

T H E

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C O V E R

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Emily Somoskey is a 2-D mixed media artist and painter from Northeast Ohio. She pursued a BA in Art Education/Painting at The University of Akron in Akron, OH (2013) and her MFA at Michigan State University, in East Lansing, MI (2020). Emily is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in Painting at Whitman College, in Walla Walla, WA.

Emily's mixed-media paintings use representational and abstract methods to explore the ways we simultaneously experience physical and mental space. On a material level, her work is largely built through layering paint and various forms of photographic imagery. These disparate mediums collectively create a complex and nuanced language that weave together moments of clarity and ambiguity. Through her work she references the shifting and overlapping nature of our experience with the sensate and psychological realms; giving form to the complexity, instability, and enigmatic nature of our lived experiences.

Her work can be found at emilysomoskey.com

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Promoting today's geniuses
and tomorrow's giants.

S T A F F

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D I S C L A I M E R

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

Table of Contents

	5
The Cage Ayumi Nakamura Translated by Toshiya Kamei	
	10
And Run Poetry by Linda Scheller	
	11
Salted Art by Julie Lynn Christian	
	12
Talkers A Short Story by Joseph Powell	
	20
Complies des Nuages (I) Poetry by Cathleen Allyn Conway	
	21
The Jungle Art by Emily Somoskey	
	22
Fleissig A Short Story by Robert Warner	
	29
Another Western Poetry by Kirk VanDyke	
	30
Reckoning Art by Lia Beatty	
	31
Clockwise Dreams Poetry by Holly Day	
	32
A Good Line A Short Story by Tom Eubanks	
	41
Tulpamancy Poetry by Linda Scheller	
	42
Roadside Memorial A Short Story by Heather Robinson	
	49
Matines de Sirènes (IX) Poetry by Cathleen Allyn Conway	
	50
Residue Art by Emily Somoskey	
	51
I Was Happy Poetry by Haydn Winston	
	52
Worded Out A Short Story by Mark Jacobs	
	58
More Moss Art by Julie Lynn Christian	
	59
Arrangement Poetry by Timothy Robbins	
	60
Wife A Short Story by James W. Morris	
	65
Are You There? Art by Julie Lynn Christian	
	66
Signals in the Unclean House Poetry by Linda Scheller	

The Cage

Ayumi Nakamura | Translated by Toshiya Kamei

“WHAT DID YOU DO TODAY, FUUKO?”

Zooley kicked off our video chat with her usual question. As I rarely strayed from my daily routine, I had trouble getting words out every time.

“In the morning I did my homework. In the afternoon I went to our neighborhood grocery store. Then I helped my mother out at the restaurant.”

“They play zomeki during the Obon festival at that store, right? I’d seen kids break into dance on several occasions.” Zooley wore lavender-framed glasses and her chestnut hair tied up in a bun. When she struck an Awa dance pose, two wrist watches flashed on her left wrist. Even months after she’d gone back to England, she remained stuck in two different time zones.

“I’ve never seen that blue watch before on you. Where did you get it? The indigo suits you.”

“I don’t remember,” she answered. “It smells musty because it was in a box for a long time, but it’s better than nothing. Say, I checked Triangle Bakery online the other day, but it was shuttered. What gives?”

“It’s moved to the shopping mall. We’ve got no bakery left in our neighborhood.”

“I loved their rye bread,” Zooley reminisced,

a nostalgic tone in her voice. “I often ate it with raw ham.”

Zooley left Tokushima eighteen months ago, but she watched over our town through Street View. Margaret, her mother, appeared on the screen in her pajamas.

“Sorry, Mum is up. Let’s chat in Japanese.” She winked. “Let me go to the kitchen.”

As Zooley got up and walked, the camera panned around her bedroom, showing towels hung on a clothesline. A cage lay in one corner of the room.

“Oh, Fuuko! You look so close now. You see this?” She pointed to the cage. “My neighbors had it in their garage, but they don’t need it anymore. I’m sorry for what happened there.”

“What? You’re the victim, Zooley. What news have you got there?”

“Not much. Mum’s eyesight is getting worse, so I’ve been quite preoccupied. But I don’t ever want to forget Tokushima.”

As Margaret bent her body, Zooley helped her enter the cage and locked the door.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Zooley pleaded. “I can’t bring her with me when I go shopping. This isn’t like Tokushima, where everything is close by and you can ride your bike for errands. The closest grocery store is an hour away by

bus. I can't leave her alone while I'm out. The cage is carpeted, so it's not too bad. You've been to Shelter, so you get the idea, Fuuko."

"Shelter is one thing. A cage is another," I said with a disapproving frown. "You can't lock up your mother in such a place!"

Margaret leaned her head against the mesh of the cage. With her eyes shut, she shook her head when Zooney asked her something.

"I'm off now. Talk to you next week, Fuuko. Our sky is always gray." She flashed a forlorn smile. "I miss Tokushima's sky."

Shelter was the special education class I attended when I was in middle school. As a tall hedge surrounded the glass windows facing the playground, the classroom was hidden from prying eyes. After I entered middle school, my peers gave me strange looks and talked to me in peculiar manners. Once I noticed my behavior was the cause of it, I spent life inside an invisible cage. After I joined Shelter, I occasionally felt relaxed. Even so, my ridiculous self flashed back into my mind from time to time, making me want to disappear.

"Sensei," I asked our teacher back then, "how am I supposed to calculate $-1-3$? I tried to replace those numbers with pencils, but couldn't do it."

"Huh? Nishida, what are you talking about?" the teacher said, his annoyance visible in his face. "Look, it's just a math problem." He sounded exasperated. "You don't need to replace the numbers with objects." He paused. "Fifteen minutes left!" he said to the whole class.

"But negative numbers don't exist, so I can do math." I pouted, throwing my pencil down on the desk.

"I can't concentrate because of Nishida," somebody said, provoking laughter.

"Quiet," our teacher said. "Nishida, Hokkaido's temperature drops below zero. So negative

numbers do exist."

"But my mother says somebody made up zero degrees. On the Fahrenheit scale—"

Our teacher clicked his tongue in frustration. When I looked up, he stood with his disheveled hair.

"That's enough. Shut up."

I looked down, gazes burning into my skin. Seized by the desire to stomp on our teacher's shadow, I scraped my shoes against the floor.

A chill ran through my spine. "Ah!" I cried.

"Oh!" Nori-chan yelped, bringing me back to the present moment. Nori-chan and Ohishi-kun cut and tore pieces of paper. I went back to my English exam.

When the bell rang to end class, the cheers of kids in the playground surged into the classroom, making me nervous. I imagined a hideous yamamba coming down from Mount Bizan and scaring the kids away.

I first met Zooney at my mother's oden restaurant in Akita-machi. It was shortly before I graduated from middle school. She accompanied her boyfriend Tanaka-san, a middle-aged man who had begun to frequent the restaurant a month earlier. Tanaka-san was a generous man. He often footed the bill for other diners, and they dubbed him "celeb incognito."

That night, my mother wore a white kappogi, nibbled spicy kaki-pi behind the counter, and listened to Sayo-san, a regular customer. My mother took out watered whisky in a teapot from the fridge and poured it into her cup.

"Seriously? Get out of here!" my mother said, mouth agape. "Your mother-in-law gave you one fewer dish? Who would've thought such a dragon lady existed today?"

"It was sashimi." Sayo-san pouted. "I screamed! I showed up at my hubby's family's funeral service just for food, darn it. They made us sit apart from the men. Are we still

in the dark ages or what? I missed yellowtail sashimi!”

When Sayo-san sighed, the door slid open, a sweet fragrance wafting in a cold draft. When I looked up, a long-legged woman in white skinny jeans appeared. She had small, oval nostrils.

“This is Zooley. She’s a dancer,” Tanaka-san winked. “From England. You’ll see her here often from now on.”

“Tanaka-san, where did you find yourself such a cutie?” a regular customer asked. “I want to stroll around Konyamach with a foreign woman like that!”

The regular invited the couple to his table.

“So, sweetie, what brought you to this place?” he asked.

“Everyone in Tokushima asks me the same thing,” the woman said with an indulgent smile. “It’s a great place to live. Convenient. Nice people.”

The whole place cheered. “It’s not convenient, but people are nice,” someone said.

“See this photo?” Tanaka-san said, pulling out a photo from his wallet. “She used to dance on a stage in Paris.” He handed the regular the photo.

“Wow. This is something.”

“Fuuko, why don’t you practice your English with Zooley-san? You’re great at it,” my mother said.

“What?”

She brought Zooley to me.

“Hello. My name . . . is . . . Fuuko.”

“Hello, Fuuko.”

“Please . . . eat . . . home-cooked curry.”

“Thanks. Your English is so good.” Zooley gave me a thumb’s up.

“This is art,” Sayo-san said, handing me the photo. In it, Zooley and other dancers, bare-breasted and dressed in red feathers, high kicked, revealing a froth of white petticoats.

“French can-can,” she said and hummed the tune.

“It’s the music for the Sports Day at school.”

We looked at each other with smiles.

“I’m gonna marry her,” Tanaka-san said. “Meet my bride-to-be.” As he hugged Zooley, Her scarf fell, revealing bruises on her neck. At a closer look, she had scratches across her cheeks.

“What happened?” I pointed. Tanaka-san flushed red.

“Why don’t you ask her in English? You’re supposed to be good at it,” Tanaka-san said, sticking his chin out.

I, too, stuck my chin out.

“What is this? What happened?” I asked Zooley in English. Applause roared across the place.

“You think you’re smart? Speaking English like that?” Tanaka-san glared at me. “Go back to your special ed class, you damn freak!” He grabbed a chair beside him and hurled it toward me. The chair grazed my arm before it landed on the floor noisily.

Mother screamed. “What are you doing?” Then she looked toward me. My arm ached. “Fuuko, go upstairs. I’ll attend to your bruise later.” She stepped toward Tanaka-san. “Hey, you’ve got no shame, have you? Pick on somebody your own size!”

Tanaka-san fled, and Zooley hurried to follow him.

My grandmother had occupied the room upstairs for more than thirty years. A couple of years ago, she fell ill while working at the restaurant. Back then, we lived in Komatsushima, a port town to the south of Tokushima City. We moved in and cared for her for a few weeks until she passed away. Then we never moved out. We inherited everything Grandmother owned—the comb she used every

day and camellia oil for her hair, her kimono, tansu, the Buddhist altar, her dressing table, match boxes, and her amber-colored oden with ingredients such as boiled eggs, daikon, and fishcakes.

“Are you up? Still hurt?” When I was up, Mother sat next me.

“I’m all right,” I said. “My mind flashed back to Dad’s angry face.”

“That’s right. Folks who lose temper all make the same scary face. His angry face still remains engraved on my memory. When your grandmother fell ill, I left everything behind to come here. But I’ve got no regrets. Don’t get me wrong, but as your grandmother was dying, I managed to sleep till morning because I didn’t have to see his angry face. Then I didn’t feel like going back to him ever again. Sorry to put you through this.”

“Don’t apologize. I’ll follow you to the end of the world, Mother. I’m glad I get to go to my new school. Also, I’m happy to study English.”

“That’s good to hear. I’ll never take you for granted, Fuuko. I truly appreciate your words.”

Ten days later, Tanaka-san was arrested. Mother read the newspaper aloud. “Yuuya Tanaka, aged fifty-five, a real estate company executive in Anan, Tokushima, allegedly held an English woman in her forties in a cage against her will and caused her minor injuries.”

“What?” I gasped.

“Tanaka was absent from home. His wife went out to look for him and found him with the English woman. Then Mrs. Tanaka attempted suicide by jumping from her veranda and ended up being severely injured. Tanaka has a history of stalking Western women in the area. Further investigation is underway.”

“Why did he put her in a cage? He said he would marry her.”

“Beats me. Zooney may have gone home. Do

you want us to look her up?”

“But I don’t know where she lives.”

Mother opened the curtain and pointed to the apartment across from us.

“While you were at school, a police car and an ambulance came. See that pair of white skinny jeans at the veranda on the third floor? Zooney must be the only one in Tokushima who could wear that size.”

The apartment was unlocked. When I opened the door, a cool breeze blew, lifting up the curtain. A cage lay in one corner of the barely furnished studio apartment. Inside, Zooney remained curled up in the fetal position. She was handcuffed and wore a collar. Mother closed the window and turned on the heater.

“Fuuko, bring a blanket and some oden in a thermos jar,” she said. When I slid the oshiire open and tried to pull out a blanket, it was stuck inside. I rummaged through it and found a transparent container full of wallets, cell-phones, cigarette lighters, wristwatches, and even papered matches. I moved away without fully understanding what I had seen.

Grandmother’s words flashed back to my mind. “A foreigner neighbor will teach me English,” she said with excitement. “If you don’t like school, you don’t have to go, Fuuko. But you should study English, so we could travel overseas next year or so. The foreign woman told me about other countries. School is such an insignificant, little world. I want you to see a wider world outside school and broaden your horizons.”

Maybe Grandmother meant Zooney. Afterward, Grandmother sent me thick English textbooks and a globe. She had marked several countries she wanted to visit, and they glowed in the dark. Shortly later, my dreams of visiting other countries with her evaporated when her kidneys began to fail, requiring dialysis three times a week. Even so, I kept studying English.

Shortly after the first anniversary of Grandmother's death, Mother sighed. "Kimi-san was born under an unlucky star. She was known for her beauty when she was young, but she had the misfortune of marrying my father, a widower with us kids. He put her in charge of this restaurant, installing her behind the counter. She never left there until she died." She shook her head with a melancholy air.

Then I learned for the first time that my grandmother wasn't related to us by blood.

At seven o'clock the following night, my English lesson with Zooley began as usual.

"What did you do today?" she asked.

"I've been cramming for the GED," I said. "Did I tell you that? I want to go to college. I didn't know what I would do in my life, but I've figured I need to make a decision to get ahead. Maybe I could broaden my horizons like Grandma used to say. Do you remember her?"

"Of course," she answered, her voice quivered slightly. "She was proud of you. She had told me she had a granddaughter who studied English. So I was glad when you talked to me. Your grandmother was sweet and kind."

"Then why did you sell her expensive textbooks and steal her stuff? The wrist watch

you say smells musty. That was Grandmother's gift when I was in middle school. It was custom made with a natural ai-dyed belt because I have sensitive skin. Grandma was so disappointed when it went missing. It's mine. Please give it back."

I noticed Margaret at the corner of the screen. She listened to our conversation, but I kept talking in English.

"Also, I've got a message from Mrs. Tanaka. I took out a piece of paper from my pocket and read it aloud: 'I'm now wheelchair bound, but I'm trying to learn to live with it. Please don't write to my husband. It was disturbing to see a picture of you in a cage. My husband is a sick man. Please don't send him such a photo because it makes things much worse. I'm sorry to hear about your mother's passing, but please don't tell my husband that you want to come back and marry him. That's not going to happen.'"

Zooley guffawed. "I didn't steal it." She sneered. "Believe me. You can have it back. Aw! It hurts, Mum. I didn't steal it."

Zooley tried to force Margaret into the cage, and Margaret hit Zooley with her cane. As their shouts and insults filled the room, I logged out of the video chat and turned off my laptop.

Ayumi Nakamura is a part-time radio announcer based in Tokushima. In 2020, her short story *Ori* won the Tokushima Shinbun Award in the third Awa Shirasagi Literary Prize. Her short fiction has appeared in *Tokushima Bungaku*.

And Run

Linda Scheller

The room has no ceiling. A man without skin
under scowling blaze surrenders his last best
resistance. All detail winnowed from shadow,
no corner quarters the seething ants of regret.

The battle settled, a man may choose to trade
antipathy for wisdom. Unnerved, he who lost
is left to follow a map of blood. Slender paths
lead to the heart, mercy's origin and terminus

Linda Scheller is the author of *Fierce Light*, a poetry collection published by FutureCycle Press in 2017. Her writing has appeared in *Notre Dame Review*, *Poem*, *West Trade Review*, *Slipstream*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Hawai'i Pacific Review*, and *Poetry East*, among other publications, with new work forthcoming in *Entropy*, *The Inflectionist Review*, *Nebo*, and *Canary*. Her website is lindascheller.com.



Salted

Julie Lynn Christian

Julie Christian is a designer and artist living in Walla Walla, Washington. She relishes observing nature in her garden and surrounding Blue Mountains—and is fascinated by illustrations of nature that generations past have left us in the form of nature field guides and children’s story books.

