

# MULESKINNER JOURNAL



Grace



Journal Eight - October 2023





## **Grace**

*...a difficult ask in a violent and weary world.*

*Grace is benevolence, to give and to receive.  
To be full of grace is to move with effortlessness and charm.*

*It is to flow like water.*

*There is grace under pressure and grace under fire.*

*Grace is cousin to courage.*

*Grace is hope and salvation.*

*It is also bought and sold, a commodity of kindness.*

*There are good graces and bad graces, dis-grace,  
and falls from grace.*

*Grace is humility, charm, a blessing for a meal.*

*Grace is the yearning not to be loved, but to love.*



# MULESKINNER JOURNAL

## JOURNAL EIGHT: GRACE

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## MARGE PIERCY

### FLOWERS TO MEDITATE ON

The rhododendrons I planted  
the first year I lived in this house  
are huge now, making a rhodo  
forest with white, purple, pink

flowers big, gorgeous. heavy.  
The bushes ask almost nothing.  
They don't get tended, watered  
in drought. In winter's cold,

their leaves curl into papyrus  
scrolls. But every June they  
give and give to us walking  
a slow path through their glory.

Why can't I live like them, asking  
little, giving whatever I can?



## MARGE PIERCY

### ALL WE DON'T CHERISH

Honeysuckle has twined  
around the Persian lilac.  
Sweetness flows through  
a window into my office.

People call it invasive,  
a weed to be yanked. But  
weeds are just plants  
we don't want someplace.

I spare it for the flowers  
that really do smell of honey  
unprocessed, fresh from  
cubbyholes of comb.

The stray cat sniffing  
for supper that could love  
you for years, the memoir  
nobody bothered to read—

a life forgotten. How  
many unhonored, often  
unnoticed are offering  
themselves to us daily?



## JUDY BANKMAN

### YAKAMOZ

is a word that in Turkish, means  
    “the reflection of moonlight on water” —  
a word that actually means a phrase,  
    that means the interaction of a cosmic body  
with something unique to planet earth.  
    in 2018, the orca whale J35 carried  
her dead newborn calf with her for 17 days  
    through the Salish Sea because grief  
is a force like gravity, or inertia; to resist  
    is to pledge allegiance  
to another planet, even for a whale.  
    at dusk, the other females  
circled round and round and round,  
    steadily illuminated by moonlight  
as it shifted on the water,  
    inviting yakamoz as the backdrop  
to their collective mourning ritual.  
    I want to steal this from the whales,  
to call up yakamoz as the landscape for  
    all my moments of grief. to split  
open the kitchen table and find a  
    lake underneath, awash in light —  
or when I’m in the car and suddenly struck  
    by an old pain, I want the asphalt  
to flood, to make a sailboat of me,  
    skimming along the watery glow.  
I want the moon in one pocket  
    & the ocean in the other, to roll them  
between my fingers like worry beads,  
    hold them close & know  
that when I need them,  
    I can cast them out to make yakamoz,  
the word that actually means a phrase,  
    the word that is a balm for  
pain as big as a whale’s.



# JOHN ROMAGNA

## ADAGIO FOR STRINGS

*for my father*

What were you trying to tell me  
Moments before you died, raising one hand  
In front of you?

There's a child who is here for the first time  
Thinking balcony lights are dim stars,  
Admiring the white baton,  
The long bows  
Moving in unison,

Cellists who play down fingerboards  
As though their hands would cross a shallow river  
Rock by rock.

You brought me here, so I'd be passionate  
About what I do, my days  
Like the purposeful moments  
Of this audience,  
Listening.

Conductor, moving his arms in a wide circle.  
I can never tell whether he's keeping time.  
Making a fist, he indicates a downbeat:  
Drums are not played;  
Cymbals are untouched;  
Trumpet players wait.

Do these musicians follow his lead?  
Or do they hold themselves together  
Like the sea?

Maestro, pausing hands,  
Invoking silence. Father, you are the music,  
After it stops.



## JUNE STODDARD

### KNOWING THE WAY

Driving north into Canada  
I arrive at the landing after years of absence  
finding my way in the dark  
lit by fireflies  
and kerosene lamps in cottages  
I glide by.  
The only noise  
gentle waves lapping against  
the wood and canvas canoe  
my great-grandfather made,  
guiding with my hand carved paddle,  
stroking the water as if I have never been gone.  
Knowing my way by starlight  
through and around  
rock outcroppings, points, and hidden bays.  
A summer homecoming,  
a hundred years in the family,  
always home to me.

On rough-hewn boards  
I step up pine needle strewn stairs,  
holding the perfect arched branch  
my father searched for and  
honed into the log cabin railing.  
Open the door.  
Read on high beds,  
stuffy old wool blankets,  
bark peeling off virgin cedar walls,  
surrounded by sounds of  
water lapping the rocky point.  
On the porch, bed swing holds me,  
as I curl under Hudson's Bay blankets,  
reading Treasure Island  
hearing bagpipes through the fog.

CONTINUED...

I open the door,  
in or out,  
it doesn't matter,  
all in nature,  
all of nature,  
surrounded in memory.  
Each rock,  
each mossy outcropping  
brings back my childhood.  
Almost every summer  
I find my way in the dark  
on the lake in our canoe,  
or on the trail.  
I know each slippery spot  
on log bridges crossing wetlands  
these sensations my lifeblood.

I swim around the point,  
awakening cold springs,  
in the lake so big and dark  
part of the lake, I swim.

My mother skinny-dipped into her 90's  
where she found her strength,  
where her doctor grandfather built canoes  
where her father was mentored by his father,  
where I became one with the water  
where I found my way,  
and taught each of my daughters  
to find theirs.  
In or out, it doesn't matter,  
all in nature, all of nature,  
surrounded in memory and knowing.  
I find my way in the dark  
a hundred years here  
always home.





# MARCO ETHERIDGE

## THREE SECONDS

The happiest moment of Zach Preston's life occurs three seconds before he steps into a crosswalk and is struck by a speeding car. Two seconds after that emotional apogee, and one second before his life will undergo a radical change administered through the agency of a barely conscious drunk driver, Zach is grinning like a maniac.

Freeze.

Zach's left foot extended over a gutter running with spring rain from the Adriatic. Right foot still planted in the safety of the wet sidewalk but pushing forward, heel already lifting, propelling Zach into the crosswalk. An umbrella in one hand, shielding Zach from the pelting drops. And in the crook of his free arm, he cradles a loaf of crusty white bread, just purchased at the bakery up the street.

Go.

In the next second, Zach takes two-and-one-half steps. The street is empty of traffic, and then it isn't. A black car appears from nowhere, speeding over the asphalt black with rain, no headlights, no windshield wipers, and no warning. The driver does not see the crosswalk or the man who is just stepping off the sidewalk.

The impact knocks Zach into the air. His body flies away through the darkness. The car speeds off without a glimmer of brake lights. The umbrella that had, a single heartbeat before, shielded Zach from the rain, spins in the swirling air above the empty crosswalk. Handle over canopy, once, twice, until gravity trumps loft. The umbrella sinks to an empty crosswalk. The bentwood handle taps the yellow-striped pavement. The umbrella balances upright, wavering, hesitating. Then the canopy tilts, falls, and settles to the asphalt beside a battered loaf of bread.

Wait.

Six weeks to the day before he is battered into the Croatian night by a driver blinded by drink, Zach Preston is in a sun-drenched office on another continent. The office is not his own. It is a modern, sterile room. Zach sits in a strangely uncomfortable ergonomic chair, facing a desk made from plate glass and sawhorses. On the far side of the desk, silhouetted by floor-to-ceiling windows, Zach's team leader is speaking.

Words drift around the office, but Zach's conscious mind does not hear them. Severance package, placement counseling, positive referral. His ears capture the sounds, but his brain refuses to pay attention. His thoughts are a tangle of fear, surprise, and worry. Then—Click! —his mind searches for a single bit of data.

How old is this pompous little prick? Ten years younger than me? Fifteen? I'm not even fifty and I'm being fired by a kid, a fucking millennial! I'm the guy who wrote the code this punk grew up with.

His angry thoughts can't stop the babble that fills the room. More words that all sound the same: redundancy, restructuring, reduction, regrettable.

Later that same day, Zach threads his way through a labyrinth of cube farms, a cardboard box cradled in his arms. The cube occupants keep their heads down, not wanting to see another dead man walking. Zach feels a scream rising in his throat.

Go ahead, you stupid drones. Keep tapping out that precious code. That's what I did and look where it got me. Better code, brighter code, pioneering the way to artificial intelligence. What a brilliant plan! Create a program that can create programs. What an idiot I was, helping to build a von Neumann machine, a self-replicating entity. Too bad, Zach. AI doesn't take bathroom breaks, eat lunch, sleep, or complain to HR. Wake up, people!

But the scream does not erupt from Zach's throat. It dies stillborn in his head as he crashes into a cube partition. The kid in the cube stares up at him, frightened. Zach mumbles an apology, hefts his jumbled box, and flees to the parking lot.

The first week of Zach's idleness is bad. The second is worse. Half-empty pizza boxes stack up on the dirty kitchen counter. Zach drinks coffee, switches to beer, stares out the window. He does not open his laptop, update his résumé, or phone a headhunter. He is an old dog, expelled from the pack, no longer wanted or needed.

If it is early enough in the day, before too many beer bottles have been emptied, Zach can grasp the irony of his situation. The monster is still out there, the monster he helped create. AI slapped Zach aside, exiled him to this one-bedroom jail cell. And the bastard is still lurking just out of sight, waiting for Zach to poke his nose through the door. Then, Wham! Who needs that shit? Zach reaches for the church key and pops open his first beer of the morning.

The third week brings a change. It is not hope that drives Zach from his apartment, but the stench. The place reeks of molding pizza crusts, sour beer bottles, and his own personal funk.

Resigned to his fate, Zach shovels grease-stained boxes into a garbage bag. He collects the many bottles, empties the foul dregs, and totes the dead soldiers to the recycle bin. After a long shower, he shaves away two weeks of stubble. There, staring into the mirror, he sees his crossroads. He can kill himself or run screaming from the cage of his apartment.

Zach decides that maybe he needs a cup of coffee, an hour or so outside of his fetid apartment. Little does he know how this minor decision will change the course of his life.

At the café, Zach orders a double espresso. Coffee in hand, he finds an empty table. He hasn't brought a laptop, a tablet, or even his phone. No way to demonstrate how connected and busy he is.

Zach sits, sips, hesitates, raises the demitasse to his nose. The espresso smells better, tastes richer. He wonders if the baristas have switched to a new roast.

A magazine lies atop the table, its pages splayed open. The images are upside, glossy photos of pretty people wearing expensive clothes posing in front of exotic locations. Zach reaches for the magazine and spins it around.

His eyes roam over the photo spread. He ignores the perfect smiles, and the sweaters knotted just so around arching necks. It's the settings that arrest his eyes. Turquoise water laps against rocky shores, crumbling stone walls bake under a golden sun, cobblestoned passageways lead to shadowed treasures.

Words leap from the thick pages. Croatia, the Dalmatian Coast, Jewel of the Adriatic. Zach sifts through fractured memories. Dislocated questions pop through his brain.

Where is Croatia? It's got to be across from Italy. When was the last time I was in Europe? Twenty-five years ago. Is that possible? Forget Europe, when was the last time I went anywhere? What the hell happened to me?

He tosses off the rest of his espresso in one gulp. The demitasse rattles in its saucer, knocking the miniature sugar spoon to the table. Zach Preston stands so quickly he upsets his chair, catching it just before it topples to the floor. Other patrons raise their eyes from glowing screens to stare at the commotion. Ignoring them, he hurries to the door of the café.

Back at his apartment, Zach ransacks the drawers of his cluttered desk. He finds his passport, flips open the cover. A minor miracle, the damn thing is valid for two more years and change. He has no memory of renewing it, but he must have done so. Another forgotten task accomplished between long bouts of writing code.

He tosses the passport on the desk, opens his laptop, and keys it to life. Search query, flights

to Europe. He checks the calendar, enters a range of dates, an open return flight. The results cascade down the screen. He chooses the first flight listed as a last-minute deal, clicks the buy button, and reaches for his wallet. Time to spend some of that severance pay.

Buzzing from the adrenaline of what he has just done and the caffeine of a gulped double espresso, Zach gathers up piles of discarded underwear and socks. He stuffs the dirty clothes into the washer and sets the machine to work. Then he heads down to the basement of the apartment building. Somewhere in his storage locker is a dusty suitcase.

Jump.

Six days later, Zach Preston is thirty-five thousand feet above the Atlantic Ocean. Most of his fellow passengers are trying to sleep, but Zach is wide awake. He stares out into the endless blackness.

Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam, standing in the passport control queue. The young woman behind the glass stamps his passport for ninety days, gives him a nod, and motions for the next person. Zach steps beyond the barrier and into the swirling throngs of travelers.

The concourse is clean and bustling. Zach stops at the first café he sees. The barista greets him in Dutch, then switches to English. Zach orders espresso and a pastry. He sits at a small table, sips his espresso, hears the many different languages drifting past his ears.

Another flight to Split, Croatia. No passport control this time. It is raining when he arrives, heavy squalls blowing in from the Adriatic. The cab driver is friendly, speaks English. Zach hands the driver an index card bearing the address of a rental apartment in Split. The driver nods, tells him it is no problem. Stows Zach's suitcase in the trunk. Doors slam and then they are off, windshield wipers slapping away the rain.

The rental is outside the Old City. The driver tells Zach he has chosen well. Lovret, a good neighborhood. When the rains end, the tourists will show up, the cruise ships, crowds of people. A good time for making money, but too many people. For now, it is quiet. He wishes Zach a pleasant stay.

The suitcase hits the floor and Zach hits the bed. He wakes in time for a late dinner, sets out on foot, and finds a restaurant. He tries out his first words in Croatian: Dobar dan. The woman offers a smiling correction. Dobra večer, good evening. Zach repeats the phrase three times. He smiles. She smiles and shows him to a table.

The wine is dry, the bread is crusty, and the food is delicious. As he eats, Zach tries to remember every small detail, soaking up each new taste and smell. When he cannot eat another bite, Zach drinks one last glass of wine, then settles his tab and tip. The server seems happy with the result.

Zach spends the next hour searching for his new apartment. The restaurant is no more than five or six blocks from the rental, but the building has disappeared into thin air. It begins to rain, and Zach is astonished when he begins to laugh. By the time he recognizes the street, then the doorway to his new building, he is soaked to the skin and still laughing at himself.

After a long, hot shower, Zach slips into bed. The noises of Split street life drift up to his third-floor apartment. He listens for all of five minutes, then falls into the sleep of the dead.

The following morning, Zach prepares himself before leaving the apartment. He has a map inked with an arrow marking home. And words, Zach has words: Dobro jutro, good morning. Molim, please. Hvala, thank you. Doviđenja, goodbye.

He finds a café, eats breakfast, drinks coffee, practices his few words. Zach ranges further through his new neighborhood, making mental notes of the closest bakery, the nearest market. He wanders down to the Old City, loses himself in the maze of cobbled passageways. Turning yet another corner, Zach stumbles onto the tiny coffee bar that will become his short-lived regular hangout.

The owner is older than Zach by a good ten years, plays classic rock in the bar, and loves Pink Floyd. When there are no orders to fill, the man steps just outside the door to watch the morning and smoke hand-rolled cigarettes. On the fourth day, Zach's coffee appears at his table before he can shake the rain from his umbrella.

Zach's first week slips away. The sun shines, or rain squalls sweep in from the Adriatic. He walks, eats, drinks, and sleeps. He reads books printed on paper instead of displayed on a screen. With each passing day, he feels lighter, slower.

The second week passes. Zach leaves his map at home, takes random turnings, gets lost on purpose. The arc of time loses its gravity. The past falls away. The future blurs, obscured by Zach's next footstep, next discovery, next meal. He is amazed at the change; amazed and happy.

And.

Zach stands on the balcony. Sheets of rain dance under the streetlights three floors below. He has forgotten to buy bread. Laughing at himself, he steps back into the apartment, slips on his coat, and grabs an umbrella.

Down the stairs, up the sidewalk, and across the busy street. Passing a sidewalk café, Zach sees a couple sheltered under a dripping awning. A black dog sits close at their feet. The dog looks up at Zach, its tongue lolling over a canine grin. Zach smiles back, splashes on toward the bakery.

He queues with the other patrons, selects his bread, pays with small coin. Then he is back on

the wet sidewalk, his bread tucked in the crook of his arm, the warm scent of yeast and oven filling the canopy of his umbrella.

In that moment of rain pelting down, shoes squelching on a foreign sidewalk, the smell of fresh bread in his head, Zach Preston is overwhelmed. It comes in a flash, like a brilliant fork of lightning.

I have never been this happy.

