

# MULESKINNER JOURNAL



## Glitches



Journal Nine - January 2024





## *Glitches*

Our Journal Nine Theme is **Glitches**

No. That's not a mistake.

This journal is about hitches, mishaps, misprints, snafus, snags, drawbacks, stumbling blocks, weak links, problems, hindrances, obstacles, monkey wrenches, grit in the gears, ants at the picnic, ants in the pants, the inappropriate aunt at the family gathering, hurdles, hiccups, forgetting to unmute, the coffee stain right before the interview, the faux pas during the interview, the faux pas whenever, painting yourself in a corner, rain delays, auto-correct, and flies in the ointment.

It's about the glitch that doesn't matter and the glitch that matters most. It's about glitches causing unexpected joy.





# MULESKINNER JOURNAL

## JOURNAL NINE: GLITCHES

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# TOM BARLOW

## VALENTINE

She is raised as fireworks  
he a slow burn  
they meet at the ash pile

her tongue sharp as a drawknife  
that only cuts as she pulls him in  
he the willing board.

For her, he dances like a marionette  
she knows her knots  
she nurses her blues  
so he brings her carnivore flowers.

Time welds them together  
the pedestal  
the effigy

day by day she pecks away  
until the holes in him whistle  
so he plays for her on Saturday nights  
while she is out

for he has been raised to expect little  
and she is every bit of that  
but what does love know of reason.

She sleeps with a hammer  
he keeps track of the knots on his head  
counts every one as a valentine.



# JASON RYBERG

## ONLY THE LONELY

Ain't so bad feelin'  
lonely (jus' cuz you're no one's  
one and only), parked

on the side of some  
lonesome stretch of backroad, just  
a few short miles out-

side of No Dice, OK:  
the radio glowin' out  
some sad and lonesome

tune, and a cool wind  
blowin' in across a field  
that, somehow, in this

powder-blue moonlight,  
looks just like desert dunes. Or  
maybe you're just one

more nameless Dutchman,  
driftin,' aimless, somewhere off  
the coast of Ghost of

a Chance, NE, or per-  
haps you're just another beat-  
down soul explorer,

unable to break  
your wayward, manic orbit  
around Three Blue Tears,

AMO. Cousin, ain't no  
reason to brood and grumble  
and stew with worry.

CONTINUED...

It really ain't all  
that bad; shit, not if you got  
your Old Grandad and

your Uncle Mickey  
with ya, swappin' lies about  
women and fights and

racin' cars under-  
neath an all-over sky of  
lonely stars. Nah, hell

man, it ain't so bad  
feelin' lonely, ain't so bad  
at all, returnin'

a lonely midnight  
call from our sly and wily  
cousin, the Coyote,

or, maybe you're just  
sharin' your last cigarette  
with the ghost of old

Uncle Roy's lonely midnight  
blues. That's right, man, go on and  
smoke that last smoke, there,

while the DJ is  
chargin' the song. Go on and  
take another pull

off that bottle and  
return that desperate call,  
and don't let no one

try to tell you; it  
aint so bad feelin' lonely...  
aint so bad at all.





## DAVID KIRBY

### I SEE ENGLAND

il See England

Teddy Roosevelt had a pit-bull named Pete who bit a Navy department clerk and tore off the pants of the French ambassador. The New York Times, August 3, 2023

Kid I went to preschool with wouldn't brush his teeth, so his parents made a game of it by calling his toothbrush his "meenter-mineter," a word he'd come up with himself when he was four. "Time to play with your meenter-mineter!" they'd say. "Buzz, buzz!" Problem is he didn't find out that a toothbrush was a "toothbrush" until he was ten and went to sleepaway camp the first time. A heads-up would have been nice. Kid I knew in high school—another kid—was rummaging in his dad's closet one morning and found a .22 pump just as the housekeeper walked by with a load of laundry, so holding what he thought was an unloaded gun at hip level, he said, "Say your prayers, Felicia!" and squeezed the trigger. The bullet went through an open window, but Felicia fell to the floor in a dead faint, and when his little brother ran in to find out what the fuss was and took one look at Felicia, he ran back out and called the police to say, "Come quick, my brother shot our housekeeper!" who at that moment was actually coming around, so the boys gave her twenty bucks not to tell and grabbed rakes and ran out and busied themselves with imaginary yard work until the patrol car pulled up and two cops jumped out holding their service weapons. What, what? went the boys. What rifle, what housekeeper, she's fine, go inside, see for yourself. You'd think my preschool buddy would have learned to brush his teeth on his own. What were his parents thinking? One trip to the dentist to have a cavity filled and they wouldn't have called him Meenter-Minter Boy at Camp Happy Valley for the next six weeks. Shit's going to happen whether you want it to or not. Take the time this comedian was doing a set at the Boston Marriott Long Wharf,

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ionly it was at five p.m., which is not good, and in the atrium, which is worse, and even worse than that, some poor guy in a wheelchair had decided to kill himself the day before by rolling off the wharf and into the harbor, and as the comic is telling the six people in his audience about the two cannibals who are eating a clown, divers are locating the dead guy and his wheelchair and hooking them to a crane and pulling them from the water and letting them drip for a half hour or so as they figure out what to do next, and now the only person in that atrium with his back to this grisly scene is saying to his audience, "This skeleton walks into a bar. . . ."

I tell young people not to overthink it. Just do what you want, young people. We get along fine with the French these days. Red wine, brie, the Eiffel Tower, Albert Camus: what's not to like? You don't have to do what your parents tell you to do. You could be a miserable engineer but a happy florist. Wouldn't you rather be a happy florist? If I'd been Pete, I too would have torn off the pants of the French ambassador, it sounds like a fun pitbull activity.







## LOIS ROMA-DEELEY

### OKAY. NOT OKAY.

I'm okay reading the paper.  
I'm not okay checking my phone,  
reading old messages--what went wrong,  
how should I help, what could we do.  
I'm okay walking to the mailbox  
and not okay reaching in, finding  
letters and cards wishing me a good day.  
I'm okay cooking dinner.  
Though when making your favorite food,  
Baked Ziti and almond cookies,  
I'm not okay  
because that ripe banana sitting in the glass bowl  
on my kitchen table,  
just like the one you politely asked for  
the last time you visited,  
wounds me.  
I'm okay vacuuming my house.  
I'm not okay standing in your bedroom  
with your mother, my daughter,  
staring into your closet. The leather jacket  
we gave you hanging there like yesterday's promise.  
Your worn shoes piled, one on top the other,  
as if you just slipped them off,  
the sweat marks ringing the edges.  
I'm okay writing this to you.  
As if you can hear me. As if  
I've put my arms around you  
and held you tight.



# ANGELA HOFFMAN

## LOST SOULS

She is the Patron Saint of Lost Souls.  
She will rescue a nest, branch, feather  
stones of any kind, a chair or dresser from the curb,  
give them a place inside her home.  
She gives things second chances like that angel with one wing,  
and the headless statue in her garden, her marriage.  
She knows what it's like to be discarded.  
She would say she is more spiritual than religious,  
forever searching for her God gone missing.  
She claims she meditates but we all know that she really gives  
every thought that seeps into her head all the attention it wants.  
She is a worrier.  
She thrives on routines, makes lists and lists for her lists,  
and you can't help but forgive her obsession with order  
when she straightens items in your home that are off kilter.  
She is envious of those who travel,  
having lived her whole life in the same small town,  
but admits she prefers to stay home.  
She is easily distracted, and sometimes she doesn't listen  
as she is too busy worrying about what you think of her.  
She is able to see your every shifting mood;  
that slight lift in your brow, the droop of your shoulder,  
a single tear, the shake of your head.  
She comes across as shy, but it just takes her a bit  
to come up with the words she wants to say. She is not eloquent.  
Often she says too much, too soon upon meeting you.  
She is vulnerable that way.  
She takes notes of everything she reads  
as that's how she anchors her thoughts, keeps them from going missing.  
She tends to tell you what to do, but really she just wants you  
to avoid the pain of figuring things out all on your own.  
She wants to pick at your core.

CONTINUED...

She is bold in her questions, wants a peek into your private life,  
wants to know where you go, what you do with your time.  
She wants to know how you feel, what you said, how you said it.  
She struggles with showing her love, but craves it more than anything.  
She is fearful about much, mostly about being lost  
in large buildings, on highways, side streets, so try to be tender  
with her questions. Are you sure this is the right way?  
Do you know the way back? She says she was born  
with no sense of direction, claims that it is a real condition.  
She wonders how she will ever overcome that deep sense  
of not knowing her way.  
She needs her own Patron Saint of Lost Souls.







## MARGARET DERITTER

### I ARRIVED AT HER DOOR THROUGH PROVIDENCE

Overshot Route 3—broken phone, no navigation, missing signage.  
By the time I reached Providence, I knew I'd gone too far,  
so I old-schooled it to a gas station and asked for directions.

No one there knew her Cape Cod town. And, of course, no printed maps,  
but a kindly clerk lent me a phone and handed me paper and pen.  
An hour later I stood at her door, this woman I knew fifty years before.

Met her in an English class—me a closeted freshman, she a lovely  
young teacher at our Christian school, married to a husband then,  
living with a woman now and married once again.

Oh, the worlds we've left behind and so much doctrine too. And yet ...  
You arrived here through Providence, she says, hugging me on her porch.  
And we both laugh—poetic souls who love the metaphor. And maybe,  
somewhere in our heretic hearts, we believe it could be true.



## WENDY DOLBER

### A CERTAIN KIND OF ENERGY

I first noticed her standing outside ShopRite contemplating the shopping carts, a hand wavering between the large and small baskets. She was dressed in black satin shorts and a puffy shirt like in the old Seinfeld episode, only this one, with its splashes of flung colors, looked like Jackson Pollock could have designed it. She stood out, among the leggings and hoodies of most of the women, weaving their way around her. She didn't seem to care that she was in everybody's way.

Finally, I reached around her, and said, "May I?" and caught hold of one of the small carts. She looked at me as if I had come out of nowhere and our eyes met for a brief second. Hers were sharply blue fringed with long brown false lashes. One was coming unhinged in the outer corner of her left eye. A whipped confection of a hat perched on the side of her head, a spray of feathers arising from a single large black rose. The feathers were quivering. Then she broke away, wheeled the cart around and pushed it through the door, looking like a brightly colored bird who had somehow gotten separated from the flock by some catastrophic event.

I followed my usual route to the left through the produce department. She made a sharp right and disappeared down an aisle. When I saw her again, she was standing in front of the row of cold cases, her hand poised to open the door. She stood there like a statue, swaying slightly in her stiletto boots, gazing in the direction of the almond milk. She was crying. I stole a glance at her face, young, pretty, expertly applied makeup, only now the black eyeliner followed the unhinged eyelash down her cheek. Her nose was running.

Grief is a kind of energy that exists in the world unfelt beyond our senses, until it becomes relevant. I had cried in that same spot remembering how my husband had always been game to run out to the market to get me my beloved vanilla almond milk. Unsweetened. Until he couldn't. I cried in the produce, pasta, meat, dairy, paper goods, even the dog aisle, nobody seeming to notice. For months, I couldn't accept that our beautiful, shared life had been short-circuited in this way.

I decided to just give her space, opened the door of the case next to where she was standing and all but crawled in, twisting my body to the right to get the almond milk behind the door she was blocking. She looked at her feet but didn't move.

I drifted off to finish my shopping, hit the refined carbohydrates aisle, grabbed a package of

Oreos and put them back, then down the paper aisle, where I stood in front of the tissues, thinking of her. I piled four boxes into my cart. I wondered was she still standing in front of the almond milk. I rolled down the aisle and peeked around the corner to see. She was. I opened a tissue box and held it out to her. We looked at each other. She took a tissue, shaking her head, as if to say, "it's all so much." I stood next to her for a moment, sharing the feeling, if such a thing is possible. Then I drifted off.





# LUKAS TALLENT

## WIFE MATERIAL

She flew down for the weekend with her new skinny jeans, a crop-top, and her scalp buzzed until she resembled a pop-rock monk. For good measure, she pierced her nose, too, and a silver hoop now dangled from her septum, but the lingering pain and metallic smell, while she waited outside McGhee Tyson, left her unsure of how he would react.