Talkers

Joseph Powell

TWO DAYS AGO, I walked in the door and Laura wasn't there. The lights were off, no explanation on the table. No table, no couch, no TV, no end tables. Everything was gone except for my clothes, the few things I brought to this fine union, a dresser, photos of Austria, my shoes, and my golf bag. There were a few things in the kitchen, some dishes, pots and pans, a sponge, a row of glasses, three cups. I thought, why three cups? It is clear she could not have done this by herself. So who was her little helper? I walked around marveling. Little clots of dust and lint were where the chairs used to be, a plastic pen top, a penny, a cashew. The pictures she took are squares of vacancy. Every garbage can in the house was full of things she discarded.

Then it occurred to me that everything was very similar to the apartment I lived in when I met her. I did not decorate. The walls were bare. There was one Lazyboy with a reading lamp and a television set; a dead plant was in the corner because I forgot to water it; black plastic garbage bags of beer cans were stacked in the storage closet, a little house of old pizza boxes was constructed in the kitchen. Now on one wall, she had tacked up a poster from those days—of dogs playing poker. I thought

it had been thrown out years ago, and the irony is that it was not mine. A roommate had bought it and left it when he left. I have always thought the card playing dogs were trite, that species of humor that evaporates on the south end of a glance. We are all spotted beasts in a game of chance, very funny. How can you live with someone for six years and only shrink and shrink further into an emblem, a label, a postage stamp? Laura had just deleted herself in a kind of deliberate time reversal. So did she cut her hair, toss her half-glasses, and go back to hot pink sweaters? Am I just the dog whose luck ran out?

The more I thought about it, the worse it got. I called her cell, but she didn't answer. I called her mother who said she knew nothing about anything, which was about as transparent as cellophane. Finally, I got in my car and drove around the city looking for her car, but by 2:00 in the morning I gave that up. The wind was blowing, and the air was damp and cold. The streets were deserted, except for a few drunks sprawled out on heat vents and under a pile of rubble. A few cars, some delivery trucks, some guy on a bicycle with flashing lights. The town was as dead as I felt. I had to be at work at 8:00 in the morning.

In the shower I could not take my mind off love. Laura is a plain woman, thin with long brown hair. Her siblings were much more attractive, but Laura has an inner surety, what I thought was contentment. Her needs seemed to be few. Our spare bedroom was half-filled with her Barbie-doll collection. Although I never counted, I would guess she has over a hundred dolls, most in their boxes, some dressed in gowns and sport wear and ratty little mink stoles. How does a forty-three year old plain Jane go there? How could this rubberized row of heads keep a soul alive? What solace did these things bring? What hurt made that an option? I realized that I had never asked her why, why this room full of plastic life meant so much to her. It suddenly seemed important to know, that there was much I did not know.

From work, I phoned her several times and she didn't answer. I tried to imagine who she had escaped with. I went through my mental rolodex of friends whose eyes had followed her ass out a room, whose voice lingered on her words, whose hands touched her when they didn't need to. Laura freelances as a technician for Microsoft and writes code I cannot begin to decipher. She worked from the house, solving techno problems for geeks; she's a kind of geek's geek. She kept her little office space very tidy, so when I came home it was hard to tell what she had been working on. Perhaps I should have been more curious about how she parted out her days and with whom.

It is true our lovemaking had become ritualized as if each of us were conserving our energies. She always came first with a suddenness, a writhing conclusion that suggested to me that she was satisfied. Yet it was the exact sequence of movements for each of us, the same preamble and epilogue, as if we could do it in our sleep, and sometimes after drinking I would rise and wonder if we had made love

at all, whether it was an early morning dream. Then I would try hard to remember each detail in sequence, but would get lost in the vagueness of drunkenness, its black veils the mind's finger cannot probe through.

I began to call our friends to see if they had seen her, but the admissions and the disclosures I was forced to reveal made each call harder and harder to make. Phone call after fruitless phone call. I began to think about the silence after love, if now I can even call it that. Silence is like that still point when the bait fish cuts loose from his ball of brothers and realizes he's surrounded by yellow tuna.

After my wife's little vanishing trick, I went to The Blue Note. The bartender and I don't really see eye to eye. He likes to duck behind his busyness when conversation gets close. He's mostly bald and shaves the sidehair, his ear cuff. He clinks his glasses, shakes ice, adjusts the TV. Even when the baseball games are on, he'll fiddle with it.

"Hey, Ken, buddy, do you think we can go back to the baseball game?"

"Sit somewhere else." There are a couple TV's in the place, not all on the same channel. He pets his bald head as if there's some invisible cowlick he needs to pat into place.

"Maybe at the Last Chance, the service is better."

"Fine," he says, arching his left eyebrow like it's waving good-riddance.

I've asked him to change it before or to play something else, and he used to, but now we've settled into a kind of mutual Fuck-You. I felt like telling his boss, but hey the guy's behind a bar all afternoon and evening listening to talkers like me. He must shave his head every morning to get a shine like that. I suppose a bald head's sexier than a fringe,

the Yul Brynner look. Now if Yul was fat and not so handsome, would that matter? Take a bald woman, for example. Maybe it's the refusal to be normal that's sexy, social boldness somehow translating into bed boldness. My wife says she doesn't care what others think of how she dresses, but she'll take two hours getting ready for a party. Why in my own head do I say "my wife" when her name's Laura? Is possession sex's narcotic? Maybe the bald head just looks like a penis poking out of its collar? Maybe if I shave my head we wouldn't fight over half open wine bottles? How long would that last, a month? Grow it out, shave it, grow it out, how long's a trick good for?

"Hello."

A salesman? He doesn't even look at me when he says it, just sits down and takes off his hat, crosses his hands, the ringed one on top. I can almost see his mind inside the viewfinder, clicking pictures. By that neat part in his hair, I can tell he's not getting any either. I try to imagine him bald. It wouldn't help. He looks like William Burroughs, a guy who could believe he'd hit the apple with his wife under it. But whose wife would do that? Maybe she wanted the bullet more than the apple did. Maybe it's the New Age's Eden story. The serpent is the curled trigger finger, that confidence. Love, drunkenness, spite, a numb fatalism—which put the apple on her head?

"Thanks," I say to Ken, who gives the briefest nod. Oh, impolite formalities.

"What's your pleasure, sir?" he asks the new guy.

The salesman looks up from his hands, one finger spins the ring on another. His mouth looks like the sucker end of an arrow. Black hair sprouts out of his right ear like cartoon grass. He takes so long to answer I wonder if it's me he's trying to solve.

On the way out, a guy in a red plaid shirt

and jeans eyes a woman in a blue dress who is leaning over the pool table. The hem rides up above her knees. There's a large brown mole at the back of her left thigh you can just see through the pantyhose, at this distance, say twenty-five feet. She lines the shot up slowly, moving her hips, adjusting her angles. Her nipples show and that outline of that brown circle, what's it called, the areola, or is it the aureola, one's a halo and one's a gland, ah the ancient confusion. What is she doing here dressed like that? Behind their glasses the barflies are buzzing. That blue dress, is it silk, is slit way down the front. The red plaid man keeps looking and walking towards the door, the late afternoon sunlight. The accountant is calculating just how far a glance stays a glance. I hear the balls click and one sinks softly into its pocket like a voice trailing off into another. Outside, the plaid man must be looking at the blue sky, wondering if she made the shot.

I never pay attention to beauties like that. They are all show and ice. It's a power thing. They want to see how many necks they can tie into knots. It's contempt really. I'm content to peek at the show.

The ring-spinner is sipping his beer like it's whiskey. I know he wants to talk. He hasn't even glanced at the woman in the blue dress. Probably calculating the costs of a divorce, offset against what, back to a studio apartment with junkies in the lobby, some old guy in the basement, widows with eight locks on their doors, some bare apartment like mine?

"You married, Buddy?" I ask, very casually.

The guy looks at me like I'm an alien, raises his ringed hand like he's a mute and couldn't talk if he wanted to. He pulls out his cell phone and deliberately makes a call to no one. The picture isn't so hard to get. Fuck you, too, Buddy. I think I've had just about enough of this place. The woman in the blue dress is leaning

against the wall with the stick between her legs, sipping from a glass of white wine.

When I think about our last year together, Laura and I hardly talked. I mean we argued about everything. Last week we opened a bottle of wine before dinner and I said I wanted to compare it to the one we had the previous night which was still half full. And she couldn't think of anything more ridiculous, one being merlot and the other a blend, apples to oranges, she said. I mean they were made by the same winery, the same year, and I was wondering if the blend actually had more character, but oh, fuck no, we can't have a civil discussion about any goddamn thing in the world, especially when it comes to her side of the family, a bunch of Bible-thumping, grace-mumbling hypocrites who hate the hell out of each other with big goddamn smiles. Hell, we've been married for six years and not one of her family ever visited us, and if she didn't call them occasionally it would be complete silence. The Blue Note is a noise refuge.

Her whole family is a bunch of fucking hypocrites. One's hooked on painkillers and is always broke; one's wife left him for another woman, not that that was his fault, but he should've wised up years ago. Can you imagine? For ten years, he's wearing boobs every time they made love, mind-fucking is what that is. And take the sex toy controversy. Laura found one of mine, the Head Honcho, in my drawer and threw a hissy fit; it made her feel "inadequate," it was "embarrassing," and though she claims to have moved beyond the religious rectitude of her parents and bothers, she was outraged in a way that wasn't just "inadequacy." And who after six years isn't inadequate? Her boredom dined on my inadequacy like it was lobster.

Uptight types, why do they even come into a bar? We're all dogs playing poker

or making drinks. They sit in a corner and feel sorry for themselves, like their fucking crisis is going to stop the clock while they work the knots out. Some people don't like to mix with the talkative. They're too damn busy checking us out and finding pigeon-holes we ought to fit in. Look at that guy in the camouflage shirt. Must be out hunting ducks—hens—probably drives a forest green Tahoe to pull his camo boat. And that haircut, like it was touched up today, nothing out of place, and that gaudy class ring like he never got over his frat days or thought he was some college somebody and the truth is four people in his whole class still remember him, and the stories from those days have been told so many times that if one of those four heard one they'd wonder what radiation atomized his memory.

Not like mine isn't some well-fooled machine, but when my sister starts yakking about things we did as kids, or what mom said, or dad did, I wonder what life she led on the other side of mine. Like that time we were playing William Tell with apples and a bow and arrow whose end was a pink suction cup, but that was only after the dog, the duck, and the cat had all been hit and high-tailed it out of there. I mean we were six or seven, bored out of our gourds, our folks were having it out inside the house over some phone bill or other—I only remember because it was from Boston and I loved the Celtics at the time. To this day Jennifer tells the story as if we had aluminum ends on those arrows and I pinned her shirt to the tree and she was damn lucky to save her eye, that as an illustration of parental neglect, of the abuse at my hands. Sure, she was wearing the apple, I admit that, but come on.

I take what Laura says with a tablespoon of salt, too. She has nothing good to say about her father, but he seems right enough to me.

Not that he doesn't have a few burrs under his blanket, but who doesn't, eh? To hear her tell it, he never got off the couch in twenty-five years, never lifted a finger to cook or clean or work in the yard. But he owned his own company, made a hundred and fifty grand a year, selling wooden windows at a time when affluence wasn't everywhere. He pounded the streets six days a week, so what if he put his feet up on Sunday and watched the fights and football? Am I right? Of course you are says the little ventriloquist inside my mind. Who talks like that to himself? Who doesn't? The one path to who we are was overgrown a long time ago.

What a fucking world. The latest car-bombs in Afghanistan are on TV. Ken's got his head in it. I'm sucking down a martini that will knock the sense out of me, soldier boy is trying to get the taste of blood out of his mouth, and two briefcases are drinking down the plunge in the stock market. And we dream of enlightenment, the earth's energy grid we can tap into with our spinal cords, joy as the truth of love. We have our heads in the clouds and our feet in the shit.

After a martini and a plate of triangles, I couldn't take this dim charade we all play any more. I leave a tip for Ken and pay my tab and tell him to also pay soldier boy's tab, that the poor fucker looks like he shot his brother. I thought I might as well go home, after all I have an empty apartment to decorate.

It's dark and the streetlights put little cones of light on the heads of parking meters like some ironic anointing. The moon is half behind a cloud but gives it a definition that makes it seem like the only real cloud in the sky. I almost get to my car when I hear a voice behind me. I turn around and it's the soldier.

"Hey," he says, "you forgot this." He is trotting up to me, trying to hand me some cash.

"What's that for?"

"I don't need your fucking money, and I'm

not anybody's god-damned boy." He's standing in front of me now in the streetlight. I can see him plainly. There's a tattoo peeking over the collar of his teeshirt, his face has that angularity of fitness and strength, his hair is cut short to near baldness, and his shoulders are so broad he must have carried some big-ass gun into battle. I know immediately that Ken has fucked me up.

"I just wanted to honor our servicemen, what's wrong with that?"

"Fuck you, who do you think you are, asshole?"

"What do you mean, what did the bartender say? What'd Ken say?"

It took me two more days to track Laura down. She finally answered her cell phone and agreed to meet me for lunch at C'est La Vie, a nice quiet restaurant that would make spectacle embarrassing, as if her motives weren't as clear as a water glass. And C'est La Vie, what kind of joke is that? Her humor always runs to the obvious. I got there first and sat by a window overlooking the lake which had two yellow kayaks with people in red parkas. I worked on some inventory totals and ordered a drink. The leaves on the trees around the lake were red and yellow, too, except the few pine and fir trees which gave the scene a kind of time-lapsed dignity. When she came in, she was wearing a pink sweater over a white blouse, a pink skirt with some spiraling design on it. Something about her didn't seem so plain, so quietly domestic. She had done nothing new to her hair, but her lipstick was redder, her makeup more pronounced.

"I thought you'd be early," she said, with a clipped edge to her voice, as if she were already striking the first blow. I wasn't going to let her go there, yet.

“What’s wrong with your eye? That looks painful,” she said as she sat down.

“You look nice, Laura. It’s good to see you.”

“Look, Tony, let’s just keep this simple. Did you ice that eye?”

“I did, thank you. I ran into a door. I thought I could see in the dark. How is concluding a marriage ‘simple’? That’s like saying the house burned down, where’s my insurance money? But what about the life inside that got burned, those years, those things, up in smoke.”

“Let’s not get sentimental. It’s not like you ever loved me anyway. You’re only in love with your own reactions to things. Everything’s a sneer. There’s no spiritual center. I’m moving to Sedona.”

“What kind of crap is that? You’ve never been religious, never gone to church that I know of. That sounds like some excuse to me, like you’re hunting for reasons to leave.” He placed his drink carefully on the little paper ring and looked directly into her eyes.

“You just haven’t paid attention to that side of me. And I don’t need reasons but I’ll give you some: you drink too much, you’re a slob, you never pick up after yourself, you never want to go anywhere but the bar. You don’t know how to love.”

“So who is the new guy. Do I know him?”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about. You don’t listen. There isn’t anybody else.”

“Who helped you move out?”

“My brother. He was here for a few days and I asked him and one of his friends to help me.”

“Why all the secrecy, why not tell me about it and we could have worked it out together?”

“I’m through talking and I knew you would try to talk me out of it. I’ve made up my mind.”

“Then why are we here?”

“I felt I owed you an explanation, after I was out and ready to talk about it.”

“Don’t you think this is a little self-absorbed? What makes you think you really know me? In your head, I’m a list of your accusations: he doesn’t do this, he doesn’t do that. I don’t feel like you were really trying either, that life for you is some primed up plastic world of Barbies and Kens. Your spirituality is just another plastic world of avoidance, of conveniently misunderstanding everyday realities. You want some kind of new age spirituality, some soft flutey mind-hum that ignores who we really are.”

“Please don’t use your two-bit psychology on me. And don’t bring my collection into it. It’s too easy. Talk about avoidance, what about all that time you spend in the bar? I’ll take my collection any day. At least I don’t come home stinking and half-conscious like you do. You’re always trashing people and bring that out in me. I just want to lead a more positive lifestyle, something more fulfilled and affirming. Is that too much to want?” She picked up her purse and set it back into her lap, a tell-tale sign.

“I said you look nice, you always look good in pink. Is that a new skirt?”

“I will use this opportunity to say goodbye.” She scooted out of the booth, straightened her skirt, leaving a reproving grimace as a kind of final punctuation mark.

