

# October Hill

M A G A Z I N E



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Volume 4, Issue 2

## Welcome to October Hill Magazine



*“A Nice Read” by Fabrice Poussin*

Welcome to the Summer Issue of *October Hill Magazine*.

The Summer issue of *October Hill Magazine* continues our fourth year as a literary publication. The celebration of our success, however, comes in the midst of the worst pandemic in 100 years, which has taken the lives of some 120,000 Americans at the time of this writing and thrown some 40 million Americans out of work. Obviously, our celebration will be tempered by the reality of the current “normal” in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world.

Nevertheless, we would like to celebrate the important new works of short stories and poetry in our Summer issue, including a very touching and moving poem by poet Trevor Maynard on the human face of suffering during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As editors, we are often faced with the difficult task of deciding which works to publish. It is never easy. For our Summer issue, our task has grown ever more difficult. The sheer number of submissions of truly excellent work has made the task of selection more difficult than ever. We are most grateful to those authors whose work we have selected for publication. But we are also grateful to those authors whose work we had to pass up. It certainly does *not* mean that their written works were not worthy of publication. On the contrary, many of them matched up very well against some of the best works submitted to us. We encourage them to try us again. Our door will always be open for the consideration of their new works.

Our readers will also notice another new wrinkle in our editorial offerings – the launch of a new section for book reviews. Our assistant editor, Julia Romero, took the initiative to help us launch this new section by reviewing a new collection of short stories for the Summer issue. She did a great job, in our humble opinion. In future issues, we will consider reviewing both short story and poetry collections submitted to us by publishers. We hope our readers enjoy this new section.

But before we get ahead of ourselves, we’d like to express our profound gratitude to our staff members for their hard work and dedication to *October Hill*: Selin Tekgurler, short story editor, and Kaitlynn Berg, assistant short story editor; Nick Pagano, poetry editor, and Neha Mulay, assistant poetry editor; and last, but hardly least, Samantha Morley, our Managing Editor, who orchestrates our entire editorial process from start to finish and who keeps our magazine – and all of us – squarely on track. We are extremely excited about our Summer issue. We hope that you’ll be equally excited as you follow our writers across the landscapes of their imaginations.

**Richard Merli**      *Editorial Director*

**Samantha Morley**      *Managing Editor*

# Meet the Team

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**Brittany Green**

*Assistant Short Story Editor*

**Neha Mulay**

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**Nick Pagano**

*Assistant Poetry Editor*

**Julia Romero**

*Proofreader*

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Interested in joining our team? Send an email with your resume to [OctoberHillMag@gmail.com](mailto:OctoberHillMag@gmail.com)

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## Fiction



*"The Blues She Said" By Fabrice Poussin*

**Fabrice Poussin** teaches French and English at Shorter University. Author of novels and poetry, his work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and many other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, the *San Pedro River Review*, as well as other publications.

# **Jabberwocky**

**By Zoe Carver**

*Cry louder!*

The journal sat open on the desk, that entry the only thing in all of its leather-bound pages. The ink was a splotchy blue, as if the user was unfamiliar with a quill and trying it out just for show.

*Cry louder!*

“What do you think it means?”

“Something meaningful, probably. She was always writing meaningful things.”

I closed the book, leaving it positioned on the oak desk between the ink quill, which had been a gift, and the well-used ballpoint pen, which had not.

*Jabberwocky, Jabberwock. Cry Louder, Cry Louder!*

“I think it's just a whole lot of nonsense.”

“Her poetry was always at least a little bit nonsense.”

I slid a finger over the desk's edge, a slight bit of dust catching under my nail.

“I'm sorry I missed it. The funeral.”

My brother shrugged. “France is a long way away to come back for something so sad. She asked for the house to stay closed until you got here. It's yours now.”

“Don't sound so bitter. You get the fortune. I get pieces of old poetry.”

“You'll probably find scraps all over this place.”

“Jabberwocky, jabberwock.”

“She went a little crazy at the end.”

“Mad, even?” I grinned at the pun, just a little. “She always did like that poem. Lewis Carroll? Or C.S. Lewis? I always get the two of them mixed up. I’m...I’m sorry, too. That I wasn’t here. I left you all alone when she was...”

“Mad,” he shrugged, moving over to some framed award hung on the wall. There were awards all over the house: a Bram Stoker in the bathroom and a National Poetry Series in the broom closet. Our mother had done it partially for irony and partly for vanity.

He then moved toward the window and pulled back the thick, velvet blinds. Melissa Van Dorsen always did have a flair for the dramatics. Outside the window was a sculpture garden, or the overgrown version of a sculpture garden our mother had left behind. Vines tangled over the arms of the replicas of David and Nike, the Burghers of Calais dusted lightly in ivy.

My brother moved over to the bookshelves.

“I think she was happy you weren’t here at the end. A little betrayed, sure. But Melissa liked the idea of you in France.”

I laughed. “She liked the idea of herself in France and just wanted to live vicariously through me. She made me write letters to her, actual letters. I don’t see why she didn’t just move.”

“Well, I think Vermont is a little better for writing Gothic horror than France.”

“She should have gone to Transylvania.” Melissa had sold our childhood home, the one in Concord, years back, and now, when we had to visit her, this mansion was a looming stranger. *The Van Dorsen Manor*, she liked to call it. The family before us had named it the Brimmell House.

I lifted another journal, this one filled page to page with half-finished story ideas and broken lines of poetry. A million more theoretical dollars, never published.

“Let’s stay here for a few days. I can’t go back to France so soon. I’ve only just arrived.”

“I have a job, Val.”

“Take a few days off. We can afford it, remember, *Cal?*”

Calvin and Valerie. Really stupid names for a brother and sister, if you think about it. Then again, Melissa had twins in one of her novels named Katie and Bradie. So it could have been worse.

I walked over to the bookcase near Calvin and nudged his shoulder. He gave me a knowing look, and I tried to return one equally as pensive. France would always be there, dead mother or not. I needed time to think. Maybe I'd sell the Vermont place. Maybe I'd give it to Calvin. Maybe I'd Airbnb it. *Jabberwocky, Jabberwock*. It was all nonsense at the moment.

He skimmed the spines of the journals on her bookcase. "What do you think we should do with all this stuff?"

"Donate it? I'm sure there's some library out there that would shoot themselves in the foot for the first draft of *Orange Masquerade*."

I shrugged, grabbing one of the journals and starting to flip through the yellowing pages. It was filled to the brim with poetry, or what I gathered to be poetry. Nonsense.

*Clean the houses, round the block*

*Tell the children, round the clock*

*Jabberwocky, Jabberwock*

"Look. There it is again, the Jabberwocky. *Tell the children*, what do you think that means?"

"Nothing, probably."

"Why do you think she gave me this house?"

"To get you to come back."

"I've never lived in Vermont."

"Vermont, Massachusetts. Same difference when you're all the way in Paris."

I looked down at the notebook. "What if there was something else?" I flipped to another page, and there it was again.



*Walk on, my love,*

*The Jabberwocky at the End of the Tunnel.*

“Did she ever mention this Jabberwocky?”

“Valerie, you weren’t here,” Calvin said, his voice suddenly stern. “You didn’t see her. She couldn’t make sense of anything at the end.”

“These poems, they’re everywhere, right?”

He sighed. “Come on. Let’s have some dinner.”

We had a \$200 bottle of Melissa’s wine paired with macaroni and cheese. I asked him about his girlfriend, only to learn that they’d broken up. He asked about France, but I felt like he already knew everything there was to say.

That night, I couldn’t sleep. The poems couldn’t be just poems. Melissa was smart; she’d always been smart. She wouldn’t do something like this, not without reason. She wouldn’t just leave without saying goodbye.

I stood.

The moon cast little patterns on the bed sheet, the thin white curtains blowing softly in the wind. The night was sticky, and I opened a window, only to be met with a cool rush of Vermont air. Calvin was in the room next door; the master was down the hall. Neither of us had wanted to claim what had been hers.

My feet made their way down the stairs and into the sitting room. Melissa had written to me once, in her old-fashioned way, that the sitting room was the best in the house. That in the summer, the sun stretched over the sculpture garden and the forest, bathing the windows with light. At night, though, it felt empty, the decadent furniture too far apart for suitable use, as if someone was creating a model of what a sitting room should look like without actually knowing how one worked.

I sat on one of the terribly uncomfortable couches. There was a piece of paper on the coffee table.

*Lest my soul weep deep and true,*

*The song harks with the blue bird's call*

*A lark upon a tree cranes to sing*

*Thin as paper trees doth fall*

I scoffed. *Doth*. She always loved words that made her seem like a 17th-century poet. *Paper trees*, like the forest? All of this—the poems, the Jabberwocky—Melissa would never leave something so random behind. I knew her. She was my mother. She was a critically acclaimed genius. She always moved with purpose.

“Valerie.”

I blinked.

“More eggs?”

“Oh. Sure.” I passed Calvin my plate, the morning rising slowly above the trees. “I found more of mom’s poetry.”

“Like I said, it’s all over.”

“I think...I think she left it for us.”

“Val-”

“The piece I found, it talked about the woods. What if there’s another clue?”

“*Clue?* There’s no *clue*. Please don’t do this.” He looked tired. “I can’t do this again.”

I ignored him. “I’m going to the woods.”

“You’re in your nightgown.”

“I’m going to the woods.”

Calvin's eyes were pleading, and maybe if I was a little more mature, I might've listened. But instead, I slipped on a pair of Melissa's galoshes and headed out the glass door. Calvin watched me from the stovetop.

I waded slowly through the garden, looking behind roses and statues and a pool chair, which felt stark with the deep forest as a background. There was nothing besides the dead leaves and untamed weeds. I called back to the house. "Where in the woods did she go? Was there a path?"

Calvin remained silent, so I scoffed and continued my search, leaving the garden and entering the thicket of bushes and thorns. It was a brisk morning, and the sun had clawed its way behind some thick gray clouds, threatening rain. I ventured further.

*Paper trees.*

I kept looking, determined to prove my brother wrong. She'd left something for me. I know she did. That was just Melissa Van Dorsen's way. She'd never just die and leave things unfinished. She'd never just leave a half-finished poem on her desk.

47 minutes later, I wandered back to the kitchen, tracking in a trail of mud and despair. Calvin was dressed already, doing paperwork at the counter. "How was your walk?"

"I think I was wrong."

"You *think*?"

"Not about the poem, about the woods. *Paper trees*. Mom wasn't writing about the forest; she was writing about the library." I kicked off the galoshes and started out of the kitchen.

"Val," Calvin called after me. "Stop. She wasn't writing about the library."

"What?"

"She wasn't writing about anything. You didn't see her at the end. You really didn't. She was delirious; she couldn't even remember to eat breakfast, much less plot out a treasure hunt."

I furrowed my brow, lips tightening. He didn't understand. She'd said goodbye to him. He didn't understand.

Calvin continued, "She gave you this house because she missed you, not because she was hiding something in the basement. This won't lead you anywhere."

"Stop it, Calvin," I said softly. "Unless you want to help, just stop it. I'm going to find the poem in the library."

"Of course you will. Mom wrote a million poems in the library; it's just which one will you find first? The one which leads you to the bedroom? The bathroom? Connecticut? Back to France? Find as many poems as you want; they won't make your treasure hunt any more real."

I stormed up the grand staircase, letting my feet clank like a child's. The library was relatively small but crowded with novels of every shape and size. It didn't take me long to find my first scrap of poetry, resting lightly on a copy of *Alice in Wonderland*.

*Winter's breath, take me hold*

*I'm not pigeon nor lion, neither so bold*

Was there a lion statue in the garden? No, I'd been there all morning. Pigeons, maybe the front yard? I was sure I'd seen some pigeons near the garage. Before I could leave for the driveway, I caught sight of another page resting on a leather armrest.

*Hark the winged angels sing*

*Red morning, gold crown*

*Dark smiles coated in crimson*

The living room had red wallpaper. That had to be something. And the bathroom, the one in the basement. Oh, and there was a painting of an angel in the foyer. Which one was the right clue? What was at the end of the tunnel? I was trying to straighten out my thoughts when I caught sight of an open book, which had a fresh scrap of parchment sticking out of the pages like a bookmark.

*Jabberwocky, Jabberwock*

*Down the rabbit hole to Marseilles*

*Beware the Bandersnatch in Nice*

*The Queen of Hearts waits for us in Paris*

My breath caught. Marseilles, Nice, Paris. That was me. Those were my letters, my stories abroad, mixed with her pleasure reading. *Jabberwocky, Jabberwock*. This wasn't poetry; it was a loose plot tied from the strings of the world around her. And I had been there, in the ancient cities, and she had been here; now, though, she was gone.

The poems weren't bread crumbs; they were pieces of her—the final traces.

I collapsed onto a rich velvet couch, clenching the parchment in a deep fist. My face contorted, at first in anguish, and then in grief. Before I could grasp control, tears started to slide down my cheeks, thick and quaking. I opened my mouth, but no sound came out, only the dry heaving of my wails. I crossed my hands over my stomach and leaned forward, swallowed by the words. "It's meaningless," I mumbled between ragged breaths. The tears came faster. "It's me. It's me. It's me. It's meaningless." The words faded out of comprehension.

Calvin came running up, alarmed by the sound. He pushed the door open and saw me on the couch, crouched over in misery.

"Hey, hey," he walked over slowly. "It's alright."

"You were right, Cal," I said between gulps of air. "I wasn't here. I didn't see her. I can't... I can't think of her like that. It's my fault I was in France. She was reading my letters and Lewis Carroll, and she was dying! Cal, she was dying, and I was in Paris."

Calvin tried his best to be sympathetic, joining me on the couch and rubbing my back. "It's not your fault. She wouldn't have wanted you to see her like that anyway."

“Melissa...Melissa is dead. Our mother is dead. And she was crazy and,” I paused, letting a few more tears drain, “and I wasn’t here. She went crazy, and I wasn’t here.” I lifted the crumpled poetry. “It’s meaningless; it’s all meaningless. She was great, and this is meaningless.”

“I know.” Calvin ran his hand through my hair. My sobs grew quieter. We sat there for a long moment, neither of us quite sure what to say.

“She’s been gone for years, and I wasn’t here to see it.” I let out another cry in anguish, heaving forward.

Calvin leaned forward, too.

“She lived her life. She did more than most. And she loved you.”

More tears came rushing, and I sobbed into my brother's arm.

*Cry Louder!*

Maybe she had been leaving us instructions after all, I thought bitterly. Nonsense; it was in my bones, in my veins. It would be my turn to become nonsense soon enough. My turn to die alone in a big house and a meaningless brain. Nonsense. I was nothing but a ticking clock.

*Jabberwocky, Jabberwock.* 

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**Zoe Carver has been writing for two years. She has studied writing at Interlochen Arts Academy and Harvard University. Her work, “Tabatha,” was published in the *Interlochen Anthology*.**

## **The Demon in Donny**

**By Nanci Woody**

When Bessie's young husband died unexpectedly of blood poisoning in 1929, she was left with a three-room shack dwarfed by cornfields in every direction, an outhouse, a coal stove that belched smoke, and their three-year-old son Donny.

She lived a lonely life for ten years until she met the charismatic, good-looking Frank, the only lover she would ever have. He was, as they say, an old-fashioned rolling stone, married with kids, though he never mentioned this to Bess. She was swept away, praying nightly she wouldn't get pregnant.

Ten months into their courtship, when it was obvious she was about six months along, she garnered the courage to tell Frank, expecting him to do the right thing. It was then he told her about his wife and three kids in a nearby town. He told her how sorry he was, so sorry, but what could he do?

Frank filed for divorce and prepared to escape, but again failed to tell Bess. She learned of his plans while sipping black coffee at the Main Street Café. The local gossips in the next booth talked of nothing else.

"I suppose you heard Bessie's lover boy is ditching her, moving out West."

"With yet another woman's what I heard."

"No! Poor Bessie. Left all alone with just that teenaged kid of hers."

"Lover boy has a wife and kids, too. Some guts, that guy."

The '40s was not a time when bastard children were held up in front of the congregation, blessed, and brought gifts. This was a time when, if you were an unmarried woman, it was shameful to get pregnant. If you were out walking, otherwise friendly people would leave the sidewalk and cross the street to avoid having to say something to you, as though your condition

were contagious. Thus, Bess never left her tiny house once she started to show, but everybody knew anyway. Telephone party lines buzzed constantly. People sat on their front porches, pretending to listen to the radio while watching what everybody else was doing.

When she was a month away from giving birth, Frank stopped by on his way to California. Bess stood by the front door and felt something break deep inside her when he said, “Damn it, woman. I didn’t promise you nothing. I’m offering you some money. Here, take it.”

Bess could see his about-to-be wife waiting in his new Cadillac with the back seat piled high with luggage.

Her throat tight, tears nearly choking her, she slapped the money out of his hand. Frank, figuring he did his duty when he offered help, drove West, never to be seen again by Bess, never to be seen by his unborn child.

When Bess was ready to deliver, she stood behind the curtains at the front window, her fingers making little holes in the lace. She watched the flaming oranges and reds float to the ground and pile up. When her contractions started, she grasped her belly, bent slightly, but didn’t cry out. Just as Donny walked home from school and through the front door, her water broke. She was embarrassed, having that happen in front of him, and he was mortified, having to witness it. She motioned for him to help her to bed and asked him to bring some towels, a chamber pot, and her nightgown.

“Please,” she said, “just leave me alone now.”

For the next few hours, she suffered the pains of childbirth alone. At some point between contractions, she told Donny, “You go next door and call the doctor. Tell him I need him bad.”

Donny hesitated, as he disliked admitting they couldn’t afford a phone, and he was embarrassed to talk to the doctor with nosy neighbors listening. Dejected, he left her bedside, sloshed through the leaves to the neighbor’s house, and rapped on the door. With his head down, he said, “I know it’s late, but my mom’s real sick. Can I use your phone to call the doctor?”



The neighbors stood nearby as Donny talked to the doctor, who knew well his mother's situation. "Can't it wait 'til morning, son?"

Donny wanted to scream and run out of that house but held tightly to his composure. "My mother says she needs you bad, so please please please come right away." He hung up the phone before the doctor could ask anything else and ignored the neighbors' offers to help as he ran for the front door.

Donny let the doctor in and waited in the next room until he heard, "I need some help here." The doctor was fussing with the sheets, wet and bloody. When they rolled his mother over, she cried out. Donny's gut seized, his heart pounded, and tears rolled from his eyes. "Get some clean sheets, now," he was told. "Hurry on."

Donny couldn't find clean sheets because Bess had only those on her bed. He picked up a clean towel and brought it to the doctor whose hands, at that moment, were tugging on the baby's head. Finally, there she was, oxygen-deprived and blue as the early morning sky. The doctor wrapped the baby in a towel and laid her in Bess's arms.

"Well, now. It's late, Bessie, and there are forms here to fill out. What name shall I put down here for the baby's father?"

Bess blinked back tears, turning her head away from him. He wrote "Unknown" on the line where the father's name should have appeared.

"And do we have a name for your little girl?"

Bess, exhausted, said, "name her after me."

"Bessie it is."

"No, doctor. Name her Patsy, for what I am."

Bess, *poor as a church mouse*, she liked to say, had even less money now that she had two kids to support. She sent Donny to the bread lines to get whatever he could and bring it home. He earned the nickname "Soupy," which he hated. It stuck all through high school until he lied about

his age and joined the Navy in 1944.

He had no place to go except to come home when he was on leave. He shared very little that was personal with Bess but enjoyed playing his guitar and singing. He loved World War II songs. *Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition. The White Cliffs of Dover.* Bess brushed the tears from her eyes when he sang *Danny Boy* in his sweet, tenor voice.

*But if ye come and all the flowers are dying. If I am dead, as dead I well may be.*

Then he'd start his boozing. The demons would take hold. His newly acquired knowledge of electronics guided him as he somehow attached the radio to the iron to amplify the sound. At full volume, he listened to Holy-roller preachers from Nashville scream and shout, "Praise the Lord" and "Hallelujah, Brother!" Donny answered them by letting loose with a chilling, demonic laugh. He spit curses at Jesus Christ throughout the miserable nights, torturing his mother and sister.

Donny re-enlisted as long as they'd have him, but when Patsy was in high school, he received a medical discharge. "Paranoid schizophrenia," the papers said, and he voluntarily checked himself into a mental hospital every month. The routine was, on the day his disability check appeared in the mail, he'd leave the psychiatrists, the hospital, and AA meetings; stock up on booze; stay with his mother and sister until the money ran out; and then return to the hospital for a free ride until the next check arrived.

Some nights, with a drawn fist, he'd threaten Bess or smash what little furniture she had. Laughing wildly, he'd toss the splintered wood into the coal-burning stove before finally succumbing to a booze-induced stupor on the rat-eaten sofa, puking and pissing his pants, soiling the couch, and waking up mean.

Patsy wanted to quit high school and get as far away from him as possible. Bess was conflicted about what to tell her daughter to do. When she was trying to give advice, Donny strong-armed his way into their conversation.

“You listen to me, little sister. You better not even think about not graduating from high school. I won’t allow it!”

He raved on, the broken vessels in his nose getting redder. “Don’t you have good grades? Don’t you want to make something of yourself, for God’s sake?”

Donny held his bottle of cheap Mogen David wine to his face before he continued. “Or do you want to wind up a crazy drunk like me?”

