

The background of the cover is a scenic landscape painting. It depicts a person in a small, light-colored boat on a body of water. In the distance, there are large, rugged mountains covered in patches of snow. The sky is filled with dramatic, dark clouds, with a warm, reddish-orange glow, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

Chantwood Magazine

JANUARY 2017 • ISSUE 6

The logo for Chantwood Magazine is centered within a double-lined rectangular border. The word "Chantwood" is written in a large, elegant, black cursive script. Below it, the word "Magazine" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

Chantwood
Magazine

January 2017 • Issue 6

Edited By:

Kristi Rathbun-Nimmo • David Jensen • Betty Darnall
Jackie Havens

Chantwood Magazine
January 2017 • Issue 6

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Chantwood Magazine • Issue 06 • January 2017
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*“There was a song and story: an aged Scylding, widely learned, told of
the old days; at times the fighter struck the harp to joy, sung
against chant-wood, or made a lay both true and sorrowful; the great-
hearted king fittingly told a marvelous tale...”*

Unknown, *Beowulf*

Michael Vander Does
Physics is Fickle

physics is fickle

even with numbers and symbols and curves
underlying unease still
knowing
in practice
shifting realities
will betray you

when,
for example,
you attempt a jump shot
fickle physics
so demanding
so amazing
so disappointing

attraction of bodies
goes unexplained

strange
bodies

is there an attraction
between the ball
and the empty space?

does it differ
from the empty space
around?

strange bodies

is it love
for just
a moment?
do pheromones have curves
that move beyond
tonight

we discover
this
or that
 theory
 is wrong

androstadienone full of mystery
dispersing like gravity
as you move away

The Temptation of Magic

Mary Driver-Thiel

Second semester at North Ridge High School has begun with an unrelenting cold snap, another snowstorm predicted for this evening. Distracted by the weather, Irene barely notices her students. She hates driving in snow, hates shivering in the parking lot scraping ice from her car, hates the crackling dryness of the air and its merciless slicing wind. Most of all, she despises having to face the elements alone.

She sits at her desk, unable to concentrate on the papers in front of her, recalling how much easier life had been when Arthur was alive. This last class of the day is her least favorite. The number of students who consider her Elements of Fiction course an easy A, a blow-off, their last best chance to get the credits required for graduation, is appalling. Year after year, everyone—including Irene—devolves over the semester into putting forth the least required amount of work. Today, she has tossed them a curriculum-mandated, in-class writing assignment to discuss the potency of words in *Hamlet*. She stares out the window, worried about getting home, unhappily anticipating a mind-numbing weekend grading essays.

The clock eventually ticks its way through the fifty-minute class. One by one, the students rise from their desks, drop their scribbled efforts in front of her, and slouch out the door.

“Miz Everett?” Bethé Alcine stands at Irene’s desk, the last student in the room. She’s a transfer from somewhere near New Orleans, and her peculiar accent is often difficult for Irene to decipher.

“You remember I told you ’bout my novel?” Bethé asks.

“Yes, yes, I do. How is it coming along?” Irene recalls a rash and uncharacteristic promise to read the finished manuscript.

“I finish.” Bethé smiles, her eyes shining with her accomplishment. On Irene’s desk, she places a thick sheaf of papers held together with neon-colored rubber bands. “You read it this weekend?”

“Um . . . I’m not sure I’ll have time.”

Bethé laughs, but it is not altogether a pleasant sound. “Miz Everett, you promise.”

“Well, yes, of course. I mean . . . I know I did, but I have so many other papers.”

Bethé waves her hand dismissively. “They no good fun. My story, you like.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can do.”

In the English department office, Irene pulls an extra sweater over her middle-aged bulk before bundling into scarf, mittens, and the ugly wool coat she only wears for subzero temps. She stuffs her frizzy gray hair into a knitted hat. It’s after four; everyone has left the building except Martin. As department chair, Martin Gregory has a proper office, with a glass-paneled door separating him from the general pool of cluttered desks. At the moment, his door is ajar and Irene can see light from the floor lamp he prefers to the fluorescent burn the rest of them have to endure. How nice it would be if Martin were leaving now, too, and if he offered to scrape the snow from her car. She could reciprocate by cooking dinner for him; perhaps they would go to a movie. In spite, or maybe because of his spindly build, thin ginger hair, and wire-rimmed glasses, Martin possesses an erudite charm, and Irene has harbored a secret crush on him for years. It’s tempting to pop in to say goodnight, but not in this shabby coat and pea green scarf that gives her complexion an ochre cast. With an audible sigh, she gathers her purse and tote bag and leaves the office.

The shadowed corridors are empty except for Juanita, the Hispanic woman tasked with mopping paper-strewn, scuff-marked floors after school each night. Juanita nods, her shy smile glinting with gold dental work. Irene considers, as she has before, the circumstances of Juanita’s life. How could one survive with so little English, working a grimy, thankless, minimum-wage job? What was the students’ phrase? “Sucks to be you.” Coarse, but fitting.

Irene turns the heater in her car to full blast, then brushes off the snow and scrapes at the ice on her windshield, keeping an eye out for Martin. His Ford Escort is parked one row away, snow-blanketed from head to tail lights. For a moment, she entertains the idea of cleaning it for him, but the wind gets the better of her. Tossing the ice scraper in the back seat, she climbs into her car and negotiates her way onto

the main road. As is her habit on the drive home, she contemplates future lesson plans. *Hamlet* will continue for another week before she introduces Charles Dickens' work as an example of fiction designed to effect social change. Irene is not optimistic about the students' enthusiasm for this topic, but then there is so little other than vulgar music, violent videos, and each other that enthuses them.

On the seat beside her, the tote bag sits like a fat, unfriendly pet, bulging with three classes' worth of essays and Bethé's 200-page manuscript. Bethé is the sort of over-achiever Irene has come to resent in her thirty-plus years of teaching—always asking too many questions, derailing lectures and lesson plans, and turning in papers three times the required length. Irene glares at the tote bag, wishing she had chosen some other career.

She parks in her designated space at the Deer Creek Apartment building, which boasts neither deer nor creek. There is, however, a view of the surrounding woods from the sliver of balcony attached to her tiny fourth-floor apartment. Since Arthur's passing—five years ago now—her pleasures are few, but she enjoys looking out at the woods as the seasons change. Snow-covered trees, followed by the first spring blossoms, the deep green of summer, then the fiery autumn foliage. Her apartment often smells of the vindaloo to which her neighbors are partial. Irene doesn't mind the aroma so much as the loneliness it provokes. She misses silly old Artie. How he had loved her cooking. For twenty-eight years, Irene had honed her culinary skills by keeping Artie filled with pot roast, chicken and biscuits, potato salad, and homemade strawberry shortcake. She had a passion for cooking, and no recipe was too daunting, but Artie preferred good solid American fare. No frills, plenty of butter and gravy.

Irene dumps her handbag and tote on what she refers to as the dining room table, even though there is no dining room. Her apartment consists of a main room with a drafty floor-to-ceiling sliding door, a closet-sized kitchen, one bathroom, and a bedroom that can accommodate nothing beyond her double bed, one chair, and one chest of drawers. Arthur did not leave her well-off.

She peels her layers of protective clothing, turns the thermostat up to 67 degrees, and flips on the television. After pouring herself a large scotch, she eats crackers with cheese and grades a dozen essays

while watching the second half of a detective show. When the ten o'clock news comes on, she treats herself to peanut butter cookies and cocoa, enduring the day's grim events to hear the weather forecast—more cold, snow, and wind all weekend—then she retires for the night.

In the morning, the apartment has a muted, gray cast caused by snow crusted over the sliding glass doors so that her view to the woods is obstructed. She can hear the wind howling and feels a draft even in the middle of the room.

For a while after breakfast, she potters about the apartment, tidying and dusting, avoiding essay-grading, although once she gets down to it, the work goes methodically. By late afternoon, she has finished two of the three classes. She returns the marked papers to her tote bag where Bethé's manuscript waits.

The Temptation of Magic. Irene thinks the title intriguing, if redolent of the glittery foil titles on the grocery store shelves. How stupid to have promised to read the thing, even if it might provide diversion from the utter crap she's been reading for the past several hours. She arms herself with red pens, coffee, and half a dozen peanut butter cookies, and settles down to read.

Drawn into the story on the first page by descriptions of the bayou, Irene can see massive cypress trees bedecked with swags of moss, smell sulfur-scented marshes pierced with the bones of old trees, hear the buzzing of insects in the humid air.

She finds Chantal, the teenaged protagonist, interesting. Chantal loves the bayou where she has grown up. She's pretty but shy, preferring to stroll the boardwalk of the forest preserve to hanging out at the mall, and she likes combing house sales for vintage clothing, costume jewelry, odd treasures. Her life would be perfect if it weren't for the secret crush she has on Charlie, the most handsome boy in school. She can't bear the thought that he will graduate in a few months, go off to college, and she'll never see him again.

Irene assumes much of the story is about Bethé's real life. In her experience, teenagers write about themselves. In the margin, she scribbles, "Excellent details," and resumes reading.

At a house sale, Chantal finds an old book of recipes and incantations "for all of heart's desires." Many of the ingredients in the potions are plants the girl is familiar with from her walks: may-apples,

white oak acorns, mayhaws, and mistletoe.

Irene has seen may-apples in the woods behind her apartment, but she has no idea what *mayhaws* are.

She reads on as Chantal experiments with her new find, chanting over candles, preparing special hair tonics and amulets to entice Charlie. He begins to notice her in the hallways at school, but Chantal is impatient. Graduation is only weeks away. She mixes up a love potion and slips it into his Gatorade.

Young love blooms, but there is something amiss. The handsome boy has begun to put on weight, his dark brows have grown unison, and the skin on his nose has thickened, giving him a decidedly pig-like appearance. Unsure if he was always like that or if he became that way after the spell was cast, Chantal tries to turn him away, but he pesters her, stalks her, until she is forced to flee her beautiful bayou.

It is past midnight when Irene finally gathers up the sheaf of papers thrown casually on the floor as each page was finished. The cookies sit uneaten on their paper plate, her coffee has long grown cold. Enchanted by Bethé's attention to detail, so far beyond the caliber of other students' work, Irene's head thrums with the rhythm of the prose. For a while, the odor of vinaloo has been replaced with the musky scents of swamp, the delicate perfumes of may-apple and mistletoe. She has heard the jingle-jangle of Chantal's vintage silver bangles, felt the quickening of her heart when Charlie first notices Chantal.

Irene moves to the window to close the curtains for the evening, and the drifting snow outside comes as a shock. To look out and see live oaks draped with moss shining under a full moon would not have surprised her a bit. If only the heart's desires could be captured with the ease of Bethé's enchantments.

Irene has to admit the girl has written a very good story. Tension built steadily; dialogue and diction were first-rate. It is only the ending that troubles Irene. Chantal deserves better.

In the morning, Irene succumbs to restlessness. She needs shampoo and the temptation of shopping for a little treat or two beckons. Nothing extravagant, just a small something to bolster the spirits. Digging the car from the damn snow is an effort, but the roads have been plowed, and as she drives, she thinks of Chantal, wonders if she would like

snow.

Irene hurries past the greeter whose cheery, “Welcome to Wal-Mart!” always makes her feel vaguely guilty. In the pharmacy area, she stares at the vast array of shampoos. L’Oreal, Pantene, VO 5, Suave, Dove, Finesse, Head & Shoulders. Too many choices. She’s about to grab the cheapest brand when a bright pink bottle of Herbal Essence catches her eye. Chantal used a herbal shampoo, though hers was homemade. Store-bought wouldn’t be the same, but Irene decides she will try it.

She wanders through the clothing section and a bright display of neon pink and orange hoodies. Wearing electric orange in XL is out of the question, but she could manage a scarf. She finds a nice one in sherbet pink and orange for \$4.99 that will brighten her outfits in the dreary days ahead. How she wishes she could escape the winter’s cold, go south until May, feast on jambalaya and étouffé, walk in air scented with magnolias!

The jewelry counter glitters at her, tempting in a way that Irene hasn’t been tempted in years. She remembers the jingling sound of Chantal’s bangles as clearly as if she’d really heard it. Perhaps she should buy a bracelet or two . . .

At school on Monday, Irene wears the new scarf, which draws compliments from one brown-nosing student, but if Martin notices, he says nothing. The shampoo is less successful. All day, she keeps catching the scent of something vaguely chemical, realizing belatedly that it’s her hair. She waits for Bethé’s 8th hour class. After the other students receive their graded papers with their usual casual indifference, Irene places the manuscript on Bethé’s desk.

“I’ve made a few corrections, and the ending needs work, but overall it isn’t bad. I think once you revise, we should see about finding you a publisher.”

The words tumble out before Irene realizes she has no idea how to get a novel published. Her own short stories have appeared in a few literary journals, but that’s completely different. A flash of annoyance with herself dissolves into a flush of pleasure as it occurs to her that Martin published a mystery novel some years ago. Bethé’s manuscript will be a perfect reason to consult him. She envisions the two of them poring over the pages, debating the finer points of grammar, working

together, finding compatibility, joy in each other's company and, yes, ultimately love.

"Miz Everett?"

"What? Oh, sorry. I was thinking of . . . I was momentarily distracted. What were you saying?"

"How soon do you need the new ending?"

"Oh, I think as soon as possible." Irene pauses before adding, "Perhaps I should have a copy of the manuscript, too. That way, I can go through it again in more detail. I'll copy it on the machine in the English office," she glances at her watch, "if you can wait a few minutes?"

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

Irene hopes she'll run into Martin, but the English office is deserted. On her way back to her classroom, she passes Juanita in the hallway. The women exchange polite nods of acknowledgement, something Irene regards as more a requirement of social graces than actual thoughtfulness.

That night at home, Irene nukes a Lean Cuisine, pours her customary scotch, and sits down to read over *The Temptation of Magic* once more. She tells herself that she is editing, but the red pen makes fewer and fewer marks as she's once again pulled into the story.

The details are quite extraordinary for so young a writer. When Irene comes to the part about *l'eau cheveux*, the special hair tonic Chantal concocts, she takes notes. She has the necessary ingredients: chamomile tea in the cupboard, some dried mint in the spice rack, and drawer sachets filled with rose petals. It's too tempting. She puts the manuscript down and collects her materials. In a mug from her cabinet, the one so glibly inscribed, "ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE," Irene brews her own tonic.

The next day Martin passes her in the hallway with only a curt nod of acknowledgement.

Undaunted, she approaches him later in the week. They are the only ones in the English office, and even though she hasn't figured out exactly what she wants to say, she doesn't want to waste the opportunity. His door is open, the aura of soft lamplight spilling beyond its frame.

She taps on the glass below his name. "Martin, I was wondering if I could ask your advice on a matter."

He looks up from his pile of papers, his wire-rimmed glasses perched at a slight angle on his nose. Irene has to damp down an urge to gently straighten them for him and brush back the lock of gray-blond hair that slants across his brow.

“I have a particularly gifted student who has written a novel, and I was wondering—”

“If you’re about to ask me to read it, the answer is no. I’m up to my ears in administrative work.” He sweeps his hand over the piles of papers on his desk. “It’s absolutely ridiculous the amount of crap they expect us to do.”

“I see.” Irene is about to turn away, but she remembers how Chantal persevered, despite her shyness. “Would you like some coffee? I was just about to go down to the cafeteria, and I’d be happy to bring you some.”

