him of his first ex-wife, Elizabeth, the Existential Nihilist. "Can I get you now," the singer moaned, "Lord, must I hesitate?" The crowd moaned with her.

When a tattooed redhead in a sun-bleached Bo Diddley concert-tee got up to find the gender-neutral bathroom, Hank eased into the empty barstool. The bartender was from his graduate seminar on Wittgenstein. "A pint of Spotted Cow, please, Heather."

"I'm Alysce. Heather dropped the class."

"My apologies." He took a second look. "You wrote the paper on "Wittgenstein's Beetle Box and the Language of Social Media."

"You remember that?"

"A nice piece of work." She beamed. "How long before the band takes a break?"

"Any time now."

"What are they drinking?"

CONTINUED...

"You know bands," she shrugged. "They'll drink what you're buying."

"Well, don't let them go thirsty, and put it on my tab." Hank handed her a twenty. "For your trouble." Alysce slipped the twenty into her apron pocket instead of the tip jar.

At the break Hank followed the band into the back ally. They were drinking pints of Raging River IPA and Bent River Stout from the pitchers Alysce provided. The lead singer drank Perrier.

Hank didn't intrude, choosing to listen to theirs lively discussion of the merits of Popeye's chicken versus KFC, followed by a critique of the cramped condition in the band's Winnebago, and despair over the unlikelihood of getting laid tonight.

As the muscular Hispanic drummer reached for a pitcher to replenish his glass, Hank pulled a stainless-steel flask from his sweat-stained sport coat. "Anyone interested in something stronger?"

Only the young base guitarist—caramel skin, kinky black hair, and a rail thin body—reached for the flask. When he took a sip, his eyes widened. "What is this stuff?"

"Twenty-one-year-old Glenfiddich single-malt scotch."

"It's older than you are, kid," the drummer scoffed.

"Never had anything like this." He took another drink.

The lead guitarist with long gray hair nudged the boy aside and reached for the flask. "That's because it's \$170 a bottle." He eyed Hank skeptically before taking a drink. "Son-of-a-bitch," he sighed, "Isn't that something?" He took another drink, savoring the scotch. "Was a time I could afford this stuff..." He tried to hand the flask back to Hank.

Hank shook his head. "I've got more."

The lead guitarist passed the flask on to the corpulent keyboard player, then wiped his sweaty palm on his ancient Levis, and reached out to shake. "I'm Wally Shepherd. No relation to Kenny Wayne Shepherd, though I toured with him back in 2013."

Hank thought about that statement for a moment. "You played guitar with Kenny Wayne Shepherd?"

Wally patted Hank on the back. "I might have served in a backup capacity..." They shook hands. "You, my friend, are not a casual blues fan."

CONTINUED...

"I am not." He glanced in the direction of the lead singer who stood away from the band, sucking on an e-cigarette, and drinking another bottled water.

"Recognize her?" Wally asked.

"Should I?"

"Elizabeth Wilkens. Everyone calls her Betty. Used to be married to Orlo Beaks."

Hank's eyes widened. "Betty Beaks!?"

"She's come out of the rabbit hole." He nudged Hank in her direction. "Go pay your respects."

As he approached the blues legend, Hank struggled for an opening line. "Vaping sucks," he blurted out.

Betty Beaks gave him a disgusted look. "If I wanted a lecture, I'd..."

Hank raised his hand to stop her. "There are better ways to kill yourself." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of unfiltered cigarettes.

"Camel Straights?"

"Been smoking them since I was twelve." He fired up his Zippo lighter and lit the cigarette. "Interested?" She snatched it from his mouth and took a drag. He tapped out another for himself.

They smoked in silence while they studied each other.

"Haven't seen you here before," she said finally.

"I came in a lot in the early days, before it became a craft brewery."

"I wasn't around," she said, glancing at his empty ring finger. Back then Betty was in federal prison. "Now we play this joint every few weeks. Always a packed house."

"I wouldn't expect anything less."

She took a deep drag and held it. After she exhaled, she added, "It's part of our extended Midwestern tour."

CONTINUED...

"I'm Henry Simmons, friends call me Hank."

That amused her. "Have many friends, Hank?"

"Precious few."

"Why is that?"

"I'm Chair of the Philosophy Department at the University."

Betty laughed a deep throaty laugh. "Which makes you the biggest asshole on campus."

"I'm in the Top Five."

"Impressive. The U is a large institution." She took a final drag before pitching the cigarette into the alley. "My son attended briefly, before my release." The drummer caught her eye and pointed to his Apple Watch.

Hank pulled out a second flask. When Betty declined the offer, he passed it to the drummer. "Twelve-year-old Glenfiddich. My personal favorite. Smoky with peat undertones."

"Well aren't you a traveling liquor store?" she scolded.

"I was provoked."

"I bet." She tossed the empty water bottle into the dumpster and reached into his pocket for another Camel.

"I teach Introduction to Philosophy in an auditorium filled with 373 hormonal and tech-obsessed twenty-year-olds. My seminar on The Continental Tradition and Philosophical Hermeneutics has five thesis candidates, none a native English speaker, unless you count the aboriginal Australian woman. And the revision of my popular textbook, *Philosophical to the Core*, is due in five weeks, but I haven't started the final chapter on Hot Young Philosophers, basically because I don't give a shit about any of them."

Betty pointed a scolding finger at him. "That chapter is what makes your textbook better than the rest."

Hank stared in disbelief. "How would you know that?"

"I served thirteen and change. I had time on my hands, so I took online classes. Fans sent

CONTINUED...

me books." Betty raised the cigarette to her lips. "Your text was not a personal favorite, but I read the last chapter three times because it wasn't about old dead white guys. Still, you came up short on black women."

Hank snorted. "There are 11,000 members of the American Philosophical Association. One-hundred-and-twenty-five of them are black." Betty waited. "Thirty of those are women. There wasn't a large pool to choose from for the chapter."

"And whose fault is that, Mr. Tailored Suit, Mr. Privileged White Guy, Mr. Department Chair?"

Hank held up his hands in surrender. "Guilty as charged."

"Any bright spots in your seminar? The aboriginal woman...?"

"Bindi shows promise." He looked around uncomfortably, wondering where his flasks landed.

Betty handed him a Perrier. "I've got a Fifteen-Year Chip in my pocket, Hank, and I know where there's a meeting after the bars close. You game?"

"Best offer I've gotten all night, but I'm going to decline."

"Sobriety is an acquired taste."

"Can't be easy playing in bars every night."

Betty pointed to the young bass player. "Ricky helps: a hand to hold; a shoulder to cry on."

Hank raised his eyebrows. "You two an item?"

"Definitely. I'm his mother."

Hank remembered the story. The boy had been five when Ricky witnessed his father's murder at the hands of his abused mother Betty. Hank tried a different conversational track. "Your band rocks."

"We've got an album climbing the blues charts. Ricky says there's 'buzz on social media,' whatever the hell that is."

"It means you're famous with the millennial set, as well as with old blues hounds like me." Betty raised her eyebrows. "So, you're not intimidated by my fame?"

CONTINUED...

"Never." When she appeared skeptical, he added, "I once shared a vegetarian pizza with Christie Brinkley in the Green Room of the Dr. Oz Show. She was reading the Cliff Notes on The Gay Science. I helped with the difficult parts."

Betty sloshed a mouthful of water and then spit. "Isn't that the book where Nietzsche maintained that 'God is dead'?"

"Yes. 'And we have killed him.' As an aspiring philosopher, Christie struggled with the concept."

The back kitchen door flew open and a voice bellowed out. "Crowd's restless! Break's over."

The guys filed back into the bar: Nestor the drummer, Ricky the base player, Vince the corpulent keyboardist, and Wally the lead guitarist. The often-married philosophy prof paused at the doorstep with the road-weary former felon, featured singer, and single mom. "Staying for the next set?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

"The band drank you out of scotch."

"I know the bartender. I won't get thirsty." He hesitated. "If you skipped the AA meeting, we could get acquainted."

"If I skipped the meeting, I'd flush fifteen years of sobriety down the toilet." Betty could hear the band playing softly, quieting the crowd, giving her a moment with Hank. "I read Nietzsche hated alcohol."

"He did, for the same reasons he shunned Christianity. They both numb pain and reassure people that things are fine while sapping them of the will to change."

"But you don't agree?" Hank shrugged. "If you came to the meeting, we could debate that." "You'd doom me to a life of sobriety?"

"It is a risk...."

Hank thought about Alysce the bartender and her dismal paper on Wittgenstein. He didn't relish the mess he'd make if he gave into that temptation. "I'll switch to coffee and join you after your last set."

"We can walk to the meeting from here." A smile spread across Betty's lips. "You realize, after my first husband, I'm not a fan of most men."

CONTINUED...

"All my exes can testify, I'm not most men."

She laughed and gave him a hip bump. "The band sleeps in the Winnebago. We'll park in the Walmart lot and load out in the morning for Racine. It can get crowded."

"I own a condo on the Mississippi River with a spectacular view of the sunrise from the master bedroom."

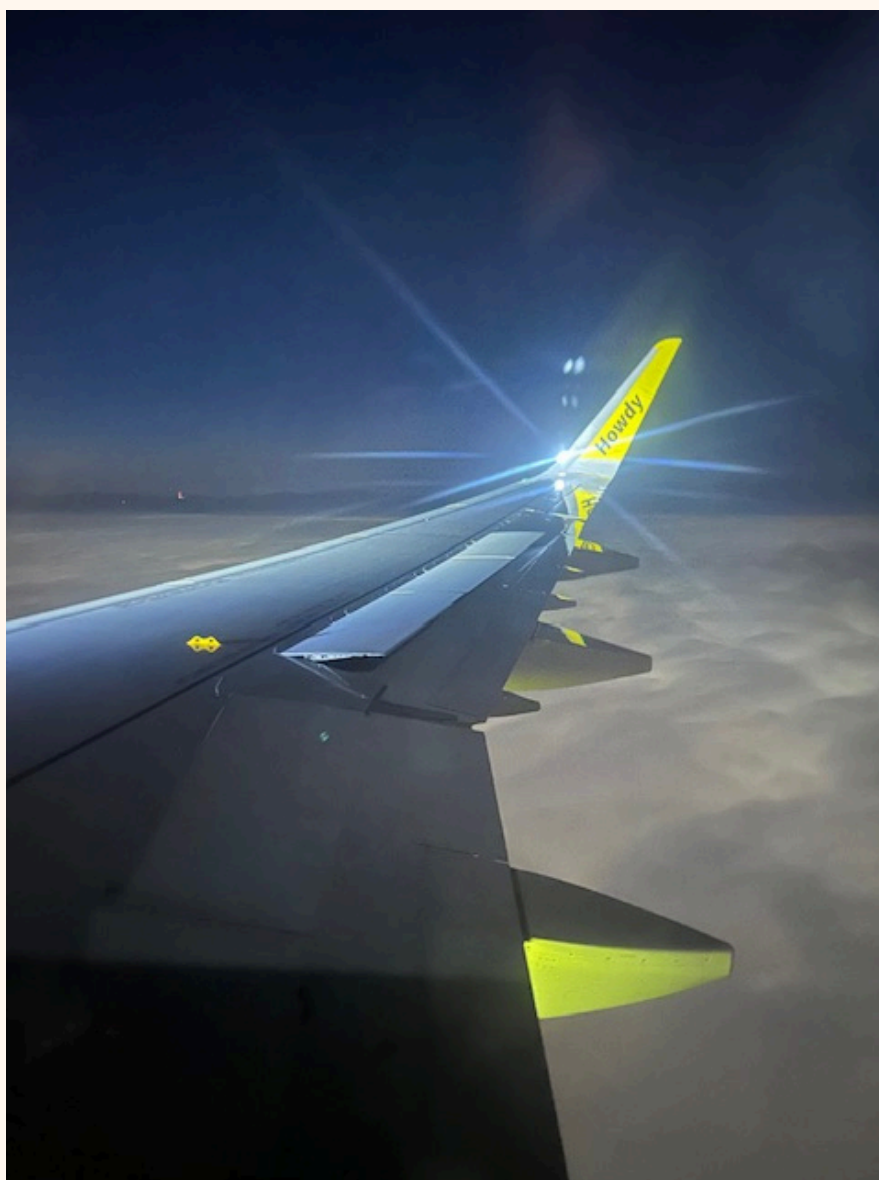
"Tempting...." Inside the Big Boar, Betty's band cranked up the opening bars of Willie Dixon's "Spoonful." That was her cue.

