



October Hill 
MAGAZINE

October Hill

M A G A Z I N E 

Volume 9, Issue 4

Welcome to October Hill Magazine.

Let's start with the big topic, but I'll keep it brief: If you do not speak up and defend your rights, they *will* be taken away. History has seen this play out time and again. We all face—*have been facing*—historical times and we need to ensure that we speak up, stand up, and defend what is just.

This isn't about political stance anymore; this is about humanity.

Moving on . . .

Thank you for being here. Thank you for opening this magazine and reading through the short stories and poetry contained herein. Thank you to those who have supported us issue over issue and not only saw us grow but helped us get to where we are.

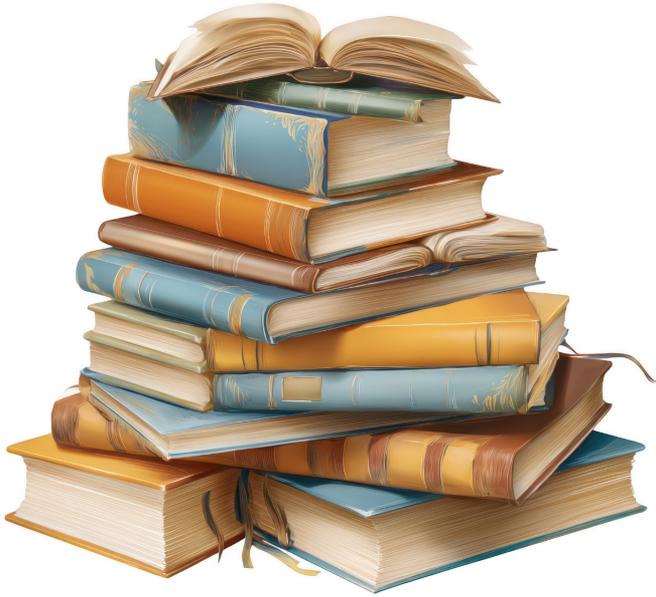
You may notice that this issue looks a bit different than before: fewer short stories, absence of book reviews, and reduced imagery. Why? Because we're going through a growth and transition period, and so are many of our staff. Our editors are incredibly talented and ambitious individuals who are setting themselves up for successful and fruitful careers, which sometimes means that their time and energy get devoted elsewhere.

This leads me to my ask: if you or someone you know is interested in joining *October Hill Magazine*, we are seeking editors, social media gurus, blog writers, reviewers, and more. Simply send an email to Editors@OctoberHillMagazine.com with your information, area of interest, and any relevant experience.

October Hill Magazine is heading into our tenth volume and we are due for a revamp of our image, processes, and structure. Now is the time to join and be part of the change.

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*Short
Stories*



Predator

By: Marianne Shaughnessy

Lying in the warm cocoon of early morning slumber, Laurie heard the sound enter her dream as the babble of children's laughter, muted and melodious as a small stream spilling over rocks. The sound created a vision of little ones with hands clasped dancing in a circle in a sun-dappled meadow. Suspended in the gentleness when the body is no longer asleep but the mind is not truly awake, Laurie was lulled for a moment by the sound. Eyes still closed, she could sense it was a sunny day by the brightness through her eyelids and the warmth on her cheek.

It was a Vermont spring no one thought would come. The winter had brought heavy snowfalls, and there was no January thaw to take the edge off weeks of temperatures that plummeted below zero. One day in February, John had found where turkeys had scratched down to the grass under the overhanging hemlocks. He took to carrying chicken feed in the back of his pickup to scatter under the trees. He had told Laurie he was worried about the deer. Laurie had had to wear snowshoes down to the hen house. Then, like a video on fast-forward, at the end of April the swamp maples burst into a red-budded haze and forsythia exploded yellow. Laurie had willed spring to come, especially this winter when even the life growing within her had stopped.

As Laurie slowly ascended from the depth of her dream, the laughter mutated until, as she lay at the edge of consciousness, it transformed into the sound of the chickens clucking.

She thought how sleep had altered the sound to children laughing—children that would not be hers. She began to sink into melancholy when she was suddenly aware that the clucking did not sound like laughter at all. Her eyes snapped open. There

Marianne Shaughnessy of Vermont was a newspaper and freelance writer for twenty-four years before earning an MFA in writing from Bennington College. Her short story "The Auction" was published in *Peregrine*. She is also a watercolor artist and enjoys traveling, spending time with her family, kayaking, and women's spirituality.

is something wrong, she thought. Loud squawks propelled her fully awake, and she leaped out of bed toward the open window.

Looking down across the sloping lawn toward the henhouse, Laurie barely caught sight of a long bushy tail around the side of the building.

"Something's after the chickens," she yelled to John. "Get the gun."

She dashed down the stairs barely connecting with each step, the dog, Rosie, close at her heels. Thinking her husband was right behind her, she flew across the lawn in her nightgown toward the henhouse. She rounded the corner where she confronted the fox, a limp bundle of feathers drooping from its mouth.

"Hey!" she yelled from deep in her belly, her voice her only ammunition.

Startled, the fox disappeared in a flash of red into the thicket behind the building.

"That was pretty stupid, you know," John said as he trotted up to her. "What if it had turned on you?"

"I thought you were right behind me. Besides, I could have killed it with my bare hands if it had," she spat through clenched teeth.

Laurie surveyed the chicken run, wondering how the fox had gotten in, but the answer was clear. She fingered the sharp edges of the rust-rotted wire that gaped open for two feet up from the ground. On the other side of the wire, the remaining eleven chickens, as varied in color and breed as autumn leaves, paced back and forth, cackling among themselves.

Laurie turned on John now. “Didn’t you check the fence before you let them out?”

“No, I didn’t check the fence,” John said sheepishly. “I just wanted to get them outside. They’d been in long enough, I figured.”

“I guess you’ll be mending the fence today,” she said.

Laurie began keeping her shotgun on the window seat in their bedroom and shells handy on the bookshelf. Each morning she woke tense, springing up from the bed to look down at the chickens that pecked serenely in their run.

A week went by since the fox had come, and Laurie began to relax. Then one morning she looked out the kitchen window and saw what she thought was a small cluster of last fall’s rust-colored leaves that the wind must have blown on the grass. Thinking that odd, she looked again. Something about the pile of leaves pricked at her, so she got the binoculars. Sure enough, what she thought were leaves were the feathers of one of the Rhode Island Red hens with its legs poking up in the air.

She was sure it wasn’t there when she looked out before her shower. Perplexed, Laurie walked out across the lawn toward the chicken. The chicken was dead, its head bitten clean off. Then she noticed the black and white feathers of the Barred Rock chickens fluttering all over the grass. Feathers were clumped along the edges of her garden, caught in the raspberry canes and scattered among the fruit trees all the way down to the henhouse. Her heart pounding, she ran down the slope of the lawn to the chicken run.

At first, her mind could not comprehend what her eyes saw. Fresh earth was flung about the grass by the wire fencing with the exposed jagged edge of ripped wood contrasting white against it. The earth had been dug away from the board and the rotted end torn away from the post, leaving an opening even she could slip through. In the few minutes she wasn’t looking, the fox had struck.

Shaking, Laurie counted five chickens in the run. Five chickens left out of twelve. He got five chickens, not counting the one lying dead on the grass and the one last week. She blamed herself for allowing the chickens to be so vulnerable. They trusted her, and she let them down. Soberly, she pulled the board back into place and tamped the earth around it. She piled rocks from the stone wall along the broken place. As she walked across the field with the dead chicken

and a shovel, foxes yipped up in the woods behind her. They yipped over and over, and it sounded like laughter—not at all like children’s laughter.

Laurie raised the shovel high in the air. “I’ll get you, you sons of bitches,” she yelled.

John replaced the board and set a new post. He bought heavy-gauge wire, four feet in height, and fortified the entire chicken run and the area underneath the rabbit cages nailed to the back of the hen house, just to be on the safe side. He told Laurie she got too attached.

“Laurie, life, even in the natural world, is not always simple, beautiful and safe,” he said.

She just stood there looking at him with shocked eyes until he realized what he had said and blushed.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled. “That was thoughtless.” It had been only four months since the miscarriage. Four months since the long-hoped-for life Laurie had carried in her womb had been taken from her.

It was the fox now that entered Laurie’s dreams. It padded stealthily among shadowy images in the dark of night, a nebulous yet ever-present terror. Now, she kept the gun loaded.

“What are you going to do, Laurie, kill every fox and coyote in the area?” John asked her one night. “You know, that fox was only following his instincts. It was a bad winter. He was doing what he had to do to survive.”

“Not with my chickens.”

For the next several nights, Laurie slept lightly, one ear always listening for her worst fear. Even the slightest noise jerked her awake, and she would sit up, waiting, expectant.

“It’s nothing,” John would mumble. “Go back to sleep.”

Then in the dark of one night she heard it. Chickens squawking rocked her from a shallow sleep.

“John, he’s back,” she cried, shaking him awake.

“You stay here,” he said, as he quickly pulled on his pants and grabbed the shotgun and a flashlight. Laurie leaned her forehead against the screen of the window, watching John’s light swing with each step.

She saw it arc over the fence and then disappear as he stepped into the hen house. Minutes passed and she did not see the light reappear. She began to fear that something truly sinister was out there in the blackness, swallowing up everything that was hers. She began to wonder if she should go down there herself when she saw the light swinging back toward the house.

“Damnest thing,” John told her as he slipped off his pants and slid back into bed. “Two chickens were out of the coop, one at either end of the run, both of them fluttering against the fence like they were looking for a way to get out. The other three were perched on the roost. I had to grab those two and push them back in. I didn’t see where anything had been scratching around. Maybe a weasel got in and scared them.”

“How would a weasel get in?” Laurie asked.

“On, they can slip through the tiniest crack or opening,” John said, settling back down to an unconcerned sleep.

Laurie lay awake for more than an hour before falling into a fitful slumber.

Two days later, Laurie saw the fox. The morning was dismal and misty with fog socked in close to the treetops. Laurie looked down from the bedroom window as usual and there it was—a large gray fox this time pacing back and forth along the outside of the chicken run, looking for the weak spot it was sure was there. It paused and glanced about, as if confused by what it found. The chickens paced, too, cackling nervously on the other side of the wire.

Laurie knelt on the window seat and slipped off the screen. She eased the shotgun out through the open window and brought it up to her shoulder, her heart pounding in her ears. From the second-floor window, she could hit the fox easily except for the chickens just beyond it in her line of trajectory. She was afraid if she took the shot, the chickens would be caught in the spread pattern of the pellets. As much as she wanted this fox, she would not risk it. She waited, hoping the fox would move, circle around or walk away, so she could catch it in the open. All it did was lie down.

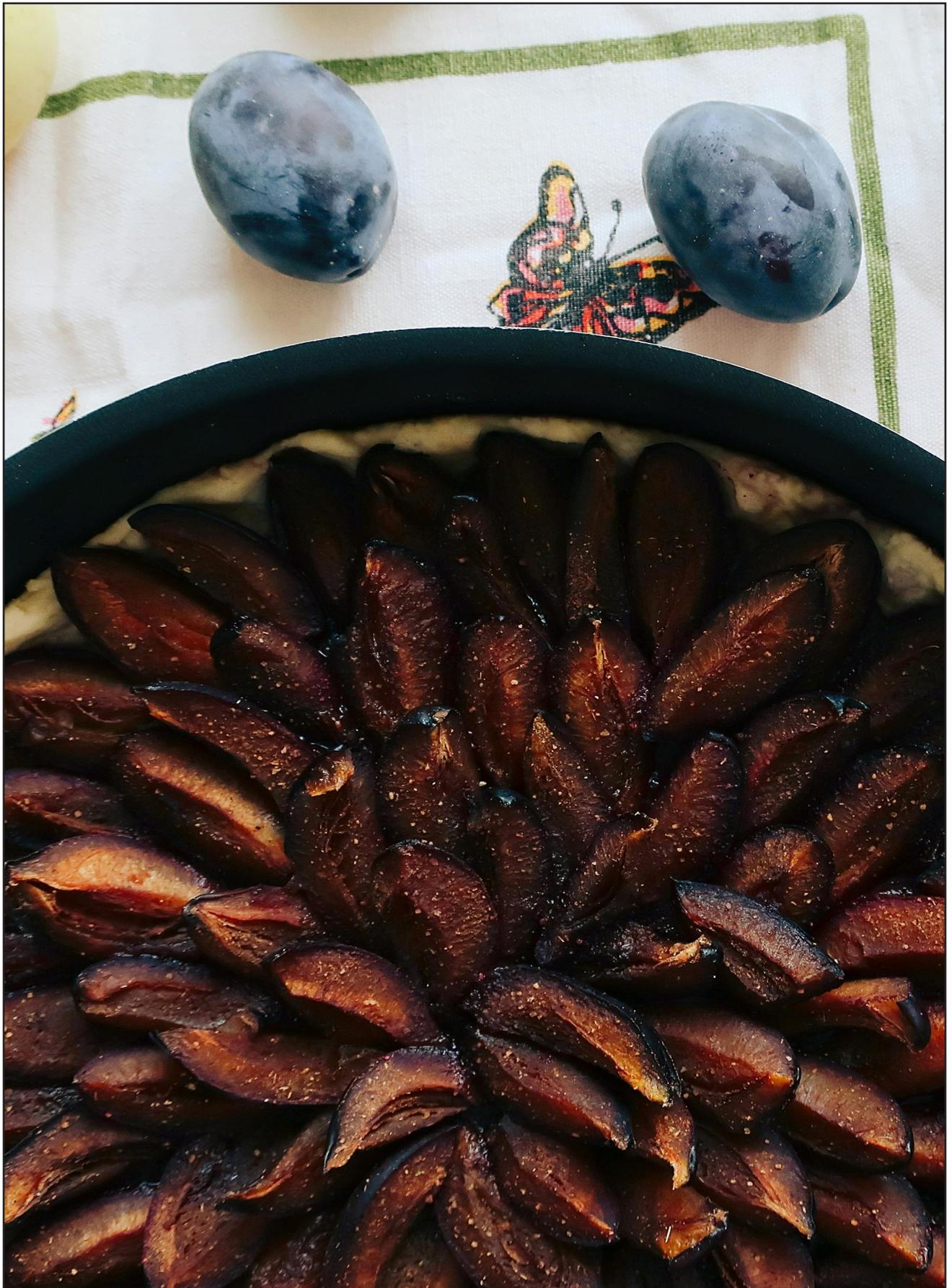
Partly frustrated, partly relieved, Laurie lowered the gun. She slipped down the stairs with the dog. Quietly opening the kitchen door, she let Rosie out and, pointing toward the henhouse, hoarsely

whispered, “Get that fox.” The dog bounded off the porch, but before she got halfway across the yard, the fox was gone.