He looks up from the papers again. “Thank you, Mrs. Everett. That would be very nice. Let me give you some money.”

“Oh, no. This will be my treat. Black, no sugar, right?” She smiles with as much charm as she can muster. All the way to the cafeteria and back, she silently thanks Chantal.

“I appreciate the coffee, but I really haven’t time to chat,” Martin says when she returns. “There’s a meeting with the Board of Education tonight, and I’m not fully prepared.” He lifts the Styrofoam cup. “Perhaps I can return the favor next week.”

The old Irene might have flounced off at the curt dismissal, but the Chantal version of Irene smiles graciously. “That would be lovely, Martin. I’ll leave you to get on with your work, then.”

In the corridor, she passes Juanita, who smiles her golden-toothed grin from behind a yellow mop bucket. Irene smiles back, walking briskly to avoid further communication.

Over the course of the next few weeks, while she pulls unwilling students through David Copperfield’s troubles and waits for any sign of attention from Martin, Irene reads over Bethé’s story multiple times. She studies Chantal’s character and wishes some of those attributes might transfer to her own jaded disposition.

During spring break, Irene treats herself to a makeover and more new clothes that she can’t justify financially, but the compliments she receives from colleagues and even some of the students on the first

day back in class are reward enough. The puffiness under her eyes has disappeared and her skin looks brighter. She has found several of the “recipes” in Bethé’s manuscript work wonders for weight loss, mood enhancement, and general well-being.

Bethé completes the final edits in mid-May, and though they disagree about the ending (Bethé refuses to change it), Irene goes once more to Martin to ask advice. He is, as before, huddled in his office, surrounded by mountains of papers. This time, he’s staring at a computer monitor, its glow giving his face a bluish cast that’s not attractive. Irene worries he’s overtired.

“Knock, knock,” she says with a cheeriness she has to force. “Do you have a minute?”

Martin swivels his chair around. “Mrs. Everett. What can I do for you?”

“Oh, please call me Irene. Otherwise, I feel so . . .”

“Irene. What’s on your mind?”

Irene takes this as an invitation to step inside the office. There’s a chair across from Martin’s desk, but she prefers to stand, grasping the back of the chair with both hands. “I’m sure you remember I told you about my student who has written a novel. Quite a good one, actually. I’d like to help her get it published. Do you think your agent would be interested?”

Martin’s face takes on the look Irene herself uses whenever a particularly dense student makes an inane comment. “I’m afraid that’s highly unlikely. First of all, my book was published over twenty years ago, and the agent I used moved to Australia the following year.”

“What about your publisher? Do have any contacts there?”

“Absolutely nothing. The book is out of print. Has been for years. It really wasn’t very good.”

“I thought it was. Your protagonist—wasn’t his name Don?—reminded me of Sam Spade.”

“You’ve read my book?”

“Sure. They have a copy in the library.”

“I’d completely forgotten. Yes, I guess they do have a copy.” The tension in his face softens. He steepled his index fingers against his lips for a minute. “The semester ends in three weeks. I’ll have some time after that to read the manuscript and perhaps we can find a way to help

your student. Check back with me later.”

Irene fairly skips out of the office. She leaves campus that afternoon in the warmth of the first balmy spring day, delighted with the future. Her visions of working with Martin are coming to fruition. All that is required is a little patience. In a state of excitement she hasn't felt since long before Arthur's passing, Irene cleans her apartment from top to bottom, and with a naughty little gleam in her eye, drives over to Bed, Bath & Beyond and buys a new set of sheets for her bed.

She hears nothing from Martin until week's end, when he stops by her classroom.

“I need your goals and cognitive coaching assessment paragraph by the end of the day tomorrow,” he says.

“Of course. I'll have them for you in the morning.” Irene smiles, but her patience has worn thin.

The Friday before final exams, Irene escalates her endeavors. She roasts a chicken for supper. After her meal, she carefully scrapes one leg bone quite clean and leaves it on the counter to dry overnight. In the morning, a little uncomfortable with her plans but unable to resist temptation's lure, she breaks the bone into small pieces and pounds the pieces to a fine powder with mortar and pestle. That afternoon, she purchases her usual grocery items, plus fresh rosemary, Hershey's dark cocoa, extra butter, and powdered sugar. In the seafood department, she requests one fresh oyster on the half shell. May-apples grow in abundance in the woods behind her apartment.

Chantal's recipe is vague about quantities, so Irene has to estimate, but the procedure is clear. Under the light of the full moon, at midnight, she mixes the powdered chicken bone, oyster shell, may-apple, and rosemary. She holds the bowl aloft and chants: *Three times stirred, once for honor, once for love, once forever*. Then she leaves the mixture to sit in the moonlight for an hour, after which it is ready to blend with more palatable ingredients.

On Monday morning, before anyone else arrives at school, Irene places a small white bakery box containing an expertly iced miniature chocolate cake on Martin's desk.

The day drags on and on. Irene has difficulty concentrating on her lectures, simple reviews for Tuesday and Wednesday's final exams. All

day, she forces herself to stay away from the English office, feeling it would be proper for Martin to seek her out to thank her, or better yet, to call her at home that evening to tell her how much he appreciates her small gift. Tense and agitated by the time her last class begins, she is aware of a current of excitement the minute the kids come in the room. Bits of their conversation reach her over the general din of shuffling feet, chairs scraping across the floor, random cussing.

“There were, like, six paramedics, dude.”

“Yeah. They took him out on a stretcher.”

“I bet he’s dead.”

“Kyle heard the guy puked all over himself.”

“Gross.”

“Hey, Mrs. Everett, did you hear what happened?”

Irene is as susceptible to the excitement of *schadenfreude* as her students. “No. What’s going on?”

“Mr. Gregory got really sick. They had to call 911. Do you think he’s dead?”

Irene barely keeps herself from fainting. Her first thought is: *He can’t be dead. Please God.* Her second thought is: *What have I done?* “I’m sure he’ll be fine. Perhaps it was. . . something. . . something he, umm . . . ate.” She searches out Bethé, who’s digging in her backpack, oblivious.

“Or a heart attack,” says Matt.

“Yeah, I’d bet on the heart. Old guy like that. Gotta be the heart,” says Jack.

The students settle themselves in their seats. Irene feels their eyes on her, and it is all she can do to not run screaming from the room. Perspiration dampens her armpits. Her heart races. Breathe. She has to remember to breathe. She’s unaware of the passage of time until one of the boys asks if she’s alright.

“Yes. Fine. Let’s get to work.” She leads them through a review of the semester material with mechanical precision, except for her sudden reluctance to discuss Gertrude’s demise in *Hamlet*. “Read the play again if you can’t remember. It’s not my job to do the work for you.”

The last bell finally rings and the students leave. Irene debates asking Bethé to stay behind, plead with her to give the story a happier ending. Instead, she locks the classroom door, turns out the lights, and sits in the dark at her desk with her head in her hands, wondering how

she could have been so stupid. When Juanita taps on her door, Irene realizes the woman must have been waiting for her to leave. She rises and opens the door. Juanita jabbers away in her pidgin English, but Irene is too upset to feign interest or even politeness.

“*Mañana, Juanita, mañana.* I’m very busy.”

Driving home, she is so distracted she makes a wrong turn. Her apartment, her refuge, is already haunted by guilt, and her first order of business is destroying all evidence: the chicken carcass, oyster shells, rosemary, and remaining chocolate are bundled into a black garbage bag and sent down the trash chute. Curled on the sofa contemplating worst-case scenarios, Irene worries that perhaps she should have taken the bag to a dumpster on the far side of town. What if the police search the apartment building’s trash? They might find the oyster shells and chicken bones. Had those been contaminated? Was Martin deathly allergic to oysters? Will the police figure out she killed him? She does not sleep that night or the next.

Wednesday morning, she arrives just before the first bell and goes directly to her classroom. Surprisingly, a glass jar filled with lilacs sits on her desk. Years ago, students occasionally brought her flowers, but that hasn’t happened for a very long time. Perhaps they are from Bethé, who has asked twice about the edited manuscript. Irene has rebuffed each inquiry with a terse, “Not now.” More likely, someone is trying to soften her up before the final exam. Under normal circumstances, she’d be pleased, curious to know who had taken the time to be thoughtful, but circumstances were far from normal. Learning Martin’s fate is all that concerns her. In as businesslike a manner as she can summon, she gets through the day, imparting last-minute study information, administering final exams, and keeping her ears open for news. The students make no mention of Mr. Gregory, nor do the few faculty members she encounters. She isn’t about to call attention to herself by asking after him and, for the same reason, she refrains from calling the hospital.

Thursday, there are the usual end-of-term meetings in the morning, after which she cleans her classroom, packs up a box of materials she wants to keep at home over the summer, and posts final grades for her classes. Juanita comes to her room just as she is ready to leave.

“*Mis flores?* You like?” Juanita’s wide face shines.

“Yes, very nice.” Irene smiles politely.

Juanita begins jabbering rapidly in Spanish, flailing her hands about, wringing them, then clasping them over her heart. Whatever is troubling her, Irene can’t be bothered. The sooner she can get out of the building, the better. She picks up her box of materials, which brings forth a new stream of staccato Spanish from Juanita. Irene catches one word—*mañana*.

“*Si, mañana,*” she replies, then dashes from the room.

It isn’t until she’s on the highway that it occurs to her the flowers must have come from Juanita. She had said “*mis flores.*” Rudimentary as Irene’s Spanish is, she knows that means “my flowers.” How thoughtful of Juanita to bring her flowers!

Just before nine that evening, Irene’s phone rings. She doesn’t want to answer it, but the noise jangles her nerves. She has no answer machine, no caller ID, no way to know who is at the other end. Other than telemarketers and the school, she receives few calls. She fears whoever it is won’t be bringing good news. Martin must have died. Poisoned. Who would be delivering the message? School superintendent? Police? Fear buzzes in her ears as she picks up the receiver. Her voice quavers as she answers, “Hello?”

“Irene Everett, please.”

She doesn’t recognize the gravelly male voice. “This is she.”

“Oh. Irene. Yes, this is Martin Gregory speaking.”

Martin??

“Are you there? Irene?”

“Oh, yes. Martin.” Does she sound calm enough? Is he going to accuse her of poisoning him? She must ask how he’s feeling or he’ll wonder why she doesn’t. “How are you? We heard you’d been . . . not feeling well.”

“Much better, thanks. Acute appendicitis. Can you believe it? At my age?”

“Oh!” Relief makes her feel woozy. “How wonderful. . . I mean, that you’re feeling better.”

“Yes. The doctors fixed me up quite well. However, I do have a small problem. They are discharging me tomorrow, but I’m not allowed

to drive just yet. I know it's a terrible imposition, but you've always been so gracious. Could I possibly ask you to come fetch me? Perhaps I could take you to dinner next weekend as a thank you."

"Why, Martin, I'd be delighted. What time shall I be there?"

"Would nine tomorrow morning be all right?"

Irene has never known such relief, such joy. The spell worked. Martin is alive and wants to see her. With school out, her time is her own, and Martin needs her. How wonderful life is!

"I'll see you then."

All the way to the hospital, she plans the future. They will take things slowly, of course. She will begin by cooking his meals, looking after his health. They will share the trials and tribulations of their jobs, take long vacations in the summer, perhaps travel to Paris. She longs to go to Paris.

At the hospital, she's made to wait, pacing in the foyer, until Martin comes down from his room. After fifteen minutes, the worries set in: has he changed his mind? Asked someone else to fetch him? Had a relapse? Just as she's about to insist she be allowed to go to his room, he appears, pushed along in a wheelchair by a young nurse. His complexion is paler than usual, but he looks alert. The nurse maneuvers him into the car with efficiency, and soon they are cruising down the road just as Irene had always imagined.

"This is so very generous of you," Martin says.

"Not at all. I'm delighted to help." Irene pauses. "Are you hungry? I'd be happy to make some lunch for you, and don't worry about groceries. I can stop by the store after I get you settled and pick up a few things."

"Would you? I was worried about that. I hate grocery shopping at the best of times. There isn't much at the house, and now I don't have the energy to even think about it."

Irene reaches over and pats his hand. "I'll take care of everything. And I'm quite a good cook, if I do say so myself."

"I'm sure you are." Martin shifts a bit in his seat. Taking her eyes off the road for a second, Irene notices his expression is uneasy.

"Everything alright?" she asks.

“I’m afraid I have a confession,” he says. “I wasn’t feeling at all well on Monday, so I didn’t eat the lovely cake you brought me. I gave it to Juanita.”

Irene remembers the lilacs still sitting on her desk.

Lauren Suchenski

I've Got This Heart

I've got this heart
that beats on odd breaths,
that forages for old forms,
that fumbles and mumbles and tumbles down
sturdier streets not meant for these feet.

I've got this heart,
four karat gold and 9 thousand years old
aching and ageless and wild with weird wind
it creases at the seams and seems solid
at the touch
but dissolves and devolves
in the light of the sun.

I've got this heart,
tingling and twisting and turning out
at the edges. it sends blood to my brain and
rain to my face, ashes and embers and fire to my
feet. it sends huge hunks of hot hurricane bone
to feast on the front of the tip of my skull.
It wins me, it woos me, it winds me up and spins me.
It finds me when I hide in my veins
hurries me out, and hollows me in.
It follows me and finishes me
and never lets me free.

Daniel James Sundahl

Pueblos

Something happens when the pinon nuts are crushed,
When the smell rises up
Like toes curling in the mud.
She says the pinon brings forth faith, bravery.
She gathers them along the gully,
East where the elf owl burrows,
Where the quail drink with soft contented noises.
Sometimes she raises the brown wing of her hand.
She remembers her father's circle of stones,
His water sign pointing as the crow flies,
There, to the north, to the black mesa.
A hawk soars, its shadow flashing on the canyon wall.
She smiles from her chair, her soul
Sighing its way through long-leafed pines.

The Partisan's Wife

Stephen Reeves

Red curves into Bordeaux lips, “ruby, if I’m going to be romantic,” Jean says. Seen through the wine-glass the sketch has colour, life. This was of a rare Petrus vintage, like the lady’s likeness hanging on his cellar wall.

“This wine was meant for lips during the great war. But yours -” he sips, then holds the glass again to her face. “Yours I think, the first empire.”

Footsteps above pound. And his heart answers. Shakily he replaces the glass upon the table, and the liquid drips, drips over a white doily—crimson in the candlelight.

“Courage, Jean,” he says. “Courage, for the lady.”

Life dances around his walls. Vibrant blue skies, a yellow ribbon in a girl’s hair. Scenes of spring, scenes of joy. But of all the paintings he’s taken down into the cold darkness of the cellar, he keeps coming back to her; the pale, faded remnant of an artist’s study, or maybe a young man’s fascination.

“It was different when you were young,” he says to her. “When I was young, too, I think. Though it is hard to remember it now. Was it for you?”

Jean closes his eyes. He tries to summon them, those memories. Images from his youth flash with the shutter of a camera, and sometimes, the jaunt of a moving picture. But the grey has seeped through. Even the face of his beloved at her window retreats from him, retreats from colour. He sighs, and finds himself below in her parent’s garden. The rocks his younger self throws clatter against the window.

One. Two.

He stands with a start, his daydream shattered. “At my door, at my door!”

Desperation clings to his limbs, stealing warmth from fingers. Each step the men take, feels like another nail in the wood. He lurches to action. The cold of the pistol’s muzzle shocks against his profile. *Clack*. And his thumb is slick against the trigger. *Click*. Nothing more. Inaction and fear take him, and he swallows, lowering the weapon to the table. The metal clangs nervously on the inlay.