When the Uber dropped her on Gay Street, he was waiting on the sidewalk.

"Look at you," he said, sweeping her in his arms like a little kid. He'd always hugged her like that, even after she told him he was a callous piece of shit or a coward for staying in Tennessee.

When he touched her scalp, she reminded him of how she liked dramatic returns, effusing every spare ounce of sweetness into her voice, as she had practiced again and again on the flight. His feathered, wavy hair, Def Leppard t-shirt, and denim cutoffs gave her courage. She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek. "I've missed you."

"Same," he said and hefted her suitcase three flights of stairs to his one-bedroom in the Sterchi building.

The place was a wreck. Coffee mugs and take-out boxes littered every ledge, shelf, or counter. It seemed, too, as if he stripped in a different spot every night for tiny piles of clothes were scattered about his living room.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm doing laundry."

"Or not," she said, smiling in part to reassure him that she really didn't mind and because to see him a mess was to see him vulnerable. You wouldn't let just anyone see you that way.

He bought this condo a year ago, before he quit his job for the state and started bartending. During the latter half of his twenties, he had re-evaluated whether or not working for a paycheck was what life was really about. Then he learned how to make drinks, bought jiggers and shakers, understood the difference an ounce and a half could make.

"If only you'd known during undergrad," she said, as she sipped the classic daiquiri he mixed for her. It was a new place, hip and Italian. When he explained the simple ingredients, she

kept leaning closer, to where she could've licked his smooth, tanned face as if it were a caramel apple.

He worked that night, so she sat at his bar and drank whatever he made: the daiquiri, a negroni, and an espresso martini. All went right through her.

Flirty girls appeared and asked him questions she already knew the answers to.

"Where did you grow up?"

"How does your hair stay like that?"

One was blonde, the other two brunettes, and you could tell they liked him by how they twirled their curls. She ran a hand over her smooth scalp. No rings in their noses, but he was polite, deferential, leaning into their attraction. A few more questions, and she decided to walk back to his place.

After taking her pills, she got to work. She gathered the mugs and loaded the dishwasher. Only two failed attempts, and she figured out how to set the automatic coffeepot, then wiped the counters clean and put his clothes in the wastebasket. Around 3:00 AM, he found her curled on his couch and watching an old horror movie that no longer scared her.

"You didn't have to clean," he said.

"I couldn't sleep," she said. He smelled of booze and lime and sweat and cologne and the sweetness of life. Beside him, she fell asleep.

The next night, she didn't go to the bar but kissed him on the cheek as he left. "Be good," she said and started on his laundry, which required four separate trips up and down three flights of stairs. When she lost her breath, she would sit for a minute, and in case someone else entered the stairwell, pretended to be doing something important on her phone. It took hours—folding his shirts and shorts and jeans. Afterward, she organized his chest of drawers, rearranged his closet, collars, jackets, and shoes. When she finished, she purloined a white dress shirt and some boxers that on her were like shorts. This was her last night in town.

At midnight, he didn't know what to say.

"What's a guy do to deserve a friend like you?"

"I think we're more than friends. I've seen you naked."

She had, five years ago. It was right before graduation, one night with a bottle of raspberry vodka and the fear that they'd never be as close again.



He sighed, and in that sigh were years and years of what hadn't been said. "That was a long time ago."

No, not really, she wanted to say. I'm not any different. The lights were dimmed, and as he went to bed, she lay wondering how to say it. I should've known then, but I didn't, and I'm sorry, but there's always now. About an hour later, she left her clothes on his couch and crept into his room. He slept on his side, and when she slipped under the covers, she realized he was naked, too, and warm. She pulled his arm over her and scooted back, felt his hardness between the cheeks of her butt. But he didn't stir, and under his warmth, she drifted off.

The next morning, he drove her to the airport.

"Come back," he said, and her heart fluttered.

"Really?"

"Anytime. Maybe I won't have to work so much, and we can go on the town, find you a man."

She tried but couldn't quite smile.

"Thank you," she said.

Once she was through security, she looked back, but he had already gone.



# STEPHEN BARILE

## MONGE

For Steve Monge

He was a scrap metal man,  
No ordinary man by any means,  
Graduating from the garbage truck  
To the scrapyards.  
A hunter, fisherman, trapper,  
He did it all, everything.  
Something left over from World War Two  
Made him a lifelong bachelor  
With a fearful disdain for women.  
Except his beloved sister.  
Many didn't know of his constant return  
Over again, in his imagination  
To his combat days in the Europe,  
A soldier in the Battle of the Bulge,  
While hunting deer near Courtwright Lake.  
Grouse hunts at Rattlesnake Crossing,  
In regions of the Sierra, east of his yard.  
He was trapped in his dirty work clothes  
Toting his thirty-ought-six rifle  
With a scope--he was a trapper too.  
Once inside the gate, you were trapped--  
Take his offer or go somewhere else.  
No matter the price of the metal,  
He called it a good deal for you.  
Every so often, he'd drive a truckload  
Of metal to the yards in Los Angeles,  
And prearranged deals for set prices.  
In the office at the back of his yard,  
Where he fried steak on a Coleman stove,  
He paid cash for metal from a cash drawer  
Welded on a pedestal, bolted to the floor.

CONTINUED...

Behind the counter, an army-cot  
With an unzipped flannel sleeping bag.  
A .45 caliber automatic pistol  
Kept ready for thieves on the bedside table.  
There was no one in his life now  
Just his sister whose home he bought with cash,  
And someone he called his stepson,  
Who stole from him regularly given a chance.  
He enjoyed holiday dinners  
being with her, sitting next to her,  
The parts and pieces of his life scattered  
On the oily ground with metal-scrap.  
I expect, he died alone.





## ZACH KEALI'I MURPHY

### POPPY IS MY HALF-SISTER BUT THAT'S NOT THE WHOLE STORY

Poppy is my half-sister and she has a whole lot of nerve. When I was twelve, Poppy tried to poison me by baking me a cake that had laundry detergent in the frosting. It took me hours to get the taste out of my mouth. Poppy offered up an apology by baking me a new cake. I threw it in her face. It was half-baked anyway. My dad said I should be more forgiving, but people usually say that to excuse their own mistakes. Poppy and I have the same dad, but we don't have the same mom. My mom's spirit died when she found out about Poppy. Poppy's mom died during childbirth.

Poppy is my half-sister and she doesn't use her whole brain, but I've been told that no one does. When I broke my leg climbing a tree during my freshman year of high school, Poppy brought a hibiscus plant to my hospital room. After she placed it by my bedside, she turned around and her backpack knocked it over. The bulky plant fell directly onto my bad leg. I had to stay in the hospital for an extra week because of it. I could've sworn Poppy knocked it over on purpose. She probably enjoyed having the house to herself. My mom salvaged the hibiscus plant. She's more forgiving than I am. Or maybe she just really likes plants. After I left the hospital, we brought the hibiscus home. It's actually quite beautiful when it blooms.

Poppy is my half-sister and she's full of surprises. When I attended my junior prom, my date ditched me midway through the dance. While I was hiding out in the hallway, wiping my mascara onto my turquoise dress, wondering if it was possible to die from humiliation, Poppy was puncturing the tires of my date's car. The entire incident was caught on the school parking lot's security camera. I asked Poppy why she did it, and the only thing she said was, "I was feeling spicy." That night, Poppy was expelled from school but accepted into my heart.

Poppy is my half-sister and I miss her a whole bunch. When I left for college, Poppy decided to help me move into my dorm, but only after I promised to bring the hibiscus plant with me. She even helped me decorate the drab walls. My mom and dad come to visit me at college, but Poppy never makes the trip. My dad always says Poppy isn't feeling well. When I came home for the holidays, Poppy wasn't around. My dad says she's staying at a friend's house now. But I think friend is a generous term. The late nights of studying feel extra lonely when I'm worrying about Poppy. I take good care of the hibiscus plant. It's dormant right now. But just when it seems like it's done growing, it always seems to bud again.





**PETER ANDREWS**

**SITTING IN AN ADIRONDACK CHAIR**

Outside a poetry reading  
Something flutters down  
A petal?  
Landing on my shirt  
Above my heart  
The fragment of a butterfly wing



## ANTHONY NEIL SMITH

### STRAYS

The second was Benny, her oldest brother. Surprised her with a call, middle of the afternoon.

"She tried to put me away, told Anita to beat it. Got a restraining order against her, can you believe it?"

Lyn stopped rocking in her chair on the back patio with her two stray cats perched on either side. This was her smoking spot now that her husband had banned it from the house. "Who did what? Restraining what?"

"I'm at the police station. Um, uh, where, I don't...excuse me, where are we again? Right, right. Tuscaloosa. I made it as far as Tuscaloosa."

Lyn fished the details. Benny's own daughter, Farrah, the rich dentist in Tennessee, had gotten the restraining order against her dad's ex-wife/current girlfriend/drinking buddy on the ground of his diminished capacity. "The doctors, they don't know what they're talking about. It's bullshit. I'm fine." Then she'd found an assisted-living complex for memory patients, an expensive one. "And it's my money she's using! Not her own, of course not. She's going to bleed me dry." After a couple weeks, he got in his Mercedes, and starting driving South without a plan, really. One quick BOLO for the car later, he's pulled over and taken in.

"Can't you tell them, or tell Farrah, please, tell them I'm on my way to see you?"

So that's what Lyn did. She told the deputies he was welcome to drive on down, and then called Farrah to let her know. Couldn't believe the girl had done this to her own father, but Lyn wasn't looking to fight. Just looking to calm things down.

"He can stay here as long as he wants, it won't be a problem. Until we can get him to another doctor, a second opinion."

Farrah gave her blessing. The nieces and nephews loved Aunt Lyn most of all, the cool aunt. She was good at handling family affairs, same as she'd done for years with her own mother before she passed at ninety-three. Only the two youngest of the six stayed around to take care of Mom, the house, and her finances. Lyn was trusted, never a doubt, even by Benny, the self-made multimillionaire, self-made asshole who'd tried and failed to take hold of the reins over the years, his mother's will too strong right up until the end.

He showed up the next day. Benny preferred "Ben" or "Benjamin" but among the six, he was Benny, end of story. He was the third oldest, seventy-seven, and Lyn hadn't seen him in a couple of years. He'd shrunk, weak shouldered, favoring his right like he'd had a stroke - maybe he had? - in a golf shirt and shorts, and still wearing his goddamned sandy-blond beach bum toupee everyone knew was a rug.

"Hey, baby girl." Still calling his sixty-eight year old sister 'baby girl.' He gave her a hug, definitely favoring his right side, she could tell now.

"What a week."

Then a look around her neighborhood.

"Lot of brothas live here, don't they?"

Of course he'd say that.

CC had been first, the youngest, and the one who'd never left home. Benny had wanted him out so they could sell Mom's house and split the money.

Lyn had said, "What money?" It was a small house, nearly busting the seams at family Christmases, in a neighborhood built in the fifties, still scarred from Katrina sixteen years on.

When Mom finally died after several years of hinting at it - "Oh Lord, I'm ready when you are" - Lyn did her thing. She smoothed sore emotions and convinced the others to let CC have the house. He'd been the one taking care of it all these years - mowing, painting, cleaning. He'd earned it.

Until it was obvious he really hadn't. Repairs never finished, appliances never replaced, Mom's room left to gather dust as-is, and "friends" taking advantage - and by "friends" Lyn knew he meant men, homosexual men. They'd known CC was gay, but he'd kept that part of his life walled away from his parents, away from the family. It wasn't obvious. He wasn't femme, liked sports and heavy metal and trucks, like all his friends. Lyn figured when Mom passed away, he'd "come out" to them all.

He didn't.

Warning signs - some bruises, some black eyes, another job lost, no explanations.

It took Lyn driving down and cleaning out the vermin - literal and etc. Scared the living shit out of men three times bigger and three times younger. She told CC he could stay with her until the house was fixed up, and she helped him get a new job at the clinic in Slidell. It was

good for him, she'd told her husband, Jonesy.