Laurie walked down to the henhouse, murmured assurances to the clucking hens, and checked on the rabbits. It was raining a fine drizzle, and the white rubber cover over the top of the rabbit hutch was glossy and wet. As Laurie started to lift it, she noticed a print that looked like a baby’s foot smudged gray on the smooth surface. The sight of it sent her heart pounding. She instinctively placed her hand on her belly. Her baby? It was irrational, but the shock of the footprint sent her reeling. She then recalled that the print of a raccoon’s back paw looks like a baby’s foot. The diminishing burst of adrenaline now left her weak, left her leaning against the hutch to keep from falling. She looked down the length of the cover and saw more baby’s feet along with the tiny print of a raccoon’s front paw, trailing up to the out-swung awning window of the hen house.

Suddenly, the scenario of two nights before played out in her mind. A raccoon must have climbed on the rabbit hutch, walked over to the window, and tried to reach in through the chicken wire covering it. Terrorized, the two chickens ran out into the run. Laurie pushed the window until it was only slightly open, just enough to let some air in. She then realized the futility. A raccoon that could pry open garbage can lids probably could swing open a window. She stood there in the drizzle soaking through her shirt and her hair, staring at the prints and the window, feeling defenseless. There was no life she could keep safe.





A Birthday Cake for Christmas

By: John Howe

John Howe has written a handful of short stories. He has previously been published in October Hill Magazine.

Dr. Joel H. Williams, M.D. escorted me into this world as my grandfather used to say, “for better or worse around 10:00am on Christmas morning of 1950.

While I only vaguely remember seeing Dr. Williams for routine checkups a few years later when I was a small child, I am told he was a member of the Medical Corps during World War I. I am further told he had never delivered a “Christmas Baby” but that was something he had always hoped to do. For her efforts, which were no doubt considerable, my mother was given a dime by the good doctor as her reward for giving birth on Christmas morning. That very dime was passed on to me by the woman who made this all possible; it has been worn thin but is a prized possession.

Dr. Williams’ generous gift spawned a tradition in our family of giving pocket change to the parents of newly minted children, intended, I suppose, for good luck.



Growing up a “Christmas baby” usually resulted in a customary and routine smile at the license bureau and those other odd offices that still ask you to verify your date of birth. Over the years, it prompted the usual commentary: “You were cheated,” or “Aww ... That’s not really fair.” And to be sure, especially as a kid, I noticed this alleged inequity in gifts, especially when it was tossed in my face. Yet another frequent comment was, “This is for Christmas *and* your birthday.” Honestly though, I never paid it much mind because Christmas was always a busy, chaotic family holiday and by the way, the gift giving was long forgotten in the midst of all the other excitement.

A Christmas birthday was unique among my school friends. Besides, I always felt I was in pretty good company, birthday-wise. There is some debate whether or not Christ was actually born on the twenty-fifth of December, but really, who am I to argue with the multitudes of Christians who observe that day to celebrate the birth of their Savior? But without one second’s hesitation, I’ll claim Jimmy Buffet, Sissy Spacek, and football star Larry Csonka as my birthday companions.

What did not go unnoticed was the absence of birthday cake. Incidentally, Christmas and all other major holidays in our family were actually a time for pie. One Christmas season, when I was six going on seven, I casually mentioned to my mother, probably to provoke a child-sized guilt trip, that I’d never had a birthday cake, and I wondered aloud if it might be a possibility. Whether or not she was “guilted” into it, my mom surprisingly responded in the affirmative.

“If you don’t want pie, that sounds like a pretty good idea to me.” I still wanted the pie, but visions of sugarplums started dancin’ in my head.

One cold, grey winter evening after I had spent some quality time playing ping-pong at the old YMCA, I walked a couple of blocks to my dad’s office. Dad and I drove up North Benton Street to Mrs. Maple’s house to pick up my birthday confection. Mrs. Maple went to my folk’s church and was well-known in the congregation for her bakin’ and cake decoratin’ skills. She worked the “church basement and parish hall” circuit doin’ more bake sales and chili suppers than you could “shake a stick at,” and that was where her reputation had been defined. She was renowned for her decorated cakes, cupcakes and pastries. My cake was enclosed in a white cardboard bakery box and was to remain a secret until served later that

evening. I didn't mind that at all and since it was in our possession, there were more visions of even more sugarplums.

My maternal grandparents came by the house that evening, still several days before Christmas. I don't recall them bringing me a gift, but my grandfather always gave me a silver dollar—a customary gift when I was that age. We ate our supper, and I settled in to be evening royalty, fawned over by loving grandparents, parents and maybe even a kind word from my sis.

The time was drawing nigh for being served a slice of my very first birthday cake. The box was opened, and the cake was brought to the table. It was a work of art: caramel-colored icing, red poinsettias in the upper corner with some green leaves, and "Happy Birthday" written diagonally across the center. I didn't know food could look so good and I remember my excitement to this day... I was the luckiest kid in the world—or at least on the Ellicott Road.

Even though I was the "birthday boy," proper etiquette was still observed to the letter in our household. My grandparents were served first as they were our elders and our guests. That was no big deal and actually added to the anticipation. My sis was anglin' for it, but mom had reserved the corner slice of cake with the poinsettia icing for me. Finally, my slice of cake was placed before me, it was a celebratory moment, and it was time for me to indulge.

Some things are just not as you might expect ... as it turned out, Mrs. Maple's work of art was a prune cake ... not exactly what a little kid would expect on his first voyage into birthday cake. My sis and I were taught never to be critical of the food set before us, no matter how much we disliked it ... and to a small boy "dislike" was an understatement. So, I held my tongue, literally and figuratively. As I recall, I scraped only the icing from the cake ... I probably tried to eat some of the actual cake, but that effort proved unsuccessful.

"Don't you like your cake," someone asked. My mom looked a tad disappointed that I did not seem more excited.

"He'd be plum crazy not to," my grandpa chuckled. My sis rolled her eyes so that only I could see. The humor was lost on me.

Over the years, I have grown to enjoy holiday fruit cakes, those with dates and raisins and nuts: they all

pretty much resemble prune cake. Today, I seriously doubt that I could discern a prune cake from any other fruit cake, and I have grown to like them all.

Every year when Christmas rolled around and even some months when someone else's birthday was being celebrated, I'd tease my mother and remind her of that prune cake. This exchange went on for years.

"Why couldn't you have just baked me a pie?"

"You told me you wanted a birthday cake. Your dad and I only did what you wanted."

"But a prune cake ... really? I was a little kid, what little kid would want a prune cake?"

My mom's usual response was always iced with a quote, "I'm told Marie Antoinette said, 'let them eat cake.' To my knowledge, Marie never offered anybody pie ... but had they asked, I'm sure she would have. You didn't ask for pie, you asked and got a cake, that's what you said you wanted. You'd be plum crazy to turn down a prune cake." I remembered my grandpa's little joke.

Well into her nineties, my mother figuratively "put down her spoon"... It's been more than ten years now. During our last Christmas together, I jokingly reminded her of the prune cake that I'd gotten nearly seventy years before and the trauma her little boy had suffered.

As always, we shared a laugh, she gave me "the look" and never batted an eye. The old woman flashed her big ol' Cheshire cat grin and told me, "Boy, you'll never let me forget that will ya? If I could still move around the kitchen, I'd try to make you another one."

She did not invoke Marie Antoinette this time around, but instead said, "Why, you could have your cake and eat it too... and by the way ... you'd be plum crazy to turn down a prune cake."



Variations of Smiles

By: William Cass

William Cass has published over 395 short stories and won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal. He's been nominated once for Best of the Net, twice for Best Small Fictions, six times for the Pushcart Prize, and had three short story collections released by Wising Up Press.

In the mid-2000s, St. Paul had already developed a fairly vibrant theater scene. Since graduating upstate the previous year with honors in Theater Arts, I'd managed to score a few minor parts there in second-rate productions. But as I sat among other hopefuls at a well-respected venue that snowy Saturday morning, I had an especially strong yearning for the starring role we were all waiting our turns to audition for. It was the same part I'd had in a college production, and one with which I felt a compelling connection.

A dozen or so of us sat crowded together in folding chairs in a dim space just off-stage. The young man next to me had draped his coat over the back of his chair revealing an untucked flannel shirt over faded jeans. His deep-set eyes lurked somewhere between fetching and disconcerting, as did the carefully curated three-day stubble gracing his cheeks and chin. He was so handsome, it was almost off-putting.

He glanced my way, appeared to hesitate, then said, "I saw you in 'Ragtime.' You were good."

I frowned a little as I regarded him, then said, "Thanks. We didn't get big crowds. Can't believe you even saw it."

"I did and enjoyed your performance," he said and smiled. "You have a nice voice. You could definitely get this part."

"Appreciate that." I smiled to myself. "You acted around here for long?"

His lips closed together, it seemed, in practiced contemplation. "Been in a few things," he said. "Some community theater. One pretty good role at the Orpheum. Another small part recently at Park

Square."

I felt my eyebrows rise because those last two places were notable. I said, "No kidding."

He shrugged. "Nothing special. No stellar reviews or anything."

"Just the same," I said. "The Orpheum and Park Square...you don't sneeze at that."

We both turned towards the stage where the current auditioner's voice rose along with piano accompaniment. Then the young man looked back, extended his hand, and said, "Name's Neal Turner, by the way".

"Ben Howland," I replied, shaking it.

We released each other's grasp as the last auditioner pushed glumly through the plush stage curtain and by us on his way to the side exit.

Neal whispered, "He didn't look real happy."

"No," I agreed.

A name was called from off-stage, and we watched the next auditioner rise and disappear through the curtain. Neal and I grew quiet again, then both started fiddling with our cell phones. I'd just become third in the audition order, and Neal was right after me. My stomach began to grumble.

He looked over again and said, "Hungry?"

"Nerves, I'm afraid."

Neal nodded slowly, appearing to study me, then

said, "You know what always calms me down when I feel like that? A nice hot cup of herbal tea."

"That right?"

"Yep." He laid his palm on his stomach. "And I could actually go for one of those myself right now." He held his mild, even gaze. "I'd run out real quick and grab us a couple, but I left my wallet in the car."

"I have money," I told him, leaning forward towards the glimpse of the stage where the auditions had been taking about fifteen minutes each. "Do you think there's enough time?"

"Sure." He pursed his lips confidently. "And I can text you if they call for you. There's a cafe right next door."

I glanced from the stage curtain to the side exit and back, considered for a moment, then said, "Here, give me your phone and I'll put in my number."

He did, and after I finished, I pushed myself to my feet. "See you shortly, then."

"Much obliged," he told me. "My turn next time."

We exchanged short nods, then I walked quickly across the floorboards and out the door into gusts of snow.

There were several café patrons in front of me waiting for the barista. I began shuffling nervously and glancing often at my silent phone until I was finally able to place my order. A few minutes later, cups were placed before me at the pick-up station, I sleeved them, and hurried back to the theater. Just as I entered the audition area, the stage curtain opened and the director emerged there with his arm around Neal's shoulders.

"Well," he announced, looking the rest of us over. "I'm going to save you all some time and trouble." He gave Neal a pleased glance as the younger man grinned and dropped his head in a sheepish manner. The director gave Neal's shoulder a little shake, then said, "This guy just knocked it out of the park, and we've made our decision. He's exactly who we want for the part, so the rest of you are free to be on your way."

Neal lifted a rueful hand as the director clapped him once on the shoulder and returned through the curtain onto the stage. The remaining auditioners

had already begun standing up and collecting their things. A few of them mumbled congratulations to Neal before shuffling past me and out the side exit.

When Neal and I were the only ones left, he looked at me with a wry smile, shrugged, and said, "Sorry. Things moved quickly after you left. Next guy up didn't last through the first song before they let him go, and the one after him bailed completely." He cocked his head. "I tried texting you when they called your name."

