

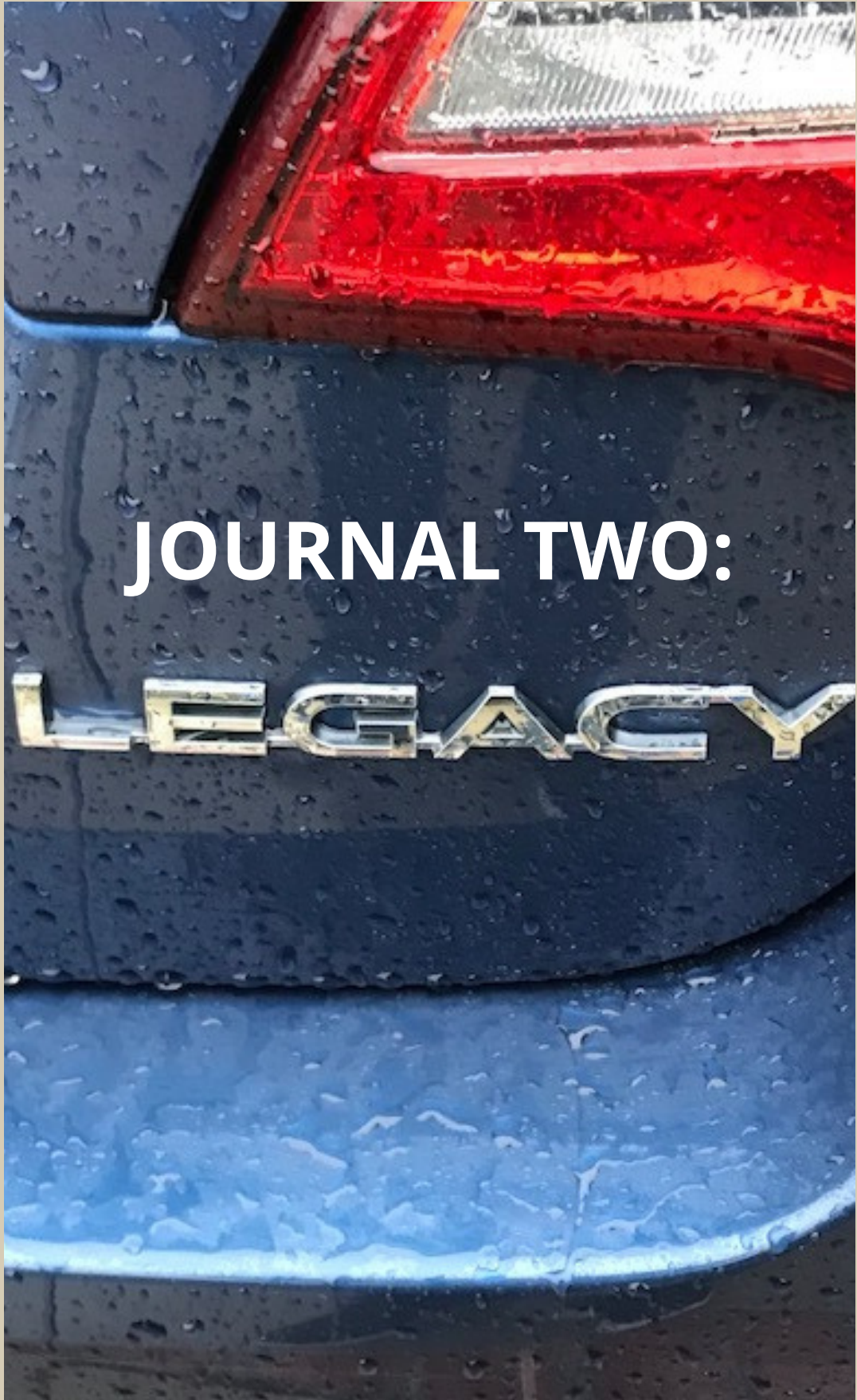
MULESKINNER JOURNAL



Legacy



Journal Two - April 2022



JOURNAL TWO:

LEGACY

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EDITORS:

GARY CAMPANELLA

PETER ANDREWS

THOMAS PHALEN

JEREMY PROEHL

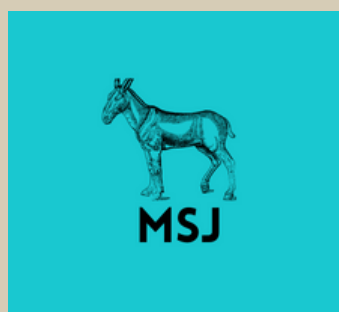
JOHN ROMAGNA

CONTACT:

MULESKINNERJOURNAL@GMAIL.COM

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MICHAEL LODERSTEDT

THINGS I KNOW ABOUT MY FATHER

He was a German
when Germans were not loved here.
A German soldier, no less
who could have killed or been killed
just years before.
Mother said after the war they opened
the gates to his British POW camp
everyone just walked
home.
Gunther plodded busted roads
from the Baltic Sea to Berlin.
Some American GIs gave him
a ride,
some smokes,
and that is why he chose
this country.

Louis Armstrong singing
Mack the Knife on the console
stereo, my mother dancing
and smoking cigarettes.

My father was a doctor
not a truck driver
not a traveling shoe salesman
not a jazz musician
not a derelict.
An obstetrician
who brought babies into this world.
He helped bring us too, but you
might never know that.

A woman once ran up to our
house, a near-blue infant in her arms
calling for help.
My father pulled a tiny red toy
dump truck from his throat
with long steel forceps.
The woman cried, her baby

screamed for air.

He was a hero.

When my mother left
and moved us to the island
my father never called
or visited, ever. Our letters
unanswered, or worse
mealy excuses that he
was too busy,
too broke.

Riding the school bus
across the bridge, low tide
smell of marsh mud, older kids sitting
behind my brother, sister
and me, thumping our ears
blood-red singing, you ain't got
no daddy.

An undiscovered obituary dated January 27, 2014
Pulaski, Virginia-- no mention of another
family. I had visited my father some years
before, while in art school. I brought
him a print as a gift. He took it
to a frame shop, they framed it
in gold. I remember feeling
something akin
to pride.



RUTH NIEMIEC

WHISKEY, WISTERIA AND POKER NIGHTS

Awake. Roll your old bones out of bed. Off the torn bygone mattress in which springs once sprung, but over quick and slow years have become bent wires, each in an opposing direction. Your babies, your children, don't visit you anymore. Their photos bleeding to sepia on your mantel, dust distorting the shape of their smiles, noses, eyes. You stopped looking at the photographs. Your babies visiting less and less, kind of, evaporated your soul, cigarette smoke in a jar, it felt like, for a little while. When the grandbabies were between the ages of birth and seven, they came to your house, wowing at the way you knitted rainbow blankets and cooked shortbread, so good you could taste the tongue laminating butter in the baking smell. Grandbabies made you feel younger. Really, the sun felt newer, you were much less tired. If you didn't catch your reflection in the windows of the house, chasing them with a hose or pushing them on the tree swing, you could have sworn you were thirty, maybe forty years younger. When the older babies, their parents came to collect them, you became acutely aware of the stage of your life. Late. Slow. Nearer to the end than the beginning. Your own offspring spoke to you so loud, like you couldn't hear them and then they'd whisper about you. You heard everything. You loved your family, still, and sunny days, in that order. One day you fell over and had no choice but to pull the phone off the hall table by its cable and call your son. He rushed over and you thought with a broken heart, oh, he looks scared and sad. In less than a month, which felt like a minute, they packed up their modern and minimalist home, moving to another state. Left you, alone. Your baby, your son, he rang you a week later to say they've arranged meal deliveries to your house. You say "thanks" and "hope the kids are well?" the receiver clicks to silence. Years go by and you haunt the spaces in this building, once your home and you look in the mirror to feel alive. At night, sometimes, you drink a little port and shoulder dance in your armchair, holding a photo of your late love in your lap. You remind him of beautiful days that you had on the coast, wisteria exploding into bloom over white picket fences, perfuming the night and the inside of your head. You remind him of your lovely young friends, poker nights, whiskey and cigarettes, the garden you planted together in spring, how gentle he was with you and your babies, all five, how beautiful you were, you, with your flaming red hair and big mouth alive. You fall asleep and awake, with the morning light piercing the painful cracks in the blinds and for a fleeting moment you think he's beside you. You know that when you pass from this world, when you die, when your skin empties and feeds the dirt, when you leave this world and its meaning, that he will be waiting for you, in that fine, woollen suit, perfectly open, holding a bouquet of pink roses. You'll be home.



NATHANIEL LLOYD RICHARDS

WORDS

I use words as my weapon of choice,
Words that come in the form of verse or prose sent to me from those that came
before,
I pluck them out of the universe and arrange them carefully onto a page,
Call me Poet,

The colour of my skin I use as a superpower,
The Gods made me black so the light within can't seep through my pores and
dissipate into this unforgiving universe,
Call me Black,

Soca, reggae and Dancehall the soundtrack to my childhood,
Stew peas, and rice and peas aromas, cook down chicken and fried dumplings
piled as high as the eye can see, a culture that played a huge part of making me
uniquely me,
Call me Caribbean,

My name was given to me from my Granma after my mother was told she would
bear no more children,
It's meaning "a gift from God" I hold dear in my darkest hours,
It also belonged to my father so now that he's gone it makes me feel closer to him
in ways I couldn't have had imagined,
Call me Nathaniel.



JENNIFER MCKEEN RODRIGUES

THE WORKHOUSE

In the old D.C. prison
turned artist haven community center
I met a photographer
her office was an old prisoner's chamber
filled with her colored photographs of the prison grounds
the walls, all cream white,
covering the messages scratched into the old paint
she gave me a sticker of one such message
she captured with her camera that spoke:
"This Cell Is Like a Window take a Look AT YOURSELF"



CELESTE OSTER

A TERRIBLE SONNET FOR JEROME

It was June and the trees were speaking their
sea language above our heads and sharing
sugar through roots deep underground. We were
walking through the woods, talking and eating
Cheetos. We were kids in grownup bodies,
waving our orange fingers and speaking
with orange mouths of life's atrocities.
Years later, Silvie would find you hanging
in the silence of your wood shop, the dead
heaviness of old lumber all around
you. Dust motes floated in air overhead.
It was September. Your burial ground
was drowned in an ocean of orange leaves.
I fed your ashes to the trees.