The kayakers were still making their way across the lake; a light breeze twisted the yellow cottonwood leaves along the shore, and put a soft ripple in the water. A few of the houses along the shore hollered out their affluence: pillars and paved walkways, flower planters, rock walls, three stories, decks and balconies against a wall of windows in a thousand shapes, docks and boats and awnings. Maybe this little chip on my shoulder is caused by the distance between me and them, between my little prideful ventriloquist and the dumb asses with all the money. What’s

intelligence but that acute faculty of setting itself apart, like a midget judge in black robes sitting up above everyone else and doling out sentences.

This is not at all how I imagined our last meeting. In my mind it was more gentle and earnest and considerate. It's clear the hurt on both sides kept us to old patterns—one accusation and the whole house of cards comes tumbling down. Maybe she's right, maybe I'm too negative and judgmental. Too unambitious. But what kind of ambition is mood music, yoga, a roomful of Barbies, and a suffocating politeness?

As I drove back, I thought about my job, managing the inventory for a hardware store. Once you know the system, the ebb and flow of seasonal items, the way the social winds blow—Eat Local, Home Therapy, Water Works—you can do the job in your sleep. I thought about other jobs more challenging, more fulfilling. Maybe I could write, or finish my architectural degree, or open my own hardware store.

The apartment was like some cage in a zoo. The walls hadn't been painted since we moved in; there were nicks and scrapes and smudges. I thought about how I could re-imagine it—the colors, the décor, the furniture. There was nothing much in the refrigerator, some old spaghetti, some vegetables, a carton of milk, olives and condiments. I didn't feel like cooking, not that my options were many anyway. The Blue Note's Happy Hour featured little triangular chicken sandwiches, toasted with melted white cheddar and some kind of mustardy sauce underneath. They are delicious, and a two-olive martini shined like some lighthouse beacon on a dark sea.

Bald Ken is not behind the bar. Some kind

of news program is on TV. Another soldier in camo fatigues and black polished boots is sitting alone in a booth. He is eating a hamburger and nursing a pint of beer, staring into some bomb-filled space in his future or past. Another boy who had lost his boyness, going interior in a way that takes almost all the taste out of that burger. Four other men and not one woman in the bar at this hour. I don't think God could have made a better martini, and I make a silent fuck-you toast to absent Ken.

I thought of Laura going down to Sedona, that New Age Capital of the World. I had a friend who lived there, and his first wife was into Reiki palm healing, Tarot, dorje bells, sweat lodges, crystals, amazonite, reconnection therapy, axiatonal energy lines, all the bubble-speak of that rip-off world. Doesn't Laura know what happened at the Angel Valley Retreat Center? All that Spiritual Warrior crap and James Ray convicted of negligent homicide which should have been manslaughter? Those dipshits paid \$10,000 to be tortured and berated. Why don't they just join the army like that sad sack eating a hamburger? They wanted to be spiritually cleansed and three of them were: they're 100 percent angels now. It's just a witch's brew of mystical mist: Native American, Jewish Kabbalah, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sanskrit blah-blah, all aswarm in some psychic miasmal juice. I can just see her Barbie Doll mind stripping down for some noumenal séance and fucked by a gray-sacked shaman who has only her own best interests in mind. He'll have his little thunderbolt up her ass as they plumb the dualities.

In two months after the new sex wears off, Laura will be knitting with some sappy soap on, which she watches over her half-glasses. When he comes in, she'll wonder where he's been, though the bar-smell on his clothes will be a

singing telegram. She won't ask, though, she won't say a word except about dinner or where his coat lands. Nothing is as simple as we say it is. We were each other's ventriloquist dummies. Charlie and Podine without Edgar in the middle, the straight man, the human brain. What were we but dolls that couldn't communicate without

one hand under a shirt and the other adjusting an appearance. What is that coming through the door? Some dude all in black with silver studs around his neck and waist, tattoos on his hands, plugs with white wires dangling out his ears like stuffing's coming out of his head. Stool's open, Bud, belly-up.

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Complies des Nuages (I)

Cathleen Allyn Conway

The light of morning is a tomb.
Gravel-white saints gather
in wild, sticky whispers.

The room was a victim of horrors,
stained glass struck with murmuring,
crackling eyes, each colour causing

pleasant memories of chalices
and singing and pain,
allied in silence and waiting.

Funerals speak in this safe place.
The mourning innocent leave,
hearts injured without suffering.

Cathleen Allyn Conway is a creative writing PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London researching experimental poetics using Sylvia Plath and female vampires as found text sources to create a full-length collection called *Bloofer*, which she is currently looking to publish. Her work has appeared in the *Emma Press Anthology of Contemporary Gothic Verse*, *Three Drops from a Cauldron*, *Luna Luna*, the Autumn 2017 Singles Series from *Spooky Girlfriend Press*, and *Gingerbread House*. Conway has published three pamphlets, the most recent, *American Ingenuie*, is a hybrid work combining Sweet Valley High and the work of Bret Easton Ellis and will be published next month with Broken Sleep Press.



The Jungle

Emily Somoskey

Fleissig

Robert Warner

IN A BLINK, an accident. A delivery truck struck a pedestrian at the intersection of Godunov and Faust Streets in the quiet neighborhood of Astoria across the East River from the monoliths of Manhattan.

The Driver, glancing to his left, failed to notice a pudgy, middle-aged man in a grey suit stepping off the curb. The victim, a Mr. Aaron Fleissig, went flying and rolled over the concrete. He remained conscious. The ambulance came siren blaring, scooped up Mr. Fleissig and delivered him to hospital in two minutes flat. Injuries included bad bruises and a badly broken right hand. Doctors assured Fleissig that after a surgery and physical therapy, that he would recover 90% of the use of the damaged hand and fingers. The problem: Fleissig, known internationally as the Tornado of the Piano, performed thirty to forty concerts each year to cheering audiences worldwide, an adulation he had enjoyed since childhood. His hands communicated his art, like vision to an artist. A .01% would have been a disaster. A 10% loss was unthinkable.

After delivering the 90% prognosis, good news for anybody else, the doctors hurried away. Fleissig's first visitors (his manager, agent and professional colleagues), after they learned

the harsh news, glanced everywhere but at his face. None could discuss the situation, a way of life and decades of the exhausting work and self-discipline, lost in an instant.

At least until Neil O'Brian, conductor of the Greater Manhattan Symphony, slipped into Feilissig's hospital room. The big man peered at Feilissig, who lay buried in the covers up to his chin. The injured hand lay above the covers cocooned in thick bandages.

O'Brian's voice boomed. "Right out of the blue?"

Fleissig didn't answer.

"Really don't know what to say," O'Brian sighed.

Fleissig still didn't answer.

"Don't be that way," O'Brian said.

"What way would you recommend?"

Fleissig asked.

"How long have we known each other, Aaron? The spark has always burned in you. It's never had anything to do with just fingers flying up and down the keyboard. You know that. So does the rest of the world."

Fleissig took a deep breath.

"Don't expect pity from me. I won't destroy you that way. When my Beth—" He paused, lost in memories. "Anyway, that was the last thing

I wanted. There are alternatives. Let me offer up one right now. Consider the podium. I have some influence.”

“I might kill somebody.”

“Composing?”

“It’s not there. You know that.”

“Then teach, man. You keep a few pupils, don’t you?”

“Not currently.”

“Think about it. Create a legacy that will survive you.”

“In other words, at some point I’ve got to make a living. What choice is there?”

“There are always choices.”

“Skip the platitudes.”

“Sure. But neither of us has any better idea.”

Fleissig left the hospital with a bag of pills and a laundry list of specialists to visit. Both he dumped in waste basket. For the first few days a stream of well-wishers, usually musicians from the local orchestras and that sort, came thumping at his door. He noticed that guest followed the stiff movement of the fingers of his bandaged right hand.

“They’re all there!” a bassoonist named Schultz blurted out at one point.

Fleissig shook his afflicted hand in the man’s face. “All present and accounted for!” Fleissig exclaimed back. His wife hustled the man out of the front door.

For a while more colleagues paid visits at odd intervals. Fleissig worked out a routine, complete with snacks offered up and a script he memorized for chit-chats. By the time the bandages were gone, so were his visitors. The Great Silence Fleissig named the time after. Each morning he walked through the neighborhood to a little park by the river and sat on the same bench to study the grandeur of the Manhattan skyline. How often have I covered

these streets, endured the rattling subway, my mind angry about something trivial? Now I have a proper reason to be angry. There are people much worse off, I heard a nurse mutter. So, what am I supposed to do? For the first time since my ninth birthday I have no practice schedule, no rehearsals, no performances and nowhere to go.

Rest.

The idea came so clearly that Fleissig through he’d spoken it aloud. He had nine hours till bedtime. There were the boring tomes he’d meant to read and those operas to hear that frankly he’d never been able to sit through. He kept the prescription for a strong sleeping pill, guaranteed to block out the night. That would handle half the problem.

Between life and death.

Fleissig sat perfectly still. After a long time, he walked slowly back to his city house and noted to himself that he was already three hundred hours behind on his practice schedule. Till something breaks. Fleissig shivered. Doesn’t mean a thing. None of this ever happened.

He arrived home to find a mailbox stuffed with bills.

Fleissig admitted to himself that money wasn’t his strong point. In his best years, a fair amount flowed in, but travel and his personal standards ate it up. Fleissig sat at his kitchen table and did some quick calculations. He called his accountant, who sighed over the phone. “Friend, you’re broke. It’s really simple.”

Fleissig felt his throat tighten. “Got any ideas?”

“Only the obvious. Get a job.”

The next day Fleissig placed an advertisement in the NYT: Students wanted. Reasonable rates. However, Burt Tilburton, keyboard chair at the Orpheus Institute, heard about the add

and arranged for several students to take ‘supplemental lessons’ with Fleissig, paid for by scholarships at a rate, in Tillburton’s words, “more than chicken feed.”

Fleissig acquiesced. He expressed deep gratitude that he didn’t really feel. He hadn’t taught in years; the closeness that grew between master and pupil never paid Fleissig what it cost in time away from his career. He’d never married for the same reason. I am, he told himself, exactly what everyone sees: a solist.

He knew what was coming. A handful college-age pupils once a week would pound on his piano, turning his private space into a public platform. Fleissig prepared. He bought potted plants, a few overstuffed chairs and a little table for the sheet music. On the Day he wore a recently pressed suit, polished shoes and slicked back his hair.

Pupil one knocked ten minutes early. Fleissig faced a tall young man in his early twenties. Far too old to be molded by anybody, Fleissig sighed inwardly, but bread is bread.

They shook hands.

“Aaron Fleissig,” the older man murmured.

“Timothy Westwood, I’m honored.”

“What are you working on?”

“The Mephistopheles Waltz.”

“Let her rip.” Fleissig dropped into one of the new overstuffed chairs and closed his eyes.

The man did. The piece ran a full ten minutes. Fleissig, who’d trained himself after years of traveling to nod off anywhere, did just that. The sudden silence at the end woke him.

Westwood was staring and frowning.

“Coming along,” Fleissig managed.

“Sir, did you ever perform this piece?”

“Hmm? Yes, as a child.”

“Do you have any specific suggestions?”

Fleissig looked far away. “Let me think about it.”

“I mean—.”

“If you want a lot verbiage, that’s not my business, is it?” Fleissig shifted in his chair. “Our time is up anyway. Go home and think about it”

Westwood snatched up his music and slammed the door behind him.

Another student passed through, a Ms. Reece, younger than Westwood. Fleissig remained awake and let his attention wander just a little. At the end of each demonstration piece Fleissig nodded. “It’s coming along,” he muttered and saw the same disappointment in her eyes. What do they expect? Fleissig asked himself. It all comes from within anyway. I can’t help that.

The routine endured for three weeks. The change occurred on the fourth week, starting with scowling Mr. Westwood.

“Coming along—.” Fleissig began.

“No, it’s not. You’ve got one good hand. Show me.”

The cheek; the gall. Suddenly Fleissig felt something move from deep inside. He had never experienced such an upwelling of anger. But it was much more than that. The room seemed to whirl around and around. Fleissig approached the piano, the center of his life since childhood.

Fleissig stopped. The room became clear again. “No. Measure one. You show me. Perform as if your life depended on it. You’ll be my hands. That’s what you want, right?”

Westwood’s mouth dropped open. But he turned back to the piano and attacked the keys Presto furioso as if his life did depend on it. Fleissig felt his face flush. His own furioso carried him along. He caught himself pacing behind Westwood, snapping the fingers of his left hand and yelling at the man, bullying, dominating the performance phrase by phrase.

The music lived for him again. His hand was dead, but his imagination blazed. How that music should be, could be, lived through another’s hands.

The music ended. Fleissig realized that he'd been pacing back and forth like a lunatic. He tugged at his sleeve. "Much better."

He was breathless.

Westwood looked down at the floor. "Maybe I'm getting somewhere," he mumbled, snatched up his music and slammed the door on the way out.

The next pupil, Ms. Reece, though talented in spades, hadn't practiced enough. Fleissig found himself striding back and forth as she stumbled through a Brahms Intermezzo. "Again!" he demanded, and she obliged. Fleissig stormed back and forth in the modest room, waving his good hand and singing. By the end poor Ms. Reese crept away slump shouldered.

After the girl was gone Fleissig stood in the empty room and stared. His heart and soul had drifted down from a high so much like the uncanny experience he'd known after every performance. He dropped down into his overstuffed chair, head in his hands. I know. By sheer will or despair I just saved what the past gave me. What I thought I'd always have.

Fleissig felt that he'd never known anything so clearly. On the rebound, he called for three more students. They were younger still and hence eager to please. Fleissig, becoming more and more comfortable with his role, roared as he strode back and forth. He bellowed in his good baritone and shook his good fist at the heavens. At the end of each lesson he moped his forehead and mumbled a few sentences at his wide-eyed pupils

A curious thing. His students didn't jump ship. He halfway expected it. They approached him with trepidation surely, but, as Fleissig rose to the heavens the students seemed to get more and more into the experience, week after week.

Months past. In December, at the cusp of the bitter city winter, Fleissig, to show the world what he was worth, decided to throw

a party. That meant an evening-long recital presented by his new students. The location: Skylar Hall, an intimate venue with two hundred seats and a stage close enough to touch. Fleissig had no trouble finding a sponsor and people to handle refreshments, recordings and photographs.

Patrons snatched up the tickets. The cream of the critics acknowledged that they'd show up. The situation seemed a little unusual, but Fleissig didn't care. I am remembered, he promised himself.

A few days later a single sustained A on the piano called the milling crowd to their seats. Fleissig felt a familiar mix of nerves and glorious anticipation. He wore his formal concert dress. His gaggle of students remained in the background. Fleissig mounted the stage and took a long, enthusiastic round of applause. From the corner of his eye he noticed a few confused glances as he stepped away from the piano on center stage. Instead, a series of students appeared and performed three selections from the heart of Fleissig's repertoire.

Fleissig hovered offstage, absorbed in his pupil's efforts much as he had been at home, waving his good hand, striding back and forth, even bursting out in his baritone when he forgot himself.

At the end of each student's performance Fleissig stepped out for a bow or two. At first the applause was strong. After the second performance the applause sounded more scattered. By the final selection, presented by beanpole Mr. Westwood, the applause amounted to no more than a polite splatter.

At the end of the concert, he stood in line with his students as the audience, packed with people he'd known for his entire career, filed past. The evening left him exhausted and exhilarated.

Reviews appeared in the papers the next day. Most critics noted the same thing: the master's pupils, old enough to show their own style, imitated Fleissig. Elderly Arch Cleburn, whom Fleissig knew suffered from nagging gallstones, griped with adjectives including "slavish...unoriginal...stifled." That night the mob of well-wishers and friends diverted him from other lives. After all, Fleissig might have argued, what about the applause? What about that?

The answer came the next Saturday. Westwood phoned on Friday to ask if the maestro might meet with his pupils as a group the next day. Fleissig didn't like the man's tone. "Do I need to serve refreshments?"

"Not needed. This won't take long. 11 a.m. good?"

Fleissig grunted an agreement and hung up. The gaggle showed up promptly at 11 a.m. with no music in their hands. They were grim.

Fleissig held his door wide open. "Seats, if you please."

They filed in silently. Fleissig remained standing. "I hope for a beautiful spring—."

"You're killing us!" The youngest student of all, Cleo, burst out as she clenched her small fist "Did you read the papers?"

