



# Unexpected Delights

# The Mocking Owl Roost

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Changing Times

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Concerto, World Premiere

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# Masthead

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF Rita Mock-Pike

COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CREATIVE TEAM Cynthia Ann Lublink

ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, WRITER & SOCIAL TEAM Sue Cook

PROOFREADER Nancy Mock

CREATIVE TEAM Annali Carmel

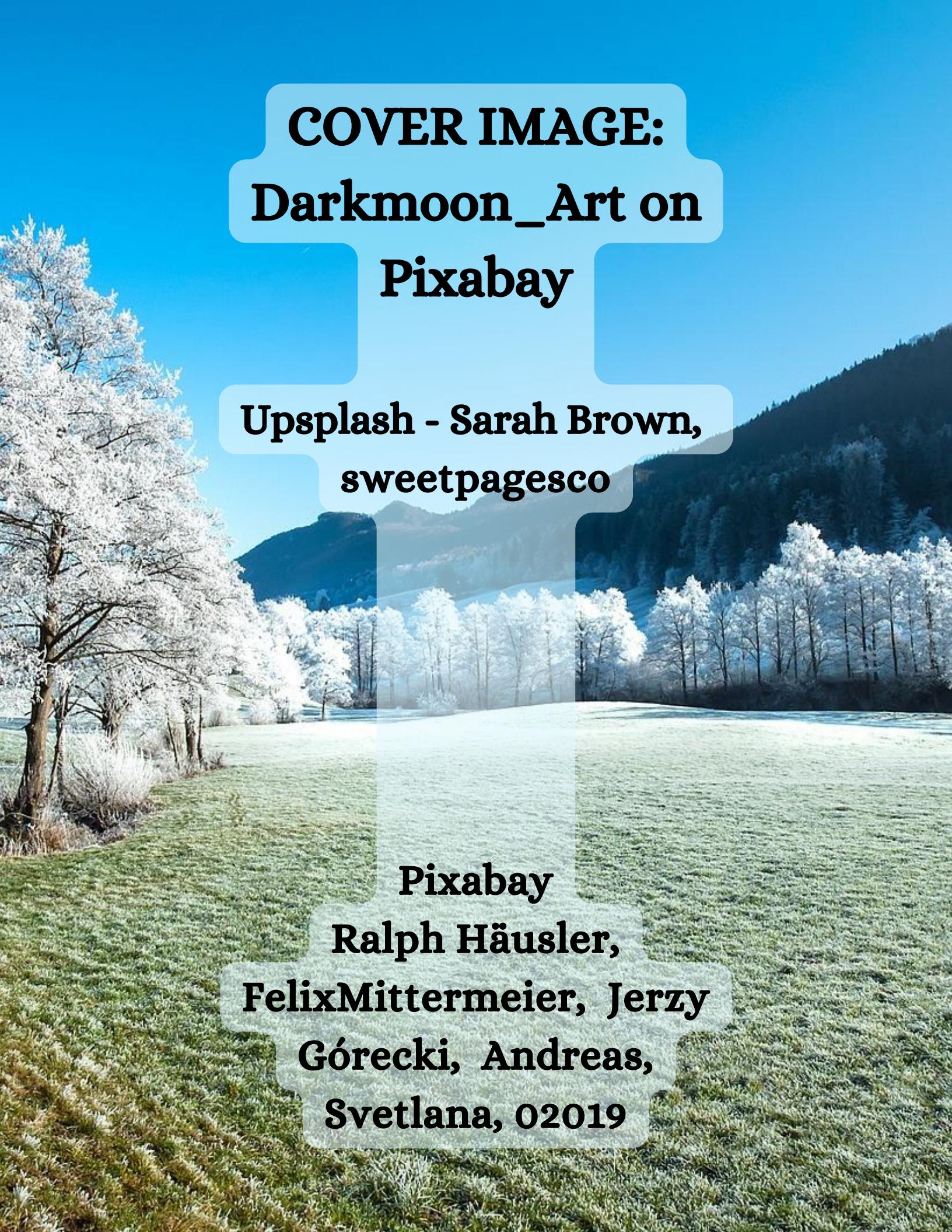
COMMISSIONING EDITOR Soren Porter

INTERVIEWER & STAFF WRITER Katie Daniels

STAFF WRITER Tandy Malinak

REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR Milene Correia

COPY EDITOR (HIATUS) Emily MacKenzie



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**Ralph Häusler,**  
**FelixMittermeier, Jerzy**  
**Górecki, Andreas,**  
**Svetlana, 02019**



The true  
delight is in  
the finding  
out rather  
than in the  
knowing.

~Isaac

Asimov

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I don't need to tell anyone that the last several years have been rough. We've seen wars and plagues and political upheaval, many losses, many changes, and more pain than it sometimes feels we can bear. And that is why we selected joyous, happy, uplifting themes for the next several issues, beginning with Unexpected Delights.

We've worked through losses and struggles in the dozen-plus issues we've published of the MockingOwl Roost, and we felt it was time to focus on flourishing and celebrating good things now. This particular theme came to me during a seminary class when we watched a clip from a Black theologian who has made it his focus to regularly focus on small, everyday delights. I asked the team, "why can't we?" And here we are.

Reading about small delights won't change the world around us, but they could help to encourage our hearts. And that is what we hope for you as you read through this issue of our little community. May you find everyday delights, like we have, and find the world is just a tiny bit more bearable as you do.

# Note from the Editor



Sometimes that unexpected delight is a hammock on a volunteer construction trip or early Christmas decor when you're feeling blue.

# Winter Summons



Steeped in light, morning calls me away  
in advance of home-bound tasks,  
perhaps with winter guile, asks  
what price comfort on a day  
that's been carved from lapis?  
The spray of an ice-laden wind  
and branches encased in glass;  
frozen needles of yellow grass  
where gardens end and lawn begins  
and a gravel path's laced  
with frost. Then the quick  
cut of wind; a breath that burns  
the eye. Birdsong that yearns,  
mostly, amid leafless thickets.  
Senses compress  
and I now reconsider things  
that are less than familiar:  
the forever-dusk of winter air,  
and a haunting silence that sings  
like receding tides upon the ear.



Poetry  
John Mura

# In the Fallen Snow

## Fiction

### Rita Mock-Pike

Drip, drip, dripping, the snow broke from the rooftop, collapsed onto the angled shed top, and splattered down, landing in a GOOSH. It happens every year, just in January these days, as the weird warm snap hits Illinois, where my Grandpa lived. I've bothered him for years to deal with it – "That gutter needs fixed!" I've told him. But he always smiled, shook his head, and leaned back into his chair, sinking into the rich, cool leather of burgundy and muted gold.

But this year, I have no one to tell that he should fix it. You see, Grandpa has gone on to the stars. I know he's there, looking down, smiling at me from among the celestial bodies. I feel his smile warming my soul. I sit outside on the deck every morning, drinking tea from his favorite mug, watching the birds as he always did. It's hard, though. I used to live in California where January is warm – well, compared to here! – and snow rarely falls from any rooftop because it rarely ever lands on houses at all. I miss him. And I just don't have the heart to get that old gutter fixed.

Time passes and January fades. The cold of February attacks me in the old, cold house and I bundle up in his cozy blankets. I've hit hard times financially, losing my job due to those clients of mine hiring consultants and canning us all. Right before Christmas, of course. The downward spiral of my world has sucked me in with its tentacles of sorrow and misery. I've tried not to languish, but they're all gone now. It's just me. And no one wants me.

February freezes into March and March melts into April. The last snow falls and that giant last GOOSH of the year shakes me from my slumber. I've fallen asleep on the deck, my mug no longer steaming as I have, apparently, slept long enough for the wind to sweep away the final warmth. Looking out across the ramshackle yard, I notice the snow pile and realize what has happened. That's what woke me. No big deal. Grandpa would smile that teasing grin, shake his head, and shrug his shoulders as once again I would have complained, "Fix that gutter!"

It's still hard. The days pass slowly as my inspiration and ambitions have dried up. My creative soul has collided with reality and I've been bled dry. Sighing, I take the mug in, put on the kettle once more, then go and sit in Grandpa's leather chair. The sleek texture may not remind others of a hug, but it does me.

A week later, I set my cup down, the steam gone this time because I've savored every drop of tea. A young squirrel scampers across the pathway by the landing zone for the snow. It drops something purple. Curious, I rise, step off the deck, and head to the spot. Perhaps this squirrel has plucked the first flower of spring and scampered off without it.

But no. It's not a dropped flower. No, indeed. It is a crocus plant, rising through the lingering snow, opening before my very eyes in the early morning sunlight. I sit beside the flower, watching it for hours, I reckon. My thighs are sore from squatting, I can barely stand when I finally stretch upward. That night, I see a shooting star, and I know. Grandpa never fixed that gutter because of the crocus. He never told me so I could discover it for myself. I can't help but cry as I watch more shooting stars streak across the heavens.

Sometimes, something that looks broken to the rest of the world is really just waiting for spring, for rebirth, for joy to shine upon it and help it bloom. Tomorrow, I will finally start that film project I've put off for months now. The title from years ago in its writing? In the Crocus Wild.



# The Coffee Shop

Melanie Maggard

Fiction



The cafe jazz mixes with tapping and grinding. Antique mirrors and local art in bright acrylics clutter the walls. Out of the hissing steam fog, the barista leans over and asks my name like he wants to get to know me better. I want to tell him how nobody spells my name right, that sometimes people combine my first and last name into another woman, who my ex is dating now. I want to tell him how much I need to be a writer, how it's scratching at my insides, how being here makes me believe I'm already one. I want to tell him how I love the smell of coffee but hate its bitterness, despise how I feel afterward. But the bell above the door rings and I've missed my chance. Spoons swirl against the curves of cups, landing on saucers with pitched sighs. I search for a spot, others avoiding my gaze, not wanting to answer the familiar questioning in my eyes. From winged armchairs with threadbare fabric and dog hairs clinging to legs, we witness time strolling by, pretending what we're doing matters. We've come here to see, to be inspired, to write, to be alone, but, here, less so. Here, there's a collective inhale when something shatters. Here, there's a greater thirst with each sip. Here, I hear my name on someone else's lips.

# Rita Mock-Pike Fiction

If I could have known what my snacking would do, I would never have gnawed on that felt hat. But it was so tempting, so fuzzy... And it did taste delightful!

But soon after my midnight snacks cut holes in the velvety blackness, I noticed these sticky, icky things placed all around. And the giants were louder and meaner and uglier than ever before. The one with brown fur on top especially seemed angry as it picked up the felty hat.

And I was distracted, always taking care of the little pinkies, and forgot to mention these icky things to Broadmor. He was always looking out for us and I for him. But not this time. I... I forgot. And my heart... Oh, my heart shall never recover.

I heard his squeaks of terror the next morning. The little ones were cuddled up in the nest, shreds of white and purple paper pulled up around them as they nuzzled and slept. I rarely left the hole when they slept, too afraid something else might come for them. But his screams! I had to find him.

Broadmor was on the far end of the kingdom, but I knew his squeaks as dearly as I knew those of my young ones. I scurried along, dodging around the giants, hiding behind furniture, hoping to remain hidden.

The giant one with black fur on top shrieked and jumped away. I dashed as fast as I could into the emergency hole the kingdom had tunneled for us in such times. I almost didn't make it before the other pink one swatted at the entrance with a brushy-bristly thing almost as tall as the giant.

Heart pounding, almost incapable of breath, I waited. I knew that getting caught wouldn't help Broadmor. As I waited, his screams of desperation and fear grew. I attempted my escape, but the pink giant came at me again. Back into the hole I dashed, breathing hard as my heart nearly burst in my chest. That was close!

I don't know how long I waited. It might have been minutes or days. Hours or years. My emotions could not tell me. But finally, the darkness fell and the giant pinks had gone to another part of the kingdom.

I scurried out and dashed along the molding until I found him.

Broadmor lay caught in one of the icky things. Sticky, struggling, and deeply exhausted, he kept his eyes closed until I spoke. "I'm here, my love."

I reached out to him, but he screamed, "No! It will catch you, too!"

"But..." I hesitated. How could I not hold him?

"Think of the pinkies," he moaned.

Our babies! How long had I been gone? Were they okay?

"Go back to them! The giants are gone. All is quiet. Take care of them, then come back to me," Broadmor whimpered.

"But..."

"I promise, I will rest. I will... wait."

I knew what he meant. I had seen it before. Others, trapped on these ickies, gone before their time. "No, Broadmor!"

"I'll be alright. Check on the pinkies."

# The Fate of Lovers

I hesitated but Broadmor lay down again and closed his eyes. "Go."

I shuffled off, quickly as I could. The pinkies were so young, so tiny. They were in grave danger if left alone too long! But I had done just that! Now, twice my forgetfulness had cursed those that I loved! But the pinkies were all right. They peeped at me for dinner, so I fed them. Then, I tucked them back into the bedding and sang a lullaby to ease their minds.

"Soft little darlings, sleep my loves.  
Cuddle and coo like the mourning doves.  
Huddle and sleep and close your eyes.  
Dawn will come and so will a surprise."

I normally sang traditional songs, full of joy and softness, but tonight, I was distracted. I hardly knew what I sang. But I had to find hope and give to them. They knew something was wrong. They couldn't speak, they couldn't ask where their papa was. But I knew they wondered. When the pinkies had drifted off again, I hurried out of the hole, dashing back to Broadmor on the far end of the kingdom. "My darling, I'm here."

"Are they okay?" he asked.

"They're perfectly fine. Worried about you, though, my love."

All night, I spent dashing back and forth, caring for my loves as best I could under the strain of the circumstances. I dragged a small flower to Broadmor, filled with sweet nectar. I had brought it into the house earlier that day as a gift for him: his favorite treat.

"Thank you, my love," he whispered, sipping the sweetness from the stamen.

But as morning came, I was so exhausted, I couldn't run back to the pinkies again. I lay down beside Broadmor. "I'm sorry, love," I whispered.

"Don't worry, beloved," he whispered back. "I'm holding on. We will find a way."

I fell asleep and dreamed of wonderful things and terrible things. Great adventures that Broadmor and I once had as young micelings, and terrible horrors of a life without him. In my fitfulness, I managed to drift and awakened to a sticky arm. "No!" I screamed, panicking, struggling.

"Stop, darling, stop. Don't struggle. Calm down," Broadmor said. "If you struggle, you'll get more stuck."

I inhaled sharply and let it out as slowly as I could. Panic threatened to destroy me, but Broadmor's soothing voice calmed me. "Relax, darling. It will be alright. You'll get free. Just breathe," he whispered.

The giant pink thing came near. I closed my eyes and dropped my head. Broadmor froze. Great, booming noises came from the giant. A scream? It knelt down, over us, whining and gurgling. "What have I done?" it whined.

The giant thing looked down at us, salty wetness falling and splashing around. Moving pink limbs and shuffling what I could only call flat paws, it moved away, a trail of sobbing sounds lingering in its wake. "Tarantella," he whispered my name.

I clasped his paw and echoed his.

"Do you think I'll grow my fur back?"

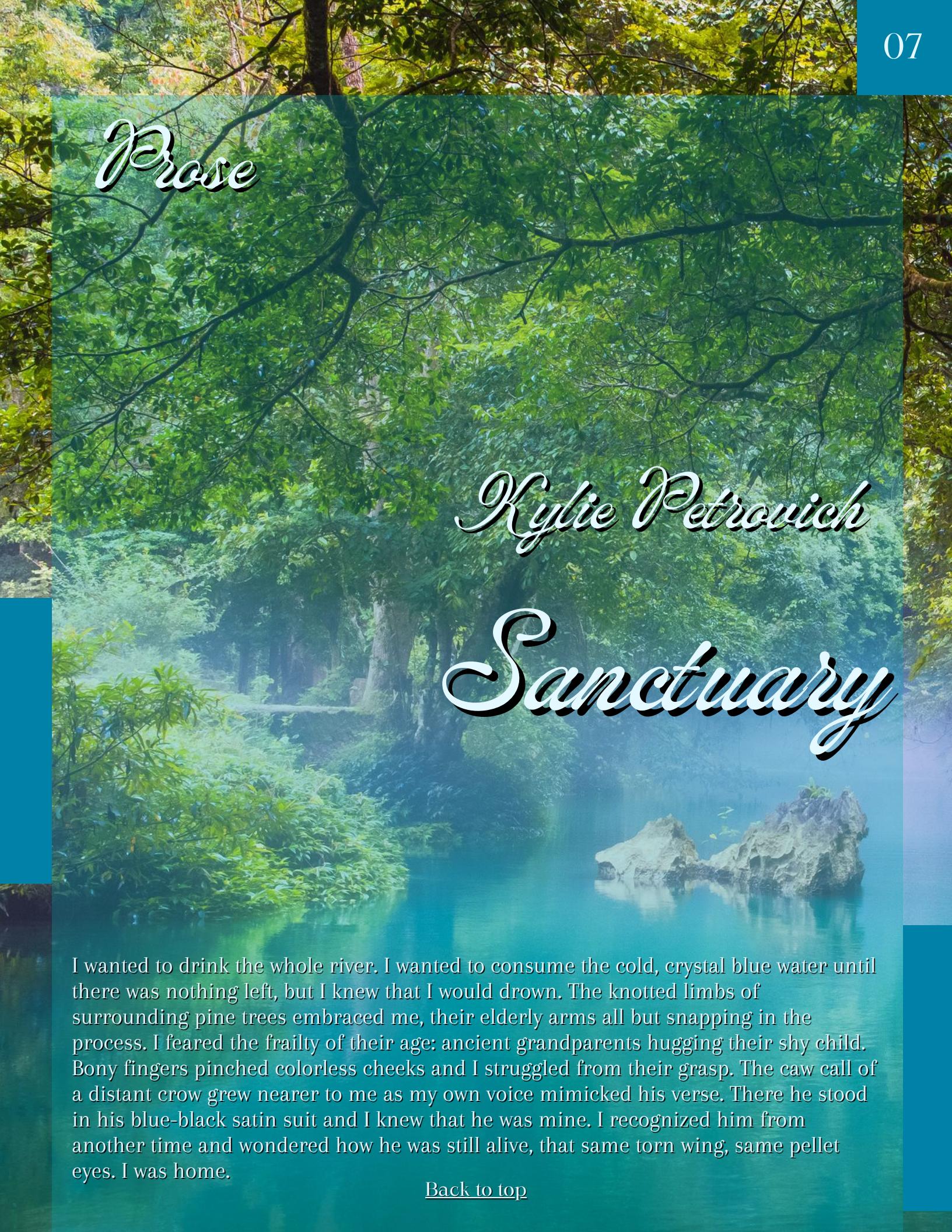
I looked at him, confusion filling my face. Then, I saw it. Broadmor had managed to eat away at his fur, peeling it off his belly and sides as he moved away from the trap, easing onto the hard floor once more.

"Broadmor!" I shouted, then whispered, afraid of bringing the giant back. "You're free!"

"Yes, my love. I told you there was a way. Now, sit still. I will get you free." My newly bald mate nibbled gently at the fur on my arm, soon releasing me from the death I had expected.

"You'll love me bald, right?" he teased.

"Of course," I whispered back, a smile brightening my eyes as I rejoiced in our fate.

A photograph of a lush, dense forest. In the foreground, there's a body of water, possibly a river or a lake, with some rocks visible. The water is a vibrant turquoise color. The background is filled with thick green trees and foliage. The overall atmosphere is serene and natural.

Prose

Kylie Petrovich

# Sanctuary

I wanted to drink the whole river. I wanted to consume the cold, crystal blue water until there was nothing left, but I knew that I would drown. The knotted limbs of surrounding pine trees embraced me, their elderly arms all but snapping in the process. I feared the frailty of their age: ancient grandparents hugging their shy child. Bony fingers pinched colorless cheeks and I struggled from their grasp. The caw call of a distant crow grew nearer to me as my own voice mimicked his verse. There he stood in his blue-black satin suit and I knew that he was mine. I recognized him from another time and wondered how he was still alive, that same torn wing, same pellet eyes. I was home.

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# Changing Times

## Mary Janicke

## Fiction

Gladys Chidwick wasn't pretty nor was she ugly. She wasn't tall nor short, fat nor thin, brilliant nor stupid. Nothing was outstanding about her, not an interesting mole on her cheek, nor glorious hair, dazzling smile, or twinkling eyes.

One morning she woke, stretched, went into the bathroom to relieve herself, then paused to look in the mirror. She had awoken from a strange dream and in that dream she had been a fascinating person. So, as she looked and looked into the mirror she tried to imagine herself as captivating. No luck.

She had a boyfriend who was nice, kind, and ordinary. As ordinary as she. He had an ordinary job and lived in an ordinary apartment and drove an ordinary car. He loved Gladys in his ordinary way. Not a grand passion but a nice steady kind of love. A love one could rely on through thick or thin.

Gladys shuffled to the kitchen in her fluffy pink slippers, put the kettle on for tea, and two slices of white bread in the toaster. She went to the front door, opened it, and peeked out. There were no neighbors about, so she scurried to retrieve the morning paper.

Her tea poured and her crisp brown toast spread with jam, she settled herself on a chair and opened the paper. News, news, news, all of it bad or sad, shrieked from the pages. But then on the back page of the first section was an ad. A full page ad at that.

NOT HAPPY WITH YOUR LIFE? TIME FOR A CHANGE? WE CAN HELP YOU.

Was this the sign she was looking for? She read how she could become a "new you. Go online to this site or call this number..." She was too shy to do either but it did get her thinking about the possibility of changing herself and becoming a new Gladys. So, she got a pad of paper and a pen from the drawer under the telephone and began to make a list of things she would like to change about herself.

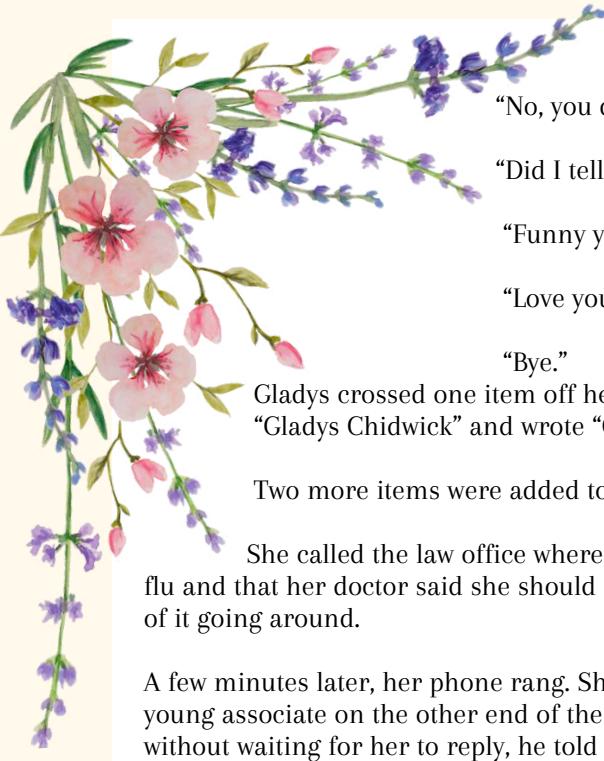
First, she listed her good features. As far as she could tell there were only two - good posture and nice hands with long graceful fingers. The list of changes ran to two pages, so she decided to start small. Her personality forced her to do everything incrementally. But she thought that perhaps with one small change there would be another and then another and then eventually an avalanche of changes would be possible.

Her cell phone buzzed. "This is Gladys."

"Gladys, it's Ben. What time should I pick you up tonight? My parents are coming into town. They want to take us out to dinner. They're looking forward to meeting you."

"Oh Ben, I'm so sorry. I'm not myself today. Staying home from work in fact. Don't think I'll be up for dinner. It's just tea and toast for me today."

"Can I pick something up for you at the pharmacy or grocery?"



"No, you don't want to catch what I've got."

"Did I tell you I'm interviewing for a new job today? It's time for a change."

"Funny you should say that. Good luck."

"Love you. Bye."

"Bye."

Gladys crossed one item off her list. Learn to lie. Then at the top of the page, she marked through "Gladys Chidwick" and wrote "Gina Charles."

Two more items were added to the list. Get a new boyfriend. Get a new job.

She called the law office where she worked as a paralegal and told them that she was sick with the flu and that her doctor said she should stay home all week or until there was no more fever. There was a lot of it going around.

A few minutes later, her phone rang. She answered the call with her new name, "Gina Charles speaking." The young associate on the other end of the line didn't notice. He said, "Gladys, where the hell are you?" Then, without waiting for her to reply, he told her that the senior partner he worked for wanted the document production ready by the end of the day.

"I can't come in today. Really sick with a fever, throwing up, and diarrhea, barely able to make it from my bed to the bathroom..."

"Can I bring the documents to your place?"

"The doctor says that what I have is very contagious."

"Well can I leave them at your front door in half an hour and ring your bell so that you'll know that they are there?"

"First, you are taking a chance leaving documents at someone's front door. Second, I am under doctor's orders to get complete bed rest."

"But who is going to do this?"

