

N U D E B R U C E



R E V I E W

NUDE BRUCE REVIEW

Issue 16

**Andrew A. Mobbs &
Timothy Snediker** – Editors-in-Chief

&
Desiree Remick – Fiction Editor

&
Bee Baxter – Cover Artist

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Beloved Nude Brucians,

New year, same Bruce, baby! Welcome to *Issue 16*, which, aside from the festive cover, is full of anything but hot air.

This trip around the sun, we were ecstatically waylaid by an army of submissions from which Bruce personally culled twenty-six of the most delectable poems, stories, and essays for your reading pleasure. Admit it: our sweet prince knows what you like, right down to the last full freaking stop. All ye naysayers, prepare your stomachs for the fattest crow once you scroll through our pages; prepare your ossified hearts for an epic softening.

Speaking of hearts, we realize now more than ever how hard it is to keep them intact amid this batshit authoritarian bedlam known as America 2026. Bruce senses it, too—the callous lunacy of the felonious Cheeto-in-Chief, the masked gestapo called Insidious Cowardly Evil violating rights and decency, the hollow chuckles of our feckless and criminally overpaid government officials, the remnants of humanity susurrating out of AI-schilling plutocrats’ quasi-souls like a punctured driverless Cybertruck tire (suck it, Muskerbezoberg). This is *so* not our kind of dystopia.

Friends, Bruce wishes he could solve all our problems. He wishes he could give every single one of you whatever you

need—a hug, a hearty meal, the right gesture at the right time. And, naturally, he wishes—as 93% of life on Earth does—that he could throw on a pair of steel-toe Timberlands and kick Donny Boy smackdab in his wrinkly, pyritic balls. But what Bruce can do is offer some hope in the form of these remarkably crafted words that we're ineffably grateful to share with you. Remember, hope springs most powerfully among chaos and cruelty, so prepare yourselves for the best kind of eruption.

Now, reader, sit back, grab your beverage of choice, and bask in pure, unadulterated literary goodness.

Ever yours,

The Editors

Poetry

That's Good Tobacco

By Andrés López

A hand will swim through
back pockets –
studded, beaded, gemmed,
covering all but the entry.
Cuts from cardboard ridge
make a sister's heritage call:

“That's good tobacco.”

She tells me
about her grandpa in Oklahoma,
a braided rattail swings across her knees:
I've never seen someone so beautiful, so familiar,
and the burning scent of our homes is all around us.

A bucket is the ashtray, and the offering is our people's
air

She passes me an open flame to keep,
to burn through *un morrión*,
to burn the bristles of John Gast's paintbrush
to light a torch in white-walled rooms.
There is white between our fingers;
there is light beneath our skin.

Alzheimer's Puzzle

By John Delaney

If you are only what you remember,
what if you don't remember much
anymore? Feeling lost and off-center?

My sister sits with a landscape puzzle,
appropriate for those aged eight and older:
204 jigsawed wooden tokens
she has scattered out over the table.

Well, I admit, the pieces ARE puzzling.
How like hours are they to fit together?
Are there clues in straight or rounded edges?
In amoeba shapes or patterned color?

Carefully, she picks one up to start,
as if candling an egg for its secrets.
I point to the box's cover. "Sweetheart?"

How To Garden

By Nathan McDowell

*

I kiss the ground, the sunflower, the lamb's ear,
and house plants, too. Every one of them.

My vibrant paradise! My benevolent verdant
thumb! Pores taste earth, my empathic dermic

field wants to know — where did it go! Mystery —
our respect for it! Someone asked how much light

a monstera needs. I said, it's a plant, it wants sun.
It would eat the whole sleeve of it if it could. That's

its favorite treat. Monsteras care nothing for data,
they want a good story! Let me change what I can,

not worry about what alchemy is between the sun
and what I poured from a green and yellow bag.

They ask what type of soil I used, I say the kind made
from the ground. And why do you ask? Does soil go
bad?

*

There are some things I don't know, like when I found
out
I couldn't garden. You left as an event but your garden
wilted.

The sun baked us who were left, the rains flooded.
Proud son
of a proud woman. You could do it all. I am a seed in
your image.

I could prune, I could water, I could break open bound
roots
but not my own. I could follow instructions, until they
stopped.

When we run, when we can't stay, lifetimes leach,
stories
we hold onto dry out and break. I try to learn more
about proper

drainage. Have I grown too large and unwieldy, not
enough life
left for these sprigs to bend, these stories lignified, so we
prune,

we water, and when it falls apart, the only thing that has
died
is the blight I mistook as me. The lack you gave was gift,
bounty.

I always needed you, or maybe just someone, other stray
saplings,
who will grow a healthy new garden. Something to offer
is enough.

xix.

by Laura Carter

the sounds are perfect fifths
but I miss the twelve-tone scale
you understand me somehow
just gonna stand there
I know
but not everything is red
civic pride never agreed upon
by the poets
the better ones are reticent
andante approaches the middle
wheels still with balance
a pierced angel of history
I agree that the sun is a neck
that the flesh is a paradox
that the sheets are tousled
but I can't replace anyone
with a new lover
serial loves
the wave of the future
too sweet for tears
too strategic for angels
the better poets are reticent
lacking conviction
maybe even politics
the intensity of the worst
finds a ladder
now I'm really afraid

Walnut

By James Croal Jackson

Old barn stands alone, the last
walnut in Dad's workshop barrel—

halved. Some inheritances
we choose no claim.

Trees remember longer
than bloodlines. Sky
keeps no records.

Twilight Cinema

By D E Kern

The sky is backlit by these afterthoughts.
The golden hour and dusk shake hands then go
their separate ways, but not before burning
an iridescent edge behind the hill,
setting fire to a mesquite skeleton
that tried to escape in three directions
only to find itself enslaved by roots.
Fate dims the houselights. A westward screen glows.
An audience of grackles falls silent,
yields to a whispered wind, a jet's dull moan.
The universe waxes nostalgic, hosts
a salon to discuss whether daylight
fades or night falls, then seems to lose its heart
for debating such semantics. Twilight
seizes the opportunity to own
this moment—seize the attention reserved
for flashes of brilliance, bending time like
a bow and breaking the speed of sound. But
darkness creeps, snuffing out the light beneath
its shroud, until I am without a prayer
of seeing the laughing rider who floats
past betrayed by just the luminescent
adornment spinning in time with her spokes.

Cartesian Trips to the Cosmos

By Abass Aremu

These lines should be performed
with pre-formed precision.

These steps should not be
mistaken but choreographed
clearly on every axis.

Journey with me
through space-time
and keep the continuous hums
of the symphony life plays

in the four corners of your institutionalized mind.
Let these letters lull you into believing
that it's never too late to dive

head first into this black hole,
and let it stretch you
beyond the limits that this
limited mind might have constructed
for your mighty existence.

Oil up your potential, put it in the pan
and let the sweetness pop.
Hold your fears captive
and let it watch your movie
in all eight of the Ks that will make it clear enough.

Let your feet move you
from the heavy start of your journey
beyond every checkpoint
and look over your shoulder
for fuel to reach your X.

Welcome to infinity, limitless lover.
Welcome to the black hole —
the other side.

We have been waiting for you.

Hooking the Bait

By Claire Hamner Matturro

Hooked right
bait shrimp won't die
fast but squirming
in saltwater draw fish.
Your strong fingers over
mine, you show me how
to place the hook.
I kill the shrimp right
off. Huddled over
my tangled line,
I try to hide
what we've done.

You kiss
the bruised skin around
my eye, your lips
tender on the blue stain
of late afternoon
and your strong fingers
stroke the small of my back,
curling downward
in a tangled gravitational pull
as I rise to your touch
like a fish circling
the baited hook.

Soft evening light

from the window
wraps your face
in something like gold.
I wait till you sleep,
your strong fingers
curled under me
in fists. Unhooking
myself without a sound,
I shut the door
to the bedroom
I won't enter again.

Morning Incense

By Mark Bessen

Sunlight shifts on morning incense.
In memory, a coil of smoke.

Memory is a coil of smoke.
He sits, smiling, feet tucked under.

Tucked feet can mean both ease and flight.
Our black cat gargoyled on his orange chair.

He took our black cat. I kept the chair.
He always left a gap behind the seat cushion.

I didn't expect to miss that gap
I'd groan shut. What crumbs might gather?

No crumbs can gather in unspoken spaces.
I sit. Some buoyancy has left the foam.

Some buoyancy has left the home. I sit.
I drift as sunlight: incensed, mourning.

Writer

By Lorelee Clark

Like chitin weaving me outward
in stability—

like beetles
constructing corridors,
digging deep—

like the desire in a wishbone,
trapped forever
after the snapping—

like the strengthening of
my skeleton
for flight.

Wrens twitter
along my back porch railing
setting up house in the holly
sparse with sticking leaves;

with words I create worlds
born of nothingness,
foraging questions
unanswerable.

On the Line

By Jennifer Fair Stewart

a sonnenizio after a line from Seamus Heaney's "Clearances"

*To strike it rich behind the linear black,
delineate the numinous in verse.
To line out mystery, Sherlock smoked three pipes;
so, soul alignment must take incense cloud,
another round of spirit, breadline aisles,
fair linen spun from flax, fire sparked from pen.*

Dive under lines in thrall and drown. Reborn,
bring into line the wayward wreckage, raw.
Delight in lining sills with treasures found.
Beauty with both eyes lined stares back, wide-lashed:
across the neat-lined page sprawl wonders, lush,
to cross the line—a superfluity—

the universe's byline pieced in signs,
as dimples wink a throughline—mirth, divine.

Under the Starless Sky, Northalsted

By Kim Hunter

There are no places for him back
there
not in honeycomb trails
nor where nestlings skim ice lake plains
they expect you to go away
the mud crusts nails and hardens
beneath moon, stars, wing dark
heavens
where words aren't so small
where small things nibble on the thin
plant
shoots of your heart
they just don't tell you
Here he is just another fresh pink joy
to brunch and flit and expand into
concrete dreams
about
but
how the skies
the mirror cloud reflecting
glassine pavement
displaces
galaxies
disappear

Writing Home

By Estill Pollock

at the window, postcards of Paris, dressed-slate
roofscape and groves of smoky brick in flagrante I kissed
your neck where the timeslip of light
incinerates the nape

a grainy monochrome that cools
and reinvents the image, in the distance Eiffel's trellised spur
recalled another age

that May, the April rains continued, boulevards
bound in steely mist, and cold
for the time of year

as we walked, grimy pigeons shoaled, scavenger eddies
near the Metro insinuating deeper rhythms, strips
torn from time, fluttering hours

sleeping rough on cold iambics, near
Quatre-Septembre I kissed the white heat of your face

in the dead light we drank to, mannequin vogues
embraced the void

At the Press Conference During the Fire

By Sean Whalen

The Chief wets pale lips with a red tongue framed by
yellow teeth.

A firing squad of reporters point microphones at his
face.

Fire is alive. It is aware it will kill itself in time.

Red and white lights reflect and break
in the crazed surface of glazed blue china eyes.

It knows it can't burn what it already burned.

Flames rummage in clothes left out on the line.
The moon creates stairways of spiraling smoke.

Fire is water. It seeks. It flows.

He pulls a Zippo from his pocket,
exchanges guns for cigarette.

And like water, there is never enough.

The Narrator

By Stacy Rollins

Behind the podium, translucent layers
of baby blue chiffon
flare dress
covered each other to opaque:
the shy leaves clinging close
to my legs. Blue-green veins, twist-ties,
jagged roots in dark pools
of tear trough under my
harrowing eyes
told geometry's secrets through diaphanous skin.
Pure skin,
rice paper summer rolling my organs.
A dish of transparency under fluorescent bulbs'
judgment in a hum.
Somewhere a sneaker squealed
the turn of an ankle on linoleum, an acrid beige.

This was fourth grade: Longwood Elementary.
Ms. Stein cast me
as the school play narrator
since I was the *best reader*,
a sentence-diagramming prodigy.
Clauses stacked infinitely in persimmon dry-erase,
the crying ones clinging close
to my ribs. Baby thin ribs, rigid on alert
as a corset must resist universes of in-breath.

No one knew I could not act!
And this was how. Beyond the podium,
I tried so hard to play myself. My self:
disembodied, a wraith, anemic, *it*.
All the world an empty costume closet
that *dis-clothes-es* one's role as none. THEREFORE,
heartfelt story modulation --
each syllable tongue-scrolled with jeweller precision
to prettify brutish chain links handed down,
handed to, a clunk of replication around the neck,
your made-up name, now author.

Behind the podium, my diagrammed guts of basil and shrimp
trembled through the last thin page. But what if

Daniel Waverly, seated in the second row but
welcome everywhere
noticed my pearlescent plastic headband?

At THE END,
I hid before the hazy, Windexed mirror near the bathrooms
amid the perfume waste of unguent pink soap wells
so I could monitor what I looked like
when the dis per sing aud ience
saw me.

As Daniel's onyx hair came into peripheral view around the wall tiles, I focused on the reflection of my infinite pupils. Daniel touched my shoulder lightly, smiled like nothing was wrong, and said,

"Good job, Stacy!"

This one is for the AIM away message

By Andrea Janov

We were not the first. Generation who used the poetry of rock and roll to speak for us. To say the things we couldn't. We were the first, though, to let it linger. In the ether. In the hope. Our crush would hover. Over our screen name. And know it was for them.

Fiction

Mad Cow Boy Disease

By Stephanie Montez

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WELCOME TO THE FIFTH ANNUAL RED ROCK AND RED DIRT RODEO!!”

I listened to the announcer shouting over the loudspeaker, welcoming everyone as I got my saddle and rope out. Most of us cow boys travel together, but I missed the last rodeo and had to drive up by myself. I would have just skipped the event, but this week the prize money was too good to pass up! Most people think I’m crazy spending all this money to compete and be here, when the other cow boys can’t even see me.

This has to be the only rodeo on the planet, where spectators keep their heads down and just listen to what the rodeo contestants are doing. But if no one can look at us, how do we get scored, you ask? The livestock judges our rides.

In all my 20 years of life, I have never seen other cow boys, even though I travel with them. When we landed on this dusty planet, we were given goggles to protect our eyes from the dust, and from seeing other cow boys. The livestock that I’ve made friends with tell me there’s a disease on their planet like the one here, that stops us cow boys from looking at each other. If we see each other, we might go crazy and start a cow boy apocalypse.

Before they came to this planet and were used as livestock for the rodeo, they were spectators of it. Watching, analyzing, some were even riders themselves. Now they are kept in pens and transported from dust town to dust town. It's weird to think that they used to be free people on their planet and we were livestock. I can't imagine the roles being reversed. Human livestock? Riding us? The cow boys!? That's crazy! I like this planet, even if I can't make or see friends of my own kind.

As I walked across the arena to the bucking chutes, I began to feel nervous. I had ridden many times before, but this time, one of the humans was crazy. I've heard he's bucked off some of the best cow boys, causing them to gain the ability to see other cow boys. Some of my cow boy buddies said that when that happens, they take the crazy cow boys and drop them in this giant portal at the end of Dust Town 51. It sends them back to the livestock's planet. That's terrifying! As much as I hate not being able to actually see some of my friends, I don't want to go to the livestock's planet!

A cow boy can only hope they draw the livestock they want, so as I reach my hoof into the hat to grab out a name, I say a prayer in my head. When I open the paper, it reads 'MEAN OLD ROY.' This can't be happening? I drew the meanest ride and now I practically have to ride for my life.

I saddle him up, make sure my rope is correct, and slap the side of the chute to signal the other cow boys. The chute opens and off I go. Mean Old Roy bucks left, then right, then spins out left again. I'm holding onto the

rigging rope for dear life, but soon I feel it. My body flies through the air and my goggles come off. I see the crowd of cow boys and cow girls. I start to scream and before I know it, I hit the ground harder than ever.

When I finally wake up, I'm in a pen like the one we held livestock in. I have never been so confused in my life, but I see something walking towards me. I shut my eyes out of fear that it's another cow boy. I don't have my goggles on and after the rodeo mishap I can't risk being sent away for going crazy. Then I hear a human's voice!

