

T H E

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La Baigneuse Valpinçon: Please Delete Me

C O V E R

Shawn Huckins

Shawn Huckins is known for both his brilliant humor and technical skill as a painter. In his most notable series to date, 'The American Revolution Revolution' and 'The American ___ tier,' Huckins satirizes social media, asking whether the devolution of language in the face of technological advancement weakens our ability to empathize and connect to one another in a meaningful way. By layering early American portraiture and landscape with text taken directly from the internet, Huckins confronts the priorities of our society in comparison to simpler times. What would George Washington post on Facebook? How would Lewis and Clark communicate their progress westward via Twitter?

Huckins' works are meticulously hand-painted, including the letters. The portraits, landscapes and pastoral scenes are sourced from public domain records and museum collections of classic American paintings.

A New Hampshire native, Huckins now lives and works in Denver, Colorado. His work has been displayed in private and public collections across the country, including the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, MA and the Vicki Myhren Gallery at the University of Denver.

the oddville press

Promoting today's geniuses and tomorrow's giants.

O D D V I L L E P R E S S . C O M

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D I S C L A I M E R

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

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Wild Thing

Carol Hamilton

...my yard, tended, but only
to primeval standards.
The volunteer peach
thrashes against the strong wind,
along with all the newly-leafed trees.
It is an untouched disgrace,
one branch parallel to
and almost sweeping the ground.
Gulls (from where?) flash
their white wings, under lit
with the early sun, and sail
above me, flapping hard.
Below them roses, once-chosen
for flamboyant shades,
have gone native, all now
ruby and small, today dancing
despite the death grip
of this driest of winters.
The hammock is almost ready
to take off. We are all
past-prime here except for
the store-bought petunias
and young vegetables
and the spring-mating birds.
The bamboo wind chimes
dance to their own music,
hollow, vivid and...
did I mention? ... wild.

Carol Hamilton has recent and upcoming publications in *San Pedro River Review*, *Dryland*, *Pinyon*, *Commonweal*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Pour Vida*, *Adirondack Review*, *The Maynard*, *Sanskrit Literary Magazine*, *U.S. I Worksheet*, *Broad River Review*, *Fire Poetry Review*, *Homestead Review*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Poem*, *Haight Ashbury Poetry Journal*, *Sandy River Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *former people Journal*, *Main Street Rag*, *Pigeonholes Review*, *Poetica Review*, *Zingara Review*, *Broad River Review* and not too long ago, *The Oddville Press*. She has published 17 books: children's novels, legends and poetry, most recently, *SUCH DEATHS* from Virtual Arts Cooperative Press Purple Flag Series. Hamilton is a former Poet Laureate of Oklahoma.



Moon Walk (Illuminated)

Squire Broel

Swallow and Stalin

Owen Yager

I'M SWITCHING, these days, between daydreaming that I'm a swallow and that I'm Stalin. The swallow days are more fun. I sit at my desk and wonder what it would be like to wake up and fly out of the nest that I built with my own hands, beak, whatever. When I'm drowning in spreadsheets and quite fucking miserable, I'll lose myself in the idea of flitting around in the dusk. It would be nice, I imagine, to pounce on a moth on the wing. To be an aerial cat. I had a cat day dream phase a month or two ago, and I suppose that this might well be the extension of that.

The Stalin days aren't whimsical like that, but dear Lord are they fun. Try, sometime, to imagine walking into a room and looking around and saying, "Hey Boris, can I get a glass of water?" and Boris would just get me a glass of water because Boris knows that if he doesn't, I can say, "Hey Vlad, can I get a gun to kill Boris with?" and Vlad would get a gun. Maybe he'd be a real pal and just kill Boris for me. If he didn't, I could ask another guy named Vlad to kill the first Vlad for me. And so on and so forth. That's what brings me back to those dreams, I think.

A bit of me, maybe a big bit of me, wants to stop having Stalin days. They scare

me. I get too excited by them. I know I'm not Stalin, and I know that I can't tell Boris to get me some water and Vlad to kill Boris, but those dreams excite me. The idea that someone, even a funny looking little Georgian man in a big coat, even me, can make a world for themselves where they, where I, can do whatever they want is exhilarating. I don't think I want to kill a person, mind. But I do love the idea that I could.

I won't, though. I won't. I'll just keep waking up at 6:45 and getting in my mom's old Buick and going to plug in numbers. I'll have a coffee break around eleven and lunch at 1 and at five on the dot I'll be walking back to my Buick to go home. That's what I did today, and that's what I did yesterday, and that's what I'll do tomorrow.

In all of that I'll find some joy in swallow days and Stalin days and whatever comes next. Maybe they'll be snowflake days and maybe they'll be moose days and maybe they'll be darker, or richer. There's a chance that I'll try to go on a date or get a dog. Maybe the dog will be big and tawny and stand outside of coffee shops while I order, and come when I call.

"Rufus!"

Owen Yager is a senior at Carleton College pursuing a major in Religion and minors in Russian and Creative Writing. His writing has recently appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine*, and he is currently working on his first novel.

City Lights

Debarshi Mitra

I saw the winters return,
as frost on car windows
while my fingers
traced out patterns
I saw this city held by lights
growing restless for motion.
I felt the growing collective desire
to be elsewhere, somewhere.
I eyed from my windows
the people behind other windows.
I felt the chasm grow wider.
In between the lights
some time had elapsed
some years , some decades.
Outside the lights still flicker away.
I still trace those patterns on windows.
I still let the lights sweep over me
not knowing where to go.

Debarshi Mitra is a 24 year old poet from New Delhi, India. His debut book of poems *Eternal Migrant* was published in May 2016 by Writers Workshop. His works have previously appeared in anthologies like *Kaafiyana*, *Wifi for Breakfast* and *Best Indian Poetry 2018* and in poetry journals like *The Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Thumbprint*, *The Punch Magazine*, *The Seattle Star*, *The Pangolin Review*, *Leaves of Ink*, *The Sunflower Collective*, *Coldnoon*, *Indiana Voice Journal*, *The Indian Cultural Forum* among various others. He was the recipient of the The Wingword Poetry Prize 2017, the Srinivas Rayaprol Poetry Prize and was long listed for the TFA Prize 2019.



Napolean Crossing the Alps

Shawn Huckins

Mexico

Mark Jacobs

IT WAS A CHAIN OF EVENTS, some of them taking place in Foster Raines' mind and some in the world at large, none more real than another. It started with the death of Methuselah's baby sister, whose name Foster never could remember. He happened to be sitting in the game room at Loblolly Village when she crossed the threshold on her walker and crashed to the floor dead as a bag of cats. A hundred and seven, people believed her to be, reserved but not unfriendly to the end. Nurses and orderlies rushed to revive her. No luck, unless you considered lucky the feat of expiring in a flash after a healthy century. Watching the commotion from his wheelchair, blanket tucked around his knees, Foster was obliged to look his own death in the face. The outcome of that stare-down was one word. Mexico.

In 1952 he had traveled to south Texas with the idea of turning cowboy. Back in Virginia, his brother Rollie was just home from Korea and glorying in all the war hero worship that came his way. Wrongly or rightly, Foster felt crowded on his home ground. But in Texas he could not get anybody to take him seriously. He was a small man, and the ways in which his short stature disadvantaged him were innumerable. In El Paso he fell into conversation with a gent who had mudflap ears and the

gift of gab. Next thing Foster knew he was holding out a doctored second-hand passport to a Mexican border guard, leaving behind the country of his birth to work as a roustabout in Colonel Billy Brunson's Portable Circus.

It lasted a year. For Foster, no time before or since had come close to Mexico. No experience got down inside him and changed his shape the way Mexico did. Watching the body of Methuselah's kid sister being taken away, he was seized by a need so fierce he had no choice but to recognize it as the sole remaining duty of his life. Mexico. Tell it.

He was leaving behind precious little. A life insurance policy would bury him. Beyond that, what anybody remembered of him was out of his hands. The brush of his lips on a grandchild's clean head. An act of unanticipated kindness, an uncalled for hurtful comment. The disciplined way he kept his hands in the ten and two position on a steering wheel. Those things mattered, of course they did. Mexico was different. It was nothing you expected, it was everything a life might be. It was the one place God showed his hand, and the Devil took swift advantage.

Such visits as he received at Loblolly Village tended to happen on the weekends, when family members weren't working. From the

Wednesday on which the old woman died to the Saturday afternoon when his daughter Polly stopped by with Kelly Elizabeth, Foster felt the need to tell about Mexico growing in him until it began crowding out everything else. It was not really fair on his part to judge his daughter and her daughter so harshly, but judge them he did. They could not put down their telephones long enough to look him in the eye. Their preoccupation with the glowing screens of their little machines made him crabby, and when Polly kissed him goodbye and told him she hoped he'd be friendlier next time he knew family was no repository for what he had to say. That was enough to break any man's heart, but it did nothing to lessen his resolve.

He waited. Some days went by, disappearing the way dew disappeared from morning grass, leaving no trace on the blade. Then a young man got himself hired as an orderly and showed up in Foster's room to wheel him outside to the Louis Jakes Memorial Contemplation Garden.

"I'm Raymond," he informed Foster.

"What do they call you in Spanish?"

The new employee gave him a puzzled look, and for a moment Foster had the sense he would refuse to wheel him outside on grounds of stupid questions.

"Never mind," he said. "It's the tattoos made me wonder is all."

Raymond shook his head. Like Foster he was a small man, though highly muscular. He wore glasses and had a fastidious look, which did not necessarily suggest he was looking down on people, just that he had the capacity to do so should he so choose. All that Foster could see of the orderly's arms was heavily inked.

"Long time ago, down in Mexico, it was a ravishing female covered head to toe with designs like yours," Foster said, pointing to Raymond's arms. "They billed her as the Tat-

tooed Lady, and back then she was a novelty. Any more, I suppose she wouldn't draw a second glance. Maria Dolores, that was the name she was baptized under although she was born on the Texas side of the border."

"Appears you got Mexico on the brain, Mr. Raines."

"You can go ahead and call me by my given name," Foster told him.

He had the sense that conversation lay ahead of them. The prospect rose before Foster like a mountain observed with a tranquil eye from the valley floor.

Outdoors it was May in Broadhope County, a warm and flower-filled month, not a month a person who had any say over it would choose to die in. In the contemplation garden any number of bugs leapt and crept, and birds whose names Foster ought to remember but did not spangled the tree branches. Just being there made Foster feel good, feel hopeful. His throat was full of important words. All he had to do was open his mouth and they would fly out. But one of the nurses stuck her head out the door and called Raymond to come give her a hand with an uncooperative resident. Foster sat alone, waiting for the orderly to return. His disappointment was great when they sent a floppy, inattentive woman to bring him back inside.