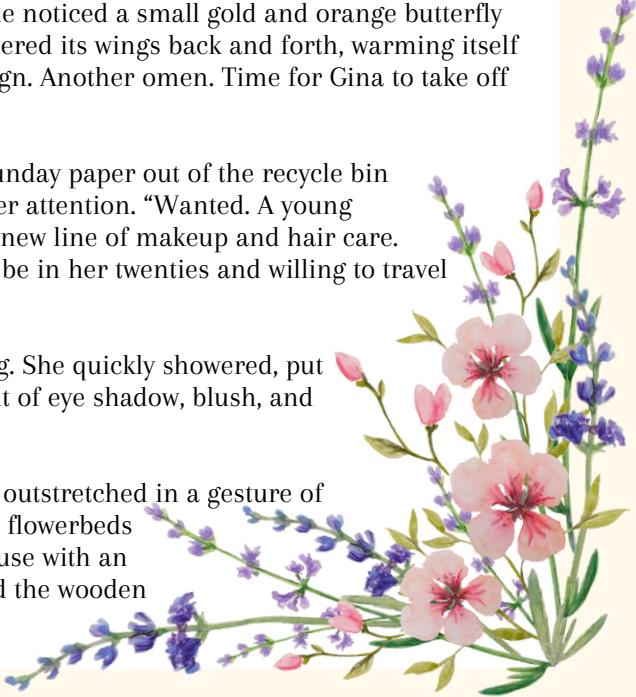
"You are."

The sun streamed in the back window. As she sipped her tea, she noticed a small gold and orange butterfly swoop and land on the outside molding. Gina watched as it fluttered its wings back and forth, warming itself in the heat reflected off the glass. Then it took flight. Another sign. Another omen. Time for Gina to take off on a new life, a new adventure.

Gina went back to her newspaper. No jobs listed. She dug the Sunday paper out of the recycle bin and found the jobs section. A tiny ad on the fifth page caught her attention. "Wanted. A young woman willing to get a complete makeover and be the face of a new line of makeup and hair care. Fernando's Cosmetics will make a new woman out of you. Must be in her twenties and willing to travel as emissary for the brand." It was worth a try.

Gina called and found that the auditions were this very morning. She quickly showered, put on her dark blue interview dress, fixed her hair, put on a tiny bit of eye shadow, blush, and lipstick, and headed out for the Golden Door Spa.

The spa was in a grand old home. Majestic oak trees with limbs outstretched in a gesture of welcome graced the perfectly manicured lawn. Carefully tended flowerbeds filled with a profusion of annuals and roses surrounded the house with an apron of color. Gina parked, sprinted up the brick path, climbed the wooden stairs onto the porch, and stood before the golden door.



There she paused to gather her nerves. Then she took hold of the knob, opened the door, and entered the world of the pampered.

A young woman sat at a desk just inside the door. She welcomed her and when she learned that Gina was there for the Fernando audition, she led Gina down the hall to the reception area. Gina stepped into the plush waiting room and inhaled the heady mixture of Marc Jacobs's Daisy, Chanel's Chance, and Dolce & Gabbana's Light Blue perfumes emanating from the wrists of the lovely women scattered around the room. Beautiful young ladies graced the sofas, chairs, and loveseats. They leafed through fashion magazines waiting to be chosen as the new face of Fernando Cosmetics. After eyeing the competition, Gina was almost ready to turn and leave. But she told herself that being rejected would not be that bad. At least she had made the first small step toward changing.

Next to each of these goddesses, perched on a nearby cushion or chair like a pet, were their designer handbags. How could these young women afford two thousand dollar purses? Did they take out a loan against their anticipated inheritance from grandma, sell a kidney, or work as a high priced escort to be able to afford them? Gina leaned toward the escort angle since they were all so perfectly gorgeous. And, and, and swinging from their slim ankles, on their lovely feet were Jimmy Choo, Manolo Blahnik, Christian Louboutin four-inch pumps. The red soles of the Christian Louboutin's flashed up and down, up and down as their owners kept time to some private rhythm. Mesmerized, Gina wondered how she even knew about these expensive brands. Must have read about them somewhere. She gathered information the way other people collected stamps or pottery.

Surrounded by these nymphs with their super sleek bodies, their long highlighted tresses, their sparkling white teeth, extra smooth skin, and full pouty lips, Gina felt lumpy and plain. "Stay or go. Stay or go." She had almost decided to leave when Fernando swooped into the room.

A tall thin man who wore his sun streaked hair in a ponytail, moved gracefully, dancer-like, around the room studying each of the girls in turn. Some nervously tucked their hair behind their ears, others pushed out their chests and moistened their lips with their tongues provocatively. Gina sat with her purse on her lap, her shoulders back, and her knees very much together.

The swooshing stopped and, there in front of Gina, stood Fernando. "Yes, yes, yes," he said. "This is exactly what I am looking for. This is an empty, plain canvas for me to draw on. This is my everywoman." The other girls looked over at Gina. No one had noticed her much less considered her any kind of competition. What did she have that they didn't? Nothing really. And that was exactly what she had. Nothing but a plain face for Fernando to work his magic on.

When she wrote out the list of her assets she had not considered the fact that her skin was fresh and clear and clean, her face a nice even oval, her eyes, while not dazzling, were a calm still blue, much like a calm still lake. Gina also had not appreciated that her chin, though not noble, was round and firm and her nose not too large or too small, but nice and ordinary. To her amazement, her face inspired Fernando to take his palette and brush and conjure up beauty.

Fernando bowed and smiled at the stunned lovelies then nodded to his assistant. He told the also-rans that he was so honored that they had taken time out of their busy schedules to come and audition.

"My assistant has a book of coupons for each of you. As a token of my appreciation, you are entitled to a free facial, a free manicure, a free pedicure, and a free makeup session. As a special reward you will be given a gift bag with samples of my new makeup line. Thank you for your beauty. Thank you for your time."

With that he swept out of the room with Gina in tow. He ushered her to a back room where a photographer and his crew were setting up their equipment. Lights and wires and props fought for space. They had placed a green screen at the far end of the room. Gina was told to stand in front of it. And so, she officially entered Wonderland.

After the pictures were taken Gina met a young stylist who showed her where to hang up her jacket. She opened a locker for Gina's purse, closed it, and then gave her the key. Finally, she held open a billowy pink smock which Gina put on over her dress. Then the stylist took her to the salon to have a

facial. After the facial, she was led to a chair to have her hair highlighted and low lighted and styled. Her tresses glowed and shimmered. Fernando looked pleased.

Next came the makeup session. No false eyelashes, no troweling on of foundation, merely a series of subtle flicks of brushed-on color. The new Gina slowly emerged as Fernando gently sculpted her face.

The stylist escorted Gina to a dressing room and asked her to change into an outfit especially chosen by Fernando to compliment her transformation. Gina took off her interview blue and donned a soft white sweater and a knee length straight blue skirt. Her sensible blue pumps were deemed perfect for the Fernando Look. A pink and blue scarf was woven gently around her neck like a fallen halo.

She was led back to the studio for the after pictures. And so began Gina's life as the face of Fernando Cosmetics. She signed a one-year contract. This was her chance to see the world. The schedule took them to a cosmetics show in Las Vegas, then on to Los Angeles and Hollywood, Tokyo, Singapore, Milan, London. They would end the tour in New York City.

Full of hope and anxiety, Gina embarked on a life of celebrity. She soon learned that there were more constraints than freedom to this new life. In Las Vegas she was confined to a room overlooking a gigantic sparkling pool which she was not allowed to lounge by. No basking or tanning allowed. It was the same in Los Angeles and Hollywood. As she traveled the world there was no touring, no sampling of local cuisine, merely a regimen of diet and exercise and boredom. So, she read.

She read sitting in airports. She read as she flew from city to city scrunched in the back of the plane in a coach seat while Fernando and his assistant were up front in business class. She listened to her audiobooks on the long taxi rides from airport to city and back. When she found herself imprisoned in a hotel room, Gina downloaded audiobooks on her iPhone and e-books on Kindle. She read Proust. She read Herodotus. She read Montaigne. She read all the great books.

Finally, her year was up. Her bank account brimmed with funds accrued. She thanked Fernando and wished him luck with the launch of yet another line of makeup. Now beautiful, poised, and extremely well-read, Gina began her search for a new career. In the New York Times jobs section, she found on page seven a small ad, "Wanted. Someone well-traveled and well-read." With an updated resume in hand, she went to the New York Public Library and applied for and got a job manning their information desk. She knew that starting small worked for her and she would, in time, advance to a more prestigious post.

Once settled in her new position at the library, Gina decided it was time for her to look for a new relationship. She went on a dating app, found an ideal prospect, and arranged to meet him for lunch at Chez Pierre.

Her hands cold, her face flushed, oblivious to the clinking of glasses and silverware and the chatter that buzzed softly around her, she sat at a table in the corner, sipped sparkling water, and watched the entrance. Her heart bumped against her ribs. She took deep breaths in and out and waited sure that she would be able to spot her perfect match.

And there he was. Not too tall and not too short, not too fat and not too thin, with an expensively trimmed full head of hair and a neat beard. He was dressed in a tweed jacket and corduroy slacks and had an easy smile and perfect teeth. The hostess led him to Gina's table. As he walked across the room Gina noticed something familiar about his stride and then something familiar about the way he held his head as he smiled and chatted with the hostess. He didn't recognize her, having never been good at faces. He stopped and said in his deep baritone voice, "Hello Gina. My name is Ben."

"Yes, I know. My name used to be Gladys."

And when he heard her speak, he knew. Ben had always been good at recognizing voices.

Her first date as her new self, the person she matched perfectly with was Ben. But of course, this was the new Ben all natty and successful, but with the same reliability he had always had.

# Concerto, World Premiere

## Rita Mock-Pike Poetry



One gasp.  
No breath.  
Edge of my seat...

Cannon boom  
followed by strings,  
high, clear,  
piercing, yet without pain.

White knuckles  
with nothing to hold,  
nothing to grip,  
nothing to breathe,  
nothing to exhale.

Like melting mountain tops  
to dehydrated souls,  
aching, yearning,  
parched beyond repair,  
resting below  
in pools of sorrow,

the concerto  
sings and dances  
across strings of gut,  
horsehair bow gliding over bridge,  
over strings,  
beside fingers  
skilled in dance.

Unexpectedly,  
the style I hate  
captures with  
all its eternal beauty,  
hope, confusion,  
light, dark, explosive,  
aching, echoing,  
heart-stopping,

juxtapositions in harmony,  
in discord.  
One hour, or twenty,  
and at last  
breath returns,  
as fractal patterns,  
moments of silence,  
near-silence,  
die in the wings.

# *Bubbles and Rain*

## *Gary Hewitt*

## *Fiction*

Claudette shivered, the rock giving no shelter at all. An addled conquistador sitting on a silver dinosaur lurched to the hilltop.

The contraption stopped. The rider pulled a few levers.

“Come on, make some clouds.” His voice soft, yet assertive.

Claudette danced from her rocky outcrop.

“Who are you?”

The figure turned. He slipped open a visor. A pair of smoky eyes stared back.

“I didn’t see you child. I’m Francois, from the university.” He removed his battered helm.

“What is it?”

“The Rainmaker, this machine makes clouds and water.”

“I thought only God did miracles.”

“The priests would agree with you. However, I have been methodical with my calculations. The tub is the secret.”

She followed the professor’s finger to a copper container.

“The vessel is stuffed with an array of ingredients. Now, stand back.”

The machine staggered into robotic life.

“It isn’t supposed to do that. Stop. Oh dear.”

The vat exploded. Metal scraps rained instead of water. The flushed professor shrank into his seat.

“I’ve failed.”

Claudette skipped to the tub and giggled at the sight of bubbles. She dipped her finger into the liquid.

“Stop,” shrieked the Professor.

“Delicious.”

Francois formed a cup with his hands and imbibed the strange water.

“I have to say this is quite wonderful. Whatever shall I call it?”

Claudette remembered her village.

“How about Champagne?”

Francois shrugged. He quite liked the taste. He scribbled a note in his diary. Today, I made no rain. Today, I made something called Champagne.

# Evenings at Vineyard Point

John Muro

Poetry

The moon's trail  
of divine dust  
brightens this pleated  
spit of shore. Flares  
of sea spray, shale-  
blue and rust,  
rise to meet  
the pale golden air  
while wind wails  
and waves combust  
even as tides retreat  
over a granite pier  
in a froth of oil-  
bright foam –  
plumes of spindrift  
taken back to air.

# Miracle Dog

## Jenny Apostol Nonfiction

Annie, our 15-year-old yellow lab is walking again. For nearly 10 months last year, both of her hind legs were paralyzed. There's been no saintly intervention, though there was frequent laying on of hands — massages and physical- and hydro-therapy sessions, plus a series of needling treatments from a veterinary acupuncturist until we ran out of money. And yet our dog's mobility returned on its own. One August morning, she simply organized her body for forward motion. Stood up, took one step and then another, as if by grace. It was a remarkable reversal, all but impossible until it was done. Annie has succeeded where most of us humans have failed: she's re-entered her own "before times."

The previous October, Annie came home from her daily visit to the park, leapt for the treat my husband routinely tossed her way, then collapsed to the floor with a loud thump. She couldn't stand up. She didn't yowl, no bone or ligament had snapped, and her tail still wagged. We carried her to her bed and petted her for a while. Her dark eyes had sunken into her face and she looked humbled, perhaps even ashamed. As if she were asking, is this all there is?

We borrowed a fleece sling. When we hauled Annie outdoors to pee, her back paws dragged on the ground, as lifeless and pathetic as a doll with broken limbs. To poop, Annie lay on the grass then dragged her body forward with her front paws like an infant learning to crawl. To keep the leg muscles from atrophy, my husband stood Annie upright for meals, making sure she wasn't knuckling her paws. She could remain balanced just long enough to eat before woozily listing sideways and tumbling onto the rug like a drunk.

Our dog did not get better. After a few days, we called the veterinary sports medicine clinic and made an appointment with the neurologist. He confirmed Annie hadn't suffered a stroke but an X-ray and manual exam identified five degenerated discs in Annie's spine. Neurological signals from her brain telling her legs to move were blocked. If her condition was temporary, we'd see an improvement soon. Given her advanced age and the sheer amount of inflammation up and down her spinal column, Annie was not a candidate for surgery. We had to accept it: our dog would likely never walk again.

It's amazing what people conclude when they see an immobilized animal. They label her, put a value on her future. Even my husband thought Annie's condition spelled doom. "She's not dying!" I kept telling friends who'd stop by the garden gate to coo at our dog as she lay peacefully in the dirt, under the fronds of a hedge. Honestly, such nonchalance is typical of our girl. She's always been the world's worst Labrador retriever. Rarely runs after a ball or frisbee unless it belongs to another dog. Then she'll eagerly steal it away to where leash-on pets are not allowed. Ignores canine company to sidle up to humans she knows will hand out treats. People assume she's smiling at them. She works beauty to her advantage. Annie could still register sensation in her lower body if you tickled her paws. When we left her outdoors, she'd drag her 63 pounds across our entire yard, traversing front to back. It's a deep lot, littered with vines, rocks, and pieces of slate that have never been leveled to the ground, not to mention various garden hoses, shovels, rakes, a wheelbarrow, and the occasional ax all dropped willy-nilly after use. Every once in a while, Annie lifted herself to take a step. We cheered her on. We figured she missed the stimulation of exercise and the thousands of scents traceable along the sidewalk. She needed air.

I heaved the pooch into a kid's wagon found on Craig's List and ferried her down the block. Tried out an expensive dog stroller a friend gave us. Both were unwieldy. Then I posted a query on a list server for a hand me down wheelchair so Annie could "walk" with her back legs suspended on wheels. My husband, a life-long dog person, was not in favor; he complained the rig would be a crutch. "That's exactly what it is!" I replied.

He and I were out of the country when our son texted us a video on WhatsApp. Beyond a curtain of bamboo, an image slowly emerged: a white dog fishtailing away from the camera along a garden path. "Good girl!" our son's voice can be heard in a whisper. "Go, Annie!" we shout into the phone.

"She's been doing this for several days," our son proudly declared when we called home.

Negative associations are thought to linger in canine memory longer than positive ones. If you've ever watched a dog freak out while being dragged to the vet, you understand. But lately, Annie seems eager to forget her disability ever happened. During the first few months of her recovery, she abandoned the soft green dog bed with its whiff of infirmity and opted to nap on the hard floor underneath a corner sideboard where she couldn't be reached. The wood was slippery and unforgiving; her nails scratched for purchase as she tried to rise, her hips threatening to cave in.

Annie over-does it outdoors too, venturing around the property multiple times a day until she's worn out and covered in ticks. It's as if ambition has entered her being. I think she likes to be alone with her thoughts.

Around 40,000 years ago, wolf dens near humans flourished on the food people supplied and a new canine culture developed. Like most co-evolutionary narratives, it's not clear which species gained the greater advantage.

Annie points to the front door (snorting, jerking, stomping feet) not only when she needs to relieve herself. She's calculating how many times she can head outside so she can come back in and get a treat. Like her wolf ancestors, Annie's been trained on reward, yet it is we who follow her lead. You could set a watch by her inner 5 o'clock dinner chime.

"Maybe I give Annie too many snacks," my husband remarked out of the blue one morning over coffee.

"It's a little late to pull back now, don't you think?" I say mostly to myself.

Our family debates whether Annie is smart or driven by instinct. Who cares? She's an expert at getting what she wants. To me, she's the cleverest of us all. Smart enough to allow 10 months of bed rest and copious amounts of CBD to work magic along the neural pathways of her spine. So active now it's like she's experiencing a second puppy-hood, back to a time when the rush of hormones would send her flying out the back door after squirrels, disappearing into the woods until someone phoned from several streets away: "I have your dog."

There's a saying in rehab circles: "Fake it till you make it," or simply, "Walk the walk." Even if you don't believe in the process, showing up can prove therapeutic. Annie lobbies for the leash and amazingly, a year after we thought she was a goner, we resume twice-a-day strolls up and down the street.

On a recent winter morning we met a neighbor walking his terrier. "Wow, a true miracle recovery!" he says smiling in Annie's direction.

This January, Annie reached the age when her mother died (105 in dog years). The pup who rolled in the compost pile with the same gorgeous face and affectionate nature as her mum is the sole survivor of her maternal line. Yet she seems to be growing younger. Living her best life during its final stage. I'm at an age when even yoga or swimming leave my muscles sore. Our kids are launched and out of the house. The past three plus years have sucked for everyone and the future looks bleak. No one gets a second chance, except apparently, our dog. Annie brings hope. She's restored people's faith in what's possible, that what you wish for may come true. And it makes me wonder, how akin is reality to what we imagine?

More than hunger and cunning has restored Annie's ambulatory nature. Her eagerness to go back to the way things were makes me think mammals are hard wired to bury painful memories the way women forget the trauma of childbirth. That dogs cannot recall the past is considered their secret to happiness. Or perhaps Annie doesn't see herself as fully dog anymore but part human - the entitled part. She dreams big. Jumps on furniture, wants to eat when we do, demands attention around the clock. Keening toward the heroic narrative of her life.

Annie lopes at a slant then shuffles out the front door sideways. Ten minutes later, I stand at the backdoor tapping the glass to call her in. She glances left to the yards adjacent then stares back at me as if making a huge decision: delay the treat she knows she'll get once home? Or go for unknown treasure - the detritus and other dead things she uncovers for a snack on her walkabouts next door? This stairwell is too tall and steep for her to safely manage so I pantomime for her to go around to the front. She hesitates a moment at the foot of the steps. Steps she used to climb. Maybe this time.

Beliefs once held, taught and bound, curdled soul with precision.

No doubts. No worries. No changing.

Years away from the haughty clime introduced other souls to heart and head.

Rising doubts. Rising worries. Time for change.

Slow-paced walk through faith and story. Books on shelves, spines revealing.

More doubts. Less worries. Continued change.

These songs of color and light, richness and sorrow, depth and despair!

They send the soul through winding passages,

along broken paths filled with thorns and lilies,

hyacinth sweet smelling, deceptive dry roses, contented briars.

Breathe, walk, pray, meditate, wonder. Sing.

Ebbing richness collides with doubts, breaking on the shores of wonder.

Yes, doubts. Yes, worries. Yes, changing.

Precision has slipped, paled, flown away, making room for greater things.

Yes, joy. Yes, love. Yes, wonder.

But still confusion, tinkling terror, silent rage fills the night with sorrow.

Yes, loss. Yes, sorrow. Yes, change.

These songs of color and light, richness and sorrow, depth and despair!

They send the soul down quiet rivers,

along currents of rage and thunder,

exquisite rivulets of water white with passion, dancing over rocks of red.

Breathe, row, pray, meditate, wonder. Sing.

Once held dear, beliefs and dogmas, filled with heart and soul, life and breath.

Yes, gone. No doubts. All changed.

Now empty, worthless, questioned, these beliefs quaking for relief.

Yes, peace. Yes, love. Yes, hope.

Replaced with questions, wonder, doubts, joy, and love. Fitted beside faith anew.

Yes, change. Yes, light. Yes, color.

These songs of color and light, richness and sorrow, depth and despair!

They frolic through the mind, pulling downward,

inward, alongside, beneath, above,

drawing power from the One who first intoned these notes of grace.

Sit, breathe, pray, meditate, wonder. Hear.

These songs of color and light, richness and sorrow, depth and despair!

Hear these songs drifting through the ether,

calling, soothing, breaking, leading

through pathways dark, sweet, challenging, filled with fear and wonder.

Hum, sing, intone, pray, frolic, play. Believe.

# These Songs Rita Mock-Pike Poetry

# Reliable

## Fiction James Hancock

At five o'clock every morning, before sunrise, the clockmaker winds his clock.

Hand carved frame of stained oak and polished brass fittings; a thing of beauty, dominating the hallway, and unfailing in its task day and night. A small brass butterfly-key inserts into the face and twists the bow with careful yet forceful fingertips. Eight rotations, each sound a satisfying clacking of the mainspring. The slow, tock... tock... tock... continues its relentless quest. The pendulum swings in steady motion, always active. Reliable.

With the front case closed, the clockmaker pockets his key, presents a smile of pride, and steps back into the wall whence he came.

Had Jorge known the clock was haunted by its maker, he wouldn't have bought it, and had it not been for his wife Sofia's calming words, Jorge would have got rid of it long ago. She always found the positive in things and pointed out the blessing of their supernatural guest. "We don't need to understand, but never be afraid of such gifts. It proves there's something in the ever after."

Over the years, the clockmaker's routine visits became more and more comforting. A silent yet dependable friend and for Jorge, death was no longer a feared thing. The clockmaker was a message to the living; we don't just end, there are echoes and manifested memories linked to people, places and objects. When one chapter ends, another begins. Even if it can't be explained or understood, there is more to explore beyond life.

After Sofia died, Jorge suffered terrible loneliness and there were times he wanted to join her, but he could hear Sofia's reassuring words. "There is something beyond life. Know that I await you there. Be strong and patient, for it isn't your time."

Jorge felt her warmth at all times, her love, a memory he could call upon whenever needed.

In the years that followed, Jorge relied on the clockmaker's companionship. The clock's ticking was a heartbeat to remind him that life goes on and Sofia was waiting for him somewhere in the beyond.

And when the ticking stopped, he saw her again, there to collect him, with arms wide and her perfect smile. "Oh, how I've missed you, my darling."

Leaving one hallway to find another, the clock had a funny way of ending up exactly where needed. Purchased for Amelia as a housewarming gift from her parents.

Amelia, like Jorge, feared death so much she was unable to enjoy life; her faith simply wasn't strong enough. The clockmaker was her saviour and answered the ultimate question.

Years later, a confident Amelia was there for her daughter when fear of the unknown crept in. When doubt of an afterlife was troubling her, and she struggled to find meaning, the clockmaker was the answer. As they watched him insert the key and carefully wind, Amelia whispered reassuring words into her daughter's ear. "We don't need to understand but never be afraid of such gifts. It proves there's something in the ever after."

# Column: The Corner Table

Cynthia Ann Lublinski

## Healing Trauma

New word: trauma.

Of course, I have heard this word before, yet for some reason, I never applied it to me, let alone any circumstance I have gone through. It's always been about finding a way to pick up, get on with life and if it was bad, figure out how to take the next breath, always trusting God, no matter what.

Trauma.

This word hit me hard recently when it found its place. It was like getting an answer to a question I didn't know how to ask. Through the years, I have worked on recovering from the various things my life has gone through by going to counseling, seeking Godly counsel, and letting God mold me, hopefully!, into a better person, despite the hard seasons I have gone through. It hasn't always been pretty or easy but it was worth the journey.

There is a saying that the teacher appears when the student is ready.

I do not believe in should-have-knowns. I believe, for the most part, that we must make the best decisions we can with the information we have at the time, and when we know more, different, or better, we adjust accordingly. No one has a crystal ball to know how any decision or choice will land. So, we proceed, navigating life, making the best choices, and shifting as necessary. That's life.

Yet there are some moments, seasons, and situations in which we do not have a choice. They happen to us and they demand survival of some sort. We do everything like we've always done, without realizing these are not just wounds that need to heal into resulting scars. Trauma hits like a DNA code change that has filed itself away without our knowledge.