SM STUBS

DEALING WITH THE STORM

In the days before it starts, you must fill sacks with sand from vacant lots then stack them in front of every door. A voice on the radio says to gather your canned food and jugs of water before the evacuation. Store shelves already bare—no candles, no batteries, no sugar for the coffee bagged by the pound. Whatever you do, keep driving. Interstates may be choked with panic, barrier islands near the coast swept clean. Do not dismiss this as routine. Drive past wherever you think you're safe. If you're lucky the eye will shift and miss your county, your lawn, your photo albums wrapped in plastic. If you're lucky your past won't be Category 5'ed. Looters may help themselves; troops may be sent to manage the chaos. Be prepared to make do with whatever you're able to lay your hands on. It will take years before you grow accustomed to the bitter taste flooding the back of your throat.



EMILY BLAIR STRIBLING

FAMILY THREADS

It is extravagant, I know,
the big vase of blue hydrangea and lavender phlox
for just the two of us.

All summer this house has been full of children,
the fragrance of small voices wafting through its rooms,
sea-shells, and painted rocks, small tokens of wonder.

We gathered as one family,
three generations from two to seventy-two,
all pulling up chairs to the old table,
all talking at once, all hungry to be fed,
sometimes accepting, other times rejecting
all that we are and we aren't.

We make no more, no less of how children and grandchildren
refuse to let us help them tie their shoes,
or build a castle or find a job.

For these few weeks we return to where it all began,
the fireflies, the picnics, swimming,
wine on the porch, lobsters and peach pie,
and shooting stars that from birth
lured this family back to do it all again and again.

Now it is just the two of us here in the old farmhouse,
caretaking memories as a new season begins
to tell a new story about the blessing of seeds
and dying leaves the wind whips and swirls.

We light the fire, pour the wine,
a prayer lodging between us
for the return of the prodigal light.



PETER MLADINIC

PERFECTLY HEALTHY

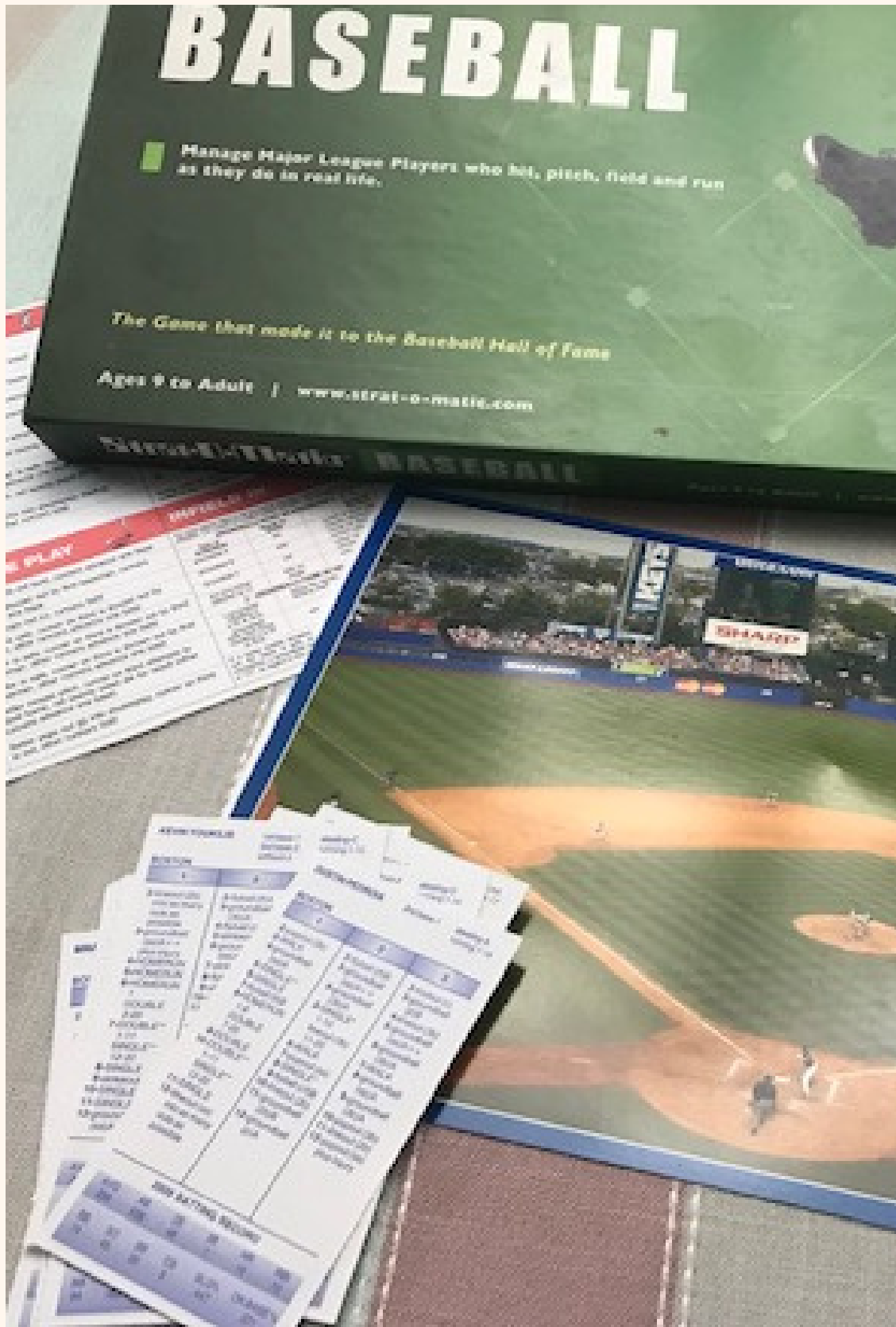
Have you ever seen a perfectly healthy dog or cat hoisted to a steel table and given a needle in its neck and killed? I haven't. But someone has. Someone has had to do it. Someone has had to take the dead dog or cat from the steel table and put it in a plastic bag and take it to a freezer to let it lie there till it's taken away like the garbage it has been turned into by Human hands.

Sure, the dog or cat is scared being placed on the steel table, it's, say, terrified but it's not like a human being terrified. Animals don't feel, at least not the way we humans feel. Animals are different. And when someone puts a needle in its neck and watches the life, if they care to look, go out of its eyes, that's not killing, not murder. The formerly perfectly healthy dog or cat was euthanized. It was put down. That's nice, a nice way of putting it, euthanized, it sounds soothing. We put the dog to sleep. Sure, there wasn't anything wrong with the dog, but there were so many and how could we keep them all, and no one wants them. We take them one by one, hoist them, because they are struggling, and put them to sleep, put them down. We euthanize the perfectly healthy dog or cat. Really, we did the animal a favor. After all, death was better than its living in a cage in a room crowded with cages, where it would have to be fed and cleaned up after, and we'd have to pay someone to do that.

Nothing wrong with killing the perfectly healthy dog or cat. It's the right thing to do. After all, it's not like killing a person.

You think, before they are taken to the room and hoisted onto the steel table, they know, they know what's about to happen, and even the other dogs and cats in cages in the crowded room, as the dog or cat is being taken away—they know, too? You think they all bark and yelp and whine in panic, out of fear?

Animals' fear is different from human fear, animals are different. They don't feel, really, at least not the way we feel. So don't upset yourself, it's just an animal. After it's dead it's not like the corpse of a dead person; it's garbage someone who's paid a decent wage will throw away. Someone's paid to stick the needle in the neck, and someone else is paid to throw out the garbage. That's how it is, how it should be. We can't keep all these perfectly healthy animals no one wants. Who would want them? How could they in any way better people's lives?



KEVIN FINNERTY

MISTAKEN SUCCESS

"That's my Boys, for you."

That's the way 80-year-old Ellis Campbell, whom everyone called El, summed up the recent actions of his sons Patrick (Rick) and Hubert (Hugh). Rick and Hugh were both men in their fifties, much richer and more famous than their old man, but El still referred to them as his Boys. They'd both issued confessions of sorts, acknowledging the error of their ways in a way I wanted to know why so I flew to find El sitting on the porch to his cabin. He hadn't showered or shaved after spending the morning fishing but had at least considered the former prior to my arrival.

"I don't want to be offensive, but I was on the lake longer than expected. That's what happens when time ain't important anymore."

His rust-colored dog came over and sniffed my loafers and khakis, then gave me a puzzled look. It could have been the attire; it could have been that it was freshly laundered.

"What kind of dog is it?"

"She's an Irish setter. Name's Carol."

"Seems like an unusual name for a dog."

El got to his feet and brushed past me. Carol followed without being called, but El had to whistle to let me know I was expected as well.

Not unlike other cabins, the interior wasn't overly spacious. I saw a kitchen area and a door that presumably led to a bathroom, but the living and dining areas were one and the same. El had a small HD TV and a few books, but most of his possession were practical items like fishing and hiking poles. Few objects of comfort.

Had I met El on the street or in the woods, not knowing anything about him, his place might not have been surprising, but I knew of his sons, like most. El hadn't any photos of either of them as far as I could see, but I saw a wedding photograph and another picture of the woman I took to be his wife.

El caught me staring. "The original Carol."

I take it she's passed?"

"Three decades now."

"Never remarried?"

El patted me on the shoulder before moving into the kitchen. He returned with a beer for each of us. I was surprised it was of the craft variety.

"That would be like a ten-time All Star refusing to recognize when his good run was done and going back to AAA to jump start his career."

"Given that analogy, I guess we should start with your older son. I don't see any photos of him. Or Hugh."

"I can see my sons any time I want. On TV, the Internet. In person if I have to."

