

# MULESKINNER JOURNAL



## Refuge



Journal Seven - July 2023





## *Refuge*

*Shelter from the Storm*

***Refuge** is where you take stock, assess the damage, treat your blisters, or finally get some sleep. It's also where you might be a refugee, dependent on the kindness of strangers, stripped of everything, caught in the middle*



# MULESKINNER JOURNAL

## JOURNAL SEVEN: REFUGE

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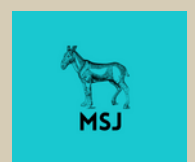
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# MEGAN JAUREGUI ECCLES

## WHAT IT IS TO BURN

There's smoke in the air.

Not the tinny smoke of barbecues or the warm, wood smoke of a fireplace. Not even the salty, beach pit smoke of summer evenings and shared laughter.

Fire season smells different.

A wildfire smells like a warning.

I'm four years old. My baby sister is in a car seat. There are kids all around me. My grandma sits beneath the oak tree in a field I've never been to. She's explaining to us that our parents will be right back, that they're fighting the fire. I imagine my mom and dad with their fists up on the front line, throwing punches. A red hand fights back. Later, I will learn that they were digging fire breaks. Later, I will learn that the unfamiliar field is the only way out.

When my aunt's house burns, it burns so hot that the roof pops off and lands in the trees, a hundred feet away. I joke that my cousin shook up a soda and left it underneath. I pick melted coins out of the rubble once it's cooled. But then my aunt and my cousins move across the country. All the laughter goes stale.

I'm fourteen years old. I've just left my first homecoming dance. The man who will someday be my husband is in the same car, my aunt's big van, filled with sleepy teenagers. I'm not tired. My head is full of excitement, buzzing like bees. I feel wild and impermanent and like anything is possible. When I get home, the air is hazy. My parents whisper in the dark. I sit out in our porch and watch the fire creep closer and closer.

In the morning, the sheriff is at our house, telling us to leave. My mom is anxious, my dad steady. Finally, he tells my mom to pack. I grab my American Girl doll, the novel I am writing, my dog. We get into my parent's new car. We take a road that seems to go nowhere, dusty, and unpaved. There's a line of cars. Uncles, aunts, cousins. All of us leaving like ants in a line. Once we hit a real road, my dad hops in a truck and goes back home to fight the fire. I know now he will clear brush and dig trenches and put out the fires he sees.

We go to the coast to my maternal grandmother's house. I sleep on the floor in the laundry room to stay close to my dog. I chat with my friends in AIM. The pool fills with ash.

The news comes in two waves. First, that the fire chief loved that he could see all of San Diego County from my parent's house. Firefighters sleep on our porch and clear the brush to protect our home. They're able to keep our home safe and countless other homes with a bird's eye view.

Second.

There's a girl who lives right behind the fire station. I've seen her at school, she's on drum line. I watched her a few nights before at the homecoming game. She's the kind of effortless, high school cool that seems infinite. She and her sister try and drive out of the fire. Their house burns. They burn. Her sister sustains severe burns. The girl doesn't survive.

I'm eighteen. My parents have come for homecoming weekend with my eight-month-old twin sisters in tow. I stayed close to home, living with my maternal grandparents off the coast and commuting to the prestigious university in which I have almost a full scholarship. One of those scholarships is in the name of the girl who died in the fire a few years earlier. It is the loveliest weekend. It is the last weekend.

It is still dark that next morning when my sisters and mother clamber into the house. The winds turn and there is no time for warning. They are here. My dad is home fighting the fires. He promised to grab my dog if things get bad.

Things get bad.

Two days later, we get the call.

"It was a rough night."

Those words live in my mind, an echo of the after and the before. A rending of my life. The stories unfold in bits and pieces. My dad joins us at my maternal grandmother's once the danger has passed. There is nothing left, save for his mother's house. Everything else is lost. The house, my dog, the last bit of hope in my father's eyes. He tells us how he could feel the roof sponge beneath his feet. How the firefighters sat at the bottom of the road, watching. How he pleaded, and they said it wasn't worth the risk. How he took the risk and lost everything anyway. My dog was so scared, she ran into the house. We find her bones in the pantry, the same place she used to wait out thunderstorms.

School is canceled for the week. My classmates joke about how awesome fire week was, how much fun they had. I don't say anything. When asked, I repeat like a litany that no one.

died. That we are okay.

I am not okay.

There's a folder in my desk drawer with all our important papers. There's a shelf in my office with books I can't stomach losing. Signed first editions, that book of Keats poetry with my husband's grandfather's name scratched into the corner, a special edition of Anne of Green Gables that my grandmother brought me from Avonlea. I know where our wedding album is and we keep hard drives together, with everything double-backed on the cloud. When the next big fire comes, I know exactly what to do.

There's an app for everything. There's an app for fires. The notifications have a special sound and I track their movement. I know which way the wind is blowing. I know the percentage of containment. I have calculated how much time we need to pack the car and how long it will take us to get to a safe place. I wonder, often, if any of those safe places are in California.

I pass out popsicles. The kids eat them beneath the eucalyptus trees, laughing and playing. The wind shifts away from us. The fire is 60% contained with no more forward movement. I can still see the smoke in the distance, hear the hum of planes.

I breathe in deep. The air is clearer now.

"I got you a flower," my three-year-old says.

I tuck it behind my ear and smile at him. He's off again, not a worry in the world. My ten-year-old looks at the smoke and looks at me.

"We're okay," I tell him.

And it's a truth and a lie. I count the seconds, count the days. One more fire season gone. I pray my children never know what it is to burn.

We are not phoenixes, rising from the ashes. We are seeds. What is destroyed comes back to the soil. There are seeds that only grow with the intensity of the heat. Some trees with deep roots come back up. We grow and we grow, different, but back again. Altered, but alive. Quick to burn and slow to rise, we manage to survive.



INVENTORY

When the moon rises up above Three Sisters Mountain like a worn silver dollar, you can almost believe it has risen just for you—that the earth's rotation and axis are meaningless. The moon is yours alone in the dark of night to be carried like a lantern to light the past while you wander your childhood haunts. There is one road into the town where you grew up, one path leading to the house where you were raised. Choice is an illusion you know when you look to the trees still towering above you as you look to the cardinal points that defined your world decades ago. You have returned again and again trying to find the roots of your life everyone talks about, but all you have found are shadows and more questions. All you know can be summed up in the things you have: One road, one moon, one brief recurring dream.



## **THE DEREV'YA SOCIAL CLUB**

И толь'ко здесь' я обречен на страдать,  
И толь'ко здесь' - к спокойствию.  
- Лермонтов, "Мой дом"

And only here I'm doomed to suffering,  
And only here - to calmness.  
- Lermontov, "My Home"

Three men watched Alexei enter. He removed his cap, scratched his cloud-white whiskers, took a seat at the bar, and politely asked the barman for tea and sushki biscuits. He turned and nodded at the three men with a satisfied smile as one of the three, an old man with a thick gray beard, rose from his seat and moved toward the bar.

The Derev'ya Social Club in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn was opened in 1951 by two Russian brothers nostalgic for the cafes of their homeland. Its main room was thirty feet square, with small black and white hexagonal floor tiles. Along the rear wall resided a long, worn mahogany bar, home to two enormous brass samovars both cast in the image of double-headed eagles, an homage to the great Tsars of Russian history. At one end of the bar stood a carved bookshelf filled with chess sets, the latest editions of the newspapers Novom Svete and Vecherniy, and dog-eared volumes of Lermontov, Chekhov, and Tolstoy, many printed in Russian. At the other end was an upright piano on which, during cold and dreary days reminiscent of the Russian winter, a skilled patron might delight the room with a Rachmaninoff Prelude. On the walls, fabled Russians such as Stravinsky, Plisetskaya, and Gorbachev looked on as their compatriots nibbled their biscuits. In the center of the room was a woodstove surrounded by tables, each with a glass vase holding flowers picked from the outdoor garden in the rear of the cafe where glorious planetrees provided guests with dappled shade, and the club with its name. Uneven stones paved the garden where its main feature, an eight-foot-tall marble fountain, was crowned with a bust of Tchaikovsky. Metal tables, benches, and heavy wooden pedestals inset with stone chess boards looked up to the maestro as pews would an altar. For the older Russian emigres, Derev'ya was a soothing refuge, a sentimental tribute to the beloved motherland, an agreeable place that blissfully erased time and distance. For those of the new generation in Brighton Beach curious about

their Russian heritage, it was a living chronicle to ensure that the time of great Russian culture and enlightenment would not be forgotten.

As the hot tea melted the memorable biscuit in Alexei's mouth, the bearded man approached him and said, "Hello, may I inquire if you are you new to the Derev'ya?"

"Yes, I am," Alexei said. "I moved here two weeks ago and as of today, I am a member of this fine club."

"Well then, allow me to introduce myself, I am Leonid Asimov, but you can call me Leo."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Leo, I am Alexei Petrovich Ivanov, but please, call me Alexei."

Leo invited Alexei to his table where the other two men were now standing to greet the stranger.

"Gentlemen, I'd like you to meet a new member of the club, Alexei Petrovich Ivanov. May I introduce Ivan Belsky, and this is Ivan Grumov. Long ago we gave up the confusion and they became Belsky and Grumov."

Eyeing the frayed and yellowed collar of his shirt, the two men shook hands with Alexei.

"It's my pleasure to meet you all. I'm very happy to now live near a café like this. In the Bronx, I had no such place nearby. To Derev'ya, I can walk in minutes. And I must say, the ginger biscuits are heavenly," Alexei said.

Leo shook his considerable stomach, "That is the work of Mrs. Solokin. She runs a serious kitchen and is not one to be trifled with. When it's known that she is making her apple blintzes, it's so busy here, you can't get in the door."

"Yes, I think you will like Brighton Beach much better than the Bronx," Belsky said. Leo offered Alexei a chair. "Please, join us."

"I don't want to interrupt your conversation," Alexei said.

"It's no interruption, we are three old men talking about nothing. We are happy to meet a new neighbor of similar age," Leo said.

"Thank you, I share the sentiment," Alexei said.

"So, you say you live nearby? Belsky asked.



"Yes, I live with my sister Vera near the glove factory on Neptune Avenue."

"Leo lives not far from there," Belsky said.

For the next hour, over tea, Mrs. Solokin's sweet pastila cakes, the men, in a pastiche of Russian and English, shared their stories from the old world and the new.

In 1931, Alexei Petrovich Ivanov was born in the small village of Dubishki, Russia. Now seventy-seven years old, he praised the sushki biscuits at Derev'ya which were almost as sweet as those he shared with his father each Sunday morning of his childhood. Young Alexei idolized his father and his fondness for books and music. He was a man of culture who always carried some book of poetry and a notebook in his suit pocket. He earned meager wages writing for the local newspaper and spent his leisure time with the educated class, discussing music, language, books, art, and writing poetry. In the evenings, after tutoring his children in the basics of English, he delighted in playing symphonies on his phonograph. He read to Alexei and his younger sister Vera at bedtime. Often, it was Pushkin. Young Alexei was ill-equipped to comprehend the verses of *A Magic Moment I Remember*, but he was spellbound by the emotion in his father's voice as he read the closing lines, "Then came a moment of renaissance, I looked up - you again are there, a fleeting vision, the quintessence of all that's beautiful and rare." They lived a civilized and artistic, if frugal, life. Alexei would never forget his father's words that material things are transient, but that which is in our hearts and minds will last forever.

In 1953, with Vera already settled in Chicago and nothing left in Russia for his heart to embrace, Alexei and his new wife Anya planned a new life in America. With the assistance of a professor in St. Petersburg who knew his father, a job as a schoolteacher was arranged in the Russian community near Pelham Parkway in the Bronx. Soon after arriving, Anya gave birth to a son, Pyotr, the most precious gift Alexei could imagine. Complications made additional children impossible, which made Pyotr all the more precious. After college, Pyotr found great success as an American entrepreneur. Alexei showered his fellow teachers with reveries, not of his son's success, but of the walks in the park with grandchildren that would surely come one day. But how could he know? There was no foretelling of a horrific railroad accident. Russia's subjugation had taken his mother and father and now America's liberties had taken his wife, his son, and his hope for a grandchild. He became an inconsolable recluse, darning his own socks, writing the occasional letter to his sister Vera, leaving his small flat in the Bronx only to go to work, or for groceries, or to pick up his mail which mostly consisted of advertisements - vacations to the Catskill Mountains, the latest child's toy, arthritis cream - all of which brought tears to his eyes. Sitting by his open eighth-floor window, he contemplated his own end. In this, he may have succeeded were it not for the resolute love of his sister Vera who could read both the feigned contentment and the unwritten sadness in her brother's letters, and who invited him to share her new home in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn.

With the dinner hour approaching, each man reached into his pocket to pay his check. Leo, Belsky, and Grumov tossed notes on the table that would pay their checks and leave a respectable gratuity for the barman. Alexei, under the curious eyes of the others, opened a small, ragged cloth purse, removed several coins, and counted them precisely before placing them on the table.

As they walked to the door, Leo said to Alexei, "Perhaps next time we play a game of Durak, you can join us. Do you play? We can always use a fourth player."

"One moment please," Alexei said, as he walked back to the table to retrieve his cap. Grumov and Belsky frowned at Leo, unsure that an invitation to join their card game was appropriate for a man they had just met.

Leo whispered, "Weren't you listening to him? He's wonderful, he will be an excellent addition to our group."

Alexei returned with his cap and answered, "I would be delighted to play with you, but I must warn you, I am a remarkably poor player. You may wish you never invited me."

Grumov said, "This will not be a problem, for no one plays Durak any more poorly than Belsky."

They all chuckled and Belsky, encouraged by Leo's words, replied, "Alexei my new friend, Grumov here believes he is the superior player, but he confuses talent with luck."

The sound of old men coughing through their laughter was heard by all as the four friends left Derev'ya and breathed the salty ocean air, each pleased with this new beginning.

Over the following years, Alexei Petrovich Ivanov made a home in Brighton Beach. He spent his mornings walking along Brighton Beach Avenue under the roar of the EL trains visiting with the shopkeepers, conversing in Russian with community elders, and making pennies appear from behind the ears of the neighborhood children. On warm days he would cross the boardwalk, remove his shoes, and feel the sand between his calloused toes, picking up errant trash as he walked. On Wednesdays, he made a detour to Saint Nicholas church where Mrs. Meladova, the former librarian, attended morning services. Alexei would bring her a few sushkis to eat and push her wheelchair to the boardwalk so she could see and smell the ocean that so lifted her spirits. After lunch at home with Vera, he would nap and then walk to the Derev'ya for tea and sweets accompanied by some lines of Turgenev under the shade of the planetrees. Soon, Leo, Belsky, and Grumov would arrive, and stories of younger days would be told and retold, the day's gossip would be broached, a chess match offered, more tea and perhaps some vodka would be drunk, and a rambunctious game of

Durak would be played. During these years, the four men shared a deep contentment with life and their friendship. But the world turns, and for some, the blessings of America – charity, freedom, conscience – compete with darker visions of selfishness, pride, and bigotry that reside in their hearts.

One September afternoon at Derev'ya, the four sat for tea in the shade by the fountain and Leo asked, "Alexei, when you were a boy in Dubishki, did your family travel often to Moscow?"

"Dubishki," Alexei said, "is halfway between Moscow and Leningrad and a great distance from both. There was no money for family trips. But my father did travel to Leningrad to be in the company of the writers and professors at the university."

"Each to his own Alexei," Grumov said sternly, "but I believe the proper name is St. Petersburg."

"Pardon me, you know it's an old habit from my youth," Alexei said.

"Yes, a habit you make no attempt to correct," Grumov said, unable to hide his irritation.

"My apologies, I will try to remember," Alexei said.

"So, your father was a professor at the university?" Belsky asked.

"No, my father was a journalist by trade, but truly, he was a poet," Alexei said. "He enjoyed the company of the writers and musicians and philosophers at the university. He would return home inspired and would write poems and then he would recite them to Vera and me."

Leo smiled, "How wonderful, to be a child and hear poetry in your father's voice. You haven't told us much about your father Alexei, did he ever come to America?"

"No, he did not. He died in Russia."

"I am sorry," Leo said.

"I believe all of us have lost our fathers. How old was he when he passed?" Belsky asked.

"He was a young man," Alexei said.

"Was he killed in the war?" Grumov asked.

Alexei looked to the floor and gazed at his shoes in need of polish. Only Leo sensed his discomfort, "I think perhaps this is too personal. Why don't we change the subject."

"No, I don't mind the question," Alexei said. "We have been friends for years."

"Are you sure?" Leo asked.

"Yes. After the war, a party official in our village with a strong dislike for my father, accused him of stealing and had him sent away. I was fourteen years old, but I knew this was a lie; everyone in the village knew my father could never do such a thing. But the hatred had always been there; the Nazis only added to it. And when they were driven out, the hate was uglier, as if that was possible. My father was sent away and shot not because he was a thief, but because he was a poet - and because he was a Jew."

The air between the men was still and as Alexei's lip quivered, Leo said, "I am very sorry Alexei. You must have a great deal of pain and anger inside."

Alexei breathed deeply and said, "I was angry for many years, but my anger consumed me and left no place for the beauty of the world to touch me, the beauty that my father shared with me and Vera through his poetry. My anger was a victory for the hate, and I refused to allow it to conquer me."

"Your philosophy is admirable Alexei, I would have difficulty myself," Leo said.

"Yes," Belsky said. "It was a terrible time; it's best to forget it and move on."

"Yes, best to move on and look ahead," Grumov said.

There was a halo of sadness around Alexei when he said, "It's true, I have had my share of tragedy and I have missed my family terribly. But, in music and art, and in my father's poetry, and my years of friendship with all of you, I have found great comfort and hope. At my age, I have only one regret, and that is not having a grandchild to love, to teach, to share poetry, and to carry on a new generation when I am gone."

"I know your feeling," Grumov said. "My grandsons are the sunshine of my life even when they disobey."

"Yes, they are delightful children. I so enjoy seeing them here at the café," Alexei said.

"My daughter lives not ten blocks from here, but I don't see my grandchildren as much as I would like to. Perhaps if the new playground is ever completed, all our grandchildren will spend more time here," Belsky said.

At that moment, Alexei stood, politely asked for his check, and said, "Gentlemen, I think it is time for me to leave you, Vera is making a pot roast tonight and it is best eaten hot. Please enjoy the evening."

Alexei departed and Leo could not contain his anger.

"You both should be ashamed of yourselves. To hear him speak of his lost family and then to carry on about the joys of your own grandchildren, was vulgar. How could you be so cruel?"

"So, we must never speak of our grandchildren again in his company? He is not the only one who lives with sadness. Our families also knew the atrocities of Stalin and the Nazis. But the son of the great Russian poet from the university at Leningrad expects pity with his stories of heartbreak," Grumov said.

"Leo, in your old age, you are taken in by his manipulations like a fool," Belsky said.

"Can any of us imagine his heartache? He has always been a man of deep emotion and kindness, yet you both treat him like someone who is trying to steal from you," Leo said.

"That would not surprise me either," Belsky said.

"What does that mean?" asked Leo.

Belsky answered, "You see the way he reaches into that filthy old purse to pick out coins to buy one biscuit for himself? I can't remember the last time he bought tea for us. I don't care if his father was a penniless poet. Leo, do you remember when Grumov invited us to dinner at Matryoshka after he won at the racetrack and Alexei was happy to join us? But, when we returned to the restaurant a month later, he could not come. Do you know why? Because he knew he would have to pay his own check."

"It's his nature," Grumov said. "The man is a miser. Will we ever see the day when he buys a new suit coat, or at least patches to cover the holes in the one he wears every day? And all these years, he lives with his sister. Why does he live there? We've all tasted her blinis, so we know it's not for the food."

Belsky and Grumov roared with laughter.

"No, it is so he can pay half rent," Belsky said. "And I'm also tiring of his air of superiority. Did you hear him last week giving me advice at the chess board? Not as a joke, but a return to his role as schoolteacher. He sits and thinks and thinks and thinks again. Such a strategist. He beats me because of my boredom as I wait for his next move."

The two howled again with laughter.

"I'm sorry you both feel this way," Leo said.

Winter came and Grumov and Belsky saw less of Leo and Alexei. When the four were

together, the chill in their words matched the cold sea air and the Durak games were less rambunctious.

On a cold but windless Wednesday morning, Leo joined Alexei for a morning walk along the beach.

"Leo, have you noticed a change in Belsky and Grumov recently?" Alexei asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Things seem different when we are together, like Chekhov's student who feels a cold wind blowing inappropriately."

"I don't know, Alexei, perhaps it's just the annoyances of old age. Maybe they aren't feeling well."

"Yes, perhaps. I will light a candle for them at St. Nicholas."

"Yes, my friend, I know you will."

In March, the garden at Derev'ya was not yet open. Grumov and Belsky were conversing at the bar when Leo walked in.

"Good afternoon Leo," Belsky said. "You're late today."

"I have bad news from Vera. Alexei was taken to the hospital this afternoon. It is serious; he is in a coma."

"Do they know the cause? Belsky asked.

"The doctors are not sure. Vera said she could not wake him from his nap. She called the ambulance, and they took him away."

"Had he complained of any pain? Grumov asked.

"No, no complaints. The doctors are doing tests and hope to know more later today."

"Should we go to see him?" Belsky asked.

"Yes, we probably should go, if he can have visitors," Grumov said.

"Only family members can see him now. Perhaps tomorrow he will improve, God willing, then

we can visit him.”