Zach is grinning like a maniac. Three seconds later, he steps into a rain-swept crosswalk. Then he is flying through the air.

Now.

He is a bird of the night, a streaking comet, a superhero. His body flies through darkness and bright raindrops. Then gravity regains its domain.

The first thing Zach smashes into is a thick hedge of star jasmine. The impact breeds an explosion of water pellets and fragrant snow-white petals. Plowing a jagged hole through the tangled hedge, Zach's tumbling body soars over a concrete sidewalk.

The second smash, a dull thud, as Zach's body plows into rain-soaked turf. He lands hard, digging a furrow through mud and dogshit, flips, rolls, and comes to rest on his back. Raindrops patter out of the night, splattering in his wide-open eyes.

Then the raindrops slow, stop, hang motionless. Zach rockets up into the darkness, shooting past the silver drops. Up and up he soars, higher and higher. He is laughing like a maniac, the diamond rain mixing with his tears.

The rain ceases. A darker shadow blots out the night sky. He is no longer flying. Zach feels the press of earth against his back. His body is cushioned in a bed of mud and crushed grass. And a cool touch against the wet flesh of his cheek, soothing fingers, the caress of an angel.

A soft voice speaking words in a language he does not know, yet Zach understands.

Wait. I am here. Stay with me. All will be well.

More shadows above him, then lights. More voices; loud, insistent. Hands reaching under his body, lifting him. The angel's touch slips from his face. Flashing lights, rattling wheels, the clank of metal, lurching motion, a wailing siren.

And then.

A light grows bright beyond his closed eyelids. A warm glow. Zach blinks, sees white walls, closes his eyes, opens them again. A white room. A bed. His body, arms resting on a sheet, tubes taped to his skin.

He shifts his gaze. A woman sitting beside him, pale, young, smiling. Zach feels a cool touch against his cheek, soothing fingers, the caress of a single moment. Then she is gone, vanishing through a doorway.

Before the door closes, a man steps into the white room. He wears a white coat. A stethoscope hangs from his neck. Then the man is standing beside the bed. He lays a hand on Zach's shoulder. His mouth moves, but Zach cannot hear his words.

A long pause. The room spins, goes dark. Two seconds, or two hours later, Zach opens his eyes. The man is still standing over his bed. He is smiling. Zach hears a voice from very far away.

"Mister Preston, good to have you with us again. Can you hear me?"

Zach struggles to speak and fails. He tries a nod, but he cannot move his head. Giving up, he blinks his eyes and smiles.

"Very good. Your neck is immobilized for now, but I don't want you to worry. It's just a precaution. You'll probably feel groggy for a few more days. You've taken a serious battering, but we are hopeful for a full recovery."

Zach smiles again. The room begins to drift. A squeeze on his shoulder, then the doctor's hand lifts away.

"Get some rest, Mister Preston. You're a very lucky man."

Lucky. The word fills his brain, flashing like a neon sign.

You got that right, Doc. I'm the luckiest man alive. The luckiest man on the planet. And the happiest.

The doctor glides across the room as sleep pulls Zach away. The door opens. The white coat disappears. And just before the world fades to warm cotton, Zach thinks he sees a pale young woman slip into the room, but he can't be sure.



# MICHAEL LODERSTEDT

## KAYAKING THE UPPER CUYAHOGA

We went on Mother's Day  
& all I could think of was how  
my own mother hated snakes. And yet--  
there they were, swimming back and forth  
the lazy river all ten. One swallowed a small fish  
headfirst, as if being born & eaten  
were the same things.

I dreamed you were standing  
in the kayak (you'd better sit down  
so you don't capsize) I dream-worried. You  
had those snakes on tiny leashes pulling  
like a river chariot. Triumphant

in the way nonsense seems  
so right. Mother's dead  
now having traded smoke  
for air, her last good  
breath from an oxygen  
machine. She'd only eat  
ice cream those last days--  
Breyers natural vanilla.

The little specks of bean  
stuck to the bowl.

But this is a poem about snakes.



## CAREY TAYLOR

### WHERE GOD RESIDES

Today I hike Neahkahnie Mountain,  
sense spirit of elk in the grasslands.

At the top of the headland I release us—ask the South Wind  
to carry our burdens, beyond lingcod and dogfish.

I stopped scanning the bar for your boat years ago,  
but on the dock I still pull crab pots

filled with your voice, sometimes your face,  
once the Pepé Le Pew tattoo on your calf

you tried to keep hidden from me.  
I was so sure of who left who, but this old

coastal fog has blurred things, left me alone  
with our bowed legs and broad shoulders,

a book about a horse you gave me at fifteen,  
chaps from that doe you hauled off this mountain.

What else could I have done  
but return to this western edge we were our best in?

To the dark of Sitka spruce, where in the smallest shaft of light,  
we were sword fern unfurling toward the blue-gray light.



## MARIE ANDERSON

### HOW FAR I CAN SEE

We were all playing hooky from our jobs except Will whose shift at Target didn't start until five.

Will and I sat under a tree at Montrose Beach, a little apart from Bruce and Merle who were marinating in the sun, determined to get some color before their law firm's annual black tie gala next week. They were my friends from college. Will didn't much like them. They "didn't suffer fools gladly," they liked to say, but Will said that was just their excuse for treating people shitty. He called them, not to their face, the BM's, and I'd started to do that too, but not to their face.

It wasn't yet noon, mid-May, mid-week, so the beach wasn't crowded. Some runners, rollerbladers, and bikers zoomed on the path behind us. A few hard bodies in bulging Speedos lay close to the water, their skin oiled and bronzed.

The BM's kept glancing up from their phones and looking at the hardbodies. When we'd arrived at the beach, Merle had nudged me and said, "I don't think this is the place for you to meet guys, Sammo. But maybe those Chippendales are for Will's benefit?"

"I'm not here to meet anyone," I said to Merle.

And that was true. I was divorced three years. My best friend was Will, who came out to me before anyone else when we were in 8th grade. And God help me, I still fantasized about Merle's husband.

I stroked the sand, watched sailboats cut the horizon, their sails pregnant with wind. Occasionally I'd read a few pages from *Moby Dick*, then reward myself with a session playing *Angry Birds* on my phone.

Will called *Moby* my beach book because the only time I opened it was at the beach.

Will was lost in his book, my ex's book actually, *The Second Deadly Sin*. My ex had left all his books behind when he'd left me the house and everything in it to atone for his freshly pregnant and pretty admin assistant. His books filled the maple shelves in the Chicago bungalow we'd bought and rehabbed together.

I'd just turned to page 145 in *Moby* when sand hit the words.

I looked up. A boy hopped in front of us, flinging sand. He was skinny, wore red gym shorts and a gray tee. On the tee, the words King Elementary School circled the face of MLK. An unzipped Spiderman backpack bulged near the boy's bare feet. A gym shoe poked out from the backpack, a hole in the toe, Velcro straps.

I'm no expert in kid-fashion, but I thought he looked too old for a Spiderman backpack and Velcro-strap shoes. Ten, maybe.

His nose was sunburned. The corners of his mouth leaked red. Ketchup or Kool-Aid, it was hard to tell from where I sat.

I wanted to wipe his face, spit on Kleenex and rub him clean as my own mom had done for me, and as I still see moms doing, even the ones who rub grocery cart handles with antibacterial wipes.

"Go away," Merle said to the boy. She was 24 weeks pregnant with her first child, so she had nothing to prove by being nice to a stranger's kid.

"Come get me!" he shouted. He hopped closer to us.

Bruce was pretending to sleep. Will had yet to look up from his book.

Suddenly, the boy collapsed. I gasped. Moby fell to the sand as I lurched up, the drill for CPR spinning my brain. The boy's arms and legs flailed over the sand like windshield wipers set on high speed.

"Sammo! Samantha! Relax! Stat!" Merle shouted. "You don't need to get into your Nurse Goodbody routine now. He's only doing angel wings!"

"Nus Goodbuddy!" the boy shouted.

I sank back into my sand chair, my cheeks burning. Right. He was just angel-winging the sand. Pregnancy had given Merle mom-eyes. Something I'd never have.

I stared at the kid. Scabs crusted his knees. A long scar puckered his left thigh. His toes were long and widely spaced.

"Very nice angel!" I called out.

He sat up, smiled at Merle.

Merle thumbed her phone, ignored the boy.

He somersaulted, attempted a cartwheel. His arms and legs moved loosey-goosey. One eye

wandered. His lips couldn't quite cover crooked teeth.

I applauded his efforts. Will looked up, smiled, and returned to his book.

Merle frowned. "Don't encourage him, Sammo," she said.

The boy tossed sand again, most of it toward the BM's. I kept smiling and considered offering him some pretzels. I can't have kids of my own, so I prove it doesn't matter by going overboard when it comes to kids. I sent flowers to my ex and his wife when their son was born, roses I hand-picked, inhaling them for freshness at the florist and smelling all the wakes I'd attended over the years.

\*

"Where are his parents?" I asked Merle. "Why isn't he in school?"

She didn't look up from her phone. "Not our prob, Sam," she muttered.

King Elementary, the school name on his tee, was just a few blocks north of the beach, on Marine Drive, the eastern edge of edgy Uptown. I drove past the school on my way to and from the Women's Cancer Clinic where I'm a nurse. The school is a large red brick rectangle. The first-floor windows are bricked. The doors are green slabs of windowless steel. No doorknobs. Opened only from the inside.

This boy had the look of an Uptown kid. His blonde hair was too long, the curls stringy, unwashed. He had none of the rosy-cheeked robustness, the salon-cut hair, the brightly colored cottons from Gap or Land's End that decorate the kids in my part of the city.

Merle frowned and stroked her stomach, a lovely swell under her pink maternity tankini. "I think I see your mother calling you," she said to the boy.

The boy's eyes popped wide. He spun around. "Wheya?" He hopped and kicked sand. "I don't see!"

Merle crossed her arms over her stomach. I wondered if she was thinking of the scene where the Elephant Man's mother, pregnant with him, is frightened by a herd of stampeding elephants. We'd streamed the film last night. The BM's were staying with me while their suburban floors were being sanded, stained, and polyurethaned. I had plenty of room in my bungalow. Two extra bedrooms were no longer needed for a husband's office or a child's room, though I'd yet to remove the alphabet border left by the previous owners.

\*

"Wheya? Wheya?" the boy was chanting. "Tell me!"

"Way out there in the water," Merle said. "See her waving her arms? Better go swim out to her. Maybe she needs your help."

Will jumped up. "Hey! Stop that, Merle!"

I tensed, ready to help Will grab the kid if he actually tried to run into the lake."

"Oh, chill dude," Merle said. "The kid knows I'm just kidding." She dimpled a smile to the boy. "Right, buddy?"

The boy laughed. "I know! I know! I'm not a dummy!"

Bruce finally opened his eyes. "Hey, Babe," he said to Merle. "Be nice. That's bad teasing."

Will shook his head, sat back down, and returned to his book. But I could tell he wasn't reading. His cheeks were red, and his lips were pressed in a tight line.

Bruce looked at me, rolled his eyes, and shrugged. He left his sand chair and loped over to my bag of pretzels. He popped one in his mouth and crouched close to me, placing his hand on my arm. My stomach fluttered the way it had 15 years ago when he'd asked me to dance at the 70's retro party in my college dorm cafeteria. We'd danced to Zeppelin's Stairway to Heaven. When I'd returned from a bathroom break, the DJ was playing Spirit's It's Nature Way, and my roommate had replaced me in Bruce's arms. Merle.

"Her hormones are wacky right now," he said, stroking my arm. I fixed my eyes on the agitated boy twirling before Merle.

Bruce winked at me, grabbed more pretzels, and returned to his chair.

"I know you just foolin' me," the boy said to Merle. "Those just little waves. All I see ah little waves. A zillion waves fah a zillion miles. Wight? Wight?"

"What's your name, young man?" I asked.

He ignored me, gazed at Merle. I thought of cats who gravitate to the least receptive person in the room. Was it because her hair was blonde and curly, like his? Or because she looked soft and maternal with her pregnancy blossoming under her tankini?

"My name is Wahbut," he said to Merle.

"Well, Wahbut," Bruce said. He shot his David Letterman sarcastic grin at me. "You cannot see for a zillion miles. Visibility is good today, but I'd say the horizon is about 10 miles away." He looked down at his phone and started thumbing his way to somewhere else.

"Oh!" Robert said. "Ten miles! I can see 10 miles! Hey! Can I have a pwetzel please?"

I held out my pretzel bag. "Here, Robert!"

But Bruce tossed a pretzel to him from the pile in his lap.

It fell in the sand. Robert scrabbled for it and popped it in his mouth.

"Bruce," Merle said. "Don't encourage him."

Robert somersaulted and landed closer to the BM's.

"How old are you, Wahbut?" Bruce asked.

"Ten!" Robert shouted. He seemed delighted with their attention. I'd kept smiling at him, but he did not look at me. I know I'm not a lookable person. I'm tall and thin and people often tell me I look tired even when I'm not tired at all. My ex thought my failure to ovulate, despite the Clomid pills and Pergonal injections, was because I was so thin. We'd try to fatten me up, eating out after work and always getting dessert. He'd spoon feed chocolate mousse into my mouth, and then we'd go home and try to get fertilized.

\*

"Ten!" Bruce exclaimed. "Fourth grade, and you still haven't learned that the distance you can see is limited to 1.22 times the square root of your height?"

"Huh?" Robert replied.

Merle laughed. "This is why our child will never go to a Chicago public school."

Will closed his book with a bang. "You just look that up on your phone, Bruce?" Will leaned sideways in his chair to reach for the pretzel bag but toppled into the sand.

Robert and the BM's laughed. When I saw Will laughing as he righted himself, I laughed too. Will held out the pretzel bag. "Here Robert. Help yourself."

Robert galloped over, his wandering eye suddenly focused perfectly on Will and me.

"Thanks!" He punched his hand into the bag, knocking it from Will's grip.

Pretzels spilled on the sand.

"Oh!" Robert fell to his knees and started scooping pretzels and sand into the bag. "I'll fix it! Sowwy!" Red splotched his cheeks. His lips trembled.

"Oh Robert," I said. "No worries. I often enjoy a little sand with pretzels."

Robert rocked back on his legs. He grabbed a pretzel from the sand and ate it. "Yah. I enjoy a little sand with my pwetzels too." He smiled at me. "Want one, Nus Goodbuddy?"

I hesitated. Chuckles from the BM's helped me decide.

"Sure!" I held out my hand.

Robert plopped a sandy pretzel in my palm. Black rimmed his fingernails.

I pushed the whole gritty thing into my mouth, chewed, swallowed. "Yum?" I managed to say, and Will and Robert laughed.

Robert arranged himself between my and Will's chairs.

"Better you than us," Merle said from her place in the sun.

"God bless you both," Bruce added.

The BM's returned to their phones.

"I know how fah I can see," Robert announced.

"Bet you don't," Will said.

I looked at Will in surprise.

Robert closed his eyes, took a deep breath. "It's 1.22 times the sqway woot of ya height." I looked at Robert in surprise.

"Yes and no," Will said. "You see stars at night, right?"

"Duh," Robert said. "Yeah."

"Well then. When you see stars, you're seeing light years, zillions of miles!"

I touched Robert's arm and he rewarded me with a crooked smile. "Have you ever wished on a shooting star, Robert?"

He nodded. "I wished Mama to come back."

Merle looked up from her phone. "Way to go, Sammo."

My heart jumped, but before I could mumble sorry, Will commanded: "Close your eyes, Robert. Now think of your mom. What color is her hair?"

Robert squeezed his eyes shut. "Bwon. It was bwon but it all fell out."

Will bit his lower lip. "Well then, you can see what once was. You can see like a time traveler."

"Yeah!" Robert exclaimed.

"Have you ever seen an angel or a superhero, like Spiderman?" Will asked.

"Not foh weal."

"But you know what they look like," Will said.

Robert nodded.

"Then you can see what Nature forgot. You can see what should be, not just what is."

Bruce approached, began rooting in the cooler behind my chair. "What a philosopher our Target clerk is," he whispered to me. His fingers landed on my knee. They felt like a fly itching me. I shifted, brushed them off.

"Go back to your wife," I murmured.

Bruce's face reddened. He returned to his chair.

"I like your Spiderman backpack," I said to Robert.

Robert galloped to his backpack and began kicking it. Stuff spilled: shoes, crumpled paper scrawled with shaky print, a lunch bag, still fat, the name Robert Heimerdinger printed in block letters on the bag.

"Hey!" Will called out. "Why you kicking your backpack?"

"Don't do that," I added, and rose from my chair and began gathering the spilled contents.

"I hate it!" Robert shouted. "It's dumb-dingaheim-doo!"

"I think your backpack is way cool," Will said.

"Everyone says it's dumbo."

"Robert." I placed my hand on his shoulder. "Help me put your stuff back in."