Reese attacked like a harpy. "Rubato is dead! What are you teaching us? What year is this? 1912?"

Fleissig felt as though he'd been felled with an ax. The room swayed.

"You know this is going on our permanent record," Jackson, another newby, hissed.

Westwood leaned forward. "Aaron—."

To hear a pupil use his first name grated on Fleissig's ears.

"You may think we don't understand."

"Fleissig mumbled. "Understand what?"

Westwood patted Fleissig's right hand.

"You've already made your reputation."

"Reputation? Like Billy the kid?"

"One day we'll leave you," Reese blurted out.

"To stand on our own two feet!" Cleo snapped.

"My mother has all your records," Jackson said politely. "Too much with the peddle. I agree."

Fleissig felt all the eyes in the room locked on him. He answered slowly. "I don't understand."

Their shoulders slumped. The silence felt thick. Fleissig heard a ringing in his ears.

"Then I must speak for us all," Westwood sighed. "We must part our ways. We wish you well." With that his students stood and filed out of the room.

Silence: that surprised Fleissig most of all. Only in the dimmest of early memories could he recall a day not filled with music. For the first few weeks he never left his house. The next week he managed a short walk to the river, but some days he forgot to eat. He woke one day to find that someone had closed the piano lid tight. He didn't remember who or when. The days were so quiet, so empty that he thought I've been fooled. This is death.

The reality chilled his soul. He feared the silence would follow him even after his physical death. Choose a voice sternly order. You know the answer. Learn, you old fool. For months Fleissig pretended he didn't hear. The scalding city summer came on full force. Fleissig sat in his stuffy apartment for days upon days till he caught a glimpse of the man in the mirror, plump no longer but gaunt and somehow still trapped on this earth.

On July 16 Fleissig phoned Mr. Westwood. "Son," Fleissig said, fully aware to whom he was speaking, "let's chat."

Westwood paused. "Are you prepared for that?"

Fleissig felt a rasp of irritation. "What's it going to cost you?"

"Okay. So you want to make it the whole gang if they'll do it?"

"Sure. The whole gang. That's the idea."

"I'll call around," Westwood said. "No promises."

You just don't know, Fleissig thought. "They'll be doughnuts, guaranteed."

The whole gang appeared on a hot afternoon as thunderstorm muttered from the Jersey shore.

"Come on in!" Fleissig threw open the door. Hurry! Before you melt! Seltzers! What's everybody say?"

Fleissig dipped into his kitchen and returned with a tray of glasses streaming condensation. There was a stack of doughnuts. "How are you people?" Fleissig asked as they drank and ate. "All for one and one for all, I guess."

"Maestro," Westwood began, his mouth stuffed with chocolate sprinkle, "you know why we are here."

Fleissig forced himself to beam like a salesman in a booth. "Certainly. An adjustment. I accept responsibility for miscommunications. I wish to correct them."

His audience exchanged glances. Fleissig's next words rushed out. "Sincerely. Ladies and gentlemen, you have no idea."

"Idea of what?" Westwood asked.

Fleissig hesitated. Without direct experience his words would be meaningless. Fleissig took a deep breath anyway. "A man of my age. Well, he comes to recognize certain things."

Like there's no fool like an old one. Fleissig almost said it aloud. Instead, he managed, "That a man my age can learn. Right up to the end. He just needs to listen. The alternative is—" Fleissig shrugged. His guest glanced at each other. "I'm a regular fount of ideas," he said quickly, "let's try an audition, teacher to pupil. This one hasn't auditioned for forty years. One piece per artist, followed by my comments. Each of you evaluates." Suddenly he felt very tired. "Then we'll see. Tomorrow is another day, I suppose."

Fleissig dropped down heavily in one of his overstuffed chairs and nodded to Westwood. "Let's proceed. What do we say?"

Westwood glanced around. No one protested. The man sat at the piano and rushed through Mendelssohn's *Capriccio in E Minor*, a piece dense with notes and requiring flying fingers and great for encores. After the splashy double octaves at the end, quiet. The music seemed to vibrate in the air.

"Coming along," Fleissig murmured fingers pressed together. "Might actually slow it down a little. Looked pained. Create a little suspense. Next, please."

Cleo, despite being a hundred pounds soaking wet, thundered out a Liszt Etude. Fleissig nodded. "Coming along. Nice tempo. Next."

One by one the remaining students presented their show pieces by Chopin and Granados. At the end of each performance Fleissig nodded and noted that the piece "was coming along." While everyone waited, Fleissig studied a few notes he'd scribbled. "So much progress ...now, for everyone, your scales an hour each day. If they're not fun, practice till they are. Suffer a little, ladies and gentlemen. Of course, we'll talk about auditions and contest. You've got to get ahead." He glanced at the serious faces around him. "The world

hasn't changed, has it?" He didn't realize what he'd said till too late. Fleissig thumped his good hand against the table. "Anything more?"

His pupils stood with music clutched to their chest. Fleissig opened the street door. "Call for times. No Saturdays, please and thank you." His pupils filed into the sticky afternoon. On the way out they muttered niceties and nodded. From the stoop Fleissig watched his pupils scatter toward the subway station. Old man, you

have accomplished a critical thing. You'll never know the creak of the boards as you cross the venerable stages of the world, nor the feeling, much like soaring, as you lift your hands to the keyboard. All that has evaporated. It isn't about reason, cause, or punishment. But the facts are simply there. Swim or drown.

Fleissig sat at the piano and picked out a childhood tune with his left hand and waited for the telephone to jangle.

Robert Warner has published several short stories and a fantasy novel in the UK, *Arthur Rex*. Currently he is retired much of the time.

Another Western

Kirk VanDyke

with every good one, a god suffers,
a god cries, slowing revolution,
frightening an innocent child's tears.
it's easier to not believe,
to not take vitamins before suicide.
the blue sky is faded by the sun.
the summer begins to break up
with a cold wind, with black clouds.
hush, hush... the thunder screams a voice
that sends even the bad scurrying
like the cockroaches that survive
the painful loss of limb.

Kirk VanDyke holds a PhD in entomology. His novel about schizophrenia, *Figures on a Beach*, is published by Elm Books. His work has appeared in *The Cape Rock*, *The Sun*, *Shark Reef*, and *San Pedro River Review*, among others.



Reckoning

Lia Beatty

Lia Beatty studies Neuroscience and Art at Whitman College. Inspired by the now-ubiquitous surgical mask and Warhol's *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), this work invokes reflection on individualism and collectivism, the rise of nationalism, and the perpetuation of ideological divides unmasked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Clockwise Dreams

Holly Day

Robots don't believe in ghosts, they attribute
the wheezing and clicking of late-night phantoms
to faulty streetlights and glitches on the power grid.
If a ghost were to present itself to a robot, the robot
would be able to dissect the apparition
as some clichéd space-time anomaly,
something broken in the universe
quickly mended by the natural order of the fabric of space
mending itself.
There would be no need to haunt a world peopled by robots.

In a world run by machines,
ghosts would find themselves
completely explained or dismissed.
The shadows of what we were
would phantom hang or drown or stab ourselves
night after night, scream for an audience
that never feared or learned fear
but only calculates and classifies who an apparition belonged to
and why the ghost is a reappearing specter.
The grave sites will be kept up with meticulous detail,
flowers will be replaced, any new revelations
will be catalogued and stored and examined
in cold but sufficient detail.

Holly Day has been a writing instructor at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis since 2000. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Hubbub*, *Grain*, and *Third Wednesday*, and her newest books are *The Tooth is the Largest Organ in the Human Body* (Anaphora Literary Press), *Book of Beasts* (Weasel Press), *Bound in Ice* (Shanti Arts), and *Music Composition for Dummies* (Wiley). Follow Holly at hollylday.blogspot.com.

A Good Line

Tom Eubanks

HIS PARENTS should have posted a sign on the eave of their tract home in Tujunga: *Sex Not Spoken Here*. Ivan turned 13 before he learned he hadn't invented masturbation. He'd even given it a name: "Electrospewshun."

His parents showed no overt affection to each other and "purple jokes"—that's what his mother called any joke with a sexual theme—were never to be told. He knew this was so, because when he was 10 he told his parents the joke about the girl whose mother warned her not to stand on her head for money because the boys only wanted to look at her underpants, and who went ahead and stood on her head for a quarter but "fooled them" because she wasn't wearing any.

He went to bed without dinner and had to memorize and recite twelve verses from Leviticus. So he never told any jokes—at all.

In 1967, when he was 15 years old, something extraordinary happened. It came to him like a crime reporter who lived next door to the Gambino Family and suddenly realized the biggest story of his career had been there all along.

He discovered these amazing creatures called *girls*.

Felt a peculiar excitement that their

presence had on him—girls didn't have to do *anything*. Just be there. He talked to a few girls, and he wasn't uncomfortable being alone with one, as long as she didn't consider him "the guy." Being just a friend kept him close to some nice girls, which he didn't want to give up. Nice or not, girls scared him.

But there was one girl who made him feel shy and cautious. He was terrified of her rejection, so he hadn't even made an attempt to ask her on a date.

She was a good Irish girl—if one existed outside of myth—named Shannon McIntyre. Tall for her age; black wavy hair like a horse's tail falling to her waist. Her eyes didn't sparkle blue, they radiated, drawing him in like an inviting lagoon. Yes, he even romanticized her eyes, hoping that one day he would spend time with her.

He knew that if he didn't cross the line of basic classroom conversation, restricted to the class subject, he would never have to know what she really thought of him. Her rebuff, he knew, would eternally purge his yearning for her, and he still enjoyed the yearning. Because she was the one girl he ached to have as his own. When he was around her, he was in a state of brain derailment. A living, breathing

train wreck. If she was within hearing distance, he first paused several seconds to wonder how his hair looked, what his expression might have to be—what she was seeing. And he thought and considered exactly what he would do with his hands—front pockets, back pockets; arms folded to push out the biceps a bit—and the cadence of his speech—slow and direct, or quick and flippant?

They rarely spoke to each other, except in greetings. He sorted this all out whenever she joined a conversation. That's where he got to know her—how he got to know her. Listening to her interact with their classmates.

She was funny. She actually told jokes; none of the other girls told jokes. They weren't purple either, so they were jokes he could repeat, if he could remember them. She was ridiculously smart, too. Not the boring, brainy kind of smart; she was naturally intelligent and able to effortlessly grasp ideas. Even her girlfriends noticed, giving her the respect of asking her opinion on many subjects.

And she didn't have all these derogatory opinions about boys that were circulating around America. She respected boys, enjoyed their company, more than the company of the girls. She made it clear that she thought women's liberation was about enjoying life as a woman not joining a group. No one challenged her either; they knew they'd lose the argument.

But he never joined her conversations. He avoided eye-contact to dispel any invitations from the other members of the group to join in. Risking embarrassing himself in front of Shannon was to be avoided at all costs.

It was grueling. Obsessive. Probably paranoid—but safe.

One day in the tenth grade, a month after getting his license to drive, he approached his mother with the subject. An oblique ploy to avoid specificity.

"Mom. If a guy wants to ask a girl out. What's the best way to do it? So when she says 'no' he doesn't feel like a jerk and wish he didn't exist. It's for a friend."

"Son," she said, ironing a crease in his father's trousers, "a boy shouldn't go asking a girl on a date with pessimism in his heart."

His attention was briefly taken by her concentration on making the crease so sharp it could cut grass. "So, Mom... in person or on the phone?"

"You're a handsome, smart, likable boy. Any girl would be lucky to go out with you."

"I'm not talking about me," Ivan lied.

She looked up, rearing the iron on its handle. Water steamed from the holes and sizzled. Smiling, she said: "Just make sure you pick the right girl. A lot of these girls are just slutty."

Ivan nodded. "Mom. I just need to know: in person or on the phone?"

"A real man asks in person," she said. "Son, just ask her. If she says 'no,' say... say, 'Okay, maybe another time.'"

"And if she says 'In your dreams?'"

Ivan closed his eyes as his mother spread apart the trouser legs and ironed the crotch. Mom said: "If she says 'In your dreams,' you say... 'If you insist.'"

Mom didn't realize the weird, sexually-charged image she just put in his head by saying that. Of him sneaking into one of Shannon's bland dreams while she's sitting alone in a cabin next to a roaring fire drinking hot chocolate and looking up and smiling and not minding at all that he's not wearing any clothes and then sighing and reaching out her arms to him for a hug.

"Ivan. Why are your eyes closed?" she asked.

He wasn't about to admit to his fear of crotch-ironing and definitely not to invading

Shannon's dream. "Just concentrating on your answer, mom," he said. "Read once that wisdom comes to those who are blind."

Mom grimaced. "I think you read it wrong."

He still couldn't get up the guts to ask Shannon out. For four years, Ivan watched Shannon flourish into a full-blown young woman. Passed on asking her to the Junior Graduation Banquet. Chickened out asking her to the high school prom.

Then he found himself at Pierce College and made new friends.

Bobby Villanova was Ivan's best friend that first year. Bobby was a handsome Hispanic boy originally from Santa Monica with leading man features and a gymnast's physique. He wore his black hair long and revolutionary. And through that first year, they spent most of their free time together. Bobby occasionally dated.

And then starting his second semester, Shannon McIntire showed up seated next to Ivan in Journalism. It was like Jesus had heard his prayers and delivered her back into his life. A little slower than he'd expected—six months was a long time—good thing it wasn't cancer, he'd be dead—but at least he learned that Mom was right and that if he asked, he'd receive.

They both were astounded to see each other again. She'd been at Pierce the first semester, too, but they just hadn't had the same classes or crossed paths in transit.

So they smiled at each other, fixated on the coincidence of their interest in journalism, and exchanged every pleasantry in the world. Some days it was just a nod and other days they talked before class, but he never asked her out, never even suggested they get something to eat in the cafeteria or spend five minutes alone together on a campus bench somewhere.

Nearing the summer break. Lying under an elm tree, eating pizza on the main quad between the library and the cafeteria. Ivan

asked Bobby, "What do you do to pick up chicks?"

"Chicks?" Bobby said, sorting something out in his mind. "I don't squeeze them too tight."

"What?"

"They're really fragile, man. Break their little bones."

"Stop it. Girls, man—you know what I mean."

Bobby grinned. "Just razzin' you, fool."

"I've liked her for five years," Ivan said, frustrated. "We've never been on a date."

"Did you ask her?"

"No, I don't know what to say," Ivan admitted. "I'm scared to death she'll turn me down."

"That's not a death sentence, man. It's motivation."

"What do I say to her? I need something fool proof."

Bobby rolled to his back, shaded his eyes with his arm, and looked at the sky. "Hey, man, all you have to have is a good line."

"A good line," Ivan repeated.

"Yeah. But. It can't sound like a good line, it's gotta sound like... you know, like—"

"Spontaneous."

"Yeah, spontaneous—slick, you know, like she never sees it comin'."

"Like what?" Ivan asked.

"So now you want me to tell you all my spontaneous good lines. All the girls hear them and I'm stuck with a bunch of *used* good lines."

"All what girls? If you got a good line, I'll only have to use it once—on Shannon."

"That Irish girl? Shit, she can dance a jig on me any day."

"Jig. Dance a jig."

"One of those, too," Bobby said.

Ivan closed his eyes, wisdom absent. "Give me your best line." He opened his eyes. "If you really have one."

Bobby rolled over on his side, propping his head up with his hand and grinned. “Shannon. You’re aimin’ high, man—like stellar.” He punched Ivan in the shoulder. “Okay. She’s worth it. Here’s one of my best. You owe me for this one.”

“Absolutely. I owe you,” Ivan said.

“You sit next to her in Journalism, right?”

“Right.”

“Perfect. Just look depressed.”

“That’s not a line. That’s a state of being.”

“Just listen,” Bobby said. “Look depressed. Stare at your desk like you’re lost in your own world.”

“That’ll be easy.”

“Don’t participate in class.”

“That’s easier.”

Bobby playfully wiggled his eyebrows. “She’ll notice. She’ll wonder.”

“Wonder.”

“She’ll ask you what’s wrong.”

“How do you know that?”

“Girls are sensitive. They zero in on depression, man, I’m tellin’ you. Girls just sense all that depression. And when she gets a whiff of you being bummed out, she won’t be able to help herself, man.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know why, they just do, man. It’s like depression has an odor and only girls smell it.”

Ivan was beginning to think Bobby got all his wisdom with his eyes wide open. “So what’s the line?”