Mrs. Solokin placed May flowers in the vases on the tables near the bar. In the garden, no sunlight could penetrate the clouds and the leaves of the planetrees were dark. Grumov, Belsky, and Leo sat near the maestro drinking tea and eating honey cakes. Belsky dealt the cards, and they played Durak in silence.

The door to the garden opened and out ran Rachel Belsky.

“Grandpa, will you come with me to the new playground when it opens later?”

Belsky spread his arms, “Of course, I will, malyshka, come give Grandpa a hug. Is your mama with you?”

“No, Mama is working, Mrs. Sergeevna is with me. She says they will make the ribbon at three o’clock and then we can go on the playground, and you can push me on the swing.”

“Yes, yes, cut the ribbon, and then you can swing. Anything you want malyshka.”

“Thank you, Grandpa. I’ll see you later, at three o’clock, don’t forget.”

“I won’t forget.”

Belsky turned to Grumov, “Will your grandchildren be at the playground for the opening?”

“Are you joking? They have been waiting three years for this day. They will be there,” Grumov said.

“I’m sure my little ones are at the playground already, waiting,” Leo said with a wistful smile.

When the time came, the three walked to the new playground. Three years of bureaucratic red tape, something Russians understand well, was finally at an end. A sea of young children with their parents, grandparents, and nannies were gathered for the ribbon cutting. The playground was the size of a city block, filled with swings, slides, jungle gyms, and even spray fountains to splash water on hot summer days. Dozens of planetrees shaded the perimeter. At the center, a three-foot square wood replica of a house stood on a short pedestal with a sign that read: BIBLIOTECHNY. It had large doors that swung open to reveal dozens of books for the children to read and borrow, plus volumes from immortal Russian poets and writers for the pleasure of the parents and grandparents. A city official stepped to a podium for the ceremony. Before he cut the ribbon, he unveiled a bronze plaque with the playground’s dedication which he read:

PUSHKIN PARK  
Dedicated to the children and grandchildren of Brighton Beach –  
Our hope and our future.

The City of New York Offers Its  
Sincere Thanks to the Park's Benefactor  
ALEXEI PETROVICH IVANOV

IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
PYOTR ALEXEYEVICH IVANOV

Belsky and Grumov stood silently, their faces expressionless. Leo wiped tears from his eyes. Mrs. Meladova, who had helped fill the small wooden library wept openly. Later, in Derev'ya's garden, the three men were having tea when Vera appeared. Leo invited her to sit at their table and said, "Vera, I had no idea Alexei was involved...what a wonderful gift to the children and tribute to his..." Leo was unable to finish.

"He had quietly arranged with the city to pay for the park several years ago," Vera said.

"If I may ask, where did he get such a sum to build a park?" Belsky asked.

"His son left him everything. Alexei was never at ease with gaining riches from the death of his son. He would have burned it all to get Anya and Pyotr back. So, he quietly gave it away, first to the public library and then to build the park. He asked me to keep his secret. But when he died, I asked for the dedication plaque to include their names."

"I understand that he would give money to the library, but why to a playground when he had no grandchildren to use it? Surely there were other ways to give away the money," Grumov said.

Vera explained softly, "His most precious hope was to have a grandchild, but he knew it was not to be. That other children would find joy in the park and be touched by the books and the poetry as he was, that was his wish."

"Vera, I will never forget him. Your brother was a man of decency and virtue," Leo said. Leo looked at Grumov and Belsky and asked, "Wouldn't you agree?"

The two men nodded in agreement, and raindrops began to fall, but none reached the gathering thanks to the broad leaves of the planetrees.







## JACOB SPENCER

### HIGHRISE

"Hey-hey, get over here, Limpy!"

Ragleg with that ratty little voice of his—maybe it's more mousy, not quite ratty. Lot of people don't make the distinction between rats and mice. Rats are a lot bigger and scarier. They're the ones that carry diseases. And cats don't go after rats, that was something people always said when I was little; but cats don't go after rats, because rats are too big and they can fight back. Mice are itty-bitty things: tiny, good targets, good for fun and food.

"You're not thinking again, are you, Limpy? Come on—come on, I got something here for you, you'll like it."

Goddamn Ragleg always goes on about how I think too much. Says it's unhealthy for me, best to use instinct, use the vessels and nerves in my fingers and toes. My brain is too wily and rily he says. Rily? Can't remember if that's a word or not. Sounds like one.

I can hear Ragleg going on again about something, so I finally open my ears to the slizzy fellow and wander over to him. The wraps around my feet are starting to get old; need to head to the hill to find new ones. But these'll do for at least a few more weeks. I don't really want to go to the hill for new ones. The hill's a long walk from town, and usually others are there, so you have to wait a long time to find a good set, because you know the good ones'll be long gone by the time you're there. Unless you show up early, which I always try to.

"Goddamnit, Limpy, you're gonna miss out!"

"I'm coming."

I start trekking across the glass and scrap mounds towards that bastard. I can hear the railyard starting up; there's a train coming slow, scraping up every bit of metal hanging down from its belly against the ice. Ragleg's gnawing on that old sandwich he dugged up from the bin earlier. It's got bits of ham and lettuce and tomato. They're all covered in frost and snowflakes and whatnot. That slizzy hair of his is damn lucky it's cold and the sun's not out, because otherwise it would be frying.

He smiles, keeping his mouth closed, as always, and points to something on the ground. It's a handheld mirror. And not like the others—this one's completely, perfectly intact, not a single

crack or smudge on it.

"See the color around it?" he says.

I have to squint to try and see any sort of color. A lighter tone of white it seems.

"It's pink," says Ragleg. "This is a girl's mirror. And it's got gold lining around it."

"Looks grey to me."

"That's because you're fucked up."

"You're the one that's fucked up," I growl.

Ragleg howls, or does whatever such sound that a rat or rat-like creature would do. Maybe a possum, though I've never seen one of those.

"Hey-hey, Limpy, smell it. Does it smell like a girl?"

I bring it to my nose and take a big whiff. It has that oily and coppery smell like scrap metal, and ice crystals all over it that make it prickle when you bring it to your skin. "Hardly."

"That's a pity," Ragleg whines. "Well, anyway, why don't you keep it?"

"Are you serious? You found it."

"Don't worry about it. Keep it."

Ragleg can really get on me sometimes. He says things, he laughs when nothing's funny. He can be a real hypocrite. But kill me if Ragleg isn't the sweetest creature I've ever known.

I want to tear up. I kneel, grab the mirror's handle, and hold it up. There I am, with grey eyes, black hair, a white, pale face. I never notice how chapped my lips are till I look in the mirror. But I hadn't ever even noticed before that there's a little scar on my left cheek.

"Where'd that come from?" I mutter and bring my hand to my face.

"You've always had that," says Ragleg.

"Not as far as I'm concerned."

He shrugs. "Whatever." Ragleg gasps and pushes my shoulder. I slip back like I'm sliding on a slimy rink and fall right on my ass. "Look, Limpy, look!"

"I can't look at nothing now, you bastard."

Ragleg cackles. "I got you good, didn't I? But look, look!" He's pointing to the highrise at the corner of that intersection for "Flo" and "Red" streets. The other corners have got nothing but ruins and rubble, but that highrise has been there, more or less straight and proper, as long as I can remember.

Up on the ninth floor is a roaring light, like a bonfire. But so high up, away from the precious metal down here? That rules out scavengers. Could be people burning pictures. I always hated the way people do that, and the way they scold you when you don't do it too.

"I'm going up there," Ragleg says and starts limping his way toward the highrise.

Ragleg grunts as he steps over a rusty old beam and gets his footwraps caught in a sharp bit of scrap metal. But he's a veteran of this stuff, so he makes it over easy enough without getting cut.

Well, damn it. Gotta follow him. So I step over that beam, taking care to avoid the sharp bits of scrap metal, and start hopscotching between the broken mirrors that litter the way to the highrise. By the time I'm halfway there, Ragleg is already taunting me, jumping up and down, at the entrance to the building.

Ragleg's waiting across the threshold for me. The threshold is marked by tiny bits of broken steel like shattered swords and spearheads.

"Come on, Limpy, what are you waiting for?"

It's not the smell of gasoline or the graffiti that I can see along the shadowy hallways. Neither is it the photo at the check-in window of a gypsy woman with the head of a cat. Those things aren't making me nervous. It's some gut feeling telling me not to go inside.

"Come on!" Ragleg whines. "If we find another girl mirror you can keep it too!"

Well, that's a lie. Any time he lies, Ragleg snorts and wipes his nose.

"Fine," I say, and step over the shattered steel.

The doors on the first floor are all shut up tight. There are scratch marks and health inspection notices plastered all over them. We turn right towards the stairwell. The walls are all lined with words in different languages, graffiti of faces of people, monkeys, dogs. One of them is quite strange. It's like a Jewish wedding band, but their bodies curve and twist surreal-like. They don't have proper faces, more like black holes where their eyes, nose, and mouth should be. They're playing fiddles, drums, clarinets.

As we head up the stairwell, Ragleg points out all the stuff that could slice and dice our poor callous feet. "Hey, rusty screws there. Ooh, and that bit's slippery. Tastes like motor oil."

"You gotta stop drinking that crap, Ragleg." That stuff is no good for him; makes him very loopy.

"Oh, don't you try to say that you don't like the warmth."

"Let's just keep going, yeah? You're the one who wants to do this!" He's not wrong about the warmth though, I'll admit.

"Yep-yep," he chitters.

We keep going. Ragleg's got his eyes always up, but I like to glance down the hallway of each floor we pass. Each one has different graffiti and murals on the walls. The second floor has trees, flowers, grass, and deer. The third one shows people all kneeling down in front of a big table with roasted animals on it.

The fourth one has a bunch of people walking through a graveyard carrying a coffin. Their faces are realistic, like in old paintings. They don't seem too sad, funny enough. A few of them are sitting on benches bored. Those poor souls carrying the coffin are scrawny like me and Ragleg, so they're not at all concerned about the dead; their shoulders are a bigger worry.

All the rest of the floors show the same stuff: people fighting. At first they're punching each other with their fists and wacking each other over the head with logs. Then they're gulleting each other with spears and dicing each other with swords. Then it goes to the ancient guns, then the slightly less ancient guns, then we finally, on the eighth floor, get to the stuff that was around when I was a kid, that could shoot hundreds of bullets a minute.

The ninth floor doesn't have any hallways or apartments. There's just a big, closed space with no windows, lit only by a few cracks in the ceiling.

"Where is it?" Ragleg says.

That bonfire and its glorious warmth are nowhere to be found. We press our heads against the floors and the walls, but there's nothing radiating from outside. It's all just that cold concrete and steel.

"Goddamn it!" Ragleg howls. He's rubbing his whole body and stroking his hand up and down the wall.

"There's nothing," I say.

"How can you be so damn soulless? This doesn't bother you one bit, does it?"

"Of course it bothers me." It bothers me a lot, but what else can you expect from the world? "Hey, it was probably something bad anyway. Scavengers or something. You can't expect anything good from people, and people must have made it. This is good! We're gonna survive today."

Ragleg coils down to the floor, breaks into a cry, and curls his body towards the wall. "It's unfair!" He tries to stomp his foot, but those wraps keep him muted and soft. He tries to stand up, but those heavy coats and scarves keep him down and he has to plop onto his knees first, then push himself up. Finally Ragleg smashes the wall with his fist. "Awww!"

There's a big metal bang when he hits the wall. And that wail of his sounds like a wounded dog. Ragleg holds his knuckles. "Limpy...I think I got something."

"No doubt!" I leap over to him and press my hand against the wall. It's a lot colder and smoother here. I spread my fingers and start feeling all over with both my hands. There's an edge where the wall gets to be rougher again. "We got a door here, Ragleg."

There's still no warmth coming through, but if that bonfire's there then to hell with whoever made it! It'll be ours! I keep on feeling the door, in the middle, on the edges, up top. Then finally, at the bottom, I get hold of a lever. I shake it, like old housewives did to their children, to get rid of the ice crystals. It creaks and groans and moans, but finally the bastard goes all the way up, and I can pull the door to the left.

It screeches like a train pulling into the station. There is some light coming through now. Ragleg's watching. I can't see his face; it's still too dark. "What is it?" I ask.

"Nothing yet."

I pull harder. More creaks, more screech. Now my hands start heating up, and I can see tiny sparks dancing around on the hinges at the bottom.

"Keep going!" Ragleg squeaks.

"Why don't you come and help?" That squeak of his gets on my nerves, makes more nerves in me. I jerk this damn lever, and the door flies open, knocking me flat on my ass. "Goddamn it," I hiss.

Ragleg's standing there silent. I pant and lean against the wall. He's not smiling, he's not laughing, he's not jeering or cheering. He's just got this blank look on his face. His head has craned down so that his eyes are forced to look up to see in front of him. His shoulders are

pushed forward into an arc surrounding his chest.

"What is it?" I say.

Ragleg's silent.

"Ugh." I scramble to my feet and walk over to him. "What's gotten into you?" I slap his chapped, stubbly cheek. He doesn't speak or wince, just keeps staring ahead. A cold, biting wind blows against me.

I turn. That bonfire is nowhere. There's a room, the size of a small apartment, but the entire wall facing the world has been blown out. There are mannequins everywhere along the edge of the room, their eyes painted over to make them look real and glossy. They're like in a ring surrounding the center of the room. But there's a single rocking chair at the precipice, and if someone were to knock it just a bit forward it would tumble all the way down and shatter on the rubble that lines the bottom of the highrise.

That room is cold. The wind is vicious in it, and the mannequins and rocking chair are shaking and chattering like in a tornado. I reach one hand in and touch the neck of a lady mannequin wearing a black garland around her neck and a grey scarf over her head. "Ooh!" I jump back and hold my finger. Her cold makes me forget that I'm even wearing gloves.

Ragleg steps away from the door, turns, and starts walking back towards the stairwell. His head is pointed at the floor.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I say. Each of his steps echoes like a thousand voices lamenting in a canyon. They get softer and softer, turning into whimpers, then hushed hisses, gradually fading away into nothingness. And all that's left is the wind, its muffled howls carrying these sharp, eternal snowflakes against my cheeks.







## AMY SMYTH MILLER

### LAS MADRES

Summer 1976 - Yuma, Arizona

July in Yuma, Arizona, at three o'clock in the morning, is dark unless the full moon is shining - but you can smell the bougainvillea blooming for miles. The rickety truck hits every bump in the road, and there's no chance of napping or I'll be thrown off the hard wooden bench. We are sandwiched with lunch pails, jugs of water, and garden hoes. The water makes a sloshing sound that provides a background to the murmur of voices. I can only pick out a word here or there because my "book Spanish" bears little resemblance to the living language spoken by the people I will work with hoeing weeds in the lettuce fields of the Wellton-Mohawk Valley for the rest of what's left of the summer.

The truck pulls up to the side of a field, and I look out at the rows and rows of plants as the sun comes over the horizon. We'll only be able to work until noon, when the blistering heat drives even the scorpions off to find shade. I'm beginning to second guess the idea of taking this job to earn enough money to buy schoolbooks for my sophomore year of high school. Why did my parents move to Arizona, where books aren't provided? I can always apply for free books, but the indignity of standing in the free lunch line is bad enough. At fifteen years old, I already understand there is a penalty to pay for being poor.

"Andale, andale pues!" A man I assume to be the foreman shouts at us, and my coworkers jump down from the truck, hoes in hand and ready to work.

The woman next to me smiles kindly and hands me a hoe. She tsks tsks, looks at my soft white hands, and points to hers where the pads beneath her fingers have been wrapped in strips of cotton. Many blisters later, I'll learn why this is so and do the same.

A few hours later, the sweat rolls down from underneath the bandana I used to tie back my long brown hair. My pale skin is streaked with dirt. "Mira!" I look over at the woman who had earlier smiled at me, standing in the next row. She points to the gallon jug of water she's holding, says, "Bebe," and then takes a swig. Then she points at the jug of water I'd been instructed to bring and that I keep near me as I move down the row. Every so often, she repeats the process.

As the sun moves higher in the sky, my back and head begin to hurt - everything hurts. This is a hard job. "Mira!" I hear the familiar voice and look over. She says it quietly so the

foreman doesn't notice. She shows me how to rest by leaning on the hoe and nods at me every so often, telling me it's time to rest or drink. As we return to the truck at the end of our workday, I hear the catcalls from one of the men. While I don't understand what he says, I know what he means. She tears into him with a lecture in Spanish. Ashamed, he barely raises his head my way and mumbles, "Lo siento," - I'm sorry - then turns away. She knows I'm just a child, even at fifteen. I may not be her child, but I'm somebody's child.

There are other women on the truck. I'm having difficulty saying their names because they're so unfamiliar to me. I can't get my Midwestern tongue to wrap around them. So I collectively call them "Las Madres" - the mothers. They care for me, making sure I drink enough water, rest when I'm tired, don't get bit by the errant snake hiding underneath the lettuce plants, and protect me from the leering glances and comments of the men on the truck.

Through my halting Spanish and gestures, I tell them that I'm working to pay for my schoolbooks and want to be a teacher one day. "Maestra," they say. And the word comes from their lips with awe and reverence.

On the last day, we ride back to town, the clickety-clack of tires on pavement our only accompaniment. Las Madres all have their heads down, taking rest where they can. Sandwiched by two of them, I sit pressed between their ample thighs because there is so little room on the bench. I feel protected by their presence, two silent sphinxes in the desert, with sand that blows in between the cracks of the truck bed, coating their sweaty arms and faces. The men no longer sneak glances at me or whisper in Spanish under their breath because the retribution of my protectors will be swift and sure. Finally, the gears of the truck grind to a halt, and the screech of the brakes signal that we are stopping. The foreman comes around and lifts the flap, and we pile out one by one. As I turn, I look at the woman who'd first reminded me out in the field to drink water and rest on the hoe. "Muchas Gracias," I say. "Por todo," I tell her thank you for everything in my halting Spanish.

"Hasta Siempre, hija," she says, then she caresses my cheek with her fingers and walks away. Even though my Spanish is limited, I know this is a way of saying goodbye to someone you'll not likely see again. This isn't the way you speak to a stranger. It's a goodbye to someone you care about, saying you'll never forget them.

I watch as she walks away with the other women, the punishingly hot sun rising high in the Arizona sky.

## **2016 Fall - Lynden, Washington**

"So, you know what a movie theater is, right?" I was working with a small group of students during a reading lesson on a cool afternoon in early October. The leaves on the maple tree just outside my classroom window had begun to explode in a riot of red and gold, then

fluttered down to stick to the casings, calling cards announcing that fall had arrived.

We were reading a story about a girl who got lost at a movie theater. For students to understand the story, I needed to ensure they had some background knowledge about movie theaters. They needed to know that different films were showing in a larger movie theater and that you would go through different doors depending on which film you were viewing. Everyone raised their hand except Elise.

"Have you been to a movie theater, Elise?"

She shook her head. I was surprised, but then I wasn't. I knew from a previous conversation with our school secretary that Elise lived in a shack at one of the migrant camps near our school. Her shack didn't contain a toilet or anywhere to bathe. Instead, they had to use the communal bathroom facilities.

I grabbed my laptop, hunted for a short video clip showing a movie theater, and played it for the group. Elise's eyes grew large. "Have all movies at same time?" she asked incredulously.

I nodded my head in affirmation. I sent the other students back to their seats and kept Elise back.

"Have you visited the grocery store with your Mama, Elise?"

She dropped her head and whispered, "No."

"Do you have a TV?"

Again, the same whisper, "No."

Now I understood why learning anything was an uphill battle for Elise. She had so little background information to help her understand any new learning. I knew her Mama didn't speak English, so this meant Elise's only English language exposure was at school.

I went to speak with the secretary at the end of the day and shared what I had learned.

"I'm not surprised," she said. "You know they are Mixteco."

"What's that?" I responded.

"The Mixteco people are indigenous peoples, mostly from the Guerrero and Oaxaca areas of Mexico. They're original natives of Mexico, related to the ancient Aztecs. They're very poor and live in houses made of adobe or bamboo sticks with dirt floors. Their language is

hard to understand. It's a tonal language, sort of like Mandarin Cantonese, and it has no written form. Many of the families who migrated here came to work in the berry fields and stayed. Some of them, like Elise's mama, don't have papers. They're always afraid of getting deported, so they keep to themselves. Single mothers, like Elise's mom, come here to have their children so they are American citizens, but they risk getting deported and are never able to see their babies again."

"Then why do they come here?" As a mother, I couldn't imagine anything worse than being separated from my children when they were young.

She looked at me patiently, understanding that my ignorance wasn't judgment but a sincere desire to understand the situation.

"They are mistreated in Mexico. They come here to have a better life for themselves and their children. There is no opportunity for them in Mexico." The secretary turned her head to the side and looked at me squarely in the eye. "Wouldn't you do whatever you could to get an education for your child and to make sure her life was better than yours if you were in a bad situation? Elise's mama's a single mother. That alone makes her a target in Mexico, without even considering she's Mixteco."

I just shook my head. I'd grown up knowing poverty, but it was a very different kind of poverty than the secretary described. It was another reason why Elise was struggling to learn in our classroom. I knew that children from impoverished families learned at slower rates than those who had their basic needs met. Engaging in the kind of exploration and activity that leads to learning when you are hungry or afraid because of unstable living situations is challenging. I knew I needed to do a better job using the techniques that helped English Language Learners in the classroom so that Elise could learn and grow.

