MULESKINNER JOURNAL

Loss and Gratitude

Journal Three - July 2022

Emerging from the haze, the sun, returned from the lonesome sea, reveals once more. We feel the losses, the forgotten and left behind, but also rejoice in what remains, what we have learned, and what has somehow grown.

The thing that comes to you and changes your life...
and when it leaves, the things that remain

The bit of wonder in everything...
and the loss that evens things out

"For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)"

The soft embrace when touch is not expected

The thing that comes back whenever it rains

The book I bookmarked and lost, and found

A cloudy day during cherry blossom season

The shattering gift that shapes your life

MULESKINNER JOURNAL

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LOSS & GRATITUDE

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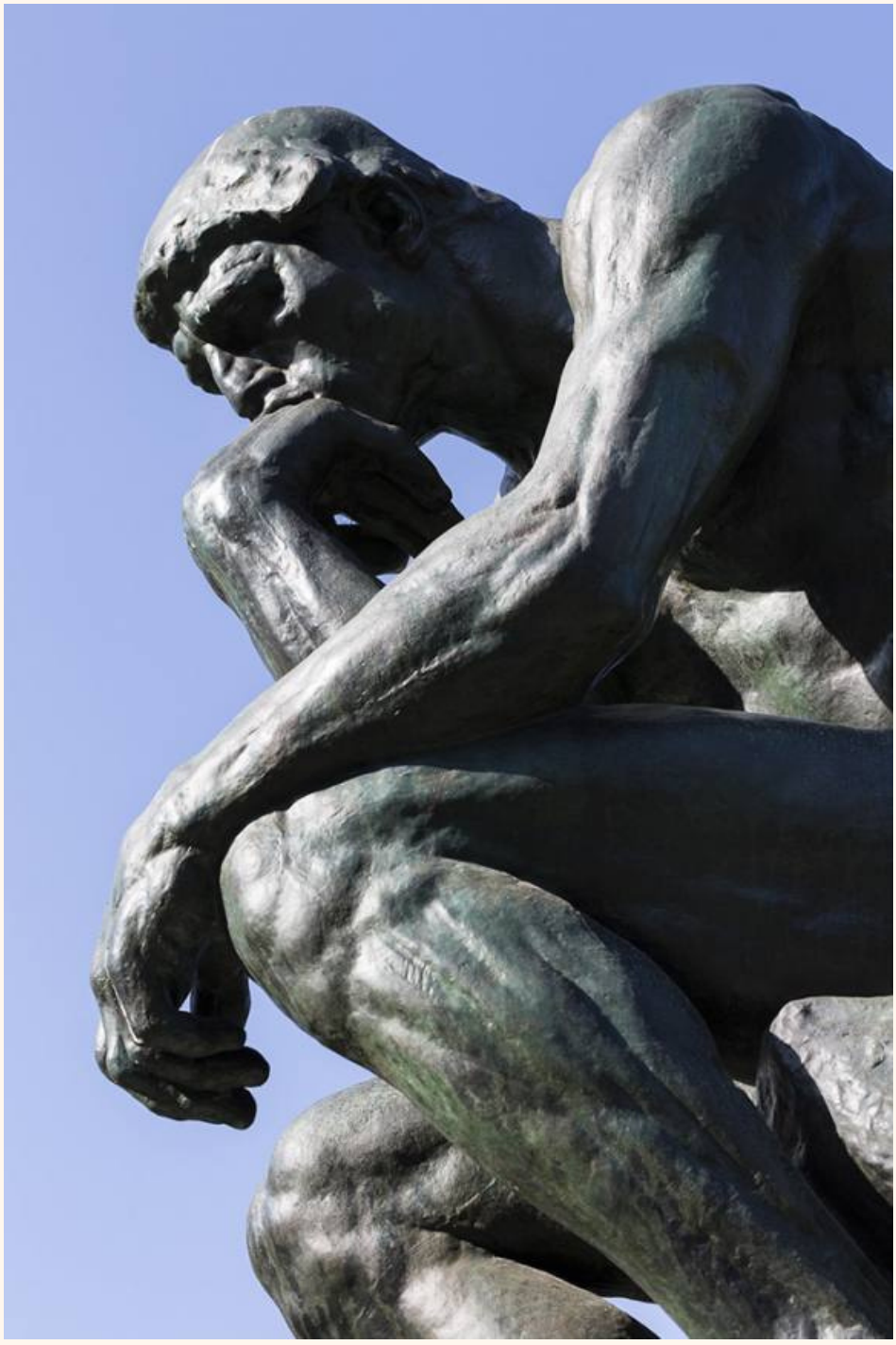


PAUL BECKMAN

HEAVY THOUGHTS

I remember the first time. We were heading towards the movies and the traffic had us blocked because of a fender bender. I didn't want to miss the cartoons, the previews, and the newsreel so I squeezed my eyes shut tight and envisioned a tow truck moving the cars out of the way and us getting through and making it to the theater in time to get front row seats just as the curtain opened and the lights dimmed.

Dad said, "the tow truck's here, we're going to make it," and we did. I thought we were plain lucky but the next time I squeezed my eyes closed and envisioned something happening I knew it was no coincidence, it was my private power.

Now, I'm no longer a kid and my power is still with me but I use it judiciously because I don't know if there's a finite number. I remember sitting at the soda fountain all alone having a cherry Coke and thinking about Mary Lynn sitting with her girlfriends chatting and laughing and the next thing I know she's sitting on the stool next to me holding her straw asking for a sip. We were inseparable for the rest of high school until two weeks before graduation she told me she was moving out of state and I closed my eyes to keep from crying and I saw the teacher walk in a new girl and introduce her to the class and give her Mary Lynn's seat next to me. When I opened my eyes, Laura was smiling at me, and I blushed, and she told me how cute I looked with my eyes all scrunched up like I was playing a movie in my head. She told me she does the same thing as we shared our lunch in the cafeteria. All was great but come Monday she had switched seats and was goo-goo-eyed over the quarterback who was sitting next to her, and she told me after class that she recognized that we shared the same power but obviously hers was stronger.

AMALIA HERREN-LAGE

QUESTIONS I HAVE ABOUT THE MYTH OF PANDORA

When our black cat ran off, his brother spent weeks
smelling for traces of him in the woodpile,
whiskers twitching out into darkness
as if asking, are you there? Are you there?
It was maddening how he refused to give-up,
his small, soft body, always a question,
unable to comprehend the passage of time.
We lived his inconclusive grief with him,
felt the sickening scrape of disappointment
through our stomachs just as sharply.
Without the body, without the smell
or the flies filling the eye sockets, hope slunk
cruelly through the house to haunt us.
Death is the only acceptable loss.

Yesterday, my father
told me he dreams my brother is dead. Only then
can he stand in the doorway of our old, shared
bedroom and weep.

GREGG SAPP

PRAY

“Pray with me, please,” Ma said, intercepting Grace’s hand short of the doorknob by brushing her fingertips lightly across her wrist. “I’m scared.”

Her touch sparked static electricity, like a brief flicker of lapsed conscience. Saying goodbye to Ma was always complicated, given that every time she left her, Grace could not help thinking that it might be the last time she saw her alive.

As a matter of principle, Grace was reluctant to indulge Ma’s churchgoing delusions, but not so much as to overtly refute them. Zorah called it a cop out, but if believing in pie-in-the-sky provided her old lady with some measure of comfort in her frailty, Grace regarded it a duty — not to mention more practical — to humor her. Confronting her over God was a lose-lose proposition.

But to pray with her? That felt worse than just benign dishonesty. To a Freedom from Religion Society dues paying and card-carrying atheist, praying was akin to ideological treason.

“Ma, it’s late,” Grace said, which was both untrue and irrelevant, but it was the best rationalization she could come up with on the spur of the moment.

“Just five minutes longer,” Ma begged. “Is that too much to ask?”

Grace felt a brick of guilt sink into her gut. That question reminded her of being ten years old and pleading with her parents for “just five more minutes” before turning off the lights at bedtime. Then as now, the truth was that five minutes were not too much to ask, in terms of the minor concession in time and effort compared to the gratitude it would yield. Back then, Ma acted magnanimous when granting the brief reprieve, but Pa only permitted those extra minutes on the condition that she spend them in prayer. The irony, now, was haunting.

“Okay, five minutes,” Grace said. Now what? she thought.

Ma parked her wheelchair beside a wingback settee, next to the homemade shrine in her room. She patted a cushion and called Grace, “Here.” This piece of antiquated furniture was one of the few things she salvaged from their old home. Some of Grace’s fondest

childhood memories were of squeezing between her mother and Remy in that same chair, watching their favorite TV show, "Xena Warrior Princess," always when her father was not home because he thought that show was a bad influence on them. It irritated Pa that Grace sat still to watch mind-warping television shows for hours on end but fidgeted constantly in the pew at St. Matthias Church during Father Duffy's homilies. "Shut up, sit still, and pray," he ordered her, to no avail.

Ma crossed herself, then took both of Grace's hands and wrapped her own hands over them, creating a four-handed fist. The tendons in her forearms were taut and quivering, as if exerting great pressure, although to Grace her grip felt about as solid as buttered bread.

"Hail Mary," Ma began, then paused, expecting Grace to join in.

Uh oh, Grace thought. Instantly upon hearing those words, the prayer replayed fully formed in her mind. Having had the Hail Mary inculcated into her brain as a kid, she could no more forget its words than she could her full name — Grace Maria Elizabeth-Seton Quinn. She associated the Hail Mary with penance, for as a child she must have said a thousand rosaries, prescribed by Father Duffy for assorted transgressions of thought and deed.

