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Volume Three, Issue One



*Sangam*

Literary Magazine

Carolyn Adams \* Jeffery Alfier \* Subhaga Crystal Bacon \* Terry Bodine \* Katlin Brock \* Paul Brucker

William Burleson \* Joan Canby \* Darrell Dela Cruz \* Deborah Doolittle \* James Fowler

Karen Frederick \* Arthur Ginsburg \* Carol Gloor \* Kenneth Gulotta \* William Heath

Quazi Johirul Islam \* John Kneal \* Karen Loeb \* Wayne McCray \* John Mummert \* Stella Nesanovich

Kathy O'Fallon \* Fabrice Poussin \* Mostofa Sarwar \* Terry Savoie \* Darren Smart

Maureen Sherbondy \* Truth Thomas \* Diane Webster \* Will Wells \* Warren Woessner \* Sarah Wofford



*Sangam Literary Magazine*

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of Languages and Literature Southern  
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[sangamlm.editorial@gmail.com](mailto:sangamlm.editorial@gmail.com)

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### *Sangam Literary Magazine*

*Sangam* features and represents works by established as well as emerging writers, irrespective of age, sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, or national origin.

In this way, *Sangam*, a Sanskrit term for **joining together**, is, in fact, a coming together for all.

*Sangam* typically publishes biannually through the Department of Languages and Literature at Southern University and A&M College's flagship campus in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. As Louisiana's largest Historically Black College and University (HBCU), Southern University is situated in a bend of the Mississippi River, a locale with important literary significance, most recently home to Louisiana's previous Poet Laureate, John Smith, who is among its Baton Rouge campus faculty.

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## Roads and Rivers

Spring 2023 Introduction



J. Michael Norris, MFA  
Chief Editor, *Sangam*

**W**hen we began reviewing pieces for this edition of *Sangam*, we did not set out with any particular theme in mind. Somehow, as the different poems and stories filtered through the selection process, we found ourselves faced again and again with motifs and metaphors that resonated together. There were trains and airplanes, boats and bridges, roads and rivers. Before us came so much flying and fleeing, loving and leaving, that it forced us to wonder why, why are so many of our writers and poets focused on these things?

We don't have an answer.

However, we would like to encourage you to reflect on the world we find ourselves in as this journal is published. We have begun to slowly emerge from a years-long pandemic, with the World Health Organization declaring just last month that the global emergency due to COVID-19 was over. But many of us still wear masks in public, afraid to bring home something fatal to our loved ones. We have watched now for over a year while Russia has tried to invade and conquer Ukraine in a slow, bloody, and destructive battle that seems increasingly as if Ukraine will stay sovereign and secure. And yet, we cannot be sure. In a historic turn of events, a former US president has been found liable for sexual abuse and indicted on 37 federal counts, including violations of the Espionage Act. Still, he is the frontrunner to be nominated as a presidential candidate by one of our major political parties.

There is so much unresolved right now in the world, it is almost like we are in the in-between times, the liminal period not quite after but not yet before. We are watching the world transform before our eyes, but what is it transforming into? And who are we becoming? Who do we want to become? Where do we want to go?

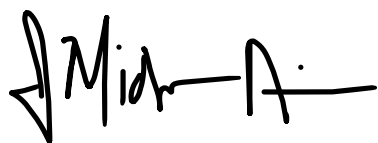
With so much unresolved, it makes sense to me that the many, varied poets and writers in this edition crave movement, invoke change, and push the narrative forward in so many different and wonderful ways.

Roads and rivers have often been used in literature to invoke choice and change, life and death. Flying has been used repeatedly to give our fictional characters a way to escape an inescapable situation, a motif we commonly find in all sorts of African American literature, from folktales to novels, from spirituals to short stories.



Again, I cannot say why these themes have come together in our collection, but somehow, they have. I suppose this is apt, as “sangam” means a coming together, sometimes of rivers, sometimes of artists, sometimes of ideas. For whatever reason, these things have come together, and we offer them to you as we found them, so you may enjoy them as we have, allowing them to touch you, wash over you, and maybe even change you.

Ultimately, we hope you enjoy!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Michael Norris". The signature is stylized with a large initial "J" and a long horizontal line extending from the end.

**J. Michael Norris, MFA**

Chief Editor, *Sangam Literary Magazine*

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# **POETRY**

**Carolyn Adams**  
**Morning Train**

I keep my eyes to myself.  
Passing through,  
over the bridge, watching  
the river gleam.  
The train runs smoothly.  
I'm almost in a doze.  
Into downtown finally,  
the older buildings gazing down  
in aged slumber.

Except for the man in the torn  
windbreaker, no one has  
much to say.  
He mumbles about  
some uncertain worry  
he can't stop thinking about.  
The rest of us sit in empathy.  
We know.  
We've all had that thing  
that pursues us.

The train shudders at a curve.  
Rails groan and shift the car.  
Glass skyscrapers are shot  
with light as we make the corner.

"I'm thinking again I shouldn't do this,"  
the talking man  
says, just loud enough  
to be heard.  
In the silent car, heads bowed  
as supplicants, we all nod  
in understanding,  
in sad agreement,  
waiting to depart at last.

**Jeffrey Alfier**

**Coda for Barstow**

Sunday, and dawn is a sprawling river of light.  
The sky speaks its cloudless language.  
Hymns crack from unseen throats —  
a rescue mission or a service held outdoors.  
Engines wake to their loud lives. Windrows of trash  
blow along streets that flank what must be the last Rexall  
on the planet. Breezes come raw and hot,  
like the sting of a shave cut too close.  
Sprinklers rouse like whispers over lawns  
intent on staying sear. Nightshift workers —  
the town's remoter souls, make their sleepy way home.  
Through eyes stalemated by insomnia, I see a crow  
on a dead pay phone surveilling transients  
passing each other up and down the street  
like the mute angels that crowded Jacob's Ladder.  
Some loiter parking lots and fummy doorways of motels,  
their arch-desert names, like Sands or Stardust —  
stopover realms of unbelonging, sun-smoked walls  
beset with hangdog plants, rooms holding shadow identities  
of the recently vacated. Down East Main,  
a middle-aged woman exits Senior Thrift Store.  
She flashes an easy smile, wears dated clothes  
no retro-styling could hope to replicate,  
her bedraggled looks adding an erotic edge to her flaws.  
She stares me up and down as if to itemize me  
head to foot as the day grows to an inconceivable heat,  
the wind shaking off its burning velocity  
in corners of dust. A homeless man slouches  
in the shade of Seven Days Liquor. His soiled red shirt  
reads Greek Week. He flips through a porn mag,  
all those glossy angles of flesh. As with those he shares

a similar plight, he seems without origin or destination.  
But perhaps he's a soul some woman  
wakened to, not many years gone, someone for whom  
she once appeared each morning, and sang.

## Jeffrey Alfier

### Takin to the Storyville Streets with the Last Woman Who'll Have Me

We rendezvous where Canal joins Magazine,  
her dress scarlet as rage. Rita's hair is pinned up  
with a tortoiseshell clip and prospects of romance.  
I make a wry comment on her chances  
but she's out of fucks to give. This woman's street-cool from  
way back, will walk anywhere in this city,  
her moods flexing like a floating rib.  
We pace through a breeze that can only offer sorry amends  
for the torpid heat. Shadows wilt in doorways,  
like silhouettes of memory. A construction crew  
works at the haggard pace of convicts.  
Through the window of a dusty shop, a woman dusts baubles  
and the small clocks of those who ran out of luck or grace.  
Stars come on so slowly a child could count them.  
At a fish market a woman in a blooded apron dumps crawfish onto  
newspaper, trims flesh from a recent catch.  
We choose cafes simple as stone, nothing of the baroque or  
fussy, nor the visual strangulation of sports bars.  
Behind heat lamps, cooks shuffle sideways through clouds of  
steam and smoke. Our waitress, a capacious soul,  
is so kind she could've been a battlefield nurse.  
We watch the streets yield to neon, a man cupping his palms  
against the window as if reading an oracle.  
Behind him, a bus passes with its only rider.

## **Subhaga Crystal Bacon**

### **Mal'Occhio**

**After Jennifer Martelli**

Feathers, pearls, the magic  
of little grandmom  
with the bowl of water  
the drop of oil  
to ward off mal'  
occhio in my sister's  
youngest child. Her  
secret in Sicilian  
no one else could read.  
Did she succeed? Did she  
fail? The baby a woman  
now with a daughter  
of her own, a labyrinth  
of mind and heart.  
The old ones die and leave  
their trail of broken bowls,  
the skin of oil and magic.  
My Germanic people eschew  
these spells. Marriage mixed  
our blood. Dark hair and eyes,  
and to the fussy baby's cries  
lost words to remove a curse.



**Terry Hall Bodine**  
**Tongue-Tied**

Our daddy used to close the loop  
on absence with striped stick candy  
and six-packs of beer, Avis shy  
behind Mama's knee. He'd ask *Why*  
*you so tongue-tied* and tickle till  
she laughed.

The spring she mastered  
making bows Avis tied everything:  
frayed hair ribbons, butcher's twine, yarn  
raveled from a sleeve. The pull cord  
for the window shade. Two stiff-tipped  
strands of waxed black string.

A wasp with her nest  
knocked cock-eyed, Mama questioned  
*Where'd you get that?* Avis mumbling  
(*closet*) into the sharp crook of her arm.  
A flick of dishrag smarting. Mama:  
*You keep out of there.*

I crept in  
once she'd left for work, disturbing  
a nicked pair of wingtip shoes, stripped  
of their laces, mouths agape. I could  
hear Avis thinking.

No longer tongue-tied,  
those shoes might let slip where he'd gone.

**Paul Brucker**

**Man, Nature, God**

(for *the* Ross Taylor)

Miss Priscilla took her Sunday morning stroll  
while I prayed at the church of my choice.

Upon return, I noticed her bob and weave  
on the back porch. I detected the signs.

She had swallowed fermented yeast  
from the pan I had left there.

I thought, let her have her fun. It's her prerogative, her reward  
for earning the red ribbon at the county fair.

When I bent down to give her a kiss,  
she quacked

Then exploded with loud report  
into hundreds of pieces.

I ran into the kitchen, covering my one good eye  
with both hands.

The district surgeon was summoned. His diagnosis:  
Penetration of eye by flaying fragment of duck.

He offered no hope for return of my optics,  
but, as consolation, provided his discounted rate.

Beloved Miss Priscilla is in a better place. I'm practically blind  
but my faith remains unbroken.

I invite you to share the wonder of it all with us, Sundays, 10 a.m.,  
at The Fresh Life Church, corner of Busse and Albert.

**Joan Canby**  
**Ikebana Class**

Friendship in flowers. I wear a red kimono  
with a pink and gold obi sashed at my back.

My friend dresses me then tells me I'm the  
perfect size to wear a kimono. She stages

my hands, with the silk sleeves spread, as if,  
I hold an umbrella, as if, I hold a fan in the

other. Then we stand at our table to arrange,  
like a ballerina's arm at an arabesque, one

gesture . . . an art form. Like the fresh moon's  
face at midnight. Like making ikebana in red.

Each element: water, container, flowers, like  
earth, sky, man. A bamboo stalk waits. White

peonies rest. Put each stem into water to loosen  
air bubbles. Arrange in a black, gold-gilt container.

A dancer points her toe in third position to improve  
nature. A body soon to age, a blossom soon to die.

**Joan Canby**  
**Dust**

Fading like dust from the tractor.  
Fading a brown sash through our  
orchards. Fading like the powdered  
dust from the truck as we drove the  
gravel road to the converted barn,  
with its hillsides of oval cacti. Pots  
of red geraniums greeted us at our  
doorstep. Today, I plant white geraniums,  
to blend in with border roses, lavender  
crape myrtles. Missing ranch's dust.

**Joan Canby**

**The Quiet Heron**

Imagine on this afternoon descent, under the bridge of Duck  
Creek, amongst the turkey ducks, mallards and geese, with

talons perched on gray white rock one heron waits, watches,  
listens and preens unaware of me. It too waits for sunset and

midnight moon, as the day's vigor unites with the evening's  
repose. Neither afternoon breeze nor evening shadows, deters,

or surprises him. No need for fortified brick, shingled roofs  
and double locks, he hears the leaves release into their watery

graves, puts his beak under his wing, lifts it high and with nimble  
plie, extension of wing to flight, he is gone. While I within my

cushions, fire's warmth wait to end this grief of loss – mother,  
father, son – no leap to make, but sighs of empty voices, rooms

that cling, neither free to flee nor fly but need to forebear.

**Darrell Dela Cruz**

**Fast Forward the Romance**

Notice how cinematographers blur specific scenes:

a bouquet to cover his embarrassment,  
a limp towel handed off-screen, steam

from tea or coffee – wake up before leaving again.  
There's always a return though, with suitable

clothes, no wrinkles, no smears but in the eyes.  
Crying is allowed only at the right time.

Repeat, repeat. It is one way of learning,  
even through continuous endings.

Kiss, kiss. The end always in love.

**Deborah Doolittle**

**Muriel Rukeyser on the Gelded Lily**

White as the moon on the darkest night.  
White as the wax of votive candles  
twinkling on the far wall of the cathedral.  
White as the bowl of cream set down for the cat  
White as the cream and the cat,  
with its soft blue eyes winking at me in twilight.  
White as any artificial, electric light  
seen on the street below.

Now I see there are no meanings hidden  
within its pristine bloom. Now I hear  
no sounds surrounding its radiance,  
detect no pollen. Only a beauty glimpsed,  
as I had glimpsed in a white horse—a  
gelded one—that leaped on the street  
in the midst of a parade  
on Broadway.

**Deborah Doolittle**

**Odilon Redon's Ode to *Peonies***

That they peer over the edge of a Ming  
Chinese vase—only three of them—big, fat,  
frilly and silly as tomatoes, all  
*rouged* red and ripening round on the vine,  
the obvious center of attention.

Who'd ever mistake that blush for being  
bashful? For feeling any shreds of shame?  
Below them, what tales the porcelain vase  
could tell them beyond the lessons of floral  
arrangements leaves them angling for more.

Dark hulk of a trading junk gives nothing  
away. The faint vibrations of a stork  
whispering beyond our sense of hearing  
To pour *crème ou lait?* for morning *cafe*.  
And how far from the meadow had them come?



**Deborah Doolittle**  
**Cicadian**

That familiar buzz that bursts  
within the confines of your  
inner ear is not a sign  
of tinnitus, not the cell  
phone on silent mode, bumbling  
on the nightstand, not your squat  
digital clock radio  
hacking and cackling into  
the darkest part of your room,  
but cicadas, hanging from  
trees like yesterday's laundry,  
winding themselves up for the  
final finale. How they  
howl into the night, hollowed  
out by the sun and their own  
contrite tintinnabulations  
of the soul. Where does one go?  
The sky has turned to that mix  
of black and white, that main gray  
tone of what's left of your life.

**Deborah Doolittle**  
**Easy Poem**

sits cross-legged on the mat,  
extends out a line with each breath,  
drops down with the next exhale.  
How subtly the mind adjusts,  
the spine reassembles itself  
into one long knotted, knobby  
rope to be climbed and unclimbed.  
How arms and legs bend and blend  
into the soft silhouette  
of a frog on a lily  
pad or a log. How laundry  
can pile up, skinned knees clean  
and tear-streaked cheeks dry up all  
by themselves. Even the wren  
outside the window injects  
its song long enough to let  
us know that this poem will  
end more or less with a line  
reminding us how far we've  
come from where we had begun.

**Deborah Doolittle**  
**Chagrin**

Think of all the ways you have hounded me,  
nipping at my heels when I walked the streets

at night. Prowling the alleyways for one  
of my cats. Howling at my single night

light, growling at that candle past midnight.  
Sniffing out all the places where we must

have been seen together. For clues. For crumbs  
at the cafe. For the old bones to gnaw

over. Those thousand little moments you  
wanted to breathe in and now believe in.

**James Fowler**  
**The Golem of Prague, Nebraska**

The country had dried up, and bankers  
were scratching at the door, so one  
old farmer rattled to the banks  
of the Platte for a special sort of clay.

Out of it he formed a hulking hand  
to help around the place, do heavy  
lifting in a hard time. Long odds  
called for extraordinary measures.

The creature, of russet hue like  
a limbed potato, spoke no words  
but grew in understanding, for when  
not working he sat with the farmer

by the radio listening to fireside chats  
and thumping his thigh in approval.  
The farm was saved, and for some years  
the two lived in quiet contentment.

When his maker passed, the golem  
pattered about the place awhile until  
restlessness set him drifting, a migrant  
with the need to keep busy, assist.

This season he'd be shaking orange trees,  
the next herding cranberries in bogs.  
He is often mistaken for Bigfoot  
in his cross-country plodding.

Though discreet, he'll gladly launch  
children into ponds upon request.  
And out west he's provided muscle  
for field workers, busting strike busters.

His initiative has grown. Mill dams start  
to disappear, their streams liberated.  
Belching smokestacks topple overnight.

When a big stretch of border wall  
ends up as Gulf Coast reef,  
some applaud, others demand arrest.  
An incensed senator from Oklahoma  
labels the golem “that Play-Doh menace.”

While rampage is an option,  
the creature mainly feels dismayed.

He might join the war on straws in the  
Pacific, then head south

to do something for the penguins. He’s  
heard about them on NPR. His old  
Prague friend would smile:  
an even bigger deal to save the farm

**Arthur Ginsberg**  
***I Can't Breathe***  
**for George Floyd**

Blood runs like water in the gutters,  
soaks the earth with its history  
of malevolent letting, all the veins  
opened now, in its latest iteration,  
a collective indignation met with smoke and fire.

So much unleashed from a flexed knee pressed  
on the pedestal upon which a man's head rests.  
Nights of shattered glass that echo 1938,  
of pilferage and pillage, of brandished shields  
and batons, flash-bangs and invective, to resurrect

the shining of Lincoln. What would he say  
if he could rise, a colossus from his stone throne  
and colonnades, to walk the Capital's broad avenues,  
war weary in the shadow of history's haze.

He would tell us to remember the blazing heat  
of the cotton fields, the overseer's whip cracking  
on black skin, the Sycamore's dangling noose,  
hobbling, burning and mauling by wild dogs let loose.  
Slaughter of fathers and sons, the men and boys  
he commanded, who spent their last breath to unlock  
our brothers' chains. Surely some justice is at hand,

a time when pigmentation cannot define a man,  
when carrying a quart of milk and groceries  
down a public street, does not end with the nightmare  
of handcuffs, clubs and bullets, vigils and prayer.  
In the worst of times, on a rain swept eve, one seeks  
a glimmer of light to soften this abject grief.

Hope in a time when blood runs like water in the gutters,  
that the four-hundred year old wound is a hole,  
through which light pours, to lift the knee  
from all who cannot breathe.

**Carol Gloor**  
**Our Fiftieth August**

The orange hand of heat  
chokes our breath  
as soon as we step outside.  
A merciless sun slices every afternoon.  
The evenings are too long,  
the trees too green.

We hide in our house  
where I want to be our cat,  
rolling onto her back,  
exposing her belly,  
arching her throat,  
trusting our touch.

Touching would be enough,  
all we might manage now.  
But one brush of fingers  
leaves sweat,  
so not even that.  
We lie in bed,  
two feet apart,

wishing for wind, rain,  
anything cool in this August--  
August, the month of our marriage.  
We do not speak.

**William Heath**  
**John Wayne Stars as Sarge**

Pinned down on the beach  
Sarge smokes while  
the hot heads get shot up.  
When the skipper gives  
the word to move out  
Sarge leads the way,  
the extras waddle after.  
These American killers  
are twelve inches high  
in black and white  
and have metal heads.  
Each has a gun and a shit-  
eating grin breaks through  
the grime whenever  
another Jap bites dust.  
After the island is secured  
and Old Glory flaps over  
the long chow line, the boys  
on leave will get laid  
by grateful girls in Hawaii.  
But Sarge stays behind  
dreaming of beachheads  
and the next batch  
of green recruits, laughing  
as he watches them unload  
their gear, "They're getting  
younger every time."



## **Quazi Johirul Islam River**

Waves pull the river to living room;  
strange guest, flump,  
Maidens imprisoned torrent in their giant buckets...

Years later brooks, many, in goblets,  
strolling on the sunny yard,

breaks down, rolls towards far and farther...

**John P. Kneal**  
**FLYING HIGH**

I was five and snuck into the spare room and closed the door,  
and, like Peter Pan, sought to lift myself from the floor---  
to flap arms and wiggle fingers in a valiant try,  
to a wonderful new realm I thought I'd briefly fly.

I quickly realized that I couldn't venture that way---  
no fantastic flight, though certainly not fair I must say.  
Yet, there is much since that for me has not gone astray.

A caring wife who keeps me fed is a come-true dream  
and with three children with rewarding jobs, I proudly beam.  
Watching my only grandchild is richer than Fantasy Land  
when I hold her on my lap so she can proudly stand.  
My career keeps our home a wholesome spot to nest  
and with many avocations I invisibly puff out my chest.

I laugh when I take a wrong turn, or none at all  
since I can always back-track, or even call.  
I still run through the white stuff to pack a snowball tight  
and spot my lovely wife when my aim should be just right.

In efforts now attached to my rambling but not so swift mind  
inspired words with humble pen I often refine.  
My strength, like time, through the hour glass seeps like sand  
'til my spirit lightly lifts off to live in Ever-Ever Land.

**Karen Loeb**

**SOJOURN IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD**

A fountain with baby angels sprouts in the  
front yard across the street.

The cherubs sing water.

A branch on a flowering shrub in my yard needs loping off.  
It's a closet pole with no clothes.

The horse that lived in the stable in back of my house  
has been gone for a hundred years.  
Headlights instead of eyes.

Our new neighbor is out there with a shovel before  
the snow has stopped. Every time.

He backs easily into his narrow two-car garage.  
His girlfriend does this too. They have small sedans, but still.

The lit wreath at Christmas. The giant Easter egg.  
The cornucopia in fall. The stars and stripes  
coming out of a hat for July. All at the house down the block.

The four-foot fire plug is up to its neck in snow.  
Today it's my job to clear it.

A cardinal in the bush means there are two somewhere else?

Wood smoke. Noon whistle. Car doors slamming.

Our street parked in. Hospital. Church. Courthouse.  
The carriage walks are blocked.