The scene outside my classroom continued to change. By the beginning of December, all the leaves were gone from the maple tree. The branches stood bare and forlorn in the now constantly darkened sky. The arborvitae trees in the distance remained green, providing the only color to the barren landscape. Almost-winter pelted the window with icy cold fistfuls of rain and sleet.

Inside, my fifth graders were also changing. "The pilgrims immigrated." Me and my mama immigrated too!" Elise said proudly. All the songs and chants, vocabulary games, cooperative learning activities, and the modeling of language by her peers had firmly taken root in Elise. I was thrilled with the improvement in her English language abilities. I could tell that she was proud of herself, as well.

The class was getting ready for an evening presentation about Colonial America. They pretended to be travel agents from each of the three regions of Colonial America, with parents stopping by their "agency" to listen to their presentations. Elise placed the gathered, white colonial women's mob cap on her head. "I wear this tonight, Mrs. Miller?"

The class was getting ready for an evening presentation about Colonial America. They pretended to be travel agents from each of the three regions of Colonial America, with parents stopping by their “agency” to listen to their presentations. Elise placed the gathered, white colonial women’s mob cap on her head. “I wear this tonight, Mrs. Miller?”

“Yes, Elise, you will wear this tonight. You look just like a girl in Colonial New England!” She smiled, her golden-brown skin glowed, and her warm brown eyes snapped brightly with anticipation.

7:00 p.m. came and went, but there was no Elise. The “Travel America” presentation went on without her. I stopped several times to wonder where she might be, but no one seemed to know. I was deeply disappointed. She’d worked so hard and was excited about the event. Elise didn’t return to school the following day or the day after. I asked the secretary, but no one had heard from her mother, and her cell phone had been disconnected.

The last day of school before winter break was finally over. Bits of popcorn littered the classroom floor. Stray pieces of tape with snowflakes were still affixed to the edges of desks, and cookie crumbs littered the carpet. I went along the groups of desks, tearing off the tape and wadding it into a ball in my hands.

“Mrs. Miller.” I turned as my name was called out from the doorway.

“Elise! Where have you been? I’ve missed you!” She ran to me, and I enveloped her in my arms.

“I miss you too, Mrs. Miller. I go to live with my aunt now.” Elise pointed to a woman standing just beyond the doorway.

“Where is your mama?”

The look on Elise’s face was hard to describe – abject despair would maybe have been close.

“They take Mama away. The Border Patrol come to her work. They send her back to Mexico.”

I looked over at Elise’s aunt. The tears in her eyes gathered on jet-black lashes, perched precariously on the tips, and dropped in little balls that rolled down her face. She stepped forward with a brown paper bag and handed it to Elise.

“Here, Mrs. Miller. This for you. My aunt make you tamales. She and my Mama say thank you for help me. I have go to new school in January. I hope my new teacher nice like you.”

I took the brown paper bag and could feel the warmth of the just-cooked tamales against

my hand. The fragrant smell of the corn masa and chile wafted up from the top. I knew what a precious gift this was from a family that had so little and had lost so much.

I hugged them both, and there we stood, las madres, holding Elise close in the warmth of our arms and our hearts - because even though she was not our child, she was somebody's child. As they wiped their eyes and turned to go, I said, "Hasta Siempre, mija."

Elise turned back with her teary face and chocolate brown eyes and smiled.







## WILLIAM CORDEIRO

### INDOLENT SUNDAY

I walk to town. I notice rubbish everywhere, bright plastic glutting summer fields: burger wrappers, six-pack rings, party foil, coffee sleeves, rainbow pools of motor oil, scumponds sumptuous as antifreeze, Snapple caps, lotto tickets, snak-pak puddings, Buffalo Wild Wings hot sauce packets, paper scraps and Dixie cups, sports bras, Ruffles, Muscle Milk, hard lemonade, Newport butts, tricked-out bobbysocks and bubble-wrap; a baby rattle, a centerfold; some dark crushed thing incinerated. Bibelots atop the farmland and the roadside gutters ripe with thickets.

I'd been trudging up to Safeway but at the stoplight, I see the shop is shut in honor of the sabbath. Its stock looks frivolous anyhow—so many stacks of cans and cases, packing crates and interlocking cardboard boxes.

Going back across the glacial till of hills and gorges, a runoff's mottled chorus trickles. I sing along, a reckless mumble tumbling in me. I resurrect old greenlush lyrics. But then gutbucket pickup trucks push me off onto a narrow shoulder. They cough, spit

CONTINUED...

sparks, burn smut. Some shout I am  
a witch or worse. They hotrod off and toss  
out empty bottles.

I love

the rooted things of earth, the shiest days  
when nothing but the past might change.  
Puddles, blossoms, smudged little leaf and  
pebble—rot's mackle, weeds, rocks, muck,  
vast clover overflowing meadow bottoms!  
Slow down, I think. Impossible. The light  
winks out. It's late. My life is passing by.





## PHILIP DIGIACOMO

### A CHANCE TAKEN

The girl talked funny. She had flagged him down just outside of Dilkon in the middle of the Navajo reservation. Her clapped out Camaro was on the dirt shoulder of Hwy 87 pointed north, trunk and hood up. Dale pulled his Bronco over and checked her out. She was sure different than any girls he knew. A short skirt that looked like rawhide, long legs and all kinds of colors in her big pile of hair, pretty too. The snakeskin boots looked expensive. So did her shearling winter coat. She started talking before he climbed down.

"It's a piece of shit, this thing, absolute rubbish! I nicked it off some old wanker in Texas who was keen on marrying me. A bit of slap and tickle and the prat thinks he owns me! So, I sorted him and now I'm legging it. Seemed like a brilliant idea at the time."

Dale had to ask. "Where are you from?" She answered, "U.K."

That didn't help. Dale tried again.

"What country then?"

She let rip with a deep, plummy laugh and said, "Brixton, which is in Lambeth, which is in London, which is in England, which is in the United Kingdom. Will that do?"

Dale chewed on that for a bit until he figured out what she meant. A foreigner like he thought.

"Oh, okay, got it."

She took a long look from his boots up to his black felt Stetson.

"What's your name luv?"

"Dale."

"Pleased to know you, Dale, I'm Syl, that's short for Sylvia, are you going to fix my car?"

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So that's how it started. Local boy meets foreign girl on the vast, mainly empty Navajo reservation in Northern Arizona on a cold clear day. Dale had a few tools in the Bronco but nothing fancy.

"Will it start?" he asked.

She slid behind the wheel showing so much bare thigh Dale had to look away.

"I'll give it a go, but mind yourself, it might explode."

It turned over then blew out a huge backfire and settled into an idle that would wake the dead.

"Okay, you can shut it off."

There was a hole in the tailpipe just north of the muffler probably.

"Can you fix it Dale? It's too bloody loud to drive."

"I'll try, have you got a jack?"

She got out. This time Dale didn't look away and looked her in the eyes. They were green with icy flecks of blue that matched the streaks in her hair.

"I haven't a clue, let's look in the boot."

They stood at the open trunk. Dale caught a whiff of her scent. It was just like the lady from Pakistan who worked at the video store in Winslow, warm, like some kind of spice maybe. The trunk was crammed with stuff. Mostly empty beer cans, baseball bats, balls, canvas bases, batting helmets and equipment bags.

"Is all this yours?"

"Don't be daft, it's not my car."

Syl was grabbing stuff and tossing it off to the side. A few balls rolled away into the ditch.

Dale said, "The jack is sometimes underneath in the well with a spare tire."

Syl lifted a heavy looking canvas bag with a drawstring top and set it on the ground next to the passenger door and came back to reach deeper into the trunk. Dale watched the bag



slowly tip over. The wind caught something poking out and blew it up and away. To Dale it looked an awful lot like a hundred-dollar bill. Was the bag stuffed full of dead presidents? That was none of Dale's business, at least not yet. Syl stood up holding one of those fancy silver aluminum suitcases.

"No jack, no spare, just me luggage. I think my fags are in here. Do you fancy one?"

Dale had never been asked that before.

"Probably not, I guess."

She threw her head back and let out that sexy laugh again.

"It's just a ciggie, do you smoke or not?"

He reached into the back pocket of his jeans for his tin of Skoal.

"I don't smoke, I just dip."

Syl watched while he put a pinch inside his lower lip.

"Well, I won't be snoggin' you, will I? That's bloody disgusting.!"

She popped open her suitcase, dug through a pile of frilly underpants, plucked out a small square box and tossed it to Dale.

"Players Navy Cut, the finest fag there is."

It had a picture on it, a guy with a beard and funny hat and two ships.

"Alright Dale, would you be a proper gent and give me a light?"

Dale handed the box back to her. "I don't have a match."

Syl lifted a pack from the box and scolded him.

"Well, you should always be prepared for a situation like this. I'm a damsel in distress unless you hadn't noticed."

He struck a match and cupped it from the wind. After she lit her smoke, she looked up at Dale's face, blew smoke from the corner of her mouth and asked, "What are you worried about Dale? He shrugged. "Nothing."

He wasn't worried, he was distracted, hoping he could find the bill that had caught the wind. It could be stuck on the barbed wire across the ditch with other bits of paper trash. Syl offered an impish smile and a soft push to his shoulder. Her fingernails were the same blue as some of her hair.

"Alright then now that we're both sorted what about my car?"

"Sure, let me see what's in my truck."

She was making him nervous. Not just because she was real pretty, but she seemed like someone who invited trouble and Dale had enough of his own. He was three payments behind on the Bronco and he couldn't hide it from the repo man much longer. Being a part-time handyman on the high desert where everyone was dirt poor made things worse. At least there was nothing owed on his tiny adobe house in Winslow by the railroad tracks. It was all his mother left him when she passed. He had spent the summer adding a room that he could rent out, but it was nowhere near finished. November was right around the corner. He would have to nail up tarps soon before the snow came. He wished he'd just taken off, but then if he got her back on the road he could follow and see where she went with all that money. All he had in the truck was a concrete block, a couple lengths of split rails for a fence he never fixed, some empty cans of Coors and some baling wire. That would do it.

The block and fence rails made a half-assed ramp in front of the rear wheel and after two slow tries Dale got the Camaro lifted just enough to slide underneath. The sun was straight overhead making the sky look white instead of blue and the wind was picking up. Syl watched from the passenger seat of the Bronco to keep warm. He kept the keys in his pocket. You just can't tell what some people might do. Hell, she could grab the bag, start his truck and get a head start before he got out from under the Camaro. He stretched out, shimmied under the car and found a poker chip sized hole in the rusted exhaust pipe just like he thought. He walked back to the Bronco for the baling wire and a beer can. Syl slid over to the driver's window and poked her head out. She had untied her hair and let it loose. It was much longer than Dale thought it would be, longer than some of the Hopi girls up on Second Mesa. Theirs was dark as coal but hers looked like colored streamers from a kid's birthday party.

"Can you fix it then?"

"I'm going to try."

He pulled the buck knife from the sheath on his belt and went to work on the can, cutting the ends off and slicing it right down the middle. Then he stomped it flat on the road. Her cigarette smoke caught the wind and slid past him. It didn't smell half bad. Back under the car he wrapped the can around the pipe twice, right over the hole as tight as he could. Then he cinched it tighter with the wire. Maybe it would hold, maybe it wouldn't. At least the

whole car hadn't come down on him. He heard horse's hooves clapping on the road as he shoved clear and stood up. A boy sat on a tan and white Paint horse right next to the Bronco. Syl was stroking its muzzle from the open window. Dale knew the kid but couldn't remember his name at first, a grandson of Phil and Hilda Honami in Shungopovi who ran the Hopi Trading Post and snack bar on Second Mesa. The boy smiled as Dale approached.

"Does your Grandmother know you're way out here?"

The boy smiled even wider and shook his head no. His dusty engineers cap with the Santa Fe Railroad patch above the bill gave his name away.

"Well, Lionel, do you remember me?" Dale asked.

Lionel turned his horse and answered, "Yes, I saw your truck. I have to go now."

He snapped the reins, gave his pony some boot heel to the belly and they took off.

Like lots of Hopi kids Lionel was on the chubby side, but he sure could handle a horse. Bareback even.

For the first time that day, Syl wasn't talking, just looking thoughtfully at Dale like she was glad to be there. He turned away and spat a stream of tobacco juice onto the road. Lionel and his horse were just a small dot headed west, trailed by a twirling puff of dust.

Syl climbed down from the Bronco as a gust of wind tossed her hair straight back over her shoulders. She turned up the collar of her coat, stepping close to Dale. He backed up a little.

"No, don't move, block the wind for me, I'm cold."

Right then she looked like a movie star, but he had no idea which one. Syl looked up and examined his face slowly like she was committing every detail to memory. Dale noticed for the first time that she wore earrings. Tiny doves, one red, one blue. She was right about it getting cold. Syl touched his arm and asked, "Do you have kids of your own, Dale?"

"No, I sure don't."

She squeezed his arm just a little.

"Well, I think you probably should."

Dale wasn't used to sharing personal stuff with just anyone, especially a pretty woman from

a foreign country. He would have to be careful. He stepped away from Syl, got in the Camaro and turned the key. It was still loud but no more than most vehicles on the res. He left it idling and loaded the block and rails into his truck.

"Well, I guess I owe you one Dale, that was champion!"

Dale figured she was happy and ready to move on. She wasn't. She gave him a friendly punch to the shoulder and said, "I could do with a proper meal, what about you, my treat?"

Dale decided to go along and see where it went.

"Well, okay, thanks. The only place around is Phil and Hilda's up on Second Mesa, and they do make a good hamburger."

Syl climbed into the Camaro.

"Then Bob's your uncle, luv. You lead and I'll follow."

Shungopovi was only about three miles by horse or ATV but closer to six by partly paved roads. Dale took it slow, giving him time to think. What if she just took off? Would he chase her? Where was she headed? He was supposed to be in Tuba City to bid on a roofing job at a Childcare Center run by the Hopi school system. Being on time was not going to be an issue. They hadn't even showed up for his first attempt. He would likely have to come back anyway. Besides that bag of money was way more than he could earn patching a roof. He looked in the rearview and saw Syl was right behind him, wearing big aviator shades and tapping those long blue nails on the wheel.

Would she offer to pay Dale for his trouble? He could use a lot more than a free lunch. What if he just took the whole thing? He knew plenty of places she'd never find. If he did it, it would have to be soon. He glanced at her in the mirror again and realized her sunglasses were tinted blue. Damn she was pretty. Sassy and sweet at the same time. He could get used to that. Now, would she call the police to say she was robbed? Not if she was driving a stolen Camaro. He needed to convince her to ditch the car. Then it would be just the two of them in the Bronco with a big bag of money.

Dale slowed for the unmarked turn onto the long dirt rise that led past a few low, unpainted cinderblock houses here and there. In wet weather even his Bronco would have a hard time getting to Shongopovi in all the mud. Six or seven dusty dogs trotted alongside, a mix of mutts, large and small. The road stopped at the top of the mesa near a crumbling concrete basketball court with a tilting off center pole holding up a bare rim. For folks who were rather short, the Hopi sure loved their B-ball. Dale made a u-turn and parked pointing downhill at the side of the trading post and motioned for Syl to do the same. Most of the dogs went for the yellow Camaro, a car they had never seen before, hoping for something

to eat. Tails wagging, ribs showing, they nipped at each other but didn't whine or bark. The big Shepard mix with one eye had been top dog for years and sat calmly waiting for Syl to get out. She rolled down the window a few inches and called to Dale.

"This is a rough lot, do you think they fancy me for lunch?"

The door to the snack bar was only twenty feet away.

"I don't know, how fast can you run?"

Dale stepped over to the Camaro and clapped his hands with a loud smack, and the dogs skulked off.

"Only kidding, come on out, just don't pet any of them."

The sign above the door that Dale had painted years ago had faded and was barely legible. He would have to come by and touch it up sometime. He checked to make sure the dogs had lost interest and opened the door for Syl.

"Welcome to Phil and Hil's Emporium."

Hilda was behind the small grill and came around to greet Dale, wiping her hands on her apron.

"Been a long time Dale, where you been keeping?"

"Construction job down in Phoenix."

"Is this your friend with all the pretty hair?" she asked with a big wink at Syl. "I heard all about her."

Lionel peeked around the end of the booth by the window still wearing his Santa Fe engineers cap. Syl had to laugh. "So, it's you again is it, telling tales, I should have known."

Dale and Syl sat across from Lionel while Hilda made their burgers. He had turned shy all of a sudden, gripping a stubby pencil and lowering his head to a school book of math problems. Dale had his own problems to figure out. Mainly what to do about Syl and her bag of money. Was she going somewhere to meet someone? Was she headed for Hollywood? Did she even have a plan? He needed to know. He could picture her sitting at his kitchen table in Winslow with a cold bottle of beer and a big grin as the sunset turned the room to gold and the freight train rumbled past. If she was really on the run from the Texas law a smart man would say goodbye and just let her go, but Dale wasn't feeling that smart. He

was beginning to like her, crazy hair and all. She was a fish out of water flopping around in a strange dry land. His gut was telling him to do the right thing, whatever that was. Hilda brought their burgers on heavy china plates from the old dining car days. Few people traveled west by train now. Years ago, high-rollers from Eastern cities would stop at the big Harvey House hotels along the way but the railways didn't carry people anymore, just all kinds of consumer goods.

The burgers were big and fat, sitting against a pile of crispy home-fries.

Syl let out a low whistle.

"Now this is wicked, I could do with a pint as well!"

So could I, Dale thought, but knew his ulcer wouldn't care much for it. The pleasure wasn't worth the pain.

"You won't find any beer here, but the '85 Fanta is a good year."

As if on cue, Lionel slid out of the booth and returned with two slender bottles of chilled bright orange soda.

Syl hadn't said a word while she ate. The dogs were pacing just outside the window. She slowly lowered her half - eaten burger and looked down at the dogs, then back at her plate and back to the dogs. Dale knew what she was thinking.

"Don't worry, it's 100% beef from Safeway."

"Then why are you smiling, Dale?"

"Well maybe 75%."

"Oh just bugger off, you!"

The blast of a truck's air horn scattered the dogs and a Hopi Tribal Police pick-up nosed right up to the window. Syl slumped down muttering quietly, "Oh shit." Dale had no time to ask her why as the officer walked right in. It was Duwayne Honahni, Hilda's nephew. He stood at the counter, his back to Dale and Syl. Lionel seemed to have vanished into thin air.

"Aunty Hill, you got a burger for me?"

Duwayne was known to be pushy, especially when on duty, and some people claimed he was wired most of the time and he likely was. It was hard to tell with his eyes covered by mirrored shades. Hilda responded, "I have some frozen, but Dale here got the last two fresh

ones." Duwayne spun around like a gunslinger ready to draw down and Syl flinched, knocking Dale's leg under the table. Duwayne just stood there grinning.

"What the hell Dale, that was supposed to be my lunch, man."

Syl was trying not to be noticed and Dale wondered why.

"Sorry, man, didn't know you were coming."

Duwayne looked at Syl and held it for a long time.

"Who's your friend with the pretty hair?"

Syl looked up at Duwayne with a completely blank face and said, "Julie, my name's Julie."

Duwayne leaned back against the drink cooler and said, "I bet that's your Camaro, Julie from Texas." Syl didn't move an inch or even blink.

"It is now, I got it in my divorce a week ago."

Duwayne looked toward the window and whistled through his teeth.

"Well, it ain't exactly cherry. I hope you got more than that."

Syl answered with one raised eyebrow and a short "maybe."

Why had she lied? "Julie?" and a "divorce?" Dale thought she was one of those people who lied to cops out of habit. Or maybe her real name was Julie and the rest was bullshit. No way would he walk now, especially with goddamn Duwayne nosing around. He hoped it wouldn't turn bad. The next sound in the tiny snack bar was the crackle and pop from the radio in Duwayne's cop truck. He straightened up trying to look professional and barked at Hilda as he walked out.

"Tell Uncle Phil I want my Skillsaw back."

With the roof rack lights spinning and wheels throwing gravel, he fishtailed down the hill and out of sight. Syl was not happy.

"What a pillock! He's a poxy excuse for a copper, do you really know him?"

"I do, and he is, but why did he make you nervous?"

"Nervous? Ha, that's a laugh, I just don't care for some people."

Dale spotted Hilda reaching to turn up the volume on her small radio by the cash register so not to hear their conversation. A polite gesture for sure.

Dale stood up and gathered their plates.

"Time to go."

Syl, produced a twenty from her coat and handed it to Hilda. She looked up at Syl and smiled. "Come back soon and bring Dale with you."

Back outside the dogs slept in the dirt as the sky smeared from pink to deep rose. It would be a cold night there on the mesa. They stood between the two cars. Syl lit a cigarette and looked up as the first stars began to show, then turned slowly to see the distant horizon in every direction.

"Absolutely stunning, all this. I've never seen anything like it."

"Big and empty", Dale added.

"Oh no, Dale. Empty is living in a cheap flat and seeing a brick wall out your window."

Syl stubbed out her cigarette with the toe of her boot.

"Where do you live, Dale?"

"A little town forty miles south of here, Winslow."

Syl moved closer to see his face in the fading light.

"Winslow? Like the song about the girl and the guy and the truck?"

"Yup, that's the one."

Everyone knew that damn Eagles song. Syl moved in close. It felt nice but Dale needed some answers. It was now or never.

"Besides the car and the baseball equipment, how much did you steal?"

"I haven't had time to count it."

"Where were you headed, anyway?"

"Anywhere but Texas, luv."



