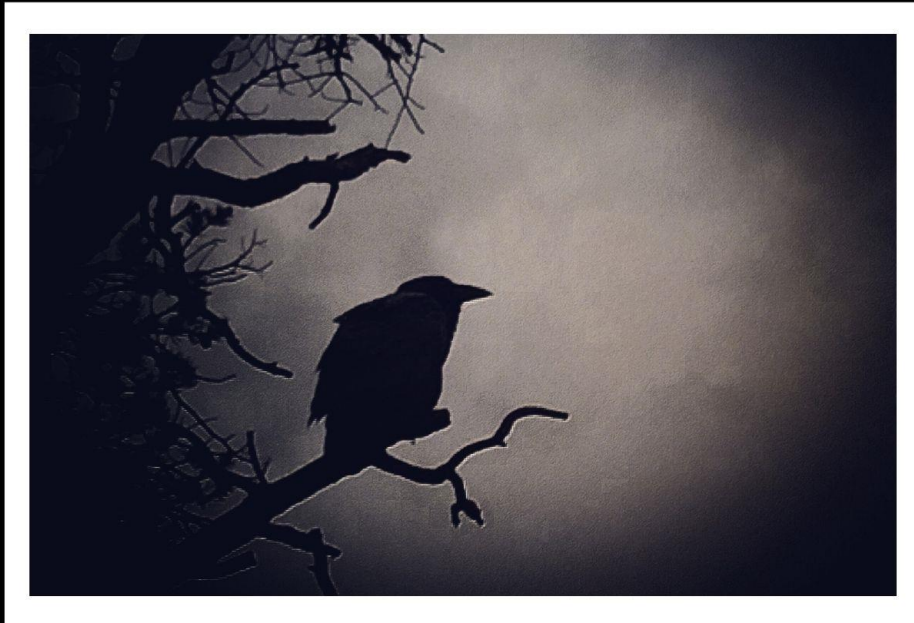


THE RAVEN REVIEW

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Amanda Hawk

The Height of the Fall

There is a myth that if you are falling in a dream
and hit the ground, you die.

As a teenager, I launch myself over and over
off every structure my mind could create.

A girl built on self-destruct
full of shrapnel shouts and cries, counting down my pain.

Tick, worthless, *tick*, not acceptable, *tick*, just a failure.
A love letter to suicide, a final prayer, as I fall.

In the end, I never quite hit
I hover inches from the ground inhaling the smell of fresh dirt and regret

or my dream diverts me to water
and splash land while the murk and algae swirl in my eyes.

One of the most common dreams is falling.
It represents insecurities, instabilities, and anxieties.

As a young woman, I linger in peaks of abstract mountains
of incomplete sentences and towering expectations.

A woman built of chaos and nerves, my body is an explosion
of trembling hands, reaching out to find balance in air.

Teeter, when, *teeter*, why, *teeter*, where do I belong.
A handwritten whisper, my scribbles transform into clouds

and slow my fall, so my body can stretch into the horizon
and I find myself in the landscape, the forest of my smile

the wilderness of my tongue, the rivers of my arms
the roadways of my bravery and press pins in the road maps of my memories.

As I fall, the portrait of me introduces itself to me
and I rest in her gaze.

Every night, I leap from the moon and dive down, down, down
into myself, and the thing with falling is you do land.

It is said if you hit the ground in your dreams and don't wake up,
it indicates your ability to confront your fears has grown stronger.

Anaira Poddar

But it Was You

“Oh, just like Nadia”
That’s when it happened
Suddenly but all at once
The ropes tightening around my heart
The voices of pleas and panic
Your laughter echoing in my ears
The feeling of an empty abyss
The blinding of the sunshine
Flooding every inch of my brain
My hand touched something cold
Something sharp
My knees folded
Folded like a floating lifeless paper
As if subconsciously
Asking for forgiveness
Forgiveness for surviving

Her face flickered
Flickered in my brain
Like a broken light
Trying to piece
Piece her together
Piece Her cascading black hair
Her twinkling blue eyes
Her cherry plump lips
And her narrow nose
Onto her rosy cheeks
And fair face
The face I can never touch again
Never see light up
Once the fireworks litter the sky

Because she jumped in front
In front of the racing bullet
The flying golden bullet
Meant for me

I can still feel her blood
Colouring my hands
As her body flailed
Down like jelly
How I stood there
Frozen like a statue
My legs pulling me deeper into the ground
My hands locked at my sides
And my eyes paused
Only to rewind to
Replay the reel
A thousand times over again

I am eternally sorry
It should have been me
But it was you
But it was you
I still freeze
Freeze when your name rings in my ears
Fall when the memories rush in
Cry when I realize you will never be back
Back like you promised.

Aryan Pandey
Anger in Love

Anger in love has always been seen,
But none of the two's ever mean.
Be it a father, Be it a mother.
Be it a brother, Be it a sister.
Anger in love has always been there,
What arbitrates is affection and care
You've anger in love with utmost warmth and care,
But remember for some no one's there.
When loveable admonish you hard,
You think they intentionally broke your heart.
But this is never the case,
There's more agony inside than the veracity in voice or face.
You'll not perceive anger took out the bad and made the perfect one,
You think it made you someone who needs none.
And then you'll see your fulfilled fear,
You were the one who strayed his dear.
You just had some good intentioned anger in your love with care,
But now, alas! You're part of some for whom no one's there.
Anger and love will always go hand in hand,
They can't be separated even by a magical wand.

Casey Burchby

Silver Nitrate

Flickering figures run
Barreling across the screen
Toward a train to safety.
It's a man caught in a system,
An average woman,
Her sickly child,
All fighting uncanny anonymity:
Helpless with panic,
They make it to the station,
Dodging inevitable explosions
Into the arms of the happy ending.

But outside the theater,
It's Hitchcock on fire:
Grotesque alien faces
Make explicit, specific threats
To tear you from your family,
To tear your family from each other,
Saying pull yourselves up by your bootstraps
Or you will see them all drown
Out on the open water;
Watch them all suffer
Across a fake border.

You are caught in a vicious riptide
Pushed back, restrained
Prevented from pursuing.
All that is holy to you

You watch a river rush past
With the force of money
Zagging in all directions
Just out of reach

Catherine O'Brien

Hitchhiking Through Dreams

In the unstirring of the night,
our joy is omnivorous.
It doesn't dine but gorges itself
on succulent sunbeams marinated in verdant valleys of endless trust.
We should approach it gingerly with downcast eyes
Lest we startle it or stain—
We don't.

We pollinate the hours with conversation,
using our muscle memories, we collaborate
on a thesaurus of summer treasures.
We speak the vernacular of the butterflies fluttering in our stomachs
We build megacities of memories,
atop which we like to sit with our kicking legs—dangling.
We plan to live lives of indiscreet richness,
that's where we see our fulfilment.
We are subject to a recurrent desire to forswear sorrow,
we enjoy infringing on its sense of entitlement.
We commit.
We exhibit the ordinariness of contentment on the daily.

At night is when I feel you most.
My mind sleets great big flurries of recollections
which have yellowed, softened, and curled at the edges.
I struggle when they fold at the edges—preparing to be diminutive,
to lick at sparks and burn.

I offer resistance.
I picture your face all winking freckles and endless grace
Upon waking, I frame that face
so that by day I can trace and at night I can etch-a-sketch in my mind.
In my dreams, you're there
and we continue to be together
laughing tears and falling together
as the cold light of day beckons and smirks.

Chloe Bollentin

In Memoriam

You grab an empty three-seater and slide all the way to the window. The benefits of train travel in the off-hours: every car is the quiet car. If you encounter a rare disturbance, you won't have to move far to escape it.

Inside your purse, a small, black leather-bound journal, appropriately somber. You flip it open to the most recent page. Your notes are a mess, but at least your handwriting is legible. Of course, your handwriting is only legible because there was so little worth writing down.

- *I mean, she was a successful career woman, I guess. A good role model, you might say. Not that it got me anywhere, I mean look at me. At my age she was married with a kid and a great job and I'm single and unemployed and living in my dead mom's house.*
- *She was like . . . I don't know, she was like funny but not funny on purpose. She would say something ridiculous, and you'd laugh at it and then she'd get mad. She was that kind of funny. You know?*
- *Like one time I was eating a bagel with cream cheese and lox, and she was like, that doesn't have any nutritional value. And I laughed and was like yeah ok. And then she yelled at me for laughing. So.*
- *Ok, ok, but I will say this. You didn't want to be on her bad side, but if you were on her good side, she would do literally anything. And I know, because I was on her good side and her bad side like all the time. So, like, if she was pissed at me, it was like, watch out. But at the same time, like . . . like one time she ran into my ex-boyfriend at the deli down the street right after he dumped me and she cornered him outside and was like, I better not see you here again. This is our deli. And I'm pretty sure he never went back there, even though they have the best bagels, like objectively.*

You like to get it down word for word as much as possible and smooth it out later. It's usually not too hard. Usually, they're slow to start because they're still in shock, and the shock clogs them up. But if you nudge around enough, eventually you'll dislodge something critical to the structural integrity of their bottled-up feelings and everything else will come tumbling out. That's the key. Once you hit on that catalyst, the resulting avalanche of memories and anecdotes and beautiful mundane details supplies the raw material from which you shape the narrative.