Trauma. It affects and infects everything. The word falls from some unknown place, presenting itself like a glorious and horrific answer.

Your voice is found afterward, sometimes when you are almost old.

And you weep hard for how it colored and shaped everything without you knowing.

Then, the guilt. It's irrational, for sure, but it is crushingly present now.

Although trauma sucks, it made me investigate.

I learned a few things that helped me understand what has happened to me, so I can heal.

When triggered, the knee-jerk emotional response varies by person, the trauma triggered, and the circumstances. This can be anything from a slight irritant to a panic attack, even when you have worked through past traumas.

That's the thing with trauma; it has changed something in you because of encountering and surviving it.

We all have been wounded. The goal is to have scars; scars are evidence the wound healed.

Trauma is different from a wound or its resulting scar. It involves basic or primal survival. It can be the result of either a singular or repeated event. When the body deems something unsafe, the brain, which is responsible for memory, emotions, and survival, jumps into action with automatic responses to safeguard us, called a trauma response.

Trauma response is a reflexive coping mechanism. Our body shifts, and chemicals are sent to the bloodstream, activating the nervous system's defenses. Yet there usually isn't enough time for the body to metabolize the chemicals, and our nervous system overloads – putting us, front and center, into the survival zone.

Everything that happens to us mentally or emotionally is stored in the body. It's all connected. Watch how the body reacts when a person is in trauma response: tense, tight, breathing changes; the whole body is ready to protect itself. We are set to a response: freeze, flee, or fight. When we experience trauma, the memory records it, the body responds to it, and a feeling becomes associated with it.

As I said above, even when you have done a lot to deal with trauma, the body is amazing in its ability to protect. Yet sometimes trauma responses may still rear their heads.

I am learning that when the moment has passed, it is important to process it. The first thing is not to feel bad. Yes, it is messy and not my favorite place to be, but the work is worth it. It helps to remember that not one person has it all figured out. Remember, no crystal ball. Every single one of us has been messy to varying degrees.

There are several things we can do to help ourselves. It can take a few days to process a situation to see if it's an area that needs further help. If it is, counseling is always at the top of the list. Other therapies may also help someone process trauma. I've found that acupuncture can help balance between the sympathetic (fight or flight) and the parasympathetic (rest and digest) nervous systems. Massage therapy can relax the body, finding areas where we are tense, then massaging those dense areas. Many massage therapists and acupuncturists believe that massage/physical therapy and certain types of physical movement can cause unexpected crying in their patients, leading them to think there is a connection to an area that contains memory. Trauma can create these dense places because it is hard to process and, therefore, "stuck."

I believe in creative art therapy. So, get out your pen, paint, drawing pencils, clay, whatever brings out your creativity, and let your emotions lead. Let it be intuitive and instinctive. You may be surprised at what you end up creating.

My faith, hope, and trust in God are essential for me. Without Him, the trauma I've endured, struggled with, and survived would not have revealed the treasures He has had for my life. These are the places where He has comforted me, and in turn, He uses me to comfort others.

We all have our stories; I want my stories to be a light in the darkness for others. I want my messy places to help me find the strength to look up and know where my help comes from. Sometimes, it takes me a minute. Yet when I finally do, there He is, waiting with compassion, meeting me in my mess, ready to show me the treasures waiting on this new journey.

# Nonfiction

# The Call Back

## CLS Sandoval



At only eight months or so, Evelyn's reactions were rather unpredictable. I always gave myself a little pep-talk, sometimes in my head, sometimes aloud before our auditions. If she's not into it, it's no big deal. We had already had a couple of callbacks, but we had yet to be cast. I was lucky to have the year off from work to pursue this little dream of a commercial or two with my infant daughter.

Leading up to this call back for Hyland Natural baby medicines, Evelyn was particularly resistant. She scrunched her face, pushed her little arms against me, and tried to wrestle out of her place in the carrier on my chest. I set my expectations on: well, we're just not going to get this one.

Then they called our names. The casting director opened the door. We walked down a little dimly lit hallway, turned a corner, and in front of the audience of producers and clients, Evelyn's eyes sparkled. She clapped her hands and a smile spread to reveal her only two teeth in the middle on the bottom. If she had the words, I imagined she would have said, "I've found my people!"

She booked it.

# Marveling in the Unexpected

Peggy Heitmann  
Poetry

One evening, out of nowhere, they appeared.  
As if transported by magic,  
a whole flutter of monarchs descended  
on the lantana bushes Mama planted  
beside our front porch stoop.  
Daddy said, "I have never seen so many  
butterflies in one place before."  
I watched as the setting sun  
caught shimmers of their wings.  
Marigold yellows and oranges,  
flecks of bright white, and black veins,  
skipped and dipped and darted  
over the pink and yellow blooms.  
Just as quickly as they landed,  
as if they had spoken to each other,  
they all took flight at once and were gone.  
The week after my father died,  
my son called me to his room,  
asked me to look out his window  
and see the butterflies—  
swallowtails, sulfurs, and monarchs  
all cavorting around  
the amethyst butterfly bush.

# Louisa Wilkinson Fiction

23

# Well



I squat in front of the yawning clothes dryer and aim a flashlight into the dark drum. A knot of aggravation lodges in my lower back. I could have my very own portal to Hell here. If any dwelling could evoke evil, as evidenced by my uncontrollable swearing, it's this ramshackle house. The status of the dryer, one of many appliances on life support, requires me to swoosh my arm around inside to determine the moisture level of the load. Cracks of static indicate that the wool dryer ball, purported to be a sustainable alternative to landfill-clogging dryer sheets, sucks.

I've recently descended into a sullen place impenetrable by Merlot, Cherry Garcia, or sex. The cause, so embarrassingly negligible, is an article in a writing magazine. An opinion, really. It's humiliating to admit the impact those imperious paragraphs have had on my mental health.

I was finally ready to publish my book, thanks in part to prodding from the sweet, supportive members of my children's writing group who always tell me my writing is excellent. I don't pause to question whether their niceness allows otherwise. Now, in January, when the upcoming months feel muscular with potential, the brilliant-haired pixie with the periwinkle eyes could come to life across the page, her pirouettes bringing sunshine to a gray world. I began searching for a publisher.

That's when I stumbled across the downward spiral-producing article. Written by a children's book agent, she maintained that kids are now so savvy, so precocious with their adorable limited attention spans and their charming technology alternatives, that only an author who is both "wicked smart" and able to "exquisitely connect with their inner child" can produce a kid's book pleasing to the little Einsteins. She likened the chances of seeing your children's book in print to winning a million dollars on a scratch-off. My glittery heroine now feels in peril. I would like to say that I'm being overly dramatic with that term, but I am not.

I stare into the dryer. My half-century-old knees pop uncomfortably, and I wonder if the act of squatting will help me connect with my inner kid. Mostly it makes me feel like an ancient peasant on lunch break somewhere at the edge of a rice paddy. I'm reminded of additional insight proffered in the article: "Without prior writing experience – any genre is better than none – pitching your book is hopeless." I feel the ancient woman nodding an affirmation, her face grave with Mandarin wisdom.

What can I possibly write to gain experience? Maybe I'll visit China! A travel blog! The last trip I took was to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, two years ago, and my travel budget has been dry ever since. I drag myself to the computer, where the blue glow of the screen bathes my spectacled face in unflattering, perhaps damaging light. I type in "writing opportunities." Ads for books and classes appear and as my clicks funnel deeper, my mood follows.

Hours later, I'm slumped in my chair, cheek in hand, heart thudding the word "failure" in a recurring beat. Can a person fail without first starting? My mind rallies like an inspirational poster on a cafeteria wall, announcing, "Yes, you can achieve 'Greatest Failure' status with just a little determination!" Then a link appears for a series of books concerning stew. Maybe it's the combo of late hour and foul mood (or maybe I'm just hungry), but as I scroll, I'm enamored with the sheer goodness of what I'm reading. The website puffs out bubbles like "heart" and "whimsy" with guidance to its authors. I am an ordinary person (a requirement). I can "write from my soul" (check!), and "avoid intricate wordplay" (not even capable of that). I click on "Possible Book Topics" with a growing sense of excitement.

I barely hear the dryer buzz as I scroll through the array of subjects I could write about. Me Time. Childhood Mishaps.

The Magic of Cats.

This may be my gateway to writing experience. Something about this sounds so right, that I skip back to the bedroom (full disclosure, I'm much too old to skip, so it's likely more like an awkward stumble) and jump onto the bed, excitedly shaking my boyfriend's shoulder. Russell is lying on his side, his broad, hairy, back to me. In the dim light I see the grease-stained uniform he has discarded on the floor, the expensive Moroccan pillow he's stuffed under his oily hair, and the empty bottle of generic-looking beer on the nightstand. I wonder when I became interested in a man who drank rock-gut beer in bed.

"Jesus, what?" he growls, rolling towards me, his substantial, naked belly rotating like a moon navigating the sky. Only one of his eyes opens, giving him a pirate-like look that is anything but attractive.

"I've got a great idea." I gush.

"Jesus."

Seriously? Learn another word. I take a deep breath. "Remember how I've been in such a sad place the past few days?" He has the decency to look somewhat confused, a confirmation that at least he is listening to my words. "You know, the article I read and how it made me believe there was no way I was going to publish my book?"

At this he closes his eyes, as if to acknowledge that due to the house not being on fire, he is going back to sleep. I shake him again.

"The bad mood I've been in? The wine and the ice cream? The sex?"

His eyes fly open, wide as eggs. "Sex? Now?"

"No! I'm talking here!"

"Jesus, I know." He closes his eyes again.

I stare at his beefy body, naked except for a ribbon of briefs tucked under his expansive gut. Might be good to explore Me Time.

"I'm getting a cat," I announce, hopping off the bed.

"I'm allergic," he replies, in a voice that carries a challenge.

"Apparently, they're magic."

"Bet this kind of crazy bullshit is why your husband left you."

I turn slowly to see him elevated on one elbow; his face twisted in a cruel smirk.

"Jesus," I whisper.

"Can I go to sleep now?" His voice is victorious.

"I'm naming it Steve." I retreat to the closet and start packing his clothes.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Janie yanks me aside before I've even made it to my desk. "I've got a terrible problem."

"A broken nail?" Her manicures are a legendary source of both pride and angst. Currently they're painted with mini-palm trees that look like spiders.

"No," she hisses. "I had a session with Jerry's medium and now my dead stepmom wants to talk to me."

"Hmm."

Her eyes narrow. "That's all you have to say?"

"No, of course not. I'm just processing." I choose my words delicately. "And why exactly is talking to your stepmom a problem?" Can you really just dial up the dead for a chat?

"Because she'll ask about Dad!"

"Which is bad because..."

"Because he's remarried."

I try to put on a face of comprehension but I can't pull it off.

She follows up with, "And she's not the forgiving sort."

I plunge in. "Sorry, I'm a little out of my league here, but doesn't she already know he's married? Like, she could look down and see that herself?"

Janie stares at me. "I'm not sure it works that way."

So silly of me.

Suddenly her face lights up. "You'll come along!"

"Where?" I'm genuinely puzzled.

"To the medium."

"Why?

"If you're there, you can help me sidestep whatever she asks me. Plus, you have a flair for awkwardness."

She has recovered so nicely that I stifle my dry, "Thanks."

She links her arm in mine, perky now that her horrible problem has been solved with my attendance. "So, what did you do this weekend? You and Russell go somewhere?"

"Actually, I kicked him out."

She raises her eyebrows. "How do you feel about that?"

I roll that question around in my brain and the answer falls out. "Good, actually. He didn't get me."

Janie nods. "It's going to feel lonely around the house," I add.

Her head bobs sympathetically. "Get a cat," she says.

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I set a goal that before I leave work, I will text my sisters, assuming that I still have their phone numbers, and suggest we meet for lunch. I procrastinate until I'm sitting in my car, ready to shift into reverse. The instant I hit "send" I am sick to my stomach.

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The restaurant is packed and I groan when I spot the table where my oldest sister, Meg, waves merrily. She's wearing a jewel-toned party hat that says, "Happy 50!" My face is likely scowling as I reach the table and spot a beaded necklace with a large medallion proclaiming, "Birthday Girl." I look at my other sister, Jen, and she raises her margarita with a sympathetic smile. My arched eyebrow says, "Drinking already?" and her sideways smirk says, "Naturally, dear."

"Now, don't go acting all grouchy about the hoopla." Meg takes off the crazy hat and fluffs the pretty, dark curls I have envied since birth. "You didn't let us celebrate with you last year, so we brought a little party. And your birthday was even a milestone."

There is genuine hurt in her voice, prompting me to say, "You look great, have you lost weight?" To which we all laugh, knowing that we're more in the "gaining" years, and we settle into our comfortable seats at the birth order table.

Lunch is actually easy. Meg is making an effort to rein in her Type-A tendencies, Jen is amping up her peacemaker skills, and I'm trying hard not to play the indolent baby sister they expect. We talk mostly about work. They don't mention their families and I don't ask.

As the server clears our plates, Jen asks, "How's Russell?" with such an innocent look of nonchalance that I smirk at my sisters' obvious plotting.

"He moved out."

"Oh." Meg utters this tentatively, unconsciously leaning forward, trying to read my face. "How'd that go?"

I am touched at the care they are taking not to ruffle my feathers. I smile. "Good. I asked him to. It was time."

"Alleluia!" Meg exclaims with a dramatic arm gesture, before a sharp glance from Jen tempers her enthusiasm.

"We just never thought he was good for you," Jen comments evenly.

"And him being a contractor." Meg sniffs. "And letting that house fall apart around your ears! Just tragic the way he never lifted a finger." She's warming to the subject until another stare-down from Jen shuts her up.

In the ensuing awkward silence, I say, "Do you two remember any childhood mishaps?" We exhale and smile.

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I had imagined the medium's house in a variety of ways. A brightly painted gingerbread cottage. A moss-covered, rotting castle. Instead, we pull up to a storefront at a strip mall. The single sign in the window is a long-stemmed red rose with the letter M scrolled across the bottom in elegant script. Inside, a young, ponytailed receptionist motions us to the sitting area, which contains a comfortable white couch and a low glass table, upon which lays one single rose.

A woman, apparently the medium, opens a side door and beckons us in. I wonder what she sees in our faces. I had counseled myself to hide my potentially insulting look of skepticism, but then, I asked Janie, wouldn't she know that anyway? "She's not a mind-reader," Janie says with exasperation. Apparently, there are a lot of jobs in the spiritual world that I'm unfamiliar with.

We nestle into tapestry-swathed chairs pulled up to a weathered table with a primeval weight to it, as if it has been transported via viking ship. I'm struck by the old-world comfort of this room, in contrast to the stark lobby décor. "No roses in here?" I ask with just a twinge of snark.

The medium turns, her expressive face framed by dangling stone earrings and auburn hair pulled into a chic messy-bun. "You don't smell them?"

I take a deep breath and an overwhelming scent of roses floods my sinuses. I instinctively close my eyes and analyze as I breathe. It's the real thing, as if my nose is nestled in a bouquet. I open my surprised lids and she smiles, her paprika-colored lips parting. "We use all our senses here."

The medium asks Janie questions about her upbringing and her father. The resulting answers could, in my mind, easily be used to create a dead grandmother who wants to pass along a message, or a knowing, deceased stepmom. My radar is up. The medium pauses, appears to listen, and breaks eye contact with Janie. Her gaze travels to the ceiling and ours follow - we are so easily led! Then she squinches her cheeks in concentration. Returning her gaze to Janie, she relays that a woman is connecting. The woman wants Janie to know that she regrets leaving too soon. Janie is stunned, her face slack. Her lips quiver with emotion. I refrain from rolling my eyes.

I don't like to admit it, but my mind wanders. Janie's questions and Messy Bun's soothing responses lull me into a daydream.

"All day a voice has tried to get my attention," the medium says. "That's unusual for me. The voice has been persistent. Very strong-willed." I smile with recognition. "She's leaving us now." The medium has a far-off look in her eyes. "She says that she is dancing in the light until she sees you again."

I'm not sure how I get outside, but the frigid air on my face is just what I need. Inanely, I'm reminded of an Andes plane crash survivor whose swollen brain healed because his head was in a snowdrift. I lay my forehead in the cushion of snow on Janie's car roof and let the healing begin.

On the way home, Janie chatters about her stepmom finally being alcohol free. I don't remember that being a theme, but in fairness I was only half listening. At a stoplight Janie turns and puts her hand on my arm with a warm, gentle pressure. "Who is your Pixie?"

I connect solidly with her caring gaze. "My daughter." My voice does not waver. "Let me tell you about her."

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That night my ramshackle house feels cozy when I walk in and I make two calls before I even take off my coat. One to the local handyman, who affirms that he has availability to fix the extensive list of items I rattle off. And then I call Meg.

"Hey," I say when she picks up the phone. "Just calling to ask about your kids and their families. I know it's been a long time since I enquired. I'd really like to meet your new grandbaby." Her speechlessness makes me smile.

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It is weeks later when I am finally sitting at the computer again. I've swapped out my punishing mission-oak desk chair for a cozy, mesh-seated roller in dove gray. I cradle a cup of hot chocolate topped with extra whipped cream, enjoying the contrast of heat against my skin and winter sleet pinging the windows. I indulge in a deep, self-forgiving breath that nourishes every bone. As I sip, Steve stretches her calico body the length of the couch. Lounging on a nubby blanket of Pixie's, she blinks, as if asking what I'm doing. "I'm writing," I say, but neither of us believes that.

"Actually, I'm looking for a publisher." As I announce this, she bicep-curls her paw towards her mouth, ejects a pink tongue and rakes it across her fur. Then her eyes close and a soft purr reverberates within the snug room. We use all our senses here.

I turn towards the computer. I trust my own opinion. I am confident this book will be born. Pixie will twirl and dance across the pages, immortalized and beloved. In the meantime, I'm in no hurry. The ancient woman gives me a knowing look as she rises and turns away, walking purposefully back to her work, her family. We both seem to trust that the path is leading us in the appropriate direction. She can't spare me even the ghost of a smile? But daydreams aren't always cooperative and she doesn't turn around. Instead, she flicks her fingers impatiently, as if to say go on, do. As my fingers connect with the keyboard, I see myself snuggling under a blanket with my grand-nieces, regaling them with the story of a brilliant-haired girl with periwinkle eyes. The dryer hums smoothly in the background and finally, after so long, I am well.



# The Angel and the Puppy

Sue Cook  
Poetry



The angels were busy in heaven that day;  
God had given them jobs to be done right away.  
The smallest of angels had asked for one, too,  
one just the right size for an angel so new.

God said he feared for his creatures on Earth,  
that people may have forgotten their beauty and worth.  
So, he told the new angel to go to the Earth right away,  
and report how the animals acted and played.

Let him know if the ones he had told to give care  
were letting them have enough food, love, and clean air.  
For love should surround every creature alive  
Michael was to make sure that their souls could survive.

The small one departed from God, just not quite sure  
how to fulfill his assigned tasks and endure  
all the stress and the strain that the ones of the Earth  
were known to give to the creatures whom God had birthed.

He sat for a while and watched those far below  
for a sign that would let him know where to go.  
He wanted to learn firsthand of this task,  
his wings wouldn't do, his halo too crass.

He watched and he watched from his cloud up above,  
till he found what he thought was a haven of love.  
He would enter a litter of puppies, he mused;  
In a litter of pups, none would guess his strange truth.

No one would suspect that an angel so new  
would do what young puppies all do.  
He smiled as he thought of his role in God's plan  
his courage was bolstered and head first he ran.

But what happened was different than the angel first thought.  
He was taken from his pup-mommy to a place to be bought.  
His eyes barely open, only eight weeks on Earth,  
Already he had shots and de-worming, and other things worse.

This poor little angel was not having fun.  
He knew what he would tell God once his job was done.  
The report wasn't good, not for these that he knew.  
Why, they didn't even give him a chance at a shoe!

Out in a cold, damp fairgrounds his litter was placed.  
The people walked by him at a slow moving pace.  
Would he ever find care, food, compassion, and love?  
Not here, not on earth! No, just in heaven above.

He sighed a big sigh, for such a wee tiny pup  
He knew that his life was one he'd gladly give up.  
Then a hand reached down and lifted him in the air.  
A face, a soft touch? "Who was this?" he wined in despair.

A lady said "Michael" to the man on her right.  
He blinked. She spoke his name and she got it right.  
Did she know he was an angel? He didn't think so.  
But to play it safe, he squirmed to and fro.

"What a sweet little pup," the woman said with a grin.  
"I think I will take him, I know he'll fit in.  
He's just like an angel." Then she winked at the man,  
"You know he needs love and I feel it's God's plan."

"I prayed for a baby but I didn't say what  
and I think that God gave me this baby, this pup."  
The angel blinked and he blinked, then he kissed his new mom  
feeling peace in his heart, his spirit, quite calm.

As she held him close and whispered his name to his ear,  
he snuggled in tightly knowing he had nothing to fear  
Mom took him for a collar, a leash, and a tag,  
some chew toys, a bed they brought home in a bag.

He slept in her room, in the finest of places,  
so he went potty outside without leaving traces.  
Mom kissed him and loved him, as well as did his dad  
This angel had the best home an angel could have.

But now that his duty was finished on Earth  
he'd have to return home, and report what he learned.  
He thought of the lady, how sweet and how kind,  
and she found him gone the next day, he knew she would cry.

So, while all were asleep, he journeyed above.  
and told God of all that he saw and all of her love.  
He asked to remain with the family he'd found  
That he was her baby, her love so profound.

For a small little puppy that didn't cost much,  
could he stay, though he knew he would lose so very much?  
God smiled and said, "Michael I can't keep you here,  
but on Earth, your wings and your halo soon would disappear.

"If you return to the family below,  
you will live like a puppy, not an angel, you know.  
This is so hard for me; I don't want you to go.  
But you alone know of their kiss on your nose."

Michael smiled and nodded, for he knew in his heart  
that he could not leave this family who played an integral part  
in saving the world from a fate worse than death,  
the lives of all animals forever in their debt.

Michael kissed the face of God with a soft puppy kiss  
feeling God's love flow through him in waves of sheer bliss.  
Then he awoke hours later on in his bed,  
His wings were gone, his halo shed.

The only knowledge of heaven seemed like a dream,  
so, Michael stretched out his paws and let out a small puppy  
scream.  
He was a small pup that had to go out.  
Just a pup, a small earth angel, who was loved without doubt.

The ultimate price was given with joy  
when love saved the day, by a wee angel boy.  
So you never know when your prayer will be heard;  
maybe an angel who waits for just the right word.





# A Lasting Delight: How Motherhood Changed Me

Jennifer Priest Mitchell

Nonfiction

First let me acknowledge all of the obvious ways in which motherhood altered me:

- I am no longer a size 2.
- My heart is forever outside of me and now divided between the lives of my two adult children whose happiness and sorrows set the stage for all of my own.
- I pray a lot more than I did before I had children, and not just for my own kids, but for yours and everyone else's and even the ones who've not yet arrived. I pray to all deities and sometimes simply to the towering trees, the wind, and the clouds. I look up and I hope for the best for all the babies.

Now, for the surprising postpartum news I'm confused and delighted by (can I say "postpartum" more than two decades after the delivery of my youngest?): I love doing laundry.

Maybe my brain really did shrink during pregnancy and never restored to its pre-maternal size, shape, or form. Still, what was once an errand to a dingy laundromat, a Saturday chore I kind of loathed, or even a basket of headaches I took to my mom's house as a college student, has become a satisfying task. And I love satisfying tasks.

I'm not particularly domestic. I appreciate a clean house but I'm happy to pay someone else to make it that way. I enjoy cooking and love baking but mostly because they end with me eating the fruits of my labor. I don't know how to iron very well and I'm not gifted at sewing or mending. But since I've joined the ranks of motherhood, the process of laundry – the planning, sorting, shaking, folding, and distribution – brings me a signature kind of joy. And here's why.

Collecting the clothes lets me briefly re-live the moment each item was dirtied. I like that. Events and experiences are in my head and in my notebooks and I actually enjoy picking up the wrinkled, sometimes stinky clothes, shaking them a bit, and tossing them into piles of other items they naturally pair with based on color, fabric, or some other category I create. (Don't tell my family this because when everyone's home, I tell others not to leave dirty clothes lying around, thinking I will be gathering them up for the laundry, but, shhhh! I don't mind it that much.)



My affinity for this mundane chore started when I was pregnant in 1998 with our first child. The washer and dryer in our two-story house in Ohio were on the basement floor, so I had to scale two flights of stairs as I took items down to wash and dry, then carry them back upstairs to put them away. I remember after a baby shower, I washed all of the little onesies we had received as gifts. I used Dreft, an odorless, dye-less laundry detergent that was heavily marketed to new mothers. I had wanted the baby clothes to smell like the Downy-soaked towels of my youth, the sweet baked in, nosebleed-inducing scent of something unnatural, yet familiar. My grandma used a lot of Downy in her loads of laundry and that scent – a single, simple odor back in the 1970s – meant love, hugs, and home. Now, of course, Downy, and every other brand, has an array of scents available for those who want to add a fragrance to their laundry – lavender, springtime fresh, sport. I like using the freshening beads in the washing machine to make things smell nice, but my family seems to prefer when the clothes smell like virtually nothing, which is a challenge. I enjoy shopping for laundry products that generate clean, but odorless clothing. “Scent doesn’t clean,” one of my children told me, so I’ve been on a bit of a mission to find just the right balance of products to achieve sanitary clothing without much odor. Maybe this is because their first experiences with clean clothes were all those Dreft-washed things with no odor, I don’t know. So, I wash my own clothing with all kinds of chemical scents, beads, and cancer-inducing add-ins, and wash everyone else’s with the purer laundry soap.