He gave it one more shot with family. His son came by that evening on his way home from work. That was rare. By a fluke of fortune Floyd was a tall man, standing a good six feet on a bad day, strapping and confident to the point of belligerence. His appearance made it easy for him to look down on the decrepit wreck his father had become. He brought Foster a book of puzzles. He went on and on about the Jersey milk cows he was running in a disused pasture, and a foreman he hated at the Frito-Lay factory where he worked on the line.

"Tell you what," said Floyd. "Son of a bitch don't stop riding me, I'll clean his damn clock for him."

Neither of them believed the threat was real.

"I went to Mexico," Foster said. "A long time ago. Before you were born."

Floyd nodded. He already knew that, or thought he did. He was thinking about something else. His lack of interest acted as a constipating force in Foster, and that was the end of it.

No sign of Raymond for a couple of days, and Foster figured he had quit. No shame in that. Taking care of old people was not everybody's cup of tea. Then the inked orderly showed up on the evening shift, and Foster asked him how come the switch.

"That your business?"

"Just making conversation."

It turned out he was starting a taxi business and needed his days free to deal with paperwork and the authorities.

"Raimundo," he said out of nowhere. "I looked it up. That's the Spanish word for Raymond. It means King of the World."

Foster nodded. Their conversation had a leapfrog quality, and Foster asked him how many vehicles his taxi service was going to run.

"Ten," was the prompt answer. "Right now, it's just one. Got a minivan. My cousin's painting the name on tonight."

"I had no useful skill," Foster said. "I mean useful as a circus act. The Colonel took me on as a roustabout."

Raymond nodded. He appeared to have what Foster's family members did not, which was the ability to listen and hear. Foster took some responsibility for that although it was not clear to him how such a generalized shortcoming had come to pass.

"What's the name of your company?"

"Sunshine Taxi Service."

It was Foster's turn to nod. He had a sense of being waist deep in the only conversation that mattered to him.

"We were a traveling circus, you understand. The Colonel was of a restless disposition, so the work suited him fine. We moved around from town to town, what the Mexicans call pueblitos. Never worked so hard in my life. It's no joke, I tell you, setting up a circus, taking it down, doing it all over again the next day and the next day and the next after that. Nothing funny about it. You lie down to sleep, it's not a body part that don't ache."

"I read the internet killed circuses," Raymond said.

"Wouldn't be surprised. Even back then it was touch and go, moneywise. We had a hard time keeping body and soul together."

"But you liked it. You liked it a lot."

"You got somebody to drive that minivan when you're working here?"

"Cousin. Same one."

"You'd best learn to do your own maintenance. At least change the oil, rotate the tires. The garages will gouge you. I'm thinking you ought to write it down."

"Write what down?"

"What I'm telling you. About Mexico and the circus."

Raymond shook his head. "I'm not writing down your story."

"It's not a story, it's what happened."

Without either of them realizing it, they had reached an impasse. They hadn't even known they were arguing, let alone about what. Raymond's phone burped at him in a meaningful way, and he left Foster's room.

Foster had a hard time getting to sleep that night. There was no explanation for the sense of loss he felt. It was just there, along with an anger at Raymond that was just as baffling. All this, notwithstanding a clear conviction that he

was not any getting dumber as his body clock wound down. Just the opposite. He was on the verge of clarity, his mind at its thinking best.

The next night, Raymond took his break in Foster's room. Foster let him smoke. The orderly opened the window, sat on the sill, and aimed the stream of his cigarette out into the night air. He showed Foster a picture, on his phone, of the taxi with the Sunshine logo on it. Foster took that as a signal.

"I drank more than was good for me, back in those days," he said. "One night, me and the sword swallower got liquored up and went out wandering in the desert."

"That was dumb."

"Yes it was. You ever hear of a Gila monster?"

"It's like King Kong, right?"

"Smaller. Poisonous as hell. The night I'm telling you about, the two of us drinking in the desert, one came out from under a rock and came at Henry. I squashed it with the heel of my boot just in time."

"Cowboy boot?"

"No, just a work boot. You can't do the kind of work we had to do if you're wearing cowboy boots. Here's what is hard to say. How lonesome the moon makes the desert look at night. Coyotes kicking up a fuss across a ridge and your heart is breaking, you can't get the thought of a particular woman out of your head no matter what."

He had to stop himself from asking Raymond to write it down. He wasn't going to beg. Instead he said, "Who you figure is going to call you for a taxi ride?"

"Not everybody's got a car, you know. Not everybody's car starts when they turn the key."

"That's a pretty good plan, I guess. It was Maria Dolores I fell in love with."

"The Tattooed Lady."

"It wasn't the tattoos. Them, I hated, no offense."

"None taken."

"It was her, the woman her own self. I would have liked it better if she didn't have any decorations."

"Long dark hair," said Raymond. "Mexican skin."

That was generous, on his part. But the spell was broken, replaced by a fit of coughing that went on long enough to worry both of them. When it passed, Foster fell hard asleep as if escaping a clear and present danger.

Over the next couple of days he tried but was unable to recover what he had summoned with Raymond: the night in the desert, the monumental nature of moonlight, the terrible lonesomeness of love, a stalking fear of... he did not exactly know of what. Raymond was willing to listen, but Foster kept the conversation on the taxi business, its unavoidable ups and downs, along with such practical tips as occurred to him to share.

The final time the orderly poked his head in the room, Foster said, "This upcoming taxi business of yours. It takes off, you'll quit this job."

"I reckon I will."

It was not fair to consider that decision, not yet taken and possibly not ever to be taken, as a betrayal. It had to do with Foster's sense of a task left undone, and time running out. Not that he had any hint or inkling he was going to die any time soon. The links between his thoughts were rubbery. None of what was going on in his mind was susceptible to reason.

There was a Mexico dream that night when Foster slept, but he distrusted it and discarded the details when he woke. It was no dream he was after; it was the real thing, which was gone from his life but somehow — this was the mystery—still there.

The following night, he asked Raymond to take him out to the contemplation garden.

"Can't. It's against the rules. Residents

supposed to stay indoors after sundown.”

“It’s a stupid rule.”

“All right.”

Which was how Foster wound up in the ideal location to bring Mexico back. A quiet spot with a fountain recirculating water in soft jets. A whippoorwill finding its spring voice. A Virginia May moon. It was nothing like a Mexican moon but did the trick.

“We were in a bind,” he said.

“You and your circus friends.”

“This one pueblo, El Agotado was the name of the place, things did not go right at all. The audience didn’t like the show. It started with the Colonel himself. Billy Brunson, a Texan by birth and a man with excessive regard for his own mustache, if you know what I mean. He owned the show and was also ringmaster. Our budget, it was no sense paying one separate. Spoke pretty decent Spanish, as best I could tell. Anyway the Colonel quickly developed a sour attitude toward the population of that town, and they felt it. He said some ugly things. Drink came into it, of course. Finally we got more or less run out of the place. With some damage to the truck that carried the elephant. All things considered, could have been a lot worse.”

He was coming to it now, or thought he might be. There was a leather pocket on the side of the wheelchair. He tapped it.

“It’s a pencil in here,” he said. “Pad of paper, too.”

“I’m not writing down your story, Foster.”

“It’s not a story, I tell you.” He stopped, then said, “What old men know...”

“They don’t know shit.”

Foster was suddenly exhausted. “You may be right.”

However, the next day Raymond apologized for his cruel remark. Foster was grateful he took the trouble but continued to feel

weak. Weakness brought on sadness. The sadness was specific. It had to do with how much there was of Mexico to bring back, and how poor a job he was making of it. Clock’s running, he heard in a voice that could have been his son’s but wasn’t, it only had his son’s peremptory tone.

Raymond continued to feel bad for having spoken in an ugly fashion to Foster the previous night, and on his break he stopped by to propose an escape.

“Where to?” said Foster.

“Our house. Momma’s there. She’ll cook for us.”

“It’s against the rules,” Foster pointed out, wanting to be sure he was serious.

“How many stupid rules is it in this place? But it’s got to be late. After midnight.”

“I might fall asleep. Just shake me by the arm.”

But Foster was wide awake when Raymond came in, helped him into the wheelchair, then out through a fire door on the back wall of the building and into his minivan. In the light on a pole put up for safety in the back lot, the Sunshine logo looked professional.

Raymond was sensitive about still living with his mother, who owned a rambler on the east edge of Briery with a big yard in which half a dozen tall white pines looked to Foster like soldiers on guard duty, nodding and drooping in the absence of enemies. Mrs. Sprouse met them at the door.

“Please come in,” she said, smiling the way Foster had seen people on television smile, answering the door to discover they had just won a large sum of money thanks somehow to a magazine subscription they had purchased.

Madeline Sprouse was commandingly large. She had a broad girth and long hair and a wide face perfect for the display of emotions. She was wearing a housedress with big pock-

ets and offered to make breakfast for Foster and her son.

"It's the first time I rode in a regular seat, no wheelchair, in a long time," Foster told her.

"Raymond's good at that sort of thing."

It happened that not a strip of bacon was to be found in the Sprouse household, so Madeline sent Raymond out for a late-night pound of center-cut. Foster sat at the kitchen table and watched her set out the makings for a substantial breakfast. Bread would be toast, eggs would be scrambled, juice would pour into glasses as coffee into mugs followed by cream in dollops.

"This taxi business of Raymond's," Foster, watching her work. "Think he can make a go of it?"

"If anybody can, it's my chick and child can. It's a certain something he's got, hard to explain. People like the boy, they always have. They cotton to him like they can't help themselves. In high school the girls went crazy for him. Telephone rang off the hook. The thing is, he never showed any interest back."

She stopped speaking just long enough to let that sink in. Foster took the information in stride.

"You like a little whiskey with your eggs?"

Madeline wanted to know.

"On occasion. Of course those occasions are few and far between, any more."

"Tonight we're celebrating Raymond's getting that livery license."

Foster expected that sitting in a real chair, eating heavy food, drinking whiskey from a tumbler would wipe him out. It didn't, though, all it did was intensify the urge to talk about Mexico. Madeline had nothing to get up early for, so the three of them sat at the table in the quiet spring night whose massive clement arms seemed to reach around them, providing shelter and a setting in which it was easy to talk.

"I wanted it to go on forever," he said.

"The circus," Raymond said.