There was no catalyst today. It was easy to get Miri talking, but most of what she said is unusable. That story about the ex-boyfriend and the deli, that could work, if you frame it right, but it risks making Deborah sound a bit unhinged. And maybe Deborah was a bit unhinged, but this is her eulogy, and there's no place for that here: no place for bitterness, certainly, and rarely any place for nuance. Nuance has to be tiptoed around, executed just right. It takes so little to push the scales in the wrong direction. You've seen it before, many times: the sister who thinks

she can disguise her jealousy with humor; the son who doesn't realize how clearly his anger at his father's emotional distance seeps into his every word. It would be like that if Miri were to speak at her mother's funeral. You're grateful, at least, that she has declined the opportunity to do so.

What stage of grief is this, you wonder. Not any you're familiar with. If it's denial, it's well-disguised; Miri seems reasonably accustomed to the fact of her mother's death. There's certainly anger, but not for any of the right reasons. Bargaining? No. Depression? Maybe, but again, unrelated. Acceptance is barely a spot on the horizon.

You flip the journal closed, conceding temporary defeat. Already, the view outside the window is rolling to a stop at the penultimate station on your journey. The distance between the Weissmans and the synagogue is not long, but it feels even shorter than you expected, and infinitely less productive than you were hoping.

The funeral is tomorrow. You've always appreciated this facet of Jewish tradition—the quick burial, just one stage of many in the carefully mapped-out grieving process—but in this case it feels oppressive, this grim deadline boring down on you.

The task ahead of you feels insurmountable, disproportionately so. You wonder if you are still in denial.

Back in your office later that afternoon, you sit with the journal open in front of you, a yellow legal pad beside it. You prefer longhand for this task, the way it encourages you to take your time, to linger over every word, ensuring that each one is just right.

You have been sitting this way for approximately twenty-five minutes, the journal and the blank legal pad side by side on your desk, when the phone rings.

“Rabbi Sarah? It's Miri.”

“Miri.” You frown down at your desk, at Miri's whirlwind of unhelpful memories copied down in your journal. “Hi. Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, everything's fine. I, uh . . . I just wanted to . . .” She pauses for long enough that you begin to wonder if she isn't going to finish her sentence at all. But before you can decide whether it's appropriate to jump in, she continues. “I wanted to apologize. For today. I, uh . . . I feel like I wasn't very helpful.”

You hesitate, unsure how to respond. “You don't have to apologize, Miri. I know this is a difficult time.”

“Right. Yeah. I know. It's just . . . I don't know. I feel like you were looking for something and I didn't give it to you. I mean, I know you didn't know her that well, and I feel bad that I didn't . . . that I couldn't be more helpful. You know?”

You know. You want to cry, to scream. You want to say, *how dare you*. You want to say, *you have no idea what you're talking about*.

Instead, you take a deep breath, inhale the unspoken words into your lungs. You're moving from denial to anger: misplaced anger, albeit, but anger, nonetheless. It's progress, you tell yourself. But this is not the time or the place.

“You don’t have to worry, Miri.” You speak slowly, laboring over your words. “You’re right, I didn’t know her well. But I know enough.”

And in Miri’s reality, this is true. In Miri’s reality, your brief, limited acquaintanceship with Deborah began the day she first stepped into this office, six-year-old Miri hugging her hip. You looked up from your desk, and for a moment, your face went pale and slack. For a moment, hers did too.

It was the last time she ever looked you directly in the eye. In an instant, she’d regained her composure, and her gaze settled somewhere by your right ear as she introduced herself and her daughter and asked about Hebrew school registration.

“Try to get some rest,” you tell Miri. “And don’t worry. I know exactly what I’m going to say.”

Under the circumstances, you can forgive yourself the lie. You set the phone down next to the legal pad and pick up your pen.

At home that evening, the legal pad rests on your kitchen table, filled with a series of false starts, half-finished and crossed out. Next to it sits a battered shoebox unearthed from the back of your closet, the one you promised yourself you weren’t going to touch tonight. Its contents won’t help your progress—if anything, they’ll hinder it—but you take them out anyway, one by one, lingering over each sepia-toned photograph, each curled-edged piece of letter paper with her handwriting scrawled all over it.

One picture, from the summer you first met: both of you looking not at the camera but at each other, mid-laugh, her tanned-golden arm slung over your shoulders. Looking at it, you can still smell her skin, sweat and sunscreen, her hair, Farrah Fawcett shampoo and lake water. Behind the boat shed at the edge of the lake, her lips tasted like the coconut lip balm she kept with her at all times like a talisman, warding off chapped skin.

You were both eighteen, but she was a worldly eighteen, confident and mature, experienced in spending her summers away from home. Unlike her parents, yours couldn’t afford to send you to summer camp, and so you’d spent all your summers babysitting until you were old enough that the camp would pay you to come. One of the few counselors who hadn’t grown up as a camper, you were an outsider until she claimed you. She’d spent every summer there since she was ten; she knew all the lingo, all the secrets, all the hiding spots.

It lasted for three summers. The disparate chunks of time blended together into one long event, like a videotape paused for ten months out of the year. The letters that filled the void between, scribbled under bedsheets late at night, stoked the embers just enough to keep the fire burning.

By the fourth summer she had found a real job, and you went back to camp without her. It was the beginning of the end. Her letters arrived less frequently. When an invitation to her wedding came in the mail, you threw it away unopened. She stopped writing, and you did too.

You place the photograph down on the table, next to the legal pad filled with all the words that didn’t feel right. You suspect that most people, if asked, would insist that an honest

eulogy is best: that the deliverer should speak from the heart. But you know, from a great deal of experience, that sometimes honesty is best only in the abstract.

Carefully, one by one, you place each item back in the shoebox in the same order that you removed them. Then you tear off the top sheet from the legal pad and pick up your pen.

Standing at the bimah the next morning, you offer a silent prayer and a silent apology: to Deborah, to Miri, to God, and to yourself. You spread out the sheets of legal paper in front of you, smoothing the edges with your fingers.

“Today, we gather together to celebrate the life and mourn the death of Deborah Ruth Weissman.”

Elizabeth Nelson

The Prayer Meeting

He was invisible. A boy of six swinging skinny legs on the seat of a weathered wingback. He was solid. Present. His body was made of bones and muscle. Yet it was as if he were only a ghost, mute and trapped beyond perception.

He was trapped. Where could he go? The closet, perhaps. Tonight, he was determined to stay put, to resist the temptation to run and hide. Temptation was evil. He knew this much in his little soul. He'd heard it often enough, tripping off the soft lips of his gentle father. *Be wary, son. Watch out!*

His mother touched his knee as she brushed past. A touch! He quickly folded his legs beneath him and placed a palm over the patch of skin. His mother! She loved him, she must, she touched his knee!

She was now opening the door, saying good evening and God bless. The women were filing in now, followed by the men. Hats and handbags were being taken with nods and thank yous, stacked in a pile over in the corner by the fireplace. These strange adult bodies began to breathe all the air, to take up all the space with their swinging limbs, their bulky clothes, like armor, that organized their shapes into a series of impossibly straight lines. The boy began to feel small, very, very small.

The room was a cityscape, the people buildings. The room was a wilderness, the people beasts. The room was some terrifying version of Heaven, the people angry angels. The room was like a peek into Hell, the people either damned or demons. His mind sparked and swirled as he watched them gather.

Someone patted his head and he nearly leapt from his skin. A man, scooting past. Hello kiddo. And then he was gone, absorbed into the growing throng. The boy's crown burned. Had he been touched by an angel or a demon? Hard to tell in this place, in this time when his home transformed into something unnamable. He wanted to touch his own head, to push away the feeling, the lingering burn, but he was frozen. Paralysis was sinking in. He'd pulled his knees under his chin, was keeping that patch of skin touched by his mother close to his heart. He tried to smell her there, but he detected only his own bland scent.

They were circling now. He could not see his mother or father, but he could hear his daddy's voice, soft at first, now rising in volume, becoming rich like something thick. Butter. Cooled bacon grease in the stove tin. That voice now transformed, and the boy loved this voice and was also amazed and terrified by its power, its ability to shape shift. The voice began to tremble, to break apart, a packed scoop of brown sugar in a bowl. The voice began to soar, a dove with silver wings swinging gracefully above bowed heads. The voice began to thicken again, through syrup into lard into frying grease into melted oil bubbling like water but with the power to kill.

This is when he usually ran.

The boy did not run. He stayed put, scooped into the deep crevice of the wingback, arms wrapped tight around his skinny legs. He willed himself to watch. So many nights, he'd listened to this ritualistic ruckus from the dark dust of the closet he shared with his sister but not tonight. Tonight, he will stay. He will listen. He will watch.

I am an explorer, he thought bravely. I am going where no boy has gone before. I am a warrior! I am brave and strong! He thought of the picture his mother had shown him many times, the gold trimmed bible opening almost on its own to the page where tiny David was forever hurling a stone into the giant's weakest spot, felling him with one brilliant shot.

His father's voice was not alone, was now a single chord in a choir of wagging tongues.

I am David, thought the boy.

His mother's voice was among them. All of them, all speaking at once, a warbled tapestry of cries and pitches and fevered slips of sound ripping at the seams of the universe.

My name is David, thought the boy. I am David.

The choir was now a cacophony, a riotous roar gaining momentum, churning faster with greater fury into the room, filling the house whose walls began to tremble.

I am the giant slayer, thought the boy. I am safe.