Then he laughed, the demon pouring out of him. He finished his tirade, threatening to make his little sister miserable if she brought up quitting high school again.


Though Patsy was indeed miserable—she never got a decent night’s sleep and slunk to school when Donny’s drunk and disorderly conduct was front-page news in the local paper (which he called *The Daily Asswipe*)—she graduated in 1957. The paper published her picture along with a graduation announcement and an article saying she was the first kid in the family to earn a scholarship and go to college.

When Patsy completed her studies and got her teaching credential, she, like her daddy 21 years earlier, headed for California, finally getting as far away from Donny as she could. She didn’t consciously think about him, but the violent, drunken scenes from her childhood were always just below the surface of her mind. She held on to a fierce hatred of her brother.

Bess remained in her shack, augmenting her meager welfare check by cleaning other people’s toilets and floors. She was ever protective of Donny, who stayed with her more often than not. He never maintained a steady job. His drinking raged on.

After Patsy had been teaching for almost two years, she received a call from an inconsolable Bess who told her that Donny’s body had been fished out of Lake Michigan, unidentifiable except for his dental work. Most likely, he was murdered.

Bess went on to tell Patsy that in Donny's abandoned Studebaker were just a few things: a six-pack with four missing Pabst Blue Ribbon beers, a wallet with an ID but no money, and a letter from the VA hospital inquiring as to his whereabouts.

Also in the car, Bess continued tearfully, was the folded, worn newspaper article with Patsy's picture and high school graduation announcement. In the margin, in his handwriting, were the words, "my little sister." 

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**Nanci Woody wrote a prize-winning novel, *Tears and Trombones*, about a disadvantaged kid who wants to become a classical musician against the wishes of his alcoholic father. She has also published poetry and short stories online and in print anthologies. She is also an artist and photographer.**

# Three Occasions When Dad Saved My Life

By Robert Best

## I

When I was a boy, Dad used to take me to watch the scrambling. Scrambles are motorcycle races—dirt bikes with knobbly tires, racing around a muddy field, the track marked out with thick, hessian rope strung between wooden stakes that had been hammered into the earth that very morning. Looking back at these events, which were, in essence, motocross for amateurs, through the lens of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Health & Safety Culture, they look like pure madness. The only nod to safety, apart from the flimsy stick ‘n’ rope barriers, were the signs dotted around the field, stating, “Motor Sport is Dangerous,” making it clear that we were all there at our own risk. We could stand wherever we liked, as long as we were on the spectator side of the ropes. Some spectators even brought picnics, complete with a basket of food and a rug to sit on.

On one cold, damp Saturday afternoon, we were standing on the outside of a right-hand bend, near a hawthorn tree. Dad was taking photographs, with his Minolta SLR, of the bike-and-sidecar combinations careering toward us, then flashing past us, trailing peacock tails of dirt and stones in their wake. We always marveled at the passenger, whose job it was to position his weight in the best place to get the combination around the next bend while keeping as many of the three wheels as possible in contact with the earth. On a right-hander, that involved him lying across the back of the bike, behind the rider. On a left-hander, he had to hang as far as he could off the outside edge of the “sidecar” (which was little more than a steel platform with grab-handles) to stop the third wheel from rising into the air and flipping the whole thing over.

Mid-race, through the blue haze of burnt two-stroke oil, over the roaring din of engines and through the excitement and testosterone, Dad suddenly yelled, “Let’s move!” We’d walked no more than five paces up the hill when one of the riders suddenly lost control on the bend, crashing

straight through the barrier, snapping two of the posts like matchsticks, and running over the rope, all before running over the very spot where we'd been standing just a few seconds before. The rider kept it on its wheels and simply headed for the next section of the barrier, where a helpful spectator lifted the rope for them so they could duck under and get back into the race.

Dad just looked at me and raised one eyebrow in his “told you so” manner and carried on taking pictures. I was so caught up in the excitement that it wasn't until that night, lying in bed and remembering the events of the day, that I realized that Dad's instincts at that moment—his intuition, perhaps—had saved us both from getting run over, seriously hurt, or possibly killed.



Dad had been a biker since his college days when he was the proud owner of an AJS 500. He had only owned cars since—first, a series of VW Beetles, and then, much to my disappointment, Renaults.

I was about 12 years old when he brought home a bike. It was only a Honda C90—the classic and extremely popular red-and-white step-thru that was launched in 1964, the year I was born—but it was a motorcycle to me, and I was delighted. It was a thrill to be dropped off at school off the back of the bike (glossing over the fact that it was, technically, a scooter), complete with my orange, open-faced helmet; I felt like I was a biking hero to my friends and the girls in my class. Dad had it for three years before announcing, one day, that he was going to get rid of it.

“Not enough oomph,” was his reasoning. The pace of traffic on the roads into the city was getting faster, and he felt the C90 just didn't have the power to accelerate out of trouble, should that ever become necessary. He said he wouldn't be replacing it. He lied.

A couple of weeks later, I'd just come in from school and was standing in the bay window at the front of our house, emptying my bag and getting my homework organized, when an unfamiliar roar caught my attention. I looked up and saw a rider, in full leather, rounding the corner and pulling up right outside the house on a seriously nice machine. I started shouting through to

Mum in the kitchen that we might have a visitor when the rider pulled off his helmet, and it was Dad. He'd ridden up on a brand-new Moto Guzzi V50, a 500cc V-twin Italian beauty, and on that day, even more than any other, Dad was my absolute hero.

Going to school on that roaring beast gave my credibility an enormous boost, but that was the least of it. What was really special was going out on day trips. He knew some incredible roads around Northumberland, the Borders, down into County Durham and across to the Lake District, and I quickly became an expert pillion on this fast bike, leaning into the bends in perfect harmony with my Dad. The late July day when Prince Charles and Lady Di got married was scorching hot and particularly memorable; neither of us had the slightest interest in watching the royal wedding on TV, so we jumped on the Guzzi and headed west to the Lakes. On a sunny summer Saturday, that area is always busy with tourists, caravaners, and day-trippers. On that day, it seemed the entire world was glued to their televisions, and we had the roads to ourselves, just as we'd hoped.

He took me to all sorts of race meetings, too, from the amateur scrambles in the fields close to home to the famous Gold Cup at Oliver's Mount, near Scarborough, where the course is partly on an old racetrack on a beautiful wooded hillside, and partly on public roads that are closed for the weekend. I loved going to these events in the car but rocking up on the back of an Italian motorcycle was a feeling like no other.

As soon as I was 17, I bought a Kawasaki KH125, and suddenly, we were able to go out together on two bikes. Dad was an Advanced Motorcycle Rider and was great at giving me tips and pointers to help me pass my riding test. When I did, I immediately upgraded to a Suzuki GS400, and I remember him being really unhappy one evening when I left him behind on some seriously twisty roads north of our town. When he eventually flagged me down into a lay-by, he said I was going far too fast for the conditions, namely patches of bright sunshine and deep shadow that made it hard to see properly on the bends. He was right, of course.

In 1989, when I was 34, we left the bikes at home and went to the Isle of Man TT, the only place in the world where the roads of an entire island are given over to hardcore professional road racing for two whole weeks. It attracts top talent from all over the world; there are a handful of fatalities every year, and every year there are calls to ban it, which are always resisted on the basis that the riders know the risks, and they're out there doing what they love. Dad took his cameras, of course, but of the 40-plus rolls of 35mm film that he shot, the vast majority showed garden walls and trees, sometimes with just the tiniest sliver of a back wheel exiting frame left. Those boys were so fast...



## II

When I was a young teenager, maybe 13 or 14, still in the days of the C90, Dad took me to the Greek island of Zante for a two-week holiday. There was no airport on the island back then. I seem to remember they were planning to build one but hadn't quite gotten around to it. Dad knew this, of course, but I'm not sure he'd thought through the implications of the two of us traveling for 24 hours straight. We pretty much used every form of transport known to man.

A neighbor gave us a lift in his car to the station.

We caught a train to Newcastle, then another to London.

We took the Tube across London to Heathrow.

From Heathrow, we flew to Athens.

We crossed the city by taxi, and then caught a coach across to the west coast of mainland Greece, which memorably involved crossing the Corinth Canal. It was Nero, the Roman emperor, who first broke ground on the project in 67 AD, and it was finally finished in 1893. It took a long time, with many failures and bankruptcies along the way, but today, it stands as a very impressive feat of engineering. I was glad I stayed awake to see it.



The coach took us to the port of Kyllini, where we took a ferry to Zakynthos, the capital of the island, and finally, a minibus took us to our villa. It was raining when we arrived; the first time in living memory that Zante had seen rain in August.

The only form of transport not involved in our 24-hour odyssey was a motorcycle, so Dad hired a 125cc for a few days so we could explore the island, meet the real locals, and, I suspect because we were both missing the Honda. I'll never forget that first lunchtime we were out, walking into a taverna, way up in the hills, looking for a bite to eat, and being greeted by a silence that suddenly descended on the place as we walked in the door, just like I'd seen in the Westerns. They turned out to be friendly enough, of course, and the Greek salad was colorful, fresh, and delightful.

We were heading back to the villa on a gravel road one oven-hot afternoon, wearing just shorts, sandals, T-shirts, and no helmets. We were following a little three-wheel truck that was carrying lengths of timber way longer than itself, precariously balanced and badly tied down. After a while, it turned right and briefly disappeared into an olive grove, only to reappear moments later as it started reversing into our path. He hadn't turned off; he was just turning around.

It was far too late for Dad to brake, especially on gravel, which invariably acts like ball bearings under the wheels of a bike that is braking or cornering hard, and it would have had us off in an instant. Instead, thinking fast, Dad leaned the bike down hard left as we leaned hard right so that the timber ends passed through the V-shaped gap we'd just created with the bike and our bodies. They were so close that I remember them brushing the hairs on my forearm.

Dad pulled over a mile or so later, and we sat in silence, in the pine-scented shade, listening to the cicadas until his hands stopped shaking.



### III

I woke up early on Boxing Day, 1989, a few months after our trip to the Isle of Man, as I was due to spend a few days in the London office before returning to my parents' house for the New Year. The plan was that, after breakfast, I would drive Dad to the station in my company BMW, and while I caught the train south, Dad would take the car back to the house where it would stay until my return.

Only a few miles out of town, the car twitched. Black ice. I regained control. We just had time to remark on it when it went again, properly this time; the back end swung out right, and the front wheels mounted the curb while the steering wheel span uselessly through my hands as we slid sideways toward a large and very solid road sign. I saw it out of my side window, rushing up fast. "Oh, Dad," I remember saying.

My next memory is screaming, screaming from the searing pain that my brain has long since blocked out. The 90-degree bend in the middle of the driver's door had punched a 90-degree break in my right femur. My right foot was still over the accelerator pedal, and my hip more or less where it started, creating the crazy angle that I saw looking down in horror at my snapped leg. Dad had managed to get out. I saw him through the windshield, almost dancing in anguish in front of the car, unhurt but wailing in his torment as he believed, in that moment, as he later told me, that the car was about to burst into flames and roast me alive. He was soon led away by a kindly old couple from the house across the street; I can't remember who stayed with me.

With both legs jammed firmly between the center console and the immovable door, I was trapped, in intense agony, for over half an hour until the fire brigade arrived to give me nitrous oxide gas and cut me out of the wreckage.

The orthopedic surgeon at the hospital gave me a choice: either spend three months in traction while the bone healed, or have an operation to insert a "K-nail," which is essentially a long, titanium pin hammered down inside the length of the femur, straightening and strengthening

it, secured with a screw at the hip-end. I went for the operation and was out of the hospital in under two weeks, having been shown by a lovely physiotherapist how to use crutches on the flat, on the slopes, and going up and down the stairs.

Weeks later, Dad and I visited the wreck at a local garage. The entire chassis was bent out of line by a foot and a half, which came as a shock—this was a well-built German car, and the speed at the point of impact must have been far less than 30 mph, yet the entire vehicle was totally bent out of shape. I was particularly intrigued by the roof, which had been caved in above the driver’s door by the impact, to the same 90 degrees as the door, creating a sharp, downward, and jagged tooth of metal at roughly the height of my temple. Only then did Dad tell me that, a second or so before we crashed, he’d reached over, his arm around my shoulders, and pulled me down. I crashed with my head resting safely on his lap.



#### IV

Nine years later, while traveling in Nepal with an intrepid group of friends whose interests ranged from photography, botany, birdwatching, walking, and climbing, Dad slipped and fell on some hotel steps in Kathmandu. We shared a dark sense of humor, Dad and I, and we found it faintly amusing that he’d happily hiked around the Annapurna mountain range and then hurt himself tripping over a bloody step. He came home in considerable pain, and, eventually, the doctors discovered a crumbling vertebra. While recovering from this injury, the digestive disorders began. Firm reassurances from the doctor that there was “nothing to worry about” were eventually followed by a bowel cancer diagnosis.

“Inoperable,” they said.


“Untreated, you have less than a year,” they said.

“With chemo, you’ve got at least two,” they said.

He decided to take up the offer of chemotherapy and was dead in nine months.

A week or so before he died at home, in his own bed, in a memory I can never unsee, he's standing naked in the bathroom, supported by my Mum, with his back to me, shaking and skeletal. My fit, strong, and active Dad, not yet 70, now looked like one of those wretches rescued from Belson.

The last time I saw him alive, he was more or less unconscious on morphine. I kissed him, and he puckered his lips in a weak response. I know he knew it was me at that moment; I had a goatee at the time, and he must have felt it scratch his sunken cheek.

You saved my life three times, Dad. Yet, when you were dying, all I could do was stand with Mum at your bedside and cry. 

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**Robert Best is the author of five books on real estate investment and an unpublished manuscript of his decade living and working in Asia. He's had 19 poems published to date and has a collection coming out in 2021 from Iron Press. He lives in Northumberland with Molly the Labrador.**

## 15 Items or Less

By David Haznaw

It was an armful, for sure. In hindsight, Customer Number Four, or simply “Number Four,” as we’ll call him in this story, should have grabbed a basket, or better yet, a cart. But when he entered his neighborhood supermarket that day, he needed just four items: instant steel-cut oatmeal for his wife; a baguette for tonight’s spaghetti dinner; baby aspirin (doctor’s orders), which took him several minutes to find since it isn’t called “baby aspirin” anymore, but no one told him that; and hemorrhoid cream (don’t ask, don’t tell).

Since he left home moments earlier, he’d been repeating the four items aloud, stubbornly refusing to write them down, telling his wife, “anyone can remember four things,” which is true, especially when one has “oatmeal/baguette/aspirin/ass cream” playing on a loop in one’s head.

He hated the grocery store. In reality, he hated just about anywhere that wasn’t home. Labeled a “shy kid” by his parents, he found his condition had worsened as the years passed. Now all grown-up, he had become an introvert’s introvert, the guy whose attempts to blend into social situations or crowded places would become ironically conspicuous soon after his arrival, thanks to his awkwardness and “uncomfortability.”

After years of trying (everything from counseling to prescription medications and even hypnotism), his wife decided the next best thing was sending him into the “belly of the beast,” which meant getting him out in public whenever possible: every errand, every dinner party, every social occasion. It was her version of immersion therapy. Every time she sent him on a mission, he’d argue and complain he was busy or tired or have some excuse not to go. And every time, she kept at him until he relented.

On this day, it took him 15 minutes to get out of the car and enter the store and, once inside, his anxiety turned manic as he darted from one aisle to another, avoiding eye contact with others, desperately hoping the aisles that contained the items he needed would be devoid of other shoppers.

Within minutes, he'd serpented and darted his way through multiple aisles, many more than necessary, which caused him, in his fidgety state, to start grabbing items outside the original list. Within minutes, he was headed to the Express Checkout, which loudly announced (if that's possible for a sign) "15 Items or Less," its one and only rule.

Fourth in line (which led to the moniker "Number Four"), his cache had grown into what now looked like the list for a supermarket scavenger hunt. In addition to the items he'd been sent to get, he added: two sticks of deodorant (don't remind him that personal-grooming and hygiene products are grossly overpriced at grocery stores), two cans of chunky soup (which are heavier than they look), a half-gallon of milk (at least it had a handle), a cheap pair of work gloves (an impulse buy), and a small container of Moose Tracks ice cream (another impulse buy, but something he thought his wife would appreciate, right after she rebuked him for buying it since she'd just started a new diet).

In all, 11 items, fully compliant with the one simple, blatantly spelled-out rule of the Express Checkout, a place designed precisely for someone who wanted—who *needed*—to get out of the store as quickly as possible and return to the comforts of his own home.

The problem was that even though it was called "Express," as the fourth customer in line, there could be up to 45 items in front of him, and that's if everyone followed the rule.

*And we all know that's not happening,* he thought as he craned his neck to inspect the baskets and carts in front of him. After all, it's human nature—these days, anyway—to push the envelope, get a little more for your experience, and bend the rules, whether you're in the Express Checkout line, the Boardroom, or on the floor of the Senate.

Even then, for Number Four, it wasn't such a big deal if someone tried to get through with 17, or even 20, items. It was the other element, the people, specifically, Customers One through Three, and the sheer amount of time they wasted on things other than "checking out," which got under his skin.

Number One had 13 items; within the acceptable range, yet she lacked awareness of the one reason the Express Lane was created: efficiency. Case in point, her items were already totaled and bagged when she announced, "Wait a minute, I might have exact change." After extensive searching, counting, and calculating, she didn't, but she did remember she had coupons for her microwave popcorn and canned fruit, which forced the cashier to summon his manager to help him void the transaction and reenter the items to account for the discounts.

*Typical*, Number Four thought, as he struggled to balance his load and his mood.

Number Two was quick out of the blocks. All he had was cough medicine, but then ironically (or maybe not), he asked for two packs of cigarettes.

This required the cashier to leave his post to retrieve the smokes from behind the customer service counter, once again bringing things to a screeching halt. "Good grief," Number Four mumbled under his breath, his anxiety building with every additional—and as he saw it, unnecessary—comment, gesture, or request.

By the time the cashier came back with the wrong cigarettes (Number Two asked for a box, not a soft pack), walked back to the customer service counter, and returned with the correct smokes (correction: the same smokes, just in a different type of package), Number Four's left arm (the one holding the ice cream) had gone completely numb.

*C'mon... C'MON!* He yelled in his mind. He wasn't in a hurry per se, but unnecessary delays of any kind created an unbearable level of anxiety for him. It had always been that way: drivers unprepared to hit the gas when the light turned green, servers who wanted to chat before

they took your food order, TV shows that liked to tease you about what's coming next, "after the commercial break," etc.

To distract himself, he decided to surveil the other checkout lanes. Next door (Lane Nine), a guy talked on the phone as he unloaded his cart. "I can't right now. I'm on line at the grocery store."

*On line?* Number Four thought. All his life, he knew it to be "in line." "On line" was the Internet. But then he remembered hearing someone else say the same thing recently, maybe in a movie.

*Must be a thing,* he thought but told himself he wasn't going to change. *Far as I'm concerned, it's "in line." That's that. Unless you're British, then it's OK. Wait, they call it a "queue," don't they?*

Returning his attention to his own line, he was now on deck. Number Three, an elderly man wearing a ball cap that read "Grandpa," really knew his stuff. He was the type who would grab a cart every time he visited, whether he needed one item or a hundred.

As he loaded his final item onto the conveyor belt—a frozen pizza—he looked back at Number Four, now struggling to keep hold of one of the deodorants and the chunky soup.

"Fourteen," Number Three announced with pride, but between the lines, what he meant was, "Don't think for a minute you're gonna catch me breaking the '15 Items or Less' rule, pal. This isn't my first rodeo, so just stand there patiently with your soup and your cream and your low-dose aspirin (he knew what it was called because he'd been taking one every morning for 25 years) and wait your turn. And by the way, next time, get a cart, (expletive deleted) rookie."

Idle chatter between Number Three and the cashier told Number Four that this man was not only a regular but also likely regarded his several-times-a-week trip as a social outing. He was, by all accounts, an employee favorite who seemed to know everyone by name. But small talk just enhanced Number Four's impatience. He wanted out. He *needed* out.



By now, the baguette was dented, and the milk was testing the limits of his finger strength. Meanwhile, one of the soup cans had created a distinct and painful crease in Number Four's arm, and both the deodorants and the low-dose aspirin were threatening to liberate themselves from his grasp. With Number Three on the final taxi before departure, Number Four hurried to get his items on the conveyor belt before all hell broke loose.

As he slid the milk onto the deck, he needed to make a small (but, as it turns out, significant) move to save the hemorrhoid cream. It was just enough to free the ice cream from the crook in his now red and frozen left arm. The ice cream fell, and the lid popped off, releasing a quart of delicious, half-melted Moose Tracks all over the floor, spray painting Number Four's shoes and pants.

(Insert many expletives, delivered under his breath and in rapid succession.)


As he tried to regain some semblance of restraint and dignity, he looked at the cashier, who graciously said, "Don't worry about it. We'll clean it up. Do you want us to get another container of ice cream for you?"

"No," Number Four said flatly as he loaded the other items onto the belt. "Thanks, though." (The last thing he wanted was to wait while someone replaced something he probably shouldn't have grabbed in the first place.)

It was then he heard it, just as the last of the items were being scanned, something a person with his level of anxiety and social awkwardness, who desperately did not want to be the center of attention, simply couldn't handle. "Sir, you dropped your hemorrhoid cream."

