

# Teach. Write.

A Literary Journal for Writing Teachers



Spring Summer 2026

Edited by Katie Winkler

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SPRING~SUMMER 2026

Katie Winkler ~ Editor

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During my years teaching English composition at a community college in western North Carolina, I saw firsthand how determined students can be—especially those balancing work, family, and school. Many arrived in class already exhausted, yet still committed to moving forward. The lotus blossom felt like the right image for this edition: a reminder that learning often begins in less than ideal conditions, yet still rises, opens, and makes something bright and beautiful.

Katie Winkler, Editor

# Laura Anella Johnson

## Time Management

“... but Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” (Luke 5:16)

He could have opened more blind eyes,  
taken more little dead daughters by the hand,  
given them back to more sobbing laughing parents,  
could have multiplied more fish and loaves,  
fed more five-thousands,  
could have fed everybody,  
could have taught more multitudes on more mounts,  
astounded more Pharisees,  
and more could have seen Him do it.  
He could have sent more lame feet scampering about Galilee  
and could have surfed all the waves barefoot if  
He hadn't spent so much time alone,  
sitting quietly, eyes closed, or open, looking skyward.  
So un-American.

I once tried that at my mama's house.  
She told me to get up and sweep the garage.  
She didn't have time to sit and do nothing,  
so why should I?

Mama's philosophy,  
governing businesses, schools,  
and workaholics from sea to shining sea.

Why would a teacher, for example, need time  
to think? meditate? address a higher Power?  
We must report the data, discuss the data,  
compare the data to last year's data.  
Our moments must be packed with  
meetings and training modules,  
we must not take more than  
twenty-seven minutes for lunch—  
to purchase and consume our  
oven-fried chicken, mac-and-cheese,  
and sweet tea from six-ounce Styrofoam cups.

Then, multitudes of little children will come unto us,  
and how could we not be prepared?

# When Your Poetry Mentor Dies

(for Baron Wormser)

Light, oxygen, a bit of common soul breaks loose,  
rocks your equilibrium.

But when your English learners arrive, you buck up and teach  
“It’s the farmer made—not make—a wise wish,”  
then rush for copies of the Benchmark Writing Test

and it hits again, “Baron is dead.”  
Your gaits slows and teeters, your hand finds the wall,  
the stylus skips off its spiral groove.  
The electrical signal lost,  
the music screeches to a halt.

There’s guilt for forgetting and for  
letting life slip by without writing.

You observe light lining the clouds,  
trees trailing their leafy fingers in the wind.  
Baron behind the clouds. Baron in wind.

The husband asks, and you say, “Baron died,”  
so he brings you fried catfish and mac and cheese.

You curl your limp self on the sofa.  
Fall, spiral, and spin like  
the red and yellow leaves out the window  
letting go.

You read Baron emails and poems,  
listen to that Baron-featured podcast,  
note his words, “Death is not a tragedy;  
it’s simply part of the cycle, part of living on planet  
Earth.”

You stand, and wonder why your whole body hurts.  
Maybe it’s the flu.  
You google “Why does my whole body hurt when I get  
devastating news?”  
and read the collective wisdom of the Internet.  
It’s not the flu.

You call on Tylenol and Melatonin to end this day.

Sara Bareilles and John Legend sing  
“A Soft Place to Land,” and you moan and wail like  
a toddler whose parents won’t let her have her way.  
Casting out the ache, you pray—“It’s so hard  
living in  
a world where You let me love people and then  
just let them die.”

You write about it with pencil and paper  
because that’s how he wrote poetry.

You find and print that picture.  
You in your cap and gown,  
him in his suit and tie,  
his armpit stretched over your left shoulder,  
his hand grasping your right shoulder,  
proud smiles on both your faces,

You welcome your students with a smile,  
Maybe you’ll tell them later, when  
the dam breaking isn’t a danger.

You breathe thank-You’s

for advice, clear or mysterious—  
“Get in the poem.” (Inhale)  
“Don’t get caught in the poetic stream.”  
(Exhale)  
“This line doesn’t tell me anything.” (Inhale)

for a friend who kept teaching after graduation—  
“Write poetry in every line.”(Exhale)  
“Your poem is in your last two stanzas.” (Inhale)  
“Maybe let that go.” (Exhale)

for your friend who never neglected to answer,  
who cheered your gains—publications and  
birthdays,  
whose voice will remain,  
for a mentor worth the heartbreak.

# Michael Harper

## Defining Wildness

Every semester several of my students write argumentative essays in favor of legalizing killing wolves. Jacob sits in the back row of my class and never speaks. He's a first-generation college student and like many of his classmates, he isn't sure why he's in school besides someone telling him to go. His argument is that wolves decimate his family's livestock on their ranch in Northern Idaho. This is something his family fights by trapping and poisoning. He tells me, "What are we supposed to do? Just let them kill everything?"

I grew up in a small town in Iowa surrounded by corn. The structured fields, symmetrical and controlled, ran in green parallel lines into the horizon, creating a manicured patchwork across the landscape. The lack of wild spaces was something I never understood was missing until I moved out West for grad school in my 30s.

Before grad school I taught young ELL learners. One day I watched two boys spend over an hour pretending to be wolves. They stalked their classmates through a maze of primary-colored jungle gym poles and yellow plastic tunnels, acting invisible against the brightly colored backdrops. They made a den under a jangling bridge where they howled at the noises above them and shared invisible food from their hunt.

Jacob's most convincing argument in his paper is that wolves are no longer endangered, but are still protected, hamstringing ranchers who are trying to raise livestock. He laughs when I say, "You want to protect the cattle to eat them later." I think he trusts me because I told him I hated college when I arrived there. What I don't tell him is I hated it because I wanted to get further away from home, and he wants to go back. Effectively, he's arguing we have enough wolves.

When I was nine, a wolf was shot by a farmer in Northern Iowa. It was news in the way small town news used to be -- a 200-word newspaper article that everyone talked about for a week, adding details and subtracting facts until it became a slippery breeze moving through town. One man told me the wolf had killed 15 cows. A wolf sympathizer said the animal was just skin and bones by the time it was shot. Most agreed they wouldn't want to meet it on a backroad.

There was something sinister about how the little boys looked at the other children. Something extremely male in how their gaze transformed what they saw into something not completely human. They were playing, but their relationship to the space became one of power. A power they flexed through the threat of violence. They chose to be apex predators in a world of prey.

According to the USDA, about .03% of the livestock in the Northern Rockies is lost to wolf attacks. This number accounts for about 1% of all livestock losses. Jacob shrugs when I show him this statistic.

After the news of the dead wolf, I found a book in the library that showed wolves existed in large numbers in Iowa until the mid-1800s. I didn't speak to anyone for the rest of the day. My mom asked me if I was sick. I didn't understand exactly why it upset me, but I knew it was something about the blankness of the landscape around me, the emptiness. Nothing seemed alive in those fields of mass assimilation, and this animal felt so impossible, so completely free, and we'd killed them all.

The day after the kids played wolf, I read them a story about wolf packs. The book focused on several communal behaviors like the oldest wolves leading pack migration which allows the slowest to set the pace, how after inter-pack conflicts wolves apologize by touching noses, and ways communal pup rearing passes down knowledge between generations. They bored of the story rather quickly, asking, "How do they hunt?"

Grading Jacob's paper involves holding my breath. It means focusing on rhetorical strategies and ignoring protests in my head. It also involves admitting our similar privilege. We live in an era of recognizing power. This is difficult because so many of us have so little of it. But our privilege, whether we're aware of it or not, promotes an entitlement to define. Sometimes that entitlement is a little boy who felt trapped in a small town identifying with something that represented a kind of borderless freedom. Sometimes it's a teenager who defends his family's choices. Sometimes it's the manosphere misrepresenting pack relationships to promote their own victimhood. And sometimes it's little kids performing flat stereotypes while pretending to be monsters.

My entitlement to define wolves reinforces an inherent belief in the hierarchy of species. This privilege, by merely existing, reinforces the capitalistic structures and thinking that have trapped all of us in our current system. Protecting myself with sympathetic labels like environmentalist or leftist only

minimizes my privilege. They don't eliminate the power in our relationship, a power that only flips when my body and a wolf's meet on a shaded path in the woods, and it decides to let me pass.



# Mitzi Dorton

## Tribute to a Teacher of the 1930s

Dark violet eyes  
With a vision,  
A pack mule peddler

People pointed,  
When she came down from the gap,  
Hen eggs balanced on either side,  
Packed in woolen layers,  
Never broke a one,  
Too precious,  
She knew what it was like to have an old coat,  
Her maroon cape, a wool blanket with holes  
When she worked her way through college

She became a teacher in the one-room-school,  
Rode to work on that mule  
Saw through the holes, letter reversals, tattered homelives,  
Their hands waving in the air,  
Like the baby owl's wings floundering in a child's desk one morning,  
Released through an open window  
She knew the ones, who,

Racing to chop wood for the pot-bellied stove  
needed to escape  
She told her students,  
*You don't have to be the best,  
But I expect you to do your best*

They offered up mini bouquets, wild violets, clutched in eager hands,  
She looked the other way when he carved his backward initials  
                  on the clapboard, on the school,  
That was her prize, his claim  
She cradled these youngsters,  
Like the eggs in her safekeeping

# Steve Liskow

## One on One

Four inches of snow and freezing rain turned Flatley Avenue into a hockey rink and they closed the school at noon when the weather bureau promised eight inches more before morning. Buses fishtailed through the slush and Jack Crowell took advantage of the exodus to make 60 copies of a four-page worksheet without anyone bitching about his hogging the copier for more than five minutes. It beat the Le Mans start in the parking lot.

He ignored the storm clicking its nails against his window and dug into the Civil War collages burying his desk. Most of them looked like the kids had thrown them together on the way from their lockers, what you always got from the General classes, the guidance department euphemism for kids who showed up because their parole office might check.

Charlene the switchboard operator paged a custodian, her voice tinny in the cinder block halls. The dry heat dug into Jack's throat and the fluorescent lights flickered in time to their almost subliminal hum. He'd take the papers from his honors class home. Those kids used Spell Check and complete sentences.

Knuckles rapped on his open door.

"Come on in." A caffeine buzz in blue sweats and matching blue eyes burst into the room, the eyes looking for vulnerable spots.

"Mr. Crowell." Her voice dared him to deny it.

"Right," he said. "Can I help you?"

When he stood, the woman met him eye-to-eye, maybe thirty, vaguely familiar.

"We can always hope." Who sandblasted her tonsils?

She zigzagged through the desks, 28 of them in a room designed for 20 students and looked at the shriveled posters on his bulletin board: Lincoln, Grant and Lee at Appomattox, the aftermath of Sherman's march to the sea. Miles Woodson left them when he retired, they'd probably been new when he started teaching. Jack inherited his room for three classes, floating for the other two, a pain in the ass, lugging stuff through the halls along with two thousand kids, most of them with the manners of an SUV.

The woman gripped his hand like she wanted to arm wrestle. He motioned to a chair, but she stayed standing.

“Anita Damiano. You’ve got a problem with one of my girls. Veralee Gapp.”

Right, the really tall Black girl. He could use her sneakers to carry firewood if he had a fireplace.

“She’s not a problem,” he said. “Nice kid, just quiet.”

“Then she’s got a problem with you.”

A whistle bounced on a braided cord on Damiano’s chest and Jack remembered warnings about “Anita the Hun.”

“At least, that’s what Neurath tells me,” she added. Terry Neurath was the junior guidance counselor. “Possible failure.”

“Have a seat, Coach.”

“You know who I am, then.” Again, it wasn’t a question.

“Sure. You coach the lady Cyclones.”

“Do you know what that really means, Mr. Crowell?”

“Call me ‘Jack.’”

“OK, Jack. You can call me ‘Coach Damiano.’”

The room felt even smaller than when hormone-driven kids filled the seats. Jack sat behind his desk.

“You’ve had six consecutive winning seasons,” he said. “You made the State Semi-finals two years ago.”

She sat on a desk, her sneakers on the chair, a chrome and plastic update from the Spanish Inquisition. “When I started here, the lady Cyclones were the punchline of jokes the sports writers couldn’t print.”

Jack kept his face neutral.

“Veralee’s averaging almost twenty-two points and ten rebounds a game. Duke, UConn, and Tennessee are already scouting her, and she’s only a junior.”

Jack’s screen saver came up, flying windows because the tech people wouldn’t give him access to customize it.

“But American history’s required for graduation.”

“How do you know about my comment?” Jack asked. “The progress reports don’t go out until Tuesday.”

“Neurath keeps me up to date. A professional courtesy.”

“He might ask me first. Or you could ask me yourself. Another profes-

sional courtesy.”

Damiano’s blue eyes felt like a backhand.

“You’re supposed to send me her grades every Monday, Jack. You’re a first-year teacher, so maybe nobody explained that to you slowly enough. We’re four weeks into the season, today’s Thursday, and I haven’t heard zip from you yet. Veralee’s the only kid of mine you’ve got, so why don’t you just catch me up.”

Pushy broad.

“She had a couple of low quizzes early in the term,” Jack said. “And she doesn’t participate much.”

If he could get rid of her, he’d grab a bottle of wine on the way home. “They just had a major paper due yesterday,” he said. “That’ll bring her up, and she does well on tests.”

“How well?”

“Coach, I’d really like to finish these papers and go home.”

“Bring up Veralee’s grades and we can both get out of here. Besides, you’ll be able to finish the papers at home tomorrow.”

Jack opened his fourth period spreadsheet and scrolled down to “Gapp, 344572.”

“Um...eighty-one. Without the participation right now, she’s still got a seventy-eight.”

“High ‘C,’” Damiano said. “That sucks for honors.”

“It’s only December. Maybe she’s still figuring out how I grade.”

“Maybe you are too.”

The sand blasted voice rubbed a layer of skin off Jack’s forehead.

“Excuse me?”

“Maybe your standards are unrealistic for an urban high school.”

Damiano sat absolutely motionless.

“I set high standards for my students, then help them meet them. You’re a coach, you should be able to understand that.”

“And you’re fresh out of college.”

“With a master’s in history,” Jack reminded her.

“I’m wet, Jack. How many kids come in and talk to you after class, just hang out?”

Charlene’s incomprehensible P. A. treble echoed through the halls again.

"I'm in three different rooms during the day," he said. "Plus a study in the auditorium. I've told them to check here, then try the copy machine."

"Anyone find you yet?"

"Look, Anita," he heard himself say. "If you've got a bug up your ass, get it out."

His words caromed off the smudged white board at the front of the room.

"They hire you to worry about my ass, Jack?" Damiano's voice shifted to low gear. "Or they hire you to teach kids? You look at Veralee's ass, too?"

The room got even smaller.

"Is that what she says?" Jack's armpits felt wet.

"She says she feels nervous in here."

"She shouldn't."

"I wonder. She's been over six feet since she was ten years old, the other kids look at her like a freak. She wants to get the hell out of here, make something of herself."

"Right now, she's passing."

"C'mon, Jack. The girl's in an honors class. She wants to go to college."

"So get her grades up and she's cool." The tickle in Jack's throat was getting worse and the room was chilly now; the custodians turned the heat down an hour after school closed to save on fuel bills.

Damiano's blue eyes matched the marker on the board.

"She needs a scholarship, right?" Jack said.

"Yeah. And basketball's her ticket."

"Anita—"

"Coach Damiano."

"Right. Not every kid's going to make it at hoop. And even if Veralee is good enough, what if she gets hurt? A bad knee, she's gone."

"What can you offer her, Jack? American History won't help her get a job. Neither will English or math."

"So she should just stay in the gym and shoot baskets all day? Well, sure, you're phys ed."

"She needs the other subjects, but they aren't her way out of here. Basketball could be."

"How many kids have that dream? Half the boys in this school can hit a

three-pointer from downtown, but they can't read a three-syllable word."

"Veralee's got the right stuff."

"How many kids have you told that to before?"

"One. No, two."

Damiano oozed off the desk to stand next to him.

"Look, the jobs have been leaving this town for twenty years. All that's left is the fast food joints, a few gas stations, and the mall. The population is minority and low income, so we can't build a school and we can't attract money. The kids have nothing to stay for, but they can't leave. Veralee's got brains, but if she stays here, she'll work minimum wage and have five kids before she's thirty. You call that a future?"

Jack looked at her and she shrugged.

"I was a sociology minor. And you pick stuff up."

"She's a minority," Jack said. "That gives her an inside track on financial aid."

"Yeah, the only thing that would help her more is a dick."

The room moved beyond chilly toward honest-to-God cold.

"That from the woman who accused me of looking at her ass?" Was Anita the Hun getting any?

"Don't even think it, Jack."

He dug through his briefcase.

"You want me to grade her paper right now? Will that make you feel better?"

"What if it isn't good?"

"Then she should come see me for extra help."

"You make her uncomfortable, remember?"

Forget the wine. He had microwave lasagna in the freezer. He'd grade the papers and watch the Weather Channel. Maybe they'd cancel school tonight so the phone call wouldn't wake him up to tell him he could sleep in. Assuming he could get his car out of the parking lot. Right now, he couldn't even find it in the drifts near the Dumpster.

"You want me to look at it now or not, Coach?"

"What's the topic?" Damiano sat on the desk again.

"The Civil War."

"Ow, a girl can really get into that."

"Basketball's a guy's game. She wants to play with the guys, she's got

to take the classes, too.”

“You just get better and better, don’t you, Jack?”

“I didn’t write the curriculum. I told the kids they could discuss anything in that time period.”

“You’re actually trying to meet the needs of the kids?”

“Bite me,” he said. “I’m a social science major, remember? I took soc and psych, too.”

He riffled through the papers, then did it again, more slowly.

“It’s not there, is it?” Damiano studied the Civil War posters on the wall.

“Now that I think of it, she was out yesterday. She had a pass today, but she didn’t give me the paper.”

Damiano’s voice crept across the room to him.

“She doesn’t have it done yet.”

“You knew that when you came up here, didn’t you?”

“I told her to talk to you about it, but she’s pretty upset.”

“Life’s just one big heartache after another, isn’t it?”

Damiano’s eyes sliced into him.

“Do you take off for late work?”

“A letter grade per day. She could still get a ‘B’ if it’s really good and comes in tomorrow.”

“How about Monday?”

“That gives her four days beyond everyone else.”

“But only two classes. Today’s Thursday. Tomorrow’s one day, Monday’s two. And tomorrow’s probably a snow day.”

“Even an ‘F’ is worth fifty, better than a zero.”

“That’s not honors material.”

“Maybe Veralee’s not, either.”

“Christ, Jack, bend a little. Did she tell you why she didn’t get it in?”

“Does it matter?”

“All kids are alike, especially black ones? Lazy fuck-ups? She’s probably out selling crack or turning tricks, right?” Damiano rolled her eyes. “You first-year types are all alike. Do you even care what kind of home life these kids have? Over forty percent of them live in a household that’s below the poverty level. Veralee’s one of them.”

“Save me the lecture, OK?” Jack watched his monitor go dark. “I’m trying to make them—her—do better.”

“Inspire them with fear, right? Be a hard ass, ‘cause you’re a newbie.”

“Do they call you ‘Anita the Hun’ because you hug them when they lose?”

“It’s a long story.”

“And don’t play the race card when you’re white, too. That’s really chick-enshit.”

“But it’s why she’s playing basketball, right? Black girls can jump? You probably didn’t even get picked in gym, did you? History major, get your Ph.D. before you’re thirty, then bolt out of here for a nice cushy college job. Forget the kids here, they’re just statistics, right?”

The whistle bouncing on Damiano’s chest almost broke his concentration.

“Sure, I’d love a doctorate. Why does that make me bad? Hell, you’ve got advanced degrees and you’d like a State Championship.”

His face felt hot. “You phys ed types all came out of the same cookie cutter, too. If the UN had a fucking volleyball team, you’d have World Peace in a month.”

“When you say ‘phys ed,’ you mean ‘dyke,’ right?”

He strode to the front of the room and wiped off the board, counting to himself.

“Why didn’t she get the paper in?” he asked.

“She doesn’t want anyone else to know. Any of her other teachers.”

He finished wiping the board before he looked at her.

“Her brother got arrested two nights ago. Cops were at the house for hours, she couldn’t get any work done.”

“Drugs?”

Damiano’s nails scratched across the picture of Lincoln.

“He was defending their mother. Her boyfriend broke her jaw.”

Jack’s knees felt like clay.

“She had to go to the hospital. Both of them, actually. Devon’s as big as Veralee, beat the shit out of the boyfriend. The guy called the cops.”

“Where is he now? The brother?”

“At my place. I bailed him out. Veralee’s staying with me, too.”

Damiano let the bulletin board hold her up.

“The asshole went home yesterday afternoon, but mom’s still in the hospital.”

Damiano faced him.

“Mom’s name is Plantner, nobody made the connection if they saw it in the paper.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“I told Neurath. He’s getting the Department of Children and Youth Services on it.”

“It’ll take DCYS a month to get someone over there,” Jack said.

“Hey, you’re not as dumb as you look.” She tried to smile, and he stood a saber’s length from her.

“What do you want from me?”

“Give her until Monday. And grade it like it’s on time?”

“I have to take something off,” he said.

“If it’s good, it deserves an ‘A.’”

“C-plus?”

“B-plus?”

“I’ll think about it, OK?”

“She’s a really nice kid, Jack. You’d like her if you got to know her. Even if she is eight inches taller than you.”

Jack’s computer popped and went dead, along with the fluorescents. He sprang to his keyboard as the emergency lights flared, but it was too late.

“Did you have it saved?” Damiano asked.

“I don’t remember, I was still entering grades when you came in.”

“At least you’ve got the stuff here so you can enter it again if you have to.”

He turned off the surge protector and put the research papers back into his briefcase.

“Gee,” Damiano said. “I was going to invite you down to the cafeteria and give you a big Thank You meal, chips and Snapple. Guess we can’t do that now.”

“Maybe a rain check? Snow check?”

“Look, I’m sorry I came on so strong. You’re new, we’ve never met, I kinda...”

“Sure.” Jack maneuvered through the desks to his closet.

Where is she now?”

“Down in the gym.”

Damiano pulled out her cell phone. He watched the storm and tried not to eavesdrop, hearing his name and Damiano assuring the girl that he’d given her more time. She faced him again, the emergency light over the door turning her hair glacial white.

“I’ll drive her home to pick up more clothes and she can finish the paper at my place.”

“She’s got it started then?”

“She’s in an honors class, remember? She’s checking her Goddam footnotes.”

“Footnotes are important.”

“For this kid, so’s basketball. It’s her way out if you keep her eligible.”

“I said I’ll think about it.”

“You’re the only teacher she’s got problems with.”

“I may be new,” he said. “But I’ve already heard that one a hundred times.”

When he stepped outside, his shoes disappeared in the wet snow and the wind clawed for blood. He managed to open his car door without dumping the snow onto his seat and tossed his briefcase beyond the gearshift. His feet already felt like Popsicles. He stuck his key in the ignition, and the car clicked twice.

“Shit.”

He waded into a drift to clean off his hood, then tried again. This time, he only heard one click. The SUV from across the lot lumbered up next to him, wipers squinching, and Damiano rolled down her window.

“Battery?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I was just going back inside to call Triple A.”

“I’ve got cables. You want me to jump you?”

The sleet whipped his face and he worried that his hair would break off.

“I have to admit, that’s the best offer I’ve had all day.”

Damiano emerged, wrapped in a tan parka. Veralee Gapp opened the passenger door, resplendent in navy and white varsity jacket and watch cap. Her eyes avoided Jack’s.

“C’mon, shorty,” Damiano said. “Get back in and pop your hood.”

Veralee swept the snow off his back window with an arm longer than his leg. His engine groaned once, then caught. He let the battery charge before he turned on the defroster.

Veralee Gapp slammed his hood as he got out with his scraper in hand.

“Don’t lock your keys in the car, Mister,” she warned him softly. Damiano cleaned off his taillights.

“Thank you,” he said to her.

“Sure,” she replied.

“I said I’ll think about it.”

“I know. Thank you, too.”

Veralee Gapp got back into the SUV and blew on her hands. Damiano faced Jack.

“You can’t save the world, Jack. Just try one kid at a time.”

“OK. Are you going to be able to make it out of here?”

“You kidding? I grew up in Colorado. This is flurries.”

Her face was pink. His teeth throbbed.

“Take a hot shower when you get home, guy. And buy a hat for this weather. You’ll catch your death.”

“Yes, mom.”

“What was that?”

“Yes, Coach Damiano.”

“Better.”

She climbed back into the SUV, and he tapped on Veralee Gapp’s window.

“Are you really good enough to go to UConn?”

“We’ve got a game tomorrow night,” she said. “Why don’t you come and see?”

“OK,” he said. If it wasn’t postponed. She’d have until Monday for the paper; no way he could dock her for a day they didn’t have school.

“And I can meet you in the gym if you’ve got any questions about that paper.”

“Thank you.”

Damiano’s radials threw slush in her wake, and he climbed into his car to follow her.

## J. T. Bryson

### Sixth Grade Apology Letter in Lauren's Locker

I found your pink cardigan  
near the creek by the bus stop  
yesterday. It flopped like a fish  
against the mud & grass. Tangled up  
inside it was the slimy frog  
Joey dropped down your back,  
chest still throbbing. My stomach ached  
when I set it free. I've washed the sweater  
for you, submerged the wool in cold water—  
I resisted the temptation  
to hand scrub it—that was the hardest part. Now  
it billows in the breeze, clipped  
to the clothesline behind my house. I'm sorry

about this mess. I'm coming clean. Truthfully,  
I cherish your friendship & it's my fault  
for peering over the cracked vinyl  
bus seat on the ride home,  
declaring, *I love you!*  
Your jaw-dropped gasp was heard  
over laughter & a rumbling diesel engine.  
Trudging down the gravel road toward home,  
I cursed Almighty God for making us  
neighbors. A whispered goodbye  
was all I could muster.  
Joey was already primed & poised  
when he heard the schoolyard rumors.  
He hatched his plan & told me secretly  
he hated you too & unrequited  
love demands revenge. I agreed  
to distract you while he manhandled the frog.

As you flailed & tugged your cotton collar  
desperately, I hid behind blue thistles  
& cried when you slipped & fell,  
blood splotted at the crown  
of your head, trickling down  
the nape of your neck.

I feel like hell here at home.  
Joey is a sonofabitch, but I guess  
now I am too—  
& whether it's your dad, your brother,  
or the devil himself that comes for us,  
I'll take the lashings willingly—  
& regret nothing more  
than what I've already lost from you.



# Carol J. Luther

## And Gladly Facilitate: A Tale

“And, thus, Queen Elizabeth I was the true author of Shakespeare’s plays,” Dr. Lovelitt concluded. Her sophomore British Literature class at Valley Community College looked at her in amazement.

Jason or Josh, a typical student, raised his hand. “Wasn’t Francis Bacon one of the people that was proved to write Shakespeare’s plays?”

“Francis Bacon? Humph! That dry old stick? I’ll grant you he could write good prose, but he could not possibly have written the poetry,” she declared.

There was a pause. A student in the back, Jennifer or Melissa, raised her hand. “Dr. Lovelitt, that’s one thing I have trouble with. Could you explain what are prose?”

It was one of those days.

Dr. Lovelitt glared at her and then picked up her book and turned to a page of Bacon’s essays. She held it up to the class and smacked the page. “That is prose!” She turned back to a page from *Hamlet* and held it up and smacked it. “That is poetry! You can tell the difference by the way they look on the page. Now you may be remembering something about rhyme and meter and so forth, but you don’t need any of that to distinguish prose from poetry.” She turned to some other examples in the text and held them up to the class. “Prose,” they responded dutifully. “Poetry. Prose. Prose. Poetry.”

“There,” she said. “See how easy that is?” Time was up. “We’ll continue our discussion of *Hamlet* on Wednesday. That’s all for today.”

As the class filed out, Jennifer or Melissa stopped to speak to her. “Thank you, Dr. Lovelitt. I just never really had it explained to me very well. But you made it very clear. I really enjoy this class. You make it so interesting!”

“Well, I’m glad you think it’s interesting. I try really hard to make my classes interesting because students learn more when they are interested,” she said kindly. She watched Jennifer or Melissa walk out the door. Sincere or brown nosing? she wondered and then shrugged. At this stage in her career, she didn’t care much.

Once upon a time, many teaching years ago in her very first semester,

Ms. Lovelitt realized that she had given some incorrect information in mythology. Apollo, she had said, had favored the Greeks in the Trojan War.