Praying out loud was almost more blatant hypocrisy than Grace thought she could stomach. Prayer agitated inner anxieties correlated with guilt, shame, regret, failure, grief, fraud, and assorted other personality disorders that she was still working on to get over. Even so, this wouldn't be the first time she tolerated her mother's prayers on occasions when to refuse them would too deeply wound the old lady. When Grace told her mother that she and Gavin were divorcing, Ma prayed for God to have mercy on them. She likewise prayed for Grace's recovery when she broke down and admitted that she was an alcoholic. Ma prayed perhaps the hardest for God to forgive Grace when she finally came out of the closet and admitted that she was a lesbian. Ma believed that she had the power — indeed, the obligation — to appeal to God on Grace's behalf, to show her a viable path to salvation. Likewise, Grace inadvertently encouraged that fantasy by allowing her mother to pray for her, even though she believed that prayer was nothing more than intellectual placebo. Neither judged the other, but they both were certain that the other was wrong.

Nevertheless, Grace had never acknowledged to Ma that she was an atheist. That was a line she was loath to cross. In her mother's mind, denying God was the only truly unforgivable sin. So, if she could appease the old lady by muttering some meaningless mumbo jumbo, she was willing to spit it out, even if she had to swallow her own integrity to speak those words. She didn't want to be responsible for triggering palpitations in her mother's already failing heart.

Grace sucked it up and said: Hail Mary, full of grace,

***

The Lord is with thee…

Grace couldn't last to the end of her first AA meeting. The group dynamics – the hugs from strangers, the clownish grins, and the unwanted attention directed to her – felt creepy. What really pushed her out the door, though, was the God part.

She should have known that any meeting held in the basement of a Catholic church would arouse unpleasant feelings. At the start, the meeting's chairperson invoked the Serenity Prayer to bless their ritual, and everybody parroted it along with her. Grace remained seated and silent when the chairperson asked if anybody was attending their first ever AA meeting — what business of it was theirs, anyway? It didn't matter; somehow, they knew anyway. The chairperson said "welcome" to nobody in particular, but several heads turned toward her.

During the meeting, members took turns introducing themselves and telling stories or sharing opinions on the suggested topic, which, ironically, was "grace." That also made Grace bristle, as if it was a personal insult. She cringed every time somebody mentioned God, and it didn't help when they euphemized the deity as some sort of nebulous "Higher Power." Not one of them described "grace" as a quality of a person's character, without attributing it to God's glory. What finally compelled her to flee was when one person said, "Let go and let God," whatever that meant. "Puh-lease," Grace groaned, unintentionally out loud. She felt the burn of a roomful of harsh glances.

Once outside, Grace muttered to herself, "fuckin' cult."

"True that," somebody said.

Grace had noticed this woman lurking outside of the meeting room, although evidently, she never entered. She sat cross-legged on a bench in the church rose garden, next to a statue of Jesus. She wore a camouflage polyester mini dress and high-rise fishnet stockings over wedge sandals, with a diamond stud through her left nostril and concentric silver hoop earrings. She had smoky black hair and cat eyeshadow deepening her pale features. The statue of Jesus was gazing skyward, as if uncomfortable being next to her.

"Uh, sorry," Grace said. "I was just talking to myself."

"Not so. You were thinking out loud. There's a difference."

"There is?"

"Yes. Those people inside are talking to themselves. There's no evidence, though, that any

of them are actually thinking, aloud or otherwise."

Grace wasn't sure if that comment was supposed to be funny, but she laughed anyway, more relieved than amused. Zorah introduced herself according to a parody of AA protocol, "Hi. My name is Zorah, and I'm an alcoholic atheistic lesbian, the bane and terror of god-fearing people everywhere."

Grace marveled that anybody would so casually reveal any of those things about herself to a stranger in a church garden. Far from shocking her, though, Zorah's candor short-circuited Grace's defense mechanisms, leaving space enough for her to be intrigued.

"I'm Grace. I don't know what I am," she said.

"Oh, I think you do, deep down," Zorah replied. "Otherwise, you wouldn't have walked out."

"Knowing what I am not isn't the same as not knowing what I am."

Zorah whistled and remarked, "That's profound." She removed a business card from her buckled purse and handed it to Grace; it bore the name and contact information for a coffee shop called The Fertile Bean. Its motto was It's a good day to brew.

"What this?"

"To be honest, I often loiter around AA meetings looking for deserters," Zorah admitted. "It's a fruitful place for recruiting members for a secular, all women's recovery group, which meets at the Bean."

Grace figured she had some time to spare. "I could use a cup," she said.

When they walked into The Fertile Bean, the barista and several customers greeted Zorah, and in return she made a gesture of a clenched fist with thumb protruding between the index and middle fingers. They took a seat in a dark booth beneath a painting of a cleft, dripping watermelon that resembled female genitalia. Zorah ordered Chai tea; Grace did the same. She looked around and wondered if all the women in attendance were alcoholic atheistic lesbians, too — and if so, what in the hell was she doing there.

"What happens during these meetings?" Grace asked.

"Sacrilege. We're all blasphemers," Zorah admitted. "But, sober ones."

There was something familiar in Zorah's blithe irreverence. It reminded Grace of herself on those halcyon Friday nights on North High Street, when she was one of Saint Francis DeSales High School's naughty girls who shed their blue blazers and pleated skirts for tight jeans and halter tops, lied about their age, and broke commandments they bragged about to each other, but never confessed to a priest.

"I bet you were raised Catholic," Grace guessed.

Zorah gestured a three-fingered benediction, and said, "It is right and just."

"I can always tell," Grace declared, pleased with herself.

Grace stuck around for the meeting that evening. Had Zorah not told her that it was an alcoholism recovery group, she would never have guessed. Neither atheism nor lesbianism were readily apparent among the members, at least not in any way that she — naively, she later realized —presumed would be evident, like butch haircuts, armpit hair, skull tattoos, or conspicuous man hating. The most frequent topics of discussion were arts-related, like foreign movies Grace had never heard of or plays in small local theaters she didn't know existed. Zorah announced that she had an exhibit of Druid-themed ceramic sculptures opening in a Short North gallery. At the end of the meeting, one woman who had been silently writing in a spiral notebook throughout read aloud the poem she just composed. The women embraced in an arm over arm group hug, and as one chanted, "Peace."

That was it. Done.

"Come back any time," Zorah said to Grace as the meeting was breaking up. "We are here to help you."

Grace hazarded, "Okay," although more to expedite an amicable exit than because she expected to ever return.

While driving home, Grace deconstructed the evening in her mind. She gave herself more time to think by driving past her house, all the way to the county line and back again. Uncharacteristically, she did not feel the urge to stop for a drink. Finally, when she pulled into the driveway, Ma was waiting while looking out the living room window. She accosted her on the porch, "I hope you haven't been drinking."

"I went to an AA meeting," Grace said, somewhat truthfully.

"Thank God," Ma called out, then broke into grateful tears.

***

Blessed art thou amongst women
And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

For six years, Grace was thorough and resourceful at hiding the sordid excesses of her drinking from Gavin, until she got a DUI and could not conceal it any longer. Even then, he believed her when she promised to never drink again. The poor, duplicitous fool, he was clueless, no matter how egregiously Grace abused his earnest and trusting nature. In retrospect, she realized that she was unconsciously trying to sabotage their marriage. The reason why, exactly, eluded her until long after she succeeded.

Gavin made it clear from the outset of their union that he wanted a family. Grace said she did, too, but later. After five years, believing that his wife was genuinely clean and sober, he suggested that it was a fortuitous time for them to begin procreating. Grace agreed and acted accordingly, for she feared that doing otherwise would call attention to her surreptitious drinking. Having become accustomed to lying to Gavin, it did not especially bother her to lie to him about taking birth control, too. Months passed; she pretended to be disappointed when she failed to get pregnant. To maintain the subterfuge, she went so far as to accompany Gavin to a fertility clinic to discuss issues and options. Providing the semen sample embarrassed him like an adolescent caught in the shower, but he did it, and when his sperm tested viable, she knew that she had exhausted every possible lie. The ensuing brouhaha proved fatal to their marriage. Her deception provided Gavin with inarguable grounds from the Church for seeking an annulment; they not only separated, but in the eyes of God, they were never actually wed in the first place. If only the Church could have nullified her guilt, too.

Single again, Grace returned home to the Old North side of Columbus, to her mother. When she showed up on the porch, with all her possessions contained in the three suitcases by her feet, Ma met Grace with hugs and tears, and she thanked God for having answered her prayers.

“Really, Ma?” Grace asked.

As Grace soon discovered, after Pa’s death, prayer had come to occupy vastly increased amounts of her mother’s time. Whereas before Ma often slept in on Sundays, leaving the old man to go to church “for” her, she now attended Holy Mass five days a week. She constructed a home shrine on a marble, halfmoon table next to the corridor leading to the bedrooms. On its surface were a rosary, a scapular, a Douay-Rheims Bible, palm fronds, a vial of holy water, ceramic statues of the archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Rafael, and a row of votive candles. Hanging on the wall to one side was an iron Christ the King crucifix, on the other a Sacred Heart of Mary mosaic plaque, and in between, an Olan Mills family portrait, taken while the old man was still alive, before Grace had gotten married and Remy

was home in between tours of duty in Iraq. The kneeler on the floor in front of the shrine bore imprints of the old lady's knees. It felt like Ma had become a nun.

For the first few weeks after moving in, Grace spent most of the time when she was home drinking vodka in her room. She got off work and went straight from her Target uniform into her pajamas. If Ma knocked at the door to inquire if she was okay, Grace would reply "Fine," "Hunky Dory," Just Peachy," or, if she was really drunk, "Chillinnaaah." Whatever her response, Ma's next action was always the same—to pray for her.

One night, instead of knocking on the door, Ma pushed it open with her shoulder, so fast as to rustle the curtains. There was no time for Grace to hide the bottle of vodka on the nightstand. Ma stopped after a single step into the room, and said, "I'm so sorry."

This puzzled Grace. Sorry for what? She wanted to shout back at the old lady that she had no right to feel sorry for her, that she owned all her faults and accepted their consequences. But starting an argument would have impeded her ability to continue drinking, so she said only, Leave me alone."