He did not feel safe as the strange words, a foreign language conjured through spirit, became a rocking ocean of ardent clamour. And now their hands were in the air, fists pumping toward the dark sky. And now their faces were thrown back and open, showing teeth, showing pink, cracked, and meaty tongues wriggling like snakes. And now eyes were rolling back into heads, flashing red-veined white. And now some of them were falling to their knees, collapsing to the floor where they vibrated with powerful electrical surges—and the boy was afraid.

The house shook. As the rumble rose and fell, so did the approaching thunder, and as the bodies writhed, the roof lifted from the little house, like a lid on a jar, and the giant was there, peering in.

The boy did not have words for this mammoth presence, for this colossal mass of monster who fixed him with his wicked gaze. The giant simply was. A mountain. A titanic crag of earth. He was rocky and pockmarked, his orifices gaping wounds seeping salty pink sludge. His smell was rot like the warm, brown liquid at the bottom of the trash bin.

The thrash of bodies was racing toward the pinnacle. The lash of tongue-whittled words that were not words but some secret code between these strange adults and God were slicing the air, carving breath into idyllic sculptures. And just as all discernible form within the cacophonous sound fell away, crumbling into a rush of barreling locomotives, the giant reached into the house and began to curl his fingers around the boy.

There were no stones to throw. No sling shot within reach. No king or guardian angel. He was alone, as he'd been before and as he'd be again. He was on his own, naked, and vulnerable. But he was small. He was quick. He was all skinny-limbed lightness and he slithered through the giant's fingers and off the wingback's seat to the floor where he scrambled beneath the chair and made a break for the hallway.

The giant swiped at him, sending a rush of foul wind in the wake of his grimy fist. David ducked. The giant cast his other fist, a boulder of hairy fingers, into the living room, crushing a crater into the floor. The resounding boom knocked David to his knees and the giant caught his small, bare foot, pinched them between two tips of rock.

A rock! There in the corner's shadow, a forgotten baseball, smooth and hard, and a little too big for his hands, but he grabbed the stone and as the giant raised him slowly into the air, his charred cavern of a mouth warbling wide in laughter, David threw back his arm. The stone lobbed into the center of the giant's third eye and with a wail of fury he was let go, falling, falling faster now, striking the napped carpet with a thwack and scramble of little boy limbs.

He may have heard the musical shatter of glass as he scampered into the bedroom where he'd left the closet door ajar, just in case, and now he dived into the dark and pulled that door shut behind him. As the latch clicked into place, the train roar of voices ceased. All that was left was a collective sigh of sniffing, satisfied exhaustion. And the boy was, if not safe, invisible once more.

Fredric Hildebrand

At the Community Table, Trinity Lutheran Church, Neenah, WI

Saturday morning and the smells
of baking bread and pasta drift
up from the basement social hall.

A decorated sandwich board
welcomes all to this free meal.
On the walls, children's artwork,

schedules of holiday events.
At the back of the room, an old
piano below a carved wood crucifix.

I unfold metal chairs. We place lilies
on each table, arrange the buffet
of lasagna, bread, salad, fruit cups,

nutrition bars. Plastic cups, pitchers
of milk, water. A dispenser of coffee.
Guests arrive in housecoats, scrubs,

service uniforms. One wears a suit
and tie. Some wheelchairs. An older
man with tattoos struggles with his

walker. A young girl clings to a worn
stuffed rabbit. Tentative voices murmur
greetings. Soon all forty seats are filled.

After a prayer, a single line forms.
We serve them. One helping of each
dish, seconds if there is extra food.

There is none today. The diners eat
with hushed voices, not looking around.

Afterward, gentle smiles, handshakes,
soft *Thank-Yous*. The girl wishes me

Happy Easter.

Gratitude. Humility. Examples for my
pale self, far from the person I should be.

Jerilyn Ring

Halftime

John raised his voice. “No son of mine is taking piano. That’s for sissies.”

Laura, his wife, leaned across the kitchen table, a malicious glint in her eye.

“And you’re a man?”

John recoiled as if she had struck him.

“No more lessons,” he yelled.

“Over my dead body.”

A loud whimper. Six-year-old Lawrence stood in the doorway. Laura’s heart skipped a beat. How long had he been there? Intercepting him as he ran toward his dad, she took his arm and led him back to his room. As soon as she let him go, he ran back to the kitchen. Just as he reached it, the front door slammed. He pressed his tear-stained face against the window as his dad’s car sped out of the driveway and roared down the street.

The lump in her throat grew larger as the car became a mere dot on the horizon. That night, Lawrence’s slender fingers, more at home on a keyboard than a baseball bat, were wrapped around her hand as she held him close.

• • •

On his fifteenth birthday, over her protests, John gave Lawrence boxing gloves. From the sidelines, she watched as he tried to heed her advice not to injure his hands or face while heeding his dad’s advice not to worry about it. After three fights and three defeats, she was secretly relieved when the boxing gloves mysteriously disappeared.

Then, on his sixteenth birthday, John gave him a shotgun, and after a few practice sessions took him bird hunting. She had begged him not to, but he didn’t listen. Later that night, Lawrence called to report an accident. He had shot his dad. The wound was skin deep, but the fall shattered his dad’s kneecap; the wound healed, the knee improved, but the breach between them deepened.

On his eighteenth birthday, he received his draft notice.

“Drafted,” she repeated, unable to believe he didn’t get a deferment. Instead, he had given up his scholarship to the Juilliard School of Music. She insisted they accompany him to the airport. Lawrence reluctant at first, finally agreed. John drove while she sat in the back, grieving the lost scholarship.

“I’m glad you didn’t try for a deferment,” his dad said, clamping down on his cigar. “Going into the army is the smartest thing you’ve done. It will make a man out of you. God knows I tried.”

“You jackass,” she shouted. “The only smart thing you ever did was marry me, and the only dumb thing I ever did was say yes and as for a man . . .”

• • •

John sat in his easy chair in front of the TV, sipping a beer. Two of his cronies sat nearby on an adjacent couch. “Did you see that?” he said, pounding his fist on the coffee table. An eight-by-ten portrait in a delicate ivory frame fell to the floor. “The dumb ox fumbled.” John leaned over, groping for the picture, both eyes still on the screen.

“I’ll get it,” Laura said, picking it up. She wiped the glass with the back of her sleeve and inspected the frame. Lawrence’s eyes stared back at her. She pressed her lip together, ignoring the pain in her chest. She placed the portrait on the mantle next to a purple heart mounted on velvet and encased in a gold frame.

In death, Lawrence would be the son he could never be in life, then his dad wouldn’t have to say his son was a pianist, instead during half time, he could say his son died in Vietnam. After a few more beers, he’d embellish it by saying he died fighting a platoon of gooks single-handed. If he had to die, she thought bitterly, why not die a hero?

John staggered to the kitchen, returning with three beers. He followed his wife’s gaze to Lawrence’s picture. “A toast,” he announced, distributing the beers to his two cronies. “To my son the hero just like his old man.” A tear ran down his cheek, but he didn’t wipe it away.

His wife whirled around and faced him, fixing him with an icy stare. When she spoke, her voice appeared calm and detached.

“If he were like you, he’d still be alive.”

“Oh, I suppose, he’s like you,” he said.

She sensed his anticipation of a rage equal to the one that was building within him. “You just don’t get it,” she said, returning to the rocking chair.

He stopped, flustered. The anger he barely was able to contain a minute ago ebbed, then subsided, replaced by confusion. He looked for his beer. Unable to find it, he searched room to room, returning empty handed.

Laura was still sitting in the rocking chair. “It’s on the floor next to your chair,” she said without looking at him. “And there’s another six-pack in the vegetable compartment.”

He lifted the beer to his mouth, gulping half of it down.

“He was like me, you know.” But now he sounded less confident. They were alone. His buddies had departed at the first sign of friction. John waited for her to speak, but she said nothing.

“You tried to make him into a sissy, but in the end, he showed you.”

He waited, almost too eagerly, for some sign that she had heard him, but she refused to carry on the charade any longer. She remained still. His words no longer had the power to move her.

John left the room and returned with his jacket and another beer. “I’m going down to Pete’s. It almost half time.” He pulled the tab from the beer; a geyser of foam erupted and ran down the sides and onto the floor before he could quench the flow with his mouth. He took

three long gulps, then headed out. The door slammed followed by the roar of an engine. The silence that followed confirmed his departure.

Her eyes rested on the Elm in the front yard. She recalled Lawrence's triumph when he finally made it to the top. She would miss that old tree. The grandfather clock in the hall chimed. If she didn't hurry, she would miss her plane.

Jessie Caitlin Bullard
Morning Song

the young woman
beneath the roof,
broken and curbed
like a wounded bird
picked at her own feathers
until they read omens
from her—a tragic
suffering personified
for the whole neighborhood
to witness.

her bad habits
made hip by bruised lipstick
and tiny tattoos
should have cued
everyone to her fate—
especially me,
the one with eyes
for torment;
an ache for an ache,
rose-colored glass
surrounds this little injured bird—
drowning in a filtered
fish bowl.