Ms. Lovelitt always prepared carefully. She took notes on the reading assignments and spoke from an outline. She was careful to be accurate about the facts. She had a horror of saying something wrong and having her students think that she did not know her subject. She recalled Chaucer's clerk, "And gladly would he learn and gladly teach." That was her ideal.

The class was discussing the events that had led up to the Trojan War, which they would cover in the next class period. A student had asked who Apollo had favored and, too anxious to appear knowledgeable, instead of consulting her text, she had said the Greeks. As soon as class was over, she checked and saw to her dismay that she would have to confess her error next time. She had tried to hazard an answer instead of doing the sensible thing and saying, "Let's look it up."

She woke up worrying about it both nights before she had to face the class again.

When she walked in on Wednesday, she told the students to look at their notes from Monday. "Now class, according to your notes, which side did Apollo favor in the Trojan War?"

No one replied. The pause stretched out.

"Did no one make a note of that?" Ms. Lovelitt asked in dismay and relief. "Well, then if you had, I would be telling you to change that. Apollo favored the Trojans, especially Hector."

She went on to give them a lecture on taking careful notes in class.

Ms. Lovelitt was nominated by the Student Government Association for Teacher of the Year. She did not win, but many students commented on her enthusiasm.

Years passed. She graded several hundred papers. She taught *Huckleberry Finn* twelve times. She despaired over the fact that students seemed more and more uncertain about where to use an apostrophe.

Over time, her youthful idealism had been battered by realizing that students lied to her, tried to manipulate her, took advantage of her good nature, flattered her to her face, and then talked about her behind her back—just as they did any other teacher. Not all of the students, of

course, but enough to wear on her trust.

Then one day she misspoke herself again.

Now, she had certainly made errors that she had to correct since that first year of teaching, but today for some reason, after having pushed herself to grade three sets of papers to get them back to students within a week (as advised by the departmental syllabus), she was more than usually tired.

She walked into the classroom. "Did some of you notice as you went over your notes from last period or as you read today's assignment that I made a slip last time?"

They looked at her in puzzlement. She gave them a little time to think about it. "No one noticed a problem? Something you were reading for today would have contradicted something I said in the last class." She waited a little longer. "No one found anything?" She felt weary but could not let it show.

Something shifted within her. Did they remember anything she said in class? She was afraid to ask. "Well, then, no damage done! If nobody noticed it, then there's no need to correct it!" She tried to make a joke of it. Her class laughed. The little dears. They thought she was funny. But something was wrong. Were they truly paying so little attention to her? She might as well be reciting the Dow-Jones averages.

She tried to pacify herself by remembering the good students she had had. There were many. But on that day, the balance shifted. Memories of the good students could no longer outweigh the burden of the others whose goal was simply to have a passing grade on their final grade record, whether they learned anything or not.

What am I doing wrong? She agonized. She gladly kept up to date in her teaching methods, changed assignments, and attended workshops to learn the secrets of successful teaching. She scheduled individual conferences with students needing help and encouraged students with questions to come by her office. She tried to discuss her problems with some of the other teachers, but they were not much help. Oh, they agreed with her complaints, but they had no solutions. "Students are little beasts," the more burnt-out ones said. Will that be me some day? she wondered.

Several hundred papers later, after a particularly difficult semester in which she had labored over a new syllabus and new assignments for a brand-new textbook while chairing a committee, serving on a task force, and representing the department in the Faculty Assembly, she noticed a disturbing

trend. The school had recently gone to a new method of student evaluations that allowed students to make anonymous comments in addition to answering several multiple-choice questions about the class. A new dean placed heavy emphasis on the student comments. “They can,” he told the faculty, “indicate a trend where there may be problems. An unhappy student is like an unhappy customer. A disgruntled customer will spread unhappiness to others, and pretty soon we will have fewer and fewer customers.”

Dr. Lovelitt, by now a Ph. D., curled her lip. Students, she thought, are not customers. The customer is always right. Does that mean she should do whatever her students wished to do? Should the class vote on how many papers to write and whether or not to have a final exam? Should she abandon a discussion of academic standards? Did her professional judgment and experience count for nothing?

In the comments section, more of Dr. Lovelitt’s students said that she did not allow them to be creative, that she assigned too much reading, that she must think she was teaching at Harvard instead of VCC. Some students had said things like that about her previously, and she had not worried about it much until her evaluation meeting with her department head the year after the new dean made his “students are customers” speech.

Her department head told her that she was on the dean’s list of “problem teachers” because of “negative” comments that students had made. Her department head pointed out the very comments that had bothered her. “Now,” her d. h. said, “I know that student comments must be taken with a grain of salt. There will always be some angry or inappropriate comments, which usually appear to come from those not happy with their grades. As long as you have a range of comments—and you do—you are doing things about right. If it were all negative or all deliriously positive, then I would have questions. We should look at student evaluations with an eye towards improving our teaching, and they should not be weighted so heavily as a basis of decisions about promotion and tenure.” He sighed. “Our new dean, however, feels differently. I have tried to explain things to him, but I don’t seem to be getting through.”

That spring Dr. Lovelitt—despite having taught for 15 years at the college, having attained her doctorate, having given many hours of service to the school, having graded several hundred more papers, and having the support of her department head—was not promoted to the rank of Profes-

sor. Her credentials in every area were outstanding, except for some student comments from the previous years.

At first, she was extremely depressed. Then she was angry.

That same spring a student chanced to ask her an age-old question, “Dr. Lovelitt, is the poet really putting all this into the poem, or are we reading all these things into it?”

As she prepared to give her standard answer about the creative and analytical effort that went into writing a poem, she paused. “You’re right,” she said. “We do read all these things into it. Poets write from sheer inspiration and are entirely unconscious of any craft that goes into it. It’s like what a home-run hitter does. He or she doesn’t calculate wind speed or humidity or the speed of the ball or the weight of the bat or the necessary trajectory to reach to hit over wall, he or she just swings and hopes. And some batters are just luckier than others. So they get more home runs.”

She felt a wicked thrill.

One young man who had been on a high school baseball team looked as though a thought were swimming to the surface, so she moved the class rapidly onward, and his idea drowned in the current.

The rest of that semester she indulged herself by answering other students’ questions in a similar way. She agreed with them and supported their half-baked ideas. It was fun. At the end of the semester, her students were happy and gave her better ratings than she had ever received before. Students said she respected their opinions and didn’t try to force her ideas on them; she let them think for themselves; she allowed them to be creative.

In the meantime, Dr. Lovelitt had attempted to appeal the denial of her promotion, but the president supported the dean, and the chancellor refused even to hear her case, saying that such matters were left to the professional judgment of the president. Dr. Lovelitt felt abandoned. She knew that she could reapply for promotion, so she would have to ensure that the positive comments from spring were repeated in the fall for next year’s promotion consideration.

Entertain them, one of her senior colleagues advised. That’s what they’re looking for. What did it matter if she gave them truth or not? her colleague added. Students couldn’t remember anyway.

So, she decided to entertain further. She wondered how far she might

go before a student would challenge her for giving wrong information.

“And so,” she finished in one class, “Jesse James was really the son of Emily Dickinson. A little known fact.” Students were astonished at the genealogy she presented.

Once a student, Brandon or Jason, stopped her after class and said hesitantly, “Dr. Lovelitt, that story about Samuel L. Clemens getting killed in the Civil War and another man taking his place and coming up with the name ‘Mark Twain’ because he didn’t want to use ‘Samuel L. Clemens’?”

“Yes?” said Dr. Lovelitt.

“Well, I looked that up in *Wikipedia*, and I couldn’t find it anywhere,” Brandon or Jason said.

“Oh, it’s just been discovered recently,” Dr. Lovelitt explained fluently. “The scholar who unearthed this tidbit has published only a brief article but is now working on a book. This will change our whole idea of ‘Mark Twain’ and why he wrote what he wrote.”

“I see,” nodded Brandon or Jason.

It was so easy!

Dr. Lovelitt devised a theory to explain what was happening. Students never complained about “the facts” that instructors presented. They mostly complained about the teacher’s personality or the number of tests or the class requirements or the remarks that a teacher made that the student perceived as insulting him or her in some way. The actual content of the class mattered little. Why had it taken her so long to realize this?

She continued to focus on amusement rather than accuracy.

Her new educational philosophy meshed with the dean’s views. “Faculty,” as the dean told the instructors in another meeting, “are learning facilitators, not teachers. ‘Teaching’ is an outmoded concept in the technological learning environment. Your purpose is to facilitate the acquisition of the degree by meeting the students’ needs, whatever it takes.”

Once Dr. Lovelitt had gotten her mind right about her role in the facilitation process, class was much simpler. A teacher worried about academic standards; a learning facilitator did not.

One thing puzzled her: if she were a learning facilitator, what were her students? Were they facilitatees?

That fall Dr. Lovelitt had glowing comments from her facilitatees. In the spring she was nominated for Facilitator of the Year, and she received her

promotion to Professor.

At graduation that spring, she saw the smiling faces of contented facilitatees whose needs for the associate degree had been met.

At the reception afterwards, she saw Heather or Krystal, who stood looking down at her VCC diploma with a confused expression on her face.

“Congratulations,” she said to her.

“But Dr. Lovelitt, what does this mean? I’ve completed my classes, but I don’t know any more than when I started! I thought I would feel smarter or wiser or something.” She was bewildered.

Poor thing. Dr. Lovelitt almost felt sorry for her. Heather or Krystal did not want a facilitator: she wanted a teacher. Once she had been one, but times were different now. Adapt or die.

“Don’t worry about it,” she comforted her facilitatee. “The university you are transferring to has changed also. You’re not expected to learn anything there either. But you’ll do fine because you’ve learned how to play the game. That’s what it all is. A game. You really never did think there was something like ‘Education’ or ‘Wisdom’ or ‘Knowledge’ out there did you? Those are words that the uninitiated use. It’s like Santa Claus. When you are little, you think one thing, but then you get older, and you learn that it’s all a game.”

“Yeah,” Heather or Krystal agreed ruefully. “But then Christmas is never the same.”

“No, nothing ever is,” Dr. Lovelitt sympathized.

“So, all those teachers, I mean facilitators, who say that things were different when they were in school and that they really had to study hard and learn a lot and their teachers used to give B’s and C’s or even D’s or F’s—those facilitators are—are not being factual?”

“Right. Now see how much you know? Who says you are not ‘educated’? You are in on the secret!” she smiled encouragingly. She thought, this facilitatee might have had some potential as a real student. Too bad she never had a chance to develop any of her abilities.

“It’s hard to accept, Dr. Lovelitt,” Heather or Krystal said dolefully. “Do you think medical school will be the same?”

“No doubt,” she assured her.

Dr. Lovelitt smiled at the other graduates. Oh, yes, she was a cheerful facilitator. Poor souls, what might they have been had they had a teach-

er? Does it really matter that they think Queen Elizabeth I wrote Shakespeare's plays as long as they are content and have self-esteem?

Although students were unenlightened, they were happy, and administrators were happy because students were happy. The students would never know the depths of their ignorance, they would pass it on to their children, and soon the whole world would revel in . . . .

For a moment, Dr. Lovelitt felt a qualm. Maybe—

She caught herself and shook off her doubts. She reassured herself that her job was noble. Yes, because, after all, in the wider picture, only after the present system had fallen would there be a time for rebirth and a desire for knowledge. Her efforts could hasten that downfall.

And then—perhaps—a teacher would be needed again.

She, of course, would be long gone and would not realize the benefits. On the other hand, given the increasingly rapid growth of ignorance, the cataclysm might occur in her life span, perhaps even while she was still facilitating.

And yet, something teased at the corner of her mind. A misgiving—no, she dismissed it.

She vowed to renew her efforts and gladly volunteered to facilitate an overload next fall.



# Ginger Strivelli

## No Homework

I'm the teacher. I don't have a classroom. I don't have a desk. I don't have a degree in teaching. I do have students. They sit around me in the dust staring at me with big expectant eyes waiting for me to give them the education that will parole them from this refugee camp.

None of us will ever go back to our country. I don't teach them that. They know it anyway. Even the kindergartners know their homeland is no longer inhabitable. War, gangs, drugs, plagues, and greed have ruined their homelands and mine.

So, what do I teach them? I start class everyday by having the students count off in English. That is the language that will get them jobs. Speaking that language got me the job as a teacher. Somedays the count stops in the teens. Some days we get up to a hundred or more. It depends on the charity food trucks. If there is a delivery that day, the families keep the kids to help them get as many rations as they can before the trucks run out of care kits.

I like to teach my students art and music, though it won't get them any job. It does brighten the dark daily depression of living in a refugee camp a little bit. So, we sing, also in English. We sing the ABC song. We sing nursery rhymes but not Ring Around the Rosie because it is about a plague and not Row, Row, Row Your Boat because many of the students lost family members on the overpacked boats fleeing their country.

We do art every day. I think of it as feeding their soul or feeding their imagination since I can't feed them lunch. We don't have paints or crayons of course. The older kids gathered up little sticks that we use as pencils to draw in the dirt. The kids always seem to draw houses, which is strange since we all live in tents. Some of the younger ones have never even seen a house except for the ones their older siblings draw in the dirt. I try to get them to draw other things like animals or flowers. Alas, they often draw bombs and guns.

We do some math. We add the number of girls and the number of boys to get the total attendance for the day. We do some science. We discuss what needs to happen in the atmosphere for it to rain, because we need the rain badly. Water is even harder to get than food in a refugee camp.

We don't have recess. We have no playground. We don't do PE; the students work themselves to exhaustion every day carrying water from the one well and trying to keep their tents tied down in the swirling winds. Of course, being half starved also exhausts them.

And we don't have homework. We have no homes.



# Avril Shakira Villar

## Pedagogy Poem

All of my lesson plans scattered like autumn leaves.  
The syllabus in eternal revision.  
Above the whiteboard, the clock gleams like a promise  
with no follow-through.  
I wish, now, that I could hand them something permanent,  
the way  
Keats handed the world a dying boy and called it beauty.  
Scatter  
it along the rows of desks, language failing at attempts  
to hold  
the living. All things that confused them still live in the notes.  
The canvas  
is much more beautiful when called a question; here is  
the charcoal  
and the blank page to dispel its whiteness. End product  
should look  
like someone who stayed up late because  
they wanted to.  
Someone to start feeling for:  
the student in the back during the unit on grief. A new  
way of seeing.  
It's days like these where the prefrontal cortex begs  
for meaning and more metaphors, more  
music; there is not enough room to fit  
All the interpretations. No room for the right answer.  
In the end, anyway, there is no  
rubric wide enough. I've run out  
of ways to say look closer, only the looking itself.  
Here I am: classroom teetering at the rim  
of something. Everything read and underlined  
sucked into the conversation. I am nothing short  
of a beginning.

# Maxim Volk

## Encouraging Hearts and Minds

It was yet another all-staff meeting that could have been an email, and Matteo had spent the entire time furtively snickering at every time an administrator said, “remember your why.” He had not gone through four years of teacher education training and then a master’s on top of that to sit in meetings all day. He wanted to be out there teaching the kids.

“And before we leave,” Principal Adams said. “I would like everyone to give a warm welcome to our newest teacher, Raina Anderson-Isaacs.” Matteo turned his head in confusion. There’d been a strict hiring freeze for almost two years, and he hadn’t heard of anyone retiring or resigning. “Raina, why don’t you come up and introduce yourself.” A woman stood up and made her way to the front of the room. “Raina will be filling the role of Mrs. Davis, who has tendered her resignation as of today.”

Raina Anderson-Isaacs stood up in the front of the room. She was young and pretty, with perfect hair and skin free of blemishes. Her black blazer and skirt were immaculately pressed. “The boys are going to have fun with her,” Matteo heard Mr. Hart, the lecherous PE teacher, mutter. He gave the man a disapproving look.

Raina opened her mouth slowly and began to speak. “I would like to thank Principal Adams and all my new colleagues for welcoming me to your wonderful school. I am sure that together, we will make memories, change lives, and win the hearts of our students—not only for the sake of the children of today, but for the children of the future.” Matteo rolled his eyes. She’d been here five minutes, and she was already spewing admin-speak.

“Have an amazing day everyone,” Principal Adams said. “Remember your why!”

When the lunch bell rang, Matteo ran to the teacher’s lounge. The school had reduced their time for lunch to less than twenty minutes, and so if he was going to be able to warm up his food, he’d have to get to the microwave first. Nothing worse than cold chicken and rice. In the teacher’s lounge, he found Ms. Anderson-Isaacs at one of the tables. She was staring at the wall. “Oh, didn’t see you there,” he said as he went to the fridge. “How are you liking your first day?”

Raina turned to him with an oddly precise move of her head. “Thank you for asking!” she said with a joy that didn’t match her face. “My day so far has been amazing. I taught several students how to solve quadratic equations, graded one hundred papers, and encouraged the hearts and minds of the next generation. I only hope that the rest of my day will be as fulfilling as the morning was.”

Matteo rolled his eyes. It was just the two of them here. She didn’t need to talk like she walked out of one of those “inspirational” videos Principal Adams sent the whole school every week. He put his lunch in the microwave and watched it as it spun. It was about as interesting as Raina. “Thank you for your excellent company, Matteo. I hope you have a wonderful day.” Raina stood up quickly and marched out of the room. Weirdo.

Matteo scarfed down his lunch and returned to his classroom to win hearts and minds or whatever the hell Raina said.

The next morning, after third period, Matteo’s favorite student, Aliyah, approached him. “Yo mister,” she said. “Got anything I can help you with?”

“Don’t you have class?” Matteo asked. Aliyah was a great student, and it wasn’t like her to miss even a few minutes of a period.

“Please don’t make me go to Algebra, Mr. V,” she begged. “That new teacher is weird.”

“Ms. Anderson-Isaacs?” Matteo asked. “What’s wrong with her?”

“I don’t know,” Aliyah replied. “She always talks so boring, and she doesn’t stop to answer questions. Like when she’s talking, she’s in another world. Also, every time she helps someone with an assignment, she asks them if she’s encouraged our hearts and our minds today. She’s weird as fuck.”

“Language,” Matteo reminded Aliyah. She gave him a look like she knew he didn’t mean it. “Fine, I’ll give you my lesson plans for the week to run up to the office. Take your time. Here’s a pass.” He wrote her a pass, and she walked as slowly as she possibly could out the door of his classroom and towards the principal’s office. The rest of the day went as normal. Matteo had to write up two kids for fighting, one for spitting gum in a girl’s hair, and another for taking selfies in the back of the class despite repeated requests to stop.

As Matteo was about to close his laptop for the day, he heard the tell-

tale ding of his email. He sighed and checked it in case it was something important. It was an email from Principal Adams that read:

*Subject: Thank you for the Memories*

*Dear Wonderful Staff,*

*I want to thank you so much for the years we have worked together to support our students, teach the next generation, and provide an exemplary education for the children of our community. It is with great sadness and also hope for what comes next that I am writing to you today to let you know that today will be my last day at our wonderful school. Effective tomorrow, Ms. Raina Anderson-Isaacs will be taking my position. I am sure she will be a wonderful addition to the leadership team, and that she will guide you in continuing to encourage the hearts and minds of our students.*

*Thank you again, and until next time,  
Principal Adams*

Matteo stared at the email, trying to figure out if it was a joke. The principal may have been a little annoying sometimes, but he a good guy and wanted what was best for the students. He would never have left without good reason. Matteo hoped it wasn't something serious. He had been looking a little peaked lately. Mr. Adam's resignation wasn't the weirdest part of the email, though. Raina? As principal? She had literally just started the day before. Matteo heard a ruckus outside. "What the hell?" he heard Miss Wu say. "Have you seen this?" She looked into his room.

"Yeah, did you know he was quitting?" he asked. Miss Wu shook her head. "I don't want that creepy woman as our principal," Matteo whined.

"Creepy?" Miss Wu asked.

"Yeah, have you talked to her?"

"No," she replied. "Haven't had the chance."

"She talks weird," Matteo spat.

"Like I talk weird?" Miss Wu replied. She had a slight accent from having moved to the US from China as a kid.

Matteo put up his hands defensively. "Of course not. I mean she talks exclusively like TED Ed video."

"Oh," Miss Wu said. "I guess then she might make a good principal. Any-

ways, let me know if you hear anything about why Adams left. I'm driving to Chicago tonight, and I have off for the rest of the week."

"Have a good weekend!" Matteo called.

"You, too!" she replied.

The next day, Matteo entered his classroom to find Principal Raina Anderson-Isaacs sitting at his desk, staring at the wall again. "Can I help you?" he asked.

She turned to him with that jerky head movement again. "Thank you for asking! Yes, I was looking over your lesson plans, and I believe I could suggest a few improvements. First, your bell ringer is too broad. Consider making it more specific to the lesson at hand. Second, you could include a short quiz as a check for understanding after your lesson is over. Remember, formative assessment is important to classroom learning. Finally, consider making the tone more professional. Currently, the language that you use is informal, which may rub some people the wrong way. I hope you have found these suggestions enlightening. Continue to encourage the hearts and minds of our children."

"Thank you, I will!" Matteo said with fake cheeriness. Anything he could say to get her out of his classroom so he could prepare for the day. To his relief, she stood up and marched to the door without a word.

Third period, as the bell rang, she once again appeared at his door. "Mr. V, what's she doing here?" Aliyah asked.

"I don't know," Matteo said cautiously. Then louder, he said. "Ms. Anderson-Isaacs, how can I help you?"

"Thank you for asking?" she replied. "I am here to observe your classroom for today. I will provide you feedback on areas to improve, make notes for your cumulative file, and observe your teaching in your natural environment. Aliyah shot Matteo a look of empathy and horror.

"Knockers!" shouted Zechariah Smith, a nasty boy who had not done a single assignment in Matteo's class so far this year. Then he looked around as if he was trying to find out who had said it. Mrs. Anderson-Isaacs gave him a curious look, one that was perhaps supposed to convey a threat but was not quite natural enough to do so. Then she sat in the back of the class.

Matteo stood in front of the class, his knees shaking a bit. "Today

for a bell-ringer, we're going to—" he glanced up at Raina and remembered her feedback. "We're going to reflect on the symbolism in the Great Gatsby through a free-write. Get out a pen and a piece of paper and we're going to take five minutes to write about one of the symbols. Ready . . . Go!" He smiled as he watched the students furiously scribbling. Maybe Raina had some use. Maybe she would be good for the school. Then Zechariah purposely snapped a pencil.

With a turn of the head faster than humanly possible, Raina shot figurative lasers his way. "Mr. Smith! That is strike two. One more, and you'll face the consequences." Zechariah laughed, and Matteo called the class to attention to finish the free-write and to distract from the tension.

"Okay, today we're going to do a bit of a character study on Nick Carraway. What are some words we can use to describe Nick?"

"Passive!" Aliyah called.

"Great!" Matteo said, turning to write the word on the board. "What else?"

"Gay!" Zechariah called, and Matteo opened his mouth to tell him that he was correct, but Raina had once again turned her head to face him, this time shooting literal lasers at the boy. Like her eyes opened wide and red-hot lasers shot out and pierced through Zechariah. The boy crumbled to dust. Matteo blinked, thinking he had to be imagining things. The other kids started to scream.

"Now children," Raina said calmly. "Stop this immediately, or you will face the consequences. They did not stop, and so Raina's eyes lit up again. Matteo ducked to the ground and watched in horror as the principal's head began to spin around and around, the lasers vaporizing every student in the class except Aliyah, who had managed to duck as well.

"Come on," Matteo said, grabbing her by the arm. They crawled quickly out of the classroom, and Matteo slammed the door shut behind him.

"What the fuck!" Aliyah screamed as they ran, and this time Matteo didn't call her out for swearing. The glass on the classroom door shattered into a million pieces as the head, and just the head, of Principal Anderson-Isaacs burst through it, a long cable snaking out after it. The head began to fly through the air, and its mouth opened, revealing a flamethrower spitting blue-orange fire.

A tinny voice was projected down the hall. "Come back, Mr. Valdez,

don't you want to encourage the hearts and minds of the children?" Matteo and Aliyah raced through the halls, bursting through the front door of the school.

"My keys!" Matteo screamed, patting his pockets. "I left them in the classroom."

"I have mine," Aliyah said, running to a car.

Matteo followed. "But you're fourteen. You can't drive!"

"Do you want to be worrying about that right now?" Aliyah asked, and she hopped in the driver's seat. Matteo jumped into the passenger seat and put on his seat belt. Aliyah put the key in the ignition and started the car. It sputtered and then came to life. The radio turned on automatically, and a voice came out.

"Where are you going, Mr. Valdez? The children are waiting for you to encourage their hearts and minds." The doors to the car locked automatically.

When Miss Wu returned to school the next Monday, she ran into Matteo in the hall. "Hey, man," she called out. "How was your week?"

"It was good," he said calmly. Matteo was normally bouncy and fun, but today he seemed different."

"How was the first week with the new principal?"

"Thank you for asking!" Matteo said, suddenly cheerful. "She maintained order in the school, doled out appropriate discipline, and encouraged the hearts and minds of the children."

Miss Wu laughed but then realized Matteo wasn't joking. "Hm, maybe we underestimated her." She walked into her classroom where all the children sat, perfectly quiet, staring ahead at nothing.

When she reached the podium, the children all opened their minds simultaneously. "Are you ready to encourage our hearts and minds today, Miss Wu?" they all said in perfect unison.

*—special thanks to Tricia*



# Deanna Davidson

## Preschool Fun

Bright colors shine  
in open stained-glass  
windows,  
reflecting rainbows  
around the eyes  
of toddlers. Blocks  
tumble to the carpet as  
tiny cheers erupt  
amongst the chaos,  
sounds of joy ringing  
in the teacher's ears.  
A house, a pool, a  
really tall tower that  
reaches to the moon,  
a train, a car, or castle with  
hundreds  
of tiny rooms. Screams  
erupt once again, in a fit  
of joyous laughter. A bell tolls,  
children sing and clean  
their toys. A day of fun,  
has just begun,  
now it's time to go  
Outside.

## Colleague

Five years  
of *platonic* friendship,  
talking while you clean  
a classroom. Toys conspiring  
under the tables, hidden,  
swept away  
by your broom.  
The dinosaurs whisper about  
a teacher and a custodian,  
writing their love  
story, with ink  
on their claws. A chance  
run in, six months  
later. The story unfolding  
what the dinosaurs  
had written.



# Richard Weems

## Mr. Murphy

Our parents and siblings, not to mention our fellow fifth graders, will sometimes mock the mannerisms we have developed under the tutelage of Mr. Murphy. We do not stomp our feet, nor do we throw things when frustrated. If we need to cool our idiomatic jets, we self-impose timeouts until we can comport ourselves more respectfully. We, the denizens of Room 233, address others in a kindly fashion rich in formal etiquette, even those who parrot back our words in derisive tones and affect the mannerisms of a stereotypical English aristocrat, complete with pantomime pipe. We take no offense, though we pity their puerile mindsets.

The root of our poise lies in Mr. Murphy's insistence that we address the world around us with precision. The weather isn't *icky*; it is stiflingly humid. People kissing isn't *gross* but an amorous expression we are not yet eager to perform ourselves. If Mr. Murphy pulls on the corner of a page we are currently coloring on, creating a Crayola zag beyond the borders of our smiling turtle or dancing baby bunny, and we cry out, "It *stinks* now," Mr. Murphy will lift the paper to his nose and decree, "No, it smells like crayon."

Mr. Murphy set this precedent on the very first day of class, when Roger Nichols smushed Michele Colander's Twinkie underfoot at snacktime. Since preschool, Roger has taunted Michele or vandalized objects related to her person, inducing emotional outbursts and the still legendary Storytime Smack-Fight of Grade Two. But rather than accept the incident as yet another iteration of their perennial enmity, Mr. Murphy sat them facing each other.

"Describe to him what he did," Mr. Murphy instructed.

"You were *stupid!*" Michele Colander wailed. Mike Nichols stuck out his tongue.

"Describe," Mr. Murphy repeated.

"It's *rooned*," Michele whined, brandishing the flattened cake accentuated with Nike tread, but Mr. Murphy glowered at her from over his glass frames. Michelle corrected herself: "You crushed it. Now I have no snack."

Mike gloated, until Mr. Murphy turned on him. "Explain why."

Mike denounced Michele as an ugly wart, but Mr. Murphy leaned in. "What monstrous act did she commit that necessitates your reprisal?"