"Did you know that there are Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in the basement at St. Matthias. You should go."

"I'd sooner go to the dentist for a root canal."

Ma winced. "God will show the way," she said as she left the room.

From that moment onward, the air in the house seemed to reverberate with prayer. Grace could sense whenever Ma prayed for her; it was like being stalked by a voyeuristic guardian angel, kind of irksome but also kind of comforting. Even though Grace didn't believe one bit in the putative "power of prayer," it reassured her that her mother still believed she was worthy of it.

Her mother's prayers were indeed answered, just not in the way she would have preferred. After managing to stay white knuckled sober for a month, Grace moved into an efficiency apartment on Cleveland Avenue, assuring her mother, "I'll be fine." She was not. Alone with her shame, she relapsed within days. That's when, as a last resort, she decided to give AA a try... and wound up at The Fertile Bean, instead.

After her experience the Bean, Grace thought about going back for a week before she conjured the courage to do it. Zorah rose when she saw her come in and met her at the door, saying, "I've been hoping you'd find your way back."

Not only had she found her way back, she stayed this time.

***

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for Us Sinners

"What kind of bread?" Grace asked. It seemed like a valid question, because bread in one form or another was central to their shared religious upbringing.

To Zorah, the answer was obvious. "Wonder bread, as white as Elmer's glue, cottage cheese, or a blank sheet of paper."

"Perfect," Grace agreed.

Once Grace abandoned herself entirely to being an atheist, she gained all the surety and comfort of a religious conversion, minus the God part.

Ever since high school, she had nursed vague skepticism about the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and omnibenevolent God the Father. It seemed like a fairy tale. Still, she never invested serious enough thought into the nature or implications of her doubts to make a declaration. During college, she was too busy having the time of her life to think about her immortal soul, or her studies for that matter; she dropped out after two years. During the early years of their marriage, she went through the motions of being a Catholic spouse; but after the annulment, whenever she was asked to state a religious affiliation, she chose the "none" option. Grace equated that with being a free thinker, unbeholden to any creed while remaining objective toward all possibilities. Ironically, though, it also discouraged her from thinking it through. None-ism a facile ideology well suited to a life of making excuses.

In the process of getting sober, Grace not only attended the atheist lesbian alcoholic recovery meetings at the Fertile Bean Coffee House, but Zorah got her a job there as a barista. "I'll make a heretic out of you yet," she said. Grace interpreted that as a dare. Prior to joining the Fertile Bean tribe, Grace treated her doubts like secrets. Among the Beaners, though, being an atheist was more than just passive disbelief; it was an active lifestyle. It couldn't be faked. They made rituals of laughing at Biblical contradictions and pointing out the fallacies and hypocrisies of believers of all creeds. They were equal opportunity blasphemers, counting among their members ex-Jews, ex-Mormons, ex-evangelicals and ex-Protestants of all flavors, an ex-Amish transgender lesbian, and, of course, ex-Catholics, which Zorah claimed "make the best atheists, because they have more rules to break." Amid the comfort of this proud community of pagans and apostates, Grace bolstered her sobriety as she reexamined her sexuality. An atheist at last, she could finally embrace being a lesbian, too.

Still, acknowledging that she did not believe in something did nothing to provide her with

something that she could believe in, such as herself. She admitted to Zorah that she was still a work in progress.

"You need to put your lack of faith into action," Zorah decreed. "And I have an idea."

Annually, the Knights of Columbus sponsored a traditional Christmas nativity scene on the statehouse lawn. Zorah filed a petition on behalf of the Freedom from Religion Society invoking the First Amendment and the Establishment Clause to request permission to install their own holiday display on those same public grounds. On a frigid, late November morning Zorah, Grace, and a couple other Beaners went to the statehouse, where they set about creating their own mock nativity scene.

Passersby on the busy downtown sidewalk stopped to watch, some to heckle. "Rot in hell," one woman shouted.

"And also with you," Zorah shouted back.

The manger was constructed from milk crates and corrugated aluminum panels that shook in the wind. The virgin Mary was a bundle of corn stalks wearing a shawl, with the cutout face of Xena Warrior Princess (Grace's contribution). Joseph was a poorly stuffed scarecrow sporting a fake nose and glasses. Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar—the three wise men—were lawn jockeys. Dangling from a bungee cord, the Angel Gabriel, a winged crash test dummy, bounced up and down. And lying in a picnic basket, a loaf of Wonder bread with a halo substituted for the Christ child.

When they were finished, the Beaners stood back to admire their statement. "That's all folks," Zorah said. "Our work here is done."

Leaving the scene was not so easy, though. To get back to where they parked the van, the Beaners had to traverse a disapproving crowd that gathered on the sidewalk behind them. Grace kept her head down and let Zorah lead the interference. Amid the catcalls and threats of divine retribution, Grace recognized one voice. Bristling, she scanned the faces and saw Remy; he was wearing black reflective sunglasses, but she was certain that he was staring bullets straight at her.

"Fuck 'em," Zorah said to the others once they reached the other side of the street. Then, speaking into Grace's ear, she added, "if they can't take a joke."

A joke? Certainly, Remy would not see it that way. What he thought mattered little to Grace, but what he might say to their old lady did worry her. Grace decided that it was better for her to reveal the truth herself than for Remy to break the news to Ma in his typically tactless way.

That same evening, Grace told her mother that she happened to be in the neighborhood

when she dropped by the old house, interrupting Ma during her evening prayers. They drank ginger ale and talked about Christmas cards received, the chances for snow, and other platitudes that only increased Grace's anxiety, until she let it out…

"Ma, I have something to tell you. Please don't judge."

Her mother pressed her palms together, under her throat.

Grace exhaled twice, lingering on the second breath. She lost her will, although now that she'd worried her mother, she had to say something. Finally, she blurted out, "Ma, I'm a lesbian."

***

Now and at the hour of our death.

When at age 70 Ma had a minor stroke and lay prone, unable to wrest herself upright for 36 hours before the mailman found her, Remy decided that enough was enough; with her degenerative disk disease, bad heart, and now this, she had to go to a senior living center, for her own good. He took charge of making all arrangements. As soon as he got her settled at the Village of Incarnate Word, he sold the old house, purportedly profiting just enough to pay for Ma's ongoing care and feeding, although he declined to show Grace the books and claimed to be deeply offended that she didn't trust him.

"It's those femi-nazis you hang out with," he said. "They've brainwashed you."

Whatever, Grace thought.

"I'm glad that Pa isn't here to see you now. He'd blow his top."

That was a low blow, even for Remy. It was true, but still a low blow.

"Whatever," Grace said aloud.

"You do know that Ma worries herself sick about you, right?"

That was even lower. Remy knew that Grace did not give a rat's ass about his opinions, but he could always provoke a reaction by guilt-tripping her over their mother's fragile mental and physical disposition.

"That's between Ma and me," Grace replied.

"And God," Remy added.

Over time, Grace and her brother developed a relationship strategy built upon benign avoidance and transactional communication. The compromise was based on an unspoken agreement that they must shield their mother from any appearance of disharmony between the two of them. Grace never mentioned Remy in Ma's presence and hoped that he similarly respected their boundaries. Still, she distrusted his forbearance. Like a good Catholic, he loved gossip because it excused him to be self-righteous. Thus, Grace suspected that Remy was really the instigator of the plan when Ma called to ask her to join them attending the Christmas morning Mass together, as a family. It felt like he was daring her to make a stand.

"It's one hour of my time, and it will placate my old lady," Grace explained to Zorah.

"Whatever," Zorah groaned in disapproval.

The last time Grace had been in church was her father's funeral, at a time when she was still married, still drinking, and still nominally Catholic. When she entered the church after so long an absence, the absurd notion occurred to her that the old man was watching them, from on high in heaven, or more likely through the haze of Purgatory.

In life, Pa never missed Mass on Sunday or any holy day of obligation. Like some men have their "man caves," Pa had church stuff. In his capacity as moderator of the Pastoral Council, Pa often had "business" with Father Duffy, which they invariably conducted over cigarettes, pork rinds and longneck bottles of Genesee Cream Ale. Ma stifled her objections, even though he sometimes returned home blackout drunk. In return, Pa did not object when Ma stayed home Sundays. Grace suspected that they liked it that way.

Father Duffy walked down the aisle between rows of pews, flinging droplets of holy water from an aspergillum while chanting, "In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti." Grace caught a bead of holy water right between the eyes. An altar boy followed, swinging an incense censer. It made Grace sneeze.

Genuflecting before the Holy Eucharist, Father Duffy raised his arms over his head; the layers of his purple and white vestments rippled like aspen leaves. He chanted, "Lord Have Mercy."

"Lord Have Mercy" the congregants chanted back.

Grace bowed her head, thinking Kill me now.

When she raised her head again, Grace glanced across the pew at Remy, his wife, and two kids next to him, all with their missalettes open. Ma sat in her wheelchair at the end of the pew, the gatekeeper. Eerily, Grace also sensed Pa's presence, standing to her left, like the ghost echo of an amputated limb.

Grace remembered Father Duffy's eulogy for her father, which began: "We are comforted

with the certain knowledge that our beloved Patrick Joseph Quinn is now with God and his angels in heaven." Meanwhile, all Grace could think about was her next drink.

The priest called out, "Glory to God in the highest." Automatically, she responded, "And peace to the people of Earth," and then bit her tongue.

Finally came the part of the high Mass that Grace dreaded most—Holy Communion. An usher invited the family to vacate the pew and queue in front of the altar to receive the sacrament. Grace sat unmoving while Remy pushed Ma out of the pew, and his family followed. Grace could almost feel Pa nudging her from behind. Still, she remained seated. The others looked back at her with expressions ranging from Ma's despair to Remy's scorn.

Father Duffy stood at the foot of the altar holding the ciborium containing the communal host, while next to him a deacon who looked not much older than the altar boys stood ready to offer the chalice of wine. Grace sighed dry breath over cracked lips. Her will to resist collapsed at the thought of the taste of the wine and the delicious sensation of it going down her throat.