I open my eyes and see a man. He looks like Mean Old Roy! I start to scream as he begins petting my head. "There, there boy," he says as he's petting me. "You'll be a great bucking bull once we get you back to the barn. The cowboys are gonna love you!" What does he mean by "cowboys"? He tries putting a rope around my head like a halter, and I start twisting and turning, but stop once I realize.

I can see the other cow boys in the pen.

Localized Corrosion

By Cliff Aliperti

It was damn cold. Penelope pulled the heavy comforter over her head, but poked her face right out again before the stale air could smother her. Still too damn cold. Her dreams were already fading, which always sucked when they were good ones. In her last one, Penelope Anton was still Penelope Cartwright: single, stylish, even driving a Porsche, not the familiar Camry that she shared with Bill. Bill Anton was reality, and that was fine, just, jeez, a little escape didn't hurt. Right? Penelope shivered even under the weight of the comforter.

And what the hell was that smell? It was noxious.

Penelope's throat already burned and she became aware that her tongue was coated with a taste that registered as turpentine. No—gasoline? Freezing, Penelope tightened the covers around her shoulders and snuggled inside them. Just yesterday she had taped a check to the front door covering a hundred gallons of oil; had Bill forgotten to turn on the heat last night?

She craned her head for a quick peek to the other side of the bed, but found it empty.

But, oh my, that odor! She felt dizzy even still horizontal in bed.

Was she sick? She never minded having an excuse to skip work, especially if she was actually ill. Penelope was killing time, killing years, as support staff at a local veterinary clinic. Some of the pets were cute, especially

the ones who weren't sick, but she only worked there because they had been the first semi-local place to call back after she had sent out resumes. That was a few years ago; after she had married Bill Anton. After she had put off launching her career, whatever that might be, with vague notions of motherhood.

"Bill," she croaked from under the covers, but Bill "Work-from-Home" Anton, did not reply.

Calling Bill's name aloud completely roused Penelope. She immediately realized that something was in fact wrong, and it likely wasn't her health.

Penelope clambered from bed and into the hall, where she nearly collided with the wide-open basement door, a surprising obstacle in her usually clear morning path to Mr. Coffee. She paused at the top of the stairs, already wishing she had kept the plush comforter wrapped around her, especially when she could somehow see her own breath inside the supposedly comfortable confines of her home.

She was no less confused when her husband looked up from the bottom of the stairs, desperation contorting his features, and shouted, "I don't know what to do!"

Penelope took in the unfamiliar scene. Bill Anton, typically unflappable, stood in his pajamas, yes, but also wore olive green winter boots and had on canary yellow plastic gloves up to his elbows. Bill gripped a sopping wet towel and had tramped through some viscous yellow-tinged fluid that seemed to coat her beloved blue Berber carpet.

"What are you doing, Bill?"

“The oil tank sprung a leak!” His face strained and his lightly muscled arms flexed as he twisted and wrung the towel over an open Hefty bag.

“I didn’t know they could do that?” Penelope said, coughing. “Is that why my throat hurts?”

Bill stopped strangling the towel, looked up to her, dropped his shoulders and shrugged. Penelope translated this silent gesture to mean, *Apparently so, you frigging moron*, though to be clear, Bill had never called her a frigging moron before. Penelope just assumed he must sometimes think it though because, well, who wasn’t at times?

Bill smiled and wiped some sweat from his brow with the exposed upper arm of his flannel PJs. “Honey, you look absolutely fetching up there,” he said, sounding a bit like Jack Nicholson gripping an axe. “But could you do me a big favor and phone the goddamn oil company and get me some help?”

“They were just here yesterday.”

“I am aware,” Bill said. *You frigging moron*, Penelope added in that same wiseass tone.

“Don’t call me that,” Penelope said.

“Call you what?” Bill asked.

Oh! Penelope snapped her fingers and smiled, hoping to diffuse the situation. “I’m on it, babe,” she said.

Penelope threw on her robe, suppressed a gag—the odor was truly overwhelming—and closed the basement door on the way to Bill’s desk in the den, where she had stored the oil company’s yellowed business card yesterday. The card was a hand-me-down from Mother, as was Penelope’s practice of leaving a paper check taped to the front door as payment.

She couldn't get her mind off that look on Bill's face. He looked more scared than angry. A mess like this was going to cost a fortune, never mind all that pricey oil spreading uselessly across the floor. But Bill's voice had cracked with panic, his forehead sprouted unfamiliar horizontal grooves, and even his sarcasm was void of its usual wink of charm. That Bill Anton downstairs just now was a stranger. Her husband was a stranger.

Penelope found the business card and called. She explained their spill to the rep as best she could, and was told they would send a team by within the hour. Penelope ended the call, pictured Bill's panic again, sighed, shivered, and tightened her robe. She saved the oil company's number to her cell, hoping her next call to them lingered so far distant that she would forget where she had just stored the ratty business card. She lighted herself a Newport, which suppressed her own mild panic but really didn't help the throat at all.

Penelope opened the basement door and yelled down to Bill, now out of view. "They say they'll have a team by within the hour."

No response.

Penelope crept halfway down the stairs and through the open railing spotted Bill bent over sopping up more oil. Was that a bald spot? He's only just thirty!

"Bill, honey, they're coming by within the hour. I don't really understand what you're doing, but I think you can stop."

Bill looked up at her, soaked towel gripped between his gloves, annoyance aging his face. Penelope withered, as intended, yet Bill's irritated expression morphed into a

fearful one. Penelope found this even more strange and disturbing than his earlier panic.

“Are you smoking?” Bill asked. Before Penelope could answer, he shouted, “Are you trying to blow us sky high?”

“Oh, crap!” She cupped her free hand over the burning tip of her Newport and fled up the stairs.

Penelope tossed the cigarette out the back door, where it settled on top of the frozen foot of snow with a brief sizzle.

This day, Penelope thought. Not a good start.

Determined to stay out of Bill’s way, Penelope dressed for work, every stitch down to her own boots and winter jacket, then in a burst of inspiration decided she could be warm plus smoke in safety out in the car.

“I’m going outside to wait for the oil people,” she called down to Bill.

Outside was no colder than inside, Penelope thought, until the first gust of wind all but shattered her spine and the powdery snowflakes dusted her face like acid. She found herself on “Team Bill” again though, appreciative of how well he had shoveled out their property as she picked up her pace without even slipping on her way to the car.

The Camry’s door stuck, but with a little elbow grease and a pop of her shoulders, Penelope was inside in no time. Now this, this felt colder. She started it up, first try, thank Christ, and braced herself waiting for the heater to kick in. Penelope melted into the seat as the car warmed, sighed, and lighted her cigarette. Heaven!

Time seemed to fly in this whited-out world, as Penelope was only halfway through her second

cigarette—technically third, if you count the one that went out the back door—when the ground vibrated as a big oil truck crackled over the plowed piles of ice and snow, snorting and exhaling once it parked. An accompanying pickup decorated with matching company logo crawled up behind the fuel truck, its crackle lighter. That was her cue.

Penelope rubbed her hands together, reminded herself to grab her gloves before leaving for work, and exited the Camry to meet the team and let them inside.

“My husband’s downstairs, I dunno, picking it up best he can,” she said to the oldest of the five men, the one her eye had designated team leader.

Team leader looked puzzled.

“Well, you’ll see,” Penelope said, opening the door and motioning for the men to enter.

Inside, she braced herself for a horror show as her hand paused on the knob of the basement door. She took a deep breath and opened it.

“Bill, the men from the oil company are here.”

Bill trudged into view.

Team leader blew warm breath into his clasped hands before turning to Penelope. “Pardon my asking, ma’am, but why’d you wait on us outside? It’s not *that* cold in here.”

“Oh, I wanted to smoke,” Penelope said, a little embarrassed at being so uncouth. She’d quit when she finally got that *real* job. Or when the other thing finally happened. Either way, no smoking in her Porsche, that much was for sure.

Team leader gave her that questioning look again.

“She damn near blew us up,” Bill shouted from the bottom of the stairs.

Nice, Penelope thought. Real nice, throw me under the bus.

Team leader shrugged. “You can smoke upstairs if that’s what you usually do,” he said. “Home heating fuel isn’t all that combustible.”

Penelope shot a look of absolute hatred down the stairs in Bill’s direction. Bill looked away, muttering.

The oil men descended, and Penelope followed until their boots hit the oil, and then she seated herself on the fourth step from the floor, safely above the intruding ooze. The conversation was too muffled to hear from there, but after a few minutes Bill returned to her, face pale, features defeated.

“They’re going to yank out the old tank, tear up the carpet, clean up best they can, then stick a new tank in.” Bill sighed. “Depending on how the clean-up goes, they may need to call the DEC.”

“DEC?” Penelope asked.

Bill squinted at her, exasperated once more. “The environmental people?” Said in a tone reserved for children and idiots. “He said if that were the case, the state would probably condemn us, and we’d have to put up at a hotel until the property passes safety regulations.”

“Oh, Bill!”

“I know,” Bill said. “It sucks.”

“Department of Environmental Conservation,” team leader said after coming around the corner. “The DEC,” he clarified. “Mr. Anton, how’d you get this tank down here?”

“It was here when we moved in,” Bill said.

“How long ago was that?”

“Three years,” Penelope said, dropping her head in shame. Three years, and she was still doing nine-to-five at the vet’s, which she could have accepted, had she been the vet. She jockeyed the phone and talked politely to worried clients. *A waste of her education*, Penelope thought, in Father’s voice. *A waste of your most fruitful years*, she added, in Mother’s voice.

“They typically last about twenty, twenty-five years,” team leader said. “But she must have had a good bit of time on her before you got here.”

“It would have never occurred to me to replace it,” Bill said, while Penelope simply wondered how team leader determined tank gender. Was she a he before failing?

“You guys get flooding down here?”

“Yes,” Bill and Penelope said in unison. “Especially after a heavy rain,” Bill added.

“That’d speed it up then,” team leader said. “Little spot rusted out on bottom of the tank. Otherwise, heck, some folks do get a lifetime out of them. That’s not why I asked though. Thing is, she measures ‘bout about a quarter inch too tight to get out of here.”

“A quarter inch?” Bill said. “Can’t you force it?”

“Quarter inch with the forcing,” team leader said.

“Oh, no,” Penelope said. “What do we do?”

“Well, we could pull her out and leave it in a corner for you,” team leader said. “But seeing how it’s so close, and seeing that your walls are already drinking up the oil anyway, we could break out the power saw, scale down your walls a couple feet and be clear.”

Penelope looked at the nearest wall and noticed the faux oak paneling was several shades darker at the bottom where it met her ruined carpet. Where it drank the oil. She shook her head, stood, and ran up the stairs, leaving this mess behind.

She sat at the kitchen table, smoking, because team leader said she could. She flinched when the buzz and grind of power tools began destroying their formerly finished basement. Soon her defeated husband pulled out the chair next to her and tugged off his gloves as he sat. Elbows on the table, Bill dropped his head into his hands.

“I think I was down there too long,” he said. “I feel lousy.”

Penelope stifled her rising rage, reached over, and gave his shoulder an encouraging rub. “It’s been a rough morning, honey.”

“He’s got a tank for us. Fifty gallons smaller so it can come through without any issue.”

“Don’t they put them underground outside now?” Penelope asked.

“They do,” he said, in that shitty tone again. “But I’d imagine you’d prefer to get the heat back up and running as soon as possible.”

“What’s it matter if we have to put up at a hotel?” Penelope asked.

Bill shook his head. “That’s out. The guy says he doesn’t need to report us.”

Penelope grasped Bill’s forearm. “But that’s great, Bill!”

“Our single bright spot, yes. Honestly, I thought I was going to have to grease him, but I think he took pity on our youth.”

“Still, it does seem awfully shortsighted,” Penelope said.

“Shortsighted?” Bill said. “You mean having the tank inside?”

“Well, yes.”

“Pen, according to what that guy said, we’ll be good for at least another twenty, twenty-five years. Right?”

The saws stopped downstairs and Penelope heard the men wrestling their old oil tank against whatever remained of her walls.

“What’s any of that matter now?” she asked.

Bill shrugged, then extended his hand. “Can I have a drag?” he asked.

I ought to burn you, Penelope thought, but instead passed the half-smoked cigarette to her husband, who had quit after college. Probably when she should have quit him, but that was maybe just the bleak morning sprouting dark thoughts.

“He says everything—cleanup, new tank, installation—is going to run twenty-three hundred bucks.”

Penelope stiffened.

“Do we have that, Bill? Can we pay it in installments?”

Bill shook his head. “It’s due today. But, yeah, we have it. Just.”

“All our savings?”

“Pretty much.”

Penelope took the cigarette back from Bill, took one last drag and sloppily stubbed it out in the ashtray. Then she stood, put her heavy coat back on and jingled her keys.

“I’ve got to get to work,” she said.

Bill turned, looking helpless.

“You’ve got this?” Penelope asked. “No point in my staying if you do.”

“I thought you would have called in today?” Bill said.

“Really, Bill? Now that we have to pay for this, you thought that?” Penelope huffed and made her way towards the front door. “I’ll be home at five-thirty.”

And she left.

#

When Penelope Anton returned home that evening, her husband Bill was back to his old self. Cheery, even.

No sooner did she have her coat back on the rack then he was gently grabbing her elbow and steering her towards the basement to show her what they’d done.

“Doesn’t look too bad, does it?” Bill asked.

The corner wall of the basement now levitated about two feet off the floor, which was no longer covered in beautiful blue carpet, but just exposed pebbled concrete that made Penelope’s skin crawl. She’d have to order new slippers online later.

“Come look at baby,” Bill said.

Around the corner he patted the side of the noticeably smaller oil tank. Old one was feminine; new one was baby. And Bill was acting like a proud papa, all but handing out cigars.

“What’s that?” Penelope asked, pointing at a label with Bill’s handwriting stuck to the tank.

“I wrote the date on it, so we’d know when time was up,” Bill said. The label, a piece of old dried-up masking tape, had already peeled up at one corner. Bill licked a

finger and smoothed the curled tape, flattening it back into place. “I mean, really, who knew these things didn’t last forever?” The edge of the tape popped back up and slowly curled forward.

“Forever is a long time.”

“That it is, sweetie.” Bill kissed the tip of her nose.

Penelope Anton wondered if their little oil tank would outlast her. She had polished her resume during lunch hour, having had enough of waiting to get her life started. Maybe she’d get that better job, get a better car. Probably not the Porsche, not anytime soon, but something good enough to make it worth quitting the cigs, baby or not. Bill’s pathetic little label would peel off and slip away before too long, but so might Penelope Cartwright.

Checkout Policy

By Frisk Normandy

By the time Stan showed up to Tender House Hospice in Detroit's East Side, I was used to the shuffle of patients and the refilling of rooms only hours after the previous tenant had died. The first thing that struck me as odd when I strolled up to suite number ten with my trusty dust mop was that the shades were drawn. Most folks lucky enough to get a south-facing room liked to fill it with sunlight and take in the cityscape.

I poked my head in and saw the back of a wheelchair and a bald, tombstone-shaped head with pale fluorescents reflecting from the top of it. I pulled out an earbud, letting the wire take up slack, and gave a knock.

"Excuse me, sir, mind if I come in for a quick cleaning?"

"No baths. I don't give a shit if this body is dirty or clean," he replied.

I pushed a nervous laugh. "Don't worry, I'm not here to sponge you, it's the room I'm after." He turned his head slightly. I met him halfway by entering the room and revealing the shag of the mop. Since he didn't tell me to go away, I proceeded with my duties and polished the floor up real nice. Back then, I didn't make small talk with the patients unless spoken to first.

As I maneuvered around the wheels of the bed, I snuck quick glances at Stan in his wheelchair. Hunched over a mobile table with a pad of paper and a dark marker, he held the writing tool like a toddler does a crayon, and

slowly put words to the page. After letting his glasses hang from the strap around his neck, he signaled at me.

I paused the Walkman in my back pocket. By then, everyone had gone digital with their MP3 players—not me, though; I preferred chunky analogue buttons and physical cassettes.