The first whiff of spring is still a thousand miles to the south stalled  
on the side of the road  
by a cornfield waiting to be planted.

**Stella Nesanovich**  
**St. Leo the Great Church, New Orleans**  
**-for Mona Lisa Saloy**

I like to imagine you there,  
kneeling outside in the grotto  
to Our Lady, inside the church  
with its ornate facade  
and Romanesque arches.

I imagine you seated before  
the Gospel ambo—not restricted  
to the back pews, the old constraint  
on those who knew the equal bounty  
of God’s grace. Creoles, Whites,  
and Blacks now sing together,  
rise as one to celebrate and praise.

I was baptized at St. Leo’s,  
took first Eucharist there when seven,  
and confirmed as well, like my siblings—  
all of us schooled at St. Leo’s,  
named for the saint who faced Attila,  
persuaded the Hun to turn  
his savagery from Italy.

What unjust, savage laws did we obey?  
Spiraling hated, bigotry—damning  
if unintentional.

Now I envision atonement:  
your beautiful Creole face at Mass,  
you seated in a pew where  
years ago I prayed.

**Stella Nesanovich**  
**Thoughts in Hurricane Season**

I remember the moonlight, the only light  
in the weeks following Hurricane Laura—  
the lunar silver etching shadows  
across the backyard amid jagged branches  
of tortured trees. No bird song then,  
only the hum of portable generators.

In those days, during weeks of evening  
darkness, the morning sun painted a vivid  
sky of rose, coral, and lilac. On my porch,  
in one pot, a Louisiana iris sprouted  
from dry soil. I had forgotten this urn  
held iris bulbs, floral worlds  
with stored energy for new growth.

The garden across the way housed caladium  
and Rex begonias with purple leaves  
that shimmered in sunlight. Vibrant fern  
fluttered as if applauding. I thought  
of ballerinas twirling green skirts.

Mid-September chill now: relief  
in the hot Louisiana summer,  
a vibration and shift of mood.  
Soon the seasonal fear of storms  
will pass. We will plant other gardens.

**Kathy O'Fallon**  
**Masters of the Universe**

It's old home week, as in *old fishing buddy*,  
and before I can open my mouth, a day out at sea.  
The moor-like winter sky, slickers and boots,  
I'm braced at the bow shivering  
before the motor's warmed up.  
Wish I hadn't eaten that extra donut.

You know those ugly lingcods?  
I only snag one, and the men mostly pretend  
not to freeze, but a bald eagle, fiercer isolate,  
dives not fifty feet from the boat,  
scoops up a flapping, pink salmon  
as big as its body, wrestles it along the sea,  
struggling to lift, trapped by its own grip  
until they both finally drown. The image  
disturbs me all week.

Driving home from the airport,  
we watch a flock of doves feed  
in the field before my property.  
A hawk dive-bombs, scatters the birds,  
grabs the fattest one in its beak,  
skitters across the road  
in front of the car like a plane stalling,  
its baggage beyond the prescribed limit.  
We miss them, but not without braking.  
The world says *take*, but I see now,  
my death could be boisterous.

**Kathy O'Fallon**  
**All Foil and Frill**

And when he speaks that, shucks, ma'am, Southern drawl,  
my panties melt and skin's reduced to fire,  
and damn, I know the gray-haired Ph.D.  
with clients in the very mess as me  
have no idea I've sunk so low's to save  
his message on the voice machine for late  
night kicks alone between the sheets. This new  
gal dreams stiletto heels, chews gum and winks  
at gorgeous guys—a tart, you say, but no—  
just less conservative, is what I mean—  
her freedom tinsel-trimmed, all foil and frill,  
the price a simple Sunday offering.  
Still cursed I am, to skirts below the knee,  
washed clean except for guilt, my middle name.

**Fabrice Poussin**  
**2027**

She had to think of a date  
a future not so distant for her story  
a few words yet without structure.

Straight lines upon yellowed out sheets  
what could she dream of so late in the day?  
the night too dark for even a thought.

Curled up in the ova the body remembers  
arms clenched upon a warm chest  
her soul still smiles in utter aloneness.

She may hear the sounds of crushing bones  
so, the ruby mass will flow free as death  
like an ink she so much desires for the quill.

A whisper and a grin on the frail envelope  
the world she yearns clearly awakens  
as she falls endlessly into the deep pit.

It was to be 2027 at the head of the new chapter  
and she wondered what mattered so much about those digits  
still in the silence of words only she understood.



**Mostofa Sarwar**  
**Black Sea's Strange Chorus**

From the gardens of laminaria,  
the meadows of seagrass,  
sonar picked up the signal

of a strange symphony,  
a classical *dhun*—  
near the remains of a revenge missile.

Dolphins and Mermaids,  
drunken Plankton, and Frogs,  
Anchovy, Khamsa, Sprat,

Gaby, and Dog Fish,  
Horse Mackerel,  
all dancing in wild merriment.

Sonar picked up the signal  
of the Black Sea's strange chorus in kelp

'Russian warship,'  
sang the revelers  
'go f\*\*\* yourself'

(Warship Moskva's missiles indiscriminately killed many civilians, so it was a great relief to many when Moskva was sunk on April 14. In this poem, nature itself celebrates the end of the warship, a monstrous perpetrator of an unnatural war.)

**Mostofa Sarwar**  
**Infinity's Love**

Perhaps Earth will have an unbearable fever  
the scourge of greenhouse gases  
Perhaps on the white attire of glaciers  
there will be a blaze of melting decay  
Perhaps countless human habitats  
will be drowned in fathomless newborn seas

Perhaps we will be reincarnated  
to aqua-butterflies, fishes, or mermaids  
Our naked bodies  
will have never-ending salty perfume

Even then  
I will find you in the infinite caravan of mermaids

In your wet eyes of one zillion dews  
I will see the elixir of watery dreams  
scintillating in seas and oceans  
Your drenched wings dancing in softer gravity waves  
Impatience will drown me  
in the watery smell of your naked body

Our love is endless  
Our love will inundate  
the fringes of wandering crinoid-clouds

Our love is unlike a convergent series  
Our love disdains mathematical existence  
Our love disdains uniqueness  
Our love loves infinity

Our love is intractable math  
The wildflowers of our love  
will bloom in the infinite realm  
will bloom in an undefined hyper-space

will bloom in the wilderness of newborn seas.

(I was a professor of Earth and Environmental Science at the University of New Orleans, and I am all too aware of the consequences of global warming. Were all glaciers to melt due to global warming, sea levels would rise about 230 feet, submerging all places I have ever called home. This brought to my mind the intriguing and melancholy possibility of my reincarnation as a fish, one future inhabitant.)

**Mostofa Sarwar**  
**Prometheus Endures**

Prometheus got on the ladder  
Neighbors helped and cheered  
He is now on this unstable roof  
looking into the blood-red eyes  
of the angry BEAR

Everybody told,  
BEAR is not mean  
that much

Prometheus believed,  
he can compromise  
and convince the BEAR  
to behave

But the BEAR transfigured  
into a two-headed Russian EAGLE  
and started eating his lever

His lever regenerates every night  
to be eaten next day

He wanted to escape at dawn  
but ladder is taken away  
by strong neighbors  
who keep on throwing  
javelins, bows, and arrows

During the day-long feast  
of the EAGLE in the open day light  
clearly visible from all around  
Prometheus endures the suffering

He looks at the sunflower fields  
A Eurasian blue tit bird  
performing familiar acrobatics  
on the yellow sunflower field  
under the deep blue sky

With unbearable pain  
he forces a glimmer of smile  
watching the blue wings  
over the yellow plumage

His heart crushes into pieces  
at the sight of flipping acrobatics  
when the upside-down bird  
shows YELLOW OVER BLUE PLUMAGE

Prometheus endures the suffering  
And the neighbors keep on throwing  
javelins, bows, and arrows

(Ukraine's flag is BLUE OVER YELLOW)

**Mostofa Sarwar**  
**Putin's Manifesto for Ukraine**

I will rape, kill, and ravage  
No resistance must raise  
Ukraine is not a nation  
Must not be any passion

Bullets will pierce  
Cut them like rippers  
No one can shed tears  
Ukraine! Go for cheers

Captive, I loved you for years  
One of my fourteen peers  
Left my home through rears  
My venom will dry your tears

One Z marks my killer tank  
Two gives my Swastika rank  
Neo-Nazi comrades are happy  
Hitler's ghost feels them nappy

I invaded you  
Keep quiet NOTHING-DO  
International law, I shout boo  
United Nations, I yell who

I will rape, kill, and ravage  
No resistance must raise  
Ukraine is not a nation  
Must not be any passion

(This poem corresponds to the current affairs about the Russian aggression against Ukraine, especially Russia's formal warning of "unpredictable consequences" for the shipment of weapons to Ukraine by US and NATO.

Putin invaded on the basis of two wrong postulates, 1) Ukraine should not exist as a nation and 2) Ukraine should be subjected to de-Nazification because it is run by Nazis.

As a political entity Ukraine (Kyiv Russ) pre-exists Moskva. The later was a vassal principality under the former.

Meanwhile, Putin's army has been committing war crimes of rape, murder, and destruction of civilian targets including hospital, daycare centers, schools, etc. - ironically, such expansionary violence has not

been seen on the continent since the reign of the Nazis he claims to be fighting. On the other hand, Ukraine's resistance is led by Zelensky, whose family members were killed in Nazi gas chambers.)

**Mostofa Sarwar**  
**Wake of the Moskva**

A peaceful rally of fish  
gathered communally  
by a cemetery  
on the belly of the Black Sea

A new member had joined  
Not a fish but a ship's carcass  
its journey to the abyss  
ending far from its namesake

But much at home  
amidst the blackest gloom  
entrapped in a tomb  
of sunken ships

Millenia made a collection  
of these killing machines  
of Greeks, Romans, Persians,  
Ottoman, Russian, British, French

Nations of earth  
brought to the end of the sea  
by plunderous greed  
And unfathomable hunger for war

Vile ambition forever preserved  
that brought death  
but also, eternal youth  
by the lack of oxygen

This was the glimpse  
the fish received  
not of culture or philosophy  
but of another mummified hull

Not of art or peace  
but of a leviathan dead  
in Putin's bloodshed  
and of wasted lives



Not a palace of coral  
not an acropolis of kelp  
but a necropolis of dead ships  
on the belly of the Black Sea

(Moskva's demise on April 14, 2022, in the Black Sea extinguished one more perpetrator of death, destruction, domination, and greed to the Necropolis of sunken killing machines representing once ascendant, now extinct empires over millennium. The oxygen-free environment at the bottom of the Black Sea has exquisitely preserved many sunken battleships. The Sinking of the Moskva ended a reign of terror spanning several weeks, which saw many civilian-lives lost and numerous hospitals, daycares, schools, apartments, and opera houses of Ukraine destroyed. The fishes of the Black Sea are the silent witnesses of the vile ambition of emperors and dictators.)

**Terry Savoie**  
**In Gettysburg**

The rot of six million pounds of mule, horse & human flesh –  
Confederate & Union soldiers alike – with the stench  
multiplying in August's dog-day swelter coursing over the hillsides

to sweep into & drown each of the valleys as women for miles  
around reluctantly submit to their husbands' heartfelt desires,  
men who've been found deficient for the war or somehow

managed to escape the draft by burying themselves deep in  
haystacks, in root cellars, in the smallest possible crawl spaces  
one could find. Now, those same men roll over onto the women

while the women, under the lightest available cotton sheets,  
suffer what the Biblical obligations demand of them without  
voicing any complaint whatsoever since the world must forge

onward despite the rampant carnage & carcass onslaught in fields  
beyond their windows. Thus, the women resign themselves,  
submissive as the Bible commands while simultaneously groping

for bottled essence of peppermint oil & a soft hand cloth infused  
with mint leaves to mask the corruption blowing in on them  
as their wayward thoughts drift off to some blessed Elsewhere

where none of this war exists since it's nothing of what the loving  
Lord could've intended, this animal lusting for blood & a need  
for progeny wrapped up in a husband's plangent moaning

as he clutches her shoulders for one more fleeting, pleasurable  
moment to be wrung from what has become his sorry life.  
He knows full well he'll never be able to carry this joy

into the Hereafter, but beyond the window & across the fields,  
that incessant drone of horse flies feeding on the offal, & a song  
to accompany what some believe will, one day, be *Peace on Earth*.

**Darren J. Smart**  
**Seamless Years**

i imagine immortality as driving an empty road  
in the black envelope of early morning

where the expression of time is years cascading  
together as seamless as light is futile against the dark

where deer on either bank lift their heads  
to inspect the moment before disappearing behind again

not aware of the road let alone destinations  
their eyes made a golden blaze for people to count

**Darren J. Smart**  
**Seashell**

at the hospital a man's bones i cup  
seashells  
the tide of skin lapping between

my palms cup as if to drink  
my fingertips prying for hold  
shells that hold a roar and a hush

i put the man to bed  
i feel bones  
not in the way a surgeon sees

not like a carpenter measures

at grandfather's camp was a great seashell  
we held

its twists a pink and white spinal cord  
an ocean's dream inside so big it couldn't be real  
hold an ear

not to whispers or waves rinsing the beach but dreams  
the shell of a great man held my grandfather  
bones keep dreams not the skin not the muscle not the wither

the sand like skin like muscle withers not the shell  
the assuring frame melts not the bone  
a puddle of thought sea of anatomy

but not the bone  
at the hospital i put a boy to bed  
ease away his helmet

i see where the shell is gone skin mushed  
where surgery removed bone  
caved the skull

where the brain needed an open cage  
to slosh buckle dream  
what would it mean to press my ear

hold an ear

listen to consciousness heave

**Maureen Sherbondy**  
**Gambling**

We throw our money  
into the river,  
then spend the remainder  
of the day trying  
to fish it back out.

Why did we think riches  
would find our pockets,  
if all we did was empty  
out every penny ever earned?

Lucky people are the ones  
who wander by the river bed  
only to admire the stream  
and rocks when a golden coin  
lights the path, gives itself away.

## **Truth Thomas**

### **4 July || Ocean City, Maryland**

At 2:30 in the morning, flag-wave drunk  
and stumbling, one man, balance beams

21st Street, just off Baltimore Avenue,  
just by Grand Hotel, Broadway singing

his Nation's Anthem. And as he sings,  
at 2:30 in the morning, their Nation's holy

anthem, rhino-bellied, Santa-bearded,  
this one man projects the words, "Oh say

can you see," up to nosebleed seats of stars—  
belts them out, holds the notes they hang

on five years longer than death, louder  
than any naked roar of sea—but not at all

as loud as this same man, curtain called  
to a blue barrel trash can, throwing up his

spleen.

**Diane Webster**  
**Rust History**

Rust, a history buff  
specializing in metalology,  
a metal detector extraordinaire,  
treasure seeker of pirate chests  
with no need for keys;  
rust is the key.

Decades of drawing soil  
dampness around, it opens  
the chest and greedily touches  
gold, silver, jewels.

Rust encrusts 1865 cannons  
blasted in half on Gettysburg  
fields buried like fallen soldiers  
bullets and buttons, officer's sword  
no longer hard for battle  
but rusted with tetanus  
left as its weapon.

Iron rim of a covered wagon  
straddles Oregon Trail long ago –  
abandoned along journey,  
heirloom now, sorrow then  
left behind as wagon train  
pushed on to beat winter snows.  
Loss of one better than loss of fifty.  
Circle of rusting tombstones,  
iron bone survive  
like parallel grooves of wagons  
across sagebrush and prairies.



## Will Wells

### *Marchons, Marchons*

The mist at the close of *Casablanca* marked  
the morph from character to myth. The haze  
of teargas over Court Street when I blundered  
from the midnight feature shocked me back to fact.  
I flinched at crackling plate-glass underfoot.  
*Put your hands above your heads and walk  
single file this way*, a bullhorn voice  
demanded. Helmeted riot police lined  
one corner, a ragged snarl of protestors  
the next, with classic movie buffs between.  
*Move to our lines or you will be arrested*,  
the voice insisted, although my lodgings lay  
the other way. When a companion turned  
to urge the crowd to leave, like Rick to Ilsa,  
a volley of rubber bullets knocked him flat.  
Though earlier, inside, I'd stood to sing  
*La Marseillaise*, I bowed my head, shuffled up  
for patting down and took the long way home.

**Warren Woessner**  
**“TODAY’S YOUNG SCIENTISTS”**

Are creating “tomorrow’s future”  
on the covers of my collection  
of 1950’s chemistry sets.

They sit on the credenza  
in my office, already crowded  
with printouts, diplomas, books  
and computer monitors.

The intent teens are peering through microscopes  
or pouring bright liquids into flasks.  
They look determined, even happy.

They have manuals that teach them  
how to conduct “exciting experiments”  
to create “floating wonders,” or “mystifying tricks.”

So why am I sad to see them every day?  
Ah, you will understand. I was one  
of them then and that was long ago  
and we did go on to create the future  
and we can’t go back and try again

# FICTION

**Katlin Brock**  
**Betty**

**B**etty lived down on Pup's Branch. It was a heap of dirt and trees. She'd moved there on account of her grandma, Willa, being sickly. They lived cramped together in a single wide trailer which they shared with a family of racoons who'd taken to scuttle bugging under the shattered underpinning to raise their babies.

Willa was a strong woman, even on her sickbed she made sure to keep everything just how she liked by using Betty's hands. It was not uncommon to see Betty moving old quilts or magazines out onto the porch, or watch her stack big plastic totes from Dollar General with all of Willa's what-nots-and-curio's inside wrapped in yellowed newspapers.

The holler wasn't quite sure what was wrong with Willa. She had seen no doctor anyone knew of but had taken to being mighty reclusive for near two years now. Betty was not married nor did she have any young'uns of her own, so when the family asked her to move in with Willa she decided it was well enough with her soul.

Sometimes there would be visitors come round to see Willa and talk to her about the old times. When people let their hogs run together snuffling along the underbrush with their ears notched to identify which family they belonged to or how people used to get together in the spring when the honeysuckle bloomed out and have singings on their porches. "Great times," Willa would say, "great and grand times we used to have".

But no more music could be heard in Pup's Branch except for maybe that modern delight stuff people called country music. Both Betty and Willa agreed there would be no Keith Urban in their house, though they weren't too mad at Dolly working her 9 to 5. Betty never had any formal job of her own but she did enough for Willa that she reckoned she'd got her taste. Betty would make sun tea from her mama's old pitcher shaped like a goose and cut up cucumbers from the garden trellis. There would be so much salt poured on them her mouth would pucker but that was how Willa liked them best.

Willa told Betty about growing up in the mountains before the juice poles and the asphalt roads. Before boys went around with their hair long, which she hated the sight of, saying she'd like nothing more than to take a pair of hog sheers to them. She claimed to

have wrestled a bear when she was in her fifties. Said she was walking down from Honey Branch back to the house after dark when it came bumbling out of the trees. Stood up on its back two legs and gave her a hug she didn't no more want than hole in the head.

Willa wrestled that bear until it turned her loose and then she took a great big stick and beat it for good measure. Wouldn't another bear in all Clay county that would come around her after that night. Betty would laugh along with Willa when she told her the story and she'd say "well, mamaw, that's your tale but I'm sitting on mine" cause she knew it was ill report to call her mamaw a liar out right.

Willa was near ninety-three or so she told folks, though Betty had her reason to doubt. She'd found Willa's birth certificate, after all, when she was going through a stack of old newspapers and it said Wilamina Stout was born'd in the good year of the Lord 1934 which made the old woman more in her comfortable eighties. Betty never questioned her mamaw, she was rightly old either which way you turned her over your knee.

Betty kept her hair on her head in a knot and wore thin skirts with big brown buttons sewn on. Her feet were often bare and her cheeks burned and the Cherokee blood in her veins bloomed sweet across her face. Saul Brummy came by one afternoon with a whole dog box full of bainya chickens in the back of his rusty Toyota. Said they were a dollar a pair. Willa came out the house on her cane, told Saul he better pack up them squawkers cause they weren't good enough for a portion.

Betty told Willa to go back in out of the heat and she turned over to Saul, told him with a coy grin, "give me a pair of them bainya chickens. Willa won't hurt to have them around and they are right pretty." She gave him a dollar from her pocket, took the two little things in each hand, one a gamey hen and the other a proud looking little buff rooster. She put them around behind the house under the old sycamore tree where it was cooler. Betty got a dish from one of the giveaway boxes to water them and she felt plumb proud of herself.

She took care to watch after them bainya chickens, made sure they ate and drank and had shade enough not to swelter. Willa complained about the little rooster with his scratchy call, she said them chickens wouldn't no use to anyone, not even dead. Betty didn't argue, just let her mamaw crow. One morning Betty woke to an awful good smell coming from the kitchen. She got up from her little cot by the backroom and found Willa frying on the stovetop with her big cast iron pan.

“Mamaw, what you got in there? Smells like something good,” Betty had said and came to sit down at the table.

“Chicken,” Willa said over the pop and crack of her greasy pan. “No more’n a mouthful each but at least it won’t be squawking and waking me up at all hours of the night.”

Betty never did quite forgive Willa for killing them chickens but she went on anyway because kinfolk was all you really had. She knew Willa was sick and frail and her life wasn’t worth much on her own. Betty’s daddy told her one time his mama had married a rich logger from down on Big Low Road and the man gave her all kinds of pretty things until he died underneath a big white cedar one spring. Willa snatched up her children, of which there were three, and moved them back up to Pup’s Branch where her parents still lived.

Some days were easier than others. Willa was a mean old woman who didn’t like being told what to do. If she felt good enough she would take the slipper off her foot and beat Betty with it wherever she might land a blow. Those were the days when Betty felt most satisfied because mamaw Willa was more herself and said things she meant outright.

The mountains giggled off their leaves and the air grew cool in the mornings all at once. Even the water tasted better, sweeter and less metallic on the tongue. A little rafter of turkeys began pecking at the dirt along their yard with a big old tom amongst them. He would sometimes puff himself up for Betty when she got too close to his hens, his feathers beautiful and full.

In those days Betty made strong coffee, she baked apple cakes from the bushels Clyde Saylor brought down from his fields. She’d sit there in the house peeling those tiny, grubby apples with the window open listening to the world hum outside. Willa would sit in her recliner watching Betty with a dark eye, using her cane to make gestures here and yon. They would talk about how the wooly worms were black as coal this year and much too heavy and it must be a rough winter coming up on them.