He wasn't thrilled, but hey, if it made his wife happy and kept CC out of trouble, no harm done.

Lyn and Jonesy's house had four bedrooms - the master, plus Lyn's youngest daughter's old room before she married and moved out, then back in for over a year after Katrina, then out again a few blocks away, plus the "music room" filled with Jonesy's guitars and amps. When he wasn't directing funerals, you'd find him in the French Quarter a few nights a week playing rhythm behind a singer/sax player who gave the tourists exactly what they wanted - Dixieland classics. He's let his hair go long and grew a jazz beard.

The last room was CC's. He wasn't there when Benny arrived, thank god, because Lyn didn't want to watch Big Brother lecture Little Brother on all his missteps again, and watch CC try to fight back but end up humiliated, Jesus.

"Good to see you, baby girl. Lots of ethnics in this neighborhood."

Repeating himself. He'd say it a few more times before bedtime. Lyn hadn't believed it when Farrah told her Benny was blanking out, forgetting where he was, asking the same questions over and over. The only thing he was solid on, she'd said, was his money. Every dime, every bill, every credit card, every account, solid.

It didn't run in the family, dementia. Their dad had been sharp as a tack until the end, and Mom's memory dulled very little the last few painful years. The oldest girls hadn't shown any signs - they'd lost Colette to cancer a couple of years prior, and Bette was still going strong at eighty.

Well, okay. Bette will be the third. Later.

Benny's routine was to come downstairs, cook himself some bacon no matter how much he got in everyone's way, then sit out back with Lyn and scold her for smoking too much.. His fucking toupee was never on straight anymore.

When she needed to go to the store, Benny would come along and pay for everything. The price was having to listen to him bitch about her driving constantly.

"Pass this fool, would you? Why are you sitting on his ass like...now slow down. Leadfoot over here. Calm down. This ain't Daytona" and on and on.

He doted on his grand-nieces, Lyn's only grandkids, and bought them sno-balls and candy. Since her oldest son, Fry, and his wife had decided not to have any kids, and her middle

daughter, Helena, was in her forties and unlucky in love, Rochelle's two girls were all Lyn had.

Benny asked Jonesy about ten times a day if they could go play golf. Goddamn, Benny missed golf.

Jonesy always held his lips in a tight grin, close to cracking. "I don't play anymore. Lost my clubs in Katrina."

"You don't need clubs. Use my clubs. We can rent you some clubs. I can give you some tips. Goddamn, I miss golf. Can't remember the last time..."

And to CC, "Never going to make it on your own unless you're on your own. You need a chance to fail. This job of yours? It's no career. That won't get you where you need to go. Let me make a few calls, I'm sure the CEO will still listen to the company founder."

CC stayed in his room a lot more.

Then after dinner, Benny would declare, "I want to watch a movie. Baby girl, find us a movie. Jonesy? Jonesy, want to watch a movie with us?"

Jonesy found an extra gig in the French Quarter. Four nights a week now.

But what was Lyn supposed to do, huh? Let her brother waste away in an old folks' home, his money sucked into a vortex? It wasn't dignified. It wasn't right.

Besides, he wasn't staying there forever. She'd get Benny set up with a new doctor, get him back to his old self, and find him a better place to live. Someplace he could golf again.

Jonesy would come around. He knew what he was getting marrying into her crazy family. A woman several years older with three adult kids? An extended family of loudmouth Beverly Hillbillies? He knew damned good and well.

Yes, Bette was third.

Bette's daughter called Lyn. "They found her passed out in her bathroom. Fell off the toilet. They got to her just in time. Heart attack."

Luckily, it wasn't fatal. They popped in two stents and let her rest a few days before releasing her.

And of course, it was Lyn there to meet her in Baton Rouge. She hadn't even told Jonesy. It shouldn't have been Lyn. Bette had two kids, plus her ex-husband who kept hanging around even though they knew it would never work. She had friends. She had co-workers -

yes, still working at eighty.

But Bette's daughter had screeched, "I can't! I can't even! With my work? With my family? We don't have room! She'd drive me up the wall! I can't do it."

And Lyn didn't trust some of the others would look after her full time. So...

She heard her older sister before she saw her, as was usual. A loud, twangy, elastic voice always on the verge of laryngitis, it seemed. A male nurse rolled her out, probably because a woman would have murdered her by then.

"Big strapping young man! You make me feel special. I'm sure you've got some young pretty things getting their panties wet for you, but if you ever want an older lover. Oh, look, there's my sister! My sister's come to get me. Look at how young and thin she is, while I'm old and fat."

Bette's hair, as always, was black as black could be, and would stay so as long as Clairol made that shade. She got out of the chair and demanded a hug from the nurse, who kept the chair between them and skittered away, something about "against policy."

"A damn lie. Forgive me Jesus. Look at you, Lyn! The Lord let me live, he let me live, Lynelle, can you believe it? I must be doing something right. Is this your Cherokee? It's fancy, real fancy. Can we get a po-boy?"

And then some.

Lyn forced herself to stay up past one in the morning and wait for Jonesy to come home from a gig. She smoked and watched the raccoons crawl over the fence from the woods looking for scraps. Lyn had nailed a few Mardi Gras cups to the back and filled them with leftover bits of dinner. Ribs, shrimp, half-eaten corn cobs.

Good thing she'd taken the peacock to a rescue or the raccoons might've feasted on it. The weirdest thing, this peacock showing up in her yard last November. Just gorgeous, the deepest blue and electric green, all those "eyes" on his tail. She didn't have a clue where it had come from, and she didn't want it to starve. She Googled what to feed it, went to Walmart for food, then set a bowl of bird seed out past the patio. Soon the peacock was coming right up to her, unafraid, happy to see her.

Lyn would've kept it forever if Jonesy hadn't told her it was a bad idea and called the rescue. She really missed the beautiful bird.

The Ring doorbell chimes alerted her to Jonesy coming in. She pictured him, setting down

the guitar case, seeing the patio light on and knowing she was there, and walking past the queen-sized blow-up mattress in the living room.

He stepped out onto the patio, holding his suit coat in his hands. Regardless of the heat down in the Quarter, he wanted to look the part. Suspenders, pin-stripes, pork pie hat. But he was soaked through and saturated with the odors of the club – beer, piss, hot garbage, sweat, and frying grease. He sat in the chair beside her, smoke curling into his face, and kept his eyes to the patio slab.

“She can’t climb the stairs. I had to give her our bed.”

A sigh.

“Well, Kelly wasn’t going to take her. What was I supposed to do?”

“I know it. Believe me, I know it. Doesn’t mean I have to be happy about it.”

“You’d better very well get happy, because you’re not going to punish me going round depressed. It’s only for a little while.”

Jonesy clapped his hands on his knees. “You said the same damned thing about CC!”

“And he’ll be staying three nights a week anymore instead of seven!”

Almost laughable. She heard it, but wouldn’t dare break. Something her mom used to do – laugh when she got real mad at you. Now that definitely runs in the family.

Lyn slumped back into her chair. “You’d better not be thinking of, uh, like, laying down some ultra-mat-ee-um, or some such. This ain’t about us. They’re getting old.”

“So are we.”

“Not like them.”

A grin. No, a fake-ass grin. “Yes, dear.”

Jonesy got up, opened the door to the kitchen, and got a little tripped up by both cats wanting out. “A few more strays won’t hurt nothing, I guess.”

Myron called the next day.

“Surprise. I’m in town.”



Number four.

Lyn was adding birdseed to a couple of new bird houses. The big seeds parrots like, hoping she could attract any that might've flown away from their homes. Nearly dropped the phone.

"You're in town?"

"Can I drop by?"

"Shit, the more the merrier, I suppose. How long will you be here?"

"I'll be over in ten minutes. We'll talk."

Myron was in-between Lyn and Benny in the order. Where Benny had become the insufferable millionaire, Myron ended up more of a drifter. A romantic. Married four times, divorced four times, with long strings of heartbreak in-between. He never lasted more than a year or two at any job, he was so restless. Texas, Tennessee, even California, Lyn had lost track.

He parked beside Benny's Mercedes in a Pontiac Grand Prix faded from red to almost pink, blistered by whatever desert he'd driven through to get here. He could care less about how his hair looked, what was left of it, and he shuffled in sandals, Lyn imagining him as Jesus for a moment.

"You have no idea, do you?" She hugged his neck. "Not a clue."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like a family reunion."

She led him inside past the dining room, really just storage for books no one had read and the queen-sized blow-up bed, to the living room, where Bette sat at the upright piano, playing and singing the only song she knew all the way through. "Sunrise, sunset, sunrise, sunset..." Benny was in the kitchen, cooking more bacon. CC loomed over Jonesy - who was enjoying a day off, plucking a guitar on the couch - talking about an AC/DC cover band he'd seen called "CD/BD."

"Look who the cat drug in!"

Benny and Myron hadn't gotten along for years, but it looked like all was forgiven. Looked that way. It wasn't long before the older harped on the younger about getting a job, keeping a woman, with Bette tossing in bombs like, "You already divorced the best you'll ever have. They keep getting worse and worse."

Then Myron told them he might need a place to stay, at least until he could save up enough and move to Vietnam – a place he'd dodged during the war – because he met a girl online who wants to marry him, if he could pay for the permits and paperwork first. Thousands.

"Dirt cheap living over there."

Lyn wanted to tell him, It's a scam!

Wanted to tell Benny, Of course there's a lot of black people here. It's New Orleans! And it's fine!

Wanted to tell CC, Grow up!

Wanted to tell Bette, Make your children take care of you!

But she never would.

Instead, she started for the patio. "Back in a minute."

She lit up as soon as her feet felt the heat of the concrete, keeping an eye peeled for raccoons, parrots, peacocks, aardvarks, lizards, whatever. Her cats brushed a coat's worth of hair onto her jeans before taking their perches on either side of her chair.

Looked like someone left a book in her chair. She recognized the cover, an old one from when they took in Helena's Shih Tzu puppy when he wasn't allowed in her new apartment. But someone – Jonesy, had to be – was having a little fun with her. They'd cut out some paper to cover the word Shih Tzu and Sharpied in another. The new title was *The Care and Feeding of Your Siblings*.

Lyn picked it up, hummed a groan and dropped it to the ground. It was funny, she had to admit to herself, but never to Jonesy. She sat and puffed and wondered where in the hell Myron was going to sleep tonight.

All it would take: a trip out to WalMart for another blow-up bed, some cheap food, an old blanket, a collar and water dish, and he'd be fine.





## HENRY SIMPSON

### GET OVER IT

Mrs. Carol called. Steve had been in a scuffle with another boy during lunch. "He's all right, Mrs. Davis. Nothing to worry about. It's simply school policy to inform parents when incidents like this happen."

"Who started the fight?" Leslie asked.

"I don't have the official answer yet. The Principal's investigating."

"Steve doesn't get into fights."

"Well, the fact of the matter is that he was in one. Several students witnessed it. A teacher intervened and reported it." She sounded like a cop.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Carol." Leslie slammed the handset down, muttering.

Steve came home from school at his usual time. Leslie was waiting for him in the kitchen, with her usual questions about his school day, which he answered predictably, while scarfing down a tuna on rye with milk, not his favorite. Leslie tried to vary his after-school snacks to provide a healthful overall average weekly mix.

Afterward, when he seemed relaxed, she told him Mrs. Carol had called concerning a "scuffle" with another boy. Steve avoided her eyes, gazed out the window, said it was "no big deal, just, this kid, he wanted my lunch and I refused, he tried to take it, so we had this sort of pulling match, and then he took a shot at me, and what was I supposed to do?"

"The Principal's investigating, honey. He seems to believe it's more than no big deal."

Steve shrugged. "So, are you gonna tell dad? If he finds out, I'm dead."

"Stay away from that boy, Steve."

"You bet, mom. That's a great idea," and he was gone, down the hallway to his room, too late to hear his mother say, "Are you being sarcastic with your mother?"

When Ted got home, she filled him in on the news of the day, top story Steve's incident. Ted

said it sounded like bullying, was upset, wanted to talk to Steve ASAP. "Cool down first, Ted." she said. "Talk to him alone, after dinner."