“What can I do for you, sir?” I pushed a grin that was more gaps and gum than teeth, but he couldn’t tell due to the mask I’d been mandated to wear recently.

“Hang this on the door.” His eyes were duller than an old motel vacancy sign.

“You sure?” The squiggly letters looked like mistakes on the page.

“Damn sure,” Stan grumbled, then coughed up a spiral of phlegm and snapped it toward the garbage bin by his feet, missing the mark. “I’d do it myself if I had the capacity to walk. These legs are just decoration now, like teeth on the starving.”

“Uh, alright.” I headed to my maintenance cart parked in the hall, tore off a ribbon of tape and attached the sign to the door. I pressed play and let the music occupy my mind while I ran a dust rag across the top of the wall mounted TV, polished the empty vase, then buffed the tabletops. With my trigger finger on the spray bottle, I brushed back the curtain, ready to give the window a shine when something bounced off the back of my dreadlocks. I turned to see a ball of paper hit the floor. The old man was up in arms, mouthing something.

“Curtains closed!” I heard him say once I removed an earbud. “I don’t want to see those poisonous smokestacks!” He pointed into the distance.

I shrugged and did as requested. This was the Motor City. It was impossible to look out a window and not see a factory.

On account of Stan being bound to a wheelchair, I did a half-assed job in the bathroom, but more than was necessary.

After leaving, I got started on the hallways. People think that pushing a dust mop is all in the arms, but it's not. Just like hockey, the wrists and shoulders get the brunt of it, twisting the stick back and forth while inching forward. Every step I took was met with the sharp jingle of keys hooked to my belt loop. When I didn't have tunes playing, the crispy crunch of my hospital-issued pants filled my ears. A couple of shifts into my tenure at Tender House Hospice, I learned that conversations between the living and the almost-dead were downright depressing. To keep my nose out of other people's business, I began wearing headphones.

After passing through an intersection, I was nearly sideswiped by a woman striding along while chatting on her phone. She was yakking and nodding like a rooster pecking at mealworms. I stopped to express my apologies for the near collision, but she just kept going. Whoever she was there to see must've been ready to expire. She stopped at suite number ten.

"Okay, I'll see you later," she said, dumping the phone into her Louis Vuitton shoulder bag. "Who the fuck put this here?" she called out, pulling down the sign. "Dad? Who did this?"

I stamped my grin into my shoulder and kept moving. I'd barely made it to the end of the hall when my

two-way radio crackled: *Richard, we have some glass and spilled liquid in room ten. Mop and bucket, please.*

Back at Stan's room, I got to work on the broken bottle of OJ. Listening to headphones had their drawbacks; with Aretha filling my ears, my spatial awareness was compromised, and I didn't realize the girl had moved behind me. When I bent over to pick up the glass, our butts bumped and I stumbled forward.

"Did you just get grease on my jeans?" she gasped, struggling to turn her head far enough to take in the breadth of her backside.

I turned my Walkman off. "I'm sorry, Miss, I didn't mean for..."

"I just bought these! If they're stained, I'll be having words with your boss. What's your name?" Her hair was styled messily and had that wet look you get from excessive gel.

I tapped my name tag, "Mr. Jackson, but you can call me Richard. I sincerely apologize."

"Do you know who put this sign on the door? *Bring viruses. NO MASKS ALLOWED!*"

I looked at Stan. Trying not to crack, his lips were sucked in. I shook my head, then went about my business with my Walkman turned off.

"Dad, I brought your cheque book; I need help with my bills," she said.

"Where's the bottle of bourbon I asked for?"

"You aren't supposed to mix booze and pain meds."

"Tell that to the drunk bums downtown," he coughed, putting his entire chest into it. "I deserve a drink for my birthday."

“Fat chance.” She pushed the cheque book so it was right under his nose.

“You write it and I’ll sign,” he said. “But not a penny more than two grand.”

“Two? I need double that!”

“If I was still rich, I’d be in a country club down south instead of dying in this hole. Ask your boss for a raise.”

“I got fired.”

“Of course you did. You must be a nightmare with that phone attached to your hand. I’d be embarrassed to ask any of my contacts to give you a job.”

“I’m not asking for employment; can you tide me over, pretty please?” She fluttered her fake caterpillar lashes.

“The last divorce rinsed me for almost all that I’ve got,” he said, putting his glasses on.

“Well, you’re not going to need the house anymore, and I know a good realtor...” she said, writing out the cheque. “Three grand. Sign it please.”

Stan shook his head. “My John Hancock isn’t worth nearly what you think.”

“Thanks, Daddy.” She put on her best little girl voice before taking a seat on the arm of the recliner. “Besides alcohol, what do you want for your birthday?”

“For someone to smother me with a pillow. I can’t imagine listening to your horseshit for another couple of months.”

“Oh, Dad, ha-ha, dramatic as always!”

“How about getting the Red Wings to win their last two games of the season?”

“You and your beloved hockey team, just a bunch of men chasing a ball,” she said.

“It’s not a ball! It’s a puck!”

She was nose-deep in her phone, bouncing her foot. “Do you still do crossword puzzles? I meant to bring you some newspapers.”

“That would’ve been nice.”

“I’ll text Alex. What about that thing we were talking about yesterday, working your only grandson into the will? Did you call your lawyer?”

“Enough!” the old man grveled. “My affairs are set in stone! You can give Alex whatever you want from your share.”

“I can’t afford it!” she cried, putting her phone in her lap. “I should get more than your sons; I grew up without a father!”

“Because I couldn’t stand to be near your mother. You just happened to get caught between.” Stan gave her a once over. “You turned out exactly like her. The buck stops here.” He pointed his index finger into the tabletop.

“You’re angry because I’m right. You can fix it by calling in the addendum to your lawyer.”

She was really working him now. I needed to see where the conversation was headed but was running out of surfaces to disinfect, so I equipped myself with a monkey wrench from my cart and got ready to fake a sink repair in the bathroom.

“I certainly won’t!” He paused for an intense round of coughing. “You and your swine mother put me through hell!”

It was difficult not to feel for him, stuck in that chair with no escape, his voice as his only tool. Starting to feel uncomfortable, I contemplated cutting my work short.

“Jenny, just leave. And don’t come back unless you’ve got a bottle of bourbon,” he said.

She began picking up her things.

“Mom’s going to contest the will unless you cut Alex in. Her lawyer says there’s a case.” Jenny held up her phone, attempting to get Stan to look at the screen before stepping toward the door.

I know I shouldn’t have listened, but I couldn’t help myself. I’d never heard such a conversation between father and daughter. I made it to my maintenance cart before realizing I’d forgotten the bin with the broken glass.

“Hang this!” Stan yelled at me. Looking defeated, he was holding up the sign again.

“It’s your birthday?” I asked, taking the paper.

“If I make it through another night.” He brought his hand to his face and motioned for me to pull down my mask.

I obliged.

“You believe the balls on that girl? Even after supporting her through a teenage pregnancy, and buying her a house, she still feels ripped off.”

I glanced around the room awkwardly and spotted a hat hanging off the coat rack. “You a Wings fan?” I asked.

He nodded. “They’re Detroit’s greatest sports franchise. Too bad they couldn’t make the playoffs.”

“They came close last year,” I said. “Edged out by one point.”

“Hand me my jacket, will you.” He pulled an envelope from the interior pocket of a high-end leather coat, one that would fetch a pretty penny on the right street corner. “Due to my condition, I’ve been giving these away.” He held out two tickets. “They’re for tonight’s game.”

“That’s awfully generous, but I’m not allowed to accept gifts.”

“I don’t give gifts. It’s a matter of circumstance.”

I’d been a Wings fan my entire life but had never attended a game. Pushing a broom in Tender House Hospice was the best job I’d ever had. Previously, I’d earned minimum wage on construction sites, barely scraping together enough cash to make rent on an apartment that was as dusty and barren as a moon crater.

“Centre ice. The only people with better seats are the refs,” he said.

“Accepting these could get me fired,” I replied, though my eyes lingered on the tickets.

“Fine.” He threw them in the garbage bin. “Empty my trash please. And throw the jacket out too. I won’t be leaving with any possessions.”

I laughed and did as instructed. But first, I removed the tickets from the envelope—they were more pristine than a wad of hundreds that had just rolled off the press. “Thanks a million, sir.” I nodded.

“It’s Stan.” We shook hands.

“Call me Ricky.” I wouldn’t say Stan smiled, but his face slackened a bit.

“Take one of your kids to the game.”

“I don’t have any,” I said. “But my sister is a huge fan.”

“No children? Dying should be a lot more peaceful knowing nobody will be fighting over your money.” He shook his head in a jerky sort of way, like a ball-and-socket joint that needed to be greased.

“I guess I’m good on two counts then, no kids and no money!” I smacked my thigh. “The greatest gift my mom ever gave us was poverty and debt.”

Stan’s eyes narrowed, causing his forehead to scrunch. “Explain.”

“I’ve learned that everyone has a debt to pay just before they checkout. Family members are never satisfied with their cut. Things get real messy.”

“You can never have enough,” Stan said. “I worked like a madman, terrified I’d go broke at any moment. And you know what? I did go broke, more than once with all the divorces. I made a lot of money for a lot of people.” He said this ruefully, with his gaze fixed on the floor tiles.

“When my mom passed,” I said, “there was no life insurance or retirement funds to fight over. Instead, my siblings and I banded together to give her a proper funeral. We shared the debt. Looking out for each other like that made us closer.”

Just then my radio crackled, giving me a start: *Richard, we’ve got a clogged toilet in room two.*

“Roger that. I’ll see you tomorrow, Stan. Thanks again!” I patted the breast pocket of my pinstriped custodian shirt.

“Make sure to hang that sign!” he yelled as I sprang for the hall.

The next day when I went for my routine cleaning, Stan was laid up in bed. I gave my customary knock, walked in, and announced, “Happy birthday, buddy!”

When he looked at me, it was as if he was trying to decipher my alien heritage. From the glassy nature of his eyes, I could tell that he was doped up on pain meds.

“Did you catch me on camera at the game last night?” I joked, while leaning on my mop stick. He tried to speak, but his tongue rolled around his mouth like a wad of bubble gum. He grunted then closed his eyes.

During my rounds, I kept an eye on Stan’s room. Since it was his last birthday, I expected to see a bunch of visitors coming and going. But I never saw a single one. Before my shift ended, I walked by once more and saw him propped up in the wheelchair. The TV was on and there was a remote under his hand.

“Stan?”

“Oh hey, Ricky.”

“I just wanted to thank you again for those tickets,” I said, entering the room and placing a Dixie cup full of ice on the table. “Our boys won!”

“Don’t mention it.”

I was happy to see he’d come out of his stupor. I pulled the juice-box-sized bottle from my backpack and set it on the table. Stan’s eyes grew to the shape of apple slices. In the short time I’d known him, they had always been mere slits.

“Bourbon!” he wheezed. “How’d you know?”

“I understand this might not be the quality you’re used to, but it’s the best I could get my hands on.”

“You got a couple cups? The Pistons’ game is about to start, have a seat in the lounge.”

I looked at my watch. I was officially off the clock, and it was shift change for the nurses. Assuming there

wasn't any trouble, no one was likely to come by for at least an hour.

"How do you like it?" I asked.

"On the rocks, if you got any."

I portioned some cubes, added the liquor and handed it to Stan.

"Happy birthday." I held up my drink and took a heavy sip. He tried to do the same, but his hands were shaky; hitting his mouth at that angle was like trying to land an airplane on an aircraft carrier during a storm.

"Mind passing me that straw?" Stan asked. He took a pull then smacked his lips together. "Velvety, with hints of butterscotch. I'll be able to tap-dance on out of here after a couple more swigs, the bourbon might knock the polyps right off the bone." Stan seemed to relax, letting the first genuine smile steamroll across his face.

"Amen to that," I said, and we bumped cups. "Bone cancer?"

He nodded, "Started in the lungs and spread. I suspect it has something to do with all the chemicals I was exposed to in the factory. I worked production before managing multiple tire plants." He looked down at his legs. "The spine is a lightning rod that transmits electricity to all parts of your body. Without a clear path, the brain is just a rambling cloud in the sky, not good for much more than talk." He shrugged. "The doctors say I won't be able to move my arms soon. I've got a couple of months yet."

"I'm sorry to hear it," I said.

He looked at the phone that was just out of reach. "Don't be. I'm happy to get on with it. Not a single call

or visitor today. I didn't expect any gifts because what could you possibly get someone who's on death row?"

"Bourbon! We can't please 'em all, Stan. Let's just enjoy the moment." I've never been much of a comforter in times of need, but I could sure talk a good game.

"Everything they say about money and happiness is true." He shook his head. "With the first million, you buy a massive house and fancy car, then suddenly you need another million."

"Chasing the almighty dollar," I sighed. "My mom used to ignore our poverty. If there wasn't food at dinnertime, she'd cover up the silence by playing Motown hits. It wasn't all bad, though. She had a piggybank she'd put pocket change into and managed to scrounge enough to buy us a birthday gift every year, usually something simple like ice cream or a toy."

"What about Christmas?" Stan asked.

"Nope. She didn't give a damn about Christ's birthday, ha-ha." I slapped my knee and thought I saw Stan jerk a bit, perhaps from a giggle. "I tell you though, no one ever cared about her birthday. For the longest time I didn't even know she had one."

"You think you could do it? If you had an opportunity to make millions, could you stop at comfort?" Stan leaned his ear, like he was getting ready for me to reveal a secret.

"I played the lottery once, for a multi-million-dollar pot. The ticket filled me with a hope so big it kept me up at night. I thought about the money constantly, spent every penny before the numbers were drawn—I thought I could manifest a win! After losing, I felt like I'd been robbed. Living on that kind of hope was tough to come

down from. Ever since, I haven't mentally spent a nickel before actually earning it. Heck yeah, I could stop at comfort, because I don't need much more than I've got."

Stan's hard-nosed expression didn't change.

"Some midweek ice cream would be nice, not just on special occasions," I finished.

"Hi, Stan," Nurse Watson said, entering the room. "I've got your meds and water. Oh hey, Rick. You guys watching the game?" She glanced at the TV.

I tensed, thinking she might smell the booze, but she never mentioned it.

"I'll be sure to take them," Stan said.

After she left, he looked at me. "Gimme a healthy pour. It's helping numb the pain. I'll go stupid after taking those damn pills and won't catch the end of the game."

We drank and chatted until the booze was gone. When it looked like the Pistons had cemented a win, Stan decided to take the meds and pass out for the night.

During my walkabout the next day, I peeked into Stan's room and saw his daughter. She had a Suit with her. Honestly, I didn't want to snoop, but I couldn't help myself—I needed to know if she was there to make amends for missing Stan's birthday. I walked in and grabbed the garbage bin. When that didn't raise any alarms, I started working the floor.

"The codicil with the requested changes to your will," the Suit said, placing it in front of Stan. "You'll need to sign in all spots with an arrow sticker."

"I know." Stan shooed him to the corner before picking up the pen.

"Mom's going to be so pleased!" Jenny paced the room, while pecking at her phone. The balls of her cheeks

looked as if they were about to burst from the sheer intensity of her smile. She stepped into the hall to take a call.

I was polishing the tabletops when Stan looked at me and asked, “You coming by for the Wing’s final game tonight?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” I said.

“Maybe you can bring another bottle of nail polish remover?” he grinned.

Seeing his smile made me blush. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Before Stan, I used to get through my workdays by minding my own business. I was there to put a shine on the place, not the people. But apparently I enjoyed being able to make a crab apple smile. On those days, when I got home to my empty apartment, I felt like I’d accomplished something meaningful. I can’t say that little bottle of bourbon made Stan’s dying days any easier, but being able to provide it sure lifted my spirits.

After Stan died, a gentleman with a severe case of dementia took over his room. Since we couldn’t build a rapport, the best I could do was slip him some chocolates every now and then.

Around the same time, a little old rockrose from Portugal checked into the house. From the moment Mrs. Silva got there, she complained about missing her daily dose of port wine. Once I learned about her condition and that she didn’t have any family to check in on her, I got my hands on a bottle of ten-year-old tawny port from a Portuguese shop across town. She warmed my heart, that one, weaving stories in broken English about her childhood and home country. If I ever qualify for a

passport, I might seriously consider heading there to try the *bifana* sandwiches she spoke so highly about.