"Gore Vidal said a person should never pass up a chance to have sex or to appear on television."

"Let's talk about that after the meeting." Betty kissed him before retreating into the bar.

The bitter taste of tobacco lingered on his lips.

"Time to sober up," he told the empty alley. "Again."



JENNIFER PINTO

TETHERED

I could tell you I have no desire to fly anywhere. Not to Massa Lubrense for a limoncello with my girlfriends or to Lisbon for a pasteis de nata and a galao, not an ounce of longing to fly to the Galapagos for a snorkeling trip with my husband on our 30th wedding anniversary. I could tell you art museums or botanical gardens in foreign countries don't pique my interest at all. I might say, "I'm funny that way, more of a homebody, really." I could convince you I prefer to experience worldly things by reading a book in a comfortable chair where I don't have to walk long distances or climb flights of stairs.

I could claim to have a fear of heights so severe the mere thought of being 31,000 feet in the air makes my heart race and my palms sweat. A fear of flying that can't be rationalized. Not by looking up crash and safety statistics, not by considering the sheer number of planes that take off and land safely each day. I could tell you I'd prefer to safely drive to my destinations in a car where I choose my seat and who my fellow passengers will be. That the conversations, snacks, drinks and songs on the radio are the best part of the trip.

I could say I have no need to feel my body glide through the air, no yearning to soar above the ground, to ride the wind and feel the softness of the clouds. I could pretend I've never spent a warm afternoon on a swing pushing myself higher and higher until I felt like I was flying. Pretend I've never laid on a blanket in the park and jealously watched birds glide above my head. Pretend I'm content to remain firmly planted on the ground like a Botero statue.

I could tell you I'm afraid the glares of fellow passengers as I board the plane will shoot through me like laser beams. I can imagine my skin turning a blotchy red when they quickly avert their eyes, looking down at their hands praying I'm not headed to the empty seat next to them, that they won't have to sacrifice an armrest for my extra inches. I could admit to the fear of humiliation that comes with asking for a seat belt extender or having the flight attendant whisper in my ear that I'm being asked to move because someone feels crowded. I could tell you about the anxiety I feel just imagining myself squeezing through the narrow aisle to the tiny bathroom where I'd have to shimmy sideways to fit inside the meager opening.

I could say the discomfort and indignity of traveling by air is worth it, that soaring through the sky in an airplane is the perfect antidote for existing in a body that feels permanently tethered to the ground. But that would be a big fat lie.



CONOR CHRISTOFFERSON

TOOTH

Day 1:

And just like that, the pain is gone.

It's magic, really. Absolute agony, followed by a little snooze and – voilà! – I'm cured. Sure, I can't feel my face and I've got a wad of gauze jammed into my mouth like Big League Chew, but that seems like a relatively small price to pay.

They won't let me drive home seeing as how I'm doped to the gills on whatever it is they give you for things like this, so the pretty little dental assistant with an asymmetrical haircut wheels me outside to my waiting dad. Dad's in the parking lot smoking a cigarette and looking surly, as per usual.

"Jesus, you look like hell," he grunts and mindlessly flicks his butt into a bank of manicured shrubs.

We don't talk on the way home. The sun is just turning in for the night, leaving behind sky the color of an orange Creamsicle. I listen to Billy Joel on the radio and rest my face against the cool window, letting the warm nothingness of medical grade narcotics wash over me.

Day 2:

I'm a bit of a wreck. One side of my face is shiny and comically swollen, as if I've been stung by a bunch of bees. Pain radiates from my jaw in waves. The aftercare instructions say this is probably normal, so my panic level is just a 3 out of 10 at this point. Curiosity gets the better of me and I use the bathroom mirror to take a quick peek inside my mouth. Good lord, what's even happening here? It's a mess of swollen, discolored flesh the color of an overripe plum. A misshapen lump of gum is visibly throbbing, with teeny tiny clots of dark red sludge pumping out of the hole where my tooth used to be. It's all pretty disconcerting, to say the least, but I'm going to trust the process. I was even able to get in a few hours of work this morning. Thankfully, online customer service doesn't require you to be in tip top condition. It's mostly reading comments about how some product or another was a massive

CONTINUED...

disappointment and then replying with something like, "Wow, that's really frustrating. Here at (multinational corporate entity) we value your business and want to make sure that every (random product) meets our own high standards. Please fill out this quick questionnaire and we will be happy to send you a new (random product)."

Day 5:

Good news, bad news. The good news is that the swelling has gone down a bit. The pain is better, too, thanks to the Percocet mom picked up for me – finally, I might add, after two days of excruciating pain. But that's neither here nor there. Dad says I'm lucky they even let me live here and when he was 25 he was already married and owned a home. Yada yada yada. I'd like to tell him that you could buy a home with 50 bucks and an old potato when he was 25, but I think better of it.

The bad news is that the hole in my mouth hasn't healed. If anything, it's worse. I've gotten into the habit of running my tongue along my gums and into the chasm where my tooth used to be. The tip of my tongue just slides in there, going much deeper into the hole than what feels natural. What the fuck is happening? The aftercare instructions say nothing about your tooth hole morphing into a frightening abyss. Panic level: 7 out 10 and climbing. I have a Zoom check up with my dentist tomorrow. Please, God, let my mouth heal.

Day 6:

The hole is getting bigger. I'm sure of it. Yesterday I measured it using an old piece of Hubba Bubba bubble gum I found on my dresser. It was three quarters of a Hubba Bubba wide. I measured again this morning and the hole could have easily fit the entire Hubba Bubba. Can the hole be growing? And a quarter Hubba Bubba a day? I'm no expert, but that seems like a lot. Panic level: Off the charts.

I'm waiting for my Dentist, Dr. Slorak, to show up in this Zoom and hopefully tell me everything's alright, very normal, totally not a concern that the purple, hideous disfigurement in my mouth is growing at a quarter of a Hubba Bubba a day. Fuck. Fuck.

While I wait, I log into Twitter. I search for Eric Trump, and then carefully type "Hey, @EricTrump, you're a troglodyte fascist with a mouth that looks like a prolapsed anus." I hit post and take a deep breath. I close my eyes and breathe out slowly. When I open them, I type "@BrunoMars Is your mom still blowing truckers for cigarette money?" Post. I see a tweet from Greta Thunberg in my feed and hit reply, then frantically type the words "midget feminazi." Post. I'm about to unleash a tirade against John Stamos when I hear Dr. Slorak calling my name from the open Zoom.

CONTINUED...

"So, how are we doing today?" Dr. Slorak asks while looking down at what I presume is my chart.

"Well, I'm getting a little concerned that the wound doesn't seem to be healing very well," I tell him.

"Hmm. Okay. Let's have a look. Can you open your mouth into the camera?"

"Ahhhhh," I say, giving Slorak full access to the mayhem unfolding inside my mouth.

"Yes ... okay, that doesn't look right, does it?" he says with a wince. "Pam, can you come here?"

Pam, the dental assistant with an asymmetric haircut, wanders into the frame and leans over Dr. Slorak's shoulder to get a better look at the screen.

"Oh, wow!" she gasps, recoiling back.

"Have you ever seen anything like this?" Dr. Slorak asks her, sotto voce.

"God, no," Pam says. "What is it?"

"I have no clue," Slorak says, his voice barely registering above a whisper.

Dr. Slorak tells me something is very clearly wrong. He says he's never seen anything quite like it. He looks befuddled and mumbles something about a possible flesh-eating bacteria. He orders me some antibiotics and schedules another Zoom check up in a week.

Panic level: I'm fucking panicking.

Day 8:

I feel like I'm in a Kafka novel. I admit I've never read a Kafka novel, but this situation certainly seems Kafkaesque. That's the phrase that keeps popping into my head: Kafkaesque.

To sum things up, here's what we know: We know the antibiotics aren't working. We know the hole is growing. It's officially two Hubba Bubba's wide. I woke up this morning and realized the hole had swallowed the tooth next to it. Just ... swallowed it. It's gone now. Where it went, shit, I have no clue. Down into the hole, would be my guess. I tried to show my mom, but she told me she's not a doctor and wouldn't even know what she was looking at.

CONTINUED...

I'm trying not to panic. I'm trying not to think bad thoughts. I'm trying not to envision a swirling darkness overtaking me and pulling me further and further into a pulsating, bottomless pit.

I grab my laptop and log into Twitter. I see The Rock has Tweeted an uplifting message about the importance of exercising and eating right. I call him a roided up asshole. I tell Jeanine Pirro she has mashed potatoes for brains. I threaten Frankie Muniz that it's "on site" if we ever meet IRL. I unleash a vicious string of invective on Lin Manuel Miranda that I won't repeat here.

Am I proud of myself for these things? Absolutely not. I hate these things. I hate myself. And yet I continue, daily, because it scratches some invisible itch, some bizarre desire to hurt people, to be noticed, to matter in some teeny tiny way, even if only as an annoyance. And I'm lonely. There's that. I'm so fucking lonely.

Day 10:

The hole has taken another tooth. This is not a huge surprise, as that particular molar felt like it was hanging on by a thread last night when I ran my tongue along my gum line for what must have been the 10,000th time. I'm too depressed to see how many Hubba Bubbas wide it is. I'm guessing at least three Hubba Bubbas wide. I'm living a nightmare. The antibiotics still aren't working, and on top of that they're giving me a fairly vicious case of diarrhea. I'm popping Percocet like candy to stay ahead of the constant pain, but I only have five pills left and Dr. Slorak won't give me a refill.

Yesterday I did a Zoom with an emergency clinic. After waiting in the clinic's virtual waiting room for what seemed like an hour, an exhausted looking nurse finally popped up on the screen. She made a little small talk and then asked me to show her the problem.

"Fuck me," she said under her breath after seeing the horror inside my mouth. "That's ... that's ... you should probably ... what do they have you on, Azithromycin? Yeah, okay, just keep taking that and ... and ... yeah, you should probably get in to see a specialist."

What did I do to deserve this? Did I kill someone? Did I, I don't know, kick an old woman in the shins as she tried to carry a heavy bag full of groceries to her car in a parking lot? No and no. I didn't do those things because I'm generally a pretty good person. I smile if someone smiles at me. I always say thank you when a waiter refills my water glass at a restaurant, even if it's, like, the fifth time they've refilled it because they keep refilling it even if I just take a sip of water. I don't deserve this shit. This is the type of shit that Jeffrey Dahmer deserves.

CONTINUED...

Day 11:

I dream I'm being eaten alive by a pulsating, amorphous slug creature with razor sharp teeth. I wake in a panic with sweat dripping from my face and a weird, dark red goo oozing out of my mouth. I spit the goo onto my nightstand and it sort of foams up and quivers. The smell is horrendous, like rotting flesh. I don't dare look in my mouth, but I run my tongue along what's left of my gum line to take stock of whatever havoc last night wrought. It's not good. I have no bottom teeth on the left side of my face and my lower jaw seems to be disintegrating. Just melting away. I rattle my Percocet bottle and find a single pill left inside.

I debate finding a large bridge to jump off and then open my laptop and log in to Twitter. Mindless scrolling. Elon Musk is calling the Pope a pedo. An influencer famous for eating 5,000 pennies is lecturing his followers on the difference between genocide and ethnocide. One of the Kardashians is touting a new partnership with the Department of Justice to create a line of lingerie for prisoners.

Just then I'm struck by a jolt of panic.

"Holy shit," I say. "Holy fucking shit."

I click on my profile, @BigDickEnergy69, and begin scrolling through old Tweets.

"Where is it? Fuck. Where is it?"