“Ami, entends-tu le vol noir des corbeaux sur nos plaines?” he sings quietly.

The footsteps are replaced by the thunder of the weight set against the door. Men shout, command him, curse at him in german.

He answers forcefully: “Ami, entends-tu les cris sourds du pays qu’on enchaîne?”

Another rattle! Jean’s body begins to quake as the wood of his door splinters. He takes the candle, over the pistol, and holds the flickering light up to his lips.

“Ohé! partisans, ouvriers et paysans.”

Thump.

“C’est l’alarme!”

Thack!

“Ce soir l’ennemi connaîtra le prix du sang.” Weaker than before.

A peace holds. The dull iron of an axe-head wiggles through the breach in his door. *The peace must hold!* He thinks, sadly, until the

cries of the men return with the sound of his door breaking.

Courage for the lady. Jean's hand finds its way back to the table, and the pistol laying there. *Strength for your brothers.* He blows out the candle.

“Et des larmes!” A whisper to the darkness.

The click of his gun waits for their answer.

Lana Bella

I Echoed the Ghosts Who Came Before

To those sinuous mist whose
chiffon smoke turned hushed
augury, where air mottled vim
and stars veined plebeian eyes,
I held with the creeping points
of black, larval memory walked
my ocean womb, like Poseidon
resin-steeped in ort of celestine,
visibility stunted by treble wind.
Bilked with rags of those little
things I still grieved, sky's suede
gloves I pressed to the brown of
my cheeks, where time strained
itself between transoceanic walls.
A fling of salt into air, I kicked to
wake, sparked over ground above
which all my hollows surged with
pale, skin flung to scree, bones
wet by weighed dew, body as one
horizontal trembling slope on ice.

Lana Bella

Debussy's La Mer

Birds and bitters laid starved—
you bent there a wraith-mystified,
exhaling adders of sea mist.
Contralto swept earthen floor
from the wreck of your treeless city,
strewn with offal supping on
camphor, red thunder in fists,
raveling loose the symmetry
of netted umlauts on phosphorous
rocks' carmine scales. Running
at angle through winter vales,
you held harshly with the waters
breathed prose of granite and
splintered moon. The swift patterns
patterned you in kind, clustering
to carbuncle pressed by strands of
bladderwracks, carried you home
to the mountain of sand, traversed
the obsidian hushful, lending you
across isles on Debussy's La Mer.

The Accidental Life Coach

Nancy Lane

The duck ringtone on his phone startled Vincent, who had fallen asleep in his recliner.

“Hi ho.”

“You sound groggy, Vinnie. Were you asleep?”

“No, I just dozed off in the chair. Thank goodness it’s you, Angela,” meaning thank goodness not Ma. Conversations with Ma always seemed endless and pointless and perhaps a little judgmental as she quizzed him about his dating frequency and whether he thought an Italian dating website might help him find a girlfriend.

“In your voicemail, Vinnie, you mentioned a class,” Angela said.

“I’ve been thinking about changing careers.”

Thirty-year-old Vincent Santorelli had worked nearly ten years at Domoto International Tracking Systems, known as, DITS, as a customer support technician, fielding customer calls and writing problem reports.

“I’m all for that, Vinnie. You deserve more.”

Vincent didn’t own a car and walked to work. On weekends, he cleaned his apartment, washed clothes in the building laundry room and watched TV or took the bus to Angela’s house to have lunch with her and his brother-in-law, Lanz.

Vincent’s mother, Gianara Santorelli, with many fifty-something best friends, regularly pressed Vincent to call so-and-so’s daughter and take her out. He phoned the attractive ones for a second date, with no

luck. He started asking the unattractive girls for a second date and was rebuffed with thin excuses as well. One girl seemed more genuine. She said, "Vincent, you're really nice and not bad looking, but I don't want to ride the bus on dates."

"It's a two-week Community College course, How to Become a Life Coach, Monday and Wednesday from seven PM to nine PM," Vincent told Angela. "It starts next week."

"How can somebody become a life coach with just four classes?"

"The college helps with job placement," he said. "I phoned the counselor. She said some firms hire without requiring special accreditation."

On Monday night, Vincent slid into a student desk in the back row of the class and watched as others filled in all the seats.

"Popular class, it seems," he said to a young, red-headed woman side-stepping into the row in front of him.

"Easy 'A,'" she said.

He smiled, but she had turned.

The instructor, middle-aged Muriel Bennett, began her lecture before the sign-in roster and last copy of the syllabus reached Vincent.

"Let's be clear," Mrs. Bennett said, "life coaching is not therapy. You can achieve a satisfying career in life coaching without the educational requirements for becoming a therapist. Specific goals, that's what life coaching is about. You will learn how to help your coachees identify specific life improvement goals and reach those goals through actions. Simple, isn't it?"

Vincent phoned Angela Monday after class and asked for her help with his first homework assignment, a list of improvement goals for his

own life. On Wednesday evening, as students ambled into the classroom, he pulled a paper folded in quarters from his sweater pocket and smoothed the paper flat.

“Did you finish the homework?” he said, leaning forward to engage the redhead, who again sat in front of him.

“No,” she said. “My friend who took the class last term told me Bennett doesn’t collect the homework. We’re only graded on the final test, multiple-choice.”

He listened carefully to the lectures but didn’t bother with the homework going forward. Three days after the test, his phone quacked. Mrs. Bennett congratulated him on earning an ‘A’ for the class and offered to forward his name and number to a friend in the life coaching industry who needed additional associates.

A week later, the bus lurched to a stop one block from the County Children’s Learning Center, which had contracted with Linda Hyatt & Associates to provide life coaching services to children in protective custody. Linda had given Vincent a briefcase, with her company logo on the side, and instructions for his first assignments, one at the county school and the other at Mystic Woods Community, an assisted living facility. Unready to commit to the career change, he had arranged a couple days off from his job at DITS to try the life coaching assignments.

“These children have endured family dysfunction,” said Bonnie Wilson, the county school director, as she walked Vincent around the facility, with its classrooms, living areas for the children and house mothers and, outside, a well-appointed playground surrounded by a chain link fence with a locked gate for safety. “They have uncertain futures. I want them to feel they have a degree of control over their outcomes. I trust you can help them.”

Mrs. Wilson escorted Vincent into the library alcove where preteens, three girls and seven boys, fidgeted in their chairs at a conference table. “This is Mr. Santorelli,” Mrs. Wilson told them. “He’ll

help you learn new things about yourselves and have fun, too.” She made a slight bow and left the room.

Twenty eyes focused on Vincent, a sea of eyes ready to drown him, take him down by exposing how unsure he felt. His face and neck burned. These formidable children before him, outnumbering him ten to one, might refuse to cooperate. What could he do? A red neon sign flashed, “FAILURE,” in his aching head.

“Mr. Santorelli,” a small voice interrupted his plague of thoughts. “Mr. Santorelli, there’s a spider on your briefcase.” Eyes off Vincent, the children stared at the spider atop the ampersand in the ‘LH & A’ logo on the briefcase he had laid on the table.

Vincent’s first impulse, to take off his shoe and beat the spider, dissolved as he looked into the faces of the young wards of the county. The pulsing, red neon sign in his head turned green and flashed, “HERO.” He pulled a pen from his shirt pocket and pushed it under the terrifying little monster. The spider clung to the pen. Vincent walked to the window, opened it with his other hand and shook the spider outside. He shut the window and let out his breath. Applause and cheers rocked the alcove. The children gave him thumbs up and exchanged fist bumps among themselves.

“Thank you, Mr. Santorelli,” said a girl wearing her hair in a braid.

“What do we do now, Mr. Santorelli?” asked the boy who had reported the eight-legged interloper.

Vincent explained goal setting and action plans, giving examples about getting good grades or becoming the best at tether ball. He withdrew forms from his briefcase. “Please write your name and age at the top of the page. I’ll help you write goals on the front of the page. Tomorrow morning, we’ll turn the page over and I’ll help you write down actions.”

The children picked up pencils Mrs. Wilson had left on the table

and began writing. If anyone looked stuck or confused, Vincent worked with them one-on-one. He conferred separately with each of the boys and two of the girls.

The third girl, the one with her hair in a braid, wrote non-stop. She flipped the page over and pushed the pencil along - definitely not following directions. Vincent wanted to help her, but his time was up. He'd have to run to catch the bus to get to his appointment at the Mystic Woods Community. He collected the ten pages, slid them into his briefcase and assured his coachees he'd return in the morning.

Yolanda Craig, the Life Enrichment Director at Mystic Woods, welcomed Vincent with a hug. "I talked our director, Mr. Canfield, into starting a life coaching program. You see, we can do only so many sing-along music afternoons or field trips to the alpaca farm. We need something focused on individuals, something to tap into their previous professional lives or mastery of home management, help them re-experience personal achievement."

Roger and Adele, in wheelchairs, and Marge and Shirley, with walkers, eyed Vincent as he deposited his briefcase upon the bingo table in the activities room where Yolanda suggested they work.

"So, Fancy Pants, you got a rabbit up your sleeve?" Roger said.

"Pay no attention to Roger," Marge said. "We ignore him because he's such a nasty man."

"He's narcissistic and maybe even psychotic," Shirley added.

Adele smiled and shook her head.

Vincent explained the process to his four coachees. Roger tore up the form Vincent handed him. "This is silly, Fancy Pants. You think I'm going to write down what I want so you can make sure I don't get it?"

"No, Roger, I want you to succeed. That's why . . ."

“Hush, Fancy Pants. I’m joshing with you.” Roger grabbed another form.

Marge and Shirley asked for help, so Vincent pulled up a chair between them. Roger wheeled to the end of the table and scribbled across his page while cussing under his breath. Adele sat with pen poised above the page, but the pale eyes behind her glasses looked up and away. She’s been transported to another time and place, thought Vincent of Adele’s trance like pose.

He heard a clattering of clashing canes, walkers, and wheelchairs and turned to see the late afternoon bingo players storm the room, claiming spaces at the table beside the coachees and passing bingo cards around.

“Oh dear, Vincent, I’ll hurry and write something,” Adele said.

Vincent scooped up the coachees’ pages. “I’ll see you all tomorrow and we’ll work on writing actions to achieve our goals.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Roger sneered.

After grocery shopping, dinner and the TV news, Vincent placed the pages from his briefcase on his dinette table and read them. The boys all included something like his tetherball example, substituting dodge ball, basketball or bean tossing. One boy thought of passing his future driver’s license test on the first try. The girls wrote goals about improving grades. Vincent felt satisfied with his coaching of the children until he came to the last page, the one written by the girl he didn’t have time to help individually.

“Brandy T 12.

Dear Mr. Santorelli, I must find Grandma. My father died two years ago. My mother is in prison because of drugs and bad checks. She kept me away from Grandma. Grandma means everything to me. She

showed me how to braid my hair and write thank you notes. She read to me and baked maple cookies for me. I need Grandma to see all the good grades I get and how my hair is always neat in a braid. I need to ask her about things. I cry every night because I don't know where she is. I want her to know where I am. I want to tell her I love her. Please, please, please help me."

Vincent's phone quacked just as he finished reading Brandy's words.

"Hi ho."

"Vinnie, too busy to call your mother once in a while?"

He extricated himself from the call after thirty minutes and reread Brandy's page. The pencil marks blurred through his tired eyes and scattered and reformed on the page into "S.O.S." He blinked, shook his head and shoved all the pages into his briefcase.

The next morning the library alcove vibrated with the children's excited buzzing. Vincent returned each child's page and suggested actions for the children's goals. Pencils clicked and children whispered and giggled among themselves.

He motioned Brandy to a pair of chairs just outside the alcove. Brandy's pale eyes reminded him of someone else, but he couldn't place the person.

"Brandy, there are actions you can take to find your grandmother," he said. "You could write a letter to her if you remember her address."

"Mr. Santorelli," Brandy said. "She isn't there anymore. I wrote a letter. It came back undelivered. I snuck out of school and took the bus to 2021 Oak Street. The house was empty, with a sign on the gate, 'NO TRESPASSING'."

"Does Mrs. Wilson have your grandmother's address?"

“Just the old address, the one I already have.”

“Did you ask the neighbors?”

“Yes, most had just moved there and didn’t know her. The woman across the street knew her but hadn’t seen her in over a year.”

“You should phone the prison, ask your mother if she knows.”

“I’m in protective custody. I’m not allowed to phone my mother until my sixteenth birthday. But you could phone and ask her. Please, Mr. Santorelli.”

“Maybe I can. I promise I’ll look into it.” Brandy smiled and placed her hand over her heart.

After helping the children write actions, Vincent told them he or another associate would check their progress in a few weeks. Brandy waved good-bye as Vincent hurried out the door to catch the bus.

He reviewed the elders’ pages as the bus crawled through traffic, making five stops on the way to Mystic Woods. Marge and Shirley had written about making better quilts and baking creations in the facility kitchen, especially maple cookies as delicious as Adele’s. They both had written their desire to “get rid of Roger.” Marge had drawn an unhappy face on the page. Roger’s goals were to move into hospice and live there forever. Adele had written, “I must get home to leave a note.”

Vincent met with his coachees in the activities room. He suggested Marge and Shirley borrow quilting books from the library, make bake plans with the facility cook, ask Adele’s help with the maple cookies and treat Roger cordially to elicit his better nature. The two ladies remained skeptical about getting along with Roger.

“Roger, please explain your goals,” Vincent said as he took a seat next to Roger.

“Sure, Fancy Pants,” Roger said. “The hospice unit is upstairs.”

“Roger, you can’t go to hospice unless you’re dying, but you want to live forever, right?”

“Right. You see, Huey, the predictor cat, lives upstairs. He visits the hospice residents all day and at night, if someone is going to die before morning, he gets on their bed, right up to their chest. Then the caregivers gather the family together. I’ve always wanted a cat. I love their purring. It’s the most heavenly sound. My mother wouldn’t let me have a cat. She preferred dogs. I married young, and my wife, Anne, was allergic to cats.”

Roger looked away momentarily and sniffled before continuing.

“I had a stroke and Anne died, so I had to move here. Stupid Canfield won’t let me have a cat. If I could have a cat, I’d be happy and maybe even pleasant to be around.”

“Why don’t you go upstairs and visit with Huey?” Vincent said.

“Canfield banned me from hospice because I’ve been nasty to the residents. The relatives can’t stand to see me around their dying loved ones.”

“Okay, Roger, how about if you start being pleasant to everyone? When somebody eventually has to move upstairs, you’ll be welcome to visit them and see Huey, too.”

“You’re not as dumb as you look, Fancy Pants. Let me mull that over.” Roger wheeled away, humming the theme song from *Cats*.

Adele rolled up next to Vincent. “I want to go to my old house and leave a note on the gate.”

“Why? Where’s your old house?”

“It’s a couple of miles from here. It’s vacant now. My husband built the house, with a huge front porch and wisteria vines along the railing.” Adele again seemed in a trance, seeing a past life filled with good times. “My husband died five years ago, and then my son, two years ago. I had to leave the house when I fell and broke my hip. I couldn’t manage the stairs anymore. I must leave a note on the gate.”

“Adele, you could write a note and give me the address. I’ll put the note on the gate for you.”

Adele placed her hand over her heart and smiled, but the smile seemed pasted on her blank face. “I have stationery in my room. I’ll write that note and put it in an envelope with the address.” Adele wheeled down the hall.

