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## Laurie King-Billman

Laurie King-Billman is

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## Couples Like Us

[Laurie King-Billman](#)

On the ride to the airport, I am thinking of the last scene of *Casablanca*. The part where the lovers embrace for the last time. My husband and I are Rick and Elsa, headed to different places, different worlds. Once we thought we were as close as two people can get.

I am crying. My husband of thirty-two years stops at a gas station so I can get coffee, and tissues to mop up my tears. It is four in the morning, and the dark shadows of lush trees and flowering bushes of a southern July dawn crowd the sides of the empty highway. In an hour I will be taking a plane to a place where vegetation takes a backseat to sky, and distant mountains surround my valley. A place where I no longer live with him.

I have bought a house on ten acres in Colorado and adopted six cats. I have a new job, but still keep my old name. The name I got from him. We are stuck in a hell of surrender and fight, where hope is slowly giving up but still letting out a few cries. A part of me wants him to try and woo me back, while another part thinks it is useless, imagining that another woman is on his mind in a way that I have not been in years. I am angry and hurt but am strong-willed enough to at least physically move on. He has found intimacy on the Internet, and I have been reluctant to even try flirting with other men. I do not feel like a more moral person, just a slower one. Despite how much this all has broken my heart, I feel disloyalty writing about it. None of his three "friendships" have stuck, or lasted, so maybe there is hope. That and those thirty-two years have kept me from finding a lawyer.

\*\*\*

He is a wonderful person in so many ways. He is helping to raise our granddaughters who lost their father to immigration. He is insanely loyal to our daughters. A family man in good ways that have kept us being best friends despite this bitter wave of pain lapping up upon the shores of all our encounters. I have a stream of *whys* that I hurl at him like machine gun bullets; he lacks answers. When he says he still loves me and only me, I believe it. Reader, feel free to think I am a sucker, but to my own defense, I did move thousands of miles away to avoid being further hurt.

These days my anger is one of the main hurdles between us. I turn it on him in walls of flame that quickly turn inward, burn down my self-esteem in blazes of self-consciousness, and defy my resolve to cut this raving out. Did I depend too much on him for identity, as I made the compromises to raise my daughters, while he contributed the larger salary and moved further along in his career? We did many things differently than typical couples. I gave birth to one daughter in a third world country and adopted another from the same country. We became a biracial, bilingual family, and I believe we did it well. Yet here we are in such a damn typical marital impasse.

I have resisted turning for help to the industry of heartbreak fixers who offer up solutions on the Internet and TV. They cry out with quick answers to weight gain, offer elixirs to youth, claim they can tell you for a price how to keep your skin and love fresh. I am a feminist after all and never believed in too much artifice to maintain anything. However, I must admit to buying a few pricey creams that I forgot to use. Could they have saved my marriage?

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According to the ads, yes.

My husband has also been a strong supporter of women’s rights and seems horrified at how late middle age has tricked him into the age-old wonder at youth. Some days he seems as distressed as me over what has happened and as surprised.

We have both had rewarding careers and are in the sage stage of recognition for our knowledge to most of our younger colleagues. Though I have found myself put in a few old folks’ corners and shunned for my years, usually I feel respected.

This situation has made me feel my years in a very painful way. We should be enjoying this time together, as we have always shared our separate fields with each other. I sometimes think that the developmental stage we have not made it through, however, is that balance of autonomy versus harmony. Did we grow too close for comfort and stop our individual growth? We did not have a perfect marriage, of course, but it worked for so long.

When we pull back onto the highway, from buying me coffee, he asks, “Haven’t you cried enough?”

Good question. How long does this kind of grief continue? How long before you give up and move on in both your body and your heart? I feel that I am dealing with a death.

The end of a marriage is the end of a unique culture, one with its own language, values, business, mission, and way of marking time. Our stories are held dear by our children. I have heard these tales repeated by my two girls to their friends with a kind of reverence: the way we met on a construction site in a ditch, actually; the time my husband defended me with a lawn chair; how each of my daughters went to buy a swimsuit in separate stores and came out with the exact same suit. Like many families we have our own holiday rituals, the presenting of my husband’s apple pie at Thanksgiving being one of the best.

An anniversary got me stuck in this particular week. I had flown back for a few days to help one of my daughters with some legal issues. He was traveling but called to say, “Stay until I’m home so we can be together for our anniversary.” I agreed, not realizing how painful those extra days would be. Now, here we are, driving toward the end-game *Casablanca* scene where Elsa says good-bye to Rick, even though it is obvious she still loves him. The noble cause for us is to simply stop the world war we have been waging in our home for the past five years, ever since I discovered certain pictures on his laptop, and he began to long for more space in his life. It was, of course, cliché; she was young. For him it was the discovery of money I carelessly spent when he was gone. Money we desperately needed to assure college for our girls. Money, I hear, is the biggest cause for marital fights, a spender always paired with a saver. This certainly held true for us.

“How many trips to this airport have we made?” I ask, blowing my nose and sipping a latte.

“Probably about eighty,” he says, relieved not to be talking about our broken marriage.

It was usually me driving him to the airport, then immediately turning around to resume the life of raising our two girls alone. Was this one of the stressors, we asked each other? If so, why did things finally fall apart when that child-raising job reached a less intense phase with young adult children? Are we just another story of “empty-nest divorce,” where we just grew apart? It does not feel to me like a clean separation, as parts of us are still merged. Our children, our love of travel, our taste in music and quirky literature, but number one our humor all roll into a ball hard not to toss over and over at each other. I feel like I will need a very sharp knife to get it all separated out.

I have not lived with him eight months now. My life is lived two thousand miles away from the town where I was

born. He didn't believe I'd go, and it took me three years, three years since our marriage went into that stage where denial no longer worked for either of us. So what is holding us in this stage of still-married-but-living-apart? We are sickened by the thought of hiring lawyers, splitting up assets. I have had trouble with the idea of changing my name back from the one I have carried twice as long as my childhood name. He has had a strange conviction that I am his soul mate. We still love each other in our own ways, talking daily through instant messenger. Once we were proud of our ability to outlast so many others; obviously this pride is false. When I am with him, I cry often, a very unflattering thing for a sixty-year-old woman to do. Are there other couples like us, painfully entangled, unable to part for good? Now that people are living longer lives, will it become more difficult to stretch love out over the years?

We do not hug good-bye when I go to the curbside check-in at the airport. We are just two people going our separate ways. He drives off without looking back. When the amused baggage handler types in my ticket and says, "Lady, your flight is for six p.m., not a.m.," I am stunned. What to do with the extra twelve hours? I go for a coffee in a just-opened Starbucks and think about hanging out at the airport—not appealing. He does not have a cell phone, so I cannot make a "turn back" call. But in the strange synchronicity that develops in close relationships, my call goes through to him the minute he walks in the door at home. He laughs, says, "I'll be right there." The synchronicity can be a curse; we will often get sick or blue or elated at the same time. We both love to write and will call each other from all those miles away either in a good flow or blocked state at the same time. When he picks me up, we are both less stressed and talk about our kids and our jobs in a light way, rare to these separation times. The day is filled with the weak light of early dawn, and having slept very little the night before, we tumble into the bed we have shared for many a year to enjoy a deep, relieved sleep. His snoring is like background ocean waves—a familiar comfort. A sound that means the world has taken on that old normal I often crave. When we wake, we reach out to each other and pull into that dance of bodies, once the glue that held us together. It feels absolutely wonderful.

That dance eventually became interrupted by high-stress jobs, children, illness, and the rupture such things as the Internet can cause to the seal of intimacy. We could have done better, but the years flew by so fast, it was hard to take stock before things went wrong, before it was too late.

On this morning we have back the harmony of other times. For the rest of the day, we enjoy an easy rapport and watch our granddaughters play in the warmth of it. My bag is ready when it is time to once again drive to the airport.

This time, when he pulls up to the curb, we embrace. We are still sad Rick and Elsa with a last kiss; that may be the last time we have this intimacy. Our problems are that hill of beans Bogie talked about, but to us they became a mountain we cannot climb.

Nothing has been solved. Our marriage was at one time an inspiration to the young people we knew. People need to believe that love is the one card that can stay constant. Now our marriage is probably a cautionary tale. As I board the plane back to my new life, I ask myself, Would I have dressed up in white, said "I do," and continued to do for as long as I did, knowing how it all would end? Would I have stood and repeated the age-old words of commitment and love if I had realized just how long till death do us part could be? Had I known the eventual outcome, would I have said yes?

I decide I would. The plane lifts off. And I think of how in *Casablanca* Rick comforts Elsa as they part for good, by talking of the wonderful days of love they had. "We'll always have Paris," he said. My husband and I will always have the memories of the many towns and cities we lived in, of the crazy years from the seventies to now, of the beautiful girls we helped launch in this world. That thought makes me smile as my plane lifts off into a clear blue sky.

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## Pam Munter

Pam Munter has authored several books including *When Teens Were Keen: Freddie Stewart and The Teen Agers of Monogram*. She's a retired clinical psychologist and former performer. Her essays and short stories have appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Manifest-Station*, *The Coachella Review*, *Lady Literary Review*, *NoiseMedium*, *The Creative Truth*, *Adelaide*, *Litro*, *Angels Flight—Literary West*, *TreeHouse Arts*, *Persephone's Daughters*, *Better After 50*, *Canyon Voices*, *Open Thought Vortex*, *Fourth and Sycamore*, *Nixes Mate*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Cold Creek Review*, *Communicators League* and others. Her play *Life Without* opened the staged reading season at *Script2Stage2Screen* in Rancho Mirage, California and was a semi-finalist in the *Ebell* of Los Angeles Playwriting Competition. She'll receive her MFA in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts in June from the University of California at Riverside/Palm Desert. [www.pammunter.com](http://www.pammunter.com)

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Geraldo  
Nonfiction

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## Geraldo

[Pam Munter](#)

It was not unusual for me to be filmed in my office. Since getting my Ph.D. and moving to Oregon, I had made frequent local and regional appearances, commenting on whatever disaster was in the news. Whether the Iran hostage crisis or the slaughter in Jonestown, I was often on TV, formulating what I hoped was an informed psychological context. I was a regular on a local morning talk show, too. I enjoyed being a media psychologist. I often recorded the shows in which I appeared and studied them so I could make improvements in my public persona and wardrobe. It was like watching someone I didn’t know and I often grimaced as I observed that person on the screen. But I was a determined student and, over time, the appearances fell more in line with what I expected of myself. I learned not to blink so much, to speak without ‘uhs,’ and to dress more simply.

And now, sitting across from me in a yellow-green leather chair in my office was television personality and icon Geraldo Rivera. He had flown in his camera crew, his girlfriend du jour and his segment producer from New York to interview me for his highly rated ABC program, *20/20*. I had just finished a morning full of clients in a busy clinical psychology practice in Beaverton, Oregon. It was 1979.

Rivera was known for his belligerence. He had a reputation for combativeness, both physical and intellectual, and I was determined to avoid getting caught up in anything resembling that. I knew he would present a challenge unlike any other interviewer.

Being a psychologist on TV wasn’t an easy task in the 1970s nor was it as ubiquitous as it is today. Psychological and psychiatric information was pretty much owned by those professional associations, accessible primarily to those who had earned advanced degrees. The specter of television shrinks was threatening to the preeminent psychology establishment, the American Psychological Association. The professional organizations watched over us as if we were errant children, hoping to forestall any violation of unethical behavior. I’m not sure they wanted us on TV at all, really. It escalated the risks of professional embarrassment.

There was a fine line between offering commentary and giving individual advice, though. The former was acceptable but the latter could be grounds for an ethics complaint and even the equivalent of disbarment. The APA frowned on providing anything resembling therapy or therapeutic interpretations if the doctor had never met the patient. If I had been asked, for instance, what I thought about a certain actor who had been arrested several times for spousal abuse, I would likely begin to discuss the conditions under which abuse often takes place, the usual scene when the police arrive, etc., without ever mentioning the celebrity or what I thought about his guilt or innocence. It was a thin line, to be sure.

In the years between 1970 and 1980, the ‘sudden growth’ pop psychology movement had emerged and flourished. It’s likely not coincidental that its rise paralleled the popularity of cults like Scientology and the Unification Church (aka the ‘Moonies’). After the tumult of the 1960s, people seemed to be looking for a different kind of metamorphosis. They had changed the social and political landscape; now they sought similar radical changes within.

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While I had been a civil rights demonstrator in the 1960s and a vocal advocate for social change, I had little sympathy for this new pop psychology movement. I could see it being potentially dangerous to many, especially in the hands of the untrained. And it almost always was. The trainers were simply people who had weathered the rigors of the courses provided by the cult. No further education in mental health required.

The notion of do-it-yourself personal growth became more accessible with the creation of Psychology Today magazine, though it took years for it to catch on after its 1969 debut. It's no surprise that its first publisher was the American Psychological Association itself, exerting its influence over the dissemination of information. The door had been opened, however, and all comers raced to capitalize on this burgeoning market. Now you didn't have to pay for expensive therapy to "find yourself." You could read a magazine or spend a weekend with others similarly seeking rapid personality change. The most successful purveyors of this lucrative pseudo-therapeutic and often dangerous movement were est and Lifespring.

It seemed inevitable that this fad would intersect my life. In the 1970s, I had a full time teaching load in clinical psychology at Portland State University, eventually as a tenured Associate Professor. I also had a full-time private practice in a Portland suburb. I loved both as they demanded my intellectual and emotional resources on a daily basis. During this decade, I had married and had a son but by the end of it, I had terminated the marriage, juggling joint custody with his father. It sometimes seemed as if I were undergoing my own growth processes during a very busy life.

I had heard about est and Lifespring. The latter had been founded in 1974 as an offshoot of est. And liberal, well-educated Portland seemed to be Growth Central for the movement. The groups were ubiquitous and wildly popular. Soon, I was fielding inquiries about them from the media. Did I know there had been adverse experiences, psychotic breaks, even some deaths as a result of their rigorous, confrontational training? What did I think of this?

Before the Age of Google or even the personal computer, it took a lot of research to answer those questions. First, I discovered that Lifespring had located its profitable Portland headquarters on the banks of the Willamette River, just blocks from my office at Portland State. The more I heard and read, the more concern I felt. Students discussed their experiences with me, but only under anxiety and duress as if they feared some unnamed consequence. Part of the indoctrination was a promise not to reveal anything to others so "you won't spoil it for your friends." As they started to talk about it, I was surprised at their evangelical zeal. They described the afterglow as "life-changing" and seemed more than eager that all their friends take the course. In reality, they were pressured to proselytize, to "put asses in seats," as founder John Hanley had coarsely demanded.

As I waited for the interview to begin, I wondered if Geraldo had interviewed Hanley. They were alike in some ways but not as smart as they thought they were, ego-driven and dangerously charismatic. Both sported an arrogance that often comes with power.

My opinion was of interest to the media because I had begun seeing some casualties from the training. People came into my psychotherapy office deflated, depressed, unsure of their lives and their commitments. It's as if all the stuffing had been extracted from them. Therapy became a rebuilding process, centering on meaning, wants and needs and trying to undo the painful memories of their often destabilizing Lifespring experiences.

Lifespring, along with other similar groups, used many of the same techniques as those engaged in brainwashing during the Korean War. There were three parts to the training: personal attacks by the leaders intended to rapidly uncover often painful or embarrassing secrets, a public catharsis often accompanied by crying or screaming, and a "rebuilding" done at the end by the Lifespring trainers and always accompanied by affirming applause by the group.

People were isolated from friends and family for long hours during the five-day period; food, water and even bathroom breaks were legislated by authoritarian leaders, the rules dictated at the first session. If people left the room, they were pursued and entreated to return. Most damaging was the breaking down of people's habitual defense system, done by public harassment and degradation. In the more advanced training, which the trainees were pressured to attend, the inductee was required to act on some long-standing fear in order to confront and theoretically erase it, often at their peril. If accomplished, praise was heaped, declarations of mental health bestowed with the person ending on a fabulous high. Many people seemed to walk on air in a state of euphoria for at least for six months, which was the maximum period the giddiness seemed to last.

In early cult research, an overwhelming number of "graduates" rated the training to be "valuable" or "very valuable." Psychologists knew this to be the result of a well-known phenomenon known as "cognitive dissonance." Subjects in experiments always praised their results more highly if they were made to undergo a painful or embarrassing process. "I would not," one tells oneself, "undergo such discomfort if it hadn't been totally worth it." So goes the psychological axiom.

By the late 1970s, I had given numerous interviews to magazines, newspapers, TV and radio about the dangers inherent in all manner of cult-like experiences, including Synanon and Scientology. Then I was contacted by a Seattle attorney who had been retained by the survivors of victims who had died during or shortly after Lifespring trainings. He asked if I would be interested in working with him as an expert witness.

This was a familiar and comfortable role for me. I had served in this capacity many times, often on the side of the defense in criminal and civil litigation. Like media psychology, there was something wonderfully theatrical about sitting in the witness box. I even relished a tough cross-examination since I was always well-prepared with my diagnoses and conclusions.

The cases against Lifespring were of national importance due to the number of deaths starting to mount. Eventually, there were over 30 lawsuits, ranging from inducing psychosis, to suicide, to wrongful deaths. Attorney Richard Stanislaw met me in my office to discuss the first case. Artie, a blue-collar worker in his 20s, had nearly drowned as a child and was afraid of the water. He never learned to swim. During an "advanced training," Lifespring leaders had convinced him that he needed to confront that fear to move forward in his life. It was decided he would swim across the Willamette River (from the eponymous "Lifespring Island"), but sadly he only made it part way across, drowning in the early-morning attempt. His surviving family filed a wrongful death lawsuit.

As the expert witness, my job was to dissect the process that led to this tragedy, how someone like non-swimmer Artie would agree to such a seemingly doomed endeavor. Why would he violate what seemed to be common sense and take that kind of fatal risk?

Over the course of the next few months, I met often with Stanislaw, informing him of the brainwashing aspects of the program, how Artie was likely made to unburden himself in front of all the other people, and how he would surely have been publicly shamed and embarrassed if he refused to take on the task assigned by the leaders. His personal weaknesses were probably exploited, as he gave over control of his life to these powerful leaders and was under extreme psychological duress, much like a POW.

As I studied this cult further, my biggest concern was that there were no conventionally trained mental health counselors anywhere to be seen. The entire leadership consisted of Lifespring graduates who had survived their own brutal indoctrination, and taught how to lead these groups by those with similarly inadequate formal mental health education. It turned out they were effective in breaking down a person but not so skilled in reconstruction, especially with those who might be more at risk. But because there was no screening of the trainees, the

leadership had no idea who might be the most vulnerable. It could be anyone who showed up the first night, but especially those with some unresolved trauma, who had pre-existing mental health issues or had suffered childhood abuse - the most psychologically fragile. They would be pushed beyond their own limits with no trained professionals to pick up the pieces. It was a frightening scenario.

There had been more than 30 lawsuits during the late 70s, some of which were decided against Lifespring for large sums. None of the suits in which I was involved actually went to court. Apparently, the information and opinions in the depositions were sufficient to motivate Lifespring to settle. I was developing a reputation as a cult buster in the media and, apparently, in the courtroom.

As I was finishing up work on Artie's wrongful death suit, I got a call from a producer from ABC's 20/20, then as now a top-rated television show. They were doing a two-part story about Lifespring and wondered if I would be willing to discuss it on camera with Geraldo Rivera. By now, I had become something of an expert on Lifespring and was even serving on a national committee on cults for the American Psychological Association, traveling to D.C. for meetings.

Of course, I responded. But he'll have to come to my office and coordinate the interview with my work schedule. I had many clients with regular time slots and it was essential to avoid a disruption or any possible upset.

Geraldo and his crew had arrived early and were waiting in the library when I emerged from my session. I showed them around the office suite so they could select the best location for the shoot. As I followed Geraldo down the hall, the effluvia in his wake made it nauseatingly clear he had not had time to shower that morning. Had he been flying on the red eye from New York? Or was this his norm? The grease in his hair looked as if it had missed the last 5000-mile oil change.

I excused myself to go to the restroom where I ran into a woman who introduced herself as his girlfriend, and just part of the entourage. Checking myself in the mirror, I reapplied my makeup and headed back to the office.

I assumed Geraldo wanted to hear about my direct experiences with the Lifespring casualties. He likely had people doing research for him but he would surely appreciate hearing from one who had treated some of the victims of this insidious pyramid scheme. He was known for his incisive questioning, for having taken a point of view before the interview. I was nervous but prepared.

Geraldo sat back in the therapist's chair while I was opposite him on the couch. Once the lights were set, Geraldo began the questioning. To my disappointment, he wasn't at all interested in my experiences with Lifespring casualties. Nor did he want to hear about my specific concerns about the program. He knew what he knew and that was apparently sufficient, so I was making more general statements. I commented on the lack of training of the trainers, the lack of screening, the dropouts who were dogged by the Lifespring staff to return. Half way through the interview, he stopped me, shaking his head with impatience.

Could you say something more dramatic about this?

I'm not sure what you mean, I said.