Ted made it through dinner by letting Leslie ramble on about the neighbors and her shopping. As soon as dinner ended, he told Steve to join him in the patio to have a chat. Steve glanced at his mother as he followed his dad outside. They sat at a picnic table in the cool early evening air.

Ted was protective of Steve, his only child. As a kid, he had been bullied and knew how demeaning it was. Years later, he enlisted in the Air Force to prove himself. Learned basic self-defense, how to use weapons and handle threats, earned non-commissioned officer stripes. Now, he supervised twenty employees in a small tool company. He was a good boss, he thought, but firm, with standards that, if anyone failed to meet them, they were out the door. Everyone in that shop knew the score. They all got along just fine, unless they messed up.

"You know what this is about, don't you, Steve?" Ted said.

"This kid from school," Steve began, "he came after me at lunch. Grabbed my sack. He musta thought I'd give it to him. When I didn't, he shoved me. I shoved him back. You know how that goes. Then we went at it."

"Anything else?"

"He followed me home from school last week. Hung around the neighborhood. Like, he was waiting for me to come outside. We don't have classes together. But when I see him, he always gives me this look."

"What's his name?"

"Terry Sloan."

"Does he belong to a gang?"

"He hangs out with some guys."

"Who won the fight?"

"It wasn't a fight, dad."

"Stay away from him."

"You're not going to do anything about this, are you?"

"You want me to ignore it?"

"Don't make a big fuss or anything."

"Sons don't give fathers orders, Steve."

Next morning, Ted called Steve's Principal and expressed concern over the incident. "I understand you're investigating it. Have you reached any conclusions yet?"

"No, Mr. Davis," said the Principal. "I'm still gathering facts."

"How long do you think that will take?"

"Hard to say. We're all quite busy."

"What do you think? Would a week be enough time?"

"No promises, Mr. Davis."

"Does the Sloan boy have a record of bullying, fighting, any other misbehaviors?"

"Mr. Davis. I cannot discuss his record with anyone except his parents or school personnel involved in his education."

"Well, then, how would you like to discuss it with the police?" Ted hung up, an empty threat, made him feel better until, minutes later, he regretted it. He felt small, after being talked down to by that overeducated son of a bitch.

A week passed with no word from the Principal. Then, Mrs. Carrol called Leslie again. Reported he had identified the guilty party and taken disciplinary measures, without revealing what they were. Added that Steve was innocent but had behaved inappropriately by defending himself with his fists. He should, instead, have reported his assailant to a teacher or whoever was monitoring students during lunch. "Jesus Christ Almighty!" Ted said when Leslie told him.

A few days later, on a Friday, Steve did not come home from school on time, and Leslie got concerned. She sat in the living room, expecting to see him riding home on his bike as he did every school day. Eventually, she spotted him late, a block away, on foot. The closer he got, the more bedraggled he appeared, as if he'd been out in the sun, walking a great distance, hauling his backpack. She opened the front door for him. "Where's your bike, honey?"

"Brian borrowed it," Steve said.

On Monday, Steve asked his mother if she could give him a ride to school. She offered to drop him off at Brian's house. He could pick up his bike there and ride it to school. "Never mind," Steve said. "I can walk." He grabbed his backpack, and was about to leave, when Leslie told him to wait. She explained the situation to Ted and her suspicion that Steve was lying about the disposition of his bike.

Ted offered to drop Steve off on his way to work. They got into Ted's pickup and were on their way. "Where's your bike?" Ted asked.

After a long silence, "It disappeared, dad."

"Like magic?"

"I parked it in Brian's driveway. Went inside with Brian. When I came back out, it was gone. Me and Brian walked the neighborhood, looking for it, no luck."

"Someone stole it?"

"I guess."

"Terry Sloan?"

"He said he got some bad shit because you called the Principal on him."

After dropping Steve off, Ted stopped at a Police substation to file a theft report on Steve's bike. He talked to a clerk and answered questions about the bike's physical description, value, color, age, condition, theft location, and so forth. The clerk discouraged hope of recovery, lectured Ted about locks, importance of teaching kids not to be careless with personal property, and other bromides.

"I have a suspect," Ted said. "He's been harassing my son at school."

"Be sure to contact the school administrators and file a complaint with them."

"I know all that," Ted said. "I don't need a lecture."

"If you'd taught your son about physical security, you wouldn't be here over a lost bicycle. We have more serious crimes to solve."

Ted composed a photo flyer describing Steve's missing bike, with family phone number. He and Steve walked door-to-door in Brian's neighborhood, handing out flyers and posting them on phone poles. Leslie received calls. Two seemed relevant. An anonymous woman reported seeing a man riding a boy's bicycle on the main thoroughfare near a local park. Also, One of Brian's neighbors noticed a man in his forties loading a red BMX bike into the



back of an old Chevy pickup. Ted called the neighbor and got the name of a landscaping company stenciled on the pickup, and then he Googled the company and got their number.

Ted called the number. A man's recorded voice answered, "Ray's Landscaping and Hauling," and requested the caller to leave a message. Ted Googled the company again and copied down their address.

Next afternoon, Ted and Steve were driving to the address. It was in a working-class neighborhood of apartments and old homes on tiny lots. A block from the address, Steve spotted Terry Sloan riding his BMX bike along the sidewalk. "That's my bike!" he exclaimed. Ted slowed, following Terry to his house; its front door and windows were covered with bars. A faded green Chevy pickup was parked beside the house. Ted pulled to the curb and parked in front. Terry glanced at them and rode past, around a corner, and disappeared. "What now, dad?" Steve said.

"Let's meet his dad."

"I'd rather wait here."

"This ain't a choice type deal, Steve. This is real life."

On the porch. The steel door was closed, but the door inside was wide open. Ted pushed the doorbell. Nothing happened. He banged on the steel door, yelling, "Ray! Ray! Ray!"

A man in a work shirt and faded blue jeans came to the door. "I'm Ray. What you want?"

"I'm Ted Davis. This is my son Steve. Your son Terry has Steve's bike. We're here to get it back."

Ray nodded. "You call my boy thief?"

Terry rode up to the porch on Steve's bike.

Ted pointed at the bike. "That's the bike. A witness saw you put it into your Chevy pickup."

Ray shook his head. "No. I found it in the park."

"That's theft. You can go to jail for that. Six months in the slammer."

Ray pulled out a roll of currency. "Twenty-five, fifty, how much you want?"

"Not for sale."

Ray came outside, grabbed Terry's arm, slapped him across the face. Ted noticed bruises on

the boy's face and arms.

"Hey," Ted said. "Don't hit your kid."

Ray glared at Ted. "He's my boy. I do what I like."

"I'll report you to Child Protective Services."

Ray released Terry. "Take your god damn bike."

Steve loaded the bike into the pickup.

Driving home, Steve sat silently, looking straight ahead. After a while, he turned to his dad. "That was awesome, dad." After a long silence, "I feel bad about what happened."

"You'll get over it."





# JULIET WALLER

## THE ELEVATOR

The elevator jerked and stopped just as Rohan said the word "constipated." We both laughed before we got concerned.

Rohan is my neighbor. We don't know each other that well but whenever I see him, he just tells me things. I like it. I wouldn't want any other neighbor telling me they're constipated but Rohan is so earnest. He's also twenty years younger than me.

We pushed the button with the bell on it. A voice said, "Stop playing with the elevator button," and hung up. We pushed it again and the voice repeated the command. Rohan said we should call the manager.

I called and felt very satisfied when the person who answered the phone realized we were not, in fact, playing with the elevator button but actually stuck. She told me she would call someone and it might be a while. Rohan and I made a plan for our future in the elevator. We decided where we would pee if needed, identified the meditation corner, the confessional corner. I'm Jewish so I've always loved the idea of a confessional. In my family, we wallow in guilt and worry and then complement each other if we lose any weight because of it. I don't condone this, it's just, you know, tradition.

Rohan excused himself to go to the confessional corner, telling me he'd always wanted to try confession, not being Catholic either. I decided to meditate even though I didn't really know how. I thought Rohan would whisper but he just used his regular voice. He said, "Forgive me, Elevator, for I have sinned." I sat criss-cross applesauce and tried to look peaceful. Rohan continued, "I'm currently dating two girls at once. They don't know about each other. I think it would make them both sad to find this out. I've never done this before, Elevator. I haven't dated much. And I am having sex with them both."

Over in the meditation corner, I blushed. Rohan went on, "But I'm being careful. It's just, I like being liked but also I like them both. Equally. I don't know what to do." He paused for a moment then said, "Elevator, if you're listening, can you give me a sign?"

And, I kid you not, a deep voice said, "Hello?"

Rohan screamed, a high, hands on his cheeks scream. I started to laugh so hard I almost

needed the pee corner.

"Fire Department," said the voice. "Hang tight. We'll get you out in a minute."

Rohan came over to sit with me in the meditation corner while we waited. He didn't say anything but I could tell he wanted me to tell him what to do.

I said, "I'm not ordained."

"As an Elevator? That's ok."

"Well," I started then stopped. I didn't want to give advice. I didn't want to become responsible for anyone's heartbreak.

Rohan sighed with enough force that it reverberated around the elevator. It bounced off the confessional corner, the thankfully unused pee corner. In the meditation corner, I felt his sigh land on my shoulder, nudging me to say something.

"What do you want me to say?"

Rohan was quick with his response. "That it's ok?"

"But it's not ok."

"Even if they don't know about each other? That's not hurting anyone, right?"

Before I could respond, the deep voice of the fireman filled the elevator again and made us both jump. "Rohan." The fireman didn't shout but there was a definite, "don't make me come in there" tone to his voice. "Why do you ask foolish questions when you already know the answer?"

Rohan crinkled his forehead so hard, his eyebrows almost touched. Outside the elevator, a small motor started to whir. I wondered how many firefighters were out there, working to help us get free. Could they all hear us or just the one with the deep voice and the blunt question? Would they refuse to rescue us unless Rohan promised to fix his problem?

I looked at Rohan. He nodded. I pointed to the ceiling, to the general direction of the fireman's voice. Rohan nodded again. He tilted his head up to the ceiling and said, "I don't know but I'll call them." I looked at him and I guess my face didn't hide some of the wariness I felt because he said, "I will!" in a way that was like if an eye roll had a voice. "I will," he said again this time with more resolve. I believed him.

"Glad to hear it," said the fireman. "You all ready to get out?"

We yelled, "Yes!" at the same time. A few seconds later the doors opened with a bang and fireman reached in to help us out.





## SAMANTHA SAPP

### TUESDAY NIGHT TAKEOUT

#### **You are going to die.**

I crumpled the fortune and dropped it back onto the broken shell of its cookie. Clearly, someone at the fortune factory was depressed. The fortunes were the most important part of any takeout meal: they were the prophetic climax of a night spent eating away feelings, a glimmer of hope. Growing up, Mom and I had lived by one strict rule: whatever your fortune was, you had to take its advice to heart. But this wasn't advice. It was a reminder of how cold and callous the universe was.

I grabbed another cookie and it cracked in my hands, guts spilling out. Channeling my inner aruspex, I divined through its curled entrails.

#### **Billions of humans just like you have lived. Almost all have been forgotten, and you will be too.**

Goosebumps sprouted all over me. It wasn't the fortune factory writer; clearly, it was the cosmic forces which paired cookie and eater that were depressed. But thankfully, I still had cookies left to open. The old lady who ran my Chinese restaurant always gave me extra, probably out of pity. One time I picked up my order, and cried into her shoulder about how I hated my job and missed living far from my mom. That night she gave me a dozen cookies as a treat, and had continued to ever since. I was grateful because they made eating takeout alone, as a washed-out college grad working retail, a little less lonely.

I reached for another fortune. The cookie crumbled away from material reality into little pieces that speckled the couch cushion.

#### **Life is 4.5 billion years old. If you're lucky, you'll live to 75 and be spared the knowledge of how long eternity is.**

I frantically re-read the fortune. It didn't change. The universe hated me.