"Mexico," Madeline said.

"Both," Foster told them. "Money was the problem. It was never enough. One of the problems, I guess I ought to say it was."

"What was the other one?" Raymond asked.

"Love," said Madeline because she had lived long enough not to doubt it.

"There's ranks in a circus, just like in the army. I was a roustabout. That's like a buck private with no opportunity of advancement. It might as well be a law saying a roustabout can't fall in love with one of the acts."

"Foster was sweet on the Tattooed Lady," Raymond explained to his mother. "Her name was Maria Dolores."

"I see."

"That was bad enough," Foster went on. "Worse was the fact that Billy Brunson, who owned the circus, thought he also ought to own Maria Dolores' affections. We were in a town on the edge of a high desert. Nights were bitter cold. The damn coyotes were howling in our dreams. All we had to eat was tortillas and beans and these little hot peppers the size of your baby finger that burned a hole in your gut."

He stopped, unable to go on. Not because he was afraid to finish but because he wanted it to be accurate, and being accurate about Mexico suddenly seemed impossible to him.

"You and the ringmaster," Madeline said, trying to help him along, "the two of you had it out."

It was no use. He slumped in his chair, limp with the strain of telling. A dull ache made itself felt in his head, just above the eyes. Almost without his knowledge Raymond was lifting him and carrying him back to the Sunshine minivan while Madeline made warm clucking noises of the sort intended to soothe,

and to a certain extent they did.

"I shouldn't have brought you out," Raymond said, driving back to Loblolly Village."

It felt late to Foster. It was late. Clock's running.

"I wanted you to write it down," he told Raymond.

"I didn't know how."

In the dark, Foster nodded. Despite himself he was losing hold of a grudge against the kid he would have preferred to hang onto.

When they reached the Village, Foster told Raymond to take him to the contemplation garden.

"You sure about that, Foster? You been up all night. I don't feel good about leaving you anyplace that ain't your bed."

But Foster held his ground, and the stubbornness of age, the weight of experience, swung the contest his way. The pearl gray light of early morning was already pouring itself into the east sky when Raymond parked his chair alongside the fountain.

"I'm sorry, Foster," he said.

It was an all-purpose apology and covered everything that needed coverage.

"Good luck," Foster told him.

"What, you plan on dying out here?"

"Not unless I'm obliged to."

"It's something in your voice makes me queasy."

"King of the World," Foster said. "You'll be it."

It was a blessing, and Raymond knew it was a blessing. That gave him the confidence he needed to do what Foster wanted him

to do, which was leave him alone. It was still dark enough he disappeared in an instant, and Foster listened to his feet on the gravel walk, going away.

A robin. That one's call he knew. And a cardinal. He knew that one, too. It was a busy sound, a feathery creature giving the world a piece of its small mind. The light of day was imminent, and water ran in the fountain jets.

Here it was before him. Billy Brunson with a murderous face and a rum bottle in his hand. Maria Dolores weeping in a white dress. Stones on the desert floor like dumb witnesses to human pain. The cold air of night, uncountable stars like so many exploding caps spilled bright across a black floor. A rattler's rattle in everybody's mind, but only in their minds. In Foster's mind, along with the rattle, the knowledge that Maria Dolores would never be his. Spitting out the bitter and not getting rid of the taste.

You got to let it go. Sitting in the garden, he now remembered that was what Madeline Sprouse whispered to him, saying goodbye under the drooping soldier pines in her front yard. Okay. All well-intended advice was welcome. Whatever it is, Foster Raines, you let it go.

It was a chain of events, and the combined effect of them was peace. What he knew, what he had seen and felt and now imperfectly remembered, what he could not hold in his hands, what hurt his heart and made the blood race in his veins, all of it was going away when he did. There was no writing it down, and nobody to leave it with. In that finality, that was where he allowed the truth of Mexico to lodge...

Mark Jacobs has published more than 140 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings*, published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy*, by Soho Press. His website can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.

100% Poem

Noelle Armstrong

WHO'S GOING TO SWOOP IN to save you now? Lipstick smearing everywhere, no more male gynecologists. I'm going to let people read my natal chart forever. Forever drag shows, braiding hair, singalongs. My parents are just playing along but that's good enough. *Asobase* is a Japanese word that acknowledges a person's refined status and their knowledge that life itself is an illusion. Brian Blanchfield taught me that. I've forgotten how my vagina works. Where's my Alien Welcome Packet? User Manual? Hello? Can I humiliate myself? Dig into me, excavate my nonsense, draw on my face when I'm asleep. I truly do not care. I'm trying to crack a code over here, making peace with my grandmother. She turned 95 and cannot move her toes, the bones that carried my father's bones.

I'm going to build a story for you and feed it to you bite by bite. I'm going to bite off a piece of you and assimilate it into my story. The oranges this year were shriveled and sour. A bitter pith you can poof from your mouth, spitting and blowing it away. As in, stay away

from me. Barbed, internal, owie. Can I be unlikable for a year? Can I sleep for a full five years and emerge refreshed? Spurting poems, gushing poems, shitting poems. I will be 100% poem. I can smell your cologne and your hot spammy sweat in yoga. I can smell all of you! I am running away in my deep daydream. No wedding invitations, no parties, no eye contact, no more necklaces. No more.

Don't mistake my urgency for caring. I can't put anything together. Implode for the monster, shed your cocoon into a giant, sleepy bloom. Shuffle and hump. A feeble combination, water white and oversoaked dairy mewl. Shine on, baby, and never buy a Kindle. I know how books work. I know when people are happy and when they are sad. And I can recognize faces. My brain is working just fine.

I am the shadow on the beach. Been dead, been grown up, been wise, been over it, been spread out thin and blanketed since I made best friends with a placenta. A great disappointment to part with such a heaving sack.

Noelle Armstrong is a poet from California. She writes about weirdo children, sticky friendships, queer persistence, mind warping, made-up rituals, evangelical madness, fun apocalypses, psychic fears, swanboats, ecosystem collapse, interspecies friendship, and comforts with a spike inside.



Reflecting the Obsidian Eye

Squire Broel

Squire Broel is a Walla Walla based artist whose practice includes sculpture, painting, drawing and performance. Broel received his BFA from Seattle Pacific University. He has exhibited nationally—most recently at the Sylvia Berlin Katzen Sculpture Garden at the American University Museum, Washington, D.C.—and internationally, including exhibitions in Canada, Vietnam, China and Indonesia. His work is in numerous collections including the Brooklyn Museum, Los Angeles County Museum, Whitman College and the City of Walla Walla.

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Glass Eye

Jan Ball

I overheard the British lady
from the other end of our dinner
table as she gestured to her left blue eye,
“This eye is glass.” I’d never noticed
when we stopped to chat in our condo
corridors.

Cancer? An accident? Birth defect?
You don’t ask the British personal
questions so soon after meeting them.

Last night, I tried to look
inconspicuously, not approaching
the intensity of Poe’s *Tell Tale
Heart* obsession by staring,
but just casually glancing down
the table to the other end.

I controlled both of my own
brown eyes to slide casually
from the arugula salad
on Edith’s plate to her thin left
shoulder and then her face.

I had an ophthalmologist who wore
only one contact lens, but I stopped
seeing her because of the long waits
with no explanation after the assistant
put eye drops in my eyes.

Edith stopped by this morning
to thank us for the dinner in that
warm British-accented voice
they have, but I forgot to look
at her glass eye.

303 of Jan Ball’s poems have been published in journals such as: *Atlanta Review*, *Calyx*, *Connecticut Review*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Phoebe*. Her two chapbooks: *accompanying spouse* and *Chapter of Faults* and her first full-length book: *I Wanted to Dance With My Father*, have been published by Finishing Line Press. Her third chapbook, *Day Job*, is due out in May, 2020.

The Week of Three Fingers

Scáth Beorh

I REJOICED when Lacy Huffington cut his right forefinger off in his bicycle chain.

I had a few good qualities as a kid. I loved old people. Okay, I had one good quality, and it was appreciated by a handful of the older folks while being underappreciated or outright despised by the others. That said, I had no character to speak of, and because of that I had no personality other than the one who demanded that everything in life go my way or not at all. A life of adversity has a tendency to change things for the better, to develop character and wit and personality, but right now I'm talking about what kind of kid I was and how I was elated when the neighborhood bully Lacy Huff-Puff, as we called him, permanently lost one of his most important fingers. I would have been happy enough if he had chopped off a pinky finger, but the fact that he stupidly stuck his forefinger between the bike chain and the chainwheel while his little brother Gerald was rotating the pedals to a maximum spin made fireworks go off all over my body, and I wasn't even there to see it! Had I been there, I would have been outwardly horrified but inwardly so gleeful that, even at my young nine years, I could have formed a new religion. I was always good at getting people together anyway, like

a director. I could, and still can, inspire others towards exciting ideas and ventures. I don't have too many opportunities to do such things these days, but there have been times when I could really rally the troupes.

Two days after Huff-Puff lost his pointer finger, Augusta Puissant, the neighborhood girl bully, chopped off her left thumb while she was showing off with her father's shockingly sharp chef knife. She was trying to cut celery like she saw him do countless times, or so she whined through millions of tears. Augusta was twelve and pretty and a tomboy, and she was mean to every neighborhood kid smaller than her or quieter than her or different than her. She especially liked to pick on me, of course, which made my enjoyment of her losing that thumb extra-special. And this time I was given the privilege of watching it happen! Oh, sure. I screamed and ran to tell my mother what had happened, but that was all just part of the play-acting. Just under my supposedly terrified skin and bulging eyes was a kid so happy that Augusta Piss-Ant was bleeding all over her lemon-yellow sweater that the only thing that could have made me happier was if she had bled to death in the process. But she didn't. She did turn a ghostly white, whatever shade

of white that actually is, and so I cut my losses and was glad that she had at least come close to death. I believed in an afterlife even then, but was uninformed about its particulars. Truth is, I had been taught that if a person died who had not gone through the ritual of the all-important Sinner's Prayer, this person, upon death, would simply go to live in Hell for eternity. Not very Biblical, I know, but most Baptists aren't.

Lacy Huff-Puff got stitches and came back home the same day he lost his finger. Augusta Piss-Ant, poor thing, lay in the hospital a whole week, and what made it even better was that it was during the Christmas holidays!

I've saved the best for last.