I keep scrolling, faster and faster, the words cascading madly down my screen until, like a slot machine, they slow and then stop on a Tweet from three weeks ago.

- Taylor Swift is an overrated piece of shit

I stare at this simple string of words, index finger hovering over my mouse, then click on the Tweet to reveal a single response, from the account @WitchySwiftly.

- Taylor is god, you fucking troll

I feel a bead of sweat forming on my forehead as I move my cursor over that Tweet and click on it, revealing my reply.

- Fuck you and fuck Taylor Swift. You're both stupid bitches

The thread continues like some sort of digital Russian nesting doll. Just when you think it's over, there's one more ugly Tweet and one more response.

CONTINUED...

- You better watch your mouth asshole. I'm a witch. I'll fuck you up
- Lol. What are you gonna do, you fucking loser?
- Fuck around and find out
- Stupid bitch
- Okay. Have it your way. I put a curse on you. You will die on the night of the next full moon. Bye bitch!

I swallow hard, open a new tab on my computer and type "When is the next full moon?" I click on the first result, which reads, "The next full moon will be on Monday, August 31." I fumble around on my bed for my phone and then tap the screen and read, in abject horror: August 30 9:24 p.m.

Jesus fucking Christ. Jesus. Fucking. Christ. My heart feels like it's going to burst out of my chest. I close my eyes and take two deep breaths and picture vast empty spaces and soft pastels encompassing endless sky. I open them and type @WitchySwift Please, please, I beg you to stop your curse. Oh my god I'm so sorry, just please let me live. I promise I won't ever say anything bad about Taylor Swift ever again. I just want to live. I post it. I wait, tap tap tapping on my mouse to hit the refresh button every two seconds.

Nothing. Oh, God, please reply. Refresh. Refresh. Refresh. Refresh. Oh, fuck. All Witchy Swift's Tweets are now gone. I click on her profile: @WitchySwift has blocked you.

"Fucking bitch," I mutter under my breath as I log out of Twitter and log back in using a burner account, @PipeLayer420. I quickly find Witchy Swift's profile and scan it for useful information.

It reads: "Welcome to the #1 Taylor Swift fan account made by and for Swift witches! It's me, I'm the problem. (Taylor liked one of my Tweets on 06/23/21 and I've never been the same!)" Location: Missoula, Montana.

I read hundreds of her Tweets, nearly all of which pertain to various Taylor Swift songs, outfits Taylor has worn, men Taylor has dated, food Taylor has eaten and liked or disliked, videos of Taylor petting stray dogs, pixelated photos of Taylor standing on a boat, looking forlorn. And then, just as I'm about to give up - bingo. I focus on a Tweet featuring a giant, sloppy hamburger under a message that reads, Best part about working at Five Guys is the free burgers. Yum!

"Gotcha," I say.

CONTINUED...

Day 12:

I sneak into my parents' room at four in the morning and find them both fast asleep. Dad's snoring violently and mom looks comatose, mouth agape, her tongue dyed purple from boxed wine. I tippy toe to her nightstand like a burglar in a silent movie, careful not to displease the creaky floorboards. The nightstand is a mess of prescription bottles, dogeared romance novels, a wine glass with a dollop of cheap merlot congealing in the bottom like a blood clot. And then I see them. Thank fucking Christ. I grab the car keys and slink out of the room undetected.

I'm on the road by 4:15, Missoula bound. It's a seven hour drive from Seattle, per Apple Maps, and Google tells me there's only one Five Guys in town, so the plan is to be there by opening and pray to God that Witchy Swifty is working and willing to listen to reason.

I'm officially out of Percocet, so I pop a handful of dad's baby aspirin and white knuckle it down the empty highway into the predawn darkness. There's an odd buzzing in my ear and my eye won't stop twitching. My jaw is literally rotting off my head, giving me the lopsided look of a cubist Picasso portrait. I drive with one hand on the wheel and one hand on my decomposing face, just in case the entire thing decides to cleave away. A viscous maroon sludge oozes out of my mouth and onto my hand, but I can't be bothered with that at the moment and continue on, petal to the metal, with my mom's 2004 Hyundai Tucson rattling and clicking as it strains to stay above 80.

I'm climbing Snoqualmie Pass just as the sun begins to crown over the eastern peaks of the Cascades, creating brilliant golden sunbeams that spread out in front of me like the fingers of God. I'm suddenly struck by a jolt of absolute peace and serenity. For the first time in weeks, nothing hurts and my mind is still. Everything gets very quiet and I find myself weeping hysterically. I let my hand slide off the steering wheel and the Hyundai drifts to the right, heading for an 18-wheeler.

"Jesus, take the wheel," I slur.

The semi's booming air horn jolts me back to reality. I yank the wheel and wildly overcorrect, nearly slamming into the jersey barrier separating east- and westbound traffic.

"Fuck. Get it together, man," I say to myself.

It's just before noon when I finally coast into Missoula on fumes feeling punch drunk and irrationally optimistic. I've never been to Montana and, even in my pathetic state, I'm struck by its beauty. Missoula is a small town tucked into a small valley bracketed by impossibly

CONTINUED...

large mountains that could probably feel either cozy or claustrophobic, depending on your state of mind. I find the Five Guys easy enough and park cockeyed in a handicap space near the entrance. Quick glance in the rearview mirror. My face is an absolute horror of drooping, oozing flesh. I scan the interior of the car until I find a small towel to cover my hideous disfigurement, then push through the restaurant's front door. There's line of customers at least 15 deep, which I bypass and head directly to the front counter.

"Excuse me, sir, there's a line here," a woman says as I scoot by.

I wave her off and continue to the counter, where I weasel my way in front of an elderly man just as he's about to order.

"Is Witchy Swifty working?" I ask and immediately realize how crazy I must sound.

The boy working the till, who appears to be about 12, gives me a stern look.

"Sir, you have to wait in line like everyone else," he says.

"Just one second. I need to find someone who uses the handle Witchy Swifty. She works here," I whine.

"Sir, you'll have to go to the back of the line," the boy says again.

"Buddy, get your ass to the back of the line," someone chirps from behind me.

Sensing a possible viral moment brewing, several people take out their phones and begin filming me.

"Fuck off, Karen!" someone shouts, causing a few others to snigger.

I offer the boy a pleading look, hoping for mercy. Nope. He just sits there looking bored and annoyed until I turn around and slink my ass to the back of the line. A few customers clap and someone calls me a douchebag as I pass them. So I wait, feeling humiliated and now sort of hungry, as each and every customer places their order. The towel pressed to my face is covered in slimy red sludge by the time I reach the front of the line.

"How can I help you," the boy says as if he's never seen me before.

"Witchy Swifty," I say into the wet towel, my voice muffled and weak. "Someone who works here goes by Witchy Swifty on Twitter. I need to talk to her."

The boy stares at me with dead eyes, looking thoroughly confused.

CONTINUED...

"Witchy Swifty!" I scream.

"So, uh, sir, you need to order something or leave."

"Did you say Witchy Swifty?" a red headed girl working the fry machine asks. "Tyson, doesn't Becky call herself Witchy Swifty on Twitter?"

A big meathead of a boy holding a mop looks at the ginger girl and shrugs.

"I think so," he says.

"Becky?" I say. "Okay, where's Becky? I really need to talk to her."

The young boy working the till lets out an exasperated sigh.

"Does anyone know if Becky is working today?" he asks his coworkers.

"She's off today and tomorrow," someone chimes in from the back of the kitchen. The woman walks to the counter still holding a container full of chopped lettuce. "Remember? She went to Seattle for that Taylor Swift concert."

My heart stops. I shit you not. It stops beating for a moment as the words Taylor and Swift and Seattle and concert reverberate in my head, bouncing around like a bee in a glass jar. She's in Seattle? She's in fucking Seattle at a Taylor fucking Swift concert? How did I miss this? How is this possible?

"So, yeah, she's not here," the boy says. "Do you, like, want something else? There are customers behind you."

I stare at him, my eyes tearing up. I want to tell him my story. I want him to fix it, to fix me. I want my life to have meaning. I want to be 5-years old again. I want to squeeze myself so tight that I implode and blow away in the wind. I want forgiveness. I want peace.

"I want a bacon cheeseburger and fries," I finally say.

The ginger girl who brings me my food says I'm grossing out the customers and asks me nicely if I could take my burger to go. Yes, of course, I say in a daze as I grab the bag from her hands and shoulder through the exit and stumble to my car. I drop the towel in the parking lot and it lands with a wet thud.

I start the car and turn on the radio. Billy Joel is playing. I shove a few fries into the side of

CONTINUED...

my mouth that still functions and take out my phone. I open Twitter and thumb through the timeline, stopping at a Tweet from Kevin Sorbo decrying our government's inflationary spending. I stare at my phone through a soft focus.

"You piece of shit. You worm. You dickless coward."



SAMUEL TEOH

STREETS OF JAPAN

1

Walk down the streets of Japan, past the glowing digital billboards, past the swarming intersections, into the winding streets of Kita City, among its tumbling houses. You will see an old woman.

She walks down the green pedestrian walkway along the side of the narrow road, her cane clicking against the concrete. Yellow and green box houses stand in wavy columns on both sides as she walks past. An outskirt wind breezes by, showering cherry blossoms across the road and pulling a strand of the old woman's graying hair from her loose bun.

"Katie!"

The old woman turns and watches as a girl – Katie – and a boy streak past, pigtails and lunchboxes flying behind them. They chase each other down the road, a whirlwind of blue coats and black randoseru, filling the street with their laughter. The girl stumbles, pulling the boy with her, and they fall in a heap.

Stray strands of black hair stick to Katie's forehead, shining with sweat. Her pudgy cheeks flush with heat and glee. She leans against the boy as they pant for breath, heaving as one. Katie's brown eyes brighten as she sees their mothers hurry around the corner. They laugh with relief when they find their children sitting back-to-back in the middle of the road.

"Mama!" Katie pulls herself to her feet and stumbles towards her mother, pulling the straps of her randoseru over her shoulders. The four fall into a laughter-filled, lighthearted repartee as they walk toward the train station and the old woman turns away, smiling.

She saves the picture in her mind, of the girl and the boy leaning against each other, sitting in the middle of the street among the falling cherry blossoms, surrounded by yellow and blue houses. As their laughter fades away, the old woman wonders if perhaps what composes her heart is not atriums and ventricles but the people she loves.

2

If you walk down the streets of Japan, past the bright, underground shops, into the bustling train stations, onto one of the orange and yellow trains, sitting among the purple seats

CONTINUED...

along the walls, you will find an old woman.

She sits still, her hands folded across her lap. The doors beep closed and the train leaves the station, at first slowly and quietly, then whirring and clicking over the train tracks as the rolling hills and cherry blossoms blur into green and yellow, green and yellow.

"The next station is Ofuna. Ofuna. JO9. The doors on the left side open." The automated voice, muffled and crackling, sounds on the speakers above. The train slows to a stop at the station and the old woman watches columns of people waiting to board slip by. With a rhythmic beeping, the doors open.

The old woman watches as a group of students rush onto the train seconds before the doors close. They wear blue-buttoned suits and shined shoes, with black briefcases and long, ragged haircuts.

A girl breezes into the train, holding hands with a boy, her hair dyed light brown, her eyes bright.

They enter the train, laughing and gasping for air. The train whirs along, clicking over the train tracks. There is a bang as an adjacent train bursts past and the roar of the train's wheels echo against the tunnel walls. The boy and the girl stand in the corner, leaning against the walls. He whispers something into her ear and she laughs, her laughter filling the train with a joyous sound, accompanying the electronic whirring and the hum of passengers murmuring.

The old woman stands when it is her stop, joining the flow of the crowd moving up the stairs, leaving the train behind, saving the picture of the girl and the boy in her mind, leaning against each other, laughing and smiling, as the humming of the train and the onboard automated announcements fade away.

3

If you walk down the streets of Japan, past the towering skyscrapers, past the thronging streets, into one of the yellow, faded restaurants along the side of an alley, you will find an old woman.