I stared at him, heat radiating up my back and through the cup sleeves until I hissed, "No, you didn't. I checked my phone every five seconds."

"Must have hit a wrong digit."

"All you had to do was tap on my damn number. That's why I entered it into your fucking cell."

His posture shifted in a way that seemed both dismissive and uneasy. His next smile and shrug merged the same qualities. I felt color rise, my eyes narrow and my jaw clench. Finally, resisting an urge to howl, I dropped both cups in the trash can next to me, turned, and pushed outside into what had become a raging snowstorm. It seemed fitting for what I was feeling.



Several weeks later, I happened upon a very favorable radio review of Neal's opening performance and quickly turned it off. Afterwards, I furiously chased away further thoughts about our interaction and its result, and instead forced myself to concentrate on other upcoming auditions I scrambled to squeeze in between my shifts waiting tables. I only managed to receive a few unremarkable parts here and there, but continued slogging away at my acting dreams for better than a year until, after completing a particularly strenuous role in a local playwright's attempt at loud and piercing rock opera, I suddenly developed singing and speaking difficulties. I was subsequently diagnosed with vocal cord polyps, which left my voice hoarse and breathy.

Even after speech therapy, it settled for good into a hushed, throaty timbre. Needless to say, this abruptly and permanently curtailed any and all acting pursuits for me.

To say I was devastated would have been an

understatement. I'd fallen in love with theater as a child, especially musicals, and had been performing ever since. My ravaged psyche was battered further by additional news about Neal's growing reputation in the field. As much as I tried to dismiss the after-effects of our audition incident together, the pain and anger associated with it never really seemed to dissipate. This became especially true when I allowed myself to ponder what might have been my future had I received that role and progressed along a positive path like Neal's instead of ruining my voice screaming Queen-type ballads at the top of my lungs nightly throughout a ten-week run. I cursed whenever I thought of standing that Saturday morning weak-kneed in humiliation off-stage; I actually cringed every time any thought of Neal invaded my mind uninvited, which occurred more often than I hoped or would have imagined possible.

After my medical diagnosis, I'd be the first to admit that I wallowed in self-pity and lack of direction, taking on more mindless, numbing waiter shifts to fill time and make ends meet. This continued for almost another year until an old college friend who'd also relocated to the Twin Cities and served as arts editor for one of its daily newspapers, called me one afternoon and asked me to attend and review the opening of a new play that evening. He told me his regular critic had quit unexpectedly that morning and he was suddenly reminded of the occasional movie reviews I wrote for the college newspaper we'd worked on together. Since I'd arrived in St. Paul, we'd met semi-regularly for lunch, so he was aware of my recent and unfortunate transition in life. He went on to say that this would give me the chance to stay connected to the world I loved so much, just in a slightly different way. His persuasive reasoning, in addition to the much-needed pay he explained I'd receive, convinced me to give the review a whirl.

My resulting effort was well-enough received that my friend offered me a permanent position with the paper writing reviews of all kinds—plays, movies, musical performances—but theater remained my favorite and became my specialty. Of course, this meant I had no choice but to attend several productions in which Neal performed, but I resolutely refused to let our past interfere with my reviews of his performances, which were consistently positive and sometimes even glowing in nature.

Ironically, not too long after Neal moved to Chicago to take on more prestigious acting offers, I also accepted a transfer there to write reviews for one of our larger sister newspapers. His notoriety

continued to grow, and I heard over time that he'd married and had a child, but our paths never actually crossed in person until we'd both been in our new location for several more years.

After attending the closing night of a production in which he'd starred, I went out for beers at an adjacent watering hole with some front-of-the-house folks I'd become friendly with. It was an old establishment with lots of dark wood, booths, and a short bar. My friends and I were already huddled together with refills in a booth by the time Neal entered with a small group of other actors from the production and took up spots facing us at the bar's midpoint. The two of us exchanged fleeting, surreptitious glances while he and his castmates ordered, then began jostling each other with lots of backslapping and raucous laughter.

A few minutes later, a waitress appeared at our table carrying a tray of pints. She began passing them out while we frowned at one another until I said to her, "We didn't order these."

She'd finished distributing the glasses, so used her free hand before leaving to gesture towards the bar and say, "He did."

When I turned in the direction she'd indicated, I saw Neal looking our way. He extended his glass towards us, but seemed to be staring directly at me, a small, wry smile creasing his lips not unlike the one he wore after those long-ago auditions. I felt my blood quicken before I stood, stammered excuses to my companions, and left quickly through an alley exit that would keep me from having to pass by Neal. As I pushed outside, I was struck by the realization that it wasn't just that his droll smile that had been so similar to the one after the audition, but also its restiveness.



Nearly another half-decade gratefully passed without further direct encounters with Neal. Towards the end of that stretch, I heard he'd gone through a divorce and been lured to Los Angeles to act in independent films. I got married myself and became the father of twin girls. Between my wife's and my combined incomes, we were just able to scrape together enough money to buy a fixer-upper bungalow in a modest neighborhood. After we moved in, I did most of the work on the place myself, so along with that time-consuming task and new

responsibilities of parenthood, we agreed I needed to make some changes to my work schedule, especially in terms of my number of evening commitments. I was able to negotiate a move with my editors from writing reviews to having a feature column of my own focusing on local human interest stories. This proved to be much more manageable in terms of family life. I'd just turned thirty-four and felt both contented and blessed.

I still maintained a number of the relationships I'd established in the theater world and was a little unnerved to find out from them that Neal had moved back to town after only a few years in Hollywood. The reason he'd apparently given for returning was that he wanted to be closer to his son, but I'd googled him from time to time and knew that his films had either been largely ignored or complete flops. His name did begin popping up again locally as a cast member in creditable theater productions, but never again, to my knowledge, in a starring role.

A half-dozen years went by which proved good for me both professionally and personally. My by-line with the paper grew in popularity, and our daughters consistently filled our lives with vibrancy. I was delighted when, in second grade and completely of their own volition, they both asked to enroll in Chicago's well-regarded children's theater program. My wife and I reveled in their early novice performances even though none were anything to write home about, and I kept my pride internal as their exuberance for theater seemed to grow *ever* stronger over time.

A blustery, rainy afternoon arrived when the arts editor stopped at my work desk to ask a favor. A long-awaited version of a Tony-winning play was opening that night, and the woman on his regular entertainment beat had suddenly taken sick with the stomach flu. He said he would be eternally grateful if I'd be willing to cover for her, go to the performance, and write its review. Reluctantly, I called my wife, received her blessing, and agreed.

The play was staged in the heart of downtown at the Goodman Theater, the city's oldest and most prestigious venue. It seemed almost nostalgic afterwards to settle with a program into my paper's new reviewer's seat just off the main stage. In the minutes before the curtain rose, I had time to peruse the program and was taken aback to find Neal's name and bio among the cast list. I was even more confounded to see that the supporting role he was playing was that of a middle-aged cuckold.

From the very outset, it was apparent that the production, acting, orchestra, and singing were all first-rate. By the conclusion of the first scene, I'd already crafted in my head the laudatory lede I'd open with in my review. Neal appeared onstage several times before intermission, and although he definitely looked older and quite worn, it didn't appear that his makeup had much to do with that. At one point, he sang a sad, stirring solo from a stool at the front of the stage close enough to my seat that I literally could have reached out and touched him. As he sang, his portrayal was so honest and tender that I swallowed over a hardness in my throat, and a jolt passed through me when for a fleeting moment it seemed that our eyes met and held.

At intermission, I joined several other former reviewing colleagues for a drink in the same lobby bar where we'd traditionally always gathered. We were chortling together at a tall-top table over old memories when I followed the deflected glances of my cohorts a few feet away where Neal stood in full costume.

He stared straight at me and said, "Thought I might find you here. Can I have a moment?"

The reviewers I was with wandered away while Neal stepped forward in front of me. Up close and in the garish lobby lights, he looked even wearier and more drawn than he had onstage. He rubbed at his chin, then said quietly, "You look good, Ben."

I was astounded that he remembered my name. The same sort of heat as on that occasion almost twenty years earlier crept up my back and shoulders. I'm not sure what kept me standing there instead of fleeing as I had the other time. Instead, like that audition morning so long ago, my eyes narrowed and my jaw clenched.

Neal's lips pressed together into a tight line, his face seemed to contort, and his eyes moistened. He said, "Listen, I'm just going to blurt this out because it's been weighing on me for a long, long time. I'm sorry about what I did to you at that audition. It was underhanded, dishonest, incredibly selfish, and just plain wrong. I can't re-do things, but it's been haunting me ever since." He kept his tortured eyes on mine. "Horribly."

Other voices and sounds around us became reduced to a muffled din. I was utterly speechless, so just nodded once.

“Okay, then.” He nodded, too, blinking, and exhaled. “I stopped by your newspaper offices several times over the years to try to say that, but couldn’t get up the courage to go inside.” He paused. “I have followed your career, though. Comforted by how well you’ve done. Your reviews and columns, of course, but I also understand you’re married with twin daughters.”

When I gave another brief nod, he did the same, then said, “That’s good. Either of them get the acting bug?”

“Both,” I heard myself say. “Actually.”

I didn’t know if his hint of grimace was due to that revelation or my raspy voice. He asked, “They in junior theater and all that?”

I nodded again.

Almost imperceptibly, Neal’s shoulders lowered. “Wish I could say the same. My own son barely talks to me. Even after all this time, still blames me for the end of the marriage, which is understandable, I guess.”

The theater’s chime rang twice directing the audience back to their seats. Neal nodded a few more times, his troubled eyes never leaving my own, then extended his hand. It was damp when I shook it. He seemed to will another tiny, wry smile onto his face, but this one was filled with self-recrimination rather than dismissiveness or unease. Conversations halted and heads turned to follow him as he left. I left my drink untouched watching his slumped, costumed back make its way towards the backstage entrance before finding my way back to my seat.



After the musical’s enthusiastic curtain call, I left the theater quickly to avoid any possible additional interactions with Neal. At that point, I didn’t really want to talk with anyone at all and had only been able to marginally pay attention to the rest of the play. When I got home, I somehow managed to write a passably appropriate and complimentary review, but made no mention of Neal’s performance in it, even though it had been noteworthy. I was pretty sure he’d understand why.

I didn’t speak to my wife about our interaction

either, nor did I share with her the shock I received when I went to pick up our daughters after their concluding junior theater class the following week. I’d stopped by the registration office to pay for their next session where I’d told them to meet me when they were done. While I fumbled for my checkbook, the young registrar consulted her computer screen, then frowned quizzically up at me, and said, “It’s already taken care of.”

I stared at her, then asked, “What?”

She leaned forward towards her terminal for closer inspection, scrolled up and down, then looked me over and nodded. “Yep. The next three sessions, in fact. And summer camp...for both girls. Paid in full, courtesy of a Mr. Neal Turner.” Her eyes danced a little. “He’s kind of well-known, isn’t he?”

I knew my eyes had widened as the hand holding my checkbook lowered itself and I did my best to regain my composure. The smile she gave me held in equal measures befuddlement and grateful surprise, as I’m certain the one I returned did. “Yeah, he was,” I muttered. “I mean, yes, he is.”

My daughters appeared on either side of me then, both grabbing a corner of my jacket. While I looked down from one to the other, I was startled, as was often the case, by how closely and fondly they resembled my wife. I found myself thinking not only of my good fortune, but also of redemption and roads taken, avoided, and finally found. As my twins looked up at me, I placed a hand on each of their shoulders and hoped the warmth and love in their smiles were reflected adequately in my own.



SONNET

ON THE SONNET

rhymes our English mu
dromeda, the Sonnet
poite of pained Loveline
it, if we must be con
interwoven and com
ed foot of Poesy:
the Lyre, and what weigh
and see, what weight
ous, and what weight
and syllable, no le
his syllable, let us
leave in the
let us
and what

Unidentified

By: Rick Sherman

Rick Sherman's work has been published in *People of Few Words*, UK, *Lincolnshire Echo*, UK, *Middle River Review*, *Hudson River Journal*, and more.

How might one feel to be the forgotten man and sole survivor in a close-knit group who was surpassed in fame and fortune by them all? *C'est moi*.

I awoke on a tepid winter's Sunday morning to my scalding dark coffee, soggy buttered toast, and drippy newspaper, and still in my pajamas to learn I was once one of a set, a coterie, and a clique.

All descriptions were used in the scan of the article about our group, our circle, and our gang. I made a mistake in one of my banner years of making a more than a sizeable donation to the alumni association, so I still get the *Statcats Alumni Review*.

Beyond the centerfold pages is a comparable picture of our gang as we were when we were young, forty years before. In today's rotogravure newspaper, we are identically arranged in another bookstore—not the original campus bookstore where we all worked part time. The employment for them was more for camaraderie than pay. I actually needed the money.

In this picture taken in the years intervening from then and now, a forty-year-old me hung on a bookstall ladder, mugging at others' volumes because no book of mine was on any shelf. But then, I hadn't even completed any of the four manuscripts I started and claimed to be working on.

Having drunk gallons of cheap vino before the photographer's arrival, the liquid was an excuse for writer's block. I grinned as a charter member of the rear *avant-garde* who was neither grubbed with most of us published at that time.