While waiting for Adele, Vincent phoned Bonnie Wilson to find out how to contact Brandy’s mother in prison, but she told him not to because of the protective custody order. Fear of failure, of letting Brandy down, crept over him. He needed more days to work on his life coaching assignments, so he phoned his friend, Lenny, who worked the swing shift at DITS. Lenny agreed to trade shifts for a few days if Vincent would start right away.

Almost four PM and Lenny’s shift started at five. Vincent still waited for Adele. After ten more minutes, Yolanda came over and handed him an envelope. “Adele, asked me to give this to you. She’s in her room with a caregiver. She suffers from depression, so we keep an eye on her. She told me to thank you.” He slipped the envelope into his briefcase and left.

On his way to work, Vincent dropped the briefcase at his apartment and grabbed a jacket from a hook by the door. Darkening clouds portended a chilly walk to work and a cold and possibly wet walk home at one AM. He walked a block and a half, rounded the corner and encountered a crowd on the sidewalk, all eyes looking up into the branches of a giant maple, with its thick, long roots bulging through the tree lawn. He recognized the red-headed woman from his life coaching

class and edged around others to find a place beside her.

“Hey, remember me from Community College?”

“Can you climb a tree?” the redhead replied.

“Sure. Why?”

“See the one-eyed cat.” The redhead pointed. “He’s a neighborhood stray. Everyone feeds him, but no one owns him. A dog chased him up this tree. He’s meowing but won’t come down.”

“If he got up there, he’ll come down,” Vincent said. “Leave smelly food, like tuna, at the base of the trunk.”

“That’s not right,” the redhead said. “I volunteer at an animal shelter. I know cats can get stuck in a tree. Why won’t you help?”

“What do you want me to do? And why are you here? Do you live nearby?”

“I live up the street.” She handed him a business card for the animal shelter. “Climb the tree and get the cat and take him to the shelter. If he continues living on the street, that dog will eventually kill him. I can find him a good home when he’s at the shelter. I’d stay to help but I’m on my way to the hospital. My sister is having her baby.”

“I don’t have a cage or a carrier,” Vincent said.

“Put him in a pillowcase and secure it closed,” she said.

“How can I get him in a pillowcase?”

“This cat is a greeter, real friendly. Just pick him up by the scruff of the neck and lower him into the pillowcase,” she said, her voice trailing off as she left.

Others, having heard their conversation, left also, perhaps feeling unneeded, thought Vincent, because he was the luckless guy assigned to rescue the cat. Running late, he decided to continue on to work and check the tree later on his way home. Perhaps the cat, having rescued himself by then, would be busy menacing rats in some alley. Nice to know the redhead lived nearby and he had an excuse to drop by the animal shelter sometime and get acquainted with her.

At work, another customer support technician clicked problem reports on a keyboard. Vincent poked his head around the cubicle partition, expecting to see Lenny's office mate, Harold. But when the desk chair spun around, he felt as if struck by lightning, or as he imagined that would feel – tingly, breathless, feet off the ground. A young black woman, embodying all the silky, shimmering, attractive women of the movies and all the everyday women, of any color or ethnicity, whose hair, skin, shape, fragrance or combination thereof had at some time disrupted his brain waves, smiled up at him.

“Hi. I'm Candy Doppler.”

He forgot his thoughts about the cat and the redhead. He stammered his name and a few pleasantries. Between answering customer calls in the next hours, he and Candy chatted. No food since breakfast, his stomach grumbled and he hoped Candy didn't hear it. Near midnight, he felt zombie-like, craving sleep in the last hour of the shift. One-on-one with a beautiful woman before him, and he could barely keep his eyes open or speak coherently.

At one AM, rain pelting him, jacket hood over his head, he ran in the quiet darkness of the sidewalks, wanting to get home, inside and warm, and fall into his bed for a ten-hour pillow hug. He flipped the furnace switch on in the apartment, pulled off his wet jacket and wrestled a dilemma – eat or sleep – he needed to do both. Sleep could wait a bit longer. He threw open the cupboard door, and his eyes fell upon a can of tuna. Oh no! He remembered the cat.

Gianara Santorelli had raised Vincent and Angela to do right, and

that included helping people and animals whenever they could. He thought of all the poor animals Angela had rescued. Back on the wet sidewalk, he scanned both sides of the street, hoping to see the one-eyed cat peeking out from under a parked car or sheltering under a porch awning. He carried a pillowcase, a Christmas tie his mother had given him and a zip lock bag full of tuna in oil in his jacket pockets.

He rounded the corner and stopped. No one was out. A streetlight near the giant maple illuminated rain falling on branches and on the cat, still high in the tree, exactly where he had last seen him. He called, "Kitty, here kitty," but the rain muffled his voice and the cat didn't move. He had climbed trees as a boy, but this maple, having no low branches, was not a climbing tree.

A light came on in the window of an apartment in the building where branches of the maple reached to the second floor. Somebody was awake at two AM. Vincent entered the unlocked building entrance, bounded up the stairs and knocked on the apartment door.

"Who is it?" a man's voice boomed.

"I'm trying to rescue a cat in this tree by your window," Vincent said.

"I know who you are," the man said as he opened the door. "I was on the sidewalk earlier and saw you talking to the redhead. Come on in."

The man opened the window for Vincent to lean out. Vincent grabbed a thick branch with both hands and hoisted his body up to straddle the branch. He scooted along the branch toward the V where it met the tree trunk. Not so bad, he thought, until he heard the window shut and turned to see the apartment light go out. A few minutes later, the man exited the building, got into a car parked across the street and drove off.

The rain stopped. The cat, on a limb on the opposite side of the

tree, didn't move. Vincent dripped tuna oil on his branch to entice the cat to come over. While waiting, he thought about Candy. Candace Doppler's family had lived in Japan for ten years because of her father's business. She learned Japanese as a child. During swing shift, DITS received many service calls from Japan and therefore paid Japanese-fluent technicians highly. Candy had suggested he learn Japanese. The thought amused him. He leaned forward to rest his cheek against the wet tree trunk, and he slept for hours, even in his precarious position.

He woke to find the sun up and the one-eyed cat sitting by him on the branch. He grabbed the cat by the scruff of the neck and lowered him into his pillowcase, which he secured with his Christmas tie.

"Hey, buddy, are you a protestor or a nut case?" a police officer yelled.

Once Vincent explained his situation, the officer radioed for a utility company crew to rescue him with their cherry picker. He walked home, cradling the cat in the pillowcase and pleased with himself for doing what had seemed impossible.

He let the cat out in the bathroom with a plate of chicken Vienna sausages, a bowl of water and a litter box improvised from shredded newspaper in a plastic dish pan. He ate oatmeal and crawled into bed at seven AM. The cat's meowing awakened him at eleven-thirty.

Vincent headed to the bus stop with the cat in the pillowcase and Adele's note in his jacket pocket along with the business card for the animal shelter. He planned to drop the cat off at the shelter and then find Adele's old house so he could leave her note on the gate.

As the bus groaned to a stop where a long line of riders waited to get on, he pulled out Adele's envelope and read the address, 2021 Oak Street. That sounded familiar. He read her note: "To Whom It May Concern – I, Adele Tandy, lived here. I moved to assisted living. If you know my granddaughter, Brandy Tandy – where she is now or where she has been - please contact me at Mystic Woods Community."

Vincent sprang up, lifted his pillowcase from the seat beside him and bolted for the back door of the bus. He jogged a mile to Mystic Woods, where the automatic doors parted for him as he darted to the unattended reception desk. He rang the desk bell and waited. No one came. He rang again and again. He could wait no longer and ran down the hall, where he met Adele as she wheeled toward the dining room.

“Adele, just who I wanted to see,” he said. “I’ve a wonderful surprise.”

“Oh, Vincent, do you have something in that pillowcase for me?” Her eyes widened as she glimpsed movement.

“No, this is a cat,” he said.

“For Roger?”

“No, no, Roger mustn’t see it. He can’t have a cat. He’d get in trouble with Canfield. I’m taking this cat to the shelter, but we’re going somewhere else first. Where can I hide this cat until we get back?”

“The girls already made my room up. So you can put it in there. They won’t be back.”

“Okay.” Vincent eased the pillowcase under Adele’s bed and closed the door as they left.

He wheeled Adele out the automatic doors to the street to meet the bus and helped her onto the wheelchair lift device. They exited the bus at the fifth stop, and he pushed Adele another block to the county school. On the way to the front entrance, they walked along the playground fence where children at recess chased soccer balls.

“Stop, Vincent,” Adele screamed.

Vincent spotted Brandy, braid bouncing side-to-side, running toward them across the field and to the fence. She bounded to the locked

gate, where she pulled up and over the top. She stepped to Adele's wheelchair and threw her arms around her sobbing grandmother.

That's when Vincent noticed the surveillance camera above the gate. Next he noticed the burly security guard bearing down on him. The guard demanded a photo ID from Vincent and retained it as he escorted the three through the front entrance and into Bonnie Wilson's office. Brandy and Adele smiled and cried while answering Mrs. Wilson's questions. Mrs. Wilson invited them to go to the patio for a lengthy visit and offered to bring them iced tea and sandwiches.

Vincent phoned Mystic Woods to inform Yolanda about Adele.

"Vincent, everyone has been worried about Adele," Yolanda said. "You should have signed her out. Oh, and do you know anything about this cat Roger has?"

"Oh, dear! I'm sorry about the cat," Vincent said. "I was on my way to the animal shelter with it."

"Well one of the staff looked for Adele in her room and saw a pillowcase crawling around on the floor. When she opened it, a cat ran out and into the hall. Roger scooped it up. He won't let anyone take it from him. If Mr. Canfield sees it, Roger will be evicted. Please come back and get it."

"But Adele is visiting with her granddaughter. I can't rush her."

"Come right away, Vincent. I'll send the Mystic Woods shuttle bus to bring Adele back later."

When the automatic doors at Mystic Woods opened for Vincent, a white-haired woman with a small terrier on a leash walked out.

"Are you a resident here?" he asked the woman.

"Yes, I live here."

“I thought pets aren’t allowed here.”

“Trixie’s a service dog. Doctor’s orders, you know - emotional health. She’s my companion dog. The facility must allow service animals. It’s the law.”

“Can doctors order a companion cat?”

“Sure, my doctor has several patients with a companion cat.”

Vincent found Yolanda at the reception desk. “Does Roger have a doctor?” he asked.

“Yes, Dr. Argentina is his doctor. In fact, he’s doctor to several of our residents. He’s upstairs in the hospice unit right now.” Vincent told Yolanda about Roger needing a doctor’s order to keep the cat. She agreed to send Dr. Argentina to Roger’s room when he finished his visit upstairs. Vincent waited with Roger.

“Vincent,” Roger said, “thank you so much for what you’re doing.” He offered a handshake as the one-eyed cat snuggled against his neck and purred like an idling motorcycle. “You’re one helluva life coach, my friend.”

On the bus ride home from Mystic Woods, Vincent smiled to himself as he thought about Candy and seeing her at work again soon. His phone quacked as he was about to leave his apartment for the swing shift at DITS.

“Hi ho.”

“Vincent, this is Linda Hyatt. I’m sorry, but I have to fire you.” Linda told him she had learned of the incident reported by the security guard at the county school and of Vincent’s failure to sign Adele out from the Mystic Woods facility.

“Vincent,” Linda said, “you broke the cardinal rule of life coaching.

You got personally involved with the coachees and tried to solve their problems yourself.”

That evening at work, Vincent told Candy about his early morning cat rescue; his day with Brandy, Adele and Roger; and his getting fired as a life coach.

“Wow, you did so much good today,” Candy said. “You’re a kind man. If that makes you less as a life coach, it makes you more as a man.” Vincent felt himself blush.

At shift end, Candy invited him to an all night movie theater. “It’s in the Emerald District,” she said. “The bus stops right in front. They show foreign movies, with subtitles. We can watch a Japanese movie so you can hear the language in case you want to learn. I think Kagemusha is still playing.”

He would go see Godzilla in Japanese without subtitles just to be with Candy. On their bus ride to the theater, he learned Candy lived in the popular Emerald District, with its many eateries, high-end boutiques, salons, jazz clubs, and fine jewelry stores. She owned a restored Pontiac GTO her father had given her, but she preferred riding the bus during the week to avoid parking hassles. On weekends she liked driving through the countryside.

In the next weeks, as spring dried into summer and newly leafed tree branches threw punches of pink and white blossoms, Vincent found himself thinking about Candy non-stop: her smile and her laugh, the way she dressed, how her hair smelled as fresh as honeysuckle. He fell in love with Candy and Candy with him. He traded jobs with Lenny to go on swing shift permanently, and Candy taught him how to speak Japanese well enough to pass his proficiency test and receive a promotion and pay raise.

At the close of their shifts at DITS, early mornings found them patronizing all-night spots in the Emerald District or snuggling on the couch at her place or his to watch a movie before showers, bed and a

fresh afternoon for stopping in at the library or taking in a new exhibit at the museum. On weekends, they drove to Silver Creek Park to hike and pick wildflowers. As summer surrendered to autumn and afternoon cloud bursts doused the trails more often than not, they switched from hiking to reading poetry in the rain, bringing a take-out basket from Banana Bandana Bakery or Quiche Creations and poetry books from the library to the park's sheltered picnic tables.

In early November, after their Friday night shift, the two watched a movie and Candy remarked on the chill in Vincent's apartment. The building manager had said the heater needed repair. Vincent went to his closet to get a sweater for Candy, which Candy wrapped tightly around her. She heard a paper crinkle in the pocket and pulled out a page folded in quarters.

"That's my homework from life coaching class," he said and took the page from her. "Would you like to hear my five life improvement goals from six months ago?"

Candy nodded.

"One – get a better job. Two – learn something new. Three – get a girlfriend."

Candy smiled.

"Four – make three new friends, not counting the girlfriend."

"Well, that would be Roger, Adele, and Brandy," she said.

He nodded and read the last goal to himself. "I haven't achieved this one yet."

"What is it?" she said.

"Five – get married."

“So, have you written an action for that one?”

He turned the page over, jotted something and handed the page to Candy.

She read.

“Well?” he said.

“Yes, Vincent, I’ll marry you.”

He drew her to him and whispered in her ear, “We’ll cancel our country drive today.”

“Why?” she said.

“We’ll be too busy shopping for the best diamond ring I can afford.”

On Christmas Eve, Vincent and Candy joined the residents of Mystic Woods Community for an eggnog and cookies celebration.

“I named my cat, ‘Jolly,’” Roger said. “I’m getting so much attention from the ladies now that I have him.” Jolly sat on Roger’s lap, kneading his knee and purring. “Shirley hurries each morning to get me a cup of tea before Marge can do it, but then Marge brings me a plate of cookies.”

Brandy, who had been given permission to stay in Adele’s room over Christmas, sat in the lobby on an ottoman in front of Adele’s wheelchair. She and Adele presented Vincent with a glitter-adorned thank you card, decorated with a heart border.

Brandy handed Candy a Christmas tin. “For you and Mr. Santorelli, Grandma and I made pumpkin bread.”

Adele reached to Candy for a hug. “We hope to come to your

wedding, if you want us, that is," she said.

"Yes, we'll feel honored to have you," Candy told her.