Six months to the day after Stan passed, I received an inheritance from an anonymous donor. I'd be lying if I said it was just enough to pay the bills. Heck, I could've wiggled my way out of the shoddy one-bedroom I'd rented for most of my life and moved into the upper-middle-class hood. I could've even gotten my chiclets fixed. But I decided against all of that; it just wasn't me. And besides, every time I considered getting loose with the money, I heard Stan asking if I could stop at comfort.

I kept on at the hospital, continued using a Walkman, and kept riding Detroit transit. The only difference was I suddenly had a retirement fund and a couple pints of ice cream in the freezer. To ensure I didn't get too attached to the money, I donated the extra within the first week. I didn't even keep a rainy-day stash. That's the beauty about spending your entire life as a poor man—you never forget the ins and outs of being in need at all times. If I lost it all, poverty would take me back with open arms.

The Rubber Tree

By Nathaniel Krenkel

On the second weekend, I get up early and make the kids French toast with fresh blackberries. We listen to *Wait Wait ... Don't Tell Me!*, then go for a walk around town. I buy them Manga books and change a five for a pile of quarters. They play Ghostbusters pinball in the back of the comic shop while I look at Matt Kindt titles. I drag them to the record shop and buy Roxy the ten dollar copy of *Skylarking* by XTC. I tell her to make sure she pays close attention to the lyrics of “Dear God” and to play it for her friends.

Nat picks them up Sunday morning before I even have time to fix them one last breakfast. I sit by the gas fire in my reading chair and, per usual, weep and stare into space, wondering in a banal loop how everything went so horribly off the rails.

“Can I come out?”

I’ve fallen asleep.

“Looks like you already have,” I say to my one-armed friend. Florida is standing in the entrance to the living room. He bops up to the tree while I check that the curtains are closed.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a rubber plant.”

“It’s dead.”

“No. Not yet.”

Florida's arm grows and he starts to pet the plant from top to bottom. "You think it likes living in this cage?"

"I don't know. And what do you mean, cage? The pot?"

"Yeah. The roots, they're cut off. No one to talk to."

"I guess. Except...it's a plant."

"Would you want to live in a bowl your whole life?"

"Florida, I'm not in the mood. And, for that matter, I do live in a bowl, it's called my fucking skull."

"Okay, relax." Florida continues to stroke the black-green leaves. "I know you Earthums murder sheep and goats and cows and chickens and turkeys and ducks and pigs and deer and each other, but I didn't know you also murder trees."

"It's not dead."

"Tortured."

I sigh and close my eyes. "Salad."

"What about salad?" Florida asks.

"Well, we murder...you know, lettuce."

"What's your point?"

I stand up and stretch. "My point is, life is death and it's a cycle, or some shit."

"Ahh. Now it all makes sense."

"You want to get high?"

"Sure, but my tolerance is low after this last week of being stuck in the closet while you try to impress your kids with bad jokes and pop culture."

"Just eat one cookie to start."

"Good idea, I don't want to become a wallowing sad fuck pillock like yourself."

"Or, eat a half."

“Half of a cookie? Don’t be daft.”

“If your tolerance is that low....”

“Okay, I’ll eat two.”

“Whatever. I’ll get the cookies. You go find something fun to watch.”

Florida ignores me and continues examining the rubber tree.

I go upstairs to my bedroom and retrieve the stash. The cookies are little bite-sized items that remind me of a toxic breakfast cereal I was not allowed to have as a kid. I wonder if all the healthy choices my parents made in some way resulted in me being a dysfunctional adult. Like, if they’d let me have Jif instead of co-op, fresh-ground, no-sugar and no-salt peanut butter, or Fruity Pebbles instead of steel-cut oats, Wonder Bread instead of whatever fucking nut/seed/wooden wheel madness they spread my no-sugar, no-salt, oil-on-the-top peanut butter on, if I’d had the same food as my friends, would I now be working at a bank in like, Salt Lake or Grand Rapids, with a fast food gut and a few guns, like a normal American man? No sex. Plenty of anger, fear, grease, hemorrhoids, pining for authoritarian rule, watching videos of ICE beating up brown people and getting semi-hard...

Back downstairs in the living room, Florida is still standing next to the rubber tree, but now it’s in the center of the room.

“You moved it?”

“It was not happy looking out the window at freedom.”

“But Florida, the window is the perfect spot.”

“It’s happier here.”

“Fine.” I see Florida eyeing the bag in my hand.

“Here.” I toss him the adult cookies. “Remember, only one.”

This time the child-proof seal gives him trouble. I could help him, but I don’t. His two thumbs and four fingers can’t find any leverage and as he struggles, his legs start to grow. “Don’t bump into the light fixture,” I warn. He looks up and steps to the side, bumping into the tree. The bag of weed cookies drops as he tries to keep the tree from toppling over. I pick up the bag and open it, dumping three cookies into my open hand. I pop two in my mouth and set the third one on the end table. Florida seems hesitant.

“Don’t eat it if you don’t want.”

“Pear pressure,” he replies.

“It’s peer pressure, not pear pressure.”

“Okay. Well, I hope this doesn’t all go peer shaped.”

He eats the whole cookie, wipes crumbs from the sides of his eyes. We high five and descend to the basement. I start to scroll through Netflix.

“I don’t feel anything. Give me another.”

“Christ, Florida, it’s not your first rodeo, you know it takes a while to kick in.”

“How long?”

“Depends, I guess. I mean, for humans, it takes at least a half an hour, unless you smoke it.”

“Smoke a cookie?”

“No, you smoke the plant.”

“That plant that you have captured and are in the process of torturing to death in your living room?”

“No, that’s the rubber tree, and it’s not being tortured. What I’m saying is, you can smoke the weed

plant, or you can make a cookie from the weed plant. Either way gets you high, but eating it takes longer. Okay?”

“Do you murder the plant first?”

“Well....yes.”

“Wait, is this cookie full of murdered plants?”

“No.” I’m tired and my eyes itch. “Weed plants make little weed plant berries that are picked and squished into weed plant jelly, okay?”

“I love jelly. Why don’t we get the weed jelly and put it on toast?”

I try not to touch my eye. Florida eats two more cookies. There’s nothing good on Netflix. “I think I’ll go get some lunch, how’s Mexican sound?”

“I’ll have the baby goat stew.”

I pause, waiting for Florida’s murdered tree discourse to catch up with what’s required to create his lunch order. When Florida picks up the new issue of the New York Review of Books and starts to read the classifieds, I go upstairs, grab my jacket, and head out the front door.

I stop at the Mexican spot on Longfellow Plaza—it’s not even noon, but they are open—and place an order for carry-out. Hearing myself order the baby goat stew makes me wonder why it’s not called baby kid stew; baby kid is redundant, so it would have to be kid stew. Which would not sell well. So, baby goat stew. Three words, all required.

When I get home, the rubber tree is back in the window, and Florida is again not in the basement. Instead, he’s busy with scissors in the kitchen.

“What’s all this?” I set the plastic bag of food on the counter and pull out the bottle of cheap pinot noir I’d bought from the Cumberland Farms around the corner. He’s dissected several back issues of the New York Review of Books and there are paper clippings on the floor and counter. I twist off the screw cap and drop it in the trash.

“GM stands for gay man, right?” Florida asks.

“I guess.” I pour wine into a metal cup until it’s half full, then start to slosh it around, pretending that a little breath might brighten up the taste of what is essentially gas station rot-gut. Florida moves two of the paper clippings from the master pile to a new, separate pile, then says, “And what’s AOL?”

“AOL? You mean like, the email address?”

“Ah, that makes sense. I thought it was Ass or Lips.” He shuffles more clippings.

“Okay, what are you doing?”

Florida ignores my question, “Is book loving literal? Like is it a physical act involving fluids?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Do you copulate with books?”

“No.”

“What if it were the book you tried to write?”

“Ouch.”

“Is that our lunch? I’m starving.” He shuffles a few more clipped classifieds around on the counter.

“Yeah, here, baby goat stew.” Florida rips the plastic lid off his stew and shoves his hand into the hot brown food.

“C’mon man, that’s gross.” I go to the cupboard and take down a bowl. Florida is holding the dripping goat

stew like it's a fistful of rare jewels. I grab his wrist and shake his hand over the bowl. Florida lets go, and the whole mess plops.

"You're stoned as fuck," I say.

"Not enough, let's have more."

"After we eat."

Florida sticks his hand in his mouth. When he takes it out, all the goat gravy and bits are gone.

"You really need to work on your table manners."

"On the Dash ship, we eat a lot of bog. It's not as messy as this goat slop, but it's also not as good. Lubie would at this point say, chimes and bells Florida, chimes and bells, and then I'd probably say something like, it's kyle, taste it uncle, and then..."

Florida prattles on about his life before coming to Earth as I go about preparing my own plate. We return to the basement to watch TV. I suggest we go straight to *The Walking Dead*, which we've been watching on and off all year, but Florida now insists we watch something called *Pigs Go Boom*. I've never heard of it, but he claims it's the most accurate show he's ever seen about space travel. He proceeds to spend ten minutes with the remote, looking for the show until I get up and forcibly remove the remote from his hand. He gives it up without a struggle and then starts to giggle. I doubt you've ever heard a Dash giggle, but it's unlike anything you're likely to hear in this life or the next. It sounds like a cross between a box of thumbtacks being dumped onto a cookie sheet and a very wet fart. And once he starts, it takes him forever to get it under control. I stand up and fetch some water, which he tosses into his mouth like he's putting out a camp fire. That seems to do the trick, though for the next hour

bursts of Dash laughter burp out. We end up watching four episodes of *The Walking Dead*—poor Rick—before agreeing to try something lighter. Both of us are starting to get a little freaked out, jumping at sounds at the window. Eventually, we settle on a documentary about dudes that climb skyscrapers dressed like super heroes. I'm reminded of a made-for-TV movie that I saw portions of when I was 3 or 4 years old, a movie about a family of tight-rope walkers. They wore matching outfits, one-piece skin-tight affairs, 1970s style, and they were always shot, cinematographically speaking, from below, with a gratuitous amount of lens-flare. I've no idea what the plot was, but there are several tragedies that involve family members falling from the wire and going splat. This film not only frightened me as a child, it left me emotionally scarred, as did a western with a man in black and a man in white. There's a scene where the man in white lassos the man in black, and the town collectively sighs with relief—our hero—now they can all return to normal life, no longer terrorized by the man in black. But what's this? The man in black is able to work some leverage below the elbow and get his hand on the grip of his gun. Look out, man in white! But it's too late, and the man in white is shot down. Again, I was horrified by this. I was a small boy in a farm house in rural Michigan that always had menacing black wasps trapped between the windows and the screens. My mom hid Micronaughts in the closet for my birthday which was weeks away, and I'd sneak in and play while keeping them in the packaging. I'm sure they looked tampered with but Mom never mentioned it. In another closet, one of many in my attic room, I'd sometimes pee. Just fucking piss on the floor.

And I'd listen to records. My favorite records were narrative-based: Spiderman, Superman, the kind that came with a book. Sounds—a ping or the swish of a light saber—would indicate when it was time to turn the page. One day my father took me to a basement stereo shop that had red neon lights running along the ceiling and he bought *Aja* by Steely Dan for himself and for me, the soundtrack to *The Muppet Movie*. I now have copies of both releases.

I kept crayon shavings in a cigar box. I'd listen to *The Muppet Movie*, picture families falling from wires and the man in black, and run my fingers through crayon shavings.

All my Steely Dan albums are in the Main Floor Stack. *The Muppet Movie* record was last seen in my daughter's pile, so it's probably at her new house, but it might still be here, up in her room. I've not looked to see which records Roxy took and which ones remain. I'm too fragile to see what she didn't need. What if she left behind Sam Cooke, or the Everly Brothers Greatest Hits? The song "Bird Dog," I can hear her singing it now. She loved that song, little kid voice, delighted, charmed, spinning dizzy. I really hope she took that album with her. But I'm not going to check. Schrödinger's cat.

"What's a bird dog? Is it like Bird Flower, my cousin?"

"What?"

"You were singing to yourself, you were singing bird dog, what is that?"

"It's nothing. You and your cousin, you're close friends?"

"Oh yes. Bird and I have had so many adventures, fighting against the Guild, riding across the blanket,

having tea with the Poetress, securing and disposing of the Guild's inventory of B.H.I.A.C.s."

"B.H.I.A.-whats?"

"Black Hole In A Can."

"That sounds fucked up."

"You have no idea. Can I have another cookie now?"

"Sure, I think they're on the counter still." I lower my footrest and go upstairs to find the weed cookies. Outside, the world looks cold. Wind blows through the yard, triggering the rusted chimes in the lilac bush. On the counter, I take a closer look at Florida's pile of New York Review of Book clippings. Most of the personals are from older people seeking companionship. A few are quite blunt: a seventy-seven year old proclaiming he's "ready" to get married, a slender gay man, again age seventy-something, seeking similar in all aspects, except his desired mate must be two decades his junior. There's a sadness to the personal ads. Everyone is overeducated and burned to a crisp with literary knowledge. Everyone loves walks. Everyone loves books and poetry and Italy. Always Florence, never Rome. Everyone seeks the open-minded, the well-spoken, as well as more common traits like "loves to laugh." One person seeks a mate that likes crosswords, TV shows from the UK, and trips to France.

Jesus fuck. They're all me.

I start to mentally compose my own NYRB personals ad: recently separated dad of two and part-time volunteer DJ seeks partner that loves getting her fingernails dirty digging through crates of old vinyl records, drunken stops at chip shops on dirty Glaswegian

streets, house music, and Alice Notley. Rosé drinkers or Edinburgh stans need not reply.

Back downstairs, Florida has finally found the show *Pigs Go Boom*. It consists of a group of pranksters placing explosive miniature pigs in unassuming places and then filming the reactions of passersby when the pigs explode into clouds of glitter and, apparently, foul stink.

“I don’t understand, this show has nothing to do with space travel,” he says.

“I’ll trade you,” I say. “Give me the remote and I’ll give you a cookie.”

Florida’s large saucer eyes roll my way and lock onto the bag of edibles. I give it a shake.

“Three cookies.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. And you open the package.”

I open the seal and retrieve three cookies. Florida’s arm extends across the room and he hands me the remote. I drop the cookies onto his open palm and he tosses them into his mouth. I do the same. I should be fine...

Cast Me White

By Aaron Golding

You might not believe me, but I was in *Dances with Wolves* when I was a kid.

One night, while the entire Lakota Nation slept, Hollywood arrived and built a fence. This fence was as long as rivers have flowed and as long as the grasses have grown. It stretched across the horizon as far as the sun shines. This was some fence. Aluminum poles anchored a current of chain link that rattled with the prairie breeze like a warning from a diamondback. But we couldn't resist. We were drawn to the fence by a promise.

Word had spread like a famine of locusts, and before we knew it, we had gathered in a long line. It was morning, and the sage and tall prairie grass was damp with dew, and our blue jeans and holey sneakers were wet, and some of us wanted to go home because we were cold and uncomfortable, and maybe scared, but we didn't dare. We stood single file, desperately wanting to know what was on the other side of this fence. Speculative whispers spread down the line. Then, someone uncle-with-braids said, "Let us in." Those words were like a gunshot at the beginning of a race that our collective DNA heard, and everyone locked their fingers through the links of that fence and shook it, and a unified rattle rumbled. We sang.

Hollywood's come

Take me back in time,

To the films

Cry Blood, Apache

Rustlers of Red Dog.
Cast me white
Make me famous,
Hollywood
Hollywood
Hollywood's come.

Still, the fence didn't open. In the afternoon we protested by cutting our hair with a grandfather's dull pocketknife that tore and uprooted the follicle like an old lawnmower over thick grass. But nothing changed. Hollywood didn't care.