She sits along a pub table, staring at a wall where the faces of beautiful women and beer advertisements peeling from the wood stare back at her. Above, the neon lights of television screens and the mellow glow from hanging paper lanterns illuminates her skin. A blend of musical beats and unintelligible Japanese calls creates both a cacophony and symphony in the old woman's ears.

A woman sits on the far end of the pub table, slumped against the wall. She wears a black

CONTINUED...

kimono and her hair, streaked with blonde highlights, is tied back into a bun. Shoulders shaking, the woman collapses against the wall and, if the old woman looked closer, she would see tears streaming from the woman's eyes, shining on her cheeks. But she does not need to look closer because she already knows.

The old woman turns away and leaves the restaurant, the calls of "arigato-gozeimas" and the pounding music fading behind her. She does not need to save a picture in her mind because she remembers it all too well. A picture of a woman leaning against a wall because the person she leaned on is no longer there.

4

If you walk down the streets of Japan, past the rural countryside with rolling houses, past the train station with whirring trains, past the lonely restaurants with neon lights, up several dozen flights of stone steps, onto a mountain overlooking the sea, you will find an old woman.

She stands there, her graying hair a tangle in the wind, her hands wrapped together tightly, her cheeks wet with salty tears, her eyes staring over the sea. And if you ask her if she is okay, she will tell you that there is no greater hurt than to live in a world with a hole in your heart.



KEITH HOOD

BUT, BEAUTIFUL

When does Rayna discover that some people view her father as an ugly man? Is it when she is four years old and they walk hand in hand in downtown Detroit, where eyes dart from her father's face to hers, and back? Is it when she sees surprise on their faces? Is it when one of those passersby, a man of course, says, "What a beautiful little girl," while reaching to touch her cornrows and braids? Her father grips the man's wrist, saying "Hands to yourself, sir." But those are people they don't know, people they have never met, and it is, widened eyes, raised eyebrows: not words.

Does discovery come at eight years old hearing comments in third grade, when her father, playing his tenor saxophone is her show-and-tell, standing in front of the class with puffed cheeks and fingers dancing on brass keys as two classmates speak in undertones.

"Isn't he ugly?"

"Nah. Ugly is a word. Ain't no words for a face like that."

But that's only children. Children always spit names. Her father's take on an old saying is, "Sticks and stones don't mean a thing if they ain't got that sting."

The show-and-tell song her father plays on the saxophone that day is titled, "But Beautiful." At home, her mother sings along when her father plays the song on an electronic keyboard in their bedroom. Rayna has been tickling the piano keys under her father's tutelage since she was five. He says that her large hands are perfect for piano. You'll be able to span more than an octave when you get older.

When she's a teenager, her father's words come true. His large hands hover over hers, both hands spanning more than an octave, as he explains that the melody of "But Beautiful" often lands on dissonant notes like 9ths or 13ths, rather than blander roots and fifths but the result is enchanting.

"Like the title," she says.

In teenage years, the name calling and flitting eyes crystallize in the person of Clarice, a best friend, who has accompanied her family on picnics, visits to amusement parks, sporting

CONTINUED...

events, and shopping trips. Clarice never uses the word but it is there, unspoken. Her friend speaks as if they are sitting side by side in a darkened theater watching the same film on screen. "Your mother is so pretty," she says. "No wonder that men are always hitting on her." This is not something the daughter has noticed until now. Her ears tingle as her friend continues. "The handsome ones hit on her because they figure they must stand a chance. You know what I'm saying?" The daughter follows her friend's glance to just such an example. "The ugly ones hit on her because they think, 'Holy shit.' we must stand a chance, too. You know what I'm saying?"

Her friend probably means no harm and her father is still her father. Still the one who walked with her, hand in hand in downtown Detroit, still the one who played his saxophone for third grade show-and-tell, still the one who held his hands over hers as they played the piano and played duets with her mother standing next to the piano and singing along. It is then that she'll remember being in her bedroom at night when just a young child. She often had a hard time falling asleep. Her father told her to read a book. Their room was always silent as she read, until she heard the soft tones of "But Beautiful" played on the electronic keyboard accompanied by her mother's light singing. It was as if her parents knew it worked as a lullaby because she never remembered hearing the song come to a finish. She never heard her mother singing the final words: "I'd never let you go, and that would be but beautiful, I know."

When Rayna is twenty years old, she will see a man, a musician, carrying a battered guitar case, and a college friend will say, "Isn't he the ugliest thing you've ever seen?"

But Rayna will see her father's hand playing love songs on her mother's face, kissing her mother on the mouth, and then kissing his daughter on the cheek.

She'll smile at her friend, saying nothing, simply hearing a strain of music, seeing her father's big hands spread an octave, then more.



MARGE PIERCY

THEY CAME AND THEY WENT

Am I crazy? Am I weird
that I remember every
cat in my life but forget
a number of lovers?

But the cats were loving
faithful, more than I can
say about half the men
and women who touched me.
whom I touched. Real
connections have built
a place in my brain, but
so many left nothing

just a little smear, just
a pimple of remembrance.
So often we bump against
each other as if by

accident, Excuse me
to get to a seat. Perhaps
we could have been
friends –not one night

collisions. My life is
littered with them like
bodies of dead ants
dry and disposable.



LAO RUBERT

SPECKLED FISH

it is quiet
but I had to have to
shut the door say no
when yes
stands at the threshold
have to shut it with a slam
close it with a click
remind the body
to hear
to listen

have to become still enough
for answers to rise
and fall again
settle into this place
that tastes like wind
smells like stone

the water stretches before me
it may take an hour maybe two
to clear to see
the speckled fish
that have always been swimming
beneath me



MARNIE E. HOCHMAN

SEARCHING FOR SOLID GROUND

When your life begins to quake and you start to notice that your 15-year-old daughter is picking at her meals, when you find out from her therapist whom she has been seeing for anxiety issues that she is purposely throwing up her food multiple times a day, when you spend the next few months doing almost nothing else other than taking her to therapists and doctors and nutritionists and fighting with her to take another bite and making her sit on the couch for an hour after eating so some of the food will be digested and having lunch with her in your car in the school parking lot and then walking her to class so she can't stop in the bathroom to purge what she just ate and reading books and websites and support group forums, you can't help but wonder what you did wrong.

When she loses 20 pounds in a few weeks and she says the ground is spinning every time she stands up and the doctor has to write a note to the gym teacher explaining that she should no longer participate in physical activities because her blood pressure isn't stable and she stops getting her period and you find another bag of puke among the detritus under her bed and you are trying to decide whether to hospitalize her because you feel completely powerless to make it all better, you can't help but think you must have done something wrong.

When you feel bad because you are feeling bad and you know that your daughter is probably feeling worse but you can't help it and you feel bad that you don't feel bad enough and you feel bad when your anger erupts, spewing exasperation and frustration in her direction because you know it isn't her fault—any of it, when she tells you that nothing you ever say to her is the right thing, when her therapist berates you for not making sure your daughter's appointments are at the same time every week and it feels like someone is taking sandpaper to your heart which has already been rubbed raw, when you worry about how all of this attention and time you are giving your daughter might be affecting her younger brother, when you send relatives an email to tell them how they can be supportive and they decide that you are being manipulative and not doing the right thing for your daughter and the whole episode makes you so sick that you now also can't eat anything, when you don't know what to say when people ask how it's going and you are still putting happy posts on Facebook about all the great things she is still managing to do, and you hate everyone else's happy Facebook posts, you start questioning the foundation of everything you believed about family and life more generally.

CONTINUED...

When your daughter finally starts to eat again and the purging begins to subside, you don't feel joy, only relief because you are too emotionally wrung out to feel anything else.

And then the depression seeps through the cracks and your daughter won't get out of bed to go to school, and she is cutting herself instead of starving and purging because it seems to be relieving the pain better and there are scars all over her stomach and upper thighs that you can hardly stand to look at which were not visible during the winter but are now that she is wearing shorts and swimsuits, and she won't tell you what she is cutting herself with or where she is hiding whatever she is cutting herself with, and she can't read even though she has always loved to read and she can't write even though she has always loved to write, and now you are seeing the doctor about which drugs to put her on or take her off of or whether to raise the dose or lower the dose or add a drug or remove one and she sleeps all day or turns manic and can't sleep at all or becomes suicidal or says she feels like she isn't in her own body, and although you know they are doing the best that they can for her, the edges of her world are becoming so jagged and fragmented and it seems as if you are helping some mad scientist do experiments on your own child and wonder if you will ever find the elusive happy pill.

And then you watch your beautiful, confident, exceptionally intelligent daughter struggle with these demons in her head, and you watch the grades slipping and all her potential and maybe her future too because she now considers "mental illness" to be part of her identity and she seeks out and befriends other kids with mental illnesses and you don't know whether this is a good thing or a very bad thing, and you don't know whether she is starting to use her mental illness as an excuse for anything and everything she doesn't want to do or whether it's not an excuse, and you don't know whether you should start to push her to get out of the house more or do more of her schoolwork or even clean her room, or whether you shouldn't, and whether you will fuck her up more if you don't—or do, and you don't know whether or not you should do something about your husband who is now exhibiting signs of depression himself, or whether you even have the energy to deal with one more problem, and you cry on the phone to your daughter's best friend's mother when your daughter goes over there after the two of you have a big fight during your "girls weekend," and you cry for months over your kitten that got run over by a car right outside your house and you are not sure whether that is normal or not and whether it is normal to start talking to your other dead cat and asking her to please take care of the kitten and then start asking your dead relatives to help you out even though you don't really believe in spirits or heaven or any of it, but the terrain keeps shifting and you wonder if maybe you should start seeing a therapist but absolutely can't imagine when you would have the time to do that, and you wonder if "mental illness" will always be part of her identity and part of your lives and whether any of you will ever feel happiness again.

And then the "right" combination of drugs is finally found and your daughter begins to stabilize but you are still taking her to see the therapist every week and you still aren't sure when or whether she will ever be completely out of the woods and gain her footing and you

CONTINUED...

don't know if she is sleeping so much because she is a teenager or because of the drugs or because she is depressed, and you are still worried that every pen you find in the bathroom is one she has used to start purging again and whether the scars on her legs and stomach—and heart—will ever heal, and you don't know why her grades are still so low and why she seems not to care about sleeping in a bed full of trash and why she can't seem to remember to do the simplest things and whether any or all or none of these things have anything to do with mental illness, and you still don't know how to have a conversation with her about any of this without bad feelings happening on both sides, and the idea that having children adds years to your life seems pretty fucking hilarious to you right now but you don't know whether to laugh or cry.

But when your daughter is almost 17-years-old you and she along with your husband and your son and you attend the 50th anniversary party for the secular humanistic Jewish organization you discovered 12 years ago when you had just moved here and were looking for a new temple to join and felt like these were your people, but now you are sitting there questioning whether things would have been different if you belonged to a regular temple and your daughter had religion to lean on during all of this. And at the end of the program portion of the event, the speaker asks if anyone else would like to say anything. And your daughter, wearing her holey black jeans and flannel button-down shirt with her spikey, blue hair gets up. And she goes to the podium. And you are one part curious and two parts nervous about how this is going to go. And in front of 150 people she begins to talk. And she speaks so eloquently about how much it has meant to her to be a part of this community where she has felt like she could always be herself. And now you are crying a little. And when she is finished people come over to you to tell you how amazing your daughter is. And for the first time in a long time you feel a small bit of joy—not because all of these people are telling you how amazing your daughter is and not because you are proud of her and not because you suddenly think she is well and happy and this is the end of the fairy tale where you can now all ride off into the sunset, but because you see that you have given her a patch of solid ground. And then you realize that perhaps you also are a piece of that solid ground. And you feel for the first time in a long time that just maybe, you did something right.



PEGGY NEWMAN

THE PINK RIBBED SWEATER

As a hospital chaplain working the night shift, I was paged to every code trauma in the ER. A code trauma is a very serious case that requires responses from a team of people. My role, at least initially, is to respond to the needs of family members and friends.