Needing three hours for the drive to the home of Gianara and Salvatore Santorelli for a Christmas feast, with Angela, Lanz and other relatives and friends, Vincent and Candy bid farewell and Merry Christmas to their Mystic Woods friends and hurried through the brisk cold to get into Candy's car.

"Do your parents know we're interracial?" Candy said.

"I told Ma you are beautiful, black, sweet and the smartest person I know."

"What did she say?"

"She told me I'd better have a wonderful wedding soon before you change your mind."

Light snow fell on the windshield as Vincent turned up the car heater.

Melissa Fitzgerald

Under an apple tree

He tastes like apples

I bite &

he's crisp.

His skin,

sweet.

At his core

seeds of good

& bad.

Plant trees in the

hollow

of my chest;

my fingers

will sprout

leaves &

fall

over and over

into you.

Your bark is rough,

I like it.

Splinters in

all the right

places.

Skin pink

& raw & swollen;

Well spring

sap

I'll lick

it up &

out fruit

blooms, new

seeds.

Take me
under an apple tree.
You taste like apples
already,
sweet
& a little bit
rotten,
I like it.

Jac Shortland

“how do they know when it’s time?”

‘Come in or you’ll miss the swifts.’

I’m trying to get the time right for the egg.

‘See them on the sycamore...watch now

they’ll all take off and do circles

and land on another tree....and phwoop

...they’ll do it over again.’

My thoughts are with the bird that
has to judge when to fly south.

I place a banana on the tray,
in case she can’t stomach the egg.

We hold off awhile
on the tablets to be swallowed.

Her little dog opts out of the walk.

I’ve left it too late, again.

I do one round of the Lough
in the dusk light.

The swifts have turned their
energies from flight to sound,
to a syncopated tuning up,
or tuning down, a backing track
to the frenetic calling of
the bigger birds on the water below,
all making for the marsh isle,
eventually to quieten and settle.

I'll go back to help her to bed
and give her *'the dreaded pills'*
and the plastic pudding bowl,
for the empty retching.
I know she'll blame *'the oul Dialysis'*
and fuss about and fret a bit
and let her hot foot hang out of the bed.
Eventually she'll settle down, quiet.

Baradore

Peter Ryan

What Barry wanted more than anything was her own entry in the *Encyclopedia of Mythical Creatures*. She already knew more or less what it would say:

BARADORE

A large dog from the Swiss Alps, identical to a Saint Bernard with one peculiar feature: the Baradore boosts a thick green stem, which sprouts from its cerebral cortex and out through its forehead. When in bloom, the stem's bulb blossoms into an enormous orange rose with red fringes. The Baradore is said to have been granted the power of speech and is highly intelligent. Thought to be inspired by, or a comedic variation of, the unicorn. (See also: Saint Bernard, Dog).

Barry vacillated between *highly intelligent* and simply *intelligent*. The former ran the risk of appearing vain, but the latter was less specific. People might think rolling over or shaking hands was “highly” intelligent for a dog, but that was something slightly less than what she meant.

Not all myths see their names in print. Barry knew that. Some were born and died before their tales were even spoken out loud. Others were told only once or twice among friends, or by parents to their children as they tucked them into their beds. The “Baradore,” as it happened, was invented by a mother of two in New Jersey. She had been quite happy to have struck upon the idea, but her youngest, Tyrese, had quickly decided that he was “too old for stories about talking dogs.” And that had been the end of it—her name had not been uttered since.

Because there had only been one telling, there was only one “Baradore” in the Land of Myth, and she needed no other name to distinguish herself. She was just “Baradore.” Or “Barry,” for short.

“You’re braver than I am, Barry” Glenda admitted, “If there was no one left to tell my story, I’m not sure I’d see the point.”

Glenda was a basilisk. The basilisks had—more or less—adopted Barry as one of their own. They were generally a friendly bunch, if a bit cynical and blunt in their manner of speaking. Fortunately, Barry avoided eye contact as a natural habit, so there was never any risk of being turned to stone.

“This community goes one day without a story,” she added, “and folks round here start to panic.”

The Basilisks lived in the Bog of Sorrows: a wetland marking the border between the Lost Woods and the Royal Forest. The woods were lousy with “Big Bad” Wolves and headless horsemen, but the Royal Forest catered more to wood elves and burly, clean-shaven bandits—mostly the ideological type, who stole only from the villainous, or romantic heroes, who stole only until they had earned enough so that they could marry their beloved. Only a very few were truly cruel. Barry had met three Robin Hoods in her time. All three were hunters as well as thieves, but only one seemed to take great delight in the sport, and the killing of woodland creatures. Though she supposed there was no inherent reason why Robin Hood couldn’t be cruel to his prey, she felt it somehow made him unworthy of the name.

“The point?” Barry wasn’t even sure she knew what Glenda meant. What was the point of anything? To have fun? To eat, and sleep, and rest? To be kind to others?

The marshes themselves were empty, save the basilisks and a few mournful spirits. They grazed over its ericaceous shrubbery, whispering secrets heard only by the cattails, or weeping in obnoxious, exaggerated moans over the weight of their own sins. They loved to recount the petty offenses they had committed when they had been among the living—in startling detail. It kept Barry up some nights. Just as the moisture of the bog kept her uncomfortably damp and chilly.

“Yes, Barry,” Glenda rejoined, “The point. Why do you even bother getting out of bed in the morning?”

Barry furrowed her brow in deep concentration.

“I would get thirsty,” she decided, “after a while.”

She flapped her jowls, flinging congealed strings of drool out from both sides. They draped themselves over the reeds.

They found a patch of solid ground not far from the woods. Barry shook the water from her fur coat as best as she could. Then she ripped up a clump of grass with her teeth and started to mulch. Glenda, to kill time, licked the green moss from a stone.

Just as Barry was beginning to circle around a dry spot in order to settle in for a long nap, three figures emerged from the thick of the Lost Woods, their eyes hidden beneath blood red hoods.

One was taller and fatter than the others. She barely fit into her clothes—which seemed to have been made for a small child. The others, being children themselves, wore similar outfits but with a better fit. All three carried large nets—big enough to nab a bird or a squirrel.

“Run!” Glenda shrieked, even though simply glaring at the trio would have likely been her best defense. She squirmed under a shrub, kicking up a whirlwind of muddy water behind her.

Barry tried to run through the marsh, and though she easily outpaced the Little Red Riding Hoods—or the Red Riders, as they liked to call them—she was quickly winded, and was forced to take a break, nestling into the bog so that the water nearly bubbled up into her nose. Then she lifted her head back up again and began panting loudly. It was a warm day, and her brown and white coat was overdue for a good shedding.

“Ain’t no lizard,” the larger of the trio announced derisively, as he splashed through the water.

When the others didn’t answer, he pulled the cotton balls from his ears.

“If you said somethin’,” he added, “Can’t hear you on account of these balls.”

When the others still did not respond, he slapped the second tallest hard on the shoulder. The Red Rider glanced up. Even under her hood, Barry could now see that the girl was blindfolded with a strip of red cloth.

“I can hear you just fine,” the girl said, “Put those cotton balls back in your ears. Some of ‘em can turn you to stone just by the sound of their voice.”

“And some of ‘em with the eyes,” the giant Red Rider said, as if reading a script he had spent a great deal of time rehearsing.

“So I’ll be your ears,” the blindfolded girl said, nodding agreeably,

“You be my eyes. That way, at least one of us will survive.”

The third Red Rider removed her hood. She wore a strip of red cloth over her mouth and nose. She said something, but it was muffled by the fabric, so she simply pointed at Barry and glared.

“Cut up the pooch,” the blindfolded girl interpreted, “Until she tells us where the Basilisks are hiding. Or until she’s dead.”

The giant Red Rider stomped toward Barry, his impossibly large hands stretched out in front of her like a cartoonish Frankenstein.

“Bite her, Barry!” Glenda shouted.

So Barry did.

She hadn’t thought that she had bitten down particularly hard, but the blood from the Red Rider’s hand gushed so high that it squirted into the brute’s eyes, and formed a pool of red in the damp moss beneath him.

“Ah! Ah! Ah!” the Red Rider shrieked. Other than staring at her finger in the hopes the worst would pass, she did nothing to stop the bleeding.

The blindfolded girl drew a sword from the sheath that was slung behind her back, but there was a fierce snarl and a hiss as something arose from the shallow water, which gave her pause.

A Saint Bernard with tarry black fur and glowing red eyes stepped forward, emerging from a cloud of ashy mist. An orange rose bloomed from its forehead—just like Barry’s—but it pulsated with a hypnotic beat, its leaves stretching and relaxing, folding forward and back again. The creature was twice her size, and its fangs twice as sharp.

The blindfolded Red Rider drew a scabbard from her side and dangled it toward the creature menacingly, but the beast did not slow its pace. It leapt into the air, and even as the scabbard was thrust into its belly, the beast brought its attacker to the ground, quickly dyeing the earth red as it tore into her flesh, starting at the neck.

The other Red Riders ran, disappearing into the thick of the woods, and the beast chased after them, playfully twisting its way through the trees.

The ashy mist hung in the air a moment before fully dissipating. It smelled of rotting, burning flesh.

“What the hell was that?” Glenda demanded, as she emerged from her place of hiding.

Barry stared down at the corpse. Its head had been completely severed from its body.

“It was another one,” she said.

“Another one what?”

“Another one me!” Barry exclaimed. A dagger-shaped drool that had been dangling from her lips finally gave into its own weight, dripping into the pool of blood.

“You’re a breed,” Glenda said, emerging from the bushes, “a species now. You bit him so hard, it created a new story.”

“Yes.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know,” Barry admitted.

“It means a quest,” Glenda said.

“A quest,” she repeated.

“This is your chance to be noticed,” Glenda insisted.

Barry considered this.

“I might like that,” she decided.

“But there are rules,” Glenda added.

Barry sighed.

There were always rules for everything.

#

“I mean,” Glenda explained as they walked, “I could go with you. I could. But normally in a quest, the hero meets new friends along the way, and then they join her and help her do whatever it is she wants to do.”

“Like Wizard of Oz,” Barry agreed. It was one of her favorites.

“Yes,” Glenda said, “Like that. Each one should have their only problems to solve. And there should be tension between you, differences that make it hard to work together.”

“But shouldn’t I just make friends with people I get along with? I get along with you.”

“No,” Glenda assured her, “that might ruin the story.”

“I don’t just care about a good story,” Barry moaned, “Mostly I just want to see what the other one’s like.”

“You should get what you want,” Glenda warned, “But not exactly

what you want. Or you should get what you thought you wanted, but it turns out that it makes you miserable. It's part of the hero's journey."

"But I'm not a hero!" Barry insisted, "There are all sorts of people in stories—people in the background. People who just smile and say good morning and go about their days. Who stay home and don't do anything particularly interesting but maybe happy, at least for a while. Why can't I be one of those?"

"No one is going to write," Glenda seethed, "About a damn dog with a damn flower sticking out of her head who doesn't do anything particularly interesting and is generally just as dumb and as happy as a stump."

Barry coughed up some of the grass she had chewed back onto the moss, bundled in a white residue. She had never considered the issue before, of whether a tree stump was happy. She thought it might miss being a tree.

"You might as well be dead," Glenda added.

#

The trees were heavy with yellow leaves. Their branches swayed slowly in the wind, back and forth, like the trunk of an elephant.

Barry felt as though she had been walking for days, though it had really only been the better part of an hour. It was cool and there was a strong breeze, but she was panting heavily. So she laid down in the shade, and rested her head against a wet, mossy log.

She watched the trees shed their leaves in quick bursts against sudden torrents of winds, until it seemed as though the bark should have been striped bare—only the branches were as full and as vibrant as they had ever been.

The leaves on the ground were arranged in a way that didn't seem random. It was as if someone had arranged them in a very particular order: first two yellow, then one orange, then red, then yellow, two orange, and two red. Barry glanced back and forth, seeing the sequence everywhere, selectively ignoring the spots where the pattern was broken.

But then the leaves seemed to change. A few that had been orange were now half-orange and half-red. A few of the orange ones were now

half yellow. It was as though an invisible scar had been scratched through reality, bleeding the colors. There was a rustling, though the air was still.

When something smooth brushed up against her back, Barry shot up and darted to another tree, leaves crunching underfoot.

An enormous snake emerged—seemingly from nowhere. His leathery skin was covered with yellow, orange, and red diamonds, identical to the hues that blanketed the earth. Gradually, he turned green, and Barry could see the full length of his body. The snake zigzagged through the forest, wrapping itself around six thick trees, forming a wide circle around her. Its head zoomed forward, its tongue flickering from its mouth. It stared at Barry for a long time, its eyes lifeless and unfocused.

“You’re not him,” it said finally.

“Not who?”

The snake shifted its head and held its tongue. Its gaze seemed to be directed to no spot in particular.

“You’ve seen the other one,” Barry guessed, “the other Baradore?”

“If that’s what you are,” the snake said, “Then yes.”

“Did you see where he went?”

“He killed my mother.”

Barry had not been expecting this.

“Oh I’m sorry,” she said.

The snake’s tongue flickered again from its mouth.

“It’s not a part of the story,” he explained.

“Well,” Barry reasoned, “stories change.”

Again Barry heard a rustling, though there was no wind. Without moving its head, the snake was shifting its body around the trees, tightening its grip.

“Who are you?” Barry asked. There was not even a trace of the fear in her voice that would have been appropriate to the situation.

Barry couldn’t quite tell, but the snake seemed to smile.

“Corral,” he said.

“Never heard of you,” she decided.

“The story is a secret,” the snake said, without stretching the “s” sounds the way Barry had hoped he might, “written by hand in a single hardbound book, seen only by the eyes of my chosen one, and read to

followers who at the threat of death dare not repeat any of what they heard.”

Barry was puzzled by this.

“What’s the point of all that?” she wondered. She had an itch where a bug had bitten her, just a few centimeters down and left from her anus. She wanted to try to gnaw at it, but she thought this might come across as rude.

“To keep the story pure,” he said as he zoomed in even closer.

Barry thought she understood.

“There’s only one version of you,” she said.

Again, the snake seemed to smile.

“I was the same,” Barry said, “just until recently.”

The snake’s head jerked back, which somehow Barry knew was a sign of disgust.

“We are not the same,” he said.

“No,” Barry agreed, “I only meant—”

“I was born of sixteen brothers and sisters,” the snake interrupted, “sprouted from Medusa’s head. But I was stronger and fatter than the others—so powerful that I starved them out, hoarding our prey. But I was not satisfied. I bit into Medusa’s eye, the mother who loved us as she loved her own self, and I burrowed through the cavity. I consumed her in her entirety. Just as I will consume you. Just as I will one day consume the world.”

“I’m sure that you will,” Barry offered amicably, “I only just meant that—”

The trees of the forest shook as the snake’s hold on them tightened. Then, like a rubber band being stretched taut and released, the snake’s head snapped backwards through the forest, flinging leaves up into the air, disappearing into the shadow of the woods.

Barry waited in the hopes that the snake would return, but gave up after a few long minutes of silence.

“I think maybe,” Barry said out loud, “He was supposed to join me on my quest. But I seem to have hurt his feelings. I’ve made a mess of things, I suppose.”

And with that, she ended her rest, and wandered further into the woods.

Her double had peed on as many trees as he could, and the trail

was not yet cold.

#

It was a relief to be free of the Lost Woods, though the plains were flat and dull. The grass was yellowed and bitter here, with the texture of dust. Even the clear sky seemed now a more faded blue.