He crouched next to me and gathered chewed up pencils. I smelled his sweat.

Will crouched next to us. "Kids in school dissing your backpack?"

"They say I should be in kindagaten with the othah Spidahmen and Winnie the Poo-Poo backpacks."

"So you took a little break from school?" I asked. "Came to the beach to get happy with the lake and the sun?"

He nodded.

"Bet your teacher is worried. Bet she wants to have you back safe and sound. Maybe they've called your parents, and now they're worried, too."

Then I remembered what he'd said about his mom. "I mean, your dad?"

He shook his head. "They usually call the home."

"The home?" Will and I asked at the same time.

"Jinx!" Robert shouted. "You owe me a pop! You say the same thing same time you gotta gimme a pop!"

"We'll give you a pop, then we'll see about getting you back to school, okay?" I asked.

Robert shrugged. "Mountain Dew?"

"Caffeine Free Diet Coke is all we have," I replied.

We settled ourselves back under the tree. I opened the cooler, handed a Coke to Robert. "Thank you," he said.

Something warm trembled from my gut to my throat and settled itself behind my eyes.

I handed a Coke to Will. "I'm going to help this kid," I whispered into his ear.

He nodded. "Count me in."

I grabbed a Coke for myself, facing the path just as a woman pushing a baby jogger ran along the path. She smiled at me and waved. I waved back, closed the cooler, and returned to my chair.

Robert sat cross-legged on the sand between me and Will. He leaned into the armrest of my chair. His hair tickled my arm. He looked up at me. His eyes focused perfectly straight. He sipped his Coke. "This hits the spot," he said. He smiled at me.

I tousled his hair. He laughed. "That tickles!"

The woman pushing the baby jogger, when she waved she probably thought she was seeing a fellow mom, a mom enjoying a day at the beach with her handsome husband and adorable son.

I sipped my Coke. Closed my eyes.

I could see it, too.



**KURT LUCHS**

**THE WOMAN IN THE MIRROR**

The dead are dead, when they're gone they're gone,  
they cannot return. And yet, sometimes, they do.  
Tonight as I was dining with my darling  
in our favorite restaurant, I looked up

to see the sweet narrow face of a woman long dead  
staring back at me obliquely from the side mirror  
on the wall: Andrea Nagy Smith,  
not seen on earth since 2012,

dear friend, lover of cats and jokes,  
honorary aunt to my two daughters,  
how is it you are here this evening  
a bit younger than when we first met

in New Haven? Who is this man with you?  
Where is the husband you found late in life  
after so much time alone, the one  
who gave you such brief, intense joy?

What realm have you returned from  
and what message do you bring me  
other than an overpowering urge to weep?  
I don't know, I don't know, but I see now

you've been alive inside me all this time  
as well as in the mirror world  
and possibly also in this world  
which I could have sworn you had left.



MORNING SHIFT

Summer's measured in blossoms fallen to the base of a mason jar.  
The kitchen's heat steams its fog beneath her apron.

Her muscles ache so bad they groan.  
She stares at the calendar by the cashier,

eyes fixed on some future day  
as if it will truly be different.

Her expression's hard to make out, eyes diverted  
from customers as if evading a sandstorm.

She hovers over the dinettes and booths, carafe  
held up like a chalice.

No a/c at home, she swims the river at night —  
cottonmouths be damned.

She opens tinned fish for supper, again for breakfast.  
Night is a moon-scoured window.

Come morning, she'll grab a clean apron,  
a red ribbon to hold up black hair,

ignore the run in her stockings,  
shield her eyes under a fluttering haze of sparrows.



**HEADING HOME**

LaLa Chere lived in a dump  
of an apartment on a side street  
in the French Quarter. Her granny,  
mum, and the odd cousin or three  
had air mattresses and got eyes-up close  
with an occasional cockroach or mouse,  
nothing they ain't seen before.

LaLa got teased bigtime in school,  
her drag name fighting like hell  
with straight A's, participation in every club  
you could conjure, and a place on the special  
student/faculty board to help solve problems  
and keep every drug from mouth or vein. Too many kids  
had died, and a teacher or two, it wasn't right.

When granny passed, LaLa kept it so far inside  
no one would ever know and she'd never tell.  
She passed by Marie Laveau's heading home  
from school, bought some safe-travel stones  
to string upon her neck and that was that.  
She rolled up her cuffs, waded into the Mississippi  
far down from the docks, blessed the old woman

ten times by always, then came home  
to help with supper. LaLa made cornbread.  
Mum made red beans and rice.  
They threw in a ham hock in honor of gran,  
keeper of the budget and all things costing  
a dollar or more. A couple extra cousins came,  
gran's place at the table stayed set and bare,

and the late sun sank hard into dusk.



## RONNIE SIRMANS

### SALVATION

I was an indeterminate boy  
with so little faith in myself.  
Then one day while no one  
was paying me much attention,  
I met a man walking on stilts,  
his pants waving like banners.

He reached down, picked me  
up, and gave me a gentle hug.  
He kept up the procession  
with his talented legs and  
strength to bear the burden  
while my ordinary legs were  
wrapped around his torso.

He asked whether I was crying,  
but I said it was just the sprinkles  
of low clouds slipping by my face.  
We brushed some tree branches,  
handfuls of soft-hued blossoms  
floating by like natural confetti  
for a mystery worth celebrating.

When he tired and lowered me  
back down, a pant leg hiked up.  
Like a tattoo on skin, an image  
had been burned into the wood  
of a skinny stilt: I saw thorns  
wrapped around a heart afire.



## NILES REDDICK

### GARDEN PARTY

We went to a garden party. It was a birthday celebration for Stella who my wife knew socially from the garden club and who'd turned seventy-five. Stella had hired a band, a caterer, and a bartender, and the event took place in her canopied backyard with old growth Oaks, Magnolias, and Ginkgo. The bartender served Bloody Marys with a splash of Worcestershire sauce to compliment the tomato juice and vodka and garnished the drink with a stalk of celery. Some had Bloody Marys while others had iced water with mint leaves. The tables were all draped in sage green plastic cloths, and each table had a round vase with Hosta leaves covering the inside glass and a couple of white hydrangeas capping the vase. Of the forty or so guests, many of Stella's friends wore floral prints on linen or seersucker and sandals, and their husbands mostly wore khakis or shorts, loafers, a seasonal short sleeved shirt, and a few wore Panama hats.

Stella's husband Bill had dementia but was sociable and a great conversationalist though we'd heard he'd lost his filters. Most simply ignored him, and while he remembered my name, he didn't remember my wife's, told her she had pretty hair, but her feet were ugly. She'd just had a manicure and pedicure the day before, and on the way home, she looked at her feet and asked if I thought her feet were ugly. I rolled my eyes and simply said no and wondered if I got dementia if I might be honest about her ugly feet.

I told Bill it was a nice party he'd thrown for Stella, and he responded, "I didn't know anything about it." It was probably true. Stella had paid for it herself and arranged all the details. The garden party was a manifestation of her belief that she had to please herself first and foremost. She couldn't rely on her husband, anyone else, or even God. The woman was a steam roller in the community, she had a one-track mind, and if someone got in her way, he'd find himself as flat as Wile E. Coyote, hearing "Beep, beep" and watching Stella the Road Runner speed away.

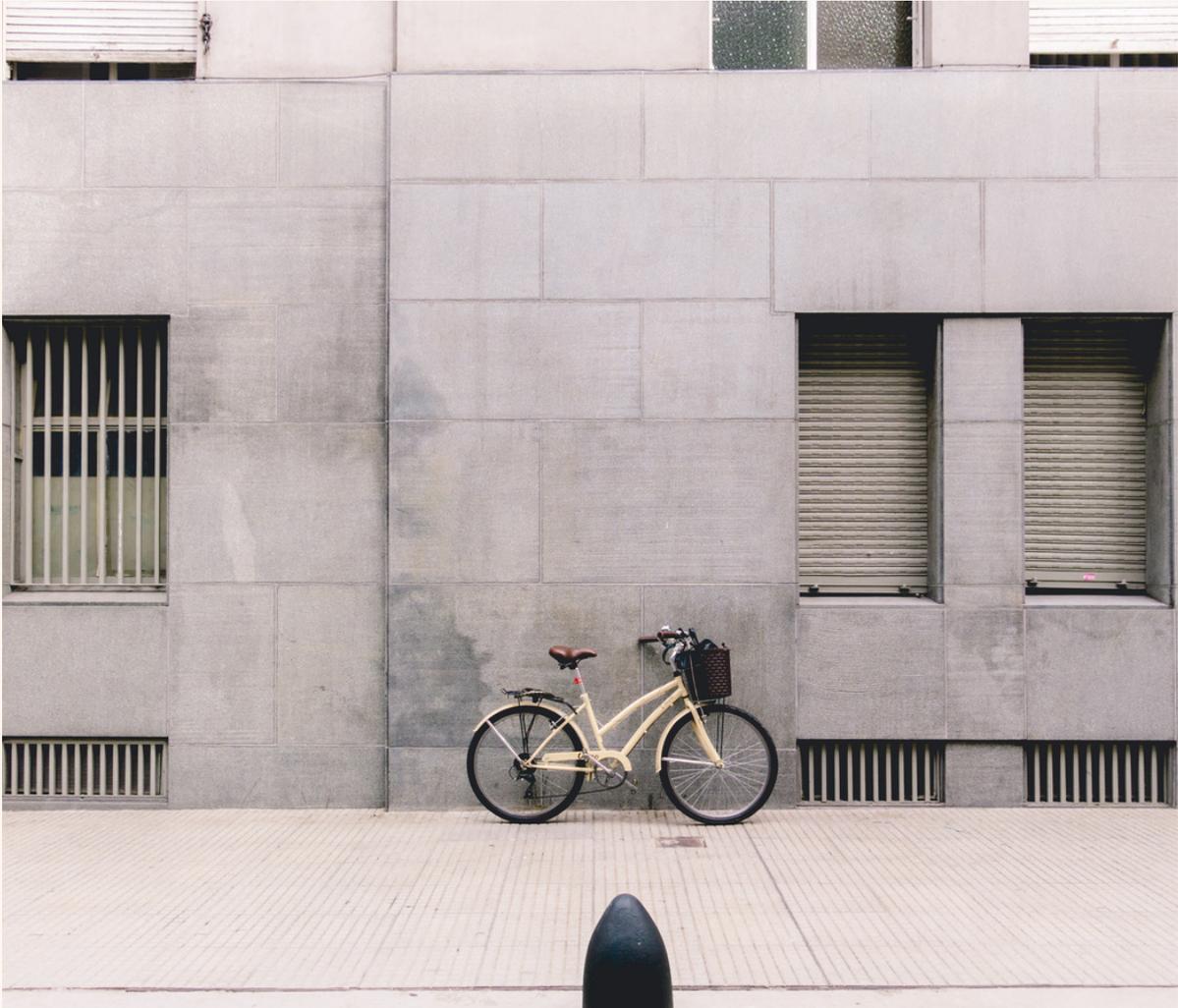
Once we were seated, we made casual conversation with others while we listened to the Rat Pack-type trio sing mostly top Sinatra songs (That's Life, Fly Me to the Moon, Something Stupid, You Make Me Feel So Young, among others) from the elevated back porch. When the band took a break, a retired Methodist minister slurred a brief prayer, missed a step, and fell into one of the plucked hydrangeas while a couple rushed to help steady him. He waived off assistance but had a waddling gait to his car after the party.

The guests lined up for a feast of sliced ham, biscuits, candied bacon, veggies, fruit, pimento and cheese, and petit fours decorated like birthday cake. Stella spoke briefly, thanked friends, relatives, college buddies, and former work colleagues for coming. While gifts hadn't been requested, a few brought them anyway, but most had piled up cards on a table. The band and trio picked up with *My Way* while people nibbled, snacked, and knocked back Bloody Marys, some of which had more vodka than tomato juice.

Bill spilled his Bloody Mary, and it rushed like a tsunami onto Loretta's linen blouse, and he took napkins and rubbed them on her. "That's okay, Bill. I've got it," Loretta said, and he responded, "Everybody sees that you've got some new ones" and continued to press her chest. "Bill, that's enough," she snapped, and it was as though someone turned on a light and he became aware, wobbled back, stepped on a tree root, and fell sideways into two guests, hitting his head on the corner of the table on his way to the ground, where he was unconscious and bled slowly from the cut above his eye. If he could smell, he would have smelled dirt again like he had on the playground when he fell from the monkey bars in elementary school, when he hoed his mother's garden as a teen for hours, or when he dated a young Stella and they went to the stock car races on Friday nights, and the race cars sent clouds of dust from the dirt track into the stands.

Someone yelled "Stella", and she directed a friend to call 911. She went to him, kneeled by him, and shook him. "Bill, I'll make sure they take care of you."





## WILLIAM CASS

### CHOICES

Javier met Rosa when she came down to Tijuana from San Diego to visit her ailing grandmother in the nursing home where he worked. He had a position there in the kitchen and brought a lunch tray to the room where Rosa sat bedside holding the old woman's hand. Rosa turned, their eyes met, and something clenched inside him. He swallowed. A small, tentative smile creased her lips, and she pointed to the lap table at the foot of the bed where he left the tray before fleeing the room. He felt foolish about his hair net, embarrassed about his stained smock, and astounded at the quiet tenderness in her gaze.

After his shift, he found Rosa alone on a bench near the kitchen's back door and stopped still in his tracks. She sat with her head bowed, a tissue clasped in her lap. She looked up at him and said, "Mi abuelita..." She paused before finishing in English, "...she's dying."

"Yes." Javier gave two short nods. "I know."

He sat down beside her and gently placed a hand on her shoulder. She resumed her silent, head-bowed grief as traffic sped by on the busy boulevard beyond the wall.

\*\*

Rosa made several more trips down that winter, each on DACA Advance Parole, to visit her grandmother before her death. She and Javier spent increasing time together when she did: sitting on the bench, taking walks, talking, getting to know each other. He told her he was about to receive a two-year certificate in computer repair from a technical college.

She asked, "Is that where you learned to speak English so well?"

"No, I was given a scholarship when I was very young to a K-12 dual-language school I attended until I graduated."

When he asked how she came to live in the United States, she told him, "My parents and I crossed the border illegally near Calexico when I was eleven. We began moving among farmworker camps in the Imperial Valley and eventually made our way to San Diego where I finished high school while they both worked custodial jobs. My parents were deported just after my graduation, but I was allowed to stay under DACA provisions because I'd already

turned eighteen." She looked away for a moment before continuing. "I was hired as a housekeeper at a hotel where a neighbor worked, and he had a garage he'd converted into a kind of studio where I live. I can't afford a car, so I take the trolley to and from Tijuana."

Javier and Rosa's romance blossomed quickly and with an intensity that surprised them both. They kept in touch daily by text, and he often arranged FaceTime visits on his cell phone for her with her grandmother. When the old woman passed away, he borrowed an oversized suit to attend her funeral and burial with Rosa. Afterwards, with Javier unable to afford a Border Crossing Card and no further visits allowed for Rosa using DACA provisions, their hearts ached for one another. Their decision to marry was almost as sudden as their courtship. A brief courthouse affair followed, and Javier had moved into Rosa's garage studio in San Diego before summer began; they were both twenty. He fixed up an old bike her neighbor gave him to ride to an overnight IT job he got at San Diego State University, which expedited his acceptance as a part-time computer science student there. By that fall, Rosa was pregnant, and nine months later, they were parents to a baby girl they named Sofia.

\*\*

Ian's father had immigrated from Singapore and his mother was Dutch-American. They ran a very successful commercial real estate firm together in Orange County and expected him to pursue an MBA immediately after graduating from SDSU and then join them in the business. When he finally mustered the courage to tell them he'd been accepted instead to the SDSU nursing program after his sophomore year, they promptly cut him off financially and told him they wanted nothing to do with him until he'd come to his senses. He scraped together tuition to begin nursing classes during the upcoming summer session, but that left him four hundred dollars short for next month's rent on his apartment, considerably less than he made at the irregular fill-in Starbucks shifts he'd found just to augment his parents' former regular stipend.

Ian felt desperate, abandoned and alone. The only boyfriend he'd ever had - another secret about himself he hadn't yet shared with his parents - had just broken up with him and moved out, exacerbating things further because he'd been splitting rent and expenses. The apartment was on the third floor and bordered the college. He often stood gazing forlornly out the window across the street into the mostly empty campus with summer session yet to begin. The silent buildings, residence halls, lawns, pathways, bus stops, and bike racks stretched sprawling before him with no offer of reprieve. He found himself fixating on the cluster of bike racks closest to him near the corner of a large residence hall with its collection of what seemed like the same couple dozen bikes randomly scattered among the bars: assorted mountain bikes in various colors, the red road bike with the raised seat in the middle, a yellow beach cruiser almost tipped on its side, bikes with baskets and milk crates strapped to the front or back, one missing a front tire entirely. Staring at them, Ian's brow furrowed as an idea slowly formed.

