

2025

# POOR YORICK

## anniversaries & the passage of time



# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers, Contributors, and Supporters

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This issue's theme—anniversaries and the passage of time—originated as a celebration of Western Connecticut State University's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its MFA in Creative and Professional Writing program. The writers whose words comprise this issue, though, took this concept and ran with it in such divergent, innovative, reflective, and unexpected ways.

The brilliant poems and stories in this issue are an invitation to consider the ways in which time and distance shape and compel us, transform and challenge us, confuse and affirm us, tear us open and, sometimes, bring us back together, and other times, leave us broken or changed. I hope you find these pieces as resonant and moving as the editorial team and I did.

A huge thank you to all the writers who trusted us with their work. What a gift to share your art with the world, to give others a chance to be changed by your art. To our readers, thank you for making the art of writing a deeply relational process by interacting with the words on these pages. Thank you to the WCSU MFA faculty whose thoughtful and smart mentorship make projects like this possible. And finally, thank you to the editorial team who volunteered their time, expertise, and insight, without which this issue wouldn't have been possible. An extra thanks to the Lead Readers, Gita and Kayla, whose sharp eyes made this issue so strong and whose tender, silly friendship made the entire process so joyful.

Lots of gratitude,  
Matt Homrich-Knieling  
*Poor Yorick* Editor-in-Chief



# MASTHEAD

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## Poetry

Kayla Bassingthwaite | lead poetry reader

Brianna Bencosme | reader

## Fiction

Gita Hassin | lead fiction reader

Sara Sherman | reader

Jenn Jackson | reader

## Creative Nonfiction

Matt Homrich-Knieling | EIC & lead CNF reader

Olivia Geiger | reader



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# WOMAN SPEAKS TO HUSBAND | ANNIE PRZYPYSZNY

*Say it again, Saxon!*

- *Emily Dickinson, "Many a phrase has the English language."*

The words you used to use, the sounds  
you used to make—the great,  
glad grunts that riled me up  
till I was love-mad, prowling  
toward you like a flame-furred cat.

I'd use your voice  
as an oar, stroking through  
the waters of your touch --  
rough waters,  
rough touch,  
good rough touch.

Now I am begging  
for you to once more let  
the wild red flower burst  
from your lips, so I can sip  
its heady nectar, grow warm  
with nectar, with the words  
you used to use:

quake

pull

grobe

knead,

blunt, thick words, exciting as the smack  
of a cudgel against the quivering depth  
of a thigh—

not violence but vibrance,  
all potential of pain ground down  
to pure snow by the heavy stone  
of your voice.

Howl, oh, howl,  
like you used to howl, sweet hound;  
let me harvest your sounds  
in the basket of me;

rush your rich sounds  
across my body, reckless;  
become the weather you were  
before silence wedged  
its way between us  
a brutal, empty beast. Say it  
again, sing it again, slam  
your song against me—  
I'm here, I'm still sturdy  
as a tree, my years are so strong  
they could chip the tooth of your ax.

# SEVENTH SACRAMENT |

## A. MICHAEL SHULTZ

If fate is mine to choose  
then spare me the hospital bed  
and let me go out like a writer

tell Father he can meet me  
for this adventure  
and to bring a thick coat

because good stories end like this:  
it's cold  
and it's Wednesday

I'm old  
and I'm scribbling verse  
into soft clay dirt

at the base of ancient foothills  
praying with splayed palms  
that the last working parts of me

outlive what's left of me

# UPON RETURNING TO THE BLOCK |

## DIMITRI REYES

I'm urged to go back to streetposts  
folded over to deliver us electric  
of this blackberry paved ground:  
black spots in the sun  
jurisdictions of light  
and lightless  
of red and blue cop lights  
converging together  
in the flash of silver sirens  
refracting that thunder  
through the gape of a window  
damp in its openness  
where bullets rain  
for consecutive days

my life  
once just roads of amber streetlights  
an architecture of safety I can't shake  
carried always in my heart  
when dark burns past a window  
and the colonial homes behind buildings  
look like inferi in its shadow

projects that beckon of unanswered calls  
into the void  
lampposts between property lines  
like torches  
borders that beckon  
our disappearance  
but always lead back home.



# ROMERO REMEMBERS MERCUTIO |

## JOHN DAVIS

After Tybalt stabbed you, night looked back,  
flapped at the hacksaw laugh of yours that warred  
through your drawers, bored through the loins  
of all the gay boys. That laugh fizzled from its  
sizzle. The stab was the chisel, the missile.  
It got the fight going. How manly  
Tybalt pranced, buffed-up. What a rough-and-ready  
fling it would have been, tiger wild, no flower-  
child profile about him, but that smile  
a mile wide. O that style. And the clothes.  
That robe. Amber-rose. Who wouldn't want to  
space-robe in his abode and explode.  
A bit of fast nasty in all of us, Mercutio. Your finger  
still lingers inside me. Your tinge-touch and much  
much more. There will be a hutch in the next  
world for us to bust some love, unrust our bodies.  
There will be a place for boys.

# THE COUSINS CLUB OF DEAD RELATIVES | BARBARA KRASNER

They all touch and kiss  
the mezuzah as they cross  
the threshold, maternal  
and paternal ancestors  
mixing freely even if  
their Yiddish dialects  
don't match up.

Cousin Gussie brings  
her amputated leg. Cousin  
Rose, or is it Bea, pulls  
out her knitting. Grandpa  
Perlman invites me  
onto his arthritic knee  
to play horsey.

My mother's dining room table  
is decked with her mother's  
cross-stitched tablecloth. My father  
takes his usual seat  
at the head of the table.  
Put up water for my tea,  
my mother commands.

Have a bagel shmear, I say.  
Or egg salad with shmalz.  
Let me scrape for you  
some smoked whitefish.  
It lies splayed open like  
our family tree, glassy-eyed  
with no vision into the  
past, present, or future.

Remember that hat you wore?  
My mother asks her father.  
My father tears up  
at the sight of his mother,  
who takes my hand into hers.  
My grandmother says to me,  
I wish I could have known you,  
as she pulls me into a circle  
and we dance the hora into the night.

# I SEND MY REGRETS | MOLLY WALSH

In our tributes, we all said that we would never forget, for God to bless you on your journey. But in this economy they raised the price of stamps by twenty more cents and condolence cards don't ring up on sale at the local pharmacy.

The greenhouse down the block is bleeding shingles. The truck bed you leaned on for your portrait has grown rust on its hood. The corner flower shop stuffed the scarecrow with wet straw and a wide brimmed hat to greet the Oddfellows, spook the tombstones. The leaves need more magenta, burn the corners, fine grain, and adjust the focus. Their veins poke through a thin membrane, seeping through the weave of rainbow shoelace smeared in mud.

The poppies that lead up to your doorway are a missed harvest. A brittle mausoleum to gold ore afternoons. Scorched grass salutations, faded walkways, lost elections. A canceled lifetime subscription.

The neighborhood vine, the stain of sun-warmed blackberries on our tongues. It lingers. I turn. I thought you stopped me, to ask if I was born to the wrong generation.

The sun and her two hawks perch along the mighty river, they all remain unmoved by the eulogy. Stop to chat with a few of the old neighbors. They miss the death rattle as they rush home to catch Night Court before bath and bed.

You always said you had a healthy reverence for Ilford and Kodak. That the thin emulsion would scorch through neurons, concussions, to the focal point. Four decades set ablaze like afternoons lost in the archives.

The Tilled Earth, Peeled Banana; The Darkroom, Screen Door; Big Red, Tomato Vine; Agent Orange, Spring Mulch

Pardon the last bloom for the iris, chrysanthemum, marigolds by the window sill. No longer summer rot. No petals, no glossy 8x10s warping to the breeze. The rot of pulpy flesh, new keys, new leases for unit 3. Earth neglected, earth tilled for the new tenant. What happens when all the negatives, the buds, the memories, the tendons are burned to ashes all the same?

I remember your tall tales about the lauryl tree, farm house in Providence. The decade lost to press passes and insurance settlements. Layered life from the window of a locomotive. 36 exposures and she's the love of your mind. A hundredth second unable to capture more than the hem of a petal pusher skipping out the screen door.

No Face, No Voice to leave thumbprints on the wax paper envelope. No Independence Day Parade, No Fireworks illuminate the black summer sky. No Flashbulbs, no portraits to dazzle future lovers. Awakened by a muse, now she's laid to rest in you.

I'm searching for your reflection in the downtown shop windows, in the Arts Walk legend, in the mirror of the lady at the intersection swiping on lipstick from the seat of her Yamaha. The glint in your eye, only to be found in granules of silver gelatin. I buy you rum and Coke at The Brotherhood. A napkin collects condensation from the glass, a sip fills the silence.

You're right that a stroll to the Safe Way isn't Woodstock. That the Sandman tucked in the harbor churns and breaks the surface tension. That I underexpose my negatives when shooting in cloudy conditions and pulled the pumpkin pasta from the oven too early. Laughed with ease when sitting, sorting negatives on your living room floor.

You search for the Red Sox game through the backrooms, unearth a glossy lady's dreamy gaze from her bed of mylar. Hit that layered life line drive, out of the kitchen studio to your checkered floor in Willimantic.

You always said to have fun as I closed the screen door behind me,  
But you didn't say if where you were going required postage.

# INTIMACY, CONDITIONED |

## MAKAYLA EVANOVICH

Blooming out of my skull, an umbilical cord swells.

I nuzzle it.

I smell you: metallic linen, garlic chicken, saline solution. Your air, populating wit, jolting.

I've awoken you.

Sandpaper shawl, baby blanket scrapyard, I pace.

Why are you wheezing on my neck? The orchards can't sleep if you whistle.

You're paradoxical, an enigmatic king crab of sorts.

Please allocate space for me to recline beneath your feet.

# TIME AS A CALIGINOUS CLOUD |

## TONY KITT

There's a beautiful future in our heads,  
but our chins struggle to get the past shaved off.  
Slipshod thoughts.  
A midstream tune (not yet audible).  
Then an oxygen burst.  
And here we are, our aquatic eyes holding  
the raft of the day.

Whale whiffling, baleen blubber...  
It's a long way from Dream Island  
to oblivion. Each continent  
has a forgotten island; each dictionary,  
crystallised tears of birds.  
As tomorrow unwinds, the wind  
blows our "forwards" backwards.

Oblivion isn't a conspiracy, it is  
the realm of ill-fated mutuality,  
the colour of colourlessness.  
Decolorissimo.  
When night crashes over the pinnacle  
of substance, algae go algebraic.  
A shark's stomach shows between the jaws.

Our hopes, the black shades of crimson.  
Our tomorrows dressed in oversight.



# PLAYING 90'S R&B ON MY WAY TO WORK WHILE DRIVING DOWN PCH | DANIEL ROMO

I sing along as if all the begging  
to win the girl back would also cut  
the traffic in half and I understand how  
a quartet is the ideal number for  
harmonizing in  
seeking forgiveness.

I wish I could say this gray morning is a lonely road,  
but it's burgeoning with commuters  
weaving in and out of lanes like  
a multi-genre mixed tape  
with no sense of clarity  
and cohesion.

The crooners confess they weren't perfect,  
and we should all be so lucky as to  
be able to belt out soulful  
apologies that ring falsetto but  
sing more like façade,  
such as City View Terrace and  
Vista Gardens Apartments,  
more languish  
than lush—  
though off-key shower voices ring  
with even more honesty.

And even if the lyrics were more feel-good  
than follow-through,  
sometimes we need to hear passionate pleas  
from velvet-suited men on bended knee  
just to get us through the day,  
or decade.

I reach my destination yet  
they beseech me to come back  
because they swear to change their ways,  
and isn't that how it is when  
we move on but forget the route we took  
to get there,  
as if the years passed by and left us behind,  
forced to replay the soundtracks of every  
trying commute  
we've ever taken.



# CONFIRMATION BIAS | THERESE GLEASON

Fact: a monarch butterfly followed my friend and me  
from downtown Mystic to the sea,  
then back to the parking lot  
of my crappy hotel  
where I had found a toenail  
from a stranger's foot  
under the sheet.

I wondered aloud if the winged insect were a sign  
from her mother, recently deceased,  
doubted it came from my dead,  
who speak to me  
through cardinals, rainbows,  
my dad's favorite rock ballads  
always on the radio when I'm driving,  
and names and dates on license plates.

Fact: on the way to the family reunion I saw *JFG*,  
my father's initials spelled out  
on the *Land of Lincoln* plate  
of the Chevy ahead of me as I idled  
in a *Steak & Shake* drive-thru,  
waiting for fries and chili mac,  
on his mother's 90th birthday.

You can tell me it's migration season, monarchs  
flying south to Mexico, but driving home  
from Mystic on I-395 I saw another  
orange and black butterfly,  
this one imprinted on a license plate  
bolted to a silver sedan  
that zoomed past me.

Don't overthink it, *Don't Stop Believin'*—  
roll the windows down,  
crank the volume, and belt  
*Livin' on a Prayer*  
while you can.



# UNBIDDEN MEMORIES | KENDRA PITTS

We all have those memories that we avoid thinking about. The memories that felt so right while they were happening.

They're usually about a girl.

Like sitting together in the dark, acrid cigarette smoke encircling you and curling up towards the endless starry sky as it melts into the ocean while you're hunched over with your heads close spilling out your shimmering diamond encrusted secrets.

Her pointing to the sky, saying "that's the big dipper," and you pretending to see it too because the stars are beautiful and she's beautiful and you'll be thinking that this is perfect and you won't be thinking about how when she leaves she'll have ruined the stars.

Or sharing the food off of each other's plates. The smell of potatoes and carrots from the Japanese curry you ate together way too much. The fancy expensive popcorn from Hawaii. The many, many boxes of lemonheads you went through over the months because she'd been craving them and bought an absurdly large box.

And as the memories come to the forefront of your mind, usually unwelcomed, you'll realize that they've spoiled and now instead of feeling right and warm they feel wrong, like curdled milk you didn't realize had gone bad until after you took a big swig straight from the bottle.

But even against your will the memory finds a way to slither its way up your spine and wind around until it can grip into your brain with its tentacle arms until you can't breathe and you can't speak and you can't feel anything besides the numbness that sets in where your bones should be.

Because that's the danger of giving yourself to someone so completely and thoroughly, not thinking about the memories that will remain long after they've left. And with it will come the tears. The sort of tears that are more like big round raindrops that could carry away a mouse on a flower petal. And you won't know if you're the mouse or the flower or the sea but you'll know that what you were isn't what you are.

And all the Band-Aids in the world couldn't cover the new cracks in your skeleton.



# THE CREEK OUT BACK | PAUL STAPLETON

It was the fifth anniversary of our move to the Carolinas.

Dolores was wide awake now.

"This is like a movie," she said. "It's like Hitchcock."

"It's the rains."

"No, it's another plague," she replied.

We gaped out the window.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Which one?" she asked. "Are you kidding me, moron?"

Dolores's degree was in literature, mine in forensics.

I wasn't in the mood.

I headed to the kitchen to get warm. Dolores disappeared into the bathroom, the one in the bedroom, the one with the bathtub, the one renovated by the previous owners in pastels and sandstone.

Ever since the affair with Hester, I was relegated to the creek out back, from which I had just returned.

We had moved to the South, a place neither of us had ever wanted, for a nebulous set of hopeful reasons: the greenery, the summery winters, the low taxes.

"It's a great place to raise a family," the realtor propositioned us. The realtor wore a tight dress, black, the front decorated with a large red letter. "Especially for private investigators," she said with more than a little insinuation.

Fate had different plans—the robbery, the stolen identity, the recession, the law-and-order governor (at least Hester was prosecuted), the bankruptcy, then out of nowhere, the boils—but even with the price of homes plummeting up North, not to mention the revolt, we could not muster the energy to break free from our Southern laze.



I was counting spoonfuls of coffee when I was assaulted by Dolores's screams. Normally, Dolores was not a screamer. I had heard her cry, bawl, whimper, but she never screamed. I hurried to the bedroom where she was leaning against the bathroom door, her hands cupped around a streaming roll of toilet paper. She was naked, fully exposed, down to the dark ornamental imprint of her panty line.

Her scar from the operation was still thick and raw.

Did I also see a faint line of hickeys?

I didn't think there was anyone since Hester.

Who could it be now?