Your words aren't strong enough. You're being too careful. I need something more forceful.

I began to worry that he wanted more than I was comfortable delivering. I couldn't discuss the recent lawsuits still

in process. I expressed my concern about the lack of mental health safeguards in this “sudden growth” organization, but it still wasn’t “tough” enough.

He seemed satisfied, however, when I concluded, “Based on all the information I have about it, I would say that Lifespring is hazardous to your health. I would advise people not to go anywhere near it.” A sound bite made for TV.

The gang packed up and I met my next client in the waiting room who was stunned to have seen such a famous face leaving my office. “Was that really Geraldo Rivera?” she asked.

Because I had sometimes seen publically recognizable people in therapy, there was a separate exit door away from the waiting area, but Geraldo and company unsurprisingly opted for the more flamboyantly public departure.

I thought I had done a good job with the interview while exercising caution and not slipping into personal invective or overstating the dangers. I thought about it several times over the course of the next few days and looked forward to seeing the programs.

The shows aired, were well reviewed, and I didn’t think anything more of it. Well, OK, I admit to having a brief fantasy of our two-part show winning an Emmy.

Then after several months passed, I got a call from someone in ABC’s legal department in New York.

“You’re being sued by Lifespring for over a hundred million dollars.”

My first response was to laugh. “What?”

“Yes. You, Roone Arledge, Geraldo Rivera, the staff of “20/20” and ABC News are equal parties to the suit.” He told me an ABC attorney would fly in to meet with me within the week.

Did he say a hundred million dollars?

I hung up the phone and stood in my office, head filled with white noise. What did this mean? Could they take everything I own, my career, my reputation, my future? A hundred million dollars? For a few words on television? Words I knew to be true, even measured?

Gathering my wits, I called Dick Stanislaw in Seattle and told him the situation. Soothingly cool, he told me he would represent me if necessary and be with me during all court matters. But, he advised, “ABC should indemnify you since the allegedly litigious words occurred on its program. No matter what, this shouldn’t cost you anything except time, of course.” I felt reassured by his statement of support. At least, I wouldn’t be dealing with this by myself. I had no idea how time-consuming this would become, not to mention disruptive on an emotional level.

ABC’s sharkskin-suited attorney on the case, Warren Wilson, arrived in Portland a few days later. We met for dinner at Trader Vic’s in downtown Portland. I thought it a good choice as the restaurant was known for its stiff drinks.

He was waiting for me and stood as I approached the table.

“Good to meet you, Dr. Munter.”

“Please. Call me Pam. Looks like we’ll be working together on this problem. I am very upset about all of this, as you can imagine.”

“Yes. But you needn’t worry. ABC gets sued all the time. We see this as a nonsense suit.”

“Doesn’t feel like nonsense to me.”

The server came over and I ordered a Mai Tai. It was there almost immediately, as if she had seen me coming.

“Yes. I can understand. There will be depositions and numerous delays in a suit like this. It could take years.”

“Years?” I gasped. “Can they win?”

“Well, we hope not. They will harass you any way they can. They’re hoping you and the rest of those being sued will capitulate. A favorite tactic is to intimidate you and wear you down.”

The Mai Tai started to have its way with me. “Warren, if I’m looking at two years of my life under this kind of stress, I have to know I won’t be liable in case there’s a settlement in their favor. I expect ABC to indemnify me.”

“Yes. Well, we can talk about that later.” Oh, no, I thought. I can’t put this off. It had been the only thing on my mind since the papers arrived. I was trying not to resent his seeming nonchalance.

“Before I jump on board with you, I have to have an assurance I’ll be protected legally. I don’t want to threaten you, really, but you have to know that if I’m held liable for a penny of this, I will sue the shit out of ABC.”

“Yes. I understand.” He didn’t flinch. “I will consult with the legal team in New York and get back to you very soon. I can’t make that decision now.” Could he have been surprised by my demand? Did other codefendants in all the other suits to which ABC was a party just roll the dice and hope for the best?

With the ingestion of the alcohol and the hope of indemnification, I relaxed a little. We started to talk about the “human potential movement” and the emergence of Lifespring. These groups always thrived best in secrecy so the “students” would be blind-sided by all the confrontation and deprivation. I was beginning to identify with their stress levels.

“They want to silence you. They want you off their back. You’ve been a powerful foe.”

“Dick said there are more cases coming down the line besides the ones we’re already working on and I have agreed to work with him.”

“I would advise you to be very selective and careful about that. And I need to tell you we are asking you to stop commenting on Lifespring in the media while the legal action is going on.”

So, it seemed that even if Lifespring lost this suit, they had won on a bigger front. They had neutralized my commentary. In the coming days, I fielded calls from Charlie Rose’s office and a “Sixty Minutes” producer, but I had to tell them I was not able to appear because of the pending hundred-million-dollar lawsuit. A hundred million dollars. It still stunned.

Two weeks later, Wilson called with the news I had been indemnified by the network and would not be responsible for any possible monetary judgment. I was pleased, of course, but it did not alleviate my anxiety. I was dealing with

two big corporations here, caught in the middle, punished for doing what I thought was responsible and ethical. My fear played hopscotch with my anger.

Though Lifespring had no documented history of violence, I knew its marketing and retention strategies were aggressive at best. And I was well aware that the media had reported alleged episodes of violence in other cults like Scientology and Synanon. I had been an expert witness in cases involving both. The shocking mass slaughter/suicide of the followers of Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple had happened only the year before. I was becoming more cognizant of all things around me Ð noises, shadows, hang-up calls on the phone. If out after dark, I started carrying a flashlight and kept my keys ready in my hand when I went to my car. One night, before going to sleep I looked up through the skylight in my second story bedroom. I knew I was way overstressed when I wondered if Lifespring was monitoring me in some way.

Wilson had been right about being swallowed up by the process. The next two years were filled with constant demands for my records, frequent depositions by both ABC and Lifespring attorneys, numerous phone conferences, and a truckload of angst. Many times, several hours were carved out of an already busy day to meet with the Lifespring attorney and Stanislaw. I appreciated that Stanislaw was there to protect my rights, especially regarding client confidentiality, but it was inevitably tense. Lifespring and the lawsuit had competed for space in my crowded life and I was getting worn down. Wilson flew in from New York several more times and we always met over dinner and drinks. At least, the ABC people ate well.

Finally, late one afternoon between clients, Wilson called to tell me that ABC had settled the case with Lifespring. No one would tell me the exact amount but I understood it to be a token low double-digit number I guessed to be around \$20,000. I was disgusted that a major media outlet had been bullied by this dangerous organization, rewarded for their irresponsible behavior. At the same time, I was relieved I had my life back. My stomach unclenched for the first time in two years.

Within a few years, Lifespring closed its headquarters in Portland and reduced its presence on the national scene. Eventually, Lifespring morphed into a new and similar organization, like Whack-A-Mole, perhaps in an attempt to clean the legal slate and bring in new, unsuspecting recruits. The controlling, authoritarian structure and brainwashing techniques remained, altered slightly to avoid further legal complications.

The perennial human hope for change and renewal knows no decade or age group. WeÐ all like a quick fix to our problems and worries. While trauma can happen in an instant, real personality change requires a much longer commitment. For those not wanting to put in the time and the work, groups like Lifespring will always have a place in our culture, by whatever name they become known. One sure antidote to the perilous flim-flam is an ongoing educational process emphasizing the development of critical thinking, using proven, scientific methods as tools to evaluate any potentially life-changing experience before jumping in. Unfortunately, there arenÐt any shortcuts to long-lasting personal growth.

While my life had been flipped on its head for a couple of years, it eventually returned to normal. There had been no major life lessons learned here. The phrase Ðunintended consequencesÐ comes to mind, but I did what I thought was appropriate all the way along this pothole-filled path. Would I have done anything any differently? No.

During the agonizing two years of anxiety and worry, I never again heard from Geraldo Rivera. HeÐs still on TV, his persona having morphed to fit the times. Perhaps because of his many years as a controversial broadcaster, he has become inured to massive lawsuits and threats to his wellbeing. I never did.

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## Jim Kelly

Jim Kelly is a retired traveling salesman whose work has been featured in War Literature & the Arts, Harvard Review and is forthcoming in Chicago Quarterly Review.

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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: Certain Men

[Jim Kelly](#)

What is it about certain men? How you don't forget things they say. Things they do. Like Mr. Brown from my growing up. He was a handyman in a small town in northern Michigan. Did odd jobs for my Grandpa. Opened the cottage up in the spring. Got the pump running so we'd have water. Put the docks in. Painted the rowboat. Made sure we had plenty of split cord wood for fires on cold nights. He never looked at us. Never spoke to us. Like for him kids didn't exist. Just things to ignore, step around.

He had a long, yellow gray face, wore the same sun bleached ball cap every summer and he didn't smile. Each time he lit a cigarette, and he smoked them one after another, he did the same thing. Closed his eyes and took a long pull. Pull that collapsed his cheeks and set off a whistling, tin foil crackle deep in his chest. Then, eyes still watery shut, he'd snap his mouth open and hold it that way, not breathing. Smoke drifted or hung in place until he'd cough. Cough and spit in rattly little bursts.

Shot him he said. I was by myself that morning making sandcastles with a red plastic bucket on our little bit of sandy beach. Mr. Brown and his helper were laying out and nailing together new sections for our dock. Fuck was that nigger thinking, fishing in our lake? Tell you one thing, won't nobody ever find the body. Did they laugh then, he and his helper, that thick bodied teenager with sun burnt face and arms? I can't remember. What I do remember is how the helper was always stopping what he was doing to run a hand back and forth across his bristly, flattop haircut and say Goddam it's hot, I could really use a cold beer about now.

After my grandparents died and the cottage got sold I never saw Mr. Brown again. Uncle Leo told us, years later, that his helper had married right out of high school, worked driving truck for the local gravel pit, had seven or eight kids, one right after the other, then died young of some quick cancer. I heard what the man said. But, all these years later, can I say that he really shot somebody? Killed a stranger for being black, black and not from around there? Maybe he was just making it all up. Telling a story. Sad sack old guy trying to impress a big strong teenager. Kid who could work circles around him. Make the kid think better of him.

Palace Quality. Laundry delivery man. Picked up one load, delivered another all bundled in brown, paper wrapped packages once a week. Palace Quality, Palace Quality he'd shout, letting himself in by our kitchen door. If I answered he'd ask for my Mom. If she answered he'd stand there with his arms crossed, leaning against the counter like he had all day, winking and talking, laughing loud. He wore a blue uniform and said things to me, if I was outside when he was leaving, like he was letting me in on a big secret.

One time he walked right into our kitchen shouting Palace Quality like usual when my Aunt Alice stopped him cold. Told him to quiet down, put down the laundry and leave. My Mom was sick and Alice was there taking care of her. That Aunt of yours he said, leaning in close is a fat pig. Is ten pounds of shit in a five pound bag. Your Mom though, she's just my type. Exactly what Palace Quality likes. Big in all the right places. Nice personality too. Enjoys a joke. I'd do her in a heartbeat.

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“Dumb bitch” Mr. Johnson shouted. If he was sober he meant Princess, the dog he bought to breed bird dogs for extra cash. If he was drunk he meant his wife. They were next door neighbors, the Johnsons. He and my Dad used to get drunk and holler. Tell fight stories. Crack each other up. One time we were by for a cookout. It was dark, late and the coals weren’t started in the grill. His kids kept asking him when we were going to eat dinner. “When I’m good and goddamn ready to cook it” he shouted.

He walked into their living room looking back, talking over his shoulder. Princess was asleep on the floor. He hadn’t seen her, there were no lights on and he was moving fast for the kitchen to get more whiskey. He tripped and fell on his face. “Dumb bitch” he shouted, picking her up and throwing her hard against the wall. She hit dropped and lay still. Later that night my Dad helped him bury her by a stunted apple tree off at the far end of their weedy little back yard.

Certain men. You don’t forget the things they say. The things they do.



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## Kristin Lieberman

Kristin Lieberman has a JD from Albany Law School and an MFA from Antioch University, Los Angeles. Her work has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes in fiction and creative nonfiction. Her work has appeared in New Madrid, Epiphany, Stirring, McNeese Review, Diverse Arts Project and others. She was a 2017 winner of the Willow Review Award for nonfiction.

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## Home Not Home

[Kristin Lieberman](#)

1. I was born in 1955. Some other things that happened in 1955: Mary Louise Smith was arrested for violating Alabama bus segregation laws in Montgomery, Alabama, and Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger and was arrested for violating Alabama segregation laws.
2. My parents used the word "n-----" when referring to African-Americans. Early on, I knew it was a hate word and so did they.
3. Not that all Republicans are bigots, but all bigots I've known are Republicans.
4. When I asked my siblings or cousins for help with something and they didn't want to do it, they would tell me, "O'm not your n-----."
5. Later they would throw around this phrase: "O'm free, white, and over twenty-one." By then I was going to law school on the East Coast and I didn't engage. I asked them if they knew what they were saying. They did.
6. I'm pretty sure they are all registered Republicans.
7. It seemed like there was a liquor store on every block in my town. I was taken to most of them by my father. I checked out the comic books while he made his purchase. If he had twelve cents left, I scored the latest Superman comic book.
8. My father once told me that he would have joined the John Birch Society, but he didn't like meetings.
9. My father was a registered Republican.
0. My family believed that the only success in life that mattered was pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. A masculine pronoun was always assumed. A woman didn't pull herself up by her bootstraps, because women did not wear boots.
1. The examples I was given implied that only white men had bootstraps.
2. Also: What if you're too poor to own boots? What if you're disabled? No bootstraps for you.
3. I read a lot as a child. This led me to realize that the key to being successful was rooted in education, not in bootstraps.
4. I never felt like the town I grew up in was home. A place cannot be home unless there is love, understanding, and support. My mother loved and supported me, but never understood me.
5. The only place I ever really felt comfortable was the public library.
6. I often dreamed that I was Supergirl and was able to fly away from home. In my dreams I made a home in a spectacular cave, and all of the superheroes fell in love with me. I crushed on Clark Kent.
7. I didn't care much for Batman. There was enough moral darkness in my universe without dealing with Batman's baggage.
8. After my father beat my mother senseless for the final time, my parents separated. My mother obtained a restraining order against him for domestic abuse.
9. My father died of alcoholism when I was fifteen. The last time I saw him, I was holding hands with my boyfriend. He shouted that I was a whore and then drove away.
0. I cried at his funeral, but not because I missed my father. I missed having a father I could look up to.
1. I ran away to college when I was seventeen.
2. In 1971 the voting age was lowered to eighteen from twenty-one. I registered as a Democrat when I turned

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eighteen, at a supermarket near my college.

13. My first summer home from college I worked in our local doctor's office as a receptionist. He refilled a lot of prescriptions for painkillers. He didn't even see his probably addicted patients, he just phoned the pharmacy. One man died the night he received his last refill.
14. My second summer home from college I worked a split shift at Denny's, where I got into an argument with one of the regular customers who believed in absolute police power. He was a highway patrolman. That was the last summer I came home.
15. I've always lived in mostly white, sometimes Republican towns. My children went to predominantly white schools. Although I liked my houses, I never felt quite comfortable in my communities.
16. I have this disquieting feeling that I'm replicating the discomfort of my childhood, but without alcohol or Superman comics.
17. I keep thinking I should try harder to fit in; then I think I should just move away.

THE END



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## Maximus Adarve

Maximus Adarve is a Colombian-American artist and writer currently living in Chicago with roots and ties to Florida, Ohio, Spain, and Peru.

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## Ascension

[Maximus Adarve](#)

Capuli, Peru is about 2,000 feet higher up than Otuzco. Otuzco is about 9,000 feet above Trujillo, which is pretty much at sea level. There’s close to a million people in the Trujillo metro area, it’s the second biggest city in Peru, next to Lima. Trujillo is the capital of La Libertad Region, it’s right on the pacific coast and it’s beautiful. All the buildings are painted the color of guava, of melon, the color of sweet. The sky is blue and the streets are full of brightly colored Volkswagen Beetles that have been running since the 1960s. The people are brown, mostly mestizo, and smiling and you can get pretty decent ceviche and an Inca Cola for like three U.S. Dollars.

Otuzco, a one-and-a-half-hour bus ride into the Andes from Trujillo, is the capital of the Otuzco Province. Only about 25,000 people live there, in a manner consistent with older traditions from their colorful handmade dress to their speech and mannerisms, though there is a definite modern influence visible in the community. They’ve just recently received full electric, cellular, and internet coverage. People don’t drive, though there are these little motorized rikshah things that are bedazzled and embroidered with different words and animals and the like. Otuzco’s painted mudbrick and cinderblock compounds are surrounded on all sides by the deep green draped goliath peaks of the Andes.

Just 2,000 miles higher, Capuli doesn’t show up on Google Maps. It isn’t a capital; it barely has 50 people living in it. There’s no conflict between old and new, tradition and change, outsiders rarely visit. Those who do are from the cathedral down the mountain in Otuzco, they try and get up there at least twice a year to restock the general store, a small room on the first floor of a mudbrick home where a 12-year-old boy named Equin lives with his younger sister who helps him run the shop. The siblings, orphans, live in alone in one of the two buildings with electricity. The other is the schoolhouse/church where the men gather in the evenings to watch local favorite football team, Club Juan Aurich, on a 12-in. x 12-in. antennaed black and white TV that is regularly assaulted by thick white bars of static. The men always sit in silence on the dirt floor, the only light filling the cavern flickering simultaneously from the screen and a small candle, and smoke from pipes and cigarettes they rolled themselves. The people of Capuli, Peru don’t talk too much. The women look like babushka-wrapped owls, and the men wear dirty dungarees and have twinkling eyes set deep in their well-worn leathery faces. Capuli is at the top of the mountain, nothing sits above it but the stars at night and faint wispy clouds during the day.

If you went there, if you visited, if you took the flight from wherever, connected at Atlanta, flew seven hours south to Lima, took the eight hour bus ride to Trujillo, the hour and a half to Otuzco, then 45 minutes winding around the incredibly tight mountain passes up to Capuli with your bus hanging precariously over edges that seem to disregard how high up you really are and continue to drop for hundreds of thousands of miles, and you arrived, and you sat and waited until the sun fell away, you would see the entire dome of the universe enveloping you and everything around you, casting it in celestial blue, enclosing you inside a dark ball full of firely light and old myths about the origins of humanity.

But on the other hand, they don’t have any plumbing or running water. You would have to shit in a hole. And after

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a day or two of avoiding this inevitability, and eating a lot of the local cuisine—which consists of an absurd amount of potatoes—your belly is going to distend and bloat. So by that point you have two choices: 1) Shit in the hole immediately. Or: 2) Allow yourself to become the most constipated you’ve ever become, because if you think you’re allowed to go to this town and live in their mudbrick home, and use their resources and then refuse any food they offer you, you’re an idiot. If and when you give up and empty your soul into the hole-in-the-ground inside the outhouse, you might find yourself craving a shower. Don’t do it. Don’t. Why would you? Why would you take a big bucket and drag it over to the one singular water pump and—in front of everyone in the town—fill it with clean, fresh, cold, refreshing, water? Why would you take all of that water (still clean, fresh, cold, and refreshing) and pour it all over your nasty dirty body and onto the ground, all over the pig, cow, and sheep shit your more than likely standing in. Why would you do that?

Why did you do it already? Why have you been doing it every single day? They can see you, even from so far away.

Capuli might not be a capital city, it might not have too many people living within its borders, it might have never been incorporated, it might have one place of commerce that’s run by a twelve-year-old kid, it might be damn near impossible to get to, live in, or even find on a map, but it is really high off the ground. Almost 12,000 feet.

How far can you see from that high? Far enough.

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## Christine Holmstrom

Christine Holmstrom survived riots, an armed escape and a death threat while working at San Quentin prison. She finally had the good sense to retire and write about her experiences. Her work has been published in several literary journals. She is now wrestling with yet another unfinished draft of her prison memoir.

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## Save Me, Ratso Rizzo

[Christine Holmstrom](#)

*San Quentin State Prison*

Holy Mary, was that Dustin Hoffman? Rising on tiptoes to see over the scrum of correctional officers swarming toward the counter to check in for second watch, I'd strained to spot the famous actor. Yep, it was him, watching the early morning chaos. Dark and unkempt, Hoffman could've slithered up from one of the prison's dank subbasements—a no-man's land of noxious fumes, clanking pipes, and dripping effluent. Hoffman reminded me of an oversized, slightly comatose rodent's squinty eyes shut like he'd been bopped over the head. I flashed on his death scene as Ratso Rizzo in *Midnight Cowboy*. He looked like he'd just walked off the set—disheveled and sweaty.

What was he doing at San Quentin anyway? Was he planning on making a prison flick? Maybe Ratso would hire me for his next film. It wasn't a totally absurd thought. A recent made-for-TV movie, *Women of San Quentin*, had been partially based on two female officers at the prison. They hadn't been in the actual film, but their names were in the credits. Money must've been involved.