It was Number Five, an older woman who, along with Numbers Six through Ten, had all gathered in line (or *on line*, if you're one of those folks) since this one-act play started several minutes prior.

It was bad enough she had basically told everyone in line—if not the entire store—that he had hemorrhoids, but she had more to say, as the growing line of locals all listened intently, watching this Shakespearean tragedy play out right in front of them.

“You know, I think that cream is ‘buy one, get one free.’ I have the circular right here. Let me check. It would be a shame if you didn’t take advantage of the deal, because that stuff works wonders. I’ve used it for years...” 

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**David Haznaw has been writing his entire career. Starting as a reporter for *The Watertown (WI) Daily Times*, David writes across many disciplines, from news, to advertising and commercial communications, and marketing. David’s first book, *A Year in Words* (2019) represents his entry into the realm of creative non-fiction.**

## A Bloody Good House

By Allison Uribe

There was barely a sound as the champagne minivan rolled to a stop at the end of the cracked driveway. The beige bungalow hosted a beautiful front yard that had been the focus of the only clear pictures sent over for the couple. They had only just discovered the property a week ago and were excited to see more of what it had to offer. The outside was gorgeous, but without a clear concept of what the inside held, the real estate agent Ms. Fletcher—or Flenser, or whatever she said over the phone—had her work cut out for her to convince them that this was indeed their forever home.

“Welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Gregor. We have a lot to cover today, and I, for one, am just cuckoo for you to get to know this lovely home. I hope that you both enjoyed the astonishing scenery as you drove up to this little slice of heaven. I know I like to take my time and savor the peace of being so close to nature.

“Now, I have a couple of things to go over before the tour really begins. To start us off, keep your hands and feet inside the *S.S. Homeowner Express* for the duration of the tour. Oh, I’m just kidding, you two! But in all actuality, we do have some unfinished renovations that you’re going to want to look out for. Don’t go worrying your cute little heads—they’re just a couple of cosmetic alterations. This house has good bones and quite the resilient spirit.”

They had never been to a one-on-one house tour before and decided on the ride over that keeping most of their questions for the end would probably be for the best. The agent reached behind her and swung the door open, giving the Gregors their first clear look at the old home.

“I was so happy to hear back from you guys about your interest in this beautiful estate. I gotta tell ya, not many people are interested in a fixer-upper on this side of town. Honestly, I think

they're just spooked by the thought of a stray coyote. Personally, I barely hear birds most days, so I doubt any such animals are anywhere close to this property. Nothing to worry over."

Mrs. Gregor laid a hand on her husband's shoulder, trying to make eye contact with him to perhaps communicate some form of hesitation. She was uncertain about possibly spending the rest of her twenties pouring money into a rickety old house. She didn't get the opportunity, but he was wide-eyed, captured by the agent's following words.

"Before we get started—a minor thing, really—but under New York State law, I have to let you know that the previous occupants have advertised to local authorities that this house has experienced a *bit* of spiritual residency. Nothing to worry about, I *assure* you. So weird, you just never know what people will dream of next." With that final warning, she spun around and led them into the foyer, the door quietly swinging closed behind the pair.

"Now, as we walk in, I want you to close your eyes, calm your mind, ignore the outside world, and *feel* yourself walk into your forever home. Do you feel it? Because I can just see you coming home, enjoying the silence of nature and the isolation from the rush of the city, and relaxing in a home that you two and a couple of kiddos can really enjoy. It's nice, right?! Now open your eyes, and let's hop to it.

"We are now stepping into the spacious living room. You can see the high, sloped ceilings and the *gorgeous* stained hardwood. Don't worry about the dark spot by the couch—it really just needs a little scrubbing, and it'll come right out. I should know; I've done it a few times by now."

Mrs. Gregor began to step further into the room, hoping to make out the exact nature of the stained floor. She hardly made it a foot in when she felt the real estate agent loop her arm through hers and spin her deeper into the house.

"I assure you that any dark spots you may see are the result of creative liberties taken up by the previous tenants when it came to meal prep." She leaned in conspiratorially to Mrs. Gregor. "Two owners back, there was a wonderful old man who could strike up the meanest barbeque on

this side of the Mississippi. I tell you, when he just up and vanished along with a couple of those roommates of his, I told myself, ‘You just *have* to be the one to make sure that his *gorgeous* property goes to the *niciest* people.’ And you know what, I think the fourth time’s the charm ‘cause you two are cuter than a basket of kittens.’”

“Now, while we walk into the dining room and kitchen, notice the open design and lots of cabinet space. You might see some of the cabinets swaying a bit, but that is just a nice cross breeze the house gets sometimes. A cross breeze is so nice in these hot summers, and you will be wishing other properties have what this one does come August. Think of it as just another reason to cuddle up close on a dark and rainy night.”

Mrs. Gregor had yet to be released by their guide. She glanced back at her husband, who was enraptured by some of the craftsman touches throughout the kitchen. They were led straight to the stairs, and Mrs. Gregor caught a glimpse of a side room they seemed to be skipping over.

“Excuse me, Miss, but what does that red door lead to? Could we go in and see it before we go upstairs?”

Despite the agent’s smile never ceasing its radiance, Mrs. Gregor almost caught a second where the woman’s face froze.

“What red door, honeybunch? Oh...that door over there. I see it now. It just leads to some renovations that I forgot to point out. Yes, that’s it. You know what, we’ll continue the tour, and later today, I’ll make sure everything in there is safe, and then we can schedule another time to check out the rest of the house. Just another reason to come back soon!”

They trekked up the stairs, and the agent paused to tell them another snippet of history.

“Ah! It almost slipped my mind, but I also have to tell you that the last homeowner did pass away quite suddenly in the next room. It was a tragedy, but I know that she is doing so much better now. There really is no nicer place to move on to the other side than a three-bedroom, two-and-a-half baths with an open floor plan.”

The three made the final stretch up the stairs, and the talkative tour guide started back up again. “Up here is the original hardwood flooring, which is very special because it was a wonderful surprise after we had to tear out the old carpet. You would have hated it, the carpet, so discolored...it was horrible.”

“Remember, eyes forward. The lighting up here is just a bit off and makes every shadow look wonky, so you might want to get an electrician out here. When you call, maybe get an estimate on the phone because they are just so rude. They always make excuses that the house is too far away, or that they don’t like kids watching them work, or some other nonsense reason they make up just to slack off.”

“As we round the banister, you will see that one of the last owners converted the loft into a bonus room. It’s very ample, and you really get the feeling that you’re welcome here. Yeah, those are all the good vibes that the house is welcoming you in with. Now, in this room, you can really see how you can easily turn it into a writing space, or a man cave, or a—”

For the first time since the group fully entered the house, Mrs. Gregor found her arm freed from the agent’s grip. She backed up to her husband’s waiting arms as the real estate agent stuttered and swayed, putting a hand to her head in a flash of what could only be confusion.

“Sorry, I just got a little light-headed for a moment, but now that I think of it, maybe you might want to just use this room as extra storage space. A man cave isn’t usually very family-friendly, you know. It’s also probably not a good idea to go about destroying the original flooring.” In a moment, it was like nothing had ever happened, and she was back to her smiling self, nudging them back toward the stairs.


Right as they got to the landing, Mr. Gregor caught sight of some boxes stacked in the corner, with a massive painting looming against the wall. He was a bit worried that they would have to go through trashed furniture from the previous owners and wanted some assurances before they continued.

“Oh, yes. I see you noticed one of the house’s many antiques coming along with the purchase. Here is an old painting of one of the previous owners’ grandmother. Don’t worry, there are only a couple of knick knacks that you would be free to deal with however you see fit. I just feel such strong energy from the items that it would be a disservice to deny any future owners the possibility of hosting such unique antiques in their own home.”

“By this point, I’m basically a heavenly miracle dealer. I mean, the local church definitely knows how holy this house is considering the number of blessings they’ve performed in the last decade. When you move in, this place will be practically shining in holy light.”

The Gregors were finally thrust out onto the porch, completing their first tour of what could be the home they spent the rest of their days in. It was a lot to take in, and they had a lot to think about. On the one hand, they needed a fresh start, and this old home looked to be their perfect match. On the other hand, the strange nature of their prospective home might serve as a more interesting playground for those pesky skeletons stuffed in their closet back in their current apartment. The young couple grasped each other’s hands and shared a soft, understanding glance. Oh yes, the Gregor’s were definitely coming back.

Hidden from the agent’s quickly shifting eyes, their small moment was, thankfully, only made known to the two lovers and the ever-watchful house behind them as their time left on the property was winding to a close. So, with a hardy click of the front door, the agent sent them on their way.

“When you head out, watch your step. Now that we’ve had our tour, let’s head back to my office, and we can schedule another date to fully explore the rest of the property, or you can sign the deed now. Oh, you two are just so fun to joke with! Now, remember you will never be alone when you make this house your home.” 

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**Allison Uribe has been writing for two years. *October Hill Magazine* will be her first publication.**

## Snake Eyes

By A.R. Bender

### I

Bert crouched against the apple tree in his shady backyard sanctuary, listening to the birds and the bees and the wind in the trees. He usually liked getting away from it all in this private little space, bordered by tall, wild shrubs and a rickety wooden fence, but the recent changes in his life had left him feeling disturbed and restless. He'd just started his first year in junior high school a few days before and was still bummed out that all the fun he had during the summer had ended. Moreover, he'd been having confusing feelings about a girl who sat next to him in one of his classes.

He'd brought a back issue of *Mad* magazine to read but set it down after a few pages and stared at the nearby sandbox that he used to spend so much time playing in. Now, weeds were growing in it, and some of his old toys were half-covered in the sand. He tossed a few pebbles into the box, aiming for the shallow hole in the middle where he'd shoveled up a dead robin the day before and buried it by a rosebush. No matter what he did, though, he still couldn't shake the feeling that even more changes would happen to him soon and that there was nothing he could do about them. Finally, he picked up the magazine and browsed through it again.

Halfway through a "Spy vs. Spy" comic strip, Craig, Steve, Johnny, and Mary Jo bounded out of the back door of his house toward him. He wasn't too surprised to see Mary Jo with them since she'd been hanging out with the group a lot more lately. Once again, he tried not to show how he felt about her ever since the time they snuck down to Ravenna Park together a few weeks before and found a big hollowed-out tree trunk to hide in. There, they talked about a lot of stuff, and even kissed a little, before climbing out and going back to their homes, a little confused about what they'd just experienced.



She gave him the faintest smile as they approached, but reverted to a nonchalant demeanor when they stopped in front of him.

“Your mom said you were here,” Johnny said. “Whatcha doing?”

“Not much,” Bert answered. “What about you?”

“We’re on the way to see Scott’s new pet,” Craig said. “Wanna come along?”

“What kind of a pet?”

“A snake,” Steve answered, with a grin.

“Let’s go,” Bert said.



They all gathered around the snake habitat in Scott’s bedroom.

“Where is it?” Craig asked.

“Right there,” Scott said, “underneath those leaves.”

“Oh yeah,” Craig said. “It blends in real well.”

“This is cool,” Bert said. “It looks like a real jungle place.”

“What kind is it?” Mary Jo asked.

“Just a Garter snake.”

“Hey, it’s moving now,” Bert said.

He watched with fascination as the snake slowly slithered along the sand, between the rocks and leaves, while flicking out its tongue. He wondered if those little eyes could see anything, so he moved his hand rapidly back and forth against the glass. Startled, the snake scrambled into the hollowed-out log.

“Aw, you scared it,” Steve said.

“Don’t worry. It’ll come out soon,” Scott said.

Bert pressed his face against the glass and peered into the log where the snake was curled up in a circle.

“How much did it cost?” Mary Jo asked.

“Nothing,” Scott said. “I caught it in our yard then put it in a jar.”

“Let’s go hunt for some ourselves,” Craig said.

“But where?” Steve asked.

“I know a place where I saw some a while ago,” Bert said. “Just on the other side of the bridge over Ravenna Park. You know, the shortcut to the ball fields in that big open area full of dry grass and stuff. Johnny and I saw one and we chased it for a while, but it got away.”

“That’s right,” Johnny said. “It was a big one.”

“Let’s go there tomorrow,” Steve said.

“Can I come, too?” Mary Jo asked.

“Sure. Why not?” Bert said.



The next day, they all crossed the bridge over the park with glass jars in hand, cut through some woods, and emerged into the open grassy area. Bert led them to the place in the middle of the field full of large rocks. They walked all around the area for about 20 minutes but saw no signs of a snake. Craig gave up first and sat down against a tree in the shade. Johnny saw a mouse, which picked up their enthusiasm for a while, but after another 30 minutes, most of them gave up and headed home, except for Bert, Davie, and Mary Jo.

“Let’s make a few more sweeps,” Bert said to them, “and then go home, too.”

The three of them split up to search different parts of the area. A short time later, Mary Jo froze in her tracks when she saw a movement in the grass and a brief glimpse of something dark slithering on the ground.

“Look!” she whispered loudly to Bert and then pointed to the spot. “I see one!”

Bert crept toward her and saw the snake as well. They both crouched down and stalked it, treading softly with each step. For a moment, they lost sight of it, and then it appeared a little

farther away. Mary Jo ran up and managed to step on its tail. As it thrashed around, trying to get away, Bert grabbed it by the head with one hand and mid-body with the other.

“We got one!” Bert shouted to Davie.

Bert held the snake up victoriously as Davie ran up to him.

“Wow, let’s see it!” Davie said.

He watched it, transfixed, as they walked toward their jars.

“What are you going to do with it?” Mary Jo asked, as Bert put the snake into a jar.

“Make it into a pet like Scott did.”



Bert and Mary Jo sat together under the apple tree in his backyard, chatting about how things were going in their different junior high schools. They also talked about the snake they caught the day before, which was now curled up next to them in a larger jar that Bert had transferred the snake into, thinking that it would be a temporary habitat until he got a big one like Scott’s; however, that wasn’t going to happen now. His parents wouldn’t let him keep it, and it was all his stupid sister’s fault. She screamed when she saw it and ran to their mom, who told him, disgustedly, that she didn’t want that *creature* in the house even after Bert had told her he’d keep it far away from them in his room and take care of it. As usual, his dad told him to do what his mom said, so that was that.

“What are you going to do with it now?” she asked as she took a big bite out of a fallen apple.

“I don’t know,” he said, still staring at the snake. “Probably let it go.” He then turned to her. “Unless you want it.”

“I’d like to, but my mom hates those things, too. I can ask her, though.”

“I guess I’ll keep it for now until you let me know.”

The more Bert thought about it, the madder he got. Unlike all the other kids in the neighborhood, he'd never had a pet: not a dog, or a cat, or a parakeet, or a hamster, or a frog—nothing!

Bert tore open a pack of Sugar Babies caramel candy bits and poured a bunch directly into his mouth.

“It hasn't moved much in a while,” she said.

Bert jiggled the jar a little, which barely caused the snake to move its head.

“Maybe it needs some water,” she said.

Bert dragged a hose from the house and drained water into the jar. The snake moved a little, and then a lot more as the bottom of the jar filled with water. He munched on some more Sugar Babies as he watched it.

He started to move the jar away from the hose when something happened; it wasn't a coherent thought or anything, but more a vague kind of feeling. He placed the jar back under the hose and felt a dark kind of thrill as he watched the water trickle in and fill the jar some more.

“It's full enough now,” she said.

“I just want to see if it can swim.”

The jar was now three-quarters full with water, and the snake had been spinning around on the surface of the water, trying to stay afloat.

“That's enough. Stop!” she exclaimed.

When the snake tried to jump out of the jar, he screwed the lid on.

“What are you doing?” she asked, becoming more alarmed.

There was now just a little pocket of air in the jar. Some part of him knew that he should tip out the water, but that odd feeling grew even stronger.

Mary Jo gazed at the strange intensity in his eyes and became equally fascinated with the frenzied activity in the jar.

Suddenly, the snake stopped spinning. It turned its head towards Bert, with its eyes riveted directly into his, and then, with its mouth agape, sank slowly to the bottom of the jar. At that moment, the little thrill suddenly morphed into something heavy and dull in the pit of his stomach.

Quickly, he unscrewed the lid and poured the water and the snake onto the ground. The snake was dead, of course, as he knew—and felt—it already was.

Mary Jo touched it and then withdrew her hand.

Bert picked up the snake, walked toward the house with Mary Jo, and stopped in front of the rosebush. Wordlessly, he dug a little hole on the other side of the bush from where he buried the robin, covered the snake with dirt, and placed a few rocks on top of it. For some time, they stared silently at the little gravesite. He offered her some of his candy, which she accepted.

“It probably wouldn’t have lived much longer, anyway,” Bert finally said.

“What do you want to do now?” she asked.

“We could go to the park, I guess.”

“That’s a good idea,” she answered, in an upbeat tone.

Suddenly, his glum mood vanished in response to the eagerness in her voice. Now, he felt a different kind of a thrill when he recalled the time they went to the park and huddled together in that big old hollowed-out tree trunk.

They tossed away their apples and headed out of the yard to the alley. Rex, Mr. Denman’s dog, barked at them ferociously from behind a fence as they walked by, which caused them both to laugh. They cut through Scott’s yard and crossed the street to the park. Mary Jo moved closer to him until their shoulders touched as they slowly made their way along the flat meadow to the edge of the woodsy area. There, they stopped and briefly looked into each other’s eyes. Mary Jo extended her hand, which he gripped, and they both made their way down the rough trail leading into the park’s ravine.

A few nights later, Bert started having nightmares about the snake's two dark specks for eyes, staring at him from within the jar just before it sank to its death. Utterly mortified, he curled up into a ball and pulled the covers over his head until he went back to sleep. Later, he had terrifying dreams that the snake had broken out of the gravesite, grown to an enormous size, and chased him around the backyard. Those dreams continued sporadically for months but eventually faded away when he started having much more pleasant nocturnal fantasies about girls and sex.



## II

Bert leaned over the racetrack railing and gazed at the shimmering image of Mount Rainier on the southern horizon, recalling the time when he and his friends hiked along the Wonderland Trail around the mountain two weeks before. They'd all just graduated from high school, and during the hike, Bert imagined that he was truly on top of the world and could do, and be, anything he wanted.

He glanced up to the tote board and took note of the odds on the horse he picked to win the race. He and his father had been watching the previous four races from the grandstand terrace while eating lunch. His father had been having a good day, so he gave Bert 20 bucks to bet on. During that time, he gave Bert a quick tutorial on how to read the Daily Racing Form. Based on this rudimentary knowledge and a gut feeling he had about one of the horses, he told his father to buy him a ticket for the race since he wasn't quite old enough to purchase one himself.

"There you go, my boy," his father said, as he handed Bert the ticket. He slogged down a beer as he checked the odds on the tote board. It was at least the fourth tall beer he had since they arrived. "Wow, fifteen to one on the Number Three. That 20 bucks to win the ticket will pay you over three hundy if it comes in."

"Did you bet on it?" Bert asked.

"Naw. I keyed on another horse."

This was the first time his father had taken him to the track. Other times, they went to baseball and football games together during his visitation periods. His father had been going there for as long as he could remember. It was one of the factors that led to the divorce a few years before—that and the booze.

After the divorce, he couldn't wait to get out of the house, and now that he'd finally finished high school—although a year late—he'd been able to do so. In the next month, he planned to move in with Deke, a friend he met in the detention center his mother sent him to the year before. Earlier in the summer, he enrolled in a local community college. His father offered to help with tuition the first quarter or two, but after that, he was on his own, “Just like I was at your age, bub.”

The race was a mile and a sixteenth, so the horses rumbled past their spots near the finish line after they broke from the gate. Bert's Number Three horse, Decimator, a bay colt with a prominent star-shaped white blaze, was settled near the middle of the pack as they passed. Decimator didn't get a call from the track announcer until the horses entered the far turn. He felt his heart leap when Number Three now flashed up on the tote board in fourth place. His pulse quickened as the horses thundered down the stretch. Decimator was now in second place and gaining on the leader.

“Go! Go! Go! Number Three!” Bert shouted as he watched his horse with that big white blaze dig in for the drive.

Decimator crossed the finish line as the winner by a length.

His father slapped him on the shoulder. “Damn, your horse did it!”

“Yeah,” was all Bert could say. He drew out the winning ticket from his shirt pocket with a shaky hand. He'd never felt such a rush, not from the alcohol he started drinking after his parent's divorce, nor from the pot he smoked, nor even from the pills Deke sometimes scored for him.

“Maybe you’ve got a knack for this, bub,” his father said with a laugh. “If you want, I’ll teach you more about handicapping a race. It’s all there in front of you on the Form. The winner in every race.”

“I’d like that a lot!”

After that, Bert spent all his free time learning how to read the Daily Racing Form. In two months, he’d be old enough to make bets on his own. He couldn’t wait to get started. Of course, he liked the idea of cashing in those winning tickets, but more than that, he wanted to feel that rush again when watching the races he made bets on.



### III

Bert trudged up the narrow and dimly lit stairwell to his fifth-floor apartment, carrying a pizza in one hand and a six-pack of beer in the other. He’d finished working three hours overtime at the warehouse and just wanted to eat, drink, and sleep. He was surprised to see Gwen crashed out on his bed. A syringe and plastic bags of other drug paraphernalia were scattered next to her purse on the bed. Her disheveled light-brown hair covered most of her face except her mouth, which was agape, taking in shallow, rapid breaths. Her fishnet stockings were torn in several places.