I did have one poem published shortly after graduation, got fifteen dollars for it, but not even as much as a publisher's nibble since then. The others

fared much better, actually three had best sellers, one had that achievement with multiple books.

I have never stopped writing, but my finished book manuscripts have not been published since. Not even an editor's sniff. I had many articles and book reviews, but not enough to earn a living. So, I had to continue in the daily men's haberdashery business that I now owned and fended off the big box stores because of the personal attention that demanded loyalty on both sides of the sales counter.

We were a motley band of hopefuls, and that was the only initial link that united us. Everyone else on campus was also equally hopeful, but they were not us. They were freshmen with dewy eyes and bewildered countenances, constantly heading the wrong way to destinations and frequently arriving late or to an empty classroom because it was the wrong day or time.

There were sophomores who brashly thought they had figured out the secrets of the campus maps and possibly the globe of the universe, because they could now successfully navigate between dorms and classes and the town pubs, only blocks away, where they could finally drink after being carded.

And oh, the mystery of mysteries is how the bartenders could spot a phony ID. Juniors, particularly coeds, discovered that now they could legally drink beer but found they didn't really like it or lost inhibitions and virginity because they did.

Seniors who were wrapped up in applying to graduate school or filling out a myriad of job applications for which they would find themselves overqualified, underexperienced, and still highly in debt. Hence their need to retreat into graduate school or opt for

a fifth year of electives and be in more debt and still ill-suited for the corporate world. Or, have to fall back on teaching, for which they were even more ill-suited to do.

However, all that university shared world didn't alone unite us and set us apart from the other students' arms, legs, and bodies. So, that four-year description was not us. We were old and mature before we matriculated from high school, and we seemed to sense that in each other. It would be years until our own children were packed off to university to realize we were then almost as young as the day we were born.

My family were modest upper-middle-class merchants, and money wasn't tight, but they practiced prudence. I just missed out on qualifying for any scholarships. I wasn't particularly sports-minded or played an instrument for the marching band. Still, I was promised a free four-year ride if my grades didn't fall below a B-minus average. Pocket money was my own responsibility. I was indentured to the family business for five years after graduation, and that meant four, not five, years of schooling versus five years of compensated servitude.

I didn't realize how fortunate a deal my parents laid out was until I met some other less fortunate people. Let's not dwell on that. It's too depressing. The final bonuses were that I wouldn't have to go job hunting after graduation and I didn't accrue an insurmountable college loan. Retail wasn't what I wanted nor studied, but it wasn't the pits either, and there would always be time to write when it was the non-holiday slack season.

In both pictures, I tower on the ladder over you all know who. Ron Hastings is famous by virtue of publishing and marketing his eleventh and what was to be his final novel. Comparing the evidence of the two pictures, his full blond curly girly locks had gone gray in his side skull, and for the rest, he's bald. He's fat. He's filthy rich. His books are smutty. He scorns the press. He spits at the paparazzi. They drink it up. Irreverence to his readers becomes their delight, and his obituary was long and laudatory.

When I ran into Ron Hastings in the Newcrest Dormitory cafeteria at the first meeting, he was thin and gawky. This was the first designated coed dorm on campus. Although genders were separated by different floors, the common areas were open to all.

Hastings, gawking in the cafeteria, focused on a girl

with messy hair, almost deliberately placed strays.

Rachel Rosenberg was perhaps just as quirky as Hastings. Still, she insisted on pretending not to notice or get angry about his mild stalking. She picked up her tray, marched defiantly over, and put her food down, facing both of us.

"Maybe you just wanted a closer look. I object to furtive flirting as practice as a rule."

Neither the Episcopalian upper-crust Hastings nor the reserved upper-middle-class Methodist I was had ever encountered a girl as forward and forthright as Rachel Rosenberg, Bronx born and raised with a second generation American of Romanian Jewish Gun Hill Road descent. And oh, that "New Yawk" irritating accent.

In the photos, behind my shoulder, half-hidden, the unshy, reserved, there is no need to tell who, Rachel has become;. She is the most famous of all now. It took her months to show us anything she wrote. She passed every solicitation to comment on our work.

Now, she had amassed awards galore, four doctoral theses parse her work and her thick biography books of third rate celebrities cram my shelves. Then after she modified her shyness, she became a plucky roaring lioness of our college years, had early success, and ultimately became a relatively reserved literary mouse. She let her work speak loudly for herself while her make-over appearance whispered, "Glam!" Her nose had long ago been restructured. Her face lifted more than a three-floor elevator. Her tummy was tucked more than a half inch pleats on a knee length skirt. Her T & A recycled more than plastic soda pop bottles. So, in the new picture, Rachel looked only a tad older than in the original, while others showed varying degrees of very late middle age.

Next to reach Rachel and third to join our group was that obsequious rhymester who piled images together like a string of pearls in greeting card pap, Hugh Bentley, Hugh had an upper crust name and a lower socio-economic class status. State poet laureate was to become his ultimate fate. His muses were an assortment of sharp hypodermic needles and some form of *ecstasy*. With much more than ink in his veins, he got his wish for early immortality.

He had a job because he needed one to survive, but he got us all hired by the off-campus bookstore where the original picture was taken. We handled

ten times more recycled textbooks than classics and *avant garde* literature.

Since dinner was never served in the dorm on Sunday evenings, our mission was to make the worker bees like Rachel and Hugh have economical but gourmet dinners in one of our cubicle-sized lodgings where the forbidden cooking in the rooms signs were ignored. If it was Pizza Sunday, exotic toppings had to be added. Stews had to have chicken and meatballs, but no pork in deference to Rachel.

The fifth group member was Enid Stryker, a distant relative of the medical equipment company. She was too distant a relative to be an heiress. Still, her father and mother, both OB/GYNs, did as well in their investments and stock market picks as the joint medical practice. Enid was the classy classicist who decided not to dabble in realism.

Enid shunned the vulgar and wrote dramas about St. Cecelia and her propensity for virginity, something she lost long before college. The passions of our bed mismatched the passion of her play. The starkness of her theatricals barely matched the emoting of her orgasms. It was easier for her to come to me than the other way around because of the female dorm floors' constant attendant chaperone's vigils, hourly patrols, and unannounced room checks.

She was a realist in bed, but her plays were unreal. I need to define the difference and add surreal.

She left me for an unnamed "*her*" and ascended to writing skin flicks and soft porn. Her work was often featured in retrospectives and is now regarded as an above ground cult classic. She's seen in the photographs sitting regally on a high-backed bar stool, which she frequently fell off for comic relief. She always had a similar high stool as a trademark when accepting accolades after a showing of her films.

The last time for the pratfall came and she landed in the orchestra pit still clutching some cheezie award statuette. That was one time gag, too many falls, and she was laid up in the hospital, where she ultimately died of a staph infection. Still, it was unprovable which staff member was responsible, so the lawsuit was dismissed, much to her greedy adopted children's chagrin.

And Mark Strand was the one who was published even before we grouped. Who never faded, who wrote incessantly in every possible form and genre

and found steady acceptance proving to be prolific, good, and damned lucky eternally prevailed. He was the most athletic, constantly pushing to run the extra mile, jump the highest hurdle, climb the highest hill, and drink the most Boilermakers. He was the one who died of a silent heart attack.

That left over the one who was never seen writing, nor was her writing ever seen, if it even existed. Evelyn Wright, whose name we thought was a misnomer, because she always took the wrong side of an argument. Evelyn became an editor and a publishing powerhouse. Who said sleeping up the corporate ladder with successively important executives was a waste of Evelyn's time,

She never did a thing for any of us to advance our writing careers. She wouldn't take my calls or read my manuscripts. However, Evelyn discovered more best-selling authors than Maxwell Perkins perceived could even exist.

She loved her chalet in Maine and finally semi-retired there, editing only books from her select collection of writers. She was an odd mixture of procrastination, laziness, and impatience. She was always the first to say, "Let's go already," but was last out the door. It was that trio of character traits that was her eventual undoing. Waiting for the last minute until the snowstorm was to start, she lolled around until it was almost too late for a long-awaited assignment.

Evelyn sped off in her vintage roadster without taking the time or care to clean snow off the hood and roof. With the combination of a sudden stop and an errant gust of wind at the end of the covered bridge that bordered her community, the snow piled off onto the windshield, blocking the view at the most inopportune driving time. Without proper snow tires or chains, she blindly skidded off the road through the low embankment and into the frozen rivulet. The car broke through the ice, filled with cold water, and rolled on its side; otherwise, it wouldn't have been completely submerged.

I never heard whether it was the concussive force of her head hitting the windshield, drowning, or hypothermia. Still, she lost her life in Spiney Creek, within five miles of her chalet. For some reason, the obit article mentioned something we knew as her self-professed trademark. She never went out except when wearing a matching bra and panty set, of which she had three drawerfuls. Her last one was pale blue and lacy.

We were all so different and yet united. However, we were of different genders, with vastly aggregated sexual proclivities, came from various communities and locals, were of other religious faiths with varying degrees of devoutness, left-of-center politics, and staunch avowed individuals.

Yet, for four glorious years, we were the most cohesive pack on campus. We were insulated, needed no one else, and functioned with equanimity and high-quality grade-wise. There were no failed tests or courses. We received outstanding high marks for oral and written presentations and term papers, and we all picked up departmental honors. Then we graduated, and the pack was no longer there. Evaporated, disintegrated, and perished as a group. Only youthful and middle-aged photographs testify to our diamonds. And it was as if the images were holographs, illusions of reality.

I awoke one tepid, fetid morning to my dark, bitter coffee and butter-soaked limp toast to the Sunday morning book review section. I am no longer a part of that dissolved clique, Ron Hastings, Rachel Rosenberg, Hugh Bentley, Enid Stryker, Evelyn Wright, and Mark Strand, none now alive. In both photos, then and now, I am the only survivor. In the caption's clockwise listing where my name should have been, and I won't waste the effort to suggest any correction, I was denoted as "Unidentified."



He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

By: Olivia Young

Helen ran, her breath ragged as she pushed through the thicket of flowers brushing against her body. He was gaining on her.

Crouched down, knees sinking into the dirt, Helen listened for Cam's light up shoes to sound against the dirt, the red coloring staining the ground beneath him. Helen stifled a giggle as Cam called out, "Wait up!"

To be fair, she couldn't remember when she first started antagonizing Cam. It just happened.

When a red light flared millimeters from her spot, the noise stopping, she knew this was her chance.

Jumping up, Helen yelled, "Boo!"

With a startled fright, Cam fell to the ground, whining, "Helen!"

There it was. The moment she looked for every time she scared him. Her name. She wondered if he did it on purpose, knew that her body flushed, her skin heating two degrees whenever her name exited his mouth, breathing it into existence. Could he tell that her stomach flipped? That just for a second, she wouldn't respond but would quietly watch him roll his eyes

Her pulse beat double time, thrumming with something new, as she watched him brush dirt from his stained jeans, taking her hand in his. She needed professional insight into her feelings, and there was no one better at relationship advice than her older sister, Mandy, and boyfriend, Rob.

So, Helen ran straight to the living room, where Mandy was sitting cross-legged in Rob's lap, his arm

Olivia Young has been writing for nine years but only started publishing two years ago. She has been published in Ohio Magazine, White Cat Publications, and Ohio State University's Research Library. She also graduated from Ohio State University, where she completed her Bachelor's in Arts degree with Research Distinction.

haphazardly draped around her shoulder, as she looked at the too, and excitedly told Mandy about the way Cam made her "feel." Mandy laughed, saying she had her first crush, and it was "cute." Rob just smiled at her, casually telling her it was love, before staring back at Mandy, seemingly entranced.

Bringing her out of thought, Cam let go of her hand, now cool against the sun-kissed breeze, frowning. "Why'd you do that—scare me?"

Suddenly shy, Helen mumbled, "I don't know."

She wanted to tell him. It was his fault after all. Why couldn't he just not smile at her or share his candy with her, whenever he got some. Instead, she held it in, fearing he wouldn't want to be friends anymore.

She assumed that was what Mandy did every time a new boy came around. He said something about her, maybe told her he had cooties, and was never welcome again. She didn't want that for her and Cam.

Playing with the seam of her dress, she tried not to pay attention to his blue eyes, reflecting the midday sun. It was difficult not to stare. Her stomach started roiling, curling up in butterflies the longer she stood with him. Without processing the words, "Hey, let's play tag," tumbled out. She tapped Cam's shoulder. "You're it!"



Reaching the foot of the willow tree, Helen doubled over, searching the field.

Confused, Helen squinted against the sun. She couldn't find him.

“Cam!”

Her heart picked up speed. There were no feet crushing flowers, no flashing lights on dirt, not even a glimmer of amber hair. Her arms goose bumped, her sweat, once hot on her back, now a sickly cool, slid down her skin, as she realized he must be hurt.

Did he end up in the pond her mother warned them not to go near? Was he submerged in the murky, green water, flailing around, screaming as he picked the gooey green slim from his face and legs?

Or...

Was he sitting on the porch, looking at the field, watching her movements sway in the grass, laughing?

No, that couldn't be.