“Well,” Bobby said conspiratorially, “when she asks, ‘Ivan, what’s wrong?’ You say—ready for this?—‘my mother died.’”

Ivan fell back on the lawn, throwing his arms over his head in surrender. “That. Is. Stupid!”

“It’s not, man! It works! It’s about as spontaneous as you can get! She gets all sensitive and you ask her out, I’m tellin’ ya!”

“So, Shannon, I’m grieving over the death of my mother—let’s hit Bob’s Big Boy for a burger and a shake?”

“No, man,” Bobby said, “it’s just a jumpin’-off point.”

“You mean, like, when I jump off the roof when she tells me I’m a callous, pathetic freak?”

“No, you use it to strike up the conversation, man.”

“And when she meets my mother, I say what? She just had a near-death experience?”

“Why the hell would you want her to meet your mother? You’re missin’ the point! That’s not what a good line’s for—not to get ‘em to like you and meet your mother!”

“My mother died. What a dumb line.”

“Then say it was your... favorite uncle or aunt or something.”

“How about if I say my best friend died of brain damage?”

Bobby rolled his eyes. “Okay, whatever.”

“You’ve actually used this line before?”

“Killed off everyone in my family, man, ten times over.”

Ivan lay there, disappointed that his best friend didn’t have better ideas. But Bobby Villanova was all he had.

Ivan asked: “Works every time?”

“Like a Dutch watch.”

“Swiss.”

As the spring session came to a close, Ivan still hadn’t asked Shannon out. Then in early June, he heard Shannon tell the girl beside him that she was going to Canada for the summer.

“So I’m practicing going, ‘It’s a beautiful morning, eh? Did you read that article in *Maple Leaf Magazine* about the three Canadians who were stoned to death for refusing to play hockey?’”

The other girl laughed. “Is that the way they talk? Why Canada?”

“My mom’s from Ontario. She helped me

get an internship at a newspaper in Toronto. I'll be staying with my aunt."

"Sounds exciting."

"Have you ever been there? They're crazy organized—everything has its place, eh? Things have a way it should be done there, and I'm afraid I'm going to get really bored real quick-like with their love for routine. And everyone apologizes for everything there." She laughed. "Even when something is your fault, the Canadian still apologizes—seriously. So we'll see. If I like it, I might stay."

That did it. If he were to spend time alone with her—just a burger and talk would be satisfactory—he had to act fast. He had to stop worrying about purging her from his pathetic life. He had nothing to lose.

He came early to the next class. Got his chair lined up with hers. He inched it closer and waited. She walked in before the instructor began his lecture and sat down across the aisle in her usual chair. He pictured himself sitting there, anxiously waiting. I'm pathetic. I'm 19 and I can't ask a girl I've known for five years to go to the movies?

Like to try the best Mexican food in L.A.?

No thanks, Ivan, she might say, it gives me gas.

Join me at the Journalism Club Summer Party next week?

No thanks, Ivan, journalists in a group are boring.

There's a new Woody Allen movie out called *Bananas*.

Woody Allen drives me bananas. I hate people who stammer.

There were too many things he didn't know about her. During his internal struggle, flipping through line after line to find the one that came with a supply of courage to ask her out, he had been staring at his desk, lost in his own world, and he must have looked awfully

depressed. Because out of the mist of classroom noise came a voice.

"Ivan? Are you all right?"

He shook himself back to the real world. It was Shannon, her eyebrows raised in concern. Could Bobby be right?

"Oh, uh... not really."

"What's wrong?" she whispered.

"It's..." What could he say? "It's... a death... in the family."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, thanks. My, uh, my favorite uncle. Jack. My Uncle Jack."

"I have a favorite uncle, too," she replied kindly. She poofed out her lower lip sympathetically.

So now what?

"How'd he... pass away?" she asked. "If you don't mind me asking."

"I don't know. Heart, I think. Not sure."

"Was he very old?"

"Fifty."

"That's pretty young."

"He liked... bacon."

Shannon smiled and then let it fade. Then she clinched her eyebrows and sympathetically nodded. Ivan couldn't tell if she understood the gravity of losing an uncle or liked bacon. Ivan could only nod, pursing his lips, pretending to listen to the professor, who had begun his lecture. But he couldn't let this opportunity slip away.

So hearing Bobby's voice in his head and not having a clue where he was going with the question, he whispered, "Would you do me a really big favor?"

"Sure."

He thought a second, fiddling with his pencil to give himself time to think. Nothing sensible came to him at first. Shannon sat there, her head tilted to one side. Waiting for the really big favor. He swallowed. The words

finally came, stretching from his brain like one long train:

“I want to go to his funeral but my Dad and Uncle Jack didn’t get along and my Dad’s not going so my Mom won’t go and if they don’t go my brother won’t go and my grandparents are already dead, so it’s just me going and I don’t want to go alone.”

Shannon blinked.

Ivan’s brain caught up to his mouth. *What did I just say? Did I just ask her to go to a funeral with me?*

Staring back long and hard, Shannon said, “Are you asking me to go to the funeral with you?”

No, absolutely not, Ivan wanted to answer, but instead he just nodded, thinking, *What a stupid, creepy idea and please, God, make her say No!* He tried to keep his expression neutral, if only to leave himself a U-turn to get out of this cul-de-sac of absurdity.

Shannon huffed a single, breathy sigh, and said: “Sure, I’ll go.”

She’ll go! She’ll go!

An empathetic smile made her lips look luscious. Ivan forgot all about his panic.

Shannon was a goddess. Everything Ivan ever dreamed of in a woman. Well, almost everything. He wasn’t thrilled about her gullibility. But he was finally going on a date with her. Ah! To a funeral. For an uncle who didn’t exist. For the next thirty-six hours, his every waking thought would be burdened by this sick deception.

A dozen times he nearly called her to say it was off, but he couldn’t come up with a single reason to cancel a funeral. It wasn’t even raining!

It was a warm June Saturday. Dressing and wishing he had a mirror in his bedroom to

practice, he tested choices of greeting: “You look charming”; or “you look amazing”; or “you’re really hot”—definitely not a good choice! He felt his body vibrating—just slightly, but noticeably—and the heavy flow of adrenaline killed his appetite.

He picked up Shannon at the apartment she shared with two other girls. She wore black. Unwittingly, Ivan had donned his favorite tie-dyed shirt with new blue jeans and black Beatle boots. He had been thinking about looking cool. He was mortified by his mistake.

“I like your shirt,” she said. “Should I change?”

She was dressed in a black, belted dress with enough of a V for some modest cleavage.

“No, you look great.”

“You’re not wearing black.”

“Oh. Yeah. Don’t own anything black. And I thought I’d send him off... casually.”

“Cool,” she said. “But you’re sure this is okay?”

“It’s perfect, honest.”

As he drove to the closest cemetery, Ivan prayed. That there would be a funeral in progress. That he could sidle up to anonymously. Wouldn’t make eye-contact with anyone, just stand there quietly, like a butler you never notice but whose presence you feel. Then slip away as it finished. He scolded himself for not calling ahead to see if one was scheduled. What would he do if no funeral was in progress? Maybe a newly-excavated plot with a plastic-covered mound beside it would be enough to convince Shannon that there was supposed to be a funeral, and he could say he got the day wrong.

The big iron gates of Liberty Lawn Cemetery were open wide. Ivan drove slowly through and followed the narrow road up the hill. He began to perspire. His mouth was dry.

"It'll be all right," Shannon said. She patted his leg, her touch releasing a new burst of adrenaline through his body. "It's too bad the rest of your family won't be here. Funerals are really a time for families to forgive."

"That's... that's what I told them, but..." Ivan began to have serious doubts about pulling this off. It seemed inevitable that she would figure this out and hate him for being a liar and a loser.

"You must've really loved him."

Ivan nodded, desperately searching the grounds for limousines and people wearing black.

"What kind of cool things did you do with Uncle Jack?"

Ivan didn't have an uncle, so he had nothing to tap into. He said the first thing that came to mind: "Bowling. Lots of bowling." He searched the grounds—no people.

"Pretty deserted today," Shannon commented, as if that were a positive thought.

They rounded a curve, passing a large mausoleum. Shannon pointed. "Is that them? By the big tree?"

Standing beneath a huge sycamore tree in the dark shade, its limbs twisting down and around, were a dozen or more men and women. He had to look closely to see them through the tangle of limbs and branches, only their legs fully visible.

His heart pounded in his chest. He took a deep breath. "Uh... yeah. That's them, I guess."

"Looks like they've started."

"Maybe we shouldn't disturb them in the middle," Ivan suggested.

"He's your uncle, Ivan. He'd want you there."

Ivan thought of an angle that might get him out of this. "Hey, one thing, though. I have

this cousin—Jack's son—who hates my guts. The last time I saw him, he told me he'd kick my ass the next time he saw me, so, uh, if he's here, I think we'll—"

"Funerals are also about forgiveness," she said. "Things'll be fine. And I've seen you run track; you're pretty fast." She tilted her head and pursed her lips at him. "Your cousin can't be so bloodthirsty as to pick a fight at his father's funeral. He should take your being there to be, I don't know, an olive branch. Trust me."

Ivan nodded, thinking, You watched me run track?

They got out. He came around the car and stopped on the grass. He had to tell her the truth. This would never work. These folks would want to know who these strangers were at their funeral. And what could he say? And Shannon would certainly notice that he didn't say "hi" or even acknowledge anyone.

Shannon reached for his hand. "Come on. I'm here."

What a woman! And what a creep I am! How did I get myself in this mess?! How could I take a wonderful, beautiful, intelligent woman to someone else's funeral for a first date? Appropriately, Ivan wanted to die.

But he'd come this far. He had to follow it through, try to play it to the end. If he got through it, he promised himself and God and all the Zodiac signs that he'd never, never, never lie to another girl again.

They moved into the shade of the sycamore. Ivan stopped, wanting to stay a few feet behind the mourners at the edge of the grave.

Shannon gasped.

In unison, all the mourners turned and looked at them.

Ivan swallowed. His heart jumped and raced.

The black mourners all stared back at him.

Tears streaming down their faces.

Shannon said: “Oh, sorry. Excuse us.”

The preacher dabbed sweat from his upper lip with a handkerchief and nodded to her. Shannon turned and headed for the car. Ivan apologized for the interruption, dipped his head at the mourners, and then ran after Shannon.

As he tried to catch up to her, he could see that her shoulders were shaking and he felt the purge in his hindbrain as he realized he’d blown it. She was upset and weeping.

“I’m sorry, okay?” he called to her. “I’m sorry—I’m a jerk—!”

She stopped just short of reaching the car and turned on him, trying to speak. Laughing so hard she could barely catch her breath. She pointed over his shoulder, then at his face, laughed harder, then turned and ran the rest of the way to the car. Ivan glanced back. The Negro mourners stared at them, scowling, mumbling.

“Get in!” he said. “They think you’re laughing at them!”

Shannon got in, tears rolling down her cheeks.

Ivan chuckled, “It’s not that funny,” her laughter contagious, the silly feeling of purge turning anti-climatic.

She nodded vigorously. “Yeah! It is! Oh, my God, I’m going to wet my pants!”

“This isn’t my car!” Ivan said in a panic.

“I can’t help it!”

“Hold it! Please!”

He gunned the engine, chirping the tires and sped down the hill to a Texaco station on the corner. Shannon ran inside the women’s restroom.

As Ivan waited, he felt like the sick, humiliated failure he was.

He closed his eyes, and a shady image of the faces of the mourners rose behind his lids,

and he shook his head, shamefully, knowing that wisdom, eyes closed or eyes open, wasn’t about to show up for this party.

“That’s better,” she sighed, throwing her black hair over the back of the seat, and turning to him with a beautiful, conspiratorial smile. “So, what’s next?”

“Next?”

“Yeah. First we crash a funeral, then what?”

“Aren’t you pissed?”

“A little maybe—for lying. But not really. I mean, you’re the first guy in a long time who’s showed me this good of a time.” Her eyebrows rose. “Know what’s missing from most of my dates?”

“No.”

“Spontaneity.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah. And surprise. No one ever surprises me. But, wow—that was a surprise. I thought you just made a mistake and found the wrong funeral, but—oh, my God—you looked so scared, I suddenly knew it was all a big, fat lie, and there’s only one reason why you’d be willing to go through all this insanity.” Shannon turned on the radio, found some music. “I can’t believe it took you five years to ask me out. I would’ve asked myself, but I wasn’t brought up that way. I figured I’d just have to wonder what you were really like.”

“If I’d known...”

“Gotta say: so far, it’s been worth the wait! You’re catching up fast!”

Silently, he acknowledged that Bob Villanova was a god. Maybe a demi-god. Except a demi-god received divine status after it was dead. Time would tell what Bob really was, but in the meantime, as he drove, the excitement of embarking on a journey of surprise and exploration with Shannon McIntyre aroused his confidence from its deep sleep. A confidence

steeped in something... reckless, maybe blind purpose—who knows? Who needs wisdom when you got purpose?

“So... what do you want to do now?” Ivan asked.

Shannon took his hand and squeezed it.

“Surprise me.”

“Okay.”

“Just don’t ever lie to me. Unless it’s part of the plan.”

Ivan smiled and accelerated. Planning his next spontaneous event.

Tom Eubanks’ full-length plays, *American Right*, *Perfect Quiet Place*, *The Art of Something*, *In the Midst of All that is Good*, and *At the End of the Day* have been produced by Elite Theatre Company in California. Santa Paula Theater Center produced his one-act play *Self Storage*; Senga Classic Theater produced his one-act play *How to Make God Laugh*. Eubanks wrote and directed the feature film *Open Spaces*, which premiered in Palm Springs, CA, in 2003. He co-authored with Milo Speriglio the non-fiction book *How to Protect Your Life & Property: An Everyday Survival Guide*. For 45 years Eubanks’ day job was working as a licensed private investigator in Southern California.

Tulpamancy

Linda Scheller

Hare's breath on stone and lightning reply
prove one of us can handle this better
than the others. We take turns watching
the mill race and draw opinions as needed
from the well of disguises. As they say,
safety in numbers, and we are one world
hidden behind this wall of skin. Replicate
intention but mutate a horde, walking party
with inaudible music. Choose your high
from the shelf of personalities. Team up.

Roadside Memorial

Heather Robinson

FERN PERKINS WAS DRIVING to meet her friend Sanjana for breakfast when she saw it, the painted white cross against the battered tree, the soggy card with a teary puppy saying “Miss you,” and the bear with the clumping black fur. “How sad,” she thought. When she pulled her Ford Escort into the parking lot at the Stargaze Diner, she wrapped the red scarf another time around her neck.

“Very brisk,” she noted, sliding across from Sanjana.

“They said on the news it would snow Wednesday,” Sanjana replied, playing with a packet of sugar. “I have to be at work at 8:30 today. Meeting with Eric.”

“Is he still there?” asked Fern. “You’d have thought they’d have dumped him when they dumped me.”

“You weren’t dumped. It was just early retirement for you,” Sanjana soothed.

“Well, it certainly felt like a boot to the backside,” sniffed Fern.

The waitress poured the coffee and confirmed they’d have the usual, grilled corn muffin for Fern, scrambled egg whites on a bagel for Sanjana.

“By the way, did someone get hit on Courtland Avenue?” Fern continued. “I saw one of those

makeshift memorials there. Right next to a tree.”

“Well, it was just a drunk,” Sanjana scoffed, flapping her hand dismissively. “He’d sloshed his way from Highland and was crossing the road around five in the morning. Never saw it coming.”

“Doesn’t seem as if many people missed him,” remarked Fern. “There’s not much there to honor his life.”

“I don’t suppose there was much to honor,” Sanjana remarked.

Later, when she got home, Fern remembered that her daughter Katie had left two beanie babies up on the bookshelf in her old room. Her daughter certainly wouldn’t need them now. She pulled down a Princess Di and a Valentino Bear, both still wearing their tags. On the way to the roadside memorial, she hummed. Well, someone would know that people cared about that poor drunk. She pulled over, then set the two new bears on either side of the black one.

But the next day, she passed the site again, seeing only the three animals, and felt sad. Surely more people loved this man! At the diner, Sanjana told her that Eric had only wanted to add more responsibilities to Sanjana’s already full plate. Fern commiserated but inwardly felt

justified in her opinion of Eric. Thank goodness she no longer worked there.