"Good choice, I'd say."

A coyote yipped somewhere close by and the dogs didn't even budge.

"Another fella might have robbed me blind, left me on the road, or something even worse. Well, now you've ruined my plan."

"That's not funny, Dale."

"That was a bad joke, Syl. Even if I had a reason to lie I wouldn't because I'm no good at it." Dale leaned down to look at the back plate on the Camaro.

"I'm surprised you got this far, these tags expired over a year ago. Might be a good idea to get rid of this car."

"Oh, right, and walk the rest of the way?"

"You could buy a new one, couldn't you?"

Better yet, Dale thought, she could dip into that bag of dead presidents and pay what's owed on the Bronco too.

"Alright Dale, who never lies, what else are you good at besides cars?"

Dale stepped over to the Bronco and dropped the tailgate.

"One thing at a time. Hilda's going to lock up and go home so let's take care of this now. Take everything you want and put it in my truck."

Syl hauled out the canvas money bag, her sunglasses, and the suitcase. It took less than a minute to load her stuff. For a split second he saw himself taking off and leaving her alone on the mesa. But he knew what he had to do.

"Follow me, go slow and stay close."

Just before the dirt became asphalt, Dale slowed the Bronco to a crawl, signaled a left turn, stopped, and got out. They were at the top of a rise with a steep drop into the dark wash below. He walked back into the Camaro's headlights.

"Okay, I want you to pull in front of me real slow and stop when I flash my lights." Syl nodded and said, "Well, Dale knows his onions, doesn't he?"

Dale had to smile. She said the damndest things. Syl drove forward a bit waiting for Dale

to give the sign to stop. Finally, he did.

"Leave it in second gear, kill the lights, kill the engine and get in the truck with me."

As soon as she did, Dale moved right up to the bumper of the Camaro and stopped when they touched.

"Say goodbye to Texas."

Dale gave the Bronco some gas to get the Camaro rolling but then it stopped. He goosed the throttle harder this time, gave it a good bump and watched it pick up speed and escape the Bronco's headlights. Syl leaned forward, elbows on the dash, peering hard through the windshield.

"It's black as pitch out there, where's it going then?"

Dale held his hand up for quiet. "Just wait and listen."

Nothing. Then a groan, a metallic scraping and a dull boom echoed up the hill. Then nothing again. Satisfied that the car had hit its mark, Dale locked the rear differential, dropped into first gear and urged the Bronco slowly back up the way they came. Syl leaned back against the passenger door watching Dale silently until he finally turned to her and asked, "What?" "Are you some kind of outlaw, Dale?"

He would have to think about that one for a while. He might be better off if he was. The bouncing springs and sound of rattling gravel stopped as they pulled up to an empty Highway 87. Over Dale's left shoulder a buttery full moon stood up above the pines of the Coconino Forest. Dale knew that after a while, the cold moonlight would blanket the bottom of the dry wash where husks of burned and rusted cars lay heaped against one another, welcoming a stranger whose yellow paint and bright chrome would not last long. The lack of sound in the high desert made a kind of noise of its own. Dale was used to it. By the dash light he could see that Syl was either deep in thought, or about to cry.

"You're a long way from home, aren't you Syl?"

She didn't answer but looked at him with soft eyes that suddenly seemed much younger. "Right now, we have two choices, head north and end up in Utah where the *Mormons* live."

"Mormons?"

"Yeah, but I doubt you all would hit it off so well."

"And number two?"

Dale took a chance he wouldn't have made twelve hours ago.

"We could head south to Winslow. My place is small and kind of under construction but at least it's warm."

Syl lit a cigarette and wound her hair onto the top of her head in a knot. It looked classy, but she hadn't answered him. Just stared straight ahead. Had he said the wrong thing? She turned quickly to him.

"What are you waiting for Dale? Fuck the Mormons."

That was a good enough answer, he didn't care much for Mormons either. He turned south towards Winslow and tried to remember the last time a woman was in his house. A couple of years at least. Maybe things were looking up. Syl was quiet for the next half hour and Dale could see she had nodded off. Dallas was over nine hundred miles away. No wonder she was snoring. Dale pulled right up to the door of his house, half carried Syl inside and lay her on the quilt covering his double bed. He went back out for the bag of money and her suitcase and heard the Union Pacific freight slowing for the crossing. By noon it would be cooling down in the massive train yard in Los Angeles. Dale laid the canvas bag next to Syl and lit the gas wall heater. Some of the night trains pulled over eighty cars and made all kinds of sounds as they rumbled past. To Dale each car passing sounded like the clang and hiss of steel jack hammers slowed to an easy, lazy rhythm. As slow as it was, his tiny house did shake just a bit. He sat on the old plaid sofa and watched Syl until the freight was out of sight and sound. She hadn't moved a muscle or batted an eye. Things were looking up for sure. Dale kicked off his boots and stretched out. He slept and had a dream. It was a summer day and Syl was painting the newly finished extra room, rolling on a pale blue that matched the softest streaks in her hair.



**DEVON NEAL**

**AFTER THE RAIN**

After the rain stops  
on this starless Friday morning,  
water still rattles in the gutters  
and whispers onto the sidewalk's grain

like a lover weighing another's duty  
to the wind-brushed sea of the sky—  
take off your wet shoes  
and come back to bed.



# JOHN BRANTINGHAM

## CACHE

The woodpeckers going at the palm trees  
outside my window wake me today.

Someone told me that palms aren't  
true trees, but I don't think the birds care.

Down the road, someone's cache of fireworks  
explodes all at once, killing some people,

taking out his house, sending the fire trucks  
screaming down the road. The neighbors gather

outside to watch the smoke plume over the city.  
The woodpeckers don't notice.





## PETER ALTERMAN

### DREAM OF THE MIDNIGHT FLYER

It's two in the morning. He's awake. Again. Robbie hears the moan of the coal train's horn as it lumbers through the silent dark on its way south through Denver to Las Animas and the wastes beyond. He can almost hear the gondolas clanking along miles of rail paralleling Interstate 25 and the South Platte.

His fragile mind imagines it is the ghost of the Midnight Flyer. He sees its headlight slicing through the vast emptiness of the North American prairie that stretches from New Mexico north to the Beaufort Sea. He's known Union Pacific trains from early childhood, though the Flyer was discontinued in 1953 after the Korean War was over, a lifetime before he was born.

In his nightmare he stands frozen on the tracks. He imagines its thousands of horsepower throbbing inside his ribcage and shivering his heart as it bears down on him, a million tons of steel rolling over him, crushing him into the dust like a cigarette butt.

He fears sleeping will relax his guard and he will not wake. He is exhausted by the effort to resist.

Only the woman asleep beside him keeps what's left of him from blowing away on the breeze like a dying ember. He rolls over against her, his face buried in the nape of her neck, his leg stumps pressing the backs of her thighs. Carolina is a small woman, a nurse at the VA hospital in Aurora where she found him and for reasons he can't fathom fell for him. Her black hair smells of her work, soap and disinfectant.

Because of her he is healing. He's out of the wheelchair and up onto prosthetic legs so he doesn't need the toilet seat safety rails any more. The VA provides pills to ease the pain and a psychologist he still keeps memories from but it is Carolina's devotion that anchors him. He doesn't know if he loves her but what she gives him is what he's always needed so he clings to her.

In return she says, "You give me what you can. I know that. For now, it's enough."

It's the 'for now' that worries him. What if there is no more? What if all he can give her in return is his need? This is the trench his mind travels in the hours between bedtime and dawn.

The first hint of light in the east releases him and he sleeps a fitful hour or two.

She wakes him before eight. It is her day off. He's got physical therapy at nine-thirty and she will drive him to his appointment because he hasn't yet mastered pedals with his artificial feet and anyway his stepfather Roy sold his truck when he joined the Army.

Over a bowl of Cheerios he says, "I'm too tired. I won't be able to do anything. Call and tell them I can't make it."

She pours more coffee in his mug. "Drink this. You'll be fine." Her coffee is awful, brown-black acid, but it's a caffeine bomb. His nerves shiver when it explodes.

She is unwilling to relent and he has no strength to insist so they ride together in silence across town to the VA hospital in her second-hand Civic. He senses she is tense but cannot guess why.

Carolina drops him at the outpatient entrance. "Have a good session," she says as he closes the car's door.

It makes a cheap tinny tink as it latches. He'd like to buy her something nicer but he can't afford to unless Roy agrees to sell the ranch to a developer. Then he'll have money.

He half-owns the ranch with his stepfather courtesy of his mother's will. It lies out east where the suburbs give way to the Great Plains, its two hundred acres sitting somewhere between DIA to the northwest and the Union Pacific tracks south. The ranch used to be much farther away from Denver but the suburbs are expanding towards it. Climate change has turned once-fertile prairie to scrub. It isn't worth much as a working ranch but the land is worth millions, or will be when development reaches it and the signs are already appearing on the State Road a few miles back.

Robbie shakes his head to focus on the present and makes his way through the lobby on titanium legs and aluminum canes.

The physical therapy session is torture. After thirty minutes his tee shirt is soaked and he's burned off all the caffeine. He droops with exhaustion, half-dangling by his upper arms on the support bars of the stopped treadmill. The ligaments in his hips and thighs throb and his stumps are blistering.

His physical therapist pretends not to notice but ends the session early. "Good job," he says, "You're making progress."

But Robbie knows that if anything today's session is a step backwards and the unearned praise angers him. He told Carolina he wasn't up for this today. "Fuck," he says, "Fuck fuck

fuck.”

The prostheses needs to be adjusted. At the PT desk he schedules an appointment for Carolina’s next day off and then makes his way painfully to the outpatient lobby, staggering through the corridors like a misaligned robot. Usually her car is idling just outside but today she’s not there so he sits in one of the molded plastic chairs lining the lobby walls and waits for her. Though there is snow covering the grass and shrubs outside, sunlight shining through the atrium warms the air and he dozes and dreams of running.

He wakes when she taps him on the shoulder. She smiles into his face tentatively. Her eyes are deep brown, dark as her coffee. He can see she wants something from him.

“Robbie,” she says. “We’re going to have a baby.”

She’s been to the OB clinic. How could he have not noticed the soft rounding of her belly? She can’t take birth control pills for some medical reason men aren’t expected to understand so yeah, they tried their best to be mindful but sometimes they weren’t. He can see she is waiting to find out if she will be a single mom but she has nothing to worry about. He’ll be responsible for them just as he is responsible for the three men dead under the Afghan sun.

“That’s great, babe,” he says, smiling up at her. “When?” But his tone belies his words and he sees that she hears it because her mood deflates and she shifts her body away from him and drops her head.

“Around Christmas,” she says, almost a whisper.

There’s so much he’s wanted from life and it’s given him so little and now he has to support a family on metal legs. But he is surprised to find he wants to make her happy and a shard of that wish for happiness warms him. He thinks, so that’s love.

He reaches out and takes her hand. “I mean it. It’s just...look at me. I’ll have to find a job,” he says. “If I can find someone who will hire half a man.”

She rubs her belly and says, “You’re more than enough man to do this.”

It breaks his mood and he barks laughter. “There’s the ranch,” he says. “Bears thinking.” Reassured, on the drive back she is chatty, full of ideas and plans, questions he has no answers for. Wedding? Sure, soon as they can fit it into her work schedule. She’s like him, not much family, a brother somewhere in Arizona or California, she’s not sure. All he has is Roy who doesn’t even rate an invitation. A ring? He thinks it should have a small red stone in it to symbolize his heart; maybe an Afghan garnet? Baby names? Boy or girl? A condo in town or the burbs? Or move to a bigger apartment? Religion: Catholic like her or whatever

he is? Be the stay at home parent? No, the hospital has a day-care center for after the baby comes. Once he's steady on his feet the VA will help him find work, maybe even at the medical center. He can fix anything mechanical or electrical. He'll talk to the vocational counselor.

"It'll be tight in our apartment for now," she says, pulling into the parking lot near the University. "But we'll make do."

"Or we could move out to the ranch," he says. "Lots of room there." After all, it's half his. Like the baby.

"Oh, no. The commute would take me at least an hour."

"Maybe less," he says. "Highway's building out towards it." It's something to consider. "We could drive out there next time you have a couple of days off."

"I don't know."

#

The ranch is weathered wood and dust. They sit on the covered porch of the house where Robbie grew up. It's needed paint since before he went into the Army four years ago, really before that, before his mother died, but now it just looks dilapidated. Carolina is showing now and sits in the only chair, a hand resting protectively on her belly. He's sitting on the top step of two, his newly-comfortable titanium legs splayed out within his jeans, his plastic feet hidden in the old black Frye boots whose heels rest on packed dirt.

A barn is off to the right and Roy's old pinto sticks its head out of its stall to watch them, occasionally tearing a mouthful of hay from the hanging bag beside it, content to rest out of the sun. Beyond the empty corral Robbie sees the dots of a handful of cattle grazing. His stepfather leans against a post smoking a Lucky, squinting northwest where gleaming dots in the air are planes landing at DIA. Roy is an anachronism, a bandy seventy-five year old, bow-legged from a lifetime in the saddle.

The acrid tobacco smell brings Robbie back to Afghanistan. The Afghan soldiers smoked Camels the Army imported, which he thought was hilarious.

"You kidding?" his stepfather says, "With them stumps you won't stay in the saddle more'n five paces."

Robbie is used to Roy's contempt and it no longer touches him. He says, "We don't use horses no more. We use ATVs now." He shifts his weight on his hips and shakes a thigh,

making the false leg jiggle. "I can drive one of them with these just like I can drive Carolina's car." He's installed straps on the pedals like stirrups to slip his plastic feet into so he can control the old Honda. Took practice to drive that way but it's second nature now.

"There's no room here for you and your Mex girlfriend," Roy says.

"Watch your mouth there, Roy." Menace, honed by combat, is in his voice.

The old man takes a drag on his cigarette and mumbles something like an apology wreathed in smoke.

Robbie looks to Carolina. She shakes her head. He says, "You owe me money for the truck." "Fuck, boy, this place ain't run a profit since your Ma died and the truck money paid for a new water pump out yonder."

"How long you think you can keep the place going then? Let's sell it for the land. You're going to need money for when you can't work no more."

"Nah." Roy pushes himself off the post and walks off, flicking the still-burning cigarette butt with a practiced motion of papery fingertip and yellow nail. It sails through the deep blue sky in an arc scribed by the orange embers at its tip and lands on dirt where it glows like a danger flare.

"Nursing homes are expensive, Roy," Carolina calls after him.

Robbie says, "So we won't raise Junior here." She knew it was a bad idea from the start. To the south an Amtrak train glides west silently, little more than a worm crawling along the horizon. Robbie watches it until it disappears.

In bed that night he can't sleep. The visit to the ranch, long delayed, disturbed him, feeling the hole left when his mother died and there was only Roy and him, sitting at the kitchen table staring at each other. He hadn't remembered that but now it was changed, now what was in that hole was the Midnight Flyer and he knows there is something he has to do, so he rises from their bed and dresses in the dark.

He's about to walk out the door when she appears from the bedroom in her nightgown. "Where you going?" she says.

It's past ten. He's wearing his old denim jacket over a wool plaid shirt and black jeans. Carolina has sewn his First Division patch onto the left shoulder of his jacket, a big red 1 on a squared olive shield. He's about to walk out the door when she appears from the bedroom in her nightgown.

"Sorry if I woke you." He jiggles her car keys. "There's something I gotta do."

She is cross. "What something you gotta do?"

He turns back to her, puts his arms around her and kisses her. "I gotta go to the ranch. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

She lays her head against his chest. "But we just came from there."

"Something I gotta do that I couldn't do then."

Maybe she knows what he means, maybe even better than he does, because his nightmare is the third shape in their bed, the demon attached to him like a leech that he must cast off, so she pulls herself away and says, "Okay."

He kisses her and leaves.

He can see their bedroom from the parking lot. She's standing at the window watching him. He waves to her and climbs into the car, tossing his canes on the passenger seat, and slips his plastic feet into the pedal straps. He doesn't look back as he drives away.

It is a chilly Fall weeknight. Without traffic the drive out to the ranch takes half as long but it is still long enough and dark enough for the memory of the operation that removed his legs to force itself on him.

He's back in the OR, awake. His legs are on fire, searing pain that runs up his thighs into his spine to his open, screaming mouth. A monitor screeches. A masked surgeon raises bloody gloved hands away from him. He sees a shapeless mass of meat, deep red and stark white, lying on a cart at the end of the table. One of his perfectly untouched feet lies at the end of the mass. He counts the toes.

A nurse in scrubs looms over him. She smells of soap and disinfectant. A clear plastic mask descends onto his face. A name tag on her breast reads Carolina. It is the last thing he remembers as he burns up in the bonfire of pain and knows nothing.

But that's wrong.

Carolina was never in Afghanistan.

The mistake is jarring and he's back on the road out past Aurora heading for the farm. Robbie turns off before he comes it and heads south on the county road the ranch's western border and continues past the corner where his land ends, driving carefully around the potholes in the asphalt. The ranch's property line is miles back.

He parks on the side of the county road north of the unmarked railroad crossing. Interstate 70 lies not far beyond the Union Pacific tracks but he hardly knows it's there. It's nearing midnight.

He is two people, the boy who loved trains and the man who dreams they will kill him. He knows it's all in his head. He's not stupid. It's obvious, the connection between his nightmares and his lost legs. But the nightmares continue.

He's here because he doesn't have time for nightmares. He's going to be a father, a real one, not the lie his mother told and retold until she married Roy. So he sits in the Civic with the engine running and the heater going though he cannot feel the warm air blowing on his jeans. He is looking at the Union Pacific app on his cellphone. The train is coming soon, a freight designated only by a number, not a name, pulled by a pair of ugly diesel-electric locomotives that look like a collection of yellow packing boxes sitting on flatbeds. Nothing like the Midnight Flyer's legendary steam behemoths but everything like them at the same time.

So he turns off the engine and climbs out of the car, grabs his canes and walks east along the side of the tracks, stumbling from time to time on the uneven ground. The line here curves in from Kansas towards the Denver rail yards.

It's coming now. He sees the headlights aimed at him from miles away. He plants his titanium legs and aluminum canes and plastic feet and stares it down. He hears the sound of millions of pounds of steel on steel setting the rails singing, feels the weight crushing him to dust, and it is upon him, its horns deafening.

As the locomotives blow past he screams wordlessly into the wind of their passage.

Then he turns and sees the last car disappear into the night and the train is merely receding red lights. He limps back to the Civic, exhausted, and climbs in. He rests his forehead on the steering wheel and sobs, chest heaving, tears streaming down his face. After a while he is calm. He opens the window and takes a breath of fresh prairie air. He wipes his face and blows his nose.

Robbie starts the car and drives back to Carolina. He climbs the stairs to their third floor apartment slowly. She is asleep on the sofa where she's waited for him but wakes and sits up when he opens the door. He kneels beside her and runs fingers through her hair. "I'm back," he says.





## JONATHAN ODELL

### BABA THE MAGNIFICENT

The old plow shed behind the Brackett's tarpaper shack was filled with shadow and the soft hissing of his pets. At this late hour, the snakes spoke only to David Lee, and the boy found this reassuring. From their boxes, they whispered to him secrets of death and survival. Of evil and grace.

On nights when his father was drunk and dangerous, the boy brought the boxes into the house and slid his snakes under his bed. Their electric hums and vibrations barred his father, frightening him from coming close. But behind the barricade, the sounds comforted the boy and lulled him to sleep as certainly as when his recently dead mother read to him from her book of Bible stories.

Tonight, he needed his snakes even closer. His father was not the only demon David Lee had to fend off. Perhaps by surrendering his life to a power beyond his control, yet something he trusted to do right by him, the way his mother had trusted God, it might assuage the advancing threat of this thing he was becoming.

David Lee stripped off his shirt, baring his stick-like arms and sunken chest. He opened the box that contained the female cottonmouth, at least three feet long now. She would be full of venom. Queen Sheba coiled and lifted her broad head. Her hinged jaw opened impossibly wide, exposing a flicking tongue, short, sharp fangs, and a mouth as white as a fish's belly. She was poised to strike.

Suicide ran unbridled in David Lee's family. The graveyard was full of Brackett men with abbreviated lifespans. At fourteen, David Lee saw the attraction, the finality of it, the numbing dread replaced by a dreamless sleep.

David Lee took ten deep breaths to slow his heart. He gazed into Queen Sheba's lidless eyes, pupils shaped like slits, and waited for permission to come near. She soon closed her jaws and relaxed her coil. Her thick head swayed rhythmically, and her tongue tasted the air. More curious now than frightened.

Moving slowly, fluidly, like a leaf in a stream, David Lee placed his hand into the box. Queen Sheba kinked her neck and lowered her head, her tongue darting. He opened his hand. She tentatively moved up David Lee's fingers and across his palm, then coiled around his wrist and ascended his arm.

Thicker than the boy's forearm, Queen Sheba wound herself upward, pulling herself ever forward by contracting and releasing the powerful muscles that ran the length of her spine. She was bequeathing the muscle that the boy lacked.

She gripped and massaged David Lee's arm, inching her way toward the boy's head. Her movements felt intimate, even affectionate. Her implausibly smooth skin like muscle encased in velvet.

When she reached David Lee's shoulder, with his arm as her anchor, she raised above his jawline and rested her head against his cheek. She was still, yet liquid. David Lee knew this was where she wanted to be. In the chill of the night, the snake craved the heat of the boy's body. David Lee was grateful to have something to offer.