The bottom line is that since I washed those first onesies and fished them out of the dryer, still damp, and hung them kind of drearily on tiny plastic baby hangers, I have loved this task. I vividly remember sitting in a chair in our basement, gazing up at the curtain rod we used for hanging laundered items to finish drying. I looked at the tiny denim Osh Kosh overalls, and all the brightly colored socks, and imagined a baby – my baby – filling them out with soft flesh and happy, warm limbs, learning to crawl and smile.

That pure joy has never left my heart, even as the loads of laundry became more than I could easily carry and the sweat-scented garments more than I could stand without holding my breath.

I love doing a full basket of reds knowing I don’t have to worry about anybody staining anybody else. It takes our family some time to develop a full load of reds, so if I don’t have enough, I might throw in some rags or beach towels that could stand a little staining; for example, the orange one with weird sunshine faces on it or the maroon one with some team’s logo in the corner.

In my earlier years, I had never had such fondness for doing my own laundry – the love of the task came about with motherhood.

I’m equally enamored with doing a load of whites. While high maintenance women might adore the scent of Chanel #5 or Estee Lauder’s Beautiful, I secretly pine for the startling and safe scent of bleach. The aromatic reminder of childhood swims, hotel sheets, and a solidly clean bathroom. I love picking up bleachy white towels, sheets, socks, and T-shirts hot from the dryer, ready to be snapped into shape and folded with crisp corners.

It’s great fun for me to create sub-groups of the less obvious categories of brights, pastels, and the blacks and navies, who can jump right in with most denim. This is the one time some of these articles of clothing get to pal around together. I enjoy seeing them befriend one another in the laundry process, a wardrobe party of sorts.

That brings us to the division into piles for the actual washing and I like that, too. I do laundry often because it makes me happy and because I have favorite things I like to wear and have ready shortly after each use. In a week, I probably do three loads of laundry now that it’s just my husband and me at home.



But when our adult children come to visit, if they have anything for me to wash, I cheerily add those items to my piles.

I like to button buttons and zip zippers so that nothing catches on anything else. It's fun to empty pockets and place their contents, even when they look like unorganized papers, random coins, or mysterious tokens that no one really wants, into neat little stacks on the counter in the laundry room. I love knowing their owners can reclaim them or choose to toss them in the trash themselves. It's a weird kind of spiritual, retrospective voyeurism, seeing what others leave in their pockets and wondering a bit about their lives, loving them in one more way.

I don't dry much of each load and what goes through the dryer doesn't stay for long. My sweet friend, Barb, endured my heated explanation when I told her we couldn't dry the kids' cross-country uniforms when our sons ran together in high school.

"The dryer is your enemy," I scolded her. A really nice Canadian woman (I mean, aren't all Canadians lovely?) and I admonished her for even thinking she could dry the uniform for just a few minutes. The fabric was dry-fit and I was uncertain of its quality, so I didn't dry the uniform for even a moment. I was equally careful with all of our daughter's tennis clothing when she was in high school. But even T-shirts, jeans, and things which others might bake dry with the towels, socks, and underwear, are removed from the dryer, shaken a bit and hung up.

As I gently remove others' clothing from the dryer, I pull shoulders into shape, yank and straighten cuffs, and flatten breast pockets and collars with my hands. Sometimes I touch them up with no-wrinkle spray.

Once the clothing is dry, folding it or leaving certain things on hangers and delivering them to the owners' closets ensues as my favorite next task. It's a quiet way of feeling connected to each of my family members.

I look forward to this ordinary household chore that represents, to me, matriarchy, connection and love. I suppose women in other parts of the world or stations of life would find it simple-minded, naïve, perhaps contrived, that I adore this process so much. I imagine that people in countries and cultures I know nothing about would be perplexed by my joy and my embrace of this domestic responsibility that warms my heart so. But I genuinely believe that we all – somewhere inside of us – have tasks of some sort that bring us quiet satisfaction. Routine accessible goals of daily life reinforce a connection to what we love, be it family, memories of gardens, the cigar scent of a grandpa's laughter or the sweet hum of a favorite aunt as she stirred soup. Such tasks can ground each of us, taking our thoughts to the places in our hearts where we find peace and hope, where we prepare for what's next, be it more laundry, or something far more complex and consequential. The one thing I know is that I sleep best after having folded something.

# The Hotel Member

Liz Lydic

Fiction

"Thank you, Ms. McEnroe, for being a member of the Fairguild Circle Membership Club for the past two years."

Jeanie scrunched her brows at the nondescript gray-suited man who smiled at her from behind the counter.

"Neil" read his nametag, and, clocking her confusion, he glanced back to his computer screen. "Yes, it looks like you first joined us in 2016, with your stay at our Houston location. I do hope my colleagues in the Lone Star State treated you well."

Jeanie conjured up that work conference in Texas, the endless sea of polo-shirted and khaki-slacked attendees, all eager as she for free swag and presentations on new software for payroll specialists. Because back then, she'd made the reservation with her own credit card and then been reimbursed by her company. So, now, apparently her name was associated with this hotel chain indefinitely.

Neil's cordial eyes warmed her quickly and Jeanie's body seemed to understand that he saw her a certain way. She straightened and pulled her slipping purse strap upward to the top of her left shoulder. She was suddenly taller, ten pounds lighter. Her knee-length practical skirt with an elastic waistband was not a sign of aging indifference, but, instead, an indication of aesthetic independence, and perhaps even, pioneering.

Jeanie's mouth softened. "Oh, yes, yes, they did. It was an excellent stay."

"Wonderful. I hope we will live up to your expectations here in Baltimore as well." Neil smiled again, handed over a small cardboard two-fold, and then gently but confidently explained where the hotel's restaurant, spa, and fitness center could be located.

Jeanie smiled through it all, then nodded to Neil. "Well done. Thank you." Neil placed his palms together near his heart and bowed a little in response. "You've made this member very happy, Neil."

"Wonderful," he responded and dipped his head toward his computer behind the counter.

Jeanie picked up the handle of her rolling suitcase, her sweater draped on her other arm. She caught the eye of the concierge at his podium. "Good afternoon. I'll be by later with some questions for you," she told him. "I'm a member."

The man, looking similar to, yet skinnier than, Neil, tucked his chin to his chest sharply in a nod and said, "Excellent, ma'am. I'll be happy to assist. Would you like some help getting up to your room?"

Jeanie's eyes widened. "Why yes, that would be nice, thank you. I presume that service is included for members?" But the concierge was radio-ing someone and didn't hear. Soon, another, taller, larger hotel employee was next to her, holding all her items, and together, they made their way to the elevator bank.

She waited until the ride up had completed before asking, "So, you're a bellhop?" As they passed a maid's cart outside an open-doored guest room, Jeanie took a handful of pre-wrapped shower caps and placed them in her purse.

"Yes, ma'am. Bellhop, or 'porter,' as I like to say."

"Ah," said Jeanie, memorizing the word. They stopped in front of her suite. "Well, as a member of this hotel, I'd like to thank you for your service." She shook his hand at the door before closing it.

The room – identical to those she'd been in before with this chain – was pristine and bright. Jeanie breathed out and it felt as though anything complicated had vacated her body. She placed her suitcase near the small closet and her sweater on the back of the workstation chair. She picked up the landline phone and dialed the front desk. "I'd like a description of the room, please? Where might I find the coffee maker, hair dryer, and other amenities? I should mention that I'm a member of this hotel."

Afterward, Jeanie perched herself at the small, stiff armchair next to a round table in the corner of the room. I may recommend a softer design, she thought, and wondered how frequently members of the Fairguild Circle Membership Club met with management to discuss such modifications.

Next, she dialed her cell phone to check in with her husband, Carl. He reviewed his day and Jeanie found herself agitated while enduring his complaints about work and his challenge in cobbling together a decent dinner in her absence. "I can't talk much longer," she interrupted.

"Oh?" he asked.

"Yes. Here at Fairguild Circle Hotel line we focus on guest experiences and I'm afraid I should really get back to that myself. There's some white bread in the fridge. Put some butter and sugar on a slice for your dessert."

Jeannie hung up the phone before hearing Carl's response.

At that moment, fully acclimated to her room, confident in her understanding of the location of the ironing board, proud of the meticulous design of the hand towels in the shape of exotic fans, Jeannie's future came to her swiftly:

- It was time to divorce Carl.
- She would take early retirement from her county job in the payroll department. The career had always felt like an ill-fitting suit to her, anyway.
- She would sell the single family home and downgrade to a condo. She'd use the money from the sale to tour all the Fairguild Circle Hotels in the country.
- She would learn everything she could about the history of the hotel chain, positioning herself as resident expert, or perhaps archivist.
- She would pursue placement into the Fairguild Circle Hotel Member hall of fame. If no such hall existed, she'd create one.

This ensuing life shift was enough to lighten a load Jeanie had not realized she'd been carrying for decades, or perhaps, it was enough to fill a hole Jeanie had not realized she'd left empty for decades.

She went to the Fairguild Circle Hotel room number 613's hall mirror, conveniently placed near the door (so that one can check one's appearance before leaving the suite. Brilliant, she thought), and took herself in.

"I'm a member," she said aloud. "I'm a member of the Fairguild Circle Hotel."





# Nuts

Patrick Johnson Poetry

You're always on my case about misplacing my phone  
losing my glasses  
or holding us up better than I hold onto keys.  
But did you know squirrels cultivate trees?  
Yes! They bury acorns to un-dirt during winter,  
forgetting most by the time snow piles high,  
thereby giving those seeds the ability to flourish.  
Forests grow at their four-fingered hands- and the land thanks them!  
If these haphazard farmers remembered their treasure,  
whole ecosystems would collapse!  
So, perhaps my mind is not absent- it is hiding,  
watching as we nook every cranny,  
fumble over furniture,  
and unturn every stone in the zen garden,  
waiting until we've gotten in our steps for the day,  
traded some hearsay,  
or came across a malfunctioning smoke detector.

# Box of Dreams

## Sue Cook



## Fiction

My name is Pandora. Yes, that Pandora. The one with the box of “worldly woes.” The Pandora that caused chaos and destruction on Earth, because she was too curious to see what wonders awaited her in that ghastly box.

At least that is what you were told. Do you want to know what really happened? Would you like Pandora to dispel the myths and speak truth into the world? Then come and sit near the fire with me.

Here, my fine friends, is a drink to help you wash down the lies of hundreds of years of falsehoods. Look deep into my green eyes, and see what really happens as the fire’s light plays across them.

Long ago the ornate box was given to me as you have heard in the story. The box was no more than the size of a trinket box but the feel was heavy and inviting. Yes, there was a draw to the box and it spoke to me.

Don’t look at me like I am daft! Women can hear and sense these things. I knew what I had to do and I did it. The box would not tolerate indecision.

Men for miles were too frightened to look into the depths of the box but I did. Swirling energy of all colors poured into a drab world filled my soul with beauty. Vibrant colors appeared everywhere, inside and outside the box as the lid lifted.

It was recorded that I released chaos into the world but I released opportunity, joy, vibrance and abundance. Not the ills of the world as was portrayed.

Wisdom flooded my body. “Pandora the powerful, must be silenced!” decreed the crowd, demanding I be locked away. So I ran. I left the glorious box and ran to those that sent it.

The dragons awaited my arrival with an unparalleled welcome of beauty. In awe, I gazed upon all the dragons of different hues and levels of vibration living together.

Slowly, I reached out to touch the dragon nearest me. It was golden red with green eyes. At first touch, our minds became one and I experienced true peace and harmony as I floated into oblivion.

Dragon language must have flooded my brain, as I had a keen understanding of their communication. When I finally regained consciousness, I realized that I was no longer Pandora, bringer of evil to the world. I was Pandora, daughter of dragons and joy bringer.

Do you like my story so far, my friends? Good, Pandora enjoys speaking light and truth into being.

When I returned, I didn’t expect turmoil. War mongers had begun fighting for sovereign territory without consideration for each other. Women and those who don’t conform were seen as chattel.

How long had I remained with the dragons?

None approached me, as I had my dragon at my side. “Pandora the Dracorider” they cried, shaking in their boots.

“No,” I said. “Pandora, bringer of joy.” But they shook their heads in disbelief.

I went to the open box and showed them the inside of the box. The wisdom, joy, opportunity, and abundance poured out, surrounding them.

They backed away from me as though wounded, frightened by the vibrance. Taking the box, I left with my friend.

There is the box that started it all. Go and see what you find inside. Will you find chaos or beauty? Betrayal or love? Let wisdom guide you and you will see that the Pandora of old is a myth. Come! Do not be afraid. Look and see what glorious awakenings Pandora’s Box holds for you. You may find your Dragon.

# A Wedding in Tel Aviv

## Ellis Shuman

## Fiction

"Harei at mekudeshet li..."

"Mekudeshet!"

"Mazal tov!"

Moments later, after stamping his foot to break the glass, the groom kissed his bride and their families rushed to crowd around them under the simple cloth huppah canopy. The grey-bearded rabbi stepped back, his role in the short ceremony of sanctifying their union completed, and the DJ raised the music to an ear-splitting level.

"Aren't you going to congratulate them?" Miri asked.

"Not yet," I said, holding back as the wedding guests surged past, getting in line to hug the new couple, to plant air kisses on their cheeks, to shake their hands. "I'm not sure he'll remember me. We haven't seen each other since childhood."

"Of course, he remembers you! He invited you to the wedding, after all. Go up there already."

I hesitated. Too many people, too much noise—the typical hubbub of an Israeli garden wedding. I would approach the groom when things got quieter when I'd have a chance to say more to him than a perfunctory "Mazal tov!"

\*\*\*

The invitation had come as a surprise. A slim envelope with my name handwritten on the outside. I assumed he got my address from my mother, who still lived in Kiryat Hayovel — the Jerusalem neighbourhood where we had grown up together, where we had been the best of friends.

"Lior and Ruti are getting married," the decorative white card announced. "Avigdor and Leora, parents of the groom, invite you to attend the happy event on September third."

I hadn't seen Lior or his parents since their family moved to Tel Aviv.

The invitation said the reception would start at 19:30, with the chuppah to follow at 20:15. I was familiar with the venue — a luxurious wedding hall with an extensive garden, a well-stocked open bar, and stands offering a wide variety of tasty hors d'oeuvres. I had attended events there in the past. The hall's over-the-top buffet meals, extravagant even for Israeli standards, attracted me almost as much as my desire to reconnect with Lior.

"You're really thinking of going?" my wife asked me.

"Miri, I'm stunned he invited me, but yes, it would be amazing to see him again."

"But you haven't kept in touch. Did he ever reach out to you before this?"

"No, but still..."

Over twenty years had passed since Lior and I attended grade school together in Kiryat Hayovel and then high school in Rehavia. Afterward, our lives had gone in different directions. For me, it was service in the Israeli Defense Forces Artillery Corps, travels through South America, and university studies. Getting a job and meeting Miri. Marriage, followed soon by starting a family. Three children — all boys. The eldest was about the age I was when Lior and I were friends. I had been married for ten years, but Lior was only getting married now. I didn't have a clue where his life had taken him.

"You can go to his wedding on your own," Miri informed me.

"Of course you're coming with me."

"I don't know the guy."

"I'll introduce you. You'll have a good time."

"Just like the good time I had when we went to your coworker's wedding three months ago? The food was horrible and the music was loud. What was her name, Katy?"

"Katya," I corrected her. "I went to your cousin's wedding last year and I hardly know her."

"That was different," Miri said. "She's family. I see her two or three times a year."

"Come with me to Lior's wedding. I want him to meet you."

"I don't enjoy being an outsider at a wedding but I'll go. This will be the last time."

"The last time?"

"The last time I'll go with you to a wedding of someone I don't know."

Miri and I were equal partners in our marriage, sharing the burdens of maintaining a household and raising our children. I was the primary breadwinner but I had readily agreed when Miri chose to return to work shortly after each of her pregnancies. We made our major life decisions together — where to send the boys to kindergarten and school, which appliances to buy, whether we would spend our vacations in Eilat or at a resort hotel in Turkey. Whenever we argued, which was very infrequent, she was the one who came out on top. Although I wasn't shy of standing my ground, I did my best to please her by deferring to her opinions. Now, when I insisted that she meet Lior and his new bride, I felt the need to make some sort of conciliatory gesture.

"After this time, if you won't come with me to weddings, I won't go either," I said.

"Not even for one of your coworkers?"

"No, I wouldn't enjoy it without you."

"How sweet!" she said sarcastically. But then she added, "Can I take that as a promise?"

"Yes, definitely."

Going to Lior's wedding would not only be my chance to reconnect with my childhood friend but also an opportunity to brag about my accomplishments over the years. I had a steady job and lived in a spacious, rented apartment. A wonderful family with three amazing sons. A comfortable life. I wanted to show Lior how successful I had become. That I had made something of myself. But I didn't say any of this to Miri.

What I did say was, "Lior will be jealous I married such a beautiful woman!"

"Flattery will get you anywhere," she said. "Even to a wedding of someone you haven't seen in twenty years."

\*\*\*

"Where's our table?" Miri asked as we made our way from the garden toward the doors of the hall where dinner would be served.

I had been fixed in place, trying to get a good look at my old friend as he stood under the chuppah. From a distance, it appeared that the years had not treated Lior particularly well. As a boy, he had been quite skinny, but good at sports. He could easily outrun me. The Lior I saw at the wedding was slightly overweight and wore glasses. His mother had served me so many meals when I came to their house after school but now I hardly recognized her. Lior's parents had visibly aged over the past two decades.

"Let's sit here," I said, pointing at table fourteen, near the back.

We found ourselves seated next to people we didn't know. In fact, other than Lior and his parents, not a single person in attendance was familiar to me. It seemed I was the only person from Lior's childhood that he had invited. I looked at the other guests, decked out in the latest fashions and designer jewellery, while Miri in comparison wore a modest, form-fitting blue dress. I had come in khaki slacks and a button-down short-sleeve shirt. That was about as dressed-up as it goes for me. Most of the menswear was casual but Lior and his older relatives were wearing suits and ties.

The music picked up, making conversation with my wife impossible. Guests got up to dance, men on one side of the floor, women on the other. I wondered if there would be mixed dancing afterward. I abhorred dancing and Miri knew that.

Still, she was liable to insist on a dance in compensation for her agreeing to come with me to the wedding.

Lior's friends circled around him as he danced with his father, spinning like a Hanukkah s'vivon. Someone brought a chair and the groom sat down reluctantly, well aware that his friends would lift him up to a rollercoaster-like ride to touch hands with his bride, who was likewise being raised by her friends. Lior had taken off his suit jacket and his white shirt bulged over his belt. His glasses were slipping down on his nose and I noticed that he still wore his kippah long after the ceremony. Had he become religious? So much had changed since we were boys. Round and round the dancing went, bride and groom held high at the centre of an ever-widening circle.

A few minutes later, guests streamed toward the buffet tables and we stood to join them. Miri picked up a plate and started selecting salads but I went straight to the carving station. A uniformed server with a chef's hat sliced appealing roasted meat and I offered him my plate. I spotted a platter of steaks, straight off the grill, and I turned to that. I forked one onto my plate, scooped up some baked potatoes and a spoonful of green beans. I was all set.

"You're not getting any salads?" Miri asked when I sat down.

"Soon. This steak looks so good, I couldn't help myself."

"The bride was wearing a beautiful wedding dress. Modern and chic."

"I didn't notice," I said, slicing my steak and savouring every marinated morsel. Tender, flavorful, juicy, and grilled to perfection.

"What was her name again?"

"I don't remember," I admitted.

"You idiot! You come to your best friend's wedding and you don't even know the name of his bride? What kind of friend are you?"

"Ex-friend," I said.

At the other side of the dance floor, I saw Lior and his new wife going from table to table, greeting their guests and posing for the professional photographer. What was her name? My mind went blank until I remembered I had the wedding invitation folded up in my pocket.

"Ruti!"

"You brought the invitation along?"

"I needed the directions on it to program Waze."

Miri shook her head and put her fork down for a moment. "Your wedding gift was way too generous, by the way."

"I wrote the check according to the recommendation on that internet site. HowMuchtoGive.com. I gave nothing more than what was suggested under the circumstances of not being in touch with a friend for twenty years."

"It was too much. This whole outing is so expensive and there's also paying for the babysitter for the boys. This is ridiculous."

"Isn't the food good?" I said, trying to change the subject.

"I'm not enjoying myself," she said, stating what was quite obvious to me. "Anyway, this is the last time I'm doing this."

"Okay, already," I said, remembering my promise to her. "Can I go get you some steak now? I'll be right back."

I made my way around the tables, past the waiter pouring red and white wine into crystal glasses, past the harried busboys clearing stacks of dirty dishes, past the cooks rushing to restock the buffet with trays of grilled salmon, Moroccan chicken breasts with prunes, rice with almonds, steamed zucchini, grilled eggplants in tahini, and much more than anyone could ever eat. It all looked so appetising but I headed to the carving station and the platters of steak.

I stopped for a moment because Lior and Ruti were nearby, standing behind a table of older guests, possibly their relatives. Lior seemed relaxed but stains of perspiration under his armpits remained from the dancing before dinner. When he smiled, I saw his teeth were picture-perfect white. All his years of orthodontia had paid off. *I should approach him now*, I thought. I would invite him over to table fourteen to meet Miri. We'd talk for a few minutes, laugh about our childhood. Maybe we'd set a date to get together, to truly reconnect.

That could wait, I decided. I approached the carving station.

"Can I cut you a slice?" the chef asked me.

"It's very good," I said to him. "But I'd like to have another steak. Two pieces." The platter of mouth-watering steaks was nowhere in sight.

"We'll have more soon," the chef promised me. He cut some meat and offered it to me on the side of his knife.

"No thanks," I said, disappointed.

I found myself standing near the bride and groom as they posed for another picture, wine glasses held high in a toast.

"One more," the photographer said, adjusting the lens of his camera.

"Mazal tov!" the guests at the table cried in unison.

The photo taken, the bride and groom thanked their guests and approached the next table. This was as good a time as any, I told myself.

"Lior!" I called out, but he continued to walk ahead with his bride. I called his name again and when he didn't respond, I touched him playfully on the shoulder.

He turned to face me. The wide smile glued to his face faded, evolving into a look of curiosity. After all these years, he didn't recognize me.

"Hey, it's me," I said.

"And you are?"

I told him my name, and he asked, "Are you a friend of Ruti's?"

"No, no. It's me. From Jerusalem, from Kiryat Hayovel."

"Kiryat Hayovel?"

"Yes," I said, adding the name of our grade school.

"Is that where you studied?"

"Lior, it's me," I repeated for the third time, the realisation that something was wrong beginning to sink in.

"Lior? My name is Shmulik. Are you Ruti's cousin?" he said, extending his hand.

"I'm sorry, I confused you with someone else," I mumbled.

What had happened? I stepped back, confused, embarrassed. I pulled the invitation out of my pocket and read the names of the bride and groom. Lior and Ruti. Lior, my childhood friend. Who the hell was Shmulik?

Then, I looked at the date listed on the card. September 3rd. Today was, hmm, the 2nd. Lior's wedding would take place tomorrow. We had come to the venue on the wrong day!

I had screwed up. I would have to return to my table with my tail between my legs. I would inform Miri of my goof but I was still set on introducing her to the boy I grew up with — my best friend from childhood. We'd have to come back to the wedding hall the next night.

But Miri's words were still fresh in my mind: "The last time I'll go with you to a wedding of someone I don't know."

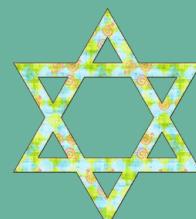
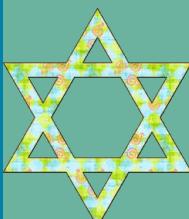
And my response.

"If you won't come with me to weddings, I won't go either."

Just then, a server approached the carving station and placed a steaming platter on the table. The chef smiled at me.

"May I offer you another steak?"

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# Photo by Clarissa Cervantes

## Poem by Rita Mock-Pike

I know a little bird  
whose eyes are big and orange.

He laughs at me  
each time he sings  
and shakes his head with scorn.