Tony Toronto was too old to be part of our neighborhood gang of twenty-some-odd kids ranging between the ages of six and twelve. When I was nine, Tony was already fourteen. When he did come outside, which was rare, he even bullied Lacy—a feat thought nearly impossible to accomplish. And one time—no, I think it was twice—Tony slapped Augusta across her freckled face so hard that her nose made a cracking sound. Why? Because she had screamed at him to shut his stupid pie-hole and go home. I was there both times. Thrilling days those were! Anyway, I hated 'Tony Tomato' more than I hated anybody on Earth. That kid haunted my days, my nights, and even my dreams! He'd show up at my dream-school and dream-stalk me, dream-sneer at me, dream-threaten me, dream-taunt me. It all began when I was seven and he was twelve. He started picking on me and pushing me around, I told him I was going to tie his ears behind his head and kick his ass out of my yard, and that was the beginning of it all. Well, that and the time I told him I thought his mother was the ugliest woman I had ever seen in my life. No, I should have never said that,

but I was somewhat outspoken as a child.

Tony Tomato lost his right middle finger. You can probably imagine what he was doing with that middle finger when he lost it, but I bet you can't imagine how he lost it, so I'll tell you.

My father had a chicken coup filled with speckled roosters and hens. He had bought them as chicks a few months before, and by the time Christmastime had rolled around they had grown up to a pretty good size. Well, one day the Blowhard's dog Cougar got loose and navigated himself across six backyards straight toward my father's chicken house. While the dog dined on this hen and that rooster, my father thought it might be a great time to try out his newly acquired WWII vintage .30-06 rifle. I found myself at once in awe, terrified, and, yes, electrified to no end that Cougar—or anything having to do with the weirdo Blowhard family—was going to die a bloody and infamous death. And I would get to watch!

Long brass rocket-like bullet in chamber, my father the sharpshooter stood like the soldier he had once been, his feet set apart and planted firmly, his eye cold and calculating, his finger hovering around the trigger of that death machine like a bee around a springtime flower.

Deep breath, hold, hold—

Crack!

And down went Tony Tomato, who had been trying to retrieve Cougar, goodhearted boy that he was, from a sure and instant death.

'Daddy! You killed Tony!'

My father, the strong and silent type, shouldered his rifle and strode out to the remainder of his chickens—I think there may have been one still standing, but barely—took lie of the situation, then stepped over to the Toronto boy and yanked his blubbering self up off his knees. 'Damned mutt,' was all my father said.

‘Maybe you’ll get him next time, Daddy. Spilt him right down the middle!’

Tony Tomato was as white as a sheet, and I knew what color that was. Colorless. Except, of course, for his shirt and pants and hi-top tennis shoes all painted a beautiful bright tomatoey red.

My father cleared his throat. ‘Maybe next time, Tony, you’ll know not to be disrespectful to your elders.’

‘Yeah—yessir,’ was all the bleeding fingerless buffoon could say, but unexpectedly, this

horrific comedy added yet a new dimension to my nightmares concerning that bully of all bullies, and I was well into my twenties before visions of Tony Toronto and his fingerless hand stopped waking me up in freezing sweats. But, if you want to psychoanalyze me, this story is proof positive that I was permanently scarred by a childhood that may have only given me one thing—a backbone I wasn’t born with. Or two things, but I’ll let you be the judge as to whether I have a sense of humor or not—something else I was born without.

Scáth Beorh is a writer of the weird and uncanny. His books include, but are not limited to, *Pinprick: Story of a Child Cannibal*, *Hollywood & Vine*, *Cool As Fuck*, *Hollow Boy*, *Dreams of Flying*, *A Thieving Primer*, *Haunted By Benevolence*, *In The Valley*, and *Little Whores*. He also helms the publishing endeavor Twelve House. More can be found via twelvehousebooks.wordpress.com

Lymantria dispar

Janna Z. Kupper

The fingerling roots of an oak clasp
caterpillars in fragile cocoons,
deliquescing, altering into a body
better suited for this world.
Do they know?
Do they know
that when they split their husks,
squirm out of shallow earth,
that the sun they dreamt of
will not be present for their rebirth?

Janna Kupper is a 27-year-old writer from New Hampshire. An avid reader since childhood, she pursued a degree in English from Plymouth State University. Janna finds that matters of the heart and mind are a constant muse to her writing. She's been published in a few literary magazines; including Plymouth's own *Centripetal*.



Moon Walk (Illuminated)

Squire Broel

Ash & Amber

Larry Deery

"TAKE ME TO THE SEA!" Kate shouted, bolting up from the bed, her arms outstretched. "Take me to the sea."

Mary jumped from the chair, grabbed Kate's arms and pushed her down beneath the bed clothes again.

"Tomorrow, Kate, tomorrow," Mary said softly.

"Mary, is that you?"

"It is Kate. It is."

Mary placed her hand on Kate's forehead, brushing aside some loose hair. And that was it. Mary felt a last breath run up the inside of her arm. She looked at Kate, waited a second then kissed her on the lips.

Mary sat by the bed looking out the window watching the day recede to dark. When she got up she pulled the curtain and headed across the fields to her own house.

"What took you so long? I've been waiting here for me dinner this past hour. Well?" her husband, Sean asked, when she entered the kitchen.

"She's gone."

"Oh, God bless her. How was she at the end?"

"Quiet. Peaceful."

"Good. Good. Now, any chance of some dinner. The kids are starving."

"I have to go back."

"She'll be alright for another while. She's not going anywhere."

"There's frozen pizza in the fridge. Give me a few minutes."

In the darkness after dinner, Mary retraced her steps across the fields. Nothing was ever right about someone dying she thought. She remembered her father being the first to go. Then her mother. There was a brother after that. She vaguely remembered grandparents suffering out last days in the cottage too. Kate would be the last. Returning from America months earlier, her moving back had given the cottage new energy. But it would be no more. The place was too small. Nobody in the country wanted to live like that anymore.

Mary hesitated at the cottage door. She lit up and looked out into the dark. She thought she heard a scream come from across the bog somewhere. When she finished smoking, she crossed the fields back home again.

"What's that?" Sean asked Mary who was holding a long object between two fingers. He took a step closer to get a better look.

"Oh Jesus. Where'd ye get that thing?"

Mary nodded in the direction of the cottage.

"That's disgusting. Get it out of sight before the kids see it." Mary dropped the vibrator into the plastic bag in her other hand and placed it on the top shelf of one of the kitchen cabinets.

"What did she be getting up to over there?" Sean said.

"She's human like the rest of us."

"That's more of an animal thing than anything else I'd say. And to bring it into this house of all places."

"I thought you might get a laugh out of it."

"A laugh? No wonder she couldn't get a man."

"She didn't want one."

"I'm not surprized! Did you call the undertaker?"

"I'll do it tomorrow. No sense in waking poor Teddy up at this time of night."

"She'll be just as dead in the morning as she is now I suppose. Come on up to bed with ye."

"Go on. I'll be up in a minute." Mary went over to the kitchen sink and began sorting the dirty dishes.

"Kate's not to be buried," Mary said.

"Why in God's name not?" Sean replied.

"I don't know! That's what I've been told."

"By who?"

"Cousin Michelin. She's the executor and all that."

"But she'll have to be buried. There's a hole already being dug for her down the way."

"Don't I know that. No burial. Those were her final wishes."

"For Jaysus sake! So what do we do then?"

"I don't know. I suppose she'll go to the church and instead of being buried she'll be . . . I just don't know, Sean."

"She always had to be awkward. When she was alive and now that she's . . ."

"This is what she wanted. She's not trying to be awkward at all."

"Well, it's going to be awkward for us. I don't know of anyone that's not been buried down in that graveyard. No one. Ever!"

"Well, she'll be the first then."

"We'll see. Look, there's Teddy now with the hearse."

Sean left the room to let Mary deal with the undertaker.

"Here's the key, Teddy. Let yourself in. You've been over at the cottage yourself before, haven't you?"

"I have indeed, Missus Lavelle. I remember your father well. And your mother too. Lovely people."

"They were."

"Have you contacted Father O'Brien yet, by the way?" Teddy remembered, as he turned to leave.

"Well . . ." Mary looked around before lowering her voice.

"There's not going to be a funeral as such. I'm not sure how it's going to work."

"No funeral! I'm not sure what you mean, Missus Lavelle. How . . ."

"I don't know either. I'll need to think about it. Let me . . ."

"Sean! Sean!" Teddy shouted when Sean returned. "No funeral Sean?" What's to be done?" he asked.

"What's wrong now?"

"It was Kate's final wishes, that's all, Sean," Mary said.

"No funeral! Sure that's impossible. She's dead, isn't she?"

"She is," Mary said.

"Well then. There'll be a funeral. Go on over Teddy and do what you have to do. We'll contact Father O'Brien ourselves and sure you can talk to him yourself then."

"Right!" Teddy agreed and left.

"What nonsense was that woman thinking?"

"You know she never liked the church."

"Sure who does. But that's not the point. She's dead. She has to be given a proper send off. Otherwise we might as well throw her into a bog hole."

"No one's suggesting that at all. Cousin Michelin has all the details. I'll talk to her later."

"There'll be no talking to anyone. The woman will be buried and that's it."

Mary leaned on the kitchen sink to look out the window. She followed the hearse as it made its way along the lane. Teddy and his assistant entered the cottage. She waited until they came out with the coffin. As they drove off she turned to say something to Sean but he'd already left the room.

"I made some copies of the will here if you want one, Mary," Michelin said, putting her cup of tea down to search through her bag for a copy.

"Sure she had nothing," Sean replied.

"Well, she had something, Sean. But she wasn't a rich woman by any means."

"She didn't make her millions in America then?" he joked.

"I'm afraid not. Kate never had much interest in money as far as I remember. Isn't that right, Mary?"

"That's right Michelin. She was harmless. A lost soul you could say."

"Exactly. Anyway, I only came over to let you know about . . ."

"No funeral, is that right?"

"That's right, Sean. No funeral whatsoever. It's here, in the will." Michelin went searching through her bag a second time for a copy.

"Sure that's not possible, is it? I mean, how can it be done?"

"Well, it is possible, Sean. Very possible. She just won't be going to the church. Simple as that."

"She'll be going to the church. Sure where else would she go?" Sean asked.

"Well, this is what she wanted." Michelin looked at Sean and then over at Mary.

"She didn't like the church so I don't see any reason why she should be sent to one," Mary replied.

"No, no, no. The whole townland knows she's dead. They'll be expecting to see her at mass. What would we say to them? They'll be asking. For Christ sake, they'll all be asking."