When I ate takeout, it was to eat away my feelings, to feel better. It was a trait I'd inherited from my mom, and probably to blame for my weight. This was not helping—this was what my therapist liked to call “spiraling” and “catastrophizing” and “I swear to God please go outside and make some friends.” But I wasn't a quitter, so I reached for another.

**Just like you, all of humanity will die. Our species will go extinct, and all remnants of humanity will fade into oblivion.**

I sniffled, wiping at my eyes, and not just because my kung pao was a little too spicy. These fortunes were cruel; I was half convinced they were written by the same crackhead who'd come into the store today and started pushing stuff off the shelves. Still, I persisted—to end on a bad fortune would be to concede my place in this universe as a lowly, lonely retail worker, a blip lost in the immensity of all there was. It would mean accepting that life is suffering and nothing more. And how was I supposed to go back to work if that was true? How was I supposed to go on?

**What a small speck you are. Invisibly small to this planet, this solar system, this galaxy, and the infinite galaxies that make up our universe.**

I could hear my pulse, blood pounding like waves against my skull. As if I were the cookie now—a worthless vessel ready to fade into oblivions. A machine without a ghost, doomed to short-circuit any kind of inner truth was revealed. Still, there were four fortunes left. Mechanically, my pattern-seeking primate brain reached for the next.

**But remember, while there are infinite galaxies, there is only one you.**

My heart stilled. That one was different, almost hopeful. Each cookie may be the same, but each one is the only one in its wrapper. So I reached for another wrapper, another cookie, another fortune.

**The billions of people that have come before you lived, loved, and found peace. You will too.**

Serenity washed over me, lulling me into a kind of false comfort—but maybe it wasn't false because the fortune was right. If everyone before me could do it, I could, too. I wasn't alone, because with me was everyone—past, present, and future—all of us had to face these

questions, and had to come to the same end. We were all in this together.

**It has gotten better before. It will get better again.**

I was reminded of being a child; of skinned knees and chicken pox, of first dates and breakups. Of summers spent at Grandma's, of nights spent gazing up at the stars and wondering. Of when the crash happened, of grappling with my dad's death. Of my mom, cooking chicken noodle soup, and the way it made me warm. Of her arms, wrapped around me, of her soothing voice. Of her tears, too—and me, there to put my arms around her, to speak soothing words back. Of us, helping each other through each day as mother and daughter, standing firm together against the world.

With careful, trembling hands, I reached for the final fortune. Slowly, I tore open the plastic. The cookie cracked with a snap. And as soon as I saw it, I knew that the fortune was for me alone, and my heart flushed with a warmth it hadn't felt in years.

Welcoming the tears, for the first time in weeks, I called my mom.



## BENJAMIN MYERS

### COPPER

We was stealing copper when the dog showed up. I had just ripped the wiring from a fuse box on the side of the old Ford dealership when I looked up to see the dog sitting by my truck, head cocked to one side like he wondered what I was doing there. Hell, I wondered what I was doing there. Tommy said we could make good money selling scrap copper. He said we could get the copper from air units and pipes and such, so there I was parked behind the Ford dealership out by the highway at three o'clock in the morning, ducking every time a truck went by even though nobody could see us behind that big metal building.

The dog was a mutt, full-grown, with a bit of lab I guess and maybe some rottweiler. Its feet were too big for its skinny body, and it was black all over except for a little patch of tan on its nose. I thought it would start barking or growling, but the dang thing just sat there and looked at me. Tommy came around the corner of the building and threw a little armful of pipe into the back of the truck. He glanced at the dog but didn't pay much attention to it. "Come on," he said, opening the passenger side door. He was talking to me, of course, but the dog didn't know that. Before Tommy could step up into the cab, the dog had brushed past him and was sitting there on the bench of my old Ram like he belonged there.

"What the hell?" Tommy said. "Where'd this dog come from?"

I shrugged.

"Well, you gonna get it out of there?" He said, standing back from the door a little like he was scared of the dog or something.

I shrugged again. "Hell," I said and got into the truck. It was my truck—Tommy's truck go impounded on his last DUI—so if I wanted a dog in there, then the dog was going to be in there. Tommy got in and closed the door, but he was so close to the end of the seat I'm surprised he didn't pinch himself in the doorframe.

By the time we got back to my trailer my back was hurting so bad I nearly forgot about the copper, Tommy, and the dog altogether. I went inside to take my pills and left Tommy to put the copper in the old tin barn. We was taking it to recyclers here and there little by little so nobody would get suspicious. We had a pile of it in the empty barn.

When I came out of the bathroom, I went to look for my cigarettes. I usually leave my keys, pack, and lighter and stuff on the kitchen counter when I come into the house, so I figured

that is where they must be. I was lighting up when I noticed the dog sitting on my front steps. I could see the dumb thing through the storm door, his head cocked to the side again and his tail wagging like he was happily waiting to come inside. I opened the door, and he came just trotting in. "Hell," I said.

So, then I was taking care of the dog. Nancy said she can't rely on me. Says I'm irresponsible and undependable. That's why she left. I was making good money in the oil field, before I hurt my back. Before I got hurt, she thought I was dependable enough, but, when the worker's comp didn't come through, she decided I ain't so dependable after all. I didn't get the worker's comp cause I wasn't on the job when I got hurt. I was drunk, and I fell off a tractor I hotwired for a joyride. But they didn't know that. I told them I hurt my back running pipe to the derrick. But they didn't find my story dependable. This dog didn't seem to find me particularly undependable, at least.

I named the dog Copper. Seemed like the obvious thing to do, and I usually do the obvious thing. At least it's usually obvious to me.

The funny thing is, that dog always wanted to go when we was stealing copper. If I was just going to town for a burger or to get smokes, Copper might have or might not have jumped up to go with me. Just as likely, he would have just kept lying there on the living room floor, maybe chewing lazily on some of the loose strands of my cigarette burned carpet. But if it was a copper run late at night, he would stick close to me until I let him in the truck. Tommy complained at first, but he got used to it after a while. We was stealing copper from every little town within sixty miles of Wakefield by then, and the dog was just part of the crew: me and Tommy and Copper.

Like I said, the copper stealing had been Tommy's idea, after he got out from his DUI. He said we could make good money with just a little work a night or two a week. He said nobody would get hurt and the places we robbed would have insurance anyways. Pills cost money whether you need them or not, so I said I was in. He said I'd have to drive, since his truck was still in impound, and since my Ram looked like a hundred other trucks in Wakefield and hereabouts.

A few weeks later we was sitting around the circle where I burn my trash, me and Tommy and a few guys I knew in school and from when I worked for the energy company. I was jumpy cause we were sitting in plastic lawn chairs pretty close to the fire, and I couldn't remember if I'd thrown away any of Nancy's old hairspray cans or anything like that. So I kept thinking something could pop big any second and we'd be right there for the shrapnel and punctured ear drums. But nothing had exploded so far, so I had another beer and leaned back in my chair.

"Hey, dumbass," Tommy said all of a sudden, pointing at Copper where he was laying by my feet. "Don't you know Copper is supposed to be a name for a red dog, not for a black one."

"Hey, dumbass," I answered. "Don't you remember where we got him." Tommy gave me his bug-eyed look then. He didn't want those other guys to know we was stealing copper.

"Hell," he said and got up to get another beer from the cooler.

My back was starting to hurt again, and I started fishing around in my jacket pocket for my pills. I wasn't in the mood for Tommy's crap. When Tommy sat back down I grinned at him and said slowly and loudly, "Hey, dumbass, don't you remember where I got this here dog." Again the bug-eyed look and clenched teeth. That face was supposed to look menacing, I guess.

I had my pill bottle out by now and was about to wash two of them down with the last of my beer when Tommy piped up with, "I don't know, Rick, was it the same place you found them pills there?" I just gave him the finger, swallowed my pills, and pitched my empty bottle into the fire. Then I went into the trailer and laid down on my bed. I could hear them all out there jawing and laughing but not for long before I was out cold.

In the morning Copper was sleeping on the steps by the front door. He was curled in a ball with his nose tucked into his ass for warmth. I opened the door and he limped stiffly into the trailer. "Hell," I said. "I'll try to be more dependable."

We'd mainly been hitting businesses, car dealerships and stuff like that, but Tommy showed up one Sunday night and said we ought to check out this new housing development out by the interstate. "Right here in Wakefield?" I said. "Ain't that kind of risky?"

"Hell," he said, "ain't risky at all. The whole thing sits down in this low spot with the road in up above. You can see anyone coming five to ten minutes before they get to the first house. We can come in through the back, where the whole thing backs up to a pasture. I know where the gate is, and we can cut the lock at the road and then cut the fence behind the houses. Nobody'll be there on a Sunday night. Ain't risky at all. It's a sure thing."

The whole thing made me twitchy, but I needed the money for pills. So Copper and me picked up Tommy about one o'clock in the morning. My trailer was on my own land out in the country, but Tommy lived in the Zion Hill park, over close to town. I had to park on the highway outside the trailer park and wait for him to come walking up the drive, cause the woman he lives with don't like him going out to steal copper at night. He waits for her to fall asleep then sneaks out and meets me by the road. She finds out every time, but Tommy likes to at least put the fight off a while if he can.

I sat there, parked just far enough from the streetlight at the entrance to stay shadowy. Tommy came down the drive and out the entrance, wincing and walking all gingerly in his socks on the gravel and carrying his boots in one hand and a big pair of bolt cutters in the other. "Hey, dumbass," I said as he got in the truck, "why didn't you put your boots on up by

your trailer?" He slammed the truck door and gave me the finger. Then he tapped the dash three times and pointed forward through the windshield. "Hell," I said and yanked the truck into drive.

Like Tommy said, we didn't drive in the front of the addition. Instead we drove around to the other side of the section line. I slowed down then, and we watched the fence line for the cattle gate. When I spotted the gate, I pulled in and aimed the lights at the gate. "Shut off them lights, dumbass," Tommy said, pushing open the truck door.

"I thought you said the house ain't even on this section, so he won't see us," I said in a kind of whisper before he closed the door.

"The people in the house won't see us, dumbass, but somebody might. We don't want nobody seeing us." He closed the truck door, and I shut off the lights and got out of the truck with the engine still running. Copper tried to follow, but I shut the door before he could get out behind me. We'd be back in the truck in a minute anyway.

Tommy had the bolt cutters open and was squeezing hard on the long yellow handles like he was trying to play an accordion or something. The padlock rattled around on the chain. Every muscle in Tommy's small body seemed tensed and strained, like somebody was yanking on a thread that connected the whole thing. I took the bolt cutters from him and braced one long handle against the post of the gate. Then I leaned sideways on the other handle until the shackle of the padlock snapped. "Hell," I said and handed the bolt cutters back to Tommy. He threw them in the back of the truck while I swung the gate open, and we got back in the cab, where Copper was waiting.

I sat behind the wheel squinting into the nearly black space ahead. "How am I supposed to see where I'm going without headlights?" I said. Tommy mumbled something I couldn't hear then opened the door again and got out. He walked in front of the truck and switched on a small Maglite he must have been keeping somewhere in his jacket. He started walking forward and I shifted into drive and followed behind him.

We bumped slowly along through the pasture, hitting clumps of bunch grass and gopher holes. Tommy was trying to follow the ruts left by a feeding truck, but he kept wandering off to one side or the other. I wondered how he could be so sure we could get the truck through to the back fence. All around us it was dark, and Copper sat right next to me in the silent cab.

When Tommy stopped at the back fence, I almost ran him down in slow motion. I hadn't expected us to come to the other side of the pasture so soon. He pulled the bolt cutters out of the back of the truck, quickly snipped the barbed wire, and pulled the cut strands aside as he motioned me through the gap in the fence. I drove through and stopped so he could put the bolt cutters in the truck bed and go back to his position in front. Then we moved forward into the back of the housing addition.



The first thing we did was crack open air units. We moved from house to house with Tommy's toolbox, taking apart the AC unit to pull out radiators, compressors, and tubing. Some of it we would have to break down further later, but we also got a lot of copper straight off. The units were already prepped to run, so we had to drain freon out onto the ground. Tommy made jokes about someone calling the EPA. "Hell," I said, "they can get in line for their shot at us."