"They're in the toilet, dammit," she said.

I opened the door and ventured inside, Dolores trepidatious behind me. The bathroom smelled of potpourri and femininity, and steamy hot water was bubbling up in mounds of suds.

A bubble bath, I surmised.

Dolores's basket of home magazines was perched atop the toilet. I removed the basket and raised the lid. A frog popped up like toast, then splashed back into the water, joining some comrades who were circling around like scuba divers. I slammed shut the lid and flushed so they could be washed out to the creek.

When I reopened the lid, they were still there, treading like castaways. One little guy secured a foothold on the porcelain and like an acrobat hoisted himself into the air, elevating, twisting, and landing on the bathroom sink with a th-thunk. Then he dove again and flopped into the bath, opening a window of clear water amidst the bubbles and foam.

"9.9!" I shouted.

"No way!" Dolores countered. "His feet did not land simultaneously, and his back was not straight when he entered the water. It was a bellyflop, moron." She said this with fraternal disdain.

I studied the foam as it expanded over the opening, as if of its own volition.

I hated it when she called me that.

"Watch out!" Dolores shouted.

The other toilet-bowl frogs were airborne, and together, they penetrated the bubble bath.

I quickly turned off the water and slammed shut the toilet.

"If I don't get in the tub now," Dolores asserted, "I'll be late for my meeting with the client."

"I'll fish them out," I said. "They seem friendly."

"You're not putting them in the basement," she said. "There's absolutely no room down there anymore. You can hardly open the door."

Then she left.

I didn't blame her. Most people don't like toilet frogs slapping against their naked bodies.

I knelt over the tub with a plastic pitcher Dolores used for odd jobs—rinsing her hair, watering the plants, waterboarding our suspects (mostly unsuspecting husbands who had pissed off their unappreciated wives, who in turn hired us, ironically, often on their wedding anniversary).

I bailed around until I finally captured somebody. He sat at the bottom of the pitcher looking destitute but devious, his throat bulging, his mouth smiling, his eyes staring at me deadpan like a comedian.

"Hey, little buddy."

He heaved himself against my nose, slathering my face with his mucoid slime, then he rebounded into the pitcher.

I searched for a place to dispose of him. One of the few poems I had ever really liked came to mind: "In just spring when the world is mudluscious the little lame balloonman whistles far and wee."

I evaluated my options.

With the basement as it was, they were limited.

I re-opened the toilet, but new arrivals leaped out and bounded about the floor.

There was no containing them short of killing the poor things.

I dumped out the pitcher and the comedian slid back into the bathtub. Then I cracked the door and squeezed myself out.

This bathroom was theirs.

Thankfully, we still had the creek out back.

# JENNY'S GARDEN | RONALD WETHERINGTON

Jenny enjoyed tending the flowers in her garden so deeply she was certain her flowers shared the feeling. When she was kneeling in the beds, wearing the straw hat that protected her from the sun, she felt a silent communion between them, not mystical but assuredly spiritual. She could almost feel the soft purring, hear the leach of collective sighs seeping upward through the soil as she poured from the watering can.

She breathed deeply as she sat back on her heels, tucking a glistening wisp of white hair back over her ear. She was nearing her 80s, but still strong and alert, her wiry frame and creased face coarsened by this high desert environment. She had lived in southern Colorado all her life, raised a daughter and buried two husbands here. Her cabin clung to the forested mountainside on the piedmont outside Fort Carson. The small garden lay against the side of the cabin. It held wildflowers and small trees and fragrant shrubs she carefully transplanted from the meadows and mountain trails. Bringing them all together where she could tend them gave her maternal comfort. A low stone wall with a small gate offered protection.

She spoke to them tenderly, recalling Julie when she was a child, filled with wonder as her mother unfolded the world before her. "There, my little ones," she whispered as she rose, "that should feed your thirst until tomorrow." She took the can and walked back to the cabin, setting it down beside the hand pump. It was mid-April, and the early blooms were opening. She poured the rest of her morning tea and sat at the kitchen table. She opened her journal to the last entry. She kept track of her daily activities—her wanderings in the mountain forest, the birds and animals she saw, and the status of the growing season. "Covert in April, candid in May," she wrote, following Dickinson.

As she made a notation about the grateful postures of her bee plants upon having their thirst quenched, she thought about Julie's scoffing at her mother's personification of her flowers. She no longer explores, Jenny grieved silently. She's lost her wonder. Perhaps tomorrow, when she visits. . . .

Julie, almost 40 now, lived in Denver, 90 miles north, and visited once or twice a month. Her mother was again in her garden the following late morning when Julie arrived. "Your flowers are doing well, Mother," she said. Jenny looked up from her attention to a fresh planting of columbine.

"They are particularly happy today, yes," she said. She rose, taking off her gardening gloves, hugging her daughter. "Let's go have some tea and biscuits." She took Julie's arm to steady herself as they walked into the cabin.

"Mom," Julie said as they sat at the table with a pot of tea and some shortbread, "I really worry about your fantasy that plants are mindful of you," she said. "I hope you don't communicate this to your friends!"

"So," her mother asked, wryly, "is it me or my reputation that concerns you?"

Julie laughed, "Both, I suppose!" She took a sip from her cup. "No, really, Mother, I worry you might take this too seriously." She frowned, reaching to touch her mother's hand. "I guess I just want you to keep being my mom and not somebody else slipping into some other place." She brushed away a tear.

Jenny covered Julie's hand with her own. "Don't worry, baby," she said, "I'm grounded here." She raised an eyebrow. "And I don't have dementia, dear." Later, in bed, she pinched her nose between her fingers, frowning. I really don't, do I? she thought.

They spent the following day hiking and reminiscing. They laughed and shared the happier recollections of childhood, of backpacking and skiing, exploring. Jenny's second husband—Julie's father—had enjoyed sharing these moments until he shipped out to Afghanistan and died there when Julie was a senior. After that, Jenny withdrew into her gardening world and Julie graduated and went away to college and moved to Denver. Mother and daughter remained close, but their interests grew apart and Julie settled into the prosaic life of corporate business, no longer beguiled by the mountains.

A tufted-eared squirrel scampered across their path while walking back. "Don't you miss this, Julie?" Jenny asked. Julie hesitated and smiled at her mom, reaching for her hand.

"A little," she said.

Jenny drew up and turned to her daughter. "You've really sort of lost your adventurous spirit, dear," she lamented. "It's not my conversations with flowers that concern you, is it?" She gave Julie a mock scowl. "It's the flowers themselves." She touched Julie's cheek, brushing back her hair. "It's nature you've given up on."

Julie held her mother's hand against her cheek. "When Dad died," she said softly, "in that place so foreign to all of us, so far from the Rockies he loved..." her voice trailed to a whisper. "It was so unfair!" she blinked away tears.

"You blame the mountain for letting him go?" Jenny's voice faltered.

"No, Mom," Julie squeezed her eyes shut. "But the mountain changed." She looked around at the pinyons and junipers, at the clumps of Chamisa and the mountain mahogany. Tears coursed down her cheeks. "This didn't belong to me anymore." They held each other and wept.

After breakfast the next morning, Julie packed to drive back to Denver, holding her mom close. "I'm happy for you that you have your garden, Mom." Jenny sighed, nodding. She waved as Julie drove off.

Then she fetched her hat, gloves, and watering can and went back into her garden. She was still for a moment, looking around her. She tested the ground with her fingers and sprinkled water around the drier spots, spending the morning gently pulling invasive weeds, loosening the soil in places, and mounding it around the recent plantings. It was arduous and sweaty and pleasantly exhausting. She had put thoughts of mental decline out of her head, but Julie's comments hounded her deep inside.

She finally sat back, wiping her brow, and looked out over the plantings. The garden was yawning, arising from slumber, preparing to root and bud and leaf and flower its way into Jenny's landscape for a new season.

The chokecherry trees hugging the east garden wall had just broken bud, their tiny white blossoms lighting up the dark branches. Inside the wall a gooseberry was prying open its pale yellow-green flowers, and the hyacinth bean had reached its tendrilled fingers up to grasp the garden wall and begin its seasonal climb. The garden seemed absorbed in rebirthing itself, stretching and nodding ever so subtly in its endeavor.

Jenny paused at the gate and looked back. The faintest vibration softened the air, curling its way through her, leaving its embrace. Her pulse quickened, and she entered the cabin for a cup of tea.



# OLD FRIENDS ARE THE BEST FRIENDS | PAUL LAMB

“Brooke Sampson? He’s dead.”

Curt had only been half listening. The din of the music in the ballroom hindered deep conversation, but he heard those four words. Through the evening, the disparaging litany at the table had been about the fellow alums whose misfortune it was not to be there. In a distant past, Curt had sat in classrooms with these men, gone to dances with them, did homework with them, showered with them many times, and yet they all felt like strangers now. He hadn’t kept up with any of them in years. He wasn’t even sure how he got stuck at a table with this mix.

“Remember Perky saying in Latin class that we’d each be an *alumnus*, not an *alumni*?” That was mostly spoken and partly slurred by Martin Powers, remembered by Curt as Marty back then and now, he’d let it be known, as Martin Francis Powers, Esq., who was very drunk. He’d appeared at the table with a full pitcher of beer and a half-empty glass, and the portions had reversed themselves more than once during the evening. Curt had nursed his own single glass of beer through that time, not expecting Marty to offer anything from his succession of refilled pitchers and not being disappointed. He tried to remember if Marty had been a drinker back in high school, but he’d not been part of that circle. “Here’s to Perky!” Marty belched, resting on his elbows, slouching toward passing out on the table but raising his glass and spilling beer on his sleeve. “*Semper ubi sub ubi!*”

Curt had respected Father Perkovic, Latin and French instructor, severe in manner but gentle in soul, and the only priest in their high school who always wore a cassock. Even in those ancient days, that was rare. Once Curt figured out how declensions worked and what conjugating verbs meant, Latin had made sense, and he did well. Perky, in turn, respected Curt as a quiet, diligent student who was always prepared and who was sometimes found tutoring his classmates or caught telling dirty jokes in Latin.

The academic part of high school had not been difficult for Curt. He'd realized early that every class had something to teach him, something that he could use or find a use for. And so he drank in the knowledge and scored the grades and earned the praise of his teachers.

More challenging were the social intrigues. Here Curt had not been the best, but that was partly because he hadn't strived to be. He'd been polite and cordial to every boy because that was far easier to do than to nurse grudges. He laughed at jokes and worked with others. He did his part and more in group projects. He ran cross country, but running is essentially a solo sport, so it suited him. He had friends. He had no real enemies. Yes, they were all high achievers in a demanding private school, all good Catholic boys. Well aware of their privilege and opportunities. Boys who could be expected to become men who would one day rule the world.

Only not this table. Curt seemed to be seated with the misfit boys. Marty, the drunk attorney whose thick ring finger betrayed a wedding band apparently removed for the evening. His nails were bitten to nubs. Billy Bookstaver, the introverted brainiac of their class, though Curt had guessed he had simply been good at taking tests and impressing teachers, was now flipping houses in South St. Louis with his brother. Next to him was Al, short for Aloysius, which raised four years of ridicule, and not always in good fun, after Perky had pounced on it in the first week of freshman Latin. Curt couldn't remember his last name — Conners? Connelly? — nor did he know what Aloysius was doing with his life now, and the man didn't care to tell the table. Two stout, balding men Curt must have known as boys, though he couldn't place them, and they didn't seem interested in pressing themselves forward. Martin Powers, even in his debased state, dominated. The accumulation of twenty years of missed chances was around him, Curt thought. He looked into their faces for any remnants of the boys he had known, but if he'd passed any one of them on the street today, he realized, he wouldn't recognize him. Was he a misfit to them too?



He wouldn't have come had Kelly not insisted.

"I'm never going to any of my high school reunions," Kelly had said over dinner on the day the invitation arrived. "I hated my classmates," he'd said over breakfast the next morning. Curt's yearbooks were on a dusty shelf in their storage locker, and Kelly thought about fetching them, having them laid out on the table when Curt got home from the hospital that evening, to nudge his husband further. "But you should go, Curt. Straight A's. Tons of friends. A flood of good memories. I'm sure you were golden then."

"I'm not golden now?"

"Solid gold!" He touched Curt's cheek and then concluded a moment later, "If nothing else, you can show yourself what you've escaped."

They discussed whether he should wear a suit or present himself more casually, relaxed among his former peers. They contrived various exit strategies. What he could talk about when his turn came, what he might reveal about himself in the twenty years since high school. Kelly insisted that he certainly had things he could brag about. "You're a doctor, Curt. A pediatrician. Saving lives every day. Toss that trifling at the good Catholic boys when the conversation flags." And they considered what he wouldn't say among the faithful. About himself. About Kelly and their son. About his memories. Some things were best left private.

Those good Catholic boys were now all be good Catholic men, and that was part of Curt's problem. He'd been one of the outliers at school. One of the small group of boys who weren't Catholic yet were enrolled there for the fine education and because his wealthy Catholic grandmother had the money to make it happen for him. He and the other heathens had still been expected to take the required religion classes and to sit mutely at the back of the chapel during services, all with the secret hope, Curt had been sure, that a graft would take and they would become converts to the faith. But his cohort was a known anomaly, and if the dutiful Catholic boys resented the latitude the faithless got, it remained unspoken then and, he hoped, was long dissipated now.

"Brooke Sampson was a queer," Martin Powers, Esq., went on, to no one in particular though in a voice that suggested he was revealing a dark secret. "Nobody knew back in high school. He kept it hidden because it would have meant immediate expulsion. Sampson was in the closet then. So he thought. And nobody who suspected ever dared suggest it since his dad was so important at Wash U. Half of us hoped to go there after high school, so we didn't want to jeopardize it. But I knew he was a fag. I knew it all along."

How did you know? Curt wondered.

The group around the table, Curt most of all, gave their attention to the drunk man, now eagerly sharing his salacious, forbidden knowledge. And Martin Francis Powers, Esq., seemed to know this because he stopped to fill his glass from the nearly empty pitcher then carefully sipped his beer, allowing a pause to linger. When he resumed, he didn't make eye contact because, Curt guessed, his eventual words might seem more authoritative, less personal, and therefore more true.

"You heard the whispers, of course. About him. About all the outsiders. Remember that one kid from Swaziland? There were stories about him too!"

"The country is called Eswatini, now," said Aloysius.

"Whatever. His father was supposed to be the most corrupt man in Africa. Or maybe the least corrupt. Half the time I couldn't understand what he was saying because his accent was so thick."

Back to Brooke, Curt willed, and the drunk attorney followed.

"Yeah, Sampson is dead. First from our graduating class. He got AIDS and killed himself. I would too if I got AIDS. Of course, the obituary never said that."

"Really?" Curt heard himself say the word, but it seemed to be someone else's voice speaking. Marty's words were an astounding assertion to be made about anyone, and Curt couldn't imagine such a thing was true about Brooke. Was Marty right, or was it just how this group of boys who were now men coped with the first death among them?

"That's the story I got," Marty continued, not looking up. "His father supposedly caught him in bed with some guy and beat the crap out of both of them. Kicked Brooke out and cut him off. And that was the beginning of his sorry end."

His father would never have done that, Curt thought. He was always kind and thoughtful. He always measured his words and paused to think before answering my questions, even if they were teenage stupid, just to sustain lively conversation around the breakfast table. Brooke's father was, is, a decent man. A gracious man. He probably suspected his son was gay even back then. Marty Powers, he was certain, didn't know what he was talking about, but Curt listened, nonetheless.

Brooke Sampson had been Curt's first kiss. It was a quick, stolen peck during cross-country practice freshman year when most of the other boys had been far ahead of them. He'd turned, grabbed Curt's face and kissed him on the lips, all while not breaking stride. No one saw them, and Curt had tried to absorb the moment amidst the sweat and exhaustion and adrenaline. Did that just happen? Did it feel good or weird? What did it mean? Except he knew what it meant. He had suspected this thing about himself for a while, abetted by his swift, intense friendship with Brooke, their skinny-dipping at the cabin, the way they sought each other in the library and the hallways, biking to each other's houses on the weekends. Sleepovers.

It had escalated.