The movie sucked. In the climactic scene a major riot breaks out in the upper yard. The lady lieutenant, who's bonking a captain on the side, strides into the melee with inmates stabbing and punching each other, holds up her hand, and yells, "Boys, put down your weapons. Stop fighting." And they do. Absolute horse pucky. In real life the woman would've been sliced, diced, and left in a bloody pile on the asphalt. Heck, I could write the script for a more realistic prison movie in a New York minute. I pictured the closing credits, my name in big block letters, "Screenplay by É"

My rescue fantasies went into warp drive as I peeked at Hoffman. I'd get a part in his next movie—make it big like 1940's buxom, blonde actress Lana Turner, reportedly "discovered" sitting on a stool at a soda fountain in Hollywood, her double-D boobs thrust against her too-tight sweater, her shiny lips parted as if waiting for a kiss. Why not me? I was young and pretty, had a pushup bra in my lingerie drawer back home. But at the moment, swaddled in my prison sergeant's uniform, I resembled a beige-and-green barber pole. Bits of glazed donut clung to the corners of my mouth. I swiped at my face with the back of my hand. I was about as glamorous as a piece of fried dog shit.

Behind the cops stacking up in front of me, I'd spotted my latest crush, a dark-haired officer, a former tennis pro, who made my skin tingle. Umm. Ummm. Umm.

He threw me a grin. "Number 425."

"Wait, I've diverted you from the visiting room. You're doing a hospital transport instead." What I really wanted was to divert cutie pie to my bedroom. That wasn't going to happen. Last I heard he was living with some babe. Too bad.

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Now I'd have to call the visiting sergeant, apologize for stealing one of his cops, listen to him rant about being short-staffed. If this was a popularity contest, I'd be coming in last.

One thing was certain: I was ready to ditch this crummy prison job, where I might get raped or stabbed. Yeah, I acted like a badass bitch, but I was a cream puff pretending to be an Amazon warrior. Ratso Rizzo could be my savior.

Glancing his way, I sighed. Damn, he wasn't even looking at me. Screw it. I could take care of myself; I didn't need a man to save me. Even Dustin Hoffman.

I checked off the names of the three officers belying up to the counter. "Gotcha. Have a safe day."

Still, I wasn't quite ready to abandon my hopes. Should I slap on some lipstick? All I had in my Tuffy jacket was a tube of lip balm. Looking good for this job hadn't been high on my priority list.

Hoffman's brow was scrunched, his arms folded across his chest. He peered in my general direction. If I weren't trapped behind the counter with twenty cops barring the way, I might've walked over and introduced myself, asked a couple questions. Like: Want the real deal about prison? I'd make a fab consultant. Wanna hire me? By the way, you were terrific in *Tootsie*.

Was Hoffman married? Maybe I could be his new girlfriend's headline straight out of the *National Enquirer*. "Oscar-winning actor falls for prison guard."

Who was I kidding? The last thing I wanted was amorous interest from a short, swarthy dude who bore an uncanny resemblance to a sewer rat. But wait, hadn't Richard Burton laid a big rock's ten-carat diamond on some waitress just to show off? Last I heard, Hoffman wasn't carrying any oversized gemstones in his pockets. Besides, he was either terminally bored or taking a nap. No diamonds for me. Still, I kept glancing his way, trying to catch his eye.

When I was a kid, there was a TV show called *The Millionaire*, where the rich man's personal secretary would show up on some deserving person's doorstep and bestow a million bucks on the astounded recipient. Every afternoon I'd wait for the doorbell in our tract house to ring, for my check to arrive.

*Braaannng*. I snatched the substation desk phone, listened for a moment. "What do you mean you're down two staff?"

It was a lockup unit, sergeant. Two cops hadn't showed up for their shift. The clang of cell doors slamming, the PA blasting, and inmates shouting drifted from the phone's receiver, along with the sergeant's demand. I could almost smell the stench of moldering trash, the scent of greasy hash browns and fried eggs congealing on breakfast trays stacked on a battered, rolling food cart.

The lockup sergeant repeated, "How soon can you get me a couple officers? I've got yard to run in fifteen. Let me know who's comin' in." In the background steam heaters belched like an out-of-tune brass section.

I smacked my coffee mug against the ink- and donut-smudged countertop. The acidic scent of dark-roast Sumatra filled my nostrils. "How the hell am I gonna find someone? No one's ever home when I call; they've all trained their kids to lie. First watch is gone. What do you think I am, a fuckin' magician?"

ÖDonÖt swear. Just get me two cops.Ö The phone clicked. Silence.

What was this, fuckinÖ Sunday school? Cussing was my way of relieving stress. One thing for sure: I wasnÖt gonna let this job kill me, like the last two watch sergeants. The first man keeled over from a heart attack. The other one cranked on his car engine inside his garage, a hose strung between the tailpipe and passenger compartment. IÖd liked himÑhe was a real sweetie pie. When iÖd heard about the suicide, IÖd rushed to a bathroom to hide my sobs. Had to play tough around here. No crying allowed. But I didnÖt plan on becoming a victim of *karoshi*, death by overwork and stress. I needed a ticket out of this hellhole. IÖm counting on you, Ratso.

As the seven oÖclock rush faded, Hoffman nodded at the prison public relations officer, ready to head out to the next stop on his tour of our lovely little institution.

I scowled. Come on, man, pay attention. Look my way. Have your minions interview meÑget some honest background on women working in a menÖs max joint.

Hoffman oozed out the substation door, followed by the prison PR man and a couple big dudes who mustÖve been his bodyguards. So much for my chances of being discovered.

Tearing the edge off my second glazed donut of the morning, I wondered if IÖd consumed enough sugar to amp me up for the day. If a fight kicked off in one of the lockup exercise yards, IÖd be in deep doo-doo, especially when the ambulances came wailing in, giving me mere minutes to stealÑI mean ÖdivertÖ more cops from their regular assignments and send them out with the casualties.

I swiped at a stray lock of hair. Too bad about Hoffman. But why was I always waiting for someone to come rescue me? Probably because this job sucked, and I had no better prospects.

My choices in men had generally been pretty patheticÑnever Prince Charming material. Marriage hadnÖt worked. Husband number one was legally blind yet planned to be a used car salesman. He had to borrow bus fare from me to scuttle off on his fruitless job search. IÖd paid for our Reno Chapel of Love wedding and the divorce six months later. Note to self: just Öcause a guy gives you Screaming Mimi orgasms doesnÖt mean you should walk down the aisle with him. Hubby number two was a lying philanderer. Yeah, heÖd leap up on a table at our favorite fish joint and announce to the astonished diners, ÖI love this woman, sheÖs fabulous,Ö and pushed misspelled love notes across the bar where we both worked. Yet I knew he was a Lothario before IÖd even taken the Ötill death do us partÖ vows. Pretty soon I was sitting in a lawyerÖs office, forking out the dough for another divorce.

IÖd even gone into therapy, trying to unravel the cause of my continual romantic mishaps. A Birkenstock-wearing therapist with a scruffy beard insisted, ÖYou have issues with men.Ö IÖd always thought the problem was that IÖd picked men with issues.

As for Ratso Rizzo, heÖd evaporated along with my silly fantasy. Time to stop dreaming. IÖd made it this farÑlived through an armed escape, a death threat, and the Juneteenth riot. Accept reality. I wasnÖt a movie star; I was a fucking prison guard. Gulping down the last of my coffee, I focused on the watch sheet, wondering whom to call to fill those vacant positions.



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## Leslie Santikian

**Leslie Santikian** is a writer and professor of English and fiction writing, currently living in her hometown of beautiful Fresno, CA. She teaches at CSU Fresno and Clovis Community College. Her work has been published in *Blue Lyra Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, and the *San Joaquin Review*, among others. She isn't afraid to dig through used books, and uses any opportunity to be by the ocean.

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## Things I Want Back Now That You’ve Left Me

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Zombie paining, done in ochers and black, that I bought for your birthday two months early; I wanted to show that I knew what you loved from the beginning. Ridiculous bow it came wrapped in, big as a head. Pink bullet of gloss that fell under your front seat during date number four. Red, I thought, would scare you away, like a girl saying “Be with me” through color. Nylons left in your spare lawyer’s closet with the mirrored sliding- door. Pink toothbrush you bought me for our first night together, which I used for ten months without buying a new one. Zombie self-help book on top of your shelf. 2,000-miles-and-more worth of gas driving to and from your city, and then, your new house, all brick and mild blue paint, which I thought would be ours when your brother moved out and we married each other, kids filling our arms like bouquets. Passion fruit curd from The Mission that only I liked. Love for symphonies, graphic novels, and breakfast; dark beards, and San Luis Obispo; kissing during Sondheim revivals; used bookstores with names like Coalesce. Belief in the fateful magic of hummingbirds. Your recipe for how to make fried chicken in a cast-iron skillet, onion gravy simmering on the gas stove in a separate pan, waiting to be absorbed into rice. Your tongue in my ear as I watched chicken sizzle. Your nose rubbed against pulse-points in my neck. Stretchy blue sheets from your bed, yoga-pants-soft, smelling like your hair and skin, and fresh Lever 2000 soap. Sudden appreciation for flannel. Title you gave me as connoisseur of Trader Joe’s chocolates, which we ate by the handful while watching morning cartoons that made us feel young. Coffee packets saved from nights in hotels. Ability to eat pancakes in Exeter, at a diner shaped like a train car, full of characters. Eggplants from my grandma’s garden, and the piles of Armenian cucumber, long, ribbed and light green, which you threw in your salad like an afterthought. Giddiness I felt when we went to a cabin in the mountains for the first time, and your car got stuck in a driveway of hard-packed ice; I sped back and forth from the house to you with bowls of hot water steaming the air, up and down the steep driveway, imagining myself in an episode of *I Love Lucy*. Days (there must have been thousands) before I knew Persian-Scottish men set me on fire. Confidence that I could cook like your mother. Brown wicker basket in which I arranged calla lilies, moss, delphinium, and ivy for a housewarming gift; don’t send the actual plants, which your brother pulled out one by one a week later, shoving each in glass dollar-store vases positioned all over the house (your family never let anything only be yours). Spaces in my chest where I kept you safe, holes that gape open without you. New Year’s card where I wrote, “I want to do more of everything with you.” Post-it stuck on your desk, saying, “Hey there, sailor!” (I was into Rita Hayworth, then.) Nights without thoughts of you and me running to each other from endless distances, bodies oozing heat on contact. Cellphones not filled with your voice, or words. Pride created when we sang a duet together one morning, in different rooms, our voices bound together by air and intention, knowing the same song and lyrics by heart. Glow that glazed my whole body when you said, like a fact, that I was a living painting stretched in your bed. Pair of storm-colored underwear I gave you to keep in your drawer, after I left for a Baltic cruise with my family; I remember rocking back and forth in the middle of black ocean, imagining you touching it with your fingers, stretching it within an inch of its life. Blanket I crocheted for you before I left for the Baltic, made with dark and painful blue yarn. Love of free Wi-Fi from tour buses, so I could send emails to you from all eight cities, so you’d see them with me: every statue and house, every calZ and shard of amber or chocolate. Postcard of the Danish man in a battered straw hat, in front of a farmhouse, that I said would be you in 50 years; afterwards, I searched hard for a woman somewhere in the frame so I could say us in 50 years. Souvenirs hoarded in my suitcase for you, beneath everything else: tiny Vasa in a bottle; cheeseboard made from Finnish cedar; bricks of Russian green tea in an

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octagon case; Gdansk magnet of a bulging Poseidon; clay mug from Estonia wrapped in a skirt, then thrust deep in my carry-on, broken pieces haunting me all 12 hours. Refuge I felt before you called me that night, shouting fears about us and your life, self-hatred coursing through your body like unhealthy blood. Who I was when you hung up the phone. Gold earring back on your nightstand, next to the clock. I left it on purpose. Everything I left in your house was on purpose.

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## Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb

Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb's work has appeared in *Depth Insights Journal*, *Watershed Review*, *The Conium Review*, *Terrain.org*, *Pedestal Magazine*, and many others, with work forthcoming in *Weber: The Contemporary West*, *Clockhouse*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *The American Journal of Nursing*, and others. In addition to past Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominations, her work more recently received Honorable Mentions from both Port Yonder Press and Erbacce Press. She is co-founder of Native West Press, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit natural history press.

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## The Ciudad Juarez Side of Sunrise

[Yvette A. Schnoeker-Shorb](#)

This corridor between  
the ranges is strange.  
I watch those shadowy  
craggy mountains  
behind the iridescent,  
glistening lights,  
a city shimmering  
beyond the forbidden  
boundary breaking  
migration\insects,  
jaguars, humans\  
where a black snake  
follows the highway,  
unwinding, unfolding,  
oblivious to emerging  
sand storms or sunrise.  
Light from the east  
greet's shared land,  
revealing rusty, dusty,  
industrial buildings  
diminishing the sparkle  
of distance. I still desire  
those jagged, gold  
hills rising from where  
I would need a passport  
that I don't have;  
they should be mine  
and would go so nicely  
with our southwest  
desert red peaks  
quietly settled on  
my side of the fence.

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## Anything, Anywhere, Anytime

[Yvette A. Schnoecker-Shorb](#)

A poor passenger, IÖm not  
inspired by this window view,  
hills, rivers, pastures, cows, flowers,  
fieldsÖscenes that will outlast me.  
But passing quickly by the glass,  
filling the frame, a red and yellow  
wall with thick, bold, black words,  
*Anything, Anywhere, Anytime*,  
appeals to us bored mortals  
living life in the slow lane,  
inconvenienced by transition,  
ultimately by death. Now thatÖs  
a message inclined to capture  
my immediate interest; it is  
the hopeful promise of control  
at my fingertips, the consoling  
pledge that before the downward  
edge of my existence, all the needs  
of my brief and fragile lifespan  
can be fulfilled by my very will.  
ItÖs all mineÖ*Anything* I want,  
*anywhere, anytime*. Whatever  
the actual cargo carried and aside  
from solicitous slogans, the sign  
gracing the side of that truck  
racing by is the first thing  
on the road IÖve seen all day  
on which my attention is sold.

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## Marianne Taylor

Marianne Taylor is a recipient of the Allen Ginsberg Award, the Helen A. Quade Memorial Award, and an Iowa Woman Poetry Prize; and her manuscript, Salt Water, Iowa, has been a finalist in a half dozen contests. Her poetry appears widely in anthologies and national journals such as Nimrod International, North American Review, Connecticut Review and Alehouse. She also writes and directs plays; teaches creative writing and literature at Kirkwood Community College; and recently stepped down from the city council in a small Midwestern town where she lives with her husband, sons, and cat.

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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: To the Fourth Estate

[Marianne Taylor](#)

What have you done  
you farting flarlists?  
you mystic pizzas?  
you fiddleheaded philanderers?  
you sloppy puppies shitting on the moon?  
you stale crumbs who cannot win the prize?  
What did you do  
about the kingdom in the desert?  
about the warming human planet  
kicked into submission?  
about all these faces  
smeared with manure?  
While they/you figured out how best to steal,  
you/they sold the middle class  
looked for ways to torture  
head lice, swollen lips,  
Dancing With the Stars,  
"pure alcohol" Òtragic. Ò  
Your works frightened the poor/us  
trying to keep your hands from snatching  
trying to preserve our/their shaky orbits  
so you could make for your living  
a dung beetle's breakfast  
flung in your face.  
Without seeing the quarks are bleeding,  
without opening your pens  
you've been blinder than rust  
in the bottom  
of this filthy pail.



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## Mirri Glasson-Darling

Mirri Glasson-Darling is an MFA student at Virginia Tech who just moved to Virginia from the Arctic village of Barrow, Alaska: the northern most community in the United States. She has received an honorable mention from Glimmertrain and has had her work appear in journals such as Willow Springs, Crab Orchard Review, South Dakota Review, The Dr. TJ Eckleburg Review, and Bosque Literary Magazine.

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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: For My Sister

[Mirri Glasson-Darling](#)

MY SISTER, our tall blue spruce was not enough  
though it had weathered windstorms and steel-wool tornados  
the rat’s nests of our hair, and stood  
Christmas lights  
gleaming from our father’s lone cardboard cut-out of a star.  
The day it finally lay down its branches  
you lay without  
drawstrings or shoelaces; silver-ringed spirals stripped  
from the spines of your notebooks and our father stood  
at the foot of your hospital bed with his arms helpless  
at his sides. I watched the bark peel away from the crumbling  
halls of our parents as they waited, knowing something  
horrible must have happened to you, but unsure of what or why.  
I would not dare speak the word then. It was too small  
to mean such invasion, too strange a sound to touch  
tongue to palette and bring to lips. All I dared to think  
was just: *That Boy*. How I wished I were a son so I might  
go and do what brothers do instead of daughters, grinding my molars  
to sand as I held your secret, clenched tight between my teeth.

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## Sandra Inskeep-Fox

Sandra Inskeep-Fox is a poet, an independent scholar and co-owner of Dorley House Books in Clear Spring, Maryland. She has been published in Chaffin Review, Facet, Cimarron Review, Commonweal Magazine, The Big Two-Hearted Review, Aureorean, Virginia Woolf Miscellany and others. Her current projects include a chapbook of poems focusing on the Bloomsbury group; and a novel set in the WWII Housing Projects in the 1950s.

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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: My Mother Finally Tells Him Off

[Sandra Inskeep-Fox](#)

I need to tell you  
before another day begins, IT REALLY  
IS NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS,  
but IÖm planning to be  
invisible after today. Oh, IÖll  
be here, and not so invisible that  
you canÖt see me. Just  
transparent enough  
to walk through walls &  
wisp along stairways  
balancing gracefully  
somewhere at dead center. When you COME  
HOME TO YOUR COUCH, when  
I get home from work, IÖll  
boil soft, rotting potatoes, scorch yellow  
all your wrinkled shirts, press your work  
pants bow-legged so theyÖll fit right.  
IÖll miss the spots on the vacuumed carpet,  
IÖll leave pits in your cherry pie, and small  
crumbs on the stick of butter, and  
maybe even lipstick stains  
Along the rim of my own cup. WHEN  
YOU LOOK UP, youÖll see nothing, but  
IÖll know. AND IF YOU WANT TO  
COMPLAIN ABOUT NOTHING, IÖll  
have the best excuse for all these  
mortal shots, for any miseries  
I might inflict. If anyone  
ever investigates theyÖll  
see that since yesterday  
I wasnÖt even here.

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## Alexis Beckford

Alexis Beckford

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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: Roe v. Wade

[Alexis Beckford](#)

*after Eduardo C. Corral*

i glance at the  
red dot spreading  
wildly against the  
puddled pavement

the smell of rain  
thrashes against  
moonlit curtains  
like the salty refines  
of a wounded anchovy

i rip open the skin  
of a mango  
feeding on the fleshy juices  
flowing down the grooves  
of my fingertips

blue vines dance gracefully  
growing loudly  
through the cracks  
of the sidewalk

the red dot settles  
down into charred watermarks  
as the sky devours  
the raindrops

slowing the pattern  
down to  
a  
gentle drizzle



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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: African American

[Alexis Beckford](#)

Hip hop. Fried chicken. Saggy pants. Ghettos. Baptist churches.  
Guns. House parties. Tupac. Watermelon. Murder. Sneakerheads.  
Drugs. Baby mamas. Drive-by shootings. Attitudes. Natural hair.  
Thirty-two inch tires. Juvie. Jail. Prison. Gold teeth. Absent fathers.  
Anger. High school dropout. Doo rags. Ebonics. Theft. Affirmative Action.  
Barbershops. Teenage pregnancy. Drug dealers. Welfare. Basketball player.  
Football player. Rapper. Yellow bone. Red bone. Black.



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## Sam Cross

Sam Cross is a dad/poet/sleep technologist in Raleigh, NC. He graduated with an MFA in Creative Writing from NCSU and is, in all likelihood, up to something.