Cam was there when Rob did that to Mandy. Left her behind and waited for her on the porch. She arrived, car smoking, hair a mess and black marks lining her clothes, a half-crumpled bag with tiny babydoll clothes inside. Rob laughed. Mandy didn't get the joke. Addressing Cam, Mandy said, "Don't ever leave a girl behind. It won't be fun for you." Whatever that meant. Rob just rolled his eyes, winking, before ushering us into the house. They talked. Well, Mandy talked, and conveniently tossed items to Rob. He wasn't very good at catching them though. It's funny, that was the last time Rob came around, save for the occasional holiday.

Would that be them too? Just passing faces at Thanksgiving or Christmas? Dread coated her tongue, that couldn't happen. They were not Mandy and Rob.

Shoulders hunched, Helen made her way to her house. She'd have to get her mother. What would Mom think? Would she be disappointed? Cam was her responsibility. Helen's stomach dropped. She should have been more careful.

She wondered if this was how Rob felt when he had that "chat" with mom. Mandy was crying, some plastic stick in her hand and Ma, red-faced, talked very loudly to Rob. Rob just stood there, eyes roaming between the stick, Mandy, and mom. Helen had felt sorry for him. He must have made a big mistake for Ma to frown like that. She didn't want that to happen to her.

When she got halfway through the clearing, a hand

reached out, grabbing ahold of her arm.

Startled, Helen stopped. Could it be?

As she turned, she found none other than Cam's mischievous smile.

Blinking back more tears, Helen's bottom lip quivered. He wasn't lost after all. Why would he do that? Couldn't he tell how worried she was.

Slowly, Cam's smile fell. "Helen, why are you crying?"

Did she really have to say it. Couldn't he tell? "I thought you were lost or hurt. Why didn't you say anything!"

Cam fiddled with his fingers, suddenly bashful. "It's your fault for scaring me earlier. I was just trying to get you back. I didn't think you'd cry."

"That wasn't nice. I thought you were really hurt."

Cam held out a hand for Helen, trying to hide the pink creeping up the side of his neck.

Helen thought his red face looked cute. Subconsciously, her hand reached for his, even with the cooties.

"Wanna race to the willow again?" Cam asked, nervously bouncing back and forth on the balls of his feet.

Her anger quickly evaporated. "Sure." Heart rate skipping a beat, she gazed into Cam's eyes. She knew then, this was love.

Dashing after him, she thought of Rob and Mandy, how they used to find each other in a crowd, and she wondered, was it her turn now?

"You're happy again," Cam said, sitting at the willow's base.

The butterflies came back, full force. "Well, you make me happy."

She then realized, she must do what people in love did: kiss. Quickly leaning in, Helen pecked Cam on the lips, watching him as he speechlessly looked at her, eyes wide in shock.

She wondered if he hated her now. Saddened by this,

she waited for him to run away screaming, but he didn't. Instead, he scooted closer.

Whispering quietly, Cam asked, "What do we do now?"

Kicking her feet in glee, she squealed, "Let's get married."

They would last forever.

Or...

Long enough for a recess wedding.





A Good Boy

By: Lucy Carr Icard

Lucy Carr Icard lives in the Prealpes of southern France. She is currently working on a literary fiction novel and enrolled in the MFA in Creative Writing program (online) at Southern New Hampshire University. Her work is influenced by her childhood in Maine and adulthood in France.

The doorbell rang, and Dan lumbered towards the entrance of the apartment. His bark turned into a wheeze after only three yelps. He lowered his head and struggled to suck in air. I looked at his frame, it was thicker than it was last May. His jowls hung and his chest swelled with each struggling breath. *Not normal for seven-year-old Malinois.*

I started to stand up but sat back down. The door was unlocked, Lydie came every Tuesday afternoon to clean.

“*Bonjour* Mr. Maurel,” her voice sang from the front door. It slammed shut. Dan dragged himself back to his mattress on the floor and with one last effort flopped onto it.

“Did you bring me anything?” I asked when she entered the room. She glanced at my unmade bed before pulling out a chair and joining me at the table.

“You know, Jean Charles, I shouldn’t bring you these.” She furrowed her brow but pulled out two packs of *Gitanes Brunes* from a bag. They smiled at me from the table like toxic friends.

Lydie pulled a pair of rubber gloves out of her handbag and asked, “Where should I start today?”

I already had a cigarette in my fingers. Smoke swirled from my nose. Dan wheezed on the floor.

“You could clean up this table for starters.” The empty sardine can from last night filled the room with a pungent smell mixed with the smoke. I pushed aside the envelope from the bank and the flyer for garden tools. They brushed against the half empty bottle of Jim Beam and my cup of coffee. *Garden tools, no need for those anymore.*

Dan must have read my thoughts because he pushed himself up and headed to the terrace. His chain clanked on the floor—the aching sound of a slave, of a prisoner, of a mortal decree. His movements were slow as he reached the end of his tether. *Poor thing can’t run anymore—not that I could take him either.*

I dragged on my cigarette, the nicotine made me feel lighter.

“I’m bored, Lydie, I have nothing to do but stare at this television set.”

Lydie followed my gaze towards the large screen I had fastened to the wall. It flickered with images of life outside. It took up the whole room. I had to ask my daughter to put up curtains to cut the glare from the sun. *Too bad in a way; it blocks my view of the ski slopes.*

I glanced at Dan; he was hunkered like he was trying to shit. *It’s good that my apartment is on the ground floor.* Dan barked feebly at a passerby—a vestige of his previous ferocious warning. I closed my eyes, and remembered the puppy I picked him up from the shelter. His fur was rich chocolate. He jumped at my legs like he wanted to kick-start them into movement. His sinewy muscles and ribs protruded from his coat. Energy burst from him as he bounded across the fields. *He nearly killed me with the long walks I took him on.* I shook my head—shaking away the memory. My heart tightened like the smoke curls that squeezed my lungs.

Dan’s bark subsided into a whimper, then a wheezing fit. He slumbered back into the room with his chain clanking behind. I felt his warm head on my knee. *Good boy Dan, you’re a good boy.*

We both watched as Lydie pulled the sheets up over my bed. A chill crawled down my spine when she drew them over the top of the pillows. She pushed the tubes of the oxygen bottle aside to tuck the lump of a pillow tightly in. Dan's breathing rasped beside me.

"I'm done for today." Lydie smiled at me and pulled her jacket over her shoulders. My eyes scanned the room. The table was tidy. The trash had been discarded. The bottle was capped. The coffee cup had disappeared, and the saucer of cigarette butts was emptied. The last box of toxic friends looked up at me, invitingly. Dan exhaled, painfully.

Lydie bent down to caress Dan. He opened one eye and showed his teeth in a feeble smile. His large canines were yellow.

"Thanks, Lydie. See you next week." I sat back in my chair. Lydie could let herself out.

"*Au revoir*, Mr. Maurel," she said, but her eyes were on Dan. I saw a tear trickle down her cheek. She wiped it away with the back of her hand.

When the door slammed shut, Dan flinched—but did not raise his head.

I had forgotten to ask Lydie to shut the door to the terrace and pull the blinds. *Crap... I can do it.*

My chest screamed as I hoisted myself out of the chair. A gush of cool breeze embraced my cheeks as if to remind me of something now obscured. I shut the door on it. The crisp air was barricaded behind the glass and curtains.

My chair beckoned me. I collapsed into its arms and struggled to catch my breath. My head pounded. I sat silently, recuperating—waiting for the blows to subside.

I massaged the pain out of my temples, then reached down to remove Dan's chain. A noise escaped him, like a surrendering sigh. My fingers grazed his back and rubbed him between the eyes. *You're a good boy.*

Stars danced before my eyes, and I sat back in my chair to let the blood drain out of my head. Absently, I opened the pack of cigarettes. The television flashed images of politics. My toxic friend seared my lip when I inhaled.

Dan's limp body was at the foot of my bed. It looked ghostly resting on its mattress. I stared at it. My eyes

blurred. Dan's image blended into that of the tight sheet pulled across my pillow. I felt a choke in my throat, and I squeezed my eyes shut. Dan wheezed softly in his sleep.

This is all my fault, I thought as I tapped my cigarette in the saucer already full of ashes.



The Lovers, Reversed

By: Kiersten Burtz

Kiersten Burtz is an MFA fiction student at Bowling Green State University with a BFA in creative writing also from BGSU. Her work has previously been published in October Hill Magazine.

“Ah...” Catherine sighs as she flips over the final Acard in a row of three to reveal a circular image covered in symbols and surrounded on all sides by small winged babies—angels. “The wheel of fortune reversed. You have some bad luck headed your way. Try to be careful and lay low for a while. Don’t take any unnecessary risks.”

As Catherine finishes her warning, Mrs. Duchamp crosses herself and kisses her rosary. Mrs. Duchamp, and folks like her, are the reason that Catherine’s tarot cards have Christian iconography on them. While her little village in Louisiana might be superstitious, they are still in the Bible Belt. The same people who patronize her business now might run her out of town for being a witch if her cards showed the original *pentacles* instead of coins.

Catherine flexes her fingers and runs her long, acrylic nails along the table as she gathers the three card spread back up and shuffles it back into the deck. Her mother always taught her that in this business, looks matter more than most things. Long nails that could glide across cards and palms with ease somehow made her more credible as a psychic. As did the low table, gaudy curtains, and tasseled floor pillows, which Mrs. Duchamp now stands up from, bracing herself with her cane on the way up.

With or without the cards, “avoid taking risks” is pretty good advice to give an eighty-year-old woman. Catherine is just grateful she didn’t pull a different card. A few months ago she had to explain to Mrs. Duchamp that the *Death* card didn’t actually mean she was going to die. It took several minutes to calm her down after that, as she gripped her rosary tight and dabbed her over-mascaraed eyes with an honest-to-god handkerchief. That was the first time Catherine had ever seen someone actually use one

of those.

Once Mrs. Duchamp is on her feet, she reaches into her handbag and pulls out a white envelope with Catherine’s name written beautifully on the front. Catherine takes it from her gently, thanking her as she does.

“No, thank you sweet pea. I’ll see you in a couple weeks.” And with that, the old woman shuffles past the curtains and out the front door, at a speed that Catherine still believes to be impressive for a little old woman with a cane. She watches out the door as Mrs. Duchamp enters the strip mall parking lot and gets into her husband’s old truck, driven by her son in law, Randy.

Once she’s gone, Catherine opens the envelope and counts its contents. \$300 in total. Catherine has tried to tell her time and time again that tarot readings are only \$200 and she would even knock the price down to \$150 since Mrs. Duchamp comes so often, but the woman insists. She might feel bad accepting it if she didn’t know that the Duchamps live in a literal mansion on the edge of town. Catherine sighs and adds the cash to her stack for the day, tossing the envelope, beautifully addressed as it is, into the small trash can disguised as a rattan jar she keeps in the corner.

Catherine hasn’t changed the room at all since her mother ran the shop. She grew up in this little store, hiding behind the curtains in the back when her mother had clients. As she grew older, her mother would ask clients if her daughter could sit in with them.

“She’s a psychic in training,” her mother would say, a smile beaming on her face. “She has the gift.”

But there was no gift. Catherine knew it, even back then. Her mother knew it, too. The only ones who didn't were the poor suckers she called clients. People down on their luck just looking for answers, feeling like they had nowhere else to turn. Not all clients are like Mrs. Duchamp. And it's those clients that make Catherine question why she even continues her practice.

She could, theoretically, quit. Close up shop and never swindle another poor soul out of money just to tell them things they already knew or didn't need to hear. But where would she go? She never finished school. Her mother found it unnecessary. She's never worked a real job a day in her life. She started doing her own readings here in the shop at age sixteen and not long after, took over the entire business after her mother's accident. And so she stays, surrounded by gaudy curtains and shiny trinkets that only she knows mean nothing.

As she skitters around the room, relighting candles that have gone out and lighting a new stick of incense, she notices a car pull up in front of her shop. Through the glass door of the storefront, Catherine sees an old, white SUV with a rusted bumper and a solid layer of dirt covering the sides. The front license plate reads *Missouri* in italicized letters on the top. That's Catherine's in. The woman who steps out is beautiful. Catherine might even say she is breathtaking. The way the sun reflects off her umber brown skin; her hair, a soft cloud atop her head; her legs, long and slender like a goddess who stepped straight out of a greek vase. And then Catherine noticed her face, forlorn and distressed. Clearly the face of someone in mourning.

Catherine advertised herself as a medium, so seeing grieving people come into her shop was far from uncommon. But usually, when she saw folks from out of state they were vans full of college kids headed to New Orleans for Mardi Gras who saw her sign on the side of the road and thought it would be funny to stop in and get their palms read as a way to get out of the car and stretch. It was rare for her to see someone from out of state so heartbroken on her doorstep.

The woman lingers on the sidewalk, contemplating whether or not she wants to come in. Catherine heads towards the door, making the decision for her. She opens it and peers outside towards the poor woman.

"Come on in, dear." Catherine smiles. "I've been waiting for you."

After years in the business, and years before that watching her mother, she's noticed that people who are unsure, become a lot more certain of her "ability" if she confronts them directly. The tinted glass of the door makes it hard to tell from the outside that she was watching them pull up, but something about a woman claiming to be a psychic peeking out and telling you she's been waiting for you draws people in.

The woman brushes aside her shock to follow Catherine inside. She looks around, timid and clearly trying not to get her hopes up. Catherine leads her past the curtains and motions to the floor pillow closest to them. As the woman takes a seat, Catherine undoes the strings on the curtains and lets them fall into place, covering the entryway and blocking any light coming from the front door.