"The gym showers are disgusting," Brooke had declared early in their first semester. "Come on over to my house after practice and you can shower there." Which Curt did, first alone in the large bathroom connected to Brooke's bedroom, luxuriating in the endless supply of hot water, but then together with him. "We'd be showering with a bunch of other boys at school," Brooke explained. "It's no different here except we won't get athlete's foot." At first, Brooke would wash only Curt's back. Later he would wash all of him. They'd lounge naked in his bedroom as they air-dried their skin, just as they did after skinny-dipping at the cabin.

He'd lost his virginity to Brooke in their sophomore year after one of those showers. It seemed inevitable as he yielded, natural in the moment. It didn't seem wrong. Brooke dressed himself in Curt's clothes afterward, first pulling on Curt's boxers with a smile and strutting about the room, then slowly donning the rest. He dressed a compliant Curt in his own clothes, clean clothes from his dresser and closet. Curt felt possessed. But he found to his surprise that he liked it. He was alone in those days. Beginning to understand this thing about himself. Afraid to confess it to his father who wouldn't understand. Certainly not to his counselor at school. Inclined toward what was denounced as a grave sin against chastity by his teachers. Fearful that he was broken.

And yet he was not alone. And maybe not broken. This boy Brooke was like him. He made it seem okay. He certainly made it feel good. Was it wrong? Maybe, but that made it even better. It was their secret, but it seemed like a good secret. And soon it didn't feel wrong.

Their relationship had continued throughout high school, the two lovers keeping their essential lives well hidden. Double dating with girls to the dances. Impishly letting rumors fly about their conquests with the ladies. Brooke's easy charm making this believable. Curt's easy academic success making him seem like a desirable catch for any girl. Invulnerable by the time they were seniors yet still giving nothing away.

After high school, Curt went to Mizzou on his grandmother's dime, while Brooke stayed in town and went to Wash U. where his father worked. Their reunions were infrequent in those long-ago years, hampered by the way life pulled them in different directions. There had been talk of a weekend at the cabin, just the two of them again, but that never happened. Later, grappling with the unrelenting demands of med school, Curt had finally lost touch with Brooke. He supposed his old friend had found someone else, just as he had found Kelly.

Yet he now understood why Brooke had not returned his intermittent calls or responded to his texts. Why he could find nothing about him online. Why this boy who was now a man, or should have been, had gone silent.

"Curt. Curt, are you with us?" Marty's slurred words were still intelligible enough to jolt Curt back to the throbbing, dimly lit ballroom where they all sat. "What's your story, Curt? You go by Shepherd now. What happened to Curt Clark?"

He was an accomplished doctor. A success in his field. Admired by everyone. Married, with a ten-year-old son. His parents still alive and vigorous. He had a nice condo in the Central West End. He'd been to Italy twice, one time with Brooke's family. He'd run the New York City Marathon. He had money in the bank and a cabin in the woods. He'd not known these men far longer than he had known them. He knew it was unfair to judge them based on the four years they had been thrown together, when they were little more than boys. They had all been trying on different personalities in those distant days. Different postures. But people are born with certain traits, certain truths that they don't always grow out of, that they sometimes grow into. He had to speak his truth.

"I changed my name when I got married."

Two heads turned his way. He thought he might have heard a chuckle. Marty looked up from his glass of beer.

"As a sign of your love and devotion?" Marty asked with a smirk in his voice. "Or because you were pussy-whipped?"

Curt thought later that he might have been dissociating when his next words came. They poured freely from his mouth without hesitation or consideration, as though spoken by someone else. Maybe that made them the most honest words shared around the table that evening. They hadn't truly known Brooke, and they didn't know him.

Brooke Sampson needed a eulogy, and Curt would give it.

"Brooke Sampson was a kind and gentle boy. A loyal friend. He was my first kiss. He was the first boy I was ever involved with. I lost my virginity to him. We were together throughout high school. I knew Brooke's secret then because I was Brooke's secret. Yes, I am gay too." He didn't know who was still listening to him, but he went on. "When I married my husband, Kelly Shepherd, I took his name not only as a sign of my love and devotion, but to rescue his name from what his family had done to it. And to him. I took his name to give him something to be proud of. To be happy to live within. There is no Curtis Clark!"

The table had gone silent. Dance music pulsed in the background, but no one at the table seemed to hear it. To Curt it was as though the entire ballroom had been muffled and time had slowed. No, it was not fair to judge these men by the boys they had been, but if they intended to judge him for the boy he was, which was foundational to the man he became, then they could do as they wished. They had the facts now. There was no more to be said.

Curt pushed his chair back and rose from the table, took a moment to find his balance in the whirl of lights and music, then turned toward the exit. His life was beyond that door, and his past was behind him.

In the parking lot, in the chill air beyond the clutch of smokers and the slow passage of cars, he heard someone call his name.

"Curt. Curt! Wait a second."

It was Aloysius with the last name Curt couldn't remember. He trotted up to him and then paused to catch his breath. Curt studied him in the harsh light from the streetlamp above, trying to guess what words Al would speak to him, what more there was to be said. Was this man friend or foe? Was he from the past or the present?

"Curt," he panted, for he was not accustomed to racing across parking lots.

Curt waited, and then Al lifted his face. It was a face, Curt thought, that had aged far more than the count of their years since high school.

"That was a brave thing you did back there, Curt."

"I don't know about brave. It seemed necessary."

But Aloysius looked directly in his eyes.

"I was with Brooke when he died."

Curt feared his legs would give way. He wasn't sure how he was still standing. But Aloysius was before him, collecting his breath to say something important, so he needed to listen.

"I knew back then. About you and Brooke." He didn't meet Curt's eyes any longer, but his words didn't sound like an accusation. "I knew because I had feelings for Brooke but never acted on them. He was with you, and I respected that."

Curt wished in that moment that he'd known Al better back in those distant days. A sensitive soul had seemed like a rare thing at his high school. Al might have been a friend. Might have wanted a friend.

"He told me you guys had lost contact after college, and I thought I could fill that void. I was wrong. Brooke didn't feel for me the way I felt for him. I wonder now if he was trying to protect me. If he already knew that there was something terribly wrong. But he let me hang around. And when he got sick and they figured out what it was, I was able to spend more time with him because no one else would. I'll never know if he resented me for that."

Why hadn't Brooke reached out to me? Curt thought. Was he ashamed? Or was it because I had changed my name? Because I was with Kelly? Because I had barely tried to seek him? Did I let him down? Did he feel that I had abandoned him? Or was he trying to protect me too?

"I visited him every day in that wretched hospice, Curt. I quit my job so I could stay at his side. Slept in a chair beside him the nights when he was most frightened. His family didn't know what to do. They disowned him. Emotionally, anyway. It was horrible for everyone. People who he thought were friends just disappeared. Half of them believed he was already dead, and the other half, I think, wished he was so they didn't have to think about him. He had no one, Curt. I prayed for him. I prayed with him because in the end he'd found his faith." It was clear that Al was fighting to keep himself together. His eyes were wet and his voice was shaky. "I was holding his hand as he took his last breath, Curt."

Curt felt tears of his own coming in that noisy, windswept parking lot, and for once he decided he didn't need to keep them in. Al, little more than a stranger to him, had been a compassionate friend to Brooke when no one else was. Curt dropped to a curbstone, the nearest and quickest way to rest because he felt he might collapse.

"Tell me about Brooke."

# LIFE WITH ART | NATHANIEL LACHENMEYER

The old woman marveled at how heavy the door to the museum had become over the past thirty years. She was holding in her left hand a large shopping bag and in her right a blue aluminum cane, which made opening the door even more of a challenge.

The security guard rushed over and helped. “Good morning, Ma’am,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said. “Good morning.”

The old woman had been beautiful once, but now her face was wrinkled, her curled hair was wiry and gray, and her shoulders curved forward, so that when she looked straight ahead, she had the appearance of someone who was peering up from the floor. She stopped just inside the building and looked around at the small bright atrium, measuring it in her mind against her memory of what it used to look like. Just about everything had changed: the lighting was much harsher now, the island with the ticket counter was new and so was the faux wood paneling; even the sign was different—it certainly had not been brushed aluminum and backlit the way it was now. For every year she had aged, the museum seemed to have grown newer by a year. It still looked and felt like a university art museum, but it had clearly benefited from a generation of donors and successful alumni.

The people who occupied the space—the security guard, the thin ponytailed man at the ticket desk, the pretty coat check girl on her phone behind the counter—were probably in different decades of their lives, but to the old woman they all appeared very young.

She walked slowly up to the ticket counter. “Good morning,” she said.

“How can I help you?” asked the ticket seller.

“One, please. Senior citizen.”

“Certainly. That will be \$8.00.”



The old woman set her shopping bag down carefully against the side of the desk and began to rummage through her purse. "How are you today?" she asked.

"Not bad," said the ticket seller. "And you?"

"Very well, thank you," said the old woman, producing her wallet. She counted out eight singles. The ticket seller gave her a ticket and a receipt. "Thank you," said the old woman. "You know, I haven't been here in thirty years."

"That's a long time," said the ticket seller.

"Yes, it is," said the old woman. She picked up her shopping bag.

Glancing at the array of cameras on the ceiling, she directed her attention to the guard, who was standing idly by. "It looks like you've got state of the art security."

"Sure do," said the guard, smiling.

"Wasn't there a big theft here at some point?" said the old woman. "A long time ago?"

"I don't think so," said the guard.

"Actually, I think there was," said the ticket seller. "Back in the 90s."

"Before my time," said the guard.

"I believe it was the mid-80s," said the old woman.

"It was a famous case, wasn't it?" said the ticket seller.

The old woman nodded. "It was a couple, a man and a woman. They walked out with a De Kooning just as easy as you please."

"Did they catch them?" asked the guard.

"I don't believe they ever did," said the old woman.

"What happened to the painting?" said the ticket seller.

"They never found it. It would be worth millions now," said the old woman.

"Wow," said the ticket seller. "Well, I hope you enjoy the exhibit."

"Thank you," said the old woman. She walked slowly over to the coat check counter. The coat check girl looked up from her phone and smiled automatically.

"Can I check this?" asked the old woman, setting her bag down carefully on the counter.

"Sure," said the girl. The bag was too big for a cubby, so she put it on the floor against the wall. Then, she handed the old woman a small red ticket.

"Thank you," said the old woman. She looked at the ticket. It had the number "42" on it. She laughed. "What do you know about that?"

The coat check girl and the ticket seller exchanged looks.

The old woman turned and headed toward the wide stairs leading to the second floor.

The guard called out to her. "The elevator's down the hall, if you want it."

The old woman waved at the guard to let him know she was fine with the stairs. She began to climb slowly, cane first, then right leg, then left. She had learned to be wary of how her knees would respond. Every day was different—some days they worked right, some they didn't. Today, they seemed to be working. On the landing, she paused for a moment to catch her breath. Then, she entered the first gallery. She walked with purpose across the gallery without stopping in front of any of the paintings. Her cane clicked on the marble floor with each step she took.

In the second gallery, she walked over to a large painting on the opposite wall. She peered up at it, studying it closely. It was a post-World War II expressionistic landscape by an artist she did not recognize. "It's not as nice," she said to herself.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" said a voice behind her.

The old woman turned and saw a young woman with red hair in a guard's uniform standing near the back wall. She, too, had her smart phone in her hand. The old woman pointed at the painting. "I said, 'It's nice.'" You don't have any other De Kooning's, do you?" asked the old woman.

"I'm not sure," said the guard. She did not seem to recognize the name.

"One of his paintings was stolen from here back in the 80s."

"Really? I didn't know that," said the guard, looking at the painting.

"Oh, yes," said the old woman. "Of course, that's not a De Kooning—that's where it used to hang. My late husband—his name was

Art, short for Arthur—he and I were very interested in the story. You see, he grew up not far from the gallery where De Kooning showed his work before he became famous and his paintings became so valuable. He almost bought one of them, my husband. But he didn't because he was a student then. He was still living with his parents and he knew they would hate it and never let him put it up. It used to haunt him, you might say."

"And one...a De...?"

"Kooning," said the old woman helpfully.

"It was stolen from this museum?"

"Yes. In 1985. November 27th, the day after Thanksgiving," said the old woman. "I bet you weren't even born then."

"I was born in 1993."

The old woman shook her head. "That's amazing. To me, anyway," she said. "Mark my words, it goes by very fast. Don't spend all your time on that thing," she added, pointing at the woman's phone with her cane.

The guard smiled politely at the eccentric old woman.

The old woman smiled back at her and then nodded goodbye. Her eyes passed over the paintings in the room as she walked, but she was thinking back to better times, when she and her husband were, although no longer young, still barely middle-aged. She found herself thinking about the past almost all the time now that her husband was gone. She moved on to the next room, and the room after that, her cane clicking, her mind in the past, following the green illuminated exit signs above the doorways. Nothing seemed to interest her as much as the painting in the second gallery.

Having finished with the second floor, the old woman walked back past the elevator and headed to the stairs. She didn't stop to consider the placard describing the wonders that awaited intrepid visitors on the third floor. She had seen what she had come to see or, perhaps, she had remembered what she wanted to remember. She hung her cane over her left wrist and, gripping the railing with her right hand, descended slowly, willing her knees to cooperate. There was no opportunity for reminiscing now; descending was

serious business. She breathed a small sigh of relief when she finally had both feet on the patterned marble of the floor and her cane back in her fist.

The old woman walked slowly and purposely toward the front door without talking to anyone. She passed the ticket island, where the ticket seller and the security guard were chatting about something university-related.

She was only a few steps from the door when the coat check girl called out. "Excuse me, Ma'am." She kept walking. "Ma'am?" She heard the coat check girl explaining to the guard, "She's left her bag."

"Ma'am?" The security guard was calling out to her, too, now. "You've forgotten your bag." Her hand was on the door handle. The door was so heavy. She could hear the guard walking quickly toward her. "Ma'am, you've forgotten your bag."

She turned and looked up at him. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "Were you talking to me?"

"If you wouldn't mind returning to the coat check," he said, pointing the way. "You've left your bag."

"Have I? Oh, yes. I had forgotten," she said.

The old woman walked over to the coat check, where her bag was waiting on the counter, with the coat check girl standing over it.

"Let's see. You need my ticket, don't you?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Number 42," said the old woman. "I remember." She started digging through her purse. "Oh, dear. What happens if I can't find it, I wonder?"

"Take your time," said the coat check girl.

"Here it is," said the old woman, pulling the red ticket out of her bag. The coat check girl extended her hand to take it. The old woman hesitated. "Actually, I'd like to donate it, if you don't mind."

"Donate it? The bag?" The coat check girl looked at her like she had lost her mind.

"What's inside the bag," explained the old woman.

"We don't take donations."

"I think the museum will want this," said the old woman.

The security guard walked over. "Is there a problem?"

"She says she wants to donate this. To the museum." The coat girl snickered.

"Yes, that's right," said the old woman.

"What's going on?" asked the ticket seller from his island.

"She wants to donate this," said the security guard, pointing at the shopping bag.

"What's in it?" asked the ticket seller.

"It doesn't matter what's—I'm calling Dr. Marcus," said the checkout girl, reaching for the wall phone next to her.

"Dr. Marcus is the executive director of the museum," explained the security guard.

"That will be fine," said the old woman.

"Dr. Marcus, can you come to the coat check for a moment?" said the coat check girl. She turned away and whispered something into the phone. Then, she hung up, turned and aimed a stiff smile at the old woman. "She'll be right out."

"What's in the bag, if you don't mind my asking?" said the security guard.

"A painting," said the old woman simply.

A door beyond the coat room opened, and Dr. Marcus, a smartly dressed woman in her late thirties, started toward them.

"Did you paint it?" asked the guard.

The coat check girl snickered again.

"No," said the old woman with a smile. She seemed to find the thought amusing, too.

Dr. Marcus introduced herself, and said, "I understand you were hoping to make a donation, Ma'am. That's very kind of you, but we don't accept donations. We have a whole complicated process for curating our collection."

The old woman opened her shopping bag and reached inside. "You are going to want to see this," she said confidently.

Not wanting to be left out, the ticket seller started walking over.

"Again, I appreciate your desire to make a contribution," began Dr. Marcus. "But..."

The old woman pulled out from her bag an inexpensively framed canvas painting. It was an abstract painting of the head and torso of a woman, painted in rough broad strokes. Dr. Marcus' eyes opened wide.

The security guard did not notice his boss' reaction. "Are you sure you didn't paint it?" he asked dismissively.