And then, at dusk, a gate appeared. The ADs and PAs, with their headsets and bullhorns, appeared atop ladders like soldiers in gun towers. "Sioux Nation," they said, "Sioux Nation. Be in our film," and then they smiled and opened the gate. We marched through a maze of box vans filled with rolled cables like razor wire. Men stood atop the vans, aiming cameras and boom mics as we shuffled past. At first timid, we took each step with caution. Sensing our hesitation, Hollywood formed two lines, like a parade, they cheered and we walked proud, backs straight, like we were royalty. They flashed pearly whites while they handed us wigs to put on our heads until our hair grew back. And after everyone had entered and received their wigs, they locked the gate behind us.

For months during the filming, we weren't allowed to go home. We weren't even allowed to wear our own clothes. We got new clothes, old buckskin leather shirts, and moccasins. We got our picture taken for continuity, and we felt at least a century lighter. Then someone Headset, someone Hollywood, directed us to different

teepees. We were told to stay there and not to speak to the talent.

At night, there were three moons in the sky. Two of the moons were fixed to tall tripods. Those moons disoriented us, changed the tides and menstrual cycles, caused all of the stars to fall from the sky, and we couldn't sleep right.

At first, it was weird having days that lasted half a month, but we adapted as we always do and eventually embraced the changes. A village of teepees felt natural after a while.

An old woman, grandma-so-and-so, came around and tied a feather in my hair that flapped when the wind blew. It felt like someone was tapping me on my shoulder. I kept looking to see who it was. But no one was there. I thought it was a ghost, and then I stopped looking. It's a funny thing having a feather tied in your hair. Makes you feel like a real Indian, like you could fly. We all felt free during those months that we were locked inside that set.

Those of us who could still speak the language got speaking roles. My uncle had a close-up. He wore his Indian face, like Crazy Horse carved out of a mountain.

All of the men were supposed to ride horses, but there weren't enough to go around, so I was a girl in the movie. You can see me if you look. I am in the scene when the whole band packs up to follow the talented white man to the buffalo, you know, *tatanka*. I'm one of those girls walking next to an old blind woman. A Hollywood Assistant said that I didn't look much like a young brave, that I was too feminine. He said I should help the blind woman. Be a good boy. He said I needed to wear a dress. And he said all of this through his

bullhorn, even though we were a few feet apart. So I wore a dress like the women, but if you look close enough, you can see me walking. The broad-shouldered girl. My wig blown around by the plains breeze, and that feather tied in my hair.

They gave us bows and arrows, old buffalo bone tools, and brains for tanning hides. They gave us bear grease to keep our wigs shiny and smooth. They gave us beads and pigments from flowers to decorate our teepees and horses with war paint because we believed we were going to war. They gave us back their interpretation of our history, and then one day when we were good and fired-up, ready for a battle, someone yelled, "That's a wrap." The crew cheered and tossed their caps, sunglasses, and headsets into the air. They opened the gate. And their bullhorns were cannons. "Sioux Nation. Thank you for your help in recreating our history. Now give us our things back and vacate our land." And then they took everything that they had given to us away and handed us back our old jeans and basketball shorts, t-shirts, and sneakers. They took down their teepees and marched us off their set. They took their wigs back and left us looking like a tribe of mourners. And we were mourning. And when we had given back every bit of our faulty sense of identity, they handed us *Dances with Wolves* blankets as parting gifts.

Hollywood had come to South Dakota and told us to be Indians. They tricked us into believing that we were Ghost Dancing all of those months, that we were surrounded by our ancestors, who whispered secrets in our ears while we dreamed, and we remembered something about who we were, and the uprising swelled

within our hearts, and then we forgot it as soon as we walked back through the fence. Hollywood is crafty.

When we got to the outside, we turned around and said, "Let us stay. Lock us up here and forget about us. We will be good. We will stay put." They pushed the last few of us out and closed the fence behind us. Our unified footsteps were drumbeaters, and the ground was our drum. We sang.

Hollywood's gone
Hollywood's gone
Turned me into a savage
For their motion picture song.
Made me proud
Walked me tall
Then told me to,
"Push on along."
Hollywood's gone
Hollywood's gone
Hollywood
Hollywood
Hollywood's gone.

That night, we slept under a foreign sky with stars and only one moon. Even the wind was phony. The next morning, the entire Lakota Nation woke up to find that the fence was gone. Holes in the ground where the poles had been anchored and the muddy scars of tire tracks from the trailers and trucks were all that was left. And we all stood where the fence had been stretched across the land, and we just stared, across the rolling hills and the prairie grass that gently swayed back and forth with the changing breeze like an ocean of greens and yellows,

looking west over the horizon for our home, for our
brave new world.

Well

By Sidney Hummel

While you slumped, inebriated, my chest caved in. You were dying. Claimed there's nothing to do, but how could I allow it? How could I. My galvanized spirit frustrated you, so you never mentioned it again. I watched as you became an animal, skilled at masking your wounds and alive past the point where it makes any sense. How long would you drag yourself? How long did we have left?

I thought of the well. You'd always called it a folktale, said if there was a talking hole in the ground that offered an exchange for your life you'd already be in it, didn't even need a wish granted. But you said it looking down, batting lashes, and I resolved to believe hard enough for both of us because there were still nights when you got drunk or scared enough to speak of the fear of your body giving up before you'd want to get better. There was a desperately buried desire for a life you'd decided you couldn't live, and it pressed firm as a gun at the back of my head. I learned how to breathe into it.

A beautiful opportunity—martyrdom, your revival my last will and testament. Most of the guys at my site, who'd apostatized as teens around the same time you did, said the well was a story made up to quell grieving minds like mine. Let him go, they told me. Loving someone more than they love themselves is codependency. As though my ceaseless outpouring of love was ignorant to the viscous consequences of your anosognosia. As if it was a choice.

Seasons turned, your body bent, and your eyes—once arrestingly intense—fatigued to dull brown buttons. You pretended I couldn't notice. I pretended you didn't hurt anymore because you'd ceased to feel, and took walks, twice a day and on my lunch breaks, to places where I spoke to God and scanned dirt, gravel and root for the well. You'd have resented my interference, like living was an unimaginable burden and you had suffered enough. Hadn't we both? And hadn't we always provided a reprieve for the other? When we were thirteen you wore a real razor blade to school on a chain around your neck, and only I noticed the blood blooming mushroom clouds through your shirt. At fifteen my father kicked me out when I refused to cut my hair, wavy past my shoulders and pale from summer sun. It was you who took me in. A litany of the unexpected because farmboys aren't supposed to dabble in dresses, devour books or doodle in margins. They're supposed to buck like colts. We'd been hard to break for all the wrong reasons and so we reared each other. And now you'd leave me, when I was God's hound hunting miracles on the ground?

Our last night, you shouted obscenely across the bar—my favorite haunt, at the edge of the crisp woods—boot heels braced on the brass foot rail of your barstool. Widebrimmed cowboy hat askew on shaggy brown hair, fleck of peanut shell in your wispy handlebar mustache. Not because you'd been eating; someone threw a handful at you, sharp and mean, in effort to shut you up. You rambled on, downed three whiskey doubles for the price of singles since the bartender was an older woman who'd always been sweet on you. Beside you I sipped wine, fat

cheeks ruddy red above my thick winter beard. Imagined the blood of Christ, maybe I should offer you a sip.

Eventually I needed a cigarette and room to pray. You didn't follow, which felt like cruel practice for the end. Outside, the woods were cold and dark, trees bare like bones, and the pale moon that shone on them just as white. I zipped my coat tight while my boots, steel-toed and caked in construction zone mud, led me away from the ruckus to the percolating creek. What was it, not even a quarter mile out? Summer nights, drunkards drown fishing there, when the rains raised the current and made it stronger than it looked, like you fighting me on this. Got to be beyond your mind wading in by moonlight after flash flood warnings. Shifts in sediment, moss-slick rocks. Got to be beyond your mind to shirk your life and all its love, too. Slip and you ain't comin' back.

I sparked my lighter and blew smoke toward the rheumatic fingers of dormant trees, crunching leaves and twigs headed toward the creek's babble. Found myself arguing with God. "If You're so damn mighty, why can't You make him forgive himself for whatever it is he thinks he's done?" Inhaling, exhaling smoke into the crystal cold night. "Huh?"

Shimmering snowflakes began to sift from on high, like God gently laughing. Felt Him on my fingertips as I ashed into the dark. He retorted, warm and full in my chest, *He can't confront something he has no capacity to address, can he?*

"Then You give him the capacity!" I jabbed. "You make him care enough about me to stay!"

So this quest? It's about you?

"I'll die for him, how the Hell is that about me?"

God's chagrin in fat flakes, prickling my nose. I inhaled hard on my cigarette and walked ahead. His voice resonated inside. *You think that magic will save him. In this, you deny his reality.*

Your reality. I'd been living it for years. Wondering, had you ever cared about yourself? Did you register pain anymore or when would you again? Praying next time you hurt it would ring like a gong, vibrate your bones something beastly, shake you awake like daughters speaking tongues, clacking heels against the broomswept churchwood floor.

"No," I muttered, walking faster, "I don't deny shit. He's the one denying." Songbird-hollow integrity, if he quit masturbating his pain he'd get it.

"You fool," a voice said out loud.

I tripped, sprawling over a waist-high wall where I belly-flopped onto a wide wooden lid. My cigarette dashed away. Quickly backing off, I felt around shadows, heart palpitating, cheeks blazing hot in bleak twilight. It was a well of stone, solid as if it had sat centuries there. But in those woods I'd roamed since childhood, I knew it hadn't. The wooden lid was solid, heavy. When I shifted it slightly, a white glow broke out across the trees like a movie set, artificial and choreographed. By who? God? He was quiet—no reaction to our interruption—as though I'd crossed into some raw country in which His power bore no influence. I heaved the wooden lid again, undaunted. The light swelled afterlife-bright then faded to a TV glow, from far at the bottom echoing up against rock. Humming expectantly.

“Act quick.” The exterior voice was smooth and rich like wine. “You’re not the only desperate man prowling the night.”

I thought of you, charading menace at the bar. What state I had left you in and why. All the nights when having peanuts thrown in your face was our signal to go home and warm by the fire with my favorite film on low so you could engage in my commentary instead of the running narrative in your head I only caught glimpses of. You loved me in negative space: the degree to which you loved me matched the absence in which you loved yourself. And I had left you, to find a solution, which would be leaving you so you could live. Who was desperate? Whose integrity was songbird thin?

“You—you do the exchange?” I started. “Save him, if I give my life?”

“I didn’t hear you show your God such flagrant doubt. Now act quick, I said! This is what you prayed for, isn’t it?”

My phone rang in my jeans pocket, vibrating against my thigh. The ringtone—a shameful pop anthem you plugged in one afternoon as I napped—jarred me back to the pitch. Step back or lean forward into the glow and I could be swallowed whole. I *would* be swallowed whole. Slip and not come back.

The glow throbbed gently as if on beat, and I considered answering your call just to stop the gyrating song. But if you followed and found me, you’d jump into the well in my place, and without you I would have to erase myself. Where would we be, then?

The ringing stopped and I swung one leg over to straddle the ledge. Forest spun, head swam—I wasn’t that

drunk. No, the red wine was welcome in my belly. I was cowardly, already missing you. Swung the other so I was a child kicking my feet on top of the playground jungle gym. “What will it feel like?” I asked the bodiless voice. “How far is the bottom?”

The glow intensified angrily, like it would rise to pinch my dangling feet and rip me down its throat. “You’re here to absolve your second God, yet you fear the fall?”

“No, I—”

“Act now, or this opportunity is lost, like him, forever.”

I took a deep breath. My phone rang again, that stadium flare. You could convince me not to do this. If I left you, we’d never smoke again at sunrise, collecting dewdrops on bare feet, imagining Jesus as a snot nose child or hormone-pumped acne-riddled teen. *No one can be holy all the time. Can they? No one can constantly act out of love. Can’t they?*

“He is God too,” I conceded, “he just can’t see it.”

I crossed my arms.

Somewhere above, the snow hissed against the ember of my cigarette.

Does the Sex Stop Here?

by Alexander Feinstein

They were late to the party. Not that anyone seemed to notice or care what time Fay and Richard Futterman arrived. What everyone wanted to know was if Jonah might show, if maybe he was in town for a shoot or something and would swagger through the apartment door at any moment. In truth, Jonah Gold only stayed in casual touch with his old college friends, and the chances that a star of his Hollywood stature would appear at an ordinary party such as this one were slim. But just past midnight, Jonah made an entrance with a willowy creature on his arm, and a roar went up that shook the window casings.

“Is that girl half his age?” said Fay.

“Less,” said Richard.

From their remove in the kitchen they watched Jonah stop for selfies at every step as he made his way through the fawning crowd. When he finally reached the Futtermans with open arms, Jonah wrapped Fay in a tight embrace and shared a crushing handshake with Richard before introducing them to Chloe, his skinny companion. “We would’ve been here earlier,” he said, “if we hadn’t taken the Sex.”

“I thought the 6 wasn’t running this weekend,” Richard said. “Track work.”

“Not the 6, Dickie,” Jonah laughed. “The Sex. You know. The ole tunnel of love.”

“Tunnel of love?” said Fay, puzzled.

“Oh my God, it was amazing!” Chloe exclaimed with a hand over her lovely mouth. “We don’t have anything like it in L.A. Who takes the subway there anyway?”

“But Jonah,” said Suzanne Bolger, just joining the conversation, “weren’t you afraid someone would recognize you?”

“Which is why we put on masks, Suzie Q,” Jonah replied. “Not the Covid kind. The costume ball kind. Like Tom Cruise wore in *Eyes Wide Shut*.”

“Kubrick’s underappreciated masterpiece,” said Adam, Suzanne’s husband and an adjunct in cinema studies at NYU. “But unlike its sublime depiction of clandestine orgies for the elite, the Sex train is for the masses, the common folk. In fact, the last time we took the S, I bumped into one of my undergrads. Literally.”

“Now we wear disguises,” said Suzanne. “I have this wig that Dolly Parton would envy.”

“And for me a Luigi Mario-inspired fake mustache,” Adam said. “Along with a vintage leather coat with grotesquely wide lapels ala John Shaft.”

Then cracking open a beer, Phil Steckel piped in. “I was so nervous my first time on the S, I couldn’t... you know. Until I thought of that kid’s book.”

“Not one of Fay’s I hope,” laughed Suzanne. “Not a Moxie Foxy.”

“Please, Suzie,” Phil said. “I’m not *that* perverse.”

“Let me guess,” said Adam, snapping his fingers. “*The Little Engine That Could*.”

“Bingo!” said Phil, and he and Adam began to pump their fists like pistons. “*I think I can, I think I can!*” they chanted. “*I know I can, I know I can!*”

“Whoo-who!” said Jonah, tugging on a pretend steam whistle. “The Sex has left the station!”

“Excuse us,” said Fay, pulling her husband away to steer him into a living room corner. “What the hell are they talking about?!” she yelled in his ear over the deafening music.

“I haven’t a goddamn clue!” Richard yelled back. “All I know is that Adam is wrong about *Eyes Wide Shut*! That movie stinks!”

#

Dr. Susskind honked into a handkerchief, then wiped his nose with the soiled rag and tucked it into his cardigan. “Come now, Fay,” he said. “A secret subway line for straphangers to have uninhibited sex?”

“Not so secret, Saul, if all my middle-aged friends are taking it,” Fay told her therapist.

“Nonsense,” Susskind said. “An urban fantasy they’ve invented to make up for their sexless marriages. Something they mashed together from the movies. *Risky Business* crossed with *Eyes Wide Shut*. Tom Cruise loses his virginity on an elevated train in the former and attends a lavish orgy in the latter.”

“Again with Tom Cruise,” said Fay with a roll of her eyes. “But wait. Jonah isn’t married. I mean, what if it is real?”

A wistful expression took over Dr. Susskind’s face. “You’re too young to remember Plato’s Retreat,” he said, stroking his snowy beard. “The swingers club in the 70’s? That den of iniquity was deliciously real alright. Until the Health Department unfairly shut it down. But putting aside your delusional friends for a moment, how are

things between you and Richard? In the bedroom that is. How is your sex life?"