We was getting close to finished, just pulling a little more wire from some of the lampposts along the street, when we saw lights up on the road in. "Time to go," Tommy said, throwing a last bit of wire into the back of the truck.

"Hell," I said. "Come on, Copper." The dog was nosing around the back of a house where burger wrappers and fast food sacks left by the workers had blown into scrubby bushes along the back fence. "Hey, Copper, come on," I said again, opening the truck door and snapping my fingers. He kept nosing at the food trash. Up on the road, the headlights stopped. I figured it was hired security, or maybe the contractor himself, checking on things. "Come on, boy," I hissed at Copper again. Tommy was already in the truck.

"Leave him, dumbass," Tommy said from the dark cab of the truck, his voice all high-pitched and panicked.

"I ain't leaving him." The headlights started to move again. Whoever was coming would be on top of us any minute.

Tommy got out of the truck, leaving the passenger door open. He walked around the back of the truck and up to the bushes where Copper was still sniffing around. With no working light posts on the street, all we had to see by was the pale moon through high clouds, but I could clearly see Tommy reach into his waistband and pull out a handgun. "What the hell?" I said, but he kept walking, right up to Copper. Looking me straight in the eyes, Tommy pointed the gun right at Copper's head. The dog kept chewing on a Taco Bell wrapper.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I said and stepped toward the man and the dog.

"We need to go. No reason for you to stay if the damn dog is dead," he said. "I sure as hell ain't going back to jail cause this damn dog won't get in the truck." He was looking at me with his eyes all scrunched together, almost like he felt bad about it. His hand was shaking, but he kept the barrel centered on Copper's forehead. The dog just sat there looking at him, a bit of taco wrapper hanging from his drooling bottom lip.

I knew whoever was in that car was almost here. I knew it was probably either the foreman or hired security and that whoever it was had probably already seen us and called the cops. I thought about Nancy. I thought about dependability. I pulled out my keys and tossed them next to Tommy's boot.

Tommy stared at me for a second. Then he lowered the gun, scooped up the keys, and ran past me to the truck. A moment later I watched the truck pass back through the hole in the fence and disappear into the dark pasture. I don't know how he was planning to make it out of the pasture without turning on the headlights, but I figured that maybe he would get lucky.

Tommy stared at me for a second. Then he lowered the gun, scooped up the keys, and ran past me to the truck. A moment later I watched the truck pass back through the hole in the fence and disappear into the dark pasture. I don't know how he was planning to make it out of the pasture without turning on the headlights, but I figured that maybe he would get lucky.





# ADELE EVERSHED

## ERRATUM

I tell you—  
I have a longing to visit ancient places—abbeys, castles, standing stones—us  
And you say—  
There is no romance in old stones only wounds and sacrifices  
But that's what you said we would never know  
You told me you wanted to sing or recite poems about me  
Like a love song, like I was a summer's day  
So everyone would know you'd found the one

I tell you—  
I think about casting my torn self on the waves—floating away on a riptide  
And you say—  
Aren't I just romanticizing drowning for the sake of poetry?  
But that's what you used to love about me  
You told me I should write my words on the air  
Like a map, like a contrail  
So you would always be able to find me

You tell me—  
It's not you—it's me—that I've become blurred at the edges—and difficult to see  
And you say—  
You have to leave while you can still see yourself  
So you go but you don't slam the door  
Yet the Buddha you bought in Thailand falls anyway  
And I wonder if that's poetic  
But I say...nothing...nothing at all



## BRIAN HAWKINS

### WHEN A PLAN COMES TOGETHER

We woke up right about the same time, the two of us sandwiched into the cab of my pickup. I couldn't feel my ass and, from the way he lurched to reposition himself on the bench seat, Hobie had at least one arm down for the count. The sun had come out, just hard to tell where it had gone. No way to know the time, even for us. Clouds so thick overhead the world might have been a glass globe shoved into a box of packing peanuts, secure for shipping to anywhere you might want to send it. Plus, my watch was MIA.

"How long you think we've been asleep?" I asked Hobie.

"Shit, Bucky. Don't know. Not long," he replied. Nothing more to offer, he resumed rubbing life back into his useless limb.

I had managed to park on that old patch of gravel out back and across the road from Wiley's Tavern. After all the hooch we snorted the night before, and more than a bump or two of nose Pez, I had no memory of take-off, let alone landing here. I tried to pull together my every remaining wit and focus on our situation. For one thing, I was still drunk but no longer flying. I estimated Hobie was in a similar condition.

As if on cue, Hobie asked, "We got any more dust in that last baggie?"

"All out. No more money neither."

Hobie swore and rotated his shoulder as best he could in the small confines of the cab, seeming satisfied his range of motion had returned but not with the situational update. "I need a bump. Still drunk, man."

With no solution to offer, I sat looking out the window at the rear of Wiley's.

"We ain't been out all that long," Hobie opined. "Couldn't have. Look it. Just barely morning. No one will be at Wiley's till at least ten. Let's bust in. Find something we can sell."

He took the slight nod of my head as full concurrence on all points.

We hopped out of the truck, my ass still numb, and stumbled across the road as quickly as we could, but looking more like extras in a George Romero movie, taking care not to vomit in Wiley's backlot. No trace of evidence from us. Too smart.

When we got to the door, Hobie tried the handle and found the deadbolt disengaged. He

looked at me, shrugged, and pushed forward. I crept in behind him as we crawled across the kitchen, like Green Berets evading VC jungle rats in Vietnam. We made it about halfway to the end of the prep table and Hobie stopped. I looked up to see Big Jeff, Old Man Wiley's longtime cook, chopping onions and staring down at us.

Like a pair of drunken, uncoordinated synchronized swimmers, we stood. Old Man Wiley, Big Jeff, and the rest of the kitchen staff had been watching us from the moment we entered. Shaking his head, Wiley stepped around Big Jeff, as well as the chef's knife looming over us, and said, "What are you two shits doin'? You tryin' to rob me during the lunch rush? Fuckin' morons of the world."

Though the whiskey and white powder might have disagreed in that moment, I have since come to realize the old man had himself a point.







# LINDEN VAN WERT

## ANGER

Yes, I see  
the hot red cat in you,  
and your jarring steps,  
the knotted muscle  
of your cheek,  
the way your underline crosses  
paper—a scalpel  
drawing black beads of ink  
into a cut-like mark—  
all tell me it is there.

Perhaps when small,  
it licked you,  
and you took it in?

Do you fear it?  
Are you afraid to show your pleasure  
when it acts with searing fire?  
And what can you be giving it  
to stoke such feral power?  
What unholy harvest dug  
what acid odors prick  
what juices meet its lips  
and from what fruit or meat  
unfound in all the stores?

You turn away  
so I should not see  
its claws reach through your flesh  
toward me.  
Has thus the tool  
become the master?



# ROBERT RAY

## BOOT TRACKS

*"These are the days that must happen to you."*

*—Walt Whitman*

Graffitied freight trains ran daily  
Indianapolis to Cincinnati.  
Miles out, we heard the roar,  
caught the light beam before  
the shrill whistles and horns.  
We propped our shotguns on the posts,  
felt the weight of the cottontails—  
gutted & stuffed in old Wonder bags  
swing low on our flame-orange backs.  
We dug out handfuls of Jolly Rancher  
wrappers, lint, coins from our pockets,  
lay the bright and dull on the rails.  
The blackbirds stayed in place, bills down  
in the picked corn fields, mined ocher  
kernels from the black and white clots,  
deep furrows, and the broken stalks—  
amber ears ripped open. From the fence row,  
we hollered and waved at the man  
blowing by in the locomotive,  
felt the hard ground and our knees shake,  
watched the brown iron rails bow down,  
rise, the silver-rim wheels roll by—  
the coins disappear  
like sparrows on the leafless boughs,  
the rabbits in the ravines.

The new snow turned black on the ties,  
shined like knife blades in the pines.  
We never found flattened pennies.  
We left boot tracks in half-thawed mud,  
blood drops atop the silvered rails—  
our pockets empty, the blackbirds  
iridescent purple, crimson-billed  
cold at sundown.



DIANA DINVERNO

## WHAT I SAY TO MY BIRTH FATHER AS I STAND AT THE EDGE OF THE SEA

Your journey begins before 1920, on a Friday  
in Glasgow when you're late for Shabbos dinner,  
and your father demands you turn out your pockets,  
throw a week's worth of earnings into the street.

Deep water transforms you into a sailor,  
although you lack a sextant, an opportunity to study stars;  
you load and unload cargo, mop floors when you yearn  
to hoist canvas, have a hand on the wheel.

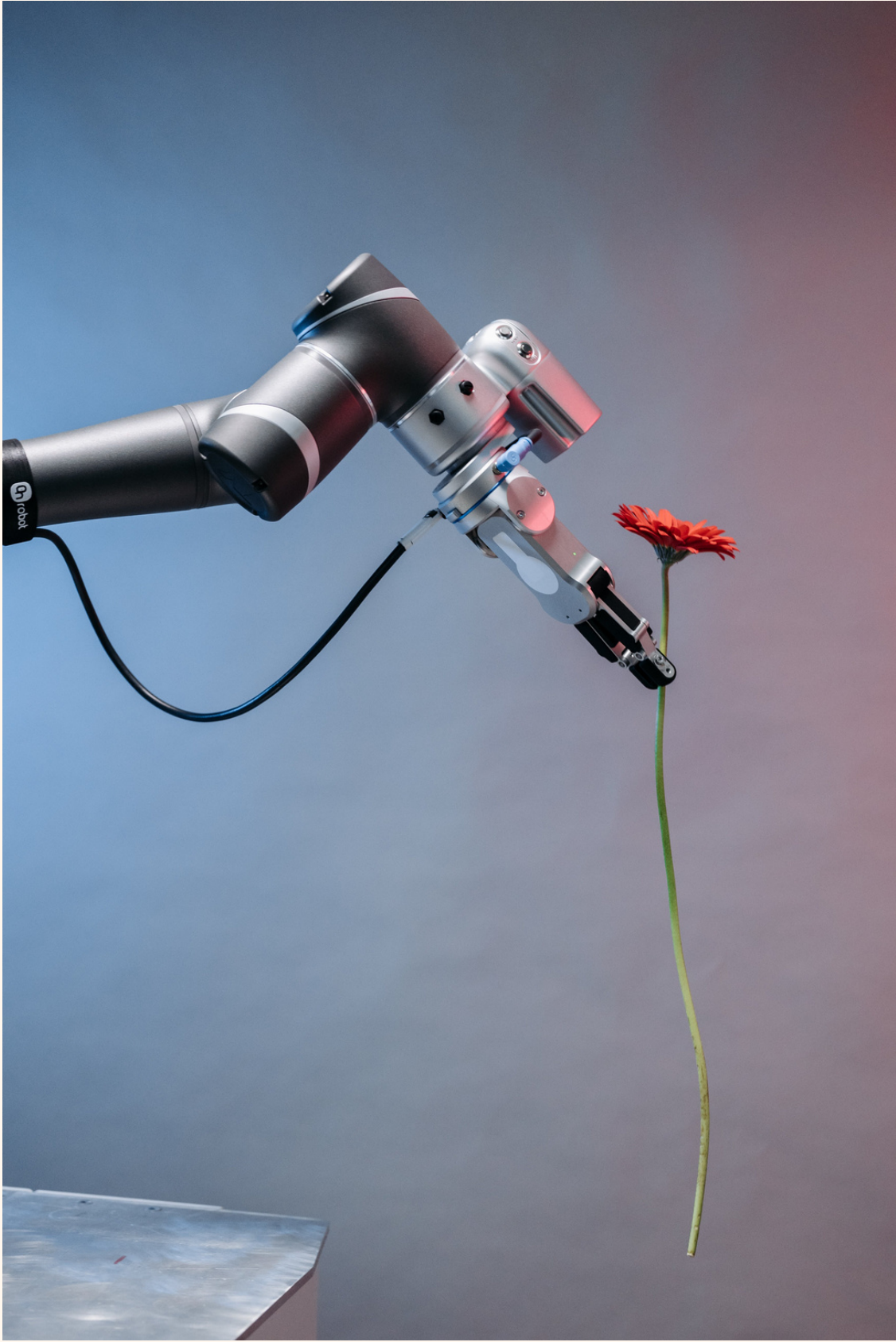
When you reach shore, you cross the border that travels  
Detroit's river, arrive in a city, once ribbon farms, that sends  
autos down assembly lines, a steady stream that spills  
into a world far-flung from your father's cold-water flat,

a restless universe hinted at in your father's early journal  
I suspect you never saw, where he recorded days spent  
with his palette, brushes, attempts to harness churned sky,  
the North Sea that, like him, you'll never lay eyes on again,

and after a patchwork of years filled with late, Friday nights,  
you find a girl who makes you feel grounded, like a Scottish  
gentleman farmer, solid as stone, while she, young and fluid,  
simply looks for a few evenings of shelter,

and one morning, in broad light, sets you adrift  
with what hums in your ear—family at a table,  
the heartbeat of a child you don't know exists  
—until you hit the inevitable snag, and claim

the earth beneath a rock in a sea of blue salvia and coreopsis,  
far from where you started—just what I imagine you wanted  
most—landing in this place where I, stunned to find you  
after all these years, visit for the first time, pebble in my hand.