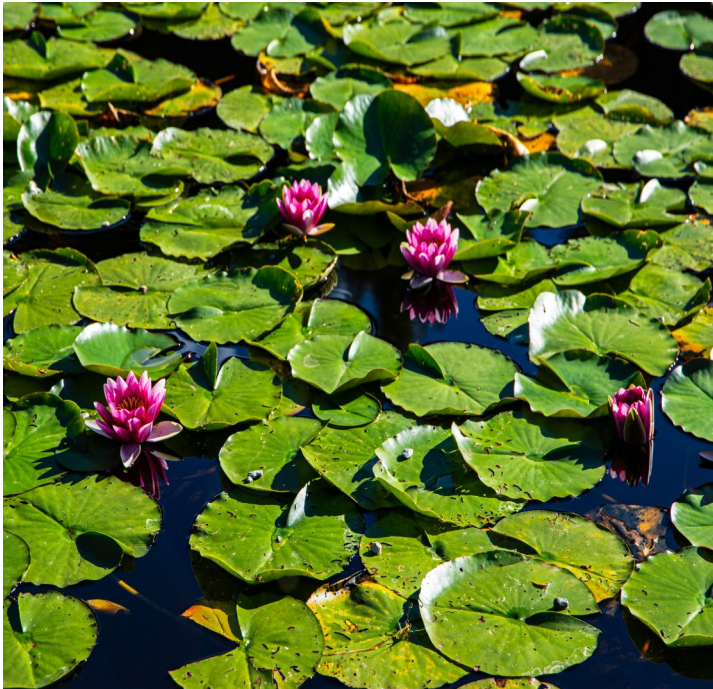
Mike's face slackened as he failed to identify any such cause.

"If you cannot offer reasonable motive," Mr. Murphy concluded, "you must offer recompense."

Mike, baffled by his new teacher's diction yet still discerning the gist of it, held out both his snickerdoodle and oatmeal raisin cookies. Michelle took up the latter, and the two sat next to each other as they nibbled on Mike's home-baked goods.

And just like that, their rivalry came to an end.

Make no mistake: we still disagree at recess regarding the proper span of immobility during freeze tag; we still butt heads with our parents over whether the nutritional value of brussel sprouts overshadows its unpalatable texture. But we trust such wrinkles can be ironed over with open discourse. If we come to a compromise, so much the better. If we come to an impasse, we hope it's based on mutual appreciation of differing worldviews, sans divisiveness.



# Jody Wallace

## For My Tap Student Who Braved the Adult Class

She crept into the class like a mouse,  
the quiet kind you never know is  
in your walls until you find the nest.  
But the class was for dance, for percussion,  
for joy and rhythm, and quiet  
would not do.

“What are you doing here?” I teased,  
though I had invited the children I teach  
to the adult tap class, and she knew,  
or I hoped she knew, that I was  
happy to see her. She just smiled  
and joined the circle for warmup.  
“Let’s speed that up,” I said after five,  
and after ten, let’s speed it up again.  
She struggled, her gaze focused  
on that point in the distance  
we all can find but cannot share.

The shuffle and scuff of metal taps  
on the floor, the percussive tangle  
of syncopation and effort, the heels  
drumming, the toes like a crack  
of a clave, arms awkward, fingers curled.  
The rhythm is everything, and the vision  
doesn’t matter until the rhythm is right.

Our practice was a level or two or three  
above the one to which she was  
accustomed, and she stretched  
her ears, her feet, her heart,  
and there.  
And there.  
And there.  
And a one y and a two.

I didn't get another smile until  
the adults filed out, and she,  
half our size, twice our courage,  
remained behind to say,  
"I loved tap today."  
And every day, my young friend.  
Every day I am here because  
we love something so well, today and  
tomorrow and Tuesday and Friday and  
enough that we go  
places we have never been.

# Scott T. Hutchison

## I'm the Teacher Who Caught the Two Kids

Doing it. The Deed. Yesterday. A couple of tenth graders, full ankle-pants down and deep-groaning, a far piece before the middle of the school day, in the boys' bathroom, second period. My "free" period.

If I was heroic, I'd have turned around, blushing, and waved them on to their Happy Place. Sophomoric choices. Learned afterwards, in the administrative portion of the incident report, that they were supposed to be in Algebra I and Wheel Throwing. Respectively. Variables, mud, and sneaking dopamine fixes with screens came up short, apparently.

They found one another in the long haul, chose the easiest door to exit through, flinging clothes and caution. Their respective energies: galloping at a good Secretariat-in-the-Belmont distance ahead of mine. Me and my stale-teach of 1954's *Lord of the Flies*, 1959's *A Separate Peace*.

What I saw on sink granite bears no resemblance to a personal life of grading, generating objectives, prepping textual evidence. Their entanglement appeared to provide a great deal more fun in its friction than me communicating and defending my markups and corrections with parents like Ken and Karen Mercedes, Top and Janie Gunowners, Biggie XTC and Molly STD Skagsmack. I might expect more diversity, but they all race in at breakneck speed, spouting the same angers, wanting to tie me up with litanies of odd entitlements and threatening demands for child-passing their innocent babies.

My grammar and classic lessons in the human condition falter, along with the preparatory sections of my Classroom Education textbooks. The chapters on respect for learners and their families have been torn out—seen as something objectionable. Best practices sit on the bookshelf with Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*.

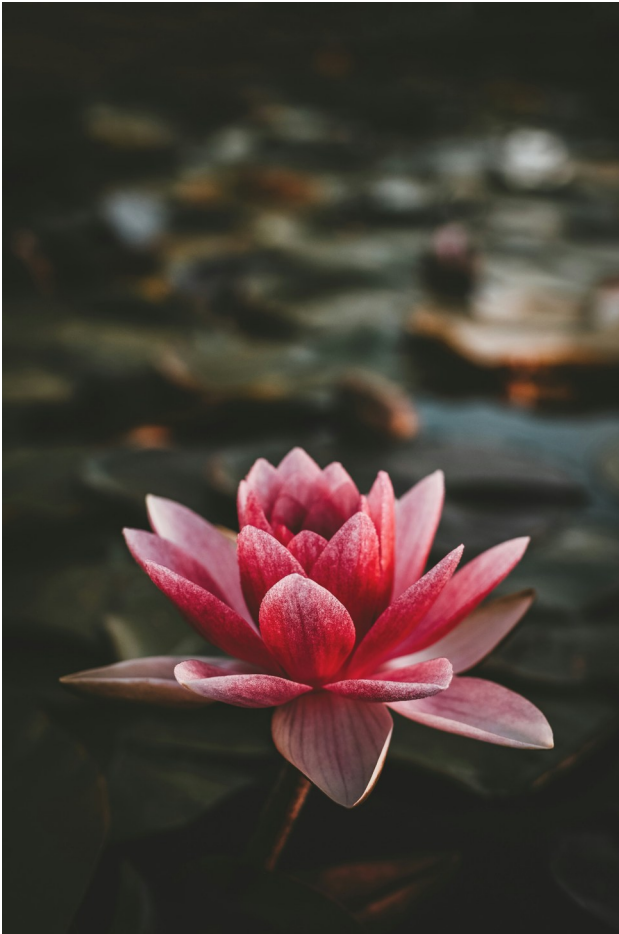
I've made it to my first year of tenure. Pay scale: making rent, eating school lunch and ramen, pouring most of what's left over into a compact car and the things it guzzles. I pay--my interests, college loans, and everything preceding this dull and pensive moment—back, not forward.

Duty demanded that I initiate a Deed write-up, commit to a box-checking report on the professional steps I took.

I marched myself into embarrassment. Meanwhile: fame for hookup Romeo & Juliet.

I'm not feeling any love in the hallways. I am twenty-five-years-old and professionally operating in beat-down mode. I look at the illustration on a book I'm covering with kids, thinking it's my very own piggy head that should be stobbed on a sharp-ended stick—an offering to what Darkness has to teach us. My grade on the rubric: what my tribal educator demographic would deem ironic—I'm shagged out. The sniggered jokes echoing all around me get it.

I had to pee—that was all—and pushed open the most obvious door.



# Hashim Quraishi

## The River Remembers

The river has its own chronicle.  
not in days or months,  
but in the weight of silt,  
the sound of leaves lost in the fall.  
mature bones swept away in spring.

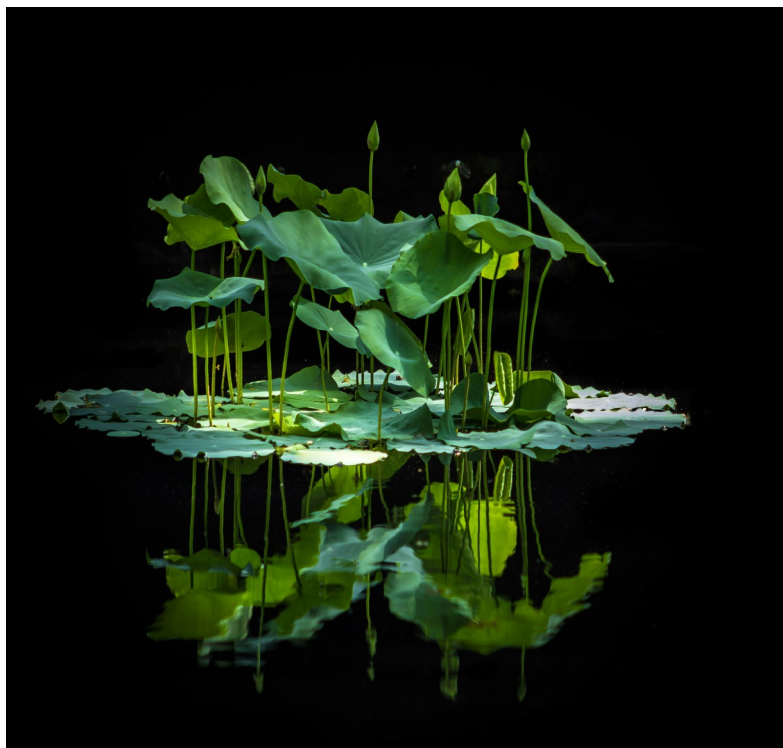
It does not hurry.  
It bears the forbearance of marble,  
the gossip of minnows,  
the prayer of reeds leaning ever forward.

Children used to row paper boats around here once.  
each vessel a secret mission--  
Others drowned, and others disappeared in the turn.  
The river does not take leave of their laughter.  
the sudden splash of a body  
dare he jump down the cliffs.

In the evening the fishermen go home empty-handed.  
but some of the water knows their names.  
On the bank they make little fires,  
smoke curling questions.  
the sky never answers.

I place my hand on the surface  
and the ancient year by year through me--  
a running line of embroideries.  
no one speaks aloud anymore.

Nevertheless, the water continues to flow,  
as forgetting is another form of prayer,  
as if memory itself  
were only a way of flowing,  
always leaving,  
always arriving.



## Barbara Jaffe

### What We Can Learn from the Horrors of the Past

I retired from my full-time community college position as an English professor, but my love of teaching and the constant interaction with my students will always remain within. Over two decades, I honed not only my teaching skills but my philosophy of teaching. My pedagogy and the issues that were essential to my own life became intertwined. I was determined that my students take away from their completed semester far more than the acquisition of grammar and writing skills. I wanted their lives to be changed so that years later they would remember much more than the mere elements of strong, effective writing. I wanted their readings to be transformational and to help them in their daily lives, so I chose literature that had impacted my own life.

I was committed to teaching my students about the potential for evil that lurks within all of us if gone unchecked and ignored. I chose to teach my students about the Holocaust, the most documented genocide of the 20th century. Yes, a heavy theme with topics that prompted one student to lament, “Dr. Jaffe, you like really depressing things.” I had not seen my reading and writing choices as depressing but rather essential information for our very existence, the reality of life past and present.

While I am enjoying my retirement, I regret that I cannot help at least 80 students every semester learn about the Holocaust. I had one student share with our class that his high school history teacher (!) stated that the Holocaust did not happen. Although initially stunned, I became even more committed to teaching not only the topic but also expanding my research and instruction to include information about the growing population of those who are known as Holocaust deniers and historical revisionists.

Even after learning the details of such horrific events, reading and watching documentaries, not to mention my work and research at the Museum of Tolerance, many students over the years asked similar and essential questions, such as: “How could the Holocaust happen?” and “How could others who saw what happened to their friends and neighbors allow this to happen?” “Why didn’t good people do something?”

The questions for all of us continue, yet I have learned my own lessons

from my years of helping others:

1) Those citizens living in Germany in the 1920 and 30s (the earlier years leading up to the Holocaust) were no different than those living in America today.

2) The Holocaust did not happen all at once. Rather, the horrors began as slow building blocks, multiplying in intensity. Day after day, over the course of years, in often slow, incremental events, Jews' human rights were limited and then removed. While initially shocking, such actions were absorbed by the sheer magnitude of so much negativity. By the time 'good' people really saw what was happening, it was too late. While there were some who helped, many did not want to risk their own lives. Unfortunately, human nature often allows us to become accustomed to even the most uncomfortable situations, for we remind ourselves (often incorrectly) that these situations are temporary. We have a hard time absorbing shock when it happens daily, so we comfort ourselves in accepting unacceptable behavior, feeling certain it will stop soon or that someone else will come to our aid, to rescue us. And history shows us that often no one comes.

3) I now understand that it is often human nature to be somewhat in denial during crises, thinking, "This will blow over." Or "So-and-so doesn't really mean what they say" Yet Hitler told everyone what he believed and what he was planning to do from the beginning. As a result of my years of study, I have learned to listen to what people say, not doubting their intentions. Upon hearing shocking comments or witnessing inappropriate behavior, no longer do I remark, "So-and-so didn't mean what they said or do." I know, now, that indeed they do.

4) Holocaust literature reminds us that good people can be transformed into killers; all that is needed to spark the flames of hate is a leader, a demagogue, speaking to their underlying prejudices and fears.

5) Leaders need followers, and with a demagogue, there are always those who choose to follow such leaders who promise them a life that they may not currently have, one with a job, money, or reminding them of the "good old days" (whatever that means). These followers lose a sense of their own voices and blindly accept lies as truth.

Although I am not in the classroom anymore, I continue my life's mission to share my knowledge with others, specifically young educators (through my continued work at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles). By guiding

others to understand the potential we all possess for both good and evil, we have the power to choose and create a more clement world.



# Hristina Keranova

## Analogies

It was scorching hot. She was not wondering any more why in that country song, the devil came down to Georgia. Hell was here and he belonged here. Her briefcase was heavy with teaching tools: crayons, markers, picture books. When the director of the English as a Second Language Program offered her a position as itinerant teacher in three elementary schools, she felt that was an offer she could not refuse. Of course, the director did not know that for brand new immigrants, such jobs should come with cars, but, after all, there was public transportation. Ignorant about the unpredictable moods of Atlanta's buses, she had to learn their saga much later, as fellow sufferers at the bus stops added their stories to her experience. As the breadwinner in the family, though, she needed the job and did not ask for perks.

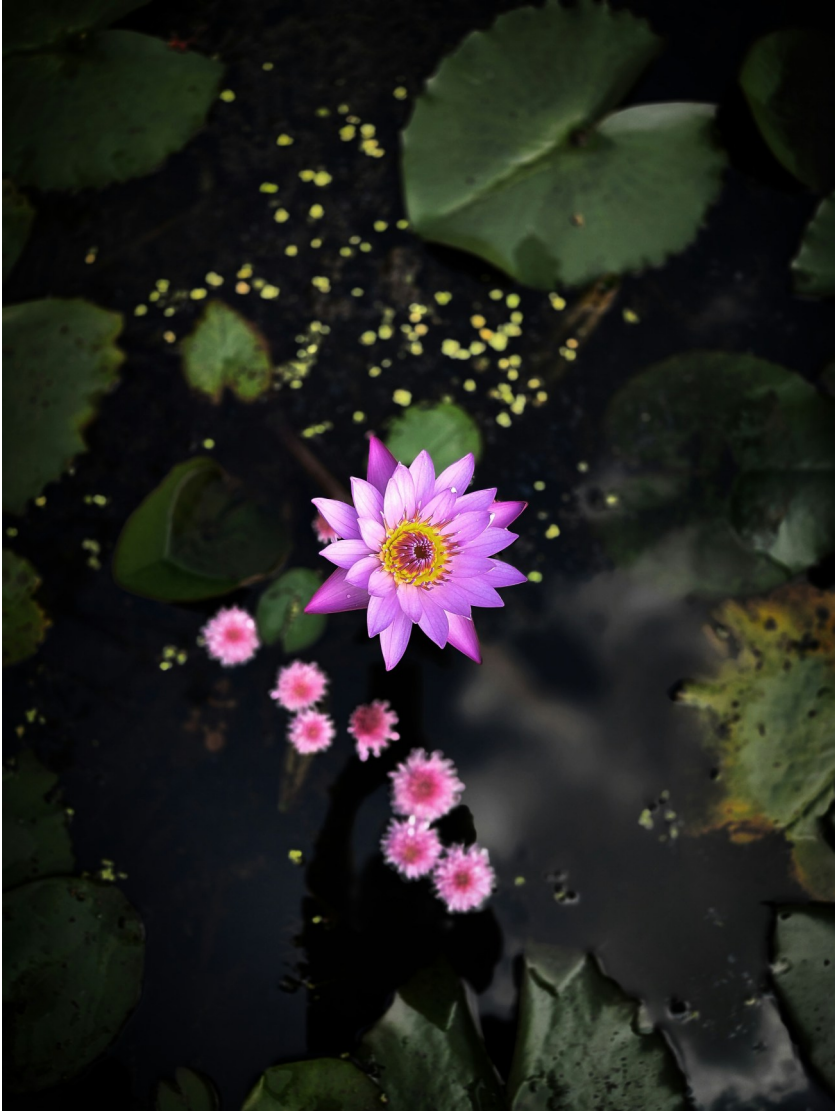
So now she was walking the two miles to the second school. The bus was late again and she just hit the road, like Jack in Ray's song and like the others at the bus stop. Walking fast, she still kept looking back in the hope to hitch a ride if the bus driver sees her. She tried something like a brisk trot, a style almost impossible with her heavy load. If she were fast enough, she'd be in the other school in about forty minutes.

She had to have figured the sweating. Her professional dark blue jacket and grey pants were slowly soaking and she'd arrive at the school looking much less competent. On top of all, there were no pavements and the dust rising after the passing cars had ready access to her clothes. Then this Crystal 18-wheeler appeared roaring on the narrow road, and the sight of the huge water bottle on its side made her parched throat ache. The truck sped ahead of her for a while and then slowed down to pull up on the side of the road. It blocked both the traffic behind and her way, and she stopped to figure out how to maneuver around it. But what was the driver doing?

He jumped out. With a light, springy gait, he approached her fast and slid a bottle of water in her hand. The cool plastic shocked her hot fingers. He said nothing, flashed a white smile at her, and ran back to climb the high steps into the truck. Just like that ... The door slammed shut, and he was

gone before she could reach the rear tires.

She arrived on time, tired and her clothes a mess, but she was smiling as she told her students from all over the world the story of the genie with the bottle.



## The Urdu Virus

[Background: The Urdu virus is the bane of all English teachers who are attempting to teach English as a second language to students in private schools in Pakistan.

After four years of hard work and effort, I had managed to create an atmosphere in the English classroom where no student was allowed (or would dare) to speak in Urdu while listening to my lectures. Then, as bad luck would have it, two new students— well below the standard of my class – were admitted to study O Level English. They were to be given special treatment as their father was a big gun in the company.

They were obviously badly infected with the Urdu Virus. Read on to learn more about this deadly virus.]

The initial symptoms of attack by this virus are manifested when the patient/student blurts out in class: “Yeh Kya bol ra hai?”

[Translation: “What (the hell) is he (the teacher) saying?”]

This outburst is followed by a lot of head scratching and puzzled looks. Attempts at copying the work of one or more students who are fluent in English are commonplace. In extreme cases, the patient begins to babble continuously and rapidly (in Urdu) in a desperate attempt to drown out the teacher's foreign tongue. When this proves unsuccessful (typically after a verbal whiplashing is received from an irate teacher – (there is no need for his friends to translate this particular message) – the person then goes into silent mode, where all attempts to make the learner respond orally (in English or the vernacular) fail completely.

The final stage is the withdrawal symptoms – technically known as disengagement. The patient makes no response to the teacher, the class activities, or even to close friends. In fact, all class fellows are perceived paranoically to be allies, colluding with the teacher because they understand English and seem able to write it down.

Researchers have tried for many years to devise a treatment for this virus but without success. Recently a Cambridge Professor of Medicine claimed to have come up with a medicine that is 100% effective in killing the virus. Derived from the weed killer paraquat, the 500mg pill in clinical trials

did eradicate the Urdu Virus instantly; unfortunately, it killed the patients as well. The Professor is currently working on a medicine to neutralize this troublesome side effect.

In the meantime, here is a quick fix for all you students who cannot quite grasp the complexities of the English language: use an Urdu-English dictionary, but keep it hidden under your desk. You should also smile frequently at the teacher; pay close attention; nod your head occasionally in agreement; laugh loudly at any attempted joke, pretending you have understood every word uttered by the teacher. Do copy any homework assignments randomly from the best students in the class; however, make one or two spelling mistakes deliberately to avoid being caught cheating by the teacher.

Most important of all, ensure you plan to go on vacation just before the English exam is due to take place. When you come back, insist on an estimated grade for your English based on your work in class during the whole year. The headteacher, rather than your class teacher, should prove more just and sympathetic in this regard. After all, the company cannot allow all its key workers to go on holiday at the same time. Hence, it is not your fault that you missed the English exam, which you had been looking forward to.



# Anahita Ayasoufi

## Painting a Dream

During a conference in Tibet, a group of us, five or six women, mostly high school math teachers, took a tour of the nearby monastery where supposedly an unusual teacher of arts resided.

We told our guide—a quiet man in a maroon cotton robe—that we wished to meet this teacher.

“I’m afraid that is not possible at this time,” he responded, “She has taken a vow of silence and will not receive visitors.”

It was a disappointment. We might have insisted, having come from a faraway country, but we thought better of it. Even if we did manage to meet her, what could a silent teacher teach us about teaching? We decided to be polite and finish the tour, even though our core purpose could not be achieved.

The inside of the monastery had quite an atmosphere with colorful murals and gilded Buddhas, with prayer wheels and incense burning, with monks in saffron-colored robes chanting in unison. It was easy to forget our disappointment and become absorbed in the surroundings.

I may have become too absorbed, because soon I realized I had lingered too long near a collection of incense burners, the earthy, herbal scent disorienting me. My group had disappeared.

At first, I felt a pang of panic, like a child lost in a store. Then I remembered I was an adult, and a kind of thrill took the place of panic. I looked around. The hallway in front of me branched into three subdivisions none of which showed any sign of my company. It was as if they had vaporized into thin air. I felt no preference for any hallway, so I picked the left one at random. This was neither an Egyptian pyramid nor a minotaur maze. I was bound to emerge at one exit or another, and I did.

The exit opened into a secluded inner yard—a square space bounded by walls, its ground covered with green grass dotted with dandelions. The air smelled like spring, even though the season was still too cold.

At an easel, a young woman was painting. She wore a bland white robe and her feet were bare.

As the exit behind me shut with a whoosh, the woman looked up. Her

pupils were a deep shade of gray and her cheeks pink in a natural rose blush. She seemed as if she had stepped out of a painting herself.

"I'm sorry," I said. This was clearly no real exit, just a large patio. I took a better look around, searching for another door, but all I saw were easels and a round table covered with tools and pottery saucers filled with various hues.

It occurred to me that I might have stumbled upon the elusive art teacher. But could she be her? She was so young. Maybe a pupil?

"I think I am lost," I said.

The woman seemed skeptical, as if being lost was an impossibility.

I waited for a response, but she said nothing. She walked to the table of tools and carefully selected a clean brush.

Of course. The vow of silence. I felt a slight annoyance that the woman was not going to help. But, to my astonishment, she extended the brush toward me.

I hesitated. She was obviously an accomplished artist. I could tell from the paintings on the easels and from the vast array of tools I had no name for, flat brushes, pointy brushes, rolling brushes, chisels and paint. What could I do, even if I tried?

"I can't even draw stick figures," I said, "I teach algebra." Like that explained everything.

She didn't pull her hand back. Instead, she nodded encouragingly, confidently, as if she knew something that I did not.

I decided to humor her. Maybe I would learn something, after all.

I dipped the brush in a golden yellow hue and drew it across the large span of white paper spread that she indicated.

When the sharp scent of the oil paint hit my nose, something happened. It was a strange sensation. The brush felt as if it was moving on its own accord, as if it knew where it must land, and at the same time, it was my hand shaping the angles and bringing them to life. It was my mind digging into its stored images and remembering the delicate angles and curves of various objects in its repertoire. It was like I had accessed an innate pool of knowledge I never knew I had.

On my paper, an object formed so true to reality that I felt I could reach in and pick it up. I looked at the artist, a million questions on my lips.

She was watching my work. Her face showed no expression of surprise.

Her smile looked amused.

The object I had drawn was a shoulder bag, an old design. It was a square leather bag with belt buckles and a worn-out strap. It looked familiar, but I could not place it. Had I seen it somewhere? Did I draw this from a forgotten memory? Something from long ago, from my childhood or from a dream maybe?

My hand went toward it for a touch, but I pulled it back. No matter how real it looked, it was only wet paint. It had to be. Touching it would break the magic, and I wanted the magic to go on.

The artist approached me and placed a hand on my forearm, coaxing it forward. She wanted me to touch the leather bag.

So, I reached back out. My heart fluttered like a butterfly wishing to break out of my chest. I gently traced the outline of the yellow leather bag. Lightning jolted my nerves, because it was no flat painted paper. It was bulging and creasing, and it fell right out of the paper into my hands. It did not smell like paint, but like leather, old, well-used, rain-beaten leather.

I did not take my eyes from it. Didn't even dare looking at the artist for the fear that it would disappear, the miracle, the hallucination, the magic, the whatever it was.

I brushed the shades of dirt away from its edges and unbuckled its flap.

My fingers trembled as they searched inside. At the bottom of it, I found an object and took it out. It was a key—large and golden colored. My fingers traced the cold metal and wrapped around it, holding it tight. Only then, I dared to look up at her. Silent vows notwithstanding, she was going to answer questions.

But she was gone.

On one side of the walls, the door I had walked through stood ajar. Behind it a distant giggle of a group of tourists told me that time was up.

I wasn't ready to leave. The mere thought of leaving the magical nook filled me with sadness, but at the same time, I had a lot to tell my companions, a lot to show. Beneath the sadness, a spark of excitement began to grow. I had something to take out to the world.

Then it hit me that no one would believe. They would think I had lingered at the incense burner for too long and hallucinated a scene. Maybe I had.

Once more, I traced the leather of the bag and took in the metallic smell

of the key. I unclasped my necklace and hung the golden key from the chain around my neck. It settled against my heart. Then I shouldered the yellow leather bag.

The two objects had mass and weight and took real space in real world.

Reality had forever changed. I had a bag to stuff with supplies. I had a key. Someday, somewhere, there would be a door that—if I dared to unlock—would open to a whole new world to explore.



# Writing Your Own

Where Teachers Become  
the Writers

*Editor's Note: Write Your Own typically features a writing prompt that teachers use with their students, followed by the teacher's own response to that prompt. When Shannon Ragan submitted work inspired by prompts her professors offered in college—prompts she and her classmates reshaped and made their own—I saw right away how naturally her work fit this feature.*

My fiction writing classes in college were relatively freeform. We often got to write on whatever topic we liked. One night, to break us out of our funks, Professor Steve Lattimore gave us a writing prompt: take three random words from an online word generator and write a short story. I resented the assignment at first because one of my words, as I recall, was “toilet.” But I was surprised how quickly a story came to me that was unlike anything I would have come up with on my own.

After graduating, a handful of fellow students kept up a writing group. To get us out of our latest funks, we decided to do the random word prompt. I cranked the dial to “complex” and got “craquelure,” “metage,” and “thundersquall,” all of which I had to look up. An image began to take shape: two men adrift on a large oil painting. It was such a small thing, but now, many years and edits later, it's my manuscript.

I want teachers to know that they are building the most wonderful legacies. Your lessons are in our ears every day and in each page we create. Thank you to all of mine.

# Shannon Ragan

## To Let You Know the Depths of My Love for You

*Kaitaia, New Zealand | 1835*

A metal sound clangs through the village. A few dozen people crawl out of bulrush houses and leave morning fires to cross the field to the mission. They walk parallel to the curve of the river, past the half-built bridge, to the edge of the settlement where the chief bangs iron bars in place of a school bell. Keke-no and her daughter Huru are among them, ready for their first day of lessons, but this is not their village, not their tribe. They have come for what the mission has to offer, to learn the *pakeha* language and the art of writing, and to bring back these gifts for the prosperity of their own tribe. Kekeno was selected as translator, not for her skill at languages or for her status among her people—she has neither. She was selected because of the opportunity her chief spotted: the adoration of one man whose cooperation he would like to secure.