Betty knew there were plenty of signs. She’d grown up reading them. How if the leaves were turned over on the trees you ought to expect rain, how the cold wouldn’t leave your bones until the blackberries bloomed out and only then was it truly time for summer air, or how it was best not to go fishing if the cows were laying down in the fields. These were truths in their own simple ways. Mythic to some but like breathing to others.

It was a cold October morning when Betty got up and trotted down to the kitchen in

her long socks. She expected to see Willa but found emptiness. Betty looked in their tiny living room without any success and so took herself back up the hall to Willa's bedroom where she knocked once on the door before entering. She found Willa in bed still, her eyes closed with their lids paper thin and her mouth trembling.

"Mamaw?" Betty knew her voice sounded like an eggshell.

Willa stirred, her eyes fluttered open and she motioned for Betty to come near to her with one of her wrinkled hands. Betty sat down on her bed, felt the familiar sag of the mattress and the boxspring. She leaned over her mamaw like a great shadow over the surface of the moon.

Her hands spread out along the quilt with its Dutch girl pattern in pinks and greens, made by Willa's own mama back in the 1920s. Everyone in the family had stake in the quilt, saying it would be theirs when Willa ate her mouthful of dirt.

"Child, I done think the old Sleeping Man has come for your old granny," Willa said and not once did her voice falter. She was not afraid. "My bones ache and my head, too, I think it might be time for the big sleep."

"Now, mamaw, you're being foolish," Betty said. It'd never occurred to her someday or another Willa might die. She reckoned her mamaw would live on forever. Willa laughed at her granddaughter, waving her hand to dismiss the notion. Willa was not a foolish woman.

A week had passed when the old woman rattled a heavy breath and grabbed after Betty's shirt-tail with her talon-like fingers. Betty had not left Willa's side. She turned away visitors. She ate her meals in the chair by the bed, only letting the old woman out of her sight to use the toilet. A week. It brought desperation into the house thick like hoary frost.

"Might you do me one last favor, my precious girl?"

"Anything," Betty put her hand on her mamaw's shoulder, she could feel the bone and she wondered to herself when Willa had turned so skinny.

"Go fetch me a weed," Willa began, "something for my nerves." What she didn't say was it was for making dying a little easier on her. "Find it and boil it and make tea."

Maybe this, too, was a kind of sign.

Betty got herself up and gathered a flashlight from the old junk drawer in the living room.

Not a sound could be heard out in the October dark, everything had fallen away. Betty

swept along the trail leading from the trailer porch steps out back towards the old sycamore where she'd kept those bairy chickens.

She could feel hot tears run down her cheeks, taste them on her tongue when she licked around her mouth. Betty wasn't sure if she was crying over Willa or her chickens. There was a deep pain in her chest, in the tips of her fingers as she searched the yard with her little flashlight trying to find a weed she'd never even heard of before. So many times Willa had turned her out like a flour sack until all Betty's pretty parts were hidden and here she ran around under a half moon with cold sweat on her forehead.

Grabbing sapling trees with bare hands to hoist herself up the sheer edge of the mountainside, her shoes slick against the foliage. She crashed down on her knees, scratched herself up to high heavens—all for you, mamaw, Betty thought to the moon, all for you.

And she remembered being a little girl. Remembered how her daddy used to take her out to an old pond called Lucky Blue where the dishes were too many to count. How they'd sit out there in sunshine all day catching and releasing and looking at their faces in the water.

Her hands were icy when she caught herself on a stumpy log and found herself on all fours in the beginning of morning. Those rose colored clouds came up the back of the mountain and turned the light a hazy sort of orange like tangerines.

All night Betty had looked for her mamaw's weed. Not a trace of anything she could find.

Cold and defeated she turned back to the house, wiping tears and mud and little bugs from off her swollen cheeks. Betty climbed up the porch and eased herself into the house, she half expected her mamaw's ghost to meet her there but found herself quite alone. Betty crept down the hall towards the bedroom, praying under her breath to not find her mamaw laying corpse.

"Mamaw?" Betty hollered. Willa was still there where she'd left her hours ago. She came to kneel down beside the bed.

"You find what I was wanting?" Willa croaked like a bully frog.

"No, I looked all night. Looked and couldn't find a trace."

"Can't do nothing on your own, can you, Betty girl?" Willa sat up from her sickbed and



she tossed away her blankets. “Guess an old woman has to do everything herself,” Willa said as she sprang up, limber like a whippy willow sprig stuck in a lump of mud. She pressed her hand against the top of Betty’s head to give herself a little balance. Betty didn’t feel the need to move a single inch, she sat there bewildered, hearing her mamaw sing under her breath before the front door slammed shut.

## **William Burleson**

### **Art**

**W**e had our heads down, conjugating verbs or some such boring shit, when one by one we each noticed the car engine revving over and over. We were on the third floor of our old brick high school with the student parking lot below, and the occasional car patching out or loud radio didn't even make us raise our heads from our books or our naps. But this wasn't tires squealing—it had snowed until lunch and you can't lay rubber in the snow—this was the sound of a V-8 engine straining at full RPMs and then stopping, again and again.

Robby Blazer was the first kid to the window to see what was going on. His desk was by the window, and he had a hard enough time sitting without having a large American engine shaking in its mounts below.

“Robby, please sit down,” Mrs. Morris said, standing behind her desk, head up, mouth tight and small. Her shirt, as always, buttoned up to her chin, making her voice higher than it otherwise would have been. Robby ignored her. The racket below continued. More kids—the boys, to be specific—got up and looked out the window. “Gentlemen, please take your seats,” said Mrs. Morris, trying to maintain some sort of control but failing mightily. Soon most of the class was at the window, boys and girls alike, and from their expressions and continued interest, there was something good happening below. When I finally got to the window from my seat across the room I had to push my way between two kids for a spot to see. Below was a '70 gold Buick Electra doing donuts in the student parking lot.

Art.

Art Parnowski and I would bomb around in his huge boat of a car after school and at all hours on weekends. He got the car from his uncle who collected junkers but didn't see the Buick as worth repairing.

Art had been one of the first people I met when my ma and me moved to Lede in 1980 after the divorce. That was three years ago. From then on, Art and I were buds. Starting the

fall of our senior year, it would be Art and me, and the Catholic boys Joe and his younger brother Dave, and sometimes Jorge, a Mexican kid whose family recently came to town. When we weren't skateboarding downtown getting yelled at, we were smoking pot. A lot. That's how Jorge got in with us, because he knew a dealer in the trailer park who never ripped him off. We would smoke up in Art's car in the student parking lot after school, in the Catholic brothers' garage, or most commonly in Art's cellar. Art's dad was gone to wherever loser dads go, just like mine, and Art and his ma lived in an old one story with a dirt yard. We could get in the cellar from the back without his ma knowing. So we did.

\*

"When are we going to get a pool?" I asked. "My last town had a pool. There's a park. How come it doesn't have a pool?" Lede, Minnesota, in the western, flat, treeless part of the state, didn't have a lot to offer. The town park was a random block without buildings at the end of main street. It featured a flagpole with a plaque about the "Great War," a bunch of vandalized playground equipment, and nothing to do.

In the cellar, Art sat on the car bucket seat and me, Jorge, and the brothers sat on two old skanky couches. Other than that, the room contained a bare bulb, the smell of mold, and a cassette deck playing Aerosmith. "Ernie, we'll get a pool at the same time we get any number of things lacking in this shithole town," Joe said.

Besides not having a pool, there was no bowling alley, no record store, no arcade. It did have a little movie theater on Main Street, but it never got the good movies. I didn't blame my ma for moving there, though. What else was she supposed to do? There weren't any jobs in the last town and no way was my father paying his due. So we moved to Lede and she got a job working seven to four at the turkey plant, we got our section 8 on the highway, and I got to get stoned with the same kids every day.

Art rolled a joint and told us a story about his older brother and his girlfriend. "I'm telling you, her tits were right there. I got a good look," Art said, putting the finishing touches on the big doobie.

“Were they big? I like them big,” Dave said, holding out his hands like he was holding two heads of lettuce.

Bigger the better,” Joe added. The brothers were always finishing each other’s sentences.

“Not huge, but these were so nice,” Art said.

“Isn’t it kinda weird that you were spying on your brother?” I asked.

“I wasn’t spying. I just walked by the garage. How should I know that he had his girlfriend’s shirt off?”

“I’d watch,” Joe said.

“You’d watch Dave make out with a girl?” I said.

“Hell yeah. Free show,” Joe said.

“We share!” Dave added. They laughed and pushed each other a couple of times.

“It’s not going to happen anyway. No girl is going to take their shirt off for either of you,” Art said. He torched up the joint.

“Are you kidding? Catholic chicks are easy. Everyone knows that,” Joe said. Since he and Dave went to Catholic school, I figured they must know what they were talking about.

“It’s science. Pent-up frustration from being told to be good, to stay a virgin. They go nuts. It doesn’t take much to get under those uniforms,” Dave added.

Is that true, Jorge?” I asked. “You’re Catholic, right?” It bugged me how quiet he could be.

“Yeah, Catholic. But I’m not messing with any of the Latina in my part of town. If I got caught banging any of those bitches, I’d take a big beating from their brothers. Or worse. No, man, not worth it.”

“You have to get on some white pussy,” Dave said before taking a hit off the joint.

“They’d like your tan ass,” Joe added.

“Who says I haven’t, bro’?” He wiggled his eyebrows like Groucho Marx. We laughed.

“I need to get laid.” Art said. “Man, it’s been months.” He made it sound like he had experience.

“Me too, man,” I added. Everyone else nodded. I was a virgin, too. I had gone out with a couple girls, but the best I ever got was a hand job.

Dave told a story about this one girl he had gone out with who he said didn’t wear underwear under her uniform skirt and ended up bouncing up and down on him in the back seat of his car. I wondered if any of the story was true.

“Wow, man. Can I call her? Do you have her number?” Jorge asked.

“Sure. You can have her. She’s a slut.”

We passed the joint, enjoying the high. Then, “Do you think Donna is hot?” Art said.

“Speaking of sluts!” Joe said.

“Hell yeah, she’s smokin’,” I replied. Donna had long legs and long blond hair and always wore a loose hippie top and hip-huggers.

Art’s eyes got big. “I’m going to ask her out.”

“You mean like to prom or something?” Dave said, smiling at his joke. None of us losers were going to go to prom, and we all knew it. Plus, Art had never dated anyone. It must have been hard for a husky kid. He was kind of a nerd, too, often talking about stuff no one cared about, like World War II sea battles.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

We all laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“I don’t think she’s the prom type,” Joe replied, to another round of laughter.

“You don’t know what you are talking about,” Art said, all hurt and all. “I had to be her partner today in Biology, and she seemed really nice.”

“Nice’ is right,” Joe said.

“Man, she’s been banged by half the guys in town,” Dave said.

“I hear she let Mr. Paulson fuck her,” Joe added. Mr. Paulson was a math teacher who had to be like forty, and everyone said he kept a fifth in his desk.

“You don’t want her. You’d have to tie a board to your ass so you won’t fall in,” Dave said, making us all laugh in overdone hysterics, except Art.

\*

He asked her out. Then again. Soon they were spending all their time together, and Donna would now hang with the rest of us in the Electra in the parking lot. That’s where the first day after Thanksgiving break, Donna, Art, Jorge and me were getting high.

“I’m going to college,” she said when I asked her what her plans were after graduation. Art passed back the joint, and I took it before Jorge could.

“Cool. Like State?” I asked, before taking a long, noisy toke, holding my breath, coughing just a tiny bit. I passed the joint to Jorge.

“No. Beauty college.”

“What’s that?” Jorge asked with more than a hint of skepticism in his voice. If she picked up on it she didn’t show it.

She took the joint from Jorge. “I know a girl who went to beauty college, and now she has a job working at auto shows.” Art rolled the window down a couple of inches venting the smoke out. It was well after school so no one was around to see it.

“What are you going to do, Art?” I asked.

“I don’t know.”

I didn’t know, either. What was there to do? There’s always the military, I figured. No one asked Jorge, mostly because he was a junior so he had a ways to go.

We finished our joint, sat back and listened to an old eight-track of Edgar Winter. Eventually, Jorge and I got out, and Art and Donna drove off.

The next day, as we walked up to the third floor for English, Art said, “We did it.”

“Did what?”

“You know, did it.” He elbowed me.

I laughed, and we high-fived. “Way to go, my man. Was it good?”

“Best ever. After I dropped you off, we did it in the Electra. Twice.”

I laughed again for no reason. I felt a little jealous.

“Ernie, I think we are in love.”

“Man, seriously?” I asked as if he had just told me he had cancer.

He didn’t say anything and the bell rang.

\*

Soon it was winter break, and we were all busy with family shit, so right after New Years it was big when we got together again in Art’s cellar, he and I and the Catholic brothers.

“I made a decision,” Art said.

We just sat there because none of us had any weed.

“I’m going to ask Donna to marry me.”

We didn’t move, time frozen, then Joe and Dave broke up laughing, falling off the old couch to either side.

“What’s so funny?” Art said. “We’re in love.” From his expression of hurt, you could tell this was not the reception he’d wanted or expected.

“How long have you been hanging out?” Dave asked.

“A month?” Joe added.

“Month and a half. So what?” Art said.

Joe pointed at me. “Tell him, Ernie,” Joe said.

“Yeah, tell ‘im, bro’,” Dave piled on.

I guess I really didn’t know what to tell him, but then Art looked at me like I was his last hope. “I’m happy for you,” I said. “Have you asked her yet?”

“No, but I will.”

And he did. And then they were officially engaged. Not that their parents knew, but everyone in school did. He even got her a ring.

\*

After about a month, she showed it to me, even though she had already shown it to me like three times.

“What do you think of it?” Donna asked me when we were sitting in Art’s Electra.

It was lunch time. Out of the blue, she had come over to me in the lunch room and grabbed me by the arm and pulled me along with her. We went out the back, me hoping to not get caught. She had on her long cloth hippie coat over a loose shirt and long skirt, but my coat was back in my locker, and it was cold as a bitch. We jumped in the Electra, and I was surprised not to see Art or any of the other guys.

“Art had to do some makeup test or something, so I borrowed his keys since we are engaged and all.” She fished in the glovebox and pulled out his stash. She tossed it to me, and she started up the car, big engine rumbling. I was excited to be skipping class, plus it was cool to have Donna want to hang with me. She popped the shifter into reverse, backed the Electra out, and off we went. I rubbed my hands together and tried to roll a joint in the cold. We didn’t go far, stopping by the sign warehouse, lot full of weird huge business signs stacked sideways behind a chain link fence: Zantigo, Burger King, Big Wheel. It was a favorite spot to get high since few people ever walked by.

That was when she held out her hand to show me the ring.

“Now where’s that joint?” she asked.

I had messed it up, paper torn. “Sorry. My hands are cold.”

“Poor baby’s cold,” she said. I wasn’t sure if she was mocking me or sympathizing. She cranked up the heat, but the car hadn’t had time to warm up yet, so it just made it worse. “Hold on.” She struggled out of her long cloth coat with a fake fur collar. “Slide over.” She lifted the center armrest, and I moved over toward her as told, and she laid the coat across



us like a blanket. She rubbed my hands under the coat. "Here." She put my open hands between her thighs and squeezed them tight. "Don't get any ideas," she said with a giggle.

I, of course, had a hard-on, and I had the idea that I might come in my jeans.

She pulled her left hand out from below the coat. "Seriously, though, what do you think?" she said, showing me the ring again.

I pretended to inspect it as if I knew anything about rings. "I think it's nice."

"Nice." She kept her hand out, looking at the ring. "Nice is right. Art's a nice guy, but I'm not sure I'm ready to settle down like he is, you know? I have plans. Still, it's nice he asked me, and it's nice to be engaged. Nice, nice, nice." She reached over and popped the glove box, rifling through the shabby selection of music. "Eight tracks. Who the hell has eight tracks," She pulled out Led Zeppelin One and popped in. We bobbed our heads to "Good Times Bad Times" mouthing the words. The song ended, and she pulled my hands out from between her legs and cupped them with hers. "I always have warm hands. I have great circulation, I guess." She let go with one hand, and out of sight under her coat with one swift move she unbuttoned one of my shirt buttons and slid a hand in on my stomach. "See?"

It was warm, and I smiled.

She laughed. "I bet you like that." She pulled her hand out and accidentally on purpose brushed against my crouch. "I knew it." She giggled again, squirming around a bit under the coat. We sat, pressed up against each other.

She still held my hands with her right hand. "Let's see how warm your hands are now," she said. She took a hand and guided it up her loose cotton shirt and under her bra. "Yeah, that's pretty good." She let her hands fall to my lap. And in just a few moments I was no longer a virgin.

"Well, speedy Gonzales, we should get back," she said, as she slid off me and straightened up her clothes. She reached behind the seat and grabbed a couple of Kleenexes. Pulling up her skirt, I got a look at her real, live pussy, and a blond one at that. She wiped off her stuff, balled the tissues up, and threw them out the window. I was fascinated; I had no idea they did that. I also felt a little guilty, like I had made a mess.

She pulled up her panties, pulled back down her skirt, and shimmied her coat back on. “Let’s smoke that joint.”

I did my job with my now warm hands and passed the joint to her to do the honors. She used the cigarette lighter in the dash. I looked at her. She looked the same, blond hair a bit messier perhaps, but the same.

She poked me on the shoulder. “So tell me, am I your first?”

I looked out the window at the snow.

She giggled. “I knew it.” She took a long drag off the joint, looking off in space, now suddenly all serious.

I thought I should say something. “Donna, you were great.”

She didn’t say anything.

“Really, I mean—“

“Ernie, don’t talk, OK?”

So I didn’t. We just sat. Then, “You know how old I was when I had my cherry popped?” She took a long drag. “I’m not even going to tell you.”

“What about Art?” I said, not really knowing what I meant by asking that.

“What about him? I was his first too. He won’t admit it, but, I know.”

She took another hit, and passed the joint to me. I did the same. Then, “Is it true about Mr. Paulson?” I couldn’t believe I asked.

“She looked sideways at me, “What’s up with you? Did I fuck Mr. Paulson? No. Not that the pig didn’t try. Hit on me three times, right in his classroom. The last time he practically tried to rape me.” She looked out the car window at the signs lined up behind the fence. “I should have given him what he wanted, I guess. I know everyone thinks I did. Then maybe he would have left me alone.” She took the joint and took a big drag. “Most guys just beg to fuck me and then when they do, they never come back. And you know what? That’s fine by me. If all it takes is a quick fuck to get a guy to leave me alone, well, that’s fine. Guys are sure weird.”

We said nothing. I thought of how good my still-wet cock felt. I thought about Art and what I had done.

She gave a small, dismissive laugh. "But then there's Art. He goes and gives me a ring."

"I would call you again."

"Oh, shut up, Ernie." She took another toke. "Sorry, I know you would. You're like Art. You are a nice guy. Thing is, I'm not looking for a nice guy. I'm not looking for any guy, really." She laid back, looked up at the roof of the car. "Funny, I thought I had it figured out."

She finally passed the joint back over to me. I looked at the glowing red cherry. I thought about how finally, finally I had had sex. I thought about how Donna didn't seem to give a shit about that fact or me. I thought about what an asshole friend I was.

She put the now-warm car in gear and started driving back to school. "I have plans. I know a girl who dances on weekends in Kansas City, and she makes a lot of cash, like a hundred a night. I'm eighteen in two months, and I can get a job there, too. Get me the hell out of this town."

I thought to ask what that meant for Art, but didn't.

She pulled in the parking lot, coincidentally into the exact same spot. She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. "Ernie? I'm sorry. Believe me, I know what it's like to be used."

I was confused. What was she sorry about? She had made me a man. It was the best thing that ever happened to me. She should apologize to Art. I should apologize to Art.

Then, as if reading my mind, "Don't tell Art, OK?" she said. "Any of it, right? Especially that we fucked? It would break his heart."

I nodded.

\*

That next day, I looked for Art as usual on my way to English, but he was nowhere. I walked up the stairs alone, into the room to my seat, desk scared with years of initials carved into the wood top.

And, fifteen minutes later, after conjugating those verbs and hearing the car rev below and seeing all the students cluster around the window as Mrs. Morris tried to command us to sit down, I stared out the third-floor window and watched Art do shitties over and over again in his Buick Electra, drawing painful circles in the fresh snow.

“What’s he doing?” some kid said.

“Crazy,” said another.

“What’s wrong with him?” said a third.

I wondered if he could get a refund on the ring, but I knew there are some things you can’t take back.

**THE END**

**Karen Frederick**  
**Obsidian**

“Can’t you hear it Sarie. Somebody’s callin my name.”

Valdosta Pomeroy was my best friend. Valdosta was an orphan like me, we was raised together until my Nana come and found me. I axed if Val could come too and since she dint have nobody Nana say alright.

It was a few years when I dint see Val, never expected to see her no mo. She promised to write, and I wrote when I could. Then she showed up at the Ainsley Canning Factory with a little girl in tow looking for work. She was real scrawny and the chile, Dottie, dint look lak she had eaten in a few days. Dottie was ten and my Chanie was ten and they both worked at the factory wit us, side by side.

Sometimes Val got lonely; she could never go very long without having a man around.

Val was so busy looking after the other kids, by now she had Gruver, Micah and Pip, three boys. Everybody worked at the factory but there never seemed to be enough. But Val scrimped and saved until she had enough to git a farm. That's when she met that no-good Chambliss. They worked the land on shares but it was on real poor land. Val did all the work and he drank all the profits.

That lil farm was full of glass, black glass like they had cleared the land and broke thousands of black glass bottles on it. The children was always barefoot and cutting their feet, deep sometimes. Val and me spent many hours pickin’ up pieces of that glass.

We moved away to another place tweny miles off and I dint see Val for a long time. By the time I saw Val again, it was now. Dottie had run off and Val was dying of the influenze. So thin she looked lak a bag of bones with real big eyes. There was no one around ‘cept her grandson, Ransom Price who everybody called Skeeter cause he was so small, but who we came to call Red cause of his fiery red hair.

“Put it over her, Sarie, closer where I kin see it.”

“Sho Val.”

I saw the small round piece of black glass Val kept on the makeshift table by the sink. The room was dark and smelled of sick. Val was at the end of her road. I had brought my doctorin' bag when I heard Val was sick and I told Henry I would be gone overnight. He just smiled and didn't say nothin' 'cept, “Be careful Sarie, me and Chanie needs you.”