"Well . . ." Michelin looked back at Mary. "Have a talk among yourselves about it and see what can be worked out." Michelin handed Mary back the key to the cottage. She picked up a large envelope from between her feet and put it on the kitchen table.

"I found these in the cottage earlier. It's most of the important stuff. You might need these documents for later on, to prove who she was and all that."

Sean reached over, grabbed the envelope and emptied the contents onto the table between them.

"An Irish passport wasn't good enough for her then?" he said, lifting up Kate's American passport and flipping through it indiscriminately.

"She had no choice in that. She worked for the government over there. It just made life easier for her," Mary said.

"The cottage is yours now, Mary. And there's a sizeable amount of money in her bank account as well. She left it all to you."

"That'll be nice," Sean said, rubbing his hands together. "The money will come in handy. The car needs . . . Is there much?"

"Well, I'll leave that to Mary, Sean. Kate did specify that Mary was the sole recipient, no one else. It's here in the will. Let me see if I can find the bloody thing." Michelin began rooting in her bag again.

"What!" Sean said.

"Well, Sean. I'm just repeating what it says here." She placed a copy of the will on the table and pushed it toward the husband and wife. "Sure, you can both work it out between

yourselves later on. That's fair, isn't it? Isn't it Mary?" Sean picked up the will.

"You've been very kind for doing all this, Michelin. I just couldn't have faced into it right now," Mary said.

"No problem, Mary. And thanks for the tea and cake. Let me know about your plans for Kate's . . . You know! Anyway, I'll be off."

"Goodbye Michelin," Sean shouted out the door after her.

"You know, that money would be a huge advantage for us, especially at this time of year," Sean said, handing her the will. "And the cottage."

"It needs a lot of work. Rewiring and all that."

"No, no, no. The Yanks love that sort of thing. There's always a load of them fishing on the lake every year. I bet they'd love to stay at a place like that. Like The Quiet Man."

"I know, Sean, I know. We'll see. We'll see."

"Well now, there's a lot to be seeing about, isn't there? There's a funeral. There's a . . ."

"We have to see about the funeral I suppose."

"It would be as handy to take her down to the church as it would for you to be bothered about all that other stuff she wanted. She was always that little bit awkward. Remember your father going to all that trouble getting planning permission for a house for her on the field along the road there? And what did she do? She took off for America! Then she comes back and only wants to be in the ould cottage. She must have froze to death in it these past couple of months, what with the wind off the lake and all."

"She was happy for the time she was there. You never know what goes on inside people's minds."

"Well, whatever did go on inside that head

of hers, I can tell you it was all about making things awkward for other people."

"Hello, Mary? It's Sergeant Langan over in Ballinrobe."

"Oh hello? Tom? How's things?"

"Grand, grand, Mary. Condolences on the loss of Kate. She was a lovely woman."

"Thanks, Tom, thanks. How is Eilish these days? We haven't seen her down at the Macra this last while."

"No, you wouldn't have. The mother's sick and she's all her time up at the house. Sure you know yourself."

"Oh I know. What can I do for you? I'm assuming this is not a social call."

"No, it isn't. It's just that a fellah arrived into the station earlier looking for you."

"For me? Who could that be? Everyone knows where I live."

"No, well this man doesn't. He's an American. Wait a sec there, Mary." Mary heard a muffling of the mouthpiece and Sergeant Langan talking to someone. "You're an American, amn't I right?"

"What was that, Tom?"

"No, nothing Mary. Only making sure of my facts. He says he's kind of an American and wants to go out to the house to see you. What do you want me to tell the man?"

"Does he look dangerous?"

"Ah no, Mary. There's only the one of him here so there's no fear of an imminent invasion at this stage." Mary heard Sergeant Langan say something to someone in the station and then laugh. "Anyway, all joking aside, I await instructions from you, Mary."

"Do you know how he knows me?"

"I do. He says he's a friend of Kate's."

"Send him across then." Mary hung up the phone.

"What was all that about?" Sean asked.

"There's an American friend of Kate's visiting."

"For fuck sake. We'll be landed with a plane load of them now. How much did Michelin say was in that bank account?"

"He's not here for the money. I'm sure he's not here for the money. Americans aren't like that at all."

"They're what!!! Money is their religion."

Twenty minutes later the doorbell rang.

"Mary? Am I right? It is Mary. I recognize you from . . ."

"Come in. There's a terrible wind out there."

"I'm Terry. Terry Kilcoyne. Sergeant Langan called earlier?"

"You've come about Kate, I presume," Mary said.

"I have indeed. I got here as quickly as I could. I hadn't heard from her in a couple of days and I was worried. So, I decided to come right over and see what was going on for myself."

"Well, Kate passed away yesterday I'm afraid to say."

"No!" Terry said, covering his eyes with his right hand and turning his head away. Sean helped him into a chair at the kitchen table. He sat there for a minute in silence. Sean nodded toward a chair. Mary sat down while Sean went over to the sink.

"You were . . . were you friends?" Mary asked.

"We were. Long-time friends. I've known her since she came to this country. The US, I mean."

"Is that right?" Sean asked, as he filled the kettle with water.

"You'll have a cup of tea at least," Mary asked, watching Sean plug the kettle in.

Terry and Mary talked while Sean got the tea ready. Then suddenly Terry was up on his

feet, his chair falling backwards onto the floor. The teapot slipped from Sean's hand onto the countertop.

"A funeral mass? Surely that's not possible." Mary looked over at Sean.

"Wait, wait a minute now," Sean said, righting the teapot.

"There's not going to be a memorial service for Kate?" Terry shouted.

"We do things a little different over here I'm afraid. There'll be no memorial anything in this house!"

"Why not?" Terry demanded.

"Well, the grave's been dug for starters. And there's a whole townland of people waiting for the mass times to be posted. Life goes on here. It's not like America where . . ."

"Who cares about those people." Terry turned to Mary. "These are your sister's final wishes, Mary. Aren't you going to respect them at least?"

"Hold on a second there," Sean answered for his wife. "There'll be no Yank telling me what to do in my house."

"I'm no Yank, as you put it. I am Irish!"

"You're Irish!" Sean laughed, tipping the teapot slightly into the sink to see if it had drawn.

"What is so funny about that?"

"Well, if you're Irish then what in God's name am I? Go on, tell me that."

"I'm not going to sit here and start an argument while . . ." Terry turned to Mary. "Would it be possible to see Kate perhaps, one last time?"

"No problem. I'll just get onto Teddy and arrange it for you."

"Thank you. And I won't have tea after all, thank you anyway."

Sean dropped the teapot heavily onto the countertop, pushing it away from him with the palm of his hand. Mary saw Terry out.

"Fucking Americans!"

"Leave him be. He's only trying to help."

"You'll know all about his help when he drains that bank account of your sister's."

"He's not even remotely interested in her money."

"Look!" Sean shouted, pointing to the teapot. "I wasted three good teabags on that fucker."

"No, no, no, Mary. This can't be happening!" Terry shouted. Mary took a step back from him, her black boots sinking into the heaped wet clay. Father O' Brien coughed. Mary tried to lift her feet out of the mud, smiling at the impatient parish priest. He nodded at her then stepped forward to the head of Kate's coffin and began the final prayers.

"I'll not have this," Terry insisted. He grabbed Mary's arm.

"This woman's sister will be buried here today. There's no foreigner telling me what to do," Sean shouted.

"We've come this far, we might as well go all the way with it," Mary said, standing between the two men.

"No! I'm not letting this happen. This is not going to happen here today." Terry trudged through the heap of upturned soil and jumped into the empty grave.

"Oh, for God's sake," shouted Sean. "That's all we need. One more American drama queen!"

"Come up, Terry. Come up!" Mary whispered.

"No! Not until you end this pitiful disregard for a woman's dying wishes."

Mary looked behind her at her husband then turned to look at Father O' Brien. She attempted to free herself once more from the muddied clay, slipping and almost falling in on top of Terry.

"Get up and help me talk to the priest then," Mary said to him.

"I've never seen the like of it before in my life," Sean said, scratching his head, watching the crowd of mass goers being shunted aside to allow the hearse and coffin make its way out the cemetery gates. "Never!"

"Cremation was her last and final wish. She told me this herself," Terry said.

"You'll pay for it yourself then," Sean said, walking away.

"Tell me again why we're driving to Dublin," Terry asked.

"There's no crematorium in the West," Mary answered, her eyes fixed on the hearse just ahead of them.

"So we have to go to Dublin to fulfil Kate's wishes? She'd have loved that."

Mary glanced at Terry. He was smiling.

"Why? Tell me why she'd have loved it?"

"Simple. She hated Dublin. Hated having to fly into it every time she came home."

"Why didn't she fly into Shannon then? It was handier for me."

"She knew you loved the day out in Dublin shopping and staying the night there."

"Oh." Mary accelerated, overtaking the hearse then pulled in in front of it. She looked in the rear-view mirror, changing lanes once more before allowing the hearse to overtake her.

"Before I forget, I want to thank you for paying for the cremation and all the other stuff as well," Mary said.

"It's nothing. It's what Kate wanted. Worth every cent in my mind. Kate always knew her own mind. She didn't think she did. She told me that people thought she was off with the fairies. I told her not to care what other people thought of her. But that's the way it is here."

"Here? How'd you mean?"

"We Irish are people pleasers. We hate to think others might think badly of us. It's what makes us so likable but at the same time so miserable."

"We Irish? You consider yourself Irish?"

"I am Irish. Born in County Mayo. I met Kate at some Mayo dance in New York not long after she arrived in the States."

"Mayo?"

"Yes, Mayo! My parents were from Achill. Island people they called themselves. But only when they were among Americans. Back home they came from Mayo. I left when I was twelve."

"You don't sound Irish."

"How do I sound?"

"American. You say what you want to say. You do what you want to do. You seem to know your own mind. Sorry if I'm being too straight with you."

"That's ok. I can take it. The Irish part dwells within. It makes me more belligerent and less tolerant of what I see here in Ireland. I haven't been back since my parents died. I'm shocked at how little has changed. Yes, people have more money but they're still the same people."

"How do you mean?"

"Kate used to tell me about her visits to Ireland. It used to make me so angry when she'd talk about being home again and how the people hadn't changed at all really from when she was younger. But she was OK with it so I had to keep my mouth shut. As I said, she knew her own mind and when she got sick she knew she wanted to go home."

"She knew she was sick?"

"Sure! It was the only reason she came home. You didn't know! We both thought she'd have more time. I was getting ready to be with her here. She was happy working in DC. Had

a great job, great social life. Great apartment in Alexandria. Our apartment actually."