Ignoring the guard, the old woman directed herself to Dr. Marcus. "Of course, you recognize it?"

Dr. Marcus bent over the painting and examined it closely. Then, holding it carefully by its frame, she turned it over and looked at the back. "My god, I think it's real."

"What is it?" asked the ticket seller. He looked at the signature in the bottom right corner. "'De Kooning'...is that the painting that was stolen?"

"Yes," said Dr. Marcus. She turned to the old woman. "How...? Where did you find it?"

The old woman looked at the painting with affection. "It's been hanging in our bedroom for the past thirty years."

"Thirty years? You've had it for thirty years?" said Dr. Marcus. The old woman nodded. "I don't understand. How did you get it?"

The old woman shrugged noncommittally.

Dr. Marcus stared at her. "Are you saying you...? No. It's not possible."

The old woman returned her gaze without blinking.

"I don't understand what's happening here," said the guard.

"You said 'our,'" the ticket seller interjected.

The old woman nodded. "Yes. It was my husband, Art, short for Arthur, and me who took it. November 27th, 1985, the day after Thanksgiving. Just as the museum opened for the day."

"I don't believe it," said the guard.

"Why not?"

"Because..." the guard began—and then stopped.

The old woman smiled. "Thirty years ago, I was a little younger than I am now. I was 42 then. It wasn't difficult. It just took nerve. In those days there weren't any cameras, and only one security guard on duty that early. We started up the stairs. Then, I stopped and asked the guard questions about the museum, while my husband went on up ahead. While I kept the guard distracted, he cut the painting carefully out of its frame and tucked it under his coat. Then, he came back down and we left. By the time the guard went upstairs to check on things, we were gone."

"I've heard the story," said Dr. Marcus. "That's the way it happened."

The coat check girl started typing into her phone.

"The part that amuses me now," said the old woman, "is the fact that I wore a disguise. Do you want to know what it was? I disguised myself as an old lady. To make myself unrecognizable and seem harmless." The old woman laughed.

"That's what it says here," said the coat check girl, holding up her phone.

"That doesn't prove anything. She could have read about it," said the guard.

"Yes. But she does have the painting," pointed out Dr. Marcus.

"Where's your husband?" asked the coat check girl.

"Art died last year," said the old woman. "For thirty years, this painting was the last thing we saw when we closed our eyes at night and the first thing we saw in the morning. Then, one morning he didn't open his eyes. And suddenly it was just me. We didn't have any children. I started to worry. What if I die and the painting gets thrown out by strangers who don't understand its importance? I was going to mail it to the museum, but would you trust the US mail with a painting worth millions?"

"So, you decided to leave it at the coat check?" said the coat check girl.

The old woman shrugged and smiled. "It was worth a try."

"You kept it all these years...?" said Dr. Marcus. The old woman nodded. "Why didn't you sell it?"

"That's not why we took it," said the old woman. "Everybody needs a little excitement in their lives. And a little art, too. In my opinion."

"Don't you feel at all guilty about what you did?" said the ticket seller.

"Maybe I did once?" said the old woman. "But, you see, we really did enjoy it. Planning the theft and then actually doing it. And then having the painting all to ourselves all those years—it made a real difference in our lives."

"Should I call the police?" asked the guard.

"Give me a minute," said Dr. Marcus.

"You can," said the old woman. "But the statute of limitations ran out ten years ago. Art and I celebrated it with a bottle of champagne." She smiled at the memory. "Anyway, I'm going to go now. I don't drive very fast anymore. If you decide to call the authorities, they will find me out on Highway 9, heading west. They won't have any trouble catching me." She pulled her empty shopping bag off the counter. "I hope you don't mind. I like to reuse these."

The old woman turned and started walking slowly toward the front door, her cane clicking with each step. Just before she reached the door, she turned and faced them. "I wonder if I could make a request...?"

"What kind of request?" asked Dr. Marcus.

The old woman pointed up the stairs with her cane. "The painting that's hanging where the De Kooning used to be. I hope you'll consider moving it and putting ours back where it was. It was a wonderful spot for it."

Dr. Marcus stared at her for a moment. "I will consider it," she said.

"Thank you. Do you know the expression, "Life is short, art is long?" Dr. Marcus nodded. "I would add to that, "Life with art is better.""

The old woman turned and leaned into the door until it started to open. She looked over her shoulder and said, "Goodbye, everybody." Then, she walked outside into another day.





# Just Breathe | Vivian Clausing

As he had nearly every Saturday morning for the last forty years, Peter finished his Earl Gray tea as the light outside glowed orange, and rinsed his faded mug, taking in the swish of the water from the faucet, and the soft glide of soap under his fingers. His students entered from the parking lot, rolled yoga mats under their arms. He pressed his palms together in greeting, spreading peace one small bow at a time, the studio an antidote to the outside world. That, as much as teaching the poses, was Peter's mission in life.

At precisely 7:55, he walked across the studio floor barefoot, feeling the room come to attention as he stepped around the brass singing bowl, folded his legs into a perfect triangle and lowered himself onto the mat in the front of the room. A beat of silence. He always started with silence.

He smiled slightly at the class as he opened his eyes, calling them to begin.

"Just breathe," he instructed. "This is a mindfulness practice that can help all of us in our daily lives. It's about focus, intention. Starting with breath." To help the newcomers he added. "Inhale. One, two, three and hold."

His throat snagged. He took a deep cleansing breath to open up space. He leaned into the exhale. Whoosh. Repeat. In. Out. His solar plexus relaxed. So did his arms and legs. The room followed. The exhales were audible.

"What if I can't catch my breath?" The woman who spoke from the back row was heavy set with curly salt and pepper black hair. Something about her seemed familiar. He waited for his mind to shift, aware that now, at sixty, ideas took a breath longer to bubble up than they had before. And then, he knew. Wanda. The nasal tone in her voice had not changed. They had met in India forty years ago, when he was studying with his yogi, working on his final certification. She'd been an overworked veterinary student who'd

come to the ashram for a week on her way to an elephant sanctuary. Her face had rounded with age, her cheekbones now softened, but her jaw was as tense as it had been in India.

"Just bring it back," he said now. He stood and walked toward Wanda, whose eyes were wide as her chest moved out of sync with her body. His feet hugged the floor, then lifted, each part of his foot articulating, heel, arch, toe. She'd followed him to every class, finally knocked on the door of his yurt one evening, wearing only a long sheer nightdress, her body visible beneath it.

Did she remember? She'd snuck out of his yurt the next morning, just as he had received a cable from home telling him his father had passed away. Before she'd left, she had scrawled her phone number on his arm in looping black ink. Regret surged through his belly. He shook his head, flattening the memory, then placed a hand on her shoulder to steady her. For a moment, they breathed together, in tandem.

"Thanks," she whispered.

He returned to his mat, his mouth turned up slightly in a smile like the Buddha, savoring the image of sitting with her over a chai tea after class. What were the chances that the universe would bring them together again after all this time? He had dreamed of her, his body prickling, especially in the days after his return to Berkeley. Somehow, he'd lost track of her number. What could his life have been? He exhaled the thought slowly.

The studio filled with the hum of steady exhales. Wanda's eyes were closed now, and a serene look had crept over her face. The next seven postures flowed, one after another like pebbles dropping into a pond. After that, the standing postures, building to camel, a wide kneed back bend that often left newer students feeling nauseous and dizzy. Thirty bodies arched, all working in harmony. God, it was beautiful. Tears stung the corners of his eyes. "Good," he said. "Beautiful work everyone."

His life here had been satisfying. Peter didn't regret sticking to his principles. His yogi had taught that attachment causes suffering, a lesson for which Peter was grateful. He had let go of the need to make a lot of money and had become a running coach instead of a corporate salesman. He'd let go of the need to

own property, renting a small room in a Craftsman bungalow with a garden that he'd tended in the afternoons. He'd given up his fascination for cars, taking his bike and the bus everywhere. And he had his students, the studio.

*Clink.* Wanda again. She had opened her water bottle, anticipating the break. She took a noisy drink.

Peter's forehead creased slightly as he attempted a benevolent look.

"Sorry," she whispered. She rested her palms on her kneecaps.

Then someone sneezed. Peter's eyes shot to the left before he could slow them. Michelle, a petite Asian woman in zebra striped tights and a tight black tank top dabbed at her nose with a tissue. Then she sneezed again.

There was a rustle of a leg to Peter's left at the same time that someone else farted to the right. And then Wanda sat back up again, knocking over her water bottle.

"Shhhhhh!" Peter said, turning toward Wanda. He felt nauseous. Strange.

"Just come back to your breathing," he said, as much for himself as for everyone else. Michelle stood, legs crossed.

"Bathroom," she mouthed. She tiptoed toward the door. There was a hard squeeze in Peter's upper arms. He put a finger to his neck. His pulse hammered. Inhale. Long hold. Exhale. Class was coming to a close, thank God.

"Be curious," he instructed. "Take your favorite closing asana."

A line of sweat seeped across his forehead. The air was thick. The heater must be acting up again. Sometimes it did too good a job. He opened one eye. The bodies on the mat looked serene and still, like sleeping children. He was proud of each one.

Everything was fine. Three minutes to go.

The back of his brain pinged, as if he were missing something important. His vision clouded, and he saw black dots hovering in front of him. Smoke, he thought. The dread was so strong that breathing could not extinguish it. He jumped to his feet, his hand clutching the singing bowl. He hit the bowl hard. The whirr of it seemed to bounce between his ears, side to side. Surprise and anxiety looked back at him from the mats.

"Everyone out!" He lunged toward the door. He made a big swinging gesture with his right arm, pushed hard against the door with his left. The singing bowl clanged again as his students jumped up and ran out of the studio. Legs churned. Bare feet slapped the pavement. Across the front of his chest, pain spiraled. He clutched the door, waiting for the room to empty.

Wanda stood on her mat, feet hip distance apart. "Are you out of your mind?" she asked.

His old yogi's face flashed through his mind, watery eyes intent as he held Peter's gaze, waiting for Peter to take the intended lesson. The biggest problems are in our own minds. We see threats. Most of the time, we are wrong. He inhaled. Clean fresh air. No smoke. Not even incense.

Wanda gave him a small smile. A friendly one. He loosened his grip on the doorframe, relaxing into whatever was coming. Be curious. Just breathe.

Wanda had been right. He should have called that phone number. Had she been disappointed too? He knew the answer. He took in the beauty of her outline against the light that came in through the studio window.

"Sorry," Peter said to Wanda.

She gave him a long slow smile.

He exhaled the guilt that he had carried for forty years. His body relaxed. He slid to the floor. Her hand was firm on his shoulder as happiness filled him like a warm bath. He lay back, leaning into it, into her.

She's here. His lips remembered the softness of hers; his belly remembered the curve of her hip. He would have reached for her, but his body was crumpling, turning in on itself. His chest fell inward towards his ribs, but he found the thin string of his breath. In. Pause. Out.

As his brain slowed like a fan unplugged, he waited. All was calm.

He held firm to the sweet sound of Wanda's water bottle, clinking like a call to prayer on the wooden floor. Inhale. Exhale.

# THE EVENING TRAIN | PETER CONRAD

The kids didn't like it when I left our family house; sold it when my sweet Paul died. All those years together. Our two boys and daughter—they were good years in the house. I chose the small vacation cottage out here in the mountains to live in, and Paul agreed. I never told anyone why I had to have this place, why I want to be here now.

There it is, do you hear it? It is the train travelling in the woods on the other side of the lake. It's the sound of the train cars on the tracks. It is far enough away to muffle the sound, so it is like the old passenger cars from the war years. Tuck—a—tuck, tuck—a—tuck, sometimes it says shh—shh, shh—shh. Soothing me; here we go, here we go.

I feel good when I hear the train. I imagine that Evan is on the train and is looking for me. He has been sober now for years and wants to see our son, Jason. He's out there and wants to meet again.

I was excited when the conductor called "all aboo-oard." We were moving on—it was a new start. It was a new town, Dauphin, Manitoba, and a new chance for Evan. Evan is always being posted further west since 1942. At the next station it should be harder to get a bottle, but then he always finds one.

Jason is asleep at last. If only I could sleep for a while, but I can't. Jason is asleep, cradled in the seat beside me. He is so tiny; a small baby who has no past to remember or to be ashamed of. He doesn't have any hair, but he is beautiful.

Gazing out from the train at the snow-covered flatness of prairie; unmarked snow smooths even the smallest rises. Life is drifting by like that familiar smell of cigarette smoke, humming voices, and the rhythm of the tracks clicking. We weren't in Fort William for more than a month before Evan was posted again. It

used to be at least two months before we were transferred—now it only takes a few weeks. Forty-two has been a continuous journey; from places that quickly become faint memories. Were we going to Fort William? No; we are leaving...

It was different when we first met at a dance for all the trainees from the nearby Air Training School. I liked the look of the boys in their uniforms. But Evan G. Wilson, Leading Aircraft Man, was handsome and polite. He was tall with a muscular chest and narrow hips. This airman was for me. He was a part of the world I wanted to be a part of. He was going to fight for us and just knowing him made me feel I was a part of it. I felt tall and beautiful when I danced with him. We listen to renditions of Jumpin' at Woodside and Let's Dance.

"You know Bet, we don't have to stay here," said Evan. I could just make out his words over the big band. The couples across the table from us were loud and careless in their conversation. I didn't want to stay there listening to them, but I was a bit nervous about leaving.

"There are no rules saying that airmen and their gals have to stay around the dance hall on nights like these. We can have a drink," said Evan. We left the dance, and we went to my small apartment. Evan had a bottle of whisky.

It was the first time I had tasted alcohol. I hated it at first, but Evan laughed and said it would go down easier. I just had to give it a chance. Soon I was laughing. "I've never felt like this before."

"I told you it would be fun," said Evan.

A tired feeling continued the first three days of the workweek. We sat together at the dance that night. I decided that I would not drink that much again. Evan didn't laugh when I told him about how I felt after last weekend. He was quiet for a while as the big band was playing their version of the new song, "String of Pearls," by Jerry Grey.

"Listen Bet, it doesn't have to be like that. I know something that is better than anything. It feels better than last week and if I could do it all the time, I wouldn't drink a thing. Say you'll come with me, Bet. Come on, you'll love it!"

"What do you want to do?"

"We can go flying. We can, you know. Say yes and I can get a ride to the station. Come on, Bet!" He pulled at my arm. Without an answer he was on his feet pulling me to the door. We rushed down the street toward the café. "It'll be like nothing you've felt before," he said as he pulled me through the café door.

I told Evan that I wanted to go for a trip in an airplane, but I never knew I would make it. Evan made a quick arrangement with the maintenance man to get an aircraft. When he went through the gate, there were no questions. Soon we were climbing onto the airplane outside of the hanger; in a few moments we were taking off; floating. When the plane sloped to one side and turned, I felt like a bird flying. It was easy to imagine that I was a bird in the dark. I saw no wings; there was nothing in front except the lights of the town below. The wind rushed by and the motors hummed. Soon the city lights were behind us. When I looked at Evan, I could see the outline of his face with the dim green glow of the instruments. We were flying together and free to do anything. We landed only a few minutes to midnight. We hurried to the hanger and Alf was waiting in his car.

"Hurry!" he called. We jumped in and he drove to the gate.

Stopping at the gate he called, "Promised to pick up Evan!"

"Only have five minutes, sir!"

Soon I was at the front door of my apartment building, and they were gone.

I really believed things were changing in Dauphin. Now that the hope has fallen through again, I'm thinking about everything. I remember the factory I worked at in Brantford. I wanted to be out of there every day. Now I just remember how good things were there. The factory work was slow and boring, yet I want to go back there. I want to work again and make my own money. Now I want to watch that clock and think about going to the Saturday dance. The train station was a shelter for only a few minutes after the train arrived. When Evan wasn't there, I knew something was happening. No one knew who Evan was and there were no instructions; I was told to go to the café down the street and any messages would be sent there.

The café was like so many cafés on the prairies; a Chinese family ran this one. It was called the Elite Café. I hadn't even asked for anything when they brought a warm bottle of milk for Jason. The Chinese lady, Mrs. Chou, held Jason and gave him the bottle.

The Chou family was so quiet. They looked at each other and it was as if they had said everything that had to be said. The café had benches and tables along one wall and round tables with chairs on the other side. There was a square opening at the back where orders are placed for the cook: Mr. Chou. I was the only one here and it was quiet except for the distant sound of a radio. The song was by Vera Lynn.