El waved for me to follow him back onto the porch. He had two wooden rockers out there so we each claimed one. The second Carol rested at El's feet.

"Hard to discuss one without the other. They were Irish twins. Inseparable, almost indistinguishable, during the early years. Same blond hair, brown eyes, fair skin, and wiry legs. They'd tell you they loved sports. And they did. Name a sport, they played it. But what they really loved was the competition. With each other and everyone else. In just about everything they played, one was always slightly better than the other. Except baseball. It was hard to compare them because Rick was a catcher and Hugh a pitcher. Usually, they were on the same team, so they complemented each other. They competed in practice when Hugh pitched to Rick. You play any ball growing up?"

"A little. Through high school but just in a small-town league. Nothing like your sons. It was just something to do for me. Actually, I like playing in beer softball leagues better."

"Nothing wrong with that. See the ball, hit the ball. A lot better than what they're doing in the bigs these days." El rocked in his chair and drank his beer, then tapped mine, which sat on the table between us, droplets running down the can. "Want another?"

I grabbed the beer and lifted it to my lips just for a taste. "I still got plenty."

El had washed his face and hands by the time he returned wearing a trucker's hat. He only brought one can this time but placed it on the metal table, whose paint was chipping away, to keep mine company.

"Did you think either of them would make the majors?"

"They didn't have the right genes for that. Carol and I knew they were smart and would succeed using their heads. Who knew we'd underestimate them?"

"Why'd Hugh go off and do what he did?"

"Because Rick was a year older and got a head start in coaching. Hugh had to do something different. Making a lot of money was a way to surpass his brother, so finance. That wasn't surprising."

"I take it the move to politics was?"

"At first, until I realized it was another form of competition. You ever run for office?"

"Eighth grade student body president. Lost. It wasn't close."

"See, that's why Hugh never ran himself. He figured it's much easier to win from the outside."

"Especially when you've got a lot of money."

El got to his feet and Carol immediately lifted her head as if she knew something exciting were about to happen. "C'mon, we can walk and talk at the same time."

Carol raced past me to be beside El, leaving me a few steps behind. I asked a couple of questions that went unanswered as we hiked through forest brush, crackling leaves, and small branches. El identified varieties of trees and plants and pointed towards animals I could barely hear and rarely saw. Despite their age, Carol and El kept a brisk pace until we reached a ridge, where El stopped and sat on a boulder large enough for a couple had we been one. He placed himself in the center, so I had to find some other, less comfortable rock.

I tried to follow El's eyes across the horizon. At first, I saw only trees and clouds. Then I spied an eagle gliding and presumed that was what had captured his attention. I waited a few minutes after it disappeared to ask about his sons' confessions.

"You're going to see them, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then ask them."

"I will, it's just you might have another perspective."

"They're still competing."

"With each other?"

"And with themselves and their legacies."

"Can you explain more?"

El rotated his neck to look at me. "I could."

I waited a minute or two before realizing El was the sort of man who played by his own set of rules or not at all. He returned his gaze to the horizon. "How about this: you go speak with them, get their explanations, then ask me what I think."

It wasn't a suggestion but a directive.

I met Rick Campbell at his home adjacent to a golf course in Scottsdale. I'd seen him many times on television but whenever I did, he was always wearing a baseball uniform and apparently contacts. A year into his retirement, Rick was still tall and athletic but now sported glasses in addition to Tiger Woods' traditional Sunday attire: a short-sleeve red shirt with a collar and black slacks.

His wife Jenny had greeted me at the door and offered me a quick tour of the living area of their home when we passed through. There was a large television mounted on a wall; good sight lines to the white marble kitchen; and loads of photographs - of ball players and of family - on the walls and any flat piece of furniture.

The former college softball pitcher showed a little age after raising two children and taking in more than the recommended amount of sun but, with biceps bigger than mine, still seemed capable of whipping a ball past a majority of batters, men and women alike. The proud parent pointed at a couple of the photos and told me in a not-obnoxious way that her children were now college athletes in their own right - the son a lacrosse player and the daughter a member of a soccer team - before she slid open the glass door that led to the family's pool.

"Can I get you some iced tea or water?"

"Either would be great."

"Do you need a refill, Dear?"

"No, but can you take Tenny inside? I'm sure he's hot."

Hearing his name, a Golden Retriever emerged from the shade of a deck chair to come close enough for a quick whiff before heading inside with his mother.

"Are you a dog lover?" Rick asked.

"We've got a Corgi as well."

"What's its name?"

"His name is Simmons, named after Ted Simmons. You met Tenny, named after Gene Tenace."

Rick paused to see if I recognized the former ball players. "I was a catcher back in the day."

"I know. I'm surprised you didn't name either Bench or Fisk."

"Everyone knew those guys were good. I learned how good Simmons and Tenace were by playing Strat-o-Matic. Did you ever play the game?"

I shook my head. "More of a card player myself."

"Strat's a board game with physical cards and dice. They probably have a computer version these days, but when I was young you had things to touch. My brother and I played all the time. Especially when we made All-Star teams, I learned the value of players who got on base a lot."

"By walking?"

"At the time, it seemed like those who got the most hits received much more attention than those who got on base any other way."

"Did you walk a lot when you played?"

"Not enough."

Jenny returned with both tea and water for me. I watched as husband and wife silently communicated a secret message before she went inside. Maybe Jenny had heard her husband tell his tale before.

"Back then, you impressed people more with your bat than with your eye. But even had I wanted to walk more, I wouldn't have succeeded. My eyesight just wasn't that great, and if you can't hit the pitches in the strike zone, the pitcher has little reason to try to get you to go fishing."

I must have stared at what I now realized were transition bifocals a little too long.

There's the eyesight you need to be a manager or a writer and there's the eyesight you need to be a Major League hitter.

"How about an umpire?"

"No vision requirement whatsoever."

"So I guess what you learned from the game stayed in the back of your mind when you became a manager?"

"Crazy to think about it now. I was just looking for a competitive edge. I taught my players to take as many pitches as possible – to get walks but also to tire out the other team's starters."

"And you succeeded."

"Until everyone caught on."

"Is that why you retired?"

"No, I retired because the game wasn't as much fun anymore."

"Because of what you did to it?"

Rick took a deep breath, then exhaled. "There's too many pitches, not enough action."

Jenny returned with a box that I saw contained an old Strat-o-Matic game. She removed the playing field, which was a worn, thin strip of cardboard with a baseball diamond on it. There were pegs for runners and two white dice and one red die. Rick showed me two-sided pitcher and hitters cards. I examined a Nolan Ryan card with loads of strikeouts and walks on it.

Rick grabbed Wille Stargell and rolled the dice. He told me to look at Ryan's card because the red came up as a 5. "What's 5, 4 say?"

"Walk."

"Figures. Ryan was an outlier back then. Too many like him now, though just for an inning or two. Nobody could do it for nine like Nolan."

He placed a runner at first and rolled for Cesar Cedeno. The red 1 meant he looked at the hitter's card. "Strike out. You see?"

I tried to look at Cedeno's card.

"No, what I mean is did you see how long that took? In real life, it's at least seven pitches, probably a lot more, to have a strikeout and walk. Here, it was mere seconds. My brother

and I could get through a nine-inning game in less than a half hour even with constant smack talk throughout."

"Is that why you apologized?"

"Did I?"

"I thought so."

"Maybe I did. I just wanted to say the game needs to change. It was the best for a very long time."

"And now it's not?"

"Not to watch. Not at the Major League level. The ball needs to be in play more often and much more quickly."

"What would you do?"

"Require two infielders on each side of the diamond. That will create more hits, which hopefully will incentivize fewer walks."

"Which you brought to the game."

The expression on Rick's face changed from that of a manager with a 4-2 lead to one who just saw his reliever give up a three-run homer. Jenny, who had kept her hand on her husband's shoulder, retreated to her home. Tenny, who had remained beside the glass door, took her place.

"I didn't mandate 12-man pitching staffs, starters only going five innings before a parade of relievers, or long play reviews."

"But you used those things to your advantage when you managed."

Rick leaned back in his chair and grabbed the back of his neck. "I'd like to see the game get back to what it once was."

"Is that even possible?"

Rick got to his feet and his Golden immediately barked as if it knew its owner was in need of assistance. Petting the tail-wagging pooch and tapping its side a couple of times seemed to relieve everyone's anxiety.

"I don't know what more I can do, I'm sorry."

I remained seated, quiet. I wasn't sure if Rick intended our interview to be over without saying so.

Rick's phone rang. His outlook brightened when he looked at it. He showed it to me and smiled. "My daughter. Are we done?"

"If you said everything you wanted to say."

"I think so, yes. Jenny can show you out."

Rick answered his phone. His tone lightened as he asked his daughter to describe her latest game. I heard him laugh as I tapped on the glass door so as not to surprise Jenny.

Hugh asked me to meet him in his condo in Miami, where he'd been spending most of his time since he decided to step away from politics. His place was 4000 square feet scores of stories into the sky. The wraparound windows offered a 360-degree view of the city and the surrounding area.

Divorced for a decade, Hugh shared his home with a Spanish model who only recently had turned thirty. A gray cat did figure eights around her tiny ankles when she silently greeted me at the door. She pointed in the direction I would find Hugh in comprehension of my words or purpose, but her failure to utter a sound left me wondering whether this was due to an inability to speak English or simply indifference.

Hugh wore gray suit pants and a white dress shirt with the top button unbuttoned. He was seated in one of the two leather chairs in a corner of the room between which sat a small granite table. He held out his palms to me.

"You've spoken with my father and brother already, I take it." Hugh smiled the family smile when I told him I had. "That's the way it always is."

After a couple of questions, Hugh sought to wrest control of the interview. "Let's do it this way since you already have a lot of information."

"Whether I do or don't, it's generally best to get an individual's direct account."

"Sure, sure, but let's cut to the chase. I wanted to make more money than them and I did. I wanted to do something more important than them and I did. I wanted to fix a problem, and I did. And then Rick took the opportunity to do so as well and got attention because, you know, baseball."