“cherry cough drops
go great with bottled coke,”
she told me,
glass dangling—
glinting like a grin.
“I think you’d really like it,”
she hummed before
taking a swig.

i used to write her love poems,
but she doesn’t know—
stories where she was soaring

and I watched from below
in admiration
welling well-beyond
my arms—
i tried to carry water
without a bucket
and it all poured out from me.

people point to her
and debate
whether or not
she deserves this fate—
destiny or doom?
and just twenty minutes
before her fall,
she was a still, fragile
portrait—
a barely-there
apparition
of a dreamer
who believed
her dreams
would take care of her,
keep her safe—
sitting in her room
collecting bottles:
sea-green, translucent,
dark red.

i phoned her last week
and she picked up
only to deliver
words i swore
people only heard
at deathbeds, or
in desperate sleep-talk, or
during final partings—
“don’t forget me,”
and a moment later,
muffled in laughter, a quip:

“sorry, I’m just so dramatic.”

late at night
i imagine her dreams
and write them down
in pages until i can guess
that i know her—
hum along as the window bird
chirps a morning song,
suck on a red cough drop,
pour the liquid down,
try to carry water
or drown.

John Grey
Battlefield

The guy was drunk,
completely out of control.
He busted two glasses,
turned over a table,
was on course to demolish the place.
Someone said,
he'd just returned
from his fourth deployment
to the Middle East.
Their sympathy gave him space
until broken shards
started flying in their direction.
The bartender grabbed hold of him
and the guy broke down,
muttered something about bombs
and buddies blown to bits.
We sat him a chair,
ground zero for sobbing.
Someone called his wife.
With help from one or two of us,
she dragged him to the car,
shoveled him onto the back seat
like a package.
The bartender cleaned up.
The rest of us finished
our drinks in silence,
then departed.
That was the night
the war came to our little town.
The battlefield's name
was Richard.

Jonathan Ferrini
A Gift of Chance

Loneliness and the need for companionship “drive” me to an evening dance class held in a storefront studio in a dingy strip mall.

Dreadful fluorescent lighting, water-stained ceiling, mirrored walls begging for cleaning highlighting my wrinkled, off the rack, business suit, all suggest a futile trek.

Women outnumber the men.

Numbers are drawn from a hat; odd numbers face even in numerical order assembling a firing squad.

I’m facing a fellow with the same predicament: we came to dance with a woman and find romance.

Maybe it was a twitch of my eye, and my quivering lip signaling “SOS,” but a woman standing next to him, took his place, and was now facing me.

She is beautiful, athletic, and wearing stylish dance gear. I’m out of my “league.”

Her beautiful smile, one delicate hand holding mine, the other hand displaying a wedding ring, placed upon my shoulder, calm my fear of dancing.

No “bullets” but a bark begins the class.

“One, two, three. One two, three.”

It feels like a military cadence as I struggle to keep step, hampering her desire to dance effortlessly, like a feather carried on the wind.

Minutes seemed like hours until a break is called. She’d certainly “ditch” me for another partner.

“Take five, class!”

An elderly couple continue to dance about the room, oblivious to everyone, as if former members of the chorus in an MGM musical of the thirties.

“I apologize for my two ‘left feet.’ I won’t be offended if you find another partner.”

“You looked anxious walking into class. I surmised you might be a novice and admire your determination to take a chance. See you after the break.”

I take refuge in the corner of the studio, hoping yoga movements will “jump start” some rhythm, and demonstrate a semblance of adroitness. I finish with “Downward Dog,” rise graciously, feeling confident, and pivot to see my dance partner watching me from across the studio.

I lay on my back, close my eyes, and breathe deeply.

Lips gently touch mine. I resist pulling her close and escalating the kiss, choosing instead to savor the sublime moment.

She raised her lips from mine, and I ask, “What does this mean?”

“I don’t know. It just felt right at the moment.”

Our romantic interlude transcended our desire to finish the class.

I walk her to a convertible sports car. Before I have an opportunity to say, “See you next week,” she pulls me close, whispering,
“We traverse life like a block attempting to roll smoothly along time’s highway. The potholes we encounter mold us into circles, continuing our journey on high performance tires.”

“What about your ring?”

“My ‘block’ is still becoming circular.”

The high-performance engine raced like my emotions.

“I don’t know your name!”

“Don’t overthink a beautiful meeting of souls. We rode a vibe without steering. Our tires were circular, gripping the road as unspoken emotions raced by us like STOP signs. Goodbye, and thank you.”

All week my heart ached with anticipation to see her again.

She wasn’t in class.

A “meeting of souls,” like witnessing a double rainbow, occurs in a split second. Time has its own rhythm.

I was skeptical of finding a double rainbow and debated leaving class. I chose not to “overthink” it, stay, and hope to meet even a single rainbow, “a gift of chance.”

Kyle Heger

The Old Stomping Grounds

O.K. Things didn't turn out exactly the way I wanted. As a matter of fact, the whole bottom came falling out of my life last night when I spoke the Magic Words. But, at least, I landed back in a place where I know what I'm doing, where I know how to get things done, *terra cognita*. I can work my way back up out of here. If I want to. I've done it before. I can do it again. And even if I can't do that, I can still manage to survive here.

• • •

I was sure last night would be a high point, a turning point for the better. I had an intuition it would. Well, intuitions can suck as much as anything else, it turns out. As much as hope and devotion. And love.

But I was just so damn sure. All the signs were there: the restaurant, the dinner, even the flowers on the table. The waitress, and the way she smiled. Everything seemed to be encouraging me, inspiring me, saying, "Go on. Everything's going fine. You're on the right track. You just need to do this one thing, to say these three Magic Words, and you'll be happier than ever."

The walk back to my rented room through the snowy streets; the crisp, clean, intoxicating air; the sparkling stars; the way you and I licked honey from *baclava* off each other's frozen fingers and sang along with music coming from someone's car window: "She came in through the bathroom window, protected by her silver spoon." It was all propitious. When you slid out of your dress in my rented room; stood in your slip, lit by a streetlamp; pressed your contours against mine and whispered, "spoons," I knew I was on the edge of a great culmination.

Oh, we'd had sex before. A lot of it. But it had been, at least on your side, of a recreational type. No endearments. Plenty of pleasure but no affection. But this was going to be different.

As we lay under the covers, entwined, I told myself, "Now is the time. Now. It's now or never," and I rolled over. But, when I began to say the Magic Words, I suddenly knew that it was all wrong, that I'd been deceived, that I was making a terrible mistake from which I might never recover. From which we might never recover. I remembered what had been holding back all those other times: my awareness of how important, maybe how necessary, your borders were to you; of how you had come to entangle intimacy with abuse. Yet, somehow, I couldn't seem to stop myself. The words were already coming out of my mouth as if by some unstoppable momentum, an act of faith, words which I knew I could never take back. "I love you," I said.

• • •

I recognize this place where I am now so well. This place where I grew up. I never thought I'd be back here. Of course, at one point, long ago, I never thought I'd leave here. It's

all coming back to me now: how to hang onto what I think I've lost, how to stop the world from getting worse, what sacrifices to make to prevent the destruction from spreading, and, most of all, how to keep it all secret, how to never reveal that I live in this place, that I'm doing what I'm doing, thinking what I'm thinking, feeling what I'm feeling. Above all, in this place, I must never speak of love. Or even hint at it. It would be selfish. It would be destructive. It would be evil.

• • •

You were lying on your back, facing the ceiling. I could feel you freeze as my words hit you and sank through your flesh. I could almost hear a small glass vial break in your chest as the words struck it, break, and spill some poisonous substance that quickly circulated throughout your system, permeating every inch of you, killing something. You sighed once, low, and shallow.

I forced myself to look at you from the corner of my eyes. You were staring at the ceiling, expressionless, pupils dilated, letting the darkness pour in like formaldehyde while something else trickled out all over the sheets from your fingertips.

Yes, those had been magic words, all right.

I sighed too and rolled over, turning my back to you, as I fell back down the long black funnel to here.

But there was one bit of good news I clung to as I fell. You were still lying there. Yes, you looked like a statue. But you could have stormed out of the bed, out of the room, out of the house. And you hadn't.

• • •

Really, I should be grateful I spent so much time here, back then, learning the ropes. Some people would be completely freaked out, completely unprepared to be here. They might just curl up into a ball and die. But not me. For me, it's second nature.

I went to work. I knew right away the first thing I needed to do: throw a life line around you with my mind, doing it so gently and slowly and cleverly that you didn't suspect a thing. This was essential, so that you wouldn't leave me, so I would have time to find other, subtler, more effective ways of keeping you with me. I already understood just how to spin the line out of my mind, like spider silk, direct it through the air, ease it over you, inch by inch, until it stuck.

Yes. It all came back to me as if I'd never left this place, as if my time "topside" had been a dream, an illusion. It was with knowledge earned by long experience that I quickly clamped a lid on that part of myself that had made the mistake of breaking the silence, of uttering those terrible words, that I chained and locked it shut, that I burned and salted the ground around it, that I pledged to make sacrifices there every day to keep the magic working.

Long into the night, I lay there in the fetal position, working my spells, cutting off hidden pieces of myself to fuel them, while you lay next to me, barely moving, barely breathing. Until at last, I fell into what passes for sleep in this place.

• • •

Now, the morning has come and it's time for us to get up and get dressed and catch the bus and go to the college campus for our first classes of the day. If I've pulled it off right, if I'm up to the challenge, it will go, at least on the surface, almost like business as usual, as nothing traumatic happened last night.