When they broke up two months before, they agreed to get back together after she went through rehab, but it looked like she didn’t make it. He stroked her hair, but she was too out of it to respond, so he ate and drank alone in the kitchen.

He was on his second beer and a third slice of pizza when he heard her moaning in the bedroom. A minute later, she stumbled in and leaned against the door jam.

“Hi, Bert,” she said in a raspy voice. “Aren’t you glad to see me?”

“Not like this, I’m not.” He was about to lecture her about it but could see that she was in no condition to comprehend much. “Want something?”



“I’ll sip on a beer.”

“Where have you been staying?”

“At Brenda’s,” she answered as she cracked open the beer. “But her boyfriend’s back, so I’m out of there now.”

“You can stay the night, but that’s it. Remember our agreement.”

“I know. How’ve you been doing?”

“Working. Staying clean. Kicked on my own.”

“That’s great. I was good for a while, too. But after Brenda kicked me out, I needed a little boost. This was my first time. Really.”

“Still dancing at the club?”

“Yeah, and oh! I’ve been thinking about my future lately, so I enrolled at Seattle Central Community College last week.”

“That’s great, Gwen.”

“Did you miss me?” she asked, after a swig of beer.

He couldn’t lie. He’d been fantasizing about her ever since they split and felt even stronger about it now with those beers in him. “Of course.”

“Why don’t we...get more comfortable in bed then?”

After foreplay, Gwen started to clear the bed and then picked up a plastic sack.

“Oh look,” she said with a grin, “there’s still some left. Might as well finish it.”

He was about to decline, but the thought of stroking her naked body, adorned with the tats and piercings he had such a fetish for, while on smack was too much to resist.

“Might as well.”



Gwen moved back in with him later that week. Eventually, they started using again, sporadically at first, but with greater frequency later on. On some days, he could barely make it to work. Gwen gave up on going back to school but managed to get a part-time job in a tattoo parlor.


One night, he woke up with a jolt that startled Gwen awake.

“What’s the matter, baby?” she mumbled. “Another bad dream?”

“Yeah,” he said, as he wiped the clammy sweat from his forehead and clambered out of bed and into the bathroom.

He splashed water on his face and stared at his grim reflection in the mirror—he was hollow-cheeked with pasty white skin and bloodshot eyes. He hadn’t been sleeping well lately, mostly because of those damn dreams, which were so similar to the ones he had when he’d been using before. He knew that he should kick again, but it was hard to do so with Gwen living with him.

He went into the kitchen and poured himself a triple shot of gin. The glass shook in his hand before he downed it. It was the third time he had one of those dreams this month. They were all like the nightmares he’d had in his youth after he killed the snake he caught.

The dream this night was the worst. In it, he was the one trapped inside the jar with the water slowly filling up as he stared with abject terror at those two dark specks of snake eyes outside the jar—which were now looking in on him. 

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**A.R. Bender is a writer of German heritage now living in Tacoma, Washington. He's completed two short story collections, a few of which have been published individually, multiple flash fiction pieces, and a smattering of poetry. He's also seeking representation for his completed historical novel. In his spare time, he enjoys hiking off the grid and coaching youth soccer.**

## Inside the Walls

By Richard Risemberg

One day, you look around and realize that you're living in a stranger's house, and the person you were has no understanding whatsoever of who you are now.

This happened to me as I sat at my desk, looking out a window facing the front yard. It was a cloudy morning, as usual for that time of year. At the edge of the porch, the boxwood hedge was looking tattered, the lawn beyond it starting to brown. I told myself, *We need to water the garden more often.* And then I thought, *But who the hell are "we"?*

In the dim, shut-up rooms behind me slept a wife and a child, people who carried my name, as I carried my father's name, and I thought about that: why is it important to so many? Long ago, we all had just one name each; and when we met, we recited the list of ancestors on both sides. Then, as often as not, we tried to kill each other. Now, on this day, in this world, we have family names which we feel we must pass on. But does it mean anything, really? We are what we are; our mothers and fathers won't change if their names disappear.

And, anyway, I've known people who have changed their names—not just their first names, but their family names, and not just actors making a career move, but regular folks. Trying to make a statement, I guess. A friend from my adolescent days, Henry Lumberg, suddenly became Roderick Stone later; it took us all a year to get used to the change. Now he's Roddy, instead of Hank, and we hardly remember “Henry.” Did his life change? No: he has the same job and still lives alone in an apartment too near the freeway. I used to think it was ridiculous. But, as I sat at my desk that morning, staring at a laptop screen where I had identified myself by the jokey moniker I used for such devices, I realized I was feeling irritated by my own name, plain and sturdy though it was, and by the circumstance that it had been appropriated by the two other humans in my house.

And I was irritated by the house itself: just a box, after all, set down on a rectangle of dirt. Why is it such a big deal? Why is a piece of paper stating that it belongs to my name, such a core component of the American Dream? Does being tied to a bank loan, taxes, repair crews, and the encroachments of ivy and joint grass really define freedom? Was I being fooled? Were we all fooling ourselves? I heard the *put-put* of a lawn mower starting outside, which soon rose to a steady roar as if the machine itself were suffering some terminal angst. Juan Carlos, the gardener—we referred to him as “our” gardener, as if we owned him—saw me looking out through the window and waved; I waved back. He lived in a dreary suburb in the flats south of town, where the houses are small and old, little clapboard shacks, nearly, a place which turns your heart gray when you drive through it. I mailed him his check every month; why didn't I just put it in his hand, man to man? Before he left, he would take out the trash cans for me; Monday afternoon, he would drive by again and bring them in, though it was a ten-mile commute. Why did we live like this? I didn't know. We did things this way because this was the way we did things. I'd never questioned it before. But now I did. Maybe it was just the onset of middle age, the slowly rising consciousness of eventual doom driving me toward nihilistic thinking.

I sat staring out the window until Juan Carlos finished, and I heard the rumble of the plastic trash bins wheeling out. His truck fired up, sputtering through a rusted tailpipe, and eased away from the curb so Juan Carlos could mow another soft-assed white guy's lawn. I heard the creaking of the floors behind me, then the flush of a toilet. The rest of the family was starting to wake up. Another Saturday waited.

Upon hearing the thud of feet on the floorboards, I turned in my swivel chair. This was a sort of vapid dance we did almost every morning: Jenny appearing with tousled hair and squinty eyes in the doorway, her robe loosely belted, her cheeks pale and soft without makeup. I arranged a smile on my face and said, “Morning, sweetie.” She padded over and bent down for a kiss. Her hair fell around my face and tickled my ears, then she straightened up, pulled the belt of her robe

tighter, and peered out the window, still squinting. “I heard the gardener,” she said. “Is he early, or am I late?”

“It's eight-thirty. You know he shows up like clockwork.”

“He shouldn't be getting up so early on a Saturday. Poor fellow.”

“Maybe if we paid him more, he wouldn't have to.”

“We pay what he asks.”

“Maybe he asks for what he knows he can get.”

Her face hardened for a moment. “He's lucky to be working. Lots of folks aren't. Has he been complaining?”

“No. I've just been thinking.”

“Oh, not again...” She smiled. “Did you make coffee?”

“I set it up. It's waiting for you.”

“I don't see how you can start the day without coffee.”

“The day starts me,” I said. It was true: I've never been able to sleep past sunrise. Maybe I should have been a gardener. But in the days before all the noisy machines.

“Have you been working?” she said. She was staring at the laptop screen and could see that I had only been reading the local paper.

“It's Saturday. Working is forbidden for us elegant bourgeois.” I got up and followed her to the kitchen. Always the mighty hunter, I went to the coffee maker and pressed the button. It started to make desperate drowning sounds, and I sat down to wait for it to finish while Jenny sliced bread to put in the toaster.

Petey woke up and came in while we were drinking coffee. He was sleepy-eyed, as always, and sat down heavily in his usual chair. Jenny put a bowl of cereal in front of him, and he began the difficult process of eating without spilling while still being groggy with sleep. *Look at us all*, I thought. *We could be a Saturday-morning cartoon family, except that nothing will ever happen*

*that anyone would sit slack-jawed and watch to alleviate the fundamental boredom of life.* The kid ate diligently, silently. I knew he'd cheer up slowly but inevitably begin to pester us and end up shunted off in front of the screen until midmorning when the neighborhood's kids started to leak out into front yards and knock on each other's doors.

Jenny's face took on color as she sipped her coffee, and she slowly un-slouched and became bright-eyed. She was what you would call a pretty woman, even a beautiful one, every now and then, when she felt really good. I suppose I loved her, though there are so many descriptions and definitions of love that you can never be sure. If you asked her, I'm sure she would tell you we were a happy family. If so, we fit Tolstoy's dictum: we could have been a cliché. Maybe we were.

I must have been making a bad face, because suddenly she asked, "Are you all right, honey? Did you sleep okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Just thinking still. About what to do with myself today." Or for the rest of my life, but I didn't say that part out loud.

"Have you got a plan, then?"

I hadn't had a plan until that second, but I said, "Yeah. I think I'll put a vegetable patch in the backyard."

"That's a wonderful idea! The produce is so bad at the Kroger."

"And we hardly use the space anyway. Even Petey doesn't go out there much. Maybe he can help me set it up. You into a little digging, champ?"

The champ squinted up at me while stuffing a spoonful of corn flakes into his face. "Can I use the big shovel?"

"Sure, you can," I said. He'd tire out in ten minutes, the way he had when we built the playhouse, which was now a home for wayward tools, but he wouldn't get in the way much, and maybe he'd like getting dirty. I wasn't sure I would. I hadn't done anything like that since I'd lived in my parents' house. But I looked at my hands, lying white on the tabletop. Maybe I could be

useful in a less abstract way than I was at the office, where all I did was ride herd on people who rode herd on people who, somewhere down the so-called chain of command, actually did something. Though the “something” was moving sealed boxes from a train to a warehouse, then from a warehouse to a truck. The real work was done in China; by people I wasn't supposed to care about.

I finished the toast and eggs that Jenny and various kitchen tools had put in front of me and got up.

“Where are you going, honey?” I had broken the pattern, and Jenny stood by the table with my second cup.

I grabbed it. “Out to the yard. You two want to join me?” I was still in the boxers and T-shirt I had slept in, barefoot.

Petey grunted and stayed put, but Jenny said, “I'll come with you as far as the porch. Last time I went out in the yard barefooted, I stepped on a bee and it stung me. You were at the office.” She followed me to the back door and stood on the little covered porch while I went out into the yard. The grass was, of course, freshly mowed: a dull, green rectangle with some brown patches, hemmed in by the usual white picket fence on two sides, with a hedge concealing the chain-link barrier at the back. I realized I didn't know the name of a single green thing I could see on the lawn except for the grass, the rosebush in the corner, and a dandelion, which had escaped Juan Carlos's thundering blades. My good fortune as a farmer was not assured. Still, the grass felt cool around my toes.

Petey came up beside me and pulled on my hand. “Can we really dig today?” he said. “I'm bored.”

“Sure,” I said. “Why not? We'll start at that back corner there. Get me two shovels from the old playhouse.”

The kid hustled off. I heard the squeak of hinges and some clanks and rattles, and Petey came back with two shovels—or I guess they were spades, the pointy kind. I mussed his hair and told him, “Now, go get your shoes on and bring me my old boots from the junk closet.” He ran off, and I stood there with the handles of both tools in one hand. There was a border of low flowers between the lawn and the fences. I didn't know what they were called, but they never grew very big. Juan Carlos took care of them, of course.

I felt pretty pathetic: living on this planet for all these years, reading, working, talking to hundreds or maybe thousands of people, and here I didn't even know the names of the goddamn flowers in my own yard. Well, I knew the names of fruits and vegetables, even if I didn't know what the plants that grew them looked like yet. I'd plant tomatoes and peppers and eggplants, for sure; I knew from hearing my friends talk that they grew well here. Maybe cabbages, too. And herbs for Jenny to cook with, like basil and oregano. But mainly Mediterranean stuff since we had that kind of weather. Maybe a lemon tree. I'd seen an ad for a miniature one online. I guessed I'd have to buy fertilizer and mulch, whatever the hell they were. Damn it. I really didn't know a thing about how to survive, did I? “Maybe I can ask Juan Carlos.” I meant to say it to myself, but I spoke it out loud.

“Ask him what?” Jenny said. She had braved the dangerous bee-ridden lawn to come to my side.

“Everything, I guess. I don't know a damn thing about growing food. Here's all this dirt and I haven't the least idea what to do to make it productive.”

“Juan Carlos hardly has the time for that...”


“I'd pay him, damn it. I'd pay the poor guy.”

She laughed. “Your garden might cost us more than just driving to the store.”

“Yes, but *'What price freedom?'*” I said.



She laughed again, but I really meant it. In my heart, I didn't care about names, history, or any of that stuff. But I had no choice except to care about my cells and bones. I'd pay Juan Carlos, all right. I'm sure he'd make the time for some extra cash. He could teach me. He could teach me how to be alive. Me, not a husband or an employee or a taxpayer, but really *me*, just an animal who talks, alive in the physical world.

Petey came back with my boots. I put them on and stood there, still in my boxer shorts, and looked over my domain. I guess I was another Tolstoy cliché, about to play the peasant farmer with the help. I didn't care. I had to get my hands dirty. I had to do something, something real. I had to do something that meant something in the world outside the walls. 

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**Richard Risemberg has published stories, poems, essays, editorials, and articles in edited publications, including the *Los Angeles Downtown News*, the *Los Angeles Business Journal*, *Momentum*, and dozens of literary magazines, from *Bangalore Review* in India to the *Maple Tree Literary Supplement* in Canada.**

# Childhood

By Peter Fraser

My grandfather had a wooden leg.

The leg was not a prosthetic plastic construction with metal pins, sleek lines, and tricky hinges. Instead, it was made of wood, carved and turned from a lump of timber. It was a part of our family, an inheritance, an artifact, almost a coat of arms. Everyone knew my granddad had a wooden leg. In fact, you could say it made us different from everyone else on the street. When I was a child, the presence of this unlikely family jewel enhanced and suggested importance in my identity that, perhaps, was not deserved. It held prominence in the casual history of my life.

When I was about nine, I gave my first speech to the class, probably about 30 boys, on the subject of my grandfather's leg. I wish I could remember the exact words. It could only be described as an immense triumph. Everyone was startled at my revelations. Everyone was impressed with the story. A wooden leg. It was a reality way beyond their collective understanding. It came from a mythical land of heroes, a supernatural world where abnormal powers were part of life, where Greek gods lounged in a land way more exotic than comic books.

The Slow Burner, our teacher, must have been moved as well. I remember him saying as we walked out the door for recess, "You, boy. Yes, you, boy. Was all that true?"

"Yes, sir."

At recess and lunch, I picked the cricket teams. I had grown in stature and reputation. The aura of significance only lasted a day, but you could taste it. You could feel the intangible mystery of life, even at that age.

He got it in the war, the biggest one. World War I. Not only did he have a wooden leg, but he had a bullet hole through it. Do you see what I mean? A bullet hole. For me, it was irresistible.

I could not leave it alone. Everyone I knew associated it with me. I often felt that, at times, it was even attached to me.

Grandad lived with us and didn't mind the endless after-school tourists who came to appraise our family heritage. He would lift his pant leg and reveal the hidden trophy, letting a grubby finger penetrate the gunshot wound. Everyone was impressed, particularly my best mates. Horse, Mick, and Tealeaves returned again and again to bear witness. To be struck with awe. To acknowledge my importance in having open access to such a significant suburban treasure.

The old bloke wasn't what you might call talkative. In fact, he wasn't very well at all. I mean, he had been approaching death for as long as I could remember. It's hard to imagine, but he joined the army at about 16 and was immediately sent to France. He ran away from home and convinced the recruitment officer he was of age, legally able to participate in the great adventure. To tour Europe at the government's expense. When I was nine years old, I knew words like Ypres, Somme, Pozieres, Verdun, Passchendaele, and Villers-Bretonneux. Words of horror, terminal ideas, poisons.

After the Armistice, he was not healthy enough to return home, so he stayed a year in a military hospital. When he was eventually about to be repatriated, he did a runner, just upped and left. He said he walked all the way to Paris on his wooden leg, to test it out.

Then he spent the early 1920s in Paris. He loaded trains, labored in warehouses, worked in bars and kitchens, dodged the military police, sometimes slept in parks, and somehow managed to continue his boyish adventures.

“There was nothing special about Paris. It was bigger than our town, of course, and they all spoke a strange language.”

“I think it's called French.”

My mother would observe from the kitchen after hearing this simple, disappointing, colonial observation.

No real flesh. Was he blind? Was he making all this up? There was a limited supply of stories from Paris, or perhaps those tales were censored from me, but I was mainly interested in those about trench warfare. And he had an endless number of them. They would roll off his tongue, as easily as if they had happened yesterday—blood, death, violence, pain, survival, and mates. I would prod and plead for more. I would demand analysis. He readily supplied all of them, amused that I was interested, perhaps grateful he could relive his great adventure, and perhaps even pleased that, at the end of his life, someone cared.

Years later, I would wonder if he had encountered Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Zelda, Ezra Pound, and all the rest of them. What about artists like Dali, Chagall, Man Ray, or Modigliani? Was he invited to the moveable feast? Did he fall over fat manuscripts ready to be delivered to an eager publisher? Was he a model for some of the artists who gathered in salons along the Seine? But by the time all these questions occurred to me, he was dead. My opportunity for clarification had disappeared.

At irregular intervals, old mates would arrive at our front door. My mother was polite but never welcoming. Macca, Wacka, Snake, Donkey, Tosser, and a cast of aging, unheard-of cronies appeared with bottles of rum and packs of cigarettes. I was sentenced to bed, missing the best of the reunions, my mother having no problem with parental censorship. My grandfather was inching closer to death the next day; my mother was hostile and irritable.


I was 16 when he died. A wave of unknown old blokes in odd suits appeared, somber, wearing medals, smoking, and anticipating a big drink. All the suits belonged to another era, and there was a general problem with their fit. My parents had prepared a small wake for Grandad, not expecting the number of mourners he attracted. Our front terrace was filled with almost 50 of these gray-haired old blokes, swearing, drinking, and smoking. They were like a secret society. Who were they? My father was unsure. My mother was civil yet resigned. How did they know about the service? How did they know he was dead? Who the hell were they?

“You wanna know how the old bastard got that bullet hole, sonny?”

Sonny. The word irritated me. My grandfather was on the way to fight in the trenches when he was my age. He had turned his back on our family and set off with a simple determination to see the world. I lived with my mum and dad, in my own bedroom, with posters of Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Bob Dylan on the walls. I wore a school uniform while he had a military kit and a soldier’s gun. And he was always evasive when I quizzed him on the bullet hole.

“We were at the Working Ferret, a big old pub that’s still there. It was a reunion right after the end of World War II. It was a good war, but not as good as ours. Atomic bombs? What rubbish. Comic book stuff. See what I mean? Now that was a fantasy ending—nothing like ours. But what a night. Everyone was there. I mean everyone. Well, the reality of it all was your Grandad passed out about midnight. Pissed. About as pissed as you could get. Davo, who was a chippy, had his gear outside and thought we should bolt his leg to the floor. Yeah, it was Davo’s idea. We drilled through his leg. Snake got into the cellar and ripped through the pub floor, and then we got a coach bolt and pinned him to the wooden decking. When he woke up, he couldn’t move. He had to take his deranged Frenchy leg off to escape. That’s how he got his nice neat bullet hole, me little mate.”

There was a small silence, all of them looking at me. Then they all laughed a cheerful and hysterical ditty. Loud and raucous. You could feel they loved the story. It was their story as well as mine. All of them were in tune, like a choir. I could hear the jingle of their medals as they guffawed and whinnied. They brayed and shouted and hooted. It was a recitation. Everyone knew the story, and now they were letting me in on the joke. I was being initiated.

I laughed as well. It was expected. My childhood was at last complete with this brittle knowledge. But, then again, I was now 16. I had grown up. 

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**Peter Fraser lives in Australia. He enjoys coffee, wine, reading, writing, and traveling.**

## Are We the First Ones Here?

By Mort Milder

I was leaning against the bar in a hotel lobby on 46th Street, waiting for Gina to finish her Christmas shopping, when a girl got up from the table where she had been sitting with three other people and came over to me.

She wore a fawn-colored wool dress that looked fantastic on her but was understated enough to make her blend into the woodwork when she wasn't in motion. At the moment, she was moving. She did it well. Her hair was a shade of brown somewhere between hazel and mousey and all the other words which mean "not blonde." It was a good brown. Some of us give off a pheromone, which Stapledon is working on synthesizing in his spare time. This girl had it in spades. It doesn't seem to be part of my tool set (so I hope Stapledon gets off his butt and figures it out soon), but she knew exactly what I was.

"Are you alone?" she asked. Without waiting for a reply, she sat on the stool next to me.

I nodded. I was blinking a little fast and having some trouble swallowing. When I get excited, my throat and tear ducts swell up. She touched my arm, and I relaxed and took a deep breath.

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"I...It's hard to explain. Here..." She touched me again, and this time my vision cleared up. Neat trick. I don't think Stapledon or Gina can do it. We're all different—different talents, different tool sets.

"*Right,*" she said, although she hadn't spoken out loud. I had a moment of proprietary jealousy—telepathy was always my thing—but tried to cover it up quickly. Not quickly enough, and she said it was fine, don't worry about it. Polite.