"Extinct," Fay sighed.

"All married couples have their droughts," Susskind assured. "I would advise that you introduce something to reignite your passions, get your juices flowing again. Internet pornography, X-rated toys, any form of stimulating paraphernalia. In other words, kink."

Kink? Hearing this from her therapist's mouth almost made Fay throw up in hers. For one thing, she and Richard had never been adventurous types behind closed doors. Sure, they'd once talked salaciously to each other, but neither could keep a straight face. Another time, they attempted something out of their prudish comfort zone and Richard hurt his back. But that was the closest they'd ever come. So, *kink* was clearly out of the question.

#

"What column do we put this creep?" asked Jenna. "Great artist or dirty old man?"

"Great artist, I'm not so sure," said Fay. "Dirty old man? Check."

Mother and daughter were in The Metropolitan Museum, staring at "Thérèse Dreaming." Jenna had to write a paper about the Balthus painting for her feminist art seminar at Barnard. The canvas depicted a teenage girl seated with eyes closed, hands clasped atop her head, and legs parted to reveal a pair of creamy white underpants beneath the red folds of her hiked skirt.

"Speaking of dirty old men," said Fay, "we saw Jonah Gold at a party on Saturday, and his latest arm candy wasn't much older than you. He said they... *took the train.*"

“You mean the Sex?” said Jenna.

“So it’s true?” Fay gasped. “Your father and I had no idea.”

“Yeah, well, you write children’s books and Dad’s an accountant. Case closed.”

Fay gripped her daughter’s arm. “You haven’t taken it, sweetheart, have you?”

“The Sex train?” said Jenna, wrinkling her nose. “No way. It’s disgusting. Mom, promise me that you and Dad would never... I mean, ew, gross. And what if someone recognized you, posted a video and it went viral? You could kiss Moxie Foxy goodbye.”

Would that be so terrible? After authoring and illustrating a dozen titles, Fay was ready to let go of the fox she’d modeled after her plump grandmother, her bubbe. Yes, Moxie, with her babushka and wire-rimmed glasses at the end of her long snout, had won the hearts of children everywhere, but Fay was eager to create something new, something edgy, something in anything but a *shmata*.

“Yikes,” said Richard, just joining his wife and daughter and leaning so close into the Balthus that his nose was practically buried between the teenage model’s legs.

“Dad!” said Jenna. “Careful where you point that male gaze.”

Fay jerked her husband back and said, “Your daughter knows about the Sex train.”

“Not that hoax again,” Richard groaned. “Wait. Jenna, you haven’t...”

“Do either of you know me?!” Jenna said before turning on her heels and storming away.

“That does it,” Richard said, watching his daughter go. “I’m calling to complain.”

“Complain?” said Fay. “To whom?”

“City Hall. Why should our tax dollars go to some sleazy railroad right under our feet?”

#

In the morning, Fay Futterman hurried to keep her hair appointment. Finding a seat on the subway, she couldn’t help but regard her fellow passengers through suspicious eyes. But those not looking at their phones were either reading a magazine or book, nodding to the music in their earbuds, or staring vacantly into space. The only affection on public display was that of the generously tattooed couple rubbing noses while standing in the doors.

After the train entered the tunnel connecting Brooklyn to Manhattan, it began to pick up unnerving speed and Fay felt a growing sense of unease as the lights flickered. Then the subway car went black, and when a moment later the lights blinked back to life, she nearly fell out of her seat. Clothes were strewn everywhere. Nightclub music pulsed from the P.A. system. And all the passengers were having sex. On their feet, backs, butts, hands, and knees. In positions that Fay didn’t know were humanly possible. The inked romantics were now making robust love against the subway doors. To Fay’s left was a couple in the exuberant throes of something circus-like. On her right was a pair engaged in an act that was probably illegal in some states. On the ceiling there clung a freak dressed as Spiderman, watching everything upside down. And round and round the stainless-steel poles spiraled topless women in the thinnest of thongs.

Then just as Fay's eyeglasses began to fog, she was surprised to detect a warm tingling below her waist, and even more surprised when a tall, dark, and very aroused stranger appeared through the writhing flesh to ask her in an irresistible English accent if she wanted to give it a go. Fay's fingers impulsively began to undo her blouse but then stopped when she noticed Moxie Foxy sitting directly across from her. Calmly knitting a scarf, Moxie looked up from her needles to glare at her creator and say, "*Feh!*"

Fay quickly buttoned up, shot to her feet, and shoved the Englishman aside to push through the grinding crowd. In a panic, she tried to escape to the adjoining car where nothing of an orgiastic nature was unfolding. But as much as she tugged on the steel handle, the door wouldn't slide open and none of the fully clothed subway riders looked up from their phones when she banged her fist on the window. Fay spun around and flew a hand to her throat. When her darting eyes focused on the emergency brake, she reached for it and pulled, forcing the train to a screeching stop with naked bodies and limbs flying.

Fay suddenly woke up to find her cheek pressed against the sweaty arm of a man in an undershirt. On her way to Manhattan, she had listed to sleep against this stranger who regarded her with a wiggle of his unibrow. Recoiling, Fay wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, then vaulted from her seat to squeeze through the closing doors.

#

"Ta-da!" said Gina, removing her client's smock with a flourish and swiveling the chair around. Fay gazed

at her reflection skeptically. She'd told her hairdresser that she wanted a change, that she was at last ready to lose her long locks. But did this pixie cut go too far? Was it too much of a leap for a fifty-something children's book author? Had she stepped out of her lane? Gina handed her client a mirror and Fay held it up to examine her hair - or lack thereof - from different angles.

"Don't worry, honey, you look fabulous," said Fernando while coloring the hair of the senior in the next chair. "Big date on the calendar? There's always a reason. Like yesterday, when I turned one of my regulars into a platinum blonde so she could surprise her hubby for their first time on the Sex train."

His client closed her magazine. "I don't get it," she rasped. "Want a change of scenery? Want to spice things up? Get a room in a clean hotel. Anywhere but a filthy subway car."

"All the hand sanitizer in the world couldn't convince me to take the Sex," said Gina.

"I only wish the LGBTQ didn't run so late for this old queen," Fernando chimed. "But did you hear about that French tourist who got his junk caught in the closing doors?"

"Or the guy who got on the Shuttle at Grand Central thinking the S was for Sex and took off all his clothes?" Gina said. "They cuffed him the second it pulled into Times Square."

"Happens every day on the F," said Fernando. "And the A? Forget about it."

"Is it true that London has its own Sex train?" Gina asked.

“Oh, no,” groaned the woman in Fernando’s chair. “Not the Tube.”

“You mean the Lube,” said Fernando. “Boris Johnson’s one and only achievement. But we have our own degenerate to thank for ours, don’t we?”

Fay lowered her mirror. “Who?”

“Giuliani,” he said. “Who else?”

#

“*The hoary marmot can be found on mountain slopes and meadows in North America. ‘Hoary’ refers to this large rodent’s silvery-gray fur,*” droned the narrator, nudging Fay and Richard closer to sleep, as these nature documentaries tended to do when they watched in bed.

“Here’s an idea,” Richard yawned. “Make your next book about one of those critters. But spell hoary W-H-O-R-E-Y. About a four-legged sex worker. *Harriet the Whorey Marmot.*”

“That would give my editor a coronary,” Fay said. “But I like the idea.”

“*After months of hibernation, the hoary marmot emerges in the spring to find a mate.*”

When a pair of these creatures began to copulate, Richard retired his eyeglasses to his nightstand, fluffed his pillow, and turned his back to his wife. Fay surfed through the channels and paused on Tom Cruise removing his mask in *Eyes Wide Shut*, then surfed some more until landing on Jonah Gold taking off his shirt. Fay turned the television off and closed her eyes but couldn’t sleep. Richard’s reaction when he’d come home from work was bothering her.

“What happened to your hair?” he’d asked, as if she had been in an accident.

“Do you like it?” she said.

“It’s very... Rosemary Woodhouse,” he said. “Let’s give it time.”

Fay now tossed and turned and finally plucked her phone from the nightstand to look at the text she’d received that morning: *Flying back to LA soon. Can we meet for coffee?*

“Richard,” she said, nudging her husband. “Richard, are you asleep? I have to ask you something. Would you ever consider taking the Sex train?”

“You woke me to ask how I feel about orgies on mass transit?”

“Hypothetically speaking.”

“Not my thing,” Richard said. “Above ground or below.”

“What *is* your thing?” Fay asked. “We’ve been married for twenty-five years, and I still don’t know. Any fetishes or fantasies?”

“Fetishes? For, like, feet or manacles? No. As for fantasies, I think they should be kept secret. I mean, what if scientists announced the discovery of a wild herd of unicorns. The entire unicorn industry of glittery tee-shirts and stuffed toys would collapse overnight.”

“Go back to sleep, Richard.”

#

None of Jonah Goldbaum’s classmates would have predicted he’d become a movie star. From his looks maybe, but certainly not his acting chops, which were on dreadful display in several college productions. Fay cringed during his role as Marco in *A View from the Bridge* and watched his Astrov in *Uncle Vanya* through splayed fingers. He did, however, fare a little better as Brick in *Cat*

on a Hot Tin Roof, because Jonah never seemed to know what to do with his hands on stage and the role allowed him to rely on a literal crutch.

After graduation, he somehow found himself in a musical adaptation of *Forrest Gump*, where, in the role of Lieutenant Dan, Jonah had the assistance of a wheelchair to keep his paws busy. Not that it mattered. The misguided production wasn't anything like a box of chocolates. If you'd seen the movie, you knew exactly what you were going to get, and it was awful, especially the *Run, Forrest, Run!* number, which depended on a cranky treadmill that only worked when it wanted to and caught fire during a matinee.

Gump! closed in no time, but not before a Hollywood producer happened to attend a performance and liked what he saw in Jonah Goldbaum's chiseled face. After the show called it quits, he flew Jonah out to L.A., shortened his name, and cast him in an action flick that launched this Jewish boy from Long Island's career. But three decades later, stars of Jonah's generation, with the exception of Tom Cruise, were watching their box office receipts fade.

"The roles are drying up, Fay," Jonah moaned when meeting her for coffee. "Think I might retire. Put a ring on Chloe's finger and ride off with her into the sunset." Then removing his aviator sunglasses, he reached across the table to brush a wispy strand from Fay's forehead. "You cut your hair," he said. "I like it. Like it a lot."

"Thank you," Fay blushed. "Richard isn't sure."

"Richard," Jonah said, dismissively. "You know, Fay, I had a crush on you in college."

"A crush? On me?"

“Big time. But you and Dickie were... Has he ever strayed? Ever had an affair?”

“Richard?” Fay laughed. “No. It’s not in his DNA.”

“Is it in yours?” Jonah asked, but Fay didn’t answer, only returned his gaze, and when he reached again, this time to rest his hand over hers, she resisted the impulse to pull her hand away. “Before I take the plunge,” he said, “maybe you’d like to come with me.”

Fay swallowed. “Come with you where?”

“On the train.”

#

In heels so high she prayed not to break an ankle, Fay Futterman descended the stoop of her Park Slope brownstone. At the bottom she paused to adjust her Jackie-O shades and mountain of blonde curls. Starting down the sidewalk, she hitched the Trader Joe’s tote bag over her shoulder and worried that she was going to be late, that if she wasn’t there when he arrived, he would walk away. This was probably their only chance. Then Fay felt her blood freeze at the sight of her daughter coming up the sidewalk. As they drew closer, she reasoned that even if Jenna did glance up from her phone, she wouldn’t recognize her own mother.

“Mom...?” Fay heard the moment they passed each other, and she quickened her stride, heels clicking on the sidewalk. “Mom, what are you doing?!” cried Jenna as her mother ran faster away. “Where are you going?!”

On the subway to Manhattan, Fay was alone in the car but for a man meticulously clipping his fingernails. While the train rumbled through the tunnel, she wondered if she should get off at the next stop, throw this mop of curls into a trashcan and go home.

“You can have it,” Suzanne had told Fay when giving her the wig that afternoon. “We took the Sex only twice, and each time it was nauseating. We’re getting a divorce by the way.”

Fay’s jaw fell open. “A divorce?”

“Adam was insufferable,” Suzanne said while stuffing her husband’s vintage leather coat into a Trader Joe’s tote. “When I found some filthy texts he’d exchanged with a sophomore, that was the last straw. I told him to get out and take his Stanley Kubrick movies with him. If I had to watch *Barry Lyndon* again, I’d eat my own eyeballs.”

When the doors opened at Canal Street, Fay let her legs whisk her up the stairs. Following Suzanne’s directions, she walked two blocks west before turning down an empty, litter-strewn street somewhere in Chinatown. At the corner was an unmarked subway entrance, where she stopped to wait with her heart drumming. Moments after the sound of a braking train, a snowy-haired man in a trenchcoat emerged from underground with a woman in leopard skin pants. Clutching his arm, the woman purred, “Oh, doctor, you were amazing.”

“Saul...?” said Fay, recognizing her shrink the moment they locked eyes.

A yellow cab had to screech to a stop as Susskind hurried his partner across the street. Then from the taxi climbed Richard, who glanced around, smiled politely at the woman in the ridiculous wig, and looked at his wristwatch.

“Pssst,” said Fay, pulling down her Jackie-O’s. “Richard. It’s me.”

He did a double take. “Fay...?”

“Sorry for the text on such short notice. Was it okay to leave work?”

“Not really, no. What’s with the Halloween costume?”

“Jonah’s getting married.”

“Jonah?” Richard said. “Married? What does that have to do with this? With us?”

“Everything.”

When Jonah had asked her to take the train with him, Fay was flattered, even quietly thrilled. Despite her desires, however, she declined his invitation. No movie star could ever entice her to... Well, if he were still alive, Paul Newman, maybe.

“Put this on,” Fay said, pulling from her bag the leather coat with hideously wide lapels.

“Fay, will you please explain.”

“Trust me,” she said, forcing her husband into the coat. Next she pressed a large, fake moustache above his lip, then pulled from her pocket the aviators that Jonah had forgotten on the café table after paying the check and leaving in a rush to go to look for an engagement ring at Tiffany. Fay unfolded the stems, slid the shades onto Richard’s face, and said, “Perfect.”

Fay tugged him down the hole and the two stopped in the dank station, where a vending machine that dispensed Trojans and Viagra was flashing SOLD OUT, the wall tiles were graffitied with pornographic images like the hieroglyphics of some horny civilization, and a vandal had drawn devil horns on a movie poster image of Jonah Gold. In the token booth there sat an attendant

with hooded eyes turning the pages of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

"I get it," said Richard. "I understand now. Fay, have you taken leave of your senses?"

Fay stepped up to the booth and asked, "What's the fare for two adults?"

On the other side of the glass, the attendant leaned into his microphone. "The ride's free," his voice crackled. "Compliments of the great City of New York."

"See?" said Fay, poking her husband with a finger. "Our tax dollars at work."

Then their attentions turned to an elderly couple making their slow way down the steps. Clad in shiny leather outfits, the woman was leading the stooped man by a leash hooked to his spiked collar. The Futtermans stepped aside to allow them to shuffle to the booth.

"Excuse me, young man," said the woman. "Does the Sex stop here?"

"Yes, ma'am," the attendant replied.

"Come, Henry," she said, towing her partner away. "We don't want to miss our train."

"Now that," said Fay, watching the seniors push through the turnstile, "is love."

But after going through the turnstile herself, Fay turned to see that her husband was frozen in place, paralyzed, and she had to take him by the lapels and yank him through.

An eerie quiet met them on the platform, with only the sound of a steady drip coming from somewhere and peals of faraway laughter echoing through the station's chambers. The leather-clad couple were oddly nowhere to be seen. The Futtermans were alone. Then Fay noticed

a creature leaning against the subway tiles. In a skimpy dress and red heels, with a cigarette dangling from her painted lips, it was Harriet the Whorey Marmot. Fay took off her sunglasses to rub her eyes, then blinked at the familiar foxtail wagging from behind a pillar.

“I can’t,” said Richard, tearing off his mustache. “I won’t. Let’s go home.”