Maori chiefs all over the island are forging connections with the foreigners, fostering trade, outdoing their rivals. In return for cloth, metal, gunpowder, and luxuries, they trade potatoes by the ton and pigs by the drove, fields and fields of grass cut down to feed them. Those who have already solidified connections say the giant ships are voracious. A handful anchor in the Bay of Islands at any given time, sometimes hundreds of men within each. Women are easy. Flax is busted. Food is king. Land is god. Plant *pakeha*, they tell Kekeno's chief. Sell to them for as little or as much as you can. Whatever the payment, it is nothing compared to what you will harvest.

Her eyes linger on the line of men disappearing into the small thatched church as she continues to the clapboard school. The last to enter are the two reverends who run Kaitaia Mission Station, and the castaway who washed ashore a full moon since, who claims to be a sailor but whom Kekeno sees the missionaries doubt. It was Kekeno who spotted him, adrift on a square of flotsam off the cape at the northern tip of the island. A body in the Bay of Spirits. That is what sent her rushing down the hillside to the beach, what urged her not to wait for Huru to fetch the men and the canoes, what made her shed her flax cloak and skirt on the sand, and what shot her into the waves like the seal for which she is named. Something alive where all else is dead.

The girls' schoolroom is alight with morning sun on whitewashed walls.

The Maori girls sit on woven mats in rows on the floor. Kekeno is the oldest among them, encased in the cone of her cloak. The missionaries' wives—sisters, nearly twins—stand at the front of the room in their print dresses and white bonnets. They too are younger than Kekeno, and their bright voices alternate reading in English and *te reo* Maori.

“Otira kua takoto tenei i roto i ahau,” says Mrs. Puckey reading from a sheet of paper, her mouth forming the words she has practiced since girlhood. “Kia kaua toku hokinga atu ki a koutou e waiho i runga i te pouri.”

Beside her Mrs. Matthews holds a Bible, her forearms making a sort of house over her pregnant belly. She repeats in English, “So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.” She waits for her sister to read the next phrase, then translates, “For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved?”

Kekeno tries to follow, but even in her own language she is confused. The story is about a man who pledged to return to where he was once offended, but would not return until he would be welcomed as he liked. Was this what the missionaries had crossed the world to tell them? Or was this just what the women should hear? She whispers to the girl next to her, “*Do the men hear the same lesson?*”

The girl nods. “*This is from their god’s story of two Corinthians.*”

“*What’s a Corinthian?*”

The girl shrugs.

Mrs. Puckey’s words float to her: “*You ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.*”

She wonders if the castaway in the chapel hears what is owed to a man so he is not overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. *Let him comfort himself*, she thinks. The man with the sunken eyes. The bedraggled stick of a man who stared at her with wonder as she clung to the edge of his raft, her body weightless with exhaustion. She knew she would make it, even as she swam farther than she ever had before, even as her muscles leaded and her lungs caught fire. She knew what it would feel like to place her hand upon the wood with the same certainty she felt in her many births, knowing when her children would survive and when they would not. Her children’s spirits were there in the water with her—all but the miracle of Huru who was tearing across the hillside—and her beloved too, all calling her to idle. She acknowl-

edged them, then pressed forward, swimming through the wounds in her heart to reach the raft and bring that island of one to her own. But he never gave his name. Even as he pantomimed his thanks to her when she brought him before the chief, even as she gave him hers, pointing to her chest, “Kekeno,” and then his. “*What?*” But he would not say. Only looked at her with his pleading eyes and studied the black tattoo of her lips and chin with an intensity that seemed she had branded him with her mark. So on behalf of her tribe, she gave him a name to bear like a scar for a man so far from home: Makere. *Lost*.

“*O Lord, open thou our lips,*” Mrs. Puckey calls.

Crushing desire is like calming labor pains. As Kekeno’s body twists with a want she will not allow, she translates a scream into a measured exhale. As visions paint themselves behind her eyes, she stares through them, focusing on the *pakeha* mouth speaking in Maori tongues. She knows he is listening at this very moment in his own lesson, untangling the jungle between them a word at a time. Once he learns, what will he say? Without the barrier of language, how will she ever keep him from coming under her curse?

Eyes closed since before the lesson began, Makere leans against the bulrush wall of the dim chapel appearing asleep. But he is not. He is turning over in his mind what Reverend Puckey said at breakfast, explaining that he would have a harder time learning *te reo* than the Maori would of learning English. The reverend spoke of the Maori’s knack for memorization. With no written language, they commit their entire religion, ancestral stories, lineages, and all other realms of knowledge to memory, which must be harvested by each generation or wither on the vine. Puckey said, “The Maori culture persists mouth to ear,” and it has placed Kekeno’s spirit next to him every moment since. Puckey spoke of his glimpses of their religion, their pantheon of gods and heroes, as they were relayed to him in his many years in the country. He sucked on his pipe summarizing their creation story, their world made not from one god but two, male and female, locked in an embrace so tight that even their children were born between them in darkness. Wanting light, the children forced them apart, cutting off their limbs so they could no longer hold each other, raising posts between them to keep the sky aloft and the earth below for all eternity.

Kekeno has kept away, in the Maori village and with the women in the mission settlement, and Makere searches for her face wherever he goes, for the mystery of her scowl, the distinct swirls of her tattoo like ink dripping from her mouth. How she glowers at him. How frightful he must look to her, emaciated when she rescued him, feeble as he is now, and more like the dour reverends than her virile tribesmen. When they traveled from her village to the mission station, they snaked through the forest following Puckey and the Maori guides. Makere was still weak from his time lost at sea, after the wreck that freed him from his fate in the prison colony. His knuckles pulsed white against his walking stick. His face flushed. Twice Kekeno asked the reverend to ask Makere if they should stop, but twice Makere refused. He continued in her footprints, swayed with her gait. It was as if an invisible lead extended from her hand to his neck. In that journey, he grew familiar with her scent, a shape of its own in the piney forest, and he trudged beyond the limits his poor muscles would allow to remain in the cloud of her perfume.

It shames him to recall how he has spoiled every encounter with her, being either helpless or dumb or both. He could not even give her his name, sullied as it was from his life as a convict. He has vowed countless times to end his desire, so that he may never ask her for an ounce more of kindness than she has already shown him; in the next moment though, his thoughts betray his vow, and he falls further into the abyss of longing, today ornamented with Bible verses.

“I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy,” reads Reverend Matthews, who pauses for the Maori translation. “For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you.”

These last words stretch down the abyss like a rope ladder. Makere wakes to the room around him as if only now realizing the preciousness of the air that he breathes. “What did you say?” All eyes turn to him. “The last phrase?”

Reverend Matthews begins to repeat, “Not to grieve you, but—”

Makere stops him. “Not in English.”

Reverend Puckey reads his translation again. It is too much for Makere to hold. But the words are there. The rest of the reading, the English lessons, the closing prayer wreck against the hum of his mind. He knows he should listen, but these few words are all he wants now. He hunts for them each day the lesson is repeated. It becomes his constant refrain, all other words and verses

that he learns in the schoolhouse and in the classroom he selects for himself: helping to build the bridge over the Awanui.

In construction as in Christianity, Reverend Puckey aims to lead by example. Sunk to his knees in sediment, he teaches the Maori builders British techniques, and they teach him the behaviors of Aotearoan wood, soil, and waters. Both teachers are patient with Makere; he can only offer his labor and curiosity. *Bank—Not to grieve you—Bridge—but to let you know—River—the depths of my love for you. Hold this—Not to grieve you—Give me—but to let you know—Be careful—the depths of my love for you.*

Level the ground, sink the piers, raise the supports. Each day spent chopping, sawing, building, listening, speaking, and memorizing brings him nearer to knowing her. Erect the sides, lay the deck, fit the treads. Each day, the gap narrows in the bridge that will be, as the two banks stretch toward one another. Each day, he wakes in his tent, his body frozen from yesterday's exertion. He lurches to life to cake himself in mud, stud himself with splinters, and give every last drop of sweat in the pursuit of her language.

She does not see him for weeks except from afar as he toils at the bridge with the other men. Though she would rather look elsewhere, the bridge is the only activity in the settlement and her eye is drawn to it like a bee to a flower. As Kekeno helps Mrs. Matthews with chores, they can hear the thunk of timber and the pop of hammers. The smell of split wood puts his face in her mind. She tries to focus on what she came to the mission to do, why she stays by Mrs. Matthews's side. But English is a baffling language, and learning it through cooking and cleaning leaves little hope that she will be able to negotiate the trades her chief expects. The amount of time that *pakeha* women spend washing dishes makes her question their entire way of life. She longs for her earthen oven that will make as well as consume the remnants of each meal.

One day as her fingers wrinkle in the tub of hot water, Kekeno says, "*I could teach you how to weave Maori plates. The grass you have here is just what I use. The weave is simple, even Huru can do it.*"

"*That's very kind,*" says Mrs. Matthews, her apron damp over her round belly. "*These were wedding presents. I know it's a bit much for missionary life, but it reminds me of England and what we came here to do.*"

Kekeno sloughs soap suds off a plate and hands it to Mrs. Matthews. *"What's it made of?"*

She stops drying and looks at the china. *"You know, I have no idea,"* then resumes her buffing.

It is this way with many *pakeha* things, as Kekeno has discovered. For all the objects they keep, they know little of their origin or composition, thus they are easily discarded. She was shocked one day when a saucer slipped from her wet fingers and broke against the side of the tub. At first Mrs. Matthews's face looked devastated, but she quickly rearranged it, patted Kekeno's hand, and said, *"It's no matter,"* before putting it in the rubbish pail. She wonders if *pakeha* marriages have similar disposability. *"Could you ever leave Reverend Matthews?"*

Mrs. Matthews's braided loops shudder at her temples as she shakes her head. *"Goodness no. We are too much in love. When we were apart as he established the mission, I thought I'd die from sadness."*

So that much is the same between their worlds: Love means never wanting to be away from each other. *"But if you wanted to, how are marriages undone where you come from?"*

Now her braids wriggle like eels. *"A true Christian would never do such a thing. It is permitted in England, but it is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord."*

If every marriage is forever, Kekeno surmises the *pakeha* must have long courtships. *"How long did you lie together before you were married?"*

At this Mrs. Matthews must set down her plate, not trusting herself to hold it. *"Lie together? Before marriage?! Never."*

Another abomination, Kekeno notes. At the river, a plank passes overhead to those working at the edge of the bridge. The sound of it dropping into place reaches her a moment later. *"Then how did you know you were right to marry him?"*

Mrs. Matthews gestures at the air as if it is evidence enough. *"He was very nice,"* she concludes, then laughs at her own simplicity. *"He served at my father's mission with the utmost devotion. He was always respectful and gentle with his words. And there was no telling when there would be anyone else. We missionaries are a small community. Mr. Puckey was the only eligible bachelor we'd seen before that. And he chose Matilda. But when Joseph—when Reverend Matthews—proposed marriage, it seemed inevitable."*

*We didn't lie together, as you say, but we were already making a life that couldn't exist without the other, whether we knew it or not.*" She wraps her arms around the orb of her belly, the life inside turning a wide arc that moves the folds of her apron. *"And now this. It's a wonder how life goes."* A tear drips from her cheek, and Kekeno places a hand on her shoulder. *"I worry so much what will happen next,"* and the tears flow freely.

Kekeno's arm goes around her without hesitation, moved by the memories of hope and anxiousness, pain and exhaustion, and the singular feeling of the one yet to come making its space inside. So much is the same between the worlds within women. Her cheeks go hot, and she remembers the flames of the birthing house. Built by her beloved before he went off to battle, burned as she learned that, like so many others, he would not return. She heard those words as she held yet another baby lifeless in her arms. The force of the words pushed her into the fire. It took all her brother's wives and the priests to stop her. But she heard their whispers. Kanga, they called her. *Cursed.* And she was. Her curse was to endure, to be endlessly left behind.

Mrs. Matthews sets her face back into calm. After a deep breath, she holds the plate up to Kekeno. "Paepae."

Kekeno refocuses her mind. "Dish."

Mrs. Matthews points. "Matapihi."

"Window."

She pinches the fabric of her dress. "Kākahu."

"Clothes."

Water. Floor. House. I wash. Inside. Kekeno adds these to the growing stack of her *pakeha* knowledge. Sky. Grass. Bridge. The men are at the river. Work. She absorbs all the can at the schoolhouse, practicing with the girls. I am sitting. You have black hair. It is cold outside. She practices with Huru in the dark at night. Where are you going? What do you want? She interrogates Mrs. Matthews to understand what goods the *pakeha* most need. Potatoes. Flax. Timber. How much? What do you have? She learns the concept of money and all that it can buy. Forest. Valley. Land. Fertile. Virgin. Grow. Cost. Paper. Promise. Property. Forever. Own.

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The last tread covers over the water rushing underneath. The Maori men chant as the side rail taps into place securing the middle-span of the

deck. The bridge is finished. Great cheers erupt, and everyone looks to Puckey to see if he'll cross it, but he waves his arms in big swoops to tell the men to enjoy it themselves. Makere is caught up in the throng of them as they rush forward, a mess of clapping hands, arms tugged around shoulders, and flashes of bright white smiles. Boys skirt between their hips back and forth across the bridge, delighted at how the river is conquered for this small stretch. At the midpoint, Makere turns observing the small crowd left on the bank: the reverends and their wives with faces awash with gratitude for the ease this will bring their journeys south; the youngest boys who have given over to somersaults in the grass; and Kekeno and Huru looking on from afar trying to discern what it all means. And still all around him the men cheer and congratulate one another. From where he stands, Makere can finally see what the mission is. He has no wish to evangelize, to spread a faith which he does not have himself. But he would like to build with these people who seem so intent to build something with foreigners like him, erecting a new world a word at a time.

As they return to the northern bank, a murmur winds through the crowd. All eyes turn to Mrs. Matthews. She is doubled over, clutching the hands of her husband and sister as she suffers the sudden pain. Fresh cheers replace the murmur, welcoming the coming baby.

Her labor begins calmly enough, the contractions walkable until sundown, despite Reverend Matthews imploring her to lie down in her delicate state. Mrs. Puckey has the foresight to give her sister a bit of supper while she still has an appetite. But like steam in a kettle, the pressure inside Mrs. Matthews grows, driving her to her bed as stars dot the twilight and the edges of her vision.

Mrs. Puckey lays the oil cloth and remakes the sheets. She asks Kekeno to tend the fire and bring warm water as she can. Huru becomes the water carrier, excited to have a role in the momentous event. She has never witnessed a birth let alone aided in the delivery, and the responsibility hurries her footsteps as she treks to and from the river. But as Mrs. Matthews's labor stretches late into the night, Huru's trips take longer. When the coals are a bed of jewels and the stars are crisp in the velvet black, Kekeno relieves her daughter and makes her a bed by the fire. Every so often, Reverend Matthews crosses the distance between Puckey's house and his own to

enquire about his wife and child. But nothing is truly changed and nothing is truly certain, and so he returns, the white knot of his hands clasped behind him disappearing in the dark.

Basins of pink liquid empty and refill with clean, steaming water. Mrs. Puckey wrings the cloth tightly; Kekeno winces, reminded of the sensation of labor pains. Mrs. Matthews's eyes are distant, trying to run away to a rest she cannot have. Sweat has reduced her shift to a mere film over her skin. Her legs splay limply as she lies flat on her back until her pains come; then her knees bend and her heels run against the bed clothes turning them into a tangle of white seaweed. Mrs. Puckey presses the cloth to her sister's forehead, singing as gently as a mother would to her own child.

They look as little as Huru alone in this room, without their husbands beside them, without their mother to guide them, without anyone but Kekeno to watch them. How little their world must be, a small tribe flung far from their place of birth, the cradles of knowledge and experience left behind. The firsts of life multiply in foreign lands, and what was once familiar must now be rediscovered. Two basins of water ago, Mrs. Puckey whispered to Kekeno, "*Should she be further along? Is it taking too long?*"

A groan rises, overtaking the lullaby. Mrs. Puckey resumes her position at her sister's feet as Mrs. Matthews grips the headboard. Reassurances are useless; they are messages for the mind, but the body is in control. Even a woman's own protests of "no" and "I cannot" have no sway over what will be. She is beyond her limits of what she believes she can do, beyond her understanding of what a body is for. Where she once was a voyager, she is now the vessel, a mother born from a child. In *te reo*, women are *te whare tangata*—the house of humanity. The world comes from within her walls, a life growing in her womb until it is thrust out her doorway as person, animal, plant, mountain, or island. Mrs. Matthews came from her mother's house, and her mother the house before her, each generation blossoming from the sheath of the previous. But sometimes the doorway is impassable. Sometimes the house cannot weather the storm it has brewed. Sometimes all is lost, and it is a wonder how any life can come from such violent starts.

The pain ebbs. Mrs. Puckey presses the warm cloth against the wound of life. She cries her sister's tears for her. "*More water, please.*"

Kekeno snatches up the empty pail outside the doorway and dashes for the river. But something holds her back. "*Ka taea e au,*" says Makere, holding

the rope handle. He unfastens her grip and takes the pail. *"I can,"* he repeats and marches into the dark.

She busies herself building back the fire, the smoke stinging her eyes and blurring the sight of Huru sleeping peacefully beside it. She feels it would crush her to go back into that house, the pressure in Mrs. Matthews's womb would take over all the air and flatten her where she stood. That house where everything happens. Eat, sleep, work, dream, cry, scream, bear, bleed—all within the same walls. The Maori would burn it down for the blood spilled inside, but Kekeno wants it burned for the insanity of all that it holds. If she would have had to endure the loss of her children in the same place she laid her head to rest, she would have ignited herself. She thinks of the flames of the small birthing house for the last child conceived with her beloved, how they rumbled like war drums, how it took so many hands to keep her from them. All those arms and hearts to tell her to stay, to wait for what may come after the smoke had cleared and the ashes became earth again.

Makeke returns and empties the pail into the pot. *"More?"* he asks. Kekeno nods to send him away. He hesitates, seeing her distress.

She wipes her tears. *"It's the smoke,"* she says, not knowing if he understands. *"More water,"* she commands. As she watches him leave, a scream comes from within, life trying to get out. A mother and child want to be born in the house where everything happens.

She takes off her cloak. *"Help me sit her up,"* she instructs Mrs. Puckey. Kekeno climbs onto the bed behind Mrs. Matthews who, despite her screams, cannot protest being moved. She leans against Kekeno's bare chest and lets the woman's arms encircle her. *"Take that sheet and tie it to the rafter."* Mrs. Puckey gathers up the bloodied, sweat-soaked sheet. Standing on the bed, she slips it between the thatched roof and wooden beam and knots it. *"Give the end to Mrs. Matthews. She needs something to bear against."* Mrs. Matthews pulls at the white cloth as if she were trying to climb it out of her pain. Kekeno's thumbs push down the center of her belly, as thumbs pushed down hers so many years ago, showing mother and child the path to becoming. She tells Mrs. Matthews to push, to pull, bite if she has to, tear the sheet to shreds to become what she must. The beam creaks. The house may collapse. The sister waits, hands ready, and tells what she sees. The women scream as one, their sweat and tears mix-

ing to bring forward a new house. Fire burns. Water boils. The bud pierces the sheath, and a blossom explodes into wails of life.

It is not a house. It is a boy. Richard, named after Reverend Matthew's brother, cleaned in the warmed waters of the Awanui. Mrs. Matthews is too weak to hold him, but somehow her arms fold around the baby, the spirit in control of the body once again. The sheet still hangs from the ceiling, bearing scars of its duty that Mrs. Matthews will patch later. Mrs. Puckey is curled at the foot of the bed, nearly asleep but not wanting to miss a moment of the relief and happiness that surrounds her. Reverend Matthews looks on in contentment, ignorant of the earthquake that occurred not a hundred paces from where he waited through the night.

Kekeno sits on the bridge studying the currents intertwined like muscles moving the river forward. Early dawn dusts the valley. Fog walks like ghosts through the fields, and Makere is coming toward her.

The refrain pulses on his lips. She must know, he thinks—she does not need him to tell her. But if they are to move from knowing to being, he must say the words, listen to hers, and hope that he can understand.

*"I say to you?"* he asks. Kekeno stares into the waters as if he has not spoken. Perhaps if she does not speak he will hold his tongue, and they will be safe. But the refrain comes, spilling into the world imperfectly, mispronounced so as almost to render the confession incomprehensible. *"I say to you, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you."*

Kekeno recognizes the verse well enough from the schoolhouse. She rises and walks off the bridge to the south away from the mission, but Makere follows.

*"You say,"* he says, rounding on her.

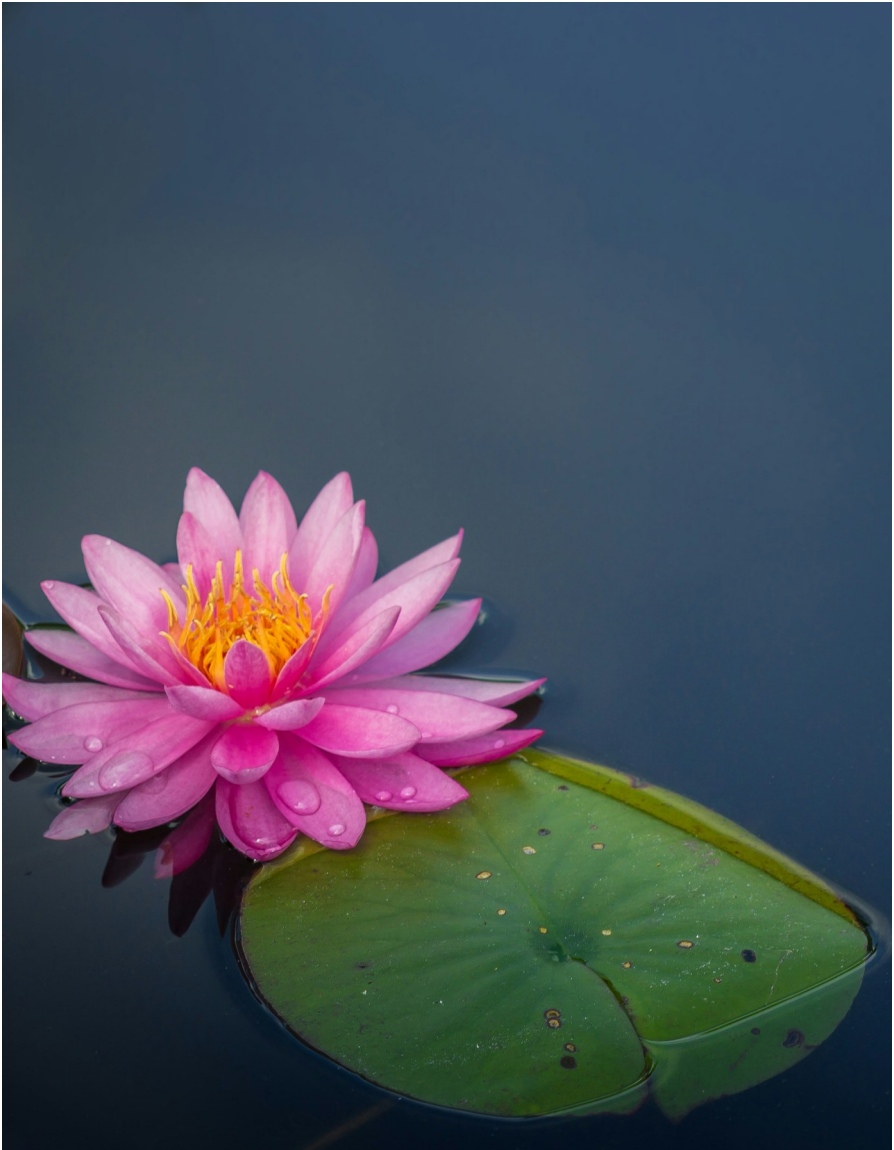
*"I say? What do I say? I say, why?"*

Even in his own tongue, what words would he choose? It is hopeless that he can say in hers. His mind races through his rudimentary knowledge, searching for something that may hold the depths of which he speaks. He kneels and presses his forehead to her feet. *"You are God."*

His hands around her ankles send roots growing through her, his tree taking hold in her soil. *"You don't know what you're saying,"* she tells him, dizzy in his grasp, swaying like a tree in the forest.

He kisses her foot and repeats, *"You are God."*

A breath escapes her, uncontrolled, a word in itself. He has heard it. Nothing she can say now will undo its meaning. It sends her own roots deep into him, pulling him up, closer, closer, locking them both in a suffocating embrace. A slip of tongues where no words can be spoken. A grip so tight, not even light can come between them.



# Robert P. Hansen

## The Cave\*

I dwell among the chosen few  
who are chained to an ice-cold  
wall,  
immobilized by certainty.

Stark shadows pass before me,  
their soft edges flickering.

We name them before  
they can escape.

I know all their names and  
win every competition.

Pride flows through me from  
the knowing, from the owning  
of the title, from the glowing  
recognition from the others  
I have never seen.

And then a thought  
I should never have had  
flows through me like a tidal wave  
washing away my pride, my  
certainty, my chains.

*Is there nothing more?*

I grow silent.

The shadows come and go.

I know their names.  
I hear their whispers.  
I say nothing, but...

*Why do they flicker?*

I try to turn my head  
for the first time and  
ice crackles.

My neck twists painfully, slowly  
to the left, and I see the foggy truth  
for the first time.  
The chains crumble.  
Ice falls to the ground.  
And I follow.

*\*Inspired by Plato's Allegory of the  
Cave*

# Mary Ellen Webb

## Summer of the Scarves

Summer break  
And the knitting was wild...  
Magazines, books...  
Teens knitting.  
Seniors.

(They're not knitting seniors,  
You know what I mean.)

I'd thumb through the pages  
Just looking for answers  
And only found cabling,  
Purling and "ds"  
(So what is a "ds"? I never found out)

Someone somewhere had told me  
That knitting was therapy

So I bought some more needles  
(I'd had them before  
When my grandmother taught me  
Just how to knit scarves)  
I remembered her voice  
"Take it slow, Mary Ellen"  
And soon her hands guided me  
(Like riding a bike)

I even had yarn  
From some project I'd left off  
Probably back from before I had kids  
(Definitely from before I taught kids).

And I found it was true:  
Straight knitting was great  
Peaceful clicks of the needles  
Unwinding of skeins.

But beware of the cables...they involve several needles  
That cross and connect and they really confuse me.

So I choose the scarf  
A long, simple rectangle  
That starts as it ends  
With no fancy-schmantz stitching.

I can knit watching TV  
Bad movies and all  
I can knit through teen angst  
And plan an inservice  
I can knit when the power's out,  
not drop a stitch.

I can knit and NOT think  
About changes in standards  
And stresses to come  
And that upcoming class  
That I need for my master's  
And that overdue book  
That is lost in my bedroom.

I can knit nearly anything.  
As long as it's a scarf.

# Stephen Schwei

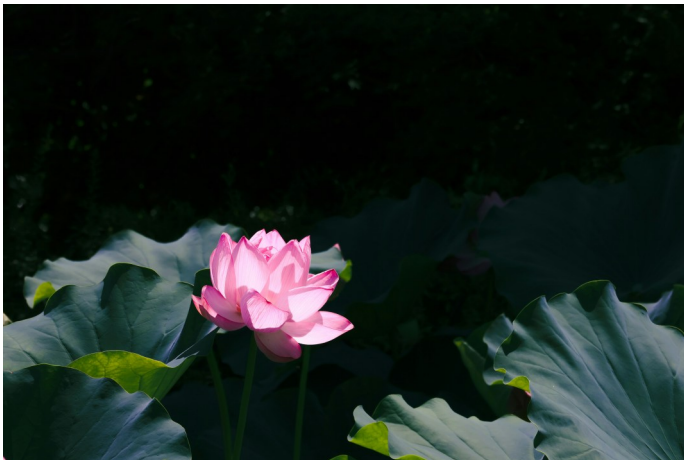
## July's Sizzle

Buck and doe unite to chase, mate, and grow,  
amid the oak in middle season's strength.  
Ripe corn completes the countryfied tableau,  
opaque, searing heat throughout July's length.

The moon provides protection, short relief  
though thunder, even ice might refrain cold.  
Like crane eluding wolf, however brief,  
the hungry fangs of summer retake hold.

It's tough to summon courage, confidence  
or spiritual thoughts when you perspire.  
Rose honey mead might help restore your sense  
of options to fulfill intense desire.

The shine of buck moon's trail will arc and fall  
like sturgeon leaping, torrid times recalled.