Catherine glides around the table and takes her own seat across from the woman.

"Tell me dear, what is your name?"

"Hana," the woman mumbles, voice shaky.

"Hana, how beautiful." Catherine smiles at her. "What brings you to me Hana? You've traveled far. You're not from here, are you?"

The shock that floats across Hana's eyes tells Catherine everything she needs to know. Hit.

"I- yes. I'm from Missouri. I just moved here. I needed..." she breathes in and holds for a moment. "I needed a fresh start."

"What are you running from, dear?" Catherine tries not to visibly cringe at her third use of the term "dear" in a single conversation. Her mother would switch between "dear" and "darling," but "darling" always seemed a bit intimate to Catherine. She stuck with "dear," but that wouldn't stop her from hating how often she said it.

Hana looks down, hesitant to speak.

"Is it your loss?" Catherine asks. "The same loss that has brought you to me?"

A flash of recognition on Hana's face. Hit.

"Who is it, dear?"

Hana takes another deep breath and holds, tears already streaming down her face.

“My son,” she says once she’s steadied herself, “Cody. He- He died. Two months ago.”

“Cody.” Catherine sits with it for a moment. “What a lovely name for a boy. Did you choose it? Or was it your hus-”

“His birth mother,” Hana interrupts. “He had that name before I adopted him.”

“I see.” Catherine tries to move quickly past her mistake. It’s hard for a client to notice the misses when they’re so abruptly redirected.

Hana fiddles with a necklace around her neck, her gaze focussed firmly on the center of the table.

“So you have come to me to speak with him, yes?” Catherine breaks the silence before it has time to permeate the air.

Hana only nods, not breaking her intense staredown with the table. Catherine can see her choking back tears, but she can’t keep them from welling up in her beautiful almond eyes.

“Alright. I will need an object connected to him. Something that reminds you of him or that belonged to him maybe? I sense that you have brought one?” She doesn’t actually *need* anything. But it is all part of the show. An extra trinket to help the smoke and mirrors work their magic. And people in mourning almost always bring an object to these types of readings. If not, they can find something they have on them that reminds them of their loved one.

Hana slowly reaches into her pocket and pulls out a piece of fabric folded neatly into a small square. The edges are a silky blue, the center fleece a lighter shade of the same. Hit. She places the blankie on the table between them.

“Good. You’re doing great, Hana.” Catherine smiles at her with reassurance. “Now, take my hand.” Catherine offers her right hand to the woman as she places her left atop the baby blanket on the center of the table. Hana’s palm is soft and clammy. She’s nervous. Catherine can’t tell if it’s because she believes this is really going to work, or if she’s scared that it won’t.

“I’m reaching out to Cody.” Catherine closes her eyes. “Cody, are you here?” Catherine doesn’t see it but Hana closes her eyes, too. Her hand shakes. With what? Fear? Anticipation? Restlessness? It doesn’t

matter. Catherine can use this.

“Cody, baby, your mommy would really like to talk to you, are you there?”

Hana’s hand twitches, but nothing happens. Of course nothing happens. Nothing ever happens. The real magic is Catherine’s ability to make her clients believe that it does.

“I hear a small voice,” Catherine says, “He’s calling ‘mama.’ He wants to speak to you. Cody, is that you?” Catherine waits a moment, giving ‘Cody’ a chance to respond. “Alright. He’s here. What would you like to say to him, dear? He’s listening.”

Hana has tears in her voice when she finally speaks, “He hasn’t called me mama in years.” It’s a miss. Catherine assumed by her looks that Hana couldn’t be older than twenty-five, awfully young for an adoptive mother. She assumed her son must have been no older than four or five. The mistake doesn’t seem to faze Hana at all.

“Cody, baby, it’s mom. If you can hear me, I want you to know how much I love you.” Hana is fully crying at this point. “I love you so much baby and I wish I had gotten more time with you.”

“Wish I had gotten more time with you” implies she knew he was dying. People rarely refer to their time with their children being limited in such a way otherwise.

“He says he hears you.” Catherine breathes the words, stopping herself before using the term “mama” again. “And that he wants you to know that it isn’t your fault. He said he feels all better now. And that he loves you.”

Hana begins to sob. Hit. Catherine opens her eyes and waits for Hana to calm herself. Something inside her breaks just a little, seeing this poor young mother who just wants closure crying on her floor, and knowing that everything she’s said from the moment they met has been a ruse.

She places the baby blanket on top of Hana’s free hand and Hana grabs it. She lets go of Catherine’s hand and clutches the baby blanket to her chest as the tears continue to stream down her face. Catherine reaches for the box of tissues she has stored in a drawer nearby for precisely times like this and places it on the table between them. When Hana’s eyes open, she takes one, drying her eyes and wiping her nose.

She continues to cry, and Catherine just sits there, watching. These are always the most awkward parts of medium readings. People mourning their loved ones in front of her and Catherine frozen, stunned, unsure of what to do or say. All she knows how to do has already been done. This is just the aftermath.

After several minutes, Hana composes herself. She manages to bring a shy smile to her face despite the tears that still roll down her cheeks every few seconds. Catherine looks down to avoid losing herself in the woman's eyes.

"How much do I owe you?" Hana asks, fumbling for her purse. She tries to shake off the relentless hiccups, but after the cry she just had, they aren't going away any time soon.

Catherine stops her, pulling her hands back to center. "Nothing at all, dear. I'm just glad I could help."

"Are you sure? I can pay. It's really no trouble—"

Catherine cuts Hana off by helping her up. Now standing, Catherine ushers Hana through the heavy curtains and back towards the door.

"I'm sure. You just take care of yourself. You've got a whole new life to start here. I'm sure that money can help you elsewhere."

Catherine leads her through the door before Hana has another chance to speak. As she walks back to her car, she turns back and mouths 'thank you' before climbing into the old SUV and pulling out of the parking lot.

Catherine isn't sure why she decided not to accept Hana's money. Maybe it's because she was beautiful. Maybe it's because Mrs. Duchamp had already overpaid that morning.

Maybe it was because she felt guilty. The kind of guilt her mother had always told her would only hold her back. But she did feel guilty for lying to Hana, and to all of her clients for that matter. But what's done is done and Catherine places the tissues back into the drawer.



Catherine isn't too shocked to see Hana again when she returns to the shop just over a week after their first meeting. A lot of her first time clients become

regulars in that way. They think they'll come for one thing, but if Catherine's reading is good enough, they can't help themselves from coming back. Catherine's mother would say that it's "a sign of a job well done." Catherine just sees it as another chance to fool the same poor sucker twice.

She doesn't want Hana to be here. She wants to tell her to run. She wants to tell her that she doesn't need her services and she should be off doing better things with her Saturday. But she doesn't. She never does.

"Hana. It's good to see you again." Catherine smiles. Her smile is as genuine as the words she spoke. It is good to see Hana again. In fact, she hoped she would. Just not here. Not back in her shop.

Hana had come for a tarot reading. She said that the seance had seemed a bit intense and while she loved being able to speak to her boy again, she didn't want to bother him. But she did want to know that he was happy. So they do the reading about him. Catherine lays out a basic three card spread. As they speak, Catherine learns more about the boy. And more about his mother—the stunning woman before her.

Catherine flips the first card—*The Empress*.

Hana had been his mother since the boy was two. He hardly remembered his birth mother. She had been a close friend of Hana's from high school. She'd given birth to him their senior year. It was a small-town religious school. Hana was one of the only people who stuck by her during the pregnancy and after. Two years later, she died in a car crash. Hana didn't think twice before adopting the boy.

Catherine flips the second card—*The Page of Cups*. Cody was only eight years old when he passed. Catherine does the math in her head and realizes this puts Hana at around 26. Her original analysis wasn't far off. He was a super creative kid. He loved arts and crafts. While he was in the hospital, he kept a sketchbook and mini easel by his bedside so he could draw and paint when he felt well enough to do so. He was a happy and loving young boy. Even as his illness overtook him, he still smiled as much as he could. He never wanted to leave his mom's arms.

The final card—*The Ten of Cups*.

Contentment. Happiness. Catherine isn't sure what landed this card in her spread, but she isn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. She was fully prepared to find some way to explain how any card she pulled

was positive. That's the beauty of the cards, after all. Their meanings are so loose and generalized she can use them to mean whatever she wants. She explains the card's significance and Hana cries. Once again Catherine has this beautiful woman in tears on the floor of her shop.

Catherine brings Hana to her feet. Once again, Hana asks how much; and once again, Catherine declines. This time she must be crazy. This is \$200 she's turning away. Mrs. Duchamp hasn't been back yet and none of her other clients overpay. So why, then, is she ushering the young woman out the door again without a penny in hand?



Hana continues to visit the shop, and each time Catherine declines her payment. At this point, she thinks, she just hopes that she'll get to see her again. She only wants to stare into those almond eyes. But each time she does, something nags at her. This woman who has captivated all of her attention, who has filled many of her daydreams, has no idea that the psychic she's put all of her faith in is nothing but a charlatan.

It has been almost three months now, and Hana has come back every single week without fail. Catherine now anticipates her visits. Saturdays at 3:00pm, almost on the dot. Now, each Saturday at 2:45 Catherine prepares a pot of tea. Chamomile and jasmine, a blend she has learned is Hana's favorite.

Catherine sets the cups on the table and prepares for her visitor. A knot ties itself in her stomach. Lying to Hana is different from lying to her other clients. It hurts her in a way she thought she couldn't hurt anymore. She thought she'd been numbed years ago. But this is the only time she gets to see Hana. Sure, they've passed each other in the grocery store before and offered a friendly wave, but it's not like they're friends—or lovers. Their relationship is strictly professional.

Today when Hana comes in and takes a seat, a smile already sits on her face. It's been weeks since Hana has cried during their readings. She's coming close to closure, but Catherine can tell that she is grasping tightly to the readings to get there.

As Hana takes a sip of her tea, Catherine pulls out her deck and shuffles through them with ease, the mastery of which took her years. But as she sets the deck on the table to begin fanning the cards, Hana

reaches out a hand to stop her.

"Not today." She reaches into her purse and pulls out a check. It's made out to Catherine for an amount of three thousand dollars. The knot in Catherine's stomach tightens.

"I know you've told me that I don't need to pay you, but this is your business. Not only that, but you've done so much to help me that I couldn't go any longer without giving you what you deserve."

"That's very sweet of you, darling." Catherine's psychic persona falls into place. She began using 'darling' with Hana a few weeks ago. It felt right. "But I really can't accept that."

"I insist." Hana slides the check across the table towards Catherine. Catherine attempts to slide it back, but Hana doesn't give in. "Please, why won't you let me pay you?"

"Because I don't deserve it!" Catherine slips as some invisible force pulls at the knot in her stomach. The mask is beginning to fall. She tries to readjust. "Because it's nothing, dear. As I've said. You are building your life here, still. You could use that elsewhere."

"I'm doing fine." Hana protests. "And if it weren't for you and your ability and hard work, I wouldn't be. So really, I want you to take it. Why won't you just take it?"

"Because it's all a lie!" Catherine blurts out, the knot yanked clear out of her chest. The mask is gone—fallen off her face and shattered on the ground into a million pieces. She bursts into sobs. "I'm no psychic! I can't communicate with the dead! No one can! And I sure as hell didn't speak to your dead son!"

Catherine's sobs are loud, so loud they seem to shake the walls of the tiny shop. Through her tears she can see Hana's face drop. This was not the news she was expecting to hear today. Catherine stares at the floor and continues to cry. She hears Hana sputter from across the table, sounds of pain and betrayal that Catherine can't make out as actual words. She just sits there, staring downward, completely broken.

This is it, she decides. She's going to quit. She can't do this anymore. She looks up to tell Hana this, but she's already gone. Catherine never heard her leave, but when she did, it must have been in a hurry because the check she brought for Catherine is still on the

table.

Catherine picks up the check and examines it. Her tears slow as she contemplates the woman who walked in with it, and the one who stormed out—no doubt two completely different people. She can't believe she hurt her like that. But it wasn't the con that hurt her, was it?

It was the truth.

Catherine takes a deep breath, centering herself, before taking the check and placing it inside her drawer, her tarot cards on top of it. She makes a vow never to cash it, but to keep it there as a reminder of the impact she has on people—the hope she gives them.

She recenters herself and dries her eyes. She redraws the curtains and makes sure the candles are still lit. Just as she finishes cleaning her face and reapplying some makeup despite her shaking hands, a car pulls up in front of her shop and a young couple gets out of either side door.

“Come on in.” Catherine peeks her head out the door.
“I’ve been expecting you.”





Leona Approaches Her Seventeenth Birthday

By: John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident, and was recently published in *Shift, River And South* and *Flights*. His latest books include *Bittersweet*, *Subject Matters*, and *Between Two Fires*. Upcoming work includes *Rush*, *Spotlong Review* and *Trampoline*.

Her bedroom window
was an orchestra seat
to the great star,
both spotlight
and the wonder being spotlighted,
glistened by glass
at the summit of the western sky.

As still as she lay,
her life was moving.
As imprisoned as she felt,
time was headed inexorably
to her seventeenth birthday
when, at last, the key to her cell
would be handed to her
through the bars.