"Those bikes have been left there for weeks now," he whispered to himself. "Probably abandoned by graduating students or kids leaving for summer vacation who don't care what happens to them anymore. I could take a few of the better ones, sell them on Craig's List, and make rent." He hesitated, chasing an uneasy flush away, then said aloud, "Why not? What the hell choice do you have?"

He waited several nights studying the patterns of the campus security vehicle that periodically drove through that portion of campus. When he felt certain that there was at least an hour between each of its overnight passes, he shoved a pair of bolt cutters into his daypack and crossed the street shortly before 2am, just after the security vehicle had disappeared into the depths of campus. Aside from the rustle of leaves in the trees above the bike racks and a soft chorus of crickets, he met only stillness as he approached. Despite that, his breathing had quickened, and a cold sweat bloomed on the back of his neck. His perusal of the available bikes was a hurried one; he chose the red road bike and three of the nicer-looking mountain bikes near it, cut their chains, and led two of them flanking his sides by their handlebars across the street, attempting nonchalance. He heard and saw no one as he tucked them behind a dumpster on the far side of his apartment building. Still, his heart hammered away. Ian re-crossed the street and began the same process with the other two bikes, but gave a little jump and froze at the sound of movement in the bushes beside the racks. A calico cat slipped out among the low branches, regarded him blankly, and slithered away. A heaved sigh escaped him, then Ian brought the remaining pair of bikes over to his building, trotting the final few yards, and tucked them in the shadows with the others.

It took him another twenty minutes to carry each bike up the back stairwell to his apartment where he leaned them haphazardly against his couch. Moments later, he'd stripped to his boxer shorts and lay on his side under covers in bed with its pillow over his head trying to drown out remnants of his father's persistent lectures about principles and destiny.

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Javier found his bicycle gone from the rack after he got off shift at seven the next morning. He regarded the sliced locks, held his own in his hands, then threw it to the ground and swore. A searing flare of anger rose in him as he cursed again with violated rage. He and Rosa had been saving what little they could for months to purchase a used bike trailer so he could take Sofia to an infant daycare near the university while he attended classes, allowing Rosa to resume a few housekeeping shifts; Sofia was almost one, and they badly needed that meager extra income. He banged his hand on the bike rack and called campus security on his cell phone. When they arrived, they told him without much conviction they'd file his report but that if he really wanted to pursue restoration, he needed to contact the city police. So, he did, but the officer he dealt with, a big man named Peters, was even less hopeful of finding the stolen bikes.

On the long walk home, Javier's thoughts turned over on themselves, furious and random. When he got to the garage studio, he curled up next to Rosa and Sofia on the pullout couch where they slept; Rosa had texted him early that morning that Sofia had been fussy all night and neither had really slept. Javier managed a few short, fitful catnaps of his own, but mostly stewed further over the injustice of what had happened and the limited possibilities of correcting it. He finally got up about nine, careful not to wake his wife and daughter, and powered up his laptop at their card table. He clicked on the local Craig's List and searched through the "bikes" link under the for-sale category. Javier sat up straight, blinking rapidly, when he found his bike's photo staring back at him at the end of the top row there. Its familiar faded blue frame with the seat's small torn corner stood perched in front of a couch in beams of low sunlight; it looked like it had been wiped down and the seat polished. Several additional pictures of it from different angles were included, as well as a description of the bike's model, dimensions, condition, and the like. An asking price of \$100 was listed along with an email address and phone number. Javier sat studying the entry for several long moments, shaking his head, clenching and unclenching his jaw. Finally, he glanced over at his slumbering family surrounded by unfinished walls and a concrete floor, considered the dismissive reactions of the campus security and police, then turned back to his laptop and created three fake email accounts.

Javier waited fifteen minutes or so between email messages to the listed address expressing interest in the bike. He intentionally tried to configure each with a different tone, voice, and length. He chose the second message to offer ten dollars more than the asking price as long as the bike was in as good a condition as it appeared in the photos; he added that he'd need to see it in person first before committing to that price.

Not quite an hour passed while Javier tried to distract himself elsewhere on the web before a reply popped up to his second message. It said: "The bike is still available at the price you offered and you're welcome to inspect it. If you're local, we could meet in the Starbucks parking lot at 53rd and College at noon." It was signed: Ian.

Javier let his fingertips hover over the laptop's keys before typing: "Sounds good, Ian. See you there." He left it unsigned.

Rosa had sleepily drawn a rousing Sofia to her breast to feed. She looked up at Javier, smiled, and said, "Hi."

"Hey, there," Javier replied. "Get some more rest. I've got to go."

He kissed them both on their foreheads and left.

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Ian had finally given up on sleep entirely with dawn's first light and forced himself into action. He cleaned up each bike and oiled their chains, then arranged them one by one in front of the couch, took photos with his phone, downloaded them to his computer, and created the four Craig's List postings. He priced each at only \$100, reasoning to himself that he wasn't looking to make a profit but just wanted to unload the bikes as quickly as possible to make the rent due at week's end. He had the postings completed shortly before nine.

To his surprise, he began receiving replies almost immediately. He had to work a shift at Starbucks that afternoon at 12:30, so decided he'd wait a couple of hours before trying to confirm any transaction that seemed viable. He concentrated first on exchanging messages with two people indicating interest in the black mountain bike before realizing they were both just fishing for a give-away price. He deleted a message asking if he'd consider trading the road bike for a surfboard, then concentrated on a series of queries that had come in intermittently over the previous hour about the blue mountain bike. He returned to the second of those queries, which offered more than asking price if the bike's actual condition matched the photos. The sender's email address included "collegeguy", and his tone was so mild-mannered that it bordered on apologetic. It was hard for Ian to imagine him as someone difficult to deal with; in fact, he seemed like he'd be a pushover. He glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost 11. The looming immediacy of his dilemma seized him, and he quickly exchanged messages arranging the meeting at the Starbucks parking lot.

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It was a forty-five-minute walk from their garage studio to the Starbucks. On the way, Javier called the phone number on the card Officer Peters had given him after taking his report and explained what had transpired. At first, Peters expressed bemused disbelief at Javier's story, but as more details were provided, he agreed to be waiting with other officers in two unmarked cars at the parking lot by 11:45.

"You won't notice us," he told Javier. "But we'll see you. If the bike is yours when you meet this guy, scratch your head, and we'll take care of things from there."

Javier arrived at the Starbucks a little early. He went inside, bought a coffee, and took a seat by the window. The strip mall parking lot was about three-quarters full of perhaps thirty vehicles with a couple spots empty in front of the store. He sipped his coffee and tried to stop the anxious tapping of his foot. He ignored the quiet chatter of conversations at other tables and the soft, piped-in background music. Just before noon, a short young man about his age of some Asian descent rode a mountain bike across the parking lot and came to a halt in one of the spaces in front. Javier made a fist, then opened it slowly: the bike was his. The young man climbed off the blue frame and looked around with a curious frown; he wore a faded polo shirt, khakis, and sneakers. Javier wasn't sure what he was expecting but was struck by how nondescript the young man appeared; except for a prematurely receding hairline, he looked like any other student on campus. Javier stood, left his cup on the table, and pushed through the jingling door outside.

He stepped towards the young man and said, "Ian?"

The young man turned and smiled. "That's right."

Javier was struck by the gentleness of his voice; his eyes were also gentle, but dancing. They shook moist hands, then Ian used his chin to gesture to the bike and said, "Well, here it is. Go ahead and look it over."

Javier nodded, regarded the bike, and scratched his head. Things happened from there in a blur. The next thing he knew, the bike had clattered to the blacktop and two uniformed officers had Ian face down against the hood of the parked car next to them, one roughly handcuffing his hands behind his back while the other recited Miranda rights. Javier flinched at the sight as Officer Peters came up beside him.

The big policeman clapped Javier on the shoulder. "Can't say I remember a theft like this being solved so quickly, but thanks."

"What happens now?"

"We'll bring him in, get him processed. Question him. Search his residence for the other bikes. Impound this one."

"When can I get it back?"

Peters shrugged. "Day or two. I'll be in touch. We'll need a formal statement from you, of course, and I'll keep you abreast of developments in the case as they arise. About charges, prosecution, sentencing...all of that."

The officer that had been handcuffing Ian jerked him upright. Even with his head bent, Javier could see him crying. Ian turned, their troubled eyes met briefly, then the officer who'd handcuffed him guided him by the elbow across the parking lot. The third officer gave Peters a satisfied nod.

Peters clapped Javier's shoulder again and said, "Officer Wallace here will give you a lift home. I'll call you soon."

Javier watched Peters leave. A small crowd had gathered in front of the strip mall shops, including staff and patrons from Starbucks, all staring at Ian's retreating figure. A kind of hollowness had invaded Javier; he didn't follow their gazes.

\*\*

As soon as Officer Peters and his partner sat down with him in the police station's interrogation room, Ian waved his rights and confessed to everything including where they could find the other bikes. By their steely expressions, he could tell his explanation about thinking the bikes had been abandoned and just needing money to make rent had fallen on deaf ears.

Ian was brought to a holding cell where he waited alone until the public defender who'd been assigned to him came to meet with him a few hours later. The lawyer, a short man in a shiny suit whose last name was Burke, said that Officer Peters had told him the owner of the parking lot bike was pissed as hell and wanted a piece of his hide. When Burke explained that because the cumulative value of the bikes exceeded \$950, Ian's preliminary charge was larceny, a felony, Ian's eyes grew wide. He gasped, "I was selling those bikes for a hundred bucks each."

"That's not what the police valued them at. They have their own scale for all types of property."

Ian's shoulders slumped. "Holy shit...what's the typical sentence for that?"

Burke's mouth closed into a tight line before he said, "Up to three years in prison...usually closer to sixteen months, though, in this sort of case."

Ian's head collapsed between his knees; he squeezed it with both hands and began crying again.

\*\*

The post-arrest exchange between Officer Peters and Javier didn't actually occur until the next day. Peters arranged for him to be brought to the station, took his statement, and told him his bike was ready to be reclaimed downstairs in stored property. When Javier asked about what had happened so far with the young man who'd stolen the bikes, Peters explained about the preliminary charge, the sentence typically involved, and the timeline for eventual court proceedings.

After he finished, Javier shook his head. "He didn't seem like a crook."

"They often don't."

"I mean, he just looked like a regular college kid...like me."

"Well." Peters cocked his head. "That's exactly what he is."

Javier turned towards the window and shook his head again. "That bike was a piece of crap."

It was given to me...I didn't pay a dime for it." He looked back at Peters. "What about the others?"

Peters let a long moment pass before he said, "We haven't actually been able to locate their owners yet."

"I saw those photos on Craig's List," Javier said. "The other three bikes weren't anything special either. Just used ones like mine that he cleaned up." Javier rubbed the back of his neck. "Jesus, I mean I don't want to ruin this guy's life. Can't you reduce the charges a bit?" Peters leaned forward at this desk. "Son, that punk stole your property and the property of others. And right now, you're our only corroborating victim. Are you saying you're not going to cooperate with us?"

"Not with that charge," Javier said. "No."

Officer Peters sat back in his chair and took a turn shaking his head. Then he waved his hand toward the door like he was shooing away a fly. "Go," he said. "I'll talk to the prosecutor and be in touch."

\*\*

Ian had spent two nights in jail because he had no means of posting the large bail required to be released; beyond telling him to never try to contact them again, his father had refused to speak to him when he'd made his lone permitted call. He was brought to the courthouse in an orange jumpsuit handcuffed to a belly chain the following morning for his arraignment and led to the defense table where Burke stood waiting for him. The bench was temporarily unoccupied while the judge was on a restroom break.

Burke looked over at Ian and said, "Well, I have some good news. The charges have just been reduced to petty larceny, and that's only a misdemeanor."

Ian stared back, dazed. "Why? How?"

The lawyer shrugged. "Not sure. Stroke of luck." A door opened behind the bench and the judge reappeared, his robes fluttering behind him. "Stand up straight," Burke whispered to Ian. "And look repentant."

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~

Ian was sentenced to a month in county jail. He wasn't surprised to receive messages during that stint from his supervisor at Starbucks that he'd been fired, from his apartment building's property manager that he'd been evicted, or from the university that he'd been expelled after they received the security and police reports about his arrest. When he was released,

he sold whatever belongings he could, rented a spot in a six-person room at a youth hostel downtown, and began looking without success for employment. He was able to arrange a few interviews, but things ended quickly with each when he had to admit his criminal record and the nature of his offense; even though it was only a misdemeanor, he found that no employer would take a chance on hiring someone who'd been a convicted thief.

He began heading early each morning to the nearest big-box hardware store and waiting with other men hoping to obtain day-work jobs. He got a few of those here and there that eventually led to a landscaper who hired him under the table on a more or less permanent basis to dig ditches for sprinkler systems. That allowed Ian to move into a room of his own in an old residence hotel near the hostel where he snuck in a hotplate and mini-fridge and which he called home for the next handful of years.

\*\*

While he completed his degree, Javier did well enough in his IT department to be promoted several times, and when he graduated, he moved into a supervisory position with them in information systems. He and Rosa had a second daughter by then and had been living for some time in a small rental house on a quiet street in La Mesa. They shared a car, but Javier still rode his bike often for exercise. He'd never told anyone about it having been stolen, not even his wife.

One sun-splashed Saturday in May, they attended a birthday party/bar-b-que for a first-grade classmate of Sofia's. Families gathered in the backyard where kids played in a blow-up bouncy house while parents mingled on the deck where the host grilled. When the time for cake and gifts arrived, Rosa realized they'd left theirs in the car, so Javier went back for it. He retrieved the wrapped box from where they'd parked up the cul-de-sac along the curb and closed the car door. He turned just as a worker climbed out of a ditch he was digging in the front lawn a few feet away. Javier didn't realize it was Ian until the young man's receding hairline was revealed when he took off his ball cap and used it to wipe sweat away from his forehead. Their eyes held and recognition filled Ian's. Javier stiffened. Ian replaced his cap and closed both hands around the handle of his shovel. He said, "You."

"Ian, right?"

Ian nodded. An older man came around the corner of the house, took several long lengths of white PVC pipe from the back of a pick-up truck in the driveway, and carried them away. He and Ian wore identical long-sleeved blue T-shirts displaying the insignia of the landscaping company stenciled on the side of the truck. They both wore jeans, but Ian's were scarred with dirt.

"You're working," Javier said.

Ian gave another grim nod.

Javier nodded himself. "It's been, what...five years?" He paused. "I've wondered about you."  
"You've wondered."

"I have, yes. I mean, about what happened to you." He moved the gift from one hip to the other. "I'm glad you're all right."

"I'm not, actually."

Javier felt his eyebrows raise.

"After I got out of jail, this was the only steady work I could get. Lost my job, my apartment, my spot in nursing school, and was kicked out of college. My parents haven't spoken to me since." Ian's face hardened. "Shit, man, I thought those bikes were abandoned, left at the end of the semester by students who didn't care about them anymore. I was just trying to make my damn rent."

Ian's voice and eyes held their same earlier gentleness despite his harsh words. Javier said, "I wasn't made aware of any of that."

"Yeah, well..."

"I didn't want to wreck your life. I just wanted some kind of retribution." Javier paused again. "I got your charges reduced."

"You did that?"

"I did. But I wouldn't have pressed charges at all if I knew the rest of it. I would've been fine with just getting my bike returned. I needed it to get back and forth to work. We were poor as hell then."

"We?"

"My family...my wife and daughter."

Ian dropped his head and shook it. "Jesus," he muttered. "No way I would've taken your bike if I'd known that." He looked up at Javier. "Doesn't matter. I shouldn't have stolen any of them. It was wrong, period. I got what I deserved."

The older landscaper appeared at the corner of the house. "Hey, Ian," he called. "I need your help back here."

Ian answered, "Coming." The landscaper left, and the two young men stood looking at each other in the white light. A dog barked nearby. Finally, Ian said, "Listen, I'm sorry."

"Me, too."

Ian gave one last nod, then turned and walked away dragging his shovel. Javier watched in a wave of regret as the back of him disappeared. He was vaguely aware of the sound of voices and laughter coming from the birthday party, but he made no move to return there. The ditch began at the base of the house and had been dug about halfway across the lawn, perhaps a foot wide and deep. The turf had been cut away neatly and set to one side with a trailing pile of earth on the other. Javier wondered how many trenches like it Ian had dug since they'd had their few brief minutes together in that parking lot. Time passed, you found shelter where you could, life went on. He wondered what he would be doing at that moment if Rosa had never come to Tijuana to visit her grandmother: another chance encounter of a different kind. A chorus of voices rose singing happy birthday, but still Javier didn't move. Instead, he hugged the gift to his chest and wondered what the future held for each of them, what control any of them had over it, and what choices, for better or worse, they had yet to make.