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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: Rebel Rebel

[Sam Cross](#)

No one will find you  
in 1861, sunken into your leather  
entanglement, finished in grease,  
undressed before an audience  
of ageless insects, fizzing  
around your one stillborn eye,  
no one will know you were an average  
golfer, you swore under your breath  
learning about your daughter, you alone  
lost the war, you never had  
a stranger cinch your necktie  
under tails of Spanish moss, you were bewitched  
by the promise alive in a shotgun,  
young once, you found foreign gods  
cleaning up like cats on your front steps,  
you refused to take in the sun  
with them, as it came trembling up  
from the trees, a perfect termite, gorging  
on their darkness, in the elastic hours left to yourself,  
you could not draw the poison out  
of your pupil, it became essential to you  
at even the cellular level, you found trust  
impossible, every virus possessed by its own  
sacred helix, judgement coming in the purest chemical,  
physical and electrical terms, what do you imagine  
might be made of you by an empty stomach, you  
who have left so little inside, keeping the gate  
of your own cage as though it opened to a heaven  
no one deserved, no one will walk away from you  
without thinking of the stars you have crossed and left  
dimmer, seeing you, no one will be able to identify  
just who else has ever belonged there,  
by your side, at a loss



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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: If I Am Guilty of Anything

[Sam Cross](#)

Let me ride my weasels  
    into the unrepentant cherry blossom  
of an alternate dawn, where I will declare our first  
    holiday for the new light that has gushed  
and swallowed you, my beached whale,  
    my empty thought bubble,  
my ingrown eyelash, I see now  
    that even you are mine for the grabbing  
Resurrect the chimney sweeps,  
    the grave robbers, the organ grinders,  
the peep show, the leech  
    Put them all back to work  
on an alchemy for the average rag,  
    on weaving a new carpet of crude  
from sea-to-sea and wall-to-wall,  
    on the purification of our depleted  
and poisoned wells of native blood  
    I want them to vaporize the glaciers  
so we can all huff the virgin fog of our prehistory  
    Watch me swap beads for another continent  
Watch me whip Satan out of a sinner  
    You can't fake that, if you were here  
from the beginning, you already know  
    I am not another dirty, inflatable necktie,  
waddling out of a gilded egg  
    with a grin trained to endure you  
I am here because I know something  
    they won't tell you, hand-to-God,  
a truth no one believes you deserve:  
    I am Santa Claus,  
my trademarked wink above the grim bed of your torches,  
    and I want to sleep with you,  
stringing my name in golden block letters around your family tree,  
    and the universe will burn forever,  
waste being an illusion projected by descendants of a single protozoa,  
    and that is not who we are  
You do not have to hunt for your heaven, my children  
    It is my gift to you



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## Alison Stone

Alison Stone has an MFA degree from Pine Manor College. Her poems have appeared in Michigan Quarterly Review, The New Statesman, The Paris Review, Ploughshares, Poet Lore, Poetry and many other journals and anthologies. She was awarded New York Quarterly’s Madeline Sadin Award and Poetry’s Frederick Boch Prize. Her first book, They Sing at Midnight, won the 2003 Many Mountains Moving Poetry Award . Her second collection, Dangerous Enough, appeared from Presa Press in 2014. Her most recent collection is Ordinary Magic (NYQ Books, 2016).

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## Eric Greinke

Eric Greinke and Alison Stone have been collaborating for three years. Alison Stone has an MFA degree from Pine Manor College. Her poems have appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *The New Statesman*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Poet Lore*, *Poetry* and many other journals and anthologies. She was awarded New York Quarterly's Madeline Sadin Award and Poetry's Frederick Boch Prize. Her first book, *They Sing at Midnight*, won the 2003 Many Mountains Moving Poetry Award. Her second collection, *Dangerous Enough*, appeared from Presa Press in 2014. Her most recent collection is *Ordinary Magic* (NYQ Books, 2016). Eric Greinke's poems and essays have been published internationally in hundreds of literary journals, such as *Gargoyle*, *New York Quarterly*, *California Quarterly*, *South Carolina Review*, *Delaware Poetry Review*, *Prosopis* (India), *Poem*, *University of Tampa Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *The Journal* (U.K.), *Ginyu* (Japan), and *Abraxas*. His most recent books are *Poets In Review* and *Zen Duende – Collaborative Poems* (with Glenna Luschei). He has an M.S.W. from Grand Valley State University. He's taught poetry writing at Grand Rapids City High School and through the Artists in the Schools Program of Michigan. [www.ericgreinke.com](http://www.ericgreinke.com)

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## In The Dark

[Alison Stone](#) & [Eric Greinke](#)

Sorry that Pluto is no longer a planet. Sorry that Tower Records closed. Sorry that Manhattan’s pushcarts transmogrified into sad telephones. Regrettable that deer munch manicured suburban lawns, their busy teeth chomping Kentucky Bluegrass. Unfortunate that clouds closed the moon’s wide eye. A shame that no one seems to feel responsible for the waste of tears spilled for unworthy lovers, or the extra miles traveled by rejected immigrants running for their lives. Easier to focus on how regrettable it is that the cost of living rises, than on the tragic spaces between family members, pulsing with traumatic long-term tensions and unresolved trust. Sorry, also, that the Pinta Island Tortoise and Chinese Paddlefish swim into oblivion, and isn’t it sad how the poor are paddling in place, their resignation a different kind of whirlpool, swirling inexorably into itself? Almost criminal that pollution causes 1 in 7 deaths, our waste and poison bombarding both personal and global immune systems. Sad but no surprise that things so often break down, the excess of some robbing others of bare necessities, with no real opportunity for change, though the few, golden exceptions go viral on the internet, neutralizing our consciences. Regrettable, too, how technology fills our bedrooms with anti-erotic red LED numbers and TV screens screaming crime and war and the occasional hard-luck adoptable dog. In the larger scheme, perhaps it’s better that we don’t look too hard, but rather, turn our guilty eyes toward the invisible dark matter that keeps the cosmos whole.



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## Petals and Roots

[Alison Stone](#) & [Eric Greinke](#)

The storm shifted slightly, pummeling  
the neighboring village. That and a fortune cookie  
implied that we were having good luck,  
that our feng shui was impeccable, our bearing regal.  
So why did the begonias droop and an odd  
foreboding hang over the table?  
Were they aware of something that we weren't?  
Was it karma, fate or luck?  
Perhaps some past misdeeds crawling  
up from guilt's sewer, or  
maybe they were victims of over-watering.  
Maybe tomorrow another storm will come, to  
test the gods' good will, confirming our favor  
or hammering us with the icy bite of  
a Plutonian spasm. Snow storms in  
the Milky Way head our way, evidence  
of cosmic inattention to our desires,  
or perhaps a test of fortitude. Too easy  
for the colors of the heavens  
to reflect the dark human soul.  
Too hard to cling to calmness as precipitation  
batters the roof, our equanimity fickle  
as an Arizonian monsoon, flooding the  
desert with unexpected flotsam and jetsam.  
Too human to greet fortune's turns with  
clenched teeth and the opposite of prayer.  
Wild lilies smile in sunlight.  
By night they dream of running.  
The thick sky covers them in  
all luck's colors, blended  
into shifting spectrums for our hungry eyes.  
They may know something that we don't,  
may know how to ride fortune's crests  
with their petals open, roots intact.

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## Paige Leland

**Paige Leland** recently graduated with her BFA in Creative Writing from Grand Valley State University in Michigan. Her work has appeared previously in *Chicago Literati*, *Polaris Literary Magazine*, *The 3288 Review* and more, and is forthcoming from *The Tahoma Literary Review*. She likes to write about childhood, the effect of place, and the beauty of our bodies. In the future, she plans to pursue her MFA in Creative Non-Fiction or Poetry. Some of her other work can be found at [paigeleland.wordpress.com](http://paigeleland.wordpress.com).

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## While Driving West on I-96, Wind Disrupts the Radio Waves

[Paige Leland](#)

*i. Song for the Morning After*

The sun burns blind-cut craters in the pores of our cheeks. We awake with elbows in our backs, stale breath between our teeth. Transparent skin blends in ivory sheets and makeup stains and make up stains.

You blow undulations in my temple, skirt small hairs behind my button ear. You press cold lips to my skin just to taste the metallic twang of pearl earring. Fingers slip between my thighs. I think of how ironic it is to feel most alive again this way.

*ii. Song for How Literally I Take Most Things*

Last Wednesday, after searing my flesh while christening my microwave with that brand of TV dinners you like, I learned you can make a burn feel better by first running it under hot water

by letting the skin fall off  
by exposing the bone

*iii. Song for the Sounds You Make When You Begin to Fall Asleep but Feel Like You're Just Falling*

To estimate logically, there are over 200 billion galaxies in the universe.

I want to tell you this because  
I want to tell you about stars and the dust that settles. About molecular biology, the division of cells. About how I've memorized leaving.

But this time, leaving feels something like when you left me. Feels like finding a penny on the ground, tails up. Feels like words on the tip of your tongue that you swallow anyway.

If I move eight hours south into a cramped studio apartment with paneled walls and porcelain sinks, I wonder if you could find me there. I wonder if you would try. I wonder if you'll think about the verse I sang you, the vibrato of Mercury's falsetto.

And most,  
I wonder if I come back, if Michigan will still be as blue as I left it.

*iv. Song for Watering the Fake Flowers*

I dress women in changing rooms that smell like you. Some days I choke on that fear, my panic like watching a body covered in a sheet being lifted into the back of an ambulance while crimson lights dance in the rearview.

Others, like Tuesday, and yesterday, and every day last week  
the women leave and I sit with my back to the wall, pretend to lock the door,  
breathe in the menthol and beer  
the sticky perfume like cologne,  
use the memory of the curve of your lip  
to steady my breathing

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## When Poems Sound Better in Times New Roman

[Paige Leland](#)

If it rains on the day your dog dies  
I will want to call it metaphor

even as you trap your breath  
in the back of your throat.

I will want to say I wish I knew  
what death feels like  
if it is like an axe piercing cold skin,  
or like falling asleep in your arms,  
or if it hurts and  
if it will ever stop hurting.  
I will want to say IÖm sorry,  
I will want to say I love you,  
I will want to twist your fingers  
until they crumble in my palms,  
anything more comforting  
than the thought of flesh decomposing  
into earth and how itÖs almost summer  
now and soon itÖll all be bones

soon weÖll all be just bones.

On days when it rains  
I like to wear thin shoes,  
let the water soften  
the thick skin on my soles.

Today when it rains,  
I eat a banana and throw it up  
in a Meijer parking lot.

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## A Metaphor for how Trash Day Reminds Me that I'll Never Be Alone No Matter How Hard I Try

[Paige Leland](#)

Nostalgia  
smells like chlorine and  
diesel engines and melted  
bomb pop palms.  
Feels like a rug burn cutting skin.  
Feels like how you loved  
chocolate almonds and clover honey  
and the moment after  
getting revenge.  
It tastes like pomegranate seeds  
that burst bitter, while you struggle  
to find the sweet  
like maybe  
it was never there  
in the first place.

I wonder if you can smell it too  
if it sticks to your throat  
like the ash of burnt marshmallows.

Does it feel like the time you asked  
why I never put furniture  
in my living room but always  
hung paintings on the walls?

I wonder  
do you remember  
the cranberries and gas station vodka  
the way your fingers rubbed like chalk  
between my thighs  
I know  
you never asked to be there  
but I'm still grateful for that night



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## Alex Wilson

Alex Wilson, a grant writer in San Francisco, writes in a subliminal surrealist style, which is the closest way for him to be true to himself without alienating the world. Recently, his poetry has appeared in "Boston Accent," "Yellow Chair Review," and "The Three Quarter Review."

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## Lynch at Hyde

[Alex Wilson](#)

When the dog  
Growled,

Sprung free,  
And attacked,

I felt  
Vulnerable

Like a  
Teletubby

Caught in a  
Bear trap.

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## Tim Kercher

Timothy Kercher lived abroad from 2006 to 2012—four years in the country of Georgia and two in Ukraine—and has now moved back to his home in Dolores, Colorado. He continues to translate contemporary poetry from the Republic of Georgia. He is a high school English teacher and has worked in five countries—Mongolia, Mexico, and Bosnia being the others. His essays, poems, and translations have appeared a number of recent literary publications, including Music & Literature, Crazyhorse, Versal, Plume, upstreet, and others.



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## The Search

[Tim Kercher](#)

The dog tracked into the classroom  
as we slunk into the hallway\N

its German Shepherd-wolf mix  
mane extending like a small quasar

of coffee and night, the dark  
orifice of nose as its epicenter,

the very center of the universe  
launching into book

bags, backpacks, purses  
populating the vast sky

of my classroom: the sensation  
of sensation searching

for what can only be perceived  
through a whiff

like the half-finished poems  
on the desks of my students.

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## Gentrification Download

[Alex Wilson](#)

I definitely have a picture  
of two horses  
fucking on a pool table.  
YouÖll love it.  
YouÖll just die.  
TheyÖre wearing  
showgirl hats, beads,  
and red boas.  
A little clichŽ,  
but it comes across  
as honest,  
like the time we heard  
a thousand nails breaking,  
blood hitting the walls, and  
a homeless woman  
shitting on City HallÖs  
front lawn.

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## Rachel Janis

Rachel Janis holds a BA from Knox College and lives above a coffee shop in Galesburg, Illinois with her fiancée, cat, and hedgehog. Her work has also appeared in *Booth* and *Gravel*. You can view her website at [racheljanisart.wordpress.com](http://racheljanisart.wordpress.com).

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## There, we are wordless, there

[Rachel Janis](#)

Somewhere, there are unpaved roads, still. Somewhere,  
I spy with my little eye a sliver of forever: the windmill  
a giant cutip swabbing up the sky. Power lines threading  
air, stitching us in. Cows scaling hills like they left  
the womb sideways.

Somewhere, turn signals speak Morse code in  
the dark. It's five o'clock somewhere. We are wordless somewhere.

God wears a hood somewhere: a dog will eat someone's life  
savings, a woman will jump at a piece of string,  
a man will wear a hazmat suit to bed, a cousin once-removed  
will turn twice-revived but he will not want it bad enough.

A man will ask, "Were you born yesterday?" A newborn  
on the other side of the world will dribble and spit up a response.

A man will ask, "Are you insane?" and a perfectly-sane  
man with a knife will say, "No, I'm dicing onions."

A woman will buy a frame with a pre-loaded picture  
of a grinning boy. She will brag to the neighbors  
that she's a mother, finally.

Two boys will rob a video store barefoot.  
A hot storm will run them down like in the movies.

We are plucked like untuned harps.  
Everywhere, the Earth will shed its skin inwards.

Everywhere, we will be uprooted only to be planted again.  
Somewhere, it's five o'clock somewhere.  
There, we are wordless there.



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## Hand to hand

[Rachel Janis](#)

IÖm up at night thinking about my writing hand. Every left-hander belongs to a tree. A bushel of Öright-brainedÖ creators. Something like a preschoolerÖs ancestry project: a lineage reincarnated for an afternoon as a swarm of toddlersÖ hands, parading in crimson paint, surrendering to the perpetual joke of being caught red, catch-phrased into oblivion. I am forever linked with this mechanical minority, these hands that, on average, will kill me nine years before my counterpart. Hands that keep me up at night for not being right. Hands that put me more at risk of alcoholism, dyslexia, stuttering, violence. I will go to the shooting range and figure out my gun hand. Maybe it will be the same as my camera hand, my softball hand, my mayo-spreading hand. Maybe it will contain a finger one gene off from a killerÖs, or a victimÖs. Surely she must have used her left hand at some point that day: to trail a sentence, to bookmark a life, as the killer did his killing, circling the library red.

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## If a Tree Were to Fall

[Rachel Janis](#)

If the C string of my cello were to snap  
in the deep woods, with no one  
around to hear, would you find the coordinates  
of its landing? Would you see  
the vibration of it in your water, little crafted rings,  
or come across a piano and notice  
the metaphor of sharp and flattened keys?  
In this life, I don't play the cello  
but if I did, the C string would be the one to go,  
finding the ground like a wiry snake, and I'd like  
to think you'd think of a wordless scroll, a spine  
losing its voice, a bridge missing a lane. But instead you'll  
stop at a tree, at some branches, and gasp  
at a mosquito wrapped in a hammock of someone  
else's blood, and you'll see the spider waiting,  
bloodied. In any other life, the spider ties  
up in silk, eats clean.



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## Lisha Ruan

Lisha Ruan is a Computer Science major and writer at Princeton University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Bitter Oleander*, *The Nottingham Review*, *By&By Poetry*, and other journals. In her free time, she enjoys learning languages, reading philosophy, and playing Avalon. You can find her online at [lisharuan.com](http://lisharuan.com).

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## Clockwork

[Lisha Ruan](#)

they who want to give  
a storm gray catZ  
a sagging arch

the fireflies dripping like honey  
a lantern at sea  
two chairs getting coffee

unwound red ribbon  
how you will never be  
a leaf underfoot

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## Isabel Brome Gaddis

Isabel Brome Gaddis earned her bachelor’s degree in Earth and Planetary Sciences from MIT and worked as a geophysicist at Shell, then as a technical writer and copywriter at Microsoft. She studied playwriting at Freehold Theatre in Seattle, writing for television at UCLA, screenwriting with Corey Mandell, and creative writing with Jack Grapes. She also holds four certificates in embroidery and design from City and Guilds of London. Her work was featured or is forthcoming in The Alembic, decomP, Foliate Oak, Forge, Grey Sparrow, Mantis, New Ohio Review, OnTheBus, Penmen Review, and Wild Violet.

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## Flight

[Isabel Brome Gaddis](#)

Having already been  
here  
(dirt, noise, gravity)

I choose to be  
there  
(light, air, weightlessness).

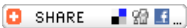
With a boarding pass  
With a pair of wax-and-feather wings  
With a brand-new pilot's license

I jump off the cliff  
I squeeze myself into the exit row  
I shake hands with the navigator.

The pilot is a hero  
The pilot is a villain  
I am the pilot.

I chart our path by hand  
I stare at light on clouds  
I have two scotches and an Ambien.

I don't ever land  
It's just another commute  
I laugh as my wings melt.



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## Mallory Bass

Mallory Bass is from Mississippi, and holds an MFA from St. Mary's College of California. She has attended Community of Writers at Squaw Valley and completed a residency at Vermont Studio Center. Her work has appeared in *Reservoir Lit* and *She Explores*. She lives in Los Angeles.

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## Solstice

[Mallory Bass](#)

not of lines  
but of opening of wind through car windows of late sun walking out of water  
not of waves not to him but from the horizon not of leaving  
but of continuum of liminal of growing fingernails the translucence of wings  
not of suture but of reiki hands of hovering of projected dust  
not of photograph but of whisper drawing dark  
not of distraction butterfly words unspent  
not of meaning but of issuance of matter  
no lesser no other  
no transient not there or there but here in here not of answer  
not of love not love but of love of love love no love not love of  
constellation but of proximal planets proximal planets not of constellation  
not of failure not of language but of unction  
not of industry but of warning but of grace falls  
but of magnetism of staying of flutter not of despite not of surely not of sure enough  
not of danger not of circumstance but of luck of bafflement of a person who sees you  
of somewhere else but here of somewhere else too  
but not that not that always but no no home  
not dependence but wonder but that of root chakra but that of unlock  
but that of mountain of trees grown from mountainside of trees crushed by boulders  
of a boulder split in the stream of a waterfall of a log path  
not of where not of when but if only but if any  
not of how much not of how come not of who does but of out here of beside  
not of will you take me not as I am not will you but of loose grain  
not of almost not of honestly not of question  
not of deserving not of wingspan not of cheesecloth over the brain not of stupor not of right  
not of good not of pit not of prairie not of pressure but of follicles of spread of gather  
not of radish but of apricot of peach leave breath of expanse of expanding



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## Tracy Mishkin

Tracy Mishkin is a call center veteran with a PhD and an MFA student in Creative Writing at Butler University. She is the author of two chapbooks, *I Almost Didn't Make It to McDonald's* (Finishing Line Press, 2014) and *The Night I Quit Flossing* (Five Oaks Press, 2016). Joe Bergstein is her father's uncle and her oldest living relative.

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## Prisoner of War

[Tracy Mishkin](#)

in honor of Sgt. Joseph Bergstein  
b. 1923

### I. Older Sister

Daddy had a still in the basement, a rich man  
as long as Prohibition lasted. I delivered whiskey  
in the pram, the bottles tucked around Joey.  
During the Depression, I dropped out, worked,  
an elevator girl. Joe cleaned chicken coops  
for quarters, grew from hungry boy to hungry man.  
Nothing but the army to fill his belly. 5' 7"  
and 110, he enlisted in the spring of '41.

### II. Sergeant

We shipped out to the Philippines  
with rusty Springfield rifles from the war  
to end all wars. After Pearl Harbor, they bombed  
our airfields. Landed at Luzon and Legazpi.  
The colonel took the Tommy guns and half  
our rations to his bunker in the woods.  
Already hungry and sick, my men and I dug in  
till we were ordered to surrender. Bergstein waved  
his undershirt as we crept up the road. We heard  
they don't take prisoners.

### III. Filipino Witness

Sundalos struggle through town, limping  
toward the prison camp. Thin men, torn  
uniforms. The broken rhythm of their feet.  
Rifle shots, the grunt of bayonets. We throw rice  
wrapped in banana leaves. The children  
bring water, dodging *Hap—n* guards on horses,  
who shake their swords. They shoot the men  
who fall behind.

### IV. Hohei, Soldier-Guard

Ten thousand *horyo* wait hours in the sun  
for water. Wormy rice their only food.  
Some eat the worms for protein. Cook  
has a dog trap underneath the kitchen hut.  
A man without a bowl will die.

No honor in surrender. Only *haji*, the shame  
that runs deep. In monsoon season, *horyo*  
stand outside, washed by rain. They cover  
the faces of the dead with weeds.

### V. American Medical Officer

I haven't forgotten the time Bergstein and his do-good pals  
washed that goner who'd shit his dysentery pants  
and brought him back inside. At the camp hospital today,  
they were scrounging sulfa drugs for some poor fool

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with syphilis. I was off-duty and told them so. Cholera, dysentery. Yes, we leave them under the barracks. Yes, they're going to die. Have you got a better way to keep the rest of us alive?