Evan said he would be there to pick me up. The Commanding Officers always finds a way to give the men leave, even those like Evan, to come to town and pick up their wives. He promised that he would have a room for me too. He's been good about doing that before.

"May I hold him?" asked Mrs. Chou.

"Please do. I'm so tired after the trip." Jason whimpered as I handed him to Mrs. Chou.

Jason's small fists extended out from the bundle. It looked like he was protesting this world. I heard a sound outside the front door of the café. The door opened with a bang; it was Evan.

"Please, take Jason," I said. She rushed to the back.

"I expected you at the damn station," said Evan.

"You're drinking again. It won't take long here, will it?" I said.

"Damn this station! Damn the postings, small towns, and the tiny room you wanted!"

"Evan, I need a room. I need a place while you're here." Evan sat down heavily on the other side of the table. He sank so far down.

"It doesn't matter. I'm already posted," said Evan.

I had to wait in the train station that night for the next train west. Evan came back and we were on our way to Davidson, Saskatchewan. Evan looked out the train window and shook his head. "It's different," he said quietly. "The way they watch now," said Evan. "All I have to do is relax and they suspect."

I don't expect anything in Davidson. This time everything felt temporary. I was at the small café in town. An old gramophone



was playing Count Basie's "One O'clock Jump." Evan had arrived to tell me why they came to get him that morning. The small café had a counter with six stools and there were five tables. I sat down at one and placed Jason's basket down. Evan hurried and sat down looking tired and confused.

"What happened?" I asked.

Evan stares at me for a moment. The waitress turns the coffee cup right side up and fills it. "I don't remember the trip to Davidson. I don't remember arriving. I didn't even know where I was in the morning when someone pulled me out of bed on the station and pushed me across the camp to meet the C.O. ... The way I arrived; I just can't blame the bugger. Maybe I'll be transferred all the way to the Island. I hate everything about the Air Force. If I knew I would be here, I would have stayed in that dirty little town in the bush and gone down the mine with Dad."

The door of the café opens again. The uniform the man is wearing is familiar to me. He is a military police officer. "Okay, Mack let's go."

Mrs. Macintyre, the waitress, returns to the table and sits down. "He is a fine baby," she says.

"Thank you for taking care of him."

"We have a room. You can stay upstairs with us."

I take the room with her; a cat with kittens that stay in a cardboard box beside the stove. I watch as I have a cup of tea. The mother lies on her side as the tiny kittens nestle close. Mrs. Macintyre rushes into the room as I hear Evan's voice from below "Where is she?" his voice is angry, cold, determined. My heart races as I glance at Mrs. Macintyre. She has a firm look I haven't seen before. I hurry to her as Evan's loud footsteps start up the stairs. "Take care of Jason," I say pushing him into her arms. She turns to the cardboard box and with her free hand scoops the cat from her kittens and places her on the floor, slips Jason into the middle of the kittens. She pulls the hand towel from the stove's handle and slips it across the top of the box. She slides the box behind the stove. The cat looks lost but hears the loud bang as Evan approaches the door. I'm paralysed; the fear grips and holds me. Mrs. Macintyre reaches for the fire poker by the fireplace as she

rushes to the door. She holds it up to Evan, who stops, and sees me behind her. His eyes are filled with fear; he turns and goes down the stairs, to a military police officer waiting.

I received notice this morning that Evan had been sent on the early train. We're going to Vancouver, but I had been warned about the west coast. "When you go out there the chances are that they'll put you in a shack in the bush on the coast to watch for an invasion." It's a one-way trip to Vancouver and the most remote posting an airman can get in the Air Force. After going to the train station, I walk through the streets of the town, unwilling to go to the café right away. I looked at the display in the store and thought about getting Jason something, but I couldn't.

I have been thinking of going the other way. I could take the train east. I could easily get a job in Toronto, when the whistle blows, and we are moving I think I will be going back east. I would be home, and my mom would take care of Jason. But she would ask questions. I don't know where I'll go, but it will be better than here.

The café is quiet except for the sound of the radio in the kitchen. "Take the A Train," is playing. Mrs. Macintyre is sitting down on the other side of the table. "Jason was very good Betty," she says.

"Maybe you received a message at the station?" asked Mrs. Macintyre.

"Evan has already gone to Vancouver; the west coast is the last place he can be transferred."

"Maybe it's time to go home for a while. I'll help you prepare tomorrow. I've got something for you." She hands me a package wrapped in brown paper. It is laundered white diapers.

"Thank you. You shouldn't have washed these."

"It was nothing."

"You'll be glad tomorrow," says Mrs. Macintyre.

"Yes, I will. He told me; the evening train goes east."

Evan agreed to everything from a distance as we quickly divorced. I always expected him to come to Toronto to see Jason, but he vanished.

I met Paul in Vancouver in 1948, when I was searching for Evan. He was what I thought Evan was and we were married, and life was calm through the years.

I imagine Evan on a train station platform, watching as my train pulls forward and steam whistle sounds. He doesn't wave, his hands by his side, bewildered unable to comprehend what is happening, like so many other times in his life.



# LES BONS TEMPS | ROLAND GOITY

The last time I was in New Orleans my wife and I were celebrating our tenth anniversary, having the time of our lives. We slung beaded Mardi Gras necklaces over our heads and pranced up and down and across every street and back alley in the French Quarter, chumming it up with street musicians of the utmost quality, shaking hands with restaurant chefs and bartenders who made the finest dishes and mixed the best cocktails we'd ever had. Then on our final day the unthinkable happened: Beth was killed in an accident in our rented Mustang convertible on a Sunday drive in the countryside west of here.

That was nine years ago. Now, whenever someone even mentions the city I get queasy. I've dreaded returning ever since, and have only done so because of the prerequisites of my job. As a lead staff member of the Washington State Department of Ecology, not attending this week's conference on sustainability wasn't an option. Someone needed to represent our faction and spread the word about the significant work we're undertaking in the Pacific Northwest and my boss decided that someone was me. And who was I to say, No? My job is constantly in jeopardy as time and again I have to explain how I really do love my job more than I love tipping back a bottle—although several co-workers who ran into me at Jake's over in Georgetown (why they were there I'll never know) after I had left work "ill" that morning might beg to differ. So, I've decided to make the best of it. I intend to confront the worst moment in my life and end my drinking once and for all before my flight home. I will make the department heads proud! Still, I plan to live it up before giving it up. It's the only way I could talk myself into following through with this.

In any case, it's nice to play a part in the revival of tourism and business conventions in a city that desperately relies on both, and where Covid-19 hit it like a sledgehammer. As far as the conference goes, it's been worthwhile so far. This afternoon's panel discussion on industrial decarbonization was especially enlightening. At least

for someone like me, whose responsibilities involve determining new ways to conserve and renew energy to ensure a safer, healthier future not just for Washingtonians but everyone on the planet. Plus, the Four Points Sheraton, the site of the conference, is easy walking distance to Old Absinthe House, the Sazerac, and Pat O'Brien's, famous drinking establishments we ducked into on my last visit. Their proximity is central to my plan at hand. They are the foundation of the last hurrah. Still, I must be careful here. I can't overdo things and further jeopardize my employment and the fine line I've been walking all these years, especially with the end of that line well within view. I'm not an angry drunk; just the kind who lets people down, most especially himself. Soon, however, if I manage things right, I'll get those appointments I'd already have if it weren't for my own self-sabotage. No more fieldwork and site visits for me; now that I'm pushing fifty I'm ready for my own capitol office with a view.

Once the afternoon session on water resource distribution in changing climate zones finishes, we attendees are free to do as we please, and what pleases me is the thought of being unleashed upon the French Quarter like a guard dog sicced on a prison escapee. Memories of my jaunt here with Beth spring up everywhere I look: the street meridian statues, the cobbled streets packed with t-shirted people ready to party, and the bars up and down the street that welcomed us. Not to mention fond recollections evoked by the lovely colleague I met hours ago who begged to come along. Zelda's an academic researcher from Canada and, as luck would have it, a doppelganger for my late wife. As we enjoy an afternoon coffee and beignets on Royal Steet, the similarities in her appearance—from the straw-colored hair that's cut in a feathered bob to those big hazel eyes—are striking. It's as if I've time-traveled back to the period before my life's unraveling.

Zelda's stirring in powdered sugar she's knocked off of one of the specialty donuts into her coffee. She does so with a little spoon and the deftness of a symphony conductor until every last white speck whirlpools into the cup's blackness. "Love these beignets," she says, "but the coffee no es bueno."

I'm really having flashbacks now. Beth had said the same thing about the coffee when we were here together, I swear it. "It's that chicory taste," I tell her. "I'm no fan, either."

Speaking of coincidences and flashbacks, I get to wondering. My in-laws were huge fans of KISS, and named their daughter after the band's most famous ballad. I ask Zelda if her parents were devotees of F. Scott Fitzgerald, perhaps they revered the man and fostered their daughter in an upbringing informed by literature. Not the case, it turns out. She tells me they were originally from Germany and just liked the name. I'm strangely relieved.

As Zelda leads a team at the University of New Brunswick, the school has sprung for everything but a tour guide it seems. It's her first time here, which is where I come in. She pegged me as someone who knows the lay of the land. While we sip our undelightful coffees and talk shop, I discover the climate stressors affecting her area are the same ones affecting mine in and around Seattle.

"Air-conditioning units were unheard of in Canada, as you might imagine," Zelda says, leaning closer, her thin, delicate hands cupped together as I sip loudly. "That is, until a few years ago."

I nod knowingly. "Out our way they've also become a necessity."

"And wildfires through late summer have become a huge problem," she says, waving her arms in the air as if clearing a plume of smoke.

"It's the same for us in the Pacific Northwest. Everyone checks the forecast for the air quality index instead of the day's temperature."

While the meetings are important, the Department team also wants me to connect and network with others around the world in similar roles, so we can transfer knowledge, build relationships, and solve the world's problems through strength in numbers and by the conference's motto of *being better together*. So far, so good, on this front. I've avoided the dating scene for months since a woman I'd been seeing—and really liked—found me head-down, asleep on a high-top table at a concert venue bar, somehow still perched upon a stool, as people headed for the exits post-show

and ninety minutes after I'd left my seat to "go take a leak" just as the act she wanted to see graced the stage. So, I'm surprised at the ease I find myself around Zelda. Perhaps it's because I know we'll soon go separate ways and I can bury my despair on my own terms. Or can I? Out of the blue she asks a question that unnerves me.

"Tell me. Why do they call it Bourbon Street?"

"Well, it was named after the French royal family of the period," I explain, "more than three centuries ago."

"Oh?" Zelda says, sounding disappointed. "I'm sure there's more to it than that. Maybe we should do a little on-the-street investigation." She stresses the last few words by walking her fingers up and down the tabletop.

My intuition tells me to proceed with caution. Yet, I get inadvertently swept up by my colleague's enthusiasm. Soon, memories of my previous visit with Beth bubble up and she's bounding down Bourbon Street beside me again as we carry clear plastic cups filled with beer. But it's not really Beth and I can't let myself get too reflective or too carried away. As I remind myself of this fact, I stumble over a cobblestone and jettison half my lager on Zelda's sandaled foot.

"Ha! I see you have a drinking problem," Zelda says, waving her foot in the warm air and shaking off whatever beer droplets will launch.

If she only knew. "I'm so sorry about that," I say.

"I just mean, you're running low." She motions for me to tilt my cup, then she slowly pours me some of hers until she eyeballs the liquid in our cups as about even.

As we finish the beers, I point out a few of the voodoo shops to Zelda. We sound a tinkling bell as we enter one. It's filled with tarot card decks, voodoo dolls, potion oils, candles, and other items that double as witchcraft mechanisms and easy tourist buys. The shop looks very familiar, and again I flash Beth's image in my mind, and can see her ash-blond hair pulled back behind her ears as she stands against that paisley-wallpapered wall, remembering how she picked up one thing after another and asked what I thought. She ultimately bought me a mini cast-iron cauldron, typically used

to burn frankincense and myrrh, but what I intended as a place to store cannabis. Now on the desk of my home office, it still stows buds, but wireless ones for my ears.

Considering my history here, I get a little anxious being back in the shop. I tell Zelda to take her time but say that I'll meet her outside.

On the sidewalk, I stand against a wrought-iron lamp post to avoid the many passersby. I scan all directions and marvel at the French Quarter. It's already regained its mojo post-pandemic, but it's never fully recovered from Hurricane Katrina. Still, it avoided the most devastating flooding back then as it's part of the lucky half of New Orleans that's above sea level; the other, unlucky half, was a victim of well-intentioned engineering designs of the nineteenth century which used mechanical pumps for draining swamplands. This I knew, or thought I knew, but was reminded of earlier during our conference welcome by a representative of the mayor's office. When Beth and I were here together, the city was only beginning to feel like itself again and the streets were lonelier than they are on this evening. My mind drifts to the world at large, and whether what happened here back in 2005 will occur again elsewhere—or, perhaps everywhere, diasporas of all sizes in all regions. I think about how New Orleans lost half its population after Katrina, and how it has taken until now just to regain half of what was lost. The wear and tear of that happening worldwide is unimaginable, but data I see keeps pointing to such an outcome unless big changes are made.

As I continue to dwell on this disconcerting topic, Zelda reappears through the front door to rescue me from my sobering thoughts. We try the famous Hurricanes at Pat O'Brien's before settling down for a late dinner at Antoine's, a favorite spot from my first visit. "Ooh, I feel so important all of a sudden," Zelda stage whispers as the *maître d'* escorts us to our table.

Once seated, we scan our menus independently yet drop them to the table a few minutes later in mirror-image fashion and say: "I'm going to have the shrimp creole." We laugh for a moment at jinxing ourselves.



"And we should get an order of Oysters Rockefeller," I add. "They were born into the world way back when from this very restaurant. And a bottle of pinot noir, of course."

Soon, we're trying the appetizers, and Zelda motions to say something. I expect to hear her verdict on the oysters, but instead she brings up her relationship status. "I recently broke off an engagement, I'll have you know."

"Oh? Cold feet?"

Zelda shakes her head. "Our marriage was destined to be bland. Henry was the type of guy who wouldn't take to this town—too much drinking, music, and revelry. What's the saying here? A French phrase, I think..."

*"Laissez les bon temps rouler?"*

"That's it!" she says.

"Everyone needs some fun in their life, to let the good times roll," I say, wondering as I say it if I'm particularly advising myself on the matter.

"Hear, hear," Zelda says, raising her glass of wine. "That's why I so appreciate your company." She says this earnestly and not flirtatiously as far as I can tell, smiling in such a way that dimples her cheeks that shine brightly in the light from an ornate chandelier overhead. We polish off our appetizers and make small talk about the next morning's conference sessions and possible plans for the afternoon. Then she slyly asks if I'm married, noting, "I don't see any ring."

"I was once but not anymore. Life doesn't always play out like we hope."

Right after I say this, our waiter appears tableside with our shrimp creole entrees. He's very old school, with conked hair like Duke Ellington. Earlier, he told us proudly how he's been with Antoine's more than four decades and counting. This time he describes the dishes with gusto as he sets them before us.

During our dinner we talk about other things like our jobs and homes and our expectations for the global future, nothing too consequential. When our waiter returns and reads off the nightly desserts, we tell him we'll need a few minutes to consider.

"I'm stuffed," Zelda says, "but, you know, I'll never forgive myself if I don't hit a blues bar or jazz joint while I'm here."

“That can be our dessert!” I say enthusiastically before questioning myself for bringing Zelda along for what was always to be a solo journey, at least according to my plan.

Three hours later, I help Zelda properly insert the electronic room key to open her hotel room door. We’re both quite loosey-goosey as we stumble to the bed and fall upon it like winter coats at a holiday party. There’s a peachy smell in the room, either from the hotel’s air freshener or, possibly, some fragrance she’s brought along for the trip. We take off our jackets and shoes and exhale, looking up to the ceiling. Soon, the rest of our clothes have disappeared and we are under the sheets, wrapped together in ways that recharge my synapses and stretch me out like kneaded dough.

Not much later, pillow under her head, Zelda’s already snoring. I softly brush her hair away from where it’s fallen around her mouth and eyes. I scoot from the bed, throw on my garments and lace up my shoes. A minute or two later I’m down the hallway, wrestling the key card into the lock of my room this time. At last, it opens.