Fuck it, Grace thought. If you're going to sin, might as well sin big. She fell into line to receive the sacrament.

***

Somewhere between The Lord is with thee and at the hour of our death, the old lady ceased praying and started mildly snoring. Grace realized she'd spoken those words alone. The old lady's hands had gone limp. She breathed in soft, erratic puffs. Grace backed away slowly, freeing her hands and then waving them in front of her mother's face to test the depth of her slumber. It seemed like it should be a sin to fall asleep before finishing a prayer.

Grace finished for her — *Amen*.

JASON RYBERG

DON'T BOTHER WAITING UP

Il have no real plans for this one,
no idea of what it might be thinking
as it looks back at me, becoming
more sentient by the minute,
self-aware, even, with each pen stroke,
letter, word, sentence, as we jointly
stitch its self together with the matter generator
of the pen, finally growing to that point
where it sits up and puts on some of
my clothes, my boots, my hat, and
walks out the back door, into the night,
with a look on its face (if we can even call it
a face) that somehow says, don't bother
waiting up, I'll be back in time for breakfast.

ROBERT NISBET

VALLEY, FARM, VACATION: WALES

ISo did the valley, did
that udder-wealthy green-wet pastureland,
reveal its magic for us,
that holiday, that summer?

We'd come from a city and a university,
from Anglo-Saxon, mediaeval studies,
some heavy stuff, but graced
with moments' poems and odd nights' libations.
We knew as well (it was part of the time,
the sixties into seventies)
of the movement back to nature and the land,
the fundamental-being story.

So the valley it was, to work on the farm,
in the cow sheds, byres and on the hay,
the hosing, brushing, shit and straw,
the blisters, smell of dung (a fair old hum
but not execrable), and the aching,
aching in the mornings, aching nights.

But many mornings, on the hotter days,
there was a shimmer to the air,
brightness and clatter to the morning milking,
and then at last the cows we were helping with
began to breathe a recognition.
And the splosh and sudden whiteness
of the milk, there'd always been that.
Evenings now, we'd slap our calloused hands
against the last of the bales
and say, Okay, job done.

September, as we prepared to leave,
we could see the shining brown
of the furrows being ploughed for winter.

MICHAEL QUATTRONE

THE OLD ORCHARD

A dump truck idles just outside the gates.
Inside, a dozer digs up apple roots.

The whining of a wrecker in reverse
seldom breaks the buzzing prayer of summer.

Point those Caterpillar treads in my direction.
Here comes another over-budget gutting.

I won't complain about the cost or time
to raze a garden I did not design.

Though I have grazed, the land was never mine.

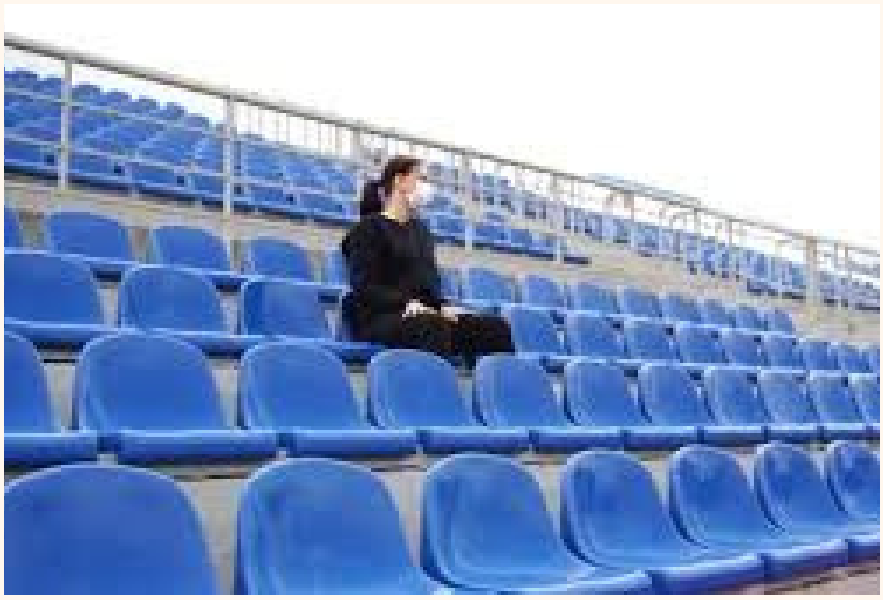
STEVE BRISENDINE

EMBERS REMEMBERED

Sunset
through suburban
maples, elms, power lines;
someone get me to the prairie,
let me

breathe in
rain-drenched sagebrush and alfalfa,
watch the world's widest sky
blaze up and die
to dusk.


GAME BOY ADVANCE



MORGAN BOYER

FOOTBALL

Just imagine that football is dragon ball.

My mother pointed to boys tackling
each other on artificial field-grass.

Just wait until the second quarter.
We'll leave right after we see the marching band.
You watch people beat each other up
in your Japanese cartoons. It's no different.

I rolled my eyes, Yes, but I'm not freezing, wet, tired and hungry surrounded by shouting strangers, bright lights & sitting on this cold piece of metal.

Well, tough, because now Alex is in the
marching band. Oh, George, I didn't see
you there. How's work? My mother spots
a high school friend who sits down
and begins chatting.

Mom, I'm really, really cold!

Play with your Gameboy, I'm talking to George.

I whipped out my Gameboy Advance.
I was in the middle of saving up volcanic
ashes in my "soot sack" from Route 113
in order to get a Black Flute from the old
glassmaker in his cottage. 1,000 steps with the help
of my trusty Absol in front; we could face anything,
and in this 32-bit island chain, there were no frigid football
stadiums, no being forced to play second fiddle.

CONTINUED...

I was Champion. Each step toward the black
flute, I strolled knowing that the umbrella ladies,
ninjas and birdkeepers knew me as their queen,
not their princess. Not second. Not third. I was first.

Look, mom, I got a black flute! I flashed the screen to her.

Oh, that's great, sweetie. Anyway George, I'll
look into whether or not I can come.
Alex's band schedule has been pretty hectic.

EDMOND STEVENS

JETER BATTING CLEANUP

Right after the midnight news, the Yankee's cable channel provided a public service to the sleepless souls and shift workers of the city with a rebroadcast of that night's game against the Blue Jays. Ben and I had already watched the real-time broadcast with Derek Jeter hitting home runs in the first and third innings, then A-Rod hooking a double into the gap to clear the bases in the fourth. Rivera rested in the bullpen and with an eight-run surplus.

Whether the Yankees or Knicks, the game was always a part of the routine of my visits to the city. What part of friendship is this, his wife would ask, puzzled how we could sit for hours with scarcely the exchange of a word, whether watching a game, or on the two-hour drive up to the Gunks to climb or mountain bike.

Silence doesn't mean a lack of communication, Ben told Dyanne. We talk that way all the time.

When was that? Dyanne asked, I think I must have been away that week.

We talked an hour ago, I said. Ben wanted sushi to-go. I told him I was feeling more like Indian.

Now the tumors were back, returned like a brawler with all his brothers and in-laws to finish off a bar fight. With every line of chemo and clinical trial played out, there was even less to say, though the silence was more of a kindness these days.

Without discussion, it was understood we'd watch the replay, even the rah-rah of the pre-game, because sleep wasn't much of an escape and I was afraid to stray too far from the room in case he might need something from the bathroom or a sudden run to the all-night pharmacy at York and Eighty-Sixth. Or, more troubling, I might have to wake Dyanne and confirm what the docs had been warning. Soon would come the time when we would no longer be able to provide the kind of final care that was inevitable. With the equine doses of steroids and Fentanyl patches keeping the pain at a bearable threshold, Ben's primary knew that this final home time was a kind of parole to allow a simulation of some normalcy with his boys and wife before the inevitable tether to the drips, catheters, oxygen.

The replay from Toronto followed the original broadcast, not one pixel out of place. Though at one in the morning, it was odd to see the stadium roof open, the sky a wispy

pearl of pre-twilight, but knowing they would pause in the visitor's seventh to close the leaves of the dome as the squalls shouldered in off Lake Ontario. Once more, Jeter took Accardo to the loge in deep right off a two-and-one count in the first inning, and then again inside the left field foul pole on the first pitch of the third. Something about the replay felt like magical thinking, the idea that we could muscle back the hands of the clock and reverse a day, a month, a season to when the cancer hadn't returned, the lesions had yet to corrode his liver, the tumor not yet pressing his diaphragm, each breath pushing back on a collapsing ceiling.

A few nights earlier, we watched Bridge on the River Kwai. It's a movie I keep coming back to with the same fantastical expectation, hoping that this time Bill Holden will push the plunger, blow up the bridge, and vanish back into the jungle with Jack Hawkins and the Thai tribal girls. I continue to hold onto this speculation that there's a secret hack to the timeline, a dropped stitch in the code, and so that the outcomes for Ben and Holden might be tilted with just the right nudge so that one cancer cell fails to gain purchase and just flushes out with the other bodily detritus. Then tonight we'd be ordering in lobster rolls, or fighting with the kids to take their showers. Or more likely I wouldn't be here at all, another evening folded into the compilation of days and nights among the more familiar modulation of crickets, pond creatures, and the currents over the tops of the beeches from the traffic on the Merritt Parkway.

Ben was now round-the-clock relocated on the sofa, semi-reclined in a fragile twist. A pillow elevated one shoulder; a rolled afghan pressed across his stomach, a poultice that might tease out some of the pain. I knew it was almost the time but not my place to ask. Ben was a teaching cardiologist at Columbia-Presbyterian. He was always the one issuing the directives, ordering the labs, stumping the young residents. One day, in the early stages of a new chemo cycle, after the oncologists, the radiology guy, and pain management team had left the room, and Ben motioned to Dyanne with a slight turn of the hand, in the intimate dialect of husband and wife, that he wished her to close the door.