**DENISE BOSSARTE**

## **THE ROBOT AND THE GREEN DRAGON**

### **Part I.**

It began on the first day of spring.

D974-T92's day at the Mainichi Japanese Daily newspaper began as usual. It was the first run of the newspapers, which had seeds embedded within each of their pages. It was a tradition to print the Green newspapers at the start of spring. Once planted, they would grow into flowers to attract butterflies and other pollinators. Next week's edition would even have herbs that could be grown to eat.

D974-T92 was the floor supervisor overseeing the multiple C62Wz's working the newspaper plant. D974-T92's job was to make sure that the presses ran smoothly, and that the newspapers were bundled and loaded into the self-driving trucks to be delivered to the other cities on Hokkaido Island, and to the other islands by plane.

D974-T92's position was actually more of an honorable retirement. As a robotic hero of the 2062 Chikara tsunami and Haruki nuclear power plant disaster, they were granted their position as a sign of respect. An honor for what they had done to prevent a complete breach of the Haruki reactor and their efforts in leading the robotic teams' cleanup after the tsunami.

For a human, theirs would have been a posh job working at the historic newspaper, the pride of Japan. The C62Wzs required little oversight. Although limited in their capabilities, they were very efficient in the functionalities they were designed and programmed for. A human would have enjoyed the minimal effort required to fill the role. For D974-T92, it was mind-numbingly boring.

Over the years, they had tried many to keep themselves engaged and their intellect busy. Eventually, they settled on the practice of origami. The physicality of folding the thin paper was not a significant challenge to their dexterous fingers. Even if the Robotic Treaties required that their nanites cover their metal alloy frame and limbs with flesh-like "skin" whenever they were out of their home, particularly when traveling to and from work.

They had spent their days conceiving more and more intricate designs, foldings that took

dozens or even hundreds of iterations to reveal a final creation. Several of their works were in museums throughout Japan. And multiples of their designs have been implemented in constructing more resilient buildings to withstand future tsunamis.

But on this day, things shifted when they pulled a sample paper from the conveyor belt to review its quality. It was traditional for the edition of the first day of spring to be focused on environmental stewardship and greening efforts. They were startled to see a picture taken of themselves standing next to the Haruki nuclear power plant right after the 2062 Chikara tsunami. They were positioned at the front of the Haruki-Chikara robotic teams, as they later became known, which had done the majority of the work with recovery, reclamation, and restoration of the Akkeshi and the Kushiro Subprefecture.

They had intentionally ignored dates over the years, particularly any anniversary dates of the Haruki-Chikara disasters. They read the bold headlines on the front page declaring it was the 50th anniversary. The Subprefecture government had kept their promise not to involve them in any celebrations or memorials after the 10th-year anniversary, so the date had crept up on them unexpectedly.

D974-T92 ignored the article and quickly flipped through the other pages of the paper. They stopped their superficial scanning when they came to the obituaries. After the massive cleanup of human bodies and biological matter the Haruki-Chikara robotic teams undertook in 2062, D974-T92 had been unusually sensitive to human death.

In fact, all the D974-Ts that were part of the Haruki-Chikara robotic teams had been affected. The months of gathering the dead of all ages for identification and cremation, and their pets and wild creatures for mass cremation, had caused many of the D974-Ts to malfunction.

A large percentage simply stopped moving once the work was done. Others developed idiosyncratic movements, like pacing in circles, that were reminiscent of zoo animals that developed psychotic patterns of behavior when isolated from their natural habitats.

Efforts were made to diagnose the D974-Ts, including classifying their symptoms as Haruki-Chikara syndrome. Nothing specific was identified as being abnormal in their programming or cybernetic brain functioning. But once the unusual behaviors began, there was no rehabilitation possible.

Robotic scientists had even collaborated with psychologists to try to intervene. Groups of D974-Ts were brought together in "group" sessions to share their Haruki-Chikara stories with the idea that they could process their experiences together. Unfortunately, these sessions led to the mass initiation of HC syndrome for 99% of the participants.

It turned out that robots did not "process" and move past experiences like traumatized humans. They could not forget what they had experienced individually or what they heard.

And sharing stories with other D974-Ts simply loaded more of the memories and imagery into their cybernetic brains, which seemed to trigger the symptoms.

Hundreds of D974-Ts were affected by HC syndrome before researchers determined that reassigning them to reconstruction and recovery of the city's buildings and infrastructure could prevent, or at least delay, the onset. Tens of thousands were deployed in the city, while hundreds more were sent out to the asteroid belts to help with the mining operations.

D974-T92 re-read the obituary for a three-year-old girl a dozen times before they could make themselves stop. They hadn't seen a child since the Haruki-Chikara cleanup. Their fragile bodies had always seemed so small compared to the piles of debris and destroyed buildings. Akkeshi was a city slowly being repopulated by humans but was still considered a hazardous zone where no children were allowed to live because of the risks of radiation and chemical exposure.

As D974-T92 stood over the open pages, an unusual thing happened. Their nanites flowed off their fingers and into the paper they held in their grasp, exposing their metal digits. D974-T92 scanned the surrounding area to make sure no one had seen this "lapse" in their maintaining a human appearance. They dropped the paper once they glanced down again.

Their nanites had interacted with the water and seeds in the paper to start the plants sprouting. In fact, the nanites were accelerating the growth process to the extent that within a minute the paper was converted into a pile of composted material with a small riot of flowers topping it.

D974-T92 quickly scooped up the pile of organic matter and rushed to the back of the plant and through the door to the outside. They threw open the lid of the disposal system and dumped the load in their arms into it. Slamming down the lid, they pushed the button to engage the system and waited until the noise of the cycle finished before reentering the building.

D974-T92 spent the rest of their shift folding and unfolding origami flowers, trying not to think about the ones they had destroyed in the disposal unit.

## **Part II.**

That evening, when D974-T92 returned to their apartment, they could not appreciate the origami that covered the walls and decorated the ceiling. They hurried past the delicate artwork to enter their maintenance station, standing in front of the full-length mirrors as the nanites retracted the imitation human tissue and left the underlying metal exposed.

Stood staring at themselves for hours, unmoving.

At 9pm, an alarm sounded and D974-T92 exited their apartment and made their way to the roof. All the other robots in the building would be entering stasis to conserve energy, but D974-T92, the lone D974-T in the housing complex, would not.

The night was clear and the stars were bright pinpricks of light across the sky. D974-T92 positioned themselves at the eastern edge of the roof and began their recitation. Although they could complete it within a few seconds if they chose simply to scroll through the written list of names, D974-T92 spoke the identification numbers of their fellow D974-Ts lost to HC syndrome out loud, slowly, and respectfully. The spoken recitation took them most of the night.

As they came to the last name, D974-T92 began reaching out to the other D974-Ts still in the city. Although they could not access the D974-Ts mining in the meteorite belt, they could connect with the thousands of D974-Ts remaining in the city.

Here they allowed themselves to the full advantage of their processing and communication speeds to meet with each D974-T, each sharing an innocuous aspect of their day. The D974-Ts had discovered that this ritual sharing of minor daily events was a potent factor in postponing HC syndrome.

D974-T92 was careful to avoid sharing anything about the 50th anniversary, the girl's obituary, or especially the episode with the flowers. They were not convinced that they were not seeing the beginnings of HC syndrome in themselves and were cautious of contaminating the others with these incidents.

As dawn broke over the city, D974-T92 ended their connection to the other D974-Ts and headed back to their apartment. They spent a short time in the maintenance station to fully recharge from the night's expenditures, then reestablished their fake human "skin" and headed back to work.

### **Part III.**

The day was uneventful at the plant, and D974-T92 passed by the rear door of the plant repeatedly, as they avoided touching any of the newspapers. After the six dozenth approach, D974-T92 exited the building. They went to the disposal unit, futilely opening the lid to examine the interior, knowing that there would be nothing left of the flowers.

After setting the lid back into place, D974-T92's attention was caught by a piece of paper blown by the wind. The paper passed down the alloy and was caught at the corner of the building. As the trapped paper shifted with the breeze, a flash of pale yellow was revealed and then hidden beneath it.

D974-T92 made their way down to the stuck paper and bent to lift it from the ground. Underneath was a faded flower from the seeds that they had sprouted yesterday. It must have dropped to the ground as they were carrying the plants to the disposal unit. D974-T92 reached down to pick up the limp flower by the stem and their nanites once again flowed from their fingers to rouse the flower to uncurl its petals.

D974-T92 heard a gasp to their right and turned to see an old man leaning on a rake in a small open space between the buildings. The man's face was heavily wrinkled and he stood slightly hunched over the rake, but his eyes were sharp as they stared at the revived flower in D974-T92's hand. D974-T92 quick scan of the area revealed only the lone man and small bunches of flowers and vegetables spotting the small space where the man stood.

It had been many years since D974-T92 had interacted directly with a live human. They and the man stared at each other in silence for a few moments before the man spoke.

"I wish I had as green a thumb as you do, Robot San," the man said in a soft but surprisingly strong voice, a grin spreading across his face. D974-T92 processed the man's facial expression and determined that the man's intention was to be friendly and that the statement was meant to be humorous.

"My name is Midori Tatsu. I was the Master Gardener of Kumamoto. I retired here in 2100 hoping to make a difference in the city after the Haruki-Chikara cleanup. But I've done little to live up to my reputation."

His right arm gestured, sweeping to encompass the small struggling garden. "There aren't many open spaces to begin with, and the soil is very poor."

At the man's beckoning, D974-T92 slowly approached the edge of the green space to stand in front of him. "Do you speak?" the man asked.

"I am designed to communicate using human speech," D974-T92 responded.

Tatsu laughed. "Yes, I hear that."

After a moment of silent appraisal, Tatsu said, "I recognize you. You are a D974-T model, right? The ones that did the cleanup?"

"Affirmative. Our identification is D974-T92."

Tatsu's eyes widened and he straightened. "The D974-T92? The hero of the Haruki-Chikara disasters?!"

"Affirmative."

Tatsu performed a deep bow, his hands in namaste. "It is through your and the other

D974-Ts efforts that I have any hope of making this small plot of land thrive again. Let alone fulfilling my dream of making the entire city green again.”

D974-T92 stood silently, waiting for Tatsu to continue.

“Do you think your green thumb would work on live plants, Robot San?” Tatsu asked.

“D974-T92 does not have enough data to answer this question. D974-T92 has not attempted to do the same for live plants. We only have evidence from the green paper and this sole flower.” D974-T92 held the flower out to Tatsu.

Tatsu gently slipped the flower from D974-T92’s fingers. “Green paper, huh? I thought I saw you putting something into the disposal yesterday. What was that?”

“D974-T92’s nanites activated the seeds in the green paper without an explicit directive. D974-T92 determined it was optimal to dispose of the flowers that were an indication of a malfunction.”