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The next morning, I arrive just in time for the first session on industrial decarbonization and sit well in the back. There’s no sign of Zelda, and I don’t blame her. When my head isn’t out in left field it feels the beat of tiny hammers pounding. I’m sure she’s feeling the same way—or worse. I’m rather thankful that today is the last day of the conference, and that the festivities end at noon. I have things to do on my personal docket, such as reconciling my past.

It’s half past the hour when Zelda taps my shoulder, startling me. She slithers quietly into the seat I’ve saved with my leather backpack, its straps spread-eagled across the back of the chair. She opens browsers and files on her laptop, just as I have on mine. We gaze at the bullet points on the projection screen that provide a roadmap for cleaner processes for chemical manufacturing, cement making, refining petroleum, food and beverage plants, and steel and iron production. I take notes and she bangs away on her keyboard. She taps my shoulder and when I turn she angles her laptop screen before me with a message in a giant-size font: *A BIT HUNGOVER LOL.*

"Just a bit?" I whisper-ask from the side of my mouth.

"Well..."

We both laugh a little too loud, and several attendees in front of us briefly turn back with looks of disapproval.

"Did we really dance on stage with that band last night, or was that something I dreamed?" she says quietly, but hoarsely.

"We did, indeed."

"I remember the hands on that bass player," she says. "His fingers. They were so long and moved like tentacles. Yours did too," she says, smiling.

For the first time, I take special notice of her accent and the way she pronounces long vowels. It's rather endearing. I'm going to miss Zelda. I start to wonder if I'll ever see her again, perhaps at another conference sometime or maybe we'll bump into each other fortuitously in New Brunswick or Seattle one day in the future. Who knows? We might even decide to stay in touch before we part our separate ways today. In any event, what I have to do this afternoon is something that I have to do alone. This afternoon is all about closing a long, devastating chapter in my life and honoring my last moments with Beth.

The entire conference ends at noon, and after the Mayor offers her final remarks it's time to bid adieu to Zelda. Seeing the astonishment across her face when I attempt to say goodbye turns the state of surprise back my way. "Where are you going without me? My flight doesn't leave until this evening," she says, and I discern the glint of tears in those big hazel-green eyes. "I thought we could pal around a little more."

Against my better judgement, an hour later I find myself with her at a corner table in a highly-rate po'boy establishment in the town of Houma, the heart of bayou country. I'm enjoying an overflowing oyster sandwich, while she's chowing down a fried shrimp roll. Of course, we're washing them down with beers. Faubourg lagers. I ask Zelda if she knows the beer's original name.

"Are you kidding? I have no idea." She spins the bottle a quarter turn to read its label.

I allow myself a laugh. "The beer was called Dixie until a name change a few years ago. I'm sure you can guess why."

She opens her mouth, as if to answer, but only her breath escapes.

"Maybe you have to be American to get it," I say.

"Hold on!" Zelda says, her voice amping up a notch. "The Civil War, the Confederacy, slavery, and all that." She slaps her forehead in self-mockery.

"Exactly," I say. "But we'd be wise to speak quietly here, if you know what I mean..."

Zelda reflexively swivels her head as far as it can turn. Most of the others working and eating here are Black, but there are some big, fair-skinned fellas with tattoos and scruffy beards who I'm sure are nice enough, but I can't help but recall the diner scene in *Easy Rider* and wonder if these nearby gentlemen are really that different from the good old boys in the film.

After lunch, I keep putting off the inevitable. Zelda's just along for the ride—a Chrysler Sebring convertible this time—but has no idea where this drive will take us. She really is nearly a spitting image for Beth, and the past—the accident—is something I can't help but contemplate, even after an hour-long pit stop at a wildlife refuge where we strolled on a boardwalk along a reedy swamp shadowed by cypress trees draped with Spanish moss. Zelda was thrilled to see a couple of alligators there, although they were only arm's length in size. Now, as I again drive, top down, along the local highways and byways just a tad over the limit, I am fascinated by the way Zelda can't stop grinning and the way her hair flows behind her in the warm breeze, another déjà vu moment from years ago when Beth was beside me.

Just as then, with wind gusting across my face, we blow past decrepit farmhouses and little shacks, and then past plantations with their fields and long driveways and antebellum mansions. Conversation between us is at a minimum while we speed along in the open air to the sound of the roaring engine, the tires slapping upon the asphalt. However, we point at things that catch our attention, like a windmill on the hill of a nearby farm, or a kitschy sculpture garden populated by concrete religious figures and dinosaurs side by side. Everything all at once becomes so familiar. Eventually, I go oblivious to everything but where I'm heading. When I came to New Orleans for the conference, I was

terrified at the thought, no matter how necessary, of what I'm about to do. Having Zelda alongside has distracted me from the imminent task but I begin to get an unsettling feeling as I recognize the landscape before me and pull to the dusty shoulder. There, I can make out a billboard in the distance; I recognize it all too well.

"Is something the matter?" Zelda asks, giving my knee a squeeze.

I've gone flush, overwhelmed with thoughts and feelings I can't begin to describe. "In a way...It's hard to explain."

Without hesitation, Zelda leans over and kisses my warming cheek. "I'm happy to listen," she says. "I mean, if it helps."

A truck passes from behind us, and then an oncoming sedan and a van from the other direction. I allow my train of thought to veer off its track and get lost in the whooshing and whirring as the vehicles zip by. I wish my past, present, and future were aboard any one of them, going anywhere but here. But what I need is a surge of strength. I summon a deep breath before saying to Zelda, "It's about my prior visit...with my wife."

With gentle prompting I proceed to tell her everything. I tell her about the Bloody Marys we drank that morning with our chicken and waffles. About how mine were doubles and how I told the waiter to keep them coming. About how I continued putting them away long after Beth was ready to go. About how I raced through a red light at a four-way intersection near Raceland, nearly t-boning an unsuspecting family in an old, banana-yellow Vanagon. Beth screamed so loud my ears rang like a firehouse alarm.

After my fuck-up, she took the wheel the rest of the day. All was just fine until an armadillo unexpectedly found its way onto the highway in front of our car not more than fifty yards from where we are now. Beth, saint that she was, veered unsteadily to avoid it but lost control of the vehicle. All I remember was flying off the shoulder and over an embanked trench on a bullseye for a lone live oak that stood out like a beacon. When I regained consciousness, Beth had already been evacuated from the car. There were State Police officers and paramedics all around, and I could see the cartoonish gambling crawdads on the sign for the Crawfish Creek Casino behind the oak tree, both of which still

stand there now as I gaze in the distance forlornly, Zelda gripping my hand in hers, taking in the whole story I've kept secreted for so long. Nine years ago in the hospital, the day after the accident, the doctors said that my drunken state during the crash was the only reason I was alive. Since, however, my love affair with drinking has only been killing me.

Zelda nods when I say I have to jump out of the car and take care of something alone. "I won't be too long," I say, but she suggests I take as much time as I need. She now understands I have to make peace with my past in order to move on with my future. Before I exit the vehicle, I reach below the driver's seat and feel around for a bottle of peppermint schnapps, which I quickly grab and stow away in my pants pocket. If Zelda notices, she keeps quiet about it. In a direct line for the tree, I stroll across the road's shoulder, skip over the roadside drainage ditch, and then pad over the soft tufts of grass and cratering mounds of dirt that sink under my feet. I've gone maybe a hundred paces over the course of several minutes, but it already feels as if I left the car hours ago. Now at the base of the oak, its branches reaching overhead like arms ready to pluck me away to my final destiny, I see that obnoxious billboard through the gaps in its leaves. The gambling crawdads have faded over the years in the sunlight, but their eyeballs and antennae and the dealer's green visor still stand out prominently just the way I remember them when first regaining my senses. A brisk breeze blows now, sending chills from my neck on down as my recollection of the accident dances in strobe-light fashion in my mind. False memories, possibly, but still powerful enough to well my eyes and blur my vision until I feel painted into a Cezanne landscape.

I stand, eyes closed, until I eventually gather myself. "I have returned, Beth!" I proclaim like a Shakespearean actor in an awkward, hesitant voice that almost sounds foreign to me. I withdraw the bottle I'd tucked into my pocket, screw off its lid, and propose a toast in a more understated tone. "To us, Beth, to our time together." Then I take a long, deep pull off the bottle, like it's cool water from a well and I'm a thirsty farmhand under a July sun. I wince, more from the liquor's obnoxiously sweet flavor than the jolt from the alcohol. Peppermint schnapps was what Beth was

drinking at a party when we met, a moment in time I'll never forget. Instead of taking another swig, however, I make a show (for an audience of none) of turning the bottle over in a quick thrust and watching the rest of its contents spill onto the clumpy soil below, between my feet and a gopher hole.

That's it, I'm out. Never will alcohol touch my lips again, I swear it. This time, there's no turning back. I've already lined up an appointment at a rehab center next week. And I'm replacing the harmful cold comfort I've found in the bottle with a healthy new regimen filled with sports and exercise. When my friend Eric rounded me up recently as an extra body one night after several guys on his rec league hoops team were out with injury or away on business, he was shocked by my point guard skills, and only half-jokingly called me a ringer. Well, Eric, you ain't seen nothing yet.

Shadows are getting longer and Zelda has a flight to catch. On my walk back to the car I start to wonder if I might talk her into staying another day. I bet she'd enjoy a carriage ride around Jackson Square.

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# THE GIFT | MARJORIE TESSER

A year after we married, some friends of my husband's, I'd met them once or twice, came to our new house and brought us gifts. For him, a semi-decent wine; for me, a cardboard box. The box was long and narrow and wasn't very deep, the kind designed for holding a handkerchief or scarf. Someone had covered it in fabric, a moiré of palest pink, with blue and purple flowers embroidered on the top. "I like the box," I said, in passing, as I opened it up. "I'm glad," they said, "We thought of you when we spotted it in the thrift shop." Inside, a wisp of dust, and a feather, gray, the type that can adorn a hat. Its fronds waved gently as the cover came off. "Lovely," I said, unsure of what to make of it. I searched for the language of the gift in the plume, and came up short. We drank the wine, I shoved it in a drawer, and that was that. For forty years it's lived there. Despite moves, yard sales, donations, I've yet to give it up. From time to time I take it out and wonder. My little gift of mystery: a box, a feather, dust, a thought.



# SEMINARIAN OFF LEASH | ANGELA TOWNSEND

I go to Princeton every fourth of July to see if my loose ends are still long enough to tie together. It is an annual check of vital signs, my left thumb on my right pulse. Am I still the girl who came here in 2003 to save the world for Jesus? She scoured books like *The Cost of Discipleship* to figure out if she was bankrupt or a tycoon. She had decided the way to love for a living was to massage her clay into a Master of Divinity. A thousand geese have taken off and landed at the corners of her eyes since then.

I go to Princeton on Independence Day because I never expected to leave. I arrived with my hair long enough to bun on top of my head. I double-knotted answers so my shoes would not slip off. I asked for all four volumes of *God and Globalization* for Christmas. Scholars from Tübingen accepted my friendship bracelets on the condition that I read new alphabets from right to left. I went house-hunting for orthodoxy and found God toasting marshmallows outside an Airstream. My favorite professor, north of eighty, dressed as Jimi Hendrix for Halloween.

I go to Princeton when the days are longest because I am greedy to be born again and again. I was a seminary “middler,” year two of three, when the resurrections hit their stride. I thought I was in love with a town. It was a more expansive ecstasy. I learned to drive at twenty-three and could take myself places. I learned that Jesus refuses to go Dutch and hell is occupied by tumbleweeds. I walked the length of the town in such infatuation, I could hardly stand up straight. I fell asleep and woke up, stronger evidence for God’s existence than the splitting of the sea. I was the same maelstrom, but at the center a long-lashed eye laughed without fear.

I go to Princeton when the students are away because I am still matriculating. I completed ninety credits. I took a job as a youth pastor. I confused parents who paid me to chaperone teens at paintball, not tell them they were fully alive. A father over six foot three warned me against prattle about the love of God. I wrote

unauthorized meditations for the Senior Brunch Bunch. I did not want to preach. They could not afford to ordain me, so I could not give bread or wine. I wanted to squeeze lukewarm hands and break the news that everything was going to be okay. I had no idea why I had gone to seminary. I was glad I had gone to seminary.

I go to Princeton when the year turns buoyant to confirm that I have gravity. I can no longer pass as a student, but the chapel windows are still pink. I press my tailbone into the pew and remember taking Communion from Jimi Hendrix. The body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ, shed for you. We received the elements by intinction, tearing uneven pieces from one loaf. I have been attempting to dip my crumbs in wine ever since. I was never ordained. I went into remission from the taste for a terminal degree. I did not want stripes on my shoulders. I wanted to write and to loosen knots. I wanted to spread rumors of resurrections.

I go to Princeton when we revel in rebellion because Princeton was my beachhead. I took a job at a cat sanctuary in a backwater. I appealed on the beasts' behalf. I was cast as Development Director and belled cats with parables. My fundraising skewed psychedelic. Donors called me their chaplain. I raised three million dollars a year. I was good at something even though I was doing something else entirely. My seminary friends call the Holy Spirit the Wild Goose and say I am where I belong. They were ordained. They see each other at convocations and assemblies. I write blogs about the cost of feline insulin and the cost of discipleship.

I go to Princeton on Independence Day because I am new to freedom. I came here like a hailstone but left like a tropical storm. The spaghetti model of my life wriggled in swaths. I slipped on the sauce and made landfall anyway. The floury hand pulled me to my feet and gave me bread every time. I am still following threads up the coastline.

# THE VERDANT GRASS OF MEMORY | DOROTHY STEINICKE

I stopped my bicycle in front of the silent house, in awe of the luxuriant grass that had grown up into knee-deep drifts in the front yard. My seven-year-old eyes had never seen grass of such a deep green or such height. The thought flickered through my mind that the grass had such a strong life force because it had been fertilized by the bodies of the family who had died in the house, just the way cemeteries are often carpeted with lush grass. I knew, even then, that this had not been what happened. I knew that the bodies must have been taken away and buried as if they were regular bodies and not the bodies of people who died tragically.

If it weren't for tragedy the flourishing tall grass would not have been tolerated in this well manicured neighborhood. I was surprised that no one had, in fact, stepped forward and mowed it. The high grass stood as a monument and a warning, apparently one that even adults respected.

It had been months before this green summer when I had learned that the entire family who lived in this house just down the road from my own house had died when carbon monoxide went creeping from room to room. There had been some failure in their heating system. They all went to bed one night and did not wake up in the morning.

This news was spoken of quietly on the school bus. Some children had already heard, they nodded sagely, betraying a certain satisfaction in their greater knowledge. Those of us hearing it for the first time sat with eyes and mouths wide open.

This was the first time I had heard of such a possibility. It may have started my lifelong habit of sleeping with the window open no matter what the weather.

The house was easy to spot when I went to investigate. A definite aura of abandoned sorrow clung to it. The snow was not shoveled from the driveway or walkway then or for the remainder of the winter. In the spring flowers bloomed extravagantly, never pruned

or picked. As summer settled in, it seemed that the house would be hidden away behind a wall of prairie grasses just as a wall of briars concealed Sleeping Beauty's castle until everyone forgot its existence.

Eventually an heir or lawyer or realtor must have swung into action. The grass was cut, the furniture moved out and a 'For Sale' sign put up. In due course a moving truck arrived that moved in other furniture and another family took up residence there. I couldn't imagine sleeping in a house where an entire family had died in their sleep. If ever there were ghosts, there would be ghosts in that house.

For all the remaining years that I lived in the neighborhood I could not pass that house without shuddering.

Forty years later, I wander down that road again in memory. I stop in front of the mournful house and wonder. The front yard of the house next door had been our sledding hill and I remember the thrill of danger in knowing that the slope went right to the road. There wasn't much traffic, but what if a car came? What if I couldn't stop? Now I assess the hill and how slight the grade is and am amazed that there was enough of a slope for a sled to slide.

Glancing back to the death house, I think I see a small knot of my childhood companions, still seven years old, gathered and pointing. I walk over to join them, but they dissolve in time and space.

I look again at the house. What do I really know of what happened there? There are secrets every house holds in confidence.

I call my mother to clarify the facts.

"Do you remember the family that all died from gas poisoning down the road from us?"