# MAGGIE NERZ IRIBARNE

## BRUCE TUESDAYS

*She watched the line stretch down the block from the front windows. Cars passed in a stream, unrelenting. Business people, regular people, those who did not need a free meal, crossed the street to avoid the crowd. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd seen them, the poor, the hungry. On a trip into the city with her grandmother for the Christmas show all she remembered afterwards was the homeless man shivering on a steaming grate, the elderly woman with smeared lipstick poking through the garbage, a dirty sleeping bag unrolled under a tree in the park. Before sleep each night, those images lingered. She worried and wondered about them all. She dreamed about the poor.*

*"C'mon in, everybody!" She propped open the front door and waved, welcoming the line. "Starting to rain. Dinner's almost ready! Get a cup of joe and a seat!"*

*"Hey, Bethie, how're ya?" John took her hand.*

*"I'm good, very good, glad to see you!"*

*She glanced once more out the door before closing it. Horns honked, someone gave someone else the finger. Life continued in the outside world of oblivion. Inside, she enjoyed a better view: her team of volunteers preparing a meal for the poor, all for free.*

*This was Beth's dream come true, her nonprofit soup kitchen, "The Table." The dream that mystified and disappointed her parents, repulsed her older sister, and destroyed her social and sex lives. How many people are living their dream? she often asked herself. Not many, she answered, not many at all.*

*\*\**

*Bruce, a new guy, came to fill out a volunteer application. Beth thought his jeans looked pressed, his white hair too freshly cut, wafts of a not-unpleasant aftershave emanated around him. He wore expensive, new looking running shoes. When Beth shook his hand, it felt too smooth.*

*"I just retired. I've always wanted to give back."*

*Blah bah blah. Beth nodded, skimming the application.*

*"Okay, I'll give you a call," she said.*

*"I could start right now. Just give me a job!"*

*Overenthusiastic. Too happy. Entitled.*

*"It doesn't work like that. I have a team I train. Like I said, I'll call you."*

*His smile lingered, his eyes full of questions.*

*"He's never done real work. He lives out in the country. I saw him getting out of a giant SUV," Beth said to Jeanie, her office assistant.*

*"He's a doctor. His training alone was real work," Jeanie said.*

*"I guess."*

*"You're not going to take him?"*

*"Well, maybe I can get a big donation out of him," Beth said.*

*"Sheesh. You're a tough customer."*

*"All these people waltzin' in here, all dolled up, finally ready to help out, after years of doing nothing." Beth's face heated.*

*"He seemed fine to me. Heart's in the right place," Jeanie said, turning back to her computer.*

*\*\**

On Bruce's first day he talked. A lot. He talked to Greg in salads. He talked to Ruth at the coffee stand. He talked to Chef Terry. Mostly he talked about his garden. Bruce obsessed about his garden.

*"We get all our produce day-old from the local businesses. We save it from being tossed. I'm really committed to that," Beth said.*

Her words fell on deaf ears.

*"I could start out back. You've got the space. And it's kind of messy out there. I--"*

*"Hey, Bruce. I've got an idea, I'll put you in the toiletry give-away closet today," Beth said.*

The toiletry closet was the real wake up call for anyone who didn't get it - the real-time desperation of the poor. Every Tuesday they lined up for toilet paper, soap, tooth paste, all

*the things many take for granted.*

*"Uh, okay," Bruce said.*

*Later when she snuck a peak, Beth enjoyed the sight of flustered Bruce, grabbing from the shelves, telling people they could only have two rolls. Still, he kept the chatter flowing. He even dispensed medical advice.*

*"How long you had that rash?" he asked Selma, who'd just lost her son in a shooting and probably didn't give a rat's ass about her rash.*

*"I've got something for that. I can bring it next time," Bruce said.*

*Selma smiled a stiff smile. Beth read her mind. Is this guy for real?*

*The following week, Bruce brought a box of tomatoes and several first aid kits.*

*"I thought I'd put them outside the closet," he said, hopeful eyes.*

*"I'd focus on the toilet paper and soap. Basics, Bruce, basics."*

*"I gotcha," he said. "Off I go!" he said brightly, too brightly for Beth's taste.*

*\*\**

*On one of the Bruce Tuesdays, Beth stood by the drink stand talking to John about his new apartment they just helped him secure.*

*"Hey, I know what that's like." Bruce popped up out of nowhere.*

*"You do?" John said.*

*"My wife passed last year. Cancer. I had to start all over again. I had to move. I couldn't take staying where I was," Bruce held his mop in front of him like a baton.*

*"Wow, sorry to hear that. I lost my Florence too. Heart trouble," John said.*

*Beth wanted to roll her eyes.*

*"Well, we've got John all sorted out, don't we John?"*

*"We sure do, Bethie, sure thing."*

*Bruce? Why don't you do the dish room today?"*

*"On it!" Bruce ran his mop to the closet and disappeared.*

*\*\**

*August's dog days hit. The Table lacked air conditioning. Fans turned slowly in all corners of the dining room. The guests sat sweating, fanning themselves. Some regulars failed to show. Beth stirred an iced coffee. She worried about her guests suffering, even dying in the heat.*

*"The elderly do not do well in this weather," she said to Bruce.*

*She'd just snuffed out his idea of serving dinner out in the back or on the sidewalk.*

*"It'd be like a bistro in Paris," he said.*

*Off his rocker.*

*"This is not Paris. I've been there, I know," she said.*

*"You've been to Paris?" Bruce asked.*

*"Yeah, you surprised?"*

*"I guess a little. Did you love it?"*

*"Did you love it?"*

*"I've actually never been."*

*"Now that's surprising," Beth said.*

*She wiped down the counter with a rag, was about to walk off.*

*"I never had the time. I was busy working, taking care of my sick wife, getting the kids organized. It was a lot. I almost didn't make it," he said, hands on hips.*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"Emotionally. I almost didn't survive that before-now time."*

*"Oh," Beth said, feeling a stab of compassion.*

*"Do you want to serve tonight?" she asked.*

*\*\**

*"For whatever reason, Bruce thinks I'd want to come out to see his place," Beth said, seated at her desk, her phone on speaker, digging into leftover mac and cheese. It was evening, everyone else gone for the day. She usually ate in the office alone at night.*

*"Do you think he likes you? You said he was a widower right?" Beth could picture her sister drinking a glass of wine poolside. She was an old school country club mom, helping out at the PTA, driving the kids to soccer practice, playing tennis in cute matching outfits.*

*"No, no I do not. I don't like him. In that way. In any way," Beth said, "Better go."*

*"Okay, Mother Teresa, God forbid you enjoy anything."*

*Beth shut down the call and looked around. Boxes of donations lined the walls. There was always so much to do. No matter how much she worked, the poor would just keep multiplying, needing someone, needing her. When she walked to her car, she'd see them. They'd be out there in the shadows, under the overpasses, lining the steps. Sometimes this fact energized her. Tonight, it overwhelmed.*

*\*\**

*The next night, John keeled over outside on the dinner line. Everyone froze in shock. Beth stared at his limp, glistening body sprawled on the sidewalk. She patted her pocket. No phone. Suddenly, Bruce appeared, unflustered. He crouched on the ground beside John, loosened his collar, elevated his feet. After the ambulance left, everyone shuffled into the dining room for dinner and business as usual commenced. Beth stood at the dish stand rolling silverware into napkins with shaking hands. Bruce put a hand on her shoulder.*

*"You okay?"*

*"Yes, of course. Are you?"*

*"A little rattled, but glad I was there." He drank a glass of water, wiped his brow with a napkin.*

*"Better get to work," Beth said, turning away.*

*\*\**

*"Though late in the season, Beth acquiesced to Bruce's garden plans. Upon her approval, he immediately began babbling about second seasons and the "fall haul." He went from Tuesday Bruce to every day Bruce. Beth waited for him to leave each day before walking the garden's perimeter, enjoying the muffled street sounds, earthy smells, the never-before-appreciated birdsong. Bruce enlisted the guests to help out. Instead of sitting and gabbing after dinner, many now headed to the back to water and weed. Several told stories of their parents' or grandparents' gardens or farms. John, returned after his heat stroke episode, remembered growing corn as a child, his smile spreading like a pearly cob. By September they had squash and eggplant and sweet potatoes. Bruce prepared bags of produce to take home. He printed simple recipes so guests could prepare their own dishes. He brought a picnic table, positioned it in the center of the yard.*

*"Studies show that being in nature actually changes the brain," he touted.*

*He even convinced Chef Terry to add the produce to his meal plan each night.*

*All the while, Bruce chatted away, standing outside with his arms folded, or holding his shovel, nodding and smiling and squatting down to explain something.*

*"Admit it. Admit you like Bruce," Jeanie said.*

*"He's fine," Beth said.*

*\*\**

*One evening, Beth jumped at a light knock. She abandoned the microwaved turkey and mash frozen dinner to open her office door, expecting Phil the cleaner.*

*"Bruce!"*

*"Hey, sorry to intrude. I know you're working."*

*"What's up, Bruce?"*

*He held up a plate covered in plastic wrap.*

*"I've seen you eating in here. I thought I'd make you something. If you don't want it now, you could save it for tomorrow-or-"*

*Beth reached for the plate, knowing it would be rude to not accept a kindness.*

*Didn't she constantly say to new guests who struggled with "handouts," "Don't block the blessing!"?*

*"Goodnight," Bruce said, his face open, happy, always so damned happy.*

*Didn't he know about all the suffering in the world? Of course he did.*

*"Thanks," she said stiffly, reaching to shut the door.*

*She returned to her desk, pulled the covering from the plate: tomatoes, mozzarella, fresh basil drizzled with balsamic and olive oil. She took a plastic fork and lifted a bite to her mouth.*

*She relaxed into her chair, slowly chewing and swallowing. It was delicious, simple, flavorful, fresh. An impulse to be outside overcame, to go out to the garden before it got any darker. Maybe Bruce would still be there, she wondered. She wanted to thank him, properly. She hoped he hadn't left.*



## JESSICA GREGG

### THE REACH

My first patient's last drink was at six this morning. I am late, so it is almost nine before I see him. But still, it has only been three hours, and there is already a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and his hand shakes as he brings a paper cup of water to his mouth.

He is thin, no shadow of a beard, no tattoos circling his forearms or crawling off his neck. Maybe in his early twenties? A man/boy. He reminds me of my son, Sam, and I think, "He is just a baby."

He perches on the hard black chair next to the exam room door, near a poster telling him it is okay not to be okay. I ask him if the light is bothering him. "No. No, it's fine," he assures me, "it's not a problem." But when I turn off the fluorescents overhead and switch on the little lamp in the corner, he sighs and leans his head back against the wall, and it is better.

"I'm glad you're here," I tell him, and I mean it.

He looks at his feet. "I'll be okay," he mumbles.

"Oh sweetie," I say, "I know you will."

I want to tell him that some mornings, I wake up with a trembly feeling of dread in my chest, or a flickering panic, for no reason other than I have an entire day ahead of me and I haven't yet filled my mind with distractions from thoughts of not being good enough, fears of my kids grown up, maybe my husband gone, and me alone, wondering where everybody went. Some mornings, I think of my father, who died in a place he didn't recognize, among people who barely knew him. I think, I can't, I can't, I can't.

Even if I'd been on time this morning, I wouldn't have seen my patient arrive. As the doctor, I get to come in later, walking in the side entrance, past the line of people waiting outside. They start queuing before it is even light. Many have no housing, so they pitch their tents nearby and walk over in the predawn hours. Others are dropped off in cars driven by family or friends who park and wait, hoping.

I generally pull up after the staff at front have explained that we'll take as many as we

can, but we likely can't admit everyone; we don't have enough nurses, or beds. My arrival usually coincides with the Covid testing. Everyone must have a negative result to come in. Sometimes the test is positive, and I hear the nurse break the news. She says she is sorry, but the person won't be able to come in after all, and she advises him to rest and hydrate if he develops symptoms. She says she doesn't know where or how he can do that with no money and no place to stay, and she agrees it is horrible. She says again, she is sorry.

When I first became a doctor, more than twenty years ago now, my children were small, my husband was still in school, and I was like the roadrunner in that old cartoon constantly zooming – from home to daycare to the hospital to the lub dubs of heart after heart to groceries to dinner to bath to sleep. I barely remember any of it other than a feeling of driving urgency and not enoughness.

During my roadrunner days, I also filled in occasionally at a local “detox” where mostly indigent patients came to cut down or quit their use of alcohol and drugs. I'd travel from the hospital perched up in the hills down to a squat brick building near the river where I'd sit with patients in a windowless exam room furnished with a desk, an exam table, and wire racks stacked with boxes of scalpels, lidocaine, gauze, syringes, needles. I treated sinewy men with deep lines in their faces who said I looked too young to be a doctor and young women with long nails and Ugg boots who told me they were dancers – and then laughed sadly those first few times when I asked, with complete sincerity, “Ballet or modern?”

Most of the staff who worked at the facility had histories of hard living and hard using themselves. I remember arriving one morning as a bearded man in the waiting room said fuck it, he was sick and needed a fix, and I heard the janitor respond, as he walked past, pushing a broom, “Nah, you got this, man. You can do this.”

In the nurses' station, I listened to a nurse croon, “I know, I know, I know,” as a thin woman with bleached blonde hair cried, and rocked, and cried.

They were patients who asked for help in their shittiest of shit times and, with them, I stopped rushing. They trusted that place, its people, and me, by association. It was a trust I hadn't earned, and I slowed down to live up to it. I loved that feeling, of being trusted, and living up to it. Now it is the only work I do. The only work I want.

I ask my patient the usual questions about withdrawal.

Does he have a headache and are sounds bothering him?

Yes, he replies, looking at his feet. Yes, his head is killing him. And yes, everything is too

loud, and the sounds make the headache worse.

“And how is your anxiety?”

He opens his eyes and looks at me as if I have finally gotten to the only question that matters. Horrible, he says, now and every day, and the only way to get through each minute is to drink. But as soon as he starts, there is no stopping, and it has gotten so bad his boyfriend says he can't come home again. But he has no one else and no place else to go. So now what will he do, he asks me. He has nothing.

“Oh honey. Oh sweetheart. I am so sorry.” I know the honeys and sweeties are not professional, but I don't care. When I speak like this, I feel right, as if the two of us are in this together, and he can depend on me, and neither of us will be alone.

But we aren't really in it together and he can't really depend on me. I will order pills that prevent seizures, pills that quiet the voices no one else can hear, and pills that steady tremulous hands. If he were withdrawing from heroin, or heroin's nasty cousin, fentanyl, I would give him medication to quell the aching in his bones and to dampen a restlessness so deep that even in sleep he would kick, thrash, and moan. But I can't offer permanent housing or help with rent that is long past due, and I can't make a tired partner trust again.

My father was a doctor too. And also a roadrunner. I'd catch glimpses of him in the morning as he left for the hospital before dawn, then maybe another glimpse at the dinner table, tired and quiet. Occasionally, he would have a weekend off or we would go on a family vacation, and I'd be surprised to find him with us, relaxing over coffee, or playing Risk with my brothers, the game laid out across the dining room table, infantries, cavalries, and artilleries scattered across the board's continents. It would feel as if we'd suddenly been joined by a distant, mostly benevolent, uncle.

I remember one summer morning, when I was about 11, my mother broke the news that my father would be coming home from work to take me out to lunch. Also, even though it was summer, I couldn't wear shorts; I had to wear a blouse and pants, and I had to eat alone with my father.

Oh, no. I told her. No, no. I did not want to go. She nodded. She said that didn't think my father really wanted to go either. But he felt like he should know me better, and that as the child squeezed between two older brothers and a younger set of twins, I didn't get enough attention.

It felt like being sentenced to lunch with the principal, or my pediatrician. We went to an Italian restaurant not too far from his office, the kind of restaurant that had linen tablecloths and quiet waiters. My father asked uncertain questions about school, what I was reading, who were my friends. I answered uncertainly back. The only part I liked about the meal was the unlimited bread with crispy tops and lots of butter. I think maybe that was the only part he liked as well.

Now I want to go back in time and tell that sweet, striving man that I understand how hard he was trying. In fact, when I really think about it, I am stunned by the beauty in the effort effort, the gorgeousness in his reach. I want to go back and kiss him on his stubbly cheek and see the surprise in his eyes and tell him I know how much he loved me, that I remember that awkward lunch, and I love him in return. I love you, I love you, I love you.

I've been trying to meditate, to get myself to slow down, to notice, to have more days with less fear. The other morning, my son called from college right in the middle of me trying to count a breath that had gotten away. I stopped trying to catch it and took the call. He said he had a funny story to tell me: a friend at school was leading a workshop on microaggressions and emailed Sam to tell him to be sure to attend. Sam is gay, and he says this is the same friend who sends him monthly updates on HIV vaccine trials, just because. He says she also told him she is so troubled by racism, she is "almost Black."