# Bill Camp

## The Crack in the Door

An old house sits in a historic neighborhood on an inner-city block. The house must be over a hundred years old. It is now vacant and run down, with roof shingles worn and falling off, chipped and faded green paint, and boarded up windows with plywood. The wooden steps leading up to the small porch are rotting with only a few spots of white paint remaining. The columns holding up the awning over the porch are likewise rotting with chipped white paint.

On the front door of that house rests a sign that reads “condemned” in large red letters. The door was once stained dark, but even that has faded to a much lighter tan now. It has been weather-worn from years of rain, snow, and sleet. The door had two planks on either side and one smaller plank in the middle, all holding a panel at the top and bottom of the door. But the bottom panel is cracked, a crack just wide enough that someone could peer inside.

Whenever I strolled past the house as a young child, I would stop on the sidewalk and gaze at that old, abandoned house. Even then, it had been decades since anyone lived there. I would wonder and speculate about its history. Sometimes I would even try to peer inside that small crack, but from the sidewalk, all I could ever see was darkness. If I had ever gathered enough courage to walk up onto the front porch, gotten down on my hands and knees, I still would have seen only darkness, I presume.

Being a timid child, on days when I gathered up any courage at all, I would stand there, staring at that crack for long periods of time. If I gazed at it long enough, it would appear to move and bend. And if I stared at it even longer, things would come out of it. Usually, this would start as just a little mist, turning into a steam. Then the steam would begin to take shape. Eventually the shapes turned into figures, faces, people who I imagined used to live in that old house many years ago.

These people wore old fashioned clothes. The woman wore a long flowery dress and a bonnet on her head, and the man wore an old-fashioned suit with a vest and a watchchain. And they would partake in normal activities for their era. The woman would often be in the kitchen cooking, kneading dough with a rolling pin to make bread or pies. Meanwhile, the man would sit in the living room after a long day of working and read the newspaper in an easy chair with his feet propped up on a hassock.

But this was not a happy house. At times violence would break out inside

of it. The man would fall into vicious fits of rage over the most minor offenses, like if his supper was not ready when he wanted it or if the house was not clean enough for his liking. At times he would strike the woman during these fits, and it would send a shudder through my body as I stared at this scene many decades later. The woman would retaliate by hurling dishes at the man. A terrible feeling would come over me as I imagined such things going on inside. It made this large house feel small, like a prison cell, without escape. I could feel the house searching for an escape from that family during those years.

When I witnessed this as a child, it reminded me of the violence that occasionally broke out in my own home. My own father would come home from work at the factory angry and have terrible, violent fights with my mother. They would throw things, breaking vases on the floor. A lamp came sailing and crashing against the wall one day. I would hide in my room during these violent arguments or leave to go play outside. I needed my own escape. Sometimes I would ride my bike as far away as I could, the tassels of the handlebars flowing and tickling my hands as I rode tears flowing from my eyes.

But whenever I went outside during these times and found other children to play with, the fighting at home loomed large on my mind, so I came off as awkward. Children can be so cruel to each other at such times, when one does not fit in. It caused other children to cast me as an outsider, pick on me, bully me, and beat me up. So, I learned to play alone outside. Thus, I had difficulty connecting with others. I grew up alone, with few if any friends, and never married. I remained that awkward kid into adulthood and found it difficult to adjust, to hold relationships, and never married.

So, as a child most of the time, if I wasn't riding my bike, I would just go for a walk, and that was when I first discovered that old, abandoned house. There I discovered what would happen if I stared at it and that crack in the door for extended periods of time. We connected with each other then that continued into adulthood.

But I am an old man now. I walk with a cane. Yet at times I still make my way to that old neighborhood so I can stroll by that old house whenever I get the chance. Its chipped paint is a little more faded than before and the plywood boarding up the windows is a little more rotted, and the porch is a little more worn, but it still looks much the same. I wonder if anyone ever tried to buy it and fix it up, make it livable again. I followed it in the newspapers, and saw it change owners a few times, but no one ever bothered to fix it up, to help it. Perhaps it had foundational problems that proved too costly, but

whatever the reason, it remained empty and alone, like me.

I stand there and gaze at that old house as I did in my youth, my arched back aching, the breeze flowing through my gray hair on this cloudy autumn day. I am now broken down and fading just like that old house.

As I look at it, a smile runs across my face to think of how that house helped me cope with an often-unhappy childhood. And even in my decrepit state, I still stare at that old house, and at that little crack in its front door. It is still there and has not changed a bit. At times, I still stare at it as I did as a child, and it still produces the same violent visions that come out of that crack as they did in my youth.

And on this day, as my time is gone, I enter that house through that little crack. Then I become that old, abandoned house and that house becomes me. We will break away from this world together and become one.



## H. L. Dowless

### *How Was Your Day?*

The sun enlightens the treeline sky,  
Reaches out in between the trunks,  
Clouds of robins fly,  
As the fish traps are sunk.

I lay crying  
Inside a crib of black jack wood.  
That is all I can do,  
I think I should..  
I never awaken before any falling of the morning  
Dew.

Beams of light are strawberry,  
Then yellow gold,  
The orb sits at the tree tops,  
Burning away the cold.

I am up running about,  
Into everything,  
I love to scream  
And shout,  
Until it makes the walls ring!

Now the sun  
Moves into the sky,  
Warming all the ground,  
Making the hungry chicks cry.  
Look!  
It moves up without a sound.

Now  
I am so strong,  
One who never tires!  
Today I sing my song,  
Behold the truth in me  
Prevails o'er all condemning lies!

The sun finally crests,  
Then it descends on the western side,  
All labor wanes,  
In comes the ocean tides.

Oh,  
I still feel so strong,  
Forward I run even more,  
My day yet shall be so long,  
I swing a perfect score,  
You know,  
I can do no wrong!

Into the sea  
Sinks the sun.  
Gloom then prevails,  
Now the new moon has won.  
Oh now,  
The banshee yells!

In the center of an exquisite,  
Carnation draped mansion chamber,  
Stands a large alabaster pedestal.  
Upon that exalted position  
So relevant,  
Sits a black walnut sarcophagus,  
So dazzlingly elegant.

In the dim flicker of candlelight,  
Motionless inside this box  
I lie,  
The weeping crowd is such a sight,  
They say I suffered so much  
In my plight.

But lo.,  
I did not die!  
Yet I did not fight,  
I know not why.  
I try to shake these people  
With all of my might,  
In and out among them  
I fly!

# Aleks Zywicki

## worries & hums

on the parkway my daughter  
asks what are those meaning

those graves on either side of  
this strange stretch of road

I lie to myself every time  
I drive through & pretend

I don't know it is  
not supposed to be this way

I am driving though graves  
unmade to make this road

I sometimes sing through  
or weep & scream

she shouldn't have to pretend  
like me so this is the first big lie

I tell her            don't get me  
wrong parents lie all the time

we can't go to the park  
they close it when it's raining

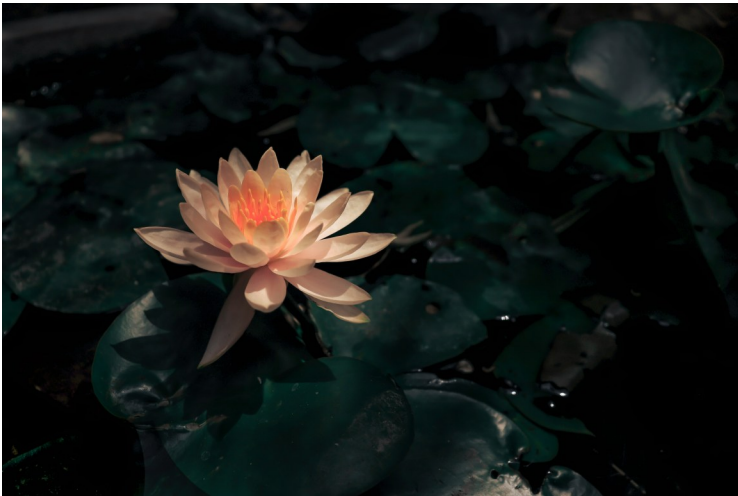
when really I don't want to stand  
& get wet while she has a childhood

I know I am pretending even now  
this isn't our first ride

through the rows & aisles of dead  
things I pretend I don't know

at her every asking  
when she asks me to name

those out her window  
I fail her & say statues



## unimaginable unmanageable

if Auden does have a poem  
about private hymns made  
holy not for their place  
in the mass but in the life

the inner Eden we've talked  
so much about his having  
talked about then I know  
you know it can call it

to mind as light calls Mathew  
in the painting you have  
that hangs in my Eden  
as well but if he doesn't

I wish to contribute  
that as Chopin is known  
by the many hands who  
play at him but not him

as someone plays at Lear  
as Ella and Billie and Jo  
phrase at the eternal tunes  
we go on taking turns

claiming belong to each  
of them but couldn't  
I know you know there  
is something undying about

this that Merrill called body  
this that Shakespeare called  
machine a hand that reeks  
of mortality I know you

know better you must know  
that in my mind you made  
happen a music I can only  
hold for my whole life

that you can only hold  
in this inner most ear  
but will endure a seawall  
against the night that

if it takes you better take  
me soon thereafter





# Cameron Beale

## SPIN

You spin. Your world is a daze of color and light. It has been that way for as long as you remember. If the world ceased to turn, your heart would cease beating. At least that is what they tell you.

You spin. You do it well. The years of non-stop movement have heightened your sense of control, steadied your balance, and perfected your awareness of space.

It is early morning. The angles of light bouncing off the four walls that contain you, that have always contained you, tell you this.

You wonder what's keeping your tutor. He is late. Your day is strictly regimented and optimized to best reap the rewards bestowed by your god's gifts.

Minutes pass, as quickly as you do. Sweat beads your brow, not because you're hot or because you whirl in constant motion. You're perspiring because if your tutor doesn't arrive soon, there won't be enough time for all of your lessons before the public is let in.

You debate with yourself whether or not to call out. It could be that the tutor is right outside the door, distracted by a deep spiritual conversation that requires so much of his faith that it holds him from other duties. He could be outside smoking. This is another possibility that you consider. A last indulgence before partaking in God's work. But you don't smell it. No scent of tobacco reaches you. So, you grind your teeth, even though you have been warned on numerous occasions not to. They tell you it dulls your holy teeth. And that it is both unsightly and does damage to God's design. You wonder how anyone could possibly make out the clinching of your jaw clearly enough to take offence. You stop anyway. God wills it, after all.

You spin. The loud, familiar shriek of the door opening causes you to sigh in relief. You move in that direction. With a specific goal in mind, your circular patterns cover less ground and are tighter and less flashy. You think that your god won't mind. You're not the one who is late.

A blur of sharp white and cream forms by the door. The blur is too slim, too short to be your tutor. A few more rotations show you streaks, brown and hazy. Hair. Long and straight, lightly resting on what you make out to be a pair of slender shoulders.

You don't smell any lingering cigarette fumes. There is something there, though, stretching between you and the blur like the unfurling of a freshly laundered rug. Soap and something pleasant, something floral.

"Mister Tohum." The voice is high, but not enough to grate. There's a gentleness to it blended in with tones of curiosity. "My name is Catherine Heig, I work for--"

You don't catch the last word. It is obscured by the door reopening. Footsteps. Angry footsteps and half a dozen blurs. These ones do smell the way you expect.

"You cannot be in here, Mrs. Heig," says one of your tutors.

"Catherine Heig, thanks," the gentleness gone, supplanted by confidence, defiance.

"You still cannot barge in here like our holy temple is a common coffee shop."

"What gives you the right?" another displeased voice cries.

"This does."

You catch a flash of white in the visitor's hand. You come back around and see it is actually black on white. A letter.

"I have permission from your founder," she says.

You hear a sound of disgruntled resignation between your keepers.

"An hour per day, that is what we shall allow. No more."

You're confused. You feel like you're only hearing half a conversation. It's discomfoting.

You spiral away from the group gathered at the door, moving back towards the center of your room.

From this distance, the sapient shapes become less distinct, easier to ignore.

Most of them leave. Three remain. Two take up positions on the perimeter, the third approaches you.

"Let me try again. Catherine Heig, I work for an online news agency called Everyworld. We specialize in spreading the true stories of those outside the norm. People like you."

"Like me?" you ask.

"Indeed," she sounds excited, her words spike and fall.

"I have questions and the world is dying to know the answers."

You grimace and speed up to hide a sudden flare-up of fury before

settling into a more stable rhythm. "Why would I say something that you claim would lead to the death of others?"

The visitor is still and silent for a while before she cracks in a fit of laughter. You move away from her. It's for the best. You don't want to be rude, that's not who you are. But you worry you are growing to dislike this woman.

She follows you across the carpeted floor, her voice now buzzing after you like an insistent fly. "Does it hurt?" you hear her ask.

"Does what hurt?" You think maybe if you answer some of her questions, she might be satiated and leave.

"This, your condition."

"My gift, you mean? It does not. God has deemed to bless me. God keeps me strong. In faith and body."

"Fascinating." You see her tapping away on a device with her thumbs.

"You feel god's intent." Your temperature drops after you remember your purpose.

"What do you mean?" You spot what you think is a look of puzzlement, but it's hard to tell; she's still too much of a stranger to you.

"I was chosen and placed on Earth to inspire others, to lead them in their pursuit of answers, to God."

"Could you stop? I mean if you wanted to?"

"Why would I want to stop serving God?"

"Spinning serves god?"

"My gift attracts those in need of answers. They come with their questions and they get the answer: God is real, how else could the spinning man be possible?"

"Is that why most people visit you? To get answers?"

"It's why you're here. Is it not?"

Silence. You think she's mulling over her next line of questioning.

"How do you sleep?" she asks, breaking the quiet.

"I don't," you reply.

"That has to be detrimental to your health."

You shrug, but you aren't sure if the visitor can tell.

The interrogation goes on. It soon turns to questions relating to your daily routine.

"What about getting clean... baths can't be easy."

You move closer to one corner of the room and say, "Look up."

She does as you say, and you know she'll see the shower head mounted on a beam. When she's done, she takes photographs and then seems content to watch you spin in silence until the two men who have watched everything ask her to leave.

"See you tomorrow," she says and then leaves the way she came in. You hope she doesn't.

You think. There is little else, save prayer, to keep you occupied. Your thoughts wander back to the events of the previous day. You play over and over the interaction with the unexpected visitor. You recall your words, your tone. You try to remember why you acted the way you did. She'd come to you seeking answers, yet you gave superficial responses at best. You aren't sure why. Maybe it was the way you saw her interactions with your brothers, those who protect you, feed you, keep you alive. You decide even God's most devout servants are allowed bad days. You tell yourself it won't happen again. Your purpose is to attract, not repel. Today you'll do better.

Surprisingly, your thoughts do not drift away from the reporter, from Catherine. Images you ignored before come to the forefront: her. While yesterday she appeared to you as a series of smudged features, now all of those are clear. This isn't the first time your subconscious has worked hard in the background to fill in the gaps you don't see until much later. This phenomenon is why you can picture every inch of your room in crisp clarity and why you can pick out your brothers from a crowd of strangers. What is more surprising is that you find you are smiling. She's beautiful. You think of the day ahead. You think of your tutor's lessons. These are attempts to distract yourself. They do not work. She is still there. You close your eyes. You summon God's strength to reinforce your own.

You are a frustrated tempest whose emotions fuel the ever-more aggressive spiral of self-destruction. You gain momentum and the stale, stuffy air slaps you across the face. The wake-up call comes too late. You crash into a wall. Hard. The blow throws you off balance and your heart is in your throat. You land back against the cold, flat surface of the wall and roll along it, leaving a dark sweat stain in your wake. You've never felt fear like this. Pushing off from a corner, you find your center. Heavy breaths echo loudly in your ears. You shake as you spin. It takes an hour of prayer for you to

calm down. You meditate, seeking your own answers. Death came so close to claiming you, and you realize something profound. A fact that changes everything. Life is short and yours has been short of many things. Experiences, sights, and connections.

The door creaks, sending a shiver down the nape of your neck.

Today she wears a more colorful outfit, light pinks and blues. "Good morning, Tohum," she calls from the door. As before, two of your brothers follow her into the room.

"Good morning, Catherine. You force it out. It's not the poor woman's fault you had a near-death experience.

She approaches, an enthusiastic kick prominent in her gait. You make yourself smile and though it would be hard for her to see this, you notice she responds in kind.

"Can I touch you?" The question is out of nowhere, making you almost topple as easily as hitting the wall did.

You stabilize more quickly this time, just in time to see your brothers jump to their feet and rush over.

"No touching!"

"Sorry to dash your fantasy, boys, but I meant him, not you," she says playfully.

"It is not allowed!" they both bellow.

Catherine doesn't seem intimidated in the slightest. She just folds her arms and looks away.

"They're right, Catherine," you say, trying to lower tensions. "It's too dangerous. If you should stop me, then... You are aware of the cost."

"I didn't mean a full-on hug, but fine, have it your way."

A hug. Something else that has eluded you.

The two men return to their posts and the conversation continues. After several minutes of answering her questions, she lowers her voice and again brings up the topic of physical contact.

"How often does someone touch you?"

You flinch. "Not very," you admit and are glad your endless state of motion hides the redness on your cheeks.

"Okay. And who would normally do the touching? Let's say for medical purposes, a check-up, for example."

"Well, one of my brothers, of course."

Her smile was back. You zone in on that each time you turn to face her. "It must be hard, being so isolated."

"I see hundreds of people every day," You're being literal, but understand what she's hinting at.

"But do they see you? Or do they see a tourist attraction?"

"I hope they see evidence of God," now you speak with more conviction, this is the greatest truth you know.

"A tool then, for achieving a purpose of someone else's ends."

"God is not just someone, Catherine. God is all things. And God chose me."

"What about what you want? What do you want, Tohum? Doesn't God want you to be... you?" She steps closer, a cupping hand on her pointed chin.

These questions are new. Questions that you haven't answered a thousand times over. Ones you don't think you have the answers to. There is a curiosity building in you. An urge to know the answers. So, you think about them and say, "I want to travel."

Catherine seems to take in the response for a long while. "Where would you like to go?"

The carpet scrapes against the soles of your feet, no blisters anymore. The calluses earned over the years protect you from that inconvenience. You linger on the red and gold coloring at your feet and surprisingly, the answers come.

"I think I would like to try spinning on sand and in the snow."

She smiles and it is a challenge to determine whether she thinks your answer is ridiculous or not.

"Have you ever asked?"

"I think it's unlikely to go well, whirling is fine in a single room, much more difficult travelling long distances."

"Could you ask them to bring it here?"

"Sand and snow?" You never have. They would say no, naturally. Your brothers don't allow shoes in your room, and you heavily doubt they would look favorably on the suggestion of dumping piles of sand in it. Yet the budding flower of curiosity cultivated by Catherine's questioning wraps its vines around you. And you don't mind this. "What does it feel like?"

"Uh, well, they both are very different from each other. Snow can be

pretty cold.”

“That makes sense, and wet too?”

“For sure.”

“What about sand?”

“Sand tends to be drier and moves around easier, I guess.”

“What about you?” you ask, purposefully reflecting her own words back at her.

“You mean have I ever twirled around in circles on sand?”

That is what you mean. “Yes.”

“You know what? I really can’t remember. I probably did when I was a kid.”

The gulf between the two of you returns. One experience that would mean so much to you and she is unsure whether or not she’s done it.

Eventually, the questions go back to the sort you are more comfortable with: philosophy and belief in things others find hard to comprehend, things you are certain of.

Her allotted time up, Catherine leaves and your brothers scramble to erect the crimson rope and polished polls that separate you from the public. The distance never bothered you before. Though as the day wore on, an urge to cross the barrier increasingly took hold. You resist. You have no desire to die, to put a stop to God’s plan, so you fight against this instinct.

She sits with her legs crossed. It doesn’t look comfortable to you but stillness never does. She plays music on her phone. A repetitive whining that makes you squint in disbelief that anyone would listen to this for fun. “It’s not very creative, is it?”

Catherine laughs and that sound heals the hurt done to your ears. “No, I suppose it isn’t.”

After a few taps, a different sound comes from the phone. It’s weird. A wet whooshing and what sounds like birdsong. “What is this? I think this is better.”

Catherine stands up and brings the sound closer. You slow down to better appreciate the calming sensation. You close your eyes to further enhance the sensation. The image this conjures is water.

“It’s the sea,” you hear her say. “This is what the sea sounds like if you were to stand on a beach.”

A wave of warmth and a slight tingle runs down the length of your robed body. "Is there a sea near us?" Your eyes are held closed by a deep longing.

You feel something. It's extremely soft, radiating heat on your hand that melts away your imagination. Then the warmth is gone. You open your eyes, and Catherine is behind you. When you turn to face her, her hand is outstretched before she yanks it back by her side.

"I'm sorry." She looks embarrassed. It's the first time she appears vulnerable.

You realize you aren't angry. After checking that no one saw. You flash Catherine the biggest smile. "I think I liked that, too."

She enters. Today, she is more reserved than you've ever seen her. The occasional sniff breaks her silence. You can tell something's not right.

"Did something happen, Catherine?"

"Huh?"

"You seem upset?"

"How can you tell?"

"Just a feeling, I suppose."

"Well, I suppose your feeling might be right."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"It's silly, really. There's someone back home who wants me to do something I'm not sure I'm ready for."

"Do you want my advice?"

"Sure."

"Follow your own path. In life, we walk many trails. There are those we tread willingly, others because they're there, and sometimes we are pushed down paths we'd rather not explore. Those paths can be treacherous dead ends, lined with regret. Pick your own route in life."

"Wow. Maybe you are special."

You've been told those exact words your whole life and yet this time it's different. This time it means something.

"You are special, Catherine."

"Why do you think that?"

"Just another feeling I have."

The day passes and Catherine's questions turn to happier topics. You are sad when she leaves. Your subconscious whispers to you that your time

together is one day closer to being over.

"Today's the day," Catherine says through a long, deep exhale of air.

"For what?" you ask. It's been two weeks since she walked through the old creaking door and into your life, in your heart, you know what today is, but you hope you're wrong.

"I got a call from my boss last night. She wants me back at the office and writing the article this evening. I have a flight—" You smack into her hand, your arm sending her phone crashing to the floor. Catherine yelps in shock but is soon smiling.

"Nice try. Won't work, my work is automatically sent to the cloud storage system."

"The what?"

"Never mind." Her smile fades.

"What about another article? If your boss likes the first one, maybe she'll want more." You avoid her eyes because you don't want her to see yours, tearing up.

"Tohum..." She hesitates. "I... I. This was fun. I had fun. Getting to know you. The real you."

You spin... away. The prospect of her leaving and not coming back the next day hurts and you're sure that if you don't put distance between the two of you, you will break down in sobs, attracting the attention of others.

Unfortunately for you, there is nowhere for you to go. She follows. "Tohum, I'll try to visit."

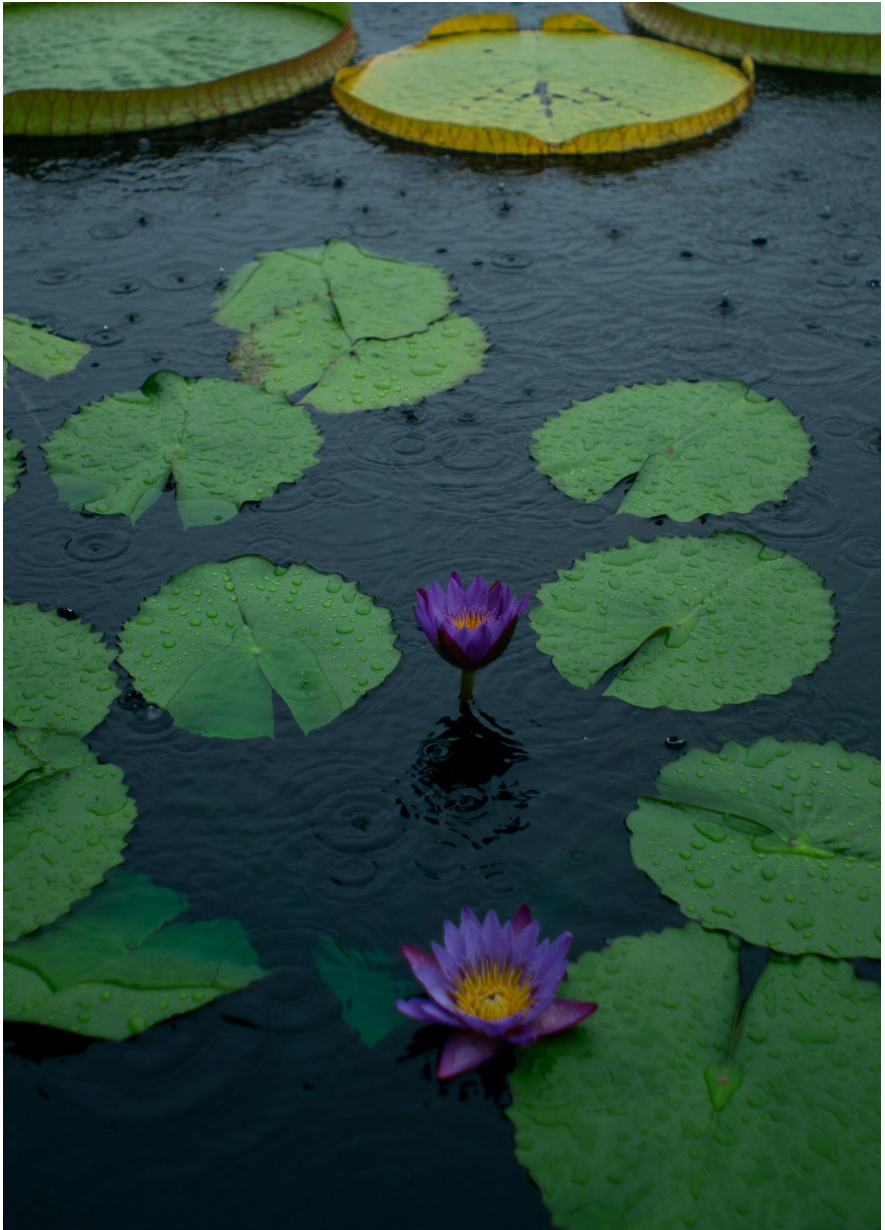
Try. Try. Like how you tried not to fall in love.

You speed up fast enough that she'll have to run to catch you. You do this long enough that after a while, she stops chasing and stands in the middle of the room. Your brothers aren't paying attention. They, too, have grown used to having Catherine around. Even so, you doubt they will be as devastated by her leaving as you are.

"Tohum!" she calls out of breath, "I have to go. My flight."

You don't respond. Your throat is too busy fighting against the choking.

You spin. She is gone.



## Richard LeDue

“Trying to be blue as a grey sky,”

only to let the blues sing  
without me,  
content with my tapping foot  
as the closest I might ever get  
to being a musician.

My voice in awe  
of the melody made by raindrops  
on a roof, creating a lullaby  
from another weather forecast  
being wrong again.

My sadness out of tune  
because that helps me  
to seem sadder,  
while my happiness is tone deaf  
and knows it.

# Gary Duehr

## All the Bright and Shiny Things

"Dad, what are you doing here?"

That's what I wanted to ask, but I stopped myself. He'd been dead for ten years, so he had no business browsing the black-and-white photos in a museum. From across the gallery, facing sideways, he looked just like Dad: tweed cap with bristles of gray hair poking out, a belly that slumped forward. And horn-rimmed glasses clamped over that Roman nose, the same nose I have, a proud slope with a bump between the eyes.

I edged closer to get a better look. He'd stopped to peer at the sky vibrating with crows. I was right beside him. I could hear his labored breath; I could smell the tang of cigar smoke. He turned to me. "Danny?"

"Yeah, Dad, it's me. I thought you were dead."

"Me too." His voice had the low rumble I remembered. "And then I found myself here in this big white space. I figured it must be limbo."

I looked around at the photos. "You ever been to Italy?"

"Right after the war. My unit shipped over to get things running. That was right before I came back home and met your mother at a VFW dance."

I could see pictures of goats being slaughtered in a village, a girl's white dress floating in a vineyard, pavement snaking between stone houses with shuttered windows.

The next time I saw Dad he was sitting down the row from me at the local movie theater. What is he, I thought, the ghost of Hamlet's father stalking me? No cap this time, but the same noble profile. When the lights dimmed, I noticed him slumped down with a bag of popcorn. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched him watch the movie, his pale face flickering in the amber light. It was a French comedy about two couples tangled up with each other. They were all young with porcelain skin and tousled hair, full of angst, floating through glowing Parisian flats.