After leaving the diner, she remembered that she also had a bag of leftover stuffed animals in the attic. Behind a box of her mother's floral china settings and her aunt's paper-weight collection (may they rest in peace), she found the bag. There had to be at least a dozen stuffed animals in there! Her heart soared. When she returned to the memorial to add these, she noticed that someone had swiped the two beanie babies, and she recalled with some chagrin that Katie had told her they might be valuable since only a few had been made. No matter. She set up the animals according to height, as you might when taking a family photo at a wedding. Stepping back, she appreciated her handiwork and smiled. With a lightness of step, she hopped back in the car.

The next day at breakfast, Sanjana mentioned that apparently, the drunk had had quite a lot of friends, as evidenced by the large number of animals set up on the side of the road. "Really?" Fern beamed.

Back at home, Fern noted that she'd run out of stuffed toys in her house and decided to replenish her stock. After all, one never knows when another tragedy might occur. She thought perhaps the local Goodwill might have a few more.

Inside the store, she found a box of shabby, well-loved cuddlees. She was examining them when a limping man accosted her.

"I wouldn't pay money for those. They're probably full of lice or bedbugs or cockroaches, or who knows what. You know the store doesn't clean anything before they display them."

"Are you sure?" queried Fern, looking at the man's craggy, unshaven face.

"Sure as eggs is eggs."

Fern quickly dropped the animals back into the bin.

The man continued, "You know I probably have a dozen of those toys in my closet. I'd pay someone to take them off my hands. At least they're clean."

"You would?" Fern asked.

"Well, not much. I wouldn't pay much. Maybe a few bucks."

"Because I am giving them to a very worthy cause," Fern explained. "Where they will get much more notice and affection."

"In that case, why don't you stop by my house? I'm at 118 Flagg Street. The name's Jerry. If you want more, you could do an advertisement or something. I bet you'd get a lot of them."

So Fern arranged to pick up the stuffed animals the next day after breakfast.

When she opened her blinds the following morning, a beautiful fluffy snow robe covered the lawn. She easily swept the light flakes off her car, arriving at the diner with time to spare.

"Isn't the snow lovely?" she remarked as she laid the napkin in her lap.

"It is right now. Wait until it all turns to dirty slush," retorted Sanjana.

"Why don't you look on the bright side? Right now it's simply beautiful."

While Fern was adding sweetener to her coffee, she started humming, and Sanjana gave her a quizzical glance.

"Well, you seem peppier! I'm glad to see you're pulling out of your slump."

"Yes, I do feel better. I'm not sure why."

Flagg Street was not far away, and Fern arrived a bit after nine. She could hear Jerry's dragging footsteps as he approached the door.

"Well, hello there," he greeted her. "I've got them all bagged up for you." Jerry waved towards three white garbage bags.

Fern noticed that he had shaved and put on some aftershave. His cheeks were pink, and he smelled like Aqua Velva.

“Thank you so much! And no need to help me get them into my car,” said Fern, pointing to his limp. “You should rest that leg. It’s not going to get better if you keep straining it.”

“Well, I don’t like sitting still, but I’ll abide by your wisdom this time. Can I ask what you’re planning to do with the animals?”

“That’s my little secret, Jerry.”

With that, she loaded the car and headed off to the accident site. The snowplow had gone by, burying the card and the chorus of animals, so she set to work digging away the murky snow with her mittened hands and rearranging the new additions alongside the ones already there. She was removing a filthy lamb and a water-logged rabbit when an Action News van pulled up. Concerned that she might be accused of stealing the toys, she put them behind her back and forced a smile as a tall brunette emerged and approached her.

“Hello there, my name is Melissa Ames, and I do human interest stories for Action News. Someone told us this memorial had become quite a spectacular display and that perhaps we need to learn more about Lee Farmer’s life. To be honest, no one seems to know much about him. Perhaps you can tell us who he was and how much he meant to you?”

Melissa gave Fern an encouraging smile. Fern struggled to decide how to respond and, realizing that some evidence of grief would be expected, did her best to draw tears and then wiped her eyes. Her brain was scrambling to come up with a story when she suddenly realized that no one would contradict her tale, so she began by remembering people she had known who had passed away.

“Lee was an extraordinary person. I am blessed to have known him. I know he had troubles in his last years, but that was because of his own grief. His favorite uncle, who was like a father, passed away unexpectedly. You may not

know this, but Lee was an excellent trombonist and played in jazz bands in the 1940s. He also gave both his time and money to urban kids, coaching them in basketball and giving them sneakers. And he had pen pals all over the world, from Greenland to Cairo.”

“Well, that’s wonderful!” Melissa exclaimed. “How did you meet him?”

Fern paused, then resumed. “One day, my daughter went off on her tricycle without telling me. She was five. Lee found her and brought her home.”

“What a lucky thing! And I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Fern.”

“Fern, I’m so glad I caught you here. What a wonderful story. Thank you for telling our readers more about Lee Farmer. I’m sure you’ll miss him.”

“I most certainly will,” Fern nodded.

Later that afternoon, she called in an ad to the local paper, and in the evening, her granddaughter, Maggie, phoned because she’d seen Melissa’s report on Action News and wanted to help. Fern told her of her plan to acquire more stuffed animals, so Maggie said she’d put a notice on a place called Craigslist.

The following week, she got so many calls! By Friday, she had a dozen bags of stuffed animals in the dining room. Most people also dropped a few dollars or coins in the jar on the oak dining table, on which she’d pasted a colorful card that read: “Donations Accepted for a Worthy Cause.”

On Sunday, a delivery van killed a young woman on Shaw Street. According to the newspaper, there was some mystery behind the accident as the police believed she had actually stepped out directly in front of the van. It was a fortuitous circumstance because the people who owned the tree on Courtland Fern had begun giving her angry looks. Obviously, they

didn't appreciate the continued display and the curiosity that came with it.

It took her a while to find the accident site on Shaw, but in the chain-link fence next to the sidewalk, someone had stuck a few plastic crosses and praying angel cards. A young redheaded woman was standing in front of the fence screaming. Normally, Fern would have shied away from this hysteria, but instead, she slowly walked over to the woman and laid a calming hand on her arm.

"I'm so sorry, Dear. Were you close to the deceased? Perhaps a sister?"

Between the young lady's sobs and Irish accent, Fern listened to her story.

"Sally was my life partner, my everything, my love. Her parents did this, with all their impossible expectations and denial of her true being. She was not a sinner; she was a saint. Their horrible religion denied her acceptance. They are as responsible as the truck that hit her."

Fern was quiet for a moment, then squeezed the grieving woman's shoulder. "Then, I presume it was they who placed the crosses and the religious cards here," she observed.

"Sally is rolling over in her grave seeing those crosses here."

"Well then, let's get rid of them," announced Fern and began to pull the crosses and cards off the fence. "I'll just put them in my car and dispose of them. But I don't think we should leave it bare – would she mind if we left a few stuffed animals to remember her by?"

"She would love that. I don't suppose you have any rabbits? She adored rabbits. My name is May, by the way."

"May, it's our lucky day. I have at least a dozen. We'll make sure that Sally is well-attended as she finds peace in the world beyond."

As together they placed bunnies and hares

against the fence, May hiccupped through her tears, "You have been such a comfort to me."

"My pleasure. And remember, my dear, that the 'Hallelujah' never comes after an easy ride. You will find love and joy again, my dear. I promise you."

The next day, Katie called. "Mom, Maggie tells me you gave away my beanie babies."

"Well, I didn't exactly give them away," Fern explained.

"Mom, just because I don't live there anymore, it doesn't mean I want you to give my things away. They were worth a lot of money. Plus, I don't think you understand that stuffed animals are for child victims, not old drunks and suicides."

"It was not suicide; it was torment and grief that caused poor Sally's death. Also, sometimes the animals are a comfort to people, even if the person who died was not young."

"If I die, you better not be propping stuffed animals on my grave. Also, why on earth are you making up stories about this sozzled Lee Farmer guy? Fine if you want to, but please don't include me in your fantasies. I never got lost on my tricycle. Please don't do this."

"I didn't think there was any harm in it. And it shows he was a kind person."

"Whatever."

"I won't do it again. I promise."

The animals were now migrating into the living room as the dining room was full, so she'd been placing the garbage bags behind the couch. She'd given up answering the phone because it seemed as if everyone had stuffed animals to give to a worthy cause. Somehow people still found her, and each morning she'd leave to meet Sanjana, and there would be a few more bags lying on the porch. When she arrived late and cross on Friday, Sanjana expressed concern.

"I'm fine," Fern said, dabbing grape jelly on

the buttery crust. "I know that God has a plan. I just have to have faith in that."

"They had a job listing for an administrative assistant at the vet hospital," Sanjana suggested.

"No, no, who could think about that." Fern shook her head. "I'm far too busy."

And apparently, God did have a plan, as the next weekend, a horrific crash happened on the winding roads up in South Fork. Kids. Drinking and unaware of the danger. The rumor was that the driver was texting. It was quite a distance, and she got lost twice, but kind dog walkers helped her on her way. Once there, she stood quietly, closed her eyes, and prayed for each of the four teenagers who'd lost their life so senselessly on that barren road. Then she delved into the back seat of her car and dragged out the bags. They were just kids, so she didn't think anyone would object to the stuffed animals. It was with a great deal of pride that she watched the 5 o'clock news that night and listened to the reporter standing in front of her impressive display.

By mid-March, the inflow of animals had dropped off considerably. Maggie explained that the ad was no longer running on Craigslist. Her mother had found out and insisted she delete it. Still, Fern had a closet full of garbage bags, and it looked like she was hiding the Michelin man whenever she opened the door. Every day she read the paper and had even begun picking up the Andover Herald, which covered some of the surrounding areas.

One morning, she remarked casually to Sanjana that there hadn't been many recent car accidents in the area.

"The cops are cracking down after those bad ones," Sanjana explained. "And not just on drunk driving, also on using a phone while

you're driving."

Well, that would explain the drop-off, Fern figured. She thought if she could just get rid of the last few bags, then Katie wouldn't be so angry with her. Fern was thinking about this when Jerry called and asked if she'd like to get a bite at Café Bleu. Despite her objections, he insisted on picking her up. Fern noticed that Jerry's foot shook a bit as he pressed on the gas pedal, but she pretended not to notice. As they drove, Jerry smiled and gave her a wink. "I know what your secret is."

"You do?"

"Well, I was watching the news, and they were covering that tragic accident with the teens."

Fern shook her head. "So very sad, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. But I noticed that one of my son's toys – his beloved Eeyore – was propped on the right side of the memorial."

Fern smiled. "Ah. Yes. I thought it was appropriate. Such a sad character for a sad event."

"I think it's wonderful. I'm sure you're helping people."

"I hope so," Fern said. She didn't really mind that he'd figured it out. It was thrilling to be able to reveal what she had been doing. "I still have a few more bags. I'm not sure what to do with them. I suppose I'll just wait."

"I'm sure you'll find a spot for them," Jerry said.

As they began to pull into a space directly in front of the café, another nearby car started to pull out, which seemed to confuse Jerry.

"Brake! Hit the brakes!" she yelled, but it was too late. Jerry had plowed right into the front of the café through the plate glass window, sending customers screaming and hitting the chair of an oblivious latte drinker. She looked down and saw that Jerry's foot was trembling on the brake.

“Oh no, oh no!” Jerry moaned. “I hit the brake. What happened?”

“Of course you did,” agreed Fern matter-of-factly. “It’s just your foot; it’s not quite strong enough.”

Within minutes the police cars, fire trucks, and ambulances were swarming. Thankfully no one had been seriously hurt, although the one customer had sustained abrasion and glass cuts to her elbow and wrist as she landed on the shard-covered floor. She was taken to the hospital as a precaution. The police quickly asked Fern and Jerry to get out of the car and separated them for questioning.

The stout, relaxed Sergeant O’Donnell asked Fern for her license, returned it to her, and took out a yellow pad.

“You two together?”

“We just came for lunch. I hardly know him. But he had no intention of jumping the curb like that. Between you and me, he has a weak foot, and he did press the brake, but maybe not hard or fast enough.”

“Hmmm,” said O’Donnell, scratching his cheek. “In my quite long experience, Mrs. Perkins, it’s almost always someone gets confused and they hit the gas instead of the brake. Especially seniors.”

Fern shook her head. “Oh no, not Jerry,” she said. “He’s a good driver, and he doesn’t have any mental issues, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I thought you hardly knew him.”

“Enough to know he’s in his right mind.”

“Well, the accident investigators will be here soon. They’ll figure this out. His car’s obviously gonna be towed. You’ll have to find another way to have some lunch. Anyone you could call?”

“My daughter. I could call her.”

“Alrighty. Good idea. You dodged a bullet here, Fern. You could have been hurt, your

friend too, and I don’t have to tell you the bloodbath that might have resulted inside if the car had gone further.”

“I know,” Fern said. Suddenly she was marveling at the image that had just come into her mind – that she had almost been the subject of a roadside memorial herself and could have been joined by many other folks in the wrong place and the wrong time. She called Katie and tried to calm her down as she explained what happened.

“We’re fine. The café is a wreck, but only one girl was hurt and she’ll be OK. We just need a ride home from Café Bleu.”

Katie seemed angry. “You hardly know this Jerry guy! If you knew he had a foot-shaking problem, you should have driven instead of him.”

“It’s his pride. I didn’t want to hurt him,” Fern responded. She noticed Jerry walking towards her. “He’s coming over to me. Can you pick us up? And try to be nice.”

“Try to be nice to the guy who almost killed my mother?” Then, Katie sighed, “of course, Mom.”

When Jerry reached her, Fern took his hand in both of hers. “It’s going to be alright, Jerry. It was just what it’s called – an accident. My daughter Katie is coming to get us.”

“All I can say is that I’m terribly sorry, Fern.”

In his eyes, Fern saw the ache of lost pride, the shame of hurting others, never mind the logistical burden of fixing and retrieving his car. “Now you stop it,” she said. “We’ll have lunch at my house. I made a delicious quiche, and we’ll just warm it up.”

When they got into the rear seat of Katie’s CRV, Katie turned around and flashed one of her fake smiles. “Nice to meet you, Jerry, despite the less than pleasant circumstances. How do you know my mother?”

“We met at Goodwill. She was going to buy

some stuffed animals. I told her not to, that I'd happily give her some I had. She was agreeable."

"Ah, aiding and abetting her projects. How nice."

There was silence then. Fern began to think more about what had just happened and how it affected Jerry and would continue to do that, even though no one had been seriously hurt. She also began to think about the other drivers who had caused death – the man who ran over stumbling Lee Farmer, the delivery driver who did not see Sally until it was too late. The family of the boy who had crashed the teenage-laden SUV. What would seeing the roadside memorials do for them? Wouldn't they just make the pain and guilt so much more profound? Wouldn't it exacerbate what was already a horrible memory every time they passed by? She sighed.

"I've been thinking," Fern said. "I don't think I'll do any more roadside distractions."

Katie nodded. "Hallelujah! I'm thrilled to hear that."

"But I still need to find good homes for the animals I have," Fern continued, looking at Jerry.

Jerry emerged from his solemn reverie. "You know, we could clean up the animals, maybe make clothes for them, and then set up something like an adoption day. You know, like for pets, but without all the cost and commitment. The neighborhood I grew up in got a lot tougher since I left it. I bet those kids would love a one-eared teddy bear or a purple kitten. I'm pretty good with a needle and thread. What do you say, Fern?"

Fern smiled. "That is just the loveliest idea, Jerry. Let's do that."

Heather Robinson is the author of *Dementions*, a dark comedy about a young doctor trying to succeed at a clinic which shortens the suffering of dementia patients and their families. Her work has been accepted by *Prometheus Dreaming*, *Door Is A Jar*, *Defenestration*, *Datura*, *Friday Flash Fiction*, *Bewildering Stories*, *ThornLit*, *Potato Soup*, *Remington Review*, and *Fiction On The Web*.

Matines de Sirènes (IX)

Cathleen Allyn Conway

The Thing, like a flexible
human is required to do,
resumes. Refreshed.