"You know what's the really scary part of all this?" he asked. I could think of any dozen scary parts. But Dyanne and I knew not to answer, understanding that Ben expected the prize of delivering his own punch line: "The scariest part is realizing you're the smartest person in the room." It was an undeniable boast, but not without basis. Ben had been top of his class at Harvard Med and a finalist for the Lasker-Debakey award while a resident at Hopkins. But that was back in the early months when everybody was forwarding emails of some new pharmaceutical study, low-alkaline or antioxidant food supplements, and testimonials for a Mexican clinic. Somebody sent a gift basket of turmeric capsules, teas, and lotion. Outside the medical community, people seemed adamant that cancer was reversible by an outlook adjustment, a tweak in the body's pH, or a meditative imaging of good cells chomping the nasty ones in a Pac-Man game played out in the arcade of the mind's-eye. It pissed Ben that people's misinformed intentions held that cancer was the result of attitude or belief

failings and that he could control his own cure by just getting his head right. Ben twisted the turmeric gift basket into the trash chute and we laughed as it whistled like Wile E. Coyote down twenty-six floors to the sub-basement.

Ben turned away from the game, his face pressed into the scrolled arm of the sofa.

"Ben?"

Maybe he couldn't hear through the drone of pain. Or maybe he knew too obviously the question that hung there in space. Finally he raised his face, all the signature authority vacated.

"I've got to quit trying to be my own doctor," he said.

"You're saying it's time to go?"

His eyes dipped to the floor so that I would not see that shadow of uncertainty and apprehension.

"I'll see if Dyanne's sleeping," I said, more proposition than statement. "I can help her wake the boys and get them dressed."

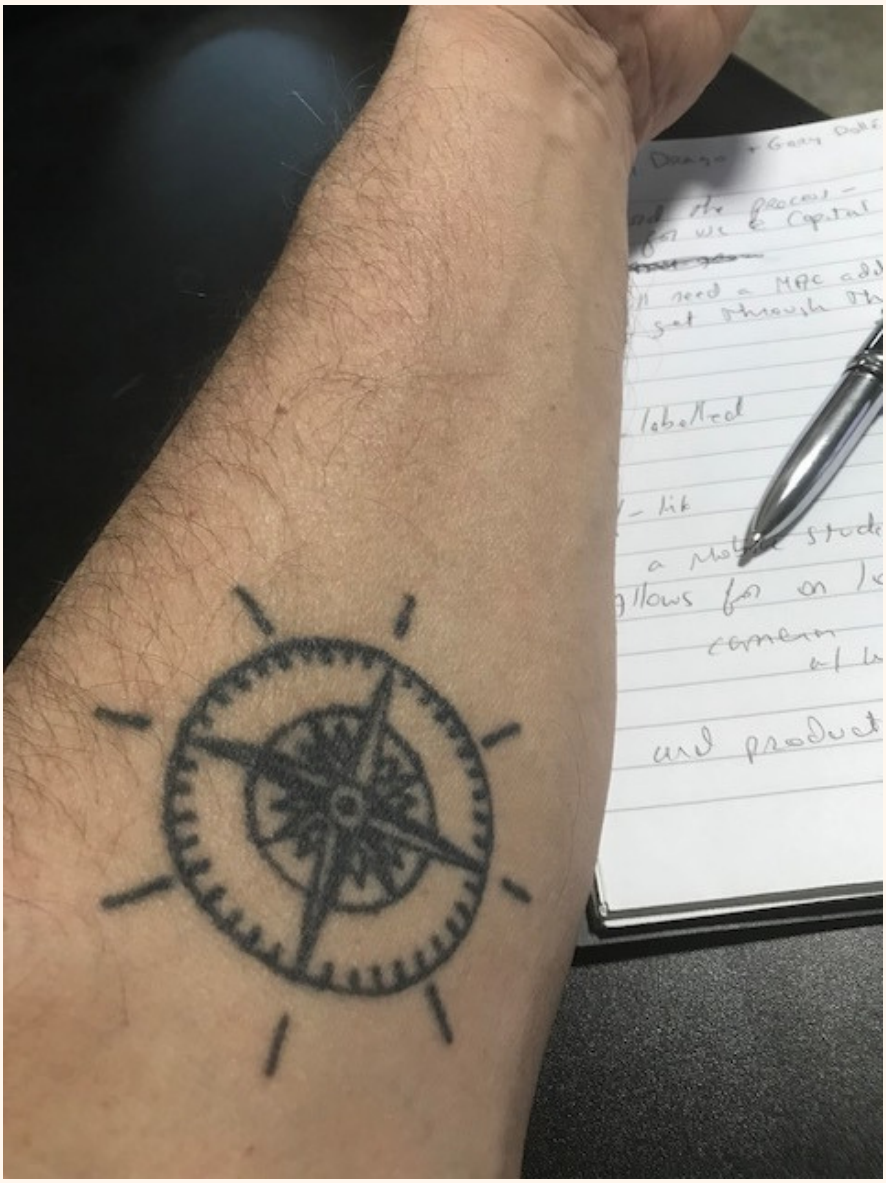
"No. It scares them when I go to Emergency. At the hospital, they'll get me on some better pain management. Just call down to the lobby and tell them we need a cab. Probably sooner better than later."

"Maybe call the EMTs?" I asked in a flat tone, trying not to suggest alarm.

"No. EMTs will really freak them out."

The remote had probably fallen between the cushions nearby, and I didn't bother to turn off the TV as I helped Ben rotate his feet from the cushion to the floor.

The only difference in the late game broadcast was the commercial breaks, with the slots now filled by discounted time-buys for a mattress warehouse in Fort Lee, a miracle mop, and a banquet hall in Chinatown, the voice-over in Mandarin. Jeter again came to the plate in the top of the third. He patted the side of his helmet then stared into the label of the bat as if reading a spiritual inscription. The pitch would be a high slider, same as the first broadcast. No, Derek, I thought. Swing under it. Foul it off into the screen. Or at least take the damn pitch. One goddamned pitch. But there would be no shift in the outcome. Like the original, Jeter hit the slider on a rainbow arc just beyond the left fielder's glove and a Toronto fan left the stadium with a collectible, to be preserved for years, maybe decades, in the corner of a sock drawer or on a shelf in a Lucite cube.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TIMOTHY TARKELLY

ON MOTHERS AND MARITIME NAVIGATION

FOR EMMA

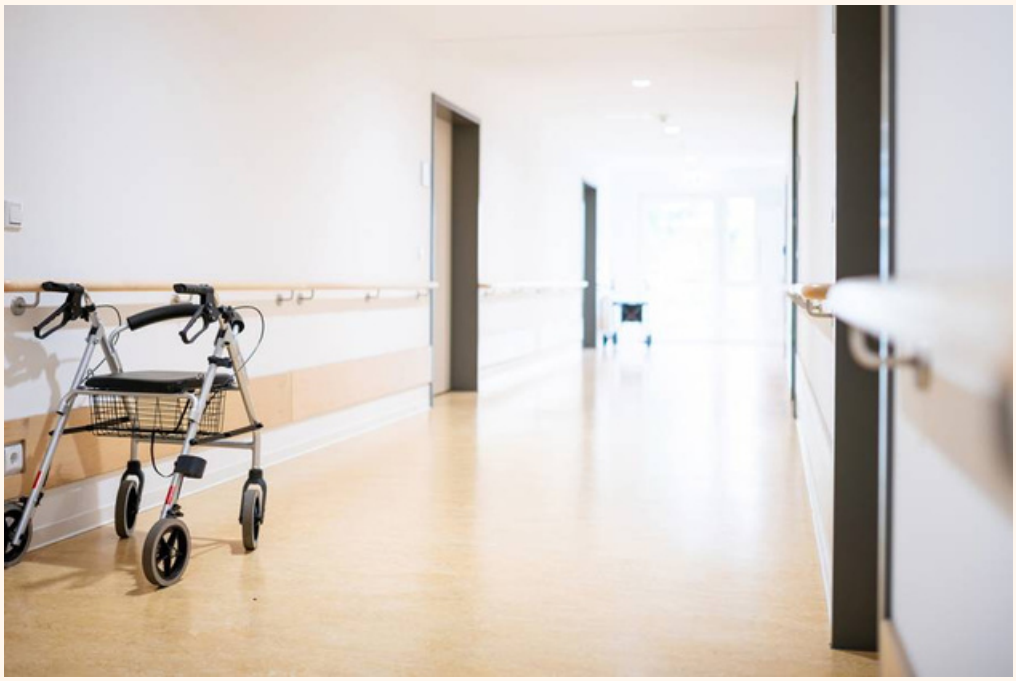
You've reached the third grade
and here's your mother
who fed you to health,
saying "listen,
you may not like your teacher,
but if you learn your times tables,
for now, you will succeed.
You will own the shore,
shine as a beacon so bright
the other kids will mistake you for the sun."

And a few years down the road,
she emerges, reminds you
hard work is the key
to keeping your head above water.

Eventually, she will sound
as a stern, salted voice,
the dirge of experience
over the rough-worn waves of adulthood,
guiding your best attempts at sea,
begging for grandchildren.

But once, all you had to do
was live. You were born
and the woman who ached
as life leapt from her own heartbeat
held an armful of god's best promise
swaddled in fleece
and showered with kisses.

That was you. That was a room
of adoring relatives
saying "it doesn't get better than this.
Just breathe. Close your eyes,
rest and know
the future can hide nothing from you,
you are the future."



GEORGINA MARIE GUARDADO

POLARITY

It's not that I have a problem
with criticism
but when the poet
who only wrote about figs and fountains
told me I needed to remove myself
from the content of my poetry
I thought of the perfect response
a day later

The page is a mirror and I need to see myself
to know the kind of damage that was done over time
to turn it into a canvas that repaints
itself into a new kind of daylight

The problem is not that I place myself on a pedestal
or that I care whether or not you're vaccinated
but when I open social media to
find someone else's depression
to get away from my own
I see that two more have died from COVID in my small town

The lovely residents of this lakeside town
are the first to lay claim to their rights
to say, they were going to die anyway.