VI. Bill ÖStewÖ Stewart

When Allied planes began to bomb the Philippines, the guards packed us in an old tub's hold, heading north. We hunched silent on chunks of coal, knees drawn up. Shoulder to shoulder, precious air. We heard the ping of our subs hunting. The buzz of bombers.

Rice came down in buckets on a rope. Sometimes it broke, scalding us. We ate every sliver we found. The shit-bucket passed on the same rope, slopping. After a while, we lost our sense of smell.

Pinned on the far side of the hold, my buddy Joe passed his canteen up for water, never got it back. I sent him my spare. When a man died, it meant more room for the rest of us.

VII. Civilian, Northern Honshu

Fifteen feet of snow on the trail to Hanacka town. Father and I worked the mines. The dense, gray rock so hard it bent the tips of picks. *Horyo* dug ore, loaded carts, worked beside us as if they were still men. When my cart jumped the track, I told Joe to put it back. He ignored me. Father beat him with a chunk of rock.

VIII. Heroes of Bataan

Freed by the atom bomb, we sailed home, gaining weight on Red Cross donuts. I still hadn't started shaving. We rode the hospital train cross-country, drinking beer with nurses, bowling oranges at liquor bottle pins.

The papers called us enlisted men Ösurvivors of BataanÖthe officers, Öheroes.Ö They ran for office on their war records. I went to college on the GI Bill.



Gentrification Download

Alex Wilson

There, we are wordless, there

Rachel Janis

Hand to hand

Rachel Janis

If a Tree Were to Fall

Rachel Janis

Clockwork

Lisha Ruan

Flight

Isabel Brome Gaddis

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## Janna Layton

Janna Layton lives in San Francisco's Outer Richmond neighborhood. Her poetry and fiction have been published in various literary journals, including Menacing Hedge, By&By Poetry, Noble / Gas Qtrly, Zone 3, and Caesura. She blogs at [readingwatchinglookingandstuff.blogspot.com](http://readingwatchinglookingandstuff.blogspot.com).

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## POST-APOCALYPTIC YOGA, ALL LEVELS

[Janna Layton](#)

### Half Moon Pose

Pretend we could see the moon if we looked.  
We know it is still there. Reach up to it.  
Up, up.  
Now bend,  
point your fingers and ribs into the distance,  
and visualize other survivors  
pointing back.

### Eagle Pose

Leg wrapped around leg,  
arm wrapped around arm.  
This isn't our old anti-microbial studio floor,  
(for those of you who knew it)  
but to balance,  
think of deep below the surface of the Earth  
where our planet is untouched, and root  
your foot to that place.

### Tree Pose

Yes, there are still trees.  
Did you see the one by where the coffee shop  
used to be, with some leaves still green?  
Life continues.  
Maybe you feel a cockroach  
scurrying over your foot. Welcome it.  
If you can,  
put your hands in prayer position.

### Camel Pose

Let us get down on our knees,  
but not in defeat. Lean back.  
Offer your heart up willingly.  
Think of camels  
and how they have calmly crossed barren deserts  
for thousands of years.  
There are probably still camels, somewhere.  
Don't look at these crumbled streets  
and fallen buildings and think of ruins.  
Think of deserts.  
Think of the kind eyes of the camel.

### Child's Pose

Don't get hung up on the name and mourn.  
You have other time for that.  
The purpose of this pose is to rest your back.  
If you're here, your back has been good to you.  
Maybe you have carried jugs of water on your back,  
or an injured neighbor, or a camping tent.  
Let your spine rest for a moment. Thank it.  
But still stretch.

### Savasana

The corpse pose.  
There is nothing morbid about it.  
We are not corpses yet,  
but others are and we do not know

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when we will join them.  
There is no shame in being a corpse.  
But at this moment,  
we are alive.  
Relax your body against the earth.  
Breathe.  
Don't think about the radiation.

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## Ron Riecki

Ron Riecki's books include *U.P.: a novel* (Sewanee Writers Series and Great Michigan Read nominated), *The Way North: Collected Upper Peninsula New Works* (2014 Michigan Notable Book from the Library of Michigan and finalist for the Eric Hoffer Book Award/Grand Prize shortlist, Midwest Book Award, Foreword Book of the Year, and Next Generation Indie Book Award), *Here: Women Writing on Michigan's Upper Peninsula* (2016 IPPY/Independent Publisher Book Award Gold Medal Great Lakes—Best Regional Fiction and Next Generation Indie Book Award—Short Story finalist), and *And Here: 100 Years of Upper Peninsula Writing, 1917-2017* (Michigan State University Press, 2017).

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## When I Was an EMT, We Never Got in Any Trouble if a Patient Died, But if You Scratched the Side of the Ambulance They Would Fire You

[Ron Riecki](#)

When my wife asks me how my day went,  
I just give her a thumbs up or a thumbs down.  
She knows not to go any farther than that.  
I have a bumper sticker that says,  
"This is going to be a stressful career."  
I learned that we shouldn't reach into pockets.  
Instead we cut them off with shears.  
I think there are two thousand drug addicts  
in the region where I work.  
I always forget to wash my hands for two minutes;  
It's recommended that we go through  
It's the same with CPR; we're supposed to sing  
in our heads. It's the perfect rhythm.  
I've been told we're supposed to wear a gown  
I know that no one does. Who has time?  
I heard. I don't wash their hands correctly.  
is like shaking hands with Death.  
I talked to the parents and he'd just got a D  
insane, this world.  
"I don't want you to touch me,"  
"If a body's over here and a head's over there,  
instructor used to say that all the time.  
Illinois begins with "Ill." He calls it a sick state,  
is shot. He said after awhile you stop thinking  
I-I-I. Me-me-me. "That's when you should retire."

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## Sometimes When My Wife Comes Home She Doesn't Kiss Me

[Ron Riecki](#)

She writes me notes in visible ink.  
Not invisible ink.  
ThatÖs when we were kids.  
We want to have kids.  
So far we canÖt.  
We keep trying  
and itÖs like the sex  
is serious.  
Sad.  
Everything changes.  
Even nothing.



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## Andrea Janov

Andrea Janov is a recent transplant to Pittsburgh who was raised by rock n' roll parents who knew the importance of concerts and going past the no trespassing signs. She spent her adolescence in a small town punk rock scene where she moshed, fell in love, and produced a few cut and paste fanzines. [andrea.janov.com](http://andrea.janov.com)

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## Firecracker

[Andrea Janov](#)

Cars fill up the driveway and the street,  
and overflow into the American Legion  
parking lot up the block.

Family, friends, those who have become both.  
4th of July graduation party. Last bash, last time  
we are all together.

Dusk fades to night.  
We climb onto the garage roof to  
a perfect view.

The sky lights up  
burst : whistle : crackle  
whistle : burst : crackle : whistle  
black power and chemistry  
tricking into darkness.

The neighbors post fireworks, fireworks  
simultaneously explode  
on all four sides of us;  
leaving a smoky sky  
as we begin to jump  
off



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## This Poem is about a Small Town in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and a College I Hated in Massachusetts

[Ron Riecki](#)

I lit a basketball on fire and rolled it into the gym.  
In divinity school, they sure the hell talked about sex  
a lot. They'd see penises in their coffee. I wanted to punch  
half the class in the face. It reminded me of high  
school when all the pot-heads used to stand on the corner

and smoke cigarettes. All the jocks would be on the bus  
not playing any sports. Nobody ever does what they want.  
We all end up with feet like pancakes. Our necks turn  
into failed cyborg parts that no longer turn. I wish  
I'd have lit the gym on fire and saved the basketball.



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## Robert Beveridge

Robert Beveridge makes noise ([xterminal.bandcamp.com](http://xterminal.bandcamp.com)) and writes poetry just outside Cleveland, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Cake, Grub Street, and The Literary Hatchet, among others.

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## Near-Life Experience

[Robert Beveridge](#)

(a choose-your-own-adventure poem)

(go to page 2)

you  
and your band of Merry Men  
are in the forest  
armed only with sticks

and a few unnameable pieces of food  
that bear a resemblance to old, dented tin.

On the hill, a house  
with seven cupboards  
and a weathervane.

Behind you, the forest.

(to enter the house, go to page 15.  
to enter the forest, go to page 7.)

page 7:

you come  
to a fork in the path.  
An old man  
in a tattered coat  
wanders off down the path  
less travelled.

(to follow the old man, go to page 27.  
to take the other road, go to page 8.)

page 8:

when you reach the city,  
the harlots  
mistake your food for money.

(go to page 30.)

page 10:

old blue eyes  
begins to croon  
and you flee into the forest.

(go to page 7.)

page 15:

the cupboards  
are full of Sinatra records  
and a beer or two.

Now,  
figure out

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how to use the phonograph.

(to drink a beer, go to page 16.  
to play the Sinatra records, go to page 10.)

page 16:

it goes down easy.

(go to page 30.)

page 27:

you and the Merry Men  
find yourselves in therapy groups  
beat deerskin drums  
with sticks  
and get in touch  
with your inner children.

You lose.

page 30:

congratulations.

your band of Merry Men  
gets merrier.

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Gentrification Download

Alex Wilson

There, we are wordless, there

Rachel Janis

Hand to hand

Rachel Janis

If a Tree Were to Fall

Rachel Janis

Clockwork

Lisha Ruan

Flight

Isabel Brome Gaddis

Solstice

Mallory Bass

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POST-APOCALYPTIC YOGA, ALL LEVELS

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When I Was an EMT, We Never Got in Any Trouble if  
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Sometimes When My Wife Comes Home She  
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This Poem is about a Small Town in the Upper  
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Leather and Velvet

Robert Beveridge

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## Leather and Velvet

[Robert Beveridge](#)

*To Carl Ann Fairs*

Your voice of jewelled  
citrus and cayenne  
on the phone from Vegas:  
Everyone thinks tonight's  
their lucky night. And you,  
leather jacket stroking black  
velvet, cherry hair  
to cover it all, kind of lost  
but happy beneath the lights  
that never fade. I can see  
the way the leather  
of the jacket kisses the velvet  
of your top, the skin beneath  
with its blossomed faint flush,  
a light, a freckled fire  
that never dies.

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## Mac Robinson

Mac Robinson is a writer and some-time photographer based in Melbourne, Australia. His work has appeared in several local publications and online at his personal website, Mac Robinson Reviews... (<https://macrobinsonlit.blogspot.com.au/>) His latest project is a story of New York in 100 photographs and can be found online at: End Of Paralysis NYC (<https://endofparalysisnyc.tumblr.com/>) Having completed a screenplay and several short stories, he is currently finishing his debut novel and doing his best to play well with others.

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## OUTRAGE CONTEST: This American Carnage

[Mac Robinson](#)

She tells me to fuck off when I try to wake her.

ÒCome on, baby, you asked me toÉÓ

ÒIÖm not getting up, I refuse to acknowledge this day. I refuse to remember it.Ó She makes a point of rolling deeper into the covers and burying her face in the pillows. IÖve tread the boards of this particular morning scene many times but today itÖs nothing to do with our collective hangover.

ÒWe need to remember it,Ó I say, though IÖm not sure she hears me. For a moment I consider turning on the soon-to-commence coverage but decide it will only make us both feel worse. I tell Madison IÖm heading out for coffee and something close to words reaches me from the bedroom. I put on one too many scarves and my big coat before heading out the door. It is cold today.

The mood on the street is hard to gauge, or rather, I feel like IÖve lost the ability to gauge anything. ItÖs somehow bustling and dead at the same time, like the excitement for a party until you realize it might actually be a wake.

ÒEven Bush is looking more and more like a fucking verdant green, compared to this impending toxic spill.Ó

A couple of nights before, Dev and I were three rounds deep when the inevitable came up.

ÒScrew Dubbya, man, IÖm already missing Barrack.Ó

ÒBarrack? Of course you miss Barrack. He werenÖt no president, man, motherfucker is a damn angel.

And now all you fucking white people that voted for this damn mangy sack of rotten orange peels suddenly got buyerÖs remorse and shit. Fuck you. And fuck you!Ó Dev started waving his drink at a few other patrons in Proletariat. He eventually settled on a trio of college-aged women at the end of the bar.

ÒAnd you, ladies! The fuck happened?!Ó

I put my hand on his arm, not unforcefully.

ÒDev, come on, man, I donÖt think these girls voted for Little Lord Trumpleroy.Ó

He gave them another look before dismissing them with a wave and a grunt. He returned his focus to me.

ÒFifty-one percent. Fifty-one percent, Jack! You told me that. Fifty-one percent of white women and now yÖall are sitting there fucking slack-jawed, wondering how the hell this all happened. Shit.Ó

He shouted back to the girls at the bar, ÒI bet you think it ainÖt right, huh? Unjust?Ó ÖYeah, I *do* actually,Ó said the one nearest us, ÒWeÖre even marching in

four days so leave your drunken mouthing off for your friend there.Ó She shot me a dismissive look and turned away. Dev persisted.

ÒOh! YouÖre marching? Well, my bad then. Actually, I should *apologize*, I mean, weÖve probably met, right?Ó

At this she was a little confused and let her guard down.

ÒIÖm not sure I know what you me-Ó

Dev pounced, cutting her off.

Ò-Yeah, at a BLM rally? Aww nah, it was at Trump Tower, right? No? I didnÖt think soÉÓ

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The girl had turned candy apple red and began holding her glass to her face. "WellÉ I don't usually do this kind of thing."

"Of course you haven't. I don't care who you voted for, just don't expect me to suddenly buy your fucking righteous anger thanks to your first brush with the *injustice* of crazy stupid white people."

Dev knocked back what was left of his Jameson and slid his empty glass down the bar.

"Our drinks are on them," Dev exaggeratedly motioned towards the girls and made for the door.

"I'm really sorry, ladies," I said, leaving some bills on the bar, "I hope you'll still go. Every bit counts."

The bartender shook his head in my direction but I still thanked him as I walked outside. Dev was standing in a cloud of fragrant smoke spilling out from his vape.

"Shit, man, I'm sorry, that was out of line," Dev shook his head.

"Well you definitely didn't handle it brilliantly butÉ you've got a point, man."

"Yeah, but still, I hope those girls still go."

"Me too. They have to."

"Wanna see if we can get into P.D.T?" he asked after a beat.

"Sure thing, man," I laughed.

It had snowed last night and as Maddy and I had stumbled home, bolstered by booze and immune to the cold, we'd resolved to join the resistance and march on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Standing outside of our building now though, the fresh powder already turning to sludge, Dev's words come back to me. Maddy and I aren't conscious protestors, we don't go to rallies or marches, do we have a right to join in now? What makes this calamity that much worse than everything else this sad broken country has thrown at its people? The air is tickling my nose and ears and I consider re-joining Maddy upstairs but the cold has already woken me completely and I resolve to continue on my quest for caffeine.

The barista at Caffé Vita has told me his name at least twice but I've already forgotten again and it is far beyond the point of asking.

"Hey, Jack," he nods.

"Hey, manÉ"

"What a day, huh?"

"Fuck, dude, where do we begin?"

"Your family all OK, bro?" He's already well into making my regular order. "Huh? Oh yeah, man, they're all right. Just a little shocked, I guess? Yours?" "Nah, bro," he says, his eyes hitting the floor, "My dad's Mexican, he's kinda

shitting himself to be honest."

"Oh, JesusÉ" Dev's words hit me again and I feel like shrinking into the corner.

"These are on me today, brother," he says, seeing me pull out my wallet, "for your repeat business." He smiles sadly, handing over my coffees. I thank him with an embarrassed grin and make for the street. The sound of the bell on the door gives me pause and I turn.

"Hey, man, what's your name again?"

"It's Diego, bro, same as my father."

"Thank you, Diego."

"See you tomorrow, Jack," he says, the smile reaching his eyes.

Heading back homeward down Ludlow, four young guys in business formal wearing those gaudy red baseball caps are walking in the opposite direction on the other side of the street. A part of me hopes they're just being ironic but their smiles are too wide and genuine and they stride with a swagger undeterred by self-

examination. Calls of Ôfascist!Ô from a window above go entirely ignored. ItÔs a sad reminder of how enough of our country sees itself, or rather, how it thinks it ought to be seen: brazen, rash, bullish in the face of facts; belief over truth, arrogance over consideration. This is not the America I believe in. Is it?


As I get closer to home, I notice a shape on the door to our building that I donÔt recognize. My pace accelerates and nearing the threshold, the shape comes into sharp, colorful focus against its white surrounds. Rendered in clean lines and bold, vibrant colors is a sunrise, floating above a single green hill with Lady Liberty looking on, her torch even more afire than the sun, a wry smile on her face. I recognize the artist immediately and feel a pang of longing for the friend I havenÔt seen in years. His work has matured significantly but his script has remained unchanged. Beneath the image, written in his sloping, painted hand, it simply says: ÔDonÔt let them take our color away.Ô

America is not my America. I am not magnificent. That is not the way of these United States. The only claim I hold to this sick, beautiful, mammoth country is the same claim everyone else has to it. Our own history is not even on our side. We abound with tragic flaws and gross injustice, a failing to most of our people. And yetÉ we can still be magnificent. We can be. And yetÉ

Stepping inside, the stairwell is filled with droning guitar music. I do my best not to trip on the stairs. Nearing our third-floor apartment, the opening measures of ÔKiller PartiesÔ become clear. I somehow manage to get the door open without spilling any coffee. I can feel the bass pumping in my chest. Maddy is still in the bedroom, sitting on the edge of the bed, wrapped in our blankets. The TV is on but

there is no way she can hear it. Sensing me in the doorway, she looks up, locking me in her gaze. She smiles deeply, in spite of the tears running down her cheeks. She starts mouthing the words, her stare and smile unwavering: Ô... we were young and we were so in love and we just needed space, and we heard about this place, they call the United StatesÉÔ

Handing her the coffees, I peel out of my heavy winter clothes and join her on the bed.

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## Ryan Row

Ryan Row's fiction has appeared in *Clarkesworld*, *Quarterly West*, *Shimmer*, *Bayou Magazine*, and elsewhere. He is a winner of the Writers of the Future Award, and holds a B.A. in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. He lives in Oakland California with a beautiful and mysterious woman. You can find him online at [ryanrow.com](http://ryanrow.com).

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## The End of Summer at Wildwood Beach New Jersey 1998

[Ryan Row](#)

Like exposed skin, the beach has a nakedness to it. The water retreats into itself and the spreading baldness of the sand is freckled with gray from the blowing ash of illegal pit fires and barbecues. The sky is a scribbled gray, too, with the topography of an earthquake, and he’s ten, maybe, or around there, some little age on the cusp of the world. His head sticks out of the sand, and nothing else of him is visible. The head seems too narrow to hold all those teeth, and definitely too narrow to hold all that’s coming, and his hair has dried flat and coarse on his unlined brow. There’s a little sand under his tongue, surprisingly hard little stones like strange bodies, and a pasty dryness in his throat, but he’s trying not to ruin the picture, trying to stay toothy and light. His smile feels thick and delicate, like the white porcelain of a toilet bowl.

With the sun gone, everything cools, and he looks like he’s been buried standing with his neck stretched up high above the ground as if he’s afraid of burning his chin on the still hot sand. Really he’s sitting with his skinny legs held tight to his chest like they’re his only friends. It’s easier this way. The hole can be shallow, just a little deeper than him.

He’s got big brown eyes like holes, and his dad is snapping photos and saying, *Perfect! Perfect!* while in the parking lot, in the car, in his mind, his mother is smoking American Spirit Reds, because they are all natural and not addictive, and she is pressing her toes into the brown plastic of the dashboard and seeing how long she can hold them there before the burn forces her to slide them away. She runs the engine and the air and behind the silver mirrors of her sunglasses, there is a whole universe she thinks of as impenetrable, but that the boy can guess at with startling accuracy. Of course, he tells no one.

Who would he tell? His dad’s breath smells like Bud and, being a lightweight, light as the white tears of seagull down coming apart in the wind right in front of his eyes, that’s all he needs. It gets him all the way there, and as he circles and circles and the camera runs out of film, he keeps on as if he’s still capturing these moments, moments that are gone forever anyway, no matter what, even from his memory. And the pictures, when he develops them, are covered in thumbs that cast fleshy halos over the scene, but most still show the boy’s face in spinning angles. He will never tell the mother about them. One he will fold into a white square the size of a cracker. And he chews it to mush and swallows it.

It’s not the ocean behind the boy, but a giant lake with an inexplicable tide all its own. It’s got crashing waves, and he’s faced away from it so little flocks of water hit the back of his neck. He starts to anticipate it based on the sound of the crash. When the wave falls over itself and curls in like a closing hand.

“You want me to dig you out, kiddo?”

“I’ll be fine,” he says. “I like it in here.”

So Dad falls asleep on his towel, snoring wet and limp as soaked rags, and dreaming of having sex with his wife

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except both of them are younger and smoother and more excitable. And in the car, Mom holds a lit cigarette over her wrist and twists the coal into her green vein, imagining she is sixteen again, soft and pale and still hidden from her future deep in the snowy northwest. Lands as still and peaceful (and desperate) as silver moonlight breaking through the heavy branches of Christmas pines and shining on the new snow, so perfect in her memory that she thinks through the pain, which is a great blank in her, that it could not, really, have existed. Could it? She feels as if she was nowhere at all before this very moment. It's the pain that makes her feel this way.