You get out of bed without looking at me, silent and expressionless, and go to the bathroom to get dressed. I know you're thinking something like, "I'll have to break up with him now," your green eyes cool and clouded. "Should I come right out and tell him, or should I just let him fall by the wayside?" But you haven't said anything yet. I made the mistake of breaking a silence last night. I believe I can manage things so you will avoid breaking an equally important silence this morning.

I'm an expert at acting like I don't care, on wearing the kind of mask you're wearing: deadpan.

I reach for my pants and put them on. Then my shirt. Moving like you are. Like a robot.

We both pick up our back packs and head out the front door to the bus stop. We're walking together. That's a good sign. No honey licking. No singing. But we don't need those. A good, slow, stubborn walk will suit us fine.

You haven't said anything yet about the Magic Words. And even if you do, I'll find some way to minimize their importance. I'll laugh at them. I'll make fun of them. I'll deny them. You have no idea how hard it will be to get rid of me. You have no way of knowing just how much neglect and rejection and abuse I can take and still stick with you, how many sacrifices I can make. You can't possibly see the powers I have at my disposal here in this world I was never meant to leave, my home, my old stomping grounds.

Lynn Finger

Friday Night at the Bookstore

We're right next to the all-night liquor store,
our doors joined at the hinge.
People come into my bookstore with
a bag of Grey Goose or Pinot Grigio tucked in their arm,

backlit by the green neon sign, and ask
for translations of Neruda, or the newest
sci-fi mystery. When we have a lull,
I go next door and talk to the owner Carl. He's tall
with black hair, face like a bittern and has a long stare,
like neither of us breathe.
I don't know the whole
background, there's a divorce, kids he doesn't see much.

He likes to catch fireflies to see them glow in the cage
of his hands, then release
them to the night.
When Carl laughs, he gasps, sputters, and says, *don't you know it.*

Carl tells me, *life isn't borrowed time, it's hard bought. I paid
for everything I owed
and more. Getting tired,
don't you know it.* Carl asked me for the sonnets of Petrarch,
and some Angelou. Tonight, I'm bringing him the books he wants.

As I enter the store, someone else, a smiling college-age
man with red hair,
is at the counter. I lay the books
in front of him, Carl here? He looks down: I thought you'd know.

Broken stars in my gut. He's gone, took his own life last night.
I thank the new clerk
and return to my store.
I should reshelve Carl's, but instead I tuck them under my front counter,

as if he might come by some day to pick them up. It is too sudden, his
leaving. But that's how people leave.

It seems this evening,
in the neon light glow from the street, and slam of the adjoining door,
he just might stop by to collect them, collect his breath, with a handful
of fireflies, his laugh.

I'm ready
for that laugh, any laugh again, anything.

Natalie Tankersley
California Lovin'

A whirlwind romance. Kisses on the dance floor, ice cream dates, and flowers every time he greeted her. Everything was sunny. Everything was supposed to be sunny.

They'd been talking for months. Michael knew he shouldn't have led her on, taking her to prom and on dates even if he never called them that. But there was something about her that made him want to put the world at her feet.

The cotton of her skirt brushes against his legs as she spun, giggling, stopping herself from falling with hands on his chest. Catching one in his grip, he brings her hand to his lips, brushing them over her sun kissed skin. "Mia," he said warningly, "don't fall now."

"Too late," she giggled, falling into his chest. I've already fallen for you." She tapped his nose with one dainty finger.

His hands fell to cradle her waist as she swayed in his grasp, eyes eagerly taking everything in. He shook his head. He should have known better than to take her to a sunflower field, but she loved flowers, and yellow ones were her absolute favorites in the entire world. "Sweetheart, sit with me for a minute, okay?"

She hummed in response, legs folding underneath her easily as he lowered the both of them to the ground. "There's a butterfly," she gasped, holding her breath like she was witnessing a miracle. Michael failed to see what was so fascinating about the butterfly, but he looked, obediently staring off in the directions he was pointing.

"Mia, I really need your attention now, sweetheart," he said, forcing her away from his chest.

She frowned at him, face falling in confusion, but she moved easily enough, letting him situate herself in front of him. "Is this about my cousins the other day? You know they were just playing. It's not really worth getting worked about, and anyway—"

"No, Mia." Michael shook his head. "I wanted to talk to you about the future." He gave her a small smile and reached out to grab her hand. "Our future."

"Oh," Mia said, looking down at her hands, cheeks flushing. "I didn't realize."

Michael gave her a sheepish grin. "Yeah." He looked around the field, desperate to find something else to look at while he talked to her. "I'm graduating in a week, you know—"

"Oh, I know, silly," Mia said, giving him a brilliant smile. "Your mom and I have already planned a big party."

"Well," he looked down at his hands, so he didn't have to meet her eyes. "Graduating means that I'm gonna be going off to college soon. I know we haven't talked about school that much, but you're only a junior. Mia, I got into my dream school."

Mia reached out and grabbed his hand. "That's great, Mike." She brushed her thumb over his knuckles. "I'm so happy for you."

"It's in California."

She looked a little stunned. "Oh. I, um, didn't realize you were looking so far away."

He pulled his hand away from hers. “It’s ‘cause my family’s there. I’m going to be leaving in June to go start setting up my life there.”

Mia smoothed out her skirt. “Okay, I guess I won’t see you as much as I wanted to this summer, but I mean, we can call and video chat and text.”

Breathing in, Michael reached out and cradled her face in his hands. She leaned into the touch, a pleased smile on her face. “Mia, sweetheart, it was never my intention to have a high school girlfriend.” Her eyes flew open, but she didn’t pull away from his grasp yet. Michael suspected that would change in a second. “I never planned to go to college with a girlfriend at all.”

Mia yanked her head out of his grasp so fast that it made his head spin. “Are you trying to break up with me?”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it like that,” Michael said, thankful that no one else was close by to hear Mia shriek. “It’s just that college is a whole new ball game. There’s gonna be so many more people there; I don’t want to limit myself.”

“Limit yourself? Are you trying to say that you’re settling for me?” Mia stood up and marched down a row of flowers, skirt swishing with each angry footstep. “Has our whole relationship been a sham?”

Michael hurried after her. “Mia, come on. You know California has always been my dream. I haven’t hidden that from you.”

“But you sure did hide the fact that you weren’t gonna wait for me. That you were just gonna drop me and chase after all those California girls.” She wouldn’t look at him. “Everything you’ve ever said to me is a lie.”

“That’s not true. Why would that be true? I love you, Mia, more than anything.”

Mia huffed and turned around; arms crossed. More than anything, Mia,” she mocked him, stomping at the ground. “You love me more than everything except California.”

“It’s my home.”

“You haven’t lived there in seven years. Is it possible that somewhere down the line home became here? I know you’ve only been here for four years, but your friends are here. People who love you are here. Your life is here. I am here.”

“You wouldn’t leave for me?”

“Why should I? You won’t stay for me.” She wouldn’t meet his eyes. “I’m not asking you to stay forever. Just give me a year. Stay for a year, so we can be close. We can leave together.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Then I can’t leave for you.”

“I thought we were in love.”

She laughed, tears running down her cheeks. “I thought so, too. Guess we were both wrong.” She trembled, and he reached out to grab her, but she jerked out of his reach. “Don’t touch me please.”

“I just want to—”

“I don’t care what you’re trying to do, love. You’ve just informed me that you had no intention of ever staying with me. Cause of course California and I don’t get to go together.” She wiped her eyes with back of her hand. “I just hope she’s as wonderful as you think she is.”

“Who is? Who are you talking about?”

“California, of course.” Mia glanced down her shoes. “I’m just not made for California, is that it?” She looked up at him, mascara smudged, tears still falling. “The worst part is that I know I would hate it there. I’d missed the cool air of the mountains, the bears walking across the streets, the roar of the dirt bikes, and the smell of exhaust in the air.” She shook her head. “I was willing to go, though.” Her face fell, and she squeezed her eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears. “I would have done anything for you.”

“I didn’t ask you for that,” he said, throwing his hands in the air. “I never wanted you to do that for me.”

“You didn’t have to ask,” she yelled back. “It’s what you do when you care about somebody. Location didn’t matter as long as I was with you.” Silence fell, and she shook her head softly. “I wanted to die with you.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I’m obviously not the person you wanted.”

“Don’t say that,” she snarled. “Don’t put this back on me. This isn’t about me. This is about that you didn’t think our relationship was gonna make it. You planned for our failure.” She shook her head, amber curls bouncing with the movement of her head. “I guess I’ll see you around then?”

“Mia, don’t walk away from me,” he said, reaching out to grab her arm.

She threw her hands up into the air, causing her shirt to ride up. “Look, I don’t know how you’ve gotten it this confused, but I’m not the one walking away. You are.”

“Mia, it isn’t that I don’t love you.” He rubbed his eyes. “This has come out all wrong.”

She was still a vision even when he knew her heart was shattering under the weight of his confession. He hadn’t realized she would take it so seriously. She tapped her foot pointedly and raised an eyebrow. Several tears had worked their way out, smearing her mascara on her face. “Then make it come out right.” She spread her arms and laughed bitterly. “If you think you can fix this then go ahead and try. See if I care one way or another.”

“Sweetheart, you’re crying.” He was drowning under the weight of her tears. She didn’t cry often, and when she did, it wasn’t pretty. On more than one occasion, he had to leave the room before he started demanding names.

“Michael, how in the world did you ever see this going down without me crying?”