“Who’s Gina?” she asked, and I was on alert right away. Not that Gina would be jealous—not of me, anyway—but you never knew what would set her off, and this was pretty much the last dive between Times Square and the park where we could still be served. My sister has a hair trigger, and, believe me, you don’t want her going off. In some ways, Gina might be the most advanced of any of us, but with great talents come great self-control issues, apparently, and most of the bartenders within ten blocks of midtown will do anything to get us to move on.

I know what you’re thinking, and, yes, I do know what they’re thinking.

To the girl, I simply replied, “She’s us.” Then, before I thought anything too revealing, “Do you mind if we keep it vocal? For now?”

“Of course,” she said. “I can’t hear myself think in here, anyway.”

“Are they…” I nodded at the group at her table.

“My cousin and some friends. We’re supposed to go to a club later. They’re not us,” she said, waving and smiling back at them. She pointed at me and made a surprised face for their benefit, which translated as “I just found an old friend!”

I ordered a round for us. Her name was Paula, and she lived in Los Angeles but kept a bachelorette studio on East 70th. Her “work” took her around the country, but in fact, she told me she printed money in a shop in Iowa City.

“Are you married?” I asked.

“I was.”

“To one of us? Why don’t we know about you?”

“He’s not us. But I wanted children, and I didn’t think I could wait until someone turned up.”

“And?”

“We couldn’t. And then it ended.” I thought I heard a longer conversation in her head, but she cut it off and took another sip of her drink. Mixed marriages are always a problem, so it’s better if there aren’t kids. Gina doesn’t talk about hers. Ever.

The bar was noisy and crowded, and Paula moved closer. “What about you?” she asked me.

“No kids. I may be a mule.” May. I hadn’t seen a doctor since I was 16. Stapledon doesn’t count since he’s only interested in research and would happily vivisect one of us if given the opportunity. I wouldn’t go within five miles of his clinic.

We had more drinks. In my head, it got quiet. We held hands. I wrote a note for Gina and left it with the bartender, and Paula told her cousin to go to the club without her.



She had only one photograph on the wall at her apartment, a close-up swath of an orchid so furiously red it shouted. But the overall effect was a quietness, which embraced the entire room. I recognized it as one of a series which had taken the city by storm last fall—and now, the pseudonymous artist was revealed. This was what she meant about printing money.

We drank some more, and I tried to say as little as possible about my life. The truth is, outside of telepathy, I don’t have that much going for myself. I worry that I may be just an average guy with one wild talent. Paula was more like Stapledon—gifted with gifts that kept on giving. None of that seemed to bother her, though. She radiated calm, like her pictures.

The next morning, we talked about getting together with Gina and Stapledon. Of course, she wanted to meet them, and I tried not to show how desperately I didn’t want her to meet Stapledon, who outclasses me on almost every front. Fortunately, she had to go to L.A. that day and wouldn’t be back in New York until New Years. She wanted to hook up telepathically. But thank God that’s not one of Stapledon’s abilities, and it’s intermittent, at best, with Gina, so I had some time to decide what to do.



Meanwhile, I hadn't made any money for a while, and holiday expenses were mounting, so this day was going to be a workday.

Mostly, I steal.

*"Hah! Two million years of evolution leads to a petty thief."* I hear you. But by itself, telepathy isn't all that much of an asset. You can't cloud the mind of a security camera. You can think you got away clean, and twenty minutes later, some detective is talking to the doorman at your condo.

"Mr. Ubermensch? Si, 15-G. Take the elevator on the right. Don't announce yourself? No problemo!"

On the other hand, there are plenty of other tools if you're willing to put in the time. Thievery is still work, and it happens to be work I'm good at. I have an advantage, but that's all it is, an edge. I like to tell myself, *I'm not mutant-dependent, I'm mutant-enabled*. I still have to do the planning, and if I wasn't really anal about the little things, I would be in trouble fast. Fortunately, I am super detail-oriented. (And that's not actually a real superpower. At least, I don't think it is.)

Did I mention that Gina can fly? She used to do it on weekends but doesn't much since Stapledon explained that the risk of exposure wasn't worth it. Now she walks like the rest of us, or Ubers. Stapledon doesn't make the rules but can be super-convincing. Super-everything, to be honest. "Don't be an outlier" is Stapledon's rule, which makes him an out-and-out liar, because it applies to everyone *but* him. Handsome, brilliant, and insightful, he's the one who's most obviously a few steps up on the evolutionary ladder.

Sometimes, Stapledon bitches about my not making better use of my talents, but he doesn't care about morality. He's really complaining about the scale. Because he sees himself as Moriarty or Captain Nemo: if he couldn't do the big time, he wouldn't do the crime. Meanwhile, I still have to pay the bills.

But I was the outlier that week, and I almost got caught more than once because I was preoccupied thinking about Paula, and about Paula and Stapledon meeting. I thought I might be in love with her, something I hadn't known was possible for me (perhaps for any of us). Stapledon told me once that he thought love might be an evolutionary holdover, a vestigial psychic tailbone. Gina disagreed, of course. She worships him, although I suspect she intimidates him as well.

But what's love got to do with it? The thought of what would happen when Stapledon and Paula met kept distracting me because when I put myself in their shoes, what else made sense? I didn't know what I could do about it.



In the end, I threw a party. Paula and I had talked all through the week, mostly about how excited she was to meet some more of us, so before she came back, I went to Zabars and lifted some pâté and Gorgonzola and then splurged by actually paying for Scottish salmon. (I don't want to go messing with the fish guy's head—I depend on him too much.)

It was just the four of us because that's all there are in Manhattan. (There's an odd guy named Craig in Jersey City, but he's scared of Gina and turned down my invitation, and there's a couple in Astoria who have a sick kid and won't leave him with anyone.) The circle is small.

"I hope you like salmon," I said, as I laid out the hors d'oeuvres.

"Unsatisfactory," said Gina, poking at the cheese suspiciously. "Aren't they endangered?"

"I love it," Paula said. She was looking across the table at Stapledon. "I couldn't wait to meet you all. I don't know why it took so long."

"Were you looking for us?" he asked.

"Of course," she said. "Always. Aren't you?"

"Oh, he's looking," Gina growled.

I brought the fish over from the sideboard and sat down. "He thinks there aren't enough of us."

Stapledon said, “Well, that’s obviously true. Our sustainability is precarious. We’re not as fecund as we should be.”

“That’s a problem,” Paula said with a distant smile.

Stapledon said, “I’m working on it, actually.”

“Sure, you are,” Gina said, as she filled a tumbler with rosé.

Stapledon ignored her.

“It’s complicated. I suspect some issues with sperm motility,” he nodded fraternally at me.

“But really, I think we just need to be seen more. By each other.”

Paula nodded in agreement, as though she liked what she saw.

“What about the backlash?” I asked over the sound of Gina’s gnashing teeth.

“Backlash?” Paula asked.

“It’s his Frankenstein complex,” Stapledon said. “He doesn’t think the normals will tolerate us.”

“I don’t see torchlight mobs,” I said, “but I don’t see peaceful coexistence, either. I think we’re safer blending in.” I sounded defensive. “After all,” I gave an unconvincing chuckle, “you’re the one who warned us about being outliers.”

“It’s tricky,” Stapledon agreed. He turned to contemplate the view out the window, giving us his Barrymore profile. “The individual survives through camouflage, but the species survives by showboating. If you can’t attract a mate, your genome is wasted.” He beamed a sidelong smile at Paula. “And we can’t afford to go to waste.”

“*Oh, shut up already.*” I looked at Gina, a little shocked, but she hadn’t said anything. Her head was down almost in her plate as she morosely picked bones and pushed them to the edge. Stapledon hadn’t reacted, either. I looked at Paula, who turned to give me a Mona Lisa smile. It was her thought, and she hadn’t spoken it aloud, just to me.

Later, we had Game Night, which Gina hates, and she suspects I cheat at word games (which is true). Trivia is Stapledon's strong suit, and he gets very competitive—more than usual. Soon, Paula and I were laughing over something only we could hear, and I felt bad about leaving Gina out (Stapledon didn't notice), but I couldn't help myself. The evening was turning out so much better than I could have hoped.

At last, I got up to clear the plates. "How was the salmon?"

"Good," said Stapledon, mopping the mustard sauce with a roll. "Enjoy it while you can. It won't be around much longer."

"No tuna, no swordfish, no dolphins," Paula said, reaching across to spear a bite from his plate. "Aren't there fish farms that are sustainable, though?"

Stapledon leaned back in his chair, ceding the last morsel to her. "In fact, they're really not. The biggest ones, the deepwater fish, are going first."

"So sad." Paula licked her lips as she got up from her chair and stood over Stapledon to clear his plate.

"We're reordering the food chain," I called from the kitchen.

"Not fast enough," said Stapledon.

"There's not going to be any left!" Gina bawled, ending on a rising note.

Then there were two crashes in quick succession, like the sound of a double-barreled shotgun; and when I looked out from the kitchen, a cold wind was blowing through the dining room, and Gina was holding a sabre of glass which, a moment before, had been part of my window. Most of the pane had fallen outward to the street twenty floors below, but there was a two-foot ribbon wedged between Paula's ribs, and she was holding her hands above and below it, as though her greatest concern was that she might stain the tablecloth with her blood.

"There won't be any left for me!" Gina was screaming, pleading to Stapledon with her hand raised and looking like she would fling the remaining shard at Paula's face. I stepped forward,

praying that somehow she would miss because I knew I wouldn't reach her in time, but knowing that Gina wouldn't miss. But Stapledon got up very quickly; and before I could take a step from the kitchen, he was already holding Gina by both arms and quietly telling her to relax. I knew Stapledon was fast, but I hadn't realized how fast. I couldn't move for a moment until he coolly suggested that I should get something and apply pressure.

I pressed a towel to Paula's side and helped her to the sofa, and then Stapledon and I traded places, and he did something with alcohol and a thread. I walked Gina out into the hall and did what I could to calm her down, which I hadn't thought to do before because I hadn't seen that we were pushing her over the edge. So, what good was it for me to read minds if I couldn't keep my psycho bitch sister from going postal in my own living room?

Meanwhile, Stapledon was saving my girlfriend's life. Looking back, I know that's something of an exaggeration.

She wasn't my girlfriend.



New Year's Day, Gina and I were on our own again. We'd planned some holiday shoplifting, but everything was closed, so we caught a movie and then another and ended up in a new place in the Village.

"Is she all right?" Gina was nursing her third drink, and I was watching her closely.

"She will be. I don't think she'll be back."

"I'm so sorry."

I didn't know what to say to that, so I waved the bartender over and ordered another round.

"I shouldn't have done it," Gina said.

"Well, no," I said, forcing a laugh. "I think it would be good if you didn't try to kill our friends anymore."

"I mean, I didn't understand what was happening. It was going well for you, wasn't it?"

“I don’t know.” I didn’t want to look at her. “I thought it was. I didn’t expect it; I thought Stapledon would just swoop in and take over. But, yeah, it seemed like it was going pretty well.”

Gina shook her head. “I can see that now.” I wondered, not for the first time, if Gina didn’t have a lot more telepathy than she admitted to.

“I didn’t understand it then,” she said. “It’s just that I can’t...think when I’m around him.” She gripped the brass rail of the bar with one hand, and when she let go, I could see shallow dimples where her fingers had been.

“Jesus, Gina.”

“You should invite her back,” she said, urgently, looking me directly in the face. “You could convince her to come back. You should talk to her.”

“I don’t know, Gi.”


“I don’t have to be here. I’ll go away.”

“You shouldn’t do that. I don’t think it matters.”

We went back to our drinks, and I thought about Paula and Stapledon in LA, and how they’d never have children, and about Gina’s kid, whom she’ll never see, and how we’re all broken, all of us. Even us.

But, obviously, there wasn’t anything to say. Not out loud.

And then I tried to cheer myself up, and I thought of all the wonderful things we could do, Paula and Stapledon, and how I could drink, and Gina could fly.

“Not anymore,” Gina said. “I’m not even thinking about it.” 

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**Mort Milder is a writer, editor, and playwright born in St. Louis, Missouri and living in New York City. He is a co-curator of Rough & Ready Productions, a performance salon for works-in-progress.**

## The Path

By David Coyle

Lou sat in the dark, drinking wine straight from the bottle. Dirty plates were everywhere, on the coffee table, the kitchen bench, the floor. He hadn't shaved in months. The curtains were pulled. The air was stale. Proof civilization was ending played on the television, filling the room with a dismal, bluish light; every channel was awful; everywhere was proof mankind had made itself redundant. Nothing meant anything anymore. *It's all just a matter of time.* Lou stared vacantly into space as he sipped his cheap pinot noir.

There was suddenly a sharp knocking on the front door. Each knock ricocheted like a bullet. Like a wet piece of paper, Lou lifted himself off the couch and walked across the "living" room to the door. He squinted as the daylight burned his face. When his eyes adjusted, he saw his friend standing there, holding a sweaty plastic bag of fried chicken.

"Hamish?"

"Lou, mate. I hope you don't mind me dropping in like this. I was just passing by to get some Hometown Chicken, you know, and it felt a bit, ah, well, a bit grim eating it on my own. Can I come in?"

"Ah, sure, yeah, whatever," Lou said.

"Chicken bones might go well with this ambiance," Hamish tried to joke as he walked in, but Lou didn't reply. The two men sat on the couch. Hamish opened his bag of chicken and offered Lou a piece. Lou shook his head. Hamish's eyes then noticed the half-empty bottle of wine on the floor by Lou's feet. Lou saw Hamish looking at it, so Hamish quickly looked away, changing the subject by glancing at the television.

"What are you watching?" he asked.

"Nothing."

“Mind if I open a curtain?” Hamish asked, putting his drumstick on a nearby, somewhat clean plate.

“Whatever makes you happy,” Lou said, shrugging his shoulders.

Hamish walked across the depressing mire to the window and ripped back a curtain, flooding the house with daylight, though not necessarily improving things. He pushed a window open, and a gentle, much-needed draught of air was exchanged with the outside world. Placing the window latch on the widest possible notch, he sat back down on the couch before eating some chicken. An awkward silence crept in to join them with the grace and subtlety of an elephant.

“No offense, mate—”

“None taken.”

“Well, you haven’t heard what I’m about to say. You might be offended.”

“Hamo, you’re licking chicken salt off your fingers. Your ability to offend me is pretty minimal.”

“Well, yeah, okay,” Hamish conceded as he finished licking his fingers. “So, I guess you won’t mind me saying then that this place has a bit of a men’s-hostel vibe. It’s like a teenage stoner lives here. It’s a bit rank, mate, a bit ‘semen-y,’ if you know what I mean?”

“Well, I have been practicing for the charity wankathon,” Lou quipped before taking a sip of his pinot noir. He tried to make it look cool, but it was such a cheap brand that it was a little difficult to swallow.

“Seriously, man—” Hamish began.

“Oh, what?!” Lou shot back, much faster and meaner than Hamish had prepared himself for, no longer in the mood for stupid banter.

“Bro, I don’t mean—”

“No! Fucking what?!” Lou spat back, the effect of his wine becoming obvious. “You just said ‘seriously, man.’ Well, ‘seriously’ what? Is my life a bit depressing for you? Is this all a little



bit fucking depressing? Well, shit. Fuck me. Sorry I didn't realize I was here to fucking impress you. Fucking dropping in at random to check up on me. Sorry, I don't have more books. Sorry, I'm not sitting here reading fucking Shakespeare and Chaucer while you eat your goddamned chicken. Jesus fucking Christ."

"Whoa, Lou, dude, calm d—"

"No! Fuck off! Fuck off with your chicken and your fucking...bullshit! I don't go around telling you how to live."

Hamish stopped. The awkward elephant collapsed on them like a clunky piece of Victorian furniture falling down wooden stairs—*thunohklontedfrumpf*.

Lou could tell that Hamish didn't know what to do or say, so he helped him out. "Just go, man."

Hamish sighed before nodding to himself. He left the chicken on the coffee table and patted Lou on the shoulder as he made his way to the door.

"I just don't want to lose two friends, man," Hamish said with a sad set of eyes. "She wouldn't want you to live like this."

Lou just stared into space. Hamish sighed and closed the door.

After a moment or two of silence, Lou tilted his head back, sharply bending his neck, and downed the rest of his terrible-tasting pinot noir. He tossed the bottle onto the other end of the couch when he was finished; it bounced onto the floor as he wiped his lips. He began breathing faster as he thought about what Hamish had just said. His lips slowly tightened, forming a little white line across his mouth. Suddenly, he stood up and flung the bag of fried chicken against the television screen. The bag fell to the floor, and the television rocked a bit, but the idiots on the reality show kept doing whatever it was they were doing.

Lou took a deep breath before walking over to the kitchen sink. He violently turned the tap on and splashed some cold water on his face. It dripped off his face as he looked out the window.

His backyard backed onto a patch of dense woodland and bush before coming to a small cliff that overlooked the sea. *She loved walking along the beach.* Lou shook his head and tightened his knuckles. Water fell in drops from his chin. He looked out the window and saw his ax embedded in his chopping block, with bits of unsorted firewood scattered around the backyard.

Lou kicked open the back door and scooped up his ax, a heavy swoop that saw a piece of wood split in two. He picked up one of the halves and reset it on the chopping block. After the ax fell again, however, one of the new halves shot up and hit him in the hand. He dropped the ax and danced around in a circle, wringing his hand in pain.

“Fuck!!!”

Biting down on his teeth, he picked up the ax and marched over to a tree branch that had always bothered him at the back of his yard. Several angry swings later, the branch creaked and cracked and fell to the ground. Lou breathed heavily, enjoying the sudden rush of adrenaline. It was probably the first time he had enjoyed anything other than the dark watery pools of alcohol in months.

It took ten swings, but the tree itself soon fell. Lou grabbed it by a branch and ripped it out of the way. He eyed another tree behind it. Sweat made flakes of bark stick to his brow. His chest lifted and fell sharply with each breath. His head swam with booze and a sudden rush of endorphins. Before long, he had cut down five trees. *She always wanted a path from the backyard to the cliff, somewhere to put a bench and watch the sunset. Let's see the miserable, bureaucratic pricks at the City Council stop me now.*

Opening the toolshed, Lou put his gardening gloves on and picked up his machete. Marching back to the small path he had already forged, he continued to hack and clear the way. The afternoon sun burned the back of his neck; his shirt stank of sweat, and his shoes were covered in fine dirt. As the sun lowered itself into the evening, and the cloudless sky seamlessly turned to pale magenta, Lou ended his war on nature. He left his gloves, ax, and machete at the frontline.

The wine had worn off, and he was feeling a hangover, but it was a better hangover than usual, one that didn't immediately beg for more wine. He had his first shower in days, washing out the dirt from under his fingernails and small twigs and leaves from his hair, before getting an early night.

The next morning, after the most substantial breakfast he'd had in months—a black coffee—he set back out to finish his project. He was surprised by how far he had actually gotten the day before; drunk Lou was seemingly pretty good at manual labor. Putting his gloves back on, he picked up his ax and tore into his next tree. He didn't stop until lunchtime, a huge mound of butchered flora steadily piling up in his backyard. However, the midday sun began to bear down on him, so he decided to take a break, eat some food, and put on some sunblock. Again, he was surprised at how far he had carved his way into the bush. He figured there couldn't be much further to go before he reached the sea. He hoped he would get there before sundown. He wanted to watch the sunset. But though he worked with a relentless, almost mad energy, another cloudless sky above him tinted purple before he reached the cliff's top.

After showering for a consecutive day, something he hadn't done in months, he sat up in bed and opened his laptop. Loading Google Maps, he zeroed in on his section and got a rough measurement of the distance from his backyard to the cliff's top. It seemed to come to about 50 meters.

The next morning, Lou took his measuring tape with him and worked out how far he had come. The path he had made so far was coming to about 60 meters. With a frown of confusion, he flicked the switch on his measuring tape. It retracted along the ground, coiling up in his hand. *I must be close.*

However, after another day of continuous hacking at the bush, felling trees, and yanking scrub out at the roots, the end was still nowhere in sight. Convinced he must be close, Lou kept working into the night. He kept looking behind him, and though it was dark, he could see the pale

moonlight shining on the white paint of his home, a pale speck of white, 200 meters away. The night sky was clear, filled with stars; an owl hooted; the air became cooler in the dead of night, with endless trees.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Lou said to himself, speaking aloud for the first time since Hamish’s visit. “This can’t be happening.”

Swapping his machete for his tape measure, he measured 220 meters. *I should be deep underwater.* Seeking a logical explanation, Lou reasoned that he was simply tired or delirious or dehydrated, or maybe it was dark, or perhaps the measurement on the computer had been wrong. He walked back home down his path and headed inside. He had a third shower, the water browning around his feet. Staring at the grit swirling down the plughole between his toes, he was so distracted by the confounding matter at hand that he—if only for the passing fraction of a moment—forgot about how much he missed his wife.

Drying himself off, he opened his computer again. There was no doubt: the distance from the edge of his backyard to the cliff’s edge was 50-some meters, a little more or a little less. *I must have measured it wrong with the tape measure.*

“There’s no other explanation,” he mumbled to himself as he fell asleep.

The next day, however, when he measured the path again—this time with a clear head and after a full Irish breakfast of sausages, hash browns, eggs, beans, mushrooms, and two cups of jet-black coffee—it was 203 meters long.