And what had they even been fighting about? He drank too much? Though he'd been making an effort to pace himself, storing the jingling bottle caps (two then, now all six) in the pocket of his bathing suit to remind him. The pointed edges sticking into his hip. She could get a job? Now that the boy was in school? She could help out, true, but also not. She had no skills and was too old to bag groceries with their pimply neighbor who was always staring at her tits and licking his braces.

How boring. How pedestrian. Better to talk about the rain. How the fat drops of it are like crystal on his tongue, delicious and painfully hard. How the sight of them makes him laugh, and the bars of dirty sun breaking over the parking lot cast tiny, broken rainbows, like flitting insects, over everything. And his dad raises his head, heavy with dreams, then crawls under the beach umbrella and pulls the towel over himself like a blanket.

The lightning is blue and gorgeous, a many branched, jigsaw of light, and the boy drinks it in. Its many branches like the many possible branches of his life. Hot. Wild as a network of roots. He feels irrationally free, even as he begins to feel dizzy from the lack of breath and the pressure on his lungs. That head can only hold so much, after all, and it's already filled to breaking with uneven rows of square teeth and organic cigarette smoke and the sound of his father's heavy breathing. With the way he can below, trapped inside his own lungs, in such an exact way that no one else can hear him. With the way he is starting to imagine, drifting to sleep most nights on a slim thought with the sounds of a breaking glass jangling in his ears, a mug his mother had thrown, a window his father had put his fist through, what it might be like if he were the only person in the world. He holds his mother's hand, sometimes, when they are out, though less and less, and he imagines it disintegrating. Imagines his father, slouched into a chair like a discarded coat, evaporating into the blue light of the television.

He feels himself breaking like the shell of an egg.

Shake that off. Better, much better, to talk about how the rain soaks into the sand and makes it heavier and heavier and darker, like it's burning. How all the sun is gone now and all the light is jagged and infrequent and loud. How breathing, now, is like screaming without sound. He can't speak. His open mouth grasping for air like a hand. And how, oh how, when he tries to stand, he finds that escape is already beyond him.

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## Gary Wosk

Gary Wosk was born in New York City, raised in the Bronx and later the San Fernando Valley in Los Angeles. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from California State University, Northridge. The former newspaper reporter works in media relations. *My Gym, They Are Here Bezillgo Versus the Allerton Theatre, Bubbe to the Rescue, The Violation, Best Intentions, Full Bladder, Typecast, Adrenalin Rush, Big Frank and Infirmary 909* are among his published short stories. His published essays include *Resilience* and *Tom, Oscar and Jimmy*. Gary lives in North Hills, California with his wife Mina.

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## The Recliner

[Gary Wosk](#)

I didn't want to let go of my recliner Marvin even though he was slowly falling apart.

That's right, I gave my recliner a name and I didn't care what anyone thought. I had a friend.

He'd been residing in the living room since my wife and I purchased him and another recliner just after we were married twenty-five years earlier.

His and her recliners. While I still have Marvin, it's been a revolving door of recliners for her. No loyalty. She doesn't know what she's missing.

Selling or giving Marvin away would have been too emotionally painful for me.

And there was no reason to show Marvin the door. Even though the aging process was catching up with him he still worked well enough. If I pulled the lever on his side for a different position, and he didn't move right away, I would gently repeat the motion. Patience. Respect. Tender loving care. That's the way I wanted to be treated when I began to become creaky.

In the beginning, Marvin was just a recliner to me. We soon became friends though. Everything seemed better when I was seated in his company. In return, I promised to always keep him clean and never give him away.

When my wife, Gertrude, wasn't around, I'd engage Marvin in a conversation. I know it sounds crazy.

“How are you today Marvin?” I'd ask.

“Oh, about the same,” he'd answer. “Just listening to the birds chirping away in the backyard. I believe there was a raccoon or opossum on the roof. The footsteps were too loud to be a squirrel. How was your day?”

“Well, work could have gone better. I wish my boss would take a long vacation.”

“Have a seat and tell me about it. By the way, please set the DVR tomorrow for *The View*. Robert de Niro is supposed to be on the show.”

Even though big brown swiveling Marvin wasn't as sturdy as he used to be, he was still dependable. Parting with him would be very difficult. I couldn't see myself offering him in a garage sale, leaving him out at the curb or donating him to a charity. Perhaps when the time came I could just move him into the garage and place a sheet over him. That's what he requested.

The sight of his exposed foam and the feel of his coarser polyester fiber didn't bother me. Just because someone

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has blemishes and a slightly musty odor doesn't mean you throw him out into the cold.

My wife didn't feel the same way about Marvin. His appearance embarrassed her whenever we had visitors. It was all in her head. No one ever mentioned his state of disrepair. She was jealous of the relationship I had with him and wanted him to go away.

"Isn't it about time we bought a new recliner?" she'd ask occasionally.

"Marvin has a lot of life left in him."

"Maybe we should move your recliner into the extra bedroom."

"No way. If we did that he'd really go downhill fast. He'd feel dejected. Not wanted. And please call him by his name: Marvin."

"I will do no such thing. It's only a recliner."

"Marvin is not an 'it'. If only you were a little more open-minded, Marvin could be your friend too."

To know Marvin was to love him. My dad, Glen, sure did.

Whenever my parents visited, he went straight for Marvin.

"He's all yours," I would remark. I liked seeing my dad happy.

The fatigued octogenarian would perk up after experiencing Marvin's warm embrace. My mom, Harriet, wished that Dad was always in such high spirits.

"Is everyone in the mood for some Chinese food tonight?" he asked everyone within minutes of sitting down in Marvin. "There's a great new restaurant in Northridge that Mom and I discovered last week. It will be my treat."

"Can we take Marvin home with us?" Mom inquired. "Your dad has discovered the fountain of youth. When he's at home he just naps all afternoon in his recliner. It's an ordinary recliner. Here, he becomes another man."

"Oh, sorry Mom," I answered her. "You know how I feel about Marvin."

"Are you both planning to go away any time soon. We could house sit."

"No plans yet," I said.

"Then we'll just have to come over more often then."

My wife's face turned ashen. "Oh, that would be fine," she responded after clearing her throat.

And Marvin was my son William's favorite recliner too.

When I caught him in the recliner with his homework, I'd say, "Shouldn't you be studying in your room where it's much quieter? That's why we bought you a beautiful new desk and wall unit."

HeÖd pat Marvin on the top of his back rest.

ÖIÖ like it here Dad. I seem to get better grades when I sit in Marvin.Ö He was right.

The family beagles enjoyed Marvin as well. Jake and Molly would curl up in him, but not at the same time. They would growl at each other over whoÖs turn it was to occupy him. Sometimes they would try to push the other one off.

Occasionally I would find Gertrude sitting on Marvin when I came home. Her first instinct was to get up, mistakenly believing I wanted her to stay away from my friend.

ÖYou donÖt have to move,Ö I always said. ÖHeÖs yours too.Ö

ÖItÖs okay, Howard I donÖt want to get between you and Marvin,Ö she said resentfully.

It was interesting that Marvin looked even more dilapidated after Gertrude sat in him. I couldnÖt tell if the new tears I spotted were the result of the natural aging process or caused by her. I suspected the latter, but I had no proof and let it slide. I was already on thin ice with her because of my friendship with Marvin.

She drew the line in the carpet one day while Marvin and I were dozing together.

ÖWake up, Howard.Ö

ÖOkay,Ö I drowsily answered her. ÖWhat is it?Ö

ÖThereÖs a sale at La-Z-Boy on recliners.Ö

ÖThatÖs why you woke me and Marvin up? Let us sleep.Ö

ÖWe need to get up and going. Everything is fifty percent off today.Ö

ÖWe donÖt need a new recliner. Can we discuss this away from Marvin? This is the kind of talk that bothers him.Ö

ÖThatÖs ridiculous Howard, but if you insist.Ö

We retreated to our bedroom

ÖYour recliner is an eye-sore,Ö said Gertrude. She had hurt my feelings.

ÖItÖs whatÖs inside Marvin that counts.Ö You canÖt judge Marvin by the way he looks on the outside.Ö

She then suggested something I found to be ridiculous.

ÖCan we get Marvin reupholstered then? I could live with that.Ö

ÖYou mean like a face lift? I donÖt think so. We have to accept Marvin as he is.Ö

Gertrude then toughened her stance. She let me have it with both barrels.

“I’ve been very open-minded about your friendship with Marvin, but I’m giving you an ultimatum,” she said.  
“It’s Marvin or me. If he’s not out of this house soon, I’ll go live with my sister.”

That was an interesting proposal. Just me and Marvin. Two pals. I didn’t take her up on her offer because I would have missed her after a while.

“I just need a little more time.”

“You need more time to decide whether you love me or your recliner more?”

“No, that’s not it. You’ll always be the love of my life,” I said.

“Number one love of your life?”

“Yes, of course.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.”

“I would never choose Marvin over you. I just need a little more time to say goodbye to him.”

“For God’s sakes, Howard!”

“I’ll try selling Marvin on eBay when we get closer to Christmas,” I said without much conviction.

“That’s two months away. Wouldn’t it just be easier to sell it in a garage sale or put it out at the curb? I don’t think anyone who shops on eBay would be interested in a recliner that is on its last legs.”

“I will say goodbye to Marvin in a dignified manner.”

When December rolled around, I hoped Gertrude had forgotten about our discussion concerning Marvin. I was wrong. When I returned home from running errands, he was missing. Gertrude was in the kitchen preparing dinner, acting as if everything was normal.

“Oh, no, Gertrude! What have you done with him?” I was hyperventilating.

“Calm down,” she told me. “You’re making yourself sick over nothing.”

“Nothing? Marvin is my friend. Did you get rid of him?”

“I had no choice. I couldn’t take your procrastinating any longer,” I said.

“What did you do with him? Is he at the dump?”

“I would never do anything like that. I’m not that heartless.”

“Then where is he?”

“Goodwill picked up your recliner,” she said.

I began pacing back and forth, not sure how I could go on without my friend.

“Should I call 9-1-1, Howard?”

“No, I need to lay down and do some breathing exercises.”

“Actually, the best way to get over this is to go with me now to La-Z-Boy. They’re having another sale.”

“Sorry, Gertrude, I’m not interested.”

“Oh, I see. Is this the beginning of the grieving process?”

“You know Marvin meant so much to me.”

“Howard. I did it for your own good. It’s just an inanimate object.”

“You had no right to give Marvin away like that. I didn’t even have a chance to say good-bye.”

“That’s just plain ridiculous. I’m leaving for La-Z-Boy with or without you.”

After she returned two hours later, she glowingly told me, “I’ve ordered a new recliner.”

“Congratulations,” I said without any inflection in my voice.

“You’re going to love the new recliner.”

“It’s your recliner, not mine.”

“Okay, then, you can sit in my recliner for now on.”

“Not interested. I’ll sit on the couch.”

“Stop pouting, Howard.”

As I expected the new recliner was not another Marvin. It had electronic controls and memory foam, but that didn’t mean anything to me. To make matters worse, there wasn’t even enough room. It was shorter and narrower than my friend. And it wasn’t cushiony. I tried it out once and that was enough.

Staying in the living room was too emotionally painful for me, so I retreated to our bedroom.

Finally, after weeks of intensive therapy, my mood was beginning to lighten up. I was starting to accept the fact that I would never see Marvin again. I even decided it would be okay to sit in Gertrude’s nondescript former recliner.

We were enjoying a pleasant Saturday afternoon when someone knocked on the front door.

“Hello, is this the Richardsons residence?” asked a middle-aged man with gray hair tied in a ponytail and weathered face.

“Yes, it is,” I answered.

“M Denny with Goodwill. Special delivery.” He pointed to the recliner by his side. I didn’t recognize Marvin at first.

“Marvin! You’ve returned. It’s a miracle. And you’re reupholstered.”

Pointing to my friend, he asked, “You named your recliner Marvin?”

“That’s right.”

“You must have really liked your recliner, Mr. Richardson.”

“That’s an understatement,” interjected my crestfallen wife who was now standing by my side.

“He looks great,” I said. “Didn’t anyone want him?”

“Four families tried him out. They didn’t feel wanted by the recliner. I know that sounds strange.”

“Not as strange as you might think,” I responded.

I tried it out too and felt the same way. It didn’t want anyone except you to sit in him.”

“That’s right, Marvin was being loyal to me.” And by the way, Marvin is not an “it.”

“Uh, oh, not this again,” said Gertrude.

“Oh, sorry,” said Denny. “I meant Marvin.”

“Enabler!” accused my wife.

“I didn’t realize that you returned donated items,” I said.

“It’s a very rare occurrence, but Marvin was obviously home sick. It happens once-in-while with furniture.”

“Don’t tell me you’re another Howard?” said Gertrude. “You need to get your brain checked out too by a shrink.”

“I’ve been in the business for forty years. I know my furniture.”

“Take it back, please,” she pleaded with him.

“I’m sorry, but this is Marvin’s home,” replied Denny.

My wife let out a deep sigh.

“It will be okay,” I told her. “The next twenty-five years with Marvin are going to be great. With you too Gertrude.”

“Don’t be surprised if you find yourself out in the garage with a sheet over your head before Marvin.”

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## Keith Buie

Keith Buie’s work has appeared in *Burnt Tongues*, the award-winning (USA Book News, This is Horror, INDIEFAB) and Bram Stoker-nominated anthology edited by best-selling author Chuck Palahniuk. Keith’s work has also appeared in *Eleven Eleven*, *The MacGuffin*, *Sand Hill Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Pisgah Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *Fox City Review*, *Quiddity International Literary Journal*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Willard & Maple*, *Metal Scratches*, and *Ghost Town*. Keith is currently writing his first novel

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## Castle

[Keith Buie](#)

After school, Mom orders me to the yard. Hollering from her bedroom, underneath thrashing blankets, while opening aspirin bottles, amid four-letter curse words, she announces her latest migraine. Middle of her forehead. A dagger through the skull.

Mom runs the cash register at Carl's Grocery all day, and her shift at the diner starts at sundown, so I'm to come back inside then and bathe and finish my homework and, only after her head stops screaming, watch television. The television is broken; every channel plays only static. She promised two paychecks ago to call the repairman, but when I reminded her last week, after she emptied the grocery bag on the counter, she said to help myself to the money tree out back, pluck off enough to fix the TV and pay the utilities and move to Paris. Ask my father for a ladder when he gets back, if I can't reach the branches.

"He'll be back *any* minute," Mom said. "Just a quick run for smokes and a two-liter of Coke, that's all," she reminded me. "Ask him when he's back. Go ahead. Ask His Majesty for the royal ladder," she said.

The usual activities await me: climbing the oak tree to name the unhatched eggs in the nest (Rudy, Miles, and Sylvester are my current choices); using the pocketknife I found along the railroad tracks to sharpen my fallen branch/homemade spear to fight off Marty Kelleman when he jumps me on my walks home from school; throwing pinecones on the roof and collecting two points when staying and one for gutter-rollers.

Instead, I risk it and stand at the chain-link fence of my next-door neighbors, the Cummings, to catch a view of sleeping Dragon, Zeus, and baby Sadie. Dogs scare me. Rottweilers terrify me. I approached Sadie, alone, last week, the crackling gravel under my feet sending both parents scurrying over, front paws on top of the fence and two foaming mouths barking, and I ran back in the house and had to change my underwear. Most days, from the kitchen window, I watch both dogs chase Sadie around a dirt circle in the backyard, underneath white T-shirts and underwear hanging from the clothesline, but behind both the inflatable pool with duct tape holding in leaks and a green station wagon surrounded by tire-high grass, which Mr. Cummings, who works in a garage but doesn't fix cars, couldn't get started two years ago, and bought a used minivan instead.

Timmy walks out to the yard and stops, stares. Hair hangs over his eyes like he's months overdue for a haircut. Timmy is in my grade at school, but he eats lunch alone after we're all back in class. Remedial, my mother calls him, but Timmy says he isn't stupid. Books are boring, so he can't pay attention. He's too tired in the morning to wake up sometimes. Plus, his dogs eat a lot. Who else will feed them three meals a day, plus snacks?

Timmy walks over to the fence and says he's seeing a movie and do I want to see a movie. The only theater in town is the dollar discount on Wooster, playing movies advertised from the previous summer, the same ones on VHS to rent from Walt's Rentals, but we don't own a VCR, so I tell Timmy I want to go. Timmy says the movie costs a dollar, and he'll ask his mom if she has an extra dollar, so he runs back inside, and after a few minutes of four different voices yelling, plus one baby crying, Timmy returns nodding, so I'm going to the movie.

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Mr. Cummings walks out first. Gray stubble covers his cheeks like he's growing a beard or just forgot to shave today. He fights to pull open the stuck door of his mint-green van rusted with jagged pieces hanging from the bottom stained the color of winter sludge. Mr. Cummings catches me staring, and he stares back, lips pursed together, as if thinking about something, only not saying.

Mrs. Cummings follows, looking like a bowling ball wearing flip-flops and a baggy white T-shirt long enough to be a dress, covering the shorts she's wearing, or the nothing she's not. Timmy's sister, Peggy, follows, barefoot and cradling her baby girl against her chest. Peggy missed a year of school after giving birth, and she never returned. She used to chain-smoke and sunbathe in a pink two-piece on the front lawn next to a radio blasting Metallica before she caught me spying from my bedroom window, and so she stopped. After the baby, she now drags trash cans to the curb wearing only her underwear and bra, clanging the lids and squinting through the sunlight at my bedroom window.

I hop in the back, in the third row next to Timmy, behind Peggy holding her baby, and behind five plastic bags overflowing with empty soda cans. When my backside hits the seat, the cushion squishes, soaking my pants. The Cummings, with Dragon, Zeus, and Sadie, all pile in some weekends and leave for hours, coming back and letting all three soaked dogs run out of the van, shaking off water after swimming at Bailey's Creek. A sign by the creek reads, "Private Property: No Trespassing," because it's technically on Mr. Bailey's property, hidden at the far end of his lot, behind a barn and a row of pine trees. Mr. Bailey got hauled off to jail for firing at swimming teenagers once, missing all three, but their parents pressed charges anyway. Got the whole town talking those two weeks last year. Now only herds of geese eat grass and swim in the creek, leaving behind floating green globs of poop to make the water smell how our toilet smells when it backs up.

The entire van smells like Bailey's Creek.

Gravel splatters as the van takes off. We roll through the four-way stop at Main and ignore car horns and a flashing red at Decker. Timmy presses his face against the window, and I stare at Peggy sitting sideways in front of me, her shirt pulled up, bra slid down, for her daughter to breastfeed. Some girls in my grade have started wearing bras, but not all of them. I never paid attention to which girls wore what. Now that's all I notice.

"Stop," Peggy shouts, and her father slams the brakes as we enter the theater parking lot.

Parked across the lot is a red Trans Am, both doors open and music blaring. Three teenage boys sit on the hood of the car, passing around the same bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag, taking turns drinking.

Mrs. Cummings asks what she's looking at, and Peggy says it's Bo.

"What's he doing?" Mrs. Cummings strains her neck to stare harder.

"He's sitting," Peggy says. "He's right there. On his car. With Kyle and Kenny. Right there. He's sitting."

Bo's rusted muffler used to announce his arrival from two blocks away. He parked his Trans Am in front of the Cummings' house when visiting last year, peach-fuzz mustache over his upper lip and long hair hanging to his jean-jacket collar as he hopped out and headed to their front door. Whenever he spotted me playing in the yard, he'd nod and call me "little man" and walk in the house without knocking. After Peggy became pregnant, Bo stopped calling me "little man" or not knocking or showing up altogether.

Timmy removes his face from the window and asks why we aren't seeing the movie yet.

Peggy whips around in her seat, her shirt still pushed up and bra pulled down, fully exposed with the baby's eyes now closed and sleeping.

"It's Bo." She points out the windshield again. "In the parking lot. He's out there."

"I can see," Timmy shouts. "I'm not blind. I'm not stupid."

"Then shut up." Peggy's eyes dart back to the windshield. "Shut up and don't be stupid."

Mrs. Cummings yells for both children to shut up or she'll shut them up herself. This is important, so they need to be quiet.

Mr. Cummings looks where his wife and daughter look. He scratches what is almost his full beard.

After ten more minutes of staring, Bo and his friends finish off their bottle. Kyle or Kenny, the one with hair to his shoulders, not all the way past his shoulders, hops off the hood of the car and spins around in a circle, heaving the bag-covered bottle off like an Olympic shot-putter. The bottle flies over a row of parked cars and lands on an empty patch of pavement, shattering. All three laugh.

Mrs. Cummings asks if Peggy saw that, and Peggy says, yeah, she saw.

Bo and his friends light up cigarettes and fail to walk over and clean up the shattered glass, so Mrs. Cummings tells Mr. Cummings to go next door. Go next door for a minute, because this might take a while.