Where is their mirror?
Maybe they need a poem.

I think of my grandmother
who one moment in her vanishing mind
thought she was a 20-year-old dancer again
attempting to gallop down the convalescent halls
with her male nursing assistant.
The next minute, she is taking her last shallow breath

CONTINUED...

alone
not knowing she is a victim of a pandemic
that no one was allowed to hold her hand
that her fiancé was raging outside the nursing home
blaming me for the doors being locked.

Yes, she would have died anyway
but who is to say it was her time.

JAMES HANNON

HEY DAD

I was mad on those Saturday nights
when you weren't home and Mom
would drink too much and leave
the rolls too long in the oven
and start crying when Mike teased her.
She'd leave the kitchen and I'd follow her
to the living room where she'd throw
herself down on the couch to cry
some more and it was just so painful.

She had so little power and she knew it
And you knew it and Mike and I knew it.
But I knew it was wrong and you two didn't
and I had no power to get you to see it.

Or maybe you knew and lived with the guilt
because Helen needed you and you needed her
on Saturday nights after the long week.

It wasn't enough,
that hour alone at the end of the day,
when she would go into your office
and close the door,
the office with the big leather recliner
and the minibar that opened at four.

I understand why you wanted a second wife.
Mom was such a good Catholic
she didn't know how babies were made
when you married after seven years of dating.

Jesus, what did you talk about all that time?
What did Ireland and the Church do to you both?

CONTINUED...

When cancer took her breasts
and threatened her life
did anyone help you?

You had been in the war
and were a man's man
and wouldn't have taken
the help that wasn't offered.

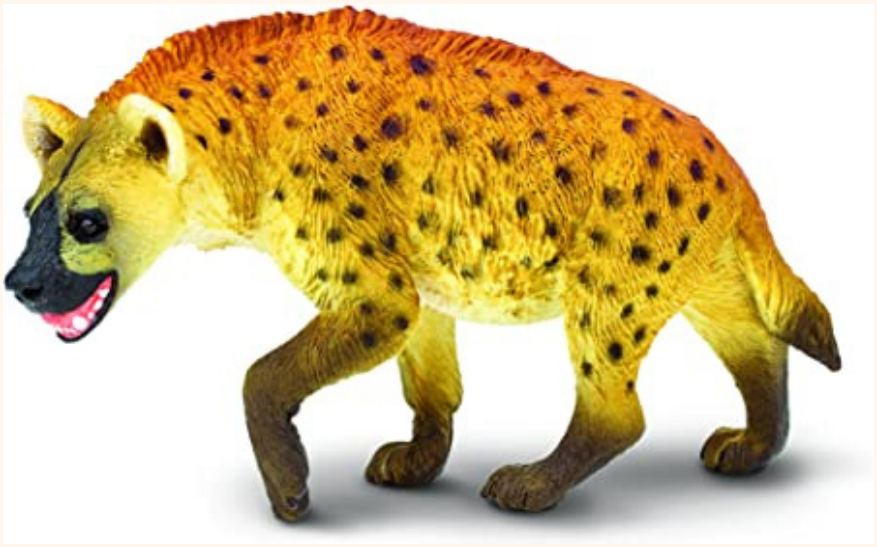
After all, you didn't cry
when your mom died
when you were eight
because Irish men don't cry.|
They drink and offer it up
for the souls in Purgatory.

And there'd been thirty generations
to practice suffering with no power,
and not enough food
after the times with no food
because the highly civilized landlords
took and took and gave back nothing.

Dad, you wouldn't want to hear
about generational trauma.
You'd say, you want sympathy?
It's in the dictionary
between stadium and symphony.

You were a pretty tough guy,
but you know what?
We had it, that generational trauma,
and the alcoholism and the coverups
and the fear of getting too close
and opening the heart
because we're sure life will break it.

I'm just glad you let me hug you near the end.



COLIN JAMES

SURVIVING THE LAST PERSON EATEN ALIVE CONTEST

The flyers were misleading
no door prizes,
ticket stubs not referred to
for the remainder of the evening.
My date was incognito
affectively unrecognizable.
I gave up looking
after surveying the other choices.
Struck up a conversation
with a cute volunteer.
She was inexplicably courteous.
I seemed to be making headway
even offering her some land I owned
on the Scottish coast.
Then they brought the hyenas in.
The noise was disconcerting.
We stood at the back kissing.
Her skin went from white to pallid.
The opposite of what I was expecting.

GALE ACUFF

I DON'T WANT TO DIE BUT I GUESS I WILL

I don't want to die but I guess I will

sooner or later and I'm for later
so that I'll live longer and can eat more
tacos and pizza and pretzels and ice
cream and chocolate and popcorn and corn dogs
and jerky and waffles other stuff
I'll miss if I'm dead but at Sunday School
they talk a lot about Heaven and if
you make the cut then you're happier than
a hog in slop and I guess that means that
gluttony is no vice up there but my
teacher said No, Gale, you're missing the point
but at the Korn Dawg King the soft-swirl cones
have a little loop at the very top
like a pigtail but it still makes a point.

ARUNI WIJESINGHE

DISCO JESUS

I find Christ
at the Purple Heart Thrift Store
at the hour of His arrival. When the girl
behind the counter lifts Him
from a box of donations, I know He
is mine. His shrink wrap is intact, His price
in Brazilian reales unsmudged on a blue sticker.
The chipped paint on His face and hands
gives Him a tortured saintliness,
but His stigmata are nail-polish bright.
What speaks to me most
is the mosaic of tiny mirrors
that adorn the drape of His robes.
Even through the dusty plastic shroud
He sparkles with diamond allure.
Tiffany splendor. Studio 54 fabulous.
I offer the princely sum of ten dollars,
carry Him out the glass door with both hands,
admire Him in the bright sun
of the strip mall parking lot.
At home I unwrap Him and place Him
in the center of the kitchen table.
After four years of marriage
my husband is used to my crow-like obsession
for anything shiny, shrugs at the treasures
I spirit home from second-hand store pilgrimages.
Jeff takes one glance at His glittering,
dubs Him Disco Jesus, then takes his mug of coffee
into another room. I sit on a chair, pew-hard,
rest my chin on double-stacked fists. I gaze
at hundreds of myselves reflected
in a nine-inch savior.
Disco Jesus finds His place

CONTINUED...

on the top shelf of our bar, outstretched arms
welcoming friends from between half-drunk bottles
of Hennessy and Crown Royal. Sometimes
I take Him down from His perch, wipe the dust
from His glory. I turn Him in my hands,
wonder at my own flawed appeal.

MARIE ANDERSON

NOT TODAY

From his bed, Finn stared out the glass wall overlooking his backyard. Rain stabbed the glass. A gorgeous dying ash tree—infected with emerald ash borer—shivered and spasmed in the wind. One crow, then two, burst from the tree, cawing.

“Raining hard today,” Finn said to his wife. “And windy. Like it was exactly six years ago.”

Libby sat in the rocker next to his bed, knitting a green sweater for their 5-year-old daughter. She did not look up.

“I wish I could go out now,” he said. “Feel the rain. Let the wind and rain push me around.”

Libby set down her knitting. She looked at her watch. “Benny’s due in 14 minutes. He’ll take you outside, if you want.”

Finn shook his head, one of the few body parts he could still move.

“There won’t be time. Too much for Benny to do today. Bowel program, for one.”

Finn watched Libby. He saw no revulsion pinch her face. He saw something worse. Boredom.

“22,514 tickets sold,” he said. “That day. Six years ago today. But who knows how many were really there.”

“All there for you, Finn,” she murmured. She glanced at her watch, resumed knitting.

“Not for me,” Finn said. “No one pays attention to the keyboard player.”

He waited for her to remind him that the band had been built around his poetry and his melodies.

“Damn!” she said. “Dropped a stitch.”

He closed his eyes, saw again the thousands of fans filling the huge field behind the barricades in front of the stage. Most were draped in the plastic green rain ponchos which the state fair organizers had distributed free to every ticket holder.

Finn's band had been scheduled for one show at the state fair. Not Finn's band, really. The band had always been about its charismatic front man, Keelan Driggs. Finn's best friend since junior high.

A state fair was normally a venue too unimportant for the band, but Libby's mother was personal assistant to the lieutenant governor, so, as a favor to Libby, the band had agreed to do one show.

They were The Draft Stand. An alt rock band who had played Chicago's Lollapalooza, done Letterman, Saturday Night Live, and were scheduled to do Madison Square Garden a week after their performance at the state fair.

That, of course, never happened.

There'd been a severe storm warning issued shortly before the band was ready to take the stage. It had been raining off and on all day.

"Maybe we should delay the concert," a fair official in a blue suit and tie had suggested to the band.

Driggs, already shirtless, had laughed. "It's only rain, dude," he said. "We can play."

***

Finn felt Libby's knitting needle softly scratch his cheek.

He opened his eyes, smiled. "How'd you know I was itching there?"

"I can tell," she said. "Your skin quivers where you itch."

"Thank you," he said.

She nodded, knitting again, not looking up from her work.

He closed his eyes again, listened to the rhythmic click from Libby's knitting needles and the rain slashing the glass wall.

He knew if he opened his eyes, he wouldn't see Libby knitting. He wouldn't see his huge bedroom with the wheelchair and electric spin bike in one corner, the pulley contraption in another, his daughter's kindergarten art masterpieces thumbtacked to the walls.

He'd see the fans, the rain-drenched fans, pickled in their plastic green rain ponchos, the last thing he'd seen as an able-bodied man.

***

He'd been positioned, as always, at the back of the stage, while his three bandmates postured and preened stage front. His fingers flew over the piano. In a few minutes, for his solo, he'd swivel from his classic piano to his Fender Rhode electric piano.

Finn stopped playing while the guitars and bass took over.