“What the hell is going on?” he asked himself. He reasoned that Google was out of date. *The cliff hasn’t moved.* He reasoned that he’d gone off course. *There’s nowhere else to go.* He gave up; something simply unreal was happening. *No, it isn’t. It can’t be. Things like this don’t happen.* It was happening, no matter how strongly Lou tried to deny it.

He decided to go for a walk along the beach—something he had forbidden himself from doing in recent months—to see if he could make sense of what was happening from the other side.

The sound of the waves, the softness of the sand underfoot, the salty breeze, the faint flash of her smile—he almost turned back. However, when he came to the stretch of beach underneath the clifftop where his path should be, he saw nothing but a thick growth of trees and scrub, untouched.

Lou walked back home and stood at the entrance to his path; the mysterious green hole bore deep into the wood and plants, the scent of sap and freshly cut wood stifling in the morning sun. Gloved up and armed with his ax and machete, Lou stepped across the threshold from his backyard into the path, determined to find the answer.

Smoldering flames of anger rekindled themselves within him as he walked down the path. *I'm not even allowed to do this for her?!* By the time he reached the end of his path, he was enraged and wielded his blades like a warrior on some ancient battlefield. He felt like a conqueror; Mehmed II slaying his way into the streets of Constantinople; Alexander conquering the known world; Achilles seeking his eternal infamy: immortality; Germanicus on the frontier of Rome's glorious banner; Aragorn at the Black Gate.

In his anger, everything began to change. No longer was he simply Lou, the poor bereaved, wearing plain shorts and a cotton T-shirt, carrying an ax and a machete from a hardware store. Now he was Lou the Inexhaustible, Lou the Savage, Lou the Victor, the Black Knight of Revenge en route to save Queen Emma, the Queen of Goodness. Lou's cheap gardening clothes morphed into elaborate, medieval chain mail, and his blades became legendary weapons, forged by the greatest craftsmen in the kingdom. Each branch became the neck of some hideous beast, some foul creature risen from the abyss. He slew them all. The Bard would compose epic poems of the exploits of Lou the Slayer of Death.

As his rage changed him into this colossal figure of myth and legend, so changed the landscape. No longer was he hacking down trees in his backyard, for the branches soon gave way. To his surprise, the cliff was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he stood amid the miserable black Fields of Wrath. The view all around was ill-set and ringed in perpetual darkness. From where he stood,

he saw at his feet how his humble path connected to an ancient one made of stone that led across these vast plains, wrought in fury, stretching all the way to the sorrowful horizon. Turning back, Lou looked down his garden path to his home: faint, fragile, distant. *This can't be happening. I'm dreaming. This is just a nightmare. Soon I'm going to wake up.* Then his home and garden path evaporated, closed over in flame and shadow. There was only one way for Lou to go now: through the seething Valleys of Acrimony.

As he walked along the Broken Road, he tried to wake himself up, but he couldn't. *This is real.* Before he could really come to terms with what was happening, Lou saw something far in the distance, a mere gray shadow across the distant horizon of smoke and mud. The Path led to a crooked Stair that climbed the ridge of a terrible peak. The mountain was a shard of black rock that buttressed the enveloping black clouds, cascading molten rain on either side.

Lou decided to head for the Stair; however, with each step he took, he felt uncontrollable anger stir deeper within him. *All I wanted was to make a path for her! Look what happened! I can't do anything!* He started to run, growing in his hatred. As he ran, desperate men, or what seemed like men, men made of gray sands, tried to plead for him to stop, but he slaughtered all of them. He slit their throats. Grieving women made of pale ash tried to slow him with their mourning, but he stabbed them all, along with their hungry children of shadow. Confused animals without skins writhed in pain—Lou let them live to live out their cruel lives in agony. And he laughed. In his own name, he hated everything. The ground underneath his weighted footsteps cracked and seeped with the odor of sulfur. Crag and thistle lined the Path: broken, twisted, burnt. He ran by lakes of seeping acids and dry riverbeds, where skeletons drowned and drank stone.

After an age of regretful things, Lou finally made it to the Foot of the Stair.

At the Foot of the Stair, he saw a Thing, shrouded in black and standing on a pedestal made of bone. Though the Thing was draped in a cloak of shade, Lou could see that it was Hamish. Or, at least, It would have been Hamish but for the fact that Its face was missing, replaced by a smooth,

stretched piece of skin. Lou tossed down his weapons and approached It slowly. Although It had no eyes, It could seemingly “see” Lou, for Its head turned to face him as he approached. Having forgotten Its own name, and from no mouth, in a shivering voice like a cold and howling wind, It spoke.

“Do you know where you are?” the Thing asked.

“Hamish, it’s me, Lou.”

The faceless, mouthless Thing was silent.

“Hamish—”

“Do you know where you are?” the Thing repeated.

“No.”

“You have journeyed far, down the Demur Passage and through the Ire. You have come now to the Stair of Allay.”

Lou looked up at the crooked stair as it bent upwards, twisted and perilous.

“Do you want to climb the Stair?”

“Where does it go?”

“The Stair of Allay leads to the Ache.”

“The Ache? What’s the Ache?”

“Do you want to climb the Stair?”

“What will I find in the Ache?”

“*Her.*”

Lou became still. The world of the Ire went black and cold and silent, teased with Promise.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you want to climb the Stair?”

“Tell me what you mean!” Lou shouted as he picked up his sword and pointed it toward the Thing.

“Wrath has no use here. You have already passed through Rancor.”

“Hamish, what is happen—”

“The Stair of Allay has two ends: the beginning, the Ire, where you are now, and the Ache,” the Thing said, pointing up the narrow, crooked Stair that led toward the brooding clouds far above. “I am at the beginning; *she* is at the Ache. Whoever lives depends on which end of the Stair you decide to finish your journey.”

“Hamish... I know it’s you.”

“Do you want to climb the Stair?”

Lou faltered. He looked around at the endless vales of nothing, then he looked resolutely at the Thing. *It’s not Hamish.*

“Yes.”

As soon as Lou started walking toward the first step of the Stair, the Thing slowly reached for the skin of Its face and slowly peeled it back. Under the grotesque mask of hideous flesh was Hamish. He looked as though he had just come up for air after drowning for an eternity.

“Lou?! Lou! Lou! Don’t do it! Please don’t do it!” he cried, no longer in some foul voice but his own.

“Hamish?”

“Lou! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I could’ve—I should’ve been a better friend, but I’ve been going through hell, too. Not like you, I know, but...please don’t do this! Turn around, man. Go back. Go home. Please don’t kill me!”

“I have to.”

“No! You don’t! This is all a trick.” The anguish on his face hid a secret that he then revealed. “It’s not really Emma up there. It’s not even a memory. But this is really me. I’m real. I’m here. This is really me, man.”

“You’re lying.”



“I’m not! I promise you, I’m not! I’m real! I brought chicken over to your place just the other day—fried chicken. Remember? It’s not her up there! She’s dead.”

“I have to see her.”

As Lou said this, Hamish began to cry and beg. It wasn’t until Lou was several hundred steps up the Stair that the sounds of Hamish’s agony began to grow faint.

Each step was a battle, and the war never seemed to be won. Broken step after broken step unfurled upwards into the black clouds. The clouds were never reached; the air just became thicker with the smell of smoke and tar. Lou took moments to rest and look down below at the landscape of the Ire. It began to sink into a void of oily seepage of murk. Nothing but darkness and distant flame could be seen, soon smothered in smoke and the wet heaviness of the Nothing. Upwards, all that was left was the notches of the Direful Stair. It bent upwards, forever.

Lou desperately sought some step that wasn’t slanted, one that he could try and sleep on. It occurred to him that he hadn’t slept in ages. He almost came to some strange definition of time, but he had not slept and couldn’t remember the feeling of anything but pain. His idea of time screamed, then faded. He yearned for sleep. *Her*. He kept climbing. There was no place to rest; each step was steeper than the last; each step was taller, narrower. There was no reprieve, no respite, only jagged steps made of stone. The sky never came closer; it was always full of clouds and thunder. Lou slowly realized that his armor grew heavier the higher he climbed. He threw it off. He was then naked, clinging to the very black Root of Anguish.

Inching his way upwards to the smoldering, ashen sky above, he finally saw an end to the Stair. He couldn’t see above it, but he hauled himself up the last mile of the terrible Step, one by one. His body was almost broken by the time he reached the soot-covered precipice of the top of the Stair. Collapsing on the top of the last step, Lou looked up to see her—Emma; she wasn’t there.

He looked around and saw that he was in the middle of a road of an abandoned city that he didn’t recognize. This was the Ache. It was a nightmare of nighttime and pouring rain. The road,

what he assumed was the continuation of his once-garden path, spanned out in both directions, lined with closed stores of faceless mannequins. There were no directions, only empty streets that trailed off in a maze of different avenues and alleys. Skyscrapers of blank steel and glass towered high above him into the sky, like rocks against the crashing waves of a storm. There was nobody in sight; the streets were empty: no cars, no lights, no people, nothing. Just rain alone.

Realizing he had been tricked, Lou looked back to the Stair, but it was too late: it had already been sealed over by a manhole.

“Hamish!” he cried as he tried to pull the manhole cover off with his fingertips. His fingernails broke, and his fingertips bled, but it was no use. The Stair of Allay was sealed to the Ache.

Water fell in such heavy amounts that Lou was soon wet through to his bones. He looked up and down the dark avenues. There was no one, no help from anywhere. All the high-rises were dark. There were no lights. Nobody had stayed as late in this dreadful place as him. He was alone. He shivered in the cold of the rain, his teeth clattering in uncontrollable applause to his stupidity. He hugged himself to keep himself warm as he walked down the empty streets. Everything was black except for some dim blue streetlamps.


The sound of the rain was deafening.

Lou found an awning under which to shelter and considered his options. He didn't know where he was. He was naked. He was about to die of hypothermia. He decided to give up, lie in the gutter, and die. Cold water washed through him, eating his bones. He let himself die. He died a thousand times. And he cried. And he sobbed. And he was pathetic. And he cried. How he cried and saw blackness, and he saw eternity and darkness as one. There was no path. He bit the concrete, and he wept. And then he collapsed, a poor forgotten man alone and naked and adrift in the currents of the faceless cityscape's gutters. The Ache bathed in him.

But he didn't die.

The rain stopped, suddenly, as if turned off by the twist of a faucet, so Lou lifted himself out of the gutter and looked down the avenues. *Why aren't I dead?* All the street signs simply pointed to different districts in the Ache: Downtown; Old Morose; The Blue Mile; Low Mood; Crestfallen; Weeping Wood. A poster for a play caught his eye, glued to a wall, with a quote: “Dignity spites pain.” Walking down many lonely boulevards, walking like a lonely drunk man bobbling on his broken knees, Lou finally came to a crossroad above which was a sign that pointed to someplace new: Home.

Lou staggered down the empty street toward Home. The further he walked, he started seeing strange street signs. They said things like “Yield,” “Permit,” “Receive,” “Enter,” and “Accept.” As soon as Lou passed this last sign, he found himself no longer in the Phantom City of Hurt, but standing outside the front of his house. Before him was the gentle, uneven brick path that led from his gate to his front door, it was shouldered by tufts of grass. A bee hummed from one daisy to another. The garden needed work. A watering can had been overgrown by some weeds; weeds had sprung little yellow flowers; the letterbox was full. Lou realized he was wearing clothes again, the same clothes he had been wearing when he had become the Beast. In a bit of a daze, he pushed open the gate and walked down the path to his front door.

The plaque on the bench that overlooks the sea reads: *Emma (1988-2020), who loved the sea and the sunset.* 

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**David Coyle is a writer from Wellington, New Zealand. He’s written screenplays (*Poppy*, New Zealand Film Commission, 2009), books (*The Bloom*, Unsolicited Press, 2019), and short stories (“The Fall,” Willard and Maple, 2020; “Dis Location,” Inkling, 2020).**

## **Baby Mama, Please No Drama**

**By Bethany Bruno**

It had been such a dry summer.

South Florida's long June days burned fields of jagged-tipped grass into a withered crisp. The air felt stale along the Intracoastal of the Indian River. The beaches reeked of shriveled seaweed along the blazing sands of its shore.

Withered was also the state of my love life, as I was again single and clueless as to why no man wanted to give me the kind of love I craved. Whether it be in the nightclubs of downtown Clematis Street, or the doomed dates formed from the wasteland of online dating, I was unable to find a good guy. I was at the end of my emotional love candle, with only a bit of wick left before complete burnout.

With the push of my mother, desperate to have her only daughter married and taken care of, I decided to try one last time. That summer, I would allow myself to plunge into the uncomfortable depths of dating, which made my whole body tense as if being stretched to the last fibers of muscle. I vamped up my online-dating profile with new selfies and even an updated list of "what I'm looking for." Most girls, I found, never went too in-depth with their profiles. Most are basically bulleted "must-haves," like height, body type, and being employed. My profile, among a sea of exposed breasts and fuzzy photo filters, was plain.

But no matter how desperate I felt, I never caved into behaving like someone I'm just not. I listed my favorite books, like *Jane Eyre* and *The Road*, as a way to show that I was into classics and new-age ideas. I talked about my selfless work as an eighth-grade reading teacher, and the hours of joy I experienced from the book club I had organized. I wrote what I wanted to find in a

guy, which included “kindness, loyalty, and a good sense of humor.” Any man with a decent sense of humor received automatic points, which point toward a promising first date.

Luckily, I didn’t have to go fishing in the online-dating pond for too long. One night, after an hour of searching numbingly through terrible male profiles, Henry’s sweet smile invited me in. His profile, like mine, felt as if it didn’t belong in this oversexualized world. It was filled with all kinds of accomplishments, interests, and, most importantly, proper grammar. The best part was the headline above his photo, which read, “In search of a baby mama, please no drama.” Clearly, a sense of humor was in his arsenal.

Henry’s profile read like my wildest romantic dream. He was a graduate of a prestigious college in the northeast, 26, loved horror movies, and listed over a dozen favorite books I adored. Henry’s profile picture showed off his soft eyes and a perfectly shaped set of white teeth. He was standing beside a large oak tree, with the sunlight bursting through the leaves in small strands, one illuminating the top of his short, wavy brown hair. I felt safe as I searched over his profile for what seemed like hours. “This is ridiculous,” I told myself aloud. “Just message him and get it over with!”

I wrote Henry a silly introductory message, consisting of “Hey! I’ll be your baby mama, and I have no drama. Care to chat?” After I sent it, I rose out of my bed and walked over toward my desk to grab my lukewarm glass of lemonade. As I took a sip and switched my ceiling fan on high, I heard the familiar “ping!” of a received message. I braced myself for the inevitable letdown of Henry not being the guy I imagined, that he would say something inappropriate in his response. Instead of some sort of sexual innuendo, Henry wrote, “Thank God I finally found you. We don’t have much time, so let’s get to it.” And with that, I slowly began to understand why it never worked with any other man before him.

Within a week of chatting back and forth feverishly online, we swapped phone numbers and began to talk every night for hours. Everything was discussed between us, even our darkest

and deepest untold beliefs and the shame we carried from our lives. Henry, I learned, was the younger brother of Sam, who died only a few years prior and who Henry hopelessly looked toward as a marker for his place in the world. I shared my own shame in the death of my father to cancer last year, and how badly I wish I could have done more to make his final days peaceful.

“He always worried about me,” I said late one night to Henry. “He worried that I would be alone or left to fend for myself. I told him to shut up. Can you believe I did that? I was just so angry at him constantly.”

Henry, always so careful in his speech, paused for a moment before saying, “You were angry because he was leaving you, right? I’m sure he’s forgiven you. And, you know, you’re not alone. Not anymore.” Henry gave me hope for a future in which I would always be loved and cared for. That future included children of our own, which he also desperately wanted. He was ready for the next step, and the steps beyond that.

“Can we meet now? I’m ready. Plus, I feel like we’ve already wasted so much time as it is,” he said.

This would usually be the part in any horror dating story where the girl instantly blocked her match and never looked back, but I couldn’t bring myself to even contemplate not seeing him. Something was telling me to give Henry a chance, to give what our love could be a chance. And that’s when I spoke up after a few moments of silence and said, “Okay, Henry, okay, but just promise me you’re not a woman and that your name is really Henry, alright?” He laughed wholeheartedly before answering, “Definitely not a woman, and yes, my name *is* Henry. You’ll understand soon enough. See you tomorrow, Meg. Goodnight.” And with those words, which made my heart soar into the ceiling of my bedroom, I laid there silently, yet my head was aloud with words from Henry. In less than 12 hours, I would finally meet the man I hoped was all I needed.

It was a warm Friday afternoon; I was dressed in my cutest maroon T-shirt dress, which was the perfect amount of loose as it hung off my body. My short dark hair was straightened; my make-up was natural-looking; and I was wearing my favorite perfume, which smelled of fresh sunflowers. I didn't recognize the address Henry gave me, but it was a residential street. Was this his house? Was he planning on making me dinner and eating together over a candlelit table setting? The anticipation was beginning to become too much. My mother wished me luck as I drove off toward my date.

As I pulled onto Abercorn Street, the sidewalks stretched for what seemed like miles. All of the houses were newer models, clearly having been built within the last ten years or so. As I reached 1880, I parked my small compact car in the gravel driveway that crunched underneath my weight. I hopped out of my car and walked up toward the front steps when I heard someone shout from inside the house. "The door is open, Megan. Come on in!" I took a deep breath, pulled out my car keys, and placed them in between my fingers, just in case this went south. But even with all my anxieties about what could happen next, I walked into the house and closed the front door behind me.

Henry was standing by his kitchen counter, preparing a meal. His hair had been brushed down and smoothed, and he was wearing a blue button-down shirt and khakis. He looked just like his picture and better than my imagination had led me to believe.

"Hello, Megan," he said sweetly. "See, I told you I wasn't a woman."

He chuckled to himself softly before patting the barstool beside him. The silence between us was palpable, as both of us were trying to gauge the other's emotions. Finally, after sensing my unease about our date, he spoke up.

"We don't have much time. So, if it's alright with you, I'd like to get right to the point," he said. I laughed and waved to him to go ahead. "Okay."

"Do you remember what my profile caption was?" he said.

I nodded, remembering how much I appreciated his quirky sense of humor.

“Well, I wasn’t trying to be funny. I was as honest as I could be, in a way. I really am looking for someone to have children with. The only catch is that, well, it would have to be now. Otherwise, it will never happen,” he said.

“I don’t understand,” I said.

My whole body tensed in anticipation for what was about to come next, and for what was surely going to jab a jagged knife into my already defenseless heart.

“I don’t have long, literally,” he said as he stopped cooking and made his way over to the barstool beside me. “I have maybe months, tops.”

I, again, laughed, but awkwardly.

“Sure, okay. This is a really sad way to get someone to sleep with you. You already know how I feel about...” I began before he interrupted.

He placed his hand upon mine then grasped it like he held a small, delicate mouse. His face molded into pain, a deep aching within him.

“I know you think I’m funny, and I do have my moments, but I mean it. This is why I wanted us to meet so soon. If we’re going to do this, we don’t have much time,” he said.

“How could you ask that of someone, of any woman? We’re not just incubators for you to pass on your bloodline,” I said, standing up and making my way toward the front door.

“I know, I know!” he said, reaching his arms out toward me, almost touching my left hand. “Please, Megan, just hear me out.”

My body froze, out of fear and confusion. What had I gotten myself into? And how was I going to get out of this now? Most importantly, why did I not feel the urge to run as fast as I could without looking back?

“I’m not doing this for me,” he said. “I know what you’re thinking, and that’s not the case. I’m doing it for her, and for you.”



He motioned toward a teal-colored photo frame at the end of the kitchen counter. In it was a photo of a young Henry and a blonde woman at a theme park in Florida. Both were wearing ridiculously large hats. They were both smiling like it was the best day of their lives.

“Please, Megan, you told me once that you want to feel safe, to feel loved, and to be taken care of. I can give you all of those things, now and when I’m gone,” he said. “You will have my life insurance and my inheritance. All that I ask for in return is to leave something behind for my mom. So that she can go on living, too.”

I sat back down on the stool, listened, and played over the scenario in my mind. Henry and I would still be a couple, and he would care for me. But, not so unlike other couples, we could begin having sex straight away, in the hopes that I would become pregnant before the end of the summer and before the end of Henry’s life.

“I know you think I’d only be using you for your body,” he began, “but it’s more than that. You’re everything I ever wanted. I just wanted to find you later on in my life. I wasn’t ready for it, but now I have to be. I have nothing left to lose but time.”

As I sat there, I began pondering the waves of emotions I felt. I didn’t try to leave. I didn’t argue that this whole situation was insane. It felt right. And it felt exciting. I stared into Henry’s pleading eyes and understood his offering for a life that contained everything but him.

“But if you’re gone, what would be left for me? Do you really think all I want is money and a baby?” I asked.

Henry placed his hands over his face, traced the smooth jawline with his fingers, and said, “You would have me. I can give you all that I have until I’m gone. And a child who will love you forever.”