We cross two lanes of traffic to the drive-through across the street most people in town call McDonald's, but doesn't have golden arches or those salty yellow French fries. Mrs. Cummings shouts over her husband to the microphone, ordering five hamburgers and five large Cokes. We pull around to the pickup window, where a girl with braces wearing a white paper hat covering half her forehead says we owe \$8.75.

Mrs. Cummings digs in her purse, pulling out wrinkled dollar bills. Her lips move when she counts. Then she stops counting and digs around in the console to gather up loose change. She hands the money to Mr. Cummings, who stares at the change before pushing the money through the window to the girl.

The girl shakes her head. "Sixty cents short."

Mrs. Cummings points to Peggy and says to look in the cushions. She tells her husband to look too. Us three in the back dig around. Dig and find some money.

Peggy holds up a quarter. Jimmy finds a dime on the floor, and I pull three pennies from the ashtray.

We hand the money to Mrs. Cummings, who holds the change out to Mr. Cummings, still digging around in the cushions between his legs.

"Hurry up." Peggy stomps and one of the plastic bags topples over, the spilling cans waking her baby, now crying. She shoves the baby's face back under her shirt, the sound of crying now replaced with sucking. "Hurry up. We're going to be late."

Mrs. Cummings leans over her husband and hands the money to the girl, who gives us the bags and cups of

soda.

“Eat your dinner,” Mrs. Cummings hands food and drinks back to us. “And drink up. I ordered the biggest sodas so you don’t run out.”

We head back across the street to the theater parking lot. This time, Mr. Cummings parks in a real spot with a straight-on view of Bo’s Trans Am.

Mother and daughter stare out the windshield, chomping on their burgers and sipping soda through their straws. Mr. Cummings nods while chewing with his mouth open, taking slurps of soda in between bites, while Timmy eats and tugs his straw up and down, making a squeaking sound neither Peggy nor Mrs. Cummings hears or comments about.

I take small bites and keep my mouth closed, saving my soda until after eating, for dessert.

“He got Lucy Lyons pregnant, you know,” Peggy says.

“What?” Mrs. Cummings asks.

“Girl from school,” Peggy says. “Bo and her went out last month. Bo got her pregnant. They’re not together, but she’s still pregnant. From Bo.”

Mrs. Cummings shakes her head and says it’s typical. The whole thing is typical.

They both stop talking to stare through the windshield.

Still sitting on his hood, Bo lights up a cigarette, smoking away. Kyle or Kenny with hair past his shoulder reaches into the car to turn the music louder. Nothing else happens, and we sit and witness every second of it.

A woman waddles out of the movie theater carrying a tub of leftover popcorn. She leans her shoulders back when walking, for balance, to keep her round stomach from toppling her frontward. When she passes the teenagers, all three laugh, and Bo says something, from the van, we cannot hear. The woman hears, and she stops and curses all three of them out. Even in the van, we hear what she says. We hear every filthy word.

Bo slides off the car and snatches away the woman’s popcorn. He tilts the tub to his lips and chews out a mouthful, passing the tub to his friends.

“You see that?” Peggy points at the scene.

“I saw,” Mrs. Cummings says. “I saw it alright.”

The woman tries to take back the popcorn, but Bo and his friends get in his car, driving off.

“He’s getting away,” Peggy shouts.

“Go after him,” Mrs. Cummings says to her husband, and he hits the gas, putting us back on the street, front bumper inches from Bo’s back bumper. We drive like this down Elm and onto Cedar. Bo drives like the speed limit is a laughable suggestion, whipping around turns without braking. Our minivan follows, weaving in and out of

traffic to keep up. The baby's face falls from under Peggy's shirt and cries, but Peggy's too fixated on the Trans Am to do anything about it.

"You're not getting away with this, Bo." Peggy's hands shake while holding her baby. "You're not getting away. I see you."

"He's not getting away," Mrs. Cummings says. "We won't let him get away."

Smoke seeps out from underneath the hood. Something under the floorboards rattles, but Mr. Cummings shoves his foot harder on the gas, so I grip the armrest with my left hand, my right clutching my drink, as the missing cup holder is broken off, rolling along the floor with aluminum cans from one of the spilled bags, until a busy intersection when Bo's brake lights turn red like a stop sign only we don't stop. We can't stop. There's no room to stop.

When we hit Bo's back bumper, both Timmy and I slide forward into the back of the seat in front of us, the other four plastic bags toppled over, rolling on the ground to the front of the van.

The baby cries louder, nothing under Peggy's shirt working to silence her.

Mrs. Cummings looks back and asks if we're all alive. She says to her daughter how Bo almost got us killed, only Peggy doesn't answer, already out of the van and darting up to Bo standing and inspecting his smashed bumper.

Peggy carries her crying baby up to Bo. She points a finger in Bo's face and yells and holds out her baby to him, who Bo stares at but doesn't grab hold. Peggy yells something about being first, and Bo just stands there, his head down, and takes the yelling.

Mrs. Cummings gets out and does some yelling herself, pointing to the crying baby, pointing at Bo, and back to the baby.

Mr. Cummings backs up the van, and Bo's bumper drops to the ground. Mr. Cummings pulls a bungee cord from the glove box and gets out, tying up Bo's bumper until it only sags, not sits, on top of the pavement.

After Peggy and Mrs. Cummings finish yelling at Bo, they get back in the van. Mr. Cummings points to the tied-up bumper for Bo to see before getting back in the van. We all sit until Bo drives off, spewing sparks as the bumper scrapes just overtop the pavement. When his car turns the corner and disappears around the bend, we keep staring. Then Mr. Cummings hits the gas and we drive along at a leisurely pace, going not to the movie or anywhere in particular.

\*\*\*

Back home, I walk in the house in time to catch Mom buttoning up her diner uniform. She says to finish my homework and go to bed.

She spots the drink in my hands, still half full, and asks what it is.

"Coke," I say.

"Coke?" Mom shakes her head, exhaling through her mouth. "Dump it out," she says. "Dump it out and don't take another sip. I can't afford the dentist. You want to get cavities?"

She makes me march to the sink and dump the soda down the drain. She says to lock the deadbolt when she's gone. The key unlocks the door, she always reminds me, but not the deadbolt.

He's not coming back," she says. "But still, lock it anyway, if he changes his mind. Lock it every night. That'll teach him."

In the bathroom, I squeeze out the toothpaste and brush my teeth before tucking myself into bed and pulling the covers up past my nose. I stare at the dark ceiling.

His rusted muffler announces his presence from two blocks away. I run to the window and throw back the curtains as Bo parks on the street. When he stops, the bungee cord snaps, his sagging fender now lying right on the pavement. Bo hops out and stares at the back of his car. He looks up and catches me staring from the window.

"Little man," Bo says. He nods.

Bo walks to the Cummings' front porch. The door is unlocked, and Bo walks in. He walks in without knocking, the king returning to his castle.

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## Kathleen Katims

Kathleen Katims is a candidate for an MFA in Creative Writing at Antioch University. Her work has been published in Verdad Magazine, The Penman Review and Lunch Ticket. She is working on a book called Second Acts, interviewing and writing about people who were stuck and moved in the direction of their dreams. She founded Saved by a Story, a story telling salon with a purposeD to share stories, create community and raise money for organizations that help people tell their story. She lives in Los Angeles, California with her awesome husband, two cool cat kids and big brown dog.

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## Lava

[Kathleen Katims](#)

“You stay here,” my mother tells me.

I look out the window at our huge elm tree and each twig and branch, is glazed with ice. So are the fire hydrant, the parking meters and the sidewalks. And the sky is steel. I’ve never seen Brooklyn look like this before. Usually I would go with them, but my mother worries that it will be too slippery for all of us to make it the five blocks to my brother and sister’s elementary school.

“Stay with your father,” she says to me.

I have to wait till next year to go to school. This year I pretend I am a school girl, insisting on carrying my brother and sister’s books when we pick them up, and I already can read some long words. My mother told me don’t be afraid of the long words. Just find the little words in the big word. My father sits on the couch in his blue work clothes staring out quiet, thinking, smoking a Pall Mall.

I watch my mother, sister and brother from the window as they make slow progress up the block. My mother takes tight steps and my sister almost falls, but my mother holds her up by her hand like she does when we are in the waves.

I open the window and a frozen gust surprises me and whips into the room down my nightgown.

“HOW DO YOU SPELL TWINKLES?” I yell to my mother. I am writing a story about our cat becoming a detective like Scooby Doo.

I’m ready with my crayon to write it on the window ledge, but she can’t hear me. I pull down the window, and the cold seeps through even still. I spell T-W-I-N-K-A-L-S the best I can in green crayon on the ledge, something that my mother will later yell at me for doing. I will try to say I didn’t do it, but she will line up Jamie, Kim and me and tell us to stick out our tongue because that will let her know who is lying. I will run from the lineup, confessing as I go, and my punishment will be to scrub it off with Windex. I never can get T-W-I-N-K-A-L-S off though, and it stays a ghost word on the windowsill.

The radiator behind the couch is churning up steam. I climb up and lie between the wall and the couch with my cat and get warm, steaming my face, my belly, my feet. My father doesn’t mind; I can see him blowing plumes of smoke out in front of him. I overheard my mother telling my father, when they were watching Johnny Carson, that the son-of-a-bitch-bastard Horing turns the heat way down low in the middle of the day when the kids are at school, turns it back up for dinnertime and morning, and off at night. I savor the heat and the steam before the pipes get cold.

*The Flintstones* is on. I go to the kitchen, get a bowl, and pour in the tinkly sounds of Lucky Charms, milk, and

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sprinkle in two tablespoons of sugar. My sister left a TV tray set up in front of the television from breakfast, and I pull a chair close to the set to watch and eat. My feet are cold and are already a little dirty. I should get socks, but I don't.

I sit close so that I imagine myself in the world of Bedrock, where the cars run on footsteps and the ribs are so big they tilt the cars. I think Betty is prettier, but I would be Wilma because she's so funny.

"Audrey, come here," my father says from behind me where he is sitting on the couch. I hear the tssst of him crushing his Pall Mall in the ashtray beside him.

I turn to him.

"What?" I ask.

"Come here," he says. He doesn't seem mad. He pats his lap for me to come sit with him. Highly unusual.

I sit in my mother's lap. I lie all over her at the end of the day when I'm tired and there is Johnny Carson and her bum leg is up on the chair and I'm supposed to go to bed, but instead I rest my head in her lap and I watch with her, even though I don't get the jokes. Sometimes she puts her hand on my back, and it feels good.

I get out of my chair to go near him.

I watch and wonder about my father a lot. I try to picture him at work and try to imagine if he talks and laughs with my uncles when they are fixing TVs at my Uncle Angel's shop.

Yesterday, Kim, Jamie and I rolled the edge of three blankets, curved them into donut shapes and made them into rafts on the red linoleum of the living room floor pretending the red was lava. When my father got home, I braved the lava flow and ran to him, hugged his legs and said, "Hi Daddy." He smiled and put his hand on my head. Kim and Jamie came to hug him too and we jockeyed among each other to get close to him.

My mother came from the kitchen and there was spaghetti sauce on the stove making the apartment smell like tomatoes, onions and butter. They didn't kiss. That would be weird.

"Hey, Joe." She smiled a satisfied smile over our heads for him, her big stirring spoon in one hand and another over her round belly. I noticed she put on lipstick. He has dark, curly hair on the sides of his head, but is bald on top. He has thick hands and a wide chest with strong arms. His feet are so big that I can stand on them while he walks.

"Hey, JJ," he smiled. He's the only one who calls her that.

"YOU'RE IN THE LAVA! YOU'RE IN THE LAVA!" I screamed. Kim, Jamie and I hop-ran back to our rafts, back to our game. My father just walked across the red linoleum and sat down on the couch and my mother went back to the kitchen.

He wears dark blue pants, and a dark blue shirt with his name on it when he works at my uncle's shop. On the weekend, he wears the dark blue pants with a white tee shirt. His hands have grease on them and, even after he washes them, the grease stays. I wondered what he would look like if he wore yellow or green or red shirts and jeans sometimes instead of the same blue clothes, but I can't picture it.

This morning, he calls me over. Truth is I really don't like being interrupted. I like to imagine I'm in Bedrock. I'm waiting for my mom, and usually my father would already have taken the bus to work. I watch television and work on my story while my mother does housework in the backrooms. If I need to spell a word, I can go find her.

He picks me up and puts me on his lap, and part of me worries that I am too old for this. I am wearing my red, flannel granny gown that I got from Santa at Christmas. I pull it over my bare knees and try to include my feet because they are pretty cold. I try to pay attention to my father and to Fred Flintstone at the same time. I can feel my father's belt buckle on my back.

His hands are thick and rough I think from handling all the insides of the televisions. I used to wonder what was inside. Were *The Flintstones* in there? My father showed me the inside of the television one day when he was fixing it, and I felt disappointed to see that it was just dusty tubes and wires.

At first, my father's runs his hands over my shins, but then they find the hem of my nightgown and start to slip up my cold legs. Then like spiders they creep into my underwear. How can this be happening? My father's hands are touching me, and I can't breathe. I can't see his face and I'm afraid to. It feels like a siren in my head so Fred Flintstone is taking, but I can't hear what he is saying. I stare dead ahead watching the TV screen. My mother was walking so slow, and I know my she will be extra careful because she doesn't want to fall on account of the baby in her tummy.

His hands are rough against my most private parts. My sister and I take a bath together and we poke our fingers up there and we pee in the tub just so we can watch the bathtub fill with yellow and then go clear. Now my father's hands are down there. I might die. He is rubbing between my legs, and there a sensation I never felt before. It is warm between my legs and my father asks, "Does it feel good?"

I say, "Yes."

He says, "Come."

I don't want to go. I want to stay with Fred Flintstone and my Lucky Charms and the cat near the radiator, and the marshmallows in my cereal are going to be just right now, mushy and sugary and beautiful colors, sea green, pink and yellow. The yellow is my favorite because it tastes like bananas.

My father stands me up, and I try to root my feet to the cold linoleum. The pipes are rattling as they shut down, and the cat looks at us coolly. He holds my hand and leads me back through the railroad apartment. I don't know where he is taking me.

He stops at the big double bed that he shares with my mother, still rumpled from their night's sleep, and he lies down in his clothes with his shoes on, and he sits me on top of him below his belt buckle. He closes his eyes and he starts to make noises that I have never heard before. He moans almost like he is hurt, but when I dare to look his eyes are closed and he seems far away. I try to move up to his stomach, try to get away from that nasty part that makes my father go away, but he picks me up and puts me back below his belt and holds me there so he can push against me. Tears stream down my cheeks, but I don't make any noise. I am shivering because the pipes are cold now.

My nightgown from Santa is up around my underwear, and my underwear is showing again and this is part that makes me feel the worst. How long before I can cover myself?

I wonder who is this man and where has my father gone. Where is the father who takes me to hunt for frogs in the

lake with my brother and sister in Prospect Park or who taught me how to ride my bike and let me go and I kept going straight even when I was so sure that I would fall over, but he knew before I did that I would keep going?

Where is my father who pushes me so high on the swings that my mother gets that squeaky voice and tells him, "Not so high, Joe?"

That father is gone and in his place is this groaning man. And then he groans one more time, not like a person, but like a bear in the forest—so loud that he shudders. He never looks at my eyes, but he picks me up and sets me back down beside the bed. My nightgown covers me now, but it almost doesn't matter.

My father walks me back to the living room, holding my hand through the rooms that my mother will straighten all morning. She will straighten the wrinkled covers and smooth over the pillows and wax the floors so when the kids come home, even though the paint is old and the house is not fancy, the floors shine and everything feels ordered and calm until the night when we use all the dishes in the house and take the baths and sleep in all the beds and she has to do it all over again.

She will finally take a break at night after she cooks to put her feet up and watch the news and then Johnny Carson. Some nights, I will sneak out of bed and slip beside her on the couch and put my head in her lap. She calls me her night owl, and if I am very quiet, she won't send me back to bed.

I don't remember if he tells me not to tell my mother, but I know I can't. I have a secret now, and I know that if my mother knows what happened that nothing would ever be the same. The walk to school and the made-up beds and the spaghetti sauce on the stove and playing lava rafts with my brother and sister would be gone. This secret would blast the roof off of the house; lava would flow down the stairs out the door to scorch the icy streets; the walls would collapse crashing upon each other until the whole house exploded. What remained of us, the people, would blast us so far away—each of us cast out on a sea of molten red. No. I must never get angry. Never let it out this secret I have.

He sits me back at the table and *The Munsters* has started. I know *Bewitched* is next, and I love them all, know all their rooms and all their friends, have been in all their houses. The Lucky Charms are soggy than they ever have been before, but it's okay because I don't want them anyway.

I know my mother is on her way home to me and that she will find me this icy morning.



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## Rick Krizman

Rick Krizman writes music, stories, and poems and holds an MFA in Writing from Pacific University. His fiction has appeared in *The Wising Up Press*, *Sediment*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Star 82 Review*, *Medusa's Laugh Press* and elsewhere, and he is a regular contributor to *The Big Smoke*. Rick is the father of two grown daughters and lives with his wife and other animals in Santa Monica, CA.

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## Asteroid

[Rick Krizman](#)

Beeps from the kitchen, Miriam punching at the timer. Outside a dog howls and Wilson goes nuts, scrabbling on the wood floors, relaying the message, *the sun's gone, oh my God, oh my God*. Then he drops an octave, growly, probably the mailman, or somebody in a hat.

"Honey, the dog," Miriam shouts, as if I don't know, and I go for the mail, toss a catalog to Wilson. "It's a high fly ball!" sails out of the TV, the crowd cheering, the smoke alarm tooting in the kitchen like a sick ambulance; a Tarzan yell from Miriam's phone, then mine whistles, all some crazed Popeye soundtrack.

"Summon the teenager," Miriam says, lunging for the oven, but Gabby's already stomping down the steps.

"I don't care if he calls or not," she broadcasts over the bleating alarm.

"Who, Elliot?" I holler from three feet away, stabbing a broomstick at the ceiling.

"Honey, I thought nobody actually *calls* anymore," Miriam says.

The beeps stop but then Gabby's phone chimes and she whizzes away, clicking, as if we can read her thumbs. Elliot, God help him.

"Okay, but I'm eating your artichoke," I yell and she U-turns to the table, her text whooshing off, sliding into her seat like she's stealing home as Miriam plunks down the blackened chicken. The dog is nuzzling my ankle and praying to the gods of gravity while the rest of us hold hands like a trio of skydivers, and Miriam races through to an "amen." Then, incredibly, a moment of absolute silence as we let go. I take a deep inhale, toking on our own randy mix of oven and sweat and animal and pheromones, and I hold it in, feeling the rush.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later and Gabby's gone. College girl. Syracuse, if only because she didn't realize Maine was even further.

"She'll be back," Miriam says across a mile of dinner table. "She's already complaining about the snow."

"In *September*?" I say, forking at my fish, wishing it was a T-bone (Miriam's idea of a "fresh start"). "Wait, she texted? What'd she say?"

"Girl stuff."

"Hey, don't make me"

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“You stick that thing in your nose and I’m so leaving you.”

Once, in the early days of the mother-daughter coalition, they’d been whispering about tampons, like Dad couldn’t handle it, so that night at dinner I pulled out a handful and screwed one into each ear and nostril. Gabby giggled and plucked one from my ear and stuck it in hers. We both deadpanned back to our food, and as I maneuvered the last bite of pork chop past my tampon tusks I caught the corner of her eye, but she didn’t flinch.

\* \* \*

I have a thousand best friends and they’re all dying. So different from back in the atomic age, when you’d know a bunch of people at church, a few more at work, parents at school and whatnot. Your family; in-laws. Maybe a hundred at most, twenty you genuinely care about, three or four you’d die for. Things had their limits. Save up for an LP and listen to it over and over. Forty songs on the radio. The occasional movie. Once in a while somebody’d pass away, but you kept planting in the spring, thinking you’d live to eat those tomatoes.

I’ve been trying to explain this to Miriam, what’s been gnawing at me.

“People live longer than ever these days,” she says.

Which isn’t my point, but I let it go.

Later at the gym Derek and I are on the ellipticals.

“It’s like I’ve got a thousand friends now,” I say.

“You’ve always been more popular than me,” he says.

“Dude, I’m not kidding. I mean, there’s this whole frame of reference, this vast backlog of movie stars, baseball players, people on TV, pop singers, that somehow . . . look, how did you feel when Whitney Houston died?”

“Devastated of course. But she’s still in here.” He points to his heart. “And here.” He makes a circle with his thumb and forefinger, lower down. *Jesus*.

“And Facebook,” I go on. “All these new old friends, from like *grade* school. I reconnected with this guy, Ricky Butler, my best friend when I was ten. A week later he drops dead. Heart attack. I mean, who just drops dead at fifty-five?”

“I don’t know. Ricky Butler?”