"What family? What are you talking about?"

"Remember? It would have been 1961 or 62, it was the family who lived in the house on the other side of the Jones family. They all died from some kind of gas poisoning. Carbon monoxide or something."

"I don't know what you're talking about". My mother says, "I don't remember any such thing and I surely think I would."

I sigh as our conversation drifts to other topics. My mother is still mentally sharp, but her memory has smoothed away many unpleasant events.

I again travel in memories to the neighborhood as it was. I examine the house in question. It sits on a small rise above the dirt road bordered with drainage ditches. There is no longer anything unusual about it, it looks like all the other neighborhood houses. Walking past, I am again seven years old. Around the bend I am startled at the sight of the Moore house. I have known that they breed St. Bernard dogs, but I haven't often seen them. Now half a dozen of the dogs are sprawled in various spots around the front lawn. As I walk by the house I am taken aback by their massive size. They look as big as horses. The nearest one raises its enormous head to regard me with appraising eyes as I pass his domain. I like dogs. I have begged my parents for a dog. But I am not actually very familiar with dogs, and these are huge. Brian Moore, a boy in my grade, steps out of the house. He sees me walking by, looking apprehensively at the dogs, never taking my eyes off them. He darts to the nearest dog, grabs its collar and points at me. "Sic em!" he shouts. Screaming in terror, I run as fast as I can. I can feel the pack of them gaining on me, their slobbering jaws gaping open, revealing giant teeth. When I can run no more, I spin around with my arms raised to protect my face. From a couple hundred yards away, I can see that not one dog has gotten up although they have all lifted their immense heads and turned to look at me. Brian is bent over laughing.

I make a phone call to my older sister.

"Oh God yes. I remember. It was horrible," she says.

"You know, I asked Mom for more information, and she doesn't even recall that it happened."

"Well...."

"Do you remember anything about the family who died? What their last name was? Who their kids were?"

There is a long pause, "No, I don't think I do."

The memory of when I first heard the story is vivid. The school bus was lurching on. Sean Cole was twisted around in his seat answering questions about the particulars.

“How did anybody even know they were dead?”

“Well...No one picked up the newspapers or the mail or brought in the milk bottles. I bet the milk froze solid and the glass exploded. Maybe it was the milkman who went in to check and there they all were tucked into their beds, looking like they were sound asleep, but they were all dead.”

“How come the milkman didn’t die?”

“It doesn’t make you die right away. It’s slow. You start to get sleepy and then you can’t move and then you stop breathing.”

My eyes roam out the school bus window. We have left my suburban neighborhood and are headed out into the country to pick up the farm kids. I have never known anyone who died. The landscape is desolate and coldly barren. Naked tree branches etch the sky like distended skeletons. It does feel like a season of death.

I try a Google search giving the name of the road and the town, my guess at the year and the words, ‘family dies’. Nothing. It was a semi-rural area; I don’t know what newspaper would have covered it. I try the same search in the archival section of the web site for the Michigan State-Journal, the newspaper in Lansing, the closest legitimate city. Nothing. Of course, online archives generally only go back to the 1980s. There must be someone who remembers. I try to think of people I might ask.

I am at the school bus stop. It is winter and we wait for the bus in the dark and snow. It is bitterly cold. There are well-developed protocols. A line of books and lunchboxes represents the order of children in line to get on the bus. In milder weather we all drop our school stuff in tidy piles before engaging in wild chasing games. In winter we are more subdued. Some boys throw snowballs at each other well away from the stop. We girls all crouch together for warmth and hug our arms around our legs, pinning the bottoms of our dresses as low as possible, trying to protect the bare skin above our knee socks. We are allowed to wear snow pants under our dresses and then remove them in the classroom cloakroom.

Our mothers urge us to do this, but no one does. Already we are bound to the maxims of what is expected of girls. I scan the moonlit faces around me. Are there children missing? It is so much easier to see what is present than what is absent.

I mail a letter to a woman who lived in the house across the street from us and still lives there. She was a phys ed teacher at the high school. Although I don't recall having much of a relationship with her when I was a child, I always felt her as a benign neighborhood presence and now, more than halfway through my life, we have begun a sporadic correspondence. When her return letter arrives, she says that she has no recollection of anything of that nature ever happening but laments that her memory has gotten very bad. She says she will forward my letter to her son, a man six or seven years my senior.

His email reply is emphatic: "Wow! I don't remember ANYthing like that. I'm not saying that it didn't happen, but I sure don't remember it."

Coming home on the bus there is no mistaking that spring is here. The snow has retreated into a few dirty piles. The newly exposed ground looks shocked and beaten. In a few places there are very tentative shoots of green. The trees are still bare but there are swellings on the tips of the branches. And there are birds. Spring birds are appearing everywhere when a few weeks ago there were only cardinals.

With warming air, we children flow through the neighborhood like rising water. We are released from the indoors as the melting snow has released water into the creeks and streams. We are all overflowing our boundaries and banks and rushing wildly. We are intoxicated by the springtime smell of moist earth coming to life. We run hard and fast just because we can.

We stop yet again in front of the desolate house. We have lost a little fear but no fascination. Now the boys are openly enjoying death and maggot humor. I'm not at that point yet. I turn away and find I am facing a different house with frightening associations.



There are very few houses that have children who do not ride our bus and go to our school, but this house is one of those few. The family is Catholic, something that is strange and exotic in our suburban, Protestant, Midwestern neighborhood. Their father drives the children into the city where they attend a Catholic school. They have a girl named Julie who is the same age as me. We made friends one day while playing outside. She invited me in to have a snack at her house. While I was there, I accidentally knocked over my milk glass and it spilled and broke. Julie and her brothers and sister all froze when it happened. I could tell that it was a bigger deal than it would have been at my house. Somebody called out, "Daddy, Julie's friend broke a glass". A large, bleary eyed and shirtless man lurched into the kitchen and glowered at me. "Well then the little bitch better get the hell out of my house." I dashed out the door and was out of their yard before the kitchen door stopped slapping. I ran home in a panic and told my mother. She told me never to go into that house again. Later, my sister called me to the phone. It was Julie's mother calling to apologize for what happened. I could tell that she was crying and the idea that the situation was so bad that it was making an adult cry made it feel even scarier. I kept telling her it was okay, it was okay, but we both knew that it wasn't.

Within my adult mind, a seed of doubt has begun to grow. Could it be that an event I have accepted as horrifying fact for decades did not, in fact, happen? Why do I have no memory of the house occupants prior to their demise? Did my sister and I never discuss this with our parents? Did we understand this to be something only to be talked about in whispers among children?

An email arrives from another neighbor of that era. I had sent him my questions so many months before that I had given up thinking that he would reply. He is a year older than I am. His family had moved away around that time. He said that he had waited to reply because he had only a vague memory of the incident. He brought it up over the summer while on a joint vacation with his parents and older sister. The three of them all remember it clearly. He said that his parents did not recall the

family's name, and that they remembered the house being occupied by a couple without children. He was able to give me the exact year as he remembered it taking place right before his family moved away.

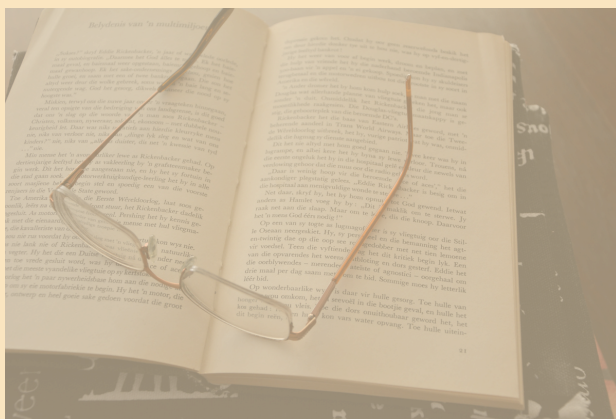
We are at Mr. Strickland's store. It is a small store with a dirt parking lot out on the highway. Inside it is dark and dingy, the few aisles crowded together. It is probably a liquor store, but to us kids it is a candy store. We go there with our handfuls of pennies. Mr. Strickland patiently counts them out, tells us what our options are and waits while we make our selections, our faces pressed against the candy case, our breathing clouding the glass. Returning home with our treats we pass the death house, now disguised as an ordinary house. We've seen the moving van but not yet the new people. Two small bespectacled boys explode out of the front door, one chasing the other with a toy gun. They run toward us yelling, coming suddenly to a halt when they become aware of us standing and watching them. We stand and silently face each other, the two of them, the five of us. They are quite young, almost toddlers, perhaps three and five years old. Both are very pale and wear glasses. I've never seen such young children wearing glasses. It gives them an aura of scholarly wisdom that contrasts with their tiny bodies and popguns. "Hi" I say in a friendly way. "Hi" one returns. The tension broken; they race off together.

Reflecting on what I think I remember; it certainly seems unlikely that children lived in that house. If they had, I would have known them, they would have waited for the school bus at the same bus stop the rest of us did. If they hadn't gone to our school, they would have stood out for that, the way Julie's family did. Was it just an adult couple? It wasn't common in the neighborhood for houses to be occupied by people without children, so that too would have been notable.

I don't know what happened in that house. I guess I never will. History, even facts, can flow like creek water in spring, separate memories and beliefs diverging into wandering arms of water that flow from the same source but run in different directions over different ground. They usually rejoin eventually but sometimes reach entirely different destinations.

# HIS SIGNATURE MOVE | NATHANIEL LACHENMEYER

First, left hand removes glasses. Then, right hand rubs eyes two or three times, travels up over forehead to hairline and back down, over eyes, cheeks, jaw and chin, curving with the neck. Then, right hand falls away. Left hand replaces glasses and adjusts as necessary, using thumb, forefinger and middle finger. Then, left hand falls away. That was his signature move when he sat down on the sofa after coming home from the university. Then, seeing me, he'd smile, and I'd run into his arms. That was my signature move. I didn't start wearing glasses until fifteen years after my father died, twenty-three years after I had last seen him, at the age of twelve. But I still do the same move on days when I'm tired. I hope that one day in the future, when I do, my grandchildren will run into my arms the way I used to run into his. Let that be their signature move when they come.



# FUNERAL FOR A GLOBAL NOMAD | ERIC D LEHMAN

After an hour and a half in the car, I make ten minutes of progress. It is July 4th weekend, and as I try to inch around the New York metro area toward rural Pennsylvania, I notice with horror that the trip meter on my phone keeps adding accidents and traffic snarls. Normally, I would not dare these roads on such a weekend, but I am on my way to the funeral of a friend. Hour after hour I start and stop and crawl and nervously watch my car get hot, through tractor trailer backups and holiday breakdowns. By the time I reach my childhood town of Wyomissing, I only have a few minutes to see my old haunts before sunset. It is much changed since my friend Jeremiah and I frolicked there together, over thirty years ago.

The next morning, I drive to an Episcopal church in nearby Lancaster County for the funeral. The country road dead-ends at a cornfield, where a large Mennonite family gathers for a holiday celebration. One set of Amish relatives has brought their horse and buggy, white bonnets, and full beards, but the house is a large neocolonial with an American flag and two-car garage. Inside the church next door, I exchange sad greetings with Jeremiah's parents and sister, and search for other people I know. Almost everyone there is a friend or family member of his parents. Luckily, our high school play director finds me, and she and I talk quietly in a pew. As the pastor calls the ceremony to order, a few more friends slip in and sit in the back rows. It is a thin showing, I feel, for one of the most extroverted people I have ever known.

We first met in junior high school when we acted together in *The Mouse That Roared*. He was a year below me, and born to be an actor, doing impressions of famous comedians, teaching me to dance, demonstrating footwork and method. He led me into the world of the theater: the transformation of imagination into skill, the fun and games of rehearsals, and the camaraderie of the group effort. We also acted together in *Bye-Bye Birdie* and *South*

*Pacific*, painting our names metaphorically on the high school stage and more literally in the cellar beneath. He acted with preternatural confidence, using his ice-blue eyes, Roman nose, and perfectly coiffed hair to great effect. "All the world's a stage," he would quote, and I believed him. We often sat in his kitchen as darkness fell outside, eating nachos and drinking Earl Grey, watching *Monty Python* and discussing how we would take the universe by storm. "Someday, we'll be legends," he stated with authority.

After I returned to Wyomissing from my first year of college, he noticed immediately that I was unhappy. "What's wrong?" he asked. I related to him the lack of friends, the huge classes, and the overwhelming mediocrity. He nodded sagely, and a week later handed me a packet of information. "This is where I'm going in the fall. You should apply." *Why not*, I thought, and I promptly filled out the attached application. The phone rang a few weeks later and my mother handed it to me. A voice on the other end set up an interview, and in another week I was on the road to Kenyon College, with Jeremiah by my side.

I can see him there, carrying laundry across the campus and being asked by a curious onlooker what he was doing. "Taking this body to the river," he said, without missing a beat. He invited me to replace an actor in a play, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, to act on the stage where Paul Newman once performed. He stood and read one of his poems to us in a candle-lit college dorm, finishing strong with "he laughs and runs and leaps and plays and beats them in the end." Now, three decades later, he is no longer laughing, leaping, or playing. And the winner in the end, as always, is death.

As the ceremony continues, making its way through the program hymn by hymn, I think about the hundreds of friends he had made over the years, and the impact he had on them. On me. For fifteen years I had been one of his closest friends but had only seen him in person once in the past decade. Other friends had seen him more recently, but not often. These contacts with friends and even family are so often diffuse and sporadic in a world where we move freely from place to place. A best friend in one place may be quickly forgotten in another.

Recently I had attended a memorial service for another friend, one who had made a life for himself in a small town in Connecticut. Like Jeremiah, he was gregarious, but unlike Jeremiah, he had lived the greater part of his life in one place. Hundreds of people attended a service on the small town green. Musicians played his favorite songs and poet laureates read his poems. It was an old-fashioned funeral, the kind they had in ancient times, when the village showed up and shared in grief. Such rituals seem rare these days.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, had spread his life across a dozen states and countries. His various jobs for internet media companies had led to even more travel, and he had made friends and acquaintances in every corner of the earth. His obituary focused on his many travels and rightly called him “a friend to the world.” Now, in between hymns, the rector of the Episcopal church acknowledges that fact, mentioning his “global family” and quoting *Moby Dick*: “It’s not down on any map: true places never are.”

In *Moby Dick*, all the characters but the narrator drown. Literature is full of tragic early exits, of deaths in far-off places, of the inability to accept mortality. Full of loss. As a professor, I had taught F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* many times and had often lingered on the title character’s funeral, which only narrator Nick Adams, Gatz’s father, and the mysterious owl-eyed man attend. Jeremiah was no Gatsby – he had real friends. But the world was a big place still, and if I had to drive six hours through heavy traffic, others had to come even farther. Many faced pandemic restrictions and possible quarantines. Factor in the price of gas, airfare, hotels, and, most of all, time. It had cost me hundreds, and would cost others thousands, to attend this ceremony in rural Lancaster County. The calculus of that seems cruel, but is a reality for those who work jobs, have families, and have little disposable income. Life intervenes. I talked to his friends in Ohio, Colorado, and California. They couldn’t make it.

Such is the price of our global nomadism. Fewer funerals for friends. Perhaps that seems a blessing in disguise, but it is not. Funerals are as important for the human animal as any other ceremony – they are part of what holds civilization together.

When archaeologists find evidence of deliberate burial, they find evidence of awareness of death in early humans. The fact that elephants visit the graveyards of their companions is a hallmark of consciousness. Funerals are part of what makes us self-aware, part of what makes us human.

As Jeremiah's ashes are interred in a small hole in the garden behind the church, a bagpiper belts out "Amazing Grace." Back to the earth, without even a tombstone to mark his place. So few people are choosing these stone memorials these days that I should not be surprised. My Connecticut friend doesn't have one, either, and most of my friends claim they will not be interested when the time comes. I can't help but want more permanence, that there is something missing in all this. Maybe that is a silly wish, for permanence in a world of change. Maybe I am only missing him. His sister tells me later that she is planning to spread her share of the ashes throughout the world as she travels with her children. "To me, that is Jeremiah," she says. "He had no permanence."