We talked for hours, ate dinner, and carried on our date that night and throughout that summer. Our time together was short, unusual, and yet so fulfilling. This kind of love was nothing like I had ever imagined, yet it was exactly what I needed. I wanted him; I wanted this life; and I

wanted to believe that somehow Henry would live, that he wasn't dying, or that by some miracle, he would be saved and we could spend our lives together. Like so many summer romances, this love would most likely not survive past the fall. One night, after a long discussion on what it means to leave behind a legacy, Henry and I held each other in his bed. His bare chest was soft and beginning to lose muscle. I ran my fingers through his thinning hair and kissed him for what seemed like hours.


“Are you scared?” I asked, staring up toward his still handsome face.

“I don't want this to end,” he said, while refusing to look into my eyes. Warm tears began to stream down his cheeks. I wiped each away with my finger, then kissed him once more.

“We have now,” I said.

The Florida grasses soon blossomed once more as the summertime heat slowly faded. With the decline of the sun came the disappearance of my period. Henry was still lying in bed when I woke him up with a kiss and placed the positive test into his hand. His scowl turned into a grin as he reached for my hand and held it between his and the test. Henry called his mother and told her of the news. She was surprised, but just as Henry had predicted, she became revived with life. My mother was happy but concerned for my life moving forward. Nobody really understood our relationship or the kind of love we felt between each other. On some deeper level, Henry and I felt like we were saving each other from a life lived unfilled, like puzzle pieces that had been lost for years, finally connecting once more before being disassembled.

Henry died in mid-October when I was about a month along. I held him as he passed and comforted his mother in the moments afterward. The death of Henry set in motion the exit of my blissfully ignorant state of mind. My summertime love had entered and departed from my life faster than a Florida afternoon rain shower. But a small fragment of this love remained behind.

Our son, Samuel, was born the following May and came into the world with wavy brown hair, which shined in the sunlight. 

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**Bethany Bruno is a writer born and raised in Florida. Her work has been previously published in *Lunch Ticket Magazine*, *Dash Literary Journal*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *Nabu Review*, and *Metafore Magazine*. She's currently working on her first novel.**

## Squirrel Bait

By Matthew Sheetz

“Don’t eat that! It won’t end well for you!” I yell, hoping to save the otherwise doomed little creature.

The squirrel doesn’t seem to care one bit what I think, though. She picks up the nut in her tiny paws and rotates it several times, apparently inspecting it for quality. Sadly, it passes the flawed quality check, and my little friend lifts the nut to her mouth.

What I appreciate most about squirrels is their magnificent tails. Of course, some tails aren’t so impressive—casualties of a violent squirrel fight, which leaves them truncated, skewed, or dangling at an odd angle. I don’t mind if *he* kills the deformed ones. Just leave the cute ones with perfect tails alone.

Up the big pin oak Miss Perfect Tail scampers, her last lunch tightly wedged between her jaws. In March, before the leaves come out, it’s easy to spot their massive nests way up in the top branches. When the winter winds howl, it would be so cozy to cuddle up in those rodent mini-Death Stars with their endless passages and secret rooms.

Too bad her nest doesn’t have a super laser, like a real Death Star. She could vaporize *his* house. Beautify the neighborhood and end *his* tyranny once and for all. Little Grand Moff Fluffy McNutmuncher would give the order. “Energize the super laser!” she’d squeak in a cute little squirrel voice, sounding much like Alvin the chipmunk.

Speaking of chipmunks, *he* could go ahead and kill every last one of those little wannabe-squirrels, for all I care. Their tails are nothing but tiny little nubbins. In fact, calling those pitiful appendages tails is a grievous misnomer. Stubs, ugly stubs, is all they are.

My wife, Linda, helped foster my appreciation of the differences between cute and ugly animals. She always said that humans, most of them at least, fell into the “ugly animal” category.

I'd so much rather see ugly animals—a category that includes my neighbor—suffer than cute ones. Would I care if *he* writhed in pain for hours, screaming until he couldn't breathe anymore? And then died with *his* last thought being how could anyone endure such excruciating agony? Not a bit.

*He* moved in the day after Linda died. He came to my door to introduce himself when *he* had to have known I was grieving. Jesus, my eyes weren't even dry yet. Even though it was irritating to be disturbed during that dark time, a part of me wondered where I would ever find companionship again. The road in front of me was empty, a featureless path winding its way through a barren, treeless countryside.

In contrast, my journey with Linda up until then had been filled with enchantment and wonder, like touring the Magic Kingdom and Epcot on repeat. By the time you get to the last attraction, you've seen and done so many fantastic things that the first one seems brand new again. The analogy applied both figuratively and literally in our case. We went there a lot.

How we had longed for a kitten or a puppy to complete our lives, but our allergies kept our dreams from ever coming true. On weekends, we'd both pop 50 mg of Benadryl, then visit the animal shelter to play with the residents. She gravitated toward fluffy kittens, while I preferred the smallest puppies. After the staff kicked us out, which they always would, we'd stop at TGIFridays for potato skins and Bud Light before going home and falling into bed. Sometimes I wouldn't wake up until the next morning.

Anyway, after such a wonderful life with Linda, I knew it would be naïve to hope for anything remotely approximating what I had lost, which is why I even entertained for a short while the possibility of a friendship with *him*. *He* struck me as the type who could perhaps (although only barely) hurdle the six-inch-high bar I had set.

And, to be honest, the fact that we were neighbors removed the biggest chunk of the work which goes into making new friends. Otherwise, where do you meet them when you're my age? Church? I don't go. Work? I'm retired. The store? C'mon.

After a couple of months going by myself to the animal shelter, which just felt bleak and sad without Linda around, I decided I needed to get to know *him* better. What alternative did I have, anyway?

One warm June Saturday, I asked *him* over for brats and beers. Yes, brats. Pigs aren't little, furry, or cute. And they have ugly tails.

Anyway, we sat on the deck long after sunset, sharing stories and getting to know each other. Surprisingly, *his* wife had died recently as well. Reminiscing felt so therapeutic, sharing stories about Linda and realizing that someone else had experienced a loss as devastating as mine.

The depth of *his* sorrow touched me deeply. Somehow, I figured nobody else in the world could feel my unique brand of grief. Yet, *he* appeared more than able. Often, *his* sobs would prevent *him* from speaking for ten minutes or more. Seeing someone else suffer over his loss was strangely—perhaps selfishly, but I'm not apologizing for it—comforting to me.

The brats, beer, and blubbering sessions on the deck became weekly occurrences, lasting well into fall. As the first few college basketball scores started rolling in, I began to feel like something was missing. Our friendship was based solely on grief...plus lousy beer and overcooked pork products.

Eventually, I began to bring up other topics. Basketball. *He* didn't care much for it. Dang. No chumming around watching games for us. Animals. *He* saw them as food, nothing else. Disney World. Never did I see a nose turn up so quickly. All the things Linda—and I, as well, of course—cared so deeply about.

That left politics and religion. Oh boy. I felt like what those Russian soldiers must have felt during WWII when their officers made them link arms and clear minefields by walking straight through them.

Neither of us were churchgoers. So, after an hour or so of bashing the faithful, there wasn't much more to talk about. Opiate of the masses, contradictions galore, hypocrisy and closed-mindedness run rampant—the usual topics. In the absence of any conflict whatsoever, though, the conversation sputtered and died like an Escalade with the gas gauge stuck at half, barreling down the highway 400 miles after its last fill-up.

Bringing us to politics. Linda was a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat. Converted me within a month of when we met. It didn't take much. I'd never given a whole lot of thought to the whole social justice thing. Lower taxes, less government, bootstraps, etc., were what stood out to me as the important issues. But now I see I was falling into the dangerous trap of unmitigated self-interest, which so many of our politicians allow us, even encourage us, to fall into. Luckily, Linda threw me a rope and pulled me out of that deep, rotting, worm-infested well.

Now, *he* was sitting there saying how socialism was ruining the country. Started with the New Deal, then LBJ's Great Society, and finally Obama—the devil incarnate, in *his* opinion. Of course, I had to disagree. I couldn't just sit there, could I? We went back and forth for maybe an hour, neither saying anything the other hadn't already heard a thousand times before. In the end, I had to cut the conversation off by saying I was tired. *He* showed himself out, and we haven't spoken, other than a quick “Hi” in the yard, since.

With the one contact I had with the outside world gone, my thoughts turned inward. A commercial during an NCAA game brought to mind a show Linda and I used to watch. *Dr. Phil*. One day during “Marriage Week,” he had on a couple who agreed about everything. The two of them seemed perfectly compatible and deliriously happy. It irritated me that Dr. Phil didn't seem

to think so. He spouted some psychobabble about “losing yourself” in someone else. What hogwash. I rooted for them to ignore him and continue on with their blissful life.

What is marriage besides having two people think as one? There wasn't a thing Linda and I disagreed on. Even the red-and-black monkey-silhouette shower curtain some people might have found trashy-looking. And the concrete gnome with the turned-up, pointy-toed boots and pocket watch. Not even the goose wearing a raincoat and a hat with ear flaps, or the sappy-looking Hummel porcelain figurines. All 53 of them. Who knew German children in their lederhosen could find so many inane things to do? Sitting on fences, herding geese, admiring flowers.

No, Linda and I were two hearts living in just one mind. (Sorry, Phil Collins, but nobody since has said it better than you.) What could possibly be wrong with that? In fact, what could possibly be more right? More perfect? We were the epitome of a married couple. I didn't resent for one second absorbing her beliefs and opinions, as Bounty paper towels absorb spilled grape juice.

During our political discussion, *he* made some snide remark to the effect that *he* would never dream of losing himself in *his* spouse. *He* would always think for himself. I asked *him* what *his* wife thought about that. According to *him*, she didn't mind it a bit and mostly agreed with *him* anyway. Hearing that was what tired me out the most and sent me to bed that night.

Shortly after our falling out was when the squirrel poisonings began. At first, I thought there must have been a new cat in the neighborhood with all the little carcasses piling up. But when I looked closer, none of them had a mark on them. It struck me as very strange. There wouldn't be that many dying of old age in such a short time span.

Finally, it hit me. One day, I was taking out the trash and saw *him* out of the corner of my eye. *He* was holding a shovel, and in its blade was a poor, fluffy dead squirrel. As *he* dumped it over the back fence, I swear I saw *him* chuckle. That's when I knew.



I knew *he* was killing them by injecting a concentrated bromadiolone solution into acorns and scattering them throughout his yard. Squirrels would take the nuts, munch on them as they always do, the little scamps, and then die slowly over the next few days as their natural blood-coagulating mechanisms failed, and they hemorrhaged out.


Um, at least that's probably what *he* was doing. How would I know for sure, though? What I do know is that I'm living next door to the John Wayne Gacy of the squirrel kingdom.

And if discovering my neighbor was a squirrel serial killer wasn't weird enough, the other day, when *he* was out working in *his* yard, I almost choked on my Hot Pocket when I noticed *his* face. I dropped my lunch—which was still far too hot to eat without burning the roof of my mouth, anyway—and ran straight to the mirror. Sure enough, the two of us are basically Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen! When they were little, that is. I can't believe I didn't notice our resemblance before.

Another strange thing. When *he* and I used to go on walks together—before the incident, that is—the other neighbors would say things to me but look straight through *him* like *he* wasn't even there. When I would try to draw *him* into the conversation, they would look at me like I was crazy.

Yes, my life's been so strange since Linda died. I can't sit back and let it just keep happening to me, though. I have to do something about it. Finally, I work up the courage to call the ASPCA. They'll stop this madness.

I sit at the kitchen table looking out over his yard and dial the number. An older woman's voice answers, "Can I help you?" I explain that my neighbor is murdering squirrels and give them *his* address. She clickety-clacks on her computer a bit and then asks me to repeat it. Then, in a voice that is no longer solicitous, and contains a hint of "you're crazy," she says there's only me at 305 and the Simpsons at 301. There is no house listed at 303, *his* address. Unbelievable. You'd think the city would do a better job of keeping house numbers straight. After checking for the third time at my insistence, she hangs up.

It's almost as if *he* doesn't exist anywhere but in *my* mind. How preposterous. I start humming Phil Collins again for some unknown reason. "Two minds living in just one heart." That's how it goes, isn't it? Sometimes I get song lyrics backward. 

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**Matthew Sheetz retired after a career in medical research and began writing fiction. He recently published a short story in *Avescope Magazine* and has another accepted and waiting for publication in *Boned*. In addition to writing short stories, he is seeking representation for an MG historical fiction novel.**

# Book Review

## A Window into Trauma and the Messiness of it All

**Title:** *The Gnome Stories*

**Author:** Ander Monson

**Print Length:** 192 pages

**Publisher:** Graywolf Press

**Review by** Julia Romero

Ander Monson's *The Gnome Stories* is a look into the darkness that subtly affects suburban life's underbelly. From sex to murder, *The Gnome Stories* covers it and then some. Monson combines first-person perspective, eerie tone, and stream-of-consciousness style, with a hint of science-fiction, to thoroughly explore the fragile, intricate, and perverse nature of the human psyche when forced through trauma.

Monson is the author of eight books, four non-fiction, two poetry collections, and two works of fiction. His most recent publications include *I Will Take the Answer* and *The Gnome Stories*, both published by Graywolf Press on February 4 of this year. Among his other achievements, Monson edits the literary magazine *DIAGRAM* and directs the MFA program at the University of Arizona.

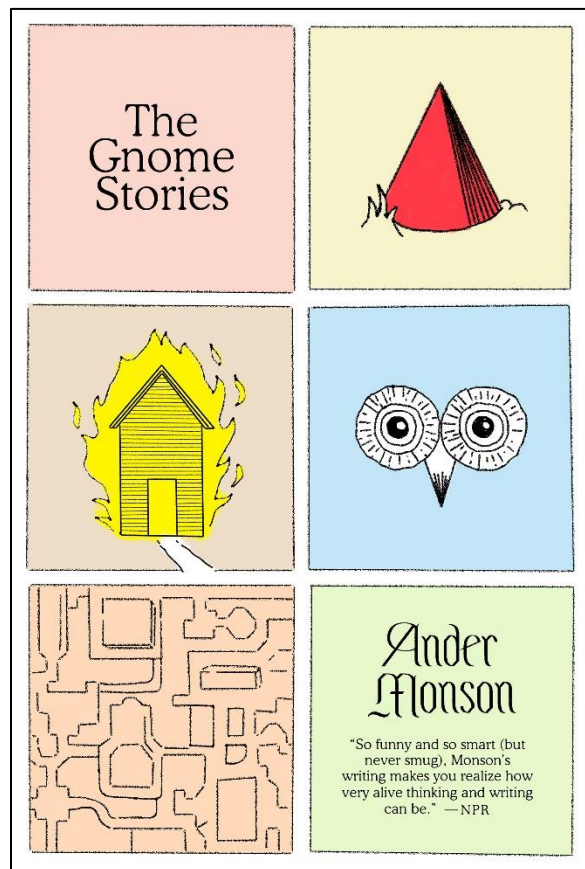
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*Monson shows the interconnectedness of life by exploring the far-reaching impact we can have on others and vice versa.*

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Monson's long and fulfilling career has led him to this new work of fiction, which is a culmination of eleven short stories, many that first appeared in different forms in various

publications. This collection of short stories follows eleven narrators attempting to make sense of their lives amid significant uprooting moments. In "Weep No More Over This Event," a recent divorce combined with a traumatic home invasion sends the narrator into a panic-induced spiral, which ends with his own descent into home invasions. "The Reassurances" follows a man who accepts a job at a facility filled with cryogenically frozen bodies, including his recently killed ex-girlfriend. The last story, "Our Song," explores the extent someone will go to keep lost love, even going so far as carelessly deciding to code a love song inside the traumatized memories of a famous songwriter.



The inner turbulence of the narrators is juxtaposed against the benign backdrop of suburban America. Although each story takes place in a different American city, readers are keenly aware that the outcome of the narrator's actions extends beyond their journey. Monson shows the interconnectedness of life by exploring the far-reaching impact we can have on others and vice versa. As a result, *The Gnome Stories* as a whole feels like one cohesive entity. Conversely, each story is distinctively idiosyncratic and could be enjoyed on its own. While every story involves a traumatic event, Monson uses his centralized writing style to explore the politics of hardship—in other words, everyone handles trauma differently.

The raw, often disturbing subject matter keeps the reader glued to the page. Monson capitalizes on our natural inclination to stare at a burning building or car accident on the side of the road. His stream-of-consciousness style allows Monson to really delve into the psyche of under-explored individuals and push boundaries on taboo topics while somehow maintaining relatability. Monson's writing style mostly worked to his benefit but there were times where it felt overwhelming due to the large number of substantial themes presented at one time. This technique often left residual feelings of disconnectedness.

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*Monson capitalizes on our natural inclination to stare at a burning building or car accident on the side of the road.*

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*The Gnome Stories* is a good recommendation for any reader who is fed up with overused tropes that do little to challenge preconceived notions. Ander Monson does not hold back at the reader's expense, which results in a refreshing and welcome change. 🍁



Ander Monson is the author of eight books, including the forthcoming *I Will Take the Answer* and *The Gnome Stories* from Graywolf. He edits the magazine *DIAGRAM* <thediagram.com> among other projects, and he directs the MFA program at the University of Arizona.



Julia Romero is a senior at New York University studying English and communications. She has a keen interest in books that test the limits of reality and offer new insights. Her hodgepodge of publishing experience includes writing book reviews and recommendations on her blog, *Booklopedia*, and writing feature stories with *Encore Magazine*.


## Poetry



*"Simplicity" By Fabrice Poussin*

## In Summer's Garden

By Dominic Windram


In summer's verdant garden, a profusion  
Of wonderful flowers: from blood red roses  
Of passion; to milk white ones of innocence.  
From bluebells soaked in the color of the seas  
And oceans, to the pink glow of carnations;  
From the golden radiance of sunflowers,  
To the enchanting sight of sweet buttercups. 

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**Dominic Windram is a poet and personal tutor from Hartlepool in the North East of England. He has had numerous poems published in *New Poetry* (2018), *The Pangolin Review* and more recently in *October Hill Magazine*. Currently, he is a resident poet on P.N.N (Progressive News Network), based in Miami, Florida.**

## Willow Lake

By Bobbi Sinha-Morey

In my dream, my pashmina  
over my shoulders, my shy  
heart wrapped in its solace,  
I took the brick path by  
Willow Lake, a golden oriole  
alive in the wind with its black  
tail and wings, a child's fort  
hidden behind white-fingered  
birch trees. I was alone with  
my own trembling thoughts,  
the quiet sky so patient as if  
listening to my breath;  
butterflies in their flurry of  
yellow wings, and I felt  
the earth waken my senses.  
I was so still gazing upon  
the most vibrant roses I'd  
ever seen quivering there  
so joyfully as if they were  
brightly dressed young girls  
sitting in the back pew of  
a church. I clung to the hush  
in the air, and words of what  
could've been a morning  
prayer forever stuck to my  
tongue. 

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**Bobbi Sinha-Morey** has been writing for many years. “The Violet Hours” and “Wild Amethyst” are some of her works. Publications include *Plainsongs* and *Pirene's Fountain*.

# Figures

By Trevor Maynard

The figures are a lot higher  
Than  
THEY  
Are saying

Up to a factor of three  
SOME  
Are  
Saying


The question is  
Do I believe  
THEM, or SOME

Meanwhile  
It is not the figures that are dying  
Meanwhile  
It is humans with given names  
Mothers, fathers  
Daughters, Sons  
Every other personal descriptor  
Meanwhile...is such a mean time

The figures  
THEY, and SOME, agree  
Are rising, thriving  
Spreading, virus-like  
Until becoming  
Statistical Gods



Which congregation will you join  
THEY or SOME  
Or somewhere in between  
Will you follow "The Statistical Mean?"

Or none  
Become an atheist  
And watch white cherry blossoms  
Blow in the breeze  
Across the graves of the dead  
Remembering each name  
Of each human  
Not the figures  
That  
THEY  
Or  
SOME  
Say 

---

**Trevor Maynard has several published collections including *The Path Now Known*, *Grey Sun Dark Moon*, and *Keep On Keepin' On*, as well as his one-act play anthology *Four Truths*. He is the editor of "Poems from The Lockdown," "Nature 20/20," and "The Poetic Bond" series.**

## **Hay Moon's Morn and Eve**

**By Eduard Schmidt-Zorner**

Mellow are the July nights  
when the sunset's reddish fading  
and the early morning lights  
dawning blur and blend together.

When summer with red roses  
bleeds to death so rapidly,  
cawing ravens mourn the dead,  
the blackbird has not sung  
its last song yet.

Warm rays from the sunset  
make distant peaks glow red,  
the scream of the wild eagle  
sounds over the forest silhouette,  
while pale-cold falls the mist  
into the closing day.

Under lime trees, under elms,  
under thatched roofs' hanging wings  
overgrown with moss and weeds,  
stretching wide and shielding.

I want to put into a song  
what on moonlit village green  
I heard the fairies lisping.  
What gray stone's mossy green  
inscription said to me.

Fog pictures rise in twilight,  
from the dark days 'past.  
I hear faint voices whisp'ring,  
sounds of pleasure, lament, anger.  
A last farewell, so distant.

Silent night in the deep forest  
around the birches' black white bark;  
around the alder's trunks so dark,  
flows the moonlight soft and mild.  
Mellow are the July nights  
when the sunset's reddish fading  
and the early morning lights  
dawning blur and blend together.


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bleeds to death so rapidly,  
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flows the moonlight soft and mild. 