Val was so sick and looked so poorly I didn't know what good it would do but I give her a sitz bath in the washtub and washed her real good with the lava soap I brought. Skeeter, her grandson was hiding in the corner lookin'.

“Bring me that rag chile.”

Skeeter brought it and I wiped Val's face and hair and tried to braid it a little. It was thick with dirt but I know it made her feel better. I dressed her back in her dirty clothes and she give me sort of a smile.

“Sarie I know. Take Skeeter with you when you go. I done heard someone callin' my name.”

I knew it wouldn't be long.

“Val, I said, “Why didn't you send word when things got bad.”

Val's eyes were shiny with fever.

“What for Sarie?”

“Where's Dottie?”

“She run off months ago with another man. She always hoped Raymond was gonna come for her, but he didn't. She kinda went crazy when he married yo Chanie, yo remember. She went plum crazy after that. Finally she left and I begged her to leave Skeeter with me.”

“What happened to the lil girl, Skeeter's sister?”

“I don't wanna say.”

“And both of em belong to Raymond.”

Val closed her eyes. I went over and touched her forehead. She was burning up. I went to the small room they had separated with some burlap and pulled all of it down to keep Val warm. I had brought several pots and some herbs and some beans and a lil rice. I decided to at least feed her, one mo' time.

“Skeeter, son, go to the spring and fill this here bucket with water and bring it to me.

“Yes ma’am.”

“Come close Sarie.”

I was taking the things out of the croaker sak I brung and stopped to look at Val. She could barely talk. Her breath was comin’ in short and shallow. I dint know how she long she’d been bad lak this. I sat next to her and held her hand.”

“You gotta hep me.”

“Mmm.”

“You gotta take Skeeter when you go.”

“But..”

“Chambliss aint comin back, and neither is Dottie.”

I jes sat, holding her hand and not looking at her. Val set her mouth lak she always did when she had her mind all made up about somethin.’

“One mo thing, Sarie. I aint gonna git no better. You gotta hep me.”

“Hep you?”

“Hep me go.”

I looked at Val. She had always been closer to me than my own sisters. Never had someone lak that sweet Val. She was lak a lil bird to me, wit a broken wing and I always took care of her, leastways when I could.

“But after, afterwards, I caint jes leave you here, alone. "I caint jes leave you.”

“The preacher say he comin’ by tomorrow night. It’ll be alright.”

“Caint you wait”

Val jes looked at me. Her breathing sounded lak somebody was pressin' a heavy stone on her small chest. Tears was rollin down her face. I dint know what to do. I knew Skeeter would be back from the spring in a few minutes. I went into my bag and took out the herbs I kept to ease the pain. I put in all I brung.

“Here’s the water Miss.”

“Jes call her Granma Sarie.” Val reached over to pat Skeeter’s head.

Skeeter looked down at the floor.

“Skeeter, you need to go play outdoors. Yo Granma gotta take her medicine now.”

“Umhuh.”

Skeeter run out.

I made a small potion in a cup and added some spring water and stirred it wit a spoon I brung. I sat next to Val and held her small thin body in my arms and give her a few spoonfuls. She closed her eyes. It dint take long. She lay real still and her breath stopped. I fell down on my knees holding Val's hand and called on Jesus. I gathered my things and went to the door.

"Skeeter, come say goodbye, yo Grandma Val is gone."

Skeeter looked at me real hard.

"We gotta go son. Look lak a storm is comin. Git on up in this wagon."

Skeeter dint move. I grabbed him and set him in the back. I wrapped him in a quilt real good and put a heavy piece of Henry's wood on it so he wasn't going nowhere. I looked at the sky. Looked lak a dark blanket of clouds was rollin' towards us. I climbed in the front and tapped the mule so we could go.

We headed down the road. I looked back at Skeeter, wit one of them piece of glass in his hand, holding it real tight. He never looked back.



**Kenneth Gulotta**  
**Lighten**

Once, Maria had gone through her day yearning to rush home to Denise and her crazy lady hair. (Crazy lady: Denise's made-up word, not Maria's, just to keep things straight.) In those days she launched herself against Denise, face to face, the second after she locked the front door, clawing her fingers into the long tangles and wrapping them behind her own head, trapping herself, an inch away from tying a Gordian knot with those thick curls.

Now, though, as Denise sat on the sofa, barely watching the television screen and riffling through the bristles of a braid, hunting out and snipping off split ends with the sharp nails of her thumb and index finger, now Maria thought she could actually hear Denise's fingernails click as they severed the two-headed tips of her hair, little insect-bone breaks. She could hear it over the sound of the news, and now she wanted nothing more than to run to the bathroom, grab the electric clippers that she used for her own buzz-cuts, shove Denise to the ground, and shear her, just plow through those tumbling, fractured locks, straight down to the roots.

It wasn't about something so changeable as hair, though. No, the problem was with something bigger. Really, it came down to all of it, just everything.

When they decided to move in together, Denise swore she would find a job. And she did, that was true: she found and promptly quit one job.

For three eroding months, increasingly riddled with sick days, Denise drove to an office building and sat in a cubicle and routed phone calls to either Sales or Service. *Thank you for calling CompuDec, how may I direct your call, okay, I'm transferring you to Service, thank you for calling CompuDec, how may I direct your call?* Until she came home one day and announced that she had given her supervisor her two-week notice.

"Crap, Denise!" Maria shouted. "What did you do? How are we supposed to make rent and pay bills on nothing but my salary?"

"It'll be okay for just a month or two. I'll find something. Besides, you said you wanted to travel some this summer."

“I said, *if* I don’t have to teach summer school, which I might, especially now, and, also, plus, I wasn’t saying I want to *re*locate for the summer. I just meant doing a few days here, maybe a week there, which you could totally manage with vacation days, if you were at a job long enough to get any.”

“I just can’t do it anymore. That place, it’s like choking. All day, I feel it, like something physical, like I walk in, and by the time I get past the lobby, some gas, some thick vapor is being pumped through my throat.”

And now it was the beginning of summer, and Maria didn’t have to teach, but she couldn’t go anywhere, because she didn’t have any, not any, extra money. Everything had gone to rent and food and electricity, and the phone probably would be cut off before the end of the week, because Denise hadn’t even *thought* about looking for another job, as far as Maria could tell, and here they were, captured, stuck together, confined to their house, next to each other on the sofa, while Denise groomed herself all day long with little snicks of her fingernails.

They met in a bookstore, like something out of a movie about a girl and a boy and *How many months will it take for them to realize the truth about each other and Poof! Happy ending*. Except they weren’t a girl and a boy, and they knew right away: it took only a day-and-a-half for them to start telling their two sets of friends that they were dating.

True, in a movie they would probably have met in the Literature section, bonding over a mutual favorite—*The Waves*, say, or *Don Quixote*. Instead, it was Employment. They were both a month out of college, looking for work, and they needed résumé samples to crib.

Of course, that was before Maria got the teaching job at the high school and started applying to master’s degree programs in Education, planning to put that English degree to work. And before Denise took one random job that she ended up quitting, with no warning, putting her Chemistry degree toward absolutely nothing. “What am I going to do with Chemistry, anyway?” she moaned. “Work in a pharmacy? Or as a lab tech? Bluh. There’s *got* to be more.”

Majors. Maria remembered her mother whining at her over the phone about choosing the right one, getting the right start on the rest of her life. And how about life now? Here, in

this house, with the English major who had a goddamned job and the Chemistry major who was out of work? Like majors counted for fuck-all, anyway. Like what you started with had anything to do with anything. No. What you did later: that was all that mattered.

Maria glanced across the room at the dining table, eyeing Denise's pile of ripped-up magazines. That was all she did. Cut pictures out of magazines and paste them onto canvas and paint over them. Hang them on the wall in the hallway. Change them, move them around. Just shuffle things.

Denise dropped the end of her braid and twisted on the sofa to face Maria. "Did I tell you about the guy?" she gasped. "The guy and the show?"

"So let me get this straight," Maria said as she jammed a paper towel into the coffee maker's filter basket. She went to the pantry and hunted for the coffee, shifting the boxes of salt and pasta and the bags of beans from spot to spot. She found it behind a bag of rice that was balanced upright, on its end. She toppled the bag and yanked the coffee can out, shaking her head. "This guy, he up and calls you, out of the blue, and asks you for some of your, whatever, your collages, to hang up in some art show he's putting on? Like, a real one, in a gallery somewhere, not in a...not a restaurant or bookstore or donut shop or something?"

"God, with the, you're just insulting," Denise groaned. The sofa squeaked as she moved, standing up and sitting back down. "Stop being so ugly."

"But you didn't even submit or apply or whatever for this, but he still comes calling you for some *art*?"

"Say 'art' like that, with that tone, like that to me, say it one more time."

"Okay, I know, I'm sorry, but you have to understand what I mean. It's just...it's surprising, is all." She opened the refrigerator door. "There was like half a jug of milk in here."

"Drank it. Plus, cereal. Ate."

Maria slammed the door with a soft, rubbery thump. "Great."

"Hey, you did, too."

"I know."

“So, don’t.”

They were silent while Maria waited for the coffee to drip. She poured, sugared, and stirred two cups.

“You *know*, also, that they’re not just collages,” Denise said as Maria came back into the living room and handed her a cup. “They’re drawings, they’re *paintings*, too. The collage part is only the beginning.”

“Yes, I know. It just seemed like more of a hobby than a, I don’t know, a real thing.”

“Yeah, well, thanks a lot. I guess I’m lucky that the rest of the world doesn’t care about your requirements, your *definitions* or whatever, for what matters, in the world of *art*, or about your rules for how I should spend my time.” She blew on the surface of her coffee; a finger of liquid tumbled over the edge of the cup and disappeared darkly into the green fabric of her T-shirt. “Shit!” she grunted.

“Denise...”

“Whatever, Maria. Just...I don’t want to talk about it with you anymore, anyway. Why don’t you...just go find something to do. Find something away from me.” She took a long drink of her coffee, and her eyes glistened; she seemed to be fighting tears, but she might have been reacting to the heat. Maria couldn’t tell.

Their first date was in a coffee shop that seemed more treehouse than building, sunk as it was into the edge of a hill, with leafy limbs pressing against the windows, enclosing the dim interior and its litter of secondhand chairs and tables. But was their first date actually a date when their reason for meeting was to work on their résumés together? And when the date, if it even was one, was apparently going to end with the most boring argument in the world?

“You leave all that space there, I’m telling you, almost half a page empty, and any company, any employer is going to think you’re trying to hide not having any work experience.” Maria slapped the pages of her own résumé versions together and stuck them in their red folder. (Red equals R equals.) “I’m just saying.”

“*Maybe* they’ll think I know something about design,” Denise said. “*Maybe* they’ll appreciate how I’ve got my headings all to the left and everything looks all nice and clean,

and not like all the blocky bits in the books, just like every other piece of off- white cardstock stacked up on their desks.”

“Whatever. Do what you want, if you don’t want to listen to any advice, after you’re the one who asked for it.”

“Come on. Are you really storming off because I don’t want to change the, what- do-you-call-’ems? The columns? On my résumé? You’re really leaving?”

“Well.” Maria stuck the folder in her case and slung it over her shoulder. “I’ve got stuff to do. I’ve got to go work on this.”

Denise leaned back and grinned. “Okay. If you want. But look: tonight, there’s this show, my friends, they’re in this punk band, playing downtown, at Liberty Lunch, right? At like ten, if you want, you know, to take a break from that, and come out and see, you know, hear some music.”

“I don’t know.”

“Come on. I’ll buy you a drink. I’ll buy you *two*.”

“Well. I’ll consider it.”

“Okay, then. Can’t ask for more.”

And Maria left, threading through the mismatched, variously shaped pieces of furniture. Each of the four times she looked back at the table, Denise was still watching her.

When Maria reached the door, Denise gave a little wave and called, “I know I’m going to see you tonight.” Maria shrugged and pushed out, onto the deck, scowling into the bright, hot light.

Was it all fighting, from the start? Maria wondered as she listlessly moved books and folders on her desk. Was that all...was that what she wanted? Did she choose to be with Denise because she wanted to be in one long argument, just so she wouldn’t be bored or settled or whatever?

She stopped moving things and pressed her hands flat on the wooden surface of her desk. Then she crossed her arms and buried her face in the crook of her left elbow. She went slack, leaning, resting in her own shadow.

“What the fuck was *that*?” Denise yelled.

Maria lifted her head. *Oh, talking now, are we?* She got up, left the extra bedroom—her office—and clumped down the hall to the living room. Denise was still on the sofa, but leaning forward, wide-eyed, her hands on her knees. “What?” Maria asked. “What was what?”

“Those bangs or pops. Did you hear that, them?”

“Kind of, I guess. I think. Firecrackers, probably, I bet they were.”

“It’s too early. They’re not on sale yet.”

“People can get them. Plus, some kids, they save them. A lot of kids make them last all year, until they can buy more.”

Denise rose from the sofa, looking toward the window. “Not any kids I ever knew.” She took a couple of steps and stopped, tilting her head, listening.

“Well, Denise, that’s what *I* used to do. My sister, too. We both did that. We did it with candy, too. Our Easter candy, we made it last until Halloween, and our Halloween candy, you know, vice versa.”

“Hush.”

“Don’t ‘hush’ me.”

“Shh. Listen.”

They stood, heads tilted, Maria with one hand on her hip and Denise with her fingers splayed toward the window, as if listening with them, too.

Maria frowned and let her hand drop to her side.

“Is that,” she said. “Are some kids out there, laughing, maybe?”

Denise took three swift steps and twitched the drape to the side, undressing a few inches of window. A metallic band of light edged the glass. At one end it escaped to the wall, drawing a line on it that faded near the ceiling.

“Way,” Denise said slowly, and then: “Wait.”

Maria shifted from one foot to the other. “What,” she murmured.

“Shit!” Denise gasped. She spun from the window to the front door, hauled sideways at the knob, and finally tore it open. She stood in the doorway, gripping the jamb with one hand, and then she shouted at Maria, “Call nine one one! Tell them...” She took a few steps

out, and then she ran back to the door. “Tell them someone, tell them a kid, tell them a *kid* got shot!” She disappeared.

“Denise, wait!” Maria shouted. She ran to the open door. Denise was sprinting across the street. “Where the fuck are you *going*?” Maria screamed.

She turned back to the room and again to the door, spinning in a complete circle, maybe two. “Shit!” she spat. She ran to the kitchen counter, but the base for the phone was empty, so she staggered back to the living room and dug between the brown sofa cushions. She yanked the phone free, turned it on, pulled its antenna out, pressed some numbers until the operator responded, until the operator spoke to her, and she said something back, some things, and then she left the phone on the coffee table, maybe it was still on and the operator was still on it, and she ran out the still-open door and into the yard.

Across the street, on the porch of one of the houses, Denise was on her knees, bent. Three people were clustered around her. One woman wailed, collapsing into the arms of another, who struggled to stand, and the third person, a man, stood to one side, shaking his head. His hands moved from his hips to his face and back to his hips.

Maria sprinted across the road. She stopped at the front steps.

Denise was still bending to the porch. Then she rose on her knees, looking down. Her shirt, mouth, and hands were splotchy, red. She sobbed, and then she sat back, falling and catching herself on one hand, her legs splayed to the side. When she lifted her hand from the porch, a red patch shaped like a piece of torn orange peel was left on the silver- gray wood.

Before her, two feet away, unmoving, a little boy lay. His eyes were open. He had short brown hair.

Sirens sounded from different directions, off in the unseen streets.

Denise looked at Maria. The red smear drifted from her mouth down her face, lightening as it neared her chin, leaving pale skin exposed. She shook her head. “I didn’t—” she said. “He—”

The woman who was holding the crying woman let her knees slowly buckle, and they both sank, wrestling into each other. She buried her face in the crying woman’s neck. “Tom-*mee*,” the crying woman moaned.

“Where in the *fuck* are they?” the man asked. “I can hear the fuckers. Why can’t they find us?” Behind him, the front door creaked open a few inches. The man snapped his fingers at it. “In!” he grunted, and the door bumped shut.

Denise kept shaking her head, looking at the meager body. “He’s—” she said.

Lights flared at the end of the street, paused, pulsed for a long second, and then turned and roared toward them. The ambulance stopped, rocking slightly, in front of the house, and with a pop its siren lapsed.

“Come on!” Maria called to Denise from the bathroom, wringing the clean rag over the sink. Water beaded and zigzagged in lightning trails to the drain. “Denise, come *here!*”

“No,” Denise said, her voice barely making the journey from the living room to Maria. “No. I’m—I’m here.”

“Well,” Maria said. She grabbed another rag from the shelf, held it under the spout of the faucet, and wrung it loosely out. She took both rags to the living room and sat on the sofa next to Denise. “But you’re going to have to take a shower. And then we should—tomorrow we should call the doctor, probably.”

“I don’t know.”

Maria frowned and pressed one of the rags against the dark red, browning patches of blood near Denise’s mouth. She counted to thirty. Then she pulled the rag from Denise’s face, folded it, and used the clean side to wipe the loosened smears from Denise’s skin.

“This isn’t going to be enough,” she said. “Okay for now, for a little while, but seriously, hon—you’re going to have to have a real wash. A shower.”

Denise shook her head and waved her hand, tracking a fly that wasn’t there. “I don’t—later.”

“Okay, later. But tonight.”

Denise shrugged.

Maria dropped the marked rag on the coffee table, opened the other one, and began pressing it against Denise’s fingers, loosening dried blood and wiping it away.

“It felt like he was getting lighter,” Denise said. “I don’t think I really could have felt that, any difference, but it did. It felt like that.”



Maria pressed her lips together, cleaning another finger. Then she asked, “How do you mean?”

“I mean, I moved him a couple of times, just a little, to get at him for the mouth-to-mouth and the chest, the compressions, I just lifted him a little and put him back down, maybe two, three times, but each time I did, he felt lighter to me. Could that be true?”

Maria, cleaning, said, “I don’t know.”

“Red and white cells, platelets, hemoglobin. Other stuff. I can’t. Water, sure. Oh, blood gases, nitrogen and, right? But that wouldn’t.”

“Hon.”

“He *was* losing blood, but the question is, could *I* have felt that, felt the difference? Could it have, you know, lightened him enough for *me* to feel it? Such a small?”

Maria dropped the second rag next to the first. She held Denise’s clean hand in both of her own. Then she lowered the slack hand carefully to Denise’s lap.

She went back to the bathroom, took a rag from the shelf, and grabbed another, just in case. She ran cold water over both and wrung them out together over the sink, and then she went back to the living room.

“Maybe you should think of something else for a little bit,” she said as she sat next to Denise. She separated the two clean rags and draped one over the armrest of the sofa. “Tell me more about the show, about the guy who wants to show your stuff.” She lifted Denise’s left, still-stained hand.

“Huhm,” Denise groaned. “The guy, this guy, knows Gabe, through something, some work thing, Gabe’s internship, some hospital party thing at the museum. And Gabe, he took all those pictures that day. And that’s how.”

Gently rubbing Denise’s fingers in the loose, wet skin of the rag, Maria asked, “So Gabe showed someone pictures of your stuff, someone he met at the hospital benefit at the museum that night, and that’s how the guy got interested and knew how to contact you?”

Denise nodded.

“Well, that’s great, babe. I’m sorry I was such an asshole before, so snotty. That’s a real thing.”

“Right,” Denise whimpered. She looked out the window, into the tree limbs on the

other side of the glass, trying to see through to the house across the street.

Years before, when she was about thirteen, Maria had practiced reading other people's thoughts, making predictions, guessing what her mother and sister and schoolmates would do each week and recording them in a purple notebook so that she could test them, so that she could track how clearly she was able to see into another mind.

Now she wondered how she could ever have wished for such a thing to be possible.

For the past two months she had been pondering ways to break up with Denise. If Denise could tell, if she ever knew what Maria had been planning. Jesus. How could she have ever considered that, how could she have made plans to break up with *this* person?

This person who ran out and threw herself onto a little bloody boy, doing whatever she could.

While she, Maria, the responsible one, the supposedly whatever one, hovered on the other side of the doorway, screaming at Denise to come back—basically, telling her to let the boy die without even trying a thing.

That was the kind of person Denise was, the kind who leapt in. And that was the kind of person *she* was. The kind who watched. Avoided.

And she had been trying to make Denise more like her. More like this nothing, who just stood by.

And she had just been insulting her, belittling things she made.

She was going to break up with Denise? Denise should break up with *her*. And the truth was, after all this, she probably would. Denise probably would.

She would be right to do it.

God.

Maria noticed the darker line weaving along the brown edges of Denise's hair, a burnt umber thread that kept breaking as the curls pulled away from each other.

She released Denise's fingers and dropped the third cloth, letting it crumple in streaks of red and pink on the coffee table, a torn strip of some unknown and unidentifiable organ. And then she lifted the last clean rag and began gently rubbing Denise's hair, removing as much of the last two hours from it as she could. Denise didn't move. Maria focused on that:

she was trying to help, and Denise was letting her. For all she knew, this might be the last night. But for now, she was cleaning Denise's hair. And Denise was letting her do that, at least.

**Wayne McCray**  
**My Unforgiving Mother**

**H**eaded home, senior high school's out. June felt like July. Scorching hot and rising. Mr. Softee took up his daily post, parked on the corner of Augustus and Jackson, two blocks away. People of all colors and dimensions huddled at the side window of the white and blue truck as it dispensed cone after cone of soft swirled ice cream. Today, I didn't stop. I opted for a three-flavored snow cone instead, which meant walking another four city blocks to the Ice Man's—a nickname given to the neighborhood corner store.

Inside, the Ice Man's brimmed as busy as the ice cream truck. But unlike it, the corner store offered central air which blew cold. When my turn to order came, I didn't bother with the menu board. Nor did I hold up the line with indecision. I knew what I wanted. One large Purple People Eater: bubble gum grape, candy blueberry and red raspberry. I paid for it and then left out with a 16-ounce foam Dixie Cup of flavored shaved ice. The frozen treat made walking the remaining distance home tolerable.