"You think you fixed the problem by walking away?"

Hugh took his right leg off of his left knee and reversed his position away from me. "I did more than that. I called them out."

"You said it was a mistake to have sought to elect people solely to obstruct, right?"

"It was a mistake to conclude doing nothing was better than doing some comparative good. I also said it was wrong to get voters to hate the other side. Opposing views not an enemy make."

"Especially not in a democracy."

"I called out those in my party who were trashing our democratic system. And those who lied to control how people think."

"Did you lie to voters when you were playing to win?"

Hugh leaned his forearms into his quads. "There are lies and there's constant lying. There are factual embellishments and there is alternative reality."

Hugh's companion entered the room carrying a black French Bulldog that looked like it did not enjoy being treated like a stuffed animal. She passed me without saying a word and whispered something into Hugh's ear. He opened his wallet and handed her three hundred dollar bills.

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I'm stepping away from politics for a while so I can try to make a living."

I looked about the room for a hint of irony but didn't find any, only quite the collection of artwork, both paintings and sculptures.

"How about the world you left behind?"

"What about it?"

"Are you going to try to fix the mess you've left?"

"That's not my fault."

"I didn't say it was, but you've stated that you made mistakes, right?"

"Mistakes were made."

"So you don't feel a responsibility to do more?"

Hugh shook his head in a way that told me we were done. He got to his feet, and I slowly got to mine. We walked towards the door.

"I'm surprised you're like this," he said.

"Like what?"

"Like the rest of them. Dad said you'd be different."

"How do you mean?"

"You don't let anyone acknowledge their shortcomings. You keep pushing. That's why most people just keep their mouths shut, you know. You're all so judgmental."

I called El when I found myself with time to kill at the airport.

"How'd it go with my boys?"

"I think fairly well but I'm not sure they'd agree."

"You throw a couple of heaters beneath their chins?"

"I'm still processing."

"Me too and I've got 50 some odd years on you."

"They acknowledged their missteps."

"Let me tell you: You're better off not starting down such paths to start."

There was a lot of noise in the terminal, so El asked if we could finish the conversation in the morning. I told him that would be fine.

"5:00 okay with you?"

"For a call?"

"To go fishing."

"Fishing? Where?"

"Here. You're flying to see me, right?"

"That wasn't the plan."

"Mine was we'd talk while fishing."

"I'm a vegetarian."

"Then I take it hunting's out as well?"

"You'd be right."

"Does it matter knowing I eat whatever I catch and kill?"

"Better, but it's still not my thing."

"You eat plants?"

"That's what a vegetarian does."

"Plants are living things too, aren't they?"

"It's not the same."

"No, nothing's the same."

I waited to see if El would explain but understood El wasn't the sort of person to fill in details. You either got it right away or not at all.

I was trying to figure out if it would be possible to speak with El from my apartment instead of the lake when El asked: "Would it offend you to be on a boat with me while I fish? On a lake early in the morning with a line overboard is a good place to talk. Hell, maybe if you've got good questions, I won't even need to cast. Be at my place by 5."

El hung up without waiting for an answer, presumably figuring the only appointment I could have at that hour was with a pillow, which was absolutely the case. I went to the gate agent and told her I needed to change my flight.

I saw El and Carol in my headlights as my rental car rattled through the gravelly driveway. El opened my door. "4:59. Good man."

"I thought time was one of the least concerns for someone living out here by himself."

"Time doesn't matter. What matters is doing what you tell other people you're going to do."

"Or doing what they tell you to do?"

El ignored my comment, and Carol led the way through the darkness, apparently by smell, as I heard it constantly sniffing at the ground. El kept up, by memory, I imagine. I struggled to keep the pace and my footing and relied mostly on sound. We reached a small lake, and El dragged a canoe closer to shore. I offered to help, but El told me he'd tell me when he needed it.

He told me to get in first. Carol boarded second without the need for a command. El launched the canoe and got in last. Only then did I realize he hadn't even brought a pole, only a wooden oar.

El only paddled three or four strokes before allowing the canoe to proceed on its own. Carol rested its head against the side of the canoe. I wondered if it were looking into the water for fish.

I became aware of the near silence. I opened my mouth but shut it before speaking. I sensed it would have been inappropriate to disturb the peace for some time. With the lack of light and a baseball hat pulled down on his head, it was difficult to see El's eyes but I felt him staring.

A fish jumped and splashed at the exact moment the first bit of sun emerged on the horizon. El lifted his hat slightly and sat back. Carol wagged its tail, occasionally tapping the canoe. El paddled us away from the one other canoe, with two poles in the water, lest our presence become a disturbance.

"Got more questions?" he asked once we'd resumed gliding.

"You ever get lonely out here by yourself?"

"I'm not lonely and I'm not by myself. Listen."

I tried to hear what El wanted me to hear. He gave me some time. I heard nothing for what seemed like minutes, then some insects, a bird, a frog, something scamper across the water, finally Carol's breathing.

"Life's more than human beings."

"Sure."

"Yeah, sure. Most don't know that or don't care."

We sat quietly for some time before a question I hadn't thought of in advance came out of my mouth. "How come I never see a car or truck at your place?"

"You know the answer."

"You don't have one. And you don't have a boat with a motor either. How'd you make your living, El?"

El chuckled and pet Carol, who turned its head and appeared to smile. "You're starting to figure things out now, huh? All of us Campbells are the same. We all eventually come clean on the bad things we've done."

"What did you do?"

"I worked in oil and gas."

"Were you an executive?"

"No, not close. I wasn't important; I didn't set policy."

"But you still feel bad about your role?"

El gave some consideration to my question. "I suppose there's a place for guilt and remorse. If you've done something, anything, that has an unfortunate consequence, you shouldn't feel happy about it. Or nothing at all. But guilt and remorse aren't enough. And they shouldn't take a person over. They drag you down and don't do anything to right whatever wrong has been done. That requires action."

"So you live out in the woods now by yourself. No car, no motorboat. Is that why you don't go see your sons?"

El grabbed the paddle and set us in motion once more. "I'm not a hermit or recluse. And I'm certainly not a saint. I still take more than I should. But I'm doing something so I'm okay with that."

"Your sons aren't?"

"I don't know. You saw them, spoke to them. What do you think?"

"I think they're searching for answers."

"I hope they find them. It would give them more peace. But yours truly can tell you, there's a long road to recovery."

We sat in silence for some time before El paddled us towards shore. When we were a couple hundred feet away, Carol jumped out and swam beside the canoe.

"You got your story now?"

"I think so."

"Good. Now comes the hard part."

El got out of the canoe and looked at me. I thought maybe he would tell me what I needed to know but he just waved his palm up as a signal for me to get up and out.

"What do you mean?"

"You know."

"Not this time."

"That's too bad. Did your grandpa tell you about me?"

I hadn't expected the question, so I paused before answering. "Some. He said you were in the Army together."

"That's right. I owed him one."

El and I stared at one another. We both seemed to realize the other knew more than they were letting on.

My grandfather didn't achieve much, not compared to the Campbells, but he managed to buy a house and raise a family after he came home from Vietnam. His son, my father, was less successful. He even spent some time in jail for a drug offense. It was during the time when my father was away that my grandfather told me he'd done something for the father of two famous individuals. He called it his duty but in light of his son's predicament, he might have considered it his greatest accomplishment.

I was just ten at the time and without any ambition or purpose, but for whatever reason, I made a mental note of the episode that was never mentioned again. I never intended to ask for a favor, but I didn't have the advantages of my co-workers who'd gone to school and gotten their jobs because of their connections.

"I got it."

That's the message I left for my editor as I drove away from El's cabin. She returned my call about an hour later, just as I reached the airport.

"When can I see it?"

I planned to tell her I'd start working on it on the flight home but was suddenly confused, distracted, by the road signs and vehicles indiscriminately crossing lanes. I'd found the car rental return easy enough the first time I left El's place but couldn't do so when required to hold a conversation at the same time. With two tasks competing for my attention, I found myself unable to concentrate on either. Speechless and fearful as horns blared around me, I ended the call because driving safely seemed more important at that moment. Even when I regained focus, I repeatedly twisted my neck and checked the mirrors, uncertain whether the road I was traveling would take me where I needed to be headed.



FOSTER TRECOST

MAN ON THE RUN

They allowed an hour for lunch, more than enough most days but that afternoon I needed every minute, plus a few. When I got back, I tried to glide by my boss's door but he caught me mid-frame. He noted the time and scolded my tardiness, then asked if I'd seen the accident. Of course I'd seen it, but couldn't talk about it, not so soon after. So I mimicked remembrance and voiced a response that consisted of just one word, employing the verbal economy I use with everyone. He wanted details but he wouldn't get them—tragic is all I said. It would've been too risky to say more.

Here's what happened: Force flung the driver to a crumpled mound in the street, but no one seemed to notice. The car, that's where we looked. On fire, yes, but was it screaming? We wished it had been, but it wasn't the car. Then the screams stopped. And there I stood on the corner, scoffing at my attackers. I knew they were close and I knew they'd try something. Emotions can be so predictable.

After work I set out in the general direction of my apartment, but before long fatigue suggested I rest. Nearly dark and no one around, I found a park and sat center-bench. And never saw them coming. Another attack, this time an ambush. My only hope was to hide in a memory, so I jumped inside the safest I could find—I was a kid and from bricks and board, fashioned a ramp. With eyes squeezed to slits, I felt a thump when my bike hit the incline, then nothing but beautiful silence. But deeper than just the absence of sound, it was the absence of everything. Time stood still. Until I hit ground and found all the bad thoughts waiting for me. Even safe memories have an edge.

Later that night my grandmother called. She'd heard about the accident and it stoked her memory, so she called to stoke mine. She said it wasn't my fault, but she was talking about a different accident. For my tenth birthday I asked for a model train, but the kind that pulled boxcars, not people. When my parents presented me with an Amtrak-styled passenger version, my disappointment sent them after an exchange. And I never saw them again. It wasn't their fault and it wasn't the other driver who killed them. It was me. They found a new train in the trunk, but they left me something that would last a lot longer.