Fay slid the wig off her head and let it drop to her feet before she removed Richard’s aviators and slipped them into her pocket. Cupping his cheeks, she drew her husband in for a long, smoldering kiss, and when their lips finally parted, Richard looked into his wife’s eyes.

“I forgot what that was like,” he breathed. “Are we really doing this?”

“Better late to the party than never,” Fay said, and as a warm current brushed their faces, she took Richard’s hand in hers and together they turned to see the bright lights of a train appear at the end of the tunnel.

Non-Fiction

ozempic can suck my entire literal
cock
(full figured)

By k r whitney

Full;

The entire thing. Served with carrots and roasted potatoes. The kind your mother makes when you visit home on a random weekend in September. She hasn't cooked in months.

Full;

Complete. Resolved. The part of the movie where Hilary Duff and Chad Michael Murray kiss in the rain after he runs off the field during the championship game. There are scouts in the crowd. His coach is counting on him. His teammates need him. He chooses her and you start the movie over.

Full;

Filled. It's 1 pm in the middle of July. You woke up an hour ago and now you're in the side yard of your apartment building star fishing on a quilt your grandmother made as a high school graduation gift. The UV index is 8, you're smothered in SPF 50 and your favorite song is queued, again, while you sip on iced fruit water. Pineapple Watermelon. Strawberry.

Figured;

Decided. Certain. The unwavering nature of your convictions. You sit at the small round table your public university provided in a dorm room you're paying too much for. It's 5 PM and your college roommate is having her first meal, a plate of broccoli, for dinner. You order pizza.

Figured;

Shaped. Carved out of stone like the women before you. Venus, the goddess of love. Beauty. Sex. Fertility. Victory.

Figured;

Prominent. Important. How rare it is to deem yourself worthy. You stand at the edge of a mineral hot spring and look down at your reflection. The orange light of an old street lamp casts harsh shadows on the divots of your body. Though it tries, not even the smell of rotten eggs sticking to your skin can penetrate your softness.

Throwing in the Dish Towel

By Beverly Jean Harris

“Don’t get too close—that ball might hit you in the face,” George said to my mom.

George was relentless. The joking began the instant we stepped in the house. I was sure Mom would lose her patience.

My mother was standing, gnarled hands gripping her walker, directly in front of the television in the den. Her slight frame belied her feistiness and fierce will, which had blossomed with her new-found freedom after my dad died fifteen years earlier. She missed Dad, but she tried to fill the emptiness with new interests that had dwindled with the years into more passive pastimes, like the tennis match on TV.

“Oh, go on,” Mom said to my husband with a dismissive wave of one hand.

George and I had taken advantage of my afternoon off for my dental checkup and had just returned from shopping. As we walked past Mom on our way to the kitchen, she kept her eyes on the TV screen.

At 97 years old, Mom was still interested in life, but life mostly filtered through to her via television. Though she’d been avoiding the news—whereas I had become morbidly obsessed with it—ever since the election of a certain “soulless” (as Mom said) reality-TV star, Mom found plenty on cable and PBS to occupy her. Lying on the den sofa, or standing in front of the TV, she watched *Masterpiece* (“That Ross Poldark never smiles,” Mom

would say) and *Nature* (“Those meerkats are the cutest things ever, but I wouldn’t want a family of them in my backyard!”). She dredged up ancient episodes of *The Tonight Show* and *Andy Griffith* and *The Waltons* (“I’ve seen this one a million times,” she’d complain, and then keep watching).

During the day, though, it was mostly figure skating or baseball or tennis that engaged her. As an English teacher in the Virginia hills in the early 1940s (where she had cooed with delight at the mice the boys slipped into her desk drawer for a prank), she had been required to coach boys’ basketball—though at first she knew nothing about it—and discovered her love of sports. In her nineties, she developed an interest in horse races. Hours before a televised Triple Crown, she’d repeatedly go over her list of the entries and get herself so excited she’d be worn out by post time. One day, George and I walked into the den to find Mom asleep on the sofa—and the Preakness half over. I woke her up. “Oh, phooey!” she said, blinking herself further awake and focusing on the homestretch. After that, George would sometimes ask her, “Is there a race on TV today?” Then he would teasingly act out what might happen if Mom were to find a race to watch: “*And they’re off!*” he’d call out, and the next second he’d drop his head and pretend to snore.

As I said, George was relentless. I worried that George’s jesting exhausted and exasperated Mom, though she usually seemed to pay him little attention. Mom would often preface an observation with “Let me say this,” and with barely a pause George would cry, “Say it!” Every Monday, Mom reminded herself, aloud, to take her methotrexate, and George would respond, “There’s a

method to your trexate.” “Oh, go on,” Mom would always reply. I sometimes thought I saw a smile on her face before she quickly suppressed it, but she never failed to wave him away, as she might a fly.

George seemed resigned to her brush-offs. “I know, I know,” he’d lament with a half-serious hangdog shrug. “I’m the skunk at the picnic.” George had once told me that whenever he acted silly as a child (whether he neighed like a pony when warned to “quit horsing around” or talked all day in a raspy croak like Froggy, the nettlesome bow-tied and vested amphibian from *Andy’s Gang*), his father would tell him “You’re not normal,” so eventually he stopped joking with his family.

The tennis game had been going on quite a while, since before we’d left for the store. Tennis mystified me. Mom had tried a few times in the past to teach me the strange “love” scoring, but I never grasped it.

The good thing about tennis was that even if the TV sound was cranked up to an astronomically high volume, it was still a quiet game, so the TV wasn’t annoyingly loud in the kitchen as George and I put away the groceries—organic brown rice, kale, quinoa. I pulled a box of Ring Dings from the bottom of the mesh bag and held it up for George to see. “Really?” I said. He had obviously slipped the box of little crème-filled devil’s food cakes into the shopping cart without my noticing.

The landline, which Mom insisted we keep, rang at a volume that could have woken the dead, since Mom also insisted that we set the ringer at its loudest. I dropped the Ring Dings box on the counter and walked across the kitchen to answer the call.

“Saved by the ring . . . ding,” George mumbled.

It was the rheumatologist's office calling.

"Dr. Allegra needs to change Mom's appointment from Monday to Wednesday, but I can take her," I said to George, holding my hand over the phone's mouthpiece. Since I worked in New York most days and George worked playing music most nights, he usually drove Mom to her appointments, but I knew he was scheduled to be in the recording studio that coming Wednesday afternoon. I didn't want him to change his plans, especially if his plans involved music.

He took a carton of milk from the refrigerator and pulled a saucepan from the cabinet. "That would be great."

I told the receptionist that Wednesday would be fine.

As I was hanging up the landline, my mother made her way into the kitchen, her walker squeaking. "There was the sweetest lady on *Johnny Carson* last night," she said. "She saved potato chips. One looked like a camel. Another looked like a pear. And one looked *exactly* like Bob Hope!" She glanced at George. "George, if you boil water in that saucepan, don't put the flame too high, like you usually do. It sings the sides of the pan."

"Okay, I won't." He took the canister of cocoa powder from the cupboard.

"And, George, don't keep that light on over the stove—we don't have any replacements for that bulb."

"I can buy some replacements," he said, washing the saucepan.

"And George, you left the butter out of the refrigerator again last night. If you keep doing that, it's going to go rancid."

“Okay, I’ll try to stop doing that. Do you want some cocoa?” He was speaking to Mom, not me. I love cocoa, but he didn’t want to tempt me since I was trying to avoid sugar. “Chocolate is *your* favorite vegetable, too, isn’t it?” he asked Mom.

Mom ignored George, as she often did, and looked at me, her eyes bright. Wisps of white hair haloed her head like a dandelion gone to seed. “I’ll tell you why your sister couldn’t stand pieces of cream in her milk when she was a child—it was because she was raised to not digest milk.”

George’s half-smile and furrowed brow told me he was as baffled by this weird non sequitur as I was. “I don’t get it,” he said. “Did you tell her ‘Here, drink this milk, but don’t digest it?’”

“Oh, go on,” my mother said, a barely perceptible glint in her eye, which faded the instant she turned and saw George drying the saucepan with the daisy-design dish towel that her friend Louise Morrissey had given her for her 97th birthday.

Mom wanted things done a certain way. There were rules. She had a place for everything. And particular things were not to be touched or moved. The digital barometer sat on the upholstered stool in the den, within view of the sofa where Mom spent most of her days and nights. The broken cover for the light above the stove waited perpetually on the kitchen counter in case we remembered to ask our neighbor to repair it. And the daisy-design dish towel that Louise Morrissey had given Mom for her 97th birthday belonged on top of the tin bread box—and was, according to my mother, too pretty to be used.

“No, no, no!” Mom cried. “Don’t use that towel! George, why can’t you remember these things?”

George sighed and tossed the towel onto the dish rack by the sink. He set the saucepan on the counter. “I guess you don’t want cocoa,” he said, his voice flat. He left the kitchen, and as he climbed the stairs his tread was less than buoyant.

Mom picked up her binoculars from their designated spot on the kitchen table next to the jar of rubber bands, and she and her walker rolled back into the den.

It always amazed me how, later in life, my mom seemed blissfully unaware of any distress she created in the wake of her squeaking walker. Maybe, as with the news, she turned off whatever she didn’t want to see or hear.

The day before, Mom had yelled at George when he scraped the remnants from his dinner plate into the “trash” (the tall plastic-lined bin by the paper shredder) rather than the “garbage” (the tin bowl next to the sink). The day before that, she had chastised him for using the new yellow sponge instead of the old green one to wash the cat’s bowl. And the day before that, she had reproached him for not putting the scissors back into the red mug on the telephone table.

In these past years in my old family home whenever my heart felt stretched between George and Mom, I would usually retreat into practicality. I began to follow Mom into the den to tell her about the call from the rheumatologist’s office—but George’s injured feelings tugged me in the other direction, and I went upstairs instead.

“Sorry she yelled at you again,” I said.

He was lying on the bed, the cat already on his chest, as he surfed through stations on the muted TV. His guitar lay beside him. Probably he’d been intending to play it, but the cat had claimed him first.

“According to your mom, I can’t do anything right,” he said, staring past the cat at the TV, a lock of his thick salt-and-pepper hair falling over one eye. He settled on a program about planets and stars. On the screen I saw a depiction of a frozen alien moonscape with a dark sky above. I wondered if the barrenness and lack of atmosphere consoled him.

“Please don’t feel bad,” I said. “It’s so hard to remember exactly how Mom wants things done. And it seems like there are new rules every day. The only reason I know any of her rules is because I grew up here. You’re at a disadvantage.”

“Ha! I guess I’ve always been at a disadvantage. I did everything wrong according to my parents too.”

George’s father commuted each morning to a job he hated, and each evening he took out his frustrations on his family. Berated and belittled, George learned to walk away and pick up his Fender. Music saved him, he would say. At twenty-one, he walked away for good and began living on his own.

So different from my own family. We were always polite and genial with each other until the very rare occasions when somebody got angry, usually my dad, usually when something Mom said offended him. I always feared the rare blowups and became hyperaware of the slight shifts in tensions that portended them. Strange, though—Mom had changed. Nowadays she wouldn’t

hesitate to express her irritation at anyone or anything, which was proving difficult for me to get used to.

George met my mom and the rest of my family when we started dating in our forties. George really got to know my mom, when, several years after my dad died, it became too difficult for Mom to live on her own, and George and I moved into my old family home to help care for her.

I realized George was probably as miserable here with Mom and me as he'd been with his parents.

Like George's father, I commuted every day to a job that left much to be desired, leaving home early and getting home late. Much of the burden of caring for Mom fell on George.

And what toll had this taken on us? We'd been married only a year when we moved in with Mom. Mom was the center of our marriage. Not always a frosted crème-filled center, either.

And where was *my* center? Had I lost myself? Music had once saved George, but what would save me? And why did I feel like I needed saving? As soon as these questions arose, they submerged again, since I had no idea how to answer them and no time to figure it out.

George scratched the cat's head. When he spoke again, his voice was softer. "Not that I'm comparing my life now to my life at home as a kid," he said. "The truth is I didn't really even have a family until I met you."

Relief rushed through me. He was okay here with us after all. He loved us. Maybe even as much as he loved his music.

"But," he continued, "I learned a long time ago that I just couldn't win with my parents. And now and then I

have to remind myself that I can't win with your mom either."

My heart went out to him. He was trying his best to please my mom. There had to be a way for them to get along better.

"Maybe if you didn't joke so much," I said, "then Mom wouldn't get annoyed . . ." As soon as the words left my mouth, I regretted them—I didn't want to sound like George's father, telling him he wasn't normal.

George shook his head, staring at the icy blue surface of Europa on the TV screen. "You've got it backwards. *You* need to lighten up."

Lighten up? That was the last thing I needed to do! "I can't lighten up. I need to keep on top of Mom's Medicare Advantage claims and her mail-order prescriptions and her non-inflammatory diet, plus I need to keep the house in order, the way Mom wants it—"

"And you're doing a great job. But *you* can't win with your mom either. We're never going to measure up to your mom's standards."

I began to panic. "But we have to try!" The alternative was unthinkable: we would drown in a deluge of my mother's never-ending nitpicking.

Unless maybe we were already inundated. Maybe I was struggling to swim, trying to get the strokes right, but flailing and failing, soon to be swamped and sucked underwater. They say when you're in a rip current you need to stop fighting, let go, and float—but that seemed counterintuitive.

"You worry too much," George said, which he'd been saying to me quite often lately. "Your mom just needs to throw her weight around a bit. Sometimes I let

it bother me, but I shouldn't. She doesn't mean any harm. We'll all be fine." He was touching the cat's ears, first one and then the other, causing her to flick each ear in quick succession as she purred. The cat adored him. "Life usually stumbles into some kind of balance. Don't forget to tell your mom you'll be taking her to Dr. Allegra."

"I'll tell her now." I felt myself slipping back into my pragmatic mindset as I went downstairs. I caught my reflection in the mirror on the landing and, with a slight shock, realized that the face in the glass wasn't my mother's—it was *mine*. My hazel eyes. My creased forehead. My ridiculous intensity. When had I become my mother? Pretty soon I'd be watching *Andy Griffith* and writing lists of Kentucky Derby entries and measuring the singe marks on the saucepan.

My vigilance had merged me with my mom. I had never stopped being hyperaware of the shifting tensions around me. I had never learned, as George had, to just walk away—even for a moment—to give myself some distance.

Back on her sofa, Mom was peering at the TV through the binoculars. "I can see the ball better this way," she said.

"Mom, Dr. Allegra switched your appointment to Wednesday, so I'm going to take you. George is busy that day."

She lowered the binoculars. "No, no, no! You need to reschedule it. George needs to take me."

My chest tightened. "Mom, I can take the day off." What was I—an old *Waltons* rerun? "Can't I take you?"

"No! Only George knows where to park—near the entrance but not *too* near the entrance. He brings my

pillow inside. He carries my green notebook and writes down everything the doctor says.”

The tightness in my chest dissipated. She was 97, I told myself. She needed things to be a certain way—because at 97, after having let go of driving and teaching and maybe even hope for the world, you sometimes grabbed onto those few small things you could still control. Routine and consistency meant peace of mind.

Mom fixed her hazel eyes on me, still making her case. “After the doctor, we always take a ride to Long Branch to look at the ocean, or we visit Laird’s Stationery, or we drive past the cherry trees on Ridge Road.” She paused. “Plus George and I have our little jokes,” she said, almost defensively.

An outing with George was a joy, an adventure. It was life itself, unfiltered.

And—who knew?—Mom liked George’s jokes.

I smiled. “Okay, Mom. I’ll reschedule it for a day when George can go with you.”

She nodded once and, looking satisfied, lifted her binoculars to continue watching the tennis game.

I remembered that love means no score.

In the kitchen, I laid the daisy-design towel across the dish rack to dry. I understood why the dish towel was special to Mom. It had been mailed to her by an old, dear friend she might never see again. It had been given to her to celebrate a birthday that might be her last.

And I understood why, to George, it was just a dish towel.