Sam reports these incidents with relish. I know he wants to make me laugh. I also wonder if he wants me to see these slices of his life, and to admire, as I do, how he navigates the complexities of a world gone haywire. I rack my brain to find something to tell him in return that will give him a glimpse of my life, maybe surprise him. I only manage the obvious and nothing new: I love you, I love you, I love you.

My second patient is full of words, energy, and methamphetamines. He is in his mid 40s, and compact: short hair, short stature, and not stringy like so many other patients. Nourished. He doesn't wait for me to ask questions, but jumps in, telling me he used crystal that morning to stay awake, but that meth isn't really his thing. His problem is the blues, the fentanyl. Everyone is using them, and everyone is dying and that is why he is here. He tells me he used just before the doors opened so he's feeling fine, but he knows it won't last and he'll start to kick soon. He wants to get off all of it, for good, and he is hoping for a spot in our residential treatment center: a bed, three meals a day, counseling.

He is sitting on the same hard black plastic chair near the same poster assuring him about okayness, and I'm a few feet away on a stool in front of the computer, typing and nodding. I ask him what his withdrawal is like, which symptoms are the worst. He says, "Well, when I get sick, I gotta tell you, I can get an attitude." He says it in a confessional

tone, but confessional like we are both thirteen-years-old and it is 2 AM at a middle school sleepover. It makes me laugh, which makes him laugh, and it is such a nice moment.

Later, I ask our case manager and the counselors in charge of admissions if we can find my funny patient a spot in our residential treatment program. They tell me no, he has been barred from several programs for violence, most recently for beating his girlfriend. They tell me this nicely, but it seems that they are looking at me with some exasperation: every time, so naive. Maybe I just imagine it, but that doesn't mean it isn't also true.

I see a similar exasperation on my daughter's face when I ask how she is getting to the party, and she tells me she does not plan to drive; she and her friends will take the bus. I think it means they will be drinking, maybe stoned. One of her classmates was shot last year, a stray bullet in the head late at night in a neighborhood not far from ours. Last month, her school went into lockdown while a man with a gun stood outside looking for I-don't-know-who. I don't know what leeway to allow when the horror is over, what constraints to impose, or the right words to say. I tell her my phone will be next to me all night until she is home. She calls, "Okay mom," over her shoulder, barely listening. Affectionate, exasperated. I hope she understands what I am saying: You are everything to me. Be safe. Don't die. I love you, I love you, I love you.

After we'd all grown up and moved out of the house, when his responsibilities to us were complete, my father left my mother, and then his work, and then most of his friends. I'll never know for sure, and he's not around to ask, but I think he retreated so far and so completely because he'd spent decades holding it all together, trying to seem less sad and anxious than he was. He was a man not okay with not being okay, and it was much easier to not be okay alone.

He eventually remarried, to a tall, quiet woman who'd once been his patient and who had a passing resemblance to my mother. I didn't know her well and only visited them rarely, but to my eyes it seemed they had a marriage founded mostly on a joint appreciation of Fox news and a commitment to not get in each other's way. When my father started to forget things, and then to forget violently, shouting for keys to the car he was no longer safe to drive, ransacking cabinets for whisky that would only make things worse, the foundation did not hold, and she left him.

We kids settled him in a nursing home in Los Angeles, near my eldest brother, Stephen, who would visit weekly, pouring Kahlua into our father's Ensure to get him to drink it, and driving him to the beach, where they would sit quietly together in the car, and stare at the waves. Then Covid hit and the nursing home closed to visitors. We tried Facetime but my father found it confusing. He stopped eating, and wouldn't leave his room, or his bed. Stephen was allowed to see him only at the very end. He said dad was tiny, a little bird-

man who would likely not have recognized his son behind the yellow gown, mask, and goggles, even if he'd regained consciousness.

Sometimes that is the image that wakes me in the middle of the night and sends my thoughts in unwelcome directions. I imagine my father awake, like me, in the dark. Unlike me, he doesn't know where he is, and he wonders why we've all left him. He wonders if we will ever come back.

I try to be okay with not being okay with my father's death and with pre-dawn emptiness, sorrow, and fear. To be okay with not being okay with the possibility that I may end up alone as well.

I know my not okayness pales next to my patients' not okayness. I also know that sadness and pain and loneliness, even when less than, keep me tender and aware. That maybe my lack of okay may really be okay: A minor dystopian superpower.

We have several other posters dotting the walls of the medical area. They are all beautiful, printed on thick, textured paper with stunning artwork. One of the other doctors bought them all on Etsy, with her own money. There is a poster with multicolored hands reaching for the sky and the words "Human. Kind. Be both." And another with painted butterflies: "The sun will rise, and we will try again."

I'm embarrassed, remembering how I'd giggled with my patient about his attitude which, it turns out, was not okay. I'm too eager, I tell myself, to find okay where it doesn't exist. Maybe marriages dissolve, and people die alone and afraid, and there is nothing okay about it. Maybe I am too ready to call survival hope and to honey and sweetie my way past despair. To suggest to my patients it is possible to make lemonade - even though the lemons are long gone and lining the pantries of those who have homes and kitchens and money to pay for them.

How dare I? How dare we? How dare we and our posters suggest that this terrible not okayness is just fine. That humans are kind. That just because the sun rises, they should try again. Perhaps our beautiful posters help me feel okay with others' suffering. Perhaps for my patients they are an assault.

But I've seen patients stop and read, sometimes take a selfie with a print, text it to a parent. My colleague told me about one petite woman, still a little high on meth and wearing the hot pink scrubs we provide on admission, who gave a shout of joy and did a short interpretive dance under one of the posters when she saw it. I don't know which one it was, or what it said. And I don't know if she even remembered it once the drugs were out of her system and her euphoria gone. Maybe she had a spot waiting for her in residential treatment, or maybe we'd found her a shelter bed, or maybe nothing. Maybe

we had exactly not one thing to offer when she asked, "What now?" Maybe, absent any methamphetamine-fueled delight, she looked at the posters and thought, "This is what you have to offer? This is it?" Maybe she thought, "Fuck you."

And if she did, who could blame her?

But maybe - and I know I am grasping at straws here, I really do - maybe she looked at the posters in the sober light of day and applauded the effort. Maybe tired, wrung out, no place to go, she saw how hard we were trying, and still saw beauty in the reach.



## CG DOMINGUEZ

### THE STILL AND THE SUBLIME

*No half-way work, no vain pretense, can satisfy the soul.*

*- George H. Kirkley*

They meet, first, in the little diner across from the old hotel in Greybull, the spring of '66.

The man Kit's there to see is already waiting for him when he arrives, both hands cupped around a mug of black coffee. He's sitting so still, soft-focused eyes pinned to some flaw in the Formica tabletop with all the contemplative tranquility of a monk, Kit hesitates before breaking his concentration. But the thing has got to be done.

He doesn't stand when Kit greets him, his heavy, dark eyes quietly tracking Kit as he makes his way from the door to the corner booth. He shakes Kit's hand with a surprising gentleness; none of that bruising grip, the caveman posturing black-tie types use in the business to assert a masculinity they worry they've let slip through their fingertips. Or maybe he's just formed his own opinions about the well-tailored shirt Kit has yet to change out of and decided it would be best not to spook the city boy before he can get a hold of his share of Kit's money.

Either way, Kit doesn't see why they should have any problems working well together.

Molina came recommended by the tap-keeper at the little bar beneath the hotel, a gruff man with a generous pour and no tolerance for the sad sacks who tried to get their drinks on credit.

"Never heard him try to cheat anyone, or drag his feet on a contract. Might be he says no, though. He can't take every job."

A promising recommendation. And now he's here, watching the man he's hired to steward his swan song looking nervous over a plate of toast and eggs.

They eat before they talk, which Kit feels to be the civilized thing. He finds himself suddenly voracious, tucking into his short stack and omelet and a tall glass of orange juice that he polishes off with a smack of his lips. Molina picks at his breakfast like a bird.

The meal accomplished, plates cleared away, Kit thinks his companion looks a little more at ease. Relieved, maybe, by the fact that Kit had demanded so little small talk from him while

they ate.

"Well now," he says, pulling the great leather portfolio from behind him. "We should probably get to it."

The plans go out over the table, still tacky in places with spots of sweet coffee gone dry. But Kit only needs the blueprints for *Molina's* sake; if called upon, he could recreate the layout and elevation both from memory, down to the scaled millimeter.

Molina takes in the geometric splay of Kit's masterwork; the simple elevation, the spare floor plan, the modest scale and proportions. As Kit watches, a sweet little frown forms on his forehead, a squint-eyed look of burgeoning confusion.

"You're sure about this?"

As if Kit had brought the wrong blueprints with him. As though he could be anything but certain.

"Why do you ask?" Kit figures it's better to nail down any real misgivings now, while he still has a chance of finding someone else to hire.

"The men building out here," Molina starts, choosing his words with methodical care, "they want hunting lodges. Chalets. Bloated log-cabin type shit."

"That's their prerogative."

"But that's not what this is."

"Not at all."

"Is this the kind of thing you usually design for your clients?"

Kit's grin widens to a Cheshire curve.

"Not at all."

They drive out to the site together. There is nothing to distinguish the lot from the vast acreage sprawling all around in every direction, except for the packed-dirt drive that turns off from the main road, the new aluminum mailbox staked into the dirt. The massed foothills of the Big Horns rise in a soapy haze a few miles off, too distant and dust-choked to make much of a view.

But Kit didn't come out this far for mountain vistas. What he wants, truth be told, is sky. He wants sky, and by God he's going to get himself some. A big scoop of it just for him, his own great round mouthful of it.

The well is already dug, the electrical routed out from the grid in Greybull. He would have to make and take his phone calls from the public box in town for a while, but that doesn't bother him. Molina takes all this in, and other things too. He looks at the grade of the road and the lay of the foundations, collating what he sees on the ground and what Kit's shown him. Once the spring mud firms up, they will be good as roses.

"Shouldn't be a tough spot," Molina says, after long silence.

Kit reaches under the passenger seat, grabs a brown paper bag and pulls two beers from it. He pops the tops with his keyring and holds one out to his companion.

"That settle it?"

Molina considers. Kit wonders if he manages to do anything without some long, syrupy moment of rumination. Then the rims of their bottles click together, a binding contract.

"Does your client mind me asking," Molina says, eyes on the horizon, peering out from under the shade of his square hand, "what he wants with a place like that all the way out here?"

"Well I sure hope he doesn't mind," Kit says, taking a pull of his beer. "He's me."

"You?"

"I'm throwing it in. I made my money, and I think I'd like to do something nice with it."

Molina frowns. For lack of anything else to do, he drinks. Kit can hear him thinking.

"What will you do out here?"

Kit shrugs. He hadn't really thought so far ahead. He never did.

"Not sure. Draft. Probably put together a lot of plans that will never see the daylight. But I don't mind that so much. Catch up on my reading. Learn to climb, or drive down to Jackson and ski a little."

Molina's eyebrows drift upwards, a subtle indication of surprise.

"Why? What'd you expect me to say?"

"The men who build out here are usually in it for the fly fishing. Or they want to play

Cowboys and Indians.”

Kit huffs, inadvertently blowing a low note from the neck of his bottle, like the leader in a jug band.

“More like Cowboys and ATF Agents, from what I hear. But that’s not my line at all. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“That’s good,” Molina says, with a hint of humor. “You’d make a lousy rancher.”

“No shit.” A pull. Another pause. “That what you did, before? Ranch handing?”

“I like having my own workshop better. And ranching’s messy.”

“I imagine it must be.”

They split another round in the Tin Cup, surrounded by old-timers who tin their piss-thin lager with tomato juice.

Kit thinks how he might have preferred a bottle of whiskey to go and a romp in his hotel room, but it was only a craving. He can be a good boy sometimes, too.

Kit remembers it well; the first time came here. He recalls the drive from the little airport, still in his suit, wrinkled to shit from twenty-four hours of wear, but he didn’t care. The first cold bolt of clean air into his lungs was enough to renew him, remake him, make him feel bathed and refreshed in the flowing waters of grace.

And then his rented Cadillac broke down beside an irrigation gutter, stinking with waste from the calf-cow operation down the road. He walked and walked along the flat ribbon of tarmac till he saw the sign of land for sale: a hundred acres with nothing that needed doing, a little landscape that already knew how to take care of itself.

And Kit saw it; on the horizon, like a dream. He saw the house, the whole bare-slat mass of it, birthed fully formed from his own imagination like the job was already done. Like the dozens of hours spent drafting and re-drafting all finished in the space of an instant. The house, the perfect house, the one he knew he had to have, that all his labors up ‘till now had prepared him for.

He made a few phone calls, when he trudged back into town. He called for a tow. He called his bank. And then he called his boss and put in his notice. He was through. Something in the high, brisk clarity of the air had got into his blood. Doubts, it seemed, were tougher to maintain at this altitude.

He had seen the house, seen his destiny. All he needed now was to find someone to build it for him.

As promised, the mud-melt dries. The creeks shrink down to fit back within their summer banks. And work begins.

They spread out under the bright sky to talk details.

The Shakers, he explained, thought they were building their own slice of heaven on earth, a literal piece of it. They thought God lived in the empty spaces that men moved through, lived in the spear of light that holds the dust motes up. So they didn't build places for any other purpose but to live and work in them, and to catch and use the light. Skylights over staircases, single great gable windows. They proportioned their buildings like Grecian temples, only without any of the decorative flourishes favored by the classical world, believing them to be in poor taste.

Kit talks him through all the old methods; the box-framing, the plank and beam composition of the floors, all the traditional workings he's sure Molina's never had the opportunity to learn all the way out here. But Molina listens attentively, thoughtfully, until Kit almost forgets he has an audience, imagining he could go on and on forever.

Kit comes to site most days, but he doesn't linger, not wanting Molina to imagine himself over-supervised.

He sometimes works alone, but more often with one other man, introduced as Cousin Pascal – burly and clumsy and talkative where Molina is none of these things. They work fast, even though the cost of their labor is metered out by the day. Molina wants the place done, he says, before winter comes. He wants Kit to get his share of the light he's been so long in craving.

Kit lets the days flow through his fingers like loose pearls, falling away from their broken strand. And he remembers how angry he was when his car broke down and he thinks less and less about how to go hunting for the sublime when it doesn't want itself to be found.

And the only constant in the changing light and weather is the way he can feel his old life drifting farther and farther and farther off like a barrel hurled from the side of a sailing ship, bobbing away in the waves, lost to the horizon.

The first big summer storm comes down from the mountains. Kit watches it from the window of the Tin Cup Inn, the roiling green and yellow clouds forming over the Jackson range, like bad milk curdling in hot coffee.

Snowflakes form, congealing out of the charged air. Kit can't help himself. He leaps bow-legged into the cab of his rented truck and streaks out to the building site. Molina is already taking shelter in the open hollow of his van, peering out into the storm and drinking coffee from a battered thermos, legs hanging from the back bumper.

"Just wanted to see it," Kit says, all he knows to give by way of explanation. Molina doesn't try and argue with him, or insist it's a madcap thing to do. Kit already knows it is, doesn't need to be told twice about it.

They get the roof up together; the three of them. Kit, and Molina, and silent Cousin Pas (who Kit begins to suspect is so quiet because he doesn't speak much English, so Kit tries to be polite and not engage in too much conversation in which he can't participate.) It takes one hot, glorious day to raise the rafters, one more to lay the planks, one to put the tin down. Stepping back, Kit can see it, really see it for the first time since it came to him in his vision. The silhouette fills just the right amount of space on the horizon, cuts just the right shape. It's perfect.

To celebrate, Molina takes them to a different place, where Kit's never been before. It's quieter, calmer. The light is softer. Kit gets drunk quicker than he has in a long time.

He designs Molina a house to live in, too. The idle hours must be filled somehow. And he gleans enough data from their conversations to give him a pretty good idea of his likes and dislikes.

The site would be key, he thinks, chewed-down nub of a pencil between his foreteeth. Something high up on a ridge, tucked into a protective clutch of boulders and cliff, the kind of place a mountain lion might choose to dig its den in. Someplace to lend an air of defensibility, of vigilant solitude.

He thinks about the castles he remembers, dotted all along the sinuous courses of the Rhine, when he took his own little Grand Tour once upon a time, falling into bed with men from Dublin to Strasbourg to Croatia and back again, more of an education than college ever offered him.

But Molina's house. That's a pretty puzzle for him to solve. Echoes of old martial practicality can only get one so far; what no one tells you about castles is they're beastly to live in. He doesn't want that for Molina. After so much toil, so much rotten luck, a man deserves a place to be comfortable.