"Nobody blames you."

Except the one talking. And the one listening. And that's when she stopped being my grandmother. She became resentful and bitter, someone who'd come to place blame, but

I'd been blamed enough, mostly by me but not always, so I changed the subject, asked if she had plans for the weekend. And let her ease back to my grandmother.

"There's the game on Sunday, I guess I'll watch it."

That's all she said, but it was enough. An ambush disguised as a lonely lady using sports to resurrect my long-gone grandfather. My emotions, they're getting clever and this time they got the best of me. Sometimes I win, sometimes they win. It was easier on my bike, time stood still. Now, at best, it just slows down.



C.K. HARTUNI

THE SECRET STASH

On our recent family jaunt to Palm Springs, we wandered into a vintage shop, mostly for the vinyl, my teen daughter's latest obsession. The staleness of the air struck me hard, as if we had walked into your grandmother's closet or an estate sale inside a random dead person's house. The next thing that stuck out was the vintage porn, set forward and displayed proudly with no protective barriers for 21 and over to cross. And as my 14- and 16-year-olds walked nonchalantly past the display, I found myself looking back with a longing gaze. I so wanted to pick up a copy and thumb through it, but I didn't, mostly because I was with my family. It is 2022, I'm half a century old, and I still care what the world, my world, thinks of me. Instead, I walked right by them and headed to the concert t-shirts in the back of the shop and began to browse.

Even today in 2022, pictures of naked bodies and our participation in viewing them has consequences. Those vintage copies of Playboy reminded me of the time I ransacked my parents' house when I was left home alone for the first time.

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I was alone in our modest two-bedroom house for the first time. My mom had finally let me stay home by myself while she ran errands, because she thought I was old enough. I was eleven and her only child. My first instinct was to comb through our tiny 1,000 square foot house, inspecting the drawers full of stuff in our built-in cabinets in the corridor and my parents' bedroom, the stacks of books and magazines on the shelves of my dad's makeshift office in the corner of our dining room. I wasn't entirely sure why this excited me so much nor did I know what I was searching for. Perhaps it was the innocence of firsts, the simplicity of childhood freedom, roaming about without someone watching over me or maybe it was the sheer pleasure of snooping and the possibility of uncovering secrets about my parents.

These jaunts were the first breaths of independence I took away from my mother. And they were never long enough. There was so much to explore in that tiny house. You see, my parents had stuff - lots and lots of stuff. They went through four major moves across three countries and still managed to bring all their stuff and accumulate more. There was a small horse statue from my dad's childhood home in Iran that dates all the way back to the 1930s. And then there were the random issues of National Geographic magazines stacked on the

living room coffee table and in numerous empty boxes that inevitably landed in the garage, in case they would be needed some day. It would be so easy to stow some treasure or slip a forbidden truth in between the junk.

My first stop that day was in our bathroom. I pulled out my dad's personal drawer and saw his trusty electric shaver, which he used every morning for a smooth shave. Then there was his black plastic comb, which he used to groom himself, and of course, the magic marker he used to touch up his grays which would tide him over until the next time my mom dyed his hair. Yes, my dad had taken to having my mom dye his hair (and eyebrows) and did so until the end of his life. But what really caught my eye that day were the boxes that were shoved all the way in the back. There was a long, white box with a tube of cream inside and the words "long-lasting" and "pleasure" printed on the outside and an open box of condoms. An "ick" crept up my belly to my throat. I remember the horror I felt when I saw these items. Instinctively, I threw the items in the drawer and slammed it. This was my moment as their child realizing that my parents have a sex life, an unspoken secret that they share. Something I'm not privy to. The feeling swept over my body like invisible ants crawling on my skin. Going through my mother's dresser drawer on a different day confirmed this fact when I found a pair of sheer high-waisted panties circa 1960. This pair was very different from the cotton briefs I was used to seeing in the laundry basket.

As an adult thinking back to that time, I think that it is truly miraculous that my parents had sex. I mean they had to have done it at least once to have had me. But the idea that they would have sex for pleasure was unfathomable. You see, I was a horrible sleeper and so was my mom. When I was a baby, I wouldn't sleep by myself so rather than co-sleep with both parents or sleep train me, my mom decided to haul a mattress to my room and sleep on the floor next to my crib. This was her solution for both of us to get some rest. She tried once, maybe twice to let me sleep on my own, but it never worked out. My anxieties always won the battle, and my mom became my roommate. My uncle, a psychiatrist, warned my parents that they were too overprotective of me and that this codependence had to stop.

But it didn't. Instead, my mom continued to sleep in my room until I was a preteen. If it wasn't for the freak accident that landed her in the hospital for a week, who knows how much longer it would have continued? During that miraculous week, my life changed. We both grew a little, and I finally learned to sleep through the night, by myself. I was twelve years old.

In time, I have been a mom to two twelve-year-olds and been blessed with a healthy husband. I can't imagine the burden our co-sleeping put on my dad and their marriage. A therapist once advised me that my mom's co-sleeping might have been deliberate to avoid sex with my dad. Another wave of "ick" swept over me at that revelation.

On subsequent adventures throughout the house, I found epic issues of Playboy and Penthouse magazines buried underneath stacks of PC magazines. They certainly weren't

displayed proudly like the ones in the vintage shop of Palm Springs in 2022. The Penthouse magazine featured Vanessa Williams who had just given up her crown as Miss America. Someone had leaked nude photos of her with another woman, and this was way too much for 1984 to handle. Clearly, 1984 was not ready for a Black Miss America. By this time, I was thirteen and had never seen anything like this before. The images of the naked bodies made my heart beat fast and my legs tingly.

My dad also had a stash of nude photos of women in my parents' closet. He had a suitcase full of them neatly cut out and saved from magazines. I was shocked at the sheer number of them. Their hairstyles and makeup informed me that these photographs were taken in the 1950s and 60s. My parents were married in 1961. Why did he keep these pictures over so many years across so many moves? I was fascinated by the degree of variation in their colors. Fifty plus shades of beige. Some with contrasting hues for their nipples, some with nipples that blended into flesh. But most of all, I was surprised by how different their bodies were in shape and size. Their fleshy arms, generous thighs and soft bellies. Their bodies were definitely not skinny and far from fit by today's standards. The weight of their breasts, some perky and strong enough to stand up on their own, others hanging heavier and waiting to be harnessed. There was a clear commonality. They were all natural, untouched by the hands of cosmetic surgeons, unchiseled and pure. Pictures of real women in their purest form.

I never confronted my mom or dad about the pornography that I had found. But I got the distinct feeling that my mom knew about it. At the time, I was infuriated. How could she just let it go? Wasn't it the equivalent of infidelity? Didn't the beratement of women bother her?

When I was fourteen, my parents started having loud, painful arguments. I strained to hear, through my closed bedroom door, to make sense of the yelling. Like a jigsaw puzzle the missing pieces came together. My dad wanted to try for a boy and my mom wanted no part of it. She was done. She must have been going through perimenopause. And this was my dad's final plea before it was too late. In the mid-eighties, forty-six was already too late. My mom could no longer use my sleep issues as an excuse and so the arguments ensued until it was a moot point. That chapter closed on our lives. I would be an only child.

After I had children, I asked my mom bluntly why she didn't want to have two and she confided that she did want two, but that there was no one to help her. She didn't really explain it, but I filled in the gaps. Her family lived on the other side of the world in another hemisphere and my dad wouldn't have stayed up nights to help out.

In the weeks after my dad's passing, my mom's cousin, a good friend of my dad, came up to visit my mom and pick up a DVD that my dad had burned for him.

"What is this?" I asked my mom. I picked up a disc with three X's inscribed on it with a black Sharpie. I wanted so badly to just toss it.

"Oh it's something your dad made for Dave."

From the label, it was obvious my dad had burned a compilation of porn videos for his buddy.

"Mom, just throw it away. Why did you call Dave and tell him to come pick it up?"

"It's okay," she said.

"Do you know what it is?"

"Yes. It's okay. Let him come pick it up. Your dad wanted him to have it."

She snatched the DVD from my hand and put it on top of the TV in the living room safe from grasp. My suspicions were confirmed, she did know about the porn all these years. Maybe she was grateful for it? And at that moment, I couldn't help but wonder if she popped it into the DVD player and watched it before David picked it up. I would have.



ROBERT OKAJI

THE SONG OF EXITS

In this house of many doors,
no music passes between its walls.
Listen. A dog pants. The woman sips tea.
You think you hear a creak,
but nothing slips through
and every twitching second
sandpapers your closed eyes.
Strings and woodwinds.
The snare's brush.
You share no guilt
but wait for that entrance, straining.
Only the light escapes.

CONTINUED...



ESTHER MARTIN

BANYON

I pull my shirt up, watch
skin tighten to my belly in

fluorescent bathroom light at
4am, scared for what brightness

will do to the day, wiping away
what might have been, as it drips down

my leg, flushing its inky redness.
All phantom and shadow, silent

I can't keep, silent I never
wanted, silent that holds

the flight of birds
who grab growth from tree top seeds,

stranglers, growing down instead
of up.

Parasites, something
that saps, growing fat, growing warm,

leaving behind a cold that
hits the floor like a stone.

Last night a reminder that my body
is battleground, hungry and lost.

Raising a white flag, asking
for mercy.



JOHN ROMAGNA

FLIGHT 800

Memories are like grown children
When they have their own lives,

Returning after months,
Years,

My mother would arrive, walk the Seine,
Tour the Louvre, have coffee
At a sidewalk table.

*Detectives told me, the force concussion
Is like a bullet to the brain.*

'Shakespeare was perfect,'
She said, 'The rest struggle.'
Though it seemed to a boy
There was never a day she didn't know what to do,
Afternoons I took too long walking home from school
Kicking stones into driveways and rocky gardens,
She didn't remind me,
What will you make of yourself?

She took me to London,
Rome,
We could stand in places Michelangelo
Cursed a pope,
Cicero spoke,
Caesar died.