This particular night, a 15-year-old boy had come in via med flight from an outside hospital. He had gone skiing with his friend and his friend's family, and he was injured in an accident. I knew it had to be more serious than broken bones for a helicopter to transport him from the small community hospital north of Boston to a city teaching hospital that offered more specialized care.

By the time Paul's parents, Marilyn and Greg, arrived at the hospital, Paul had died. I met them at the front desk and escorted them to the private waiting area we used for the most serious cases, the ones in which privacy was most important. Even before we introduced ourselves to each other, they wanted to know how their son Paul was doing. I explained that not being a medical provider, I couldn't give them medical information, but I could let the doctor know they had arrived so that he could come and talk to them.

It wasn't long before I returned with the doctor. Marilyn and Greg were sitting side by side, so he pulled up a chair across from them.

He began, "I am so sorry, but we couldn't save your son."

At first all Marilyn could say was no. "No. It can't be. No. No." She began to sob, occasionally saying "no" as she took a breath.

Looking at Greg, the doctor continued, "We did everything we could. So did the EMT's. They did CPR in the helicopter, trying everything they could to get him here where they hoped we could save him. And we tried everything."

Marilyn looked at the doctor, apparently wanting to hear what they tried. He continued, "We inserted a breathing tube, used electric shock, tried medications. Nothing worked. I'm so very sorry."

After a pause he asked, "Do you have any questions?"

CONTINUED...

Greg looked at Marilyn, and saw she had nothing to ask, so he responded by shaking his head no. The doctor said he would be available if they wanted to talk to him again. Once more, he said how sorry he was and left. The whole conversation couldn't have been longer than a couple of minutes.

Greg tried to fight his tears but then gave in to them. Husband and wife, both were too distraught to offer each other any comfort. The shock was too intense.

These are the moments I find most difficult. I hate feeling helpless. I sat down next to Marilyn, put my hand on her shoulder, and like the doctor, told her how sorry I was.

As if crying was contagious, I was barely able to contain my own tears. Determined to control my emotions, I set my gaze on the mother's pink ribbed sweater. It was well-worn, a bit pilled from being washed many times. The sweater was fitted but not tight, a casual look that went well with Marilyn's blue jeans. I noticed that she was slim and attractive. Her gasps for air brought me back into the reality of her grief. As she blew her nose, I pushed the small trash bin toward her.

I saw that Greg was trying to regain his composure. He looked at his wife but had no words to offer. In this moment of relative calm, I asked Greg and Marilyn if they would like to see their son. They looked at each other and nodded in agreement. I excused myself so I could see if the room had been cleaned and if Paul's body was free of visible blood and arranged under clean sheets. I saw the nurses had everything ready.

When I returned to the waiting area, I was relieved to see that Marilyn and Greg were quietly talking to each other. When Marilyn saw me in the doorway, she responded with an acknowledging nod and a slight smile and then looked at her husband. She tilted her head and raised her eyebrows with a silent question that he understood. He turned to me and said, "I think we're ready."

I escorted them to the room. For a moment, there was silence. The couple stood together, looking at their son in disbelief. Then Marilyn gasped for a breath and said, "No," just as she had when she first heard that Paul had died.

Her husband put his hand around his wife's waist as if she might need him to hold her so she wouldn't collapse. A moment later, she laid her head on her son's chest. Her deep sobs returned. Greg had appeared to regain his composure, but the sound of Marilyn's sobs seemed more than he could bear. I heard him gasp as if he was trying to swallow his tears and his grief.

When Marilyn raised her head off her son's chest, I gently took the boy's hand from beneath the sheet and laid it at his side. His mother took his hand and said, "It's still warm."

CONTINUED...

"Can you tell me about your son?" I asked.

"He was really kind and smart," Greg replied.

Marilyn nodded adding, "He's so good. He's a really good kid. Everybody likes him. He's..." She couldn't finish her sentence. She seemed to know she shouldn't speak of her son in the present tense, but she wasn't ready to speak of him in the past tense, the language that acknowledges death.

"He must have been a wonderful son," I offered, inviting a response.

Greg nodded as his wife agreed, "He was very caring. A sweet kid even when he was really young. And a good brother. He has a little sister at home." Pausing briefly, Marilyn added, "She's going to be devastated."

Marilyn and Greg were sitting at Paul's bedside. I was standing closer to the door and could hear two nurses talking quietly about what a horrible situation it was. One had the shaky voice of a person trying not to cry. The mother's cries and the reality of the boy's death seemed to draw everyone into feeling a portion of the pain. I was moved by the nurse's tears, and again rested my eyes on the gentle pink of Marilyn's sweater.

Seeing the trauma doctor pacing back and forth in the hallway, I thought perhaps he wanted to help, but didn't know what to do.

Then a nurse came into the room and asked the parents if they had any questions for the doctor. They looked at each other and shook their heads. The father looked at the nurse and said, "I don't think so."

I wondered why the doctor didn't come into the room. Offering a word or two of condolence seemed like a minimal gesture, the least he could do given the situation. Of course, I kept my critical thoughts to myself.

I asked the parents if they would like me to say a prayer. The boy's mother responded, "Please."

After a more formal prayer, I asked God to welcome home this wonderful young man. I tried to paint a picture of Jesus embracing this couple's son with love, welcoming him home after a short life beautifully lived. I thanked God for the gift of his life and his love. I acknowledged his kindness and generosity, and his roles as brother, son and friend. And then I asked God for comfort for all those who would be grieving."

When I had the sense that it was the right time to help the parents say goodbye, I told them I

CONTINUED...

would give them some privacy to say goodbye and assured them I'd be right there in the hallway if they needed anything. In a few minutes, they emerged from the room. Leaving the body behind has to be one of the hardest moments. The nurse brought a bag with Paul's jacket, wallet, and a couple of other things and walked with us back to the room where they left their coats. In the hallway Greg asked me about making arrangements with a funeral home while the nurse quietly offered her sympathy to Marilyn. We hugged and then they left.

I headed toward the chapel to sit for a few moments. When I opened the door, I saw the doctor who had been pacing outside Paul's room. I was deeply moved by the sight of him, sitting bent over with his face in his hands, quietly hiding his feelings. Not wanting to interrupt his solitude, I left as silently as I was able. I felt guilty that I had judged him. I knew I had learned an important lesson.

The next day, as I sat to write in my journal, I closed my eyes to reflect on the experience. The mother's pink ribbed sweater came to mind. Obviously worn and washed many times it was nothing special, just a piece of everyday clothing for wintertime in New England. But there were moments when looking at it, it became the unlikely anchor that helped me stay grounded, safe from the emotions that threatened to draw me into the grief and sadness that, in turn, threatened to distance me from the needs of Paul's parents.

When I shared my experience with Cal, the chaplain who was my mentor when I was new in my role, his comment was, "The doctor needed a pink sweater."



ALLISON BURRIS

REASONS FOR THE WITCH HUNT

We burned her because she lived alone
and because cats are evil.
We burned her because, like all women
she was obsessed with sex, but not with us.
We burned her because we assume
she wanted to be a man,
flying with that broom between her legs.
Because she had no children
Because she's too old to have more children.
Because we are scared the Devil might, in fact, win out.
We burned her over a birthmark,
a small prick to see her bleed.
We haven't had an execution in a while.
It's because she did not fall sick.
Because she knows too much.
Because she births babes and eats them.
We burned her because we wanted to
see her shaved and naked.
Because we wanted her to beg.
Because someone should die
for our shame.
We burned her because she kept giving out
ideas, contraception, choices, chances.
Because she bled by the light of the moon.
We burned her because it's just so creepy—
the herbs drying from the ceiling,
her patience with crawling creatures.
We burned her because
there was nothing else to do.



ELLEN DEVLIN

MONSTERS

The dead are rumored to be alive again—
half-rotted torsos, empty eye sockets,
loping around on ruined tendons.
What do they want? Who wants to live again
in our endless need, our lost knowing? Someone
remembered gravestones chiseled with words
and wondered if a worded stone keeps
the dead down. Maybe it soothes them, sings
a night song. There are always the dead, lying
on the forest floor, on roads, in a barn,
a milking bucket beside her. So, we
gathered small stones, glass, and metal shards,
scratched words on the stones, brave/shareful/
songful/funny/, and placed them on the forehead
of the unburied dead. Some of us
put a hand on the chest or kissed the stone
and our own chest, warmed, unrecognized.



HOLLY KARAPETKOVA

THE FIRST WAR WAS FOR LOVE

As if there weren't enough to go around.
As if your mother locked you in your room
the first three years of your life and boom:
all the neurons got crossed. As if your wounds
armed themselves with plastic spears and swords
and went marching off to Jerusalem,
Antioch, Constantinople, a column
of crossbows aimed at someone else's god

only to return god-smacked, diseased,
and awakened to love as idolatry--
coming to my rescue, mounting your steed
to save what never wanted saving,
your army of toy knights falling at my feet,
all the battlements rising in your head.



OSHRY MOYAL

LOVE POEM IN THE KEY OF DUCHENNE

My DNA - Deletion in Dystrophin Gene:

when You are the one
to love me,
the only one
to love me, I know-
this cascade of
broken glass
that is life
raining down on me
will never break
the skin,
never spill the blood
from my veins,
never leave me
writhing
in a maroon pool,
warmth draining,
bitter cold
invading

— — — — — deletion of exons 48-50 — — — — —

loneliness and sorrow
will follow you
until the end
muscle disease
never really gives,
it takes
it took your future
when you crashed through
the glass floor of diagnosis
Duchenne
Muscular
Dystrophy

CONTINUED...

glass shards shriek,
chasing you down
to your cruel new reality,
each one slicing away
another part of you,
the innocent prisoner
muscle cell death,
your sentence
lung searing cries,
your useless appeal
to the life
laid out for you:
wheelchair
confinement
at 12
back-breaking
scoliosis
at 15
progressing stages of
heart and respiratory
failure
ventilator
dependence
by your late 20s
death
expected
by your early 30s
lyrics that echoed
through my mind
in a perpetual loop—

— — — — — **deletion in repair** — — — — —

until I found You
and You ripped
the needle
from the record
and sang me
Your own song
to be loved
by You

CONTINUED...

is to be protected
by You:
when You walk up
behind me,
intoxicatingly close,
Your icy, raspberry mint
breath
sends a ripple
of shivers
down my spine,
Your bottom lip
barely sticking to my neck,
teasing
You gave me all of You
so I'd never
fight alone
no one before You
had the courage
to love me
but my thin, frail body
never scared
You
Your flowing, dark amber
locks tickle
the inside of my ear
as You rest Your chin
on my shoulder
and train Your gaze
on what's waiting
ahead
then, Your voice,
softly, "breathe,"
and, assuringly,
"this is nothing"
no one before You
had the confidence
to save me
but doubt
never hindered
You
when You grip
my chest,
shockwaves charge

CONTINUED...

through my bones,
and an explosive
jolt
deflects the threats
as they barrel
towards us
because we are one
when You love me—
the only one who can



KATINA CREMONA

BANDA LANDA

for Eleni

I remember lying on yoga mats, head to toe
under a dark swirling sky. An intimate breeze

seeped into our skin. Our cells soaked
in a bath of bells, chimes and gongs.

You spoke for the speechless with your
rush of laughter. We signed up for

the following year, floated home into the night
thrumming with life. But you died while

I was away and the sweet sound bath woman
stopped working on Kythira. I'd barely begun

to know you as our island's anaesthetist who swam
in maxi dresses, believed in fairies. I thought

we'd bask for years to come but our beloved
bar, Banda Landra, closed for summer.

Someone could die before they glance
at this stanza. I want to remember to be like you.

To plunge into this wild life.
This shared meal. This heartbeat.



DAN MUENZER

EARTH TO ANTAEUS

The curious episode began when my son looked up at me through his wire-frame monocle and told me he would be starring in *The Labors of Hercules*. It didn't surprise me – either the starring role or the eyewear. For one, Kody's plummy mid-Atlantic accent (self-taught) had ensured him the lead in every school play since *The Runaway Flapjack*; and for the other, he'd recently been taken by the optometric stylings of Erich von Stroheim.