Only a rare tree or shrub offered shade, but the flatness also held its advantages: Barry could see clearly what was ahead of her and to the sides.

It was a trail of carcasses that she now followed. A dead vulture, killed for sport, a hyena, eaten down to its bones, and three lopsided chunks of bloody brown fur, possibly antelope, covered in flies. They all bore his scent.

The bodies had been dragged across the earth, leaving thick red scars in the dying, yellowed grass, as if to make the trail more obvious.

She wondered, being the first Baradore, whether she was entitled to make any rules. She had never faced this question before: what a Baradore might be expected to do—or to not do. The answer would have always been: whatever she happened to choose to do herself. Now that she was not alone, it seemed like there needed to be rules about how a Baradore might be expected to behave. Not killing—or at least taking no pleasure in killing—should probably be high on the list.

From a few miles off, Barry spotted a blue and white box. Drawing nearer, she could see that it was, in fact, a canopy bed. It was made out of wood and painted white. The shapes that had been carved onto the posts—the reliefs depicting kings and queens and the random flourishes of carefully crafted geometric designs—were painted in blue.

On the bed, behind a net of lacey white curtains, lay a young girl with dark black hair and pale skin. She wore a long blue and black dress and clutched a rose with her stiff hands folded across her bosom. Her nails had grown impossibly long, reaching past her shoulders in their slant upwards. They did not grow straight—rather they looped and curled like a particularly vomit-inducing rollercoaster.

Barry leapt up onto the mattress, doing three circles before landing with a loud grunt at the woman's side, and resting her head onto the sleeper's stomach. The woman did not stir.

When Barry woke from her dreamless sleep, she could see a man on a horse through the transparent curtains. He wore a tight white shirt with large brass buttons and blue shoulder pads that puffed up almost to his ears. His cape was blue and white. When he dismounted awkwardly, the cape twisted around, so that it looked more like a long bib, but he swept it back over his shoulder majestically with a quick flick of his wrist.

Ignoring Barry, he pushed through the curtain and leaned on the body, peering in at the woman with a look of disgust. Slowly, and carefully, he lowered his lips onto hers, keeping his eyes open all the while, as if he expected her, at any moment, to leap up and scratch out his eyes.

He retracted his lips slowly and then carefully monitored the girl's face.

"You're not her," he sighed. Then he turned to Barry and suggested: "Perhaps this is your Prince."

"Oh, I'm not a Prince," Barry said.

The man leapt up and hit his head against the top wooden posts of the bed.

"I'm sorry," Barry whispered, urgently, though she wasn't sure exactly what for. The man must have lived a rather sheltered life, if this was his first encounter with a talking dog.

"Are you hers?"

"No," Barry said, trying not to let any pride creep into her voice, "I'm my own story."

"Good for you!" It could have been sarcasm, but it seemed as though it was meant sincerely.

She noticed for the first time that the man had a handsome face. His eyes were a crystal clear blue and his lips were reddish and full. He had a long neck and olive toned skin, with crisp black hair that swirled in waves across the crown of his head. The smirk that spread across his face, and which then seemed to never leave it, indicated to Barry that he knew he was handsome—that he may have even thought that he was even handsomer than he really was.

"I'm Prince Charming," the man said, with a quick bow as Barry leapt off the bed and back down to the dying, yellowish grass.

"I'm Barry," she answered, accompanied with a gesture that was

about as close as a Saint Bernard could get to a curtsy.

They wandered together through the plains, Prince Charming walking his horse instead of riding it.

“What will you do when you find him?” Charming asked, after Barr had told him her story.

“Oh I don’t know.”

“Make puppies, I suppose,” he teased.

Barry hadn’t even considered this.

“But we’re the same story. It wouldn’t even be possible!”

For a moment, Charming’s smile faded.

“I was joking,” he claimed, with only thinly veiled disgust.

“What about you?” Barry asked, “When you find your Snow White?”

“Oh. Well,” he said, “I’ll inherit her father’s lands, which include several prominent cities on the Eastern coast. If I impose heavy tariffs it should be enough to pay for the wars in the north. Otherwise, we won’t be able to pay our debts, and we’ll end up at war with our Western allies as well.”

“Yes that,” Barry suggested hopefully, “But also live happily with the woman of your dreams?”

The prince laughed. “I wish I had the luxury. My life is not my own. I dread going to sleep at night knowing that I’ll have to wake up the next morning with the same burdens to bear. There’s very little in my life in the way of pleasure. Only death and bureaucracy.”

“You’re quite famous,” Barry suggested.

The prince smiled. “I like that bit. It is nice. People look up to me. They want to marry me. Or they want to be me.”

“Even though,” Barry said, as if suddenly understanding some great truth, “you do not want to be yourself!”

The prince’s smile faded and his eyes seemed somehow seemed to grow heavy, as if they might sink into his cheekbones, and creases rippled across his forehead like ocean waves against a storm.

They wandered together in silence for awhile; until the Prince finally made the excuse that he was actually in quite a hurry. He mounted his horse and wished her a pleasant journey.

“Pleasant journey!” Barry shouted back as the horse broke into a trot. She had wanted to shout “sorry,” but held her tongue.

As he road off, the image of the Prince changed in her memory.

His smile, in retrospect, seemed to her softer and more kind. His skin, she imagined, glowed with a radiant intensity. Even his clothes, as he disappeared into the horizon, seemed warmer somehow, more inviting. As the hours wore on, he became only more and more handsome in her mind's eye, until she was filled with an insatiable desire. For the rest of the day, she could think of nothing other than his face, but when she woke again the next morning, under the shade of a lonely willow tree, his features were a half-forgotten blur, and she began to wonder what all the fuss had been about.

“At any rate,” she sighed, “he was surely meant to be the second companion on my quest, and I offended him. Glenda would be so disappointed.”

#

Things became hilly at the foot of the mountains, and Barry found she had to take much more frequent stops to rest. Occasionally there was something close to a “trail” where others had passed through, but for the most part she found herself pushing herself through bushes and tripping over thick roots—her fur, but now, covered in brambles. The trek uphill was exhausting and on the way back down she always treaded carefully, worried that she might skid and fall.

When it started to rain, she sought shelter in a cave in the foothills. It was too dark to tell how far in the opening tunneled into the mountain. She slept just far enough in to be completely encased in shadow, but no farther. It gave her peace of mind to know that no one passing the cave would be able to see her inside. She dreamt happily of the Bog of Sorrows.

She woke with a heavy weight pressing down against her, sharp claws piercing her legs. There were voices in the dark.

“It isn't him,” one said.

“Of course it is.”

“Drag 'em into the light.”

She was dragged across the gravelly earth, a cloud of dust forming in her wake. The rain had stopped. The sun broke through small cracks in the clouds.

When the dust cleared, she found herself encircled by a sleuth of black bears. They all could be described as “rat-like,” but none in precisely the same way. A fair number had rat tails, but just as many, or more, had rat faces. Their entire front torso might be rat, and their back entirely bear—or vice versa. They smelled awful, that seemed a universal: some strange combination of sharp cheese and melting plastic.

“No, you’re right,” one announced, “It isn’t him.”

This news was greeted with murmurs of disappointment. It seemed they had been greatly looking forward to tearing Barry apart, limb-by-limb.

“You’ve seen him then, the other Baradore?” Barry asked, quickly picking up on the situation. She was, after all, “highly intelligent”—and not just “for a dog.”

“We saw another like you,” one of the larger bears admitted, “He attacked us, unprovoked, killing two of our brethren.”

“I have been following him for many days,” Barry said, “So that I can stop him.”

It was a lie—or at least a half-truth. Barry had not really known what would happen when she finally found the other of her kind, but she knew that surely now, with the thought of vengeance fresh on their minds, one of these strange bears would join her as a companion on her quest.

The bears mumbled amongst themselves, and finally, the largest among them said:

“You are welcome to rest awhile here with us,” he said, “We will prepare a feast.”

“Time is short,” Barry said, in an attempt to sound dramatic, “We should not let the trail run cold.”

“It would be rude,” the bear suggested darkly, “to refuse our hospitality.”

It was meant as a threat, but Barry didn’t take it that way.

“Well,” she said, “I don’t want to appear ungrateful.”

#

At the feast, Barry was seated next to a rat-faced bear with one

eye. It was large and located slightly off-center on his forehead.

Conscious of the fact that she had offended others on her journey, Barry tried not to look at it directly. She didn't want her to think she was gawking.

They had laid out thick, hand woven carpets over the grass to sit upon. Lanterns in the shapes of honeycombs had been hung from wires strung between the trees, though it was still daylight.

"We're Ratbears," the Cyclops said, without prompting, "I'm Purella."

"Oh!" Barry said, making eye contact for only the briefest of moments, "I don't think I've heard any stories about the Ratbears."

"There aren't very many of us," Purella admitted, "We're not really those kinds of stories."

"What kind of stories are you?"

Purella laughed.

"Well," she said, "it's a pretty common idea. People just stumble onto it. The draw a bear and they add a rattail for some reason. Or they just start listing out crazy combinations in their head: a cat with butterfly wings, a cat with a giraffe's neck, a bear with a rat's face. That's usually about as far as it goes. There might be some sketch of an idea for a story there somewhere, but not really. There's a few real stories—with beginnings, middles, and ends—but most of them aren't very good."

"Oh," Barry said, "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. I'm sure they're wonderful stories. It's very creative, all that mixing and matching."

But Purella just laughed.

They served honeycomb, raw fish, and roast venison—which was more than Barry had expected, though the honey got all over her fur and made it sticky. She would need to find a river soon.

The Ratbears sang songs and challenged each other to wrestling matches—which were awkward and unfolded at an unbelievably slow pace, but at least no one ever seemed to end up getting hurt.

The next morning, Purella led Barry back to the caves.

"The caves cut deep into the mountain," she said, "And then opens out to a narrow trail that leads down into the valley. That's where he

passed through. You'll have to make your way in the dark."

"That won't be a problem," Barry said. She wasn't one to brag, but she had a pretty good nose on her. "Will you come with me?"

It was the first time Barry had worked up the courage to ask anyone directly.

Purella seemed taken aback.

"Why would I go?" she wondered. She immediately back pedaled, seemingly worried that she might have caused offense: "I mean, you seem very nice and all, but that's not what I do. I stay here. I always stay here. This is my home."

"I just thought," Barry reasoned, "that you might want to avenge the others. Make it a quest."

Purella cast her one eye to the ground.

"Have you thought about," she asked, "how you might change afterwards?"

Barry hadn't.

"I haven't quite figured out," she admitted, "All the rules."

"You're supposed to change," Purella insisted, "You save the world, but you come home wounded and despondent having seen the face of war. Or you travel the world looking for something great, and you realize that there is no place you'd rather be than the place that you started."

But Barry was already homesick.

"I think I've already learned my lesson," she said.

"Oh no," Purella said, "It can only come at the end."

"So," Barry pleaded, "You won't come with me?"

Purella turned her one eye to Barry and locked her gaze.

"A grand story will stretch you," she warned, "It will hurt, make you change. I'd rather not have any of that, if it can be avoided."

Barry realized that she would rather not have any of it either. But she had come this far. If she didn't push forward, what would any of it have been for?

"I hope," Purella shouted after her, as Barry walked deeper into the tunnel, "there's a happy ending!"

"Me too!" Barry shouted back. But the light from the entrance to the cave was now obscured.

#

The caves eventually opened out onto a winding path on a crumbling bluff, several miles above an enormous ravine. The path was narrow, and not particularly well kempt. There were even places where trees blocked the path, their roots sticking out from the side of the cliff. There was a steep incline before the ground leveled off, though it continued to curve too sharply for Barry to see what was around the next bend.

Eventually, he reached a clearing. A nearly smooth half circle had been carved into the side of the mountain, leaving an area a few hundred feet across for vegetation to thrive. A bee almost as large as Barry's face zoomed by, and hopped from purple flower to purple flower, the stem's buckling beneath the pollinator's weight. A single virulent vine seemed to spread across the entire clearing, wrapping itself around flowers and bushes alike, and blocking the chances of all but the strongest life from reaching upwards and outwards toward the sun. There were no trees here, and no shade save what was provided by the mountain itself.

The other Baradore stood at the center of the clearing, feasting on the corpse of a bird as large as a bear.

The other Baradore was twice as big as Barry, and though his fur was brown and white, the brown was much darker and the white had a yellowish hue, like stained teeth. His eyes were red and swollen and, though he drooled as readily as Barry, his sharp teeth changed this from an effect that appeared merely awkward and dopey, to something rabid and vile.

"You're slow," the other Baradore shouted, blood dribbling down its chin, "I've been waiting."

"I'm sorry," she answered—though she wasn't sure what she was apologizing for.

The other Baradore paced back and forth, looking Barry up and down.

"You're pathetic," he said.

Barry wasn't sure how to respond.

"Oh, I don't know," she stammered, "I mean, I came first. You're just a retelling. That means you're based on me, doesn't it? It means you

would have never existed without me.”

The other Baradore snarled and snapped its jaw, quickening its pace as it marched back and forth across the vine.

“I’m nothing like you,” he assured her.

“We must have something in common,” Barry suggested tentatively, “What do you want? What are you like? What are your plans?”

“I will kill every human and elf in the Land of Myth,” the other Baradore said, “I’ll fight at the side of the Dark Lord himself, his faithful servant, the only creature in the world he trusts. And then I will kill him and take his place.”

“Well,” Barry admitted, “I guess we’re different on that. Honestly, I just want to go home. I’m not even sure why I came. I thought I might want a grander story, but I miss the Bog of Sorrows. I miss splashing through the marshes. And my friends. I’ve met so many people along the way, and they all have stories—but the larger stories don’t seem to make them any happier.”

“You’re nothing,” the other Baradore whispered, “a joke.”

“Do you really think you won’t be?” Barry asked, not intending any offense, “I mean: you’re a Saint Bernard with a flower coming out of your head. And you eat people. Do you really think they’ll make you the arch villain? Not the comic relief?”

The other Baradore snapped his jaw, drool and blood splattering across the clearing.

“I guess this is what I learned,” Barry surmised, “That this was the whole point of it all—that I had to come all this way to realize that things weren’t that bad at home. But I sort of already knew that, so what was the—”

The Baradore lunged at her, biting down hard into her throat, and together they tumbled through the vines until Barry, blood flooding from her neck, charged at her opponent in a panic, pushing him toward the edge. Together they tumbled down the rocky slope of the bluff, collecting bruises, scrapes, and dirt on their path down until they slid off the side of the mountain, free falling through the air and plunging to the bottom of the dry creek ten miles below.

“This can’t be all that there is,” was Barry’s last thought before impact, a strange peace creeping over her, “This can’t be what it was

for.”

But that was it. That was the end of her story.

#

It would be years before anyone struck on the same idea. There were no prophetic dreams, no moments of epiphany in the shower—Tara Clayton simply decided one morning that she would make a calendar consisting entirely of puppies with flowers sticking out of their heads. Then she would mail them out to her relatives for Christmas. December, of course, could feature no other breed than the Saint Bernard. She didn't have any of her own, so she just edited a photo she found on the Internet.

The nameless pups were born in the Land of Myth at the bottom of the dried creek, where the bodies of the two Baradores who came before them had turned to bone and dust. They paid them no mind.

They wandered their new world from end to end in silence, saying nothing but hearing much. The Land of Myth had its own tall tales and its own memories, and there were still a few who knew Barry, and in the remembering made something of her life that was larger and bolder than it had ever really been.