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**Eduard Schmidt-Zorner is a translator and writer of poetry, haibun, haiku, and short stories. He writes in four languages and has been published in 91 anthologies, literary journals, and broadsheets.**

## Enjoy the Silence

By Sarah Butchin

You loved the song so I learned to love it too  
Pieces of me, more of you  
It played in my head as we laughed in the booth  
I was warm, you were aloof  
You didn't love me but I thought you could  
You couldn't love me but I prayed you would  
Fluorescent lights burned sterile white  
Too harsh for that hour of night  
But I hoped they would help you see me.  
You walked me home as the sun rose slow over the city's hills  
Sky pink kisses, the innocent thrill  
You didn't love me but I thought you could  
You couldn't love me but I prayed you would  
Holding me tight in an empty lot  
I wanted more, I knew you did not  
But I hoped one day you would know me.  
That you would care. 

---

**Sarah Butchin lives in Scottsdale, Arizona where she is an MFA student, a wonderful mother to her five-year-old twins, a hard-working freelance writer, and a rather adequate wife. Her debut novel *In the Time of Towertown* will be released through Black Rose Writing in mid-2020.**

## The Grief Eater

By Phil Goldstein

He has many names, but what He does never varies.  
He feeds off the untimely deaths of children, among other delicacies.

He feasts on families torn asunder like a ravenous wolf.  
He eagerly devours silent agonies. I have the bite marks to prove it.

Spectral face unseen, hooded and cloaked,  
He has stalked us for millennia, and me for decades.

He towers over even the tallest of men — *good god!* you might say —  
yet He is anything but. He has but one malignant purpose.


He swoops in like a shadowy rocket, having targeted His prey.  
Pain is His sustenance and what He multiplies in His wake.

I remember the first time I saw His eel of a tongue  
as He salivated over the cold sweat on my hairless chest.

He could sense it inside of me: a glass door shattered but still intact.  
He would treat every shard of me as a morsel. *Mmmmm.*

I did not give Him the satisfaction of crumbling. I ran.  
I changed my face and buried any trace of my scent.

I was a cunning quarry. I was a haunted, hunted boy who  
became a haunted, hunted man. Eventually, He found me.

I stood and ran no more. He fluttered. I told Him, *You've lost;*  
*I bled it out on my own. There is nothing more for you to drink.* 

---

**Phil Goldstein is a journalist and writer who lives in Washington, D.C. His poetry has been published in the journals *In Parentheses*, *The Ideate Review*, *Awakened Voices*, *The Galway Review*, *Amethyst Review*, and is forthcoming in *Rust+Moth*. By day, he works as a senior editor for Manifest, a content marketing agency.**


## Somewhere

By Mike McNamara

Something called loneliness. Which  
was once just a word. Becomes a  
feeling. Somewhere on this journey.  
Between chalk and candlelight.

Clouds. Motionless in the sky.  
Still river and a waveless sea.  
Seeds frozen that will never flower.  
Someone who was once you. Once me.

A tattooed night. A painted day.  
Framed between a timeless hour.  
Voiceless. A prayer. Paused  
midway between the longing and the praying.


Halfway across our own Rubicon.  
We touch. For a moment. Drift  
as in a dream. One heartbeat.  
Caught. Between candlelight and chalk. 

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**Mike McNamara's publishing credits include *Overhearing the Incoherent* (Crevatt and Crevatt, 1997), *This Transmission*, (The Argotist Online, 2019) and a collection entitled, *Dialling A Starless Past* (Arenig Press, November 2019).**

## Ash

By Emlia Rose

You can braid stars and cradle my  
platinum tresses spilling over the  
willow of waterfalls, I'll root up from  
the barracks of Babylon far off from  
this flatbed of rock, shell, and Jack  
Daniels on some atrophied night in  
these thrice butchered fields just to  
tell you I'm Lorelee and perhaps by  
that time I'll come home to stitch plaid  
on your branch again, resuming our  
porridge days and we can make leaf  
print pastels by the shimmer of sun  
lit sensation at this twisting of fate  
where once we had flowered in dime  
store poetics with the song of our souls  
on the crosscurrents. 

---

**Emlia Rose is a poet, dollmaker, and animal rescue coordinator. She has been published in *PoetTree Rascal* and *Octagon*.**



## Bitters


By Eugene Stevenson

What have you got on me,  
to make this mattress  
so unruly, unread  
newspaper on the floor?  
If at all the time was past,  
the stone's throw picnic  
of the hills & river stayed  
until the black fright  
storm died dry & fled.

Turned with words, basted,  
wounds & all, with brine  
to prickle the pink skin's  
edges, the cuts rise to hold  
printer's ink, high above a  
textured page,  
well beyond the rage of  
childless women who  
use those words to  
different ends.

Listen to the song the  
wind is turning on,  
carry down the street.  
Gull's wing clipped,  
dog's nose dry,  
sky bound with roses.  
In translation  
loses life & blood,

damned to isolation.  
The skull, hard & sullen,  
mocks the easy mash  
of gray & ganglia.

Where I am is  
where I have been  
is where I have gone  
is where I am going to be  
in the middle of  
the month: sea-horsed,  
with lemon peel &  
bitters inside me. 

---

**Eugene Stevenson writes to make some semblance of order out of disorder, to make sense of the unthinkable, to make still photographs out of daily rushes. His poems have appeared in *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, *DASH Literary Journal*, *Dime Show Review*, *Gravel Literary Magazine*, *The Hudson Review*, and *Swamp Ape Review*.**


## Portrait of Me, 17, In a Sapphire Gown and a Gossamer Shawl

By Maria Picone

Once upon a Denny's  
after prom we gathered,  
took pictures &, commemorating choices won,

began to speculate  
into what forms we could  
extend our opalescent shapes into: reforge.

I didn't know I  
couldn't fill a wallet  
with recession's bylaws, couldn't sing a ballad

over eggs and pancakes,  
we anted up  
our crumpled teenage money & we waited, hushed. 


---

**Maria S. Picone has an MFA from Goddard College. Her hobbies are learning languages, looking at cats on the Internet, and painting. Her poetry appears in *Mineral Lit Mag*, *Ariel Chart*, and *Eleventh Transmission: 45 Poems of Protest*.**

## Lupine Fields

By Kevin Casey

In Maine, the larger fields were guarded  
by a sign—often a plywood board tacked  
to a tomato stake like a roadside cross  
before a shrine: “Please don’t pick the flowers.”  
And usually the cars pulled over just  
to venerate with cell phone cameras  
those waves of tapered tails of magenta,  
cream and violet rolling beneath  
the slate blue line of mountains that trimmed the sky.

But further north, these same blooms were used  
as a cover crop for potatoes,  
“green manure” planted just to be tilled  
back into the soil—gem-studded scepters  
buried for the benefit of those tubers  
in their dusty shrouds, like pharaohs interred  
in a trough shot through with amethyst florets,  
the precious jewels easing the burden  
of having to wait for Fall’s resurrection. 

---


**Kevin Casey is the author of *Ways to Make a Halo* (Aldrich Press, 2018) and *American Lotus* (Glass Lyre Press, 2018). *And Waking...* was published by Bottom Dog Press in 2016. His poems have appeared in *Rust+Moth*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, and Ted Kooser's syndicated column “American Life in Poetry.”**

## Song of My Soul

By Robert Feldman

let this song gently brush your lips  
that it might forever sleep in light  
that it might forever heal careless voices  
that it might forever protect you from the contagion of this world's dire heart

let this song tenderly caress your cheeks  
that it might forever rest with softness  
that it might forever blush with longing and joy  
that it might swell from the bittersweetness of this world's squandered innocence

and let this song carry your feet  
that it might forever jingle from the rhythm of payals  
that it might forever breath eternal  
that it might forever usher in the hearts of imperfect poets  
into this world's elusive grandeur and everlasting grace 


---

**Robert Feldman is inspired by iconic members of his hometown Paterson's literary tradition, most notably Allen/Louis Ginsberg and William Carlos Williams. Robert continues writing, publishing, and presenting his work (including *Hineni*, 2018; *Sunflowers, Sutras, Wheatfields and other ArtPoems*, 2019) while he makes fire paintings and plays tabla.**

**Forecast**  
**By Steve Abbott**

Ten days in two weeks, rain  
in steady drizzle or monsoon curtains  
that make the street writhe a torrent.  
Of course, I'm never satisfied  
with the weather—what everybody  
talks about, sometimes elated  
but more commonly, at least  
in central Ohio, whining.  
I'd prefer things my way—  
a life subject to my whim,  
keystrokes or swipes at screens  
conjuring a universe I command.

This afternoon's humidity clings  
like wet underwear, a forecast  
whose accuracy will be wrung out  
by a line of digital green stuttering  
across the screen of the app  
I downloaded waiting for another  
load of laundry to dry. The future is  
predictable, still out of my hands,  
but I adjust plans and complain,  
possibly amused by the cartoon  
of my unwillingness to accept  
the way it is: a cosmos beyond  
my control, this imperfect world  
I can scan—like the lives of  
celebrity, politician, and friend—


for flaws to give me something  
to talk about. 

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**Steve Abbott has published five chapbooks and two full-length collections—*A Green Line Between Green Fields* and *A Language the Image Speaks*, a collection of ekphrastic poems—and has edited the anthologies *Cap City Poets* and *Everything Stops and Listens*. He edits the Ohio Poetry Association's annual journal *Common Threads*.**

## Loss

By Sherri London Pastolove

Loss is swallowed with morning coffee  
it flows through your body  
oozes through your pores  
a permeating scent of sorrow  
that follows you through turnstiles  
and morning meetings  
on the express line in the supermarket  
and at dinner with friends,  
as your leg taps the barstool in  
unconscious distraction  
it is the granule of sugar  
from that morning coffee  
lodged deep in your throat  
like a dam that keeps tears at bay  
all the while knowing  
that if you cough and clear it  
you will drown in memory's abyss  
float away from the hum of humanity  
and life as you knew it 

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**Sherri London Pastolove has been writing for over 50 years. *Cowgirls* and *Love in D Major* are her published poetry collections. Her work has appeared in *Newsday*, *NCPLS Review*, and as part of the 911 Memorial Artists registry.**



## Palette

By Mark Howard

White walls and blue lines —  
Her room should cast no shadows  
since it's always bright

A little too bright —  
then again, it's her room —  
Who am I to judge?

Mostly, she's white,  
reflecting all the colors  
and taking none in.

Some days though, she's blue,  
absorbing both joy and pain  
in equal amount —

That's why I painted  
over all of the pain here  
so, now it's just white.


No more sky hues  
just a soft pillowy cloud  
to slowly fall in

until she came home  
and saw what I had done here.

Now, there's no more wall.

And there's no more wall  
because of the hole she punched  
and the wound she dealt

over and over  
until it was wires,  
drywall, and sheetrock

And, thus, frayed — our foundation. 


---

**Mark A. Howard is a poet/editor with a B.A. in English. He has previously published with *The Avatar Review*, *VerbalArt*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, and *The Merrimack Review* and done editorial work for Jake Dockins' *Amherst & Malone*.**

## Sorry Momma

By Linda Crate

all my life  
they have tried to  
force me out of  
myself and model me  
into the perfect  
woman,  
they tell me i should  
be softness and petals always;  
sorry momma,  
that cannot be me;  
all my flowers have thorns and in  
the garden of my heart there  
are briars and cactuses and thistles  
sharp and cutting as the edge  
of my wit—  
they wanted softness,  
i could not give them;  
they wanted smooth marble  
but i am the jagged gold of a sunset  
rosemary and bloodred bleeding  
the blood of carnelian  
birds;  
they wanted someone who sewed  
her lips shut but i always have  
something to say—  
they wanted a lady,  
but i was born a legend destined  
for greatness;  
the lightening bolt on my arm told me so

i am a daughter of the moon  
shining even when i am not seen i shine—  
& i scream in hurricanes  
eroding away those who wound and forsake me  
until nothing is left of them  
not even a goodbye. 


---

**Linda Crate's works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is the author of six poetry chapbooks, the latest of which is *More Than Bone Music* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, March 2019).**

## The Sounds Tucked Away

By Holly Day

I put my heavy coat on, wrap a scarf around my neck  
wish I was covering myself in a cape of green kudzu  
decorating my hair with wide-open red flowers instead.  
Outside, the snow climbs up past my knees and I can't help  
but wonder at how much water this would be, if it were raining instead  
imagine myself splashing through warm summer rains  
the low constant rumble of storm clouds grumbling overhead, a flash of lightning  
on the horizon, thunder one, two, three seconds away  
air hot and heavy like the breath of an animal.


If I close my eyes and try hard enough, I can hear the rustling  
of earthworms gnawing their way through dead leaves  
the fat grubs of ladybugs and zebra beetles twisting in their sleep  
the tiny creaks and chirps of tiny, bald squirrels  
tucked up against their mother's warm breast, the hum of bees, warmed by the sun  
all the things I need to believe in right now  
so impossibly beautiful to exist. 

---

**Holly Day's poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *Harvard Review*.**

## Ocean Study #1

By Joshua Baker

Past colorful taffy shops, aged neon signs,  
thousands of shingles worn gray  
Across sand-scattered sidewalks  
we find access to views inspiring reverence  
The ocean is a reminder  
to leave the earth stumbling, dream-spent  
Shoes off, walking, feet slowly sand sink  
If we go just far enough, water will caress us  
Too far, and it wreaks havoc  
Nowhere is permanence more of a myth  
Than in the combined whispers of surf and foam  
In the shadow of ancient sea stacks.  
In the grains of a microscopic world sifting between toes  
Here, grace is airborne in neon kites and swooping gulls  
Clouds scud northeast, shapeshifting, pulling eyes  
Towards horizons beyond watery pound and hiss  
While legs struggle to assume normal gaits  
And we gawk at sinuous tide lines  
of kelp whips, shells, foam, tiny crabs  
Cheek muscles always ready to contract, trigger smiles  
This is a place to arrive tired, to cull stress but leave breathless  
A place to imagine hope, to ponder the magic of wave sets  
A place where infinity is an itch we need to scratch.  
Dive, leap, run.  
Deep breathe this blue. 

---

**Joshua H. Baker lives in Oregon, where he works for the U.S. Postal Service. His writing has appeared or will appear in *Cirque*, *The Opiate*, *99E*, and *Bending Genres*. In his spare time, he enjoys hiking and taking photographs at the seams between civilization and nature.**

## Love and Hate

By Thomas Piekarski

I love you for the goodness your largesse begets,  
Native American, African, Arab, European, Asian.

I hate you for the many unforgivable crimes  
you impose on one another, utter hypocrisy.

I hear your chants, rapt incantations,  
feel them pummeling my eardrum.

Plutocrats taking charge, the world held  
hostage by a future that will not happen.


Invisible dark matter holds us together  
in a temporary state at war with peace.

Horus busy stuffing himself on unborn planets  
while we spin sinister webs like caged spiders.

The great unifier hasn't arrived and never will,  
so we blow up bridges now while we're able.

Unsung heroes pinned along a thin clothesline,  
hung to wither in time's cornea amid the ether.

Go, get your machetes out, slash the body politic.


Smite those who love to hate, disparage and slay. 

---

**Thomas Piekarski is a former editor of the *California State Poetry Quarterly*. His poetry has appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad, including *Taj Mahal Review*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg*, and *South African Literary Journal*.**

## Calling Distance

By Stephen Jackson

When we decided to actually do it — to cross that final boundary, to sneak through the tunnel that passed under the highway — it wasn't how deep and swift the water of the creek beneath the tunnel ran that concerned us, how narrow and slippery was the ledge on either side of it, not the arch of the tunnel pressing down upon our heads, consuming the daylight outside it the farther we stepped carefully in, nor was it the fact that we were defying our mother by going so far beyond the limited distance she'd allow us to roam from our house — that is, within calling distance — what was mostly on our mind was getting on with it, getting started with our lives, being on our way, on a journey through days which could never have begun within the narrow parameters of Christopher's house, the woods, the reservoir, the highway. And looking back now at my six-year-old self as we pass through the tunnel, I grow weak just thinking of all I have had to do to break free of that beautiful, awful place, but — most of all, of everything in my life I have yet to get done. 

---

**Stephen Jackson lives and writes in the Pacific Northwest. His poems have most recently appeared or are forthcoming in *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Calliope*, *Chronotope*, *The Inflectionist Review*, as well as on the International Human Rights Art Festival Publishes platform, and in the *PoetRhy Garden*.**



## Empty Promises


By Jacqueline Wu

Moonbeams illuminate the cedar wood floors of the tiny antique shop,  
The only source of light in the darkest hour of the night,  
When dreamers dream, with only the bitter cold seeping into fatigued bones....  
Until the horizon turns orange and gold, and the moon hides its face yet again.

A small girl with red cheeks and raven black hair opens the door,  
Holding the weathered hand of father, their breaths forming fog in the wintry air,  
For in the depths of the tiny shop lay a lone black violin case,  
Out of place like a brick among colorful feathers in stark contrast.

Once, it was appraised by many, carefully handcrafted with the utmost love and care,  
And not a speck of dust dared touch its polished varnish then.  
Its warm, rich melodies had sung in many acclaimed concert halls,  
Its timeless, haunting beauty connecting the souls of strangers for that one moment,  
Allowing breaths to catch and tears to inevitably fall, fulfilling its selfless promise.

Now, after many long years trapped in the steady undulation of the glorious past,  
The violin had forgotten its promise, its concert days only a fading dream of youth.  
And the small desperate flicker of hope had simmered to a dying flame in its fragile shell,  
Until the girl with the raven black hair, straight like the definition, became its owner.

Yes, I bought the violin that day,  
For it was a joyous freedom for the girl and the violin  
With its warm, rich melodies still ringing in acclaimed concert halls,  
Its timeless, haunting beauty connecting the souls of strangers for that one moment,  
Allowing breaths to catch and tears to inevitably fall, fulfilling its selfless promise. 

---

**Jacqueline Wu has been writing for five years. *October Hill Magazine* will be her first publication.**


# Jupiter Dies in My Dreams

By Samuel Hickcox

The solar system's cherry  
Bomb swells on Jupiter  
And evaporates gas giants

Comets rain on terrestrial planets  
And push the moons out of orbit  
To vanish with cosmic waste

She disappears into the dark  
Without blowing a kiss goodbye  
Warped by black hole spacetime


Fading in the night like  
A child's lullaby fearing  
The darkness near a night light 

---

**Samuel Hickcox has been writing for three years. *October Hill Magazine* will be his first publication. He's a graduate of the University of Arizona where he earned his Bachelor's in Creative Writing. He updates his blog, *Inspirational Sports*, with the most inspiring stories in sports.**

## Sic Transit Gloria

By Glenn Moss

The autumn Vermont chill laughing at my coat  
Reminds me that my calendar days are thinning  
A leaf brushes against my cheek, a rough kiss goodbye  
On my left, a train track rusting from abandonment  
The dead tears of young lovers and widowed aunts  
Once headed to Hartford and Albany, places of vanished promise  
On my right, a river overfed by God and Greenland  
Carries memories of Cartier's dreams, Mohican canoes, watermill groans  
And the rush of spawning fish, slaps of bear claws, rolling of light and dark  
Walking towards the maple shadows waiting to welcome me  
I think of the grass that will cover the track and offer whispers to the river  
Free at last of our wasted grace 

---

**Glenn Moss is a media lawyer who has been writing poetry and stories since high school. His poems and stories have been published in *Ithaca Lit*, *West Trade Review*, *Oddville Press*, *Oberon*, *Foliage Oak Magazine*, *Illuminations*, *Qu*, and *34<sup>th</sup> Parallel*.**


# Love Bigger Than Loss

By Kersten Christianson

amidst the kilometers  
the loonies and toonies  
shatter of ice in glass  
paper crumple of leaves

in breeze and birch  
somewhere in 5K words  
in the comings and goings  
of friends and children

breakfast for dinner  
stolen moments to write  
i wrap my grief in tissue  
paper, layer by crinkle,

color and pattern  
word by word our love  
was more flammable  
than the missing 

---

**Kersten Christianson is a raven-watching, moon-gazing, high school English-teaching Alaskan. She serves as poetry editor of the quarterly journal *Alaska Women Speak*. Her latest collection of poetry, *Curating the House of Nostalgia*, will publish in 2020 (Sheila-Na-Gig Editions). Kersten holds an MFA from the University of Alaska.**

## **Not Speaking**

**By Lisa Beere**

unwanted words: guttural, raw, needy  
attempt to overthrow my clenched jaw  
to seep through gaps between my teeth  
so many things to say...


unheard by his ears, yet screaming in mine  
how did we arrive at this...ending  
a final ragged cutting  
an aggressive severing of hearts?

so many years, so much wasted time  
all those repeated mistakes  
my impatience  
those mental wanderings...

paper cuts, barely seen but sharply  
bleeding  
memories tearing mercilessly at my insides  
how did we arrive at this?

how did our dream expire like wisps at dawn?  
did the joining not take?  
our links too fragile to withstand life?  
was everything a mirage?

screams shriek at a higher pitch now  
heard only by me  
and dogs...  
dogs!

offering comfort  
as only they seem to understand  
despite my shell  
there's great pain 

---

**Lisa Beere is an author of children's books, poetry, a WWII anthology, and various short stories. She enjoys white water rafting, singing, baking, skiing, dancing, and wandering through galleries.**



*By Fabrice Poussin*

**Thank you to all of the authors, readers, and followers  
who have made this possible!**