If sometimes I wish my son would be just a little more middle-of-the-road, it's for his own sake: old dad knows what it's like to have your cowlick dangled over a toilet or your lunch money stolen. I even hoped playing *Hercules* might do him some good: there was a man who was feared and respected, yet walked around every day dressed in lion's fur. But I didn't press the issue. Ever since the T-ball incident, I've stopped trying to instill lessons in normative, bully-proof behavior. I'm hoping Kody doesn't need them, but his broken pencils leave me feeling rather uncertain.

I busied myself looking for ways to prepare my son for his role, hoping to emphasize the more empowering aspects of the myth. I had vague memories of serial decapitations, terrifying beasts, an opera singer who shot lightning from his hands (though this last turned out to be a labor not of *Hercules*, but of 1980s Schwarzenegger). I read up online, and the next time I delivered Kody his frozen spirulina, I looked around appraisingly at the Victorian magic tricks that lay scattered around his room and said, "These are some real Augean stables in here, son." But he just returned to practicing sleight of hand with his linking rings. That boy can be loyal to his hobbies at the expense of everything else. The magic tricks were a new interest I suspected he'd caught from his stepfather.

My mythic hopes turned out to be for naught, anyway, since my son wasn't even playing *Hercules*. The melancholy fact became apparent when I overheard him rehearsing some of his lines. "Stop right there, you lion-caped monkey! Let me add your head to my altar of skulls!" He had adopted the voice of Peter Lorre, one of his favorite film actors. No matter the voice, it didn't sound all that heroic, or the sentiment in keeping with the liberator of Theseus.

"Which labor of Hercules is that, Kody?"

He hardly looked up from his script. "The one where he lifts me into the air and crushes all my bones, of course."

CONTINUED...

"He?"

"Hercules," he said. "I'm Antaeus."

"Right," I said, "Anteaus." I searched my memory for who that might mean in that profuse, incestuous shuffle of demigods, heroes, and fiends. I wondered if Hercules himself ever had trouble keeping them straight.

Later on I fired up the Internet, though first I had to click through all the male enlargement ads that have infested my computer. The knowledge gained of my son's incipient victimization didn't make me feel that great. Product of Poseidon's liaison with Earth herself, Antaeus couldn't be defeated as long as his feet touched the ground – so sneaky Hercules lifted him up and squeezed him like the world's worst dance partner. At least that's what it looked like on the red and black krater I inspected. To be dispatched with a club or a sword might be tolerated by a hero, but a mighty bear hug? It seemed undignified. The only thing worse would be to be that guy who was killed with a bed. In passing I noticed that Hercules, despite his robust torso, had genitals the size of a little sprig of mistletoe – which made me feel a little better.

I did get used to the idea of Kody playing Antaeus. I am not Orestes, or Oedipus, or any of those old pagans whose maddened resolve (even in the wrong) makes them into tragic legends. I knew better than to project my own issues onto my son (I even let him drop archery for needlepoint) – but when I found out who was starring as Hercules, I felt even more depressed.

The very first daisies were showing their yellow faces to the sun. I remember, because Mike crushed them with his tires as he backed into the driveway. He advanced on me with what appeared to be a medium-sized cage covered in a cape. My son with his messenger bag and two-tone shoes looked like a particularly dapper newspaper boy. "Takes a village to raise an owl," Mike said and handed me the cage. A gray feather rested on the shoulder of Mike's suit. His tie was so straight you'd think it had been knotted by a precision machine. From polished sole to lacquered crown he looked every inch the gentleman. Apparently it was our turn with the class pet.

"The bird needs its snack," he said. He twisted his wrist, sending a white mouse scurrying out of his sleeve. The lively morsel then scampered into a piece of Tupperware Kody drew from his bag. "And don't worry about the performance," Mike said to me, leaning in, "I won't let her squeeze too hard." Then he turned and strode off with that showman's posture that won over my ex-wife, revealing, as he did so, the back of his suit, which had been sewn over with fluorescent green motley and had "Mr. MagicPants" written on the back in bright yellow spangles. Mike was running late for his 3:30 at the Children's Palace.

That night I lay awake to the hooting of Athena (for such was the name the class had

CONTINUED...

bestowed upon their pet). The “her” Mike had mentioned was his daughter Odessa, the new female Hercules, who had been Kody’s classmate and friend since kindergarten. What are the odds, I ask myself, that my wife would marry the father of one of Kody’s classmates? Pretty good, I answer myself, considering they fell in love at PTA meetings.

In the meantime, Odessa had grown at such an alarming rate that the school had needed to order new chairs. I suspected, in fact, that she was the reason my son could wear a monocle and still not be stuffed in a locker. At the bus stop she looked like the Statue of Liberty and her classmates were the tourists. It gave me some comfort, but there’s only so far a man can go in life protected by the muscles of his step-sister.

But now those muscles would be turned against him! Again and again I saw poor Anteauss lifted from the bosom of his mother earth and crushed. Unfairly, I thought. He was equally the son of gods. According to some sources, he wasn’t a brigand at all, but simply a powerful Libyan ruler, and Hercules’s conquest merely an apology for colonialism.

To make matters worse, Antaeus’s manner of demise summoned up one of the worst memories of my childhood, an episode from the dark era before I learned to sacrifice parts of myself in the interest of safety. I remembered being held upside down over the grade school toilet and shaken until all the Burger Boy trading cards fell from my pockets. Up and down I went, lifted mid-air by big David McKey, the blood rushing from my feet to my head. Abandoned to the sticky tile, I gave my prized, waterlogged cards one sorrowful glance and never collected them again.

Surely there must be a gentler way to guide a youth into the safe paths of social conformity. I even felt something like righteous anger on behalf of that ancient Libyan lunkhead.

The next morning I decided to pay a visit to my own mother, the soil that bore me and ripened me. I put on my best long underwear, two pairs of pants, a shirt and a sweater. I donned my jacket, pulled on my hat and mittens, and made the journey to my very own sitting room, first pausing to knock on the door.

“Come in,” said a voice that sounded like it came from the center of an igloo.

Sometimes I wish she were a little more middle-of-the-road too.

At first I could hardly see, my eyes stung so much from the cold. My mother was sitting on a platform that looked like a Tibetan chorten. With her half-lidded eyes and full lotus she looked waxy and motionless like a decorative candle.

“Tell him it’s almost finished. I just gotta put one more jewel in the eye socket.”

CONTINUED...

On the table beside her, four plastic skulls were strung along red tinsel. She'd pasted the sockets with plastic gems. She was making Kody a girdle worthy of a luchador.

"Man, it's cold in here."

"I'm migrating my chakras."

For the past twenty years my mother had kept her living quarters within the FDA approved range for the storage of poultry. She claimed it allowed her to sync her biorhythms to the universal aether. She looked very well-preserved for her age, I admitted it, though it did require a large monthly expenditure of electricity and refrigerant.

"Would you say that I was a happy kid?" I asked.

Her eyes opened slowly, and I could have sworn I saw a faint film of frost crackle as she resettled her hands.

"Are you thinking about those Burger Boy cards again," she said, reaching toward a side table. She handed me a small bronze frame whose glass was obscured by a lacy filigree of ice. I melted it with my breath and wiped the condensation on my sleeve.

"That is the face of a perfectly normal child," she said.

It wasn't exactly the question I had asked, but I let that pass. I set the picture aside – photographs of myself always make me angry, somehow. Besides, the one I really was worried about was Kody. My worry even made me lose control for a moment. My feelings puffed out in frost before me.

"Everyone in his life is bizarre," I said, "and their oddity is giving him a false sense of security."

"I know you were always embarrassed of me."

"You were the only mother who wore a Song dynasty gown. And you packed fermented bean curd for my lunch."

"But they didn't bully you for that?"

"Not thanks to you. And now Kody's mother has taken to hand tinting silent films. His new step-father thinks nothing of going to Starbucks dressed in a crimson cape. And his grandmother...well, you still have a very, very cold handshake. But you're the exceptions, you know. Fate has passed you over. Most people who stand out the way Kody does get

CONTINUED...

repulsed, rebuffed, bogged down in shame, or worse. We're not demigods. I don't want him to find out the hard way what happens to people like him."

My mother closed her eyes. "You want him to sell his soul."

"No," I said. "Just rent it a little."

"Kody is beautiful and unique. The best thing you can do is just let him be, just as I let you be."

She reached somewhere within her robe and pulled out a white mouse. "Here, take this to him. He was going to put it next to the butter then thought better of it." Its eyes had glazed open and its tail had frozen in a hug around itself. It was almost as though it had frozen in proximity to her body.

"And who are they, anyway," I continued, "to consign Kody to a bit part, not even a full labor, and take the lead away from him? It's the only power he's ever had."

"True power is within," she said. "And don't worry about him. He has a fine father to guide him."

On the way out I grabbed an extra gallon of milk I'd left to chill by the bookshelf then shut the door behind me.

She'd meant it as a compliment (I think), but something about the word "fine" stuck in my craw, and I chewed it over for the rest of the day. No Herculean concubines, jealous centaurs, poisoned shirts for me: if anything I lose people from sheer, boring fineness. I've always thought the safest option was to make myself as small, as normal, as fine as possible. As a boy, my mother's eccentricity left me no choice. And then I went and married her likeness, and she left me for a man so resplendently uninhibited he converses with rubber chickens.

It turns out fineness can protect you from a lot of things, but not everything.

One afternoon I slouched on a beanbag chair watching Kody rehearse. Athena shifted side by side on the rail on her shockingly ugly feet.

"What if he put dirt in his shoes," I said. "Then he'd always have mother underfoot. Or is the power proportional, does it require a certain depth of clay? Did he risk his life every time he ascended a platform?"

Kody looked up from his script and bit his upper lip, like he does when he's thinking. "What if

CONTINUED...

he lived in an underground cave?" he said.

"Why's that?"

"The earth would surround him on every side. He'd be four times as strong."

"Maybe," I said. "You might be onto something. Isn't it frustrating to see such great power undone by simple lack of precaution?"

"I guess so."

"I mean, if you have the luxury of only owning a single flaw, you think you'd owe it to yourself to cover that fault and be done with it. Most mortals have so many that it takes a whole lifetime to know what to protect against and by the time you figure it out you've already been struck by an arrow or had your head dunked in the toilet."

"I don't think Antaeus was known for his intelligence," Kody said.

"No, but you are – so what would you do?"

He thought about it. "Magnets," he said. "I'd pave the whole hillside with a magnetic sheet. Then I'd wear iron shoes and no one would be strong enough to lift them but me."

"Good, but a little impracticable."

We spent the rest of the day concocting fantasies of every possible combination of pulleys, winches, superglues, and wheels – anything to keep Antaeus' feet firmly on the ground. In one memorable idea he was just a head sticking out of the Libyan desert, his alimentary needs tended to by a trained army of moles.

We may not have come any closer to changing the fate of a mythical bandit and murderer, but we did have fun. It was the most fun we'd had together in a long time. I was reluctant to leave, so for a while we sat in silence listening to Athena make odd little screeches. Then I noticed a new pin stuck on my son's messenger bag.

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"Everyone in the class has a superhero nickname. That's mine."

I contemplated for a moment. The pin said "Special K."

"How do they say it?" I finally asked. "I mean, special as in special, or, you know, 'special.'"

CONTINUED...

He shrugged. "I dunno. Like unique."

Then we said goodnight and before I left I noticed that the floor of Athena's cage was decorated with little tufts of fur.

That evening I dreamed of an Antaeus as big as the Empire State Building. His muscles glistened and he was crouched over a skull. Then the sky darkened as an even larger giant blocked out the sun, bent over, and uprooted him like the flimsiest daisy. All of his Burger Boy cards scattered hither and yon across the countries of men...

With two weeks until the performance, I started rehearsing with him every day. Kody would show up in the living room in character, with toga and club, and we'd run through his lines. Together we decided to modulate his voice to something closer to grizzled Jimmy Stewart. We also practiced his head crushing swing using his old T ball equipment.

"If you were Antaeus," he asked, "how would you walk?"