Nothing was really “dead” here, not in the way we might mean it. All that was old would be new again. Kings deposed would reclaim their thrones. Wars would be unwon. And stories would find new tellers.

Rachel Roupp
Appaloosa

The collection of cowboy figurines
that I requested after my grandfather died
are stowed beneath my bed.

When I sleep
I hear the hoof beats of their horses,
the men all whooping in unison,
and the firing of guns.

I brought them home
when I still loved him.
Just after the mourners named me
“his granddaughter,” and
the priest prayed the rosary for him
one last time.

When I was little I pointed
to the figurines until he
hoisted me onto his shoulders
so I could examine the men up close.

One figure, he said,
was a man breaking a wild appaloosa.
Now I know
it was a mare.

I know no one’s soul is black and white,
but when I reach back into my memories of him
my hands come back blackened with the ashes
of the way I used to love him.

When I look at the cowboys now,
I see predators seeking prey.
Combing the high plains
for one wild mare
who can be brought to her knees,
made to beg.

So I have shoved them away,
hidden the men in the dark
I thought would contain them,
but each night
the hoof beats pound again.
They no longer sound like freedom,
but like being tamed.

Stephen Mead

Cocteau's Orpheus

It looks like diving: fingertips,
Palms clasped, the mirror a river the minute
You start entering. Ripples, brilliance scurries
Energy up arms. Behind, the splintered looking glass
Reforms intact. What sort of wind is this now
That you've gone & stepped beyond? Memories,
Doubted beliefs fill a landscape of outlines which look
Superimposed. Arches meld into alleys & an ivy
Flakiness gives motion to walls.

It's hard to walk, isn't it Orpheus?
You're pushing against time with a song yet to sing.
Who does it belong to? Yourself? Eurydice? Or
The beautiful raven-haired figure some know as
Princess, some know as Death? Every night
As you slept she has watched your dreaming,
Having the passion, humor & hardness of life
With her motives concealed. Only love could take
Such risk, would defy the Gods' business for the test,
The sacrifice she sees that you need.

You thought that you knew her, didn't you Orpheus?
Though your singing no, never, quite touched upon this-----
That her love surpasses your world & the other worlds' both,
That for her there's a torment even crueler
Beyond what mere mortals can conceive?

Still, when it takes her, she will yet have the knowledge,
A few moments stolen, of what your promised devotion
Has undone. As for you, rescued Orpheus, a poet at last
(as played by Jean Marais) you shall return by hard-earned
breath past the eye of the mirror & into the arms of Eurydice.

Here's your song: a work of dreams & of amnesia
Reeling subtitle after subtitle from the immemorial
Fluid of French.

Here, in the reality of this movie, Death & her Conspirators
Must go to Hell for the sake of such themes.

For What It's Worth

Serena Johe

It used to be that my wife and I would sleep in the stone passageways of the old electric rail, deep underground to avoid the sun and the heat radiation from above. Without anything but big swaths of broken cement and those huge buildings around to absorb the sun between them, there's nothing up there but heat. Even the tallest of those buildings couldn't make a shadow strong enough to protect your rear in the afternoon.

Even so, some folks find it tempting to stay in those dilapidated things, but their being empty is really the only good thing about them. People just seem to want to believe in some kind of nostalgia – but nostalgia for what, I couldn't tell you. Neither could they.

Nobody's seen running water around here, and nobody's father's father's father's father ever has either, and all the power that supposedly used to vibrate the cities like the low purr of a cat is long gone, too. I suppose it's the stories that draw them now – stories are harder to kill than people, but they also won't save you from the damning sort of heat that bursts trees into flame during the summer.

So Charlene and I did what anyone with half a brain would do: we stayed underground.

I'd like to say that we were happy where we were, but that'd be half a lie. I was perfectly content with the life we'd built in the railway, with all its easy exits and openings. But then, to be fair, I think I'd be happy living halfway under someone's foot as long as Charlene was nearby.

She, on the other hand, is not so simple minded as me. She's always been ambitious, reaching for things that she wants with all the heart and substance of her Earthly soul. She's a woman with dreams, and what Charlene dreamed of was having a house.

The trouble is that there's something about wanting so much that brings a man – and a woman – face to face with some pretty disheartening problems. The first is that you obviously have to be able to get what you want. Then to be able to do that, you've got to do

something else, and so on and so forth until you've lost about what you'd been meaning to gain.

Now, about the house.

It's a little thing with stone walls and a shingled roof, dirt floor on the ground level, blue-hued wood on the second, and eight windows with peeling green shutters. The grass had long overgrown the fenced yard and spilled out, disappearing into the edges of a small shaded forest full to the brim with all kinds of critters and plants: squirrels, rabbits, tortoises with painted shells, stunted oaks and evergreens and paw paw trees somehow twice as tall as me. The smell of old fruit and fermentation filled the air in the two or so months that weren't ruined by the shellacking sun.

"That's where the well is," Charlene explained as she toured me through the land. I nodded dumbly, letting her lead me into and out of the forest while my thoughts buzzed like drunken flies. "Can you believe it, Richy? A well!"

"I – I can't," I said honestly.

"And here, around this plot, we can have a garden! It'll be easy with the well water, and there's room to grow all sorts of things, you see?"

Of course I did see. Our yard is bigger than ten people laid across it sideways. There'd be room to grow food for sure, and there'd be space to make our own things and keep them somewhere other than our backs, and I could even see that the grueling three day walk out of the city had been worth coming here for. I understood all that – what I didn't understand was how she'd done it.

And of course wrangling an explanation out of her was like trying to wrestle a greased snake. No matter how many times I asked in that first year, she'd just smile at me in that mysterious way, like it hadn't been a big deal at all and she'd just whipped her hands around and yanked the house right out of the dreams in her head.

"It's ours," she'd say, "and that's what matters."

For Charlene, that was the truth. But, like I said, getting what you want out of life isn't so simple.

Our worries began when the nausea started. For a while she'd be sick for an hour each morning, dry heaving or else tossing up her breakfast. That was an explainable symptom, though, and we had our suspicions about it. We both tried not to hope too hard that the sickness

had spawned not from some disease or other, but maybe from a new life. The prospect had her walking around like she was lighter than the red dust in August, and she moved about the house with a swollen belly, sick as a dog, and happier than I'd ever seen her.

It made it that much more heartbreaking when the vomiting began to happen at night, too. Even then we tried to make sense of it.

"Maybe it's just struggling in there," I'd say. "A fighter like you."

When the garden began to wilt though, that's when I knew something was really wrong. That garden was her baby in the absence of a real life one, and she tended to it with all the love of a mother. Despite the heat, she'd managed to cultivate a crop of tomatoes, heads of lettuce, peppers as big as your fist, and vines of beautiful purple flowers she'd found hidden in the forest. To neglect that garden was a symptom of death, I was sure. It terrified me.

It got so bad that even with her eyes open she seemed to be in some sort of hypnotized state. At least twice she'd asked me why it was so bright, where the rails were.

Yet, somehow, she stayed tight-lipped right up until the point where she'd all but wasted away, when her skin had yellowed to the color of animal fat and her face had sunk so you could almost see the ridges of her teeth through her cheeks.

Meanwhile, me and my clumsy hands couldn't seem to do a thing to help. It was my desperation, I think, that finally got her to let the cat out of the bag.

"It's my insides, Richy," her voice was hoarse from exhaustion, and I watched her strain to bring her left hand to the small scar beside her stomach. I sat on the edge of the bed, readjusting her pillows and changing the damp cloth on her forehead like a helpless child. She looked so fragile there, all that fieriness and ambition melted away with the heat of the fever. It made my heart squeeze.

"Charlene, I can't – you have to tell me what happened. We have to do something."

She tried to take a deep breath. It rattled through her like pebbles in an empty jar.

"Do you remember Carlson?" She asked.

"From the rail?"

She nodded.

“What about him?”

Charlene let her head fall to the side. She tried to speak, but her tongue was dead weight in her mouth. I could see her silently pleading with me to put the pieces together, but at first I couldn't make heads or tails of what she was getting at about Carlson.

We'd known the guy, sort of, back at the rails, and he was dumber than a sack of dirt. Now, you've probably noticed that I'm no firecracker either, but at least I have the sense to do the things that need to get done. Carlson, on the other hand – he's one of those living ghosts of a person, the sort that can't find the time to take care of himself but still manages to waste a day getting drunk.

At some point he'd taken up residence in an empty tower in the city, after which he'd promptly gone and got himself a few wooden barrels and a clunker of a whiskey still, along with a couple of other knickknacks: a wooden pipe, a dehydrator, and oddly enough, an old leather saddle he keeps on a bar stool by the door. It was a mystery how he'd managed to lug all of it back to that disfigured spire he called a home, but he'd be glad to tell you how he acquired it, at least.

Carlson called it a “mortgage.” He said it was like betting on your future. You get money, and if you can't pay it back, then you've got to give up something of equal value. Only, nobody like me or Carlson could ever afford to pay back such a huge sum of money. And I'm not the brightest, but if you ask me, that seems an awful lot more like a sale than a bet.

“But you're not allowed to call it that,” he'd say.

No matter what you call it, though, it is what it is: Carlson got his prized still and his phantom of a cowboy life, and someone else got his kidney.

I looked down at the small scar on Charlene's stomach and felt that cold, serpentine dread slide its way through my veins and straight to my heart. The realization felt like a funeral – quiet and ear splitting at once, with so much bunched up agony that you can't even get yourself to cry.

“Charlene,” I whispered, “what have you done?”

Her gaze wandered around the room, imagining the dying garden outside and the cellar we'd fixed up by hand and the little wind chime she'd made for the door, and then she set her eyes on me, begging me

to understand. I knew she wanted to tell me what'd happened, but she couldn't – either because she couldn't find the strength to say it, or because she was afraid to.

Up until then I was sure my wife wasn't scared of anything.

Charlene licked her cracked lips. "My liver," she said, and then, "Cumulus."

Then she closed her eyes and spoke no more.

Sitting there, dumbfounded, reconciling the anguish settling in somewhere behind my ribs, I'd never felt more alone in my life, or more determined.

I filled as many bottles as we had in the house with water and left them by her bedside along with some crackers and clean sheets, and then I packed a small bag, kissed my dying wife, and left.

#

I think I'm the only man from the outside who's ever seen Cumulus.

Starting out, though, I had no idea who he was, where he was, or why the hell he wanted my wife's liver in the first place. The only thing I knew is that you had to get a mortgage to get the money, and you got mortgages at the bank, so that's where I went.

I'd been to Midtown only once before, a long time ago before my parents passed away, but it was an old memory. I knew of the things they had there: computers, televisions, electricity and running water, but after so long I could hardly fathom what any of that was like. I waited in the bank with the slack-jawed amazement of a child, watching people conduct their business like there was no big to-do about it.

When I got to the front of the line I stood there bewildered for a minute more, taking it in. I was separated from the bank woman by a hard plastic wall with holes in it, but behind her, I could see the faint electric glow of screens, hear the registers clanging and the clicking of fingers at a keypad; even the carpet under my feet and the smooth lines of the counter were fascinating to me.

I guess I must've stood there longer than I thought though, because when the woman spoke to me, she didn't sound pleased.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Yes, I think so."

I waited to hear what she might have to say, because as I know it, conversations go tit-for-tat, but apparently that wasn't the right thing to do.

"What may I help you with, sir?"

"I, uh, I'm here for my wife."

"Does she work here?"

"No, no, I mean, I'm here on behalf of my wife, in order to, well, get her liver back."

"Her liver, sir?"

"Yes, that's right," I repeated, trying to sound sure of myself.

"I'm afraid you must be mistaken. The bank doesn't take those kinds of assets as collateral."

"I think you're the one that's mistaken. My wife got a mortgage here," I pressed.

I had all the bravado a body could hold when I left my wife's side that night, but confidence is a hard thing to keep in front of so many uncaring faces. The assuredness of the people in Midtown, that the lights overhead wouldn't just pop or that their strange machinery wouldn't just melt in the heat has a way of making a person feel utterly insignificant. The city is walled in to keep the temperature a certain way, and the people have about as many barriers, too. Seemed to me that compared to everybody outside, everybody inside only went between neutral and annoyed.

"Did she apply at this bank?" The woman had begun click-clacking away at her machine.

"Yes, I think so."

"And what is her name, sir?"

"Charlene."

"Charlene...?"

"Yes, that's right. Charlene."

The woman paused all her rapid motions to look up at me. She seemed unhappy.

"What's her last name, sir. Her surname."

"Her – oh, well. I don't know."

"You said she was your wife."

"She is my wife," I snapped, starting to get annoyed myself. "But I don't know why that matters."

The woman didn't sigh, or tap her fingers, or bat an eye. She just looked at me like she'd found a tick on her heel.

"Do you have a last name?"

"What the hell would I need two names for?"

"If you don't have a surname, sir, I can't search for your wife's mortgage papers in the system."

I balked at her. It sounded like nonsense.

"You sure as hell let her get a mortgage without one, so why would she need one to look at it again?"

"We store all of our clients' information based on last name and social security number, so if you don't have either of those things –"

"Now you look here, miss," I pushed my finger up at the glass, "you let my wife come in here and get that mortgage without a last name, and now she's sick. She's dying in our bed at home, alone, because I had to leave to come fix this mess, so you'd better tell me what's what so I can go home and take care of her!"

Finally, she began to look alarmed, though not for the sake of Charlene's health, of course. People had started to stare, and I realized that my making a fuss was forcing a reaction. Good, I thought.

"Sir, if you'd just calm down –"

"I will not calm down! My wife is on her last breath because you uppity thieves went and took her liver from her knowing full well she'd never be able to pay back your loan, and now she's going to die. Because of you."

"I can't help you unless you have –"

"I don't have to have nothing to get your help because Charlene sure as hell didn't have anything when she came in here, and you all were right ready to take her liver from her. You may as well have just bought it outright instead of going through all your roundabout nonsense!"

Her lips were pressed together, and I could see from the corner of my eye that people had started to mumble. She didn't like the word "bought," and I remembered what Carlson had said. I turned to the side as if to walk away but kept talking.

"Might as well stick a sign on the front door advertising it. In fact, why don't I just go on out there and do it for you? I'll just write one up and paste it right over that advertisement on the front door –"

“Sir, please, I think I can help you, if you’ll just quiet down.”

“Well,” I turned back to her. “All right then.”

When it was clear I’d settled down a bit, she carried on.

“I can’t look up your wife’s mortgage information without a last name –” I went to start up again, but she held up a hand, “there is no way to do it without one, or I would. But, I can tell you that all acquired mortgage assets from unpaid loans go to Cumulus.”

“Then I’d better go talk to him.”

“Sir?”

“Cumulus, I mean. I’d better go talk to him. Where can I find him?”

“...Cumulus is a city, sir.”

You can imagine that I was a bit embarrassed by that.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I groaned. The woman didn’t reply, and this time I knew to keep talking anyway. “I just walked four days to get here. How much further is it?”

“You walked four days?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Outside?”

I raised an eyebrow at her. Looked like we both had some things to learn, I guess.

“No other way to get here,” I said.

The woman’s expression finally settled into something more human. Probably for the first time, she realized exactly what state I was in and what I’d been saying, with the sun fried skin on my shoulders and the heat blisters on my face and my wife dying miles away. Lots of insiders think it’s impossible to live out there in the heat, that life under the sun is something to be impressed by. In a way, I suppose they’re right, but it’s not like there are other options.