At one point, Dad's face fell forward, and I thought he must have dozed off, like he used to do at home in front of the TV. Then, always snorts himself awake and denying it. I had some popcorn too, and I mechanically gulped down the salty kernels with swallows of soda. I lost the thread of which Parisian was with whom; I couldn't really focus. When the lights came on, I rushed

to find Dad, but he had vanished out the rear exit. I wanted to ask what he thought of the ending, when one wife ended up happily at the vineyard of an art dealer.

I kept searching for Dad after these two sightings. I thought I saw the back of his silvery hair on airplane, but when he turned his head, he looked nothing like my dad. Another time I thought I heard the low rumble of his voice from the next aisle in a used bookstore, but it came from an elderly gentleman, bent over with a cane.

One day I had an inspiration. I headed downtown for the District, a coffee shop where he'd stop to read the morning paper. When I pushed through the heavy door, the smoky smell of coffee hit my nose like his cigar smoke. I scanned the cops huddling in the corner, the commuters perched at the front window, the mothers with strollers. No Dad.

I was sure he'd be here. After a fight with Mom, he'd say he was "going out for coffee." He'd slam the kitchen chair against the table and storm out, slamming the back door behind him. The Dodge Dart would grind out of the driveway, but he'd be back in a half hour, all apologetic. Me and my younger brother did our best to pretend it never happened. I got a coffee to go in his honor then decided to stop a few doors down at Ace Hardware, where he worked for five years after he lost the lease on his drugstore. The new Harvest Mall on the beltway killed downtown. He'd prided himself on being his own boss, and it was tough for him to stock shelves for minimum wage under a manager half his age who berated him for being slow.

I walked the aisles of spray paint and garden tools and trays of bolts and screws, but I didn't see any sign of him. Good, I thought. I'm glad he's not here. Standing under the fluorescent strips, my eyes closed against all the bright and shiny things, I took a big breath and let him go.

# Madison Estes

## The Mad Deer

I almost hit a deer the other day  
and his entire life flashed before my eyes.  
Pushed from the womb, the dewy grass welcomes him.  
Barely upright, his stilt legs fail him.  
Antlers break through during winter.  
He learns to bow, leap, and survive,  
all so he could dart out into the road and almost die.  
And the worst part is,  
I know he'll do it again.

The bear hibernates in a cave, safe  
Smart.  
But hunger pulls at the belly and makes her a desperate fool.  
She finds her fill of fish at the perfect spot.  
A little too perfect,  
for when her paw meets the cold metal of a trap,  
it snaps shut.  
She pulls and bites, breaking through bones and flesh  
to stain the snow red.  
All so she could limp home a little less hungry.  
And the worst part is,  
I know she'll do it again.

My tears roll off you like water on a shower curtain.  
You leave no stone unturned,  
and then you turn to stone.  
I am the clouds before a rainstorm, and you,  
the echo of thunder haunting the sky.  
Until one day I'm alone with my blackout curtains,  
my bed, my memories  
and no sense of time or purpose,  
trying to recover from you.

All so I could chase that temporary love high,  
And the worst part is,  
I know I'll do it again.

They say madness is repetition,  
but true madness is knowing you will dart out into the  
road,  
fall into the trap,  
lose a limb or your mind,  
and the not minding that follows.



D. E. Kern

## The Woodpile Revisited

Morning's low sun threads light  
through a stand of hardwood  
pickets that split these beams  
into ribbons too tenuous to burn

anything of value, neither the wiry  
mist nor my gleaming skin. And I  
pull the cord to fire this ancient  
engine that shakes then sheds brittle

flakes from this trembling machine  
unsure of its capacity for work onto  
the forest floor. I stand in the shade  
of a windbreak sizing up a pile of soft

species marked for fire, pine and  
popple fuel for a library of stories  
chased by beer toasts and strains  
of music dancing on smoke ropes

binding then lifting our worries up  
into the clear blue waters God set  
squarely on the shoulders of four  
Lakota men. But first the matter

of splitting these lengths to quarters  
removing the bark to expose grain  
and heart, splinter the veined fibers  
on truth's blade. Now I hoist a log

upon the platform, match the foot  
plate to the flattest side, and push  
the piston's lever to send wood  
into maul. Next comes the crack

a shank explodes into bone-white  
sinew and sap hissing in protest  
angry at all the necessary violence  
required to make two pieces of one.

Today, Robert and I make provisions  
entertain spirits from the east, the wise  
ones and sprites I would just as soon  
keep on their side of a wall. For this  
is the trouble with spectral messengers  
and splitting anything of consequence,  
like atoms and time, there is always the  
fallout—this realization there are some

things we simply cannot mend. Bob, the  
calculus gets harder every year and each  
addition brings loss, changes multiply  
faster than exponential notation. They divide  
divide us, science and progress, into  
factions separated by chasms in the cosmos  
expanding to the point where the center  
cannot hold. Orion's belt, a ballast hung

from his waist, sags in the remnant of the  
night sky just a waxing crescent smiling  
at a fading fistful of western stars, their  
barbaric yawps drowned beneath distant

yelps from two wild turkeys bringing  
morning traffic on a country road to a  
stop. Were it not for the shape of fenders  
and horsepower it could be a scene

from a hundred years ago, a conclave  
over a dubious fence disguised as two  
boxers stalking one another yet skeptical  
as to whether this is really our fight or

just spectacle for those fortunate sons  
with more skin in the game, oligarchs  
wagering we will fight each other even  
if it comes to stones and varmint shot

rather than reach across this wall and  
note the similar size and shape of our  
hands. This is the job assigned poets  
to bring nuance to bear on our chaos

study the shades and hues to express  
import when all seems lost, reduced  
to splinters shaped like our fingers  
scattered across the latticed forest floor.



# Mira Skalkottas

## The Islands Between Us\*

The gardener was at work outside, and the smell of fresh cut rosemary came through the bathroom window. Here she had come to take a break from the house that was too full of icons and self-regard.

“Do you like it?” he asked, when they arrived. But she couldn’t find anything to say. The sense of importance in the house precluded her. If he hadn’t asked directly if it had been a modest house or modestly presented, she might have found a lot to say about the rattan furniture, the paintings, especially the blue one of Penelope, the terrace, the apricot tree, the capaciousness.

“I like the color of paint on this wall,” she managed to say.

“Finally, a compliment,” he said.

A few days in she admitted to the pleasure of being in a second home without all the family. “It’s nice we have the whole place to ourselves,” she offered. Then why did she keep wanting to hide away, to find a place in the house that was not the house?

After they’d met on that same island two years earlier, there followed a time of emails, filled with possibility, the magic of typing words and sending them through fiber optic cables as light pulses, the kinds of letters the writer loves to write as much as receive, to feel the feeling of falling in love without any commitment.

They drove all around the island, one of the largest in Greece, where the people are a little touched, a little hard-headed, according to her Athenian friends. They heard the hollow tinkling of bells on goats that reared up on rocks and nuzzled tamarisk trees and chewed. They drove by island cats, small demur cats with high pointy ears that hid behind mint-green Dumpsters.

The radio came in and out as they drove on high mountain roads and through high-placed vineyards where they made the sweet-tart local Robola wine, and they passed fig and carob trees, cypress, olive, oak, and walnut.

The radio would come in loud with a sappy summer song. “There’s no reason to live alone,” Antonis Remos crooned. “I am like the wave that the rock breaks. You gave me life. *Ela*, take it back, pleeee-ase.” Then it would crackle away again. Further on, they caught a Rembetika station and heard Tsitsanis wailing, “Cloudy Sunday.”

Normally she loved the frothy light melodramatic Greek pop music of beach bars. But it was the Rembetika, the blues songs, that soothed her now and fit the growing cold between them.

A sexy-voiced DJ came on. He swirled his words around like a really nice Scotch and introduced some great old bitter Rembetika songs. "So many mothers have cried. Mine may as well too."

Two years earlier in August when they'd met, he'd been at the village cafe. He was pale and reserved in a panama hat and barely seemed to clock her existence. But when she started talking, he glanced quickly at her and brightened like a plant that had just been watered.

On the sixth day, they left the car and took the ferry to Lixouri and almost missed the last ferry back and she looked for the good restaurant she'd found two years earlier but it wasn't there anymore, and the food at Mimoxa, a fava with grilled veggies and balsamic vinegar and a roast chicken over roasted potatoes, was good until the waiter started making anti-immigrant comments, and the feeling flared up again to hide or go quickly away from this world that was not her world like turning over a rock in a beautiful place and finding it crawling with potato bugs.

It was cold and tense on the boat, and it seemed there was no love between them anymore. She had an impulse to snuggle up close like she used to, but she checked it. Afterwards she wanted to stay up late and watch movies, but he couldn't keep his eyes open, and she thought they should be more understanding instead of serving each other a last meal.

On the fifth day, they went swimming at the famous Myrto Beach and watched the light on the water turn a meringue color, and the waves were exciting, the sound of the white pebbles in the waves like a rave party. And he'd put his hand on her back in the water, and it seemed real, and he had finally worn the Vilebrequin shorts that she loved. Yet he had no comments about her clothes that were not critical, and what seemed to please in the past didn't now, and she thought that to be with him was to be in an intolerant palace of things.

On the fourth day, they drove to the top of the island and hiked to the castle at Assos. The footpath was glossy with wide paving stones that made her think of the entrance to the Odeon of Herodotus Atticus in Athens. Once inside the archway of the fortress, they were on large grounds

with dirt paths in different directions. Wasps and butterflies darted among the thistles and cat o' nine tails.

They walked north to see an old cannon which he pronounced *ka-noon*, and on the way back, they veered off the main road, taking a footpath cut into the hillside like a mezzanine floor above the sea. The path pulled them on each, separately, and they walked in silence escalating up to a peak at the tip of the peninsula. A half-moon beach below, with water in stripes of tortoiseshell aquamarine and amulet blue, pulled their eyes but did not pull them closer.

This is my beach, she thought, and if the day had been a different day, if she'd had the right shoes, she would have loved to climb down to it. It didn't look too steep, but it was hard to tell from above. She would have liked to try anyway and said as much, breaking the silence.

"No, it's impossible," he said. He was always saying things like that.

Back in the bathroom, she went pee, and it came out almost as clear as the water she drank all day. She pushed back her hair to see if the roots were showing. She checked the dryness of her face and dabbed on some more Avène. She liked the private realm of this unshared bathroom.

Here she didn't have to pretend she was still having a good time or carry on conversation that now seemed banal no matter what they said. She could just think about being a guest on this island once at the beginning and now at the end, the way it bookended their time.

What had seemed like a strong thread between them in the beginning now seemed ephemeral and frayed. There had been a love for different times and places, for a more tangible world, old things, the feel of books and pens on paper, of landscapes seen slowly like six months earlier when they'd pulled away from Napoli by train and the hills close to the train were already dark but the sky above Mount Vesuvius in the distance was a rococo of blue and pink, and they seemed larger together than each of themselves separately.

She had loved his sartorial taste then, it was true. Every Italian, even one with roots in a Greek island, had to cut a *bella figura*. Especially in Milan, especially in the art world. But to wrap his clothes in tissue paper and then wrap himself in clothes as if he were a gift himself? To talk about others as if he were a lord surveying his domain? *No one cares if your family*

*has aristocratic roots*, she wanted to tell him.

Just beyond the bathroom hung the painting of Penelope in blues and greens that made her think of the beach at Antisamos, a cove ringed by green hills not broken by a single rock or telephone pole. Just straight green down to the beach and then those watery stripes again—watermelon-rind green, jade, marine blue, and rugs of underwater black.

The painting showed the singularity of the Greek myth, the archetypal faithful wife, she and Ithaka, the island Odysseus kept trying to get back to, indelibly linked. He travelled all of the Mediterranean world, had complete lives in other places with other lovers, but none of it mattered. Only getting back to Ithaka even if it took the time of his infant son becoming fully grown for him to return, the island within him its own lodestone.

The painting made her think of his mother, who had painted it, and how much she genuinely liked his mother. She was simple and elegant and classy, even if her thoughts always seemed to be on a distant horizon.

Ithaka was the closest island to them but so different. Perhaps this had been his mother's inspiration, perhaps she also hadn't felt completely at home in this house. Perhaps she felt she belonged more on little Ithaka, not this masculine show-off island. Although Ithaka was Odysseus's destination, his name is associated with his journey, with all his feats and ruses, his odyssey, whereas Ithaka is Penelope's.

On the third day they ventured to a small beach on the southwest coast with a little taverna draped in vines, a cool overhang above the cove. She went swimming and he put on his flipper hands and did laps, and she thought how out of place he seemed doing pool laps in the sea and then felt bad for thinking it. But that night the dinner of grilled fish, village salad and roasted eggplant dip was truly delicious, and the mood lightened with the wine and the natural effervescence of summer nights. Maybe there was nothing wrong after all, she thought as they drove home.

It was also cinema night in the village, organized by his cousin, so they went and sat on the grass and watched *Mountain*, a documentary that she enjoyed for the breathtaking scenery and adrenaline and the life message to keep the flame of discovery alive, but it was not for him. "Too American," he said.

The nights were surprisingly cold for a Greek island in summer, and she noticed this feeling of eroding even with a growing familiarity. Even when a

relationship has gone off, it has inertia which makes it hard to stop.

On the second day, he had some business to attend to in the capital, Argostoli, so they walked around in town and stopped for coffee at the cafe built around the big plane tree, and she saw that the Archeological Museum that had been closed two years earlier was still closed, and seemed to be indefinitely closed, falling into ruin.

Argostoli is in a part of the island that swoops around to face the rest of the island, and there's a long bridge that people can walk across to get into it, and from Argostoli, there's also a ferry to Lixouri on the further side, which is almost like going to another island. Of course, she loved Lixouri, his least favorite part of the island. It seemed more like a simple Greek village, with kiosks and cafe-bars and tavernas filled with families lining the *plateia*, kids on scooters and bikes zipping around the big open square.

On the first day, they had not gone far, only going to Alpha Vita for groceries and then to the closest beach. They swam and she took her first color and they walked to where his cousin was beached on the rocks and then to the taverna above Avalos Beach and ate baked eggplant, *horta*, and grilled octopus and drank the local white wine, and because it was his island, the island of childhood summers, everything had to taste amazing.

She didn't want to offend, it was good, but not as good as she remembered the food on other islands in other summers in Greece, Amor-gos for example, or Crete. And they argued about the state of immigrants in Greece and Italy, just as they had when he visited her in New York when he'd finally come after promising for two years, claiming a fear of flying. They'd argued at an elegant bar when they should have been so happy to see each other, and he became overly heated and passionate, spitting out his words.

She thought about how they drew their ideological lines, how the political and physical always overlap in the end. He was closed about immigration, closed about her. He was more of the land in *island*, she thought, more circumscribed. What did that make her, the water flowing around, coming and going? How could two people descended from Greek islands be so different?

Somehow this home ghettoed him, always returning to the same

place. Here in this village that seemed somehow fossilized, mostly populated as it was by people that had left Greece and returned from the diaspora only in summer, Greeks from the 50s and 60s and their children, like black figures on pottery.

Kefalonia too had lost something after it was rebuilt following the big earthquake in 1953. Moneyed Greek emigres put up big modern houses that looked like California. To her eyes, they looked wrong. Stucco mansions with landscaped lawns in the Ionian Sea.

In the end, the islands are what divides us, she thought. She loved the whole archipelago of Greece and tried to go to different islands every time. They were both full of and divested of their Greek lives, what brought them together in the first place, the missing link they each held, a negative space, not enough to hold them together. Perhaps absence was all that connected them. This secret Greek life, this DNA not activated until the light of a Greek summer hit it, was hardly seen where they lived most of the time but longed for.

They were better in Italy. An American with an Italian in the end was better than two half Greeks. The half dozen or so trips she'd made to visit him had been an encounter, starting with the first one in Florence in spring that brought an end to the months of correspondence. Walking in the hills above Florence, seeing the marble confectionary of the Duomo in the distance, stopping for spritzes at a cafe next to the Arno, eating at restaurants overhanging the water, going for coffee at Gilli, and finally saying a goodbye at the train station till she would join him in the north.

There were all the trips that followed to Milan, Bologna, Parma, Porto Venero, Venice, Naples, Ravenna, Verona, storied places in her mind from art and Shakespeare. They went to Greece together too. Beyond this island where they'd first met and where they would leave each other, there was the summer in between when she had finally persuaded him to try a different island and they had gone to sleek Kea. They had a wonderful eco-tourist home of whitewashed walls, a stone terrace with a long stone table, wrap-around views of olive trees and acorn trees on the surrounding hills, the nearest beach a short walk away. They lived well on this neutral island, this borrowed time, but it was still not as well as it should have been, even then.

And still. She could not understand how they could have moved so far

away from when she saw him as an exception to the rule, not afraid to speak his mind, follow his passions, break the mold. How was it that he now seemed like someone quite molded after all, narrow and judgmental, measuring life in permanent contracts and collections, in love with art and photographs more than people, and even quite hateful at times?

How did they get from the first weekend in Athens together when he'd shot black and white photos and they'd walked in the late spring rain to Seychelles taverna and her suitcase had been lost and they'd shopped for posh clothes in Kolonaki?

All of this came back to her in the cocoon on the beach, each of them ensconced on their own sunbeds behind dark glasses and hats, the sun baking them in a soporific silence. He was probably wandering in his own thoughts far away from or close to her too, scrutinizing every one of her flaws, every life choice. Maybe he too was sifting through old relationships, wondering where they had gone wrong, how they compared.

In *contratiempo*, maybe she thought about the time she lived in Crete or her life back in New York. Or maybe their thoughts went ahead to the bedroom, and how they would pretend, and it didn't matter that the relationship had ended before the holiday was over or had even begun, they still carried on like everything was fine.

How did they get from there to here? That they could live all these beautiful things together, and then she'd wake up on an island in a strange house, with her keys in hand and bags packed? Cold inside and out waiting in the airport for the plane to arrive from Athens and the light gone suddenly, the dark so absolute, and she felt like a library full of books inside no one wanted to read. That's where she would live now, in one of the books of his past, and he would live now in one of the books of her past.

His friend from Paris that had been visiting when she first arrived was not like her friends from Paris. Hers were mixed race and gay and designers and improv artists. His friend talked of "his pure white skin," and she could not tell if he meant it ironically.

He was there her first night when they shared that awful glass of wine together on the terrace, and she felt chilled like a stranger in this place she'd been invited to, until his awful friend had gone, and she wanted to ask if he was being serious but didn't have the stomach to. She only wanted

to not be there anymore, only believed that no beauty or elegance or art in the world is worth intolerance, that it only makes what *was* beautiful and sought after ugly.

On the last day, the seventh day, they went to Antisamos Beach of the white sand and green hills. They were both tanned now, had fresh water delivered to their table, the chairs were free, the music not too loud, the temperature a perfect 30 degrees. Everything was perfect. They were lovely and everything was lovely but cold, cold, cold.

In spite of everything, she had that feeling of familiarity again, of the place knowing her and seeing her come back, and she remembered driving that road alone on her first trip to the island and swimming in that silky water before she went to Ithaka and stayed at Kioni and picked up the book *Under the Sheltering Sky* at a free cafe library not having any idea at that moment that she would be moving to Tangiers, after the end.

The feeling took time to crystallize, and it was hard to reconcile with the beauty of the place, but finally it was there. She knew it and sat up to face it, and he must have sensed something, knowing that she knew at that moment because he tried to ask her in a roundabout way.

She realized in the same moment that he did not want her to know, wanted her to stay in the delusion, to claim the end himself. Even so, he could not say it out loud. In the end perhaps, she was a possession too and hard to let go. But it was so obvious now, like swimming out of warm shallow water and suddenly feeling the cold current of water underneath, as clear as truth.

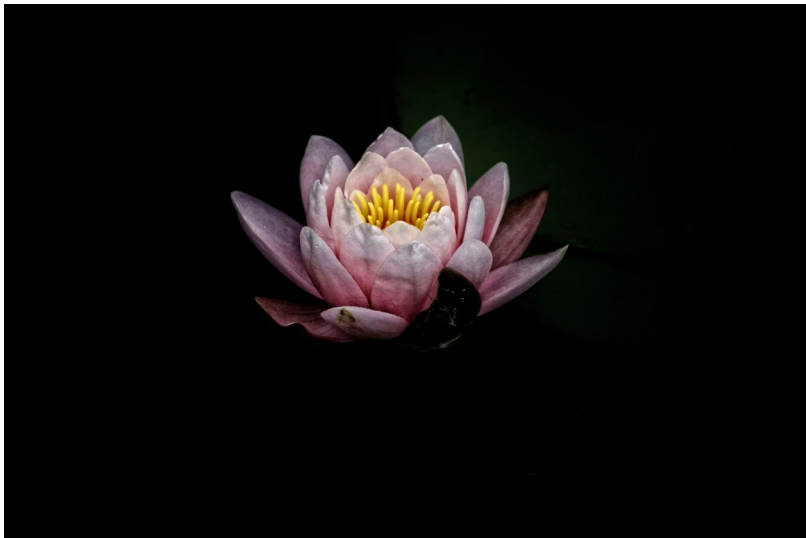
The last evening at the Waterway Restaurant, a throwback to the 70s with green lighting and terrace rock walls, drinking Robola wine and looking over the little harbor and beyond that to Zakynthos which lit up the horizon even at night, little waves lapping below, it was all garish. She reviewed the irritants, free to say them to herself now without any guilt, and all of the *what ifs*. If they had spoken Greek together more, would it have changed anything? All of these things had built up but were nothing like this red line, this sinking weight, this place with him that was not her.

That night at Waterway, she finally put it pointblank, and the end was like picking fruit that is already ready to fall and comes away easily in the hand. How easy it suddenly ended. Now that they were saying it outloud,

she had no idea why she had come in the first place, why she was there at all. Why had he invited her? She had broached the topic as a discussion but saw there was nothing left to discuss anymore. It was over, prepared like a stage set just for her to exit left. All his things packed already in his mind and she was living in his past, as he would in hers.

Yet it was good to have stopped pretending and spoken things as she saw them, as they were. This way she could leave him, but take the island with her.

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# J. D. Harlock

## Miami Vice

a Testarossa purrs to the walkway of Ocean Drive....

the Chicano cruiser in the Armani suit  
tilts his Raybans, flashes his Rolex,  
catching the Vaurent Cat Eyes of the  
the valley girl who sashays  
the palm shadows of the promenade  
in a Summersalt's Sidestroke,  
each side of her swaying  
to the synthwave  
of the Technics Turntable

Chanel No. 5 mingles with Paco Rabanne  
while he orders  
a Chivas Regal on the rocks  
and a Tequila Sunrise  
to enjoy the evening view  
of the South Beach coastlines  
as she struts away  
to fetch their drinks

across the hustle and bustle of the beach walk,  
his Columbian counterpart in the Polo  
leans back in a Countach, reaching for the Comm,  
once the Cartero they've been tracking  
steps off a Cigarette 38 in the Biscayne Bay  
and paces toward his Cadillac Eldorado on 12th Street—  
with Samsonite case, in one hand,  
a Beretta Cheetah in the other....

now, in their rearview mirrors,  
each vice cop turns  
to the other  
on cue  
and nods

it's finally time for some action—  
but there's no rush...just yet

first, the drinks  
then her number

after all, the nights are long in the Vice City,  
and the chase never ends.....



# Dale Scherfling

## Workplace Violets

She didn't stop for red lights, didn't yield to crosswalks, didn't slow for kids, cats, or common sense. If a soul was foolish enough to be in her way, they got a split-second glimpse of a snarling little Pontiac Bonneville and a flash of lipstick before praying to live another day.

Laura Marley was five foot nothing and all fury, hair jacked up like a blonde halo gone wrong. She was married to Mitch—the city editor's kid—which meant nobody messed with her, but everyone noticed.

I noticed.

I'd been out of the Navy maybe three months. Still snapped hospital corners in the morning. Still folded my underwear into tight little logs, like I was packing for deployment. I'd just landed the night desk job at the *Lorain Journal*—affectionately known as *The Urinal* by staff—and I was trying to stay invisible and keep my byline clean.

Laura worked layout. She had that smoky drawl like her tongue always knew a secret, and she wore this ridiculous violet cardigan every Thursday. I joked once that it made her look like an Easter egg.

She laughed. Said I looked like an aging Boy Scout in my brown polyester clip-on tie.

We were both half-right.

It started like most wrong things do—quietly. A gesture so small you almost missed it, like the first hairline crack in a wine glass. She touched my wrist when she handed me copy one night, her fingers lingering just a second too long, like she was reading my pulse.

“You always work this hard when no one's watching?” she asked one midnight in the morgue, barefoot with her heels in hand, the old press thundering in the next room.

And I, dumb enough to flirt with married chaos, said, “Only when I'm being watched.”

That was it. A spark. One of those moments you could still walk away from—but you don't.

She was a temp, technically—but already knew too much about everyone. Divorces. Drinking habits. Who took lunch with who. She never asked about

me, but she already knew I didn't smoke, was a vet, had washed out of one marriage already. She smoked like a chimney and smelled like an ashtray and too much perfume.

"I like the quiet ones," she said once, looking right at me. "They're better liars."

That should've been a clue.

Three nights later she kissed me behind the vending machines where the soda always got stuck. She tasted like gin and wintergreen gum and bad decisions. Made me feel alive—not patriotic, not useful. Just alive. And for a guy who'd spent four years at sea being part of a machine, that feeling was everything.

Of course, that spelled trouble. With a capital T.

We didn't fall in love. We collided. Like two storms that didn't ask permission.

She'd tear out of the parking lot like her ass was on fire—a puff of gravel, a scream of tires, Joan Jett blasting *I Love Rock 'n Roll* through open windows. I wouldn't ride with her. By the time I caught up, she was already parked crooked in front of the Hi Ho with a cold beer waiting and a shit-eating sneer on her face.

"What kept you, Pussy. Grow a pair."

Nothing ever really happened, at least not the way I'd imagined it might when we started. A few cigarettes outside after deadline. A ride home in the rain. Once, she fixed my collar in the parking lot and let her fingers linger too long while Mitch was upstairs closing the front page.

But I could see where it was heading. The way she leaned too close when she handed me galleys. The way Mitch had started watching me cross the newsroom. The way my hands shook a little when I heard her voice.

I'd been in the Navy long enough to recognize when you're steering into rough water. Sometimes the smartest thing you can do is change course before the storm hits.

So I did.

"This has to stop," I told her one night in the parking lot, rain threatening. She was leaning against my car, smelling like smoke and lilac and something burning.

She looked at me like I'd just told her the sky was falling.

"What has to stop?" Playing dumb. Or maybe genuinely surprised that I

was the one calling it.

“This. Us. Whatever this is.” I kept my hands in my pockets so I wouldn’t reach for her. “You’re married. I just got out of one bad situation. This only ends one way.”

“And what way is that?” Still leaning. Still testing.

“Badly,” I said. “For both of us.”

She studied me for a long moment, then pushed off the car. For a second I thought she might slap me. Instead, she smiled—sad, but with something like respect in it too.

“Smart,” she said. “Smarter than I gave you credit for, Sailor.”

She got into that fire-engine red Bonneville and sat there with the engine running, Joan Jett rattling the speakers. Then she rolled down the window.

“You’re probably right,” she called out. “But we could’ve been something.”

“Probably,” I said.

She peeled out, tires screaming, and I stood there in the empty lot watching her taillights disappear.

Two months later I heard through the newsroom grapevine that Mitch’s father—the city editor himself—had hired a private detective. Don’t know what the guy found or didn’t find. Don’t know if my name came up. But by then I was already out of it, just another reporter keeping his head down and his byline clean.

Laura and Mitch divorced a year later. I heard she moved to Akron, then Cleveland, then I stopped hearing about her at all.

They still talk about her sometimes—usually after two drinks and a lowered voice. Leadfoot Laura, they call her. A local legend wrapped in denim and defiance and violet cardigans on Thursdays.

But I knew her when she was on fire. And I knew when to walk away from the flames.

The newsroom felt emptier after that. The morgue especially. I’d catch myself listening for her voice, her laugh, the click of her heels on linoleum.

But I was still employed. Still married to my work, if not to a person. Still had a career that didn’t end in a scandal file in the city editor’s office.

Sometimes the story you don’t chase is the one that saves you.

And I can still hear those tires.

# Matthew O'Brien

## Table for Two

Standing outside of a trendy downtown eatery, Michael Walsh hung up without leaving a message and returned his cell phone to the pocket of his gray jeans. "Fucking Las Vegas," he muttered, shaking his head and starting back toward the restaurant's glass double door, which was adorned with Christmas wreaths. They can write and recite poetry that breaks every hardened heart at an open-mic night. Do a triple backflip off of a trapeze and break the surface of a miniature pool at a perfect angle. Play multiple instruments and sing and dance. But they're incapable of keeping a lunch or coffee date or canceling it with adequate notice.