I thought about what it might be like to know you were invulnerable, to know that your every whim was backed up by demigod biceps the size of large Cornish hens. To know that any strangeness in yourself or in your mother had all the unblinking, inevitable power of myth.

"I think I'd walk with a burly confidence," I said.

We started screening sumo wrestling videos. I scrutinized Kody pacing back and forth across the room on his little stalking horse legs.

"You need more heft. Your movements need to be more...girthy."

So we dusted off some of the old exercise equipment from the basement. With the help of resistance bands and gauze we wound five pound weights around his torso. For his limbs we used the sandbags we'd bought back when the neighbor's sump was overflowing our flower boxes. The added weight gave his movements a deliberate, underwater slowness and dignity. Most of the extra bulk was concealed beneath his toga.

"I think even the real son of Zeus would have trouble lifting you now," I said.

His footprints left spongy divots in the carpet that slowly filled in behind him.

I mixed together a packet of sugar and water into something we were both pleased to call lemonade. Kody had sunk so far into the couch his head was almost level with the seat.

"Mike is a pretty cool guy, right?" I said.

CONTINUED...

"He's as funny as Chaplin. He even lets me use his stage makeup."

I remembered the time Mike came to the PTA meeting fresh from a performance. He hadn't had time to change and his rouged nose stood out luridly beneath the cap and bells. Shamelessness protects some people from all misfortune—but you can't show a whit of self-consciousness. Any doubt and they'll seize you and rend you to pieces. I studied my son, the inherited weakness of his jaw that made it look like he had hardly any neck, the spindly, slightly awkward arms that tapered into delicate fingers, and wondered whether he would be among the invulnerable shameless. I rather hoped that he would. But there were no guarantees.

My reflections drifted into a realm dominated by Burger Boy cards, the glass of lemonade sweating in my palm. When my attention returned, Kody was describing all the stage tricks they had planned: a bull that charged on hidden rails, a hole to Hades that opened right in the center of the stage.

I hadn't realized that Mike had been put in charge of special effects.

"Whatever happened to that kid who kept tying your shoelaces together?" I asked.

Kody had fallen so far between the cushions that he had begun to collapse on himself like certain species of sea anemone.

"He doesn't do that. Not since Odessa started hanging out with me more."

I grabbed a protruding limb and hauled him out of the sofa. The momentum almost sent him careening into the lamp.

Over the next several days he started wearing the weights all the time. You could hear the boards creaking as he walked down the hallway. He still looked pretty puny but he moved like the Colossus of Rhodes. He kept in character, too. One time he slid his dinner plate across the floor with a tiny yet resonant burp (he was too heavy to mount the chair) and said, "Ice cream, please, you hideous rube."

"Yes, Lord Antaeus," I said and presented him the dish and the cherry. He ate with his fingers and a great smacking of lips.

One night I found myself once again unable to accustom myself to the empty expanse of my queen size bed. I came upon him silhouetted against the living room window. His small fists were propped on his hips and his white sneakers showed beneath the tangle of his toga. Outside the vast night stretched on and on and all the houses were asleep. I walked away quietly so as not to disturb him. As I retreated down the hallway, I heard him, with a serious voice, boasting to the moon.

CONTINUED...

On the day of the performance I saw a squirrel leap from branch to branch and miss. Then my lawn sprinkler choked and dribbled rust-colored water onto my shoes. The portents were there, for good or ill, to one who knew how to read the signs.

I didn't know why I felt so nervous, as though I were about to be held upside down on stage and have all my cards come raining out of my pockets.

The gym was full of the people I'd spent the past six years making small talk with in the lulls at school events. Why now this sweat on the back of my neck? The talk had only grown somewhat more awkward after my wife left me in between PTA sessions. As treasurer, I still kept the budgets perfectly balanced. I picked my way through the smiles to a seat in the back. Each nod came at me as though it were a stone. Mike was somewhere backstage reattaching a hydra head, and my ex-wife would be with my mother somewhere in the front row, both of them readying their cameras.

And Kody, Lord Antaeus—when I'd dropped him off, he had gravely made his way back stage, treading his way through monsters and beasts. He never broke character or looked to the right or the left. Now I couldn't see him through the living jumble of feathers, fabric, and scales. I wanted just a glimpse of him, though. The world out there can be so cruel.

I was grateful when the lights dimmed, since for some reason I felt like crying. Before the show begins is almost my favorite part. In the echoes of the final stage settings, you can hear the whispers of a new mode of existence. I wondered why in all these ancient scenes the temples were somehow already in ruins, bare unconnected columns and fallen capitals, as though they'd never been young.

Mr. Tomlin, the theater teacher, was on stage saying something about the insane jealousy of Hera and tugging at his fashionable suspenders. Then a little girl shrilled a few pitchy notes on a recorder and the show began in earnest.

My anxiety grew more acute as the performance progressed. I was like someone nervous for his own lines who can't pay attention to anything else. There were the serpents who almost strangled Hercules the cradle (Mike had done wonderful things with sock puppets), there the famous Nemean lion: all the impossible tasks, easily dispatched, weighed me down somehow, with each moment passing more quickly to the next, headed inevitably toward the starring moment that would also mean Kody's doom. Odessa made an imposing Hercules, I had to admit. The Stymphalian birds flitted around her like so many mosquitoes. The Cretan bull shook like a scared puppy and Geryon the three-headed giant collapsed in a heap before she'd even strung her bow.

What was Kody doing backstage? I suddenly thought back to the time I'd lost him at the mega mart. I'd looked all over for him in a panic until I found him at the end of the soup

CONTINUED...

aisle. He'd found a worker's cart and was slowly restocking the shelves, carefully examining the cans as the crowds filtered around him, stacking them neatly as though everything depended on it.

"I have another labor for you, Hercules! Ha ha ha!" The boy playing Eurystheus had ascended his cardboard throne. He twirled a fake mustache more reminiscent of Wyatt Earp than anything Attic, and ring pops glistened on his fingers. "I'm hungry for some apples-golden ones! Ha ha ha!"

And then there he was. Kody trundled heavily on stage, stepping around rope and smoke pots. It was as though his seventy pounds were shaped around bones of lead. He carried himself with a fierce dignity, not at all like a petty bandit. Facing a Hercules twice his size, he did not cower. He faced her like he faced all the rest of the world: with an unconsciousness that made me feel both proud and afraid.

"Hercules, son of Zeus, I am Antaeus, born of earth. You have come far, but your journey is at an end. No challenger has ever defeated me in battle - see where their skulls shine in the sun. I promise I'll give yours a prominent spot. Ready your club!"

Three times the adversaries circled each other, and three times they skirmished without either giving way. Antaeus's girdle of skulls chattered and clicked, their gemmed sockets flashing. No other noise from the audience was to be heard, just a dim silence at the edge of the fray.

"Is that all you got?" Antaeus cried. "Let's go another round...Jerk-ules!"

Hercules prepared himself for a mighty strike. Odessa wound up like an all-star slugger and loosed the foam bat. It connected with a thwack and sent Antaeus to the ground, where he lay like a fallen scoop of vanilla ice cream, his bright toga spreading around him. Then from some unseen center of power he gathered himself in, recomposed his limp limbs and rose again. By this time I had totally lost control. Tears were streaming down my face as I watched my son slowly prop himself back up. They fought again and again, and every time Antaeus fell, he rose with redoubled strength.

I suddenly felt weirdly grateful for my ex-wife, Mike, my mother, even Mr. Tomlin: I thought back to Kody silhouetted against the dark window, looking so small and alone. I would be too afraid if it were just me, if I were the only one he had.

"He's gaining power from his mother, the earth!" Hercules cried. "I need to lift him so he doesn't touch the ground!"

This was the big moment. Antaeus raised his fists to the sky, and for the first time let out a

CONTINUED...

mighty roar. Hercules set aside her club. She advanced on Antaeus until her long shadow fell over him as though he were a diminutive fire hydrant. I felt a skip in my own heart when she bent down and seized him around the ribs.

At first I thought it was part of the show. Hercules strained but Antaeus stayed rooted to the ground. She tried again. There was a little shuffling within his robes but that was all. By the time Odessa's face turned red around the bulging veins, I knew something strange was going on. She really was trying and yet Antaeus wouldn't budge.

A low murmur rose from the crowd. Odessa stood back and looked around helplessly. My son's face was pale and immovable, set as alabaster.

The succeeding moments unfolded very rapidly, but to my contracted attention everything played out in slow motion. Mr. Tomlin was first on the stage. He asked helplessly what was going on but then the back of his suspenders caught on one of the perches of the Stymphalian birds. He rubberbanded backward and fell from the stage with a thud.

Then from stage right Mike leaped past the curtain.

"I think –" he said, but his speech was interrupted by Athena. She dove down from where she'd been watching in the rafters, a dusky ball of feathers and talons. She clambered on his sleeve, apparently looking for another mouse, and her wings overshadowed him.

By that time my ex-wife and my mother had roused themselves from their surprise. Both rushed the stage simultaneously and collided, tripping over each other's legs. "I'm melting," my mother cried. She'd fallen over a footlight and the hot beam spilled around her, throwing her cool shadow to the ceiling. My ex-wife struggled to extricate her limbs from an extension cord.

Through it all my son had stood still and silent, his pale face unmoving. More shapes started to shift in the crowd but before they could stand I leaped the three rows down to the floor. "Lord Antaeus!" I cried with a warped crack in my voice.

I sailed over the supine forms, gained the stage, and wrapped my arms around my son. I could feel his quick breath and the slight tremor that ran through his body. I tried to lift him but some countervailing force kept him rooted to the spot.

"Kody," I whispered into his ear, "are you wearing your weights?"

"No," he said.

I tried again but something was keeping him suctioned to the ground.

CONTINUED...

"Kody, what's going on?"

"Something's stuck, Dad." He sounded afraid and I could sense the crowd stirring behind me. I pulled again, applying even more force, but all I heard was the groaning of the wooden stage. It was as though it didn't want to let him go.

"Dad, help!"

"I'm trying, buddy." I closed my eyes against the stage glare, and for a moment the whole world disappeared. When I opened them again I saw what looked like a small demon crouching in the shadow, holding a trident. It had blue skin, green weedy hair, and seemed to be laughing.

"Poseidon," I screamed. "Poseidon!"

With supernatural exertion I pulled against the obscure potency that held us in thrall. At the point of greatest resistance I pushed through the blockage, letting out a holler. The spell fractured and I lifted my son into the liberating air. For a moment we stood, locked in an embrace. I was not Hercules, but his father, and I had freed him.

The strength that coursed through the two of us carried me off the stage, through the purgatorial dark and toward the exit. With a mighty and thoroughly gratuitous kick I burst the door. Its glass cracked in the opening concussion, betokening over a hundred dollars in damages.

It was only when I had retreated to the shadow of the jungle gym that I noticed part of the stage was still attached to Kody's feet. I laid him down carefully and freed his foot from the buckled rail. His shoe had been caught under one of the trolley tracks that had guided the Cretan bull.

"Are you okay?" I asked. A stripe of sun slanted across his pale face and his limp arms sprawled weakly. He looked so small and helpless in the vastness of the yard.

Then he flipped himself over, spread his hands in the grass, and slowly but steadily arose. "I warned you that I was undefeated!" he said. "Ha ha ha!"

Then he walked back toward the gym with the slightest of limps.

I followed after. I knew I would try to step assuredly over the broken glass and not feel ashamed. I'd try to pass before the audience, proud of myself as of my son, and unmindful of regret.

Sometimes I think my mother is right: sometimes you don't want to keep your feet too firmly on the ground.



SRIHARINI SESHACHALAM

WHAT'S LEFT OF YOU LIVES

i look to an ocean
i'll never see,
dreaming of the sky's shore,
a spell of smoked mackerel
and a man and woman
seated around fire
still spinning a net of silver thread.

my great grandmother,
who died before she could see me,
swam in a dark sea
past midnight, after her husband
would return home with a shoal of fish
for her to char with cumin and turmeric,
the same shoal she had swam beside
the night before.

the women of my family
only wake when all the men
have gone to bed,
laughter translating each
other's crying. faces lined with
stories netted to trade under
the quiet our night
pretends to be.

i can't swim but
love the sea
from a whale-watching
boat every winter.
as close as i can get
to her mulberry waves
in mourning of a sky
she can't touch either.