I didn't have to be like them.
I could be a father,
Teach.

CONTINUED...

She let me close an easy door on her life,
The way I might close off a spare bedroom,
Photos, furnishings, everything
In place.

I see her,
Seated in a cone of light, savoring
A glass of wine, a few pages of the book
I gave her. It was not her first trip
To Paris.



WILLIAM CASS

GRASPING AT STRAWS

Sunday night. All the lights were out. Except for the flicker of the television, the room was dark. I'd been lying on the couch for the past few hours channel-surfing, dozing. I was on my own now, with no one to answer to, so what else did I have to do? For once, my L.A. neighborhood was quiet, with no noises from any of the other apartments, no vehicles passing, no dogs barking.

Finally, shortly before midnight, I turned off the television, took a leak, and got into bed. Before pulling up the sheet, I checked my cell. A series of phone messages suddenly came through all at once together in a single moment, seven or eight of them. They had originally been left at various times throughout the day on Friday and were all from my mechanic, Miguel, who'd been working on my broken-down car. They began early that morning with him telling me he'd found something additional wrong with my engine and asking for my permission to fix it along with the originally agreed-upon repair. He was sorry, Miguel said, but it was needed for the transmission to function at all. He wasn't sure of the cost involved; it depended on where he could find parts, but it wouldn't be cheap: close to six, seven hundred extra for sure, he said, maybe a little north of that. Several additional messages followed every couple of hours thereafter, briefer but of a similar ilk, and more urgent. Mid-afternoon, he left one saying he'd located and ordered the parts, and they'd be delivered within the hour. He paused then, and I pictured him rubbing his short-cropped hair the way he did when he was anxious or unsure.

Finally, he said, "I know you need the car first thing Monday for..." I heard him hesitate, then say, "...for that trip, so unless I hear otherwise from you, I'm going to go ahead and complete the repair with the new parts." There was another long pause before he said he hoped that was okay.

His very last message of the bunch was left at seven-thirty that night saying he'd just finished with the repairs and I could pick the car up as soon as his shop opened on Monday. I knew he closed at five; I hadn't lost my own job so long ago that I'd forgotten how lousy it felt to work that late on a Friday. I heard him blow out a breath; whether it was from further frustration or sheer exhaustion, I couldn't tell. It didn't really matter to me because I didn't have the money for the extra repair and I hadn't authorized it. Why those messages all came through to me in bulk the way they had - delayed out there somewhere in the ether-sphere - wasn't my fault. I planned to tell him as much in the morning.

"I'll pay for the original estimate I signed off on," I whispered into the darkness, and found

myself gritting my teeth. "Not a penny more."

powered down the cell and concentrated on nodding my head. That plan sounded all right to me; it seemed fair enough. Still, something stiffened suddenly inside of me when I thought of telling Miguel the next morning, and I threw the cell across the room. I heard it clunk against the baseboard on the opposite wall. It didn't help the way I felt, not a bit.

I took an Uber to Miguel's shop in the morning and waited for him with my daypack in front of his office. I stopped to glance inside my car where it was parked near the entrance to his lot; the protective paper he spread on the floor mats while he worked was wrinkled but still there. Miguel came around the corner of his shop shortly before eight. The glance he gave me was furtive; I kept the one I returned as even as I was able.

"Guess you finally got my messages," he said as he unlocked the office door. His voice sounded intentionally peeved.

"Yeah," I told him, "But not until late last night. They all came around midnight in a big group. Didn't know a thing before that."

He made a snorting sound as I followed him inside. He flipped on the ceiling lights, went behind the counter, rifled through some invoices next to the cash register, found the one he was looking for, and pushed it my way. The key to my car was taped on top. I looked at the total on the bottom and whistled, shaking my head.

"Yeah," I heard him say. "I know it's more than you were hoping for, but it was needed to fix your car. I explained all that on one of my messages."

"You mean one of those I didn't get until late last night," I said. "And one I never authorized. One I never would have if I'd gotten the message when you left it."

"Not my fault you didn't." His attempt to meet my gaze looked determined but unsteady. He pointed. "Your car would still be sitting out there broken down without the additional repair. No way you could leave on...go anywhere today."

"That should have been for me to figure out." I set my jaw hard. "Not you."

We stared at each other. A fly buzzed somewhere in the stillness of the office. The morning was already hot, and a bead of sweat trickled down the side of his forehead. He was a tall, skinny guy; we both were. We'd sat at the end of the bench together on our high school basketball team, but were never particularly close friends. Close enough, though, that I'd been bringing my cars to him to work on for over a decade. Never a problem between us before.

His cell phone began buzzing in his jeans' pocket. He fished it out, studied the screen, and

scowled. "Listen," he said. "I have to take this. Diego's school. He got on the bus this morning not feeling well." Diego was Miguel's son who was in the same grade as my own son, Todd; they'd had occasional playdates together. Miguel gestured with the phone to the closest mechanic's bay attached to the office. "I'll be right back."

I watched him hurry around the corner and disappear into the darkened bay. I waited long enough to hear his muted voice move farther inside the bay before taking out my wallet. I took four one-hundred-dollar bills from it – slightly more than the original estimate for the repair – set them on top of the invoice, and peeled off the key. I trotted outside to my car, got inside, started the engine, and drove out of the lot without looking back. I didn't bother returning to my place for anything else; I just got on the I-5 a few blocks up from Miguel's shop and headed north towards where my wife, Molly, and I had agreed for us to meet with Todd. She'd chosen a place to meet that was about a three-hour drive north. If I kept my speed up and had no major delays, I thought I could still make it. I hoped so, anyway. It was the first time she'd agreed to do anything like that since our separation, and I didn't want to screw it up.

I managed to chase away thoughts of Miguel on the drive. There was plenty of traffic to navigate and concentrate on through the suburbs, but then it thinned out before the Grapevine. The 99 was even less crowded, and there was almost nothing after Bakersfield except the occasional tang of manure from fields the road split. I pulled onto the designated frontage road a few minutes after eleven and saw Molly's car parked in the meager shade of a lone tree in the near corner of a parking lot that served a gas station-restaurant. She stood leaning up against the hood with an arm behind Todd. He'd just turned seven a few months earlier, a string bean like me, dressed in a tank top, baggy shorts, and flip-flops. As I pulled up next to them, he didn't look up from where he stood scratching in the dirt with a stick; Molly glanced at her watch, then fixed me with a cold, steady glare.

I got out of the car slowly, came up beside Todd, and cradled his head against my hip. "Hey, there, big guy," I said. "Been missing you."

He didn't say anything, kept scratching with his stick, but I felt his head lean into me. I rubbed his shoulder, looked at Molly, and said, "Thanks for bringing him, for meeting like this."

She gave a stiff nod.

I nodded, too, several times. The morning had grown hotter, especially inland where we were, and her dark hair was matted against her forehead. Something clenched inside of me as I watched her blow a wisp of it from in front of her face and tuck it behind an ear. "So," I said. "How have you been?"

"How do you suppose?"

"Yeah, well, listen. I know you don't want to hear it from me again, but I'm sorry."

"Sorry enough to break up with her?"

I cocked my head, looked away, then back. "Things have changed. Gotten quieter."

"Quieter, huh?" Molly gave out a huff. "Well, you go ahead and have a nice, quiet two hours with our son." She glanced at her watch again. "Less now. I'll be back to pick him up at one. Don't be late."

I watched her lean down, peck him on the top of the head, then climb back into her car. I stepped out of the way with Todd. He still hadn't looked up. She drove away without regarding us. Where she'd go, I had no idea. She'd set the meeting spot saying it was roughly half-way for each of us, although I knew it was less than two hours to her parents' house where she'd taken Todd after she moved out. Much too far, though, for her to return there in the interim. Aside from the bank of restrooms next to the restaurant and gas station, there wasn't much of anything in any direction that I was aware of except miles of agricultural fields. I supposed she'd just drive around through them. Maybe find a cottonwood along an irrigation ditch offering enough shade to sit next to and wait, or some livestock somewhere to watch graze; from our drives together to visit her family, I knew there were operations like that the way she'd come.

Molly left a little cloud of dust in her wake. After she'd turned onto the frontage road, I gave Todd's shoulder a pat and said, "How about if we get us some lunch? Bet they have chocolate shakes inside. Maybe they'll even make yours a malt."

The grin he gave me was gap-toothed. I didn't know if he was waiting for her to leave before looking my way, but regardless, it made my heart quicken. I gave his shoulder another rub, and we walked across the lot together to the restaurant. As we did, he clutched my hand tightly.

The worn-out inside of the air-conditioned restaurant was done up in a roadside diner-type motif: red vinyl booths, spinning stools at a counter, travelogue memorabilia hung half-hazardly on the walls, a juke box in the corner. It wasn't very crowded. We settled in at the counter, and a waitress set places in front of us; Todd's included a children's placemat with pictures to color on which she set a tiny box of crayons; she poured coffee for me. We glanced over the menu quickly, and when Todd asked her, she said she could make his chocolate malt. I stuck with coffee, and we both ordered cheeseburgers and fries. A song I vaguely recognized played on the juke box, some ballad from the sixties or seventies.

I watched Todd immediately open his crayon box and begin coloring a family of teddy bears. His forehead furrowed into concentration in that way of his, one much the same as his mother's. I waited a few moments before asking, "So how's school going?"

He shrugged, kept coloring, and said, "I told you my teacher is a boy. He wears bow ties and socks Mom calls 'argyle'. He's nice."

"Made any new friends?"

He shrugged again. "A girl across the aisle likes dinosaurs, too. She has a bunch she takes out to recess. She's not supposed to; no toys allowed. But the duties let us play with them together in a corner by the Big Toy. She's nice, too. Then there's Aunt Tina's son. They come over a lot. He's younger than me, but he's okay."

"Your cousin, Lucas."

"Yeah." He squinted up at me with a frown. "Luke, you mean."

"That's right. Luke."

"You want to come home with us, they'll probably be there at Papa's and Gram's."