Arriving at home I found, as always, my mother sitting on the shaded front porch in her wicker patio chair, legs crossed, and the Bible in her lap. I didn't hear any humming, something she did often after reading the scriptures. Then, I saw at her feet a half-empty fifth of Old Charter, two balled up packs of Camel cigarettes, and an ashtray full of smashed butts. I also noticed her face, her eyes open, but looking dead, staring into infinity. As I stood there her eyes didn't follow. I became scared. Morbid ideas floated about. To confirm them, I reached out and touched her arm.

"Mama? Mama!"

She tensed up. Her head suddenly jerked back. Those brown eyes became alert, looking at my face sharply.

"Boy! Where did you come from?" Mama said, "Don't scare me like that," slapping my hand. "And why are your lips blue?"

"It's from a snow cone," I said. "But are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Now move," she said. "Move I said!"

And I did. Mama closed her Bible and took hold of the armrest. I tried to help, but she refused. She then paused, removed a brown envelope from the Bible and held it out.

"Take this," she said.

"What's this?"

Mama didn't say anything. She knelt down, picked up her things, and then went inside. The door slammed shut. I looked at the letter and noticed the dated postmark.

"No way!" I said, recognizing the sender's name.

Enclosed, two crinkled letters. Within the folded papers I found photo booth pictures of a smiling baby and two familiar faces. I sat down instantly on the top step, unburdened my book bag, and began reading. His words focused on the past and present. About the obvious, he remained unapologetic but loving, and ended it with the hint of a possible homecoming.

"This explains it," I said. The alcohol. The Bible. The smoking.

I ran inside and found her in the kitchen, putting the whiskey back into the top cabinet.

"Mama?" I said. "This letter is four months old."

"And?" lighting another cigarette.

"So why am I finding this out now?"

"Does it matter?"

"Does it matter?" I said. "Of course it matters."

"If you say so."

"I do say so."

"Really?" Mama said, "And who are you?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I hope not, but they'll be here today."

"Really! You don't seem too happy about it."

"Should I?"

"Mama? Come on now," I said. "Let it go already. It's over and done with. He's your son."

"I have a son."

"You do, but I have a brother."

"Keep thinking that."

\*

Nine years ago, Mama put out her firstborn son, my older brother, Miles. His wrongful action? He went too far. Miles defiled her house by 'playing house' with the girl in the photo, Peola. Mama never allowed him to defend his actions. She didn't believe in dialogue, not one between adult and child. Being old school, she didn't recognize children as anything other than children. They must listen and do and never backtalk, disobey, or show-up any adult. To do otherwise held repercussions. Sometimes verbally, if not physically. In short, inside her house, there is only her worldview, her rules, her voice. She is The God. Accept it, or get the fuck out.

Living under such a parenting style became taxing. Having a mother so thoroughly influenced by those unforgotten generations enabled her to treat her own flesh and blood as disposable and do it without much forethought. I remember a few unnecessary whoopings and the words behind them. She often said: "This hurts me more than you. Or, this is for your own good." And on and on.

But then Miles went and did what he did. I, myself, lacked his bravery. However, I understood why. Peola came to him in a bind. Miles cared about her a lot. Even though Mama disapproved, he felt obligated. So it made sense why it turned out how it did. I mean, Peola and Miles have been together since forever—before I ever came along.

Mama held misgivings early on about their friendship. She cynically assumed Miles' fixation on Peola came from his fondness of white beauty and what it represented, but not the actual person and their common interest. In her mind, white-looking black girls passed through life recklessly. She knew of others while growing up who became silly, promiscuous, and damaged after puberty hit.

Personally, I saw her as one plain looking, below-short, chubby, hazel eyed, straight dark haired, black girl of mixed ancestry. And in ten years of knowing her, she changed very little. Peola still looked ordinary, near-white, maybe a few inches taller than five feet two, plump but a bit more curvy and proportional, with ridiculously long hair often kept in fancy buns.

Whereas Miles became darker, lankier, and strappier, with massive square hands, and big feet. Although his physique filled out, he never grew any facial hair, something Peola loved. She enjoyed caressing and kissing his square indigo face since childhood. Even Miles hairstyle remained the same: a classic buzz cut.

Perhaps Mama lost it and flashed back when she looked out the living room window, onto the front porch, and saw Peola get up and straddle Miles' lap. She gave him a bunch of excited head nods, followed by a wide grin and, one indulgent kiss and lengthy hug.

"Hey! Hey!" Mama said, rushing out the front door and toward them both. "Get off of him like that."

"Hey, Ms. Ivory," Peola said. "Guess what?"

"Get off of him, I said."

"We weren't doing anything."

"Oh, yes you were," Mama said. "Dry humping, that's what."

"What?" Peola said. "Ms. Ivory, what are you talking about?"

"Don't pretend," said Mama. "I know you feel it? The white part of you coming out, overtaking everything else."

"Mama?" Miles said, as Peola stood up. "What's wrong with you? It's not what you think."

"I know you're not talking," said Mama. "As for you, take your half-white ass home and don't come back. I figured this might happen. Now, go on. Go home."

"Mama? What the —?" Miles said.

"Shut it!" said Mama. "Say something else."

Miles rose tall, silent but irritated. He looked down on his mother. Peola slowly distanced herself. She went across the street and stood there. Up went her left hand, displaying the ring. A blown kiss followed along with goodbye wave. She then ran down the block a ways and stopped.

"MILES! I LOVE YOU!"

"THE HELL YOU DO," said Mama. "JUST DON'T COME BACK!"

"Ma?" Miles said.

"WHAT!"

"That's my girlfriend."

Mama slapped him.

"Since when?" Mama said, "And you're still talking."

Miles didn't respond. Instead, he stormed indoors. Mama pursued him and then proceeded to remove the extra telephones. She forbade him from calling her and using the phone in general. This left Miles in a foul mood which worsened whenever the phone rang. And after repeated attempts, Peola realized our Mama didn't play. Miles became unavailable.

To get around this, Miles and Peola used high school to stay in contact and spend quality time together. Mama interfered there as well. She transferred Miles, and myself, into an all-black Catholic school for boys. Her thinking: to put a death nail to their relationship it required an Afrocentric atmosphere, a much longer school day, and a strict religious education.

But it didn't. They didn't grow distant but fonder. So my mother resorted to petty forms of discipline: house arrest, making him get a part-time job, and doing community service. She reached for whatever she deemed necessary to prevent him from seeing Peola. And in spite of these drastic measures, they still met clandestinely wherever and whenever possible.

Then late one night Peola arrived at his bedroom window, tapping on the glass with his class ring on her left index finger. Her face rosy and wet from tears. I didn't know what to think; except, it took her a lot of nerve. And I do mean a lot of nerve to show up at our house after being threatened to never come back.

"You climbed the fence?" Miles asked.

"Sure did," Peola said. "I waited until your mom left for work."

"Miles? If Mama finds out she's here," I said. "She'll kill us."

"Not us, me," Miles said. "So let's get it right, alright."

"I'm just saying," I said. "You know how she gets."

"I know, I know."

The trouble Peola tried so hard to put up with at home soon reached its tipping point. Home became unsafe. Moreover, Miles felt he owed her after what transpired on the porch



a while back. So he invited her to spend the night, but stressing they must leave together at 6 a.m., for school, and ahead of his mother's arrival.

My brother and I soon learned why she arrived at his window. Peola's mother, Josephine Martin-Beauvais, started dating seriously three years after her husband's death. Her father, Russell Beauvais, a third generation Mohawk and cloudwalker, died when the bridge he worked on suddenly collapsed. Killing him and many others.

Even after death, Russell took care of the home and family. Somehow, he left behind enough cash for them to survive and move forward. Financially stable, his death regrettably failed to unite mother and daughter. Just the opposite. Their relationship grew distant. Peola later learned his loss affected her mother greatly.

Josephine grieved. Often felt lonely. Angry. Even with Peola nearby, her daughter's support didn't satisfy. She missed male contact. Enter one Mr. Richard P. Johnson, a fellow co-worker and substitute lover. A man Peola never liked whenever he visited. Even so, her mother became so fixated on this guy and in time he came to live with them.

Peola ultimately suffered. She felt unsafe around him and relayed her fears: like how he looked at her body hungrily. Josephine found this amusing, but not Peola. Not at all and with reason. Many nights ago, Josephine and Richard celebrated her mother's promotion with binge drinking and debauchery. Josephine became the next overnight shift supervisor, which came with a raise, but also longer hours.

One night, Josephine laid in bed unresponsive. Richard snuck into Peola's bedroom drunk, horny, and naked from the waist down. He hoped to find her in bed fast asleep. Instead, a small baseball bat awaited him. She didn't target his head, but his midsection. Peola hit his nuts hard enough to face-plant him into a fetal position. She regrets not smashing him.

From then on, Peola kept her distance. Especially so with her mother's late work hours. Every night, she locked the door. Then barricaded herself in her own bedroom by sliding furniture in front of it. The floor became her bed and the corner wall the headboard. She always faced the door. Ready to repel him with the 225 Little League Louisville Slugger she held in her lap.

For one month, she coped with this misery. Peola seldom went home early from school. One day she chose to skip the library. Mom wasn't home. Richard neither. Now while there she found her bedroom door gone and left immediately. Peola rode the city bus and subway until 10 p.m., thinking about her options. Then, she came straight to our house.

Miles gave up his bed and made a pallet on the floor. They talked well into the night, but soon she fell asleep, and slept soundly for once. Miles didn't sleep at all, but laid awake. And at 4:30 a.m., he woke Peola. She showered, ate breakfast, and got dressed. When I got up I saw Peola dressed in Miles' old high school sweatpants, t-shirt, and hoodie. She kissed him goodbye on the cheek and exited how she came. Peola later met us at the bus stop and rode along to the Catholic school.

I kept their indiscretion a secret. Soon thereafter, one sleepover became many. Peola slept at our place on days when our mother worked and only at home when hers didn't. This arrangement continued for months. Then, one night, instead of their usual fun and talk, she urged Miles to get off the floor and sleep in his bed. Soon thereafter, I felt the wall we shared shake and at the same time some low guttural moans and groans.

"Oh lord...stop...please stop." Peola said, panting.

"What?" said Miles, also breathing heavily.

"Wesley might wake up."

"Okay," said Miles. "So what do you want to do?"

The tremors returned. Moans too. From then on, they fucked nightly. I laid there in bed annoyed with a pillow over my head, waiting on them to finish, and go to sleep. Surprisingly, neither of them overslept. Not once. Plus, she always met us at the bus stop to ride along.

\*

Mama held suspicious. No dirty laundry. Not really. House in order. Groceries disappearing fast. Too fast for her, even with two growing boys. Even the refrigerator changed. It kept less fried and more baked foods. Leftovers became new dishes. Everything suggested another hand at work. Mama considered Miles too much of a novice in the kitchen and both of us quite anathemic to housework.

On a Wednesday night, she found out. While love-making music played, I heard a different kind of thump and not from the wall. I sat up fast. "Is that Mama?" Those angry recognizable footsteps said as much. "Yeah, it's Mama." She strode past my bedroom for Miles'. I jumped out of bed and looked down the hallway.

Her abrupt entrance startled the lovebirds. Mama caught them in the act. She looked for something to grab, the telephone line sufficed. Soon a plastic cord cut through the air and landed on naked flesh. Miles' hung penis ultimately went flaccid. Peola breasts and ass danced from side-to-side on the bed, to avoid being cornered, and getting hit. Despite all the pandemonium, my brother responded chivalrously.

Naked, she ran into the hallway unsure of what to do next. Meanwhile, he scooped up and tossed Peola her clothes, panties, and sneakers. Miles did this while his glistening dark skin felt every lash meted out. Peola, in tears, looked on, but got dressed. "Go!" He said, "Get out of here." Reluctant, she ran off while he braced himself in the doorway, obstructing his mother from giving chase. Then she realized: she really wanted her son. So her arm never tired. Her anger showed. Particularly at his refusal to cry out.

Mama didn't let up. These lashes forced him onto one knee. Yet, Miles spared Peola our mother's wrath. His back paid for it, though. I ran up and interceded, asking for mercy. She simply stared. Next thing I knew, I felt those same blows and quickly moved out of harm's way. Once the front door opened and closed, Miles stood upright and faced Mama. He took hold of her wrists.

"Mama! Enough already!" Miles said.

"Don't tell me when to stop," trying to break free.

"Stop," Miles said. "She's gone, alright."

"But you're not," said Mama. "The only fucking taking place in this house is when I do it and I don't."

"But Ma? Her stepdad is a —."

"That's not my problem. It's hers and this ain't your house. Is it?"

"No it's not," Miles said. "But still."

"Still, nothing."

Mama kept struggling, kicking, trying to free herself. Miles released her. He then reached for his clothes.

"Those aren't yours. I paid for them."

"Peola is outside."

"If that's how you feel," Mama said. "You better go as is or not at all."

Miles sorted through the dirty clothes hamper. He put on a pair of funky black low cut socks, a pair of crinkly navy blue basketball trunks, a dingy gray customized t-shirt, and slipped into a pair of sandals. Items he purchased. He then removed the bottom dresser drawer, reached inside, and withdrew a purple Crown Royal bag. I knew it contained money. Miles now looked at his mother blocking the doorway.

"Move," Miles said. "I'm out and take this."

He snatched off his neck the St. Christopher's chain she gifted him and tossed it at her feet.

"Step aside," said Miles.

"Pick it up," she said. "I said pick it up, goddamnit."

"No! That's yours," Miles said, "You pick it up."

Enraged, she lunged at him. Miles dodged this blow, then nudged her. She lost her balance and landed ungracefully on the floor. Miles left without any concern. She discarded the makeshift whip, crawled over and picked up the gold chain off the carpet. Once upright, she went into her bedroom, cursing obscenities the entire time. She suddenly emerged holding a shiny revolver and gave chase.

"Mama!" I said. "What are you doing?"

She turned and put the handgun right into my chest.

"I brought you into this world, I'll take you out of it," she said. The front door opened and shut. "Never side against your mother, ever again! Do you understand?"

I nodded.

Surprisingly, Peola didn't leave. She sat on the curb facing the bungalow. When Miles exited, she stood up and leapt with joy. Right there, in the street, they both met and embraced. Miles winced a bit. He then suggested they go and go fast. Neither looked back,

but hurried off, utilizing a shortcut between two houses. By the time Mama stood on the front porch, they disappeared into darkness.

"Don't come back! Do you hear me? Don't come back!"

I remember it like yesterday.

\*

"He'll be here when?" I asked.

"In another hour, maybe less."

"So what're you going to do?"

She exhaled a plume of smoke and sat there.

"Ma? I'm trying to talk to you."

"Then talk."

"You act as if you don't want to see him."

"I do?"

"That's not the impression I'm getting."

A car horn blew twice. I ran upfront and looked out the living room window. "It's them," I said. "There's a taxi outside." Soon one charcoal giant exited, shouldering a backpack. Behind him, a short nearly white female. In her arms, she cradled a child. I ran outside to greet them and almost tackled my brother, clutching him so firmly he grunted. Meanwhile, the cab driver retrieved the baby stroller stored in the trunk.

"Miles? Man, I missed you so much."

"Same here, little brother," Miles said. He pulled Wesley closer then pushed him back.

"I like those lips. Snow cone, I bet?"

"Purple People Eater," I said.

"16-ounce," Miles said, "from Mr. Gervin's."

"Of course."

"Sir, Here you are," said the cab driver. Giving Miles the stroller.

"Thanks," said Miles. "Take care."

"You too, sir."

The cab driver closed the trunk, got behind the wheel, and slowly drove off.

Miles said: "So how are you holding up?"

"I'm alright," I said. "More importantly, I graduate this Friday."

"I know," said Miles. "That's why I'm here. The letters I sent said as much."

"Letters?"

"Every month," Miles said.

"Seriously!"

"You didn't get them?"

"Not until today and a four-month old one at that."

"Mama!"

"Hello Wesley," Peola said.

"I'm sorry." I said. "Wow! Look at you." Warm hugs followed. "When did you get so fine?"

Peola smiled and blushed.

"Don't play," Miles said. "I saw you looking at her when Mama got after us."

I simply smiled: "There wasn't much to look at."

"Yeah, right. So where's Mama?"

"Inside," I said. "Say? This is it? Where're your bags?"

"Still at the hotel," Peola said.

"Why?"

"We only came for your graduation," Peola said. "Parents were optional."

"Really, it's like that."

"Yep," Peola said. "I left on bad terms, too."

"Yeah, I know. I know," I said. "Guess what? I got accepted into college."

Miles said: "Sweet!"

"Where?" Peola said.

"Lutheran University," I said.

"Isn't that somewhere on the east coast?" Peola said.

"Sure is," I said.

"Smart move," said Miles.

"Enough standing here," I said. "Let's go inside."

Suddenly, Peola's hazel eyes widened with alarm and fear. She held her baby tight and ran across the street. Miles looked at his running wife. I instead spun around and saw Mama there on the porch, a nine year old scowl on her face. Along with a raised shiny revolver in one hand. Her other hand, a closed fist.

"Mama!" I yelled, "No!"

Gunshots rang. Buzzes and ricochets followed. Peola and her child, the people walking, screamed, and sought safety behind anything bullet proof. Not me. I shielded my brother. Both of us landed onto the asphalt road. Moments later, a dark shadow stretched across us. I noticed blood. Then I felt it. My shoulder burned. Miles! Are you alright?"

"Yeah...I think so."

The bullet grazed his smooth face. Across his right cheek. He sat up then looked past me. I turned and there stood Mama, the revolver aiming. Her fisted left hand tossed the St. Christopher's chain at him.

Mama said: "Go on Miles, pick it up."

"You haven't changed." Miles said, "Not one bit."

"Not at all," said Mama. "Now pick it up."

"No," he said.

"Move aside Wesley," she said. "I said: Move!"

"No!"

"No?"

Click, click, click followed. Frustrated, she headed for the house. Most likely to reload.

**John Mummert**  
**Six Hundred Feet**

**Friday Night**

**E**laine had talked me into going to the game to see her nephew play even though he hardly ever does. Mostly he sits on the bench, collecting splinters in his behind as Elaine would say, unless we're way ahead or way behind. Eddie was working the last shift before Christmas shut-down, and wouldn't be home until near midnight. Raymond—that's Elaine's husband—was working late at the store what with Christmas being only three days away. So me and Elaine went to cheer on our varsity.

We were up by four with a couple minutes to go in the first half. Elaine's nephew had his usual seat at the end of the bench. The crowd was loud, the game being against a big conference rival. We take our basketball serious around these parts. When one of our boys lost the ball out of bounds, the PA announcer took advantage of the referee's whistle and the quiet groan from us fans, and asked if Dr. Allard might be in the gym, and would he please report to the scorers table right away.

It got kinda quiet as the doctor made his way out of the bleachers. Then it got real quiet when the announcer asked if Perry Hier might be in the gym, and would he please also come to the scorers table. Even those cheering for the other side sensed something was amiss.

Those closest to the scorers table heard the principal say something to Dr. Allard about the mine, and that run through the crowd in no time at all. Curtis Allard's been the doctor out at No. 2 since before the war. Perry Hier is a first-shift foremen at the same mine, but it turned out he wasn't at the game. Dr. Allard raced for the door. I bet close to half of us got up and followed, pulling on our coats as we stumbled down the bleachers. There's boys on the team with daddies and brothers in that mine. No telling what was going through their minds. I suppose they finished the game. I don't know who won.

Outside, we could hear the alarm shrieking in the distance—the mine's out the north edge of town—slicing through the cold and the dark, peeling the skin along my spine. Car



tires crunched across the cold parking lot gravel. Elaine steered her '47 Studebaker coupe north a few blocks to avoid traffic through the center of town, then headed west through the back streets toward the state highway. A mix of rain and snow spit on the windshield. Neither of us spoke.

The moon was a bit past half, but it was dark enough to see red emergency lights flashing against the night sky by the time we crossed the railroad tracks. Police and fire truck sirens screamed from every direction. When we reached the highway, cars were backed up from the direction of the mine. Elaine nosed the Studebaker into the slowed traffic, shot across the highway, and raced north on another side street. That woman could drive stock cars if they'd let her.

Elaine slid into a spot on the back side of the Little Egypt Motor Lodge. Folks was standing outside their rooms, watching a quarter-mile or so northwest to where what looked to be smoke spiraled from the mine. Me and Elaine took off on foot up the highway alongside lots of other folks, past cars pulled off to the side. We reached the main mine entrance, but couldn't go no farther on account the gate was blocked by a sheriff's car. A state trooper who looked hardly old enough to be such stood on the highway waving traffic past. Police cars and ambulances, some from nearby towns, was pulling in, only them and mine company people and such being let through the gate. I reckon Dr. Allard and Perry Hier—if they'd run Perry down yet—didn't have no trouble getting in. A few people tried to follow the railroad spur into the mine property, which no one is supposed to do, but the gate there was chained shut.

A rumpled deputy sheriff who looked like he just woke up was out front with a bullhorn telling us all to keep calm. "Won't do nobody any good to panic," he was saying. He got a few smart-aleck comments thrown his way, which I didn't think there was any call for, but I suppose folks was scared. Denis Jankovic, one of our city policemen, was also at the gate, talking to folks in the crowd—he knows most of us—and trying to calm everyone down. Denis joined the police force a couple years ago after he got out of the Army where he was an MP over in Germany. I should say West Germany, being as that's what it is now.

All we could do was stand and wait, pace and smoke a cigarette, try not to think on

things too much. After about an hour, though it felt as if half the night had passed, the deputy with the bullhorn asked us to listen up, then said there'd been some kind of accident. That's what he said, but we all knew he meant an explosion. They didn't know yet if anybody'd been hurt. Miners who'd been closest to the main shaft had already come up, and some others were waiting their turns at the cage. The deputy said they'd be sending rescue crews down quick as they could, which caused quite a stir since that meant men might be hurt, or leastways trapped.

After another half-hour or so, which also felt like about half the night now that we knew there'd been an explosion, somebody decided to let us inside the gate. A few folks had tried to climb the fence, and I reckon they decided letting us in might calm everybody down. The deputy said we'd have to stay off the entrance road so the rescue folks could get through, but we could wait on the grounds around the office and the main engine building. They opened the gate and a sudden rush of people tried to get through all at once, bunched up like a kink in a garden hose, but there wasn't much pushing or shoving. We all spread out once we got inside, and scurried across the snow and ice the couple hundred yards to the office.

Police and mine people was rushing in and out of the engine building, and to and from No. 4 portal—that's the main entry shaft what sits farther back, where we weren't allowed.