"You lived together?"

"Yes, of course. We phoned each other every day right up until a couple of days ago. And when she stopped answering I knew something was wrong. But I didn't think . . . She didn't tell you?"

"No, nothing. We didn't even know she was dying. It just seemed to come upon her all of a sudden."

"Yeah, well, she knew she didn't have a lot of time. Like I said, she knew her own mind and this was the way she wanted it played out."

They were the only two people in the crematorium. As the coffin disappeared in through the curtain a man came out to let them know that the service was now finished. Terry thanked him.

"Did Kate say what she wanted done with her ashes?"

"She came here to die. I think this is where she wants to be."

Terry led Mary out into the Dublin rain. He took her hand and shook it.

"I'm not going back with you. I'm sorry, Mary. I just can't."

"Sure why not? You can stay with us if there's a problem with the B&B." Terry smiled.

"That's not the problem. You know, Kate always tried to explain to me why she had to leave. I never understood. I do now."

"What? Explain to me why she left. I want to know."

"I can't."

"You won't."

"I can't."

Terry leaned over and hugged Mary then walked out the gates of the cemetery.

Mary placed the box on top of the fridge and

put the kettle on. Halfway through her mug of tea she went to the fridge, took the urn from the box and put it on the table beside her. After her second biscuit she took the urn and placed it on the mantelpiece.

Sean came in from work.

"For fuck sake Mary. You can't leave that thing there. It's like having a ghost in the house."

"That's my sister."

"It's a pile of ashes. You should have put her in the ground. There could be anyone in that tin for all you know." Mary grabbed the urn from the mantelpiece and walked out of the room.

She drove to the cemetery. The grave had been filled in already. She stood on the raised plot, the urn held tightly to her chest and looked West over the lake and toward the mountains. She kicked a lump of heaped earth and returned to the car.

Mary was up early the next morning. Sean met

her at the front door.

"Where are you going? Sure it's still dark outside."

"I'm going to Westport."

"What's in Westport at this time of the day?"

"I'm going to scatter Kate's ashes in the sea there at the pier in Lecanvey."

"Aw Jaysus now. You've been watching too many films, or "moovies" as those feckers call them. The lake is as good a place as any if you're looking for somewhere to throw her."

"It's not funny, Sean. This shouldn't be so hard."

"I'm being serious. Anyway, I need the car."

"For what?"

"The kids. I need to take the kids to mass. It's Sunday, remember?"

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Do it some other time or just take her down to the lake and dump her there. She won't know the difference. Honestly Mary, I need the car. For the kids. For mass."

Until recently, Larry Deery was living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Intending to drive around the US, Deery got stuck in Missoula, Montana with a blown head gasket, or something... He writes short stories and cleans workplaces when he has a job.

Color of Words

Barry Green

My friend uses paints to speak about the words
That he cannot find
Colors lost trying to explain themselves
Trying to tell the story of why he lost his family
Painting faces and moods
Red and black arguments
Blue and yellow absences.

Children in mixed pallets looking for a door
A way to be away
Reading the pictures painted with slashing strokes
Long subtle greens fading to black
Looking for a key to open a way away
To lock the world behind them
To find silence on a canvas
Without a frame.

Barry Green was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY. After working in the southwest US and upstate New York, he moved to Virginia in 1974 and currently lives in the town of Ashland. He had several poems published in small journals in the 1970s, then stopped writing for the next 40 years. He is now retired and has once again picked up pen and paper.

Basic

Robert Sachs

"WE'RE TRAINED TO FIGHT," Kessler had complained to his sergeant after thirteen weeks stuck at Fort Leonard Wood. "Why aren't we fighting? Why are we stuck here?" At that time, he had been afraid the war would be over before they got to Europe.

Now he is on patrol outside the Manzanar Relocation camp in the Mojave Desert of California, assigned here by the War Relocation Authority. It used to be called something else, now it's a Japanese American internment camp about as far from Europe as he can get. Kessler's job is to walk perimeter just in case one of these poor bastards tries to escape.

"Under no circumstances are you to discharge your weapon," his sergeant had said. "Unless ordered to do so."

"What about shooting at coyotes, Sarge? Can we at least do that?"

"If and when I tell you to shoot at coyotes, Kessler, you do it. Until then, your safety's on and your finger's off the trigger."

Several of the men groaned. "This shit is worse than basic," one said.

To the consternation of his parents, Kessler had enlisted on his eighteenth birthday. "Ivan," his mother said, "you're too young. Go first to college."

War had been declared more than a year before and Kessler was anxious to serve his

country. "We've been attacked, Mom. Isn't this what men do?"

But there was more to it than that. He felt suffocated beneath the expectations friends and family heaped upon him. He was more than a good student in high school, he was first in his class and valedictorian. His love of science and biology led everyone to assume he would go on to medical school and become a doctor. Kessler too assumed this would be the natural progression of his life. Yet, he was mindful of the trap of leading life to the expectations of others. Was he wrong in wanting more certainty? The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor provided an excuse to wiggle free from the expectations.

Kessler had found basic difficult, but he had been a track star in high school and remained in good shape. He more than held his own. The biggest adjustment was living in the barracks with a group of small-town boys wary of his Chicago roots. They should only know, he thought back then. Sure, he could take the El downtown—and on occasion he and his friends did that—or in the summer bus to the beach, but basically he was a captive of his small neighborhood every bit as much as they were captives of their small towns. Yet, when he told them this, it came off as condescension.

At least at Leonard Wood—unlike Manzanar—there was a town close by for R and R. That's

where he'd met Dorothy. Kessler remembered being gripped by equal measures of excitement and dread on the cold February evening he stood outside the Waynesville whorehouse clenching his teeth to keep them from chattering. This was to be his first time. Part of him wanted to run back to the base. He worried he'd be too nervous to perform, that he was too skinny to be taken seriously, that it was too small. But he promised himself he wouldn't go off to war a virgin and this whorehouse—really just a string of small rooms over a downtown beer joint popular with the soldiers—provided his only realistic opportunity to make good on that promise.

He rarely socialized with the other soldiers, but on this night the prospect of getting laid convinced him to go along with them into town. After some drinks at the bar, they took him upstairs. "You want to see action, Kessler baby?" one of them said, "We'll show you action."

Her name was Dorothy.

Sitting next to Dorothy on the bed, Kessler thought she couldn't be much older than he. His first surprise was neither her youth nor her beauty—though she was certainly beautiful—but her innocence. The look of innocence. It was as if this were her first time. Her pale blue eyes were wide and unblinking. Her full lips, parted.

"You look nice," she had said, lowering those eyes and putting her hand on Kessler's knee.

"Thanks," he said, almost choking on the word.

"You don't need to be nervous with me. Is this your first time?"

"First time in a bordello," he replied. It was the truth, if not the whole truth. He hadn't planned on using that word: bordello; he hadn't planned anything. But the sound of it seemed more appropriate—less accusatory—

in this small room with Dorothy than "whorehouse" or "cathouse."

"How long..." he began.

"Have I been doing this? About a year, year and a half. Pays the rent. And don't start with the 'nice girl' routine." She laughed.

"No, I wasn't. Just making conversation, I suppose."

"It's a job. Just like you've got a job, this is mine. What's your name, soldier?" She said it kindly, and it was clear to Kessler that she'd said it many times before.

"Ivan," he said.

"The Terrible?"

"Yep, that's me." He smiled.

"Well Ivan, let's get you comfortable."

There was a sweetness about Dorothy that soothed Kessler's nerves. She made it easy for him to forget she was a professional. He imagined meeting her at a school dance, asking if he can take her home. She agrees, kissing him goodnight and Kessler floats home. They begin to date, they grow close and on his last night in town before going off to college, she gives herself to him. This is what he imagined while Dorothy slipped off her silk-like kimono, and guided him through the preliminaries and then the main event in a way that made him feel in control and more than adequate to the task.

After that, Kessler went back to the whorehouse whenever he could, asking each time for Dorothy.

"Why just me?" she asked after the third time. "Don't you want to try some of the other girls?"

"Not interested in the others," he said.

"I'm not the prettiest, not as full figured as some. And a couple of them have special talents that might interest you." She smiled then and Kessler smiled back, but he didn't really understand what Dorothy meant.

"I like you," he said.

"And I like you."

They talked about growing up: Kessler in Chicago, Dorothy in Waynesville. The big city was impersonal; the small town was suffocating. Her experiences were foreign to him; his were exotic to her.

"Aren't you afraid of getting killed?" she asked him one evening.

"Yeah. I think everyone harbors that fear. But we're fighting for something important, right?"

"I guess so," she said hesitantly. Then, as if remembering her role, she added, "Sure we are. I wouldn't want the Nazis coming over here and telling us how to live. But you're so young. It just seems a shame..." Dorothy began to cry, and Kessler pulled her close.

Mrs. Pilgrim, who ran the house, knocked on the door. "Everything alright, Dorothy?" It was her way of moving things along. There were customers waiting and Kessler had been taking too much of Dorothy's time.

"Give us a minute," Dorothy yelled, wiping her eyes. She suggested they see each other outside the whorehouse. "I'm off Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Here's my number," she whispered while Kessler dressed.

Kessler had to wait until Wednesday to get a pass. Dorothy rented a room in the Smithson's bungalow near the edge of town. Mr. and Mrs. Smithson met him at the door. Kessler calculated they were both in their seventies. "Dorothy's told us all about you," Mrs. Smithson said. "We're happy to meet you and hope you'll be around for a while."

Kessler wondered if they knew what Dorothy did for a living. If so, he thought, they must be the most open-minded people in the county.

"Actually, I'm hoping my unit gets shipped out sooner rather than later." And then he

added, "I'll miss seeing Dorothy though. But I'll be back."

"I heard that," Dorothy said reaching the door, showing a soft, luminous smile. She took Kessler's arm. "Let's go."

They decided to see Woman of the Year at the movie house. Later, on the walk home, she asked, "Are there really women like that? Tess seems incredibly strong and independent."

"It's a movie," Kessler said.

"But still, Katherine Hepburn really is this dynamo, right? And the thing the

Tracey character said about the importance of sports during wartime. Do you agree?"

"Hell yes. I thought Hepburn was way off base on that one. Soldiers need something to take their minds off the fighting. Everyone else too."

"Yeah, I guess so," she said. "Whatever we can do at home to keep spirits up."

Kessler put his arm around Dorothy's shoulder as they walked, and she put her arm around his waist. At the door of the Smithson house, Dorothy gave Kessler a chaste kiss. "Thanks, Ivan. Don't be a stranger."