He looked at Libby. She stood off to the side in the shadows of the covered stage, gazing at Driggs. Driggs' voice soared. His naked chest glistened with sweat. Libby's palms pressed into her still flat belly. She was four weeks pregnant, often racked with nausea.

Finn was pumped on Adderall and two lines of coke. He saw everything.

In the distance, he saw the giant Ferris wheel shudder to a stop, its lights blink off. Probably shut down because of the rain, Finn thought. The wind had picked up too. A red baseball cap flew up from some fan's head.

Finn saw Libby slap her hand to her mouth and hurry off the stage.

To vomit, Finn knew. He was turning 27 tomorrow. In eight months he'd be a father. Finally achieving something over Driggs.

He swiveled to the electric piano and began flying solo, burning as the crowd roared, his fingers tearing up the keys, melting the black and whites, spinning glissandos and triplets with his right while pounding with his left.

He glanced up at the cheering, roaring rain-drenched pickles, and that's when it happened.

Thunder rocked Finn's body. Except it wasn't thunder. It was a tremendous howl of wind and then the collapse of the stage roof. Something slammed his body to the stage floor. He heard a fierce cracking sound. He couldn't move. Excruciating pain radiated from his neck. He blacked out.

***

Of the four band members, Finn was the only survivor. Paralyzed from the shoulders down. A C4 quadriplegic.

***

He still took drugs. Not fun drugs anymore. No more vodka, Adderall, coke, weed. But pills. Lots of pills. Pills to control chest pains and nerve pains and muscle spasms. Pills for improving bladder and bowel control. Pills for his fevers, chills, cold sweat. Pills for depression and anxiety. Pills for sleep.

***

A knock on the door opened Finn's eyes. He saw relief on Libby's face. "Come on in, Benny!" she said.

She stood as a short bald man pushed his bulk into the room. Tattoos inked his arms and scalp. A smile and bright green eyes energized his smooth-shaven face.

"Mornin' Boss, Miz Boss."

"Shift change!" Libby said.

"Ouch," Finn said. "That's how you see quality time with me?"

"I'm joking, Finn." She was already at the door, looking at her watch. "You know I have to get Hazel from school."

"So what's on tap? Another six-hour play date? For Hazel, I mean."

"What are you implying Finn?"

"I'm implying that I never see my daughter much these days. Kindergarten is done at 11:30. You guys are gone till dinner time."

"What, you want your 5-year-old daughter here while you're doing your bowel program today, Finn? Say the word. We'll skip her 90-minute play date and her trip to the mall so she can watch Benny help you shit."

"Love you too!" Finn shouted when she slammed the door behind her.

"She hates me," Finn said as Benny maneuvered Finn into the Hoyer lift.

"You can only hate what you love, Boss." The lift deposited Finn on the toilet.

They began the hour-long bowel program. Benny gave Finn a suppository, then digitally stimulated Finn's body to "go" multiple times, each time inserting his finger to verify if Finn's bowel was clean.

Benny talked the whole time. It was one of the reasons Benny was Finn's favorite personal aide.

"I despise this, Benny," Finn gasped as nausea spasmed his body. "I despise being so helpless, so useless."

"It's uselessness that makes you useful, Boss."

The state paid for Finn's aides, therapists, nurses, doctors. The state had been found negligent in the improper construction of the stage rigging. Hazel and Libby and Finn would always be provided for. Under the terms of the settlement, all their bills, including Hazel's future college, were the state's responsibility.

"Six years is long enough, Benny. Not even the doctors are saying anymore that I might walk again. So what that I'm an incomplete quad if I'm still paralyzed. I'm going to be 33 tomorrow. Jesus was 33 when he died. I don't want to live longer than Jesus."

"Happy birthday, Boss."

"Here's what you can give me, Benny. For my birthday. Set me free. A pillow over my face. What do you say?"

"You got a beautiful little girl to help your wife love."

"I appreciate and resent that you didn't say help my wife raise. I appreciate and resent that you said beautiful little girl not beautiful little daughter."

"It's not who has a kid, Boss. It's who loves a kid."

"She's got Driggs's blonde hair. And a fine singing voice. Perfect pitch. Honey tone. Like Driggs. Me, I couldn't carry a tune when I was able-bodied. I sure can't carry one now."

"Driggs was a blondie?"

"He dyed his yellow curls pitch black back in high school. My suggestion, by the way."

"Boss, you say the word, I still got the DNA kit in my trunk. What you asked me to get you last year when you turned 32. Then changed your mind. That kit cost me 50 bucks. You can pay me back at your convenience, thank you. We'll cheek swab you, Hazel, Libby. Send the samples to the lab in the postage-paid mailing envelope. Get the results back in two weeks. But I don't advise you doing this. You can only know what you don't know. And you not knowing Hazel's paternity is making you know what being a real father is all about."

“Half the time, Benny, no, nearly all the time, I don’t understand what the hell you mean. You put these opposites, these contradictions in one sentence, and I don’t know whether you’re talking profound truth or shallow unreasoning.”

“Reasoning is found in unreasoning, Boss.”

Finn laughed. Benny could always make Finn laugh.

Blessedly, the bowel program had been successful. They’d be able to skip it tomorrow.

“Feel like biking today, Boss?”

“I want it to end, Benny. I want it all to end.”

“It’s got to begin before it can end, Boss. So let’s begin the bike.”

Benny hooked Finn on the spin bike. Electrodes on Finn’s quads and calves shocked his legs into movement for one hour. Then they switched to the arms.

Eventually back in bed, bathed, teeth brushed, nails clipped, nose hairs trimmed, skin inspected for bed sores, penis checked for infection from the catheter, hair combed, Finn was ready for Hazel.

He looked at the clock on the wall over his flat screen TV.

“Where the hell are they, Benny?”

And then Hazel burst into the room. Libby slowly followed. Hazel climbed on his bed. Finn could feel her. It was his great joy, feeling her weight on his paralyzed legs.

She hugged him. He couldn’t hug her back.

She kissed him. He kissed her back.

Libby lifted Finn’s arm and placed his hand on Hazel’s yellow curls.

“Where did these gorgeous yellow curls come from?” Finn knew he was ruining Libby’s kind gesture. He couldn’t help it.

Benny scowled. “Recessive genes, Boss?” He removed Finn’s hand from Hazel’s head to make room for his own. He tousled Hazel’s hair and tapped her nose. “Well, my work here is done. See you tomorrow, folks.” Benny left. To Finn, it felt like oxygen had left the room with him. It was an effort to breathe.

“You’re being silly, Daddy,” Hazel said. “You know where my hair comes from! It grows from my head!”

Finn smiled at his daughter. “Last time I saw such gorgeous yellow curls was before my buddy Driggs dyed his hair black back in junior high.”

Color drained from Libby’s face. “Finn,” she said.

He looked from Hazel to Libby. From his beautiful daughter to his beautiful wife, just turned 30, stuck with C4 quad for a husband. She did not look bored now, Finn thought. It gave him a sick comfort. He still had the power to banish her boredom.

“Tell me, Libby,” he said. “For my birthday present. The truth.”

She trembled. “Haze,” she said. “Tell Daddy what you did in kindergarten today. I’ll be right back.” And she fled.

Now Finn felt the blood drain from his own face. He was rarely left alone with Hazel. What if she fell, or started choking, or crying? He’d be useless.

Hazel scrambled from his bed to the rocking chair and began chatting about the barn she’d finger-painted at the art easel in school, about how she was the only girl who still couldn’t skip—“but I can gallop the fastest, Daddy!”—and how she now had three best friends—Tiff, Alesha, and Kimble.

Libby returned, wheeling something red and silver into the room. She pushed it to the foot of his bed.

Finn looked hard. Blinked.

A keyboard.

“What’s this?” Finn felt dizzy. Was this some sort of cruel joke? Was Libby, whose piano lessons had stopped when she was 12, planning to plunk out Happy Birthday Dear Paralyzed Useless Finn and may there not be many more?

But it was Hazel who ran to the keyboard. It was Hazel who began to play. A sweet melody. She sang as she played. A sweet true voice. The melody was familiar. The words were familiar.

You are the sun
Who heats my heart.
You are the moon
Who lights my dark.
You are the tree
On which I climb
Away from the shadows
Who darken my mind.

It hit him. His poem. A poem he'd written long ago set to a melody he'd composed for his high school sweetheart. Libby.

Hazel began singing the refrain. Other voices joined in. His. And Libby's.

So don't don't don't ever go away.
You are the salvation of my day.

The performance ended. Hazel's cheeks flushed red.

"Did I sound OK, Daddy?"

Finn couldn't speak. He nodded.

"Are you surprised? I been learning the piano in secret and practicing in secret to surprise you for your birthday. My piano teacher is so nice, Daddy. She says I'm really good. I learn really fast. I want to be a musician like you, Daddy. My piano teacher says you could write songs for me to learn."

Finn couldn't speak. He nodded again. Tears burned his eyes.

"One more thing for your birthday, Daddy. My piano teacher took her favorite Draft Stand song—she says it's your lushiest ballad—and she made it easier for me to play. I been practicing it every day after school at her house. I can play it almost without no mistakes. I'll go get the sheet music so I can play it for you now."

"It's in the car, Hazel," Libby said. "But can you frost Daddy's cake now, too? Everything's set out on the kitchen table. Then bring the music and cake here."

Hazel's eyes widened. "I can frost it by myself? Really? Thanks, Mama! I'll do a good job! I promise!"

"I'll be back!" Hazel shouted, and she ran from the room.

Finn listened to her footfalls on the stairs.

“She’s a regular little Mozart,” Libby said. “Her piano teacher said she’s never seen anyone take so quickly to the piano. A prodigy. Like you, Finn.”

Finn nodded. “Like me,” he whispered.

“Finn.” Libby moved to his bedside. She pulled an envelope from the pocket of her jeans. She held it out to him. “I’ve had it for two years, Finn. I haven’t opened it. It’s got the results. A couple of years ago I swabbed your cheek while you were sleeping. It’ll tell you about our little girl. Your daughter.”