Things calmed down some as everybody got wore out with worry and dread. It was quiet except for muffled sobs from some of the women, and from children old enough to understand their daddies might be in trouble. Everybody stood staring back toward No. 4.

The cage finally come up again sometime after ten o'clock. We had quite a shock when it opened and black smoke come pouring out. But then we saw some of the miners, and everybody got excited, especially when somebody saw their husband or son or father or brother was safe.

Those men was awful happy to be up top, but I reckon most was about as scared as a cow led down the chute to slaughter. Their eyes was wide, staring out of faces caked black with coal dust.

Coughing on account of the gas and the dust. They hugged their wives and kids, and their voices shook as they told how the whole mine roared and shook, dust blowing like a

tornado, chunks of rock falling from the ceiling. Heavy machinery, even railroad cars, thrown about like toys. The main lights flickering, then going out. Pitch black six hundred feet underground except for the battery lamps on their helmets.

We've been here ever since. Waiting. I have to be here when Eddie comes out.

## **Saturday**

Just over a hundred got out safe last night. Some come up No. 4 portal and other shafts where the cages still worked. Some climbed the stairway in the ventilation shaft—six hundred feet straight up.

“How long's that climb take?” someone asked. Nobody answered. Reckon nobody knew.

Most of those who got out are still here, waiting with the rest of us. Because a hundred and twelve are still trapped below. One of the men who come up first said something about seeing bodies thrown about, all burned and torn. Another miner shushed him quick like, but we'd heard him.

The explosion knocked out the ventilation fans, and it took most of the night to get them started again. It was well after midnight before the first rescue crews entered the mine to begin searching the miles and miles of tunnel, toting heavy oxygen tanks on their backs, and lugging shovels, picks, and wrenches to clear rubble and shattered machinery. Unable to stay down too long at a stretch on account of the gas. They all had to come up mid-morning when there was another problem with the ventilation.

“It's all blown to hell down there,” one said.

They been bringing bodies out since six o'clock this morning. Twenty-eight so far. A steady drone of engines and the grind of tires on the mine road follow ambulances in and out. There's hearses from funeral homes too, on account there aren't enough ambulances.

The crowd grew throughout the night. Families and friends and neighbors cluster together, vacant stares of despair in their eyes, wiping at tears that flow when it all gets to be too much. People are wrapped in blankets and scarves against the cold wind.

Some wait near the main gate, fearful of coming closer, fearful of the worst. It's so quiet. Little of the panic and crying of last night, all now settled into fear.

The misting rain is doing its best to turn to snow. We wait, stare back toward No. 4 shaft, pace because it's so hard to stand still, smoke one cigarette after another to keep our nerves from fraying further. A shiver passes through the crowd every time the bell sounds to signal the cage is on its way up. A crippled dog—something's wrong with one of his back legs—is nosing about for attention, begging for scraps, but everybody's too preoccupied to pay him any mind.

I haven't shed any tears. Because I know this: Edward Hermann Messerli, Sr. is alive. There's not a single doubt in my body.

I don't know what I'd do without Elaine being here. She's my best friend despite me being almost eight years older. We worked together six years at the Ben Franklin. Howard, her first husband, got killed at Salerno during the war. There was some bitterness in her face when she saw me and Eddie at Howard's funeral. But I don't know I could've expected her to be happy for me that day, knowing Eddie was safe and Howard would never come home. Eddie didn't get drafted on account he was older and had a family, and 'cause coal mining was considered a vital occupation.

Elaine married Raymond about two years ago after he moved down from Alton to manage the P.N. Hirsch store. Raymond's real quiet though I think he determined to marry Elaine the first time he laid eyes on her. He weren't the only one with such intent, but turned out he's the only one had a chance. Her and Raymond are good together. She's the old Elaine again, not the crushed and empty Elaine she was after Howard was killed.

Edward Jr.—me and Eddie's boy—can't be here. He's in the Navy, on what they call a dock landing ship, shuttling troops and supplies from Japan to Korea where the fighting never seems to end. Me and Eddie met a man at the lumber yard a few months back who lost his boy— a Marine—over there at Chosin.

Edward Jr. talked about joining the Marines, which I wasn't none too happy about. Me and Eddie had a fight over it.

"He's eighteen, Jeanne, old enough to make his own decision."

"Marines go in first. Look how many got killed taking those islands in the Pacific."

“There’s things go wrong on ships too,” Eddie said. “Always a risk. Unless they stick him behind a desk somewheres.”

“I don’t like knowing he might get sent someplace dangerous. He could get killed.” Well, that was a dumb thing to say.

“You mean someplace like digging coal six hundred feet underground?” Eddie said.

“Where every day you gotta wonder if there might be a cave-in or an explosion?”

That shut me up quick like, some ‘cause he had a point and some ‘cause I didn’t have a good comeback, which I suppose made me madder. Somewhere in my mind, I’m always worried when Eddie’s at work.

“Navy or Marines, he might have a better future than following me into the mines,” Eddie said. “Or in some other piddly job he might find around here.”

Edward Jr’s letters sound like he’s happy. I’m glad that Navy recruiter was more convincing than the Marine fella.

\*

Some things ought never be. They’re using the high school gym as a morgue. There was boys playing basketball on that floor last night. Elaine’s just come back from there. She went earlier this afternoon to help get Inez Franklin home. Inez collapsed when she found her husband and her boy was both dead.

“They’re using brattice cloth,” Elaine said. “To lay them on, and . . . you know . . . to cover them.”

Brattice cloth is what they use to direct ventilation in the mines. Elaine won’t say anything more about what she saw. Maybe it shocked her. But Elaine’s not the type to get shocked too easy. I think she’s worried I’ll start imagining Eddie laying in a row of men on the basketball court, covered with brattice cloth. I won’t because Eddie’s alive.

Charlie, my little brother, works at a mine out near Ziegler. He’s on one of the rescue teams. “I’ll find him,” he said to me before he went down the first time.

He won’t say what he’s seen down there. Might be he’s trying to keep me from imagining things too. But most of the other rescuers aren’t saying much neither. Even with oxygen tanks and masks, a lot of ‘em come up choking and coughing, the dust and gas still being so thick. It’s dangerous down there, crawling and digging through

collapsed tunnels, watching for loose rock falling from the ceiling. Dragging bodies out of the rubble.

You can't help but hear things. Some of the bodies are burned and tore up so bad they can't be identified except by pocket knives and pipes and engraved watches they might carry. I know this is true 'cause they been asking us questions, like if our husbands and brothers and fathers carry any of those things, or do they wear glasses or a ring of some sort. Are any of his teeth missing? Good Lord.

Some folks are waiting over at the gym, but most are still here at the mine, hoping their kin will come walking out, hoping the police—most often Denis Jankovic—or a relative don't come to fetch them over to the high school. Denis had to carry one poor woman to the aid station about an hour ago, on account she fainted as he approached. I reckon all this is bringing bad memories to Denis. One of his grandfathers got killed in a gas explosion down south of here when Denis was a little boy.

Earlier this morning, they told us we can wait in the wash house—where the men change clothes after their shift—to get out of the cold and the off-and-on drizzle and snow. We can wander closer to No. 4 shaft now, long as we stay off the road and don't get in the way. The cold wind is blocked some between the buildings. We wait, and stare at the cage that will bring Eddie out any time now, try to get a little warmth from the fires they got burning in barrels. People sit wherever they can, on empty crates or old pieces of machinery. That crippled dog is still here, trying to stay warm, begging scraps and a pat on his head. A flock of geese fly over on their way south, honking the way they do. Any other time, this'd make me smile. I love the sound of geese honking, which Eddie finds funny. He always grins watching me smile at geese honking.

Late afternoon, while I'm sitting on a bench and leaning against the wall in the wash house, I hear a commotion near No. 4.

"Is it true?" someone yells. "Who is it?"

"Janos Horvath," someone responds. "Found him near passed out in an air pocket. They're bringing him up in the cage."

It's been almost twenty-four hours since the explosion. And there's men still alive!

The cage bell sounds. I race from the wash house, pulling on my coat, nearly slip on a

patch of ice. Miners push the crowd back from the other side, and Janos is in the middle, covered head to toe in coal dust. Ruby—that's Janos's wife—is crying and holding onto him so tight she's covered in coal dust herself. I try to elbow my way to them, to ask Janos if he's seen Eddie, but there's too many people, all pushing and cheering and yelling questions.

"How you feeling, Janos?" "Are there others alive?"

Janos is coughing, having trouble breathing. Even though he's known a good many of us for darn near twenty years, his head jerks about like he's not sure where he is. His face says he wants to cry. "I . . . heard this sound. Like a train. Dust come blowing through the tunnel.

Support timbers . . . more'n a foot thick . . . started snapping like they was twigs. There's lots . . . all the fellas with me . . ."

Janos doubles over coughing again. He straightens and rubs a hand over his face. Now he is crying. They steer him to an ambulance that will carry him to the hospital.

We go back to waiting. I pace back and forth, sneak peeks at No. 4, but try not to stare so as not to jinx Eddie being on the cage the next time it comes up. Janos lived. Eddie is alive.

We sit in the wash house for a time to get out of the cold and the drizzle that's falling again. I wash my face—I must look like a field mouse dragged in by our neighbor's cat. We sit on the bench next to Eddie's locker where his shoes and pants and the shirt I got him for his last birthday hang inside. A little Christmas wreath hangs on the door where he's pinned a small picture of me and Edward Jr.

Elaine's brought sandwiches and coffee from the Red Cross canteen in front of the engine building. She pushes half a grilled ham and cheese into my hands.

"Jeanne, you have to eat."

"I wish Eddie would get in touch with one of the rescue crews," I tell her. "I know he got behind a barricade and found an air pocket. He's waiting to make sure it's safe. He'll come out soon as the rescuers get near."

Elaine doesn't say anything. I reckon she's worried Eddie isn't coming out. But like I say, those who survived are waiting in air pockets. Just like Janos did.

“I gave Eddie the brush-off the first time we met,” I tell Elaine, knowing she’s heard all this before, but not wanting it to be so quiet. “Thought he was kind of a galoot. Turns out he’s just shy. More afraid to talk to me than not wanting to. But we did talk, and then Edward Jr. come along, which my daddy was none too happy about with me being only seventeen, and work being so hard to find in those days, and Eddie having to support us all of a sudden. But we managed ’til he got on with the mine. Coal miner like his daddy and brother. Half his cousins. My daddy and brother. Six hundred feet underground. Six hundred damn feet.”

I don’t know how long I’ve been yapping, but I stop at the notion of just how far down six hundred feet might be. I hadn’t noticed the cold so much before, but now I’m shivering, and worrying it might get cold six hundred feet down in a coal mine in December. Which I know very well it does not, but still I hope the rescue crew has a blanket for Eddie.

“We’re going to see Rio Grande sometime next week,” I tell Elaine. “I swear, Eddie has to see every western what comes out. I wish I could’ve gotten through to Edward Jr. The Navy will get a telegram to him, but I don’t want him to worry. Maybe me and Eddie can get a call through tonight or tomorrow.”

Elaine’s been letting me go on and on. She passes me pieces of a sandwich whenever I pause, which I eat without paying much mind. “They’ll send Edward Jr. home,” she says.

I look at her and frown. “No. They’d only do that if Eddie had been killed. I wish he could come home, but as long as him and Eddie are both safe, that’s all that matters.”

## **Sunday**

Hollering outside wakes me. I reckon I dozed off last night sometime after the rain and snow turned all to snow. I look out a window, across the space between the wash house and No. 4 shaft. It’s not quite light out yet. Lanterns hang from poles, their light reflecting off the snow.

A woman is screaming at a man in a white shirt. “You knew! You all knew, and you didn’t do anything! You bastards, you let them die!”

The man scurries away. He works for the mine company. And I know this woman is



right.

I've seen the state mine inspector's notices, some going back two years, posted on the bulletin board in the wash house. Ventilation inadequate . . . excessive buildup of coal dust . . . risk of explosion. Eddie never mentioned these notices.

Recommendations of previous inspections have not been complied with. Bastards.

The crowd has grown smaller, what with the kin of those they've found getting ready for funerals. Others have gone home or over to the high school to wait. They're ones have given up hope, just waiting for a body to be found.

Anna Merrick is still here. Rhys—that's her husband—is right smart, and he's worked in the mines for a good twenty-five years. He'd have known what to do.

"I wouldn't be surprised if Rhys and Eddie are waiting together, wondering what's taking the rescue crews so long," I tell Elaine. "They'll josh Charlie, give him a hard time about that."

Later in the morning, Elaine goes to get us something to eat. She comes back with Raymond, who's brought supplies to the canteen. I can tell by the way Elaine's got her arms around Raymond, she's real glad he's not a coal miner. I'm glad too. It wouldn't be right, Elaine losing another husband. Even though I don't feel hungry, I make myself eat a fried egg sandwich. I need to stay strong for Eddie.

Raymond offers to call my mother and sister to let them know we're still waiting for news. Mama lives over in McLeansboro, but she's too laid up with arthritis and the gout to be here in the cold. My older lives up in Maywood where her husband is a foreman for the can company. I agree because I'm not feeling up to calling myself. I was sure Eddie would be out by now. Like Janos.

Charlie's come up from a shift on rescue. He slides the heavy oxygen tank off his back, and we give him some of our bacon and toasted bread. I don't much know what to say to him. Everybody he's helped bring out so far has been dead. Some of them were his friends. I can see the despair in his face. I see it in the face of everyone on the rescue crews.

Charlie looks so tired. "We'll find him, Jeanne," he tells me again. "But . . . it's been

close to two days now. I'm . . . I mean, it's possible . . . he-he might not make it, and . . ."

"He did make it!" I say in a tone I used when he hid one of my dolls or tried to squirt me with a hose when we were little. I give Charlie a look, and he drops his head. "Janos got out.

Others will too. Eddie's alive."

Charlie can tell I'm upset he'd even think such a thing. He starts to speak, but stops. He blows out a deep breath, stares at the ground. "Some of the men, they had time to write notes . . . you know, to their wives and kids. Before the gas got to them."

He tries to smile before he picks up his oxygen tank and heads for the engine room. I suppose I shouldn't have jumped on him the way I did, but he ought to know better. He ought to know Eddie is okay. I wonder if Eddie has written me a note. He's not really the note-writing type, but you never know. He can read it to me if he wants after he gets out, but I bet he'll be too embarrassed.

We wait. Pace. I stare at the shaft, watch the ambulances come in and out. Fifty-seven are dead. Newspaper and radio people are all over the place, some even from St. Louis and Chicago. The governor come down from Springfield for a couple hours this morning. The union has people here. They say John L. Lewis himself will be here tomorrow.

It stays quiet through the afternoon except for the ambulances—and a big Buick hearse—that back up to No. 4 to take more bodies to the high school. I doze in the wash house for a bit, and Elaine lets me sleep. She says I needed the rest. She wakes me when they find Rhys Merrick.

Alive.

Almost forty-two hours since the explosion. He's unconscious, but he's alive. Now I have no doubt they will find Eddie. He's alive.

There's an oxygen mask on Rhys's face, and that crippled dog is chasing behind the stretcher as they carry him to the ambulance. A while later they bring up a rescue miner who got his knee tore up when rock fell from a tunnel ceiling. That crippled dog goes chasing behind that stretcher too. Maybe that dog is Eddie's guardian angel, waiting until he's safe.

Elaine is pushing me to go home and sleep for a few hours, but I'm not about to leave

without Eddie. I can sleep a bit in the wash house whenever I get too tired to wait outside. I hope all this is over soon.

## **Monday**

It's mid-morning, as gray and overcast as it was all weekend. Even slumped against a wall I slept a good long while last night. I suppose I'm more worn out than I want to admit.

Ninety-one dead. We watch another ambulance leave the mine, turn onto the highway, drive south into town. More than ninety times so far, and I'm fully aware no more than three of those ambulances have turned right off the highway to go to the hospital. Only those carrying Janos, Rhys, and the rescue worker who got hurt. All the others, every single one, turned left off the highway.

Toward the high school.

A horn blares. "Get that damn dog out of the way!"

That crippled dog is standing in the middle of the mine road, and the ambulance can't get past. One of the miners picks up a stick and flings it at the dog. "Go on! Git!" The dog barks at the ambulance, then retreats into a field to the north.

It's just some dumb old dog, a stray, but I break down. Why can't people take care of their dogs, not let 'em run loose? They get all crippled and in the way where they might get run over by an ambulance or maybe that big ole hearse, and then there'd be a dead dog that wouldn't get taken to the high school on account it's a dog and not a miner and . . . damn dog. Dammit.

Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit!

I have to get hold of myself. I don't want Eddie finding me in such a state.

We wait. Pace some more. Stare at No. 4 shaft. I want to scream. I want to scream so bad.

Is this what madness feels like, what gets you sent to the state hospital down at Anna?

Raymond stops by on his way to a funeral. They're holding them all day, today and

tomorrow, nine o'clock in the morning going on 'til eight o'clock at night. The front page of every newspaper in the area is a list of names and funeral notices. Twenty-seven today. Forty tomorrow. More the day after that. Some are shared—father and son, or brothers, buried together. Raymond tells me Dewey McNeil's funeral is tonight at eight o'clock. And I realize today is Christmas Eve. For the first time, I feel I'm going to collapse. I was at Dewey and Loretta's wedding five years ago. On Christmas Eve. At eight o'clock in the evening. How can fate be this cruel to Loretta?

Raymond tells me my sister and her husband are on their way down from Maywood. They left this morning. I hate for them to rush down here, but I guess it will make Eddie feel good they were so worried. We can all spend Christmas with Mama this year.

Mama told Raymond she's afraid for me, and that I can come stay with her. Don't know why I'd need to do that. "Tell her I'll be all sorted out soon as I see Eddie," I say.

We wait.

A big ole Chrysler ambulance backs up to No. 4, and like all the other times, a bunch of miners gather around so nobody can get past. It's early afternoon. Elaine's pouring more coffee down me, and trying to get me to eat another sandwich. I appreciate the food much, but I'm sick of these sandwiches. I imagine Eddie must be awful hungry. And thirsty. I wish I'd put another sandwich in his dinner pail before he went to work. Bet he'd give a week's pay for this baloney.

A funeral procession passes along the highway outside the mine, on the way to a cemetery north of town. At least the fourth I've seen today. Maybe an hour later, there's another. Then another.

Then another. I know there's others headed south. East. West.

Christmas Eve. I hope I can give Eddie his present tonight. I wander back into the wash house, and I find the Christmas wreath has been knocked off Eddie's locker. Someone has stepped on it, and the picture of me and Edward Jr. is torn. I'm crying now, which I don't understand. It's just a silly wreath knocked down in the commotion of so many people coming in and out of here the last couple days. Elaine puts her arms around me and tells me it's okay, it's my nerves getting to me what with all the waiting. She leads me back

outside to get some air.

We wait and pace. I need a cigarette. I'm out of my Viceroy's and I bummed Elaine's last Parliament an hour ago. Eddie must be coming up soon. They've found most all the others. I want to be here when he steps out of the cage. I want him to know I never gave up, not for a second. I've been right here all along, waiting to throw my arms around him. Edward Hermann Messerli, Sr., standing right here, in the flesh, covered in coal dust, that shy grin on his face.

Probably ask me, "How come you stayed out here in the cold like this?" That'd be like him, not wanting a fuss made. I expect I'll break down and cry like a big baby, but I won't care.

Hardly any of us still here. I'm feeling lost. I turn around, so as not to jinx the cage by staring, and to look for Elaine, who's gone to the aid station to ask again if there's any news. She's standing halfway between me and the engine building, talking with Denis Jankovic. They walk toward the shaft. Denis stops a few yards away, hands on his hips. He bites his lip, stares at the ground. He looks tired. Don't guess he's slept much since all this started. I turn back to the cage, where Eddie will be coming out soon, where there's no activity.

Elaine steps beside me. "Jeanne?"

I don't acknowledge her. Every thought I have is on making that cage come up. One more trip to the surface and Eddie will be here.

"Jeanne."

"He's coming," I finally say. "I know he is." She touches my arm. "Jeanne, please."

I step away.

"Jeanne, come away from here with me." I don't answer.

"Please." Elaine wrings her hands, twists at her wedding ring. Her voice shakes. "I'll be there. I won't leave you."

Elaine's my best friend. I can't believe how much I hate her right now.

But I let her lead me. We don't speak. We get into the back of a Ford police car parked alongside the office. Denis starts the engine, looks in the rearview mirror to Elaine. She nods. Denis puts the car in gear, steers down the mine entrance road.

Elaine hugs me close. Salerno. I stare straight ahead. This is not what it seems. This is not what it seems.

Denis turns onto the highway.

This is not what it seems.

I close my eyes, hope with all my might Denis will drive south, straight on through town, down to Crab Orchard Lake where me and Eddie like to go sometimes, where maybe there'll be some geese flying south, honking up a storm and making me smile and Eddie laugh. I hope we can go later this week while the mine is closed and Eddie has some extra time. He can try out the binoculars I bought him for Christmas, the ones I know he's been hankering after.

Denis turns left off the highway. Toward the high school.

#####

**Sarah Wofford**  
**Rocket Holler**

There was a rocketship outside town. One of the old ones, like you seen in a comic in the 1950s. It was only about the size of a trailer. Barely big enough for a family, really only meant for two. It was on its belly, so there weren't no main access doors, but there were portholes all the way round it, and over time most of them had been screwed off. You couldn't break theperma-glass without fancy equipment, but with enough time, a crowbar could pop off the safety ring holding the whole mechanism in place. The rigors of space were one thing, the whims of intrepid middle schoolers were a whole nother.

Astra-Dean was gonna get in there, she swore it. Her brother Michael said the big kids had all tried but were too big to fit through the porthole. And all the little kids were too scared. Not Astra-Dean. She weren't scared of nothing. 'Cept snakes. Mama told her how to tell the regular ones from the venomous ones but she could never remember which was which and just figured she ought not bother with any of them. 'Sides, there weren't gonna be no snakes in a rocketship. Supposedly a dead body, but no snakes.