That seems a sensible solution. Perhaps we have only to adapt to these 21st century circumstances. After all, his London friends held their own celebration of life weeks ago and I mourned with mutual friends on the phone and messaged others on the internet. Some may have even attended this ceremony by "zoom" and have certainly gathered using this technology to grieve. That seems like a good beginning for a pandemic-haunted world of internet nomads. One day soon, funerals may take an undreamt-of virtual form and the human ritual will reassert itself properly in our culture. For the last generations to live in the real world, and those dying in the transition, it might come too late.

After the service, his sister gives me his copy of a photo we had taken at the end of high school, picturing us with two other friends sitting on the overgrown median wall of a dead-end highway spur. In the intervening years, that spur had since been connected to join the pieces of Route 222, the same highway that I drove yesterday, that runs past this small rural church where he is interred. As J.R.R. Tolkien, one of our favorite authors, might have said, that same road led everywhere, to the farthest ends of the earth.

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We gather at the clubhouse of his mother's retirement community. There are deviled eggs, roast beef sandwiches, and hard pretzels. I mingle with the family and parents' friends, sharing memories. Two more Kenyon College friends arrive and share their own. I tell them a story about how we had begun a drive home from college at 8 a.m., with no sleep the night before, Talking Heads blasting on the stereo to keep me awake. Jeremiah lay slumped in the corner against the window, apparently fast asleep. "Mr. Jones" came onto the tape deck and he began to twitch. Then shake. By the middle of the song, he was dancing a dance of life and we boogied over the Appalachians towards home.

Like so many of us in this increasingly global village, he was born to travel. Once, we drove several hours to Delaware just to eat hot wings, then later that day drove to Philadelphia for mussel pots. We enjoyed a fine Italian dinner in New York City, an Indian meal in London, a Chinese buffet in San Francisco. I can see him grinning from ear to ear as the tips of his skis edged out over a black diamond route in Lake Tahoe. A week after that he was driving along the dirt roads of Joshua Tree National Park, "Where the Streets Have No Name" blasting on the tape deck. With a flourish, he popped a champagne cork on the banks of the Thames at midnight on the millennium.

After dinner at a local joint in Lititz, I leave the sleepy farming community and merge back onto Route 222. The photo of my friends sitting on the median rests on the seat next to me, and I think about the impermanent permanence of that, and of other things we may have left behind. Other rituals we had performed, other images we had left in our nomadic journeys. Small things, to be sure. But there were a few.

Near the turn of the millennium, I was driving to Jeremiah's house, and as I entered Wyomissing, I realized that the dead-end highway continued, that the spur had been connected. As in a dark dream, my car kept rolling down the long field of concrete, past dynamited cliffs, and directly over the once-forested playground of my youth. The spot where Jeremiah and I had taken the photo over a decade before was now a pleasant bypass. I pulled off at an exit, turned around, and drove back to his house,

where we shared our amazement at this topographical transformation.

Later that day, the two of us visited the high school we shared, which had also been transformed by years of construction into something unrecognizable. After searching the entire complex, Jeremiah led the way down into the cellar of the theater, where once we had danced and sung. As the bare lightbulbs flickered on, I searched for our spray-painted names, finding them at last, nearly buried underneath the paintjobs of new groups of actors. My friend reached into his bag and pulled out a fresh can of black spray paint. "Jeremiah and Eric Were Here" appeared on the wall.

I hope it is still there, if only for a little while.

# 4:15PM IN EAST HADDAM, CONNECTICUT | MONICA MACANSANTOS

4:15 p.m. in East Haddam, Connecticut is when the sun touches down on the water, sending forth its dying glow through turning leaves that blaze through the darkening sky. I am brought to a halt near the edge of this pond, the air around me set alight by these red and orange leaves that pull me into their deepening radiance.

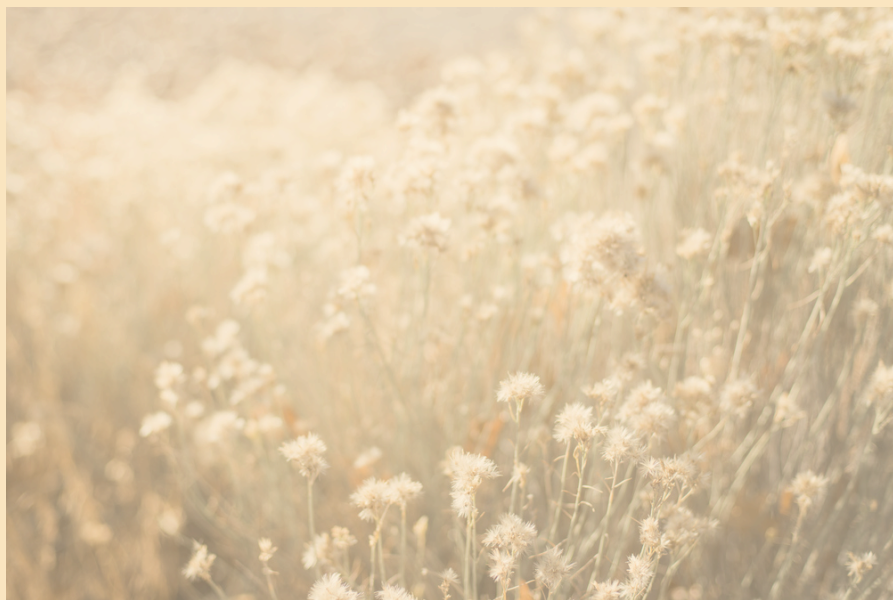
When Lydia, the director of this artists' residency program, drove me deeper into the New England woods on my first day back in America, I could sense my body reawakening to its buried longings, subsumed beneath the loud thrum of fear that has become a constant of my days. In the year and a half I have spent quarantined inside my childhood home in the Philippines, I have forgotten that such an exuberance of colors could exist in the natural world, and that these trees, growing luminous in the ebbing afternoon light, could shelter a private hush that would urge me deeper into their embrace.

In the afternoons, I follow these footpaths that wind around and across the residency's grounds, allowing myself to be swallowed up by a silence that submerges me in my thoughts. The pandemic has thrown my life in disarray, and even as my confidence in my own survival has gained solidity thanks to the vaccine, my faith in the future remains unsteady as it takes on the weight of my apprehensions. Quarantining in my childhood home has made me devote myself more fully to my writing, and while this has given me clarity about the kind of life I want to live, the world's gradual reopening has made me unsure about the possibility of truly dedicating myself to my art. Is this all a futile pursuit, I ask myself, as I sit at my desk inside my cozy one-room studio, watching the early afternoon light brush across my laptop keyboard where I labor on a novel I'm revising for the nth time. Will this result in something tangible, a book that will have a place in this world, or am I simply wasting my time?

I step outside my studio for my afternoon walk, and the clarity I seek as my footsteps take me further into the woods becomes a silence that yields no answers. I hear the faraway knock of a woodpecker, and the sudden rush of wings across water as a flock of migrating Canada geese take flight, and these sounds exist unto themselves, unencumbered by the heaviness of my thoughts. The forest has been around longer than I have, and its sounds and colors bear no resemblance to the troubles I carry in my heart.

It is when the sun sinks through the trees, nudging me to a halt, that my thoughts are brought to a standstill. Engulfed in its glow, I can feel the beauty of the forest acknowledging me, responding to my heartaches with a radiance that sets me alight.





# AUTHOR BIOS

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**Annie Przypyszny** is a poet from Washington, DC pursuing an MFA in Poetry at the University of Maryland. She has poems published or forthcoming in *Bear Review*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *Sugar House Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Atticus Review*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *The Champagne Room*, *The MacGuffin*, *Cider Press Review*, and others.

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**Dimitri Reyes** is a Puerto Rican multidisciplinary artist, content creator, and educator from Newark, New Jersey. He has been named one of [The Best New Latinx Authors of 2023](#) by LatinoStories.com for his most recent book, [Papi Pichón](#) (Get Fresh Books, 2023) which was a finalist for the Omnidawn chapbook contest and the Andrés Montoya Poetry Prize. His other books include [Every First and Fifteenth](#), the winner of the Digging Press 2020 Chapbook Award, and the poetry journal [Shadow Work for Poets](#), now available on Amazon. Dimitri's work has been featured on [NPR](#) and [PBS](#), and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net Anthology. He was an inaugural poetry fellow for the [Poets & Writers Get The Word Out](#) publishing incubator as well as a 2024 fellow with the NJ Arts Professional Learning Institute. You can find more of his writing in [Poem-a-Day](#), [Verse Daily](#), [Até Mais: Latinx Futurisms](#), and elsewhere. Dimitri is the Marketing & Communications Director at CavanKerry Press.

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**Barbara Krasner** holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. The author of two poetry chapbooks, three novels in verse, and a forthcoming ekphrastic poetry collection, *The Night Watch* (Kelsay Books), her work has also been featured in more than sixty literary journals, including *Nimrod*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Here: A Poetry Journal*. A multiple Pushcart Prize nominee, she lives and teaches in New Jersey. Visit her website at [www.barbarakrasner.com](http://www.barbarakrasner.com).

**Molly Walsh** is a graduate of The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where she studied visual and performing arts. Over the years, Molly has found herself wearing many hats as a photographer, writer and reporter for numerous publications around the South Sound region of Washington State and beyond. Molly's poetry has appeared in *October Hill Magazine*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Pioneertown and Maudlin House*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Gone Lawn* and *The Portland Review*. You can find more of her work at [mollywphoto.com](http://mollywphoto.com).

**Makayla Evanovich** is a twenty-two-year-old psychedelic horror poet and poetry editor for *Lilac Blossom Magazine*. She has recently obtained a Bachelor's in Arts in English from Point Park University where she focused her research on analyzing horror literature from the lens of psychoanalysis and disability studies. She has poetry published in *The Solitude Diaries* and *Luxury Literature Magazines* and has been a featured poet for Lacuna Vox.

**Tony Kitt** is a poet from Dublin, Ireland. He has been working as a creative writing tutor and a magazine editor. His poetry titles include *Endurable Infinity* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022) and *The Magic Flute* (SurVision Books, Dublin, Ireland, 2019). A new collection, *Sky Sailing*, is forthcoming from Salmon Poetry, Ireland, in autumn 2025. His poems appear in multiple magazines and anthologies, including *Oxford Poetry*, *Poetry Ireland Review*, *Poetry Daily*, *The North*, *Cyphers*, *The Café Review*, *Plume*, *Matter*, *The Fortnightly Review*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *The New Ulster*, etc. He edited the *Contemporary Tangential Surrealist Poetry anthology* (SurVision Books, 2023) and the anthology entitled *Invasion: Ukrainian Poems about the War* (SurVision Books, 2022).

**Daniel Romo** is the author of *Bum Knees and Grieving Sunsets* (FlowerSong Press 2023), *Moonlighting as an Avalanche* (Tebot Bach 2021), *Apologies in Reverse* (FutureCycle Press 2019), and other books. His work can be found in *The Los Angeles Review*, *MAYDAY*, *Hotel Amerika*, and elsewhere. He received an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte, and he lives, writes, and rides his bikes in Long Beach, CA. More at [danieljromo.com](http://danieljromo.com).

**Therese Gleason** is author of three poetry chapbooks: *Hemicrania* (Chestnut Review, 2024), about living with chronic migraine; *Matrilineal* (Finishing Line, 2021), which received Honorable Mention for the Jean Pedrick Chapbook Prize from the New England Poetry Club; and *Libation* (2006), which was selected by Kwame Dawes as co-winner of the South Carolina Poetry Initiative Chapbook Competition. Her poetry, flash fiction, and essays appear in *32 Poems*, *Chestnut Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Lunch Ticket–Amuse Bouche*, *New Ohio Review*, *On the Seawall*, *Rattle–Poets Respond*, and elsewhere. Originally from Louisville, Kentucky, she teaches language and literacy to multilingual learners in a public elementary school in central Massachusetts. She has an MFA in Poetry from Pacific University. (Online: [thereseogleason.com](http://thereseogleason.com))

**Kendra Pitts** is an aspiring poetry and fiction writer living in Jacksonville, Florida. Her work focuses on human emotions, growth, and connections with others. She is currently a student in the English MA in Professional and Creative Writing at Central Washington University.

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**Ron Wetherington** is a retired professor of anthropology living in Dallas, Texas. He has published a novel, *Kiva* (Sunstone Press), and numerous short fiction pieces, as well as creative nonfiction, in this second career. Read some of his pubs at [rwetheri.com](http://rwetheri.com)



**Paul Lamb** lives near Kansas City but escapes to his Ozark cabin whenever he gets the chance. His stories have appeared in dozens of literary magazines and his two novels, *One-Match Fire* and *Parent Imperfect*, are published by Blue Cedar Press. He has a novel coming out in the summer of 2025 from Graveside Press. You can read more about him at [paullambwriter.com](http://paullambwriter.com). He rarely strays far from his laptop.

**Nathaniel Lachenmeyer** is an award-winning disabled author of books for children and adults. His first book, *The Outsider*, which takes as its subject his late father's struggles with schizophrenia and homelessness, was published by Broadway Books. Nathaniel has forthcoming/recently published poems, stories and essays with *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Santa Clara Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Epiphany*, *Permafrost*, *About Place Journal* and *DIAGRAM*. Nathaniel lives outside Atlanta with his family. [NathanielLachenmeyer.com](http://NathanielLachenmeyer.com).

**Vivian Clausing** has directed a program for women transitioning from incarceration, given seated chair massage to the homeless and advocated for youth and the adults who minister to them. A former lawyer, she holds a degree in English from Stanford (1984), a JD from UCLA (1987) and a Master's in Theology and Multi-Cultural Ministry from the Franciscan School of Theology in Berkeley. (2008). Her essay *Death into Life: A Spirituality of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* was published in *Emerging from the Vineyard* in 2014, and her flash fiction has appeared in *The Bloomin' Onion* and *10 x 10 Flash Fiction*. A graduate of Stanford's OWC writing program, she lives in the Bay Area with her husband and four cats.

**Peter C. Conrad** holds a Bachelor of Education and his MA from the University of Saskatchewan. He has been a teacher, editor, instructional designer, published articles, wrote lectures for multiple art history and design courses for the Art Institute Online, and published three Canadian histories. He was a runner-up of the My Dream Writing Contest 2024, appeared in Wingless Dreamer Publisher's 2024 anthology *Summer Fireflies 2*. His work appears in over thirty literary journals worldwide. When Peter is not writing he is painting and drawing. He now lives in Calgary.

**Roland Goity** lives in Issaquah, WA, where the summers are spectacular and the winters are made for writing. Recent stories of his appear or are forthcoming in *Cirque*, *Landlocked Magazine*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Bending Genres*, and *Barzakh Magazine*.

**Marjorie Tesser's** poetry and prose have appeared in *Cutleaf*, *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *ANMLY*, *SWWIM*, and others. Marjorie has an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and won a prize from the Academy of American Poets. She is the author of poetry chapbooks, *The Important Thing Is* (winner of the Firewheel Chapbook Award), and *The Magic Feather*, and is editor-in-chief of *MER-Mom Egg Review*.

**Angela Townsend** graduated from Princeton Seminary and Vassar College. She is a four time Best of the Net nominee and the 2024 winner of West Trade Review's 704 Prize for Flash Fiction. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *CutBank*, *Pleiades*, *SmokeLong*, and *Terrain*, among others.

**Dorothy Steinicke** grew up in Michigan and now lives in Los Angeles. Her essays explore the places where the urban and the wild intersect. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Catamaran Literary Reader*, *Reforestation Magazine*, *Woods Reader*, *Western Tanager* and *Peninsula Arts*.

**Eric Lehman** is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Bridgeport and a contributor to numerous magazines and literary journals, including *Appalachia*, *Connecticut Magazine*, and *Estuary*, for which he won several awards from the Connecticut chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. He has been consulted on diverse subjects and quoted by The Atlantic Monthly, USA Today, the BBC, the History Channel, Deutsche Presse-Agentur, and The Wall Street Journal.

**Monica Macansantos** is the author of *Returning to My Father's Kitchen: Essays* (Curbstone/Northwestern University Press, 2025), and *Love and Other Rituals: Selected Stories* (2022). A 2024-25 Shearing Fellow with the Black Mountain Institute in Las Vegas, her work has appeared in *Colorado Review*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Bennington Review*, *River Styx*, and *Lit Hub*, among others. She earned her MFA as a James A. Michener Fellow from the University of Texas at Austin, and her PhD in Creative Writing from the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.