CONTINUED...

i love her how
women love the moon,
kissing the tears
of her light pierced
by men with poles.

i love her like
the pieces of you i watch rot like
the bottle of blackberry jam
you forgot in the fridge
able to age
unlike you, god
there's still so much
i have left to tell you.

salt spraying my face
like the sting
or soft caress
of a mother's palm,
i'm sorry this world was more
than you could dream of.



ELLEN STONE

I TURNED TO FIELD WHEN YOU LEFT

Blown open, apart, the way a gale cuts through the back acres
before the corn is down. Emptied by absence, a shirt crumpling
without a body in it. The room, air siphoned. How soft

your face, easy lips spilled open like a wave that halts, stops
in its crest, lace spread out forever. You had tried all morning
to hang on, or maybe let go, I could not tell, only heard the small

wind of you, your little chuffs of breath, that tiny rhythm. I did not
know you were trudging still, your last steps up the back mountain
until the top where you could see the wideness of what comes after.

When you were ready to leap, leave your body like a seahawk sheds
its bones when it takes wing, I was gathering myself, my things
as if I could take it all with me while you were letting go, laying

burdens down. And what could I have done were I there with you,
holding your hand? Help you shrug off this heavy place, its thick
coat you had to wear some lonely winters, the clasps, wide buttons

you could no longer manage. Let you go— balloon, moth, dragonfly
on your way out of your careful skin, that tight container, a window
curtain now where the breeze subsides. Empty boat, overturned.



AUTHOR BIOS

Michael Loderstedt's first book of poems *Why We Fished* published by Redhawk Publications in 2023 received a silver award from the UK Poetry Book Awards. Recent writings have been featured in *Naugatuck River Review*, *Muleskinner Journal*, the *NC Literary Review*, *Bangalore Review*, *Poem for Cleveland & Musepaper*. He was awarded a 2020 Ohio Arts Council Fellowship in Literature, and currently lives in Cleveland, Ohio near the shore of Lake Erie with his wife Lori and son Ethan.

Karen Townsend explores the deep sea of the human psyche through speculative fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction. She has an MFA in Creative Writing and a hunger to build creative community in Virginia where she explores personality theory and looks for her next adventure.

Jordan Dilley lives and writes in Idaho. She has an MA in literature from the University of Utah. Her work has appeared in the *Vassar Review*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, and *Loch Raven Review* as well as other publications. Her 2022 short fiction piece "Lani in the River" was nominated by JMWW for a Pushcart Prize.

M F Drummy holds a PhD in historical theology from Fordham University. His work has appeared, or will appear, in *Allium*, [Alternate Route], *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *Ars Sententia*, *Deal Jam*, *Emerge*, *FERAL*, *Green Silk*, *Last Leaves*, *Main Street Rag*, *Marbled Sigh*, *Meetinghouse*, *Poemeleon*, *The Word's Faire*, *Winged Penny Review*, and many others. He and his way cool life partner of over 20 years enjoy splitting their time between the Colorado Rockies and the rest of the planet.

David Kirby is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English at Florida State University. *Entertainment Weekly* has called Kirby's poetry one of "5 Reasons to Live." In 2016, Kirby received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Florida Humanities, which called him "a literary treasure of our state." He is currently on the editorial board of *Alice James Books*.

Tricia Knoll often dreams of flying but is content to live in the deep forests of Vermont. Her work appears widely in journals and anthologies. She is a Contributing Editor to *Verse Virtual*. Website: triciaknoll.com

Al Ortolani's newest collection of poems, *The Taco Boat*, was recently released by NYQ Books. He is a winner of the Rattle Chapbook Prize and has been featured in *Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac* and *Ted Kooser's American Life in Poetry*. Ortolani is a husband, father, and grandfather, currently entertaining the idea of becoming a hermit. However, his wife prefers the company of the neighborhood feminists, and his dog Stanley refuses to live without treats.

Ken O'Steen's fiction has appeared in *Cleaver Magazine*, *Fjords Review*, *Eclectica*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Litro*, *The Westchester Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *Sleet*, *Whistling Shade*, *Fiction Week Literary Review*, and other fine publications. Ken is from Los Angeles, California, and currently lives in Proctor, Vermont.

Joan Rivard is a Canadian writer who loves poetry. She thinks you should start sharing those superb words you've been carrying around inside.

Alan Swyer is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, boxing, and singer Billy Vera. In the realm of music, among his productions is an album of Ray Charles love songs. His novel *'The Beard'* was recently published by Harvard Square Editions.

Ann Marie Potter currently lives in the beautiful state of Wyoming where she watches the wind blow, the sky snow, and the deer play—and poop—in her front yard. Her fiction has appeared in *The Storyteller*, *The Meadow*, *Peauxdunque Review*, and *Literally Stories*.

AUTHOR BIOS

Kristy Snedden is a trauma psychotherapist. Her poetry appears in various on-line and print journals and anthologies, including Snapdragon, CV2, and storySouth. Among other honors, her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She serves as the Book Review Editor for Anti-Heroine Chic. Kristy runs Brainspotting Through the Poet's Eye groups to deepen healing through writing and Brainspotting. She loves hiking near her home in the foothills of Appalachia.

Susanna Lang tries to be grounded in two places, Chicago and Uzès, France. The 2024 winner of the Marvin Bell Memorial Poetry Prize from December Magazine, her most recent chapbook, *Like This*, was released in 2023 (Unsolicited Books), along with her translations of poems by Souad Labbize, *My Soul Has No Corners* (Diálogos Books). Her work appears in such publications as *The Common*, *Asymptote*, *American Life in Poetry*, *Mayday*, *Rhino Reviews* and *The Slowdown*.

Nicole Marie Curtis is a poet, fiction author, sailor, camper, hiker, daughter, sister, and aunt. She was born in La Porte, Indiana and raised in Whittier, CA. She holds onto those Midwestern roots and celebrates growing up in Los Angeles County. Her work focuses on family and its effect on the individual, the deconstruction of a woman's self, and the rebuilding of intimate relationships, romantic, friendly, or familial. She lives and works in Southern California.

Daniel Bliss is a world-traveling poet originally from Anchorage, Alaska. Currently, he is based in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan as part of the writing MFA program at the University of Saskatchewan. His poems often focus on relationship to the long list of places he's lived. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in *League of Canadian Poets*, *Blood and Bourbon*, *BarBar*, *After Hours*, *Down in the Dirt*, and many others.

Caroline Moreton is an emerging writer based in London. She has an MA in Creative and Life Writing from Goldsmiths College. Her short stories have appeared in *JMWW* and *Timber Ghost Press*.

Paul Lewellan retired from education after fifty years of teaching. He lives, writes, and gardens on the banks of the Mississippi River. His muse is his wife of forty-two years Pamela. He has recently published in *Close to the Bone*, *Brown Bag*, *October Hill*, and *Coffee Ring Review*. In all things he's advised by his 18-year-old Shih Tzu, Mannie. Find archives of his stories at www.paullewellan.com.

Jennifer Pinto writes both fiction and creative nonfiction. She lives in Cincinnati with her husband and Goldendoodle pup, Josie. She enjoys pottery, cooking Indian meals and drinking coffee at all hours of the day. Her work has been published in *Sundog Lit*, *Halfway Down the Stairs* and *The Bookends Review*. She has work forthcoming in *The Bluebird Word* and *Lunch Ticket*.

Conor Christofferson lives and writes in the Pacific Northwest.

Samuel Teoh is a homeschooled high school sophomore living in Taiwan. He loves to drink bubble tea, listen to K-pop, and read/write stories in his free time.

Keith Hood is a former janitor and window cleaner living in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He retired from a job as a field technician for a Michigan electric utility after 32 years avoiding electrocution. Keith is the 2024 *One Story* magazine Adina Talve-Goodman Fellow. His work appears in *Callaloo*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Vestal Review*, *The Forge*, and many more. His *Vestal Review* story, "One Fell Off" was selected for inclusion in *Best Microfiction 2024*.

Marge Piercy has published 20 poetry collections, most recently, *ON THE WAY OUT, TURN OFF THE LIGHT* [Knopf]; 17 novels including *SEX WARS*. PM Press reissued *VIDA, DANCE THE EAGLE TO SLEEP*; they brought out short stories *THE COST OF LUNCH, ETC* and *MY BODY, MY LIFE* [essays, poems]. She has read at over 575 venues here and abroad.

AUTHOR BIOS

Lao Rubert lives in Durham, North Carolina. Her poems have appeared in Adanna, Atlanta Review, Barzakh, Collateral, Mom Egg Review, Poetry in Plain Sight, 2024 Pinesong Award Anthology, Poetry East, Snapdragon, Topical Poetry, and elsewhere. She was shortlisted for the Anita McAndrews Poets for Human Rights Award established by Poets Without Borders. Rubert received an M.A. in English Literature from Duke University and has spent a career working to reform the criminal justice system.

Marni Hochman's work has been published in Spent: Exposing Our Complicated Relationship with Shopping (Seal Press), and has appeared in Five Minutes, Writer's Advice and Role Reboot. When not writing, she teaches ESL to adult learners. She lives in Michigan with her husband and her three cats. Her son, whom this story is about, is now twenty-five years old, married and pursuing a Ph.D. in Anthropology and Social Change, and is an outspoken advocate for mental health care and LGBTQ+ rights.

Peg Newman lives and works in Boston. Though retired from her role as a prison chaplain, Peg continues her part time work as a chaplain in a large city hospital. She volunteers with Second /chance Justice where she advocates for criminal justice reform. Currently, Peg is working on a memoir.

Allison Burris grew up in the Pacific Northwest and currently lives in Oakland, California. Her poems embrace the whimsical and cozy, explore human connection, and affirm the power of stories. She received her MLIS from San Jose State University and her poetry appears or is forthcoming in various journals, including After Happy Hour Review, Passionfruit, The Marbled Sigh, and Avalon Literary Review.

Ellen Devlin is the author of two chapbooks: Rita and Heavenly Bodies at the MET, both published by Červená Barva Press. Her recent work has appeared in The Coachella Review, The Amethyst Review, Mom Egg Review, RockPaperPoem, Beyond Words, and The Westchester Review, among others. She has a forthcoming full-length collection from Broadstone Books.

Holly Karapetkova is Poet Laureate Emerita of Arlington, Virginia, and recipient of a 2022 Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship. She's the author of two award-winning books, Towline from Cloudbank Books and Words We Might One Day Say from Washington Writers Publishing House.

Oshry Moyal is a disabled poet from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania who primarily writes about love and disability. He earned his Bachelor's degree in English Literature from Temple University in 2019.

Katina Cremona is a Greek-Australian who lives between the island of Kythira and Athens in Greece. She works as a psychologist, psychotherapist and leadership coach at IMD business school in Lausanne, Switzerland.

Dan Muenzer is an educator from Honolulu, Hawaii. He dreams of one day writing a page-for page reproduction of Robert Burton's "The Anatomy of Melancholy."

Sriharini Seshachalam is a Northern California based writer and UCD alumni. She enjoys watching, reading, and writing horror in her free time, accompanied by her betta fish, Blahaj. Seshachalam's poetry reflects questions and challenges with ancestry, particularly lost ancestry and efforts to reconnect with culture. She recently attended the Napa Valley Writers' Conference and had her short story, "In or Out," accepted by the Southland Alibi.

Ellen Stone advises a poetry club at Community High School, co-hosts a monthly poetry series, Skazat! and edits Public School Poetry in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is the author of The Solid Living World (Michigan Writers' Cooperative Press, 2013) and What Is in the Blood (Mayapple Press, 2020). Ellen was a 2024 Writer in Residence at Good Hart Artist Residency. Her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart prize and Best of the Net.





THE MULESKINNER JOURNAL

LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.