"I don't think so." I put my hand on his shoulder again. "Not this time."

"When, then?"

The big, wide eyes he looked at me with were Molly's, too. I swallowed and said, "I'm not sure."

"When I ask Mom when you're coming up or when we're going back, she just starts crying."

I felt my lips purse and gave his shoulder a squeeze. The waitress set his malt in front of him then, most of it in a tall, frosted glass with whipped cream on top, and the rest in a perspiring metal canister. Todd's eyes grew even wider as he pulled the glass in front of him and took a slurp through the straw standing still in the middle next to a tall spoon.

"Wow," he told her. He licked off a dollop of whipped cream from the top. "The place my dad takes me at home for these doesn't have two containers like this. Just a paper cup with a lid. It's a drive-thru."

She smiled and glanced back and forth between us, a heavy-set, middle-aged woman with purple highlights at the tips of her graying hair. "Well, kiddo, you enjoy that, then. Your burgers will be out in a minute."

She went away. I watched Todd kneel up on his stool and alternate his attention back and forth between the picture he was coloring and the malt. I thought about his room in our apartment that I'd left untouched since they moved away. I'd left Molly's things untouched,

too. She'd gone off with Todd in a hurry the morning after she discovered my affair, right after I'd left for work. She'd folded a short, terse note on the kitchen counter telling me where they were going. When I tried calling, she wouldn't answer, but we had begun texting recently, just perfunctory stuff. And she'd also started letting Todd call me on my cell every few nights, so that was another step in the right direction, as was this rendezvous. As context, I'd told Miguel about those things before he began working on my car last week. At some point, while I did, unexpectedly, I felt my voice catch. I thought I'd recovered quickly and he hadn't noticed, but when I was done, Miguel reached over, clasped my arm, and said he understood. I didn't tell him anything about my demotion at work, though. I hadn't told Molly anything about that either.

When our meals came, Todd gave a happy yelp, and the waitress and I exchanged small smiles. I tucked an open napkin under his chin, cut his burger in half, squirted ketchup onto his plate for the fries, and gently took the crayon he was using from him. I set it next to the others in the open box, watched him start eating, then joined him myself. I waited until we'd both chewed a couple of mouthfuls to ask, "So aside from the crying, how's your mom been doing?"

Todd shrugged again, took another slurp of malt, and said, "Okay, I guess, but she seems sad all the time. Stares out our bedroom window a lot."

"She like working with Papa at his store?"

"I guess."

"Aunt Tina still works there, too?"

He nodded. "Grams, too, when she's not watching me."

I nodded myself and struggled to think of something else to say. We'd covered most regular topics during our phone conversations. Not much new to broach except what the future might hold, and I didn't want to go there with him. I couldn't even enter his room at home anymore; it was too hard. Truth be known, sometimes when I was in the apartment alone, its silence seemed to almost scream. Especially lately. I couldn't say for certain any longer who had actually initiated my affair, but I knew that I didn't see the same hopeful future for us that she did. The steam had gone out of that for me. Mostly, as time went on, I just felt more and more like an idiot about things. About the way I'd acted, the decisions I'd made and those I hadn't.

The song on the jukebox changed again, so someone must have selected a new batch of tunes, though I hadn't been aware of it. Todd only ate a few bites of his burger and fries before pushing away his plate, setting his napkin on it, and resuming his coloring between slurps of malt. When the waitress came by and asked if he was done with his meal, he

nodded without looking at her. She took his plate away and I slowly finished my own, checking for messages on my cell phone as I did. There were two phone calls from Miguel that I didn't listen to, but no others. None from Molly, and no texts from her either. I pictured her out there driving aimlessly through the fields thinking whatever thoughts she had, and found myself pinching the bridge of my nose until it hurt. Sitting there next to our son, I looked around that tired, half-full diner in the middle of nowhere and wondered how the hell I'd gotten there. How the hell I'd gotten us all to that place.

I glanced at my watch when the waitress came by to take my plate: still not quite an hour left before Molly would be back for Todd. I asked the waitress if there was anything special to do around there. She considered for a moment, then shrugged, and said, "Not much. We do have a handful of arcade-style video games in that passageway, if your son likes that sort of thing." She gestured with her chin. "Over there where the restaurant joins the gas station store."

Todd gave a little gasp and tugged at my arm. "You bet I'm interested. Can I, Dad?" I sighed, but was glad to have the new activity for him. I took out my wallet and asked her, "Can you make change?"

"Machines take ones and fives, give credits."

I nodded, leafed through my wallet, and handed Todd a couple of each. He gave me a kiss on the cheek, wet and sticky with malt, and we watched him scamper off into the passageway.

"Cute kid," she told me, lifting my plate. "You two travelling somewhere?"

"Nah," I said. "Just having a little get-together until his mom picks him up."

"I see," she said. Something in the look she gave me told me that experience was one she was familiar with. "Shucks," she said more quietly. The music from the juke box ended for a moment, replaced by electronic pings from a video game. When a new song started, she asked, "Top that coffee off for you?"

"Sure, thanks."

She did that, turned our check upside down on the counter, and I watched her walk with my plate through a swinging door into the kitchen.

I went ahead then, brought my cell phone to my ear, and listened to Miguel's messages. The first was as irate as I'd ever heard him. "You son-of-a-bitch..." and "How dare you..." and "I'd better get the rest of that payment or else I'll...". The second came an hour or so afterwards

and was more tempered. "Listen," he said. "Maybe you intended to make arrangements for the rest of the payment. I know you were in a hurry, had to hit the road to meet Molly and Todd." He paused, and I pictured him rubbing his head. "Anyway, listen, give me a call, so we can work this out."

I set down my cell phone and thought back to when he and I finally got in at the end of a blow-out basketball game together in high school and started a fast break in the wrong direction; that's how inept we were. Thankfully, we both missed shots at our opponent's goal before time expired, but our shared humiliation afterward knew no bounds. I felt a little smile crease my lips now thinking about it. That went away, though, when I remembered Molly waiting for me outside the locker room after that game. We'd just started dating and she said nothing when she saw the pained look in my eyes, just took my hand and suggested we go for a walk, which we did. She didn't say much on the walk either, but the way she gently rubbed the back of my hand with her thumb was about the most comforting thing I'd ever felt.

I sat there another fifteen minutes or so thinking more about things. I thought about the passage of time that began a couple of months earlier when the principal where I'd taught first told me about how declining enrollment to start the school year might mean needing to consolidate a few classes. If so, he warned me, I'd be one of the first teachers that would have to be let go because of my low seniority. If that happened, class sizes would increase and, he promised, he could hire me back as instructional aide for one of them; something I'd done part time in college and a job that wouldn't pay a third of what I was making as a teacher. When I told Molly about that, she didn't really seem to care; her attention, like always, continued to center on Todd. But the single woman who taught in the classroom across from mine commiserated with me about the unfairness of it all. As the consolidation threat grew more serious, she began buying me drinks after work so I could blow off steam; she listened to me whine and complain with nothing but flattery and support. Her hand began lingering longer on mine when she clutched it for encouragement, and things just developed, got more serious between us, I guess, as time went on. Especially when the classroom consolidations at work became a reality and I reluctantly began my demeaning new position. I don't remember the details, but I do know that my fall was pretty hard and quick at the time, both with her and from anything close to grace.

My coffee grew cold, and I became aware of Todd's occasional shouts of excitement from the passageway. Finally, I blew out a breath, turned over our check, left some bills for payment that included a generous tip for our waitress, and joined him there. I found him engrossed in a warfare game that involved a lot of explosions and flashing lights. He was standing on a short plastic stool, and each time he fired his imaginary weapon, a puff of air escaped him.

When that game ended, he asked me to play one with him. He'd used up all his credits except a few on an old-fashioned pinball machine, so I inserted enough quarters to allow us both to

play, and we took turns doing that. Soon, we were both yelling at the machine. It had been years since I'd last played, but he began mimicking the shakes I remembered from those days and gave the machine as I manipulated the levers. He won by a few points and made a victorious thrust with his fist in the air as I scooped him off his stool from behind into a tight hug.

I checked my watch again after I'd set him down. "Come on," I told him. "Your mom will be coming for you soon, but we can play catch until she gets here. I brought our mitts and a ball."

He let out a whoop and held my hand again as we returned to my car in the parking lot, skipping a little to keep up with my longer strides. I got our mitts and ball out of my daypack on the passenger seat, situated Todd about ten yards away from me, and lobbed the ball to him. He made an awkward return throw that bounced once into my mitt. He'd just started playing before they'd left, joining his first Little League team at the lowest level, but was enthusiastic about learning the game. I'd looked forward to working with him to help him improve, but of course, that opportunity never came. And I didn't use the current occasion to try any new instruction with him, content instead just to pass the time we had left tossing the ball back and forth and tracking down his errant throws. None of that seemed to bother Todd, though; his big grin never left his face, and he made the same, pleased puffing sound each time he threw the ball that he had while maneuvering levers on the video games.

Not long afterwards, Molly drove back into the parking lot. I didn't have to look at my watch to know she was a little early. She parked again in the bit of shade the tree provided and got out of her car. I made a last catch of one of Todd's bouncing throws, then nodded towards his mom and said, "Okay, bud. Time to wrap things up."

Molly and I both watched him frown, then shake his head. I walked up to him slowly, wrapped his head against my hip like I had when I first arrived, and said, "We'll get together again soon."

He said, "Come back with us." When I looked down, his eyes were shut tight. "Or we can go with you."

"Not this time," I told him quietly. "Come on now."

But when I lifted my hand off his shoulder, he wrapped his arms around my thigh and latched on, shaking his head. I looked at Molly. She shook her head, too, but more slowly, looking past us with an expression that was equal parts exasperation and sadness. There was plenty I would have liked to say to her, most of it filled with regret, but I knew that wasn't the time for it, not with Todd there and clinging to me the way he was.

"Todd," Molly said, her voice hard and stern. "We need to go. Now. I have to get to work."