I made cocoa. I carried a mug of it into the den to Mom. And then I made two more mugs of cocoa—one for George and—why not?—one for me. An image of the

frozen blue moonscape flashed across my mind: there was something more I needed. Something elemental, something music-like and immaterial, something singular to me. In time, maybe I'd know. But for now, a little sweetness was a start. Mom's rules weren't the only ones that needed to bend. I tucked the box of Ring Dings under my arm (I could avoid sugar tomorrow), took hold of the mugs, and once again climbed the stairs.

A Stoat by Any Other Name

By Anne Hollyday

In 1997, to mark the occasion of Dad's 70th birthday, we fly to London for a family celebration. Dad wears his age like a World War II medal, with grace. The plan, ambitious as it is misguided, involves corralling five wildly different individuals, each with their unique circadian rhythms, dietary restrictions, and psychological quirks, into a one-week stay at a charming Bloomsbury hotel. It is hard enough for us to pay attention to each other during a single dinner conversation at home, let alone participate in joint activities for an entire week. We even stagger our arrival times to the small hotel in Cartwright Gardens, as though staggering our dysfunction. Mom and Dad fly from Continental Florida, arriving on Thursday. My older brother, Dick, and his fiancée, Janet, fly from Connecticut to Heathrow on Friday. My younger brother, Tom, and I fly separately to Heathrow and Gatwick, respectively, on Saturday.

My sole hope for the trip is to meet and fall in love with a tall, brooding Englishman who reads poetry – the kind I am not meeting in New York City. The city has exhausted me with its soul-crushing dating pool of undesirable men. During my last foray to a New York City bar, I meet a junior private detective who lives in an apartment with ragged, worn-out sheets. So, I arrive after an exhausting plane flight at Gatwick, hungry for bone structure and a well-tailored coat. I leap into a cab and then brace myself against one end of the seat, then the

other, in terrified silence while the driver hurls the cab through traffic. I am unable to nap at the hotel since my room isn't ready; anyway, I'm far too wound up to sleep.

Walking with my parents and future sister-in-law through Hyde Park, I feel myself nearly hallucinating from exhaustion. I lock eyes with a handsome British man who passes us while clutching a book, who looks like he just stepped out of an Evelyn Waugh novel. I imagine him to be a young lord on holiday from university, who hands me a note written on parchment that smells of tobacco.

Nymph, in all thy orisons, what's that perfume? Very sexy! And why are you in a place like this, among tourists and the poorly dressed? Meet me by the water fountain in 15 minutes. Yours in haste, Lord Haverstock.

Of course, Lord Haverstock is probably an accountant named Nigel who lives with his mother in Basingstoke, but I cling to the fantasy like a flotation device. Back at the hotel, I climb to my room at the top of a narrow, near-vertical staircase. From my window, I spot a sliver of London University.

In the morning, we meet in the dining room for our first English breakfast: metal racks of cold toast, canned nectarine sections, weak tea, and the choice of a plate of murky scrambled eggs with fatty sausages or Weetabix cereal. I opt for a pot of coffee. Over breakfast, plans are made. Our parents will pick up theatre tickets to the play "An Inspector Calls," then visit the war rooms used by Winston Churchill. Dick and his fiancée, Janet, will scope out a restaurant for tonight and view the National Gallery. Tom and I, new to London, will ride the tour bus.

Just as breakfast is winding down, a tall elderly man with a southern drawl bellows across the dining room as

though we had survived military training together. “Well, hello—o-o-o-o-o-o-o! How are y’all doing?” He bolts across the room and claps Dad on the back. Dad introduces him as Larry Leftsted. Larry and his wife, Francis, are traveling from North Carolina and staying at the same hotel. Mom, who is painfully shy and allergic to public displays of anything, is wearing a smile so strained, it looks like her face might split.

Larry, it turns out, is a veteran of Patton’s Third Army in World War II and has taken to greeting Dad each morning like they were old war buddies, even though their shared trauma is limited to our English breakfasts. Mom’s eye twitches every time he says “y’all.” It is like watching a pressure cooker start to boil.

Tom and I board the tour bus. After about three hours of circling the Houses of Parliament, the British Museum, and Westminster Abbey, we have had enough. We decide to split up and treat ourselves to one thing we really want. Tom heads over to Tower Records in pursuit of British vinyl. I wander down a side street into an obscure British dress shop where the clerk looks unsettlingly like Colin Firth. I buy a black suit. Although the jacket flares out like a riding coat, I can tell the fabric is higher quality than anything American-made. I imagine myself being propositioned by a British intellectual at the theater while wearing this suit.

“Very provocative. Even if you’re chaste as ice, how about grabbing dinner after the second act?” says Sir Montague.

The next morning at the British Museum. Dad, a history buff, is in his element. We walk by Lindow Man, a corpse from prehistoric times found in a bog with his throat cut, now encased in glass. We admire the Rosetta

Stone, discovered during Napoleon's time, filled with hieroglyphs transcribed on a wall facing it. We view the Elgin Marbles, large white stones carved with the finest horse heads, gods, and centaurs ever sculpted in ancient Greece. That's when I see my brother Tom take out a pen knife and chip off a piece of ancient stone, which he pops into his knapsack.

From experience, I know that starting an argument with Tom during a family gathering will backfire.

Horried, I catch up with everyone else. We cab over to the Tower of London, which is a macabre set of dark fortresses. The Little Princes, Edward V and the Duke of York, may have been murdered here by their uncle Richard III, and it may have been a location of torture for other figures of historical importance. Still, the Tower has become a modern-day tourist trap. Several guards are dressed up in 15th- or 16th-century costumes and Bearskin hats. Dad is eager to take a tour of the Tower. Every room is filled with jewels, portraits, or old remnants of torture devices. I listen with one ear as the tour guide blathers on. "Look at this," Dad exclaims, pointing to something that resembles a raccoon skin hat. "Is that a stoat?" The British guide looks at Dad disdainfully. "Sir, that's not a stoat; it's an ermine."

I look down at the base of a tower wall in time to see Tom pick off a piece of brick with his pen knife and stuff it into his knapsack.

Later that day, at the National Portrait Gallery, I admire a full-length Elizabeth I, along with an impressive miniature of Sir Walter Raleigh and a wonderful Holbein cartoon of Henry VIII. My favorite is a portrait of William Shakespeare with a gold earring that seems oddly

contemporary, as though he is George Michael. As we head through the gift shop on the way out, I whistle to Tom. Then I hide the museum store bag, flaunt a pair of 16th-century imitation blue glass earrings, and stuff them into my pocketbook.

A moment later, I wave the receipt at him as a reminder of who the moral authority in our family is. “See, I paid for these,” I mouth at him.

The next morning, we all board a train for Bath from London, believing ourselves, for a fleeting moment, to be the sort of Henry James Americans who tour the countryside. We sit down in a palatial compartment with its own sliding door, wide seats, and full-length windows. It all feels vaguely illicit, as though we have snuck into the VIP section of a funeral. But our moment of luxury does not last.

The train manager approaches us. He dresses like a naval officer passionate about rules in a double-breasted blue uniform and a matching cap. “Sir, these are not first-class tickets,” he tells Dad, who reacts with the same bewilderment he reserves for European plumbing.

We brace for the humiliation of being marched back to second class. But instead, the train manager glances over at our disoriented faces – me clutching a guidebook – and says, “Stay put. You’re welcome.” He says it crisply, like a *maître d’* seating a particularly lower-class family by the kitchen. Just like that, we are upgraded not by status or money, but by pity – a deeply American kind of victory.

In the late afternoon, we head back to a Bloomsbury pub for refreshments. The proprietor has just brought us some hot tea, scones, and soft drinks when a shadow

looms behind us. We hear someone banging on the glass pane window.

“Well, hello –o-o-o-o-o-o-o! How are y’all doing?” It’s Larry Leftsted again, waving from outside like an escaped convict from Marshalsea Prison. “Mind if I set awhile?” he mouths to us. Dad nods yes, happily. Mom nearly drops her teacup. “Why can’t we have just one moment of peace?” she whispers.

Then reality sets in. I realize then and there: romance for me will not happen on this trip. No Lords, no Sirs, no Colin Firths. I might as well embrace my family dysfunction. Dad goes outside to make a gentle excuse to Larry. Mom stares into her teacup, as if it might tell her how to disappear. I will plan my next trip to London with a girlfriend or even ALONE so I can meet someone over pints and too many crisps. Right now, this is my life: listening to Dad lecture us on history; watching my brother dismantle a nation’s heritage; and attending Mom like an on-call nurse during a traumatic operation.

This isn’t a love story; it’s a hostage situation with family ties.

Contributors

(in order of appearance)

Andrés López is an undergraduate writer studying English and Women and Gender Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. As a proud queer and Latin writer, Andrés's work covers issues of race and intersectionality identities and has been published in Laurus Literary Magazine. Outside of writing, Andrés is an editor for Laurus Literary magazine and will be editor-in-chief of the publication next year.

John Delaney's publications include *Waypoints* (2017), a collection of place poems, *Twenty Questions* (2019), a chapbook, *Delicate Arch* (2022), poems and photographs of national parks and monuments, *Galápagos* (2023), a collaborative chapbook of his son Andrew's photographs and my poems, *Nile* (2024), poems and photographs about Egypt, and *Filing Order: Sonnets* (2025). He lives in Port Townsend, WA.

Nathan McDowell is a first-generation American poet living in Columbus, OH. He runs poetry programming through Village Poetry at Two Dollar Radio HQ. His work can be found in *Bicoastal Review*, and is forthcoming in *Spark to Flame*, and *Tightwires Anthology*.

Laura Carter lives in metro Atlanta, where she finished an MFA in 2007. She has since published many poems, chapbooks, and book reviews. She hopes you are well.

James Croal Jackson is a Filipino-American poet working in film production. His latest chapbook is *A God You Believed In* (Pinhole Poetry, 2023). Recent poems are in *ITERANT*, *Stirring*, and *The Indianapolis Review*. He edits *The Mantle Poetry* from Nashville, Tennessee. (jamescroaljackson.com)

D E Kern is a writer and educator from Bethlehem, PA. His work has appeared in *Appalachian Review*, *Big Muddy*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Good River Review*, *Mantis* and *Rio Grande Review* among others. He teaches English at Arizona Western College.

Abass Aremu is a black poet, essayist, student of the universe and lover of words. He is published in the *Indiana Northwest University SPIRITS Poetry Magazine* and is a multiple award-winning essayist.

A former lawyer, **Claire Hamner Maturro** lived with her husband in a homemade house in the Georgia woods for two decades, which improved her world view and writing. Her novels include four published by HarperCollins. Her poetry appears in *ONE ART*, *SLANT*, *Lascaux Review*, *Two Hawks*, *Glassworks*, and *Eclectica Magazine*. She is an associate editor at *Southern Literary Review* and now lives in Florida.

Mark Bessen is a queer writer living in Austin, Texas, originally from Southern California. His work has been featured in *Electric Literature*, *Epiphany*, *Taco Bell Quarterly*, and *Tahoma Literary Review*, among others.

Loralee Clark's latest chapbook, *Solemnity Rites*, (Prolific Pulse Press, 2025) is an account of reimagined myths and truths of who we are as humans and how we live our histories. She has a chapbook forthcoming, *Neolithic Imaginings: Mythical Explorations of the Unknown* (Kelsay Press, 2026). Clark resides in Virginia; her website is sites.google.com/view/loraleeclark.

Jennifer Fair Stewart is the author of the chapbook *Marginalia: An Interactive Book of Hours* (The Orchard Street Press). Her poetry has won multiple awards, including the 2024 Rhina Espaillat Poetry Award with Plough, and appears widely. Find her at <https://jenniferfairstewart.carrd.co/>

Kim Hunter is a midwestern writer with writing that appeared in *Lavender Review*, *HLFG*, *Blue Heron Review*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, and others. She served as editor of *The Prompt*. Her writing is committed to highlighting small town queer life and the people living seen and unseen in rural America.

Estill Pollock publications include *Constructing the Human* (Poetry Salzburg) and the book cycle *Relic Environments Trilogy* (Cinnamon Press, Wales). His poetry collections in the series *Cartographic Projections of a Sphere—Entropy, Time Signatures, Ark, Heathen Anthems, Alias and Parse Poetica—*are published by Broadstone Books. The e-chapbooks *And Then* and *Working Title* are published by Mudlark.

Sean Whalen lives near Pilot Mound, Iowa, where he finds inspiration close to home. He is a retired health and safety professional, current volunteer fire chief, and received his MA from Iowa State in Creative Writing. His poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in multiple publications.

Stacy Rollins is a writer, artist, and singer currently living in the Greater Philadelphia Area who has authored two books, *_Truer Faults_* and *_Learning to Read_*. Her work has appeared in *Atticus Review*, *Bicoastal Review*, *Everyday Genius*, *Diversion Press*, *Black Heart Magazine*, *Crack the Spine*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *New York Dreaming*, *Garbanzo*, *Nailed Magazine*, *Shantih*, *The Oleander Review*, *Rat's Ass Review*, *Helen Literary Magazine*, and *Armorolla*.

Andrea Janov is a mess of contradictions, fan of parallel structure, and nostalgic pack rat who writes poetry about punk rock kids. She believes in the beauty of the ordinary and the power of the vernacular. Her work strives to reveal the art in what we see, say, do, ignore, and forget every day. She has been published in several kick ass journals and has two collections out

in the world, Mix Tapes and Photo Albums (EMP Books 2022) and Short Skirts and Whiskey Shots (Earth Island Books 2023). Information about her work lives on the internet at andreajanov.com.

Stephanie Montez is a second year, undergraduate student at New Mexico State University.

Cliff Aliperti wrote about classic film for many years at his site Immortal Ephemera, a project culminating with his book, "Helen Twelvetrees, Perfect Ingenue." Cliff's fiction has also appeared in After Dinner Conversation, The Razor, Fiction on the Web, JAKE, and elsewhere. You can find more about Cliff at cliffaliperti.com. Bluesky & X: @IEphemera.

Frisk Normandy is a father, musician and author, living with his family in the mountains of Vancouver, British Columbia. Most recently, his short stories have appeared in Heart of Flesh Literary Journal and The Avalon Literary Review.

Nathaniel Krenkel lives in Portland, Maine. He is the host of Rhizome Radio at WMPG, and runs the record labels Team Love and Oystertones. He's a graduate of Bowdoin College and grew up in small-town Utah. Published work can be found at nathanielkrenkel.com

Aaron Golding is an enrolled member of the Seneca Nation of Indians, Beaver Clan. His writing centers on the stories of Native Peoples reconnecting with their culture and identity, which mirrors his own experiences. He currently lives in Chicago with his wife, two children, and two cats. He has been published in Hair Trigger 29 and Ghost Factory 3.

Sidney Hummel has been writing since they could staple construction paper together and call it a book. They are now a public school teacher in NYC, seeking to foster the same spirit

of authentic expression in their students that they take to the page in their spare time.

Alexander Feinstein's stories have appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Quarterly*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Landlocked*, and *The Ana*, among others. A private investigator by profession, he is at work on a collection of stories and a novel, and splits his time between looking for parking in Brooklyn, NY and hiking the hills of Western Connecticut.

k r whitney is a Boston-based writer studying Creative Nonfiction at Emerson College and teaching English at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Her writing focuses on complicated family relationships, body image issues, and feminist topics. When she's not writing or teaching, she enjoys obsessing over the *Twilight Saga*, and playing music with her friends.

Beverly Harris is an editor by day and a writer when she gets a chance to do something other than edit. Her writing has appeared in *The Summerset Review*, *Philadelphia Stories*, and *Short Story America*. Beverly studied poetry with Charles Simic, fiction with Marvin Cohen, nonfiction with Estelle Erasmus, and humor with Second City's Blayr Austin. She can be found online at beverlyjeanharris.com.

Anne Hollyday enjoys writing humorous and biographical personal essays. She has been published in *Narrative Magazine*, as well as writing for business magazines, including *Marketing Computers*, *Risk Management Magazine*, and *Forbes SIA*. She earned her M.S. in Strategic Communications from Columbia University in New York City in 2012 and works part-time as a marketing proposals manager for a New York law firm. She lives with her husband, Timothy Kelley, in Upper Manhattan.

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