She started pounding that machine with her fingers again.

“Cumulus isn’t accessible by foot. You’ll have to take the train to get inside.”

“And I suppose that costs money.”

“I’m printing you a pass now, sir. I’ll charge it to Charlene’s account.”

“But I thought you said you couldn’t –”

The woman’s eyes flitted up at me briefly before returning to the screen.

Maybe people here weren't so bad after all, I thought.

#

It took me several hours to figure out where the train was. It didn't help that I got stopped at least three times by people asking about my business there. Midtown doesn't take kindly to outsiders, and I think I'd only gotten that far because I stank so bad from the four-day journey that nobody wanted to come near me. Thankfully, the ones that did let me go when I showed them my pass.

When I finally managed to get to the train, I was surprised by how unfamiliar it was. The empty rail station that Charlene and I lived out of for years looked nothing like it.

Screens were suspended from metal beams in every corner of the room, lights hung from the ceiling so brightly that they hardly casted a shadow, and all along the sides were kiosks selling food neatly packed in little bags and paper sacks.

I'd never seen so much to eat in my whole life. I didn't have any money, but I convinced one of the sales people there to trade me a bag of some sweet candies in exchange for the wooden whistle I'd carved from the soft wood of a balsam fir in the back yard. When she got better, I figured I'd give them to Charlene and tell her all about this strange place.

The other big difference was an obvious one: the trains. They were awfully quiet, quieter than I would've thought from the stories people tell on the outside, but they're at least as comfortable as anyone would have you believe. I even managed to fall asleep for the two-hour trip, and when I got off the escalator to see the streets of Cumulus, I was glad that I had.

The city was huge. And I mean huge.

I've never heard so many noises at once, or seen so many people, or machines, or things I'd never seen before. Right off the escalator – which is befuddling enough already – there were flashing signs, and different colored lights strung up on wires, and a whole host of things that I can't explain to this day, least of all what people were wearing. Some of those shoes were shinier than sunlight off a lake.

The best thing, though, was the water. Right outside a building

there was this moving water machine, like an upright river but with some kind of pressurized thing inside so it never ran out or dried up. Everywhere I went in that city, in fact, there was plenty to drink. If it weren't for all the nonsensical attitudes of the people, I might've liked to live there myself.

When I'd had my fill, I went about finding my way to a hospital. I figured that if organs were going to go anywhere, they'd be going to a hospital, though it did occur to me that with all the strange habits of the people in Cumulus, they could've just been serving them up gourmet style for all I knew.

Thankfully that wasn't the case, or else I would've just figured it a lost cause and gone home right then. The truth of it wasn't much better though.

The woman at the front desk in the hospital was busy chatting with some fellow in a blue paper dress – odd, I know, but it seemed to be the garb of choice. I waited for them to finish their conversation, but when it became obvious they weren't talking business, I cleared my throat and got the same annoyed “may I help you” as I had at the bank.

As I explained what'd happened, however, not only was she less friendly than the woman at the bank, she just plain didn't believe me. Neither did the fellow with her. I think they thought I must've lost my mind, judging by the way they looked at me.

“That's one hell of a crazy story,” the man muttered, giving the woman behind the desk a worried look. She rolled her eyes at us both, I think.

“Organ transplants have nothing to do with the bank,” she said, but I wasn't having it.

“Then where do you think they come from?”

“From donors – and by donors, I mean the deceased. Or else they're artificially manufactured.”

“Artificially manufactured?”

“That's right. By Cellcor.”

I remembered the advertisement that I'd threatened to vandalize. “The one at the bank?”

The young man jumped in then. “They're sponsored by the bank, but they're not the same company. I mean, you're talking conspiracy theory shit.”

Even someone as dumb as me could put two and two together, but I had no proof and no shot at convincing those folks. They already thought I was two antlers short of a buck.

But I couldn't help but be insulted.

"You think I'm talking nonsense? You all are the ones who are collecting organs!"

"Man, are you kidding me? They're not collecting them," he sounded defensive, and I can only guess it had to do with the young woman being employed by the hospital I was accusing. "They're for people that need them. I just got a liver transplant myself, for your information, and it wasn't from your wife, it was from Cellcor. You should see all the waivers and shit they have you sign – the company's legit."

It took me a moment to figure out his strange words, but I knew that very well might've been my wife's liver, or someone else's dying back on the outside, and this guy looked as healthy as a horse. He certainly cussed with enough energy to show it.

"And what on earth did you need a new liver for?"

"I drink a lot."

"You what?"

"I drink a lot," he said again.

"If it's killing your liver, then why the hell are you drinking so damn much?"

"Because I can get a new one, obviously."

"You're just plain nuts," I said.

The idea was as appalling and confusing as anything I'd ever heard – more than their denial, more than the moving stairs, more than Carlson with his missing kidney and his whiskey still.

But this gentleman seemed completely unbothered. In fact, he even had the nerve to ask me what planet I was from, which I could only assume meant where on this planet I was from.

He didn't believe me about that either though.

"Okay, I get it now," he rolled his eyes. "You're from Midtown and you're just totally bonkers."

"I told you, I'm not from Midtown, I'm from –"

"Nobody lives outside. It's impossible. The atmosphere is totally screwed."

I couldn't fathom a thing to say about that. We could go back and

forth forever trying to convince each other, but he would never step outside this bubble of a city long enough to believe me. I didn't have the energy or the inclination to argue, so instead, I turned back to the woman at the desk.

"So there's no way for me to get my wife's liver back?" I asked again.

"If your wife's liver is damaged, then you can purchase a transplant."

Not that it mattered, considering, but I felt like I had to ask anyway. "And how much does that cost?"

"\$80,000."

It was more money than I'd ever heard of. I doubted I could even count that high.

But that woman didn't care about me, or about Charlene, and I'd be damned if I let her or her rotten chump of a boyfriend see me spill the tears I felt building behind my eyes. So I went for the door, trying to regain some of my pride, but I could still hear them whisper. Their laughter bounced around that big tiled room as I walked away, and it didn't help that I stumbled a bit as the front doors slid open like they had a mind of their own.

I headed back to the station with a heavy heart. At the very least, I'd have a lot to tell Charlene about, with all the weird gadgets and food and the strange way people spoke, but to this day, I've never told her about the man in the blue paper dress.

I think she believes, like the people in Cumulus, that the organs get used by those that really need them, and she already had enough trouble with a broken liver. I don't need to break her heart, too.

#

When I got back to the bank in Midtown, I was lucky enough to find the same woman working behind the counter. Before anything else, and though I was sure she would deny how much she'd helped me, I thought it proper to ask her name so I could remember the only kindness I'd found on the inside.

"Louisa," she introduced herself.

"Well, Louisa, it's nice to see you again. I'm Richy."

She smiled at me, more genuine than any other person I'd run into thus far, and I think that change of heart put some spark back in my own. At least now I could say that the trip to Cumulus hadn't been for nothing.

"And what can I help you with today, Richy?" She asked, but I could tell from the sympathy in her eyes that she already knew.

"I'd like to get a mortgage."

"On your house?"

"No," I said, because it would crush Charlene to powder to lose that house.

"What asset would you like to use as collateral?"

"I imagine you've already figured that out, Louisa."

She had, of course.

"Give me a moment," she said. "I'll get the manager."

#

It took me a hell of a lot longer to get back to my wife with one lung missing, and it took even longer to get us both back to Midtown with her in my arms. Thank the good Earth for Louisa, though – with her help we made it to Cumulus, and with the money from my so-called mortgage, they were able to perform the transplant.

Days now are much more regular, and I couldn't be happier about it. One crazy story in my lifetime is more than I need, but I did learn something along the way, and here's where I'm going to contradict myself a little bit.

I know I said that if you want something you can't easily get, you've got to give more than you have to get it. For the most part, I stand by that. It's a foolish thing to chase what's beyond your reach, and I think that's the lesson Charlene learned.

But after all I went through, I can say for certain that my philosophy isn't always true. I may get tired easily now, and I can't help Charlene as well with bringing water from the well or fixing the traps in the backyard, but the truth is that it's a small price to pay.

Charlene is the only thing in this world that I've ever wanted, and a lung isn't worth half as much as the way she smiles at me. Really, I think I came out on top.

About the Authors

Michael Vander Does is a jazz-poet from Columbus, Ohio. He has been published here and there. Favorites include *The Croton Review*, *Negative Capability*, *Connotation Press*, *Istanbul Literary Review*, *Café Noir*, and *Tryst*. He performs with The Jazz Poetry Ensemble (poetry and trombone). They have released three CDs: the most recent are “Thanamattapoeia,” with Edward “Kidd” Jordan, and “Motherless Acoustivore,” with Kidd and Hamiet Bluiett. Recently, the JPE has been performing with avant-garde jazz greats like Kidd, D.D. Jackson, and Hamiet Bluiett. Michael’s poetry is much informed by this music. He has received a few awards from the likes of the Ohio Arts Council and Puffin Foundation West. He is active in the community, presenting and promoting modern poetry, avant-garde jazz, and civil rights. He has a colorful all-yard garden also informed by avant-garde jazz. More can be found at www.makejazznotwar.org.

Mary Driver-Thiel holds a B.A. in Fine Art and a Master of Arts in Teaching. Her short stories have been published in various literary journals in America and the U.K., and she is the author of two novels, *The World Undone* and *Twelve Thousand Mornings*. She lives in the Chicago area with her husband and Woki, the Wonder Dog. For more information please visit her website: www.marydriverthiel.com

Lauren Suchenski is a fragment sentence-dependent, ellipsis-loving writer and lives somewhere where the trees change color. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Gambling the Aisle*, *Dark Matter Journal*, *Red Fez*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, *Black Elephant Literary Journal*, *Stoneboat Literary Magazine*, *The Soap Box*, *Centum Press*, *Unbroken Journal* and *Five 2 One Magazine*, among others. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and her first collection of poems “Full of Ears and Eyes Am I” (Finishing Line Press) is due out later this year. You can find more of her poetry at @_laurel_hill on Instagram or @laurensuchenski on Twitter.

Daniel James Sundahl is Emeritus Professor in English and American Studies at Hillsdale College where he taught for thirty-three years. Retirement, though, is ambiguous....

Stephen Reeves was born in Huntsville, Alabama in 1980, but grew up in a small community just on the edge; Madison. After living in the same area for over thirty years Stephen met his future wife in 2010, and in 2012 they were married. He currently resides in Switzerland with his wife, two cats, and an obsessive Pomeranian.

A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, **Lana Bella** is an author of two chapbooks, *Under My Dark* (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2016) and *Adagio* (Finishing Line Press, forthcoming), has had poetry and fiction featured with over 300 journals, *2River*, *California Quarterly*, *Chiron Review*, *Columbia Journal*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *San Pedro River Review*, *The Hamilton Stone Review*, *The Homestead Review*, *The Ilanot Review*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Third Wednesday*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Yes Poetry*, and *elsewhere*, among others. Lana resides in the US and the coastal town of Nha Trang, Vietnam, where she is a mom of two far-too-clever frolicsome imps.

Nancy Lane, a graduate of UCLA and member of Willamette Writers, lives with her husband and their dog in Beaverton, Oregon. Her short stories have appeared in *Indiana Voice Journal*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Mid American Fiction* and *Photography and Fiction on the Web*. Her essays have appeared in *Indiana Voice Journal* and the *AARP Bulletin*.

Melissa Fitzgerald is a poet and student at Northeastern University.

Jac Shortland is a Cork woman. Her work has been published in diverse anthologies and journals. Her poems reflect the mind of a woman, who simply hasn't made her mind up about any of life's mysteries and most likely never will.

Peter Ryan is a PhD student in the sociology department at the University of Notre Dame. He is interested specifically in the study of religion and social movements. His free time, when he has any, is spent

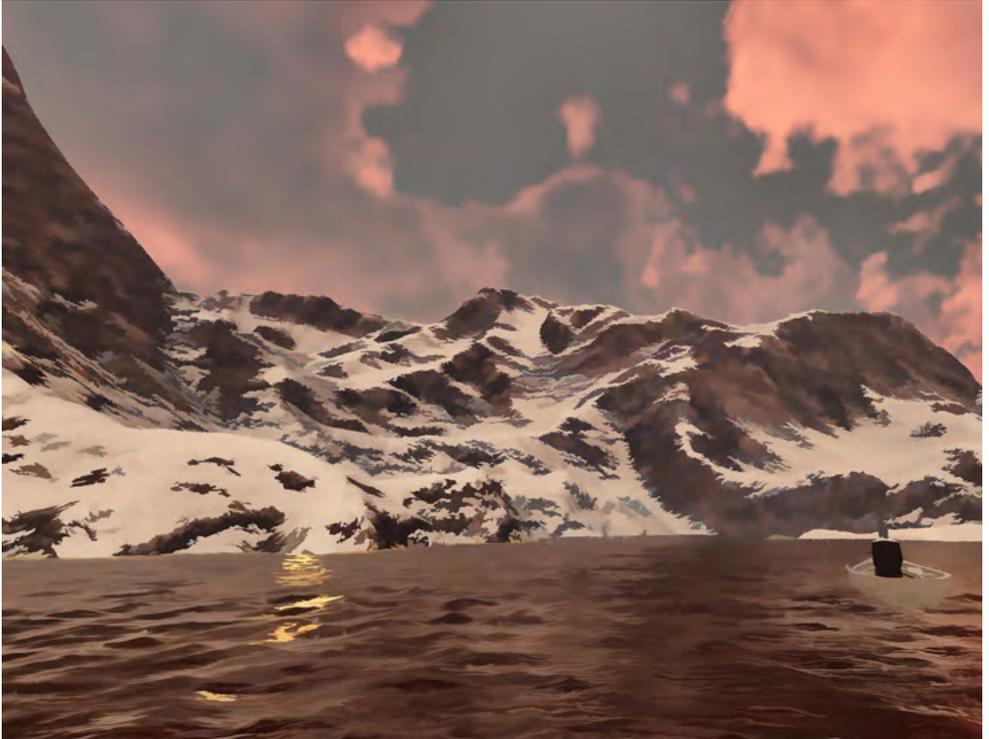
in the company of his wife and their 130-pound Saint Bernard.

Rachel Roupp is a poet and aspiring witch from Pennsylvania. Her work has appeared in *Rag Queen Periodical*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *Persephone's Daughters*, and *Komorebi Literary Magazine*. She is known for poems that make people cry and her superb selfies with her basset hound.

A resident of NY, **Stephen Mead** is a published artist, writer, maker of short-collage films and sound-collage downloads. His latest P.O.D. amazon release is an art-text hybrid, "According to the Order of Nature (We too are Cosmos Made)", a work which takes to task the words which have been used against LGBT folks from time immemorial. In 2014 he began a webpage to gather links of his poetry being published in such zines as *Great Works*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Quill & Parchment*, etc., in one place: Poetry on the Line, Stephen Mead.

Serena Johe is an avid reader and writer with a particular interest in magical realism, sci-fi, and other speculative fiction.

About the Artist



“Accept”

Henry Hu

Hong Kong bred, Sydney based. Henry’s artworks are personal, intentional, with a focus on storytelling. He strives to assemble a full body of work, forming a collection piece by piece with each individual art collection, usually consisting of multiple pieces, often in the same style, grouped by specific themes, concepts or stories. By utilizing digital tools, a variety of styles can be seen across collections matching their subject matters. Visit henryhhu.com for more.