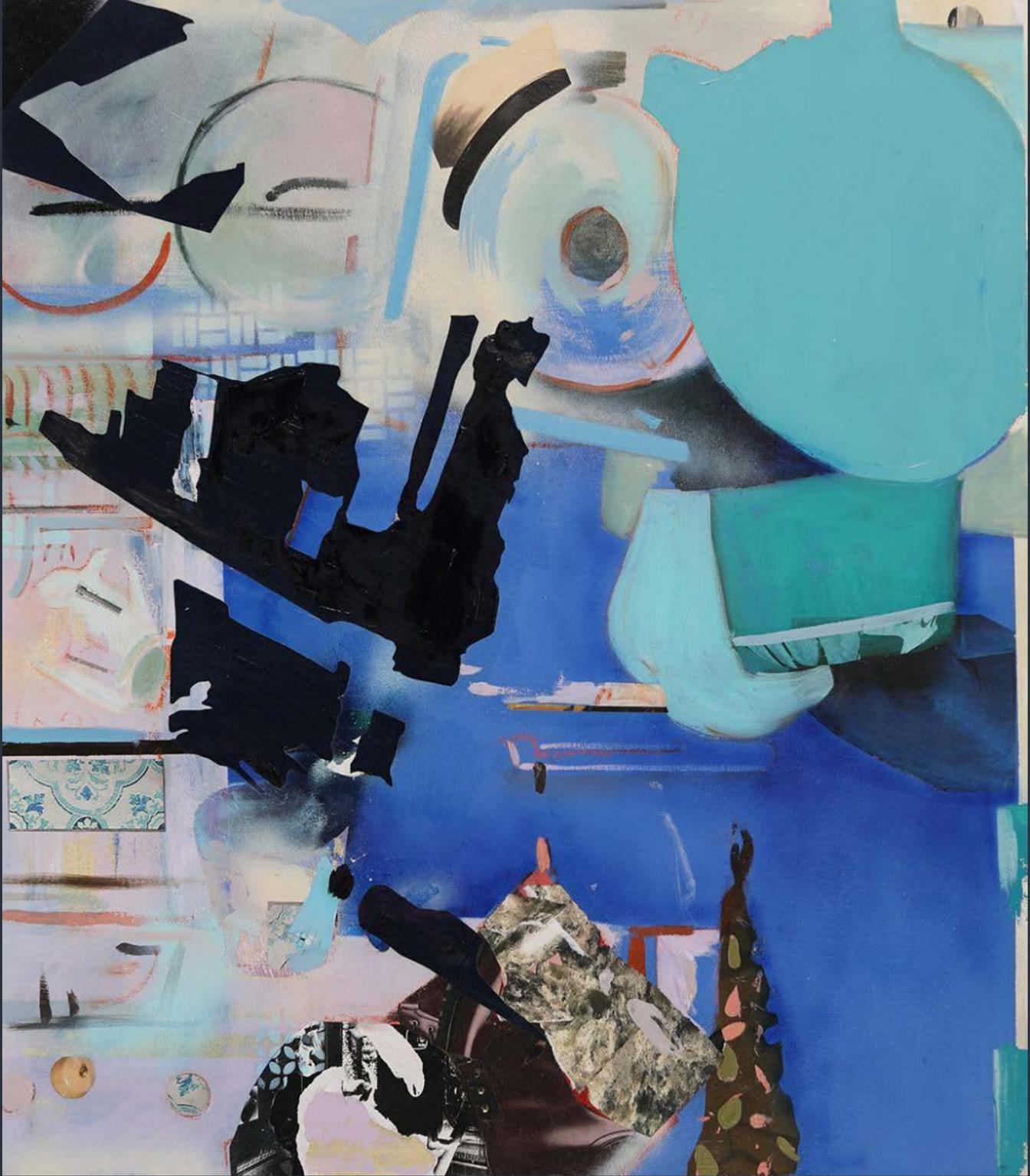
The fire search is unbearable.
My windows open to its windbeat:
bed torn, books scattered.

Under the human side
of the greenhouse, visible to me,
chains of night harass my mind.

No more in case the Thing can read.
It makes a sound similar to wings.
My ink is reversed.

The moon is high and the path
unwinds before sunrise.
Cast off a candle like it's a custom.

Walk quickly, I told myself.
In a few hours I'll be alive.



Residue

Emily Somoskey

50

I Was Happy

Haydn Winston

I was happy until
Somebody asked me if
I was happy really

Crouching between old cans
Of paint and a pile of
Apple firewood behind
This peeling potting shed
The spigot is frosted
In the backyard and my
Soul feels everything right
Beside me from the light
Caught in the wheels of a
Blue wagon to the far
Away hills blistered with
Burning December ice

Prophets are so somber
I'm a mutt, a halfwit
Broken at the hip but
Jovian while I walk
My radiant motion
Your radiant motion

Ask me anything else
Ignore the monuments
Let's scamper through alleys
Sniffing for new prayers
Lapping night water from
Rusted pipes and yapping
And chasing the stray cats

Haydn Winston is a writer from Colorado currently residing in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He used to think *Happiness* was like this...clarity we were all seeking. Getting to the top of some snowy, jaggedy-ass, cougar infested mountain and looking down on the valley and suddenly everything makes sense. And part of him thinks he's still seeking that clarity. Absence of want and all that. But as it turns out, he's not sure that's what *Happy* means. At least not these days. So he'll keep smoking and staring at mountains until that gets sorted.

Worded Out

Mark Jacobs

TWO MINUTES FROM SIGN-OFF, Quentin Drake felt the words going out of him. A physical sensation, like wetting his pants. Vocabulary leaked away in a wet rush. In the production control room, Allison knew something was up and cut to Sanibel. Finish it, she snapped into the young woman's earpiece, thereby making Sanibel's day. In the eighteen months she had worked the 6:00 o'clock segment with Quentin, Sanibel had never once done the sign-off. The partnership was not equal. Drake was the property, the local boy who had made real good. With Quentin on their screen, the TV 33 audience felt high trust levels in the news.

In his wordless daze, Quentin heard his co-host say, "NBC Nightly News starts now," sounding as though she were mumbling in a fish bowl. He unhooked himself and stood up. Without the weight of words he felt lighter, and slightly disoriented. The slightest breeze would turn him around.

"Quentin?" said Sanibel. "You okay?"

Her concern was made for TV. He did not hold that against her, any more than he held her youth and beauty against her. Unless the universe changed its operating system, he would turn 37 in a month. He did not mean to scowl at Sanibel, but that was what happened.

She gave him a genuinely puzzled look, and he stalked off the set.

In the control room, his producer was standing with her arms folded on her chest. Allison was smart. She was luminous. She had mortgaged her soul in a deal to whose particulars Quentin was not privy. This afternoon she wore black and pearls, the latter a family legacy. Her pearl days were always intense for everybody.

"What the fuck just happened, Quentin?"

For Allison, there was no such thing as a private conversation. The editors and camera guys, the coffee serf, the HR deputy director, they were all gawking, hoping for the worst. But Quentin was in no condition to joust.

"Words," he said.

Allison would have to infer the rest. He untied his tie, threw it over the back of an empty chair. Unaccustomed to symbolic actions, he felt the unstable weight of freedom. He went out the door husbanding the few words he had left. In the parking lot, seated at the wheel of the Cayenne, he took his phone from the breast pocket of his suit jacket. He deleted his Twitter account. It seemed like the logical next step.

It was spring in Buffalo. An oxymoron, Allison liked to quip. She was from Southern

California, and only the job kept her in Western New York. Quentin left the lot in a lather of late afternoon sunshine and drove to Jill's apartment. But didn't get there. On I-190, he noticed a sign for the Outer Harbor. It seemed to have been put up specifically for him. He went there.

Parked. Ignored the mutter of envy his hot red Porsche elicited from a carful of teenagers in somebody's daddy's Ford. Did not know why he was there until he walked to the edge of the steely Niagara River and saw gulls exploiting the raw wind, smelled a distillation of the city's history, intuited the Province of Ontario across the way. I get it, he thought, and threw his phone into the river. He waited to see if joy would follow. Something followed, but he was honest with himself and did not call it joy.

It was not a breakdown. Whatever was happening to him, it was not disintegration.

He drove to Jill's showplace apartment downtown oscillating between cheerfulness and curiosity. He did not miss all the words that had leached away but held open the possibility of their return, when it was right and proper for them to come back. He had just enough locution left to converse with Jill, who met him at the door of her place wearing real estate casual. Her expression of concern meant Allison had called her.

Jill had been a beauty queen in her teens and early twenties, winning contests around the state. Strawberry blonde was what they called her hair. Quentin was grateful that descriptors came to him as he needed them. Maybe that was how it was going to be. He would be the beneficiary of a just-in-time verbal delivery system. He kissed her more deliberately than had been his recent custom, which took her aback.

"It's Denver, isn't it," she said. "You're stressing over the interview."

A station in Denver had been recruiting

him. Bigger market, better money, Rocky Mountains out the window. Three steps up. Impossible, just then, to say what he thought on the subject. One word was all he had.

"Sushi."

Twenty minutes later they were in Allentown at their favorite place, on low chairs, eating subtly spiced fish.

The good warm saki went to his head, where there was more room than there had been when he woke that morning. The free space was a luxury, like a generous line of credit.

"From here on out I only want to say true things," he told Jill.

"I don't know what that means, Quentin."

The tricky part was doling out words from his meager supply. Waste had to be avoided.

"A dream," he said.

Last night's dream had only just now come back to him.

Jill said, "Tell me about it," which pleased him. She was not always interested in the things that interested him.

"I threw something big and heavy into a large body of water."

"A rock? A dead body? And was it a lake?"

"It was symbolic. Yes, I think it was a lake."

She shook her head. "The Quentin Drake I know does not talk about symbolic dreams."

"Throwing it away made me feel free, like I had gotten rid of a terrible burden."

"And that's why you screwed up on air?"

"Maybe."

She said, "Let's talk about Denver."

"Okay."

"I don't think I can go."

He nodded. It was the most he could manage by way of encouragement.

"Real estate is the only thing I'm good at," she explained. "And I can't sell property in a city I don't know. It wouldn't be... authentic."

“Then I won’t go.”

His decisive change of heart took her by surprise. He came up with just enough words to make her see he meant it. He would tell them he was withdrawing from consideration for the job. Not that he could put it this way, but his decision was due to a lack of vocabulary. Jill was touched by his generosity, and back at her place she did not press him to talk. In the living room, he sat on the sofa and she stood behind him, kneading his shoulders with remarkable patience. It was not the right moment to tell her he wasn’t going back to Channel 33.

He owed it to Allison to convey his decision in person. Well, and he no longer had a phone. In the morning he drove to her apartment. She lived with a fortune-teller who went by the name of Blue Chill, who had followed her from California. When Quentin arrived, Chill was seated at the dining room table, lean and barechested, dealing Tarot cards while toking on a blunt. He frowned at the interruption. There had never been much of a wavelength between him and Quentin.

Allison took the news better than Quentin wished she would.

“Maybe it’s for the best.”

“How would it be for the best?”

“Success came to you fast and young.

You never did any kind of apprenticeship. You started out a star.”

Her insight was the catalyst he had not known he was searching for. By the time he was back in the car he had conducted an inventory of self. The situation being what it was, he could only afford single words. Glib. Superficial. Vain. Self-absorbed. He heard in memory the endless flood of sentences that spilled from his mouth, on camera and off, and felt something it took a moment to name. Disgust. The man pulling away from the curb was not a man

Quentin Drake wished to spend any amount of time with.

How could he have become that person? Lacking the inner resources to figure that out, he drove to Mug’s. Mug’s was a bar in Black Rock, the neighborhood where he grew up. He pounded on the door. It was too early to be selling beer and sympathy. Eventually a powerfully built man in a white, short-sleeved shirt opened up for him.

“What do you want?”

Quentin’s father. He had bought the bar ten years ago with an insurance settlement from the accident that killed his wife and Quentin’s mother. Clinton Drake knew all there was to know about the husbandry of words. He and his son were not close. But for the first time, Quentin felt a stab of admiration for his father’s lack of a way with words.

“I quit my job.”

Clinton nodded. “Want a drink?”

“Jameson.”

His father waved him to a stool and went behind the bar to serve him the whiskey. This, too, was new: Quentin’s ability to see the generosity in Clinton’s gesture.

“Rocks?”

“Neat.”

For a man past sixty, Clinton Drake remained brashly good looking. No gut to speak of, and his hair was still more black than gray. But he was old enough, Quentin saw now, not to give a damn about his appearance. Which had its own appeal. An acquired integrity.

“So what happened?” father asked son.

Quentin shrugged, momentarily self-conscious in the presence of the man who had dreamed him up. “Lotta bullshit.”

“I hear you.”

“You want a drink, Dad?”

Clinton’s eyebrows went up, indicating he did. Who needed all those words?

They sat there in the morning dark of Mug's, a hangout for working men and women, and men and women who ought to be working, and got hammered on Irish whiskey. Quentin felt an unfamiliar admiration for his old man for not asking a million questions about Channel 33. He was unfazed by his son's big news. Over the course of the morning and its whiskeys, admiration turned into pride.

"So what you gonna do?" his father asked him at one point.

"Don't know."

Clinton's face twisted in a grimace. It did not mean he was in pain but that he had an idea. He disappeared into his office, came back out with a set of keys on a rabbit's foot ring. He tossed them on the bar.

"What?" said Quentin.

"Your Uncle Jimmy bought a cabin. Out in the middle of nowhere down in Chenango County. Wants me to hunt deer with him."

"You gonna?"

"Might. Go there. See what you think."

Quentin took the keys, stuffed them in the pocket of his jeans. His father fried him a couple of bologna sandwiches to soak up the alcohol. They tasted like childhood. Later, stumbling to the door, he understood in a flash of painful insight how he had become the person he was. He had not paid sufficient attention at the turning points.

In the car, he thought about calling a cab. But that meant going back into the bar and borrowing his father's phone, which might snap the spell of comity that had settled on them. So he drove slowly, conscious of his problematic reaction time.

Somehow he managed to think and drive at the same time, a minor miracle in a world that was short on them, generally.

He was the first in the family to go to college. He was telegenically handsome, and

his voice went with his face. Words came to him unbidden. A job at Channel 33 opened up. A journalism professor recommended him. Three days later he was on the air. His luck, he saw now, had been his curse. It sealed him in a cocoon. He might have predicted the disappearance of his words, if he had been a more reflective person.

He went home and slept. All afternoon.

In the evening, persistent knocking on his apartment front door woke him. Most likely it was Jill. She couldn't call, and she was worried. Along with a blinding headache Quentin felt an unfamiliar tenderness toward his fiancée that made her a new person. But he did not get out of bed to open the door. He went back to sleep.

The elation of an insight woke him in the night's thick middle. By all rights, he ought to be worrying about what came next. He was unemployed, and no path forward into the future had yet opened up. But he was not worried. Not at all. Maybe that signified progress.

Next day he stopped by Jill's office on Hertel Avenue. Dean & Martin specialized in commercial properties. On the wall, when you stepped into the lobby, was a splashy photo of Jill shaking hands with a businessman in suit and tie and yellow hard hat. *We just broke our own record*, read the caption.

Quentin expected to find her anxious, or angry. Jill's beginnings were as humble as his. Success mattered. Part of success, maybe the biggest part, was financial security. But she sat in her leather chair under a strawberry blonde halo looking up at him as though everything were normal.

"Allison called," she said. "She told me you quit."

Quentin nodded. It was notable, how often you could get away without a verbal response in an average conversation.

“We need to pick the venue,” Jill said quietly.

She meant the place where their wedding reception would be held. Venue was no longer a word in Quentin’s storehouse. They had kicked around Seasons East, at the upper end of upscale. Why the hell not? The decision suddenly seemed to Quentin not so much irrelevant as overtaken by incomprehensible events.

“Love,” he said.

He watched her take in the word, which had to do for a full statement of feeling. He had the sense she was able to extrapolate. He told her he would be away a while, wasn’t sure how long. She nodded, accepting his need for what it was; whatever it was. He kissed her and left.

The next morning he drove to his uncle’s cabin in Chenango County. His father was right: the middle of nowhere, at the end of a dirt track off a secondary county highway that needed gravel. No neighbors, and the electric lines drooped silent on their poles.

Backed up to a stand of hardwoods, the cabin was a basic kind of place. One big room divided into a kitchen and sleeping space with a couple of bunks. On one wall, a topographical map of the county. On another, an arrow driven into an exposed joist held fast a photo of a black bear rearing up on its hind legs.

No phone, no television, no internet. How had his father known this was what he wanted?