It was a fair question. “Mia, I—”

“Michael, shut up. Just take me home.”

The ride back to her house was silent except for her sobs in the backseat. She wouldn’t even look at him, and his heart plummeted in his chest. He had lost her. He had managed to make his first love despise him. He pulled up in front of her house, but he didn’t unlock the doors yet.

“Mia, sweetheart, please don’t hate me.”

With a sad smile, Mia wiped her face, smearing her makeup and shook her head. “I could never hate you.” He unlocked the doors. She stepped out, holding her purse close to her chest, and turned to face him one last time. “I hope you’re happier in California than you were with me.” She slammed the door shut.

Patty Somlo

Roamers

Killer gave Tom Hart's short, styled brown hair and well-pressed pants the once-over.

"Hey, man. You got two dollars so I can buy lunch?" Killer asked Hart, a reporter from the *Chronicle*, who'd just walked up.

Hart stepped closer to where Killer sat next to a No Parking sign.

"My name's Tom," Hart said. He started to reach out his hand, but seeing the grime covering Killer's exposed palm, he stopped.

"That ain't gonna get me lunch," Killer said.

Killer smiled, showing off teeth most people would have preferred to hide.

"I'm doing a story and wondered if I might talk to you. It's about the Roamer lifestyle," Hart explained.

Killer gave Hart the once-over a second time.

"Roamers ain't got no lifestyle," Killer said.

His voice skittered up, almost like a girl's, when he said the word *lifestyle*.

"Well, maybe not," Hart said, shoving both hands into his pants pockets, the right one fiddling with a quarter and a dime.

Hart took a breath and thought about what to say next.

"You're here, you know, and you roam all over the city. I wonder about that. I wonder who you are, where you come from, where you're going."

"Don't come from no place," Killer said. He hadn't bothered to stand up.

"Well, that can't be true. Everybody comes from some place. Look, how about I buy you lunch? Or a beer if you'd like."

Killer was reluctant to leave his spot. The well-dressed people were just starting to stream from their offices. New to the corner, Killer failed to understand that by clustering together, the Roamers, with their dark ugly dogs and backpacks, dirty dreadlocks, and unwashed clothes, didn't stand a chance. Even if one of those secretaries, lawyers or accountants might be convinced out of fear or guilt or kindness to drop a quarter into Killer's hand, they weren't going to do so with that pack of Roamers sprawled out all around.

The thought of a beer, though, got Killer walking into the corner store, where he made Hart buy two bottles, each one slipped into its own brown paper sack. He headed for the river and told Hart if he wanted, he could follow.

When they got to a dark place under a bridge that crossed to the river's east side, Killer stopped. The concrete was slimy with pigeon droppings and littered with cigarette butts, candy wrappers and broken glass.

"Let's stop here," Killer said then.

Hart didn't like the looks of the place. How stupid he'd been, coming here carrying credit cards, his driver's license and a roll of cash.

“I’d rather stand over there,” Hart said, stepping out from under the bridge, to wait at the sidewalk’s edge, where joggers and couples and mothers pushing strollers and tourists with cameras passed by.

“Ain’t a good idea to drink beer out in public,” Killer said. “Ya get arrested for that.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Hart said, but then decided not to drink his beer at all.

Killer sat down in the darkest corner, on the ground. Hart could barely make him out there but smelled the smoke from his cigarette drifting toward the river. Hart had done his share of tough interviews, but this was something else. If he’d still been married to Cassie, she would have scolded him.

Cassie thought Hart’s chosen profession of journalism was a complete and utter waste of time. She’d decided long ago that everything in life – politics, jobs, money, advancement, college – was rigged. To Cassie, there was no point in voting or volunteering, donating money to charity or believing in anything.

Cassie did believe in one thing, and no statistic or well-wrought argument could change her mind. Life, Cassie felt certain, was dangerous. Criminals, germs, terrorists, defective airplanes built to crash, and foods that would give you cancer were just a few of the threats Cassie guarded against. Hart couldn’t help but smile thinking if he were still married to Cassie, what she would say about Hart standing under the bridge with a guy named Killer.

“So, what’d you want to know?” Killer asked.

Hart cleared his throat. He didn’t like shouting his questions across the dark to a guy he could barely see.

“You know, if you moved over here a bit, I doubt anyone’s going to arrest you. Look, I’ll warn you if I see a cop coming.”

“I like it back here,” Killer said. “I like the dark.”

“Why is that?” Hart asked.

“Why? Don’t know, man. Feels safe, I suppose.”

“Safe? Safe from what?”

“Oh, you know. Safe from all the bad guys.”

“Who are the bad guys?”

Killer laughed. “Everybody. Everybody’s bad. Didn’t you know that?”

“No,” Hart said. “I hadn’t noticed.”

It was Hart who moved a little closer. Even then, the distance forced him to raise his voice.

“Where are your parents?” Hart asked Killer next.

“Ain’t got none.”

The answer floated out from the dark, along with a thin drifting line of smoke.

“Did you grow up in an orphanage?”

Hart listened to the murmur of conversation out on the sidewalk while he waited for Killer’s response.

“No, man. I lived in a closet.”

“A closet? What do you mean, a closet?”

Killer snorted. Hart realized that he was laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Hart asked.

“Everybody knows what a closet is,” the voice coming from the dark corner said.

“Of course, I know what a closet is. I’ve just never heard of someone living in one.”

“Well, you have now.”

“So, tell me. Where was this closet?”

“In my uncle’s house.”

Hart took this in, debating what to ask next. He breathed in smoke from Killer’s cigarette. It occurred to him that Killer hadn’t stopped smoking the entire time they’d been under the bridge.

“He let me out when he wanted to use me,” Killer said. Hart was surprised that Killer had spoken without being prompted.

Hart swallowed hard. If he had been sitting across a table from Killer and seen his face, he would have known what to say. Hart prided himself on getting men and women he interviewed to open up. He knew how to take a moment and not waste it. Sometimes, he let the words hang in the air and settle, so the man who had just made a harshly honest admission would become comfortable. Then Hart could ease him into a deeper question.

“And how often was that?” Hart finally asked.

Hart turned toward the river to get a breath of fresh air. The sunlight seemed brighter than it had been earlier. A sailboat, the wood golden and gleaming, its white triangular sail filled with wind, drifted past.

Hart thought about how long it had been since he’d taken a vacation. How long since he’d had any fun.

“Every day, man,” Hart heard the voice from the dark recesses of the underpass say.

Hidden in a brown paper bag, the beer bottle went up to Hart’s lips and he gulped and swallowed. He didn’t really like beer. Mostly, he avoided alcohol. He’d never been one to lose his cool, even when he was young. One drink could leave him with a raging headache, and he didn’t see the point.

Journalism had been his drug, he thought now. Why else would he have followed a scruffy guy named Killer into a dark and dirty tunnel and listened, while Killer talked about being molested by his uncle as a child?

“Did you ever tell anybody?” Hart asked now. “Did you tell the police or a teacher at school?”

Killer snorted, then laughed. “Naw, man. My uncle woulda’ killed me.”

“You never told anybody?”

The dark place under the bridge grew silent. It seemed to Hart that the noise of conversation outside increased the sunlight becoming almost blinding.

He watched a speedboat race through the water, causing waves to form, and barrel toward shore. The waves made him think about a trip he’d taken with Cassie to Hawaii, when they were

first in love. He remembered holding her in the warm ocean, and then warning her to dive, right before a huge wave broke.

Hart had almost forgotten that he'd asked Killer a question and was still waiting for a response.

"I told my old lady once."

Still daydreaming, Hart traced back where they'd left things before his mind drifted off.

"Your old lady?" Hart asked. "You mean, your wife?"

"Yeah, man."

"Are you married?"

"Naw. Wadn't really married to her, you know. We just shacked up."

"Why did you tell her?"

Killer snorted again. Hart thought he heard the click of a lighter and then smelled smoke.

"Man, you don't wanta know."

At that moment, Hart realized that he didn't. In a sense, the Roamer piece had been a last-ditch attempt to relive the thrill he'd always felt covering a good story. It was, he had tried to explain to Cassie more than once, like sculpting, chipping away at the outside layers of stone to reach the center, where the truth would be lying.

Hart knew there was no truth now. Everything had gotten so turned around. Sure, he'd managed to expose a few corrupt officials. But in the end, they all got away with their crimes. Hart hated to admit that Cassie might have been right.

"Hey, man," Hart heard Killer say from somewhere in the dark. "What else you want to know?"

Hart watched more boats pass and joggers, bike riders and a couple smiling and holding hands. There was nothing else he wanted to know about this guy. He knew everything he cared to know and then some. These past twenty years, Hart had learned more than he'd ever wanted about the evil that abounded in the world.

"I want to know how to sail a boat," Hart said, almost to himself.

"What's that, man? I couldn't hear you."

Hart set his bottle in its wrinkled brown paper sack down on the dirty concrete, next to a pile of pigeon droppings. Then he began to walk. He headed in the direction of the marina, the sun hitting the back of his neck after the coolness of the shade under the bridge, making him feel for the first time all day relaxed and warm.

Ranjith Sivaraman

I Have You Only

When my quaver meets
a premature death in my throat When I curl up like a Chartreux I have you only

When my eyes meet
a deep sea of darkness in my nights When I see no face with warmth
I have you only

When my heart hangs
like a beehive on an abandoned mesquite tree When I sink like an over ripe coffee cherry
I have you only

When my soul evaporates
into a fragrant cloud
When I rain like mystified drops I have you only....