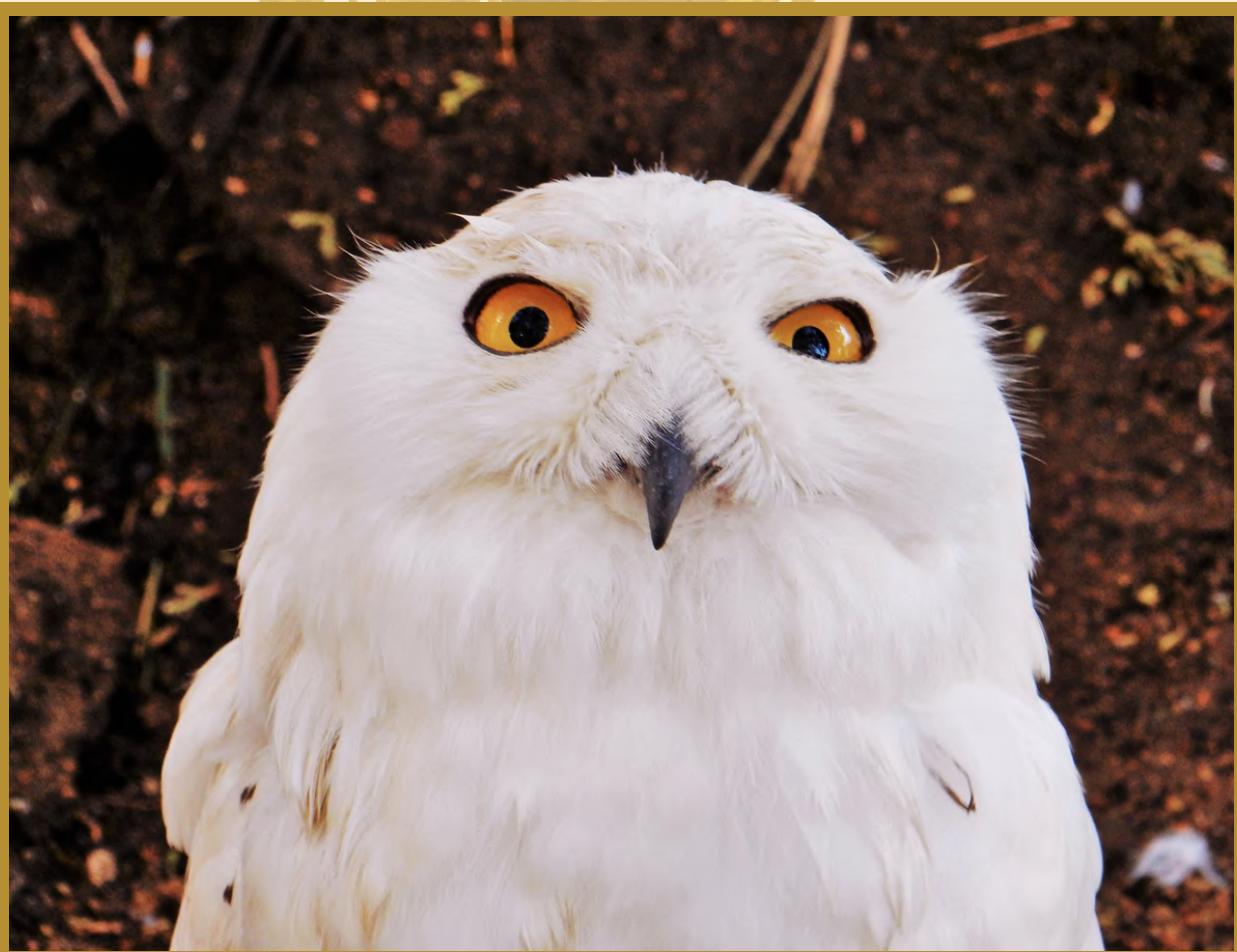
And yet I love this little bird,  
my friend, my mocking owl.  
He knows his name,  
(I think mine, too)  
and that is why he scowls.

“Come dance, come play!”  
His eyes betray his one lifelong desire  
and sometimes, I feel the fool;  
for I know the truth is there -  
he waits with eyes of fire.

This little mocking owl, my friend,  
this mockingbird I know,  
he taunts me from the tree outside  
with laughs and giggles loud,  
for he is owl and gives hoot “allo!”

Inside, I sit and watch  
with desire rankling deep within.  
That mocking bird, that mocking owl  
with eyes so big and orange -  
he wishes me to sin!

For he is owl - a blasted owl!  
And I am trapped inside  
where ne’re shall kitty claw reach out  
to trap the fiend, so wicked, yes!  
Ack! With lifelong misery, I do reside.



Photography/Poetry Collaboration

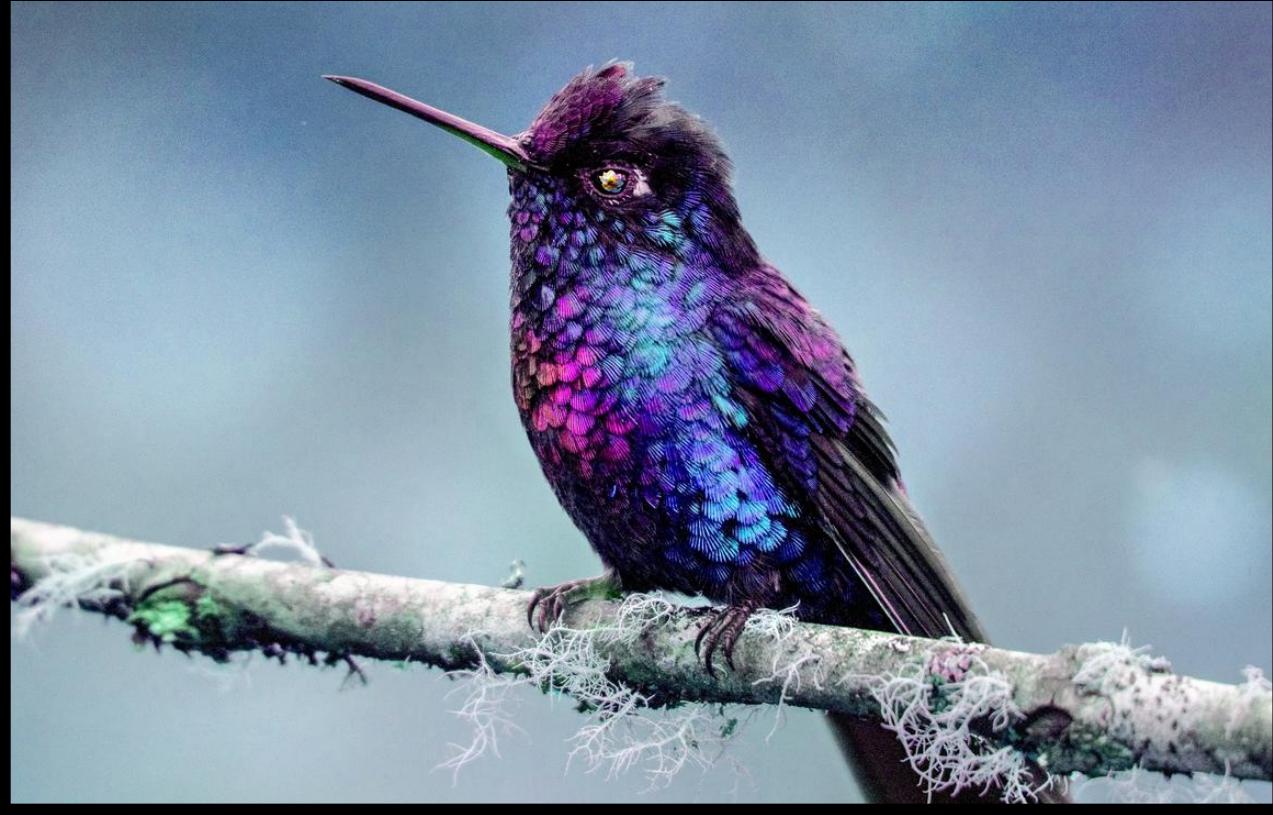
# The Mocking Owl

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# Precious Things are Found in the Trees

## Savannah Hernandez

### Poetry



The Taaffeite Hummingbird calls for my Gaze  
To Witness the Amber Glow flow through the Web of Embracing Branches  
To Witness the playful Wind dancing with the Rustling, Malachite Leaves  
And Reminds me to raise my Eyes to the Canopies whenever I so shamefully forget,  
The Taaffeite Hummingbird calls for my Gaze

The Tree Tops hold such Wondrous Treasures  
With Pearls cradled in Cassarite Wicker beds as they're Lulled by Songbird Melodies  
With Fragrant Flowers that transmute into Fruits of succulent Agates and Citrines  
And the Sky becomes a Stained Glass Cathedral painted in Ammolite  
The Treetops hold such Wondrous Treasures

# A Kind Drink

## Nick Perry

## Fiction

For Danielle, day drinking in the summer mixed the marvellous and the dangerous. It represented the kind of freedom that people worldwide fought for, the totally unchained liberty to sit amongst strangers and inebriate without worry of attack or advantage. To sit without expectation and allow oneself to detach from all the other responsibilities, identities, and stories of themselves, within the crew of passengers that never cared who she was beyond the bar. But its innocence was not total. Too much or too early and the claw of drunkenness would tightly grip her head and plunge it into anxiety, guilt, and wallow. It was this dangerous precipice that held in equal opportunity the magic of indulgence with the curse of inebriation.

Curving the corners and crossing the intersections, she began to daydream about what she might get in her glass. When she drank in strange places, she kept her orders to the classics: Old Fashioneds, Manhattans, Negronis, or Dark and Stormies. Those were the drinks that anyone worthy of shaking a cup would have a hard time destroying. Danielle rarely went for those kinds of drinks at her local because knew it. If they did, then those bartenders deserved every ounce of sprayed lime juice into each careless, self-inflicted cut on their hands that they got.

She wasn't at the level of being a well-recognized regular with a designated spot but could be on the bright side of a few familiarly raised eyebrows when she sat down. It was a welcome relationship between herself and the shifting staff at this great good place. They didn't need to know each other's names since each could fulfil their side of the relationship without them.

She pushed the brass handle of the main door and stepped inside. The floor was angled in light as the high windows allowed the sun's most precious beams to enter like old friends but, somehow, with even greater mirth. Danielle walked through the charming decorations of leather and oak, inhaling their delicious scent amongst the alcohol. They spun through her nostrils like figure skaters. The insistent old-worldliness of this place kept it from having background televisions or droning music.

It was something that should have felt awkward but, due to the bull-dogged and surprisingly lucky owner, there were just enough people in this section of Vancouver who needed such a place. The people who supplied the stools with their presence left no room for music because the air was jammed with conversation. From each table, the eminence of laughter and stories collected had been observed, honed, embellished where necessary, and now were ready for presentation amongst friends. Glasses bumped into each other while the natural flow of human interaction ceased only when a speaker had the drink up to their face. Standing amidst the light and laughter, Danielle wished the world could be powered by this kind of energy.

She continued her paces to the bar and took a seat near the server's stand, sliding the stool just enough away to leave them their space. As she settled in, one of the bartenders spotted her and began his approach. He was easy to recognize since he was tall, but not looming, and both of his arms were covered in vibrant Japanese tattoos depicting flowers, warriors, and animals whose silent presence demanded attention.

"Hi, hey there, and hello," he said. "How's your day been?"

Danielle thought more about what her day was going to be rather than what it was. "Well, now that I'm here, I've got a feeling that today's going to be something pretty great," she said.

"Oh yeah? Why come?"

"I just feel like when the sun's out and there's no work to be done for the rest of the day — or tomorrow — that I'm lucky enough to be invincible. It's like I'm related to Superman and the sun gives me powers of happiness."



The bartender let out a wide smile as he nodded automatically. "I hear that, I definitely do, and I appreciate that you're having such a lovely day."

"Thank you!"

"So do you have any ideas as to what kind of drink you'd love to pair with your most perfect day?" The bartender had now bent both arms to the bar so he and Danielle were on the same eye-line.

"I'm not sure. Normally, I'd turn to some kind of brown liquor but today I don't feel like that's the mood. That kind of thing is best served in winter when everything's dark three-thirty and today is anti- whatever that kind of feeling is. I don't know, what do you think?"

The bartender tapped his pinched fingers on the bar. "How much do you trust me?"

"As a bartender or as a man?"

The bartender laughed. "As a guy who also loves drinking on days like this."

Danielle laughed lightly back. "Then I trust you wholly."

"Thank you for your blessing. But with that trust, I'm going to go make you something tailor-made for today and, if you say 'I don't like it', you can have it for free. Deal?"

"Deal."

The bartender punched something into the tablet, took the chit, and crumpled it into his pocket. He engaged in regular conversation with the other patrons at his bar, all with the same interest as when he spoke to Danielle. She recognized his professionalism and wondered if he really loved his job as much as he presented. Or perhaps he had been doing it long enough that he knew how to place the melody of his voice to always sound on the side of delight.

What she couldn't figure out was the drink he was mixing. The labels on the bottles were covered by his hands and he swapped them with such precision and speed that Danielle could hardly tell their shapes apart. Her spying was failing, so she let her focus drift around the room again.

With the influence of the décor, she expected a thin layer of cigar smoke to swim through but its presence was totally absent. It would have fit and, perhaps, such smokiness would have added to the painting of a scene. But being in it, breathing the life of the atmosphere, its subtraction was just as enjoyable. Most of the men looked like they were old smokers and, Danielle bet, would light up immediately if permitted.

"And here you are." The bartender returned with a drink of pale glowing yellow in a coupe glass. Danielle was intrigued and expected something pineapple-forward from such a bright and clouded view.

"So what did I get?" she asked.

"I recommend just going in. Like my Dad always says 'There are many ways into a pool but the steps ain't one of them.'"

Danielle swiped the hair off her shoulder and brought the glass to her lips. The chill of the glass surrounded her fingertips. An aroma of lemon rose off the surface followed by a quick bite that promised strength. She made sure to make eye contact with the bartender as she said cheers before tilting the glass and drawing in its brilliance. It flowed quickly, like mercury.

"So?" the bartender asked after a moment.

It was perfect. Light but fun with a tinge of intensity that had swirled so well into each other. Danielle imagined the amount of alcohol was considerable but so well balanced and used that it added a dimension to the drink instead of squashing it.

"This is great," Danielle said. "What's in it?"

"I'm very glad you like it. That one's two parts light rum, two parts lemon juice, three parts Mescal, and two more parts Triple Sec. Put all that in a shaker with ice, shake, shake, shake, strain into a chilled glass, and voilà!"

Danielle took another sip. "I definitely get the lemon and the bit of sweetness from the rum." She disappeared for a moment into the taste, attempting to locate all the components. "But what was that other thing you mentioned? Not Triple Sec."

"Mescal?"

"Yeah!" Danielle said, slightly leaving her seat. "What is that?"

The bartender smiled as he put his hands on the bar, anchoring himself to his conversation.

"Mescal is a Mexican alcohol that's name literally means 'oven-cooked agave', " he said.

"Agave? Isn't that what tequila is made of?"



"Only blue agave, and only if it's from one of five states in Mexico. It's like champagne, if it's from the Champagne region of France it's legit. If not it's just —"

"It's just sparkling white wine," Danielle said.

"Just like Rob Lowe taught us. Yes, but in this case it's a spirit instead of a wine. Oh, and before you ask, it has nothing to do with mescaline. That's something totally different but that I love with equal enthusiasm."

Danielle smiled as she took another sip. "It's just so good," she said. "I feel like I can smell the sunscreen and chlorine from being beachside." Her focus fell out of concentration with the conversation. "Wow, sorry, I don't think I've ever sat in this kind of feeling over a drink before."

"Hey, no fear and no sin for enjoying something good. Say whatever you think sounds like the truth."

She took a beat and let all the other noise and people from the bar disappear. "This drink makes me want to dissolve into sea-foam."

"You know, I get that feeling. And while you're on your way there, don't forget to pay thanks to one Malcolm Lowry."

"To who?" Danielle asked, coming back from her mental waves.

"Malcolm Lowry."

"Was he some kind of secret legend of a bartender?"

The bartender bashfully shook his head.

"No, no, he wasn't one of us but he knew us well. He was a writer. One of those that wrote little, died early, and became a necessity after he was gone. His legend even brought him out here to Vancouver, or maybe it was North Van, and I heard he set one of his books out Gabriola way. Me, I've only read his most famous novel, Under the Volcano, and one of the things I remember most from it is that everyone drinks mescal and, man, do they drink a lot of it."

"Under the Volcano," Danielle said as if trying to catch a memory, "I'll have to add that to my to-be-read list."

"It does good for just about everyone — especially people who like to pair their drinks with the sun. He's got a line that's not in that book, but is allegedly on his tombstone, that I like so much I got it tattooed across my ribs."

"I mean, given the state of your arms, I'm surprised there's any room! Can I hear what it is?"

"Well I'm glad you asked to hear and not to see it — especially while I'm on the clock!"

Anyway, the line goes 'Here lies Malcolm Lowry, late of the Bowery, whose prose was flowery, and often glowery. He lived nightly and drank daily and died playing the ukulele'. I'm sure it's not a real poem. I think it's a great way to run at life."

"That is certainly one way of going about it. But you obviously believe in it, otherwise you'd never think to put something like that on you forever!"

They continued talking through one more drink and between the times the bartender had to service his other customers. The expressions stuck to the faces of his colleagues betrayed a slight annoyance and then an acceptance that this was just how he did his job. At least their tip pool was shared.

Danielle didn't mind when he detached from their shared time because she was wise to the purpose of their interaction. He was selling and she was buying. It was nice for exactly what it was and there needed to be nothing more. Part of the service she came to this place for were these moments of passing companionship that no other public place offered. The contentment of the place laid in its execution.

After she finished her second drink, the bartender picked up the glass and spun it around in his hand.

"Anything else on this late afternoon-slash-early evening?"

"No, no, I don't want to lose all my night here. Which isn't to say that this is a lovely place — just that I don't want to lose track of everything, you know?"

The bartender nodded.

"Just the bill when you've got a chance."

He grinned sincerely. When he presented the cheque, he immediately turned to wash a glass in order to provide the necessary privacy of the paying customer. Danielle called him back.

"May I?" she said.



He turned with a shock as if his mother had just called his full name.

“I don’t like it,” she said.

“Pardon?” he asked.

“You said that if I said ‘I don’t like it’ then I could have my first drink for free so I’m saying it now. I don’t like it.”

The bartender tucked his tongue between his top teeth and lip at her besting. He snatched the receipt away and presented her a new one. The first drink had been voided with the note of explanation underneath reading “Outsmarted.”

She tipped the amount the drink would have cost and handed the machine back to the bartender.

“Any receipt today?” he said.

“No, thank you.”

“Alright. Well, thank you so much for spending some of your day here and I appreciate having the chance to talk to you.”

Danielle thanked him back, gave a wave after she collected her things, and walked once more through the breeze of voices. She wondered who would next take her stool and wished they would have the same hospitality that had just enwrapped her.

As she walked out and through the streets, the sun was setting. There was a gorgeous, bright summer sunset which glowed red at its lowest, orange in the middle, and gradually fell upwards into indigo. A magical tricolour whose shades fit where they should have clashed. It shone so strongly that the light appeared to be coming from the water and breaking through towards the sky. Danielle moved clear of the buildings to see it in all the open splendour the coast allowed, trying to imprint those colours on her memory. She looked at all the other people around. They too were taking in the sunset in their own way. Some photographed, some stared, some kissed. Each one a more perfect shadow of themselves holding to their moment both individually and collectively. Danielle looked at them and then behind to the buildings in the east with one pervading thought pulsed through her heart: People must have an inherent pull towards optimism because, even though darkness was rising in an equal effort to surround them, everyone had turned towards the light.



# The Black Orb is Like A Box Of chocolates

## Sue Cook

## Fiction



Millie smiled as she jumped into the front seat of her car. “Diao, we are off to taste awesome chocolate in a beautiful autumn setting. It’s our first time away from the store in what feels like ages!”

Diao chuckled as he perched on the passenger seat. “Do you think it’s safe to leave the Orb with...” He pointed his beak at the front door of the store. “...them?”

Millie arched her brow and stared hard at the door. Finally she turned to him and spoke softly. “Diao, fledglings have to learn to fly sometime. Might as well be now.” They both laughed as Millie pulled away from the curb, leaving Annabelle and Gar in charge of the Black Orb, Millie’s.

She thought that she had to be half-crazy leaving the store in Annabelle’s care but she did need to restock her crystals and she knew the perfect spot to get more. Besides, a chocolate festival was in the same town as the crystal store: Nature’s Gifts. How often do you find a crystal haven holding a chocolate soirée? It was the perfect scenario.

After pulling into the first park spot she could find, Millie watched the crowds flocking into the shop they’d come to visit. “Diao,” she said, turning to her travel companion, “we’re nowhere near ready for expansion, but what do you think about maybe holding some festivals like this one at the Black Orb? A tea and cookie festival, maybe?”

Diao, now a tall, handsome Jamaican man, walked up beside her. “That would be cool, Mil! We could dance, serve tea, baked goods, chocolate, and sell out the store, Mon.” He winked.

Millie had to laugh knowing that Diao would want to make his “special” cookies for the customers.

She raised an eyebrow in his direction. “That was not exactly what I was thinking, Diao, when I mentioned sweets. I know what kind of cookies you would make for it.” They both laughed hard as they walked into the store.

As they entered, excited for their adventure, they missed the sight of a young man walking past them into the garden area of the store carrying a large box. He set up a booth in the garden and placed his precious chocolate behind him. His chocolate was like none other at the festival: one lick and it infused the customer with love. He smiled brightly as he waited for his customers.

Millie and Diao chatted throughout the afternoon with the festival coordinator and store owner, Marie, and loaded their car with amazing crystals. They were both blown away by the amount of raw material and exquisite jewelry that they were able to acquire for the shop.

“Diao, this will be perfect for the Orb,” Millie said as they loaded another box into the car.



Diao nodded his head. "Yeah, Mil, but I think it's time to stop for the day. I hear all that chocolate calling my name," Diao chuckled softly. "My stomach is growling."

Millie smiled as they walked towards the chocolate. "I didn't know ravens could eat chocolate. Isn't it bad for you?"

Diao looked back at her and flashed her a beautiful smile.

"Do I look like a raven right now?" He did a little dance and proceeded to purchase a piece of fudge and popped it in his mouth to prove the point.

It was then they heard the scream. Diao and Millie turned to see Marie, running out of the jewelry section of the store and towards them.

"It's gone!" she cried. "The Star of Idirea is gone. It was here and then... Poof."

Millie went with Marie to double-check the jewelry counters while Diao walked around the grounds to see if somebody had dropped it. He turned to walk back to the store when he saw a man putting a shiny object into his shirt pocket.

Without hesitation, Diao walked around the back of the store, forgetting about the man in the garden selling chocolate, and shifted. The raven form was so much easier for this kind of thing, moving about with freedom and ease with which human bodies didn't allow.

Diao made a very loud "caw" as he swooped down on the man, landed on his shoulder with talons digging deep, and picked his shirt pocket. Without a sound, he flew off with the shiny object in his beak.

The commotion caused Millie and Marie to run outside. The man was yelling about his shirt pocket being picked by a raven. "What is going on around here?" the man said. "I buy a piece of moonstone jewelry for my wife and a raven takes it! Does Edgar Allan Poe live here or something?"

Marie tried to comfort her customer while Millie went to look for the raven. She knew exactly what happened.

"Diao! Diao, where are you? What have you done?"

A tall Jamaican man approached her from the shadows. "Mil, shhh. I found it."

She looked at the shiny object between his fingers. It was beautiful. A natural powder blue star sapphire, surrounded by chocolate diamonds in white gold: the Eye of Idirea.

While lost in admiration, they were broken away when a soft voice spoke out, "You know I saw you." Diao and Millie turned to face the man.

"What did you say?" Millie stared at him.

"I said that I saw him" – pointing at Diao – "change into a raven. Here. Before my eyes. That is real Dungeons and Dragons kind of magic, man. So cool!"

Diao's eyes grew huge as he fell speechless.

Millie smiled and said, "You are absolutely right. What do you think he is? You know, in Dungeons and Dragons terms."

The man came closer and whispered, "A shapeshifter."

Diao remained silent.

Millie laughed. "Right again. So, can we keep this between us? I mean he did catch a thief..."

The man grinned slyly. "Only if you come back and buy my chocolate when you're finished with this stolen jewelry business." He said it like a true salesman.

"Fine," Millie agreed and shook hands with him. "We will be back in a little bit."

That seemed to satisfy him, so Millie and Diao went to look for Marie. Marie was still calming the customer down.

"Marie, we found the Eye. My associate Diao found it on the ground next to this gent's foot," indicating the disgruntled customer. "The raven must have dropped it."

Marie stared at the two friends and almost began to cry. "Thank you so much. The Eye of Idirea was on display here for a week before going to another gem show. It's irreplaceable. I would have lost everything paying for it."

Diao had moved to stand next to the customer-thief. "Don't even attempt to leave, Mon. We got you dead to rights. You don't want me to call my raven friend again, do you?" The man touched his shoulder and shook his head. He remained next to Diao until the authorities arrived.

Millie, once a customer, now a friend, walked Marie back into the store and hugged her.

Once Marie was calmed down and the authorities had taken the thief away, Millie headed back into the garden to make good on her promise.

"Ok, I am here. Sell me your chocolate," Millie said to the man.

He smiled. "My name is Peter and my chocolate is a symbol of love."



He indicted a box but something wasn't quite right. The box was moving.

"Most of my chocolate has been purchased but I have one left," Peter said, removing the top of the box. A small chocolate colored labradoodle puppy looked out.