In that moment, David Lee was complete, lacking nothing. This close to death, he was totally alive, but at peace. Queen Sheba trusted him, and he, her. The two were one. They became the same wondrous creature, one nobody had a name for, not boy, not man, not snake, not queer.

David Lee gently gripped Queen Sheba and looped her length around his neck. Her head, now level with his chest, kinked back, biting the air.

If he had to die, he wanted to be taken by what he loved rather than what he feared. But tonight, she refused to harm him. He offered his life to Queen Sheba, and in exchange, she gave him absolute peace; the kind found only in the calm eye of danger.

David Lee often relived that day at the carnival when the spell was cast. Baba the Magnificent stepped barefoot onto the stage, wearing a sequined red cape and a silk turban. He turned to the audience, expressionless, as if under a spell himself. A woman scantily dressed in billowing silks and a ruby in her navel stepped on stage to loosen the tie string around Baba's neck. The cape dropped from his shoulders onto the stage. Beneath, Baba wore a loincloth, revealing a finely muscled body, oiled and gleaming, stirring David Lee in a way both strange and familiar.

Several woven baskets surrounded Baba. His assistant removed the top from one and Baba reached in. He retrieved a writhing cobra which he allowed to coil up his arm.

After emptying several more baskets, Baba has sheathed himself in serpents, some looped around his shoulders, others coiled up his arms and around his waist. He reached both hands into the final basket to retrieve two fistfuls of smaller snakes and brought them up to his chest. Baba himself had nearly disappeared. Remaining was a writhing mass of flicking tongues and twisting tails.

For those few minutes, the snakes made the man mightier than any demon in God's creation. Shedding his own skin, Baba had encased himself in pure muscle, fangs, and venom. No one would dare harm him. With his cloak of scales, the snakes had transformed him into a wondrous beast, one simultaneously worshiped and feared. He had truly found the calm eye of danger.

Tonight, it was David Lee who wore the armor of scales, safe, released from the mounting confusion over what he was becoming, free of the violence by those who claimed to know. For a few moments, the boy disappeared into a shielded world of absolute darkness, a world where nothing could reach him.



## JEFF BURT

### RAIN

I had come to the Sand Hills of Nebraska to see wild buffalo in spring, and the migration of cranes at the Platte River. I had come to visit Rain Schultheiss, an old NCO friend from my four long years in the service, and to see his blooming lilacs, planted over an old outhouse hole. His actual name was Reinhold, but archaic names did not last long in a barracks or on the basketball court. His father had been a German Luftwaffe prisoner of war in Wisconsin in the 1940s, returned to Wisconsin after the war, and then settled in Nebraska. Rain had left Nebraska for the service as Reinhold, his proper name, had been captured and imprisoned in Viet Nam, and returned as Rain. I had not seen him since 1983.

I was on a transcontinental tour in my 1973 Key West soft green Monte Carlo, a last road trip for the Carlo as well as myself. At an average of thirteen miles per gallon, the Monte Carlo not only burned dollars, threw out carbon dioxide, but gave profit to many little mom and pop gas stations throughout the country.

My son had driven with me from California to Florida, and then back until we hit Chicago, when he got a job offer to do software coding and mapping for a firm doing artificial intelligence for self-driving cars and trucks. Their forte was trucks, and my son's forte was mapping. Not only were the electric trucks and cars displacing the Carlo, the AI was displacing the driver, me. He flew from Chicago to San Francisco.

I had meandered from Chicago through Wisconsin and Minnesota, dropping down to Sioux Falls, Iowa, and had plans to take the Missouri River to Council Bluffs, cross over to Omaha, and then follow I-80 through silos and Herefords until I needed to turn off into no man's land to see Rain.

My plan suffered a diversion in Sioux Falls. I stopped at a gas station about ten at night. The restrooms were already locked, so I shambled out back to take a leak by the light of my cell phone. As soon as I turned on the spotlight, I saw two small men hunched in between a couple of propane tanks. They were short, very short, with thick faces, and I took them to be from Central America.

"No ICE," one said.

I laughed. "No, I'm not with ICE. Immigration doesn't pee in the dark. You guys hiding?"

"Yes," the older one said, coming out between the tanks. "We work at a packing plant. The plant got raided. Workers rounded up, taken. Fifty-six. Should have been fifty-eight, but we," he gestured to his friend, "we ran."

"You need food, water?"

"Yes. We need a ride."

"Where to?"

"Nebraska. Grand Island. I have family there."

"That's what you are taught to say," I laughed. "Really have family there?"

The older man laughed and snorted. "Yes, if you count friends as family." He looked down at his shoes. "Some drunks have chased us. They have shotguns and fast pickups. We have only our feet. They are nearby, I don't know where, but they have come by often."

"You need a car to hide in, both of you?"

"Si."

I thought of my son, his generosity toward migrants, his consistent attitude that eventually, with the economies of the global marketplace, we will all be migrants. I saw the two men hunched over as I had been as a child, kept in a closet when my fidgeting became too much for my mother, sequestered in the farthest chair in an elementary schoolroom, sometimes facing a corner for an hour to make me still.

"I've got a lot in my trunk. You'll have to hide in the backseat. It's got a lot of room, and my car has major horsepower and I can probably outrun their trucks. I am going towards Grand Island and you can go as far as I go."

The man nodded, and interpreted for his friend, who then came out and shook my hand.

I brought the Carlo around and they climbed in the backseat and I gave them the two blankets I had and a sleeping bag. The younger man stretched out on the floor and covered himself with the sleeping bag. I could not see his head nor feet. The older man sat alert in the backseat, leaning forward, I am sure wary of me.

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We headed south, and had not gone more than twenty miles before three pickups with high beams on came gunning past. The older man in the backseat dropped down. They shined a flashlight in my face even though going eighty, and must have liked what they saw because they kept on driving.

In Omaha hours later I decided to gas one more time and buy some doughnuts and coffee, and hid the car behind an empty mall.

The older man told me they had been in the U.S. for seven years, worked at the meat packing plant for six, paid cash for everything, and lived in a shack that had a toilet, a sink, a heater, and two beds. They sent money to Guatemala when they could. The people in the area knew they were undocumented, but didn't hassle them. If anything, especially in the winter, they were nice to them. Two churches often brought them clothes and cookies and occasionally a gift card.

An hour later, outside of Lincoln, I got pulled over by a Nebraska State Patrol Officer for speeding and she shined a flashlight into the back seat before approaching me at the driver's window. She asked for license and registration, and then asked for the IDs of the older man in the backseat, not yet seeing the young man on the floor.

The older man's ID was a flimsy almost paper-like driver's license issued by Mexico and a ragtag often folded international driver's license that was valid for supposedly two more years, though they were never authorized for such a length. Much of the paper had water stains, and the signatures were washed out.

She cleared us without issuing a ticket or a warning, and then lectured me about how folks in the middle of the country didn't appreciate Californians speeding through the state as fast as they wanted because they were bored with cornfields, soybeans, cows, and silos. I told her we were going to visit a friend in the Sandhills and she brightened like a meteor.

Good country, that. It's the season for the cranes migrating, too. You should get a load of them.

I nodded, started the car, and left.

The older man giggled, said the international license always threw off the Iowa state troopers from asking more questions because they see them once in a lifetime and don't want to take a chance on making an error. It's like, he said, we are workers at an embassy. And it works in Nebraska, too.

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We stopped in the morning near a truck stop just off I-80, I bought three breakfasts and brought them to the car. They ate them quickly. The coffees were all black, but I had taken a fistful each of creamer and sugar, and they shared, pouring all of the sugar and about half of the creamer into their cups. About a football field away graders, backhoes, and diggers chugged away, as if strip mining in the plains. Modular homes to the west of the truck stop lined the horizon in a single row, almost eerily suggesting a wall. All of those homes had workers involved in the construction, as if it were a company town.

The counter person said they had discovered some lithium, the new gold, and they had a permit to dig an old seabed up and discover if there was more lithium than the small amount that blew east from the top of the sand. She said it reminded her of Oklahoma and the oil jennies working non-stop to feed the thirst for oil. It won't stop with EVs. People need to travel, food, relatives, jobs. But it's that lust I don't get, she said, it's noxious, you can smell it in the air, it's money, it's the smell of cheating the earth, death. It's like we're saying we can move and you can't.

When I returned to the car, I told the men.

"I have worked in pits," the older man said. "Gravel for roads. Once I saw a road slide back into a pit, like earth had called it back."

The diggers worked furiously, chugging black smoke eastward. I wondered how many batteries would be required to compensate for the carbon fuel emissions. The diggers worked at the corners while the bulldozers worked in columns. White collar workers with ties and yellow hard-hats seemed as plentiful as the drivers.

On the highway, diggers and dump trucks seemed to swim slowly, at times clogging both lanes. The dump trucks headed to a massive mound about seven miles north that we could see from the road, like a ziggurat, tier after narrowing tier reaching toward the clouds. Diggers crawled at ten miles per hour, apparently the construction crew lacking enough flat beds to transport them south. I resisted laying on my horn, but I was among the few. In retort, many of the digger drivers feigned not being able to hear, removing their hands from the steering controls and cupping as if radar antennae. Up ahead was a large farmhouse with an overhead irrigation pipe spraying their lawn, a lush growth in a dusty land. On the edge of the corn fields, several brown-skinned males ran with plastic irrigation pipes until they disappeared into the corn.

After the delay, we zipped toward Rain's, even though passed by nearly every other car and pickup truck. Rain had warned us that his mailbox had been leveled in the winter by a plow



and he had not resurrected it, saying he lacked the faith required. In its place was an odd combination of metal sculpture—a road plate as a base, pipes sticking upwards like bats, and two rusted barbeque grills at different depths and heights suggesting a catcher and umpire. The grills had a matching set of actual catcher's masks.

Rain staggered down the driveway when he saw the Carlo turn in. He had a six-pack of Coke dangling from his left, long arm, and a cigarette held towards his face in his short right arm. Even in the heat he wore his shirt buttoned to the top, and when he turned to walk back toward the house his shirt had so many creases that I could tell he had not washed it in a while, perhaps had slept in it.

Elizabeth Rivera stood near the front door, head up as if looking at the ceiling of the porch. She took one of the Cokes from Rain, but did not follow him as he went inside. I parked the car and the three of us got out and stretched, looked at the sky, scratched, and made our way to the house. Elizabeth stood at the door, made her greetings, but continued to look over at the Monte Carlo.

"The sun," she said, "makes your car look like an emerald cove in tropical waters. Still that same dream," she laughed.

"Your dream or mine?"

"Mine, of course. I have only been to Canada and Mexico."

"Mexico has some light green waters on the Baja and the Atlantic side."

"My people came from Sonora. Highlands. Blue skies, a few clouds. Your car, it makes me want to swim."

Rain had not said hello, but grunted for us to take a seat on the couch, which when three men sat down the cushions sank almost to the floor. I told him about the ICE bust, the goons in the pickups.

"When you need to leave," Rain said, "one of you will have to wriggle off the end of the couch and give the others a hand." He winked. "No one following you any longer?" We all shook our heads no.

"Hard to get shut up in a car for a long drive, and Nebraska is a long drive. Which one of you was the one that hid under the bag? Did you do that the whole way?"

"Si," said the younger man. "Stayed warm, out of sight."

"Like a lizard hiding in a hole," Elizabeth said.

"No lizards here," Ralph said. "You can walk around as free. Keep your head up. Try to find some cool air, if there is any. Just keep your hands to yourself, and be polite with this woman."

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"Tries to be my father figure," Elizabeth said in a high-pitched voice. "Wants me to get my dates pre-approved. Shotgun at the door type. And I am over sixty."

"Elizabeth, here. You remember her from the service? Worked in general services accounting keeping track of expense reports. What happened was that Elizabeth came for a visit but ended up at that sorry site of a parish we've got. She cleaned it, talked to the priest, and when she returned, she said she needed to stay with me for a week so she could get a place to live. She'd bought the diner. The diner! A losing money-pit full of losing people. Just like the parish. Said she wanted to make it into a truck stop, diesel, a place to rest overnight, an oasis in the Sandhills.

She endured and she prospered, Rain muttered. She added a gas station, then a new wing to the restaurant, then on to the sleeping sites and the battery hookups. I mean, Elizabeth's a compelling woman, all rosy cheeked and smiling in the morning, coming with a cup of coffee and a cinnamon bun to your truck window. Said she got it from an old Swedish magazine where an old gent was serving the coffee into those little teeny demitasse cups. Said the drawing made him look like Mickey Mouse—only four fingers, because a fifth one would have obscured the cup from the picture. But when she did the coffee and sweets, once a customer stopped there, they always came back. And locals, and by locals, I mean people as far away as thirty, forty miles, they came, too.

She knows business. She knows money.

She's endured a lot. Jokes about being Mexican, racism, hard work, desecration of the parish, not that it might not have deserved it. Hard to see her devotion to that faith when that faith subjugated her people. But she's all about the personal relationship, you know, and I get it, the church ain't the thing. It's Jesus," Rain boomed, raising his hands in the air.

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"And now you bring these two migrants that should be kicked out but she's bound and determined to show compassion, so I'm putting them up. I'll pay for their work. Suddenly we are eating five to a table and Elizabeth will be happy, your two fellow travelers will be happy, you're happy, and I'm happy. Go figure."

Rain took me on a walk around his place, stopping at the lilacs, the outhouse, the sunflowers acting like a fence to the southern side of his property.

"Why did you stop working at the machine shop and move out here?" I asked Rain.

"It was not that I could afford to quit, to stop working. I had payments enough, and government checks meant a smaller apartment in a cheaper city, no new car smell even if it was an aromatic toxin. It wasn't money. My hands had betrayed me, had swollen and lost the messages my mind gave, could no longer tumble a part, or twirl a tool or even detonate the space bar on a computer keyboard—they were stuck, the knuckle that adjoined to the palm had no strength left after fifty years of labor. All I knew was mechanical. Even the skills I had learned with meters, computers and touch screens were concussive—I touched hard here, or pressed hard there, or pounded keys as if they were rivets to be popped into metal.

I was obsolete. My thumbs failed, my hands, the very instruments I required to be steady in labor had become wobbly. My vision had never wavered. I don't need glasses. My memory never lapsed, my feet and attitude still nimble and resolute. But my hands had betrayed me.

Look at these palms. Trace the lines. Sanded spots in the cushions of the palms. See? And the fingertips have been scorched and pierced so many times I can no longer leave a readable print of my identity. I stare into the future and no longer know who I will become."

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"Perhaps the effaced fingertips and palms whisper a transformation, time for new pursuits," I said.

"No," Rain laughed. "My job was to take old trucks and make them useful, to re-fashion, like an elephant made from the DNA of a mammoth in a frozen tarpit. I'd take the plow blade from one with no motor and attach it to the front end of one that had only one gear to push dirt where the transmission didn't matter. Perfect for being a poor farmer out here.

Frankenstein, he called me, able to stick a bolt anywhere and force an electric charge and animate the dead. That's all I know.

Elizabeth tidies the house once a week while I sit in a rocker on the little deck I made out of pallets and old rubber tires, she winks and says I will be a gentleman again after she's done, trying for these many years to make me into what I am not, add a smiling plow for a grin, a little motor to my pace."

We sat on the porch and didn't speak, as if learning the history of Rain had brought an end to history itself, and there was no more catching up to do. It was an oddly fulfilling space.

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Early morning, in the dark, Rain woke me and told me to dress. Lightning flashed too close to count, not striking pitchforks but wrinkled sheets making clouds into lampshades of quivering electricity so near the hairs on our arms lifted as if in cellular praise. We walked to a cliffside—we could not hear except for roar, that low rumble that oceans hide in abalone shells and caves pronounce the deeper one enters. As we stood on the top of the hill and all senses strobed, we heard a low moaning and when the sky lit the valley floor saw paired a baby and mother buffalo.

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Other than a few "Incredible" and "Wow," we didn't speak on the way back, left our muddy shoes at the door, and went back to bed. Rain looked happy. It was the first time I had seen his cheeks uplifted.

Sometimes the simplicity of a place like the Sand Hills can lull you into a quiet that makes you think you could live there forever. Sometimes it's the vistas, how far vision can extend. But often that is just a rest, a dozing, and the lack of electric pulse, of a population. But I needed to travel, to get away, maybe just to go.

I had always spun like one of those gyroscopes pulled by a wound string until I fell. I wasn't through spinning yet.

Driving gave me both a way to cover space and to have space, a way to be solitary but not alone. I cannot describe very well what populates inside my head when I see low clouds racing across the sky before the grey skirt of thunderclouds, small branches looking as if they might almost break from the larger branches, but it is as if a person has spoken and I must carry on conversation with it. Or when a small orchard of apple trees appears near a creek in which a lone weeping willow stands, erect and full, branches like a large nineteenth-century skirt reaching to the ground. Or a dust devil race over a patch of dirt and dissipates forty feet in the air that brings memories of my mother crouching in fear that we'd be

whisked from the grass into a neverland. Or over the hump of the Interstate when I can see the skylines of Oakland and San Francisco and the salt marshes near Fremont at the same time.

On this trip, at times, even with my son, I felt a need to take a spin alone, to feel the Monte Carlo horsepower first shake the car and then at a tremendous and unsafe speed the engine become fully harnessed such that the car not only did not shake, but seemed to pierce the air without touching the road, frictionless.

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Rain, Elizabeth, and I mulled over what to do with the two stranded workers. Then Rain started his truck, and said he knew where we could go. We got our gear and Rain told us to get in the Monte Carlo, took Elizabeth by the hand, and then went silent. Where could we go? We were in the middle of the Sand Hills. There was no place to go but more of the Sand Hills. We had not gone three miles when he abruptly turned onto a dirt lane, and we drove for several rut-filled miles until we reached the top of a hill.

An old wooden church stood at the top.

"It's got a kitchen," Elizabeth said. "It's got running water from a well, and I clean it every month, so it's not dusty. It's got a small room in the back with three cots. It served as the hideout for a Turkish husband and wife who the town thought had brought the Spanish flu that killed so many in 1920. It's Methodist. They used to teach Lakota to read English there, and the Lakota learned that the white man's Bible talked about justice and compassion and reconciliation, and they turned it back on the residents, who all they wanted to do was steal from and suppress the Lakota. Uncomfortable times. Deadly times.

The pastor of the church agreed with the Lakota, so the white farmers removed him as pastor. The Methodist church sent another young pastor, who ended up agreeing with the Lakota. The settlers almost lynched him. His pregnant wife hustled down to the tree where they'd hung a rope. After that the church never sent anyone, and all the preaching was done by men in the church, and then no one came any more. Like a boil that was pierced. The church has been abandoned, but like the Catholic parish, I tend to it now and again. I like how this church stands tall on the Sandhills, that cross in the skyline above everything, and the church empty below. It says a lot.

I can make sure the two men eat. I can have their laundry done."

"Laundry," Rain scoffed. "They've got to have clothes to do laundry. We've got to buy them

extra shirts and pants and boots and jackets. Bedding. The whole list.”

Rain scuffed his feet in the dirt.

“I’ll put them to work, too. Got lots to repair. Work through the winter, I guess. If they can drive, I’ll give them my truck. I’ve been where they’ve been, and it’s a small space, a captivity. People say they want to force them out, the migrants, but really what they do is force them in. In their heads, these migrants, they live in a tiny, tiny world. Cramped, knees to the face. I’ve been there. They can work with cows from raising the calf, not cutting up the adult. Might be a refreshing change for them.”

“You,” he said, turning to me. “You need to get on the road. It’s what you’re traveling for. To travel. To go. That freedom of not being in a tin can getting to work, working in a tin can, and then coming home to a tin can. Getting to nowhere. That’s what this is for me. Home. Nowhere can be home, and this is my nowhere. You need to get in that Monte Carlo.”

You just witnessed three of the four best things of spring around here, the returning of life. The cranes going north, the buffalo giving birth, the lilac sprouting. If you noticed on your walk, you’d have noticed how the prairie grass is growing, not even so much growing, as resuscitating from the winter, all dried out like noodles and then splashed with rain and back to full and green. That’s all I need to get through summer and fall and winter again, just those four things coming back to life. You don’t see those in Chicago or California. There’s grass, lawns, but not the rebirth of sod. There’s no buffalo, no cranes, no lilac that’s the only thing of color in five miles, bee-coupled, fragrant.”

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I returned the items to the trunk and made sure I had nothing that could flap or fly out of the car, because I intended on having the windows down for much of the day, and at eighty miles per hour, the Monte Carlo had a vicious cyclone inside of it. I thought about Rain and Elizabeth having found their home, and how I’d never really found one.

I shook Rain’s hand. “Thanks for the use of your home.”

“Home?” Rain repeated. “You mean house. You can’t use a home. But I can smell it home from here. It has a scent, and more than anywhere else I have been I find that scent stronger. It’s the scent of a kitchen that you smell from a few blocks away, or of the wet soil off in the distance when you are standing on dry dirt. It’s the smell after clouds have passed over a field of prairie and the sun gleams on the bobbing heads of grass and grain again. It’s a scent of the person you love in the air outside the front door before you enter the

house. And I'm close. I am close right here, and that's enough. It's enough to be close. I could wander through the rest of the Sand Hills, through Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, California, like you, and all the way back and never find it. But here I am close. Not home, but where I belong. Welcome to obsolescence."