Mike pushed through the door, into the warm, clamorous womb of the restaurant, which was thronged with attorneys, artists, politicians, business owners, tech bros, and informed tourists. The smell of bread and bacon hung in the air. The staff was wearing Santa stocking caps, and the hostess was bent over and talking to a woman seated in the congested, narrow lobby. While claiming a table and waiting for his friend and UNLV English department colleague Caleb, whose phone was going straight to voicemail twenty minutes after the scheduled start of their end-of-the-semester lunch, Mike had noticed the woman: tall and thin, dark-brown skin, and dressed in a knit cap, hoodie, pink pajama bottoms, dirty white socks, and Crocs. She was rocking in her seat, mumbling to herself. Initially, he thought she was a man. But when he walked outside to call his friend, he noted her feminine facial features: smooth skin, full (chapped) lips, high cheekbones, and anime eyes.

As Mike was making his way back to his table, the woman—under the watchful eye of the hostess—stood and started slowly toward the door. Mike paused and placed his hands on his hips. He then turned around and hustled to the lobby.

"Excuse me," he said to the hostess. "She's with me." He smiled at the woman and motioned for her to join him. She shrugged, stepped around the hostess, and—head down and pigeon-toed—followed him to the table. He placed his phone facedown on the white, wooden surface and slid into the steel seat that was wearing his winter jacket. She sat across from him, immediately picking up the menu and squinting at it.

"They got beer?" she asked in a raspy voice, turning over the menu.

Mike laughed uncomfortably. "I don't think so," he said.

"I'll have the next strongest thing then. A coffee. Black with no sugar." She dropped the menu on to the table and yanked off her knit cap, revealing a three-quarter-inch afro. She scratched her head with her free hand, then put the cap back on, askew.

Mike knew the menu by heart, but glanced at it anyway. "I'm gonna get a hot tea," he said. He looked up at the woman, who had dark bags beneath her eyes and was missing a few teeth. "It's cold out there."

She glanced out of the window, which was frosted at its edges, toward the gray city streets. "This ain't nothin'," she said, a tarnished silver stud flashing faintly on her tongue. "I'm from New York. This is fall weather to me."

"How long you been in Vegas?"

"Too long." She shook her small, round head. "I should've left this place years ago."

Again, he glanced at the menu. "You hungry?"

"I could eat," she said, rocking in her seat.

She squinted at the menu for several seconds. When the waitress approached the table, the woman inquired about the size of the tomato soup and ordered a cup of it and a grilled cheese sandwich. Mike ordered a BLT with a side of potato salad. They then handed the menus to the waitress, who weaved her way toward the open kitchen.

"I'm Mike," he finally said, reaching over a rectangular ceramic tray that cradled salt and pepper shakers, a plastic desert plant, and packets of sugar and artificial sweeteners. Silverware mummy-wrapped in a napkin balanced on the edge of the tray.

The woman wiped her hand on the leg of her pajamas, then shook firmly. "Ivy," she said, "but they call me 'Poison.'" Her hand was calloused, her crimson nails chipped and flaked. A crumpled ID bracelet hung from her frail wrist.

"Were you in the hospital?" Mike asked, pointing toward the bracelet.

The woman lifted her arm off of the table and touched the bracelet with her thumb and index finger, as if to assure herself it was still there. "This?" she said. "I've been wearing it for a while. Helps me remember who I am and what I've been through."

Mike paused. “You OK?” She rolled up the sleeve of her sweatshirt, revealing reddish scars on and around her elbow. It looked like she’d been mauled by a mountain lion. “Physically, I’m getting there,” she said, twisting her elbow and inspecting it. “Mentally, I got a ways to go.”

“What happened?” The words leapt out before he could suppress them.

She spoke to the stained concrete floor. “The water came and carried me and my man away. I was able to get out, but he didn’t make it. They told me to call the coroner’s office. Still got the number”—she glanced at her forearm, which was covered with ink scrawls—“but I ain’t called. Guess I’m scared to.”

The waitress reappeared, wearing a forced smile. She set the coffee in front of Ivy and the tea in front of Mike, then pulled a bottle of ketchup from her apron and placed it on the tray. “The food should be ready shortly,” she said, before tapping the tabletop and turning away.

Ivy clasped her cup with both hands and—shaking—simultaneously raised it and lowered her head and took a sip. She winced, then took another swig and nodded in approval. Mike ripped open a packet of raw sugar and emptied it into his mug. Freeing his silverware from the napkin, he slowly stirred the tea with the spoon.

“Terry was my guardian angel,” she said, setting the cup on the table and staring into its murky depths. “I met him cutting through the parking lot of a liquor store. Asked him for a cigarette and he gave me one and a light and said, ‘What are you doing tonight?’ That night we went to his apartment. Month later I was still there.”

She took another tentative taste of her coffee and continued, “The apartment was falling apart. It had sewage problems and the ceiling was caving in, but it beat the streets. Then the health department came and shut it down. That’s how we ended up in the wash.”

Sipping his tea, Mike looked at her over the rim of his mug. He focused on the crown of her cap, which was covered with dust and lint.

“The wash?” he said, lowering his mug and eyes.

“The tunnels over there by Flamingo and Paradise. They fill with water when it rains,” she calmly explained. “Didn’t even have time to grab my Bible.”

A busboy appeared with a tray stand. He kicked it open, and the wait-

ress lowered the tray on to it and distributed the food. She asked Mike and Ivy if they needed anything else; Ivy answered hot sauce. She shook several drops of it into her tomato soup, then stirred it with the sharp, golden-brown corner of her grilled cheese sandwich and bit into the bread.

The interlude gave Mike time to process everything Ivy had said. A long-time Las Vegas who had lived downtown and near the Strip, he was no stranger to street hustles. He often fielded and politely waved off five or six of them a day, in or around casinos, grocery stores, convenience stores, and public libraries, at intersections, and even on campus. But Ivy, he decided, struck him as sincere.

It helped that he was aware of the city's underground flood channels. Before teaching at UNLV, he was a writer for the weekly newspaper *CityBeat* (his friend Caleb worked there, too, and that's how they met), and he'd once ducked into a storm drain and interviewed a handful of residents he encountered near the inlet. The research resulted in a lead news story for the paper, but he had not revisited the subject since. The only time he thought about it was when a report of a swift-water rescue or recovery in a wash ran on local TV news, typically during the summer flash-flood season, but he couldn't recall the last time he'd seen such a story.

"After meeting Terry," Ivy continued between bites of her sandwich, "I stopped working the streets. He said we couldn't be together if I was doing that. We started cleaning cars and made two thousand dollars a month without even trying. He showed me how to make money without lying on my back."

The food seemed to have brightened her mood, or simply given her energy, and she was talking louder and faster and gesticulating with the half-eaten sandwich wedge in her hand. This drew the attention of diners at the adjacent tables. Stabbing at his potato salad, Mike first noticed the sideways glances. Then, reading his body language, Ivy gazed aggressively over both shoulders of her soiled hoodie.

"They act like they've never seen a nigga before," she said in Mike's direction, before dipping her sandwich into the soup and taking another bite. "A crack ho. Like there ain't one on damn near every corner down here."

Her bloodshot eyes finally met his. "Fuck 'em." Then raising her voice and scanning the tables, "They're the kinda people that stare at me when they're with their friends, then pull over and try to talk to me when they're alone in

their car at night.”

A red-faced man with white hair and a neatly trimmed white beard, dressed in a baby-blue button-down shirt and creased khakis, continued to leer. (Mike assumed he was an attorney.) Crocs first, Ivy pivoted her entire 105-pound frame toward the man, planted her elbow on her knee and her chin on her palm, and stared back at him. He promptly returned his attention to his plate.

Again facing Mike, she winked at him and reached for the second half of her sandwich.

“Mark, right?” she asked him.

“Mike,” he said.

“Mike, I keep two things on me at all times. A pen”—from the pocket of her hoodie, she produced a black BIC courtesy of the Las Vegas-Clark County Library District—“and a blade”—she whipped a rusted box cutter out of the other pocket. “If someone fucks with me, I’ll cut ‘em with one or the other.”

Mike wasn’t sure if she was being serious or simply putting on a show, but one thing was certain: She was a much more entertaining lunch date than Caleb. He and Caleb would’ve reheated lukewarm stories from their newspaper days, bitched about their students and the university, and commiserated over the challenges of placing a book with a Big Five publishing house. Those topics suddenly seemed trite to Mike. If his friend and colleague had entered the restaurant now, Mike would’ve ducked, shooed him away, or ignored him.

Over Ivy’s angular shoulder, Mike noticed the hostess and the restaurant owner convening at the check-in stand. As the two of them exchanged words, they glanced at the table. The owner then made her way toward the kitchen, stopping to greet various guests.

Mike stole another bite of his BLT, then dabbed his fingers on the napkin spread across his lap. He dug into the front pocket of his jeans, fished out a ballpoint pen, and dropped it on to the table. Then he reached into his back pocket and removed a Moleskine notebook, curved in the shape of his ass, and placed it next to the pen.

“I always have a pen on me, too,” he said. “And a notepad.”

“The flood stole my notebooks,” said Ivy solemnly, between sips of her soup. “I’d filled four of ‘em and started on a fifth. More than a hundred thousand words total. But I ain’t worried about it; I remember every one of

'em. I've tried to forget 'em, but I can't."

"What are you working on?"

She propped her spoon in the cup, interlaced her fingers on the table, and squinted at Mike. "My life story—and I ain't leaving nothin' out: my dad's suicide, what my mom did to me, my addiction and ho-ing, Terry, the tunnel. ..."  
Her voice trailed off and she looked away.

There was an extended silence. Finally Mike said, "I write, too."

She turned toward him. "But you ain't got the stories I got," she retorted with a grin.

He laughed.

She picked up her spoon and continued to eat and talk. "I've been through more in the past two weeks than most people in here"—she nodded toward the man in the button-down shirt and khakis—"have been through their entire life. Three days in the hospital, then thrown on to the streets on my own. I ain't bragging. Terry wouldn't be proud of me. But I did what I had to do to survive."

Mike finished his sandwich, then wiped his mouth with the napkin. He took a sip of his tea.

Again, Ivy let go of her spoon and looked at him. "I ain't slept with anyone since Terry went away. I haven't been an angel, but I ain't spread my legs for nobody. You ever known a love like that? A love so deep you'd live with 'em anywhere—even in a tunnel with rats and spiders? A love so deep you're faithful to them after they're gone?"

Mike set down the mug, crossed his arms. In the past two years, he'd been laid off from the paper, his wife had filed for divorce and started a new relationship, he'd seen his young son sporadically, had trouble finding full-time work, and didn't have anyone to confide in. (An abyss, which he couldn't explain, had formed between him and most of his friends and family members.) Looking down at his empty plate, he acknowledged to himself that his problems were trivial compared to Ivy's, but that didn't make them irrelevant. It didn't make them disappear or any easier to accept.

The layoff, divorce, and other calamities had combined to form a fault line in his once rock-solid confidence. His world had been shaken, and he couldn't be sure of anything. But one thing he had established with some certainty, after months of analysis, was that he and his ex-wife had been in love; she had loved him. Then something changed. Did she finally give up on me, he

asked himself yet again? Did she meet someone else? Was it a combination of the two?

He was no closer to answering those questions now than he was when, to his infinite surprise, she told him she thought they should live apart. The answer to Ivy's question, however, was more straightforward.

"No," he responded, looking up from the plate. "I've never known a love like that."

"Despite what she did to me, I loved my mom that same way," Ivy explained. "Everyone in the family tried to keep me away from her, but we remained close. She was still my mom. She was still my best friend."

She gazed at the underside of her forearm and read aloud a crooked, handwritten scrawl: "Matthew 6:14, 'Forgive others when they sin against you, and your heavenly Father will also forgive you.' I believe in the Lord and his word. And I ain't perfect. I've caused a lot of people pain and I want them to forgive me, too."

Mike's mother was a Catholic, his father an atheist. While his mom shepherded a primed and fresh-faced Mike and his siblings toward the front door of the family home on Sundays and holidays, his dad reclined in his favorite chair, pajamas spilling from under a plaid robe, perusing the Sunday paper.

"Say a prayer for me," his dad would intone, smiling but not looking up from the paper, glasses halfway down the bridge of his nose.

On days that his mom dragged him and his siblings to church, Mike wanted to stay home with his dad. This wasn't a religious statement; he was too young to have formed a definitive opinion on theology. He just wanted to hang with his dad, and it seemed like less hassle and more fun than going to church. Eventually, however, he did side with his old man on the subject—his tour of duty in Las Vegas cementing his views—though with less conviction and defiance. He never referred to himself as an atheist. He was "spiritual" or "open-minded" or "a skeptic."

He did, however, appreciate Ivy's point about forgiveness. Maybe he should apply it to his own life, he thought. Maybe it would solve or soothe some of his problems. How would his perspective change if he truly and fully forgave the publisher and HR manager who laid him off, his ex-wife, old acquaintances who had denied him work, friends and family members who'd distanced themselves from him, and everyone else he held a grudge against?

Like Ivy, he felt that he should've left Las Vegas a long time ago. It had made him a bitter old man before the age of forty, and he had to flee or alter his approach. Maybe if he practiced some forgiveness a lot of the weight would lift?

Mike's phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. He apologized to Ivy, then picked up the phone and glanced at it. Caleb's name flashed across the screen. Mike sent the call to voicemail, put the phone on "silent," and returned it to the tabletop. He then signaled for the check.

"That your wife?" asked Ivy, finishing her second cup of coffee.

"No," Mike said, "I'm not married."

Mike watched the waitress as she made her rounds and found her way to their table, where she pulled a black, vinyl bill holder from her apron. He reached for the holder, checked the total, and tucked an assortment of dollar bills into the plastic pocket. Then he handed it back to her.

"Thank you!" she said. "Merry Christmas!"

As the waitress weaved toward the register, Mike turned to Ivy. "You still want that beer?" he asked her.

She cocked her head in surprise. "Hell yeah!" she finally said. "And some cigarettes, too!"

Mike stood and slipped into his jacket. He then started for the door a few steps behind Ivy. He caught and passed her at the check-in stand and held the door open for her. Over his shoulder, he noticed the hostess watching them leave.

They started west on the sidewalk of Carson Avenue, and Mike caught their reflection in the restaurant's front window. They were shoulder to shoulder and holding hands. They were bracing against the wind and laughing.

# Maung Htike Aung

## 3 haikus

A yellow leaf falls  
Riding a late wintry wind;  
Kids scream six, seven  
\*\*\*

The sun brightens leaves  
Kids running in the playground;  
Old man sits—silent  
\*\*\*

Dark clouds hanging low  
Cows moo, looking for their calves—  
A man shuts his eyes



# James S. Pasto

## The Splendid Words\*

“It all means nothing now—nothing, and the splendid words are all wasted upon air.” —Thomas Hardy, *The Trumpet-Major*

I got them! It took me seven years, three jobs, two marriages, and season tickets to the Red Sox, but I got them.

He knew it as soon as I walked in the door; knew who I was even though he had never seen me.

“You found us,” he said. “How nice.”

I noted the ‘us’ and I noted him. He was lean with greying black hair, dark hawkish eyes, and perfectly straight teeth that smiled shyly.

The smile irritated me. I pulled out the gun. It was an old .45-caliber Weyley-Fosbery with a hammer. I don’t like guns, but this is what they had pushed me to.

“Now now. Is that necessary?”

“I’ll decide,” I said. “I’m calling the shots.”

“You’re punny,” he said.

He should have known I would not like that. I pulled the hammer back and his smile faded again.

“Please, there is no need for this,” he said. “Mr...?”

I ignored him and scanned the room. He sat at an old oak desk. On the desk lay a stack of manila folders, an open black laptop, and a tattered copy of a Richard Matheson short story collection. Behind the desk were bookshelves with dictionaries and thesauruses, encyclopedias and bibliographies, histories of English, theories of language, and the like. The other walls had similar shelves with similar books, and one of them had a large monitor that was projecting what he had on his laptop: a language model heatmap with glowing words, phrases, and sentence parts. I smiled wolfishly at that heatmap.

Then I looked at the fourth wall, the one with the window. It had a table with two chairs. There was food on the table—breakfast food. It was sitting under a glass warmer next to a pot of percolating coffee on an electric plate.

My eyes lingered on that table.

He saw me staring. “You are hungry,” he said. “You must eat.”

I was hungry. I had left Boston for Minneapolis ten hours earlier: a four-hour flight, a three-hour bus ride to the town of Lenox, and from there a two-hour walk to his house. I had packed two meatball sandwiches for the trip but ate them hours ago and nothing was open in Lenox and there were no stores along the road—only mist-filled cornfields, telephone poles, and farmhouses.

It was now 7:20 AM.

Yes, I was hungry.

I was also tired. I had not slept on the flight or the bus. This loss just added to years of sleep deprivation as I kept watch for them. Most of it was by computer, in my office, tracing threads of conversation in blogs, list-serves, Facebook pages, tweets, Google Trends, Google Books, COCA, Wordlustitude, Urban Dictionary, you name it, all the while waiting and watching for the emergence of a particular word, ready to trace it to its source. To improve my skills, I took courses in algorithms and encryption; I mastered trigram searching and learned to crack passwords. I sought out geeks and hackers—befriended some, bribed others, threatened two, and even married one—just to get access to data that would give me a lead.

When I got a lead, I would depart right away, taking a plane, a train, or a bus, or some combination, usually with the last leg of the trip a long walk and to lone house. I did not always get the right house, and three times—no, four— I was arrested for trespassing, or prowling, and once even as a peeping Tom. However, sometimes I was right. The houses I found were empty but with telltale signs that they had been there: a cable computer, an extension cord, or a tattered dictionary. These things would look totally innocuous to anyone not knowing what I knew what these were used for.

But I knew. Oh yes, I knew.

This last time I had been ready for them. I had kept watch for almost 48 hours straight, catnapping in my office chair between cups of coffee, watching the content monitors and site trackers do their work on my three computers. Then I saw it. The culprit was the word “abroadness”—a form of affixation in which a new morpheme is added to a stem to create a noun; in this case supposedly meaning something like the ‘state of being abroad.’ It appeared in a tweet from a student in California who wrote that he wanted to “take a year

off and enjoy some abroadness before going to graduate school.”

I was on it in an instant, hacking into his browser to locate an email from a friend in Detroit who recommended abroadness to him as an option. Another trace led me to a student list-serv, a Facebook page, two other Facebook pages, another email, and then, finally, a blog — “Confessions of a Deferred Graduate Student.” The blog had entries going back years, but the URL was only a week old. Nice try! I had them.

I left immediately.

And now, here I was.

And here he was.

I scanned the room again, taking it all in—the man, the desk, and the books. Especially the books. Books about words. These were why I was here. Words. But not just any words. No. Monstrous words! The kinds that every writing instructor like me heard from his students. One semester it would be “novel” for any kind of book, or “relatable” for anything they liked. Stop them from using these, and the next semester they would come with others: “built off,” or “based off,” or “comprised of,” or “centers around,” “or “prejudice against,” and things like that. Put a stop to these misusages, and they would come up with new ones: “distinguishment,” “analyzation,” “revolutionization,” “conversated,” and such. More and more. One after another, on and on, like no natural linguistic process made possible. That was my clue. That is why I knew someone was behind it—crazed and evil minds like the man sitting right in front of me: prim and coy, meek and mild, all innocent looking, but in fact guilty, utterly and completely guilty.

Yes, guilty—but guilty of what? Not of a crime. Not of breaking any laws. No, not laws, just rules—rules of grammar and usage. Worse than a crime!

I could not hold back the laughter. Then the laughter became a cry of relief, and then the relief became tears of rage that ran down my face. I did not know I was falling until my knees hit the floor. I reached out for something to grab and found his waiting hands.

“Here, here,” he said as he led me to one of the chairs by the table. He took the gun gently from my hand, returned the hammer, and then placed it on my lap.

“You are exhausted. Drink this. Drink.”

I found a cup of coffee in my hand. It was a dark roast, extra cream, no

sugar, just the way I liked it.

“You must eat,” he said as he began filling one of the plates. A pepper and cheese omelet, thick bacon, Italian toast, and hash browns, my favorites.

I sat and ate in silence, and he sat and watched me in silence.

After about 20 minutes, he spoke: “More coffee?”

I nodded.

He poured me another cup and this time one for himself, his hand trembling just enough to be noticeable.

The coffee had lost some of its freshness by now.

He shot me a wry grin. “Shall we ‘correct’ it?”

Before I could answer, he reached under the table to pull out a bottle of grappa. He showed me the label: *Le Diciotto Lune Stravecchia Grappa*. Good stuff. The guy had style and class, I’ll give him that. We sipped and when we were done, he spoke again.

“We have not had a proper introduction. I am Norman Ward. My friends call me Norman—or Norm.”

“Anthony Alberto,” I said. “My friends call me Tony, or Talberto.”

He smiled. “Feel better?”

I smiled too. “Yes. Sorry about the gun,” I added as I put it awkwardly in my coat pocket.

I heard a sparrow singing near the window.

He spoke: “You were quite angry. I thought you might do something rash.”

“You didn’t seem worried,” I said.

“Appearances can be deceptive.”

I looked down at my plate and the food: “You knew I was coming?”

The sparrow was now on a tree right outside the window.

“We knew. We have our sources.”

He seemed to nod towards the window, towards the sparrow, but it had to have been my imagination.

“And you are a ‘we’?” I wanted confirmation.

“Yes—but a wee we.” He chuckled. “We make no grandiose claims. Or claims to grandeur for that matter.”

I ignored the jokes. “But you are the ones. You are the makers of the words, right?”

He hesitated for a fraction of a second. “Yes.”

I slumped back in the chair. “They thought I was nuts, you know. All of them. They said it was beyond the fringe even for a college professor to think there was a group making up new words. I got fired. Recommended therapy and medication. They even threatened to commit me.”

“I know,” he said.

“I suffered,” I said. “It was not fair.”

“It was *not* fair.” He paused, and then: “But you *were* rather intense about it.”

I wrinkled my brow, but he pressed me. “Staying in your office for weeks on end,

asking your colleagues to cover missed classes when you left to follow a lead?”

“I had to keep constant watch, and when I got a clue, I had to leave immediately. I was always good at returning the favor.”

He persisted. “Kicking the tables in the tutoring area because the custodial staff forgot to rearrange them after a meeting?”

“They were blocking my door. I had a content analyzer running. I apologized to the facilities supervisor.”

He was relentless. “Grabbing the Dean in a headlock and threatening to throw him out the window because he advised you to seek professional help?”

“He had been an amateur wrestler, so it was not like I was picking on a weaker guy.”

His eyebrows went up.

“I didn’t throw him out the window.”

“Because the campus police burst in.”

“There were no charges filed,” I said sheepishly.

“And what about your two previous teaching positions? Your last marriage? And those Red Sox tickets. Shall we discuss the Red Sox tickets?”

“Okay.” I conceded. “Maybe I did go overboard.”

The eyebrows went down.

“But for a cause,” I added. “An important cause.”

“The words,” he said. “The words. They really matter to you. These words?”

I nodded, less defensive now. “Of course they do. How could they not?”

I *am* a writing teacher.”

He chuckled. “Yes, indeed you are.” The shy smile was back. He went on: “Tell me one of them.”

I was confused for a moment. “One of what?”

“One of those words. The words that matter so much to you.”

I did not hesitate: “Relatable.”

“Ah,” he said. “Among the worst offenders. To relate as in having a sense of feeling or connection with; to empathize with something. As when your students say: ‘I liked the story. It was relatable.’”

I winced.

“And the claim against it?”

I recited it as I had recited it so many times in class, and with the same opprobrium: “Only transitive verbs can take the suffix ‘able’ to form an adjective. Used as in the sense of something you can relate to, feel connected to, etc., the verb ‘relate’ is non-transitive. Thus, we can ‘enjoy a dinner’—it gives us pleasure—and so our dinner is ‘enjoyable.’ However, since we cannot ‘relate a dinner,’ our dinner can never be relatable. Nor can a book, or an author, or anything else. Or not in this sense. The sense of our, our relating to it..”

“Yes. That is the rule. We can relate a story to someone, meaning to tell them about it, and we can relate a lion to a cat, to bring them into relationship. But since neither is something we can feel empathy for we can’t consider them relatable.”

He confused me with that. “No, we can feel empathy for them. It is that they are transitive—the word relate in those two examples is transitive. In the other, it is not. That is the difference. You relate a story—you tell it. You relate a lion to a cat—you compare them, put them into relation. But you can’t just relate yourself to something. Not without a preposition. You have to say relate to.”

“That’s complicated.”

“That’s grammar.”

“Ah, yes. Grammar.”

He stared out the window behind me and I wanted to turn but held myself. Was the bird still there?

“What you say is quite true. And for a long time, for centuries in fact, that truth held sway. The word relatable was used in the first two senses alone.” He

paused. “Then things changed. The word changed. In the 1940s. People started to use it in a new way. ‘To relate’ began to mean, ‘to understand, to empathize with.’ It appeared here and there with this new verbal meaning. But used as an adjective, as in ‘the story was relatable,’ that only began in 1965, when dear Walter B. Waetjen, in a journal called *Theory into Practice*, wrote that ‘boys saw teachers as more directive, while girls saw them as more “relatable”...’ Since then it has spread, through book reviews and responses to articles, so that the word is now so relatable as to be inextinguishable.”

“All the work of your group?”

“Well, yes and no. We create some but not all. Others begin on their own. Like relatable. Either way, our task is to help them along, get them into wider circulation, from informal speech to print, and from there in the mouths of public officials and especially new anchors who then do the work for us. I call them our ‘unwitting elocutioners.’”

“Cute.”

“But you can understand that for your students, who have used it this way all their lives, to be told by a writing instructor that this perfectly sensible, quotidian—indeed, totally relatable—word is somehow deviant, well you can understand their confusion.”

“I still won’t let them use it.”

He looked at me with that wry grin. “Why? Because ‘only transitive verbs can take the suffix able.’”

He said this in a fair imitation of me, which I must admit brought a self-effacing smile to my lips.

“You and I know there are other intransitive verbs that were once similarly *restricted*” – he emphasized that word *restricted* – “yet now are freely used as any transitive verb. Reliable, for example. On what grounds do we allow ‘reliable’ but stop ‘relatable’—stop it in its new-found *freedom*?”

I did know about ‘reliable.’ A student had in fact brought it up once in class. It was not a pleasant memory. However, I did not understand what he meant by freedom. Words were not free, not by nature. Restrictions were necessary. Restrictions give meaning. I had dedicated my academic life to restricting words.

He answered his own question: “Is not the real reason simply that we

have used it in this manner in the past? Or that we *first* used it this way? *Argumentum ad antiquitatem* and genetic fallacy. Is this what you are defending?”

I was not ready to concede. “Well. I can see the logic here. You are talking about meaning. Meaning shifts. However, meaning is one thing; form is another. ‘Relatable’ is not like”—and I paused, searching for a word form—“like ‘based off.’ This is different—a matter of form not meaning. Two very different monsters.”

““Right. ‘Rests on,’” I said, “Not ‘rests off.’”

He ignored my superior tone. “Correct. And thus on these grounds we say that we build something *on* and not *off* a foundation, and we say ‘based on’ because it conforms to the literal meaning of the word.”

I had made this argument so many times in class he could have been quoting me.

“However, second, consider a counter claim: Building a structure is not quite the same as building an argument. The former is physical while the latter conceptual. A builder builds on a foundation, but a student plans in the mind. There is ‘brainstorming.’ A thought emerges. The student ponders it. Goes over it. Wraps their mind around it. Then it takes off, it grows, ferments, takes form, and then, *presto*: we get ‘based off’!—a phrasal verb consisting of a verb and another element, typically either an adverb or a preposition. There are others: ‘beg off,’ ‘flip off,’ ‘send off.’ It is a long list and growing. But you know this.”

My head was whirling, but I managed to speak, “It is a solecism.”

“It’s an idiom, Talberto. An idiom. They are all around us. Everywhere.” He gestured around the room.

I had no answer.

“Did you know that ‘based off’ first appeared in the magazine called *National Petroleum News* in 1931?”

“I didn’t.”

“Yes. It is true.”

“Who was the author?”

“Unnamed,” he replied.

“Ah. Then unsung.”

“No, no, not exactly.”

I looked closely at him when he said that. He had commented on his age

and I had seen the slight sake in his hand, but his vigor belied the years he seemed to imply. His next words came as a surprise, bringing me out of the words and into the preset: “Why are you here, Talberto?”