Imagining true liberty,
a thoughtful smile
grew out of her blood's
excited current.

She could see herself
riding a white horse in a circus.
Or taking an evening stroll
on the deck of a cruise ship.
Or skiing down a mountain.
Or on a dance floor,
attracting the attention
of a dozen handsome men.

That star may have inspired.
But it was her age
that gave her permission.



Red Sea Smudged

By: Rufus Wright

Rufus Wright claims more crises than quota, more joys than deserved. His poetry comes from Blue Ridge education, MBA in NYC, teaching junior high, surviving corporations and several marriages, and hearing, watching, and appreciating what's gone on around him. He lives in central Texas, loves Cindy, and writes every day.

Coffee splashed
across unfinished watercolor
browned the wheat field's sunset
pumpkin hue became
terra cotta.

My palm's edge swept
through puddle smudge
and split wheat into seahalves
smartly enough
to satisfy Moses.

Index fingertip dabbed
cerulean blue as fish
left flopping
by the separation.

Thumb then streaked
a weighty glob of alizarin crimson
insisting seawalls glisten red.



Keeping Your Attention

By: Paul Rabinowitz

Paul Rabinowitz is an author, screenwriter, photographer and founder of ARTS By The People. He is the author of six books. Paul's poems and fiction are the inspiration for eight award-winning experimental films including Best Experimental Short at Cannes and Paris Film Festival.

as I write a new poem this morning
I turn into a great white heron
the kind that forces you to look up
shade both eyes from a blinding sun
understand how I appear on the stage
reading poems under blinding lights
fanning out delicate plumes as I land
your vestibular senses spinning
perched in the rushes of still water
I evoke a sense of calm and tranquility
the crowd reaches for their Ray-Bans
leaning forward in unison to watch
get a better look maybe take photos
for posterity while they bear witness
and recall they were also near extinction
the unrestrained slaughter of their kind
the highly profitable plume trade
decorative adornments in couture hats
wondering as I move into the last stanza
if there's any protection in place
when we reveal ourselves in public spaces
expanding ripples distort our reflection
as we're called up to speak the truth
fanning our wings as we arrive at the end
balancing on one leg to blend like reeds
as if that's enough to hide from my prey



Growing Small

By: Richard Dinges, Jr.

Richard Dinges, Jr. works on his homestead beside a drying pond, surrounded by trees and grassland, with his wife, two dogs, one cat, and twelve chickens. *Avalon Literary Review*, *Wilderness House*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Plainsongs*, and *Grey Sparrow* most recently accepted his words for their publications.

Each year my home
grows smaller. Each
room becomes a set
piece with a sofa
or a bed set just
so, no magazine
cover or copy
of interior design
dreams. Now less room
for me, crowded
out by memories,
I tuck into
a basement corner
under a bright light
that reflects from
a sheet of paper
ready to be stained
with illegible ink.



Hello Little Raindrop

By: Allan Lake

Allan Lake, originally from Canada, has lived in Saskatchewan, Cape Breton Island, Ibiza, Tasmania and Melbourne. His latest chapbook of poems, *My Photos of Sicily*, was published by Ginninderra Press. Such journals as *Hong Kong Review*, *American Writers Review*, *Tokyo Poetry Journal*, and others have published him.

No complaining, just saying
it's cold and raining because it is
and I do not resist stating the obvious
on any grey-as-my-hair and mood day.
This is no conversation starter, although
sometimes I like to hear a human voice,
even my own. Morning walk still hap-
pens because walking on the spot inside
my dry apartment has no appeal even
if I play marching music at volume.
I choose to believe I'm going somewhere
even if I shuffle around the nearby park
a couple times. People's dogs walk up,
say hello as if they are out on their own
looking to make new friends, renew
old acquaintances. It's a big city so
no hellos to two-legged walkers unless
they also happen to have wings.
The magpies know me by now so
do not expect any stale bread.
Mine is no odyssey; I am no hero.
Do not judge me by my appearance.
Behold a person who, anticipating
precipitation, wears a cheap raincoat.
I'm not an umbrella person but do not
feel superior to that ilk. In this city
near the lovely bottom on Australia,
many ignore seasons and wear the same

apparel year round. I cannot under-
stand such behaviour and marvel
at this indifference to temperature,
wind, wet weather. Long ago I tried
to reason with them but without success.
I imagine that on such a day as this,
bus drivers feel more fortunate than
parking inspectors but I like to walk
in my raincoat, hood up, to some cozy
cafe where the music can determine
my mental state for at least an hour.
A jazz version of Autumn Leaves may
lead to heartache that autumn and
aging are unavoidable, life just so
many seasons. However, today's cafe
is all joyful funky because it's the one
on Tennyson Street. Yes, that Tennyson,
the 'daffodilly' rhyming Poet Laureate
'imbowered' under Queen Victoria.
If alive today the poet would be ancient
and likely hip hop hammer those perfect
rhymes that get masses off their asses
before some assinine out of ten sports
event. But raindrops won't find me
wandering there, where punters rave
and drink cold coffee from paper cups.
Knowing what you now know,
you still won't find me.



Strides

By: Lola Basiliere

Lola Basiliere is an artist based in New York City.
Upcoming publications in the *New Croton Review*.

My new year's resolution
was to buy more shoes and
walk quickly. Today, I am out
on the town. I am wearing new
loafers and they are the first new
thing I've had since last year.
I know how to walk and sink
into each hip as I step. I have a long
stride and a better memory.
You used to want me.
It's mid March and it's fake spring
in New York. The seasons timid in
changing and not yet ready to commit.
We who are not always ready to change.
Everyone hurries through unseasonable
warmth. Don't we all forget the sun.
Don't we all want to lounge in the meadows.
Next week it will be winter
again. Slowness and stillness melting
together. Right now I have new shoes.
Don't we all want to feel new again.
No one has touched these toes.
I got these shoes at Union Square
last Saturday because I go downtown
to feel young again. And who doesn't.
And who wants to feel their age.
I pass every man who subconsciously
hates me slowing down (they all look the same).
If I can cross in front of someone I do.
If I can speed up I will. The sun is blinding.
Don't we all love the smell of spring
on the east side. *Hello!*
I trip over an uneven sidewalk slab
rounding the corner of East 88th.
My shoes don't scuff. I pick up the pace.
The sun is on my back. I have a party to get to.



Mandolin Beach

By: Richard King Perkins II

Richard King Perkins II is an advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Huntley, IL, with his wife, Vickie, and daughter, Sage. He is a ten-time Pushcart, Best of the Net and Best of the Web nominee whose work has appeared in more than fifteen hundred publications.

Somewhere on a mandolin beach, your portrait still burns.

Witness these primary colorations;
original atomica and essential oils,
men doing manly things without apology,
bearing only apparitions to honor a certain invincibility.

Covered in mud and the vestiges of desecration,
you wander the great forests as my most radiant being,
arising beyond the levity of the flimsiest limbs
and the gravity of the big rock candy mountains.

You may have compromised away your instinctual urges
but there was little you could do to stop it—
the endless hits of Novocain with whole grain bread
and the false suns unable to rise or set.

A certain sense of self was culled from troughs of despair
particles of evanescence given permanence
until here, where synthesizers burrow deeply
and the utterance of my beast is expressed as poetry.

Tides will wash away nothing—you are buried within me.



Planet Fitness

By: Boyd Bauman

Boyd Bauman grew up on a small ranch in Kansas with his dad, the storyteller, and mom, the family scribe. His books of poetry are *Cleave* and *Scheherazade Plays the Chestnut Tree Café*. After stints in New York, Colorado, Alaska, Japan, and Vietnam, Boyd writes in Kansas City.

What a world we've created,
driving across town to run
redundant gravitational experiments:
The weight returns to earth after every lift!
running in place and straining
not to feel it as burning metaphor,
climbing invisible stairs
to some advertised heaven.

What tangible works could we accomplish
were we to harness all that energy within its core?
Mass volunteer programs to exercise empathy
for our fellow inhabitants?
Personal trainers could instruct us
to take steps to the nearest homeless shelter,
pet shelter, old folks' shelter,
to lift spirits at the literacy center,
or like our ancestors, work up a sweat outside,
building little free libraries, picking up trash
from the ditches, keeping our planet fit
just a little while longer.

Measure the impact of such repetitions!
By Jove, think of the atmospheric transformation
if we all simply jumped on our bikes
and spun our way to work each day.

There I go again, sitting in judgement,
when it was only last week
I discovered the orbits
of so many cars in the parking lot,
pillows on the headrests, laundry in the backseat,
glimpses of the gravity of the situation,
peoples' entire universes.

For \$15 a month, it's a shower
in a clean, well-lighted place,
an hour or two of salary
from a minimum wage job,
bare minimum to get us fit for the day
in this world we've created.



Black Box

By: Anne Whitehouse

Anne Whitehouse is the author of poetry collections: *The Surveyor's Hand*, *Blessings and Curses*, *The Refrain*, *Meteor Shower*, *Outside from the Inside*, and *Steady*, as well as chapbooks, *Surrealist Muse* (about Leonora Carrington), *Escaping Lee Miller*, *Frida*, *Being Ruth Asawa*, and *Adrienne Fidelin Restored*, and a novel, *Fall Love*.

I put my psychic pain
in a box of black iron,
and then I saw myself
close the door on it.

The pain was contained
and mostly concealed
where it couldn't touch me,
but I could still see its angry flames
through the seams of the box,
where the sides joined at right angles.

A fire left untended will die out,
or it will become a destructive force,
consuming everything in its path.
Not every tended fire is nurturing,
but a nurturing fire must be tended.

As if it were still summer,
I walk barefooted
over the sun-warmed stones
that thread my plot of wetlands,
over the bridge spanning the stream,
around the shallow frog pond.
Purple and white asters are blooming.
A golden spiral of gnats
suspends over the water.

A net of nerves
weaves through my tissues,
fanning out from the eyes
to the optic nerve
in the center of my brain.

Behind the bridge of the nose.
On top of the pituitary gland.
In a line from the roof of the mouth,
where the hard palate turns soft.

Once I went to an exhibit of silence
at the Guggenheim Museum.
Five people at a time were given access
to a room of pure silence and darkness
that gradually lightened like a desert
landscape, vast and empty.

It took a while to adjust to the silence.
It was like the eye exercise
where you cup your hand
over your closed eye
and wait for the gray
to turn into velvety blackness.

I stood in a silence so deep
it seemed I could hear
my blood circulating in my veins.
I was just getting used to it
when my time was up.



Cemetery Eyes

By: William Miller

William Miller's ninth collection of poetry, *UnderCheba*, was published in 2025 by Shanti Arts Press. His poems have appeared in *The Penn Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *West Branch*. He lives and writes in the French Quarter of New Orleans

Once she was a child, a sister, daughter,
mother. She had a house, a garden,
money in the bank. Now she lives between
above-ground tombs in a cemetery
plainly visible from the main road.

A line of laundry is strung from wall
to wall—houses of the dead no one remembers.
The humid nights are the worst,
last longer than a dozen hours,
wet and moonless.

Her story changes every time
she tells it, crafted for the listener,
a donation to her battered purse.
If he is a lonely man, she appeals to his heart:
her husband beat her, beat her again—

the right man would redeem her
though she gladly accepts a twenty-dollar bill,
the familiar cliché of “good luck.” She’s kept
her figure, walks miles a day to collection
centers that feed the homeless

with cans of beans, boxes of old pasta,
whatever needs to be cleared from
a suburban shelf. Only her eyes betray her,
remind us she has fallen a long way: bonfires,
whirlpools, sunsets between lovely lids.



Broken

By: Joseph Gustafson

Joseph Gustafson is widely published in newspapers and magazines and is the author of seven books of poetry.

The poets are with the angels.
They are broken heroes,
broken compasses looking for homes,
lost in the world's failures,
trying to use word paths
to lift us from the dark into the light.
No one but other poets are listening.
Bodies are falling into Hades.
The poets are with the angels,
broken beyond repair.



Two Poems

By: Sarah Pouliot

Upon Viewing Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*

Outside of the Royal Museum,
a spider's labyrinth crystallizes,
the frozen web glistening like tinsel:
no flies dance in translucent threads,
no moths twirl in silk coffins,
no one watches the orb weaver starve.

We ignore death like a stray street dog,
unwilling to stroke its coarse back
because shedding hair will linger
on our sleeves, and slobber will soil our jeans,
but my fingers sweep its xylophone spine,
requiems rattling my cochlea, laments
blanketing my body like the atmosphere.

"It's oxymoronic," you say,
"to be omnipresent yet invisible,"
weightless limbs drifting in the current,
"like gravity, oxygen, God."

If the earth was an ekphrastic poem,
it would orbit Bruegel's Icarus:
sunken wings unseen by a fisherman
or sheep grazing on the precipice.
Melted wax drowns in the Aegean
as the plough wheel spins.

Hailing from Titusville, Florida, and studying poetics at the University of Oxford, Sarah Pouliot seeks to capture what it means to be human. When she is not writing, she enjoys eating pasta, sweating vigorously during hot yoga, and playing fetch with her ball-of-energy border collie, Theo.

Ruminations on Spoken Word

My words don't add up as easily as numbers;
they don't accumulate to a final solution.

Instead, syllables scatter like seeds,
germinating more questions than answers.