Millie gasped, then gave her best attempt not to squeal like a delighted schoolgirl. "May I hold the puppy?" Peter lifted the puppy and handed him to her.

"It's a male and my last bit of chocolate. Are you staying true to your word? Are you buying him?" Peter queried.

Millie looked into the golden eyes of the puppy and knew he was hers. "Yes, I am!" she cried. Tears of joy fell down her cheeks as the puppy licked them away.

Diao walked up as she was agreeing to the sale of the puppy. "Whoa, Mil. A puppy? I can take the rest of our gang, but a puppy?!"

Millie nodded. "A puppy, Diao. A chocolate puppy. We agreed."

Peter laughed. "Dude, I am keeping your Shapeshifter booty safe. Believe me, you *need* this puppy."

Diao shook his head and paid for the puppy. "Okay, Mil, but you are taking him out at two in the morning, not *moi*."

Millie laughed then looked at Peter while hugging the puppy. "Peter, please keep Diao's secret safe. We don't need people chasing him down. Please."

Peter smiled, "You don't need to worry about me. I am just glad that magic is real. A shifter... Wow!"

Millie and Diao walked towards the car with the puppy in arms. "Diao, will you drive so I can hold little man?"

As they drove along the country roads, Millie gazed into the little dog's eyes. "So what do we call you, little man? How about Toblerone? We could call you Toby for short." Millie gave him a kiss on the nose. The puppy cuddled tightly to Millie.

"Toby is good, Millie," Diao quipped. "I like that name. It's sweet and strong at the same time. It's important to have a good name."

Millie smiled at Diao when she heard a muffled "I agree. Toby will be a wonderful name for me I do believe."

Diao almost wrecked the car in surprise. He quickly pulled off the road.

"Mil, did he just talk?"

"Yes I just talked," Toby said indignantly. "All dogs talk, you silly shifter!" Toby looked away, but gave Diao a wicked side eye.

Diao squeaked a bit. "You... You know I..."

"Of course I know," Toby cut him off. "The vendor wasn't the only one who saw you flapping around."

And with that Toby snuggled against Millie for the long ride back.

"Unbelievable." Diao shook his head.

Millie smiled and leaned her head back against the headrest enjoying the warmth of the sun on her face. "Isn't life grand?" she asked softly.

Toby responded with a kiss on her chin.

# Meeting the Spirits

## Tulip Chowdhury

## Fiction

At times in life, faith intervenes and connects us to miracles of the invisible world. Such was my meeting with some magical spirits on Christmas Eve. It was late afternoon and I was wandering around downtown Amherst where I live. My eyes feasted on the white world of the deep winter and the colorful holiday decorations around the town. The shop windows had lines of Santa Claus, reindeer, and cars passed by with Christmas carols blaring from their radios.

Since I moved to Amherst, Massachusetts, Christmas has been my favorite time to roam around the town. The colorful spring and summer sent challenges to the white world of snow in winter. The air was getting colder as the sun spread its pink hues over the remote Pelham hills on the western horizon. The Christmas lights looked magical under the setting light of the day. Ah! It's so good to be out, I mused to myself and walked on humming a favorite song.

I passed the town's post office and continued toward the park a little ahead. I was passing the tall gate of the West Cemetery when someone seemed to tap on my shoulder. I paused in my steps. There was a voice in my head or beside me – I wasn't sure – directing me.

“Enter the cemetery, please,” I heard.

I did not hesitate and, as if in a trance, went through the tall gate and started on the path that cut through the cemetery. I remembered that my favorite poet of Massachusetts, Emily Dickinson, was buried there. I also recalled that when I visited the Emily Dickinson Museum earlier that month, I had felt her all around me inside her home. And there, at that moment in the cemetery, her presence again held me still.

I stopped walking for a few seconds, for a hand seemed to have mine and led me deeper inside the burial ground. Undoubtedly, the gentle touch of her hand on mine seemed to break a dam, and our love of poetry united us like a gust of wind carrying us in its force. I squeezed my eyes as a halo of a woman clad in white joined me. The voice came again. Who else could be as soft as a butterfly? Walk on, please.

Following the voice, I walked deeper into the cemetery grounds. Night time and a graveyard, all should be quiet, but I was wrong. Christmas carols echoed all around me and voices were reciting poems, too. All seemed vibrant, yet happening behind some wall, a wall that I could not see or touch. The melodies and verses came like voices from the Earth's core, penetrating my mind like echoes from a deep cave. I was transferred to a mystic land of people long gone from my world. But something was different. I had left the full wintertime outside the cemetery but once I stepped inside, a complete transformation happened. Hands clasped tight, eyes ready to pop out, I took in the dreamy springtime with birds, butterflies, and bees buzzing around. I was not imagining the sudden change in the air. I pinched my cheeks to be sure. Flocks of birds around me were caught in a frenzied orchestra while the bees hovered over the colorful flowers for nectar. I had heard about time travel and it seemed I was caught in such an experience. A winter day could turn to spring within the pace of a few moments. Surely, with God, anything is possible. Time travel to a mystic place was my hidden dream till that moment. Dreams come true after all, it seems.

I had expected a solitary walk in the West Cemetery, eternal silence. But, I was not sure what was happening, for the graveyard seemed to be bustling with people. I could feel their presence, though I could not see them.

Shadowy figures seemed to be moving around in clothes of the long past, women in billowing skirts and men in tall hats as seen in the paintings I had seen of the earlier centuries.

Fear gripped me. I was not superstitious, but what happened to me at the graveyard? I exclaimed aloud, "Oh dear! What is going to happen? Where am I going? Have I lost my mind?"

Someone behind me sighed and hesitant footsteps stopped as if to listen to me. Had someone been walking with me?

As if in the answer, I heard a soft, gentle voice, "It's your heart that brought you to the spirits's gathering for Christmas. Had you not so longed to see me, Tulip? You are a poet in Amherst like I was."

I stopped in my tracks. On my right side, I could fathom a familiar figure and there, the kind and sweet face of the late Emily Dickinson looked at me. At once, I knew it was her spirit.

I believe that souls do not die and that meeting Emily at that moment was an affirmation. As I stared at Emily, the blending of our two poetic souls held the universal bond of humankind. Emily walked along with me in perfect harmony of steps. She remained quiet as if with the perfect understanding of my need to take in the miracle of our meeting.

Dumbfounded, I said, "Hello, Emily. I'm honored to have you with me. I had no idea that I would meet you."

I spoke softly, afraid that Emily would leave my side if I spoke loudly. My voice sounded like a stranger's, caught in the weirdness of the moment.

With a tilt of her head and a sweet smile, Emily took my right hand and gave it a friendly squeeze. The warmth of her hold seeped through the three layers of clothing I wore.

Suddenly, I felt lighter within my inner being, and my heart bubbled like a summer stream. Me, from Bangladesh, and my beloved American poet, bonded like soul mates, transcending our times on Earth. What a miracle in the meeting of creative selves.

As we walked farther into the graveyard, the voices I had been aware of earlier became louder. The spirits of children, youths, and adults moved around us.

There was magic in the air and I could feel an immense sense of giving into the creative moods of Emily and myself. I became aware of voices going up and down, reciting Emily Dickinson's poem "Death."

The air mingled with her words in the poem: "Because I could not stop for Death / he kindly stopped for me / The carriage held but just ourselves / And Immortality..."

As Emily and I moved along the path across the graveyard, my eyes fell on the different kinds of tombstones. So many names of the deceased with dates and words of love engraved bathed in a heavenly light. I could read them when my mind focused on one.

The recitation of poems and snatches of hymns flowed from them as if the ground itself was in a poetic mood. I could catch snatches of Emily Dickinson's other poems, too. The voices reminded me of cicadas that sing on summer days. But it was deep in winter.

"In our world of the hereafter, seasons blend into one, you see." I heard Emily's voice explain. *How did she know all my thoughts? Souls of poets connect between two worlds, perhaps?*

All the spirits around me were in a festive mood, joyous on that night of poetic awakening. They were not lamenting over death; instead, there was a peaceful acceptance. I felt my spirit reach the tranquility of its own. *I would join them one day.* I felt Emily's hand pat me on my shoulder as if to say, "I understand your thoughts."

My eyes fell on a grave marked very simply on a square-shaped headstone. A woman's spirit sat on it, a whitish glow in a female form. She said, "Oh, I see you have finally found our Emily; we knew how badly you wanted to meet her."

There was a soft laugh, sweet like a bird's song, and Emily spoke up from my side, "How can we not meet? We two are free spirits; our hearts are captivated by love and nature."

Somewhere, an owl hooted and I pinched myself to ensure I was awake. *Was I dreaming?* But Emily knew just what I thought, for she said, "Oh, you are awake and very much alive. But on this day, you got lucky and got your wish to meet me and other spirits. You are safe and will go home soon."

Passing by a massive mound of snow, I tried to look closer at Emily's face. I longed to see those lovely, large eyes, the delicate nose, and the smiling lips on the beautiful face. True to the pictures I had seen, there was an aura of pureness in her whole poetic self.

There was unity with Emily under the vast canopy of the night sky. My brown skin and her white did not cause a ripple in our soul connection. We were poets in love with life.

The night began to deepen and gusts of cold wind hit my face. I gathered the lapels of my coat closer, seeking warmth. As Emily and I walked, I wondered what had brought me to the cemetery that day. Was it my longing to see her in person? Things happen for a reason, and I sought the answer in my puzzled self and the spiritual happenings around me.

I was thinking of saying farewell to Emily when I saw a familiar figure, the spirit of Rabindranath Tagore. *Am I going crazy?*

How come even Tagore's spirit has come to Amherst? With this versatile work of songs, poems, and prose, Tagore was the beacon of my literary inspiration. He seemed to walk in long white garb, the "dhuti" that Indian people wear. With the distinct sharp nose, the long beard, and those deep-set eyes, I was not making any mistakes.

I felt that the depth of my worship of the work had brought him there to join in the winter evening. And once again, I could distinguish his voice, breaking the silence of the cemetery, "*Darieyo acho aamar gaanero paare*" (you wait on the threshold my songs).

As I walked, Emily gently held my hand, leading me on, explaining, "This is a special night when spirits of poets from all over the world meet. In the world of the spirits, there is no land boundary, so Tagore roams around. And the world of the living can see us if they truly love us."

And then she exclaimed, "Oh look, it's snowing. Don't you love this wonder of nature? It was to be a white Christmas, after all!"

I felt the snowflakes touch me like angels' kisses all over. "Aha, so another poet is here. Look, Tulip, look!" I heard from Emily. I could hardly believe my sight. It was the Afghan poet Mewlana Jalaluddin Rumi, my spiritual harbor. There he stood, with that humble look that often comes on men of wisdom. His head was covered with what we call a turban.

"My poet friend, Emily, would you perhaps like to listen to a part of my poem of the spirits since we are here reconciling our poetic senses?" Rumi said.

"I am flattered to meet you, Poet Rumi." I stammered. But where was he? Didn't I see his halo? Just as suddenly as he had come, he had vanished. But he wanted to recite something.

"It's about time to go," I heard a voice beside me. Somewhere, a bell rang, one like the church nearby. I felt emptiness beside me. Indeed, there was no Rumi or Emily. Was the church bell a reminder for the spirits to become invisible again?

Then my eyes caught her receding figure, moving farther away from me; it was Emily's spirit.

"Please, Emily, stay a little longer," I said softly.

But she looked overhead and smiled sweetly, her voice seeping into space. "Perhaps next year if we are meant to meet, I shall see you again, my poet friend."

And then there was only darkness and silence in the cemetery.

The presence of the spirits seemed like a dream as I came out of the gate. But I knew I was looking forward to returning to the cemetery next Christmas Eve. As I left the West Cemetery behind, I whispered to the falling snowflakes, "May my friends rest in peace in their other world."

My belief in the spiritual world had brought me to them. Life was a mystery waiting to unfold for the seekers.

## Fiction

Carbon  
Tea

Sean  
Cahill-Lemme



I understand that people process death in their own ways, I really do. But this wasn't our thing, it was their thing. Hell, even if it was our thing, I would never suggest something so disgusting. What did she expect? For me to take my shoes off, sit cross-legged on the floor, and start sipping when the clock struck midnight? At what point does grief become insanity? I wasn't going to do it, simple as that. They never invited me anyway; it was their thing.

"It wasn't always our thing," Bowie said. "Not at first. She asked you to join so many times and you always blew her off."

"I never blew her off. I was just busy." Bowie waltzed a Yuka plant toward the front door. "I'm sorry I didn't have time to drink Yerba Mate in Patagonia, or chai tea in the Himalayas," I said. "I had a daughter to take care of."

"We never went to the Himalayas. And okay, so you were busy, how is that her fault? You would get annoyed whenever she invited you anyway."

"Because she invited me on purpose," I said.

Bowie was orbiting around me, picking up poetry books and wooden idols and putting them into specific boxes. "What could you possibly be talking about?" she asked.

"She knew I couldn't come, Bow, and she asked anyway. It was like her little way of digging at me because I chose to live a normal life with the man I—"

"That doesn't go in that box," Bowie interrupted. She took the vase from my hands. "It's a Dharmachakra. Tibetan things go in this box here."

I looked around the room. Everything could have been Tibetan. "I'll just pack the tea," I said.

Bowie stopped and turned to me.

"How about you do picture duty? They all go in that box there."

If she wasn't going to let me help, I wasn't going to argue. I picked up the first picture and looked at it. It was the most colorful picture I had ever seen. Bowie and my mother wore flowing dresses with ornate braiding and beads. Bowie's dress was a bright canary yellow and my mother's dress was a vivid red. They sat outside a building that was impossibly blue, drinking tea, of course, and looking more like sisters than Bowie and I ever had.

"Is this in India?" I asked. I felt Bowie over my shoulder.

"That's in Chefchaouen," she said. "I love that picture; Mom looks so beautiful."

"So, not India?"

"Morocco. The Rif Mountains."

I went around the world with them in each picture I packed. They drank tea in France, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and other places I didn't recognize. "So where do you plan on doing this?" I asked.

"Downstairs."

"Can't I just watch? Do I have to...participate?"

"It's what she wanted." Bowie pulled a poster off the wall. "Do you want this?" she asked. The poster was of Joni Mitchell's *Ladies of the Canyon*. I could see my mother swaying in the kitchen while she cooked, pointing the wooden spoon at me when it was my turn to sing. "She bought it for you in San Francisco," said Bowie.

"No, she didn't," I said.

"Yes, she did."

"Then why is it here?"

"Because you didn't want it."

"I've never even seen it," I said. "How could she know I didn't want it?"

"She brought it over to your house when we came back from San Francisco. She had it wrapped. You stopped her before she could even open it. You said, 'Mom, if that's some crazy piece of art you expect me to hang, I don't want it.'"

Bowie was still holding the poster waiting for me to decide. "She spent a lot of time picking it out. I remember my feet getting so tired standing in that gallery. It was between this album and Blue, and she picked this one because you two sang it the most. The rest of the day she kept asking me if she made the right choice."

"Why wouldn't she have just told me, like an adult? That's so petty."

"I guess she didn't think you deserved it, and frankly, I agree with her." Bowie let that last comment trail off. "So, want it or not?"

I shook my head. "I have nowhere to put it."

There were these glass orbs hanging in the windows. The sun set through them and the light shimmered around the room like water. It danced over Bowie and it must have been dancing on me too, because she smiled at me and said, "Sun catchers." She walked slowly around the room with her arms raised, trying not to make any sudden movements, like she was covered in butterflies. I knew she was going to try and say it was my mom there with us but I wasn't going to let her.

"How should we pack these?" I asked. "Are they expensive?" I unhooked the sun catchers from the window and laid them out on the couch. The strings of light fell away. I switched on a lamp; its shade was embroidered with jewels and their gaudy colors splattered against the walls.

"Jesus," I said, and switched it off. I thought I heard Bowie laugh but she might have just been clearing her throat. I found a different lamp, a crescent moon with a bulb that was hanging at the center, kitschy, but at least it had normal white light.

Bowie walked to the couch and held up the sun catcher. "They're not expensive," she said, "but she blew the glass herself. We need to be careful with them."

"Never volunteer to move a sentimental person," I said. "Is there anything in this house that doesn't have some strange significance?"

"Why would anyone put something in their house that isn't significant to them?" Bowie asked.

We cleared everything out from the first and second floor. We stood in the middle of the empty room staring at the red spiral staircase that curled down into the basement. Bowie looked back at me. "Thanks for helping," she said, "You don't have to do this part. I got it."

"Bow, you'll be here all night. I'll help."

"This part is important to me," she said.

"I know," I said, "It was your thing."

Bowie rolled her eyes. "I want to show you something," she said. "Let's go down."

So, I was finally going to see it. My mother's sacred room. She talked about this room so much that I made it a point never to go down. She brought it up in every conversation, like when you're fresh in love, and you wait in the wings for a seamless opportunity to talk about the person you're in love with and you think you're being subtle or maybe you just don't care. *Mel, you have to see this compartment I just added. Mel, you need to try this Cambodian tea. My shoulder has been hurting too, I think it's from hoisting up that bamboo lattice.*

I followed Bowie down the stairs, expecting to slip at any moment. "What's wrong with normal stairs?" I asked. "If she had gotten older, she could have fallen down."

"But she didn't, did she?"

We reached the bottom of the stairs and, much like I had expected, it wasn't a room that could be processed all at once. Open bird cages overgrown with ivy hung from the ceiling, stone fountains of women pouring tea were placed around

the room, every wall was made of bamboo lattice except for one. The fourth, and biggest, wall was a map of the world. Tea bags were pinned across it in chaotic fashion. Bowie walked up beside me like an art seller.

"So, like what," I asked, "each of these bags are from the place they're pinned to?"

"Right," said Bowie, "and the colors are coordinated with the shelves in the next room." She pointed to a small door that I hadn't noticed.

"It must have cost a fortune to order all of it," I said.

Bowie laughed. "She didn't order any of it. She bought every bag in person."

"That can't be true; you were never in Russia."

"I was never in Russia," said Bowie. "She went by herself after college. A lot of these places she visited before we were even born. Mel, I told you, it was her thing and she wanted it to be our—"

"What did you want to show me?"

"It's in here."

I followed Bowie into a room that wasn't really a room at all. It was more like a small, colorful, cellar. "Didn't she ever get claustrophobic?" I asked.

"Don't you?" asked Bowie.

"Show me what you're going to show me."

"This is it." Bowie motioned around at all the boxes of tea.

"It's just more tea," I said.

"It's your tea."

"I'm not taking mom's tea, Bow."

"It's not mom's, it's yours."

"Listen, Bow, I'm really tired and—"

"Everywhere we went she bought a third box for you. I think she put notes in some of them. I don't know what her plan was, because clearly you were never going to take them. And I wasn't going to show you but I thought she deserved for you to know."

"Again, why wouldn't she just give them to me? I like tea as much as the next person."

"Maybe because you would have dumped it into a thermos and drank it while you filled out a spreadsheet."

"That's exactly what I would have done, Bowie, and do you know why? Because that is what people do with tea."

"I'll never understand why you place so much importance on the things you do," said Bowie.

"That must be a joke," I said. "It's tea Bowie, fucking tea. And you know, it would be nice to have the time to travel, to not have to answer to anyone, but I chose to have a family and to have people that I care for and that care for me, and that takes having a job, Bow, and having health insurance, and going to teacher conferences. And sometimes it sucks, but you know what? I have them now. What do you have?"

Bowie didn't say anything. I walked back up the absurd spirals and stood for a second to breathe in the empty house. Even empty, it looked whacky, not a single square frame, and I thought, what other way could she have decorated this house? It begged for the sun catchers, and the dream catchers, the totems, the plants, the goddamn tea, and for her. I heard Bowie starting to pack up the tea boxes downstairs. I stopped and stood in the empty room. Then I turned around and walked back downstairs.

"Alright," I said. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The Carbon Tea."

"Mel, you don't have to."

"I want to."

Bowie walked to a small cabinet and pulled out a triangular box, ornate — each corner had a beautiful engravement of a woman's face, each different but familiar.

"It's us," Bowie said. "She made the box herself; it's what kept her busy all that time in bed."

"It's beautiful," I said.

Bowie looked at me with the same incredulous smile she had as a girl, when we would say liberating things under our bed covers, like sex and penis, and the most scandalous of all: like-like. Bowie smiled so widely at me. Was beautiful a word I so seldom used? I had said it to Jane after her recital last week, hadn't I? Or when we visited Artist's Point in Yellowstone. I know I thought it, but did I say it? No, I guess I didn't. I said it was nice. *Yeah, let's not get crazy Melanie, it's nice, it's fine, maybe even pretty, but beautiful? That's a word for little girls.*

Bowie opened the box and pulled out a jar that was — since I've already said it once — also beautiful. After the jar, she pulled out a spherical sift that attached to a silver chain. She sat pretzel style on the floor and began packing the sphere with the contents of the jar. I had never seen Bow put that

much concentration into anything. When it was fully packed, she swung the sift back and forth like a hypnotist to make sure the contents were secure.

Water started boiling in the corner and she walked over and took it off the heat. I could feel my heart beginning to pound; my stomach turned a little. She placed the sift into a glass pitcher and I watched the colors travel through the clear water like lavender smoke. It filled the entirety of the pitcher, and then Bowie poured it into cups. She walked over to me and held one out. "This cup was mom's," she said and handed it to me.

"Should we say something?" I asked.

"The steep time is five minutes."

"The steep?"

"The time it will take her to fully release. We usually meditated while we waited."

"Bowie, can I just—"

"Just count your breaths. One in, one out, one in, one out, until you reach ten. Then start the count over."

"What should I think about?" I asked.

"Nothing — that's the big misconception about meditation — people think they need to think. If you're thinking, you're not in the present. Just focus on your breaths."

And so, I did.

I counted my breaths and every time I wandered up to the cluttered attic of my head, I would gently escort myself back down. I could hear my mother's voice throwing out that cliché: Live in the moment — for all her eccentricities, she was quick with a platitude.

"Should I close my eyes?" I asked.

"I do," she said, "but you don't have to. Keep counting."

I kept my eyes open and counted my breaths. At first, there was nothing, but then, something changed. For a very brief moment, and for the first time since I was kid, I was present in my own life. I was sitting across from my sister, and I was there, or here? And the philosophy of living in the moment, the one that had been beaten into a meaningless cliché, suddenly became the only truth I knew.

And then it passed.



# The Colors

## Sue Cook

## Poetry

The colors of the season flow through my veins like blood,  
turning my soul into a kaleidoscope of  
red

orange

yellow

green

as they tumble before my eyes;

Gifts of the Earth.

faeries of another realm, dressed in their finest fall attire.

My body lies amongst the leaves  
hearing their soft mummerings,  
knowing that I am slowly becoming one with the ecosystem of light.

Their songs rise, almost a chant.

“Listen to us, lest we leave this planet to hold space on another.

You would not breathe, if we did not resuscitate you daily.”

Tears stream down my face as I collect the leaves  
and wait for the leaf collector to come and whisk them away.

Can you hear the siren call of the trees?

The unexpected delights found in a sliver of leaf and a droplet of water?

No?

Look deeply into the microscope  
for the call of the trees lies within the it's cells.

This tiny droplet of water and the leaves contains our future.



# No Longer a Widow

Melanie Maggard

Fiction

I stared at the red pill the doctor placed in the palm of my sweaty hand, underneath a small oval of skin turned pink. When I first came to him for help, he asked me if I was sure this is what I wanted, if I was sure I wanted to forget my lost husband. I was tired of remembering everything I had before, how I felt when I was with him, what I was missing from my life now he was gone. I wanted to forget I ever had those things so I could move on.

I didn't want to be his widow anymore.

My husband's body was never found. He was presumed dead after being missing for months after a surfing trip off the coast of Bali. He had gone out early that morning as I laid entangled in thin cotton sheets in our bungalow off the beach. A kiss on my naked shoulder blade before he was gone, telling me he would be back with breakfast. I told him he better not return unless he had more than that.

I remember hearing him whistle as he trudged through the thick yellow sand before I dozed back to dreams of rolling waves and the smell of our scent in the air.

I had buried an old shoe box in the woods near our home outside Seattle with ramblings I wrote to him in the middle of the night while I waited for him to return, before I declared myself stupid to keep hoping he was alive. No funeral, no big event. Just me and Buster, our French terrier, walking through the forest trying to forget him, to lose him in the evergreens. Flashes of his hiking boots on the muddy rocks that lined the bend in the path, his coat in the dark edges of a redwood in shadow. Even Buster seemed depressed. But the doctor said the pill wasn't safe for dogs.

I was told that the medical team programs each pill to target memories associated with the individual or event you want to forget. For weeks, I had looked at hundreds of pictures of him, watched videos of us together, read letters, emails, and texts he had written to me, while hooked up to electrodes. The machines scanned my brain activity, neurotransmitter, and hormone levels. Moments we had shared, glimpses into the life we had, a kaleidoscope of his face in a million different lights. My eyes darted from one to the other so quickly as if I was searching for him to appear, to wave at me from the photo.