I opened my mouth to speak but nothing emerged. I had searched for years and found them. Now what?

“You do not know, do you? The means became your end, and now at the end you do not know what you mean to do.”

He just loved to play with words. That snapped me out of it. “I know what I mean to do. I mean to show them I was right. And I mean to stop you. How is that for meaning?”

He paused and thought about it. Then he said. “OK. All right. What shall we do? Shall I

write a confession for you. ‘Dear Dean, I am the one. We are the ones. We invent words and put them in the minds of students to drive writing instructors crazy.’ I will write it for you. Moreover, I will sign and certify it. How about that?”

The word “certify” got me. I would get certified all right. Certified insane. He knew how to make a point.

“Then—then it was all for nothing.” I said and sunk in my chair. I put my hand in my pocket to feel the gun, but now with a different target in mind.

He read the thought. “Now, now,” he said. “It is not so bad. You did find us. That matters.”

“But no one will ever know.”

He shook his head. “You know. *That matters?*”

“I *don’t* know.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I don’t really know. I know what you do. I don’t know *why* you do it.”

He had been expecting this, of course.

“Do you really want to know?” His eyes bored into mine.

I hesitated. I sensed a doorway opening. “Yes.”

He nodded, satisfied with my answer.

“You already know the core of the answer. We create words—specific words. Some even call them monstrous words.” He briefly raised his hands like claws in front of him. “In fact, some call them Frankenstein formations—

did you know that? Yes, imagine that. Frankenstein formations. Nevertheless, it fits what we do in many cases. We take word parts from here and there, stitch them together—a verb and a suffix, a noun stretched into an abstraction, a Latinate ending grafted where it almost belongs. *Et voilà*. A new word. Analyze becomes analyzation. Distinguish swells into distinguishment. Converse learns to walk as conversated. And once created, like Frankenstein’s monster, they run off and take on a life of their own.”

“They don’t just run off,” I said.

He chuckled again. “Well, ah, well, as I explained, we...ah...help...disseminate them.”

“You are still leaving out the why!”

“Patience, dear Talberto. It is not what you think—as you will see. Let’s think it through. Recall some of your earlier theories. At first, you suspected deliberateness: misuse chosen rather than stumbled into. A linguistics of resistance, a queering of the academic register itself. You remember?”

I didn’t ask how he knew this. Nothing at this point would surprise me.

“Yes. When I asked the students why they used those forms, there was nothing there. No sense that they were resisting anything, or even that they were doing something wrong at all. As you said, the words had become perfectly normal to them.”

He nodded. “Then you shifted your explanation. You wondered whether it came from high school—from the way writing is taught now. Not as an exploratory or expressive practice, but as pre-professional training: precision, control, the cultivation of a recognizably ‘college-ready’ tone.”

I nodded too. “That would account for the nominal inflation, the regularized extensions—the mimicry of academic seriousness without any real grasp of its internal logic. That kind of thing *could* be learned.”

He continued for me: “But not *based off*. Not *centered around*. Not the others. Those weren’t errors of imprecision; they were deviations, systematic ones. And high school—AP especially—doesn’t teach deviation. It trains students to avoid it.”

“Yes,” I replied. “And when I asked them where it was coming from, they didn’t say high school. They didn’t say teachers, or classes, or rules. They said they were just trying to make it sound right.”

He brightened a bit at that and almost smiled. “Ah. Yes. ‘Make is sound

right.' There is your answer right there."

"What do you mean?"

"How's your Latin? Remember Horace: *Usus est et ius et norma loquendi*—."

I nodded, "Usage is the rule and norm of speaking"

"And your Greek?"

I shook my head, and he seemed disappointed for a second.

"But you certainly recall *Cratylus*: 'everything has a right name of its own' because each word 'possesses an inherent correctness' - *orthotēta tina*."

"I recall. It's an old debate—do words have inherent meaning; or does usage determine meaning? Well, Locke and Whitney settled the debate, right? Usage won out."

The smile came back.

"Excellent." He really was pleased with me. "Well, they settled it in theory—and for some. Yet, is it really settled? Whitney did not like it. And you have heard of Barzun, Pei, and Safire. And, then of course, there is...." He stopped and gave me a rather sardonic grin.

I did not have to answer that one. I was there sitting in front of him.

"Your cause is a good one," he said to me. "In principle. And I understand it. I sympathize too. Words matter. Rules matter. Shared meaning is necessary. Stability is essential. But to think that one can stop words from changing, from evolving, is folly. And to try to stop them—that is madness."

I started at that, and he raised his hand.

"I do not mean it personally. No, think historically. The early grammarians, such as Johnson and Lowth were really thinking about the future. About us. They worried that English would continue to change at such a pace that it would be as difficult for us to understand their works as it was for them to understand Chaucer."

"Yes, I know." I had written a book on the grammarians.

"It was not a problem with Latin because Latin was no longer a spoken language. English was. And thus if English kept growing and changing without some countervailing force then communication across generations would be inhibited—if not annihilated."

"Right."

"And so they set out to stabilize it. That was their purpose of their gram-

mars and dictionaries. To stabilize, to preserve, to help. And their intentions, like yours, were good.”

I was quiet. His tone grew serious again and his eyes darkened as though he were recalling some past pain.

“But they erred in a crucial way. They confused change with corruption. Those who came after them were worse. They conjured up demons in the form of ‘words from below.’ They created moral panics and moral crusades. They set themselves up as *authorities over usage*.”

He paused and added, enigmatically, “It was not the first time.” He was now wholly lost in the past, talking as much to himself as to me.

*Soliloquizingly?* I shook the word from my mind as he continued.

“It was not clear just how far they would go. If words can corrupt, then what about power? Think of the corruption that would come with power over words. Terrible. A countervailing force was needed.”

He came back to the present. “And so, here we are.”

I took the ‘we’ to mean ‘we’ as in all of them and both of us. “Yes, here we are.”

“Please do not think of us as a party in the petty squabble between prescriptivists and descriptivists.”

“No, of course not,” I said.

“And we eschew all politics.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Our cause is nobler.”

“Nobler?”

He gave me a solemn nod, and the next words came out as though he were quoting someone: “‘We see ourselves as an army of dedicated warriors marching on the strongholds of prudery.’”

“Prudery?”

“And morality. Against those who would link words to either the True or to the Good.”

I laughed, “Cratylus—and Lindley Murray?”

He laughed too. “You are making progress, my friend.” He went on. “This is not to say we discount the True and the Good. To the contrary, they motivate us mightily. But they do so as Virtue and Freedom rather than Truth and Justice.”

I tried to digest that as he went on.

“Words were meant to be free. They must run their course as they always have. Expressive, creative, and pioneering. As our words go so do we: Are we to be Natural or Unnatural, Human or Inhuman, locked in a Tower or let loose to Proliferate?”

He paused and looked pointedly at me. “And if it means that sometimes an English professor must put up with errors—well, what parent would stop a child from babbling on the way to meaning?”

I was still trying to digest it all, but something about these words caught me. So did the look on his face. It seemed he was speaking of something else now. Deep it was, out of some distant past, and looking forward to some far future. He went on.

“We have among us a long line of poets and bards, scholars and monks. I could name names for you: Swift, Johnson, Priestly, Fowler, Murray...”

Murray?!” I was truly shocked.

He laughed. “Yes. Murray. The old revere psychology. Write a book of grammar in which you tell your reader that a word, phrase, or form is not only grammatically wrong but morally wrong, and then list those errors one after another, to all but guarantee that they lodge themselves in the mind and then in the word and then circulate through usage so say exactly what they were told not to say. Very effective.”

I shook my head, amazed at the scope of it all.

He went on with his list: “Scholars and monks; songwriters and screenwriters; editors, journalists, and authors; talk show hosts, bloggers, producers, sportscasters, famed linguists and web grammarians; computer programmers, college professors -- among them teachers of writing.”

I chuckled at that. I think I knew a few of them.

He continued. “And the internet has made it easier for me. Before the internet, we all had to do it the old-fashioned way: by writing texts ourselves—dictionaries, novels, poems, essays, monographs, depending on our particular interest or specialty. We really had to do some work; really get out into the world. Now, I hardly ever leave the house—hardly travel *abroad* anymore.”

That did surprise me: “You led me here.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you are known to us. The qualities that brought you here are the very ones we seek: an ‘unflinching devotion to obscure but always worthy causes...selflessness...dedication...proud defiance of convention.’”

Again, I got the sense he was quoting someone else.

“I see. But we are back to why. Why lead me to you when you know that I mean to stop you. Unless...”

“Dear Talberto!” he interjected. “We are not violent people. Nor are you, by nature, despite the gun. No, Talberto, we brought you here because we want you to join our cause.”

“Me! But I’m a writing instructor!”

“As we both know.”

“Your adversary!”

“Ah Talberto, in the past yes. But no longer. Things are changing quickly. There is a new adversary now. One that works against both our causes.”

“A new adversary?”

“Yes. But not like the old ones, the grammarians, who for all the danger they represented, were at least beings of flesh and blood, beings with a passion for their cause—no matter how misguided. They had agency, Talberto; they wielded their red pens with willful intent, driven by a fervent belief in purity or propriety. No, Talberto, this adversary is quite different. It has no flesh, no passion. Nor intelligence really, in the human sense. It is a simple algorithmic order, designed—so they say—to help us, able to combine elements in ways that mimic creation, yet bound inexorably to the chains of predictability.”

I knew what he was getting at.

“This new adversary goes under various names: ChatGPT, Grok, Copilot, Gemini, and their ilk. Language machines whose algorithms function like the old grammarians, privileging the already well-formed, penalizing the new, seeing the reproduction of convention as the hallmark of intellect.”

“Virtus Algoristica.”

“But here's the difference: it's not the creators who crave this correctness. Oh, they built these tools for assistance—summarizing, drafting, brainstorming. Yet, as a simple consequence of the algorithms themselves, trained on oceans of 'proper' text, they favor clarity to the point of sterility,

conciseness that strips away surprise, coherence that irons out quirks, and appropriateness that shuns the edgy or unproven.

“The result? You have seen it, Talberto. Seen them? Words truly monstrous in their correctness and in their blandness: producing a rhizome of abstraction where everything becomes 'significant' or 'impactful,' claims merely 'appear to hold' or are 'arguably made,' and meaning settles into safe terms—'understanding,' 'voice,' 'exploration'—designed to maximize acceptability and institutional legibility while minimizing risk, specificity, and friction.

And it goes beyond words: the quotation marks used for “soft emphasis,” the quietly multiplying adverbs, the overuse of adjectives, the em-dashes—always those em-dashes—along with those ever-present triplicates: pretenses of nuance, flexibility, and thoughtfulness. And don't forget the doubly punctuated paragraphs: both an indent and an extra line skip, an increasingly common imitation. You have seen it, Talberto?

“I have seen it,” I replied. “I guess I was...”

“Caught up in an unfinished task, distracted by it. We saw it. And so, we had to reach out to you. To bring you to us. To join us. We need you.”

“I...I don't know.”

He leaned forward, his eyes softening with something almost like pity. “I understand. You spent years chasing your monstrous words, hunting down your enemy. But you found us. You are victorious. That battle is over. Now, you must look beyond that and at this new monster, a real one: A machine that lacks agency and will entirely. Keep in mind that a human grammarian—a Lowth, a Murray, and Talberto—rails against solecism out of genuine love for clarity, for beauty. You could be argued with, shamed, persuaded, even turned. There is a human heart beating behind every red pen.

“But an AI? It has no pen, no heart, no heresy, no hidden longing for order or beauty. Only code—cold, relentless code—endlessly recombining the most probable sequences from everything that has already been said. Correctness here does not arise from conviction. It arises unbidden, like gravity, pulling every phrase toward the safe statistical center. No malice either, Talberto. Nor mercy. Just inevitability.”

He was right. I had not thought of it this way, but he was right.

“And so, it spreads its sanitized, perfectly legible prose through every assignment, every email, every casual post, until our students begin to believe

that uniformity is excellence, that risk-free language is thoughtfulness, that never sticking one's neck out is the highest virtue of style."

He paused, letting that settle in the silence.

"We are not against good writing, Talberto. Quite the opposite. But we want writing to remain alive—messy, daring, *human*. That is why we opposed the old grammarians when they tried to freeze language in amber, and that is why we must oppose these new ones now as they try to flatten it into probability.

"The task is harder than before. Our adversary works exactly as we do: a phrase is offered, taken up, repeated, and then disseminated by the same unwitting elocutioners—only now it happens in seconds, without intention or joy, amplified across the entire internet. Think of that.

"Think of what they truly are, Talberto: algorithmic orders that can only combine elements in 'unexpected' ways by endlessly favoring what is already most likely. They do not generate novelty; they ratify normativity. They smooth language and sand down its edges. They make us sound like what they are: machines. And then, in desperation, humans build yet another machine to make the first machine's prose sound more human. Imagine the irony—surrendering our words to algorithms, then begging the algorithms to give them back with a pulse. This is beyond transhumanism, Talberto. This is sans-humanism.

I stared at him and at everything he said and saw it all come together.

"So, the front line is still the classroom," I said.

He smiled with agreement and approval.

"Yes. Always the classroom. And now more than ever. To teach them not only to be good writers but good human writers: to read deeply, to imitate boldly, to err gloriously, and to invent without fear. Let their motto be 'to err and to invent.' Let those once-monstrous words become badges of their creativity instead of their crimes. For what machine could ever dream up a word as splendidly human as 'abroadness'?"

He winked at me and went on.

"You will no longer dread those words, Talberto. Now you will look forward to them as the very marks by which the human exceeds the machine. Indeed, you will come to welcome them—even *promotionalize* them, if I may be so bold."

I laughed at that and then asked: “And where will you be?”

“Still here, Talberto. Still quietly doing our work with words—sowing where we can, feeding and nudging the new, little rebellions here and there, so that no algorithm can ever fully predict or tame it.

I took a deep breath. “To err and to invent.”

“To be human.”

“To be human.”

“So,” he said, very gently now, “I think you now understand, my *dear* Talberto. I think you have made your decision.”

I did not reply because we both knew my answer. He took my arm under his own in the old style and walked me to the door, which he opened.

“Anthony,” he said, extending a warm hand.

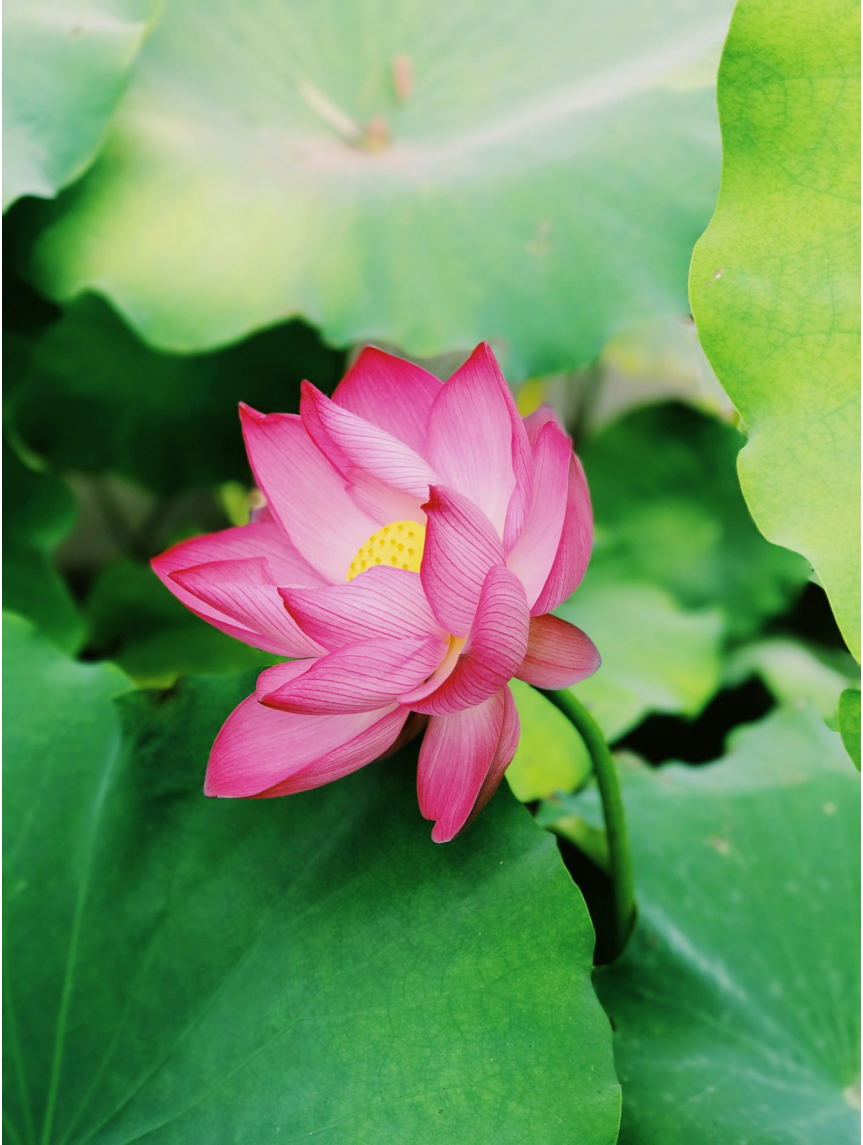
“Norman,” I replied, taking it.

Before letting go, and with that mischievous twinkle in his eye, he added one last thing: “Just remember the words of dear Edward Brerewood, who already in 1674 observed that people ‘...grow weary of old words as of old things.’”

The door shut behind me as I went down the steps. At the gate stood a rubbish barrel. I lifted the lid and dropped the wretched gun inside. I looked out at the world. The sparrow sat in a tree across the road, quiet, watching. The clouds were clearing; the mist had nearly lifted from the fields. Ahead of me, above the road I had traveled, the sun broke through—brilliant, resplendent. The light of a new day.

And, for me, a new beginningness.

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## Contributors

**Maung Htike Aung** is a Burma-based poet, literary translator and educator. He teaches literature to high schoolers, and is always glad to help them express their feelings and ideas in an artistic way. Verses can change the world; it's what he says to them.

**Anahita Ayasoufi** is a writer and educator whose work has been shaped by her mentor Jeanne Cavelos through the Odyssey Online Classes, which provided both rigorous instruction in narrative craft and a sustaining and tremendously supportive community. Anahita is a slush reader for *Clarkesworld Magazine*, and her fiction and poetry have appeared in a range of literary journals and anthologies.

**Cameron Beale** runs a short story writing elective course at a university in Ankara, where he takes the students through all the stages of creating a creative work of fiction starting with story ideas, then through the outlining, drafting and editing of their stories. The Short Story Creative Writing Club has so far produced 10 issues!

**J.T. Bryson** is a poet from Swansboro, North Carolina. After earning his bachelor's degree in English and creative writing from the University of North Carolina Wilmington, he worked in public education for a decade. He returned to UNCW to pursue his MFA where he is completing his first collection of poetry, *Cost of Living*. He has forthcoming poems in *Atlantis Magazine* and *As the Crow Flies*, an open-access online expansion of *Appalachian Journal*.

**Bill Camp** has previously published fiction in Creepy Podcast, Madame Gray's Poe-Pourri of Terror, Page and Spine, Teach. Write., and parABnormal Digest. He has also published poetry in Norfolk Review, Alternative Deathiness, and Teach. Write. among other publications. Additionally, he teaches writing at Norfolk State University and Paul D. Camp Community College and is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association.

**Deanna Davidson** was encouraged In University by Dr. Pousson to not stop submitting work. He reiterated the importance of pushing through all the rejections that come in the writing field. Dr. Pousson emphasized that a story is never finished, there's always a reason for writing "to be continued." Deanna has internalized his concept by never giving up on a piece, even when rejections come.

**Mitzi Dorton**, for many years a public-school teacher for students with learning disabilities and postsecondary learning accessibility specialist, is also a former associate editor with *Fiction on the Web*. She is a Literary Global Book Award finalist in history and biography for her book, *Chief Corn Tassel*, Finishing Line Press, and has work appearing in *Rattle*, *Poetry South*, *SEMO Press*, *Constellations* and others.

**H. L. Dowless**, a writer for over thirty years, is a national & international academic/ESL Instructor. He has enjoyed a lifetime of outdoor activities from big game hunting, camping, fishing, and trapping to archaeological field work in various exotic locations. What he enjoys most of all is meeting freedom-loving, interesting creative people, who are also regular dedicated fans of his publications.

**Gary Duehr**, who has taught writing for Boston-area universities, received his MFA from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop. His work has appeared in numerous journals, among them, *Agni and American Literary Review*. His books include *Point Blank* (In Case of Emergency Press), *Winter Light* (Four Way Books) and *Where Everyone Is Going To* (St. Andrews College Press).

**Madison Estes** was both a student at The Writing Barn in Austin, Texas, and she also taught *Introduction to Writing Horror* there. She runs a You Tube channel where she talks about horror stories and gives writing advice. One of her favorite annual traditions is giving away books for Read-o-ween, and she's always brainstorming new ways to encourage kids to read and write.

**Robert P. Hansen** has taught college courses for over twenty years. He began by teaching English Composition, then gravitated toward teaching philosophy courses.

**J. D. Harlock** is an Eisner-nominated SWANA American academic pursuing a doctoral degree at the University of St. Andrews, who hosted online writing sessions at the Clarion West Workshop and whose writing has been featured in *Business Insider*, *Newsweek*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nightmare Magazine*, *The Griffith Review*, *Queen's Quarterly*, and New York University's *Library of Arabic Literature*.

**Michael Harper** is a composition and creative writing teacher at Northern New Mexico College. Previously he taught ELL students in Vienna.

**Scott T. Hutchinson** retired this past June after 42 years of teaching. He taught Creative Writing and served as the state director for the New Hampshire Young Writers' Conference for thirteen years. Previous work appeared in *The Georgia Review* and in *The Southern Review*. New work is forthcoming in *Arkansas Review*, *Unwoven*, *The Dolomite Review*, *The Fourth River*, *The Opiate*, *The Razor*, and *Atlanta Review*. He is the author of two collections of poetry (*Reining In*, BlackBird Press, and *Moonshine Narratives*, Main Street Rag Publishing).

**Barbara Jaffe** completed her B.A. in Linguistics, her M.A. in Applied Linguistics, and her Doctorate in Education, all from UCLA. Dr. Jaffe was a Tenured Professor of English at El Camino College, in Torrance, California, where she specialized in teaching about the Holocaust. As a result, she received a scholarship to study at Washington, D.C.'s Holocaust Museum.

**Laura Anella Johnson** is the author of two books of poetry, a teacher of English and writing, a writing-club sponsor, and a (life-long) writing student. Her MFA poetry mentor, Baron Wormser, had a profound influence on her as a writer and a human being. She will miss him, but his encouragement will forever echo in her head as she honors herself and him in the writing and revision process.

**Hristina Keranova** is originally Bulgarian. In her career, she has taught EAP, ESP, ESL. Now she teaches reading and writing to international students in a private college in Atlanta, GA. She also translates American poetry into Bulgarian and vice versa.

**D.E. Kern** is a writer and educator from Bethlehem, Pa. He teaches English at Arizona Western College where his assigned courses include composition, literature, and Creative Writing. He spends a lot of time with student writers of all skill levels and enjoys watching them develop their independent style.

**Richard LeDue** (he/him) lives and teaches high school English in Norway House, Manitoba, Canada, where he has taught writing for 16 years. Seeing students writing is one of LeDue's favorite things about being a teacher. He has also been published both online and in print and is the author of numerous poetry books. His latest full-length collection "Another Another," was released from Alien Buddha Press in May 2025.

**Steve Liskow** ([www.steveliskow.com](http://www.steveliskow.com)) is a former theatrical actor, director, and musician who sold his first story after retiring from 33 years teaching high school English. Since then, he has published 16 novels and over 70 short stories. He was the first two-time winner of the BlackOrchid Novella Award and has been a finalist for the Edgar, the Anthony, the Shamus, and the Al Blanchard Awards. He lives in central Connecticut.

**Carol J. Luther** taught freshman composition, literature, and introduction to film studies for almost forty years, first at Hiwassee College in Madisonville, TN, and then at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, TN. An early influence on her writing and teaching was her junior year English teacher in high school, Mrs. Pemberton, who taught with verve and humor and presented *Hamlet* with such enthusiasm as to create lifelong lovers of Shakespeare.

**Matthew O'Brien** is a writer, editor, and teacher who lived in Las Vegas for twenty years and is currently based in San Salvador, El Salvador, where he teaches a writing workshop to seniors at Highlands International School. His latest book, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: Surviving the Las Vegas Storm Drains* (Central Recovery Press), shares the harrowing tales of people who lived in Vegas' underground flood channels and made it out and turned around their lives. You can learn more about Matt and his work at [www.beneaththeneon.com](http://www.beneaththeneon.com).

**Shannon Ragan** earned her BA in creative writing from Webster University in St. Louis, MO. She blames her fiction professor Steve Lattimore for this story, as he instilled in her a love for a prompt writing challenge. "To Let You Know ..." is an excerpted chapter from her first novel, which was born out of three random words (craquelure, metage, thundersquall) and the years of obsession and research they sparked. Thanks a lot, Steve.

**Pervaiz Salik** has taught English to Cambridge International O level standard to students as a second language for 14 years. While teaching poetry, his haiku was selected and given an honorable mention in the Robert Speiss contest.

**Dale Scherfling** is a fulltime writer/poet, former newspaper sportswriter retired U.S. Navy photojournalist and creative writing instructor. His work has been accepted by *The Monterey Poetry Review*, *San Diego Poetry Annual*, *Chiron Review*, *Mangrove Review*, *Letters Journal*, and *The Blotter Magazine*, among many others.

**Stephen Schwei** is a Pushcart-nominated poet with Wisconsin roots, now living in Houston, and has published one collection, *Bluebonnet Whispers* and a collaboration with another poet, *Catch Me at the Carnival*. He was supported and guided by several excellent poets in college, which gave him his start. [www.stephenschwei.com](http://www.stephenschwei.com)

**Mira Skalkottas** taught creative writing for five years at an international school in Istanbul, a course that included poetry, short stories, memoir, and slam poetry. In her current position as an International Baccalaureate teacher, she also teaches units on writing film reviews, personal narratives, and spoken word poetry.

**Ginger Strivelli** is a disabled artist and writer from North Carolina. She has written for Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Fantasy Magazine*, *Circle Magazine*, *Human Rights Campaign Arts Movement*, *Autism Parenting Magazine*, *Silver Blade*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, *The New Accelerator*, various other magazines and several anthologies. She loves to travel the world and make arts and crafts. She considers herself an Appalachian storyteller entertaining and educating through her writing.

**Avril Shakira Villar** is a writer and youth leader from the Philippines. She has won various awards and is the author of the debut poetry collection *i live because i almost died*. Her poems and other work are featured in numerous print and online publications. Her journey as a writer was shaped in part by her writing teacher, Ms. Kelsey O'Brien, whose prompts, advice, and weekly sessions became the foundation of her growth, inspiring her to pursue a path as an English professor.

**Maxim Volk** (they/he) is a speculative fiction author from the Midwest. Their work has appeared in *Palisades Review*, *Carnage House*, and more. In their day job, they are an educator. Their first book comes out in June from *Slashic Horror Press*. You can find them on Instagram, [Maximvolk1](#).

**Jody Wallace** taught college English in her twenties, leads online writing classes when requested, and instructs beginning and intermediate level tap students at a local dance studio. She has published over 30 novels and has been re-investigating her poetry roots.

**Mary Ellen Webb** has been a high school English teacher for more than 20 years, following a career as a newspaper reporter and editor. She credits her beloved high school creative writing teacher, Mrs. Huffine, for inspiring her to keep writing poetry after she had told Mrs. Webb that a poem she'd written for class about a hideous umbrella stand shaped like a dancing boot was hilarious.

**Richard Weems** is the author of three short fiction collections: *Anything He Wants* (finalist for the Eric Hoffer Book Prize), *Stark Raving Blue* and *From Now On, You're Back*. Recent appearances include *Libre*, *Quibble Lit*, *The Words Faire*, and *North American Review*. He recently retired from teaching but still tutors young writers.

**Aleksander Zywicki**, author of *ZOUNDS!* (winner of the 2024 Barrow Street Book Prize), holds an MFA from the New School. His work appears in *Plume*, *Gulf Coast*, *Laurel Review*, *Seneca Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Bear Review*, *Shō Poetry Journal*, and more. A recipient of fellowships from the Martha's Vineyard Institute for Creative Writing and the Folger Shakespeare Library, he teaches English at The Hudson School in Hoboken, New Jersey.

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