Sarah Malini
Death March

I am strung up now like any common criminal
or disobedient slave.
Nailed to the stake of industry
forced to carry the crossbeam of my duties
through the streets
to the site of our public executions.
Lashed not upon olive tree beams
but maple here, a reminder of just who I have disobeyed
and disappointed and disavowed.
I don't remember making any promises
to follow this social contract
just the act of living has been enough
to ink my name
and social insurance number
to a contract I never got the chance to read.

It will take days
before I die.
Shoulders ripped from sockets,
festering sepsis and possible asphyxiation
when I can no longer
bear up all my own weight,
dehydration as the turkey vultures
wheel above me, in a wake
unable to wait.

The Roman Empire used this most efficient method
as a warning to the other miscreants that gathered.
And like all else we do,
here we emulate the great leaders
of western civilization past.
If it worked for them
it should work for us too.

Among the many bodies left to rot
wither and dry out
bones cracking into dust in the sun,

does my emaciated corpse
look good hung up on display?

Scott Laudati

Can't Die in Portland

It was summer everywhere but Portland, Maine. From Brooklyn to Portsmouth the road crews sat along I-95 and stared longingly into the finality of their existence. This was it. The winters too cold and the summers too hot. Fall was spoken about with the nostalgia of an old folk song, and spring of course, ran shorter than a rainy weekend. They spent the entirety of these uncomfortable months working on the sides of roads while everyone sped by on their way to somewhere better, or worse; the only time the two groups interacted was when a motorist fell asleep and drove over the short wall of orange cones. "At least we have a job," one hardhat probably said to the other. And none of them ever walked into traffic; they never even thought about it. But Seal thought about it as he drove past those crews on his way straight north from New York City. In fact, it was all he thought about. Of his existence. Of walking into traffic and freeing himself from the nightmare of being a man.

Seal liked Portland because he never sweat there. It was the beginning of June when he drove by the 7-11 on Congress Street and parked his car behind Longfellow Square. He stopped to play a game of pinball in a laundromat then walked down to Casco Bay. He saw a few crabs running in the muck left behind by a receding tide. He smelled his favorite smell: the chopped bait used in lobster traps - a rotting stink caked into the wooden hulls of lobster boats and imbedded deep beneath the nails of watermen - a stink that grew stronger as their boats headed back to the docks after a day at sea. And he saw his favorite bird: the black backed gull, almost the size of a pelican, dozens of them gathered and erupted with long calls just as the returning lobster boats became visible. They sailed down on the docks with singular focus, arguing for the prime spots where a few scraps might get tossed their way.

Yes, Seal liked Portland. He didn't like kids. He didn't like their fats parents bumbling around complaining about the price of lobster rolls. Or how they waited online for hours to try French fries dipped in duck fat. Or how his serenity was continually broken by car horns and idiots screwing up the simple crosswalk directions in ways only tourists could. But all in all, he thought Portland was probably his favorite city.

He didn't know why he cared about having a favorite city. He was 35 and he didn't have any money. He didn't understand how this was possible being that his whole previous year had been spent under piers in Brooklyn rebuilding dock pilings. He couldn't really remember anything from that time. He wanted to. He wanted to explain to everyone the way your hands feel in January when seawater gets under your gloves. The real maddening blind rage your body goes into when you can feel parts of it dying for \$22 an hour. He wanted to tell them that quitting was the only sane thing to do in an insane world. But nobody actually cares about anyone else, so he didn't bother. And he was thinking about that last winter now and it didn't seem like it had really been him who'd gone through it. What did his mind do while he hit concrete with a hammer 40 hours a week, week after week? He had no idea. He could remember his ex-girlfriends. His priests. The people he'd once called his best friends. The moment when it *all*

stopped being possible and everything just morphed into varying levels of impossible. What was the point? Did he ever really have a chance?

Now 35 years had gone by. A whole lifetime and nothing to show for it.

He stepped into the water of Casco Bay; the freezing water, replenished daily with new freezing water brought down by the Labrador Current from Halifax and beyond. He cursed but he was committed, after all it was the same familiar cold, he'd known on those days floating under the piers that finally brought him to *this*. The days spent soaking wet, icicles growing off his clothes and weighing him down like his limbs were the branches of an old tree, sailing into the eternal blackness of a pit whose middle saw no light, the sounds of a city above muffled and rounded out into some inaudible animal roar, like he was sailing around the Congo itself, but caught here in the real heart of darkness, seeing no more than the radius of his headlamp, or occasionally when a hose or machine exploded unexpectedly he might get a second to see his surroundings until the fireball or a fountain of sparks arched into the river, plummeting his world back into the unimaginable desert of darkness again.

Yes. He was going to kill himself one way or the other. It'll be a better world without me, he thought, one less loser consuming the dwindling water supply. He was up to his neck now. Well, here we go, he thought. He took one last breath as a commotion was beginning up on a dock. A high New England dock that had to account for the 30-foot swing between tides. He turned to look and saw the same crowd who just before had been ruining his peace with stupid human moments like: "See how fat I look? That's a terrible picture, take another one!" and their dad or boyfriend grumbled that this wasn't what they'd spent all year working for, but still, feeling obligated to prove to their friends watching on the internet that their lives were perfect, repositioned themselves for a more professional stance, and hoped somehow that through a filter or maybe God's love this next picture would suffice, and they wouldn't have to endure any more berating in front of the other tourists.

But now they were all pointing at Seal, screaming, "HELP."

That was when he saw the dog, thrashing wildly under the dock, being bounced against the barnacle covered pier legs and letting out a fading yelp with each hit. Seal hated people, all people, on some days even his own mother, but he loved dogs, all dogs, and he didn't hesitate a second before swimming madly to the drowning creature.

Blood was seeping out of the dog and thickening the water like a chemical spill. The barnacles were worse than serrated knives attacking their bodies and Seal took a good sticking as he caught up to the dog. It was a big pitbull, probably the king of many dog parks, but it submitted immediately into his arms, and paddled the best it could, not just to assist, but because it was a good dog, and it didn't want to be a burden to anyone, even upon its possible death. But it did not die. Seal got the dog up onto the beach and saw that the wounds were basically superficial. The dog was exhausted more than anything else, and after a few seconds of heavy panting his tail began to wag like a toy coming back to life. You're a good dog, Seal said, and pat the dog's stomach to reassure him. It was a beautiful moment. Man and dog lying there under

the fading summer sun. Blessed with this Maine shore. A savior and a life saved. Nothing could mean more than this.

A blonde girl with a tattoo above her eyebrow and a shirt that said “PUSSY IS THE POWER” slid down the embankment toward them like a skier with no skis. “Cornwall. Cornwall, my poor doggy,” she said. “Is he ok?”

“He’s Ok,” Seal said. “He is what he’s supposed to be—a good dog.”

“I can’t believe you were out in the water already. If you hadn’t been there Cornwall would be dead. You’re a hero. You saved my dog’s life. It’s a miracle.”
Was it a miracle? If he hadn’t decided to kill himself once and for all, about seven hours ago in Brooklyn, he never would’ve driven here, he never would’ve gotten into the cold water, and Cornwall would be a floating snack bar filling the stomach of every crab and seagull in the bay. Was this fate? His life now had meaning. He was a man who’d found his moment; for the first time not marginalized by circumstance and bad luck. I am The Peoples’ Champ, he thought, I am indeed a hero.

Then the girl started sobbing and put her head against Seal’s chest. The pandemic was over, but he realized it had been a year since a woman touched him and he liked it. She pulled her head away and apologized for the wet mess of her face, but she didn’t really sound sorry, and he thought she looked pretty good.

“We’re catching an REI Line out of here in an hour and heading back to Asheville,” she said.

“Ohhhh, you’re a gutter punk.” He pointed at the tattoo on her face. “That makes sense. You don’t smell like a gutter punk, though.”

“Have you ever done it?”

“No.”

“Come with us.”

“I can’t.”

“You have to! There’s a zoo we’ll pass in New Jersey. They have hyenas and you can feed them popcorn. Have you ever fed popcorn to a hyena?”

“That does sound pretty good. But I was supposed to kill myself. I only stopped to save your dog.”

“Come to the popcorn zoo with me. You can’t kill yourself now. That would be absurd. And I’ll feel responsible.”

She was right. It did seem ridiculous now. Seal’s life had gone from completely meaningless to almost the guarantee that he was going to get laid if he could just hang on a little while longer. I can always kill myself tomorrow, he thought.

They left the beach hand in hand and the dog never strayed more than a foot away. They crossed Munjoy Hill and she laid down in the street in front of the lighthouse and told Seal to take a picture of her from an angle that made the lighthouse look like an erection growing from her crotch. Then they went down to the rail yard and sat in the weeds.

“If you can count the bolts in the wheel, it means the train is going slow enough for you to jump on,” she said. “I’ll go first. When I get on, you toss Cornwall up to me, then climb up.” A freight train that had to be two miles long crawled by. They waited for the engine car to follow a bend out of view and sat silently while the oil cars followed one by one. Eventually the boxcars were up.

“Let’s go,” she said.

She threw her bag into an open boxcar, and it disappeared inside. Then she put both of her hands on its floor and hoisted herself up.