"Come on, son," I said again and rubbed Todd's back. He didn't let go of my thigh but did allow me to walk him stiffly to the far side of Molly's car. She climbed in the driver's side, and between the two of us, we got him into the passenger seat and buckled in. He kept his head down the whole time, not looking at either of us. His mitt was still on. I patted it and said, "You keep that for next time."

Then I kissed the top of his head as Molly had earlier, closed his door, and stepped away from the car. As I did, something fell in me like a stone dropping into a deep, deep well. Molly put the car in gear.

"Thanks again," I told her through Todd's open window. Then I heard myself say, "Listen, wait." I paused there in the heat of the early afternoon watching her shake her head again, staring straight ahead. Todd began to squirm and sniffle. "That's okay," I said to her finally. "Go ahead, get going. I'll call you."

She nodded, the same expression never leaving her face. I raised my hand to her as she drove away, but only Todd looked over. He made the same gesture, it seemed to me, meekly. I wondered what he'd think later about this time in his life, how he'd remember me, and my heart became an aching fist. My own father had left when I was about his age. I stood and watched them go until the ribbon of dust they'd left in their wake had dissipated entirely.

I only stopped once on the way back to use the restroom and for gas. While I waited for my tank to fill, I listened to another phone message from Miguel. It was short and didn't even address me by name. He simply said, "You know what, forget about what you owe me on the car. You've got a lot going on right now. Take care of that." Afterwards, I could hear some sort of machinery in the background, maybe a hydraulic drill or an air compressor, then the line went dead. I felt my shoulders slump and powered my phone down completely; I couldn't face any more messages from him.

For the rest of the drive, I just let my thoughts tumble over themselves. I had plenty of time for that because I soon ran into an accident that left me sitting still waiting for it to clear for almost a half-hour, and then hit bad traffic once I got back to the outskirts of Los Angeles. So, I had lots of opportunity to think about things and form a kind of plan, as scattered and disjointed as it may have been.

When I got to my neighborhood, I stopped at a drugstore and bought a small manilla envelope, then drove over to Miguel's shop. I was relieved to find that it had already closed when I got there. I put the remaining four twenty-dollar bills that I had left in my wallet inside the envelope, then took off my watch. It had been an expensive high school graduation gift from my grandfather, and Miguel had always admired it. I dropped it in the envelope, too, sealed it, scribbled Miguel's name on the front, then got out of my car and walked up to his office door. I glanced inside: the office was dark, no one around. I opened the mail slot

below the door's window, dropped the envelope through, and heard it plop onto the linoleum inside.

I drove next over to the open-air bar where the woman I was involved with and I were going to meet a little later for happy hour. I didn't bother going home to shower and clean up first because I had no plans to go inside. I knew I'd just sit in the parking lot until she drove up, then get out, and say to her what I'd been rehearsing as best I could before leaving again. I'd considered calling or sending a text to end things, but felt like it was something I needed to do face to face.

After that, I guessed I'd drive back to my empty apartment, listen to its stillness some more, avoid Todd's room and my wife's things, and just wait to call Molly until I knew he'd be in bed asleep. Then, I'd say what I had to say to her, as well, and hope for the best. I suppose that hope was all I could really do at that point. Hope and pray. I thought about Todd clinging to my thigh and Molly tucking that stray strand of hair behind her ear and told myself I'd muster as much of both as I possibly could. Not many options available to me otherwise. I knew I was grasping at straws, but what choice did I have? As much as I wished otherwise, none that I could see. Not a single one.



KRISTEN BAUM DEBEASI

APOTHEOSIS

On the day I learn my grandfather will die, I count.
It's his hundred-and-first year. In six days, God created
all the stuff—heavens, earth, plants, animals.
And God saw that it was good. That's what Genesis says.

And my grandfather, the carpenter, woodworker, giant,
at home with sawdust underfoot and hammer in hand, dwelt
on good things. So, on the day I learn my grandfather will die,
I remember things he thought were good: baseball games

and three holes of golf in the front yard. Lemon drops
and peppermints in a Cool Whip container in his work truck.
Croquet games. Snowmen so tall I could barely reach
the lowest lump of coal, and doubles skating with him,

the way he folded me into him and carried me above the rough river ice.
I remember how he would turn off his hearing aid
when everyone sat talking after the Sabbath meal, sly smile
on his face that told me nothing was going to change his world.

And in the bottom of the tenth month, on the 28th day,
God took my grandpa back. To me, he had walked on water
and on stilts, and as the years passed, he slowly shrank
to human size, his mind becoming as a little child's.

In the end, the conspiratorial grin was gone. He slipped into sainthood
more quietly than he had arrived, doing everything
The Good Book said to do. And I saw that

it was good.

AUTHOR BIOS

Michael Loderstedt is Professor Emeritus of Kent State University where he taught printmaking and photography. He continues to explore new studio and writing projects that investigate the geography, histories or the natural phenomena of place. His recent manuscript entitled *The Yellowhammer's Cross* received a 2020 Ohio Arts Council Fellowship in Non-Fiction Literature, his recent work has been published in *Neighborhood Voices*, *Muleskinner Journal*, and the *NC Literary Review* (receiving the 2021 James Applewhite Prize for Poetry). You can follow his projects on Instagram @m_loderstedt.

Ruth Niemiec (she/her) is a writer of non-fiction, fiction and poetry in English and Polish. She received her BA with a major in Professional Writing from Victoria University. Her latest work has recently appeared in *Dumbo Feather* (aus), *Mamamia* (aus), *ABC Everyday* (aus) *Neon Literary Magazine* (uk), *Coffee People* (us), *Parliament* (us) and *Rhodora* (in). Ruth also reads creative non-fiction for literary publications; *Catatonic Daughters* and *Kitchen Table Quarterly*. You can drop her a line at <http://www.ruthniemiec.com> or IG @ruth_niemiec

Nathaniel Lloyd Richards is a British Born black Caribbean man who lived in China for four and a half years (Beijing and Shanghai). He is an educator, with a history of Youth Work and has worked with children's non-profit charities in the UK, New York and Utah. In 2020 he completed his postgraduate work in Child, Adolescent and Family Mental Health.

Jennifer McKeen Rodrigues has been published in *Breadcrumb Scabs Poetry Magazine* as both a poet and photographer. Currently, she is editing her memoir about surviving a rare childhood blood disorder. Jennifer is a certified yoga therapist, military spouse, and mother. She lives on the sacred land of the Nisqually tribe in DuPont, WA.

Celeste Oster is a compulsive taker of classes, lover of odd words, and maker of handbound books. Her poems have appeared in *Thorny Locust*, *The Same*, and a variety of long-defunct literary journals.

SM Stubbs co-owned a bar in Brooklyn until recently. Recipient of a scholarship to Bread Loaf, nominated for the Pushcart and Best New Poets. Winner of the 2019 Rose Warner Poetry Prize from *The Freshwater Review*. His work has appeared in numerous magazines, including *Poetry Northwest*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *New Ohio Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *Crab Creek Review*, *December*, and *The Rumpus*.

Emily Blair Stribling grew up in the south but has lived most of her life in New England because she finds the seasons and the natural world is where she is most at home. For many years she lived on a farm in Maine with a host of goats, chickens and family. She recently moved to CT to be closer to children and grandchildren. Emily is a poet, a teacher, a wife, a mother, and a grandmother, still filled with wonder and hope. Her work has appeared in numerous reviews and journals among them *The New York Quarterly*, *Maine Farms*, *Poets On*, *Poetry Nook* and NPR's *Poems From Here*. One of her poems is included in the anthology, *Balancing Act 2*, and *Finishing Line Press* published her chapbook, *The Mercy of Light*. She is the recipient of an American Book Award and New York City's Pen and Brush Award.

Peter Mladinic's fourth book of poems, *Knives on a Table* is available from Better Than Starbucks Publications. An animal rights advocate, he lives in Hobbs, New Mexico

Kevin Finnerty's stories have appeared in *Eclectica Magazine*, *Newfound*, *Portage Magazine*, *Variety Pack*, *The Westchester Review*, and other journals.

AUTHOR BIOS

Foster Trecoast writes stories that are mostly made up. They tend to follow his attention span: sometimes short, sometimes very short. Recent work appears in Harpy Backchannels Journal, Right Hand Pointing, and BigCityLit. He lives near New Orleans with his wife and dog.

C. K. Hartuni is practically a native to Southern California. She immigrated to Los Angeles with her family at age 5 from Iran. She has been writing short stories since age 7. In March 2020 when the pandemic shut everything down, she began a daily practice of morning writing with a group of fellow writers. Currently, she is working on a collection of essays about growing up as an immigrant in America. She is also working on her debut novel about a woman struggling with depression in the 1950s.

Robert Okaji is a Texan living in Indiana. He once worked in a library. The author of multiple chapbooks, his poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in Great Lakes Review, Threepenny Review, Book of Matches, The Night Heron Barks, Vox Populi and elsewhere.

Esther Martin is from Maine and is a student at Bates College. At Bates, she studies geology and chemistry, namely stable isotopes. She works in the summers on the water as a kelp farmer and aquaculture researcher. She has studied kelp's ability to sequester carbon, oyster growth, and the accessibility of the aquaculture industry to new entrants.

William Cass has had over 250 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as December, Briar Cliff Review, and Zone 3. He was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at Glimmer Train and Black Hill Press, and won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal. He has received one Best Small Fictions nomination, three Pushcart nominations, and his short story collection, Something Like Hope & Other Stories, was recently released by Wising Up Press. He lives in San Diego, California.

Kristen Baum DeBeasi is a poet, writer and composer whose poetry has appeared in Blue Heron Review, Contrary Magazine, Menacing Hedge and elsewhere. She is a Best of the Net nominee and was Moon Tide Press's Poet of the Month for July 2021. A native Oregonian, she now resides in Los Angeles. When she isn't composing or writing, she loves testing new recipes, watching hummingbirds hatch, and collecting twigs for her fairy garden.

photography by Gary Campanella







THE MULESKINNER JOURNAL

LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.