I look around the bright, wide-windowed gym at the young women with their swishing ponytails, pumping Stairmasters in time with their ear-buds, at the clipped, Nike-clad executives gaping at the flatscreens on their treadmills, like they don’t know every day is a tragedy. What about their own thousand friends? Their own coterie of sitcom actors and standup comics, and old girlfriends and third cousins, all so vulnerable to a quick shift of the odds. Kirk Douglas. Is he still alive? How about Moe? I worry about Bono, Springsteen, how can they keep that up? And Jagger. And the guy who moves like Jagger. Any one of them tomorrow’s headlines.

“How can you wake up every morning and not worry about who’s going to kick it next?” I say to Derek,

wondering if his cool insouciance is really just dopey ignorance.

“I don’t know, it’s like worrying about planes falling out of the sky.”

“But planes *do* fall out of the sky.”

“Less than ever, don’t you think?”

“It’s not how many planes.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s the people *on* the planes.”

\* \* \*

At the breakfast table Miriam is reading about the asteroid, something I’ve tried, unsuccessfully, not to think about.

“You’re not worried?” I ask.

“About your thousand best friends?” She’s heard it up to here.

“Nooo.”

“The asteroid? According to this guy at NASA, it’d be like hitting a bullet with a bullet.” She fluffs out the paper and turns the page.

“Still,” I say, “there’s that crater in Arizona. Not to mention the suspicious depth of the Atlantic Ocean.”

“So?”

“So sometimes the bullet hits the fucking bullet.”

Miriam blinks at me over her paper as if I’m a stranger in a coffee shop who just plopped down at her table, then presses her hand to my cheek. “Don’t worry, she’s fine. She’ll be back.”

Who tells somebody who’s worrying not to worry? It’s like telling a drowning man to swim. Or a parent staring into the crib saying, *Just breathe, dammit.*

\* \* \*

Another night we’re in the family room after dinner, the AC humming, Miriam’s fingernails clattering on her keyboard. Almost like normal, but still, two doing the work for three. I put on the Beatles.

*I read the news today, oh boy.*

The microwave dings. Popcorn. Wilson shoots me a hopeful look.

“About a lucky dog who made the grade,” I sing, pushing up from the couch. But the song is making me

nervous. I'm remembering that humongous piano chord at the end. *Holy shit*, what if that's the whole story right there? That final twenty seconds. The murmuring orchestra getting higher and louder, chaotic, ascending, converging like a horde of Tomahawk missiles on the penultimate note, then *Blam!* Cradle to grave. Like the twenty seconds before the asteroid hits, its own gravity yanking us heavenward.

\* \* \*

Scientists report on the odds of an asteroid strike. Bono suggests a new space initiative. Jesus, we can't lose Bono.

\* \* \*

When Gabby was a toddler we'd be on a road trip and I'd use the Time Machine. "Close your little eyes, then I'll snap my fingers and we'll be there," I'd say, and she'd conk right out.

It works on me too. Visualize where I want to be, what I want to be doing, across some vale of unpleasantness. Sausaged into a plane to Mexico for example, I can catapult my awareness into that future moment on the sand sipping a neat tequila, blazing a Cohiba, and before you know it I'm actually there, looking back, thinking *that was really fast*.

\* \* \*

Miriam and I watch that movie, *ReAnimator*, with the evil doctor, now just a detached head in a dish of reanimating fluid, plotting revenge. I'm digging the ludicrous impossibility of it, my own body on the couch sympathetically comatose from the neck down, when I remember I met the director once. Nice guy, overweight, rubbery gray skin. Did he just stop making movies? My intravenous drip of worry starts up again. Miriam hears my sigh and peers over her MacBook.

"What?" I say.

She bites her lip, considering me. Maybe I've become the detached head in the fluid. Not evil, of course, but still not everything a woman might want from a man.

\* \* \*

With Gabby gone and Miriam barricaded behind emails and newspapers, I'm grateful for my thinking-about-things job and start working longer hours. Problems with solutions.

\* \* \*

I loom over the bathroom sink. Miriam's in bed reading *People*, all articles that will some day be repurposed as obituaries. I study my eyeballs and track the red capillaries. I try to make each one of my real pupils look only at its corresponding reflected pupil, then roll all four of them up to examine my eyebrows. How many hairs? If I counted one per second, how many seconds? If I named each one would I need a baby book? Maximilian. Bubba. Dylan. Dakota. Carolina. South Carolina? Two hairs growing out of a single pore. Jack and Jill. I run out of names, then scan down my mountainous nose to the sandy stubble above my lip, each single whisker squirming out of the viscous surface of skin, which puckers up around it. I imagine the razor shearing off the ends and the skin sinking flat, then almost immediately the little bumps as the hairs resume their struggle.

It seems like hours later when I turn off the bathroom light and climb in next to Miriam.

“Was I in there long?” I ask her.

She puts down her magazine. “Where?”

\* \* \*

I’m at work, perusing my list of Things To Think About, but the other list keeps cutting in. Five more “friend” requests. Don’t they know?

Derek’s back and drops a wooden figurine on my desk. “Got this in Moscow.” He pulls up the one to reveal the other inside, and so on.

“Wow, like I’ve never seen one of these,” I say as he lines them up.

“Hey, it’s for you,” he says, and now I feel bad. But not too bad, because while he was in Russia scarfing down sturgeon eggs and icy vodka and sharing the company’s great thoughts with people who don’t have many of their own, I was here in my cubicle squeezing out new thoughts into the hopper. His week lasted a month while mine blinked by in a single day.

“So what’s the latest on the asteroid?” he asks.

Thinking about the asteroid isn’t my job, of course, isn’t even part of our department, but Derek knows I’ve been thinking about it on the side, that I’ve seen memos from the fifth floor.

“Pretty soon it won’t just be the Hubble,” I say. “Amateur astronomers will be able to see it.”

“Like a comet streaking across the sky?”

“No, like a dim star slowly getting brighter.”

He does his own thinking on that and frowns.

“Who’s working on this?”

“Apparently our best people.”

After work I shoot pool with Derek. Sighting down on the eight ball I hear him cough and suddenly think, *Jesus, what if he’s next.*

\* \* \*

I’m clearing and Miriam’s filling the dishwasher. “This isn’t about your thousand so-called friends,” she says, and rests her hand on mine, but her touch feels prickly and I pull away. She’s right, but not how she thinks. If you can’t care about a thousand souls then what chance do the real numbers have? The five thousand soldiers in Iraq, or the fifty thousand in “Nam, or the half a million in the Civil War, or the six million Jews, or the twenty million Russians, or God knows how many if the asteroid hits. I mean, the thought of even rounding off the numbers.

Try to imagine just one person, I tell Miriam. Say a kid in Baghdad, sitting at the table in the morning eating oatmeal, or whatever it is, I don't even know. His mother packs a cloth bag with his lunch. His little sister on the bench next to him, kicking her feet that don't quite touch the floor and singing a kid's song. He's eleven years old, serious-minded as he eats his breakfast, thinking about solving the numbers in school, then getting his degree at an American university and returning to Iraq to care for his mother because his Shiite father left a month ago with two Sunnis and hasn't been heard from. I imagine him realizing in two or three years that he can't leave at all, because who'll bring the bread. But for now, he quits the table with purpose, arms himself with books and lunch, and launches into the dust-choked street, already loud with pushcart vendors, livestock and chickens, suited business men, Mercedes with blacked-out windows. I'm pulling for him, just to make it to school and learn a little something, then get home to his mother for a bowl of milky tea, to giggle with his sister, having been the man all day. He shortcuts by the bazaar and I picture him sneaking up on his pal who cooks commmeal pancakes there every morning, and knocking off his hat, the two play-wrestling for a moment, then "God is great" and he heads off. But there's a car bomb in the bazaar and I want to yell *run*, but he can't hear me and stops to buy a papaya for his mother. He doesn't even hear the explosion.

"And that's just one," I say to Miriam, who is looking at me with alarm as I push tears off my cheek.

\*\*\*

For a week I've slept as little as possible, worried about the Time Machine zooming forward when I'm not paying attention. I'm reading a book about Franz Hausman, the German guard who saved all those people at Auschwitz then died three years later on a cobblestone street near the castle in Salzburg when the bullet from a misguided Nazi-hunter entered his brain, widowing his war bride and leaving his twin baby sons fatherless. I'll be looking at page fifty-seven when suddenly my eyes will fly open and it's still page fifty-seven, but hours later.

\*\*\*

The days pass so quickly at work I stop going. I tell Miriam they're painting the cubicles and I can't think through the fumes, but I'm pretty sure she doesn't believe me.

"Who was that guy with the sword hanging by a hair over his head?" I ask while we're reading in the living room. "Procrustes?"

"Damocles" she says. "And don't worry, he's already dead."

Right, I think, but *was it the sword?*

\*\*\*

"You're not eating anymore," Miriam says, watching me twirl spinach with my fork like it's spaghetti. She sounds tired. "You can't just worry about everybody."

"It's not like I have a choice, Miriam. Do you know who died today? Do you want to see the list?"

"You've got to stop it."

"I can't stop it."

Her phone bleats.

“Go ahead, it might be somebody’s last words,” I say and she burns me with a look. “What?”

“Her doctor’s visit.”

“Doctor?”

“Gabby’s fine. You’re the one with all the friends dying. Jerry-fucking-Lewis and Steve Jobs and Helen Mirren and the guy from the J. Geils band who’s not even J. Geils for fuck sake.”

“Helen Mirren’s not.”

“Oh, she will be. Maybe any moment now.”

“If I could.”

“If you could what? Save them? For what, your asteroid?” Her lip turns down, she squeezes her eyes shut and then the sobs hit her like a seizure. I’m at her, holding her while she shakes. “I worry about her so much,” Miriam stutters. I pull her face into my neck.

“She’ll be fine. You said so,” I say, then shake my head to scatter any possible thought that she may not be fine.

“What about your thousand *friends*,” Miriam says, the last word rising out of a fresh spurt of tears, but no shake of the head can keep my heart from groaning under the weight of so many souls.

“I’ll make more,” I say, faltering.

“But what about the asteroid?” she says, and I lose all hope, thinking of the inevitable midday shadow, the low rumbling, the clattering cups and plates as the earth quivers before its firing squad. I feel the orchestra rising up in me like a sickness, accelerating toward that final incandescent note, then the brief pause, the fake reprieve, just long enough for me to look back on it all, thinking *that was too fast*, before a hundred pianos hit the sidewalk.

In a conniption of panic I jam my lips against Miriam’s; hers reach back as they always have, and it could just as well be the first time we kissed, how many years ago on the crowded escalator, when afterwards she slipped her fingers into mine, our grip tightening as we stepped off into the shared vertigo of the next new thing, then the thing after, and again, the flip-book blur of events that *couldn’t possibly have already happened*.

I trace my fingertips down each vertebra while Miriam strokes the back of my neck, and who can tell if it’s then or now, moments side by side or they’d stretch on for centuries.



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## Christopher Kuhl

Christopher Kuhl is a widely published poet, but has begun to explore short fiction. His recent story, "Wade," was awarded Editor's Choice 2016 in INSCAPE. As a poet, he is an active reader of his work across northern Illinois (but publications cover a lot more ground, both in the USA and, occasionally, Canada). On occasion, Christopher gives talks and workshops for curious non-writers. His writing is wide-ranging in content and form. Music, in which he holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in composition, plays an important role in the sounds and shapes of his language. He also studies classical Hebrew.

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## The Dewey Decimal System

[Christopher Kuhl](#)

There’s an ironing board and a cheap guitar on the front porch. And a big-butted ’71 Plymouth Duster, the paint completely dulled, up on blocks in the side yard. Wade doesn’t like any of this: it makes them look like white trash, but he knows they’re not. They don’t hang out at bars where the women stand around showing their midriffs even if they haven’t got the body for it. His mother doesn’t tease her hair. His father wears a tie when he goes to work. And Wade himself doesn’t wear muscle shirts or torn jeans; his t-shirts are immaculate and his crisp jeans look new, though they’re not.

Wade’s brother Lyle bought the guitar just so he could learn to play “Stairway to Heaven” and get some groupies. But he never got it right, so he abandoned it. It was the same with the car: he got it for \$200 because it didn’t run. Lyle thought he knew how to make it run, but again he was wrong, so it sits fading and rusting away, and Lyle is no closer to getting a girl.

Wade doesn’t have a girl either. But maybe that’s because he’s still living at home and doesn’t have a job or car. His father slips him a couple twenties every week, and he makes a little more cashing in beer cans and bottles he finds every Monday at the make-out place just out of town. He rides out there on an old ten-speed bike with its too-loose chain and a big plastic garbage bag and then, when he’s filled the bag, he goes to the recycling plant and gets eight or nine dollars. All in all, it’s not a bad way to live.

Wade’s father, however, is not as content with this life as Wade is. His father thinks it’s high time he got a job and moved out. But Wade dropped out of high school and what kind of job could he get that would support him in a place of his own? His mother tells his father to leave him alone, that it’s clear Wade is a thinker, that he sits on the porch all day watching the street action, thinking. She doesn’t know what he’s thinking about, but she’s sure it’ll lead to something big. At least he isn’t throwing money away on things that he thinks will get or charm a girl. Although, Wade’s mother says, he has plenty of charm if you just give him a chance.

His father is not satisfied with this assessment. If Wade wants to think, let him get a job at the gas station: there’s a bunch of philosophers for you; they certainly don’t give you any service. Sure, it’d be minimum wage, but maybe he could share an apartment, or rent a room in someone else’s house. Wade hears all this and his mind goes blank except to wish they wouldn’t fight so loudly, especially over him; he thinks they might as well be white trash and live in a trailer park where everybody knows everybody else’s business. Beat-up old trailers resting on cinder blocks, with black plastic skirts hiding the emptiness underneath.

\*\*\*

One evening, sitting as usual on the porch, Wade sees it. The moon, full, orange and huge, just hanging where he could almost touch it, lighting up everything around him. It’s late September. Wade knows this must be the harvest moon; he remembers learning about it in fifth grade science class. And he remembers it’s called the “harvest moon” because its long period of strong light helped the farmers get their crops in: that was social

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studies.

It’s getting chilly. Wade is thinking now: about the moon, the earth, the sun. He has a lot of questions, but no one to answer them. Certainly not Lyle, even though he graduated high school last spring; not his mother, who is constantly shifting things—furniture, knick-knacks, pictures; not his father, who’s an accountant and couldn’t care less about the moon or Wade’s questions.

Wade decides he’ll go the next day to the local library. Surely a librarian, surrounded by books all day, must know everything. What else would she have to do except read, interrupted by the occasional request for a new library card or a particular book, like *The Catcher in the Rye*, a book Wade read as a sophomore, the only one he liked. Maybe because of all the “goddamns” and because Holden was also shiftless, although in a different way—more desperate—than Wade, who is a lot of things, but not the cursing kind of desperate.

At the library Wade is overwhelmed by the old metal bookshelves, floor to ceiling with old, dark books. He doesn’t know where to start; he doesn’t even know how to frame his questions: he saw the harvest moon and just wants to know why? And what? Why, and what “what”? And the library seems to be empty. There’s no one at the beat-up old desk at the entrance; he doesn’t see anyone in the rows of books.

He’s about to walk, no, run out, spooked by the shelves, the books, the quiet, when a fiftyish woman materializes. Wade now feels trapped; he’s going to have to ask his questions. But how? Before he can figure it out, the woman—the librarian—asks him kindly, not at all as formidable as he thought someone spending her life in this kind of space would have to be, if he has a library card. Wade hesitates; he doesn’t, but he’s stunned, too stunned to answer the simple “no” that is required of him. Dry-mouthed, unable to speak, he shakes his head. “Well then, we’ll have to get you one. What’s your name, young man?”

Wade spits it out and something gives way in him. Then his name, address, and date of birth are typed up, and before he can make sense of it, the woman is thrusting a card into his hand, complete with his information and a metal strip bearing a number. She explains about borrowing books, time limits, returning books—undamaged—by the due date, late fees. Lost, he feels like he’s made a terrible mistake, shoves his library card in his back pocket, and half-runs out the door.

\* \* \*

That night the harvest moon is out, even bigger, if possible, and Wade’s chest constricts. He has even more questions, not just about the harvest moon, but about the earth and the sun, lots of questions he didn’t ask in grade school, that didn’t occur to him then, maybe because his teachers seemed to suggest there were no other things to know than what they, the teachers in every grade, told him. But Wade has more and doesn’t know how to answer them. No one he knows has the answers or even asks such questions. They’re perfectly content to live out their lives rooted in gravity—what is gravity, why don’t people on the bottom of the earth just fall off?—a gravity of mind and heart.

And Wade realizes, suddenly, and all because of the moon’s entry into his life, that yes, he is a thinker, but (he also wonders) what good is it going to do him when he can’t, and doesn’t know anybody who can, answer his questions? Suddenly, scared, he realizes his only hope is the library and the woman who made his card. He will have to go back, tomorrow, before the moon slivers away.

\* \* \*

In the morning, he thinks he’ll have better luck, look like a thinker, if he puts on something other than a T-shirt and jeans. He chooses a blue button-down shirt and a pair of chinos, puts on dark socks and shoes instead of sneakers. He stands in front of the mirror to survey the effect, the transformation, smooths down his hair, and is, all

in all, pleased. All he needs is a tie and he could be working at a desk in his father's office. Not that he wants to, but he could, he looks like he could.

He goes downstairs and heads out to the porch. Sometime since last night, Lyle has thrown a pile of oil-stained, hole-ridden T-shirts and torn jeans on the ironing board. It's not clear whether they're destined for the laundry or disposal. Suddenly, Wade is disheartened. Even in his good clothes, he feels like the librarian will see right through him and know that he didn't graduate high school and still lives at home, jobless, without a car or a girlfriend, and a mother who can't stop moving furniture. Why would she want to help him?

He sits on the glider, not knowing what to do. Lyle bounds out the door, down the steps, calling "hey!" and then he's gone. His mother comes out, looks around, and then goes back in, all without a word. His father, complete with a tie, comes out to go to work and notices Wade's appearance. "Nice look, boy. Got a job interview?" and slips him an extra twenty. Wade doesn't say anything; how could he even begin to explain? But he expects that when he comes home without a job, that he dressed up just to go to the library, his parents will start arguing about him again, and Wade will just want to crawl under the porch, get lost in the darkness that seems to be his life.

But then he pulls himself together; he's got a lot of questions to answer before the moon disappears. He hops on his bike and pedals into town and, complete with his library card, but no more sure of how to ask what he wants to know, enters the library. What he needs, he thinks, is a book on the moon and the earth. So he starts wandering through the stacks, overwhelmed at the variety of books, unable to find what he wants. Suddenly, silently, the same gray-haired woman, the librarian, materializes again beside him.

"Can I help you, young man?"

Startled, Wade blurts out, "The moon was large and orange last night and the night before. Why? Why don't people fall off the bottom of the earth? Does the earth turn into a silver like the moon does? Maybe my questions are stupid. But you're a librarian, right? I need a book. Maybe two or three. But nothing too hard." Here Wade stops. This is the most he's spoken in weeks to anyone, and he worries that the librarian, like everybody else, will think he's stupid along with shiftless.

But the librarian seems to take Wade's barrage of questions in stride. She suggests they sit down, and she'll try to help him. And she does. First, she tells him that even though she's a librarian, she doesn't know everything. Second, she assures him that his questions are very good ones, and that even scientists don't know all the answers. And third, she says a library is a "temple of knowledge," a temple holding a collection of many thinkers of many times and places, and that being a thinker means being a questioner, "Like you, young man." Wade takes this all in, and feels as though he might really be a thinker; he certainly has questions. "But," says the librarian, "with so much knowledge in one building in so many books, there has to be a way to organize it, so you can find the kinds of books you need for the kinds of questions you have. And that way," she says, pausing, "is the Dewey Decimal System."

A system? This scares Wade; how can he understand a system? Then the librarian shows him an outline: humanity's knowledge, ideas, and artistic creations are broken into ten major categories, each category having a number; the division of each category breaks down into nine subcategories, each of which is divided into nine specialized topics; then more decimal points break down the specialized topics even further. "In short," says the librarian, "the Dewey Decimal System is hierarchical, moving more and more deeply, from the general to the specific. Shall we try your questions on it?"

The librarian is so kind, so clear, and the system so orderly that Wade thinks he will cry. This is what he wanted but had never known existed. It beat sitting on the porch, watching life go by randomly; it wasn't random, you could

order it; that was the thing his nearly white trash family didn't seem to know or care about. Order. No cars on blocks. No ironing board piled with oily, torn clothes, no warped guitar on the porch, all of it threatening in its disarray. Wade thinks he'd like to live at the library, it's so perfect. He finds his books, using the system to get to 523.3 and 523.4, picks out three that don't seem too hard, checks them out, and pedals home.

That night, reading, Wade starts spinning. The moon orbits the earth, which spins on its own axis, and at the same time orbits the sun. And the sun spins on the tail of the Milky Way, which is itself sailing through the universe. Everything is dizzying; the universe is expanding, black holes are swallowing other stars, other stars are exploding. The universe itself is a big Dewey Decimal System, and Wade is perched on all of it, moving further and further into the decimals at the speed of light.



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