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When I drove down his lane and onto the country road and watched the dust kick up behind me, I hungered to be with my wife, I hungered to be near my children. I smelled asphalt, country dust, vinyl. Home was close. I spread my left foot toward the door, and nearly pinned the accelerator to the floor. The Carlo roared. I kept accelerating until I no longer could feel the friction of the tires or the impedance of the air.





AMY LERMAN

## HAROLD AND THE PURPLE CRAYON

*Don't be surprised when you wake early,  
the sun's window streaks pathing you  
to the bathroom, and you see me  
outlined in purple, drawn into the wall.  
I liked watching you drift last night only  
moments after you laughed at the sitcom,  
but your snores silenced our ceiling fan's  
whirr, the television, me, so I left you, the cat  
burrowed into your side, for the ribbon-tied,  
purple crayon you gave me last Valentine's  
Day, an homage to my favorite children's  
book and my memory  
—or is it yours now?—  
of crayoning my name, incorrectly spelled,  
all over Aunt Elaine's newly-painted walls.  
Of course, I know people with mortgages don't  
color their walls—  
though, in all fairness, I've told you about  
our neighbors growing up, the ones who  
muraled the front of their house in *The Yellow  
Submarine* cover—  
and I should follow the sleep hygiene instructions  
for insomnia—  
    *Sit in a chair in the dark because the bed  
is reserved for two things: sleep and hanky panky—  
but, I can't, and oh, how our hallway's  
wall yearned  
for that apple tree trunk, strong enough  
to house so much ripe fruit I drew  
into its foliage. I can reenact Eden,**

CONTINUED...

*if you like, draw my hair longer  
to cover breasts, a handed apple, and once  
you are here, we can  
crayon a mountain  
or a balloon  
or a moonlit path  
to keep us  
from getting lost.*





## RICHARD C. MCPHERSON

### AVAILABLE LIGHT

The suffocating desert heat wilted everything, even the sound of distant artillery fire, even Andi's voice as they hurried behind a large rock formation. "We can hide here for the night and get to the road at dawn." She shifted her dirt-covered pack to the ground, careful not to bump the camera hanging from her belt. She slipped off a dingy white Press armband and passed it to Murphy with a whisper. "Here, use this."

The grimy soldier collapsed against a car-size boulder and groaned. "Shit." He glared at Andi as he took the armband and pressed it against the oozing bullet wound on his shoulder. "Shit."

"We should be OK here till morning. With a little light we can find the road before..."  
"What the fuck do you know? You think those dirty fatigues make you some kind of soldier, sweetcakes?" He spat in the dirt and scoffed. "No rifle, not even a pissant pistol. Just a camera. A camera! Shit load of good that'll do if those Taliban pricks hit us." He winced in pain, settled back against the boulder.

Andi sipped from a canteen and looked evenly at Murphy. "You think acting badass makes you some kind of soldier?" She sloshed the remaining water in the canteen and gave it to Murphy. "I know what I'm doing."

He took the canteen, sipped, harumphed. "Yeah, takin' party pics for the folks back home." A few desultory rounds from a distant machine gun glided through the twilight. "Gonna show everybody our brave boys in action?" A lazy mortar round thudded not far away. "You think anybody wants to see this clusterfuck?" A bullet pinged off a lifeless tree a few yards away. "Listen, here's how it's gonna be. When this bleeding stops, I'm headed to the road," he jerked his thumb, "then back to our last position. And you," his lip curled, "stay the fuck here. You'd just slow me down, get me shot, taking your dumb pics."

Andi considered Murphy. "Are you sure the road is that way? I think we got turned around when we got separated from the unit, dodging that enemy patrol."

"So, it's General Sweetcakes now. You know infantry tactics?"

"I know the direction of our grenade launchers is behind us now. Toward the mountain."  
Murphy craned his neck. "Maybe."

"This is your first war, right Murphy?"

He looked at her in disbelief. "Yeah, Sweetcakes. And my last if I get out of here in one piece."

"It's my third. And probably not my last."

Murphy was silent while Andi methodically dusted off her camera.

\*\*\*

Quiet had settled over everything. Murphy watched Andi pick up her camera and look at him through the viewfinder of her camera. "Gonna take my picture, Sweetcakes?" He gave her the finger, then shoved it higher, defiant. "Here, take a picture of this."

Snap. Snap. "That's good, Murphy."

"Bullshit."

"No. Flipping me off wasn't bullshit. You're really pissed. You're hurt. And scared." He stared at her, silent. "It was in your face." She blew desert dust off her camera. "Ever looked at someone through a camera?" Andi offered Murphy her camera and he waved it away. "Here. Take a good look at me and tell me what you see." She tilted her head slyly. "I'll buy you a drink." She reached into her pack, withdrew an airline-sized bottle of Jack Daniels, and tossed it to him.

Murphy broke into a crooked smile. "Well, fuck me." He opened the bottle, took a swig, and softened a little. "OK, Sweetcakes. If you got another bottle of Jack, I'll play." He finished the bottle.

Andi withdrew another tiny bottle from her backpack, held it up, and wiggled it. "First take a few pictures of me."

He picked up the camera, frowned, and looked at Andi through the viewfinder.

"What do you see?"

"A dumb bimbo who could be back at HQ partyin' with some officer, but she's hiding here with me."

"What else? Who am I? The camera will show you if you let it."

He studied Andi, moved the camera up and down her. Snap. "A tall, older babe with a good rack. Probably a fox in your day." A smile just this side of a leer. Snap.

"Good. What's my face tell you?"

He paused, eye on the camera. "You should look scared shitless. But you're not." He put the camera in his lap. "Your face is in a little box, can't even tell you're in a war. That's bullshit." "No, Murphy, that's the point. The box, the viewfinder? It keeps the world out so you can see only the person in front of you." He harrumphed. "You hate bullshit? So do I. You want to see what's not bullshit? Get yourself a camera and start looking at people through it."

He picked up the camera and studied Andi again. He shifted slightly and winced from the pain in his shoulder. "Here." He tossed the camera back to her. "You owe me another bottle of Jack."

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"I hear someone." Murphy's whisper was urgent. He turned toward the edge of the huge stone shelter and moved his rifle into his lap. A few feet away a voice muttered softly. Murphy winced as he tried and failed to lift the rifle to his wounded shoulder. Andi expertly swept the rifle from his hands and brought it to eye level. Clumsy footsteps got closer, someone slipping. Andi pointed the rifle toward the sound approaching their rock sanctuary, brought it to eye level, and wrapped her finger around the trigger.

"Oy!" A man stumbled into sight and toppled at Andi's feet. He froze and raised his hands. His U.S. Army uniform was filthy, the pants torn open at the knee. The fear in his eyes turned to surprise as he scanned Andi, then Murphy. "You're Americans!" A shot zinged high above the boulder. "I'm Chaplain Cohen."

Andi slipped her finger off the trigger and lowered the rifle. She blew out a long breath.

Murphy spat. "Shit. We need an infantry platoon, and they send us a worthless padre."

The chaplain brushed off sandy dirt and looked at Andi. "Who are you?"

"Andi Green, freelance photojournalist."

"Andi Green? Andrea Green?"

Murphy gaped. "You know her?"

"Not personally. But Hurricane Isabelle? The pictures of the bungled response, the human suffering? The Pulitzer Prize? I know about her." He wiped his hand on his jacket and reached toward Andi. "Rabbi David Cohen. This is an honor. We're in distinguished company, corporal."

"We're in the shitter, is where we are, padre." He watched Andi shake the chaplain's hand. "Sweetcakes here is taking pictures of this clusterfuck." The chaplain flinched as a bullet pinged off a nearby boulder. "What about you, padre, you God squad types just go looking for trouble?"

"I was headed for battalion..." a mortar round threw up dirt and debris not far away. "...for battalion HQ. I was trying to find the road, but I'm lost."

Murphy snorted. "Then you're in the right place too. We're all lost."

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A few shots stitched the darkness, slowed, then stopped, a ragged farewell to soldiers on both sides. The three sat still, helping the silence last. Andi checked her camera and Rabbi Cohen studied Murphy's glowering look, watched the knuckles of his balled fists grow white. "How bad is your wound, corporal?"

"What do you care? You're not a priest, not even a real padre." He stuttered the last syllable with scorn. "Just a...Ra...bbbbbi? You gonna say some weird Jew prayer?"

Cohen half-smiled. "Couldn't hurt, corporal." Murphy was pushing on his shoulder, testing the wounded area. "We Jews are good at getting shot at, been doing it for centuries. Maybe the weird prayers helped. It looks like you could use some help."

Murphy spat. "I love this fucking wound. It's gonna get me out of this shitty war."

Rabbi Cohen nodded. "Why're you here at all? This unit is all-volunteer."

Murphy ignored a canteen the rabbi offered. "Better than jail."

"Jail? The Army doesn't usually take somebody who's in trouble with the law. You must have an important skill."

Murphy straightened a little, a touch of pride in his voice. "I can fix anything with wheels. Take it apart, put it together, whatever. I was part of this crew in Paterson, we boosted cars sometimes. I'd change a car so we could sell it or fence the parts." He scowled. "I got busted in a sting. Jersey state cops nailed all six of us. I was the only guy with no record, so



the judge offered me a deal." He spat, then shrugged. "Paterson sucked, my old man was a drunk."

"So, the Army, trucks, the motor pool."

"Motor pool, my ass." Murphy's voice grew weary. "That was the plan, then some geniuses kicked off this dumbass war and they shipped me to a forward unit, needed wheels fast." He turned away from the rabbi. "Now piss off..." His lips curled. "...padre. I need some shuteye." He turned back. "And if you got any good Jew prayers, pray we get to the goddam road before the A-rab pricks find us." He sneered. "I bet they'd love to get their hands on a Super-Jew." Murphy folded into fetal position and closed his eyes.

Andi watched the rabbi look in the distance, as if searching for an unseen enemy.

Snap.

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Andi accepted a crumbling energy bar from Cohen and took a bite. She chewed thoughtfully, then picked a nut from her teeth. "Are there many Jewish chaplains?" She handed the energy bar back.

"Not many. We may be God's chosen people, but we're not chosen very often by the Army." He started to take a bite but looked at Murphy's still form and stopped. "I'll save the rest for him." He slipped the remains of the bar into his pants pocket. "Most of us are stateside." He rubbed the stubble on his face. "I'd just finished rabbinical training and there was so much antisemitism everywhere. I needed to do this. You know, a Jew in the foxhole might change a few minds." Brief machine gun fire added minor emphasis, too far away to merit a look. "I was a 9/11 kid, fifteen when it happened. It hit us pretty hard. We lost an uncle and his son - my cousin Adam - in the Trade Center." He sighed. "Uncle Moishe had just opened a restaurant in one of the towers, Adam was at NYU and was waiting tables. He was like an older brother to me." Cohen fell silent.

"I'm so sorry, rabbi."

He fingered his chaplain insignia. "I just wanted to reach people. To help stop the hate."

Andi picked up her big camera, looked it over, and set it back on the ground. She pulled a smaller camera out of her fatigue pants, scanned the tiny sanctuary through the viewfinder, framed the chaplain, and zoomed in close.

"Is moonlight enough to get good pictures?" he asked.

Snap. Snap. "Sometimes the light you're given has to be enough."

Rabbi Cohen smiled. "That's what I tell people, too."

\*\*\*

The Rabbi studied Murphy, balled up against the boulder, hands tucked to his chest. "Murphy's afraid, scared right down to his core. Back in Jersey he had his crew and knew his enemies - the other gangs, the cops. But here? Murphy's all alone, truly lost."

The sound of his name drew Murphy from a half-sleep, but he remained still, eyes closed, listening.

Andi nodded in the pale moonlight. "Yes, scared is one thing. Normal, natural. But to feel like you're facing possible death alone?" She shook her head and pushed back a lock of tangled, dark hair. "That's the hardest thing there is."

"Is that why you took up photography, Andi? To capture people alone? Your pictures - don't get me wrong, they're magnificent - but they're bleak."

Andi breathed deeply. "I got my first camera for my twelfth birthday. My mother and I were at this little lake in Pennsylvania. Eagle's Mere. Tiny lake, so clear you could see the bottom, peaceful, no motorboats, just canoes. Surrounded by thick woods and a trail where we'd pick wild blueberries." She smiled. "The Laurel Path." She chuckled. "Corny, right? But I couldn't wait to get there every summer vacation. It was just a week or two, but I waited all year for it. Summer friends, swimming, the ice cream shop." She leaned back. "That winter, my dad got terribly sick. Chemo was awful, it took months. He died on the first day of Spring." She picked up a pebble and tossed it from hand to hand. "Mom was determined to go to Eagle's Mere, like we always did. She wanted me to see there was still sunshine and laughter in life. So, she gave me a camera and we went."

Rabbi Cohen reached over and touched Andi's hand. "What a hard age to lose a parent."

Andi nodded. "I took pictures everywhere. My dog in our canoe, my friends, strangers, the blueberry bushes." Her voice lost its wistful quality; now she was reporting. "When school started, I took the camera with me everywhere. I hid behind it, to keep myself apart from people." She picked up her camera briefly, then put it on top of her backpack. "But all the camera did was bring me closer to people. I was afraid of connecting with strangers, and the camera brought connections that were incredibly intimate. At first, I felt like an intruder, looking at their faces. But later? I realized I was being allowed to share their humanity. That was their gift to me, and it became my gift to the world." She laughed softly. "Wow, that's pompous. I'm sorry."

"No, Andi, you found a purpose and it's all about connecting with other people, especially when they're suffering." He motioned toward Murphy. "Or scared."

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Rabbi Cohen reached toward Murphy's rifle and hissed. "Stay down! Quiet!" Rustling in the surrounding brush grew twig-snapping close. Cohen took the weapon and peered around the boulder, one knee on the ground. Silence. He edged into the brush beyond the massive boulder's protection. Still no sound. He crouched and took a careful step, rifle held high. Two more steps, snapping a twig.

Bam! Bam! Then the sound of a different weapon. Bang!

Thrashing erupted in the brush, punctuated by the angry, confused shouts of two men grappling amid erratic gunshots.

Behind the boulder Andi crouched and held her breath.

Murphy pulled a grenade from his belt, sat straighter, and put his finger through the pin. Rabbi Cohen crawled, struggled into sight. His voice was hoarse. "We're OK. He was alone." His words were ragged. "He...he's dead." Andi rushed to grab the chaplain's jacket, covered in blood. "Andi, go get the rifle. I couldn't...I can't..." His body went limp, eyes empty.

Andi checked his pulse and breathing. She looked at Murphy. "He's gone."

\*\*\*

It was dangerously close to dawn, the sky a faint but irreversible slate color. Units on both sides would start moving. Murphy shifted, rotated his shoulder slowly, and groaned. "Listen up, Sweetcakes. I'm headed out toward the road. You stay here. If you don't hear anything after ten minutes, go any direction you think..."

"Quiet!" Andi cut him off and grabbed the rifle. "Something's moving."

The footsteps were stealthy, several men getting closer. Murphy whispered, "Hand me the bayonet."

Andi lifted the rifle, slippery with Cohen's blood, crept to the edge of the boulder, and inched around its craggy end.

Two ear-splitting shots ripped the silence. Murphy gritted his teeth and raised his bayonet but dropped it when Andi fell back on top of him.

An American soldier appeared, his rifle aimed squarely at Murphy's chest. He froze. "Sarge, over here!"

Murphy tried to push Andi off him. She was bleeding from bullet wounds in her head and chest. Her small camera fell into his lap.

\*\*\*

*Top Dog, this is Dune Buggy. We need mobile evac. We have friendlies. One wounded, Two dead. Repeat, friendlies.*

*Say again, one wounded, two KIA?*

*Negative. One KIA. The other is a civilian journalist.*

*Dune Buggy, confirming a civilian fatality from enemy action?*

Negative. There was a pause. Civilian fatality was from friendly fire.

\*\*\*

A medic was dressing Murphy's shoulder, and Murphy reached past him to pick up Andi's small camera. The medic ripped off a length of tape with his teeth. "They let you carry a camera out here, corporal?"

"It was hers." Murphy's voice dropped to a whisper. "She gave it to me." He lifted the camera and scanned the scene through the viewfinder: He framed a young soldier on his knees, his rifle on the ground, wailing over Andi's body. He was gripping his head, pulling on his hair, rocking back and forth, praying in Spanish.

Murphy shifted his view to the right: The chaplain's body was being prepared for a stretcher by two soldiers, one a young Black woman who examined Cohen's chaplain insignia and softly issued instructions.

He turned the camera to the left: A captain was conferring with a sergeant. "Humvee's on the way, just a couple of minutes." He pointed over his shoulder toward Murphy. "Can he walk? The road's only about a hundred yards."

Murphy laid the camera in his lap and looked again at Andi's body and the young soldier who shot her. He picked up the camera and framed the sobbing soldier in the weak light.

Snap.

The soldier looked up at Murphy with tears streaming down his face, eyes pleading to a stranger for forgiveness.

Snap.



# KAECEY MCCORMICK

## DESERT REFUGE

I was there alone—  
watching dusk spread for miles,  
purple and orange clouds stacked behind rock piles  
cast to one side but somehow upright in this land  
where saguaros stretch like barbed wire  
beneath the bat-filled sky.

Once I walked down a sloping trail  
into a canyon. With one hand I reached for the dark  
wings of birds clinging to the rocky walls, wishing I, too, could glide  
across the jagged maw. I slid down that path, half blinded  
by the midday sun, dreaming of the pink and red juice hidden  
in the cacti with the fingers of the other hand stuck between my lips,  
teeth cutting trails in my nails, wet tongue searching out the broken,  
bloody skin of my cuticles. But no matter how many times  
I snagged their ripe skin from those prickly fingers,  
the fruit was always rotten.  
Bone dry.

Now I'm here again, alone,  
carving trails with a needle in the underside of my arm—  
a map, a constellation of the desert,  
a way back beneath the barbed wire  
to the place I was before.





# TERRY TROWBRIDGE

## GRADE SCHOOLER DESCHOOLING HIMSELF

*red, revolutionary songs  
and above your head  
the birds  
were an army in chorus  
-from Gianna Patriarca, "Summers with Arduino"  
in Italian Women and Other Tragedies*

the birds teach him their songs  
this boy who will not accept classrooms

he is outside, the rain paused for him,  
the birds restarting their chorus

he prefers the dampness of rural lawns,  
learning by osmosis by brushing up against  
flower seeds and insects perched on stems

we do not know which tiny creature he is allergic to  
but sometimes he comes inside with a swollen welt

he is present, here,  
because, absent anyone taking his side,  
he is the "troublemaker"  
his desk moved to the hallway, isolated, alone,  
trapped in the gaze of the other classes  
on their way to gym or choir

the birdsong  
he learns  
bites are no object  
burrs no sting



# TAYLOR MCKAY HATHORN

## ALONE AND LOITERING

My mother dies when I am seventy. All of my friends' mothers are long dead: Brenda's mother died when we were in college, on a lonely stretch of Highway 80 at the wheel of a drunk driver; Helen's mother died after a long battle with breast cancer when we were forty-seven.

My mother outlasted them all, beating a round of thyroid cancer when she was in her sixties and a terrible bout of the flu when she was nearly eighty. And now, with no clear cause other than the cause of being nearly one hundred, the charge nurse at the nursing home in Ohio tells me that I should come. I drive in the middle of the night, wearing glasses instead of contacts. My husband is seventy-five, only five years older than I am, but when you are old, one more year seems like a hundred, and so his back is too bad to make the trip.

Michael kisses me at the door, tears in his eyes that I must do this alone. My friends with dead mothers speak endlessly of waning desire, of how they haven't screwed their husbands in ten years, and yet. And yet.

It's the middle of the night, and my mother is dying, and Michael makes me promise to call him every hour, and I drive toward Cincinnati.

The last time I drove through the night was eleven years ago when my last grandchild was born. Michael was driving then, touching the brakes and my knee as we cruised down the mostly-empty interstate. He had squeezed my knee when we had arrived at the hospital, had whispered, Let's go, Grams, calling me by my grandma name, both of us not knowing then that this was the last child who'd ever call us Grams and Pop.

It's five am when I arrive, shift change, but a nurse has compassion on me, an old lady who's driven all night long and whose mother is dying on the second floor.

"She's still conscious," the nurse tells me on the stairwell, but my mother hasn't been conscious in any of the ways that counted in nearly ten years. She doesn't have dementia, the doctors say, she's just old. I don't know what that means, just being old. For my mother, it was a softening, a falling away of ability and meaningful conversation. When I told her that my oldest grandchild had graduated from high school, she said that's good but didn't ask any of the follow-up questions that would have led to things that I wanted

to tell her, like the fact that she was going to cooking school in New York and that her chef's knife would cost two hundred dollars, a year's rent in my parents' first home.

When I come into the room, my mother looks over at me. I am not the oldest child and should not have been the one they called. That was Hannah, but she died two years ago, riddled with brain cancer that stole her speech and her control of her organs and eventually her life. Mother couldn't go to the funeral, so I sat where she would have, at the end of the pew, my three younger siblings and their spouses like so many stairsteps all the way to the stained glass window.

"Agnes," my mother says, and it's the first time she's said my name in a long time. On the phone and at our last visits, I was always dear, an endearment she had never given me in any of the years that counted.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, all I know to say. The topics have waned over the years: her health and the weather and how Michael is doing and where my girls are living and what my grandchildren are studying. A few words about the remaining siblings that make it sound like I talk to Sue, Evan, and Peter more than I do.

"I miss Hagan," she says in response. My mother's second husband died thirty years ago, felled by the sort of heart attack they call the widow-maker, and so it had been.