I walked home yearning for the bottle of champagne in my fridge and getting high on the smell of fresh baked bread in the shopping bag off my shoulder. I would have a picnic in my living room like we used to do when we were dating. I remembered the time he fed me frozen grapes as he made love to me, our lips and tongues thick and icy.

"I love to feed on you," he whispered as he nibbled along my neck.

Tonight, I would get tipsy on bubbly, then sleep with him one last time.

When I arrived at our apartment, a man in acid-washed jeans and a black t-shirt knocked at my door. Buster barked from the other side. I asked the man what he wanted.

Then, I saw his hair, the way it curled around the back of his neck like my husband's before he started keeping it short. I saw the way he ran his hand through it, those smooth, muscular hands that would touch me. He turned to face me as my bag slid to the floor.



# Unexpected Love

## Perri Dodgson Fiction

She felt like she was going insane. The tap-tapping of the hanging branch on her caravan roof was relentless in the wind. Was it always so loud? Eleanor felt close to tears as she lay, trying to sleep, holding her pillow awkwardly to her ears. What if the whole branch came off? Would it damage her roof? Would she be able to hide if there was someone out there trying to break in with a stick? The wind died down and the tapping dwindled but her mind kept churning so she did not sleep. Who can I get to trim back the trees? I can't get up there. Who shall I ask? Where will I find a ladder? What if they fall? Will it be my fault?

Eleanor was a worrier. At the grand age of seventy-three, her mind was well overdue for a rest, but it didn't help that financially she'd never been so low. She was still getting used to not having things of the best quality around her. When her husband had died, she'd had to sell their beautiful country cottage with its Edwardian-style conservatory, the home she'd loved. Everything had been sold to pay off his debts at the golf club and, unknown to her, he had been transferring hundreds into his flailing antique shop before it had finally had to close down.

Left with only enough money to buy a caravan for a home, Eleanor bravely endeavoured to set herself up with a new way of life, albeit without a few luxuries. She was quite excited and considered it a new adventure. Renting a pitch on a site in the middle of nowhere, she thought "I can cycle out to the village for my food and essentials, and there's the number thirty-four that'll take me into town if I need it."

"I'm quite happy slumming it for a while and the thought of doing what I want, when I want is wonderful." She was nothing but positive; she just needed to get the trees cut back a bit.

The van was cosy inside. Anything that wasn't essential had gone to people she knew or charity shops. The things she couldn't bear to part with: the photos of her son when he was a baby, a card that a man had painted for her before she'd gotten married and some letters. All were safe in the top drawer in her bedroom.

Everything else was newly acquired, that way she wouldn't be interrupted by memories every five minutes. She'd filled the place with bright colours, tastefully matched of course, but no browns or greys. No muted tones like khaki or olive, either. She'd seen a life-style guru on TV ages ago that told her to "surround yourself with things that give you joy." Of course, she had worried that it would be too garish but the sentiment sounded lovely so that's what she did. Trying to keep her standards up and everything tasteful, she kept the van clean outside and the windows gleaming. She placed little flowering pots in a row up the track to her door and a little painted porcelain number plaque on the wall. The curtains all hung down, perfectly vertical, framing the charming net panels, and in the centre of one window hung a canary-yellow bird mobile. "Where did this come from?" she asked herself at least twice a day when it caught her eye. "So lovely," she smiled. "I must have put it up when I was day-dreaming."

The next day, Eleanor sat peacefully gazing out of the side window, wondering what time the caretaker would arrive so that she could again tackle him about the trees. The gentle rustling in the air was suddenly interrupted by the awkward sound of a back-firing engine. Annoyed, she turned to see a tatty white van making its way up the track towards her.

"Oh, what a heap!" she flinched as it pulled up next to the empty caravan in the row opposite to hers. "Must be getting a new neighbour."

Pulling back into the anonymity of her van, she watched two men, one visibly older than the other judging by his unruly mop of grey hair, opening its doors and taking a myriad of containers and boxes inside. "I won't be a nosy neighbour," Eleanor sniffed and defied herself not to peek. She picked up her novel and allowed herself to transport off to the Middle Age and the court of King Arthur.

A knock on her door brought her back to the 21st Century with a jolt.

"Hello, are you in?" A man's voice boomed. "I thought I'd pop over and introduce myself."

Cautiously, she peered from behind the door.

"Oh, hello. I saw you arrive earlier. I'm Eleanor." She held out her hand for him to shake.

"Blimey, a bit formal aren't we then?" he laughed, taking her hand.

"I believe that manners maketh the man."

"They do indeed. Well then, my name is Geoff. How do you do?"

"How do you do? So, you'll be staying over there for a while?"

"For the foreseeable, m'dear. Moving in, for me sins."

Cockney, she thought.

"My mate Jim dropped off my stuff. He's a good sort, helps me out till I can get meself a motor."

She nodded, relieved that she wouldn't have to see that old van every morning when she woke up.

Pleasantries done, Eleanor announced she had to go and find a groundsman to complain about the trees. Geoff's needed trimming too so she'd report back to him, hopefully with a date the gardeners would be coming.

She found the site manager sweeping up leaves at the site entrance.

"I've already told you, Ellie." He stood back with his hands on his hips. "No one can come out till next Thursday. I'll come by myself, and cut back that branch that's bothering you if you like. Just let me find a ladder and I'll come over."

"It's Eleanor, not Ellie. No, you haven't, and thank you." She smiled, hating the way people always tried to shorten her name but pleased that he was going to help her. Back at the van, she strode over and knocked on Geoff's door. A loud, tinny transistor radio was playing inside and she could hear him humming along to a sixties tune.

"They're coming to cut the trees back next Thursday," she shouted above the din. "Just so you know."

His answer made her feel silly. "Oh, I'm not bothered about a few trees, love. There's more important things in life to worry about. Like where I'm going to get my next couple of quid from," he laughed. "Here, you look like you've got enough to be going on with – I might be over later to scrounge a piece of cake!"

"Oh no you won't," said Eleanor and marched back to her van. "The cheek of it!"

"I've joined the writing group at the library," said Eleanor. Geoff had come to sit next to her on the bus into town. Both of them wore thick coats and scarves. Her collar displayed a brooch depicting a flower arrangement, he wore a cap and fingerless gloves. "I've always wanted to be a writer." She told him.

"Too posh for me, that lot. Bet they think they're so intellectual," he sniffed.

"No, they're not actually. They're nice people, thoughtful. You'd be amazed at the poems they write."

"Poetry! Pa! Don't talk to me about poetry. Taught by the university of life, me. That's what teaches proper poetry. None of that namby-pamby stuff."

"Do you write, then?" she said, turning to him in surprise.

"I like to dip me toes in now and again. I could come up with something as good as that lot, easy!"

"Write a poem then! Let me read it to them, see what they think, if you're so clever."

"I will," he huffed.

The following week, at the library, Eleanor told the writing group about 'this silly old man she knows who thinks he's a poet.' She read Geoff's poem to the assortment of wannabe writers and someone said that it was pretentious and banal, that it was full of clichés and didn't evoke an emotion of any kind.

She did feel guilty though. "I suppose that was mean of me," she thought. "But he's such an annoying little man, I can't help it!"

On the way back to the bus stop she picked out a few groceries at the small supermarket on the corner. She'd gone to the till fumbling with the coins in her hand but her mind went blank as soon as she focused on the numbers. She couldn't seem to make any sense of them at all. "Sorry, I seem to have forgotten my glasses," she said to the cashier. "Can you just take the right amount?"

Holding her hand out full of coins, she felt cross with herself. This had happened a few times lately so she'd come up with the 'glasses' idea. It saved her pride in an embarrassing situation. Assuming her coin muddling must be because she'd become so used to using her debit card, she pushed the niggling worry to the back of her mind with the rest of the cobwebs.

The bus was late. Eleanor began to worry it wouldn't turn up. "What if I have to wait another hour? I need to get the ham in the fridge, how will I know if it's gone off?"

A bus pulled up at her stop. She stepped on and began fumbling for her purse among her shopping bags and handbag. "Oh, dear. Where is it?" She was aware of the queue forming behind her but that just made her panic more. Dropping the bags onto the floor, she darted her hands in and out of her coat pockets bringing out old receipts and shopping lists.

Geoff suddenly appeared by her side, lifted her bags, and took her elbow to guide her off the bus. "Eleanor, it's alright. It's not our bus. The thirty-four will be another twenty minutes. Come on, let me help you find your purse."

In the end they had to return to the supermarket to see if she'd left it at the till. She had. The cashier had kept it under the counter thinking the lady would come back for it.

Later, with the curtains closed and the little Tiffany lamp shining a multicoloured warmth into her living area, she picked up the TV remote control. She looked at it, knowing it's what you use to switch the TV on. When she pointed it at the screen nothing happened. She kept looking at it. What was she supposed to do to it? Trying to relax and let her actions come naturally, after a few seconds she pressed a button, then another, and the welcoming green light came on. The screen burst into action. "I'm just tired," she thought.

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Spring came and melted the harsh edges of winter to a promise of new life. Eleanor still felt muddled on occasion in her daily life but shrugged it off like a tickling shawl. "I'm getting old. That's all it is."

Hedgerows filled out, lush and swollen with new growth and Wellington boots got stored away for a few months. Birdsongs filled the caravan site with a vengeance, and, all in all, it was a delightful place to be. Eleanor opened her windows and door to let some warmth into her van and she set about washing the mould and dead leaves off the bodywork. Soon it gleamed white again. A lot of her outside plant pots needed attention, so she made a promise to herself to get some new baby Lobelias and Petunias soon to make them look presentable.

Across the way, the appearance of Geoff's caravan was in stark contrast. Accumulated around it were what she called trash pieces: a rusty bicycle, a grey metal filing cabinet, and assorted wheels and other metal things. She didn't know what on earth they were. He'd put up a makeshift storage area made with old wood that had a corrugated iron roof and a huge padlock on the door. It was understandable that he needed storage but did it have to be so scruffy?

He had caught her turning her nose up at the pile the other day and said, "Get over yourself, woman! Not everyone can afford a nice little wooden shed like yours."

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to be rude." She was a lady, after all.

"Come and have some tea with me tonight?" he grinned. "Or do you think you're too good to set foot in my humble abode?"

Unable to think of a quick excuse to turn him down, Eleanor accepted his invitation. "Six o'clock okay with you, then love? It won't be much," he said, pleased. "Just the odd cucumber sandwich or two."

At ten past six, flustered with the worry of what to wear, and "should I put my hair up?" her anxiety came to a head. She'd become concerned with wanting to avoid looking flirty, meaning a high neckline was important, but also not too formal, so long sleeves were a no-no. Should she put some lipstick on? Would he then think she was being too posh? It was all so difficult to think straight! She turned up at Geoff's door wearing a woollen bobble-hat, a sun-dress, thick grey woollen tights and the wellies she'd packed away days earlier. On top of the hat sat a pair of glasses and sat on her nose was another pair, this time attached to a string of pearls so she could hang them like a necklace. Her canvas shopping bag hung from her hand and, knowing she had to give something as a gift, she reached in and pulled out a bunch of carrots for him.

He stood there, mouth agape.

"What on earth are you... We..." He stuttered himself to silence. He could see she was looking a bit vacant, as if she were shell-shocked. "Come in, me old love. Come and take the weight off your feet. Come and have some give-n'-take."

She looked at him, more confused than ever. "Piece of cake, love, piece of cake! Oh, don't mind me. Come and sit down."

Gingerly lowering herself into an armchair that he'd covered with a curtain, he pushed over a stool for her to rest her feet on.

"Just relax and I'll put the kettle on. Tea is it? Do you have sugar?" he asked.

"One sugar please, Geoff," she replied.

He was chuffed she'd said his name. He wondered what was going on in that head of hers.

It was comfortably warm in the van. They drank and ate quietly while Eleanor picked out a photo or two from his shelf and smiled as he told her about his family and the life he'd led before coming to the caravan site. It was all much cleaner than she'd anticipated. Judging from the state of the outside, she'd imagined it to be much more of a male environment, smelling of oil and nicotine. But instead, he'd wiped down the tops and put out little cathedral printed coasters and the smell of Pledge was still in the air. There was a vase of flowers on the pull down table. He must have gone out and picked them from the hedgerows especially for her. Despite her initial misgivings, Eleanor felt flattered and comfortable and she began to enjoy herself.

"Sorry about earlier," she told her new friend. "I can't believe I gave you a bunch of carrots! Sometimes I don't feel the full shilling. It's a price we pay for getting older, I'm afraid."

"Don't worry. I love carrots," he replied. "Come on, love, it's late. Let's think about getting you home."

Ever the gentleman, Geoff started to walk Eleanor over to her van. Mid-way, she stopped suddenly and looked both ways, faltering her step as if she didn't know which way to go. He gently pulled her arm, and as they safely reached her door she seemed to re-focus. She turned and frowned at him in disgust.

"I don't need your help!" she snapped.

All is definitely not well there, thought Geoff as he returned home.

It was the middle of the night, about one thirty or two o'clock, when Geoff got up to use the bathroom. An odd light was coming through the patterned glass window. Usually, it was pitch black out there. He strained his head to look out the little window and saw it was coming from Eleanor's caravan. All of the lights were on and the door was swinging open. He could hear her kettle whistling.

Earlier, Eleanor had jolted upright in her bed in the pitch black caravan. "That blessed branch has grown back again." She cursed as the tapping seemed louder than ever. It seemed to vibrate into her head and wouldn't let her concentrate on a full sentence of thought. As she had done a hundred times before, she

sat up, pushed her feet into slippers and put on her housecoat. She stumbled over to the kettle and switched it on. Always unlocked now, because the key was never where she had left it, the door was hanging open. The beauty of the fresh night air drew her over and suddenly she stopped. What was she going out for? Down the step she went and took a few tentative steps into the night. What was it she had to do?

"That's right! Where's that caretaker? I need him to cut back my trees. Where is he?" She thought. She walked further on. The half-moon lit the pale dry mud of the track to the site entrance. She knew what she'd come out for now, but where was everybody? The gates were open as always. "I don't know why they even have gates," she tutted, mumbling to herself as she took a left turn. This part of the track took her down to a more heavily wooded area where a large red tractor stood in a tumbledown lean-to. She stood and looked at it. What had she come out for? She stumbled further, her thin soled slippers giving her little protection from the stones on the track. Wrapping her housecoat across her chest, she stopped again, frightened. "Where in heaven's name am I?" Suddenly feeling exhausted, she let her body slide helplessly to the ground. Terrified and unable to make sense of it all, she gave into the tears of utter frustration and waited for her thoughts to come back into focus.

"Eleanor! Eleanor!"

She could hear Geoff shouting. The familiar voice pierced the fog in her head. "What does that silly man want now?" she thought. She stood, shuddering. Finally, realising where she was, the relief spread through her bones like a steaming mug of hot chocolate. Geoff's running footsteps reached her just as she made it back to the gates. He took off his old fleece, wrapped it around her and held her tightly until she stopped trying to push him off. Her head dropped onto his shoulder. *Safe now.*

The surgery was sterile and everything glowed shiny and white. The window blinds gently rattled in the incoming breeze as the doctor sat staring at his computer screen. Then, concerned, he turned to Eleanor and said, "So, Mrs. Brennan, all your blood results are back and they appear fine. But the scan results are showing a few anomalies. Nothing to worry about just yet. With your permission, I'd like to do a few more tests to ascertain what's really going on here. Get to the bottom of the problem, so to speak."

Eleanor sighed. She'd more or less known there was a problem but to hear it spoken made it official, and that was very scary indeed.

"In the meantime I can refer you to our Memory Clinic. You'll get the appointment through the post," the doctor continued. "Here are some leaflets you can browse through until then. There are some useful phone numbers should you feel the need to talk to someone."

She saw the word "dementia" very clearly printed on the front of the one on the top of the pile. It stood out like the name on a children's book cover. He went on to advise her to get her family involved and seriously think about her future. Whilst nodding in acknowledgement, she thought "I'll not worry them. There's not a lot they can do from America anyway. This is something I've got to deal with on my own."

Back in the waiting room, the receptionist noticed Eleanor's hesitating steps and look of confusion. "The way out's just over there, Mrs. Brennan," she said, pointing to the exit.

A week later, Eleanor received a letter saying a social worker was going to visit. It gave a date and time and asked if she'd like someone present to serve as an extra pair of ears. Also enclosed was a form she had to sign to give permission for them to share her medical information with that named person and they had to sign it too.

"But I don't have anyone," she thought. "The only person who really knows what's going on is Geoff, and he won't do at all. What will they think if they see him with that old tie holding his jeans up? They'll think I've picked him up from the street."

Although, if she had been honest with herself she'd have realised she was getting fond of the old man. He badly needed a haircut and often wore it tied back in a ponytail. She knew he could probably scrub up quite nicely with a bit of guidance. From her, obviously.

The two of them met the next morning. The past few weeks had seen them sitting out in the sun together on a pair of old deckchairs Geoff had "acquired." Eleanor had brought out a nice little embroidered cushion for her head.

She suddenly braced herself. Laying her book in her lap she said, "There's something I need to ask you but I don't know how to say it."

"You want me to take me shirt off? Happily!" Geoff laughed. Then serious, "Don't be daft, woman! You can ask me anything."

Nervously, she explained to him about the appointment. Her book dropped to the floor as she twisted to face him.

"I hate to bother you with it but would you mind sitting in on the meeting with me? I've a feeling I'm going to need a friendly face in my corner."

He took her face in his hands. "Eleanor, of course I will. Us old 'uns? We need to look out for each other." She could have cried with gratitude.

Days later, at the meeting, she was crying for another reason. "Carers? I don't need carers! I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself, thank you very much!" The thought of strangers invading her beautiful little caravan, her safe harbour, was too much to bear.

"The trouble is, Mrs. Brennan, that we want to keep you safe. All our carers are lovely, all they'd do is pop by, check you've taken your medication and have a little chat. That way we can keep an eye on your progress. That's all."

"But what about my daughter at Christmas? She'll be on the bus..." A frown crumpled her brow before she finished the sentence. Why did she just say that? She didn't even have a daughter.

Turning to Geoff, her eyes met his. His heart broke as he saw every terrible wave of realisation wash over her.

"What's wrong with me?" she wailed. Her helpless sobbing filled the caravan.

*I'm in love with the bloody woman!* He thought with a start.

The social worker left with the promise to revisit next week when Eleanor had had some time to think. That evening, they sat in Geoff's tatty old van with a microwave meal on their knees. A curry for him and a tagliatelle for her would set them up for the evening now that autumn was drawing in. They watched a quiz programme on TV. The curtains were drawn and the scent of the small wood burner filled the van. Softly vibrating, the lino floor echoed the drone of the refrigerator and the tiny rattle of the plates on the draining board each time someone moved. With a flick of his wrist Geoff switched off the TV and turned to Eleanor.

"Look." He cleared his throat. "I've something to say, love, and I'm only asking you to think about it – but..."

She lowered her gaze, sensitive to his sudden seriousness. He stopped and gathered up all his courage, said "The thing is... I'm thinking that I'm all you've got and you're certainly all I've got. How about you let me move my van over next to yours and we face the next few years together?" Eleanor looked up, her eyes wide, questioning.

"I know we're not a couple, but we could be. Let me look after you, only as much or as little as you want me to. I won't crowd you. I'd just be there if you need someone."

He bent to put her plate on the floor and then took both of her hands in his. "I love you, you daft old bat!"

The cuckoo clock kept ticking as Eleanor caught her breath in surprise. She looked into the huge earnest eyes of the old man who had the biggest heart of anyone she'd ever met and, for once, nothing could have been clearer.

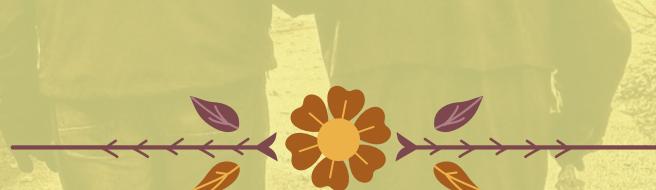
"You know, I make out that I've never needed any one." She lifted her hand to his craggy cheek and let herself feel the skin on the face of the man she'd come to rely on. "But I do need you, Geoff. And I love you, too. You can be bloody annoying at times!" Laughing then, "but then so can I."

Her pale mascara-smudged eyes seemed to bore into him as if searching the deep ocean of his soul. Questions were unspoken but answered. "We're adults, we both know it's going to get tough..." She didn't talk any more because he was on his knees and hugging her.

"Shut up, woman!" his kiss seemed to say.

Secretly grinning to themselves, they spent the rest of the evening making plans for their new living arrangement, while Eleanor decided which of his clothes he could no longer wear.

"It just shows," she thought, "It's never too late to find love."



Music often appears at the perfect moment.

Chaos and uncertainty rules the internet.  
The struggle of keeping your head above water is a reality –  
mentally and physically –  
and then a piece of music plays  
and all your troubles of the moment dissipate  
like the wafting scent of evergreen on the wind.

October brings such glorious colors  
The Divine painting across the leaves with a broad paintbrush of heaven.  
Vibrant reds  
    oranges  
    yellows  
    and greens  
spill onto my lap, as I rest beneath the oaks,  
back against the bark to feel a tree's essence flow through my body.

The eyes of the deer turn to look at me as I  
move slowly through the brush, camera in hand,  
unexpected delights of colors, sounds and images flooding my mind.

The month ends.

November begins.

With it

comes the unexpected delights of Christmas music on my “Music Choice”  
app.

I have faced the hardest day of the year and here the music awaits.  
Life will be alright as the strains of “Silver Bells” play from my speakers.  
Sadness dissipates and the music remains.

*Poetry*  
*November Bliss*  
*Sue Cook*

# Dharma and the Ducks

fiction  
Jacquie  
E. Lewis

**“Our culture made a virtue of living only as extroverts. We discouraged the inner journey, the quest for a center. So we lost our center and have to find it again.” - Anais Nin**

Benton starts to say something but instead studies her face. Then in a rush, he says, “I bought a building and the tenants wrecked the place. They left without paying rent.”

She stands there absorbing what he said, knowing better than to question him on what is yet another impulsive and irrational purchase. When he says, “Can you help me clean it up?” She nods, hiding her resentment and desire to have nothing to do with it.

The next day, she sees an eyesore, a vacant two-flat apartment building in a rundown part of the city. Its white dilapidated frame seems assembled as a hasty afterthought among the sturdier brick apartments. Inside, there is no electricity and filth is everywhere. Trash is covered with cat urine and bloody diarrhoea; a porn magazine is jammed behind the bathroom sink. Her body sinks with defeat at the idea of being a slumlord. But once Benton makes up his mind, there is no way to sway him. So, she works in silence, wishing herself anywhere but here.

She scrubs the sink and deposits the magazine in the trash, remembering Benton’s bachelor apartment where useless stuff was piled like a fortress with only a tiny path to walk through.

Once home, tired of being on her feet for hours and not making a dent in the cleaning, she wants to take a shower and relax but the animals must be fed and exercised. She removes her rabbit from his cage, holding Pooka gently, one hand across his chest, the other embracing his hindquarters, and places him on the floor. Pooka snuffles, his whiskers bobbing, hops a few paces, and decides a tongue bath is in order. She smiles and asks, “Are you washing up for dinner?”

Her dogs are sprawled along the floor in typical canine disregard of human pathways. She steps over them, stretches her hand into the cockatiel’s cage and lightly places the side of her finger to the bird’s lower belly. Ms. Noggs steps up to her finger and she moves the bird to the counter. The bird flutters, stretching her grey and white feathers, their striations catching the light as tiny wisps of down float and sway like white butterflies.

When she turns to the sink, Benton bursts into the kitchen, waving his arms as if initiating a military attack, and screams, “This is all your fault.”

Like a prey animal, she stiffens. The dogs quietly leave, heads down with guilty eyes, as if they are responsible for a deep despicable deed. Her back is to him and she asks the wall, “What happened? What is all my fault?”

He doesn’t answer, just reaches out and punches her in the back. She fears showing emotion that will make him angrier, deciding this must be about the building.

He detonates, dashing the windowsill plants to the floor. Shards and dirt spread all over the kitchen and her rabbit freezes, then runs for the corner. He grabs a glass juice bottle, raises it over her cockatiel, who is perched on the edge of the counter, and shouts, “You’re never there for me.” He slams the glass on the counter edge. The flightless bird tries to fly but crashes to the floor.

Benton slams objects to the ground: cookbooks; knives; the remains of her coffee cup, its brown liquid spreading out like blood at a crime scene; a family photo, glass broken, the photo soaked. He rants, "You think everything I do is all a big fucking joke. Well, you're not going to pull this shit again."

Glass and shards are everywhere, the floor a landmine. She panics. The animals are on the floor. She gets Ms. Noggs on her finger and with her free hand, as if to shelter her from rain, she hovers over the bird's head and body. Next she cradles Pooka to her chest, feeling his rapid heartbeat. When the animals are secure in their cages she takes refuge on the back porch, eliminating herself as Benton's target. She wishes she could flee but she can't. There are animals inside.