He unloaded the supplies he had brought with him. That was easy, but the next part came to him just as easily. He sat outside on the porch in a rocking chair. He rocked. He failed to think. Birds went by, intent on their northern migration. In the yard, a yellow butterfly with black markings landed on the stump of a tree that looked as though it had been used as a chopping block. At a certain point he heard the

engine of a small airplane overhead, but he did not look up for it. A breeze came and went. He enjoyed the sensation of air on his skin. At that point, the small number of words available to him was no hardship. His first evening at the cabin took him nowhere, which turned out to be his destination of choice.

He woke early and experimented with some pancakes on the propane stove. He met with little success, but a mug of black coffee out on the porch made up for his failure.

He spent the morning hiking the gravel road in both directions, and the afternoon took care of itself. The evening brought color to the sky, and then stars sprinkled from the black onto the tops of sleeping trees. Without his having had to work at it, he passed a wordless day.

Which repeated itself a couple of times. His pancakes improved marginally. He remembered jelly, its multiple uses.

From the porch he could hear water running. His third morning at the cabin, he went into the woods and down the bank of a gully, through the bottom of which ran a fast, shallow creek. There were patches of silt, and spots where shoots of delicate green raised their nodding heads above the water line, but most of the creek bottom was made up of stones. The stones interested Quentin, he was not sure why.

He picked one up. It was eight inches across and flat as a plate, cut by a diagonal, some sort of elemental scoring. In color it was a deep gray. Lines of mineral matter, of a lighter color, shot through the stone like a network of miniature waterways. He carried the stone back to the cabin with a sense of purpose but no object.

He placed it on the ground in the rough center of the yard, which was loamy earth scattered with clumps of weeds, all of which

probably had individual names and identities. As did the stone, for that matter. Names were words and not currently of concern to Quentin.

The stone looked good where he dropped it. Looked right.

The next day he went back to the creek. This time he picked up three stones, one of them flat like the first, the other two irregular and singular. A pleasure to the eye. One of them was more black than gray. He carried them to the yard and dropped them where he had placed the first.

In the beginning he thought he might be building a fireplace. His Uncle Jimmy would like that. But what was happening was no fireplace. Morning and afternoon, when the moment felt right, he made his way into the woods, down the gully, to the creek bottom. He brought back stones. As many or as few as he felt like carrying. To make the cut, a stone had to draw his eye. Not all of them did.

Pancakes and stars. Birds and breeze. A sense of anticipation, a feeling of relief. Several days.

It was becoming a mound. He shaped the

escalating pile only minimally, moving with reluctance a stone from the place he first left it. It wanted to take a pyramid shape and did.

One night it rained, and he lay awake on his cot listening to the drumming on the roof. Now there was music.

A question occurred to him. Took a while to come clear in his mind, which was working slowly and, he hoped, with more deliberation than it used to. But over the course of a day it did come clear. He lay down with it that night. More rain, but he found he was unable to stay awake and listen.

In the morning he woke early. A squirrel on the roof. A plank of dense sunlight shoved through the front window. This was how it felt when the world around you started over. He lay in bed for a minute, looking forward to stepping out onto the porch, observing the dripping trees, his mounding pyramid. There was no way to be sure, of course, but he had a hunch today was the day he would answer the question that occupied his mind: What was the stone for word?

Mark Jacobs has published more than 160 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings*, published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy*, by Soho Press. His website can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.



More Moss

Julie Lynn Christian

Arrangement

Timothy Robbins

You can't imagine
how sorry I am to
keep you
waiting.
Sorry I can't help
starting with
an insult to your
imagination.
I suppose now
you feel like
one of the hats
that hang on my wall,
each impeccably
groomed,
brimming with self-
containment,
hoping to
attract my notice
by pretending
to hang
alone — no
other thief
and certainly no
Hebrew
megalomaniac.
Damn you. See
how you've
already made me
waste precious
moments
when I have so
many arrangements
to make.

Timothy Robbins has published five volumes of poetry: *Three New Poets* (Hanging Loose Press), *Denny's Arbor Vitae* (Adelaide Books), *Carrying Bodies* (Main Street Rag Press) *Mother Wheel* (Cholla Needles Press) and *This Night I Sup in Your House* (Cyberwit.net). He lives in Wisconsin with his husband of 23 years.

Wife

James W. Morris

WIFE IN THE BATHROOM, gargling. Her habit before she comes to bed.

Me, other side of the wall, in the darkened bedroom. Awakened by the sound. I'm a light sleeper, an early-to-bed, early-to-rise type; she's a confirmed night owl. Mixed marriage.

Gargling, of course, is not exactly an attractive sound, even the more or less feminine wasy Wife does it, but it's attractive to me because it means she'll shortly be joining me in our warm bed. She will emit a deep sigh, click out the bathroom light, creak open the bedroom door, and slip under the covers alongside me. She likes to slide a thin arm around my neck, kiss me behind the ear. I like that, too. A lot. In winter, she might put her impossibly cold feet on my lower back to warm them up. This I don't like so much. The price you pay, eh?

The gargling ends and I wait, lying stoically in the dim night listening for the sigh, the click of the switch, the creak of the door.

I could not say how much time passes; my heartbeat shakes the bed.

Then I remember: Wife dead.

Years, now.

Morning. Just after dawn.

I grunt rather theatrically, swing my thin

legs over the edge of the bed, grunt again.

Hardest part of being old—the morning inventory. What hurts, what purports to be working.

I have a progressive neurological disease which I won't properly name because that would be too respectful to it, almost like giving in. Let's call him Ol' Parky.

So far, Ol' Parky has gifted me with three main symptoms. First, an involuntary tremolo in my speaking voice I pretend gives it a Morgan Freeman-style gravitas, but which really comes across as a stereotypically elderly quaver. Second, an odd giddy-up in my walking gait due to a painful feeling akin to a marble being ever-present under the ball of my left foot as I move about. Third—the most recently arrived symptom—an alarming tendency for my left hand to occasionally freeze into the shape of a claw. You know, an old man living on his own, shuffling around room-to-room all day long in his cramped dusty house, has little use for a claw, really.

My hand is clenched this morning, and I work hard to unclench it, rubbing it vigorously on my pajama leg. Use my other hand to force it back into regular hand shape.

Once it's unclenched, I use it to give Ol' Parky the finger.

I stand, wobble, then shuffle my way

slowly to the bathroom, hanging onto nearby furniture for support. This is the feeblest time of the day for me, early morning, so I'm supposed to use a walker for this little trek, but I don't bother. I do keep the walker by the bed, but truthfully the thing sees most of its use as a clothes rack. Just too damn convenient.

Exiting the bathroom, I can smell that downstairs Wife has made the morning coffee. That's something to look forward to, anyway.

She—

One stair at a time, I creak my way down to the first floor, pass through the darkened (virtually unused) dining room, and enter the tiny kitchen, where I stand silently in the center of the cold tile. Of course, no Wife, no coffee. I remember that I don't even own a coffee maker anymore, required to eliminate all caffeine. And don't you dare talk to me about decaf. It's better to eliminate something entirely than take a half-assed approach.

Still, for a while, there had been a persuasively real roasted coffee smell, an enticing, caffeine-rich, warm house-filling aroma.

Gone, now.

Shortly after we were married forty-seven years ago, she started calling me Husband. So, what could I do? Called her Wife. Our names became our roles. I mean—our roles became our names. Not sure why. Her actual name Sandra. Nothing wrong with that, is there? Sounds funny now, though. Name of a stranger.

I have a modest insight while crunching my breakfast cereal. After fussing about for a bit, in the endless, unproductive, clumsy, time-wasting manner for which we elderly are so universally

beloved, I finally manage to locate and unfold the tiny, densely-printed insert that came with the latest prescription my doctor has given me for slowing the progression of Ol' Parky. Never really read any of these insert things before, never met anyone who has. Have you?

I swap my regular glasses for my reading glasses. Tell me: why, exactly, do they make the print on these damn things so small? The drug is intended mostly for use by old people. Shouldn't the default font be large print? How much more would it cost—a penny? Anyway.

I locate the listing of possible side effects:

- dizziness
- constipation
- confusion
- headache
- irregular heartbeat
- abdominal pain
- hallucinations
- vomit which looks like coffee grounds

I read over that last item again, make sure I read it right. Yep. "Vomit that looks like coffee grounds." Have you noticed? Side effects are often more disgusting than many of the symptoms of the targeted disease. I wonder if that's why so many people quit taking their pills.

Hallucinations, yeah. That's the one.

The insert suggests I call my doctor.

Every three months Doctor Kent tries to talk me into going into one of those places. So-called assisted-living. More like assisted-dying.

I pretend to consider it, but of course will never go unless declared incompetent or drugged and dragged. Ok, sooner or later, Ol' Parky will probably get me, will be the victor in our little existential set-to, but I am seventy-nine years old. Might fool him, luck out and die from something unrelated in the meantime, right? One can hope.

Kent and I compromised. I allow a visiting nurse twice a week. Monday and Thursday. Also, Meals on Wheels, so I'm not so tempted to drive to the grocery store, using my claw to roll down the car window. I like the MOW people a lot, but they give too much white bread. Two slices with nearly every meal! I feel guilty throwing it out right away, so I hold it in the fridge until it gets moldy, and then I throw it out.

The only thing I don't like about the visiting nurse, Karin, is that she's too beautiful. It's disturbing somehow. She is from the Caribbean, which country I always forget, and her dark skin is flawless, so perfect I want to test my teeth on her cheek when she bends over me to take my blood pressure. I never do bite, however. I am extremely well-behaved, in fact, borderline charming, not wanting reports of irrational behavior being funneled back to Doctor Kent.

By the way, his first name is not Clark, but I sometimes call him that to annoy. His eyelids flicker.

I phone his office to report the hallucinations and he calls me back six hours later. Typical.

"Doctor Kent," I say. "Since this morning I've had a heart attack and a stroke and paralysis and Ebola and a fall which has put me into a coma and for some reason my left arm has shriveled down to the size of a butternut squash. All during the six hours while I've been waiting for you to return my call."

Kent sighs. He loves talking to me but won't admit it. "You're speaking rather well for a man in a coma," he observes.

I tell him about the hallucinations.

"Are they scary? Are you finding them especially disturbing?" he asks.

I think about it. "No, not really," I say. "They

are ok. Comforting in a way, actually. It's reality that's disturbing."

Kent makes a noise halfway between a laugh and a snort.

"All right," he says. "It could be the disease itself causing the hallucinations, rather than the new drug, but I think we should stop it anyway. Now, this is a powerful drug. You can't discontinue it all-of-a-sudden, so we'll taper you off. Starting tomorrow, switch to a half-dose, and stay on the half-dose till the next time I see you."

That evening I am watching an episode of the old Dick Van Dyke show, the one where Rob suffers a concussion, loses his memory for a while, wanders out of his New York office, and comes to his senses several hours later while dancing with a strange blonde woman at a house party in Red Hook, New Jersey. Will Laura, who has been frantic with worry, believe his story? Even after she sees the lipstick on his collar?

In front of me, on the TV tray, is my microwaved Tuesday MOW meal: meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, and—instead of white bread, for a change—a corn muffin tightly wrapped in cellophane. I am struggling to prise open the securely shrink-wrapped cellophane, which seems astonishingly, unnecessarily sturdy and refuses to yield.

"What did they think they were packing in here, plutonium?" I ask myself.

The show goes to commercial. I mute the sound, as always, then go back to my struggle with the impenetrable plastic.

The wrapping yields all of a sudden and of course the corn muffin shoots into the air and drops to the well-worn carpet, where it nestles against my left foot. When I bend down to retrieve it, I hear Wife walking around upstairs.

Know her tread anywhere.

She walks with purposeful briskness from the guest bedroom to our bedroom, then goes into the bathroom for a while. I hear water running. Then the bathroom door creaks open and I hear her walk back into our bedroom, where I imagine she is making the bed. Wife never could stand an unmade bed.

She is humming quietly to herself, as usual. I swallow, find my voice, shout up the stairs. “Wife?” I ask.
Sound stops.

That night I crawl into the (unmade) bed a bit earlier than usual and surprise myself by falling asleep easily. I wake a couple hours later to hear Wife in the bathroom, gargling.

Finally, the deep sigh. Then the click of the bathroom light. This is followed a few seconds later by the creak of the bedroom door opening.

Then, sadly—nothing.

The next day, I follow my usual routine. When it is time take my medication (I take six different pills, all together, in the mornings), I head to the kitchen with my pill caddy to obtain a butterknife to split the pill causing the hallucinations, as instructed.

Using two fingers, I hold the oblong pill up to the light of the window over the sink to locate the helpful dividing line in the center and notice for the first time what a pleasant color the pill is. Cool pale orange. Like a Creamsicle.

I am never good at splitting medications—my hands shake more than I would like. After wavering a moment, I put the butterknife down.

Wasn't I the one who said it is better not to do things in a half-assed way?

I shake two more Creamsicle pills out of

the container, line them up with the first one on the kitchen counter, and consider them for a while. Then I swallow all three before I have a chance to stop myself.

About ninety minutes later, sitting in a chair in the living room, I begin to feel really weird. Reeeeeeeeeeally weeeeeeeeird. I've never used recreational drugs, wonder if this is what it means to be high. If so, I don't like it much.

I stand, take a couple teetery steps. I think I might enjoy throwing up. But then I remember the coffee grounds and change my mind.

“The real me is a small person who lives inside the machine of my body,” I say out loud. “I inhabit the head, peep out the eye-windows, pull the levers of the mind.”

Wait. What am I saying?

I want to lie on the bed. But the prospect of climbing up the stairs is daunting. I should've moved my bedroom downstairs like everyone always says.

But wait. I am a free American. Widower. Living in my own home, with a paid-off mortgage. Loved by no one, but I am therefore beholden to no one. In other words, I cannot be stopped—if I want, I can just throw myself down and lie here on the well-worn carpet in my living room.

Which I do.

When I wake, the quality of the sunlight streaming through the windows has changed. More golden. Time has passed.

I have lived in this house for decades, but never before spent any significant time lying on my back on the living room floor and staring up at the ceiling. Guess this shows that new perspectives are always possible. Even if they are really boring.

I'm still kind of fuzzy-headed, detached. Sensations arrive a bit delayed, like when you stub your toe and it takes a second for the pain to make itself known.

I decide to relax and listen to the cats. We have three: Athos, Porthos, and Stinky. They like to chase each other from room to room, jumping up onto windowsills to view outside something vitally important to cats—birds, I guess—then jumping down to scamper to the next window to get a slightly different view. Whenever they land back down on the floor, they make a specific kind of thud—a cat thud, Wife calls it.

I lie on the carpet listening to the cat thuds. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds in a minute. Either our three cats are getting extremely tired or we actually have a lot of cats I haven't ever seen.

When I wake again the day is darkening. I feel a small amount of Puritan shame knowing I have spent so much of my day snoozing on the living room floor. However, in truth this does not represent a significantly greater waste of time than the manner in which I usually pass my days.

I remember how happy I was listening to the cats a few hours earlier. Now, my mind somewhat clearer, I calculate the last one of

them died thirteen years ago.

Having to urinate badly, I am able, fortunately, to get to my feet with relative ease. I make it to the half-bath located off the kitchen just in time.

Though not particularly hungry, I heat and eat a can of tomato soup, then drop myself back into place in my favorite well-worn living room chair. I pull the pill caddy over from the table next to me and without hesitation take three more Creamsicle pills.

Much later, I open my eyes to darkness, and utter quiet. After a moment, I realize I'm comfortably tucked up in bed, though I have no memory of having climbed the stairs.

In the bathroom, Wife begins gargling.

Afterwards, she emits a large sigh and switches out the bathroom light. Then I hear the bedroom door creak open.

I sense her quiet footfalls as she approaches. I smell her perfume.

I shift over to make room in the bed and feel her modest weight settle upon the mattress next to me. Then, at last, I sense a thin arm surrounding my neck. I feel Wife's warm breath on my ear as she comes close to kiss me, her pale face looming in the darkness, and that's when I know everything is going to be all right.

James W. Morris is a graduate of LaSalle University in Philadelphia, where he was awarded a scholarship for creative writing. He has published dozens of short stories, humor pieces, essays, and poems in various literary magazines, including *Philadelphia Stories* and *Zahir*.



Are You There?

Julie Lynn Christian

Signals in the Unclean House

Linda Scheller

Who sent these messages,
dust pushed and lifted
from the bookshelf universe,
shadows of music
played by ghosts
on wood and tchotchkes?

I suspect the ancestors
write my fate
in relief and spell,
harbingeing loss
in negative space.

Inscrutable truths
and unheard songs,
I do not speak
this language
yet.