"I know you hated him," she says, not looking at me, and I feel my throat tighten. My mother met Hagan when I was thirteen. My parents had been divorced for less than a year, and while my father drank whiskey sours that made him angry and then mournful, my mother went on dates. It felt inappropriate to watch my mother put on lipstick and nylons while all my friends' mothers made pork roasts and sewed their homecoming dresses.

"But I loved him," she says, and her eyes are bright in a way that belies the fog that has slowly enveloped her over the last decade.

I did hate him. I hated the diamond ring he gave her when I was fourteen, hated the way he moved in when I was fifteen, hated that he bought me a stupid string of pearls when I was eighteen. I hated him even more when my own father died, bloated and yellow, a year later.

I moved away after college and called my mother collect when I thought Hagan would be at work. I married a man just like my father and not at all like Hagan, and I hated him even more for that, hated that he had become some silent, perfect comparison when I had never given him permission to be anything at all.

When my husband broke my collarbone and four ribs, I called my mother because I had no

one left to call and Hagan answered the phone. He drove five hours, paid my hospital bill in full, and left a note with the phone number for a divorce attorney. He never came in my room, and I hated him for that, too, and I thought about how much I hated him every time I took a breath and felt the stabbing pain of what loving the wrong man could do to you.

I met Michael ten years later, the only other single parent chaperone at the sixth grade dance, and when his daughter broke a heel and cried, he put her feet in his lap and broke the other heel to match. "See, flats," he said, and I was reminded irresistibly of Hagan, of the string of pearls, of the divorce lawyer who mysteriously never sent a bill. I was reminded of kindness, I knew suddenly, and I found that the hate had burned away, left only a raw, glistening emptiness in its place.

Michael asked me to dinner for six months before I said yes. Saying no to Michael was a crawling penance, a terrible devotion. I had spurned and shunned the only kindness that I had ever known; who was I to recognize it now when it came to me, all these years later, and wordlessly pointed out to me how full of hate I had always been?

"Stop punishing yourself," Michael said to me on the night I finally gave in, even though he didn't know what the crime was, only that he was the consequence. The next morning, I wanted to call my mother and tell her that I was sorry, but I was too old to say it, and so I just began buying Hagan a gift every Christmas, always something so bland it could be overlooked, like pine-scented cologne or a silk tie or cuff links. I sent him a card on his birthday sometimes, but not every year, even though I always remembered.

At his funeral, I sat beside my mother and she did not look at me even once, and I wondered if she somehow thought my years of hate had weakened the valves of his heart.

"I didn't hate him, Mother," I manage finally, forcing the words around all the years I couldn't say them and the way I have become an old woman who never learns.

She does not reply, and I look up at her, the silence so deep that the room echoes with lack. The rising sun is reflected in the darkness of her eyes.



# JOHN ROMAGNA

## A PLACE TO FISH

*for Tim Romagna: 1990-2012*

I placed my hand on your chest,  
Looked at the straight green line on the monitor;  
Your breathing was done. There is no silence  
Like that. You were there,  
But you were not.

Nurses came back.  
They had quiet work.

So do I,  
Keeping your workroom:  
Your tools; machines set up as though  
You just used them,  
Unfinished guitars,

You could be cutting your initials into a fretboard,  
Swearing,  
Starting over.

I drive the roads you drove, in the country  
Where joggers can run on the wrong side,  
Places that are not silent of themselves  
But you're not there, singing Sinatra,  
Not stopping when a fox runs in front of you,  
Not pulling over in the shade of the same trees  
I see now, or leaning on a 3-rail fence, taking photos  
Of goldenrod and long grass as they sway in circles  
As though there is more than one wind. Not arriving  
At the bridge, where the river flows beneath you  
Like antique glass. You told me, spiders there  
String webs like spiral galaxies, so many,  
They must be their own universe





## JUNE STODDARD

### A DISMANTLING

The formal entry beacons ritual,  
with healing crystal votive holders,  
gold framed mirrors reflecting selves on every wall,  
no family for photos.

Halfway up the royal red painted stairs  
sits the dog-eared Beardsley,  
nestled into the floor to ceiling wall of books,  
leading up into their private lair,  
with bamboo king bed,  
emerald green Chinese lacquered chest,  
Kilim rugs,  
shutters open wide to expansive mountain views,  
entering I'm schooled in intimate space.

Now,  
six decades of their partnership shattered  
with his sudden death.  
I empty her home of forty years to care for her  
and wonder  
does she know her sanctuary is coming apart?  
Is that why she fell?

Her skull teeters on broken vertebrae,  
neck brace in place, immobile,  
stuck in uncomprehending mind  
wild, unable to do anything.  
Fingers busted, nose broken,  
we laugh that she has had a nose job  
maybe masks will fit better now.

On the wall my photo watches over her.  
She knows me from it,  
chosen family.  
Under the new burden I carry  
my heart, back, shoulders grow wider and lighter,  
expansive.



# SARAH DICKENSON SNYDER

## THE ODYSSEY

*It's chock full of notations  
like I was translating the translation,  
like I was figuring out a mystery  
like I wanted to find the line  
when Penelope knows  
that Odysseus has returned.*

*First the divine sign: Telemachus's sneeze.  
She laughs at this disruption  
of sound down in the main hall.  
Knows a sneeze releases truth:  
may death relieve us, clean as that,  
of all the suitors. A woman who  
has mourned for almost two decades  
and four hundred pages of tears,  
silences, weaving, unweaving,  
waiting for Odysseus to exact revenge,  
and then suddenly seized by laughter—*

*how I begin to see the shattering  
as fallen pieces that might be collected  
and held in my palm. That there is  
warmth in the gathering.*

*The scent of spring rising from a long winter,  
the bush of lilacs finding courage to return  
in cones of fragrant purple flowers. I smell  
something of my mother on the hairbrush  
she left behind and touch  
the wooden handle she touched.  
Yesterday when I hugged  
a student, now an adult,  
she said, You smell the same,  
and pulled herself back into me.*



## NILSA MARIANO

### PAPER DOLS AND BOXES

There were days I could not stay outside a minute longer,  
The noise scraping and poking like sharp knives.  
Inside I grabbed my blanket, boxes and dolls.  
The space between my parents bed and the window was just enough room,  
Scissors and magazines laid out,  
I unclench my fists to cut out pictures of gardens, beaches and clothes  
to glue onto empty shoe boxes.  
My paper dolls liked bathing suits, big kitchens and pool houses.  
They aspired to be snobs.  
They liked the things I imagined belonged in fancy houses,  
fancier than our two bedroom apartment in the Vandyke projects.  
Such a pompous name for what others called a slum.  
The real satisfaction was the quiet in that space,  
Warm sun filtering through the sheer window curtains,  
soft light gently tracing my paper bathing beauties as I carefully cut,  
sitting on my beach blanket atop cold tiles.  
I leaned against the tall headboard, a paper doll in each hand,  
In the other room Mami plays soft boleros on her record player,  
loud enough to dim the sounds of sirens, screams and fear,  
our safe zone away from the foreign  
outside



## JUDIITH WALLER CARROLL

### THE CHILDREN ARE CRYING AND A DOG'S AT THE DOOR

We have lived near the ocean,  
at the foot of a mountain,  
in the woods where a fox napped  
outside our sunroom window, and now  
this house we are sharing with our son and his family.  
Five decades of belongings tucked tightly  
into our small suite of rooms. Unpacked  
boxes still waiting in the garage.  
But the sun is out, the irises are blooming,  
and here comes the baby saying Uh Oh,  
the three-year old explaining how garbage trucks work.  
Two purring cats massaging our legs,  
a pair of disheveled dogs wagging their tails.  
A burst of high notes coming from the bird cage:  
the cockatiel's version of Ode to Joy.





## HOPE COULTER

### HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THE LAST DAYS OF SUMMER

*Under the Willows, by John Singer Sargent (United States) 1887*

First get hold of a boat, one you can handle  
yourself. Drag it scraping through mud and weeds

as frogs jump aside and the funk of the rich sweet muck  
fills your nostrils. Scoot the punt out from the bank

till the free water catches it. Don't mind the squelch,  
your shoes will dry: just hoist your skirts, give a push

and swing yourself in. Feel how you're water-borne now,  
a regular Cleopatra! enthroned with a dragonfly

as your lord attendant, and flicked beads of water  
for jewels. Lie back. Here's a cushion—better?

It's soft, it pillows your head, and if the willow fronds  
don't quite screen the sun, tip your hat down

over your face. Breathe its sweet straw and the scent  
of your sweat, while the summer brilliance

comes checkering through its weave  
as it does through the leaves above.

Let go. Give your gravity to the water  
that holds you up from way deep. The dense shade,

the mundane trunks of the trees, your troubles  
and chores: you can let them recede,

let them fall away. All is glaze now and wetness,  
green-gilded reflection, air as warm as your skin,

CONTINUED...

a floating and slipping and drowse. Even the current  
that laps at the hull sounds lazy, like the one bird

somewhere in the leaves overhead, that calls Here am I,  
over and over—Here am I, it says. Where are you?





## JUDY BANKMAN

### FREDA

in the photo, our eyes are big —  
    I am three years old, elbow deep  
in soap suds, and she is teaching me  
    how to wash the dishes.  
my smile stretches tiny cheeks  
    wide as an orange slice, as if to say,  
what a moment to be alive.  
    in the fridge, I imagine — potatoes, apples,  
kosher dills from the cash n' carry,  
    an everlasting supply of schmaltz  
hardened in jars. rainbows speckle the walls,  
    refracting in the tiny crystals  
on her living room lamps.  
    we are four generations apart,  
her care & her hands hold me, unwavering.  
    when she says I make her heart sing,  
she taps her chest and hums.  
    I haven't learned yet what it means  
to fail, to hurt another person,  
    to deserve something, or not —  
and here she is, showing me  
    what it looks like to love.



## SHARIF GEMIE

### LEADING THE WAY

I was at my desk, checking some confusing data from the thermometer near the top of the hill. Was it working properly? Or had it fallen to the ground? My phone buzzed and I turned it off, but then I heard Edmund's phone in our bedroom. I had time to think, oh no, that'll wake him, before he staggered out.

'Did you see?' he asked. 'She's coming now.'

I couldn't believe it, so I checked my phone. And there it was: a visit from Monifa at 2pm. We expected the UN Base to send a representative to discuss our migration options, but who'd choose this time? In June? But sure enough, Monifa arrived ten minutes later. When I opened the outer door, it was like a vision: a tall figure with a UN-issue parasol over her head, standing still in the ripples of the summer heat haze. Young, serious, with long, blue braids that fell half-way down her back. Edmund was still groggy from sleeping, so I invited Monifa through the inner door, out of the sun.

She checked her Pad, looking at each of us in turn. 'Kate Jenkins? Edmund Jenkins?'

We nodded and then I couldn't stop myself.

'Why have you come at this time?'

Monifa pointed back to the road: a gleaming red Kool-Kar.

'It's basically a fridge on wheels. I could drive to Cardiff, even now.'

Her voice was clear, bright and melodious.

Edmund and I exchanged a look. The air-con on our aging Verto has been playing up again. Ieuan checked it last week, patched it as best he could, but I wasn't looking forward to shopping on Friday evening.

'I've got some med's for you,' said Monifa, looking at Edmund and lifting up a box. 'And I thought you might like some fruit and veg. It's frozen.'

Fruit and veg? Was she trying to bribe us? I wasn't going to say no.

Edmund finally woke up. 'But don't just stand there, come in, come in.'

He led her into the sitting-room, which was still in the shade. He was only limping a bit, while she paced steadily down the hall. As I put the food in the freezer, I could hear her voice.

'Nice place. I can see why you want to stay.'

Don't start, don't start, yet. I need to hear this.

Edmund talked about his carpentry, telling her he'd made the chair she was sitting on. Monifa must've done the right course on managing difficult clients: she complimented him on his skills, even sounded sincere.

I rushed back from the freezer. Monifa sat on Edmund's funny little chair, while he sprawled on the old sofa.

'Edmund,' I chided. 'Haven't you offered our guest a drink?'

He looked surprised and began to say, 'It's just that...'

I understood: when did we last have an unexpected visitor? When did we last have a visitor?

'Tea or coffee, Monifa?'

'A cup of tea would be great, thanks. Milk, no sugar.'

Oh no, that'll be the last of our milk. I went back to the kitchen and realised—again!—they might start the discussion without me, so I rushed round, trying to listen with one ear.

'And next door?' asked Monifa.

'They left, they left years ago. Solicitors, young couple.'

'Nothing keeping them, I suppose.'

Edmund said nothing, but I could imagine the look on his face: surly, defiant, a bit disconcerted.

'And the next house along?' Monifa continued.

'Builders. They tried to adapt their house, but it was too exposed.'

'While you—'



'Yeah, we're lucky. In the shadow of the hill, most of the day.'

I got back to the sitting-room, with a tray, a teapot, three cups, a small jug of milk and even a plate of home-made biscuits. I glanced round. This room still looks nice, we decorated it well, all those years ago and we've maintained it, haven't let it go. Strong, calm colours, highlighted by our decision to paint the ceiling turquoise, part of our war on white and magnolia. Over the mantelpiece, the picture of me with Trudy and James, before they left. Over the sofa, Edmund's photo, the nice one, of our old bookshop at sunset, just before it closed. I smiled.

I poured the tea, then sat next to Edmund on the sofa.

'So...' said Monifa.

'So...' said Edmund.

This is it, we're onto the serious stuff.

'The last years haven't been so bad in Abergavenny,' said Monifa. Her voice had changed: no longer friendly guest; now, visiting UN aid-worker.

Edmund nodded, but I couldn't restrain myself.

'Not bad! The river's reduced to a trickle, we daren't open a door or a window after 8am, and there's only one supermarket left—'

'But we're managing.' Edmund sounded firm and clear.

'How long have you've been here?' she asked.

'Decades.' Edmund turned to me, frowning.

I shrugged. I knew exactly how long, but didn't want to sound like a know-all.

'The house of your dreams?' she asked.

'Not exactly,' I said. 'But we've worked on it, you know.'

Edmund nodded. 'And now the neighbours have gone—we can spread out.'

'No problems with your med's?' asked Monifa.

'There's still a GP, a health centre and a couple of pharmacies,' he said.

Monifa sat back in her chair, looked at Edmund, then at me.

'The forecast for Abergavenny doesn't look great,' she said. 'The good years are over.' She turned to me. 'You know this, Kate, you've been gathering climate data, haven't you?'

I could sense Edmund, next to me, growing stiffer, turning away. I nodded, not wanting to say anything that might provoke him.

He coughed. 'For five years, I've been living with the same diagnosis: my cancer will return, it's just a matter of time. I figure I might as well stay as—'

'A medical emergency here could be very difficult for you.' Monifa searched for the right word. 'Very painful. There are better facilities in Greenland.'

'This is my home.' Edmund's voice was clear, level, even unemotional.

'The supply of specialist drugs and treatments will get more difficult.'

'No problems yet.'

'Do you really want to wait until there are problems?'

No, Monifa, no, that wasn't the right thing to say. Edmund glared at her. He can be very stubborn these days. I tried to think of something that might push her towards talking the right way to persuade Edmund. Nothing came. We sat for a moment, listening to the air-con wheezing.

'We mustn't take up more of your time,' said Edmund.

'We need to get this right. I'm here to make sure you know all the vital information.'

'I want you to go now.'

Monifa looked up, opened her mouth to say something, then changed her mind. Instead she tapped on her Pad, found a standard UN form.

'Would sign this, please?' she asked. 'Just to confirm that I've updated you about your options.'

'No, I won't.' Edmund spoke quietly, but I could tell he was furious.

'Do you mind telling me why not?'

'You haven't told me anything that I didn't already know.'

I saw the flicker of anger cross her face. An unsigned form meant that, for administrative purposes, Monifa's visit hadn't happened. It had been a waste of her time. She glanced at me, but I shook my head. There was no point in making Edmund angrier.

There was an odd moment as she left. Edmund led the way out, Monifa followed, with me last. But as she left our sitting-room, Monifa turned round, handed me a little card.

'There's an online forum for local women.' She spoke softly and quickly. 'We'll have a chat tomorrow. Why don't you log on?' Then, more softly, more quickly: 'It would be good to talk.'

I took her card, followed them into the hall without thinking about it, waved goodbye as Monifa disappeared into the heat-haze. Then I realised: my God, she thinks Edmund's coercing me!

\*\*\*

We went back to the sitting-room. I had to say something about the way Edmund had treated Monifa, but what? I didn't want another argument.

'Edmund--'

He looked up, gave me an odd grin.

'Have you heard the latest joke?' he asked.

I grinned back, happy to hear him making jokes. It's a good sign, isn't it? He's got past that dreadful depression of last month, he doesn't wallow in bitterness any more. It's the amateur dramatics, that's what it is, the play's the thing. But if only he'd make better jokes.

'Tell me,' I said.

'God's been having problems.'

'Yes?'

'He keeps thinking he's a UN aid-worker.'

Despite myself, I laughed a little. Edmund smiled, proud as ever. It must be true, he's feeling stronger.

'Oh, Edmund, can't you do better than that?'

He grinned again, shook his head. 'It's the best I've got, Kate.'

'But—Monifa, she was quite something, wasn't she?' I said.

'Those braids! That car!'

'Knew her stuff.'

I looked right at him and he nodded sadly.

\*\*\*

Monifa doesn't understand. How could she? Old Lagos doesn't exist anymore. Thirty million people, all moved out in ten years, when the heat grew unbearable. There's one New Lagos in Canada, another in Siberia. She's part of that great wave. Nigeria's practically empty now: a couple of giant solar farms and a wave-power scheme, all automated, that's what's left.

What must Edmund and I look like to her? Two dinosaurs, who won't admit that the Jurassic Age is over. She must think we're privileged. Or stupid. Or both.

Lord knows this isn't the retirement we'd imagined. We used to think we'd have hobbies. I wanted to go back to the painting I'd done in college, while Edmund thought about carpentry. Neither of us got what we wanted. I grew bored with sketching dried-out rivers and ash-brown fields. Edmund missed the buzz of classes and chatting and socializing. I still sketch a bit, but my days are occupied with checking weather readings, posting them to the Base, taking care of the house, looking after Edmund on his bad days. Last year he was too ill to do much. This year—well, he could help round the house more. We've been together for so long, we're going to stick together, we've got to. It's not exciting, but I'm not complaining. Although—I want something better. I don't want to end here.

It's the am-dram that keeps him going. It's one of those things—you can put into it as much as you want and Edmund puts a lot into it. Researches the plays and the characters. Looks up every detail, thinks about the characters. When it started, all those years ago, the local society met in an actual studio, there were face-to-face rehearsals and finally the play was presented in the Theatre. But then—people complained that the studio was too hot (it wasn't well-insulated), the journeys to the rehearsals were too difficult and as for staging the play in the Theatre... Like everything that remained, it went virtual, bit by bit. Zoom rehearsals. They held onto the idea of staging the play in the Theatre to the bitter end, until someone pointed out that for Faustus, there were more people on the stage than in the audience.

Matt the Geek was a dab hand with Zoom. He showed them how you could produce a

Zoom group meeting with a CGI background, 3D figures in costumes and even add sound effects. It took a bit of band width, but it was less fuss than hiring the Theatre. Quite honestly, the figures look a bit plastic and puppet-like, but it's not bad as a stop-gap.

Only—it's not a stop-gap, is it? This is permanent, this is the way we live.

\*\*\*

I logged on to Monifa's women's meeting. I didn't tell Edmund what I was doing, not exactly. Just told him there was a Zoom conference and closed the door. He didn't ask any questions.

Eight women logged in. Then three more. Monifa looked radiant. But the others! Oh Lord, it was like looking in a mirror. Old, tired, creased faces; strong, intelligent women worn out by years of heat and disappointment. Some stubborn old mules, like Edmund, saying that they were born here and they'd die here. And others—like me, stuck with their husbands or whatever.

Monifa was great. Listened to everyone, gave advice on everything from counselling centres to air-con repairs, stopped anyone dominating the discussions and quietly reminded us of the advantages of Greenland. It's UN policy, migration's not compulsory, but it is very strongly recommended. Assistance provided all the way. Monifa sounded persuasive, really persuasive. If only she'd been like that with Edmund.

I recognised one of the other women, from years ago. Remembered her speaking at a Labour Party meeting, back in the 2030s, demanding better flood defences to ensure the long-term future of the town. Those were the days! If only we'd known. Even then it was too late, the damage had been done, decades ago.

It could've been stopped. In the 1990s, it wasn't too late. Even the 2000s. In the 2020s, we could've prevented the worst. But...

\*\*\*

Yesterday was the big production. Edmund got his chance: playing King Lear. There were 65 watching, partners and children mainly, with 8 from Greenland. Only three logged out during the play.

I hunched over my screen and smiled to see my husband playing a mad medieval king. He was great! All that anger and despair, utterly convincing, yet still sounding like a real person. I felt so proud of him. The camera moves were a bit clunky, as always. And Cordelia was disappointing: the poor woman was so obviously in her 50s and there was nothing the CGI could do to hide it.

But there's that bit where Edmund—or Lear—shouts at the storms. Oh Lord, that hit me, and I wept real tears, by myself, in my study. Isn't that what we're doing? Shouting at the storms?