“Ok,” she said. “Get ready, Cornwall.”

Seal and Cornwall were slow trotting along with the speed of the train. She laid on her stomach and extended both hands out from the boxcar. Cornwall was pretty seasoned at this and basically jumped up and landed in her arms. Once the dog got situated, she reached her arms out again for Seal. He was ready. Suddenly a big jolt jerked the train back and forth and then it started to speed up.

“Hurry,” she said.

Seal started to fall behind. His feet slipped on the gravel laid along the side of the tracks and made a full sprint impossible. Do it, he said to himself, you’ve got one shot at this. He lunged at the open door. Both of his hands slapped the floor next to the girl and her dog, but there was nothing to grip. For a second it looked like he had it but then his hands started to slide, and the momentum of gravity pulled his lower half under the train. Then he was on the ground. He saw his legs bounce limply between the bottom of the train and the tracks before they disappeared out the other side. He looked at the open boxcar, growing further away, and her face, her beautiful face decaying into some kind of horror, etched into the last seconds of his memory. And the dog, too. Cornwall’s mouth was moving in vicious agony, teeth barred and unforgiving, barking with no sound.

Will the hyenas get enough popcorn tonight, he wondered? Will they go to bed hungry?

Shelby Catalano

Rotten to the Core

My outward shell is bright with glaze
Its color mirrored brilliantly
But what they don't all see inside
Would make them see me differently

I'm rotten to my core, you see
The flesh decaying pus
Their happiness, my jealousy
Ire steaming within the muck

I do not tell them anything
Pride keeps it sewn inside
If they really knew how I felt
I'd much rather have died

Evaporating dust and ash
My blood has lost vitality
Ambrosia poured upon concrete
Destroying practicality

I suffer in silence willingly
Never to be discovered
That loneliness chewed my bones
To a fossil all but smothered

Forgotten and irrelevant
Hope sinks into the ground
Concealing my every shame
As I'm finally unfound

Being alone a siren's song
That soothes with absolution
The groundwater now welcomes me
Finality in resolution

My goodbye comes with peace
Next priority my home

Watching outside the looking glass
With nowhere left to roam

Guts unfurl with no remorse
My tears my skin my marrow
I cannot hide it anymore
Ah, rotting is such sweet sorrow

Thomas Piekarski

Mount Lassen in Ice

1.

It's mid-June, the country rambunctious on the edge of summer, millions basking on beaches, firing up barbecues and camping. In Tucson it's over a hundred degrees, but here at 8000 feet I'm frozen. Five miles outside Lassen Park I encounter hail. Uh-oh.

2.

Peter Lassen was a humble Dane. Like many Europeans he left his native land, emigrated to the wide-open world on the other side of the pond. Lassen financed his way as a journeyman blacksmith, from the east coast onto Missouri. His timing was ripe, the West practically begging for exploration and settlement. By then trappers had discovered various routes across the Rockies and ultimately to California.

3.

Mount Lassen erupted in both 1914 and 1915. Only St. Helens along the Cascade Range has gone off since. In previous epochs Hood and Ranier have both blown and remain threats to populations that risk their lives living in those areas. Hunting home for the Atsugwei, Yana, Maidu and Yahi, this volatile Lassen terrain was sacred.

4.

What it means to be American, its rivers running through your heart, groundbreaking entrepreneur, one in whom the spirit of our nation resides, willing to take risks, indomitable confidence brimming. Those explorers and mountain men who with courage mapped the West's landscape

won't be forgotten so long as there is an America.

5.

Hissing steam vents, burbling mud pots, snow flurries.
Heated by molten rock, hot plumes rise. Still, I'm cold.
And sulfur stinks terribly like dozens of rotten eggs.

6.

Excited Lassen boarded the ship *Lausanne*
on Oregon's Willamette River in 1840,
landing at Bodega Bay along the California coast.
He reconnoitered at Fort Ross, treated well,
acquired horses and continued on to Sutter's Fort,
welcomed there by the enterprising and at times
jovial, most magnanimous captain.

7.

At trailhead to the peak, I look up and observe
the entire mountaintop cloaked in ominous clouds.
I shiver thinking of scaling the 2000 feet
from this base to the summit as I once did
with my woman much later in the season.
The switchbacks are wicked, and path quite steep,
one typically having to stop and rest.
Once at the top wonderment becomes
all consuming. With shortness of breath
at 10,450 feet I looked out, scanning panoramic
over countless miles: Nevada east, Mount Shasta
to the north, Sierra peaks protruding southward,
and west the Siskiyou range, impenetrable
to those lacking adequate navigational skills
in the early days. Surely majestic as it can get.

8.

Lassen among the largest plug dome volcanos on Earth.
I'm standing on ground beneath which brews

an enormous roiling cauldron of scathing melted rock
that spans miles. When the legendary Jedediah Smith
passed this mountain en route to Fort Vancouver
he named it Mount Joseph, although
several others had their own designations.
Later it was permanently renamed for the man
who pioneered this habitat, built a rancho,
planted crops and bred animals
after receiving a generous grant
from the Mexican governor.
Always kind to travelers,
even the self-seeking scoundrel Fremont,
Peter established a town he named Benton City
after the much-respected U.S. senator.

9.

Gigantic grinding tectonic plates beneath this place
generate friction and enormous heat that churns,
at sporadic intervals belches searing magma and ash,
Mother Earth's bowels hurled way up in the sky
sending shock waves throughout pristine forests
and lava that cools into phantasmagoric shapes.

10.

When Lassen arrived in his newly granted acreage
with a nominal herd of cattle and few horses
he was the only white man within miles,
Indian tribes having for centuries populated it.
Near the Sacramento river's source, rugged, idyllic,
heavily timbered, serene, as of then sheer wilderness.

11.

Hail coats the road with a thin blanket of ice.
I motor slowly around steep, sharp curves.

Emerald Lake under two feet of powder. Trails
to Devils Kitchen and Bumpass Hell impassible

without snowshoes, for which I'm ill-equipped.

12.

On his land in Benton City settlers built cabins and Lassen a gristmill at Deer Creek. In effort to further ambitions Peter returned to Missouri, sold himself as a guide to the land of opportunity. Upon return he found the township abandoned, workers all run off to seek gold which had lately been discovered, fate that also befell Sutter.

Lassen grew weary of life on this isolated outpost so deeded away most of his land, headed several miles due east, over the Cascades onto a plain that is the very western edge of the Great Basin. There he made his home, selling guide services to willing travelers anxious to reach waterways where they thought gold could be plucked by the bucket. Lassen offered them a shorter route than they might otherwise elect to travel. But it was treacherous. Those who employed his assistance took the risk of living to regret their decision.

13.

Within Lassen Park's paradise of natural splendor cohabits a proliferation of wildlife rarely equaled. Among various creatures we find bobcat, raccoon, mountain lion, coyote, black bear, fox, weasel, skunk.

Cascade frogs keep up frenetic chatter as I roll past Kings Creek. The rough-skinned newt is often noticed in spring crossing trails and into rushing snowmelt streams.

Boutique lakes at various locations hold trout in abundance. White-headed woodpecker, chipmunk, mule deer, mountain chickadee, dark-eyed junco, pika, golden mantled squirrel,

sagebrush lizard, gray-crowned finch, long-toed salamander, tortoise shell butterfly, all of these define an environment in which they flourish.

14.

Peter Lassen's untimely death remains a mystery, so upon leaving the park I resolve to seek his gravesite. He's buried five miles outside the town of Susanville. Going there will cause a delay in me getting home but I'm in no rush, locating that grave a must.

Lassen loved prospecting, never gave it up. There was yet gold to be had, even this far north. A strike near Shasta caused that community to swell. Tales of a mythical Gold Lake somewhere in the area believed by many. Lassen found the pull irresistible.

As this territory grew there became the need for administration, law and order, infrastructure, government. Peter remained constantly involved, man of stature, dreamer, adventurer, proud founder.

15.

In the hills not far from his home near Honey Lake along with two partners Peter went prospecting one fair day, at Black Rock Canyon which is now in Nevada. Lassen was murdered there along with a man named Clapper. The third partner Wyatt escaped, hurried to Honey Valley and reported that they were ambushed by Paiutes. But relations with local Indians remained civil, so no motive for them to kill made sense. Yet all these years it has been the accepted explanation. Perhaps Wyatt himself murdered them. Who knows?

16.

The gravesite located down a country road

through gentle meandering hills green as you'll see.
Though quite a ways from the park, it's bitterly cold
but no hailstones or snowflakes, just a few raindrops.
Parking barely adequate, though I manage to squeeze in
and walk beneath a metal arch with a big wooden sign
above it that in bold letters is carved one word, LASSEN.

Through an iron turnstile and across a brief glade
I arrive at a perfectly level, massive stone slab
upon which is mounted a ten-foot tall
polished granite obelisk
with these stark words chiseled into its base:

In Memory of
Peter Lassen
The Pioneer Who
Was Killed By
The Indians
April 26, 1859
Aged 66 Years

Walter Weinschenk

The Wagon

The wagon in which I ride
Slows, stops, mired in mud;
The paint fades beneath the rays
Of an apoplectic sun;
The axle breaks, the wheels fall off,
It crumbles to the ground.

Nighttime has descended,
I don't know where I am
But I remember a ride I took
And I remember getting out:
I stood alone upon a road;
I saw a light and began to walk.