Finn felt his heart bounce like a puppy. Your daughter. “So. You’re telling me she’s mine? Absolutely?”

“Oh Finn. I won’t lie to you. I don’t know. It was just that one time with Driggs. I am so so sorry. But it shouldn’t matter anymore. It doesn’t matter. She is yours. She’ll always be yours. It’s not who has you. It’s who loves you.”

His heart froze. Something dark and green had just strangled the puppy. “You’re quoting Benny now? The man who helps me shit.”

“Quoting Benny? He say that to you? Maybe he was quoting me, Finn.” She flung the envelope on his useless legs. “I know you’re miserable!” she shouted. Tears glittered her eyes “I know you’re in the worst pain, and I wish to God I could help you bear it.”

“The worst pain,” Finn heard himself say, “is knowing that your pain will pass.” Benny, he thought, would be proud of me.

Libby stared at him. She clenched her fists. Her lips trembled.

“You mean death,” she finally said. “Knowing that your pain will pass. Knowing that you’ll die. Because that’s the only way pain will pass. Well then, I’m a member of that club too, Finn. We all are. We all know we’re going to die.”

He looked at the envelope on his legs. If he could’ve moved his legs, he would have kicked the envelope away. “You’ve never opened it,” he said. “Why not?”

“It’s your right to know. Yours and eventually Hazel’s. Not mine.”

She grabbed the envelope, held it up. “Should I open it now, Finn?”

He looked out the glass wall. Hours earlier, the rain had stopped. The gorgeous dying ash

tree did not move. Not a leaf, not a branch. The tree could not move without wind. And the wind had died.

“Finn, say the word and I’ll open it and hold the lab report before your eyes. You can read it. You can know the truth.”

Finn watched the gorgeous dying ash tree. It was moving again. He could almost hear the leaves sighing in the breeze. The wind never stayed dead for long.

“Should I, Finn? Libby was crying.

Finn moved his head, one of the few body parts he could still move without help.

“Not today,” he said.

MARDA MESSICK

LOST PAGES

Pages you know exist but you can't find them.
—William Stafford

The black ruled notebook
I packed for a journey,
the journal of my love and fear,
is missing from the suitcase pocket,
someplace misplaced,
disappeared.

My inward words, found,
exposed, puzzled over,
deciphered elsewhere
by a stranger, my inner life
a splayed-open book,
held in unknown hands.

If I found your lost pages
in a cafe, under a bed,
on a seat in a train
that just left the station,
would you be ashamed,
of your human condition?

There's incognito relief
in the unsigned confession,
in the letter unsent,
in love undeclared,
in not showing up,
in pretending to live.

Now I write each day on
a new blank page,

CONTINUED...

the flux of myself safe in a drawer,
seeds for the mill,
chaos and storm, the needful outpouring
before the poem.

What is hidden comes
to the light, the inside revealed,
the secret disclosed,
one you can keep, one you can own:
like you, I'm afraid
and dying for love.

AUTHOR BIOS

Gregg Sapp, an Ohio native, is a Pinnacle Award-winning and Pushcart Prize-nominated author of the "Holidazed" series of satires, each of which is centered around a different holiday. To date, there are four books in the series: "Halloween from the Other Side," "The Christmas Donut Revolution," "Upside Down Independence Day," and the latest, "Murder by Valentine Candy." Previous books include "Dollarapalooza," set in a dollar store, and "Fresh News Straight from Heaven," which is based on the folklore of Johnny Appleseed. He has published short fiction in Kestrel, Parody, Waypoints, Defenstration, Marathon Review, Zodiac Review, Semaphore, Goat's Milk, and contributed frequently to Midwestern Gothic. He lives in Tumwater, WA.

Paul Beckman's latest flash collection, Kiss Kiss (Truth Serum Press) was a finalist for the 2019 Indie Book Awards. Some of his stories appeared in Spelk, Connotation Press, Necessary Fiction, Litro, Pank, Playboy, WINK, Jellyfish Review, The Wax Paper, Monkey, and The Lost Balloon. He had a story selected for the 2020 National Flash Fiction Day Anthology Lineup and was shortlisted in the Strands International Flash Fiction Competition. He was nominated for 2021 Best of the Web and Best Micro-Fiction. Paul earned his MFA from Bennington College and has his next collection of connected flash stories coming out with Cervana Barva.

Amalia Herren-Lage is about to graduate from Bates College with a BA in Gender and Sexuality Studies. At Bates, she has been passionate about science and technology studies, and creative writing, culminating in a semi-creative senior thesis exploring biological citizenship and disability studies as they relate to her experience with a terminally ill mother. In her free time, she enjoys cooking, reading poetry, and visiting her family in Spain.

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

Robert Nisbet is a Welsh poet whose work has appeared widely in Britain and the USA. He won the Prole Pamphlet Competition in 2017 with Robeson, Fitzgerald and Other Heroes. In the USA he has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize four times in the last three years.

Michael Quattrone is the author of Rhinoceroses (New School Chapbook Award, 2006). His work has been collected in The Best American Erotic Poems (Scribner, 2008) and The Incredible Sestina Anthology (Write Bloody, 2013). Recent poems appear in The Night Heron Barks, The Best American Poetry Blog, and DMQ Review. Michael lives in Tarrytown, New York, where he reads poetry for The Westchester Review, and serves on the advisory committee of Slapering Hol Press. Read more at: michaelquattrone.com.

Steve Brisendine is a writer, poet, occasional artist and recovering journalist living and working in Mission, KS. He is the author of two collections from Spartan Press: The Words We Do Not Have (2021) and the upcoming Salt Holds No Secret But This (2022). He was a finalist for the 2021 Derick Burleson Poetry Prize.

Morgan Boyer is the author of The Serotonin Cradle (Finishing Line Press, 2018) and a graduate of Carlow University. Boyer has been featured in Kallisto Gaia Press, Thirty West Publishing House, Oyez Review, Pennsylvania English, and Voices from the Attic. Boyer is a neurodivergent bisexual woman who resides in Pittsburgh, PA.

AUTHOR BIOS

Edmond Stevens has written extensively for television and film and contributed most recently as guest editor for The Alpinist Magazine. His novella, “Skating to New York,” was adapted for film and was runner-up for the Howard Frank Mosher Prize, Green Writers Press. His short story, "Buried," will appear in the coming edition of Deep Wild Journal. In 2018, Mr. Stevens received his MFA from Antioch University. He pursues wild, little-traveled peaks and destinations because these are a physical representation of the mental process of writing, finding by trial and error the path to the summit. For example, he most recently climbed Everest’s North Col via Tibet.

Timothy Tarkelly's work has appeared in Flyover Country, The Jupiter Review, The Daily Drunk, and others. He has published several books of poetry including Gently in Manner, Strongly in Deed: Poems on Eisenhower (Spartan Press), Luckhound (Spartan Press) and On Slip Rigs and Spiritual Growth (OAC Books). He recently collaborated with Ukrainian visual artist Elena Samarsky on the book All Other Forms of Expression (OAC Books.) His newest chapbook, Ordering Dumplings With Bitcoin, was released by Alien Buddha Press in May 2022. When he's not writing, he teaches in Southeast Kansas.

Georgina Marie Guardado is the Poet Laureate of Lake County, CA for 2020-2024, the first Mexican-American and youngest to serve in this role for the county. She is a Poets Laureate Fellow with the Academy of American Poets, the Literary and Poetry Out Loud Coordinator for the Lake County Arts Council, and Poet in Residence for The Bloom. She has received support from the Mendocino Coast and Napa Valley Writers’ Conferences, and the Community of Writers Poetry Workshop. Her work has appeared in The Bloom, Noyo Review, Poets.org, and Humble Pie Magazine, and is forthcoming in Gulf Coast Journal and Colossus: Freedom.

James Hannon is a psychotherapist in Massachusetts where he accompanies adolescents and adults who are recovering from addictions. His work has appeared in Blue Lake Review, Blue River, Cold Mountain Review, Soundings East, and other journals and in Gathered: Contemporary Quaker Poets. His second collection, To My Children at Christmas, was published in 2022 by Kelsay Books.

Colin James has a couple of chapbooks of poetry published. Dreams Of The Really Annoying from Writing Knights Press and A Thoroughness Not Deprived of Absurdity from Piski's Porch Press and a book of poems, Resisting Probability, from Sagging Meniscus Press.

Gale Acuff: I have had poetry published in Ascent, Reed, Journal of Black Mountain College Studies, The Font, Chiron Review, Poem, Adirondack Review, Florida Review, Slant, Arkansas Review, South Dakota Review, Roanoke Review, and many other journals in a dozen countries. I have authored three books of poetry: Buffalo Nickel, The Weight of the World, and The Story of My Lives. I have taught university English courses in the US, China, and Palestine.

Aruni Wijesinghe is a project manager, ESL teacher, occasional sous chef, and erstwhile belly dance instructor. A Pushcart Prize-nominated poet, her work has been published in journals and anthologies both nationally and internationally. Her debut poetry collection, 2 Revere Place, is currently available through Moon Tide Press.
She lives a quiet life in Orange County, California with her husband Jeff and their cats Jack and Josie. You can follow her writing at www.aruniwrites.com and on Instagram @aruniwrites.

Marie Anderson is a Chicago area married mother of three millennials. Her stories have appeared in over 50 publications, including The Saturday Evening Post, Shotgun Honey, Sunlight Press, and Brilliant Flash Fiction. In 2021, her story "Metaphors," was published by After Dinner Conversation as a standalone on Kindle, and that story still occasionally cracks the top ten in three Amazon Free-Kindle categories, including Young Adult Fiction on Prejudice.

Marda Messick is a poet and accidental theologian living in Tallahassee, FL on the ancestral territory of the Apalachee Nation. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The Christian Century, Delmarva Review, Literary Mama, Speckled Trout Review, and Pandemics Journal.

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