So the house on the ridge won't shut out the world, even as it might appear to lord over it a little. He takes his cues from the proportions of the farmsteads still dotted around; snug, easy to heat, and opens up the elevation; proposing big sash windows in kitchen and den. The bedroom would have a shielded view clear down to the bottom of the valley, but would look up as well as down. He knows Molina doesn't need the sun to wake him, but wouldn't be bothered either by the fall of light on his face in the morning.

The walls come up, ready to prep and plaster. They source their own ingredients, combine and pour them through an old cement mixer. The old recipe has a thickness like clotted cream, works on nice and smooth, and they lay it down in long, sensual sweeps of their trowels.

The stuff still gets everywhere, even being careful as they are, little flecks of fake snow caught in the crisp waves of Molina's hair, the bristle of his mustache. Kit cards his fingers over his own scalp, and feels the way it sticks in places, crusted by the limewash. They call it a day. Molina held to his promise to drive them both, when the weather looked doubtful, and the Caddy couldn't be trusted (though that car had done a heroic job, ferrying him all over the West).

They bump shoulders on the bench seat. Something about the meditative rhythm of the work today has got him feeling lighter than normal, like he's liable to float up off the seat if he isn't careful to stay put. He's glad Molina is doing the driving, either way. He drives with a languid smoothness, changing gears like he's sculling; pulling the paddles in long, flowing movements (like the old Chinese ladies Kit knows, who practice tai chi in a park down the street from his apartment in Glendale.).

Leaning close, Kit catches a whiff of Molina's smell: plain bar soap and antiperspirant, and suddenly his mouth is dust-dry.

"Got time for a drink?" Kit asks.

"Just the one, maybe."

But Kit's been at this a long while. He knows how to read certain signs. Sure, it's occurred to him. Sure, he's let the thought of it keep him company on long, cold nights. But he's long-since learned his lesson about mixing the personal and the professional together. He's been burned often enough.

And what was more, he had gotten over the old, dangerous urge to take risks, to make a move on someone, not knowing if they would answer back in kind or take a swing at him. The little charge, the frisson of threat had only been a turn-on for so long. Time has taught him better.

He lets Molina down easy. And the man goes easy, too.

But Kit thinks he knows how it will go, with time. He knows this thing will keep, that it will wait for him in the tall grass. He means to put down roots here, where Molina has already dug himself deep, and mayhap they will grow together, the little tendrils of their tension intertwining down in the dirt.

But he will let the future form itself, with time. He will let it be an empty space, waiting for the light of God to fill it up, and them with it.

He will be patient.





# WESS MONGO JOLLEY

## MANHATTAN ARMS

(in Three Parts)

### I. FERAL

He decided to keep the horns that broke through his forehead one muddy spring morning. No sense, he thought, in being appalled at those things that sprout unexpectedly from our flesh. Yet he was, at first, and would touch them with trepidation behind locked doors. The farm girl on the hill suggested a doctor she knew, the one that fixed her toenail thing. His foreman left a baseball cap with a wide front bill surreptitiously on his passenger seat. And his mother revived his childhood refrain, "whatever makes you happy dear."

For it was truth unspoken, even to his own heart, that the horns did indeed bring him joy. Even the sting and the pain and the blood when the dry skin first split was exquisite. And soon those two stout blossoms of bone felt the stir of every breath of wind. In sleepless hours he would trace their contours with trembling caresses. And in the morning he'd delight at the torn pillowcases and lightly drifting down on his lips.

With time the stares became fewer although they never went away completely. Friends eventually looked him in the eye again and not in the horns. He wore the baseball cap out of habit, and eventually he learned to sleep on his back. The horns stopped growing at a modest two inches, and the summer boiled the blood in his veins. For although to all the world it seemed he was content, inside he began to tire of sunshine. The smooth foreheads of the farmers made his shoulders tremble. The weight of his baseball cap became unbearable, an ache that only concrete and glass could assuage.

So April found him on a bus to Manhattan, neon glinting off creamy bone through smoky glass. On the city streets he hardly merited a second glance from the hurried crowds. In a world of women with tattooed faces and old men with pierced nostrils, he blended in. And he found joy in being a freak of no particular note.

## II. CITY OF THE DEAD

They heard that he took a train to Manhattan. They heard that he stepped blinking into a crowd at Penn Station, where he promptly mingled and was lost. They say that he hasn't been seen since, and that dust is settling on his books. His friends seemed concerned, but only at first. Concern quickly turned to gossip, and gossip to catty remarks, until even those faded away.

The seasons washed the earth clean of his memory. For a few years there were false sightings. A visitor to the city thought they saw him from a passing bus window or across a busy city street. And for a time they looked and squinted and tried to see. But soon, they would forget.

In the City of the Dead, they say, you must wait until the last person on earth forgets your name. And every year in Manhattan those with horns, and tails, and fins, step from buses or emerge blinking from taxicabs. The city opens its arms and they fade into the cavernous streets. In Manhattan, you can wander forever and never tread the same street twice. There is always piano music drifting through an open window. And laughter, always laughter. In the City of the Dead they are always smiling. Waiting for the last person they knew to forget their names. Listening in coffee shops for their new names to be spoken.

### III HOMECOMING

The day came when, for 24 hours, no one stared at his horns. No one looked, and no one looked away. The day came when he forgot who he was, and longed again for the world to find him appalling.

So he found a bench in Union Square where he could sleep, unnoticed. He closed his eyes and opened his thighs to God. When he awoke, autumn had chilled the air. Dried leaves weighed heavily upon his chest, and someone had stolen his hat. His forehead, unbroken and healed, caused him to weep.

He cried until sunset, invisible now to the crowds. He cried until his name was gone. He cried until he forgot his home. He cried until his tears washed the last of the old words away.

He cried until midnight. He cried until the skyscrapers whispered in his ears.

He cried until there were wings.

He cried until his shadow flickered across the moon.



## BOB ZASLOW

### JIGSAW PUZZLE

He was perhaps 83, sitting.  
She, a year or two older, standing,  
cane in her left hand.

Both working the puzzle  
from opposite sides of the library table.  
Not a sound.  
Except for the cardboard pieces  
sliding, then snapping into place.  
Furrowed brows.  
Hunched backs.  
Papery hands that danced  
over the board like bygone ballerinas.

When he found a piece  
in the lower right that fit,  
his face relaxed for a moment.  
A mini-satori.  
When she looked down but could find no fit,  
she shrugged but did not sit,  
scurrying to the southwest,  
two pieces in her hand,  
as if it would double her chances;

eyes surveying the territory  
like a watchful Napoleon,  
she pounced to a spot three inches  
from the bottom and  
fit both pieces,  
releasing a tiny breath.

She did not look across the table  
for acknowledgment, even though  
this was no small feat.  
Instead, she sat and breathed.

CONTINUED...

I imagined they'd been married  
sixty years and they had no need  
to say, I love you, either.

Suddenly, he moved like a much younger man  
to her side of the table, laying down another piece  
as he fit his left hand over her right.  
She worked the northwestern side.  
Snap. Snap. Two more pieces.  
I left before they finished.  
By then, I knew  
they were not just passing the time,  
but squeezing all the juice out of it.





## CHARLOTTE AMELIA POE

### IN THIS CORNER OF THE UNIVERSE THERE IS A CONSTELLATION SET ASIDE FOR YOU

If you buy enough gold acrylic paint, and paint stars on your ceiling against the dark, then maybe, just maybe, the world won't end.

And if it ends anyway, debris beating at the plasterboard as the ceiling groans and the stars start to crack and splinter, then god, at least you'll have something to look at, to be less alone as home swallows you whole.

If you imagine, for a second, we are not on a planet, spinning out in space. Instead, we exist in two dimensions, with limits to test and strain against but never cross. And you are there and I am here, and there is an entire map between the two of us, and the world will end before your mouth breathes into mine.

And so, also, if the sky does fall, and you are there, and I am here, then the map we are on will grow heavy with the weight of it, and start to cave, and it is there that I will meet you, girl, in the folded paper of your expectations, and all the rivers and all the roads will be no more than lines, and we will be the only real things, and if there are no stars left, we will make the stars anew.

And - well. If the world doesn't end, the story goes differently, and I can make fewer promises, tucked away by coordinates and street names. You tell me seaside and I tell you field, and I have never shared the sunset with you in a way that mattered.

Girl, if we can't have hot chocolate one November afternoon when the air is crisp and you are blushed pink with it, then I wonder, could I trade a star, my hands stained gold, rubble in my hair as I beg all the gods of all the universe for a golden hour, carved out of time that isn't yours, or mine, but ours.

A ghost is rooted by the certainty of its demise. And oh, the stars are so so heavy against the softest parts of me. So girl, beautiful girl, longed after girl, sometimes chemical girl, if I do not build a bonfire, then at least allow a flare into the night.

And a message in a bottle never read as sweet as when it arrived to you in flames.



**MATT POINDEXTER**

**THE PIANO TUNER**

He needs a quiet house to do the work, his bag of tools as full of felts and mutes as hammers, levers, metal bits. He roots around inside the busted box. I lurk just out of view, but fear each tuning pin too old and weak, so long ignored. I bought it from a thrift store half-off sale and thought I'd learn to play, but can't yet, three years in. Is it just junk, not worth the time or cost to tune? Not so, he cranks the pitches flat and sharp. The toughest keys he strikes and speaks to, hushed. I realize I have felt so lost for years. Please, someone, whisper soft like that to me. Please fix this dissonance, these creaks.



## ROSEMARY DUNN MOELLER

### RUINS OF THE *MIKVEH* IN SPEYER, GERMANY

This stone chamber survives, buried, forgotten  
for seven hundred years since the Black Death moved citizens  
to annihilate their Jewish population, contaminants.  
Archeologists dug down along a synagogue wall stone by stone,  
preserving broken artifacts of centuries of worship,  
exposed fifty stairs deep toward a spring,  
first straight then curved round, a circular twisting until  
the stone walled basin, a mikveh, still filled freshly.

Before I arrived, tourists had thrown in coins. Wishes?  
I wished to strip naked, wash away the sweat of walking  
in cathedrals behind tour guides with minimal knowledge,  
step into the depths, now, alone, wondering at rituals.  
Could I be refreshed, renewed, here now? My ancestors  
got at least three hundred years of relative peace, eating,  
working, learning in homes here before being chased east,  
or buried out of sight, as forgotten as the mikveh,  
too deep to destroy, a blessing of spring water.



## ANNA BOORAEM

### TAKING STOCK

First, we argued about it in the grocery store. Gregor insisted that Alpha and Jenny were NOT vegan, paleo, or gluten free. But I knew, I told him, I knew they were at least one if not all three of those things.

We didn't speak to each other for the next twenty minutes. At checkout we barely looked at each other as we dumped our purchases on the conveyor belt. Of course, he paid. Gregor always pays.

At home, we lay all the ingredients out on the kitchen table. It seemed like a puzzle with mixed up pieces - miso, bratwurst, cilantro, pearl barley, chili seasoning, beef broth, frozen peas, edamame, coconut milk, and a big can of stewed tomatoes. The kind with basil.

We fought again.

Gregor stormed into the living room and disappeared into his online role-playing game.

I sat at the table and drank a beer. I thought about where I'd live if I left him. I thought about our cat, Mr. Angel Face. I thought about Alpha and Jenny and if it really was possible to be vegan AND paleo AND gluten free. I thought about how our diets have evolved because of privilege or intelligence or conscientiousness or what the fuck I don't even know. I couldn't decide if it was good or bad to be this conscious, this picky, this healthy; if it was better for the world or worse.

I sat there for an hour, I guess. Mr. Angel Face joined me for a time. It got dark because it gets dark early now. And the kitchen got cold.

Finally, I lit the candle on the table and took a breath. I pulled out the big orange Le Creuset my dad left me and just started throwing everything in it. Gregor came in after a while and turned on the light and turned up the heat. He put on some music, pop songs from the eighties that he knows I love, and we danced and sang and even kissed as I threw in the last stem of cilantro.

It was the worst soup anyone had ever tasted, but it didn't even matter. We'd made it through another day. We were still dancing and singing and kissing, and every time that feels like a miracle.

Alpha and Jenny, for what it's worth, are doing Keto.



# JASON RYBERG

## SURPLUS

Here's the news, brothers  
and sisters! The first few seeds  
of rain have been o-

fficially cast and  
sewn into the wind this fine  
evening. And now

the rain is in my  
face, my words and in my wine.  
But you'll find no fine

crystal chalice or  
be-jeweled goblet, here, just  
this here jelly jar

decorated with  
dancing, cavorting, and leap-  
frogging dinosaurs.

But, it will serve the  
spirits of the moment as  
appropriately

as anything; this  
impromptu consecration,  
this suddenly and

ceremonious  
mingling of potentially  
volatile, vital

ingredients (some  
very strong hoodoo, yessir):  
rainwater, wine and

CONTINUED...

lightning, plus the fine,  
red, wind-sifted soil and dust  
of Oklahoma,

lifted and carried  
across the state line as the  
sun has just gone down,

upon the rolling,  
billowing waves of a dark,  
wandering weather-

front, which has just now  
released the surplus of its  
beautiful sadness.





**JD CLAPP**

## **THE CHOSEN ONES**

The note simply read: I can't do this anymore. The note led to texts, then calls, then family meetings. It had all piled up on the kid. First, the Army gave him his walking papers a month in. His parents divorced the same year. The year before all that, his asshole father conned him out of his inheritance. It would be a lot for any 22-year-old.

The kid gravitated to me in bad times, and I had spent many hours with him in the field and on the water. With no other viable plan, the family asked me to buy them time, and the kid ended up in the passenger seat of my truck, an unplanned companion on a mule deer and cow elk hunt I booked long before.

The kid stared blankly ahead. He looked tired and sad, but we started the road trip over ten hours earlier. Hell, I was tired. Lost in my own thoughts, I let him be.

I realized I was once a version of the kid. I knew his road ahead, understood his self-chosen obstacles. His way out would be more difficult than mine. He got dealt a shittier hand. I also understood even if he could pull himself out of the current spiral, as life rolled out in front of him, new and more brutal gut punches waited ahead. The ghost in the passenger seat always lurked.

\*\*

We barreled east on I 40, the New Mexican plains rolling by. Late fall, the sun perpetually west, cast grainy shadows across tawny grass highlands spilling out into the expanse of a sepia tinged road trip. Patsy Cline served as our soundtrack to an otherwise silent film. It looked like flat easy country, but I knew better.

I sipped tepid gas station french roast from a styrofoam cup. He stared out the passenger window.

He finally spoke, "Pronghorn."

A small herd of antelope and cow elk rolled by just off the road. It was familiar. I was not of this place, but I knew it well enough.

"How long till we get to the ranch?" the kid asked.

"I'd say we have another two hours. It'll be dark before we get to Trinidad."

The kid nodded.

"You ok?" I asked.

"Something bad is going to happen."

"On the hunt?" I asked.

The kid thought. "No. Something bad back home."

"To you?"

"No. Like I told everyone, I couldn't hurt myself even if I wanted to. I'm a coward..."

He paused and looked away. I thought he might be fighting tears.

He continued, "Something bad is going to happen at home."

\*\*

A Latina, about 22, his age, greeted us at the door. She was tall, athletic, very pretty, dressed in fitted jeans, brown cowboy boots, and a blue and white flannel shirt.

"Hi, I'm Maria. I'm the cook and caretaker. You must be Jake," she said.

"I am. Nice to meet you. This is Cam," I said introducing the kid.

The kid said "hi," looking at her for a second then at his feet.

We grabbed my gun and our bags from the truck bed.

"She is kind of hot," The kid said.

"You should talk to her then. We are here four days."

"Girls like her don't talk to guys like me."

"Mope."

\*\*

The next morning Brent shook our hands. He was a prototype western guide: genes of a mountain goat, cowboy handsome, 5 foot ten, 160 pounds of carbon fiber bones, titanium joints, and heavy-duty elastic band tendons. He sported light weight Danner boots and Sitka performance camo. I thought, the bastard looks like he's running just standing there. Knowing what was ahead, I mentally rehearsed saying, "hold up for a minute, let me catch my breath."

The kid sat down at the breakfast table, a heavy sigh his first sound. The scent of bacon and coffee filled the room, Maria busy clanking pans in the next room. I grabbed my first coffee, thankfully not the gas station variety, before Maria dished up breakfast. Brent followed universal guide protocol, filling his Yeti cup with coffee, swiping an apple, and dipping out to get ready.

"See you boys in about 30."

The kid stirred his eggs, my plate already clean. Tired of pulling teeth for conversation, I asked, "What's the problem?"

"Our guide is sleeping with her."

"Who?"

"The cook. Maria. He came out of her room this morning. I saw him."

"Good for him."

"I'll never get the girl."

"Probably not. Stop being a mope," I said.

\*\*

"Let's make sure your rifle is on, then go look for a nice muley this morning," Brent said.