"Can't I come in?"

"Don't be silly. The Smithsons would have a fit."

"But..."

She put her finger on his lips. "All in good time."

On the base, Kessler overheard other soldiers talking about Dorothy. He wondered if they were doing it to make him angry or if she was just one of the favorites. He tried to ignore the talk, but it made him physically ill. Now that they were dating—he liked to apply that word to their relationship—now that he thought of her as someone he could love, he couldn't bring himself to see her at the whorehouse. She told him she felt the same way. "It would be weird," she said.

And yet she refused to go all the way with him anywhere else. She rejected his idea of a hotel room, even one in a different town. One evening, he mentioned to Dorothy what he'd been hearing about her on the base.

"With them it's just a job. With you it's different."

"Different how?"

"You know. Different."

"Tell me."

"I think I'm in love with you," she said in a whisper.

"That was going to be my line," he said, surprising himself. "But do you need to continue working at the bordello? It's driving me crazy."

"I'm salting away a lot of money, Ivan. Money we can use later. Can married men get deferments?"

"It's too late for that. And it won't be long before I ship out."

"I'll quit the day you get back," she promised.

Kessler walked back to the center of town and found a cab to take him to the base.

By July, there are almost ten thousand Japanese Americans housed at Manzanar. Kessler, armed with his rifle, walks a portion of the perimeter of the camp during the evening hours. Now, he has neither war nor Dorothy. When he complains, his sergeant says: "There are a million GIs in foxholes that'd switch places with you in a heartbeat. Quit your whining."

Kessler has plenty of time to think while on patrol. Alone under a bright desert moon, he aches to see Dorothy again, but at the same time he wonders if it really is love. She was his first time; she was comforting and sweet. He needed tenderness at the moment, and she provided it. It's understandable he'd have strong feelings for her. But Kessler is used to

weighing alternatives and he is at least open to the notion that the attraction, as real as it may have seemed in Waynesville, could have been more hormonal than love. Could he expect her to adjust to life in Chicago? He wonders if she's even thought of that. Their conversations hadn't gotten to the practical details of a life after the war. He knows he couldn't live in Waynesville. And what would his parents and his friends think of him bringing home a southern girl with no more than a high school education?

It's been three months since he's slept with her at the whorehouse. He pictures her slipping off her kimono, wrapping her legs around his waist and showing him—as she put it—how to get a girl's juices flowing; it still arouses Kessler. He walks to a desolate area, lies down in the underbrush a few yards from the fence, takes off his holster, loosens his belt and masturbates. He tells himself the relief he feels is more than sexual, that he's not ready to place Dorothy in a category of experiences with a past but with no future. And then he begins to worry that he's walking away from responsibility. Is it becoming a pattern? If he ever gets back to Leonard Wood, should he give this thing—whatever it is—with Dorothy an opportunity to grow? He'll call her the next time he gets leave.

One night while making his rounds, Kessler sees an attractive young woman digging up a small piece of earth near the chain-linked fence topped with rolls of barbed wire. He bends down on his side of the fence.

"What are you planting, miss?" he asks.

The woman looks up. "Shiso," she says. "I have permission."

"Of course," he says. "I just wondered."

"It's an herb. We add it to salads here. At

home, we'd snack on the toasted seeds."

"Maybe you'll let me try it," Kessler says.

"My hope is that neither of us will be here long enough to taste the leaves of this plant."

"Amen to that," he says. "And yet you're planting."

She smiles warily and as she digs, they begin a relaxed conversation.

"I thought I saw you the other night. In the bushes?"

"No," he says, "Couldn't have been me. Been in the field hospital for a couple of days with an intestinal bug."

She tells Kessler she was a typist at a law firm in San Francisco. "The firm tried to hold onto to me, but they couldn't. Roosevelt's executive order made few exceptions."

"Must be rough," he says. He tells her how depressed he is because it doesn't look as if he'll see any fighting.

"You're lucky," she says. "It's horrible in here. We're treated like dirt. The food is awful, much of it spoiled. People are getting sick."

"It's wartime..." Kessler begins.

"That's no excuse. We're American citizens, most of us."

Kessler nods his head. "It's strange; that's for sure."

"It's illegal. And it's a tragedy." She stands and looks directly at Kessler, waiting, he supposes, for his agreement. "I must go," she says at last. "Mother will start to worry."

He watches as she glides away in her sandals, her long black hair catching the moon's luster. He doesn't see her for two days and then on the third day she's again at the fence.

"It's good to have someone young to talk to," Eleanor Mitsuyama says. After that, walking with her at night, he on one side of the fence, she on the other, becomes a regular routine, something Kessler looks forward to. He discovers she was born six months to the day after

him; he in Chicago, she in San Francisco. He tells her about the icy winters, and she tells him about the fog on the hills surrounding the city.

"You make it sound lovely," he says.

"It was," she says.

"Maybe someday, after this is over, I'll visit."

They talk about what they'll do after the war. "I'm thinking about law school," Eleanor says. "Do you think they'd let a Japanese-American female into law school?"

"Sure. Why not? This is America."

Eleanor laughs and it takes Kessler a second to realize what he said and where they're standing. "Sorry."

Eleanor lives in a small barracks with her mother and father and another family from San Francisco they didn't know. "My mother is having a terrible time. She is a very traditional and shy person and there are no private stalls in the bathroom. We try to keep other women out while she is there but it's not always possible. It makes her cry."

Kessler shudders to think how his mother would handle it. "Would it hurt them to put up dividers?"

"We've asked. We created a council of inmates to speak on our behalf about such things, but we're laughed at or ignored."

Kessler later mentions this to his sergeant. "I'm sure a couple of guys can do the job in a few hours," he says.

"Keep your nose out of inmate affairs," the sergeant says. "We're here to man the perimeter, nothing else. Got me, Kessler?"

Two months of guard duty pass slowly for Kessler. And while he looks forward to his talks with Eleanor, it's not enough for either of them.

"It would be nice to see you on the same side of the fence," she says. "Is it possible for you to get assigned inside?"

He tells her what the sergeant had said but promises to ask. When he raises the issue with his sergeant the noncom laughs. “Told you once, Kessler. Don’t start looking for ways to get in the pants of a good-looking inmate.”

The following week his unit learns they’re being shipped back to Fort Leonard Wood. “Looks like we’re being trained for overseas duty,” the sergeant tells him. “This is your lucky day, Kessler.”

But Kessler doesn’t feel lucky. “I’m shipping out,” he tells Eleanor that night. He aches to hold her in his arms. “Can’t tell you where—I don’t really know—but it looks like I’ll finally get to see some action.”

“I’ll miss our walks, Ivan.”

“And I’ll miss you. After the war is over, I’ll visit, and you can show me the fog on the hills.”

“Be safe,” she says. She puts two fingers to her lips, kisses them and holds them to the fence. Kessler does the same and their fingers touch.

Life at Fort Leonard Wood picks up for Kessler where it left off. The summer heat makes the training more difficult, but the difficulty has a way of focusing his mind. And with the likelihood of imminent deployment, Kessler and his

fellow soldiers are imbued with a seriousness of purpose, an urgency not present earlier.

Three days pass before he calls Dorothy. “It’s good to hear your voice,” she says over the phone, but Kessler senses a difference. The distance he hears could be in her voice or in his mind. When he asks when he can see her, there is silence.

“Ivan, I’m seeing someone,” she says finally. “A local boy, back from the war. A high school friend. Pretty shot up, but he’ll survive.”

“I see,” Kessler says. “Sounds serious.”

“I was going to write and tell you, but I didn’t know how to reach you. You never called, never wrote.”

“I thought a lot about you while I was in the California desert. I was hoping we could talk, work through what’s what.”

“I don’t think it’d help now. I’m spending a lot of time taking care of Matt—that’s his name.”

He wishes Dorothy all the best and hangs up the phone, forgetting to ask if she is still working at the warehouse. His next leave is unexpectedly cancelled. The sergeant tells him they’re headed overseas within a few days.

“This is it,” he says to Kessler. “This is what we’ve been waiting for. Basic training is over.”

“Wonder where we’re headed,” one of the soldiers says.

Kessler too wonders where he’s headed.

Robert Sachs’ work has appeared most recently in *The Louisville Review*, the *Chicago Quarterly Review*, and the *Delmarva Review*. He earned an M.F.A. in Writing from Spalding University in 2009. His story, “Vondelpark,” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2017. Originally from Chicago, he currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky. He serves on the board of Louisville Literary Arts. Read more at roberthsachs.com.



Diamonds in the Dark Valley

Squire Broel

Fat Chance

Patrick Theron Erickson

It is contrary
to the nature
of actual bodies

to be in more places
than one

or in more
than one place at once

So I am here
and you there

And since
it is contrary
to nature
for bodies at rest
to move themselves

never the twain
shall meet

except we lay
these bodies aside

and time and space
are no more

You
with the stars
in your eyes

and I
with the earth
at my feet.

Patrick Theron Erickson, a resident of Garland, Texas, a Tree City, just south of Duck Creek, is a retired parish pastor put out to pasture himself. His work has appeared in *The Oddville Press*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, and *The Main Street Rag*, among other publications, and more recently in *Vox Poetica*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine* and *Futures Trading*.

Senior

Arshan Dhillon

THE DAY OF THE PROMOTION Junior felt a surge of excitement, which he had not felt in a long time. Last time he had this feeling, he had been accepted into his architecture program, which he still hoped to complete one day. He kept the acceptance letter in his desk drawer at work, occasionally taking it out and reading it over again, thinking about how it would have felt if he had been able to graduate. Now, however, he had another letter, one that informed him of his promotion. He carried that with him in his breast pocket so he could show his father.

He parked his car in front of his father's house, and as he went around the hood of the car, he almost stepped into the puddle of water which was slowly draining into the street gutter. The rain had just stopped on his way over. Luckily, he caught himself and was able to skip over the puddle and onto the neatly-kept front lawn. He knocked on the front door, which his father had built himself. It was made of thick red oak wood and it hurt the knuckles, but you had to knock because the doorbell didn't work. It was as if you had to pay a price to see him. His father's footsteps fell upon the floor with authority. Something stirred inside of him from merely feeling the vibrations of his father's footsteps, his presence coming nearer, and he straightened his posture and held his wrist behind his back like a young soldier does when a drill sergeant enters the room. He

released a long, drawn-out breath and waited. The steps were not hurried. His father did not rush for anyone. He was always in control. The door sprang open and his father stretched across the gaping entrance. Junior could tell his father had not been expecting company, for he simply wore his robe with no undershirt and he could see his father's broad chest and specks of grey hair that covered it. Junior found himself lowering his head as if he were bowing, a natural reaction.