\*\*\*

Monifa's enthusiasm made me look again at Greenland, on the Web. It's changed! No longer hardy pioneers, but established townfolk. No, city-dwellers. Or citizens? Five settlements of over fifteen million people, plus dozens of big towns. Planned cities, all growing, each competing to be the greenest, the most harmonious. They've got commercial zones, manufacturing zones, agricultural zones, leisure zones, recycling points, canals and rivers integrated into the centres, regulations about how high you can build. A bit exhausting, really. Last time we looked, Edmund got put off by the sheer do-gooding worthiness of it all.

'There's a limit to the number of multi-ethnic, gender-neutral ecumenical spiritual centres I can take,' he'd groaned.

But that wasn't his main complaint. It was the flats themselves. We'd qualify for a basic two-room apartment, with a tiny kitchenette and ensuite. If we were lucky, with a view. No gardens, although there were communal roof gardens and farms and shared balconies bursting with flowers and veg.

'A little box!' he'd said.

And that was that. I could see what he meant. We'd both worked into our 60s, saving along the way. We put everything, body and soul, into doing up this house the way we wanted it and we'd been saved by the lucky accident of being in the shadow of the hill. Now the neighbours had moved, we'd spread out, adding extensions to the conservatory and a workshop for Edmund's carpentry. Moving into a Greenland box would mean giving up so much.

What happened to the rich in Greenland? I couldn't see a millionaire opting for one of those little boxes. I looked and looked, but I found no sign of them. No luxury mansions, no gated estates. I rather liked that egalitarian ethic. Thinking about it, I remembered a report about techies and tycoons buying vast tracts of New Zealand. Good luck to them.

I potted on in Greenland, looking at the discussion forums and public meetings: Green Spirituality; DIY Power Generation; Internationalism or Cosmopolitanism; Sufism and Socialism... The list didn't stop. Online meetings, face-to-face discussions, guided walks, seminars, illustrated lectures, after-film debates. It was the mixture of people, it had led to something. There were migrants from Lebanon, Wales, Ghana, Ireland—from all over, really. And they wanted to talk and meet. Book groups, cycling clubs, skateboarding parks, parent and toddler groups, pubs organising a trans-cultural Eisteddfod, a synagogue with yoga

classes, three chapels teaching how to cook authentic curry, trans-gender approaches to the Abrahamic religions, a lute-making workshop, restaurants with football teams and piano classes, and—oh—a drama club auditioning for *As You Like It*.

At that moment, Edmund walked in. He saw my screen straight away.

'As You Like It?' he said and looked closer. 'But—Greenland. Box City.'

'There's a lot going on, there really is.'

'Hmmm...' He leant over, scrolled down, taking in the details of the production. 'They're having fun with the gender-bending, aren't they? And love—'

'Edmund, couldn't we talk about it?'

'No.' He glared at me.

'Yes, we've got to, Edmund, we really have.'

We stared at each other.

'Not now.' He turned away. 'I was writing to the group, about the next play. I wanted to check if—'

'Then when?'

'This evening. When we go out.'

'You mean it?'

He walked away without replying.

\*\*\*

It was a summertime habit of ours. Around sunset, if I wasn't going shopping and Edmund felt strong enough, we'd stroll down the hill, see if there was any water in the river, maybe push out to the old canal, where there was still a line of trees bending gracefully over a muddy little channel.

I heard Edmund getting ready downstairs and quickly checked online. Oh dear.

'Edmund?' I called as I walked down.

'Hmmm?' He was putting his shoes on.

'I've checked the forecast and—'

He looked up.

I shook my head. 'Thunderstorms predicted.'

'What? Another 50 per cent probability? Hell, we can ignore that, it means a few drops on the way, if that.'

'No. It's 80 per cent probable and they say it's a bad one.'

Edmund's face fell.

'C'mon Edmund, we can sit out the back for a bit, now the sun's gone in. Get some fresh air that way.'

He wanted to argue, but I opened the French windows, pulled up two chairs, poured two glasses of wine and he followed me.

For a moment or two, it all looked like it used to. The dark-pink sunset, the deep purple of the mountains, some birds flying past and that mysterious, wonderful sense of calm you get at the end of a day. Edmund joined me and we raised our glasses to each other.

How could I raise the topic of Greenland? Then I spotted dark clouds moving in, real whoppers, heavy and serious. They often come at sunset. We looked at each other and jumped into action. Edmund checked that the windows and doors were locked in his workshop and the conservatory, I pulled the chairs in, ran upstairs and checked the windows, then came down and locked the French windows.

We sat at the kitchen table and the fireworks started. Blinding flashes of lightning split the sky, great rumbles of thunder shook the house.

'So long as the power stays on,' muttered Edmund.

'Worthy of Lear?'

'Hah!' He adopted his Lear voice. "'Sulph'rous and thought-executing fires... oak-cleaving thunderbolts".'

The rain crashed in. Great ramrods pelted down for ten minutes, hitting the patio. Heavy enough to cause a flash flood down by the bridge, but not enough to turn the dry fields green.



'Then we argued.

'Admit it, Edmund, that place in Greenland has more life in one evening than we'd see here in a year.'

'We've put so much into this house. It's home.'

'It was home, it's not anymore.'

'It's home to me!'

'We're locked in all day. The only sound we ever hear is the air-con.'

'Kate: I don't have long left. My cancer will return, it's just a matter of time.'

'This isn't fair, Edmund, it's not fair on me.'

'You go!'

That made me cry. It's not the first time he's said it.

\*\*\*

We slept in separate rooms. We often do in summer: it's hard to sleep with the heat lying so heavy over the house and the air-con wheezing. Edmund's usually uncomfortable and needs to get up. Musical beds, we call it.

I couldn't get to sleep. I kept seeing us in one of those two-room flats. Would it be so bad? There'd be more to do, more people to meet, better medical care for Edmund—and for me when I needed it. Eventually, I slept for a couple of hours and woke a bit after 4. It'd be dawn soon and I had to check the weather instruments, to make sure they were intact after that storm. I slipped out quietly, without even a cup of coffee, trying not to wake Edmund.

The air felt fresh. I walked up the hill, past the deserted houses. The roof has collapsed on the house at the corner and luxurious weeds have invaded its sitting-room. Early twenty-first century construction! It wasn't meant to last, was it? None of it was. While—those housing-blocks in Greenland, thick and solid. They look like they'll survive for decades, even longer, never mind the heat or the storms. Maybe someone learnt that lesson, at least.

The weather instruments have to be placed just right: not so sheltered that they can't measure the sun, wind or rain properly, not so exposed that they get smashed by every thunderstorm or gale. They need constant attention. One of the thermometers had cracked: I had a spare. A barometer had lost its aerial. I put in my bag, I could repair it at home. The

'rest seemed fine. I'd check for anomalies in their data, just to be sure.

I turned round, faced the town, just as the sun came out. Little brown, grey and white rows of buildings—whiter than they used to be, as people painted their roofs white in a desperate attempt to hold back the heat. The grey mass of the old castle. Yellow-brown trees, no longer green. The air was clear, but it wouldn't be long before the heat haze started. I thought of Matt the Geek's CGI-background for King Lear. Splotchy, flat uneven scenery, scenery you couldn't believe in. Nothing will come of nothing—that's the line, isn't it?

This place has seen so much. Gafenni, originally a row of blacksmiths working along the river. Then a Roman fort, border wars and finally a pretty market town. It's changed, it's always changed, it doesn't stay the same. It's got to change again.

This isn't a town, not anymore. It's a waiting-room.

\*\*\*

When I got back, I found Edmund eating some of Monifa's fruit that I'd let defrost. Peach juice ran down his chin.

'Okay?' he asked.

I couldn't stop myself.

'Don't you want to die with some dignity? This town doesn't exist anymore! A handful of crinkly old nutters, a GP and a supermarket isn't a town. It's stifling me, Edmund, it's absolutely stifling me.'

He looked up, peach juice sticky on his chin and he looked so sad that I regretted my words.

'I'm sorry, Edmund, I didn't—'

'No.' He held up his hand, sighed.

'At least look—look at the group, in Greenland, the one that's doing As You...'

He nodded.

\*\*\*

We may be old, but we can move fast when we want to. Two weeks later, we were sitting in the departure lounge at Cardiff Airship Centre, waiting for the flight announcement. Monifa

'came to see us off, blue braids jangling. She is so nice!

'There have been reports of severe storms south of Iceland,' she told us. 'You may have quite a wait. Will you be—'

'Monifa,' I interrupted. 'We're not feeble.'

She laughed. 'And in two weeks, your luggage—'

'One crate!' said Edmund.

'It's all you're allowed.'

'All we need,' I said.

I gave Edmund's arm a squeeze. I didn't want our last meeting with Monifa to end in a shouting-match.

'I'm sure you're doing the right thing,' she said and flashed us one of her big grins.

I wasn't sure, not sure at all. Edmund's not strong and it was an 18-hour flight. Why had I argued for this so strongly?

We said goodbye, then I hugged her and Edmund shook her hand, even smiled at her.

\*\*\*

Edmund shifted in his chair.

'Remember the old days?' he said.

'Hmmm?'

'Four hours to the Canary Isles.'

'Our honeymoon in Barcelona—that flight barely took an hour.'

'It's all airships now.' He sighed. 'Until they sort out hydrogen power...'

'They're quieter.'

I looked round the Airship Centre. They've made an effort with it: not stuffed to the gills with expensive shops selling expensive perfumes and chocolates, but providing a bit of space

and air, a bit of calm. High walls, painted white and green. Windows at the top that closed automatically as the sun came round. Gentle air-con. Not exactly cool—nowhere is nowadays—but at least you can breathe. Quiet, soothing music. Everyone has to wait in these places as they compute the latest data on storms and gales. There are play-rooms for children, easy chairs to nap on, places to meditate. An announcement flashed up: a five-a-side football match was starting and they needed a goalie. Then another announcement: there was a poetry reading next door.

I got out my Pad, clicked onto Greenland, found the details of the As You Like It auditions. I didn't say anything. Edward glanced at it, looked back at the announcement screen, but then moved closer to me and read through the casting instructions for the audition.

'In Wales, I was a king,' he sighed. 'In Greenland, I'll be a second attendant, if that.'

I hugged his arm. 'You'll be a great second attendant, I'm sure. They'll write about you in the reviews.'

He laughed.

'And—you'll be performing in front of a real, live audience,' I reminded him.

'There is that.' He looked round the room a bit, then put his actor-voice on. 'The wise man knows himself to be a fool.'

'That's not Lear, is it?'

'No. As You Like It.'

I checked the announcement screen: flight still pending. Were we doing the right thing? This had been our home for so long. I started to speak, just to calm my nerves.

'We're not leaving home, Edmund.'

'No?'

'We're taking it with us, I promise you.'

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded.

There was soft ping from the announcement screen. Our Greenland flight was leaving in twenty minutes.





# MARGARET DERITTER

## THE CHARISMA OF CITIES

New York traffic makes me long for sex,  
and diesel fumes take me back to when

I turned sixteen and yearned  
to cross the great gray bridge

to the Henry Hudson Parkway, drive  
down Greenwich Village streets or ride

the Staten Island Ferry for a dime—or nickel?—  
I can't remember which it was back then.

But I can feel the breeze that rounded  
Ellis Island as I longed for Liberty's folds.

How can cities hold such sex appeal?  
Or make me want to shed my ancient skin?

O, Adolescence! Take me to my first  
French restaurant—escargot and pinot noir.

Twirl on skates past the great gold statue,  
Prometheus, bringer of fire.

Kneel on St. Patrick's benches. Ride with me  
for hours aboard the Circle Line,

past the harp strings of the Brooklyn Bridge,  
the curving contours of the U.N. building,

a world of flags waving to me on the East River  
as the boat threads its way around Manhattan

to the rocky cliffs of the Palisades,  
the lightning rod of the Empire State Building.





## AUTHOR BIOS

**Megan Jauregui Eccles** writes dark, speculative fiction for young adults and is represented by Lauren Galit of LKG Agency Her writing has appeared in Kelp Journal, Coachella Review, Ladies of the Fright, The Lineup, Wild Greens, and Dwarf+Giant. She teaches creative writing at John Paul the Great Catholic University and holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of California Riverside—Palm Desert.

**Justin Evans** was born and raised in Utah. He served in the Army and went to Utah and Nevada universities for his education. He lives with his wife and sons in rural Nevada, where he teaches high school. He is the author of four chapbooks and six full-length collections of poetry His most recent books are *Cross Country* (Wordtech Editions, 2019) written with the poet Jeff Newberry, and *All the Brilliant Ideas I've Ever Had* (Aldrich Books, 2020). He has poetry forthcoming in *Sugar House Review*. In 2022 he was granted an Artist Fellowship from the Nevada Arts Council.

**P.A. Callaro** is a native New Yorker who stumbled into a love of literature in college. Now, he runs for miles in the early morning searching for clarity of thought. Occasionally he finds it and invents characters for his fiction who discover, or stumble into, some of life's small but stubborn truths. His work will appear in the April 2023 edition of *The Umbrella Factory* magazine.

**Jacob Spencer** holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from the University of Arkansas at Monticello, as well as a TEFL Certification. He minored in English with an emphasis on creative writing. In addition to history and creative writing, he also plays piano and studies classical and folk music. Major literary influences include Anton Chekhov, Arthur Schnitzler, Franz Kafka, love of music, and his knowledge of history.

**Amy Smyth Miller** is a nationally recognized elementary school teacher working as an intervention specialist in a rural public school district. She currently holds National Board certification, as well as certification in the education of students who are multi-language learners. She lives in northern Washington State with my husband, "Captain Crusty," and her sons, daughter-in-law, and grandsons. "Las Madres" is excerpted from Amy's forthcoming memoir, *Writing My Way Home*.

**William Cordeiro** (not provided)

**Philip DiGiacomo** is a former painter and actor from New York. He studied creative writing with Lou Mathews, Colette Sartor and Ben Loory at UCLA. He lives with his wife, the painter Hilary Baker in a 100-year-old farmhouse in Ojai, California. It's where he writes, reads, cooks, and sometimes races an old Porsche. His work has been published in, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Literary Manhattan*, *The Examined Life Journal*, *Fleas on The Dog*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Fish Food Magazine* and other online journals.

**Devon Neal (he/him)** is a Bardstown, KY resident who received a B.A. in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University and an MBA from The University of the Cumberlands. He currently works as a Human Resources Manager in Louisville, KY. His work has been featured in *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *From the Depths* and *The Rye Whiskey Review*, and *coalitionworks*, and is forthcoming in *Intangience Magazine*.

**John Brantingham** was Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been featured in hundreds of magazines. He has twenty-one books of poetry, memoir, and fiction including his latest, *Life: Orange to Pear* (Bamboo Dart Press) and *Kitkitdizzi* (Bamboo Dart Press). He lives in Jamestown, New York.

**Peter Alterman** has published science fiction, literary fiction, mainstream fiction and literary criticism since 1974. A complete bibliography is at [www.peteralterman.com](http://www.peteralterman.com).

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## AUTHOR BIOS

**Jonathan Odell** (he, him) is the author of three novels, *The View from Delphi* (Macadam Cage 2004) *The Healing* (Random House 2012) *Miss Hazel and the Rosa Parks Club* (Maiden Lane Press 2015). His essays, short stories, and poetry have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Commonweal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and others. He lives in Minneapolis with his husband. [JonathanOdell.com](http://JonathanOdell.com)

**Jeff Burt** lives in Santa Cruz County, California, and has worked in electronics and mental health administration. He work previously in *Muleskinner Journal*, *Gold Man Review*, *Brazos River Review*, and *Green Lantern Literary*. He won the 2016 *Consequence Magazine Fiction Prize*.

**Amy Lerman** lives with her husband and very spoiled cats in the Arizona desert where she is residential English Faculty at Mesa Community College. Her chapbook, *Orbital Debris* (Choeofpleirn Press, 2022) won the 2022 Jonathan Holden Poetry Chapbook Contest, she has been a Pushcart nominee, and her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Box of Matches*, *The Madison Review*, *Midwest Review*, *Radar Poetry*, *Rattle*, and other publications.

**Richard C. McPherson's** short stories have appeared in *Living Springs Anthology Stories Through the Ages*, the *Black Fox Literary Journal*, the *Unleash Press 2022 Anthology*, *Conversations*, *The Write Launch*, *Twelve Winters Journal*, and *Bright Flash Literary Review*. His first novel, *Man Wanted in Cheyenne*, was released in January 2023 by Unleash Press and has been called "smart, funny and tender," and "satisfyingly original." He taught digital communications at New York University and UCLA, and lives in California His website is [richardcmcpherson.com](http://richardcmcpherson.com).

**Kaecey McCormick** is a writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her poetry and prose have found homes in different places, including *Pine Hills Review*, *Jabberwock Review*, *One Sentence Poems*, *On the Seawall*, *Third Wednesday* and *Clockhouse* as well as her chapbooks *Sleeping with Demons* (2023) and *Pixelated Tears* (2018). She served as poet laureate for the city of Cupertino, teaches poetry at The Writers Studio, and is a current Steinbeck Fellow at SJSU. When not writing, you can find Kaecey hiking up a mountain, painting, or reading a book. Connect at [kaeceymccormick.com](http://kaeceymccormick.com)

**Terry Trowbridge's** poems have appeared in [The New Quarterly](#), [Carousel](#), [Lascaux Review](#), [Kolkata Arts](#), [Dalhousie Review](#), [untethered](#), [Quail Bell](#), [Nashwaak Review](#), [Orbis](#), [Snakeskin Poetry](#), [Literary Yard](#), [Gray Sparrow](#), [CV2](#), [Brittle Star](#), [Bombfire](#), [American Mathematical Monthly](#), [Fresh Words](#), [Mathematical Intelligencer](#), [Canadian Journal of Family and Youth](#), [Journal of Humanistic Mathematics](#), [PPP](#), [Synchronized Chaos](#), [New Verse News](#), [Five Fleas](#), [Borderless](#), [Literary Veganism](#), [Indian Periodical](#), and [more](#). His lit crit has appeared in [Ariel](#), [BeZine](#), [British Columbia Review](#), [Hamilton Arts & Letters](#), [Episteme](#), [Studies in Social Justice](#), [Rampike](#), [Amsterdam Review](#), and [The /t3mz/ Review](#). Terry is grateful to the [Ontario Arts Council](#) for his first writing grant, and their support of so many other writers during the polycrisis.

**Taylor McKay Hathorn** is a Mississippian by birth and a Jacksonian by choice, and you can read more of her work at [www.taylormckayhathorn.com](http://www.taylormckayhathorn.com)

**John Romagna** lives in Clinton, NJ. His most recently published poem, *Variation on a Poem by Yeats*, was awarded Honorable Mention in the *Passager Journal's* 2022 Anual Poetry Contest issue, September 2022.

**June Stoddard** aspires to write mysteries to rationalize years of binge streaming BBC detective shows, and after a thirty-year career as a private eye corporate matchmaker finds herself living and solving her own mysteries. June is published in *Blue Sky Press Publications*. She writes weekly with Peggy Dobree's *Slow Lightning Lit*, and is an editor for *Muleskinner Journal*. June is a graduate of UW-Madison with a double Major in English & Theatre and lives in Santa Monica.

## AUTHOR BIOS

**Sarah Dickenson Snyder** lives in Vermont, carves in stone, & rides her bike. Travel opens her eyes. She has four poetry collections, *The Human Contract* (2017), *Notes from a Nomad* (nominated for the Massachusetts Book Awards 2018), *With a Polaroid Camera* (2019), and *Now These Three Remain* (2023). Poems have been nominated for Best of Net and Pushcart Prizes. Recent work is in *Rattle*, *Lily Poetry Review*, and *RHINO*.  
[sarahdickensonsnyder.com](http://sarahdickensonsnyder.com)

**Nilsa Mariano:** I graduated from Binghamton University New York, in Comparative Literature. I have been published in *Stone Canoe*, *Five Minute Magazine* and *MicroFiction Monday Magazine* and *Chicken Soup for the Latino Soul*.

**Judith Waller Carroll's** poems have been featured on *Verse Daily* and *The Writer's Almanac*, published in numerous journals and anthologies, and nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She is the author of two collections of poetry, *Ordinary Splendor* (MoonPath Press 2022) and *What You Saw and Still Remember*, a runner-up for the 2017 Main Street Rag Poetry Award. Her chapbook *The Consolation of Roses*, won the 2015 Astounding Beauty Ruffian Press Poetry Prize.

**Hope Coulter** teaches and directs the Hendrix–Murphy Foundation Programs in Literature and Language at Hendrix College. She is the author of *The Wheel of Light* (BrickHouse Books 2015), and her work has appeared in numerous journals, including *The Yale Review*, *Southwest Review*, and *Literary Matters*. Awards for her writing include a 2022 Meringoff Award in poetry, the Porter Prize for Literary Excellence, and five Pushcart nominations. She lives in Little Rock.

**Judy Bankman** (she/her) lives with her dog Rosie in Portland, OR on Multnomah, Clackamas, and Kalapuya land. Her work can be found in *Yes, Poetry*, *Souvenir Lit*, *Linden Avenue*, and *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place*, among others. She was a finalist in the 2020 Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Literary Festival Poetry Contest.

**Sharif Gemie** is a retired History Professor, mostly researching the lives of marginalized and minority peoples. He's lived in South Wales for 30 years. On retirement, he turned to writing fiction.

**Margaret DeRitter** is the author of the full-length poetry collection *Singing Back to the Sirens* (Unsolicited Press, 2020). She lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and serves as copy editor and poetry editor of *Encore*, a regional feature magazine.







# THE MULESKINNER JOURNAL

LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.