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Space travel had been all the rage when Earth was ending. They found all these other Goldilocks planets, and suddenly we knew how to get to 'em. They'd been saying for years that Earth wasn't gonna be habitable forever, so off humans went. Scientists were first. Well, really it was like the olden days. Test pilots were sent off in stasis chambers at top speed—we were only traveling near-light back then—and they get dropped onto a planet just to make sure we can survive. And we did! So first the test pilots, whose only jobs were to keep breathing, then the space scientists. Then the engineers. Then they was hiring for off-world construction and space travel was gonna open up to a new class of people! Roughnecks and rednecks got jobs building housing complexes and water systems on planets with names like "Freedom" and "Endurance." We were really bad at naming things. But once everything was ready for folks to start moving, not everybody had a chance to go. Space travel was expensive. Even when the

lightspeed engine got invented and things were supposed to even out, it still ended up being the super-rich getting first pick of where they wanted to live. Then the really-rich. Then the regular-rich. Pretty soon we had a handful of planets that really only lacked one thing: poor people.

Some folks figured we'd be better off, even if no one else ever got to go to the new planets. And they were sorta right. Relatively speaking, poor people weren't nearly as poor no more, and people who had been comfortable before were now the top of the food chain. That was just in America though. Most countries had formed science alliances with other countries and sent families to the new planets via lottery. Of course the super-rich still managed to go first, but it was only here that they were paying their way above the table, not below it.

Huge ships were built in orbit. They were bigger than the biggest aircraft carriers. They carried eight thousand people at a time, traveling faster than light. It was a year's journey, and everybody but a small crew was kept in stasis and woken up on arrival. At least, that's how it went at first.

They tried real hard to keep the faster-than-light engine under wraps. But with organizations all over the world figurin' it out, it ended up not bein' all that difficult to get your hands on the schematics. What if you didn't have to spend a small fortune getting your family on one of the government ships? And the era of the personal spaceship was born.

They didn't make them very well at first. A lot of folks died. It was all illegal at first, and no two places built them the same. But then the government finally said to hell with it and legalized the whole thing and threw some safety standards out for good measure. Like the times of the three point seatbelt, everything got a little safer. Then everything got a little cheaper.

There were still billions of people on Earth. Even with a few million on other planets, and more leavin' everyday, it was still a lot. But the ones that left seemed to take so much with them. It had taken a long time, but before a single thing had been built off-Earth, some decisions were made. It weren't easy decisions, neither. Folks got real mad that for so long everybody knew what was wrong but nothing was being done about it. Things got rough.



Some people called it revolution. Some called it war. In the end it was decided that the new Earths weren't gonna just be copies of the old. No more billion-dollar companies. No more dollar-a-day factory workers in distant warehouses making cheap crap for middle America. The people who owned those companies weren't too happy with the news. Factories shut down. Businesses closed. Supply chains collapsed. A lot of folks died. Again. While all those rich folks were leaving Earth, everybody left behind had to rebuild a life on a planet that nobody knew if it would survive or not. But amazing things happen when you start shutting things down. Earth thrived. It took some years, but finally the planet wasn't in danger of burnin up no more. They was still shipping people off by the thousands, and would be for decades to come, but Earth was breathing again.

It was chaos for a good long while. All the workin parts were there, all the infrastructure, but everybody was in shambles. Half the world's governments was on a different planet and there weren't no mad rush to be holding elections right off the bat. It was apparent that they—whoever they were—hadn't thought everything through before gallivanting off to outer space. But survival was what humans were built for, and they did. They survived with fewer luxuries, but they survived. A new avenue for survival had arisen: space.

Everybody knew where the new planets were. And it ain't like you gotta take left turns in space. Everything is just a straight shot. You gotta be real careful with your trajectory so you don't miss what you're aiming for, but if you've got a ship that'll do course corrections even that ain't the end of the world. Humans had figured out real-deal space travel and pert near everybody wanted in.

\*

Astra-Dean had a plan. She had a backpack full of supplies. Flashlight. Rope. Snacks. Pocketknife. Umbrella. Gloves. Another flashlight. One of those clunky instant cameras where the photo just pops right out. She'd even spent her own savings to get extra film for it just for today. She wasn't bringing nobody with her. This was a solo adventure. She's pretty sure Michael would have tagged along if she'd asked but she didn't want anyone with her, at least this time around. She didn't want nobody to see if

she failed, or worse, chickened out. She was going there right after school. It was lightly misting, threatening to turn into real rain, so she didn't think anybody would be making their way to hang out at the rocketship today. She really hoped not.

The ship was in Rocket Holler. Cause of course it was. It'd been there so long nobody knew what the place was called before it was there. It was about a mile from the school, on the other side of the old state park, so Astra-Dean started walking as soon as the last bell rung.

"Hey! Where you goin?" her brother Michael yelled.

"Don't worry about it," she said, not even turning around to look at him.

"Uh huh. Sure. You better be home by supper or Mama's gonna ground us both."

"Yeah yeah."

Astra-Dean walked on, gripping her backpack straps. Nobody followed her. She walked down the street, away from school, until she got to the main highway. She walked east a ways until she came to a crude path between the trees. This would take her around the border of the park. She stopped to tie her shoe and continued down the path. It was wide enough for a small car if the driver was adventurous enough. The trail had definitely been made by feet and not cars, though. It was evenly downtrodden across the whole track, instead of having two divots from wheels.

The fence that marked the edge of the park was torn loose from its post from years of youth misuse. She easily slipped through it. The path cut through some fairly thin woods until it dropped off steeply into the holler proper. Astra-Dean half-walked, half-slid down the grassy slope until the earth beneath her evened out. There it was. Just a few yards away in all its rusted glory. She walked slowly towards it. She'd been here dozens of times, but never alone, and never with the plan to get into the thing. Leaves and sticks crunched beneath her sneakers. She was barely breathin. She stopped and shook her head. What was she doin? Nothin out here was spooky. It was still broad daylight.

"Get a grip, AD," she mumbled to herself. Hitching her backpack up higher she marched right up to the ship. One of its porthole covers was on the ground a few feet from it. The perma-glass was cracked, but not broken. It was deep in the ground, only half of it sticking up. She nudged at it with her shoe. It didn't budge. Astra-Dean walked right up to the ship

until she was close enough to touch it. She didn't yet. Just took a few big breaths. She finally reached out and ran her hand over the hull. The parts that weren't rusted were still smooth. It was a steel-blue color now. She wondered what it had looked like in its heyday. She bet it was beautiful.

She stepped back to look at the whole ship. Nobody really knew how it had gotten out here, but the way its belly was half buried in the earth, it didn't seem like it had come willingly. She walked around it, her hand running along its hull. She stepped around its external thrusters, her hand skipping over the spider-web covered maw of its main engine. The other side was in the same shape, rust covering it from the ground to about Astra-Dean's nose. She had to reach her hand up to be able to keep off the rust. On the far side were open portholes, too. The only visible one that was still intact was back here, close to the ground. The portholes were spaced out about every couple feet. They were wide. Her shoulders would fit through one easily. Probably.

She'd thought carefully about which porthole she was going to attempt. One of Michael's friends had made fun of her, but the last time she was out here she'd taken a couple pictures of the ship so she could decide ahead of time which one she wanted to try to fit through. Kids had been climbing on the thing for ages so it weren't hard to get all the right angles. The porthole on top would have been the easiest to get through. The whole mechanism was pulled clean off the ship, leaving just a smooth hole behind. A few brave kids over the years had stuck their heads in through it to see but it was too dark inside. There was probably a time of day when the light came through just right that you'd be able to see what was inside, but it weren't any time of day that kids were out runnin around in. Anyways, she couldn't use the top porthole. Sure, she could get in that way, but gettin out would be a whole nother story. She didn't know if there was anything in the ship she could climb on, so it wasn't worth the risk. She still considered it for a moment. She'd brought rope for a reason, after all.

She shook her head and moved back around to the other side of the ship. She knew where she was going in from. She'd still have to partially climb up the ship to get in, but she was confident she could get back out. Astra-Dean had very nearly brought her mama's little folding step stool to school with her in her backpack, but she figured that

was a little cross the border of suspicious. Mama would not like the idea of her trying to climb into the old rocketship. She didn't really want her kids hanging around it at all, truth be told. She thought it was dangerous. Astra-Dean just figured she believed the rumor that there was an old, decomposed body still in the ship and didn't want her kids near it.

Astra-Dean didn't know if she believed about the dead body or not. Surely someone would have found real proof of it if it had really been out here so long. But then again, no one knew what was inside the old thing either. Had someone before her gotten in? Did they take pictures? She knew a long time ago there was cameras that didn't need film and you could just carry around in your pocket. Her history teacher swore up and down her grandparents had one when they were young. But that was Before. Her teacher said that so many things changed when all the factories stopped that when things started up again we couldn't go right back to how things were. We had to start over. We had all the knowledge but not the resources so computers couldn't fit in your pocket no more. Astra-Dean had a hard time imagining it. She struggled to see how the big, square monitor that sat on the desk in their living room could ever squish down to be small enough to carry in her backpack, much less a pocket. Seemed like a crazy, but awesome, thought to her.

She thought about the Before times a lot. It was her favorite part of history. It just seemed to her like everything was happening at once and it was happening then. Some of it was scary, like the plague. But then she'd read about huge music festivals and how the internet got to the point that the whole world could laugh at the same joke. That part of the non-fiction section of the library was her favorite. She'd read about how people used to use their pocket computers to reunite lost dogs with their owners and get left-behind toys to little kids. She'd read about protests and marches and how kids just a few years older than her big brother were dead set on changing the world. And they did. To a certain extent, she supposed. They couldn't stop the inevitable from happening, but maybe that's just what it means to be inevitable. Astra-Dean didn't know.

The rocketship wasn't from the Before, she knew that much. There weren't personal ships like this until decades later. She wished she could look up who made it, but any identifying marks were either buried in the dirt or had been eaten away by rust. Astra-Dean loved a good mystery. She loved not knowing the answer to something and getting to

track it down. Her brother said she was a nerd. She didn't care. She done what research at the library that she could. Her best guess put the ship at about 50 years old, but she couldn't know for sure. She wanted to know so bad though. It was eatin at her. This belonged to somebody once. It meant somethin to somebody, she just knew it.

She walks around to the porthole she's chosen for entry. It's about head-level to her, but she's been practicing on the monkey bars for weeks now and she's certain she's got the strength to hoist herself up there. It's unfortunately not one of the ones where the entire window mechanism has been torn off. Just the inner bit that held the perma-glass in place. There's still a metal ring bolted to the exterior of the ship. And it ain't like the hull is just a thin slice of metal. It's thick, made out of all sorts of alloys her science teacher is always rambling on about. There's insulation too. Space insulation. All that sort of stuff was way more streamlined by the time this ship was built, but there will still be a good 8 inches of hull before she's in the ship proper.

Astra-Dean pulled her gloves out of her backpack. They were just knit winter gloves but they were all she had so they'd hafta do. Making sure her backpack was secure, she reached for the porthole and pulled herself up.

Oddly enough, the personal spaceship industry made the world feel a little more normal, all things considered. There was factories again, albeit different ones than there used to be. They weren't cheap enough for everyone and there weren't no used ones floating around, but they were still a pretty big deal. Even though Earth weren't on the edge of burnin up no more, plenty of people still wanted out. The new planets meant new opportunities and chances at new lives. Some folks were lucky enough to get on the government ships that were goin out. Others poured their savings into a ship of their own.

There were two ways to travel in a personal spaceship: the long way and the short way.

Both of em technically took the same amount of time but one felt a lot shorter than the other. The short way was for rich folks who could afford to put stasis chambers in their ships. Stasis chambers looked kinda like, well, kinda like caskets. Which was

weird considering you went in them to sleep for a long time. Rich people got the royal treatment when it was time for their launch. They were placed in medically induced comas and then put in the stasis chambers that kept them that way for the entire journey. If for some reason they happened to wake up and the medical protocols in the chamber couldn't put them right back under, the artificial gravity automatically kicked on and there were plenty of supplies to last the remainder of the trip.

Otherwise they spent a year asleep.

If you weren't rich enough to afford stasis, you got to take the long way. These were the folks who spent the trip awake, living out their lives in a tiny vessel for the full year and change it would take to reach the new planets. The number of people you were taking determined the size of the ship. The biggest were around 20,000 cubic feet and could hold a family of eight or so, depending on ages and size. The smallest were maybe a third that size and were a snug fit for two. The smaller ones were about the size of a single wide trailer. All the ships, no matter the size, came with the ability to create artificial gravity, but the smaller ships could only have it on part of the time. Most people chose to sleep in zero gravity and then be awake while the gravity was on.

It took a certain mental fortitude to be able to calmly live in a spaceship for a little over a year. Not everyone was up for it. If you were put in stasis it was no big deal, but people who couldn't afford that option usually had to go through a psychological examination before they were cleared to even buy a ship. It was all part of the financing application. A new normal for folks trying to find a better life. Those that passed the tests and filled out all the forms and signed away whatever property they owned on Earth that wouldn't be coming with them, those got to experience the excitement of living in space.

Using the toes of her sneakers against the rusty hull, Astra-Dean was able to pull herself up and into the open porthole. She got her head in first, then her right arm, then her left. She pushed on the interior walls of the ship until more of her was in than out, and she went tumbling face first inside. She landed next to an ancient looking stationary bike. She could barely see it in the dark of the ship's interior, but very few things in the world were bicycle shaped other than bicycles.

The floor beneath her was slightly damp, and she could feel it start to seep into her

jeans.

She stood up and pulled her backpack off her back. She still had her school things in it, unfortunately, but she shuffled those aside and groped around until she found what she was looking for: her flashlight. Her mother had a battery-operated camping lantern that she'd wanted to bring, but it was too conspicuous in her backpack so she'd had to leave it. Shame. She took a deep breath—the air in here tasted musty—and turned on the flashlight, half certain that she was about to be face to face with a rotten corpse or a skeleton.

The first thing she saw was the stationary bike. She stepped closer to it. In her reading she knew that some form of exercise equipment was mandatory on all spacecraft that people wouldn't be in stasis on. Something to do with spaceflight atrophying musculature or some such. She reached out to one of the pedals with the toe of her shoe. It didn't budge. The whole thing was rusted even more in-place than it had been. She turned the beam of the flashlight slowly to the right. Next to the bike was a big object built right into the ship. She couldn't tell what it was made of but it wasn't rusted like the bike. There were words stenciled on it. She stepped closer, shining her flashlight right on them. "WATER TANK" it read. She reached a shaky hand out and knocked her gloved knuckles against it. It sounded hollow. All the water must be long gone.

The chemical symbol, H<sub>2</sub>O was written beneath the label. Every time she saw something like that she thought back to science class, her teacher explaining how everything in the universe was just made up of atoms. Sometimes Astra-Dean felt like one day she was just gonna shake apart and become a shambling pile of protons, electrons, and neutrons.

She knew from her excursions to the library that ships like this had huge water tanks taking up one part of the ship. Everything got filtered and reused so you didn't actually have to bring a whole year's supply of water with you, but you still brought a lot. This was a ship that people would live on, not a stasis ship, obviously. Those were 90% storage and definitely didn't have bikes. That also explained why it looked like it was upside down from the outside but was actually laying on its "bottom" from the

inside. She knew the main access door was in the nose cone of the ship, as you had to be seated and buckled in there during takeoff. Cause the nose of the ship was “up” while it was on Earth, you couldn’t be in the living part of the ship until you was in outer space. Otherwise you’d just fall and land on the back wall.

Continuing to turn to the right, She saw a heavy-looking door with no window. It had a lever handle. She reached out and pulled it. It moved, but barely. Sticking her flashlight in her teeth, she used both hands and yanked on the handle. It turned with a loud click. Her eyes widened. She hadn’t expected it to move.

“What the heck...” she mumbled around the flashlight. Shrugging to herself, she tugged hard at the door. It came open so easily she fell back on the floor, her flashlight dropping and rolling away towards the now open door. There was a hiss of air as the door swung open. She pulled herself up and took a slow step towards the door. Crouching down, she snagged her flashlight from the slightly soggy floor. She stood slowly, shining her light in front of her. The beam of light fell on what looked like it was an instrument panel. Astra-Dean stepped forward until she was in the doorway.

This was the nosecone of the ship, the cockpit, she could tell. Everything was angled towards the front. Instead of windows there were screens everywhere. Most of them cracked. There was two chairs with elaborate buckles on them. Both were empty. Astra-Dean breathed a sigh of relief. No dead body yet. The air seemed a little less musty in this room. The door must have been shut tight for a long time. There weren’t much dust everywhere either. She stepped between the chairs and stepped up to the array of buttons and gauges on the panel that jutted out from the angled walls.

Fuel gauge. On empty. H2O. On empty. There were what musta been a hundred switches and buttons that she could tell once lit up. Switches labeled things like “OCS/AUX” and “MAN/AUT.” That one was switched to “MAN.” Curious, she reached out and flipped it. She jumped back, bringing her finger to her chest. It’d shocked her. She shook her head and turned around to leave the cockpit.

Remembering something, she turned back around and swung her backpack off her shoulders, dropping it into one of the pilot chairs. She pulled off her now damp gloves, stuffing them inside the backpack once she unzipped it. She rifled around inside until she



found the camera she had brought with her. It was boxy, with a long strap she slipped over her head. She stepped back into the doorway, a half-step, really, considering how small the space was, and brought the viewfinder up to her eye. She pressed the button but nothing happened. She looked down at the camera in her hands, turning it around and over. Her mama had taught her how to use it ages ago but it had been a while since she'd done it herself. She fiddled with the various bits of it until one thing gave way and opened down in the front. It whirred. She brought the viewfinder up to her eye again and pressed the button. This time it worked and in just a moment an undeveloped picture was popping out of the front of the camera. She took it out and gave it a little shake before tossing it into her backpack and pulling the backpack back over one shoulder.

She walked back through the doorway, her flashlight beam ahead of her. Noting the stationary bike to her right, she turned left. Two boxy machines were stacked on top of one another. She giggled when she realized what they were. A washer and dryer. They even looked similar to the ones in her own home. Even in space nobody wanted dirty clothes. Butted up next to the washer and dryer was a cabinet of some kind. It looked wooden, with two doors that met in the middle. She carefully reached out and tugged on one of the doors. It swung open.

Clothes. At least that's what they probably was originally. Now it just looked like damp, moth-eaten hunks of fabric on hangers. They smelled super musty and kinda gross. Astra-Dean flinched when she saw the spiderwebs draped across the corners of the closet. She weren't scared of spiders the way she was snakes, but she still didn't like them none. She opened the other door of the closet for a better look. Taking a step back, she pulled the camera up to her face again and snapped a picture.

Sweeping her flashlight and turning further to the right, she nearly collided with something. She jumped back, skittish at the prospect of things looming in the dark that she couldn't see, before relaxing. It was a table. A booth, really. Two bench seats and the table in the middle all seemed to be made out of one continuous piece. It was perpendicular to the wall, with the back of one seat sitting flush to the curved hull. Stepping around the bench seat a little, it was obvious that this was the kitchenette of

the ship. There was a little stove and sink even. Astra-Dean figured that it wasn't out in the middle of the woods it would have felt homey. She knew people had to

live in ships like this for a year or so to get to the new planets. She hadn't ever thought of the fact that they would have to make the ship a home for that long. She took another picture.

The comfort one could expect while living in space for a year or so really depended on the ship you'd be spending your time in. There were all sorts of designs and models out there, though they all followed the same basic construction. They differed by style, and whether or not they came with all the bells and whistles. When it come to spaceships, bigger don't always mean better. Some of the biggest ones they made were boxes on rockets. They had sleep pods and bathrooms, but nothing above the bare minimum to get you to your destination alive. The littler ones weren't necessarily better neither. People called em "shoebboxes in the sky" cause of how tiny and cramped they were. Some of the smaller ships were okay though. They were made for couples or small families. You might not get a lot of privacy in a ship like that, but it wouldn't be too bad if you really liked the person you were flyin with.

Some of the ships were notorious for their various problems. SB88s tended to wobble on launch until they were well clear of the tower. FTHC-7s were discontinued when three of them just exploded on the launchpad over the course of a month. G-625s were known to occasionally just not launch at all once they got to the launch pad. This was partly because they wouldn't launch unless their fuel tanks were full (technically a safety feature so you didn't run out halfway through the launch) but their gauges were notorious for not being accurate unless the ship was sitting nosecone to the sky. Yet it had to be fueled on its side. You might "fill up" a G-625 only to set it upright and the gauge to tell you that you were missing a quarter of it. That being said, you could also maybe burn some of the fuel on an attempted launch, leave maybe an eighth or so of a tank of fuel still in it but when you laid it down again the gauge would read empty. But once it was on a truck, that wasn't really a problem. It wouldn't be a problem unless the automatic launch sequence was started again, which, without people in the ship, wouldn't happen.

Occasional problems or not, the smaller ships were cheaper of course, too. Not that

that always helped folks. Buyin a spaceship wasn't like buyin a car, or even a house. It was a lot of money for something you were only gonna use the once. First thing you had to do was decide what was makin the trip and what was staying behind. Own a house? Land? A car? Well you can't take it with you. So these sorts of things were generally written over to whoever was selling the spaceship and they kindly let you continue living there until your launch day. Usually.

And then there were those poor folks who sold what they could, packed what they could fit, and were all strapped into their ship on launch day only for...nothing to happen. Sometimes, not too terribly often, ships just didn't launch. But it might burn too much fuel to try again, so the ship either needed to be refueled so you could try again or the whole launch was scrapped. Some people didn't have enough money to buy more fuel. And they had usually sold everything they had to buy the spaceship already. What then?

\*

She turned around to see what was on the other side of the ship from where she was standing. It was a curved door that had fake wood paneling on it like she seen at her friend Nova's house.

There was just a normal-looking doorknob on it. With her flashlight in one hand, she reached out and gently turned the knob. It turned with ease, so she pulled on the door. It swung open to reveal a small room with a tile floor. Pointing her flashlight up, she saw a rusted showerhead. Below, she saw an old-fashioned fold-down toilet. There was a mirror on one wall. Her flashlight beam was briefly reflected back to her in it.

Stepping away from the bathroom, she continued left. A reflection of her flashlight caught her eye and she startled. What looked like two, cylindrical, chrome caskets were attached long side to the wall. Sleeping pods. These had always kinda freaked her out when they learned about them and their differences from stasis pods. People on ships this small only had gravity in shifts. They usually decided to sleep in zero gravity and go about their "day" shifts with gravity on. So they slept in these pods, where they got strapped in so they didn't just float around in their sleep. Swallowing loudly, Astra-Dean reached out for the seam of the pod, and tugged. It swung open so quickly she

jumped back, just knowing a dead body was going to pop out at her at any moment.