"Is it Friday already?" His father's voice was deep and his lips barely moved. There was some stubble on his chin.

"No, it's still Wednesday."

"Of course I know what day it is, you think I'm that far gone?"

Junior smiled, embarrassed at taking his father's question literally. His father often joked and asked questions that didn't need answers but he found himself answering them anyway.

"I thought you only came to see me on Friday."

His father stepped back, granting Junior space to come inside. Junior squeezed past his father who closed the door behind them. His father was a big man, shoulders still strong for someone his age, chest still stuck out further than his belly even though men his age often had fuller bellies. He pulled him in for an embrace. There was a musky smell to him as if he had just been exercising. When he let him

go, like a little child, Junior found himself staring up at his father.

"So, what's the special occasion?" He asked patting Junior on the back, which made him stumble forward a little. Before Junior could answer, his father started for the kitchen and Junior hurried to keep up with his long strides.

"I was just making some coffee. You want some?"

"Sure. Two teaspoons of sugar please."

"I don't have any. The doctor said to lay off so I've been having it black. It might be too bitter for you."

"I think I can handle it," Junior said.

"You sure? I guess you're a grown boy now."

The sound of the news anchors filled the open room, as the shifting light from the television set fell upon the yoga mat that was set in front of it. The mat was flanked on either side by two sets of dumbbells. You had to take a step up from the living room onto the kitchen floor where the table was lightly decorated with just a crystal bowl in the middle with a couple bananas in it and a war novel lay on top of the morning paper. The table was surrounded by a few chairs and his father pulled one out, gesturing for him to take a seat as he went to pour the coffee.

"This any good?" He asked his father as he picked up the novel and read the back summary.

"Junk," his father replied, "none of them can ever capture it correctly."

He put the book back down.

"How's Emily?"

His father joined him at the table, placing a cup of coffee in front of Junior.

Junior felt the warmth through the mug as he lifted the cup to his lip. His father was not lying about the coffee. He had to consciously stop himself from making a face as the

bitter drink went down his throat because he could tell that he was being watched. He took another sip for good measure.

"Better now, she's almost over her cold," Junior said, lowering the cup down to the table.

His father spread out on the chair and faced Junior. Junior felt as if he were back in school, in the principal's office having to answer for some wrongdoing that he hadn't done. The silence alone was heavy enough to cause him discomfort as his father calmly sipped his coffee. He cleared his throat and attempted to say something but his father cut him off.

"I have been meaning to thank her for letting me stay with you for those few months."

"Oh, that was nothing. It was the least we could do."

"I must have been a real nuisance for you to get rid of me so quickly."

This time there was only the illusion of silence as he tried to think of a way to counter his father's ruling, but instead sank further into the chair—or perhaps his father grew larger. Junior stared at the tabletop where his coffee cup was, watching the steam rise. Although his father had been a difficult house guest because he needed so much attention, Junior could never bring himself to tell his father the truth.

"No, it was never like that," Junior muttered, his voice was subdued, barely above a whisper, a courteous man would have leaned closer but his father kept his imposing position. It was as if his father's gaze could change his tone, manipulate his words, cause the letters to come out quickly, in a hurried manner, as if he were breathing hard, trying to catch his breath.

He reached for the novel again but stopped, instead he folded his hands in front of him.

"Come on, I'm only joking," his father's loaded hand patted Junior on the shoulder, "we can joke with one another, can't we? That's what men do. Your mother never understood it, but I told her that it's all play between us."

Junior replied with a smile and a soft, "yes," that was barely audible and sounded more like a deep exhale.

"But I must say, I would like to see you and Emily more than once a week. I'm getting up there, not much left for me. If I can't even get my boy to come to see me, what am I still doing here?"

"Don't say that, please, I know I should come more often but I'm just trying to do for what you did for me. I'm trying to make it easy for you. Also, while we are on that subject of work—" he went to take the envelope out when his father asked, "How are you liking my old job?"

"About that—"

"Do they still talk about me or have they forgotten about the old workhorse?"

"They remember, of course, they remember, how can they forget someone like you?"

"What good is a horse if he can't gallop," his father said, his voice flat and toneless as if he were making a statement to himself.

"Mr. Edwards speaks so highly of you there that I've had trouble keeping up," he said, making his father smile. "I've been working so much overtime recently so I don't fall behind on anything."

"Just make sure your bride doesn't mind. That was a good thing about your mother, she understood a man's need to work."

"Emily is a doll. She's always putting up with my headache but I'll take her on a vacation or something one of these days."

His father finished his cup of coffee. He stared at Junior's almost full cup, knowing he

had been right about his son's taste. He took his own empty cup to the sink and started to rinse it.

"I can do that for you," Junior said, joining his father at the kitchen sink. There was a window above the sink but the curtains were drawn. The faint sound of the drizzle outside could be heard tapping against the window. He noticed the lack of dust on the windowsill.

"I'm not that old yet," his father replied.

"I didn't mean that," said Junior whose voice was drowned by the flow of the tap water. His father shut it off and placed the cup to dry on the cloth that was placed beside the kitchen sink.

"So, they still remember the old bull?" he asked.

"Oh, very much., In fact, Mr. Edwards was talking to me about you today."

"My work's got you looking soft," his father poked Junior in the belly. "Here, look at mine, still solid," he slapped his own stomach with an open palm, "Now you must know how hard I used to work to keep in shape."

"I guess Emily's been keeping me too well fed," Junior smiled.

"That's no excuse. A man has to stay tight. Softness is an illness to his character. How can you expect others to follow you if they see this belly of yours? You can't lead men if you can't even control what you put in your mouth."

"You're right."

"Of course I'm right, I've been doing your job much longer than you have."

"About that—"

"I saw the doc the other day and you know what he said?" His father didn't wait for an answer although Junior opened his mouth to reply. "He said I'm in the top percentile of his patients when it comes to physique. I told the doc I've never missed a day of exercising. Every morning I exercise. You should do that

too or else you're gonna fall apart when you get to my age."

There was a hint of a joke in his father speech and so Junior smiled, weakly. His father patted him on the shoulder and said, "Don't worry, you've got plenty of time to straighten up."

"But listen I got some good news for you," Junior said.

His father turned towards him, leaning onto the kitchen counter, arms folded across his chest.

"What's that?"

Junior pulled out the letter from his supervisor.

"I'm being promoted," He said, presenting the letter to his father.

His father did not accept it.

"About time we got that position."

He turned his back to his son and picked out a glass bowl from the cabinet above. "The son always eats the sweet fruit of his father's labor," he said, as he poured cornflakes into his glass bowl.

"I am very grateful." Junior's arm hung beside him and his hand still holding the letter.

His father spoke, as he poured milk into the bowl, "I suppose that is what the purpose of being a father is, I lay the foundation, build upon it, make it nice and pretty for you to come and see further than I ever did. Congratulations."

"Thank you."

His father took a spoonful and aggressively shoved it in his mouth, some of the milk dribbled down his chin which he wiped with the back of his hand.

"I was thinking," Junior said, "This new position can allow me to hire some help to look after you the days I can't come."

His father chewed, his jaw flexing and relaxing, his eyes staring right at Junior and Jun-

ior's own shifted back to the tabletop, where his coffee had lost its steam.

"So you'll be coming to see me even less?" His father asked.

"No, no, nothing like that. I just felt it'll be good for you to have someone around to talk to and be with."

"Why can't that someone be you?"

Junior's voice softened. "These past few months I've been neglecting Emily too much and I just thought the two of us can spend more time together."

His father did not reply. Instead, he quietly finished his bowl of cereal, the metal spoon scraping the glass bowl after each bite. Once the bowl was empty, he let out a sigh and leaned back into his chair.

"It makes sense, more time for your bride and less time for your old man. Don't worry, I'll be gone soon, you'll have plenty of time after that."

"Please don't talk like that."

"All these years I spent working, I only did that so I could see you do good in your life. So, I'm happy for you and now, if it means to watch you from afar, then I suppose I'll do that; I'll clap for you from the stands."

He stood up, towering over Junior, "You do what you think is best, after all, you're the man of the house now, right?"

Junior looked down, staring at his father's strong legs and feeling the weight of his father's touch as he lightly patted him on the cheek. His father picked up the coffee mug and carried it with the empty bowl to the sink. He poured out the coffee into the sink and rinsed out the cup before cleaning the bowl as well. He left both the cup and bowl to dry beside the other mug.

He seemed to be waiting for Junior to say something, perhaps apologize, to take back what he had said, thank him for the promo-

tion. But Junior stayed silent, his voice not allowed to speak.

"Well you must be a busy man these days," his father said, "I shouldn't keep you away from your mistress much longer." He started for the door and Junior stood up without a word and followed his father's strides.

His father held the door open for him and Junior stepped through.

"It was good seeing you," his father said.

"Please, I would come more often if it wasn't for Emily and the work—"

His father smiled, quieting Junior with his look.

"Your grandfather would not tolerate such words, in fact, I think he wouldn't like you one bit for saying such things. I'm different than my father; I don't judge like he used to. He would have judged you to be a lousy boy—inconsiderate. He was a hard man from a different time but I still loved him and took care of him because that's the duty of a son. But me, I don't judge you. You do what you think is best and send my regards to my workers and also

to Emily."

The light from the sun cast his father's shadow upon Junior, whose gaze was fixed upon his father's feet, unable to raise his head and meet his father's eyes.

"I'll try to make it work," he said.

"You do what you like, son—you're the man now."

His father closed the door.

For a moment he stayed in the silence that was only present in his heart, as the street behind him busied itself with utter disregard. He felt so alone and so small. That silence that was within him began to break and it started as a whisper first but in seconds it turned into screams, screams of yearning, screams of acceptance, screams which wanted to hear his father simply say "I'm proud of you", screams which were ultimately just the tantrums of a child, he understood. He took the letter and crumpled it into a little ball and threw it down the gutter as he got into his car and headed back to work. The rain fell tearfully from the skies.

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winter thinking

Jan Ball

today no landscape of shifting dimensions
on Lake Michigan
only a pearl gray lake frozen in contemplation

snowflakes swirl then gather into paisley formations
on the ice floes

the shirt you wore
the colors congealing
into multi-colored commas

what you don't say clinks in my ears like Chivas Regal
on crushed ice

yet still anticipating the gulp of the water
at the end of the spring pier