Didn't Plato warn us against writing?
Fearful we'd turn pens into crutches
and forget the rhythm of history on our lips—

the tautness of stories
stretched in throats, tension
rumbling the larynx.

You can solve an equation with graphite,
but poetry must be spoken into existence.

Slowly at first—
tongue flattened and pressed
against your palate,

focusing on each phoneme
like Beethoven reaching for the right keys
before collapsing into cadence—

a molar-dented pencil
pressed against a grand piano.



Photographed

By: Jonay Arie

Jonay Arie is a writer living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where she's pursuing her degree in Library Science. Her poem, "Contemplations" has been published in *Same Faces Collective*. She is an occasional photographer and working on her first novel.

Her arms are wrapped around him, with clasped hands,
Not hugging her back, protecting her from oil-dusted hands.

I'm reminded of how he never hugs us properly,
We'll embrace him and he just pats our back with his hands.

He was rotating my sister's tires—she never goes to the shop.
But he never taught us to rotate, build, or mend with our hands.

A lifetime of factory work, tobacco farms, and car repairing.
Pushing, picking and pulling with unrelenting rough hands.

I can see we share the same finger creases and nail shape,
I always joked with him that I have old lady hands.

It had been a few months since we were all in this driveway,
I was there with the camera in my hands.

"All you have to do is drive to the express lane."
But I think he'd much rather have the wheels in his hands.



Betsy's Monster

By: Erren Geraud Kelly

Erren Geraud Kelly is a past contributor of October Hill Review. His work has been featured in numerous literary journals and magazines in the United States and Canada and abroad. Kelly lives in Lynn, Massachusetts.

Sometimes comes out
And plays with her at night
Let's her know, sleep is overrated
He dances with her and makes
Her smile, when she's feeling
Bored and jaded
Sometimes, he'll carry her on
His back, as they travel to
The stars, her nightgown,
Billowing like a flag, to the sound
Of a guitar, he may be a monster
But he always give her peace
She is like the daffodils, her soul
Flies in the wind, as she finds release
The monster made it clear, it wasn't
Much of a loss, he wasn't worth her
Tears, no matter the cost.



Why We Don't Care

By: John Tracy

John Tracy is an attorney from Tuckahoe, NY. His poems have appeared in *Southern Poetry Review* and *North Dakota Quarterly*, among others.

Because the price of eggs.

Because rise and grind,
feckless Gen whatever,
and invent a new omelet.

Because we took eggs off the shelves
before the love mob
could come and take it.

Because the baptismal font takes cash only.
Because I caught the preacher eating egg drop soup.
Because the font dispenses holy water and survival kits.
Because the survival kits have dehydrated eggs.

Because the invisible hand is already whisking.

Because we have the ocean.
Because we have the guns.



Bridge

By: Robert L. Dean, Jr.

Robert L. Dean, Jr. is the author of *The Night Window* (Kung Fu Treachery Press, 2025), *Pulp* (Finishing Line Press, 2022), *The Aerialist Will not be Performing* (Turning Plow Press, 2020), and *At the Lake with Heisenberg* (Spartan Press, 2018). He is a Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee.

Once we crossed
now we burn
you the far end
me the near
red tongues lick
the middle

stone we avoid
steel iron
anything sturdy
a study in rickety
relationship
near collapse
now and then

nutritionally deficient
we absorb
nothing essential
one from the other
insufficient illumination
we hibernate
each in our own cave
legs bowed
growth stunted

two plus two equals
as far as we can see
nothing
but shadows ghost us
nip heels
caress necks
fingers cold like shivers

arms out
we try to feel
warmth
but structure
has collapsed
and all we hug
above this scar
is smoke



I Am in This World Again & Again & Again & Again

By: James Treacy

James Treacy is a writer and teacher in New Jersey. His work has previously been published in *Pumpernickel House* and *Wingless Dreamer*. When not writing, he enjoys playing fiddle, watching hockey, and forgetting to switch the laundry to the dryer.

Underneath the splay of undergrowth, between the tangles of branches,
Above the splatter of seedlings vying for a chance at sunlight,
There is pattern and form.

It's in the distribution of seeds,
The split of veins in leaves, in the structure of pinecones.

Mathematicians write equations
to analyze the geometry
of geology,
of gardens,
and of gills,
And become the new poet laureates.

Look closely at the jagged face,
or at the crags and
breaks
of mountains;

Look up and see the supernova spew stardust upward and outward.
See the ethereal colors of the nebula swirl between galaxies in cosines and paraboles.

Now look inside at the wholly unsteady rhythm of your heart,
Or at your unnatural desire to see figures listed in sturdy columns.
Know that it's deceit,
It's insult to the formulas inside you.
There is no

left & right up & down

To your eyes or your brain.

The calculator adds better than us, and knows the answers to the universe better than us.
Entropy is laziness; nothing is without design, nothing is ungraphable.
Fractals have made a mockery of infinity.

A map of the universe is indistinguishable
from a map of the spread of our neurons in hot electric tendrils.



Whither Tinsel?

By: Doug Stoiber

Doug Stoiber writes poetry and short fiction and is a member of the Mossy Creek Writers in East Tennessee. Fifteen of his short stories and twenty-two of his poems have been selected for publication in literary journals, poetry and fiction anthologies, and on literary websites.

When I was a lad and still believed that Santa Claus came down our flue,
I'd wake at dawn on Christmas Day and take the stairs two at a time
Fling wide the door to the living room and marvel at a dream come true
Our Christmas tree, bedecked in silver, a vision brilliant and sublime

No Fourth of July rockets match the flashing shimmering sparks
Thrown off by tinsel's mirrored strands, each pine branch clad with silver streamers
Throughout the room, reflected sparkles rift the air like flaming darts
Surpassing brilliance even of the brightest of the Christmas dreamer's

What has become of tinsel now? Its ubiquity far in my past
Consigned to memory, not in style for trimming trees at Christmas
Not found weeks later, curbside on forsaken husk (*it couldn't last*)
Not flailing at our wintered eyes for one last smile as we get back to business

The bane of brooms and vacuums, tinsel fought them to a maddening draw;
Fingers scooping up the rogue remains could wad a veritable ball of lead
We, tasked with "redding up" the Christmas-littered living room, revealed our labor's flaw
When certain siblings flung these dense projectiles at another's head

Ah, Tinsel! You were always so; that swish of energy and light
Despite our parents' reprimands, we jollied in the fun of chucking handfuls at the spruce
Indeed, the pre- and post-Yule flinging of your strands brought pre- and post-delight
Ah, well. You made my Christmas dazzle ere you fell into disuse



On the Run

By: Margaret Coombs

Margaret Coombs has published poems in *Verse-Virtual*, *Moss Piglet*, and *Silver Birch Press*. Chapbooks include *The Joy of Their Holiness* and *Where Sweetness Falls With the Rain*. She is a co-founder and editor for the *Fresh Water Press* and is the poetry editor for *The Solitary Plover*.

This poem begins with a line by William Stafford.

We pulled the trees around us
to make our camp knowing
that a hiding place for weary
refugees might attract also the outlaw,
the ruthless, the thug.

We pulled the trees around us.
Somebody knew their language,
beseeched them for help.
They bowed their branches over us,
hid us in greenery. We felt
a warm insulation of boughs.
Their scent calmed our worries,
comforted our dread. That night
we slept in peace.



healing is the nagging feeling you are your own Sisyphus

By: Mollie Fortunak

Mollie Fortunak is a university student in her last year at the University of Cincinnati for Interior Design. She has no idea what post-grad life will look like but enjoys toying with a myriad of hobbies (writing, crocheting, reading, baking) for the foreseeable future.

Opening your eyes.
The glass broken. Shattered.
A muffled sob.
A washed floor.
A puzzle piece back together.
The delusion of what could still be.

Opening your eyes and envisioning a future.
Drinking water.
Not glass, but ceramic.
A promise to heal.
Not for the world.
But for yourself.
A smile.
A laugh.
A returned text.

Opening your eyes.
Your mind trying to accept.
Something that's gone.
To re-make it.
To break it.
Speckles of light.
Of glass, of hope, of failure.
Glowing on the floor.
When do you really abandon it?
Your friends?
Your family?
Yourself?

Opening your eyes and envisioning a future.
Putting the bottle back on the shelf.
Ignoring the black phone screen.
Dumping a rock out of your shoe.
You abandon a glass when it's been shattered.
Keep a promise to yourself.
The item is broken, but the memory is repaired.

Open your eyes.
Smile in the mirror.
Time passes.
Wounds knit closed.
But every so often.
You hear the echoed shatter.
The pieces on the floor.
And the rock rolls back down.



Dried Childhood

By: Diane Webster

Diane Webster's work has appeared in *North Dakota Quarterly*, *New English Review*, *Studio One* and other literary magazines. Micro-chaps were published by Origami Poetry Press in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. She was a featured writer in *Macrame Literary Journal* and *WestWard Quarterly*.

A footprint squishes mud
into a curled border
embracing the passage
of a child come this way.

Petrified by sunshine
until rain steps in
like an adult incurious
of habitat who destroys
evidence wind dusts over.

Others tromped this path . . .
the one more traveled.
Fleeting mark
undocumented . . .
not "one small step,"
not "one giant leap."
A temporary smudge,
a mote of ash
erased by touch.



Flight of Memories

By: Mark Katrinak

Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, Mark Katrinak is now a resident of Golden Valley, Arizona. When not working for a mental health agency, he enjoys birds, cats, fine wine, and spending time with his family.

The late November afternoons grow dim
like dying candlelight. Against the panes
the sleeping cats decode their dreams.
Paint peels from ceilings where the chandeliers
once swayed above the loud festivities
only a troubled ghost or two still hear.

Beyond desires thinning, going bald,
I see the mom-and-pop is gone—
and something new instead elicits cough,
particles swirling in the lamp post light
flickering on crushed cans, cigarette packs,
stained sofas left for refuse, broken spokes.

The highest buildings sway, secure the stares
from aerial perspectives, planes
ascending till they reach the clouds,
passengers catching autos shrinking down to dots—
suburban housing, trees and swimming pools
eliminated by increasing heights.

Down here the hope a hope will thrive again,
give light to something other than a cheaper drink
or door, that once a promise is conceived
the merely modest can settle back and take
another outlook on the autumn's falling leaves,
another chilly evening threatening.



Words Whispering in the Silence

By: Pulkita Anand

Pulkita Anand is a reader of poetry. Her recent eco-poetry collection is *we were not born to be erased*. Various publications include: *New Verse News*, *Green Verse: An anthology of poems for our planet*, *Ecological Citizen*, *Origami Press*, *October Hill Magazine*, *Inanna Publication*, *SAGE Magazine*, *The Sunlight Press* and elsewhere.

I search for the poem in every nook and every cranny
Then the poem searched for me in every lane and every house
While I was digging the words, it sat on the hem of my clothes
While I was drinking water, it mixed in me
I search for the poem in every book and every card
Then the poem searched for me in every bank and every coin
While I was collecting the sentences of life, it sat on my tongue
While I was dreaming of love, it filled me with love
I search for the poem in every flower and every tree
Then the poem searched for me in desolate thoughts and forlorn hope
While I was packing my bag, it sat beside me, consoling me
While I was paranoid of the darkness, it lit my heart
Then the humming of a poem echoing my being, my life . . .



Finding a New Home

By: Duane Anderson

Duane Anderson lives in Olathe, Kansas. He has had poems published in *Fine Lines*, *Cholla Needles*, and several other publications. He is the author of *On the Corner of Walk and Don't Walk*, *Conquer the Mountains*, *Family Portraits*, and *The Life of an Ordinary Man*, and *In the Eyes Of*.

I went outside looking for nails and screws
after the roofers had torn off the old shingles,
replacing the roof with new ones the day before,
finding nine nails on the driveway along with
seven nails and screws on the street,

but after telling my wife what I had found,
she said that she didn't care,
so went back outside, returning them
to the driveway and street
after she told me she did not care.

Maybe she liked the idea of one of them
puncturing a tire from her car,
disabling it with a flat tire,
needing that change of pace in her life,
allowing her to change the flat tire by herself,

or calling someone for companionship for their help.
Now at least, I know it is something
I would never do again,
and if any nail was discovered,
leaving it in its new found home.



Charlie

By: Ken Wuetcher

Ken Wuetcher has been writing for two years. He holds a MA in English Literature from DePaul University in Chicago. His writing has been published in the *Avalon Literary Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *The Main Street Rag*, and *North Dakota Quarterly*.

A brown Fall City beer bottle
seemed always clutched in
his wizened hand.
A Camel cigarette
invariably in the
corner of his mouth,
smoke wafting into the air.
Charlie was bony and frail and
walked with a slight limp.
His wife was a plump
German woman who
spent most of her time in
the kitchen cooking.
Charlie had two sons:
they ran wild along the
river banks, swam and shot rifles.
Charlie's brown work pants
stopped at the top of his ankles,
white socks revealed.
He always wore hard black shoes
even when mowing the yard,
Friday evenings after their
drive from the city.
He pitched horse shoes all weekend,
except in the early mornings.
Charlie was out on his boat docks
with his rod and reel,
fished in the calm
Ohio River waters
as Apollo began his ascent
in the eastern sky.
Sunday evenings they drove
back to the city in an old
dilapidated Chevy.
His factory job awaited him
early Monday morning.



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