In the evening, when Benton is sprawled on the couch absorbed in watching T.V., she pretends nothing's wrong and sits down at her desk. She opens Google and indulges in being far away, viewing islands in Greece, palazzos in Florence. As a daily meditator, and participant on many retreats over the years, she has the idea to search for a spiritual respite. In a moment of serendipity, she finds a five-day silent mindfulness retreat starting the next day, only thirty miles away.

Nonchalantly, she goes to the phone in the bedroom to call her friend. When Siobhan agrees to take the animals, she digs through her purse and grabs her credit card. Minutes later she registers for the retreat.

The next morning, when Benton is at work, she places a note on the kitchen table: I've decided to go on a retreat for a few days. The animals are sheltered and safe so you have the whole place to yourself. Enjoy your vacation! I'll be back soon.

She is about to begin boot camp for the mind at a secluded monastery. The grounds flourish with spruce, fir, pine, and aspen. A dirt trail meanders around the property and along the path are ginkgoes, their leaves like little fans waving in the breeze to cool passersby. To the far side of the land runs a river with a footbridge made of iron and wooden planks resembling railroad ties. It extends to a treacherous track that rambles up a mountain. In the middle of the estate lies a duck pond, and up the hill, rests the meditation hall.

She's standing on the dirt path watching the ducks and eavesdropping. The ducks have a small latched gate, which opens to a short wooden pier on a slight peninsula. On this finger of land stands a little three-sided house where the caretaker places their food. Ten feet away she watches and listens as a monk and a retreatant chat at the pond. The monk shakes his head and says, "They won't come near other people. I feed them so they only come by me." When she hears this her desire to get friendly with the ducks is dampened. She bows her head and turns to walk up the hill to the meditation hall.

The retreat begins and people sit on zabutons, zafus, and chairs. During meditation her mind tumbles into a fog, becoming heavy and sluggish. She tries to stay alert counting

breaths to ten but her brain is in a twilight zone of torpor, like lying on a sunny beach like lying on a sunny beach, on a lazy afternoon, and being de-stressed by the sun. The bell sounds and it is time to do walking meditation. They will alternate sitting and walking the entire retreat. She is glad to get up and move, to shake herself out of this hazy condition.

In walking meditation, she slowly focuses on her movements as she walks, noticing how her feet touch the ground. Her eyes look downward, conscious of not looking at others, focusing on her own body and mind; sights, sounds, smells, physical sensations. When thoughts, feelings, or emotions arise, she acknowledges them like a psychologist showing empathy to a distressed client.

She visits the ducks but they seem to avoid her although she never attempts to get near. They appear as a living diorama, a picturesque image in a pastoral scene. But she feels a kinship. They are beautiful beings and names come to her, to honour them as individuals, Chelveston and Garfield, from decades old children's T.V. shows.

When she hears the bell to return to the hall, her mind wanders to thoughts of Benton. Emotion surfaces that she wants to escape from: fear changing to anger, then to sadness. She names them all, finally returning to her breath.

Benton consumes her thoughts over and over, as if she has an insurmountable problem that must be solved. A raptor picking at prey, pulling at her soul, ripping, tearing memories of their life together. A memory of the first time he was violent, six months into their marriage, blazes in image and feeling. The vividness of being picked up and thrown across the floor, her back smacked against the wall, her legs spread out like those of a Raggedy Ann doll. Her eyes flicker for a brief moment, as if to shut the door on pain.

The teacher leads them in loving-kindness meditation and she tries to pour out positive feelings to Benton. She remembers when they were going together, how handsome he was, how seemingly understanding. How happy they were, Christmas shopping all day at the mall, eating at the crepe restaurant, and then going to a movie. She recognizes and accepts the rising emotion of love. But then fear, anger, sadness return. She wants to get up and run out of the room but she works with what arises.

Later, she imagines friends, then acquaintances and her heart opens to them. Her body feels light and she realises how grateful she is to experience this retreat. When they focus on other species, her mind floats to the ducks. She pictures their peaceful, non-hurried existence and they inspire joy in her that wells up from her solar plexus, spouting tears in her eyes.

She is doing walking meditation and tries to emanate feelings of compassion toward Benton. By working on this maybe she can find a middle way, not to forget what he's done but to try to understand. She remembers a moment when times were good

but she feels herself pull away as if she has to stand alone. She returns to her breath.

She is sitting in the meditation hall and her mind becomes transfixed. A weightiness overtakes her as if she is in a dream, paralyzed to run, boxed in with bundles of useless stuff, like the debris constructed walls in Benton's old apartment. She vacillates between wanting Benton out of her life and trying to make the marriage work. She thinks of Roddy Doyle's protagonist, Paula Spencer "...I wanted to get away; I wanted to run. I couldn't stand it any more. But I didn't want to run."

*Maybe I should have put my foot down once and for all. Maybe I've provoked him. But what kind of marriage is it to never say what I think or feel? I have to stick with it. It's a marriage. Maybe I should try harder. Maybe I can make it work.* Like a trapped animal going over and over the same maze, she realises that trying harder has nothing to do with how she feels, the devastating hopelessness and loneliness.

When she visits the pond she watches the ducks as they swim peacefully. The ducks want many of the same things she wants: a sense of ease; a life of happiness. She is bonded to them. They glance at her in complete contentment, skimming the water in slow gliding movements, like feathered sages. Little Buddhas in the river of life.

A woman approaches the ducks and they send out low quacks of warning. When she walks to the shore they swim away and hide in the bullrushes. When she leaves, they swim closer.

Chelveston, slightly bigger than Garfield, moves to the side of the pond to search for grubs. She watches as he digs, then rinses his beak; dipping, dunking, and dousing, as if sampling fondue. Garfield dives and his chubby rump shoots straight up, white tail feathers twitching. As it begins to drizzle, the ducks point their wings up, cleansing their underarms or, in exaltation of living, praise the heavens.

During the Dharma talk the teacher says, "Mindfulness is, in part, about being peaceful with oneself and others but Buddhism is not passive. No one has to be a doormat."

*This is bullshit. I have become his slave. I am done. I have to get out. I have to have a plan to leave and disappear from his life. I hate him.* She pauses. Names it "anger." Recognizes that her anger causes her suffering. Notices her anger has dissipated. Returns to her breath.

*If I left, would a landlord accept me with four animals? No women's shelter would. Can I get by on one salary? Would I be lonely? Would he stalk me?* When she catches herself lost in thought, she returns to her body, noticing that desperation and defeat reside in her chest. She realises she is getting to know her mind.

Later, she is acutely aware of the noises around her, a cough from a retreatant, twittering birds outside. She's conscious of a reddish gold colour that steadily becomes brighter and redder,

a radiance from within permeating through her eyelids, as if she is looking into the eye of the sun. Warmth floods through her body and she is calmer. It is easier for her to concentrate on her breath. An engulfing silence descends upon her, vaster and deeper than the meditating quiet in the room.

At mealtimes, colours pop from the plant-based food and she tastes its rich and varied flavours. She notices her thoughts and feelings as they enter her mind and recede, like drifting clouds. She feels buoyant, contented, joyful.

In the meditation hall a mysterious visceral and palpable psychic force permeates her. Described as a realm of the poets, it is as if everyone in the room feels a deep sense of harmony. She remembers a Yeats quote: "The borders of our mind are ever shifting, and many minds can flow into one another and create a single mind, a single energy." The group radiates peaceful positive energy without trying, all helping each other achieve greater awareness.

She's visiting the ducks and notices that one of the ducks has lost a white feather. As she picks it up and smiles, they look at her, as if acknowledging a connection. Her rational mind tells her this can't be true. But a memory surfaces. She reflects on her dog; even if she doesn't mention his name or look at him, he seems to know when she is talking about him. How when she sits on the floor and brushes her dogs, removing little bales of fur, her dog will growl at the other dog, claiming ownership of his sloughed furry bundles. How does he know the fur is his when it is nested on the floor, no longer part of his body? Do Chelveston or Garfield also know that this feather belonged to one of them? Whatever their measure of awareness, she cherishes the feather as a personal and special gift. She watches their habits with wonder until she hears the bell.

She is sitting in the meditation hall and is in Samadhi, a place described by mystics where all the universe can be experienced by mere observation of a flower; like being invited by an author into a story. The book is open. The pages turn. And suddenly you are there, dropped into this other world, this new reality.

She reflects on how nature fills the silence on retreats. The sky is a rich blue and there is a slight breeze that glides across her arms and flows through her hair while the sun warms her entire body. Her mind is alert, her senses alive. She notices her surroundings as if for the first time and the sheer beauty overcomes her. The divine shows through every living thing, life is illuminated from within.

In the adjacent greenery, flowers sprinkle the landscape. Their vibrant colours create a necklace embracing the path, yellow and red wildflowers with tiny purple irises, their aroma like violets after a soft rain. Birds, plumed tenants in the deep branches of trees, twitter and plan, argue and gossip, and celebrate life. The leaves of their homes gently sway in the waft as if affirming all is as it should be.

She decided to do a retreat to escape the shackles of her world but now she feels more bonded to the world than ever. It is a world always with her, but rarely recognized, where she knows she is connected to all things.

One last time, she visits the ducks and stands by the edge of the dirt path about twenty feet from the pond. Almost as soon as she gets there, they come over to the edge of the pond, shuffle out of the water, muttering all the while. She thinks there is something adorable about their movements and well-rounded bums, as if she's watching toddlers with bulky diapers. They waddle right up to her.

At first, she wonders if they are threatening her because they view her as on their territory. But, immediately she realises that they are greeting her, looking at her and walking back and forth in front of her with soft quacks. She remembers what the caretaker said, that they avoid people other than him and she feels blessed because somehow she has communicated friendly intentions to them the past few days and they have understood. On her face an ecstatic smile appears. She and the ducks have touched each other mind to mind, heart to heart.

She realises that it is not only communing with nature these past few days, or the silent and powerful meditation experience, but also the relationship with the ducks that has changed her. Not to worry about the future or muse on the past, the ducks have led by example. In turn, the ducks felt her heart. They sensed something move and glide within her and their examples of peace and contentment point in the direction of where her life needs to go.

She marvels on her work over the past five days. How her meditation led to higher consciousness and this led to communing with the ducks. She is at peace. She likens it to experiences in other spiritual traditions that describe connecting with the still small voice within, or receiving an answer to prayer, or simply as the power of intuition. All silent reflective practices serve as a passage to clarity when the discursive and judging mind is hushed. She vows to cultivate this state of mind, to continue with daily meditations and intensive retreats.

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She is relieved as she unloads the car because Benton won't be home for a few hours. The dogs, tails wagging, bound to the house, while she struggles to remove Pooka's cage from the backseat, moving it this way and that, inching it through the narrow space. Saving her clothes in the trunk for last, she unstraps Ms. Noggs cage from the front seat, and soothing the bird, carries her into the house.

She smiles and kisses Benton hello when he gets home, to calm and contain what might be another eruption. But he responds to her greeting by smiling and saying, "I got you something. Hold on while I go get it."

He hands her a small silver box and when she opens it she finds an iPad mini. This generous act of forgiveness touches

her and she hasn't the heart to turn him away. She will give Benton another chance. But this thought is quickly replaced by memories that surface and anger reappears. An overwhelming heaviness consumes her and she realises his expensive gift offers nothing but an empty promise.

The next day her mother calls. "He just gave you a nice gift to show he's sorry. Give your marriage a chance." She listens distracted as she digs between the couch cushions, removing detritus that has gathered through the years.

Later Siobhan says, "Your life is like walking on pieces of glass, girl. Look, it's not exactly suitable with the boiler in the middle of the room, no gas line for cooking, and the walls are full of tar but you'd be better off getting out of there and crashing in my unfinished basement than taking any more of his bullshit. He thinks if he gives you a present that the past never occurred. Get real. He's not going to change." She listens, her cell in hand, her other elbow on the desk, head bowed, holding her hand to her forehead, like she's performing a laying on of hands.

That evening Benton bolts in to her office and roars, "There's fucking feathers around the bird cage and that goddamn rabbit has to go." She says nothing, wishing she could capture the peace she felt on retreat but she cannot. She wants the pain to end. As she recleans the cages she takes solace in the innocence of animals.

The next morning, after Benton has left for work, she sits in morning meditation, her dogs snoring by her side. It feels as if there has been a premature and unexpected death in the family but her mind drifts to the ducks. She wants to know contentment. She wants to live in peace. When meditation is over she hesitates as if questioning herself, then she grabs her phone and dials.

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Her hat sits resolutely on her head while the animals wait in the car. Her note sits on the coffee table next to the iPad. As she pauses in the doorway, she stares into the room, the scene rooting in her memory, contemplating on what could have been and what will never be. In her hatband rests a gift from a friend, a delicately placed luminous white feather, an emblem which holds a sacred and everlasting memory and a newfound belief; that spiritual gifts can arrive unexpectedly. And in that belief all things are possible. Then her body straightens as she turns to look ahead and she quietly closes the door.



# Contributor Bios

## JENNY APOSTOL – MARYLAND, USA

Jenny Apostol's essays have appeared or are forthcoming in Kenyon Review, The Washington Post, Brevity, Speculative Nonfiction, Cordella, SweetLit, Blood Tree Literature, and Creative Nonfiction's "Sunday Short Reads" among other publications. She was a finalist for the Annie Dillard Award for Creative Nonfiction at Bellingham Review. Jenny holds an MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. Before she turned to creative writing, she was a television producer at National Geographic immersed in the natural world. Jenny lives outside of Washington DC with her husband, a dog, a cat, five hens, and occasionally, two adult children.

## SEAN CAHILL-LEMME – CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, USA

Sean Cahill-Lemme is an English tutor from the Midwest who has storytelling in his blood. When Sean isn't writing stories, he is composing music or performing on stage. He takes his inspiration from the everyday truths of life and believes there is no greater pleasure than moving people with art.

## CLARISSA CERVANTES – CALIFORNIA, USA

Clarissa Cervantes is an outdoor travel photographer. Clarissa also supplies freelance travel articles on a variety of travel destinations for newspaper, blogs, websites, and magazines such as USA Today and LA Times. Clarissa's photo gallery includes images from all over the globe, where she finds inspiration to share her images with others through her creative lens, inviting the viewer to question, explore more, and look closer at the world around them.

## TULIP CHOWDHURY – MASSACHUSETTS, USA

Tulip Chowdhury is a long-time educator and writer. She has authored multiple books, including *Visible, Invisible and Beyond*, *Soul Inside Out*, and a collection of poetry entitled *Red, Blue, and Purple*. The books are available on Amazon, Kindle, and Barnes and Noble. Tulip currently resides in Massachusetts, USA.

## PERRI DODGSON – ENGLAND

Perri Dodgson was born in 1959 into an RAF family. Her early life was spent in permanent transit making her school life rather chaotic. She studied graphic arts, worked in banking, did layout design, and worked in the care sector. Now retired, she lives in Wellingborough, England. She realised how much she loves storytelling and creating characters when she joined her local writing group early this year. Writing flash fiction, fiction, and poetry. She is enjoying the learning process and also planning her first novel.

## JAMES HANCOCK – UK

James Hancock is a writer/screenwriter who specializes in bizarre comedy, thriller, horror, sci-fi and twisted fairy tales. He takes readers down strange and seldom trodden paths, often dark, and always with a twist or two along the way. A few of his short screenplays have been made into films, his stories read on podcasts, and he has been published in several print magazines, online, and in anthology books. He lives in England with his wife, two daughters, and a bunch of pets he insisted his girls could **not** have.

## PEGGY HEITMANN – NORTH CAROLINA, USA

Peggy Heitmann has published poems and forthcoming in Remington Review, The Impostor, Deep Overstock, and Amethyst Review among others. She considers herself both word & visual artist. Peggy lives in Raleigh, NC area with her husband and two cats.

## SAVANNAH HERNANDEZ – CALIFORNIA, USA

Savannah Hernandez is a creative story writer, poet, and visual artist who graduated from Cal Poly Pomona University with a Bachelors in English Literature. Her themes often focus on healing, growth, and reflections on life.

## MARY JANICKE – USA

Mary Janicke is a gardener and writer living in Houston, Texas. Her work has appeared in the New York Times, USA Today, Blue Lake Review, Still Life, Honeyguide, Open Door, and elsewhere.

## PATRICK JOHNSON – QUEENS, NY, USA

Patrick Johnson is an emerging, Queer poet from Queens, New York. He is a public school science teacher and labor union advocate. His poetry draws from many themes, often inspired by science and human history. He facilitates a weekly poetry workshop, and enjoys supporting other poets in their artistic journeys.

## JACQUIE E. LEWIS – NEW MEXICO, USA

Jacquie E. Lewis is a retired psychologist. She has co-edited two books, *Working with Dreams and PTSD Nightmares* and *Weaving Dreams into the Classroom*. She lives with her husband, Joe, Thai Dye, who was rescued from the dog meat trade in Thailand, and Pandora the box turtle, who she has lived with since 1984. Jacquie has been vegan since 1990 and meditates daily. She also attends silent meditation retreats, is a race walker, lifts weights, and does yoga. She is currently writing an autobiographical novel about the 1960s.

## Contributor Bios

### LIZ LYDIC – SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, USA

Liz Lydic is a mom, writer, and local government employee in the Los Angeles area. She also does theatre stuff.

### GARY HEWITT MAIDSTONE (KINGSRACONTEUR) – UK

Gary Hewitt is a writer who has had a love of the written word for many years. His style is a unique blend of grittiness mixed with a dash of the unusual. Over the years, he's adjusted to a punchy style of writing and is always looking to find new ideas and originality. His inspirations are Stephen King, James Herbert, Graham Masterton, William Gibson, JRR Tolkien, and many more. He doesn't just read horror and sci-fi, though, and is quite happy to sit down with a feel-good tale or two. Gary also works with Tarot, Reiki, and other realms of the esoteric. It's all a quirky mix that can elicit some unusual inspiration for stories, poems, and longer works of fiction.

### MELANIE MAGGARD – SEATTLE, WASHINGTON, USA

Melanie Maggard is a flash and poetic prose writer who loves dribbles and drabbles. She has published in Cotton Xenomorph, The Dribble Drabble Review, X-R-A-Y Magazine, Five Minute Lit, and others.

### JOHN MURO – CONNECTICUT, USA

A two-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize, as well as the Best of the Net Award, John Muro is a resident of Connecticut, a graduate of Trinity College and a lover of all things chocolate. He has published two volumes of poems – In the Lilac Hour and Pastoral Suite – in 2020 and 2022, respectively. Both books were published by Antrim House, and both are available on Amazon. John's poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies, including Acumen, Barnstorm, Grey Sparrow, MockingOwl Roost, River Heron, Sky Island and the Valparaiso Review.

### NICK PERRY – VANCOUVER, CANADA

Nick Perry is a blooming schoolteacher and writer. Hailing from Canada's west coast, he lives his life as if he's already on television.

### KYLIE PETROVICH – NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE, USA

Kylie Petrovich is an English PhD Candidate at Middle Tennessee State University. She received a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from the University of Pittsburgh, a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Full Sail University, and a Master of Arts in English from Belmont University. Ms. Petrovich specializes in modern American literature, popular culture, and critical theory. Ms. Petrovich enjoys creative writing, watercolor painting, and maintains avid interest in psychology. Currently, her research focuses primarily on identity.

### JENNIFER PRIEST MITCHELL – ARIZONA, USA

Jennifer Priest Mitchell, a native of Ohio, holds a bachelor's degree from Capital University in Columbus and a master's degree from Arizona State University. She started composing poetry and short stories while growing up in Perrysburg, Ohio. Jennifer has supported her family by writing for several universities over the years, and with her freelance articles in numerous regional publications. She has published with the Chicken Soup for the Soul Series and is now assembling a collection of essays for publication. Jennifer enjoys baking, hiking with her husband and dogs, and pursuing her family's genealogy while collecting historic recipes and photographs.

### CLS SANDOVAL – CALIFORNIA, USA

CLS Sandoval, PhD (she/her) is a pushcart nominated writer and communication professor with accolades in film, academia, and creative writing who speaks, signs, acts, publishes, sings, performs, writes, paints, teaches and rarely relaxes. She's a flash fiction and poetry editor for Dark Onus Lit. She has presented over 50 times at communication conferences, published 15 academic articles, two academic books, three full-length literary collections, three chapbooks, as well as flash and poetry pieces in several literary journals, recently including Opiate Magazine, The Journal of Magical Wonder, and A Moon of One's Own. She is raising her daughter and dog with her husband in Alhambra, CA.

### ELLIS SHUMAN – ISRAEL

Ellis Shuman is an American-born Israeli author, travel writer, and book reviewer. His writing has appeared in The Jerusalem Post, The Times of Israel, and The Huffington Post. He is the author of The Virtual Kibbutz, Valley of Thracians, and The Burgas Affair. His short fiction has appeared in Isele Magazine, Vagabond, The Write Launch, Esoterica, Ariel Chart, Jewish Literary Journal, and other literary publications.

### LOUISA WILKINSON – ILLINOIS, USA

Louisa Wilkinson resides in rural Illinois, where she loves the open spaces and the rhythm of the seasons. She also loves a good story, and is an avid reader as well as an author for both children and adults.

## Staff Bios

### **ANNALI CARMEL - CREATIVE TEAM**

Annali Carmel (she/her) enjoys her life in rural New South Wales, where she listens to a lot of music, does some singing, and welcomes the occasional affection of Aria the cat when she deigns the peasant worthy.

### **SUE COOK - ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE, WRITER, SOCIAL MEDIA TEAM**

Sue Cook (she/her) lives in Freeport, Illinois with her husband Randy and two dogs. Her passions include assistance dogs, rescue dogs, music, acting, theater, poetry, and Doctor Who. She's been in both film and theater and is a regular cast member of the podcast Doctor Who's Line is it....Anyway? Sue is an advocate for the use of Service Dogs to assist their disabled handlers to maintain their independence. Quigley's Quest, her first children's book, addresses how a dog becomes a Service Dog.

### **MILENE CORREIA - REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR**

Brazilian multidisciplinary artist. Major in English Language and Literature, taking a specialization course in Teaching of Drama. I write, rewrite, draw and compose and expose because my heart can't fit all these feelings. Leo, Queer, 92.

### **KATIE DANIELS - STAFF WRITER & INTERVIEWER**

Katie Daniels is a lifelong Florida kid, where she still resides with her husband and their pup-child. She loves reading, meeting new people, and seeing new places. If you need anything, just bribe her with a donut.

### **CYNTHIA ANN LUBLINK - COMMISSIONING EDITOR & CREATIVE TEAM**

Cyndi (she/her) is the mama of two grown children and Oma to eight grandchildren, all of whom she adores. She's a biker chick with a lady's heart and forty tattoos that tell some of her life story. Not just a cancer survivor, she's a life thriver. She also loves painting and finds the process like solving math equations. She has been a writer/poet since the age of nine, her first poem being about God's Hands. She wrote for Christian Biker Magazine for five years.

### **EMILY MACKENZIE - COPY EDITOR**

Emily MacKenzie is a Canadian-born writer who currently teaches Secondary English in Scotland. She studied English and Creative Writing at Carleton University in Ottawa, although her love of writing developed long before that. Emily loves exploring different narrative formats and styles in her own writing, and while she tends to stick with long or short prose fiction, the odd poem slips through from time to time. She can most often be found tackling one of several young adult fantasy stories she intends to publish, both on her tablet, and on the walls with stickies, markers, and poster paper.

### **TANDY MALINAK - STAFF WRITER**

A Seattleite by birth, Tandy Malinak loves mountains but not rain. So she escaped to Chicago to learn what 'winter', 'summer', and 'real thunderstorm' mean, and she decided she liked them all. Tandy earned a BA in Education specializing in English and now spends her days homeschooling, nannying, and helping to lead her church's kids' ministry. In her free time, she writes fantasy and sci-fi, solves crosswords, and plays Nintendo. She lives with her husband, two dragon-loving kids, and three black cats.

### **NANCY MOCK - PROOFREADER**

Nancy was born in Montana, raised in Ohio, and moved to Florida almost 30 years ago. Mother of Rita Mock-Pike and her two siblings. Nancy learned to make computers "dance" in the early 1970s, with her husband's encouragement, before most people had computers in their homes. She's had a lot of experience formatting magazines, flyers, etc. throughout her life. As a retiree, her favorite hobbies are still crafting (mostly sewing) and reading.

## Staff Bios

### RITA MOCK-PIKE - CO-FOUNDER & EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Editor-in-Chief of The MockingOwl Roost, Rita Mock-Pike (she/her) is the granddaughter of aviatrix, Jerrie Mock, first woman to pilot an airplane solo around the world. Rita has found inspiration from her grandmother's life and flight and pursued many of her own dreams in theatre, podcasting, novel writing, and cooking up delicious food from around the world. She now writes on food, travel, pets, faith, and the arts. She's happily married to Matt, and faithfully serves the very fluffy kitten queen, Lady Stardust.

### SOREN PORTER - CO-FOUNDER & COMMISSIONING EDITOR

Soren Porter – He/him, INFJ, 30s-ish I think?, happily forever taken (sorry lads and ladies!). Writing reflections of faith and philosophy. LGBTQIA+ ally and sworn enemy of white supremacy. You might hear Soren ranting against evil policies, sharing ridiculous pop culture, or tossing around some theological thoughts on Tumblr or Twitter.