Nothing happened. The pod door, or maybe it was a lid, swung open on creaky hinges and stopped. There was a long, unzipped sack-looking thing inside, open to reveal a series of buckles and straps. She closed the pod, flicking her eyes to the second one. Should she check it or just let it be? She licked her lips, chewing on them for a minute. She stepped over to the other pod and slowly opened it. It looked identical inside to the other. She let out a breath. Closing the pod, she gripped her flashlight with her teeth and took a picture of the two pods. Her camera flash briefly lit up the logo etched into the pods, that Astra-Dean hadn't managed to see with her flashlight.

The logo read "G-625."

She was near the back of the ship now. The back wall was all storage cabinets. She knew from her reading that the main engine was behind there somewhere. It would have angled inward, in the same direction of the nosecone of the ship. She stepped up to one of the storage compartments. If there was still clothes in the closet, would there still be stuff in storage too? She weren't going to be able to reach the topmost one, but the one on the bottom had a handle that was about mid-shin height. She squatted down, careful to keep her butt off the damp floor, and reached for the handle. She felt it move slightly when she pulled so she tried again, harder this time. The cabinet came open with a hissing sound like when the cockpit had opened. It must have been shut good for a real long time.

There were boxes inside. Astra-Dean couldn't tell what they were made of but they obviously weren't cardboard. She pulled one out and, realizing it was light enough to carry, she brought it back across the ship to the table she'd found. The tabletop was mostly dry, except for maybe a fine layer of mist that had managed to come in from the same porthole Astra-Dean had. The box was sealed with some kinda tape. She tried to peel it off with her fingers, but it wouldn't budge. But Astra-Dean had come prepared. She felt around in her backpack until she came up with her pocketknife. She carefully unfolded it and pressed the blade to the tape, wanting to open it but not wanting to hurt anything that might be inside. She pulled the blade across the tape, the sound loud in the empty spaceship.

She carefully opened the flaps of the box and peered inside. The box was full of large

envelopes. Flashlight in her left, she reached with her right hand and pulled an envelope out at random.

Handwritten on the envelope in big, blocky letters was the word “wedding.” Frowning, Astra-Dean set the envelope on top of the box then flipped it over to find the opening. It was closed with a string wrapped around a little metal brad. She unwound the string until she could open the flap all the way. Without looking, she reached inside. Whatever was in there felt thin and almost papery. But slick. She grabbed a few and pulled them out and set them on top of the envelope. They were pictures. Wedding pictures.

They had at one point been in color, but had faded with time. The first one was of just the bride, standing in front of a brick building with what looked like a red door. She was halfway facing the camera and the train of her dress was cascaded around her. She was beautiful. The next picture was of the bride and she assumed the groom at the front of a church, staring into each other’s eyes. Astra-Dean felt like maybe this was something she wasn’t meant to see. Like this was for someone else. She stuffed the pictures back in the envelope, the envelope back in the box, and the box back in the storage compartment she’d found it in. She shut the compartment door as hard as she could, hoping she hadn’t too terribly disturbed the memories within.

If you were unlucky enough to have a ship that didn’t launch, and unlucky enough to not be able to afford the fuel for another try, there weren’t many options left for you. You could try to sell whatever meager possessions you had left, or you had to sell the ship itself. Most dealers would buy back ships that didn’t launch for way less than they’d originally been sold for. So it’s not like you could sell the spaceship and then get your house back. You didn’t get enough money for that. Instead most folks were left to significantly downsize from their previous living arrangements, while also having to deal with any plans they’d made for the new planets. You could easily sell whatever plot of land or apartment you’d been hoping to inhabit, but the money wasn’t much.

So there you’d be left, no house on Earth and no way to get to the new planets, watching as the ship of all your hopes and dreams was carted away on a truck down the highway. They’d said you could collect your things from the ship back at the

dealership. But if the straps holding the ship on the truck came loose in a turn and sent the ship careening off into the woods and the truck nearly into oncoming traffic? Well then you'd really lost it all.

Astra-Dean turned around from the storage cabinets and looked at the ship. There was really only one more section she hadn't investigated. There was a squishy looking couch against the gently sloping wall. Beyond the couch was a faux wall, there to give the ship a feeling of separate rooms, probably. On the wall, which was more wood paneling like the bathroom door, was a picture frame. She walked closer to it. It was a cross stitch that said "Home Sweet Home." She tried to nudge it, but however it was stuck to the wall, it wasn't coming down. She stepped back to take a picture of the whole set up. Tilting her head to the side, she thought for a moment. She backed up to the back wall and took a picture. Then she walked to the cockpit door, turned around, and took another picture. She wanted to be able to see as much of it as she could when the pictures developed. She figured a couple that were already in her bags probably had already but she was gonna wait till she got home to check.

She sighed. She guessed her exploration was really done now. She didn't know how she felt yet. Yeah, it was rusty and gross and cobwebby in places, but there were no dead bodies, no big secrets. She turned back to the porthole she'd come in through. She shoved her flashlight back in her backpack, making sure it was zipped all the way up. She shoved the backpack through the porthole first. She gripped the sides of the porthole, and a few things went wrong.

They'd actually gone wrong quite a while before. Ya see, if there was one switch in a G-625 that you didn't want to flip while it wasn't on the launchpad, it was the one that took it from manual flight to automatic flight. MAN/AUT. Automatic flight is exactly what you want on the launchpad. You don't have to remember some crazy start-up sequence, and instead the computer does all the hard work for you. But G-625s, with their gauges that lie and rocket fuel that doesn't degrade over time, you don't ever want to start up the automatic flight while it's just, say, lying out in the woods.

The spaceship, having spent that past who-knows-how-long lying dormant in the woods, makes one final trip. It's not far. Its engine only ignites for a moment but it's

enough to send it another fifty yards into the holler. The force is enough that Astra-Dean hits the back wall with enough force to crack her head open and break her neck. Turns out there really weren't all that much rocket fuel left in it. Just enough to ignite the external thrusters completely and for the main engine to sputter to life for a brief few seconds. Enough that the ship spins, tossing around Astra-Dean like clothes in a dryer.

A few hours after Astra-Dean should have reasonably been home, her brother spills the beans that she was probably out investigating the notorious spaceship. It's really raining by then, but her mama drags Michael out into the woods to retrieve her, thinking the girl is in a world of trouble. They arrive in the holler, wet and angry at the young girl, to find the smoky remains of some foliage and no spaceship. Astra-Dean's mama screams. She nearly faints thinking the absurd thought that her daughter has gone to space without her.

They don't realize she was in the ship until they find her backpack. The photos, all things considered, are beautiful. None of them are particularly well lit, the flash too bright for the foreground but not reaching to the back. But they're careful documentation of her adventure nonetheless.

The search party eventually finds the path of destruction, and then finally the ship. It's upside down from what it had been, and the nosecone is deep in the wet earth. The main access doors are bare to the forest air for the first time in decades, but they're rusted shut. They hafta wake up a welder. It's getting late.

They get the exterior doors open then the interior doors—the ones that opened up in the floor that Astra-Dean never even noticed—and her mama's wails could be heard hundreds of yards away. It was the head wound that killed her, and it wasn't instantaneous. She bled out more and more with every spin and bump until her little body just didn't have any more to give.

In the aftermath, nobody knew what to do with the spaceship. Its Ship Identification Number went back to a now-defunct ship dealership. There's nobody to collect it. It belonged to no one. The forest it's in don't belong to nobody. It's just county land. They can't afford to haul it out and scrapping it would cost more than

what it's worth. Serious people have serious discussions for a day or two. Somebody, maybe a deputy, maybe just some kid, tries to set fire to the interior of the ship but everything is so fire-retardant that nothing happens. The rain clears out most of the blood after a while. They fixed the fence at the edge of the park property and left the hunk of spaceship to rot in peace.

And nobody goes to Rocket Holler no more.



## Contributors

**Carolyn Adams'** poetry and art have appeared in *Steam Ticket*, *Cimarron Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *Dissident Voice*, and *Blueline Magazine*, among others. Having authored four chapbooks, her full-length volume is forthcoming from Fernwood Press. She has been twice nominated for both Best of the Net and a Pushcart prize.

**Jeffrey Alfier's** most recent book, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include *Carolina Quarterly*, *Copper Nickel*, *The Emerson Review*, *Faultline*, *Hotel Amerika*, *New York Quarterly*, *Penn Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Vassar Review*. He is founder and co-editor of Blue Horse Press.

**Subhaga Crystal Bacon's** new book, *Transitory*, is forthcoming in the fall of 2023 from BOA Editions. She's the author of two previous collections, *Blue Hunger*, 2020, Methow Press, and *Elegy with a Glass of Whiskey*, BOA Editions, 2004. A Queer Elder, she lives, writes, and teaches rural northcentral Washington. Her recent work appears or is forthcoming in *The Indianapolis Review*, *Rise Up Review*, *Wood Cat Review*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and *The Meadowlark Review*. Her work can be found on [www.subhagacrystalbacon.com](http://www.subhagacrystalbacon.com).

**Terry Hall Bodine** is a graduate of the College of William & Mary in Virginia. Recent publication credits include *Steam Ticket*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine*, and *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*. Terry lives in Lynchburg with her husband, Bill, and works with academic advising at the University of Lynchburg. New works are forthcoming in *Saguaro Review*, *Broad River Review*, and *Lone Mountain Literary Society*.

**Katlin Brock** is a 29 year old from Kentucky. Her publication credits include a short story with *Fiction Southeast* alongside several poems in publication with *Jelly Bucket*, *Family Show Bear Circus*, *HeartWood Literary*, and three volumes of the *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, and a poem with *Sheila-Na-Gig*. She has also written a flash piece for *NoSleep Podcast*. She has a forthcoming poetry book, *The Dead Always Stay*, with Plan B Press due out later this year.

**Paul Brucker**, a marketing communications writer, lives in Mt. Prospect, IL, "Where "Friendliness is a Way of Life." He put a lid on poetry writing when he went to the Northwestern University grad ad school in a questionable attempt to learn how to think like a businessman and secure a decent income. Nevertheless, he has succumbed to writing poetry again.

He has been published recently in "[The Literary Nest](#)," "[Fishbowl Press](#)," "[The Beautiful Space](#)," "[Prachya Review](#)," "[The Bangalore Review](#)," "[monthstoyears](#)" and "[The Pagan's Muse: Words of Ritual, Invocation and Inspiration](#)."

**William E. Burleson's** short stories have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies to date, including *The New Guard* and *American Fiction 14* and *16*. Burleson has also published extensively in non-fiction, most notably his book, *Bi America* (Haworth Press, 2005), *Hennepin History Magazine*, and numerous other publications. Burleson is also the founder of Flexible Press. For more information: [www.williamburleson.com](http://www.williamburleson.com).

**Joan Canby** has been published in *Main Street Rag*, *California Quarterly* and *Frogpond*. Her chapbook *Cascades* has just been published by Assure Press in Dallas.

**Darrell Dela Cruz's** work has appeared in or will appear forthcoming *Saw Palm*, *The Minetta Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Studio One*, *Steam Ticket*, and *Cider Press Review*. He has a blog: [ddcpoetry.blogspot.com](http://ddcpoetry.blogspot.com). He graduated with an MFA in Poetry from San Jose State University.

**Deborah H. Doolittle** has lived in lots of different places, but now calls North Carolina home. A Pushcart Prize nominee, she is the author of *Floribunda* (Main Street Rag) and three chapbooks, *No Crazy Notions*, *That Echo*, and *Bogbound* (Orchard Street Press). Some of her poems have recently appeared in *Cloudbank*, *Dash*, *Glimpse*, *The Journal* (Wales), *Kakalak*, *Slant*, and *The Stand*. She shares a home with her husband, four housecats, and a backyard full of birds.

**James Fowler** teaches literature at the University of Central Arkansas. He is author of a poetry collection, *The Pain Trader* (Golden Antelope Press, 2020), and a volume of short stories, *Field Trip* (Cornerpost Press, 2022).

**Karen Frederick** is an avid reader, runner and teacher. She divides her time between Los Angeles and Washington, DC. Her stories have appeared in *Scriblerus*, *The Paragon Press*, *The Evening Street Review*, *Underwood*, *Moonlight and Indigo*, and the *Book Smugglers Den*. Member of the Author's Guild.

She is currently working on a short story manuscript "Twice Told Tales", stories that span 1900 years as well as two novels, "The Kensaken – The Inspector 1689" and "Midnight Symphony."

**Arthur Ginsberg** is a neurologist and poet based in Seattle. He has studied poetry at the University of Washington and at Squaw Valley, with Galway Kinnell, Sharon Olds, and Lucille Clifton. Recent work appears in the anthologies, *Blood and Bone*, and *Primary Care*, from University of Iowa Press. He was awarded the William Stafford prize in 2003. He attained an MFA degree in creative writing in July 2010 from Pacific University in Forest

Grove, Oregon where he studied with Dorianne Laux, Marvin Bell and David St. John. His book, “The Anatomist,” was published in the summer of 2013. A second book, “Brain Works” has been recently released by David Roberts Books. He currently teaches a course, titled, “Brain and the Healing Power of Poetry” at the University of Washington.

**Carol L. Gloor** has been writing since she was sixteen, mostly poetry. Her work has appeared in many hard copy and online journals, most recently in the online journal *Abandoned Mine*. Her poetry chapbook, *Assisted Living*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2013, and her full length collection, *Falling Back*, was published by Word Poetry in 2018. *Assisted Living* won the publisher’s Starting Gate award.

**Kenneth Gulotta** writes fiction and poetry while earning a living as a technical writer. He has an MA in creative writing from the University of Texas at Austin and a PhD in English from Tulane University. He lives in New Orleans with his wife and stepson. His fiction and poetry have been published widely; he can be found at [www.kennethgulotta.com](http://www.kennethgulotta.com).

**William Heath** has published three poetry books, *The Walking Man*, *Steel Valley Elegy*, and *Going Places*; a chapbook, *Night Moves in Ohio*; three novels: *The Children Bob Moses Led* (winner of the Hackney Award), *Devil Dancer*, and *Blacksnake’s Path*; a work of history, *William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest* (winner of two Spur Awards); and a collection of interviews, *Conversations with Robert Stone*. He lives in Annapolis. His website is: [www.williamheathbooks.com](http://www.williamheathbooks.com)

**Quazi Johirul Islam** was born on 10 February 1968 in Bangladesh. He is a renowned poet of the contemporary Bengali literature, he introduced verbless poems, a new form. Quazi has published 32 collections of poems and a total of 80 books including short stories, fictions, and free proses. He has been awarded many times in country and abroad by the Bengali community. His poems were translated in English, Serbian, Albanian and Odisha languages.

**John P. Kneal**, pen name for John A. Willoughby, has had over ninety poems published in poetry journals, company newsletters, anthologies, and fee-free public web sites. In addition, his first book of poetry, *Everyday Poems*, was published in late 2017. Samples of his work are also available at [www.JohnPKneal.com](http://www.JohnPKneal.com).

**Karen Loeb’s** poems and stories have appeared recently in *Big City Lit*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Thema*, *Foreign Literary Journal*, and *Muddy River*

*Poetry Review*. Her work has won both the fiction and poetry contests in *Wisconsin People and Ideas*. She was Eau Claire, Wisconsin writer-in-residence 2018-2020.

**Wayne McCray's** short stories have appeared in *Afro Literary Magazine*, *Bandit Fiction*, *The Bookends Review*, *Chitro Magazine*, *The Dillydoun Review*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Ilinix Magazine*, *The Ocotillo Review*, *Ogma Magazine*, *Pigeon Review*, *Roi Faineant*, *The Rush Magazine*, *Sangam Literary Magazine*, *Susurrus*, *Swim Press*, and *Wingless Dreamer*. He works diligently at becoming a Minimalist from his book-laden junk room.

**John Mummert** is retired from his first career in the water quality field. He grew up in southern Illinois, not far from the setting of this story. He has a short story published in the anthology *Wild: Uncivilized Tales From Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers* (2020). He is a member of the Historical Novel Society and the Rocky Mountain Fiction Writers.

**Stella Nesanovich** is the author of two full-length collections of poems: *Vespers at Mount Angel* (Xavier Review Press, 2004) and *Colors of the River* (Yellow Flag Press, 2015) as well as four poetry chapbooks. Her poetry has appeared in many journals and magazines and several anthologies and has been featured on *American Life in Poetry*. She is Professor Emerita of English from McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

**Kathy O'Fallon's** poems and short stories have been published in numerous literary journals, magazines, anthologies, and chapbooks. She was a finalist for The Backwater's Prize for *Listening for Tchaikovsky*, and for *Adfinitas* with *Inlandia*. O'Fallon is a psychologist working in Carlsbad, CA.

Fabrice Poussin is the advisor for *The Chimes*, the Shorter University award winning poetry and arts publication. His writing and photography have been published in print, including *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *La Pensee Universelle*, *Paris*, and other art and literature magazines in the United States and abroad. Most recently, his collection "In Absentia," was published in August 2021 with Silver Bow Publishing.

**Mostofa Sarwar**, Ph.D., M.S., M.Sc., authored three books of Bengali poems (*Binosto Rupantorer Bikartotto*, *Anulipi: Antorongo Muhurte*, and *Prarthito Nirbasoner Unmad Podaboly*) and published poems and literary essays in Bengali and English magazines and reviews in Bangladesh and USA. He was recognized for his literary contribution by the World Literary Center of Bangladesh at its North American Conference in New York in

2003. For his literary contributions and community leadership, he was awarded at a reception of over six thousand people in Madison Square Garden (New York) by the Federation of Bangladeshi Associations in North America in 2000, during the Annual International Meeting. His recent opinion work has been published in *The Advocate* of Baton Rouge, *The Times Picayune* of New Orleans, *The Daily Advent – Opera News* of New York, *The Daily Star* and *Bdnews24* of Bangladesh, *The Straits Times* of Singapore, *Phuket News* of Thailand, and *Newsbreak* of Philippines. He regularly writes opinion editorials in Bengali for newspapers in New York and Dhaka. He is also a weekly commentator on politics and current affairs at TBN24 and IB TV (two Bengali live television channels broadcasted out of New York), and occasionally appears as a commentator on NEWS24 and Ekattor TV (two news channels broadcasted out of Dhaka). He co-edited a book on geophysics published by Springer Vieweg of Germany and received distinguish associate editor award for journal *Geophysics*.

Dr. Sarwar, is professor emeritus of geophysics and former Associate Provost at the University of New Orleans, former dean, and interim vice-chancellor of academic affairs & college provost at Delgado Community College, and former commissioner of the governing board of Regional Transit Authority of New Orleans. He also taught at University of Innsbruck – Austria, University of Pennsylvania, Indiana University, and Dhaka University - Bangladesh. He worked as a scientist at Shell Technology Center Houston, and senior research fellow at the US Naval Research Laboratory in NASA’s Stennis Space Center.

Dr. Sarwar’s research resulted in many published peer-reviewed papers. He has presented over 100 talks in seminars at universities, research laboratories of multinational corporations, government research laboratories, and annual international meetings of professional societies. Over the course of his career, he has been invited to speak in various countries in Asia, Europe and North America, including Austria, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bulgaria, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Russia, Sweden, and the Netherlands. He could be reached at [asarwar2001@yahoo.com](mailto:asarwar2001@yahoo.com).

**Terry Savoie** has had more than four hundred poems published in the past forty years in journals such as *Poetry (Chicago)*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Ploughshares*, *America*, *American Journal of Poetry*, *APR*, *Prairie Schooner*, *North American Review* and *The Iowa Review* among many, many others.

**Darren J. Smart** earned a BFA in creative writing from the University of Maine at Farmington before pursuing a graduate degree in occupational therapy. His poetry has been published in *8Poems* and *The Sandy River Review*.

**Maureen Sherbondy's** most recent book is *Lines in Opposition*. Her work has appeared in *The Stone Canoe*, *Oakland Review*, *Litro*, *Calyx*, and other journals. Maureen lives in Durham, NC. [www.maureensherbondy.com](http://www.maureensherbondy.com)

**Truth Thomas** is a singer-songwriter and NAACP Image Award-winning poet, born in Knoxville, Tennessee and raised in Washington, DC. He studied creative writing at Howard University and earned his MFA in poetry at New England College. His poems have appeared in over 150 publications, including *Poetry Magazine* and *The 100 Best African American Poems (edited by Nikki Giovanni)*.

**Diane Webster's** goal is to remain open to poetry ideas in everyday life, nature or an overheard phrase and to write. Diane enjoys the challenge of transforming images into words to fit her poems. Her work has appeared in "El Portal," "North Dakota Quarterly," "Eunoia Review" and other literary magazines.

**Will Wells** has published three previous full-length volumes of poetry, most *recently* *Odd Lots, Scraps & Second-hand, Like New* (Grayson Books, 2017) which won the 2016 Grayson Poetry Prize and *Unsettled Accounts* (Ohio Univ./Swallow Press, 2010) which won the Hollis Summers Prize. Wells has served as a Walter Dakin Writing Fellow at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and as a Fellow at the West Chester Poetry Conference four times and the Wesleyan Poetry Conference once. Wells has earned three Ohio Arts Council Fellowships in Poetry, one NEA fellowship in poetry, and was named Ohio Poet of the Year in 2010. His poems are forthcoming or appear in current or recent issues of *Notre Dame Review*, *River Styx*, *Southwest Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *32 poems*, *Think: A Journal of Poetry & Prose*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Cortland Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Evansville Review*, *Glassworks*, *Tauganuck River Review*, *Southwest Review*, etc. He teaches at Ohio State University.

**Sarah Wofford:** Born and raised in northeast Arkansas, Sarah Wofford graduated from Arkansas State University with a degree in English. She has been published in the university's literary publication "The Tributary," as well as appearing at their Delta Blues Symposium.

Sarah considers herself to be an excellent example of what happens when 1970s punk rock sensibilities meet the homemaking habits of the 1930s. She quilts, sews, knits, and hand-embroiders, all with a mohawk whose color changes on a whim. When she's not writing or otherwise crafting she can be found playing with her nieces and nephews or her beloved pets, a cat named Sylvia and an absolute mutt of a dog named Tupelo. She likes spaceships, dragons, and post-it notes.



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Warren Woessner

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