"Sounds good to me," I said.

"We have some nice representative bucks hanging around," code for "there's no chance of finding a 200-inch deer, and I hope you aren't a picky pain in my ass."

"I'm not picky. If it's mature, I'll shoot it," I said.

"Awesome! I have a solid deer patterned. The last three guys I guided passed it up," he said.

"I don't care about scores. I mostly hunt for meat. This will be my first mule deer," I said.

"Wow—Ok, this will be a great first muley buck," he said.

We pulled off the road after a quarter mile. Brent walked away from the truck, put up his binoculars and look back at us. He moved a few yards, then pulled a two-liter soda bottle from his pack and set it down.

"What's he doing?" the kid asked.

"He was ranging us. That's 100 yards. I'll take a shot or two at the bottle to make sure my scope is still on."

When Brent was back at the truck, I sat and leaned against the front wheel, bracing my elbows on my knees. I shot once, hitting the bottle an inch or so higher than where my crosshairs sat.

"I could never make that shot," the kid said.

"Yes, you could. I could teach you right now in a few minutes."

"That's ok. Maybe later."

I remembered using the same, "maybe later" ploy when I was his age to avoid any chance of embarrassment of failure.

We drove over, collected the soda bottle, and headed into the hills.

It was typical western style hunting. We drove dirt single track roads; Brent's young and trained eagle eyes seeing animals we couldn't. Brent would say something like, "too young" or "not what we are looking for" or "coyote" and drive on.

Around 10:00 a.m. we stopped driving and began hiking. Brent led holding the shooting sticks, I followed with my rifle, and the kid trailed shooting video on his phone. We made our way into a dense oak thicket. Late October leaves, orange, yellow, shades of red, covered the ground; the air heavy with the sweet scent of decay and wet earth.

Brent stopped ahead of us. He held his hand up to the side, indicating we should stop. Brent glassed, put up the sticks, and motioned me forward. I signaled for the kid to stay put. I put the rifle up and Brent whispered, "120 yard straight ahead in that thicket. It's the deer the I told you about."

I found him in the scope, slightly quartering to us. Brent whispered, "See if he steps broadside. Give him a minute. He doesn't know we are here. If you feel comfortable shoot him in the chest. Now or never." Brent whispered.

I was solid. The kid loudly shuffled behind us. Now or never indeed. I shot and the .300 magnum caliber shell sent a thundering boom reminiscent of waves crashing on rocks echoing through the thicket. The deer bunched up and kicked his hind legs in the air. He stumbled forward, found his feet, then crashed off into the woods.

"I didn't hear the thwack. But I hit him," I said.

My ears rang.

"You center punched him. Perfect heart shot. He's dead over there someplace," Brent said with a big smile.

The deer laid 30 feet from where I shot him. Clearly past his prime, his face had gone gray, his heavy body scarred from years of fighting, a 4 x 4 rack with antlers of average width, height, and girth. Brent looked in his mouth.

"He is old. Hardly any teeth. He wasn't going to last this winter. He's great first buck."

"He's perfect. Thanks for putting us on him so quick."

\*\*

On the way back to the lodge, the kid had grown silent again. He seemed agitated in the morning at breakfast, but I hadn't been in the mood to ask him why. Finally, he spoke up.

"Last night I dreamt my dog died."

"Is he sick?"

"No. He's old but he was fine when we left."

"Then stop worrying about it," I said with an edge.

"You don't understand. I see things. I dream things and they come true."

"Well, I see dead people," I said.

"You do?"

He missed the movie reference.

Honestly, however, I didn't know what to say. The year before, my wife dragged me to a psychic. When the woman did my reading she said, "You are one of the chosen ones. You are blessed with future sight." My wife was excited; I was not.

"Well, if he is old and dies, he had a great life. You can't do anything about it anyway."

We were almost to Trinidad when my sister-in-law called him. I knew when he picked up. The strange part, the spooky part, I felt a pang of impending doom a few minutes before the call. He hung up, tears in his eyes.

"My dog died an hour ago."

That night we sat in the great room by the fire. I decided the only way help him at this point would tarnish the "golden uncle" image he held of me. I'm not sure misery truly loves company, but company normalizes misery. I told him of my own struggles as a kid and young man. I told him it was my experience life never seemed to be simple or easy for long. There would be myriad obstacles, hard choices, regrets.

I told him there were also abundant good times ahead. It was just life and he needed to find a sane path forward, be it stoic or Zen or something else. Finally, I told him I was not worried about him. I knew he would be fine; I got through it, everyone faces obstacles, etc. But I was firm on one point.

"Stop holding yourself back through self-pity and doubt. Nobody likes a mope."

We had a last drink by the dying fire.

He said, "I feel better. I feel a lot better."

\*\*

After an unremarkable cow elk hunt, we headed home. The I40 stretched ahead, a black ribbon splitting endless fields to the south, and squat mountains to the north.

Someplace before Santa Fe, the kid said, "I do feel a lot better. But the psychic thing scares me. Seriously, I don't want to know when bad things are going to happen."

Thinking if it was good enough for misery, knowing someone who also had a bit of "the shine" as Steven King called it, might help. So, I told him about my visit to the psychic with my wife.

"So, I am a chosen one too?" he asked.

I laughed.

"I guess we both are," I answered.

He nodded, looking peacefully out the window.

I turned up the music and Van Morrison's "Into the Mystic" came on...



## AVA MACK

### LOBSTER COMPLEX

"Well, if God doesn't exist, who's laughing at us?"  
-Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

Here's the thing about my savior complex,  
I'm done wasting it on men.  
I've decided that's above my pay grade  
God knows there's no fixing them.

My holy fire light of righteousness rather  
wholly is reserved  
for the gruesome supermarket sea tank where  
the sacrificial lobsters are preserved

with the ingenuity of cruelty  
man has mastered oh so well  
conscientiously kept alive just to die  
in the boiling pot of hell.

Every time I pass their tank,  
I think today might be the day  
I break their chains of rubber bands  
their sins of deliciousness in full repay.

Yes, today might be the day  
I pay the exorbitant price  
and become the savior of the lobsters  
their crustacean Jesus Christ.

Lugging a dozen buckets to the sea  
in a nautical Stations of the Cross  
I'll undo the capture and the crime  
right the wrong, replace what's lost.

CONTINUED...

A valiant gesture, yes, and done in vain  
the lobsters surely will be lured back again  
their claws condemned to a buttered roll  
their wingèd souls sent up to Heaven

but maybe one will get away,  
and one is all you need  
to spread the gospel of the lobster savior  
and Her selfless, daring deed.





## AUTHOR BIOS

**Marge Piercy** has published 20 poetry collections, most recently, *ON THE WAY OUT, TURN OFF THE LIGHT* [Knopf]; 17 novels including *SEX WARS*. PM Press reissued *VIDA, DANCE THE EAGLE TO SLEEP*; they brought out short stories *THE COST OF LUNCH, ETC*, and *MY BODY, MY LIFE* [essays, poems]. She has read at over 575 venues here and abroad.

**Judy Bankman** (she/her) lives with her dog Rosie in Portland, OR on Multnomah, Clackamas, and Kalapuya land. Her work can be found in *Yes, Poetry*, *Souvenir Lit*, *Linden Avenue*, and *Windfall: A Journal of Poetry of Place*, among others. She was a finalist in the 2020 Tennessee Williams & New Orleans Literary Festival Poetry Contest.

**John Romagna** lives in Clinton, NJ. His most recently published poem, *Variation on a Poem by Yeats*, was awarded Honorable Mention in the *Passager Journal's* 2022 Annual Poetry Contest issue, September 2022.

**June Stoddard** reads her work at Susan Hayden's *Library Girl*, Elena Secota's *Rapp Salon*, and is published in *Blue Sky Press Publications*. She writes weekly with Peggy Dobreer's *Slow Lightning Lit*, and during the pandemic weekly with Jackie Heinze's *Rise & Write On*. June counts being a literary magazine editor, career coach & headhunter, mom of twins, and producer among the many hats she wears. June was mentored by Carolyn See and Jim Krusoe in creative writing and is a graduate of UW-Madison with a double Major in English & Theatre. She lives in Santa Monica, CA.

**Marco Etheridge** is a writer of prose, an occasional playwright, and a part-time poet. He lives and writes in Vienna, Austria. His work has been featured in more than eighty reviews and journals across Canada, Australia, the UK, and the USA. *"The Wrong Name"* is Marco's latest collection of short fiction. When he isn't crafting stories, Marco is a contributing editor for a new 'Zine called *Hotch Potch*.  
Author website: <https://www.marcoetheridgefiction.com/>

**Michael Loderstedt** was recently published in the *NC Literary Review*. He has also had poems published in a recent anthology entitled *neighborhood Voices* (Literary Cleveland/Cleveland Public Library) and received an Ohio Arts Council Fellowship in Literature in 2020.

**Carey Taylor** is the author of *The Lure of Impermanence* (Cirque Press 2018). She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and winner of the 2022 Neahkahnie Mountain Poetry Prize. Her work has been published both nationally and internationally. She holds a Master of Arts degree in School Counseling and currently lives in Portland, Oregon.

**Marie Anderson** is a Chicago area married mother of three millennials. Her stories have appeared in about 65 publications, including *Muleskinner Journal*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Sunlight Press*, *Mystery Magazine*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and forthcoming in *Calliope Interactive*. Since 2009, she has led (and learned so much good stuff from) a writing critique group at a public library in La Grange, IL.

**Kurt Luchs** ([kurtluchs.com](http://kurtluchs.com)) won a 2022 Pushcart Prize, a 2021 James Tate Poetry Prize, the 2021 Eyelands Book Award for Short Stories, and the 2019 Atlanta Review International Poetry Contest. He is a Contributing Editor of *Exacting Clam*. His humor collection, *It's Funny Until Someone Loses an Eye (Then It's Really Funny)* (2017), and his poetry collection, *Falling in the Direction of Up* (2021), are published by *Sagging Meniscus Press*. His latest poetry chapbook is *The Sound of One Hand Slapping* (2022) from *SurVision Books* (Dublin, Ireland). He lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

**JC Alfier's** (they/them) most recent book of poetry, *The Shadow Field*, was published by Louisiana Literature Press (2020). Journal credits include *The Emerson Review*, *Faultline*, *New York Quarterly*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Penn Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, and *Vassar Review*. They are also an artist doing collage and double-exposure work.

CONTINUED...

## AUTHOR BIOS

**Tobi Alfier** is published nationally and internationally. Credits include War, Literature and the Arts, The American Journal of Poetry, KGB Bar Lit Mag, Washington Square Review, Cholla Needles, The Ogham Stone, Permafrost, Gargoyle, Arkansas Review, Anti-Heroic Chic, and others. She is co-editor of San Pedro River Review ([www.bluehorsepress.com](http://www.bluehorsepress.com)).

**Ronnie Sirmans** is an Atlanta print newspaper digital journalist whose poems have appeared in Tar River Poetry, The American Journal of Poetry, Atlanta Review, Plainsongs, The South Carolina Review, Sojourners, Fathom, and elsewhere.

**Niles Reddick** is author of a novel, three collections, and a novella. His work has been featured in over 500 publications including The Saturday Evening Post, New Reader Magazine, The Museum of Americana, Citron Review, Nunum, Right Hand Pointing, and Vestal Review. He is a four-time Pushcart, three-time Best Micro, and three-time Best of the Net nominee. His newest flash collection If Not for You was recently released by Big Table Publishing.

**William Cass** has had over 300 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as december, Briar Cliff Review, and Zone 3. He won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal. A nominee for both Best Small Fictions and Best of the Net anthologies, he has also received five Pushcart Prize nominations. His first short story collection, Something Like Hope & Other Stories, was published by Wising Up Press in 2020, and a second collection, Uncommon & Other Stories, was recently released by the same press. He lives in San Diego, California.

**Maggie Nerz Iribarne** is 53, lives in Syracuse, NY, writes about witches, cleaning ladies, priests/nuns, struggling teachers, neighborhood ghosts, and other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>.

**Jessica Gregg:** I am a physician and writer and have published stories and op-eds in The American Scholar, Commonweal, The New England Journal of Medicine, The Washington Post, Health Affairs, JAMA, Time magazine, The Fix, Salon, and Huffington Post.

**C.G. Dominguez** is a Puerto Rican physician-in-training working and writing in the American Midwest with her wife, her dog, and her black raspberry patch.

**Wess Mongo Jolley** is a Canadian novelist, editor, podcaster, poet and poetry promoter. He is Founder and Executive Director of the Performance Poetry Preservation Project, and is most well-known for hosting the IndieFeed Performance Poetry Channel podcast for more than ten years.

His work has appeared in journals such as Off the Coast, Apparition Literary Magazine, PANK, The New Verse News, Danse Macabre, The Chamber Magazine, The Legendary, decomP, Dressing Room Poetry Journal, RFD, TreeHouse Arts, and in collections such as the Write Bloody Press book The Good Things About America.

For the past six years, Mongo has been hard at work on his sprawling supernatural horror trilogy, The Last Handful of Clover. He describes the work as "an epic meditation on aging, loss, and regret." The novel is currently being released serially on Patreon, Wattpad, QSaltLake, and as an audiobook podcast.

Mongo writes and freelance edits full time from his home in Montreal, Quebec. Find him at <http://wessmongojolley.com>.

**Charlotte Amelia Poe** (they/them) is an autistic nonbinary author from England. Their first book, How To Be Autistic, was published in 2019. Their debut novel, The Language Of Dead Flowers, was published in September 2022. Their second novel, Ghost Towns, was self published in 2023. Their second memoir, (currently untitled), will be published in 2024. Their poetry has been published internationally.

## AUTHOR BIOS

**Bob Zaslav** (playwright, filmmaker, poet and lyricist, children's book author, educator) won a Bronze Award from the American Film Institute for his documentary film, *Nadine Valenti, Portrait of a Painter*. As an advertising copywriter/creative supervisor, he won a Clio and two Effies. And as book-writer for the musical play, *The Seed of Abraham*, his show received high praise for its performances at the FringeNYC Festival's flagship Bleecker Street Theater. His play, *You Were Awesome!* was published in Applause Books' anthology, *Best Ten-Minute Plays*, 2019. He has also written the rap-musical, *Bardolatry!* which follows Shakespeare's life through the stories of six of his most popular plays...all with syncopated, humorous lyrics. In addition, his children's book *The Mayfly and the Methuselah Tree*, won the Best Children's Picture Book, spring 2022, from The BookFest. His poetry has been published by *Muleskinner Journal* and he has self-published fourteen children's books. <https://www.mrzstorytime.com>  
Bob has two Master's Degrees. One in Art from Hunter College and the other in Education from Mercy College (Summa cum Laude).

**Matt Poindexter's** (he/him/his) poems have appeared or are forthcoming in the Best New Poets series, *storySouth*, *Meridian*, *Greensboro Review*, and elsewhere. He previously served as the editor of *Inch* (Bull City Press). He lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

**Rosemary Dunn Moeller:** I have a book of poems, *Long Term Mates Migrate Great Distances* coming out this autumn 2023 from Scurfpea Publishing SD.

**Anna Booraem:** I am a librarian by day, a voracious reader by night, and a writer in flashes. I appreciate apocalyptic fiction, great dialogue, and any writing that explores how it feels to be human. My interests include celebrity and pop culture, spending time in nature, thinking about fashion and creative projects, and eating as much queso as seems appropriate for a woman my age.

**Jason Ryberg** is the author of eighteen books of poetry, six screenplays, a few short stories, a box full of folders, notebooks and scraps of paper that could one day be (loosely) construed as a novel, and, a couple of angry letters to various magazine and newspaper editors. He is currently an artist-in-residence at both The Prospero Institute of Disquieted P/o/e/t/i/c/s and the Osage Arts Community, and is an editor and designer at Spartan Books. His latest collection of poems is *The Great American Pyramid Scheme* (co-authored with W.E. Leathem, Tim Tarkelly and Mack Thorn, OAC Books, 2022). He lives part-time in Kansas City, MO with a rooster named Little Red and a billygoat named Giuseppe and part-time somewhere in the Ozarks, near the Gasconade River, where there are also many strange and wonderful woodland critters.

**JD Clapp** lives and writes in San Diego CA. His work has appeared in numerous outlets including *Written Tales*, *Cafe Lit*, *Wrong Turn Lit*, *WhiskyBlot*, *Prosetrics*, and *10 x 10 Flash Fiction Stories*.

**Ava Mack** (she/her) is a Boston-based poet and writer. She is currently the 2023 Poetry Fellow at The Writers' Room of Boston. Women, memory, and political speech are foundational to her work. She holds a BA and MA in political science from Boston University where she graduated summa cum laude.







# THE MULESKINNER JOURNAL

LONG JOURNEYS. HARD ROADS. GOOD TIMES.