Tatsu’s eyes narrowed. “A malfunction? Ah, you think it might be a sign of Haruki-Chikara syndrome.”

“It is a distinct possibility it is D974-T92’s idiosyncratic behavior is because of HC Syndrome.”

“It’s been 50 years since the disasters. Surely you would have developed HC Syndrome before now, right?”

“The probability decreases every year past the disasters, but there is no conclusive evidence that the probability drops to zero. It is impossible to prove an absence.”

Tatsu considered D974-T92 as he twirled the flower in his hand. “I don’t think this ‘glitch’ is a sign of HC syndrome, Robot San. I think it could actually be a very powerful gift.”

“A gift?”

“Robot San, the work you and the other D974-Ts did was something next to miraculous. But the initial efforts were put into the cleanup and disposal of the dead and the destroyed. It wasn’t until HC Syndrome was identified as a pandemic among the D974-Ts that you were tasked with salvaging and rebuilding.

It’s theorized that the work of putting things back together, of creating a city out of rubble, was what helped the D974-Ts avoid HC syndrome. And what could be more creative and restoring than the ability to grow things?”

D974-T92’s gaze shifted from Tatsu’s face to the flower in his hand. They then raised their

eyes to survey the struggling plants in the area behind Tatsu.

"How would you like to get more data?" Tatsu asked.

"More data would assist in determining if D974-T92 is malfunctioning."

"Then come into my garden and let's see what you can do with my plants."

Tatsu turned to lead D974-T92 to a patch of flowers that were struggling to grow in the loose soil.

"What do you advise D974-T92 to do?"

"Just do whatever you did before. Whatever comes naturally."

D974-T92 knelt down beside the flower bed and passed their hands over the tops of the flowers. Nothing happened with their nanites. The imitation skin remained firmly attached to their fingers.

"Try putting your hands in the soil," Tatsu suggested.

D974-T92 complied and sunk their hands up to the wrists in the slightly moist dirt. Within a few seconds, the nanites disappeared from their fingers into the soil beneath the plants. For a few moments, nothing happened and then the flowers straightened and started to grow.

"Amazing!" Tatsu shouted as more and more flowers erupted from the dirt, filling the space with color and the air with fragrance.

D974-T92 continued to kneel on the ground as the effects of the nanites spread throughout the garden. Patches of sparse greenery soon were filled with flowering bushes, swaths of blooming flowers, and plants heavy with vegetables of all kinds.

The wood and metal shed at the back of the property slowly dissolved in on itself as the nanites claimed the carbon and other chemicals needed to do their work. Tatsu jumped and then barked a laugh when the rake he was holding dissolved from his hands into the ground beneath his feet, causing a vine of deep rich green to spiral around his leg.

"This is the miracle I was hoping for! Look what your gift is capable of!" Tatsu carefully unwound the vine to free his leg and scampered excitedly around the garden from one heavy growth to another.

From their position on the ground, D974-T92 turned slowly to examine every square inch of the gardens. This was something they would share with the other D974-Ts tonight, each of the D974-Ts.

## Epilogue

D974-T92 laid their hand on top of the tombstone at the peak of the hill in the center of the park. The inscription on the tombstone read: "Midori Tatsu, 2023- 2120. The Green Dragon who brought the spirit of Akkeshi back to life."

D974-T92's gaze wandered across the landscape they, Tatsu, and the other D974-Ts had created together. They had used the unclaimed biological material from the residents, pets, and wildlife victims of the tsunami as the raw materials for creating this and the other parks and green spaces throughout the city.

Not only had the other D974-Ts been able to replicate D974-T92's "gift", but they had rehabilitated the D974-Ts that everyone thought were lost to HC syndrome, as well. D974-T92's recitation list was now down to a handful of D974-Ts who remained lost to them.

D974-T92 missed Tatsu's ceaseless enthusiasm and energy. But something new had come to the city. The sound of children's laughter.







## AUTHOR BIOS

In addition to five novels and over one hundred short stories in print, **Tom Barlow** is also an accomplished poet with over a hundred poems appearing in journals such as Ekphrastic Review, Voicemail Poetry, New York Quarterly, Modern Poetry Quarterly, and many more. See [tombarlowauthor.com](http://tombarlowauthor.com).

**Jason Ryberg** is the author of eighteen books of poetry, six screenplays, a few short stories, a box full of folders, notebooks and scraps of paper that could one day be (loosely) construed as a novel, and, a couple of angry letters to various magazine and newspaper editors. He is currently an artist-in-residence at both The Prospero Institute of Disquieted P/o/e/t/i/c/s and the Osage Arts Community, and is an editor and designer at Spartan Books. His latest collection of poems is *The Great American Pyramid Scheme* (co-authored with W.E. Leathem, Tim Tarkelly and Mack Thorn, OAC Books, 2022). He lives part-time in Kansas City, MO with a rooster named Little Red and a billygoat named Giuseppe and part-time somewhere in the Ozarks, near the Gasconade River, where there are also many strange and wonderful woodland critters.

**David Kirby** teaches at Florida State University, where he is the Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor of English. His latest books are a poetry collection, *Help Me, Information*, and a textbook modestly entitled *The Knowledge: Where Poems Come From and How to Write Them*. Kirby is also the author of *Little Richard: The Birth of Rock 'n' Roll*, which the Times Literary Supplement described as "a hymn of praise to the emancipatory power of nonsense." He is currently on the editorial board of Alice James Books.

**Lois Roma-Deeley's** most recent poetry collection is *Like Water in the Palm of My Hand* (2022). Her previous books include *The Short List of Certainties*, winner of the Jacopone da Todi Book Prize (2017); *High Notes* (2010)—a Paterson Poetry Prize finalist; *northSight* (2006); *Rules of Hunger* (2004). Her poems have been published in numerous anthologies and journals, nationally and internationally including Academy of American Poets' Poem-a-Day Series, *Post Road*, *Spillway*, *The Columbia Poetry Review* and many more. She's Associate Editor of the poetry journal *Presence*. Roma-Deeley is Poet Laureate of Scottsdale, Arizona. (2021-2024). [www.loisroma-deeley.com](http://www.loisroma-deeley.com)

**Angela Hoffman** lives in Wisconsin. With her retirement from teaching and the pandemic coinciding, she took to writing poetry. She writes a poem a day. Her poetry has been widely published. Angela's collections include *Resurrection Lily 2022*, *Olly Olly Oxen Free 2023*, and *Hold the Contraries*, forthcoming 2024 (Kelsay Books).

**Margaret DeRitter** is the author of the full-length poetry collection *Singing Back to the Sirens* (Unsolicited Press, 2020) and the chapbook *Fly Me to Heaven By Way of New Jersey*, a winner of the 2018 Celery City Chapbook Contest. She lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and serves as copy editor and poetry editor of *Encore*, a regional feature magazine.

**Wendy Dolber** is the author of *The Guru Next Door*. She has had short stories published in *Sixfold* and *Sequoia Speaks* (upcoming). Her work has been long-listed for The Lasceax Prize and she is a past recipient of a New Jersey State Council on the Arts grant. She lives in New Jersey.

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**Stephen Barile**, a Fresno, California native, attended Fresno City College, Fresno Pacific University, and California State University, Fresno, and taught writing at Madera Community College, and CSU Fresno. His poems have been anthologized and published widely in on-line and in print journals, including: *The Broad River Review*, *Featured Poets*, *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, *The Heartland Review*, *Ignatian*, *London Grip*, *MacQueen's Quinterly*, *Mason Street Review*, *The Nelligan Review*, *New World Writing Quarterly*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *The Opiate*, *OVUNQUE SIAMO*, *Pharos*, *Rio Grande Review*, *San Joaquin Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, *The Selkie*, *The Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *Tower Poetry*, *Willawaw Journal*.

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**Zach Keali'i Murphy** is a Hawaii-born writer with a background in cinema. His stories appear in Reed Magazine, Maudlin House, The Coachella Review, Raritan Quarterly, Another Chicago Magazine, Flash Frog, Still Point Arts Quarterly, and more. He has published the chapbooks *Tiny Universes* (Selcouth Station Press) and *If We Keep Moving* (Ghost City Press). He lives with his wonderful wife, Kelly, in St. Paul, Minnesota.

**Peter Andrews** has been a speechwriter, a radio producer, an innovation consultant, and a chemist. He has written 8 short plays (produced), dozens of short stories, 100s of articles, and over 200 speeches. He attended Clarion, Bread Loaf, and Stowe Story Labs. In 2022, he was one of five Blue Sky fellows, and since September 2021, his scripts have been finalists/semifinalists/2nd round at Austin Film Festival, ISA Family, Emerging Screenwriters, and Hollyshorts. Peter has been a speechwriter, a radio producer, an innovation consultant, and a chemist. He has written 8 short plays (produced), dozens of short stories, 100s of articles, and over 200 speeches. He attended Clarion, Bread Loaf, and Stowe Stowe Labs. In 2022, he was one of five Blue Sky fellows, and since 9/21, his scripts have been finalists/semifinalists/2nd round in Austin Film Festival, ISA Family, Emerging Screenwriters, and Hollyshorts. Peter lives in the Hudson Valley.

**Anthony Neil Smith** is a novelist (*Slow Bear*, *The Drummer*, *Yellow Medicine*, many more), short story writer (*HAD*, *Reckon Review*, *Barcelona Review*, *Cowboy Jamboree*, *Maudlin House*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Exquisite Corpse*, many more), professor (Southwest Minnesota State University), Mexican food enthusiast, cheap wine lover, and admirer of Italian exploitation films. One of his pieces was chosen for Best American Mystery and Suspense 2023. He was previously an associate editor with Mississippi Review Web, and is now editor of *Revolution John*.

**Henry Simpson** is the author of novels, short stories, and technical works, e.g., [Amazon fiction](#). He studied engineering and did graduate work in English and Psychology at UC Santa Barbara. He lives in Monterey, California.

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**Samantha Sapp** is a former middle school teacher and current MFA student at Miami University. Though she is originally from the Florida Panhandle, she has spent the last few years in the Midwest coping poorly with winter. Her work has appeared in the literary journal *Sinister Wisdom*, and she was a finalist for the 2022 Wergle Flomp Humor Poetry Contest.

**Benjamin Myers** is a former poet laureate of Oklahoma and the author of four books of poetry, including *Black Sunday* and *the Family Book of Martyrs*, both published by Lamar University Press. His poems have appeared in *Image*, *The Yale Review*, *32 Poems*, *Rattle*, and many other journals.

**Adele Evershed** was born in Wales. Her prose and poetry have been widely published in journals and anthologies such as *Every Day Fiction*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Anti Heroin Chic*, *Gyroscope*, and *Janus Lit*. Adele has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize for poetry and short fiction and Best of the Net for poetry. Finishing Line Press published her first poetry chapbook, *Turbulence in Small Places*. Her second collection, *The Brink of Silence* is available from Bottlecap Press.

**Brian Hawkins** lives and works in southern Indiana with his wife Lacy, two dogs, and three cats. They own a bookstore in their hometown where they also teach high school. Brian's work has appeared in *Morehead State University's literary journal Inscape*, *Scribes Micro Fiction*, *Down in the Dirt*, *The Barcelona Review*, and *Ariel Chart*. He can be found on Instagram @[hawk.it.is](#) and Twitter: @hawk\_it\_is.

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**Linden Van Wert**, born in Massachusetts, worked in New York as a book designer and proofreader, became a mother in Florida and is now a teacher in California. Her work has been published or soon to be seen in *Orchards Poetry*, *California Quarterly*.

**Robert E. Ray** is a retired public servant. His poetry has been published by *Rattle*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Wee Sparrow Poetry Press*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *High Shelf Press*, and *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*. Robert is a graduate of Eastern Kentucky University. He lives in rural southeast Georgia.

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**Denise Bossarte** is an award-winning author, poet, photographer and artist whose passion is inspiring others. Her daytime job in IT helps to keep the household running. She enjoys writing, exploring new art forms, and teaching contemplative photography workshops. She lives in Texas with her husband and literary cat, Za' Ji.





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